

CHAPTER 4

THE WARSAW AIRLIFT: THE INITIAL OPERATIONS

The revolt of the Polish Home Army on 1 August 1944 must be seen within the context of events in the later phases of the Second World War. In the five years of the German occupation of Poland, life in Warsaw became intolerable for its inhabitants. People were killed by the Germans on a massive scale. This created the ideal environment for the official underground organisation to coordinate all resistance activities in Poland. They were just waiting for the right time to liberate themselves.

When the Soviet Union became a member of the Allies in 1943, the relationship between Poland and the Soviet Union did not improve. Official diplomatic relations had not yet been restored. Because of Stalin's callous attitude towards the Poles, they were convinced that his aim was eventually to control Poland. In July 1944, the Russian armies advanced closer to Warsaw. This worried the Poles. They knew it was essential for them to liberate themselves before the Russians arrived. They could not allow any one, especially the Russians, to forestall their moment of victory. But, after the start of the uprising, the situation in Warsaw became desperate for the partisans when the Russian Army's advance suddenly stopped, and nothing came of the decisive action they expected from the Russians.

From 2 August, the Polish government-in-exile in London earnestly and repeatedly requested Allied support. On 3 August, Polish Special Duties Flight 1586 flew three successful sorties to Warsaw, and again on 8 August.¹ These flights took off from Foggia, in Italy.² They confirmed earlier reports that the Germans had withdrawn a large part of their anti-aircraft defence from the city. On 9 August, a further four successful sorties were carried out.³ These initial flights proved valuable in providing some idea of the hazards of supply dropping on such a densely built-up area.

1 *Daily Express*, 15 August 1944: Allies drop arms in Warsaw, p.4.

2 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p. 248.

3 *The Times*, 11 August 1944: Help for Warsaw, p.3.

In response to the urgent, insistent appeals from the Polish authorities, Churchill decided to increase the effort by using more aircraft.⁴ Therefore 205 Group, commanded by a South African officer, Brigadier J.T. (Jimmy) Durrant⁵ was ordered to assist Polish Special Duties Flight 1586.⁶ 205 Group included 178 Squadron and 148 Squadron (334 Wing), Royal Air Force, and 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron (2 Wing) South African Air Force.

On the night of 12 August, with the weather deteriorating by the hour, a number of aircraft, including six Halifaxes of 148 Squadron Royal Air Force, took part in special supply flights from Brindisi in Italy, to Warsaw, to parachute supplies in to Polish partisans. Three aircraft were successful in dropping their supplies on the target areas in Warsaw. Two aircraft, Halifax EB196 E and Halifax JN897 T, succeeded in dropping 9 containers and 6 packages each. The other, Halifax JN958 A, was attacked by a German fighter in the vicinity of Cracow. The pilot took evasive action and also succeeded in dropping his containers. These aircraft flew an average of 11 hours on their journey to Warsaw and back.⁷

Three other aircraft also managed to reach Warsaw but could not find the target areas and decided to return. One of these aircraft, Halifax BB429 V, could not find the target because of navigational error. The aircraft also experienced technical problems. The other two, Halifax JP245 D and Halifax JP223 W, could not pinpoint the target area, and therefore had to abandon the mission and return to base. Dense cloud-banks and electric storms forced several other aircraft to turn back to base after they had already crossed the Carpathian Mountains.⁸

4 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.249.

5 During 1943 Colonel Jimmy Durrant was officer commanding 3 Wing SAAF. He later took up a post with the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces. On 3 August 1944 he became Officer Commanding 205 Group. This Group included 178 Squadron RAF and 2 Wing, SAAF with 31 and 34 Squadrons. He was promoted brigadier on assumption of his new duties; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.233.

6 A.E. van Jaarsveldt, "Die Warskoudebakel", *Militaria*, vol. 7, no 4, 1977, p.30.

7 Public Record Office, London, Air 27, Piece 996, report 12/13 Aug. 1944, pp.2,4.

8 Public Record Office, London, Air 27, Piece 996, report 12/13 Aug. 1944, p.4.

When the aircraft approached Warsaw around midnight, the blazing city⁹ was visible from about 45 kilometres away. Heavy smoke clouded large parts of the city. One of the crew members remarked afterwards that if he had been blind he could have smelt his way to Warsaw from 30 kilometres away.¹⁰ Upon reaching their target areas the aircraft decreased speed to approximately 140 kilometres per hour and descended to an altitude of 150 metres. These slow moving aircraft with their precious cargo were now clearly visible in the bright glow emanating from the burning buildings, making them easy targets for enemy fire.¹¹

Although earlier reports had indicated that very few German anti-aircraft guns were operating in Warsaw, these aircraft encountered heavy opposition. Searchlights blinded the pilots and made it impossible for some to distinguish the dropping zones. Others succeeded in identifying the dropping zones at Krasinski Square, which could be identified because white lights had been placed by partisans in a diamond-shaped lane to indicate the drop-zone.¹²

The following day, reports were received from the underground army in Warsaw. These reports indicated that the supplies they received had enabled them to expand the borders of the territory they controlled to the northern end of the market in the old city. This represented a significant increase in the size of the area they controlled. German defences, however, soon isolated the three sectors held by the partisans, dividing the different sectors from one another and preventing supplies from sector B from reaching sectors A or C.

The partisans now pleaded for supplies to be dropped on the other two sectors.¹³

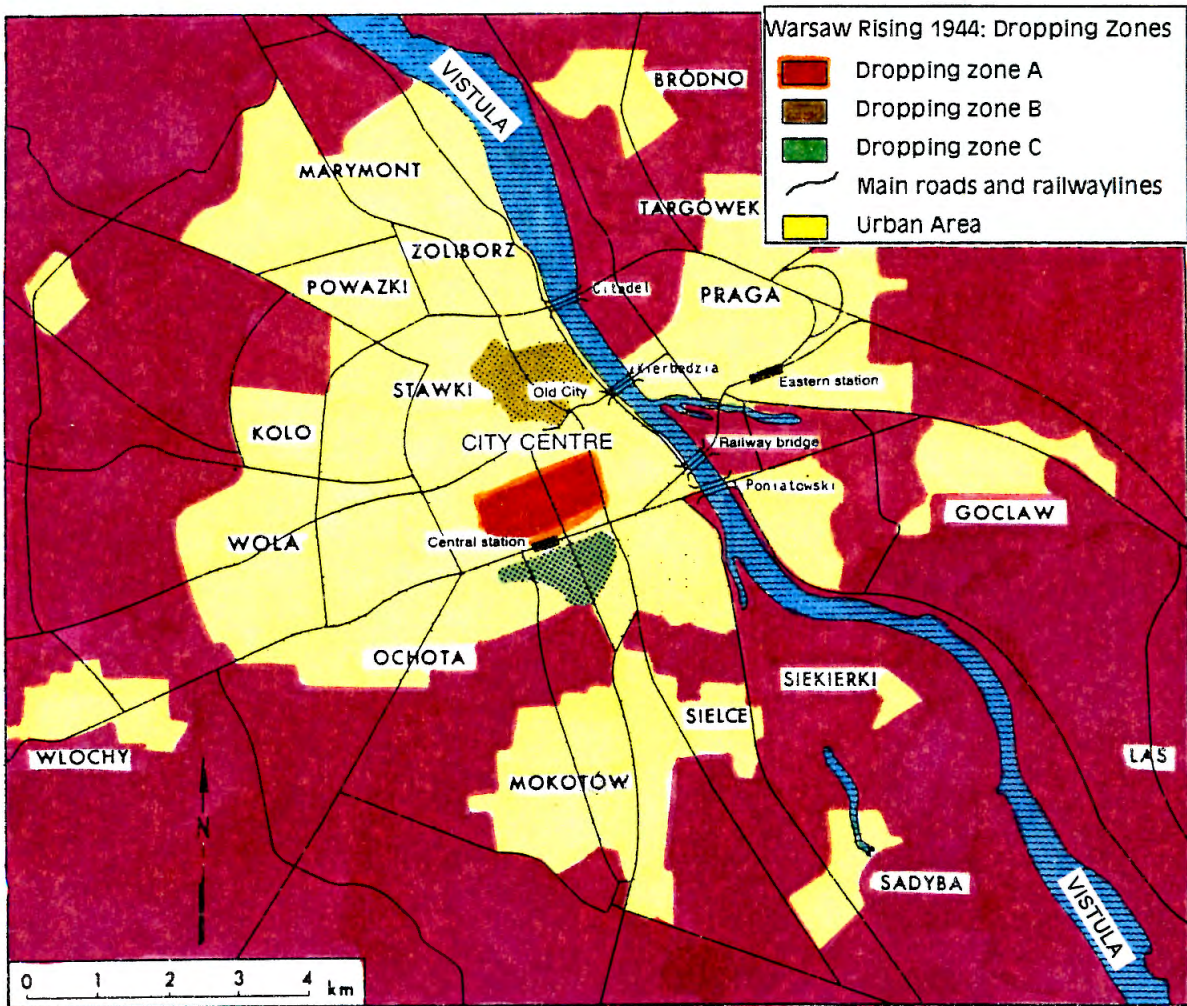
9 Buildings in Warsaw were burning because of the fighting between the Germans and the inhabitants of the city. Many building were also set on fire by the Germans.

10 R.C.W. Burgess, Personal interview, Cape Town, 7 December 1984.

11 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, pp.250-251.

12 British Ministry of Defence, London, Air Historical Branch, File 13: Air supply for Warsaw, n.d.

13 British Ministry of Defence, London, Air Historical Branch, File 13: Air supply for Warsaw, n.d.



WARSAW RISING 1944: MAP INDICATING DROPPING ZONES A, B AND C, THE MAIN ROADS AND RAILWAY LINES, AS WELL AS THE URBAN AREA IN WARSAW.

In August 1944 Lieutenant-Colonel D.U. Nel became the new Officer Commanding 31 Squadron. Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Williams was promoted to Wing-Commander of 2 Wing.¹⁴ On 13 August 1944, crews of 31 Squadron SAAF received instructions to fly sorties from their Italian bases at Celone or Brindisi.¹⁵ A Polish Squadron Commandant indicated the route and objective on a map and explained the particulars of this high-priority operation. The target was Warsaw and the purpose of the operation was to provide the besieged city with supplies. The aircraft would transport metal containers with weapons, ammunition and medicines. The Polish officer showed the crews a map indicating the air-supply zones in Warsaw.¹⁶

Up to that point in time, 31 and 34 Squadron SAAF had been mainly involved in the Mediterranean. They were involved in the bombing of the Italian port of Genoa, and participated in the important task of laying sea-mines in the Danube.¹⁷

Right from the outset, the crews of 205 Group raised the question with their commanding officers, why they should be involved in these flights over a distance of 2 815 kilometres when the Russians, by then a member of the Allies, could provide the supplies.¹⁸ This question was again raised with the Officer Commanding 205 Group, Brigadier Jimmy Durrant. He also could not offer an explanation. According to reports they received, the Russians were just outside Warsaw, fighting the Germans on the outskirts or the city.¹⁹ No reasons could be given why the Russians were unwilling to render any assistance to the Poles.

The Americans were also reluctant to become involved. On 13 August, General J. Eaker, head of the United States Combined Chiefs of Staff, suggested a review of the original decision not to employ heavy bombers of the United

14 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.191.

15 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.249.

16 D DOC S, Pretoria, SAAF, War Diary, Container 44, File 1, p.54237; J.T. Durrant, Personal interview, Johannesburg, 14 June 1983.

17 The laying of sea-mines in the Danube was to prevent cargo ships, carrying mainly oil, from reaching the enemy; L. Isemonger, *Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron*, p.88. H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.249.

18 L.J. van Eyssen, Personal interview, 15 August 1983.

19 N.D. Orpen, *Airlift to Warsaw; The rising of 1944*, p.80.

States Air Force to drop supplies on Warsaw. Although no definite commitments were proposed by the Allies in Europe, it was suggested that the United States Air Force should do their best to assist with the operations in the Warsaw area.²⁰ Senior officers, however, were in agreement with the United States Secretary of State, Harry Hopkins, that the United States government would seriously jeopardise relations with the Soviet Government if it insisted on using Russian bases during such supply operations.²¹

On 13 August, during the afternoon briefing session, the Allied crews of 205 Group were given more information concerning the operation they were to undertake. For the greater part of the distance of 2 815 kilometres from Brindisi to Warsaw, the aircraft would be flying over enemy territory, while a large part of the flight also had to take place in broad daylight.²²

The aircraft involved did not fly in closed formation although they left approximately at the same time. In close formation enemy searchlight batteries could spot the aircraft more easily and pinpoint them as targets. German night fighters, taking off from Szombathely in Hungary and Cracow in Poland, could also intercept these Liberators more easily in a closed formation. The Allies did not have any fighter aircraft available to accompany the Liberators during the long flights to Warsaw.²³

The route extended from the heel of Italy across the Adriatic sea, Yugoslavia, Hungary and the eastern parts of Czechoslovakia to the Carpathians. Pilots then had to follow the Vistula river to Warsaw,²⁴ where they had to pass over four

20 National Archives, Washington DC, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Warsaw dropping operations, n.d.

21 National Archives, Washington DC, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Warsaw dropping operations, n.d.

22 N. Orpen, *Airlift to Warsaw; The rising of 1944*, p.81; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.250; J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, 15 August 1983; Anon. "SAAF heroes in Warsaw Airlift", *Paratus*, vol. 34, no.9, September 1983, p.22.

23 The Americans flew in a closed formation to Warsaw on 18 September because they were escorted by P-51 aircraft

24 In the south, the Vistula river, north-east of Cracow, followed the shape of a half-round arch and then narrowed to 350 - 400 metres, where it flowed through the city of Warsaw. There were four prominent bridges across the Vistula: Poniatowski bridge, situated between the centre of the city and Saska Kepa; a train bridge between the eastern and central stations; Kierbedzia bridge, between the old city and the suburb, Praga; and the fourth, the Citadel bridge; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.250.

prominent bridges across the river. The aircraft flew at a speed of 260 kilometres per hour and descended to an altitude of 152 metres. At the fourth bridge they had to turn left, flying westward for a short distance, before turning in a southerly direction again. Supplies had to be accurately dropped on identified street areas or air-supply zones. The supply zones, as had been pre-arranged with the aircrews, would be indicated by the letter "T" being displayed with the tail-end of the "T" pointing in the direction of the city centre. After the aircraft flashed a code letter, the letter "T" would be displayed by electric flashlights. The centre of the supply zone would be indicated by red lights. As soon as the cargo had been dropped, the aircraft were to circle over the zone and flash the letter "K" in order to establish from the partisan's signals whether the supplies had been received.²⁵

The Liberator bomber, which was used for this exercise, weighed 25 480 kilogram (28 tons) and was equipped with four engines, each developing approximately 150 kilowatt.²⁶ Each aircraft carried 12 metal containers, 2,45 metres long, weighing approximately 150 kilogram each, a total of approximately 1 800 kilogram of supplies.²⁷ The fuel capacity of the aircraft was roughly 9 000 litres and the fuel consumption nearly 4,5 litres per 1,857 kilometres. Therefore the aircraft could fly a distance of 3 714 kilometres. The aircraft was armed with ten half-inch machine guns. Only a small amount of ammunition and arms could be carried on each flight since the largest part of the aircraft's carrying capacity was taken up by fuel. Usually during ordinary flights the calculated fuel reserve would be 25% to account for possible emergencies. During the flights to Warsaw the estimated reserve was only 9%.²⁸

Naturally, flying this great distance, these Liberators would be easy targets for enemy aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery. Enemy searchlight batteries spotted the aircraft and pinpointed them as targets for German night fighters, taking

25 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.258; A. Blake, *Die vlug na Warschau* (unp. document, South African Military Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.); L.Isemonger, *Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron*, p.88

26 A. Blake, *Die vlug na Warschau* (unp. document, South African Military Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.).

27 J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, 15 August 1983.

28 A. Blake, *Die vlug na Warschau* (unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.); J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, 15 August 1983.

off from Szombathely in Hungary and Cracow in Poland to intercept the Liberators.²⁹ These German night fighters could strike at any time and posed a constant danger. This caused the aircrews great stress and anxiety and made the flights extremely perilous³⁰ Many aircraft were damaged so badly they had to carry out forced landings. Others were shot down by night fighters or anti-aircraft guns.³¹

For most of the flight, navigators were unable to communicate with radio transmission from ground stations on their radios because they were out of reach. Under normal conditions these ground stations helped the navigators to maintain the aircraft on course. Pilots also had to be on the alert to spot high mountain ranges like the Tatra mountains in Czechoslovakia and the Carpathian mountains closer to Warsaw.

Upon reaching the Vistula, the aircrews became aware of a dim glow on the horizon. As they approached, it slowly became bigger until it developed into a bright inferno. This was Warsaw, the capital of Poland, burning.³²

The aircraft trembled³³ as they flew at approximately 350 metres above the burning city. The warm air and smoke inside the aircraft became almost intolerable. Fires lit the sky above the city, making the aircraft easy targets for enemy machine guns positioned on the roofs. Pilots were often blinded by the searchlight batteries stationed across the city.³⁴

29 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, pp.250-251.

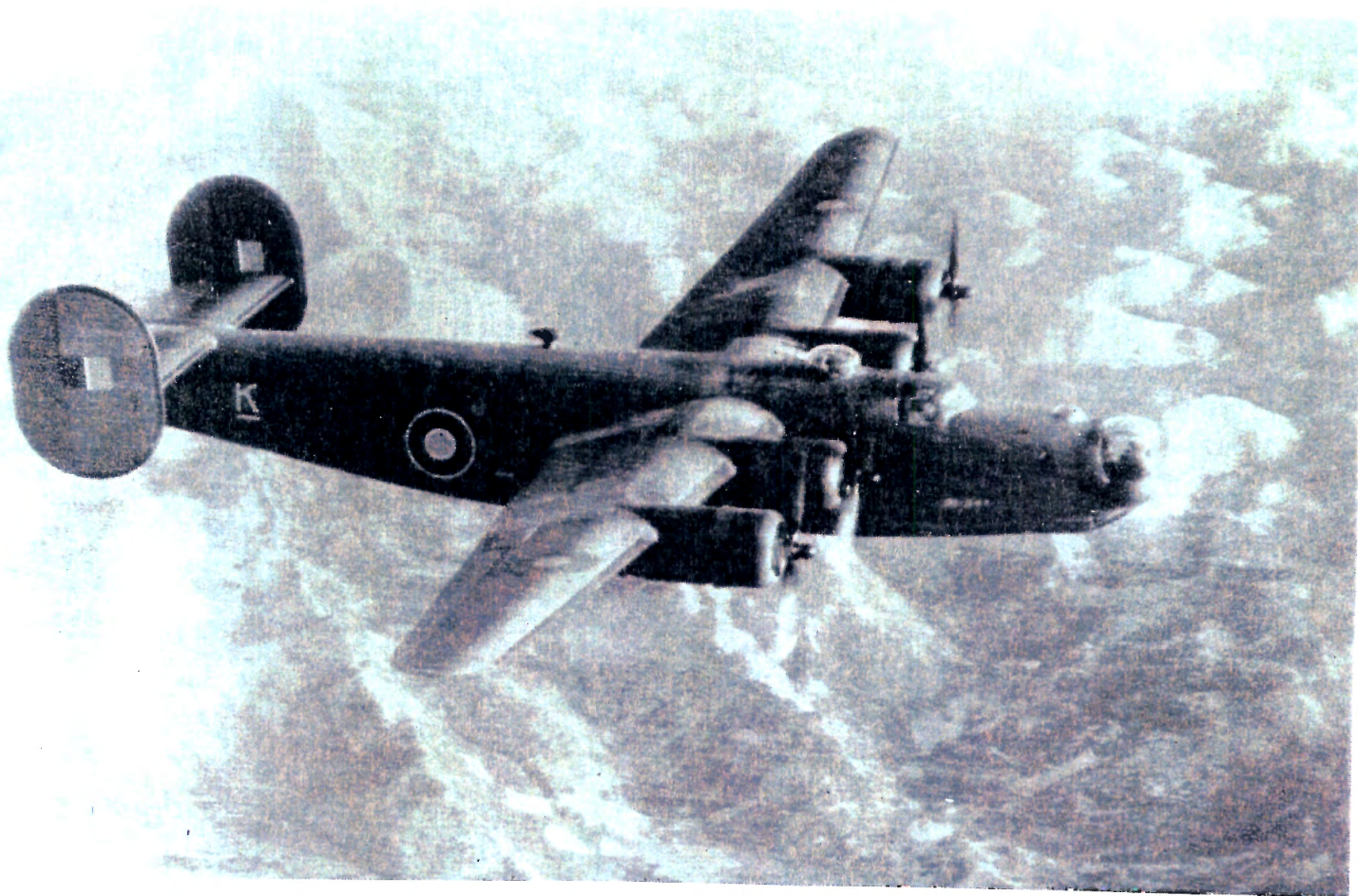
30 A. Blake, *Die vlug na Warschau* (unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.).

31 British Ministry of Defence, London, Air Historical Branch, London, File 13: Air supply for Warsaw, n.d.

32 A. Blake, *Die vlug na Warschau* (unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.); J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, 15 August 1983.

33 This was because of the thermal effect of the fires in the burning city.

34 L. Isemonger, *Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron*, p.93.



LIBERATOR MK VI IN WHICH SUPPLY FLIGHTS TO WARSAW WERE UNDERTAKEN.

Source; *Militaria*, vol. 7, no. 4, April 1977.

The air was streaked with tracer bullets and, when a Liberator exploded after a direct hit, it appeared like a small spark against the background of the burning city. The Polish partisans usually marked the supply zones with flare-strips. To mark the target at night, large fires were lit, approximately nine metres apart. At Krasinski Square the dropping zones could be identified because white lights had been placed by partisans in a diamond-shaped lane to indicate the drop-zone. When big fires were burning nearby, fires were only lit when the aircraft reached the dropping zones and the pilots had flashed an identifying code letter. When enemy flights across air-supply zones were a threat, fires were only lit after identifying code letters had been flashed by both the pilot and the ground forces. Since aircraft flying at such a low altitude were an easy target, it was necessary to select air-supply zones very carefully. Even if visibility was excellent, crews were still exposed to the dangers of flying low over unknown areas. To enable the ground forces to collect the containers quickly, the pilot flashed another code letter to notify ground forces when the supplies had been dropped. Ground forces then flashed again to indicate whether or not the containers had been received. This procedure enabled pilots to report immediately on the success of the mission.³⁵ The reason that different code letters were used was to prevent the Germans from intervening. German flights across air-supply zones were always a threat to the partisans. If the enemy knew where the dropping zones were, they could inform the German ground forces about the whereabouts of the partisans. Sometimes German forces also tried to confuse the Allied aircrews from positions on the ground by flashing codes in order to get them to drop supplies in areas that they controlled. The codes were usually pre-arranged with the aircrews at the briefings and were to indicated by different letters of the alphabet.

In spite of these precautions, large quantities of the weapons and ammunition in the metal containers were intercepted by the Germans.³⁶

35 A. Blake, *Die vlug na Warschau* (unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.); A.E. van Jaarsveldt, "Die Warskoudebakel", *Militaria*, vol.7, no.4, 1977, p.30; British Ministry of Defence, Air Historical Branch, London, File 13: Air supply for Warsaw, n.d.

36 A. Blake: *Die vlug na Warschau* (unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.); L.J. van Eyssen, Personal interview, 15 August 1983.

As the number of aircraft taking part in these missions increased, every dropping process was thoroughly planned to prevent collisions and injuries to ground personnel. Each Liberator usually carried 12 containers. When dropped simultaneously the containers usually bumped against each other, either tearing or damaging the parachutes in the process. It was later discovered that the safest method of delivery was to drop the metal containers one after another from fairly low altitude and at reasonably low flying speeds.³⁷

³⁷ N.D. Orpen, *Airlift to Warsaw; The rising of 1944*, p.82; A. Blake, *Die vlug na Warschau* (Unp. document, South African Military History Museum, Johannesburg, n.d.); J.L. van Eyssen, Personal interview, 15 August 1983.