

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher M. Rein. *The North African Air Campaign: U.S. Army Air Forces from El Alamein to Salerno*. Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012. x + 290 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1878-1.

Reviewed by Brad Gladman

Published on H-War (November, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Christopher M. Rein's work is a welcome addition to the still scant literature on the North African air campaign, the American contribution to its implementation, and their combined operations in the Mediterranean. It is an important part of a growing body of literature reexamining the North African campaign to focus on a previously ignored aspect—the centrality of air power to Allied victory in the theater. Rein offers a well-researched, well-written account of how the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) applied its understanding of interwar air power theory to meet the operational requirements of the war in the Mediterranean theater. In so doing, he challenges many of the standard assumptions about the USAAF's thinking during the interwar years, and shows that despite a preference for the strategic mission, the USAAF learned quickly to provide effective support of naval and ground forces in North Africa, Tunisia, Sicily, and Italy.

Beginning with an analysis of interwar air power theory and doctrinal development, Rein constructs a convincing argument showing that American airmen were not as unsophisticated in their understanding of tactical air power as the literature typically portrays. While a main focus of the USAAF leadership certainly was strategic bombing both prior to and during the war, the force was more heterogeneous than is normally suggested. Rein provides a detailed account of efforts to explore aircraft types and methods directly and indirectly supporting naval and ground forces. All of this culminated in the crafting of what Rein argues were sound doctrinal manuals, most notably, *Field Manual 31-35*. While a written doctrine is not necessarily a reflection of an operational capability, Rein's work does show clearly that between

the wars some U.S. airmen thought deeply about strategy, and that this thinking proved valuable when the time came to put theory into practice.

The first opportunity to do so came in mid-late 1942 when a USAAF fighter and medium bomber force was devoted almost exclusively to an interdiction and close support role for British ground and naval forces. Rein argues that the interwar experimentation and thinking about tactical support saw the USAAF adapt quickly, dealing with the steep learning curve from its interwar experimentation and learning from the more experienced Royal Air Force, to apply its air power in direct and indirect support of the ground campaign in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. In so doing, Rein argues, USAAF leaders were forced to confront some key issues, such as how to prioritize between immediate requirements on the ground for air superiority, interdiction, and close-air support operations with their preferred method of attack from the air—strategic bombing. Rein shows that despite some mistakes in the planning and execution of the Ploesti raids, the USAAF was quite pragmatic in meeting the requirements of the ground and naval forces. Moreover, Rein counters the traditional interpretations of USAAF thinking by showing that despite a focus on strategic bombing among senior USAAF leadership that denied the Ninth and Twelfth Air Forces the resources needed to maximize their support, something further complicated by other organizational mistakes, the assets sent to the Mediterranean theater made a substantial contribution to the Allied victories from El Alamein through the Italian campaign.

If this book has a flaw, one has to search hard for it.

That said, there are a few instances where the focus on the North African air campaign takes what seem unnecessary diversions into brief discussions of, for example, the USAAF and anti-submarine warfare. While, as the author says, Operation Torch could not have taken place in the face of heavy U-boats opposition, and the failure to devote sufficient long-range aircraft to help close the mid-Atlantic gap illustrates the focus of USAAF leadership, it is debatable whether this diversion really adds that much to those discussions. But this small flaw does not detract from Rein's fine job of illustrating the central role of air power in the North African, Sicilian, and Italian campaigns of the Second World War.

A final strength of Rein's work is how it brings the discussion forward to show that the underlying principles of air power, learned at some cost during World War Two, still apply in the modern context. While the exact nature of air operations today differs markedly from then, Rein shows how the essential elements are much

the same. Then as now, air forces need to be commanded by air force officers who understand how to apply air power to achieve desired effects, but ideally under a theater commander equally versed in how to employ air power. It is through the forging of an integrated, joint team that air power's effect is best felt, not through theories of air power winning wars on its own. This lesson was driven home in the Mediterranean theater, and is as true now as then. In the absence of a comprehensive theory of air power, Rein concludes, "airmen could do worse than to revisit other ideas that have stood the test of time.... Air forces can best hasten the end of conflict, if they are unable to deter it in the first place, when they are fully prepared to help the surface forces accomplish their tasks as fully integrated members of the joint team" (p. 211). This demonstration of how history has much to teach modern students of air power rounds out a fascinating, long overdue account of the development and contribution of the most powerful and flexible Allied weapon of the North African campaign.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Brad Gladman. Review of Rein, Christopher M., *The North African Air Campaign: U.S. Army Air Forces from El Alamein to Salerno*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38464>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.