

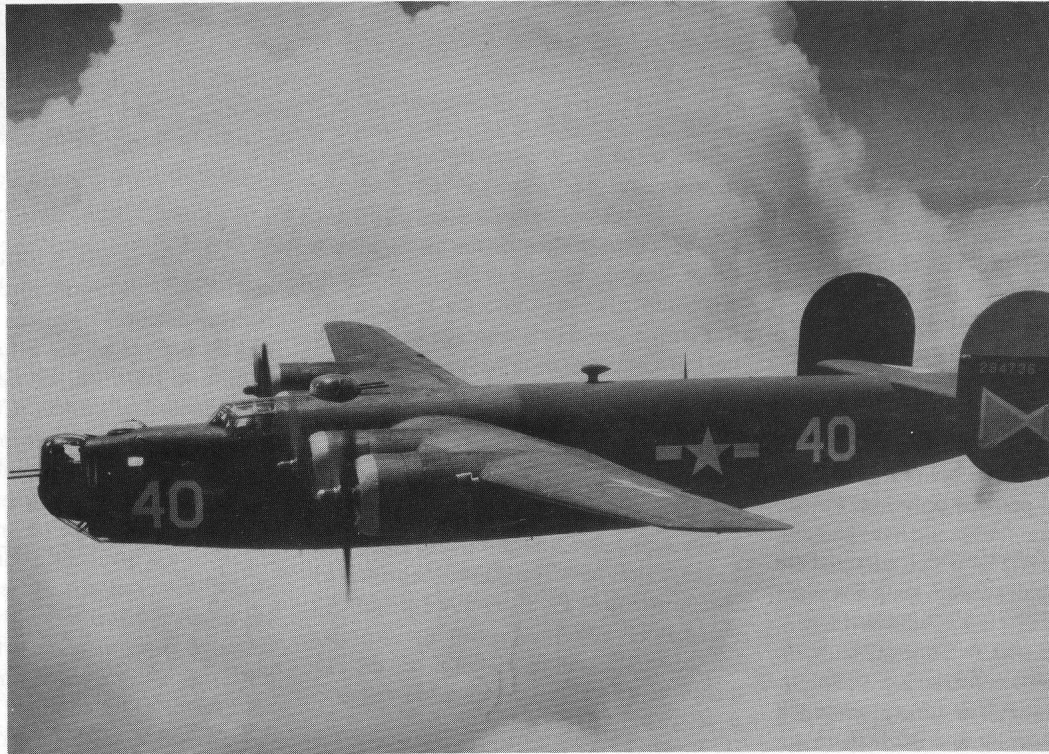
the Fifteenth had many more problems with fields being washed out, PSP curling, and the like. In addition to better airfields, Great Britain had better-developed facilities, ranging from a net of navigation and communications aids to air/sea rescue, repair, and supply. Terrain was another of the Eighth's advantages. Although terrain is normally not considered in air operations, it is relevant here in two respects. First, the Fifteenth had to cross mountains to and from its targets. This was not a major problem when all was well, but it certainly made a difference in poor weather or when aircraft were not functioning normally. Second, the Eighth was closer to its foe. Until June 1944, it was only a short hop

across the Channel to enemy-controlled territory and the distance to the German border from the British bases was but 250 miles, while the Fifteenth had to fly 450 miles to get to Austria. As a result, the Eighth's average missions were shorter than those of the Fifteenth. (5)

The expectations that weather would favor operations from Italy proved in error. Because of Eighth Air Force advantages in terrain, better weather data, shorter missions, and lesser use of the B-24, it was less hindered by the weather. While 25 percent of the Eighth's days were non-operational, the Fifteenth averaged 37 percent. Put another way, between September 1944 and April 1945 the Eighth aborted fewer missions due to bad weather (5.76 percent vs. 15.05 percent) than did the Fifteenth. (6)

To the men who served in the two units during the war, the biggest difference between the two was the living conditions. While the Eighth's personnel lived in either

permanent quarters or Quonset huts with showers, the Fifteenth's crews were billeted in tents with homemade heaters, infested with snakes and insects of all descriptions, and were forced to wash in their helmets. The Italian-based airmen went to the nearest town once a month for baths, haircuts, and shaves. Although there is some disagree-



A B-24 H of the 825th Squadron returning from a mission 1944. (Bill Keese photo)

ment over which unit had the best food (or the worst!), the Eighth ate in mess halls with waiter service while the Fifteenth ate sandwiches in one big tent with "bitter coffee [served] for days at a time." In contrast to the Italians, the British spoke a language generally understandable to the Americans. In addition there were many more opportunities for recreation and entertainment in Britain than in Italy. Unlike the airmen in England, those in Italy had to pull guard duty. During one of the shuttle bombing missions of Operation FRANTIC, a Fifteenth Air Force unit historian wrote of visiting Eighth Air Force crews: "Our visitors from England via Russia don't think much of our hospitality. We are sorry but at the time we are unable to furnish cokes, USO shows, and clean sheets." (7) In short, the living was more comfortable in England than in Italy. (8)

Another view of these two air forces

can be found in the perceptions of airmen who served in both organizations. Some of these crewmen were flying their second tour, but most were transferred in 1944, ostensibly to bring lessons from one theater to the other. Besides confirming the comments presented above, they also add the following observations. The Eighth ran a

m u c h tighter operation than did the Fifteenth, which seemed undisciplined, if not haphazard, to some. The Fifteenth also appeared less organized and professional. "The Fifteenth," wrote an airman who had completed one tour with the Eighth, "is a rude contrast to the smooth operation of the Eighth." (9)

### Bomber Operations

Perhaps the major operational difference between the two air forces was their aircraft. Throughout most of its service, two-thirds of the Eighth's heavy bombers were B17s and one-third were B-24s, while the Fifteenth's composition was the reverse. To pull no punches: the B-17 was a much better bomber than the B-24. Aircrews believed the Fortress was a superior combat aircraft, a view shared by many and supported by the statistics. A 1944 systems analyst's report that compared the two bombers stated: "The B-17 is very much the more valuable airplane." (10) One report in the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concluded in more detail: "The B-17 was a more efficient combat aircraft than the B-24 from a viewpoint of bombing accuracy, life of aircraft, tons dropped for each effective sortie, and losses." (11)