CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

12.1 INTRODUCTION

The overall participation of the SAAF in the Second World War contributed to the Allied successes. Therefore, in this study, before evaluating and interpreting the contribution of the SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift, it was necessary to determine the role it played in the overall Allied effort. These aspects have been discussed in chapter 1. Nearly 50 000 members of the SAAF participated in the war. As indicated earlier in this study, South Africa was the first dominion air force to be formed and played a much greater role than those of other dominions such as Australia and Canada. South African airmen played a decisive and major role in many theatres of the war.

In East Africa, SAAF squadrons made a considerable contribution to ultimate victory. They also played a valuable role in operations in the Middle East. SAAF squadrons successfully bombed enemy occupied airfields, and undoubtedly played a vital role in reducing the enemy's air strength in the Western Desert, where they achieved numerous victories. The SAAF participated in nearly 34 000 operations in North Africa alone. 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 during the war.

The contribution of 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift is the major focus of this study. The conclusion reached is that their performance was one of outstanding accomplishment in South Africa's military history. The Warsaw Airlift represents an incident in the history of the Second World War that has many, often complex, facets. These SAAF squadrons participated in probably the most hazardous operation undertaken by the SAAF during the war when they undertook dropping supplies to partisans in Warsaw during August and September 1944.

Crews of 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF also participated in numerous other operations during the Second World War. Both squadrons were involved
in laying mines in the Danube River, bombing local enemy installations, as well as bombing targets in the north-west of Italy. The squadrons were also prominent in operations aimed at bombing marshalling yards. The aircrews were constantly subjected to danger. Later, operations became more risky because of improved enemy anti-aircraft defences.

12.2 A UNIQUE OPERATION.

In order to contextualise the contribution of the SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift, and to show how this operation represents one of the most outstanding achievements of the SAAF, one could compare it with supply-dropping operations in Yugoslavia, from October to November 1944. It could then be claimed that the experience these crews obtained during the Warsaw Airlift was to their advantage during dropping operations in Yugoslavia. But, because of the specific nature of the Warsaw Airlift it remains difficult to make such a comparison.

Both operations saw the SAAF providing valuable supplies to partisans during World War II. There were, however, many differences.

The flights to Warsaw from 13 August to 22 September represented a round trip of 2 815 kilometres over enemy controlled areas. Most of the distance had to be flown at night because the crew flew over enemy territory. Over Warsaw most of the aircraft encountered severe anti-aircraft fire and attacks from German fighter aircraft.

By contrast, the flights to Yugoslavia from 4 October until the end of November 1944 were relatively short flights across the Adriatic sea. Most of these operations, like the flights on the 4th of October 1944, when nine aircraft of 31 Squadron dropped supplies to partisans in Yugoslavia, and later in the month, when another seven aircraft successfully dropped supplies to partisans at Vociv and Sanski Most, were directed at three specific areas and could be executed in daylight. The containers were dropped from less than 280 metres above the targets because there was no anti-aircraft fire from enemy controlled installations. Favourable weather conditions prevailed in the case of

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1 The supply-dropping operation to Yugoslavia is discussed in chapter 2.
the flights to and from Yugoslavia. As soon as the aircraft were loaded, the crews again took off, to evade possible bad weather. Yugoslavia was relatively close to Italy. Consequently weather conditions could be predicted in advance. Aircrews could now drop supplies in daylight on zones which had clearly been marked beforehand. Naturally the supplies reached their destinations more accurately. During the Warsaw operations, the distances involved made it impossible to predict the weather and daylight drops were impracticable.

Another important point of difference was that much less resistance was encountered in Yugoslavia than in Warsaw. Since the beginning of October, the Germans were in the process of retreating from Yugoslavia. When aircraft took supplies to partisans in Yugoslavia in November, there was absolutely no opposition, and operations could be conducted under favourable conditions. Once the Liberators returned, they were refuelled and reloaded approximately 500 containers to be delivered to Yugoslavian partisans. In the case of the Warsaw flights, the SAAF aircraft encountered heavy anti-aircraft defences, and even, on occasion rifle fire from the roofs of buildings in the besieged city. It was seldom possible for any of the aircraft crews, after flying long distances, to summarily load provisions and once again take off for the dropping destination.

Even night operations were conducted with more success in the case of the Yugoslavian operations. On 4 November, 12 aircraft left at 22h10. They were to drop supplies on targets marked by fires. The operation was successful, primarily because no opposition was encountered. Of the 500 containers which were dropped, 489 were collected by the Yugoslavian partisans.

From the 4th to the 6th of November, highly successful supply-drops were carried out by the squadron to partisans in Yugoslavia. The partisans reportedly received 1 014 containers. No opposition was encountered. In November 31 Squadron alone carried out 194 day and night sorties, which totalled a record

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2 D.DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54608.

3 These numbers were sometimes very much exaggerated, a possible explanation being that these figures were reported to encourage the efforts of the squadron's supply-drops; D DDOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, pp.54614-54615.

4 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54616.
number of 772 operational hours.\(^5\) No losses were sustained during these sorties.

The accomplishments in Yugoslavia should, consequently, under no circumstances be considered as having been of a similar standing to the operations of flights to and from Warsaw. In the case of the latter, many losses were, by comparison, the order of the day. The successes achieved in Yugoslavia can at most suggest the complexity and problematic nature of the Warsaw flights.

For exactly the same reason the Warsaw Airlift could not and should not be compared with similar operations during or after World War II. The Berlin Airlift of 1948, for instance, involved a totally different situation. Because these flights took place under post-bellum circumstances, the aircraft did not encounter opposition from anti-aircraft artillery, enemy aircraft or demoralising searchlight batteries stationed across the city. No fires lit the sky above the city, making the aircraft easy targets for enemy guns positioned everywhere in the city. Aircraft were flying only short distances and they landed on airfields in Berlin. Supplies were not dropped on specific zones. Instead they were flown in and unloaded at the airport. There was no trace of any warm air and smoke inside the aircraft to make it almost impossible for aircrews to identify the dropping zones. The Berlin Airlift involved a modern air transport operation to supply a city of 2.5 million people, solely by means of aviation transport, with cargo.\(^6\) The success of the Berlin Airlift cannot be attributed to the skill, ability, or courage of a single man or group. Instead it represents a spectacular demonstration of many flights to and from Berlin to deliver thousands of tonnes of supplies to a politically beleaguered city.\(^7\)

The political circumstances surrounding the Warsaw Airlift and the military and strategic aspects that have been discussed make this a unique operation, peculiar unto itself.

The fact remains that every one of these flights represents an outstanding act of bravery. Although subsequent events showed that, in terms of the overall

\(^5\) D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54621.


strategy of the war, little was accomplished by the Warsaw operations, they nevertheless represent one of the most outstanding achievements of the SAAF.

As indicated in this study, 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF proved themselves as two of the finest squadrons within the Allied Air Forces. A number of decorations were awarded to individual members of these squadrons, but this does not necessarily testify to bravery and efficiency by all the crews. Undoubtedly, many of the crew members could not handle the anxiety and stress laid on them during these flights. One very good example is that of Lieutenant W. Norval who bailed out of his aircraft, near Warsaw. The circumstances of an air crew were also quite different to those of other military groups like the infantry. Once they found themselves in the sky, the men were bound together. There was really no way out. Up to a point, Soldiers fighting on the ground could decide to turn around and run away. But the aircrews, hundreds of metres up in the sky, did not have much of a choice. Therefore they were forced to act as a team and everyone knew that his actions could influence the lives of others, even making the difference between life and death. But, 31 Squadron especially, which played the major role of the two SAAF squadrons, were admired for their actions and won praise for their achievements. In chapter 10 it is indicated that their performance was outstanding. No other squadron surpassed their efforts.

12.3 POLITICAL AND MILITARY CONSIDERATIONS

Some questions remain to be answered in order to come to a conclusion regarding the participation and contribution of the SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift.

The Allies were, from the beginning, reluctant to participate in the flights to Warsaw. One of the first questions that arose among the Allied aircrews, upon hearing about their task, was whether this operation was militarily feasible and why the supplies could not have been provided by the Soviet Union. The Russians most probably did not have any supplies available since their own were already exhausted by that time. The fact remains, however, that Britain would have been more than willing to provide the necessary supplies, if the

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8 The events that took place during the flight with Norval as captain of Liberator KG836 C, are discussed in chapter 5.
Soviets had been prepared to distribute them. Yet, despite the fact that the Russians did have the military capacity to assist the Poles, they would not even consider allowing Allied aircraft to use their airfields. But the Soviets, who maintained that part of Eastern Poland was still rightfully theirs, shared a central principle with the Germans. They also became a conqueror of Poland when they signed the non-aggression pact in Moscow on 23 August 1939. Closer investigation also indicated they had revisionist claims concerning Polish territory. Various interpretations of the Soviet actions are possible, but it must be assumed that the Soviet Union had other plans for Poland and they certainly had a number of hidden agendas. The assessment that the Soviets had no sympathy with the Poles later proved to be completely accurate. This was also the reason why the Soviets denied any assistance to the Polish partisans in 1944.

It is clear that, because of political pressure, Churchill was persuaded to give the order for these vital supply flights to be conducted. He was very much aware of the fact that the Polish partisans had acted irresponsibly and that their actions represented a reckless adventure. He was aware of the fact that the partisans were partly responsible for the helpless circumstances in Warsaw. Had they communicated with the Soviets before they launched the uprising, their situation could have been much different. But the success achieved on 8 and 9 August 1944 by seven aircraft of Polish Special Duties Flight 1586, in successfully dropping supplies to the partisans, left Churchill with no option but to agree to further Allied support.

Definite deductions can be made from the conversation between Durrant and Churchill on the necessity and practicability of the long distance flights to Warsaw. The British press was correct when it reported that the Warsaw operations were politically inspired. Strategical considerations, which usually determine the outcome of war, did not apply in this instance and did not play any role whatsoever. The SAAF squadrons achieved much more success with operations at the Danube. They were now involved in an operation where they only had a 30% success rate. The operation turn out to be a military disaster and should have been reconsidered or cancelled. Durrant evaluated the operation from a military point of view, but Churchill looked at it from a

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9 This scenario is discussed in chapter 3.

10 The conversation between Durrant and Churchill is discussed in chapter 5.
political angle. He believed it was imperative for the Allies to render assistance to the Polish people, but by doing so, he placed the lives of many aircrews in jeopardy. The aircrews were literally thrown into a stream of dangerous and futile operations in which many were killed. Later, military strategists agreed that political considerations overruled conventional principles of military operations.

When Churchill's role is evaluated in respect of the airlift, it seems at first that he was very concerned with the position of the Polish people, but it remains difficult to determine whether he was one of the heroes of the airlift, or whether he merely gambled with human lives in order to score political mileage. Yet, when one considers the implications for the Polish people, there must be consensus that he had no alternative but to approve the operations.

As has been indicated in earlier chapters, many political considerations were involved and these initially played an important role in decision making during the war. This was the case in the Warsaw Airlift. The consequences of Stalin's callous conduct towards the Polish people were grave. Ultimately the Polish question became one of the most controversial problems the West had to contend with after the war. Relations between Britain and the Soviet Union became strained. Stalin's conduct was seen as blatant and treacherous. He had the power and authority to help the Poles, but it was for the sake of promoting future USSR hegemony that he ordered his troops to halt the liberation of Warsaw, pausing literally on the burning city's doorstep. He used every possible ploy in the book to avoid action which would have enabled the embattled Polish Armia Krajowa succeed in their revolt. He claimed the revolt was premature and had been carried out recklessly, and argued that the Soviets could not support such an adventure. Stalin's treachery was also confirmed by Air Marshal Sir John Slessor when he later disclosed Stalin's refusal to allow even a single aircraft of the Allies to land on Russian airfields. Stalin constantly used threats and bullying tactics in negotiations with British and American diplomats. He repeatedly reiterated his view that the situation would never have arisen had the partisans first taken counsel with the supreme command of the Soviet Union. Stalin's eventual aim was the total control of Poland and he made his intentions clear by the refusal to acknowledge the Polish government-in-exile. His intentions had become

11 The Stalin factor in the Warsaw Revolt is described in chapter 3.
obvious to the partisans. They realised that Stalin was playing for time and therefore knew why his answers to their direct questions were intentionally vague. His whole attitude created deep suspicions. It even seemed that he considered the Poles in Warsaw were not worthy of assistance. In short, the liberation of Poland was contrary to Stalin’s ultimate political objectives.

12.4 THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE AMERICANS

Crafty manipulation by the Russian diplomats kept the Americans on their toes, although they were careful not to offend their American Allies too much.\(^\text{12}\)

The United States government did not want to jeopardise relations with the Soviets either and therefore political considerations played an important role in the initial decision of the Americans not to participate in the Warsaw flights. The American government wished to avoid entanglement in the quarrel between Moscow and the Polish government-in-exile in London. It seemed absolutely nonsensical to them to jeopardise victory over Germany, the chance of Russian entry into the war against Japan, and the dream of post-war unity by getting involved in the difficult issue between the Soviets and the Poles. The Americans therefore played a curious game. Their actions were influenced by a fear of offending the Russians whilst at the same time appeasing their Allied friends. But the Americans also knew that if they did not assist the Polish people it would lead to a public outcry and give credence to the rumours that their actions were influenced by their fear of offending the Soviet Union. They also wanted to avoid criticism implying that they were playing political games to avoid responsibilities. Meanwhile, politicians and militarists could not agree. Consequently they voiced many different opinions regarding the Warsaw affair. The Americans also knew that if the Soviet Government’s refusal to allow them to use Russian airfields became public knowledge, it would embarrass the Russians publicly. They were calculating to the extreme in making sure they pleased both sides. Furthermore, as was explained in the introduction of this thesis, the underlying antagonism in the relationship between the Soviets and Poland created a difficult situation for the Allies and made it extremely difficult for the Americans to decide whether their sympathy should be with the Soviets or the Poles. Another important issue they had to consider at the

\(^\text{12}\) This information is discussed in chapter 3, chapter 9 and chapter 11.
time was whether the United States should get involved in European politics at all, since their tradition was that of no involvement in European affairs. Eventually they managed exceptionally well in appeasing both sides.

In September, the Soviet government surprised the Allies by informing the British and American governments that the Soviets were prepared to allow Allied aircraft to use Russian airfields for a mission to Warsaw. This was certainly a surprising move by the Soviet government. The reason could be that the Russians were shifting their responsibility to the Americans to hide the fact that they themselves had not provided adequate aid to the Poles. Another reason could be that the Soviets cynically thought that such an operation could in any case make no difference to the fate of the Polish people at that stage. Perhaps they thought that by co-operating they could regain the respect of the Allies and that they needed to improve their image.

It is of the utmost importance that the participation of the 8th USAF must be seen within the context of the combined Allied effort. Statistical calculations show that, in the single operation of the Americans, 640 containers were dropped, which represents 54% of the total effort of the Warsaw Airlift. The other Allied squadrons flew on seven alternate nights and dropped 457 containers, which represents the outstanding 46%.

It would, however, certainly be unfair to judge the efforts of the Allies who flew from Italy to Warsaw on the same grounds as the single effort of the Americans. No real comparison can be drawn. The effort of the Allied squadrons, operating from Italy, was a massive undertaking. It exceeded, in effort and duration, all other initiatives undertaken by any other Allied power, at any other time, in an effort to help the Polish partisans. The fact remains that the supplies dropped by these Allied squadrons meant the difference between survival and defeat in Warsaw. In the later stages of the Polish uprising, the help became even more crucial. It meant the difference between life and death for the Polish people in Warsaw. Moreover, the continuous arrival of Allied planes to drop supplies must have had a salutary effect on morale and revived partisan hopes for ultimate victory.

The effort of the Americans was commendable. It represented a much better planned operation than those of the Allies and, seen from a military

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13 The flight of the 8th United States Air Force is discussed in chapter 9.
perspective, the mission complied with all the strategic requirements for an operation of this nature. The 110 bombers which carried the containers were accompanied by 64 fighter aeroplanes to protect them from possible attacks by enemy fighters. The slow moving aircraft of the Allied squadrons which flew from Italy, on the other hand, were on their own and had to defend themselves against enemy fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft fire. In fact, they were, most of the time, sitting ducks.

The Americans flew from Britain on a daylight mission and landed on Russian airfields. The other Allied crews flew from Italy and had to fly back from Poland before landing. Furthermore these flights were conducted at night when weather conditions were, as a rule, worse than by day.

The Americans dropped the containers from a height of more than 4,000 metres. This was one of the reasons why less than 50% could be retrieved by the partisans. Accuracy could have been increased by reducing the dropping altitude, but this was, according to military experts, not recommended under the prevailing circumstances. On the other hand, most of the Allied aircraft dropped their containers from an altitude of about 200 to 300 metres.

The supplies received by the Polish population after the American sortie were said to be crucial but the most important contribution the Americans made was that their effort raised a terrific enthusiasm among the populace in Warsaw. The morale and the feelings of the people in Warsaw improved immensely and it was seen as the first effort of many to come. The containers fell far and wide, and many into German controlled zones, but the mere fact that the American had rendered help was perhaps even more precious to the exhausted defenders than the supplies.

The few survivors of the city were desperately clinging to the hope of some impossible change of fate, or a miracle. They still believed that any day parachutists would descend from the skies. If parachutists had been used, however, the partisans and other onlookers would have witnessed a fearful massacre because machine-gun fire, directed at the swaying parachutes as they came closer to the ground, would have wiped these forces out. As it was, many of the coloured canopies supporting the containers caught fire or were struck by heavy flak.

Unfortunately for the Poles, the cost of the operation, as well as possible losses, compelled the American War Department to advise against continuing
with the further dropping of supplies. General Anderson also suggested that these operations be discouraged in the highest government circles. The Soviets were not in favour of a repetition of such a mission either.

If military considerations alone had governed the decision to fly sorties to Warsaw, three or four daylight missions would have been sufficient to relieve the Polish partisans. Yet, the flights from Southern Italy were too dangerous to undertake and the distance was too great for a combined effort such as that of the Americans to be undertaken. Only a few types of aircraft could fly such a distance. Allied squadrons were, at the time, also involved in many other important operations, like the mining of the Danube. It must furthermore be kept in mind that Churchill ordered the flights because of political considerations. There is no doubt that he must have been concerned about the probable military consequences. It must also be remembered that he also had certain reservations about the way in which the revolt in Warsaw had been conducted. On 18 August he wrote to Roosevelt that he was convinced that the Warsaw revolt represented a reckless adventure.

As far as the Warsaw Airlift is concerned a military lesson is to be learned from this episode: Adventurous initiatives which are unlikely to work should not be undertaken for purely political motives. The flights undertaken from Italy were conducted under the most hazardous circumstances and, as indicated very clearly in the individual flight reports, the crews were battling against overwhelming odds. Their objectives were unrealistic and militarily catastrophic. Seen from a military perspective, this operation was reckless and should never have taken place.

12.5 ULTIMATELY IN VAIN, BUT A CONTRIBUTION OF GREAT SIGNIFICANCE

The Smuts papers at the Central Archives Depot in Pretoria\textsuperscript{14} as well as Hansard\textsuperscript{15} were consulted to find evidence regarding parliamentary reaction, here in South Africa, on the participation of the SAAF squadrons in the Warsaw


Airlift. No such information could be found. The reason why information was not available must be attributed to the fact that military operations like these, especially when applied in conjunction with other Allied airforces, were regarded as secret. The SAAF was part of the giant Imperial War Machine.\textsuperscript{16} Although General Smuts was very much involved in the war, he could surely not have been aware of all the operations the SAAF were involved in. Most military information was considered secret and, at the time, information about an operation like the Warsaw Airlift would not have been available to parliament.\textsuperscript{17} It must also be borne in mind that usually parliament would only make the decision whether to become involved in a war. Afterwards the conduct of the war became the responsibility of the Minister of Defence and the war ministry. Furthermore, in the Second World War forces were incorporated into different groups. 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron of 2 Wing SAAF were incorporated into 205 Group, Balkan Air Force. They were operating from Foggia in Southern Europe and were part of the Mediterranean Allied Strategical Air Force which included the Desert Air Force, the Balkan Air Force and the Tactical Air Force. The SAAF squadrons were as such earmarked for diverse operations, such as, for example, the invasion of Southern France. 205 Group consisted of five wings and they were responsible for all strategical operations at night.\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, it must be assumed that very little information could be made available to the South African Parliament at the time.

Newspaper reports in South Africa on the Warsaw operations were also very scarce. The same reason applied. They could not always distinguish between operations the RAF were involved in and those in which the SAAF participated. Another reason could have been that the pro-government press did not want to publish information on such a sensitive operation where many South Africans died. Opposition to the government could easily have used such information for political expediency. One of the South African newspapers that reported briefly on the Warsaw flights, referred to it as, "RAF drops over

\textsuperscript{17} A.E. Van Jaarsveldt, Telephonic conversation, 10 October 1997. Me. Van Jaarsveldt, a researcher at D Docs, Pretoria, also did research on the Warsaw Airlift. She confirmed that no information would have been made available to parliament since these operations were kept secret, until the end of the war. \\
\textsuperscript{18} L. lsemonger, \textit{Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron}, p.52.
Warsaw". This shows clearly that the South African press did not at first realise what the involvement of the SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift was and therefore did not regard it as very important. Later, after the September flights, a little more information became available and reports then suggested that the South Africans had been involved in a series of flights to assist the Polish partisans in Warsaw. In later years, when the importance of the South African contribution became known, a number of newspapers reported on anniversary ceremonies of the Warsaw Airlift. These reports mostly referred to the operation as epic flights.

Today the aircrews are honoured for their brave actions when the gallantry of South Africans in the war is commemorated. The Polish community gathers in Johannesburg in September every year to commemorate these events. During this annual memorial service, pilots, aircrews and ground personnel of 31 and 34 Squadrons SAAF are entertained as guests of the Polish community in South Africa. The Poles arrive in great numbers to pay homage to the small number of remaining survivors and also to the memory of those who died during the Warsaw Airlift. Altogether 44 crew members of the SAAF died during the flights to Warsaw. The climax of the commemoration is reached when the courageous contribution of the airmen who participated is honoured during a wreath-laying ceremony at the Cenotaph Graveyard in Johannesburg.

The Warsaw operation resulted in a firm bond of friendship between the crew members who took part in the task flights to Warsaw and the free Polish community in South Africa. The Warsaw Airlift is, therefore, important from a cultural-historical perspective.

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19 Rand Daily Mail, 23 September 1944, p.4
Similar commemorating services are held in Poland. Every year on the evening of "All Saints Day" fresh flowers and candles are put on the airmen's graves in the graveyards of Warsaw and Cracow.24

Although the episode of the airlift was in many instances futile and utterly senseless,25 it invokes feelings of deep respect for the aircrews who participated in the flights to Warsaw and risked their own lives.

Allied squadrons have been widely praised for their courageous conduct, perseverance and sense of duty whilst participating in the Warsaw Airlift. Several individuals received awards for gallantry, including the Distinguished Flying Cross. Both strategists and statesmen have commented on these operations. In his book, *The Central Blue*, Air Marshal Sir John Slessor referred to these flights as "a story of the utmost gallantry and self-sacrifice on the part of the air-crews who participated".26 Josef Garlinski says that "the great sacrifice of the young men who died with the full knowledge that their death could not alter the course of the events, is an example of the utmost heroism"27 and Winston Churchill describes the courageous conduct of these air crews as "an epic of human courage".28

It is one of the tragedies of war that sacrifices like those of the Allied airmen, who gave their lives to assist their Polish Allies, were ultimately in vain.

25 When Bor-Komorowski surrendered to the Germans, the partisans had vainly tried for 63 days to liberate their capital. Of the approximately 40 000 men and women who were members of the underground army, roughly 18 000 died. About 25 000 were wounded, 6 500 seriously, and the total number of civilian casualties was estimated at 180 000 people.
26 J. Slessor, *The Central Blue*, p.621