
Air-Ground! Teamwork on the Western Front

by Center for Air Force History, 1992

When the history of this war is written, one of the significant developments to be noted and discussed will be the formation and rapid growth of the air-ground tactical team. Born of resourcefulness and necessity, cradled in the African desert, the lusty infant quickly grew into a creature of bone and sinew until, when Normandy was invaded, it had become a smoothly functioning striking force of terrific power, destined to change many tactical theories theretofore accepted as axioms. This story focuses its attention upon one phase of air-ground cooperation, the drive across France of Maj. Gen. O. P. Weyland's XIX Tactical Air Command (XIX TAC) and Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army.

For 30 days this new battle team moved ahead without pause—eastward, southward, and westward. Six days after it went into operation, all Brittany had been conquered except for three beleaguered ports; 9 days later, one jaw of the Falaise-Argentan trap had been clamped shut; in another week the Seine was crossed above and below Paris; and by the end of the first month this air ground combination was fighting within 60 miles of Germany.

In the course of these incredibly rapid operations XIX TAC was called upon to carry out many assignments that no air arm had ever done before. To keep up with the advance of Third Army's forward command post, frequently 20 miles a day, XIX TAC had to move its combat headquarters five times during the 31 days of August. It was an air force that never could settle down, that always must keep trucks and vans ready to roll closer to the front, that never could permit a time lag in its operational planning and coordination.

In August, Thunderbolts and Mustangs of XIX TAC flew on five different fronts, none of which was stable. The fighters probed and disorganized with their bombs deep areas of enemy concentrations and shallow zones directly ahead of Third Army tanks; they protected the Third Army's rearward supply roads, at one time very narrow and precarious, from ground attack and sabotage aircraft; they flew almost daily against suicide garrisons which the Germans left behind encircled, sternly defended harbor cities; and finally, in a completely unorthodox move, they were given full responsibility for the protection of General Patton's long, vulnerable right flank along the Loire.

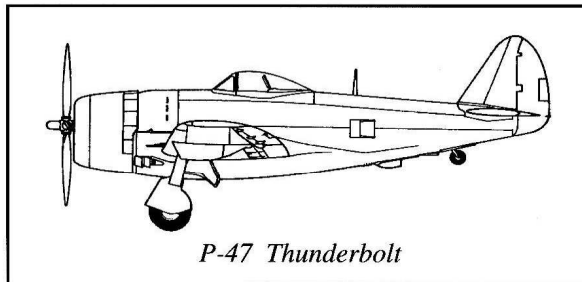
This diversity of assignment meant that the aircraft of XIX TAC had to operate simultaneously along an irregular, shifting 500 mile front ranging from Brest almost to the Rhine. Dozens of high priority missions were required on every good flying day to meet threats along the whole uneven battle line, to keep the Germans in every sector immobile and off balance, and to prevent any massing of enemy strength to oppose the Third Army.

Background of the XIX Tactical Air Command By 1 August most elements of General Weyland's command had fought the enemy for at least 5 months, and some had been in combat since December. XIX TAC joined the Third Army with a backlog of combat

experience in all three of its tactical assignments: neutralization of enemy air power; interdiction of enemy movement on roads, rails, and rivers to and from the battle zone; and close cooperation with ground forces.

General Weyland took command of XIX TAC, then one of the two components of IX Fighter Command, on 4 February 1944. His first headquarters was at Aldermaston Court, near Reading in Berkshire, from where he directed the administration and helped to plot the operations of Thunderbolts and Mustangs flying from East Anglian bases with Eighth Air Force Fortresses and Liberators. Soon after its activation XIX TAC consisted of two fighter wings, the 100th and 303rd embracing five groups of Thunderbolts and two of Mustangs.

Gradually the aircraft of IX Fighter Command shifted from long-distance escort missions, protecting the heavies against the Luftwaffe, to fighter-bomber operations against all types of enemy defensive and logistic targets in northern France, the Lowlands, and within the borders of the Reich. As invasion drew close, General Weyland's seven groups moved to advanced landing strips in Kent, a few minutes' flying time from the enemy, the better to carry out their



P-47 Thunderbolt

part in the softening of the German garrison armies in France.

In the weeks of furious air warfare before D-day, XIX TAC's operations were coordinated with those of its sister organization, IX Tactical Air Command, under Maj. Gen. Elwood R. Quesada. XIX TAC participated in the pre invasion rail and road smashing campaigns and helped to destroy bridges across the Seine, the Meuse, and the Oise to divide from each other all possible invasion sectors and to make transportation from the big German weapons and materiel factories to the Westwall difficult and perilous. To take one obvious example, the destruction of all bridges across the Seine from Paris to the sea separated the German Seventh Army in Brittany and Normandy from the enemy Fifteenth Army in the Pas de Calais.

Fighter-bomber pilots, learning their trade the hard way during April and May, returned to base each day with new techniques for sealing tunnels, blowing up bridges, blocking tracks, and derauling railway cars. They approached their targets from a dozen different angles, ranging from a horizontal, almost zero-degree bomb run, to the nearly perpendicular approach of straight dive bombing. Their record of enemy vehicles destroyed and rails severed ran into impressive figures.

From D-day to 1 August, when the First Army was the only American army operating in France, XIX TAC groups, based first in England, then in Normandy, were under operational control of IX TAC. General Weyland's airmen participated in all the close cooperation missions of those first 2 invasion months the 3, 4, and 5th missions-a-day schedule of the assault stage; the interdiction of traffic across the Loire and through the Paris-Orleans gap; the harrying of enemy movement inside Normandy and Brittany; the