

Eaker to acquiesce in destroying the obstacle.

Shortly after that came the "Big Week" of February 19-25 for the Combined Bombing Offensive. During the only important period of good weather in several months, Fifteenth and Eighth jointly participated in mass raids against the German aircraft industry. Fifteenth lost 14 bombers out of 183 dispatched on its first day of participation, February 22, against Regensburg. The next day 102 bombers went against a ball bearing plant in Austria, losing 19 aircraft. On February 24 Fifteenth attacked an aircraft component plant at Steyr, Austria, losing 17 bombers. The intensity of the air battles was reflected in loss claims. On February 22, the escort fighters for the Fifteenth and Eighth forces claimed 60 German fighters at the price of 11 lost. On February 24, the bombers claimed 108 German fighters destroyed, while the escorts claimed 37.

Fortunately, the weather held good for the fourth successive day as both Fifteenth and Eighth attacked German aircraft factories in southern Germany on February 25. Fifteenth launched 400 bombers, of which 176 attacked the main target at Regensburg, while the remainder were dispatched against other targets at a shorter flying range. These actions concluded a week of maximum effort to paralyze the German aircraft industry and defeat the German Air Force before the deadline for the Normandy invasion, looming ahead in June 1944. Fifteenth lost 89 bombers total, or an average of about six percent per mission. Bomber losses per sortie were nearly five times as great as those of the escorts.

On March 15, units of Fifteenth joined with those of the Twelfth in a mass satura-

tion bombing designed to eliminate German resistance in the Cassino area; the town was destroyed, but Allied armies were unable to break through at the time. Fifteenth flew its first "thousand ton" raid on March 28, one of a five-day series of especially heavy missions against rail yards and industrial areas in northern Italy in support of "Operation Strangle." This operation was carried out from March 19 to May 11 to cut off supplies to the German troops. On April 3 bombers made the first heavy air attack on Budapest, Hungary. The next day Fifteenth's heavy bombers made the first air attack on Bucharest, Rumania. Other special missions reached

directive, strategic bombing missions were intensified against central and eastern Europe.

Previously, Fifteenth had begun strikes on April 5 against the Ploesti, Rumania, oil refining installations as a crowning achievement of the spring campaign. The refinery complex had already been struck by Eighth, beginning August 1, 1943, but the 11 remaining refineries still had a production capacity of eight million tons, a reduction of only one million. These attacks continued until August 24, 1944, when Russian land forces moved into the area.



Robert Altman photo 484th BG

to Sofia, Bulgaria, and later to Athens, Greece. During the May 25-27 period, hundreds of bombers dropped more than 3,000 tons on 14 rail and transportation centers in southern France as part of the preparation for the upcoming cross-channel invasion.

With the success of this preinvasion bombing support, an order was issued from USSAF to Fifteenth on the afternoon of D-Day, June 6, 1944, stating: "From this day on you need spend no further effort in the battle area. We will handle it here. You go back and keep working on the sources of military strength, particularly air strength, deep in Germany." With this

Meanwhile, on June 2, 1944, "Operation Frantic" had begun. This was a system of shuttle missions by which U.S. planes bombed eastern European targets and landed at one of three airfields in western Russia. The operation began with a raid of B-17s and P-51s against Debrecen, Hungary. On July 22, Fifteenth established the first all-fighter shuttle to Russia. These missions occurred sporadically until September 13, end-

ing because of Russian obstinacy, vulnerability of the airfields to German attack, increasing distance from the Eastern front, endangerment of Russo-American relations, and relative inefficiency of the system.

At the time the Ploesti missions were ending, Fifteenth's planes supported "Operation Anvil," the amphibious invasion of southern France. Simultaneously, for the first time since the V-1 flying bombs began to attack London on June 12, 1944, Fifteenth was called in to aid the months-long effort to destroy their launching and manufacturing sites. During August a total of 773.7 tons were dropped by 323 bombers against V-weapon plants at Ober Raderach, Germany.