

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

The 306th Fighter Wing assigned the roles of each of the four P-51 fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force on the mission to Berlin. The 332nd Fighter Group, the only African-American group in the Army Air Forces, was assigned to provide close escort for the 5th Bombardment Wing on penetration to the target, to the prudent limit of

endurance. The 325th Fighter Group was assigned to escort the lead three groups of the bombardment wing not only on penetration to the target, but also over the target, and on withdrawal back to central Italy, while the 31st Fighter Group was assigned to escort the rear groups to, over, and from the target. The 52nd Fighter Group was assigned to meet the bombers in the target area and escort them on withdrawal homeward, picking up where the 332nd Fighter Group left off. In other words, the six bombardment groups of the 5th Bombardment Wing would be escorted by all four of the P-51 fighter groups of the 306th Fighter Wing, and none of the fighter groups would be the lone escort on any of the legs of the mission. According to the mission documents, there would be at least three fighter escort groups accompanying the 5th Bombardment Wing at any given point on the mission. In fact, on the way home, there would be four, because in addition to the P-51s, the 82nd Fighter Group, with P-38s, would help escort the bombers on withdrawal 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	Aircraft	Altitude in	Tons	Target	Aircraft	Aircraft
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Group	over target	feet	dropped	time	lost	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

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 two 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 anti-aircraft 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 that day. 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=anti-aircraft 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.

Table VIII: Fighter Group Assignments on Fifteenth Air Force 24 March 1945 Mission to Berlin

Fighter Group	Type Aircraft	Assignment that day	Time of rendezvous rendezvoused with bombers
31 st	P-51	penetration, target cover, and withdrawal for rear 3 of 6 bomber groups of 5 th Bomb. Wing	1145
52 nd	P-51	target cover and withdrawal for 5 th Bomb. Wing	1215
325 th	P-51	penetration, target cover, and withdrawal for lead 3 groups of the 5 th Bomb. Wing	1200**
332 nd	P-51	penetration to prudent limit of endurance	1145
82 nd	P-38	penetration (2 squadrons) and withdrawal (other squadrons) for 5 th Bomb. Wing	1145*

*reported late rendezvous because group took off late, because of delayed delivery of 300-gallon belly tanks, but still met the bombers as early as any of the other groups.

**supposed to provide penetration escort for the lead 3 groups, but did not meet the bombers until fifteen minutes after three of the other groups had already rendezvoused with them

Source: Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, with group mission reports therein (AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945)

Table IX: Accuracy of Bombardment Groups of the 5th Bomb Wing of the Fifteenth Air Force on the 24 March 1945 Mission to Berlin (Daimler-Benz Tank Assembly Plant)

Bombardment Group	Type of Aircraft	Accuracy
2	B-17	“the pattern..was good...off to the left” (not accurate)
97	B-17	“photos show a large pattern being off course to the left” (not accurate)
99	B-17	“pictures show an excellent pattern in the briefed MPI (mean point of impact, or target) with a few scattered short hits” (accurate)
01	B-17	“the pattern from 2 boxes was centered on the briefed MPI, but the pattern of the other 2 boxes fell a little short” (half accurate)
463	B-17	“photos show bombs hitting in the target area, although the pattern was large...” (somewhat accurate)
483	B-17	“pictures show a poor pattern, but with some excellent hits” (somewhat accurate)

Source: Fifteenth Air Force Mission Folder for 24 March 1945, with group mission reports therein (AFHRA call number 670.332, 24 Mar 1945)

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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; 306th Fighter Wing Mission Report 136 for 24 March 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).