The core of Robert S. Ehlers Jr.’s fine account of the air war in the Mediterranean during World War II is an operational-level study focused on the integration of airpower into the overall conduct of military activity, or the lack of it. Ehlers’s central contention in *The Mediterranean Air War: Airpower and Allied Victory in World War II* is that the Allies’ increasingly competent and bi-national integration of land, sea, and air assets stands in sharp contrast to the profound disfunctionality that marked similar efforts by the Axis powers. He argues convincingly that it was possible for the Axis to win in the Mediterranean if they had approached the theater with a clear strategy, centralized leadership, and operational practices based on the careful allocation of available assets. This, he contends, would have been possible without committing substantial additional resources to the theater; the “better use of the ones they had could well have done the trick” (p. 9). The war in the Mediterranean, in other words, was not won by superior numbers—although the Allies increasingly benefited from the big battalions—but by the side that learned best how to deploy its available forces. While this operational question is Ehlers’s central focus, he does not stint on discussing both the strategic context and the tactical details of the application of airpower. In relation to big-picture strategy, Ehlers very much follows historian Douglas Porch’s campaign to assert the pivotal character of the Mediterranean theater, and he endorses Porch’s judgment that victory there was “a requirement for Allied success” (p. 4). To a card-carrying Mediterraneanist such as myself, this argument seems to be right on the money.

During the course of the war in the Mediterranean, the air assets available to the Allies rose from the meager 370 Royal Air Force machines in Egypt and East Africa under the command of Air Chief Marshal Arthur Longmore in May 1940, to the five thousand-plus modern combat aircraft available to American lieutenant general Ira Eaker’s Mediterranean Allied Air Force in 1944 (p. 397). This massive air armada enjoyed complete air supremacy, enabling Allied aircraft both to dominate within the Mediterranean itself and to range deeply into central Europe. Yet these simple statistics at least partially obscure the fact that this was not a process of incremental growth. Rather, from the first battles with the Italians in the summer and fall of 1940 through to the eviction of the Axis from the North African littoral with the victory in Tunisia in May, 1943, the issue was closely contested, with the Axis coming close to victory during the great German-led offensives in North Africa in 1941 and 1942. In this light, Ehlers focuses a great deal of attention on the struggle for Malta, arguing—correctly in my view—that the repeated suspension and eventual cancellation of Operation Hercules, the Axis plan to capture the troublesome island, was “one of the pivotal blunders of the war” (p. 199).

What comes across most clearly here is, to use a term not commonly used by military historians, a question of agency. Within a given set of circumstances, it matters who makes decisions, how those decisions are made, and above all, how they are executed. From this point of view, Ehlers’s account of the individual personalities and command structures helps to build a sophisticated account of Allied air forces that were genuine learning organiza-
tions, flexible enough to permit experimentation and innovation, yet sufficiently centralized to ensure both the organized generalization of lessons learned and the rational overall disposition of resources. A high degree of centralization was initially forced upon the British by the necessity of marshaling extremely scarce resources to the best advantage, not least because the latest aircraft types were being held for the defense of the British Isles. Having established the habits of centralization *in extremis*, including the practice of collocating headquarters to ensure maximum interservice collaboration, they became ingrained in British, and later Anglo-American, practice in ways that continually maximized both the use of available assets and the dissemination of doctrinal developments. American air units, arriving in the theater in large numbers following the Torch landing in November 1942, were thus able to assimilate the hard-won lessons of their British allies without having to go through their own protracted learning experience. As Ehlers makes clear, the Axis experience was, in contrast, marked by a chronic lack of centralization, constant breakdowns in communication between ground and air forces, and by profound divisions between the Axis partners.

The central figure in all of this was Chief Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, and Ehlers rightly highlights his leadership. Taking over from Longmore in June 1941, Tedder quickly recognized that the air force’s primary initial mission was to secure and maintain air superiority, a task that required the consistent deployment of air assets against enemy airfields and lines of supply on both land and sea. Ironically, as Winston Churchill noted after a critical meeting with theater commanders and the chiefs of staff in London in July 1941, the struggle for air superiority would mean that ground units would see fewer friendly aircraft overhead. The “mischievous practice” of “keeping standing patrols over moving columns” had to be abandoned, the prime minister insisted, in favor of round-the-clock attacks on the “rearward services of the enemy” (p. 153). This key lesson in the deployment of airpower eluded the Axis forces, with Rommel insisting that Luftwaffe assets be used primarily to provide close support for fast-moving tank columns. Given the high quality of German pilots and equipment, this approach could yield devastating results at the point of contact. It could not, however, counter an Allied air effort whose concerted attacks on the “rearward services” were continually eating into Axis resources (p. 153). Ehlers insists that by misusing their air assets, Axis commanders, and Rommel in particular, threw away the opportunity to leverage their superior equipment and well-trained crews to secure a decisive advantage in North Africa.

As British airpower was deployed with increasing effect against Axis shipping, and as British commanders learned to integrate air and naval resources in this effort, the Axis forces in North Africa entered an accelerating “logistical death spiral” (p. 239). Ironically, by extending his advance to El Alamein without having secure air superiority, Rommel succeeded only in placing his head very firmly in the noose. At this point, it seems, the significance of a concentrated effort to secure air superiority finally dawned on him; it was, to say the least, a little late in the day. If Axis logistics were catastrophically shambolic, Ehlers does a fine job of discussing the increasingly competent logistical and support effort that facilitated Allied air operations. In particular, he highlights the remarkable work performed by Air Vice-Marshal Graham Dawson, Tedder’s chief maintenance officer. Under Dawson, recovery teams scoured the desert for damaged aircraft that were then refurbished with parts manufactured in new plants set up in Egypt; again, the contrast with the Luftwaffe, which frequently abandoned aircraft for want of spares, is striking.

Over the course of the war in the North African desert, the Royal Air Force (RAF) perfected the integration of airpower into fast-moving ground battle. RAF squadrons became adept at “leapfrogging” to new airfields as ground forces advanced or retreated; at one point RAF airfields were operating under German artillery fire in advance of forward Eighth Army ground units! As this integration progressed, airpower came to be viewed less as a “support” for ground and naval units, and more as a key component of a genuinely “combined” bi- or trilateral effort.

As British aircraft secured air superiority, they were able to pay increasing attention to the provision of tactical support for their ground forces. Here, too, the Desert Air Force was working out in practice the complexities of targeting, resource allocation, and the avoidance of “friendly fire.” Again, integration was the key, with radio-equipped RAF liaison teams working directly with the army at the divisional and brigade levels. None of this, of course, evolved seamlessly or without significant trial and error. But evolve it did, and as these lessons were generalized and codified, they formed the basis of airpower doctrine for the rest of the war. In this way, as in so many others, the experience of the war in the Mediterranean was critical to the Allies’ eventual victory. In the short term, however, many of the lessons learned in the fast-paced warfare of the North African desert did
not translate directly into the campaigns in Sicily, Italy, and the South of France. Perhaps as a result, Ehlers’s account loses something of its energy as the fighting moves north across the Mediterranean; it is striking that the Desert War occupies nearly three hundred pages of text, while the Italian and French campaigns, despite the larger forces involved, cover barely one hundred.

By the time the Allies moved north into Sicily and Italy, they were well on the way to achieving air supremacy; indeed, with the exception of limited attacks on Allied invasion forces by aircraft equipped with guided bombs, the Luftwaffe virtually disappears from the story. Despite this advantage, however, complex terrain, slow-moving battlefronts, tenacious German defenses, and poor flying weather negated the application of many of the close support techniques developed in North Africa. Instead, in early 1944 Allied tactical airpower was concentrated on an effort to force German ground forces to retreat by cutting off their supplies. Operation Strangle thus saw airpower concentrated on railroads (there was a heated discussion about the relative efficacy of bombing bridges or marshaling yards) and truck convoys in a concerted effort to starve out well-entrenched German troops. There was, Ehlers suggests, some “excessive enthusiasm” in the planning process, with Eaker arguing that the Germans could be dislodged by airpower alone (p. 330). In fact, while airpower played an important role in Operation Diadem, the Allied drive on Rome that began in May 1944, it proved entirely incapable of forcing a German retreat by itself. As Ehlers explains, Allied after-action reports quickly recognized this fact; he does not, however, explore the degree to which such “excessive enthusiasm” has a persistent tendency to bubble up when air commanders get a chance to think that their cherished arm might alone hold the key to victory (p. 334).

To round out his coverage of the entire theater, Ehlers includes short but useful accounts of the under-resourced and unsuccessful German air efforts in support of the anti-British uprising in Iraq in 1941, and of the operations of the Balkan Air Force (BAF) in support of Josip Broz Tito’s Partisans in Yugoslavia. The latter saw the Allies employing their capacity for the integrated deployment of airpower in all of its major role—including air superiority, interdiction, direct support, heavy bombing, air transport, photoreconnaissance, and medical evacuation—in support of irregular warfare. Established in June 1944, the BAF supplied the Partisans with large quantities of weapons and equipment, first by parachute drop and later via improvised airstrips prepared under the direction of British and American officers; meanwhile, during Operation Ratweek, guerilla fighters and Allied airplanes combined to harass German units retreating through Yugoslavia. Although it is impossible to measure the significance of airpower to the Partisan victory, it was, as Ehlers shows, by no means negligible.

One of the strengths of Ehlers’s narrative is his account of the strategic bombing campaign undertaken by the American Fifteenth Air Force, established in November 1943. Eclipsed by the storied Eighth Air Force, that effort, like so much else in the Mediterranean, has “received relatively little attention” (p. 363). Particularly after the Foggia airfield complex in central Italy became available to Allied aircraft, heavy bombers based in the Mediterranean made an “immense” contribution to the Allied strategic bombing campaign, participating in the Operation Big Week attacks on German aircraft production, and in strikes against Axis oil production, particularly in Ploesti, Rumania (p. 363). Backed by attacks on railroad lines and by mining the Danube, these efforts helped to cripple German fuel production and distribution; they also, as Ehlers demonstrates, directly assisted the Red Army’s drive into the Balkans by denying the Wehrmacht the fuel necessary to wage a mobile defense. Surprisingly, however, Ehlers errs in his claim that the August 1943 attacks on Ploesti (Operation Tidal-wave) marked the first American attack on Rumanian oil refining; in fact, the B-24s of the Halverston Detachment had launched a similar attack the previous summer, before being assigned to remain in the Middle East as part of the newly formed US Middle East Air Force.

Unsurprisingly in a work of this scope, there are several other minor errors. In August 1941, for example, there was no Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) for General George C. Marshall to be chair of, and when it was formed in February 1942, it had no formal chair. While Admiral Ernest King might have wished that it had, the JCS as a whole never seriously expressed any “desire for a Japan-first strategy” (p. 223). Allied leaders at Casablanca did not “reconfirm” the policy of seeking the unconditional defeat of the Axis powers, but proclaimed it there for the first time, and I rather doubt that Franklin Roosevelt thought of himself as favoring only a “light” commitment to Italy, particularly when the political dimensions of grand strategy are taken into account (pp. 266, 293). The numerous in-text photographs help to illustrate and animate the text, but many of the maps are a disappointment; they are fine maps, mostly from the West Point collection, but they do not reproduce well on this scale and without color. Such minor weaknesses and
errors, however, do not detract from the overall quality of the work.

A rather more substantial case could be made for the very modest coverage Ehlers gives to carrier-based airpower. Here, and although the USS Wasp’s critical efforts to resupply Malta are covered in detail, the British Fleet Air Arm attack on the Italian naval base at Taranto is accorded barely a paragraph. This is surely inadequate, not only with regard to its impact on Italian naval operations in the Mediterranean, but also as a demonstration of the vulnerability of anchored warships to an aerial attack conducted with surprise and skill.

This book is a very valuable addition to the history of the war in the Mediterranean and, more generally, to the overall history of World War II. One of Ehlers’ great strengths is his ability to write not just about the Mediterranean, but also about the innumerable connections between the Mediterranean and other theaters of the war. So, for example, Allied airpower in the theater is limited by the demands of home defense and of the war in Asia and the Pacific; German air units shuttle between Russia and the Mediterranean, unable to be maximally effective in either; Axis forces briefly threaten a strategic convergence in the Indian Ocean, underlining the importance of Allied control of Suez and of Middle East oil; and American strategic bombing aids the Red Army advance into the Balkans. From all of these points of view, as well as in its own right, the Mediterranean assumes considerable importance. This all underscores, as Ehlers emphasizes, the failure of the Axis to develop a clear and consistent strategy for the theater, and the price they paid for carrying out the efforts they did undertake in a decentralized and disorganized manner.

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