

The AAF's Fifteenth Air Force was a war baby, born in Italy after a brief gestation and as the result of induced labor. It had a short life—just 22 months. It lived in the shadow of its older and much bigger brother and strategic partner, the England-based Eighth Air Force.

During the war, the public heard much about “The Mighty Eighth” and little of “The Forgotten Fifteenth.” Veterans of the Italian campaign have an explanation of sorts: “If you were a war correspondent, would you rather sip scotch in a London hotel or swig vino in a tent at Foggia?”

At its peak, the Fifteenth was about half the size of the Eighth. It had 21 bomb groups, compared to 41 in the Eighth. The Fifteenth had seven fighter groups; the Eighth had 15. Americans have heard much about the Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group, a

famous part of the Fifteenth, but almost nothing of the other bomber, fighter, and reconnaissance groups.

Even so, the Fifteenth did at least its part in the war, consistently doing more than expected, taking the air war to the Axis factories and refineries beyond the reach of Britain-based aircraft. Most importantly, the pilots of the Fifteenth in the spring and summer of 1944 turned off the Wehrmacht's Balkan oil taps, wrecking the Ploesti refinery complex in Romania with strategic effects felt throughout the theater.

Not So Sunny

The Fifteenth attacked targets in a large number of Axis and Axis-occupied countries, including Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Austria, France, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Poland, and Yugoslavia.

When the Fifteenth was established on Nov. 1, 1943, it began life with a

famous commander, Maj. Gen. James H. Doolittle. He had not only led the 1942 raid on Tokyo but had served as commander of Twelfth Air Force and the joint North African Strategic Air Forces.

Doolittle owned an unrivaled reputation in military and civil aviation. Having learned the trade of a senior commander in his 13 months in Africa and the Mediterranean, he was well-suited to establish the US Army's southern strategic air arm. He was given only two weeks' notice. At the end of November, he established his headquarters in Bari, on Italy's Adriatic coast.

Twelfth Air Force contributed its heavy bomb groups to Doolittle's new command. Meanwhile, Maj. Gen. John K. Cannon turned the Twelfth itself into the Mediterranean tactical air arm.

The Fifteenth was brought into being as a result of two factors: geography and climate.

THE FORGOT



The goal was to take advantage of good weather and proximity to the Romanian oil fields. Fifteenth Air Force found the going tougher than expected.

Geography was crucial. Allied strategists had long recognized the importance of Romanian oil in fueling the Axis war machine. Romania lay a daunting 1,300 miles from Britain, putting the Balkan oil fields beyond the reach of Eighth bombers. On the other hand, the oil fields were less than 600 miles distant from the big Allied air base complex at Foggia, Italy.

Weather also equally important to the Allied planners. Britain and northern Europe were notorious for their overcast and soggy weather. Italy, in sharp contrast, was viewed as being mostly sunny and clear. The Foggia complex, in this view, would be able to support

a continuous strategic air campaign against the Third Reich.

Thus, when the Fifteenth stood up in November 1943, top airmen reckoned that they would be flying in a more permissive environment.

The predictions were wrong.

Take weather, for example. During the first two months of life, the Fifteenth's heavy bombers managed to conduct operations on just 30 days. Throughout 1944, the Eighth actually operated 20 percent more often than did the Fifteenth.

The Fifteenth also faced geographical realities few Americans had ever encountered. Its bombers flew westward

across the Tyrrhenian Sea, Corsica, and Sardinia to French targets; northward over the Alps to Austria and Germany; eastward over the Adriatic to the Balkans, Carpathian Mountains, and Greece.

Meanwhile, Doolittle absorbed units from XII Bomber Command. His fledgling force comprised three B-17 and two B-24 bomb groups plus three P-38 Lightning groups. Temporarily attached were a number of medium bombers.

The Fifteenth launched its first heavy bomber mission on Nov. 2, 1943. It was a long-range attack on the Messerschmitt factory near Vienna. Because the badly damaged Foggia complex of

TEN FIFTEENTH

By Barrett Tillman



A Fifteenth Air Force B-24 slogs through mud and water, lumbering toward the runway and a takeoff position at an airdrome in Italy. Bad weather plagued the Fifteenth even in Italy, normally sunny and clear.

bases was still under repair, the B-24s flew from Tunisia.

In his memoir, *I Could Never Be So Lucky Again*, Doolittle described the first mission:

"Our B-17s and B-24s hit the Messerschmitt factory at Wiener Neustadt, a 1,600-mile (round trip) mission that netted excellent results," he said. "That facility was turning out about 250 fighters a month. We estimated we put it out of action for at least two months."

Doolittle recalled that some 150 German fighters attacked the Allied bombers before, during, and after their bombing runs, even flying through their own flak. He lost six B-17s and five B-24s that day.

Though Wiener Neustadt Messerschmitt production was cut roughly 75 percent, the Germans proved exceedingly resilient, and soon the rate began rising again. A restrike policy became mandatory, as proved by postraid regeneration at Ploesti, Regensburg, Schweinfurt, and other hard targets.

The Army Air Forces' industrious aviation engineers struggled against rain, mud, and shortages of heavy equipment to bring Foggia and other bases up to fighting trim. By the end of March 1944, 20 bases in the Foggia aviation complex had become operational, affording adequate facilities for the growing air force.

In January 1944, mere months after it started operations, the Fifteenth underwent a sudden command change. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, tapped Doolittle to take over Eighth Air Force. The famous airman had barely had time to "shake the stick" before he left for England, turning the command over to Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, future Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

By late January 1944, the Fifteenth had sprouted stronger wings. It now comprised a dozen bomb groups and four fighter outfits, including one equipped with P-47s.

Air strategists had long argued the merits of "morale bombing," which had failed against Britain and thus far had little effect in Germany. Nonetheless, early in 1944 the combined chiefs directed the Fifteenth to bomb city centers in Bucharest and Sofia, hoping to separate those capitals from the Axis camp.

Some resented the missions, considered "terror bombings" by many, including many airmen. One B-17 group member noted, "It would seem that orders are orders." Eventually the morale missions proved ineffective and even counterproductive.

The new year brought multiple tasks: supporting Allied troops on the Anzio beachhead, conducting tactical operations (including the controversial bombing of Monte Cassino), and carrying out a strategic bombing campaign against Germany's aircraft industry.

The latter effort, officially designated Operation Argument, was better known as "Big Week."

Shooting Their Way In

Bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force, during the period Feb. 20-25, 1944, joined with the Eighth for three missions against Luftwaffe production sites in Germany and Austria. Because most of the targets lay at the edge of P-38 coverage, the "heavies" mostly had to shoot their way in and out.

And so they did, along the way striking aircraft plants at Regensburg on Feb. 22, at Steyr, Austria, on Feb. 23, and again at Regensburg on Feb. 25.

B-17s and B-24s inflicted significant damage on Messerschmitt factories, but the Luftwaffe itself exacted a grim price. Nearly 40 bombers were shot down, as were four fighters.

B-24 flight engineer Loyd Lewis recalled the Feb. 22 mission in the 449th Bomb Group's history, *Maximum Effort*. Lewis, flying with Lt. Carl Browning, said, "Everything seemed to be going OK, when all of a sudden I spotted fighter planes very far out at 3 o'clock. They were diving down into the clouds and out of sight. I remember getting on the intercom and announcing the enemy planes. This was the last I remembered. I was hit ... and knocked unconscious."

He regained consciousness a couple of days later in an Austrian hospital, where he learned his bomber had been attacked by Me-109s and FW-190 fighters firing cannon shells. The bomber pilot was stunned by a shell burst, and the aircraft went into a dive. The copilot managed to right the bomber and help the crew bail out.

At the end of Big Week, Twining counted a horrendous cost: 89 bombers



Fifteenth Air Force bombers score hits on the oil storage facilities at Regensburg, Germany (top), and at the Turin/Orbassano ball bearing works in Italy (bottom). War correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote so eloquently of the war in the Mediterranean Theater that a B-29 Superfortress was named in tribute to him (middle).

and seven fighters lost. The attrition amounted to about 16 percent of total bomber sorties—four times the maximum sustainable rate. Already short of fighters, the Fifteenth conducted no further deep penetration missions until the situation could be redressed.

On the way, however, was some help: P-51 Mustangs. The Eighth already had P-51s by the time of Big Week. The Fifteenth needed them too. Spitfire groups transferred to the Fifteenth and converted to Mustangs. At the same time, the 325th exchanged its P-47s for Mustangs, and by early July, the 332nd had also done so.

The Spitfire outfits—the 31st and 52nd—managed an orderly transition while the 325th “Checkertails” parked their P-47s on May 24 and flew their first Mustang mission three days later.

The US strategic air commander was Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz in London. He oversaw the efforts of the Eighth and Fifteenth, maintaining cordial relations with Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, commander of Mediterranean Allied Air Forces. Spaatz had a huge task, requiring coordination of vast air fleets at opposite ends of the European continent. By and large, it worked.

The run-up to D-Day in mid-1944 placed strategic air forces under the direct control of Eisenhower. At that time, strategists differed in supporting either “the transportation plan” or “the oil plan” as the best way to defeat Germany. As commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, Eisenhower naturally leaned toward the transport plan. Wrecking German communications in northwestern Europe would directly support Operation Overlord, whereas focusing on oil would pay benefits over a longer term.

In August 1943—three months before the Fifteenth was established—a low-level B-24 mission against Ploesti had produced spectacular losses for marginal results, proof that many industrial targets required persistent bombing.

However, because Romanian oil lay within reach only of Italy-based bombers, Mediterranean commanders chafed under the transport plan. Eaker and Twining began attacking the Ploesti complex in April 1944, near the end of the transport phase. They were directed to strike the rail yards, presumably preventing oil from being shipped elsewhere. With a wink and a nod from Spaatz, however, bomber leaders began moving aim points closer to the 10 refineries circling the city. It was a rare



L-r: Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz, Lt. Gen. George Patton, Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, Maj. Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg, and Brig. Gen. Otto Weyland. As a major general, Doolittle was the first commander of Fifteenth Air Force. Spaatz took on the enormous task of coordinating vast air fleets—including Fifteenth Air Force—from London.

case of de facto insubordination, but it began paying dividends.

Meanwhile, two Fifteenth airmen received the Medal of Honor for missions against Ploesti petroleum targets.

Romanian Danger

On June 23, 1944, 2nd Lt. David R. Kingsley was a 97th Bomb Group bombardier on a B-17 that was hammered by flak and chased by fighters. When the pilot ordered the crew to bail, Kingsley unhesitatingly gave his parachute harness to a badly wounded gunner. The Fortress, with Kingsley aboard, crashed in Bulgaria, where local residents established a memorial to their neighbors killed in the crash—and to the selfless Kingsley.

First Lt. Donald D. Pucket was a 98th Group B-24 pilot. Two weeks after Kingsley’s sacrifice, Pucket’s B-24 was crippled by AAA bursts, which killed one man and wounded six. Pucket nursed the damaged Liberator 150 miles southwest of Ploesti before ordering a bailout. With the bomber rapidly descending, Pucket returned to the cockpit rather than leave three men who either could not or would not jump. His attempt to bring the bomber under control failed, with the loss of all crew still aboard.

A remarkable mission against Ploesti was flown by two P-38 groups on June 10. The 1st Fighter Group escorted 82nd Group Lightning aircraft in a long-range

attack that hoped to elude detection by flying low. It didn’t work. Spotted by Romanian and German defenders, the top-cover Lightnings were drawn into widespread dogfights, and Ploesti’s guns and smoke generators were ready when the dive bombers rolled in. Some worthwhile targets were struck, but losses were heavy: 24 of the 96 fighters on the mission were lost.

Two dozen Ploesti missions cost the Fifteenth some 230 aircraft—but produced results. When Romania capitulated in August 1944, Allied researchers found the refineries mostly reduced to wreckage, their output only 10 percent of what it had been five months earlier. It was a severe blow to the Axis.

By June, at the height of the Ploesti campaign, the Fifteenth had achieved maturity. Though flying the same aircraft as the Eighth, the proportions differed. The Eighth was nearly 60 percent B-17s, while the Fifteenth was three-quarters B-24s. Mustangs dominated VIII Fighter Command. In the Fifteenth, four P-51 groups provided long-range escort, while P-38s flew shorter escorts and increasingly performed dive bombing and strafing.

June also brought the start of Operation Frantic: shuttle missions to and from Russia. The goal was to attack targets ordinarily out of reach in Eastern Europe. Frantic I in June saw the assembly of 130 B-17s and 70 Mustangs. Two later

missions, in July and August, featured only fighters.

After Romania's capitulation, the Luftwaffe had little reason to commit heavy forces to the Balkans. Aerial opposition all but disappeared. In the last eight months of hostilities, the Fifteenth lost 26 bombers to enemy aircraft. Some bomb groups began flying with one waist gunner instead of two, and Twining's fighters increasingly went down on the deck, strafing whatever moved and much that did not.

Going Home ... But Not Yet

By then, however, the invasion of southern France had grabbed the world's attention. The Aug. 15 operation Anvil-Dragoon was supported by Fifteenth bombers and fighters, including the 1st and 14th Groups' P-38s, temporarily operating from Corsica.

Meanwhile, other operations continued. Little known today is the remarkable work of the 859th and 885th Bomb Squadrons that conducted special operations missions and rescued downed fliers. Working with Yugoslavian partisans, Fifteenth airmen carved out landing strips in German-occupied territory. Additionally, the 5th Photographic Group and a dedicated weather recon squadron plied their esoteric trades, losing far more airplanes to the climate than enemy action.

A brief resurgence of the Luftwaffe in March and April 1945 brought new German Me-262 jet fighters to the southern skies, harassing bomber formations and occasionally inflicting losses, but Fifteenth fighter pilots mostly took their measure. The 31st Fighter Group downed eight Me-262s.

The Fifteenth mounted its only Berlin mission on March 24, 1944. This attack on a tank factory and other targets cost the US only 10 heavy bombers among some 660 dispatched—proof of Allied ownership of German skies.

The Fifteenth logged its last bombing mission on May 1, 1945, with a small strike at Salzburg, Austria. Thereafter Twining's crews largely flew recon sorties and supply drops in Yugoslavia.

With VE Day on May 8, most Mediterranean airmen breathed a sigh of relief. However, elation among some was short-lived upon learning they were slated to rotate to the Pacific for the expected invasion of Japan. Three months later, those concerns ended by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which prompted the



The Blue Streak, a Fifteenth Air Force B-24, passes by steaming Mount Vesuvius, in the Naples region of Italy. German armaments minister Albert Speer said he could see the war's end when the Fifteenth's bombers crossed the Alps from Italy toward the Third Reich's industrial targets.

surrender of Japan. The Fifteenth was formally deactivated Sept. 15, 1945.

Fifteenth Air Force was successful, but it paid a high price, losing at least 1,850 bombers, 650 fighters or recon aircraft, and hundreds of airmen. Romania's oil spout was almost totally closed off, and Axis communications were severely hampered. Fifteenth fighters claimed 1,800 enemy aircraft destroyed and produced 74 aces.

The enemy knew the Fifteenth's worth. Albert Speer, the organizational genius and Third Reich's armaments minister, wrote that he could "see omens of the war's end almost every day in the blue southern sky when, flying provocatively low, the bombers of the American Fifteenth Air Force crossed the Alps from their Italian bases to attack German industrial targets."

Fifteenth Air Force's veterans continued making contributions long after VE Day. Twining became Air Force Chief of Staff—1953 to 1957—and Chairman of

the Joint Chiefs until retirement in 1960.

Other Washington insiders from Foggia were three B-24 men who became United States Senators: Democrats Lloyd M. Bentsen Jr. of Texas; William D. Hathaway of Maine; and George S. McGovern of South Dakota.

War correspondent Ernie Pyle was the popular chronicler of the Mediterranean Theater, writing about fliers as well as GIs. Before departing for the Pacific (where he was killed by a sniper shot) he wrote, "Few of us can ever conjure up any truly fond memories of the Italian campaign. The enemy had been hard, and so had the elements. ... There was little solace for those who had suffered, and none at all for those who had died, in trying to rationalize about why things had happened as they did."

Today, the men of the Forgotten Fifteenth, with their numbers rapidly decreasing, look back on their experience and know that Pyle's tribute remains as valid as ever. ■

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