

# Operation Frantic

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## Overview

At the Tehran Conference in November 1943, the Allied leaders devised an audacious new form of bombing strategy against Nazi Germany. American heavy bombers stationed in Britain and Italy would fly strike missions deep into the heart of Nazi territory or occupied Eastern Europe. Afterwards, they would land on secret American air bases (to be defended by the Soviets) actually located inside Soviet Russia, re-arm and re-fuel - and then attack a second target on the way home.

Operation Frantic was to permanently establish three heavy bomber groups in Soviet territory, but only a small contingent of U.S. troops were based on the Eastern Front.

During the four months of the operation, 24 targets in Nazi Germany and in German-held territory, some never before in effective range of the American strategic bomber forces, were attacked.

This shuttle bombing technique complicated the defense of German targets. The operations were discontinued due to logistical difficulties in supporting the USAAF forces in the Soviet Union, and differences between the United States and the Soviet Union at political as well as military levels. The main difficulty encountered by the U.S. forces was inadequate air base protection by the Soviets. The Soviet high command (Stalin) refused U.S. requests for adequate artillery and night fighter support, etc., that the U.S. Military offered to provide to make the Soviet defense of the bases more effective.

## Airfields

Operation Frantic was a series of seven shuttle bombing operations during World War II conducted by American aircraft based in Great Britain and Southern Italy which then landed at three Soviet airfields in Ukraine. The operation began in June, 1944 and ended in September.

In February 1944, the USAAF received access to six air bases in Ukraine, but it turned out only three were set up for the effort. In haste, the United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe established a headquarters detachment at Poltava Airfield, near Kiev in the Soviet Union in late April, 1944. Poltava was designated as USAAF Station 559 for security purposes and was referred to as Station 559 in all messages and written correspondence. Poltava was one of three Ukraine installations operated by Headquarters, Eastern Command USSAF. The others were Piryatin Airfield (AAF-560) and Mirgorod Airfield (AAF-561). Poltava and Mirgorod were to be used for heavy bombers (B-24 Liberators, B-17 Flying Fortresses), while Piryatin would be used for long-range escort fighters (P-51 Mustangs, P-38 Lightnings).



**USAAF Fifteenth Air Force B-17 Flying Fortresses and Red Air Force Yakovlev Yak-9 fighters share an airfield as aircrews swap sorties, 1944**

The bases were farther from the eastern front than the USAAF liked, and they were also in a poor state of repair. All this could be chalked up to the strains of war, as everything in the regions the Germans had retreated from was in a poor state of repair, if it hadn't been totally demolished. However, the American officers trying to direct the effort found themselves dealing with an unfriendly and suspicious Soviet bureaucracy that raised every obstacle. Allies or not, the Americans were foreigners, and Stalin did not like having foreigners around at all. Winston Churchill had not been very enthusiastic about Frantic, believing that it was placing a lot more trust on Stalin than was wise, and events were bearing him out.

Heavy equipment and bulky supplies went by sea to the port of Archangel, north of Leningrad, and then by freight train to the airfields in the Ukraine. Additional supplies and key personnel would fly in on Air Transport Command transports from the ATC base at Mehrabad Airport, Iran. Delicate negotiations finally fixed a total of forty-two round-trip ATC missions to make the bases operational for the AAF, and allowed an additional rate of two weekly support missions to sustain the U.S. contingent. The issue of flight communications eventually ended with a compromise, allowing U.S. crews to carry out navigation and radio duties with a Soviet observer resident at all related communications centers. Eventually, the ATC in support of FRANTIC delivered some 450 personnel and thirty-six thousand pounds of cargo by June 1944.

## **Operations**

After much preparation at the three Ukrainian airfields by advance elements of Headquarters, Eastern Command USSAF and Air Transport Command, the first shuttle mission was for Fifteenth Air Force B-17 Flying Fortresses and their P-51 Mustang fighter escorts taking off from airfields around Foggia, Italy, raiding the railroad marshalling yards at Debrecen, Hungary, and then flying on to the Ukraine.

### **First Shuttle Mission (Fifteenth Air Force)**



**Red Air Force and USAAF airmen meet at Poltava, 2 June 1944. Despite the tensions between Soviet and Allied Leadership over Operation Frantic, the American airmen were made to feel very welcome by the Soviet personnel assigned to support them.**

- 2 June 1944: 130 B-17s, escorted by 70 P-51 Mustangs, takeoff from Italy and bomb the marshaling yard at Debrecen, Hungary and land in the USSR, the B-17s at Poltava and Mirgorod and the P-51s at Piryatin. One B-17F (97th BG, 414th BS) is lost over the target; 27 other B-17s, forced off course en route to the Oradea, Romania marshaling yard, also hit Debrecen.



**B-17s arriving at Poltava, 2 June 1944.**

- 6 June 1944: 104 B-17s and 42 P-51 Mustangs (having flown to the USSR from Italy on 2 June) attack the airfield at Galati, Romania and return to their shuttle bases in the USSR. Eight enemy fighters are shot down and two P-51Bs (325th FG and 318th FS) are lost.

- 11 June 1944: 126 B-17s and 60 P-51s depart Russian shuttle bases for Italy to complete the first Operation Frantic operation. On the way 121 B-17s bomb the Foctani, Romania airfield 1 B-17F (97 BG) is lost.

### **Second Shuttle Mission (Eighth Air Force)**

After the first shuttle mission, the consensus reached by USSTAF that all seemed to go well enough. The second shuttle raid planned was for Eighth Air Force B-17s to attack synthetic oil facilities in Eastern Germany and proceed on to the USSR.

- 21 June 1944: 145 of 163 B-17s begin shuttle bombing missions between the United Kingdom and bases in the USSR. 72 P-38 Lightnings, 38 P-47 Thunderbolts and 57 P-51 Mustangs escort the B-17s to the target ( synthetic oil plant at Ruhland, Germany ); 123 B-17s bomb the primary target, 21 bomb the marshaling yard at Elsterwerda and a lone B-17 bombs the marshaling yard at Riesa, Germany due to a bomb rack malfunction. 4th Fighter Group P-51s accompany the B-17s to the USSR (including 486 Squadron "borrowed" from the 352nd FG). 20 to 30 Luftwaffe fighters attack the force; in the resulting battle a P-51B and six German fighters are destroyed; an F model B-17, 385th Bombardment Group, 549th Bomb Squadron piloted by Matthew Totter is damaged by flack and loses three engines on the flight and flies to Sweden where it is interned and later converted to SE-BAN, a Swedish airliner. 144 B-17s land in the USSR, 73 at Poltava, and the rest at Mirgorod; the 64 remaining P-51s land at Piryatin.

What was unknown at the time was that after the raid on Ruhland, the attacking B-17s were being shadowed from a distance by a Luftwaffe Heinkel He-111 bomber, which identified the Ukrainian airfields where they landed. On the night of 21 June the Combat Wing of B-17s which earlier landed at Poltava sustained severe losses as the result of an enemy air attack on the airfield. Personnel were alerted at approximately 2330 hours when it was announced that German bombers had crossed the front lines in the general direction of Poltava. At 0030 hours Pathfinder aircraft released flares directly above the airfield and 10 minutes later the first bombs were dropped. For almost two hours an estimated 75 Luftwaffe bombers attacked the base, exhibiting a very high degree of accuracy. A very large majority of the bombs were dropped in the dispersal area of the landing ground where only B-17s were parked, indicating without question that the B-17s constituted the specific objective of the raiders. Of the 73 B-17s which had landed at Poltava, 47 were destroyed and most of the remainder severely damaged. One American combat crew member was killed and one other was severely wounded; several others suffered minor injuries. In addition to the aircraft suffering heavy damage, the stores of fuel and ammunition were also attacked and a large amount destroyed. Three days after the attack, only nine of the 73 aircraft at Poltava were operational. Joseph Stalin's plan to defend the shuttle bombing operation airfields entirely with Soviet defenses failed entirely. The truck mounted 50 caliber machine guns that the Soviet high command insisted would be adequate had no effect on the Luftwaffe, as no aircraft were shot down or disabled. Also, Russian and American piloted fighter aircraft were not allowed to take off (by Soviet high-command) to engage the Luftwaffe during this attack at Poltava. Why is a good question.

- 22 June 1944: Because of the attack on USAAF Eighth Air Force B-17s at Poltava, the B-17s at Mirgorod and P-51s at Piryatin are moved to Soviet air bases farther east; they are to be returned to Mirgorod and Piryatin and be dispatched to bases in Italy as soon as the weather permits; the move is fortunate as German bombers strike both Piryatin and Mirgorod during the night of 22/23 June. However the airfields which were used for dispersal had very short runways and had no fuel or munitions for the aircraft. Aircrews of destroyed aircraft are picked up by Air Transport Command and ferried back to UK via Mehrabad Airport, Tehran, Iran.
- 26 June 1944: Losses and damage sustained by the Luftwaffe bomber attack on Poltava and damage suffered on route to Russia had reduced the number of operational B-17s to a total of 73. All available aircraft were formed into one composite Combat Wing of three groups for the execution of the return mission to Italy. The aircraft at the dispersal airfields were flown back to Mirgorod and Poltava for servicing, rearming and refueling. This delayed the takeoff times to mid-afternoon which meant that the aircraft would not arrive in Italy until the early evening twilight. The B-17s rendezvous with 55 P-51s from Piryatin, bomb the oil refinery and marshaling yard at Drohobycz, Poland (one returns to the USSR because of mechanical trouble), and then proceed to Italy; Fifteenth Air Force P-51s meet the formation 1 hour after the attack and escort the B-17s to Foggia. It was planned for the Eighth Air Force aircraft to return to bases in England on 27 June or as soon thereafter as weather conditions permitted, but unfavorable forecasts persisted. During the period the B-17s participated in one Fifteenth Air Force mission and the P-51s in two missions.
- 2 July 1944: The Eighth Air Force P-51 Group joined with other Fifteenth Air Force fighters in escorting 509 heavy bombers on a mission to three objectives in the Budapest, Hungary area; a marshaling yard (253 aircraft); Vecses Airfield (142 aircraft) and the Shell Oil Refinery (114 aircraft). The P-51s preceded the bombers and conducted a free-lance sweep in the target area. Aggressive enemy opposition was encountered and four P-51s were lost in combat and one other P-51 failed to return. USAAF bombers and fighters claim 50+ fighters shot down.
- 3 July 1944: Fifty-Seven Eighth Air Force B-17s were dispatched, escorted by the P-51 Mustang group (38 aircraft) in conjunction with 44 Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers, attacking a marshaling yard and railway shops at Arad, Romania.
- 5 July 1944: 72 Eighth Air Force B-17s complete the shuttle mission (UK-USSR-Italy-UK) and attack a marshaling yard at Béziers, France (with Fifteenth Air Force B-24s) while on the last leg from Italy to the UK; 42 P-51s return to UK with the B-17s (of the eleven P-51s remaining in Italy, ten return to the UK the following day and the last several days later). Upon their return to England, the American crews reported that the Soviets failed to put up any effective resistance to the raid. In hindsight, given the occasional gross blunderings of the Soviet war machine, and the fact that in the Soviet military few dared take initiative without approval from the leadership, that impression might have been incorrect. In the aftermath of the Poltava disaster, the USAAF wanted to

move the P-61 Black Widow-equipped 427th Night Fighter Squadron from Italy to Poltava to provide night air defense over the fields. However, the Soviets refused to allow USAAF night fighters to defend the bomber bases, insisting that air defense was their responsibility. The shuttle bombing missions were not abandoned for the moment, but they were suspended until the mess on the ground could be cleaned up and the defenses of the airbases improved. Realizing that the Soviets could not adequately protect the heavy bombers from night raids, the Americans abandoned plans to permanently station three heavy bomber groups on Soviet airfields.

### **Third Shuttle Mission (Fifteenth Air Force)**

To keep the project alive, Fifteenth Air Force next shuttled P-38 and P-51 fighters to the Soviet Union in late July.

- 22 July 1944: 76 P-38s and 58 P-51s begin the second Fifteenth Air Force shuttle mission, attacking airfields at Zilistea (Jiliste) Buzau, Romania and landing at bases in the USSR.
- 25 July 1944: Operating from USSR bases, 34 P-51s and 33 P-38s attack the airfield at Mielec, Poland and return to the USSR.
- 26 July 1944: Fighters leave USSR bases, strafe enemy aircraft in the Bucharest–Ploiești, Romania area, and return to bases in Italy.

### **Fourth Shuttle Mission (Fifteenth Air Force)**

- 4 August 1944: In an attempt to comply with the first direct Soviet request for USAAF air strikes, 70+ P-38s and P-51s of the Fifteenth Air Force leave Italy, attack the airfield and town of Focsani, Romania and land at bases in the USSR.
- 6 August 1944: 60 fighters of the USAAF Fifteenth Air Force take off from bases in the USSR, attack the Craiova marshaling yard and other railroad targets in the Bucharest–Ploiești, Romania area, and land at Italian bases.

After balancing losses and battle damage against the value of the targets, U.S. military leaders at the Soviet bases discontinued the fighter-bomber operations.

### **Fifth Shuttle Mission (Eighth Air Force)**

- 6 August 1944: 75 B-17s hit Rahmel aircraft factories at Gdynia, Poland and proceeds to bases in the USSR. Escort is provided by 154 P-51
- 7 August 1944: A shuttle mission is flown in accordance with a Soviet request; 55 B-17s and 29 P-51s attack an oil refinery at Trzebina, Poland without loss; the aircraft return to bases in the USSR.

- 12 August 1944: The second shuttle-bombing mission flown by Eighth Air Force from UK-USSR-Italy-UK is completed, with all aircraft flying to Fifteenth Air Force bases in Southern Italy.
- 13 August 1944: 72 B-17s take off from Fifteenth Air Force bases in Italy, 3 have various problems; the others bomb Franczal Airfield, just south of Toulouse, France and then proceed to the UK; 62 P-51 Mustangs (part of the shuttle-mission force) and 43 from the UK provide escort; no aircraft are lost; 70 B-17s and 58 P-51s land in the UK; 5 B-17s and 6 P-51s, either left in Italy or returning there during this mission, subsequently return to the UK.

### **Sixth Shuttle Mission (Eighth Air Force)**

- 11 September 1944: 75 Eighth Air Force B-17s bomb oil refineries at Chemnitz, Germany along with 64 P-51 Mustangs, continues on and lands in the USSR
- 13 September 1944: 73 B-17s, escorted by 63 P-51s, continuing the UK-USSR-Italy-UK shuttle-bombing mission, take off from USSR bases, bomb steel and armament works at Diósgyőr, Hungary and proceed to US Fifteenth Air Force bases in Italy.
- 15 September 1944: Eighth Air Force in England dispatches 110 B-17s to drop supplies to the Warsaw Uprising Polish Home Army and then proceed to bases in the USSR. However a weather front is encountered over the North Sea and the bombers are recalled back to England. Escort is provided by 149 P-51 Mustangs; 2 P-51s (42-106783, 43-24842, 363d FS) collide in a cloud and are lost.
- 17 September 1944: Shuttle mission is completed as 72 US Eighth Air Force B-17s and 59 P-51s fly without bombs from Italy to the UK.

### **Seventh Shuttle Mission (Eighth Air Force)**

- 18 September 1944: After turning back due to bad weather on 15 September, the last Eighth Air Force UK-USSR-Italy-UK mission sends 107 B-17s to supply the Polish Home Army in Warsaw with 1,248 paratropped containers. Fewer than 250 are on target for pick-up by the Polish forces; 1 B-17 is lost (390th BG 568th BS); escort is provided by 137 P-51s 64 P-51s continue to the USSR 2 P-51s are lost (355th FG 386th/368th FS).
- 19 September 1944: 100 B-17s and 61 P-51s takeoff from bases in the USSR and bomb the marshaling yard at Szolnok, Hungary and continue to bases in Italy. Aircraft remain in Italy due to bad weather until 23 September when they fly without bombs from Italy to the UK.

Summary - The bombing raid on the railroad marshaling yards at Szolnok would be the end of FRANTIC as the original targets had been taken by the rapidly advancing Soviet offensives. The USAAF, citing logistical problems and becoming weary of growing Soviet intransigence announced a suspension of Frantic shuttle missions. A reluctant Stalin agreed to the winter

intermission of operations, however the operation was not to resume. The U.S. and Soviet advances by the spring of 1945 ended the need for shuttle missions and the ATC flew out the last U.S. contingent of personnel from its headquarters at Poltava in June 1945.

Operation Frantic demonstrated the flexibility of airlift equipment and personnel. It also demonstrated the political role of airlift logistics in terms of operational support that would have been impossible by conventional ground-based means. However it had not been a good use of Allied resources. The Germans judged it to be a propaganda exercise to impress the Soviets, but all it really accomplished was to make the strains in the Allied alliance more obvious.

As of NOV 2011 research analysts from DPMO are continuing a search for information about missing Americans who participated in Operation Frantic. The analysts are researching information on the secret operation in the Russian archives in Podolsk, Russia. DPMO field investigators also have explored possible crash sites and interviewed witnesses in Ukraine.

[Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Frantic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Frantic) Dec 2011 ++]