



In the fall of 1943, the Germans moved many of their armament plants eastward, out of convenient range for Allied bombers flying from England. In order to bring the plants under attack, Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces, proposed “shuttle bombing”—staging US aircraft into and out of airfields on the Russian front, which was much closer to targets in eastern Germany and Poland.

If B-17s could land at bases in Soviet territory instead of making the long round trip back to England or Italy, they could reach what would otherwise be the most distant targets. They could fly additional missions while deployed to the Russian bases and strike still more hard-to-reach targets on the flight home.

Arnold hoped the shuttle bombing would force the dispersal of German fighters, ease the fighter threat over western Europe, and draw Luftwaffe units away from Normandy before the



The Poltava Debacle

By John T. Correll

The US would stage B-17s in the Soviet Union, to strike targets deep in German territory. It sounded like a good idea.

impending D-Day invasion. In October 1943, Arnold secured approval from the Combined Chiefs of Staff to pursue the idea. The British agreed to cooperate but declined to take part, regarding it as little more than a stunt.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was enthusiastic about the project and proposed it to Soviet leader Joseph Stalin at the Big Three conference in Tehran in November.

W. Averell Harriman, US ambassador to the Soviet Union, and Maj. Gen. John R. Deane, chief of the US

military mission in Moscow, continued the negotiations.

Stalin was reluctant. He was by nature suspicious and distrusting, and as Harriman pointed out, "We have to realize that the establishment within the country of armed forces of a foreign nation under their own command has never before been permitted to my knowledge in the history of Russia, and there are many inhibitions to break down."

Stalin approved the use of Russian bases "in principle," but working out the details with the Soviet bureaucracy was a slow and tedious process. The shuttle bombing operation, code-named "Frantic," did not begin until June 1944.

The Hidden Agenda

However, there was considerably more than that to the story. Bombing German industrial targets was not the only US objective in Operation Frantic, and not even the most important one. The main goals were of a more political nature.

Roosevelt fervently wanted to build a cooperative relationship with the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1943, Stalin accused the Allies of not doing their part in the war effort and failing to follow through on establishing a second front in France. A major motive for the shuttle bombing was "the desire to demonstrate to the Russians how eager the Americans

were to wage war on the German enemy in every possible way," said the official AAF history of the war.

Arnold hoped that Operation Frantic would be a first step toward use of Soviet bases elsewhere, notably in Siberia, from which US bombers would be able to reach targets in Japan. The Soviets employed their airpower to support the Red Army but they put little stock in strategic bombing. If the shuttle missions were successful, they might help change the Soviet assessment of bombers and lead to better cooperation.

The United States poured massive amounts of equipment, war materiel, and supplies into the USSR through Lend Lease, but in dealings with the Soviets, the compromises usually went one way: The Americans gave in to whatever the Soviets insisted on.

"The President favored what might be called a two-phased approach to the Soviets," said historian Lloyd C. Gardner. "It was his belief that the crucial transition period after the war should be used to build trust among the Big Three. As that trust grew, presumably, the tendency to act unilaterally would fade away of itself. Whatever had to be conceded to reassure Stalin during the war would be redeemed when the transition to a more open world was complete. Admittedly, this was all quite vague in Roosevelt's mind."

Once again in Operation Frantic, the Americans had misjudged Stalin and the Russians. "Soviet Russia had a deep distrust of the United States and had no intention of collaborating during or after World War II except in those instances in which the Soviet Union would benefit," said Glenn B. Infield, who recounted in *The Poltava Affair* the problems and warning signs ignored or underestimated by the Americans in their determination to make the operation work.

Bases in Ukraine

The Soviets permitted the Americans to use three airfields in Ukraine. The one closest to the battle front, Piryatin, was about 100 miles east of Kiev. Mirgorod was 50 miles beyond that, and it was 50 further on to Poltava.

Piryatin, being the westernmost of the bases, was the location for the US fighters, which did not have as much range as the bombers. Poltava was the main base for the B-17s, as well as joint Soviet-American headquarters throughout the operation. The bombers used Mirgorod as well.

Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, was in charge of the operation. Rotational



A Soviet sentry guards remains of two B-17s at Poltava. Forty-three B-17s were totally destroyed and 26 damaged by the Germans during the June 22, 1944, raid.



B-17s from the 97th and 99th Bomb Group land at Amendola Airfield, Italy, after the first shuttle bombing raid. In the foreground, a C-54 waits to take Lt. Gen. Ira Eaker back to Ukraine.

aircraft and aircrews would be drawn from Eighth Air Force in Britain and Fifteenth Air Force in Italy. USSTAF Eastern Command was set up at Poltava to run the Russian end of things. The Russians would allow Eastern Command no more than 1,200 permanent party personnel. Maj. Gen. Robert L. Walsh took command of Eastern Command in June, reporting to Deane in Moscow.

There was considerable work to do. The Germans had left the bases in ruins when they retreated the previous September. All of the necessary facilities, including hangars and control towers, had to be built. Most of the permanent party and all of the shuttle crews would be housed in tents.

At Poltava, one runway was 3,300 feet, the other 1,900 feet. B-17s needed runways at least a mile long. There was no time to construct hard-top runways so mats of pierced-steel planking were laid down instead. The Americans provided the planking and the Soviets contributed the labor, much of which was performed, to the amazement of the Americans, by women.

Everything, including high-octane gasoline, vehicles, most rations, and 12,393 tons of pierced-steel planking, had to be shipped in, either by air through Tehran or by ship to Murmansk and south from there by rail. The Soviets supplied meat and fresh vegetables. In a stipulation that would prove to be critical, the Russians would not allow US fighters to perform air base defense. The three airfields would be defended by Soviet anti-aircraft batteries and Yak-9 fighters.

Frantic Joe

Much had changed in the six months it took to get Operation Frantic organized and started. The Red Army advanced faster than expected, and by June was surging through the Ukraine and pushing the Germans back into Poland and Romania. That left the shuttle bases farther from the front and reduced their operational value. The Russians, more confident of victory than before, were less willing to have foreign forces based in their territory, especially in the politically unstable Ukraine.

The first mission was named “Frantic Joe.” Spaatz had intended that Eighth Air Force would fly it. The most lucrative targets were on the way from England to the Ukraine, but with the D-Day invasion imminent, Spaatz assigned the mission to Fifteenth Air Force in Italy and chose Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, commander of Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, to lead it in person.

Eaker wanted Frantic Joe to bomb aircraft plants in Latvia and Poland, which American aircraft could not ordinarily reach, but the Russians would not clear those targets. Eaker had to settle for striking a railway yard in Hungary, as close to Italy as it was to Russia. It was not a particularly important target, but it was all that the Russians would approve.

Frantic Joe launched from Italy the morning of June 2 with 130 B-17s and 69 P-51 escort fighters. Eaker flew as copilot on one of the B-17s and led the bombers into Poltava and Mirgorod after a seven-hour flight. The fighters landed at Piryatin.

Eaker was greeted in Ukraine by a host of senior Soviet officials as well as by Harriman and Deane. The welcome was warm and duly recorded by about 20 US, British, and Russian war correspondents who were there taking notes and pictures. The arrival got worldwide publicity, which had a mixed effect. Stalin was not pleased with all the stories about how the Americans were helping him win the war in the east.

Soon after landing, Eaker flew to Moscow, where the reception and discussions lasted until 4 a.m. Eaker spent 10 days in Russia, and the D-Day invasion began while the Frantic Joe contingent was in-country. Spaatz cabled Eaker to stay in Russia for a few more days as a threat to the German rear and perhaps draw some airpower away from Normandy. On June 6, US aircraft flying from the Ukraine bases attacked an airfield in Romania. Eaker led the task force back to Italy on June 11, bombing an airfield in northeastern Romania en route.

Frantic Joe was regarded as a big success. The mission had “enormous immediate and long-term importance,” said James Parton, Eaker’s aide and Fifteenth Air Force historian, who accompanied Eaker on Frantic Joe. “For the immediate, it opened a third air front for the strategic bombardment of German war industries; for the longer future, it was America’s most dramatic effort to establish a complete, trusting relationship with Russia.”

Unfortunately, Frantic Joe was also the high point of the entire operation.

Fissures, already present but unseen or disregarded, would soon tear the shuttle bombing partnership apart and call into question the initial wisdom of it. After that first Frantic mission, all of the bomber operations were flown by Eighth Air Force, although Fifteenth Air Force provided some of the fighters for subsequent missions.

Disaster at Poltava

The second mission, known as Frantic II, took off for Ukraine June 21, led by one of the stars of Eighth Air Force, Col. Archie J. Old Jr.

From the departure point off the English coast, it was 1,554 miles to Poltava, so the B-17s used auxiliary "Tokyo tanks," which gave them considerably greater range with their combat loads. The task force, which consisted of 114 B-17s, and 70 P-51s, bombed an oil plant south of Berlin on the way East.

Beyond Warsaw, the Americans noticed a single-engine German fighter keeping pace with them. It ducked into the clouds when the P-51s went after it. It was a lone Me-109, and it had already reported the position of the bombers to the Luftwaffe. An He-177 reconnaissance aircraft followed the B-17s into Poltava and took pictures. The Russians would not allow the US fighters at Piryatin to intercept it.

The reconnaissance film was soon delivered to the Luftwaffe base at Minsk, where the Germans had sent medium bombers, He-111s and Ju-88s, to await the next US shuttle mission to Russia. They took off for Poltava at 8:45 p.m., and were joined en route by Me-109 and FW-190 fighters. As they crossed the Russian lines, they encountered several Yak fighters, shot one down, and chased the others away.

At 12:30 a.m. on June 22, the first German airplane swept over Poltava, dropping flares to illuminate the field. Close behind came the strike force of 150 bombers. The attack lasted for almost two hours, unhampered by anything resembling an air defense. The Luftwaffe destroyed 43 of the B-17s on the ramp and damaged another 26. Fifteen P-51s and assorted Russian aircraft were destroyed as well. The German bombs ignited 450,000 gallons of high-octane fuel, which had been brought to Poltava with grievous effort. Most of the munitions in the bomb dump were also lost. The Russians would not clear US fighters to take off and attack the Germans.

"Russian anti-aircraft and fighter defenses failed miserably," Deane said. "Their anti-aircraft batteries fired 28,000



Maj. Gen. Robert Walsh (r, with cigarette) listens to a mission report at Poltava, as Capt. Henry Ware (c), a speaker of Russian on Maj. Gen. John Deane's staff, interprets.

rounds of medium and heavy shells assisted by searchlights without bringing down a single German airplane. There were supposed to be 40 Yaks on hand as night fighters, but only four or five of them got off the ground."

The Luftwaffe struck Mirgorod and Piryatin the next night, but the aircraft had been dispersed to other locations. Again, the attacks lasted for two hours, and again, no Soviet fighters showed up.

The surviving American aircraft departed for Italy June 26, striking an oil refinery in Poland on the way. The same day, Deane requested permission for a P-61 Black Widow night fighter squadron to deploy to Ukraine to defend the bases. The proposal was strung out and sidetracked until the Americans finally dropped it.

With fuel in short supply in the Ukraine, there were no B-17 deployments in July. However, to keep the operation from lapsing completely, Spaatz ordered two fighter-only shuttles, Frantics III and IV, from Italy in July and early August. They struck airfields in Romania and other targets but were peripheral to the basic purpose of the shuttle mission.

The American desire to continue the operation was so great that two more bomber shuttle missions were ordered. Frantics V and VI deployed from England Aug. 6 and Sept. 11, even though there had been no change in provisions for air defense.

Nose Dive in Attitude

"The German strike on Poltava cast a pall on Frantic," said historian Mark J. Conversino, who dissected the failure of the shuttle bombing operation in *Fighting*

With the Soviets. "By July, even transient aircrews who were on the ground for only a few days noticed that relations between the Americans and Soviets were showing signs of tension and strain," Conversino said.

The new Soviet attitude was a sharp change from the welcome accorded to Eaker and Frantic Joe. It was seen not only in everyday encounters between Russians and members of the Eastern Command permanent party but also in official obstructionism and harassment.

A long list of factors may have contributed to the deterioration, including "fraternization" with local women, Russian resentment of Americans' material wealth, fights and other confrontations inflamed by excessive drinking on both sides, the black market trade in American products, and the general Soviet dislike of large numbers of foreigners in their country.

These problems, familiar from other places and other wars, do not fully explain the sudden and pervasive chill that descended on the relationships in Ukraine. Eastern Command officials concluded that the change was directed by Stalin, who had developed second thoughts about Operation Frantic.

"Stalin saw victory clearly in his hands and felt much less reason to seek American aid or be cooperative with USSTAF," Parton said. "But, with Muscovite wile, neither he nor his spokesman simply said Eastern Command was no longer necessary. Instead, they began a deliberate campaign of delay and sabotage."

Stalin did not want to share credit for the Red Army's success. Even more important, he did not want the Allies to



MSgt. John Bassett and MSgt. Michael Cajolda get help from Lenin Boykov, a Russian maintainer, as they work on a visiting task force bomber.

share in postwar control of the vast territory liberated or conquered in eastern Europe. This would become dramatically apparent in the course of the last shuttle mission, Frantic VII.

As the Soviet armies approached Warsaw, the patriot force, the Polish Home Army, rose and attacked the Germans on Aug. 1. The Russians halted their advance, and Germans turned their full efforts on the Poles. US officials in Washington asked USSTAF to undertake a supply drop mission. B-17s could not complete an England-Warsaw-England round trip, so it could not be done without use of the Frantic bases. The Soviets refused permission, even after appeals to Stalin from Roosevelt and Churchill.

“Stalin was furious,” the Russian news agency RIA Novosti explained in its retrospective of events in 2005. “He realized that the pro-Western Polish leadership wanted to liberate the capital without the help of the Red Army, so that they could later restore the prewar anti-Soviet cordon sanitaire.” Said more directly, Stalin did not want to share postwar control of Poland with the Polish. It suited his purposes to let the Germans eliminate the competition.

On Sept. 11, Stalin finally agreed to a Warsaw airdrop shuttle mission and Frantic VII, with 107 heavily loaded B-17s, took off from England Sept. 18. The sad outcome, in the words of the official Army Air Forces history, was that the bombers “circled the area for an hour and dropped 1,284 containers with machine-gun parts, pistols, small-arms ammunition, hand grenades, incendiaries, explosives, food, and medical supplies. While at first it appeared that the mission

had been a great success and so it was hailed, it was later known that only 288, or possibly only 130 of the containers fell into Polish hands. The Germans got the others.”

The Russians would not clear a second supply drop and before the Red Army offensive resumed, the Germans had extinguished the Warsaw insurrection, in which some 250,000 Poles were killed.

US Lingers and Leaves

Frantic VII was the last of the shuttle missions. The straightforward military objectives had been overcome by events. Poltava was now so far from the German front that it had little strategic value. The United States had captured the Marianas in the Pacific and B-29s could reach targets in Japan from there. The use of bases in Soviet Siberia was no longer that important.

Nevertheless, US and AAF leaders were unwilling to let Operation Frantic go or concede its failure. Soviet foreign minister V. M. Molotov bluntly told the Americans that the Russians wanted their bases back. By October, all but 200 Eastern Command caretakers had left, but USSTAF held onto an aircraft recovery and repair operation at Poltava, hoping to reactivate Frantic in the spring.

Soviet obstructionism intensified, bogging down US flights and movements. Every transaction was a struggle. The United States turned Eastern Command stockpiles, including tons of pierced-steel planking, over to the Russians,

who received the bounty with the usual lack of grace. One of the transfers was a warehouse full of food, including thousands of cans of peaches. The Russians complained that they were 10 cans of peaches short of the listed inventory.

The last Americans finally left Poltava July 23, 1945, and the shuttle bombing experiment was over at last. During the course of it, a total of 1,030 US bombers and fighters had deployed in Operation Frantic. They flew 2,207 sorties to or from Ukraine. In addition to the aircraft destroyed by the Germans at Poltava, five B-17s and 17 fighters were lost in combat.

The planners expected 800 bomber sorties a month. In June, August, and September 1944—there were no bomber sorties in July—Operation Frantic produced only 958 sorties in which bombers reached their targets, and that included 107 in the supply mission to Warsaw. All of the targets bombed on Frantic missions could have been struck without using Russian bases and with less effort. “Some of the attacks would probably not have been regarded as worth making but for the desire to use those bases,” said the official AAF history of the war. The anticipated diversion of German air defenses did not happen. The Luftwaffe did not redeploy any of its fighters to the east.

“From a political viewpoint, President Roosevelt was determined that he could use a wartime friendliness with Stalin to develop a successful postwar relationship,” Harriman said. “Before he died, he realized that his hopes had not been achieved.”

Almost 70 years later, the failure of Operation Frantic is still studied and analyzed. Some accounts emphasize the sustained American effort to establish military cooperation. Infield makes a different and darker assessment in *The Poltava Affair*, which he subtitled *A Russian Warning, An American Tragedy*. In his interpretation, the concessions and compromises carried forward into the Cold War.

“This ‘backing down’ by the Americans never stopped throughout the entire lifetime of ‘Operation Frantic’ and there is little doubt that this lack of firmness affected the postwar relations between the United States and the Soviet Union,” Infield said. “Stalin used ‘Operation Frantic’ to probe the Americans to see what manner of men they were and to test their mettle.” ■

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