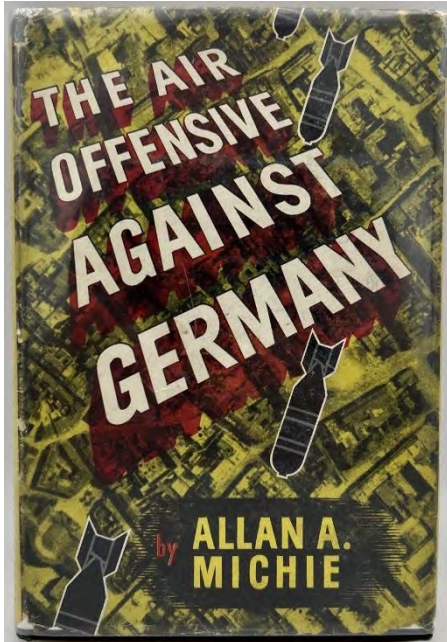


U.S. Planes "Inferior." – By David Gray

A number of stories appeared in the British press in February 1943 regarding the qualities of aircraft in the United States Air Force. These arguments went on right through the war and remain a point of contention even today. This contemporary 'argument,' carried out in the American and British



newspapers sheds some light on the thoughts of those involved at the time but we must always bear in mind when these statements were being made that technology moved extremely fast in the Second World War, and new aircraft designs were constantly being brought into production.

The first article headed 'Day Bombing Criticised - U.S. PLANES "INFERIOR"' came after a scathing attack against the policy of daylight bombing which had been made in the United States that week. The comments, which caused a sensation, were made in a book, "The Air Offensive Against Germany," by Allan Michie, correspondent of the magazine *Time*.

Michie stated that American fighters and bombers were inferior. He added that attempts had been made to subdue criticism; and that statements made by American officials had been deliberately misleading.

Lancasters Best

In his book Michie wrote "British Lancasters (*below*), are the best all-round bombers in the skies. Regardless of the tremendous publicity given Fortresses and Liberators, the truth is that we have not yet in operation a plane comparable to any of the three British heavy bombers.

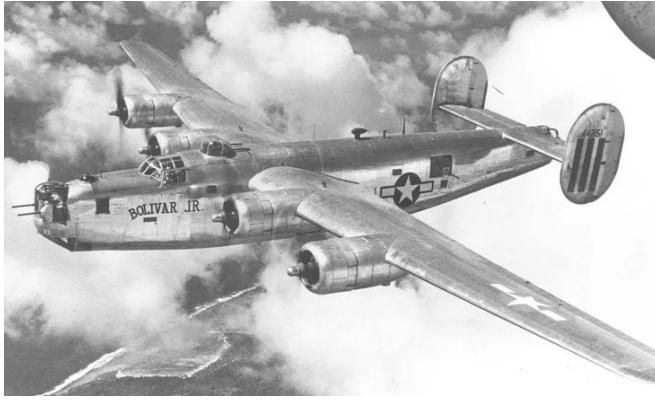


We may with some justice claim a bombsight that enables us to hit a barrel, but to hit a barrel from 20,000ft you must see the barrel. On the bombing range of California, Texas and Georgia, and in the Pacific, where there are cloudless blue skies, this is not a formidable achievement, but in Europe, where invariably there are layers of cloud, precision bombing is almost impossible."

No Night Training

Michie went on to say, "Three things alone hold up American participation in the night assault on Germany. They are that the bombers are not equipped with flare dampers on the engines [to prevent exhaust flames being seen]; that the crews are not sufficiently trained for night work, and that the Air Force Command is stubbornly holding to day bombing."

He added that instead of building Lancasters and Spitfires, which Britain offered the United States two years earlier, "We have the enormous Willow Run plant and many others for the production of



Liberators (*left*), for the next three years. Liberators are almost as obsolete as Britain's Wellingtons, the production of which was almost stopped in 1942."

American View

Publication of the book was followed almost immediately by a formal statement by Major-General Eaker, commanding the U.S. Eighth Army Air Force strongly defending

daylight bombing.

On February 18th 1943, a story appeared in the British press entitled "**ROUND THE CLOCK**" RAIDS BEST POLICY.



As American heavy bomber units completed six months of operations from British bases, Major-General Ira C. Eaker, (*left*), Commanding General of the United States Eighth Army Air Force, in what was clearly a response to Michie's book, urged that "it would be the greatest tragedy" if either the American or British bombing efforts should be diverted from their present pattern.

He went on, "It is sometimes assumed that American Air Forces in Britain are wrong to bomb by day or the RAF is in error to bomb by night. What is best for one is inevitably best for the other. This is a wholly mistaken view. If the RAF bombed habitually in the daytime its losses would be too high. If the United States Air Forces bombed at night its losses would be higher and its efficiency would be greatly reduced."

"The simple reason for this unalterable fact is that the RAF bombers were built for night bombing and their crews have been specially trained for night bombing. On the other hand, American bombers have been built for day bombing and American crews have been specially trained in high altitude, precision daylight bombing."

"This does not mean that the RAF cannot occasionally bomb by day. Neither does it mean that the United States Army Air Forces may not occasionally bomb at night. But neither will be in its best element nor do its best work under these conditions."

Why would the general say that British bombers were built for night bombing? The RAF initially began their bombing raids during daytime and soon discovered that it was taking too much of a toll on aircraft and crews and changed to night time operations. When the Americans came into the war, they insisted that their bombers, bristling with machine guns, were so well defended, that along with flying in box formations with the mutual protection of hundreds of machine guns defending the bomber stream, no German fighter could possibly get through. In reality, this theory was totally flawed.

Ironically, only six months after this book was published, on August 1st 1943, 53 Liberators were shot down out of a total of 177, with another 58 damaged beyond repair on a mission to attack the Ploesti oilfields in Romania. 660 airmen were lost with 310 killed.



A mission on August 17th 1943, to Regensburg–Schweinfurt (*left*), just two week later, saw a combined loss of around 60 bombers (39 at Schweinfurt out of 209 and an unspecified number at Regensburg).

In a second raid to Schweinfurt on October 14th 1943, eight months after Michie’s book was published, the U.S. Army Air Force lost 60 of the 291 bombers that took part in the raid, plus 17 more damaged beyond repair. With over 600 airmen killed or captured, this was considered the costliest USAAF mission and the day was known as ‘Black Thursday.’

Three Reasons

Gen Eaker went on, “There are three primary reasons why United States Army Air Forces in Britain should continue daylight bombing and the RAF Bomber Command should continue to operate largely at night. They are:

1. The maximum destructive effort against the enemy can be realised under these conditions only.
2. Enemy defences will be more alert throughout the 24 hours.
3. American bombers operating over Germany in daylight force the enemy to maintain a large force of day fighters which otherwise would be free to operate elsewhere.

In short, the present scheme of bombing round the clock keeps the enemy’s fighters and A.A. defences extended to the limit.”

There was a firm response in the press from a British correspondent in New York, two days later, to Maj.-Gen. Eaker’s statement. This was under the heading of **“U.S. CRITICS OF DAY BOMBING – THEORY BOLSTERED BY ‘BALLYHOO’”**

The *New York Herald-Tribune* commented on the coincidence that the United States War Department was ready with the release to the press of Gen Eaker’s statement, attacking critics of American aviation tactics just when reviews of Mr. Allan Michie’s book were appearing.

“If the Air Force felt that Mr. Michie’s arguments demanded rebuttal,” said the newspaper, “It should have at least had the courtesy and frankness to mention him by name and to rebut his arguments. Gen. Eaker’s statement does neither.

The *Herald-Tribune* went on to commend Mr. Michie’s book as “Temperately and factually written.”

“Although he does not mention the book or the author by name, the version of the statement ascribed to Gen Eaker...referred to ‘well-meaning individuals’ who argue against day bombing as ‘more dangerous to the Allied cause than any fifth column operating anywhere in the world. Mr. Michie’s argument is that daylight ‘precision bombing’ is not practical under European conditions.”

The Heald-Tribune stated that the American Air Force, according to Mr. Michie, arrived in Britain with a tactical theory and planes alike unsuited to the problem; but instead of abandoning the theory, it has been using ‘Ballyhoo’ methods [extravagant publicity] to try to justify it.