



Now striking heavy body blows at the enemy is the B-17 series of Boeing "Flying Fortresses." Above is the B-17E, latest of the line and "bigger and more deadly" than any of its predecessors. Power-operated gun turrets marks this key weapon in America's war program.

Where is Our Air Power?

by

Col. ROLAND BIRNN

U. S. Army Air Forces



Our Air Forces, scattered along far-flung fighting fronts, show superiority against heavy odds.

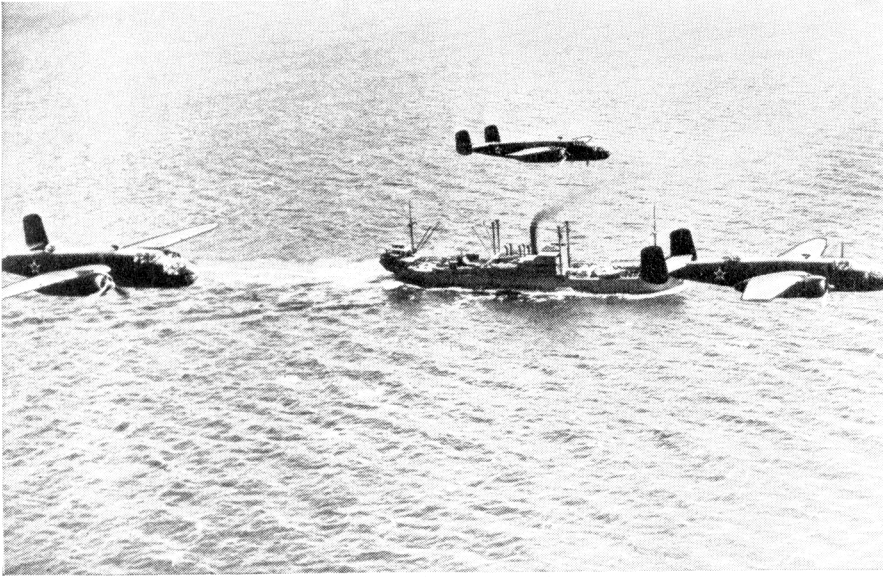
WHERE is American air power?" The question is born of impatience. It bobs up nervously, repeatedly, in disregard of President Roosevelt's reminder of time, distance, enemy geographical advantages and other factors in this "new kind of war." It persists in the face of daily battle victories by United States flyers and other triumphs in which American planes figure.

The feeling seems to be that in the first four months of the war alone American aircraft plants must have turned out more planes than were in the entire Japanese air force at the start. The qualitative superiority of our aircraft has been established beyond question. Why indeed has not our air power made itself felt more decisively? The complete answer cannot be given, of course, without betraying priceless information to the

enemy. But Hitler and the Japanese know that American air power is on the way. It is rising as inexorably as the tide, even though not as rapidly as any of us would like.

Unfortunately, it is spread thin for the moment. With due regard to the familiar military principle that to try to be strong at all points may result in being superior at none, it has to be spread all over the map at this early stage because of the very nature of a conflict which covers the entire globe for the first time in all history. The enemy is throwing punches at us from many directions and may throw more from others. We will have to take some on the shoulders or the less vulnerable parts of our strategic anatomy, while we get in position to uncork our terrific right. But we can't take many on the chin. So we have to spread out the important defense to guard that chin, and spreading it out takes planes, many of them.

Neither the Japanese nor the Nazis will be told anything they do not already know by a quick look at our



Although the Navy now supervises the air patrol of the Atlantic, North American B-25 Army bombers (above) also are used to combat the threat of Axis submarines.

world wide efforts, necessities and problems in this year of preparation for offensive blows to come. Although generally known, these tend to be overlooked at times or are obscured in the day by day drama of the war.

With the spotlight on the other side of the world, it was easy to forget that upon American air power, in conjunction with sea power, rests the primary responsibility for keeping control of the Atlantic. Army and Navy planes patrolling the skies from Iceland to the Panama Canal and to South America testify to the whereabouts of much of our aerial strength. The House Military Affairs Special Committee on Aviation thus outlined our task in the Atlantic:

"The importance of air power and the development of large air forces by potential enemies have forced our acquisition of outlying offshore bases for strategic defense uses. We must make it most difficult, if not impossible, for hostile bombers to reach our cities and strategic defense areas.

"Through building up defense air bases at Newfoundland, Bermuda, Puerto Rico and upon various islands in the West Indies southerly to Georgetown in British Guiana, we are screening the entire Atlantic coastline of the continental United States and the Caribbean area with air bases designed to prevent any air or surface invasion of the United States or the Panama Canal Zone from the east or south.

"When our program of construction is completed at these outposts and they are adequately manned with first-line

planes, it is the judgment of our special committee that raids on our strategic areas by an enemy in force will be most difficult.

"Through the acquisition and completion of Naval and air bases at these outposts, we augment our security in two ways: First, by permitting effective air defense (that is, striking the enemy before he can take off to bomb our vital establishments); second, by denying access to the enemy of these offshore areas themselves as bases from which to attack us."

Lieut Gen Henry H Arnold, the Army Air Forces commander, indicated the magnitude of this particular phase when he stated (shortly before war engulfed the United States) that in the North Atlantic region, "we are garrisoning eight large bases and four radio and weather stations where 20 to 30 men will maintain emergency staging fields."

On the other side of the Atlantic, Lord Beaverbrook has reported that last year alone the United States supplied some 2,000 military aircraft to underwrite the security of the British Isles and to add to the striking power of the RAF.

Hundreds of Curtiss *Kittyhawk* and *Tomahawk* fighters in Britain's offensive in the desert against the Nazi Afrika Korps roared a partial answer to the question of the whereabouts of our air power last winter.

India is claiming the attention of our air strategists. Farther east the colorful American Volunteer Group of former Army and Navy pilots, flying early

model P-40 fighters, were inflicting damage to the enemy. Although forced back from the Burma Road by overwhelming numbers, they licked from the start five times and more their weight in Japanese aircraft.

In the Southwest Pacific, almost at the world's most distant area from the United States, American air power has written a blazing chapter in warfare against odds made overwhelming by enemy treachery and by distance. In Australia, as well as in Java and the Philippines, we were called on to contribute the major share of the aerial effort to curb the invaders.

Beyond all these commitments, heavy demands had to be met at the same time to bolster defenses of the home front. Secretary of War Stimson made this clear when he announced a few weeks after Pearl Harbor that aerial defenses of both Hawaii and our own west coast had been made stronger than at any previous time.

Alaska is another story which, because of the North Pacific's strategic importance cannot be revealed at this stage. Iceland is another outpost whose story cannot be told.

Likewise veiled by wartime necessity are operations of the Ferry Command extending across the Pacific as well as spanning the North and South Atlantic to tie together all the far-flung fighting fronts of the United Nations.

At home, mounting air power is too familiar to require more than a mention of the 1942-43 production goal of 185,000 planes and the announced official objective to expand the Army Air Forces alone to possibly 2,000,000 men.

Every American has thrilled at the triumphs of American flyers and planes in the Pacific; over the hammer blows struck by long range Army heavy bombers; by the manner in which Navy carrier-based fighters disposed of 16 out of 18 enemy bombers in a single brief engagement; and over the amazing exploits of Gen Douglas MacArthur's little air "force" on the Bataan peninsula.

Of sharper significance for the future are summaries of accomplishments covering extended periods. After less than 12 weeks, the War Department was able to report that the Army Air Forces had probably sunk 19 Japanese vessels and seriously damaged 31 others. Army planes, along with antiaircraft artillery, had shot down a minimum of 245 Japanese planes, while the foe accounted for but 48 in the air even though the Japanese

were in overwhelming numerical superiority in almost every encounter. The five-to-one ratio was maintained by the AVG in Burma who in the same period definitely sent 165 enemy planes crashing while losing only 31 of their own aircraft. Heavy losses sustained by both sides from the destruction of planes on the ground were excluded because accurate figures for the foe were unobtainable and disclosure of our own losses in this category would assist the enemy.

Most reassuring of all portents of the future has been the record of the heavy four-engined bombers on which offensive calculations are largely based. The limited number of B-17 *Flying Fortresses* which were called on to carry the ball against, appalling difficulties in the Philippines and then the Netherlands Indies lived up to every advance expectation that they would strike body blows.

It was not until they were able to operate from bases in the Indies beyond the immediate reach of the foe that they really began to function. Their score thereafter must have caused some wincing in Tokyo (and Berlin as well). Only the factors of distance and time prevented our sending sufficient fighting planes to support the bombers when the enemy finally moved in close.

A tabulation from official communiques shows that in the approximately seven weeks between January 5 and February 25 they definitely sent to the bottom one Japanese cruiser, a destroyer and five transports besides downing 31 or more enemy planes in aerial combat or raids on air fields.

Hit and sunk or put out of action were an enemy battleship which was twice heavily bombed in the Southern Philippines' Gulf of Davao, four cruisers and 11 additional transports.

The tabulation is ultra-conservative. What the War Department had to say in reporting on all American Army Air Forces operations applied particularly to the long range, high altitude heavy bombers. This statement said that "it is particularly difficult to confirm sinking of vessels by aerial action, because the pilots and observers are often at too great an altitude or are flying at too great a speed to know in every instance the results of an attack." The reports were confined to those enemy vessels where the observed damage was so great as to leave little doubt of ultimate destruction, or where direct hits were scored.

Equally gratifying has been the demonstration of the ability of the heavy bombers to take care of themselves. One was shot down on February 2, in a raid on the Borneo oil port of Balikpapan, but the formation of four accounted for nine enemy fighters. A week earlier, another was shot down in the Battle of Macassar Strait, but the five in this formation sank one transport, set fire to another and shot down two or three enemy planes.

The heaviest loss of heavy bombers was on January 19, when a formation of five was intercepted by enemy fighters. Two B-17s were shot down that day and one was damaged, but they accounted for nine Japanese fighters. In a substantial majority of the attacks the big bombers returned undamaged to their bases.

The record of the P-40 fighters has been as impressive. A relative handful of A-24 Army dive bombers proved their worth in the baptism of fire for this type in the air and sea battle of the Java Sea on the eve of the Japanese invasion of the island of Java.

Unfortunately, the time and distance factor prevented a well balanced air force there; one with its quota of pursuit planes to allow the bombers to operate and be serviced with a minimum of damage from the enemy air force.

Altogether, at the outset of this first World War of the Air, facing the most formidable military undertaking in modern history, American air power, thin as it is, already is making some grimly reassuring, preliminary reports on its whereabouts. The advance guard of this air effort is plugging the leaks in the dikes; sometimes being overwhelmed or lost in the process, but allowing the tide of air power to rise and rise, until our strategists, gauging the time and place, release this pent up tide in a roaring flood strong enough, effective enough, to overwhelm our enemies.

This article was originally published in the June, 1942, issue of *Flying and Popular Aviation* magazine, vol 30, no 6, pp 31-32, 61.