
James Holland. *Big Week: The Biggest Air Battle of World War II*.
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Book Review

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There are perhaps three or even four types of historians. The overly popular ones like a Bill O'Reilly who churns books out. The historical fiction "historians" like Sharon Kay Penman or Jeff Shaara who bring to life periods of history via fiction. The very narrow academic historians who provide good reads but never seem to enter the consciousness of the public. And then there is the last type, the ones who combine the best of the first two categories. They weave history with a bit more of a personal angle. James Holland falls into the latter category. His World War II Trilogy has met with general acclaim. Having reviewed the first two published volumes, it is apparent that he continues to mine WWII history with his soon-to-be published *Big Week: The Biggest Air Battle of World War II*. This review is of an uncorrected proof copy of *Big Week*.



Everyone knows about the Strategic Air Campaign but seemingly, the Big Week has escaped public consciousness. Kenney's *Pointblank Directive* was among a handful of modern books to cover this campaign. However, Holland's story line never strays far from the Big Week and how the US Army Air Force, Royal Air Force, and the Luftwaffe all reached that culmination point in the last week of February 1944. Holland deftly emphasizes how the USAAF leadership understood its fortunes were at a watershed moment. If the war was to be won, and a successful invasion of Europe launched, the Luftwaffe had to be defeated. This meant no less than the reversal of the air war, which was going badly for the

Allies.

There are several themes of note that Holland stresses throughout the book. The most prevalent theme is how the fortunes of war change, albeit not fully seen at first by the participants. Holland is at his best when he speaks to the war in the skies by using personal accounts from both the USAAF and the Luftwaffe. For the USAAF, we get the accounts of both fighter pilots and bomber crews. Knowing one's friend are aboard, the horror of reading a story where a B-17 collides with another bomber, begins to sway back and forth out of control, flip over, and break in half is simply beyond the imagination of today's reader of whom very few have ever served. The Luftwaffe narratives are solely the product of the fighter pilots whose mission it was to defeat the American bomber streams. One begins to understand the ascendancy of the Allies as they had two trained pilots for every fighter plane. They had a limited number of missions to fly and generally got a pass every weekend. Contrast that with the Luftwaffe pilots who flew until they died or were incapacitated by wounds. The ongoing missions of Heinz Knoke are simply amazing. Knoke was in the air multiple times during the day to do battle; he was shot down, but pulled early from the hospital because the need for experienced veterans is so great.

Holland adroitly ties the personal narratives in with the bigger picture. Holland ensures that the reader understands the Germans frittered away any technological advances they had due in large part to both political infighting among the Nazi leadership and a failure to understand the vast potential of the United States. The old quip attributed to Goering that the Americans only knew how to make razor blades and refrigerators was proven so untrue. The Luftwaffe's airframes were now no longer superior to the Allies, and in fact with the ME-109 fighter, had gone as far in terms of advancements as the airframe could go. Worse was the difference in training flight hours between the Luftwaffe pilots and the Americans highlighted by Holland. Luftwaffe pilots were lucky to get one hundred fifty hours before being committed to combat whereas Americans received three hundred or more. The Third Reich, though producing many fighter airplanes, realized a perpetual fuel shortage and could not train pilots to fly those increasing numbers of planes in anything roughly approaching tactical skill parity in combat.

The Americans had difficulties as well. Over twelve thousand Americans died during the course of flight training—and to think modern planes like the F-35 have issues! One of the main bomber escorts, the P-38 saw at one point, forty percent of the planes down for maintenance due to engine issues related to flying in the atmospheric of Europe. Glenn Miller, the famous orchestra leader, simply vanished between England and France in his plane. Even Jimmy Stewart, the



USAAF Boeing B-17s attacking oil installations in Germany.

American icon of the screen, went into harm's way. By December 1943, the USAAF was on its heels, fought, and defeated in round one by the Luftwaffe. Yet whereas the Luftwaffe could only hope they got the ME-262 jet fighter's teething problems solved, the Americans now had the killer fighter plane—the P-51 Mustang. On that platform, the RAF mounted the Merlin Rolls-Royce engine, and with the new American fighter doctrine of going after the Luftwaffe's fighters versus the previous tactic of protecting the bombers, the Luftwaffe's prospects became bleak. Add on the addition of drop tanks that increased the American fighter escorts range, and as Holland relates, the writing was on the wall.

All the prelude leading up to the Big Week—day-by-day air battles—truly establishes the why of how the campaign was fought and why it mattered. Consider on the actual morning of the D-Day invasion that only two Luftwaffe fighters attacked the beachheads. Would that have been the same case had the Big Week failed? What Holland doesn't come out and say, but the discerning reader will pick up, is that the bombers were in a sense bait, like a red flag to a bull, goading the Luftwaffe to either have their cities, industries, and transportation nodes bombed or come up and fight. The Big Week clearly established that from here on out, the Luftwaffe was in a strategic cul-de-sac, from training, to technology, to platforms.

Now an air campaign does not really allow for grand sweeping maps or ones of tactical disposition because the air is a three dimensional battlefield that

rapidly devolves into aerial chaos. A partial listing of what the *Big Week* includes in terms of maps and diagrams is a breakdown of the key primary aerial platforms with a picture, the location of both 8th Air Force bases in England, the day and night Luftwaffe bases, target, and Allied Fighter escort ranges, and a personal favorite that always astounds modern-day US Air Force Students, the Combat Box Formation.



USAAF Attack on the marshalling yards at Leipzig.

The *Big Week* is that rare history work that cuts across many demographic and knowledge lines. It has just enough to satisfy those with a greater knowledge base. But because Holland's organization, style, and methodology draw in the more casual reader, it excels at introducing the subject to those with less knowledge on it. This work is hardly one of those standard strategic bombing campaign books that would fly over the same historical target set and cut little new ground. Instead, *Big Week* is a satisfying book, rich in detail that stays on topic. Holland painted a vivid picture of the Big Week and provided just enough attention to the other lesser, but important issue to the week that broke the back of the Luftwaffe's fighter arm.