

WEATHER RECON: LIGHTNING STYLE

THE 15th WEATHER RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON'S P-38 PILOTS WERE A MAJOR FACTOR IN THE SUCCESS OF THE 15th AIR FORCE'S STRATEGIC BOMBING CAMPAIGN

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The scope of the then three-year-old air war in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO) was greatly expanded in the fall of 1943 after the Italian mainland was invaded by the Allies in early September. Within two months, the southern portion of the country — to just north of Naples — had been taken over, the Italian government there having capitulated and switched sides effective 8 September.

By November, numerous Italian airfields had been captured by Allied forces and were either

already being utilized or were being prepared for use by their air forces, including those in the huge plain surrounding the city of Foggia, directly east of Naples near the Adriatic Sea (see *Air Classics* January 2021). Based there henceforth would be the four-engine Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress and Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers and their escort fighters of the new, strategic 5th Air Force (AF), commanded by Maj. Gen. James H. "Jimmy" Doolittle, which was activated in Tunisia on 1 November. The 15th would be headquartered at Bari, on the coast just south of Foggia, from December 1943 until the end of the war. All of Germany's territory and that of its

Axis allies in southern and eastern Europe would now be increasingly vulnerable to attack by this new, long-range aerial threat.

On 3 November, two days after the 15th AF was activated, so was a special Weather Reconnaissance Detachment (WRD) that was attached to it. The WRD was comprised of six Lockheed P-38G Lightnings, their combat-experienced pilots, and 22 enlisted ground

Pathfinder USAAF 44-23139 at Burbank shortly after completion. The date was symbolic — 6 June 1944, D-Day. Note the field's historic tower (camouflaged) in the background. The modification was done in one of Lockheed's prototype shops and that metal work is of higher quality than the rest of the aircraft. It appears the prototype stayed stateside for testing and was never deployed overseas.