CHAPTER 2

31 SQUADRON AND 34 SQUADRON SAAF AND THEIR ROLE IN WORLD WAR II

2.1 INTRODUCTION

31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF participated in probably the most hazardous operations undertaken by the SAAF during the war when they took part in supply dropping operations to Warsaw in August and September 1944. Their efforts proved that they were as good as any other squadrons within the Allied Air Forces. Although subsequent events showed that little was accomplished by these operations, they nevertheless represent one of the most outstanding achievements of the SAAF.¹

Although this thesis is especially concerned with the participation of these two SAAF squadrons in the Warsaw Airlift, it will be indicated that they were not only involved in the Warsaw Airlift, but also took part in many other operations during the war. The main concern in this chapter will be to investigate the contribution of these squadrons in the other theatres of the war, excluding Warsaw, which will be analysed in later chapters. Their participation in other operations earlier had an effect on their preparedness when they participated in the Warsaw Airlift and contributed to the success they achieved. The experience they obtained during the Warsaw Airlift was again to their advantage when they were later involved in supply-dropping operations in Yugoslavia. Therefore, it will only be possible to evaluate the contribution of these two squadrons in the Warsaw Airlift when their involvement in all other theatres of the war is also taken into consideration.

To present a better understanding of the daily activities and personal circumstances of the aircrews who were involved in the flights to Warsaw, their daily activities at Foggia are also briefly described. Available

documentation, and personal interviews provided vital information on the daily camp activities.

2.2 31 SQUADRON SAAF

On 1 December 1939, 31 Squadron (Coastal Patrol) was established from both 13 Squadron, which was based in Durban, and 14 Squadron, which was based in Port Elizabeth. 13 Squadron became 31 Squadron "A" Flight and 14 Squadron became "B" Flight and operated Junkers JU 86's in a coastal reconnaissance role. They were later re-equipped with Avro Ansons, but after less than a year the flights were redesigned to No 31 and No 33 Coastal Reconnaissance Flights.

In January 1944, the squadron became operationally active. The aircrews were posted to Palestine, where they used converted B24 Liberators and were also involved in bombing strategic targets in Eastern Europe. Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Williams became the Officer Commanding with the task of building the squadron entrusted to him.

After having arrived in the Middle East on 19 February 1944, the crew trained and equipped themselves for the tasks lying ahead. The first eight big four-engined monoplanes, the Liberator MKVI’s, arrived on 27 April 1944. Each

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2. Lawrence Isemonger who served as a corporal in the Technical Stores of 31 Squadron SAAF wrote of his personal experiences during the Second World War. He also gathered recollections of former members of 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF who participated in the Warsaw Airlift.


5. L. isemonger, Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa’s First Heavy Bomber Squadron, p.2.

6. Jim Williams was a 35 year-old Johannesburg businessman whose family firm of construction engineers was well known throughout the country. He had joined the SAAF at the outbreak of the war and served 24 Squadron with great distinction, first as an ordinary lieutenant and eventually as officer commanding. He was one of the first civilians in the active citizen force to obtain command of a squadron; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, Eagles Victorious, p.191.


8. For more information on the Liberator refer to chapter 4.
Liberator MKVI usually required eight crew members. It cruised at 313 kilometres per hour at 6 100 metres, with a still air range of 1 600 kilometres when carrying a bombload of 5 800 kilogram. The planes were American-built and armed with four 0,303 and eight 0,20 mm machine guns.\textsuperscript{9} These planes had an additional navigation aid, known as ‘Gee’, with which the aircraft’s position could be fixed precisely even hundreds of kilometres from a fixed master station. The Liberator MKVI’s also had three types of radar counter-measure equipment: Mandrel,\textsuperscript{10} Boozer,\textsuperscript{11} and Window.\textsuperscript{12}

J.A. Williams became Wing-Commander of 2 Wing in April 1944 and was promoted to Colonel.\textsuperscript{13} Lieutenant-Colonel D.U. Nel succeeded him in command of 31 Squadron.\textsuperscript{14}

More Liberator MKVI’s arrived and Williams left for Foggia in Italy to study heavy bomber operations. By the 3rd of May, 31 Squadron was allotted another 16 Liberators. The first operation was scheduled for 21 May, then postponed to 25 May, but had to be cancelled again because of foul weather conditions. On 23 May, aircrews of 31 Squadron collected another six Liberators at Heliopolis in Egypt.\textsuperscript{15}

On 27 May, 31 Squadron launched its first raid on the runway at Kastelli Pediada in Eastern Crete, defying the weather which had kept them at bay for so long. This attack proved to be a failure. One aircraft had to land at Genaclis in Eastern Crete with engine trouble. The others all returned safely, but had no success because of dense cloud cover over the target area. On 31 May 1944, after more favourable weather had set in, ten of 31 Squadron’s high-winged Liberators left

\textsuperscript{10} Mandrell - a jamming transmitter.
\textsuperscript{11} Boozer - an enemy radar detector.
\textsuperscript{12} Window - a code-name for foil which was dropped to create a misleading cloud of ‘blips’ on enemy radar screens.
\textsuperscript{13} H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, Eagles Victorious, p.191.
\textsuperscript{14} Dirkie Nel first served with 12 Squadron SAAF in East Africa. He was then posted to 24 Squadron where he was appointed Flight Commander. On 2 May 1944 he was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and became Officer Commanding 31 Squadron; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, Eagles Victorious, p.191.
\textsuperscript{15} H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, Eagles Victorious, p.192.
again for the same target. Nine Liberators satisfactorily bombed the target and returned safely. Only one had to return early because the top of its revolving cupola had been blown off. From June onward 31 Squadron also carried out operations from Gebel Hamzi in Egypt.

From early June 1944, 31 Squadron mounted raids against Heraklion in Crete, after which the squadron moved across to the Celone landing ground in Southern Italy. From here they carried out their first attack on 25 June 1944, when they bombed the Shell Koolaz oil refineries at Bucharest. On 26 June, their target was the Aquila oil refinery in Trieste in Italy and, on 28 June, ten Liberators were detailed to bomb the oil refineries at Giurgiu, Romania, on the Danube. Three aircraft were lost during these operations. Another aircraft was lost on 2 July, when the squadron attacked the Prahova oil refinery at Bucharest. The main object of this operation was to destroy the oil storage tanks of the refinery.

In July, crews of 31 Squadron participated in several operations. On 19 July, they attacked and bombed the Romsa oil refinery at Turin, on the 19th the refinery at Rijeka in Yugoslavia, on the 21st the Pardubice refinery in Czechoslovakia, on the 23rd the refinery at Prahova, and on the 26th the

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19 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53962.

20 Three Liberators were shot down. One of these was piloted by Major J.A. Mouton, second in command of 31 Squadron. The other men who died were the crews of Captain L. van der Spuy and Lieutenant J.S. Haggie. This represented a great loss to the Squadron; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.240.


22 34 Squadron operated with 31 Squadron for the first time during this operation to Fanto. It turned out not to be a very successful beginning for them. Two of the aircraft returned early with engine and electrical defects, one accidently jettisoned its bombs fifteen minutes before reaching the target and the fourth failed to return. It was obvious that the aircrews of 34 Squadron were comparatively untrained at this stage and it was decided that they should stand down for intensive training; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.241; L. Isemonger, *Target Warsaw: The Story of South Africa’s First Heavy Bomber Squadron*, p.48.
RomanaAmericano refinery at Ploesti in Romania. On 27 July, the Prahova oil refinery at Bucharest was again attacked. This attack was not completely successful, because of problems with smoke screens and decoys. On 30 July, mines were laid in the Danube in Romania.

2.2.1 Foggia

31 Squadron was moved to Foggia, in Italy, during August 1944 and all the men were accommodated in tents. The squadron was, by now, 700 men strong. The Foggia camp was situated in the district of Celone in Southern Italy. The camp was roughly divided into four sections. The tents of the air mechanics and corporals were placed along the edge of the camp. The sergeants' lines were adjacent to these and the officers' tents were located a little further away. Since April 1944, members of an American expeditionary force had been operating a radio station at the Foggia camp. Every morning at approximately 06h00 the men were woken up by the sound of music. The first item of the day was a 30 minute recorded program of light and jazz music entitled “Music while you wake”. One of the important contributions the station made was providing the exact time. At 07h00 and again at 08h00, news from the BBC in London was broadcast. At 08h00 the radio station echoed the chimes of Big Ben in London. The chimes indicated the end of the early morning session.

The administrative nerve centre of the Foggia camp was located near the middle of the camp. It consisted of the adjutant's trailer, the orderly room, post office and pay office. Close by was the hospital and medical inspection room, where the daily aches and pains were attended to. The motor transport

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23 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53963.
25 L. Isemonger, Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron, p.41.
section, with a fleet of more than fifty three-ton trucks, formed the northern camp boundary.

A short distance further was an old farmhouse which occupied the "Q stores" where the supplies were kept. Military operations were also directed from the dilapidated out-buildings of the old farmhouse. Aircraft were directed from a barn which was converted into an operations room and quarters for the intelligence officer and his staff.

Not far from there, neat little farmhouses with red-tiled roofs and whitewashed walls, could be seen in the distance. It was here that Mussolini founded a collective land settlement plan for Italian farmers. During the war there were no signs of cattle or any of the usual farm animals anymore because all the livestock had been swept away by the Nazis.

A few weeks after the crews had set up camp, it could no longer be recognised as a military establishment. It rather resembled a squatter camp. Scrap timber, galvanised iron sheeting and stone were scrounged to enlarge the tents, which now had box sides and stoops. Almost every tent had its own water supply, which was supplied by an old drum or discarded fuel cell, fitted with a tap. Some tents had crude showers or private wash places.27

The airfield of Celone, with a runway of 1.6 kilometers, was located almost two kilometres from the domestic camp at Foggia. Here the aircraft were parked on the far side of the runway. The Balkan air force controlled many of the operations. Consequently supplies could not always be stored in the Foggia area. The aircraft participating in the airlift were thus forced by circumstances also to use the airfield at Brindisi to load supplies. They also used the facilities at this airfield for briefing purposes.

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Available documentation provides information on the daily camp activities of the air force personnel who participated in the campaign to fly supplies to Warsaw.

After waking up in the mornings, they would wash and shave. There would be a breakfast consisting of porridge, fried bacon, and scrambled eggs made from egg powder. They shared the mess with the other inhabitants of the camp. According to a description by Isemonger, the first topic of the morning was invariably the previous night’s operation. Everybody wanted to know whether all the “kites” which flew on a mission the previous night had returned. Usually a groan followed the news that a Liberator had failed to reach its target. If one of the aircraft had been lost the previous night, a sobering quietness would descend over the mess. The conversation would then shift to a discussion on the possible whereabouts of the crew and its individual members. Many questions were on their minds. Had the crew members survived? Were they captured? Had they succeeded in counteracting the Germans?

After breakfast the crews were transported by truck to the airfields or to the Operations Room to determine which operations were scheduled for the day. Usually operations where scheduled for the evenings. When news of an important mission or operation was received, a red flag was hoisted on a pole protruding above the roof of the Operations Room. This meant that the crews were to assemble there as soon as possible. The crews would then be briefed on the night’s operation by an Intelligence officer. At the far end of the Operations Room was a large map of Europe. The location of the target of a specific mission was of great importance. Therefore it was indicated as clearly as possible on this map. Then a detailed description of the operation was given. The reason for the operation was explained and the necessary background information was clearly indicated. Photographs, which provided perspective views of the target from various angles of approach, were handed round so that everybody would have an accurate mental picture of the target.

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Information on the flight route, the bomb loads or supplies the aircraft were to carry, as well as the number of aircraft taking part, was also provided.\textsuperscript{29}

Although acute gastric enteritis and malaria were common diseases in the Foggia area, the living conditions and spacing of individuals were a lot better than earlier in the war, with better feeding arrangements and increased water supplies. From the start, however, many difficulties were experienced, with a shortage of many crucial items. Since their arrival at Foggia the squadrons had experienced a lack of technical equipment and aircraft stores. Simple items like nails, nuts, bolts, spanners and distilled water were in short supply and they had to improvise, beg or borrow parts and other equipment from allies, or just had to do without many of these at times. In spite of all these problems, the squadron's morale and enthusiasm never seemed to fail.\textsuperscript{30}

On 3 August, Liberators of 31 Squadron were switched to South-eastern France to blast the railway marshalling yards at Portes Les Valence south of Lyons.\textsuperscript{31} On 7 August, the Steina Mager aerodrome near the Szombathely marshalling yards in Hungary was successfully attacked and many JU 88 night fighters were destroyed. One aircraft and crew of 31 Squadron was lost. The Romana Americano oil refinery at Ploesti was once again attacked and bombed on 9 August by a force of 82 planes. Eleven of these aircraft were part of 31 Squadron.\textsuperscript{32}

During August, 31 Squadron was also detailed to mine the Danube beds downstream from Belgrade.\textsuperscript{33} All the beds were successfully mined.\textsuperscript{34} 31

\textsuperscript{29} J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, Johannesburg, 15 August 1983; R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984; R.R. Klette, Telephone Interview, Somerset West, 13 December 1984; J.R. Coleman, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984; A. Blake, Die Vlug na Warschau (unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.).

\textsuperscript{30} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53969.

\textsuperscript{31} L. Isemonger, Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron, p.53; J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, Johannesburg, 15 August 1983.


\textsuperscript{33} The Germans began to rely more on the use of the Danube to convey oil and other materials to feed their hungry war machine. Allied aircrews were involved in laying mines in the Danube in a bid to disrupt this line of communication. These mines, cylindrical-shaped metal containers filled with high explosives, had small parachutes fitted to their top. This parachute unfolded automatically as it left the bomb bay and ensured a steady descent before the mine hit the water and sank to the bottom of the river; L. Isemonger, Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron, p.41.
Squadron carried out a number of these mining operations, which were known to the Operation Room as "planting vegetables in the Danube bed." Great skill in navigation and courage in flying through flak and mountainous terrain were required of the airmen. The aircrews were subjected to many dangers. Usually the mines were dropped from a very low altitude of approximately 80 metres. The enemy was fully aware of this threat to their river lifeline and anti-aircraft defences were placed on the river banks. The aircraft were also subject to dangers from natural features, such as high banks and hills. In addition, there were other military hazards such as small arms fire from the river banks and night fighters that regularly patrolled the river.35

From 13 August onwards 31 Squadron was involved in the Warsaw Airlift to Poland. This operation will be dealt with in chapter four.36

After the Warsaw run 31 Squadron returned to attacking oil targets from 20 August onwards. They once again attacked and bombed enemy installations like the Herman Göring Nibelungen Werke near St Valentine.37 The next day, the 21st, five Liberators carried out a very successful attack on the Szony refinery in Hungary. This success considerably boosted the morale of the aircrews. On 22 August, the marshalling yards in Miskole, Hungary, were attacked. This was a significant attack, because this target played a vital part in the supply route to the Russian Front. On 23 August, Captain R.B. Bird, who had been reported missing on the 2nd of July,38 was reported to be interned in Romania.39 On this day Major C.A.P. Greindl and seven crews took off for Algiers in North Africa to collect Halifaxes and Liberators from 144 Military Unit.40 The other crew members were informed that until replacement aircrews and

34 D.DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53973.
35 L. Isemonger, Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa’s First Heavy Bomber Squadron, p.41.
36 These flights to Warsaw will be described in detail in chapter 4 of this thesis.
37 D.DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53976.
39 L. Isemonger, Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa’s First Heavy Bomber Squadron, p.42.
40 D.DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53977.
aircraft arrived, the squadron would be called upon to supply only two aircraft whenever in operation.\textsuperscript{41}

The marshalling yard at Bologna in Italy was bombed on the 24th of August. It seemed that 31 Squadron was now assigned to Tactical Targets viz the disruption of the enemy’s supply lines in Northern Italy. This resulted in frequent nightly bombing operations on tactical communication targets.\textsuperscript{42}

On 25 August 1944, two Liberators of 31 Squadron, with 70 Allied bombers, successfully attacked targets at the Ravenna marshalling yards and the Canal terminus in Italy.\textsuperscript{43} Replacement aircraft were tested and inspected on 26 August. Because 31 Squadron now had only six aircraft available, 34 Squadron also became involved in these bombing raids, and made eight aircraft available. Night bombing continued on enemy ground forces and installations in the Pesaro area of Italy.\textsuperscript{44}

On 28 August, the aircrews were once again detailed to mine the Danube beds in the vicinity of Belgrade and north of Belgrade towards Budapest. Operations against targets in the west of Italy had to be cancelled because of a deterioration in weather conditions. During the month of August, 31 Squadron flew a total of 628 effective operational hours.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{2.2.2 SEPTEMBER 1944}

The weather conditions at Foggia started deteriorating drastically from September 1944. Rain pelted down and generally bad weather conditions prevailed. The squadron nevertheless continued with bombing operations and

\textsuperscript{41} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53978.
\textsuperscript{42} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53978.
\textsuperscript{43} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53979.
\textsuperscript{44} Pesaro area: The east hinge of the Gothic line.
\textsuperscript{45} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53981.
repeatedly attacked and bombed marshalling yards at Bologna, Ferrara and Ravenna in Italy.\textsuperscript{46}

On 10 September, after a great deal of indecision and vacillation, the squadron again took part in the dropping of supplies to Polish forces in Warsaw. These flights had to be cancelled on 11 September, due to bad weather conditions.\textsuperscript{47}

At the same time, some of the aircraft of 31 Squadron continued mining the Danube, west of Györ towards Vienna. This operation became more and more delicate because of the many enemy anti-aircraft installations protecting the Danube. This also became very dangerous because of the presence of night fighters in the area.\textsuperscript{48} After the Warsaw operations were cancelled on 11 September, the other aircraft of 31 Squadron were also detailed for mining the Danube. The crews of these aircraft received orders on 13 and 14 September to continue with operations in Northern Italy and in the Athens area in Greece.

The main objective of the squadrons was to render the landing grounds at Eleusis, Kalamaki and Tatoi unserviceable. These aerodromes, which were situated in the Athens area, were used by the Germans to withdraw supplies and troops from Athens by air transport.\textsuperscript{49}

On the 16th, four aircraft were detailed to drop supplies over Warsaw, while another four formed part of a bombing force against the Milan Lambrate marshalling yards in Northern Italy. Both these operations had to be cancelled later, because of unfavourable weather conditions. The Brescia marshalling yards on the Verona-Milan railway line in Northern Italy were successfully bombed on the next day by seven aircraft. On the 18th, nine squadron aircraft supported an attack against enemy ground forces north west of Rimini in the Adriatic sector.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{46} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53995.
\textsuperscript{47} These flights will be discussed in chapter 8 of this thesis.
\textsuperscript{48} L. Isemonger, \textit{Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron}, p.146.
\textsuperscript{49} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.53996.
\textsuperscript{50} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, pp.53996-53997.
On 19 September, eight Liberators bombed the railhead at Szekesfehervar in Hungary. The squadron's operations were now transposed from night bombing on Italian targets to daylight attacks on communications in Hungary. The following day, seven aircraft bombed the railway marshalling yards at Hegyeshalom in Italy. Three other aircraft, with 68 Allied bombers, attacked the port of Salonica in Greece and caused extensive damage. The next day the squadrons were called upon to despatch two supply aircraft to drop supplies on the woods 16 kilometres from Warsaw.

On 24 September, a new policy was adopted concerning the squadrons of 205 group. The new policy stated that one wing in the group would be stood down each night. This was done in order to give a very deserved break to both ground and air crews. The squadron continued with operations in Hungary, Northern Italy and Yugoslavia, when the weather permitted such operations.

During September, 31 Squadron carried out 133 sorties, totalling 673 operational hours. This was done in spite of shortages in both crews and equipment. The attacks were generally against targets such as rail communication links and ranged from Greece, through Yugoslavia and Northern Italy into Hungary. Most of the attacks in September, however, were carried out against rail communications in Northern Italy. The squadron's operations also included attacks on small installations such as pontoon bridges and viaducts. The most successful raids carried out were the attacking of Brescia Rimini and Hegyeshalom in Italy, and also the destruction of 77 aircraft in the Athens area.

During October, 31 Squadron dropped supplies to partisans in Yugoslavia and, apart from these supply-dropping operations, the main squadron activity was

51 L. Isemonger, Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron, p.152.
52 These flights will be discussed in chapter 9 of this thesis.
54 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54001.
55 A viaduct is a single bridgelike structure, especially a large one of arched masonry, over a valley or ravine; D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54001.
56 D.doc S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54001.
directed against communication targets in Yugoslavia and Northern Italy. From 4 October, nine aircraft of 31 Squadron dropped supplies to partisans in Yugoslavia. These supply-drops were directed to three specific areas and could be carried out from less than 280 metres above the targets, because of very favourable weather conditions. Aircraft also mined the Danube, north east of Győr in Hungary, and bombed the Pontoon bridge at San Benedetto in Italy.

All of the crews successfully dropped their supplies to the partisans. Supplies consisted mainly of arms and ammunition, which enabled the partisans to carry out their activities against German forces successfully. Captain L.S. Beukes, in addition to the task of supply-dropping, successfully laid bombs in the Danube, north east of Győr, which was a region heavily protected by anti-aircraft guns and night fighters. On 25 October, the Germans started to withdraw from Eastern Poland. Partisan groups played a major part in forcing this withdrawal and therefore their contribution in the war became more important.

Supplies had to be delivered to the partisans so that they could further their activities, because they were far more effective than bombing attacks. Seven aircraft successfully dropped supplies to partisans at Vociv and Sanski Most in Yugoslavia. After these successful operations, the aircraft were forced to direct the drops to central Yugoslavia because of prevailing weather conditions. As soon as the aircraft were loaded, the crews had to take off as early as possible to evade bad weather conditions. Because of the early take-off, crews were over the areas in day-time and the supplies could be dropped on visual markings. Two of the aircraft experienced difficulties with cloud-cover. The next day operations had to be cancelled because of bad weather conditions.

Apart from these supply-dropping operations, the main activity of the squadron during October was the bombing of communication targets in Yugoslavia, Hungary and Northern Italy. These operations were very successful,
because no opposition was encountered. The squadron flew a total of 382 operational hours, and completed 85 sorties for a loss of six aircraft.\textsuperscript{60}

On 4 November, another drop of supplies to partisans was made in Yugoslavia. Twelve aircraft took off at 13:00 hours. These aircraft encountered no opposition, and the operation was successfully completed. After the Liberators had returned, they were refueled and reloaded with 528 containers to be delivered to other Yugoslavian partisans. Twelve aircraft left at 22:10 hours to carry out this night-light operation. They were to drop supplies on targets marked by fires. The operation was successful and no opposition was encountered. Of the 500 containers which were dropped, 489 were received by the Yugoslavian partisans. Twelve aircraft were scheduled to carry out supply drops on 5 November. Only 11 of the aircraft left the airbase that morning, because one of the aircraft had been bogged down the previous night, and had a broken tail skid, which could not be replaced in time for the aircraft to take part in the operation. The aircrew were ordered to drop their supplies near smoke or marking signals, which would be put out by the partisans. In the event these signals were not seen; instead the crews saw white-cross pin points and dropped the supplies near these. From the 4th to the 6th of November, the partisans reportedly received 1,014 containers.\textsuperscript{61} After the aircraft returned, they were reloaded and refueled. Ten aircraft left again to make drops to IX Corps in North-West Yugoslavia. The squadron's two remaining aircraft were not in a condition to participate in this operation, because of technical problems. One of the ten aircraft that departed had to return, because the crew wrongly assessed that the engine was on fire. On their return, they discovered that the engine was not on fire but only torching. The other nine aircraft were ordered to drop supplies from 280 - 550 metres on areas where red sky-markers would indicate the dropping zones. If these markers were not spotted, then the crews were to drop supplies in a square where eight fires were lit. In the event of failure, or if they were prevented by cloud cover from identifying the zones, then the drops would be carried out

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54614.
\item \textsuperscript{61} 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 DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, pp.54614-54615.
\end{itemize}
by a Gee-fix.\textsuperscript{62} The remaining nine aircraft successfully dropped supplies with the aid of sky-markers. No opposition was encountered.\textsuperscript{63}

In addition to those previously mentioned, six highly successful supply-drops were carried out by the squadron to partisans in Yugoslavia. This was a major achievement and news of the event was broadcast by Colfer Talbot, a correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), from Italy to Britain. This address was also broadcast by the BBC on several overseas wavelengths.\textsuperscript{64}

The operations were seriously hampered by winter weather conditions and the unserviceability of the aerodromes. Nevertheless, during the month of November, 31 Squadron carried out 194 day and night sorties, which totalled a record number of 772 operational hours.\textsuperscript{65} Remarkably, no losses were sustained during this great number of sorties. This achievement may be compared to that of May, when only 23 sorties were carried out, though no losses were sustained.\textsuperscript{66} Most of the operations carried out during November were in support of the partisan forces in Yugoslavia. This represented both daylight and night operations and included bombing and supply-dropping missions.\textsuperscript{67}

2.2.3 DECEMBER 1944

31 Squadron completed 106 sorties during December 1944, flying a total of 502 operational hours.\textsuperscript{68} The foul weather made living and working conditions at Foggia unbearable. The landing fields turned into a mud-bath and it became

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Gee-fix - an accurate fix on a position even hundreds of kilometres from a fixed master station, done with a navigation aid known as a 'Gee', with which the MKVI Liberators were equipped.
\item \textsuperscript{63} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54616.
\item \textsuperscript{64} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54599.
\item \textsuperscript{65} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54621.
\item \textsuperscript{66} D DOC S, Pretoria SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54621.
\item \textsuperscript{67} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54616.
\item \textsuperscript{68} D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 45, File 1, p.30848.
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