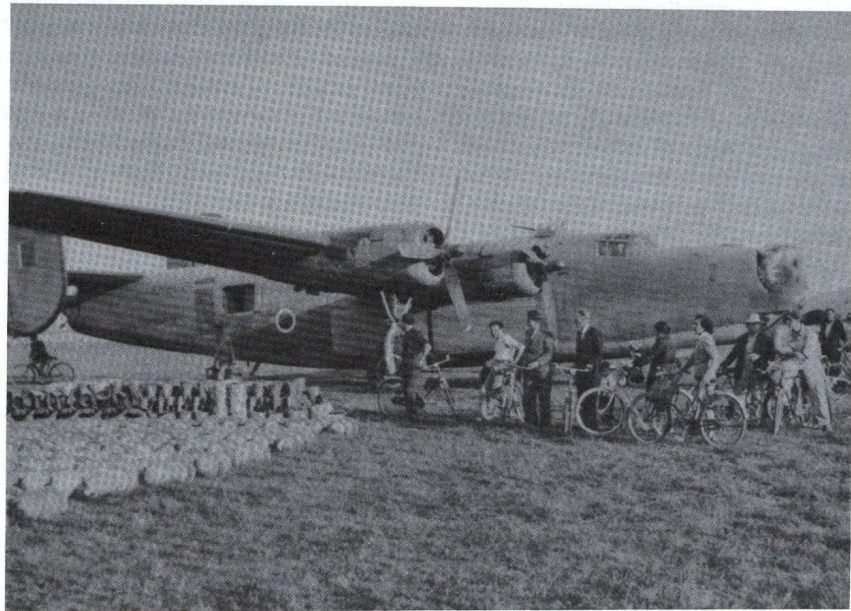


record than the Wimpeys, which were truly clapped-out. 'So the bomber force was much fewer than in operations from the UK. But we all had to be over the target in a bombing cloud or 'stream' within three minutes instead of the ten or fifteen minutes usual in north-west Europe. This was essential to prevent flak singling out individual planes and meant that we had to navigate very precisely indeed. The Liberator's wonderful electrical and radio equipment, stability in flying, and good auto-pilot, was a big help in this direction. Incidentally, because the Air Ministry supposed Italian-based Liberators met less opposition than the heavy bombers based in the UK, the tour of duty for crews was increased from thirty to forty operations. The chances of survival for crew members (and planes) was therefore theoretically the same.

The small towns on the railways through the Alps were defended out of all proportion to their size because of the vital German need to keep their supply routes open. Towns like Bruch and Villach in Austria, and Ljubljana in Yugoslavia, were typical. Certainly there were plenty of legitimate targets down there in the dark. For example, I remember one such raid to Pragersko, a tiny junction in Yugoslavia, where we obviously hit a munitions supply train as the explosions on the ground were like a fireworks display and even at 15,000 feet we had the feeling of flying right through an inferno.

'Most raids were flown at around 12,000 to 15,000 feet. There was no point in going higher and losing accuracy in bombing. Over the target we had to stagger our bombing heights to lessen the chance of collisions and sometimes we had to descend to say 8,000 feet, if we had been allocated one of the lower levels. This meant that instead of being able to get the hell away from the target, flak, and prowling night fighters, we had to climb at slower speed to get back to bomber-stream height. Also on raids to Austrian targets, we had to get back over the Alps.

'On 23 March 1945, after bombing a rail junction and marshaling yard near Innsbruck, we had to climb immediately in order to clear the mountains. Had we been only slightly off course we could not have made it, due to the higher peaks on either side. This night we entered cloud as we turned from the target for home. The cloud was colored red from the ground fires and there was no visual contact with the mountain peaks all around. As we climbed the



Martin Bowman

*D for Dog of 178 Squadron on supply operations at Revolto, Northern Italy on May 8, 1945.*

Liberator seemed slower than usual and we seemed to be heading directly for a mountain. I turned the electronic boost control into 'Emergency position 10' and the Lib seemed just to jump upwards. At that moment we broke cloud into a magnificent scene of the Tyrolean Alps in bright moonlight. Fortunately we were safe at the necessary height so I was able to reduce boost and avoid further over stressing the engine. The panorama below was breathtakingly beautiful and a strong contrast to the scene of death and destruction we had just created only a few miles away.

Towards the end of the war a new type of operation was introduced. Instead of strategic bombing we switched to close support for the 8th Army's final offensive of the war as, the front moved into the plains of the Po valley. We were 'blanket bombing' the German troop positions just before the 8th Army launched a local attack, sometimes going for a small bridge area or a bottleneck as part of the total operation. There was no identifiable bombing point that we could find on our own so we had to bomb on Pathfinder markers which were dropped using dead reckoning or radar.

There was no Gee, unlike in western Europe as we were out of range, which was a pity as it was the best navigational aid in existence and highly accurate. Instead we had 'Loran', which used stations 500 to 1,000 miles away and allowed no instant fixes, so as far as we could we used other

methods. On these tactical raids we were in effect using the Liberators at night to reinforce what the American light bombers were doing in the daytime. ' Arthur Jeffries, a beam gunner with 40 Squadron, flew on the Po raid on the night of 18 April. He recalls: 'The briefing for the raid took a little longer than usual due to the complexities of this range of targets. Our own particular sector was at Malalburgo. We could hardly believe our ears when we were told that we were laying a barrage only a 1,000 yards ahead of the 5th Army and at night! The time for take-off was at 19.25 hours.

'The Pathfinders (614 Squadron Liberators) were to drop markers, and our navigator and bomb-aimer would be further assisted by members of the ground units firing tracer shells at the enemy positions. Timing was of prime importance. We arrived in *E for Easy* a couple of minutes early and had to resort to a navigational trick or two to rectify this. Right on time the marker flares were dropped and the tracer shells indicated the target. From then on our bombing run began. Ted Hawes, our bomb-aimer, was in complete control, cool and confident. A quick look at our target area and we all knew that this 'first' night-support attack had been a success. Only light anti-aircraft fire was encountered and the night fighters were conspicuous in their absence. Letters of congratulation were received from General Alexander and General McCreery on the success of the mission.'