



GHQ Air Force

This strange arrangement in 1935 split the Air Corps into two camps—but it led the way to an independent Air Force.

By John T. Correll

In the years following World War I, the Army had a hard time keeping a lid on its rambunctious air arm. The aviators, convinced that airpower had revolutionized warfare, rallied to the call of the firebrand Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell for a separate aeronautical department, co-equal with the Army and the Navy.

They were further inspired by the example of the Royal Air Force, formed in 1918, by the merger of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service. Britain had established the world's first independent air force after experiencing the bombardment of London during the war by German zeppelins and airplanes.

US airmen were impatient with their role and status, but independence for



them was not to be. The Army Air Service—part of the Signal Corps until May 1918—gave a good account of itself in the war, but it was in combat for only nine months. Its contributions were not central to the outcome.

Aviation was popular with the public and Congress, and between 1916 and 1920, eight separate bills seeking to create a separate air service were introduced. That made little impression on the War Department, which regarded airpower, at best, as a supporting capability for the ground forces.

Demobilization of the Army began within hours of the Armistice in 1918, and the air arm took its share of the reductions. The Air Service was cut back 95 percent from its wartime strength and all but 22 of its 185 aero squadrons were disbanded. A spirit of isolation-

That did not mean that the branches of the Army were equal. The Infantry was first in the pecking order. The Air Service was last, and by a wide margin. Many of the airmen were young and brash, which did not help their case with the Army elders.

The Chief of the Air Service was a major general in charge of schools, depots, and acquisition of airplanes and other equipment. Tactical aeronautical units—like infantry, cavalry, and artillery units—were parceled out to the nine Army corps area commanders.

With the drastic drawdown in effect, most of the Army's infrastructure existed only on paper or in skeleton form. Plans for fleshing out the force in wartime were extensive and complicated.

When Ulysses S. Grant had become head of the Union Army during the Civil

report to the GHQ, which would then lead them in battle. In 1924, the Army specifically authorized a GHQ Air Force to be headed by an air officer and to be the air component of the GHQ.

The Army continued to insist that the Air Service had no mission other than support of the ground forces, despite growing evidence of other kinds of capabilities. Mitchell's airmen sank a battleship in 1921, and Army aviators flew around the world in 1924. Agitation for a separate air service continued. In 1925, the Army court-martialed Mitchell for his criticism of the War Department and the armed forces, but it failed to silence him.

Standby Mode

The Air Corps Act of 1926 changed the name of the air arm, making it sound more important but leaving its role and status unchanged. By the 1930s, the Army had largely overcome its early prejudice that aviation had little or no military value. Even so, the Air Corps was regarded as no more than a branch of the Army, like the artillery and the cavalry, and was expected to behave as such. The mission was to support the ground forces. Maj. Gen. Hugh A. Drum, the deputy chief of staff and second ranking officer in the Army, declared that there was no requirement for airplanes to fly farther than three days' march ahead of the infantry.

A provisional GHQ Air Force was formed for Army maneuvers in 1933. With a wary eye on the revolution and continuing unrest in Cuba, the Army kept the headquarters element of the GHQ Air Force in a standby mode after the maneuvers.

To the chagrin of the old guard, the prospects for airpower kept expanding. For example, bigger and better Army bombers challenged the Navy for the coastal defense mission. Proposals kept bubbling up for a separate service. In February 1934, two bills introduced in Congress proposed a separate promotion list and budget for the Air Corps, along with increases in personnel and aircraft.

Between 1919 and 1934, no fewer than 15 special boards, commissions, and committees had pondered the question of what to do about Army aviation. The most significant of these was the Baker Board of 1934, chaired by former Secretary of War Newton D. Baker. It suggested setting up a GHQ Air Force for regular peacetime operations. Such a measure would not only head off



An early B-17C in flight. Whether to develop the B-17 was the biggest issue between Andrews and the Army.

ism dominated US political opinion and defense policy. It was a poor time for the newest part of the Army to be looking to expand.

The War Department understood that aviation had introduced something new into warfare. The Army Reorganization Act of 1920 recognized the Air Service as a combatant branch of the Army, on an organizational par with the Infantry, the Artillery, and the Quartermaster Corps.

Opposite top: B-17s in formation flight. Left: Lt. Gen. Frank Andrews in the cockpit of a Flying Fortress. Andrews was a leading advocate of the development of a long-range bomber.

War, he left a subordinate in charge of affairs in Washington and made his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac in the field, chasing Robert E. Lee back toward Richmond. The Army's war mobilization plan in the 1920s was based on a similar idea.

The concept of a "General Headquarters" had its specific origins with Gen. John J. Pershing, who established such an organization for his American Expeditionary Force in France in World War I. The Army mobilization plan in the 1920s assumed that the Chief of Staff, like Grant in the Civil War, would leave Washington and take command of a Pershing-style GHQ in the field. All land and air combat forces would



In 1935 (l-r), Maj. Jimmy Doolittle (Air Corps Reserves), Brig. Gen. Hap Arnold, and Brig. Gen. Oscar Westover stand next to the Mackay Trophy that Arnold received for a record-setting flight. Arnold was at this time GHQ Air Force's 1st Wing commander. Westover became Chief of the Air Corps later that year.

the demand for a separate air service but would also provide a way to take advantage of the growing capabilities of airpower.

With great fanfare, the GHQ Air Force was set up March 1, 1935, with headquarters at Langley Field, Va. The Chief of the Air Corps, Maj. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois, wanted command of GHQ Air Force for himself, but the Army leaders did not want him to have any more power than he already did.

The commander chosen was Frank M. Andrews—described by *Time* magazine as “a hitherto obscure field officer”—who was jumped in grade from lieutenant colonel to temporary brigadier general. Andrews was a seasoned airman who had begun his Army career in the horse cavalry. No US airman had held such a command since the days of Billy Mitchell in France. No overall General Headquarters had been mobilized, so Andrews reported directly to the Chief of Staff, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, through the Army General Staff.

Air Corps tactical units were taken away from individual field commands and assigned to GHQ Air Force. That meant about 40 percent of the Air Corps was now in GHQ Air Force. Foulois held control of the rest for training, procurement, supply, and other functions. Foulois reported to MacArthur, just as Andrews did.

Thus, the air arm was split into two camps. Organizational competitiveness was inevitable and grew sharper when

Andrews was within the year promoted to temporary major general.

Intramural Arguments

Air Corps cohesion weakened temporarily, but the real significance of the GHQ Air Force was not yet fully apparent. It was a unique force, like nothing else in the Army, with all of the field units of a combat branch assigned to one organization and commanded by an officer of that branch. It was the closest thing so far to an independent air force.

GHQ Air Force had three wings, encompassing 30 tactical squadrons. These squadrons comprised 12 bom-

bardment, 10 pursuit, six attack, and two reconnaissance units. The 1st Wing at March Field, Calif., was commanded by Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, promoted to brigadier general in his new assignment. Brig. Gen. Henry Conger Pratt commanded the 2nd Wing at Langley, and Col. Gerald C. Brant had the 3rd Wing at Barksdale Field, La.

Maj. Gen. Oscar Westover, who succeeded Foulois as Chief of the Air Corps, in December 1935, clashed regularly with Andrews. Westover wanted GHQ Air Force transferred to his control. Andrews opposed this. More fundamentally, Westover was not a boat rocker whereas Andrews flung one challenge after another at the Army.

Westover brought Arnold to Washington as his assistant. Arnold did not want the job, but he got along well with everybody and he was a stabilizing influence. In his memoirs, Arnold said he had previously sided with GHQ Air Force in the “intramural argument” dividing the air arm but that he soon developed “a new kind of sympathy” for Air Corps headquarters.

In 1936, Arnold and Maj. Ira C. Eaker published the first edition of their book, *The Flying Game*, in which they described GHQ Air Force as “the first recognition in the United States of the need for an air force designed, equipped, and trained to operate beyond the sphere of influence of either armies or navies.”

The biggest issue in the running battle between Andrews and the Army was the B-17 bomber. MacArthur, who had chosen Andrews to command GHQ



Maj. Gen. Malin Craig (l) became Army Chief of Staff in 1935. Arnold (r) was appointed assistant chief of the Air Corps in 1936.

Air Force, backed development of an experimental long-range bomber. When GHQ Air Force was activated in 1935, several prototype bombers were flying, among them the four-engine Boeing XB-17, forerunner of the B-17 Flying Fortress. Andrews was the leading advocate of the B-17 and wanted it designated as the standard bomber for the Air Corps.

However, Gen. Malin Craig, who replaced MacArthur as Chief of Staff in October 1935, was ill-disposed toward such bombers or airpower in general. Speaking for the General Staff, Craig's deputy, Maj. Gen. Stanley D. Embrick, said that "the military superiority of ... a B-17 over two or three smaller planes that could be procured with the same funds remains to be established."

Andrews had an extra burden in making the case for the B-17. The public was staunchly isolationist, and strategic bombardment was not an approved Air Corps mission. Thus the purpose of the heavy bomber was initially pitched as coastal defense. As a demonstration of capability, GHQ Air Force B-17s intercepted the Italian ocean liner *Rex* 725 miles east of New York in 1938. The Navy was outraged and so was Craig.

Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring, a strong isolationist, shared Craig's lack of enthusiasm for the B-17. The Army bought only a few B-17s, instead buying cheaper, two-engine bombers.

Westover was killed in an airplane crash in September 1938. Craig offered to nominate Andrews to be Chief of the Air Corps on condition that Andrews stop pushing the B-17. Andrews declined and Arnold was chosen instead. In January 1939, Andrews further antagonized the War Department with a speech to the National Aeronautic Association. In it, he said the US was a sixth-rate airpower. That contradicted Woodring, who was assuring the public of the nation's air strength.

Retribution came swiftly when Andrews' tour at GHQ Air Force ended in March 1939. He reverted from major general to his permanent grade of colonel and was assigned as air officer for the VIII Corps Area in San Antonio—the same backwater to which Mitchell had been exiled in 1925 for similar outspokenness.

The logjam finally was broken by the active intervention in military affairs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In previous times, he had been assistant secretary of the Navy and as offended as anyone by Billy Mitchell. As war

Shifting Lines of Authority

Old Army, 1926. Chief of Air Corps reports to Army General Staff, as do chiefs of Infantry, Artillery, Quartermaster Corps, etc. Flying units in the field controlled by individual corps area commanders.

GHQ Air Force, 1935. Flying units taken away from corps commanders, put into single organization headed by an airman and reporting to the General Staff. Leadership of air arm divided, with Chief of Air Corps also reporting to General Staff but having no control of GHQ Air Force.

Air Corps Control, 1939. Chief of Air Corps—rather than General Staff—designated to "supervise" GHQ Air Force. Nominal change, as General Staff continued to exercise control.

GHQ Army Activation, 1940. All Army field units, including aviation units in GHQ Air Force, assigned to the newly activated GHQ Army.

Army Air Forces, 1941. Both the Chief of the Air Corps and the commander of Air Force Combat Command (formerly GHQ Air Force) report to the Chief of the new Army Air Forces. However, various organizational issues cloud the lines of control.

The Army Triad, 1942. Army divided into three autonomous commands: Army Air Forces, Army Ground Forces (replacing GHQ Army), and Army Service Forces. Office of Chief of Air Corps and Air Force Combat Command dissolved.

clouds gathered in Europe and Asia, though, Roosevelt became a supporter of airpower.

Alarmed by German militarism and the growing capability of the Luftwaffe, President Roosevelt launched a rearmament program. At a White House meeting in November 1938, he called for an Army air force of 20,000 airplanes. He said he did not want to talk about ground forces, that "a new barracks at some post in Wyoming" would not "scare Hitler one goddamned bit." That put aircraft production, including production of the B-17 bomber, on a faster track.

Nothing More Important

At the end of 1938, the Air Corps had only 13 B-17s. When the US entered the war in December 1941, the newly named Army Air Forces had 198, with thousands more on the way. "No single item of our defense today is more important than a large four-engine bomber capacity," Roosevelt said as he cranked up production.

Meanwhile, a number of other important changes took place. Maj. Gen. George C. Marshall replaced Embrick as deputy chief of staff of the Army in 1938. He was a strong supporter of airpower, and he thought highly of Andrews. In July 1939, Craig was on final leave prior to retirement and Marshall, chosen to replace him, was acting Chief of Staff. Risking the displeasure of Craig and Woodring, Marshall re-

called Andrews—in his fourth month of exile in San Antonio—to Washington, promoted him to brigadier general, and made him assistant chief of staff for operations.

(In 1943, Andrews was killed in an air crash. He had advanced to the grade of lieutenant general and was commander of all US forces in the European Theater. It was widely believed that had he lived, he, rather than Dwight D. Eisenhower, would have been the Allied commander for the D-Day invasion.)

Roosevelt had never agreed with the isolationist views of Woodring but did not dismiss him because he could deliver votes at election time. Finally, in July 1940, Woodring was replaced with Henry L. Stimson, a fire-breathing interventionist.

With the departure of Andrews from GHQ Air Force in 1939, the Army entered a zigzag series of adjustments and redrew the organizational chart several times before hitting on a solution that worked.

In March 1939, Delos C. Emmons was promoted to major general and sent to GHQ Air Force to replace Andrews. Concurrently, the Army made another one of its cosmetic changes, switching control of GHQ Air Force—on paper, at least—from the General Staff to the Chief of the Air Corps. This gave the appearance that Hap Arnold, six months into his tour, had gained the control denied to Westover but in reality, Em-



Andrews (front) and staff view an aerial demonstration at the new GHQ Air Force at Langley Field, Va.

mons continued to get his orders from the General Staff.

The Air Corps split widened the following year. With war approaching and mobilization looking more likely, the Army finally activated Army GHQ in July 1940, five years after GHQ Air Force had been activated. Its first task was to train tactical units for four field armies set up in a 1932 mobilization plan. In November 1940, GHQ Air Force assumed its wartime role and was assigned to Army GHQ. The three original wings of GHQ Air Force were soon reorganized as four air forces. Airmen braced themselves, expecting to hear that the four air forces had been placed under the four field armies, but that did not happen.

What did happen was Emmons was promoted to lieutenant general in November 1940, the first airman to achieve that grade. That put him on a par with the commanders of the field armies, who were three-star generals, but it made Emmons senior to Arnold, who was still a two-star. Arnold was deputy chief of staff for air as well as Chief of the Air Corps. This gave him a certain advantage in the decision-making process but, as Arnold said later, it was an “awkward situation.”

(It was the last promotion for Emmons, who would finish World War II as commander of the Alaskan Department. By that time, Arnold was a five-star general commanding the Army Air Forces.)

The lashed-up organization with Army GHQ in charge of operational air and ground forces did not last long. It was becoming obvious that a two-

ocean war would be too complicated to run from a Pershing-style GHQ in the field. Marshall also saw for himself that the General Staff responded with particular slowness on matters affecting the air forces.

A reorganization in June 1941 created the Army Air Forces. It took GHQ Air Force away from Army GHQ, renamed it “Air Force Combat Command,” and assigned it to the AAF. Arnold’s new title was Chief of the Army Air Forces and he controlled both the Air Corps and Air Force Combat Command.

Spatz Returns

Emmons once again reported to Arnold, who was junior to him by one star. Arnold was finally promoted to lieutenant general in December 1941. Later that month, Emmons was sent to command the Army’s Hawaiian Department, replacing Lt. Gen. Walter C. Short, who was relieved following Japan’s attack on US bases in Hawaii.

Air Force Combat Command had only a few months to go before its demise in the next round of reorganizing, but Arnold took the opportunity to bring in Carl A. Spatz as commander and promote him to major general.

In February 1942, *Time* magazine predicted that, unless the Air Force got more autonomy, “the hue and cry for a separate air arm ... will go up again, louder and clearer than before.”

Soon, the Army adopted its fourth

organizational scheme since 1939 and the configuration that would carry it through the war. In March 1942, War Department Circular 59 divided the Army into three autonomous commands—Army Air Forces, Army Ground Forces, and Services of Supply (later Army Service Forces).

Arnold’s title was changed to Commanding General, Army Air Forces. The Office of the Chief of the Air Corps and Air Force Combat Command were abolished and their functions taken over by AAF headquarters. (The Air Corps formally existed until 1947.)

Army GHQ was dissolved and its training functions taken over by Army Ground Forces. That was the end of the last vestige of the 1920s mobilization plan. The GHQ concept had probably been obsolete even back then, but its continuation in the interwar years permitted the air arm to grow and develop.

Circular 59 contained one catch: It was to expire six months after the end of the war. Potentially, the AAF could revert to being no more than a component of the Army. As a practical matter, that was not going to happen. What had begun with the GHQ Air Force in 1935 might be slowed but not stopped.

Arnold suppressed the clamor for Air Force independence until the war was over. From February 1942 on, he was a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, alongside Marshall and the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Ernest J. King.

The 1930s had begun with a small Air Corps flying open-cockpit biplanes as both bombers and pursuit aircraft. It was the most junior branch of the Army, popular with the public but lacking real influence inside the Army. The 1930s saw a great leap in aeronautical technology, and the aircraft of 1940 looked different, were different, and represented a new era. The B-17 bomber was operational and the P-38 fighter was in early stages of production.

Airpower was almost universally recognized as a likely significant force in the coming war. There was no longer any real question about the imperatives of strategic bombardment and other missions independent of the ground forces. During the formative years of GHQ Air Force, the air arm had developed a conceptual and operational cohesion. It had become an air force rather than an air corps. ■

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