CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIR FORCE AND ITS PARTICIPATION IN WORLD WAR II

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide a synoptic picture of the participation of the SAAF in the Second World War. The role played by the SAAF in the various theatres of the war will be briefly discussed to give an overall review of the South Africans' contribution to the total war effort. This information will not always relate directly to the main issue dealt with in this thesis, but will provide the context in which the participation of 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift should be viewed and evaluated. It will also be indicated that although the SAAF squadrons\(^1\) represented only a small part of a sizeable Allied force, they were highly effective in their mastery of crucial assignments in European operational conditions. During the first years of the war, a basis was laid for cooperation between the SAAF and RAF. During the Warsaw Airlift, this cooperation manifested itself in formidable teamwork between the two air forces.

1.2 THE PERIOD BEFORE WORLD WAR II

Jan Christiaan Smuts became Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa in 1919. Well known for his important role in international politics, Smuts was also a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, and chairman of the Select Committee responsible for reorganising Britain's aviation forces.\(^2\) The Imperial Government had made a large number of Royal Air Force planes and quantities

\(^{1}\) A squadron is a formation of military aircraft of two or three flights operating as a unit. A flight is a tactical unit in the Air Force that consists of two or more aircraft.

of equipment available to the Union and other Dominions, since Great Britain held a vast quantity of surplus armaments after the First World War. This was referred to as the "Imperial Gift" and the recipients were given the opportunity of making a choice from what was available.

General Smuts realised the vital importance of an effective air force. To undertake the establishment of an air force for South Africa, he chose Lieutenant-Colonel Helperus Andreas (Pierre) van Ryneveld, the highly experienced commander of Royal Air Force 2nd Army Wing at Cologne, Germany. He was appointed Director of Air Services in South Africa, with effect from 1 February 1920. This date is generally regarded as the founding day of the South African Air Force (SAAF). On his return from London, Van Ryneveld immediately started organising the Air Force.

In 1921, the first officers were appointed to the SAAF. Van Ryneveld wanted a small, elite group trained in all aspects of aerial warfare. An intensive recruitment campaign during 1921 brought in 9,000 applicants, which enabled

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5 Van Ryneveld specialised in military aviation. Having received a B.A.-degree, he won a scholarship to the Imperial College of Science, and there he completed his B.Sc.-degree in engineering. With the outbreak of the First World War he enlisted in the Royal North Lancashire Regiment. From the Western front, he was transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in 1915. He flew against the Zeppelins in their night raids on London and was later transferred to Gallipoli. After Gallipoli came Egypt and the Western Desert drive against the Senussi, in which South African Infantry Units played an important part. In 1916, he was awarded the Military Cross (MC). In 1918, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and was knighted by King George V. Later he also fought in Egypt and on the Salonika and London fronts. He was about to be promoted to Colonel when the war ended. A.L. Gavshon, *Fight for Freedom*, p.34.
8 Although there appears to be no known statutory authority for its formation, this title was first used officially on 1 February 1923, when the SAAF was listed as one of the units of the Permanent Force, under the provisions of the Defence Act; D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History file, 1920-1980, Vol. 1: *History of the SAAF*, p.2.
Van Ryneveld to select only the best.\textsuperscript{10} The programme for the period 1921 to 1922 was designed primarily to enable the SAAF to be established on a firm foundation.\textsuperscript{11} The SAAF was the first Dominion air force to be formed.\textsuperscript{12} From the start it was important for the SAAF to be able to operate under conditions likely to be encountered locally.

The SAAF was involved in its first action in March 1922 when a miners' strike on the Rand led to the declaration of martial law, following violent clashes between the South African Police and the strikers.\textsuperscript{13} 1 Squadron SAAF was called upon to fly reconnaissance missions and bombard the strikers' positions.\textsuperscript{14} During this operation two pilots were killed, two wounded and two aircraft were irreparably damaged. A total of 127 hours was flown.\textsuperscript{15}

From 29 May to 3 July 1922, the SAAF was called on to act against the Bondelzwart Namas at Kalkfontein South (Karasburg) in the then South West Africa.\textsuperscript{16} The rising lasted only a few days. Three aircraft were involved in accidents. In April 1925, DH9's of the SAAF were also employed against dissident Rehoboth Basters.\textsuperscript{17}

From 1921, the SAAF concentrated mainly on flight training. In 1925, a Central Flying School was established at Zwartkop.\textsuperscript{18} The SAAF also cooperated with the Department of Posts and Telecommunications to launch an experimental air mail shuttle, serving South Africa's coastal cities, but this unique venture was

\begin{enumerate}
\item D. Becker, \textit{On Wings of Eagles: South Africa's Military Aviation History}, p.29.
\item He insisted the SAAF be an autonomous body, he himself being directly responsible to the Minister of Defence. He once threatened to resign when someone suggested otherwise. H. Potgieter, et al., \textit{Aircraft of the South African Air Force}, p.19.
\item H. Potgieter, et al., \textit{Aircraft of the South African Air Force}, p.19.
\item D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History File, 1920 -1980, Vol I, p.3.
\end{enumerate}
terminated later the same year.\textsuperscript{19} In 1926, the SAAF also started cooperating with other civil authorities.\textsuperscript{20} Night flights now became part of pilot training for the first time. The SAAF also purchased a first consignment of 33 parachutes for exercise jumps.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1927, periodic liaison flights were undertaken to Khartoum and Cairo, in conjunction with the RAF. This created a chain of airfields throughout Africa which later proved to be of strategical importance during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{22}

A practice was inaugurated with the RAF whereby pilots were exchanged on a regular basis. The RAF seconded certain pilots to the SAAF for a period of about 24 months. These pilots specialised in specific categories such as flying instruction, navigation, armaments or aerial photography.\textsuperscript{23} This cooperation with the RAF laid the basis for joint operations, like the Warsaw Airlift, during the Second World War.

In 1933, Van Ryneveld was promoted to Brigadier-General and became Chief of General Staff.\textsuperscript{24} Two years later, Oswald Pirow, South African Minister of Defence, announced that the expansion of the Union Defence Force would be accomplished by 1942. One thousand additional pilots and 1 700 new artisans were to be trained in the new SAAF.\textsuperscript{25} During the late 1930's, the SAAF

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} D DOCS, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History File, 1920 - 1980, Vol. I, p.3.
\item \textsuperscript{22} D DOCS, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History File, 1920 - 1980, Vol. I, p.3.
\item \textsuperscript{24} From 1 May 1933, Lieutenant-Colonel J. Holthouse was appointed Director of Civil Aviation. In September 1933, the Department of Civil Aviation was transferred to the Department of Defence and the position of Director of Civil Aviation was abolished. The entire aviation organisation in South Africa thus came under the control of the Director of Air Services. The next year, the South African Railways and Harbour Administration took over the Union Airways and formed the South African Airways (SAA) on 1 February 1934. Holthouse was transferred to assume executive control of this new airline. From then on, the SAAF and the SAA became two separate entities; D. Becker, \textit{On Wings of Eagles: South Africa's Military Aviation History}, p.45; K.A. Maxwell & J.M. Smith, \textit{Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag Goue Jubileumgedenkboek}, p.33.
\item \textsuperscript{25} F.T. Jane, \textit{Jane's All the World's Aircraft}, 1936, p.23b.
\end{itemize}
expanded dramatically and stations were opened in various parts of the country. In August 1938, Waterkloof Air Station was established as an operational airfield and 1 Squadron, 2 squadron and 3 Squadron were stationed there. During the same year, training schools were also established at Durban, Bloemfontein and Cape Town.26

The mounting trouble in Europe from 1938 onward potentially endangered South Africa's sovereignty.27 The South African Government therefore decided to strengthen its existing air defence programme. From now on, all the flying clubs as well as private flying schools would be subsidised. Pirow announced a grant of £50 000 a year for the training of pupils who went on to qualify for the Air Force Reserve.28 With this programme they wanted to form a reserve of 1 000 civilian pilots by 1942. The British Government, which fully supported the South African endeavours, offered to sell 200 aircraft to the SAAF at a very low price. The first of these planes started arriving in Cape Town in 1938. These aircraft proved invaluable to the SAAF for future training.29

When, by March 1939, the outbreak of a major war in Europe became almost a certainty, it was decided to conduct a complete inventory of the SAAF. There were 160 Permanent Force officers, 35 cadets and 1 400 other ranks in the SAAF.30 When World War II started, later the same year, the SAAF's tally consisted of four Hurricane MK1's; six Hawker Fury MKII's; one Fairy Battle MKIII; one Bristol Blenheim MKI, 63 obsolete Hawker Hartbees, of which more than 40 were no longer flight-worthy (due to a shortage of parts) and 18 Junker 86Z-7 passenger aircraft which had been converted into bombers.31 On 23 October 1939, Van Ryneveld approved a plan known as the Peace Expansion Scheme, requiring 720 aircraft, of which 336 were to be fighters.32

28 F.T. Jane, Jane's All the World's Aircraft, 1936, p.23b.
31 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 370: East Africa original draft narratives (Air), East Africa, Air Operations June-October 1940, p.1.
The Union Defence Force also realised the importance of the developing and training of personnel for the Air Force and therefore embarked on an ambitious and dynamic training programme, in cooperation with the Royal Air Force.\textsuperscript{33} Smuts, who again became Prime Minister in September 1939,\textsuperscript{34} also requested Britain to establish flight training facilities in South Africa. An initial agreement was signed in June 1941. This training programme became known as the Joint Air Training Scheme (JATS). In accordance with JATS, South Africa was to provide the facilities for the training and Great Britain the aircraft and equipment.\textsuperscript{35} The training programme made provision for the establishment of 24 flying schools. The target was to have at least 3,000 pilots and 2,000 observers trained by 1942. The training of ground personnel was also included in the programme. JATS can be seen as the turning point in South Africa's Air Force training programme. It constantly had to be revised owing to developments in operations during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{36}

1.3 CONDUCT IN WORLD WAR II

On 6 September 1939, the Union of South Africa declared war on Germany. Although unarmed, obsolete Wapitis were immediately instructed to fly routine patrols along the South African coast.\textsuperscript{37} Only a few of these aircraft

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\textsuperscript{33} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History, Container 4, File AA/5: Manuscript of Lt. A.C. Parker's History of SAAF (Appeared in August '45 copy of Libertas), p.2.

\textsuperscript{34} When the outbreak of a Second World War became a reality, General J.B.M. Hertzog, Prime Minister of the Union since 1924, proposed a policy of neutrality, since the country was a self-governing dominion within the British Empire. The Deputy Prime Minister, General Smuts, disagreed and advocated active support of Great Britain. The crucial vote after a very stormy debate in Parliament, where 80 members voted for and 67 against participation in the war, left Hertzog with no choice but to resign and Smuts became Prime Minister for a second time; J. Van der Poel, Selections From the Smuts Papers, Vol. VI, p.187.

\textsuperscript{35} J.A. Brown, Eagles Strike, p.17; D. Becker, On Wings of Eagles: South Africa's Military Aviation History, p.61; J. Keene, South Africa in World War II, p.33.


were equipped with parachutes. The radio equipment was old and not up to standard and dated from the First World War.  

On 7 October 1940, Vice Marshall M.B. Frew became Director of Training and set out the functions of the South African Air Force patrol units as follows:

Primary duty of aircraft cooperation with Naval hunting forces ... reporting and shadowing any enemy ships sighted, whether merchant ships or warships and to ensure that no hostile war vessels, including armed merchant men masquerading as friendly or neutral ships approach the coast of the Union undetected.

At the outbreak of the war, only about 50 of the 93 available aircraft were flight-worthy. The situation changed rapidly. During 1941, the strength of the SAAF increased to 31 204 members. This included 956 pilots. By the end of that year, 1 709 aircraft were deployed throughout the Union for training and operational purposes.

Fortunately, there was little enemy activity at the time and therefore enough time was available to prepare for the pressing problems of the future air war. The protection of the South African coast was carried out mainly by formations of Coastal Reconnaissance Flights equipped with converted Junkers JU 86's stationed at Durban, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Walvis Bay. One of these JU 86's was responsible for the SAAF's first success of the war. The German liner, SS Watussi, was intercepted off the Cape coast and scuttled.
Captain H.H. Balfour, British Under-Secretary of State for Air, commended the standard of training during an inspection visit to South Africa in June 1941. He said that nothing could break the RAF-SAAF combination. He had seen training of the highest standard and trainees were as fit and as keen as he had seen anywhere. The maintenance work done by ground crews was excellent and ground instructional works some of the best he had seen.44

By the end of 1942, there was a total number of 44,417 personnel in the SAAF. This included 2,349 pilots. The number of training schools had increased from six to 18.45

The pattern of the escalating war was clear: the Middle East and East Africa were fast becoming major theatres of war, with the Cape sea route requiring extra protection to allow the safe passage of essential convoys of troops and supplies to those areas. This placed an even greater burden on the SAAF. From September 1939 to May 1945, coastal reconnaissance squadrons carried out more than 15,000 sorties. Extensive anti-submarine patrols off the South African coast made a major contribution to restricting enemy submarine activity in this area. Altogether, 26 submarines were attacked from the air. Coastal aircraft intercepted 17 blockade runners and rescued about 400 survivors from sunken ships.46

1.3.1 EAST AFRICA

South Africa declared itself at war with Italy on 11 June 1940.47 The Italian forces in Abyssinia, consisting of 200,000 troops and nearly 400 aircraft, constituted a grave threat to Kenya and the Sudan. Three South African

47 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, South Africa at War, pp.63-64.
squadrons were formed early in 1940 and sent north, joined shortly afterwards by another three.48

The SAAF squadrons operated on all fronts in Somaliland and Abyssinia and despite the Italian numerical advantage of more than four to one in the air, made a considerable contribution towards the victory achieved in this campaign. The Italians surrendered in November 1941. Afterwards, commenting on the part played by the SAAF, Sir Archibald Sinclair, British Under-Secretary of State for Air, commented:

When the Italians come to draw up a list of the factors that caused them to lose the East African Empire they will place the South African Air Force somewhere near the top of the list.49

The East African campaign led to the creation of a shuttle service, which was operated by 50 Squadron, later incorporated into 5 Wing. They used Valentias, JU 52/3Ms and Lodestars. They ferried troops and supplies up north and carried wounded soldiers back south.50 From the outbreak of the war until the end of February 1945, the SAAF transported 53 126 passengers and about 1.5 million kilograms of supplies.51 As the war progressed, this service was extended to Cairo and eventually to Bari and Rome, where Dakotas were used.52

Throughout the East African campaign, the SAAF squadrons flew a total of 6 517 sorties and destroyed 71 enemy aircraft in the air and at least another 70 on the ground.53 The SAAF lost 79 pilots and air crew during this campaign. A total of 5 persons was reported missing.54 Lieutenant R.H.C. Kershaw, who

52 D. Becker, On Wings of Eagles: South Africa's Military Aviation History, p.75.
participated in the East African campaign, was the first SAAF pilot awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO).55

1.3.2 MADAGASCAR

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the Allies feared that Madagascar could be used by the Japanese as a submarine base.56 Shortly after news of Pearl Harbour reached South Africa, fortress areas on the coast and coastal flights of the SAAF were put on military standby.57

Compared with the North African campaign, the SAAF's role in "Operation Ironclad", the Allied occupation of the harbour at Diego Suarez, can be seen as modest.58 The SAAF did not participate in the actual operation itself, although three flights of the SAAF were sent to the Madagascar harbour to assist in the land operations that followed the occupation of Diego Suarez. No RAF aircraft were available at the time.59

During March and April 1942, SAAF Marylands photographed Madagascar in anticipation of the British assault on the whole of Madagascar in May 1942.60 After the landings and the capture of the Arrachart airfield at Diego Suarez, Beauforts and Marylands of 36 Squadron and 37 Squadron, as well as a number of Lodestars, were used in conjunction with the RAF aircraft.

55 Two flights of Hurricanes were strafing an Italian airfield in Abyssinia, when one of the flight commanders, Captain A. Frost, was hit and landed his damaged aircraft on the satellite airfield nearby. Despite the fact that they were under well-directed enemy fire, Kershaw landed alongside him. Frost managed to climb into the cockpit onto Kershaw's lap and they succeeded in getting the Hurricane off the ground and back to base; D.W. Pidsley, The South African Air Force: a Perspective in the Context of the Growth and Development of the South African Society up to 1985, p.54.


57 J.A. Brown, Eagles Strike, p.383.


59 J. Keene, South Africa in World War II, p.99.

From May 1942 to November 1942, three flights of the SAAF flew 401 sorties on reconnaissance and other duties during the six-month campaign. These flights consisted of 17 operational Beaufort and Maryland aircraft, of which six Beauforts and one Maryland were forced down due to enemy action or mechanical problems. Colonel S.A. Melville of the SAAF commanded the entire Air Force component. There were sufficient spares available only for one month, but miracles of improvisation by the technical staff members in the workshops (Erks), saw the campaign through.

1.3.3 NORTH AFRICA

Moving its activities from Eritrea and Abyssinia to the desert areas of North Africa, the SAAF suddenly experienced weather elements belonging to another part of the world. Now the sand, heat and cold of the desert area of North Africa formed part of their daily existence. Here the SAAF faced a more sophisticated, determined and better equipped air force, the German air force, resolute and efficient with highly skilled pilots at the controls of the dreaded Messerschmitts. At their side fought the Italian Air Force, which participated in great numbers, flying modern Macchi aircraft, with pilots more tenacious than the dispirited Italians encountered in East Africa.

Living conditions in the desert were difficult and uncomfortable. Sand was everywhere - in the tents, on the tables, in the food. A desert sandstorm

61 J.A. Brown, Eagles Strike, p.400.
63 J.A. Brown, Eagles Strike, p.386.
64 Something SAAF ground crews were famous for later in the Western Desert and elsewhere; D.W. Pidsley, The South African Air Force: a Perspective in the Context of the Growth and Development of the South African Society up to 1985, p.55.
65 During the Warsaw Airlift the German night fighters posed a constant danger to the aircraft of the SAAF. This caused the aircrews great stress and anxiety and made the flights extremely perilous. Many aircraft were damaged so badly they had to carry out forced landings. Others were shot down by the German night fighters.
driven by gale-force wind reduced visibility to a few metres. Skies were frequently overcast although sometimes this proved to be helpful when pilots were trying to evade an enemy plane. Frequent rains often turned everything into mud. In winter, temperatures dropped to zero degrees Celsius, but in the summer blistering "khamseen" winds could push temperatures in the cockpits up to 45 degrees Celsius, while the temperatures inside tents would sometimes top 38 degrees Celsius.67

During May 1941, General Sir Archibald Wavell, officer commanding the Middle Eastern campaigns, had to cope with maintaining simultaneous operations on five fronts. Allied forces were threatened at Crete, North Africa, Syria, the Egyptian ports and Palestine. In the last days of April 1941, Germany completed its occupation of Greece. In Egypt, the lack of transport reduced much of the Allied force to static duties.68

The South Africans got their first opportunity in this theatre of war, when Wavell identified a fleeting opportunity for an attack in Egypt that could restore their position in Cyrenaica. As early as April 1941, the SAAF had sent eight bomber squadrons to the Middle East. There were also five fighter squadrons, one army cooperation squadron and a photographic squadron.69 1 Fighter Squadron was the first SAAF unit to reach Egypt. Its Hurricanes arrived from Eritrea in April 1941 and were assigned to the defence of Alexandria. One month later, 24 Bomber Squadron's Marylands, formerly 14 Squadron, also reached Egypt. Both squadrons were attached to RAF wings. This started a close association that welded the two forces together in the famous Desert Air Force, but also later during the flights to Warsaw, and carried them as companions in arms right to the end of the war in Europe.70 During a brief, but unsuccessful, defence of Crete, the SAAF tasted their first action in the Middle East. Marylands of 24 Squadron, in conjunction with the RAF, bombed enemy occupied airfields on the island, and Hurricanes of 1 Squadron provided an escort for the Marylands and other RAF flights.71 During this operation, South

68 J.A. Brown, Eagles Strike, p.20.
69 J.A. Brown, Eagles Strike, p.35.
African airmen flew 110 hours of the total of 887 hours flown by the Allied forces. The small number of SAAF pilots succeeded in destroying eight enemy aircraft.\footnote{J.A. Brown, \textit{Eagles Strike}, p.31.}

The next big action the SAAF became involved in was Operation Battleaxe, which started on 14 June 1941.\footnote{N.D. Orpen, \textit{War in the Desert}, pp.13-15; D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 379: SAAF Narrative of Operations in the Middle East, March to July 1941, p.68.} This operation was the first of a series of backward and forward movements, which characterised fighting in North Africa. By 18 June, Battleaxe had failed and both sides settled down to an uneasy stalemate.\footnote{N.D. Orpen, \textit{War in the Desert}, p.15.} The SAAF suffered heavy casualties in this intensive desert operation against a numerically superior enemy. 1 Squadron lost nine aircraft and seven pilots in only seven sorties.\footnote{K.A. Maxwell \& J.M. Smith, \textit{Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag Goue Jubileumgedenkboek}, p.52.}

The next big Allied offensive, named Operation Crusader, started on 18 November 1941. By now the Allied forces were better equipped.\footnote{N.D. Orpen, \textit{War in the Desert}, p.49.} Once again the pattern of desert warfare, where the battle fluctuated backwards and forwards, was the order of the day. Eventually the Allied forces gained the upper hand and relieved Tobruk. By January 1942, the Allied forces had driven the Axis forces back as far as El Agheila.\footnote{K.A. Maxwell \& J.M. Smith, \textit{Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag Goue Jubileumgedenkboek}, p.53; H.J. Martin \& N.D. Orpen, \textit{South Africa at War}, p.102.} 1 Squadron and 2 Squadron had spent a total of 770 hours in the air.\footnote{D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 379: SAAF Narrative of Operations in the Middle East, October 1941, p.248.} At the conclusion of this operation, Air Chief Marshal Tedder paid special tribute to the SAAF.\footnote{H. Potgieter, et al., \textit{Aircraft of the South African Air Force}, p.28.}

The activities of the SAAF in the desert during the period June to July 1942 represented some of the finest hours for the South Africans. Bostons from 12 Squadron and 24 Squadron embarked on a systematic, almost non-stop bombing operation, utilising 18 planes in the process. This operation became
known as the "Boston Shuttle Service" and the Axis forces called it the "Indomitable Eighteen".\textsuperscript{80}

When the Allied offensive reached its peak with the battle for Egypt the SAAF fighter squadrons made a considerable contribution and flew more than 200 sorties on one day.\textsuperscript{81} The SAAF carried out a total of 3,064 sorties during July 1942. During the same time the fighter squadrons recorded 75 confirmed victories.\textsuperscript{82}

The so-called second Battle of El Alamein started on 23 October 1942.\textsuperscript{83} A total of 11 SAAF squadrons operated in support of the Eighth Army of the Allied forces. On 26 October, Major D.W. Pidsley of the SAAF attacked and sank the tanker Prosperina, which was carrying a vital cargo of fuel supplies to the forces of the German commander, General Erwin Rommel.\textsuperscript{84} The loss of these supplies and the severe battering the Axis forces received from the Allied forces in general, forced Rommel to start withdrawing his troops. By the end of that year the campaign in the Middle East was all over.\textsuperscript{85} Vice-Air Marshal L. Slater congratulated 15 Squadron on their very successful attacks on enemy targets.\textsuperscript{86}

Rommel's \textit{Deutsches Afrika Korps} started withdrawing in November 1942 and eventually surrendered at Cape Bon in Tunisia. The Axis powers in North Africa only surrendered on 13 May 1943.\textsuperscript{87}

More than 400 enemy aircraft had been destroyed by the SAAF since April 1941.\textsuperscript{88} From 1 January 1943 to 12 May 1943 the SAAF flew a total of 8,777

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\textsuperscript{80} D. Becker, \textit{On Wings of Eagles: South Africa's Military Aviation History}, p.87.
\textsuperscript{83} J. Keene, \textit{South Africa in World War II}, p.90.
\textsuperscript{84} J.A. Brown, \textit{Eagles Strike}, p.276.
\textsuperscript{87} K.A. Maxwell & J.M. Smith, \textit{Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag Goue Jubileumgedenkboek}, p.70.
\textsuperscript{88} J.A. Brown, \textit{Eagles Strike}, p.382.
\end{flushright}
sorties,\textsuperscript{89} thus bringing the number of operational sorties in North Africa to 33,971.

By coincidence the SAAF had the distinction of dropping the first and last bomb during the hostilities in Africa. The first was on 11 June 1940 on an Italian camp at Moyale in Abyssinia, and the last on the Italian 1st Army in April 1943 in Tunisia.\textsuperscript{90}

During the Campaign, JATS, back home, produced no less than 9,826 trained personnel as well as 7,824 artisans who passed through the Technical Training Schools. Of the pilots, 2,545 were members of the SAAF and 606 were attached to the RAF. By the middle of June 1943, the whole organisation was running smoothly and the Air Schools, involved in the JATS, achieved the very impressive total of 1,281,767 flying hours.\textsuperscript{91}

\subsection*{1.3.4 SICILY}

In January 1943, before the end of the Tunisian campaign, American and British strategists met in Casablanca.\textsuperscript{92} Plans were devised for the invasion of Europe via the Mediterranean. Sicily was chosen as the first target for assault, since its capture would provide a springboard for landings on the Italian mainland as well as for further air attacks on Germany.\textsuperscript{93}

The attack on Sicily, known as "Operation Husky" took much careful and detailed planning. The Allies realised from the outset that the air forces had to play a vital role. The neighbouring small islands of Pantelleria and Lampedusa

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History, Container 4: Chronology Operations North (M.E.F., B.N.A.F., C.M.P.) Period, April 1941 - June 1944, The SAAF in the Middle East, Chronology 1943, p.3.
\item J.A. Brown, Eagles Strike, p.382.
\item H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, South Africa at War, p.274.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
had to be occupied before Sicily could be invaded.\textsuperscript{94} During May and June 1943, the SAAF flew more than 6,000 sorties,\textsuperscript{95} the light bombers undertaking only 300 sorties.\textsuperscript{96} On 11 June the Italians at Pantelleria surrendered and on 13 June at Lampedusa and Linosa.\textsuperscript{97} The road to Sicily was now cleared for the planned offensive.

60 Squadron undertook its biggest assignment ever by completing an aerial survey of the areas of Sicily targeted for the invasion.\textsuperscript{98} On 9 July, massive Allied air raids pounded enemy concentrations in Sicily.\textsuperscript{99}

The Allies had aerial superiority over Germany and Italy. They had 4,000 planes to the 1,900 German and Italian planes.\textsuperscript{100} The use of these planes was part of the first phase of the Allied invasion, and comprised the systematic destruction of Sicily's airfields, their bases and lines of communication. SAAF squadrons were actively involved in these operations.\textsuperscript{101} In the meantime 3 Wing switched to night bombing and continued to raid targets until the actual invasion commenced on 9 July 1943.\textsuperscript{102} During the ensuing days, the air force

\textsuperscript{94} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 281, File FC/1/Islands: SAAF Operations in the Campaign of the Islands (Pantelleria and Sicily) 8 May - 19 August 1943, p.1.
\textsuperscript{95} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 281, File FC/1/Islands: SAAF Operations in the Campaign of the Islands (Pantelleria and Sicily) 8 May - 19 August 1943, p.2.
\textsuperscript{96} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 281, File FC/1/Islands: SAAF Operations in the Campaign of the Islands (Pantelleria and Sicily) 8 May - 19 August 1943, pp.5-7.
\textsuperscript{97} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 238, File FB/1: History of Sicilian Campaign beginning with air attacks on Pantelleria and Lampedusa with special reference to the role played by SAAF squadrons, May 1943 to August 1943, p.2.
\textsuperscript{100} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 281, File FC/1/Islands: SAAF Operations in the Campaign of the Islands (Pantelleria and Sicily) 8 May - 19 August 1943, p.3.
\textsuperscript{101} K.A. Maxwell & J.M. Smith, Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag Goue Jubileumgedenkboek, p.75.
\textsuperscript{102} H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, Eagles Victorious, pp.21-22.
provided maximum cover and support bombing for the nearly 2,800 vessels of different types and sizes used by the Allied forces invading Sicily.103

The enemy retreated, offering intense resistance all the way. On 17 August, 38 days later, the campaign was over. However, the Germans had managed to withdraw a large part of their garrison to the Italian mainland in spite of heavy raids on embarkation and landing points in Sicily and Italy.104

From 3 July to 17 August 1943, the bombers of the SAAF, consisting of 12 Squadron, 21 Squadron and 24 Squadron, completed a total of 1,046 sorties. This represented 35% of the total light bomber force of the Allied air forces,105 and represented 42% of the total light bomber sorties carried out by the Allied forces.106

The six South African squadrons represented only a small part of a much bigger Allied force, but were highly effective and were involved in many crucial assignments in Europe.107

The experiences of the SAAF during these operations surely had a significant influence on their conduct in operations such as the flights from Italy to Warsaw later in the war.

1.3.5 THE DODECANESE ISLANDS

The decision of the Allied command to occupy the islands Cos, Samos and Leros in the Italian held Dodecanese, north-east of Crete, also involved the SAAF.108 The successful capture of these islands would have opened the supply route to

Russia through the Dardanelles and the airfields would have been of assistance in the strategic bombing of vital enemy targets.  

On 12 September 1943, a small and inadequate British force occupied Cos. The next day Major C.A. van Vliet with 7 Squadron SAAF arrived to participate in the operation.

The German forces located in the Axis strongholds of Rhodes and Crete responded with a massive bombing campaign and started to prepare themselves for a landing on the island. In the beginning of October a combined force of paratroopers and seaborne forces attacked the islands. Outnumbered and handicapped by a breakdown of the radio-location system, 7 Squadron shot down 12 of the attackers and damaged others. They lost six of their own pilots.

The South Africans carried on fighting for two more days, employing a rapidly diminishing number of serviceable Spitfires. With German mortars dropping on the air field, squadron members succeeded in reaching the beach and escaped by boat. The whole Aegean Islands episode had no significant effect on the outcome of the Mediterranean War. It only dramatically illustrated that neither troops nor ships in isolated positions and without air support could survive for any length of time against a mobile enemy bringing its own air power to bear at the crucial point.

1.3.6 ITALY

On 13 September 1943, the invasion of Italy commenced with assaults on three fronts: Reggio di Calabria, Taranto and Salerno.\textsuperscript{117}

Conditions in air fighting over Italy were vastly different from those in North Africa. Living conditions were much better for both air and ground crews. Camps in Italy were usually pleasantly situated in green meadows or in shady woods. On the other hand, no worse conditions in which to work on aircraft could be imagined than the bitter cold, snow, gale force storms and mud of the Italian winter.\textsuperscript{118} The topography and climate in Italy were very different to that of Africa.\textsuperscript{119} During the Warsaw Airlift, the flights also commenced from airfields in Italy.

By the end of August 1943, the Allied forces had more than 3,000 aircraft available\textsuperscript{120} while the Luftwaffe’s total was 1,109 aircraft,\textsuperscript{121} of which only 574 were airworthy.\textsuperscript{122}

3 Wing shared in the difficult task of supporting operations on the Salerno and Anzio beach-heads.\textsuperscript{123} 40 Squadron SAAF flew constant tactical reconnaissance sorties. Their task was also to do air reconnaissance for the British battleships, HMS Nelson and HMS Rodney, during a bombardment of coastal defences.\textsuperscript{124} Dakotas from 28 and 44 Squadrons were involved in transport operations,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{117} D. DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 370, File 14: Italy, Air Narratives (Provisional), The Invasion of Italy, pp.1-2; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, Eagles Victorious, p.41.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} J. Keene, South Africa in World War II, pp. 179-180.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, Eagles Victorious, p.10.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} C.J.C. Molony, et al., History of the Second World War - the Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. V, p.362.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} C.J.C. Molony, et al., History of the Second World War - the Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. V, p.253.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} H. Potgieter, et al., Aircraft of the South African Air Force, p.31.
\end{itemize}
scheduled services, casualty evacuation and in supply dropping operations to partisans in Yugoslavia and Northern Italy.\textsuperscript{125}

After a meeting between Van Ryneveld and the Air Ministry in London in October 1943, it was decided that the commitments of the SAAF would be greatly increased in the Mediterranean theatre.\textsuperscript{126} A large number of RAF air crew members were then released from their duties in the Mediterranean to take part in a maximum effort elsewhere in Europe.\textsuperscript{127}

The SAAF air crews were increased and provision was made for the formation of a heavy bomber wing flying Liberators. These Liberators were later used to transport supplies to the Polish partisans in Warsaw. Another Marauder medium-bomber squadron and three more fighter-bomber squadrons, equipped with Spitfires and Kittyhawks, as well as a second Dakota transport squadron to assist the SAAF's hard-pressed 28 Squadron, were sent to the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{128} Three coastal squadrons were also withdrawn from the Union and were sent to the Mediterranean. The SAAF also flew Catalinas from Durban to Italy to take over the duties of an RAF squadron.\textsuperscript{129}

This enormous task was carried out promptly and on schedule. In due course, the SAAF’s presence in Italy escalated dramatically, prompting the following proud statement from Smuts\textsuperscript{130} in an address to the Union Senate in March 1944:

\begin{quote}
The SAAF today is largely responsible for the defence and patrolling of the Mediterranean from Alexandria to Algiers, of the Atlantic Coast from West Africa to Cape Town, and of the Indian Ocean from Cape Point to the Red Sea. In addition we have in Italy many
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{128} H. Potgieter, et al., \textit{Aircraft of the South African Air Force}, p.31.
\textsuperscript{130} General Smuts was promoted Field-Marshal in the British Army on 23 May 1941; N.D. Orpen, East African and Abyssinian Campaigns, p.314.
squadrons comprising a very large proportion of the tactical air forces available to the Allied command in theatres of operations.\textsuperscript{131}

The SAAF participated in the Italian campaign with something like 420 frontline planes of all types of which only 35 were "modern" or "latest" aircraft.\textsuperscript{132} The SAAF squadrons in Italy played a very important and notable part in providing support to the Allied Forces' Eighth and Fifth Armies and took part in some of the toughest fighting of the war. From November 1942 (at the end of the African campaign) to May 1945, when nearly a million German and Italian troops capitulated, the SAAF flew a total of 82 401 sorties.\textsuperscript{133}

From 9 April 1945 to 2 May 1945, the SAAF squadrons based in Italy took part in the so-called "Victory" spring offensive and peaked in their effort. In fact, during April the SAAF collectively flew more sorties than in any other month during the war. 3 Wing and 8 Wing carried out a total of 6 526 sorties against tactical targets on the Italian Front.\textsuperscript{134}

These were the last operational sorties flown by the SAAF in Europe. No fewer than 44 569 men had volunteered for service in the SAAF during the war. Smuts also stated that as many as 32 squadrons of the SAAF were participating in air combat. This represented a total of between 35 000 and 40 000 men. Their participation also demanded sacrifice; 2 227 members died.\textsuperscript{135}

\textbf{1.3.7 THE WARSAW OPERATIONS}

By the end of July 1944, two heavy-bomber squadrons, 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron of 2 Wing SAAF, were incorporated into 205 Group, Balkan Air Force, stationed at Foggia in Southern Italy. They were part of the Mediterranean

\textsuperscript{133} The participation of the two SAAF Dakota transport squadrons is not included; D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History File, 1920 -1980, Vol. I, p.18.
Allied Strategical Air Force, which included the Desert Air Force, the Balkan Air Force and the Tactical Air Force. The two South African squadrons were earmarked to participate in the invasion of Southern France. 205 Group consisted of five wings and they were responsible for all strategical operations at night.\(^\text{136}\) The officer commanding 205 Group was one of South Africa's most outstanding airmen, Brigadier James Thom Durrant.\(^\text{137}\)

In August 1944, the South African squadrons were participating in the operations of the Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Force in attacking German fighter bases in Hungary. By 12 August 1944, their Liberator aircraft had already been fitted with jamming devices to neutralise the Germans' early-warning radar posts. It was anticipated that the South Africans would play a major role in the preliminary bombardment of Southern France.\(^\text{138}\)

By mid-August, weather conditions were deteriorating fast and rain and poor weather made any operations from the Italian bases extremely dangerous. During this time, a Polish Squadron of 2 Wing was operating from Campo Casale and undertook flights to Warsaw.\(^\text{139}\)

On the afternoon of 12th August the crews of 31 Squadron SAAF were waiting to be briefed on their night operations. They expected an attack on Genoa harbour as a first step towards their invasion of Southern France. Then word came that the operation was cancelled. New instructions indicated that six Liberators of 31 Squadron were to get ready to fly to Brindisi to participate in a special flight. Then new orders came again. Now ten Liberators were to go to Brindisi. The next day the South Africans were informed that they were to take part in flights to Warsaw, the capital of Poland.\(^\text{140}\) The Warsaw Airlift was about to begin.

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1.4 CONCLUSION

At the outbreak of the war, the SAAF consisted of only 160 permanent force officers, 35 cadets and 1 400 other ranks. In 1939, the SAAF had a total of 93 aircraft, of which more than 40 were no longer flight-worthy, but by the end of 1941, 1 709 aircraft were deployed. By 1941, the SAAF had increased to 31 204 personnel, including 956 pilots, and by 1943 the number further increased to 44 417 personnel, of which 2 349 were pilots. By the end of the war, no fewer than 44 569 members of the SAAF had served in fulfilling absolutely essential tasks not only in operational functions but in administrative capacities or in specialised armaments, engineering, medical and many other fields.\textsuperscript{141} It was a superb record which had demanded large scale sacrifice from South Africans. The SAAF's contribution in the Second World War represents a commendable achievement.

From September 1939 to May 1945, the SAAF coastal reconnaissance squadrons carried out more than 15 000 sorties. Extensive anti-submarine patrols off the South African coast made a major contribution to restricting enemy submarine activity in this area. Altogether, 26 submarines were attacked from the air. Coastal aircraft intercepted 17 blockade runners and rescued about 400 survivors from sunken ships.

The SAAF was the first Dominion air force to be formed and played a much greater role in the aerial war than other dominions such as Australia and Canada. In East Africa, the SAAF squadrons made a decisive contribution. Although the Italians' numbers compared to those of the South Africans were more than four to one in the air, the Italians surrendered to the Allies in 1941. The South Africans, on the other hand, continued fighting and contributed to a great extent to the victory achieved in the East African campaign. Although the SAAF did not participate in the actual occupation of the harbour at Diego Suarez at Madagascar, they played a valuable role in supporting the British. In the Middle East, SAAF squadrons successfully bombed enemy occupied airfields. They destroyed eight enemy aircraft during one single operation. In the Western Desert the SAAF suffered heavy casualties against a numerically

\textsuperscript{141} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Unit History, Container 4, file AA/5: Manuscript of Lt. A.C. Parker's History of SAAF, pp.2-3.
superior enemy. Nevertheless, SAAF squadrons undoubtedly played a vital role in reducing the enemy's air strength in the desert. In Egypt, the SAAF fighter squadrons also achieved many victories. During the first half of 1943, the SAAF flew nearly 9,000 sorties. A total of 33,971 sorties was flown by the SAAF in North Africa. SAAF squadrons were also actively involved in operations in Sicily and the Dodecanese islands. Another major contribution made by the SAAF was the training of RAF pilots and instructors in South Africa in the course of the war.

The SAAF represented only a small part of a sizeable Allied force but they were highly effective in various assignments in Europe. The experiences of the SAAF in these operations during the war surely had a significant influence on their conduct in operations, such as the flights from Italy to Warsaw, later in the war.

During the first years of the war, a basis was laid for cooperation between the SAAF and RAF. This cooperation laid the basis for joint operations. A close association with each other welded the two forces together and carried them as companions right to the end of the war. During the Warsaw Airlift, this cooperation manifested itself in formidable teamwork between the two Air forces.

Lieutenant General H.J. Martin, chief of the South African Air Force from 1965 to 1967, remarked in the last chapter in *Eagles Victorious* that supreme courage, fortitude and inspired endeavour contributed to the magnificent record of the SAAF. South Africa could be justly proud of its airmen, who had set standards during the war which remain an inspiration and a goal aimed at by future generations serving in the SAAF.142

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