

LIBERATING

WARSAW

A break from operations was on the cards for the personnel of 31 Squadron, the South African Air Force's first heavy bomber unit. But such hopes were dashed shortly before midday on Sunday August 13, 1944 when the aircrews were called to the 'Ops'

tent. Ten aircraft were to leave immediately for Brindisi, in the 'heel' of Italy on the Adriatic coast, where they would receive further instructions.

The Consolidated Liberator VIs of 31 Squadron had moved from Gebel Hamzi airfield, better known as 'Kilo 40', in Egypt to Celone, near Foggia, Italy, in June 1944. Following a series of difficult raids against oil refinery installations near Bucharest in Romania and Pardubice in

Czechoslovakia, attention turned to marshalling yards and landing grounds in Hungary, and laying mines – 'Gardening' – in the River Danube to disrupt enemy use of barges.

On the briefing room map a thin ribbon cut a jagged path from Brindisi across eastern Europe, finally ending on the River Vistula – Warsaw! Appeals by newly appointed officer commanding 205 Group, South African Brigadier J T 'Jimmy' Durrant, to the air officer commanding Balkan Air Force, AVM Sir John Slessor, were overruled.

Durrant was concerned about the inexperience of the fresh replacement





STEVE MACLEAN DESCRIBES THE DESPERATE EFFORTS TO SUPPLY BELEAGUERED POLISH PARTISANS AMID A VICIOUS GERMAN BACKLASH AND SOVIET INACTION

crews following the losses on the oil refinery raids.

The Polish Government in exile had issued a desperate appeal for assistance: in Warsaw the partisan 'Home Army' – the Armia Krajowa – had risen against the Germans. Soviet forces were only 50 miles away but no help would be found there. It fell to the intrepid airmen of five SAAF and RAF units to undertake the near impossible.

The Liberators and Halifaxes in 205 Group were the only aircraft with the range to reach Warsaw from Italy. To complicate matters, it would be a 1,600-mile

round-trip as permission to use Russian landing grounds east of Warsaw had been denied.

BLAZING INFERNO

Shortly before dusk on August 13, the ten Liberator Mk. VIs of 31 Squadron lifted off in the company of a similar number from the RAF's 178 Squadron and four Handley Page Halifaxes of 148 Squadron. Dense cloud and electrical storms greeted the loose formation as it climbed over Yugoslavia. Of the 24, only 15 bombers eventually reached the Polish capital that first night.

Once over the Carpathians they dropped down to approach Warsaw over the southern plains, a red glow in the distance indicating the destination. The South Africans were to fly along the Vistula and, at the fourth bridge, turn to port and port again where the drop zone would be indicated by white and red markers. The old

city was aflame, entire streets a blazing inferno, while blue and white searchlights pierced the night as anti-aircraft fire clawed at the lumbering bombers, by now down to little more than rooftop height.

Liberator EW105 *G-for-George*, flown by Lt Robert 'Bob' Klette, was the first to make the second turn and decelerate to 135mph (217km/h), flaps down, as he approached the drop zone. With two engines shot out and a third misfiring, navigator Lt Bryan Jones pressed the release and the containers fell away to Krasinkich Square in the city centre.

George was mortally wounded. With instruments shattered and darkness ahead it's been claimed that Klette sought out a field and made a textbook forced-landing. The airman later recalled it was

unintentional: ➔

Below
The Warsaw Uprising Monument in Warsaw, Poland. ISTOCK - EWG3D

Right
Liberator VI 'K-for-King',
the type flown by 31 and
34 Squadrons SAAF.



Below
The crew of Liberator
EW105. Standing, left to
right: Herbert Brown,
mid upper gunner; Eric
Winchester, beam gunner/
radio operator; Henry
Upton, tail gunner.
Seated, left to right: Alf
Faul, second pilot; Bob
Klette, pilot; Bryan Jones,
navigator/bomb aimer.



Right
A plaque honouring the
sacrifice of 2nd Lt Robert
Hamilton, Sgt Leslie
Mayes and Sgt Herbert
Hudson on the memorial
'Airman's Hill' at the crash
site of Liberator KG939.



Below
Liberator EW105 'G' lying
on a Warsaw airfield on
the morning of August
14, 1944.

"I suddenly felt a severe jarring and scraping under the Liberator's belly. Our 'Lib' had made a perfect belly landing on Warsaw's main airfield."

K-for-King EW138 suffered similar punishment. Short of the drop zone the pilot called for the canisters to be released before attempting to climb away from searchlights as flak hammered the Liberator. Without a word to the others he stood up and clipped on his 'chute before baling out, ending up in captivity at Luckenwalde camp.

Co-pilot Bob Burgess grabbed the controls and managed to bring *King* into level flight, although a quick survey revealed extensive damage. Return to Foggia was impossible and the crew elected to head east towards Russia.

Ten hours after leaving Brindisi, Burgess and the navigator, Lt Noel Slead, force-landed EW138 on a field near Emilchino, west of Kiev, shortly before daybreak. Their

efforts earned Burgess a DSO, Slead a DFC and Sgt Allan Bates, the bomb-aimer, a DFM. Three weeks later the airmen were back in Cairo.

SHOT TO RIBBONS

To shorten the distance, the following night's operations were flown from Celone. Seven Liberators of 31 Squadron, eight from 178 and six Halifaxes from 148 initially flew east before turning north over Albania. Several seconded SAAF officers could be counted among the crews in the RAF Liberators.

In addition to prowling night-fighters, the ground defences were waiting and unleashed hell on the aircraft. *A-for-Able*, KG939, was

shot to ribbons approaching the Vistula, forcing Capt Jack van Eyssen to order the canisters to be jettisoned, and pull the dying Liberator up to sufficient height for six of the crew to bale out.

Sgts Leslie Mays and Herbert Hudson, rear and beam gunner respectively, had been killed by flak, while Lt Bob Hamilton's 'chute failed to open. The survivors were moved to safety by Polish civilians before being handed over to the Russians and eventually returning home via Moscow and Teheran.

The crew of KG871 were afforded no such opportunity. Approaching Warsaw, their Liberator was hit by flak and crashed near Golidzinow, killing all aboard. Meanwhile,



having survived the run-in along the Vistula and the turn onto approach for Krasinkich Square, Lt G C Hooley coaxed KG836 even lower down Midowa Street. A wing clipped a building and it crashed at the entrance to the square.

Seventeen sorties had been flown by the SAAF over the two nights: 11 drops had been completed but only seven were thought to have been successful. Five aircraft had been lost, 18 crew killed and 11 were prisoners of war.

The evening of the 15th brought some respite for the South Africans as 178 Squadron was tasked to return to Warsaw alone. In the face of unsustainable losses, the drop zone was moved to a wooded area at Kampinos, six miles west of the capital.

PRESENCE OF MIND

On August 16, six Liberators again departed Celone for Warsaw, the SAAF crews aware that 178 Squadron had managed to drop canisters over the woods and return without loss the previous evening. This was not to be the case on the second time around.

His aircraft struck by multiple

flak rounds as it approached Warsaw, Maj I J M Odendaal ordered his crew to take to their chutes. Co-pilot Lt Groenewald grabbed his pack but, before he could buckle it on, EW248 exploded and blew him into the night sky.

He had the presence of mind to clip the parachute on and pull the ripcord in time to slow his descent as he fell to earth. Burned but otherwise uninjured he was found by a Pole who passed him on to

sympathetic partisans for medical attention. Groenewald went on to fight alongside the partisans before eventually moving through Moscow and back to the West in February 1945.

Capt I C Allen and crew in KG941 dropped their canisters over the wooded target area and turned for home. Near Kraków a volley of anti-aircraft fire tore into the Liberator and it fell to earth with the crew trapped inside.

Whether Captain Lawrie and his crew managed to deliver their cargo to the partisans is unknown: EW166 was shot down by a night-fighter over southern Poland with the loss of all aboard.

With this, the SAAF's first efforts to supply Warsaw's Home Army ended. Eight Liberators had been lost during 23 sorties on three nights. Aircraft could be replaced almost immediately but experienced airmen could not and the effect on morale was immense.

The RAF's 178 Squadron was tasked to continue, but poor weather led to cancelled sorties and on August 19 operations were cancelled.

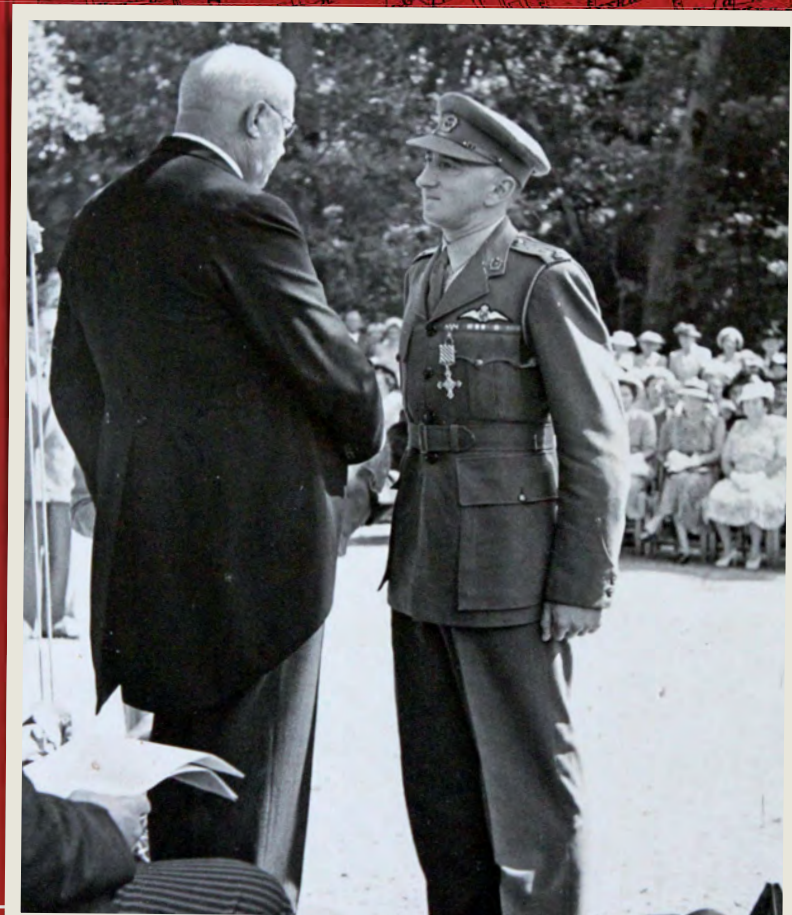
TIPPING POINT

In Warsaw the situation had reached tipping point. A plea for further assistance saw supply flights resume at the end of August. Bad weather over Poland then curtailed operations until the night of September 10 when the SAAF's 31 and 34 Squadrons joined 148 Squadron and 1586 (Polish Special Duties) Flight on the trip to the city.

No. 34 Squadron – also flying Liberator VIs as part of 2 Wing

"Lt G C Hooley coaxed KG836 even lower down Midowa Street. A wing clipped a building and it crashed at the entrance to the square"

Below left Major 'Jack' van Eyssen receiving the DFC from Sir Guy Garrod on June 18, 1945.



Right
Charles Nel as a trainee pilot in 1941. With 31 Squadron, he managed a successful drop to the partisans in woods at Kampinos, outside Warsaw, in the early hours of September 22, 1944.



Below right
Inside a Liberator cockpit.

Bottom left
Lt Bryan Jones, navigator of EW105 'G' on the night of August 13, 1944.

Bottom right
The 31 Squadron flightline at Celone.

SOLE SURVIVOR OF THE FLIGHTS



Pastor Bryan Jones at the Katyn Memorial service in Johannesburg on September 13, 2016.

As EW105 *G-for-George* slithered to a halt at an airfield in Warsaw on August 13, 1944, the crew clambered out and scattered amid searchlights and machine gun fire. Bryan Jones, Bob Klette and Alf Faul were captured and taken to the control tower for interrogation. The rest of the crew eventually joined them, gunner Herbert Brown later succumbing to his wounds. Following solitary confinement and interrogation by the Gestapo, 'Davy' Jones was reunited with Klette and Faul for the train journey to Stalag Luft III at Sagan.

In January 1945, with the approach of Russian forces, the prisoners were forced to march westwards through cold, snow and slush for six days to Stalag IIIA at Luckenwalde, south of Berlin. A week later they were marched to a railway station for transportation to Bavaria, but marauding P-47 Thunderbolts strafed the station and locomotives, forcing a return to camp.

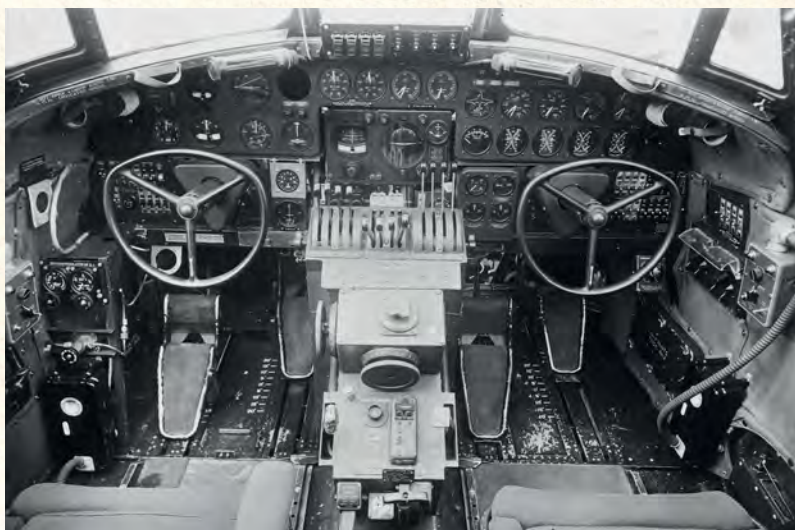
Soviet forces liberated Stalag IIIA on April 22, and Bryan and others were eventually picked up by Americans and taken to an Advanced Repatriation Centre on the River Elba and from there to England. After a month, Bryan and his fellow South Africans boarded the *Athlone Castle* for the voyage home.

A man of strong faith, Bryan became a church minister in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. He has been a leading figure in ensuring the relationship between Poland and South Africa is not forgotten. As the sole survivor of the SAAF's supply runs to Warsaw he continues to play a key role in the annual commemoration service held at the Katyn Memorial in Johannesburg.

SAAF, 205 Group – had played a role in Operation Turpitude on the Turkish border in June 1944 before entering the fray in support of Operation Dragoon, the invasion of southern France, in August.

A series of raids followed, including a visit to the refinery at Szony and marshalling yards at Miskolc in Hungary, a tank factory near St Valentin, Austria, and further mining of the Danube.

Negotiation at the most senior levels had cleared the aircraft to venture east over Russian airspace on approach to Warsaw, and delayed fuses meant the canisters' parachutes could deploy later so that drops could be made from 11,500ft,



removing the danger of small arms fire from the equation.

The flight met poor weather on the way to Poland with dense cloud and icing above 11,000ft. Arriving overhead the city, crews were dismayed to see conditions had barely improved.

Capt Hayward made three runs over the area, eventually climbing to around 14,800ft before ordering the 12 canisters to be dropped from KG874.

Lt Smith in KG886 and Capt Beukes in KG875





marked. There was little chance of enemy night fighters over the drop zone, and with runs being made from 11,000ft the danger of light flak would be eliminated. The reality was very different.

Liberator EW250, flown by Lt D O Cullingworth, was intercepted by a night-fighter near Kraków and shot down, with Sgt R T Pither as the sole survivor. *H-for-How*, KH152, flown by Lt J A Lithgow DFC, met a similar fate.

Three of the remaining Liberators orbited the drop zone for 30 minutes but failed to locate the recognition lights and returned to base with their loads. Sgt Burry (RAF) made the sole drop, managing to get six containers away over lights that bore little resemblance to those they'd been briefed about.

Both SAAF heavy bomber squadrons continued to supply partisan forces in Italy and Yugoslavia.

"Estimates vary, but in the two months of bitter fighting it's thought that as many as 200,000 Poles perished"



Date	Time	Altitude	Type and No.	Plan	Duty	Remarks	Time
3-8-44			Liberator G. Lt. R. Alton		Nav/B	Red on Paris in VOULENCE (France) Mustangs. No opposition	7.30
7-8-44			Liberator Z. Lt. Kluge		Nav/B	Red on ADRIANO ARSIZIANO OIL KILNERY at PLOESTI (Rumania). Very big barrage H.R.B. and L.R.B. many searchlights and fighter activity.	6.35
10-8-44			Liberator K. Lt. Kluge		Nav/B	Min-laying in DANUBE, 40 miles East of Belgrade (Yugoslavia) L.R.B. from bombs - 8/2 holes	5.00
11-8-44			Liberator C. Lt. Alton		Navigation	Celone - Racona. Visit to 3.500 Mtd. 15. Summary 4/2, returned to BASE	
12-8-44			Liberator G.			Celone - Racona. Load supply re Wood 1.05	
15-8-44			G.			Supply dropping on WARSAW	3.20

eventually dropped over the city when unable to locate the markers in the woods. The fourth 31 Squadron aircraft, flown by Lt Le Seuer, could find neither and he returned KH104 to Celone with the cargo.

Four of 34 Squadron's Liberators had been tasked but only three departed, leaving Lt J a Lithgow and Captains Carter and Endler to carry the squadron standard north. Lithgow in EW195 made several runs over the area but, unable to positively identify the target zone, he ordered the dozen canisters dropped at a position southwest of the city. Carter in KG150 elected to return to Celone with his load after fruitless searching for the markers.

It's believed that Endler's EW198 had completed a successful run over the drop zone and turned for home before being attacked and shot down by a night-fighter between the towns of Skopje and Kumanovo

in Yugoslavia. Co-pilot Lt Jack Chapman and the tail gunner, Plt Off G Crook, took to their parachutes and remained captive for the rest of the war.

In the early morning of September 22, five Liberators approached the Kampinos woods in good visibility; Lt C P Nel (in KG874) and Fg Off Badham (RAF, in KG967) of 31 Squadron successfully dropping as did Lt J Smith of 34 Squadron (EW192), while Lt van Zyl (*Q-for-Queen*) and Lt Maas (EW207) were unable to locate the markers and returned their cargoes to Celone.

ALL IN VAIN

The SAAF's final flights to Warsaw, on October 16, saw six aircraft from 34 Squadron briefed to drop containers around Radomsko and Konskie, southwest of the capital. Polish liaison officers assured them that the zones would be well

By early October, the Germans had crushed the uprising in Warsaw. The Home Army had hoped that by opening a 'second front', the Soviet 'liberation' of the city would be brought forward. Instead, the Russian forces held back.

Estimates vary, but in the two months of bitter fighting it's thought that as many as 200,000 Poles perished. It is this tragedy of political opportunism that continued to undermine the incredible efforts to help Poland while Warsaw burned.

The author wishes to acknowledge the unstinting efforts of Bryan Jones in continuing to honour the memory of 'The Flights', and thanks his son, Darryl, for images and invaluable assistance. Further images courtesy of Jack van Eyssen, Charles Nel, Wilbur Wannenburg and Pawel Sulich. With thanks to Timus le Roux.

Above, left to right A wooden cross stood sentinel at the crash site of KG939 at Michelin near Warsaw until replaced by a permanent structure.

Maintenance on a Liberator's Pratt & Whitney R1830-65 radial at Celone.

Bryan Jones' logbook, showing his entry for the flight to Warsaw on the night of August 13, 1944.