Friendly Fire in WWII by David Gray

Allied Aircraft

There's no single definitive number for Allied aircraft lost to friendly fire in WWII, as records are incomplete and difficult to separate from combat losses, but major incidents included hundreds of paratrooper deaths in Sicily from friendly fire and significant losses, with estimates suggesting hundreds, if not thousands, of aircraft and personnel were lost across all theatres due to friendly fire. Key factors were secrecy, poor coordination, and confusion in fast-moving situations, leading to tragic events like Allied anti-aircraft shooting down their own planes.

Major Examples of American Friendly Fire Losses

Invasion of Sicily (Operation Husky, 11 July 1943):

It looked like a milk run for the 82nd Airborne Division's 504th Regimental Combat Team (*below*). Less than two days prior, American and British troops had landed on the southern coast of Sicily and established a beachhead. Now, the 504th was en route to reinforce that beachhead. The flight would be entirely over Allied-controlled water and land, and the men would jump onto an airfield already in American hands. As the planes neared the Sicilian coast, the paratroopers' highest hope for a safe crossing seemed justified.

Then, in an instant, disaster struck. Tracers lit the sky and antiaircraft shells rocked the low-flying transports. Bullets and shrapnel ripped through wings, fuselages, and flesh. Planes caught fire and "tumbled out of the air like burning crosses," one paratrooper recalled. The paratroopers and aircrews immediately realized that it wasn't the enemy sending up this deadly wall of fire. To their dismay, a seemingly simple mission had inexplicably turned into a friendly-fire nightmare—one of the bloodiest such incidents of the war.

What worried General Matthew B. Ridgway, (*below, centre*), Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, before the mission was the danger of friendly fire when the 504th's transports flew over the Allied invasion fleet anchored off Sicily. Weeks before the invasion, Ridgway demanded a guarantee from the U.S. Navy—over whose ships the 504th transport planes would fly—that it would hold its fire when his men passed overhead. The navy, however, refused to make a promise it wasn't sure it could keep. Ridgway stood his ground and said he would recommend cancelling the jump.

Under pressure from Lieutenant General George S. Patton, Husky's American ground commander, the navy compromised. Three days before the invasion, on July 7, 1943, it agreed to provide a safe corridor: a two-mile-wide lane devoid of ships that the 504th could fly over without drawing fire.

Heavy Luftwaffe air raids on the day of the jump had given Patton second thoughts about the night's mission. Army and navy gunners were "jumpy," he thought, and he feared they would fire on the 504th's planes. At 8 p.m., he tried to scrub the operation, but the C-47s were already in the air and out of radio contact. "Am terribly worried," he wrote in his diary. Patton soon had more reason to worry. At 9:50 p.m., less than an hour before the 504th's arrival, the Luftwaffe launched its heaviest bombing raid of the day. Antiaircraft batteries let loose, and ships maneuvered frantically to dodge falling bombs. If gunners had been jittery before, they were now even more on edge.

As the C-47s approached, army and navy gunners mistook them for German bombers. A lone gun opened up and immediately, as though by a prearranged signal, ships and guns on shore fired a devastating torrent of antiaircraft fire.

Stricken C-47 shot down by friendly fire

Stricken planes caught fire, and men either jumped or fell from the burning aircraft. Several C-47s crashed with their paratroopers still inside, including one carrying Brigadier General Charles L. Keerans Jr., the 82nd's assistant division commander. The plane carrying Lieutenant Colonel Leslie G. Freeman ditched 500 yards offshore, and navy gunners raked it with gunfire, killing or wounding 11 paratroopers and crewmen. The destroyer USS *Beatty* fired its 20mm guns at a downed C-47 before realizing its mistake and rescuing the survivors.

Planes that remained aloft took their hits, too. The one from which 504th commander Colonel Reuben H. Tucker jumped returned to its base with more than 1,000 holes in it. Several pilots reported being chased by friendly fire for 30 miles after they left Sicilian airspace. Eight planes headed back to Tunisia without dropping their paratroopers; their pilots felt it would be tantamount to murder to drop men into the heavy fire. For the pilots, crewmen, and paratroopers, "the safest place for us tonight…would have been over enemy territory," one after-action report noted sarcastically.

Paratroopers who successfully jumped from their planes were far from home free. Ground troops fired at them as they descended and after they landed. Some units claimed they had been warned to expect German paratroopers that night. Chaplain Delbert A. Kuehl and his group landed near a stone wall and came under fire. Shouting the password did no good and, for the first time in his life, Kuehl cursed. Unbeknownst to the paratroopers, the 504th's password and counter-sign (Ulysses/Grant) were different from the ones given to the ground troops (Think/Quickly). Kuehl crawled to his left in a large circle. He snuck up behind the men firing at his group, tapped one on the shoulder, and told him they were shooting at fellow Americans. When Colonel Tucker hit the ground, he sprinted to five nearby tanks to stop the tankers from firing at his men.

The next day revealed the disaster's full magnitude. Twenty-three planes had been lost, and 37 were heavily damaged. The 504th had suffered 81 dead, 132 wounded, and 16 missing. The toll for pilots and crewmen from the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing was seven dead, 30 wounded, and 53 missing. It

would prove to be America's second most costly friendly-fire incident of the war, eclipsed only by Operation Cobra a year later.

In the end, no one was disciplined and Patton kept his job. The various boards and commands tasked with investigating over the next few weeks realized the failure was a systemic one, born of inexperience in airborne operations—not dereliction. "Many mistakes were made and many lessons learnt," was the verdict of British Major General Frederick A. Browning, Eisenhower's airborne adviser.

Operation Cobra, Normandy, July 26th 1944

Allied troops spent six bloody weeks stuck in dense hedgerows of Normandy after the D-Day landings, fighting the German Wehrmacht one cow pasture at a time. U.S. Army general Omar Bradley cooked up a plan to break through the German defences by calling upon the heavy four-engine bombers of the 8th Air Force. What followed was one of the worst friendly-fire incidents in the history of the U.S. Army.

General Bradley had identified the main German defensive line as running along the east-to-west road connecting the cities of St. Lo and Perrier. He wanted to blast a hole in it through which his tank divisions could drive into the open country south of Normandy.

The secret weapons for the attack, called Operation Cobra, were the massive four-engine strategic bombers of the 8th Air Force.

The famous B-17 Flying Fortress (*left*), and B-24 Liberator were designed to carpet-bomb factories and cities, *not* take out troops on the front line. A Flying Fortress could drop up to 17,000 pounds of bombs, sending massive explosions rippling over large swathes of the ground.

Bradley designated a zone five kilometres long by two kilometres deep to the west of the city of St. Lo that he wanted the 8th Air Force to blast into oblivion. However, Bradley's plan had a significant problem. Weapons as imprecise as a B-17 were as likely to hit friendly troops as they were the enemy. Bradley reassured the 8th Air Force that he would pull back his troops 800 meters just before the bombardment. The Army Air Force generals insisted the minimum safe distance was *3,000* meters. After some haggling, they settled on a gap of 1,200 meters.

Bradley also stipulated that the bombers approach parallel to the front-line troops, so if any of them released their bombs too early, they wouldn't land on the American lines.

After several delays because of bad weather, on July 25, clear skies were recorded and the bombers of the 8th Air Force leaped into action. However, as the bomber formations approached Normandy, grey clouds reappeared.

The attack was called off — but not before over 100 aircraft dropped their bombs. Sixteen B-17s dropped their bombs two kilometres north of their target, hitting the 30th Infantry Division. Twenty-five American soldiers were killed and over 130 wounded. Enraged troops of the 120th Infantry Regiment even opened fire on the American planes.

Bradley (*left*), was furious — the aircraft had approached perpendicular, not parallel, to the American lines. The commander of the 9th Air Force, Gen. Elwood Quesada, whose fighter bombers *had* approached parallel, sent a reproachful message to the 8th, as well.

The Bombardment

Clear weather on July 26 allowed the 8th Air Force to go in for real. The attack began with dive bombing, strafing and rocket attacks by 550 fighter bombers. Then the entire strength of the 8th Air Force, over 1,800 bombers, flew in.

Once again, against orders, the bombers flew perpendicular to the allied lines. Many used the smoke from earlier bombing as a guide for where to drop their bombs, but unfortunately the wind began blowing the smoke toward the north. This time, 77 dropped too soon.

A 4th Infantry Division battalion commander described the feeling of dread. “The dive bombers came in beautifully, dropped their bombs right in front us just where they belonged. Then the first group of heavies dropped theirs. The next wave came in closer, the next one closer, still closer. Then they came right on top of us. The shock was awful.”

The short bombing killed 111 American soldiers and wounded 490, the majority in the 30th Division. The entire headquarters staff of a battalion in its 47th regiment was wiped out save for the commander.

Eisenhower was so furious that he declared he would never employ strategic bombers on tactical targets again.

Niš Incident, Nov 1944

This friendly fire incident involved American and Soviet forces. On 7 November 1944, United States Army Air Forces fighters strafed a Red Army convoy and airbase near Niš, Yugoslavia, which resulted in an air battle over the area between American and responding Soviet Air Force fighters. More than thirty Red Army soldiers were killed on the ground. Two American P-38 Lightning (*left*), and two Soviet Yak-9 fighters were shot down in the air battle, and a third Yak-9 fell to Soviet antiaircraft fire.

Due to the death of Red Army general Grigory Kotov, the incident caused diplomatic strain, which was resolved when Soviet officials accepted the American explanation that the attack was a mistake caused

by navigational error. Despite the official conclusion, postwar Soviet memoirs claimed that they believed the American attack was intentional.

Why Exact Figures Are Elusive

- **Secrecy:** Many incidents, were initially classified.
- **Reporting Difficulties:** Distinguishing friendly fire from enemy action was often challenging in the heat of battle, and not every incident was recorded.
- **Vastness of War:** The sheer scale of air operations across multiple fronts makes comprehensive tracking nearly impossible.

While precise totals are elusive, friendly fire was a significant, often tragic, factor in World War II aviation, causing losses far beyond just aircraft to incidents like the chaos during landings or mistaken identity during operations.

In response to these heavy losses, particularly the Sicily disasters, the Allies introduced **Invasion Stripes** (*left*)— distinctive black and white bands—for the **D-Day** invasion to help ground and naval forces identify friendly aircraft more easily.

While there is no definitive total for all Allied aircraft lost to friendly fire during World War II, modern studies and historical data provide significant figures and representative percentages.

A US Army War College study estimated that **13% to 24%** of all 20th-century casualties were caused by friendly fire. Specifically for World War II, research indicates a friendly fire death rate for all US troops of approximately **12–14%**, with some records citing roughly **21,000 Americans** (7%) killed by their own forces.

Some historians estimate that up to **20%** of aircraft losses in certain campaigns may be attributed to friendly fire, though exact numbers are often obscured by the "fog of war".