The fog of war can be deadly and tragic.

FRATRICIDE

By Phillip S. Meilinger

From the Revolutionary War to the present day, US forces have come under fire not only from the enemy but from their own side—a situation known as fratricide or, more commonly, "friendly fire." Indeed, one of these terrible episodes marred an iconic campaign of World War II.

Allied forces landed in Normandy on June 6, 1944, but quickly bogged down, unable to push through to open country. Casualties mounted. The British, under Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery, attempted breakouts near Caen, but had no success. Now it was US Army Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley's turn at the strategic town of Saint-Lô.

Bradley and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted heavy bombers to blow a hole in German defenses, allowing American ground troops to pour through. The situation near the Normandy beaches was in stalemate; a breakout would permit maneuver.

A US convoy moves through Saint-Lô, France, in July 1944. Disastrous friendly fire incidents there killed more than 100 American ground troops.

US Army photos

Allied anti-aircraft fire brought down this Spitfire—piloted by an American—over Paestum Beach in Italy.

US Army Air Forces Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, the air commander, was not keen on the use of heavy bombers in a tactical support role; his crews were not trained for the mission. But ground commanders insisted so the airmen began planning. Bradley wanted bombers to fly parallel to the front lines during the run. He thought this approach would lower the chances of "short bombs"—the tendency of some crews to release loads early in order to avoid enemy anti-aircraft fire over targets.

Airmen argued that such a long, narrow bomb run—the target area was seven miles by one mile—would unduly expose aircraft to enemy artillery. Instead, they wanted to bring bombers in on a wide front perpendicular to the target: a major east-to-west road out of Saint-Lô. This would allow the bombers to penetrate the German AAA belt quickly, without diminishing the effectiveness of the air strikes. Crews would use special care not to drop short. Even so, the airmen warned Bradley there would undoubtedly be casualties, with 1,500 bombers hitting a relatively small area near friendly troops. Bradley said the risk was acceptable, as long as a hole could be opened in German lines.

On July 25, 1944, bombers of Eighth Air Force began attacks on the south side of the Saint-Lô road. Soon, the ground became obscured by smoke and debris from bomb explosions. Following bombers began to drift, uncertain of the location of a key road landmark.

The result was disaster. Short bombs killed more than 100 American ground troops during the bombardment, including Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair—at that time the highest ranking US general killed in combat during the war. In the following investigation, Spaatz maintained that the tactics used were correct: Lateral or drift error was always greater than range error, which led to short bombs.

Although the accident cast a pall over the campaign, it had a far more serious effect on German defenders. American bombers breached the enemy lines, allowing Bradley's forces to pour through the resulting gap, and the dash across France was about to begin.

"The planes kept coming overhead, like a conveyor belt. ... My front lines looked like a landscape on the moon," German Lt. Gen. Fritz H. M. Bayerlein, of the elite Panzer Lehr Division, later testified. Bayerlein stated that the bombing put out of commission 70 percent of his troops and destroyed all of his tanks.

Lt. Gen. Lesley McNair died in the short-bombing at Saint-Lô. He was the highest-ranking American officer to be killed by friendly fire in World War II.

The affair was terrible for US troops due to the bombing errors, but the tactical results proved positive: Mobility was restored to the battlefield. Yet, Saint-Lô was not the first—or even most serious—example of fratricide during World War II.

The "Safety Corridor"

One year earlier the Allies had recaptured North Africa. Allied leadership determined Sicily would be the next step, though US Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall Jr. wanted to land on the coast of France instead.

The British refused. They had already been thrown off the European continent at Dunkirk in 1940, and a landing at Dieppe in 1942 had proved disastrous. They preferred a less risky operation, believing Sicily, a natural stepping-stone to Italy, would open a second front in Europe with a weakened adversary. The Italian government was tottering, and an assault on Italian territory might push it to the negotiating table.

Allied forces would land in two different areas. The British, under Montgomery, would assault the island's east coast, while Americans under Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. would land on the southwestern coast. Patton's area contained several airfields, deemed essential for Allied success, and had to be quickly captured and converted to Allied use. "I would like to stress that point because I am sure that without the airfields, while I may get ashore, I won't live long," Patton himself put it. Airborne troops would be used with the initial amphibious landings to help secure airfields, bridges, and other key points to cut off enemy defenders while facilitating the advance of Allied forces hitting the beaches.

One of these drops involved a combat regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, set to land near the airfield at Gela. At 8:45 a.m. on July 11, 1943, Patton messaged his principal commanders that a parachute drop would occur that night. Bradley directed his staff to notify Army AAA units and the naval units off the coast. He wanted to ensure friendly forces would not fire on C-47s carrying paratroopers as they approached Sicily.

For the safety of the air convoy, a corridor several miles wide was established from Malta to Sicily. No Allied units were to shoot at aircraft in that corridor—especially if they were flying from the south. The 82nd Airborne's commander, Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, was still concerned. When he approached the Navy regarding his fear of friendly fire, the sailors told him they could make no promises regarding the safety of the transport airplanes.

Ridgway then went to Patton and insisted the Navy be forced to do better. Patton talked to the Navy, pushing them to ensure their AAA would not fire on aircraft in the previously designated air corridor. Ridgway then visited the Army's artillery units on the beachhead to make sure they personally got word of the impending airborne attack.

Unfortunately, a risky situation worsened when the German Luftwaffe launched air strikes against Allied troops along the beach and ships off the coast that day. One USN supply ship took a direct hit and exploded. As a result, the gunners at sea and on the ground had been primed to shoot at anything flying overhead.

That evening more than 2,300 paratroopers of the 504th Regimental Combat Team loaded onto 144 C-47s in Tunisia and took off. Two hours later they hit their checkpoint at Malta, heading up the safe corridor for Sicily, 70 miles to the north. As the air armada approached Sicily it was a stroke of bad luck that Luftwaffe bombers had just departed, after having pounded troops and ships. When the jittery gunners below heard the thrum of aircraft engines they feared another Luftwaffe attack—despite their arrival from the south—and they primed their guns.

Almost miraculously, the first group of C-47s reached the coast on target and turned northwest for the final 35 miles to drop their paratroopers at Gela. No one

fired on them and all aircraft disgorged their forces over the drop zone.

The aircraft behind them would fare much worse. The flight, containing battalion commander Lt. Col. William P. Yarborough, approached the beach at 700 feet. This time, a gunner opened fire. Hundreds of others followed suit.

"This surprised and puzzled us greatly because the aircraft they were aiming at were coming from the direction of North Africa, territory from which the Allies were operating," one sailor recalled. He had rushed on deck to the sound of his ship blasting away with all guns. He saw the airplanes take evasive action to no avail: "It was a terrifying scene and one that we could only view with near disbelief." Another said the barrage was like "a curtain of explosives had been draped across the sky as if to bar entrance to Sicily by outside intruders, be they friendly or enemy." Yarborough's C-47—as well as all the others—flashed their amber position lights continuously, the agreed signal that they were friendlies. Either no one below noticed the signals or they disregarded them, and fire intensified.

Under Fire for 20 Miles

Yarborough, who would survive the ordeal, attempted to remain outwardly calm as he watched nearby aircraft burst into flames and plummet to earth. Some airplanes took direct hits and exploded into nothingness. A number of paratroopers, in an attempt to escape from the flying coffins, bailed out, whether over land or water. Gunners tracked and shot them as they drifted slowly down. Some landed in the water and clung to wreckage. Appallingly, naval gunners lowered their sights and began blazing away with machine guns and 20 mm cannons at the helpless paratroopers and aircrews. When they realized their error, the sailors launched boats and attempted to rescue survivors.

Aircraft broke formation in an effort to escape the fire from below; some turned around and headed back to Africa. Some pilots claimed naval gunners shot at them for 20 miles after they left Sicily.

Patton, Bradley, and Ridgway were on the beach watching the cataclysm unfold above their heads. Bradley was so astounded he stood in the open watching in dismay even though in grave danger from exploding shells. The carnage continued. Even those paratroopers fortunate enough to land safely often found themselves fired upon by friendly troops who thought they were German spies.

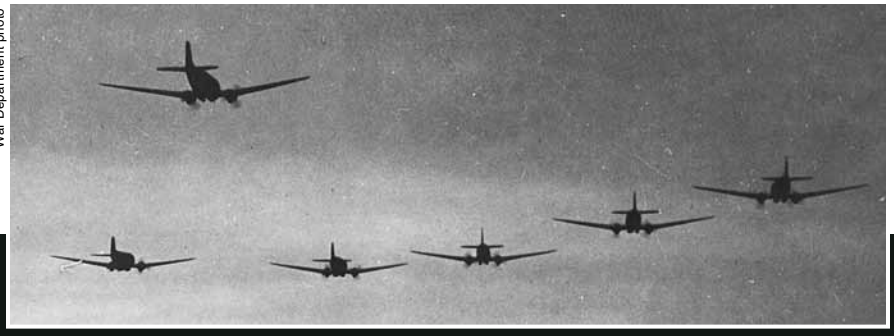
By the time it was over, 23 C-47s were shot down and 37 others received heavy damage. Sixty aircrew members went down with their aircraft, and 229 paratroopers died from friendly fire. Because other members of the 504th had turned back, thus saving the troopers on board, the following morning the regiment counted less than 550 men—barely a quarter of their strength were ready for Sicily.

Two days after the disaster at Gela, another airborne operation was launched when 124 aircraft attempted to drop their paratroopers on a bridge near Lentini. Astonishingly, once again the safety corridor was not cleared and troop carriers flew into a hail of friendly ground fire—11 airplanes were shot down and another 50 were damaged.

A board of inquiry convened to determine what went wrong, but answers hardly comforted anyone. Brig. Gen. Paul L. Williams, commander of Northwest African Air Force Troop Carrier Command, was unable to determine if the Navy or the Army fired first. But both fired at will.

The US Navy official historian, Rear Adm. Samuel Eliot Morison, barely mentioned the incident in his massive history and blamed the Army and the air forces for the disaster. He maintained the operation was announced too late for word to reach all of the ships—12 hours apparently being not enough time. He also complained the C-47s should have come in at a higher altitude—not realizing this would mean the paratroopers

War Department photo



US Army photo

Top: C-47s packed with troops. Bottom: Paratroopers inside a C-47 head for Sicily. On July 11, 1943, 23 C-47s such as this were blown out of the sky over Italy by friendly fire, and 37 others were heavily damaged. More than 200 American troops were killed.

USMC photo by MSgt. Edward D. Kniery

US marines work to retrieve a destroyed amphibious assault vehicle near Nasiriyah, Iraq, in 2003. In one friendly fire incident, 10 marines died when a controller, also a marine, called in an A-10 air strike in error.

would be drifting down from a greater height and thus more vulnerable to ground fire. British Adm. Andrew B. Cunningham stated his gunners were within their rights to fire at anything that flew over their ship, saying, "Nothing else could be acceptable to the Navy."

Regrettably, cases of fratricide continued in conflicts after World War II.

In a study conducted by the US Army in 1982, researchers examined fratricide incidents in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. They determined that friendly fire accounted for a small number of US casualties, less than two percent. Most of those occurred during World War II, and nearly two-thirds of all such incidents were the result of ground-on-ground fire.

The percentage of US troops killed in fratricide incidents leapt dramatically during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, though the number of such incidents attributable to air-on-ground attacks dropped significantly. During Desert Storm, fratricide claimed 35 of 148 US battle deaths, around 24 percent. Although most were the result of ground-on-ground firing, there were also four USAF incidents of air-on-ground attacks.

Military commanders have pushed to eliminate fratricide. They have not been completely successful, but numbers have been reduced.

There was a tragic air-on-air fratricide in April 1984, when two F-15s under the control of an airborne early warning aircraft misidentified two US Army Black Hawk helicopters as enemies. Both helicopters were shot down, killing 26 Americans.

During the second Gulf War beginning in March 2003, analysis showed that fratricide accounted for about 11 percent of the 115 battle deaths. One incident occurred at Nasiriyah, Iraq, on March 23, 2003. Ten marines were killed when two A-10s strafed them. An investigation exonerated the pilots, placing the blame on the marine controller who called for the air strike in clear violation of the standing order because he could not see the target.

There were also ground-on-air fratricide incidents. The day before—March 22, 2003—a US Army Patriot battery shot down a Royal Air Force Tornado fighter, and both crew members died. Two days later a Patriot battery locked on to an Air Force F-16, but the pilot destroyed it with an anti-radiation missile. Fortunately, no one on the ground was killed. In April 2003 a Patriot missile downed a US Navy F/A-18, killing the pilot.

The number of such fratricide incidents has decreased dramatically in the years since then, partly because of improved air weapons, delivery systems and accuracy, partly due to better intelligence, and also due to fewer allied ground forces deployed in harm's way.

Collateral Damage

Today, the greater concern is euphemistically referred to as "collateral damage"—the death or injury of civilians as a result of military operations. This is most common when enemy forces attack friendly ground troops.

This situation, termed "troops in contact," has proved a thorny problem. Ordinarily, preplanned targets receive a thorough vetting in advance of an air strike to confirm intelligence has identified the correct target and collateral damage will be held to a minimum.

In a troops-in-contact circumstance, these safeguards are usually bypassed. Forces on the ground under attack often call in an air strike to assist them. A responding aircraft will receive enemy location information—possibly GPS coordinates—but it may simply be a general description of a building where enemy fire is originating. The pilots then do their best to identify the enemy and deploy their weapons so as to protect friendly ground forces in trouble. It is in this context where most mistakes occur.

Human Rights Watch completed a study of collateral damage incidents in Afghanistan and determined the vast majority of cases where air-delivered weapons caused civilian casualties were troops-in-contact incidents.

The statistics are compelling. In the 35 air strikes that caused collateral damage from 2006 to 2007, only two had been preplanned. Thus, more than 95 percent of the 35 air strikes resulting in collateral damage involved troops in contact—those instances when the rigorous safeguards taken at air and space operations centers to avoid such mistakes were bypassed. Given there were 4,696 air strikes flown by coalition air forces dropping"major munitions" during those two years, the number causing collateral damage was a mere .74 percent of that total—a remarkably small number.

Nonetheless, fratricide remains a serious concern to American forces. Although the number of casualties attributed to friendly fire has decreased since World War II, as a percentage of casualties the number spiked during Desert Storm. Partly this was a statistical anomaly: The coalition suffered remarkably few casualties during the war due to the size of the force and the speed of the ground war. The frequency and severity of these incidents has decreased in years since. Attention now focuses on civilian casualties—another form of fratricide—as killing or injuring civilians is so harmful to American interests that extraordinary actions are taken to limit and possibly eliminate these incidents.

Each of these deaths is tragic, so the work to avoid them will continue. ■

Phillip S. Meilinger is a retired Air Force pilot with 30 years of service and a doctorate in military history from the University of Michigan. He is the author of eight books and more than 80 articles on military affairs. His latest book is Into the Sun: Novels of the US Air Force. *His most recent article for* Air Force *Magazine, "The Early War Plans," appeared in December 2012.*