

dispatched failed to return. The South Africans, were hit badly, losing eight Liberators in four nights.

With that operations ceased but were restarted after protests from the Polish authorities with aircraft from No. 1586 Flight. Four of the nine aircraft failed to return on two nights and after further losses bad weather prevented any further missions to the beleaguered Poles. In early September the Russians finally agreed to co-operate but by then the Polish, RAF, and SAAF units had lost thirty-one aircraft out of 181 dispatched in twenty-two nights of operations.

Meanwhile the Liberators of the 15th Air Force and No. 178 Squadron continued pounding enemy targets throughout the Mediterranean and its immediate area. No. 178 Squadron had been using Liberators since the beginning of 1943 and had built up an impressive record, listing among its targets those of Crete, the Aegean Islands, and the Ploesti oil refinery. Apart from a few scattered units employing a handful of Liberators, up to October 1944, 178 was the only true RAF B-24 squadron in the Mediterranean. But that month 37 Squadron, based at Tortorella, began exchanging its Wellingtons for the Liberator Mark VI. During the year this Squadron had flown many operations not only dropping Partisans and mining the Danube, but also normal bombing raids.

As more and more Liberators became available, three more Wellington squadrons converted to Liberators in the first three months of 1945. In January that year 70 Squadron at Tortorella began re-equipping with Liberator VIs, as did 104 Squadron at Foggia Main, a month later. In March 1945, 40 Squadron also began converting to Liberator VIs at Foggia Main.

Crews were doubtless pleased with their new breed of bomber, which was different in every way from the Wellington and most other aircraft. Although it did not have the standard British blind flying panel which contained all the vital flying instruments, the instruments were arranged somewhat haphazardly and checks for take-off and landing were only possible by having the flight engineer read out from a long check list. It did have a superb radio and auto-pilot. The auxiliary engine-driven generator (for use on ground to ensure enough electricity for hydraulic brake pressures etc.) removed the constant anxiety of losing brake power when taxi-ing, which had been experienced with the Wellington, due to the slow running engines not being able to maintain pressure.

Pilots found the flight deck a dream. There was more room than in the 'Wimpey' and there was even a carpet on the floor. (The ashtrays were removed on delivery as no smoking was permitted in any British service aircraft.) In its flying handling the Liberator was a lumbering aircraft 'like flying a bus' but crews rapidly got used to its performance and even enjoyed its superior stability (and hence comfort). The tricycle undercarriage (which no British aircraft had at the time) was also vastly superior to tailwheel designs both for visibility and ease of handling.

No. 205 Group could now call upon six Liberator bomber squadrons including two SAAF Squadrons. The SAAF Squadrons had played a large part in the Mediterranean war, dropping supplies to guerrillas and taking part in the mining operations in the Danube. Not all the personnel in the South African squadrons were natives of that country. Quite often replacements were RAF personnel trained in Egypt and Palestine like Frank Mortimer, a Liberator air-gunner who was one of those who joined 34 Squadron (SAAF) in October 1944. He recalls: 'We arrived at Foggia and reported to 34 SAAF at Tortorella. Our living accommodation was four to a tent. It was raining at the time and ours was on a slope. There were no beds. I was fortunate to have a sleeping-bag with me. All around the airfield, which had been a maintenance unit for the Germans, were wrecked Junkers 88s. None of the JU-88s had tires. They had been stolen by the Italians to mend their plimsolls (sneakers). I took a rudder off a JU-88 and slept on that for a few weeks. We also made radio sets from parts of their wreckage which we finished off with bent pins and razor blades, using our aircraft headsets for earphones.

'There was no place to dry out flying clothes so we slept in them. The dampness was intense and on raids we flew in wet clothes. The dampness also got into the parachutes and it is doubtful whether they would have worked when needed. We tried to make the tents more habitable by digging down about four feet to make more headroom. We also stole runway sheeting and used that to prop up the sides. Cleaning was another problem. There was a bowser which brought one jerry can of water every day. In Foggia we used to try and take a bath but it was over-populated with Americans and the British Army. Gradually as crews were shot down it was the custom to raid their tents, and take little luxuries, like a wooden bed. It was dog eat dog, with little sentiment at all.

'Our first two operations were supply drops to Tito's Partisans in Yugoslavia. These were completed under code names, flying about 100 feet over the DZs. I recall very vividly flying in the region of 500 feet. We dropped sugar, boots, rifles and other supplies and we could quite clearly see horses and carts coming to pick them up. During briefing for a raid on Yugoslavia we were told that there were three main Partisan groups involved-Tito, Mihailovich's men, and the Chetniks. We were told to watch out for the Chetniks because they were known to help the Germans look for downed airmen.

Most of the RAF crews were posted to 70 (ATF) Squadron in January 1945 and the SAs gave us a farewell party. I for one was proud to have flown with them. They were good men and I'll always remember the CO; he was a fantastic man. No. 70 Squadron's base was no better. The Sergeants' Mess was another cowshed and the food was foul. I lived off tins of South African pears and peaches. The place was infested with snakes and I even saw a warrant officer cutting one up to make a tie out of it.'

In January 1945 Denis Allen joined No. 40 Squadron at Foggia Main from 1675 HCU at Abu-Suier in the Canal Zone: 'I was delayed by the smallpox epidemic in Cairo and arrived on the Squadron a few days after my first crew (Skipper F/S Smout), only to find they had gone on their first op without me, and failed to return.

'I became acquainted with many US aircrew, both at Foggia and at Prestwick, where I did the automatic pilot course. I remember with great affection these quiet, serious young men with their easy-going temperament and good nature. The Commanding Officer of 40 Squadron, Group Captain Smythe, placed me with Pilot Officer Colin Dunn's crew who had lost their flight engineer. PO Dunn and crew had already completed ten 'ops' and despite the natural reluctance of all crews to take on a 'rookie' like myself, they made me welcome and I always considered myself lucky to join such a friendly and experienced crew. I flew eight 'ops' with my new crew, including one daylight mission. Our daylight 'op' was interesting, the target, a wharf named Arsa, was too small to bomb at night. We went in just above the altitude for accurate flak at about 24,000 feet. This was too high for such a small target so we were instructed to drop one bomb as a marker, make the necessary corrections on the bomb sight and