



390th Bomb Group B17s with P-47 escort during a mission to Emden Germany October 4, 1943. Nearest B-17 is called Skippy S/N 42-3329. USAF Photo via Ian Hawkins.

not killed). In comparison, the U.S. Army suffered 63,000 casualties in the Normandy campaign, the U.S. Navy took 69,000 casualties, and the U.S. Marine Corps sustained 75,000 casualties during the war. (2)

The Eighth Air Force flew its first heavy bomber mission from Britain on 17 August 1942, but did not bomb Germany until January 1943. The unit attempted to carry out the AAF doctrine of unescorted, daylight, precision bombing but was repulsed, most dramatically in actions against Regensburg-Schweinfurt (17 August 1943) and on missions flown in early October 1943. The terrible losses suffered by the Eighth (over 9 percent of credit sorties in October) forced the AAF to curtail strategic bombing. Meanwhile the AAF was basing strategic bombers in the Mediterranean Theater. Compared to the Eighth, these bombers were primarily engaged in interdiction and long range support of the ground forces until November 1943. As a result, they did not suffer the heavy losses sustained by the Eighth. Because of this and the fact that the Fifteenth was not created until November 1943, a comparison between the two air forces is not valid until after that date.

In late 1943 the AAF reorganized its

forces in both the European (British-based) and Mediterranean (based primarily in Italy) Theaters, establishing a separate tactical and strategic air force in each theater. The argument for creating two strategic forces was that it would permit bombers to reach targets inaccessible from Britain, divide the German defenders, lessen the congestion of aircraft and units in England, and use Italian bases where the weather was better. Top U.S. leaders such as Arnold, Spaatz, Doolittle, and Eisenhower favored this scheme, while Eaker, commander of the Eighth, and Harris, head of RAF Bomber Command, opposed it. Eaker anticipated supply and maintenance problems and noted that weather was most critical over the targets, not over the bases. He also pointed out that only a few targets were closer to Italian bases. In addition, bombers operating out of Italy would have to cross the Alps going and returning, a much more daunting obstacle than the English Channel. Nevertheless, on 1 November 1943 the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the scheme. (3)

Common Elements and Differences

The Eighth and Fifteenth had many common elements and at first glance the two

forces appeared to be essentially the same. Their personnel were trained in the same training centers, their equipment was essentially the same, they shared and attempted to apply the same doctrine, they pursued the same goals, and they bombed similar targets, sometimes the same targets. Both faced the same problems of weather, aircraft malfunctions, and of course German flak and fighters. It would seem the only difference was that one unit was based in England and mainly bombed targets in Germany, while the other was based in Italy and primarily bombed targets in southern Europe.

This impression, however, is only valid at the most casual level. The Eighth was about twice the size of the Fifteenth in terms of numbers of units and aircraft; at its peak it had forty heavy bomber and fifteen fighter groups compared to the Fifteenth's twenty-one heavy bomber and seven fighter groups. (4) Thus the Eighth flew nearly twice as many sorties and dropped just over twice as many tons of bombs as did the Fifteenth. The English-based airmen also had the advantage of superior facilities. Many of the Eighth's airfields were long-established compared with the recently constructed fields in Italy, many of which used PSP (Pierced Steel Planking). As a result,