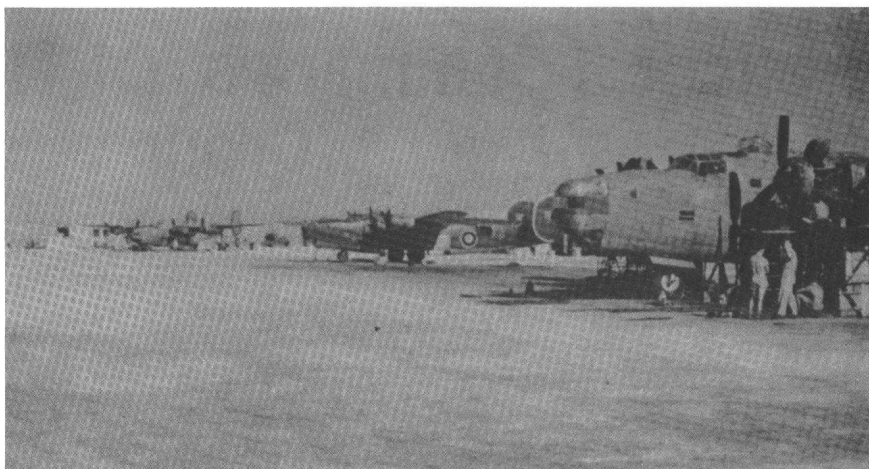


On 25 April 1945, 205 Group crews were briefed for an operation that was a return to rail junction and marshaling yard raids after their close support work. Sixty-one Liberators were dispatched to the marshaling yards at Freilassing in Austria about four miles northwest of Salzburg. No. 614 (County of Glamorgan) Squadron dispatched seven Pathfinder Liberators to illuminate and mark the yards. Deryck Fereday was among the bomber crews who took part: 'The operation took an hour longer than usual due to the greater distance (I logged six hours five minutes, carrying two 1,000 lb and ten 500 lb bombs). It went completely to the pattern of other raids: heavy flak over the target, lots of ground explosions and flames indicating munitions in the rail trucks destroyed. Coming back we climbed with plenty of time before we reached the Alps so I permitted myself the luxury of 'listening out' on the pilot's standard frequency radio, which was controlled from above the pilot's head in the roof of the flight deck and could be tuned to almost any broadcast frequency (normally we used only the push button VHF radio for ground/air control, plus the WOP's Morse set). Loud and clear was an Austrian station playing Strauss waltzes, without commentary or other introduction, just showing that someone down there was determined to end the war in three-four time. Even today hearing the 'Blue Danube' brings on instant Liberator nostalgia.

'This was the last bombing raid of the war. We stood by for other operations but none were confirmed: indeed the fighting lines were so fluid that no one quite knew what point the invading armies had reached. Then VI-Victory in Italy Day-was announced on 6 May 1945. We won the war in Italy with the help of the Liberator, two days before VE-Day was announced in the West.'

During 1945 Liberators flew British troops from Italy to Athens to help suppress the ELAS rising. This caused unrest among South African crews because many were of Greek extraction. On the very last day of the war and for a few days after the German surrender in Italy, Liberators transported petrol and supplies to the British 8th Army advancing from northern Italy into Austria.

Denis Allen of 40 Squadron recalls: 'During the summer of 1945 we made several flights to northern Italy carrying petrol and army rations. These flights were regarded as an 'easy' number but in fact proved just as hazardous as a 'normal' mission! The trouble arose from the temporary landing strip. The Liberator soon broke-up the sun-



Martin Bowman

*Liberators of 70 Squadron at Agir, Palestine after the end of the war in Europe.*

baked turf and produced large areas of soft sandy soil which hindered take-off. On one occasion I remember even with 120 on the clock the Liberator simply refused to leave the runway.'

No. 148 Squadron was also involved with 'trooping' duties as G. J. Hill recalls: 'We were given the job of transporting POWs back to the UK as part of Operation Exodus. Benches were fitted and bomb-doors were sealed with doped fabric to keep the draughts out. However, a steady slipstream blew through the holes and the fuselage was below freezing for most of the trip. We carried twenty-seven passengers at a time in the bomb-bays and during the flight, we let them up into the back of the Liberator for a smoke, one at a time and asking him to pass it on.'

One by one the Liberator squadrons left Italy. On 6 November 1945, 148 Squadron left Foggia and flew to Gianacalis in Egypt. G. J. Hill remembers the trip: 'We carried everything we could get on these aircraft and we took possibly the only two pigs to fly on Liberators. The pigs had been with 148 a long time and were well fed with the swill from three messes. It was a sight to behold to see pigs' heads looking out of large beam windows as the Lib took off from Foggia. On 25 January 1946, 148 Squadron was disbanded at Gianacalis. We had a wonderful farewell party.

On 13 November, 178 Squadron moved to Fayid, Egypt, and towards the end of December was disbanded. Crews were posted to 70 Squadron of 205 Group at Shallufa, Egypt. Trooping continued until in February 1946 crews heard that they were to change to Lancs flown by new crews who

would be coming out from the UK. The Libs were to be given back to the Americans, as Britain saw no point in paying for them when ample British aircraft were now available for bomber squadrons.

Deryck Fereday recalls: 'We ferried the Libs one by one to Gebel Hamzi (formerly known as 'Kilo 40') on the desert road from Cairo to Alexandria and El Alamein. The last trip was made on 20 March 1946 and we had to suffer the indignity of being brought back by a Lancaster crew whose knees were still white and who had never seen a shot fired in anger. The Libs at Gebel Hamzi were parked in two long lines stretching to the desert horizon. The Maintenance Unit closed down in September 1946 but not before German POWs were brought in to chop through the aircraft, breaking the tail-plane off, and hammering a spike sledge through each engine.

'By the time our last trip was made the first Libs had the sand washing over their tires and had already been stripped by locals of anything salable or of scrap value. It was a sorry sight, those beautiful and efficient flying machines in their graveyard, but they had done their job. It was the end of an era.'

*Taken from the book, "The Liberator B-24 1939-1945," by Martin Bowman. First published in the United Kingdom by Wensum Books (Norwich Ltd.. Library of Congress Catalog No 80-50342. Reprinted by permission. Book is not in print, but can be found in used book stores.*