

1943:

What Changed the Allies' Prospects

by

Admiral WILLIAM V. PRATT,
U.S.N. Retired



Messner in The Rochester Times-Union

To get a true perspective of the Allied position in this war today, it is useful to go back one year and see where the Allies then stood politically and militarily in relation to the Axis.

At that time the Axis armies had almost complete control. They had overrun most of Western Europe. In Africa, Axis troops were knocking at the gates of Alexandria, and Axis influence extended over the African Mediterranean littoral from the Atlantic to Egypt, practically closing the Mediterranean to Allied traffic. The Suez Canal was under a definite threat. Gibraltar and little Malta still held out, but Malta was so hard put to survive that at times it had to be supplied by British submarines. On the eastern front, Axis armies held great slices of Russian soil and were pushing toward the Volga and the rich oil fields of the Caucasus.

In the Atlantic, Axis submarines were almost winning the struggle for control of that ocean, while America, a late-comer in the war, was working feverishly to overcome the setback of Pearl Harbor and to prepare for global war.

In the Pacific, the Japanese had brought an empire under their control, stretching from Burma and the Andaman Islands through the Netherlands Indies and the Solomons to the outer Aleutians. Through their holdings in New Guinea, the Solomons, and the islands of the Arafura Sea, they threatened the existence of Australia. Flushed with pride by the ease with which they had extended their island holdings, they had made a bid for the Hawaiian Islands in the Battle of Midway. China held out but cut off from the resources of the outside world was forced to fight on in its own Oriental way.

From a superficial aspect, except when Britain and Russia were fighting alone, never did the picture look gloomier than it did one year ago. Gradually, however, as the new year ran its course, Allied prospects brightened, until confidence in ultimate victory seemed assured even if the going was long and tough. What caused the change?

Foremost of all stands the indomitable spirit of free men, which will never submit to being fettered. Second comes the irresistible strength of free enterprise, backed by great resources when diverted from the channels of peace and turned to the supply of correct implements for waging efficient war. And third was an acquired proficiency in the art of war.

No one agency alone can claim credit for the series of spectacular victories which mark this last year. But outstanding credit must be given to control of the air, which the Allies have wrested from the Axis Powers, and to the successful anti-submarine campaign. Bereft of these advantages, Allied military and sea power would have remained in shackles.

An example of the increase and expansion of air power is found in the strategic bombing of Axis centers of strength. Another is the support it has given to amphibious warfare. The first easy successes of the Japanese in the Pacific indicate the possibilities of amphibious warfare when it meets weak resistance. The campaign in Norway to repel the invading Nazis shows the futility of amphibious warfare without air control. It remained for the campaign in Sicily to demonstrate the effectiveness of amphibious warfare against resistance when accompanied by an effective air superiority. Control of the air has brought to amphibious warfare an enhanced value in the surprise factor, so that its strategic value now equals or surpasses its tactical value. Still, amphibious warfare, conducted as the Allies must conduct it over vast oceans, would have gotten nowhere unless first the Axis submarine campaign had been brought under some degree of control. This is another of the Allied accomplishments of the past year.

There have been many hard-fought battles on the Russian front, most of them with the Russians on the defensive. It took, however, a Stalingrad, which will rank as one of the great battles of the world, to turn the offensive Axis tide and cause it to ebb into defensive strategy. The important victories in North Africa removed the threat to the Suez Canal, helped to clear the Mediterranean for the passage of Allied shipping, increased the scope and effectiveness of Allied naval power, and paved the way for the thrust into Sicily.

The successful campaign in Sicily had both political and military repercussions. It helped to break the tie between Hitler and Mussolini, increased the unrest against the Axis oppressors, threw jitters in the Axis supporters, raised British and American prestige, caused the Italians to remove troops from the Balkans, made the Germans reorient their forces to prepare better for the defense of the European Mediterranean littoral, and gave the Allies a strong position from which to launch attacks directed against the mainland. In support of all these moves was

It helped to break the tie between Hitler and Mussolini, increased the unrest against the Axis oppressors, threw jitters in the Axis supporters, raised British and American prestige, caused the Italians to remove troops from the Balkans, made the Germans reorient their forces to prepare better for the defense of the European Mediterranean littoral, and gave the Allies a strong position from which to launch attacks directed against the mainland. In support of all these moves was the strategic bombing of the Continent, which shattered Axis key points, influenced morale, and, together with the threat of a western invasion, made the Germans hold back much of their reserve power which otherwise might have been thrown onto the Russian front.

In the Southwest Pacific, the successful campaign for the possession of the Guadalcanal area, assisted by our campaign in New Guinea, made Australia safe, turned the tide of the Japanese sweep south, and gave us positions for further advances north toward the citadels of Japanese strength. Our air power has shown its superiority over that of the Japanese, and has been here, as elsewhere, a dominating influence, notably in the battle of Bismarck Sea, and in other sea and land engagements. The Nov. 12-15 night actions showed the superiority of our gun power.

In China there has been slight change in comparison with other fields of battle, and in Burma the situation is relatively static.

Summing up in general: On every front, military, political, naval, and air, Allied prospects are much brighter than they were one year ago. On every front in this global war Axis strategy is definitely on the defensive, except in those regions in the Pacific area where Allied amphibious and air power have not yet struck decisively.