

# Friendly Rivals: The Eighth and FIFTEENTH AIR FORCES in World War II

By Kenneth P. Werrell

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The bulk of the general literature that mentions the strategic bombing of Germany tends to lump the American and British bombing together. Even among those who separate out AAF (Army Air Forces) and RAF (Royal Air Force) strategic bombing, few realize that two U.S. strategic bombing forces, the Eighth in England and the Fifteenth in Italy, carried out the American side of the bombing offensive. Perhaps none but the participants realize that these forces, while sharing many characteristics, were also different. What follows is the use of comparative history techniques to investigate the common and uncommon elements of these two American air forces and their war effort.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight their differences and similarities in the hope that they will illuminate previously unknown or neglected aspects. I do not intend to "prove" the superiority of either air force, that bombing failed, or that bombing could have won the war. Rather, I am employing a different technique and attempting to gain a different perspective on that campaign to indicate some of the things we know, and some of the things we do not know about it. I believe that in so doing, aspects of the bombing offensive that may be fruitful for further study can be spotlighted.

## Background

In brief, strategic bombing was a technological attempt to avoid the stalemate and slaughter of World War I trench warfare. Air theorists, most notably Douhet, Trenchard, and Mitchell, prophesied that wars would be won by bombers attacking enemy cities and civilians. American airmen at first agreed with this concept (goals and tactics), but by the mid-1930s had come up with a distinctly American solution: daylight, unescorted, high-altitude, precision bombing formations that would destroy specific industrial targets. The U.S. airmen sought a target in the "industrial web," or what might be called a "bottleneck target," which if destroyed,

would cause the entire enemy economy to collapse.

During World War II, Germany, Britain, and the U.S. employed strategic bombers. The Germans dropped 70,000 tons of bombs on Britain, a puny total compared to the 1.4 million tons dropped by the Anglo-Americans on Germany. The Americans put perhaps 25 percent of their resources into air arms, of which the AAF expended approximately 40 percent on heavy and very heavy bombers. During the strategic air war against Germany, the AAF flew 400,000 heavy bomber sorties and dropped about one million tons of bombs. The cost in men and machines was high: the AAF lost 6,700 bombers and over 62,000 men (casualties,

