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THE CINDERELLA FRONT: ALLIED SPECIAL AIR  
OPERATIONS IN YUGOSLAVIA DURING WORLD WAR II

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by

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## *Contents*

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER .....	ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	iv
PREFACE .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	vi
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND .....	1
STRATEGY, CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS, AND MILITARY OBJECTIVES .....	6
Strategy Development .....	6
The Context of Yugoslav Air Operations .....	8
Military Objectives of Yugoslav Operations .....	14
EARLY OPERATIONS IN YUGOSLAVIA, 1941-1943 .....	17
Disposition of Axis Forces and Strategy .....	17
The Allied Plan of Attack .....	19
Operations .....	19
THE BALKAN AIR FORCE, 1944-1945 .....	27
A Changed Environment .....	28
Disposition of Axis Forces and Strategy .....	30
Allied Plan of Attack .....	30
Operations .....	31
Significant Operations .....	35
RATWEEK .....	35
Naval Operations .....	36
Operations Against The German 21st Mountain Corps .....	37
CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FOR TODAY .....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	45

*Illustrations*

	<i>Page</i>
Figure 1. Campaign Planning Model.....	4
Figure 2. Map of Yugoslavia.....	13

## *Preface*

In this short work I have tried to bring to light a few of the many fascinating lessons of air operations in Yugoslavia in World War II. Many people, if not most, know nothing of the dangerous missions and courageous individuals who undertook this unconventional warfare. My hope is that this research will draw one to read more about the special warriors who flew into the darkness over enemy territory for the Allied war effort.

This paper views these operations from the perspective of coalition warfare. Today, just as in 1942, the significant conflicts that threaten US survival require forces only coalitions can generate. Since coalitions are difficult to build and even harder to maintain, I believe study of the Mediterranean theater and Yugoslav operations will prove valuable. The deliberations of strategists like Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower guided events crucial to the immediate war effort, ultimately shaping the post-war world.

I greatly appreciate the contribution of Dr. Matthew R. Schwonek, Air Command and Staff College. He gave me my first insights into the importance of these little-known operations and unending help and encouragement in uncovering historical documents. He inspired me to see these operations, not from the point of view of troops and squadrons on a campaign map, but from the eyes of Partisan soldiers, Allied agents, and aircrews struggling to find a drop zone on a rainy, mountain night.

### *Abstract*

This research paper examines how special operations were conducted in Yugoslavia during WW II; how did the operational art conducted fit into Allied grand strategy; and how effective were these operations? These operations were conducted using multinational, coalition forces, and for this reason the lessons from this examination are relevant to warriors today.

Conducting military operations almost always involve a scarcity of forces. This scarcity forces difficult decisions in development of strategic goals and conduct of operations. This difficulty is further compounded when coalition forces involve multiple nations, each with their own priorities. This is the situation that existed in WW II. The US wanted a concentrated invasion of NW Europe, while Britain and Russia were interested in a multi-front battle of attrition against the Axis, featuring a Balkan invasion. There were inadequate forces to commit to an invasion of the Balkans, but there was an opportunity to divert Axis strength from other fronts. This paper will look at Allied operations in Yugoslavia (typical Balkan operations) and analyze: 1.) the unique contextual factors influencing special operations in the Balkans during WW II, 2.) operational art factors of this unconventional employment of airpower in the politically divided region, and 3.) the success and/or failure of military planners and commanders in deriving military from strategic objectives and in attaining these objectives.

The methodology used is to outline Allied operations from: 1) a brief explanation of the development of grand strategy within a coalition of forces, to 2) discussion of air power and joint force employment in Yugoslavia, and 3) draw conclusions as to the effectiveness and relevance of this strategy and the related operations for today's warrior. The analysis and conclusions will examine the logic and congruence of these operations to the respective strategy and will highlight contextual influences (aircraft and equipment capabilities, weather, logistics) on the success of these operations to meet the strategic objective.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Background

In early 1942, as Hitler's Axis tightened its grip across the breadth of Europe, Russian blood stained the snow near Moscow; Britain and France's desperate attempts to match Axis armament programs had been too little, too late; and a US presence had yet to be felt. There was little reason for optimism, but there was unity of purpose among these nations united against the Axis. The Axis could only be defeated by forming a coalition of nations through a long struggle of mobilization, force projection and finally decisive military engagement to force a final solution.<sup>1</sup>

Few military operations have the luxury of abundant resources. Resource constraints force difficult decisions in the development of strategic goals and the conduct of operations. This difficulty is further compounded in coalition warfare, where each member is needed, but not all are friends. This is the situation that existed in WW II. The US wanted a concentrated invasion of north west Europe while Britain and Russia pushed for a multi-front battle of attrition against the Axis.<sup>2</sup> Resource constraints drove the resulting war-winning strategy that incorporated the primary Northwest European theater and gave lower priority to the Mediterranean theater of operations. Perhaps the step-sister relationship of the Mediterranean theater to Northwest Europe in terms of priority, or British hopes of it emerging from humble beginnings to be a decisive front inspired

some to call it the “Cinderella Front.”<sup>3</sup> While not delivering the death blow, Allied operations in North Africa, Italy, France and the Balkan countries of Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania played an important role in the execution of Mediterranean strategy and the final defeat of Germany.

Operations in the Balkans progressed from extremely limited special operations beginning in March 1942 to extensive, joint military operations through the collapse of Germany in May 1945. Although not the decisive front, Balkan operations tied up a great many Italian and German troops, making Allied operations on the European and Eastern fronts more effective. The majority of these air, ground, and special operations were conducted within Yugoslavia.<sup>4</sup> Because much about these operations remained secret throughout the war, valuable lessons and stories of courage, innovation, and determination have remained largely unseen in the dusty pages of military archives. This paper explores Allied special air operations in Yugoslavia in World War II to illustrate lessons relevant to warfighting today.

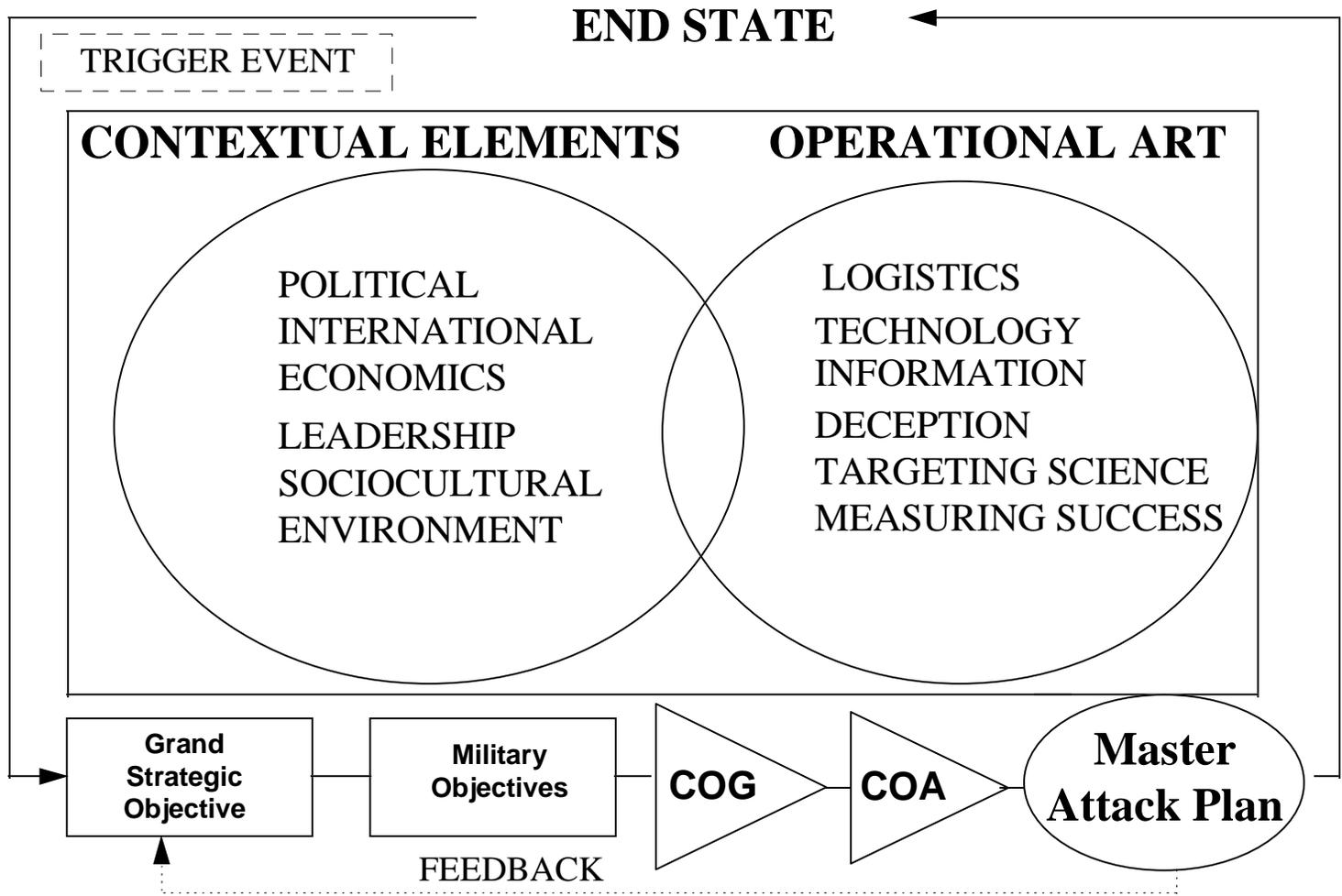
This paper will focus on Yugoslavian operations in order to illuminate three important lessons from the Cinderella front. First, today, as in WW II, multinational, coalition warfare is essential to the successful defeat of any significant adversary. Ensuring congruency of strategy with military objectives is critical to attaining the desired end state and is greatly influenced by the complex contextual environment presented in coalition warfare. Secondly, Allied operations in Yugoslavia in WW II highlighted the value of special operations forces and demonstrated the capability of even limited forces to assist in achieving strategic objectives when employed in coordinated, multinational, joint operations. Finally, three operations will be summarized to bring to light the value and

limitations of these WW II coalition operations that are directly applicable to US military operations today.

This essay uses the campaign planning model as a framework for analyzing Allied operations in Yugoslavia in WW II. This model (Figure 1) was developed at Air Command and Staff College as a method of illustrating the complex relationships between contextual elements and operational art elements in the successful accomplishment of strategic objectives.<sup>5</sup> It utilizes many concepts incorporated in US joint doctrine. In addition to being a useful planning tool, as a retrospective tool it provides an excellent process model for examining the details of historical case studies.

Key parts of this model include strategic objectives, desired end state, military objectives, centers of gravity, courses of action, master attack plan, contextual elements, and operational art. While national or coalition leadership determines the desired end state and strategic objectives, military leaders must plan to achieve these objectives within the context of a campaign theater. The model identifies a number of contextual elements that affect military operations that are usually outside the influence of the military commander. These elements—politics, international relationships, sociocultural norms, economics, leadership, and environment—can have positive or negative effects on the mission and are important to understand and exploit. A clear understanding of the contextual elements is necessary to setting military objectives, identifying centers of gravity, and developing courses of action. The operational art elements of the campaign

Figure 1. Campaign Planning Model



planning model are the instruments of warfare used to achieve military objectives and measure achievement. The model includes six operational art elements: logistics, technology, information, targeting science, deception, and success measurements. However, any number may be added, where relevant.

After a brief discussion of strategic objectives and an analysis of the contextual elements of the Mediterranean theater, military objectives and the operational art in Yugoslavia will be detailed. This essay will cover two distinct periods of operations. First covered are early operations in Yugoslavia, characterized almost exclusively by innovative employment of small units of special operations forces. This is followed by discussion of extensive, joint military operations under coordination of the Balkan Air Force. The contextual elements in Yugoslavia during these two periods differed greatly and significantly affected operational art employment.

Finally, through a survey of three representative operations, this essay will show how contextual elements in Yugoslav operations affected Allied ability to successfully attain strategic goals and the desired end state. The lessons that emerge are directly applicable to US warfighters today.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 5-7.

<sup>2</sup>Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *United States Army in World War II: The War Department, Strategic Planning for Warfare*, (Washington: Department of the Army, 1953), 159, 294.

<sup>3</sup>Colonel John H. Foster, *History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 7.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Lieutenant Colonel Larry Weaver and Robert Pollock, "Campaign Planning for the 21st Century: An Effect-Based Approach to the Planning Process", *War Theory Coursebook*, Air Command and Staff College: Maxwell AFB, 1996, 36.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Strategy, Contextual Elements, and Military Objectives**

#### **Strategy Development**

Important to a critical analysis of wartime operations is a clear understanding of the strategic goals and supporting military objectives involved. The contextual elements within which strategy is developed and war is fought can limit or enhance the ability to achieve one's goals. They were notably influential in Allied special air operations in Yugoslavia during World War II.

The development of a unified strategy to defeat the Axis powers required a unified plan, agreeable to each major member of the Allied coalition—the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union—as well as smaller member states, such as Yugoslavia. By the time the US entered the war, the USSR had barely survived Hitler's Operation BARBAROSSA invasion and was desperate for the establishment of a second front. Britain, while capable of holding the British Isles, critically needed help to defend United Kingdom assets in the Middle East. British leaders pushed for an encirclement of the Axis, followed by the establishment of multiple fronts that would wear down, “tighten the ring”, and strangle Hitler's Reich.<sup>1</sup> The US focus was on preparing for the decisive engagement, the invasion of Europe. In January, 1942 General Dwight D. Eisenhower succinctly described the

American input to the coalition: “We’ve got to go to Europe and fight—and we’ve got to quit wasting resources all over the world—and still worse—wasting time. If we are to keep Russia in, save the Middle East, India, and Burma, we’ve got to begin slugging with air at West Europe; to be followed by a land attack as soon as possible.”<sup>2</sup> These differences describe the nature of coalition warfare and were just as challenging to unified strategy development in World War II as were divergent views during the Gulf War 50 years later.

An Anglo-American grand strategy was first agreed to at the Washington Conference in December 1941. On 1 January 1942 the United Nations Declaration was signed by the US, UK, USSR, and China which codified the coalition and outlined a strategy to 1) maintain the security of the main areas of allied war industry, 2) defeat Germany, then Japan, 3) maintain essential lines of communication (defeat the U-boat), 4) close and “tighten the noose” around the Axis, and 5) continuous development of offensive action to wear down and undermine German forces.<sup>3</sup> A strategy, reflecting much coalition compromise, incorporating a Mediterranean front—Operation Torch—was established a little later, in July. War production and the US buildup in England, however, would be dedicated primarily toward the European invasion preparation. This scarcity of resources would characterize allied air operations in Yugoslavia and the Mediterranean, in general, until after the great D-Day invasion in 1944.

Allied Mediterranean theater strategy resulted in a campaign plan requiring the complete control of North Africa, followed by an invasion and defeat of Italy, and culminating in the attack of Germany through France or possibly the Balkans. To facilitate operations, the Mediterranean was divided at the Adriatic shore of Italy. The

Combined Chiefs of Staff of the Western Alliance—US and Britain—jointly controlled the western region (including southern France), while the British were assigned responsibility for operations in the Middle East region, which included all the Balkans.<sup>4</sup> While the Allies successfully regained Africa in 1942 and southern Italy in 1943, resources remained prioritized for Europe. As a result, Allied operations in southern France, Yugoslavia, and throughout the Balkans were limited to the conduct of special operations by air in support of resistance groups fighting the Axis. Early operations, though limited, supported Allied strategy and reflected Churchill’s call to “breed and feed” resistance units, so they might rise up and join the fight against the Axis.

### **The Context of Yugoslav Air Operations**

While political elements always influence warfare, politics were particularly influential to the situation in Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia they were tangled as well. Throughout history the Balkan region has been politically unstable as an oft-traded pawn or spoil of war. The Yugoslavia existing at the outbreak of World War II was a fragile monarchy constructed from what was left over after France, Great Britain, and the US redrew the map of eastern Europe following World War I. When Italy and Germany invaded in 1941, King Peter and the Yugoslav government fled to London. Yugoslavia was partitioned by the Axis with the Italians controlling the western areas including most of present day Croatia and the Dalmatian coast. Germany annexed for itself the northernmost region of Slovenia, ceded Macedonia to Bulgaria for political favor, and sent occupation troops to ensure access to Yugoslavia’s natural resources and maintain a protective buffer against Allied attack.<sup>5</sup> Amid the resulting political void, competing nationalistic resistance groups

spawned. Josip Broz, better known as “Tito”, and Draja Mihailovich came to lead the two primary resistance groups—Communist Yugoslav and Royalist Serb—fighting the Axis troops and collaborators. These two groups essentially consisted of poorly equipped guerrillas who despised each other almost as much as the Germans. However, they were fighting the Germans, and, in 1942, they were the all the Allies had.

The international context seemed hopeless under the spreading blanket of German conquest. By 17 April, 1941 the Germans and Italians had captured all the major cities and forced the Yugoslav leadership to flee. Although the siege of England and Operation BARBAROSSA, the failed invasion of Russia, occupied the majority of Reich resources, Germany dedicated significant effort to protecting its Balkan supply sources and southern defensive line. From across the Mediterranean, it was impossible for the Allies to conduct any significant operations in Yugoslavia.

The sociocultural context in Yugoslavia worked to the advantage of the occupying forces. In 1941, Yugoslavia’s sixteen million inhabitants included Hungarians, Austrians and Germans in addition to the native Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. German cultural influence among the Croats served to reinforce traditional Croatian hostility to Serbs, while Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Moslem faiths further splintered loyalties. In occupied Yugoslavia three significant power groups emerged: the Fascist Utasha regime in occupied Croatia, royalist nationalist Serbs in eastern Yugoslavia, and Communist Partisans of central Bosnia and coastal Croatia. In this context of splintered factions, the Allies, led by Britain, searched for opportunities against the Axis.

The economic context was a primary influence on Yugoslavian operations. The greatest responsibility for Allied war production, especially airpower, rested on US

shoulders. Even though production had geared up substantially before the US forces arrived in 1942, production and personnel were limited. The strategy formulation that resulted in the Combined Bomber Offensive and the invasion of the European continent reduced both the priority and the resources available for any operations in Yugoslavia and special operations in general. However, when British intelligence confirmed the existence of resistance groups in Yugoslavia operating much like the French underground, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) expanded clandestine Yugoslav operations to the extent their French and other operations allowed.

Of all the contextual elements, the leadership and physical environment were perhaps most influential in the development of specific military objectives. The leadership in Fascist Croatia, under Utasha leader Ante Pavelich, stirred up fierce opposition when it murdered large numbers of Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies in an effort to ethnically cleanse the region. Similarly, in Serbia the German puppet, General Nedich, oversaw the first experiments in mass executions of Jews, non-Serbs, and Serb political enemies by poison gas. The brutality of the Axis puppet leadership eventually drove many to join one of the two major resistance groups that developed.

Mihailovich formed a Serbian nationalist resistance movement, often called the Chetniks. Mihailovich, a former general was a gifted leader and politician who early and effectively courted US support for the Chetniks. He was popular enough to be featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.<sup>6</sup> Establishing contact with the government-in-exile of King Peter, he was eventually named minister of defense and commander of the resistance forces within Yugoslavia. Simultaneously, Tito organized the Yugoslavian Communists

and others into a rival resistance group, called the Partisans. Where the Chetniks were composed of small, clandestine, local units, the Partisans formed larger, composite groups moving about the country and not tied to a particular locality. This difference made the Partisans less hesitant to attack, as the severe reprisals of the Germans would only fall upon the locals. These conflicting efforts fueled a hatred that eventually resulted in a war within a war between the Chetniks and Partisans.

The Allies initially attempted to supply both groups and encourage unity, but eventually British influence swung the bulk of air supply efforts to favor the Partisans because they were more active and aggressive in fighting the Germans. A brief mention needs to be made also of Britain's resolve to gain coalition partners in Greece, Yugoslavia, and all the Balkans. Resources were so scarce before 1943, the Allies could offer little more than token support, but British SOE agents established contact with the Partisans and Chetniks and conducted the first air supply missions. Eventually, in May 1943, SOE and OSS agents were parachuted into Yugoslavia to become the first official military liaisons to the Partisans and Chetniks and to gather reliable information about their effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>

The physical environment of Yugoslavia (Figure 2) offered the most daunting restrictions on air operations. The term "Balkan" is derived from a Turkish word meaning "mountain." Except for the northern parts of the Croatian and Serbian regions where the Drava and Sava rivers flow through broad valleys, Yugoslavia is mountainous to the sea's edge. Owing to the rugged mountains, poverty, and volatile political history, the transportation and communication infrastructure in Yugoslavia was primitive. Yugoslavia had only about six thousand miles of railways; most connecting to the major international

rail line passing through Zagreb and the northern valleys to Belgrade before continuing south toward Greece.<sup>8</sup> The mountainous terrain and few hard-surfaced roads limited the mobility of forces, making roads and rail lines between the major cities vital lines of communication (LOC). This allowed the Germans to focus their occupation forces on a relatively small percentage of the country, but also left the greater portion of Yugoslavia open to resistance activities.

Weather was also a dominant factor. While coastal areas enjoyed a mild, Mediterranean climate, most of Yugoslavia had a central European climate with rainy summers, cold winters, and extended periods of rapidly varying weather conditions, unfavorable to air operations. Generally, supplies had to be dropped in hilly country where the extreme variability of visibility, wind speed and direction threatened safety and mission success. Lack of air cover, owing to extreme ranges, meant that missions were flown almost exclusively at night. While this greatly increased the inherent danger of mountain flying it offered significant protection against ground and air

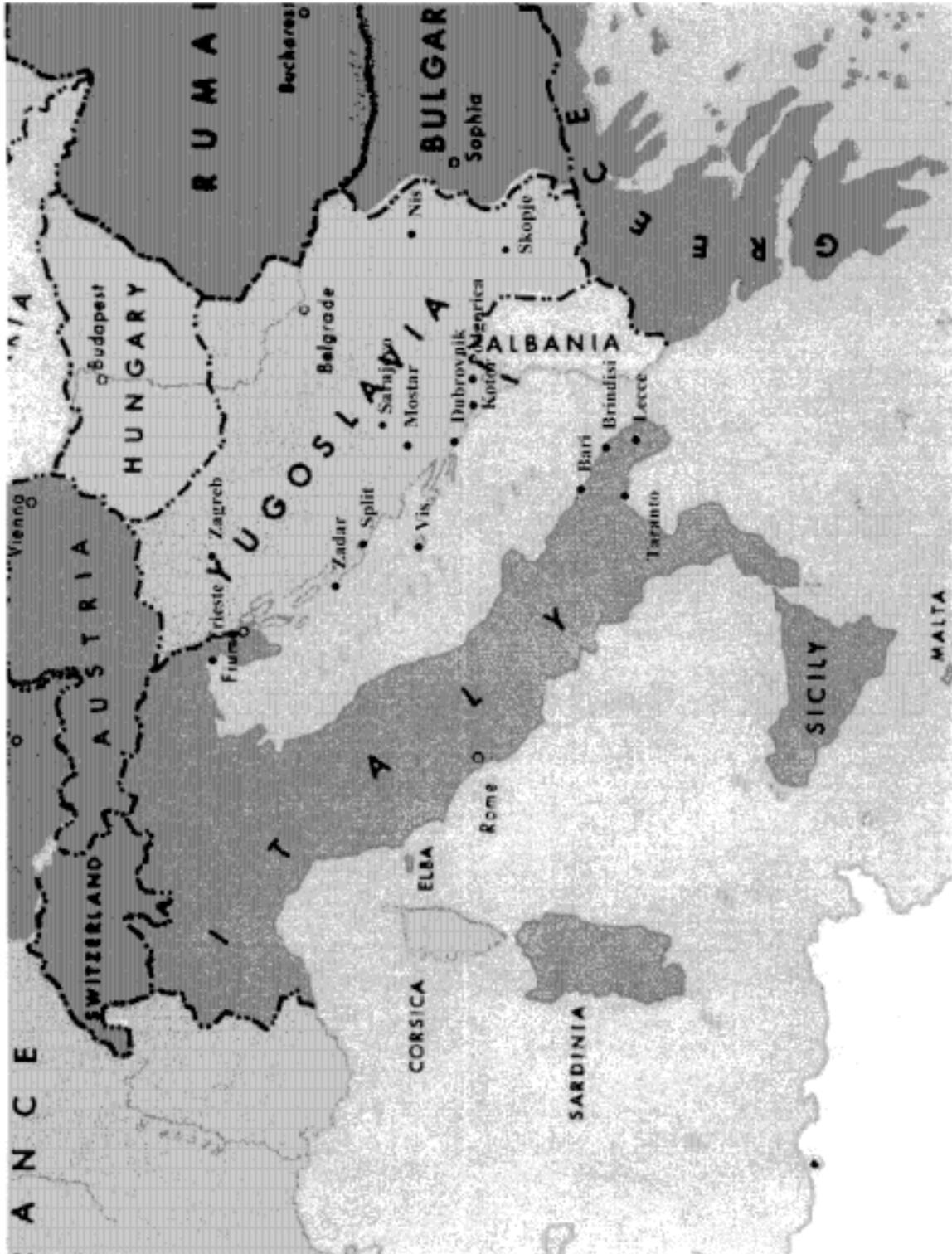


Figure 2. Map of Yugoslavia

attacks. The Luftwaffe presence was never strong, but occasionally among the occupation forces were formidable night fighters.<sup>9</sup>

By modern standards, the airfields in Yugoslavia were not especially good, but were more than adequate for German needs. Substantial fields existed near Zagreb and Belgrade, with less developed fields at Sarajevo, Bihac, Zara, and Banja Luka used as advanced fields when range was crucial.<sup>10</sup> Since no Balkan resistance group presented an air threat, the Germans were able to limit Luftwaffe strength. However, with no access to airfields, Allied supply flights were limited to air drops from modified long range bombers until techniques and battlefield successes allowed landings. Italian and German control of the Adriatic, low priority for limited Allied supply vessels, and poor port facilities combined to make airlift the only feasible delivery method.

In 1942, when the British first began planning air operations, the closest Allied airfields to Yugoslavia were located in the Middle East. Long-range bombers were the only aircraft capable of flying the distances required. Four B-24 “Liberator” bombers modified for cargo drops and dedicated to the task provided a psychological boost, but insignificant battlefield progress. Until the strategic situation in the Mediterranean improved, operations to Yugoslavia were limited to air supply missions by special operations forces.

### **Military Objectives of Yugoslav Operations**

The specific military objectives available to the Allies for air operations in Yugoslavia were driven by local contextual elements and those of the entire Mediterranean theater. While operations greatly increased in size and complexity with the formation of the Balkan

Air Force in 1944, they remained centered on the two specific, phased objectives implied in the “breed and feed” strategy.

The first objective was modest; to maintain the spirit of freedom among the population of Axis-occupied countries. The objective was to establish contact and begin the air drops of supplies and arms to the small and scattered resistance groups pledged to fight the enemy. The desired result was that the few die-hard patriots supplied would perform subversive activities, such as blowing up ammunition dumps, fuel, bridges, etc. Continued air drops of supplies and agents would support their growth into organized forces. The second objective, was to eventually establish more formal liaisons with successful resistance groups to facilitate and concentrate supplies to their greatest effect. Operations were to provide the resistance movements whatever direct air, military, or naval battlefield support could be spared and to furnish arms and equipment for resistance movements of any political color which were genuinely engaged in fighting the Germans. The hope was that raw materials would be diverted from Hitler’s use and significant German troop strength would be kept from other fronts. This objective aimed to coordinate and unify the resistance groups so these larger, better supplied groups would soon be strong enough to strike at the Germans in no meek manner.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 15-16.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *United States Army in World War II: The War Department, Strategic Planning for Warfare*, (Washington: Department of the Army, 1953), 156.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 100.

<sup>4</sup>Maxwell Schoenfeld, *The War Ministry of Winston Churchill*, (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1972), 103. Evolved yet continuous strategy from Arcadia Conference.

## Notes

<sup>5</sup>Robert M. Kennedy, *CMH Publication 104-18: German Antiguerrilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1944)*, Internet, 9.

<sup>6</sup>“World Battlefronts.” *Time*, 25 May 1942.

<sup>7</sup>Franklin Lindsay, *Beacons in the Night: With the OSS and Tito’s Partisans in Wartime Yugoslavia*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>8</sup>Robert M. Kennedy, *CMH Publication 104-18: German Antiguerrilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1944)*, Internet, 7.

<sup>9</sup>Headquarters Balkan Air Force, *The History of The Balkan Air Force*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 147.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Early Operations in Yugoslavia, 1941-1943**

While Allied military goals and objectives in the Balkans were clear and congruent with coalition strategy, the means available to achieve those objectives were meager. The hundreds of miles separating Allied forces from the resistance units in Yugoslavia could be spanned by long-range bombers, but exceeded the range of protective fighters. This distance that insulated the Axis occupiers in Yugoslavia was also the primary influence on Allied operations. The resulting disposition and intent of Axis and Allied forces was a result of their respective perception of centers of gravity and the courses of action each chose to pursue. The success of each force in these early years hinged on their determination and innovation.

#### **Disposition of Axis Forces and Strategy**

German interests in Yugoslavia, as defined by Hitler, involved the extraction of war resources, especially copper and maintaining a security buffer against the Allies. Disdaining the populace, Hitler had made good his promise to destroy Yugoslavia as a national entity by dissecting it in the occupation process. The Germans, in deference to Mussolini and anxious to begin Operation BARBAROSSA, allowed the occupation of Yugoslavia and the Balkans in general to be primarily the responsibility of the Italians.

Militarily, the German High Command considered the Balkans a protective shield against attack from the south. They also were a valuable source of strategic raw materials for the German war machine. In Yugoslavia, the Italians occupied Croatia, including most of the Dalmatian coast, with the Germans controlling the balance. The Germans believed the population could be controlled with a minimum number of troops by keeping the diverse ethnic groups from uniting. While the German Twelfth Army held the important stronghold of Greece, an area defense, the LXV Corps, was created to cover German interests in Yugoslavia. They were to maintain LOC to Greece, protect removal of Balkan oil, bauxite, chrome, and the critical copper production in northeast Serbia, and shield from attack the important shipping route of the Danube basin. The LXV Corps was headquartered in Belgrade with its 704th, 713th, 714th, 717th, and 718th Infantry Divisions spread throughout the country.<sup>1</sup>

At no time during the occupation did the Luftwaffe maintain a large force in Yugoslavia. They perceived the air threat from the Allies or Yugoslavian resistance groups to be insignificant and wanted to maintain the minimum air forces required to ensure their security and supply lines. The Germans protected their LOC with approximately 50 front-line Me-109 fighters stationed around the major cities of Belgrade, Zagreb, and Nis and sometimes deployed to Sarajevo and Skopje. In addition they flew approximately one hundred second-line ground attack aircraft including 50 Ju-87 "Stuka" and various Do 17s, Hs 126s, Fi 156s, and Cr 42s.<sup>2</sup>

The strength, composition, and combat experience of German air and ground forces is often cited as inadequate, but it was sized to its role in Axis Balkan plans. The larger German Twelfth Army in Greece held the outer shield of protection and was commanded

by Field Marshal Wilhelm List, directly answerable to Hitler. Meanwhile, Italy maintained 20 of her 32 division Balkan occupation force in Yugoslavia and Albania.<sup>3</sup> While not a large defensive force, German and Italian naval craft patrolled and kept open Adriatic supply routes.

### **The Allied Plan of Attack**

The Allies well understood Axis centers of gravity in Yugoslavia and throughout the Balkans. The roads and railways were mapped, numbers of locomotives were known, and thanks to military intelligence agents, Axis troop concentrations were even identified. But lack of resources, the priority of the Normandy invasion, and the distance to the enemy limited any course of action.

Starting in 1942, the Allied course of action was to drop agents and supplies to Tito's Partisans and Mihailovich's Chetniks, monitor progress against occupation forces, collect intelligence of the enemy, and expand operations as possible to reduce German troop strength. The fact that normal combat operations were impossible at the distances involved and the paucity of forces available made this an ideal mission for British SOE and American OSS agencies. The plan was for the SOE to coordinate operations, supplied as possible with aircraft from the Royal Air Force (RAF), the US Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Forces, Russia, Poland, and other allies. These special operations missions would mirror similar special operations in the wider European theater.

### **Operations**

The success of air operations in Yugoslavia was the result of nothing less than the dedicated efforts of heroic, innovative airmen. There was no "silver bullet" just the

concerted employment of airpower to supply resistance groups far from Allied logistics bases. The size and success of early operations was limited, but critical to Partisan successes. Larger forces and greater technology would eventually be employed in joint and far more conventional operations, but early operations depended on intelligence, targeting science, and deception to succeed.

Delivery of supplies to the Partisans and Chetniks began in May, 1942, when a flight of four B-24 Liberators was made available from the 108th Heavy Bomb Squadron.<sup>4</sup> The invasion of Italy and special operations to France prevented expansion, but these few modified, long-range bombers, completed 25 missions that year. The Chetniks and Partisans became more active, and by March, 1943 the Allies established the 148th Squadron in Libya to increase capacity, adding 14 modified RAF Halifax bombers to the Yugoslavian supply effort. Special operations flights from North Africa required the heavy payload capacity, long range, and defensive capability that only four-engined, heavy bombers such as these possessed.

Allied advances and the capitulation of the Italians in September, 1943 were to allow significant changes in operations. In 1943 the RAF routinely airdropped agents and supplies on special duty missions for the SOE all across occupied Europe, while the fledgling American OSS accomplished its first mission to the French Resistance. Shortages of suitable aircraft and Normandy priority still limited operations, but consolidation of resources was recognized as a way to increase effectiveness. While the US struggled to find suitable aircraft without impacting Major General Ira Eaker's Eighth Air Force in Europe, a small cascade of organizational changes culminated in late 1943 with the establishment of the 334th Special Operations Wing to consolidate all special

operations in the eastern Mediterranean. First established in North Africa, it quickly moved in January, 1944 to Brindisi, Italy which for the first time was within fighter escort range of Yugoslavia. The 334th Wing was a multinational force consisting of:

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. 148 Sqdn, (RAF)              | Modified Halifax bombers               |
| 2. 1586 Flt, (Polish Air Force) | Modified Halifax and Liberator bombers |
| 3. 62 Troop Carrier Grp, USAAF  | C-47 Dakotas                           |
| 4. 1 Sqdn, Italian Air Force    | CZ 1007 cargo aircraft <sup>5</sup>    |
| 5. 88 Sqdn, Italian Air Force   | SM 82 cargo aircraft                   |

Established by Headquarters, Mediterranean Allied Air Force (MAAF), the 334th Wing operated under British leadership and SOE influence as its operating area was in the Middle East region. Similarly, the US Army Air Force and the American OSS conducted special air operations in Italy and France using the 2641st Bomb Group as a nucleus. The unity of effort and consolidation of assets resulting from the establishment of the 334th Wing provided the capacity to begin airlift of significant amount of supplies to Yugoslavia. These special operations forces were employed, however, on a temporary basis and were always liable to recall by their parent headquarters. As the prospect of a complete Allied victory in Europe began to take shape, the resistance units in Yugoslavia, France, and other occupied countries grew rapidly. British and American leadership began looking for ways to increase these special air operations.

Technology played an important role in special air operations in Yugoslavia, but it was more the product of innovation and determination than of any James Bond espionage laboratory. Agents and supplies were infiltrated by foot, fishing boats, or submarines; but aircraft were faster, more flexible, and more certain than any other method. While 1944 would bring fighter escort, electronic beacons, and lightweight radios, modification of heavy bombers for airdrop duties and tactics development made early operations possible.

Initial 334th Wing operations to Yugoslavia were conducted by modified Liberator and Halifax bombers; later supplemented with Dakota cargo aircraft. Special operations missions dictated that these aircraft be extensively modified and flown low, slow, and in total darkness, well outside of the normal bomber flight envelope. Modifications to the B-24 Liberator were typical and illustrate the innovation used to enhance basic technology.<sup>6</sup> The bomb bays were modified and supply containers developed so that up to 18 containers, weighing from 250 to 320 pounds could be dropped from the internal bomb racks. The front turret and the ball turret under the aircraft were removed to provide better visibility for the bombardier and allow the installation of an additional hatch for bundle and agent drops. To reduce attack risk from German night fighters, flame dampers were installed on all engine exhausts, reducing the tell-tale glow at night. Black-out curtains were installed over most windows, interior lighting was limited, and the planes were painted a dull black color to further conceal them at night. With these modifications the Liberator could deliver a practical load of six thousand pounds approximately one thousand miles. The Halifax received similar modifications, as did the Dakota which had release racks mounted externally under the fuselage of the aircraft.

Special air operations also required flying skills unique to the mission. Missions required unescorted, single aircraft flights, at low altitudes in the dark of night, to unmarked sites in the Yugoslavian mountains. Navigation depended on “dead reckoning” techniques, and the heavy bomber had to be flown between 125 and 135 miles per hour through gusty mountain passes during drops. The technology available was limited, but the skill and dedication of special duty aircrew provided valuable supplies, arms, and equipment, enabling the Chetniks and Partisans to hold on until more could be done.

The intelligence gathered by liaisons to the resistance groups was crucial to the success of supply missions and was the primary influence on Allied strategy in Yugoslavia. The search for intelligence ultimately resulted in the demise of the Chetniks and their eclipse by Tito's Partisans. Psychological warfare was also employed by the Allies to maintain Yugoslavian fighting spirit and demoralize the enemy.

To gather intelligence, agents were infiltrated to both the Partisans and the Chetniks. In 1942, though supplies were limited, token support was sent equally to each. The new year would bring a change. The Germans were executing Operation SCHWARZ, one of a series of offensives aimed at the resistance fighters, when F. W. D. Deakin was sent by the British to gather information. His reports contained two important observations. The first was that the Partisans were courageous and aggressive in battling the German 1st Mountain and 104th Light Division, had suffered important casualties, and needed more support. The second observation was that the entire German 1st Mountain Division had transited from Russia on rail lines through Mihailovich-controlled territory. British intercepts (ULTRA) of German message traffic reportedly confirmed Chetnik timidity or collaboration. Even though today many circumstances, facts, and motivations remain unclear, intelligence reports resulted in increased Allied interest in Yugoslavia air operations and shifted policy.<sup>7</sup> In September 1943, at Churchill's request, Brigadier General Fitzroy Maclean was parachuted to Tito's headquarters near Drvar to serve as a permanent, formal liaison to the Partisans. While the Chetniks were still occasionally supplied, the Partisans received the bulk of all future support.

The decision to back Tito was not lightly made, owing to his Communist ideology. It was made under the pressure to defeat the Germans. Maclean remembered the following telling conversation he had with Churchill on the subject:

I now emphasized to Mr. Churchill the other points which I had already made in my report, namely that in my view the Partisans, whether we helped them or not, would be the decisive political factor in Yugoslavia after the war and, secondly, that Tito and the other leaders of the Movement were openly and avowedly Communist and that the system they would establish would inevitably be on the Soviet lines and, in all probability, strongly oriented towards the Soviet Union.

The Prime Minister's reply resolved my doubts.

'Do you intend,' he asked 'to make Yugoslavia your home after the war?'  
'No, sir,' I replied.

'Neither do I,' he said. 'And, that being so, the less you and I worry about the form of government they set up, the better. That's for them to decide. What interests us is, which of them is doing the most harm to the Germans?'<sup>8</sup>

In addition to intelligence activities, on virtually every supply mission, leaflets were dropped to intimidate the Germans and to remind the Yugoslavs that they were not alone and encourage them to join the Partisan effort. Given the Axis occupation policy of limited troop presence, this psychological warfare technique effectively informed and motivated the Partisans and intimidated the Germans. The weight of leaflets was only a small percentage of the total load, but grew as supply tonnage increased and by 1944 exceeded 50 tons per month.

The targeting science employed in early air operations in Yugoslavia was crude, yet vitally important to mission success. Before 1944, electronic capabilities were limited, distances great, and enemy threat significant. As a result, missions were primarily supply airdrops to a limited number of known, safe, drop zones. Containers of equipment or

bundles of food or clothing were usually dropped from five hundred feet above the drop zone to allow parachutes to open, yet minimize drift. Targeting science included the significant use of deception. Secrecy was paramount to the safety of both the lightly armed aircraft and the Partisans at the drop zones. The resistance groups would occupy drop zones only for the brief time required to receive supplies and then quickly disappear again. Eventually procedures were developed in which aircrew would use flashlights to signal Morse Code to the ground; if the proper “letter of the day” was flashed in return, the supplies were dropped. This was a primitive, yet effective targeting and deception procedure.<sup>9</sup> It prevented supplies from being dropped into German hands and allowed moderately successful drops in the absence of radios or elaborate navigation equipment.

The measure of military success before 1944 was as basic as the two objectives. The objective to maintain the spirit of those fighting the Germans was monitored in leaflet and supply tonnage delivered and measured in the growth and success of Tito’s Partisans. Though formal rosters were not available, under Allied special operations the Allies measured Partisan strength at over three hundred thousand by March 1944.<sup>10</sup> The second objective to establish more formal liaisons with successful resistance groups was realized when Maclean was dispatched to Tito and Mihailovich abandoned.

Military strategy in Allied special air operations in Yugoslavia was congruent with Allied Grand strategy, directly supporting the fourth and fifth elements of that strategy by attempting to close and “tighten the noose” around the Axis, and developing offensive action to wear down the German forces. The specific military objectives derived from these strategic goals reflected the restriction to not jeopardize higher priority goals including the northwest European invasion. Critical progress was made by merely

establishing special operations units and developing operational art, but the scarcity of resources and the lack of unity of effort among supply and combat operations in the Balkans limited the effectiveness of the Allies and Partisans. New bases in Italy and the scare from the nearly disastrous German attack on Tito's headquarters renewed Allied attention on improving Yugoslav operations and set the stage for the formation of an effective multinational, joint force, the Balkan Air Force.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Robert M. Kennedy, *CMH Publication 104-18: German Antiguerrilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1944)*, Internet, 1 December 1996, Available from <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/BALKAN.htm>, 11.

<sup>2</sup>Headquarters Balkan Air Force, *The History of The Balkan Air Force*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 145.

<sup>3</sup>Robert M. Kennedy, *CMH Publication 104-18: German Antiguerrilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1944)*, On-line. Internet, 1 December 1996, Available from <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/BALKAN.htm>, 10.

<sup>4</sup>Colonel John H. Foster, *History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediteranean Theatre*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 4.

<sup>5</sup>Italy surrendered in 1943, at which time a new Italian government joined the war on the side of the Allies. Ibid, 5.

<sup>6</sup>Monro MacCloskey, *Secret Air Missions: Counterinsurgency Operations in Southern Europe*, (New York: Richards Rosen Press, Inc, 1966), 29.

<sup>7</sup>David Martin, *Ally Betrayed: The Uncensored Story of Tito and Mihailovich*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1946), 34.

<sup>8</sup>Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), 402-3.

<sup>9</sup>Colonel John H. Foster, *History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediteranean Theatre*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 92.

<sup>10</sup>Warren G. Harris, *Special Operations: AAF Aid to European Resistance Movements, 1943-1945*, AAF Historical Office, HQ Army Air Forces, June 1947, 86.

## Chapter 4

### **The Balkan Air Force, 1944-1945**

The Allies made tremendous progress in the Mediterranean theater in 1943; Mussolini's Fascists collapsed and half of the Italian peninsula was in Allied control. Yet the hope that characterized the previous fall was tempered by setbacks in the spring of 1944. The Germans quickly filled the void left by the retreating Italians before Tito's Partisans could gain control of any part of the Dalmatian coast. In May, following a bomber attack, 750 paratroopers overran Tito's secret headquarters near Drvar. Tito, his staff, and 118 wounded Partisans escaped but had to be evacuated over a four-night period by the heroic efforts of one Russian and 16 American Dakota sorties.<sup>1</sup> These were some of the first missions to land in Yugoslavia. This near-elimination of the entire Partisan leadership coincided with Allied plans to consolidate efforts at the new Italian bases and hastened the formation of the Balkan Air Force (BAF).

The year 1944 saw a changed strategic situation. With a hold on Italy and the Germans limited to the European continent, the Mediterranean was markedly safer for naval operations. Land forces were in Italy, would soon be in France, and when available could be landed in the Balkans. At the Tehran Conference, Allied leaders called for increased support to the Partisans, "by supplies and equipment to the greatest possible extent, and also by commando operations."<sup>2</sup> The Allies recognized that land, naval, and

air operations needed to be coordinated, but politics prevented naming a single joint force commander. Allied commanders agreed that as the air force would play the predominant role in trans-Adriatic operations the coordinator should be the air force commander. In June 1944, Eisenhower established the Balkan Air Force to coordinate the planning and execution of trans-Adriatic operations of all three services. Ground troops from various British commando, special forces, raiding support regiments, and desert units were consolidated under a single commander, Brigadier General G. M. Davy, and designated, Land Forces Adriatic (LFA). British Middle East naval forces operating in the Adriatic remained under Flag Officer Taranto and Adriatic and Liaison Italy (FOTALI) but formally fell under operational control of the BAF.<sup>3</sup> Air Vice Marshall William Elliott, as commander of the BAF, established an extensive liaison network with Allied land and naval force commanders at Bari as well with Maclean and Tito on the island of Vis.<sup>4</sup>

### **A Changed Environment**

Contextual elements are never static; constantly enhancing or hindering the fortunes of war. The political, international, sociocultural, economic, leadership, and physical environments in the Mediterranean theater shifted as the Allies inched their way toward victory. Particularly influential were political changes.

The physical nature of Yugoslavia did not change, but the establishment of Allied bases in Italy opened the area to tactical aircraft operations. Medium bombers could now support ground operations, and fighter escort made day operations possible. The movement of BAF aircraft to Italy was the single most important contextual shift. The

mere proximity to Yugoslavia allowed for operations that no amount of increased money or technology could equal.

Economics and technology did greatly increase BAF support to the Partisans. Even though most of the Allied resources remained employed against Field Marshal Kesselring in Italy, moderate gains were made in equipment available for Yugoslavian special operations. Moreover, new technology greatly aided operations by allowing aircraft landings to replace inefficient air drops. Just before the formation of BAF, the first clandestine teams were dropped into Yugoslavia with portable electronic beacons to survey sites for secret landing zones. Portable radios, called “sugar phones,” also soon became available, making voice communication possible at Partisan landing sites. These changes in the operating environment drastically increased BAF capabilities and Partisan effectiveness.

Though nearly killed in the May 1944 attack at Drvar, Tito had already consolidated his position as the recognized leader of Yugoslavian resistance. With the disintegration of the Chetniks in Serbia and the growth of Partisan strength in Croatia, Tito was increasing his control over the remainder of Yugoslavia. Through Maclean he had direct access to Churchill who by June, 1944 convinced King Peter to recognize him as supreme commander of all Yugoslav forces, effectively disowning Mihailovich<sup>5</sup>. As the leader of all Yugoslav forces in the coalition, Tito approved all Allied operations in Yugoslavia through the BAF liaison on Vis.<sup>6</sup> All bombing required his approval and no ground forces could deploy to the interior without his permission. This arrangement functioned well initially, but as Tito’s power increased and eventual German defeat became obvious, his mistrust of British intentions and his confidence that he would rule a Communist post-war

Yugoslavia interfered with operations. His refusal to allow significant Allied ground forces to operate in Yugoslavia limited progress against the German forces and significantly inhibited operations in Croatia and northern Italy in 1945.

### **Disposition of Axis Forces and Strategy**

When the BAF was formed, there were 18 German divisions in Greece, Albania, and Yugoslavia and smaller garrisons amounting to about 50 additional battalions. The enemy's principal goal was to secure the Balkans after the collapse of Italy in order to protect petroleum and other war material sources, secure the Dalmatian coast to protect LOC with troops in northern Italy, and protect German forces against attack from resistance groups. The German Air Force in Yugoslavia remained small, sized for support of the ground operations. Front-line Me-109 fighters and Ju-87 aircraft numbered less than one hundred, mostly at Zagreb and Belgrade. About 50 second-line aircraft remained available for ground support and anti-Partisan actions. At sea, the Germans had but a few motor gunboats and schooners to protect Adriatic LOC. While Allied progress in Yugoslavia was sometimes disappointing, by 1944 German operations were increasingly defensive in nature. The BAF was formed to capitalize on this situation and further strengthen the Partisans while attacking enemy forces.

### **Allied Plan of Attack**

Courses of action open to the Allies were greatly improved by the acquisition of bases in Italy. Though still limited, the resources and attention available to Yugoslavian operations had risen as European theater goals were achieved. The Allied course of action was to expand supply operations to the Partisans and begin direct land, air, and sea

combat support of Partisan troops. While the military objectives of this plan did not include an Allied invasion, Elliott, the BAF commander, directed that the primary object of trans-Adriatic operations “was to contain and destroy as many enemy forces as possible in the Balkans.”<sup>7</sup> First, the BAF was to afford maximum assistance to Tito’s Partisans, now known as the Yugoslav Army of National Liberation (JANL), by providing arms, equipment, and air support for its operations against the Germans. Second, land and sea forces were to secure a base on the Dalmatian coast so that supplies could be infiltrated by sea. While air operations were crucial, a much greater tonnage could be moved when safe ports were available. Finally, combined land and sea forces were to carry out attacks against German forces on the Dalmatian islands and coast.

## **Operations**

The formation of the BAF involved more the consolidation of capabilities than growth. The unity of effort provided by the joint application of air, land, and sea forces through the BAF increased combat effectiveness and eliminated layers of coordination. Within the BAF headquarters at Bari, Italy were located the BAF commander, the LFA commander, and liaisons from FOTALI and the Partisans.<sup>8</sup> Air, land, and naval forces operated from Brindisi, Lecce, Taranto, and other close-by bases. Daily mission planning conferences also included Fifteenth Air Force and the Psychological Warfare Branch officers to arrange strategic bomber and leaflet support. This closeness allowed much more effective force employment in Yugoslavia and all the Balkans.

A multinational air force consisting of 24 squadrons, fifteen aircraft types, and aircrew of eight nationalities—British, American, Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, South African,

and Yugoslav—were under the operational control of BAF.<sup>9</sup> With the liberation of France, the BAF gained the services of US special operations air units and was free to concentrate on Balkan and east European missions. Operating from Italy, the BAF gained its own squadrons of escort fighters and medium bombers, with monthly reassignments from other MAAF units as north Africa and southern Italy were secured.

While air power remained the primary emphasis, land and naval forces joined to establish bases along the Dalmatian coast. LFA was a relatively small British ground force dedicated to Yugoslav operations and organized for small-scale attacks. These units consolidated from the Yugoslav sector of British special operations Force 399, four commando units, several specialized regiments, three squadrons of the British amphibious Special Boat Service troops and a number of ancillary units. All Adriatic naval forces were controlled from Taranto and closely coordinated with BAF coastal attack operations. While not constituting a true joint command, the BAF became a three-service combat force provider to Tito's Partisans, with the Air Officer Commanding, BAF the "supported" commander.

In the spring of 1944, technology arrived when a few British Mark I electronic homing beacons were infiltrated in to Yugoslavia.<sup>10</sup> Transmissions from these units, nicknamed "Eureka" transmitters, could be received by BAF aircraft equipped with corresponding "Rebecca" receivers. The Eureka sets, with a range of 50 miles in open country and approximately 30 miles in mountainous terrain, greatly simplified the navigation task of missions in poor weather or darkness. By the end of the war, successful contacts were made on 66 to 80 percent of all missions requiring Eureka/Rebecca use.

Completely blind airdrops were made on several occasions and landing fields, otherwise obscured, were often located using beacons.

The “Sugarphone” portable radio was first used in Yugoslav special operations in August 1944 when 30 BAF Dakotas were equipped and 17 ground units were furnished.<sup>11</sup> The advantages of Sugarphones included its portability (about 30 pounds), high degree of security due to its low power and high frequency, ease of use, and ability to be dropped by parachute. There were never enough Sugarphones in Yugoslavia to cover all operations, but they consistently proved invaluable. In its first month the Sugarphone facilitated the evacuation of over a thousand wounded Partisans from a heavily cratered field just before the strip was overrun by Germans.

Effective communication and intelligence links with Yugoslav forces remained essential to successful operations. While the Air Intelligence Section of MAAF provided suitable intelligence about ports, airfields, roads, and railways, air support always presented a problem because the Partisans were constantly on the move. Recognized as crucial, communications was the subject of the first meeting between the BAF commander and Marshall Tito, 10 July, 1944 on the island of Vis.<sup>12</sup> Several methods were developed to address tactical and strategic target approval, the flow of intelligence on German troop movements, and the exact location of Partisan forces. Air support of ground forces was improved when British Liaison Officers (BLO) were attached to JANL Corps where they forwarded requests for air support by radio to the British Air Advisor on Vis for approval by Tito. German unit disposition, strength, and probable action intelligence was gathered by Partisan and LFA ground personnel and relayed to Vis and BAF headquarters at Bari. Naval and air intelligence of Adriatic operations were coordinated at BAF headquarters.

Targeting science in Yugoslavia significantly improved after 1943. The BLOs attached to JANL units enabled more effective delivery of supplies. Partisan ground attacks were augmented with Allied air and naval bombardment. The Balkan Air Terminal Service (BATS) was formed by the BAF to develop a network of landing sites for the evacuation of wounded and so that landings could replace the less efficient airdrop of supplies.<sup>13</sup> Each BATS team consisted of an airfield controller, a radio operator, and a skilled radio technician. They carried a Eureka beacon and were parachuted into enemy territory to rendezvous with Partisan units. BATS teams operated in enemy territory for up to six months in extremely dangerous conditions; German aggressively bombed discovered landing sites. Five BATS teams became operational in enemy territory, establishing 36 secret landing strips.

The formation of the Balkan Air Force began the rapid expansion of operations in Yugoslavia with success measured in supply tonnage, Partisan force strength, and indications of German withdrawals as the Balkans began to slip from their hands. Occasions began to arise however, when the Allies wanted to augment Partisan troops on the battlefield, with the intent to kill or capture more Germans. Tito was wary of post-war British intentions and began to limit Allied ground presence in Yugoslavia. The Allies began to notice missed opportunities as Tito increasingly controlled operations.

Deception became a less important Allied tool as Partisan strength grew and German forces adopted a defensive posture closer in to their LOC. Following the failure of the German Seventh Offensive against the Partisans, the Allies countered with a combined land and air attack of the German-held rail system, Operation RATWEEK.<sup>14</sup> This highly successful effort disrupted German troop movements throughout the Balkans and virtually

eliminated the Luftwaffe as a threat in Yugoslavia. After RATWEEK daylight missions and landings became routine and increased dramatically. Coalition friction first impaired warfighting during deployment of an LFA unit, Floyd Force into Yugoslavia and gradually eroded Allied relations with Tito. A short summary of three operations of land, sea, and air forces best brings to light the synergy brought by the BAF as well as some of the challenges of coalition warfare.

## **Significant Operations**

### **RATWEEK**

After the seventh enemy offensive, which had resulted in Tito's near defeat and withdrawal to Vis in 1944, had fallen short of German goals, Maclean and Elliott suggested an immediate Allied counter attack. They proposed a combined effort by the BAF, Fifteenth Air Force, LFA, and Tito's Partisans in a closely coordinated attack on enemy LOC throughout Yugoslavia to make it untenable by the Germans and in the process to prevent any possible enemy withdrawal. Tito wholeheartedly welcomed the massive support and Eisenhower approved the plan for RATWEEK to start 1 September 1944.

RATWEEK air missions combined the tactical strength of BAF fighters and medium bombers with heavy bomber attacks from Fifteenth Air Force. Deep air attacks combined with Partisan raids destroyed over one hundred locomotives and severed practically all the trunk railways and many of the main roads of the German LOC. With a shortage of trucks and fuel, rail was critical to German operations. At the height of a major German troop withdrawal from Greece, made imperative by Russian advances in Romania and Bulgaria,

RATWEEK stopped all through railway traffic in Yugoslavia. The enemy, forced to the roads, then lost over three hundred trucks from fighter air attack by day and many more by Partisan night raids. Deep attacks to neutralize enemy airfields destroyed 94 aircraft, crippling the Luftwaffe in Yugoslavia.

While air power was destroying targets deep within Yugoslavia, the Long Range Desert Group and the Special Boat Service destroyed a bridge near Gruda and attacked targets throughout the coastal area near Dubrovnik. British light coastal craft attacked enemy supply ships servicing German garrisons in the Dalmatian islands. Royal Navy forces increased pressure along the Adriatic coast to deny the enemy a sea route of reinforcement or escape.

RATWEEK was successful beyond all expectation. Although much of the physical damage was easily repaired, the Germans never really recovered from these attacks. Closely planned as a combined offensive, the unity of effort between the Partisans and the BAF during RATWEEK was principally responsible for its success. This open cooperation did not characterize all future operations. After RATWEEK, as eventual Allied victory became more obvious to the Yugoslav masses; Tito's political power and desire to curtail Allied influence quickly grew.

### **Naval Operations**

The BAF supplemented operations of the Royal Navy and the limited Partisan fleet in attacking German LOC in the Adriatic. While the Germans were forced to withdraw from Greece and Bulgaria, they tenaciously held on to the northern Adriatic and the Dalmatian coast for raw material essential to their war effort.<sup>15</sup> Ships carried bauxite, cement, and

the only hard coal available for occupied Italy from ports in Yugoslavia to the German base at Trieste.

Since the majority of Allied naval strength in the northern Adriatic consisted of light, patrol, they operated against German shipping primarily by night to minimize exposure to attack by aircraft and coastal defense guns. Naval operations were combined with daylight coverage by the BAF to provide a 24-hour threat to German shipping. Tito's headquarters approved virtually unlimited targets in the coastal regions of Croatia and Slovenia. BAF fighter attacks on ships loading at the East Istrian ports such as Fiume were combined with 15th Air Force strategic bombing of docks and port facilities to block German supply shipments. Air power played the predominant role in this extremely successful operation, eventually sinking 183 enemy vessels; 110 in its first four months of operations. Naval guns and air support were also used to aid LFA ground forces in their efforts to establish Allied supply ports along the coast from Split to Zadar.

### **Operations Against The German 21st Mountain Corps**

In October 1944, Partisan advances in southern Montenegro resulted in the isolation of the German 21st Mountain Corps, consisting of 45,000 troops, near the town of Podgorica.<sup>16</sup> After a long retreat from Greece through Albania, there were 80 miles of rugged mountains between them and the remainder of Army Group E. In order to annihilate this body of enemy troops, BAF and Partisan planners thought it essential to provide the Partisans immediate air support and sufficient artillery to block likely escape routes. The BAF and Fifteenth Air Force began massive attacks, while 30 truckloads of supplies and 600 to 700 JANL reinforcements were sealifted from Italy. Permission was

received from Tito's newly established Belgrade headquarters for an LFA artillery force to aid the Partisans.

The British rushed to assemble an appropriate artillery force, code named Floyd Force. While they had promised only 16-20 guns, they were able to sealift to Dubrovnik by 28 October an entire artillery regiment and a protecting force of commandos. Floyd Force, much larger than the Partisans expected, alarmed the local commander, General Radovan Vukanovic. The Partisans were well aware of current British operations against Communist factions in Greece and were extremely wary. General Vukanovic allowed only a small advance party of Floyd Force to deploy, while he contacted Belgrade for instructions. This small party operated with the Partisan 2d Corps and within two weeks had killed one hundred and captured three hundred officers and men of the 181st German Division. Dozens of BAF close air support attacks and Floyd Force artillery pinned the Germans down; eventually limiting their escape possibilities to a single mountain pass. Vukanovic then deployed more of Floyd force with his Partisans to block the German escape.

However, on November 23, there was a sudden change in orders. After receiving instructions from Belgrade, the Partisans declared they had information that the enemy was about to initiate a surprise attack on the Dubrovnik area from Mostar and the entire Floyd Force was immediately to be sent back to Dubrovnik to meet the threat. As Marshall Tito was the Supreme Commander in Yugoslavia, the British had no choice but to pull Floyd Force to Dubrovnik, where no attack came.<sup>17</sup>

By 1 December the German 21 Mountain Corps slipped through the mountains to join Army Group E in the Ibar valley. Continued air attacks caused serious losses, but a

monumental opportunity to eliminate 45,000 Germans from the war had slipped from Allied grasp. The BAF and Maclean again offered Floyd Force to the Partisans for an attack toward Mostar. Tito replied that he had sufficient artillery in the area but hinted only that they could be deployed north of Zadar, far from the Partisans and still firmly in German control. Unused, Floyd Force was eventually withdrawn to Italy.

Military strategy in Allied air operations in Yugoslavia under the BAF remained congruent with Allied Grand Strategy. Early operations were modest and heroically conducted through innovative use of scarce resources, but operations under the BAF were greatly expanded and began to significantly affect German operations. While the Germans struggled to hold the Allies in northern Italy and the Russian advance from the east, the Partisans helped to “tighten the noose”, wearing down the Germans until they were forced to withdraw. The specific military goals of special operations under the BAF grew from mere air supply, as in early operations, to include direct air, land, and sea attacks of German forces and LOC. This expansion directly supported strategic goals and became possible when bases were obtained in Italy within reach of tactical aviation.

The tactics employed by the BAF were wholly congruent with objectives and unmistakably successful, with the significant exception of Allied ground force employment in Yugoslavia. The Allies achieved their objective in Yugoslavia, but not as completely nor as effectively as it might have been with available Allied ground forces. Scholars continue to debate the specific motives of Tito, Stalin, Churchill, and other leaders but agree that as German defeat approached the political contextual element in Yugoslavia continued to shift. Tito grew more confident that he would rule a communist post-war Yugoslavia, wary of British intentions, and increasingly intolerant of British troops in the

country. The Floyd Force experience began a gradual deterioration of relations. In April 1945, Yugoslav troops actually took into “custody” British forces engaged in clean-up operations on the Yugoslavian-claimed Istrian peninsula because they did not have written “passes” issued by Tito’s headquarters.<sup>18</sup>

Operations in Yugoslavia under the BAF proved very effective even though the “Cinderella Front” did not deliver the decisive blow to the German Reich. Throughout the war, the delivery of 16,500 tons of supplies and the evacuation of 19,000 people by special duty aircraft to the Partisans made the difference between defeat and victory.<sup>19</sup> This was accomplished on 8,640 successful sorties in 11,632 attempts, with weather the principal cause of failure. Only 18 supply aircraft were lost in Yugoslav operations. In addition to the supply flights, the BAF flew bomber and fighter combat sorties in support of Partisan ground forces. These missions destroyed enemy supplies, transportation, airfields, aircraft, and troops in addition to supporting Partisan efforts. The unity of effort and the synergy resulting from the coordination of air, land, and sea forces by the BAF tied up approximately 600,000 German troops throughout the Balkans.<sup>20</sup> This feat was largely accomplished by the effective and efficient use of airpower. In 1944-1945, the BAF flew over 38,000 sorties with only 330 losses.

The Germans were unable to counter operations under the BAF. They bombed landing fields, sent armored patrols to capture drop zones, and attempted to interdict Partisan supply missions using dummy landing strips. These efforts failed because Partisan strength grew to be overwhelming, the BAF eventually established at least 322 drop zones in Yugoslavia, and combined Partisan and BAF operations defeated Luftwaffe resources

and disrupted German lines of communication. Hitler himself admitted the success of the BAF and the failure of German countermeasures when he complained of Tito:

To call a man like Tito a Marshal is absolutely correct. A man who has practically no materiel at his disposal, who keeps a full enemy force constantly on the alert, and who always recuperates from our blows deserves this title more so than some of our own Colonel Generals and Field Marshals who could not operate skillfully with the finest machine the world has ever known.<sup>21</sup>

The BAF, as a force multiplier, was responsible for part of this achievement.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Walter R. Roberts, *Tito, Mihailovic and The Allies, 1941-1945*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 228

<sup>2</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers: The Conferences at Cairo and Tehran, 1943*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961), 652.

<sup>3</sup>Headquarters Balkan Air Force, *The History of The Balkan Air Force*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 5.

<sup>4</sup>Hilary St. George Saunders, *Royal Air Force, 1939-1945*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954), 237.

<sup>5</sup>Walter R. Roberts, *Tito, Mihailovic and The Allies, 1941-1945*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 260.

<sup>6</sup>Headquarters Balkan Air Force, *The History of The Balkan Air Force*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 5

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 5

<sup>10</sup>Colonel John H. Foster, *History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 108

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 111

<sup>12</sup>Headquarters Balkan Air Force, *The History of The Balkan Air Force*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 10.

<sup>13</sup>Colonel John H. Foster, *History of Special Operations (Air) in the Mediterranean Theatre*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 17

<sup>14</sup>Headquarters Balkan Air Force, *The History of The Balkan Air Force*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 9.

<sup>15</sup>Charles W. Koburger, Jr., *Naval Warfare in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1940-1945*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishing, 1993), 123

<sup>16</sup>Headquarters Balkan Air Force, *The History of The Balkan Air Force*, (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air Force Historical Research Agency), 142.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

## Notes

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>19</sup>Warren G. Harris, *Special Operations: AAF Aid to European Resistance Movements, 1943-1945*, AAF Historical Office, HQ Army Air Forces, June 1947, 100.

<sup>20</sup>Robert M. Kennedy, *CMH Publication 104-18: German Antiguerrilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1944)*, On-line. Internet, 1 December 1996, Available from <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/BALKAN.htm>.Internet, 33.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Warren G. Harris, *Special Operations: AAF Aid to European Resistance Movements, 1943-1945*, AAF Historical Office, HQ Army Air Forces, June 1947, 101.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Lessons for Today

This analysis of Allied special air operations in Yugoslavia in World War II offers valuable lessons for efforts to mold today's armed forces into the most effective joint fighting force possible. The first lesson is that the strength offered by coalition warfare was needed to defeat the Axis; it was critical to allied success in Desert Storm; and it will become increasingly essential in future struggles. In a dangerous world and in a time of constrained resources, US military officers must become more educated in forming partnerships and fighting as coalition members. In coalition planning, the six contextual elements contained within the Campaign planning model must be considered with respect to all coalition members in order to achieve the unity of effort required to win.

A second lesson for today's officer is that war, like politics, "makes strange bedfellows." Tito's Partisans emerged as the most effective resistance group fighting the Axis in Yugoslavia. As a Communist group, they represented a possible threat to Western Europe following the war. Historians are now free to ponder what would have resulted from an Allied refusal to supply the Partisans, but Churchill and Roosevelt chose the coalition required to accomplish their end state, which did not consider Yugoslavia. Today's coalition architects must recognize that differing goals affect coalition commitment and effectiveness. Special operations, like military operations other than war,

are especially sensitive to politics, as shown in these operations. Urgent to achieve an Allied goal to prevent the escape of the German 21st Mountain Corps, the LFA deployed significant troops in Floyd Force without clearly stating the size and intentions of the force. A better understanding political sensitivities and a more coordinated “ground forces policy” might have improved BAF operations in Yugoslavia and is an essential consideration for future coalition operations.

A third lesson from the BAF experience is the value of joint warfare, coordinated by a single agency results in unity of effort and increased effectiveness. Early operations in Yugoslavia showed that even with scarce resources, brave and innovative airmen could still accomplish much. But the operations carried out under Balkan Air Force leadership showed the tremendous synergy that results from the joint application of air, land, sea, and special operations forces. One must study the history of joint victories, plan, train, and always be ready to fight in multinational joint teams.

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