

Raid on the Settimo Road Bridges

by Daniel Setzer

Based on the book by Roger Juglair with Silvana Miniotti called,

Ponte San Martino: Martirio di un paese valdostano
[Ponte San Martino: The Martyrdom of a village in the Aosta Valley]

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The Roman Bridge at Ponte San Martino - Retrieved from www.regione.vda.it

Preface

On August 23, 1944 the 340th Bombardment Group was given yet another bridge to bomb. For the 'Bridge Busters' of the 340th this was in many ways just another routine bombing raid. However, there were characteristics of the raid that were far from routine, in fact the origins of the order to go to the Settimo bridge have been shrouded in mystery for many decades.

The raid was a devastating blow to the village as can well be imagined. The bridges that were targeted by the American B-25 Mitchell bombers were located in the center of the town. This was unlike the bridge at Ala, for example, in the Brenner Pass that was targeted by the Allied bombers on no less than 900 missions during the war but without a single loss of civilian life in the nearby town.

It was unclear to the unfortunate inhabitants of the village as to why they were targeted. Tucked away in the upper northwest corner of Italy they did not lie on any of the main supply routes for the German army. The only industry was a steel plant, but it was located at some distance from the village and miles from the Settimo Road Bridge. On the day of the attack the headquarters of the German area commander and the Italian Republican Guard were both hit. Nevertheless, only nine enemy soldiers were killed. The 'troop concentrations' could not have been a reason for dispatching 18 bombers to take them out.

The effect of the bombing was shock and horror, followed by sorrow and grieving. It quickly devolved to bitterness and recriminations. Everyone in the village sought to discover the circumstances that had caused this calamity. Everyone was suspect and the stress of the catastrophe opened up old wounds between the various social factions in the town.

Early History

During ancient Roman times the Romans built a bridge over the deep gorge cut by the Lys river. The bridge was built in the year 25 BC and features a spectacular, graceful stone arch over the river and a small guard-house at the center.

The bridge was one of the largest construction projects along the Roman Road to Gaul, and Julius Caesar pushed hard to assure its completion. This route to Gaul going through the Gran and the Piccolo San Bernardo passes was the quickest way to get from the Po Valley in Italy to the Rhône Valley in France.

The bridge was a boon to the village because it concentrated travelers in the village as they made their way back and forth across the bridge. It was ideal for the merchants selling goods to the people passing through.

In the year 1800 another great conqueror, Napoleon, made use of this route during his audacious campaign against Italy. His army went through the Aosta Valley and across the Roman Bridge in Ponte San Martino on their way to their important victory at the Battle of Marengo.

In the middle of the 19th century a new road was pushed through to better accommodate the additional traffic and a more modern bridge was built across the river just 55 feet south of the Roman Bridge.

The creation of the new unified nation of Italy in 1861 and the construction of rail lines in neighboring valleys of the Alps had undesirable effects on the inhabitants of the Aosta Valley. The lucrative commercial traffic bypassed them. The Val d'Aosta became a backwater, the economies suffered and the people became poorer.

That began to change with the construction of an electrical generation plant in 1919.

Then in 1931 construction began on a steel production plant that was able to take advantage of the nearby electrical power. The steel plant had a profound impact on the town. Between 1931 and 1932 the population jumped from 1,600 to 2,800.

The work shifts at the plant dictated the daily rhythms of the town.

In 1939 Mussolini toured through many parts of the Val d'Aosta as part of a visit to the Fiat plant in Torino. He was greeted with enthusiastic, well-choreographed demonstrations of support. The villagers' presence at this manifestation of support, was obligatory. However, Il Duce's pro-German/anti-French message did not sit well with many of the local inhabitants whose family members had emigrated to France looking for work.

War is Declared

Italy declared war on June 10, 1940. The proximity of the Val d'Aosta to the French border put them on the front lines. The Battle of the Alps was fortunately very brief and did not greatly affect the local population. However, the wave of enthusiasm brought by Mussolini's visit began to fade in the wake of the strong resistance put up by the French and the heavy losses suffered by the Italian Alpine troops. The initial euphoria over the successful German Blitzkrieg and the hopes for a quick victory in the West waned as the English doggedly refused to buckle under the German onslaught.

Activity at the steel plant kicked into high gear as part of the war effort. Workers at the plant were exempt from the military draft, but for the farm boys the same was not the case. Many left for the front where they served with courage but without much enthusiasm.

For the subsistence farmers the loss of a young man to military service represented a considerable hardship. It resulted in even more hard work and privation.

The Axis propaganda of 1940 through 1942 exulted in the decisive victories over the enemy, but the words of the soldiers home on leave told a different story. They told of victorious advances transformed into humiliating retreats. The West African colonies conquered in 1936 were completely lost after only one year of war. After 1942 the major defeats at El Alamein and in Russia put an end to the military adventures of the Fascists and their African Empire.

More and more families received the cold, formal telegrams stating: "The soldier,, on the date, failed to answer at roll-call and must be considered missing." These telegrams were arriving from North Africa, Greece and Russia. They never failed to throw families into total despair.

For some families the anxiety was relieved in part at least by the arrival of a letter from the Red Cross informing them that their son or husband was taken prisoner by the Allies. Other families hung their

faint hopes on the one word in the letter, "...missing..." Often this small hope would be dashed when the remains of their loved-one were identified, sometimes a decade later.

It wasn't just the notices from distant front lines that preoccupied the people of Ponte San Martino. This new war was total-war and death was not found only on the front lines, it also fell from the skies, sometimes at night during fierce air raids. They learned very early on in this conflict that the war could come find them when the English bombed Torino and other Northern Italian cities. The reports from that city were reports of death, fire and destruction. After 1941 many residents of the big cities moved to the small towns where they thought they would be safe.

On many occasions the sleep of the villagers in Ponte San Martino was interrupted by the rumble of the bombers as they flew over on their way to bomb Milan, Turin and Genoa. One of the most spectacular of these incursions occurred on the 24th October in 1944 when over two hundred four-engine Lancasters flew over in tight formation headed for Milan. That they could make this flight without any opposition was a humiliation to the government and a clear indication of its military impotence and weakness.

Nevertheless, if we are to believe a few of the local newspapers, a British attack did hit in the territory of Ponte San Martino.

A couple of local journals reported on a sinister plan of the British to float balloons over Italian territory with the intent of causing short-circuits in the electrical lines that they would encounter. One attack, described in detail, told how a balloon came in contact with electrical wires, then emitted a bizarre sound before disgorging a liquid that burst into flames burning a nearby wood. In spite of this highly detailed story, the event left no memory of it among the local population.

The British did try sending incendiary balloons into the Germans forests in 1942, but they did not have the intended effect of destroying Germany's lumber industry and some of the balloons drifted into neutral Swiss territory and Allied France.

Italy Quits the Axis

On September 8, 1943 the citizens of Italy received the news of the armistice. Their hearts were divided between fleeting joy and great trepidation. No one knew anything about the fates of the young men of Ponte San Martino who had gone to war.

Now that Italy had suddenly switched sides in the war, many of the Italian soldiers became prisoners of the Germans. It happened so quickly that they did not have time to contact their families. Many of them who were serving on the Yugoslavian front became partisans fighting on the side of Tito. No one at home could know that or what might have become of them. Some who were already stationed in Northern Italy actually managed to overcome all obstacles and get back to their homes.

The events of September 8th initiated a new phase in the war. The Fascists who had been routed by the fall from grace of Mussolini on July 25th, now found a new voice. The German commandos had 'freed' Il Duce and set him up as the leader of the new Italian Socialist Republic which was comprised of much of Northern Italy. The new Republic's call for fresh recruits and the general opposition to this new regime caused many young men to take to the roads high in the mountains.

March 4th saw the first battle between the anti-Republican rebels and the pro-Nazi Fascists. One

Fascist was killed, a partisan and a civilian girl were wounded.

These skirmishes further divided the villagers in Ponte San Martino between the supporters of the various factions and the larger majority who only wanted to stay out of the conflicts and hope for a quick and painless end to the war.

In the Spring and Summer of 1944 the anxiety of the locals rose noticeably. The partisan attacks and ambushes, followed by the brutal sweeps made by the German troops created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. Many of the inhabitants of Ponte San Martino joined the resistance and from May through July 1944 there were a steady succession of partisan attacks followed by Nazi sweeps through the countryside.

On the 30th of June the partisans engaged a group of Italian SS on a road near Gressoney. The SS retaliated with a fierce sweep through the area burning several homes in Chamieux and Capoluogo followed the next day by the total destruction by fire of the village of Marine. All in all 80 dwellings were destroyed.

Later, on July 25th, the Battle of the Valle del Lys (Lys Valley) included attacks on a railroad bridge and electrical plant that brought the war to the doorstep of Ponte San Martino.

Also during this time the Allies stepped up their air attacks on communication lines in France and Italy as part of the preparations for the invasion of the South of France, Operation Dragoon. All of the actions of the French and Italian partisans during the summer of 1944 were planned with the sole purpose of preparing for and supporting Operation Dragoon.



*Homes in the Val d'Aosta Valley
destroyed by German reprisals*

The nearby city of Chivasso had already been subject to over air 100 attacks by the Allies. In the first years of the war the attacks were primarily night raids on the steel mills and machine shops in the area.

Beginning in 1944 the air raids were conducted in daylight and the targets shifted to the rail bridges. In July and August there were six attacks on the towns of the Italian Piedmont. By coincidence at least two of the attacks were carried out by the 340th Bombardment Group, the same group that would carry out the attack on the Settimo bridges on August 23rd. The six attacks occurred on July 22, 24, 25 and 26th, then on the 2nd and 20th of August.

Air traffic intensified during this period of time and the people of Ponte San Martino often heard the sound of air raid sirens. The invasion in Southern France and the activities of the partisans had effectively cut the supply lines between the German forces in Northern Italy and the forces in Southern France. The only way to supply the troops facing the Allies in France was by air. Many Junker JU-52 tri-motor planes flew over on the way to the French airfields still in German hands.



Lockheed F5 Reconnaissance Plane

Among all of this air traffic the passage of a single Lockheed F5 was hardly noticed as it flew over the area on August 20th. However, it was a US reconnaissance plane on a photographic mission tracking the movement of German troops and supplies. No one at the time could have guessed the tragic consequences this simple fly-over would have for those living near the Settimo Bridge.

A Normal Day During the War

On August 23th the day began early for the 340th Bombardment Group. Colonel Chapman, commander of the Group, had received his orders that detailed the missions for the day and he briefed his staff on the objectives. This responsibility actually fell to Major Joseph E. Ruebel who also had the authority to sign documents in Colonel Chapman's name. The target that morning, the Group's 521st mission, would be the railroad bridge at Blanoux, France not far from Arles.

Everyone was up at 0600 hours and headed to the mess tent for breakfast. Pilots of the 488th and 489th Squadrons went to the briefing at 0700 hours where they learned that the mission would be a long one all the way to a bridge known as La Grande Combe in Blanoux. They were given the codes and radio frequencies to use on this mission and got a report on the weather expected over the target.

When they arrived at the target they found 10/10 cloud coverage which made a bomb run impossible. They made a wide circle and came back to the target twice in the hopes of finding a hole in the clouds but nothing opened up for them. Since they had not been assigned an alternate target, they had no choice but to return to Corsica with their bombloads. On the return trip home they happened to pass by an area that was defended by anti-aircraft and two planes were holed by flak, but the hits were not serious. That the raid was flown without any fighter support is an indicator of how bad shape the Luftwaffe was in. They did not have a single fighter plane stationed in Southern France.

Mission #522

Later that same day, at 1500 hours, another briefing took place. Crews from 18 ships assembled in the meeting hall. The atmosphere was light, full of the joking and good humor one expects of a group of 20 year-olds. At the front of the room was a large map with a colored ribbon tracing the route of the raid. There were also several aerial photos taken by the Lockheed F5 of the Aosta Valley.

Their mission was to bomb the Settimo Road Bridges located at pinpoint J-172864 in the Po Valley north of Turin. The formation was to be made up of 12 aircraft from the 488th Squadron and 6 from the 489th. They would fly in three groups of six planes each, the group of six was known as a box. The first two boxes would attack the east bridge and the third box would attack the west bridge.



The 18 ships took off at 1600 hours, each armed with 4 1000-lbs bombs. Shortly after take-off, two aircraft in the last box reported mechanical problems and returned to base.

At 1730 hours the formation reached Ponte San Martino. The people in the town heard the roar of the powerful B-25 engines. They were alarmed at the sound, but also curious as to what was going on. They came out into the streets for a better look. In the distance they could pick out the 16 silvery specks in the sky shimmering in the hot afternoon sun.

Some noticed more silvery specks suddenly appear beneath the first. These were the deadly bombs that after a short flight fell in the center of town with three distinct impacts followed by a series of explosions that shook the ground and immediately filled the air with a dark suffocating smoke. A few of the bombs did not land in the same area as their fellows. Three overshot the town center and exploded harmlessly in a field. Judging from the pattern of the other explosions, the three bombs that missed should have hit the old Roman bridge and destroyed it.

Bomber 8K had performed a bizarre maneuver while in formation that caused the bombs to go astray. The move was very risky given tightness of the formation during the bomb run. In his report following the mission the pilot justified the move by saying that he was executing an evasive maneuver. This was quite unlikely considering that the only anti-aircraft gun protecting Ponte San Martino was a single

machine gun that did not fire a single shot that day. While Joseph Heller, who, as bombardier flew on this mission, was writing his novel, *Catch-22*, he speculated that the pilot dropped his bombs wide for purely humanitarian reasons.

“Yossarian no longer gave a damn where his bombs fell, although he did not go as far as Dunbar, who dropped his bombs hundreds of yards past the village and would face a court-marshal if it could ever be shown he had done it deliberately. Without a word even to Yossarian, Dunbar had washed his hands of the mission.” [Heller *Catch-22*, p. 330]

Although some of the bombs of aircraft 8K had fallen off-target, the loads of the other 15 planes landed in the town in a tight pattern and with deadly accuracy. They made their turn off the bomb run and retraced their route back to Corsica.

The return flight home was uneventful except for a problem on 8K. The 'evasive maneuver' that caused three of the four 1000 lbs bombs to fall wide of the target also caused one of the bombs to jam in the bomb bay. The tail-gunner, Private Ricks, had to climb into the bomb bay and kick it free. It was never a good idea to try and land a bomber that had a live bomb hung up in the bomb bay.

While researching the details of this raid, Roger Juglair had the good fortune to make contact with Robert Burger, who, as a 1st Lieutenant at the time, was the bombardier on 8T piloted by Saleem Aswad. In an email to Juglair in November of 2003, Burger recalled the mission:

“Dear Roger,

At the time of the bombing of your town I was 22 years of age. I am now a very active and healthy 83. I was the squadron bombing officer of the 488th bombardment squadron which was part of the 340th Bombardment Group.

The pilot was Saleem Aswad of Armenian decent. He was a very good friend of mine. We were briefed for that mission and it was the town itself that was the target. The Air Crews were not advised of the reason for the destruction of this town. The mission leader was in contact with our home base by the radio operator using Morse code. The code name of the home base of this mission was Blacktop.

On the approach to the target, as I was just about ready to start sighting in on the target with the Norden bombsight I thought there must be some mistake. The target was not near a major highway or railroad. There was no anti-aircraft fire and the target seemed undefended.

In the military and I quote from the famous poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. "Yours is not to reason why, yours is but to do or die." So I started my bomb run. As my five wingmen saw my bomb bay doors open they in turn opened theirs. When they saw my bombs drop they triggered their load. Each airplane carried four, one thousand pound general purpose bombs.

I ordered the radio operator to send the following signal back to Blacktop. Mike, Sugar, Oboe, King. The phonetic alphabet for Mission Successful and as to the weather Okay.

The bombs that were out of the immediate area were probably caused by bombardier error or malfunction of the bomb racks in the airplane.

This mission started from Alesan on the eastern coast of the island of Corsica.

I have always wondered what the casualties were on this mission.

Please advise the survivors and the relatives of those casualties that this mission still bothers me to this day and I feel for them.

I did not hear anyone assigned to the mission in question that mentioned anything at all about it not being a military target.

I hope that I have answered your questions roger.

Bob Burger”

In a follow-up email Burger also stated:

“When I attacked Ponte San Martino I could easily see that there were no major highways nor railroads in the area. My thoughts were that it was a mistake and I very nearly aborted the mission. In retrospect, my thoughts were that if it were not in error the only other explanation would be old Benito. So, who really knows the real reason?”

As Burger hesitated before triggering the bomb drop for the entire formation, his best guess as to why they had been ordered to destroy an undefended village off the major supply routes was that it was suspected of being the hiding place for Benito Mussolini. Hitting Old Benito would be a worthwhile military target, so, “Bombs Away!”

The radio-gunner had reported back to base that the mission a success, but the tragic and ironic fact was that in spite of the tight and accurate bomb pattern....both bridges remained standing!



*Bombardier Lt. Robert Burger
(Photo Courtesy Roger Juglair)*

The Questions

Why was Ponte San Martino selected as a target? This question was being asked by the people on the ground almost from the moment the bombs hit.

Most people were quick to blame the partisans whose delays in sabotage operations caused the English to become impatient with them. The English were being blamed for the bombing. The Americans were a more abstract and distant enemy. The English on the other hand had been the prime target of Fascist propaganda for many years.

The common opinion seemed to dismiss the bridges themselves as the target of the raid. After all, in spite of the massive destruction in the town, both bridges were untouched. Blame continued to fall on the partisans.

The blame and accusations reverberated in the Aosta Valley for years. In April of 1947 a right-wing newspaper in Turin printed an article called, "*Aosta – The Dead of Ponte S. Martino Demand Justice.*"

The article insisted that the town was in no way a military target and cited three facts to backup that opinion:

1. The town was located far away from the front lines.
2. There were bigger and more important bridges located throughout the Aosta Valley.
3. There were no significant numbers of German troops stationed anywhere near the town.

The newspaper claimed to have information regarding a clandestine radio transmission originating in the city of Cogne that called for the attack on Ponte San Martino. The alleged motive had nothing to do with the war going on around them. It revolved around a plot to erase all records of a 45 million Lire construction loan made between two Italian companies. Two of the principals in the deal had transported all of the loan documents to their house near the Settimo bridges. The house was totally destroyed and both people perished.

The article was published twice and quickly met with vehement refutations from several people in the Val d'Aosta and from representatives of the partisan movement, particularly their famous leader, "Mésard."

In a subsequent issue the newspaper had to retract a great part of the article.

Although this news report was largely discredited, the basic idea of the raid being called in simply to wipe out a particular family continued to have some currency especially among those the most hard hit by the raid.

The family most mentioned as the true target of the raid was the Badery family.

Following the battle of the Colle del Lys on July 2, 1944 and the stepped up sabotage attacks on the rail lines, the German command in Ponte identified the culprits as the band of partisans operating around the town of Perloz



Partisan Leader Mésard (Cesare Olietti) - Collected from www.regione.vda.it

just north of Ponte San Martino. A dispatch dated August 21, 1944 stated the German's threat to increase reprisals against the factions in Perloz. In the face of this threat, some of the local priests offered to act as intermediaries.

The talk was that Badery had called on the Allies to bomb the bridges knowing that the attack would almost certainly destroy the German office located near the bridges of Ponte San Martino. Ponte would be sacrificed in order to prevent the Germans from carrying out a massive reprisal attack on Perloz.

However, records show that Bono Badery arranged for a meeting with the commander of the German contingent in Ponte, Oberleutenant Erich Frederick Arnold on August 22nd, but the meeting came to nothing due to the passage of one or more trucks near the agreed spot. The next day, the 23rd, Oberleutenant Arnold died beneath the ruins of the Roman Bridge Inn where he had established his headquarters in Ponte.

Based on these events it seems unlikely that the Germans were planning another attack on the citizens of Perloz. They were not concentrating troops here, in fact the number of military casualties was very low considering that the headquarters of both the German and Italian Republican Guard were both hit. There were only three German soldiers killed: Oberleutenant Erick Frederick Arnold, German commander and member of the SS Polizei, Oberwachtmeister Hans Fiedler of the SS Polizei and Hauptman Helmut Pinckert of the Third Regiment Branderburger Division.

The units they represented caused a great deal of death and misery in Italy. The Brandenburg Division was an elite unit that specialized in infiltration of enemy lines and in counter-guerrilla activities. During the previous months this Division had scored many successes, but the August 15th invasion in France had caused them to make a hasty retreat back to Italy where they would remain until October.

The Italian Republican Guard lost six men: Angelo Alchieri, Gino Barilli, Rosario Guerrieri, and Giovanni Foracchi. Two were in German uniform Guiseppe Minoletti, Waffen SS and Luigi Morandi, also with the Waffen SS.

The mission report of the 340th Bombardment Group did not mention any troop concentrations and that was confirmed by the bombardier who led the raid on Ponte San Martino.

Although there were no real indications that the Germans were planning a major operation against the small band of partisans the myth was kept alive by another untruth. The lie went around that none of the partisan band lost a single member of their family in the bombing attack. This is absolutely untrue. For example, Andrea Ugonino, a partisan in Badery's band, lost his own mother in the attack.

In spite of evidence to the contrary, in their desperation to find a nearby guilty party, someone to blame, this myth persists even today.

Bad blood existed between the residents of Ponte and Perloz. If residents of one town ventured to go to the market at the neighboring town, there was a good chance that they would be met with mockery and taunts. This tension continued well after the war when the two towns bickered over the distribution of reconstruction funds.

These tensions culminated in the attempted arson of Bono Badery's home in Ponte during the winter of 1949-50.

The reconstruction of the town center of Ponte San Martino was finally completed nearly eight years after the war, in 1953. At the inauguration of the new town center the Council president, Severino Caveri spoke about all the difficulties that had been overcome in order to rebuild the town. Instead of calming the waters, his speech roiled them again.

In 1964 he tried once again to put an end to the finger-pointing and recriminations. Caveri cited a letter from the partisans at Pont Canavese, who were engaged in combat with the Italo-German forces, requesting Allied air support. According to Caveri, the Allied Command confused Pont Canavese with Ponte San Martino and bombed the wrong town.

Of course this was not the case. The documents from the 340th Bomb Group state the distance between the two bridges to be precisely 55 feet, which is indeed the case. There was no possible confusion with Pont Canavese.

The Analysis of the Mission

Why, on August 23rd 1944, did Ponte San Martino find itself in the bomb-sights of the 340th Bombardment Group? Did the bombs just fall out of the blue, or was there a reason it was selected for destruction?

In order to understand the reason for the attack, one has to understand the tactical situation in the area at this time. Fortunately, the Allied documents are able to give us the answers to our questions.

What were the significant military operations going on in this theater of the war?

In nearby France the largest amphibian assault operation in the history of the Mediterranean was going on. Begun on August 15th as Operation Dragoon, it was intended to compliment Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy two months earlier on June 6th.

Preparations for the two invasions actually began months before the first ground troops embarked for the beaches. Beginning in April 1944 literally hundreds of bombing missions were planned with the intention of isolating the two theaters of battle. The absolute top priority was the disruption of communication lines. By that it was meant the destruction and disruption of truck and especially rail traffic supporting the German armies in the field. It has been estimated that these bombings alone cost the lives of over 50,000 people.

One of the things hindering the search for answers regarding the bombing has been the erroneous belief that all of the documents surrounding the event remain classified as 'Secret.' This may be true for some Italian documents that can not be released until 80 years following the death of the principals mentioned in them. However, the US Army documents became public only 20 years after the events mentioned.

Thanks to a series of fortunate accidents, coincidences and good friends, Roger Juglair managed to find, over a period of several years, all the documentation required to resolve the mystery surrounding the bombing of the Settimo Road bridges. Today, many of those documents are even available on the Internet.

The first document that fell into his hands detailed the bomb tonnage dropped by the 340th Bomb

Group. It allow him to isolate the tonnage that fell on Ponte. It formed the basis for his first work which was published in 1994 and distributed to the public as part of the observances of the 50th anniversary of the tragedy.

Later he obtained copies of the mission orders, crew lists and mission debriefing reports. Additional documents allowed him to reconstruct, on a day-by-day basis, the actions of the Allied Command that eventually led up to the decision to attack Ponte.

An analysis of Allied documents of both the RAF and the USAAF, Italian documents and Wehrmacht records paint a very different picture than the common view laying the guilt at the feet of the partisans.

In fact the records show that the intense partisan activity actually served to reduce the number of air attacks and therefor casualties on the ground. **Every successful mission carried out by the partisans resulted in a bombing mission being canceled by the Allies.**

The first fact made clear by a study of the documentation is that the bridges of Ponte San Martino can not be separated out of the Allied operations supporting Operation Dragoon.

Operation Dragoon, the invasion of the South of France, was a integral part of the 'Assault on Fortress Europe' that began with the invasion at Normandy. The path to these invasions were prepared by the extensive use of air power. The mission was the “**...interdiction of communication lines.**”

The final push kicked off in a spectacular manner. Code named “Mallroy Mayor” on July 11th there were attacks on the 23 most important bridges over the Po River. Between the July 15th and August 10th the 12th Air Force alone flew one hundred and fifty bombing missions dropping 80,000 tons of explosives.

The goal of the attacks was to isolate the German forces in France from the troops stationed in Northern Italy. Many of the bridges had to be hit more than once because the German engineers worked feverishly to repair the bridges and often were able to restore them in incredibly short time.

Just in the Piedmont area of Northern Italy over fifty missions hit bridges in Chivasso, Casale Monferrato, Alessandria and Asti. In the rest of Northern Italy there were strikes against Ventimiglia, Piacenza and Borgoforte.

From August 10th on, the targets changed to artillery positions and the command bases of the Germans and the Italian Republican Guard. Many of the attacks on enemy HQ's were considered diversions intended to confuse the enemy as to where the actual landings would take place.

An example of such an attack was the mission to the little town of Toirano in Savona on August 12th. It was hit hard by a formation of B-17 heavy bombers simply because there was a single battery of artillery nearby. Dozens of innocent people were sacrificed with the sole goal being to keep the German command off-guard.

Once this critical phase of close ground support ended, the bombers once again turned their attention to blocking communication lines. They kept up the pressure by making every roadway, train station and bridge a primary target. This meant that every tactical support aircraft would be used to hit not only the objectives that were not attacked in the previous wave of attacks, but would also be directed against targets as demanded by immediate tactical developments on the ground.

The attacks on the communication lines in and out of France continued well into September until the front lines stabilized along the edge of the Alps. The cost of this campaign in civilian lives was very high, and it would have been a lot higher if the partisan groups in the Piedmont and North Italy had not taken it upon themselves to destroy many bridges in the area, thus avoiding the major destruction caused by air raids.

The Italian partisans and the French 'maquis' had already made an important contribution to Operation Dragoon. Toward the end of July and beginning of August they continued the struggle by attempting to gain control of the Alpine crossroads.

20. Il distaccamento Cappellin della 3^a brigata Lys.



The Cappellin Detachment of the 3rd Lys Partisan Brigade

(Photo Courtesy Roger Juglair)

There were a series of bloody battles throughout the Piedmont and along the French border that cost many lives among the partisans and the civilian population. The civilians in particular became the object of the Nazi's rage and frustration with the attacks.

Soon after the invasion began the German command in Italy initiated a counter-attack utilizing armored units, Alpine troops and the anti-partisan unit, the Brandenburg Division. Valuable support was also provided by units of the Republican Guard.

The local partisans could not do much against this massing of enemy troops and by late August the Alps were once again fully under the control of the Fascists.

The communication line that goes from France to Italy through the Piccolo San Bernardo pass is by no

means a major transportation route, but in an emergency it could allow for the passage of a significant number of troops heading to the front, or conversely troops in retreat. As the Allies advanced toward Grenoble, this pass could allow enemy troops to escape who would otherwise be trapped in France.

The French resistance fighters, the maquis, had already launched operations similar to those of the Italian partisans, but they had the advantage of having Allied soldiers on the ground to their rear. They were able to gain control on their own of strategic points in the High Savoy country even before the arrival of the Allied forces.

It should also be mentioned that during this time the Allies were parachuting agents to the partisan groups. In order to assure that the partisans were performing at their maximum ability, the agents were telling them that the Allies were planning a major push through the Liguria in order to descend to the Padua plain.

The reality was that the American command had decided that after the invasion in Southern France was consolidated, they were going to concentrate their efforts in completing the push from Normandy into Germany. The Italian theater would remain a secondary front left entirely to the Free French forces.

In the sectors around the Val d'Aosta and Canavese from mid-July until mid-September the partisans executed a series of attacks that effectively slowed the movements of German troops and shut down transportation pathways.

According to a report from the Partisan Command, signed by Edoardo Consolo, known as "Solemio", their efforts were for the most part directed toward the disruption of rail traffic through Chivasso-Aosta and highway traffic along state road no. 26 which ran through the Piccolo San Bernardo pass. These attacks were coordinated with careful planning by the Unified Partisan Command.

The plan foresaw the isolation of the Val d'Aosta area from the rest of Italy.

On July 10th the Marmore Partisan Brigade derailed the train from Châtillon to Saint-Vincent.

On July 18th the rail bridge at Quincinetto was blown up.

On July 24th the Chambave to Nus train was attacked.

On July 25th partisans from Alimiro severely damaged the rail bridge in Ivrea. The partisan group then sent a letter to the Prefect at Ivrea requesting him not to repair the bridge, otherwise the town would be subject to a devastating air bombardment. The request was ignored and the bridge repaired.

On July 25, 26 and 27th the partisans from the Lys Valley attempted to take control also of the Gressoney Valley. After a pitched battle they were obliged to withdraw.

On the 6th and 7th of August nearly 40 meters of the state highway of Mongiovetta were blown up, effectively cutting in two the Aosta Valley. This was a prime objective of the overall plan.

Between the 7th and 8th of August in another extraordinary feat of sabotage an additional 40 meters of highway were destroyed near Mongiovetta. The same day at Montjovet the railroad tracks and rail station were destroyed.

The head of the Stefanini Province declared the total isolation of Val d'Aosta from Province.

On August 10th the bridge between Quincinetto and Chambave was blown.

On August 11th there was another attack made on the rail lines near Chambave.

On August 12th the rail bridge at Saint-Marcel was blown.

On August 14th a renewed attack on the bridge at Quincinetto caused it to collapse into the river.

On August 15th the day of the invasion there was yet another attack on Mongiovetta and a train was derailed at Montalto Dora.

Also on this day a significant portion of the highway leading to the Piccolo San Bernardo pass was destroyed. At the direction of the Allied Command orders were given to redouble efforts to disrupt traffic on the Piccolo San Bernardo pass.

At this point the only territory that the Germans had complete control of was the San Bernardo pass.

On August 17th there was a new attack on Mongiovetta.

On August 18th another attempt was made on the rail lines at Mongiovetta.

On August 19th a band of partisans under orders from their leader, Mésard, attacked a depot at Arpy to obtain explosives and detonators for use in an attack on the bridge at Equilivaz (between Avise and Derby). If successful, it would sever Aosta from the other valleys.

On August 20th there was a new attack on the rail line at Chambave. Also on this day mechanized column was attacked by partisan elements near Quart. Partisans from Canavese attacked a German column near Carema.

Using forced labor, the Germans managed to repair the roadway at Montjovet. Trucks were able once again to travel between Saint-Vincent and Montjovet. The lighter vehicles were directed to use the old Roman road.

The Aosta Valley was no longer cut in two.

The partisans began planning an operation to blow the bridge at Mongiovetta, but these preparations took time and they could not see a way to accomplish the task until the beginning of September.

On the 20th of August the Allies launched a reconnaissance flight over the Val d'Aosta. In all probability this was the date when Ponte San Martino's fate was decided. The lone P-38 spotted a column of trucks and armored vehicles headed up toward the Aosta Valley. The decision was made to block their transit.

On August 26th at dawn the bridge at Equivivaz was blown up, but it was too late for Ponte.

The attack was probably a consequence of the repair of the route through Mongiovetta. The Allied Command was afraid of being surprised by the Germans. They were very worried about two armored

divisions.

The concern over Mongiovetta and the two armored divisions can be seen in the correspondence between the Committee for National Liberation and the Allies. There is a letter written by the partisan leader “Solemio” (Edoardo Consolo) to the Allied Command sent via a representative of the O.S.S. in Switzerland. The Allies expressed their concern about the two armor divisions and their fear that the divisions would manage to cross the Alps and join battle against the American troops fighting in France. These concerns were made very clear to the partisan leaders.

A major indication of this concern can be found in a notation on the debriefing report made by the 489th Bomb Squadron. The note referred to the target as “..the town center is believed to be the command headquarters of an armored division.”

Joseph Heller, the author of the great war novel, *Catch-22*, flew on the mission to Settimo. In his book he describes a mission briefing where the squadron is being ordered to bomb a small mountain village.

“They will be bombing a tiny undefended village, reducing the whole community to rubble.

[...]

Its only purpose is to delay German reinforcements at a time when we aren't even planning an offensive.

[...]

Why, this tiny mountain village is so insignificant that it isn't even there.

[...]

These two armored divisions will be coming down from Austria into Italy along this road. The village is built on such a steep incline that all the rubble from the houses and other buildings you destroy will certainly tumble right down and pile up on the road.” [Heller, *Catch-22*, p. 325]

The Army of Liguria, this was the name that the Germans gave to the forces pulled together to counter the invasion in Province, consisted of elements of both German and Italian divisions. The 90th Panzer Grenadiers was originally an armored infantry division, but had lately been beefed up with number of assault cannons. Elements of the 90th detached and moved north to reclaim the valleys controlled by the partisans. The partisans now found themselves under attack not only from the 90th Panzer in front of them but also from their rear by armored units retreating from the invasion front.

More armored units arrived from Vienna to prop up the Axis defenders almost doubling the number of troops in the zone. The arrival of these fresh troops, some equipped with the new 'Tiger' tanks was confirmed by prisoner interrogation, messages from partisans, and intercepted dispatches encoded with the flawed Enigma encryption. All of the above was confirmed by aerial reconnaissance. The Allies were convinced of the possible attack in strength from the Germans. It was decided to create a 'concrete roadblock' and, thus, the fate of Ponte San Martino was sealed.

The Bombs Fall

Witnesses to the bombing all agree that the bombs fell in three distinct groups, a fact that is reflected in the original bombing orders. The formation of 16 B-25's was divided into three sections. Normally it would have consisted of three 'boxes' of six planes each, but two of the ships belonging to the 489th Squadron had to turn back shortly after take-off due to engine trouble.



The Roman Bridge & Ponte San Martino before the Attack

The famous Norden bomb-sights were incredibly accurate, however they were also expensive and difficult to manufacture. Moreover, the USAAF was terrified that one might fall into the hands of the enemy intact and allow the German engineers to reverse-engineer one. US Bombardiers entrusted with a Norden had to take an oath swearing to see to the destruction of the device before looking to their own safety in case the plane went down over enemy territory. Before and after each mission, the bombardiers would be escorted to and from their plane by armed guards as the bombardiers carried the bomb-sight back and forth to the aircraft.

Only the lead aircraft in each box had a bomb-sight. The job of the other bombardiers in the 'box' was to carefully watch the bomb-bay doors of the lead plane with their finger on the drop button. When they saw the first bomb emerge from the lead plane's belly, they pushed the button. Later in the war the

aircraft come to be equipped with radio-controlled switches that would release the bombs in all of the ships in a box simultaneously with the lead plane's release.

The goal of all these efforts was to keep the falling bombs in the tightest possible pattern in the hope of concentrating as much fire-power as possible on the precise target indicated in the Norden bomb-sight.



*Bomb Pattern - Red: 1st Box, Green: 2nd Box, Blue: 3rd Box
(Map Courtesy Roger Juglair)*

On this mission Ponte San Martino was divided into three target areas. The lead bombardier, 1st Lt. Robert Burger flying in 8T had extra authority due to his designation as the 'lead.' He was the only one who could abort the bombing run. His specific zone of attack was the part of town known as the Marchetto. It was here that 24 bombs landed. The exception was the four bombs on 8K which fell wide of the target.

The Roman quarter was the target for the box led by 8N and sighted by the bombardier, Capt. C.T. O'Brien. This included the Roman Bridge Inn, HQ of the local German command, and the north side of the main road through Ponte. All 24 bombs fell within the target area.

The bombardier leading the four ships of the 489th Squadron was Lt. Broden. He was assigned the section of town centering on the west side of the new bridge. Sixteen 1,000-lbs bombs landed in the area on the south side of the road. In addition to the homes bordering the road, the city hall was hit, and, unfortunately, the Italo Balbo Elementary School was also located there.

During the debriefing back at base, the crews showed a certain satisfaction at having eliminated the objective and having destroyed the bridges. They were pleased to have dropped their bomb loads in such tight, compact patterns. It was hard to tell due to the thick dust clouds kicked up by the explosion, but they expressed confidence that both target bridges had been taken down.

The facts were otherwise. The approach to the new bridge was cratered and the Roman Bridge was hit near the western approach, but they were not structurally damaged. In spite of the ferocious attack, both bridges remained intact and passable. On the other hand, the road to the Marchetto, on the east side, was totally swept away. The twenty 1,000-pounders wiped out practically the entire Old Quarter of the Marchetto. Nothing was left except a single dwelling, the largest and the oldest. Although it was left standing, it later had to be condemned.

On the Roman Road the American bombs penetrated roofs right to the basements before exploding and virtually destroying the ancient via Consolare. Many of the houses on the hill survived with light damage, except for several near the chapel of San Giacomo. Some accounts state that at least one bomb was found unexploded in the terraced hillside of San Giacomo.

Another group of bombs collapsed the houses near Via Ghisolfa destroying forever that small alleyway.

Ordnance fell in the Piazza del Monumento completely leveling the Cafe National, and the Roman Bridge Inn which the Germans had made their local headquarters. Also destroyed were several buildings near the Old Mill that were located on the right bank of the Lys river.

The area surrounding the elementary school was targeted by the four planes of the 489th Squadron. The bombs blew a deep crater in the road and pulverized the photographic studio of the Ardisone Brothers as well as the barber shop. One bomb hit next to the school, collapsing a large part of the east side of the building and devastating the interior of the structure.

The same group of bombs hit the Municipal Quarter causing great damage to the post office on that side of the Via Centrale. Four bombs from the last aircraft fell in a tight group just south of the school making deep craters and severely damaging the houses nearby. In particular the kindergarten was badly damaged where, by chance, a sewing class for young girls was in session.



The Roman Bridge & Ponte San Martino after the Attack

Roger Juglair's book carries several eyewitness accounts by the villagers of the bombing. Most tell of a quiet, hot August afternoon. Children were playing in the Memorial Plaza by the monument to the WWI soldiers. Some were sitting on their doorsteps having a light snack to hold them over until dinner later that evening. There was no air raid alarm sounded in the village. However, at the steel plant on the edge of town, since it was a possible military target, they did get a phone call from the control center in Ivrea saying that a formation of bombers were in the area. The employees got out of the building and assembled in a field nearby. There was very little excitement or concern. This was a fairly common occurrence as groups of bombers passed over the area on the way to bomb bigger and more important targets. Most of the steel workers saw the approaching formation of aircraft and were horrified to see bombs falling toward town. They all began running for the village to see what might have happened to their homes and loved ones.

When the bombs exploded in town they raised an immense dark cloud of black dust and ash. The sun was totally blocked out and the survivors in town found themselves engulfed in darkness. This only added to their terror, they could only hear the screams of the wounded and the frightened calls of villagers calling out for their family members. The steel workers encountered people running from the

town, completely blackened by the dust cloud, many shoeless or half-naked from having their clothes blown off them from the concussions.

The horror and despair reached it climax when the people realized that the elementary school had been hit. Of the 130 people who died that day approximately 40 were children.

More bombs were destined to bring more death and destruction to the village of Ponte, but the crew of 8K dropped them wide of the target without causing any more casualties. In his report following the mission the pilot admitted missing his target due to pilot error while executing evasive maneuvers.

Let us examine for a moment the 'evasive maneuvers' executed by 8K. On this afternoon there was not a single report of anti-aircraft fire over the target. Even if there were ack-ack protecting the town, evasive maneuvers would have been performed before and after the actual bomb run. From the initial point (IP) of the bomb run to the moment the bombs were dropped, the ship would have to cease all evasive movements and be held straight and steady over the target. In fact at this point it would be the bombardier who was flying the aircraft. The pilot and co-pilot would push back from the controls with their hands off the stick for the one to two minutes required for the bombardier to place the aircraft exactly over the target.

Considering the above one can only conclude that the pilot 2nd Lt. Clifton C. Grosskopf took it upon himself to wrest control of the aircraft from the bombardier before the bomb run was completed in order to avoid bombing the village. If so, he would have done so at great personal risk. If proved, it would have been clear dereliction of duty. It could result in a court-marshal and even a possible death penalty for the offense.

Entry from the War Diary of the 489th Bomb Squadron for
August 23, 1944:

This period was one of ordinary activity with nothing special to note.

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