

While aircrews are loyal to their aircraft, after all, they stake their lives on their machines, most would agree that the Fortress both looked and handled better than the Liberator. One former B-24 pilot labelled the Lib a truck: "It looked like a truck, it hauled a big load like a truck, and it flew like a truck." (12) In contrast to the Liberator, the Fortress was a "forgiving" aircraft, which may have been its outstanding virtue considering its hastily trained and inexperienced crews. This characteristic is reflected in the accident rate, both stateside and overseas, which clearly favored the B-17. (13) The B-24 did have a performance edge, at least initially, but wartime modifications had a more detrimental effect on the Lib than on the Fort, so that the latter emerged with both range and bomb load advantages. (14)

More importantly, the Boeing bomber was more combat worthy. The B-17 could fly higher, which afforded more protection from German flak, and was more stable, which allowed it to fly tighter formations and steadier bomb runs. B-17 aircrews relate, perhaps only half in jest, that the best escort they could have had was not fighters, but B-24s, which attracted the GAF. (As we shall see, the statistics seem to bear this out.) The B-17 could be ditched, something done with extreme difficulty in the B-24 due to its construction and high-mounted wing. (15) The Liberator tended to catch fire when hit and could not take punishment as well as the legendary B-17. In combat, the B-24 was 1.5 times as likely to be lost when hit. It should also be noted that the two aircraft were not sent on comparable missions, the Forts pulled the more difficult ones. The bottom line was that the average Fortress in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations flew over twice as many sorties as the Liberator, 77 sorties to 35.8. (16)

The crews were aware of these differences. A 1944 survey of heavy bomber crew members in Europe asked: "Do you think you have the best type of airplane for the particular job which you have to do?" While 92 percent of the B-17 crews answered "yes" and 4 percent "no," the responses from the B-24 crews were, respectively, 76 and 16 percent. Two-thirds of the B-24 crew members who answered "no" said they wanted B-17s; none of the B-17 crew members who answered "no" desired service with B-24s. (17) These facts highlight the achievement and courage of those who flew the B-24s. At the same time, they

also raise serious questions as to why over eighteen thousand Liberators were built, three for every two Fortresses, at a cost slightly higher than the B-17, when they did not perform as well in combat. (18)

Fighter Operations

The Eighth had even a greater superiority in numbers of fighters than bombers. While it had twice the number of bombers, it has almost three times as many fighters and consequently flew three times as many sorties as the Italian based fighters, claimed three times as many enemy aircraft destroyed in the air, and yet suffered only twice as many losses. (19) In addition the Eighth Air Force also received escort protection from the Ninth Air Force and the RAF, which further increased its advantage in the number of fighter escort sorties per bomber sortie.

The Eighth Air Force also had a qualitative advantage. Over one half of its fighter sorties were flown by P-51s and over one-third by P-47s, while the Fifteenth flew almost equal numbers of fighter sorties with P-51s and P-38s. The Eighth received its first Mustang in February 1944 (Ninth Air Force P-51s began escort of the Eighth's bombers in December 1943), while the Fifteenth was first escorted by Mustangs in April 1944. (20)

The point is that the P-51 was clearly a better air-to-air fighter than the P-38, which, when combined with its greater range, made it the best escort fighter in the European war. In the Fifteenth Air Force the two fighters flew almost exactly the same number of sorties, but their combat record was dramatically different. While the Lightning had more encounters with enemy fighters, giving it a better chance to prove itself, it suffered more combat losses while registering far fewer claims. The overall loss rate per sortie was 1.27 percent for the P-38 vs. 1.02 percent for the P-51. In air to air combat, P-38 pilots claimed 4.64 kills for every known Lightning loss to enemy aircraft, while the figure for P-51 pilots was 19.14 to (21)

The P-51's superiority can also be seen in the Eighth Air Force operations. Unfortunately, the Eighth did not break down fighter operations by aircraft type on a regular basis, but we do have a comparison by fighter types for the most critical period of the air war, November 1943 through March 1944, during which the AAF won daylight

air superiority. In that decisive five-month period, the Eighth's P-38s claimed fewer German aircraft destroyed than its overall losses in combat (.98 ratio). In comparison, the P-51s claimed 4.73 enemy fighters destroyed for each loss and P-47s claimed 3.63 enemy aircraft destroyed for each loss. Little wonder that Eighth converted almost entirely to P-51s by October 1944. (22)

In short, the Eighth flew only 10 percent of its fighter sorties with other than the AAF's best (P-51) or second best (P-47) fighters, while the Fifteenth flew over 40 percent with the third best (P-38).

Targets

There is also a difference in where and on what the two air forces dropped their bombs. About 43 percent of the Eighth's and 24 percent of the Fifteenth's tonnage fell on oil facilities, aircraft factories, and other industrial targets. Compared to the Fifteenth, the Eighth dropped only about half the percentage of bombs on oil targets (10.7 vs. 19.4 percent), but almost three times the percentage on industrial targets (13.4 vs. 4.8 percent). Tonnage figures for aircraft factories and airfields are unclear, but indicate that the Eighth dropped about the same percentage on airfields as did the Fifteenth, but a greater percentage on aircraft factories. In contrast, about one-third of the Eighth's and one-half of the Fifteenth's bombs fell on land communications targets: especially marshaling yards, but also bridges. Tactical targets (air/ ground support, airfields, etc.) consumed the remainder of the total bombing effort. (23)

Quite striking is the modest percentage of bombs delivered by American strategic bombers on strategic targets. There is a problem of both definitions and record keeping, but clearly oil and factories fall into the strategic category, less clear are what are termed "land transportation targets" which cover both marshaling yards in Germany, probably strategic targets, and marshaling yards in other countries, probably tactical targets. Of all the bombs dropped by the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces, 54 percent were aimed at and transportation targets in Germany, oil facilities, and industrial factories throughout Europe. (24)

The location of the targets was determined by the geography of the air forces bases. Roughly three-quarters of the Eighth's bombs fell on Germany and one-fourth on France. As might be expected, the Fifteenth's bombs fell mainly in southern and eastern