

TARGET: BERLIN
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In some ways, the Fifteenth Air Force's bombing raid on Berlin on March 24, 1945, was superlative. The Fifteenth had never attacked the German capital before. The Eighth Air Force in Britain usually had that assignment. The Germans had come to expect raids on Berlin to come from Britain to the west, and not from Italy to the south. Moreover, the Eighth Air Force was busy that day bombing other targets in support of the Allied crossing of the Rhine River. The Fifteenth Air Force's bombers and their escorts had never flown so far before on a mission. The specific target: the Daimler-Benz tank assembly plant, which produced armored vehicles then resisting the advances of the Allied armies in Europe.¹

During the second half of 1944 and the first four months of 1945, the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy possessed twenty-one bombardment groups, organized into five wings, and seven fighter groups, organized into two wings, one permanent and the other provisional. The bombardment groups flew B-24 and B-17 heavy bombers, and the fighter groups flew P-51 and P-38 fighter airplanes, primarily to escort the bombers, but also for strafing ground targets. From several bases in Italy, the bombardment groups flew missions to destroy various targets in southern and central Europe still under Nazi occupation. The fighter escorts, also based at several locations in Italy, rendezvoused with the bombers on the way to the target, over the target, or on the way back. Among the targets were factories and marshalling yards in southern Germany.

Berlin was not the only Fifteenth Air Force target that day. In fact, fifteen B-24 groups were sent to bomb other targets: eight to Neuburg, Germany; four to Munich, also in Germany, and three to Ceske Budejovice in Czechoslovakia. The Fifth Bomb Wing, and its six B-17 bombardment groups, however, were assigned to bomb Berlin. Among them were the 2d, 97th, 99th, 301st, 463d, and 483d. The Flying Fortresses were more survivable than the B-24 Liberators because they were more likely to return to base after being hit.²

The Daimler-Benz plant in Berlin was expected to be heavily defended, not only by several batteries of anti-aircraft artillery, but also by the best of the German fighters. They included new Me-262 jet aircraft, which could fly as much as 100 miles per hour faster than the Fifteenth Air Force's fastest propeller-driven fighters. For that reason, the Fifteenth Air Force assigned no less than five of its seven fighter groups to escort the bombers. The 31st, 52d, 325th, and 332d Fighter Groups flew the P-51 Mustang, and the 82d flew the P-38 Lightning. In other words, six bombardment groups that day were escorted by five fighter groups. The Fifteenth Air Force rarely assigned so many fighter groups to escort only one bombardment wing, but the more dangerous Berlin target was worth the extra effort.³

The eleven groups assigned the Berlin mission were based at ten different air bases in Italy in March 1945. Both the 2d and 97th Bombardment Groups were stationed at Amendola. The 99th, 301st, 463, and 483d Bombardment Groups were stationed at Tortorella, Lucera, Celone, and Sterparone respectively. Mondolfo was the home base of the 31st Fighter Group, while the 52d Fighter Group was based at Madna Airfield. The 325th Fighter Group called Rimini home, and the 332d was stationed at Ramitelli

Airfield. For the mission there had to be a complicated set of assemblies during flight. Each of the escorting fighter groups had its own assignment, but all of them were to cover at least part of the Fifth Bombardment Wing's groups.⁴

Table I: Home Bases of Fifteenth Air Force Groups on the Berlin Mission, 24 March 1945.⁵

Group	Home Base in Italy at time	DUCs earned previously
2d Bombardment	Amendola	Two
97 th Bombardment	Amendola	Two
99 th Bombardment	Tortorella	Two
301 st Bombardment	Lucera	Two
463d Bombardment	Celone	One
483d Bombardment	Sterparone	One
31 st Fighter	Mondolfo	Two
52d Fighter	Madna	Two
82d Fighter	Vicenzo	Three
325 th Fighter	Rimini	Two
332d Fighter	Ramitelli	None

All of the groups had much experience in the war already. In fact, every group except one had already earned at least one Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC) for a previous mission. Four of the bombardment groups had already earned two DUCs, and four of the five fighter groups had already earned at least two. In fact, the 82d Fighter Group, the only P-38 group on the Berlin raid, had already earned three DUCs. The only group without such an award, the 332d Fighter Group, had entered the conflict later than the others. Still, it had been in combat for more than a year, and had gained a reputation for effectiveness.⁶

Each of the escorting fighter groups had its own assignment, but all of them were to cover at least part of the Fifth Bombardment Wing's groups. For example, the 325th Fighter Group was to cover the three leading groups on penetration to Berlin. The 332d, the only African-American fighter group in World War II, and the only African-

American group to enter combat, was assigned to provide close escort for the whole wing to Berlin to the limit of the fighters' fuel endurance. The 31st Fighter Group was to provide close escort on penetration, over the target, and withdrawal for the three rear groups of the bombardment wing. The 52d was to cover the bombers over the target and on withdrawal. Finally, the 82d Fighter Group was assigned to escort the withdrawal of the bombers from Berlin.⁷

The six bombardment groups of the Fifth Wing launched a total of 169 B-17s on March 24, but only 148 of these made it over the target. Eleven returned early. The other ten were either shot down or failed to reach the proper area at the appropriate time. 147 of the bombers that reached the target dropped their bombs, which consisted of some 356 tons of 1000-pound general purpose and cyclonite bombs. The bombing from all six groups took place between 1221 and 1234 hours, or only about 13 minutes. All of the bombardment groups were escorted, and all except one, the 97th, reported enemy aircraft encounters. They all reported flak.⁸

Table II: Fifteenth Air Force Bombardment Groups Bombing Berlin, 24 March 1945⁹

Bomb Group	Aircraft over target	Altitude in feet	Tons dropped	Target time	Aircraft lost	Aircraft missing
2	26	27,200	64	1228	1	1
97	26	28,000	58	1221	0	0
99	26	25,000	63	1232	0	0
301	26	27,600	63	1234	0	0
463	20	26,000	50	1221	2	4
483	25	24,800	58.5	1228	0	1
TOTALS	169	-	356.5	-	3	6

Good visibility on the day of the mission allowed all bomb runs of the Fifth Wing's six groups to be visual. The runs lasted from 3.5 to 8 minutes, with an average of

about five minutes. Bombing occurred from altitudes ranging from 25,000 to 28,300 feet. Indicated air speed ranged from 145 to 150 miles per hour, but the bombers did not all fly over the target at the same time. Those arriving later contended with some obscurity due to the smoke of earlier-dropped bombs in the area. Half of the formations were diamond-shaped. Although some of the bombs landed on target, many of the patterns were large and either off to the left or short of the aiming point.¹⁰

Table III: Bomb Runs of the Fifth Wing, Fifteenth Air Force, 24 March 1945

Bomb Gp	Bomb Run	Altitude	Speed
2	8 minute visual	27,200 feet	150 mph
97	6.5 minute visual	28,300 feet	150 mph
99	5 minute visual	25,000 feet	150 mph
301	5 minute visual	28,000 feet	145 mph
463	4 minute visual	25,000 feet	150 mph
483	4 minute visual	25,000 feet	150 mph

The five fighter groups on the Berlin mission launched a total of 258 fighters, mostly P-51s but also P-38s, to guard the 169 Flying Fortresses launched. Some of the fighters turned back early, but 241 of the fighters were effective escorts that day for the 148 bombers that reached the capital. In other words, despite the unusually high number of escorts for this Fifteenth Air Force bombing mission, there were still less than two escorts for every bomber.¹¹

Table IV: Fifteenth Air Force Fighter Groups Escorting Bombers to Berlin, 24 March 1945¹²

Fighter Group	Aircraft in target area	Type of aircraft flown	Enemy aircraft encountered	Time of rendezvous with bombers	Time leaving bombers
31	53	P-51	Me-262s	1145	1320
52	54	P-51	Me-109	1215	1345
82	29	P-38	Me-262s	1145	1230
325	51	P-51	Me-262s	1200	1425

332	54	P-51	Me-262s	1145	1225
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The aerial dogfights were intense. The Germans launched as many as 30 jet Me-262s against the bombers, and the American P-51 Mustang escorts, although significantly slower than the fighters, but more highly maneuverable, engaged. Eight of the Mustang pilots each shot down an enemy airplane that day, including William Daniel, Forrest Keene, Raymond Leonard, Kenneth Smith, and William Wilder of the 31st Fighter Group's 308th Fighter Squadron, and Roscoe Brown, Earl Lane, and Charles Brantley of the 332d Fighter Group's 100th Fighter Squadron. All of these aerial victories was scored by P-51 against ME-262 aircraft. Fighter pilots of the Fifteenth Air Force had shot down ME-262s on earlier missions, but never so many on one day.¹³

Table V: Fifteenth Air Force Aerial Victories Over German Me-262 Jets on 24 Mar 1945

NAME	FTR GP	FTR SQ	AUTHORITY
Col. William A. Daniel	31	308	15 AF GO# 2525 (19 Apr 1945)
1 Lt. Forrest M. Keene	31	308	15 AF GO# 2709 (24 Apr 1945)
1 Lt. Raymond D. Leonard	31	308	15 AF GO# 2709 (24 Apr 1945)
Capt. Kenneth T. Smith	31	308	15 AF GO# 2709 (24 Apr 1945)
2d Lt. William M. Wilder	31	308	15 AF GO# 2709 (24 Apr 1945)
2d Lt. Charles V. Brantley	332	100	15 AF GO# 2293 (12 Apr 1945)
1 Lt. Roscoe C. Brown	332	100	15 AF GO# 2293 (12 Apr 1945)
1 Lt. Earl R. Lane	332	100	15 AF GO# 2293 (12 Apr 1945)

Fourteen of the airplanes the Fifteenth Air Force sent to Berlin on March 24, 1945 failed to return. Among them were nine of the Fifth Bombardment Wing's B-17s, six of which belonged to the 463d Bombardment Group, two of which belonged to the 2d Bombardment Group, and one of which belonged to the 483d Bombardment Group. Of the lost bombers, six were shot down primarily by enemy antiaircraft artillery, or flak.

The three other lost bombers were shot down by enemy aircraft fire. Enemy aircraft also hit at least two of the six bombers that went down primarily by flak. Only one of the five fighter groups escorting the Fifth Bombardment Wing bombers that day also suffered losses. Five of the P-51s of the 332d Fighter Group also failed to return. Each B-17 carried a crew of ten. With nine of the bombers failing to return, and five fighters, 95 men did not come back, at least immediately, from the Berlin raid.¹⁴

Table VI: Missing Air Crew Reports of the Bombers Failing to Return from the Berlin Mission, Fifteenth Air Force, 24 March 1945
(AAA=antiaircraft artillery; E/A= enemy aircraft)

Missing Air Crew Report	Bomb Group	Bomb Squadron	Reason for loss	Number aboard aircraft	Time and place
13208	463	774	AAA	10	1146. 5027N, 1321E
13258	463	772	AAA	10	1145. 4955N, 1310E
13271	463	772	AAA and E/A	10	1150. 5040N, 1340E
13274	463	773	E/A	10	1208. 5100N, 1310E
13278	463	773	E/A	10	1200. 5205N, 1310E
13371	463	775	AAA	10	1250. 5045N, 1320E
13372	2	429	AAA	10	1400. 4810N, 1450E
13374	2	20	AAA and E/A	10	1215-1230. 5200-5220N, 1300-1335E
13375	483	817	E/A	10	1227. Berlin area

Table VII: Missing Air Crew Reports of the Fighters Failing to Return from the Berlin Mission, 24 March 1945, Fifteenth Air Force, 24 March 1945

Missing Air Crew Report	Fighter Group	Pilot	Aircraft Type	Reason for loss
13266	332	Flight Officer Leon W. Spears	P-51	Unknown
13267	332	Captain Armour G. McDaniel	P-51	Enemy aircraft
13268	332	Flight Officer James T. Mitchell, Jr.	P-51	Mechanical failure
13269	332	2d Lieutenant Ronald W. Reeves	P-51	Lack of fuel
13270	332	2d Lieutenant Robert C. Robinson, Jr.	P-51	Lack of fuel

The five fighter pilots that did not come back immediately, all members of the 332d Fighter Group, included Capt. Armour G. McDaniel, who was seen to have been hit by enemy aircraft fire; Flight Officer Leon W. Spears, lost to an unknown cause; Flight Officer James T. Mitchell, Jr., whose aircraft is believed to have suffered mechanical failure; and Second Lieutenants Ronald W. Reeves and Robert C. Robinson, who were believed to have landed at another airfield because they lacked enough fuel to land at their home field of Ramitelli. The March 1945 history of the 332d Fighter Group notes all five of these pilots as having gone missing in action, but the May history of the group notes that Flight Officers Mitchell and Spears returned to the 301st Fighter Squadron on May 10, having been repatriated from Poland.¹⁵

Only three of the eleven bombardment and fighter groups that went to Berlin on March 24, 1945 earned the Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC) for the mission. They included the 463d and 483d Bombardment Groups and the 332d Fighter Group. In other words, two of six, or only a third, of the participating bombardment groups earned the decoration, and only one of five of the fighter groups. Every participating group that did not earn the DUC for the Berlin mission had already earned at least one DUC for another or other missions. In fact, after the Berlin raid, all eleven of the groups had a total of two Distinguished Unit Citations, except the 82d Fighter Group, which had three, and the 332d Fighter Group, which had one.¹⁶

The March 24, 1945 mission to Berlin was important historically for a number of reasons. It was the first Fifteenth Air Force mission to the German capital and the longest Fifteenth Air Force mission of the war. It was a mission in which Fifteenth Air

Force fighters shot down more German jet ME-262 airplanes than any other day.

Although the mission occurred in the closing months of the war, destruction of facilities at the Daimler-Benz tank works contributed to the Allied advance, depriving the Germans of some of the tanks they needed to defend the capital.

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¹ Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945. Kit C. Carter and Robert Mueller, *The Army Air Forces in World War II Combat Chronology, 1941-1945* (Maxwell AFB, AL, and Washington, DC: Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Agency, Air University, and Office of Air Force History, 1973), 606-607.

² Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, which contains narrative mission reports for all bombardment and fighter groups launched that day, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945.

³ Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945. Kit C. Carter and Robert Mueller, *The Army Air Forces in World War II Combat Chronology, 1941-1945* (Maxwell AFB, AL, and Washington, DC: Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Agency, Air University, and Office of Air Force History, 1973), 606-607.

⁴ Maurer Maurer, *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983).

⁵ Maurer Maurer, *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983).

⁶ Maurer Maurer, *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983).

⁷ Narrative mission reports of the 31st, 52d, 82d, 325th, and 332d Fighter Groups for 24 March 1945, contained in the Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945.

⁸ Fifth Wing A-2 Section Daily Intelligence Report, 24 March 1945, contained in the Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.

⁹ Fifth Wing A-2 Section Daily Intelligence Report, 24 March 1945, contained in the Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.

¹⁰ Fifth Wing Nav-Bomb-PFF Analysis for Mission of 24 March 1945, drafted for Fifteenth Air Force commander, in Fifteenth Air Force mission folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945.

¹¹ Narrative mission reports of the 31st, 52d, 82d, 325th, and 332d Fighter Groups, contained in the Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.

¹² Narrative mission reports of the 31st, 52d, 82d, 325th, and 332d Fighter Groups, contained in the Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.

¹³ USAF Historical Study No. 85, *USAF Credits for the Destruction of Enemy Aircraft, World War II* (Maxwell AFB, AL and Washington, DC: Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center and Office of Air Force History, 1978), 506 and aerial victory credit cards at AFHRA. 31st Fighter Group narrative mission report, 24 March 1945, in Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, AFRHA call number 670.332, 24 March 1945.

¹⁴ Missing Air Crew Reports, numbers 13208, 13258, 13266, 13267, 13268, 13269, 13270, 13271, 13274, 13278, 13371, 13372, 13374, 13375. Fifteenth Air Force General Order number 2293, dated 12 April 1945. The Fifth Wing A-2 Section Daily Intelligence Report for 24 March 1945 (AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945) agrees that nine bombers either were lost or went missing on the raid, and notes one of these from the 483d Bombardment Group, two from the Second Bombardment Group, and six from the 463d Bombardment Group.

¹⁵ Missing Air Crew Reports 13266-13270; 332d Fighter Group histories for March and May 1945, AFHRA call numbers GP-332-HI, Mar 1945 and GP-332-HI, May 1945.

¹⁶ Lineage and honors histories of each of the eleven groups, contained in Maurer Maurer, *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983).