
Dissecting the Origins of Air-Centric Special Operations Theory¹



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Abstract

This article reexamines the intellectual origins, development, and operational execution of air-centric special operations theory during World War II. For over half a century, historians have offered conflicting narratives as to the origins, development, and initial execution of air-centric special operations theory. In light of newly uncovered historical evidence, this article concludes that each of the conflicting narratives falls significantly short of what the evidentiary record informs.

From 5 March to 6 March 1944 the Allies successfully executed the air invasion of Burma as part of a larger Allied plan to push back Japanese forces in the China-Burma-India Theater and reestablish the land route between India and China. Otherwise known as Operation THURSDAY, the operation involved the use of gliders to land a specialized invasion force deep inside Japanese-occupied territory—a specialized force tasked with establishing an expeditionary airfield, known as Broadway, to land follow-on specialized ground forces, aircraft, and military supplies, all with the purpose of disrupting the Japanese military's infrastructure and lines of communications. The innovative use of air power to

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In India (most likely Imphal), Colonel Philip G. Cochran briefs the Air Commandos as they prepare for Operation Thursday. [Margaret Enloe and the Cortez F. Enloe Estate]

carry out this operation, which at the time was a military first, has led historians to designate Operation THURSDAY as the birth of air-centric special operations theory—that is, a reliance on specialized military air power and tactics to carry out military operations. What made Operation THURSDAY such an innovation at the time was that it essentially flipped conventional air power doctrine on its head. Rather than simply airdrop ground units behind enemy lines as part of a larger ground assault, Operation THURSDAY involved a sustainable and mobile vertical envelopment to wreak havoc on the enemy from within their own territory.

Although historians agree on the significance of Operation THURSDAY, and credit it as the birth of air-centric special operations, they disagree over who should be credited with formulating the concept. There are essentially two schools of thought as to who should be credited. The first school, which this article will refer to as the American school, generally credits U.S. Army Air Forces Colonels Philip G. Cochran and John R. Alison. Meanwhile, the second school, which this article will refer to as the British school, generally credits British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten and Major General Orde C. Wingate.² This is not to say that

2. For some of the more well-known accounts of Operation THURSDAY, see Simon Anglim, *Orde Wingate and the British Army, 1922–1944* (New York: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), 175–212; William T. Y’Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan: Allied Special Operations in World War II Burma* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 88–120; Herbert A. Mason, Jr., Randy G. Bergeron, and James A. Renfrow, Jr., *Operation THURSDAY: Birth of the Air Com-*

there is not some historical overlap between the competing schools of thought. Both schools agree that the concept of air-centric special operations was approved at the August 1943 Quebec Conference, which was attended by the likes of U.S. Army Air Forces General Henry “Hap” Arnold, Mountbatten, and Wingate. There is also agreement between the competing schools that Arnold subsequently recruited Cochran and Alison to lead the Air Commandos, and directed them to work alongside Wingate.³

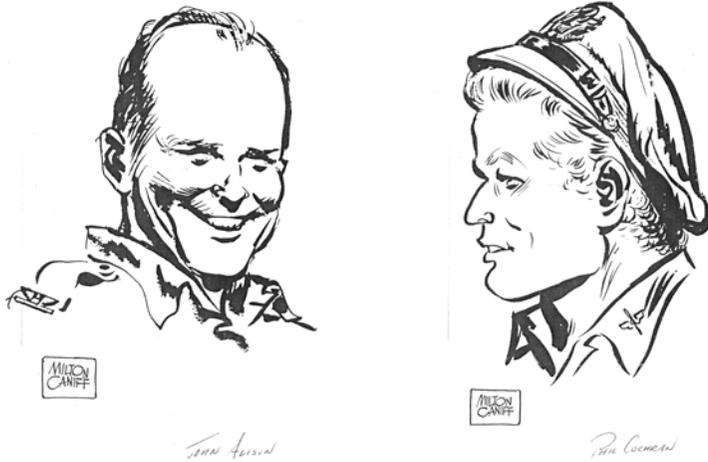
But other than agreeing on these two facts, the two schools of thought diverge significantly. While the American school focuses intently on the contributions of Cochran and Alison and casts British figures as supporting actors, the British school focuses intently on Mountbatten and Wingate and casts the American figures as supporting actors. The reason for this historical divergence chiefly lies with each school failing to research, weigh, and consider the other’s supporting evidence. The American school has compiled its narrative by relying almost solely on American archival sources. The same is true of the British school, albeit from British archival sources. Additionally, at times, both schools failed to conduct comprehensive research beyond unit histories and existing publications, or gave more historical weight to certain accounts over others, all without sufficiently explaining why. There are indeed other methodological concerns with the competing schools of thought. However, the point to be made is, as a matter of history, who should be credited with formulating the air-centric special operations concept is very much in dispute. The intention of this article is to settle this debate by analyzing the historical evidence anew. But before dissecting the origins of air-centric special operations, it is worth expounding on the evidentiary inconsistencies within the respective schools of thought.

Air-Centric Special Operations in the American School of Thought

According to the American school, the genesis of air-centric special operations began with the establishment of Project 9, which would later be renamed the 1st Air Commando Group (1 ACG). The story is one of special operations legend. It

mandos (Montgomery, Ala.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1994), 1–44; David Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits: Redressing the Balance* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1994), 102–44; Shelford Bidwell, *The Chindit War: The Campaign in Burma, 1944* (London: Book Club Associates, 1979), 102–11; Michael Calvert, *Chindits—Long Range Penetration* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 21–43; Christopher Sykes, *Orde Wingate* (New York: Collins, 1958), 449–63; Charles J. Rolo, *Wingate’s Raiders* (New York: Viking Press, 1944), 204–34.

3. See Anglim, *Orde Wingate and the British Army*, 191, 215; Y’Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan*, 70; Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942–45* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 216–19; Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits*, 111; Luigi Rossetto, “Major-General Orde Charles Wingate and the Development of Long Range Penetration” (master’s thesis, Kansas State University, 1982), 249–54; Raymond Callahan, *Burma, 1942–1945* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1979), 138–39; Calvert, *Chindits*, 12; Derek Tulloch, *Wingate in Peace and War* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1972), 120–21; Sykes, *Orde Wingate*, 449–63; Rolo, *Wingate’s Raiders*, 201–3.



Milton Caniff drawings of Colonel John R. Alison (left) and Colonel Philip G. Cochran (right). Caniff's comic strip Terry and the Pirates was based on Cochran's career, including his time as commander of the Air Commandos. [©2017 CLASSIC COOL™. The Milton Caniff Estate]

centers on General Arnold, the commander of the U.S. Army Air Forces, who was taught to fly by the Wright brothers and essentially pioneered military aviation, offering unconditional air support to carry out operations behind Japanese lines in Burma to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Major General Wingate, and Admiral Mountbatten, the head of the new Southeast Asia command. In order to fulfill his promise, Arnold sought a meeting with two field grade officers, Colonels Cochran and Alison, both of whom were already legends in their own right. Cochran, a Silver Star and two-time Distinguished Flying Cross recipient, was known among fighter squadrons as a tactical innovator. He was also the inspiration for well-known cartoonist Milton Caniff's comic strip *Terry and the Pirates*. Meanwhile, Alison, who knew Cochran from their aviation cadet days, was a gritty air combat veteran in his own right. Alison had earned ace status while flying for General Claire Lee Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force in China and was, at the time, commander of the famed 1st American Volunteer Group (1 AVG) Flying Tigers.⁴

At their meeting in late August 1943, Arnold informed Cochran and Alison of the need to create a specialized air unit to carry out Wingate's military operations in Burma. Although neither Cochran nor Alison expressed a desire to take on

4. See Y'Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan*, 14–40; Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, *Operation THURSDAY*, 8–11; Barbara P. King and Edward M. Leete, "The 1st Air Commando Group of World War II: An Historical Perspective" (research study, United States Air Force Air Command and Staff College, 1977), 16–28.

Arnold's mission, Arnold assigned it to them anyway, gave them virtually infinite latitude to execute it, and issued the order: "To hell with the paperwork, go out and fight!" Subsequently, Cochran and Alison worked with Wingate to execute Operation THURSDAY and the rest, as they say, is history.⁵

As supporting evidence for this story, the American school largely relies on a *National Geographic* article written by General Arnold after Operation THURSDAY and published in August 1944, as well as interviews conducted with Cochran and Alison. On their face, the evidentiary sources appear valid. But on closer examination the sources present a number of objectivity problems. Starting with the *National Geographic* article, what the American school seemingly failed to consider was the article's intended purpose and audience. The article was not so much an objective account of the facts as it was an attempt by Arnold to promote the success of joint operations with the Allies and garner public support for the war effort. Noticeably absent from Arnold's article was any mention of the trials and tribulations associated with executing Operation THURSDAY, and rightfully so given the passing of Wingate in an accidental plane crash on 24 March.⁶ This should have given any historian pause in accepting the entire content of Arnold's article as factual.

The historical interviews of Cochran and Alison are equally concerning. Each was conducted well after the events of Operation THURSDAY took place. In the case of Cochran, the only useful interview was conducted thirty-one years after the operation, and in the case of Alison's three interviews, the earliest was sixteen years after.⁷ Given the significant time lapse between the dates of the interviews and the events of Operation THURSDAY, the architects of the American school should have proceeded cautiously considering that the memories of Cochran and Alison would have been severely deteriorated, or perhaps modified over the years.⁸

At different points in their lives, both Cochran and Alison in fact acknowledged this objectivity problem. In a 25 May 1956 letter to Albert F. Simpson, chief of the United States Air Force Historical Division, Cochran wrote that the "particular

5. Henry H. Arnold, "The Aerial Invasion of Burma," *National Geographic* 86 (August 1944): 129; Colonel Philip G. Cochran, interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 20–21 October and 11 November 1975, USAF Oral History Collection, Air Force Historical Research Agency (hereafter cited as AFHRA), Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama; John R. Alison, interview by Kenneth Leish, July 1960, reel number K1213, AFHRA; Major General John R. Alison, interview by Major Scottie S. Thompson, 22–28 April 1979, USAF Oral History Collection.

6. Certainly for General Arnold to reveal operationally sensitive information, such as the number of casualties and aircraft lost, in an open source medium would have been a breach of operational security. Still, the point to be made is that General Arnold's purpose was to elicit support for the war effort, not factually recount events as they happened. See Arnold, "The Aerial Invasion of Burma," 129–44.

7. See Colonel Philip G. Cochran, interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 20–21 October and 11 November 1975, USAF Oral History Collection; John R. Alison, interview by Kenneth Leish, July 1960, reel number K1213, AFHRA.

8. See Peter Mead, *Orde Wingate and the Historians* (Braunton, Devon, U.K.: Merlin Books 1987), 79–82.

letters and directives from General Arnold giving a certain latitude in planning and executing” what would become Operation THURSDAY no longer existed.⁹ The only historical sources left to even capture “the atmosphere of the time, the spirit behind certain of General Arnold’s verbal orders and attitudes,” were personal opinions, which were “perhaps only prejudices” by now.¹⁰ Then there was Alison, who in a 15 August 1972 letter to Derek Tulloch discussing an *Air Force Magazine* article on Major General Wingate’s final flight, wrote that the article “illustrates how quickly people forget what actually happened and rearrange their memories according to what they think happened. This [article provides] an interesting emotional vignette. I am sure that it is the way the author remembers the events. Sometimes fading memories are mistaken for history.”¹¹

Yet although both Cochran and Alison acknowledged the objectivity problems associated with relying on distant memory to reconstruct history, the two were just as susceptible to revising it. A fitting example is Cochran’s and Alison’s recounting of their relationship with Brigadier General William D. Old, the commander of Troop Carrier Command. Based on a number of documents, it is evident that the relationship between Old, Cochran, and the Air Commandos was far from cordial. Not only did Old publicly disagree with the conceptual premise behind Operation THURSDAY, but Old resented that the Air Commandos operated independently.¹² It was also Old who complained about the Air Commandos’ “unkempt” appearance during the execution phase of Operation THURSDAY, which prompted Cochran to issue his famous “tongue in the cheek” shave memo to the Air Commandos operating behind enemy lines. Cochran joked that the “beards and attempts at beards” were “not appreciated by visitors” like Old, but that “work comes before shaving” and they would “never be criticized for being unkempt if [they] are so damn busy [they] can’t take the time to doll up.”¹³ Lastly, there was Old’s intentional omission of the Air Commandos in his Operation THURSDAY after action report, which in many ways was a slight against Cochran, Alison, and the Air Commandos.¹⁴

9. Philip G. Cochran to Albert F. Simpson, 25 May 1956, folder 1, box 4, Major Cortez F. Enloe Papers, U.S. Air Force Academy Library, Colorado (hereafter cited as Enloe Papers).

10. Ibid.

11. John R. Alison to Derek Tulloch, 15 August 1972, folder 3, box 2, Enloe Papers. See also John R. Alison, letter to Derek Tulloch, 17 July 1972, folder 3, box 2, Enloe Papers (praising Tulloch for his discussion of Wingate’s final flight, and admitting the pilot’s inexperience would not have overcome a B-25 engine failure). For the article Alison was referring to, see Howard Sparks, “The Hand That Nobody Won,” *Air Force Magazine* 55 (August 1972): 70.

12. Y’Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan*, 86.

13. Ibid., 73–74. See also Captain Cortez F. Enloe, Journal, dated 5 March 1944, 53–54, folder 3, box 3, Enloe Papers. For a hard copy of Cochran’s shave memo, see Memorandum by Colonel Philip Cochran, 13 March 1944, folder 11, box 7, Enloe Papers.

14. William D. Old, “Memorandum, Troop Carrier Headquarters,” 16 March 1944, Operation THURSDAY, AIR 23-1945, The National Archives (TNA), United Kingdom (hereafter AIR 23-1945).

Despite Old's disdain for the Air Commandos, neither Cochran nor Alison ever acknowledged that there was a problem. In fact, during an April 1979 interview, when Alison was asked about the rumors of a fractured relationship, he immediately dismissed any negative rumors as "no real problem" and claimed that Old had always supported the Air Commandos "despite what you might hear."¹⁵ As well intentioned, noble, and professional as Alison intended to be in the interview, his 1979 assessment of Old was in direct contradiction to the evidentiary record, particularly what Air Commando flight surgeon Captain Cortez Enloe witnessed and later jotted down in his personal journal. According to Enloe, it was in the very midst of the initial glider invasion on 5 March, at the point where Alison had cut off all communication, and it was unknown whether the landing force was under attack by the Japanese, that Old took the opportunity to berate Cochran for what he perceived to be Operation THURSDAY's failure:

[S]hortly after two, [John] Alison called [Philip Cochran] saying, "Don't send anymore tonight." It was apparent that the operation was not going perfectly but surely on the West of the invasion there was nothing serious. Everyone was perplexed and no one could understand the reason for the sudden cryptic message from inside Burma. Phil reacted quickly: "If little John says no more planes then that is good enough for me. Stop all air operations and call everyone back until we find out what's up." It appeared as if the [*sic*] had fallen when Wingate received a message from his ground Commander, Brigadier Calvert reading in code "Soya Link" meaning "brother on the ground." Then Broadway radio shutdown. It was like a nightmare . . .

Phil looked haggard as he stood in the doorway of the lighted command tent. He was tired, dead tired as only a man who has directed every energy of his being toward our goal can be. This was the greatest night of his life, yet he had lost the false sense of frivolity with . . . his more serious thoughts. He was serious as he remarked: "Looks like they have got us Doc. God damn it, why can't I be there in the fight?" And then the real Phil came back for a second as with the slightest suppression of a smile he said: "We ain't lost yet or have we?" . . .

At least Phil had started for bed when he encountered General Old. For Phil it was an unfortunate encounter for Old had all along been piqued at being left out of the picture when he had dominated the American scene for publicity for so long. He must have felt some chagrin at having his first pilot be relegated to flying co-pilot to our own second pilots who took over troop carrier ships for the invasion and in our troubles he found his opportunity. Like hitting a man while he is down, Old made capital of the allied difficulties that night.

15. Major General John R. Alison, interview by Major Scottie S. Thompson, 22–28 April 1979, 370.

Employing his rank to get Cochran's attention, he harangued Phil for nearly a half an hour on his "failure." He said the Commandos were an unkempt, undisciplined rabble that had no idea what they were doing. He said he knew double tows wouldn't work and he hoped that now Phil wouldn't be so hard headed about it. It was a strange display for an officer, much [more] a general, to gloat over what then seemed [like] the failure of his own army & unfair as a man to take the opportunity when he cares of the man, who had tried so hard, [then] to berate him and cry, almost jubilantly: "I told you so!"¹⁶

Certainly it is plausible that Enloe's account of what transpired between Cochran and Old was blown out of proportion, but Enloe was not the only person to make note of Old's demeaning behavior that night. In a 10 March 1944 official report, British Air Marshal Jackie Baldwin, the 3rd Tactical Air Force commander, also noted how Old openly berated Cochran.¹⁷

The overall point to be made about the American school and the origins of air-centric special operations is that the supporting evidence leaves historians with more questions than answers. Why exactly did Arnold so eagerly agree to support Wingate's mission in Burma? What, if any, orders or guidance did Arnold give to Cochran and Alison regarding the formation of the Air Commandos? Are we really to believe—as the American school claims—that Arnold gave Cochran and Alison virtually infinite latitude in forming and developing the Air Commandos? What was the inspiration for Operation THURSDAY and on whose idea was it premised?

Air-Centric Special Operations in the British School of Thought

According to the British school, the story begins with the failure of Operation LONGCLOTH (February–May 1943), which involved Major General Wingate's Long Range Penetration Groups (LRPG) marching deep into Japanese-occupied Burma to conduct special warfare. Given that the LRPGs were operating behind Japanese lines, and therefore removed from standard military resupply, the success of Operation LONGCLOTH hinged on executing nighttime airdrops. Unfortunately for Wingate and his LRPGs, the resupply missions were executed infrequently. This in turn resulted in the LRPGs experiencing frequent starvation, severe exhaustion, and illness. What did not help matters was Wingate's inability to extract any of his ill or wounded LRPG troops; in fact, often he had to leave

16. Captain Cortez F. Enloe, Journal, dated 5 March 1944, 48–53, folder 3, box 3, Enloe Papers. This was not the only instance in which Enloe noted Old's disdain for the Air Commandos. See *Ibid.*, 20 March 1944, 264–65 ("Old . . . on several occasions had never let an opportunity pass to make a snide remark to us—to criticize our camp—and to attempt to discourage the operation"). What makes Enloe's journal of such importance is it remains the only surviving day-to-day personal account of Operation THURSDAY from the perspective of an Air Commando.

17. Air Marshal Jackie Baldwin, "Report to Air Chief Marshal Peirse," 10 March 1944, Operation THURSDAY: Allied Landings in North East Burma, AIR 23-7655, TNA (hereafter AIR 23-7655).



Colonel John R. Alison (second from left) and Major General Orde Wingate (fifth from left) after the safe arrival of the Chindits from the 77th Indian Brigade at the expeditionary landing strip Broadway [U.S. Air Force Academy archives]

the ill and wounded behind to complete the mission. These unfortunates were generally never heard from again.

Ultimately, it was the trials, tribulations, and failures of Operation LONGCLOTH that inspired Wingate to formulate the concept of air-centric special operations. The idea was subsequently briefed to Prime Minister Churchill and later at the 1943 Quebec Conference, where Admiral Mountbatten enlisted General Arnold to provide Wingate's LRPGs with air support. It was then Arnold who assigned Colonels Cochran and Alison to work alongside Wingate and coordinate American air power to carry out Operation THURSDAY. And to honor Mountbatten for his service as commander of the British Commandos, Arnold later renamed the specialized air unit the Air Commandos.¹⁸

On its face, the British school's account seems historically credible. It is undisputed that the lessons learned from Operation LONGCLOTH influenced Wingate to advocate for dedicated airlift platforms, and there is certainly documentary evidence that suggests Wingate and Mountbatten were in fact responsible for the formulation and development of air-centric special operations. However, a closer look at the evidence reveals two substantial deficiencies. First and foremost, a

18. See, for example, Anglim, *Orde Wingate and the British Army*, 175–80; Sykes, *Orde Wingate*, 449–63.

perusal of the evidentiary sources reveals that the architects of the British school never went beyond the British perspective, and therefore never tested the validity of Wingate's and Mountbatten's claims in formulating and developing air-centric special operations. Second, and equally concerning, the plan that Wingate briefed at the Quebec Conference—as well as other plans drafted by the British general—was in no way comparable to what would become Operation THURSDAY.¹⁹

Thus, much like the American school, the British school's account on the origins of air-centric special operations leaves us with more questions than answers. Are Wingate's and Mountbatten's claims to air-centric special operations supported by the totality of the evidence? Are they in conflict? If Wingate's and Mountbatten's claims are supported, how exactly did Wingate's plan briefed at the Quebec Conference change to become Operation THURSDAY? If there is conflict, how is one to distinguish what is fact from fiction?

Rethinking the Origins of Air-Centric Special Operations

In the two preceding sections, the historical deficiencies regarding the origins of air-centric special operations were unpacked and explained, leaving a series of unanswered questions. In cases like this, historians generally seek out the answers in one of two ways. The first approach would be to compare and contrast the competing schools of thought and try to explain why one school's account is more plausible than the other. The second approach would be to find as much consensus between the competing schools as possible, discard the conflicting portions as unknowns, and inform the reader of the findings. In the case of air-centric special operations, there is a problem, however, with relying on either of these approaches. They both require that all the historical evidence has been disclosed, yet, as it turns out for the story of air-centric special operations, this is not the case.

What both the American and British schools overlooked is that the concept of air-centric special operations and what would become Operation THURSDAY were not born from Major General Wingate's briefing at the 1943 Quebec Conference or from the innovative minds of Colonels Cochran and Alison. Rather, the concept was formulated in May 1942 by U.S. Army Air Forces Major

19. For supporting evidence suggesting Wingate and Mountbatten were responsible for the genesis of air-centric special operations, see Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 216–19; Report, “First Air Commando Invasion of Burma,” 29 March 1944, AIR 23-1945; Derek Tulloch to wife, 16 March 1944, folder 2, box 6, Enloe Papers; Major General Orde C. Wingate, “Covering Letter to Report on Air Borne Movements of Two Brigades of Special Force in Operation THURSDAY,” 19 March 1944, Second “Wingate” Expedition 1944 Operation THURSDAY 3rd Indian Division, vol. 2, AIR 23-1946, TNA (hereafter AIR 23-1946); Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to Major General Orde C. Wingate, 19 March 1944, folder 11, box 7, Enloe Papers; Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 28 March 1944, box 6, President's Secretary's File, 1933–1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt: Papers as President, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York (hereafter cited as FDRL). See also Unknown, “Allied Aims in Burma,” *Times* (London), 21 March 1941, 4.

General George C. Kenney in a paper titled "Air Force Offensive-Defensive Basic Unit."²⁰ Kenney, who commanded all U.S. Army and Allied air forces in the Southwest Pacific from August 1942 to the final battles of World War II, was an innovator throughout his career. In 1933, it was Kenney, inspired by the ideas of Italian general and air power theorist Giulio Douhet, who challenged the existing defensive composition of U.S. air forces in an Army War College thesis.²¹ It was also Kenney who solved Arnold's problem of transporting four-ton trucks via airlift. Seeing that the trucks were too large to fit in a C-47 aircraft, Kenney devised cutting the trucks in half with acetylene torches, loading and shipping the halves, and having them reassembled once in theater.²² The idea actually worked and U.S. Army General George C. Marshall was so impressed that for the rest of his life he introduced Kenney as "the guy that sawed the trucks in half."²³

When Kenney presented Arnold with the concept of air-centric special operations, the two generals had already developed a mutual admiration.²⁴ Commanding the Fourth Air Force in May 1942, Kenney wrote to Arnold of an "Air Blitz Unit" consisting of a P-39 squadron, a B-25 squadron, two transport squadrons, an airdrome defense unit, and an aircraft warning unit. The "Air Blitz Unit" was intended to be a self-contained force, which could operate in "sparsely settled countries."²⁵ To secure a runway for incoming aircraft, Kenney proposed "parachuting a small detachment."²⁶ Although Kenney intended the "Air Blitz Unit" to operate in open terrain theaters like North Africa and the Middle East, he foresaw instances where the concept could be employed in more dense and less traverse theaters, to include India. Kenney's idea was simple yet innovative. He thought it was "high time" the Army made its "air units completely air borne," not simply tools to advance ground forces as Tactical Air Commands. In Kenney's mind, this aerial "Joe Louis" would execute operational movements "the

20. Major General George C. Kenney to Lieutenant General Henry H. Arnold, 18 May 1942, reel number 84, General Henry H. Arnold Papers, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter Arnold Papers); Memorandum, "Air Force Offensive-Defensive Basic Unit," 17 May 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers.

21. Captain George C. Kenney, "The Proper Composition of the Air Force, U.S." (thesis, Army War College, 29 April 1933); Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907-1960*, vol. 1 (Montgomery, Ala.: Air University Press, 1989), 69.

22. General George C. Kenney, interview, 18 July 1969, 24-25, Henry H. Arnold Murray-Green Collection, box 68, folder 5, Air Force Academy Library (hereafter Murray-Green Collection).

23. *Ibid.*, 25.

24. *Ibid.*, 18-19, 24.

25. Major General George C. Kenney to Lieutenant General Henry H. Arnold, 18 May 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers; Memorandum, "Air Force Offensive-Defensive Basic Unit," 17 May 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers.

26. Major General George C. Kenney to Lieutenant General Henry H. Arnold, 18 May 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers.

like of which our Air Force has never known, but identical to that which will be encountered in any other part of the world."²⁷

Arnold strongly endorsed Kenney's proposal, writing, "The necessity for offensive air forces which are capable of advancing by 'fire and movement' has long presented a problem to me."²⁸ Arnold noted how the U.S. Army Air Forces had yet to devise an "effective way of operating without being tied to the concrete and fixed installations of core or lead permanent bases, a condition which effectively limits our ability to take advantage of the characteristic mobility of our weapon."²⁹ There was a problem, however, with carrying out Kenney's proposal—logistics. It was, in Arnold's words, the "greatest problem" because air transport alone could not provide the "essential gasoline, ammunition and bombs" that a forward-deployed air unit would require to be operationally effective.³⁰ It was here that Arnold proposed that Kenney use gliders as the logistics solution.³¹

Arnold became intrigued with the concept of glider operations following the 1940 German attack on Fort Eben-Emael in Belgium. At the time of the attack, Fort Eben-Emael was considered the lynchpin of the Belgian line of defense. In fact, military experts had calculated that should the Germans ever advance on Fort Eben-Emael, it could withstand an attack for up to thirty days. Yet with just eleven gliders and seventy-two paratroopers, armed with high explosives, the vastly outnumbered Germans were able to surprise the Belgians, subdue the fort, and facilitate the German Army's advance. This was soon followed by the fall of France and the withdrawal of the British at Dunkirk.³²

It was the successful attack on Fort Eben-Emael that essentially prompted Arnold to reexamine the use of gliders for offensive operations.³³ What resulted was the expansion of air-to-ground operational capabilities within the U.S. military. Arnold was made aware of this expansion in a September 1941 memo, which

27. Memorandum, "Air Force Offensive-Defensive Basic Unit," 17 May 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers.

28. Lieutenant General Henry H. Arnold to Major General George C. Kenney, 10 June 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. See, for example, William H. Nicholas, "Gliders—Silent Weapons of the Sky," *National Geographic* 86 (August 1944): 149.

33. See Major Manuel A. Conley, "Whispering Wings: America's World War II Combat Glider Experience," *The Retired Officer*, June 1980, 26. Arnold's decision to reexamine the use of gliders for offensive operations was reinforced following the Germans' use of gliders to invade Crete in 1941. See, for example, Ansel E. Talbert, "Leaders in U.S. Army and Navy Favor Use of Gliders as Result of Crete Invasion," *Oakland (Calif.) Tribune*, 29 August 1941, 4; "Arnold Praises Gliders in Army," *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*, 14 July 1941, 24; "Air Corps to be Trained in Use of Glider," *Shreveport (La.) Times*, 14 July 1941, 2; "General Arnold Tells Glider Banquet U.S. Plans Sailplane Force," *Fresno (Calif.) Bee*, 14 July 1941, 3. See also "Nazi Glider Lessons," *Rochester (N.Y.) Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 July 1942, 8.

“strongly stressed” how gliders could provide an “outstanding new development in the theory of warfare; namely, envelopment of the enemy from the air.”³⁴ In the memo, Arnold argued that the use of gliders could prove “just as revolutionary in its effect on warfare of the future as the musket was in the battles against the knights of old,” and it “can be logically predicted that during the present war, and in the years to come, every alert military leader and technician will reach out in all directions for new methods of attack from the air and for new means to accomplish this third dimensional envelopment.”³⁵

Within less than a year, the development of new glider capabilities, to include their air extraction from the ground, was well underway. However, Arnold had yet to devise an optimal way to incorporate these capabilities within the larger U.S. Army Air Forces. Herein lies the importance of Kenney’s Air Blitz Unit proposal. It provided Arnold with the answer. Although Arnold cautioned Kenney that glider operations were still being “studied and developed” and therefore may not be the answer to the Air Blitz Unit’s logistical problems, Arnold promised Kenney on 10 June 1942 that the proposal would be forwarded and considered.³⁶

A week later, Kenney’s proposal was received by Lieutenant General Carl A. Spaatz’s Commando Division, with Arnold’s recommendation that the staff “get busy on this right away.”³⁷ The late historian William T. Y’Blood, author of *Air Commandos Against Japan*, wrote that at this point Kenney’s proposal “disappeared into bureaucratic limbo,” yet seemingly “planted the seeds of a special USAAF commando unit.”³⁸ Unfortunately, if Y’Blood had investigated a bit further, he would have learned that Kenney’s proposal did not just “plant the seed”; it was officially approved. This is evidenced by a 17 July press release by General Arnold on the formation of a new “Troop Carrier Command” consisting of an “air commando force”:

This air-borne attack force does not give us an instantaneous or cheap solution to our war problem. Its creation is calling for a stupendous effort. The time when it will attain its full power is still a long way off . . . Glider pilots and air-borne combat troops will be in the forefront of attacks . . . The importance of these swiftly moving combat teams cannot be overestimated. This will be a self-contained force whose soldiers, equipment and supplies are all transported by air. It will be able and trained to strike the enemy where he is least prepared. Although many details must be kept secret concerning its exact size, composition, tactics, objectives,

34. Glider Memorandum, 10 September 1941, reel number 129, Arnold Papers.

35. Ibid.

36. Lieutenant General Henry H. Arnold to Major General George C. Kenney, 10 June 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers.

37. Memorandum, “Air Force Offensive-Defensive Basic Unit,” 16 June 1942, reel number 84, Arnold Papers.

38. Y’Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan*, 11.

and when and where it will strike it can now be revealed that in size, equipment and fire power the air-borne army ultimately will exceed anything the world has yet seen.³⁹

This first attempt at establishing the Air Commandos proved rather unsuccessful. Although Arnold may have wanted to establish a “self-contained” Air Commando force, air-centric special operations never developed beyond basic troop carrier, glider, and parachute operations.⁴⁰ Despite this shortfall, noting the 1942 establishment of the Air Commandos is significant in two respects. First, it refutes the claim that the name “Air Commandos” was an homage to Admiral Mountbatten. Not only was Mountbatten not involved with the 1942 establishment of the Air Commandos, but the term “commando” had been used for years to describe specialized military units of all types.⁴¹ Second and more importantly, the 1942 establishment of the Air Commandos predates by more than a year the historical timelines of both the American and British schools.

39. The press release appeared in newspapers across the United States. See “U.S. Air Commandos Prepare for New Offensive Actions,” *Lock Haven (Pa.) Express*, 21 July 1942; “Air Commandos Set to Strike Enemy Where Least Prepared,” *Oakland (Calif.) Tribune*, 18 July 1942, 3; United Press, “Army Forms Corps of Air Commandos,” *New York Times*, 18 July 1942, 6; “Airborne Army to Be World’s Best—Arnold,” *Washington Post*, 18 July 1942, 3; “U.S. Air Commandos to be ‘Greatest Ever,’” *Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal*, 18 July 1942, 2; “Army Reveals Air Commando Raiding Group,” *Rochester (N.Y.) Democrat and Chronicle*, 18 July 1942, 7; “U.S. Training Air-Commandos to Raid Enemies, Arnold Announces,” *Wilkes-Barre (Pa.) Record*, 18 July 1942, 1; “Air Commandos,” *Cincinnati (Ohio) Enquirer*, 18 July 1942, 3; “Air Commando Force Created By Army as Spearhead of Attacks,” *St. Louis (Mo.) Star and Times*, 18 July 1942, 2; “Army Trains Mighty Air Commando Force,” *Des Moines (Iowa) Register*, 18 July 1942, 5; “U.S. Starts Aerial Commando Force,” *Baltimore (Md.) Sun*, 18 July 1942, 1; “Air Commando Unit Training,” *Salem (Ore.) Statesmen Journal*, 18 July 1942, 2; “U.S. Training Air Commandos for World’s Largest Sky Arm,” *Detroit (Mich.) Free Press*, 18 July 1942, 3; “Reveal Air Force Training U.S. Commandos,” *Bakersfield Californian*, 18 July 1942, 2.

40. See Donald E. Keyhoe, “This Week: Commandos on Wings,” *Indianapolis (Ind.) Star*, 1 November 1942, 10; “Ground Troops Will Support Air Forces,” *Sedalia (Mo.) Democrat*, 22 October 1942; “Notable News Events in Pictures,” *Wellington (Tex.) Leader*, 10 September 1942, 13; “Glider ‘Commandos of Air’ Training at U. of Detroit,” *Detroit Free Press*, 23 August 1942, 5; Bill Boni, “New Glider-Pickup May Be Used by Air Commandos,” *Alton (Ill.) Evening Telegraph*, 29 July 1942, 2; “Air Commandos, Tough Fighting Men, Eager to Hit Axis,” *Indianapolis (Ind.) Star*, 19 July 1942, 3; “Air Commandos Begin Training Near Columbus,” *Logan (Ohio) Daily News*, 6 July 1942, 1. It is worth noting that before General Arnold’s press release, the glider pilots were referred to as “Winged Commandos.” See “Winged Commandos: Glider Pilots in Demand,” *Abilene (Tex.) Reporter-News*, 21 June 1942, 6; “U.S. ‘Winged Commandos’ Seen as Hint of Air-Borne Allied Invasion of Europe,” *Bradford (Pa.) Evening Star and Daily Record*, 18 June 1942, 8; “Winged Commandos Train,” *Idaho Falls (Idaho) Post-Register*, 15 June 1942, 4.

41. Here, it is worth noting that the first use of term “Air Commandos” was used to describe a group of specially trained U.S. Navy fighting pilots. The name did not stick. See “UNC to Train Roughest, Toughest Air Commandos,” *Daily Tar Heel* (Chapel Hill, N.C.), 24 May 1942, 1. See also “U.S. Trains Air Commandos, Leads in Pilot Training,” *Salem (Ohio) News*, 23 May 1942, 6.

As a matter of historiography, it is impossible to fully explain why every historian who previously examined the origins of air-centric special operations omitted the 1942 Air Commandos. There is no evidence to indicate that these omissions were intentional, for nothing in the official records of the 1 ACG, L RPGs, or Operation THURSDAY remotely suggests that the origins of air-centric special operations date back to 1942. It seems that except for Arnold, and perhaps Kenney, the key figures involved in planning and executing what would become Operation THURSDAY (Wingate, Cochran, Alison, Mountbatten, and others) were completely unaware of their establishment. The fact that the origins of air-centric special operations predate the longstanding historical accounts by a year does not diminish the overall importance of Operation THURSDAY. It does, however, change our understanding of what actually transpired in 1943, why it transpired, and who was truly driving the air-centric special operations concept.

At the 1943 Quebec Conference it was Arnold who agreed to provide Wingate with air support. It was also Arnold who met with Cochran and Alison, gave them virtual *carte blanche* to form a specialized air unit capable of assisting Wingate, and issued the order, "To hell with the paperwork, go out and fight!"⁴² While this modest telling of the air-centric special operations origins story can be found in a number of contemporaneous documents, it is likely more fiction than fact.⁴³ Considering Arnold's role in devising air-centric special operations a year earlier, are we really to believe that Arnold whimsically decided to provide Wingate with hundreds of aircraft without a predisposition of how he wanted to use them? Also, are we really to believe that someone as educated and cerebral in air power doctrine as Arnold gave two field grade officers minimal guidance in creating a specialized air unit? Last, are we really to believe two field grade officers, Cochran and Alison, put together the Air Commandos based on their own impulses or that they somehow surmised the concept of air-centric special operations from their personal meetings with Wingate?

Certainly, accepting each of these historical propositions as true makes for a great story. And while it is certainly plausible that Cochran and Alison created an air-centric special operations plan of their own, one separate and distinct from Kenney's Air Blitz Unit proposal and Arnold's addition of gliders, a comparison of the two plans shows significant overlap. Not only did both plans cut directly against conventional air power doctrine at a period in time when aircraft were generally confined to conducting reconnaissance, deploying munitions to predetermined targets, or aiding in the advancement of ground forces, they both involved the establishment of forward-based airfields to strike the enemy from

42. See, for example, Y'Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan*, 11, 25–26.

43. For some contemporary documents confirming this account, see Arnold, "The Aerial Invasion of Burma," 129–30; John R. Alison, "Glider Invasion—A Jungle Epic," *New York Times*, 1 May 1944, SM12; Memorandum, "Summary of Operations of First Commando Group," 10 April 1944, reel number 106, Arnold Papers; Report, "First Air Commando Invasion of Burma," 29 March 1944, AIR 23-1945.

within through the use of fighters, bombers, transport aircraft, light planes, and gliders. At the very minimum, the similarity between the two plans suggests that Arnold must have shared his and Kenney's air-centric special operations concept with Cochran and Alison.⁴⁴ The use of light planes and gliders by Cochran and Alison, in particular, suggests that such a conversation had to have taken place at some point. Unfortunately, historians will never know the details of that particular conversation or other conversations.⁴⁵

Another part of the air-centric special operations origins story altered by the 1942 establishment of the Air Commandos is the roles of Wingate and Mountbatten. The British school of thought largely credits Wingate with formulating air-centric special operations and Operation THURSDAY. In a 1994 study on Wingate, David Rooney claimed that the "real purpose" of Operation THURSDAY was "to put into practice Wingate's original idea of the Stronghold" —an idea that involved each expeditionary airfield maintaining fortified structures and bunkers, where military personnel could rally and attempt to hold off an enemy attack.⁴⁶ In a more recent study, Simon Anglim suggested that Operation THURSDAY was the "final evolution" of Wingate's military thought on the concept of LRPGs.⁴⁷ Standing on their own, both of these studies are rather convincing in their claims. However, when the supporting evidence within these studies is compared to the actual timeline of events, particularly the 1942 development of air-centric special operations, they fail to withstand scrutiny.

But even if we completely remove the 1942 evidence from the air-centric special operations origins story, there are glaring problems with accepting Wingate as the intellectual forefather. The most notable problem is the actual content of Wingate's initial plans. The plans contain nothing beyond providing aerial resupply to the LRPGs.⁴⁸ Wingate's 10 August 1943 memorandum on LRPGs expressly states that air power was intended to be limited to dropping "airborne and parachutist troops," as well as the use of Royal Air Force controllers to direct resupply with "great accuracy on targets invisible and undetectable from the air."⁴⁹ It is only after Wingate met with Cochran a month later that one can

44. Alison later stated as much in a phone interview. See John R. Alison, interview by Dr. Green, 12 August 1971, 4, folder 5, box 68, Murray-Green Collection.

45. As Cochran admitted in 1956, there is no surviving documentation as to what exactly Arnold briefed and directed. See Philip G. Cochran to Albert F. Simpson, 25 May 1956, folder 1, box 4, Enloe Papers.

46. Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits*, 111.

47. Anglim, *Orde Wingate and the British Army*, 212.

48. Through January 1944 the discussions centered on the Air Commandos providing aerial resupply. See, for example, Major General George E. Stratemeyer, Personal Diary, 1 January 1944 Thru 31 December 1944, 7, box 1, Thomas and Margaret Overlander Collection (hereafter Overlander Collection), U.S. Air Force Academy Library, Colorado; Third Tactical Air Force, "Outline Plan Operation 'THURSDAY,'" folder 10, box 6, Enloe Papers.

49. Brigadier General Orde Wingate, "Forces of Long-Range Penetration," 10 August 1943, folder 11, box 7, Enloe Papers.

see how the operational plan gradually changed and began to reflect what would become Operation THURSDAY.

Yet Wingate's Operation THURSDAY after action report implies that the entire operation, to include the air-centric special operations theory on which it was premised, was his doing.⁵⁰ In the report, Wingate bestowed praise on the Air Commandos for "supporting" his operation, yet he omitted any reference to their role in the planning:

It is . . . important to bear in mind that this plan was the first plan for the use of airborne forces which applied a novel principle. This principle may be defined as follows: Instead of being mesmerized by the fact that the enemy is operating from an airfield, or series of airfields, which it is essential to neutralize, and therefore conclude that to do so we must put down air borne forces in the immediate neighbourhood of their objectives, the principle was followed of establishing instead our own airfields and Stronghold. These were to be where the enemy was NOT in force, and could not arrive in force for a considerable time. This resulted in our obtaining at trifling cost a defended airport just as useful as BHAMO or INDAW [airfield], and without the hazard of descending out of the sky upon or near enemy defences.⁵¹

Here, Wingate sold the entire operation as being constructed around the stronghold concept.⁵² It was a concept Wingate hoped to improve on after the completion of Operation THURSDAY. "It is, however, evident that unless the enemy is confronted with the establishment of several Strongholds simultaneously," wrote Wingate, "he will be able ultimately to forbid the use of a single one by any type of aircraft, provided he is able to concentrate all his forces on one strip."⁵³ From Wingate's perspective, the only solution to this problem was to construct a "joint defence of the Strongholds, [through] the joint establishment of two or more strips simultaneously."⁵⁴ But even if we completely remove the 1942 establishment of the Air Commandos, there are two historical problems with relying on Wingate's stronghold as the conceptual origin of air-centric special operations.

First, it places events in 1943 out of sequence. It would mean Wingate devised the stronghold concept first—that is, before the air-centric concepts developed by Kenney and Arnold were tried and tested by Cochran, Alison, and the Air

50. Major General Orde C. Wingate, "Covering Letter to Report on Air Borne Movements of Two Brigades of Special Force in Operation THURSDAY," 19 March 1944, AIR 23-1946.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Anglim, *Orde Wingate and the British Army*, 191–98; Mead, *Orde Wingate and the Historians*, 107–10; Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits*, 111; Sykes, *Orde Wingate*, 512–13.

53. Major General Orde C. Wingate, "Covering Letter to Report on Air Borne Movements of Two Brigades of Special Force in Operation THURSDAY," 19 March 1944, AIR 23-1946.

54. *Ibid.*



*Colonel Philip
G. Cochran and
Colonel John R.
Alison observing a
night flight exercise
in preparation for
Operation Thursday
[Margaret Enloe
and the Cortez F.
Enloe Estate]*

Commandos. But this is impossible seeing that Wingate did not introduce the stronghold concept until January of 1944, well after Cochran briefed Mountbatten, Wingate, and other British officers on the Air Commandos' capabilities. At best, Wingate's stronghold concept was a tactical compromise to better mesh the LRPGs with air-centric special operations theory. Yet, for whatever reason, Wingate perceived it to be the other way around: the Air Commandos were in Burma to facilitate the movement of LRPGs and aid in the development of his military ideas, period. But what Wingate failed to realize was it was the other way around: Arnold was using the LRPGs to test air-centric special operations theory. This understanding of what actually transpired is supported in Alison's May 1944 editorial in the *New York Times*. Well before collaborating with Wingate, Alison wrote, Arnold, Cochran, and Alison had already devised their own doctrine, operational plans, and course of action.⁵⁵ "We didn't know how he would react to the idea," wrote Alison, adding if "General Wingate is the genius that everyone says he is, he'll be quick to realize the advantages of this type of warfare," and "[i]f he isn't a genius, then, we ought to be able to talk him into it."⁵⁶

Keeping Alison's thought in mind, it is worth noting that as innovative as air-centric special operations were at the time, the concept was more evolutionary than revolutionary. This is because the basic premise behind air-centric special operations was built on established military tactics and principles. In a 25 April 1944 interview, Alison openly conceded that the concept was "an old principle of warfare—something like the old cavalry action which had taken place during the

55. See, for example, John R. Alison, letter to Colonel J. C. White, 19 July 1988, reel number B0681, AFHRA.

56. Alison, "Glider Invasion—A Jungle Epic," SM12.

Civil War.”⁵⁷ The Air Commandos merely improved on it. What distinguished their approach from historical predecessors was the use of air power to accomplish the task. Fighters and bombers were employed as mobile artillery for ground forces, with the lynchpin of operations being the use of troop transports and light planes to insert and extract supplies or personnel. According to an unpublished working chapter entitled “The Theory and Command and Control of Light Plane Support of Ground Forces,” light planes provided ground forces with the “additional mobility” necessary to “evacuate[e] the wounded and ill, replac[e] personnel, perform[] short range reconnaissance, transport[] . . . supplementary supplies and personnel, and perform[] the mission of long range cavalry.”⁵⁸ To state it plainly, it was through air superiority that the ground troops would wreak havoc on the enemy, which in turn would aid the main body’s advance.

This brings us to the second reason Wingate’s stronghold cannot conceivably be what brought about the concept of air-centric special operations. Wingate’s stronghold idea was the antithesis to the special operations principle of mobility—a principle that Kenney’s Air Blitz Unit proposal adhered to and that Arnold’s glider and light plane concept was intended to support. Initially Wingate’s LRPGs and the Air Commandos were in accord on this principle, but later Wingate decided to go in a much different direction. This fact did not go unnoticed by the Air Commandos. As flight surgeon Captain Enloe penned in his Operation THURSDAY journal:

With this idea of a stronghold at each air strip Wingate has violated the principle of mobility in LRP. These strongholds serve no purpose I can think of, for although they are a place for a 1000 men holdup [sic] with plenty of supplies, they cannot defend an airfield. I believe it to be a principle of air-ground defense that no airfield is defensible within artillery range of its perimeter. The stronghold may be able to withstand repeated enemy attacks, but the strip cannot be used if the enemy is able to put one rifle shot across it at will. The strip is a fragile, delicate thing which must be defended miles & miles away. You can’t fight close to it and fly airplanes in. Fluidity of motion is a law of LRP and instead of establishing a stronghold and sitting down & waiting for the enemy to move in and fight you must send units out and not stalk, but intercept the enemy before he is within a gunshot of your strip or air traffic pattern.⁵⁹

Enloe was not the only person to make note of the theoretical and practical conflict between special operations doctrine and the stronghold. Wingate himself admitted this deficiency in a military report, writing: “The permanent occupation of air strip ‘strongholds’ pins penetration troops to a fixed area against which the enemy

57. Colonel John R. Alison interview with Lieutenant Colonel John W. McGuire, 25 April 1944, reel number A1272, AFHRA.

58. “The Theory and Command and Control of Light Plane Support of Ground Forces,” n.d., reel number B0681, AFHRA.

59. Captain Cortez F. Enloe, Journal, dated 1 April 1944, 84, folder 3, box 3, Enloe Papers.

can concentrate and this is opposed to the whole theory of penetration tactics.”⁶⁰ To be clear, by formulating the stronghold, Wingate knew he was contradicting the very “essence of successful penetration operations,” and therefore he could not have been the architect of air-centric special operations.⁶¹ It cannot be emphasized enough that air-centric special operations were premised on mobility. The Air Commandos knew there was no need for strongholds when expeditionary airstrips could be operational within just eight hours.⁶² The ability to create these expeditionary airfields was facilitated by the use of gliders, which could insert and extract personnel and equipment, all without landing larger aircraft.⁶³ While the manner in which gliders inserted personnel and equipment was well known at the time, the manner in which they were extracted had yet to be seen by Wingate and Mountbatten.⁶⁴ Cochran and Alison were in fact the first to demonstrate this capability to them.⁶⁵

The overall point to be made is that a careful examination of the supporting evidence in no way supports the proposition that Wingate, his LRPCs, or his stronghold concept were the inspiration for air-centric special operations. At the same time, it is understandable why so many in the British school have given Wingate credit. There are a number of supporting documents in the British National Archives that state with certainty it was Wingate who was responsible.⁶⁶ However, once these documents are placed in larger context, we find the claim is unsupported.

60. Major General Orde C. Wingate, “Employment of 3d Indian Division 1944/45,” AIR 23-1946.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Colonel John R. Alison, interview with Lieutenant Colonel John W. McGuire, 25 April 1944, reel number A1272, AFHRA.

63. For a discussion on the history of recovering gliders, see Keith H. Thoms, Gerald Berry, and Lee Jett, “Austere Recovery of Gliders,” *JFQ* 48 (1st Quarter 2008): 135. For more on the actual process by which the gliders were extracted, see All American Aviation, Inc., *Handbook of Instructions: Model 80X Glider Pick Up System Installed in the Douglas C-47A Airplane, No. 42-23710* (Wilmington, Del.: 1943), folder 2, box 13, Enloe Papers. For how glider mobility assisted in the extraction of casualties, see War Department Public Affairs, “Military Flight Medical History Made by Flight Surgeons in Burma,” 14 June 1944, folder 4, box 23, Enloe Papers.

64. When Arnold made the announcement on the formation of the Air Commandos in 1942, he stated that many of the tactics were “secret” and made no mention of the capability to extract the gliders from the ground. See United Press, “Army Forms Corps of Air Commandos,” 6; Unknown, “Airborne Army to Be World’s Best—Arnold,” *Washington Post*, 18 July 1942, 3. But the capability was publicly released in newspapers. See, for example, James Thrasher, “Peacetime Uses of Freight Glider are Adapted for Carrying Trouble to Axis,” *Fitchburg (Mass.) Sentinel*, 31 July 1943, 3; “Freight Gliders Carrying Trouble to Axis,” *Beatrice (Neb.) Daily Sun*, 30 July 1943, 5; “Gliders Have Great Significance in Modern War,” *Wilmington (Ohio) News-Journal*, 16 July 1942, 3.

65. Captain Cortez F. Enloe, Journal, dated 7 February 1944, 145, folder 3, box 3, Enloe Papers.

66. Report, “First Air Commando Invasion of Burma,” 29 March 1944, AIR 23-1945; Derek Tulloch to wife, 16 March 1944, folder 2, box 6, Enloe Papers; Major General Orde C. Wingate, “Covering Letter to Report on Air Borne Movements of Two Brigades of Special Force in Operation THURSDAY,” 19 March 1944, AIR 23-1946.



Milton Caniff drawing of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten [©2017 CLASSIC COOL™. The Milton Caniff Estate]

If historians in both schools had applied a more rigorous research agenda, they would have also uncovered the folly of crediting Mountbatten with formulating air-centric special operations. Unlike with Wingate, there are no operational documents that remotely hint at Mountbatten contributing to the concept. The only contemporaneous evidence is two letters that Mountbatten himself wrote. The first letter was a reply to Wingate's request that the Air Commandos be properly credited for their role in Operation THURSDAY. Mountbatten wrote: "Perhaps you forget that No. 1 Air Commando was my personal invention and that I persuaded General Arnold to set it up for me, so that you can imagine my personal pride in the doings of the child of my imagination."⁶⁷ The second letter was addressed to U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to whom Mountbatten wrote: "It was when I was visiting Arnold in Washington after the Quebec Conference that I suggested to him the formation of an Air Commando to help Wingate. This new formation has proved the most unqualified success and has revolutionized jungle warfare."⁶⁸

But once one places these letters alongside the other evidence, it becomes clear that Mountbatten did not play a central role in formulating the concept of air-centric special operations.⁶⁹ What further undermines Mountbatten's letters

67. Lord Louis Mountbatten to Major General Orde C. Wingate, 19 March 1944, folder 4, box 8, Enloe Papers.

68. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 28 March 1944, box 6, President's Secretary's File, 1933–1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt: Papers as President, FDRL.

69. The same holds true for the assertion that the Air Commandos were named in honor of the British admiral. Arnold's press release in the summer of 1942 confirms that the name "Air Commandos" was already to be given to the air-centric special operations unit. See United Press, "Army Forms Corps of Air Commandos," 6.

is that it was he who pushed for the end of all air-centric special operations in the China-Burma-India Theater. If the Air Commandos and air-centric special operations theory were truly Mountbatten's "personal invention" and the "child of [his] imagination," as he claimed, it is quite odd that he advocated so diligently for their discontinuance.⁷⁰ In fact, from the very inception of the Air Commandos, Mountbatten sought to place Cochran's and Alison's aircraft, personnel, and equipment at his own personal disposal.⁷¹ Following the execution of Operation THURSDAY, Mountbatten's efforts to gain control of the Air Commandos continued, which prompted Arnold to write a letter reaffirming the Air Commandos' command autonomy.⁷² Labeled by Cochran and Alison as the "Dear Dickie" letter,⁷³ it included at the bottom a handwritten postscript to Mountbatten that emphasized the significance of testing and honing air-centric special operations. "I believe that these units will be of tremendous value to you in your operations. I am very hopeful that out of these operations will come a new air-ground technique that will—I was going to say revolutionize—perhaps that is the right word—modern principles of cooperative warfare," wrote Arnold.⁷⁴

In follow-on correspondence, Arnold continued to emphasize to Mountbatten the importance of the Air Commandos' autonomy to conduct air-centric special operations.⁷⁵ Considering the true origins of the air-centric special operations, Arnold's hardline defense of the Air Commandos should come as no surprise. The concept of air-centric special operations and the Air Commandos were primarily his doing. Ultimately, Arnold hoped to prove that it was possible to stand conventional air power doctrine on its head and impact the battlefield. As Arnold wrote in a letter to Mountbatten dated 7 June 1944, the Air Commandos were deployed to Burma because he believed that their "first employment . . . would show the way for wider and more decisive utilization of such operations."⁷⁶ In the letter, Arnold made clear that it would be a "decided backward step" should Mountbatten or anyone else relegate the Air Commandos to supporting

70. Lord Louis Mountbatten to Major General Orde C. Wingate, 19 March 1944, folder 4, box 8, Enloe Papers.

71. See Major General George E. Stratemeyer, Personal Diary, 26 July 1943 Thru 31 December 1943, 46, 48–49, box 1, Overlander Collection; Captain Cortez F. Enloe, Journal, 19 January 1944, 30–31, folder 3, box 3, Enloe Papers.

72. Y'Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan*, 121–23.

73. Colonel Cochran initially brought the issue of command and control to Major General George E. Stratemeyer, but it was eventually brought to General Arnold. See Major General George E. Stratemeyer, Personal Diary, 1 January 1944 Thru 31 December 1944, 31, 36, box 1, Overlander Collection.

74. General Henry H. Arnold to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, 24 March 1944, folder 1, box 4, Enloe Papers.

75. See, for example, General Henry H. Arnold, letter to Air Marshal W. L. Welsh, 27 May 1944, folder 1, box 4, Enloe Papers.

76. General Henry H. Arnold to Louis Mountbatten, 7 June 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection.

conventional air missions.⁷⁷ Arnold then emphasized the importance of continuing air-centric special operations:

In order to get the maximum value from our Air Commandos, and develop new principles for their participation in air warfare, we must have extreme flexibility. The greatest possible freedom for this development can be secured only by creating a self-contained ground and air command which can accomplish the type of mission we visualize.... The Cochran force as we outlined in Washington when you were here was nothing more than an idea—an idea which visualized putting down by air considerable ground forces far behind the enemy's lines and at places where he could offer no serious opposition. Possibly the means to accomplish this purpose have been available in other theatres, but apparently the idea or the desire to use such resources in a bold and decisive manner has been lacking. While I am confident that our concept has practically unlimited possibilities for development in Burma, enthusiastic support from the theatre is most essential to determine the eventual capabilities of such operations.⁷⁸

In the end, despite Arnold's best efforts, the Air Commandos were eventually stripped of their autonomy and integrated with conventional forces. While the Air Commando units retained their respective designations, they were primarily used to support conventional operations. Unbeknownst to Arnold, it was his friend and confidant U.S. Major General George E. Stratemeyer, Commanding General of Army Air Forces, India-Burma Sector, who assisted Mountbatten in discontinuing the air-centric special operations concept.

Initial correspondence shows that Stratemeyer did in fact advocate for the Air Commandos' autonomy in accordance with Arnold's wishes.⁷⁹ In a letter dated 19 May 1944, Stratemeyer wrote to Arnold, "[I] have insisted that your principles laid down in [the "Dear Dickie"] letter are my bible and that [I] cannot vary from those principles which you insisted must be followed... [I] will continue to resist any change in employment of these units unless instructions are received from you to the contrary."⁸⁰ But as the strategic goals in the China-Burma-India Theater shifted, Stratemeyer ended up assisting Mountbatten in dismantling the Air Commandos' autonomy. Stratemeyer's change of heart was

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. See Major General George E. Stratemeyer to General Henry H. Arnold, 22 May 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection; Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to Major General George E. Stratemeyer, 13 May 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection; Major General George E. Stratemeyer, Personal Diary, 1 January 1944 Thru 31 December 1944, 57, box 1, Overlander Collection; General Henry H. Arnold to Major General George E. Stratemeyer, 20 May 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection; Major General George E. Stratemeyer to General Henry H. Arnold, 19 May 19, 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection.

80. Major General George E. Stratemeyer to General Henry H. Arnold, 19 May 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection.

most likely the result of a meeting on 23 June with General Old about the “letters from General Arnold concerning the Air Commando Units.”⁸¹ What exactly transpired at the meeting is unknown, but Old did not support the Air Commandos or their air-centric special operations concept.⁸² Two days later, Stratemeyer wrote his first defense of Mountbatten’s position, which explained to Arnold how the China-Burma-India Theater did not have enough ground forces to continue the air-centric special operations concept.⁸³

Despite receiving this bad news, Arnold remained hopeful that the Air Commandos would be employed appropriately. In a letter dated 5 June 1944, Arnold in fact offered the Air Commandos’ services to Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell, who was serving as the commanding general for U.S. Army Forces in the China-Burma-India Theater, and in that position was already responsible for the administration and supply of the 1 ACG. Arnold wrote that through “the bold use of [the Air Commandos] in [the movement of ground troops and supplies], we not only obtain a wider choice of objectives at which to strike with airborne troops but we also gain the opportunity of striking the enemy where he can offer the least resistance.”⁸⁴ But Stratemeyer interfered with Arnold’s inquiry by drafting his own response, presenting it to Stilwell for signature, and then having Old hand carry the letter to Washington, D.C.⁸⁵ In the letter was the following:

In trying to give you a plan which would justify assignment to this Theater of two Air Commando Groups and two Combat Cargo Groups, as indicated in your letter of 5 June 1944, on this subject I always arrive at the same limiting factor—i.e. availability of ground force units which they can support in air commando actions. I believe I appreciate the potentialities of these two units or a combination of them, as could be applicable to the circumstances in Burma. To take full advantage of this specialized type of air-ground movement and air support, I must have troops as competent and as well organized to do the job as your specially trained and organized Commandos and Combat Cargo units. . . . I realized that if you were willing to grant that my entire operations were on the Air Commando principle, your desires as to the employment of these units as such would not be satisfied. It does not constitute employment of these units to their full capabilities and for operations which could be accomplished in no other manner. . . . Again it is desired

81. Major General George E. Stratemeyer, Personal Diary, 1 January 1944 Thru 31 December 1944, 74, box 1, Overlander Collection.

82. See pp. 808–10.

83. Major General George E. Stratemeyer to General Henry H. Arnold, 25 June 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection.

84. General Henry H. Arnold to Joseph W. Stilwell, 5 June 1944, box 1, ad 1, Overlander Collection.

85. Major General George E. Stratemeyer, Personal Diary, 1 January 1944 Thru 31 December 1944, 74–75, Overlander Collection.

to emphasize that the ground troops employed must be of such caliber and numerical strength that they can be depended upon to hold and extend vital areas logistically sustained by air; particularly that they are able and disposed to provide security for advanced airfields in that area. . . . [But] if you will secure for me one or more American Divisions, I will prove the value of Air Commando units and I think I can make Buck Rogers ashamed of himself. Otherwise I am afraid I will be forced to use them as now planned.

The letter concluded by recommending that the Air Commandos be placed under the direction and control of Old.⁸⁶

Arnold rejected this recommendation and instead placed the 1 ACG under Major General Kenney, who was then the commander of the Far East Air Forces (FEAF). Although Kenney was eager to exploit the Air Commandos' capabilities, strategic goals ultimately prevented them from being employed as designed.⁸⁷ The same held true for the two follow-on Air Commando units, the 2nd Air Commando Group (2 ACG) and 3rd Air Commando Group (3 ACG), respectively. While both the units were certainly innovative and effective, they were not employed in a manner consistent with the concept of air-centric special operations.⁸⁸

Conclusion: The Origins of Air-Centric Special Operations and its Legacy

For more than half a century, whether one was aligned with the American or British school, the origins of air-centric special operations appeared rather straightforward. From the American perspective, Colonels Cochran and Alison were the architects responsible for formulating and developing the concept. Although Cochran and Alison took General Arnold's "to hell with the paperwork" order quite literally, and therefore left historians with marginal documentation on the Air Commandos' formation and development, enough supporting documentation survived to support the longstanding claim. Meanwhile, from the British perspective, Major General Wingate and Admiral Mountbatten were the architects. The evidentiary foundation for the British school's interpretation is arguably more convincing than the American school's. In fact, following Wingate's untimely death in Burma, a number of American newspaper articles credited Wingate and Mountbatten with the formation of the Air Commandos.⁸⁹ Even the

86. Ibid.

87. Y'Blood, *Air Commandos Against Japan*, 203–4.

88. Ibid., 147–200, 203–49.

89. See, for example, "Wingate and Cochran—And Some Light on the War in North Burma," *Oakland (Calif.) Tribune*, 11 April 1944, D26 ("The scheme for an air commando was first thought of by Admiral Mountbatten who gave the idea to General H. H. Arnold, Chief of the U.S.A.A.F. General Arnold gave the name 'commando' to the formation as a compliment to Admiral Mountbatten"); George Palmer, "Colorful Jungle Fighter Chief Dies in Burma Plane Crash," *Salem (Ore.) Daily Capital Journal*, 1 April 1944, 8 (stating that after Wingate's death the Air Commandos were "still . . . following Wingate's principles"); "Hero of 'Ghost Army' Raid on Japs Jungle," *Chicago Tribune*, 1 April 1944, 1 (stating that Wingate "fathered" the Air Commandos).

War Department issued a statement to this effect: "The idea of having a specially trained 'air commando force' fly the jungle fighters of Maj. Gen. Orde C. Wingate over the head of the enemy and land them behind the Japanese lines was *inspired by* Wingate's earth-bound expedition into Burma in the spring of 1943."⁹⁰

But a closer examination of the historical evidence reveals that the concept of air-centric operations was not the brainchild of Wingate, Mountbatten, Cochran, or Alison. Rather, it was the forward thinking of Major General Kenney and the fortitude of General Arnold that brought air-centric special operations to the forefront. Arnold, in particular, was instrumental in getting the concept approved as the Air Commandos in both 1942 and 1943. Also, without Arnold the Air Commandos would have been unable to remain autonomous to successfully carry out Operation THURSDAY and follow-on air-centric special operations.

This is not to say that Wingate, Mountbatten, Cochran, and Alison did not play important roles. It is unquestioned that without Wingate's LRPCs and the need for their aerial resupply, the 1943 Air Commandos never would have taken off. Mountbatten was an important intermediary between Arnold, Wingate, Cochran, and Alison. Meanwhile, without Cochran and Alison, the concept of air-centric operations would never have been realized. The 1942 Air Commandos were unable to develop any capabilities beyond basic troop carrier, glider, and parachute operations; however, Cochran's and Alison's Air Commandos far exceeded their 1942 counterparts, and in the process added a few capabilities that Kenney and Arnold had not thought of, such as the employment of helicopters for combat and rescue operations. Needless to say, Cochran's and Alison's flexible, "can-do" approach, as well as their ability to work alongside the sometimes egocentric and brash Wingate, was instrumental in developing and honing the concept of air-centric special operations.

For whatever reason, perhaps by Arnold's graciousness and diplomatic rapport, Wingate, Mountbatten, Cochran, and Alison each came to the conclusion that the concept of air-centric special operations was largely his own doing. Yet, as the historical evidence conveys, nothing could be further from the truth.

90. See, for example, "Backyard Invasion of Burma Fruit of Quebec Conference," *Hancock Democrat* (Greenfield, Ind.), 11 May 1944, 7 (emphasis added); "Airborne Invasion of Burma Planned at Quebec Conference," *Battle Creek (Mich.) Enquirer*, 26 April 1944, 3 (emphasis added).

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