Air Force Historical Studies

Air Power and the Reduction of the Colmar Pocket

January–February 1945

Christopher Koontz

AIR FORCE History and Museums PROGRAM

Cover

Bomb-laden USAAF P–47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) taxi on the flight line at a snow-covered airfield near Nancy, France, before a mission in early 1945. *National Archives.*

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Contents

Bombing Raid on Offenburg Marshalling Yard. **Allied aircraft hit this critical German rail junction repeatedly during Operation Cheerful. The USAAF's 320th Bombardment Group carried out this raid on February 15, 1945, to disrupt German attempts to reorganize after their withdrawal from the Colmar Pocket. Note the numerous craters from previous attacks surrounding the rail yard.** *National Archives.*

Introduction

The morning of January 26, 1945, was, like many of the mornings that preceded it in the French province of Alsace, bitterly cold and remained that way as the day went on. A company of U.S. infantrymen—or, more accurately, what was left of one, for all but one of its officers were dead and only 18 of its 120-strong original complement of enlisted men remained alive or unwounded after the heavy fighting it had endured over the last three days—had taken up a position in the forest north of the small town of Holtzwihr. Two days earlier, an attempt to take the town from the Germans holding it had been bloodily repulsed, and the company was the first element of 3d Infantry Division to arrive for a second try.

After daylight broke, the cold and weary soldiers dug foxholes into the frozen ground of the field that stretched across Holtzwihr's northern border as they waited for reinforcements. The arrival of a second infantry company and a pair of tank destroyers, however, attracted the attention of the German troops defending the area. Shortly after 2 p.m., artillery shells began exploding around the company's hastily dug emplacements, and after the barrage lifted, six German tanks rumbled out of the woods on the opposite side of the snow-covered field. Behind them were more than 200 soldiers on foot. One of the U.S. tank destroyers quickly fell victim to the panzer gunners. Its surviving crew exited their burning vehicle and hurried for the perceived safety of the woods. They were soon joined by the crew of the second tank destroyer after it slid into a ditch, leaving it immobile and the crew unable to use its main gun.

With his unit badly outnumbered and outgunned, the U.S. company commander ordered his men to fall back into the forest. Staying behind, he called for artillery support and returned fire with his carbine as best he could while tank and machine-gun fire shredded the trees around him. He was new in command, having assumed responsibility just the night before as the company's last remaining officer, but he remained calm. Allowing the tanks to roll by his position, he passed targeting grids to the artillerymen while keeping an eye on the enemy troops as they closed in.

His efforts paid off, and the German infantry began to take casualties of their own as U.S. shells screamed over the treetops and exploded in the field. But they still advanced, and others replaced those who had been killed or wounded.

After he ran out of ammunition, the company commander hurried to the blazing tank destroyer, lugging his field telephone with him. Clambering to the turret, he slewed the armored vehicle's .50-caliber machine gun toward the German troops and opened fire, stopping only to talk to his men sheltered in the woods or update the artillery target coordinates. Some of the requested rounds landed perilously close to his own position, for some of the Germans closed to just yards from the tank destroyer before they fell or were turned back by high-explosive blasts, shrapnel, and the unrelenting machine-gun fire he kept pouring into their ranks. He was wounded in the leg by German artillery fire, but 2d Lt. Audie L. Murphy, the commander of Company B, 15th Infantry, 3d Infantry Division, stayed where he was. Even the reappearance of the panzers failed to move him from his position. Although they scored two direct hits on the tank destroyer, the German tank crews seemed unable to discern the origin of the fire that had pinned down their infantry support, and they hesitated from renewing their assault on the edge of the forest without foot troops to screen their movements. Writing about the event years later, Murphy wryly noted that the fires that crept closer and closer to the tank destroyer's dangerously combustible fuel and ammunition stores during the hour-long stand had made his feet warm for the first time in three days.[1]

As the flames reduced Murphy's tank destroyer to a smoldering wreck, sixteen U.S. Army Air Force P–47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers arrived overhead. Murphy had the location of the Germans marked by smoke artillery rounds, and the Thunderbolts strafed the enemy-held parts of the field and bombed the town to prevent its use as an assembly or fallback position. Still more P–47s arrived shortly after and attacked German troops and vehicles on the roads nearby. Now threatened from the air and unable to free their infantry from Murphy's field of fire, the panzers withdrew. After Murphy's field telephone gave out, he decided that he had done as much as he could where he was and abandoned his firing position. It turned out to be a wise decision, for the tank destroyer finally exploded shortly after he reached the edge of the woods. There, he rallied his men and wrested control of the field from the Germans with a furious counterattack. The application of combined U.S. air and ground

1. Audie Murphy, *To Hell and Back: The Classic Memoir of World War II by America's Most Decorated Soldier* (NY: Henry Holt, 1949), 238–43; Sgt. Elmer C. Brawley, "Complete Description of Service Rendered," Mar 1, 1945, NARA, RG 319, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299776.

First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) Ground Crew. **Airmen assigned to the 371st Fighter Group at Tantonville, France, try to keep themselves warm in the bitterly cold and wet conditions that characterized the winter of 1944–45.** *National Archives.*

power proved overwhelming. Murphy's soldiers were safe, and he had prevented the Germans from breaking through the forest and into his unit's rear lines. The next day, U.S. troops took the town.

The newly liberated town of Holtzwihr was situated along a canal that ran east from the Alsatian city of Colmar and led to a second canal cut parallel to the Rhine River. Behind the second canal were the last two miles of French soil, and once Allied troops had taken that small area, only the Rhine stood between them and Germany. The engagement at Holtzwihr was just one among hundreds of firefights that took place between January 20 and February 8, 1945, and Murphy was just one of the tens of thousands of U.S. and French troops ordered to push the German Nineteenth Army out of a defensive perimeter that surrounded Colmar and guarded the French banks of the Rhine. The Germans called these last remaining square miles of French territory south of Strasbourg in their possession the Alsatian Bridgehead, but it is more generally known by its Allied appellation, the Colmar Pocket.

Most of the Allied aircraft supporting the operation to clear the Colmar Pocket were part of a hastily assembled and provisionally organized air force comprised of U.S. Army Air Force and French Air Force medium bomber, fighter-bomber, fighter, and reconnaissance elements. Throughout the campaign to cut off and destroy the German forces in the Colmar Pocket, the provisional air force provided not only close air support, such as it did for Murphy's company at Holtzwihr, but also struck vital bridges, rail targets, and supply depots as part of an interdiction campaign against German lines of communication. Together, air strikes against German troop formations and logistical targets served to degrade the ability of Nineteenth Army to maintain its toehold in Alsace. This study explores the causes that permitted the successes achieved by Allied air power during the campaign, as well as the constraints that limited or prevented greater effectiveness.

To provide context for the aerial operations that took place over and behind the Colmar Pocket in early 1945, the study begins with a discussion of the strategic and operational developments that led to the formation of the German salient in Alsace. Here, a combination of stunning tactical successes and frustrating failures resulted in the Allies failing to cut off the German Nineteenth Army after U.S. and French forces crossed through passes in the Vosges Mountains on their way to liberate Strasbourg and reach the Rhine. Complicating matters for the Allied ground forces was their lack of sufficient air support, which was caused in part by faulty planning on the part of senior air and ground leaders. The failure to establish an effective headquarters structure, to assemble the tactical units necessary for a numbered air force-level organization, and to create adequate bases and logistical supply lines had limited the application of air power for months after the initial Allied landings in southern France in the summer of 1944 and continued to do so well into 1945. While many of these shortcomings had been addressed or were in the process of being ameliorated, they still proved to be a limiting factor when planning and conducting a large-scale operation such as that necessary to close the Colmar Pocket.

Forced to fight with what they had available, the staff and leadership of the Allied provisional air force crafted plans that resulted in minimal changes to their usual air operations, which already gave priority to interdiction and air support, to support the offensive that began in January 1945. While the assembled aerial forces lacked sufficient mass to meet all of the requirements demanded of them, this was nothing new, and the air plans provided an effective means to make do with what the provisional air force had on hand. Air power, as it did at Holtzwihr, provided tactical

flexibility and, at times, overwhelming power at the local level when applied in support of ground forces, destroying a considerable number of German strongholds, troop formations, and armored vehicles. More effective was a wider program of interdiction strikes, which hampered German attempts to reinforce the Colmar Pocket during the opening stages of the campaign, and to withdraw from it and relocate their remaining forces during its later stages.

* * *

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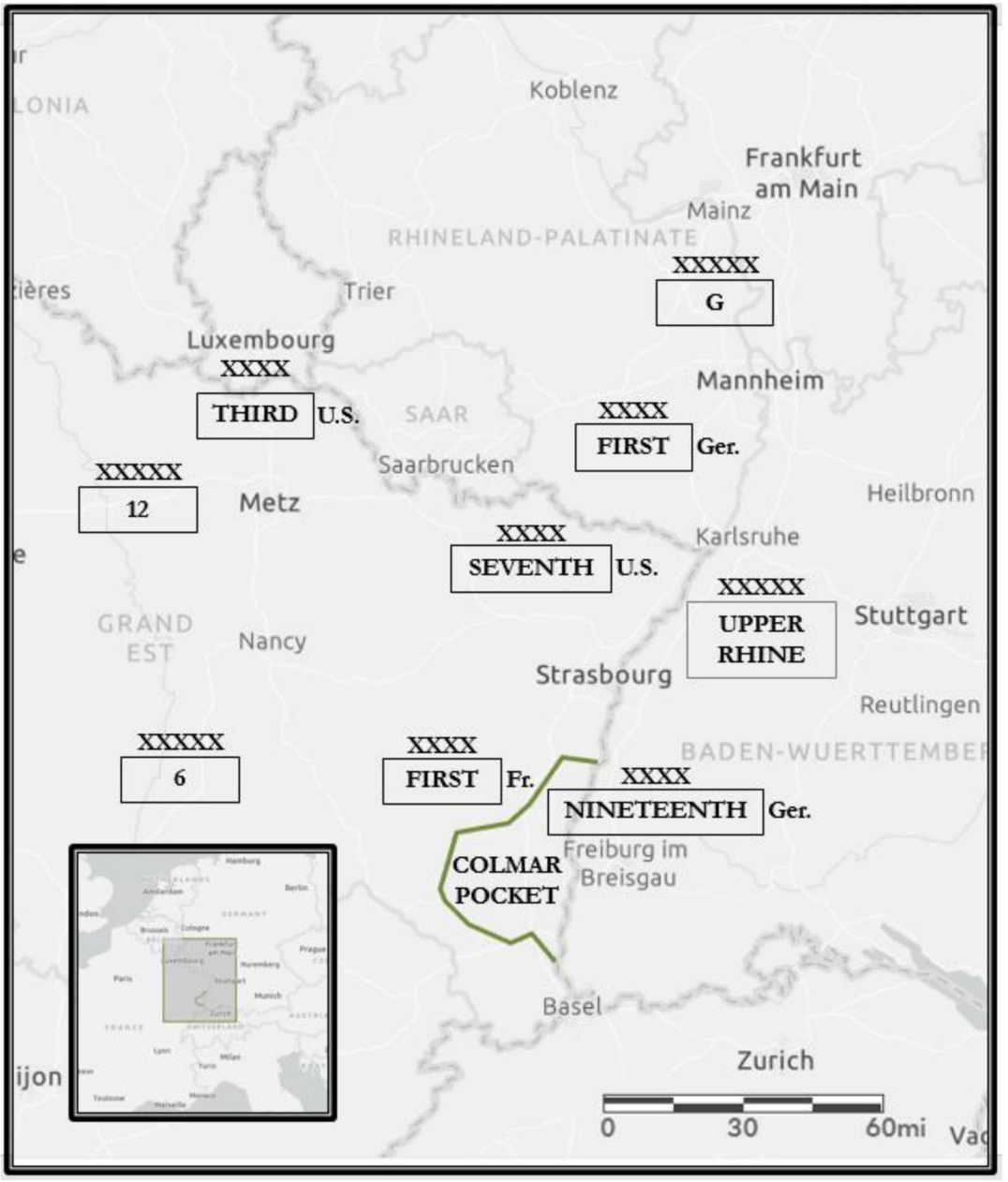


6th Army Group Front, January 1945

One

Formation of the Colmar Pocket

In January 1945, Allied troops in northeastern France and the Low Countries prepared to cross the Rhine River and begin the long-anticipated drive into Germany that would bring the Second World War to a hard-won conclusion. But before the push into the heartland of the Third Reich could begin, U.S. and French elements of Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers's 6th Army Group had to conduct a major operation to reduce the Colmar Pocket, a formidable salient occupied by the Wehrmacht's Nineteenth Army in the French region of Alsace. The effort to eliminate this German foothold, which Allied commanders hoped would take days to accomplish, instead took almost a month. The U.S. and French troops ringing the salient received considerable reinforcements, but bitter winter conditions made dislodging the German defenders even more difficult.

One crucial advantage that the Allies held, however, was command of the skies. Although the weather mitigated their ability to employ the air power available to them to its fullest, U.S. and French air forces provided air-ground strikes along the German front lines and conducted an interdiction campaign against transportation and communications targets far behind them. Together, Allied aerial attacks weakened German defenses, sapped enemy morale, and disrupted the logistical network needed to maintain an aggressive defense of the Colmar Pocket. The final elimination of the German salient in February 1945 effectively destroyed the Nineteenth Army, bringing stability to the southern flank of the Allied front lines and clearing the way for the Rhine crossings and the eventual defeat of the German forces defending the Third Reich's Western Front.

The Allied advance to Alsace followed the successful campaign to liberate southern France. It had begun on August 15, 1944, when U.S., British, Canadian, and French forces landed on the Riviera, either wading ashore or parachuting behind the front lines as part of Operation Dragoon. Their landing beaches had been isolated by a lengthy and thorough bombing

Moving Ashore After Operation Dragoon. **USAAF airmen take a break at a hastily built Allied airfield in southern France. Heavy bombers of the Mediterranean-based Fifteenth Air Force were used as transports to deliver supplies, munitions, and fuel to bases such as this one until regular logistical channels could be established. A pair of French Supermarine Spitfire fighters can be seen in the background.** *National Archives.*

campaign that targeted artillery batteries, coastal defense emplacements, and radar installations, as well as diversionary targets selected to mask the Allies' intended landing zones. The preparatory aerial bombing also damaged or destroyed dozens of critical bridges and blocked road crossings, degrading the Wehrmacht's ability to dispatch reinforcements or reposition units for a counterattack against the beachhead.[1] Once ashore, the invasion force, aided by air power based in Corsica, Sardinia, and mainland Italy, as well as British and U.S. aircraft carriers, made swift progress against the understrength German Nineteenth Army, led by Lt. Gen. (*General der Infantrie*) Friedrich Wiese, which was charged with defending the area.[2] As the Germans faltered and fell back from the beachhead, Allied bombers and fighter-bombers struck railroads and marshaling yards, creating havoc

1. EUCOM, "Isolation of the Battlefield—Southern France," Part G of "Battlefield Studies, World War II," Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL (AFHRA), 519.042, A5520, 1–4; Air Sect., General Board, USF/ETO, "Air Power in the European Theater of Operations," Study No. 56, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Command, Carlisle Barracks, PA (USHAEC), 16.

2. A-2, HQ AAF, *The AAF in the Invasion of Southern France: An Interim Report* (1945; repr., Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1992), 10–19; Joachim Ludewig, *Rückzug: The German Retreat from France, 1944*, ed. David T. Zabecki (Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2012), 65–66, 75–79. For overviews of the landings and campaign in southern France, see Detlef Vogel, "German and Allied Conduct of the War in the West," Part II of *The Strategic Air War in Europe and the War in the West and East Asia, 1943–1944/5*, Vol. VII of *Germany and the Second World War*, tr. Derry Cook-Radmore et al., 9 Vols. (Clarendon: Oxford UP, 2006), 636–62, and Robert M. Citino, *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944–1945* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2017), 315–24.

in the German rear that stalled troop movements and disrupted supply lines.[3] After the end of the war, Nineteenth Army's chief of staff lamented the heavy damage done to German lines of communication before and during the invasion, noting the "exemplary" air support provided to Allied ground units as they advanced from the beachhead.[4] Harried from the air and pressured by Allied ground forces, the German Nineteenth Army had little choice but to retreat northward through the Rhone valley.

With the beachhead in southern France secure, on September 15, 1944, the two Allied armies pursuing the fleeing Nineteenth Army—the U.S. Seventh Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Alexander M. Patch, and Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's French Army B (soon to be renamed the First French Army)—were placed under Devers's command as part of his 6th Army Group. Command and control of the army group passed from Allied Forces Headquarters, which was responsible for the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), which oversaw the European Theater of Operations.[5] By this time, Patch's forces had advanced far enough north to link with elements of the U.S. Third Army under Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr., connecting Devers's 6th Army Group's front with that of Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley's 12th Army Group.

While the southern end of Eisenhower's "broad front" in Western Europe was taking shape, the retreating German Nineteenth Army reached the Vosges Mountains, which dominated the western frontier of Alsace and formed the last major natural obstacle between Allied forces and the Rhine in northeastern France. There, Wiese's battle-weary troops linked with the Wehrmacht's First Army, which had headed north from southwestern France in an ill-fated attempt to parry the Allied forces driving from Normandy to Paris, only to end up retreating eastward. The two German armies became part of a defensive front west of the Vosges held by two understrength army groups.[6] U.S. and French forces pursuing them ground to a halt at the foothills of the Vosges as they ran into the reinvigorated German defenses and an early and wet winter arrived, hampering operations

3. EUCOM, "Isolation of the Battlefield—Southern France," AFHRA, 519.042, A5520, 5–6; AAF Evaluation Board in the ETO, "Effectiveness of Third Phase Tactical Air Operations in the European Theater, 5 May 1944–8 May 1945," Aug 20, 1945, Part 1-C, "Invasion of Southern France (Dragoon), 15 August 1944," AFHRA, 138.4-36, A1175, 110.

4. Maj. Gen. Walter Botsch, "History of U.S. Seventh Army: Overall Estimate," HQ USAREUR, *Foreign Military Studies 1945–54*, B-213, USAHEC, 9.

5. Jeffery J. Clarke and Robert Ross Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine: The U.S. Army in World War II—The European Theater of Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1993), 26–30. The 6th Army Group had been formally established on August 1, 1944, with the expectation that it would assume command and control of Allied forces in southern France after the initial invasion.

6. G-2, 12th Army Grp, "Destruction of the German Armies in Western Europe, June 6th 1944–May 9, 1945," Sept 25, 1945, USAHEC, 12–15; Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign: The U.S. Army in World War II—The European Theater of Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1950), 43–52, 203–5; Vogel, "German and Allied Conduct of the War in the West," 631–32, 659.

in the air and on the ground. Compounding these difficulties, Devers's forces were now more than 400 miles from their initial landing beaches. They had outrun their logistical tether, and competing demands for scarce supplies such as ammunition and fuel led to friction between U.S. and French commanders.[7] Both the Allies and the Germans were weakened, under-supplied, and subject to the vagaries of the weather. Weeks turned into a month, and then longer, as U.S., French, and German troops tried to break their opponents' lines, to no avail.

In mid-October 1944, Devers wrote to British General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, the Allied supreme commander in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, describing the stalemate in the Vosges. Concerned but undaunted by the plight of his under-provisioned army group, Devers informed Wilson that "at the moment here in France we are in good shape but we are working hand to mouth and we have had to slow up our operations until our supply catches up."[8] Victory in the Vosges would have to wait until the Allies sorted out their lines of communication.

Another restraint on the progress of the U.S. and French armies that concerned Devers was a lack of sufficient air power. SHAEF had not created a permanent air organization to support Operation Dragoon and the subsequent drive to the Franco-German border. By the time the offensive had ground to a halt, USAAF's Ninth Air Force and the commands of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces had already recalled most of the Allied air units supporting it so they could resume their original assignments covering 12th Army Group's area of operations and the Mediterranean Theater. As Devers pointed out to de Lattre at the latter's command post in Besançon on October 12, 1944, each of his two armies was constrained to a single option for any future advance: "a very narrow front backed up in depth" that could be covered by the meager air forces that had been allocated to cover his army group's operations.[9]

By mid-November, the Allies managed to establish effective lines of communication to reach Devers's forces. Now adequately supplied and reinforced by fresh U.S. infantry divisions, the 6th Army Group finally drove through gaps in the Vosges in mid-November 1944. The Allied advance into the mountains forced the surrender of more than 15,000

7. G-3, 6th Army Grp, "Final Report, World War II," Jul 1, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 13–15; Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, Diary, October 8, 1944, USAHEC, Jacob L. Devers Papers.

8. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Henry Maitland Wilson, SACMED, Oct 19, 1944, York County (PA) Historical Center (YCHC), Devers Papers, Box 21, Fld 11. At the time, Devers still held the position of Deputy Supreme Commander, Mediterranean Theater, and would hold it until October 22, when he was succeeded by Lt. Gen. Joseph T. McNarney. Ray S. Cline, *Washington Command Post: The U.S. Army in World War II—The War Department* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1951), 376.

9. Devers Diary, Oct 12, 1944, USAHEC.

Supplying the Air Campaign in Southern France. **Armorers at a hastily constructed airfield in southern France use a crane to stack 500-pound general purpose bombs. The establishment of facilities such as this one allowed XII Tactical Air Command to provide steady air cover for 6th Army Group's advance during the autumn of 1944.** *National Archives.*

German troops, effectively destroying two Wehrmacht divisions, and drove a wedge between the German First and Nineteenth Armies.[10] Devers's troops soon neared the German border, liberating the cities of Belfort and Strasbourg and pushing the German Nineteenth Army up against the Rhine. However, in order to pass through the mountains, 6th Army Group had to divide its forces, sending the U.S. Seventh Army through the Saverne Pass to the north and the First French Army through the Belfort Gap to the south. The road network in the Belfort Gap had been swamped by weeks of rainy weather, slowing the French advance. Lost time and the geographic dispersion of the Allied forces allowed the Germans to consolidate a new defensive line in the form of a salient around Colmar. This city lay roughly in the middle of the eighty miles that stretched from north to south between Strasbourg and Belfort. Situated in a massive plain and protected by the Vosges to the west and the Rhine to the east, it provided a natural pivot point for what proved to be a formidable defensive perimeter. German defenders could count on strong artillery support from the German banks of the Rhine and had adequate bridging across the river

10. G-2, 6th Army Grp, "Final Report, World War II," NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.6, Box 1308, 10, 15–16.

to sustain a lengthy stand in Alsace. Ordered by Adolf Hitler himself to stand their ground, the occupants of the salient readied for the inevitable Allied attempt to dislodge them.[11]

Despite the importance the Führer granted the position, what became known as the Colmar Pocket, which stretched forty-five miles north and south along the Rhine's western banks and twenty-five miles deep into the Allies' front lines, initially appeared to hold little strategic significance.[12] At the end of November, General Eisenhower paid a visit to the 6th Army Group's front in Alsace. Pleased with the progress that 6th Army Group had made, he wrote to U.S. Army chief of staff Gen. George C. Marshall giving an optimistic assessment of the strategic situation along the Allied southern flank. Eisenhower informed Marshall that he had ordered Devers's army group to "take on the task of mopping up west of the Rhine so that Devers can hurriedly throw his strength to the north" as soon as possible.[13] The supreme commander wanted to add Patch's Seventh Army to the three armies of Bradley's 12th Army Group already battering away at German defenses on the Siegfried Line while de Lattre's army consolidated its hold on the newly liberated French frontier.

Eisenhower's order came as a disappointment, but not a surprise, to Devers, who had known for more than a month that the supreme commander intended to use his army group as a screening force to protect the southern flank of Bradley's advance into the Ruhr and Saar regions, the industrial heartland of the Third Reich.[14] Eisenhower's decision to halt 6th Army Group's advance—the U.S. Army's official history characterized it as "dubious"—froze Devers's front in place, and the supreme commander's assessment of affairs in Alsace soon turned to irritation as the French army struggled to reduce the Colmar Pocket.[15] A frustrated Devers, who had been preparing to bypass the pocket and send the U.S. Seventh Army east

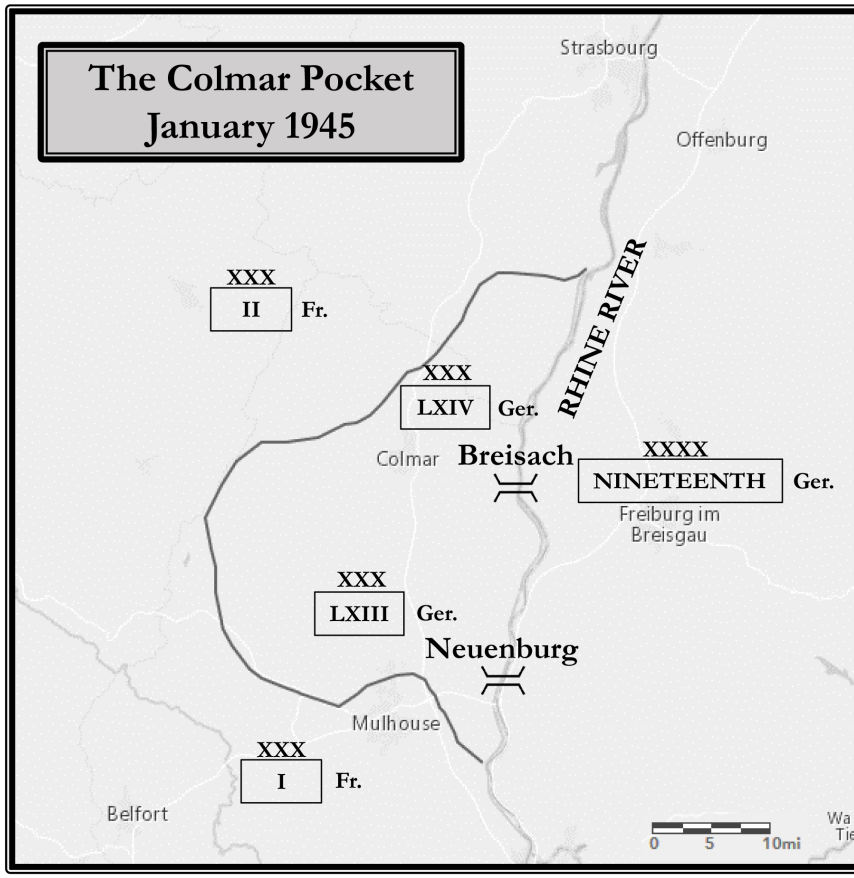
11. HQ, Seventh Army, History, Phase Three, NARA, RG 338, Entry P50338, Box 4, 525–28, 670–71; G-2, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.6, Box 1308, 16–17; Jonathan O. Seaman, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," *Military Review* 31:7 (Oct 1951), 40–42. Colonel Seaman served as one of 6th Army Group's assistant operations officers.

12. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 431–37, 533; Vogel, "German and Allied Conduct of the War in the West," 675; Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1999), 206–11.

13. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, SCAEF, to Gen. George C. Marshall, CSA, Nov 27, 1944, Msg 2143, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years*, Alfred D. Chandler, ed., 5 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1970), 4:2320–22 (hereafter *Eisenhower Papers: War Years*); Russell Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign of Germany and France 1944–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981), 408–9; James Scott Wheeler, *Jacob L. Devers: A General's Life* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2015), 372–73.

14. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, SCAEF, to Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, Oct 23, 1944, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 21, Fld 11. The letter is reprinted as Msg 2064 in *Eisenhower Papers: War Years*, 4:2249–50.

15. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 437–45. See also G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 23.



across the Rhine, ruefully diverted Patch's army north as ordered.[16] Yet he still harbored notions of fording the river and pressing into Germany, meeting with senior air commanders in early December to discuss plans for an air campaign to degrade German defenses along both sides of the Rhine to set conditions for a future offensive. "All that is needed," he confidently wrote to his diary, "is about three days of good weather. We have the will and the brains; we need more bombs."[17]

While the Allies adjusted their front lines, the Germans reinforced theirs. Intent on keeping Devers's armies tied down west of the Rhine,

16. Wheeler, *Devers*, 372–73, 379; Rick Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944–1945* (NY: Henry Holt, 2013), 372–75.

17. Devers Diary, Dec 7, 1944, USAHEC; David N. Spires, *Air Power for Patton's Army: The XIX Tactical Air Command in the Second World War* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2002), 174. Three days later, staffers from XII Tactical Air Command, which covered 6th Army Group's area of operations, and Seventh Army began discussions regarding air and ground support for a Rhine crossing by Patton's Third Army, which could possibly be used as a springboard for a subsequent crossing by Patch's army. The German attack in the Ardennes ensured that these discussions never passed the preliminary stages. See Spires, 177–79.

Hitler insisted that Nineteenth Army maintain its precarious position in Alsace and entrusted the defense of the Third Reich's southwestern frontier to Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, leader of the feared Schutzstaffel (SS).[18] On November 29, 1944, Himmler took charge of what was known as Army Group Upper Rhine (*Oberkommando Oberrhein*), which contained only one true army, the Nineteenth, engaged on the front lines. The remainder of Himmler's forces, a motley assemblage of training, reserve, and police units, were collected and placed under subordinate SS commands east of the Rhine. The SS chief owed his new position to his personal loyalty to the Führer, not military acumen or experience. Driven by political zeal and concerned with maintaining his privileged position within the Nazi hierarchy, he had no intention of merely holding the pocket in Alsace; rather, he hoped to reward Hitler's faith in him by retaking Strasbourg. To inspire his frontline troops, he relieved Wiese as commander of Nineteenth Army on December 18, replaced him with Lt. Gen. (*General der Infanterie*) Siegfried Rasp, and began sending reinforcements and supplies into the salient around Colmar.[19] Corresponding with the arrival of new men and supplies, Rasp received orders to move much of his logistical support behind the Rhine. These units had little offensive or defensive capabilities, and getting them out of the way would free up the roads and rails in occupied Alsace for units with greater combat power.[20]

The flurry of German activity in northeastern France did not go unnoticed by Devers and his staff, who expected their foe to make better use of scarce time and resources by strengthening defensive positions on the far side of the Rhine. Perplexed by Himmler's quixotic intent to reclaim Strasbourg and determination to hold the Colmar Pocket, 6th Army Group's intelligence staff judged in a postwar report that his arrival gave the Allies "an added advantage."[21] Making matters worse for the Germans, Himmler brought with him a host of poorly chosen subordinate commanders and staff officers, heralding "a new low" for command effectiveness within the Wehrmacht.[22] The diminished competence within the army group headquarters was echoed in the ranks it commanded. The troops sent to bolster the German toehold in Alsace were mostly an amalgamation of straggler units, reserves, and, despite the order to move them behind the

18. Maj. Gen. Friedrich von Mellenthin, et al., "Army Group G (20 Sep-8 Nov 1944): Report of the Chief of Staff," *FMS*, B-078, USAHEC, 105–6, 117.

19. Lt. Gen. Friedrich Wiese, "The 19th Army in the Belfort Gap, in the Vosges, and Alsace," *FMS*, B-781, USAHEC, 21; Col. Kurt Brandstädter, "Fighting of the 19. 'Armee' for the Bridgehead 'Elsass' and Defense of the Upper-Rhine Front from 4 January to 21 March 1945," *FMS*, B-463, USAHEC, 4–5.

20. Army Grp Oberrhein to 19 Army, Msg. 110, Dec 8, 1944, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 65873, Roll 172, 7223763.

21. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.6, Box 1308, 14.

22. Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2000), 221.

Himmler and Hausser. **Heinrich Himmler, leader of the Schutzstaffel (SS), commanded Army Group Upper Rhine during the early stages of the Allied assault to clear the Colmar Pocket. Behind him is Waffen-SS General Paul Hausser, who replaced Himmler as the overall German commander of the forces in the region during the operation.** *U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.*

Rhine, support elements with limited combat power and little chance of holding out for long against a coordinated combined-arms assault backed by air power, armor, and artillery. Although Nineteenth Army was nominally comprised of two corps incorporating eight divisions and reserve units, its major combat elements were undermanned and short of supplies. The army's chief of staff estimated that its actual frontline fighting strength in early 1945 numbered possibly as low as 11,000 combat-effective troops.[23] Nonetheless, the German high command was committed to holding the pocket with whatever forces it could muster, and the six months that had passed since the invasion of Normandy had given the Wehrmacht ample opportunities to demonstrate its ability to plan and conduct defensive

23. Brandstädter, "Fighting of the 19. 'Armee' for the Bridgehead 'Elsass' and Defense of the Upper-Rhine Front from 4 January to 21 March 1945," 6–12.

U.S. Army Leaders in Northern France. **(***From the left***) General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower confers with Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr., and Lt. Gen. Alexander M. Patch at Lunéville, France, on March 17, 1945, during the advances of Third and Seventh Armies to the Rhine. Eisenhower considered the reduction of the Colmar Pocket to be an essential precondition for the advance of Patton's and Patch's armies across the Rhine.** *USAF.*

holding operations on the Western Front. As events proved, although deficient in numbers, experience, and logistical support, the Germans defending the Colmar Pocket would not give up without a fight.

Himmler's bid to seize the initiative in Alsace coincided with the Third Reich's last major offensive against the Allies on the Western Front. On December 16, 1944, the Germans launched a surprisingly strong counterattack in the Ardennes sector of the Allied front, some 125 miles northwest of the Colmar Pocket. As the reeling Allies shifted to the defensive in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge, de Lattre's French forces attempted to evict Nineteenth Army from their now-strengthened salient around Colmar. Preparations for the assault had begun well before the German thrust in the Ardennes, but the French troops were exhausted by five months of steady combat and were short of personnel, trained officers, and equipment. They were in no shape to "mop up" the Colmar Pocket, as Eisenhower had directed, and failed to do so, even after receiving assistance from units of the U.S. Seventh Army.[24] Any future attempt to roust the

24. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 27; Seventh Army, History, Phase Three, NARA, RG 338, Entry P50338, Box 4, 525–528, 675–678; John A. Adams, *General Jacob Devers: World War II's Forgotten Four Star* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2015), 273–80.

Germans from their positions in Alsace would require an even greater commitment of manpower and materiel on the part of their U.S. allies.

The inability of the French to eliminate the Colmar Pocket weighed heavily on Eisenhower, who was already concerned by the unforeseen scope and savagery of the German assault in the Ardennes. He later claimed that the Colmar Pocket imposed a "definite restrictive influence" on his command options during the Ardennes offensive by preventing a wholesale redeployment of the U.S. Seventh Army to reinforce Bradley's buckling front lines in Belgium and Luxembourg. The predicament only added to his already pronounced irritation that Devers had allowed such a sizable salient to exist in the first place.[25] Facing a threat far greater than that posed by the enemy forces ensconced around Colmar, Eisenhower issued an order to 6th Army Group on December 18, 1944, to suspend all offensive operations so that it could secure 12th Army Group's right flank. To comply with the new directive, the U.S. Seventh Army assumed responsibility for a part of the front previously assigned to Patton's Third Army and reverted to a defensive posture, forestalling any hope of joining the French to accomplish Eisenhower's accompanying order to "eliminate the Colmar Pocket" in the near future.[26]

To this point, Devers remained confounded by the apparent determination of the Germans to hold onto their bastion in Alsace. He had long expected that they would evacuate their troops occupying the pocket and reposition them in locations more favorable for slowing the Allied line of advance once they crossed the river. This proved to be an incorrect assumption; even one of Devers's more sympathetic biographers judged his presumption that the Germans would withdraw from the pocket as a "major miscalculation."[27] After receiving his new orders from Eisenhower to clear the pocket, Devers wrote to remind his superior that his "main mission" was to support Patton's front, which limited his options to assign the forces needed to "close the pocket rapidly." He further warned that even if de Lattre achieved victory, his army would "be greatly in need of refitting and training. They will not have one single division that will be good for offensive action."[28] Nonetheless, smarting from the supreme commander's displeasure, Devers wrote a chastising memo to de Lattre. Echoing Eisenhower's criticism, Devers made clear his disappointment

25. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 352.

26. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, SCAEF, to Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley, CG, 12th Army Grp, and Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, Dec 18, 1944, Msg 2178, *Eisenhower Papers: War Years*, 4:2356.

27. Wheeler, *Devers*, 379. See also Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 550–55, and David P. Colley, *Decision at Strasbourg: Ike's Strategic Mistake to Halt the Sixth Army Group at the Rhine in 1944* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute, 2008), 180–87.

28. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, SCAEF, Dec 18, 1944, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 20, Fld 31.

that one of his armies, eight divisions strong, continued to be "contained by a German force of much lesser strength," hoping to goad his French subordinate to commit his forces in a coordinated attack to finally crush the enemy salient.[29]

Devers's frustration with the French failure to evict the Germans from Alsace increased later in the month when he received warnings from his intelligence staff that the Germans were massing forces to initiate yet another offensive, this one directed against his own armies. His mistake in leaving the pocket contained was quickly compounded by the start of the expected assault, code named Northwind (*Nordwind*), as the new year began. Operation Northwind included attacks by the German Nineteenth Army across the pocket's perimeter, accompanied by other thrusts against Patch's overextended U.S. Seventh Army north and northwest of the salient in Alsace and Lorraine. Although smaller in scale than the Ardennes offensive, the eruption of enemy activity in 6th Army Group's sector still required equal amounts of grim determination and firepower to suppress, bolstered by heavy bomber missions flown by the U.S. Eighth Air Force against supply depots and transportation facilities in southern Germany.[30]

As they had in the Ardennes, Allied commanders recovered from early German successes, repositioned their forces, and, when weather allowed, matched counterattacks on the ground with massed aerial assaults against German troop concentrations and lines of communication. Despite weeks of bitter winter fighting, the Germans failed to achieve any strategic objectives with either of their offensives. By mid-January 1945, the Wehrmacht had been beaten back in the Ardennes by superior air and land power, and while Northwind had inflicted heavy losses upon Patch's army, 6th Army Group had contained Himmler's attempt to expand the Colmar Pocket. The Germans had managed only to extend their bridgehead a few miles to the north by taking the town of Erstein during an advance up the Ill River, which roughly demarcated the pocket's uppermost defensive line. This small success achieved, the Germans seemed content to limit their activities to "aggressive patrolling actions and harassing fire" around the northern edges of the salient, according to a 6th Army Group report.[31] Other than seizing Erstein, the only other notable accomplishment of Northwind was the sparking of an ugly row between Eisenhower and

29. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 French Army, Dec 18, 1944, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 20, Fld 31.

30. David G. Rempel, "Battle of the Bulge," Chap. 19 of *Europe: Argument to V-E Day*, Vol. 3 of *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, 7 vols., ed. Wesley F. Craven and James Lea Cate (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1951), 701–2; Citino, *Wehrmacht's Last Stand*, 409–20.

31. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 18, Jan 20, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

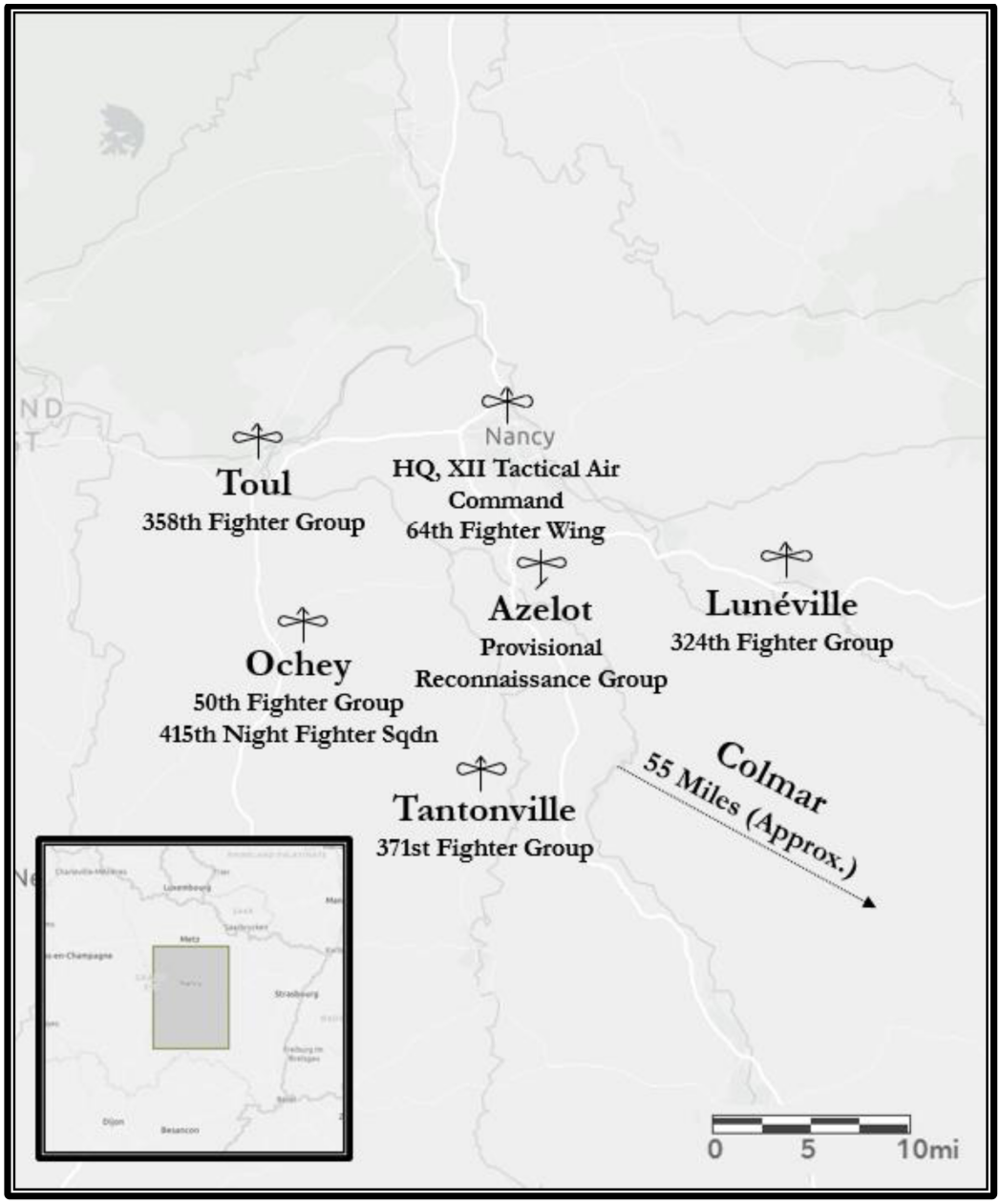
French leader Charles de Gaulle after the supreme commander proposed a temporary withdrawal from Strasbourg in order to tighten up his defensive lines. The disagreement between Eisenhower and de Gaulle soured personal relations between the two, but it did not fracture the alliance in any substantial manner.[32]

The unpredicted ability of the Germans to mass air and ground forces for the Ardennes and Alsace offensives, however, had caused great consternation among the senior civilian and military leadership of the Allies. Concerned as ever with protecting the southern flank of the Allied "broad front" stretching from the Low Countries to Switzerland, Eisenhower continued to press Devers to eliminate the nagging enemy presence at Colmar once and for all.[33] On January 13, he sent his chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, to meet with Devers. One of Smith's main functions, as one of Devers's biographers noted, was to serve as Eisenhower's proxy "when there was a problem or a subordinate needed a stiff talking to," and one of the topics he brought up with Devers was the German enclave in Alsace.[34] Smith's visit was not needed to goad Devers into action, for 6th Army Group's staff was already developing plans for a combined U.S./French operation to crush the Colmar Pocket. As Devers's planners pored over maps, charts, intelligence estimates, and troop and equipment tables, they gave the future offensive an unlikely code name: Cheerful.

32. Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 768. For the Franco-American dispute over Strasbourg, see Franklin Louis Gurley, "Policy Versus Strategy: The Defense of Strasbourg in Winter 1944–1945," *Journal of Military History* 58:3 (July 1994), 481–514, and Forrest C. Pogue, *The Supreme Command: The U.S. Army in World War II—The European Theater of Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1954), 398–401.

33. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 347; Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, SCAEF, to Gen. George C. Marshall, CSA, Jan 12, 1945, Msg 2237, *Eisenhower Papers: War Years*, 4:2424–25; Carlo d'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (NY: Henry Holt, 2001), 665–70.

34. Adams, *Devers*, 320. The tension between Eisenhower and Devers was deeply personal and extended beyond professional and military disagreements. One of Devers's biographers called the interpersonal dynamics between the two "toxic" and "dysfunctional." See Wheeler, *Devers*, 2–4; see also d'Este, *Eisenhower*, 668–71.



First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) USAAF Fighter-Bomber and Reconnaissance Bases

Two

Allied Air Power in Alsace: The First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)

The air force tasked to provide most of the air support for Operation Cheerful was one of the most unusual major organizations in the European Theater. Formed in the autumn of 1944, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) was created to establish an appropriate level of command for the air units supporting the campaigns in southern France and the Rhineland. Although a considerable aerial armada of U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF), British, and French aircraft had been assembled to support Operation Dragoon in August 1944, no plan for permanent assignment of air units to support Lt. Gen. Jacob Devers's 6th Army Group had been put into place in the months that followed. As the Allies drove up the Rhone Valley, their air support began to dwindle as fighter, bomber, and reconnaissance units temporarily assigned from either the Mediterranean or European Theaters returned to their original commands. After a series of negotiations between senior Allied leaders overseeing the air wars in the European and Mediterranean Theaters, in early October 1944, several USAAF and French Air Force (*Armée de l'Air*) units were united underneath a single air force—the recognized echelon of command to support an army group—albeit a provisional one, under the administrative control of Lt. Gen. Carl A. "Tooey" Spaatz, commander of U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF). The First Tactical Air Force (Provisional), the only provisional unit at such a high echelon created during the war, was commanded by Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce. Royce oversaw four major subordinate tactical commands: one USAAF, one mixed USAAF and French, and two purely French.

By the time Devers's staff began planning to eliminate the Colmar Pocket in January 1945, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s USAAF fighter-bomber, night fighter, and reconnaissance units, consolidated under

Brig. Gen. Gordon P. Saville's XII Tactical Air Command, operated out of air bases near two major cities in northeast France. XII Tactical Air Command and its main subordinate tactical command, the 64th Fighter Wing, were headquartered at Nancy, roughly thirty miles north of Vittel. The wing had been situated in the suburban commune of Ludres, just south of Nancy, but the catastrophic explosion of an ammunition dump forced it to find new administrative and billeting facilities in the city proper at the beginning of January.[1] The wing's four fighter-bomber groups, all flying Republic P–47 Thunderbolts, were stationed at a clutch of four airfields within a fifteen-mile radius of Nancy. These included the 50th Fighter Group at Ochey, which also housed the 415th Night Fighter Squadron's British-built radar-equipped Bristol Type 156 Beaufighters; the 324th Fighter Group, to the east at Lunéville; the 358th Fighter Group, west of Nancy at Toul; and the 371st Fighter Group, at Tantonville to the south. The provisional air force's USAAF reconnaissance units, flying camera-equipped variants of the Lockheed P–38 Lightning and North American P–51 Mustang, also operated out of the clutch of air bases surrounding Nancy. The F–5 Lightnings of the 34th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron and two F–6 Mustang units, the 111th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron and the 162d Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, were all based south of Nancy at Azelot.[2]

While the close proximity of these bases to Saville's headquarters at Nancy simplified communications, logistical support, and the exercise of command and control, it also left the tactical striking power and reconnaissance capabilities of the provisional air force subject to weather conditions, since foul weather at one location would most likely affect the others nearby. For the Colmar Pocket operation it also meant that on days when aircraft could get aloft, they were only a short distance—less than sixty miles—from the front lines. Even when conducting interdiction missions deep into German territory, it took less than an hour after takeoff for fighter-bombers and reconnaissance aircraft to arrive over their targets.

The second major tactical element of the provisional air force was Brig. Gen. John P. Doyle's 42d Bombardment Wing. The wing had originally been placed under Saville's XII Tactical Air Command after its transfer from the Mediterranean Theater-based Twelfth Air Force, but two weeks before Operation Cheerful began, it was detached and placed under control

1. 64 Fght Wg, War Diary, Mar 1, 1945, AFHRA, WG-64-HI, C0010.

2. Stat. Ctrl., USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, Jun 30, 1945, USAHEC, 6–8. The statistical summary incorrectly places the base of 324th Fighter Group at Dole-Taveaux; the group moved from there to Lunéville at the beginning of January 1945. See the monthly squadron outline histories and war diaries of the 313th, 314th, and 315th Fighter Squadrons, AFHRA, A0771 and A0722.

of First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s headquarters.[3] It included two USAAF medium bomber groups, the 17th and 320th. These were veteran units, each with more than a year's worth of operating experience in the Mediterranean and European Theaters.[4] In addition to its two USAAF bomber groups, two French medium bomber groups, the 31st and 34th, were attached to the wing. The consolidation of the U.S. and French bomber groups, all operating Martin B–26 Marauders, into a single wing created a sort of ersatz bomber command—a formal one had been ruled out during discussions held the previous autumn—for the provisional air force. Rather than operating as parts of composite units under separate national chains of commands, putting the provisional air force's bombers under a single command reporting directly to Royce's headquarters promised efficiency and flexibility in determining their best employment.[5]

The amalgamation of USAAF and French Air Force units into a single wing was unusual and necessitated a division of internal command and control responsibilities. As the wing commander, Doyle exercised authority over all matters pertaining to operations, training, and intelligence. All orders issued to the French bombers would be sent through the commander of the French 11th Bombardment Wing, who retained command of his two groups "within the limits of a Wing Commander's prerogative" and was to see that "perfect" liaison at all echelons with his U.S. counterparts was established and maintained. Ultimate responsibility for administration, discipline, and other personnel issues, as well as logistics and maintenance of the French bombers, remained within the French Air Force's chain of command. The First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) would deal with any supply or repair issues that could not be arranged or performed by the French air service command, which operated at the end of a convoluted supply chain involving multiple U.S., French, and Allied commands and lacked an adequate number of trained and experienced personnel.[6]

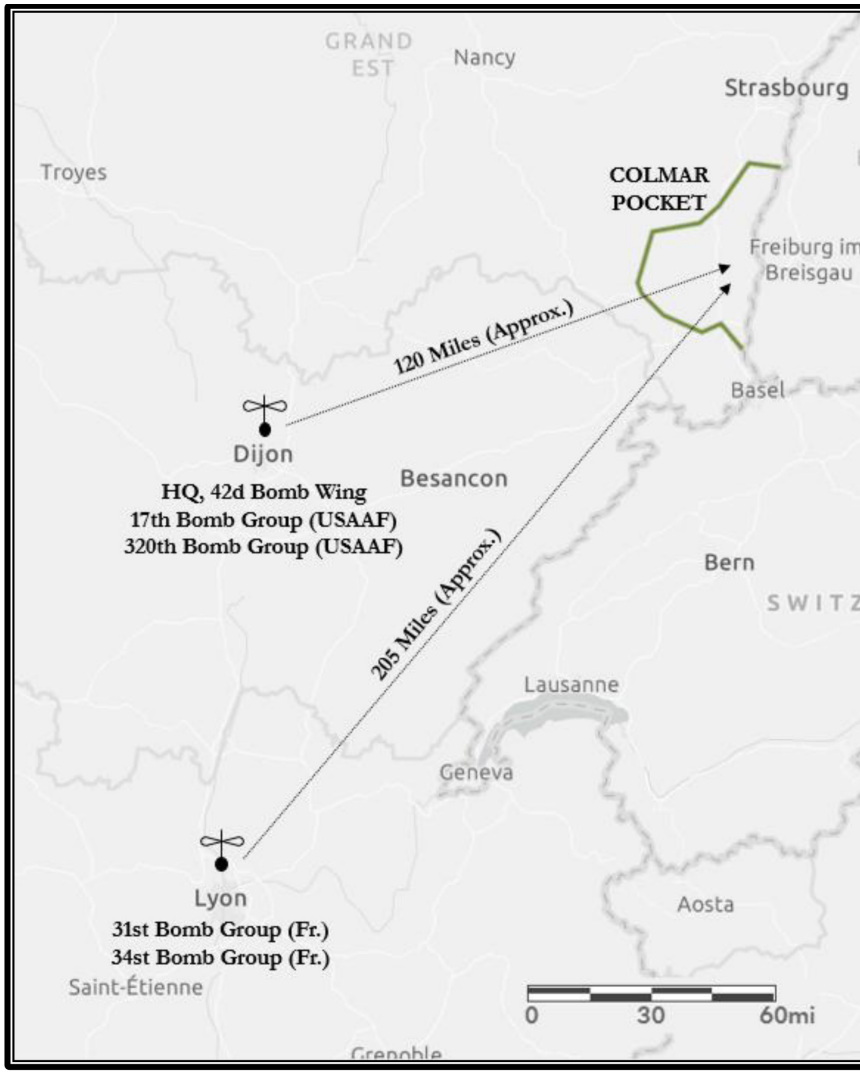
While the provisional air force's USAAF fighter-bomber and reconnaissance units had been placed near the front in Alsace, basing decisions

3. 17 Bomb Grp, Unit History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-17-HI (BOMB), B0082.

4. Maurer Maurer, ed., *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 390–91; Richard P. Hallion, *Strike From the Sky: The History of Battlefield Air Attack, 1911–1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1989), 182–83. The 17th Bombardment Group provided the aircraft and most of the volunteer airmen for the famed raid on Tokyo led by Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle on April 18, 1942. See Kramer J. Rohfleisch, "Drawing the Battle Line in the Pacific," Chap 12 of *Plans and Early Operations, January 1939 to August 1942*, Vol. 1 of *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, 7 vols., ed. Wesley F. Craven and James Lea Cate (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1947), 438–44.

5. 1 TACAF, "History: First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) in the European Theater of Operations, 20 October 1944-21 May 1945," 2 vols., AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:27.

6. Gen. René Bouscat, Chief, French Air Force, to French Air Ministry, et al., subj: "Project Concerning 2d Bomb Wing," n.d., AFHRA, 549.6319-1, C5033. The file contains the French language original and an English translation. It reads "2d" in title, but actual designation was the 11th.



First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) Medium Bomber Bases

reached months before the Colmar Pocket operation led to reduced effectiveness of its medium bomber units. The USAAF elements of 42d Bombardment Wing were based at Dijon, roughly 120 miles away from 6th Army Group's front. To reach the front lines or press on to targets over the Rhine, the wing's bombers had to fly over the Vosges Mountains, requiring a rapid increase in altitude to clear the mountaintops. This steep climbing maneuver forced the aircraft to carry reduced bomb loads to decrease weight, and the attendant increase in fuel consumption shortened their

striking range once they had passed over the mountains.[7] The two French B–26 medium bomber groups were based near Lyon, approximately 200 miles away from Colmar. The even greater distance from Lyon to Colmar increased the range limitations imposed upon their U.S. counterparts when making their way to their targets.

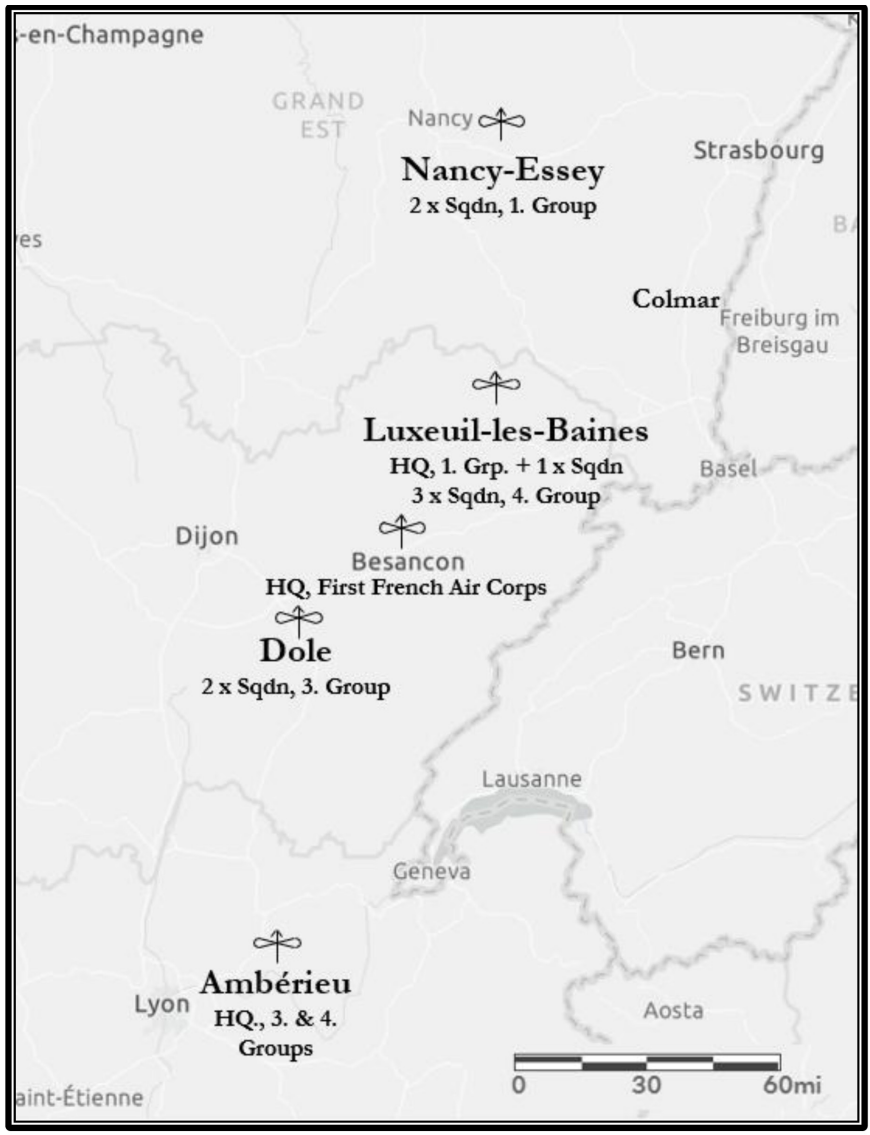
Brig. Gen. Paul Gerardot's First French Air Corps was the third major tactical command of the provisional air force. Gerardot's command was a mix of battle-hardened French units augmented by others which had just recently been formed and equipped. French air units had operated under XII Tactical Air Command since the early stages of Operation Dragoon, but French requests to operate with greater independence led to their consolidation and placement under the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) as a separate command element alongside XII Tactical Air Command.[8] When French air units were first assigned to the provisional air force, USAAF officers identified several areas of concern, particularly in logistical supply and reconnaissance capabilities, which would have to be addressed.[9] While deficiencies in the training and fielding of its reconnaissance elements remained unresolved, by mid-December 1944, the First French Air Corps had overcome most of the hurdles encountered during its organization and rounded into shape as a rough equivalent of a USAAF tactical air command.[10] It included one fighter group, 1. Group, which was equipped with British-built Supermarine Spitfires logistically sustained through Royal Air Force (RAF) supply channels. Two other groups, 3. and 4. Groups, flew P–47 fighter-bombers, although 3. Group had only two squadrons, one fewer than its counterpart. The air corps had a small reconnaissance squadron composed of two flights, one flying F–5s for photo reconnaissance and the other operating Spitfires as a tactical reconnaissance unit. The First French Air Corps was, for the most part, organized, trained, and equipped in accordance with U.S. and British practices, and the French had accrued valuable tactical experience operating alongside other Allied air forces in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. Although comparatively deficient in manpower and logistical capabilities to their USAAF and RAF partners, the First French

7. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:52.

8. Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce, CG, 1 TACAF, to CG, XII TAC, and CG, 1 FAC, subj: "Letter of Instructions No. 2," Nov 11, 1944, AFHRA, 549.183-1, C5026.

9. Col. Jerome Preston, Stat. Ctrl., USSTAF, to Maj. Gen. Hugh J. Knerr, DCG-A, USSTAF, subj: "Trip to First Tactical Air Force and First French Air Corps," Nov 6, 1944, AFHRA, 519.201-14, A5559.

10. Col. J. P. Gordon, Asst. AG, USSTAF, to Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce, CG, 1 TACAF, subj: "Attachment of Units (No. 84)," Dec 12, 1944, in Edmund C. Langmead, "A Report on the First Tactical Air Force (Prov.), European Theater of Operations, 1944–1945," Oct 1, 1967, Exhibit File No. II, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, A1843.



First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) French Air Force Tactical and Reconnaissance Bases

Air Corps was able to provide effective, if at times limited, air cover for de Lattre's army.[11]

The bases of the French fighter, fighter-bomber, and reconnaissance units were dispersed widely throughout northeastern France, with head-

11. Ronald Chalmers Hood III, "Bitter Victory: French Military Effectiveness during the Second World War," Chap. 6 of *The Second World War*, Vol. 3 of *Military Effectiveness*, ed. Allen R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 238, 244, 248.

quarters often separated by great distances from the facilities hosting their subordinate squadrons. Some of the French air corps' bases lay well behind the Vosges, resulting in lengthy flying times to and from the front lines. The First French Air Corps headquarters was in Besançon, almost seventy miles south of Royce's headquarters in Vittel. Luxeuil-les-Baines, at the southeast foot of the Vosges and fifty miles southwest of Colmar, was the main French air base supporting operations in northeastern France. It was home of the headquarters of 1. Group and one of its Spitfire squadrons, the three P–47 squadrons of 4. Group, and the Spitfire reconnaissance flight. The other two French Spitfire fighter squadrons were at Essey, just east of Nancy. The two squadrons of the undersized 3. Group, headquartered in Ambérieu, operated out of Dole, more than 100 miles southwest of Colmar. Ambérieu, near the French bomber bases in Lyon, also served as the headquarters for 4. Group. Dependent on XII Tactical Air Command's photographic intelligence processors and analysts because of a lack of trained personnel, the French F–5 flight joined the USAAF reconnaissance units operating out of Azelot.[12]

In addition to XII Tactical Air Command, 42d Bombardment Wing, and the First French Air Corps, the provisional air force also exercised nominal control over the Western French Air Force, the most unusual of its commands. Employing a motley assortment of mostly obsolete U.S., French, and British aircraft augmented by captured German planes, it patrolled the Atlantic coastline. Its primary task was surveillance of the Gironde Estuary, where the Germans still held several isolated but well-fortified port cities. Most of its aircraft were based at either Cognac, to the north of the estuary, or Bordeaux, at the waterway's southern end. Therefore, they were too distant from the front lines for the Western French Air Force to have a role in the campaign to clear the Colmar Pocket. In any case, although included as part of the provisional air force to ensure logistical support, there was, as the commander of the USAAF provisional air service command bluntly noted, "no military requirement for, nor interest in, coordination of the activities of the First Tactical Air Force with those of the Western French Air Force." Its operations were largely guided by the French war ministry, rather than from Vittel.[13]

Even had the Western French Air Force been a fully integrated component of Royce's command, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) was much smaller, in terms of both aircraft and equipment, than the formally

12. Col. T. J. Brogan, AG, 1 TACAF, to Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, CG, USSTAF, subj: "French Units Under Operational Control of First Tactical Air Force (Prov.)," Dec 1, 1944, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, in Langmead, 1 TACAF Rpt, Exhibit File No. II, A1843; Chap. 3 of Yves Le Clair and Brigitte Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar* (Turckheim: Musée Mémoral des Combats de la Poche de Colmar, 2004), 231–82.

13. Langmead, 1 TACAF Rpt, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, A1843, 17.

organized air forces supporting the Allied army groups in northern France. The standard structure of an Allied air force in the European Theater assigned one USAAF tactical air command or, in the case of Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery's Anglo-Canadian 21st Army Group, RAF air group to provide air support for each army of an army group.[14] The provisional air force's structure honored that arrangement, with USAAF XII Tactical Air Command supporting Patch's army and the French air corps supporting de Lattre's, but few other similarities existed. When the invasion of the European mainland began in June 1944, Ninth Air Force, which supported Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group, boasted five fighter wings comprised of eighteen fighter and fighter-bomber groups, enough to equip two tactical air commands, one supporting Lt. Gen. Courtney H. Hodges's First Army and the other Lt. Gen. George Patton's Third Army when it was activated in August 1944. In accordance with organizational convention, units were assigned and amalgamated to create a provisional third tactical air command after the Normandy invasion when Lt. Gen. William H. Simpson's Ninth Army joined the army group. Ninth Air Force also included an organic bomber command of eleven groups organized into three wings, four reconnaissance groups, and a troop carrier command to conduct airborne operations.[15]

Royce's provisional air force paled in comparison to Ninth Air Force in terms of organizational strength. At the start of 1945, the provisional air force had but seven fighter and fighter-bomber groups—one of which was the undersized French fighter-bomber unit—falling under XII Tactical Air Command and the First French Air Corps, a single bomber wing with seven fewer groups than Ninth Air Force's formally authorized bomber command, and two reconnaissance commands, one a provisional USAAF group and the other the small and still-developing French element. Correspondingly, with its smaller organizational strength, the provisional air force had less personnel attached to fill its ranks than the permanent tactical air forces operating in the European Theater. By January 31, 1945, the number of airmen assigned to Ninth Air Force had grown to 167,337, more than 43,000 of whom were non-Army Air Forces personnel attached to the command.[16] By comparison, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s authorized

14. W. A. Jacobs, "The Battle for France, 1944," Chap. 6 of Benjamin Franklin Cooling, ed., *Case Studies in the Development of Close Air Support* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1990), 237–40.

15. For the organization of Ninth Air Force, see Joseph W. Angell and Alfred Goldberg, "The Ninth Air Force," Chap. 3 of *Europe: Argument to V-E Day,* Vol. 3 of *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, 7 vols., ed. Wesley F. Craven and James Lea Cate (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1951), 110–13. See also HQ, AAF, "Condensed Analysis of the Ninth Air Force in the European Theater of Operations" (1946; repr., Office of Air Force History: Washington, DC, 1984), 66–76.

16. 9 AF, "Operational History of the Ninth Air Force," AFHRA, 533.01-2, B5587, Book I, Preface, xiii.

end strength for the same date stood at 21,396 USAAF positions—2,706 officers and 18,690 enlisted men—and it fell 227 short of that total because of a lack of enlisted men.[17] Personnel assigned to the French units in mid-December 1944 numbered just 15,546, of whom 1,180 were officers and 14,366 enlisted men.[18] Taken together, the USAAF and French personnel of the provisional air force amounted to less than 37,000, less than one-quarter of the airmen assigned to Ninth Air Force.

Not only was the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) relatively small in terms of its organization and manpower, but aircraft were allocated to its tactical units at a reduced scale. As 1945 began, a notional USAAF single-engine fighter group would have more than 100 aircraft, with an ideal allocation of at least 111 and no more than 126. These aircraft would be flown and maintained by nearly 1,000 men and officers. A medium bomber group would have a complement of 96 aircraft and a personnel allotment of more than 1,750.[19] While the provisional air force's USAAF fighter-bomber and medium-bomber groups were within the expected range for personnel allocations, they had fewer aircraft than the expected standard. The air force's four fighter groups were composed of three squadrons each, with twenty-five P–47s per squadron for a total of seventy-five. The two USAAF groups of 42d Bombardment Wing, made up of four squadrons each, each had sixty-four B–26s.[20] Therefore, the USAAF fighter-bomber and medium bomber groups supporting Devers's army group had roughly two-thirds the number of aircraft they could have been expected to have available.

With the exception of its reconnaissance elements, the provisional air force's French units in northeastern France were organized roughly at par with those of the USAAF in terms of aircraft, but given shortages of aircraft and trained pilots, air crews, and support personnel available to the fledgling French Air Force, meeting their authorized strengths was an optimistic goal. The two French medium bomber groups attached to 42d Bombardment Wing were organized at the same size as their USAAF counterparts at the squadron echelon, with sixteen bombers allotted per

17. Stat. Ctrl., USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, 13.

18. 1 TACAF, "Recap of U.S. T/O Strength of I French Air Corps Units Attached to First TACAF(P)," Dec 13, 1944, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, in Langmead, 1 TACAF Rpt, Exhibit File No. II, A1843. The report notes that the number of personnel assigned to the Western French Air Force was "unknown," demonstrating the lack of oversight the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) had over the French units patrolling the Atlantic coastline.

19. William A. Goss, "The AAF," Chap 2 of *Men and Planes*, Vol. 6 of *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, 7 vols., ed. Wesley F. Craven and James Lea Cate (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1955), 59.

20. Stat. Ctrl., 1 TACAF, "Composition of Tactical Units," Mar 1, 1945, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, in Langmead, 1 TACAF Rpt, Exhibit File No. II, A1843; Maj. Gen. F. L. Anderson, Dep G-3, USSTAF, to Maj. Gen. Ralph Royce, CG, 1 TACAF, subj: "Target Flow of Replacement Aircraft for First Tactical Air Force," Feb 6, 1945, AFHRA, 549.6319-1, C5033.

squadron, but each group had three rather than four squadrons. Like XII Tactical Air Command's P–47 groups, the fighter and fighter-bomber groups of the First French Air Corps, save for the undersized 3. Group, had three squadrons, each with an authorized aircraft allocation of twenty-five.[21] Because of competing needs for aircraft for other commands and theaters of operation, both USAAF and French units were chronically short of their authorized number of aircraft, and inevitable combat losses, accidents, and crew shortages meant that many of the aircraft they had on hand at any given time were unavailable. One bright spot for the provisional air force as Operation Cheerful approached was an excess of USAAF medium bombers, the result of a convergence of fortunate circumstances. A group's worth of spare aircraft had been sent along with 42d Bombardment Wing when it moved from Italy to France in November 1944, and a sharply decreased operation pace imposed by the harsh winter of 1944 reduced opportunities for losses incurred through combat and accidents.[22]

The primary cause of the organizational and logistical disparities between the provisional air force and other Allied air forces supporting army groups lay in the need to pull units from northern France, the Low Countries, and Italy to form it without unduly disrupting operations in those areas, but there were also other factors at work. First, the new air force had to support the operations of only two armies within Devers's 6th Army Group, whose area of responsibility was mostly dominated by the Vosges, limiting the employment of mechanized and armored units. Ninth Air Force had to cover the skies above three armies spread across a much wider front that provided greater avenues for mobility and maneuver. Another factor was that comparatively less strategic depth for future operations lay behind the German defenses ahead of 6th Army Group's sector of the Allied front. Once they crossed the Rhine and moved into southern Germany, Devers's armies would find their avenues of advance and ability to maneuver again limited by terrain, this time by the vast wooded mountains of the Black Forest. Also, there were fewer large cities and manufacturing centers in the territory to be invested by Devers's armies once they crossed the Rhine than those to be taken in Bradley's and Montgomery's impending advances.[23] Finally, with its comparatively larger bomber force, Ninth Air Force also required a sizable

21. Brig. Gen. Jack W. Wood, Air Component, SHAEF Mission (France), to Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce, CG, 1 TACAF, Msg. 931/RD/236, Jan 26, 1945, AFHRA, 549.6319-1, C5033.

22. Maj. Gen. Hugh J. Knerr, DCA, USSTAF, subj: "Minutes of Meeting Held at Caserta, 14 October 1944, with Respect to Transfer of 42nd Wing and Certain Service Units to France," Oct 22, 1944, 655.193, AFHRA. One of the wing's groups was converting to North American B–25 Mitchell medium bombers at the time of its transfer from Italy to France. The group's personnel remained assigned to Twelfth Air Force and their old B–26s followed the wing to France.

23. Langmead, 1 TACAF Rpt, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, A1843, 7, 11, 18; Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 403.

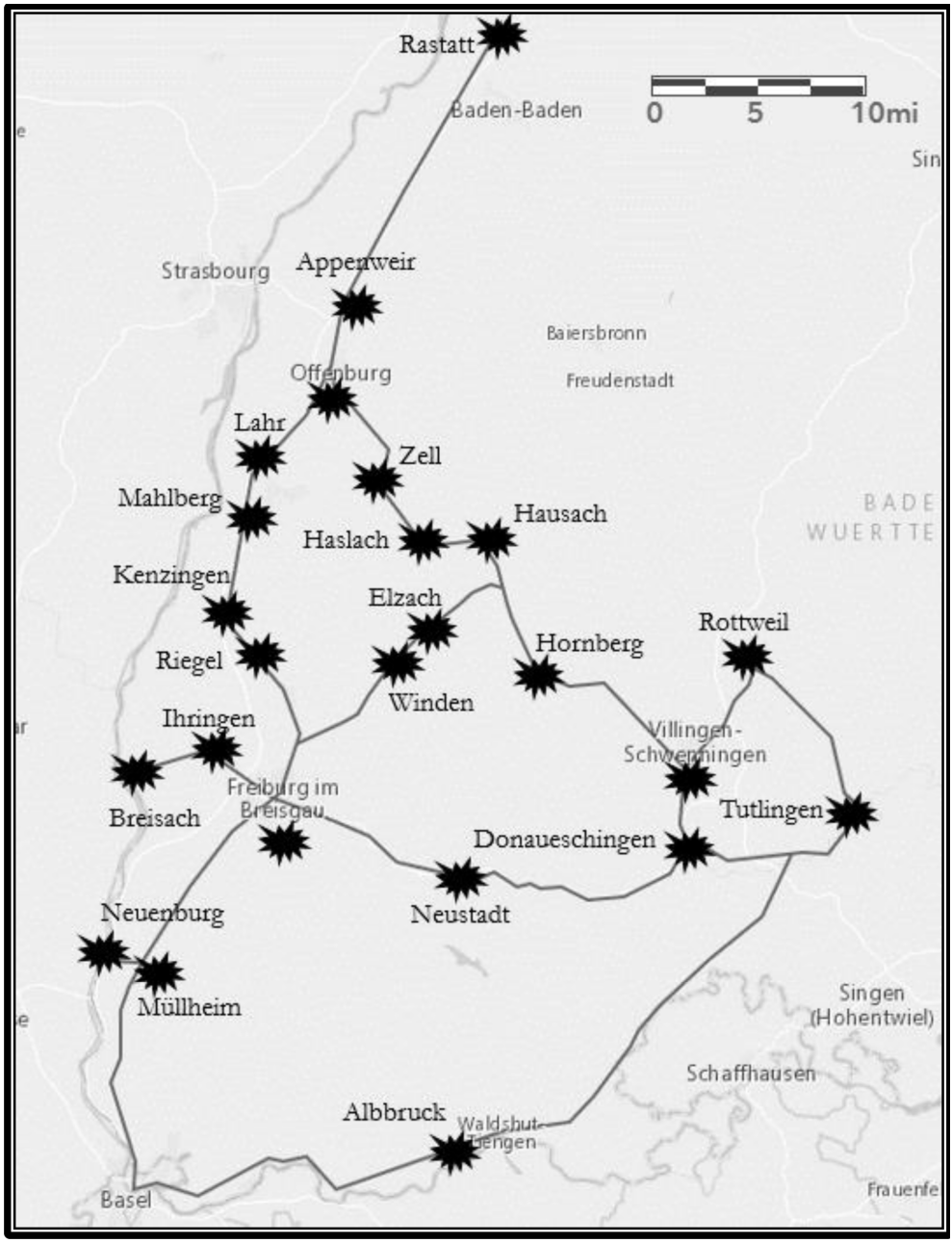
Table 1: First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)
Aircraft on Combat Stations
January 1945

Aircraft	Assigned (USAAF/French)		Operational (USAAF/French)		Percent Operational (USAAF/French)	
B–26	153	102	114	65	74.5	57.0
P–47	268	111	187	56	69.8	50.5
F–5	18	N/A	10	N/A	55.6	N/A
F–6*	51	9	34	8	66.7	88.8
Spitfire	-	52	-	44	-	84.6
Beaufighter	7	-	6	-	85.7	-

Source: "First Tactical Air Force Preliminary Summary of Operations, January 1945," Feb 15, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3065, C5030. The totals for Spitfires includes both the fighter and reconnaissance versions of that aircraft operated by the French 1. Group (46 assigned/39 operational/84.7 percent operational) and II/33 Reconnaissance Flight (6 assigned/5 operational/83.3 percent operational).

*The French II/33 Reconnaissance Flight began to receive F–6s in mid-January 1945. By the end of January 1945 they had received eight of the nine aircraft assigned but made few flights with them during the Colmar Pocket operation. See Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la bataille de la poche de Colmar*, 264–65.

fighter component for escort duty, a task similarly shouldered, albeit with less frequency, by the provisional air force's P–47s and Spitfires. Even with the unexpected and unwelcome duration of the German grip on the Colmar Pocket, the operational demand for air power along the southern end of the Allied front was not as great as that which existed along its line of advance to the north, where the bulk of Eisenhower's forces were committed. Nonetheless, the decision to assemble the U.S. and French units at decreased levels of strength proved to be a limiting factor once the decision to clear the Germans out of the Colmar Pocket once and for all had been determined.



Major Rail Interdiction Targets, January–February 1945

THREE

Planning and Targeting for Operation Cheerful

Preparation for Operation Cheerful began in earnest on January 4, 1945, after Lt. Gen. Jacob Devers "informally expressed the intention of reducing the Colmar Pocket" to his staff. General of the Army Dwight Eisenhower's planners at Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces, determined that such an operation was "the first priority" once the German counterattacks at the Ardennes and Alsace-Lorraine had been contained and beaten back.[1] The broad conceptual outline of the upcoming operation began to come into shape at a meeting of 6th Army Group's joint planning staff held on the afternoon of January 9.[2]

Col. Dache M. Reeves, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s director of plans, and the other 6th Army Group planners knew from the difficulties the French had faced during the previous month that evicting the Germans from the pocket would be no easy task. They estimated that the foe had 15,000 combat-effective troops assigned to eight divisions, backed by strong combined arms support in the form of a brigade's worth of armor in the pocket and artillery batteries positioned behind it across the Rhine. Devers's planners, however, underestimated the total forces arrayed against their own. Thanks to Heinrich Himmler's strategically dubious insistence on reinforcing the pocket, the German Nineteenth Army had more than 22,000 frontline troops and thousands more less-capable men stationed west of the river, although the ability of many of these to endure an extended campaign was questionable.[3]

1. Brig. Gen. Reuben E. Jenkins, ACS G-3, 6th Army Grp, to JPS, 6th Army Grp, subj: "Resumption of the Offensive by Sixth Army Group," Jan 4, 1945, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031; Charles B. MacDonald, *The Last Offensive: The U.S. Army in World War II—The European Theater of Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1973), 55.

2. Maj. J. E. Wadsworth, JPS, 6th Army Grp, to ACS G-3, 6th Army Grp, et al., subj: "Operation Cheerful," Jan 9, 1945, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031.

3. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 538.

Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers. **Devers commanded the combined U.S./French 6th Army Group from the September 1944 until the end of the war. His air of self-confidence rankled many fellow general officers, especially Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, but he proved to be a skilled organizer during the Southern France and Rhineland Campaigns and was adept at handling international frictions with his French subordinates.** *USAF.*

While 6th Army Group planners did not have an accurate assessment of the enemy's overall strength, they knew for certain that the Germans, by virtue of holding a salient rather than an extended front, possessed short lines of internal communication and could maneuver units quickly from one trouble spot to another unless hindered by air attack or weather. The defenders also held advantageous terrain running from the Vosges Mountains along the northwest border of the pocket to the tangles of the Harth Forest along the pocket's southeastern edge, east of the city of Mulhouse. The thick forest was ideal for hiding troop concentrations, armored vehicles, and caches of fuel and ammunition, making the true strength of the German forces, as well as their intentions once the battle began, "difficult to discern," according to the planning staff.[4]

The unrelenting winter weather that prevailed at the time complicated the challenges posed by the Alsatian terrain. The plain that lay between the

4. G-3, 6th Army Grp, subj: "Operation Cheerful," Jan 9, 1945, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031.

Vosges and the Harth Forest was cut by canals, rivers, and "innumerable" smaller streams, which would force Allied troops to make diversions or undertake time-consuming and treacherous water crossings.[5] Initially, the planners wanted to begin the offensive in early February to take advantage of comparatively warmer weather. Devers, under pressure from Eisenhower—the supreme Allied commander's exasperation with the persistence of the Colmar Pocket had by now exacerbated the long-standing and mutual disaffection between the two generals—overruled them, arguing that frozen ground and streams could be more easily crossed by infantry and armor than muddy morasses and running watercourses, and that the canals and waterways that carved through Alsace would become swollen from melting snow and ice if the offensive were delayed for warmer weather.[6] Neither was an optimal choice, and Devers's decision stood. Operation Cheerful would begin before January ended.

After taking these and a host of other factors into account, on January 10, 6th Army Group's joint planning staff submitted its proposal for the offensive to Maj. Gen. David G. Barr, Devers's chief of staff.[7] The plans laid out a classic double envelopment assault to be executed by the two corps of Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's First French Army, one to the south of Colmar and the other, augmented with U.S. forces, to the north. These reinforcements would include two U.S. divisions released from Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force's reserve, and the U.S. Seventh Army's 3d Infantry Division. The ultimate objective, rather than liberating Colmar, was to take the city of Neuf-Brisach, ten miles to the southeast. Roughly in the middle of the Colmar Pocket's border along the Rhine, Neuf-Brisach lay two just miles west of a bridge across the river that led to the German city of Breisach. The bridge was one of just two capable of handling rail traffic between Germany and the Colmar Pocket. As long as it remained in German hands, it would continue to serve as a lifeline to move troops and supplies in and out of the salient. The seizure of Neuf-Brisach would leave Colmar isolated and block the best avenue of escape for any German forces still on the west side of the Rhine.[8]

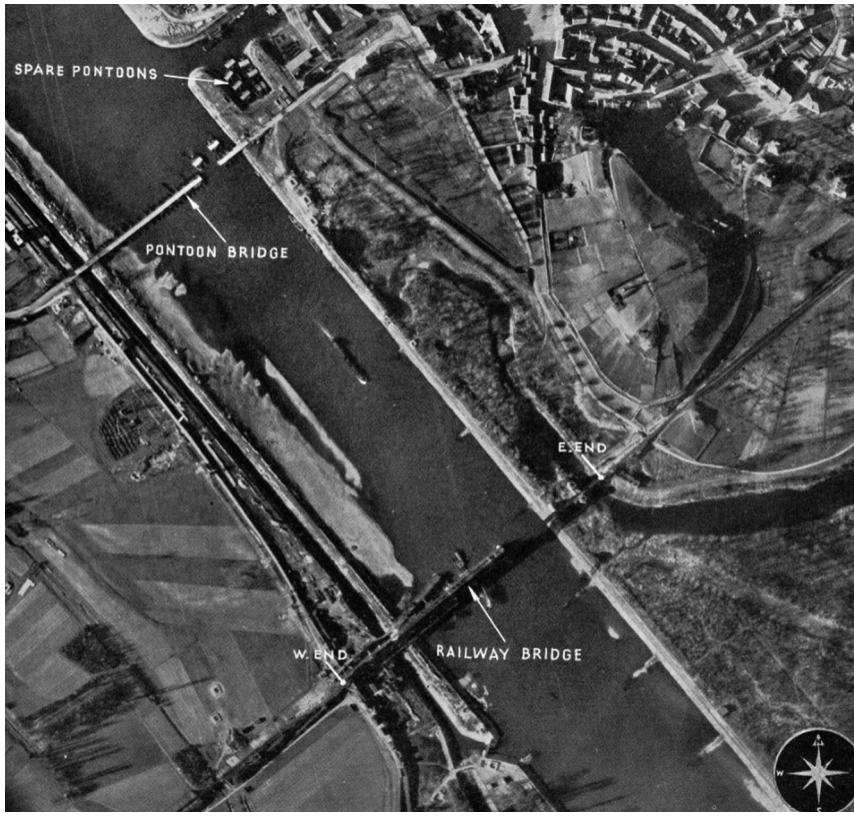
Taking the city, however, would be no easy task. Originally designed at the end of the seventeenth century by Louis XIV's redoubtable engineer, the Comte de Vauban, Neuf-Brisach was walled and well-fortified, and more modern defensive works, either constructed by the French before

5. Ibid.

6. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 37–39; Adams, *Devers*, 322.

7. Seaman, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," 45.

8. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 533–35; Wheeler, *Devers*, 401–2.



Targeting the Breisach River Crossing. **The First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s targeting information for the Breisach bridge included this photo showing the rail and pontoon bridges and ferry operations.** *USAF.*

the war or during the German occupation, guarded its main approaches.[9] Knowing that these defenses posed a potentially daunting challenge, 6th Army Group's planners envisioned adding an airborne assault to the operation. This, they hoped, would bypass the German road defenses and pin down the troops garrisoning the city before they could retreat across the bridge or demolish it to prevent it from falling into Allied hands.[10]

Regardless of how the fortress was attacked, given the status of the Breisach bridge as the primary line of communication in and out of the Colmar Pocket, airmen of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) expected orders to hit it, along with a second span fourteen miles to the south between Chalampé, France, and Neuenburg, Germany, as part of

9. For the design and construction of the Neuf-Brisach fortress, see Jean-Denis G. G. Lepage, *Vauban and the French Military Under Louis XIV: An Illustrated History of Fortifications and Strategies* (NY: Macmillan, 2009), 185–87.

10. Seaman, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," 45–47.

First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) Commanders. **Gen. René Bouscat, the French Air Force's chief of staff, poses with the combined commanders of the provisional air force. From left to right, standing: Brig. Gen. Edmund C. Langmead, deputy commander for administration; Brig. Gen. John P. Doyle, 42d Bombardment Wing; Brig. Gen. Ned L. Schramm, deputy commander for operations. From left to right, seated: Brig. Gen. Paul Gerardot, First French Air Corps; General Bouscat; Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce, First Tactical Air Force (Prov.); Brig. Gen. Glenn O. Barcus, 64th Fighter Wing. Missing is Brig. Gen. Gordon P. Saville, XII Tactical Air Command.** *USAF.*

any operation intended to reduce or destroy the German salient. The two rail bridges, along with smaller bridges erected near them for foot and wheeled traffic, had long been nettlesome targets for Allied pilots. Despite repeated attempts to blast them into the Rhine, the bridges proved to be dismayingly invulnerable to damage or destruction. The German garrison guarding the Breisach bridge, impressed by its improbable invincibility in the face of repeated Allied air attacks, awarded it an honorary Iron Cross.[11] Holding it in somewhat lesser emotional regard, the targeting staffers of First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s intelligence section categorized it, in the laconic vocabulary of targeting nomenclature, as "substantial." Supported by three massive lattice girders, it stretched 660 feet long and 13 feet wide. From Breisach, its single rail track ran west over the river toward Colmar and east into German territory to Freiburg, some eleven miles distant. A companion bridge, eight feet longer and five feet wider,

11. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 537.

constructed of wood planking, floated on pontoons just to the north and permitted the transit of personnel and motorized vehicles.[12] Identified by the Germans as one of their most critical lines of communication in the immediate area, the Breisach bridge was well protected by antiaircraft guns of various calibers and underwater nets and obstacles to prevent attacks with mines or torpedoes. If these defenses failed, repair parts and materials were stocked and engineers stationed nearby so that immediate repairs could be effected, and plans and procedures were in place to secure additional engineering support if the bridge sustained extensive damage from Allied attacks.[13]

Frustration with the inability to neutralize or destroy the Rhine bridges from the air not only rattled the airmen of the provisional air force, but also led to tensions between U.S. and French commanders. Beginning in late October 1944, Maj. Gen. Ralph Royce's airmen, assisted by medium bombers and attack aircraft of Ninth Air Force's 9th Bombardment Division, began a series of attacks against the Breisach and Neuenburg bridges. Some of these air strikes caused enough damage to temporarily halt cross-river traffic, but the bridges retained enough structural integrity to be repaired and put back into service, sometimes within hours, once the attacking aircraft had left.[14]

Impatience with the inability of air power to destroy the bridges came to a head in mid-December 1944. While his forces were engaged in that month's failed attempt to drive the Germans out of the Colmar Pocket, de Lattre wrote to Devers, complaining that the First French Air Corps had failed to interdict enemy movements and communications across the Rhine. The Breisach and Neuenburg bridges had faced only four air raids between them by French aircraft since the end of October, and these had been met with heavy antiaircraft fire. The air corps, he argued, lacked enough medium bombers to bring down the bridges and other targets in his army's area of operations. Even when weather allowed them to get off the ground at their bases in Lyon, their distance from the front lines—approximately 200 miles—reduced their bomb loads and the number of fighters that could escort them to their targets. De Lattre maintained that "it is absolutely necessary to mount a mass attack upon these objectives" and targets across the river to keep the Germans in the Colmar Pocket isolated.[15]

12. A-2, 1 TACAF, "Advance Material Issue No. 1–June 1944, Area: 4807E (Strasbourg)," AFHRA, 549.6271, C5033.

13. Lt. Gen. Rudolf Veiel, "Wehrkreis V (1 Sept 1943-15 Apr 1945)," *FMS*, B-193, USAHEC, 18–20.

14. 1 TACAF, "Operations of the First Tactical Air Force (Prov)," May 6, 1945, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031; 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:72; 9 Bomb Div, S-2 Rpt, Nov 18, 1944, AFHRA, 534.365, B5823.

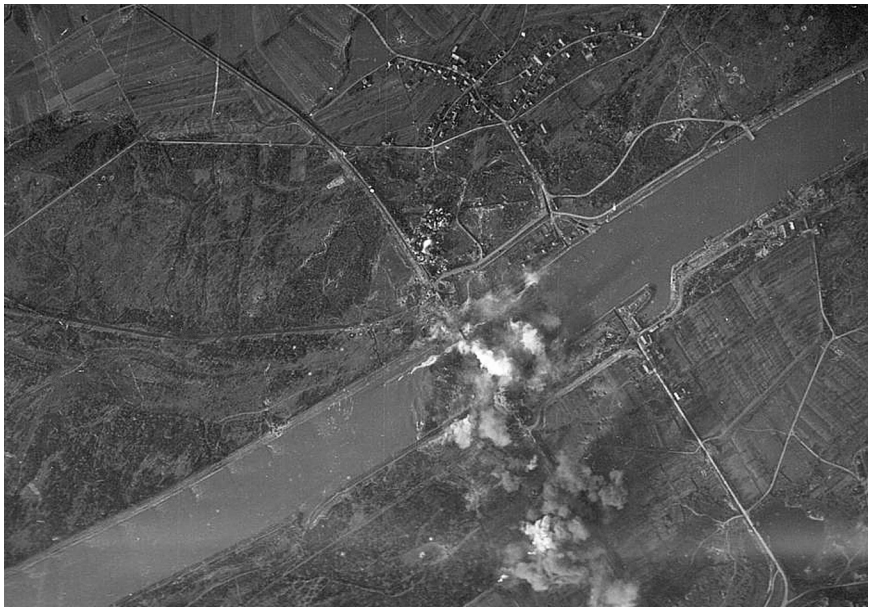
15. Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, to Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, No. 138/3.US, Dec 11, 1944, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031. In both USAAF and French records, the bridges are referred to by their German terminus. See also de Lattre's memoir, *The History of the First French Army*, tr. Malcolm Barnes (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952), 293.

Table 2: Allied Air Strikes Against the Breisach and Neuenburg Bridges, October–December 1944		
Date	**Target**	**Results**
Oct. 29	Breisach	Rail access blocked
Oct. 29	Neuenburg	Road unusable, rail blocked, repaired Nov. 1
Oct. 31	Breisach	Three attacks, no hits
Nov. 1	Breisach	Rail bridge blocked, repaired Nov. 3
Nov. 1*	Neuenburg	No hits
Nov. 3	Breisach	No damage to bridges, rail access track damaged
Nov. 3	Neuenburg	Road bridge traffic diverted, reopened to military traffic Nov. 8
Nov. 4	Breisach	Road bridge hit, damage immediately repaired
Nov. 4	Neuenburg	No damage
Nov. 17*	Neuenburg	Light damage, bridge still serviceable
Nov. 18*	Breisach	Main girder hit, deck damaged; opened for limited use on Nov. 25
Nov. 18*	Neuenburg	Bridges blocked, rail bridge damaged but still serviceable
Nov. 19	Breisach	Rail bridge blocked
Nov. 19*	Neuenburg	Rail bridge blocked and damaged; reopened Nov. 23
Nov. 21	Neuenburg	Rail bridge blocked
Nov. 27	Breisach	Rail bridge blocked, reopened Dec. 3
Dec. 2	Breisach	No hits
Dec. 7*	Neuenburg	Bridge damaged and unserviceable
Dec. 8*	Breisach	Heavy damage
Dec. 10	Breisach	Two attacks, no hits
Dec. 17	Breisach	No hits
Dec. 23	Breisach	Rail bridge closed, one rail track reopened Dec. 24

Source: AF/SA, HQ USAF, *Historical Data Research on Air Interdiction in World War II. Regional Report No. 2: Tactical Air Interdiction by U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II: Germany*, prepared by Historical Evaluation and Research Organization (February, 1972), Table C-2, "Air Attacks on Bridges," C-25–C28.

*The information to compile the table by the original authors derives from weekly reports of *Oberbefehlshaber West* (OB West), the overall headquarters of German forces in Western Europe, and omits at least five air attacks against the bridges. For these missing strikes and additional details on the November 17–19 strikes see HQ 9 AF, Photo Interpretation Reports, AFHRA, 534.365, B5823, and Transport Div, U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, "The Effects of Strategic Bombing on German Transportation," Nov 20, 1945, AFHRA 137.312, A1140, 63–64.

De Lattre's letter was intended to press Devers to enlist additional USAAF support in the effort to bring down the Rhine bridges. Devers's headquarters duly passed de Lattre's request on to Royce's staff in Vittel. After receiving the missive on December 15, the planning section drafted

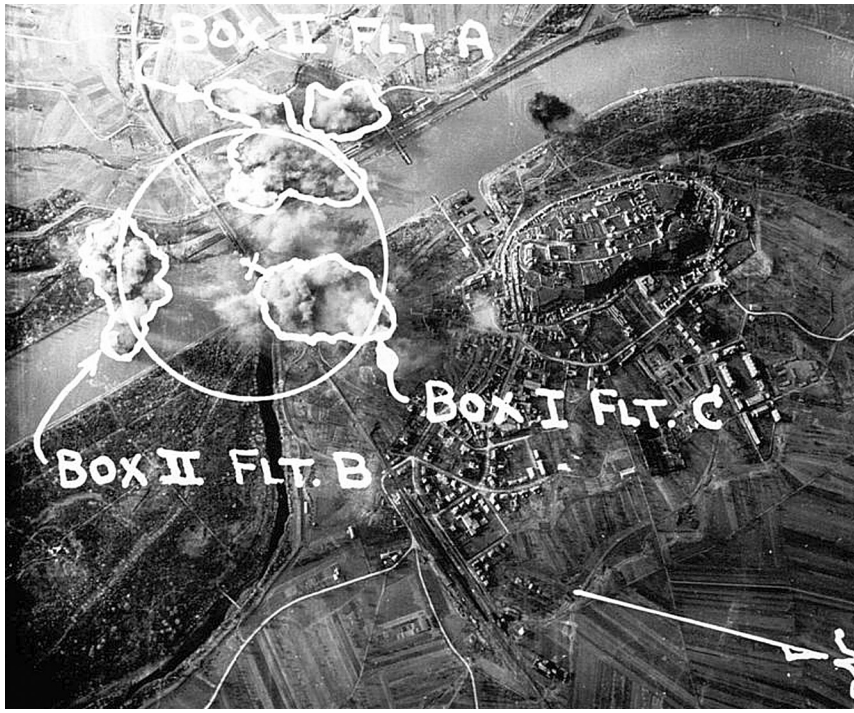


Air Strike on the Neuenburg Bridge. **Thirty-six Ninth Air Force B–26s attacked the bridge on November 18, 1944. Several near misses resulted in temporarily blocking both rail and road traffic across the Rhine River.** *USAF.*

a response. The reply concurred with the French general's assessment on the importance of the bridges and rail transport targets on the German side of the Rhine, but it also noted that "for some time first priority in air intentions has been given to these objectives." The problem lay not in the determination of priorities for the application of air power, but with the wretched winter weather. Royce's planners suggested that, despite de Lattre's protestations, the First French Air Corps had adequate resources to make effective strikes on the bridges and expressed the hope that the French bombers would find success as soon as weather permitted them to do so. As a concession, the response message allowed that USAAF medium bombers—42d Bombardment Wing's two USAAF groups had begun to arrive in France just three weeks before—would join them in their effort to drop the bridges once the skies had cleared.[16]

The reply to de Lattre was somewhat disingenuous. Even if combined, the USAAF and French medium bomber units of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) lacked enough aircraft to mount a coordinated effort to take out the bridges at Breisach and Neuenburg, even in favorable weather conditions, without foregoing other interdiction missions until the task was

16. Col. Dache M. Reeves, Dir Plans, 1 TACAF, to 1 Fr Army, subj: "Draft Cable as a Reply to de Lattre's Request," Dec 17, 1944, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031. The draft was approved and sent on or about December 18. See 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:93.



Air Strike on the Breisach Bridge. **Twin-engine attack aircraft of the Ninth Air Force dropped more than 125 bombs on the Breisach rail bridge on November 18, 1944. Despite claiming several probable hits, they failed to drop the bridge into the Rhine.** *USAF.*

accomplished. Aware of this fact, when the attack on the Colmar Pocket began in January, Royce himself requested the heavy bombers of the U.S. Eighth Air Force to attack the bridges, belying his staff's suggestion that the French bomber groups should have been capable of doing so on their own. After the war had ended, the provisional air force's targeting officer, Maj. Daniel T. Selko, argued that the French never could have taken down the Breisach crossing, even with assistance from 42d Bombardment Wing's two USAAF groups. The topography of the Rhine Valley, which was quite wide and flat on the French side—the nearest mountain ridges to the bridge were just two miles away to the northeast on the German side of the Rhine, but more than ten miles distant on the French side—left only two routes of attack. The most obvious one, heading straight from the west over the river valley, would expose an attacking bomber force to the fire of more than 150 antiaircraft guns situated between Colmar and Freiburg. The mountainous topography of the eastern route left it of little use other than for observation and reconnaissance, and it was also well-defended by antiaircraft guns. Noting the difficulties posed by the terrain, which included a sharp bend in the river just north of the bridge, Selko

claimed that "only heavies could have destroyed the Breisach [bridge] because of its defenses. (Our mediums couldn't sight on the bridge from the IP [initial point of a bomb run] because of its position in the valley.)" Even had medium bombers been capable of braving the bridge's defenses in sufficient numbers, the ever-inclement weather over the target resulted in constant limited visibility conditions, and the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) was "not equipped for blind [radar-assisted] bombing . . . it [the bridge] was an Eighth Air Force target."[17] However, the Eighth Air Force had its own struggles with the weather, and the unexpected surge in tactical interdiction missions to stem the German offensive in the Ardennes only added to long-standing competing demands for strategic air power, leaving its heavy bombers unavailable to strike the bridges until shortly before Operation Cheerful began.[18]

Even when heavy bombers were made available for missions against the bridges, they were not allocated in sufficient numbers to ensure their destruction. Although the provisional air force had so far failed to destroy the Rhine bridges, little help was forthcoming from other Allied strategic and tactical air forces before the start of Operation Cheerful. As Devers's and Royce's staffs were making their final plans for the operation, however, Ninth Air Force identified the Breisach bridge as a "highest priority tactical target" in a strike request sent to Eighth Air Force. The request resulted in a rare assignment of heavy bombers to hit the lines of communications feeding the Colmar Pocket. Eighth Air Force was already in the process of planning raids on airfields and sites associated with the production of jet aircraft deep in southern Germany, so diverting or reassigning aircraft to one more target in the area posed no major difficulties. After receiving Ninth Air Force's request, the bridge, along with a list of sites in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, was added to the list of targets to be hit by a force of 640 Boeing B–17 Flying Fortresses and Consolidated B–24 Liberators on January 15, 1945. The heavy bombers assigned to the raid included 108 B–17s of 1st Air Division, which received the Breisach bridge as their primary target. When they arrived around midday, they found the area, as the provisional air force's own bomber crews usually did, obscured by a thick blanket of clouds. The B–17 crews had been ordered to bomb the bridge only if visual conditions permitted; if unable to do so, they were to proceed to the closest marshaling yard large enough to be "blind" bombed

17. Interview with Maj. Daniel T. Selko, A-2, 1 TACAF, Jun 21, 1945, AFHRA, 549.051, C5026 (hereafter Selko interview). See also EUCOM, "Air Cooperation, Alsace-Lorraine Campaign," Part I of "Battlefield Studies, World War II," AFHRA, 519.042, A5520, 6–7.

18. A-3, Air Staff, SHAEF, "Report on Allied Air Force Operations From 17th to 27th December, 1944," AFHRA, 505.48, A5116, 3–7; Air Staff, SHAEF, "Notes of the Allied Air Commander's Conference," Jan 11, 1945, LOC, Carl A. Spaatz Papers, Box 20, Fld 1.

with radar.[19] Even with the assistance of radar, bombing a marshaling yard from high altitude through heavy cloud cover was little more accurate than bombing without it, and given the proximity of most rail yards to populated areas, such an attack was certain to inflict civilian casualties and extensive damage to nearby structures and housing.[20] Nonetheless, the strike force, carefully skirting outside the range of the bridge's formidable antiaircraft defenses, proceeded to Freiburg and pounded the city's rail facilities with 264 tons of bombs. Overcast conditions below their bombing altitude, however, prevented an observation of the strike's effectiveness.[21] Despite whatever damage was wrought to the Freiburg rail yard that day, it remained serviceable, and the Breisach bridge was untouched, keeping the main supply line for the German defenders in the Colmar Pocket open.

If the Rhine bridges could not be destroyed from the air, Devers's planners would have to ensure their seizure by ground troops. On January 14, the night before the aborted heavy bomber raid on Breisach, Devers met with de Lattre to discuss the forces allocated for the attack, promising the French general at least one additional infantry division and a French armored division currently operating with Patch's U.S. Seventh Army.[22] The next day de Lattre, his confidence raised, conferred with the corps and division commanders who would be leading the initial assault and sent a letter of instruction to his army, directing them to "launch without delay and by surprise, with all the means at your disposal, powerful offensive operations . . . aimed at a total reduction of the Alsace bridgehead."[23]

Preparations and plans for ground operations were soon complemented by those guiding air operations. The First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s deputy commander for operations, Brig. Gen. Ned L. Schramm, issued Royce's air orders for Cheerful on January 17, three days before the operation was to begin. The instructions stated that "maximum close support will be given to the main effort of the Sixth Army Group as first priority" and included instructions for airmen to provide close air support for ground forces regardless of nationality.[24] Such mutual support was atypical but congruous with the provisional air force's letter of instruction

19. 8 AF, Msg E-SS-20, Jan 17, 1945, AFHRA, 520.332, B5014; 8 AF, Int Ops Sum No. 260, Jan 15, 1945, AFHRA, 520.332, B5014.

20. Richard G. Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 484, 507–8, 569–71.

21. 1 Air Div, "Report of Operations, Tactical Targets, 15 January 1945," Jan 23, 1945, AFHRA, 520.332, B5014; 8 AF, *Monthly Summary of Operations, January 1945*, Feb 11, 1945, 20, 70.

22. De Lattre, *History of the First French Army*, 335.

23. De Lattre's letter of instruction cited in G-3, 6th Army Grp, "G-3 Report After Action Against Enemy for Period 010001A January 1945 to 312400A January 1945," Feb 11, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308. See also de Lattre, *History of the First French Army*, 335–36.

24. Brig. Gen. Ned L. Schramm, DCG-O, 1 TACAF, to CG, XII TAC, et al., subj: "Air Operations in Conjunction with First French Army," Jan 17, 1945, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. **The First French Army commander (*right*) discusses operations with the Allied supreme commander in November 1944.** *USAF.*

in effect at the time. In principle, the USAAF units of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) supported U.S. Seventh Army operations, while the French units supported those of de Lattre's army. Usually each nation's air element was sufficient to support the operations of their countrymen on the ground, but in practice, aircraft were dispatched to support ground forces regardless of nationality if available assets were insufficient to meet an operational requirement or unplanned contingency.[25]

International air-ground cooperation was of paramount importance, for the French were to shoulder the greater share of the burden on the ground. The southern pincer of the Allied assault, to be conducted by Lt. Gen. Marie Émile Antoine Béthouart's French I Corps, would cross its line of departure on January 20 covered by the First French Air Corps. The French II Corps, led by Maj. Gen. Joseph Jean de Goislard de Monsabert, would begin its drive north of Colmar two days later. Augmented by U.S. divisions that would fall under command of the U.S. XXI Corps after the initial stages of the assault, Monsabert's troops would rely on

25. Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce, CG, 1 TACAF, to CG, XII TAC, and CG, 1 FAC, subj: "Letter of Instructions No. 2," Nov 11, 1944, AFHRA, 549.183-1, C5026; 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:50.

the fighter-bombers of XII Tactical Air Command for their air support. To facilitate communications and to reduce frictions caused by language or unfamiliarity, First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s headquarters provided combined U.S./French liaison units for control and signals when one nation's fighter-bombers were called upon to operate in the other's area of operations. The few French units in 6th Army Group not participating in the encirclement were directed to contact de Lattre personally to request air support. It would be up to de Lattre to "decide if any air effort can be spared from either of his corps" until victory was achieved.[26] Given that almost all of the First French Army's units were dedicated to the operation, and considering the amount of air support they would require, such a request would most likely remain unfulfilled. Planning and conventions aside, during the execution of Operation Cheerful, the First French Air Corps devoted almost all of its missions to the support of the French I Corps on the southern end of the Colmar Pocket.[27] With its paper strength of just over 100 Thunderbolts, barely half of which were mission capable, it was unable to meet the high operational demands that existed when flying weather prevailed. The lack of availability ensured that Brig. Gen. Paul Gerardot's fighter-bombers would make only marginal contributions to efforts elsewhere during the operation.

In addition to close air support for ground forces, the air orders for Operation Cheerful also called for both U.S. and French fighter-bombers to conduct interdiction missions to isolate the battlefield and harass or prevent German units from withdrawing over the Rhine once the pocket began to collapse. This role served as a modification of the provisional air force's letter of instruction in effect at the time, which enumerated "bombing of vital highway and railroad bridges" and "cutting railroad lines on inner and outer lines of interdiction" as the first two assigned tasks for XII Tactical Air Command and the First French Air Corps, but was simply a reordering of tactical priorities. Other than close cooperation taking temporary precedence over interdiction and increasing U.S. cooperation with French ground forces, the air orders resulted in no major change of mission for the provisional air force's fighter-bomber elements.[28]

The shift in priorities ordinarily would have met with consternation from de Lattre, who had long been troubled by the persistence of German lines of communication leading in and out of the Colmar Pocket. The "most urgent target" for air power during the operation, in the French

26. Schramm to CG, XII TAC, et al., subj: "Air Operations in Conjunction with First French Army," AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031.

27. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:86.

28. Royce to CG, XII TAC, and CG, 1 FAC, subj: "Letter of Instructions No. 2," AFHRA, 549.183-1, C5026.

commander's mind, remained the Rhine bridges.[29] Therefore, the air orders directed the USAAF and French medium bombers of 42d Bombardment Wing to concentrate on hitting the Neuenburg bridge on the southeastern edge of the pocket and other targets "considered suitable for such aircraft," such as rail yards, troop barracks, and ammunition dumps. To assist them with interdiction duties, Royce's air orders announced his intent to enlist the heavy bombers of Eighth Air Force, along with any Ninth Air Force aircraft that could be pulled away from supporting Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley's operations to the north. The former would be requested to strike the Breisach rail bridge "as 1-A priority target until destroyed" and other targets "in excess of this Air Force's capabilities" deemed best left to heavy bombers. Ninth Air Force's medium bombers and twin-engine attack aircraft, Royce hoped, would be released to support the operations of Patch's army, offsetting any shortages caused by the dispatch of XII Tactical Air Command's fighter-bombers to cover the advance of the French II Corps on the north side of the Colmar Pocket.[30]

Since Royce's orders to provide support for ground forces closing the Colmar Pocket amounted to a sharpened focus on attacking German movements in the immediate geographic area, rather than a broad change of mission, no major steps needed to be taken to align the air plan with the ground plan. The final air plan for Operation Cheerful, issued on January 17, 1945, was a brief two-page document that stressed the need to achieve effects swiftly, lest a needlessly lengthy campaign delay other upcoming operations. Efforts competing for time, attention, and aerial resources included the U.S. Seventh Army's advance across the Rhine, which could occur once Eisenhower had granted approval, and a long-postponed operation, code named Independence, to force the surrender of German forces still holding critical seaports on the Bay of Biscay.[31] Royce hoped that, ably assisted by air power, the Allied ground assault in Alsace—possibly augmented by the delivery of paratroopers to seize the approach to the Breisach Bridge, as was discussed during the early planning stages by Devers's staff—would force the collapse in the pocket in no more than a week.

The air plan for Cheerful noted, as had the air orders issued shortly before, that the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) did not have sufficient

29. De Lattre, *History of the First French Army*, 345.

30. Schramm to CG, XII TAC, et al., subj: "Air Operations in Conjunction with First French Army," AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031.

31. 1 TACAF, "Air Plan: Operation Cheerful," Jan 17, 1945, AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031. Operation Independence had been planned since October 1944 but lack of adequate forces and logistical support forced several postponements. The seaports were not cleared until April 1945. See Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 359, 464, 533, 577; and G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 14, 59–60.

Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce. **Royce had extensive staff and diplomatic experience in the Pacific, Mediterranean, and European Theaters of Operation before he took command of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) in October 1944. His frustrations with the role and support given to his air force by senior Allied air commanders came to a head during Operation Cheerful.** *USAF.*

forces of its own to meet the requirements laid out in the operational plan while maintaining its commitments elsewhere along 6th Army Group's front. Even discounting the notional parachute assault—Royce apparently had never learned that the proposal had been shelved during the early stages of planning, and in any case the delivery of paratroopers would have had to have been performed by another air force since his command lacked a troop carrier element of its own—the provisional air force still needed to cover the U.S. Seventh Army's operations north of the Colmar Pocket. The suppression of German activity along Patch's front would require "a considerable force for patrol, armed reconnaissance, [and] attacks on enemy supplies," and to provide full support for other missions, including guarding the Seventh Army's flank with that of Lt. Gen. George Patton's Third Army in Lorraine, would be impossible because of the demands of the Colmar Pocket operation.[32]

32. Selko interview.

Given the need for "strong fighter bomber participation" to cover the units of the U.S. XXI Corps supporting the French II Corps and the inability of 42d Bombardment Wing to execute a successful interdiction plan to isolate the Colmar Pocket on its own, Royce's air plan for Cheerful made explicit demands for additional air power to be detailed to the upcoming operation. To provide the "essential" air support needed by U.S. ground units in 6th Army Group's sector, Royce requested that four fighter-bomber groups from Ninth Air Force be placed under XII Tactical Air Command's operational control for the campaign. To remedy the provisional air force's shortfall in bomber strength, Royce proposed that Ninth Air Force's medium bombers accept the responsibility to attack targets, mostly crossings along the banks of the Rhine, identified by XII Tactical Air Command. Royce also formally requested that heavy bombardment assets be brought to bear against the bridges at Neuenburg and Breisach. In addition to striking these communications targets, he also identified Kaiserstuhl, the site of a marshaling yard on a spur line leading north from the Breisach bridge's railway, as requiring aerial attack by heavy bombers.[33]

Royce knew that his repeated requests for the B–17s and B–24s of Eighth Air Force to take out the Rhine bridges and other transport and communications targets in support of Operation Cheerful would meet with resistance, as they had for months, at the headquarters of U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe. Lt. Gen. Carl "Tooey" Spaatz's staff, which determined the employment of USAAF strategic bombing assets, had long ago decided that the rail network in southern Germany did not represent a high-priority target for air power of any type. As early as September 1944, a study produced by USSTAF's intelligence staff identified sixteen rail lines in Germany and the Low Countries suitable for targeting by tactical aircraft rather than heavy bombers. The major arteries running behind the German Nineteenth Army's front in Alsace—the line north and south that connected Mulhausen, Freiburg, and Appenweier, and the line linking Offenburg, Villingen, and Immindingen to the east and west—were the last two entries on the list.[34] The same study assigned primary or secondary importance to eighty-six major rail hubs in Germany; those feeding the Colmar Pocket were not designated as primary targets.[35]

In addition to USSTAF's low consideration of the lines of communication feeding the Colmar Pocket, Operation Cheerful occurred in the midst

33. 1 TACAF, "Air Plan: Operation Cheerful," AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031.

34. A-2, USSTAF, "Air Attack Plan against the Transportation Systems of Germany," Sept 16, 1944, Appendix A, "Priority Rail Lines for Line Cutting and Strafing Attacks," LOC, Spaatz Papers, Box 18, Fld 3.

35. Ibid.

of a broad shift in determination of Allied strategic targeting priorities. The last months of 1944 and early 1945 had seen a period of increased tactical bombing on and behind the Ardennes front and concentrated attacks on the German transportation network, but by the time Operation Cheerful began, USSTAF had redesignated oil and petroleum targets, along with sites involved in the production of jet aircraft, as the highest priorities for Eighth Air Force's heavy bombers. In addition to this strategic reappraisal, a new demand emerged in the form of requests to support the Soviet advance on the Eastern Front, placing yet more requirements on the USAAF's heavy bomber assets.[36] Given these competing priorities, convincing USSTAF and Eighth Air Force to dedicate strategic bombers to strike the Rhine bridges in any kind of sustained manner was an unlikely prospect, and the attempt by Eighth Air Force to take out the Breisach bridge on January 15, 1945 proved to be a lost opportunity. As events turned out, there would be only one more attempt by heavy bombers to strikes the Breisach bridge, and that too was foiled by weather.

Nor was the request for temporary control or direction of assets belonging to Maj. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg's Ninth Air Force likely to be acknowledged with favor. At the time, Vandenberg's airmen were preoccupied with bottling up German forces retreating from the Ardennes, so a request for a wing's worth of its fighter-bombers for a week or more was, at best, aspirational.[37] As Ninth Air Force's weekly intelligence summaries attest, none of its fighter-bomber groups fell under First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) control during Operation Cheerful, nor were its aircraft dedicated in any significant numbers to provide support for the U.S. Seventh Army's defense of Strasbourg. During the end of January and beginning of February 1945, as the operation to clear the Colmar Pocket took place, the medium bombers and twin-engine attack aircraft of Vandenberg's 9th Bombardment Division concentrated on hitting communications targets in the Rhineland, well north of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s interdiction zone.[38] Given the priorities laid out by USSTAF and the demands for both strategic and tactical air power elsewhere, Royce could reasonably expect at best only marginal

36. Richard G. Davis, *Bombing the European Axis Powers: A Historical Digest of the Combined Bomber Offensive, 1939–1945* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air UP, 2006), 481–85, 488; Robert S. Ehlers Jr., *Targeting the Third Reich: Air Intelligence and the Allied Bombing Campaigns* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2009), 304–11.

37. 9 AF, "Operational History of the Ninth Air Force," AFHRA, 533.01-2, B5587, Book I, Section V, 7–9, 22–23; Book II, Section I, 21–29. Ninth Air Force bombers did hit rail targets in the town of Bingen, sixty-five miles east of Freiburg, on February 10, 1945, the day after the Colmar Pocket collapsed, to impede German movement behind Sixth Army Group's front.

38. A-2, 9 AF, IntSums, Nos. 116–120, Jan 15–Feb 12, 1945, AFHRA, 533.607, B5735–B5736; Photo/Recon, 9 AF (Adv.), "Status of Outstanding Ninth Air Force Bomb Damage Assessment Tasks," Jan 23, 1945, and Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, 533.454, B5732.

assistance from forces not already under his operational control once Operation Cheerful began on January 20.

While the final air orders and plans were being crafted, in the dwindling time that remained before the operation began, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) staged several attacks against enemy lines of communications to isolate German forces in the Colmar Pocket and to set favorable conditions for the impending offensive. These strikes against German transportation targets on both sides of the Rhine, as well as the bridges at Breisach and Neuenburg, achieved mixed results. The road bridges at both of the main Rhine crossings were heavily bombed and left impassable by foot or vehicle traffic for stretches of time, but the sturdy rail bridges remained operable, allowing one or two trains a day to shuttle troops and materiel to Colmar from rail stops on the line between Freiburg and Offenburg. Additionally, photo reconnaissance flights revealed adequate stocks of equipment to build or repair pontoon bridges, suggesting that the preparatory bombardment had done little to degrade German recuperative capabilities.[39]

In addition to the failure to put the bridges and railroads leading to the pocket out of commission, Allied bombing raids also did not halt the flow of maritime traffic across the Rhine. In the weeks before the operation began, 6th Army Group's intelligence staff estimated that the Germans were operating at least fifteen ferries from port and docking facilities that remained in service. While the preparatory interdiction strikes hindered the ability of the Germans to sustain their presence in the Colmar Pocket, "there was no indication that the enemy had been seriously embarrassed."[40] The most noticeable effect of air power on German lines of communications in and out of the pocket was that rail and ferry traffic in the area typically moved at night to avoid being spotted and struck by Allied aircraft. While tactical reconnaissance confirmed some wheeled traffic movements during daylight hours, these were conducted only near the front lines and, most likely, only when damage to the rail network left no other alternative.[41]

Confounded by the weather and inability to mass sufficient aerial force in and behind the Colmar Pocket, the provisional air force's staff believed that by mid-January, they had achieved no more than "short-term interdiction" of German movements south of Strasbourg. The bridges at Breisach and Neuenburg, though repeatedly damaged by air raids, remained serviceable. Augmented by ferries and temporary pontoon

39. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:73–74.

40. 6th Army Grp, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," Chapter VI of "History of the Headquarters Sixth Army Group, ETO, Nov 44-Feb 45," NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-0.2, Box 1301, 61; 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:73–74.

41. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 18, Jan 20, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

bridging, the bridges continued to serve as lifelines for the defenders of the Colmar Pocket. Royce's airmen, however, had achieved some successes before Operation Cheerful began. The provisional air force's intelligence staff noted that rail traffic in and out of the Colmar Pocket had decreased, and efforts to destroy or damage trains, railroads, and facilities further north and east were also making steady progress. Bomb-laden P–47s had hit enough bridges to stop most rail movement immediately in front of 6th Army Group's lines north of the pocket, possibly an augur of future success to the southern stretches of the Allied front.[42]

A final pressing problem for Royce's planners and airmen was that a number of rail bridges still spanned the Rhine north of 6th Army Group's front. Several river bridges were in operation between the cities of Koblenz and Karlsruhe, meaning that the Germans still possessed the option, albeit an unlikely one, of mounting a counteroffensive to defend the Colmar Pocket by shifting forces from the north. To prevent such an attempt, the provisional air force conducted a major B–26 strike on January 16 that caused heavy damage to the rail network at Rastatt, an important rail hub that linked the German rear lines behind the Colmar Pocket to Karlsruhe. The medium bombers pounded several critical transportation targets in and around the city and succeeded in dropping one of the approaches to a large four-road bridge into the Murg River.[43] The damage to the Rastatt bridge left the most direct route to the German salient from the north temporarily out of service, and the city's rail facilities would remain high on the provisional air force's target list after the ground assault began. Further to the north and east, USAAF fighter-bombers attacked German armor concentrations and supply dumps near the rail centers at Karlsruhe and Neustadt, aiming to interdict any traffic heading south to Freiburg.[44]

These final interdiction strikes before Operation Cheerful began brought modest results. For the cost of seven Allied aircraft, between January 15 and January 22, 1945, the provisional air force claimed the destruction of 126 railcars, 4 locomotives, 31 motor vehicles, and 7 barges and damaged almost a hundred vehicles of various types. Along with the destruction of vehicles and rolling stock, ten rail yards and more than two dozen railroad lines in southwestern Germany suffered damage from U.S. and French air raids. Royce's airmen also conducted tactical strikes against German troop formations during the period, leading to claims of eight armored vehicles destroyed, seven gun positions damaged, and three supply dumps damaged.[45] On the whole, however, German combined arms

42. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:73–75.
43. Ibid.
44. A-2, 9 AF, IntSum No. 116, Jan 15–Jan 22, 1945, AFHRA, 533.607, B5736.
45. Ibid.

capabilities and defenses in the Colmar Pocket went relatively untouched, leaving most of the work to be done in the weeks ahead to de Lattre's artillery, infantry, and armor.

While these preparatory interdiction and tactical air strikes took place, the provisional air force's staff began implementing measures called for in the air plan for Operation Cheerful to ensure steady and clear communication between U.S. and French headquarters, aerial units, and ground troops once the offensive began. Procedures to coordinate air and ground efforts and to allocate aerial assets where they were most needed or could be most effective had previously taken place directly between XII Tactical Air Command and the headquarters of the two armies now under Devers, but in January, Royce's staff began crafting new processes to allow the headquarters of the provisional air force and 6th Army Group to synchronize air and ground operations.[46] In addition, the provisional air force adopted a new signals system to issue air/ground orders to French units, with wires laid to allow speech and teletype signals between Devers's headquarters and de Lattre's. A second signals system linked the First French Air Corps to the headquarters of 6th Army Group and the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) in Vittel. The First French Air Corps also established an advanced headquarters, which included a U.S. cryptographic team to receive, transmit, and decipher coded signals. The cryptographic section was assisted by a French signals group that operated a radio station and handled switchboard and teletype duties. Finally, the French advanced air headquarters received a pair of U.S. radio teams connecting them to Royce's command post in Vittel and to XII Tactical Air Command's headquarters in Nancy, allowing them to contact those headquarters directly in the case of emergency or inability to communicate with their own commanders.[47] The new signals architecture improved the coordination of air/ground efforts and decreased chances for international frictions caused by misunderstandings or delayed receipt of messages, both of which would be necessary given the evident need for U.S. and French air and ground units to conduct combined operations in the Colmar Pocket.

Despite the many odds against it—its insufficient allocation of aircraft and personnel, the difficulties of striking its primary interdiction targets, and the winter weather of 1944–45—one thing the provisional air force's planners and airmen could count on when the offensive began on January 20, 1945, was that they would hold near total air superiority. Indeed, the Allies seized command of the skies over southern France in

46. Selko interview.

47. 6th Army Grp, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-0.2, Box 1301, 61–62.

the first hours of Operation Dragoon and never relinquished it.[48] Allied air supremacy in the European Theater at this point in the war was the result of months of unceasing attacks against the Third Reich's aircraft factories, oil production facilities, and transportation network. Facing insuperable logistical shortages and massive aircraft and crew losses on the Eastern Front, in the Mediterranean, and in northern France, the Luftwaffe was no longer able to balance the needs imposed by fighting on multiple fronts while protecting German cities and industrial infrastructure from the onslaught of the Allied Combined Bomber Offensive.[49]

The Germans keenly felt the loss of air superiority throughout the Southern France and Rhineland Campaigns and would continue to do so throughout the clearing of the Colmar Pocket. The Luftwaffe, unable to make effective use of its remaining bombers in the area, which were few in number and lacked adequate fighter escort, was forced to employ single-engine fighters in "a confusing manner" during the Wehrmacht's retreat up the Rhone valley to Alsace, using the same aircraft for ground support and counter-bomber missions.[50] Attrition, whether through combat losses, lack of maintenance, or reassignment of units to other fronts, quickly whittled down German aircraft reserves. By December 1944, Ninth Air Force's intelligence staff estimated that the Luftwaffe could muster no more than seventy-five fighters in the provisional air force's sector. Because of the scarcity of fuel and repair parts, probably no more than 65 percent of those aircraft were serviceable at any given time.[51]

While the serviceability rate hovered around that of the provisional air force's (see Table 1 on p. 31), Allied supremacy in numbers alone, even for Royce's undersized air force, boded ill for the Luftwaffe's ability to stem a major advance against the Colmar Pocket. Although the Germans had been able to mass a surprising number of aircraft to support the offensives of December 1944 and January 1945, this proved to be a singular and unsustainable event accomplished in part by further denuding the air units

48. The Luftwaffe had fewer than 200 aircraft stationed in southern France at the time of the Allied invasion. Most of them were bombers employed in anti-shipping and coastal patrol duties, and bulk of the fighter aircraft belonged to a training group with "limited" defensive capabilities. See Maj. Herbert Beuchs, "Strength and Location of the German Air Force in Southern France," *FMS*, A-869, USAHEC. See also A-2, HQ AAF, *The AAF in the Invasion of Southern France: An Interim Report*, 17–19.

49. Horst Boog, "The Strategic Air War in Europe and Air Defense of the Reich, 1943–1944," Part I of *The Strategic Air War in Europe and the War in the West and East Asia, 1943–1944/5*, Vol. VII of *Germany and the Second World War*, tr. Derry Cook-Radmore et al., 9 Vols. (Clarendon: Oxford UP, 2006), 333; Philips Payson O'Brien, *How the War was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), 357–61, 365–72; James S. Corum, "Defeat of the Luftwaffe, 1935–1945," Chap. 7 of *Why Air Forces Fail: The Anatomy of Defeat*, ed. Robin Higham and Stephen J. Harris (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2006), 203–26.

50. XII TAC, "A Short History of the XII Tactical Air Command," Oct 15, 1947, AFHRA, 650.01-4, 17 Sep 1942-15 Oct 1947, A6193, 12; EUCOM, "Isolation of the Battlefield—Southern France," AFHRA, 519.042, A5520, 5–6; Ibid., "Air Cooperation, Alsace–Lorraine Campaign," Part I, 1–2.

51. A-2, 9 AF (Adv.), "Close Support GAF Fighters," Dec 10, 1944, AFHRA, 549.6315, C5033.

defending Alsace and Lorraine. Inevitable losses to superior Allied air strength and inescapable shortages of fuel, maintenance and repair stocks, and trained pilots quickly manifested themselves once again, and the Allies were able to wrest back control of the skies all along the Western Front.[52] Col. Horst Wilutzky, the operations officer of the German Army Group G, which took part in the Northwind offensive and would take control of Nineteenth Army during the final battle for the Colmar Pocket, recalled after the war that in early 1945:

> The German Luftwaffe scarcely put in an appearance. Shortages of planes and high octane gasoline, as well as limitations imposed by weather conditions, allowed only a very restricted commitment of the Luftwaffe, the point of main effort of which was elsewhere. . . . The enemy air force dominated the region.[53]

During Northwind, German ground forces could expect to receive air support only once or twice a week. For mutual defense against the Allied fighters that commanded the skies, seventy or so German fighters would take to the air and conduct their missions in a massed formation. The lack of tactical flexibility resulting from the use of such formations left them good for little more than reconnaissance, and, in any case, most missions were intercepted by Allied fighters and forced to turn back before they ever reached the battlefield.[54] Other than further destruction of a few of the already-scarce German aircraft operating in the Rhineland and Alsace, nothing occurred to change the balance of power in the air over Alsace during the weeks between Operations Northwind and Cheerful.

Aware of the systemic challenges facing the Luftwaffe, the Allies expected little resistance from the air once Operation Cheerful began. During the weeks that preceded the operation, the Luftwaffe had been able to carry out little but desultory attempts to surveil the forces gathering against them on the ground, leading 6th Army Group's intelligence section to declare German air capabilities "insignificant" and primarily defensive in nature.[55] Royce's own intelligence staffers concluded that the Germans' ability to resist the Colmar offensive from the air was "almost negligible," for the Luftwaffe units in the area had already been stripped of aircraft and fuel to support the failed Ardennes counteroffensive. The

52. A-3, Air Staff, SHAEF, "Report on Allied Air Force Operations From 17th to 27th December, 1944," AFHRA, 505.48, A5116, 5–6, 8.

53. Col. Horst Wilutzky, "The Offensive of A Gp G in Northern Alsace in January 1945," *FMS*, B-095, USAHEC, 8.

54. Ibid.

55. 6th Army Grp, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-0.2, Box 1301, 61.

Messerschmitt Me 262 A–1 Jet Fighter. **Sightings of the Me 262, which was capable of flying more than 500 miles per hour—over a hundred miles per hour faster than any Allied piston-engine fighter—were of great interest to the provisional air force's pilots and intelligence staffers.** *National Archives.*

few German pilots still flying in the area showed little interest in taking on Allied aircraft. The sole exceptions were the pilots of Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter-bombers, which made an unwelcome appearance in the area at beginning of the month, strafing and bombing ground formations and providing effective top cover for slower piston-engine fighters. Less confident in their aircraft and skills than the jet aviators, most German pilots flying armed reconnaissance patrols would either flee upon sighting Allied fighters or make only a half-hearted attack before speeding away to safety.[56] Such encounters led pilots and staffers of XII Tactical Air Command to the conclusion that the primary intention of German fighter pilots was to entice Allied fighter-bombers to release their ordnance in anticipation of a dogfight rather than offering combat. The reluctance of the enemy to close in and engage led to wholesale changes in tactics for XII Tactical Air Command's fighter-bomber pilots, who ceased conducting aggressive fighter sweep patrols searching for enemy aircraft to engage

56. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:67–68; XII TAC, "A Short History of the XII Tactical Air Command," AFHRA, 650.01-4, A6193, 14. Despite the overall qualitative and quantitative decline of the Luftwaffe, the appearance of German jet fighters in late 1944 greatly worried Allied civilian and military leaders. See Tami Davis Biddle, "On the Crest of Fear: V-Weapons, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Last Stages of World War II in Europe," *Journal of Military History* 83:1 (Jan 2019), 182–89.

French Supermarine Spitfire Mark IX. **A Spitfire of the I/7 Squadron, 1. Fighter Group (Royal Air Force designation 328 Squadron) taxis on a snow-covered runway near the Vosges Mountains, with a crew chief assisting the pilot. The First French Air Corps employed Spitfires in fighter and reconnaissance roles.** *National Archives.*

and destroy, as they had during the campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. Freed from the burden of fruitlessly looking for dogfights that would rarely come, they were able to execute interdiction and close cooperation ground attack missions with "comparative immunity."[57] During Operation Cheerful, fighter sweep missions were left, for the most part, to the First French Air Corps' Spitfire group, whose aircraft had comparatively limited ground strike capabilities when compared to the USAAF and French Thunderbolt groups.

Attainment of air superiority was the primary task the USAAF intended for its tactical air forces to accomplish. Its possession allowed the provisional air force to concentrate on tasks, such as interdicting enemy supply lines and isolating and striking their forces on the front lines, which could be synchronized and coordinated with ground operations.[58] The tactical flexibility allowed by air superiority demonstrated itself

57. XII TAC, "A Report on Phase 3 Operations of the XII Tactical Air Command for Army Air Forces Evaluation Board, European Theatre of Operations," Mar 1945, USAHEC, 3.

58. AAF Evaluation Board in the ETO, "Tactics and Techniques Developed by the United States Tactical Air Commands in the European Theater of Operations," Mar 1, 1945, AFHRA, 138.4-33, A1174, 2; Jacobs, "Battle for France, 1944," 251.

during the battle to close the Colmar Pocket. The German ground forces defending the pocket, left unprotected while Allied medium bombers and fighter-bombers prowled the skies above them uncontested, found maneuver by foot or vehicle during daylight hours a risky prospect. The chief of staff of the German Nineteenth Army, Col. (*Oberst*) Kurt Brandstädter, lamented in a postwar assessment of the Colmar Pocket operation that the "fighting power and morale of the troops were especially impaired by the *entire lack of air forces on our side*," which exacerbated the Germans' inability to supply and concentrate enough forces to counter the protracted, large-scale combined-arms assaults that the Allies would execute during Operation Cheerful.[59]

The greatest threat to Allied aircraft operating over Alsace and southwestern Germany in early 1945 came from ground-based antiaircraft fire. Responsibility for antiaircraft defense in the area was divided between the Luftwaffe and the army. For its part, the Luftwaffe had assigned its IV Flak Corps to defend German cities and the ground units attempting to stem the advance of Devers's 6th Army Group. The IV Flak Corps was composed of three divisions. One, the 9th Flak Division, was headquartered opposite of the lines of Patch's U.S. Seventh Army west of the city of Pirmasens. The command posts for the other two were situated at critical points on the main railway running parallel to the Rhine that fed the Colmar Pocket. Orders from 13th Flak Division were issued out of Breisgau, a few miles west of Freiburg, and 28th Flak Division had its headquarters at Bad Herrenalb, in the mountains just west of Rastatt. Between them, the two divisions assigned south of Pirmasens fielded an estimated 138 antiaircraft batteries employing guns of various calibers. A heavy antiaircraft battery would include four to six 88mm or 105mm guns. Medium batteries were composed of nine to twelve 30mm to 50mm guns, sometimes mounted in pairs, as well as searchlights. Light batteries employed a wide range of small-caliber guns, often mounted in pairs or quads, and machine guns. Batteries of all types were mechanized for mobility, but often in an improvised fashion, and shortages led to the widespread employment of captured Allied models of medium and light guns.[60] In addition to the corps' artillery batteries, it also fielded a small number of smoke and barrage balloon units. No dedicated searchlight batteries were assigned to the IV Flak Corps, but since most batteries had their own organic searchlight sections and the provisional air force had

59. Brandstädter, "Fighting of the 19th 'Armee' for the Bridgehead 'Elsass' and Defense of the Upper-Rhine Front from 4 January to 21 March 1945," 10. Emphasis in original.

60. Maj. Gen. Joseph Schmid, "Strategic Concentration of AAA and Flying Units in the West (Luftwaffe Command West Area), September 1944 to May 1945," Vol. 15 of "Luftwaffe Operations in the West 1943 to 1945," USAF Study No. 159, AFHRA, K113.107-158, 50, 193–98, 285–94.

Table 3: Luftwaffe IV Flak Corps Batteries January 22, 1945		
Unit	**Heavy**	**Medium/ Light**
9th Flak Div. (Großsteinhausen)	26	29
13th Flak Division (Breisgau)	37	26
28th Flak Division (Bad Herrenalb)	48	27
Total	111	82

SOURCE: Maj. Gen. Joseph Schmid, "Strategic Concentration of AAA and Flying Units in the West (Luftwaffe Command West Area), September 1944 to May 1945," Vol. 15 of "Luftwaffe Operations in the West 1943 to 1945," USAF Study No. 159, AFHRA, K113.107-158, 128. Table omits fractional unit numbers representing sub-battery sized sections for clarity but includes numbers for provisional and temporary batteries assigned at the division echelon.

only one small night fighter squadron, their absence did not significantly lessen the threat that German flak posed to Allied aviators in the area.

Along with the vital Rhine bridges, the main rail yards and waystations along the lines behind and leading to the Colmar Pocket received substantial numbers of antiaircraft units for their defense. As the primary hub in the network immediately behind the Rhine, the rail facilities in Freiburg were protected by nine antiaircraft batteries, six of which were equipped with heavy-caliber guns, and four additional units operating rapid-firing small-caliber guns. Several other cities and towns that would face Allied air attack during Operation Cheerful, including Riegel, Hausach, Donaueschingen, and Appenweier, had multiple antiaircraft sections operating weapons of varying calibers assigned to guard their rail yards and roads. In addition to the rail defenses, in early January 1945 the Luftwaffe had made at least thirty small-caliber guns available to protect bridges and river ferries, and crews were being trained to man fifty more. Once these guns and crews arrived, they would free up other light antiaircraft units for rail yard defense duties.[61] While Alsace and southern Germany bristled with antiaircraft guns, flak defense of German territory behind the Colmar Pocket was comparatively weak to that provided to areas farther from the Rhine, with proportionally heavier antiaircraft capabilities assigned to larger centers of population and industrial production, including Stuttgart to the west, Karlsruhe and Mannheim to the north, and Friedrichshafen on the shores of Lake Constance.[62]

Complicating matters was the fact that by this stage in the war, the German antiaircraft arm had, like the Luftwaffe's fighter force, found its

61. Army Grp Oberrhein, "Flakschutz für Eisenbahn," Jan 3, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 65873, Roll 172, 7223482.

62. Heinz Baruda, "Kriegschäden im Baden-Württemburg, 1939–1945," Forward to Map 7.11, *Historischer Atlas vom Baden-Württemburg*, ed. Karl Heinz Schröder, et al. (Stuttgart: Kommission für geschichtliche Landeskunde in Baden-Württemburg, 1972–88), 6–7, 10, https://www.leo-bw.de/media/kgl_atlas/current/delivered/pdf/HABW_7_11.pdf.

aggregate effectiveness greatly curtailed by pressures placed upon it by the around the clock Combined Bomber Offensive in the west and the advance of the Red Army in the east.[63] Nonetheless, although beset by shortages of ammunition, critical equipment, and personnel, German antiaircraft guns remained a persistent and potent defense against USAAF and French aircraft flying over and behind the Colmar Pocket.

Other than the German flak defenses, there was one major factor that mitigated the Allies' ability to make full effect of the air superiority they had wrested from the enemy. Though the skies over northeastern France were usually clear of German aircraft, they were often filled with cloud banks, precipitation of seemingly every type, and fog during the winter of 1944–45. The weather, as Devers's planners had predicted, would have a considerable impact on Allied operations both in the air and on the ground. The prevailing meteorological conditions at this stage of the Rhineland Campaign served as "something of an equalizer for the two otherwise grossly imbalanced opponents," negating the Allies' overwhelming advantage in air power by reducing the numbers of sorties flown, limiting the types of missions that could be undertaken, and often grounding aircraft completely.[64] Inclement conditions had a particularly restrictive influence on reconnaissance efforts. Camera-equipped aircraft spent days or weeks grounded by the weather, and when they could perform their missions, the photographic images subsequently developed often revealed that snowfalls had obscured terrain features, enemy positions, and other critical details.[65]

The provisional air force's air control records document the difficulties posed by the prevailing weather conditions before and after Operation Cheerful. From mid-January to the end of March 1945, the 64th Fighter Wing's air control center at Nancy logged a mere eighteen days of "operational flying weather," along with thirty-three days of "limited" operational capability and twenty-seven days of "non-operational" weather. Forty-two days during the reporting period were marred by precipitation, much of it frozen, with some overlap with the forty-nine days marked with foggy conditions.[66] Noting the danger imposed by the weather, the historian for one of the wing's P–47 fighter-bomber groups complained in his submission for January 1945 that the wing leadership "continues to insist on flying some missions in weather that could hardly be termed 'operational.'"[67]

63. Edward B. Westermann, *Flak: German Anti-Aircraft Defenses, 1914–1945* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2001), 277–83.

64. Keith E. Bonn, *When the Odds Were Even: The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944–January 1945* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 2006), 19.

65. G-2, XXI Corps, "G-2 Air: XXI Corps During the Colmar Pocket Operation," Apr 21, 1945, USAHEC, 7.

66. 64 Fght Wg, "History of Control Center #2," July 3, 1945, AFHRA, WG-64-HI, C0010.

67. 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343.

U.S. B–26 Marauder. **A bomber of the 444th Bombardment Squadron, 320th Bomb Group, flies over France in April 1945.** *National Archives.*

Hazardous flying and landing conditions led to increased accident rates that taxed the provisional air force's ability to keep its aircraft operable. Being a recently activated provisional unit, in early 1945 its air service command lacked well-established supply channels procedures to process requisitions for equipment to keep aircraft flying. This circumstance would have been a problem in any case, but the adverse weather exacerbated logistical and maintenance difficulties. Crucial cold-weather supplies, such as wing covers and de-icing solution, were particularly difficult to come by. Because the provisional air force's bases were mostly either repurposed airfields captured from the Germans or hastily constructed new facilities closer to the front lines, hangar space "was an almost unknown phenomenon," forcing mechanics to work on delicate engines and electrical wiring while exposed to the elements. Planes that could be kept in flying condition operated from runways and taxi spaces covered with snow, slush, and mud, and areas not covered with pierced steel planking became rutted through repeated use. Together, these hazards led to frequent landing and taxiing accidents.[68]

Inadequate logistical support and dangerous ground conditions resulted in the development of innovative methods to keep aircraft flying. Airmen improvised ways to obtain badly needed supplies, build maintenance facilities, and conduct field tests for engines, armament, and

68. ASC, 1 TACAF, Historical Narrative, AFHRA, 550.01, C5034, 12–13.

equipment. One ingenious method to deal with the weather was recorded in the 371st Fighter Group's monthly history for January 1945. The unit had arrived at its air base in Tantonville, France, shortly before Christmas 1944, but despite months of cold and wet weather, it had yet to receive snowplows. Faced with unrelenting snowstorms, the group's line and staff personnel reported nightly for emergency duty at midnight to clear the runways of accumulating precipitation with push brooms before it compacted and froze. Once they had completed the backbreaking work, a Thunderbolt would taxi down the runway, its propeller wash blowing away the piles of snow and slush. After several nights of this, the group obtained a snowplow—whether through official or unofficial means is left to the reader's imagination—and "another obstacle was overcome and operations marched on."[69]

The weather also boded ill for the interdiction program outlined in the air plan for Operation Cheerful. The 42d Bombardment Wing found its B–26s grounded for almost the entire duration of the operation, since bomber operations in the European Theater of Operations were dependent upon favorable weather conditions. Just to get off the ground, a Marauder required clear visibility conditions of at least one mile and a thousand-foot ceiling beneath any cloud cover, and to ensure safe landing conditions, the visibility requirement was doubled. Pilots could make their way through cloud cover above the thousand-foot ceiling flying by instruments, but any kind of icing conditions within the clouds would force the cancellation of a mission. If a medium bomber mission got off the ground safely, wind and cloud conditions over the target area were often variable, and the lead pilot required at least five miles of clear visibility to verify the target and to permit bombing runs conducted in formation.[70] Given the prevailing conditions during late January and early February 1945, the meeting of minimal requirements for bomber missions was a rarity.

The struggles of the wing's 17th Bombardment Group during the month of January 1945 demonstrate the limitations that the prevailing weather imposed upon the employment of air power. The group had more than 70 percent of its missions cancelled during the month, and its B–26s released ordnance on only three of the ten missions it was able to execute. The group estimated that barely more than half of the bombs released on those missions struck within 400 feet of their intended aiming points, and weather contributed to the loss of four Marauders in accidents.[71] The next month, the weather improved, and the group achieved far better results.

69. 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343.

70. 9 Bomb Div, "Medium Bombardment: Its Use in Ground Support," Dec 1, 1944, AFHRA, 534.547B, B5830.

71. 17 Bomb Grp, Unit History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-17-HI(Bomb), B0082.

In February, the group was able to fly twenty-five missions, all of which resulted in ordnance dropped. Bombing accuracy rose to over 70 percent, and only one aircraft was lost to a mishap.[72] But favorable weather did not become predominant until later in the month, after Operation Cheerful had concluded; as it turned out, weather-related groundings ensured that the group contributed but three missions in support of the operation.

Although weather had curtailed the availability and effectiveness of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s medium bomber units in the weeks preceding Operation Cheerful, the demand for interdiction strikes grew as the planned start date for the offensive neared. In addition to the two major bridges at Breisach and Neuenburg, 6th Army Group's operations staff identified targets, including rail lines and crossings along the Rhine, in eight major German cities just four days before the operation was slated to begin. These included sites in or near Mannheim, Worms, Mainz, Speyer, and Koblenz, and lay as far as 150 miles northeast of Colmar.[73] Despite the growing number of cities, bridges, and rail facilities added to the target list, the provisional air force's medium bombers would play a negligible role in striking these faraway targets until after the eradication of the Colmar Pocket. Between January 20 and February 9, the USAAF units of 42d Bombardment Wing managed to fly sorties on only six days. Of a total of 490 sorties launched, only 241 were deemed effective in carrying out the intended mission, mostly because of weather-related recalls or lack of conditions necessary for accurate bombardment over the target area.[74]

The unavailability and ineffectiveness of the Marauder units meant that most of the aerial activity over the Colmar Pocket or in the German lines of communications behind it would be conducted by the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s P–47 fighter-bomber groups. The primary targets for Thunderbolts during Operation Cheerful were marshaling yards, rail and road junctions, and bridges in German territory. The majority of these targets lay less than fifty miles from the Rhine and were attacked to prevent the Germans from bringing in last-minute reinforcements or conducting an orderly retreat from the Colmar Pocket. Of particular importance were railways running to or from Freiburg, the main hub for trains crossing the Rhine over the Breisach bridge. From there, rail lines ran north to Offenburg and west into the Black Forest. Thunderbolts bombed major junctions of the Rheintalbahn, the main line running along the Rhine to the north, as often as weather permitted during the operation. Important targets in the city of Offenburg, which itself served as a way station for

72. 17 Bomb Grp, Unit History, Feb 1945, AFHRA, GP-17-HI(Bomb), B0082.

73. G-3, 6th Army Grp, to G-3, SHAEF, Msg. Ref. No. BX 22951, Jan 16, 1945, AFHRA, 549.323-1, C5031.

74. Stat. Ctrl., USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, 25–26.

trains headed north to Karlsruhe through Rastatt, included its marshaling yard and a bridge across the Kinzig River. Other major rail targets were the two railways that ran through the city of Rottweil. The first of these connected to Villingen to the west, and from there to Offenburg. The other ran south to Tuttlingen and north to the Neckar River and on to Stuttgart. Both railways received particular attention from bomb-laden Thunderbolts in February during the closing stages of the operation.

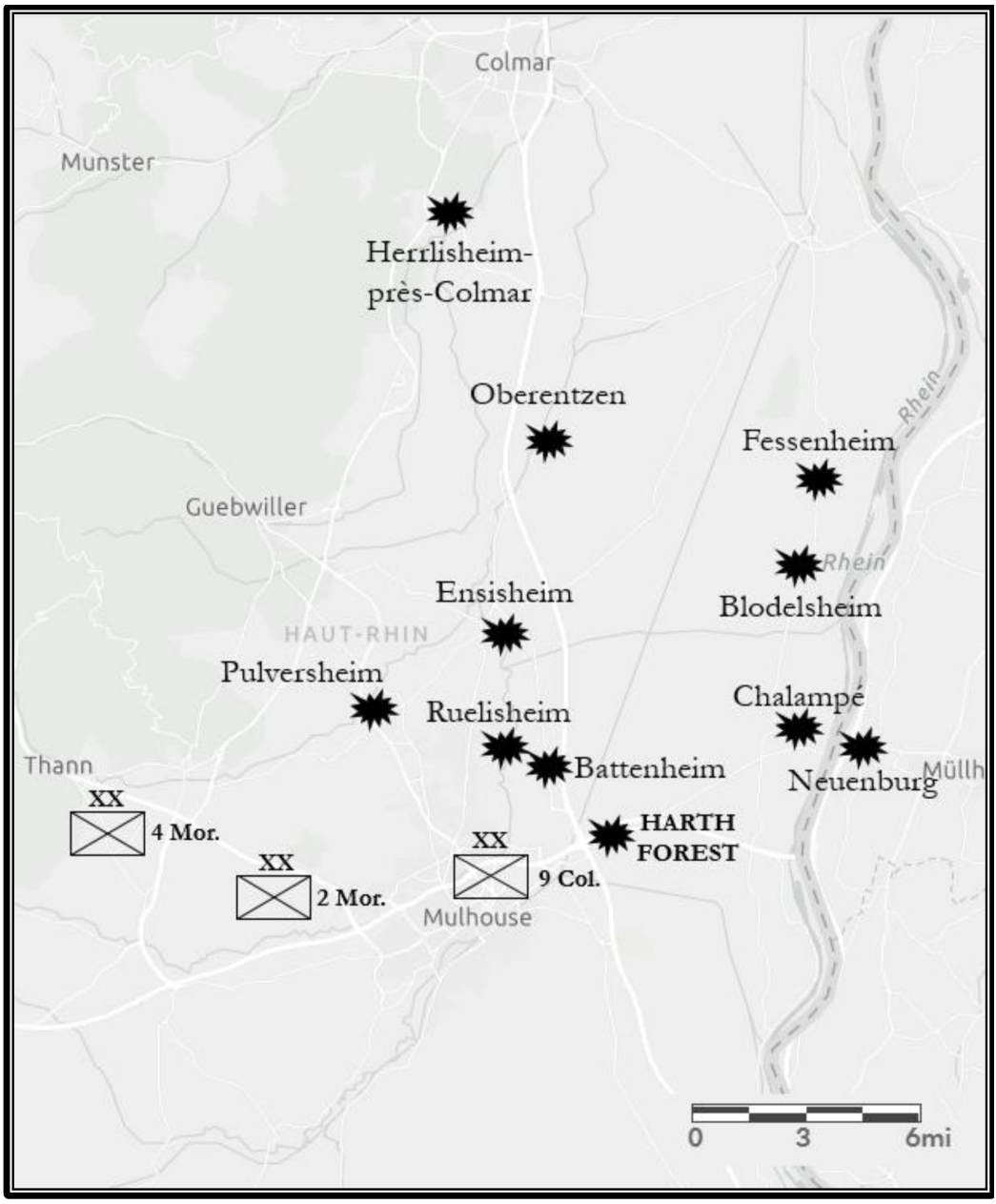
Although the P–47 was a less-than-ideal substitute for the B–26 as the primary aircraft for a wide-scale interdiction campaign, it was well suited to conduct another main mission of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional): close air support for ground troops. The Thunderbolt was a large, ruggedly built single-engine fighter that could sustain heavy damage during combat. Armed with eight .50-caliber machine guns, it could also carry rocket launchers and more than a ton of bombs. Fighter-bombers carried varying ordnance loads, depending on the type of mission they were expected to fly or targets they expected to find on any given day. These would often include a combination of different types of bombs, including general-purpose, incendiary, and fragmentation munitions.[75] Though limited by the challenging meteorological conditions, Thunderbolt pilots managed to, as 6th Army Group's final operational report stated, deliver "some effective and damaging blows" to the German defenders within the Colmar Pocket.[76]

Most of the missions flown by the provisional air force's P–47s during Operation Cheerful were armed reconnaissance. During these missions, aircraft would range over a pre-assigned area looking for targets to strike or waiting for orders from a ground controller, rather than being given a defined objective. When requested to conduct a close cooperation mission, the primary tactical targets of Allied fighter-bombers included fortified positions, gun emplacements, and troop formations.[77] Typically during the operation, the P–47s of the provisional air force's U.S. units would range widely over 6th Army Group's operational area, supporting operations in the Colmar Pocket and U.S. Seventh Army efforts farther north, while also crossing over the Rhine to hit rail and communications targets in Germany, all during the same sortie. Fighter-bomber pilots could also expect to fly multiple sorties incorporating multiple missions on days with good weather.

75. XII TAC, "A Report on Phase 3 Operations of the XII Tactical Air Command for Army Air Forces Evaluation Board, European Theatre of Operations," 31, 149; Alfred Goldberg, "AAF Aircraft of World War II," Chap. 6 of *Men and Planes*, Vol. 6 of *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, 7 vols., ed. Wesley F. Craven and James Lea Cate (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1955), 215–17.

76. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 112.

77. XII TAC, "A Short History of the XII Tactical Air Command," AFHRA, 650.01-4, A6193, 14.



**Air Strikes Supporting the French I Corps,
January 20–25, 1945**

Four

Air Operations January 20–25, 1945

By mid-January, the broad contours of the plans for both ground and air elements of Operation Cheerful had emerged and were in the process of final refinement and approval. As part of the final preparations for the assault, Lt. Gen. Jacob Devers revised his army group's letter of instructions to its senior commanders on January 18, 1945. In the new instructions, he expressed his desired intent of "eliminating the Colmar pocket and destroying the German forces west of the Rhine in that area" by aggressive offensive action. Other than the omission of the unlikely airborne assault on Neuf-Brisach, the operational plan remained for the most part unchanged from its original conception. Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's First French Army would begin the operation on January 20. Early that morning, Lt. Gen. Antoine Béthouart's I Corps would advance northwest of Mulhouse on the southern end of the pocket, disrupting the transportation network and cutting off the German forces still holding out in the Vosges. Once this critical task had been achieved and the town of Ensisheim, seven miles north of the original line of departure, had been taken, the corps would turn its armored forces east toward Neuf-Brisach.

Two days after Béthouart's troops started their attack, Maj. Gen. Joseph de Goislard de Monsabert's II Corps would launch an assault on the northern half of the salient. As the original plan had envisioned, the French II Corps was to bypass Colmar, leaving it isolated, and make their way to Neuf-Brisach, denying the Germans access to the vital crossing over the Rhine. To bolster the northern pincer, Devers ordered Lt. Gen. Alexander Patch to release the French 2d Armored Division, then operating as part of his U.S. Seventh Army, to de Lattre's operational control. De Lattre also received the U.S. 12th Armored Division. These two armored divisions, as well as the 28th Infantry Division from SHAEF's reserves, were to be moved north of the German salient under radio silence at night or in small elements to preserve the element of surprise and to convince the enemy

that any movements that they might have observed indicated "purely defensive intentions."[1]

After receiving Devers's letter of instruction, de Lattre sent a response shortly before evening fell, noting that he stood "entirely in agreement on everything and especially the dates." However, he had conferred with Monsabert earlier that day, who advised him that the U.S. 3d Infantry Division, which would lead the northern assault, would not be ready to move from its line of departure until the night of January 22. Therefore, "*the real effort of attack* for the whole of II Corps" would actually begin in the morning darkness of January 23. Taking this into account, de Lattre mused on the benefits of delaying the launch of the offensive for a day so that no more than forty-eight hours would elapse between the first movements of the southern and northern pincers. However, noting the severity of the fighting taking place on Patch's front near Strasbourg—Maj. Gen. Roderick R. Allen's 12th Armored Division, slated to move south as a reinforcement for Monsabert's corps, was in the midst of a disastrously executed and costly attack against a German bridgehead on the west side of the Rhine—he assured Devers that he understood his commander's "impatience" to see the operation commence on schedule: "Therefore, count on it well—*I Corps will attack on the morning of the 20th*."[2] Ignoring de Lattre's equivocation regarding the timing of the northern pincer attack, Devers's response conveyed his "complete confidence" in the First French Army's ability to "again destroy the 19th German Army." To cheer the French general's spirits, he closed with a word of praise: "In these difficult times your aggressive leadership stands out, which assures success."[3]

The day before Operation Cheerful began turned out to be a difficult one for the Allies in Alsace. Fierce fighting continued along the U.S. Seventh Army's front lines, which guarded the northern approaches to Strasbourg. Two battalions of the U.S. 12th Armored Division that had been cut off during its calamitous assault remained missing, and efforts to locate and relieve them were met with vigorous counterattacks that forced elements of the U.S. VI Corps to yield ground, briefly handing the initiative to the

1. 6th Army Grp, to CG, 1 French Army, and CG, Seventh Army, subj: "Letter of Instructions No. 9," Jan 18, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308. The French 2d Armored Division often operated under U.S. command and control because of political disputes and personal animosity between its commander, Maj. Gen. Philippe François Marie Leclerc de Hauteclocque, and de Lattre. See William Mortimer Moore, *Free France's Lion: The Life of Philippe Leclerc, de Gaulle's Greatest General* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2011), 371–74.

2. Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, to Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, Jan 18, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 4. Emphasis in original.

3. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, Jan 18, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 4.

enemy.[4] The German successes on January 19 resulted in the dedication of most of the provisional air force's firepower to areas north of the Colmar Pocket. Allied fighter-bombers dropped more than 118 tons of bombs during the day, almost all in direct support of Patch's forces or to interdict the supply routes behind the German forces engaging them.[5]

German aggressiveness north of the pocket was accompanied by unwelcome weather, which curtailed most of the missions planned by the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) to prepare for the impending French offensive. Cloudy conditions foiled two attempts by 42d Bombardment Wing to hit rail yards at Rastatt and Achern, a small town fifteen miles to its south, which could be used to send trains to reinforce the German salient in Alsace. Other than a few fighter-bomber strikes against enemy rail targets south of Offenburg, the provisional air force's aircraft accomplished no significant degradation of German defenses or communications during the final hours before Operation Cheerful began. The weather cleared somewhat late in the afternoon, allowing for a handful of last-minute tactical reconnaissance flights over the Colmar Pocket, but the intelligence gathered during these sorties revealed little not already known to Devers's and Maj. Gen. Ralph Royce's analysts in Vittel.[6]

Despite the setbacks north of the pocket and the miserable weather, Devers gave little or no thought to delaying Operation Cheerful. Confident that Patch's troops could handle whatever the Germans could throw at them, he paid a visit to the command posts of Generals Béthouart, whose corps would soon spring into action on the southern side of the German salient, and de Lattre. He found Béthouart "calm and cool but determined" and in possession of "a good, aggressive power plan." De Lattre's "aggressive, driving, and determined" demeanor during their conference cheered the army group commander: "He seems to rise to real heights of leadership when necessary. I have confidence that this attack will be successful."[7] Over two weeks of preparations had come to an end, and the operation would begin as planned.

The weather and events of the next day, however, soon dampened the optimism Devers had displayed the previous evening. The morning of Saturday, January 20, began with a torrential blizzard that augured ill for both ground and air efforts. Nonetheless, the French I Corps advanced

4. G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rpt, Jan 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308. The 17th Armored Infantry Battalion and 43d Tank Battalion were annihilated after their encirclement by the Germans, with only a few survivors managing to make their way back to the Allied lines. See Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 523–26.

5. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum No. 121, Jan 19–Jan 20, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

6. 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4287, Jan 20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

7. Devers Diary, Jan 19, 1945, USAHEC.

Republic P–47 Thunderbolt Fighter-Bomber. **Ruggedly built and powerfully armed, P–47s conducted the majority of close cooperation and interdiction strikes during the clearing of the Colmar Pocket. Here, a P–47 of the 404th Fighter Squadron, 371st Fighter Group, taxis on a runway constructed of pierced steel planking, a versatile construction material used to build temporary air strips during the Second World War.** *National Archives.*

as planned from its positions near the city of Mulhouse into German-held territory, with two Moroccan divisions—the 2d Moroccan Infantry Division and the 4th Moroccan Mountain Division—leading the way. On their right flank, the 9th Colonial Infantry Division, composed of troops from France's sub-Saharan African colonies and former Free French elements, moved north from Mulhouse itself. All along the front, French infantry and tanks slogged slowly through the snow as massed artillery fire blanketed the German defenses.[8] Fortunately for Monsabert's troops, the weather broke in places for a few hours, allowing single-engine aircraft to make sorties to and over the front. As the French I Corps pressed against the German lines along the southern edge of the pocket, two of XII Tactical Air Command's fighter-bomber groups were able to get aircraft aloft to provide air support. The 371st Fighter Group at Tantonville was socked in, as was 324th Fighter Group, whose air base at Lunéville was blanketed by five feet of snow, but the 50th and 358th Fighter Groups were able to launch several sorties before snowstorms returned in the afternoon.[9]

8. G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rpt, Jan 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308; Seaman, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," 47.

9. 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343; 358 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-358-HI(FI), B0319; 316 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-316-HI, A0722.

The 358th Fighter Group managed to get each of its three squadrons in the air during the brief time permitted by the weather.[10] Two squadrons conducted two armed reconnaissance missions in the Colmar Pocket, ranging over Colmar itself and Mulhouse at the pocket's southern end. The first wave of Thunderbolts took off from Toul at 8:15 a.m.; within twenty-one minutes, the rest were on their way to their assigned objectives. Twelve P–47s attacked the port city of Chalampé shortly before 9 a.m., where several snow-covered barges were moored alongside large piers extending into the Rhine from both banks. Although German antiaircraft defenses threw up intense machine-gun and cannon fire against them, the attackers destroyed one of the piers and sent at least two barges to the bottom of the river while damaging two others with a barrage of eight half-ton general-purpose bombs and four incendiary munitions.[11]

The P–47s then headed west toward Mulhouse to hit targets in the rear lines of the Germans resisting the French I Corps' advance, arriving over the town of Ruelisheim. The main road out of the town led northeast to Ensisheim, which was the main objective to be seized by the two Moroccan divisions before they began their drive to Chalampé.[12] The pilots claimed to have destroyed a warehouse that burned down after three direct hits, but they failed to hit a number of other targets in the German rear lines between Mulhouse and Colmar, including a bridge and several buildings, during later raids over the German salient. During the course of their patrol, they strafed two convoys spotted on roads a few miles north and northeast of Ensisheim, destroying three horse-drawn artillery pieces and a flak position four miles northwest of the city, and wrecking two motorized vehicles and damaging two horse cars near Oberentzen, five and a half miles north on the main road leading to Colmar, before returning to base.[13]

The second wave of P–47s assigned to the Colmar Pocket hit Ensisheim itself. Arriving at 10 a.m., they also bombed but missed a road bridge, but other bombs struck home, one destroying five buildings in the town with a direct hit. They then headed across the Rhine to Freiburg, where icing conditions forced some of the Thunderbolts to jettison their ordnance. Eager to put their remaining munitions to good effect, they veered west to Breisach. Pressing on through machine-gun and heavy antiaircraft artillery fire, they attempted to bomb the rail bridge across the Rhine. Despite releasing a dozen bombs, they could not credibly claim

10. 358 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-358-HI(FI), B0319.
11. 366 Fght Sqdn, Mission Rpt 388, Jan 20, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-366-HI, A0787.
12. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 39; Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 539.
13. 366 Fght Sqdn, Mission Rpt 388, Jan 20, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-366-HI, A0787.

to have caused any damage to the massive span, but one errant bomb flattened four nearby buildings.[14]

While destructive, the air attacks at Ruelisheim and Ensisheim failed to block German avenues of reinforcement and were too small in scope to have made a difference for the French offensive, which by midday had been halted by accumulating snow, disadvantageous terrain, and dogged German resistance.[15] The French and Moroccan troops struggling on the ground received no assistance from the First French Air Corps during the day, for like their USAAF counterparts, the French 4. Group also encountered discouraging weather. Six French P–47s sent to hit an ammunition supply dump at Bollwiller, approximately three and a half miles west of Ensisheim, had to jettison their bombs before reaching the target and returned to base shortly after 11 a.m.[16] Already, the weather had begun to take its toll on the Allied offensive, both in the air and on the ground.

While the weather bedeviled operations over the Colmar Pocket, clearer skies beckoned across the Rhine. As the French P–47s headed home from their aborted strike at Bollwiller, pilots of the U.S. 50th Fighter Group were about to take advantage of a rare opportunity to engage in a dogfight with German aircraft. The group, which had been grounded by winter storms for two of the three previous days, had sent fifteen of the 10th Fighter Squadron's P–47s out that morning to support U.S. Seventh Army operations near Strasbourg. After concluding their patrol there, they headed over German lines to perform armed reconnaissance behind the Colmar Pocket. Around 11 a.m., the Thunderbolt pilots, now forty miles deep into German territory, spotted a flight of five Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters flying at low altitude near Donaueschingen, a crucial railway juncture for trains heading west to Freiburg. Led by 2d Lt. Robert E. Jones, the P–47s released their remaining bombs to gain maneuverability and dove on the German fighters, gaining tactical surprise. Four of the Messerschmitts, which the Thunderbolt pilots suspected were flown by novice pilots still in training, were promptly shot from the sky. The fifth, however, evaded the attacking Thunderbolts and closed in on the flight leader's wingman, who called for help. Although he had already expended all of his machine-gun ammunition, Jones dove to his wingman's aid and maneuvered his Thunderbolt behind the German fighter's tail as if lining up for a shot. Not knowing that his pursuer's guns were empty, the pilot parachuted from his Messerschmitt, escaping the fate of his unlucky

14. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 20, Jan 19–20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4343, Jan 20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 20–21, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

15. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 39; G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 19, Jan 27, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

16. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 20, Jan 19–20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

French P–47 Pilot. **Lt. George Gauthier, a pilot of the First French Air Corps, climbs into his fighter-bomber. An experienced pilot with almost 200 missions to his credit when this photo was taken in early 1945, Gauthier flew with the French Air Force in Tunisia, Italy, and Sicily before participating in the liberation of his homeland.** *National Archives.*

comrades by leaving his ship to plummet unguided to the ground below. Jones later received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his courage and quick thinking during the engagement.[17]

Jones's unconventional aerial victory was one of the few highlights of the first day of Operation Cheerful for the aviators of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional), for the window of weather clear enough to allow aerial activity proved to be brief. The last of 50th Fighter Group's Thunderbolts made it back to Ochey just after noon. One P–47 ran out of fuel before it could touch down, forcing the pilot to make a belly landing that destroyed the aircraft. The pilot fortunately walked away unscathed from the controlled crash, but flight operations ceased for the remainder of the day, leaving Allied ground troops without air cover.[18] Snowstorms closed in once again, and a series of sharp German counterattacks later in the evening halted the French I Corps' advance after only a few miles.

17. 50 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-50-HI, B0144; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 20, Jan 19–20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; XII TAC, General Order No. 51, Mar 10, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721.

18. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 20, Jan 19–20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4344, Jan 20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

The weather on January 20 not only diminished the effectiveness of tactical air strikes, but it also effectively put an end to Royce's attempt to enlist Eighth Air Force's heavy bombers to destroy the bridge at Breisach. Early that morning, a strike force comprised of six groups from 3d Air Division—223 B–17 Flying Fortresses in all—departed from their bases in England. The mission's primary target was the marshaling yard in the German city of Heilbronn. While the bombers assigned to hit the Heilbronn marshaling yard plastered it and other rail targets in the vicinity with 574 tons of bombs, 108 of the bombers headed roughly 115 miles southwest to Breisach, their mission's secondary target. When they arrived, they found the bridge completely obscured by overcast conditions. Although the Heilbronn strike had been carried out with the use of the H2X ground-scanning radar, which allowed for "blind" bombing through cloud cover, the conditions at Breisach were sufficiently heavy enough to prevent a radar-assisted strike, forcing the B–17s to abort the attack. It was a costly day for 3d Air Division, which lost eleven bombers to unspecified causes, most likely weather-related mishaps, during the mission. The cancelled bombing raid at Breisach turned out to be the only attempt to employ heavy bombers in direct support of Operation Cheerful.[19] For the remainder of the operation, 42d Bombardment Wing's twin-engine medium bombers would be the most potent aerial weapon available to the Allied forces for attacks against the German lines of communication sustaining the Colmar Pocket, and they would spend most of the operation, as they were on its first day, grounded by ice, snow, clouds, and fog.

The weather that had confounded the efforts of both tactical and strategic air forces over Alsace on January 20 remained foul throughout the night and after sunrise. On the morning of January 21, de Lattre wrote to Devers, recounting the first day of the offensive. The Germans had launched "hard counterattacks" against his troops that, combined with snow and sleet, had blunted their advance.[20] To Allied dismay, these counterattacks were supported by the unexpected presence of armor, which had evaded aerial surveillance and made its way to stiffen the Mulhouse perimeter. When French troops encountered enemy armor, they could not be quickly reinforced with their own tanks, which had smaller tracks

19. 3d Air Div, "Tactical Report of Mission-Sterkrade-Heilbronn-Breisach-20 January 1945," AFHRA, 520.332, B 5015; 8 AF, Int/Ops Sum No. 265, Jan 20, 1945, AFHRA, 520.343, B5035. Eighth Air Force's intelligence and operations summaries for January 21 through February 9 (Nos. 266 through 285) record no further strikes against the Breisach bridge by Eighth Air Force nor, save for a pinprick strike by four B–17s against the rail yard at Speyer on January 21, any of the major communications centers targeted by the First Tactical Air Force (Prov.) during Operation Cheerful. See also 8 AF, *Monthly Summary of Operations, January 1945*, Feb 11, 1945, 73–76, and *Monthly Summary of Operations, February 1945*, Mar 11, 1945, 58–60.

20. Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, to Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, Jan 21, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 4.

than the German panzers and struggled to gain traction on ice and snow. In the face of superior defensive firepower, French attempts to press the offensive had bogged down and become "great consumers of infantry." Fearing that the northern pincer would also degenerate into a morass of delays and defeats, the French commander implored Devers to reinforce it with at least one more infantry division and, if possible, to deploy a reserve armored division to bolster the defense of Strasbourg. Hoping not to appear overly pessimistic, he declared that the request for further assistance had not altered his "resolute intentions" to press the assault on the southern end of the salient "with determination." De Lattre insisted that the second pincer would attack on schedule regardless of the weather or number of troops committed, but he suggested that more troops would "give us a *guarantee of success*."[21] His concerns were not unfounded, given the difficulties his troops had encountered on the first day, but unbeknownst to him at the time, the German Nineteenth Army had already committed most of its scarce armored reserves to shore up the southern end of the pocket.[22] When U.S. and French troops launched the northern pincer, the Germans would find their ability to reinforce against its advance gravely limited.

As January 21 began, the French I Corps found itself facing a grueling series of German counterattacks that again limited its attempts to move forward. They had to do so without air support, for precipitation and cloudy conditions kept almost all of the provisional air force's night fighters, fighter-bombers, medium bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft grounded for the day. Eleven of 324th Fighter Group's P–47s sent to patrol the U.S. Seventh Army sector bombed a formation of German tanks well north of the pocket but made no claims upon their return, although they had placed all their bombs in the target area. Gathering snowstorms forced them to return to base early, and by the time they reached Lunéville, conditions had grown so hazardous that landing mishaps sent two Thunderbolts careening off the runway. Both pilots escaped unhurt, but their aircraft sustained enough damage that they required depot-level repairs before they could be deemed airworthy again.[23] Eight P–47s of French 3. Group managed to take off for a mission late in the morning but were forced by the weather to turn back after jettisoning their bombs. Only seven planes made it back. The pilot of the eighth bailed out of his fighter-bomber after developing engine trouble, leaving it to crash into a river. A handful of 4. Group Thunderbolts and two reconnaissance aircraft made it into the air during the day but accomplished little other than confirming the unsuitability of the weather for flying.[24]

21. Ibid. Emphasis in original.
22. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 539–40.
23. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 21–Jan 22, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
24. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 21, Jan 20–21, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

The weather cleared on January 22, allowing the airmen of the provisional air force to take to the skies in number as the French II Corps and its U.S. attachments prepared to cross their lines of departure. For the first time during Operation Cheerful, the B–26s of 42d Bombardment Wing managed to get aloft, with forty P–47s of the 50th and 324th Fighter Groups flying alongside as escorts, to strike German lines of communication supporting the defense of the Colmar Pocket.[25] Although more than a hundred medium bombers from the two USAAF groups left their bases in Dijon, their missions brought only, as Royce's headquarters later reported to USSTAF, "poor results."[26] The 17th Bombardment Group sent two waves of Marauders to bomb a railway bridge in Rastatt to cut off rail traffic between Offenburg and Karlsruhe, but when they reached their target shortly before noon, cloudy weather forced the bombers to return without releasing their ordnance. Adding to the frustration of the bomber crews, one Marauder was hit by flak on the way back to base. The pilot managed to hold his stricken craft steady long enough for his crew to bail out and followed suit after confirming that their parachutes had opened, leaving the abandoned bomber to its fiery end near Saverne, a few miles west of Strasbourg. When the Marauders made it back to Dijon, one crashed while landing, killing one of its crew, and six others required repairs for antiaircraft damage incurred during the mission. A strike force of 320th Bombardment Group fared little better while attempting to execute a second interdiction strike against a rail bridge and supply dump in Speyer. Cloudy conditions also forced these pilots to turn back before reaching their targets, but they managed to return to base without loss or damage.[27]

While weather foiled the two USAAF bombardment groups' missions, 42d Bombardment Wing's pair of French B–26 groups were able to carry out strikes on the bridges spanning the Rhine on the south side of the Colmar Pocket. Both French groups, however, failed to rendezvous with their fighter escorts en route and achieved only meager results from their bomb runs after reaching their targets. The 34th Bombardment Group attempted to destroy the Neuenburg rail bridge with 1,000-pound bombs but scored no hits. The 31st Bombardment Group also failed to destroy its primary target, one of the pontoon bridges stretching across the river near the main rail bridge. It was a poor showing for the French bombardiers; both groups released more than a hundred bombs each over their targets, but not a single one found its mark.[28] Making matters worse, two of

25. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 22–Jan 23, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
26. 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4494, Jan 23, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.
27. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 22, Jan 21–22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.
28. Ibid.; 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4494, Jan 23, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

French Martin B–26 Marauder Medium Bomber. **French bombers conduct a mission over southern France in September 1944. French bomber units attached to the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) operated as part of the USAAF's 42d Bombardment Wing during Operation Cheerful, attacking German rail yards and supply depots.** *National Archives.*

31st Bombardment Group's Marauders fell to the accurate fire of heavy antiaircraft guns defending the bridges. One bomber erupted into flames immediately after being hit and went down, taking its entire seven-man crew along with it. The pilot and bombardier of the other stricken bomber were killed by the flak burst, but five of their crew members managed to bail out before the B–26 crashed along the French bank of the Rhine. One died after his parachute became entangled in the bomber's burning tail assembly, and another was killed by enemy gunfire during his descent. The three survivors were taken prisoner by German troops after they reached the ground.[29] Ten other French B–26s—four of the 34th's and six of the 31st's—were hit by flak during the raids but managed to return to their bases near Lyon for repairs.[30]

Like the B–26 units, many of the provisional air force's P–47 elements also found difficulty executing their missions during the day. One such unit was the French 3. Group, which dispatched its fighter-bombers to the Harth Forest in the afternoon to hit road interchanges linking Chalampé to Mulhouse. A flight of eight Thunderbolts arrived over Battenheim,

29. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 185–86.

30. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 22, Jan 21–22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4494, Jan 23, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

roughly two miles north of the forest, at 2:13 p.m., but missed hitting the road junction that had been designated as the target. Although the air strike failed, the pilots were able to conduct reconnaissance of the ground below, spotting approximately 150 armed vehicles and two tanks—the vehicle tally was probably, like many aerial reconnaissance claims, inflated—sheltered in the forest, suggesting that the Germans were massing to reinforce the southern side of the salient. Two other flights of French P–47s arrived over the area an hour later. Eight fighter-bombers attacked a crossroads in Battenheim that led to Mulhouse to the south and Chalampé to the west at 3:15 p.m., releasing two dozen 500-pound bombs. Weather prohibited observations of the strike, but the French pilots were able to spot armored vehicles and heavy machine-gun fire emanating from the depths of the forest west of the town. As they made their strike, seven more French P–47s tried to hit a second crossroads in the forest that connected Mulhouse, Ensisheim, and Chalampé. After missing with ten bombs, the pilots jettisoned their remaining munitions and returned to base.[31]

Pilots of the French 4. Group achieved better results from a series of strikes supporting the drive to Ensisheim, which remained stalled by weather, heavily forested terrain, and stiff German opposition. After a mid-morning weather mission confirmed favorable flying conditions, 4. Group sent out five flights of P–47s between 2:00 and 4:15 p.m. Eight P–47s arrived over Pulversheim, a small town three miles southwest of Ensisheim, at 2:25 p.m. during an armed reconnaissance mission. The Germans occupying the town, apparently caught unaware, were able to respond with intense but inaccurate antiaircraft fire. Evading the flak, the French pilots scored several hits on a rail bridge, damaging it along with a railroad running to its southeast side. Their bombs also threw up enough debris to block a foot road leading to the northwest. Four more bombs damaged buildings believed to be occupied by German troops. Other 4. Group P–47 flights hit targets in the Harth Forest, bombing canals and roads on the southeastern and northern sides of the forest before the weather grounded the group's fifth and final mission near dusk.[32] These air strikes were not enough to dislodge the Germans from the forest, however, nor to allow any significant ground advance by the French I Corps. French troops managed to clear the Lutterbach woods just north of Mulhouse during the day, but Ensisheim lay six miles distant from the hard-gained ground they now occupied.[33]

While its French P–47 groups concentrated on German rear lines supporting the southern end of the pocket, operational demands required the provisional air force to divide its four USAAF fighter-bomber groups

31. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 22, Jan 21–22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.
32. Ibid.; Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 180–82.
33. G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rpt, Jan 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308.

to cover the fronts of both the U.S. Seventh and First French armies on January 22. North of the pocket, attempts to locate and recover 12th Armored Division's two lost battalions had failed, and German counterattacks forced the U.S. VI Corps to withdraw from its front lines so quickly that the enemy could not organize an effective pursuit.[34] To help blunt the renewed threat to Strasbourg, two of XII Tactical Air Command's Thunderbolt groups, the 324th and 358th, were dedicated to supporting Patch's forces, and a third, the 50th, performed most of its missions north of the Colmar Pocket as well. The three fighter-bomber groups struck German troops and vehicles and hit marshaling yards, supply depots, and other interdiction targets, helping to buy time for VI Corps to establish a new defensive perimeter behind the Moder River. The demand for air power in Patch's sector left 371st Fighter Group to shoulder most of the USAAF's close cooperation duties in the Colmar Pocket during the day, but its pilots also flew across the Rhine to hit communications targets in the German rear. In this latter task, it received a small amount of assistance from Thunderbolts of 50th Fighter Group.[35]

In good weather, fighter-bombers would leave shortly after daybreak, but on the morning of January 22, wintry conditions delayed the departure of the 371st's fighter-bombers until late morning. The runways at Tantonville had been cleared of snow by 8:30 a.m., but two hours would pass before the weather broke. Once safe launching conditions prevailed, a flight of fighter-bombers—the first of eight that the group would dispatch over the course of the day—lumbered down the runways and took to the skies.[36] The first wave of P–47s launched at 10:40 a.m.; within thirteen minutes, thirty-one Thunderbolts were in the air and headed toward the Colmar Pocket and beyond. Twelve crossed the Rhine to strike Müllheim, the last major road junction for German forces headed to the pocket across the Neuenburg bridge. Despite dropping a dozen general-purpose and incendiary bombs on a stretch of railroad there, the pilots could not judge the results of their strike with any accuracy. They then proceeded north to Biberach, a rail junction connecting Offenburg and Lahr to points south and east in the Black Forest. Upon their arrival, the P–47s pounced on a large number of railcars, pelting them with a hail of twenty-three general-purpose and incendiary bombs before heading in for strafing runs. Pulling up from the havoc below, the fighter-bomber pilots estimated that they had destroyed a dozen railroad cars and damaged sixteen more, along with two locomotives. Bomb damage also razed two buildings and cut the railroad in at least three places.[37]

34. Ibid.; Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 526.

35. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 22–Jan 23, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

36. 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343.

37. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 22, Jan 21–22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 22–Jan 23, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

Other strikes conducted by 371st Fighter Group during the morning, however, were less successful than the raid on the Biberach rail yard. Eight of the group's Thunderbolts conducted an air strike in the southern stretches of the Harth Forest to support French I Corps at 11:15 a.m., but they failed to cause any damage or hinder traffic on a road fork leading from Mulhouse to Chalampé. The P–47s then headed over the Rhine, spotting large concentrations of railcars at Offenburg and southwest of Lahr in the town of Mahlberg, but did not attack them and returned to base. Another flight of eleven Thunderbolts circled its target area near Müllheim for forty-five minutes waiting in vain for the clouds preventing their bombing runs to clear. Unable to spot the road crossing they had been ordered to attack, the pilots jettisoned their bombs into the woods around the town shortly before noon and headed back to Tantonville.[38]

The weather began to worsen as the day went on, making it increasingly difficult for the 371st's Thunderbolt pilots to spot targets and to gauge the effectiveness of the few strikes that could be executed. Weather conditions inhibited what turned out to be a costly mission on the northern end of the Colmar Pocket. Eight heavily laden P–47s of 405th Fighter Squadron headed out to hit German positions that lay ahead of the French II Corps' planned advance north of Colmar but had to cancel their pre-briefed mission after failing to make radio contact with their assigned air-ground controller. The frustrated pilots turned north and headed north of Offenburg to their secondary target, the town of Sasbach. As they crossed over the Rhine, half of the flight became separated from the other in the cloud-filled skies. The planes that made it to Sasbach at 2 p.m. released thirty-six general-purpose and incendiary bombs on the town but could not determine the results of their raid because of cloud cover. The remainder of the flight jettisoned its bombs and returned to base. During the ninety-mile flight back to Tantonville, one of the Thunderbolts crashed in a forest thirty-five miles south of Nancy, killing its pilot, 1st Lt. Henry Wieczarek.[39]

The 50th Fighter Group achieved mixed results from its sole air strike in the First French Army's sector on January 22. Sixteen P–47s launched from Ochey to hit rail facilities near Freiburg in the afternoon. An attempt to bomb a bridge at Betzenhausen, a town on the city's northwestern outskirts, at 2:10 p.m. resulted in no hits, but a simultaneous strike saturated a rail bridge at the nearby town of Hugstetten with twenty-nine 500-pound general-purpose bombs, three incendiary white phosphorus bombs, and six fragmentation bombs, damaging the span and cutting the rail line there. The pilots claimed two direct hits on the middle of the bridge but admitted

38. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 22, Jan 21–22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.
39. Ibid.; 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343.

Freezing Conditions. **A First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) ground crew tries to free a P–47 from a snow rut. Snow and heavy cloud cover greatly limited air operations in January 1945.** *National Archives.*

that smoke rising from the target area prevented them from making an accurate observation.[40]

Two hours after 50th Fighter Group's strike, weather and communications difficulties frustrated yet another attempt by 371st Fighter Group to coordinate an air strike to prepare conditions for the French I Corps' planned advance. Unable to execute their planned attack, a flight of eleven P–47s headed to Hugstetten to make a second attempt at dropping the rail bridge there. After flying unscathed through antiaircraft fire originating from Freiburg, the Thunderbolts arrived over the target at 4:40 p.m. Thirty more general-purpose and incendiary bombs rained down on the bridge, which, as the pilots peered through gathering clouds estimated, most likely sustained further damage but remained undestroyed.[41]

The last strike of the day for January 22 that U.S. pilots conducted was to prepare for the advance of Allied troops in the northern half of the pocket that night. A flight of eleven 371st Fighter Group P–47s hit German artillery positions in the town of Jebsheim, which would soon become the scene of a bitter, two-day battle between U.S. and German troops, at 4:15 p.m. Four of the eighteen 500-pound general-purpose

40. 50 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 25, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 22, Jan 21–22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

41. Ibid.; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 22–Jan 23, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

bombs released during the attack found their mark, and four more grazed a pair of gun emplacements, damaging but not destroying both.[42] Air power did little to set conditions for the French II Corps's impending assault. Of the three strikes XII Tactical Air Command had planned on the north end of the Colmar Pocket, the Jebsheim strike was the only one that did not result in diversion to a secondary target. As had occurred three days before, foul weather and the heavy operational demands of defending the U.S. Seventh Army's sector meant that the provisional air force could do little to degrade the German defenses before the advance of one of de Lattre's corps began. The strongpoints guarding the area between Colmar and Neuf-Brisach remained almost completely untouched by air attack, placing the burden of their reduction on ground forces and ensuring that the road to the Breisach bridge would be hard won.

As dusk fell on the 22d, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) had launched 492 sorties, all but fifteen by its bomber, fighter-bomber, and reconnaissance units engaging the enemy near the Rhine. The large number of sorties relative to other days during Operation Cheerful meant that more aircraft and aircrews than usual were flying in suboptimal weather for aerial operations and into effective German antiaircraft fire. Losses for the day were, in comparison to others during the clearing of the Colmar Pocket, disproportionally heavy. The 42d Bombardment Wing lost five B–26s to flak, accidents, and indeterminate causes, and sixteen other medium bombers suffered damage from the enemy's antiaircraft defenses. Three of XII Tactical Air Command's P–47s were shot down or lost to unknown causes. Eight more were holed by enemy flak, along with a single First French Air Corps P–47. Yet little had been gained for these losses. Close cooperation missions resulted in only a few pinprick strikes, and the interdiction program had failed to slow or shut down the rail and road lines leading to Breisach and points west across the Rhine. The provisional air force's intelligence section concluded that "it seems unlikely that these attack[s] have accomplished any considerable interdiction of traffic," necessitating an increased air presence over the pocket and German rear lines if and when the weather broke.[43] The intelligence staffers would receive little in the way of photographic or aerial surveillance reports to assist with their assessments, for several of the provisional air force's reconnaissance flights were either canceled or recalled after takeoff because of inclement weather conditions.[44]

42. 371 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 23, 1945, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 22–Jan 23, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

43. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 22, Jan 21–22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

44. 34 Photo Recon Sqdn, Daily War Diary, Jan 22, 2945, AFHRA, SQ-PHOTO-34-HI, A0888.

Concerns had begun to mount on the ground as well. De Lattre, dismayed by the weather and the failure of the French I Corps to reach its objectives during the first two days of the operation, wrote to Devers on January 22 to express his frustrations at the faltering start of Operation Cheerful. The French commander noted that "frightful weather" and "violent enemy reactions" had taken a heavy toll on his troops and repeated his request for reinforcement in the form of yet another infantry division, warning that "only at this price will we achieve victory."[45] Devers's response, drafted the next day, was an admixture of praise for the French commander and his troops and a reminder of the expectations his superior demanded of him. The army group commander lauded the "fine start" that de Lattre's army had made, but he also noted that it had already been well-reinforced for the operation. All that was needed, Devers suggested, was continued "aggressive action with force and drive." He reminded de Lattre that the "only object of your whole campaign is, with your First French Army as reinforced, to liquidate the Colmar Pocket." Devers closed stating his "complete confidence" in the French general's "ability, with the means at your disposal," to accomplish the task at hand.[46]

Devers's letter made it clear that de Lattre could not hold out for further reinforcements. The second pincer of Operation Cheerful snapped into position as planned late during the night of January 22–23 as elements of de Monsabert's II French Corps began their advance. The Allied push to clear the north end of the Colmar Pocket, which included two French infantry divisions and a French armored division, was assisted by two U.S. units: the 3d Infantry Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. John W. O'Daniel, and Maj. Gen. Norman D. Cota's U.S. 28th Infantry Division. The 3d Infantry Division, which had seen action in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, was one of the U.S. Army's most battle-hardened and effective divisions. Augmented by a regiment from the U.S. 63d Infantry Division and French armored units, it would advance at the center of the French thrust, bypassing Colmar and driving east along the Colmar Channel toward the Rhone-Rhine Canal. Once it reached the second canal, it would turn south to take Neuf-Brisach. Cota's division took its place at the northwest corner of the pocket, just above the city of Colmar. It had suffered heavy losses during the U.S. First Army's grueling Huertgen Forest offensive in late 1944, only to be ground down once again in the Ardennes just weeks before it was committed to take part in Operation

45. Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, to Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, Msg 141/Op. 3, Jan 22, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 4.

46. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, Msg SGS No. 4894, Jan 23, 1945, No. 75, NARA, RG 331, Entry 240D, Box 10.

Cheerful. Initially released to 6th Army Group by SHAEF with the knowledge that its offensive capabilities were limited, the 28th Infantry Division ended up being assigned for a direct assault into the heart of the pocket—the city of Colmar itself.[47]

The German forces holding the fifty-mile-long front on the northern end of the pocket fell under the German LXIV Corps. Months of unceasing combat in the Vosges had ensured that its four divisions, save for elements of the recently arrived but inexperienced 2d Mountain Division which were hurried into the pocket, were badly understrength and under-supplied. Stretched out from the Vosges to the Rhine, the Germans established a flimsy approximation of a defense in depth by stationing troops in blocking positions and strongpoints in towns along major routes of advance. While capable of inflicting costly setbacks and worrisome delays upon the attacking Allies, the concentration of troops in scattered and isolated points along the front left them difficult to supply or reinforce, unable to provide mutual support, and vulnerable to encirclement.[48] To counter the German defensive positions, the attacking Allies would have to take advantage of their superiority in numbers, combined arms capabilities, and air power to inflict a series of defeats in detail against the Germans on their way to the Breisach bridge.

The Allied advance on the north end of the pocket began in the dark of night early on January 23. The U.S. 3d Infantry Division left its line of departure northeast of Colmar and made good progress, pressing through the Colmar Forest to a cluster of towns near the Colmar Canal while French forces guarded their left flank. The weather cleared enough after daybreak on the 23d, permitting the provisional air force's single-engine aircraft, save for those of the French 3. Group, to conduct armed reconnaissance and close cooperation missions. The First French Air Corps managed to get forty-two fighters and fighter-bombers aloft, most of which executed missions to the south and east of Colmar. Flight operations began at 9 a.m. with a two-plane reconnaissance flight, which discovered that the Germans had covered the Breisach bridge with small trees, a frequently used ruse to conceal any recently incurred damage or ongoing efforts to repair them. The attempt to camouflage the span proved to be ineffective, for the reconnaissance pilots could see that at the moment it was undamaged and serviceable. Thirty minutes later, 1. Group's Spitfires flew an hour-long fighter sweep down the Rhine that took it from Strasbourg to Mulhouse,

47. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 7–39; Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 534–36; Michael E. Weaver, *Guard Wars: The 28th Infantry Division in World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 245–46.

48. Lt. Gen. Max Grimmeiß, "Rhineland Campaign: Battles in the Alsace Bridgehead, 28 Jan 45–7 Feb 45," *FMS*, B-099, USAHEC, 3–9.

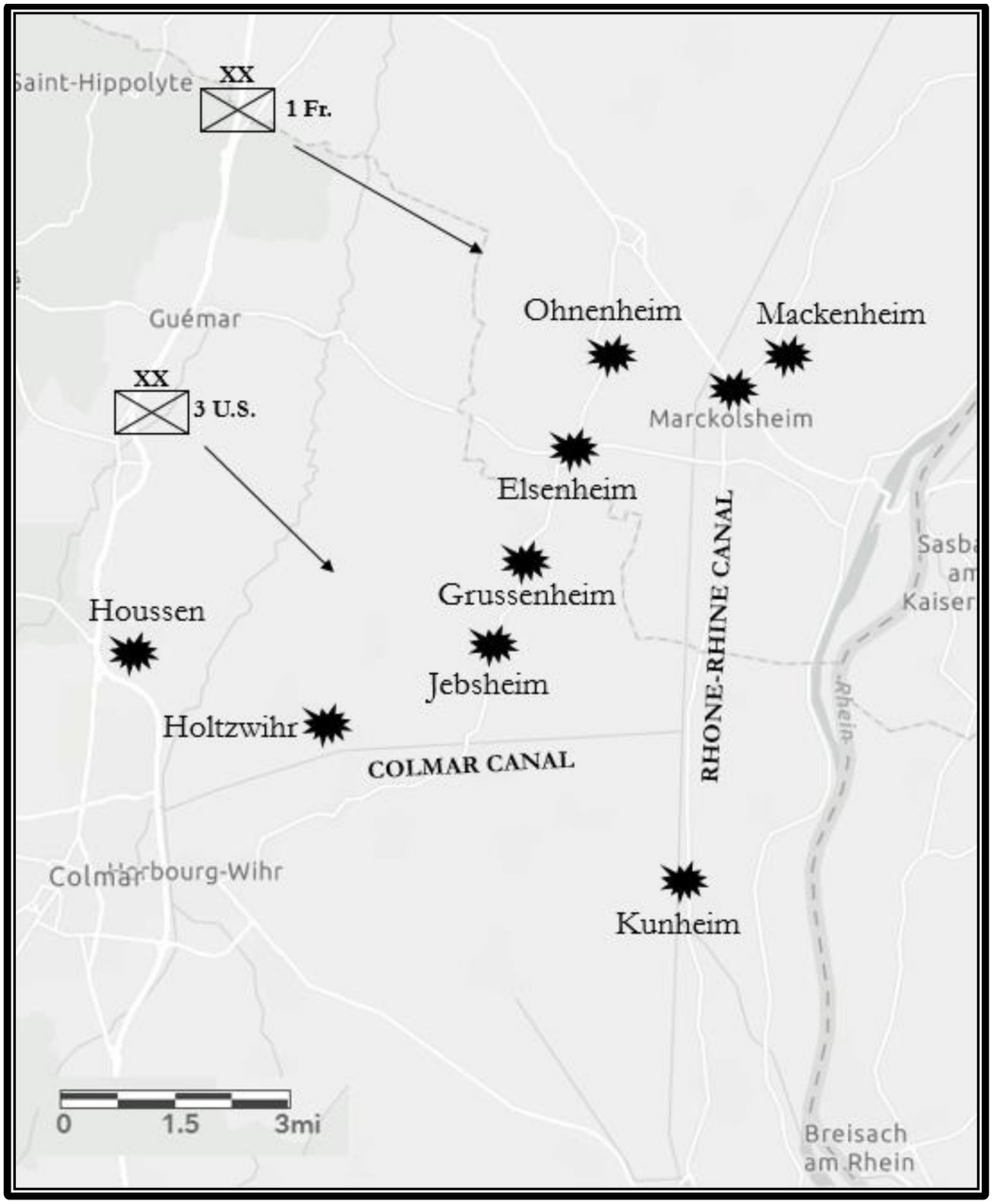
but they made no contact with German aircraft and did not attack any ground positions. Confident that they would face little or no opposition, thirty Thunderbolts of the French 4. Group took off to strike targets on both sides of the Rhine. Twelve participated in attacks on German supply and rail facilities near Mahlberg, roughly at the midpoint of the rail line between Offenburg and Freiburg, between 9:05 and 10:45 a.m. Although they failed to hit their primary target, an ammunition dump at Grafenhausen, the P–47s claimed the probable destruction of three buildings and blocked roads running out of the town of Orschweier, along with the damage of at least fifty of sixty railcars after strafing two parked trains at Kippenheim. Four other French P–47s flew a fighter sweep between Mulhouse and Colmar, but they spotted little more than smoke rising from the area and a few camouflaged vehicles in the Harth Forest, whose presence they reported but did not attack. Despite the stalemate on the southern end of the Colmar Pocket, the French Thunderbolts executed few close cooperation missions, either planned or opportunistic, to support the French I Corps during the day. The only bombs released on the west banks of the Rhine by French P–47s fell on a supply depot at Blodelsheim, roughly four miles north of Chalampé, and on an ammunition dump near the town of Kunheim, a few miles north of Neuf-Breisach. Both targets were destroyed with direct hits.[49] The last French aircraft launched on January 23 had landed by 11:10 a.m. Two ammunition dumps had been destroyed and a rail yard along with dozens of railcars damaged in less than two hours, with no losses other than two Thunderbolts requiring repairs to light flak damage.[50] It had been a short but effective day for the French fighter-bombers, but again, the weather prevented the First French Air Corps from conducting the kind of sustained operations needed to support the I French Corps's offensive, which remained stalled on the southern end of the Colmar Pocket.

XII Tactical Air Command also began to launch its aircraft around 9 a.m. on January 23. Within an hour, 126 P–47s went up in eleven waves, heading for various objectives.[51] Three of the tactical air command's fighter groups conducted both interdiction and close cooperation strikes in and near the Colmar Pocket. Fifteen Thunderbolts of 50th Fighter Group executed a raid over German territory at 10:10 a.m. against enemy troop positions in the Hochdorfer Forest, just across the Rhine from the northernmost edge of the Colmar Pocket, before turning back over the river to provide close cooperation strikes for the French II Corps. By this time, the French 1st Infantry Division, stationed on the left flank of the U.S. 3d Infantry

49. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 189–90; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 23, Jan 22–23, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

50. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 23, Jan 22–23, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

51. Ibid.



Air Strikes Supporting the French II Corps, January 20–25, 1945

Division, had begun to advance toward the city of Marckolsheim. The P–47s destroyed twenty buildings in the town of Ohnenheim, less than two miles northwest of the French objective, and started a massive fire that sent smoke spiraling 300 feet into the air above the rail line that ran through its limits. The Thunderbolts then headed back over the river to strafe a German barracks at the request of an air-ground controller. The results of the strafing run were inconclusive, but the pilots believed they had destroyed four more buildings and started another fire in the target area.[52]

While the Thunderbolts were conducting the strafing attacks across the Rhine, fifteen more 50th Fighter Group P–47s were patrolling the skies over the advancing French 1st Infantry Division. Their target was the town of Mackenheim, which lay on the northeast approach to Marckolsheim. A combination of general-purpose and incendiary munitions—ten of the former and five of the latter—left the town in flames. The use of these types of munitions in tandom in strikes against occupied French towns, which were mostly composed of wooden structures, proved to be a reliable means of reducing German strongpoints and shelters and was frequently employed by Allied fighter-bombers throughout Operation Cheerful. The Thunderbolts then headed south to Marckolsheim itself, where they attacked an ammunition dump supplying the German defenders. After unleashing another torrent of general-purpose and incendiary bombs, the pilots did not observe any secondary explosions after pulling up from their attacks on the dump, indicating that the strike had been ineffective, but the pilots counted twenty buildings surrounding it destroyed before they departed at 11 a.m. The last of 50th Fighter Group's fighter-bombers touched down just before noon. Like their French counterparts, all forty of its ships returned from their assigned sorties, although five had sustained light to moderate damage from German antiaircraft fire over the course of the morning.[53]

The 324th and 371st Fighter Groups, like the 50th, hit targets on both sides of the Rhine on January 23. The 324th launched eighteen fighter-bombers, patrolling both the Colmar Pocket and the U.S. Seventh Army's area of operations. On their way to the Rhine, eight of the group's P–47s were approached by a single German Me 262 near the town of Bischwiller, thirteen miles northwest of Strasbourg, at 10:15 a.m. The Thunderbolts were flying low at an altitude of 10,000 feet, and the enemy jet, flying even lower, climbed to attack. The P–47s maneuvered aggressively to meet the Me 262, forcing the German pilot to disengage and speed away. After declining an air controller's request to head north to Saarbrucken because

52. 50 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 25, 1944, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 23–Jan 24, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

53. 324 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 23, 1944, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 23–Jan 24, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

of fuel considerations, the P–47s crossed the river and bombed a fuel dump at Unterentersbach, a small town south of Offenburg, at 10:30 a.m. and were rewarded with two resounding explosions after their bombs hit the target. On their way back over the river to France, the fighter-bombers received reports that two other Me 262s were strafing ground troops near Hagenau, just a few miles northwest from their earlier encounter with the German jet. Their search yielded no results, and the Thunderbolts returned to Ochey without further incident.[54]

The 371st Fighter Group flew three missions on the morning of January 23, mounting thirty-three P–47 sorties during the day. One group proceeded to Elsenheim, roughly two miles west of Marckolsheim, where attacking French troops had run into well-entrenched German positions backed up by armor. The P–47s released several munitions in the town, and fires broke out and began to spread through the streets. Other 371st Thunderbolts headed across the Rhine to strafe and bomb rail yards south of Offenburg. Afterward, the pilots claimed to have damaged twenty locomotives and railcars but assessed that no discernable damage to the tracks had been caused by their attacks. The group's fighter-bombers also struck targets indicated by air-ground controllers south and northeast of Colmar. Guided in for their attacks by white smoke markers, they scored hits on German troops huddled in a forest a mile north of Jebsheim in the French II Corps sector, but they achieved only five near-misses on a group of buildings occupied by German troops near Herrlisheim-près-Colmar in the rear lines of the German units resisting the French I Corps.[55]

By midday of January 23, the arrival of another round of snowstorms curtailed air operations once again. The last of the provisional air force's Thunderbolts returned to base before noon.[56] Some Allied aircraft were forced to head for the nearest friendly landing strip as clouds closed in and precipitation began to fall. One French P–47 landed at 371st Fighter Group's base at Tantonville with less than five gallons of fuel left in its tanks.[57] The grounding of the fighter-bombers could not have come at a worse time. The advance of 3d Infantry Division to the Colmar Canal came to a halt late in the day after the appearance of German armor near the town of Riedwihr sent its 30th Infantry Regiment into a disorderly retreat. After the division regrouped and recovered that night, it girded itself for the grim series of attacks and counterattacks that would come as it resumed its drive southeast to Neuf-Brisach.[58]

54. 316 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 682, Jan 23, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-316-HI, A0722.

55. 371 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 24, 1944, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 23, Jan 22–23, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

56. Ibid.; 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4552, Jan 24, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

57. 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343.

58. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 542–47.

Although the attack on the northern half of the pocket had, like the attack in the south, run into bad weather and delays, the opening of a second front in the Colmar Pocket had a disquieting effect upon Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, commander of Army Group Upper Rhine. After Lt. Gen. (*General der Infantrie*) Helmut Thumm, commander of Nineteenth Army's LXIV Corps, suggested that his defensive line could be shortened by withdrawing from the northernmost edges of the pocket, Himmler ordered his relief for "defeatism."[59] Thumm's sacking was symptomatic of the strategic incoherence that lay behind the German defense of their Alsatian salient. By refusing to give ground that could not be profitably defended, the German leadership set the stage for preventable losses of men and materiel while placing subordinate commanders in untenable positions that encouraged improvisation and insubordination to prevent such losses.

As day broke on January 24, both pincers of the Allied advance had become mired down amid stalemates and setbacks. Devers, as he was wont to do, conducted a battlefield circulation tour that included visits to 3d Infantry Division's command post as well as those of de Lattre and Monsabert. After conferring with his field commanders, Devers took comfort from their collective confidence and determination to see the operation through. However, he was worried by the possibility of another German offensive aimed at Strasbourg and discouraged that the slow progress on both sides of the Colmar Pocket had squandered the element of surprise. He nonetheless believed that his forces still held the advantage against the Germans and remained confident that they could achieve victory in Alsace, but it would now take ten to fourteen days, rather than less than a week, to collapse the German salient.[60] The new timeline coincided with the commitment of additional U.S. forces to Operation Cheerful. The next day, as had been planned, operational control of the battered U.S. 12th Armored Division, still reeling from its heavy losses north of Strasbourg, passed from the U.S. VI Corps to the French II Corps.[61]

However, it would be days before de Lattre would be able to employ his newly obtained troops and tanks, and his forces already in the field would have to fight for much of what would turn out to be a critical period of Operation Cheerful with only limited air support. Most of XII Tactical Air Command's missions for the day of January 24 occurred to the northwest, with three of its fighter groups—the 371st suspended

59. Lt. Gen. Helmut Thumm, "Report Concerning the Commitment of the LXIV Army Corps in Alsace During the Period from 28 Aug 44 to 28 Jan 45," *FMS,* B-050, USAHEC, 15–16; Brandstädter, "Fighting of the 19. 'Armee' for the Bridgehead 'Elsass' and Defense of the Upper-Rhine Front from 4 January to 21 March 1945," 17–18.

60. Devers Diary, Jan 24, 1945, USAHEC.

61. G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rpt, Jan 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308.

operations for the day because of the weather—attacking rail facilities and bridges in Karlsruhe and Mannheim, more than seventy-five miles away from the pocket.[62] One fighter-bomber raid, however, targeted a highway bridge spanning the Dreisam Canal, a waterway running parallel to the Rhine on the German side of the river, northwest of Freiburg. One of 50th Fighter Group's Thunderbolts destroyed the bridge with a direct hit, and the explosions of other general-purpose, incendiary, and fragmentation bombs left the shattered span's road blocked. A strike on a second bridge in the area was unsuccessful, and despite flying through a harrowing barrage of antiaircraft fire near Breisach on their way back to base, all fifteen fighter-bombers returned safely shortly before 5:00 p.m.[63] While the 50th's P–47s were conducting their strikes, sixteen of 358th Fighter Group's fighter-bombers were making a looping patrol over the Colmar Pocket, ranging from Colmar south to Mulhouse and back north to Elsenheim, which had been attacked the previous day. The 367th Fighter Squadron's Thunderbolts once again set the town ablaze and flew low through rising smoke to make two strafing runs, hoping to catch any German troops or vehicles attempting to escape the flames. Some of the P–47s experienced mechanical failures that left three bombs hanging on their mounts, but the pilots managed to shake the troublesome ordnance free over Grussenheim, a mile to the south of Elsenheim, starting a second fire there. While the flight also encountered frequent bursts of flak throughout their patrol, the German gunners failed to score any hits.[64]

The First French Air Corps, however, was active over the pocket in the afternoon. The 3. Group's fighter-bombers carried out thirty-one sorties, targeting road crossings and German trucks parked in northern stretches of the Harth Forest. Although results from these strikes were difficult to determine, a salvo of eight bombs destroyed a supply depot on the French banks of the Rhine near the town of Fessenheim, causing a number of secondary explosions and fires. The group also bombed the town of Holtzwihr, which lay ahead of the U.S. 3d Infantry Division's line of advance, but again, the pilots could not evaluate the effectiveness of their attack with any accuracy. The French 4. Group executed strikes at Houssen, a northern suburb of Colmar two miles west of Holtzwihr, before crossing the Rhine to hit rail facilities in Mahlberg, which the group had bombed the previous day. Despite releasing more than seven tons of bombs over their targets, the French P–47 pilots could claim no successes because of limited visibility. Worse, seven P–47s were hit by antiaircraft fire over the course of the group's two missions for the day. German flak

62. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 24, Jan 23–24, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.
63. 50 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 24, 1944, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354.
64. 358 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 24, 1944, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354.

Brig. Gen. Ned L. Schramm. **Schramm served as commander of the 71st Fighter Wing before it was incorporated into the headquarters of the provisional air force. He then became Royce's operations deputy and issued the air plan and air orders for Operation Cheerful in that capacity.** *National Archives.*

claimed one Thunderbolt, although its pilot parachuted to safety, and half of the others damaged awaited major repairs after their return to base.[65]

As night fell on January 24, a major weather front bringing heavy snowstorms moved into the area. For the next four days, almost all aerial activity for the airmen of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) ceased. Two French reconnaissance planes took off to observe German positions near Neuf-Brisach on the morning of January 25 but returned after less than fifty minutes with nothing significant to report.[66] Later in the day, de Lattre wrote a scathing letter in which he complained to Devers about the air support his two corps had received over the preceding four days. The liaison procedures worked out by Royce's staff, in de Lattre's estimation, had proved ineffective. He had seen Brig. Gen. Paul Gerardot, commander of the First French Air Corps, just once since Operation Cheerful began, and he had seen no air liaison officers at his forward command post since the second day of the operation. To address de Lattre's concerns, Devers dispatched one of his most trusted staffers, Lt. Col. Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. A former U.S. senator with extensive diplomatic experience and a fluent command of the French language, Lodge had proved valuable time and time again

65. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 24, Jan 23–24, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 1 TACAF to USSTAF, et al., Msg D4626, Jan 25, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

66. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 25, Jan 24–25, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

during the Southern France and Rhineland Campaigns as an intermediary between Devers and de Lattre, smoothing over misunderstandings and ruffled relations between the two commanders. With Brig. Gen. Ned Schramm, Royce's operations deputy, in tow, Lodge met with de Lattre and managed to reach, as the provisional air force's historian delicately put it, "the desired conciliation" with the French general.[67]

While de Lattre fumed and Lodge and Schramm prepared to deal with the latest international contretemps within 6th Army Group headquarters, major changes were about to take place that would shape the aerial planning for the remainder of Operation Cheerful. On January 25, Royce attended a meeting of Allied air leaders at SHAEF headquarters in Versailles. Those present debated, among other vexing issues, the strategic priorities that determined the employment of heavy bombers in the European Theater of Operations. The Royal Air Force's Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur W. Tedder, Eisenhower's deputy commander and chair of the meeting, "warned against attacking bridges" and suggested that heavy bombers could be best used in strikes against marshaling yards and rail centers. Attempts to cut roads and connectors between communications hubs, Tedder argued, were best left to tactical strikes by medium bombers and fighter-bombers. If Tedder's position carried the day, it would remove any hope of getting support from Eighth Air Force in the destruction of the bridges at Breisach and Neuenburg. The deputy supreme commander's suggestion received concurrence from Lt. Gen. Carl "Tooey" Spaatz, the USSTAF commander, who then queried Royce if the Breisach crossing could be removed as a priority target. A desultory discussion followed, but in the end, Royce relented and agreed that it could.[68] The meeting marked the end of Royce's attempts to enlist outside assistance in his efforts to cut the lines of communication across the Rhine that sustained the Colmar Pocket. From this point forward, Royce knew without question that he would have to complete Operation Cheerful with the air assets he had been assigned when the operation began.

Royce also knew that he would no longer have to brook the continued disinterest his superiors showed in his logistical, organizational, and operational difficulties. The lack of concern over the continued serviceability of the Rhine bridges proved to be one of the last in a long series of frustrations Royce endured as commander of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional). Throughout the planning and preparations for Operation Cheerful, Royce, considering the war to be effectively over and believing that his organization's contributions to its conclusion were of

67. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:88–89. For Lodge's service as a liaison between Devers and de Lattre, see Luke A. Nichter, *The Last Brahmin: Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., and the Making of the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2020), 70–72.

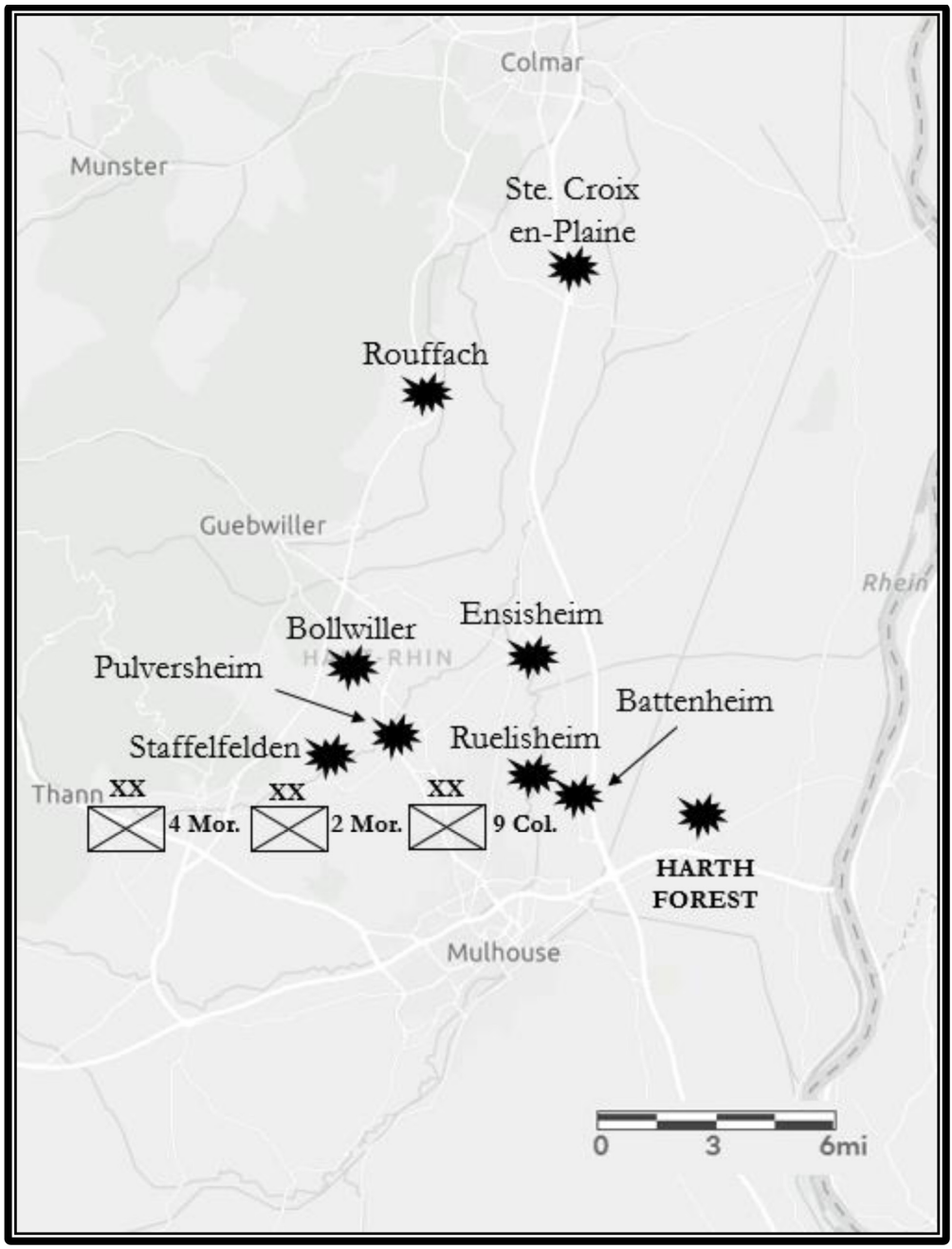
68. Air Staff, SHAEF, "Notes of the Allied Air Commanders Conference," Jan 25, 1945, LOC, Spaatz Papers, Box 20, Fld 1.

little consequence, considered resigning his command. Shortly before the operation to clear the Colmar Pocket was to begin, Devers accepted his resignation, to be made effective before the end of the month, and the two began to consider ways to ensure an orderly succession of command. Once he had received Devers's concurrence, Royce sent an eyes-only radio message via the "Redline" system to Spaatz at his headquarters in St-Germain-en-Laye, France, to announce his intentions. He suggested that Brig. Gen. Gordon Saville, commander of XII Tactical Air Command, be promoted to take over the air force upon his departure. Saville, Royce contended, had gained the trust of 6th Army Group's ground commanders, and his staff and operational experience alongside the French had demonstrated his ability to handle the political side of commanding a combined multinational force. To take Saville's place, Royce suggested promoting Brig. Gen. Glenn O. Barcus, who commanded XII Tactical Air Command's 64th Fighter Wing. In turn, Barcus's place would be filled by his executive officer, Col. Nelson P. Jackson.[69] Spaatz concurred with Royce's decision to relinquish command on January 20, the day Operation Cheerful began, and nine days later, the War Department's adjutant general provided Royce a graceful exit with an assignment to Army Air Forces headquarters in Washington, DC.[70]

The first five days of Operation Cheerful had brought, at best, mixed results for the Allied attempt to clear the Colmar Pocket. The French assault to the south had not made much progress, and German reinforcements and weather boded ill for the future. To the north, the combined U.S.-French assault had fared better, but the doggedness of the German defense and relentless snows had proved daunting there as well. Throughout the war, discussions between U.S. and French commanders in 6th Army Group and its provisional air force were often marred by heated disagreements over political and strategic issues, but the lack of success led to new frustrations that spilled over into exchanges between Allied air and ground commanders. Royce's decision to step down from his command, all the more remarkable for taking place in the midst of a major operation, showed his displeasure with the situation. The Allied commanders who remained could only place their trust in the determination of their troops and airmen and wait for the weather to break.

69. Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce, CG, 1 TACAF, to Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, CG, USSTAF, AFHRA, 549.293, C5029; XII TAC, GO No. 9, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, 655.193, A6352; 64 Fght Wg, "Historical Records," Feb 1, 1945, AFHRA, WG-64-HI, C0010. Personal reasons may have also played into Royce's decision to resign. His first wife died during the war, and he married a Red Cross worker he had met during an earlier tour of duty less than two weeks after his return stateside. See "Gen. Ralph Royce Weds in Detroit," *New York Times*, Feb 10, 1945.

70. Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, CG, USSTAF, to Maj. Gen. Ralph W. Royce, CG, 1 TACAF, Jan 20, 1945, AFHRA, 549.293, C5029; Maj. Gen. James A. Ulio, TAG, to 1 TACAF, Msg WAR 27612, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, 549.293, C5029.



Air Strikes Supporting the French I Corps,
January 26–31, 1945

FIVE

Air Operations January 26–31, 1945

As Maj. Gen. Ralph Royce prepared for his departure from the provisional air force's headquarters in Vittel, Operation Cheerful continued. While the original plans saw U.S. and French troops reaching the Rhine bridges within a week, it was now clear that a second week, if not more, would be necessary to bring the operation to a successful conclusion. The impending change of command of the provisional air force, however, had far less of a deleterious effect on its operations than the weather of late January. Clouds and snow still prevailed in the skies over Alsace and southern Germany, leaving little time for the provisional air force's aircraft to conduct missions. Unable to bomb accurately in such conditions, 42d Bombardment Wing's B–26s remained, for the most part, grounded, leaving only fighter-bombers to execute interdiction and close support strikes in and behind the Colmar Pocket.

The war diarist of XII Tactical Air Command's 64th Fighter Wing attested that "bad weather prevented all flying" for the period from January 25 to January 28, but the wing's own operations and intelligence summary and data compiled by USSTAF after the war confirm that it, together with the First French Air Corps, was able to put more than a hundred P–47s into the air, along with a handful of reconnaissance aircraft, on January 26.[1] Once again, there was only a brief window of a few hours after daybreak that would allow planes to operate with a modicum of safety. They would have to make the most of it. To carry out its missions, the French 3. Group sent its P–47s out without bombs. Although they could only perform strafing runs, the unladen fighter-bombers could take off and land more safely from their icy runways, which had been coated with sand to improve traction. Sixteen Thunderbolts made it up to conduct two armed reconnaissance

1. 64 Fght Wg, War Diary, Mar 1, 1945, AFHRA, WG-64-HI, C0010; Stat. Ctrl., USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, 25–26; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 26, Jan 25–26, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030. The 64th Fighter Wing mounted ninety-five sorties on January 26, 1945, and the First French Air Corps' 3. Group added another nineteen for a total of 114. The French P–47s executed strafing missions in the southern end of the Colmar Pocket, with no results observed and one aircraft heavily damaged by flak.

Challenging Conditions. **Ground crews and pilots struggled to launch and recover aircraft safely in the harsh weather that dominated the winter of 1944–45. Here, a crew chief helps a pilot of the 366th Fighter Squadron, 358th Fighter Group, steer his aircraft across a snowy runway.** *National Archives.*

missions over the southern side of the Colmar Pocket. After finding no targets, the pilots of the first flight of ten Thunderbolts performed a strafing run near the town of Bollwiller, while the second machine-gunned the eastern side of the Harth Forest. No results were observed from either attack, and one P–47 was struck by an antiaircraft shell at Bollwiller that tore a square-meter-sized hole in its fuselage. The six that strafed the forest also spotted four German tanks and a few vehicles near Pulversheim but did not attack them. All the aircraft made it back to base safely before bad weather closed in again, and the commander of the French First Air Corps expressed both admiration and amazement that his fighter-bomber pilots had been able to get their aircraft aloft at all given the icy conditions.[2]

Once again, the weight of XII Tactical Air Command's sorties went to support the U.S. Seventh Army's front, but the availability of air power on January 26 came as a great relief to the soldiers of the U.S. 3d Infantry Division, who were still fighting to wrest the northern stretches of the Colmar Canal from determined German defenders. On the morning of the 26th, the 254th Infantry Regiment was headed for the division's next objective, Jebsheim. The Germans defended Jebsheim ferociously and deployed armor to counterattack the U.S. troops holding positions west of the town near Riedwihr and Holtzwihr. Fortunately for the troops who found themselves resisting the German counterattack, 50th Fighter Group

2. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 195–96. The 1 TACAF COSUM for the day gives a sortie total of nineteen instead of sixteen.

had begun runway operations at 2:48 p.m.; within seventeen minutes, forty-one P–47s were headed east to the Colmar Canal. Although eleven of the fighter-bombers had to turn back because of weather or mechanical problems, the remainder pressed on to the towns of Holtzwihr and Wickerswihr, its neighbor to the southeast.[3] The Thunderbolt pilots who arrived over Holtzwihr would find themselves playing a critical role in what was to become one of the most famed encounters of the Second World War. Below them, 2d Lt. Audie Murphy of B Company, 15th Infantry Regiment, was holding off an assault by hundreds of German soldiers supported by tanks with the machine gun of a burning tank destroyer. Calling in artillery while raking the enemy infantry with machine-gun fire, Murphy's valorous stand, for which he later received the Medal of Honor, helped to save the remains of his beleaguered company, which had suffered grievous losses over the previous three days.[4]

While Murphy and his comrades fended off the German assault, sixteen P–47s of 81st Fighter Squadron arrived at 3 p.m. to find clear skies over Holtzwihr. As they flew over the battlefield, the Thunderbolt pilots observed a sizable column of U.S. vehicles at a standstill on the main road to the town. The artillery fire Murphy had requested was falling short, and German troops were gathering in the town to reinforce the ongoing assault against the thinly held U.S. lines.[5] As the author of the 3d Infantry Division's postwar history put it, the unexpected appearance of friendly fighter-bombers roaring through the break in the weather appeared to be "as though planned by a scenario writer."[6] The P–47s strafed the German infantry, adding to the carnage already wrought by Murphy's unrelenting fire, before pounding their assembly area in Holtzwihr with eighteen general-purpose bombs and six incendiary munitions. Pillars of red smoke erupted from the burning town, and with their rear lines now endangered, the Germans threatening Murphy's position faltered and fell back.[7] An hour later, fourteen Thunderbolts from the 10th Fighter Squadron went on to hit Wickerswihr, suppressing the fire of enemy self-propelled artillery guns there and causing two major explosions that, like at Holtzwihr, soon sent flames spreading through the town. The fighter-bombers then began striking any targets of opportunity that could be identified, strafing German vehicles moving around the town, knocking out a tank, and destroying a

3. 50 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 30, 1945, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 26, Jan 25–26, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

4. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 546–47; Donald G. Taggart, ed., *History of the 3rd Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington, DC: Infantry Journal, 1947), 310–12; Nathan N. Prefer, *Eisenhower's Thorn on the Rhine: The Battles for the Colmar Pocket, 1944–1945* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2015), 245–47.

5. 81 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 26, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-81-HI, A0760.

6. Taggart, *History of the 3rd Infantry Division in World War II*, 312–13.

7. 81 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 26, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-81-HI, A0760.

truck. By the time they finally departed the area, the aircraft had released ten and a half tons of general-purpose bombs, as well as numerous incendiary and fragmentation munitions, against German positions.[8] Assisted by effective air power, the troops of 3d Infantry Division were able to repel the German counterattacks along the canal and secure the line of advance east to Jebsheim.

The air attacks at Holtzwihr and Wickerswihr were perhaps the most effective tactical strikes conducted during Operation Cheerful, saving Murphy's unit from an almost certain defeat and preserving the momentum of the Allied advance to the Rhone-Rhine Canal. The decision to take advantage of the brief respite in the treacherous winter weather, though, proved to be a costly one. One of the 50th Group's P–47s crashed while trying to land at Ochey. Although the pilot walked away unharmed, his fighter-bomber was damaged beyond repair.[9] The 371st Fighter Group lost more than 10 percent of the aircraft sent on thirty-two sorties supporting the U.S. Seventh Army when they tried to land on their ice-covered runways at Tantonville. Three of the returning P–47s either crashed or cracked their landing gear, and a fourth suffered damage after it hit an icy patch and skidded off the runway while touching down.[10] By the time the last of XII Tactical Air Command's Thunderbolt touched down, one in six had incurred damage of varying degrees from landing accidents.

The high accident rate on January 26 boded ill for the future. Indeed, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) saw all of its units in northeastern France grounded the next day. The ill weather stretched into the 28th too, leaving the two pincers of the Allied advance, which had yet to cut off the city of Colmar as planned, without air cover as snowstorms raged over northeastern France.[11] During this period, the 10th Fighter Squadron's war diarist reported that snow drifts between three to five feet had piled up at its air base at Toul.[12]

The accumulating snowfall, however, did not prevent General of the Army Dwight Eisenhower from making his way to Lt. Gen. Jacob Devers's headquarters in Vittel on January 27 for what turned out to be a testy meeting between the supreme commander and his subordinate. Eisenhower expressed his irritation that after a week of operations, the Colmar Pocket had yet to collapse. Devers explained that the severe weather had made things remarkably difficult for his troops, but he accepted

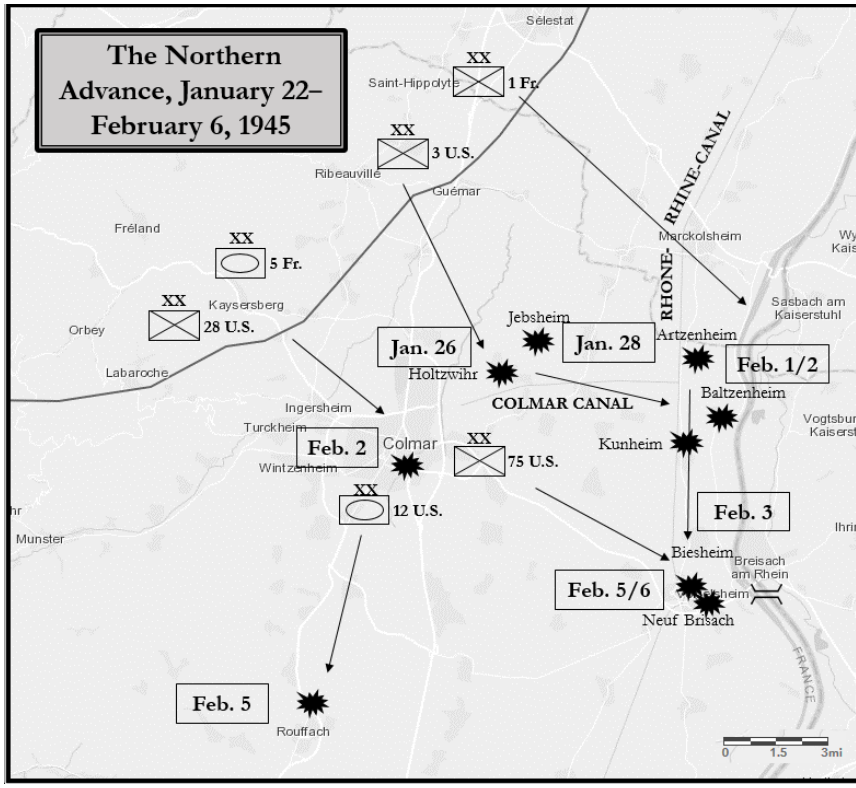
8. 50 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 30, 1945, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354; 10 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 26, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721.

9. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 26, Jan 25–26, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

10. 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343.

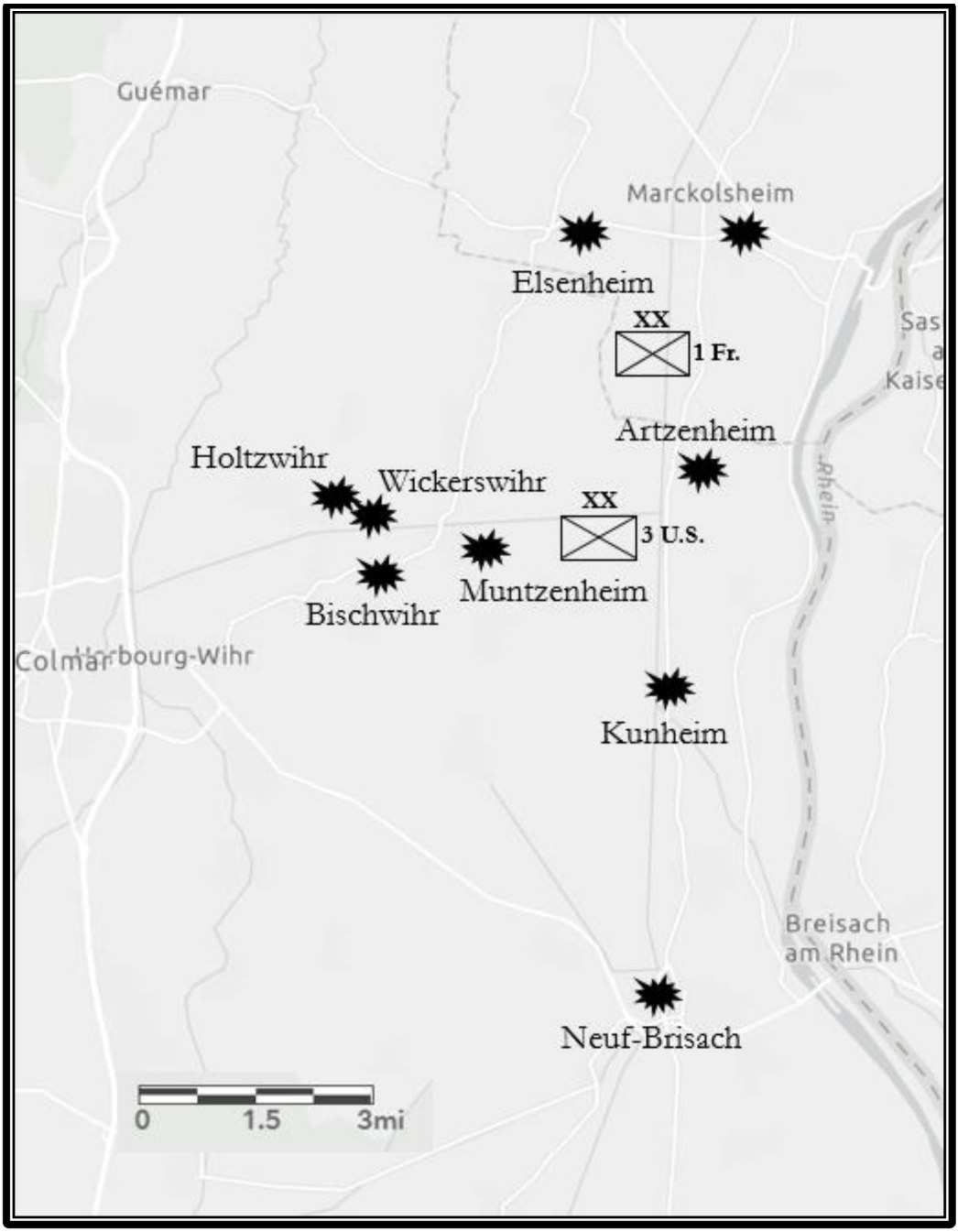
11. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 27, Jan 26–27, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 28, Jan 27–28, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; Stat. Ctrl., USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, 25.

12. 10 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 27–28, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721.



responsibility for their slow progress.[13] For his part, the 6th Army Group commander shared Eisenhower's frustration. The French I Corps had indeed achieved, as Devers's operations staff later characterized them, only "local gains" on the southern side of the German salient over the previous seven days.[14] But while tactical surprise had been negated and a rapid drive to the Rhine bridges was no longer possible, the French I Corps' offensive had begun to wear the Germans down through attrition. Devers could take greater satisfaction from events on the northern side of the pocket, where the French II Corps and its attached U.S. units had made more demonstrable progress. The U.S. 3d Infantry Division was mopping up the last enemy resistance in Holtzwihr and Wickerswihr and was in the process of clearing the town of Jebsheim. After taking that objective, the division would have control of a front of almost four miles along the Colmar Canal, and the path to the Rhone-Rhine Canal and then south to Neuf-Brisach lay ahead. To speed up the Allied advance, Devers requested another U.S. division from the SHAEF reserve. The request was duly approved, and the 75th Infantry Division moved into French-

13. Devers Diary, Jan 27, 1945, USAHEC; Wheeler, *Devers*, 402–3.
14. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 39.



Air Strikes Supporting the French II Corps, January 26–25, 1945

held territory.[15] Two days later, on January 29, the three U.S. infantry divisions so far committed to action in the pocket—the 3d, 28th, and 75th Infantry Divisions—as well as elements of the French 5th Armored Division were placed under the command and control of the U.S. XXI Corps, commanded by Maj. Gen. Frank W. Milburn, as part of the First French Army.[16]

Although both Eisenhower and Devers were disappointed with the amount of ground gained to this point, cracks had begun to open in the German defenses. The 6th Army Group's weekly intelligence report noted that enemy forces in the pocket were, as expected, forced to shift units north and south to counter alternating attacks from both Allied pincers. With their units stretched along extended fronts they struggled to keep reinforced, their ability to continue holding the salient was becoming more precarious by the day. The Germans had already begun to run out of reserve forces, and even their best front-line units were "having extreme difficulty holding well prepared defensive positions in blizzards propitious for such an intention."[17]

Although the French I Corps was nowhere near its planned objectives, the German forces on the southern front, unable to mount a sustained counteroffensive and facing the threat possible encirclement, had begun a slow withdrawal.[18] Sensing that the tide was about to turn now that his long-hoped-for reinforcements were on the way, the commander of the First French Army, Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, expressed confidence that he could finally dispatch his weakened foe. "Things are going well and are on the whole taking place within the period of time which I had planned," he wrote to Devers on January 27. "To the North as well as the South the advance is now continuous. I believe that soon it will show an irresistible superiority."[19]

De Lattre's optimism proved to be well-founded. After three days of bitter fighting, Jebsheim fell to the 254th Infantry Regiment on January 28. This, along with the impending arrival of the 75th Infantry Division, allowed the 3d Infantry Division to reposition the bulk of its forces near the west bank of the Rhine for a final push down the Rhone-Rhine Canal to Neuf-Brisach.[20] For the previous four days, the troops of the 3d Infantry Division had been forced to fight almost entirely without air support

15. Eisenhower originally intended to reinforce 6th Army Group with divisions taken from 12th Army Group but was dissuaded after receiving uncharacteristically heated resistance from Bradley and, more characteristically, Patton. Like his superior, Bradley held Devers in low personal and professional regard. See Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life: An Autobiography* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 210, 387–89; d'Este, *Eisenhower*, 671.

16. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 39; G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rpt, Jan 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308.

17. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 19, Jan 27, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

18. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.6, Box 1308, 18.

19. Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, to Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, Jan 27, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 5.

20. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 550–51.

because of the weather, which ranged from intermittent snows to raging blizzards, against German forces occupying reinforced concrete pillbox fortifications and entrenched fighting positions along the approaches to the canal.[21] But as they prepared for their drive to Neuf-Brisach, forecasts called for favorable weather. As Devers wrote in a letter home to his wife, "with luck and a few days of flying weather," his forces could hope to eliminate the German toehold in Alsace within ten days.[22]

Although temporarily deprived of air power, U.S. and French troops continued to grind away at the German defenses. To the south of the Colmar Pocket, the French I Corps had yet to take its primary objective of Ensisheim, seven miles distant from its original line of departure, but on the other side of the pocket, most of the area north of the Colmar Canal was now securely in Allied hands. When the weather finally cleared on January 29, allowing the provisional air force to participate when and where it could, it would do so under new leadership. While USAAF and French pilots and crews readied to resume operations, orders for Royce's stateside reassignment arrived and, as planned, Brig. Gen. Gordon Saville assumed command. Royce's voluntary resignation came as a shock to the headquarters staff in Vittel, for he had not communicated to them his intention until his departure became imminent. Brig. Gen. Edmund C. Langmead, the provisional air force's logistics and administrative deputy and a longtime associate of Royce's, initially surmised that Royce had been the victim of an undeserved relief for cause by Lt. Gen. Carl "Tooey" Spaatz, the USSTAF commander. Spaatz indeed held mixed thoughts regarding his appointment of Royce as commander of the provisional air force. In his annual efficiency report for 1944, issued less than three weeks before Operation Cheerful began, Spaatz gave Royce the middling rank of twenty-third in a list of fifty-two known general officers at his grade, but also conferred upon him "superior" ratings for performance and professional knowledge, along with a specific endorsement for an air force-level command.[23] Whatever reservations Spaatz may have had about Royce's performance, he did not harbor enough doubts to force his removal. Lacking this knowledge, Langmead and other senior officers in Vittel harbored fears that they too were not "far behind in getting consideration for the Iron Cross" and sent packing.[24]

Morale in the headquarters was already low, and Royce's unexpected and ill-explained relief only added to the stresses of trying to wage an air

21. 64 Fght Wg, War Diary, Mar 1, 1945, AFHRA, WG-64-HI, C0010; G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 18, Jan 20, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

22. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Georgie Devers, Jan 28, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 12.

23. Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, CG, USSTAF, to TAG, War Dept., subj: "Efficiency Report, 201-Royce, Ralph (O)," Dec 31, 1944, LOC, Spaatz Papers, Box 19, Fld 3.

24. Langmead, 1 TACAF Rpt, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, A1843, Appendix B, iv–v.

Brig. Gen. Gordon P. Saville. **Saville led XII Tactical Air Command from Operation Dragoon until the height of the campaign to clear the Colmar Pocket, when he assumed command of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional). This photo was taken after his postwar promotion to major general.** *USAF.*

campaign against an apparently defeated yet stubbornly defiant enemy in the bleak, gloomy winter of 1944–45. Nonetheless, Royce's succession plan of promoting Saville and Brig. Gen. Glenn Barcus kept the core of the provisional air force's command staff together, minimizing organizational turbulence and ensuring continuity of operations, and no wave of reliefs or reassignments followed in the wake of his voluntary departure. Just two days after the Colmar Pocket had been cleared, Devers wrote to Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, the commander of U.S. Army Air Forces in Washington, to express his satisfaction with his air commanders. Ever complimentary of his subordinates, Devers wrote that Royce had done "a very good job" during his tenure, but "Saville will do a better job . . . [he] will be able to show a higher air command in this theater that we have not gotten our proper share of air support."[25]

25. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Henry H. Arnold, CG, AAF, Feb 11, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 16.

The transition between Royce and Saville, however, was not seamless. While he brought years of experience in leading tactical aviation units and had forged good relations with the French, Saville proved to be a difficult commander for whom to work. "Brash and brutally blunt," as one historian put it, his personal demeanor quickly grated on his subordinates in Vittel. Langmead described Saville's tenure in command as a "very hectic period" in which the two "saw opposite sides of every problem that arose."[26] Nonetheless, the decision to promote Saville had been made, and he would remain in command until the conclusion of Operation Cheerful and beyond. His tenure brought little change in the provisional air force's operations. Weather and operational-level demands would continue to be the primary factors that determined tactical pace and targeting priorities, rather than individual decisions made in Vittel.

Meanwhile, the Germans were making their own changes of commanders overseeing the battle for the Colmar Pocket. In a rare positive development for the German defenders, Heinrich Himmler no longer commanded them. At the end of January, Army Group Upper Rhine was dissolved and the SS leader was transferred to the Eastern Front to helm "one of Hitler's most desperate creations," Army Group Vistula, yet another hastily assembled hodgepodge of SS forces, shattered regular army units, and ill-prepared reserve troops.[27] The German Nineteenth Army now fell under Army Group G, commanded by General (*SS-Oberstgruppenführer*) Paul Hausser. An instrumental figure in the training and organizational development of the SS's military component, the Waffen-SS, Hausser had served two tours on the Eastern Front and during the attempt to halt the Allied breakout from Normandy. He had led a Waffen-SS infantry division during the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. During this first tour on the Eastern Front, he was shot in the face, costing him his right eye. While commanding an SS armored corps in early 1943, he disobeyed direct orders twice. Although Adolf Hitler himself directed his corps to hold the city of Kharkiv in mid-February 1943, Hausser withdrew in order to prevent his corps from being surrounded by a Soviet army. Weeks later he sent his troops charging into the city rather than around it, resulting in heavy casualties. Hausser went unpunished for both infractions. Just five months before taking command of Army Group G, he had led the German Seventh Army as it made its disastrous breakout from the Falaise Pocket. Thousands of his troops had been killed or cut off by Allied air and ground power at Falaise, and he was again wounded in the face while making

26. Kenneth Schaffel, *The Emerging Shield: The Air Force and the Evolution of Continental Air Defense, 1945–1960* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1991), 84–85; Langmead, 1 TACAF Rpt, AFHRA, 168.7011-5, A1843, Appendix B, v.

27. David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, rev. ed. (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2015), 312.

General Paul Hausser. **A veteran of the Eastern Front and the Normandy campaign, Hausser oversaw the German withdrawal from the Colmar Pocket after taking command of Army Group G in late January 1945.** *National Archives.*

his own retreat.[28] If nothing else, Hausser had considerable experience in leading outnumbered forces fighting without air cover and threatened with imminent encirclement and destruction.

After Hausser took command, conflicting directives from his superior at High Command West (*Oberbefehlshaber West*, or OB West), Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, confronted him regarding his intent for the defense of the Colmar Pocket. Rundstedt initially ordered Hausser to hold the existing front lines in Alsace and, if possible, to strengthen them. However, on January 30, OB West informed Hausser that it would be impossible to reinforce Nineteenth Army, but Rundstedt was now at least willing to approve a fighting withdrawal toward the banks of the Rhine. Once Nineteenth Army had regrouped there, it could then possibly mount

28. Gen. Paul Hausser, "Seventh Army 29 June to 20 August 1944," *FMS*, A-907, USAHEC, 2; Vogel, "German and Allied Conduct of the War in the West," 610–12; Citino, *Wehrmacht's Last Stand*, 266–69. For Hausser's conduct at Kharkiv, see Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 189–93.

a counteroffensive to take back lost ground. More importantly to OB West, continued defense of the pocket would tie up the U.S. and French forces attempting to evict the Germans.[29]

Lt. Gen. Siegfried Rasp, commander of Nineteenth Army, received orders to shore up what was left of the German salient by organizing a new perimeter to hold the area east of Colmar and protect the river crossing at Neuenburg.[30] Rundstedt's plans for the pocket, heavily influenced by the demands of Hitler and his military inner circle, verged on the fantastic. By this time, the positions of Rasp's units were being dictated by the Allies, not the wishes of the German high command. In the coming days, against long-standing orders—he had been repeatedly directed during the previous weeks to hold onto the Colmar Pocket at all costs—Rasp, with Hausser's tacit approval, started withdrawing support troops, vehicles, and equipment to the German side of the Rhine and attempting to extract what forces he could from Vosges through Allied lines.[31]

As the changes of Allied air commanders and German ground commanders took place on January 29, the weather cleared. The 42d Bombardment Wing's USSAF and French B–26s mounted attacks on three rail facilities in the afternoon, but all lay behind the U.S. Seventh Army's front. The USSAF's 320th Bombardment Group was able to hit its secondary target after finding the city of Neustadt, a major stop on the rail line between Freiburg and Donaueschingen, blanketed by clouds, but could not observe the results of their raid. The 17th Bombardment Group returned to base with their bomb bays full after failing to hit either their primary or secondary assignments. The two French groups had a particularly difficult time trying to hit a rail facility north of the Rhineland city of Pirmasens. Four of 31st Bombardment Group's aircraft turned back early, three because of midair mechanical problems, and the remaining thirteen found the cloud cover too heavy to conduct the attack. A taxiing accident resulted in a runway pileup that prevented nineteen of 34th Bombardment Group's Marauders from taking off, leaving just five to attempt a second attack on the rail yard that was also thwarted by the weather.[32] Escort requirements for these four fruitless missions tied up fifty-five P–47s and Spitfires—just over 10 percent of the provisional air force's mission-capable fighters and fighter-bombers—leaving them unable to conduct more profitable armed reconnaissance or fighter sweep sorties.[33]

29. Army Grp G, War Diary, Jan 29, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/27, Roll 145, 7191096; and Jan 30, 7191101.

30. Gen. Paul Hausser, CG, Army Grp G, to Lt. Gen. Siegfried Rasp, CG, 19 Army, Msg Ia 520/45, Feb 1, 1945, War Diary Annex, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191745.

31. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 549–50, 556–58.

32. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 29, Jan 28–29, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 42 Bomb Wg, War Diary, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, WG-42-HI (BOMB), B0949.

33. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 29–Jan 30, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

French 3. Group, the only French P–47 group active during the day, made the most of its fifty-four sorties. Ranging a dogleg course that took them over Colmar, Müllheim, and Offenburg, the group's pilots claimed the destruction of two motorized vehicles, one carrying German troops, and damage to twenty-two other vehicles and twenty rail cars.[34] Other French fighter-bomber missions concentrated on a number of targets in and near Staffelfelden, a town in the foothills of the Vosges north of the French I Corps' front. Thunderbolts destroyed a bridge over the Thur River and an artillery battery there, while others performed bombing and strafing runs throughout the German rear lines. Lines of communication received particular attention, with strafing runs performed on the east-west road running from Staffelfelden to Pulversheim and the north-south road from Ensisheim to Batteheim, as well as strikes on trucks and horse-drawn vehicles spotted from the air. The Harth Forest also received a number of blind strafing attacks through the treetops in hope of catching German troops or vehicles hidden there. Additionally, French fighter-bombers ranged north into the rear lines of the German units opposing the assault on the northern end of the Colmar Pocket, making a successful attack on an ammunition dump in Kunheim on the Rhone-Rhine Canal north of the Breisach crossing and a failed attack targeting the road network south of Neuf-Brisach.[35]

P–47s of XII Tactical Air Command not assigned to bomber escort missions also had a busy day on January 29. The 371st Fighter Group was able to fly 111 sorties, with an average of ten Thunderbolts assigned per completed mission for the day, with flight operations starting at 7:45 a.m. and ending at 5:40 p.m.[36] Typifying the hectic operational tempo adopted to take advantage of the break in the weather were the activities of the group's 405th Fighter Squadron, which conducted four missions before snowfall and nightfall darkened the skies once again. The 405th carried out four of the group's eleven missions, its pilots continuously returning from one to refuel and rearm before launching for the next. At one point only thirty-nine minutes elapsed between the time the P–47s landed and launched once again. Five of the group's Thunderbolts crashed or befell accidents while conducting "fast operations" on Tantonville's overworked runways.[37]

Across the Rhine, other USAAF fighter-bomber squadrons were hammering railroads and marshaling yards used by the Germans to ferry troops and supplies in and out of the Colmar Pocket.[38] One particularly effective strike was conducted by Thunderbolts of 314th Fighter Squadron, which was one of the three squadrons of 324th Fighter Group. Seven P–47s

34. Ibid.
35. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 196–98.
36. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 29, Jan 28–29, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.
37. 371 Fght Grp, Outline History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, GP-371-HI(FI), B0343.
38. 64 Fght Wg, War Diary, Mar 1, 1945, AFHRA, WG-64-HI, C0010.

USAAF P–47 Armed and Ready. **Crew chief SSgt. John A. Randy prepares pilot Lt. Wilson C. Hansard for a mission. The fighter-bomber's visible external armament includes a 500-pound general purpose bomb underneath the wing and a 100-pound white phosphorus incendiary munition mounted centerline under the fuselage, in addition to its wing-mounted .50-caliber machine guns.** *National Archives.*

took off on the morning of January 29 from Lunéville and headed north, intending to cover the U.S. Seventh Army's area of operations. The mission started off inauspiciously. Ten minutes after takeoff, one of the fighter-bombers had to turn back when its propeller began to malfunction, and after flying past Strasbourg, the remaining half dozen found hazy conditions prevailing at low altitude. They also experienced difficulties maintaining radio contact with ground controllers, and when signals were clear, the controllers struggled to find them targets. The six P–47s returned to Strasbourg and, when the weather suddenly cleared, headed back east toward Offenburg. Arriving at 10:15 a.m., they found locomotives readying to head north and more than 200 railcars parked in the city's marshaling yard. Two of the P–47s had 500-pound incendiary bombs underneath their wings; the remainder carried general-purpose quarter-ton bombs. The six Thunderbolts circled around to the south to execute a dive-bombing attack, descending from 12,000 feet in altitude. Just 600 feet above the marshaling yard, they released their ordnance and leveled off to make strafing runs. Two incendiary bombs hit a building—most likely a repair shop—near the railway, setting it ablaze, and two more hit less than

fifty feet in front of one of the locomotives, damaging it and the rail tracks. Two other bombs fell harmlessly into a field, but four smashed into the rail yard and nearby structures, with ominous green streaks of smoke rising from the ensuing fires. Estimating that they had damaged at least twenty of the railcars below, the pilots headed west back to Lunéville.[39]

Within the Colmar Pocket, USAAF fighter-bombers were busy supporting the French II Corps' drive toward Neuf-Brisach, concentrating their strikes on German positions still holding out on the south side of the Colmar Canal. Shortly before 11 a.m., eight P–47s of 315th Fighter Squadron spotted a detachment of at least fifty black-clad German soldiers—most likely Schutzstaffel (SS) troopers—mounted on horses near Gunsbach, a town on the banks of the Fecht River approximately nine miles west of Colmar. The pilots reported the sighting and headed to their target, the town of Bischwihr, just south of Holtzwihr on the opposite side of the canal. After arriving at Bischwihr, the Thunderbolts dove in for a bombing attack, leveling ten buildings and starting fires through the town. The pilots then spotted suspicious vehicle tracks along the canal heading west and performed a two-mile strafing run along the waterway in hopes of catching an enemy vehicle, but no claims resulted from the attack. The ground controller directing the Bischwihr strike declared it to have been a "very good show," leaving the fighter-bombers free to strike the German cavalry column they had seen earlier, now determined to be heading west toward Colmar. Two strafing passes unhorsed at least ten of the German troops, felling their unfortunate steeds, and scattered the rest.[40]

Other elements of XII Tactical Air Command also provided close cooperation strikes near the Colmar Canal on January 29. These got off to a poor start when the 371st Fighter Group's 404th Fighter Squadron was forced to call off a strike on Elsenheim shortly after 8 a.m. The frustrated Thunderbolt pilots headed over Rhine to release their ordnance over German territory and returned to base. Their group mates, the 405th Fighter Squadron, also aborted an attack on Elsenheim shortly afterward, but headed across the river to Müllheim, a transportation junction just behind the Neuenburg crossing, and pelted the rails in the area with two dozen general-purpose and incendiary munitions. Four direct hits cut the rails in three places and damaged four buildings.[41] But after this weather-addled beginning, a flight of Thunderbolts of 50th Fighter Group's 10th Fighter Squadron concluded a morning fighter sweep, they "thoroughly

39. 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 859, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 29–Jan 30, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

40. 315 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 774, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-315-HI, A0772; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 29–Jan 30, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

41. 371 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 30, 1945, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354.

strafed" the town of Muntzenheim, a German-held strongpoint one and a half miles east of Bischwihr. Their attack destroyed two buildings and damaged a pair of German motor vehicles in the town.[42]

Bischwihr itself received the attention of the 371st Fighter Group's fighter-bombers, which bombed the town and the woods nearby at 11:20 a.m. before heading west to strafe the roads leading west out of Colmar, damaging a truck and three horse-drawn carts headed for the city.[43] Their departure cleared the skies for nine P–47s of 324th Fighter Group's 314th Fighter Squadron, which had launched that morning without an assigned objective. After taking off, one of the fighter-bombers developed engine trouble and had to turn back after jettisoning his ordnance. The nine remaining Thunderbolts headed to Colmar after an air controller told them to loiter there until he could assign them a target. Once they made it to Colmar, the voice of a second air controller came in over the radio, and an argument between the two controllers broke out over who had control over the flight. The less-than-amiable discussion resulted in the original controller sending the P–47s to bomb and strafe a wooded area sheltering a large number of German troops along the road from Jebsheim to Artzenheim. Artzenheim lay at the intersection of the Colmar and Rhone-Rhine Canals, and once it was taken, the 3d Infantry Division would begin its advance south toward Neuf-Brisach. Swooping down from the west, the Thunderbolts pulled up at 1,500 feet after releasing a dozen 500-pound bombs. Five bombs missed the target, but the remainder fell into the woods, including two incendiary munitions that landed just short of the trees, spreading fires below the foliage. The fighter-bombers then turned around to strafe a second forested area to the west before running short of gas and returning to base.[44]

Soon after, eight P–47s of 324th Fighter Group's 314th Fighter Squadron appeared over the Colmar Canal. The newly arrived Thunderbolts dive-bombed a road intersection in the middle of Muntzenheim shortly after noon and conducted their own strafing runs, leaving several buildings on fire. A ground controller informed the pilots that a large formation of thirty German tanks had been spotted at Elsenheim, less than three miles north of 3d Infantry Division's front lines. The Thunderbolts, now out of bombs, wheeled north to investigate. During the four-mile stretch, they passed over the newly liberated town of Jebsheim, which was still burning from artillery fire. They arrived at Elsenheim to find it ablaze as well. The reported concentration of armor was nowhere to be found, but the pilots observed and strafed German troops dug into slit trenches, foxholes, and

42. 10 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721.
43. 371 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 30, 1945, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354.
44. 316 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 685, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-316-HI, A0772.

Rocket Launcher-Equipped P–47. **Some of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s fighter-bomber groups received rocket launchers at the end of January 1945, improving their ability to strike trains, vehicles, and troop positions. Here, an armorer works on the launching tubes of one of the 324th Fighter Group's P–47s.** *National Archives.*

artillery shell craters in the woods near the town after a ground controller granted them the authorization to strike them. While the pilots could not observe the results of the attack, their ground controller confirmed it had been a "good show."[45] Later that afternoon, two other flights out of Lunéville bombed and strafed an enemy self-propelled gun, troop positions, and artillery emplacements between Jebsheim and Artzenheim.[46]

As twilight neared, the 371st Fighter Group, which had been foiled in its two attempts to attack German positions near the Colmar Canal earlier in the day, sent four of its last flights for the day to Elsenheim. The first of these left Tantonville at 2 p.m. and arrived over Elsenheim twenty minutes later. Although the town was still in flames from earlier air raids, the 404th Fighter Squadron released sixteen quarter-ton general-purpose bombs into the conflagration below before racing back to base to rearm. Over the next hour, the 405th and 406th Fighter Squadrons flew over the area, attacking German vehicle traffic and troop emplacements. The 405th bombed four tanks spotted near Artzenheim. Though the pilots could not confirm if they had hit their targets, they claimed to have caused considerable damage to the road being used by the enemy tankers and dropped two more bombs

45. 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 860, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771.
46. 315 Fght Sdqn, Sortie Rpt 776, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-315-HI, A0722.

into the blazing streets of Elsenheim for good measure on their return to base, where they too rearmed and refueled before heading back. Their group mates complied with instructions from an air controller to attack German troops spotted in the woods north of the burning town, releasing two dozen bombs and strafing through the trees. Receiving confirmation from the air controller that their strike had been effective, they ranged south of Neuf Brisach to strafe German road traffic, destroying one truck and damaging another before they headed back to Tantonville.[47]

Meanwhile, the 404th Fighter Squadron was on its way back to the canal area. Their air controller originally intended to have them conduct a second strike on the woods northwest of Elsenheim, but the Thunderbolt pilots could not detect the smoke marker identifying their target. Rather than waste the dwindling daylight available, the air controller approved them to add to the havoc in Elsenheim, and sixteen of the twenty-one general-purpose bombs released by the pilots fell into the structures and streets below. With Elsenheim now thoroughly destroyed and neutralized as a strongpoint or assembly area, the last aerial attack of the day near the canal took place to the south at Muntzenheim at 3:55 p.m. Twelve of the 405th Fighter Squadron's P–47s pelted the burning town with two dozen bombs, causing new fires that spread from rooftop to rooftop and leveling an estimated twenty buildings.[48]

By the end of the day, XII Tactical Air Command had expended more than 200 general-purpose and incendiary munitions over the western stretches of the Colmar Canal between Colmar and Artzenheim.[49] The combined attacks on January 29 significantly degraded the German defenses that lay on the path to Artzenheim and helped to shore up the vulnerable flanks of 3d Infantry Division's position along the Colmar Canal and the French 1st Infantry to its left. Shortly after Operation Cheerful concluded, Maj. Gen. John O'Daniel, the 3d Infantry Division commander, wrote to XII Tactical Air Command to praise the "excellent results" from the provisional air force's fighter-bomber efforts during the day, which "materially reduced" German artillery and armor opposition, allowing his troops to advance quickly and take a great number of prisoners.[50] Further to the southeast, nine of the 324th's Thunderbolts struck targets behind the French I Corps' line of advance. Shortly before 5 p.m., they shot up what the pilots identified as a German armor column passing through Saint Croix en-Plaine, four miles south of Colmar, and bombed the nearby town of Rouffach. While they

47. 371 Fght Grp, Ops Rpt, Jan 30, 1945, AFHRA, 655.3061, A6354.
48. Ibid.
49. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 29–Jan 30, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
50. Maj. Gen. John W. O'Daniel, CG, 3d Inf Div, to Brig. Gen. Glenn O. Barcus, CG, XII TAC, Feb 10, 1945, in 81 Fght Sqdn, Unit History, Jan 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-81-HI, A0760.

Brig. Gen. Edmund C. Langmead. **Langmead came along with Royce from the Allied Expeditionary Air Force to serve as the provisional air force's deputy commander for administration. With responsibility for both personnel and logistical issues, he was an important member of the headquarters staff. This photo was taken after his postwar promotion to major general.** *National Archives.*

could not determine the precise identity of the armor or the effectiveness of their strafing runs, the pilots confirmed the destruction of five buildings in Saint Croix en-Plaine and three more in Rouffach.[51]

Although foul weather would limit flying for the next few days, USAAF and French P–47s kept up the pressure on the Germans resisting O'Daniels's troops as much as possible. Of the seventy-three fighter-bomber sorties the provisional air force was able to launch on January 30, thirty-one were dedicated to air strikes along the Colmar Canal. Between them, fourteen Thunderbolts of 324th Fighter Group and seventeen of the French 3. Group performed strafing runs and released more than fourteen tons of general-purpose, incendiary, and fragmentation bombs in support of U.S. troops advancing south of the canal and French forces engaged near

51. 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 862, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771.

Marckolsheim, claiming the destruction of twenty-three buildings and three motor vehicles.[52] The fighter-bomber strikes along the canal, combined with heavy artillery fire, blunted a German counterattack on the south side of the canal that wore on into the night and the next day but failed to halt the Allies.[53] Although weather prevented the provisional air force from making further strikes on January 31, U.S. and French troops had made enough headway to clear the towns and roads south of the Colmar Canal. The few German troops still defending the area could offer only "scattered resistance," and the seizure of the town of Widensolen on the last day of the month put Allied troops less than four miles away from Neuf-Brisach.[54]

In addition to permitting effective close cooperation from XII Tactical Air Command's fighter-bombers, the break in the weather on January 29 also allowed the provisional reconnaissance group to conduct missions for the first time in three days. One successful reconnaissance sortie—indeed, one of the handful conducted during the entire month of January 1945—occurred around 3 p.m., when one of 34th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron's F–5s found clear skies over the Rhine crossing at Breisach. The pilot made three runs over the bridge, evading at least twenty flak bursts during each pass by changing his altitude, airspeed, and approaches. Through his display of "complete disregard" of the heavy enemy fire, he was able to photograph the entire length of the bridge, confirming its continued use as an effective line of communication in and out of the Colmar Pocket.[55] Not all the flights that day were so lucky, though. One of 162d Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron's F–6s was either hit by flak or struck a ground obstruction while flying low east of the Rhine and crashed in a fireball, killing the pilot.[56]

Unlike the U.S. and French air units engaged in the Colmar Pocket, the Luftwaffe could do little to take advantage of the break in the weather on January 29. Allied aviators spotted just four German aircraft—two Me 262 jets flying at high altitude near Colmar, and two single-engine piston aircraft presumed to be fighters seen flying low near Breisach—over or near the pocket, none of which attempted to engage.[57]

52. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 30, Jan 29–30, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; 316 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 687, Jan 30, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-316-HI, A0772.

53. Army Grp G, Evening Rpt, Jan 20, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29, Roll 145, 7191683.

54. G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rpt, Jan 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308.

55. 34 Photo Recon Sqdn, Unit History, Jan 31, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-PHOTO-34-HI, A0888.

56. 111 Tac Recon Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 29, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-RCN-111-HI, A0916.

57. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 29–Jan 30, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211. Total Allied sightings of enemy aircraft for the day numbered no more than sixty, and almost all were made north of the Colmar Pocket. The German aircraft spotted were "very unaggressive" and "went out of way to avoid combat." See 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 29, Jan 28–29, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030.

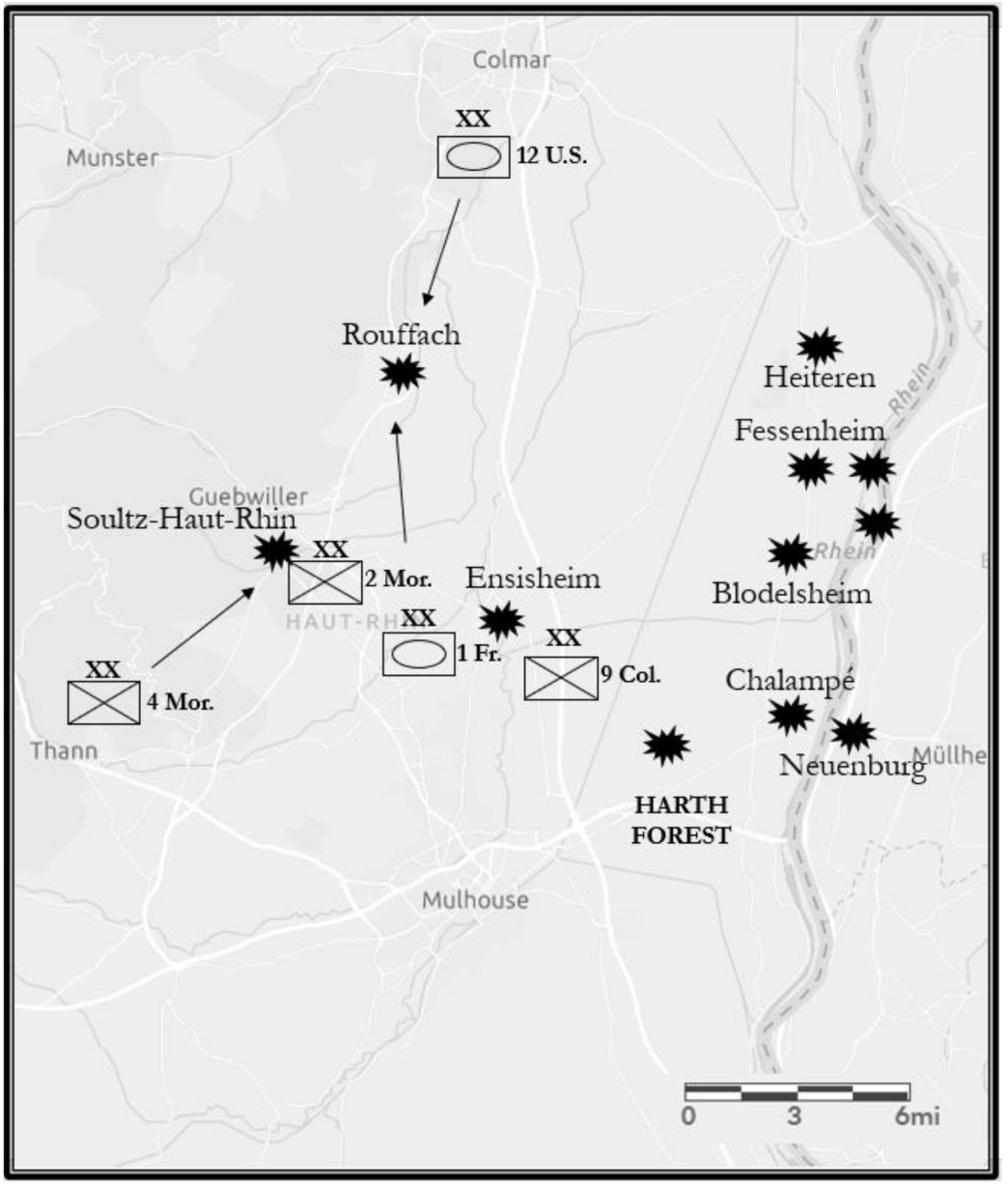
Already dominant in the air, the air-to-ground effectiveness of XII Tactical Air Command's P–47 units was enhanced around this time with the arrival of new munitions types. At the start of February, armorers in some of the provisional air force's fighter-bomber groups began fitting aircraft with rocket launchers. Pilots initially objected to decreased mobility caused by the ungainly launching tubes and found the rockets to be difficult to aim and erratic in flight. But the pilots found that when they struck home, rockets proved to be effective weapons against armor and motorized vehicles. The Thunderbolt units also received models of incendiary munitions that had not been issued to them previously. One of these was the 500-pound M17 cluster bomb, which pilots initially struggled to employ effectively because its trajectory after release differed from that of a typical bomb of similar size. Several strikes conducted shortly after its introduction resulted in ordnance falling short of intended aiming points, but pilots soon became familiar with its peculiar characteristics. A second munition introduced was the M76, a more conventionally designed 500-pounder. Filled with napalm, the M76 was a devastating weapon when applied against targets like wooden structures and railcars packed in marshaling yards.[58] Both of these were frequent and favorite targets of P–47 pilots in the 6th Army Group's area of operations.

While the provisional air force's armorers and pilots integrated the new weapons into their arsenal, the weather warmed somewhat as February crept closer. From the provisional reconnaissance group's airfields at Azelot, the war diarist of 111th Tactical Reconnaissance squadron noted that "the weather turned unseasonably warm, and everything started to melt. Ice and snow are fast disappearing."[59] The warmer weather of February, however, was accompanied by three days of haze and fog, which brought their own challenges to the airmen of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional). Nonetheless, the change in the weather portended an expansion of the tactical air campaign along the Rhine. As Langmead, the commander of the provisional air force's air service command, remarked after the war: "January was bad because of snow. In February we started to fight."[60] The improvement in the weather, fighting capabilities, and spirit in the provisional air force's tactical units would be sorely needed. It would take nine more days before the campaign to crush the Colmar Pocket would come to an end.

58. 10th Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721; 81st Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-81-HI, A0780.

59. 111 Tac Recon Sqdn, War Diary, Jan 30, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-RCN-111-HI, A0916.

60. Interview with Brig. Gen. Edmund C. Langmead, DCG-A, 1 TACAF, Jun 22, 1945, AFHRA, 549.051, C5026 (hereafter Langmead interview).



Air Strikes Supporting the French I Corps,
February 1–5, 1945

Six

Air Operations February 1–5, 1945

As February 1945 began, the Allied drive toward the German-held bridges over the Rhine continued to gain momentum. French and U.S. troops had advanced deep behind the initial German defenses on the north side of the Colmar Pocket and had begun to consolidate their lines of advance for the final pushes to Neuf-Brisach. To the south, the French I Corps remained well short of its anticipated objectives, but once the northern pincer reached Neuf-Brisach, Chalampé would be the last remaining conduit to a bridge across the Rhine. The Germans were beginning to withdraw their troops from the Vosges, but their fallback positions were separated by wide gaps that left them vulnerable to future isolation and encirclement. The defenders of the Colmar Pocket also began to show the strains of the heavy casualties inflicted upon them by the Allies. By this stage in Operation Cheerful, the German Nineteenth Army could neither muster nor maneuver adequate reinforcements to shore up its disintegrating defenses.[1]

While weather still confounded air operations, the few reconnaissance flights the provisional air force mounted in the last days of January revealed that enemy resistance was "generally weakening" within the Colmar Pocket. However, aerial surveillance also confirmed that both the Breisach and Neuenburg bridges across the Rhine remained serviceable. Sizable caches of pontoon equipment and an operable tug to move them were positioned near the Breisach crossing to keep at least a tenuous lifeline across the Rhine there. Allied aviators could not yet positively identify major traffic movements on the roads and railways leading to and from the bridges indicating a wholesale retreat, but Brig. Gen. Gordon Saville's intelligence staff for the provisional air force concluded that continued defense of the pocket was no longer tenable, and withdrawal was the most likely next move the Germans would make.[2]

1. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 548–51.
2. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 31, Jan 30–Jan 31, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

Aviation Engineers Clear a Runway. **February 1945 brought rain instead of the snow that dominated most of the previous month. Here, First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) engineers clear mud off of a runway.** *National Archives.*

February also brought changes in the weather. These new meteorological conditions, like the blizzards of January, would complicate air operations. Although the heavy snows that had fouled the skies stopped, the first day of February ushered in a warm front bringing rain, sleet, and fog. The war diarist for the 34th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron lamented that the rain and melting snow had rendered the squadron's installation at Azelot "a better submarine base" than an airfield.[3] Some of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s Thunderbolts, however, were able to resume operations to support the most encouraging advance on the ground, that of the U.S. 3d Infantry Division, now joined by the French 1st Infantry Division, on its advance toward the Rhone-Rhine Canal. On the morning of February 1, 324th Fighter Group dedicated twenty-eight sorties to preparatory strikes ahead of the Allied troops on their way to Artzenheim. That town, situated at the junction of the Colmar and Rhone-Rhine Canals, served as the last objective to be seized before the drive to Neuf-Brisach. Eleven P–47s unleashed thirty-one bombs on German positions in Artzenheim beginning at 8:20 a.m., including eighteen 500-pound general-purpose bombs expended within the confines of the town.[4] The pilots could

3. 34 Photo Recon Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 1, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-PHOTO-34-HI, A0888.

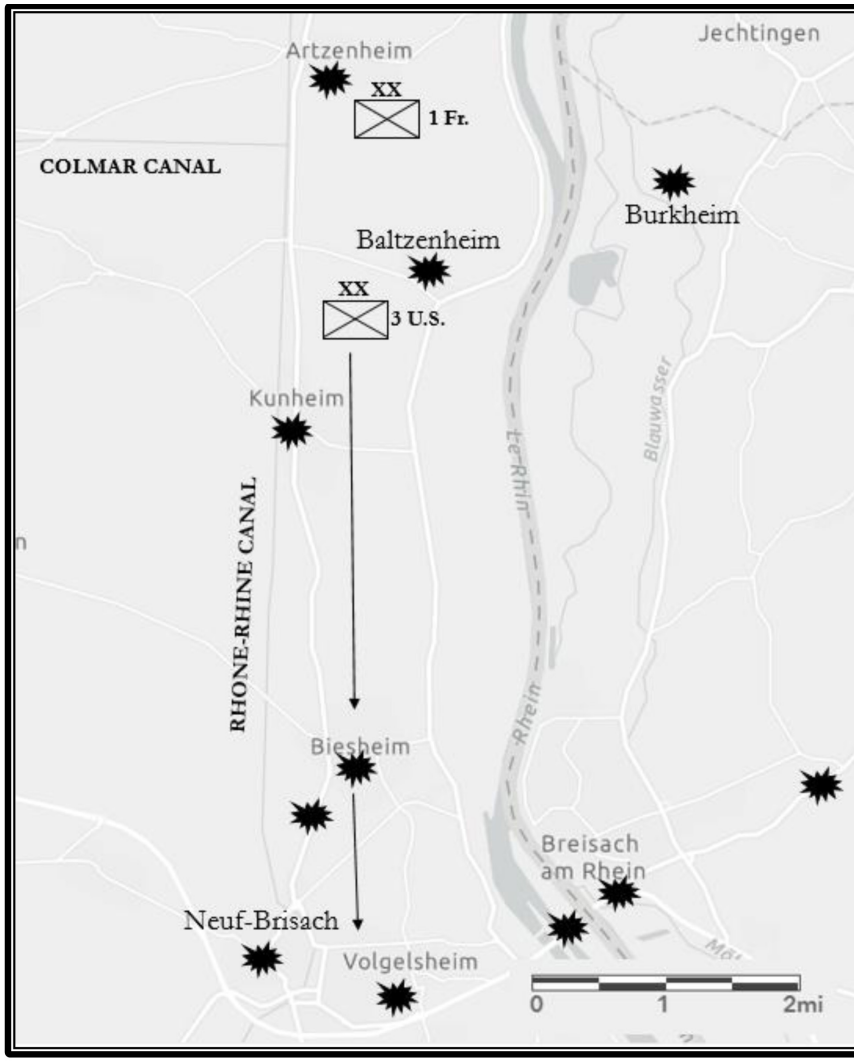
4. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Jan 31–Feb 1, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211; 315 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt No. 778, Feb 1, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-315-HI, A0772.

not observe the results of the bombing on German troops or vehicles, but they claimed to have seen several buildings struck and destroyed by their ordnance. They went on to strafe locomotives and railcars before heading home—at least one railcar most likely bearing fuel exploded—with one of their fighters lightly damaged by enemy flak.[5] The French 1st Infantry Division took Artzenheim later in the day, allowing 3d Infantry Division's 7th Regiment to cross the Rhone-Rhine Canal, where it began to prepare for its impending advance on Neuf-Brisach.[6]

Shortly after the strike on Artzenheim, XII Tactical Air Command fighter-bombers performed preparatory strikes on German positions lying on the route of advance to Neuf-Brisach. One of these strikes was unsuccessful, however, and undertaken at unnecessary risk. At 8:20 a.m., a dozen P–47s of 314th Fighter Squadron took off on a mission to bomb Kunheim, a town on the east bank of the Rhone-Rhine Canal roughly halfway between Artzenheim and Neuf-Brisach. Two Thunderbolts experienced mechanical difficulties and had to turn back before reaching the target, but the remaining ten were contacted by a ground controller who directed them to abort the Kunheim strike and to stand by for further instructions. After a brief wait, the ground controller sent them the coordinates of a German strongpoint guarding a road bridge roughly two miles west of the original target. The controller advised a west-to-east or north-to-south approach, but then suddenly another ground controller intervened and cancelled the strike, directing the fighters to return to base. The pilots disregarded the second controller and opted to hit the target from the west, flying through intense and accurate large-caliber antiaircraft fire to the release point. Their decision was ill-advised. Each of the twenty-three bombs, released from 2,000 feet, missed the target—some by as many as three miles to the east, where they fell in the nearby town of Baltzenheim, which was already burning from Allied artillery fire.[7] Luckily, although mechanical problems forced a third Thunderbolt to head back to base shortly after the unsuccessful and unauthorized attack, none of the others were damaged or downed by flak.

Less than three miles south of Kunheim lay Biesheim, the site of an old Maginot fort occupied by German troops that blocked the northern approach to Neuf-Brisach. Aerial surveillance had also revealed numerous other defensive positions, including trenches and fortified bunkers, guarding the roads on the north side of the town, providing an enticing number of potential targets for roving fighter-bombers. Seven P–47s that been diverted from their original target of Baltzenheim released nineteen bombs in strikes against enemy troop concentrations and vehicles spotted

5. PA, 1 TACAF, "First TAC AF Ops, 1 Feb 45," AFHRA, 549.309, Feb 2, 1945, C5031.
6. 3d Inf Div, "Report of Operations, 1–28 February 1945," Mar 23, 1945, AFHRA, 585.03, C5139.
7. 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rept 864, Feb 1, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771.



Air Strikes Supporting the Drive to Neuf-Brisach, February 1–6, 1945

along the road leading from Biesheim to the fort at 8:25 a.m. The bombing resulted in a massive explosion in the northwest sector of the town, where the fort was located, and set off fires that raged long after the P–47s departed.[8] The last of the 324th's Thunderbolts returned to Lunéville at 10:20 a.m. Two of the twenty-eight fighter-bombers suffered minor damage from landing accidents, and the USAAF units of the provisional air force launched no more aircraft for the rest of February 1. Before darkness fell,

8. 316 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 688, Feb 1, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-316-HI, A0722.

however, the First French Air Corps conducted an interdiction strike far behind German lines, dropping more than seven tons of bombs in the rail hub city of Donaueschingen at the request of an air controller.[9]

The preparatory strikes on Artzenheim and Biesheim helped to pave the way for the 3d Infantry Division's 7th Infantry Regiment, which had made considerable progress along the banks of the Rhone-Rhine Canal by the time the sun set on February 1. The Germans still held several fortified positions along the road to Neuf-Brisach, but many were in flames or reduced to rubble after being subjected to heavy Allied aerial and artillery bombardment. Once these blocking positions were cleared, the main objective of the offensive would be in sight.[10] The weather prevented any late-day reconnaissance or night flying, but the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s intelligence staff remained convinced that by this time, the dwindling number of tenable defensive points available to the Germans indicated that the enemy now had little choice but to withdraw from the Colmar Pocket. However, the Germans had yet to be forced to make that determination. The Wehrmacht had relinquished its positions along the banks of the Colmar Canal to the Allies, but further fighting down the Rhone-Rhine Canal still lay ahead. The French I Corps was still stalled on the southern end of the pocket, and both major Rhine crossings remained in operation. Aerial observation of rail traffic between rail yards in the Rhine valley and Stuttgart suggested that the Germans still retained the ability to reinforce, possibly with armor, if they chose to sell their last territory in the Colmar Pocket to the Allies as dearly as possible.[11]

In fact, that was what the German high command planned to do. Adolf Hitler and his closest military advisors still intended to maintain their toehold in Alsace for as long as possible and ordered Gen. Paul Hausser's Army Group G to continue to resist the Allied offensive. At 1 a.m. on February 2, Hausser informed Lt. Gen. Siegfried Rasp, commander of Nineteenth Army, that the Führer himself had ordered his army to hold the pocket "under any circumstance." To do so, he held Rasp responsible for ensuring that "every last man" was thrown into the defense of Nineteenth Army's north and south flanks. The sole exception was the front in the Vosges. Hausser allowed that forces could be reassigned to other sectors in the pocket if their movement would not dangerously weaken the flank there, but since many of these units were already in the process of withdrawing, this amounted to a post hoc authorization for their retreat.[12] Hausser,

9. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 32, Jan 31–Feb 1, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
10. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 1–2, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
11. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 32, Jan 31–Feb 1, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
12. Gen. Paul Hausser, CG, Army Grp G, to Lt. Gen. Siegfried Rasp, CG, Nineteenth Army, Msg Ia Nr. 516/45, Feb 2, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191766.

however, intended to take his instructions as literally as possible to prevent the wholesale destruction of Nineteenth Army. Ordered to hold the pocket to the last man—which he interpreted as frontline combat-ready troops—later in the day he issued orders to his engineering command that weapons, equipment, and supplies considered inessential for its defense were to be evacuated across the Rhine. Plans to move materiel out of the pocket, he stressed, needed to take into consideration the likely possibility that one or both of the main crossing points would fall in the coming days.[13] The determination of which weapons and equipment were essential to defend the pocket quickly became elastic. Army Group G's staff realized that Allied pressure against the northern and southern fronts would require the movement of Nineteenth Army's artillery to the plains along the riverbanks, where it would surely be captured if the Allies successfully broke through one or both flanks.[14] Therefore, there was no choice but to move it across the river as soon as possible. Whether the Führer wished it or not, the German withdrawal from the Colmar Pocket was beginning in earnest.

Unluckily for the German troops ordered to stay within the Colmar Pocket, the day of Friday, February 2, broke with, as the war diarist of 358th Fighter Group noted, "excellent flying weather."[15] Not only were the skies clear over the air bases clustered around Nancy, but also over the provisional air force's bomber and fighter bases located behind the Vosges Mountains. With the weather cold but clear, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) was finally able to conduct operations throughout the course of an entire day. Leading the way, XII Tactical Air Command mounted more than 500 fighter, fighter-bomber, and reconnaissance sorties before the sun set. The French First Air Corps added another 126 of their own. They did so unopposed in the air; although the Luftwaffe flew a small number of reconnaissance flights over the area, including some by Me 262 jets, as usual they offered no resistance when challenged by Allied fighter-bombers.[16]

The propitious break in the weather allowed the Allies to maneuver successfully in the air and on the ground, setting favorable conditions for an attempt to wrest Colmar, the symbolic heart of the German salient in Alsace, from the enemy. Two regiments of the U.S. 28th Infantry Division, which had previously been holding the French line between Colmar and the Vosges, advanced under cover of darkness to the outskirts of the city. Early in the morning of February 2, they allowed a combat command of the French 5th Armored Division to pass through their lines. The French

13. Gen. Paul Hausser, CG, Army Grp G, to Lt. Col. Layer, Eng Cmd Oberrhein, Msg Ia Nr. 526/45, Feb 2, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191769.

14. Army Grp G, "Mitgehörte Sprache mit OB, Chef, und Ia," Feb 3, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191822.

15. 358 Fght Grp, Outline History, Feb 1945, AFHRA, GP-358-HI(FI), B0319.

16. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

tanks drove through the German defensive perimeter and headed for the city's center. Unable to resist the armored onslaught, the defenders began to withdraw via roads to the south and southeast. Having given the French the honor of liberating Colmar, the 28th Infantry Division's reward was the task of securing the city's outer environs and rousting German holdouts from their positions, a grueling business that carried on into the next day.[17]

While Allied troops cleared Colmar, the provisional air force's fighters and fighter-bombers attacked German lines of communication and avenues of retreat. Spitfires of the French 1. Group flew fighter sweeps over Colmar and Mulhouse, while the Thunderbolts of 3. and 4. Groups hit railways, bridges, and ammunition dumps in the southern side of the pocket. Most of the French air strikes served to impede German withdrawals either south from Colmar or north from the outskirts of Mulhouse, with targets including railways, roads, and ammunition dumps bombed near Rouffach and Ensisheim, both critical junctures in roads running between the two cities. French P–47s also hit and destroyed a pontoon bridge north of Chalampé at Blodelsheim, preventing its use as means for an eventual German evacuation across Rhine. In addition to these strikes on possible pathways for a German retreat, French fighter-bombers also struck targets near the Neuenburg bridge to degrade Nineteenth Army's anticipated last-ditch defensive positions, including an ammunition depot north of Chalampé at Fessenheim.[18]

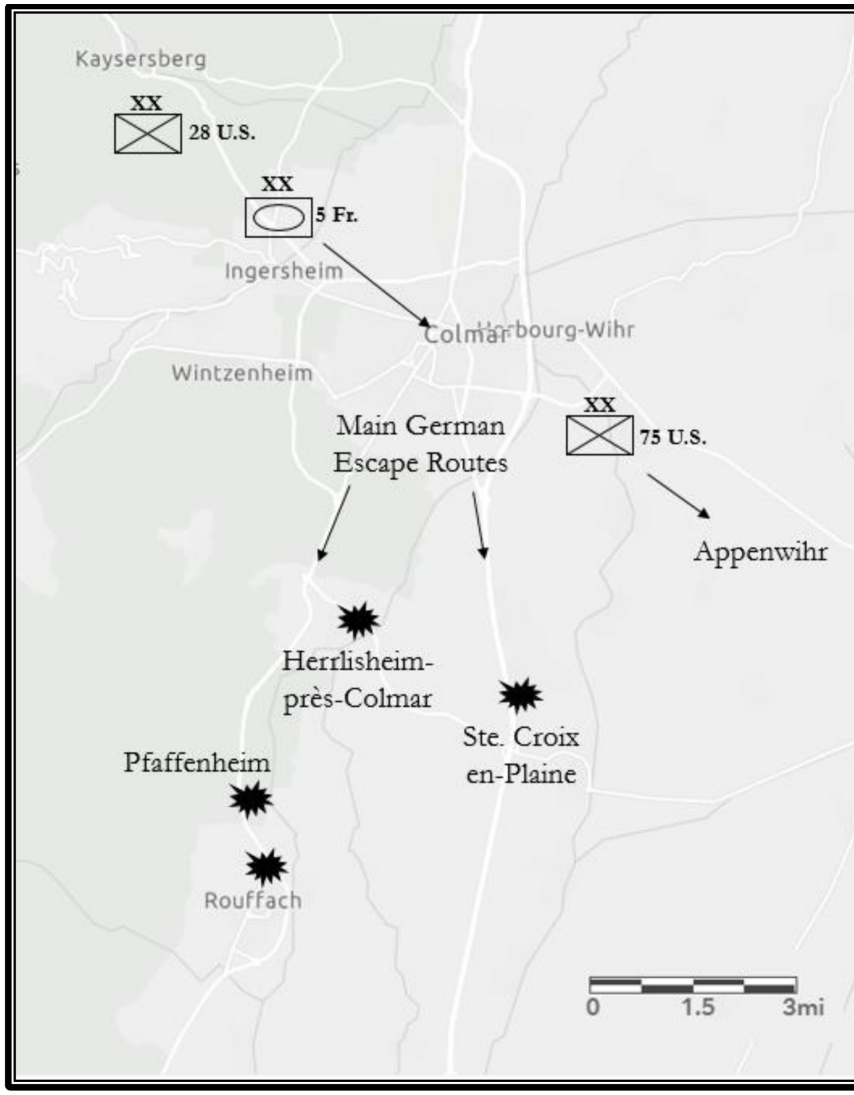
As February 2 wore on, the continuous application of air power made the German withdrawal from Colmar a dangerous one. Low on supplies and morale, the retreating Germans conducted only sporadic, uncoordinated delaying attacks against U.S. and French troops investing the city and its suburbs.[19] Many of those taking flight soon found the roads leading out of the city congested by disorganized and disorderly masses of motorized vehicles, horse-drawn wagons and carts, and dismounted infantry. Immobilized German troops on the roads became ideal targets for roving Allied fighter-bombers as the roads became increasingly jammed as the day went on.

Shortly after 2 p.m., eight P–47s of 324th Fighter Group's 315th Fighter Squadron arrived over Colmar after a strike on Biesheim. As they reconnoitered the area, the Thunderbolt pilots observed a large German convoy five miles to the south near the town of Saint Croix en-Plaine. The convoy was estimated to number between eighty to a hundred horse-drawn vehicles and six motorized vehicles. Their visibility unhindered by the clear skies, the pilots discerned that complement of motorized

17. 28th Inf Div, Unit Rpt No. 8, Mar 13, 1945, AFHRA, 585.028, C5136; Weaver, *Guard Wars*, 247–48.

18. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

19. 28th Inf Div, Unit Rpt No. 8, AFHRA, 585.028, C5136.



Air Strikes Against the German Retreat from Rouffach, February 2, 1945

vehicles included at least two scavenged U.S. vehicles, a jeep and a truck, suggesting the lack of suitable organic transport available to the enemy for an orderly withdrawal. The Thunderbolt pilots designated a road crossing ahead of the convoy as an ideal place to begin their strike and dove down from 9,000 feet, releasing twenty-one 500-pound bombs, both general-purpose and incendiary white phosphorus munitions, before wheeling around to make three strafing passes. The P–47s destroyed four of the

motorized transports—one exploded, while the other three caught fire and burned—and damaged more than twenty-five of the horse-drawn vehicles, killing a number of the luckless horses pressed into the evacuation.[20]

Just fifteen minutes later, more Thunderbolts arrived to harry the German withdrawal. Diverted from their original mission of cutting railroads in the U.S. Seventh Army sector, a flight of thirteen P–47s of the 314th Fighter Squadron was reassigned to conduct an armed reconnaissance patrol over Colmar. Arriving overhead, the pilots spotted enemy vehicles and troops attempting to flee from the city. They also saw a second convoy of German troops in both motorized and horse-drawn vehicles moving southward near Saint Croix en-Plaine, and yet another on the road leading southwest to Rouffach, roughly nine miles south of Colmar. The P–47s split up at 2:30 p.m. to hit both convoys. Four set off for the road to Rouffach to attack the thirty-five motor vehicles and twenty horse-drawn carts seen there, while eight others peeled off to strike the fifty horse carts and twenty-five trucks headed for Saint Croix en-Plaine. Bombs, rockets, and machine-gun rounds pelted both convoys as the Thunderbolts made repeated runs, turning the roads into masses of burning vehicles, screaming men, and wounded horses. The fighter-bombers left three motor vehicles blazing and another ten heavily damaged in Saint Croix en-Plaine, along with a dozen horse-drawn carts destroyed or damaged. On the Rouffach road, the Thunderbolt pilots counted five trucks destroyed and fifty vehicles of all types severely damaged. A quartet of P–47s then peeled off to strafe the town of Pfaffenheim, just north of Rouffach, after catching sight of at least two dozen motor vehicles parked there. Although German gunners met their attack with accurate flak, the strafing runs set off a large explosion that spewed a column of gray smoke a thousand feet into the air, flattening five buildings and setting fires throughout the town. The fighter-bombers also machine-gunned vehicles spotted in the streets, wrecking one and mauling four others. One P–47 pulled up damaged by the antiaircraft barrage, but it and all the other fighter-bombers safely returned to their base at Lunéville.[21]

Air strikes against the escape routes south of Colmar on February 2 culminated at 4:30 p.m. when two waves of Thunderbolts arrived to add to the carnage there. A dozen of 50th Fighter Group's P–47s bombed Rouffach and the roads leading to it and strafed whatever targets they could find, leaving seven vehicles destroyed or damaged in their wake before they returned to base.[22] They were joined by twelve more P–47s of 324th Fighter Group, which had just completed an attack north of

20. 315 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 781, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-315-HI, A0772.
21. 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 867, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771.
22. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

Neuf-Brisach and, after being sent westward by their air controller, were drawn to the area after spotting fires and smoke rising from the roadways. After reconnoitering the area and seeing at least sixty vehicles tied up on the road between Rouffach and Herrlisheim-près-Colmar, eight of the Thunderbolts swooped down, firing machine guns and rockets. In their wake, they left the wreckage of seven trucks and a horse-drawn vehicle, along with twenty-nine other vehicles damaged to some extent, and the pilots counted eleven corpses on the roadsides. Two other P–47s passed over dozens of vehicles parked in Rouffach but elected to hit the town's rail yard instead, where they had seen dozens of boxcars and a number of flatcars loaded with what seemed to be wheeled vehicles. The Thunderbolts pelted thirty boxcars with a hail of .50-caliber rounds, as well as six of the ten vehicles loaded on the flatcars. The fighter-bombers regrouped and headed back to the Rhine, strafing the streets of Neuf-Brisach for good measure before returning to base.[23]

By late afternoon, the cumulative effects of the repeated strikes against the German columns heading south had become apparent, turning the withdrawal into a rout. In a postwar study, Lt. Gen. (*General der Artillerie*) Max Grimmeiß, who had taken command of the German LXIV Corps just four days before the fall of Colmar, recalled that the fighter-bomber attacks his troops were subjected to during their retreat were "rather heavy and disturbing, also rich in casualties."[24] The P–47s had done their work well, significantly degrading the combat power, maneuverability, and supplies of the enemy, as well as German morale, in the heart of the Colmar Pocket. Similarly heavy and unrelenting air strikes would continue into the next day, further increasing air power's effects against the ability of the Germans to mount a coherent defense of their toehold in Alsace.

While U.S and French fighter-bombers harried the German retreat from Colmar on February 2, other provisional air force Thunderbolts covered 3d Infantry Division's advance down the Rhone-Rhine Canal, striking defensive positions and bottling up German troops trying to make their way to the Breisach bridge. Their targets included German positions and fortifications in Biesheim, which they pounded throughout the day with bombs, rockets, and strafing runs. The first of these began when P–47s from 324th Fighter Group reached their target at 9 a.m. Diving from 14,000 down to 2,000 feet through intense heavy- and light-caliber antiaircraft fire, the Thunderbolts unleashed eight general-purpose bombs and one incendiary bomb over German positions, including the

23. 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 868, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771.

24. Lt. Gen. Max Grimmeiß, "Rhineland Campaign: Battles in the Alsace Bridgehead, 28 Jan 45-7 Feb 45," 18.

Table 4: Battle Damage Claims for 64th Fighter Wing Air Strikes February 2, 1945		
Target	**Destroyed**	**Damaged**
Locomotives	1	27
Railroad Cars	129	230
Motor Transport	80	130
Horse-Drawn Vehicles	2	65
Tanks	-	5
Armored Vehicles	15	8
Staff Cars	1	1
Barges	1	14
Supply Dumps	2	-
Guns	2	7
Buildings	116	21
Bridges	2	4
Storage Tanks	-	2
Marshaling Yards	-	3
Rail Cuts	35	N/A
Road Blocks	9	N/A

Source: 64 Fighter Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211. Claims include those from strikes in support of U.S. Seventh Army operations.

Maginot fort and an ammunition dump near the road stretching southwest to Neuf-Brisach, before crossing the river for a rocket attack on German town of Burkheim, a staging area for German forces retreating across the Rhine by barge from the Baltzenheim-Artzenheim area.[25] By the time the P–47s headed for the river, Biesheim was in flames from at least two major fires, and several bomb strikes had cratered the road to Neuf-Brisach.[26] While effective air support softened up the still-strong enemy defenses just three miles ahead of them, the 3d Infantry Division completed the clearing of the last German holdouts in Kunheim and Baltzenheim. By noon their rear lines were secure, and O'Daniel's troops prepared for the assault on Biesheim itself.[27]

At midday, eleven more Thunderbolts from 50th Fighter Group arrived over Biesheim to conduct a combat cooperation mission. Their air strikes,

25. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032; 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 865, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771.

26. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

27. 3d Inf Div, Ops Rpt, Feb 1945, AFHRA, 585.03, C5139.

employing four tons of general-purpose and white phosphorus munitions, left the road south to Neuf-Brisach blocked shortly after 1 p.m. Two of the incendiary bombs hung on their mounts during the attack, so the Thunderbolts proceeded to Offenburg, where the pilots thought they could find a railroad or train to target. After reaching the city, the pilots managed to release the troublesome ordnance. Ten more P–47s—these from 324th Fighter Group—added to the havoc wrought in Biesheim earlier in the day, putting twenty-five bombs on target at 5 p.m. Their strikes destroyed two buildings in the town, and like many other Thunderbolts that day, they strafed targets of opportunity that appeared in the area before leaving, damaging three motor transports.[28]

As the Thunderbolts were pounding the roads of Colmar and Biesheim, the medium bombers of 42d Bombardment Wing entered the fray to strike targets in and around Offenburg, which P–47s of the 358th and 371st Fighter Groups also bombed during the day. Although their French compatriots remained socked in at their bases in Lyon, B–26s of the U.S. 17th and 320th Bombardment Groups flew eighty-six sorties on February 2 after having spent the previous three days grounded by fog, clouds, and rain. Their targets were logistical supply depots in the German rear lines supplying the defense of the Colmar Pocket and garrisons housing enemy troops. Just before 2 p.m., eighteen of 320th Bombardment Group's Marauders struck a fuel depot at Zell am Harmersbach, a stop on the rail line leading southwest from Offenburg. Bombing through clouds, the crews dropped more than 400 bombs and claimed to have started a series of fires near the depot, despite over 10 percent of the bombs being "salvoed"—that is, the entire bomb load released at once rather than at the release point—by their bombardiers through error or because of mechanical malfunctions. As they made their attack, thirty-three more B–26s headed to the town of Ramsbach, nine miles west of Offenburg. Five headed back after being deemed unnecessary for the mission, and another two turned back after developing engine trouble while en route. Eighteen of the bombers managed to drop 144 500-pound bombs on the target, an ammunition dump with storage sheds dug into revetments, during a twenty-one-minute attack starting at 2:07 p.m., while eight others released their ordnance in an attempt to hit several buildings in the surrounding area. Six of the bombers circled the area to take photographs, noting "good pattern and excellent concentration, covered target."[29]

The 17th Bombardment Group's raid took place against a barracks housing German troops in Offenburg itself. After reaching Offenburg, the

28. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.; 315 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 782, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-315-HI, A0772.

29. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032; 42 Bomb Wg, War Diary, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, WG-42-HI (BOMB), B0949.

bombers dropped "Window," strips of aluminum foil that created false images for enemy radar, and headed to the target, putting 248 bombs on the target area. Almost 10 percent of the bombs were salvoed, although sixteen of the twenty-four 500-pound bombs released in that fashion fell from the bomb bay over the target area. The bombers returned to base without loss or damage.[30]

The bombers had finished their work by early afternoon, but all four USAAF fighter-bomber groups sent out flights on February 2 for as long as they could safely do so; in fact, each group conducted an air strike within the Colmar Pocket after 4:30 p.m., by which time the Thunderbolts were usually done for the day. Taking advantage of the last flickers of daylight, 358th Fighter Group's 365th Fighter Squadron, as the squadron's war diarist noted, "nearly succeeded in giving our night fighters very close competition" by flying in near-dark conditions to Volgelsheim, an industrial community that lay between Neuf-Brisach and the Breisach bridge. Taking off just after 5 p.m., nine of the 358th's Thunderbolts arrived over the town, greeted by heavy antiaircraft fire. Plowing through the flak, they released their bombs and wheeled around to head back to base. Although darkness and enemy fire prevented the pilots from observing the results of their strike, all the raiders made it safely back to Toul.[31]

The final fighter-bomber strike of February 2 sent eight P–47s of the 10th Fighter Squadron to hit the Breisach river crossing one last time. The squadron had begun to stand down for the day that afternoon, but a late report that German formations were spotted heading to the bridge "broke up chowlines and sent pilots, crew chiefs, armorers, and clerks hurrying to the [flight] line for a 'twilight takeoff.'"[32] It was dark over the target area when they finally made it to Breisach at 6:20 p.m., but the Thunderbolt pilots still pressed their attack on German positions in Neuf-Brisach and the massive rail bridge across the Rhine. After releasing their ordnance, they believed they had put at least one 500-pound bomb on the bridge or missed closely enough to still cause damage, but the next day an SS command involved in the defense of the river crossing reported that its "strong flak defenses" had prevented any damage to the bridge and ferry facilities during the day.[33] The fighter-bombers flew through the darkness back to their base, where, assisted by flares and searchlights, all eight made a safe landing.[34] By the time night finally fell, USAAF P–47s had tallied

30. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
31. 365 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-365-HI, A0787.
32. 10 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721.
33. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211; Army Grp G, Daily Rpt Feb 2, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191761.
34. 10 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721.

117 sorties over Biesheim, Neuf-Brisach, and Volgelsheim, releasing more than 43.5 tons of ordnance against fortifications, gun emplacements, buildings, bridges, and road and rail crossings.[35]

After the sun set, 415th Night Fighter Squadron's radar-equipped Bristol Beaufighters took off to patrol the night skies over the Colmar Pocket. One spotted lights on the ground north of Ensisheim and attacked, causing explosions and two large fires, most likely from a pair of destroyed German supply dumps. The strike brought an end to the destruction wrought by the provisional air force on February 2. Despite the high number of sorties—a record number for the provisional air force since it began operations in November 1944—losses were light. Only two U.S. P–47s failed to return from their missions, one downed by antiaircraft fire along with its pilot, and one that crashed after its engine failed. Twenty-three other fighter-bombers suffered damage during the day from flak and runway mishaps, four of which had to be written off. In addition to XII Tactical Air Command's losses, six French P–47s suffered repairable damage from enemy antiaircraft fire. These losses were negligible in terms of keeping steady air cover as long as the weather held.[36] By the end of the day, 64th Fighter Wing's P–47s had dropped almost 240 tons of bombs—934 munitions in all, including 641 500-pound general-purpose bombs—on targets in and around the Colmar Pocket area and against German forces opposing the U.S. Seventh Army.[37]

The clear weather of February 2 also afforded ample opportunities to observe German movements and lines of communications behind the Colmar Pocket. Between them, USAAF and French reconnaissance units of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) flew sixty-eight sorties, gathering valuable visual and photographic intelligence to add to the observations made by fighter-bomber pilots during their strikes.[38] Unfortunately for the pilots of 34th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron, the cameras of five of thirteen F–5s that launched during the day failed before they reached their targets. The squadron had been struggling with old and unreliable photographic gear for some time, and postflight analysis of their photo reconnaissance products was often plagued with errors made by overworked U.S. and inexperienced French intelligence personnel.[39] Accepting that such difficulties were inevitable given materiel and staffing shortages, the provisional air force's intelligence and operations staffs set to work scrutinizing the film retrieved from the functional cameras,

35. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
36. Ibid.; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
37. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 2–3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
38. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
39. 34 Photo Recon Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 2–3, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-PHOTO-34-HI, A0888.

U.S. Troops Advance through Riedwihr. **Men of the 75th Infantry Division march through the streets of Riedwihr on February 3, 1945, heading east toward the Rhine River after the liberation of Colmar.** *National Archives.*

looking for evidence of rail movements out of Breisach and Freiburg to points north and east to guide the planning of future strikes.

The heavy air activity over the roads leading from Colmar and around the Breisach crossing on February 2 was matched by gains by Allied troops on the ground. With the loss of Colmar, the Germans could no longer hold a coherent defensive line across the length of the pocket. The remaining defenders in the north end of the pocket, like the former garrison of Colmar, began to withdraw, but their path to the Rhine was blocked by the 3d Infantry Division's grip on both sides of the Rhone-Rhine Canal and a complementary assault by Maj. Gen. Ray E. Porter's 75th Infantry Division. After mopping up the rear lines along the Colmar Canal, the 75th Infantry Division skirted around Colmar and attacked the town of Appenwihr, the first objective on its advance to Neuf-Brisach.[40] Enemy positions defending the roads to Neuf-Brisach and the city itself had taken a terrible pounding from the air. The Breisach bridge, though damaged by earlier bombing attacks, was still serviceable, as was the Neuenburg bridge, but German troops attempting to reach them found their way blocked or hindered by rail cuts and roadblocks caused by

40. 75th Inf Div, After Action Rpt, Feb 1945, Appendix 1, AFHRA, 585.075, C5145.

USAAF and French tactical strikes. The roads leading to and out of Neuf-Brisach had been blocked by bomb debris or wrecked vehicles in several places, including the roads to Biesheim to the north and to Oberaasheim and Volgelsheim to the southeast. The rail network behind the front lines, critical for any large-scale evacuation, had taken serious blows as well, with strikes having taken place during the day at Offenburg and points as far as fifty miles to the southeast, including Gengenbach, Zell am Harmersbach, Haslach, Hausach, and Horb am Neckar, in addition to the usual strikes on the north-south line between Offenburg and Freiburg. The First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s intelligence staff concluded that the rail loop connecting Breisach, Freiburg, and Offenburg had been rendered "temporarily unserviceable" by Allied bombing, and the railways leading north to Stuttgart out of Donaueschingen had been cut at two points.[41]

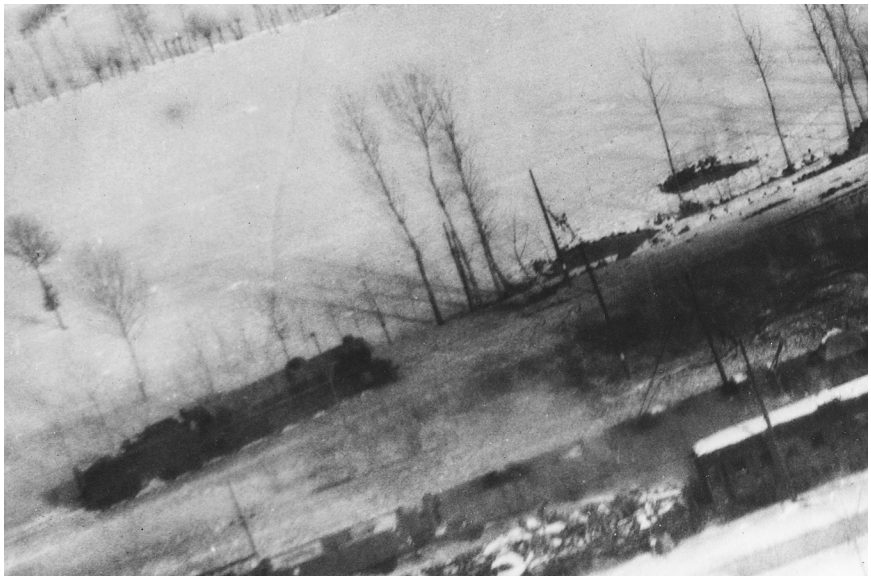
The ability to inflict further damage to German lines of communication, as had been the case since the start of Operation Cheerful, depended on the weather. The morning after the provisional air force's banner day of February 2 ushered in a cold front, bringing in mists, rain, and overcast skies on the 3d that grounded the B–26s and all French aircraft save for one brief weather reconnaissance flight. For its part, XII Tactical Air Command flew just 107 sorties, including twelve tactical reconnaissance and two night fighter sorties, on February 3.[42] Most of the Thunderbolts that managed to get aloft headed across the Rhine to bomb rail targets on the inner interdiction line behind the Colmar Pocket, including the marshaling yard in Riegel, the meeting point for the rail lines running north from Breisach and Freiburg. The rail yards in the latter two cities were also targeted, as was Offenburg's during the day. While prowling over the rails connecting the German cities, the P–47s strafed and rocketed two moving trains, including one loaded with motorized vehicles on flatcars. When they returned, the P–47 pilots claimed to have left the wreckage of one locomotive and twenty-three railcars in the yards, with three other locomotives and more than thirty railcars in damaged condition, and to have weakened the foundation of a rail bridge in Offenburg. In addition to the attacks on rail traffic, the Thunderbolts also bombed rail tracks running out of the marshaling yards, making three cuts in the artery from Freiburg to Offenburg and two in the railways running east to Villingen to Donaueschingen.[43]

Other strikes conducted on February 3 took place closer to the front lines. By now, 3d Infantry Division had begun to evict the dug-in defenders

41. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 33, Feb 1–Feb 2, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

42. PA, 1 TACAF, "Ops, 3 Feb 45," Feb 3, 1945, AFHRA, 549.309, C5031; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 3–4, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

43. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 3–4, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 34, Feb 2–3, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.



German Train Under Strafing Attack. **USAAF fighters strafe a German train in northern France during the winter of 1944. Attacks on rail targets such as this one were the primary means of interdicting German supply lines in and behind the Colmar Pocket during Operation Cheerful.** *National Archives.*

at Biesheim. While parts of the town remained in German hands, O'Daniel was confident enough in the eventual outcome there to send patrols ahead to probe the defenses of Neuf-Brisach.[44] As O'Daniel's scouts surveilled the walls of the fortress town, aircraft arrived overhead to soften it up before the impending assault. Three waves of P–47s arrived between 9:30 and 11 a.m., bombing and strafing the town center and enemy-occupied strongpoints around it. The Thunderbolt pilots claimed the destruction of twenty to thirty-five buildings, as well as a fortified strongpoint a thousand yards west of the rail bridge, and observed numerous fires spreading through the town. After the second wave attacked, its pilots estimated that half of the town had been destroyed or suffered damage, noting that the smoke from raging fires on its east side rose to and above their bombing altitude.[45]

Ineffective antiaircraft fire on both sides of the Rhine and a short window of flying weather ensured that losses were light for February 3. Two of XII Tactical Air Command's P–47s were shot down during the day and their pilots listed as missing in action. A third was able to limp back to base after flying through debris thrown up by a bomb blast, but other fighter-bombers hit by flak on the 3d received only moderate or slight damage. Joining the list of losses was one of the 415th Night Fighter

44. 3d Inf Div, Ops Rpt, Feb 1945, AFHRA, 585.03, C5139.

45. PA, 1 TACAF, "Ops, 3 Feb 45," AFHRA, 549.309, C5031; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 34, Feb 2–3, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

Squadron's Beaufighters, which crashed in a mishap during the night, killing both its pilot and radar operator.[46]

With the weather clearing, the air superiority owned by the Allies began to make itself manifest. After the war, Col. Kurt Brandstädter, chief of staff of the Wehrmacht's Nineteenth Army, claimed that the weather ensured that Allied fighter-bombers were "*without any particular influence*" on the immediate battlefield in Alsace.[47] In fact, the presence of fighter-bombers—often referred to in German reporting as "Jabos," short for the German *Jagdbomber*—for a second consecutive day over the Colmar Pocket had a profoundly unsettling effect upon Brandstädter. Army Group G's morning report for February 3, issued at 7:10 a.m., included a grim entry that the troops defending the southern half of the salient had had their combat strength "reduced to a minimum through constant Jabo attacks" the previous day.[48] Two and a half hours later, Brandstädter called in to the headquarters of Army Group G, informing them that he could not accurately account for the positions of his units because Allied air attacks had cut all of his signal lines. Maj. Gen. (*Generalleutnant*) Helmut Staedke, the army group's chief of staff, asked Brandstädter if he thought the units in the pocket could be withdrawn to the Rhine, with an eye toward their eventual evacuation. Only "if the weather is favorable and no Jabo attacks are expected," Brandstädter surmised, could his troops be able to move east and begin loading their vehicles onto ferries. "The main thing," both agreed, "is we need to keep both bridges, and we'll have to see that nothing happens at Breisach." Since the fall of Biesheim meant that just two miles lay between Allied troops and the rail bridge, the odds of nothing happening to the Breisach crossing were rapidly diminishing. The two then turned again to the troubling reemergence of Allied air superiority, with Brandstädter complaining that "it was so bad with the Jabos yesterday you couldn't see a single man on the road," and, more measuredly, assessing that fighter-bomber attacks had seriously degraded Nineteenth Army's defenses on the southern side of the pocket.[49]

Brandstädter's consternation about the pounding German troops were taking from the air led the commander of Army Group G, Gen. Paul Hausser, to send a personal message later that night to his superiors at OB West. "The commander of Nineteenth Army," Hausser wrote, "reports that on February 2 enemy fighter-bomber activity, completely uninterrupted by our own air force, caused heavy losses of vehicles and equipment and

46. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 3–4, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

47. Col. Kurt Brandstädter, "The Defensive Battle," *FMS*, B-789, USAHEC, 42–44.

48. Army Grp G, Morning Rpt, Feb 3, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191797.

49. Army Grp G, "Mitgehörte Sprache mit OB, Chef, und Ia," Feb 3, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191817–7191818.

made movements quite impossible." The amount of men and materiel that needed to be repositioned within the pocket meant that some movements would have to be conducted in daylight, and Nineteenth Army would be forced to employ routes and river crossings well known to the Allies, leaving them especially vulnerable to air attacks. Given the urgency of the situation, Hausser inquired if the Luftwaffe could provide dedicated fighter cover for Nineteenth Army as it reconsolidated what was left of its former salient around the Rhine crossings.[50] The response from Luftwaffe Command West (*Luftwaffenkommando West*), delivered the next day, brought little comfort. The fighter bases assigned to defend the front in Army Group G's sector were far behind the Rhine in the Black Forest, where they had been moved to protect them from Allied air attack. The closest fighter units to the Colmar Pocket belonged to 53d Fighter Wing (*Jagdgeschwader 53*), which was headquartered in Bonlanden, almost 115 miles east of the Rhine. Three of the wing's four subordinate fighter groups, all flying Messerschmitt Bf 109s, were operating at the time in southwestern Germany, the fourth having been assigned to defend the Third Reich's eastern border. The wing's II Group was based near Stuttgart at Malmsheim, 85 miles northwest of Colmar; its III Group was at Kirrlach, near Karlsruhe and 97 miles northwest of Colmar; and the recently-established IV Group flew out of Nellingen, which was near the wing headquarters and more than 115 miles from Colmar.[51] Heavy clouds forming above the mountains surrounding the Black Forest bases caused frequent grounding conditions. Even when German fighters could get in the air, while their bases were hardly any further away from the front than those of their Allied foes, fuel shortages ensured that three-quarters of their sortie time was spent just getting to and from the front. [52] Although Hausser and his staff continued to press for dedicated fighter cover to aid in the defense of the salient, none would be forthcoming. Nineteenth Army would have to fight on without effective air support.

On the other side of the Rhine, as darkness, fog, and rain moved in once again on the night of February 3, 6th Army Group's intelligence staff prepared its weekly report on German capabilities and intentions. Devers's analysts concluded that Nineteenth Army now faced "imminent liquidation."[53] Signs of a major breakdown in its ability to continue the

50. Army Grp G to OB-West, Msg Ia 549/45, Feb 3, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191814.

51. Schmid, "Strategic Concentration of AAA and Flying Units in the West (Luftwaffe Command West Area), September 1944 to May 1945," AFHRA, K113.107-158, 50.

52. Army Grp G, War Diary, Feb 4, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/27, Roll 145, 7191133.

53. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 20, Feb 3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

defense of the shrinking salient in Alsace were now becoming manifest, and it was clear that the Germans had begun a fighting withdrawal toward the Rhine. Nineteenth Army had already pulled the 708th Volksgrenadier Division out of the pocket. The division had suffered heavy losses while trying to hold back the Allied drive to the Rhone-Rhine Canal, and its commander lamented after the war that at that point, he "no longer had a division but only remnants left."[54] Three other German divisions in the pocket had been battered to the point of losing "organic cohesion." Devers's intelligence staffers concluded that these units, and the others still fighting to protect the German bridgehead over the Rhine, now had only two options: follow the Volksgrenadiers across the river, or face encirclement and destruction.[55] As long as the Rhine bridges were serviceable, the first option remained viable.

Striking the German lifelines across the river would prove a difficult task on February 4. Heavy rains set in during the morning, prolonging the limited flying conditions caused by the arrival of the previous day's cold front. The wet weather was especially vexing to the USAAF provisional reconnaissance group at Azelot. Looking on its waterlogged runways, 34th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron's war diarist dolefully remarked that unless the skies cleared soon, the unit's Lightnings would have to be reconfigured into floatplanes.[56] Pilots of F–6s trying to take off or land found that the air scoops on their aircrafts' underbellies were sucking in mud thrown up by propeller wash, forcing planes to be grounded after missions until their radiators could be decontaminated. Pilots also returned from sorties to find that their cameras had been smeared or caked with mud during takeoff. Forced to operate in such conditions into the near future, the photo section of 111th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron tried to improvise a wiper blade to keep the lenses clear, but the makeshift system proved ineffective.[57] Mud also forced the maintenance crews of the P–47 units to develop innovative ways to keep their fighter-bombers in the air. At Ochey, 313th Fighter Squadron's engineers pressed engine decontamination equipment into use to wash accumulating mud out of landing gear locks and tail wheel doors.[58] Like the snows of January, the rains of February proved to be a potent point of friction in the conduct of air operations.

With many of the provisional air force's aircraft grounded, German troops in the pocket continued their fighting withdrawal toward the Rhine

54. Brig. Gen. Wilhelm Bleckwenn, "708th Volks Grenadier Division (20 Nov 1944–14 Feb 1945)," *FMS*, B-100, USAHEC, 3.

55. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 20, Feb 3, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

56. 34 Photo Recon Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 4, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-PHOTO-34-HI, A0888.

57. 111 Tac Recon Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 4–9, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-RCN-111-HI, A0916.

58. 313 Fght Sqdn, Historical Data, Feb 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-313-HI, A0771.

Messerschmitt Bf 109G. **This versatile fighter served as the Luftwaffe's primary interceptor and fighter-bomber throughout the Second World War, but shortages of fuel, repair parts, and skilled pilots limited the effectiveness of Luftwaffe units operating it during Operation Cheerful.** *National Archives.*

crossings. Despite the destruction wrought by the P–47s in and around Neuf-Brisach on February 3, the bridge there remained open to traffic, including motorized vehicles, going both ways across the Rhine. Neither the Breisach bridge nor the Neuenburg bridge had sustained enough damage from the air to render either one unserviceable for a large-scale German withdrawal from the Colmar Pocket. Even had the Thunderbolts dropped the Breisach bridge, aerial reconnaissance had revealed enough pontoon bridging near it to serve as a "floating highway" for German forces trying to cross the river, augmented by ferries and barges.[59] While temporary bridges and watercraft were able to handle far less capacity than the massive rail bridges, they still remained viable means of escape from the Colmar Pocket. Sealing off the German retreat would require not only destroying the rail spans, but also the seizure of the crossing points to prevent the use of the ferries and secondary bridges.

Although discouraged by their previous failures to drop or neutralize the Breisach bridge, the airmen of the provisional air force attempted multiple attacks on the span on the morning of February 4. Strikes against the crossing started shortly after daylight broke. Just after 8 a.m., a dozen P–47s of the 324th Fighter Group's 314th Fighter Squadron took off

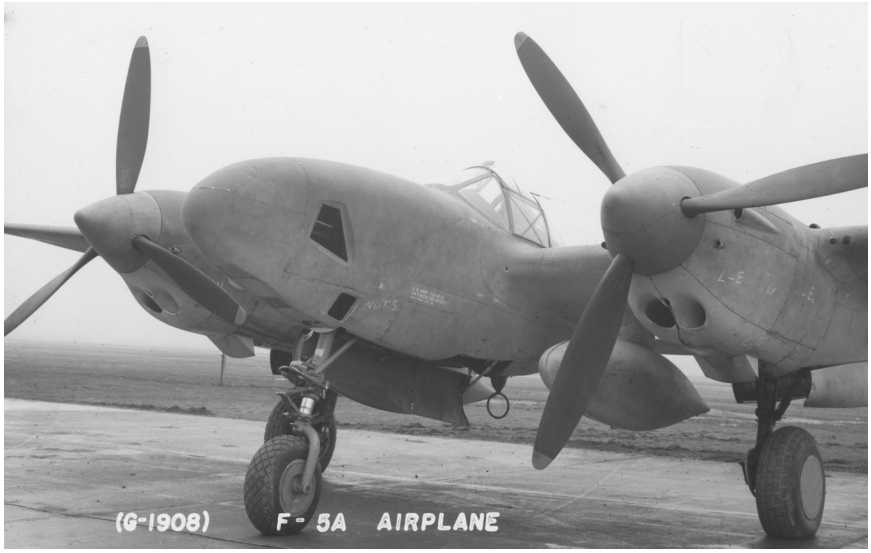
59. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 34, Feb 2–3, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

from Lunéville and awaited to receive an assignment from their ground controller. When it came, the Thunderbolts headed off to perform armed reconnaissance over the wooded stretches of the Harth Forest to the south of Neuf-Brisach. After finding no targets there, the pilots requested and received clearance to conduct a strike on Breisach bridge as a target of opportunity. The Thunderbolts began their attack at 8:30 a.m. After forming up at 10,000 feet, the fighter-bombers dove through accurate heavy-caliber antiaircraft fire to just 1,500 feet above the bridge, firing rockets and unleashing twenty-five general-purpose and incendiary bombs during their descent. Nine bombs splashed harmlessly into the Rhine, but three—a single 100-pounder and two 500-pounders—hit the span dead center, tearing up the rail line. Other bombs fell around the bridge, cutting the rail line on the approaches to both east and west and starting fires in the city of Breisach. With their remaining munitions, the P–47s struck the roads leading to the bridge on both sides of the Rhine, heading east to bomb the roadway to Ihringen, just over two miles east of Breisach, and west to the French town of Heiteren, three miles from Neuf-Brisach, where strafing runs and rockets damaged two buildings and a truck.[60]

Shortly afterward, thirty-five Thunderbolts of 371st Fighter Group arrived in three waves over Breisach. After reconnoitering the area and confirming that fires were still raging through the city and that the eastern terminus of the bridge had sustained major damage, the aircraft released seventeen tons of general-purpose bombs and a ton and a half of incendiary munitions around the area. After returning to base, the pilots claimed to have possibly struck the bridge again and cut its rails in at least three places. In addition to the hits on the bridge, bombs falling on the rail facilities were believed to have demolished sixteen railcars and damaged fifteen others. The two raids on the bridge were the only missions conducted by USAAF fighter-bombers over the Colmar Pocket during the day. Rainy weather moved into the area, and the last of XII Tactical Air Command's P–47s returned to base around 10 a.m., bringing an end to their operations.[61]

Like their USAAF counterparts, the fighter-bombers of the First French Air Corps had only a short window on February 4 in which to launch and land before the weather set in at their bases around midday. With XII Tactical Air Command concentrating its attacks on the Breisach crossing, the French P–47s assumed responsibility for strikes against river crossings and German troop movements in the Chalampé-Neuenburg area. Sixty French fighter-bombers patrolled the banks of the Rhine in the southern end of the Colmar Pocket, hitting bridges and other means of escape for the Germans attempting to outrun the Allied advance. Eleven P–47s of 3.

60. 314 Fght Sqdn, Sortie Rpt 870, Feb 4, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-314-HI, A0771.
61. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 35, Feb 3–4, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.



Lockheed F–5 Lightning. **The provisional air force's USAAF and French reconnaissance units both operated this camera-equipped version of the twin-engine P–38 Lightning fighter. Note the camera windows visible on the sides and ventral surface of the aircraft's nose.** *National Archives.*

Group dropped more than three tons of general-purpose and incendiary bombs on a pontoon bridge across the river at Blodelsheim, roughly four and a half miles north of Chalampé, destroying it. A flight of the group's I/5 Squadron led by the squadron commander, Maj. Edmond Marin la Mesée, damaged a second pontoon crossing two miles further to the north near Fessenheim.[62] Immediately after hitting the bridge near Fessenheim, Marin la Mesée, a highly-decorated veteran of the 1940 campaign in France with sixteen aerial victories to his credit, spotted a German motorized convoy on the road northeast of the bridge and led his Thunderbolts in for a strafing run. Antiaircraft batteries in the area threw up a wall of flak that claimed his ship as he turned to make an ill-advised second pass on the vehicles below, but the surviving Thunderbolts had destroyed at least two of the trucks and damaged a fuel tanker. Soon after, Sfc. Pierre Uhry's fighter-bomber went down after being hit by antiaircraft fire, and the flight retired after strafing a second German convoy, destroying two more trucks and damaging a third, and knocking out one of the flak batteries in the area. The latter attack resulted in yet another Thunderbolt struck by flak, but the pilot managed to nurse his damaged fighter-bomber back to base. After the flight returned, the surviving pilots were sternly reminded of standing orders to not make second passes over targets while strafing. To drive the point home, the new squadron commander and the ground controller directing the engagement

62. Ibid.

agreed to revive the long-standing practice of combining strafing attacks with bomb runs rather than conducting them as separate actions, a protocol that had fallen into recent disuse.[63]

Accurate antiaircraft fire plagued the French fighter-bombers throughout the morning. At 9 a.m., eight 3. Group Thunderbolts headed out to strike river crossings and road traffic on both sides of the Rhine between Neuf-Brisach and Chalampé. After pounding the German town of Bremgarten, which lay across the river from Fessenheim, with fourteen bombs, the P–47s crossed back over to France to strike a German convoy. Their target, a cluster of trucks on a road near the town of Geiswasser, was just four miles north of the area where Marin de Mesée and Uhry had met their fates, and they too found their arrival heralded with a wall of intense flak. Pressing on through enemy fire, the Thunderbolts destroyed three trucks, but at a cost of two of their number. One of the stricken fighter-bombers managed to pull up and, after lurching northward for ten miles, plowed into a field near Jebsheim, where U.S. troops recovered the pilot. The other burst into flames and crashed, killing the pilot. Two other Thunderbolts in the flight were hit by flak but managed to return to base for repairs.[64] Despite the daunting antiaircraft fire and their accumulating losses, the First French Air Corps continued to mount missions until shortly after 1 p.m., with its two P–47 groups striking river crossings, conducting strafing runs on German troops spotted in the Harth Forest, and bombing a crossroads at Soultz-Haut-Rhin, a town in the foothills of the Vosges west of Ensisheim, mostly with inconclusive results.[65] It had been a costly day for the French fighter-bombers, whose pilots displayed exceptional aggressiveness and perseverance in the face of adversity. Their losses made clear that the German forces in the Colmar Pocket, while withdrawing, still retained the will to fight.

The attention paid to striking the Breisach bridge and other river crossings during the day meant that rail facilities in the German rear lines received only a few fighter-bomber attacks, but these were more effective than the French strikes in the pocket. Heavy rail traffic heading north to Offenburg and from there to Donaueschingen led the provisional air force's intelligence staff to assess the use of these rail lines as an "escape route" from the area to safer points eastward. To impede German movements away from the river plain, USAAF P–47s hit Offenburg and nearby rail yards, as well rail facilities deeper in the Black Forest at Donaueschingen

63. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 208; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 35, Feb 3–4, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032. The provisional air force's operational summary does not mention the loss of the two French P–47s on this mission, nor any other French battle damage losses during the day, a remarkable omission.

64. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 209.

65. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 35, Feb 3–4, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032; Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 211–12.

and Rottweil. By the end of the day, the fighter-bombers had inflicted enough damage on bridges and tracks to have temporarily taken these lines out of service.[66]

Rain and clouds made sure that the provisional air force's medium bombers did not join the Thunderbolts during the day. However, one French B–26 got aloft on February 4 for a dramatic raid on the Neuenburg bridge. A dozen bombers of 34th Bombardment Group were preparing to take off to hit the bridge when heavy clouds rolled in over their base at Lyon-Bron. The group's operations officer, Maj. Robert Michaud, frustrated by the cancellation of yet another mission, proposed that if the weather prevented bombing by formations of aircraft, perhaps a single aircraft could make it through to the target. After the wing headquarters declined to allow him to test his theory, at 3:30 p.m. he crept into the cockpit of a B–26 carrying four 1,000-pound bombs and radioed the control tower, invoking his prerogative to authorize takeoff for a training flight. After receiving clearance to launch, Michaud headed, alone and unescorted, to the Chalampé-Neuenburg crossing. After reaching his target, he dove to just thirty feet above the bridge and released his bombs, two of which he believed struck home, and strafed German trucks and antiaircraft artillery positions for good measure before climbing into the clouds to escape their returning fire. Reports of the sortie soon spread throughout the provisional air force's units, raising the spirits of Michaud's fellow airmen, but he received a sentence of fifteen days' detention as punishment after he and his flak-riddled bomber returned to base after his two hour, twenty-minute-long sortie.[67]

Unsurprisingly, Michaud's bold but quixotic one-plane raid on February 4 failed, just as previous attacks by dozens of bombers had, to drop the Neuenburg bridge. However, XII Tactical Air Command's Thunderbolts had left a great deal of damage behind them at the Breisach river crossing. Early in the afternoon, Lieutenant General Rasp, commander of Nineteenth Army, briefed Major General Staedke, Army Group G's chief of staff, on the bleak situation developing in the shrinking salient in Alsace. When Staedke asked Rasp if he could evacuate his troops still in the eastern stretch of the pocket, Rasp told him that he had already discussed his plans to do so with Hausser. Staedke then impressed upon Rasp, in blunt fashion, that "the most important thing is that we don't get cut off." The chances of avoiding that eventuality were rapidly diminishing, for he then mentioned that he had received reports that the rail bridge at Breisach had been destroyed. Rasp replied curtly: "Other than that, nothing's new. I just

66. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 35, Feb 3–4, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

67. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 213–15; 42 Bomb Wg, War Diary, Feb 4, 1945, AFHRA, WG-42-HI (BOMB), B0949.

want to point out again the gravity of the situation."[68] In fact, the bridge had sustained major damage but remained sturdy enough to provide one more night of service to the Germans, permitting the further evacuation of vehicles and artillery pieces.[69] But the increasing air attacks on the bridge and the advance of the Allies to the gates of Neuf-Brisach had sealed the fate of the Breisach crossing.

Just after midnight on February 5, 3d Infantry Division's 7th Infantry Regiment began an attack on Volgelsheim, just east of Neuf-Brisach. Powerful searchlights pierced the darkness as U.S. and German troops struggled for control of the town. The Germans fought desperately but buckled and began to fall back. Though fighting would carry on well into the next day, U.S. troops were now less than a mile from the river crossing point. With its loss now a certainty, in the early hours of February 5, German engineers detonated carefully placed explosive charges, blasting the colossal rail bridge and the road bridge into the chilly depths of the Rhine. At 5:30 p.m., a company of U.S. troops accompanied by four tanks barged through to the French terminus of the road bridge and confirmed that both bridges had been demolished. Two other companies and three tank destroyers rolled past them and cut off the former rail bridge terminus, sealing off the western side of the river.[70]

While 3d Infantry Division cleared Volgelsheim and invested the river crossing zone, other Allied ground forces continued their advance. They had to do so without air support, for harsh weather once again prevented almost all aerial activity on February 5. To choke off the enemy's main escape routes after taking Colmar, Brig. Gen. Norman D. Cota's U.S. 28th Infantry Division moved south of the city and seized Herrlisheim-près-Colmar and Saint Croix en-Plaine, where USAAF and French P–47s had ravaged German convoys fleeing Colmar three days earlier, and smaller towns along the main roads running to the south.[71] This advance put elements of the northern Allied pincer less than six miles from Ensisheim, which the French I Corps had encircled but not yet wrested from the Germans. While Cota's troops prepared to turn east and join the push toward the Rhine, a battalion of the U.S. 12th Armored Division, which de Lattre had been holding in reserve, passed through their lines and headed south to Rouffach, where they would link up with elements of the French I Corps, bypassing the bottleneck at Ensisheim. When its tanks finally

68. Army Grp G, "Mitgehörte Sprache mit OB, Chef, und Ia," Feb 4, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191841–7191842.

69. Army Grp G, "Mitgehörte Sprache mit OB, Chef, und Ia," Feb 5, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191869.

70. 3d Inf Div, Ops Rpt, Feb 1945, AFHRA, 585.03, C5139; Ulrich Boeyng, "Die Badischen Rheinbrücken—Das Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs vor 75 Jahren: Teil 1—Die Zerstörung der Rheinbrücken zwischen Neuenburg und Wintersdorf," *Denkmalpflege in Baden-Württemburg* 49:2 (June 2020): 90, https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/ nbdpfbw/issue/ view/5134.

71. 28th Inf Div, Unit Rpt No. 8, AFHRA, 585.028, C5136.

The Wreckage of the Breisach Bridge. **The Germans demolished the Breisach bridge after the fall of Neuf-Brisach to prevent it from falling into Allied hands, trapping thousands of their own troops on the west banks of the Rhine.** *National Archives.*

reached Rouffach, the western half of the pocket would be completely cut off. With their chances of escape dwindling, the Germans not yet caught in the trap withdrew to the east. Confident that the U.S. XXI Corps and French II Corps held the advantage at the Breisach crossing, on the afternoon of February 5, de Lattre directed French I Corps to swing the bulk of its forces east to cut off the river crossing at Chalampé.[72]

Early on the morning of February 6, Neuf-Brisach fell to 3d Infantry Division. Despite the heavy fighting needed to clear the Germans out of Biesheim and Volgelsheim, the long-dreaded siege of the walled fortress itself never took place. After convincing a local to show them the way through the outer defenses, a single platoon overwhelmed a skeleton force of just seventy-six defenders, who unsurprisingly offered little resistance after being abandoned by their officers, who had ordered them to stay behind and fight to the death.[73] When a flight of 50th Fighter Group's P–47s arrived over Breisach at 8:40 a.m., they looked down to find that the rail bridge was now unserviceable, with its east span dropped into the river. Their reports were confirmed by USAAF and French reconnaissance flights later in the day.[74] Although the Breisach crossing had been lost, the evacuation of Nineteenth Army elements that could make it to a barge, ferry, or the Neuenburg bridge continued. By this time, Hausser and his staff had all but ignored Hitler's order to fight to the last man in the Colmar Pocket,

72. 6th Army Grp, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-0.2, Box 1301, 17.

73. 3d Inf Div, "The Capture of Neuf Brisach," Feb 28, 1945, AFHRA, 585.03, C5139.

74. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 6–7, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

and Army Group G had already issued plans to relocate and reconstitute Nineteenth Army's divisions in Germany after withdrawal.[75] But a final authorization from Hitler himself allowing Rasp to evacuate his shattered army would not come until the afternoon of February 8. By then, it was too late for most of the frontline troops to make their way to a viable escape route.[76] Those who remained squeezed into the remnants of the salient would have to choose to fight on without hope of relief or surrender.

Although Nineteenth Army had been able to drag out the defense of the Colmar Pocket for more than two weeks, its fate had been sealed much earlier. After the war, Colonel Brandstädter, the army's chief of staff, assessed the causes that led to the collapse of the Colmar Pocket in the face of the Allied pincer assault. First and foremost, like the rest of the Wehrmacht in early 1945, Nineteenth Army was desperately short of personnel. At several points along the German lines ringing the pocket, the defenders could man only strongpoints blocking the main avenues they thought the Allies would take, rather than hold a steady perimeter along the line. Nineteenth Army had "no reserves whatsoever," and personnel shortages forced Rasp and his commanders to reinforce against Allied penetrations by moving troops from sectors considered less at risk. Nor did the Germans have adequate armor and artillery support. While German tanks were on the whole superior to those employed by the Allies, and the appearance of just one or two panzers during an engagement could result in tactical reverses and delays, the defense of the southern edge of the pocket resulted in the early committal of the scant German armored reserves. Although Rasp's troops received artillery support from guns stationed across the Rhine, the batteries in the pocket were severely understrength, and at times individual guns were allotted only two to four rounds per day. Even the ability to provide adequate stocks of machine guns and small arms for individual soldiers in tactical units was not a given. Nineteenth Army already faced grievous deficiencies in manpower and materiel before Operation Cheerful began, and these only became worse as Allied air power began to hammer the lines of communication on both sides of the Rhine. Not only was there little fuel to transport men and equipment, but the "the crushing superiority of the enemy fighter bombers in the air" prevented any systematic attempt at reinforcement and resupply, especially during the last days of the operation.[77]

The end was near. From this point on, the main targeting priority of the provisional air force in the pocket became German forces moving

75. Army Grp G to Nineteenth Army, et al., Msg Ia 570/45, Feb 5, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191859.

76. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 556–58.

77. Brandstädter, "Defensive Battle," 42–44. Brandstädter also cited terrain, especially the mountainous topography of the Vosges and the barrier posed by the Rhine River, and weather as a challenge, but these were limiting factors for the Allies as well.

to the Neuenburg bridge, attempting to prevent their withdrawal; or, if this could not be accomplished, to make their retreat a dangerous and disorderly one.[78] To minimize interference from the air, the Germans conducted their river crossing operations under cover of night, employing small watercraft, pontoon bridges, and other temporary expedients.[79] This tactic exposed a weakness in the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s force structure, for it had only a single squadron of British-built Bristol Beaufighters serving as radar-equipped night fighters. The 415th Night Fighter Squadron had only a small number of these ungainly twin-engine aircraft, originally secured through the Reverse Lend-Lease equipment transfer program when the USAAF's efforts to develop its own night fighter ran into delays.[80] The loss of even one of these aircraft, as happened with a landing accident on the night of February 3, was keenly felt. With no more than nine Beaufighters operational at any time during the Colmar Pocket operation, the Allies had little ability to conduct moonlight intruder patrols to attack German units moving east across the river.[81] Even when weather permitted night fighter missions during the German withdrawal, they were usually directed against targets in the German rear lines, rather than the rich opportunity offered by traffic running to and from the two main rail bridges and the ferry docks.

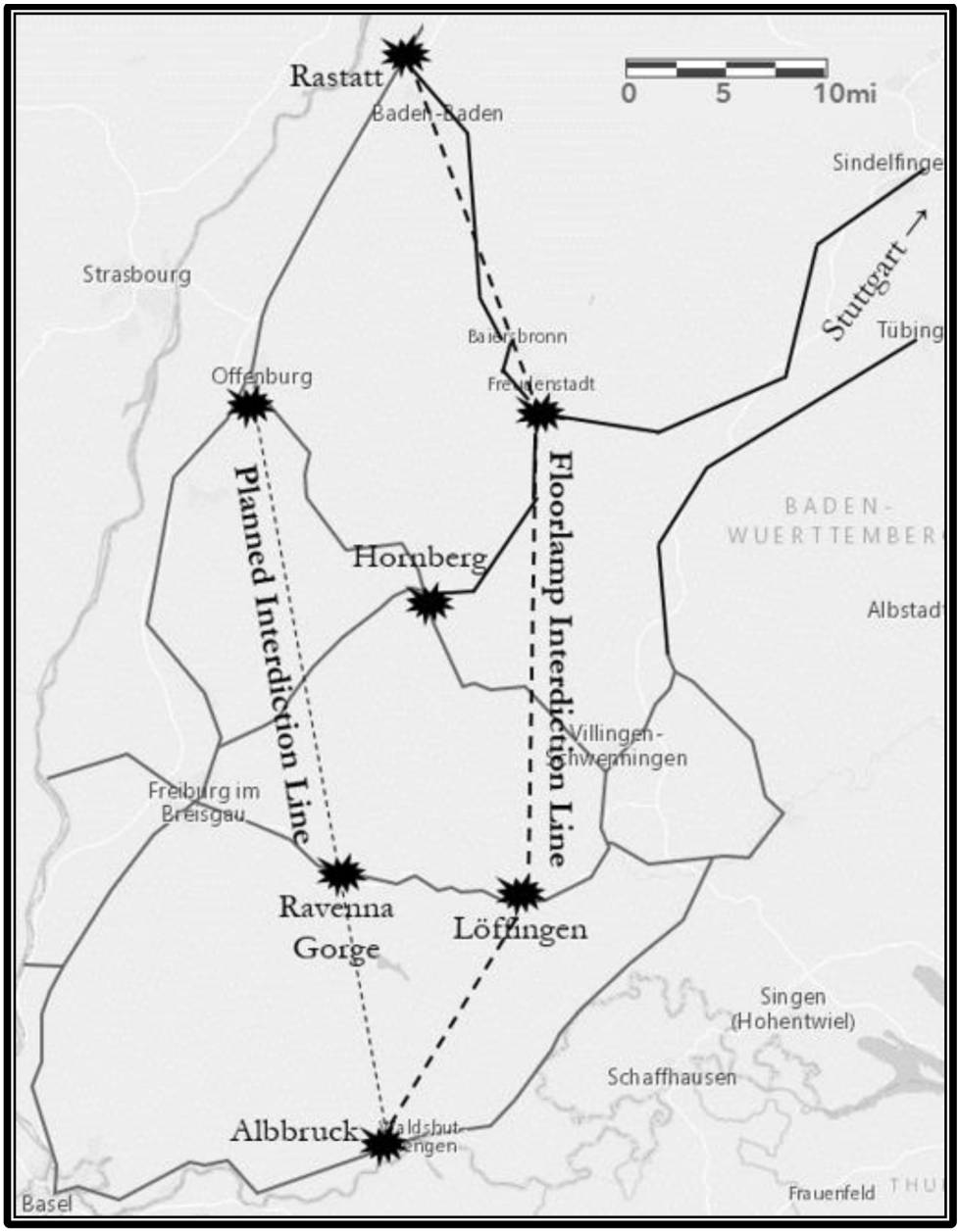
Whatever its limitations during the hours of darkness, the provisional air force continued its dominance in the skies over and behind the Colmar Pocket. With the Breisach bridge now lost, the German forces still in Alsace found themselves compressed into a shrinking perimeter between Neuf-Brisach and Mulhuasen, with the Neuenburg bridge serving as their sole source of sustainment and retreat. Confident that the situation west of the Rhine was in hand, U.S. and French airmen could direct the weight of their efforts to attacks on German lines of communication across the river. While fighter-bombers would continue to pound the Germans still holding what was left of their once-daunting salient, the final days of Operation Cheerful would bring further destruction and disruption to the rails and roads on the German side of the Rhine.

78. Selko interview.

79. Ibid.

80. For the USAAF's difficulties in developing its own night fighters, see Stephen L. McFarland, *Conquering the Night: Army Air Forces Night Fighters at War* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1998).

81. Stat. Ctrl., USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, 17–18; ASC, 1 TACAF, "American Units Operational Maintenance Proficiency," Apr 1945, AFHRA, 550.84, C5034; Selko interview.



Operation Floorlamp, February 1945

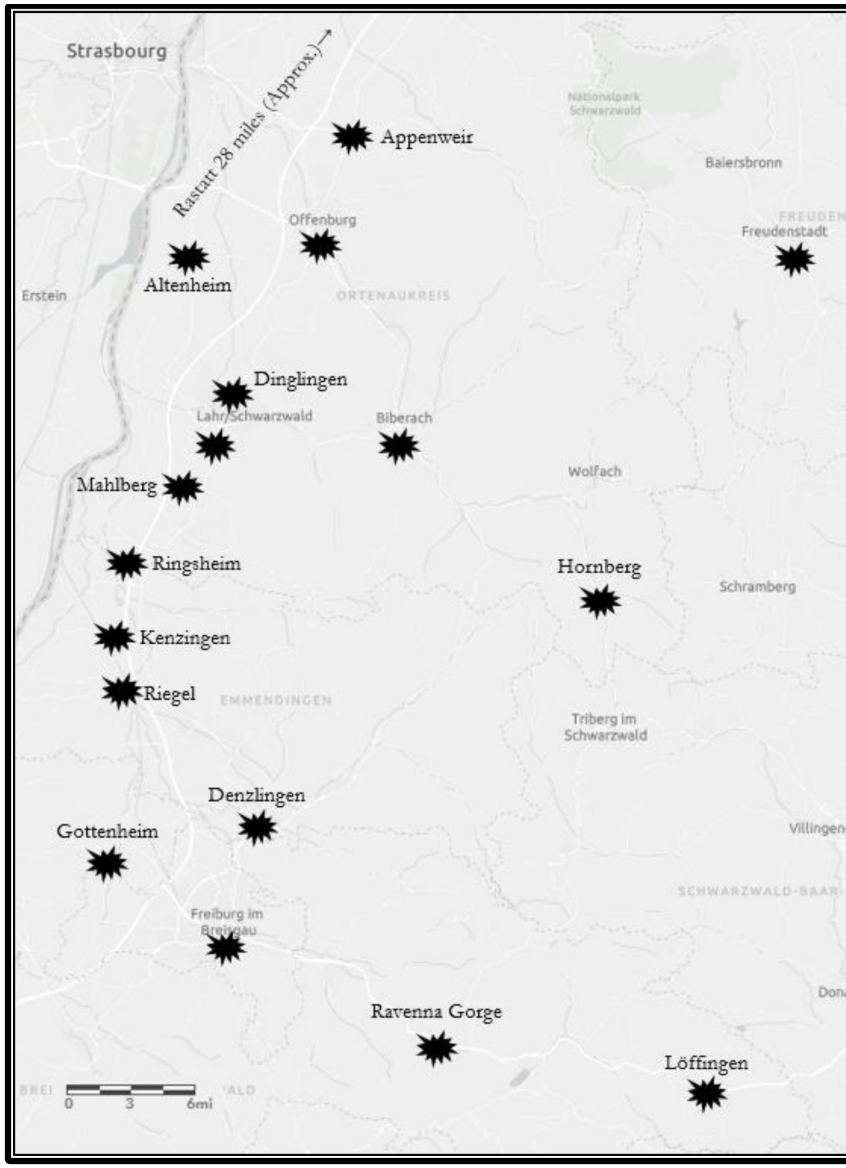
SEVEN

Air Operations February 6–9, 1945

While the provisional air force continued to harry the remnants of Nineteenth Army still in the Colmar Pocket, after February 5, U.S. and French airmen shifted their attention toward targets across the Rhine, hoping to prevent the Germans from relocating and reorganizing the battle-weary units that had already been withdrawn. To this end, while continuing strikes to disrupt rail lines leading north and east from Freiburg, the provisional air force planned a series of attacks against rails and bridges deeper in German territory, an effort code named Floorlamp. If effective, these strikes would prevent the Germans from moving their evacuated forces to the north, where they could reinforce the front facing Lt. Gen. Alexander Patch's U.S. Seventh Army, or to safety deeper in the Black Forest.

Planning for Operation Floorlamp began in earnest on February 3. Brig. Gen. Glenn Barcus, Brig. Gen. Gordon Saville's replacement as commander of XII Tactical Air Command, received preliminary intelligence estimates that Nineteenth Army had already evacuated most of its forces, leaving only 7,000 combat-effective troops on the west side of the Rhine. At the time Barcus received these estimates, the provisional air force was planning a series of concentrated fighter-bomber strikes against rail targets along a north-south axis sixty-two miles long between Offenburg and Albbruck, near the Swiss border. The center of the interdiction zone was Ravenna Gorge, which lay just south of the town of Breitnau on the rail line between Freiburg and Neustadt. The main target there was a large viaduct rail bridge that spanned the deep gorge that cut through the mountains there, making it an ideal chokepoint for rail traffic running between the two cities and points further east.

Believing that the current plan would fail to impede the movements of German troops that had already escaped the pocket, Barcus suggested to



Interdiction Strikes against the Freiburg Rail Lines, February 6–9, 1945

Saville that the provisional air force consider conducting a series of strikes against an "outer system" of rail junctions at five locations. Albbruck still demarcated the southern edge of the proposed interdiction zone, which now included Rastatt, Freudenstadt, and Löffingen. Stretching thirty miles further north and forty miles further east, the central point of

Floorlamp's outer zone was Hornberg, a stop on the line running southeast from Offenburg roughly twenty-two miles north of the Ravenna Gorge bridge, the center of the originally planned interdiction zone. The usual targets in the inner zone, especially the rail line between Freiburg and Offenburg, could still be struck as planned—if enough were taken out the Germans would at least be forced to conduct foot marches to other rail stations farther out—but Barcus "urgently" recommended to Saville that these five sites receive the highest targeting priority for the provisional air force's fighter-bombers. In addition, the added sites were to be designated as alternate targets for the medium bombers should they be able to get aloft in the coming days.[1] The plan received Saville's concurrence, and the provisional air force widened its aerial net over Nineteenth Army's evacuation routes.

February 6 began with an interdiction strike to close off any rail traffic running for safety away from the German side of the Breisach crossing. Early that morning, after visually confirming the destruction of the rail bridge, fourteen of 50th Fighter Group's P–47s dive-bombed Breisach and its marshaling yard, pelting the area with twenty quarter-ton general-purpose bombs that destroyed two buildings and tore up the rail line heading east out of the town. The Thunderbolts also performed a number of strafing runs over roads and rails in the area, destroying a tank, five trucks, and a horse-drawn cart and damaging a dozen boxcars before heading back to their base at Ochey.[2]

While the Breisach raid took place, Operation Floorlamp, the expanded interdiction program, was about to begin. A dozen Thunderbolts from 358th Fighter Group were on their way to Rastatt, the northern point of the provisional air force's extended interdiction zone, after failing to find favorable weather over their primary target. Once the aircraft arrived at 8:55 a.m., they released two dozen 1,000-pound semi-armor-piercing bombs—munitions specifically designed to penetrate steel and concrete targets—during repeated attacks on a rail bridge and marshaling yard in the city. Despite the sizable expenditure of specialized ordnance, the P–47s only damaged the bridge with several near misses, but the strike managed to tear up the rail line running over the bridge and a small marshaling yard abutting it. One Thunderbolt was hit by flak during the raid, and another sustained severe damage as the result of a landing accident after returning to Toul, but both pilots escaped injuries.[3]

While the Rastatt strike wrought only moderate damage to its intended target, other USAAF fighter-bombers found greater success farther south.

1. XII TAC to 1 TACAF, Msg E636A, Feb 3, 1945. AFHRA, 549.322K, C5031.
2. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 6–7, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
3. Ibid.

Twelve more of the 358th's fighter-bombers, along with thirty-six of 371st Fighter Group's, performed armed reconnaissance over the roads and rail lines running south and east from Offenburg, bombing and strafing anything moving below as they scoured the twenty-five miles stretching between Offenburg and the center of the new interdiction zone at Hornberg. In just an hour between roughly 8:30 and 9:30 a.m., the P–47 pilots claimed to have destroyed two locomotives, seventeen railcars, and sixteen motorized vehicles, while leaving another twenty locomotives, eighty-six railcars, and twenty-four trucks wrecked or burning behind them. The price for this heavy toll of enemy road and rail traffic, which was accompanied by at least seventeen holes blasted into the railroads and damage to two rail bridges, was just two of the 371st's fighter-bombers, both lost, as was the 358th's, to landing mishaps from which their pilots walked away safely.[4] By late morning, XII Tactical Air Command had devastated rail and road movements and, at least for the short term, paralyzed the northwestern half of the rail network running through the Black Forest between Offenburg and Donaueschingen.

Other USAAF fighter-bombers hit communications targets in German territory, but by mid-morning, deteriorating meteorological conditions made operations difficult. The 324th Fighter Group put twenty-two Thunderbolts into the air between 9:00 and 9:35 a.m. but increasingly cloudy conditions forced their recall before they reached their targets. One of the returning fighter-bombers sustained major damage during a crash landing, but yet again, the fortunate pilot emerged from the mishap uninjured. Ten other P–47s launched later in the morning failed to make contact with their air controller and, lacking a specified target, headed to Altenheim, a small town west of Offenburg, which they pummeled at 10 a.m. with general-purpose and incendiary munitions, razing a dozen buildings. The aircraft returned to base around the same time as the fighter-bombers that had raided the rail lines further east, and once the last Thunderbolt touched down at 10:45 a.m., XII Tactical Air Command ceased flight operations for the day, save for a few reconnaissance flights, as bad weather set in once again.[5]

While the provisional air force's USAAF units struck the German rear lines, its French elements concentrated their efforts to block German road and river traffic heading to or from the Neuenburg crossing. The First French Air Corps mounted eighty-three fighter-bomber sorties on February 6 after two early weather sorties confirmed safe flying conditions over their bases. Forty-seven of these sorties were flown by the 3. Group which,

4. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 37, Feb 5–6, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032; 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 6–7, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

5. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 37, Feb 5–6, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

in accordance with the French I Corps' new operational priority, made repeated attacks on the river crossing between Chalampé and Neuenburg. Eight of the group's P–47s attempted to dive-bomb a ferry being used to evacuate German troops after reaching the crossing at Blodelsheim, just to the north of Chalampé. Four of their bombs fell harmlessly into the river, but ten near misses caused severe damage to a nearby pontoon bridge. The Thunderbolts then strafed a convoy spotted nearby, destroying or damaging five vehicles, and returned to the river, intending to hit the ferry again. When they arrived, they found the ferry had Red Cross markings, suggesting that it was serving as a waterborne ambulance at the time, so they left it unmolested. Air controllers vectored in two more flights to Blodelsheim during the day, and the third and last finally resulted in two direct hits on the by-then unmarked ferry, putting it out of commission. The 3. Group's Thunderbolts also made strikes across the Rhine to hamper ground traffic moving on the roads out of Neuenburg, flattening the town center of Schliengen, four miles to the south, with a dozen bombs, and leaving a crossroads five miles north of Neuenburg unserviceable after blasting it with sixteen bombs.[6] Both of these targets received a second pounding for good measure by the Thunderbolts of the French 4. Group later in the day after two flights of their fighter-bombers found their primary targets obscured by cloud cover. The group also paid Blodelsheim its fourth visit of the day, although this time the Thunderbolts concentrated their attacks on the town and port facilities rather than watercraft. A few French fighter-bombers also ranged across the Rhine to tie up traffic heading out of Breisach and Freiburg, hitting rail lines and roads and destroying or damaging dozens of vehicles with strafing runs.[7] Weather conditions began to deteriorate as the hours passed, and the last French fighter-bomber returned to base late in the afternoon, ending aerial operations for the day. Although the efforts of the USAAF and French Thunderbolts had been curtailed, both of Nineteenth Army's corps headquarters reported that "vigorous Jabo activity" had complemented the battering their forces took from Allied artillery during the day.[8]

Clouds and rain grounded most of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s aircraft again the next day (February 7), save for a few French tactical and weather reconnaissance sorties, preventing them from continuing to bottle up the retreat from the Colmar Pocket.[9] Though hindered by the lack of air support on the 7th, the Allied advance on the

6. Ibid.; Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 216–17.

7. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 217–18.

8. Army Grp G, Evening Rept, Feb 6, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191878.

9. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 38, Feb 6–7, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032; 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

ground continued to squeeze the Germans into an ever-shrinking salient. With no formal retreat authorization in sight, Lt. Gen. Siegfried Rasp's troops now sought only to hold the Neuenburg Bridge for as long as possible. By this time, the U.S. 28th and 75th Infantry Divisions had crossed the Rhone-Rhine Canal and occupied the western banks of the Rhine, and the French 2d Armored Division pushed through the southern suburbs of Neuf-Brisach. When they reached Fessenheim, they met up with elements of the French I Corps, finally completing the pincer movement envisioned by the planners of Operation Cheerful.[10] The closure of the pincer had come later and farther south than planned, but all that now remained was to clear the Germans out of the Harth Forest and close the last six miles to the Neuenburg bridge.

Across the Rhine, trains ran both ways on rails, and roads heading out of the area were choked with foot and vehicle traffic as the Germans attempted to move troops, tanks, and equipment to safer quarters. By this time, parts of three of Nineteenth Army's divisions had been, as Army Group G phrased it, "detached from the bridgehead," regardless of the repeated orders to hold the line in Alsace, and were trying to reorganize along the German banks of the Rhine.[11] Trains began to run in greater numbers between Freiburg and Offenburg, and later from Offenburg to stations farther north and east, suggesting to 6th Army Group's intelligence staff that the Germans were attempting to facilitate a "speedy evacuation" from the area across the river from their tenuous enclave in Alsace. But south of Offenburg, the cumulative effects of repeated air attacks complicated attempts to conduct an orderly withdrawal. The devastation Allied air strikes had wrought along the rails running eastward between Freiburg and Donaueschingen forced the Germans to resort to motor transport as the main means to convey retreating troops and materiel from Breisach and Neuenburg to points deeper in the Black Forest.[12]

The air assault resumed in full once again on February 8. As usual, the provisional air force's fighter-bombers began operations shortly after daybreak, which unfortunately for the Germans brought almost an entire day of clear flying weather. Enemy activity in the U.S. Seventh Army's sector north of the Colmar Pocket was, in comparison to recent weeks, fairly limited save for a few hot spots north of Strasbourg, meaning that the provisional air force could throw the weight of effort against the rail and road networks used to conduct the withdrawal and reorganization of

10. G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rept, Feb 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308.
11. Army Grp G, Daily Rept, Feb 7, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191905.
12. G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 21, Feb 10, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

Nineteenth Army.[13] By end of the day, XII Tactical Air Command had flown 374 fighter-bomber sorties, along with 110 other sorties associated with other types of missions, and the First French Air Corps added 134 fighter-bomber, fighter, and reconnaissance sorties.[14] The majority of these were directed against German lines of communication and other transportation targets near the east bank of the Rhine in an attempt to harass and impede the withdrawal and repositioning of German forces fleeing from the Colmar Pocket. And finally, after days of inaction other than Maj. Robert Michaud's wildcat raid on the Neuenburg bridge, 42d Bombardment Wing was able to resume interdiction missions against rail targets in the German rear lines.

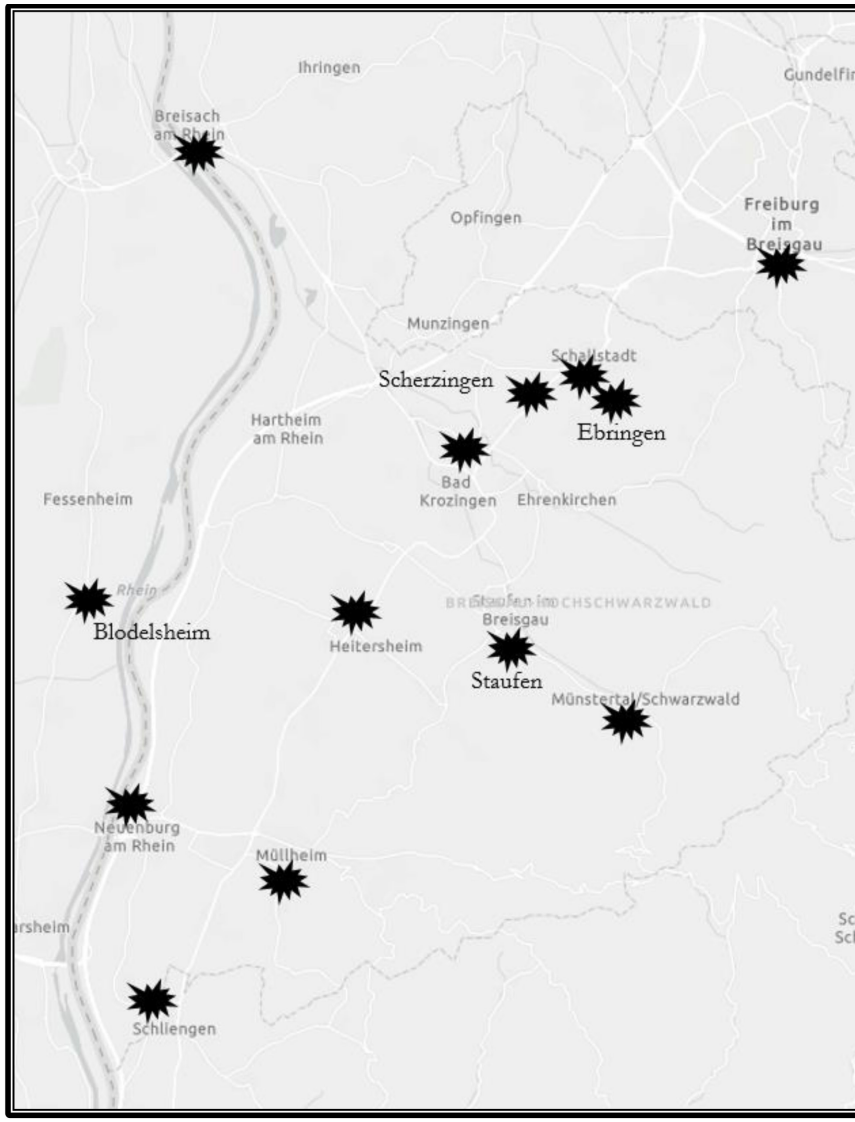
It would prove to be a busy day for the provisional air force, which assigned priority targeting to the lines of communication leading first north out of Neuenburg to Freiburg; from Freiburg to the north to Offenburg and to the east toward Donaueschingen; and those heading north from Offenburg to Rastatt. In accordance with the plan for Floorlamp, strikes also took place against rails and bridges close enough to the Swiss border to draw fire from antiaircraft gunners eager to defend their nation's neutrality.[15] As the central hub of the rail and road network in the area behind the Colmar Pocket, Freiburg and nearby towns bore the brunt of the aerial assault.

Attacks against the German lines of communication began shortly after daylight, when a dozen of 371st Fighter Group's Thunderbolts attempted to drop the Neuenburg bridge, now the sole remaining permanent bridge sustaining the Colmar Pocket. Arriving at 8:10 a.m., they released two dozen 500-pound bombs over the target in the course of half an hour. German antiaircraft gunners managed to hit one of the attacking P–47s, but it remained stubbornly aloft. After returning from the raid, the pilots claimed to have hit the approaches on both sides of the bridge and cut the railroad running across it. In addition to two near misses on the center of the span, they also thought they had scored a direct hit that had sent the span on the French side crashing into the river below. This claim later proved to be inaccurate, for the bridge remained standing until the next morning. Other than this early-morning raid, the river crossing area between Chalampé and Neuenburg was passed over in preference for other targets lying behind it until late in the afternoon, when sixteen

13. G-3, 6th Army Grp, After Action Rept, Feb 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308; G-2, 6th Army Grp, Weekly Int Sum No. 21, Feb 10, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-2.15, Box 1308.

14. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

15. Army Grp G, Daily Rept, Feb 8, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191925. Neither USAAF nor German records document any damage done to Allied aircraft by Swiss action.



Interdiction Strikes South of Freiburg, February 6–9, 1945

Thunderbolts strafed and damaged four barges being used to evacuate German troops and equipment shortly after 4 p.m.[16]

As part of the attacks dedicated to stopping the flow of troops and vehicles out of Neuenburg, the small German town of Staufen, eight

16. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

miles northwest of the river crossing, received a merciless pounding from USAAF and French fighter-bombers throughout the early hours of February 8. Nestled in the foothills of the mountains rising from the Rhine plain, Staufen served as an entry point for rail and road traffic heading eastward into the interior of the Black Forest. The town had yet to be attacked during Operation Cheerful, but that day its roads were packed with German vehicles and armor, making it an ideal target for the provisional air force's Thunderbolts. Stafuen's ordeal began shortly before 10 a.m., after sixteen of 50th Fighter Group's P–47s failed to identify any suitable targets in what was left of the Colmar Pocket. Given permission by their air controller to cross the river, they ranged over the area north of Neuenburg, searching for German movements and troop concentrations.[17] After bombing rail facilities in two towns in the foothills east of the main road between Neuenburg and Freiburg—Schallstadt, six miles to the north of Staufen, and Müllheim, six miles to its south—the flight headed to Staufen and dove in to attack after observing that its streets were "jammed with armored vehicles, tanks, M/T [motorized transports] (bumper to bumper)" and spotting at least thirty tanks pooled in the town center. The first attack on Staufen was limited to strafing runs, albeit effective ones that destroyed a truck and damaged nine others and a tank.[18] But more Thunderbolts were on the way, and they would soon unleash far greater destruction.

Reports that German armored and motorized vehicles were concentrated in Staufen spread swiftly. At 11:15 a.m., 50th Fighter Group sent sixteen more P–47s to the town, but this time it was the flight's primary target. Covering the eighty-five miles from Ochey to Staufen in just fifteen minutes, the Thunderbolts were welcomed with intense antiaircraft fire from heavy-caliber guns defending the town. The German gunners hit one of the Thunderbolts but failed to bring it down, and the fighter-bombers pressed their attack, sending two dozen 500-pound general-purpose bombs hurtling to the streets below. Three of the bombs were near misses, but the remainder landed squarely in the center of the town, leveling dozens of buildings and starting fires that swept through the streets. Heavy flak prevented the pilots from flying low enough to see if they had hit any of the tanks and traffic moving through the town, but they estimated that they had flattened at least eighty buildings before heading east to strike rails and roads deeper in the Black Forest.[19] After completing their raid, the pilots reported that Staufen still remained a "good target," ensuring that the town would receive little respite in the coming hours. By the time they landed at 12:55 p.m., another sixteen Thunderbolts were already on

17. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
18. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
19. Ibid.

their way from Ochey to Staufen. They dropped six more tons of general-purpose bombs on the burning town at 12:30 p.m.[20] Concentrating on the western side of the village, this third air raid destroyed a large oil tank, adding its flaming contents to the conflagrations already raging through the streets. The pilots also claimed to have knocked down fifty buildings and damaged thirty more. They estimated that at least half of the town had been razed or consumed by flames and sped away to strafe road and rail traffic north of Freiburg, where their targets included a train carrying motorized transports, damaging at least a dozen of the trucks and destroying the locomotive conveying them.[21]

After 50th Fighter Group's P–47s departed Staufen for Freiburg, they were replaced over the town by a dozen more from 371st Fighter Group. They had taken off at 12:55 p.m. for a mission against a rail bridge in Offenburg, but their air controller directed them instead to hit the armor and vehicles congregated in and near Staufen.[22] Finding the target area blanketed by smoke rising from the inferno below, they released thirty-six general purpose bombs, all of which the pilots believed hit the town, but this estimate could not be confirmed because of limited visibility. They then patrolled the roads leading east and north of the burning town, racking up an impressive tally of claims: a supply dump and nine motorized transports destroyed, and damage caused to three tanks, three antiaircraft positions, nine trucks, and a horse-drawn vehicle. Three Thunderbolts suffered major damage from antiaircraft fire over the course of the mission, but all twelve of the sturdily built fighter-bombers brought their pilots safely back to their base at Tantonville.[23]

Twenty minutes after 371st Fighter Group's P–47s started their attack, French Thunderbolts of the 3. Group took off for Staufen, looking to add to the havoc there. For a third time in less than four hours, the town received another salvo of two dozen 500-pound bombs—this time evenly divided between general-purpose and incendiary munitions—that ravaged the residential center and rail yard.[24] After concluding the strike, the pilots received a report that a French reconnaissance flight had spotted a convoy headed to Freiburg but failed to find it before heading back to base. Other 3. Group fighter-bombers conducted strikes near Staufen during the day, bombing a crossroads southeast of the town after failing to hit their assigned target in Münstertal, some three miles deeper in the Black Forest, and strafing a convoy of eight motorized vehicles at Heitersheim, just to

20. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
21. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
22. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
23. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
24. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

the north. The results of the bombing attack were inconclusive, and after the dozen Thunderbolts that executed the strafing run returned, their flight leader berated his pilots for the lack of tactical discipline he had observed during their attacks.[25]

The intensity and frequency of the previous raids ensured that the ineffectiveness of this final attack was of little tactical consequence. By mid-afternoon of February 8, Allied fighter-bombers had dropped at least 108 500-pound bombs, both general-purpose and incendiary, on Staufen. This represented some twenty-seven tons' worth of munitions expended over a town whose current boundaries encompass less than nine square miles. After the war, a history of the city of Staufen described the air raids as a "catastrophe" that claimed the lives of fifty-one citizens and twenty-eight soldiers and destroyed fifty-two buildings and damaged more than 300 others.[26] Despite their human and architectural cost, the cumulative effects of the air raids were devastatingly effective in military terms. German armor, vehicle, and troop movement had already become severely congested before the attacks, and with the town still blazing well into the night, the aerial assault had left it a chokepoint unusable for German forces hoping to flee from the banks of the Rhine.

The repeated bombing attacks that ravaged Staufen represented the most intense application of air power in the rear lines of the Colmar Pocket on February 8. Accompanying it were numerous smaller strikes against roads, rails, and traffic caught on them between Neuenburg and Freiburg. Most of these took place in mid-afternoon and were carried out by both USAAF and French Thunderbolts. Shortly before 3 p.m., Allied fighter-bombers began a series of bombing and strafing attacks in a triangular area anchored by Staufen to the east, Heitersheim to the south, and Freiburg to the north. Two flights of 50th Fighter Group's P–47s arrived over the area, with sixteen heading for the town of Bad Krözingen, roughly in the middle of the triangle's long side, where they dropped twenty-three bombs on the town center and its rail yard to the west. The resulting explosions cut the rail in two places and destroyed ten buildings. Twenty vehicles were spotted in the city streets before the attack, and the pilots claimed that they had destroyed four and damaged the remainder. A dozen of 50th Fighter Group's Thunderbolts swept the area to the north of Bad Krözingen, first bombing the rail yard at Scherzingen, where the pilots had identified twenty railcars. The bombardment tore up the railroad, destroyed six of the railcars in the yard, and left eight others damaged.

25. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 219.

26. See "Staufen: The History of the City," https://www.staufen.de/unsere+stadt/stadtgeschichte. The section on the bombing raids of February 8, 1945, mentions only attacks by French aircraft and not the USAAF attacks that preceded and followed those conducted by the First French Air Corps.

The fighter-bombers then proceeded two miles south to Bad Krözingen to strafe enemy road traffic, destroying four motorized and one horse-drawn vehicle and damaging four trucks. Throughout the raids, the Thunderbolts faced volleys from heavy antiaircraft guns positioned along the eight-mile stretch of railway that ran south from Freiburg to Bad Krözingen. The firing damaged two of the attackers, one severely and one less so, but once again, the pilots managed to keep their rugged Thunderbolts aloft and under control until they landed back at Ochey.[27]

Eight French P–47s arrived in the area about the same time as their USAAF counterparts. These French fighter-bombers had launched shortly after 2 p.m., with several of the pilots lightening their aircraft by releasing a number of general-purpose and fragmentation bombs at the end of the runway after experiencing difficulties getting their ships airborne. Although their striking power was reduced, the pilots pressed on and bombed a crossroads at Heitersheim to the south of Bad Krözingen at 2:50 p.m. They then turned east to strafe the road leading out of the town into the Black Forest, catching and destroying two trucks and blocking the road with debris in at least three places. The pilots observed USAAF Thunderbolts conducting other ground strikes nearby before passing over a number of towns in flames from the clearing operations taking place south of Neuf-Brisach while on their way to back to base.[28] Seven of their group mates arrived over the area roughly two hours later, having been sent to attack a barracks identified near Scherzingen. However, the pilots searched in vain for the target and realized after spotting it some two miles to the northwest at Ebringen that their preflight briefing had been informed by flawed intelligence. The Thunderbolts closed in and attacked with general-purpose and fragmentation bombs. The latter were of little use against structures, but the pilots claimed the destruction of ten buildings during the bombing run. Again, the attackers experienced accurate antiaircraft fire, and four of the seven pilots found themselves nursing damaged fighter-bombers back to base.[29]

Further to the north, Freiburg and a number of nearby towns found their roads and rails under constant attack throughout the day on February 8. At 8:15 a.m., P–47s of 358th Fighter Group—which was unusually active in supporting operations in the First French Army's sector during the day, as opposed to its usual weight of effort being dedicated in the U.S. Seventh Army's sector—made the first of two raids on the viaduct over Ravenna Gorge, one of the primary targets identified by XII Tactical Air Command in the plans for Operation Floorlamp. The 358th's fighter-bombers scored

27. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
28. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 220.
29. Ibid., 221.

at least one direct hit on the bridge in the first raid with a 1,000-pound semi-armor-piercing bomb, and a second attack at midday blasted several additional cuts into the rails on both sides of the crossing to those caused earlier.[30] While the morning strike at Ravenna Gorge was taking place, twenty-five P–47s of the 50th and 371st Fighter Groups arrived over Riegel. The loss of the Breisach bridge had resulted in a drop in rail traffic to and from that point, but Riegel's rail line to Freiburg remained active. The 371st Fighter Group's flight, numbering eleven fighter-bombers, first hit the rail yard at Riegel, damaging the yard and destroying the locomotive of a train preparing to head south with two direct hits. The aircraft then conducted a six-mile-long patrol up the railway to the north, bombing rail junctions at Kenzingen and Ringsheim. The rails at both targets sustained damage, and the Thunderbolts shot up a train at the Ringsheim rail yard. On their way to Riegel, one of 50th Fighter Group's fighter-bombers suffered engine trouble, resulting in the pilot's harrowing escape from a fiery belly landing south of Nancy, but the remainder pressed on. After reaching the target, they pounced on a train headed south from the Riegel yard, pounding it with twenty 500-pound bombs and following up with a strafing run for good measure. The pilots claimed two direct hits on the train and thought they had damaged the locomotive and all ten of the railcars it was pulling, as well as the railway itself.[31]

Two more flights of 50th Fighter Group's P–47s worked over the Riegel rail yard during the morning. The first, arriving at 9 a.m., destroyed a locomotive and fifteen of the twenty cars connected to it before it could escape southward before heading north to tear up the rails leading to Kenzingen.[32] The second arrived an hour and twenty minutes later. The Thunderbolts bombed the rail tracks once again and wrecked eight boxcars in the rail yard. Spotting vehicles moving "in all directions" to the northeast—many of them being towed, indicating shortages of fuel—the Thunderbolts swooped down on the roads between Lahr and Biberach for strafing runs, leaving the burning hulks of nine trucks. Reaching Biberach, they cut the railroad and destroyed eight boxcars in the town's marshaling yard with a pair of bombs and followed the rail line back west to Kenzingen for one last strike before returning to base.[33]

It had been a costly morning for German rolling stock and rail facilities north of Freiburg, with five trains already destroyed or mauled and considerable damage done to rail tracks and facilities by USAAF

30. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
31. Ibid. For the aircraft mishap, see 81 Fight Sqdn, "Pilot's Statement of Aircraft Accident," Feb 9, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-81-HI, A0760.
32. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
33. Ibid.

Thunderbolts. Fighter-bombers of the French 4. Group arrived in the area after noon to add to the destruction. At 11:40 a.m., a flight of a dozen French P–47s took off and headed for Freiburg. One experienced a propeller malfunction and had to turn back after releasing its ordnance, but the remaining eleven pressed on and hit the Freiburg marshaling yard with twenty-two 500-pound bombs, damaging two buildings and cutting the rails in at least three places.[34] The pilots also reported the destruction of two locomotives and thirty railcars, but these claims were not registered in the provisional air force's daily operational summary.[35] Having expended their bomb loads, the P–47s conducted strafing attacks on rolling stock in the area, damaging twenty-eight railcars in Freiburg and another ten at Mahlberg to the north. One fighter-bomber was hit by flak, but the damage incurred did not prevent the Thunderbolts from heading to newly liberated Colmar for a flyover of a military ceremony on their way back to base.[36] A second wave of French fighter-bombers arrived in the area shortly afterward to work over the Freiburg rail yard with "particularly accurate" bombing. Two dozen bombs hit the rail yard, destroying a dozen buildings and fifty railcars parked in the yard. The bombing also tore up the rails leading north from the yard and hit a nearby bridge. Like their groupmates, these Thunderbolts also flew low over Colmar as part of its liberation ceremonies. A third flight of French fighter-bombers failed to hit a rail bridge east of Freiburg at 12:30 p.m., bringing an end to the series of successful strikes by the First French Air Corps' 4. Group.[37]

Fighter-bomber strikes at Freiburg and points north continued throughout the afternoon of February 8. Shortly before 3 p.m., a flight of eight of 371st Fighter Group's P–47s arrived to strafe rail traffic after bombing the large fortress that dominated the German terminus of what was left of the Breisach bridge. Catching three different trains moving between Lahr and Offenburg, the pilots managed to damage several railcars with machine-gun fire before leaving the area.[38] Still more attacks followed, with two flights of 358th Fighter Group arriving to attack Denzlingen, a northern suburb of Freiburg, and finding the rail yard there packed with thirty to forty railcars. The first flight started an hour-long rampage at 3:40 p.m., beginning with a twenty-bomb strike on the Denzlingen marshaling yard that leveled five buildings and left approximately half of the railcars destroyed or damaged. The aircraft then headed west to the suburb of Gottenheim to hit another packed rail yard and a factory, which was

34. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 220.
35. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
36. Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 220.
37. Ibid.
38. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

apparently involved in vehicle production or repair, judging by a large ramp with fifteen vehicles parked tightly next to one another leading to it. Both targets sustained damage, and bombing and strafing destroyed or damaged all the vehicles parked on the ramp. The P–47s then took a course to the northwest toward Lahr that led them to a number of military targets, including a barracks complex of six buildings, two antiaircraft batteries, and two vehicle convoys, all of which received thorough strafing, as did two small towns along the Rhine, before the pilots turned west for home. By the time they left, their strafing spree had left five vehicles, four motorized and one horse-drawn, destroyed and five others damaged. The attacks on the antiaircraft batteries put one heavy gun out of commission and at least temporarily silenced three lighter pieces.[39]

While 358th Fighter Group's Thunderbolts were running loose west of Freiburg, a dozen P–47s of their group's 367th Fighter Squadron arrived over Denzlingen at 4 p.m. The fighter-bomber flight had headed out to attack the marshaling yard at Zweibrücken in the U.S. Seventh Army sector, but weather conditions prevented the aircraft from hitting their primary target. Released by the ground controller to conduct armed reconnaissance, the squadron headed south to Denzlingen to find its marshaling yard three-quarters full of locomotives and railcars. The Thunderbolts swooped down through heavy flak and pounded the rail yard with twenty 1,000-pound bombs, returning to strafe once they had expended their ordnance. Tank cars carrying fuel exploded from direct hits, and bombs that missed the rail yard spread fires in the buildings adjoining it. When they departed, the pilots estimated that they had destroyed twenty railcars with bombs and damaged another thirty with machine-gun rounds. One of the P–47s crashed while landing at Toul when its propeller gave out during the final approach, but its pilot walked away from the mishap.[40]

Around midday, 42d Bombardment Wing dispatched six waves of aircraft against transportation nodes behind the Rhine in hope of bottling up the German retreat across the river. Like most of the other bomber strikes carried out in the previous few weeks, cloudy conditions, mechanical failures, and errors ensured that most of their attacks did little to prevent the Germans from moving men and materiel within their rear lines. The first strike was a flight of twenty-five B–26s of the French 31st Bombardment Group, which departed shortly before 1 p.m. to follow up on the fighter-bomber attacks on the Freiburg rail yard. Three of the French bombers turned back before reaching the target, and after a two-and-a-half-hour flight, the remaining bombers were greeted by accurate

39. Ibid.
40. 367 Fght Sqdn, History, Feb 8, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-367-HI, A0787.

fire from heavy antiaircraft guns and the unwelcome presence of three Messerschmitt Bf 109s. The German fighters made an "unaggressive" pass at the bombers before scurrying away without inflicting any damage. The French bombers pelted the marshaling yard with 149 500-hundred-pound bombs before departing, but the raid went far from smoothly. Several bombs missed the rail yard completely, and twenty others remained hung on their bomb bay racks due to mechanical malfunctions. Making matters worse, a miscalculation by the lead bombardier forced seven bombers—almost a quarter of the entire strike force—to salvo their payloads ten miles away from the target. Shortly after the raid, a second wave of thirteen bombers sent out by 34th Bombardment Group arrived over Freiburg. German antiaircraft gunners, alerted by the arrival of the first attack, threw up a wall of heavy flak that claimed one of the French bombers. The stricken Marauder exploded in midair, and only one parachute was observed to emerge from the flaming wreckage as it fell earthward. The surviving bombers took evasive action and released more than twenty-three tons of bombs on the rail yard, without observable results, before returning to base.[41]

During the bomber raids on Freiburg, eleven Spitfires of the French 1. Group flying escort alongside the Marauders encountered a large group of Messerschmitt Bf 109s—possibly as many as twenty—attempting to transit through or out of the area over Waldkirch, roughly five miles northeast of the target zone. Although outnumbered almost two to one, the French pilots elected to engage and were well-rewarded for their aggressiveness and confidence, claiming to have downed one of the German fighters during the dogfight and to have damaged at least one other, without incurring losses of their own.[42] This turned out to be the only air-to-air engagement involving French pilots during Operation Cheerful, but the Spitfire pilots made the most of it.

The USAAF bombardment groups fared little better than their French wing mates during the day of February 8. While the French bombers were striking Freiburg, twenty-seven of 320th Bombardment Group's B–26s arrived over Löffingen, one of the targets delineating the eastern limit of the Floorlamp interdiction zone, to hit a rail bridge leading to the northeast. The bombers found it difficult to hold their formation while over the target, however, and only eighteen Marauders attacked the bridge. They plastered the span with 144 quarter-ton high-explosive bombs starting at 2:40 p.m., achieving "fairly good" results. Nine bombers, however, still had full bomb bays, posing a dilemma for the flight leader. Unwilling to break

41. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
42. Ibid.; Le Clair and Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar*, 224–25.

formation and leave some of his aircraft without fighter escort, rather than sending the still-laden B–26s to the mission's secondary target, the flight leader elected to have them strike their assigned target of last resort. This decision reached, the nine B–26s released most of their ordnance during an ineffective strike on a troop barrack at Lahr, between Freiburg and Offenburg, on their way back to their base at Dijon.[43]

At 3:30 p.m., roughly an hour after the attacks conducted by the French medium bombardment groups on Freiburg, two dozen B–26s of 17th Bombardment Group neared Rastatt, where they attempted to destroy a railway bridge over the Murg River. Despite clear weather and wayward antiaircraft fire, only six of the bombers were able to release their bombs on the target. While these bombs fell accurately, the aircrews believed that they failed to destroy the bridge, and the ordnance of the other Marauders fell well short and south of the intended target.[44] Almost two hours later, a flight of eleven P–47s arrived over Rastatt and headed for the rail bridge. Their pilots reported missing the bridge with all eighteen bombs released, but the resulting explosions caused damage to the rails on its southern approach and destroyed a nearby warehouse. The fighter-bombers also strafed a rail yard, shooting up a locomotive and destroying two of the twenty railcars parked there. German antiaircraft gunners managed to hit two of the attackers, but the pilots of both of the damaged planes managed to nurse their ships home safely.[45]

In addition to the Rastatt raids, 42d Bombardment Wing sent two dozen USAAF B–26s laden with thousand-pound demolition bombs to hit a viaduct near Freudenstadt, the other site serving as the eastern rim of the Floorlamp interdiction zone. Freudenstadt already had been visited twice during the day by 358th Fighter Group's P–47s, which struck a bridge and other rail and road lines in the town and shot up motorized and horse-drawn vehicles and an antiaircraft battery for good measure before departing.[46] But by the time the B–26s arrived, heavy weather had set in over the target area, sparing it from yet another attack. Rough weather also foiled their attempt to hit their secondary target, a rail bridge at Hornberg, the central point of the expanded interdiction zone. Rather than return to base with their bomb bays full, the Marauders headed north of Offenburg to hit the rail yard at Appenweier as a target of opportunity. Like most of the other medium bomber strikes conducted during the day, the Appenweier raid was rife with weather difficulties and errors committed by pilots and bombardiers, resulting in 30 percent of the ninety-three half-

43. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
44. Ibid.
45. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
46. Ibid.

Messerschmitt Bf 109 Shot Down. **A German fighter goes down to the guns of a USAAF fighter during a dogfight. First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) pilots claimed to have shot down eleven Bf 109s and damaged another in three in encounters such as this one during the battle for the Colmar Pocket, with no losses of their own.** *National Archives.*

ton bombs salvoed away from the target. Weather foiled a second attempt to bomb the Hornberg bridge later in the afternoon, in which almost 100 1,000-pound bombs missed the structure completely, although the bomber crews reported possible hits on a tunnel opening north of the target.[47]

The last major area of concentration for Allied air strikes on February 8 was Offenburg. Like Staufen and Freiburg, attacks there began early in the morning and continued throughout the day. The first fighter-bombers reached Offenburg at 8:45 a.m. Sixteen of 371st Fighter Group's P–47s sent to hit a railroad bridge began a half-hour long strike, during which they released forty-six bombs on the target area. The Thunderbolts scored at least four direct hits and twenty-seven near misses on the bridge, blowing out its eastern span and the rail line leading away in that direction, putting it out of commission. Other bombs took out a smaller rail bridge and buildings nearby and damaged a light antiaircraft position that evidently did little more than draw the Thunderbolts' attention to its location. Their work done at Offenburg, the P–47s headed north to work over rail and road traffic leading to Appenweier with their machine guns. Their strafing runs wrecked a staff car and damaged five locomotives and fifteen boxcars before they headed back to Tantonville. One of the Thunderbolts had to be written off after running out of fuel and gliding to a controlled crash, but the

47. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

pilot had done a skilled job of guiding his ship in safely. The group hit the bridge again at 4:35 p.m., when eleven P–47s put two more bombs into the damaged span and strafed four more antiaircraft positions guarding the city. This time the German gunners managed to hit one of the attackers, but the pilot was able to nurse his sturdy fighter-bomber back to base for repairs.[48]

While they made no appreciable contribution during the day to the defense of the remnants of the German bridgehead in Alsace or the rail network that sustained it, Luftwaffe elements were still operating in the area and unusually active during the day of February 8. Several flights of German fighters filled the skies near Offenburg around midday, including a pair of Me 262 jets heading to the north and a gaggle of approximately thirty Me Bf 109s, which ran into 358th Fighter Group's 366th Fighter Squadron roughly thirty miles east of the city. The P–47s were returning from a successful strike on a rail bridge near the Swiss border, and the German pilots unwisely decided to pursue them just before 1 p.m. After giving chase to the outnumbered Thunderbolts all the way to Offenburg, the Messerschmitts released their drop tanks, indicating their intent to attack. The USAAF pilots accepted the challenge, tearing into the German formation at 11,000 feet. Although the German pilots flew the most recent models of their fighters and displayed impressive aerobatic skills during the ensuing dogfight, five of their number were shot from the sky in prompt order without loss to the 366th Fighter Squadron. Three of the Messerschmitts went down in flames, and two more exploded in midair. The victorious pilot of one of the Thunderbolts found himself struggling to control his plane after the concussion from the exploding German fighter sent it hurtling hundreds of feet upward, but he managed to right his aircraft, which sustained no serious damage from the shock or debris. Only one of the German pilots was seen to bail out of his burning fighter before its destruction.[49] There had not been a significant air-to-air engagement between USAAF and German aircraft since the first day of Operation Cheerful, when the pilots of 50th Fighter Group's 10th Squadron also claimed five aerial victories, and there were to be no more until after the operation concluded. Outnumbered and overmatched, the remnants of the Luftwaffe defending southwestern Germany once again proved incapable of mounting anything but fitful and ineffective responses from the air, leaving their front and rear lines vulnerable to Allied attack any time the skies were clear.

Along with the five Messerschmitts downed near Offenburg, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) USAAF P–47s on February 8 claimed the destruction of six locomotives, ninety-seven rail cars, and forty-eight

48. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
49. 366 Fght Sqdn, Outline History, Feb 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-366-HI, A0787.

motor or horse-drawn vehicles, as well as the cutting of forty-five rail lines and blocking of three roads. Almost 200 buildings in towns throughout southeastern Germany were destroyed or burning, along with three major rail yards and five rail bridges. The provisional air force's French units added one more German fighter destroyed to the daily tally of claims, along with additional devastation of enemy rail facilities, buildings, and vehicles. The havoc wrought on the German lines of communication came at the cost of two USAAF P–47s lost, both from accidents caused by mechanical failures, and one French B–26 shot down over Freiburg. In addition to these losses, fifteen of XII Tactical Air Command's Thunderbolts suffered lesser damage from enemy flak or landing accidents during the day.[50] Fifteen French B–26s and four French P–47s also incurred varying degrees of damage but returned to base safely with their pilots and crews.[51] For just three aircraft lost and thirty-four needing repair, the provisional air force could claim to have exacted a disproportionate cost upon German lines of communication, which were already struggling to contain the flow of forces fleeing east from the Rhine.

Ever since the beginning of Operation Cheerful, the provisional air force's daily reports of its fighter-bomber activities had been punctuated with the disheartening remark "NRO:" No Results Observed. Aerial reconnaissance of German road and rail activity during the evacuation of the Colmar Pocket, however, demonstrated that even the limited attacks conducted during days with good flying weather had begun to take a cumulative toll on the transportation network sustaining the salient, significantly hampering the conduct of an orderly and effective retreat. The roads east from Freiburg to Donaueschingen were generally clear during the daytime, but this was most likely due to the fear of Allied air attack, and on the roads where vehicle traffic could be spotted, a notable number of vehicles were being towed by others, suggesting that the Germans were experiencing severe fuel shortages.[52] This assessment turned out to be a correct, as Army Group G's quartermaster (*Generalintendant*) recalled "extensive reduction of the fuel consumption" during Nineteenth Army's retreat across the river as a contributing factor to the abandonment or loss of supplies and provisions.[53]

Unfortunately for the Germans, fuel was not the only target of Allied air power during this stage of the operation to clear the Colmar Pocket. As the hours passed on February 8, the Germans scrambled to assess the results of the relentless air attacks on their lines of communication along

50. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
51. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 39, Feb 7–8, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
52. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.
53. Otto Witek, "My Activity as Generalintendant of the Heeres Gruppe G," *FMS*, B-366, USAHEC, 29.

the Rhine. At 4:35 p.m., Col. Kurt Brandstädter, Nineteenth Army's chief of staff, provided an update on his army's precarious position in Alsace to Army Group G's operations officer. The German bridgehead was now at a point of total collapse, and Nineteenth Army's escape avenues were gravely threatened by the weight and effectiveness of Allied combined arms being directed against them. The rail and vehicle bridges at Neuenburg and river ferries were now subject to "systematic targeting," with observation aircraft directing artillery barrages on spans, docks, and rivercraft. The tactical proficiency displayed by Allied air-ground teams had resulted in two ferries taken out of service, and massed U.S. and French artillery fire boded ill for the future survival of the remaining bridges.[54] On the German side of the Rhine, it was clear by the evening that Neuenburg, Staufen, and the rail facilities in and around Freiburg had all been the targets of concentrated fighter-bomber attacks and taken a dreadful pounding during the day.[55] Shortly after 7 p.m., Army Group G's headquarters received reports that Allied air power had also disrupted the transportation network farther north. The bombing raids on Rastatt and Offenburg had been more effective than the attackers had originally estimated. The USAAF B–26s that had bombed the rail bridge in Rastatt succeeded in dropping it into the Murg River earlier in the day, and the destruction of the bridge at Offenburg by USAAF P–47s had severely tied up rail traffic there as well.[56]

The next day, the Germans discovered that air strikes had also torn up the rail line between Lahr and Offenburg to a sufficient degree that it would not be usable for almost a week.[57] In addition to the devastation wrought from the air, the advance of U.S. and French troops to the Rhine had brought the rail yards at Kenzingen, more than six miles across the Rhine, within range of Allied artillery, which inflicted further damage and put additional pressure on the rail line between Freiburg and Lahr.[58]

The amount of destruction wrought upon the German rail and road network soon became clear to the Allies as well. On February 9, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) was able to mount thirty-six tactical reconnaissance missions. Although only "scant observations" could be made in the foggy mountains and woods stretching east to Donaueschingen, aerial surveillance confirmed that the German lines of communication

54. Army Grp G, "Mitgehörte Sprache mit OB, Chef, und Ia," Feb 8, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191935.

55. Army Grp G, Evening Rept, Feb 8, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191923.

56. Army Grp G, "Mitgehörte Sprache mit OB, Chef, und Ia," Feb 8, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191939.

57. Army Grp G, Evening Rept, Feb 9, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191943.

58. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 8–9, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

running parallel to the Rhine were in disarray.[59] Hundreds of railcars remained in the marshaling yards in and around Freiburg and Offenburg, but there were few locomotives with steaming engines ready to pull them anywhere, and no apparent plan to get other locomotives underway in a systematic fashion seemed to exist. The provisional air force's intelligence staff estimated that the aerial attacks on February 8 and 9 had, at least for the time being, disrupted rail traffic running through Freiburg to Neuenburg and Offenburg, and from Freiburg to points east.[60]

Subsequent evaluations and events confirmed the accuracy of the estimates prepared by Saville's staffers. Army Group G's evacuation plans for Nineteenth Army gave priority to the withdrawal of its two divisions deemed to still possess some semblance of combat capability, the 2d Mountain and 338th Infantry Divisions. These units were to be sent northward as soon as possible to bolster the forces of First Army, which was engaged against Patch's U.S. Seventh Army north of Strasbourg.[61] In the weeks ahead, the bulk of Nineteenth Army's forces would follow them north, leaving just token forces to protect German soil south of Offenburg. After the war, Hausser recalled his struggles to put this plan into action. During the week after the Colmar Pocket operation ended, he had found that:

> Especially effective were the continuous air attacks against highways, railroads, and billets in the Rhein Valley. Although they did not have the intensity of the air attacks in Normandy, nevertheless they rendered troop movements difficult and impeded railroad transportation. Some trains had to take a round-about way through the Schwarz Wald [Black Forest]. The Rhein Valley was more or less blocked. The movement of tanks and assault guns was a special problem.[62]

Army Group G's staff correctly interpreted the aerial targeting pattern as an attempt to prevent a swift repositioning of their forces retreating from the Colmar Pocket to the north. After its withdrawal over the river, the 2d Mountain Division reorganized at Kaiserstuhl, near Freiburg, and the 338th Infantry Division marched a mile north from the Neuenburg bridge to the town of Sandkopf.[63] On February 9, Army Group G had to shelve its plans to move the two divisions farther north by rail from their

59. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 40, Feb 8–9, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.
60. Ibid.
61. Army Grp G to 19 Army, et al., Msg Ia Nr. 591/45, Feb 5, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191860–7191861.
62. Gen. Paul Hausser, "Army Group G (28 Jan 45–21 Mar 45)," *FMS*, B-600, USAHEC, 14.
63. Army Grp G, Daily Rept, Feb 7, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191905; and Feb 8, 1945, 7191926.

assembly areas. Because of the "extensive destruction" to the rail lines and the loss of the bridges in Offenburg and Rastatt, the troops had no option but to conduct grueling foot marches to loading stations that had not been disabled by air attack.[64]

Operation Floorlamp had proved to be a partial success. As Barcus had predicted when he proposed the expanded interdiction zone six days earlier, the Germans could march their way around any railway obstructions between Freiburg and Offenburg, but the hunt for usable rail yards and the time wasted by foot travel added to the pressures placed on the forces evacuating across the Rhine. Continual air attacks on the railways in the inner interdiction area meant that almost an entire week passed before 338th Infantry Division was finally able to load up and move north. The division was still reeling from the beating it had taken in the Colmar Pocket, and the lack of adequate transport ensured that little could be done to reconstitute its losses. Three thousand expected replacements never arrived, and when the division finally shipped out, it was forced to leave most of its armor and artillery behind. By the time its combined arms assets finally began to reach the new front, the division had already been thrown into action without them.[65]

On the western side of the Rhine, the final end of German resistance came on the morning of February 9, when French troops of the 9th Colonial Infantry Division entered Chalampé. As they had at Breisach, the Germans had planned ahead for this eventuality. With French troops and tanks headed for the Neuenburg bridge, demolition charges set off a rippling series of explosions that sent the large rail span plunging into the river, cutting the last major avenue of escape to German territory.[66] The small detachment left by Nineteenth Army to oversee the last withdrawals then surrendered to the French, having been granted permission by their division and corps commanders to do so. Enough blood had already been shed, and in any case, any attempt to slip away would have been blocked by superior Allied ground forces and the fighter-bombers which, as their division commander ruefully wrote after the war, had "left us no peace" in the previous days.[67] With the fall of the bridgehead at Chalampé, the last French territory in Alsace south of Strasbourg was freed of German occupation, and all that remained was to mop up the holdouts trapped on the western side of the Rhine.[68]

64. Army Grp G, War Diary, Feb 9, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/27, Roll 145, 7191161.

65. Brig. Gen. Wolf Ewert, "The Engagements of the 338th Infantry Division in the Rhineland," *FMS*, B-531, USAHEC, 1–3.

66. Army Grp G, Daily Rept, Feb 9, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191944; and Feb 8, 1945, 7191926; Boeyng, "Die Badischen Rheinbrücken," 91.

67. Brig. Gen. Wolf Ewert, "The 338th Infantry Division in the Bridgehead of Elsass," *FMS*, B-074, USAHEC, 9.

68. 64 Fght Wg, Ops/Int Sum, Feb 9–10, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

With the fall of the French terminus of the Neuenburg crossing, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) shifted its attention north, and most of the missions flown on February 9 went to support the U.S. Seventh Army or to interdict German lines of communication across from the First French Army's new positions along the banks of the river. In hopes of further harassing Army Group G's attempts to recover and reconstitute Nineteenth Army's divisions, 358th Fighter Group sent twenty-six P–47s to hit the marshaling yard at Freiburg and a bridge leading out of Offenburg. Bombing through clouds and haze, the fighter-bombers set fire to the Freiburg rail facility but could not estimate any damage caused at Offenburg. These strikes were followed by two flights of Thunderbolts from 50th Fighter Group's 10th Fighter Squadron, which tried to cut the rail line between Freiburg and Offenburg "in as many places as possible."[69] They were soon joined by other squadrons from the group, which by the end of the day had filled the skies over Freiburg with 105 P–47s. Swooping down from the clouds, they pelted the rail yard with rockets and almost forty tons of general-purpose bombs, wrecking or destroying dozens of railcars and blasting tracks in fourteen places.

While the USAAF fighter-bombers were attacking the German rail system, fighters of the First French Air Corps flew cover missions for Allied troops in the vicinity of Colmar and Mulhouse. They found nothing significant to report as German resistance dwindled. Four of the French Spitfires had to make belly landings upon their return due to poor weather and hazardous ground conditions, making their fruitless mission a costly one.[70] However, it was one of the last ordered to support Allied troops clearing German forces out of the Colmar Pocket. The offensive had finally come to a victorious end for 6th Army Group and its provisional air force.

69. 10 Fght Sqdn, War Diary, Feb 9, 1945, AFHRA, SQ-FI-10-HI, A0721.
70. 1 TACAF, COSUM No. 41, Feb 9–10, 1945, AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

Epilogue

Despite the difficulties and setbacks encountered by Allied air and ground forces, especially during the early stages of the offensive, the operation to clear the Colmar Pocket resulted in a catastrophic rout for the Germans. In a letter congratulating Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, "the great liberator of Colmar," for his triumph, Lt. Gen. Jacob Devers estimated that at least 80 percent of the Wehrmacht's Nineteenth Army had become casualties or prisoners of the Allies.[1] Although the bridges at Breisach and Neuenburg were not destroyed until the last days of the offensive, most of the German forces defending the pocket failed to make it to the German side of the Rhine, resulting in the effective destruction of Nineteenth Army.

During the latter half of the fight to hold the pocket, Lt. Gen. Siegfried Rasp and Col. Kurt Brandstädter, his chief of staff, rarely submitted timely or accurate casualty figures for Nineteenth Army to their superiors at the headquarters of Army Group G. Brandstädter originally reported the army's casualties for the period between January 20 and February 5 as 800 killed in action, 2,596 wounded, and 3,129 missing, for a total of 6,525. He admitted that these were preliminary figures and expressed hope that the number of missing would decrease as stragglers returned to their units.[2] The true number of German losses, however, was much greater. Between them, U.S. and French forces accepted the surrender of more than 16,000 enemy troops. The French took the majority of the German prisoners, sending more than 10,000 to the rear lines for internment.[3] While Rasp and Brandstädter believed that they had successfully evacuated most of their

1. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, First French Army, Feb 9, 1945, YCHC, Devers Papers, Box 22, Fld 16.

2. Army Grp G, Daily Rpt, Feb 9, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191946.

3. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 40.

troops, in actuality, probably no more than 10,000 made it across the river, and they soon reported a total of more than 22,000 "permanent" casualties dead or captured.[4] Given this figure and the total of 16,438 prisoners-of-war reported by 6th Army Group's operations section, German fatalities and casualties otherwise unaccounted for could quite possibly have reached more than 5,500.

Nineteenth Army remained intact as an organized element of the Wehrmacht command structure in the west, but its most capable fighting units were quickly reassigned to other commands. Those that were left were in even worse condition than they had been when while stationed in the Colmar Pocket. Badly understrength and under-provisioned, the six remaining divisions were consolidated into three. Before the end of the month, two of these were reassigned to First Army, along with the army's remaining armor and much of its artillery, and the third division was assigned elsewhere in mid-March.[5] The remnants that remained assigned to the army headquarters proved no match for the Allied forces that pursued them deeper and deeper into German territory until the unconditional surrender that came in May 1945. As historian Rick Atkinson poetically put it, after its expulsion from the Colmar Pocket, Nineteenth Army was little else but "a silent, spectral memory, a legion of shades."[6]

With the Nineteenth Army evicted from Alsace, the First French Army assumed defensive positions along the Rhine from the Swiss border to Strasbourg. The U.S. units that had been attached to de Lattre's First French Army for the operation returned to Lt. Gen. Alexander Patch's U.S. Seventh Army, still guarding Lt. Gen. George Patton's southern flank and the approaches to Strasbourg, or to SHAEF's operational reserve. Although victorious, the forces of both Allied nations had been drained by weeks of fierce fighting in the harsh weather in Alsace. During Operation Cheerful, the First French Army and its U.S. attachments suffered more than 23,000 casualties. Non-battle casualties caused by the cold, disease, and injuries slightly outweighed the number of killed and wounded in the XXI Corps' U.S. units, 3,228 to 2,961; for the two French corps, the ratio was more than two to one, with 11,963 to 5,067 casualties of each type.[7]

The civilians of Alsace suffered their own losses, as they had during the five preceding months since Allied and German forces first met at

4. Clarke and Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine*, 556–57.

5. Brandstädter, "Fighting of the 19th 'Armee' for the Bridgehead 'Elsass' and Defense of the Upper-Rhine Front from 4 January to 21 March 1945," 31–32.

6. Atkinson, *Guns at Last Light*, 533.

7. G-3, 6th Army Grp, Final Rpt, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-10-G3, Box 1310, 40. Slightly higher approximated casualty figures for the U.S. XXI Corps appear in 6th Army Group's history, along with slightly lower French figures: 3,467 battle losses (493 killed in action) and 4,487 non-battle losses for XXI Corps, and a total of 10,034 losses of all types for the First French Army. See 6th Army Grp, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," 5.

the Vosges. One significant aspect of the plans and orders guiding the application of air power during Operation Cheerful is that they made no explicit mention of avoiding civilian casualties or destruction to population centers, either French or German. It is notable that as the provisional air force executed the weeks-long air campaign, it made no attacks on Colmar itself, which, as the largest population center in the German-held salient, offered the greatest potential for inadvertent civilian casualties and property damage. However, the city was not explicitly proscribed as a potential target in the air orders or plans. The ground plans for the operation drafted by 6th Army Group specifically instructed Allied troops to bypass and isolate Colmar, but the planners were more concerned with their forces being tied down in a prolonged series of block-by-block, house-to-house engagements rather than sparing the city and its citizens. Military targets in or near Colmar's outlying suburbs came under attack from the air during the operation, as did others in or near numerous towns along the Allied lines of advance. French air units executed their share of these attacks, apparently with little if any reservation. Charles De Gaulle's government had long since accepted that the liberation of France could not be achieved without the inadvertent deaths of noncombatants. After protests lodged by Gen. René Bouscat, the French Air Force's chief of staff, with SHAEF in October 1944 against the targeting of rail facilities in Colmar and Strasbourg went nowhere, French air leaders realized they had little choice but to fall in line.[8]

A report compiled by the French interior ministry conducted at the end of the war cited by the noted air power historian Richard Overy gives a figure of 1,548 French civilians killed and 692 injured by aerial bombing during 1945.[9] Aerial bombardment of occupied towns during the German Northwind offensive and the Allied Colmar Pocket operation accounted for an indeterminate number of French losses, but the majority of these casualties were the result of two heavy bomber strikes on Royan, one

8. Davis, *Spaatz and the Air War In Europe*, 408; Claudia Baldoli and Andrew Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy Under Allied Air Attack, 1940–1945* (London: Continuum, 2012), 236. Given the weight of effort and destruction wrought by strategic bombing and the air campaigns that preceded and supported the invasion of Normandy, the recent historical literature concerning the employment of air power over occupied France is dominated by these issues. See Baldoli and Knapp, passim, and Stephen A. Bourque's *Beyond the Beach: The Allied War Against France* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute, 2018). For exemplary concise overviews, see Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 556–82; Conrad C. Crane, *American Air Power Strategy in World War II: Bombs, Cities, Civilians, and Oil* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2016), 44–45, 80–84; and "The Air War in France," Chap. 2 of Robert Lynn Fuller, *After D-Day: The U.S. Army Encounters the French* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2021), 37–67.

9. *Bulletin d'information de la défense passive*, May 1945 (Paris: Ministry of Interior, 1939–1945), cited in Overy, *Bombing War*, 581. The numbers for the French study should be considered as a minimal estimation. For the bureaucratic and historical difficulties in determining accurate counts of French civilian losses during the war see Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, 260–61.

of the German-held fortified seaports still holding out along the Bay of Biscay. Despite Royan's limited potential as a logistical node and the fact that the Germans had been successfully contained, Allied bombers struck the city twice. The RAF Bomber Command raid took place in January; the second, conducted by Eighth Air Force heavy bombers and Ninth Air Force medium bombers, occurred in mid-April, just weeks before the war in Europe ended.[10]

While the USAAF and French Air Force never intended to target French civilians during Operation Cheerful, they bombed and strafed town centers known to be occupied by German troops and rail, road, and river communications targets west of the Rhine regardless of the potential cost to be borne by noncombatants caught in the crossfire. While tactical air strikes by fighter-bombers and medium bombers were in general more accurate and less indiscriminately destructive than high-altitude bombardment, every bomb dropped by an Allied aviator over France was subject to any number of factors, including wind and weather conditions, mechanical malfunctions, and the proficiency of any given pilot, bombardier, or navigator, leading to potential inaccuracy from its release until its impact.[11]

While the airmen of the provisional air force did not deliberately target German civilians, they gave little consideration to inadvertent casualties caused by attacks on military and communications targets situated in or near populated areas across the Rhine during Operation Cheerful. By 1945, prewar plans for limiting civilian casualties through precision daylight bombing had come to naught, and from the USAAF's highest leadership down, a general belief prevailed that the best way to limit destruction and death was by applying sufficient force to bring the war to its swiftest possible conclusion.[12]

Casualties of noncombatants during the operation, however, were mitigated in part by the evacuation of much of the local population from Nineteenth Army's rear areas. Evacuations of German towns along the Rhine began after a British heavy bomber raid on Freiburg on the night of November 27, 1944, caused massive destruction and left almost 3,000 dead.[13] Shortly after, the Nazi Party administrators responsible for Baden and Alsace began coordinating with Army Group Upper Rhine to relocate civilians living within five kilometers of the Rhine. The demarcation line

10. The First Tactical Air Force (Prov.) was involved in the planning of the first Royan raid. See AFHRA, 549.322B, C5031; Bourque, *Beyond the Beach*, 91–94.

11. Fuller, *After D-Day*, 171–72; Bourque, *Beyond the Beach*, 260.

12. Mark Clodfelter, *Beneficial Bombing: The Progressive Foundations of American Air Power, 1917–1945* (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 2010), 5.

13. For a vivid recounting of the Freiburg raid, see Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*, tr. Allison Brown (NY: Columbia UP, 2006), 264–68.

French Civilians in Mittelwihr. **Artillery barrages and aerial bombardment devastated scores of Alsatian towns during the campaign to clear the Colmar Pocket. Here, French civilians survey the damage in Mittelwihr, a small town just north of Colmar, on February 8, 1945.** *National Archives.*

was just over three statute miles from the river banks, placing it within the range of any heavy Allied artillery positioned a similar distance away from the river on the opposite side. While German authorities sought overall to prevent unnecessary loss of life, they also intended to preserve skilled workers who could be put back to supporting the war effort elsewhere. Local district authorities in several towns and cities just outside the five-kilometer zone, including Offenburg, Lahr, and Müllheim, received modified orders that limited the pool of potential evacuees in hopes of sustaining local commercial and agricultural activities. Along with these essential workers, other groups, including prisoners of war, foreign laborers, and males eligible for service in the *Volksstürm* (People's Storm), a paramilitary defense force primarily composed of teens and men too old for traditional military service, were to stay where they were. Otherwise, all noncombatants were to be evacuated eastward.[14] Days later, Freiburg, Rastatt, and Breisach, along with Karlsruhe to the north, fell under the restricted evacuation list, but the evacuation zone for the three districts already on the list was expanded from the five-kilometer line all the way to the western edge of the Black Forest.[15]

14. Gauleitung Baden, subj: "Personelle Räumung in Rheinebene," Dec 2, 1944, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 65873, Roll 172, 7223506–7223510.

15. Gauleitung Baden, Msg B107/44, Dec 5, 1944, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 65873, Roll 172, 7223522.

After the determination of the limited-evacuation districts, Army Group Upper Rhine assisted with moving an estimated 24,000 civilians out of the populated areas along the banks of the Rhine, beginning with locations where Allied air and artillery attacks were expected. Given the degraded state of the transportation network, transporting civilians to safer quarters where they would be less of a hindrance to Nineteenth Army's logistical and rear echelon operations proved to be a difficult endeavor, and only one-third of those selected for evacuation had been moved out by early January 1945.[16] Nonetheless, evacuations continued after Operation Cheerful began, although the number of displaced persons by this time had overwhelmed the area civil defense district's capacity to find adequate shelter for them.[17]

Despite the dearth of contemporary records that survived the bombing, evacuations, and the Allied invasion, a postwar historical commission compiled enough data to give a fragmentary picture of the cost of the war to the present-day German state of Baden-Württemberg. Of note are the figures for casualties and property damage at the two main river crossing terminuses of Breisach and Neuenburg. The two towns suffered massive devastation from persistent Allied air and artillery strikes, many of which took place during Operation Cheerful, in early 1945. Breisach was heavily damaged and Neuenburg almost completely destroyed, but only the first town incurred civilian casualties, and only a small number. The data also suggests that, given the comparatively low percentages of fatalities and physical destruction between towns that experienced mostly daylight tactical attacks against marshaling yards and rail facilities and Freiburg, the target of a British nighttime area bombing raid, USAAF and French fighter-bomber and medium bomber crews were at least somewhat successful in their attempts to limit bombing and strafing attacks to immediate target areas.

The end of Operation Cheerful brought a brief period of relative calm along the Allied line in Alsace, allowing the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) to adjust its operational focus. The First French Air Corps assumed the task of conducting interdiction strikes to the east of 6th Army Group's new front along the Rhine and sent its P–47s across the river to hit railways and communications targets deep in the Black Forest. Freed from having to support combined U.S./French operations in de Lattre's sector, XII Tactical Air Command shifted its attention to the north, massing its fighter-

16. Army Grp Oberrhein, Msg. 435, Jan 5, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 65873, Roll 172, 7223501.

17. Wehrkreis V to Army Grp Oberrhein, Msg. 153/45, Jan 24, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 65873, Roll 172, 7223497.

Table 5: Estimated Damage to Selected German Cities and Towns in the First Tactical Air Force (Prov.) Area of Operations, 1939–1945		
Location	**Civilian Deaths**	**Percent of Buildings Destroyed or Uninhabitable**
Biberach	55	3%
Breisach	9	74.7%
Donaueschingen	N/A	13%
Freiburg	2,515	27.8%
Freudenstadt	57	40%
Lahr	120	6%
Müllheim	N/A	10%
Neuenburg	0	96%
Offenburg	42	5%
Rastatt	51	9.1%
Staufen	49	12.9%
Villigen-Schwennigen	N/A	7%

Source: Heinz Baruda, "Kriegschäden im Baden-Württemburg, 1939–1945," Forward to Map 7.11, *Historischer Atlas vom Baden-Württemburg*, ed. Karl Heinz Schröder, et al. (Stuttgart: Kommission für geschichtliche Landeskunde in Baden-Württemburg, 1972–1988), https://www.leo-bw.de/media/kgl_atlas/current/delivered/pdf/HABW_7_11.pdf. Table considers battle damage from all causes during the war.

bombers for attacks on targets behind Patch's front.[18] Despite the dedication of effort to other areas, the provisional air force continued to disrupt German attempts to recover from the defeat in the Colmar Pocket. Allied air strikes heavily damaged rail bridges at Freiburg and Kinzig, to the north of Offenburg, on February 11. Initial reports submitted to the headquarters of Army Group G projected that both bridges would be out of commission for an extended period, with repairs for the Kinzig crossing requiring perhaps an entire month to complete. Gen. Paul Hausser's staff assured themselves that repairs rarely took as long as estimated, but the loss of the Freiburg bridge meant that the northward deployment of the 2d Mountain Division would require extensive rerouting, unless sufficient fuel could be found to move its men and materiel by truck to another loading facility.[19] The next day, while Army Group G scrambled to find the needed motor transport, the Allied provisional air force began a three-day series of railway strikes, racking up staggering (and most likely exaggerated) claims of 1,165 railcars destroyed and more than 2,000 damaged, to ensure that rails remained an insufficient and dangerous option for any German troop movements. During this period, Allied P–47s and B–26s also hit supply depots, barracks, and motor traffic

18. Air Staff, SHAEF, "Notes of the Allied Air Commanders Conference," Feb 15, 1945, LOC, Spaatz Papers, Box 20, Fld 2.

19. Army Grp G, "Mitgehörte Sprache mit OB, Chef, und Ia," Feb 11, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7192003.

to prevent Army Group G from regrouping and refitting its units into some semblance of combat effectiveness.[20]

While the aerial assault on the German rail and road network took its toll on lines of communication, rolling stock, and vehicles, as the provisional air force's postwar history pointed out, "complete paralysis was not achieved, nor was it even approached." The Germans had too many "devious" secondary routes available and had demonstrated "a remarkable recuperative capacity" to repair rail and road damage as it occurred.[21] Nonetheless, the consequences of the aerial onslaught were telling. As a result of the pounding its lines of communication were taking from the air, on February 14, Army Group G's headquarters began to question its ability to conduct the reconsolidation and relocation of its units after the disaster in the Colmar Pocket as initially planned.[22] Allied patrolling of the skies across the Rhine went unhindered by the Luftwaffe, so no end to the transportation disruptions were in sight. Hausser's planners would have to continue to improvise ways to move troops to their new defensive positions. With the weather continuing to clear as the month passed and spring drawing near, things would only get worse, and the Germans sought to acclimate themselves to the uninterrupted presence of Allied aircraft over their own soil. As Army Group G's war diarist glumly wrote just six days after the loss of the Colmar Pocket: "The day passes quietly by for Nineteenth Army, just the normal enemy harassing artillery fire and brisk enemy air activity."[23]

By mid-February, the Germans noticed that USAAF and French aerial reconnaissance flights over southern Germany had dramatically increased. Taking advantage of the clearer weather, Allied observers were gathering intelligence for the staffers of the provisional air force's headquarters who, like those assigned to de Lattre's and Patch's command posts, were developing plans to support 6th Army Group's next major offensive. After crushing the Colmar Pocket, Devers released orders to Patch and de Lattre to rotate their units between the front and rear lines. Those sent to the rear had little time to rest, however, for the unit rotation policy included orders for the army commanders to put training programs into place over the coming weeks to prepare for the inevitable next step: Operation Undertone, the offensive to breach the Siegfried Line and drive into the territory of

20. 1 TACAF, Msg. D-S-4, May 6, 1945, AFHRA, 549.322K, C3051.

21. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:113.

22. Army Grp G, Daily Rpt, Feb 14, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/29a, Roll 145, 7191905; and Feb 8, 1945, 7192057.

23. Army Grp G, War Diary, Feb 15, 1945, NARA, RG 242, Entry T-311, Item 75141/27, Roll 145, 7191187.

the Third Reich.[24] Once these units had made sufficient headway, the provisional air force would follow Devers's forces once again, just as it had during the advance from the Rhone Valley to Alsace. This time, it would be moving out of France and into new bases in German territory.

It would do so without Brig. Gen. Gordon Saville, who had assumed command of the provisional air force during Operation Cheerful and seen it to its successful conclusion. Despite the ongoing preparations to cross the Rhine, Saville's command of the provisional air force turned out to be surprisingly brief. At the beginning of February, Maj. Gen. Barney M. Giles, Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold's deputy and chief of staff, wrote to Lt. Gen. Carl "Tooey" Spaatz to discuss an Army Air Force initiative to bring general officers with extensive wartime experience back to the United States. Spaatz sent a response on February 9, the day the Colmar Pocket finally collapsed, indicating his concurrence that Saville should be considered for reassignment stateside. Efforts were underway to increase the strength of the provisional air force by attaching two more fighter-bomber groups and service units from Twelfth Air Force, paving the way, Spaatz thought, for the move of the rest of the air force from the Mediterranean Theater to France. Saville could "be spared without replacement" by transferring Maj. Gen. Robert W. Webster, Twelfth Air Force's deputy commander, to take over the provisional air force until that eventuality occurred.[25] Spaatz wrote again to Giles, to praising Saville's services as "thoroughly satisfactory in every respect," and noting that he had developed a strong relationship with Devers during his short time as commander of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional).[26] Shortly afterward, General of the Army Dwight Eisenhower wrote to Lt. Gen. Thomas T. Handy, the U.S. Army's deputy chief of staff in Washington, citing Saville as one of three "successful commanders" deserving of promotion in the near future.[27] With these endorsements, Saville was reassigned to a stateside command and Webster assumed command of the provisional air force, a position he would retain until the end of the war.

24. Maj. Gen. David G. Barr, COS, 6th Army Grp, to Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, CG, 1 Fr Army, subj: "Retraining," Feb 10, 1945, NARA, RG 331, Entry 240D, Box 10; HQ, 6th Army Grp, to CG, Seventh Army, et al., subj: "Letter of Instructions No. 10," Feb 12, 1945, NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-3, Box 1308.

25. Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, CG, USSTAF, to Maj. Gen. Barney M. Giles, DCG, AAF, Feb 9, 1945, AFHRA, 519.1612, A5534.

26. Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, CG, USSTAF, to Maj. Gen. Barney M. Giles, DCG, AAF, Feb 25, 1945, AFHRA, 519.1612, A5534.

27. General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, SCAEF, to Lt. Gen. Thomas T. Handy, DCSA, Feb 2, 1945, Msg 2272, *Eisenhower Papers: War Years*, 4:2469–71. Saville went on to become an influential advocate of tactical air power and continental air defense in the independent postwar U.S. Air Force. See "Saville Takes Charge," Chap. 4 of Schaffel, *Emerging Shield*, 83–105.

Table 6: First Tactical Air Force (Prov.) USAAF Unit Total/Effective Sorties, January 20–February 9, 1945					
DATE	**B–26**	**P–47**	**Beaufighter**	**F–5**	**F–6**
January 20	–	83/70	2/0	–	–
January 21	–	12/11	–	–	–
January 22	105/0	324/296	–	–	8/6
January 23	–	128/122	–	–	6/6
January 24	–	109/106	–	–	18/18
January 25	–	–	–	–	–
January 26	–	113/90	–	–	4/2
January 27	–	–	–	–	–
January 28	–	–	–	–	–
January 29	91/43	383/361	–	6/6	41/40
January 30	–	51/38	–	–	16/14
January 31	–	–	3/3	–	–
February 1	–	77/27	–	–	–
February 2	89/74	476/453	7/5	13/13	46/42
February 3	–	102/93	2/2	–	12/12
February 4	–	136/118	1/1	–	4/2
February 5	–	–	–	–	–
February 6	1/1	132/94	–	–	22/22
February 7	–	–	–	–	4/2
February 8	103/92	434/412	–	10/9	60/58
February 9	101/31	418/397	3/2	11/0	42/36
TOTAL	490/241	2,978/2,688	18/13	40/28	283/260
Total Sorties (All Aircraft)			3,809		
Total Effective Sorties (All Aircraft)			3,230		

Source: Stat. Ctrl, USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, Jun 30, 1945, 25–26. Sorties include those conducted in support of U.S. Seventh Army operations.

Conclusion

The clearing of the Colmar Pocket and the destruction of the Wehrmacht's Nineteenth Army was a clear victory for the Allied 6th Army Group, but it was accomplished at great cost. The U.S. and French troops charged with isolating Colmar and driving the Germans to the banks of the Rhine faced several limiting factors beyond their control. First and foremost was the weather. Another important limiting factor was the terrain. As one U.S. Army historian has noted, the province of Alsace, along with the Ardennes to the north, was "no general's playground but rather a place where firepower and bravery meant more than plans or brilliant maneuver."[1]

Yet another critical factor working against a swift Allied success was a lack of sufficient air support to wage an effective interdiction campaign against the lines of communication that had sustained the German bridgehead in Alsace for almost three months. As one U.S. Air Force historian observed, the two main factors characterizing a successful air interdiction campaign are air superiority and "*sustained pressure* on enemy communications."[2] The First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) entered Operation Cheerful with the first in hand. Allied aviators faced minimal opposition from the Luftwaffe and bested its planes and pilots handily in the few encounters where German aircraft offered battle, but it could not deliver the second element of sustained pressure until late in the campaign.

As it did with the ground forces fighting below, the weather played the most critical role in reducing the Allies' advantage in air superiority and ability to strike enemy communications targets and ground formations at will. Lt. Gen. Jacob Devers himself noted this fact in a letter of commendation delivered to the officers and enlisted personnel of the

1. Roger Cirillo, *The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II: Ardennes-Alsace* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1995), 53.

2. Eduard Mark, *Aerial Interdiction: Air Power and the Land Battle in Three American Wars* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1994), 4. Emphasis in original.

First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) the day after the Colmar Pocket collapsed, citing "freezing conditions, poor visibility, uncertain winds, and treacherous snowstorms" that had to be overcome by the provisional air force's aviators and ground crews.[3] On six of the twenty days that passed between the beginning and end of Operation Cheerful, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) found its aircraft either completely grounded or limited to negligible numbers of weather reconnaissance or night fighter sorties. The weather made bombing operations particularly difficult, preventing 42d Bombardment Wing's medium bombers from mounting missions on all but five days, and most of the missions flown achieved meager results. As the provisional air force's targeting officer explained after the war:

> Weather kept us on the ground for most of January. There was little air power could do during this period but to destroy the enemy's forward positions. Interdiction did not help. The only thing to do was to go out on armed recce [reconnaissance] and shoot up moving vehicles and trains where we could identify them.[4]

When the bad weather broke in February, the German forces holding the Colmar Pocket were already buckling against the Allied advance from both north and south. With better weather, air power became more effective, but the collapse of the German forces west of the Rhine was already taking place, and German demolition charges placed on the Breisach and Neuenburg bridges, not Allied bombs, ultimately sealed the fate of German forces still across the river.

While aerial interdiction proved unable to seal off the flow of men and materiel in and out of the pocket over the Rhine bridges, close air support proved valuable to ground forces throughout the campaign. A postwar U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF) analysis of the effectiveness of aerial attacks against ground forces specifically mentioned the success of air power in the 3d Infantry Division's battle for Holtzwihr on January 26, 1945. Based on comments gathered from U.S. ground troops, the study noted that entrenched ground forces were usually "not vulnerable to air attack," but the air strikes on Holtzwihr proved to be an exception to this rule that prevented the infantrymen from having to close in for close-quarters combat to disrupt and dislodge the Germans holding the town.[5]

It is clear that at specific moments within the campaign—in particular, the steady succession of aerial hammer blows on the towns and strongpoints

3. Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, CG, 6th Army Grp, to 1 TACAF, subj: "Commendation," Feb 10, 1945, in 34 Photo Recon Sqdn, Unit History, Feb 1945, AFHRA, SQ-PHOTO-34-HI, A0888.

4. Selko interview.

5. AAF Evaluation Board in the ETO, "Effectiveness of Third Phase Tactical Air Operations in the European Theater, 5 May 1944–8 May 1945," Aug 20, 1945, Part 1-D, "Statements from Allied Ground Forces on the Effectiveness of Air Cooperation," AFHRA, 138.4-36, A1175, 230.

along the Colmar and Rhone-Rhine Canals ahead of the 3d Infantry Division's line of advance, culminating in the pounding delivered to German defenses at Artzenheim, Baltzenheim, Kunheim, and Biesheim—when the weather did not pose a limiting factor, close cooperation between air and ground forces was quite effective.[6] But other than these instances, the operational record reflects little cohesive planning or coordination of close cooperation strikes in direct support of a geographic or operational line of advance. Most close cooperation strikes during Operation Cheerful instead came as the result of observations made during armed reconnaissance or unplanned requests for assistance determined and delivered by air controllers assigned to ground units. These circumstances resulted in a diffused application of air power, with strikes occurring in scattered areas across the Colmar Pocket with little concentration of capabilities or effort. But even so, opportunistic attacks against German ground forces proved to be quite effective, such as the bombing and strafing attacks against the retreat from Colmar on February 2, in isolated instances.

Operations to clear the Colmar Pocket also revealed shortcomings in the organization of the provisional air force created to support 6th Army Group. Most notably, it was critically short of the number of bombers necessary to conduct an effective air campaign based on the interdiction of the enemy's rear lines. The commanders of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional), who believed they had to guard against ground commanders' demands to employ aircraft to strike front-line targets better suited for artillery, believed that interdiction was the role and mission best suited for the tactical air power placed at their disposal.[7] But they did not have enough bombers to inflict paralyzing damage against German rail, transport, and supply targets beyond the Rhine. Even had the weather permitted the B–26s to fly more sorties, the 42d Bombardment Wing, with less than 200 operational USAAF and French bombers, had too few aircraft to effectively strike targets in the German rear area behind the Colmar Pocket. The provisional air force's intended zone of interdiction consisted of a triangle encompassing more than 3,000 square miles, with a base stretching from Mulhouse and the Swiss border to Lake Constance in the south up to Karlsruhe in the north. Thousands of more square miles lay behind the U.S. Seventh Army's front and their critical boundary line protecting the right flank of Lt. Gen. George Patton's U.S. Third Army. Compounding the lack of effective organic bomber strength within the force structure of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional), the assistance requested of Eighth and Ninth Air Forces in the days before and during Operation Cheerful began arrived in too few instances, or not at all. The

6. Brandstädter, "Fighting of the 19. 'Armee' for the Bridgehead 'Elsass' and Defense of the Upper-Rhine Front from 4 January to 21 March 1945," 28.

7. Selko interview.

other air forces were having their own difficulties with the weather at the time, as the provisional air force's combined operations summaries attest, and had their own priorities of effort.

The paucity of bomber support, caused by deficient force structure and weather factors, placed the burden of interdiction strikes on the P–47s of XII Tactical Air Command and the First French Air Corps. Better able to operate in rough weather than the medium bombers, swifter, and closer to the front, fighter-bombers could reach targets quickly and take greater advantage of short breaks in the vicious winter weather during the first two weeks of Operation Cheerful. Their ability to deliver a combination of general-purpose and incendiary munitions, later combined with rockets, proved to be a potent weapon against rail and road targets.[8] If one had to pick a single-engine aircraft to wage a short-term interdiction campaign, the P–47 was an ideal choice. However, since it was able to carry only one-fourth the ordnance of a B–26, the Thunderbolt was a poor substitute at best for a multi-engine bomber over a sustained period lasting almost three weeks.

Additionally, as was the case with the medium bomber units, the provisional air force lacked enough fighter-bombers to meet its commitments. During the Anglo-American meetings that preceded the February 1945 summit at Yalta, USAAF leaders pressed the British to release two P–47 groups from the Mediterranean Theater, claiming that 6th Army Group "had been robbed" of the fighter-bomber support it required.[9] Ensuing negotiations resulted in the transfer of two USAAF P–47 groups to the provisional air force, but the transfer resulted in the net addition of only one group after the 371st Fighter Group was reassigned back to Ninth Air Force.[10] The force structure of the First French Air Corps, with its two groups, one of which was undersized, remained unchanged. Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's and Lt. Gen. Alexander Patch's armies would cross the Rhine with essentially the same air power available to them as they had during the clearing of the Colmar Pocket.

The operational requirements imposed by Operation Cheerful exceeded the amount of air power that the provisional air force could provide. The battle for the Colmar Pocket was not a maximum-effort mission for the provisional air force, which still had to honor its commitments to support U.S. Seventh Army's operations to the north and to apply its limited air power to the most productive ends. The Germans persisted with their failed offensive in northern Alsace until five days after Operation Cheerful

8. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:77.

9. "Meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, 2:30 p.m.," Jan 31, 1945, FRUS, *The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955), 485–88; Maj. Gen. Frederick L. Anderson, DCS, USSTAF, to Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, CG, USSTAF, Feb 2, 1945, LOC, Spaatz Papers, Box 20.

10. Stat. Ctrl, USSTAF, *First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945*, 4.

began, diverting aerial assets needed to quell the enemy's efforts in the north. Even after the Northwind offensive had been defeated, the boundary between the U.S. Third and Seventh Armies remained the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s "first priority area."[11] Given General of the Army Dwight Eisenhower's manifestly clear intent to place the Allied weight of effort in the sectors of the 21st or 12th Army Groups, rather than 6th Army Group's, allocating greater aerial resources to protect Patton's flank made operational sense. Even when 6th Army Group's headquarters wished to increase air support for the First French Army, it was the responsibility of the provisional air force's leaders to provide their best professional advice on the employment of air power. Given the USAAF's decided preference for interdiction, as the commander of the provisional air service command put it after the war, "The Army would never have given up any of their support for an instant," and Devers's air commanders often had to deny requests for additional missions dedicated to close cooperation.[12]

Since the provisional air force's intelligence and operations staff believed that German defenders in the Colmar Pocket and elsewhere on the 6th Army Group front would attack or defend with whatever personnel, equipment, and supplies were available to them when orders arrived, regardless of their sufficiency, they held fast to the idea that the best targets for air power, especially their bombers, were the enemy's tactical reserves. Most such targets lay to the north of the pocket on the U.S. Seventh Army front. These included large troop formations, which were "the highest priority as targets," and supply depots storing fuel and ammunition intended for distribution at the division level or echelons above, rather than the scattered caches of supplies ferreted away by the Germans holding the Colmar Pocket to sustain their presence in Alsace.[13]

Despite the odds stacked against it during Operation Cheerful, the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) managed to inflict a fair amount of damage upon the German defenders in the Colmar Pocket and caused significant disruption of communications and logistical transport in the enemy rear lines. A statistical study produced by USSTAF shortly after the war's end estimated that between January 20 and February 9, 1945, the provisional air force's USAAF units mounted more than 3,800 total sorties (see Table 6). Of these, 6th Army Group deduced that 1,083 were flown by XII Tactical Air Command aircraft in support of operations in or near the Colmar Pocket. The First French Air Corps contributed another 987 of their own, for a total of 1,980 close cooperation, interdiction, and reconnaissance sorties.[14] Along with the efforts of the fighter-bombers, U.S.

11. Selko interview.
12. Langmead interview.
13. 1 TACAF History, AFHRA, 549.01 V.1, C5025, 1:76.
14. 6th Army Grp, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," 63.

Table 7: First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) Battle Damage Claims for Operation Cheerful January 20–February 9, 1945		
Target	**Destroyed**	**Damaged**
Marshaling Yards	N/A	19
Rail Cuts	N/A	98
Road Blocks	N/A	36
Bridges	7	13
Locomotives	9	39
Railcars	254	472
Barges	3	0
Motor Vehicles	114	143
Horse-Drawn Vehicles	4	35
Tanks	18	6
Buildings	403	64

Source: HQ, 6th Army Grp, "Reduction of the Colmar Pocket," Chapter VI of "History of the Headquarters Sixth Army Group, ETO, Nov 44-Feb 45," NARA, RG 407, Entry 427, 99/06-0.2, Box 1301, 63.

and French elements of the 42d Bombardment Wing struck vital rail and logistical targets in Freiburg, Offenburg, Zell am Harmersbach, Löffingen, Rastatt, and Speyer, as well as the Neuenburg bridge.[15] While none of these medium bomber raids resulted in the complete destruction or neutralization of their targets, they added to the difficulties faced by the Germans in their attempts to reinforce, resupply, or withdraw personnel and materiel from the immediate area, especially toward the end of the campaign.

While effective in impeding German troop movements, tactical air power was ill-suited for a larger interdiction program targeting a transportation network stretching almost 200 miles across the fronts of the two Allied armies operating in northeastern France and thousands of square miles behind them. The postwar U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey named "widespread operations of fighter-bombers upon the smaller stations and open lines," strikes against bridges, and "heavy strafing operations" against train traffic as three of six major components of the Allied air campaign against the German rail network. These types of strikes were most effective when paired with extensive preparatory attacks on major rail yards by heavy bombers, and the last only when coupled with complementary attacks on nearby workshop and repair facilities.[16] Destruction of locomotives and rail cars, one of the primary targets of the provisional air force during the

15. 1 TACAF, COSUMS, cumulative, Jan 20–Feb 9, 1945, AFHRA, 549.3063, C5030; and AFHRA, 549.606, C5032.

16. Transport Div, U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, "The Effects of Strategic Bombing on German Transportation," Nov 20, 1945, AFHRA, 137.312, A1140, 3–4.

Table 8: First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) Aerial Victories in Support of Operation Cheerful January 20–February 9, 1945		
Name and Unit	**Date**	**Credit**
1st Lt. Roy F. Center Jr. 10th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Jan. 20	2 destroyed
2d Lt. Frank Fasmer 10th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Jan. 20	1 destroyed
2d Lt. Robert E. Jones 10th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Jan. 20	1 destroyed
1st Lt. Leman L. Rosenberg 10th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Jan. 20	1 destroyed
2d Lt. Allan Gilbert 366th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Feb. 8	1 destroyed
Capt. Thomas M. Hergert 366th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Feb. 8	1 destroyed
1st Lt. Donald O. Scherer 366th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Feb. 8	2 destroyed
Maj. Louis L. Wilson, Jr. 366th Fght Sqdn, USAAF	Feb. 8	1 destroyed
Capt. Gabriel Gauthier II/7 Sqdn, FAF	Feb. 8	.5 destroyed, .5 damaged
Capt. [NFN] Motte-Remy II/7 Sqdn, FAF	Feb. 8	.5 destroyed, .5 damaged
SOURCES: Daniel L. Haulman and William C. Stancik, eds., *Air Force Aerial Victory Credits: World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam* (Montgomery, AL: U.S. Air Force Historical Research Center, 1988); Yves Le Clair and Brigitte Kolb, *L'armée de l'air dans la battaille de la poche de Colmar* (Turckheim: Musée Mémoral des Combats de la Poche de Colmar, 2004), 225.		

closing of the Colmar Pocket, was only a "trivial" contributor to the systemic collapse of the German war effort. Thousands of locomotives scavenged from the conquered territories of the Reich stood ready to replace those lost to Allied air attacks, and unpowered rail cars were comparatively simple vehicles both difficult to destroy and easily repaired when damaged. Severe coal shortages were of far more consequence to German rail engineers at this stage of the war than lost locomotives and rolling stock.[17] The railways the trains ran on were also relatively simple to repair after being cut by bombing attacks, and vast pools of prisoners of war, foreign conscript laborers, and locally recruited labor gangs could be put to work repairing them after attacking planes had left. As the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey remarked of those who kept the German rail network running, the "will to operate remained to the end."[18]

17. Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *The Collapse of the German War Economy, 1944–1945: Allied Air Power and the German National Railway* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1988), 154.

18. Transport Div, USSBS, "The Effects of Strategic Bombing on German Transportation," 3.

When tactical air strikes against trains, rail yards, and rail lines were paired with repeated, systematic attacks by strategic bombing against major marshaling yards and rail hubs, as they were in other areas of Germany and areas under its occupation, they could have a powerful effect. By early 1945, Allied strategic and tactical air attacks left the German transportation system teetering on the verge of collapse, and with it the economy of the Third Reich. Destruction of rail and water transport facilities throughout Germany resulted in a cascading series of shortages and deficiencies, each amplifying the effect of the others, including coal, coke, steel, labor, electrical power, and communications systems, leading to economic paralysis.[19] But no such pairing of strategic and tactical air power was ever planned or took place in southwestern Germany before or during Operation Cheerful, leaving almost all of the attacks on the German rail network to tactical air units unable to provide adequate mass or weight of effort to disrupt German lines of communication in a systematic or permanent fashion.

Aerial interdiction of the German rail and road network was unable to make a decisive difference during Operation Cheerful, but decisiveness was not the issue at hand. Rather, the most important effect that tactical air power provided during Operation Cheerful was additional points of pressure upon the German defenses guarding the gates to the Rhine. The clearing of the Colmar Pocket in January and February 1945 was yet another battle of attrition, the manner of battle that had dominated in France and the Low Countries since the invasion of Normandy. It was a style of battle that benefitted the Allies, who through years of coordinated strategic planning and socioeconomic mobilization could throw more men and materiel into the battlefield. Not only could the Allies field superior air and ground forces and absorb losses more effectively than their German opponents, years of experience allowed them to employ their larger forces with greater tactical flexibility and effectiveness than those of the Wehrmacht, which was saddled with the unachievable strategic goals of the National Socialist regime and hidebound by its own flawed operational concepts.[20] As the Allies learned in the foothills of the Vosges, the front in Lorraine, and the Hürtgen Forest, and even as the Germans themselves experienced during the Ardennes and Northwind offensives, in a battle of attrition, maneuver quickly lost importance in comparison to the combined effects of weather, terrain, and firepower upon the men and machines on the battlefield and the lines of communication needed to keep them supplied. In such a battle, air power could provide only the last of these elements, and in the Colmar Pocket, even that was limited.

19. Mierzejewski, *Collapse of the German War Economy,* 141–54; USSBS, "Over-All Report (European War)," Sept 30, 1945, AFHRA, 137.301-1, A1123.

20. Cathal J. Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (NY: Oxford UP, 2017), 479, 486–88; Citino, *Wehrmacht's Last Stand*, 3–11.

Appendix

First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)
Tactical Unit Organization
January 20–February 9, 1945

Headquarters, First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)

XII Tactical Air Command (USAAF)

64th Fighter Wing

50th Fighter Group (P–47)
10th Fighter Squadron
81st Fighter Squadron
313th Fighter Squadron

324th Fighter Group (P–47)
314th Fighter Squadron
315th Fighter Squadron
316th Fighter Squadron

358th Fighter Group (P–47)
365th Fighter Squadron
366th Fighter Squadron
367th Fighter Squadron

371st Fighter Group (P–47)
404th Fighter Squadron
405th Fighter Squadron
406th Fighter Squadron

415th Night Fighter Squadron (Beaufighter)

Provisional Reconnaissance Group

34th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron (F–5)
111th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (F–6)
162d Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (F–6)

42d Bombardment Wing (USAAF/French Air Force)

17th Bombardment Group (USAAF, B–26)
34th Bombardment Squadron
37th Bombardment Squadron
95th Bombardment Squadron
432d Bombardment Squadron

320th Bombardment Group (USAAF, B–26)
441st Bombardment Squadron
442d Bombardment Squadron
443d Bombardment Squadron
444th Bombardment Squadron

11th Bombardment Wing (French Air Force, B–26)

31st Bombardment Group
I/19 Bombardment Squadron "Gascogne"
I/22 Bombardment Squadron "Maroc"
II/20 Bombardment Squadron "Bretagne"

34th Bombardment Group
I/32 Bombardment Squadron "Bourgogne"
II/52 Bombardment Squadron "Franche-Comté"
II/63 Bombardment Squadron "Sénégal"

First French Air Corps (French Air Force)

1st Fighter Group (Spitfire)
I/3 Squadron "Corse"
I/7 Squadron "Provence"
II/7 Squadron "Nice"

3d Fighter Group (P–47)
I/4 Squadron "Navarre"
I/5 Squadron "Champagne"

4th Fighter Group (P–47)
II/3 Squadron "Dauphiné"
II/5 Squadron "La Fayette"
III/3 Squadron "Ardennes"

I/33 Photo Reconnaissance Squadron "Belfort" (F–5)

II/33 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron "Savoie" (Spitfire)

Western French Air Force (French)

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MAAF – Mediterranean Allied Air Forces
RAF – Royal Air Force
SHAEF – Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces
SS – Schutzstaffel (Protection Squads)
USAAF – U.S. Army Air Forces
USSTAF – U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Shortly after the Second World War ended, the historical section of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)'s headquarters began to write a historical narrative of the unit before its impending and inevitable dissolution. Unfortunately, as the authors noted, when the headquarters disbanded most of its senior personnel were reassigned before they could be interviewed and almost all operational records were destroyed. None of the provisional air force's three commanders left memoirs, diaries, or substantial record collections related to their time in command, and no decimal file of its headquarters correspondence exists. Surviving records of the provisional air force's subordinate USAAF wings, groups, and squadrons are highly variable in terms of content and completeness. The following documents proved to be of critical importance to reconstruct the activities and efforts of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) during the clearing of the Colmar Pocket. Unless specified otherwise, they are

archived at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base, AL:

Headquarters, First Tactical Air Force (Provisional). "Cheerful and Floorlamp (Reduction of the Colmar Pocket)," Entry 549.322K (C5031). This entry contains extracts of the Colmar Pocket chapter from the 6th Army Group's historical narrative, as well as planning documents and correspondence related to Operation Cheerful and Operation Floorlamp, the interdiction program executed in the late stages of the larger Colmar Pocket operation.

_____. "Combined Operational Summaries, Dec 44/Mar 45," Entry 549.3063 (C5030). The provisional air force's combined operational summaries (COSUMS) are the most important source of operational records that escaped destruction. They include information on mission assignments, sortie tallies, target sites, and munitions expenditures for USAAF and French units, as well as comments on intelligence gathering and ground operations in the 6th Army Group sector. The summaries also include brief sections on the activities of the USAAF Eighth and Ninth Air Forces and the RAF's 2d Tactical Air Force and Bomber Command. The entry also includes some memoranda to U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe detailing operations, but these are not inclusive for the duration of Operation Cheerful and largely duplicative of the information contained in the operational summaries.

_____. "Combined Operational Summaries, Jan 31–Feb 1," Entry 549.606 (C5032). This entry contains some summaries not included in Entry 549.3063.

_____. "History: First Tactical Air Force (Provisional) in the European Theater of Operations, 20 October 1944-21 May 1945," Entry 549.01 (C5025). This is the main historical narrative of the provisional air force. Its content is primarily focused on organizational matters rather than operations.

_____. "Letters of Instruction First TACAF," Entry 549.183-1 (C5026). This entry contains letters of instruction outlaying the commander's intent for the provisional air force.

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of the main USAAF tactical element of the provisional air force documents its service in the Mediterranean and European Theaters of Operation.

Headquarters, 64th Fighter Wing. "Operations and Intelligence Summaries," Entry WG-64-HI (C0010). These are the daily reports of XII Tactical Air Command's fighter-bomber element. AFHRA holds the reports for February 1945, but not for the preceding month. Complete reports for both months are available in the U.S. Seventh Army's records at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Md., in Records Group 407, Entry 427, 107-14.0, Box 2211.

Langmead, Edmund C. "A Report on the First Tactical Air Force (Prov) European Theater of Operations 1944–1945," Entry 168.7011-5 (A1843). Langmead served as the deputy commanding general for administration of the provisional air force and oversaw the provisional air service command supporting its USAAF units. His report, written from a highly personal and critical viewpoint, includes a wealth of primary documents, mostly dealing with logistics, maintenance, and supply issues.

Statistical Control Section, U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe. "First Tactical Air Force (Prov.): Summary of Operations of American Units, 1 November 1944 through 8 May 1945. Jun 30, 1945," Entry 549.308C1 (C5030). This report contains valuable statistics regarding unit attachments, personnel, sortie and aircraft availability rates, munitions expenditures, and other aspects of the provisional air force's USAAF units.

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