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**THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIR FORCE AND THE
WARSAW AIRLIFT OF 1944**

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Dedicated to my wife

Anelia

and our four daughters

Marié, Annelie, Marike-Louise and Caromien

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN TEXT

AK	: Armia Krajowa (Polish Home Guard)
AL	: Armia Ludowa (Communist-controlled People's Army)
OC	: Officer Commanding
BCAF	: Belgian Congo Air Force
D DOC S	: Defence Documentation Services (Military Information Bureau)
DFC	: Distinguished Flying Cross
DSO	: Distinguished Service Order
JATS	: Joint Air Training Scheme
NAREP	: Narratives and Reports
NSZ	: Narrate Shily Zbronje (National Armed Forces)
RAF	: Royal Air Force
SAB	: Central Archives Depot
SAAF	: South African Air Force
SAMWH	: South African Museum for War History
SOE	: Special Operations Executive
US	: United States
USAF	: United States Air Force
USSTAF	: United States Strategic Air Force
USSR	: Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
ZAS	: Zwartkop Air Station
ZWZ	: Zwiazek Walki Zbrojonej (The Association for Armed Struggle)

INTRODUCTION

The Second World War started on 3 September 1939, after the German forces had invaded Poland three days earlier without any previous declaration of war. On 17 September, Russian troops invaded Poland from the east and occupied the eastern provinces. Britain and France declared war against Germany but could not save Poland in time. This came as a bitter blow to the Polish people, who knew that once again their independence was at stake. Soon after the German occupation, Polish liberation movements were formed to coordinate all resistance activities against the Germans.¹ In January 1940, all the resistance movements were ordered to submit to the authority of the Home Army, later known as the *Armia Krajowa*. These Polish partisans were waiting for the right moment to free themselves from German occupation. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, a door was opened for cooperation between the Allies and the Soviet Union. This changed the Polish-Russian situation dramatically.

In 1943, Russian forces launched an extensive offensive against the Germans and were engaged in fierce battles with them. By July 1944, the Russian armies were approximately 48 kilometres from Warsaw. Since diplomatic relations were not yet restored, the Polish partisans knew that Russian liberation could have serious implications for them. It could well simply mean an replacing one oppressor with another. They dreaded even a temporary or partial occupation by the Russians. Therefore, with the Russian armies on their doorstep, the *Armia Krajowa* instigated an uprising against the Germans in Warsaw on 1 August 1944 and occupied major sectors of the city. Two days later, the partisans controlled most of the city's south-western sector. Because the uprising had important consequences for the plans of the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, the Russian forces were abruptly ordered to stop their advance on Warsaw.

The situation in Warsaw soon became desperate for the partisans because they needed armour and ammunition, as well as medical supplies. On 3 August 1944, the Commander of the Polish partisans in Warsaw called for urgent help from the Allies. In response to this insistent appeal, the British Prime Minister,

¹ The Polish people, who resisted the German occupation of Poland and who fought against the Germans, are usually referred to as partisans. In this thesis the term will also be used to refer to them.

Winston Churchill, ordered Allied squadrons to fly from Italy to provide the necessary supplies to Warsaw. This operation became known as the "Warsaw Airlift".

Of the many tragic episodes of war throughout history, few, if any, demonstrate such intrinsic futility as the Warsaw Airlift of August and September 1944; indeed, as will be explained further in this study, statesmen and military strategists agree that political expediency dictated military principle.

Although many books have been published on various aspects of the Second World War, very little research has been done into the Warsaw affair and only a few books on the topic have been published. Most of these works are popular narratives of events.²

The author of this study wrote a Masters' thesis on the participation of 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron South African Air Force (SAAF) in the Warsaw Airlift.³ An extremely focused research was conducted, primarily into the involvement of the two South African squadrons which participated in the Warsaw Airlift. Mainly primary sources which were available in South Africa were used. The study did not give any attention to the political background which led to the Warsaw Airlift nor did it compare the involvement of the South African squadrons to that of other squadrons which participated.

Many authoritative works by military historians have appeared on various aspects of the war, but none of them deals with the Warsaw Airlift in a comprehensive way. Keene,⁴ for instance, deals comprehensively with the participation of the South African forces in the Second World War, but does not even mention the Warsaw Airlift. A standard work on air battles during the Second World War⁵ does not deal with the Warsaw operation at all.

2 These texts will be discussed later in this chapter.

3 P.L. Möller, *31 Eskader en 34 Eskader Suid-Afrikaanse Lugmag se aandeel aan die Warskou-operasies gedurende Augustus en September 1944* (Ongep. M.A.- verhandeling, US, 1985).

4 J. Keene, *South Africa in World War II* (Pretoria, Human & Rousseau, 1995).

5 C. Chant, et al., *World War II Land Sea and Air Battles, 1939-1945* (Great Britain, Octopus Books, 1977).

In this thesis, the main concern will be to evaluate the role of the SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift, and to place the contribution of the SAAF within the broad context of the involvement of the Allied Forces. It will also be shown, by means of a comparative study and statistical data, that the SAAF did indeed play a major role.

In order to evaluate the role of the SAAF the focus will be on questions such as:

- * Was this operation militarily feasible? Should an operation, which represented a flight of more than 2 815 km over enemy territory, ever have taken place, and is there any military lesson to be learned from this episode?
- * Did political considerations play a major part? At the outset, the British press alleged that the operation was more politically inspired than militarily defensible, and therefore insisted on an answer as to whether these flights took place because of political or military considerations.
- * Why was the burden of the flights allocated to crews of the SAAF and other Allied Forces, although the South Africans were playing a very successful part in other spheres of the war at that stage?
- * What was the attitude of the aircrews to the dangerous missions they had to undertake? What were the main problems they encountered during these flights? What was the rate of success?
- * Were the efforts by the aircrews who participated of any help to the partisans? Did they succeed in reducing the casualties in Poland? Did the supplies dropped by these Allied squadrons mean the difference between survival or defeat and did it mean the difference between life and death for the Polish people in Warsaw? Moreover, did the continuous arrival of Allied planes to drop supplies have any salutary effect on morale and hopes for the revived partisans?
- * Can a comparison be drawn between the efforts of the Allies who flew from Italy to Warsaw on the one hand, and the single contribution to the airlift of the Americans on the other hand to evaluate and judge the success achieved by both?
- * Did the fact that the uprising by the partisans in Warsaw failed, belittle the efforts of the crews participating in the airlift?

Other aspects that will have to be considered, seen from an Allied viewpoint, is Churchill's role and position,⁶ as well as the involvement of the Americans and the role of Stalin and the Soviets.

The research for this study was conducted at archives in South Africa, Britain, and the United States of America. Polish, Russian and German sources were not consulted as a result of linguistic constraints. It should, however, be borne in mind that this study deals with the history of an Allied operation and the objective was to evaluate this from the Allied point of view.

South African military archival sources, which include war diaries, divisional documents, documents of the Union War Histories Advisory Committee and original sortie reports,⁷ were consulted. Most of these documents are kept at the South African National Defence Force Documentation Services' Offices in Pretoria.

The various war diaries contain vital information on every aspect of military activities during the war. Much information was collected from the war diaries about the airmen who were involved in the airlift to Warsaw because they contain very accurate day to day accounts of their activities.

The sortie reports were of particular value. They are original reports, which contain vital information on the flights to Warsaw by the crews involved. Every little detail and piece of information about the flights are given in these sortie reports, in which the crews of the various aircraft are indicated as well as the time the aircraft left homebase, at what altitude they flew and all the in-flight observations made by the crews. The observations of the flight crews over Warsaw and the drops of supplies to the partisans are given in the finest detail in these reports.

The divisional documents and documents of the Union War Histories were used for additional information. The Union War Histories Committee was founded by Jan Smuts to record the history of the War. Although these documents hold much detailed information on the war, they contributed less than other sources to the compilation of information on the Warsaw Airlift.

6 Churchill had personally ordered the flights to Warsaw; H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious*, p.249; J.T. Durrant, Personal interview, 14 June 1983.

7 The official information about a specific flight is indicated in the sortie report.

Personal interviews with some of those who were involved in the flights to Warsaw were used to support these sources.

In Britain, archival investigation and study were carried out at the Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, London, as well as the Imperial War Museum, the Royal Air Force Museum, Colindale Newspaper Library, the British Library, the British Library of Political and Economical Science, the British Newspaper Library, the House of Commons Library, the House of Lords' Record Office, Her Majesty's Stationery Office and the Ministry of Defence, Lacon House, London.

The Public Records Office, where the official military documents of the Royal Air Force are kept, is situated at Kew, near London. Vital information on the participation of Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons which participated in the Warsaw Airlift was found here. Many other documents used at this archive provided information on British policy regarding the Warsaw incident. An example is the original script by E.L. Woodward of British Foreign Policy in the Second World War. Many documents about Churchill were also found here.

At the British Ministry of Defence at Lacon House in London, much information was gathered. Documents contained information on the role played by squadrons of the RAF during the Warsaw Airlift. Information on reunions which took place in the 1970s and 1980s was also found. Many of the pamphlets that were consulted here did not contain correct information. Flights are recorded on days when they could not have taken place because of very bad weather conditions. Nevertheless, vital information on the observations of RAF crews who participated in flights to Warsaw was found here.

At the British Library, many books and periodicals regarding the Polish situation during the war were consulted.

At Colindale Newspaper Library, all the newspapers which reported on the situation in Warsaw from 1 August 1944 till the end of October 1944 were consulted, to gather information to support the official archival documentation of the events in Warsaw.

In the United States, much time was spent at the National Archives as well as the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The National Archives contain most of the documents on the operation the Americans called "Frantic 7". The detailed information on the flight to Warsaw on 18 September 1944 was found here. Many documents on the political considerations involved were also

found at this archive. At the Library of Congress, various books and periodicals were consulted. Subsequent research to support the information found at the National Archives in Washington also took place at the National Archives, Suitland, Virginia.

Among the secondary sources which were used, the following were especially valuable:

Martin and Orpen were involved in the writing of several books on the Second World War.⁸ Two of these texts deal specifically with the South African aircrews in the Warsaw Airlift.⁹ Lieutenant General H.J. Martin, the co-author of the first of these, served in the SAAF throughout World War II. The sixth volume in the series on the South African Forces in World War II is aptly named *Eagles Victorious*.¹⁰ This collaboration between an experienced former chief of the SAAF and a widely respected historian has resulted in a unique record of the operations of the SAAF from about 1943 to the end of the war in 1945. During this period, the Allied air superiority rapidly gained almost total mastery of the skies over the Mediterranean, Italy and the Balkans. The South African contribution to this great exercise involved no fewer than 28 Squadrons, serving not only in four different SAAF Wings but also under both British and American commands. These widespread activities demanded the highest measure of courage, efficiency and devotion to duty in the face of danger from ground fire which increased by the day as resistance from German fighters slackened, and encompassed some of the finest accomplishments of any air force during the war. Among them, the Warsaw supply dropping operations stand out as a supreme example of selfless bravery. One of the chapters in *Eagles Victorious*, entitled "Tragedy at Warsaw", deals adequately with the Warsaw Airlift. This ordeal against overwhelming odds remains an epic of tenacity. This operation provides us with classic examples of an aspect of air force activity of which little has been previously heard. Martin and Orpen have compiled a record that puts the role of the SAAF in its true perspective. This

8 N.D. Orpen, *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1968); N.D. Orpen, *War in the Desert* (Cape Town Purnell, 1971); H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *South Africa at War* (Johannesburg, Purnell, 1979)

9 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1977); N.D. Orpen, *Airlift to Warsaw: The Rising of 1944* (New York, Foulsham & Co., 1984).

10 H.J. Martin & N.D. Orpen, *Eagles Victorious* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1977)

detailed history deals with the events relating to the war with authority and discernment, and is an excellent account of the most dramatic moments in South Africa's military annals. Unfortunately they do not compare the success of the South African squadrons to that of other squadrons which participated. Nor does the work deal with the complicated political issues which were involved in the Airlift.

The second text, Neil Orpens' *Airlift to Warsaw: The Rising of 1944*, is exclusively concerned with the facts of the Airlift. He concentrates on popular incidents and is mostly concerned with matters of human interest. To a certain extent he distorts the events to suit his main theme. He is mostly concerned with the shining examples of selfless courage which were displayed by the people who were involved. He does not mention the role played by the SAAF in other operations during the war, nor does he make comparisons between the involvement of the different Allied squadrons which participated.

Air Marshall Sir John Slessor, Officer Commanding the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces in Italy, wrote a book¹¹ on the contribution of the Allied Air Forces in the Second World War. Slessor was very much involved in negotiations regarding the Warsaw Airlift. His book provides the reader with information on the total involvement of the Allied forces in the Mediterranean during the war. The value of this book lies in Slessors' first hand information regarding the political issues and the balanced way in which they are discussed. Unfortunately the contribution of the South African squadrons is not evaluated.

Pidsley¹² is particularly concerned with the contribution of the South African Forces in World War II. This writer deals adequately with the contribution of the South African forces in the Second World War. His work succeeds in giving perspective on the context of the growth and development of the South African forces.

Other works deal to a large extent with corps and unit histories and some of them are narratives relating to the actions in which South African units were

¹¹ J. Slessor, *The Central Blue* (London, Cassell, 1956).

¹² D.W. Pidsley, *The South African Air Force: a Perspective in the Context of the Growth and Development of the South African Society up to 1985* (Pretoria, SAAF Col., 1989).

involved. Acts of bravery and deeds of valour are given pride of place and therefore many of these works are often biased.

Lawrence Isemonger wrote a manuscript on his personal experiences during the Second World War.¹³ The manuscript is kept at the Documentation Services of the South African National Defence Force in Pretoria. Isemonger served as a corporal in the Technical Stores of 31 Squadron SAAF. He gathered recollections of former members of 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron SAAF who participated in the Warsaw Airlift. The value of this document lies in the detailed description of the personal experiences of the aircrews involved in the flights to Warsaw. The document is written in an informal style. Together with official archival documents this manuscript makes a significant contribution towards analysing the history of the Warsaw Airlift. Perhaps one of its greatest contributions lies in the fact that it contains valuable information of an unofficial nature.

Some books published on European politics during the Second World War explain the concerns the Great Powers had regarding the Polish question. Authors of these books are not always in agreement with one another when it comes to facts concerning the war.

Publications by Garlinski, Kacewicz, Polonski and Gilbert¹⁴ give a valuable range of viewpoints on the various political issues involved. It will be shown in the thesis that different writers held many varying opinions on these matters. Many Polish writers have written books on the Warsaw affair. The works found most valuable for this study of the role played by Polish partisans after the invasion of the German forces in Warsaw are those by Berg, Bruce, Ciechanowski, Deschner, Dragomer, Korbonski, Nowak, Pomian, Zawodny and Zagorski.¹⁵ The main contribution of these writers is the first hand information

¹³ L. Isemonger, *Target Warsaw. The Story of South Africa's First Heavy Bomber Squadron* (unp. document, Library, D DOC S, (Pretoria)).

¹⁴ J. Garlinski, *Poland, SOE and the Allies* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1969); G.V. Kacewicz, *Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the Polish Government in Exile, 1939-1945* (The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1979); A. Polonsky, *The Great Powers and the Polish Question, 1941-1945* (London, Orbis, 1976); M. Gilbert, *Churchill* (London, Heinemann, 1979).

¹⁵ M. Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto: A Diary* (New York, University Press, 1944); G. Bruce, *The Warsaw Uprising, 1 August - 2 October 1944* (London, Hart-Davis, 1972); J.M. Ciechanowski, *The Warsaw Rising of 1944* (New York, University Press, 1974); G. Deschner, *Warsaw Rising* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1972); U. Dragomer, *It Started in Poland* (London, Faber & Faber, 1941); S. Korbonski, *The Polish Underground State, 1939-45* (New York, Praeger, 1978); J. Nowak, *Courier from Warsaw* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1982); A. Pomian, *The*

they give on the situation in Warsaw during the German occupation. They also supplied vital information on events in Warsaw during the airlift. This information is vital to the main concerns of this study.

The first chapter of this thesis reviews the founding years of the SAAF and gives a synoptic picture of the participation and the contribution of the SAAF in the Second World War. The South African forces were involved in a number of activities. Among their fine accomplishments was the Warsaw Airlift. This chapter tries to place the Warsaw Airlift in the context of the total involvement of the SAAF in the war.

In the second chapter, the history of the two South African squadrons, 31 Squadron and 34 Squadron, which participated in the Warsaw Airlift, is discussed. Since these two squadrons were not only involved in the Warsaw Airlift, but also in many other theatres of the war, this information gives the reader a better understanding of the role the squadrons played in the total war effort. This chapter provides information on the operations which the two squadrons who later participated in the Warsaw Airlift were involved in earlier in the war. The daily activities at Foggia are also briefly described to present a better understanding of the daily activities and personal circumstances of the aircrews who were involved in the flights to Warsaw

The third chapter presents an account of the political situation in Warsaw in 1939 after the German forces invaded Poland. The very complicated political situation is described to inform the reader about the relationships between the European countries at the time. The relationship between the Poles and the Soviets is evaluated. The ill-fated Warsaw uprising is described and the different accounts of the resulting agony are evaluated. The Stalin factor in the Warsaw affair is dealt with to show his reluctance to get involved in the Warsaw uprising. He professed to believe that the uprising was instigated by criminals and irresponsible agitators. Churchill on the other hand asserted that everything possible should be done to assist the valiant Poles. Churchill's conduct and his efforts to assist the Polish patriots are also discussed. Whether these flights took place because of political or military considerations will also be considered and the Soviet conduct will be evaluated. This chapter also deals with the events which led to the airlift and the subsequent failure of the revolt

in the devastated Polish capital. The main objective of this chapter is therefore to set the stage for the reader to understand the political scenario on the eve of the Allies involvement in the Warsaw Airlift.

Chapters four to nine give a detailed description of the sorties undertaken by the various Allied squadrons, recording specific details of the dangerous flights to Warsaw. Although similarities did exist every individual flight to Warsaw represents an individual experience. My previous study on the participation of the SAAF squadrons forms the foundation on which I now evaluate the following: the role and contribution of the SAAF within the broad context of the involvement of the Allied Powers during these operations; the flights of SAAF crews who dropped supplies to the Polish partisans; the role played by the RAF; and the involved account of the single drop by the United States Army Air Force (USAAF), marred by a maze of ploys and political intrigue. It will be indicated that every one of the flights to Warsaw embodies its very own set of circumstances. In these chapters it will be indicated why the burden of these flights was allocated to crews of the SAAF and other Allied Forces. It will be shown that although the aircrews knew that they were going to be involved in very dangerous flights they saw it as a challenge and no one refused to obey the order by Churchill. The many problems they encountered during these flights, as well as the actions by the aircrews, will be discussed. The number of containers dropped by each aircraft will be indicated. It will be shown that the supplies dropped by these Allied squadrons meant the difference between survival or defeat and even the difference between life and death for the Polish people in Warsaw. Moreover, it will be demonstrated how the continuous arrival of Allied planes to drop supplies had a salutary effect on the morale and hopes of the revived partisans. In chapter nine, the operation by the Americans will be discussed and it will be indicated that they achieved more success on the one day mission than the Allies achieved during a much longer period.

A synopsis is given in chapter ten, where a statistical analysis of the flights is presented. A detailed and conclusive summary of the operation is also provided. This chapter will provide conclusions on the role of the SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift, and place the contribution of the SAAF within the broad context of the involvement of the Allied Forces. It will be indicated, by means of a comparative study and statistical data, that the SAAF did indeed play a major role.

Chapter 11 deals briefly with the aftermath to the operation, which ended in September 1944. The circumstances in Warsaw up to the end of October 1944 are dealt with.

Chapter 12 deals with the main findings of this thesis. The Warsaw Airlift represents many, often complex, facets that will be evaluated in this chapter. In order to come to a conclusion regarding the participation and contribution of the SAAF in the Warsaw Airlift, the issues detailed earlier will be evaluated. It will also be considered whether the fact that the revolt by the partisans in Warsaw failed and that subsequent events showed that, in terms of the overall strategy of the war, little was accomplished by the Warsaw operations, made the efforts of the aircrews who participated less remarkable.