

The hope of Quebec and Pentagon planners was that Fifteenth could operate when Eighth was "socked in" by the English weather. Ironically, Fifteenth soon faced the same problem in operating from the Mediterranean area. In addition, its planes had to face Alpine clouds with their hazardous icing conditions and their interference with visibility. To complicate matters, there was no convenient English channel for aircraft "ditching" purposes, and aircraft flying with one or two engines knocked out found it hard to go over or around the Alps on the return leg of a mission. Fifteenth's operational area extended over a large territory stretching westward almost to the Franco-Spanish frontier, northward through Czechoslovakia to Berlin, eastward to the Black Sea, and southward to the Peloponnesian peninsula. Normally, its objectives lay within a 700-mile arc centered at Foggia, Italy.

#### Combat Operations Against Hitler's Europe

Fifteenth flew its first combat mission from North African bases on its activation day. Flying Fortress groups from the 5th Bomb Wing in a ground support mission attacked both the La Spezia naval base in Italy and the nearby Vezzano railway bridge, a communications target north of Rome. The next day, November 2, the command directed its first strategic efforts against the Messerschmitt ME-109 airframe works at Wiener Neustadt, Austria, dropping 312 tons of bombs. The invaders encountered 120 to 160 enemy aircraft of which 56 were destroyed and another 27 probably destroyed, while losing 10 B-17s. This mission was considered to be the "Big Week" effort of February 1944 (described later).

It had been the intent of Pentagon planners that Headquarters Fifteenth and its newly assigned units move soon onto permanent installations located in the heel of the Italian boot. There was no problem from the standpoint of ground action, for it had been two months since

the Allied invasions of Italy, and that offensive did not stall until it was north of Naples. Rather, the airfields were not ready by mid-November due to rains and



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construction difficulties. Enough progress had been made by December 1, 1943, however, that Headquarters Fifteenth was able to close down officially and reopen for business the same day 475 miles closer to its assigned bombing arena across the Mediterranean at Bari, Italy. There, 200 rooms were occupied in a large, modern office building formerly used by the Italian Air Force as a zone headquarters.

The movement of units was phased, so that no stand-down was necessary, and operations continued for some time from both North African and Italian bases. On moving day, more than 100 B-17s bombed the Turin, Italy, ball bearing works and marshalling yards. With fighter escort, B-26s attacked bridges and railroad facilities at three locations. Because of weather, B-24s and accompanying P-38s were recalled.

Fifteenth's move was a classic case of logistics triumphing over adversity. Existing airfields in the Bari/Foggia area, which had previously been badly battered by Allied bombing, had to be repaired, and new ones bulldozed out of the Italian plain. Enormous engineering problems were involved. Steel mats had to be used to keep the bombers from bogging down in the spongy turf. Steady winter rains added to the misery of men and machines. Even an auxiliary road network had to be built. Yet, although a great supply problem existed, combat crews never lacked materiel with which to fight. Bomb

stockage kept ahead of requirements, and gasoline was piped in and stored in adequate field facilities.

A month after the move General Doolittle was re-assigned as commander of the Eighth. He was succeeded by Major General Nathan F. Twining on January 3, 1944. General Twining had served in the South Pacific area (#3) before his new assignment. He remained as Fifteenth's commander until completion of the Combined Bombing Offensive 16 months later.

Space does not permit a lengthy story of Fifteenth's operational activities in the period before May 1945, but a few highlights will illustrate

the achievements. On December 19, 1943, Fifteenth made its first mass raid into Germany proper, attacking the Messerschmitt plant at Augsburg. On January 2, 1944, air attacks began in preparation for the Anzio, Italy, landing behind the ground battle line stymied in the Cassino area. In the most intensive phase of this beachhead isolation campaign, 600 sorties were flown between January 16 and January 22 against rail yards and transportation centers in central Italy, as preparation for the Anzio landing executed on the latter date.

The next major episode in Fifteenth's wartime history was one of the most controversial of the conflict. This was the bombing on February 15, 1944 of the historic Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino in preparation for an assault designed to end the U.S. Fifth Army's month-long stalemate before the Germans' Gustav Line south of Rome. Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker did not approve of the abbey bombing, contending it would serve no useful military purpose. Whether or not the Germans used it as an outpost is still a matter of dispute, but both General Eaker and Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers, commander of the European theater of operations at the time, saw a radio antenna on the abbey roof when they scouted the structure several days earlier in a Piper Cub observation plane. However, continued pressures from ground commanders about the infantry advance up the road to Rome from Naples being impeded beyond the time schedule led General