
Combat Express

Reprinted from December 1944 Air Force Magazine

The fighters called for help and the bombers came through.

Editors Note: This story tells of other organizations that were ferrying supplies to General Patton's 3rd Army. By using smaller aircraft, supplies could be delivered close to the front. In some cases aviation fuel was pumped right into the tanks of the Tactical Air Force aircraft. Tactical aircraft were fighters, and other smaller aircraft that were especially modified to attack ground targets and enemy occupied strong points.

Everything that moved, be it trains, trucks, and tanks, became prime targets of the roving P-47s and P-51s. Tactical Aircraft (TAC) aircraft airdromes would move behind the ground troops as they advanced toward Germany.

For the 12th Tactical Air Command it was a critical hour. From the day the 7th Army had stormed the beaches of southern France, the ground troops had been driving forward, never losing momentum, never being curtailed by their own insufficiencies. And with bomb and gun power they had torn the German strong points to rubble and dust, the 12th had provided the air support and led the way.

Now they had the Nazis on the run. They had to keep operating, but they needed supplies of rations, ammunition and gasoline, needed them badly.

The ground forces couldn't be called upon for aid. They were having their own headaches keeping their own units supplied. From the beachhead it was a 3 1/2-day turnaround by truck. And the roads had about reached their capacity.

So for once, instead of helping the bombers, the fighters and light attack planes called upon the bombers to help them. And help arrived without delay.

From the 15th Air Force came a fleet of B-24s. Shifted from strategic bombing missions, they were assigned to fly the gasoline and supplies from their Italian bases to bases in southern France under the direction of the Tactical Air Command men in southern and central France.

Each B-24 was fitted to carry empty gasoline drums in the rear section, unfused 500 pounders were hung in the bomb bay, while many cases of .50 caliber ammunitions and food supplies were distributed to whatever storage space was left. Each plane made the short flight with a full load of fuel in every available tank.

In tight formations they flew to airdromes that but a week before had been targets for the new occupants. Many of the crew members in the B-24s were ground men who were making their first mission to help with the unloading. They were astonished at the destruction the AAF had wrought upon the targets they passed over.

When the planes landed, the townspeople long accustomed to diving for the nearest shelter whenever the big bombers passed overhead flocked out to the airdrome like children to a circus. They watched as the aircraft turned onto the apron, and ran in a large semicircle around the field. They saw the bomb bay doors open and the bombs come down guided by careful hands. They waved and cheered as the engines revved up and the empty planes took off to return the next day with still more bombs, ammunition,

gasoline and other supplies for the fighters.

But even the efforts of the B-24s was not enough. The drive to the north was in full swing again, this time for the Belfort Gap, gateway to Germany. It was decided to add a fleet of A-20s and whatever C-47s were available; for those smaller planes could go into the forward fields where the B-24s could not land. There was such a demand for the cargo that the A-20s and C-47s often taxied to within hose distance of the combat P-47s. The ground men pumped the gasoline from one plane to another like a blood transfusion. They lifted bombs down from the bomb bay, fused them and re hung them on the P-47s.

A small indication of what the Thunderbolts did with these supplies may be gained from their score in a single day's operation. On that day they nailed 43 Locomotives, destroying 34 of them, leaving nine damaged. In addition they damaged 29 railroad cars carrying German troops and supplies to the Belfort Gap. Of the 125,000 rounds ammunition flow in one day, a P-47 fired 90,000 into enemy convoys in the Belfort Gap area. Gradually, the race to keep the fighters supplied was being won. The reserve of material was mounting with each delivery by the ingenious Combat Express. Indeed the delivery of surplus gasoline began to pose a problem, but high octane fuel could not be poured on a field, when no more storage tanks were available. A lieutenant at one field came up with the answer. Finding four wine tank cars nearby, he secured permission from French authorities to have the tank cars moved to a siding on the airfield. This done, the cars were thoroughly cleaned and 25,000 gallons of the precious fuel found storage space.

By this time the front became more stabilized, as the ground forces moved in to stand before the Belfort Gap, the moves from airdrome to airdrome became less frequent, and Brig. Gen. Gordon P Saville happily announced that his 12th Tactical Air Command was in swell shape they- had several days' supply of necessary material.

With the reestablishment of the railway lines, the emergency was over and the Combat Express made its last supply run. The B-24 went back to bombing strategic targets. The A-20s returned to flying their errands of ill-will, and the C-47s flew to meet other demands. The 7th Army was readying itself for the Battle of Belfort Gap. Thanks to their big friends and the supplies they had brought, the 12th tactical Air Force was ready to take its usual place, the place up front.