

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episodes 1 and 2.**

Directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, written by John Orloff. Aired January 26, 2024, Apple TV+.

Masters of the Air is the third World War II miniseries from Stephen Spielberg, Tom Hanks, and Gary Goetzman, executive producers of *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010). Like the earlier series, this most recent offering is based on a compelling book by a distinguished author, in this case *Masters of the Air: America's Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War against Nazi Germany* by Donald L. Miller, professor emeritus at Lafayette College and a frequent adviser to film and documentary producers.¹

Spielberg, Hanks, and Goetzman put Miller's material into the hands of head writer and co-producer John Orloff, best known for having written two episodes of *Band of Brothers*, including "Day of Days," which told of Easy Company's jump into Normandy.² Four of the series' nine episodes, including both under review here, were directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga. Fukunaga is an experienced producer and director of both movies and prestige TV, with credits such as the 2021 James Bond film *No Time to Die* and first season of HBO's *True Detective* to his name.³

Masters of the Air focuses on the wartime experience of the 100th Bomb Group, a four-squadron B-17 unit based at Thorpe Abbots airfield in Norfolk. The group at its arrival in the United Kingdom comprised 37 crews of 10 Airmen—a larger pool of dramatis personae than the single infantry company featured in *Band of Brothers*, but still substantially more constrained in both size and scope than *The Battle of Britain* (1969) or *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), two of the best examples of an earlier generation's World War II aviation epics. Confining the story to a relatively small number of individuals is characteristic of Spielberg's approach to historical filmmaking, an approach exemplified in *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *Schindler's List* (1994), and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

The two most prominently featured Airmen are Majors Gale Clevon and John Egan, commanders of the 350th and 418th Bomb Squadrons. Known as "Buck" and "Bucky," Clevon and Egan were prewar aviation cadets who became bombardment instructor pilots before their deployment with the 100th Bomb Group to the UK.⁴ They are well played here by Austin Butler (a 2022 Academy Award nominee for *Elvis*) and Callum Turner (*The Boys in the Boat*, 2023), who manage to portray Clevon and Egan, respectively, as confident and competent aviators who are nonetheless shaken by the violent intensity of air warfare. "Why didn't you tell me?" asks Clevon after his first sortie, in which three 100th Bomb Group Flying Fortresses were shot down, with a presumed loss of all 30 crewmen.

1. "Author & Historian Donald L. Miller," Lafayette College, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://sites.lafayette.edu/>.

2. "John Orloff," IMDb [International Movie Database], accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.imdb.com/>.

3. "Cary Joji Fukunaga," IMDb, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.imdb.com/>.

4. "Gale Winston Clevon," American Air Museum in Britain, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.americanairmuseum.com/>; and "John Clarence Egan," American Air Museum, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.americanairmuseum.com/>.

What Egan doesn't say but Fukunaga does show is that maneuvering large formations of heavy bombers in combat conditions can be almost unbearably chaotic. The group struggles to rendezvous over Thorpe Abbots, the lead aircraft aborts for a mechanical problem, the trailing element straggles, and a damaged Fort can't maintain station on the return leg. It is evident that the crews face considerable challenges in simply aviating, navigating, and communicating, well before confronting the rigors of actual air combat. That struggle is also convincingly presented: the flak bursts and German fighters are obviously computer generated, but their size, shape, speed, and relative motion are marvelously rendered. The Playtone-Amblin CGI artists appear to have modeled these scenes on documentary footage, perhaps from the extraordinary 2018 film *The Cold Blue*, compiled from restored stock from William Wyler's 1944 *Memphis Belle*.⁵ The flying scenes are so realistically and similarly composed that *Masters of the Air* feels at times like an expansion of *The Cold Blue* universe.

That these first combat missions—the 100th Bomb Group had flown on two diversions a week earlier—are depicted with a clear and unsentimental eye bodes well for the remainder of the series. The producers have gone to some lengths for authentic detail: Egan wears “his trademark sheepskin jacket,” the pre-mission brief matches historical records, the crews don parachutes from rows of racks instead of more dramatic sport-styled lockers.⁶ The crew coordination is likewise realistic: engine start sequences, checklist usage, and intercom chatter have the right vocabulary and rhythm. Orloff avoids the temptation of inserting exposition into these snippets, choosing instead to let the camera explain the dialogue.

Occasionally, however, he and Fukunaga allow their confidence in the audience to waver, and they reach for the crutch of a voiceover. Two episodes in, the narration is not yet a burden, as it is used infrequently, but it does feel abrupt and unnecessary. The bit about the Norden bombsight in “Part Two,” for example, added little, and one can imagine if Spielberg had been behind the camera there would have been no words at all—just a zoomed closeup of the manufacturing label while the bombardier pinned the bombsight into place.

There are a few other distracting conversations, mostly in bars. The opening scene of the first episode in which we are introduced to Clevon, Egan, and their dates is clunky. So, too, is the bar argument between our Masters and their Royal Air Force counterparts, who are dismissive of the US strategy of daylight precision bombing. Such a row might well have taken place between American and British airmen, but this depiction of it and the fight that follows are unconvincing.

These last observations are mere quibbles. The show so far succeeds wonderfully on all counts: it is accurate, believable, and watchable. In technical terms it is the equal, at least, of *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*, and the dialogue and acting to this point far exceed the latter.

5. “*The Cold Blue*,” IMDb, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.imdb.com/>.

6. “John Clarence Egan.”

If the series is able to maintain the momentum gathered in this taxi and takeoff phase, it should have no trouble finding its strategic target.

Dr. Stephen L. Renner, Colonel, USAF, Retired

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episode 3.**

Directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, written by John Orloff. Aired February 1, 2024, Apple TV+.

Having recently rewatched *Twelve O' Clock High* (1949)—the stark depiction of the immense burden of commanding in combat—I found it jarring to see the first trailer for *Masters of the Air*. Whereas *Twelve O' Clock High* was shot in black and white and features more scenes in an office than in the air, *Masters of the Air's* trailer is evocatively colorful and brash. Still, both—to some extent—delve into the same territory of the interdependent struggle to balance a leader's responsibility to the mission as well as to their crew members. Both also focus on so-called “hard luck units.”¹ In addition to pointing out some differences and similarities between the two shows, this review above all will help contextualize *Masters of the Air* given the disappointingly limited background information the show has provided so far.

Masters of the Air begins in May 1943, almost a year after the Eighth Air Force's first mission. *Twelve O' Clock High*, by contrast, starts earlier in the war. Indeed, the authors of the novel on which the movie was based had been with the Eighth Air Force since its arrival in England in 1942. They had thus witnessed one of the darkest periods of the Eighth's history in the winter and spring of 1943 as the organization began bombing Germany. Without the long-range fighters that greatly eased the bombers' missions in 1944, it was statistically impossible for crews to finish their tours at this point in the war.

It was also difficult for the Eighth's leadership, with some advocates of daylight bombing desperate enough to consider the need to perhaps switch to nighttime bombing.² *Masters of the Air's* second episode briefly touches on this tension between British and American bomber crews. But the fight that breaks out between the two nations' crews has little to do with Airmen having imbibed their leaders' doctrine but rather more to do with the human costs that the American crews had to pay.³

The key tension that has not significantly emerged yet in *Masters of the Air* is that between the crews and the Eighth Air Force's highest-ranking and, arguably, its most dogmatic leaders.⁴ As one Airman wrote critically and retrospectively of the Army Air Forces'

1. See John T. Correll, “The Real Twelve O' Clock High,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, January 1, 2011, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

2. Heather Venable, “Rescuing a General: General Haywood ‘Possum’ Hansell and the Burden of Command,” *Journal of Military History* 84, no. 2 (2020): 502–503.

3. See, for example, Richard Overy, *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940–1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 78.

4. See Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6–7.

mindset, “Washington was engaging in a numbers game similar to the one that was later used in the Vietnam War” resting on “grossly exaggerated reports.”⁵ This critique receives some credence from the correspondence of Army Air Forces General Ira Eaker. Eaker wrote in the middle of March 1943 that the Eighth Air Force had successfully completed its “daylight high-level precision bombing experiment.” Nothing could be further from the truth, especially without the arrival of long-range escort fighters. Instead, the fulfillment of missions required what Eaker dubbed the “self-sacrifice” of bomber crews. Tragically, though, the targeting of submarine pens that played such an important role in this phase of the war—the subject of episode 2—was a waste. They were so well-reinforced by concrete that even a fortuitously precise hit would be unsuccessful.⁶

These human costs had taken a toll on the morale of crew members and some leaders, including two colonels who returned to the United States from England in April 1943, supposedly having lost their “combat spirit.” Hearing of this, Eaker insisted that each member of the Eighth Air Force be “fully imbued with the offensive spirit” and be willing “to pay any cost and at all odds.”⁷ This was the mindset of Air Force generals leading into episode 3. Having finally built up an air fleet, Air Force leadership would now proceed to burn through it, determined to prove itself to the other services and its ideas to itself and the Royal Air Force.

This notion of “maximum effort” emerges in both *Twelve O’ Clock High* and *Masters of the Air*, as epitomized by the latter in episode 3’s raid on Schweinfurt and Regensburg. As Colonel Neil Harding (played by James Murray) explains in this episode, a “maximum effort” attack consisted of 12 bombers in August 1942, but now the Americans could launch 370 bombers. Putting this number in perspective, however, shows how much maturing the Eighth Air Force still had to do. The previous month, the British had launched 791 bombers during Operation Gomorrah, the infamous attack on Hamburg, Germany.⁸

Episode 3 also marks a key shift in the air war’s targeting. In episode 2, the Eighth Air Force struck joint targets. The attack on a German submarine pen in Norway supports the Battle of the Atlantic, so critical in keeping sea lines open between the United States and Great Britain. Schweinfurt and Regensburg, by contrast, epitomize the types of industrial bottleneck targets that pre-war air planners had envisioned at Maxwell Air Force Base’s Air Corps Tactical School. Schweinfurt had a key ball bearings factory that planners hoped could grind fighter production to a halt. US air planners had latched onto the

5. Ralph H. Nutter, *With the Possum and the Eagle: The Memoir of a Navigator’s War over Germany and Japan* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2005), 120.

6. General Ira Eaker to Commanding General, VIII Bomber Command, March 24, 1943, Papers of Ira C. Eaker, Box I:19, Library of Congress; and also see Barrett Tillman, “Hard Targets,” *Air Force Magazine*, September 2015, 80–84; <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

7. Major General Ira C. Eaker to Commanding General, Fighter Command, April 21, 1943, Papers of Ira C. Eaker, Box I:19, Library of Congress.

8. John Curatola, “Operation Gomorrah: The First of the Firestorms,” National World War II Museum, July 10, 2023, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/>; and see Overy, *Bombers*, 167.

idea of bottleneck targets after noting how a flood of a Pennsylvania factory had temporarily shut down aircraft production because the factory was the only one to produce an unusual spring required in propellers.⁹

To obtain as much surprise as possible and prevent the enemy to concentrate forces, planners envisioned all the bombers flying the same course for both targets, only breaking into two groups at the last possible moment. Those bombers heading for Regensburg would, in theory, receive the most attention by the Germans, thus facilitating the bombers headed to Schweinfurt. Leaving Regensburg, bombers would fly south to African airfields to avoid having to face German fighters a second time.

Equipped with B-17Fs with so-called “Tokyo tanks,” aircraft bound for Regensburg carried an extra 1,080 gallons of fuel. But the fuel came at a cost. Because the aircraft drew on the Tokyo tanks first, the aircraft easily caught fire if hit. By contrast, the Schweinfurt bombers would have to bear the full force of German attention.¹⁰

Some key problems resulted from the Americans seeking to have a maximum effort without having conserved the required mass to effectively destroy a target. Lacking sizeable-enough weapon loads or aircraft numbers to destroy the factory, they ended up destroying what could be fixed relatively quickly.¹¹ Airpower zealots might proclaim that Regensburg had been “literally wiped off the map,” and a bomber crew member in episode 3 does excitedly claim the factory to be “gone.” But hindsight would not support such proclamations.¹² Losing as many bombers in one day as the Eighth Air Force had in the previous six months, moreover, meant that any destruction that had occurred could not be followed up on until October.¹³

More importantly, the problem with this plan was simple: it required all the pieces to fall in place. The literal fog of war—in this case caused by English weather—had something to say about a plan depending on precise timing, breaking up the synchronized plan into two disparate groupings, allowing German fighters to attack both.¹⁴

One historian has retrospectively described this plan as so complex as to be “all but overwhelming.”¹⁵ It is difficult to ascertain exactly what message *Masters of the Air*’s screenwriters meant to convey regarding the mission’s planning. They have Harding proudly proclaiming the mission to be the “biggest armada in air history,” albeit incorrectly, as the British had flown more bombers the previous month. Harding also intones, “The mighty Eighth has a plan” consisting of a “three-punch combo” in which “timing

9. Stephen Budiansky, *Air Power: The Men, Machines, and Ideas that Revolutionized War, from Kitty Hawk to Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

10. Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air: America’s Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 195.

11. Miller, 200, 192.

12. Lieutenant General Harold George, qtd. in Miller, 200.

13. Miller, 201.

14. Ed Jablonski, *Double Strike: The Epic Air Raids on Regensburg-Schweinfurt, August 17* (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

15. Jablonski, 36.

will be essential.” Unless the writers expect viewers to home in on the importance of timing, we must perhaps wait to see the evolving messages as the series continues to release new episodes.

In the meantime, it is enough to return to *Twelve O’ Clock High* and *Masters of the Air*. The former focuses most on the burden of command and thus features far more glimpses into the mental anguish of those responsible for serving the mission first and foremost. By contrast, *Masters of the Air* focuses much more on the men who must carry out the mission. As such, episode 3 fittingly concludes with badly-battered bombers and their bloodied crews finding themselves with only each other as they observe the setting sun over the Algerian desert.

Heather P. Venable, PhD

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episode 4.**

Directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, written by John Orloff. Aired February 9, 2024, Apple TV+.

By this episode, it seems the catch phrase of Major Gale “Buck” Clevon (played by Austin Butler), “Don’t count on it,” applies to almost any situation members of the 100th find themselves in. Nothing is going to plan, the losses are adding up, and positive outcomes are difficult to discern. Yet, there are constants that buoy all the crew involved in proving the efficacy of daylight strategic bombardment: support from loved ones back home, camaraderie formed from bonds strengthened in combat, and commitments to the triumph of good over evil.

Episode 4 shifts from the difficulty of combat at 25,000 feet to the commitments and ties that bind those determined to make a difference in the vast effort of World War II. The determination and efforts of folks who are not on the front lines are this episode’s subject—women, the underground resistance, support troops, and the displaced.

Although barred from combat, women played a huge role in Allied victory. Liberated to a degree from domestic roles, they took jobs in factories to produce the instruments of victory while men went to fight. For other women, the opportunity to travel and get closer to the action drew them to service in organizations such as the Red Cross. Glimpses of these Doughnut Dollies—largely nicknamed by Katherine “Tattie” Spaatz, active Red Cross volunteer and daughter of Twelfth Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Carl A. Spaatz—came in previous episodes.¹

Motivated by a desire to both help with the war effort and see the world, Helen (Emma Canning) is the living embodiment of the “girl next door” back home—dispensing coffee, doughnuts, and smiles to 100th Bomb Group members in East Anglia.² At a group

1. See David R. Mets, *Master of Airpower: General Carl A. Spaatz* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1997), 170, 178–179.

2. See Kara Dixon Vuic, *The Girls Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Lines* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), ch. 2 and 3.

dance, she catches the eye of replacement pilot Lieutenant Herbert Nash (Laurie Davidson). Nash seems interested in her as more than a reminder from back home, while Helen struggles with maintaining her professional role over a more romantic one. When Nash is later lost in combat, Helen must deal with the shock of loss that service members confront directly. Although Helen fills a role as a morale builder who ensures the crews see a pretty face before they go into combat, the independence and freedom from societal norms that come with uniformed Red Cross service offer her scant protection from the direct pain of loss.

Following the Regensburg-Schweinfurt double raid in North Africa, bombardier Captain James Douglass (Elliot Warren) also seeks female support while composing a letter that conveys his nostalgia for the comforts of home and family, amid the long hours of training and combat far from home. This segues to Thorpe Abbots, where the crew of Captain Glenn Dye (George Webster) returns from their mission. They are the first crew of the 100th to complete 25 missions and earn a trip home from the war. Dye's return temporarily elevates his English girlfriend, Lil (Nancy Farino), from a prop to a more prominent position as she apprehensively scans the skies as well. That night, Dye and his compatriots are feted with a celebration that serves as an introduction for a number of replacement aircrew—led by Lieutenant Robert “Rosie” Rosenthal (Nate Mann)—who seek acceptance from both senior leaders and experienced crews while contemplating the event's significance. The men account for the losses, with only 12 of the original 35 crews that established the 100th Bomb Group in England remaining after three months of combat. In reality, Dye's crew was the only crew of the original 35 that completed a 25-mission tour.³

Commander Colonel Neil “Chick” Harding (James Murray) bristles at the suggestion from the medical staff that his unit is “flak-happy” and needs some time at a rest house to deal with the stress of combat. Harding's view here seems counter to the historical view of the Eighth Air Force leadership and most aircrew. Keeping morale high and aircrew motivated were important to the medical staff and most commanders, so leave and passes were fairly liberal, and time in rest and recreation facilities was quite common.

Major John “Bucky” Egan (Callum Turner) takes Clevin's advice for an extended leave in London and is soon in a Polish restaurant/club in Hammersmith enjoying shots and the company of Paulina (Joanna Kulig), the wife of a Polish Air Force pilot. Flying, marital status, dancing, and sex are the topics, not atypical for American aircrew in English towns and cities, especially London.⁴ There is even a brief mention of the famed Piccadilly Commandos, the army of prostitutes who plied their trade in London during

3. Harry H. Crosby, *A Wing and a Prayer: The “Bloody 100th” Bomb Group of the U.S. Eighth Air Force in Action over Europe in World War II* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1993), 131.

4. See, for example, Juliet Gardiner, *Overpaid, Oversexed, and Over Here: The American GI in World War II Britain* (New York: Canopy Books, 1992); Robert Morgan with Ron Powers, *The Man Who Flew the Memphis Belle: Memoir of a WWII Bomber Pilot* (New York: New American Library, 2011), 138–39; and Crosby, *Wing*, 305–309.

the war.⁵ Paulina later relates that her husband stayed to fight the invading Germans while she evacuated and she is unsure if he is a prisoner or dead in a Silesian potato field.

Ultimately, Egan and Paulina spend the night together. As London is bombed around them, Egan becomes mesmerized by the Luftwaffe raid and confesses that he has never seen the “business end” of what he does. Paulina asserts that the Germans deserve whatever violence and destruction can be delivered to them. The next day, she declares her heart cannot lose another pilot after Egan tries to entice her to spend the day with him. Their story arc details how different people are affected by the chaos of war, seeking escape and respite for many varied reasons.

Meanwhile, the ripples from Regensburg-Schweinfurt radiate further as Sergeant William Quinn (Kai Alexander) opts for passage to freedom through the resistance network. He meets up with fellow crewman Sergeant Charles Bailey (Bailey Brook) and another Airman, Bob, in a Belgian café. Dour members of the resistance interrogate them, demanding verbal and written answers. The three crewmen, accompanied by two Belgians, move out after offering responses on baseball and rousing renditions of the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Quinn and Bailey are shocked when Bob is summarily executed in front of them. Neither are swayed when the resistance guides insist he was a German infiltrator. Although it seems most viewers also don’t understand why Bob was singled out as a traitor, it appears that Bob dated his written responses in the European format of day-before-month while the others must have employed the American month-before-day standard. This scene mirrors another from Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) involving the exposure of an infiltrator, where an undercover British commando orders beers with an English hand gesture that gives himself away to the German authorities.

As the Americans continue their journey, female members of the resistance become objects of both affection and authority, which Quinn struggles to accept. The resistance, in most European countries, was another avenue for women to surmount traditional gender roles, and the series showcases this as well.⁶

Back at Thorpe Abbots, the bomb group is gearing up for the next big mission to Bremen. Clevon will lead the high squadron, but Egan will be in London on a pass. Clevon’s plane has maintenance issues, but Sergeant Ken Lemmons (Rafferty Law), a regular in all the episodes since the group arrived in England, comes through for him.

Throughout the series, there have been the almost obligatory kudos for the maintenance troops, but not to the extent of this scene. Clevon’s plane, *Our Baby*, has an issue with the number two engine and will have to abort the mission if it cannot be fixed. Lemmons assures Clevon that he can repair the problem on the runway. Riding on the left landing gear while the plane taxis, he completes the repair just as the B-17 lines up on the

5. See Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air: America’s Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 216–20.

6. See *In the Shadows of War: An American Pilot’s Odyssey through Occupied France and the Camps of Germany* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

runway for takeoff. Lemmons then rolls off the gear and under the wing and horizontal stabilizer to a waiting jeep, yelling “you’re good to go!” to Cleven. His commitment to accomplishing the mission shines through.

The episode ends with a focus on Lemmons and his crew as the planes return from Bremen. The crew chief is disappointed to discover that *Our Baby* is not coming back, along with eight other Flying Fortresses of the group. Lemmons kicks a toolbox out of frustration, and the pain from both the loss and action is etched on his face. Only 16 of 24 crewmen return, with Cleven, Major Harry Crosby (Anthony Boyle), and Nash among the missing.

The storyline shifts to Rosenthal, who has completed his first mission and heads into debrief. Obviously stunned by the carnage he has witnessed, he is in a state of shock. He grabs a mission whiskey, but lets it go as he realizes that someone has to tell Helen that Nash is not coming home. Simultaneously, other aircrew realize that Egan must be notified as well that his best friend is also presumed dead.

Strolling down a street in London, Egan confronts the scene of a bombed-out house and mother screaming for her dead child. Once more, he witnesses firsthand the business end of strategic bombing, but he moves on, seeking news regarding the Bremen raid. At the newsstand, the headline screams Bremen has been destroyed and 30 bombers did not return. He rushes to the iconic red phone booth and calls the base. In a transparent baseball code, we all learn that Cleven is presumed dead. Egan steels himself and confirms he will be back for the next mission.

This episode widens our aperture on who has a stake in the success of the Mighty Eighth and all the lives these incredibly youthful Airmen are affecting. Simultaneously, episode 4 resets the cast of characters for dedicated viewers. The original core of the 100th is almost completely gone, and those who remain are barely hanging on. Attrition is even hitting the new crews so fast, we can barely remember them as well. Rosenthal appears to have a promising future. Will Egan be there to guide him to become a master of the air as well? As his best friend would state, don’t count on it.

Dr. John G. Terino, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF, Retired

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episode 5.**

Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, written by John Orloff. Aired February 16, 2024, Apple TV+.

Episode 5 of *Masters of the Air* is the most searing installment yet. Classic movies such as *Twelve O’clock High* (1949), *Command Decision* (1949), *Memphis Belle* (1990), and *Fortress* (2012) have tried to convey the carnage of World War II’s Combined Bomber Offensive over Europe, but none do so as effectively as this episode. This production excels at graphically illustrating the difficulty of aerial warfare and the terrible consequences in battles five miles in the air, on the ground below, at home station, and even back in the United States. Perhaps introducing directors Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, the team re-

sponsible for directing the smash Marvel Cinematic Universe action hit, *Captain Marvel* (2019), is the reason the action sequences are so visceral in this episode. Although the 100th Bomb Group had been hardened in combat by October 1943, three straight days of missions to Bremen, Marienberg, and Münster have staggered its resolve.

Previous episodes had shown the devastation of combat and losses of the series' notable characters, who often seemed to come straight from central casting in Hollywood. They were energetic young pilots with brash demeanors, cocksure attitudes, and all the visual flair associated with the bomber boy stereotype: 50 mission crush hats, leather jackets, white scarves, sunglasses, and rakish good looks. Major John "Bucky" Egan (Callum Turner), Major Gale "Buck" Clevon (Austin Butler), and Lieutenant Curtis Biddick (Barry Keoghan) were the mainstays of the 100th.¹ Colonel Neil "Chick" Harding (James Murray) was the hard-bitten, aggressive leader we expected to lead this lot as well.² Now, all of them are gone—or soon will be—and a new leader has emerged.

Lieutenant Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal (Nate Mann) arrives with a bunch of other new faces to make up for the horrendous losses the hard-luck 100th has been dealt. His first mission, seen in episode 4, was the raid on Bremen, where the group lost seven aircraft. In Donald Miller's book, after his third mission in three days, Rosenthal leaves his bomber and asks the intelligence officer "Are they are all this tough?" before going with his men for medical care.³ This episode vividly illustrates why he asked the question by highlighting the raid on Münster.

Egan views this mission as an opportunity to avenge Clevon's death. Up to this point, Egan has been the life of the party at Thorpe Abbots, but the loss of his best friend has understandably altered his mood, making him pensive and solemn. Still in the business of dropping bombs, Egan exhibits a clear change in character as he is seen drinking and smoking in his "office," the flight deck of a parked B-17, before he careens away in a jeep for briefing.

The target of the raid is the medieval walled city of Münster. Instead of a factory or submarine pens, the Army Air Forces is going after a railroad marshalling yard in the center of town. Mirroring decades-old debates regarding appropriate targets for strategic bombing, the crews opine about whether they should target a site so close to houses and churches. Uncharacteristically, Egan ends the discussion by pulling rank and formality. Avenging Clevon is enough reason for him. As the crews head for their bombers, Egan literally puts on a new mantle of responsibility by shedding his omnipresent fleece coat for the standard leather jacket.

1. Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air: America's Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 9; and Harry H. Crosby, *A Wing and a Prayer: The "Bloody 100th" Bomb Group of the U.S. Eighth Air Force in Action over Europe in World War II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 36, 39–40, 260.

2. Crosby, 142, 147–48.

3. Miller, *Masters*, 20.

As we have accompanied the 100th Bomb Group in previous missions, we have seen extraordinary heroism, stoicism, and flagging discipline in keeping formation as well. The group has a well-deserved reputation for its hard charging ways and hotshot piloting, but as the missions move from the relative ease of French targets to the Third Reich, flying skills do not make up for poor formation and rigid discipline.⁴ In spite of that reputation, even the best group formation of 18 unescorted Flying Fortresses is not a match for 200-plus Luftwaffe fighters coming at them head on.

Because of damage from the previous two days' missions and aborts, the 100th only has 13 B-17s heading to Münster. In about seven minutes, the group basically ceases to exist as the lead bomber with Egan at the helm is hit and other aircraft either explode almost instantly or are last seen plummeting in pieces to German soil below.⁵ The mission was obviously nerve-racking for the crews as there were more f-bombs dropped in this episode than in the previous four combined.

While waiting for the escorting fighters to withdraw—in this case aided by ground fog that kept one fighter group at base and a missed rendezvous that forced another on to turn home early—the German fighters had extra time to attack.⁶ By targeting lead crews and going after individual groups, the Luftwaffe fighters eliminated experienced veterans, broke up unit integrity, and picked off dispersed individual bombers one by one. Employing rockets allowed the less maneuverable twin-engine fighters to stay out of gun range and hit bombers with devastating effect.

During this single week in October 1943, the Bloody Hundredth lost 21 planes and over 200 men missing or killed.⁷ The only regular combat crew to return was that of Rosenthal. In the episode, his crew is shown far from home in a badly crippled ship, with two engines on the same wing out, a huge hole in one wing, and three gunners seriously wounded. As they lose altitude and limp home, Rosenthal maneuvers the B-17 to help his crew shoot down pursuing enemy fighters. The crew arrives back at Thorpe Abbots, and it is a grim scene as the group maintainers and staff realize that only a single aircraft has returned.

More so than any previous episode, the influence of chance and fate is highlighted. Egan has bailed out and is on the run in Germany, and Captain Harry Crosby (Anthony Boyle), promoted to group navigator, misses the mission, probably saving his life as the man he replaced, his good friend Captain Joseph “Bubbles” Payne (Louis Greator), is killed in action. In reality, Payne and his crew were lost on the March 4, 1944, mission over Berlin months later. Nevertheless, the randomness of combat and the devastation of loss are amply demonstrated in this episode. Even the formerly good-natured and kind-hearted crew chief, Sergeant Ken Lemmons (Rafferty Law) grieves mightily and loses his

4. Geoffrey Perret, *Winged Victory: The Army Air Forces in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1993), 275.

5. Roger Freeman, *The Mighty Eighth: Units, Men, and Machines* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 77.

6. Perret, *Winged Victory*, 275.

7. Crosby, *Wing*, 147.

bearing around the English children who follow him all the time. Clearly, the losses and changes indicate the 100th is about to chart a new course, and Rosenthal will pilot the course Crosby charts into the future.

At this point, even the most cynical viewer has to question the efficacy of the Army Air Forces' bombing strategy. The horrendous losses incurred during day bombing and the suitability of striking targets near civilian areas have already made their way into the dialogue of the series. The devastating losses have increased dramatically as well. Hopefully, future episodes will deliver answers to help understand why daylight bombing remained an important element of Allied victory in World War II.

Dr. John G. Terino, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF, Retired

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episode 6.**

Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, written by John Orloff. Aired February 23, 2024, Apple TV+.

Masters of the Air episode 6, in addition to chronicling the aftermath of the brutal Münster mission of October 10, 1943, also unpacks a number of important topics surrounding the US Army Air Forces' bomber war against Germany. Some viewers may have missed any reference in the series to the disastrous October 14, 1943, "Second Schweinfurt" mission, which essentially forced a temporary halt to deep daylight raids into German airspace. While the raid's impact on the Eighth Air Force as a whole was enormous, in this one case the Bloody Hundredth got off lightly: after Münster, the 100th could only muster eight planes for the Schweinfurt raid, and all returned safely with no casualties.¹

Though the show takes some chronological liberties and makes other concessions to good storytelling, the issues raised are fundamental to an understanding of the bomber war. This installment features three major plot lines: Major John "Bucky" Egan's (Callum Turner) odyssey from bail out to arrival at a prisoner of war (POW) camp; Major Harry Crosby's (Anthony Boyle) attendance at an Oxford symposium to address Anglo-American relations, and the arrival of Lieutenant Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal's (Nate Mann) new crew at Thorpe Abbots and their stay at a rest home after three harrowing missions.

A powerful scene depicts dozens of footlockers of missing crew members being readied for shipment home, but the action soon shifts to Egan's efforts to evade capture and then deal with the first phases of his captivity. In reality, Egan's capture and transit to a POW camp were routine, but the show takes the opportunity to dramatize the range of hazards facing downed Airmen.

Shotgun-toting German farmers first capture Egan and pass him on to the authorities. While he and some fellow captives are being marched through the burning streets of a

1. Roger Freeman, *Mighty Eighth War Diary* (London: Jane's, 1981), 126.

bombed German town, a furious mob of civilians, encouraged by a party official, overpowers the guards and begins attacking the *Terrorflieger* (“terror flyers”). Most of the Airmen are killed; Egan manages to escape from the burial wagon taking them to an unmarked grave. Once again captured by the police, Egan finally passes to Luftwaffe control and finds himself at the transit camp and interrogation center known as Dulag Luft.

Egan’s encounter with the lynch mob is based on a number of incidents that took place during the war. Nazi propaganda encouraged German civilians to take the law into their own hands. Photos of American pilots wearing leather jackets decorated with names such as “Murder Incorporated” were circulated in order to incite violence against Allied airmen. The Allied authorities investigated and punished a number of these crimes post-war.² Though not central to the episode, there are other issues of morality touched upon. We see dead civilians being pulled from the rubble, and an uncomprehending Egan glimpses a train hauling cattle cars filled with human beings—by late 1943 the extermination of the Jews of Europe was accelerating.

At Dulag Luft, Egan faces a skilled interrogator seeking to extract valuable information. US Army Air Forces personnel of the day received only minimal survival, resistance, evasion, and escape training; most knew—as Egan did—that “name, rank, and serial number” were the only permissible items to be divulged. Yet they were unprepared for the sophisticated grilling in store for them at Dulag Luft.

The urbane, cultured interrogator shrewdly combines the “brother airman” card, a disarming curiosity about baseball, and veiled threats of treating Egan as a spy. German interrogators could draw on thick files of information about every Army Air Forces unit, culled from press clippings, previous interrogations, and especially letters, diaries, photos, and even theater ticket stubs brought along on missions by careless Americans. Astonished POWs, confronted by all of this information, were easily convinced that the Germans already knew everything. So what was the harm in filling out a few “Red Cross” forms—which their interrogators claimed would serve to notify their families at home? English-speaking Germans were sometimes placed in the cells with new captives, masquerading as fellow Americans. Eventually, the 100th’s parent Third Air Division produced educational materials warning Airmen to “Empty Your Pockets!,” “Beware of Fake Forms,” and “If You Didn’t Know Him Before, Don’t Trust Him Now!”³ The “spy” ploy turns out to be a bluff, and the uncooperative Egan is sent to Stalag Luft III—the future site of the famed prison break, the “Great Escape”—where he is reunited with some friends.

The second subplot involves the series’ narrator, navigator Crosby. Still grieving and guilt-ridden over the loss of his friend Captain Joseph “Bubbles” Payne (Louis Greator), Crosby is selected to represent the Army Air Forces at a symposium hosted by Balliol College, Oxford University. At the week-long event, British and American per-

2. See Kevin T. Hall, *Terror Flyers: The Lynching of American Airmen in Nazi Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

3. Third Bombardment Division History, February 1945, US Air Force (USAF) Historical Research Agency, 527.02 Volume II.

sonnel attended lectures by distinguished dons and discussed the state of Anglo-American relations. Despite the gauzy memories of the “friendly invasion,” the arrival of millions of American personnel in the UK did not always proceed smoothly. Incidents of disorderly conduct, poaching on private land, mistreatment of women, and other clashes of cultures were worrisome to the Allied leadership.

Writer John Orloff takes a bit of dramatic license here: Payne was indeed killed in action, but later in the war.⁴ Still, this Oxford subplot, and Crosby’s growing friendship with a British female junior officer attending the conference, largely track with the account in the real-life Crosby’s outstanding memoir *A Wing and a Prayer*.

In that memoir, Crosby noted that when Egan and Major Gale “Buck” Clevens were shot down, the character of the 100th Bomb Group changed. He admits that his feelings about the two Airmen were complicated. He considered both to be outstanding, larger-than-life leaders, but he also saw within them an undisciplined aspect that did not always work to the benefit of the unit.⁵

The final subplot of this episode involves a new crew led by pilot Rosenthal. Three missions in three days, culminating with Münster—theirs was the only ship to return to Thorpe Abbots that awful day—earn them a spell at the “Flak House.”⁶

It’s worth remembering that right about this time, General George S. Patton famously slapped two shell-shocked infantrymen who were patients in a Sicily field hospital. Victorian-era ideas that combat fatigue was a symptom of a character defect—pejoratively referred to as a “Lack of Moral Fiber”—persisted.⁷ Yet the Army Air Forces was somewhat ahead of the curve in recognizing that even the bravest individuals have a breaking point. Though the service still dealt rather harshly with outright combat refusals, crews who had been through a harrowing set of missions were sent to a country house for a short period of recuperation, supervised by a flight surgeon and furnished with access to all sorts of genteel amenities. Later in the war “flak leave” became a normal part of a crew’s combat tour.⁸

Rosenthal’s crewmates take full advantage of the opportunity, but he himself bristles at the inactivity. He complains to the flight surgeon that he was just getting into his battle rhythm after three missions, and he compares himself to American jazz drummer/bandleader Gene Krupa, forced to stop playing in the middle of a set just as he was hitting his stride. The flight doc listens sympathetically, then notes that Krupa wasn’t only playing for himself—he was setting the rhythm for the entire orchestra. This insight gives Rosenthal pause, and he joins his crew for the rest of the brief reprieve. He is last seen

4. Harry H. Crosby, *A Wing and a Prayer: The “Bloody 100th” Bomb Group of the U.S. Eighth Air Force in Action over Europe in World War II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 241.

5. Crosby, 320.

6. See Ian Hawkins, *Münster: The Way it Was* (Anaheim, CA: Robinson, 1984).

7. Mark Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 164–65.

8. See Wells.

back at the base, tapping out a Krupa-esque riff on the crew hatch of his B-17 before boarding. This neat scene foreshadows Rosenthal's rise to one of the greatest leaders to come out of the 100th Bomb Group.

Questions of morality, inter-Allied relations, and combat stress are front and center in this important segment of the series. The fortunes of the 100th Bomb Group—and indeed of the entire US Army Air Forces daylight bombing effort—bottomed out in mid-October 1943. But changes were in the works—leadership, strategic, operational, and tactical—that would radically transform the narrative. And it would be a transformation and a learning curve that the 100th would do its costly part to bring about.

Richard R. Muller, PhD

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episode 7.**

Directed by Dee Rees, written by John Orloff. Aired March 1, 2024, Apple TV+.

Episode 7 begins the final third of the story of the 100th Bombardment Group's war, picking up after a significant chronological leap, from mid-October 1943 to March 1944. Many changes are underway both within the group and the wider war. Two narrative threads dominate this episode: the shifts in aerial strategy and tactics that would ultimately bring the Allies air mastery over Occupied Europe, and the story of Majors John "Bucky" Egan (Callum Turner) and Gale "Buck" Clevon (Austin Butler) from behind the barbed wire of Stalag Luft III.

Perceptions of the Allied prisoner of war (POW) experience are commonly shaped by Hollywood portrayals, ranging from the black comedy *Stalag 17* (1953) to the star-studded, embellished classic *The Great Escape* (1963). This series opts for a more realistic, gritty portrayal. Although the Luftwaffe ran its camps broadly in line with the Geneva Convention, there is no trace of a *Hogan's Heroes'* (1965–71) sensibility here. Malnourished prisoners catch an unfortunate cat to augment their meager rations, and we see a POW shot and wounded by guards for a minor infraction. The captured Airmen endure stultifying boredom, punctuated only by infrequent mail calls, endless card games, and occasional bits of war news gleaned from an illicit crystal radio set that Clevon manufactures from scrounged components. The POWs learn of the stalemate in the Italian theater as well as major Soviet victories on the Eastern Front—a nod to the Red Army's contribution to victory in Europe.

Egan and Clevon naturally discuss the possibility of escape, but the prospects seem dim. The camp, located deep inside Germany near Sagan in Silesia (now Poland), is far from potential resistance contacts. They are bystanders to the "Great Escape," the March 24, 1944, mass tunnel breakout of 76 Royal Air Force prisoners. The camp's new acting commandant tells the senior US officers that 50 escapees were executed. He hints darkly that control of Allied POWs might soon pass from the military to the Gestapo and asks the lead POW to identify the Jewish officers in the camp. He replies that there are only Americans present. Ultimately, Egan and Clevon resign themselves to sitting out the war.

In reality, despite fears of reprisals, little happened to the POWs remaining at the camp. Appalled by the killings, the Luftwaffe staff provided materials for the construction of a memorial.¹ Many accounts of the Great Escape use the term “executed” to describe the fate of the fifty, implying some sort of due process was involved; however, these men were murdered on orders from the highest level. Though the decisionmakers in question were beyond mortal judgment after 1945, the British painstakingly investigated and arrested the actual Gestapo killers. Most, after a fair trial, were executed.

Back at Thorpe Abbots, the 100th endures the crescendo and eventual turning point of the daylight bomber offensive. As appropriate, most higher-level strategy debates and decisions are not dramatized as little of this percolated down to the crews flying the missions. After the crisis of autumn 1943, General Henry “Hap” Arnold, the Army Air Forces chief, cleaned house at the Eighth Air Force, sending its commander Major General Ira Eaker to the Mediterranean and replacing him with Major General James Doolittle, hero of the 1942 Tokyo raid. Lieutenant General Carl Spaatz took over a new headquarters, US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, with oversight of both the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces, the latter operating out of newly captured Italian bases. Arnold, in a New Year’s 1944 message to all commands, insisted that gaining air superiority was the priority: “Destroy the German Air Force wherever you find it—in the air, on the ground, and in the factories.”² A dramatic series of February 1944 raids on German aircraft factories, dubbed “Big Week”—not portrayed in the series—began the progressive eradication of the German fighter force.³

The effect of these sweeping changes is slow to reach Thorpe Abbots. The group was mauled in the first major Army Air Forces attack on Berlin on March 6, 1944. The losses—69 bombers, 15 from the 100th—were the highest of the entire war.⁴ The portrayal of the damaged planes’ return contains some of the series’ most powerful images. A crew hatch is flung open and dozens of empty .50-caliber brass casings spill out. A quick shot of a shattered, bloodstained ball turret evokes Randall Jarrell’s short poem “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner.” Medics swarm over the shredded bombers, extricating and treating crewmen with all manner of horrible injuries. Some years ago, I interviewed a former Eighth Air Force medic, and he freely admitted that he still had nightmares about things he had seen 75 years earlier.

Yet amid the carnage of “Black Monday,” and another brutal raid on the Reich capital two days later, some rays of hope emerge. Two missing crewmen return to Thorpe Abbots after months spent evading capture with the help of the resistance. In line with US policy they are taken off flying status; it was too risky to permit personnel who had contact with the resistance network to return to the air. Captain Robert “Rosie” Rosenthal’s

1. Paul Brickhill, *The Great Escape* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 191.

2. Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Volume III, Europe: Argument to V-E Day* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 8.

3. Donald Caldwell and Richard Muller, *The Luftwaffe over Germany: Defense of the Reich* (London: Greenhill, 2007), 144–89.

4. Jeffrey Ethell and Alfred Price, *Target Berlin: Mission 250—6 March 1944* (London: Jane’s, 1981), 142.

(Nate Mann) crew hits the milestone of 25 missions and completes their tour, but their celebration is tempered by the announcement that an operational tour is now 30 missions. This “moving of the goal posts” seems capricious and heartless to the crews—but the rationale was based on a hard look at the actuarial tables. Experienced crews were a valuable commodity; with the Eighth Air Force expanding dramatically as 1944 began, Doolittle realized that he needed to hang onto his seasoned veterans. And, though it was hard to discern, Airmen’s chances of survival were improving as spring 1944 wore on.

The episode also depicts the arrival of the North American P-51 Mustang escort fighter, which combined superior performance and long range. With drop tanks they could accompany the bombers to Berlin and back. Acting Group Commander Lieutenant Colonel John Bennett (Corin Silva) tells Rosenthal that, from here on in, the bombers will essentially function as “bait” to bring the German fighters into the sky so the escorts can destroy them. And indeed, the Luftwaffe day fighter force lost its entire frontline strength—and irreplaceable pilots—during spring 1944.

In the series, the arrival of the game-changing Mustangs is almost a *deus ex machina*. The reality is more complex—and more interesting. *Masters of the Air* focuses on the bomber experience, but it is worth emphasizing that VIII Fighter Command went through its own painful learning curve. Debates about close escort versus fighter sweeps, development of “relay” procedures to ensure coverage of bomber formations for as long as possible, and technical innovations such as auxiliary fuel tanks, were ongoing.⁵ The Mustang itself was a fortuitous combination of an American airframe and a British Merlin engine. The command even published a 1940s version of a “wiki” that made the rounds: *Skywash*—a collection of combat report extracts with commentary and “lessons learned” from combat leaders.⁶

Though the episode implies that an early 1944 order from Doolittle caused the switch in focus from protecting bombers to destroying enemy fighters, the command had for months been moving toward such an air superiority strategy. A November 1943 general order stressed, “We have two scores we are aiming at; first the number of bombers we bring back safely, and second the number of German fighters we destroy.”⁷ Much of the heavy lifting of the early 1944 air superiority battles was borne by the P-47 Thunderbolt fighters, although the incomparable Mustang garners most of the good press.

The episode concludes with Rosenthal telling soon-to-be Group Commander Bennett that he is volunteering for a second tour. Rosenthal would ultimately command two of the 100th Bomb Group squadrons and stand in the front rank of the combat leaders who turned things around for the group. As group navigator Harry Crosby sums up in his

5. VIII Fighter Command, “Tactics and Techniques of Long Range Fighter Escort in VIII Fighter Command,” July 25, 1944, US Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA) 524.522.

6. VIII Fighter Command, *Skywash*, no. 1, May 1943, AFHRA 524.549A.

7. VIII Fighter Command, *Skywash*, no. 5, November 1943, AFHRA 524.549A.

memoir: “Bucky Egan and Buck Cleven gave the 100th its personality. Bob Rosenthal helped us want to win the war . . . [everybody] wanted to be like Rosie.”⁸

Richard R. Muller, PhD

8. Harry H. Crosby, *A Wing and a Prayer: The “Bloody 100th” Bomb Group of the U.S. Eighth Air Force in Action over Europe in World War II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 320.

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episode 8.**

Directed by Dee Rees, written by John Orloff. Aired March 8, 2024, Apple TV+.

Instead of bomber crew members from the 100th Bomb Group within the Eighth Air Force, in episode 8 we are introduced to fighter pilots from the Tuskegee Airmen of the 99th Fighter Squadron in the Fifteenth Air Force of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. While one might question the initial incongruity of a completely different organization in a different theater of the war, screenwriter John Orloff has held true to the compelling story of the camaraderie so prevalent in warfare by weaving in the Tuskegee Airmen’s story into the overarching narrative of the 100th. While other movies such as HBO’s *Tuskegee Airmen* (1995) and George Lucas’ *Red Tails* (2012) focus on the Tuskegee Airmen as a collective, episode 8 offers insight into actual individuals.

The opening scene shows a flight of P-40L Warhawks on a true dusk bombing mission on June 1, 1944, to strike an ammunition dump in Italy.¹ The narration references the original World War I-era nomenclature of pursuit squadrons, which changed to fighter squadrons in 1942.² Notably, all four P-40s are sporting the distinctive shark mouth nose art made famous by China’s Flying Tigers. While the Tuskegee Airmen were not known to paint the grins on their P-40s, the scene shows just how synonymous they had become with the P-40. The scene introduces the Tuskegee Airmen and subtly shows that at that point in the war, they were relegated mostly to a ground attack role flying obsolete aircraft.

We next see Major Harry Crosby (Anthony Boyle) in the frenzied preparation for D-Day. D-Day often evokes images of paratroopers jumping out of C-47s in the middle of the night or men storming the beaches from Higgins Boats, but rarely does it call to mind the contributions of airpower in the invasion. In addition to the targeting of railroads, bridges, and other lines of communication in the lead-up to D-Day, the previous episode showed the focus on the destruction of the Luftwaffe to ensure air superiority for the invasion. As Crosby references, instead of a single mission per day for the 100th, the invasion required multiple sorties per day. With the proximity of the Normandy region to the

1. 99th Fighter Squadron Sortie Reports, June 1943–May 1945, 2 of 4, 156, <https://blackfreedom.proquest.com/>.

2. Daniel L. Haulman, historian, e-mail to the author, March 13, 2024.

bomber bases in East Anglia, bombers were able to conduct quick-turn missions to strike, return, re-arm, refuel, and go back out. Not only did this maintain pressure on the German army in preventing its ability to counter the invasion, but it also provided a visual umbrella of non-stop American and Allied aircraft over the landing force, proving the Allies' attainment of air supremacy. As the supreme commander of Allied forces, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, stated in late June while surveying the Normandy beachhead, "If I didn't have air supremacy, I wouldn't be here."³

Crosby demonstrates the oft-overlooked fact that each of those missions had to be planned down to the minute detail—not only to secure headings, distances, and altitudes, but also to ensure deconfliction in time and space for the myriad of other aircraft flying in support of the invasion. The burden falls on Crosby as group navigator to plan all of the missions. With no time to rest, he stays awake for nearly three days of non-stop preparation until passing out from sheer exhaustion.

Episode 8 also continues to tease out the story of Sandra Westgate (Bel Powley)—the real-life Landra Wingate. Crosby could never confirm Wingate's actual role, but he long suspected she was an operative of the Special Operations Executive—the UK's counterpart to the American Office of Strategic Services, the modern CIA's precursor. Although Westgate's brief appearances do little to advance the overall narrative, they do expose how women served in the highly dangerous role of covert intelligence collection in Nazi-occupied territories during the war.

In the subsequent mission brief for D-Day we see two leadership transitions. The overt transition is in the change of command from Lieutenant Colonel John Bennett's (Corin Silva) temporary leadership of the 100th, to the permanent command of the beloved Colonel Tom Jeffrey (Christopher Lakewood)—known to 100th veterans as "Colonel Jeff"—who served as their longest-tenured commander.⁴ Major Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal's (Nate Mann) also transitions from an advice-seeking neophyte pilot in episode 4, to the veteran leader and squadron commander doling out advice in episode 8, after volunteering for a second tour. Such was often the case in combat, with lieutenants rapidly rising to field-grade ranks and command positions, often due to the combat attrition of leaders.

Although we don't see any actual bombing on the D-Day missions, Rosenthal does mention the pace and scale of operations, flying multiple sorties on D-Day, and the near-mythical sight of the thousands of ships and boats in the invasion fleet, which many aviators described as a near-religious event. The fact that Crosby slept through all of it is also true to the fact that sometimes we miss the big show—either by being out of the theater of conflict, off the flying schedule, or simply asleep.

Back in Foggia, Italy, the 99th is united under the 332d Fighter Group and the legendary leadership of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. (Jerry Mackinnon). The bar scene subtly ac-

3. Silvano Wueschner, "Key to Success: Allied Airpower at Normandy," Maxwell AFB (website), May 29, 2019, <https://www.maxwell.af.mil/>.

4. "Col Thomas S. Jeffrey, Jr.," 100th Bomb Group Foundation, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://100thbg.com/>.

knowledges the debunking of the myth that the Tuskegee Airmen never lost a bomber to enemy fighters under their escort.⁵ The Airmen's combat record is one of distinction and honor that doesn't need any embellishment, yet one that had to actively counter a false narrative that grew in relatively modern years.

The following mission accurately depicts a strike on August 12, 1944, by the 332d against radar sites at Toulon in preparation for Operation Dragoon, the Allied invasion of southern France, just a few days later. Now flying P-51s, the 332d is able to conduct long-range attacks and escort bombers into Germany. Although shown flying P-51Ds with high velocity aircraft rockets (HVARs), the 332d was in actuality flying P-51B/Cs with no rockets on that mission, notable because the B/C-models had only four .50-caliber guns compared to the D-model's six, reducing available firepower by a third.⁶ Without high-explosive armament like HVARs or bombs, targeting radar installations with just four machine guns was a highly inefficient task. The scene does, however, highlight the challenges of maximum range operations necessitating external fuel tanks along with the performance impact due to the drag of the external tanks and having to occasionally use aircraft movement to shake loose a "hung" tank.

In the process, Lieutenants Richard Macon (Josiah Cross), Robert Daniels (Ncuti Gatwa), and Alexander Jefferson (Brandon Cook) are shot down, with Macon sustaining a broken shoulder and neck. As in previous episodes, the German interrogators at Stalag Luft use the more relaxed, friendly interrogation method they favored over the harsh torture experienced by Airmen in other theaters from the Japanese. In his memoir, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, Jefferson recalls not only his interrogator's love of jazz and Lucky Strike cigarettes, but also his own shock at the amount of information his captors had in his dossier, to include the maintenance inspection report completed on his very aircraft just the day prior to his fateful mission.⁷

The interrogation also reveals the common sentiment of the Tuskegee Airmen—who fought for a country that treated them as second-class citizens—that America, though not perfect, was worth fighting for. These Airmen were in fact fighting two wars: the war against Nazi tyranny and the war against segregation and racism at home. Many African-American veterans from World War II went on to be civil rights advocates and leaders, inspired by their combat service to fight at home for a better America.

Despite segregation at home and a segregated military, Black Airmen were forced into integration in the shared experience as prisoners of war (POW). White and Black Airmen relied on each other to survive. As the episode reveals, when Macon, Daniels, and Jefferson were shot down, many POWs had already been in prison for up to a year or

5. Daniel L. Haulman, *Tuskegee Airmen Myths and Realities* (Maxwell AFB, AL: US Air Force Historical Research Agency, 2014), 7.

6. 99th Fighter Squadron Sortie Reports, June 1943–May 1945, 3 of 4, 110, <https://blackfreedom.proquest.com/>.

7. Alexander Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 55–60.

more and had no idea about the Tuskegee Airmen. Seeing the men at the POW camp was a surprise for most.

Only 12 Tuskegee Airmen were held in Stalag Luft III, but when a downed bomber pilot later shows up and excitedly claims that “if the Red Tails had been escorting us we wouldn’t have gotten shot down,” declaring “how many times the Red Tails saved [them],” word about their reputation in combat quickly spreads through the camp.⁸ In his memoir, Jefferson notes with irony that a white prisoner from the South—Major Gale “Buck” Cleven (Austin Butler) in the movie, but a different prisoner in reality—chose him to bunk in his room because he knew Jefferson wasn’t a spy. Jefferson says he likely would have “caught hell” from a white Southerner back home. But in the POW camp, ironically, he was trusted because he was Black.⁹

Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Ziemann, USAF

8. Jefferson, 76.

9. Jefferson, 65.

***Masters of the Air*, season 1, episode 9.**

Directed by Tim Van Patten, written by John Orloff. Aired March 15, 2024, Apple TV+.

Episode 9 brings the war in Europe—and thus the story arcs—to an end. It begins with Major Robert “Rosie” Rosenthal (Nate Mann) leading the 100th Bomb Group and the entire 3rd Air Division on a strike against Berlin on February 3, 1945, complete with P-51 escorts.¹ This scene does well to show the scale of air operations by that point in the war with the “thousand plane raids.” The February 3rd mission included over two thousand aircraft—1,437 heavy bombers and 948 fighters—to strike right at the heart of the Third Reich.² As Navigator Major Harry Crosby (Anthony Boyle) narrates, the men of the Army Air Forces have gained air superiority and are truly “masters of the air.”

Yet air superiority does not mean impunity, as Rosenthal’s crew is shot down. Mann does a terrific job showing not only Rosenthal’s command of his crew and his aircraft on the bomb run, but also the difficulty in getting out of an aircraft that is spinning out of control. Many crew members were unable to bail out of bombers due to being pinned against the aircraft by centrifugal force, spinning to their deaths. Upon landing, Rosenthal breaks the same arm that he broke in his first crash—a forced landing in France—and convinces advancing Russian soldiers that he’s an American. As the book on which the series is based reveals—in a moment where reality seems even more bizarre than

1. Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air: America’s Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2024), 423.

2. Robert Dorr, “The Bombing of Berlin by Doolittle’s Eighth Air Force,” *WWII Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2014), <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/>.

Hollywood—Rosenthal was actually greeted with a bear hug from the Russian soldier who only moments prior pointed a rifle at him.³

During Rosenthal's time with his Russian hosts he visits what historians believe to have been the Zabikowo camp near Poznan, Poland, where prisoners—mostly Jews—were hung, shot, and burned. While some rumblings of “death camps” were shared among Allied personnel, it wasn't until the discovery of the multitude of concentration camps that the true horror and scale of the wholesale industrial extermination of Jews and other persecuted groups became known to the world.⁴

Episode 9 also exposes the audience to the brutality of the “Blizzard March,” when prisoner of war (POW) camps were hastily evacuated in late January 1945 as the Allies closed in on the Reich and the POWs were moved deeper into the German heartland, potentially to be used as hostages. Utter chaos ensues as 10,000 POWs from Stalag Luft III prepare for a trip of unknown duration and destination in blizzard conditions with just 30 minutes' notice. Within that half hour, some POWs chose to consume as much food as possible, paying dearly for it later as their shrunken stomachs forced them to vomit. Others made hasty decisions as to what they could carry on makeshift sleds.⁵

The line of prisoners from Stalag Luft III extended 30 miles and spanned days and nights of marching. POWs were packed into cattle cars with human and animal feces on the floor, with many suffering from dysentery and hypothermia. There were a few fatalities from an air attack by an unwitting P-47.⁶ Shared misery led to shared humanity, accurately depicted as one POW is shown helping a German guard who struggles to keep up on the march.

The Muskau brickworks factory provides a brief respite for warmth before the march continues on to Nuremberg's Stalag XIII B and eventually to the overcrowded Stalag VIIA in Moosburg, where POWs joined with thousands of other Allied prisoners from across the British empire, ballooning to a total camp population of over 100,000. In reality, for nearly three months, even the Red Cross didn't know where the prisoners were.⁷ Of note, while Lieutenant Colonel Albert Patton “Bub” Clark (Sam Hazeldine) is shown as the senior American officer from Stalag III, in actuality it was Colonel Darr Alkire—the original stateside commander of the 100th, ironically—who served in this role. Alkire later took command of a B-24 group.⁸

Although little backstory is given, we meet George Neithammer (Josh Dylan), a college friend of Major Gale “Buck” Cleven (Austin Butler) from Wyoming. Neither knew that the other had joined the Air Corps until they saw each other as POWs and later

3. Miller, *Masters of the Air*, 424.

4. “Zabikowo Camp,” Holocaust Historical Society, February 5, 2022, <https://www.holocausthistorical.society.org.uk/>.

5. Miller, *Masters of the Air*, 492–505.

6. Miller.

7. Miller.

8. Miller.

made their escape together. While Major John “Bucky” Egan (Callum Turner) is shown fighting with a guard while Cleven and two others escape, the true story is an even more compelling example of duty. When Cleven told Egan about his plans to escape, Egan told him that as Alkire’s provost to maintain order among the POWs, he was duty bound to stay with the prisoners, sacrificing his chance for freedom for the greater good.⁹

Fortunately for viewers, the episode depicts the liberation of Stalag VIIA by General George S. Patton’s Third Army. With a little dramatic license, red-tail P-51s are shown visible from the camp, strafing the nearby Moosburg train station. Skirmishes between German guard towers and American forces preceded the camp’s liberation. Seeing the American flag raised over the town of Moosburg, Egan remarks on the tears and salutes across camp before he eventually replaces the Nazi flag over the camp as well.

A different form of airpower is shown with the Operation Chowhound/Manna air-drops of food to the people of the Netherlands. True to screen, bombers and crews accustomed to dropping tons of death and destruction took joy in bringing life and sustenance instead, witnessing the demonstration of genuine gratitude from the Dutch, who spelled out “MANY THANKS, YANKS” in a tulip field.¹⁰ Such missions were widely popular among the Airmen, who leapt at the chance to do something positive after enduring the horrors of war. One history records the reaction of one such crew member:

Children ran out of school waving excitedly. One old man stopped at a crossroads and shook his umbrella. The roads were crowded with hundreds of people waving. Nobody spoke in the aircraft. My vision was a little misty. Perhaps it was the rain on the Perspex.¹¹

The episode also captures perhaps one of the more enduring legacies of the Eighth Air Force: the profound bond between American Airmen and their English hosts—often referred to as the “Friendly Invasion.” Children like Sammy Hurry (Alfie Tempest) did in fact spend most of their free time on base with the ground crews, and townspeople came out in their Sunday best to see the crews fly off one last time for home.¹² The strong connection between the Airmen and the countryfolk is evident in the local museums established and maintained after the war to honor those who served. The historical accuracy of the *Masters of the Air* set was largely due to the photos and memories preserved by the local Brits who maintain the museum at Thorpe Abbots, the actual home of the 100th.

The episode also shows the emotional toll the war had on the Airmen. In contemplating the end of the war, Crosby and Rosenthal try to reconcile what they, as individuals, did in war. While just war theory and the law of armed conflict clearly state that the use

9. Kirk Saduski, historian, interview by author, March 8, 2024.

10. Miller, *Masters of the Air*, 490.

11. Edward Jablonski, *Air War*, Volume IV (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 122.

12. Chuck Dunning, “Keepers of the Castles of Little America,” *British Heritage Travel*, September 23, 1997, <https://britishheritage.com/>.

of force in World War II was justified, many still wrestled with its moral and ethical challenges. Rosenthal himself, whom many believed volunteered for a second tour because he was Jewish or had family members imprisoned in Germany, notes, “I didn’t do it because I was a Jew, I did it because I was human, and I can’t stand bullies.”¹³

The episode’s coda shares what happened to a number of the main characters after the war, demonstrating the diversity of experiences in post-war life common to World War II veterans. Some stayed in the service, others became lawyers or teachers, or obtained advanced degrees—in other words, they moved on with life. Many did not talk about their service—especially to their families—for years, if ever.¹⁴

Masters of the Air succeeds in showing ordinary people doing extraordinary things during the horror of warfare. No other screen portrayal to date has succeeded in showing the full scale of mass daylight bombing raids. For general viewers, the series highlights the courage and sacrifices of the Airmen of the Eighth Air Force and those in the English countryside who kept them flying. It also reveals the brutality of warfare in the subfreezing cold blue. For today’s Airmen, *Masters of the Air* shows our origin story—the doctrine and strategy developed here at Maxwell Field in the 1930s and the culture of Air Corps Airmen that lives on today.

Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Ziemann, USAF

13. Donald Miller, interview by author, February 16, 2024.

14. Saduski.

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