CHAPTER 5

THE FLIGHTS OF 13-14 AUGUST 1944

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The flights of 13-14 August represented the first large-scale supply effort of the combined Allied forces of 205 Group. Twenty Liberators and seven Halifaxes were scheduled to fly from Brindisi in Italy to drop supplies to the partisans in Warsaw, but due to unserviceability, three of the seven Halifaxes failed to take off. Therefore only 24 aircraft participated.

The first flights departed from Brindisi at 19:10. The weather proved foul. Dense cloud-banks and electric storms forced several SAAF and RAF aircraft to turn back after they had already crossed the Carpathian Mountains. Only 15 aircraft, seven Liberators of 31 Squadron SAAF, six Liberators of 178 Squadron RAF, and two Halifaxes of 148 Squadron RAF, succeeded in dropping supplies on Warsaw. Supplies were dropped from heights varying from 80 to 250 metres. Crews flew at little more than roof-top height over the burning city in a hail of machine-gun and rifle fire.

This first attempt to supply Warsaw would later prove to have been one of the most successful of all the flights during this operation.

From sortie reports and interviews with members of the South African crews who participated in these flights to Warsaw, it became very clear that this must have been a terrifying experience. Everyone who took part mentioned the long distance to Warsaw and claimed that this caused them great anxiety.

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1 The Carpathian mountain range was on the border between Czechoslovakia and Poland; H.J. Martin and N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.250.
3 See chapter 10, Table 1.
Right from the start some aircrews referred to the operation as absolute madness. They remembered the anxious moments when German night fighters followed them and they could recall how the pilots took evasive action to prevent being shot down. Many crew members saw other aircraft, most probably containing fellow crew members and friends, being shot down. Bob Burgess recalled how he and his crew witnessed the destruction of two of their own aircraft. One was hit directly ahead of them. The Liberator literally disintegrated in front of them after it had been hit, probably on the main petrol tanks. They just saw a ball of fire and then bits of pieces being hurled in all directions. They also witnessed how another aircraft was hit by flak from anti-aircraft fire before it plunged to the ground. These must have been very sad and heart-rendering moments for Burgess and his fellow crew members. They must have had the same thoughts passing through their minds. Who were these fellows who had just sacrificed their lives a few minutes earlier? Were they their personal friends? Perhaps someone who shared the tent with them. It could even have been someone with whom they had laughed and joked a few hours earlier. Burgess recalled that they were indeed saddened and shocked at the tragedies they had just witnessed.

Another terrifying experience must have been when their Liberators were hit by anti-aircraft fire. An interesting phenomenon was that when the aircraft reached Warsaw, crews became excited. Perhaps this was largely as a result of the nervous tension to which they were being exposed. They could smell the burning fires and could see people in the streets of the city. Some could even see German soldiers shooting at them from the streets or from the rooftops of buildings. Once they reached Warsaw, it was important for them to drop the supplies in the correct zones. Most members of flight crews recollected that

5 R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.
7 J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, Johannesburg, 15 August 1983.
8 R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.
they were sympathetic towards the Polish partisans and regarded them as their friends and not merely as allies. The Germans, on the other hand, were regarded as the foe. After the supplies were dropped, the excitement amongst flight crews in the aircraft turned into what might be described as an anxious anticipation. Aircrew members recalled how they felt that they only wanted to get away from the anti-aircraft fire as soon as possible. Some crew members later referred to the city as a mad house. They were also keenly aware of the overwhelming brightness of the enemy searchlight batteries and the smoke. Once the besieged city lay behind them the stress seemed to disappear. They felt safe in the dark. There was however another fear, constantly stalking in the back of their minds. Successful completion of the journey home depended on how severely the aircraft had been damaged by flak.

Although similarities in the events during these flights do exist, many more individual experiences were recollected. The most interesting, but also crucial aspect of these flights to Warsaw, lies in the understanding that every one of the flights actually represents an individual experience. The main issue that is dealt with in this study is the contribution of the different squadrons to the Warsaw Airlift. Therefore it is absolutely essential to describe every individual flight. It could appear at times as if the detailed information is overwhelming and even superfluous, but from the discussion to follow it will become clear that the circumstances were different in the case of every flight.

A detailed description of the sorties undertaken by the Allied squadrons on 13-14 August on these dangerous flights to Warsaw follows.


10 J.R. Coleman, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.

5.2 DETAILS OF THE INDIVIDUAL FLIGHTS

5.2.1 31 SQUADRON SAAF

The crew of Liberator EW166 Z, with Captain G. Laurie as pilot, departed from Brindisi at 19:10. The flight to Warsaw went extremely well. On their arrival at Warsaw, they noticed numerous fires.

Twelve metal containers were dropped in the correct zones. The searchlights were noticed north of the city. Three objects, possibly air balloons, were observed in the vicinity of sector B.

On its way back, the Liberator was attacked from behind by a twin-engined enemy aircraft. The gunner in the mid-upper position fired a volley of shots at the attacker and the latter took evasive action and disappeared. The return trip to the home base in Italy took place without any further incidents.12

The flight of Liberator EW248 P, with Captain K.G. Hayward at the controls, went well, although stormy weather was experienced at times. Upon their arrival over Warsaw, they flew from the western bank of the river and turned left at the fourth bridge.13 The church with its dome and a multitude of constantly flickering white and red lights were identified in zone B.

The southern part of the city was covered with smoke and many buildings on the western side were burning heavily. Searchlights and a signal light were observed at Citadel.14

On the southern side of the city as well as on the eastern river bank, searchlights were visible through the smoke. Light anti-aircraft fire was noticed southwest of the city and also on the western bank. While flying over the eastern bank of the Vistula, they were fired at from the eastern side of the city. The rear turret of the Liberator was hit by a .303 bullet.

12 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54233.
13 This bridge was known as the Citadel bridge.
14 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, Union War History, Container 140, p.5567.
The aircraft's keel level was also hit and the intercom put out of action. Number two engine's generator was hit by anti-aircraft fire from the city and damaged beyond repair. Despite this damage all 12 metal containers were dropped and, according to calculations, supplies were delivered in the southern quarter of the drop-zone. The aircraft reached Brindisi early the next morning after a flight of more than ten hours.\(^{15}\)

On their arrival over Warsaw, the crew of Liberator KG836 C, piloted by Captain N. van Rensburg, identified the four bridges over the Vistula. A high church tower was noticed against the background of the burning city. Light anti-aircraft fire was observed near Praski Park and on the eastern bank of the river, south of the city. Six blue searchlights were seen in the Cyto Ela area. The aircraft approached Warsaw from the eastern river bank and flew over the target. Its speed, however, was too high and a second attempt had to be made at a lower speed. The 12 metal containers were dropped and it was estimated that the provisions were delivered near the middle of the B zone area. On the return to Italy, a storm which lasted about 15 minutes was reported. The Liberator reached its home base at Brindisi after a successful flight of ten hours.\(^{16}\)

The events that took place during the flight of Liberator EW138 K, with Lieutenant W. Norval at the helm, make it surely one of the most dramatic of the Warsaw flights.\(^{17}\) During the first part of the flight to Warsaw, everything went well, although the crew experienced difficulties with the hydraulic control of the rear turret in the tail of the aircraft. In spite of the fact that enemy night fighters were spotted, Warsaw was reached safely. On arriving over Warsaw, they were met by heavy fire from anti-aircraft guns. Norval ordered the metal containers to be dropped, even though the aircraft was still 1.5 kilometres to the south of the predetermined air-supply zones.\(^{18}\) Enemy searchlights lit the right side of the aircraft, whereupon the pilot turned to the left and increased altitude to escape their attention. At this stage, however, the outside engine on the left wing of the Liberator was hit by anti-aircraft fire.

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15 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54237.
16 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54236.
and had to be switched off. Almost simultaneously the Liberator was caught in
the beams of a group of ten to 12 searchlights. A number of anti-aircraft guns
immediately began a heavy barrage, which placed the aircraft in an extremely
dangerous position. Norval tried to fly the aircraft away from the lights.

After a few terrifying moments, he succeeded, but suddenly grabbed his
parachute, opened the doors of the bomb chamber and jumped out without a
further word.\(^\text{19}\) His action could possibly be attributed to extreme stress. The
Liberator went out of control and began to lose height as it went into a nose-
dive, veering wildly from one bank of the Vistula to the other. The co-pilot,
Lieutenant R.C.W. Burgess, succeeded in regaining control only 303 metres
above the ground.\(^\text{20}\)

Burgess later described his reaction after Norval threw himself out of the
aircraft.\(^\text{21}\) At first he experienced unbelievable shock. He found himself all
alone on the flight deck because all the other crew members were all at their
stations throughout the aircraft and were unaware of the drama which had
just taken place further forward. Recovering his senses Burgess grabbed the
control column and endeavoured to stop the plunging aircraft's mad dive. At
this stage he was thinking only about the many lives he held in his hands. A
glaring light in the cockpit however revealed another danger: the bomber was
once again caught in searchlights. Burgess finally succeeded in pulling the
aircraft out of its nosedive but could only establish partial control. The heavy
bomber was now flying around in circles because he could just not keep her on
a straight course, although he did manage to gain a little height. In fact, they
were now milling around over the very heart of Warsaw. Burgess recalled that
he thought the German anti-aircraft personnel must have thought they were
absolutely crazy.

In the meantime, as can be imagined, all the members of the crew had been
shouting into the intercom, imploring the absent pilot "to get the hell out of

\(^{19}\) R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.

\(^{20}\) N.D. Orpen, Airlift to Warsaw: The Rising of 1944, p.89; D DDO S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary,
Container 44, File 1, War Diary, p.53976.

\(^{21}\) R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.
the target area".22 The gunner in the wing turret, realising the danger from the ground continued firing at the searchlights with his machine-guns, eliminating them one after another, until Burgess finally succeeded in piloting the limping aircraft away from the burning city.

Then for the first time since the dramatic change of events, he spoke to the crew. He told them that Norval was indisposed and that he had taken over the controls. The navigator, Lieutenant Sleed, immediately came to the flight deck and when he saw the empty seat next to Burgess, turned grey from shock. Unable to concede the true situation any longer, Burgess again called up the crew and this time explained in plain language just what had really happened. He also reminded them that he had never flown or landed a Liberator on his own before. He offered them all the choice of bailing out or of staying with the stricken aircraft. They all unanimously opted to stay.

When the worst was over and the burning city left behind, Burgess and Sleed decided to fly eastward in the direction of the Russian positions, since the damaged Liberator would not have been able to reach Italy.23 The compass was out of order, the instruments defective and one of the engines out of action. The controls were partially damaged and the hydraulic defect in one of the turrets limited their defence against night fighters even further. The badly damaged aircraft was controlled with difficulty and constantly threatened to nose-dive.24

Burgess finally succeeded in reaching an altitude of 1 200 metres and again gave his crew the choice of staying in the bomber or using their parachutes. All decided rather to attempt a forced landing.25 The omnipresent danger was increased when radar-equipped night fighters appeared as if from nowhere and began to follow them. The crew opened the large doors in the fuselage in

22 R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.
case they had to leave the aircraft in a hurry after an attack, but disregarded the fighter threat and concentrated on keeping the Liberator in the air at all costs. A fuel problem was overcome when Sleed, with great difficulty, made his way to the fuel tanks in the fuselage via a narrow bridge, over the open bomb doors now slippery because of leaking oil, where, although in constant danger, he pumped fuel to the main tanks. Three hours later, Burgess had succeeded in increasing his altitude to 2 400 metres. A further problem now arose when the propeller of the damaged engine suddenly began to turn uncontrollably, causing the bomber to dive towards the ground at a speed of 435 kilometres per hour. With great difficulty Burgess succeeded in regaining control by which time the aircraft had dropped to an altitude of only 900 metres.

At daybreak they began to search for an appropriate place for a forced landing. Shortly afterwards, they flew over a village with an old airfield and decided to attempt a landing. The bomber circled over the village eight times, while the crew struggled to put the aircraft's wheels and air brakes into operation. The ninth approach was successful and at 05:35 Burgess carried out a successful forced landing on the primitive airfield at Emilchino, approximately 160 kilometres west of Kiev. Tense and anxious during this dramatic landing, those of the crew who could strap themselves in did so while the others sat down with their backs to the front of the aircraft. Their sense of relief when the plane finally came to rest can be readily imagined.

Burgess recalled that he had never seen an aircrew leave an aircraft so quickly. After hours of purgatory, they went down on their hands and knees and kissed mother earth. The immense joy at just being alive was beyond description. The nightmare a short while ago seemed like some impossible dream. The few flowers and green grass at their feet took on a new meaning. Suddenly they noticed simple things in life with much more appreciation than previously.

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27 R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.
They were not, however, oblivious of more practical concerns and secret documents on board, such as a navigational aid system, were immediately destroyed.

The most important question on their minds remained where in Europe they were. Their most disturbing thought at this stage was the loss of contact with their base and the outside world. Nobody knew their whereabouts. Nobody knew that they were still alive.

During this time there had been no sign of life in the tiny village of approximately ten houses and one large building about two kilometres away. Then one of the crew shouted a word of warning. They now saw two army lorries leaving the village and making their way cautiously and steadily towards the position where they had landed. As the lorries came closer the crew, now filled with a feeling of apprehensiveness, could see the soldiers in each vehicle. They were all armed with submachine guns and rifles. There seemed to be a sinister and strange attitude in their line of approach. Just who were they? Burgess and his crew could still not identify their uniforms from that distance. Then, much to their amazement, they noticed that some of the soldiers carrying those submachine guns were women, big, buxom women in uniform. Although they were then in shouting distance, the crew could still not place the type of uniform or the language they spoke. As they approached closer, the crew felt absolutely defenceless standing there next to the aircraft. The leader of the group was now within 10 metres of them. Then at last all of them could see the red badge with the star, identifying the officer as a Russian. They spoke to the crew in their unknown language which made no sense at all. Burgess tried English but to no avail. They found themselves at loggerheads and felt extremely helpless. All this time the Russians were very suspicious and alert in their attitude towards the South Africans. Eventually, by means of sign language, signs and single word phrases, the crew could figure out that they had landed on Soviet territory and they could make the Russians understand that they were not the enemy. They were then transported to the small village. Here they were taken to the large building which was the Communal Dining Room, and before long they were given a large plate of four fried eggs each, bacon, black bread, butter, vodka and black Russian tea. After breakfast
they were given a place to lie down and within minutes they were all sound asleep.\textsuperscript{28}

The next day the South African crew was handed over to the British representatives in the Soviet Union and the men returned to their unit in Italy. Norval was taken prisoner by the Germans. Burgess, who at that stage had only 300 flying hours experience, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.\textsuperscript{29}

When Liberator EW105 G, commanded by Lieutenant R.R. Klette, arrived over Warsaw, the aircraft was immediately caught in the bright beams of searchlights for approximately 15 seconds and bombarded by anti-aircraft batteries. Bullets penetrated the framework and caused several on-board fires. Three of the four engines were hit and burst into flames, causing a severe fire which threatened to destroy the fuselage.\textsuperscript{30} The damaged engines were switched off and the fire-extinguishing systems switched on in an attempt to extinguish the fires. The 12 metal containers were dropped at the same time in the hope that the supplies would reach the Poles. Klette then succeeded, with great difficulty, in starting one of the damaged engines and began to fly away from Warsaw in a south-easterly direction.\textsuperscript{31} Since they were flying at a low altitude it was impossible for the crew to use their parachutes. They were still flying over densely built-up areas when an opening suddenly appeared and Klette decided to take the chance of making a forced landing.

The Liberator landed on its fuselage and scraped forward over the ground for several hundred metres.\textsuperscript{32} To the amazement of the crew they realised that they had indeed landed in the middle of the main airfield of Warsaw, which was not in use at the time.\textsuperscript{33} A fire in the camera hatch was extinguished

\textsuperscript{28} R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.
\textsuperscript{30} R.R. Klette, Telephone interview, Somerset West, 13 December 1984.
\textsuperscript{31} A. Blake, Die Vlug na Warschau (unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.)
\textsuperscript{33} R.R. Klette, Telephonic interview, Somerset West, 13 December 1984.