



B-29s, THE MARIANAS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AIR POWER

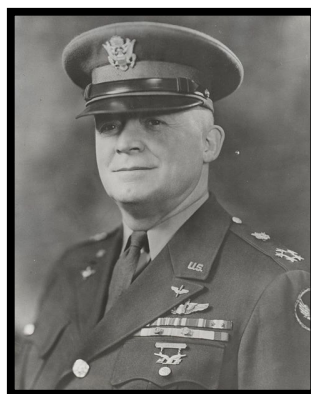
The B-29 operations in the Marianas represent two milestones in the transformation of American air power. First, they marked a necessary departure from both the teachings of the Air Corps Tactical School and the strategy in Europe, which called for precision bombing of enemy military and industrial targets. Instead, the leaders of the B-29 missions put Giulio Douhet’s theories into practice, using area bombings intended to defeat Japan by demoralizing the civilian population.



Giulio Douhet
Source: [Wikipedia](#)

Secondly, the “Superfortress” can be seen as a symbol of the transition of the air corps into its own service. For the first time, the “army of the air” would be an equal to the land and naval forces.

Two figures played preeminent roles in this transformation. Gen. Henry “Hap” Arnold established the 20th Air Force and took direct command in Washington as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The nomenclature is not insignificant. This “air force” was to operate independently of the Army and answerable to Arnold. Indeed, Arnold’s position on the JCS allowed his field commander to have unprecedented power.



General Henry “Hap” Arnold
Source: US Army



The other leading figure was Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, who capitalized on several factors in his campaign to make air power the predominant instrument of war: a free hand in making tactical and even strategic decisions; technology (a highly sophisticated long-range bomber); geography (bases largely isolated from hostile forces); and unfailing loyal crews (men who flew long missions against exceedingly tough odds).



Curtis LeMay
Source: US Army

This environment was rough on the 11-man crews. Long distances (Tokyo is more than 1,500 miles from Saipan, two-and-a-half times the distance from London to Berlin) and the lack of friendly “ditching” areas weighed heavily on crews during the “drag back home” over open ocean.

On 9 March 1945, abandoning all high-altitude, daytime precision attacks, LeMay launched a low-level nighttime raid of Tokyo, his 325 B-29s armed exclusively with incendiary bombs. The attack was devastating: 89,000 people dead, 267,000 buildings destroyed and water in the city’s canals boiled.

Thereafter, the use of incendiaries grew exponentially (limited only by a shortage in April 1945), with nearly 101,000 incendiary bombs dropped on Japanese cities from March to August 1945 compared to 2,300 in the four months preceding the Tokyo fire bomb raid.

Indicative of the power of the emerging Air Force and the independence of the B-29 force in the Marianas, LeMay was convinced that the Superfortress would decide the war. He met with the Joint Chiefs in June 1945, five months before the anticipated invasion of Japan, to argue for a free hand in defeating the Japanese. LeMay later recalled:

Here was a crazy flyboy coming in saying that war could be ended without invasion. We didn’t make much of an imprint. So we went back to the Marianas and did it anyway.

The ultimate firebombing missions came in early August at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the Marianas and the B-29 inaugurating the nuclear age.

The incendiary attacks succeeded in carrying total war to the people: more than 40 percent of the urban area of 66 cities was destroyed, nearly 1 million people killed and 22 million Japanese (30 percent of the country) were left homeless.

The death toll well exceeded Japan’s 780,000 combat casualties.

**The Story of The “Billy Mitchell Group”
468 H-Bomb Group – From the C.B.I. to the Marianas**



The B-29 operations out of the Marianas also demonstrated the potential of an independent air force. The Superfortress gave Arnold and LeMay the opportunity to show that a land invasion could be avoided.

The influence of the B-29 and the Marianas persist to this day. Forward bases that are secure from enemy attack remain part of Air Force strategy. So too is the insistence on overwhelming air power and a willingness to use it so as to economize on ground forces.

**Timothy Spence
The American Military and Its Historical Foundations
22 October 2002**