THE MIGHTY 8TH

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR CAN MAKE

BY **BARRETT TILLMAN**

The Mighty Eighth flew a wide variety of aircraft in the Army Air Force's inventory: B–17s, B–24s, P–38s, P–47s, and P–51s, plus reconnaissance and air–sea rescue planes.

Heavy-hitters of the Eighth's bombing campaign *Mon Tete Rouge II* and fellow B-17Gs from the 452nd BG head for Chateaudun, France, on another strategic mission to neutralize German logistical resources here on March, 28, 1944. *Mon Tete* was later lost to flak on a mission to Kassel in December of that year.

At the beginning

The Eighth's origins were humble and hasty. Three weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the organization was activated without aircraft at Savannah, Georgia, with headquarters established at Bolling Field, D.C. Maj. Gen. Carl Spaatz established the Eighth at Bushey Park southwest of London in June 1942.

However, a pioneering cadre had arrived in February. Brigadier General Ira Eaker and six officers laid the groundwork for Spaatz and others who would follow. The small group included future combat leaders: Lt. Col. Frank Armstrong, Maj. Peter "Bud" Beasley, and Captains Fred Castle and Beirne Lay. Castle would perish as a brigadier general and Lay became the Eighth's chronicler in print and on screen.

The Mighty Eighth was America's strategic air force in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). But before U.S. airmen could begin bombing Occupied Europe, immense logistics and doctrinal-operational hurdles had to be cleared. Eaker took over the Eighth from Spaatz in December, and Job One was establishing more than 200 bases and the vast support organization necessary to sustain an air campaign. Therefore, he and Spaatz had to work hand in glove with the British, and it was not always easy.

D-Day for the 91st BG at Bassingborne as B-17Gs taxi past a lone pathfinder "Mickey Ship" (DF-P) as they queue for a tactical misson to Cherbourg to attack German marshaling areas. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Learning the trade

By mid 1942, the Royal Air Force had been bombing Germany for two years. The results were disappointing, as flak and fighters forced Bomber Command to operate at night. Some RAF commanders thought the Eighth should join the nocturnal offensive but the Americans stuck to their guns—and their doctrine. They believed in precision daylight bombing, "precision" being a relative term. Lacking long-range escort fighters, the Yanks knew they would take losses in deep penetration missions but believed in the self-defending bomber. Hence, the B-17's moniker, Flying Fortress. Augmented by B-24 Liberators, Eaker's airmen were convinced they could accomplish in daylight what the British could not. If so, the Allies could attack Germany round the clock in the Combined Bombing Offensive.

The Eighth's first bomb groups went operational that summer, breaking in slowly. Eaker led the first U.S. heavy bomber mission, 12 Fortresses attacking Rouen on August 17, 1942. Gradually, their numbers increased, but numbers alone were insufficient. Much remained to be learned.

56th FG pilots Maj. Paul A. Conger, Lt. Cameron M. Hart and Lt. Phillip G. Kuhn all from the 63rd Sq. pose in front of a former 78th FG P-47D after the group's hi-test P-47Ms developed teething engine problems and had to be supplemented with replacements in their quest to hang on to their revered Thunderbolts.

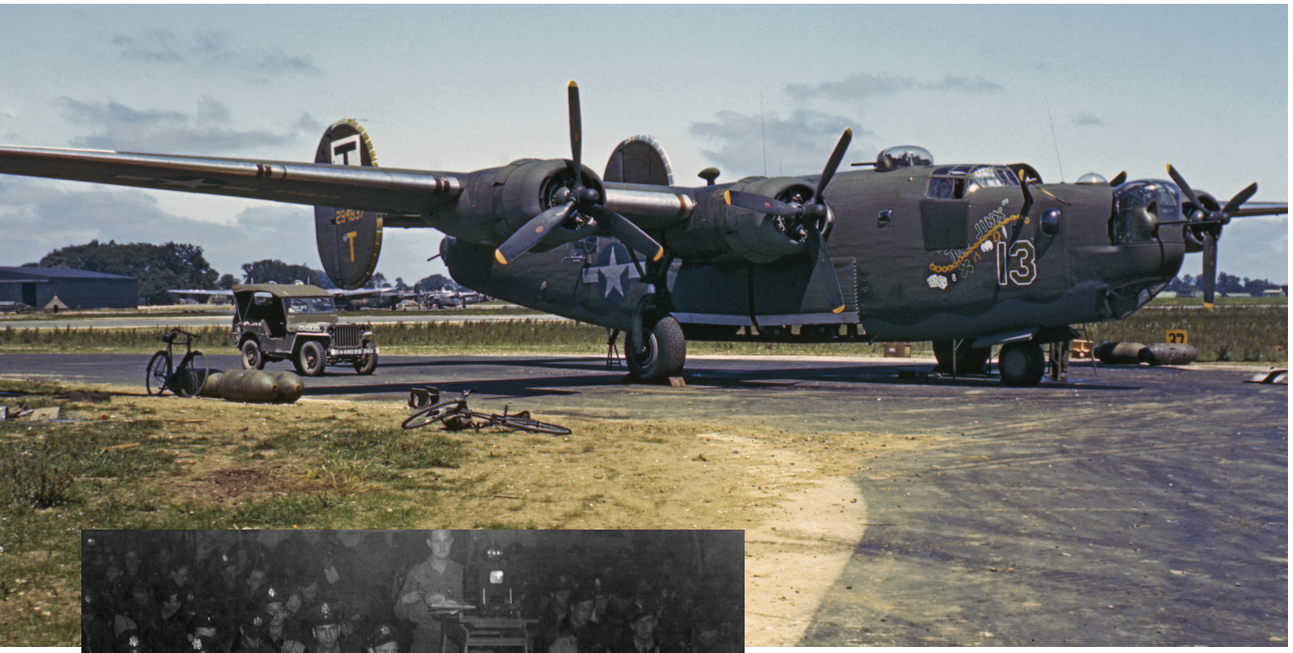
Additionally, some early units were siphoned off to North Africa. The invasion of French Morocco in November delayed the Eighth building to full strength, but Spaatz and Eaker's men continued flying and learning.

Commander of the 305th Bomb Group was Colonel Curtis E. LeMay, a renowned pilot and navigator who had helped perfect the B-17. Additionally, he taught himself everything worth knowing about the Norden bombsight, bringing a driving ambition and icy intellect to the job. But he was skeptical of claims he heard and conducted a personal investigation. He found both navigation and bombing badly wanting: only about 20 percent of the Eighth's tonnage was striking within five miles of the target.

LeMay convinced his superiors that changes were needed. His group proved the value of the "combat box" formation that not only tightened up bombing patterns but afforded better defensive firepower against interceptors. He moved up fast, commanding a wing in May 1943 and a division in September.

In August, LeMay figured prominently in the most ambitious mission yet. On the 17th, anniversary of Eaker's first heavy bomber mission, a dual strike was launched against aircraft plants at Schweinfurt and Regensburg in central and southern Germany.

By the summer of 1944, this P-47C that had initially provided the 8th's strategic bombing escort duty, was now relegated to the 551st Fighter Training Squadron at Atcham to bring newly arrived pilots into the tactics of the ETO's Fighter Command. (Photos courtesy of Stan Piet)



Top: On the hardstand at Station #134 at Eye, Suffolk, *The Jinx* was adorned with numerous bad luck symbols to ward off any misfortune of war; that was apparently quite successful as this 490th BG B–24H survived ETO and later 15th AF duty to war's end. (Photo courtesy of the Mark Brown Collection/ USAFA)

Inset: An oft–repeated scene, usually at the crack of dawn, bomber flight crews are finishing up their pre–flight briefings as the navigators are given their time hack to maintain their time–on–target planning. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

The two task forces were to divide the Luftwaffe defenses. LeMay's wing targeted Regensburg, continuing across the Mediterranean to Algeria. Brigadier General R.B. Williams' First Wing drew Schweinfurt, expecting to benefit by German attention to LeMay's Fourth. But British weather intervened, keeping Williams' force grounded until mutual support was lost.

The result was near catastrophic: of 376 bombers launched, 60 were lost and dozens heavily damaged. Beyond range of P-47s, LeMay wryly noted, "Our fighter escort had black crosses on its wings." B-17 gunners reported 288 kills and Allied fighters 31 while the Germans lost about 50 to all causes — a victory for the Jagdwaffe.

Regensburg was hard hit but Schweinfurt sustained light damage. "Schweinfurt II" came two months later, with similar results. Sixty Fortresses went down, and 17 were scrapped. With losses exceeding 20 percent, the future of deep-penetration bombing appeared dubious.

Under new management

A significant change occurred early in the new year. On January 3 Ira Eaker, who had built the Eighth from little more than a briefcase, was sent to Italy, commanding the southern half of the Combined Bombing Offensive. He was replaced by Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle who had established the 15th Air Force there in November. General Dwight Eisenhower wanted his Mediterranean colleague running the Northern European air war, and Doolittle eagerly accepted the task. But he was realistic, writing: "I have a bigger and more interesting job, but it is infinitely more difficult than the one I had (in Italy). Down there…any modest success was apparently appreciated. Up here miracles are confidently anticipated. Have been a little slow in getting my Miracle Department organized…"

Organization was indeed a factor in February when the Eighth was sectioned into three divisions. Each included four to six bomb wings and a fighter wing. As a rule, the First and Third divisions flew B-17s and the Second B-24s though five groups flew both, as Doolittle preferred Fortresses for standardization.

That month strategic operations peaked with "Big Week," a combined north-south campaign against Germany's aircraft industry by the Eighth and the Fifteenth. Between February 20 and 25 the UK-based bombers launched four times into the Reich. The initial mission, focusing on Leipzig and Brunswick, was a watershed: the Eighth's first 1,000-bomber effort.

Damage to some factories was significant but it was efficiently repaired. More than ever, the need for a sustained campaign was evident — there would be no magic bullet in the strategic air war.

Big Week was closely followed with another milestone, "Big B." On March 4, guided by radar pathfinders, 29 B-17s of the 95th and "Bloody 100th" Groups pushed through weather, becoming the first Americans to bomb the metropolitan area. More than 250 bombers aborted with others attacking alternate targets.

Two days later, the Eighth launched against Berlin proper with 658 heavies bombing the capital and nearby cities. The Luftwaffe resisted savagely: despite Mustang escort, 69 bombers were hacked down, a record one-day loss.

Lieutenant C.B. "Red" Harper of the 100th recalled the March 6 mission with 30 B-17s: "At 11:59 all hell broke loose. We were attacked by over 100 German fighter planes from the III *Gruppe* of JG 54, Me 109s and Fw 190s. They hit us head on in pairs. On the first pass they had six of our nine-ship high squadron on fire but missed me. They swung around and came at us again head on and took out the six that were already burning and shot down two more of our high squadron leaving my plane the only one left in the high squadron. They then took out seven more bombers from the lead and low squadrons, making a total of fifteen bombers shot down from the 100th Bomb Group in less than 10 minutes. It looked like a parachute invasion. Bombers and fighters were on fire and exploding all over the sky."

Nevertheless, Doolittle's heavies were back again on the 8th, leaving another 36 "Viermots" in the dirt.

Tactics evolved as well as organization. Doolittle's most significant change came early in his tenure when he turned the fighters loose from the bombers. Eaker had insisted on close escort, partly owing to few fighter groups on hand, partly because bomber crews liked seeing P-38s and P-47s. He should have known better — he had been in Britain in 1940 when Hermann Goring insisted that Bf 109s fly close escort on Luftwaffe bombers.

Doolittle reckoned that the best defense was a vigorous offense. He allowed fighter groups to roam farther afield, breaking up Luftwaffe gaggles before they could swarm the heavies. He also authorized attacks on enemy airfields. It worked: between January and June, Eighth bomber losses to enemy aircraft dropped 50 percent.

Fighter pilots relished their newfound freedom. Recalled triple ace C.E. "Bud" Anderson of the 357th Fighter Group, "We were motivated, aggressive. Only the fittest and most competitive survived the training, and then the deadly winnowing out imposed by our last and best teacher, the German Air Force …Combat was exciting, addictive, a test of your mettle and manhood — a crucible in which men became a cut above the ordinary."

The 357th was the Eighth's first Merlin-powered P-51 unit, only the second in the ETO. The Ninth Air Force's 354th Group was loaned to the Eighth in November until more Mustang units arrived. With unexcelled range, the North American ponies galloped farther and farther afield, affording "big friends" escort to and from almost any target.

Fighter pilots were enthused about the Mustang. The Fourth Group's Col. Don Blakeslee managed a hasty transition from P-47s, telling his pilots "You can learn to fly 'em on the way to the target."

Top: One of the most well–known Lightning photos of the war shows First Lt. Loren Wilson of the 383rd FS flying his P–38J s/n 42–67978 N2+K near their home field of Honnington, England, during 1944. (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)

Bottom: The first U.S. fighter unit in the UK to achieve combat status, the 31st FG arrived at Atcham in June 1942 assigned Spitfire VBs and under RAF control. They participated in a number of fighter sweeps and bomber escorts, particularly the Dieppe raid, but were transferred to the 12AF in October to support the Torch invasion. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Gun camera footage showing Col. Glenn Duncan CO of the 353rd FG downing a Fw 190 during 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

In February, including Big Week, ETO fighters claimed 342 German planes in the air and on the ground. Once Doolittle's policy took hold the numbers soared: 545 in March and nearly 1,000 in April.

Yet even when the Luftwaffe was conquered, an implacable enemy remained: European weather. Long after the war, pilots were nearly unanimous that their training lacked sufficient emphasis on instrument flying. But it just wasn't possible. Take a newly winged 220-hour pilot, send him to multi-engine or fighter transition and operational training, work him into a squadron for unit training, and send him to war. In the last four months of hostilities, 15 percent of heavy bomber losses were non-combat related.

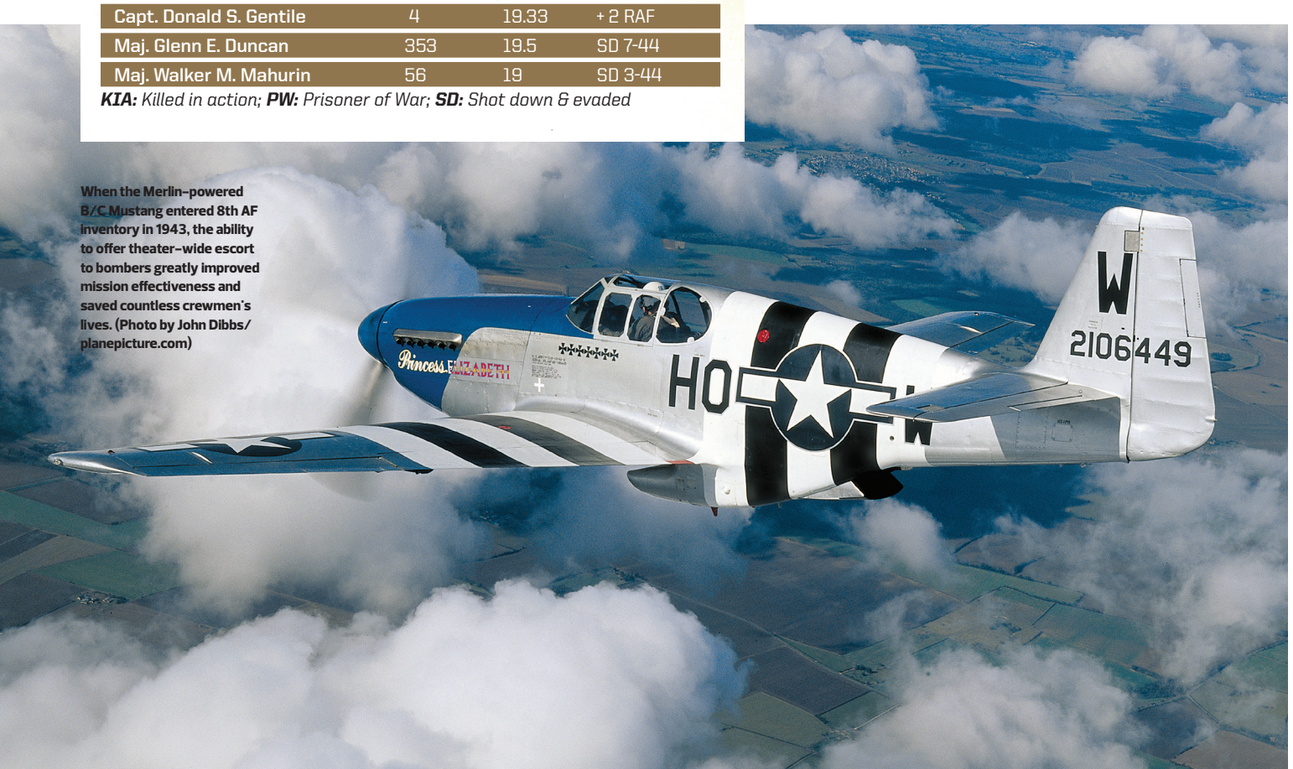
Control of the Eighth shifted from Spaatz's strategic bomber command to Eisenhower's control starting April 1, 1944. The onset of D-Day marked a temporary end to the Combined Bombing Offensive as airpower focused on German transport systems throughout Northern France. Luftwaffe opposition on the landing beaches on June 6 was negligible, as air supremacy was complete. Allied fighters only downed 30 enemy aircraft on D-Day.

By that time the Eighth's roster was nearly complete with 41 bomb groups (22 B-17s) and 15 fighter. The latter included six P-47 and four P-38 groups but shortly the Lightnings were gone and only the 56th retained Thunderbolts.

TOP 10 EIGHTH AIR FORCE FIGHTER ACES

Pilot	Group	Score	Comment
Lt. Col. Francis S. Gabreski	56	28	PW 7-44
Capt. Robert S. Johnson	56	27	
Maj. George E. Preddy	352	26.83	KIA 12-44
Lt. Col. John C. Meyer	352	24	+ 2 Korea
Col. David C. Schilling	56	22.5	
Capt. Raymond S. Wetmore	359	21.25	
Capt. Frederick C Christensen	56	21	
Capt. Donald S. Gentile	4	19.33	+ 2 RAF
Maj. Glenn E. Duncan	353	19.5	SD 7-44
Maj. Walker M. Mahurin	56	19	SD 3-44

KIA: *Killed in action;* ***PW:*** *Prisoner of War;* ***SD:*** *Shot down & evaded*



When the Merlin-powered B/C Mustang entered 8th AF inventory in 1943, the ability to offer theater-wide escort to bombers greatly improved mission effectiveness and saved countless crewmen's lives. (Photo by John Dibbs/ planepicture.com)

The airmen bristled at the diversion from their primary mission, but heavy bombardment helped support ground forces. Probably the best example was *Operation Cobra*, with B-17s and -24s saturating German defenses in the Allied breakout from Normandy. On July 25, almost 1,500 bombers unloaded west of Saint-Lo but poor air-ground coordination resulted in nearly 500 friendly casualties.

Before month's end the strategic air campaign resumed with attacks on enemy petroleum production, flying ever deeper into Germany. Originally a bomber tour was 25 missions, but Doolittle later extended it to 30 and then 35. With fewer losses, crews gained experience and performed better. However, there were few "milk runs" to those at the sharp end. Sergeant Mel Pontillo, a 489th Group Liberator gunner, recalled his last mission in November 1944:

"We were hitting an oil refinery plant at Sterkrade … in the Ruhr Valley. In this area, the Germans have over 900 flak guns. So, you can see why I was sweating.

"We left England and made landfall just south of Flushing…We went through Belgium, to the IP. We turned towards the bombing run and headed for the target. The Jerries really had our altitude today, and I think they threw up everything that they had; even the kitchen sink.

"Long before we dropped the bombs, flak was hitting all around us. We dropped the bombs and made a left-hand turn. The flak was so close that I could see the red flashes as it burst. We finally flew out of the flak and I really felt much better. As we left the target, the top turret gunner said he had two holes in his turret." They just missed his head.

"We finally left the coast and what a feeling. I was glad. Then too, I felt funny. On the way home we led the whole division. We finally landed, and boy, did I feel good. We had two holes in the top turret, one big hole in the right wing, and one in the left wing."

New year

Nine days before Christmas the German Army launched a stunning attack through the Ardennes Forest, catching the Allies by surprise. To help support the Ninth Air Force and RAF, the Eighth lent the 352nd and 361st Fighter Groups to bolster the hard-pressed Allies. The 352nd moved to Belgium in late December but the top gun, Maj. George Preddy, was killed in a friendly-fire incident by American gunners on Christmas Day.

On New Year's Day, Lt. Col. John C. Meyer had a squadron of blue-nosed Mustangs ready to take off on short notice. When the Luftwaffe opened *Operation Bodenplatte* that morning, the airspace over Airfield Y-29 became a churning low-level "furball" with P-51s and P-47s engaging Bf 109s and Fw 190s. The 352nd pilots downed 23 without loss.

Two weeks later, the air war peaked when AAF fighters scored a record 174 kills on January 14. The 357th sprang "The Great Mousetrap Play," claiming 58 victories for three losses north of Berlin. Increasingly the Luftwaffe was found on its airdromes rather than in the sky.

The long-range capabilities of the Mustang brought full-time coverage to the 8th's strategic bombers but the vulnerability of their liquid-cooled engines were often the reason for this scene where Lt. James C. Harrington of the 355th FG, brought his P-51B (YF-X) to a successful landing at his home field of Steeple Morden in July 1944. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Down on the deck

With Doolittle's policy change, VIII Fighter Command began working "on the deck" in the spring of 1944 and kept the pressure on Luftwaffe airdromes thereafter. As the Reich compressed in 1945, airfields were crammed with more and more planes, offering increasingly lucrative targets. The pinnacle came on April 16 when nearly 750 enemy planes were claimed destroyed on the ground. Four groups each received credit for 100-plus, paced by the 78th and 353rd, both with more than 130.

Four of the five leading strafers were group commanders or deputies, all lieutenant colonels. One reason for their success undoubtedly was because they were first over the target. Surprise was crucial to success and survival in strafing, as AA gunners could quickly adjust to following aircraft. Still, it was risky: six of the top 15 were shot down though one evaded capture.

The Fourth Group's star strafer was Maj. Jim Goodson who burned 15 planes on the ground plus 14 in the air. He joked that planning a major strafing mission could be counterproductive: "I was shot down on the only mission I ever planned!"

The most successful strafer was 55th Group commander Elwyn Righetti. He scored in mul-

EIGHTH AIR FORCE GROUPS, JUNE 1944

B-17s
91, 92, 94, 95, 96, 100, 303, 305, 306, 351, 379, 381, 384, 385, 388, 390, 398, 401, 447, 452, 457, 482 487

B-24s
34, 44, 93, 389, 392, 445, 446, 448, 453, 458, 466, 467, 486, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, (801, 802 special ops)

P-38s
20, 55, 364, 479. 7th Recon (F-5s)

P-47s
56, 78, 353 356, 359, 361

P-51s
4, 339, 352, 357

Captain Roy M. Scrutchfield of the 55th Ftr Squadron, 20th FG, at Kings Cliffe with his ground crew, T/Sgt. Meyers and Corporals Meade and Holler, pose before *Jeanne*, his P-38J 43-28430, coded KI-N. This ship was lost in a flying accident on June 16, 1944, with Major Paul A. Lobinger at the controls. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

TOP 15 EIGHTH AIR FORCE STRAFING ACES

Pilot	Group	Score	Comment
Lt. Col. Elwyn G. Righetti *	55	27	KIA 4-45
Lt. Col. Joseph L. Thury	339	25	
Lt. Col. John D. Landers *	55, 78	20	
Maj. Archie A. Tower	339	18	
Lt. Col. Claiborne H Kinnard *	4, 355	17	
Capt. Gordon B. Compton *	353	15	
1st Lt. William J. Cullerton *	355	15	PW 4-45
Maj. James A. Goodson *	4	15	PW 6-44
Capt. Henry W. Brown *	355	14.5	PW 10-44
Maj. Fred W. Glover *	4	14.5	Evaded
Capt. Edwin L. Heller *	352	14.5	
Capt. Melville W. Hightshoe	353	14.5	
Capt. Herbert G. Kolb	353	14.5	
Maj. Gerald Montgomery *	4	14.5	
Maj. John T. Godfrey *	4	13.67	PW 8-44

** = 5 or more aerial victories. 6 of top 15 shot down 40%*
***KIA:** Killed in action; **PW:** Prisoner of War; **SD:** Shot down & evaded*

tiples including six each on two days. On his last mission, April 17, he burned seven planes then took hits to his engine. Ever aggressive, he made another pass to claim two more destroyed, then bellied in nearby. He radioed that he broke his nose but said, "Be seeing you." It was not to be: apparently he was murdered by civilians. His 27 remained tops among strafers.

Among the finest shooters was Lt. Col. John Landers, the 24-year-old CO of the 78th Group. Having survived P-40s in the Southwest Pacific, he ran his Axis aerial total to 14.5 plus 20 "grounders." His gun camera film was impressive. In one instance he followed a German vehicle through a 90-degree left turn, keeping his tracers in the center of the road. Asked how he did it, "Big John" deadpanned, "Rudder, son. Lots of rudder."

The stellar performance was a 56th Group pilot, Lt. Randall Murphy, who burned 10 planes on April 13 while other Wolfpack pilots added 85 more.

In all, Eighth Air Force fighters claimed more than 4,000 grounders, led by the 355th's "Steeple Morden Strafers" with 502. The 4th, 339th, and 353rd all tallied 400 or more.

The numbers

At full strength in mid-1944, the Eighth numbered 41 bomb groups and 15 fighter groups. But the force was more than bombers and fighters. Three recon groups were assigned, one of which transferred to the Ninth Air Force. Each air division had a weather scouting unit flying P-51s, and special-operations squadrons performed air-sea rescue and electronic countermeasures missions.

The 15 groups of VIII Fighter Command claimed 5,150 aerial victories. The 246 aces accounted for over 1,700, or one-third of the total.

Precise figures are elusive but about 350,000 men passed through the Mighty Eighth, and most sources cite 26,000 lost to all causes and 21,000 wounded. (Total Marine Corps combat-related fatalities were 19,500.) Moreover, the Eighth lost 5,500 heavies to all causes. In a three-year campaign fought from 30,000 feet to the ground, the Mighty Eighth earned its record in frozen blood and crystalline contrails throughout Europe's skies.

Postscript

Dismantling the Eighth began immediately. First home was the 389th Bomb Group, which returned its B-24s to "Uncle Sugar" within two weeks of V-E Day. Originally 12 groups were retained on occupation duty but eventually they too flew west to peace — and home.

Meanwhile, half of the war remained to be won. In July, Jimmy Doolittle took some of his headquarters staff to Okinawa where the Eighth was to recycle with B-29s. Two new groups were combat-ready when the emperor over-rode his war cabinet and accepted surrender in mid-August.

In June 1946, the Eighth was assigned to the Strategic Air Command, serving in that capacity for the duration of the Cold War. Boeing remained the lifeblood of the command, as Convair B-36s were succeeded by B-47s and B-52s.

Today the Eighth Air Force belongs to Global Strike Command, fielding two B-52 wings in Louisiana and North Dakota, and the B-2 wing at Whiteman AFB, Missouri. ✠