CHAPTER 1


James Hudson

Experience is useless unless the right conclusions are drawn from it.
Frederick the Great

This chapter argues that during the North African campaign, the air doctrine(s) employed by the Allies merged into a single approach toward the conduct of tactical air operations. During this campaign, and in conjunction with various other factors such as improved logistics, better intelligence, and increased mobility, the Allied air forces would greatly increase their effectiveness in conducting tactical air operations in conjunction with the ground forces. Although there were certainly further innovations and refinements made to the employment of tactical airpower after the successful conclusion of operations in Tunisia, it was during the North African campaign in which the Allies would gain a common fundamental understanding of tactical air operations which allowed them to improve the system and to integrate new nations into operations.

This is not the first examination of the development of alliance air doctrine during the combined operations in North Africa. In exploring the origins of a coalition air-land doctrine, most writers give serious credit to the Royal Air Force (RAF), specifically the Western Desert Air Force (WDAF), for the development of a practical doctrine that both maintained the flexibility of air operations, by employing centralized command, while still ensuring that the ground

forces received the support they required.² Offering an alternative view is David Mets, who argues that the commanders of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) already understood the correct doctrine, but were unable to implement it in the face of opposition from ground commanders. He thus contends that the sole British contribution was to lend their prestige and combat savvy to the incorporation of the right answer into American doctrinal writings.³ Mets, however, neglects the fact that it was the U.S. air commanders who would first advise Eisenhower to divide his available air assets along national lines, a policy in direct opposition to this “correct” doctrine.⁴ This chapter will broadly follow Paul Johnson’s assertion that: “The record suggests that at this concrete level, [the ways and means to accomplish the doctrine] the American practice of tactical air power was indeed strongly influenced by the British model.”⁵ The RAF had been fighting in the theater since 1940 against both the Italian and Germans and, as such, had developed a degree of familiarity with the employment of tactical air power. This prior experience ensured that the RAF was able to swiftly blend the USAAF into operations as well as pass on their dearly learned lessons of the previous years. Such lessons as learnt by the RAF during the Desert War led to major changes in the doctrine for employing air power, as well as associated changes in the manner of orchestrating the command and control of coalition air forces, which would prove successful in future operations.


