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*Little Queen II a Mark VI Lib of No 2 (SAAF) Wing. Both 31 and 34 Squadrons operated from Italy with the B-24 and operated from Italy as part of 205 Group. In August 1944, 31 Squadron lost 8 B-24s in four nights during supply drops to the beleaguered Polish Home army in Warsaw and in six weeks the squadrons lost 24 of their 33 aircraft.*

invaded by the Germans. Various Partisan groups became a constant menace to the occupying troops and in February 1944 the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill announced that no less than fourteen of the twenty German divisions as well as six other satellite divisions were being contained in the Balkan Peninsula, by a force of 250,000 Yugoslav Partisans supplied by elements of the RAF and American air forces in the Mediterranean.

Four Liberators from No. 148 Squadron had been supplying Resistance groups in Albania, Greece, and Yugoslavia since May 1942. In March 1943 Halifaxes became available and this squadron provided the nucleus of a Special Operations Air Force, which by June 1944 consisted of eight squadrons, including one flight of Liberators, and was manned by personnel from no less than five nations. This arrangement was nothing new. The officers and men of the 376th Bomb Group of the 15th AF was operated from October 1943 by Yugoslav nationals trained in the United States. They made their operational debut in November 1943 in four B-24J Liberators presented to them by President Roosevelt at Bolling Field upon completion of their training. On 16 November the Yugoslavs joined with the 376th crews in bombing hangars, administration buildings, and parked aircraft at Eleusis airbase, north-west of Athens. The Yugoslav Liberators were later ferried to

Cairo where King Peter officially accepted them on behalf of the Yugoslavian Government in Exile. Their war record was long and distinguished and losses were disproportionately high for such a small force.

Special Operations Executive (SOE) units also operated from the Mediterranean during the war. By May 1943 many flights had been made to Poland from England. Between August and October 1943 brief use was made of three Liberators (BZ 859, 860, and 362, later transferred to 1586 Flight) but these long trips were subject to heavy fighter opposition and the risks were great. It was decided, therefore, to operate SOE aircraft from the Mediterranean theater. No. 1575 Flight (which became 624 Squadron in 1943), No. 1586 Flight (which became 301 (Pomeranian-Polish) Squadron in November 1944), and 148 Squadron were based at Blida, Derna, and Tocra in North Africa, although airfields in Italy were used on occasions in 1944, principally Brindisi but also Foggia. G. J. Hill, a fitter with 148 Squadron at Brindisi in August 1944, recalls the Polish Liberators: 'We used these Polish Liberators to convert some of the crews on to B-24s. Our Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Dickie Knight and his flight engineer, had served on Liberators before so they were given the job of converting the rest of the crews. After a very short time we received a batch of B-24Js from a maintenance unit in Algiers. The old

Polish Liberators were flown back by the crews who had ferried in the new B-24s.'

Liberators, Lysanders, and Halifaxes based in southern Italy ranged throughout the Balkan countries, Czechoslovakia, southern France and, towards the end of the war, Austria and Germany, dropping 'Joes', Resistance leaders, arms, and supplies. By the end of the war the Balkan Air Force had flown over 11,500 sorties into Yugoslavia and had delivered over 16,400 gross tons of supplies to the Partisans. On the personnel side, 2,500 persons had been flown in and 19,000 brought out of the country.

Although the Balkans was the center of operations for the special force, in August 1944 another supply mission was required farther north. The Russian armies had swept aside German resistance in Poland and were at the approaches of Warsaw. The Polish Home Army under General Bor was persuaded to rise against the German occupation troops but the Russians made no attempt whatever to support the rising. On the eve of 1 August 1944 General Bor requested all possible air support for the rising but for some time the Russians refused to allow RAF and American aircraft, involved in supplying arms to Warsaw, to make emergency landings in Russian-held territory. Bor pleaded for the bombing of the environs of the capital, the dispatch of Polish fighter squadrons from France, and even the dropping of the Polish parachute brigade into Warsaw itself. His pleas were, however, impractical. His fourth demand, that of increasing the air supply of arms and ammunition was just possible, involving as it did, a round trip of about 1,750 miles. Much of the journey would be over enemy-held territory bristling with anti-aircraft defenses and night fighters.

The Special Duty squadrons in England were fully committed to 'Overlord' so the task of supplying the Polish Home Army was given to the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces. At first Air Marshal Slessor opposed the plan on the grounds that the undertaking was suicidal but after appeals to Russia had failed and the Polish situation became more acute he was forced to agree to a small trial sortie being dispatched from No. 1586 (Polish) Special Duty Flight. These few aircraft proved successful and two Liberator Squadrons, No. 31 (SAAF) and No. 178 of 205 Group, were diverted from the invasion of southern France to support them. But Slessor's worst fears were realized and on the five nights between the 12 and 17 August, seventeen of the ninety-three aircraft