

There were no suitable heavy night-bombers to be spared for 205 Group so it was decided to equip them with the Liberator, despite the fact that the B-24 had many operational disadvantages for night work, the principal one being the bright flames and white-hot turbo supercharger exhausts which made the aircraft a beacon in the sky for night fighters. Since nightfighter activity was not as intense over Italy and southern Europe as it was in the northwest it was considered that losses from night fighters would not be high. A further disadvantage was the 0.50 caliber machine-guns which had a much better range than the 0.303 guns but as the gunner could not see far enough in the dark to avail himself of this, the only advantage was their superior hitting power. However, it was found that as soon as the gunner fired, the flash from the guns ruined his night vision so he had little chance of aiming on a second attack. The front gun turret was also useless, as was the under gun turret as the light from the turbo-chargers made it impossible to see fighters at night.

So the RAF removed the under gun turret and the guns from the front turret, which was then faired over with fabric. The beam guns were also taken out because it was found that fighter attacks always came from behind. However, conversion to the Liberator was slow. On 15 January 1943 No. 178 Squadron was formed at Shandur in the Suez Canal Zone from a detachment of 160 Squadron and began receiving Liberator Mark IIIs. The following night three Liberators took off and bombed targets in Tripoli. It was not a full-scale beginning and 178 remained the only Liberator Squadron in 205 Group until October 1944, although on 14 March 1943 a 'Special Liberator' Flight was formed at Gambut, Libya. It was later re-designated 148 Squadron and began special duties, dropping arms and supplies to Resistance groups in Albania, Greece, and Yugoslavia.

In January 1944, 148 Squadron moved to Italy and when not engaged in special operations its aircraft joined with other squadrons of 205 Group on heavy bombing raids on northern Italy and southern Europe. By April 1944, the powerful Mediterranean Allied Strategic Force was playing a vital role in the conduct of the war which was by no means confined to Italy or the Italian

Front. The 15th AF continued to pound targets by day while the RAF Liberators and Wellingtons struck under the cover of darkness. By June the combined forces bombed railway networks in south-east Europe in support of Russian military operations in Rumania. Throughout the summer of 1944 Austrian aircraft manufacturing centers at Wiener Neustadt were bombed day and night and oil-producing centers, too, were bombed, often in conjunction with Bomber Command in England. By the autumn of 1944



Martin Bowman

*Not a scene from the first World War, but RAF living conditions at Foggia*

these attacks had assumed top priority. Vast aerial fleets of 15th AF Liberators and B-17s escorted by Mustangs and Lightnings, attacked the refineries at Ploesti and bombed Budapest, Komarom, Gyor, and Petfurdo in Hungary, Belgrade and other cities in Yugoslavia and Trieste in north-eastern Italy. Meanwhile, Liberators and Wellingtons of No. 205 Group flew unescorted at night from their bases in southern Italy and stoked up the fires left by the American bombers.'

Of special importance to the Germans were the Hungarian and Rumanian railway systems. These came under constant Allied aerial bombardment and in the summer of 1944 the Germans were deprived of the use of the Lwow-Cernauti Railway by the Russians. The only alternative route

linking Germany with the grainlands of Hungary and the oil fields of Rumania was the River Danube, capable of carrying 10,000 tons of war material daily. It was estimated that eight million tons of a B-24 of the 15th AF material had reached Germany in 1942 by this waterway alone. By mid-March 1944 the Danube was carrying more than double the amount carried by rail. Even a temporary halt in this river traffic would seriously hamper the German war effort and in April 1944 No. 205 Group began 'Gardening' operations, 'sowing' the waterways with mines. On the night of 8 April three Liberators and nineteen Wellingtons from 178 Squadron dropped forty mines near Belgrade. Over the next nine days 137 more mines were dropped and in May the total number dropped had risen to over 500. No 'Gardening' sorties were flown during June but on the night of 1 July sixteen Liberators and fifty-three Wellingtons dropped 192 mines in the biggest operation of the mining campaign. The following night another sixty mines were dropped.

At first the 'Gardening' sorties were only flown on nights of the full moon as the aircraft had to fly no higher than 200 feet and even—heights of forty and fifty feet were reported. 'Gardening' sorties continued throughout July, August, and September. On the night of 4 October four Liberators and eighteen Wellingtons flew the final mission of the operation and dropped fifty-eight mines in the Danube in Hungary west of Budapest, north of Gyor, and east of Esztergom. In six months of operations, 1,382 mines were laid by Liberators and Wellingtons of No. 205 Group in eighteen attacks.

The effect on the supply route was catastrophic. Several ships were sunk and blocked the waterway in parts and by May coal traffic had virtually ceased. Canals and ports were choked with barges and by August 1944 the volume of material transported along the Danube had been reduced by about 70 per cent.

Meanwhile yet another Air Command had come into existence in the Mediterranean theatre—the Balkan Air Force. Its formation in June 1944 was a logical step in the sequence of events which had begun in April 1941 when Yugoslavia had been