

On February 1, 1942 the ground echelon, minus the Communications Section, was sent by train to Argentia, Newfoundland for duty as antiaircraft troops to provide protection for the North Atlantic fleet ships when they were in harbor. The Communications Section operated the ground radio station at St. Johns, Newfoundland.

On June 7, 1942, the ground echelon was relieved of its antiaircraft duties by a National Guard unit, and returned to Langley. Still designated the 49th Bombardment Squadron, it was a bomb squadron in name only – one without air crews or aircraft. At Langley they were assigned duties with other units engaged in antisubmarine patrol. Eventually most of the ground echelon personnel were assigned to the 812th Bombardment Squadron, 482nd Bombardment Group, Eighth Air force in June 1943.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the 49th Bombardment Squadron was reduced to paper status only.

The 49th Squadron air echelon had re-equipped with fifteen B-17D's for its new reconnaissance mission. The Squadron's earlier models of B-17 B and B-17C's were transferred to the 96th Squadron. The air echelon flew out of Langley with its fifteen airplanes on December 1, 1941 en route to Gander Air Base, Newfoundland. The flight stopped that night at Mitchel Field. Weather stymied their departure, their route, or their destination for the next six days, and they were still at Mitchel on December 7th.

On Monday December 8, the air echelon was ordered west. They left Mitchel not knowing their destination except to proceed toward the Pacific Northwest and they would be told on the way. They stopped at St. Louis, Missouri for fuel, then flew to Sherman Field, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas for an overnight stop and to await orders. They remained at Sherman Field for a day before flying to Lowry Field, Colorado. When they left Lowry, just after noon on Friday, December 12, they still didn't have destination orders. Somewhere in the vicinity of Salt Lake City, Utah, they were told to go to Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington. They landed at Geiger late in the afternoon that Friday. To their amazement they found that the fifteen box cars of unit equipment, except for the footlockers, had been re-routed to Geiger.

The 49th flew its first armed reconnaissance on December 13 against a possible Japanese naval attack on the Pacific Northwest. These reconnaissance missions continued on almost a daily basis for the next six weeks. During this period a satellite base was established at Yakima, Washington, some 160 miles southwest of Spokane. It was used as an intermediate stopover point when the armed reconnaissance sweep was to be extended further to sea.

Tragedy struck the operation at Geiger when a B-17 crashed after take off destroying the airplane and killing part of the crew. The aircraft was loaded with three 500-pound demolition bombs and a bomb bay tank. One engine quit on takeoff. The pilot, Lt. Eugene Zadonstiff, circled the field but crashed at the approach end of the landing runway. One of the 500-pound bombs detonated. The other two bombs just rolled away without exploding. Of the eight crew members on board, Lt. Zadonstiff and four others were killed. The three survivors were in



*M/Sgt. Thomas U. Simms pictured, 49th Bomb Squadron, Ground Echelon. Party on return from New Foundland, 1942.*

the aft part of the aircraft. The Group had been in a state of war only a few short weeks and had already lost two airplanes and most of their two crews.<sup>7</sup>

Between the sixth and seventh week at Geiger, the air crews and their fourteen B-17D's were ordered to Bakersfield, California. On arrival they turned in their B-17D's and were given new B-17E's just off the production line. The Squadron was processed for overseas movement and proceeded via MacDill Air Base, Florida to India as replacements for the 19th Bombardment Group.<sup>8</sup> The 19th had been in the Philippines on December 8, 1941 when they were attacked by the Japanese.<sup>9</sup> The 19th survived the attack, but lost 12 of their 35 B-17s. Since then the Group had suffered combat losses while attacking Japanese forces in the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies. By late January 1942, the 19th was in dire need of replacements. With the transfer of the 49th air echelon to overseas duty, the 2nd Bombardment Group was down to less than one complete squadron.

On December 7, the 96th Squadron had a mix of B-17B, B-17C and B-18A aircraft. On December 8, all the B-17's, except one, departed for March Field, California — a flight of six B-17B and B-17C aircraft. They took the southern route through Ohio, Texas and Arizona to March Field. The last B-17 left late on December 8, following the route of the earlier departures. This plane was flown by Lt. Ted Swanson. Swanson's aircraft was delayed for a day at Ft. Knox, Kentucky by engine trouble. On December 10, Swanson was diverted from March Field to Geiger Field. He arrived at Geiger early on December 12. Swanson and his crew expected to fly patrol against a possible Japanese attack on the Pacific Northwest. By a quirk of fate, Swanson's B-17 was the only one on the field with armor plate and a full complement of machine guns. Swanson and his crew never flew a patrol mission because they always got ranked out of their B-17. Eventually they lost the B-17 to higher-ranking pilots and were declared as surplus crew. Swanson's Christmas present for 1941 was orders reassigning him and his crew to Bakersfield, California. At Bakersfield the crew was issued a fully equipped B-17E, side arms, and survival gear and ordered to Java,

Dutch East Indies. They were to be replacements for the 19th Bombardment Group out of the Philippines.<sup>10</sup>

The balance of the 96th Squadron remained at March Field for three weeks. It was intended that they be part of the reserve bomber force on the West Coast. The crews flew practice missions each day and were kept on alert in case they were needed to back up the bomber force in the Pacific Northwest. The Squadron's six crews flew back to Langley in late January 1942. No planes were lost during this deployment, except by the transfer of Lt. Swanson to Geiger Field.

While the B-17s were deployed to the west coast, all that was left of the Group's combat capability at Langley was a few 96th Squadron crews and their B-18As. They were kept busy flying anti-submarine patrol from Langley, and from deployment bases in the Carolina's and Florida. The B-18's were loaded with 100 pound bombs to patrol the coast line about 200 miles at sea in search of submarines. Their operation covered roughly the area from Langley southward to Opa Locka, Florida, just north of Miami. The operation was indicative of how thin Air Corps resources were stretched.

Before December 7, 1941, to be the pilot in the B-17 required 7 years of service and 2,000 flying hours. On December 8, 1941, these restrictions disappeared. Anyone who had qualified as a copilot in a B-17 or as first pilot in the B-18 was immediately given about four circuits around the airfield to qualify as a B-17 pilot.

The last of the production line for the B-17D and the first for the B-17E were turning out several B-17's per day for delivery to tactical units. In 1942 the 2nd Bomb Group began receiving some of these B-17's. There was great competition for these airplanes, especially the B-17E. The B-17E had tail guns, a ball turret and a single radio operators gun. Some of the B-17E's had a plexiglass nose with ball swivel mounts for .30 calibre machine guns. Other improvements included more powerful engines, self-sealing fuel tanks, and more advanced superchargers. Delivery priority for the B-17E was to Groups who were in combat training or being readied for deployment overseas in 1942. Meeting neither of these conditions, the 2nd received only a few



B-17E's. Those that were received were usually given to a crew going to MacDill Field, Florida for overseas processing.

On February 1, 1942 the Group had two of its three squadrons at Langley — the 20th and 96th — and one squadron without aircraft in Newfoundland. The 429th Bombardment Squadron, previously attached to the 2nd was now assigned to the Group as its fourth squadron. The 429th, at the time, was stationed in Newfoundland flying antisubmarine patrol over the North Atlantic.

### 429TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON

Under the Air Corps expansion program in 1940, twenty some Reconnaissance Squadrons were redesignated as Reconnaissance Squadrons (Long Range) The purpose was to create long range armed reconnaissance units equipped with either the B-18 or B-17 aircraft. The 41st was among the redesignated long-range units.

The 41st had lineage going back to World War I. The 41st Aero Squadron was organized as a pursuit unit on June 16, 1917. It moved to France on August 19, 1918 and was stationed, respectively, at Romorantin, Colombey-les-Belles, and Lay St. Remy. The Squadron waited delivery of Spad VII and Sopwith Camel pursuit planes. It was finally equipped in November 1918, too late to enter combat. After the Armistice the 41st served as part of the occupational force at Trier and Coblenz, Germany. The Squadron was returned to the U.S. in May 1919, and stationed at Camp Lee, Virginia in June 1919, and then disbanded. In July 1922, it was reactivated and assigned to the 10th School Group, Kelly Field, Texas. In July 1931, the 41st was assigned to the Air Corps advanced Flying School, Kelly Field. On March 1, 1935, it was redesignated as the 41st Reconnaissance Squadron (Long Range Amphibian). On September 1, 1936, it was again redesignated the 41st Reconnaissance Squadron and subsequently inactivated because of fund shortages and because the Air Corps lost the sea search reconnaissance mission to the Navy.

The unit was reactivated December 11, 1939, as the 41st Reconnaissance Squadron (Long Range) during the build-up of the Air Corps beginning in 1939. The Squadron was reactivated on February 1, 1940 and again redesignated as the 41st Reconnaissance Squadron (Heavy). On reactivation, the Squadron was assigned to the 2nd Wing at Langley. This assignment lasted until August 23, 1941. The Squadron, still assigned to the 2nd Wing, was transferred to Newfoundland Airport, Newfoundland to fly antisubmarine patrol over the North Atlantic. In April 1942, the 41st was attached to the 2nd Bombardment Group for administrative purposes. In February 1942, the Squadron was redesignated the 429th Bombardment Squadron and assigned to the 2nd Bombardment Group as the fourth squadron. It remained in Newfoundland, under the Newfoundland Base Command, flying antisubmarine patrol in B-18 and B-17 aircraft. When the 2nd Bombardment Group at Langley changed designations with the 304th Bombardment Group at Ephrata, Washington, the 429th Bombardment Squadron also exchanged designations with a 304th Squadron.<sup>11</sup>



*429th Bomb Squadron party at Gander, Newfoundland, July 4, 1942. Beer and cigars were the standard for the day.*

The Squadron insignia of the 41st Aero Squadron in WW I did not carry forward into the post war Air Service/Air Corps insignia. The insignia of the 41st Squadron, approved on May 12, 1930, was: "An Indian head in black war paint with three red feathers attached to a scalp lock with arms holding a drawn bow and arrow in black."

The 429th was assigned to the 2nd until January 1, 1962 when it was inactivated as the Air Force went back to the three-squadron group.

### SPRING - SUMMER - FALL 1942

By April 1942 all the 20th Squadron B-25's had been transferred to newly formed medium bomb groups. The 20th was left with a variety of old aircraft, principally the B-18A. Occasionally the 20th received a B-17 D or E which were quickly scheduled for antisubmarine patrol.<sup>12</sup>

Lt. Col. Darr Alkire was Group Commander on December 7, 1941. In May 1942 he was promoted to colonel. Maj. Smith, 20th Squadron commander, was promoted to lieutenant colonel and to Deputy Group Commander. In mid-May the Group received a Consolidated LB-30, the lend lease version of the B-24. The LB-30 was flown to Boston, Massachusetts for modification to install air-sea search radar. In June 1942 a B-24D was assigned to the Group. These aircraft were used for antisubmarine patrol. The expanding 8th Air Force in England had a priority on B-17's and the B-24 was less subject to early withdrawal, hence the 2nd had the service of the B-24s longer than it did any of the replacement B-17's. The B-24 was better suited to the long, grueling hours of over water antisubmarine patrol. It had greater range than the B-17 and was easier to fly at the lower altitudes of 1,000 to 5,000 feet.

By June 1942 it became apparent that the Army Air Corps was the primary force in antisubmarine patrol in the Atlantic. The Navy's heavy

commitment in the Pacific Ocean area prevented it from mounting any kind of effort along the Atlantic seaboard or any sizeable air effort along the North Atlantic sea route to England.

The Group's patrol area included the Chesapeake Bay and significant portions of the Atlantic seaboard. No enemy shipping was found in the patrol area, but there was concern that the Germans might venture into the area with either submarine resupply ships or merchant raiders. The B-17's patrolled to a distance of approximately 600 miles off shore while the B-18's and B-25's conducted shorter range patrols. By July 1942, the patrol planes, including the B-24D, began using the British-developed air surface vessel (ASV) radar in conjunction with the U.S.- developed magnetic anomaly detector (MAD).

Col. Alkire and Lt. Col. Smith spent much time in New York with the Army Air Force staff developing a command organization devoted to the exclusive mission of anti-submarine warfare. The Army Air Force organization would be adjacent to the Navy's Eastern Sea Frontier Headquarters.<sup>13</sup>

Between March 1942 and the unit designation change in November 1942, the 2nd Bombardment Group lost many of its trained air and ground crews. Each month air crews designated for overseas assignments went to MacDill Field, picked up new B-17E's, and flew to groups in India and Australia as replacement crews. A typical description of this continuous draw down of personnel was told by Walter Gerzin, a pilot assigned to the 20th Squadron: "I finally got to fly in a B-17B on February 11, 1942. Between February 15 and 27, 1942, I continued to fly in the B-17 and was checked out as first pilot. I flew a B-17B on sub patrol on March 1, 1942. On March 3d and 5th I flew a B-17E on sub patrol. On April 20, 1942 I was reassigned from the 2nd Bombardment Group to MacDill Field, Florida. Once there I picked up a brand new B-17E and





USO Dance, Gander, Newfoundland, 49th bomb Squadron, October 1942. Joan Blondell and Sgt. Bradley Solomon still eating doughnuts.

headed overseas to India.”<sup>14</sup> Gerzin’s experience was not unique for this time period.

Another experience told by Walter Zahorsky gives an insight to the shortage of qualified air crew members. Walter Zahorsky enlisted in the Air Corps on December 16, 1941. He was assigned directly to Langley and went through, what might be called, basic training there. While in basic training, Zahorsky exhibited an unusual aptitude for aircrew duty. He was assigned to the 96th Squadron and given bombardier training. He received training on the M-5 and M-9 Norden bombsights and in low altitude bombing. Within five weeks, Zahorsky was in the nose of a B-17 patrolling the Atlantic and Caribbean areas. His patrol flights took him to Bermuda, Puerto Rico, Newfoundland and a host of air fields along the U.S. Atlantic Coast. Zahorsky went from the rank of private on December 16, 1941 to sergeant on February 15, 1942.<sup>15</sup>

There are no records that summarize trained aircrew turnover in the 2nd Bombardment Group between December 7, 1941 and November 10, 1942, but it is obvious from the numerous unit personnel and equipment transfers and deployments that the turnover was extra ordinarily high. It is likewise obvious that the 2nd Bombardment Group was an exceedingly rich source of critically needed resources at the time.

On November 10, 1942, the 2nd Bombardment Group at Langley exchanged designations with the 304th Bombardment Group at Ephrata, Washington. This was a name change only and did not involve the transfer of personnel or equipment. The 2nd Bombardment Group at Langley became the 304th Bombardment Group. The four squadrons in each Group exchanged their respective designations.

The 304th Bombardment Group, now at Langley, was inactivated in late November 1942. Its squadrons were assigned to the 25th Antisubmarine Wing. The 361st Squadron became the 1st Antisubmarine Squadron in November 1942,

and departed Langley in January 1943. The 362nd and 363rd Squadrons became the 18th and 19th Antisubmarine Squadrons, respectively. The 421st, remained in Newfoundland until its subsequent transfer to the United Kingdom.

## COMMAND AND CONTROL

In 1941 the Air Corps underwent a major reorganization. GHQ Air Force moved from Langley Air Field to Bolling Field, Washington, D.C on March 14, 1941. The Northeast Air District, formed in January 1941, became the 1st Air Force in March 1941. The Army Air Corps became the Army Air Force in June 1941, and that same month the 1st Air Force activated the First Bomber Command, formerly the 2nd Bombardment Wing at Langley. The 2nd Bombardment Group was subordinated to the First Bomber Command. In mobilizing for war in general and for antisubmarine operations in particular, Langley Field underwent a near complete reorganization.<sup>16</sup> This was in part an out-growth of the ongoing discussions that Col. Alkire and Lt. Col. Smith had with the Antisubmarine Command in New York City. The First Bomber Command Headquarters became the Army Air Force Antisubmarine Command and departed Langley for New York in January 1942. Designations of the subordinate Air Corps units were changed to anti-submarine designations. Col. Alkire was transferred in September 1942, and Lt. Col. Smith replaced him as the Group commander. The 2nd Bombardment Group was then subordinate to the Army Air Corps Antisubmarine Command.

Considering that the 304th Bombardment Group was inactivated at Langley in November 1942, it is fortunate that the switch in designations occurred between the 2nd and the 304th. There is no assurance that the same fate would have befallen the 2nd had it remained at Langley, but the redesignation avoided that eventuality. The history, lineage and honors of the

Group were not only preserved, but were perpetuated to this date.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Dale O. Smith: Screaming Eagles, Memoirs of a B-17 Group Commander. 1990. Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill, NC., p.8

<sup>2</sup> Ibid Smith p.11

<sup>3</sup> Ibid Smith p. 11

<sup>4</sup> Ibid Smith pp 11-12

<sup>5</sup> Second Bombardment Association Newsletter, Volume 8, No.2 June 1992. pp 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Letter Henry J. Sekerke, August 27, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Letter Bradley Soloman dated August 1994. Soloman was assigned to the 49th Air Echelon as a mechanic. When the air echelon went to Bakersfield, Soloman and the other mechanics were returned to the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid Soloman Letter.

<sup>9</sup> The Philippines are west of the International dateline, 180 degrees, therefore the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 was actually Dec.8 1941 in the Philippines.

<sup>10</sup> Second Bombardment Association Newsletter Volume 7, No. 1, March/April 1991. p.4.

<sup>11</sup> Combat Squadrons of the Air Force - World War II. Maurer Maurer, pp 527-528. And Letter from John I Marion, POBox 336, Weatherford TX., 76086, dated April 22, 1994

<sup>12</sup> Ibid Smith p.29

<sup>13</sup> Ibid Smith p.34

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Walter Gerzin dated April 24, 1994

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Walter Zahorsky September 1994

<sup>16</sup> Langley Field – The Early Years. Office of History 4500th Air Base Wing, Langley AFB, Virginia, 1977, pp136-139

## CHAPTER IX

### REDESIGNATION, TRAINING AND DEPLOYMENT

On August 13, 1942, Gen. Eisenhower, Commander Allied Forces, announced that he meant to build the TORCH (plan for the invasion of North Africa) air force around a nucleus taken from the Eighth Air Force in England, with additional units drawn directly from the United States.<sup>1</sup> This decision ultimately determined the course of combat involvement of the 2nd Bombardment Group in WW II. No one in the Group knew or imagined such an effect at the time.

On August 13, 1942, the Group was at Langley Field, Virginia, where it had been engaged in antisubmarine patrol along the Atlantic seaboard. The Group would not go into training for overseas combat duty for another three months. Even then it would train in the Pacific Northwest, and it would get there essentially by proxy.

The proxy organization was the 304th Bombardment Group (H). It was activated at Salt Lake Army Air Base, Salt Lake City, Utah, on September 11, 1942, and was transferred September 15, 1942, without personnel or equipment, from Salt Lake to Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington. Group organizational equipment was shipped directly from Salt Lake City to Ephrata Army Air Base, Washington<sup>2</sup>. On September 19, 1942, the 304th Bomb Group, less detachment of the air echelon, was ordered from Geiger Field to Ephrata to arrive not later than October 1. A cadre of thirty-five officers and two hundred ninety-nine enlisted men with Capt. Everett S. MacQueston in charge, was transferred September 24, 1942, from the 34th Bomb Group,



Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington to Ephrata AAB to join the 304th Bomb Group there by October 1. The detachment of the air echelon remained at Geiger Field to continue B-17 training under the 15th Bombardment Wing of the Second Air Force. Later, on October 21, the detachment was ordered to move to Ephrata so as to be there prepared to resume operational training by November 1, 1942. On that date training control of the unit was transferred to the 16th Bombardment Wing.<sup>3</sup>

At the outbreak of WW II the 2nd Bomb Group, having pioneered the military application of the B-17, was the best trained and most experienced bombardment group in the Army Air Corps. Little wonder that a handful of bomber specialists in the 2nd had to be expanded beyond recognition into slots in the new bomb groups being formed. As a tiny nucleus, they ignited and reignited, ad infinitum, the torch of time-tested Air Corps doctrine for trainees to follow.<sup>4</sup> One such bomber specialist from the 2nd was Col. Ford J. Lauer. On September 24, 1942 he became commander of the 304th Bomb Group at Geiger Field. The 304th Group consisted of a Group Headquarters and four squadrons, the 361st, 362nd, 363rd and 421st.<sup>5</sup>

Four B-17Fs were received on September 30, one for each squadron. The airplanes were flown to Ephrata that same day. The following day the remainder of the original cadre moved by train from Geiger Field to Ephrata, arriving at 6:20 P.M.<sup>6</sup>

## EPHRATA

Ephrata Army Air Base was typical of numerous military bases that sprang up throughout the rural economic wastelands of post-depression America. Land was cheap and plentiful. Locations were purposely remote where military preparations were away from prying eyes and the easy reach of potential enemies; where fliers and soldiers in the making and their machines would not threaten or disturb large population centers; where the local populace, in search of relief from the long deprivations of the depression, was more than receptive; and where terrain and weather fitted training needs.



Cpl. John Constance and Pvt. John Reed, 96th Squadron, in Tent City, Ephrata, Washington. (Courtesy of C. Richards)

Ephrata's seasonal weather provided every element likely to be encountered in combat, except that of the tropics. There was insufferable heat with wind-born, all-invasive powdery dust and rain-made quagmires, both of which could render man and machine useless. There were snows and chilling winter blasts over a treeless plain. Interspersed through all these were beautiful, cloudless days and clear starry nights ideal for flying training.

As a military base Ephrata had a short and turbulent history. It started as a small civilian emergency field on the airway between St. Paul, Minnesota, and Seattle, Washington. It was financed primarily from relief funds in the midst of the depression. When operational it had two unsurfaced landing strips 2,800 and 3,200 feet long, runway border lights, a rotating beacon, and a twenty-four hour radio range.<sup>7</sup> It received provisional status as an army air base in June 1942, a year and a half before construction of permanent facilities was completed. In October 1945 it was shut down as a military base to start conversion to civilian status as a municipal airport. Twice during this brief span it reverted to standby and caretaker status, only to be quickly resurrected for a new military mission.<sup>8</sup>

Ephrata community leaders had long promoted the airfield and the surrounding area for military aviation use. These efforts were directed primarily at Gen. H. H. Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Corps. Proposals cited the strategic importance of the area to the defense of the Puget Sound region, and to the Columbia River Basin Dam development projects, and as an interior defense and supply route to military interests in Alaska. Finally, in April 1941, sufficient interest had been aroused with the Army that modest improvements to the airfield were approved in Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup>

The first major development in the area for military use was not the airfield but bombing and gunnery ranges. In April 1941 a detachment of three officers and thirty-five enlisted men arrived in Ephrata to start construction of the first bombing range eighteen miles southeast of Ephrata. Soon, Ephrata, with a population of less than 1,000, found itself trying to play host to over 1,200 military personnel. "...Mabel Bell Thompson, who was running the Bell Hotel in Ephrata, took a long distance telephone call from an Army officer who told her to reserve rooms for 1,200 soldiers. When Mabel said she couldn't do that, the officer warned her he would have to take over the hotel. Mabel remembers that she replied:

'Well, if you can fit 1,200 men in 40 rooms, you're a better man than I am. But I'll tell you what — have them bring sleeping bags and I'll find a place for them.' She goes on to relate, 'And we put them on the floor in the school gymnasium until their tents arrived by truck two or three days later, and they used the bathrooms in the schools and churches.'<sup>10</sup>

These troops were to maintain the bombing and gunnery ranges and act as spotters. Four more ranges were added. Bombing practice was frequently scheduled on a twenty-four-hour basis. Planes came from an eleven-state area for bombing and gunnery practice. Sometime during this period the town of Warden, Washington, forty-five miles southeast of Ephrata, was "bombed." Practice bombs weighed 100 pounds,



Sgt. Charles W. Richards among Ephrata hutments, October 1942. (Courtesy of C. Richards)

were filled with sand and equipped with detonators, making them visible to ground spotters and scorers. Unfortunately, Warden had a city lighting pattern that was similar to one of the nearby bombing ranges. The first bombardier to make the mistaken identity nearly hit a church. Following the second "bombing" raid on Warden, the County Sheriff telephoned Ephrata airfield and declared: "I think Warden is about to surrender." After that the Army took corrective action to protect Warden from further "attacks."<sup>11</sup>

Following Pearl Harbor military preparations and build-up at Ephrata intensified. Maj. Gen. Robert Olds became commander of the Second Air Force in May, 1942, with headquarters at Ft. George Wright, Spokane, Washington. His mission included training of bombardment crews. He quickly submitted his mission plan that included build-up of the Ephrata airport as an army air base. Approval of his plan resulted in Ephrata airport being designated as Ephrata Army Air Base on June 19, 1942.<sup>12</sup>

The long-time promotion, by local community leaders, of the Ephrata Airfield for military use seemed to be vindicated when the Japanese invaded the Aleutian Islands. A provisional unit of sixteen B-17 bombers with air crews and maintenance personnel began arriving at Ephrata at the end of May and early June. One of those crew members, Rudolph Koller, tells what happened next to some of the crews:

"I was there (at Ephrata) on or about June 3, 1942, with a provisional squadron of eight B-17E aircraft. The base was absolutely bare bones at the time. A nice long runway, one or two buildings and tents...I stayed there about two or three days. Then, in a flash, without warning, one afternoon we scrambled out of Ephrata to McChord AAB in Tacoma, Washington. Once at McChord we were assembled in one of the hangars and briefed on the Japanese invasion of the Aleutians. We were told that we represented the only major strike force that could protect the Pacific Northwest. We were assigned a patrol route each day for four aircraft. These covered an area from Astoria, Oregon, north through a spot about 50 miles north of Victoria, B. C. We



flew seaward each day to a point 300 miles off shore, then either 30 miles north or south and back to the coast. Then on to McChord. The other four crews and aircraft remained on the ground on alert until 1300 hours each day. We were armed with six 500-pound bombs and a bomb bay fuel tank in the other bay of the aircraft."<sup>13</sup>

Koller returned to Ephrata at the end of September as a member of the 304th Bomb Group.

Bomb groups in training were stationed at Ephrata during base construction. Simultaneously the base complement grew steadily, thus keeping the base in a constant state of turmoil. Base facilities were meager and primitive. Before permanent facilities were built, personnel were quartered in a succession of floorless pyramidal tents, sometimes twelve men to a tent, and later, wooden hutments, neither with water or electricity. Hutments were approximately sixteen feet square with two windows, a door and a heating stove in the middle of the room. They were mounted on large wooden runners, making them towable for the frequent relocations. Initially there was a shortage of heating stoves for the tents and the hutments and frequent shortages of coal and fuel. Similar conditions prevailed throughout the base during the construction period regarding supplies, material, equipment, services and facilities. Several initial wooden buildings were salvaged Civilian Conservation Corps camp units. Living and working conditions were abysmal. A sampling of unit histories gives examples that typified conditions. Facilities in the summer were stiflingly hot and freezing in the winter. Latrines were remote from both living and working areas. Boxes served as both desks and chairs. Some parts were stored randomly in barrels. At various times supplies, including rations, had to be unloaded on the ground for lack of storage space. Rations had to be guarded from marauding cats and dogs. Dur-

ing one period a mess hall designed to serve 250 to 300 had to serve 1,600. Military units necessarily shared mess halls. There was no readily accessible commercial infrastructure with the capacity to give adequate relief to military needs. Trying to create order out of this confusion was an all-consuming challenge. Some personnel exhibited extraordinary dedication and great ingenuity. Others were thrust into positions and problems beyond their competence.<sup>14</sup>

Ephrata was a willing, even eager, host community but with a population of less than 1,000, its limited resources were quickly oversaturated.

This was the environment that the 304th Bomb Group found when it arrived on September 30 and October 1, 1942. The base did have a new 6,000 foot runway and a permanent operations tower. Most of the other facilities were still temporary and primitive. Most officers and enlisted men lived in the pyramidal tents, however, a few lucky officer crew members were housed in the wooden, green-painted four-man huts or newly constructed tar paper shacks. The Group headquarters and mess hall were in the same wood-frame building. The Operations and the Maintenance functions were in pyramidal tents. Support offices of all types were in large tents.

The effect of austere living conditions was compounded by the weather. Initially it was cold, rainy, and foggy. The first snow came November 2. Nighttime temperatures ranged from zero to twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Doctors were soon treating upper respiratory infections. Even the food, while adequate in quantity, lacked variety and was frequently poorly prepared. One bright spot was the post exchange which was adequately stocked. Recreational facilities were meager to nonexistent. There was a small theater in a cold, barren building with poor acoustics. There was nothing else.<sup>15</sup>

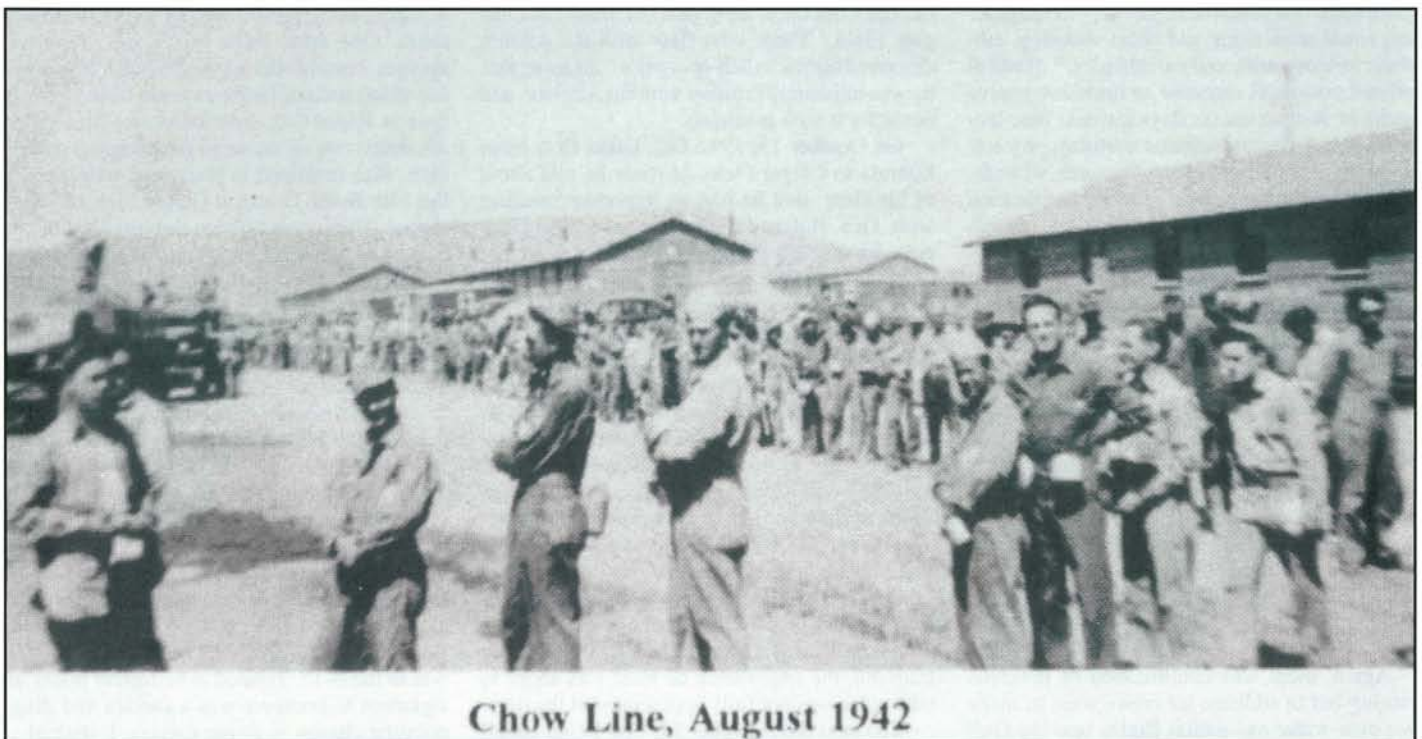
The town of Ephrata was generous but could

offer few diversions beyond a small USO, one theater and one bowling alley. The order to move to Ephrata started a scramble for housing for those accompanied by dependents. The Bell Hotel — with its forty rooms, two small motels, and a few rooms for rent in private homes — exhausted the possibilities. James Heaberg, one of the Group bombardiers recalled: "[I remember] my wife going from door to door trying to find a place to live . . . the hotel in Ephrata renting out cots for people to sleep in the halls."<sup>16</sup> Carl Hutter of the Group related his experience:

"Lieutenant Kent Wonnell and I rented a room with Mrs. Ruby Wilson in town for about three months while accommodations were being built at EAAB. Lieutenant Wonnell and I rented the 'back room' of her home. Both of us were six feet two inches or better and we slept together in one regular-sized bed. (Better than pyramidal tents!)...Kent and I were like 'adopted sons' to her while we lived in her home. She introduced me to my wife of 50 years . . . in September '42 my future wife moved into the FRONT bedroom. With Mrs. Wilson as 'chaperon' we shared the same house for about two or three weeks, when Kent and I moved back to EAA base."<sup>17</sup>

Gas rationing, shortage of private and public transportation and the press of military duties left little opportunity to take advantage of the few accommodations that were available in the outlying communities. The closest, largest city was Wenatchee and it was fifty miles away. Even the flight line on the base was a mile from the living area. Neither morale nor training requirements were well served by these conditions. Living conditions aside, there was little diversion from military duties. Of necessity the preoccupation was with work, eating, and sleeping.

Still the troops showed great resiliency and there was little or no serious griping. They took



Ephrata chow line, August '42. (Courtesy of C.E. Atkinson/P. Dunston)



pride in overcoming adversity. They had come to fight a war whose cause they believed in, and they accepted deprivation as the natural consequence of rapid mobilization, confident that it was temporary. In retrospect Ephrata was a good proving ground for the combat field conditions and tent life of North Africa and the rain and mud of Italy yet to come.

The inadequacy of living amenities had its parallel in training capability. Training programs were not well planned or documented. Training equipment and facilities were likewise lacking. Much was left to individual units and to the discretion of air crews and ground troops. Improvisation was commonplace. Later, training became better planned, organized, and supported. Combat Crew Training Units (CCTU's) were organized and dedicated to training combat crews. CCTU's adapted their training to the lessons fed back from combat experience. But the training of the 304th Bomb Group and, in turn, the 2nd Bomb Group pre-dated these developments. Training at the time was broadly divided into four phases:

### FIRST PHASE

This phase consisted mostly of transition training into the B-17, navigational flights, instrument flying and some practice bombing. The flight echelon received this phase of training while still with the 34th Bomb Group at Geiger Field. The ground echelon received both first and second phase training at Ephrata.

### SECOND PHASE

This phase included local day and night flying, cross-country, instrument, formation and high altitude flying, and bombing and aerial gunnery practice. Ground schools gave training in engineering, intelligence, Morse code and blinker practice, chemical warfare, Link trainer (there were two machines), gunnery range practice, small arms firing and skeet shooting, athletics, military drill, and calisthenics.<sup>18</sup> Medical enlisted personnel received an intensive twelve weeks of instruction six days a week, four lectures a day. Subjects included anatomy, physiology, drugs, shock, bandaging, fractures, wounds, artificial respiration, litter bearing, purification of water, chemical warfare, sanitation, records and reports and drill. Only one training film was available. The air echelon received lectures in shock, hemorrhage, fractures, otitis media, physiology of flight anoxia, aeroembolism, and sinusitis.<sup>19</sup>

### THIRD PHASE

This phase was generally a continuation and extension of phase-two training into more advanced subject matter. The air echelon engaged in mock combat missions with practice bombing and air-to-ground gunnery.

### FOURTH PHASE

Again, there was continuation of previous training but in addition air crews were to make two over-water navigation flights into the Gulf of Mexico in anticipation of a trans-oceanic flight

to a combat theater. During this phase the full complement of new B-17's was to be received and thoroughly checked out. The ground echelon did not accompany the flight echelon in this phase but remained at their third phase bases and received more basic training, including drill, hikes, calisthenics, range practice, intelligence, and security.<sup>20</sup> They also prepared for the move by ground transportation to a port of embarkation and, thence, overseas by ship.

October 1942 was the month of buildup, organization, and commencement of training as a group. On October 5, Col. Lauer led seven aircraft, three of which were borrowed, on a joint Army-Navy maneuver. The formation flew four hundred miles out over the Pacific, then turned back toward shore to make a simulated bombing attack from twelve-thousand feet on a shipyard. P-38 Lighting interceptors were to ward off the attack but cloud cover prevented them from sighting the bombers. The maneuvers could not be completed because of inclement weather. The bombers returned to McChord Field and stayed there until weather permitted return to Ephrata.<sup>21</sup>

The inability to complete the maneuvers was a disappointment, particularly to Col. Lauer. He was eager to get the Group combat ready. As soon as aircraft were assigned, he had them flying. A major problem was too few aircraft for the number of assigned crews. Lauer had a penchant for formation flying but he never really explained why. Only later did it become apparent that viable daylight bombing depended on close order bomber formation and the concentration of defensive fire power. This knowledge came from his experience with the 2nd Bomb Group in earlier years.

Col. Lauer took justifiable pride in his service in the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley Field, Virginia. He had participated in the Group's South American flights and had been one of the Group's check pilots. He was the navigator on the tenth out of twelve YB-17s delivered to the Group, from the Boeing plant in Seattle to Langley Field. Those who flew with the colonel described him as "a hell-of-a-pilot," meaning that he was intimately familiar with the airplane and could fly it with precision.

On October 13, 1942 Col. Lauer flew from Ephrata to Geiger Field. In route he told some of his crew that he had an important meeting with Gen. Robert C. Olds, Commanding General, Second Air Force. Gen. Olds was former commander of the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley Field and a former associate and friend of Col. Lauer's. "An important meeting" was all that Lauer said. Upon arrival at Geiger, he left in a staff car for Ft. George Wright, Headquarters, Second Air Force. Two and a half hours later he returned, all smiles. He said, "Gen. Olds is going to change us from the 304th Bomb Group to the 2nd Bomb Group and soon". On the return flight to Ephrata, Lauer expounded on the history of the 2nd Bomb Group and how great it was to be redesignated as the 2nd Bomb Group - the oldest bombardment group in the Army Air Corps dating back to 1918 and WW I. To his young crew, not steeped in military history or tradition, the importance of what was about to take place was not fully appreciated at the time.

The next day, October 14, Col. Lauer called a meeting of the Group air echelon at the base

theater, where he broke the news of the impending redesignation. It took a while to realize the significance of becoming the 2nd Bombardment Group (H). By the time the Group deployed overseas in March, there was a more universal appreciation of the illustrious heritage and tradition that the Group would carry into combat.

The first practice bombs were dropped and machine guns fired on the Ephrata bombing and gunnery range on October 14. There was intensive use of the two Link trainers by all the squadrons. Pilots started to learn simple three-plane formation flying. "Round robin" cross-country flights were flown for navigation and instrument flight training.<sup>22</sup>

Two inspection formations were held during October which 429th Squadron personnel in particular will not forget. The first was held on the flight line in front of the airplanes. It was a bitterly cold day. The 429th personnel were the last to be inspected. By the time Col. Lauer finally got to these last troops, they were turning blue from the cold. Because of the shortage of supplies, common at the time, several men did not have overcoats. To them Lauer was excruciatingly slow. When he stopped at a member, it was more to question than to inspect: "How many flying hours do you have? Are you ready to go to combat? Are you satisfied with your crew? Your training? Etc.?" Everyone managed to survive the inspection despite the cold.<sup>23</sup> Later, on October 23, Col. Lauer held a show-down inspection in the camp area. The troops formed up in the muddy street. It was warmer this time. Each squadron conducted a gas-attack drill, and the formation ended with a war bond sales lecture.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the month additional personnel continued to arrive. Personnel came from the replacement center at Salt Lake Army Air Base. Some enlisted men came directly from various technical training centers. Some pilots transferred back from the Royal Canadian Air Force, bringing considerable flying experience with them. One such pilot was Capt. Robert E. Haynes, commander of the 362nd Squadron. A few pilots and staff officers came from the Army base at Rapid City, South Dakota. On October 20, thirty-two air crews of the detached air echelon, who remained in phase one training with the 34th Bomb Group at Geiger Field, were assigned. These crews began arriving October 26, and by October 31 all had arrived. They were divided equally, eight each, to the four squadrons. On October 30 four additional B-17s arrived, and on November 3 two more were delivered. The Group then had its full complement of air crews and ten aircraft.<sup>25</sup>

Except for commanders and key staff personnel, most air crew members had never been in a B-17 before joining the 34th or 304th Groups. Many aircraft commanders were early 1942 flying school graduates. Most copilots were more recent flying school graduates. Production of pilots did not match the demand for bomber and fighter pilots. Many Group copilots were graduates of single engine advanced flying schools. Their first experience with multi-engine aircraft was in the B-17. Trained to be fighter pilots, assignment to bombers was a sudden and disappointing change in flying careers. It dashed visions of gaining fame as fighter aces. An added



disappointment was playing second fiddle to aircraft commanders who, in many cases, were only one or two flying school classes senior, albeit graduates of multi-engine flying schools.

Navigators and bombardiers were mostly new graduates with about one hundred hours of flying time. Each squadron did have a small core of navigators and bombardiers who had four or more months experience and one hundred fifty to two hundred hours flying time.

November 1 marked the start of phase two training for the flight echelon, as training started under supervision of the 16th Wing, Second Air Force. It was the general practice for each phase of training to be under the supervision of a different wing. Because of the limited number of aircraft — two each in two squadrons and three each in the other two squadrons — and a full complement of air crews, flying training was put on a twenty-four-hour-a-day basis. Flying hours steadily increased except when hampered by weather, then the emphasis was on ground school and Link training. During November extensive training was given in engineering, radio, armament, use of oxygen, chemical warfare, intelligence, and medical services. Troops were given orientation in small arms weapons and sent to the nearby Alkali Range to practice fire .22 caliber and .45 caliber pistols, and shot guns.<sup>26</sup>

Military combat training is inherently dangerous. Fortunately the first accident to befall the Group was a minor one but it had the potential for a fatality. It happened November 5 during the largest formation and practice bombing mission to date. A .50 caliber B-17 waist gun was accidentally discharged. The bullet hit a piece of armor plate in the rear of the airplane, slightly wounding tail gunner, M/Sgt Marion F. Rinehart Jr. of Selah, Washington.<sup>27</sup>

On November 10, 1942 General Order No. 168, Headquarters Second Air Force, Ft. George Wright, Spokane, Washington officially redesignated the 304th Bombardment Group as the 2nd Bombardment Group and vice versa.<sup>28</sup> The effect was that the 2nd Bomb Group moved from Langley Field, Virginia to Ephrata without personnel or equipment and the 304th Bomb Group moved from Ephrata to Langley Field without personnel or equipment. There was understandable elation at Ephrata and disappointment at Langley. Lt. Col. (later Maj. Gen.) Dale O. Smith, who had just assumed command of the 2nd at Langley from Col. Darr Alkire, said, "It must have been that Ford Lauer who pulled this off!"

The 304th Bombardment Group squadrons were redesignated as follows:

- 361st to the 20th
- 362nd to the 49th
- 363rd to the 96th
- 421st to the 429th<sup>29</sup>

Two days earlier, on November 8, the United States and Great Britain launched operation TORCH, the three-pronged invasion of North Africa. This was the crucial event that caused diversion of the 2nd Bomb Group from England to North Africa for combat during WW II.

On November 19 Col. Lauer flew from Ephrata to Great Falls Army Air Base, Montana. In route Lauer told his copilot, Lt. Bernard B. Pasero and navigator, Lt. Koller that the Group



Col. Ford J. Lauer making first B-17 landing at Great Falls Army Air Base, Montana, Nov. 30, 1942. (Photo Section)

was going to move to Great Falls soon. This was a pre-move inspection trip. Lauer said, "I want you two to keep your eyes open and report anything unusual to me." Pasero and Koller weren't sure what "unusual" meant. It was a great occasion when Lauer's plane set down at Great Falls, the first B-17 to land at this newly constructed base. The local press was on hand even though there were two feet of snow on the ground.

The next day, November 20, Lauer and the crew toured the three satellite bases at Cut Bank, Glasgow, and Lewiston, Montana, where three of the squadrons would be based. Lauer told Pasero and Koller that the 20th Squadron would be based with the Group headquarters at Great Falls, the 49th Squadron at Lewiston, the 96th Squadron at Glasgow and the 429th Squadron at Cut Bank. These satellite bases lay in a large north and easterly quarter-circle from Great Falls. Cut Bank was 95 miles north northwest, just 28 miles from the Canadian border. Glasgow was 220 miles east northeast and Lewiston was 87 miles east southeast.

Lauer and crew returned to Great Falls that evening. The next three days were spent making a closer inspection of base facilities. They flew back to Ephrata on November 24. By that time the impending move had been announced and preparations were underway. Col. Lauer encouraged all those still accompanied by dependents to send them home. He emphasized that the training schedule in Montana would be heavy and little time would be available for families. Some took him at his word; others ignored it and kept their dependents with them through the Montana training period.

### MONTANA-GREAT FALLS, CUT BANK, GLASGOW AND LEWISTON

At 6:00 A.M. November 27, a small advance party left Ephrata by passenger train for Great Falls to direct the relocations. At 11:00 A.M. the same day the Group, except air crews assigned to fly the airplanes, left by troop train for their respective Montana bases. They arrived on No-

vember 28 and 29. The next two or three days were used to set up offices. Those flying the airplanes waited until November 30 to make the trip. Flying training resumed on December 2. Ground school resumed on December 5. The 20th Squadron was the only one to have a Link trainer. Overseas immunization started with cholera and typhus shots.<sup>30</sup>

On December 4, Capt. Marion F. Caruthers — then a flight leader but to become the 96th Squadron commander on December 17 — flew Lt. Col. Marvin F. Stadler (Group Executive Officer) and others to Rapid City, South Dakota, to pick up a C-78, a twin-engine, five-place aircraft for liaison use between Group Headquarters and the satellite bases.<sup>31</sup>

Phase three training, under the supervision of the 17th Wing of the Second Air Force, commenced with the move to Montana. Normally this phase would have been one month long, but at Col. Lauer's request it was extended to two months. A nominal amount of training was achieved at Ephrata because of the shortage of aircraft, inclement weather, and the meager facilities. Additional B-17s were delivered periodically, but the number assigned fluctuated aggravatingly. The Group had barely reached a sufficient number of aircraft for efficient training when it was levied on to support other groups. On December 15 four B-17s were transferred to the 351st Group at Geiger Field. The next day four additional B-17s were transferred to the 96th Group at Pocatello, Idaho, leaving the Group with twenty-one total aircraft. By the start of phase three training, the Group had yet to fly a Group-simulated combat mission.

The three-shift, twenty-four-hour training schedule continued into phase three, allowing three eight-hour scheduling periods. With five aircraft per squadron, for example, the objective was to keep three aircraft in the air twelve hours out of the twenty-four-hour period. Ground crews began setting record aircraft in-service rates. Weather was the major inhibitor of flying. Up to November 15, while still at Ephrata, the record number of hours flown daily was sixty-





Standing L to R: Maj. Herman W. Gaddis, Gp. Flt. Surgeon; Lt. Col. Marvin F. Stadler, Deputy Gp. Cmdr; Col. Lauer; 1st Lt. Rudolph C. Koller, Jr., Gp. Navigator; Capt. Lyman E. Ihle, 20th Squadron Flt. Surgeon; Lt. Lesquin, duties unk. Kneeling front, 2nd Lt. Walter E. Simmons, Asst. Gp. Intelligence Officer. (Photo Section)

four hours and twenty minutes, (64:20). A month later, daily flying hours were logged as follows:

|              |                            |
|--------------|----------------------------|
| December 11: | 133:35, the record to date |
| December 13: | 148:00, from 36 missions   |
| December 15: | 154:45, from 36 missions   |

Then on December 15 and 16, the eight aircraft were transferred. By December 18 the total flying hours accumulated by squadron was as follows:

|                |                      |
|----------------|----------------------|
| 20th Squadron  | 410:05               |
| 49th Squadron  | 381:15               |
| 96th Squadron  | 437:35               |
| 429th Squadron | 325:55 <sup>32</sup> |

The Group flew its first mock-combat mission on December 21. Fourteen aircraft assembled at Great Falls and were led by Col. Lauer on a simulated bombing mission on the Great Falls bombing range, and on strafing runs over the gunnery range. Each aircraft dropped two practice bombs. Three thousand six hundred and fifty seven (3,657) rounds of .50 caliber ammunition were expended. Very good results were observed.<sup>33</sup> A similar mission was flown December 23, with Lt Col Stadler leading the first flight and Maj John J. Melcher, Group Operations Officer, the second flight. On Christmas Day combat crews again assembled at Great Falls for a special mission, which was scrubbed. The next



The commanders, December 1942. L to R: Capt. Joseph W. Triggs, 20th Squadron; Maj. Robert E. "Pappy" Hayes, 49th Squadron; Col. Lauer; Capt. Marion F. Caruthers, 96th Squadron; and Capt. Robert W. Neal, 429th Squadron. (Photo Section)





*Training Formation, Montana, 1942. (Photo Section)*

day the assembled crews used the occasion to practice formation flying.<sup>34</sup> The mock-combat missions gave ordnance and armament personnel valuable experience in loading bombs and in aircraft weapons maintenance.

The length of flying training missions varied widely. Some were as short as 2:00 hours; others, mostly cross-country legs, were as long as 6:00 to 8:00 hours. Typically air crews flew twelve to fifteen days during December and logged approximately 70:00 hours of flying time. The training experience in Montana was in stark contrast to that of Ephrata. Crews began to acquire a sense of competence and confidence. Then the first major tragedy struck.

### A "ROUTINE" TRAINING MISSION

The history of aviation is the story of man's quest to triumph over the forces of nature. Aviation was born when man succeeded in overcoming the force of gravity on a sustained basis. This accomplished, weather became the major nemesis of safe flight. Weather extracted more tribute in human life and suffering and broken machines than any other single cause during 2nd Bomb Group training. The explosive expansion of military aviation during WW II was accompanied by a grim toll in lives and machines. "While on a routine training mission" became the attribution lexicon to report these accidents. It was as though characterizing an act as "routine," ordinary, or commonplace, gave it an imputed immunity from danger. Or did "routinely" performing according to prescribed procedures imply minimal risk? Or did "routine," habitual repetition endow an activity with safety? Hardly. Aviation, and particularly military training aviation, involves too many uncontrollable variables.

The phrase, "on a routine training mission", was a misnomer, especially when applied to training accidents of the 2nd Bomb Group. Mixing marginally trained, fledgling pilots, aircraft of questionable reliability, and some of the most severe weather in the country hardly created "routine" conditions.

To be a first pilot on a B-17 in 1938 required 7 to 11 years commissioned service, over 2,000 hours logged as a pilot, and ratings as a dead reckoning and celestial navigator, an expert aerial bombardier and expert aerial gunner. The 1940-41 training program for the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley Field set the qualifications for a class I aircraft commander at 2,000 hours of flying time and seven years of service.<sup>35</sup> By 1942, pilots with barely more than 200 hours of flying school time and less than one year of military service were moving directly into the B-17 cockpit, and in one or two months were aircraft commanders.

The B-17 was the premiere bomber of its time. Its feats of durability while ravaged by flak and fighters are legendary. Still, it suffered some toll in reliability through the rush of wartime production. Wartime B-17's were produced by a consortium of Vega Aircraft Corporation, Burbank, California; Douglas Aircraft Company, Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Boeing Aircraft Company. Similarly, the 1,200 horse power, R-1820-65 Wright Cyclone was also manufactured by Studebaker.

Weather, the third member of this sometimes deadly mixture, was the most dangerous. Beginning with the mist, rain, fog and later snow of Ephrata, weather conditions deteriorated as the winter wore on. During the last half of January 1943 weather brought flying to a virtual standstill at most bases. Montana natives described the 1942-43 winter as the worst in fifty years.

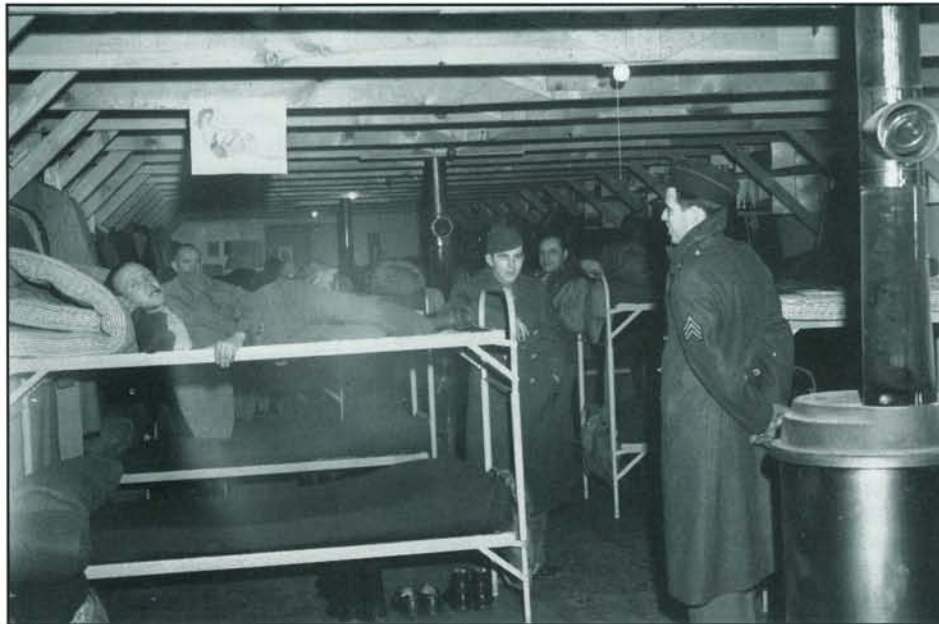
Snow covered the ground, with brief exceptions, from early December through January. At Glasgow snow drifts on occasion were ten feet deep. During the worst weather there it took snow plows several days to clear runways, taxiways and ramps. For one five-day period the thermometer never rose above twenty degrees below zero Fahrenheit and reached a low of forty-eight degrees below zero.<sup>36</sup> At Cut Bank, 429th Squadron personnel recalled that the city cordoned off the water tower to protect against ice falling from the giant icicles formed around the base of the tank. During this period plumbings froze solid on the base.<sup>37</sup> Weather was little better at Great Falls. The temperature from January 16 through 23 ranged from fifteen to thirty-two degrees below zero.<sup>38</sup> It was not unusual for ground and air crews to struggle to get engines started, then have to abort the mission when it became impossible to keep oil temperatures above the minimum for takeoff.

On December 30, 1942, a three-plane element of the 20th Squadron departed Great Falls for Ainsworth Army Air Base, Nebraska. The element leader was Lt. Jacob "Jake" W. Bigham. The right wing man was Lt. Clyde H. Knaggs, and Lt. Edward T. Layfield was flying the left wing. Besides a crew of ten, there were two passengers on Layfield's airplane. Weather at Great Falls was overcast with ceilings of 2,500 to 3,000 feet. Shortly after assembly Lt. Bigham gave the order to commence the prescribed overcast penetration procedure. The procedure was for the element leader to start his climb straight ahead on course at 500 feet per minute at 150 miles per hour indicated airspeed. The right wingman turns 45 degrees to the right, flies straight and level for one minute then turns left back to course and commences the climb at 500





Some 96th Squadron Personnel, Glasgow, Montana, 1942. "X" denotes Sgt. James R. Harris, squadron parachute rigger. (Courtesy of J. Harris and B. Hanson)



20th Squadron barracks scene, Great Falls. Far right: Sgt. Harold Sells; center: Cpl. Robert Lewis, both of the Squadron Photo Section. It took all three stoves to overcome the -40 degree weather. (Courtesy of L. Moore)



Great Falls. Left, Lt. George H. Stuart, 20th Squadron Adjutants Office. Person on right not identified. (Courtesy of L. Moore)

feet per minute at 150 miles per hour. The left wingman, in this case Lt. Layfield, was to turn left 45 degrees, descend 500 feet at 500 feet per minute then turn right, back to course, and climb at 500 feet per minute at 150 miles per hour. This procedure gives both lateral and vertical separation of aircraft to avoid collision during overcast penetration and still facilitate reassembly on top of the overcast.

Lts. Bigam and Knaggs completed the pen-

etration without incident and without such adverse weather effects as icing or snow buildup on the aircraft. Lt. Layfield did not appear when expected and no communication was received from him. The remaining two aircraft continued the mission as scheduled. It was not uncommon to fly simulated combat missions with radio silence, as was the frequent practice in actual combat. Later over South Dakota, Army Airways Communication

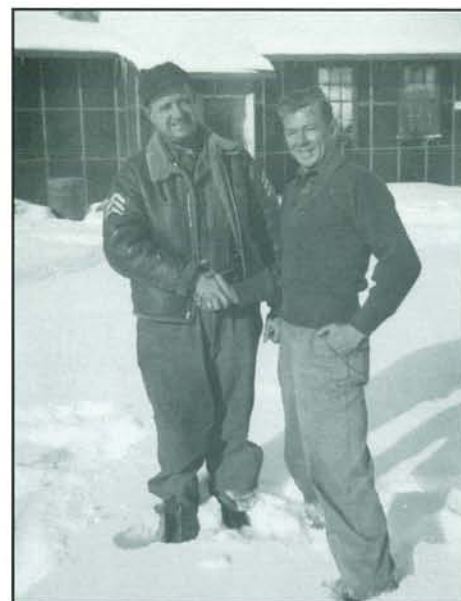
Service inquired as to the number of aircraft in the element. They were advised that three aircraft had started from Great Falls but one had failed to make assembly after overcast penetration. The fate of Lt. Layfield's craft and crew was then unknown to the element. When the two remaining crews landed at Ainsworth they learned that Lt. Layfield's aircraft had crashed without survivors.

One of the passengers in the crash was





Great Falls. L to R: Sgts. Towle, Looney, Phillip Reedy, (S-2) and Holden. (Courtesy of L. Moore)



Great Falls. L to R: Sgts. Kelly and Davis (Courtesy of L. Moore)

Maj. Orville A. Ralston, the Group Intelligence Officer. He was a decorated veteran of WW I, having been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for "combat success and daring". He had led a flight over the western front and had officially been credited with six German planes and unofficially credited with six more which could not be conclusively attributed to his actions.<sup>39</sup>

Maj. Ralston was from Valentine, Nebraska, a scant forty-five miles northwest of Ainsworth. His wife and daughter were waiting for him in Base Operations at Ainsworth. After confirming the fate of the aircraft and passengers, Lt. Bigham sought out the base chaplain to break the devastating news to Maj. Ralston's wife and daughter.

According to the account in the December 31, 1942 issue of the *Roundup Record-Tribune*, Roundup, Montana, the plane crashed at 2:15 P.M. and burned ten miles south of Musselshell, Montana. The crash scene indicated that the plane "slithered on the belly of the fuselage about 30 yards before hitting two pine trees about 7 inches in diameter. The fuselage of the plane passed between the two trees, which hit the outer ends of the wings. The plane went about 70 yards further along the ground before coming to a stop." Military authorities at Lewiston were notified. Two cars and two ambulances from Lewiston arrived and took over the crash scene about 6:00 that evening. The paper initially reported eleven casualties,<sup>40</sup> but later revised the count to twelve.<sup>41</sup> The next day trucks and heavy equipment came from Great Falls and removed the wreckage.

Capt. John Lloyd, Public Relations Officer at Great Falls, said the probable cause of the accident would have to await the report of a board of inquiry.<sup>42</sup> The Group history, written later, stated that Lt. Layfield was "forced to crash land at Musselshell, Montana because of adverse weather conditions and loss of control of the aircraft".<sup>43</sup> Eyewitness accounts and subsequent research suggest more specific and possibly other potential reasons for the crash.

The *Roundup Record-Tribune* reported there were no witnesses to the actual crash. While eyewitness accounts vary on this and other details, there are enough similarities to give some hints as to possible causes of the accident. The paper reported one eyewitness, Mr. John McCleary, as saying "...the tail surfaces of the plane appeared to be 'flapping' and the plane went into a couple of spins or loops within sight of his ranch." He and a crew of men then at the ranch started for the crash scene when they saw the smoke of the crash. The heat from the burning wreckage was so intense that would-be rescuers could not approach near the airplane for about an hour.<sup>44</sup>

Another eyewitness account came from Mrs. Mearl Thompson of Musselshell, Montana, writing on behalf of her husband. On January 26, 1945, she replied to a letter they received from a Mr. Hanson (believed to be the father of T/Sgt Wallace H. Hanson who perished in the crash) of St. Paul, Minnesota. Mrs. Thompson wrote in part, "My husband was the only one who actually saw the plane hit the ground. He, our son, and I were the first ones on the scene. It crashed about a mile from our house. The motors were all running O.K. My son & I were in the house. We heard the motors roaring terribly and rushed out to see. The weather was clear except a few scattered clouds. One heavy cloud was hanging over a hill near our house and we could not see the plane on account of it. All at once, it just seemed to drop out of the cloud. It rolled over several times; then it straightened up, made a few circles and rolled over several times again. One of the elevators seemed to be hanging down. Our son had worked for Lockheed Aircraft several months prior to this and he said it was the elevator . . . Mr. Thompson was out working where he saw it hit and explode. The plane hit three trees and broke them off right at the ground. This tore the wings off. The body slid onto a little rocky knoll which tore it up a lot . . . My husband says that they threw out some paper when they were in the air over our place but we never found it. The ground was barely covered

with snow at the time and that night it started to snow and was a terrible storm. He walked all afternoon until dark looking for it. Then after the snow was gone we looked several times. The country is very rough and rocky here."<sup>45</sup>

Fifty-two years later another eyewitness had similar recollections. Mr. Elton Roberts of Musselshell, Montana stated that he was in a shed shoveling corn when he heard the motors of an airplane "screaming." He ran outside but did not see the airplane immediately. When he did, it was "way upstairs" and descending rapidly in a "violent" spin. The airplane was observed to recover from that spin, and the pilot seemed to have it under control. Then it went into a second spin. At different times Mr. Roberts saw two pieces of the horizontal stabilizer or elevator come off the plane. He is uncertain as to when in the sequence of the two spins and recoveries these pieces came off. The plane recovered from the second spin, leveled off, and again appeared to be under control. By now it was quite low – "not more than a thousand feet above the ground." It flew over Mr. Roberts' location in a tight circle to the left as if the pilot were trying to land on a nearby road. The airplane continued to lose altitude. Then a wing clipped a tall dead pine tree, crashed and burst into flames over a ridge about three quarters of a mile from Mr. Roberts. Mr. Roberts believes he was first on the scene, but others arrived immediately from other directions. It was apparent there were no survivors. About six months later Mr. Roberts found a piece of the tail he had seen come off of the plane. He recalls that it was about six feet long and three feet wide and was composed of both metal and fabric. He described the fabric as "tattered." He notified Army authorities but no one came to recover it. Mr. Roberts remembers particularly how loud the airplane motors were "screaming" from the time he first heard the airplane until it crashed.<sup>46</sup>

Another eyewitness, Mr. Charles Moore of Roundup, was alerted to the plight of the airplane by the sound of motors being "gunned." He rushed outside and saw three airplanes fly-





Aircraft accident January 8, 1943. Right main landing gear drag link failure caused gear to collapse during Lt. Donald J. Stoeger's fourth touch-and-go landing. (Courtesy of J. Stoeger)

ing east at fairly high altitude. The airplane with the revving motors turned west, then turned back east and shortly thereafter went into a near vertical dive. The airplane leveled off close to the ground, and headed toward a ridge to the north. It pulled up over the ridge, causing Mr. Moore to think the pilot was merely stunting. The plane disappeared from sight over the ridge and soon a black plume of smoke from the crash appeared. Mr. Moore mounted his saddle horse and rode hard in the direction of the crash, stopping at a well site on the way to pick up an axe if needed to chop someone out of the wreckage. Mr. Moore fully expected to find the crashed plane on a meadow just over the first ridge. It wasn't there. It wasn't even over the second ridge. By then his horse was exhausted. The smoke plume began to dissipate. At this point Mr. Moore gave up the effort realizing that he risked injury or death to his mount in a futile attempt to reach the crash in time. Unfamiliar with the sight of large airplanes, Mr. Moore had the illusion that the crash was a mere mile away rather than the five miles it proved to be. Mr. Moore said a neighbor, Elton's brother Glenn Roberts, rode his horse to exhaustion because of the same illusion. Mr. Moore did not see any failure of the airplane tail section. He had heard that part of the tail was found later some distance from the crash site.<sup>47</sup>

There are two notable common observances

in these varying accounts: first, damage or failure of the elevator or elevators; second, the roaring and pulsing or revving of the engines. The causes are not conclusively known. Was elevator failure caused by a design or production flaw or from over-stress of a violent, high-speed maneuver? Was the roar and revving of the engines from propellers overspeeding in a high speed dive, the pilot's resorting to high and variable power settings to maintain control or from run-away propellers? This latter phenomenon had occurred in cold weather flying. On one occasion an air crew had all four propellers run away simultaneously. After the crash, air crews talked about the potential for disorientation when making the transition from visual flying to instruments, as might happen during the overcast penetration procedure used by the three-ship element. The weather over Musselshell seems to discount this as a contributing cause. According to eyewitnesses, there were scattered clouds and good visibility and the airplane was observed at fairly high altitude initially. These conditions and the maneuvers of the airplane prior to the crash suggest that Lt. Layfield had ample altitude, time, and visibility to recover from any weather-induced disorientation.

Beginning with the production of the F model B-17, a different method of attaching the fabric to the elevator was introduced to speed production. Previously, the fabric was attached to the

aluminum alloy ribs by hand lacing through holes in the ribs. The new method of attachment used a pronged metal staple or clip that was injected through the fabric and anchored in the rib holes by the prongs. The first Boeing-built B-17F crashed during flight test demonstrating design dive speed capability. The aircraft became uncontrollable during the high speed dive and had to be abandoned. Everyone got out safely. Examination of the recovered wreckage showed that elevator fabric had torn loose from the supporting metal trailing edge structure. The left elevator spar had broken, rotated back and flattened an area along the tail gunner's compartment. Boeing accident investigators concluded that separation of the fabric from the elevator was caused by the new attachment method. Unlike hand lacing where the needles passed between fabric threads, the pronged clips caused small tears in the fabric which escalated into attachment separation under pressure of the dive-speed test. An engineering fix was immediately designed and instituted on all production models.<sup>48</sup> Boeing Service Bulletins and follow-on Army Technical Orders were issued for retrofits on in-service aircraft.<sup>49</sup> Lt. Layfield's aircraft, Number 42-5123, was one such in-service airplane. He crashed December 30, 1942. The first Boeing elevator retrofit Service Bulletin was issued April 16, 1943.

To this day there is debris from the crash scat-



tered along that fateful ridge south of Musselshell. Pieces of twisted metal and shards of broken components, some with identification numbers still visible, were picked up after interest in the crash was renewed by this history.<sup>50</sup>

This was just the first in a string of "routine training mission" accidents to befall the Group.

The following evening, New Year's Eve 1942, three aircraft were returning to Montana bases from cross-country flights to Texas. They ran into a weather front at Billings, Montana. The crews landed at Billings Municipal Airport and took rooms at a local hotel for the night. During the night the flight engineer of one plane went back to the airport and started the engines of his plane, probably to warm them and help assure a start during the cold morning hours. While running up the engines, the airplane jumped the wheel chocks and ran into the tail of another B-17. Repairs took several days.<sup>51</sup>

Just eight days later on January 8, 1943, Lt. Donald J. Stoeger of the 20th Squadron had the right landing gear collapse on a "routine" landing. He had left the gear down and locked while practicing touch-and-go landings. It was on the fourth landing that the accident happened. The airplane skidded off the runway in a right ground loop. There was damage to the ball turret and to the right wing tip and flap. The propellers were bent on engines three and four. The sudden stoppage of these two engines required they be overhauled. No one was injured. The cause of the accident was failure of the drag link on the right landing gear. Investigation determined that the drag link was too small and therefor under strength. Subsequently, drag link tube walls were thickened and joint design strengthened.<sup>52</sup>

Seven days later, on January 15, high winds, with gusts to sixty-eight miles per hour whipped up dust and snow creating widespread low-visibility conditions. 2nd Lt. Richard E. Eggers of the 429th Squadron on a "routine" training mission out of Cut Bank was unable to land at his home base because of the low visibility. He flew the ninety-five miles to Great Falls and attempted a low-visibility approach. The airplane hit a high-tension wire on the approach cutting off approximately five feet of the vertical stabilizer. The wire tangled with the number one engine propeller and the resulting heat loosened rivets in the right wing section. Lt. Eggers was able to maintain control of the aircraft. He aborted the landing and flew to Gore Field, an adjacent airport at Great Falls, where he landed safely.<sup>53</sup>

Drifting snow posed a recurring hazard. Once Capt. Robert W. Neal, Commander of the 429th Squadron, hit a drift on takeoff. The sudden drag pulled the airplane off the runway and forced completion of the takeoff run cross-field through deep snow. Fortunately there was enough clear space to complete the rest of the takeoff run successfully.<sup>54</sup>

Later, during phase four training at Kearney Nebraska, the combination of weather and pilot inexperience claimed another crew and two more aircraft.

## TRAINING CONTINUES

Phase three training continued through January 1943 but was greatly curtailed between January 15 and January 26 because of extreme cold



L to R: Maj. Billy Bishop, Base Executive Officer, Great Falls Army Air Base, Maj. Charles E. Clapp, Gp. Executive Officer. Maj. Clapp served as an aerial observer with 96th Squadron in WW I. (Courtesy of R. Koller)

and bad weather.<sup>55</sup> Flying hours logged by air crew members were approximately two-thirds that logged in December. The average number of days flown was approximately ten and the average number of hours logged was forty. Squadron training included formation flying, celestial and dead-reckoning navigation, air-to-ground gunnery, and practice bombing. Ground school included aircraft identification, map and aerial photograph reading and aircraft systems operation.<sup>56</sup> Col. Lauer led ten aircraft on a cross-country flight to Rapid City, South Dakota, and back. One purpose of the mission was to give gunners practice in air-to-air gunnery, but this part of the mission never materialized. Throughout the training period aerial gunners were limited to firing at mock ground targets on gunnery ranges during low level strafing runs. The efficacy of this practice as adequate preparation for aerial combat with high-speed fighters is doubtful. Ground mockup targets didn't move and didn't shoot back. But it was the best training provided at the time.

On January 6, 1943, Maj. Charles E. Clapp was assigned as Group Executive Officer succeeding Lt. Col. Stadler who was promoted to Deputy Group Commander for a short period before becoming Commander of the 383rd Bom-

bardment Group (H) at Rapid City, South Dakota. Maj. Clapp was the "grandpappy" of the organization. He was a veteran of WW I, first as a cadet in the Aviation Signal Section of the Army Signal Corps. Later he was assigned to the 96th Squadron of the 1st Day Bombardment Group. His brother, Lt. Roger Clapp, a pilot in the 96th Squadron, designed that squadron's famous Red Devil insignia. Lt. Clapp was killed in a training accident at the front in France in 1918. Maj. Clapp received his commission as a second lieutenant in France in February 1918. He was thus part of the long tradition of the 2nd Bomb Group that extended from WW I through WW II. He was the only member of the Group known to have served in the Group during both world wars.<sup>57</sup>

No general furloughs had been approved since activation of the Group. On January 15 authority was given to grant six-day furloughs to personnel living in the West and Midwest. Furloughs beyond these two areas were deemed too far to travel for the time allowed. Several who met the travel criteria took advantage of the furlough policy. Most Group personnel never got the opportunity for a furlough before going overseas.<sup>58</sup>

Special winter clothing and flying gear were



issued during the stay in Montana. Some troops received beautiful white, hooded parkas with fur lining and trim. Was the cold weather gear and clothing merely for training in Montana or did they portend a combat locale? As time wore on in this frigid and often dreary environment, speculation mounted about where the Group would be sent for combat. It was a secret not even known to the Group Commander. Secrecy creates an information vacuum and heightens curiosity. There is a compulsion among military personnel to fill the information vacuum and the filler of choice is rumor. The most persistent rumor had the Group going to cold climes, probably Alaska. Capt. Caruthers, Commander of the 96th Squadron, was quoted in the January 8, 1943, issue of the "Red Devil News" that: "We are going to a country that starts with an A and ends with an A. That could be Asia, Australia, Alaska, Antarctica or Africa."<sup>59</sup> A few contrarians held that all the cold weather training was merely a smoke screen for assignment to the tropics. Regardless of the Group's combat destination, there was a deep-rooted understanding of its purpose in the war. That same issue of the "Red Devil News" carried this poetic reminder:

### PRIDE OF GLASGOW'S AIRDROME

From Glasgow's airport on the hill  
Bombers take off and land at will.  
Day or night it's all the same  
Pilots learning war's grim game.  
'Mid winter's snow and summer's rains  
We hear the drone of the bombing planes.  
Miles above the crawling things  
They beat the air on giant wings.  
High and far and wide they soar  
Learning the grim techniques of war.  
Lest we submit to tyrant's chains  
We must have more big bombing planes.

By Vernon Hamilton  
December 17, 1942

At 2:00 A.M. on January 29, 1943, an advance party departed Great Falls by plane to make arrangements for deployment of the Group. The party consisted of Maj. Clapp, Group Executive Officer; Maj. Melcher, Group Operations Officer; Capt. Norman Annich, Group Intelligence Officer; and Lt. Edward J. Barburek, Group Communications Officer.

The party flew to New York City, arriving that evening. The next day they journeyed to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where they waited until February 9 for orders. The orders directed them to the Brooklyn Port of Embarkation, New York and in turn by Pacific Clipper from La Guardia Field across the Atlantic. Their route took them to Bermuda and Porta Royal Island, Azores, where they were delayed three days by high seas. From the Azores they went to Lisbon, Portugal and finally to Foyne, Ireland, on the River Shannon — arriving February 15. They then traveled by bus to an air field near Limerick, Ireland to fly by British airliner to Bristol, England. At Bristol they took the train to London and on to Eighth Air Force Headquarters at Teddington, ten miles outside of London, arriving there on February 16. They were then ordered to Eighth Bomber Command at High

Wycombe, England. Here the party went into advance training in combat operations, intelligence, communications, and theater administration with Eighth Bomber Command and designated subordinate units until March 1, 1943. On that date secret orders were received to proceed to North Africa. The party left Handon Field, eight miles outside of London, on March 7 by DC-3 troop transport for Prestwick, Scotland. Here they waited three days for a DC-4 troop transport to take them to Algiers, Algeria by way of Marrakech and Oran, French Morocco, arriving at Headquarters, Northwest African Air Force the following afternoon. Subsequently they were ordered to Casablanca, French Morocco, and on March 17 they returned to Marrakech to prepare for the arrival of the flight echelon.<sup>60</sup>

### COMMUNITY RELATIONS

No war in which the United States has fought in modern times had such wholehearted and unqualified popular support as WW II. Two factors were probably preeminent in creating this unabashed patriotism. First was the justness of the cause. The unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's deceit and unbridled ambitions eliminated public doubt about the cause. Secondly, U.S. armed forces were not predominantly professional warriors but mobilized citizen soldiers drawn from the civilian youth of the nation. A spontaneous bond sprang up between these citizens in uniform and their host communities. The experience of the 2nd Bomb Group was probably typical.

Tiny Ephrata had little to offer but the measure of hospitality isn't how much was offered, but rather how much was given of what was available. On that scale, Ephrata's hospitality was as generous as the better endowed larger communities. Great Falls and the satellite base cities of Cut Bank, Glasgow and Lewiston — though still small cities and towns — simply had more to offer. Also, the Group stayed longer in Montana, providing greater opportunity to develop relationships.

Great Falls was the largest community. It could and did provide more recreational, cultural and social amenities and more housing opportunities than the other Montana communities. Goodwill and generous hospitality at all unit locations were universal with one notable but brief exception.

Across the Missouri River north of Great Falls was the town of Black Eagle. It was a one-company mill town. The mill produced huge quantities of copper wire. The population was predominantly Italian. Black Eagle was noted for its good Italian food, its hardworking, fiercely independent blue collar citizenry and the leisure pursuits that commonly serve mill towns. The restaurants and the bars and saloons of Black Eagle were irresistible temptations to some troops. Many were away from home for the first time and felt the need to satisfy their curiosity about more earthy pastimes. Their invasion of the mill worker's enclave was not always well received. Some airmen were badly treated including a few who suffered beatings. This treatment was probably little different from what would have been accorded any other sizeable foray into the area for the first time. Still, Col

Lauer was sufficiently incensed over the treatment of his airmen that he assigned a Group Officer to accompany the police on their patrols of Black Eagle. Very tall and solidly built, this officer wore a long coat with his side arms visibly showing and his military hat pulled down close over his eyes. The police were highly cooperative, helping play up the impression they wanted to create by whispered asides that this Air Corps guy was one mean SOB. The presence of an officer had the desired dampening effect on any aggressive tendencies of the troops. His no-nonsense demeanor, in the company of the police, had a similar desired effect on the locals. After a short period of these joint patrols, the problems abated.

The brief Black Eagle experience was atypical of the general reception. For Christmas 1942 the merchants of Great Falls donated the Christmas decorations for the base. Families, whose sons and daughters were away in wartime service or employment, opened their homes to the sons and daughters of others. Invitations to dinner on holidays were so numerous they could hardly be filled. On Christmas Day nearly every member of the 429th Squadron was invited to dinner at homes in Cut Bank and nearby Shelby. Simultaneous with the arrival of the 429th Squadron at Cut Bank, the Masonic Hall was opened as a club for the enlisted men. The Hy Miller Hotel, Iverson's Cafe, the Glacier Cafe, the Recreation Center ( better known as the Bowling Alley), and the Cut Bank Hotel all became frequent outing places. Santa Rita to the north and Shelby to the east had additional places of interest. Community-sponsored dances, entertainment and recreation were commonplace. Community newspapers reported extensively about personnel and happenings at the bases. Unit newspapers did similarly about military activities and involvement in the community. One vital statistic gives conclusive confirmation of just how congenial community relations were. Members of the 429th Squadron first arrived at Cut Bank on November 29, 1942. The last members of the Squadron left on March 13, 1943. This brief span of 105 days produced 26 marriages between members of the Squadron and local girls!<sup>61</sup>

One of those brides, the former Miss Dorothy Judson of Cut Bank, soon experienced the anxiety of being a war bride. She married 2nd Lt. Douglas L. MacCarter, copilot on Lt. Kenneth W. Spinning's crew. Another war bride, Margaret "Peg" Yoder and Lt. Spinning were married the day he graduated from flying school at Craig Field, Selma, Alabama. Since then she had followed him to Florida, Ephrata, and Cut Bank. The two wives now followed their husbands to Kearney, Nebraska for phase four training. Ten days later Lt. Spinning's crew made a crash landing in Missouri when they were unable to find Kearney in bad weather. There were anxious moments in Kearney until word was received that the crew was unharmed.

### KEARNEY, NEBRASKA

Phase three training was brought to a close at the end of January 1943. Flight echelons of all squadrons assembled at Great Falls for the trip to Kearney for phase-four training under the





Back L to R: Capt. Joseph K. Mitrovi, P; 2nd Lt. Warren T. Lyons, CP; 1st Lt. Burton R. Thorman, N; 2nd Lt. Andy Miller, B. Front L to R: S/Sgt. Clifford E. Parsons, TG; T/Sgt. Darrell L. Jones, UTG; Pvt. Roy O. Lantz, WG; S/Sgt. Andrew Chubick, WG; S/SGT. Robert E. Parker, LTG; T/Sgt. George S. Lundberg, ROG. (Courtesy of D. Jones/R. Jones)

supervision of the 7th Processing Headquarters, 21st Wing of the Second Air Force. Those who could be accommodated flew the training airplanes to Kearney. The balance of the air echelon departed February 2 by troop train. As the train backed onto the siding at Kearney Army Air Base, 38 new B-17F's could be seen lined up neatly in a long row down the ramp. Within a few hours the Group assigned one of these new planes to each crew. On average the aircraft had twelve hours of flying time.<sup>62</sup>

Training at Kearney was dedicated to final state-side preparation of crews and aircraft for overseas deployment and combat. Several days were spent in personal affairs processing. A line of processing stations was set up on tables in the base Recreation Hall. Such items as insurance, wills, powers-of-attorney, allotments, immunizations, physical examinations and ID's were taken care of.

Pilots and crews test-hopped their new planes, swung compasses, aligned drift meters and calibrated airspeed indicators. Crew members checked out the equipment at their individual stations. Pilots were given instrument checks in the Link trainer and in the air.<sup>63</sup> For the first time crews had "ownership" of their own airplane. They could learn its peculiarities and know whether to be concerned when a gauge needle fluctuated or to ignore it as a harmless quirk. Airplane names and nose art appeared. Over-water navigational training flights for those crews and aircraft that were ready started in mid-February. Each crew was to have two flights over the Gulf of Mexico, one flight on a trip to Florida and one while in Florida. The Group was ordered back to Kearney from Florida, for reasons explained later, before all crews completed their over-water training flights. Later, some crews flew from Kearney to DeRidder, Louisiana, out over the Gulf and back for this mission. But as events developed, most crews got only one over-water flight and a few had none prior to deployment. Crews were to stop at 2nd Air Force Headquarters at Salina, Kansas, for briefings on the Gulf flights and on transoceanic

flights. Second Air Force Headquarters had moved from Ft. George Wright; later it relocated to Colorado Springs, Colorado. Col. Lauer ordered the flights to begin and personally set the process in motion. The preferred out-going route was south from Mobile, Alabama over the Gulf then east to Florida, terminating the mission at Orlando Army Air Base. A rendezvous at Orlando was scheduled for February 13.

Because most personnel were unable to take advantage of the leave policy announced on January 15, Col. Lauer requested approval for a six-day preembarkation leave. His request was denied. Lauer decided to use the Florida mission as an opportunity for the air crews to have some fun. The first to start the Florida mission, Lauer departed Kearney on February 10, followed by all the crews that were ready to leave. Lauer's route was from Kearney to Salina, Kansas, Mobile, Alabama, then south over the Gulf of Mexico and east to Florida, arriving at Orlando on February 13. All air crews were not ready to make the trip by the time Col. Lauer left. Five days elapsed between the time the first and last crews in this wave arrived at Orlando. Lauer let it be known that crews were free to take advantage of their time in Florida. Following his own advice, he left the base promptly after arrival.

Crews of the 429th Squadron did not leave Kearney until February 13. They went as a squadron led by their Commander, Maj. Neal. The Squadron flew to Salina, Kansas, where they stayed over night. The next day they were briefed on the Gulf mission and on the North Atlantic, South Atlantic, and South Pacific routes by navigators who had made these crossings.

The night before departure from Salina was very cold. By taxi time the next morning only two pilots were able to start all engines on their aircraft. It was eleven o'clock before all planes were ready for takeoff. The next destination was Mobile, but by the time the Squadron reached Laurel, Mississippi, Maj. Neal had feathered one engine and was having trouble with another. He landed at Laurel Army Air Base. The rest of the

Squadron circled the base for some time awaiting developments, then landed. After all the airplanes were parked, it was discovered that about three feet of the vertical stabilizer was missing on Capt. Joseph K. Mitrovi's airplane! While maneuvering in formation he had flown underneath Lt. Samuel F. Olson's airplane and came up too close to the latter's propellers. Two days later those aircraft that were flyable left Laurel, flew to Mobile, refueled, then flew south and east on the Gulf mission. The over-water part of the trip was flown at 20,000 feet. Bomb racks were checked out and guns test fired on this leg of the mission.<sup>64</sup>

While at Orlando Army Air Base, some 2nd Bomb Group air crews engaged in that famous Army provisioning process known as "midnight requisitioning." Their priority was items marked for B-17s but they weren't above easing some personal hardships of wartime service. By various ruses and diversions they purloined an unusual quantity of B-17 parts and personal supplies and equipment, including at least one motor scooter. It mattered little that they did not know where they were going for combat. They reasoned that some shortage of supplies would be inevitable in any combat theater. This foresight did prove beneficial when the filched items helped to keep the Group operational in North Africa during the combat period before the ground echelon arrived. Months later, Army inspectors coming through North Africa inquired, unsuccessfully, about the missing material.

Word of the Group's conduct at Orlando soon reached Second Air Force Headquarters and the Group was immediately ordered back to Kearney. It took three hours to locate Col Lauer. He returned to the base bearing the legacy of an obvious binge. He got his airplane off the ground, turned precisely to the navigator's designated heading, and collapsed on the wheel. For the next three hours copilot Pasero struggled with the weight of his commander asleep against the wheel. Later a weather advisory was received that Kearney was below minimums. Soon, unforecasted and unanticipated severe weather was encountered. Col. Lauer terminated the flight early at Topeka, Kansas. At Topeka, Lauer received word to report to Gen. Olds, Commander, Second Air Force at Salina. Lauer was in the air at daylight for the one-hour trip to Salina. As he left his crew for the meeting with Gen. Olds, his navigator Lt. Koller gave him a copy of the weather brief from Orlando that forecast no unusual weather for the Orlando-Kearney flight. Lauer returned three hours later with a look of grave concern on his face. "We have airplanes down all over the midwest and one has crashed!" Unknown to him at the time, two had crashed. "If it hadn't been for that weather brief I think I would have been fired. Gen. Olds told me to get this outfit together and get overseas as soon as possible."

Weather extracted an awful toll from the ranks of the 2nd Bomb Group on the night of February 18, 1943. Twenty-eight aircraft, including Col. Lauer's, left Orlando for Kearney. These twenty-eight airplanes landed in eighteen different states. Two had crashed. One crew survived and one crew was lost. Only two planes made it safely back to Kearney that night. Widespread bad weather was a partial cause for dis-



persal of the airplanes, but it was not the only cause for airplanes being scattered from Indiana to Texas. Denied preembarkation leave and taking a belated cue from their Commander to have fun, some crews used the bad weather as an excuse simply to fly to destinations of their choice. They chose to fly home or to see girl friends and fiancées for a few precious hours. This was not true of Lt. Ned D. Knaphus and crew of the 429th Squadron.

Fog over Kansas and Nebraska caused Lt. Knaphus to attempt a landing in Kansas rather than continuing to Kearney. He thought he was over Salina, when in fact he was over Hutchison which has an elevation *three hundred feet higher* than Salina. The crew in Lt. Spinning's airplane, also of the 429th Squadron, heard the following radio conversation between Lt. Knaphus and Salina Tower (see right):

That was all. He crashed in the landing pattern at Hutchison killing the entire crew.<sup>65</sup>

In the early hours of that same morning, Lt. Spinning, flying about trying to locate Kearney, exhausted his fuel supply and was forced to make an emergency landing near Braymer, Missouri, which is fifty miles east of St. Joseph, Missouri and two hundred sixty-five miles east south east of Kearney. 2nd Lt. Raymond T. Bernier, navigator on Spinning's crew, described the incident:

"We started out from Orlando, Florida with a limited supply of fuel at 10:06 PM on the evening of Feb 18, 1943. After flying along for several hours, we identified ourselves over Topeka, Kansas, after which we lost visual contact with the ground. We flew on instruments until we passed where Kearney should have been. During this time we heard Lt. Knaphus calling Salina Tower.

We let our E.T.A. run over ten (10) minutes; then we tried using radio facilities. We didn't think we had enough gas to reach Salina. Our heading was 130 degrees at three thousand (3,000) feet and we tried to pick up the Kansas City Beam, the Lincoln Beam and the St. Louis Beam but with no success. Then there was a break in the clouds and we saw an airport with lighted runways below us and we started to 'let down' using that as a visual check-point. Then it disappeared, vanished. We turned and circled, but it couldn't be found again.

Then we saw a red flashing beacon and we let down to two hundred (200) feet and we saw the outline of a little town. We flew very low and found a road heading south. Our first attempt to land was frustrated by a bridge in the road and we had to pull up. On the next attempt we just about ran into a farm house and as we pulled up the engines began to sputter — out of gas, so we went straight ahead and landed on the road. The left wing clipped a row of fence posts and it veered us off to the left and we came to a stop in a muddy field." No one was injured.<sup>66</sup>

The new bride, Dorothy (Judson) MacCarter, wife of copilot Douglas MacCarter, sent a clipping about the crash from a Chillicothe, Missouri newspaper to her parents in Cut Bank, Montana. The article was reprinted in the *Cut Bank Pioneer Press* on March 5, 1943. The account gave additional details about the crash. The airplane landed wheels-up on a gravel road. The farm house that was barely missed belonged to Willis Snead. "The plane was considerably damaged

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Salina Tower to Lt. Knaphus: | Flash your landing lights and we'll see if we can locate you. |
| Lt. Knaphus :                | I'm flashing my passing lights now.                           |
| Salina Tower :               | We do not see you.  |
| Lt. Knaphus :                | I'll try flashing my Aldus lamp.                              |
| Salina Tower :               | We still do not see you.                                      |
| Lt. Knaphus :                | I'm coming down anyway.                                       |

but was wholly intact. The front edge of the wings was dented by the fence posts, all the propeller blades were bent, the belly gun turret was torn off, a fence post went through the nose and another through the side of the cabin, and there was some damage to the back edge of the wings. Skippy, the crew's mascot, a small black and white dog, was the only near casualty. He was standing where one of the fence posts went through the cabin but was not injured. The members of the crew said there wasn't even a bump when the plane landed." The crew stayed six days in Braymer and was treated royally by the local citizenry. Skippy was owned by Natalie Edkins of Cut Bank,<sup>67</sup> but was taken overseas by Lt. Spinning as the crew's mascot, and had a notable combat tour as "3rd Lt. Skippy." The airplane was dismantled, hauled to St. Joseph, Missouri, repaired and later put back into service.<sup>68</sup>

That same night Lt. Arval L. Streadback, also of the 429th Squadron, had engine trouble and was forced to land at Atlanta, Georgia. After minor repairs were made, he flew to Indianapolis, Indiana. The next evening on the return trip to Kearney, engine trouble developed again, forcing a landing at Scott Field, Belleville, Illinois, for an engine change. The crew and plane remained there for two weeks.<sup>69</sup>

Col. Lauer returned to Kearney February 20, and to accounts of the diversions and fates of his crews and airplanes. Later he called a meeting of the officers in the base theater to talk, among other things, about the pending deployment and to read a letter from the Commander of Orlando Air Base to Gen. Olds, who in turn endorsed it to Col. Lauer. The letter from Orlando contained a litany of infractions committed by Group personnel during their stay. These included failure to return automobiles checked out from the base motor pool, parking aircraft so as to interfere with ground traffic, practice bombs being unloaded and left along the parking ramp, and unauthorized withdrawals from base supply. The letter concluded with the comment that throughout the period the Group Commander could not be located! The endorsement from Gen. Olds was a terse and emphatic confirmation of his verbal order — get your Group together and get overseas.

This history recounts only a few of the buzzings, stuttings, scroungings, and other high jinks of the Group during training and deployment. Few of these escapades were ever a matter of record. Instead they were secreted away in people's memories to be revealed only after time distanced them from official action. In retrospect such antics seem inane and amateurish. In some cases they were, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the post-WW II period. A system of redundant controls and strictest military discipline was imposed around post-

war, high-tech, costly air war machines, many of which singly carried mega-ton weapons whose use or misuse had dire implications of international proportions. But the early period of WW II was a heady time. Farm boys, soda jerks and students made quantum leaps from obscurity to near-celebrity status in the cockpits of the latest and best airplanes the nation had ever produced. Their rise was well publicized in military press releases to home town newspapers. Relatives and friends bask in their reflected stardom. For many, their earliest exposure to aviation was a visit from some flamboyant barnstormer who buzzed the countryside to scare up enough pasture-launched customers to buy fuel to get to and promote the next show. The latter day aviators were not only given much classier planes for their version of barnstorming but were paid handsomely for their fun.

The rush of mobilization was accompanied by an aerial laissez faire that beckoned temptingly and temptation frequently won out over reason. New groups were forming rapidly and there weren't enough experienced military professionals to assure control and discipline. Gen. LeMay faced this laissez faire phenomena. As a young commander of the 305th Bomb Group, LeMay earned his vulgar nickname of "Iron Ass" when he imposed the discipline designed to create a better military perspective and commitment to mission. But he lamented the task of turning gas station attendants and farmers into disciplined airmen.<sup>70</sup>

These antics were the manifestation of a uniquely American freedom of spirit and self-initiative. In the long run the aversion to conformity and the freedoms inherent in a democratic society nurture an indispensable personal initiative that takes over when the unforeseen invalidates the best made plans of battle and wars. It was this spirit that averted an ultimate disaster at Omaha Beach. It is the spirit that impels heroes, large and small, to rise to the occasion. It brought air crews home against insurmountable odds. It made aces out of former aviation novices. It made saviors out of doctors and nurses in field hospitals short of supplies and simple medical amenities. It led ground crews to mend broken planes in the barren desert when there weren't any parts. It found supplies when supplies didn't exist. It created the means when the ends were imperative.

On February 22, Col. Lauer flew his airplane to Tinker Army Air Depot, Oklahoma for repairs and modifications. The Commander at Tinker was a personal friend of Lauer's and agreed to give priority to the work. Navigator Koller was left to shepherd the airplane through the process. He had a three-ball-socket plastic nose put on the plane together with two .30 caliber machine guns. Racks for ten one-hundred-round ammu-



nitration cans were mounted in the nose section convenient to the guns. In addition, he had a B-3 gyro-stabilized driftmeter installed at the navigator's station. The driftmeter could be and was later used as a back-up bombsight. It proved valuable in flying for bearings and land fall across the Mediterranean and in hitting over water and coastal initial points. These modifications improved the defensive fire power and enhanced the navigation and bombing capability of the Commander's airplane.

Special Order No. 30, March 4, 1943, Kearney Army Air Base, ordered the 2nd Bomb Group flight echelon to Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, the port of aerial embarkation. There was no plan or effort to deploy as a Group. Aircraft commanders were on their own to complete preparations as soon as possible, get to Morrison Field, and go overseas.

Preparation for deployment was not always a simple matter. Lt. Delbert E. Resta, 96th Squadron, left Kearney March 9 for Morrison Field. Air crews were told that in case of aircraft mechanical problems, and having a choice, they should land at an Army depot. Depots were more likely to have the wherewithal to make quality and timely repairs. Lt. Resta experienced an engine failure on his new B-17F and landed at the Mobile Army Depot, Alabama. Mobile was operating on three eight-hour shifts, twenty-four hours a day. Despite this and a Number 1 overseas priority, it took eleven days to replace the failed engine. Even considering that depots were required to comply with all outstanding technical orders, eleven days was an inordinate amount of time. It was a new airplane and there should have been little other than the engine to contend with. At one point the crew learned that the aircraft sat on the ramp for three days because of a bureaucratic foul-up. The Maintenance status board showed the aircraft repaired and transferred to Flight Test. Flight Test had no record of receiving the plane from Maintenance. Once a crew member checking on the status of the airplane happened upon two depot employees, a male and a female, engaged in a little hanky-panky in the rear of the nose sec-

tion. Their excuse for being there was to test check a heated suit outlet.

The plane was finally ready on March 20 and the crew departed for Morrison Field. They had barely flown out of sight of Mobile when the new engine failed. Reluctantly, Lt. Resta returned to Mobile. The logged flying time was one hour. Metal filings were found in the oil sump and in the impeller section of the engine. Such experiences with Studebaker engines led to facetious claims by aircrew members that engine tolerances were so poor that pistons frequently changed holes. It was another five days before the airplane was ready for its third try for Morrison. Later air crews would marvel at how Group field maintenance crews, working through the night if necessary, in the open and in the desert, could change a failed or shot-out engine and have the aircraft test flown and ready for combat the next day or the day following.

When Lt. Resta did fly successfully to Morrison Field, it was without his navigator. The crew navigator, who had gone through all four phases of training, had openly vowed he would not go to combat. During the lengthy stay in Mobile, he fortuitously came down with a bad cold and congestion. The base flight surgeon grounded him, saying that flight above 3,000 feet risked rupturing his ear drums. In April the navigator was transferred from the 2nd Bomb Group to the 22nd Ferrying Command. At Morrison, Lt. Resta reported his need for a navigator. A couple hours later, 2nd Lt. Floyd J. Morris, Jr., came to Lt. Resta's room to report as the new navigator. Asked how much over-water navigation he had, Lt. Morris sheepishly confided he had never been over water. Morris had been assigned to the 429th Squadron but was displaced from his crew for the deployment. Subsequently he was transferred to the 96th Squadron and became the permanent navigator on Resta's crew.<sup>71</sup> At ten o'clock the next night, March 27, Resta and crew took off on their transoceanic trip with a heavily loaded aircraft, a new navigator, and haunting doubts about a newly installed engine. They made the trip safely after two unsettling

experiences for relatively new aviators. Going through the inter-tropical front over the south Atlantic in the middle of the night, they encountered a frightening but harmless attack of Saint Elmo's fire. Long tongues of flame arced around the rotation plane of the propellers and trailed back toward the wings. A miniature lightning storm sent jagged streaks of blue-white "strikes" up and down the cockpit windscreens. The whole airplane was enveloped in an eerie glow that lit the cockpit to near-daylight intensity. Radios crackled but no harm was done. The fight was fifty minutes past the ETA and still no landfall. Fuel supplies were dwindling and ditching seemed very much in prospect. Anxiety mounted sharply when a quick check of route navigation aids showed that the ocean currents were away from shore in the Dakar area. When landfall did come, coastal haze restricted visibility so much that location could not be determined. After repeated calls Dakar tower answered. With a description of the visible coast line, the tower confirmed the crew's location and directed a left turn up the coast to the field about fifteen minutes away. To everyone's relief, Resta made a straight-in approach and landed with the red lights glowing brightly on all four auxiliary fuel tanks.

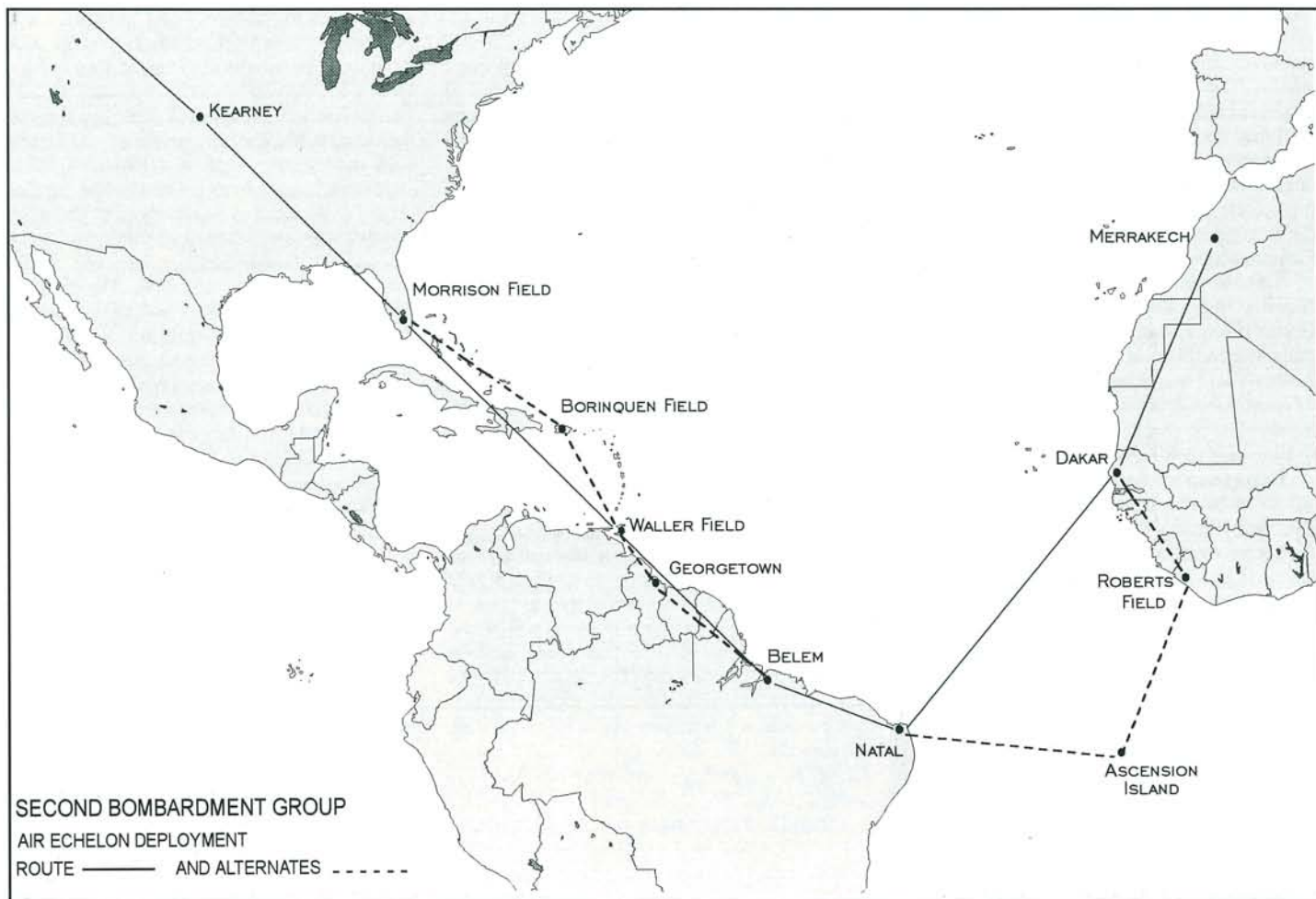
The last plane to deploy was that of Lt. Clark B. Gathercole of the 96th Squadron. While still in phase three training at Glasgow, he had the misfortune to ingest a bird or birds in an engine while following his element leader buzzing the Montana country side. The engine failed. Earlier his element leader had similarly ingested a pheasant in an engine and escaped with only a warning, but it was made clear that authorities would be serious about the ban on buzzing in the future. Lt. Gathercole returned to base with the indisputable evidence for the engine failure. He agreed to take the blame for the incident to protect his element leader from the consequences of a second infraction. Gathercole hopefully speculated that he might have hit some eagles but the birds turned out to be of the grouse family. Capt. Caruthers, his Squadron Commander, grounded him for thirty days, took his crew for deployment and left him at Glasgow to ship over with the ground echelon. (The January 8, 1942 issue of the 96th Squadron *Red Devil News*, Glasgow, Montana, reported that the airplane involved in this, and probably other buzzings, had a rather indelicate name on its nose. Someone ordered the name removed when it became an embarrassment during a public relations display at Great Falls. After the Gathercole incident the plane was re-christened "Gather — Burd.")

Lt. Gathercole was ordered to Kearney on February 22 after the two plane crashes and the loss of the Knaphus crew on the night of February 18. He was given a make-up flight crew and five passengers. His copilot was 2nd Lt. Roy S. Kline of the 429th Squadron. The navigator was 1st Lt. Kemp F. Martin from the 20th Squadron. The passengers were: 2nd Lt. Robert K. Oliver, Group weather officer; M/Sgt. Bernard B. Cohen, line chief; S/Sgt. Robert D. Fillingame; a communications NCO — both of the 20th Squadron — and two NCOs from Group Headquarters, M/Sgt. George F. Seimer, and Sgt. Albert J. Aboud.<sup>72</sup> Navigator Martin had been requisitioned to replace the navigator on Lt. Layfield's crew killed in the December 30, 1942



The re-named "Gather-Burd," Glasgow, Montana. (Courtesy of J. Harris via B. Hanson)





crash at Musselshell, Montana. Lt. Martin arrived at Great Falls in early January. Because of bad weather and resultant training schedule problems, he had never flown a training mission with the Group until the trip to Morrison Field with Lt. Gathercole.<sup>73</sup>

The two February 18 crashes required rush requisitions for replacement aircraft. Whether for this reason, or because there was no bombardier on the make-up crew, Lt. Gathercole arrived at Morrison Field in an airplane without a bombsight. The rush to solve this requirement spun a web of waste and confusion. Unknown to Lt. Gathercole and apparently to each other, both Morrison Field Operations and Supply became involved in finding a bombsight. One was found at Mobile Depot. Either Morrison Operations or Supply ordered the sight shipped to Morrison while the other sent Gathercole to Mobile. Gathercole stayed in Mobile for five days before returning to Morrison, only to find that the bombsight was on its way back to Mobile. Unbelievably, this process repeated itself one and half more times! In a spasm of frustration the Morrison Field Commander ordered Gathercole back to Mobile for the third time with explicit instructions not to return until the bombsight had been mated to the aircraft. Three weeks were consumed in this process.<sup>74</sup> Gathercole departed from Morrison Field on April 1, 1943 and arrived at Marrakech on April 13.<sup>75</sup>

At Morrison Field crews were issued deployment kits and supplies. These included a water-

tight, floatable, survival kit about the size of a footlocker. In addition to spare parts, tools, other essential gear, records and personal baggage, deploying aircraft were used for opportune airlift of priority cargo and mail. Air crews did personal provisioning against imagined war-zone scarcities by squirreling away daily necessities and favorite goodies in the nooks and crannies of the airplanes. Besides food, candy, gum, tobacco and toiletries, there was at least one ball turret full of liquor and two dogs in the casual cargo. One dog was that of Lt. Stoeger, "Duffy McDuff," a cocker spaniel, but Duffy was never meant for combat. He suffered the indignity of being ordered out of mess halls and officer's clubs en route, he broke a leg, got distemper and came to an untimely end at Marrakech. By that time he had logged forty hours in a B-17. In a post-war video Stoeger says that Duffy was buried in Marrakech with full military honors and was awarded one of Stoeger's air medals, posthumously. The other dog was Skippy, the survivor of Lt. Spinning's crash at Braymer, Missouri.

Deploying aircraft were equipped with bomb bay fuel tanks adding 840 gallons of fuel to the normal 2,750 gallons that extended flying time to approximately 15 hours. One officer in the crew was designated as the "per diem" officer. He was given a bag of money, instructions and authorization for paying per diem to the crew, and purchasing essential services and supplies should that become necessary.

Operations Order Number 126, March 9,

1943, Headquarters 15th Ferrying Group, Caribbean Wing ATC, Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, authorized and directed the deployment of the original thirty eight crews and aircraft of the Group. (Appendix 16) The assigned destination was Army Air Force General Depot No. 1, La Senia, North Africa. La Senia Depot with an airfield, was south of Oran, Algeria. Like many plans at the time, this was a tenuous one given the fluid situation of the war in North Africa. The Group was never based at La Senia.

While crews were given route orientation briefings, they did not know their ultimate destination at time of take off from Morrison Field. They were given a sealed manila envelope, which contained Operations Order 126 among other things, with instructions not to open it until two hours into the flight. The prescribed route was from West Palm Beach to Waller Field, Trinidad; Belem, Brazil; Natal, Brazil; and then either to Ascension Island in the mid-south Atlantic or if winds were favorable, direct to Dakar, Senegal in French West Africa. The Group was to gather at Marrakech, French Morocco. Some pilots varied from the prescribed route because of weather, fuel or safety considerations. Several crews elected to refuel at Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico to have the added comfort of full tanks as they headed down the chain of Caribbean islands toward Trinidad. Some refueled at Georgetown, British Guyana.

Col. Lauer was the first of the Group to de-



part the U.S. He took off from Morrison Field on March 10 and flew the prescribed route — Morrison to Waller, Waller to Belem, and Belem to Natal. The second day out he chose to fly over, rather than through, the inter-tropical front between Waller and Belem, topping the front on oxygen at 24,000 feet. Lauer opted for Ascension Island when favorable winds for a direct flight to Dakar did not materialize after two days of waiting in Natal. The tropical heat and humidity of Brazil were oppressive after a northern winter of training.

Ascension Island was the cause of some anxiety among the air crews. It was a volcanic dot in a vast ocean — a tiny, thirty-four square mile proving ground for even the best of navigators. The thought of missing it caused several crews to risk the winds on the long, direct flight to Dakar, knowing they had a whole continent for a target. Ascension provided two other gnawing concerns. There were persistent rumors that German submarines surfaced and transmitted a bogus radio homing signal to draw aircraft off course into watery oblivion. No 2nd Bombardment Group crews experienced this ruse. The other concern had much less serious potential. The runway at Ascension had a hump in it. Pilots had to overcome the tendency of the airplane to leave the ground prematurely as it topped the hump on takeoff. Aside from being a mid-ocean refueling stop, Ascension had little to recommend it.

From Ascension Lauer flew to Roberts Field, Liberia. While there an Air Transport Command C-54 taxied into the nose of a 2nd Bomb Group B-17. Lauer sent a message to his friend the Commander of ATC recommending that the errant pilot be grounded. The next day he flew to Dakar experiencing some engine problems on the way that forced a day's delay for repairs. He arrived at Marrakech, French Morocco, late in the afternoon March 19, 1943. The advance party had done much to prepare for the Group's arrival. The thirty-eight Group airplanes and crews straggled in until April 13. According to Lauer, the 2nd was the first combat unit to deploy overseas without the loss of a single aircraft.

## MARRAKECH, FRENCH MOROCCO

The stay at Marrakech was longer than planned but it proved to be a provident delay. The time was filled with much needed additional Group training missions, and Col. Lauer was relieved and replaced by a seasoned combat veteran. Part of the delay was to await arrival of straggling air crews and part was for want of a forward airfield. Shortly after the Group began arriving, Brig. Gen. Joseph K. Cannon, Commander-in-Chief, Northwest African Training Command, paid a visit and advised that the Group's intended air base wasn't ready.

The originally assigned base at La Senia south of Oran was now out of the question. This general area, including Casablanca, was the main supply route, outside of that via the Mediterranean, for supporting the Allied North African campaign. "A really gorgeous congestion developed" when the rush of Air Corps contingents following the invasion swelled requirements to three times available capacity.<sup>76</sup> Before the invasion it was planned that the Twelfth Air Force

would be deployed mainly in the western area of Algeria. Very early Gen. Doolittle, the Commander, saw his responsibilities as getting his striking forces into eastern Algeria and in Tunisia to support the North African campaign and to protect the lines of communication through Gibraltar. He planned to break up the vast North African area into districts and create composite forces of both bombers and fighters to be used as circumstances dictated. His plans were realized when Constantine, Algeria, was approved as the headquarters for his bomber command. As the North African campaign evolved, a group of bases on the Constantine plateau served to support conclusion of the Tunisian campaign and the Sicilian campaign that followed.<sup>77</sup> One such base was at Navarin, south and west of Constantine. The base was occupied by the 99th Bomb Group. A second runway was under construction for use by the 2nd Bomb Group, but wasn't completed.

First Group arrivals at Marrakech were billeted in a local sports stadium, except field grade officers who stayed at the De la Mamounia Hotel. Later a tent camp was set up in an olive grove near the airfield. Training in bombing, gunnery, and formation practice resumed as soon as crews arrived. Training missions were flown regularly as weather permitted. These were mostly local area flights of less than four hours duration. On April 5 Col. Lauer took his officer flight crew to Chateaudun du Rhuml, Algeria, the 97th Bomb Group base. The crew flew as observers with the 97th Group on a combat mission against Trapani, Sicily. On the return trip Col. Lauer flew over the base at Navarin. He made two low-level passes over the runway under construction. On the second pass, when it appeared he might land, he was frantically waved off by people on the ground. Construction and spring rains kept the runway unserviceable. Following their Commander's example, the Squadron Commanders and their staff air crews also went to combat units and flew missions as observers.

The stay at Marrakech was during part of the spring rainy season. It wasn't long before the olive grove camp was a sloshy mess. Col. Lauer strongly suggested that some of his enterprising officers could surely find some relief from the mud. Capt. Philip Neal, Assistant Group Operations Officer, knew of a large supply dump at Mogador on the Atlantic Coast seventy miles from Marrakech. Capt. Neal suggested to Maj. Clapp that he take a truck, a requisition, and a couple of people and visit the dump. Maj. Clapp approved. Neal set off in the truck with Lt. Koller and Lt. Taylor, the Group Bombardier. To their surprise and delight, they found piles of dunnage from the tons of supplies and equipment shipped to the Casablanca area. Wood was a scarce and prized commodity. The dump was lightly manned. While Capt. Neal was in the office clearing his requisition, Koller and Taylor scouted the dump. They found a new truck park full of 2 1/2 ton trucks with keys in the ignitions and full gas tanks. A quick check of the requisition showed it called for dunnage without specifying an amount. The two lieutenants quickly "liberated" two trucks from the park. The three officers filled the three trucks with dunnage. The lieutenants removed their caps and insignia to appear more like regular truck drivers. Capt. Neal led his little



L to R: 2nd Lt. Robert K. Oliver, Group Weather Officer and 2nd Lt. Roy S. Kline, CP, in the Marrakech, Morocco olive grove camp. Lt. Kline was KIA July 8, 1943 on mission 37 to Gerbini, Sicily. (Courtesy of K. Martin)

convoy through a different perimeter gate than they used on entering, surrendered a copy of the requisition to the guard and gestured to the two extra trucks with the comment, "They're with me." The convoy was cleared and they drove back to Marrakech without incident. They arrived after dark but had no trouble finding takers for their cargo. Most of it was used for tent flooring. The two extra trucks were turned over to Maj. Clapp, who somehow got them to Chateaudun du Rhumel, the Group's first operational base. To the knowledge of those involved, the Group Headquarters continued to have two extra trucks. When inspectors visited, the trucks would temporarily become part of the flightline fleet.

While at Marrakech, surplus B-17D and E model aircraft from the 19th Bomb Group had been flown in from India and parked on the air-drome awaiting further movement back to the U.S. These planes were quietly cannibalized of their armor plate and some machine guns. Several 2nd Bomb Group aircraft sprouted nose modifications with a single .50 caliber machine gun firing forward.

On or just prior to April 20, Gen. Cannon returned to Marrakech, interviewed Col. Lauer and relieved him. Lauer was an alcoholic. Following his binge at Orlando and his meeting with Gen. Olds, Lauer had "gone on the wagon." His self-control effort succeeded until someone placed or left a bottle of liquor in his room at the De la Moumonia Hotel. The source and purpose of this "gift" are a mystery. Regardless, Lauer succumbed. He was reduced to lieutenant colonel and transferred to Cannon's Northwest Africa Training Command. Eight months later he was promoted back to colonel and appointed Commander of the 99th Bomb Group. He commanded the Group in Italy from February 15, until sometime in July, 1944.

At the time Col. Lauer was relieved, a theater evaluation team, headed by Lt. Col. Joseph A. Thomas, was in the process of determining the Group's combat readiness. Gen. Cannon immediately appointed Thomas as Lauer's successor. The effective date of the change in com-



manders was April 20, 1943. Lt. Col. Thomas was a former commander of the 342nd Squadron of the 97th Bombardment Group, and a seasoned combat veteran with thirty-three missions and 133 combat hours. Like Lauer, he too had been a pre-war member of the 2nd Bombardment Group.

On April 22 some of the air echelon flew to the base at Navarin, Algeria. Weather and field conditions there were so miserable that crews spent most of two days and the nights in their airplanes. It was apparent that drainage and the condition of the second runway were unsuitable for operation of another group. The Group was ordered to Chateaudun du Rhum some twenty miles away. The field there was on higher ground and fully serviceable. The Group shared the base with the 97th Group. By April 27 the Group air echelon, except for four crews, together with the Headquarters, 20th and 49th Squadrons and three officers and one hundred enlisted men of the 96th Squadron were in place at Chateaudun, anticipating the Group's first combat mission.

### GROUND ECHELON DEPLOYMENT

The ground echelon and a few air crew members, displaced by staff personnel, started moving by rail March 13 from Montana to Camp Kilmer, New Brunswick, New Jersey for deployment. The serious shortage of seaworthy shipping capacity made deployment of Group personnel a prolonged, hodgepodge affair. Starting April 1, they embarked at various dates and in an assortment of vessels from New York for North Africa. Some had the good fortune to make the trip in as few as nine days in fast, unescorted vessels. A few others took as long as forty-five days to complete the trip. Group members were scattered among fourteen different ships. Two ships sailed unescorted. The remaining twelve made passage in five large convoys. Group personnel were transported in four large contingents and ten small detachments. The latter were composed primarily of one officer and three enlisted men assigned to cargo security duties. This dispersion was more happenstance than a deliberate attempt to diversify risk. One ship was sunk in a collision with a friendly vessel in U.S. coastal waters. Engine and steering gear problems plagued one ship. Another lost its life boats in a storm and returned to port. A U-boat struck one convoy and threatened another. Still, everyone arrived safely in Africa.

The first and largest movement of personnel departed Great Falls by troop train at 5:00 P.M. March 13, 1943, in a snow storm. They caught up with sunny skies in Wyoming that lasted to Ohio where they encountered heavy rains. It was fair weather again from Pennsylvania to New Jersey. They arrived at Camp Kilmer on March 17.<sup>78</sup>

429th Squadron personnel left March 13 from Lewiston. The 96th Squadron didn't depart Glasgow until March 14; their train was consolidated with that of the 429th in Chicago. The two squadrons reached Kilmer on March 18.<sup>79</sup>

A group of eighteen newly assigned radio operators and technicians reported to Great Falls after the ground echelon had departed. After a few days they received orders, boarded a pas-

senger train, and caught up with the Group at Kilmer on March 22. Their trip across the country in Pullman cars and private compartments — thanks to a generous conductor, and with liveried waiters in a dining car replete with white linens and silver — was the last government-furnished luxury they would enjoy for many months to come.<sup>80</sup>

All troops were confined to the base upon arrival at Kilmer until outfitted according to Army Tables of Organization and Table of Allowances. Capt. McQueston, Group Adjutant, was in command. Issued items included impregnated gas-resisting clothing — which incidentally was taken away overseas — clothing, bedding, small arms, and mosquito netting. Training resumed including more close-order drill; range practice; calisthenics and obstacle courses; hikes and marches; training and orientation films; security measures; and practice in pitching tents. William G. Covell, a radio specialist and member of the group of 18 who had the passenger train ride across the country, recalls time and preparation at Kilmer: “. . . we were issued still more clothing and equipment. Each man got another pair of shoes (a total of three pair), a steel helmet with plastic liner, a shelter half, two mattress covers, extra socks, extra underwear, knitted gloves and a little knitted cap. One afternoon, we lined up and were issued rifles — the 30-06 Springfield, model 1903. In spite of the model year, these were new guns, covered with cosmoline and right out of the packing cases. . . We had been issued gas masks months before and had carried those awkward things all over the country. Finally, each man was given a stencil with his name and serial number to paint in white on each dark blue barracks bag.<sup>81</sup>

One day, I was trucked to the rifle range at Ft. Dix with others from the 2nd Bomb Group where I fired at targets and was given a quick course on how to shoot the 30-06 Springfield rifle. This gun was not new to me though because my Dad had brought one home from the Army (a 1917 model) and had shown me how to handle it, disassemble it, and shoot it. I also knew that the gun has quite a kick and if you don't hold it correctly, it will knock you on your \_ \_ \_ and if you don't keep your thumb out of the way, it will give you a bloody nose. I enjoyed the afternoon of shooting but for the men who had never fired a 30-06 before, the hard kick and ear-splitting crack were quite a surprise.”<sup>82</sup>

The 96th Squadron was the first unit to complete deployment preparations. Twelve-hour passes were issued. New York City was only thirty miles away and many members of the Group enjoyed the sights and numerous attractions of the city. Others were able to visit their homes or to meet families in the area.<sup>83</sup>

Deployment occurred as transportation became available. The first and largest contingent, under McQueston — composed of Group Headquarters personnel, all of the 20th and 49th Squadrons and 3 officers and 100 enlisted men of the 96th Squadron — departed New York April 1, 1943 on the S.S. *Monterey*. The *Monterey* went unescorted and arrived in Casablanca on April 12. They experienced no mishaps and no enemy sightings or encounters.<sup>84</sup>

The second contingent of 8 officers of the 429th Squadron and 125 enlisted men of the 96th

Squadron, with Lt. Joseph M. McCoid in command, sailed from New York April 4 on the Landing Ship Tank, (LST) No. 358 in a near sixty-ship convoy.<sup>85</sup> The convoy was made up mostly of LSTs, about 35, 15 other ships and a six-destroyer escort. The other ships included an oil tanker, two sea-going tugs, a converted yacht, and several overage, rust-bucket freighters. The convoy steamed in five parallel columns of nine or ten ships per column. The destroyers took up defensive positions in front, rear, and sides of the convoy. The convoy went by way of Bermuda and docked at Port Lyautey, French Morocco, on April 30 after 26 tedious days. The shallow draft, blunt-nosed LST was an ocean-going vessel about the size of a small freighter. Designed to run up on shore and disgorge tanks and other amphibious assault cargo, it was a lumbering vessel that butted its blunt nose into the waves with shuddering impacts. Top speed was about 10 knots. The LST had three 20 mm. gun turrets forward, one in the center of the bow and one each on the port and starboard sides. There were three larger gun turrets aft, two 40 mm. turrets atop the superstructure behind the bridge, and one 5-inch gun on the fantail.<sup>86</sup>

It took four days to reach Bermuda. The convoy cruised at about five knots and its zigzag course extended route distances. It remained in Bermuda three days during which there was a bad storm trapping many men, on shore pass, overnight in the city. The convoy departed Bermuda April 11 and within a few hours was joined by another one of about fifty LSIs (Land Ship Infantry). This swelled the convoy to over 100 ships.

Duty rosters were used extensively on these troop movements. They helped to ease the burden on overloaded ship crews, made the troops more self-sufficient, and kept them occupied. One such roster was for twenty-four-hour watches in four-hour tours in the gun turrets. Seasickness was a prevalent malady in rough seas. It was no respecter of time, place, or duty. William G. Covell, then a corporal, was on the gun watch duty roster for most of the trip. He was in the 40mm. gun turret atop the bridge superstructure one night when he became ill. To get to the ship's rail he had to go down a ladder on the side of the superstructure to the main deck and cross about eight feet of deck to the rail. He tells what happened: “It was another dark and stormy night. The LST was rolling and pitching for all she was worth. I got to the edge of the superstructure, turned around, and started down the ladder. I remember that on the way down, I would be laying on the ladder when the ship rolled one way and hanging from the ladder when it rolled the other way. I got to the bottom, already starting to retch, let go, and headed for the rail just as the ship took a roll in that direction. The deck tilted and I went skittering towards the edge of the deck. I put out my arms to catch the rail. I couldn't see it but knew about where it should be. However, where I hit the rail, instead of a solid metal pipe which would have caught me across the chest, there was a piece of stranded wire cable (this was a section that was removed when the ship was in port) and the cable was slack! The cable caught me at about my belt buckle and suddenly I found myself doing a balancing act, halfway over the rail! I hung there for what seemed like a year, feet thrashing on



one side, arms waving on the other. Somehow, I got my feet back down on the deck and my hands on the cable and then I was OK. ....The close call scared me so much I was no longer sick."<sup>87</sup> Had Covell gone overboard with no witnesses in the dark of night into a thrashing, stormy sea, there was little likelihood that he would have been missed or found in time.

Covell relates two other incidents on the trip: "One morning, as I was leaning on the rail watching the ocean and the ships in the convoy, one of the escorts picked up a signal or saw something that it didn't like. I happened to be watching this destroyer when she suddenly poured on the coal, made a sharp turn and headed towards the convoy at full speed. About halfway to our location, she heeled into another sharp turn, and then I saw the depth charges start to roll off the stern. There was a delay of several seconds; then the sea erupted in a huge burst of water and foam and there was a series of muted explosions which I could feel through the ship's deck. Even as the charges exploded, the destroyer was coming around in a 180-degree turn to cross over the same spot, and again the depth charges rolled off the stern. The ocean churned again and again and each time I could feel the vibration and hear the rumble of the explosions. Now the destroyer began a slow criss-cross of the area, looking for all the world like a old hound dog trying to sniff out a rabbit track. But whatever triggered the attack was gone. Meanwhile, all the ships in the convoy had gone to general quarters and all the crews stood by, ready to run or fight. Nothing more happened. . ."<sup>88</sup>

Another time Covell was in his bunk when he heard a lot of commotion on the deck, claxons going off and men shouting. He hurried to the deck. "...I saw the LST next to us on the port side coming straight at the side of our ship! Sailors were running around on both LSTs, trying to get fenders over the sides (which was rather like trying to stop an elephant with a fly swatter) and making other preparations for a collision. The other ship was churning up the water as she went hard astern, and our LST was turning as fast as she could to starboard. Both ships were sounding their claxons." Fortunately the ships missed by a few yards. The near collision was caused by failure of the steering gear on the other ship.<sup>89</sup>

Strict freshwater rationing was in effect on LST 358 for the trip. There were large freshwater tanks on the deck which obviously were destined for someone ashore. When the convoy reached Africa, the channel leading to port was so shallow that the freshwater had to be pumped overboard to reduce the ship's draft. The ship's complement was treated to a freshwater splurge before completion of the pumping.<sup>90</sup>

The third contingent of 62 men from the 429th Squadron commanded by Capt. William M. Hall, Squadron Flight Surgeon, departed April 12 in a convoy aboard the *Edmund Rutledge*, a Liberty ship, and arrived in Africa on May 5.

The fourth contingent left April 15 on the *S.S. Mariposa* and steamed without escort arriving ahead of both the second and third contingents that had left earlier. Lt. Evan E. Stauffer, 429th Adjutant, was in command of the 2 officers and 199 men from the 96th Squadron. The *Mariposa* completed the trip in record time of nine days without incident, arriving April 24.<sup>91</sup>

The 96th Squadron had the most members assigned to cargo security duty. 2nd Lt. Leroy Brown, a copilot, and 3 men were detached to the Liberty Ship, *William O. Mosley*. They left New York April 1 in a forty-ship convoy and arrived in Africa on April 19.

Lt. Scheuermann and three men left Hampton Roads, Virginia, on April 1 in an old cargo ship, the *Robin Adair*, sailed unescorted to Bermuda, and arrived April 4. There it took on the cargo of a damaged ship, missed one convoy because of engine trouble, and finally left Bermuda May 1 in a large convoy, arriving in Africa May 16 after forty-five days.<sup>92</sup>

Eleven (11) officers and 15 men were also detached to Hampton Roads on April 2. About a week later, 6 of the officers boarded the United Fruit Company ship, *Metapan*. They sailed to New York and departed on April 14 in a convoy of about sixty ships, proceeding via Bermuda to Africa, and arrived on May 4. Lt. Jack K. Moore described the unusually sumptuous accommodations aboard the *Metapan*. The ship had refrigerated holds, comfortable passenger cabins, a promenade deck, game room and a music room. The ship's captain held stubbornly to the tradition of invited guests dining each night at his table. The Air Corps Officers were his permanent guests throughout the trip. Dining was gracious and formal with fine food, good drinks, linens, china, silver, and crystal. There was time and the means for recreation — cards, shuffleboard and a piano. They were also witnesses to some unscheduled excitement: one of the convoy tankers was torpedoed. The *Metapan* passengers watched the fire works, the destroyers dropping depth charges in their hunt for the U-boat, and other ships rescuing the crew of the tanker.<sup>93</sup>

The remaining 5 officers of the group of 11 and the 15 enlisted men were split into five detachments and assigned to cargo security on five Liberty ships — the *Matthew T. Goldsborough*, the *John Page*, the *Champ Clark*, the *Halstead*, and the *Kelly*. The ships proceeded individually from Hampton Roads to New York. They all departed New York April 14 and made the trip to Africa in the same convoy as the *Metapan*.

Lt. Miller and 3 men were assigned to the Liberty ship *William S. Tilgham*. They left Hampton Roads on March 25, arrived in New York March 27, and left New York in a large convoy on March 28. The *Tilgham* lost its life boats in a storm and returned to New York on March 31. It left New York the second time in the large convoy on April 14 and made the trip safely to Africa.

A detachment of cargo security people from the 429th Squadron had to survive the sinking of their first ship before getting to Africa. 2nd Lt. Henry A. Zremski, S/Sgt Donald V. Ring, Sgt. James E. Mahoney, and Cpl. Albert Gerstein boarded the *S.S. Luckenback* at Newport News on March 25. Sgt. Mahoney describes the incident: "About three o'clock in the afternoon of March 27th we cast off our ropes and were piloted away from the dock. We had barely dropped our pilot when two Navy barges almost rammed us. A few moments later, one of the barges again cut across our path, causing us to back-water. Our vessel then wandered around in the bay correcting its compasses, and at eight that night Lt.

Zremski informed us that we were proceeding to New York unescorted and in a total back-out. We three enlisted men were in a cabin to ourselves and we sat around talking or reading until 11:00 P.M., when we decided to retire. We followed the instructions of our officer and slept (went to bed) in our clothes, placing our life preservers where they would be handy and tried to sleep.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of 11:30 P.M., none of us had quite time enough to be asleep, we were aroused by a sudden jar. The vessel careened from one side to the other and then settled down to quivering like a bowl of jello. The general alarm sounded, so we snatched our preservers and dashed from the cabin. I was the last to leave.

Floating debris all aflame in water around us was the first sight that met my eyes. I heard a series of explosions and I saw another vessel falling to our rear in flames. I turned around to look for my shipmates and, not finding them, rushed to the lifeboat assigned to me earlier that day.

The men of the merchant marine and the sailors were standing by awaiting orders to abandon ship. It seemed that we were not going to sink, so I took stock of myself and discovered that I had come away without shoes. I hurried back to the cabin and, after a few anxious minutes, returned to the lifeboats completely clothed. I arrived just in time to hear the order to lower away. I climbed into a lifeboat and began to assist the men to lower the boat. The ship was beginning to list and we had a difficult time trying to reach the water level. Upon reaching the water we found that our lines were fouled; meanwhile the ship continued to list and seem to be turning over on its side. The other lifeboat had succeeded in getting free and was rowing away. Immediately there was a call for all with knives to start cutting away the ropes. I had no knife and seemed to think that I was in the way of the others, so I slipped overboard following the example of some of the sailors. I started to swim toward the receding lifeboat and realized that I could never catch up with them. I looked back and saw that my boat was now free, so I waited for it to come alongside and pulled myself aboard. Lt. Zremski was in the boat and later helped row it away. I had been in the water only about fifteen minutes, but it seemed longer at the time.

We rowed an erratic course and finally decided to rest alongside a buoy approximately 200 yards from the sinking vessel. The ship could be seen slowly submerging and turning over as it sunk. About half an hour later the hull arose in the air and then the next minute the ship was gone. The Coast Guard had arrived on the scene and were searching the waters for survivors. One hour later one of the cutters picked up our boat and, as we drew alongside threw us a line. We were hauled aboard and those of us who had been in the water were sent down to the engine room to dry out and to keep warm. All of us were tired and feeling rather blue, and we did look pretty bedraggled. One of the sailors called my attention to a cut over my eye; upon brushing it with my hand I found dried blood. I never knew when I received the scratch and I promptly forgot about it, because it did not seem to be very bad.



Two hours later we arrived at the Norfolk Naval Station where the Red Cross tried to supply us with dry clothes. First aid was given to those in need of it. After breakfast at the Navy mess, we were picked up by the port officers, who drove us to the Intelligence Section at Newport News for interrogation. We told our stories separately and were dismissed for examination by the Army Surgeon. He asked us a few questions and decided that all we needed was a little rest. We then returned to Camp Patrick Henry to be reequipped, having lost most of our equipment. Three weeks later we were assigned to another vessel, this time making the trip across successfully."<sup>94</sup>

All of the ground echelon had arrived in Africa by May 5 except Lt Scheuermann's cargo security detail, which didn't arrive until May 16. Considerable precautions were taken to keep departure dates and destinations secret. Troops were confined to bases prior to scheduled sailing dates. Few, if any, knew or learned of their destination until they docked. There was much speculation but little more. Officers commented that if the ship captains knew where they were going, they weren't saying. The warm weather, the clear skies and the white, cream and tiled buildings of Casablanca were a welcome surprise and relief for the arriving troops.

#### CASABLANCA

The first and largest contingent composed of Group Headquarters and the 20th and 49th Squad-

rons arrived April 12. They marched with full packs the five miles from the dock to their bivouac at Camp Don B. Passage. The camp was in the southern heights skirting Casablanca. It was a tent camp and the men were quartered in pyramidal tents — shades of Ephrata and a return to tent life that would be the standard accommodation throughout WW II. There were no cots so men slept on the ground. There was no lumber or material to make mosquito bars. Without protection, mosquito bites were generally universal. Water for both drinking and hygiene became a problem for lack of supply transport. Similarly, a shortage of food required reduction of the daily ration. Food supply was adequate for sustenance but continued hunger sapped morale.

The first contingent stayed only six days before moving by rail to Navarin, Algeria. The route took them from Casablanca northeast to Rabat, east to Meknes, French Morocco, then skirted the end of the Middle Atlas mountain range into Oran, Algeria. From there they paralleled the Mediterranean coast to Algiers and then east southeast to Navarin. The approximately 1,000 mile trip was made by French WW I vintage narrow gauge (40/8) railway. Some men were placed in cars on which animal dung lay inches deep on the floor and walls. The medical staff argued strongly that the cars should be cleaned but were overruled by the contingent commander. Regular stops for washing and latrine activity were not adhered to. It was catch as catch can. Sleeping was irregular and difficult. Several cooks were burned when a gas

stove blew up and one soldier cut his hand getting off the train. Needless to say cold C rations were far from satisfactory but probably necessary under the circumstances.<sup>95</sup> On Easter Sunday, April 25, the contingent arrived at Navarin. Navarin was in the northeast corner of Algeria, south of Contantine and about 100 miles from the Tunisian border. The contingent had to march eight miles to the base. Here they met up with elements of the air echelon that had arrived just a few days earlier. They immediately went about setting up camp. They experienced the same wretched conditions that had confined some of the air crews to their airplanes. The next morning, April 26, they received orders to move 20 miles to the north to Chateaudun du Rhuml. The following morning they were packed, loaded, and ready to convoy to Chateaudun. By April 27 all combat crews and airplanes were at Chateaudun except four. The Group flew its first mission the next day.<sup>96</sup>

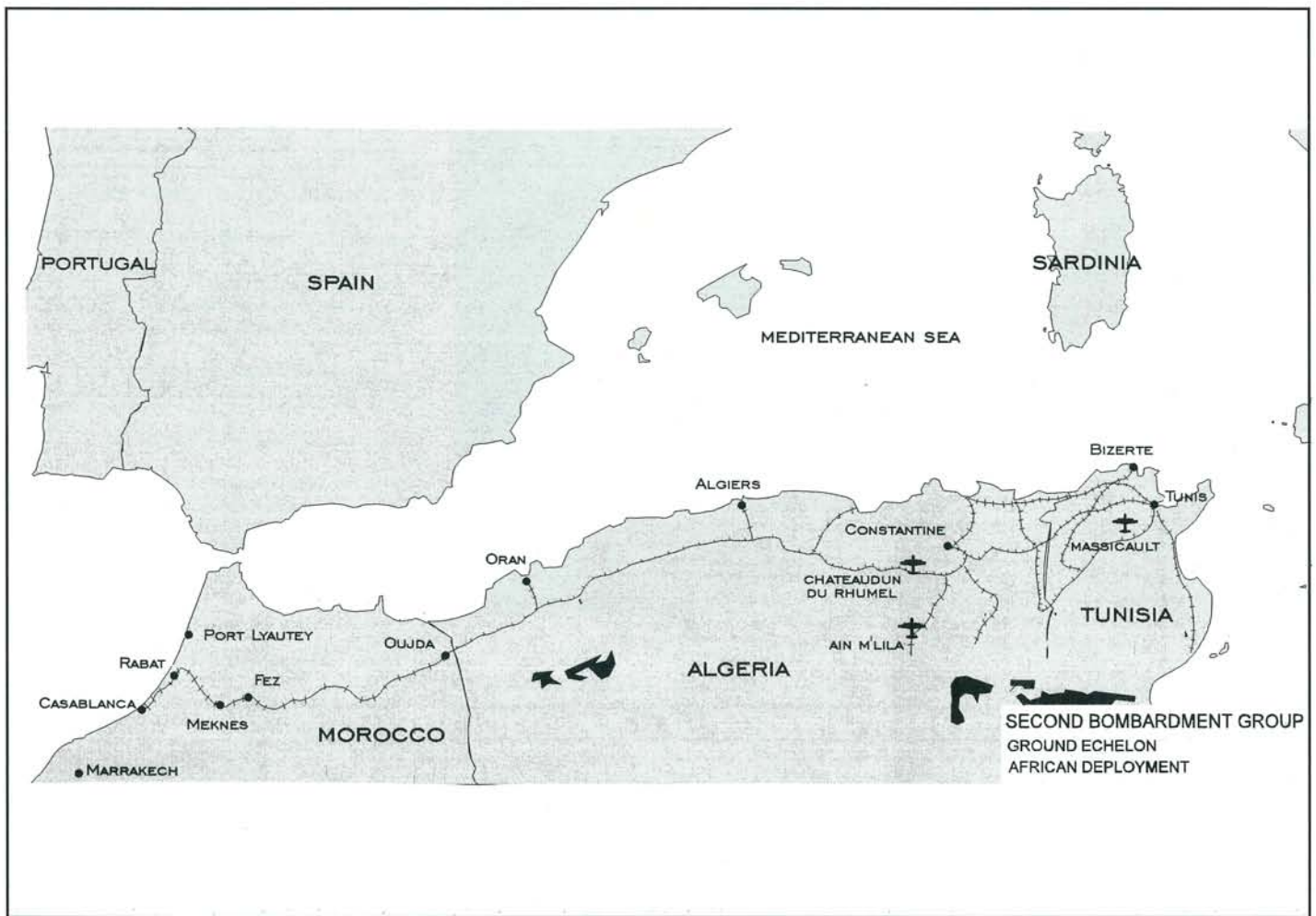
The second, third, and fourth contingents, which arrived in Africa from April 24 to May 5, stayed at Camp Passage until May 25. Those on LST 358 docked at Port Lyautey up the Sebou River north of Rabat-Sal'e. They were trucked the two-hour trip to the camp. The other two contingents docked at Casablanca and marched to the camp. The time at camp was used to assemble the vehicles, equipment and supplies to be used by the Group. Training was resumed including more close-order drill, calisthenics, sports, security measures, and study of the North African theater.

The longer stay at Camp Don B. Passage was



Unloading LST 358 at Port Lyautey, French Morocco. (Courtesy of the United States Army/W. Covell)





good preparation for transition to a Group camp. Except for tent shelter, conditions closely matched those of a battlefield encampment. C rations were the standard bill-of-fare. There was no electricity. Those without an issue flashlight were given one candle per tent. Water was still in short supply. Necessity imposed a valuable lesson in rationing — how to make do with one helmet full of water per day. Open area straddle slit-trench latrines were dug and rolls of toilet paper were mounted conveniently on stakes. These soon disappeared, forcing a system of check-out and check-in from the orderly room. It wasn't long until most tents had somehow arranged for their own private supply. A twenty-four-hour camp perimeter guard was mounted. One night a barrage of small arms fire erupted when a guard's challenge of movement in a nearby olive grove was answered by several shots. The assailants, quickly spooked into surrendering, were a few Quartermaster Corps soldiers who were partying in the grove. Fortunately no one was injured, but the offending troops were dressed down in no uncertain terms by the Provost Marshall who had been summoned.<sup>97</sup>

There was some relief from the daily camp routine. Troops were able to spend a little time enjoying the food, wares and sights of Casablanca and take a dip in the ocean and the very lucky got a hot bath at the Red Cross Canteen.

Lt. Jack Moore, who had traveled in the luxury of the refrigerated *Metapan*, remained on

board the ship for almost two weeks after docking, waiting for the ship to be unloaded. One day he had a visit from an officer friend, Lt. A. J. Tyborski, the 96th Squadron Mess Officer. Upon Lt. Moore's suggestion, Tyborski and two cooks returned the next day in a six-by-six truck with a requisition. They filled the truck with frozen meat, poultry, eggs, cheese, and canned goods from *Metapan's* cargo. Later, the process was repeated after Lt. Moore made friends with a British Royal Navy Lieutenant, a crew member on the French luxury liner *Louis Pasteur*. This time there were two trucks, and they were filled with Coca-Cola, candies, toiletries, cigarettes, and fresh fruit.<sup>98</sup> It isn't recorded who was the beneficiary of all this good food. Unit histories don't mention it or admit to having anything other than C-rations.

After several days of transferring cargo and equipment from the Casablanca docks to the railway freight yard and loading it on flatbed cars, the order was given to prepare to move out. On May 25 the Group marched in full gear the two miles to the rail yard. The train was the same French WW I vintage as that was used by the first contingent a month earlier. Behind the locomotive was one passenger car for officers, followed by boxcars for enlisted men and then flatbeds loaded with freight. The train didn't pull out until after dark. It was a tiresome stop and go trip. The single railroad track was host to two way traffic which meant that one train had to stop on a siding to allow another to pass. There

were stops for water and coal and at least one shower stop at an overhead tank. One timid (or merely considerate) troop, who stood patiently at the perimeter of the bathing multitude waiting his turn, had to be pulled aboard in his birthday suit to the astonishment of local villagers when the train pulled out while he was still showering.<sup>99</sup>

Several of the trains going in the opposite direction were filled with Italian and German prisoners of war. Sometimes the trains stopped opposite one another. Members of the Group walked along the cars chatting with the prisoners and the American guards, who rode on top of the cars armed with rifles and shotguns. The Italians were relaxed, friendly, and happy to be out of the war. They all seemed to have relatives in the United States. The Germans were proud, sullen, and unfriendly. They had the air of professional warriors still convinced of victory and just sorry they weren't going to be a part of it.<sup>100</sup> The train pulled into Chateaudun on May 29.

The remainder of the ground echelon, mostly members of the 96th and 429th Squadrons, left Casablanca by vehicle convoy on May 26, the day after the train left. The convoy was made up of jeeps, command cars, weapons carriers, ambulances, trucks, and service vehicles. S/Sgt. Charles W. Richards and S/Sgt. John McWeeney, both of 96th Squadron S-1, drove the orderly room jeep pulling a trailer containing their personal gear, unit records, office equipment, and supplies. The convoy got underway about 8:00





German prisoner of war train, May 1943. (Courtesy of C. Richards)

A.M., except for a camp clean-up detail that caught up with the convoy by mid-afternoon. The convoy bivouaced in an open field outside Fez, Morocco the first night. Members shared night guard duty then tried to catch up on sleep during the day. Meals were mostly the usual C rations, although some food was scrounged from the mess hall for the first day, and some was acquired along the way. The second day they met a large convoy of 1st Armored Division troops looking weary and war-torn. The Division had been in the thick of the North African campaign from the invasion in November 1942 until Tunisia was wrested from the Axis in early May 1943.

After two days of hard driving, the convoy reached Oujda, Morocco, just west of the Algerian border. The men had their bed rolls on the ground early that second night, only to be disturbed by a night-long wedding celebration in a nearby field, complete with fireworks and the wail of native music. Up early the next day, they pressed on and didn't stop until after dark near Orleansville, Algeria. It was a day of hot, dusty driving after the first two days of nice weather and beautiful countryside. That day the convoy met other American and British armored units returning battered but victorious from their battles with the Axis. The fourth day the convoy was late getting away. Sgt. Richards and a couple buddies went into Orleansville, lucked into a shower at the Red Cross, and bummed three loaves of bread from a GI bakery. They bought some fruit and onions from native vendors and were back to the convoy in time for the late morning departure. This day's drive brought them into the scenic Algerian coastal range of the Atlas mountains, but juggling the gears and cranking the steering wheel of a heavy vehicle around mountain roads was tiring work. One weary jeep driver wrecked his vehicle dodging an Arab boy. The driver cut his foot severely. Native children had pestered the convoy at every opportunity. Sgt. Richards and others rode on top of unsecured vehicles while going through towns and villages to prevent pilfering.

The men threw candy from their rations to lure children away from the convoy. The fourth night was spent in an area south of Algiers. Late on the fifth day, everyone sensed they could reach their destination without spending another night along the road, and sleeping on the ground in the open. The convoy pulled into Setif, southwest of Contantine, sometime between 6:00 and 7:00 P.M., and found itself in the midst of a military parade. There were just thirty-six miles to go. The road ran along the relatively level terrain of the Constantine plateau and was straighter than the mountainous ones behind them. The convoy fairly dashed to the finish, reaching juggernaut speeds of sixty miles per hour. It rolled into Chateaudun about 8:00 P.M. after five days in serpentine formation, nose to exhaust, grinding out about 1,050 frazzling miles.<sup>101</sup> The date was May 30 and the Group was all together again for the first time since February 2. The flight echelon had been in combat for thirty-two days and had flown seventeen missions.

#### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> W. F. Craven and J. L. Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, vol 2. (University of Chicago Press, 1949; repr: Washington DC, Office of AF History, 1983) 51.
- <sup>2</sup> Ltr, Hq 2AF, office of CG, Sep 11, 1942, file 370.5 (E-3)
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, Sep 19, 1942
- <sup>4</sup> Bernie Lay, Jr., Col. USAF (Ret), article, "The Background"
- <sup>5</sup> Joseph M. McCoid, "2nd Bombardment Group History", (Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL. Records include unit histories cited extensively from these sources: Group History, author Joseph M. McCoid, microfilm reels; B0040, 41, 42 and 43. 20th Squadron History, author J. Robert Gibson, microfilm reel A0542, 49th Squadron History, author R. W. Suhre, microfilm reel A0553, 96th Squadron History, authors John S. Barwick and David Mundy, microfilm reel A0573, and 429th Squadron History, authors Joseph M. McCoid and Hamilton M. Lamb, microfilm reel A0613) 2, microfilm no. B0040
- <sup>6</sup> Patricia J. Dunston, *Certain Lands Southeast Of Ephrata*, (Soap Lake, WA, by author, 1993) 3
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 18, 31, 47.

- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 9, 11.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 12, 13.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 14.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 16, 22.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 18
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid* 78-84
- <sup>14</sup> Raymond J. Beal, "2nd Bomb Group Medical History" (Maxwell AFB, AL, USAF Historical Research Agency) 16, microfilm no. B0040
- <sup>15</sup> Patricia J. Dunston, *Certain Lands Southeast of Ephrata*, (Soap Lake, WA, by author, 1993) 35
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid* 36
- <sup>17</sup> McCoid Group History, 2
- <sup>18</sup> Beal Group Medical History, 16
- <sup>19</sup> McCoid, Group History, 3
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid* 3
- <sup>21</sup> McCoid, 429th Squadron History, 3
- <sup>21</sup> McCoid, Group History, 4; 429th Squadron History, 6
- <sup>22</sup> McCoid, 429th Squadron History, 5
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 6
- <sup>24</sup> McCoid, Group History, 3, 4
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 4; Carl R. Grubb, *Group Diary, Records, Army Air Forces World War II, Combat Operations Reports 1942-1946* (Washington National Records Center, Suitland MD) Nov 11-15; 20-24
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 4
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 4
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 5
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 5; Grubb, *Group Diary*, Dec 5, '42
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 5
- <sup>31</sup> Grubb, *Group Diary*, Dec 18, '42
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, Dec 21, '42
- <sup>33</sup> McCoid, Group History, 6
- <sup>34</sup> "Second Bombardment Group Annual Training Program" FY 1940-41, Langley, Field, Va. (Maxwell AFB, AL., USAF History Research Agency) microfilm no. B0042, frame 0910
- <sup>35</sup> Barwick, 96th Squadron History, Jan, '43, page 6
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid* McCoid, 429th Squadron History, 10
- <sup>37</sup> Grubb, *Group Diary* Jan 16-23, 1943
- <sup>37</sup> Roundup Record-Tribune, (Roundup, Montana, Dec 31, 1942)
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, Jan 7, 1943
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>41</sup> McCoid, Group History, 7
- <sup>42</sup> Roundup Record-Tribune, Dec. 31, 1942
- <sup>43</sup> Mrs. Mearl Thompson, Musselshell, MT, ltr Jan 26, 1945 to Mr. Hanson, St. Paul, MN
- <sup>44</sup> Elton Roberts, Musselshell, MT. telephone interviews, Feb 17, Apr 20, 1994
- <sup>45</sup> Charles Moore, Roundup, MT, telephone interview, February 24, 1994
- <sup>46</sup> Roy V. Ostling, Bellevue, WA retired Boeing engineer, telephone interviews April 13, 19, 1994, letter, April 15, 1994.
- <sup>47</sup> Army Air Forces Technical Order No. 01-20E-55, Nov 15, 1943 incorporating Boeing Service Bulletins 129, of D-3456, April 16, 1943, and 36 of D-4105, April 19, 1943
- <sup>48</sup> Mrs. Adair Rademacher, Musselshell, MT, ltr Oct 4, 1994
- <sup>49</sup> McCoid, 429th Squadron History, 8
- <sup>50</sup> Donald J. Stoeger Video Diary
- <sup>51</sup> McCoid, 429th Squadron History, 8, 9
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 10
- <sup>53</sup> Carl R. Grubb, *Group Diary*, January 16, '43
- <sup>54</sup> Barwick, 96th Squadron History, Jan '43, page 6
- <sup>55</sup> McCoid, Group History, 8
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 8, 9
- <sup>57</sup> "Red Devil News" (Glasgow, MT., Jan 8, '43. Restored by Wilson Printers for Howard R. Fox, Sanford, ME, 1993)
- <sup>58</sup> McCoid, Group History, 10
- <sup>59</sup> McCoid, 429th Squadron History, 9
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 11, 12
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 13
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 13, 14
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 14, 15



- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 15, 16  
<sup>65</sup> Cut Bank Pioneer Press, *Glacier County, MT, Mar 5, 1943*  
<sup>66</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 11  
<sup>67</sup> McCoid, *429th Squadron History*, 17  
<sup>68</sup> Curtis E. LeMay with MacKinley Kantor, "Mission With LeMay" (*Double Day & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1965*) 217, 218  
<sup>69</sup> Barwick, *96th Squadron History*, 11  
<sup>70</sup> Clark B. Gathercole, *Ojai, CA telephone interview June, 1994.*  
<sup>71</sup> Kemp F. Martin, *Houston, TX telephone interview June, 1994*  
<sup>72</sup> Gathercole interview  
<sup>73</sup> Barwick, *96th Squadron History*, 9  
<sup>74</sup> Craven and Cate, 83  
<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 84  
<sup>76</sup> *Grubb Group Diary, Mar 13, 1943*  
<sup>77</sup> Barwick, *96th Squadron History*, 9  
<sup>78</sup> William G. Covell, *The Great Adventure, unpublished personal history, WW II, Jul '42 -Sep '45*  
<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>81</sup> Barwick, *96th Squadron History*, 9, 10  
<sup>82</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 12  
<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 12  
<sup>84</sup> Covell personal history  
<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>89</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 12  
<sup>90</sup> Barwick, *96th Squadron History, Apr '43, page 11*  
<sup>91</sup> Jack K. Moore, *Montana to Casablanca, former member of the 96th Squadron, unpublished personal account*  
<sup>92</sup> McCoid, *429th Squadron History*, 19,20,21,22  
<sup>93</sup> Beal, *Group Medical History*, 18,19  
<sup>94</sup> *Grubb Group Diary, Apr 20, 25, 27*  
<sup>95</sup> Covell personal history  
<sup>96</sup> Moore account  
<sup>97</sup> Covell personal history  
<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>99</sup> Charles W. Richards personal account

---

## CHAPTER X

### COMBAT - NORTH AFRICA - CHATEAUDUN DU RHUMEL & AIN M'LILA

---

Helen Field at Chateaudun was a dirt strip scraped out of sparse farm land about twenty-five miles southwest of Constantine, Algeria. The Group's location is recorded as Chateaudun du Rhumel, its geographic site near a tiny Arab village strung along the Setif-Constantine road. The field was about four miles northwest of the village.<sup>1</sup> The landing strip was north of the road and ran generally east and west. Taxiways ran parallel along each side of the strip and across the ends. Revetments for parking, maintenance and servicing the airplanes branched off the taxiways. The revetments were well dispersed for security. The camp area was located along a ridge of higher ground between one and two miles north of the airfield. The flight line was in general view looking south from the camp area.<sup>2</sup> The field offered nothing more than a landing strip, taxi and parking areas for airplanes and the land to establish living, administrative, operations and maintenance areas. All the means for creating these capabilities had to be brought in by the Group. The field was shared with the 97th Bombardment Group, which had operated

from the field since the middle of February. Within their own austere conditions and limited resources, the 97th gave support until the 2nd's ground echelon, supplies and equipment arrived, and the Group could establish its own support infrastructure. The 97th was a fully operational combat unit flying regularly scheduled strike missions, so the 2nd depended heavily on self-help for the first thirty-two days of combat that it took for the complete ground echelon to arrive. Air crews pitched tents, loaded bombs, serviced and maintained airplanes, and did all manner of things to be able to fly seventeen missions before the last of the ground echelon arrived on May 30, 1943.

Air crews started moving forward from Marrakech on April 22, 1943. Some stopped briefly at Navarin until it was declared non-operational. The 429th Squadron flew as a unit to Navarin on April 22 but was diverted by radio and landed at Telergma, where they remained for five days before being ordered to Chateaudun on April 27. They arrived the day before the Group's first mission.<sup>3</sup> The last airplane to leave Marrakech was former commander Lauer's aircraft number 42- 29595, piloted by Lt. Pasero and crew. The airplane had continued to be plagued by engine problems first encountered on the deployment leg from Roberts Field, Liberia to Dakar. Pasero and crew took advantage of the delay to dismantle and load lumber from the abandoned Group mess hall at Marrakech. They had to divert to an alternate field because of weather at Chateaudun. Aircraft 595 was flown on its first mission by Lt. Col. Thomas leading the Group on mission number four against Trapani, Sicily, May 6.

#### PERSPECTIVE<sup>4</sup>

The war in North Africa had its genesis in Mussolini's ambition and opportunism. Spurred by and jealous of Hitler's successes and what appeared to be the imminent defeat of Great Britain, Mussolini wanted to prove himself worthy to sit with Hitler at the victor's table. He needed a quick conquest. Egypt and the Suez seemed to offer vulnerable and worthy prizes. Mussolini had 250,000 troops in Libya which he thought could quickly wrest the prizes from the 36,000 defenders from a beleaguered Great Britain. Thus emboldened, he ordered an offensive that spawned the war in North Africa. Over the next two and one half years the war seesawed back and forth three times between Tunisia and the outer reaches of Alexandria, Egypt before the Allies drove the Germans and Italians out of North Africa.

On September 13, 1940, 80,000 ill-equipped and ill-prepared Italian troops under unenthusiastic leadership launched an offensive to the east from Libya. In just four days they made a surprisingly easy advance across the Libyan desert and sixty miles into Egypt. Here they halted to set up defenses and consolidate their position.

Later, the British Eighth Army, probing the Italian defenses, found a fifteen-mile gap in their perimeter defense. On December 6, 1940, the British counteroffensive poured through the gap thoroughly routing the surprised Italians and inflicting a devastating defeat on them as they fled back almost to the borders of Tunisia. The Ital-

ians abandoned sizeable war booty and left 110,000 prisoners in their wake. A reluctant Hitler was forced to come to Mussolini's aid. He did so with Lt. Gen. Erwin Rommel and his newly formed Afrika Korps.

Twice over the next two years the wily and audacious Rommel pushed tantalizingly close to the Egyptian prize. He advanced and won battle field victories, sometimes with numerically inferior forces, employing the bold strategies and tactics that earned him the title "The Desert Fox" and made him a legend in his own time. But victory was not to be his. Hitler failed to send the supplies and reinforcements when and in the quantities promised to gain victory.

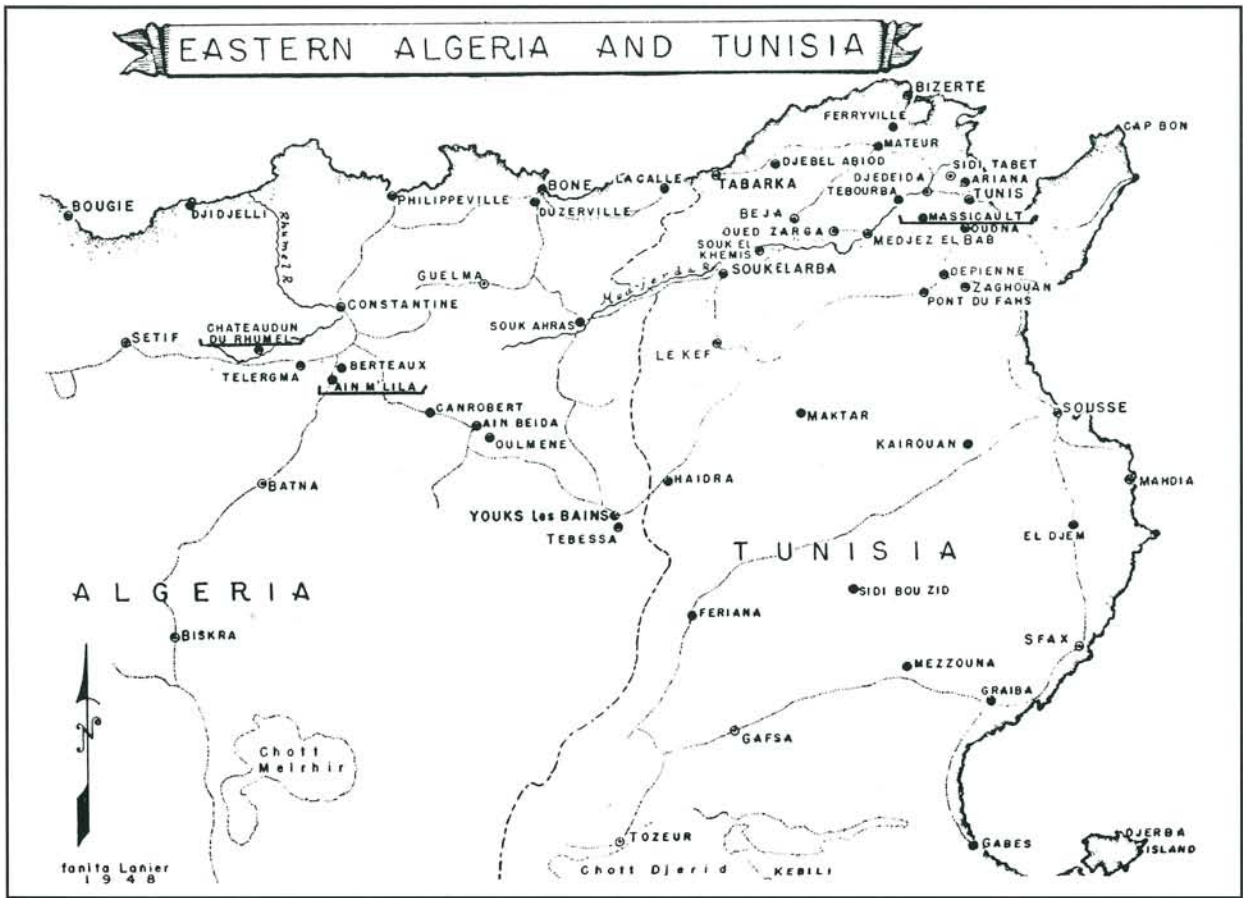
The British suffered their first reversal at the hands of Rommel when Churchill depleted the Eighth Army to honor his promise to come to the aid of Greece which was doggedly resisting invasion, first by the Italians and then the Germans. These reversals continued, including the morale sapping loss of Tobruk, while Churchill went through a succession of Middle East commanders. He settled on the winning combination of General Harold L. Alexander, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East and Lt. Gen. Bernard Law Montgomery, Commander-in-Chief, Eighth Army. By the fall of 1942 the British amassed sufficient forces to mount the counter-offensive and win the crucial battle of El Alamein. The furious battle started in the early morning hours of October 23 and raged for ten days before Rommel was forced to withdraw grudgingly. The victory at El Alamein was a turning point of the war and marked the beginning of the end for the Axis in North Africa.

From El Alamein the British battled against fierce and stubborn resistance from the Germans and the Italians before pushing them into the borders of Tunisia, where they faced the on-coming forces of Operation TORCH. Even in the waning days of his power in North Africa, Rommel inflicted a humiliating set-back on the U.S. II Corps at Kasserine Pass. The Axis thrust reached the Algerian border, forced the evacuation of five Allied forward airfields and the abandonment of two others and threatened to turn north to the coast with the potential to cut the lines of communication to Allied troops facing Tunis and Bizerte. But Allied resistance stiffened and Rommel became uncharacteristically cautious. The Allies brought reinforcements and increased resolve to the battle and forced the enemy to withdraw. After Kasserine, the flamboyant Maj. Gen. George S. Patton replaced the II Corps commander and quickly whipped the demoralized Corps back into fighting shape.

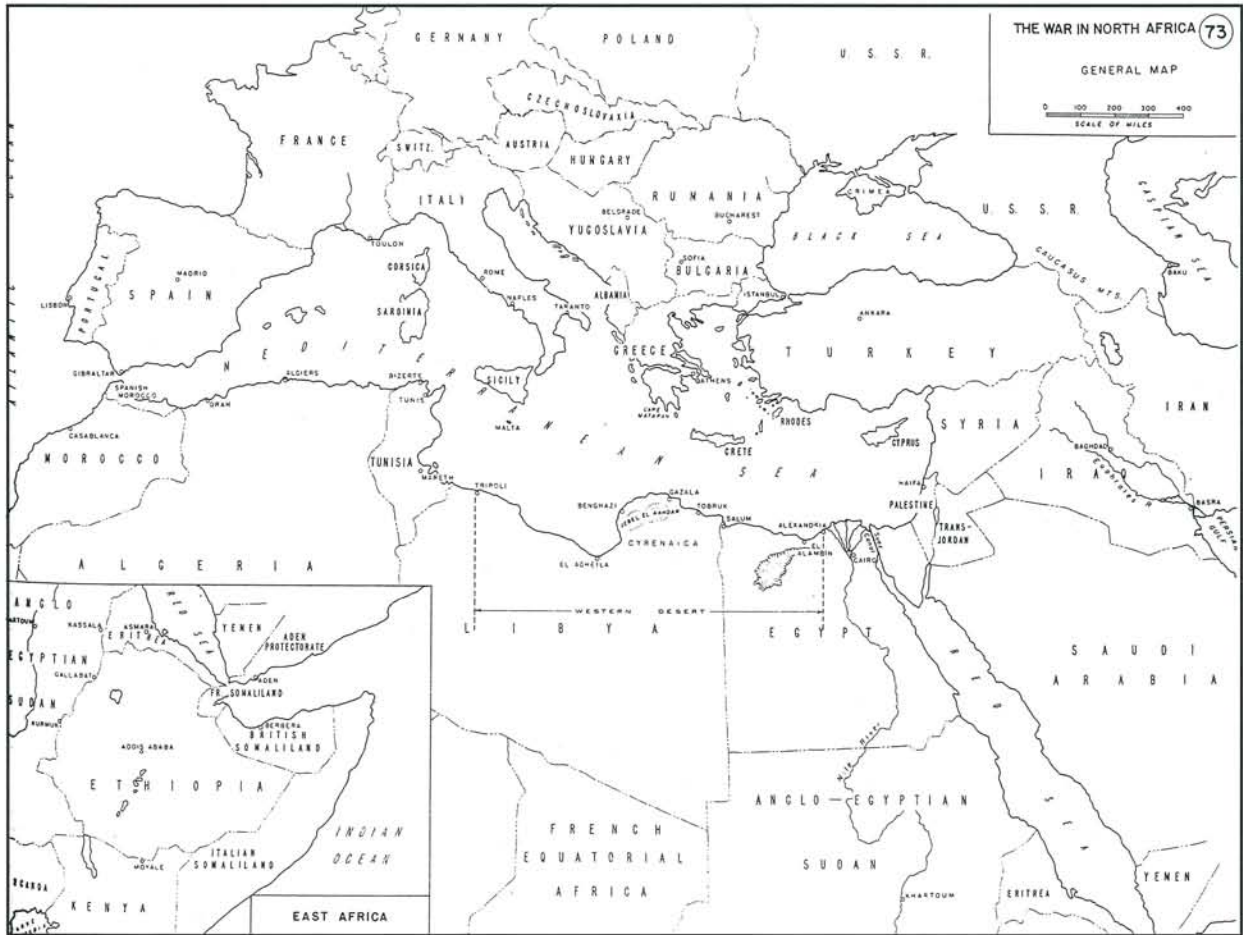
Squeezed between the superior forces of the British Eighth Army on the east and the U.S., British and Free French forces on the west, the Axis forces gradually gave way. Attempting to delay the Eighth Army advance, Rommel attacked at Medinine on March 6, 1943. British camouflaged armor-piercing anti-tank guns devastated Rommel's armor, costing him 52 of his precious Panzer tanks. This ended his two year campaign in North Africa.

Throughout the North African campaign neither side had been able to achieve and sustain air superiority. Not until TORCH air forces were in place was Allied air superiority achieved on an enduring basis. In the end these forces played





Source: Craven and Cate, Vol II, 80.



Source: West Point Atlas of American Wars (Chief editor, Big. Gen. Vincent J. Esposito, Vol II, Praeger Publishers, NY, 1973) Map 73



**PRINCIPAL UNITS OF NORTHWEST  
AFRICAN AIR FORCES**

1 June 1943

**Strategic Air Force**

U.S. 2d, 27th, 99th, 301st Bomb Groups (B-17's)  
U.S. 310th, 321st Bomb Groups (B-25's)  
U.S. 17th, 319th, 320th Bomb Groups (B-26's)  
U.S. 1st, 14th, 82d Fighter Groups (P-38's)  
U.S. 325th Fighter Group (P-40's)  
Four wings, RAF Wellingtons

**Tactical Air Force**

**TACTICAL BOMBER FORCE**

U.S. 47th Bomb Group (A-20's)  
U.S. 12th, \* 340th\* Bomb Groups (B-25's)  
Two RAF, one SAAF wings  
Two tac/recece squadrons

**XII AIR SUPPORT COMMAND**

U.S. 33d, 324th\* Fighter Groups (P-40's)  
U.S. 31st Fighter Group (Spits)  
U.S. 27th, 86th Fighter-Bomber Groups (A-36's)  
U.S. 111th Observation Squadron

**WESTERN DESERT AIR FORCE**

RAF and SAAF, but including U.S. 57th\* and  
79th\* Fighter Groups (P-40's)

\* Ninth Air Force

**Coastal Air Force**

U.S. 81st, 350th Fighter Groups (P-39's)  
U.S. 52d Fighter Group (Spits)  
Three RAF wings  
Two air defense commands  
Miscellaneous units, including U.S. 1st and 2d  
Antisubmarine Squadrons

**Troop Carrier Command**

U.S. 51st Wing: 60th, 62d, 64th Groups (C-47's)  
U.S. 52d Wing: 61st, 313th, 314th, 316th\*  
Groups (C-47's)  
RAF 38 Wing

**Training Command**

Three replacement battalions  
U.S. 68th Observation Group  
Miscellaneous training units

**Photographic Reconnaissance Wing**

U.S. 3d Photo Group  
Two RAF squadrons  
One FAF squadron

\* Ninth Air Force

**ASSIGNED STRENGTH OF USAAF GROUPS**

1. Heavy bombers: 48 planes (4 sqs, 12 planes each)
2. Medium bombers: 57 planes (4 sqs, 13 planes each, plus  
5 hq planes)
3. Light bombers: 57 planes (4 sqs, 13 planes each, plus  
5 hq planes)
4. Dive bombers: 57 planes (4 sqs, 13 planes each, plus  
5 hq planes)
5. Fighters: 75 planes (3 sqs, 25 planes each)
6. Troop carrier: 52 planes (4 sqs, 13 planes each)

In each instance the strength was normal, except in the case  
of the heavies where normal unit equipment was 35 aircraft.

*Principal Units of Northwest African Air Forces, 1943. Source: Craven & Cate, Vol II, 417.*

a vital role in supporting ground forces and in denying supply and reinforcements to the Italians and the Germans.

In mid-April, Gen. Patton was detached to work on plans for the invasion of Sicily. His deputy, Maj. Gen. Omar Bradley, took command of the II Corps. On April 26 the U.S. 34th Infantry Division of the II Corps started its assault on Hill 609. This 609 meter hill commanded the Tine River Valley and the southern plain approach to Tunis. It took four days of valiant fighting at a cost of 200 dead, 1,600 wounded and 700 missing or captured to overcome the last-ditch resistance of the dug-in German defenders. The 2nd Bomb Group flew its first mission while the battle for Hill 609 raged. On May 5 the Group, on its second mission, joined other allied planes on the heaviest air attack of the North African campaign when 1,958 bombing and ground support sorties were flown in 24 hours.

On May 7 the first triumphant British forces rolled into Tunis. On May 13 the last major Axis

commander capitulated. The African campaign was over. The air campaign in preparation for the invasion of Sicily was already under way.

The African experience, particularly the setbacks of the 1942-43 winter campaign, provided valuable lessons in the employment of air forces. Air forces seemed never to realize their military potential when assigned diverse and incompatible roles as they were in the North African theater. Fighter units were assigned to port and shipping defense, bomber escort and support of ground forces. Bomber units were assigned to anti-submarine sorties, strategic bombardment and strikes on enemy artillery positions.

On February 20 Gen. Eisenhower announced sweeping changes to his command, which, among other things, were designed to improve the use of air power. The air forces component was organized under the Mediterranean Air Command (MAC). Subordinate to MAC were three other new organizations: Northwest African Air Forces (NAAF), Middle East Air Command (MEAC) and RAF Malta Air Command.

The Northwest African Air Forces (NAAF), commanded by Lt. Gen. Spaatz, had four major operating sub-commands: Northwest African Strategic Air Force (NASAF), commanded by Maj. Gen. Doolittle, Northwest African Tactical Air Force (NATAF), Northwest African Coastal Air Force (NACAF), and Northwest African Training Command (NATC), plus the Northwest African Photographic Reconnaissance Wing. On March 18, the Northwest African Troop Carrier Command was added. The 5th Bombardment Wing of NASAF, Commanded by Brig. Gen. J. H. Atkinson, included four B-17 Groups, the 2nd, 97th, 99th and 301st; and two P-38 fighter groups, the 1st and 14th. The immediate role of the strategic bomber forces was to isolate the Axis bridgehead in Tunisia and interrupt the build-up of Sicilian defenses.<sup>5</sup>

**COMBAT!**

**MISSION 1, APRIL 28, 1943**

**TERRANOVA, SARDINIA, HARBOR/SHIPPING**

On Wednesday, April 28, the 2nd Bomb Group embarked on its first wartime bombing mission in over twenty-four years. The Group's last previous raid against a wartime enemy had been flown November 5 1918 by the 1st Day Bombardment Group from Maulan, France during the closing days of WW I. The Group was to put up eighteen aircraft. The mission: bomb and destroy Axis shipping in the harbor at Terranova, Sardinia. The Group was to rendezvous at 6,000 feet over Chateaudun at 2:00 P.M. with the 301st Bomb Group, who would lead the mission.<sup>6</sup> Routes out and back, as always, were designed to serve a combination of needs: conserve time and fuel; obscure intentions; provide the least known exposure to enemy actions; avoid weather; facilitate fighter escort when available; and assure the best opportunity for achieving the target objective. In short, provide the maximum probability for overall mission success.

The weather from the African coast to the target was forecasted to be partly cloudy. There were to be multiple cloud layers at 1,400 and 20,000 feet. Haze along coastal areas would cause variable visibility of 3 to 8 miles. Coastal areas would have scattered showers typical of spring weather.<sup>7</sup> The bomb load was 12 five-hundred-pound demolition bombs. The bomb run was to be from due west at 20,000 feet. But it was not to be. The target was obscured and could not be successfully assaulted. There was no enemy opposition. All airplanes returned safely to base still carrying their bombs.

It was an anti-climactic conclusion to a day filled with a mixture of great anticipation and anxiety. For the Group it was valuable experience and training under near combat conditions. The mission routine included virtually the full litany of procedures that would be repeated, with minor exceptions, for the 412 missions the Group flew during its two years in combat: briefing, transportation, stations, start engines, taxi, take-off, assembly, rendezvous, start climb to altitude, test fire guns, go on oxygen, rendezvous with fighter escort when available, proceed to initial point, make bomb run, attack target, turn off target, rally, maintain formation and vary it so as to concentrate maximum defensive fire power,





report attacking enemy aircraft, return to base, debrief, clean guns, service and repair aircraft, and prepare to fly and fight another day.

The next four days the Group went through a state of emotional fibrillation as missions were scheduled, briefed and scrubbed. The Group was weather-bound. April 29 target, Genoa, Italy shipping – scrubbed because of weather. April 30, target, Terranova, Sardinia shipping – scrubbed for weather. May 1, for the third time, target, Terranova shipping, docks, harbor installations and warehouses – scrubbed. May 2 target of opportunity shipping between Ferryville and Bizerte, Tunisia – scrubbed.<sup>8</sup> Scheduling a search-and-destroy mission for a strategic bomber unit was a tell-tale clue to the desperation and frustration of air commanders. The weather gave time and impetus for improving living conditions. Most members of the Group were sleeping on the ground in bed rolls. Securing tents against the rain was an obvious priority.

### MISSION 2, MAY 3, 1943

#### BIZERTE, TUNISIA, HARBOR/SHIPPING

Although still plagued by weather, the Group's near-combat experience came to an emphatic close on May 3. Twenty-eight aircraft took off under the leadership of Lt. Col. Thomas to follow the 99th Bomb Group over the target. Chateaudun was seven tenths overcast from 1,000 feet to 4,000 feet. For the return the forecast was for overcast skies with ceilings of 2,000 to 3,000 feet in rain showers. Going out,

fourteen airplanes lost the formation in the overcast skies and returned early with their bomb loads. Thirteen airplanes made it to the target with the Group. One airplane got separated from the Group and joined the 99th Group in the target area. The thirteen airplanes that made it to the target dropped their 39 tons of 500-pound demolition bombs. Several hits were observed on jetties and buildings on the southern shore of Goulet Du Lac at Bizerte. Several hits were observed on the hangars and workshops of the Naval Base on the north shore and at the mouth of the lake. Two aircraft dropped 80,000 surrender leaflets over enemy territory.

No enemy aircraft were encountered. Flak, (A term adapted from the German name for their anti-aircraft cannon, "Flieger Abwehrr Kanone.") The term referred to the exploding projectiles, and the deadly shrapnel they created, fired at airplanes by anti-aircraft artillery. Its purpose was to knock down or damage airplanes and wound or kill the crew.) was accurate and moderately intense. Five aircraft were damaged by flak. T/Sgt Theodore F. Ramsey of Molus, Kentucky, radio-gunner on Lt. Holger A. Selling's crew, 20th Squadron, was wounded by flak in two places on the lower left leg after leaving the target. Sgt. Ramsey stayed at his post. Pilot Selling called for a crew check as soon as he could after bombs away and heard, "radio hit." After the crew descended below oxygen level, Capt. Richard T. Headrick, 20th Squadron Operations Officer, flying as copilot, came to the radio compartment to give Sgt. Ramsey first aid. He found him still trying to

clear a jam in his gun. Upon landing, Sgt. Ramsey was taken immediately by ambulance to the hospital but died of complications on May 11. He was the Group's first combat casualty of WW II<sup>10</sup>, although Lt. Harold W. Seng, a navigator from Lincoln, Nebraska was mortally wounded on the Mother's Day raid May 9 on Palermo, Sicily, and also succumbed on May 11. Dr. Lyman E. Ihle, the 20th Squadron Flight Surgeon, in a video tape of his WW II experiences produced in the late 1980's, expressed regret that penicillin was not available at the time to treat Sgt. Ramsey.

Weather came close to being the greatest threat to this mission. Group Navigator, Lt. Koller had given Lt. Col. Thomas the course for return to base after the bomb run. There had been enough breaks in the overcast en route to the target for Koller to get drift readings and determine wind direction and ground speed. These were used to compute the return course. By the time the bomb run and the watchful alert for potential fighter attacks were over, the clouds below were solid. The 10 watt radio range at Chateaudun was out of commission. As the ETA for Chateaudun approached, the thirteen aircraft still in formation were at 10,000 feet. After getting assurance from Koller that there were no mountains in the immediate vicinity, Col. Thomas elected to let down. Fortunately, a large hole appeared in the overcast. Col. Thomas tightened the formation and tightened his let down circle. The Group came out safely at 2,500 feet, but no Chateaudun! (Post-mission analysis showed that a weather front had passed through the area and the shift in wind direction



and velocity was greater than Koller had used in his computations.) Shortly, the Group flew over a town. Thomas said it was Setif. Koller disagreed. They made another turn over the town. Koller remembered that Setif had a city square. The town underneath didn't. Koller identified the town as Batna. If correct, they were south of Chateaudun and would soon cross a railroad track. He gave a new course to his commander. As hoped they crossed the railroad and in twenty minutes were over the base.<sup>11</sup> All airplanes landed safely in light but steady rain. Lt. Koller later received the DFC for his navigational skill on this mission. By contrast, the 99th lost seven airplanes and two crews to weather that day. That Group had airplanes down all over the area, including some that landed on the beaches north of Constantine.

It was Capt. Jack L. Bentley of the 429th Squadron who got separated from the Group and joined the 99th Group formation. Capt. Bentley did not drop his bombs because the flight leaders of the formation did not drop theirs. With weather deteriorating, the 99th Group Flight Leader advised Bentley to head for the ocean or the desert. He chose to try to make it back to base. Somewhere just south of Constantine, he jettisoned his bombs against the side of a hill. Five minutes later while searching for a place to land he hit a high tension line along a road, damaging the right aileron. He cut the number one engine to offset the right drag on the plane, headed for the first open field and crash landed at 5:30 P.M. The number one engine caught fire, but was put out by the crew, assisted by soldiers in the area, who came to the scene with fire extinguishers. The crash was in the vicinity of the 46th Quartermaster Corps, 2nd Battalion Headquarter's dispensary near Ouled Rahmoun, about fifteen miles south of Constantine. The airplane was damaged beyond repair. The crew was uninjured. The airplane was turned over to the executive officer of the nearby Quartermaster unit. He was advised of the confidential equipment on board and agreed to maintain a guard over the wreckage until Air Force personnel could come to salvage parts. The crew made its way back to base, arriving at 12:30 A.M., May 4.<sup>12</sup>

### MISSION 3, MAY 5, 1943

#### LA GOULETTE, TUNISIA, HARBOR/SHIPPING

Twenty-nine aircraft took off. There were two early returns. Lt. Col. Thomas led the twenty-seven aircraft on a very successful mission. Hits and near misses were observed on one large and several small boats, and explosions and fire on two possible munitions boats along the north docks. Hits were also observed in the barracks area, along the docks, at the oil storage, and at an ore loading depot. The entire target area was in flames. Belching black smoke was seen from ten to twelve miles at 24,000 feet altitude. There were no losses but eleven ships were slightly damaged by flak. S/Sgt. Robert E. Parker of Wakefield, Maine, a ball turret gunner from the 429th Squadron received credit for the first probable enemy aircraft destroyed when he put three bursts into a Me-109. The aircraft was observed going down in black smoke but was lost from sight shortly before it would have crashed.<sup>13</sup>

### MISSION 4, MAY 6, 1943

#### TRAPANI, SICILY

#### SHIPPING/DOCKS/NAVAL BASE

The Group put up twenty-eight airplanes and there were no early returns. Trapani was a major seaport on the northwest coast of Sicily. The Group dropped sixty-four tons of 300-pound demolition bombs. Hits were made on shipping, docks, refueling units, a naval base, ammunition magazines, marshalling yards and on an oil storage area. The target area was left burning with black smoke visible for thirty miles at 24,000 feet. The Group enjoyed the comforting presence of twenty-four P-38's escorting from the 14th Fighter Group. No enemy fighters were observed. Lt. Geoffery D. France, on liaison duty from British Naval Authority to make observations of shipping and teach naval identification to air crews, flew as an observer.<sup>14</sup>

The May 7 mission to Marsala, Sicily was scrubbed because of weather. This date and May 8 were noteworthy for the fall of Tunis and Bizerte. As if by way of celebration, the Group was treated to a visit by Captain Eddie Rickenbacker who gave an excellent motivational pep-talk.

### MISSION 5, MAY 9, 1943

#### (MOTHER'S DAY)

#### PALERMO, SICILY, CITY

Palermo was one more target on the list of priorities to destroy the Sicilian defenses and deny enemy use of Sicilian harbors and resources for recovery and re-supply from the defeat in North Africa. It was the largest single air raid yet staged by the North African Air Forces. The four B-17 heavy bombardment groups put up 125 Flying Fortresses. The fighter groups put up ninety-eight P-38 escorts.

The 97th led the four B-17 groups. The 2nd was assigned the "tail-end Charlie" position. Out of the 34 aircraft that took off, the Group put 32 over the target. The bombing altitude was 28,000 feet. For reasons that aren't recorded, the bomb run was 26 minutes long! That was an extra twenty minutes of needless vulnerability while the Group droned slowly along straight and level in unlimited visibility, giving enemy fighters and antiaircraft gun crews an inordinate amount of preparation and response time. The Italians were prone to use barrage antiaircraft fire. Their gunners determined the course and altitude of the attacking bombers. They then picked an imaginary "box" in the air in the path of the oncoming bombers. Firing with abandon they filled the box with flak. The barrage approach is a variation to the usual hunting technique. Usually the hunter aims the bullet to intercept (tracking fire) the quarry. In barrage hunting the hunter saturates the area and lets the quarry intercept a bullet. With twenty-six minutes at their disposal, the hunters had time to fill the box. The Germans were more inclined to use tracking fire. Because of the accuracy of the Palermo flak, there was speculation that the Germans had taken over the antiaircraft defenses.

Bombs were strung from the water front through the heart of the city, toward a large cathedral near the middle of the city which intelli-



Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker. (Courtesy of K. Martin)

gence reports said the enemy used for ammunition storage in the belief that the Allies would respect the religious shrine. To include such a shrine in a bombing attack on a Mother's Day Sunday was a disquieting thought even given the aroused fervor of a brutal war. But such disquieting thoughts seldom survived mission launch. The intensity of combat is an immediate and all-consuming distraction. Even after a sensitive target is hit or destroyed, the four and five miles of airspace separating crews from targets provided a conscience-soothing detachment from the grave consequences of their actions.

The fire and smoke from the earlier group raids left some uncertainty about the 2nd's bombing results. But overall there were numerous hits in the middle of the city, on the docks and in the harbor. Hits near the cathedral left it badly damaged if not destroyed. Fires and explosions were observed near the area reported to be an enemy Army Headquarters. A munitions ship or tanker moored along the southeast docks exploded from a direct hit. A total of twenty-one encounters with enemy aircraft, Me-109s, Me-110s, Me-210s, Ma-200s and some unidentified single and twin engine fighters, were reported but no claims were made.<sup>15</sup> Flak was intense and accurate, leaving twenty-three aircraft damaged, one with 64 flak holes. One lost its plexiglass nose, one, Lt. Resta's of the 96th Squadron lost two engines forcing an emergency landing at Bone and one, Lt. Guy L. Thompson's, forced down at sea.<sup>16</sup> Flak wounded four; two slightly, one seriously — Sgt. Frederick B. Crutchfield, TG, with serious head wound, and one mortally, 2nd Lt. Harold W. Seng, as told earlier, with a flak wound over the heart. Crews had no flak jackets in those early days. All of the wounded were from the 20th Squadron.

Lt. Thompson and crew in airplane number 42-9614, "Woikin Gail," went down in the water about fifty-five miles west of Trapani, Sicily, with engines number 3 and 4 out and number 1 smoking. The airplane broke apart on impact and sank quickly, but all of the crew were seen in the water with their life jackets inflated. The life rafts did not deploy.

Capt. Headrick and Lt. Selling both followed the stricken crew down to provide protection and assistance once they were in the water. The crews in the escorting aircraft watched as Thompson's crew jettisoned everything movable including shoes. But to no avail. Some of the imperiled crew waved and laughed, showing admirable composure despite their predicament. Headrick and Selling tried to drop life



rafts to the men in the water. Headrick's hit the tail of his plane, rendering the raft useless. The same fate befell an emergency radio which he dropped. Selling's first raft fouled his plane's tail, almost causing him to crash. His second raft fell close to the crew. Headrick reported that the downed crew was approximately two miles from a small island and notified the Malta Air-Sea Rescue by radio. The two aiding crews remained in the area until low fuel supplies forced them to return to base. They departed with high expectations that the downed crew would survive. Inquiries during the war and exhaustive research following the war resulted in the crew being declared officially deceased. The Navy Department Hydrographic Office reported that the sea currents in the area were away from the small island and toward the northern coast of Sicily, thirty-five miles away. The water temperature ranged from 61 to 63 degrees Fahrenheit which cast doubt on the crew's ability to survive long enough to make landfall unaided.<sup>17</sup>

At the mission critique, Col. Thomas criticized Group air discipline. The formation must stay together regardless of who goes down. To do otherwise in hostile territory is to invite further disaster. To young and inexperienced combatants, this military logic was a bitter antidote for their natural instincts toward buddies whose airplane is crippled and straggling and enemy fighters, smelling blood, are seen swarming in a frenzied rush for the kill.

The first crew loss was a sobering confirmation of the inevitable consequences of aerial warfare. No formal sampling or plotting of how aircrews coped emotionally with combat were done. Had there been, one sensed the results would have followed a bell curve, showing a dominant majority flanked by two lesser minorities. Most airmen were at once brave and fearful, masking their fears with contrived nonchalance and self-assuring bravado. They immersed themselves in diversions, anything to keep from internalizing the threats of combat. They kept brooding at bay and imaginations in check. They feigned ruses to dupe the demons of combat. Flak or a fighter's shell always had someone else's name on it — some name unknown in their circle of friends. This majority went about combat in a competent and journeyman-like fashion. They were always ready to fly a mission — the sooner to get it over with and get home. Their window to the war was opaque.

At one end of the curve were those few for which no amount of diversion or denial could keep the terrors away. With each day and with each mission their uncontrollable agonies intensified. They had one or a variety of manifestations of their torment. They vomited, lost bladder control on a mission, lost weight, developed migraines, suffered through sleepless nights, or had nightmares for the first time in their lives. They shunned making new friends lest they embrace a larger arena for potential grief. Their window to the war was clear and unobstructed and commonly it was a magnifying glass that enlarged the horrors to insurmountable dimensions. Some of these few died a thousand deaths, yet gallantly survived a complete or near complete tour. Another few were mercifully pardoned early from their private torment. Later, in his

Group Medical History, Maj. Raymond J. Beal, Flight Surgeon wrote as follows: "Out of approximately 2600 men who are now flying or have flown combat: . . . 6 - completed 40 missions and were sent to ZI and are expected to resume combat at a later date. . . . 20 - sent to Med Disp Bd (Medical Dispensation Board) because of combat anxiety. . . . No cases have been classified into the category of 'lacking of moral fibre'!"

At the other end of the curve were the aerial warriors. Those few who reveled in the art of war, savored its excitement and studied its intricacies. They welcomed and even sought the enemy's challenge. War was a test of wits, will and skill and repeated exposure seemed to confer an immunity to its dangers. Some were simply motivated by an enlarged sense of duty and patriotism. Regardless, air warriors seldom dwelled on dangers. They took life for granted and had that infinite faith the young have in their immortality. These few often stretched out their tours, voluntarily flew extra missions, or sought a second tour elsewhere. Their window to the war was both a mirror and a slate. One reflected recognition, honor and glory. The other recorded the war in memorable, meticulous detail. Typical, but not inclusive, of these combatants were Capt. Clarence W. Godecke, Flight Officer Henry A. Heim, T/Sgt. Darrell L. Jones, and Maj. Ernest L. Blanton.

Capt. Godecke, who trained and deployed with the original Group to Africa, completed his tour of 50 missions in late September 1943. He rotated back to the U.S. and was assigned to the Flight Test Section at McClellan Field, Sacramento, California. When AAF Headquarters, Washington, D.C. issued an appeal for B-17 squadron commanders for the Eighth Air Force, Godecke met the qualifications. He voluntarily returned to combat in August 1944 and flew 18 more missions, and served as a squadron commander in the 96th Bomb Group. One of those 18 missions was the last shuttle mission to Russia on September 11, 1944. His aircraft was badly shot-up on the outbound mission and he had to abort the return mission on September 13. Even after the airplane was repaired, he and his crew were trapped at Poltava Field in the Ukraine for over a month. The escape route for stranded crews, who couldn't fly a return shuttle mission, was over Russian territory to Tehran, Iran, then to Cairo, and thence to an Allied base in Italy or northwest Africa. The Russians required that planes flying over Russian territory have a Russian navigator aboard. When numerous Russian promises failed to produce a navigator, the frustrated Godecke set upon an alternate solution.

There was an extensive graveyard of B-17 airplanes at Poltava from previous shuttle missions and crippled aircraft from other missions where crews sought sanctuary in friendly territory. (The first shuttle mission by the Eighth Air Force was flown on June 17, 1944. The Germans made a devastating midnight raid on the parked planes at Poltava, destroying 43 B-17s and damaging 26 others.) Also, there was the equivalent of six other aircrews similarly stranded in the area. With the help of these crews and ground crews sent to support the shuttle mission campaign, six flyable B-17s were cobbled together. Godecke flight-tested each aircraft and led the

effort to plan a return shuttle mission by the seven-ship formation to contravene the need for a Russian navigator. But he had no bombs. An appeal to the Russians for bombs produced another false promise. When no bombs were forthcoming by the night before the mission was to launch, Godecke decided to fly the mission exactly as planned and as agreed to with the Russians. The seven ship shuttle mission launched the next morning. The Russians let them go. The miniature wave simulated the raid on the designated target in Hungary, even to the extent of making a bomb run with doors open to empty bomb bays. The formation flew the mission unopposed and landed safely in Italy.

Late in the war, Godecke led the first food drop mission to the starving Dutch. Between 2 and 3 million people were on the brink of starvation in German-occupied Holland. Relief supplies had been stockpiled for use when Holland was freed. Fearing this might be too late to avert a tragedy, the Allies, working through the Swiss government, sought German government agreement for safe conduct of relief missions. The terms of the communication made it clear who would be held responsible for the fate of the Dutch people if relief was not speedily delivered. Seyess-Inquart, the Nazi High Commissioner generally agreed, but specific clearances had not been received when the first relief flight was loaded and ready to go. American commanders decided not to wait. Forty-five 45 airplanes took off with Godecke in the lead. His instructions were to take the formation up over the North Sea to a point opposite the landfall. There he was to take his lead element on the prescribed penetration route to the drop zone while the remaining planes orbited out of anti-aircraft artillery range. Godecke, and his two wingmen, crossed the Dutch coast just south of The Hague at 500 feet, right into the phalanx of clearly visible 105 mm and 88 mm German coastal batteries. The Germans let them go. They flew to the drop zone unchallenged. Godecke then radioed for the others to follow him in. That and other similar mercy missions were completed without German interference.

Godecke remained in active combat until the war's end in Europe. Asked why he went back to combat after safely completing one tour of 50 missions, his answer was a simple, "I missed the action." As an after thought he added, "It led to a promotion."<sup>18</sup>

Flight Officer Heim was an enlisted aerial gunner/observer in B-18s in Hawaii on December 7, 1941. He flew 16 antisubmarine and anti-shipping patrol missions before rotating to the U.S. with an aviation cadet appointment. He completed pilot training in class 42K and was among the first to receive Flight Officer appointments. Heim had only a high school education which didn't meet the qualifications for a commission. He joined the Group as a copilot in August, 1943. Because of rotations and combat losses Heim became one of the most experienced survivors in the 20th Squadron. He was promoted to Flight Commander February 1, 1944 and was assigned to mission lead positions in the Squadron and later as deputy group and group lead. On April 1, 1944 he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant. In late April, upon



completion of his combat tour, Heim was placed on detached service to U.S. for thirty days of rest and rehabilitation due to "prolonged combat fatigue." He returned to the Group at the end of that period, and resumed flying combat missions. He was quickly promoted to 1st lieutenant and within months was promoted to captain.

While flying deputy group lead September 22, 1944, on a mission to Munich, Heim's aircraft received severe flak damage but returned safely. It was on that mission that he and his crew saw their first German jet fighter. That day he told 20th Squadron First Sergeant, Clyde "Tiny" Atkerson to "put in his papers." "Tiny", who had been begging Heim to stop flying combat, was only too glad to comply. Heim flew his last, and seventieth, mission against the Komarom, Hungary marshalling yards on October 14, 1944. He was awarded the DFC by approving orders from Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters dated September 29, 1944. Later he became a B-29 aircrew commander and flew fifty-one missions in the Korean War.<sup>19</sup>

T/Sgt. Darrell L. Jones, an aerial engineer and upper turret gunner, trained and deployed with the 429th Squadron. He completed fifty missions

in October 1943 and returned to the U.S. He was married in December 1943 and was assigned to replacement crew training at Avon Park, Florida. He came to detest training and much to the dis-

may of his wife, he volunteered to fly another combat tour. Because of his competence, and status as a combat returnee, he was allowed to select the crew he would join. He selected the crew



1st Lt. and former Flight Officer, Henry A. Heim upon completion of his first fifty missions.



M/Sgt. Clyde "Tiny" Atkerson, First Sergeant, 20th Squadron.



The Godecke crew: Back L to R: 2nd Lt. Fred F. Thurston, CP; 2nd Lt. John (NMI) Karpinol, B; Lt. Godecke, P; 2nd Lt. Franklin (NMI) Newcomer, N; Capt. Norman E. Annich, Group G-2 (who flew frequently with the crew). Front L to R: T/Sgt. Donald M. Hamann, AG; T/Sgt. Elton E. Fessenden, ROG; S/Sgt. Donald G. Flicek, AG; S/Sgt. Frank A. Mangiante, AG; T/Sgt. Tandy W. Guinn, UTG; S/Sgt. William R. Carney, Jr., AG; Lts. Karpinol and Newcomer completed fifty missions together on Sep. 6, 1943 and were the first two members of the 20th Squadron to do so. (Courtesy of C. Godecke, Jr.)





T/Sgt. Darrell L. Jones. (Courtesy of D. Jones/R. Jones)

of 1st Lt. Victor Mack, whose aerial engineer had gotten ill. They deployed to Doetham Green, England, in September 1944, and joined the 370th Squadron, 452nd Bombardment Group, 3rd Air Division.

In the early part of November, Allied intelligence learned that Hitler was to make an appearance at a park near Weisbaden, Germany. The 452nd Group was among those sent to bomb the park. (Crews were told later they missed Hitler by an hour.) Lt Mack's airplane lost an engine to mechanical failure on the mission and couldn't stay with the formation. Bad weather further complicated the return flight. Lt. Mack made an emergency landing in a snow storm at a field near Brussels, Belgium, barely averting a crash. The crew later returned to England and resumed flying missions. On another mission, again in bad weather, the formation was called back just shortly before target time. The bombs, which had been fused, were to be jettisoned, but wouldn't release. T/Sgt. Jones went into the open bomb bay over the English channel and managed to release the hung bombs.

Sgt. Jones flew twenty-six missions on his second tour. The scheduler for that twenty-sixth mission was unaware that Sgt. Jones had finished his required twenty-five missions, and was mortified to learn of his mistake after the mission was launched. The scheduler apologized profusely to Jones after he safely returned from the extra mission. Sgt. Jones knew he needn't fly the mission, but didn't bother to question the schedule or complain before going. Jones was awarded the DFC March 11, 1945.

Asked why he went back to fly the second tour, T/Sgt. Jones's widow, Mrs. Ruth Jones, merely said that "Darrell was terribly patriotic and anxious for the war to end." He was also aware there was an urgent need for combat-experienced aerial engineers, and he preferred to be one than train others.<sup>20</sup>

Maj. Blanton joined the Group as a 2nd Lt. and flew his first mission on January 16, 1944. He completed fifty missions on May 12, 1944. Three months later, on August 15, 1944, he returned to combat. His last twenty-three missions were all in lead positions — squadron, deputy

or group lead. On March 26, 1945, his 83rd mission, while flying with Group lead, Col. Richard Waugh, they were reported missing in action on a raid to Vienna. Their plane was badly damaged by flak and lost two engines, but they went down in Russian-occupied Hungary. They returned to the Group on April 29, 1945.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of how air and ground crews reacted to combat and the war, there was one universal motivation — to serve honorably.

Before being ordered on its first mission to Italy, the Group flew three more missions against adjacent islands in the Mediterranean.

### MISSION 6, MAY 10, 1943

BO RIZZO, SICILY, AIRDROME

### MISSION 7, MARSALA, MAY 11, 1943

SICILY, CITY/HARBOR

### MISSION 8, MAY 13, 1943

CAGLIARI, SARDINIA, CITY/HARBOR

Brig. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenburg, Chief of Staff, NASAF, flew as an observer with Col. Thomas to Bo Rizzo. Fragmentation bombs were used for the first time. Dropped accurately and with the right dispersion, fragmentation bombs were particularly devastating against airplanes. Tests at the time showed that each bomb exploded into 1,000 to 1,500 pieces. Approximately three-fifths of these were comparable to a .30 caliber bullet, with an effective range of 60 yards.<sup>22</sup> The south and west sides of the airdrome were well covered and three fires were started in this area. The coverage of the rest of the area was only fair. Two fires were observed among aircraft dispersed in a field south of the airdrome. Flak was light and inaccurate, no enemy aircraft were encountered, and all planes returned undamaged.

Col. Thomas had led the Group on its first six missions, but had to abort the Marsala mission when one life raft accidentally deployed and hung-up on the horizontal stabilizer. This was the first abort in forty missions for Thomas and he was disappointed and angry. Maj. Robert Neal, Commander of the 429th and deputy lead, took over. The mission became terribly confused after Thomas left. Squadrons became separated from one another and attack the target from different directions. Bombs from the 20th barely missed other planes flying below. Fortunately, poor technique produced fairly credible results. Bombs set fire to a ship in the harbor, started fires along the docks and near the railroad station, and left a large warehouse blazing. Enemy opposition was nominal and ineffective.<sup>23</sup>

On May 12, Maj Neal was relieved as Commander of the 429th and assigned to Group Operations. Capt. Jack L. Bentley, the Squadron Operations Officer, was promoted to Commander.

The 2nd led the four B-17 groups for first time on the mission to Cagliari at the southern tip of Sardinia. Maj. Haynes of the 49th was Group lead. All bombs were in the target area. One load of bombs hit along the docks scoring a direct hit on a boat causing it to explode. Fires from the raid could be seen from 100 miles at 15,000 feet. Four airplanes received slight flak damage. One Me-109 broke off a feeble attack after a few bursts from Group gunners.<sup>24</sup>

### MISSION 9, MAY 14, 1943

CIVITAVECCHIA, ITALY, SHIPS/HARBOR

On this first raid to Italy, the target was well covered with hits on ships in the harbor and on the docks. Bombardiers reported an explosion along the dock during the raid and tail gunners reported a terrific explosion after the Group was 50 miles at sea on the return. Fires and smoke were still visible from 60 miles at 18,000 feet. Except for ineffective flak, there was no enemy opposition.<sup>25</sup>

After the Palermo raid on May 9, Sgt. Grubb noted in the Group Diary that: "Crews working night and day and doing an excellent job." The Group flew eight missions in the first fourteen days of May with only part of the ground echelon present. May 15, 16 and 17 were welcome non-operational days. Crews worked on living conditions, wrote letters, caught up with sack time, and some managed to visit Constantine.

### MISSION 10, MAY 18, 1943

MESSINA, SICILY, RAIL INSTALLATIONS

It was an inauspicious debut for Gen. Doolittle's first mission with the Group. Maj. Haynes was Group lead with Doolittle as an observer. Cloud cover and icing above 9000 feet forced the Group to abort.<sup>26</sup> Penetrating an overcast in formation is a white knuckle experience of the first order. The procedure is dangerous even when carefully planned and practiced and the Group had done little or none of either. Its first formation flight, with a full complement of airplanes, was at Marrakech — in clear weather. Its first experience with weather penetration was on the Bizerte mission when half of the Group got separated, broke formation, and aborted early. The other half that made it to the target and back was the beneficiary of Col. Thomas's familiarity with the area, his combat savvy leadership, and the providence of a hole in the overcast! Taking a group through an overcast can provoke peril of life-threatening proportions. Does the formation loosen up to avoid the unexpected in low visibility and risk losing visual contact? Or does the formation tighten up, in the attempt to preserve visual contact, only to fail at a point of lowest visibility and highest vulnerability. Or the group may succeed in maintaining formation, only to have turbulence or prop wash throw airplanes uncontrollably and irretrievably together. A little episode on this mission illustrates the hazards of putting a large number of airplanes in the same small, murky airspace.

Maj. Triggs, leading the 20th Squadron, was busy dividing attention among his instruments, his wingmen, and his Squadron's relative position in the Group when the formation nosed into the clouds. His wingmen moved in until their wingtips overlapped those of Trigg's airplane. As visibility faded, the lead element's three cockpits were still in view of each other, with the wingmen giving singular attention to maintaining formation. Triggs, perhaps nervous about the wingmen pressing his sides, did not make the necessary transition from visual to instrument flying. In those few moments of divided attention, Trigg's lead plane slowly leaned left into a 30 degree bank! The wingmen, expertly and faithfully, stayed glued to



their positions – the leader’s wing was their flight horizon. Jarred into the reality of what had happened, Triggs, in a reflex reaction, rolled suddenly out of the turn. The right wingman, riding high in the turn, disappeared over the top of his leader into the clouds. The left wingman, riding low in the turn, disappeared underneath his leader into the clouds. Trigg’s tail gunner, in a voice mixed with anger and near-terror, screamed over the intercom: “What the HELL is going on up there? A bombardier just went by about three feet from our tail!” Of course the bombardier, no doubt equally alarmed, was riding in the nose of his airplane, probably that of the left wingman. The guardian angels were out in force that day. There were no collisions.

Other formations hadn’t fared much better. Scattered airplanes came popping out of the clouds at 17,500 feet. Attempts to re-assemble and proceed to the target were unsuccessful. A ragtag bunch of airplanes drifted back to base with their bombs, except one that jettisoned bombs into the Mediterranean and landed at a field 30 miles south of Le Kef, Tunisia with two engines out.

Much can be said about what could and should have been done, but this was the reality at the time. Later, in Italy, when weather became a third foe along with flak and fighters, techniques and the judgement to accommodate to, prevail over, or just avoid weather, were better perfected.

### **MISSION 11, MAY 20, 1943**

#### **GROSSETTO, ITALY, AIRDROME**

This was the longest and most successful counter-air mission to date. The airdrome was just inland ninety miles northwest of Rome. It was the operational base for torpedo bombers which had been a serious threat to Allied shipping. The Group used a combination of demolition and fragmentation bombs. Fifty planes were destroyed and ten probables on the ground. Many fires were started and the smoke was visible for ninety miles. Flak was light and inaccurate and no enemy aircraft were encountered.

The Group first used fragmentation bombs on mission 6, May 10 in the raid on the Bo Rizzo airdrome, but the results weren’t as impressive as at Grossetto because fewer airplanes were caught on the ground. The Grossetto raid demonstrated how effective the fragmentation bomb could be against large coveys of parked airplanes. Fragmentation bombs were wrapped with spiral metal band springs that were .44 of an inch thick. When the bomb exploded, these springs disintegrated into 1,000 to 1,500 jagged little projectiles traveling at an initial velocity of 4,000 to 5,000 feet per second. At 40 yards there was one projectile per vertical square yard. Fragments had been measured to a distance of 500 to 600 yards. In penetration tests, 60% of the fragments perforated 7/8 inch spruce panels reinforced with 1/8 inch steel plates at 50 meters (about 55 yards). Fragments would perforate all parts of an airplane at 60 feet, except engine cylinders backed by pistons, and heavy metal spars. Fragments would pierce wings, gas tanks, tires, intake manifolds, and radiators, at 200 feet. In addition to airplanes, the bomb was effective against motor convoys, light structures, and of course, personnel.<sup>27</sup> It was a nasty little weapon for the mean business of war.

The Grossetto mission results earned a letter of commendation from Gen. Atkinson, Commander of the Fifth Wing.<sup>28</sup>

### **MISSION 12, MAY 21, 1943**

#### **SCIACCA, SICILY, AIRDROME**

Sciacca was a fighter-bomber base on the southwest coast of the island. The base was well camouflaged, bounded by mountains on one side and olive groves on the other three sides making it a difficult target to see. The 2nd followed the 301st. Smoke from their bombs obscured the target. The 2nd’s bombs fell within the smoke area giving good coverage. There was no enemy opposition.<sup>29</sup>

### **MISSION 13, MAY 24, 1943**

#### **TERRANOVA, SARDINIA, SHIPS/HARBOR**

The campaign against ports and airdromes continued with this raid on the harbor and shipping at Terranova. One ship was blown up and numerous hits made on harbor installations, warehouses and ammunition dumps. Resulting fires were visible for fifty miles from 20,000 feet. Enemy resistance was minimal. P-38’s of the 1st Fighter Group provided escort, assuring there were no enemy aircraft encounters. Gen. Atkinson accompanied Col. Thomas in the lead airplane.<sup>30</sup>

### **MISSION 14, MAY 25, 1943**

#### **MESSINA, SICILY, RAIL INSTALLATIONS**

After the aborted mission on May 18 and one canceled on May 23, the Group finally succeeded in getting to Messina. Messina was the Sicilian terminus of a vital trans-shipment point between Italy and Sicily across the narrow Straits of Messina. It was a principle route for supplying Axis forces during the African and Sicilian campaigns. At the end of the latter campaign, the Axis used the strait as an escape route to extract thousands of men and an enormous amount of equipment and arms for use in the Italian campaign. The narrow straits made the area unsuitable for attack by major naval forces. If Messina was to be destroyed or neutralized it would have to be from the air. Until their final days in Sicily, the Axis doggedly defended Messina. Flak was always heavy, intense and accurate and the area was respectfully referred to as “Ack-Ack Alley.” The axis kept flak batteries on both sides of the straits and usually on heavily-gunned Siebel ferries in the channel. Siebels were pontooned rafts capable of carrying two or three 88 mm and various light antiaircraft guns.<sup>31</sup> Initially, fighters were numerous and aggressive over Messina, but the steady Allied counter-air offensive depleted their numbers and forced withdrawal of the rest. In six trips to Messina, the Group lost 2 aircraft and crews, had 4 wounded, had 52 planes damaged and claimed 4 enemy aircraft destroyed, and 7 probables.

Capt. Caruthers, 96th Squadron Commander, led the Group following the 301st over the target. The other two B-17 groups made a follow-on raid one and one half hours later. The targeted rail installations were well covered. Fires and smoke from the strike were still visible from sixty 60 miles at 16,000 feet. Approximately twenty-five Me-109s, FW-190s and Ma-202s

attack the formation before the bomb run. There was no fighter escort. Group gunners received credit for the first two enemy aircraft confirmed destroyed. T/Sgt. Fred L. Green, radio gunner, from South Seattle, Washington, and S/Sgt. Joseph H. Doser, top turret gunner, of Ravenswood, Indiana, both of the 49th Squadron received joint credit for one Me-109. 2nd Lt. Edward H. Lombard, Navigator, from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, also of the 49th, received credit for one Ma-202 destroyed. One crew landed at Bizerte with three men slightly wounded by fire from the fighters, two engines out and 70 holes in the airplane. With wounded treated and the airplane repaired, the crew returned to Chateaudun the following evening. Eleven other aircraft were damaged by the fighter attacks and flak.<sup>32</sup>

### **MISSION 15, MAY 26, 1943**

#### **COMISO, SICILY, AIRDROME**

Comiso was one of the nineteen principal Axis airdromes and landing fields in Sicily. Again, the 2nd followed the 301st and again there was no fighter escort. The 301st dropped 20-pound fragmentation bombs. The 2nd dropped a combination of 500-pound demolition and fragmentation munitions. The results were good and stirred a twenty minute running battle with enemy fighters. Sixteen Group airplanes were singled out by 8 FW-190s and 27 Me-109s. The fighters used multiple tactics. Single plane attacks came from above, level, and on one occasion from below. They showed preference for the right rear quadrant from 2:00 to 7:00 o’clock. Two-ship teams made diving frontal attacks just to either side of the head-on position, firing as they came, then dropping aerial bombs as they pulled up and away from the formation. The bombs burst at formation altitude but, fortunately, behind it. Others flew in formation above the Group, and what was judged to be a spotter plane, flew out of gunner’s range to the side of the bombers, giving the fighters overhead, altitude information for aerial bombing. While unnerving, these aerial bombing tactics inflicted no damage. The machine gun and cannon fire were more effective, claiming the life of S/Sgt. Joseph L. Myers, LTG, from the 429th, and damaging one aircraft sufficiently that the pilot prudently landed at Tunis with one engine shot out and holes in the tail. The fighters went home short 3 Me-109s and with 5 others damaged.<sup>33</sup>

### **MISSION 16, MAY 28, 1943**

#### **LEGHORN, ITALY, HARBOR**

#### **INSTALLATIONS**

The four B-17 groups attacked this target in two waves, one hour apart. The 2nd led the 301st in the second wave. The specific target was the inner harbor. It included shipyard overhaul facilities believed to be the largest of its type in Italy. Support facilities included a power sub-station, dry docks, rail lines, large warehouses, and fuel storage. Two small merchant ships, several small tankers, two or three barges, and one small war vessel were in the harbor. Fires, explosions and heavy black smoke rising to 5,000 feet and visible for 90 miles were evidence that the target suffered considerable destruction. Four





Winston S. Churchill during visit to Chateaudun Du Rhumel, June 1, 1943. (Courtesy of C. Richards)

planes were lightly damaged by flak. Enemy fighters made seven passes at the formation and three were damaged for their effort. Several other fighters were seen in the area but chose to stay out of range.<sup>34</sup>

Saturday, May 29, was a non-operational day. The train from Casablanca arrived at a station near Chateaudun with part of the 96th and 429th ground echelons. Trucks were soon busy hauling men, baggage, packing boxes, supplies and equipment to the camp and airfield. The next evening, about 8:00 P.M., the convoy of trucks, jeeps, trailers and ambulances from Casablanca rolled into camp with the last of the Group ground echelon. There was much joshing between the "seasoned combat" veterans and their greenhorn friends they had last seen in early February in Montana. The Group was now whole, with aircrews, planes and ground echelon, for the first time since activation September 11, 1942, as the 304th Bombardment Group.

### MISSION 17, MAY 30, 1943

NAPLES, ITALY

#### POMIGLIANO AIRCRAFT FACTORY

During the latter part of May, NAAF had struck hard and often at the principle Axis airfields in Sicily and Sardinia. This was to keep the Axis air arm from interfering with the assault on the island fortress of Pantelleria and have the concurrent effect of preparing for the invasion of Sicily. As a consequence the enemy had withdrawn its bombers from the islands to southern Italy. NAAF promptly sent its B-17s after them, with missions to Naples and Foggia.<sup>35</sup>

The NAAF Flying Fortresses made a coordinated attack on important targets near the heart of Naples. The aircraft factory was assigned to the 301st and the 2nd. It built the Daimler-Benz 601 engine used in Messerschmitts and Ma 202s and had a capacity of 250 engines per month. The Capodichino Airdrome, five miles southwest

of the factory, was assigned to the 97th. At last report there were 50 fighters there. The Canello Air Depot, five miles northeast of the factory and the main German air supply depot for all of Italy, was assigned to the 99th.

Twelve enemy fighters, Me-109s, Me-210s and a Ma-200 attacked the 2nd just prior to and just after the bomb run. The formation tightened, concentrated its fire power and discouraged the attackers. "E/A came in firing. Gave him several bursts. E/A turned away and did not return," was the common debriefing report. The opposition did not deter the mission. All bombs were heavily concentrated on the target and on that portion of the factory airfield closest to the plant. Eight aircraft were slightly damaged by flak and fighters. Gunners were credited with one fighter destroyed and four damaged.<sup>36</sup>

### MISSION 18, MAY 31, 1943

#### FOGGIA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

Foggia, and its cluster of eight landing fields and the future home of the 2nd, was the most inhospitable target in Italy for the Group. The 2nd went to Foggia five times and lost five crews. The losses were more devastating because they all occurred on the second mission. The toll of that mission hung like an ominous omen over the remaining three Foggia missions.

On this first mission, the 2nd was the last of the four B-17 groups over the target. The Foggia marshalling yards were an important junction in the Italian rail system. The north-south lines ran from Rome through Foggia to Bari on the Adriatic Coast, then south to the heel of Italy. The east-west line ran between Naples and Foggia.

Fighters attacked the Group for the fifty minutes while it was over land. Good concentration of defensive fire kept them from scoring any victories. Gunners claimed one probable. Seven planes received some, but no crippling damage from flak and fighters. Bombing results were good. On the return flight, the Group was flying

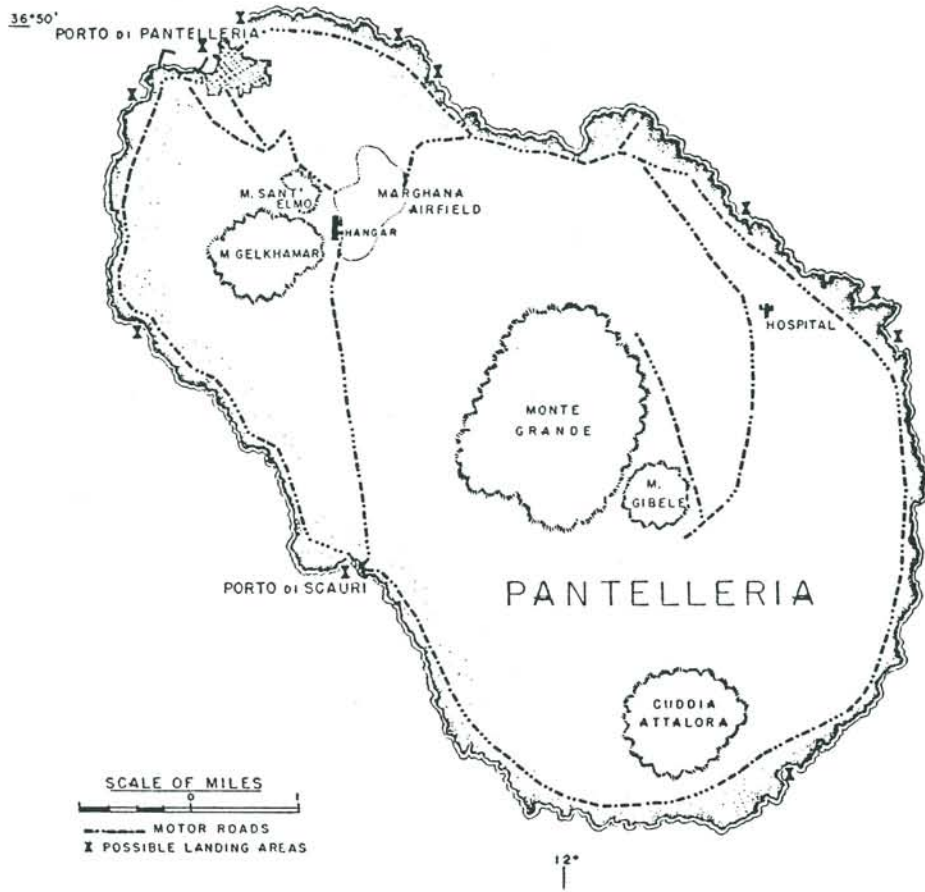
low over the water when fifteen fighters from Sicily made a surprise attack. They arrived at high altitude, undetected, made an uncontested frontal diving attack then dropped aerial bombs on Col. Thomas's lead squadron as they pulled away. The bombs exploded to the left and below the formation. The fighters returned for gunnery passes. For some aircrews the first alert to the attack were the water spouts and churning from the aerial bombs. For others, it was the tail gunner asking what those little plumes of water were running in a trail behind the airplane. He got an immediate answer when a fighter came tearing past at the end of its firing run. Some gunners, trying to save time, had thoughtlessly removed their guns for cleaning. It was one of the anomalies of war. The Group came out unscathed. The German pilots, expecting the usual fusillade of .50 caliber machine gun fire, realized too late the measure of their surprise, turned away, and missed the lay up.

A more pleasant surprise was in store the next day, June 1. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had flown to Africa directly from his third Washington conference with President Roosevelt. He and the President had reviewed the total war situation and more specifically, Churchill had sought agreement to invade Italy following the conquest of Sicily. U.S. military planners favored limiting further conquest to Sardinia after Sicily in deference to the needs of OVERLORD. Churchill deplored keeping over a million and a half fine troops, and all their air and naval power, idle for a year, while Russia fought every day across its enormous front. Invasion of Italy would divert and occupy Axis forces in relief of Russia and possibly force Italy out of the war. Roosevelt didn't seem ready to press his advisors about the invasion of Italy. Churchill prevailed on the President to let General Marshall accompany him to Algiers to confer with Eisenhower and his staff. They arrived in Algiers on May 29. On June 1 Churchill took a two-day break from the discussions for a tour of the victorious troops and units in the area.<sup>37</sup> He, together with Sir Anthony Eden, British Foreign Secretary, Gen. Marshall, Field Marshall Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of Imperial Staff, Field Marshall Sir Harold Alexander, Allied Ground Forces Commander, Air Marshall Tedder, Deputy Supreme Commander, Allied Forces, and Gens. Spaatz and Doolittle attended the 97th Bomb Group mission briefing across the field from the 2nd's location. The mission was the Island of Pantelleria.

The Churchill-Eisenhower discussions resumed in Algiers on June 3. They agreed that Eisenhower should report on the early phases of the Sicilian operation to the Combined Chiefs of Staff in time for them to make a decision on the plan to follow. There was general agreement that if Sicily went quickly and easily, invasion of Italy should follow. At the final meeting, the question of bombing the marshalling yards at Rome was discussed. The yards were an important part of the Italian transportation network and a necessary military objective. Churchill and Marshall were to seek the authorization of their respective governments to bomb the yards.

Of his visit to Africa, Churchill wrote: "I have no more pleasant memories of the war than the eight days in Algiers and Tunis."<sup>38</sup>





Mediterranean



Source: Craven and Cate Vol II, 420.

### MISSION 19, JUNE 5, 1943 LA SPEZIA, ITALY BATTLESHIPS/HARBOR

This was the longest mission to date. The targets — three Littorio class battleships. The Group was split into three 10 and 11 ship formations that flew as elements of the 97th, 99th and 301st Groups. The bomb load was two 2,000-pound general purpose bombs. Near misses were made on all three ships leaving two damaged and one severely damaged. Hits were scored on the nearby docks and in the city. Flak was intense but did little damage. Only two fighters were reported and they barely came within range before breaking away. Crews logged over eight hours flying time.<sup>39</sup>

### MISSIONS 20-25, JUNE 7-11, 1943<sup>39</sup> PANTELLERIA ISLAND TOWN AND GUN POSITIONS

A place of banishment during the Roman Empire, Pantelleria is a forty-two square mile, volcanic island jutting up in the Sicilian Straits about midway between Sicily and Tunisia — fifty-three miles from the latter and sixty-three miles from the former. Conquest of Pantelleria became a matter of considerable concern and caution as plans for the invasion of Sicily progressed. The cliff-lined coast had a notable lack of beaches. The only feasible area for invasion was around the harbor and town of Porto di Pantelleria on the north end of the island. Even

there the harbor was small and shallow with tricky offshore currents and high surf. The island's natural defenses and key position lent well to development of a fortress commanding the adjacent sea lanes. The island had been a forbidden military zone since 1926 and the Italian government had been strengthening its natural defenses since that time. There were more than 100 gun emplacements, with the highest concentration around the harbor. Others were located to command the few additional places where landings might be attempted. All were well fortified. A number of pillboxes, machine-gun nests, and strong points were scattered about the island, taking advantage of the mountains and seaside cliffs. Marghiana Airfield, in the north central part of the island, was about 5000 feet long on its longest axis. It was capable of holding eighty fighter aircraft and could serve as a base for Axis reconnaissance planes. On the southeast side of the airfield there was a huge, below-ground hangar, 1,100 feet long, that housed an electric light plant, water supply, and repair facilities. The Germans had installed radar on the island with a range of eighty miles that could detect any large movement of shipping or aircraft between Tunisia and southern Sicily. The coastal caves and grottos served as ammunition depots and refueling points for submarines and torpedo boats that threatened Allied shipping in the central Mediterranean.

Estimates of the island's garrison ranged from 10,000 to 12,000. This was an impressive number when backed by the island's formidable defenses. But the garrison was over-aged, diverse,

untested in battle or conditioned to intensive bombardment. Many had their families with them. The emerging Allied dominance of the area left little hope for support, resupply or reinforcement of the defenders. The garrison's morale and resolve were assessed as doubtful. Still, a lengthy and courageous defense of the island might stiffen the spirit of the Italian army and people. These and other considerations caused differences of opinion among Allied ground, naval, and air forces as to the wisdom of an assault on Pantelleria and the nature of the assault if attempted. After the invasion of Sicily was shifted from Palermo to the southeastern coast, Pantelleria took on even greater strategic importance and Eisenhower concluded that it must be captured and occupied.

Besides denying it to the enemy, capture of the island would give the Allies a forward base for short-range fighters, such as the P-40 and Spitfires, to cover the Sicilian invasion fleets and landing beaches. Crippled Allied aircraft could use the airfield if unable to make it back to bases in North Africa.

Gen. Eisenhower decided to start with aerial and naval bombardment in an attempt to break the resistance and will of the garrison and the civilian population. If this tactic alone failed to force surrender, it should help assure success of the amphibious landing, scheduled for June 11, with minimum loss of life. The British I Infantry Division, trained in amphibious warfare but not slated for the invasion of Sicily, was chosen for the landing. Air Marshall Tedder was authorized to use all of the NAAF, supplemented by



heavy and medium bombers from the Middle East command if necessary. An air and naval blockade of the island was to be maintained. Gen. Eisenhower told Gen. Marshall, he wanted to make Pantelleria a sort of laboratory to see whether aerial bombardment could inflict enough physical and morale damage as to make a landing a rather simple affair. Air commanders were eager to demonstrate the prowess of air power.

As the air commander, Gen. Spaatz committed the entire SAF and part of the TAF of NAAF to the campaign: 4 heavy, 7 medium and 2 light bomb groups and 8 fighter groups, some 1,000 plus aircraft.

Pantelleria had been attacked by fighters and medium bombers from May 8 through 11 to prevent use of the airfield by planes to cover the Axis evacuation from Tunisia. The first raid put the landing area out of action and destroyed a sizeable number of airplanes on the ground. The remaining raids had been precautionary. By May 18, when the main offensive began, it was estimated that the Axis had 900 operational combat planes within range of and some on the island. Allied medium bombers and fighter bombers began the offensive and continued it through May, concentrating mostly on Porta di Pantelleria and the airfield, to forestall their use in building up reserve supplies by the enemy. On June 1, when B-17s were first used, the emphasis shifted to the coastal batteries and the gun emplacements. These raids continued daily through June 5. Also, five times between May 31 and June 5, the air assault was supplemented by naval bombardment. On June 6 the second phase of the air assault started with around-the-clock air attack that was to continue and increase in intensity until D-day, June 11. On the 8th of June, the British Royal Navy launched a full scale attack on the city, the docks, and coastal batteries with five light cruisers, eight destroyers and three torpedo boats. The enemy response was weak and inaccurate giving some indication of the effect of the aerial bombardment.

Prior to June 6, the Italian and German Air Force (GAF) had not come to the defense of the island. On June 6 and 7 small groups of enemy fighters attempted interceptions. These diminished then increased June 10 and 11 when the Allied air offensive reached its highest intensity. During this period two night fighter-bomber attacks were made by the enemy on North African bases. The air opposition had little effect on the Allied air operations and cost the enemy an estimated sixty planes, nearly four times the number lost by the Allies for all of the period May 18 to June 11.

Despite the inordinate and incessant pounding of the island, enemy antiaircraft fire continued up to the final raid on June 11, just prior to surrender. The flak was characterized as heavy, slight in intensity and generally lacking in accuracy, even though bombing altitudes for the heavy bombers was lowered to medium bomber levels in an attempt to increase accuracy against the dug-in gun positions. The air forces gave no quarter or spared any effort to bomb the island into submission. In the latter stages of the assault, dust and smoke from prior raids obscured targets, and on June 10, a day of

continuous bombing, aircraft were sometimes so thick in the island air space that units had to circle and wait for others to complete their bomb runs.

The 2nd made its first Pantelleria raid on June 7. The aiming point – six symmetrical stores or barracks buildings in the northwest part of the city – was well covered. Enemy opposition included a few ineffective aerial bombs, four half-hearted attacks by Me-109s, and flak that slightly damaged one aircraft. The next four missions were all against gun positions. The bomb loads for June 8 and 9 were changed from 500-pound demolition bombs to 1,000-pound general purpose bombs. On the June 8 raid direct hits were observed on one gun position. The other suffered no discernable damage. Dust and haze over the target on June 9 left results in doubt. The Group was back over that same target at 8:55 the next morning. This time the mission was thwarted by 8/10's cloud cover and poor visibility, and was considered a failure. The Group returned to the same target at 4:30 P.M. In the meantime, Doolittle, unhappy with the efforts to knock out the fortified guns, lowered the bombing altitude from the 15,000 - 17,000 foot level to the 12,000 - 15,000 foot level. By target time the weather had improved only marginally to variable overcast of 5/10's to 8/10's. The bombing results were better with several hits near the gun position, but enough bombs fell outside the diminutive target to disappoint the determined crews. At 11:42 the morning of June 11 the Group released its bombs on the city from 10,000 feet, completing its sixth consecutive raid against the island. The damage and destruction in the target area were extensive. There was one large explosion and fire with black smoke spewing skyward.<sup>40</sup>

As the Group approached the target on this last raid, the invasion fleet was engaged in pre-landing fire on shore targets. As soon as the Group left the target, landing craft started moving to shore. Twice during the final blitz, once on June 8 and again on June 10, the island was accorded an opportunity to surrender. Each time leaflets were dropped demanding immediate cessation of hostilities, and unconditional surrender of all military personnel. Each time, after a six hour unilateral cease fire without the prescribed response, the blitz resumed. The landing craft reached the beaches in the harbor area at 11:55 A.M. There was no opposition except some small arms fire at one beach that was quickly quelled. The night before Vice Admiral Gino Pavesi, military governor of Pantelleria, had informed Rome that the bombing was unendurable, the island water supply destroyed, they were out of ammunition, there were no communications, and the people were exhausted. He ask for approval to surrender. Mussolini then ordered the surrender. A destroyer and several airplanes reported seeing a white flag of surrender as the landing force approached the beaches and a white cross appeared on the battered airfield. At 5:35 that afternoon the formal surrender terms were signed in the big hangar. The most hoped for outcome had been realized. From May 8 to June 11, the NAAF dropped 6,200 tons of bombs and flew 5,285 sorties at a loss of fourteen aircraft — four destroyed, ten missing and sixteen damaged over the island itself<sup>41</sup> — but none from the 2nd.

There was justified and understandable elation among air power enthusiasts over the surrender of Pantelleria. It was the first territorial conquest in history by air action. The official AAF history concludes that the poor morale of the defenders was the determining factor in the failure to put up a strong and prolonged defense. Further, that the air assault hurt the defenders ability to resist and broke their will. Was the conquest by air an unqualified confirmation of the power to subdue as some air power proponents asserted at the time? Hardly. The over-aged, untested garrison, many with families in jeopardy, and whose morale was suspect from the beginning, hardly qualified to confirm that extreme air power theory. As Hanson W. Baldwin wrote: "Victory through air power in World War II was an ideal, not a reality, but victory without air power in that or any other war was, and is, for the United States impossible."<sup>42</sup> A younger, trained, experienced, and more resolute force, unhampered by concerns of family, would have extracted a far greater toll from the invaders. These considerations aside, it was no small victory. There was no loss of life among the landing forces. By July 10, when the invasion of Sicily started, Pantelleria was already a fully operational Allied air base with fighter planes, rescue units, a weather station, and an emergency landing ground. It gave air support to the ground troops pushing ashore in southeastern Sicily.

The next day attention was directed at the three adjacent islands of the Pelagies group: Lampedusa, Linosa and Lampione, which also surrendered.

### SICILY, PRELUDE TO ITALY<sup>43</sup>

The invasion of Sicily, operation HUSKY, was approved at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943. Planning started in February, but by May the main elements of the plan had been altered. Originally U.S. forces were to land on the northwest coast near Palermo. The British would land at the opposite end of the island on the eastern shore below Syracuse. This plan was changed in favor of an eight-pronged amphibious assault along a 100-mile coastline around the east and southeast tip of the island. D-day was July 10.

In brief, the air plan in preparation for HUSKY was to destroy or neutralize Axis air power prior to the invasion. Next, to give air support to the invasion forces, and following the assault, to provide air cover for the invasion area and the supply convoys, and take the offensive against enemy shipping and naval forces. Additionally, Allied air forces were to limit opposing air action threatening build-up of the invasion fleet and forces along the North African coastline, disrupt the lines of communication on which the strength of the Axis depended, block efforts to reinforce Sicily, and achieve and maintain air superiority over Sicily. On July 2, D-day minus 8, Allied air forces were to launch a systematic attack of increasing intensity against enemy air fields to eliminate any effective air opposition to the invasion.

When the air operations began, the Allies had 4,900 operational aircraft opposed by 900 Ger-



man and 500 Italian operational aircraft. The increasing strength and continuing attacks by Allied air left fewer and fewer sanctuaries for Axis air forces. The enemy was forced to resort to frequent moves of his dwindling resources, to hasty construction of landing grounds and to repeated repair of bomb-damaged airfields. To track enemy actions and find the illusive and most lucrative targets, HUSKY laid on an all-consuming task-load of photo reconnaissance. Elliot Roosevelt's photo reconnaissance wing (NAPRW) flew 500 missions from May 15 to July 10. NAPRW mapped the entire 10,000 square miles of Sicily. Allied naval forces required photographs of virtually every port in the western and central Mediterranean. Major ports were covered daily. Those harboring units of the Italian fleet were visited twice a day. Smaller ports serving coastal traffic were visited twice a week. The air forces demanded coverage of all airdromes in Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Italy and the western Balkans. Once a week these airdromes were all photographed within a four-hour period to yield an accurate count of aircraft locations at a given time. To meet the additional demands by the heavy bomb groups, NAPRW gave special coverage to harbors, industrial areas, and lines of communication.

The air offensive immediate to HUSKY started the day after the fall of Pantelleria. Priority attention was given to Sicilian airfields where the Axis had nineteen principle airdromes and landing grounds and a dozen newly constructed fields of lesser importance. From June 12 through July 14, the 2nd flew eighteen missions; fifteen to Sicily, two to Italy and one to Sardinia. Eleven of the eighteen were against airfields, five were against rail installations and marshalling yards and two against the Sicilian cities of Palermo and Messina.<sup>44</sup>

### **MISSION 26, JUNE 12, 1943**

#### **PALERMO, SICILY BOCCA DI FALCO AIRDROME**

This airdrome was one of the four most important Axis air bases in Sicily. There were approximately seventy-one aircraft on the field at the time of the raid, including single, twin and multi-engine types. Most were in dispersal areas and on a perimeter track bordering the field. The raid destroyed thirty and damaged twenty-five. Direct hits and near misses were recorded on a variety of facilities, including hangars, workshops, fuel stores, two gun emplacements and other unidentified buildings. Fires were started with black smoke that was visible for two hundred miles at 18,000 feet. Ten Group bombers were slightly damaged by flak. A small number of enemy fighters made passes without effect and were quickly driven away by the P-38 escort.<sup>45</sup>

### **MISSION 27, JUNE 15, 1943**

#### **CASTELVETRANO, SICILY, AIRDROME**

Castelvetro was a medium bomber base about forty-five miles southwest of Palermo. The Group carried a mixed load of 20-pound fragmentation and 300-pound demolition bombs. About ten minutes before target time, aerial

bombs were sighted. They exploded to the rear of the formation closer to the 301st following the 2nd. The 2nd received no damage from the aerial bombs, flak or fighters. The raid was successful. Facilities were set afire and several large aircraft were left blazing, including one on the runway.<sup>46</sup>

### **AIN M'LILA**

No missions were scheduled from June 16 through 20, while the Group moved thirty miles to its new field at Ain M'Lila, Algeria, that was twenty-two miles southwest of Constantine. The Group moved itself. The aircrews went with their airplanes. Everything else was transported in Group vehicles with trucks shuttling back and forth. The field and campsite were a considerable improvement over Chateaudun. The camp was in a grassy meadow-like area. Tents were lined up in orderly rows around an open quadrangle with a squadron on each side. The runways, taxiways and dispersal areas were all dirt. One major amenity was a two story stone warehouse owned by Shell Oil Company that was large enough for all of the Group Headquarters offices and for a briefing and war room that could seat all the crews.<sup>47</sup>

### **MISSION 28, JUNE 21, 1943**

#### **NAPLES, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS**

These yards were an important part of the Italian rail network. They lay a few hundred yards from the bay of Naples coastline in the midst of a large industrial complex. It was a rich target. Maj. Haynes, Commander of the 49th Squadron, led the Group followed by the 99th. The 97th and 301st Groups attacked the Cancellero Air Depot at the same time. All groups carried a combination of 500-pound clusters of incendiaries and 300-pound general purpose bombs. At least twenty-five hits were made on the central railroad station, sidings and freight sheds, and ten or more on the locomotive sheds and depots. Direct hits and damaging near misses were made on a large number of other lucrative targets adjacent to the rail yards, including: seven buildings in a torpedo factory area causing partial destruction and fires; buildings in the northwest quarter of the Royal Arsenal; industrial, commercial and residential buildings north of the Arsenal and on the adjacent marshalling yards; cotton mills and on rolling stock on nearby sidings doing extensive damage; and on the I.M.A.M. Airframe buildings, the Corso Meridionale Stores dump and the small marshalling yards between these two areas. Scattered hits were made outside these major targets in nearby commercial and residential areas causing demolition and fires.

Flak over the target was heavy, intense, and accurate, damaging eight airplanes, one of which was knocked out of the formation, attacked by fighters and forced to ditch one half mile from the Isle of Ischia a few miles outside the Bay of Naples. Six single-engine fighters made one diving pass each at the 96th Squadron. There was no damage and no claims, although one fighter pilot was seen to bailout, leaving his plane in a steep dive toward the water. No one saw the plane crash and no claim was confirmed. Some aerial

bombs were dropped toward the formation but exploded harmlessly out of range.<sup>48</sup>

Capt. Jack L. Bentley, Commander 429th Squadron, was flying squadron lead in aircraft No. 42-29605, "Huney Bun," when it took a blast of flak over the target. After leaving the target and on the route back over water, Bentley's airplane went into a steep glide with black smoke and oil streaming from number three and four engines and white vapor trailing from between them. All four propellers were turning and the plane was under control. Once separated from the formation, he was attack by several fighters. One closed in from the tail and fired a long fifteen-second burst, dead astern. Capt. Roderic D. O'Connor, flying lead in the second element behind Bentley, took his element down to give cover and his gunners drove the fighters away. O'Connor closed to within a few feet of the stricken plane. The copilot's seat was empty and he assumed the copilot had taken over the top turret. Other crew members reported that the waist gun and tail gunners positions were vacant. O'Connor crossed over to Bentley's left wing. He noted a hole in the left elevator approximately two feet in diameter. Bentley signaled that he was turning back to Ischia. Capt. Caruthers, leading the 96th Squadron, followed Bentley down with his formation but stayed above that of O'Connor's. Caruthers speculated that the white vapor was gasoline. Both formations continued on the homebound course when Bentley turned back to Ischia. There were no reported sightings of Bentley's ditching.<sup>49</sup>

Statements taken from evaders and from survivors after liberation from prisoner of war camps tell the fate of the crew. The airplane was ditched one half mile north of Ischia, with one dead, one unconscious, five wounded and three unharmed. Copilot 2nd Lt. John D. Williams Jr., was killed instantly by flak and went down with the ship when it sank after ditching. S/Sgt. Walter S. Thompson Jr., TG, received a bad wound to his left forearm and numerous other wounds. He was assisted from the airplane through the radio hatch in a state of shock. Once ashore at Ischia he was taken to an Italian dispensary. The next day the Italians reported he had died. According to hearsay reports from survivors, he was buried in a cemetery in Naples. Capt. Bentley, T/Sgt. George F. Immonen, LTG, and T/Sgt. Urgan M. Heinen, ROG, were unharmed and were confined to a jail cell that first night on Ischia. The remaining five crew members, Capt. Charles W. Grooms, N, wounded in the right leg, 1st Lt. James H. Heaberg, B, wounded in the right hand, T/Sgt. Norman C. Moore, UTG, wounded in the left thigh, S/Sgt. Harold Marlow, LWG, wounded by shrapnel and a machine gun bullet, and Sgt. Roy D. Musser, RWG, wounded in left arm and shoulder, were all given first aid then moved to hospitals for medical treatment and placed in a quarantine camp for fifteen days. Later, all, except T/Sgt. Moore, were transferred to Italian prison camps.

T/Sgt. Moore was taken to a hospital in Naples. He was still there when the city was captured by the Allies. Sgt. Moore was then moved to a hospital at Bizerte. After his recovery, he returned to the 429th Squadron. Following a happy reunion, he was released on October 28, 1943 from combat duty and sent back to the U.S.<sup>50</sup>



On August 29 Sgt. Musser was taken to a camp at Servigliano where he was held until September 14, the day after the Italian capitulation. The Italian guards opened the prison gates and released about 2,000 Allied prisoners. Among those released besides Musser, were Sgts. Heinen and Immonen. They all joined with three other Allied enlisted airmen, and the group succeeded in evading for several months by living in a cave in the hills and with friendly Italian families. On March 11, 1944, Sgt. Heinen and Immonen were among a small group of evaders captured by the Germans. After that Sgt. Musser went back into hiding in the countryside so as not to endanger his Italian benefactors. He and other evaders lived in caves until late June 1944 when they learned that Allied forces were about 10 miles away. The evaders obtained a truck from the Italians and with the aid of Italian Partisans made their way back to Allied control. Sgt. Musser reported that he had not been briefed on escape and evasion since coming overseas and he had no escape equipment after going down in the water.

The remaining six members of the crew besides the two fatalities and Sgts. Moore and Musser, spent the rest of the war in prison camps.<sup>51</sup>

Capt. O'Connor, Squadron Executive Officer, was named to succeed Bentley as Commander of the 429th Squadron.

### **MISSION 29, JUNE 25, 1943** **MESSINA, SICILY, CITY**

Messina remained a primary target in the effort to block reinforcement of Sicily. The Messina Straits were barely 2 miles wide. The terminus had a daily clearance capacity of 4,000 to 5,000 tons.<sup>52</sup> With the invasion of Sicily becoming more apparent, and with growing Allied dominance of the air and sea lanes, the Axis defended Messina with increasing desperation. The four B-17 Groups pounded the city, the ferry, railroad yards, docks, and warehouse areas with more than 300 tons of bombs in the single largest raid by NAAF during the month of June. The 2nd was the tail-end group over the target. The bomb load varied from 300 to 1000 and 2000-pound demolition bombs. There was no fighter escort, although fighters from Malta made a diversionary raid.

Bombs fell on the infantry barracks, at each end of a railway viaduct and possibly on the artillery barracks area, though results were partially obscured by dust and smoke. Direct hits damaged nearly one-half mile of railroad tracks and damaged a railroad bridge. But the wreckage came at a price.

Flak was heavy, intense and accurate. By the time the 2nd got to the target flak smoke filled the bomb run route. Approximately thirty fighters engaged the formation before and after the target and again off the coast of Sicily near Trapani. Attacks came from every point on the clock. It was probably the largest variety of fighters the Group had seen to date: Me-109s, FW-190s, Me-210s, Reggani 2001s, Ma-200s, Ma-202s and Me-110s. The attackers were fearlessly aggressive, flying into the formation on several passes. They dropped aerial bombs but were off target. Twenty airplanes were damaged by a com-

bination of flak and fighter guns. Lt. Richard Eggers of the 429th Squadron had engine trouble just prior to the bomb run. He dropped out of his formation, salvoed his bombs over Messina outside the target area, and tried to join another group already on its way home. During the twenty minutes he was alone, he was attack by fighters but his gunners fought them off, claiming four probables. He made it safely to Tunis where he landed with the trim control shot out and elevator control damaged. Capt. Albert D. Hinsey and crew from the 49th Squadron had no such luck.

Hinsey, in aircraft No. 42-29615, was flying the right wing of his commander, Maj. Haynes. An Me-109 made a head-on attack at the squadron formation. T/Sgt. Charles B. Johnson, upper turret gunner on Maj. Haynes' crew, took aim on the incoming fighter at approximately 1,000 yards and fired on it all the way in, apparently killing the pilot. Now set on its course, the fighter bore in like a giant missile on Capt. Hinsey's hapless plane, crashed into the right wing and exploded. The collision tore off part of the Fort's right wing, it rolled over slowly and went into a flat, inverted spin. As the spin accelerated, the airplane began to disintegrate, breaking in two just back of the radio compartment. Only one chute appeared. One part of the broken bird crashed on the Italian mainland and the other fell into the Messina Straits. This loss involved one of the imponderable ironies of war. The regular top turret gunner on Hinsey's crew, T/Sgt. Pat S. Lamach was in the hospital with dysentery. His replacement for this mission was S/Sgt. Urban B. Lavoie.<sup>53</sup> None of the crew are known to survive.<sup>54</sup>

Four officers of the 429th Squadron were wounded, two seriously — 1st Lt. Robert D. Thorman, N, left shoulder, and 2nd Lt. Richard R. Marrow, B, left arm. Both were hospitalized at the 61st Station Hospital. Gunners claimed 2 enemy aircraft destroyed and 7 probables.<sup>55</sup>

### **MISSION 30, JUNE 28, 1943** **LEGHORN, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS**

This was second trip to Italy's second largest harbor and its largest naval base. The marshalling yards were an important part of the rail system supporting the Axis forces. A sizeable industrial complex, a large oil refinery and oil storage facilities, and a hydroelectric power plant were in the area. Ninety-seven Fortresses from the four groups dropped 261 tons of bombs on their targets, severely damaging the industrial and railway installations. There were no injuries, damage or losses to the Group. Lt. Holger A. Selling, 20th Squadron, feathered engines number two and three just after the bomb run. The crew jettisoned guns, ammunition, bomb hoist and other loose items and made it safely to Philippeville, Algeria.<sup>56</sup>

### **MISSION 31, JUNE 30, 1943** **PALERMO, SICILY** **CITY/MILITARY INSTALLATIONS**

The 301st and the 2nd attacked the barracks, stores and some unidentified military compound buildings in the city. The target was well covered and there was considerable damage in the

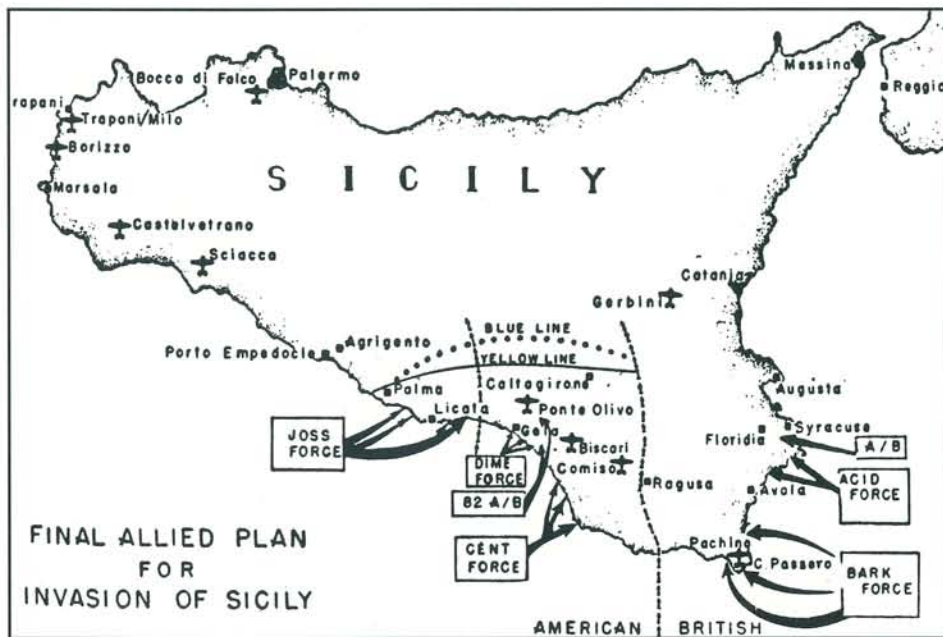
surrounding residential area of the city. Unlike the Mother's Day raid on May 9, there was a nominal amount of inaccurate flak and not one enemy fighter sighted, perhaps because of twenty-four escorting P-38s from the 14th Fighter Group.<sup>57</sup>

**MISSION 32, JULY 3, 1943**  
CHILIVANO, SARDINIA, LANDING GROUND  
**MISSION 33, JULY 4, 1943**  
CATANIA, SICILY, AIRDROME  
**MISSION 34, JULY 5, 1943**  
GERBINI, SICILY, SATELLITE NUMBER 6  
**MISSION 35, JULY 6, 1943**  
GERBINI, SICILY, SATELLITE NUMBER 6  
**MISSION 36, JULY 7, 1943**  
GERBINI, SICILY, SATELLITE NUMBER 6  
**MISSION 37, JULY 8, 1943**  
GERBINI, SICILY  
SATELLITES NUMBER 4 AND 5  
**MISSION 38, JULY 9, 1943**  
BISCARI/SAN PIETRO, SICILY  
LANDING GROUND  
**MISSION 39, JULY 10, 1943**  
GERBINI, SICILY, SATELLITE NUMBER 9

The Group flew seven consecutive missions as its part of the HUSKY air plan for raids of growing intensity against enemy airfields, commencing on July 3, D-day minus 7. The Gerbini complex was the most important and it received the brunt of these attacks. The Group used fragmentation bombs on the first three missions, hoping to catch enemy aircraft on the ground. Three hundred (300) and 500-pound demolition bombs were used on the remaining four missions to crater landing areas, and destroy airfield installations. Bombing results ranged from good to fair to unknown. The results were fair over Chilivano. The Group tried to use the autopilot for first time by the lead ship, but the autopilot failed on the bomb run, forcing manual take over.<sup>58</sup> During the bomb run, when the AFCE is used, the Bombardier takes over flight control of the airplane. At the time of bomb release, the airplane must be straight and level and flying at a given airspeed. When the bombsight is mated to the autopilot, the bombardier has direct control over the heading of the airplane during the final minutes of the bomb run. Otherwise, the bombardier must instruct the pilot verbally over the intercom or transmit directions to the Pilots Direction Indicator (on pilot's instrument panel) so the pilot flies the airplane such that the cross hairs on the bombsight intersect the target signaling release of the bombs. On Mission 36 to Gerbini No. 6, the target was substantially obscured by 9/10ths cloud cover at 18,000 feet. Mission 33 to Catania was very successful. The target was well covered and heavy black smoke with clearly visible flames was seen from 22,000 feet. The Group again used the C-1 autopilot on the bomb run. This time the lead plane in each squadron used the autopilot. The bombardiers in the other planes synchronized their bomb release on their respective squadron lead plane.<sup>59</sup>

On this set of missions, the Group claimed 18 enemy aircraft destroyed, 2 probables and 2





Source: Craven and Cate Vol II, 420.

damaged in air action and several destroyed or damaged on the ground. The Group losses were 2 aircraft to enemy fighters, 1 killed, 2 wounded, 17 aircraft damaged and 5 emergency landings.

The July 4 raid on Catania unleashed the largest fighter attack to date against the Group. Fifty to seventy-five Me-109s, Me-110s, Ma-200s, FW-190s and Re-2001s battled the formation for thirty minutes from every angle and elevation. They dropped aerial bombs and used multiple and single plane tactics. Gunners downed 13 Me-109s, 3 FW-190s and 1 Ma-200 and claimed 2 Me-109 probables. Lt. Dutton C. Dutton, 96th Squadron, in plane No. 42-3066, experienced an engine failure just after leaving the target. At least fifty fighters sprang to the attack, pressing vigorously for about five minutes. Dutton's gunners claimed two before the attackers gave up, or selected other prey. Dutton landed at Malta where repairs were made and he returned to Ain M'Lila that evening. 2nd. Lt. Richard F. Underwood, 20th Squadron, in plane No. 42-5427, was attacked by fighters who made thirty-five passes in a twenty-five minute running battle. His gunners shot down two of the attackers but his plane was so badly damaged he had to make an emergency landing at Malta. The fighters had plastered the airplane, leaving damage to number one engine nacelle and air intake ducts; the right stabilizer, elevator and elevator controls; control cables including those for the automatic pilot; number 4 engine nacelle; the right aileron and surrounding wing sections; and severed the rudder controls. Miraculously, none of the crew was injured, and the plane was still controllable enough for an emergency landing. After two days of repairs, the crew flew back to base.

Lt. Walter C. Laich and crew of the 20th Squadron in airplane No. 42-29607, "Stormy Weather," became victims of this raid. It is believed they were hit by aerial bombs coming off the target. Lt. Laich was flying on the right wing of Lt. Philip K. Devine leading the second element of the 20th Squadron. After being hit, the plane fell out of position, and came up below and to Devine's left. Devine, his bombardier, navigator and ball turret gunner, all had a view

of Laich's plane. Fire and smoke were coming from the number 3 engine nacelle, and the trailing edge of the right wing, indicating a fuel tank fire. Lt. Laich feathered number 3 propeller, then restarted it in a vain attempt to blow out the fire. In five minutes flames enveloped the right wing and spread to the bomb bay and radio room. Immediately, five or six men bailed out of the waist door, and five or six chutes (eyewitness accounts vary) were seen to open. Two of these men hit the horizontal stabilizer. The chute for only one opened. The other man appeared to be unconscious. Lt. Laich continued to fly the airplane for about eight minutes, in what seemed to be an effort to give all of the crew time to bail out. Enemy fighters followed the plane down, and all the while T/Sgt. Calton B. Grissom, Jr., UTG, kept firing at them. He was still firing when the blazing ship broke in two at the radio room and disintegrated. None of the crew survived.<sup>60</sup>

The other casualty of the Catania raid was S/ Sgt. Norman E. Ferree a tail gunner in the 96th Squadron and the first KIA for that Squadron in WW II. The Squadron felt it had avenged his loss as their gunners accounted for ten of the seventeen enemy fighters destroyed and one of the two probables that day.<sup>61</sup>

T/Sgt. Robert S. Lash, a Group Operations clerk and keeper of a Group Journal, flew his first mission as an observer and recorded the mission as follows: "A/C 607 (Lt. Laich) flying along in perfect formation with a ring of fire around it - 3 chutes, plane went into gentle glide, tail section burned off & A/C fell into water from 12,000 feet. In meantime fighters were raising hell. On several occasions I would be safe in saying every plane was sending bullets at fighters - most vivid 4th of July I've ever seen, with tracers all over the sky, a formation of bombers, fighters darting in and out and black puffs all around. The fighters followed for 40 minutes, then it ended rather abruptly."

The Catania raid was an important milestone in the evolution of the Group's combat capability. First, it provided vindication of the synchronous salvo-bombing technique, using the auto-



Lt. Walter C. Laich. He and his crew KIA on mission 33 to Catania, Sicily airdrome, July 4, 1943. (Courtesy of K. Martin)

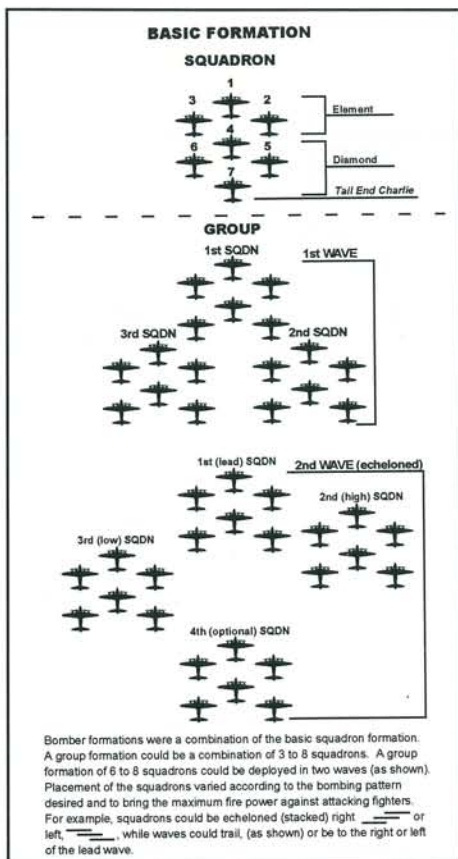
pilot in the lead airplanes. Early in the Group's combat experience, raids against small but important targets, didn't produce the results that was reasonably expected. The Group Bombar-dier, Lt. John F. Taylor, suggested the technique to Lt. Col. Thomas, and that it be tested. Col. Thomas agreed. Four crews went to a bombing range in Algeria, tested the procedure and came back convinced it could produce results superior to that then being used on highly concentrated and pin-point targets.

The second development was the bomber defense formation designed by Lt. Col. Thomas that appreciably increased the Group's fighter defense capability and lessened the losses from fighter attacks. The basic formation was a shallow, four-ship diamond with the "tail-end-Charlie" aircraft echeloned either right or left, and down in the direction of the fighter attack. If the attack was from both sides, the Group formed a "V", half echeloned right and half echeloned left. This formation opened all top turrets and right or left waist guns to the attack direction, and opened all ball turrets and left or right waist guns to the withdrawal of the fighters. Eighth Air Force observers took this unique defensive formation back to England and perfected it into the well-known "combat box." The fact that the Group lost only one airplane and one killed to an enemy force of fifty to seventy-five fighters, while confirming seventeen destroyed and two probables, seemed to prove the efficacy of this defense formation.

Enemy air opposition steadily declined after the Catania mission. During the remaining counter-air offensive over Sicily, the Group benefitted from fighter escort, simultaneous raids by other NAAF units on nearby targets that drew off enemy fighters, and the cumulative effect of the total air offensive.

The first raid on Gerbini on July 5, started three fires with flames and smoke visible from 40 miles at 22,000 feet. Only four Me-109s got through the escort to make a tentative attack. One of these was shot, went down, crashed and exploded.<sup>62</sup> The 2nd had a relatively easy mission on this day because the enemy concentrated on the 99th Group. The 99th sent twenty-seven B-17s against the south half of the Gerbini main airdrome. As the Group neared the target, it was jumped by about 100 Me-109s, FW-190s and Mc-202s. The Group fought its way to the tar-





get, dropped 3,240 fragmentation bombs destroying twenty-eight fighters on the ground, and severely damaging airdrome installations. In the running battle to and from the target, the Group destroyed 38 of the attackers, probably destroyed another 11 and damaged 1. Those victories came at a cost of three of its own Fortresses.<sup>63</sup>

During the second raid on Gerbini, July 6, two men were wounded by flak and gunners damaged two enemy aircraft out of the three that made tepid attacks. Lt. Newton S. Blackford, 429th Squadron, flying aircraft number 42-3342, lost two engines returning from the mission, had exhausted or lost fuel and left the formation at the African coast. He made a forced landing in a wheat field two miles east of Montcalm, Algeria, and thirty-five miles southwest of Constantine, killing ten grazing sheep. One of the men wounded on this mission was on this crew. He was taken to the hospital. A guard was placed on the airplane. The next day an engineering crew from the 429th came, repaired one engine, and Capt. Walter F. Kutschera took off with three engines, and flew the plane back to base.<sup>64</sup>

Target coverage on the fourth consecutive trip to Gerbini was fair, flak was negligible and no fighters attack the Group formation, but one crew was lost to fighters on this mission. 2nd. Lt. Roy S. Kline, 429th Squadron, in aircraft number 42-3083, "Miss Carriage", turned back at 18,000 feet the southwest coast of Sicily. Shortly thereafter two Me-109s attacked knocking out two engines. 2nd. Lt. Edwin G. Kocher, N, and the only survivor, told what happened: "... our plane was lagging - plane couldn't put out to maintain formation position. Pilot called me and said 'If we can't catch up before hitting the coast of Sicily we will turn back. We turned back. . . Nothing for a few minutes and then I saw a couple of Me-109s at-

## How To Bail Out of the Flying Fortress

**LIFE VEST SHOULD BE WORN UNDER PARACHUTE HARNESS ON ALL OVERWATER FLIGHTS**

### Procedure When Wearing Conventional Seat or Back-Type Parachute

When an emergency develops in the air and it becomes necessary to bail out of your airplane, there is no time for confusion or second-guessing. The procedure must be automatic. The instructions below, and the diagram, show through what hatches and in what order crew members should make their exit. Ground drills based on this procedure will help you obtain the efficiency and speed necessary to abandon your airplane successfully and safely. Wherever possible, jump from the after end of the hatch. Where several crew members bail out of the same exit, each should inspect the others to make sure that all are wearing a full complement of equipment securely fastened.

**PILOT** - Exits fourth out forward end of bomb bay. (Alternate exit, out front entrance door.) Is last to leave plane.

**CO-PILOT** - Exits second through forward end of bomb bay.

**BOMBARDIER** - Exits second through front entrance door.

**NAVIGATOR** - Exits first out of front entrance door.

**UPPER TURRET GUNNER** - Exits first out forward end of bomb bay.

**RADIO OPERATOR** - Exits third through after end of bomb bay.

**RIGHT WAIST GUNNER** - Exits second through main entrance door.

**LEFT WAIST GUNNER** - Exits first out main entrance door.

**BALL TURRET GUNNER** - Exits third out of main entrance door.

**TAIL GUNNER** - Exits through small emergency door in tail.

### Procedure When Wearing Quick Attachable Chute Harness...

When the order is given over the inter-com to "Abandon Airplane," each crew member will remove the individual seat-type dinghy and back-type parachute from their respective positions near his station, snap them onto his QAC harness, and exit through the hatch specified. The following instructions, used with the diagram, show the positions of the dinghies and the parachutes, the egress exit hatch, and the order of bailing out. Where several crew members bail out of the same hatch, each should check the others to make sure that all are wearing a full complement of equipment securely fastened. Whenever possible, jump from the after end of the hatch. Remember, a life vest should be worn under the QAC harness on all over-water flights. The layout on the dinghy should be snapped onto the D-ring on the life vest. Periodic ground drills will familiarize your crew members with the operations of the QAC harness and the order of bail-out.

**PILOT** - Parachute mounted on floor directly behind pilot's seat in pilot's cabin. Dinghy worn in seat position. Pilot is fourth to exit through forward end of bomb bay. (Alternate exit, out front entrance door.) Last to leave plane.

**CO-PILOT** - Parachute mounted on floor directly behind co-pilot's seat in pilot's compartment. Dinghy worn in seat position. Exits second through forward end of bomb bay. (Alternate exit, through front entrance door.)

**BOMBARDIER** - Parachute mounted in navigator's compartment on starboard wall directly opposite navigator about half-way up on wall. Dinghy mounted in navigator's compartment near floor on starboard side. Exits first through forward main entrance door.

**NAVIGATOR** - Parachute mounted on bulkhead armor plating directly above door on inner side of navigator's compartment. Dinghy mounted alongside and to rear of bombardier's dinghy. Exits first through front entrance door.

**UPPER TURRET GUNNER** - Parachute mounted on floor just forward of bomb bay bulkhead on port side. Dinghy mounted on forward wall of bomb bay bulkhead in turret compartment, directly below entrance to bomb bay. Exits first through forward end of bomb bay.

**RADIO OPERATOR** - Parachute mounted on starboard wall just forward of rear bulkhead of radio compartment, three-fourths way up side of wall. Dinghy mounted directly beneath radio operator's parachute. Exits third through after end of bomb bay.

**RIGHT WAIST GUNNER** - Parachute mounted on starboard wall just forward of rear floor and even with top of door. Dinghy mounted directly beneath parachute. Exits second through main entrance door.

**LEFT WAIST GUNNER** - Parachute mounted on wall immediately aft and on same level as left waist window on port side. Dinghy mounted directly beneath left waist gunner's parachute. Exits first through main entrance door.

**BALL TURRET GUNNER** - Parachute mounted on all starboard side of rear bulkhead of radio compartment, about even with top of door. Dinghy mounted directly beneath ball turret gunner's parachute. Exits third through main entrance door.

**TAIL GUNNER** - Parachute mounted on starboard wall immediately aft and slightly above rear gunner's escape hatch. Dinghy mounted directly beneath parachute. Exits through small emergency door in tail.

tack us. I started firing at one e/a off on our left wing, when a machine gun bullet must have hit the ball and socket of my gun, putting it out of commission. The next thing I noticed No. 2 and No. 4 engines were feathered and we were losing altitude to 15,000 feet. . . During all this time I was wearing my steel helmet over my headset and did not hear the 'Abandon Ship' order. I saw a small amount of blood dripping from the upper turret and saw bombardier go back. I thought he was going to take over the upper turret. I looked around again and noticed the escape hatch was open and the copilot was going out. I hooked my chute pack to harness which I was wearing and jumped through the nose hatch, pulling rip-cord at once. Everything worked fine as I kicked my legs to straighten shroud lines, I could see other drifting chutes above me, with e/a fighters circling around but not firing at chutes. I think I saw four chutes above me and a like number below me. I think I was the last man to leave the plane. I pulled on shrouds attempting to drift toward fellows already in the water. I was approximately 200 yards

from the plane which had one wing sticking out of the water. When I struck the water, I swam toward the plane. I called to the others, asking if they had a raft. Their reply was 'there is no raft'. Upon reaching the plane I found the raft with large hole burned in one side. I opened the carbon dioxide bottle and it filled the good half of the raft. There were no paddles so upon hearing Lt. Grace, (2nd Lt. Raymond W. Grace, bombardier), answer my call, tied a string around my neck and shoulders from the raft and swam to Lt. Grace. He passed out as I reached him and I pulled him aboard the raft. One-half hour later a P-51. . . was circling around me. All this time Grace and several others were alive. I tried artificial resuscitation on Lt. Grace and continued to work on him, at the same time calling to the others of my crew, but heard no answers. Lt. Grace did not regain consciousness. I worked on him all night and by Friday morning, July 9th, I could feel no pulse. . . I let the air out of his vest and let him into the water. Thursday, July 8th, the first night was calm. Friday a north wind arose and sea became very



rough, waves reaching a height of about 30 feet. I drifted until about 2100 hours Saturday night, July 10th when I was picked up by a British destroyer and was told we would reach Malta in about three or four hours . . .”

Lt. Kocher got back to the Group July 15, sunburned, sore and the worse from shock and exposure. Later he was transferred to non-combat duty with NAATC. None of the rest of the crew were ever heard from.<sup>65</sup>

The July 9 raid on the Biscari airdrome brought the welcome relief of no flak and no fighters. Airfield installations — hangars, repair shops, administration and quarters — all received damage. Bombs left craters across the landing area and into the revetments. On the return, the Group flew past more than 100 ships of the Sicilian invasion fleet off the coast of Africa.<sup>66</sup>

July 10, was HUSKY D-Day, and the Group's last raid on the Gerbini complex. Wake up was 3:45 A.M. and the bombs were away at 9:17 A.M. There was a little flak, seven very wary encounters but no losses, no damage and no claims. The big show was down below. There was intense activity along the southeastern and eastern coasts. Hundreds of landing craft were along the beaches and the areas just inland were under heavy naval shell fire. The skies were full of airplanes and the water was teeming with the 3,000 ships in the invasion fleet. The invasion was augmented the night before by two airborne assaults — one with glider-borne troops in the British sector, and one with paratroopers dropped in the U.S. sector. Both were fraught with a variety of problems and barely averted disaster.

One operation, involving 133 tow planes, mostly C-47s of the 51st Troop Carrier Wing, pulling gliders loaded with more than 1,600 paratroopers of the British I Airborne Division, was to capture a canal bridge south of Syracuse. A complicated flight route around Malta, darkness, unexpected high winds, and inadequately trained British glider pilots nearly turned the mission into a calamity. Only 12 gliders landed in the vicinity of the drop zone, 65 came down at sea and the rest at various points on the island. The few paratroopers dropped in the target area did capture and hold the bridge until invasion troops arrive.<sup>67</sup>

The other airborne mission to the Gela area, flown concurrently, suffered the same problems with nearly the same results. Two hundred twenty-six (226) C-47s of the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing, loaded with 3,405 paratroopers of the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division, arrived in the drop zone area in almost complete darkness and were unable to see their final check points. The drops were widely scattered, but enough came down in the area of the drop zone to seize the objective — a road junction east of Gela.<sup>68</sup>

At H-hour, 02:45 A.M. the invasion forces started storming ashore.<sup>69</sup> By 06:00 A.M. all landings had been successfully completed and a large convoy was clearly visible steaming back to Africa for re-supply as the Group flew home from its last raid to Gerbini. This was Lt. Col. Thomas' 50th mission.

The air offensive against Sicily and the defensive patrols over the ships and beaches gave the invasion fleet and forces near immunity from enemy air attack. The Allied ground troops met little effective opposition from the Italians defending the beaches. By the end of D-day beach-

heads had been secured, but the Germans mounted a strong counter-offensive inland around Gela. To relieve the hard-pressed Allied troops, another airborne mission of 144 C-47s of the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing, with approximately 2,000 paratroops of the 504th Regimental Combat Team, was hastily planned and mounted the same night, July 11. Insufficient time was allowed to warn Allied naval vessels along the route. Only too late it was learned that a safety corridor had not been cleared, and that the enemy had retaken the drop zone near the Gela/Farello airport. Met with withering fire from both friend and foe, the airborne formation broke up and pilots resorted to their own decisions to protect the paratroops. Casualties were heavy. Twenty-three aircraft failed to return and of those that did, over half were badly damaged. The 504th suffered heavy losses and was unable to accomplish its mission.<sup>70</sup>

Despite the near-tragic experience of July 11, it was decided to attempt one more large airborne operation. The objective was a river bridge in the Catania area. Again the mission was set up too late, the safety corridor hadn't been cleared, and the planes ran into heavy fire from Allied naval vessels as well as from friendly and hostile shore batteries. Of the 124 aircraft involved, 50 were badly damaged, 11 destroyed by friendly fire, and another 27 forced to return to their Tunisian bases with full or partial loads. Even so, enough British paratroopers landed close enough to seize the bridge, remove the enemy-set demolition, and hold it until Allied ground forces took possession on the morning of July 14.<sup>71</sup>

Out of the 666 troop carrier sorties flown on the four airborne missions, 45 aircraft were lost, 25 of which were believed to be from friendly fire. Of the 5,000 paratroopers carried, some 60% landed far from their drop zones. Gen. Eisenhower ordered a study of the operations by a board of officers to determine the lessons learned for use in the future. In addition to the obvious conclusions about proper training, advance planning and communications, and suitability of the role for airborne troops, the board concluded that planning should be centralized in one headquarters, and that the air commander-in-chief should control the troop carrying agency and decide whether the operation should be carried out.<sup>72</sup>

During July 11 and 12 the Tactical Air Force steadily increased its effort against enemy movements. The Strategic Air Force threw its full weight against lines of communication and airfields to aid the advance of the ground forces. The four days following D-day, the 2nd went after Sicilian rail facilities and the Trapani/Milo airdrome.

### **MISSION 40, JULY 11, 1943**

CATANIA, SICILY

SOUTH MARSHALLING YARDS

### **MISSION 41, JULY 12, 1943**

MESSINA, SICILY, RAILROAD BRIDGES

### **MISSION 42, JULY 13, 1943**

TRAPANI/MILO, SICILY, AIRDROME

### **MISSION 43, JULY 14, 1943**

MESSINA, SICILY, RAILROAD YARDS

The mission to Catania was in clear, cloudless skies. Africa, Sicily and Malta were all vis-

ible at the same time. More landing craft were going ashore. Naval craft of all kinds were along or near the coast from Gela all the way around the southern tip of the island to within five miles of Catania. The Navy ships were still shelling coastal defenses. One transport was on fire and one had been sunk. The 2nd was the last of the four B-17 groups over the target. The flak started about half way across the island and damaged fourteen planes but there were no injuries. The railroad through Catania was on the line between Messina to the north and Syracuse on the southeastern coast. It was a crucial link in the transport of Axis men and materiel from the Italian mainland. The raid severely damaged the marshalling yards. Six Me-109s and Re-200ls made passes at the formation. Five of the attackers quickly broke away when fired upon but one Re-2001 pressed to within fifty yards and was shot down. The pilot was apparently injured or killed because he didn't get out as the plane went down in flames and smoke, crashing to the ground.<sup>74</sup>

The Messina targets were two railroad bridges on the Italy-Sicily "life line." There were several near misses but no direct hits on the bridges. Bombs did fall directly on nearby tracks, rolling stock, maintenance yards and buildings. For the first time the route took the Group directly across Sicily and over Mt. Etna. There were no fighters but moderate flak damaged seven airplanes and wounded one navigator.<sup>75</sup>

The Trapani/Milo airdrome had all-weather runways and was suitable for medium bombers. The bombing "post holed" one runway and left it unusable. Nine airplanes were slightly damaged by flak. Six Me-109s intercepted the Group and gunners claimed one probable. The attacker was set afire and went into a spin but no one saw it explode, crash, or the pilot bailout.<sup>76</sup>

Messina was repeatedly raided in a determined effort to destroy it as a terminus for movement of Axis personnel and materiel. The Group took the same route across Sicily as on the July 12 raid. Smoke and dust over the target hampered target identification and observation of results. An explosion erupted in the target area during the bomb run followed by another one after the turn away from the target, indicating that some munitions stores were hit. The flak was intense and accurate. It came in brackets approximately 1,000 feet in depth with several bursts occurring simultaneously at different altitudes within the bracket. Enemy fire came from batteries on both sides of the straits and from ships in the channel. Lt. Vincent J. McIntyre, leading the second element of the 96th Squadron in plane number 42-29583, "Sixty-Fifty," took a bad hit just after the bomb run. He got away from the target and tried to turn out to sea. His two wingmen followed. Smoke was coming out of the radio hatch and the cockpit, and there were several holes in the left wing. Fire broke out and nine crewmen bailed out in two groups of four and five. The airplane went into a flaming dive and disintegrated shortly before crashing in the water. Witnesses on the mission thought the crew's descent would bring them down inland over Sicily. Later, 2nd Lt. Richard M. Bentley, the copilot, told Lt. Pasero in prison camp at Chieti, Italy, that he landed in the Straits of Messina. Italians soon picked him up in a motor launch. The launch then made a thorough



search of the area, found four of the enlisted men but none of the rest of the crew.<sup>77</sup> In addition to Bentley, four enlisted crew members survived — S/Sgt. Otis W. Wharton, UTG, S/Sgt. James D. Kingsland, LTG, S/Sgt. George H. Tucker, TG, and T/Sgt. Phillip E. Zimmerman, ROG.<sup>78</sup>

The Group's performance against Messina was better than could be observed and earned plaudits from Gen. Atkinson, Commander, 5th Wing. His July 14 teletype commendation read: "CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR EXTREMELY ACCURATE BOMBING OF RR AT MESSINA PD PILOTS AND BOMBARDIERS ESPECIALLY COMMENDED PD".

The Group's synchronized salvo-bombing technique was proving to be increasingly effective.

Enemy air resistance over and near Sicily declined rapidly because of losses to the counter-air campaign of Allied Strategic and Tactical Air Forces. Already forced to resort primarily to night attacks, all effective air opposition over Sicily ceased by July 13. HUSKY planners had allowed for a ten percent loss from the 3,000-ship invasion fleet. The actual loss was twelve ships. In the week following D-day, Allied ground forces had occupied approximately one-third of the island. They had seized six airfields, and eighteen and a half Allied air squadrons had already moved in. NAAF now directed its offensive onto the Italian mainland, where the bulk of the Axis air forces had retreated, and from whence would come relief for Axis hard-pressed ground forces in Sicily. The 2nd's next nine missions were directed against targets in Italy.<sup>79</sup>

### MISSION 44, JULY 15, 1943

#### NAPLES, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

The Group took only three squadrons and eighteen planes to the target. One Squadron was given a rest. The briefing emphasized the importance of the Naples yards at this time. The bombing was good with a heavy concentration on and just to the right of the target among rail installations and industry. Rolling stock on the tracks, the torpedo works, the IMAM Airframe works, the Royal Arsenal., and the Corso-Meridionale Dump all received hits and damage. Heavy black smoke was boiling up from around the Dump, indicative of an oil fire. Flak from ground batteries and ships in the harbor was intense and accurate, damaging eleven of the eighteen aircraft, but none was crippling. Eight fighters attacked the formation, wounding four men, two seriously. Three of the wounded, including the seriously wounded, were on the lead crew of Capt. Joseph W. Triggs, Commander of the 20th Squadron. S/Sgt. Robert J. Helb, TG, had his left arm amputated by the explosion of a 20 mm cannon shell. S/Sgt. Elton C. Collins, waist gunner, received multiple shrapnel wounds in his lower extremities. Capt. Triggs landed at Bizerte to hasten medical treatment. Two of the fighters were shot down and one was damaged.<sup>80</sup>

### MISSION 45, JULY 16, 1943

#### SAN GIOVANNI, ITALY, FERRY TERMINUS

This mission started on a tragic note. Lt. Newton S. Blackford took off in plane number 42-



The Lt. Blackford crew tragedy, July 16, 1943, Ain M'Lila. Moments before this was an airplane, a crew of ten and sixteen 300-pound bombs. (Courtesy of Photo Section/R. Koller)



San Giovanni Ferry Terminus, Italy, July 16, 1943.

3342, loaded with sixteen 300-pound bombs. This was the first mission for number 342 after having three new engines installed. Immediately after the plane cleared the ground, engine number one failed and it was feathered. Then smoke began coming from engine number two. In a frantic effort to maintain altitude, Lt. Blackford pulled the nose up as the over-burdened airplane continued to lose power and airspeed. The plane began to "mush" in a tail low attitude, the left wing went down, and the plane crashed. The left wing hit the ground first, the right wing severed

a power line, and with that instantaneous mixture of high voltage, heat and fuel, thirteen of the sixteen bombs detonated. The highly concentrated explosion left a charred and smoldering area of utter destruction. Sgt. Vincent Wechtenhiser and Pvt. Archie R. Ellis witnessed the tragedy while driving the 96th Squadron ambulance along a road just 200 yards from the crash site. There was nothing left for the ambulance crew to do.<sup>81</sup>

A bomber fully loaded with fuel, bombs and crew simply cannot maintain flight at take off



with any significant loss of power. The best chance for survival is to respect the physical laws of aerodynamics and crash land straight ahead, wings level, while there is still enough airspeed for flight control. During a dire and unexpected emergency, there is a powerful, natural instinct to resist the inevitable. The memorial scrolls of aviation are filled with the names of those lost to this natural instinct.

The San Giovanni ferry terminus was across the straits from Messina. Two days earlier on the mission to Messina, three enemy troop ships were observed unloading in Messina harbor. This news was flashed to 5th Wing headquarters. The Allies were determined to cut off axis supply from Italy to Sicily. Capt. Caruthers of the 96th led this mission with Lt. Col. Thomas as his copilot. The raid produced a high concentration of bombs on the target. Extensive damage was inflicted on the ferry terminus, terminus building, marshalling yards, rolling stock and barracks. The flak was the same as that over Messina because it all came from the same sources. The Group put twenty-six airplanes over the target and twenty-one came away with some flak damage. Sheer luck spared injuries. 2nd Lt. Elias Dahir, 49th Squadron, lost the number two engine to flak over the target. The engine lost all oil and the propeller could not be feathered. The other six aircraft of his Squadron covered his flight to the Licata landing ground on the southwest coast of Sic-

ily, where he was the first Group airplane to land in Sicily. Licata had been liberated on D-day. After repairs by the crew, they flew back to the home base that afternoon. Lt. Dahir reported there were other friendly aircraft on the field, that gasoline and oil were available in five gallon cans but there were no mechanics or parts.<sup>82</sup>

### MISSION 46, JULY 17, 1943 NAPLES, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

For the second time in three days the Group joined in one of largest raids of the summer to deprive the Axis the use of the marshalling yards in Naples. Intelligence reported that ships continued to operate at night between Naples and Sicily. The attack was started by B-24s from the 9th Air Force at 2:00 P.M. At 3:17 P.M., B-17s of the 301st and the 2nd struck, followed by a wave of B-26 medium bombers at 3:45 P.M. The final three blows came at ten minute intervals starting at 4:30 P.M. with B-17s of the 97th and 99th, followed by two more waves of B-26s at 4:40 and 4:50 P.M. By the time the 2nd finished its bomb run, in just the second of the six assaults, black smoke was pouring from many devastated targets — fuel storage tanks, rolling stock, rail facilities, and industrial buildings. In all, 353 medium and heavy bombers dropped 650 tons of bombs, destroying large parts of the rail yards, the central station, industrial areas to the north and south, and fuel installations to the east.

Maj. John N. Melcher, Deputy Group Commander, led the Group's 26 aircraft over the target. There was no fighter opposition. Flak slightly damaged eleven aircraft.<sup>83</sup>

Since July 2 the Group had flown fifteen consecutive missions. Aircrews came home from the Naples mission to a welcome and well deserved diversion. That evening the Group's fifteen-piece orchestra, under the direction of Sgt. Irving N. Pedigreen, played for a formal dance in the warehouse. The 96th Squadron hosted the gala affair. Nurses from nearby field hospitals came in evening gowns, and some enterprising party planners found corsages for them. The bill-of-fare was cold liquid refreshments, fresh hamburgers with trimmings, and a special treat, devil's food cake. Besides the sheer pleasure of a rare social event, there was the therapeutic effect of briefly setting aside the dust, sweat and grime of war to emerge from tents neatly attired in gowns and uniforms accented by perfumes and after shave lotions. The next day, July 18, was a welcome day off.<sup>84</sup>

### MISSION 47, JULY 19, 1943 ROME, ITALY SAN LORENZO MARSHALLING YARDS

The solemn atmosphere at the briefing conveyed the weighty import of the decision to bomb targets in the Rome area. Considering both military and political implications made this one of



First raid on Rome, July 19, 1943. The San Lorenzo marshalling yards are completely obscured by smoke. The Coliseum is the oval structure toward the upper right edge of photo. (Photo Section)



the most significant operations of the war. Militarily, Rome was the heart of the Italian system of communications. All rail traffic between northern and southern Italy, except that routed directly from Bologna to such east coast points as Foggia and Bari, passed through Rome's two large marshalling yards, the Littorio and the San Lorenzo. These two out of service, combined with the destruction just done at Naples, would put a two hundred mile gap for several days in the ability of the Axis to move troops and supplies by rail from central to southern Italy.<sup>85</sup>

The political ramifications of striking Rome ranged across a spectrum of international scope. Rome was at the core of Mussolini's Fascist government. There was great symbolism in being able to strike the center of Fascist power with impunity. Italian morale was already sagging under the weight of constant reversals. An attack might drive a wedge between Mussolini and the bulk of the Italian people. Compounding all these considerations were matters of enormous sensitivity. Rome was the "Eternal City", the cradle of Western civilization, the seat of the Popes and the center of the Catholic world.<sup>86</sup> There would be little tolerance for failure to separate Rome, the military objective, from Rome the center of history, art, culture and religion.

Warnings were given and precautions were taken. The target was outlined so that no sensitive area was within 1,000 yards of target borders. These target maps clearly identified religious centers with a "must on no account be damaged" note. Axes of attack were away from these sensitive areas.<sup>87</sup> There were to be no bombs short or long. If in doubt, don't! Unknown at briefing time, P-38s dropped leaflets over the city warning of the raid two hours before the first scheduled bombs away. Finally, crew members were given the option of being excused from the mission for religious or reasons of conscience. None ask to be excused.

The Group was second over the target after the 301st Lt. Col. Thomas led. His copilot was Lt. Col. John H. Brown, AFCE representative for the Honeywell Corporation. Flying as observer was Maj. James B. Hilliard, Assistant Intelligence Officer, from the 5th Wing. Five cameras were used to record results. There was excellent concentration of bombs in the target area.<sup>88</sup> Photos taken five days later on July 24, showed that the four B-17 groups had caused widespread and severe damage to tracks, rolling stock, rail installations, nearby industrial plants, and that no train activity had resumed at Lorenzo. The Basilica of San Lorenzo, just outside the target area, together with its cloisters, was badly damaged.<sup>89</sup> One bomb fell some distance away from the Basilica, but the blast over-pressure caved in the roof and front facade, destroying thirteenth and fourteenth century frescoes and mosaics.<sup>90</sup> No other major religious shrine was touched. Flak was totally ineffective. Six fighters attack the formation and all quickly scurried away save one Re-2001 that came within 400 yards and was last seen at 8,000 feet in a near vertical dive smoking furiously. The gunner was awarded a probable.<sup>91</sup>

That same day five B-24 Groups of the Ninth Air Force attacked the Rome Littorio marshalling yards, and two B-25 and three B-26 medium bomber groups struck the Littorio and

Ciampino airfields. The B-24s destroyed tracks, rolling stock, shops, oil storage, and blew up an ammunition train. The medium bombers destroyed a hangar and twelve airplanes and damaged ten others on the Littorio airfield. They used fragmentation and demolition bombs on the south Ciampino airfield rendering it temporarily unserviceable and destroying thirty-eight airplanes on the ground. The total force of approximately 500 bombers dropped about 1,000 tons of bombs at a cost of one B-25 and one B-26. Air Marshall Tedder, Commander-in-Chief, MAC, required radio reports from each group immediately upon release of bombs. The reports were in Washington and London two minutes later.<sup>92</sup>

That morning Mussolini left by air to meet with Hitler at a villa near Rimini. Hitler held forth at length about the need for supreme effort. The ever-promised new German weapons would be ready for use against England by winter. Italy must be defended so that Sicily may become the Allies' Stalingrad. But Germany could not provide the reinforcements and equipment asked for by Italy, except some for Sicily, because of pressure on the Russian front. In the midst of Hitler's discourse an agitated Italian officer entered the room to report that Rome was undergoing a violent enemy bombardment. Returning to Rome, Mussolini flew into a huge black cloud of smoke from the fires in the Littorio rail yards.<sup>93</sup>

The success of the Rome and Naples raids allowed time to switch attention to enemy air forces. Most of those forces were now based in southern Italy. The 2nd's next four missions were to be enemy airdromes, but two were nullified by weather.

### **MISSION 48, JULY 21, 1943**

#### **GROSSETTO, ITALY, AIRDROME**

The target was 8 to 9/10s overcast. Thirteen of twenty airplanes dropped bombs but no results could be observed. One squadron of seven planes brought their bombs home.<sup>94</sup>

### **MISSION 49, JULY 23, 1943**

#### **LEVERANO, ITALY, LANDING GROUND**

This was a maximum range mission of approximately 1,400 miles, the longest to date for the 2nd. Leverano was one of the most active airfields on the Italian heel. Fifty-eight fighters were reported on the field and 110 more at fields within attacking range. Maj. Haynes led the Group on this joint mission with the 301st. Just after leaving the target, enemy fighters swarmed onto the Group, concentrating on the 429th Squadron. They attacked in groups of twenty to thirty airplanes for forty-five minutes. Two gunners were killed, one seriously wounded and five slightly wounded, all from the 429th, and all from 20 mm cannon fire. There was no flak. Those killed were Sgts. George E. Hopper and Joseph S. Wojcik, both ball turret gunners. Seriously wounded was Sgt Everett E. Eye, waist gunner, who suffered a fractured left elbow. Gunners took their toll of the attackers, confirming eleven destroyed, four probables and two damaged. Because of the joint raid, attribution for bombing results could not be determined. Eighty percent of the bombs fell in the

target area. The raid caught forty-five airplanes on the ground. Thirty-six were destroyed or damaged and of these, fifteen were set afire. There were three separate explosions of fuel, munitions or gas. Several buildings were badly damaged and enough bomb craters were left on the field to render it temporarily unusable. Several planes landed near Tunis for planned refueling on the way back. Others landed at Tunis El Aouina Airport and at Bizerte because of the dead, wounded or mechanical emergencies.<sup>95</sup>

### **MISSION 50, JULY 27, 1943**

#### **FOGGIA, ITALY, SAN NICOLA SATELLITE**

The Group encountered 9/10s overcast from 3,000 to 25,000 feet and turned back ten miles before landfall.

July 28 and 29 were stand down days while preparations were made for the move to Massicault, Tunisia. On the 28th the Group formed on the parade ground for a formal awards ceremony. Gen. Atkinson presented air medals to 154 officers and 213 enlisted men and purple hearts to 7 men.<sup>96</sup>

### **MISSION 51, JULY 30, 1943**

#### **GROTTAGLIA, ITALY AIRDROME**

Grottaglia was on the outskirts of Taranto at the base of the Italian heel and just 50 miles from Leverano. Fears of another long fray with fighters never materialized. Incredibly, the Group returned untouched. Sixty-five aircraft were caught on the field. Twenty-six were destroyed or damaged. The roof was blown off one hangar, a second had holes in the roof and a third was left blazing. Repair and storage structures and personnel quarters were destroyed or extensively damaged. The landing area had lengthy strings of pot holes. Maj. Donald H. Ainsworth, Group Operations Officer, led the mission.<sup>97</sup>

The next four days were non-operational while the Group moved to Massicault. The 96th Squadron ground echelon was packed and had their tents down ready to move July 28, but the Quartermaster trucks to move them didn't arrive. The 96th troops slept on the ground in the open that night. After the trucks arrived on the 29th, and were loaded, there was another long wait before the convoy was formed, and ready to move out. By then it was 2:30 in the morning. The trip was slow and tedious as the convoy wound its way over rough mountainous roads in the cold, damp night weather with tired troops being jostled by the hard truck suspensions. The convoy moved faster and easier once it descended onto the Tunisian plain. It arrived at Massicault about 5:00 P.M., too late to pitch tents, so the troops spent another night in the open.<sup>98</sup> The air echelon flew in the next day. Massicault is fifteen miles west-south-west of Tunis, Tunisia. The camp area was a considerable letdown from Ain M'Lila. It was in a dry, hot, and dusty wheat stubble from which all the bugs hadn't yet migrated. Units were much more dispersed. One squadron was nearly three miles from Group Headquarters. Massicault had no single, large building to house Group offices and the briefing room as there was at Ain M'Lila. Group Intelligence and Operations were favored



with a rather nice French farm house. The briefing and debriefing room was in the adjoining cow barn which had to be divested of four or five inches of manure before being outfitted with situation and world maps, charts and posters. Engineering, Materiel and Personnel reverted to tent accommodations. These latter offices were approximately two and a half miles from the farm house.<sup>99</sup>

The airfield was an improvement. Hardstands were more widely dispersed and there were three runways. Two parallel runways ran northwest-southeast. One was 450 feet wide and 5,500 feet long. The other was 450 feet by 6,500 feet. The third runway ran northeast-southwest and was 450 feet by 6,500 feet.<sup>100</sup> It wasn't long before the Group took advantage of these new capabilities. The parallel runways led to experiments with multiple takeoffs and two simultaneous assemblies. Two airplanes took off from each runway at less than two minute intervals. The trailing airplane was staggered to the upwind side of the lead plane. Those from the left runway circled left for assembly and those from the right circled right. Thus, normally two squadrons took off from each runway, assembled in opposite quadrants, then flew intersecting courses toward a geographical departure point for Group assembly. The lead squadrons made "s" turns or altered course to facilitate Group assembly. With practice, the Group got average assemble time down to thirty minutes, and as low as twenty-four minutes. Eighth Air Force observers were

highly impressed by the efficiency of this assembly. Maj. Ainsworth was the innovator of the procedure.

Counting Marrakech and Camp Don B. Passage, at Casablanca, Massicault was the fourth and last African encampment for the Group air and ground echelons.

### FLAK! — "FLIEGER ABWEHR KANONE."

As the war progressed, the Allies achieved air superiority and the Luftwaffe ceased to be a determining factor after mid-1944. Not that the Luftwaffe didn't make appearances after that time. (the 2nd Bomb Group had one of its most disastrous encounters with the Luftwaffe in August 1944), but these were sporadic and non-sustainable operations. By contrast there always seemed to be flak. It endured throughout the war and never fully abated. In fact it became more intense in the final stages of the war over transportation choke points used by retreating German armies and over vital industries and oil supply sources that Germany tried desperately to save.

To the airman, flak was many things. It was the bursting shell fire with the telltale puffs of black and gray acrid smoke. It was the shrapnel, those jagged pieces of hot metal streaking randomly through space at the speed of bullets that could damage or destroy the vital parts of men and machine. It was an unseen menace that wreaked its havoc quicker than the eye could

see. Flak struck fear in even the strong-hearted, because it could blast an airplane and its crew out of the sky without warning. Air crews loathed flak, particularly the gunners, who were trained and ready to match skills with a visible enemy fighter, but were powerless against flak.

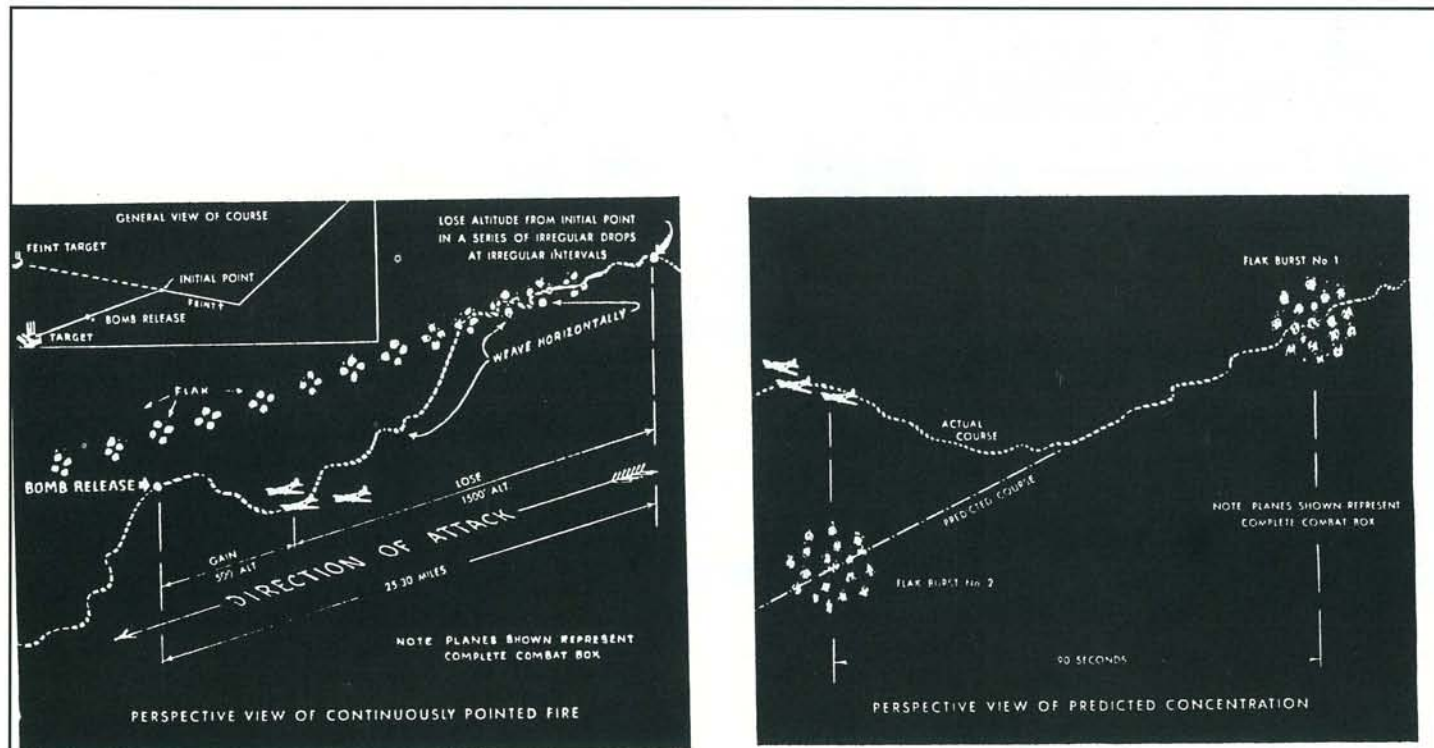
Flak was divided into two main types — heavy and light. Heavy flak consisted mostly of 88mm and 105mm, and on rare occasions, 128mm guns. There were mobile batteries of the latter that roamed the perimeters of the Ploesti oil fields on a track.<sup>101</sup> These guns fired high explosive projectiles with time fuses that exploded at the end of a predicted time, spewing their lethal fragments about.

Light flak was fired from automatic weapons and was encountered only at lower altitudes. The shells had percussion fuses along with a tracer, and exploded only on impact. High level bombers had to worry only with heavy flak.<sup>102</sup>

The mainstay of German anti-aircraft defense was the Model 41, 88mm gun. It was sighted like a rifle, weighed almost nine tons when set up to fire with a barrel 21 feet long. It sported a muzzle velocity of more than 3,282 feet per second to launch its 42-pound projectile. A good crew could fire it twenty times per minute.

The 105mm weapon weighed 11 1/4 tons and had a muzzle velocity of 2,900 feet per second to thrust its 57 pounds of angry iron aloft. Its rate of fire was less than the 88mm.<sup>103</sup>

The effective ceilings and lethal radii of the most commonly used weapons were as follows:



**CONTINUOUSLY POINTED FIRE** and general evasive tactics are diagrammed above. Inset at upper left shows how planes make a feint before the initial point to mislead gunners.

**PREDICTED CONCENTRATIONS** are based on a central control plotting the planes' probable course and calling for fire at set points. Bursts can be higher than in continuous fire.



|       | <u>Ceiling</u>     | <u>Radius</u> |
|-------|--------------------|---------------|
| 88mm  | 26,000 — 27,000 ft | 30 feet       |
| 105mm | About 31,000 ft    | 50 feet       |

The main effect of a burst was forward in the direction of the shell trajectory, a burst below an

aircraft being more damaging than a burst above the aircraft.<sup>104</sup>

When considering total bomber losses, relatively few were due directly to flak. The greatest effect of flak was to cripple the bomber (and the crew) and have it fall prey to fighters. The

annals of WW II are replete with stories and pictures of flak-shredded and mangled bombers straggling back to base when not preyed upon.

Many airmen felt that escaping flak was very much a matter of luck. Certainly one did not fly deliberately over known gun positions except when necessary to reach the target. It was getting to the target that was the problem. Those last 6 to 8 minutes of straight and level flight on the bomb run were the most vulnerable. Yet, with proper precautions, flak casualties were greatly reduced.

The 8th Bomber Command developed a flak clock that charted the safest and riskiest courses into and out of a target area. Of course to be effective, development of the clock depended on accurate intelligence about the number and location of the anti-aircraft batteries.

Flying at the highest altitude over defended areas, consistent with bombing accuracy, decreased the probability of being hit. But the most common tactic was evasive action. The Army Air Force devised tactics for the two most common methods of fire control used by enemy gun crews — tracking fire and barrage fire. Since all anti-aircraft weapons required time to aim and deliver their projectiles, the cardinal rule for evasion was not to let the gunners know your plan of flight.

In tracking fire, or continuously pointed fire, the gunners fired continuously along the bomber's probable flight path. To be effective, this method of fire required that the bombers fly a steady course long enough for a probable route to be plotted by the anti-aircraft batteries. Evasion involved changing both course and altitude. In the target area, where a steady course had to be maintained on the bomb run, the bombers had to mask intentions by feigning toward a false target. In single target areas this was not always possible.

In barrage fire there were concentrations of fire at set points on the bomber's probable course. The evasive action was primarily change of course. If the gunners determined the intended target, they could set up a barrage of fire over it. They selected an imaginary box in the sky and filled it with flak. For the bombers there was no acceptable alternative but to bore through it and hope for the best. (See accompanying illustrations of firing methods and evasion tactics.)<sup>105</sup>

Air crew observations and debriefings were used to gather intelligence about gun placements and numbers and to assess effectiveness of flak defenses. Flak encounters were reported in three categories (see chart lower left).<sup>106</sup>

The most worrisome and most dangerous flak was heavy, intense, and accurate.

## FIGHTERS

Unlike flak, fighters were viewed as making encounters more sporting — man and machine against man and machine. It wasn't all gentlemanly, because they called one another names during battle, at least our side did. Yet, when one reflects on these experiences, it is clear that enemy fighter pilots seldom picked a fair fight. Their inclination to join battle was directly proportional to their numbers and the number of condition of the quarry. Those that flak had wounded and left limping behind could expect



Briefing room, the former barn. (Courtesy of R. Koller)



Escape Kit and Purse display on stone wall of briefing room. (Courtesy of R. Koller)

| <u>Category</u> | <u>Assessment</u>                                |
|-----------------|--|
| Type of flak    | Heavy or light (nearly always heavy)             |
| Amount:         | Slight — widely scattered smoke puffs            |
|                 | Moderate — many scattered smoke puffs            |
|                 | Intense — sky full of puffs, "could walk on it!" |
| Accuracy:       | As to altitude — accurate or inaccurate          |
|                 | As to deflection — accurate or inaccurate        |



the most aggressive fighters in the greatest numbers. Fighter opposition was also proportional to the importance the enemy attached to the territory being defended, such as industrial and population centers, critical resources, particularly oil, and the fighter's own infrastructure. Regensburg, Schweinfurt, and Ploesti come to mind where fighters swarmed to the defense in such overwhelming numbers as to make these famous names in the European air war, because bomber losses were in the 50s and 60s. Those numbers include only the ones that didn't come back. There was much carnage among those that did. For the 2nd Bomb Group, other less prominent aerial battles come to mind – Steyr, Austria, Privoser, Czechoslovakia, and Catania, Sicily. The latter more for the aerial victories than the losses, and where the first encounter with fighters in large numbers occurred.

The air war was essentially one of attrition, and in the end, the Luftwaffe, fighting from a Germany under siege, was no match for the air armada produced from the sanctuary of the U.S. The Luftwaffe was eventually overwhelmed by sheer numbers. A comparison of what each respective airman faced illustrates the point. The American airman enjoyed the assurance of a definitive tour of battle – 25, 35, or 50 missions. His Luftwaffe counterpart never reached the luxury of a prescribed tour. They had to fight until shot down and captured, or killed, or crippled, or grounded for lack of fuel or a flyable aircraft. Some German pilots flew as many as five sorties a day, and some who survived, attained such lofty combat records as 500 missions and over 1,000 combat hours.

If aerial victories are an indicator, the major opposition to the 2nd came from the various models of the Me-109. The FW-190 was a distant second, and other types weren't in the running at all. There was a brief period in the Sicilian campaign when a select Hermann Goering (Luftwaffe chief) unit of FW-190s, with yellow propeller spinners, caught everyone's attention for their audacity and skill. Considering some discrepancy in the records, 2nd gunners knocked down between 180 to 190 Me-109s, 55 to 60 FW-190s, and less than a half dozen of any other type. (See Appendix 18.)

The Italians barely counted by comparison with the Luftwaffe. They didn't have the equipment, in numbers or quality, comparable to the Luftwaffe, and their hearts didn't seem to be in it, even though until Italy got out of the war, the air battles were over their back yards.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 14

<sup>2</sup> Covell personal history, 5-1

<sup>3</sup> McCoid, *429th Squadron History*, 18

<sup>4</sup> Perspective is a composite of readings from the following sources:

Winston S. Churchill, "The Second World War - The Hinge of Fate" (Houghton Mifflin Company Boston; The Riverside Press Cambridge 1950) Book Two, chs: 1,2,3,6,7,10, 11 and 19.

W. F. Craven and J. L. Cate, "The Army Air Forces in World War II", vol 2. (University of Chicago Press, 1949: repr: Washington DC, Office of AF History, 1983) chs: 4, 5 and 6.

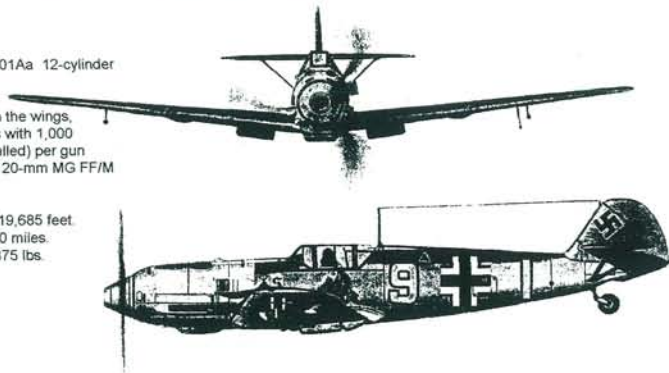
Richard Collier, "The War in the Desert, World War II" (Time-Life Books, Inc., Alexandria, Virginia 1977)

<sup>5</sup> Craven and Cate, 161 - 5

<sup>6</sup> Operations Order No. 1, Apr 28, 1943, "Records of

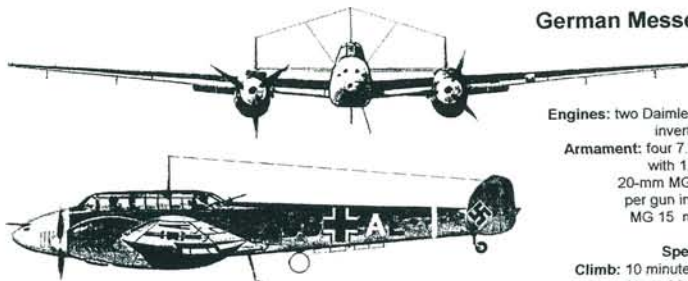
### The German Messerschmitt Bf 109E-3 single-seat fighter

**Engine:** one Daimler-Benz DB 601Aa 12-cylinder V inline, 1,175-hp at take-off.  
**Armament:** two 20-mm MG FF cannon with 60 rounds per gun in the wings, two 7.9-mm MG17 machine guns with 1,000 rounds (600 when MG FF/M installed) per gun in the fuselage, and one optional 20-mm MG FF/M with 200 rounds in the nose.  
**Speed:** 348 mph at 14,560 feet.  
**Climb:** 7 minutes 45 seconds to 19,685 feet.  
**Ceiling:** 34,450 feet **Range:** 410 miles.  
**Weight empty/loaded:** 4,189/5,875 lbs.  
**Span:** 32 feet 4 1/2 inches.  
**Length:** 28 feet 4 1/2 inches.  
**Height:** 8 feet 2 1/3 inches.



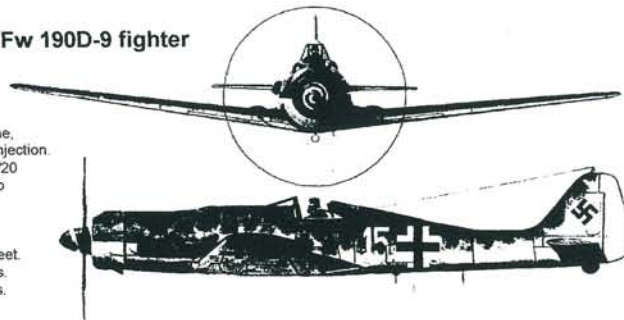
### German Messerschmitt Bf 110C

**Engines:** two Daimler-Benz DB 601A 12-cylinder inverted-V inlines, 1,100-hp each.  
**Armament:** four 7.9-mm MG 17 machine guns with 1,000 rounds per gun and two 20-mm MG FF cannon with 180 rounds per gun in the nose, and one 7.9-mm MG 15 machine gun with 750 rounds in the rear cockpit.  
**Speed:** 349 mph at 22,965 feet.  
**Climb:** 10 minutes 12 seconds to 19,840 feet.  
**Ceiling:** 32,000 feet. **Range:** 565 miles.  
**Weight empty/loaded:** 11,400/15,300 lbs.  
**Span:** 53 feet 4 7/8 inches.  
**Length:** 39 feet 8 1/2 inches.  
**Height:** 11 feet 6 inches. **Crew:** two



### The German Focke-Wulf Fw 190D-9 fighter

**Engine:** one Junkers Jumo 213A-1 inline, 2,240-hp with MW-50 methanol-water injection.  
**Armament:** two 20-mm Mauser MG151/20 cannon with 250 rounds per gun and two 13-mm Rheinmetall Borsig MG 131 machine guns with 475 rounds per gun.  
**Speed:** 426 mph at 21,650 feet.  
**Climb:** 7 minutes 6 seconds to 19,685 feet.  
**Ceiling:** 37,000 feet. **Range:** 520 miles.  
**Weight empty/loaded:** 7,694/10,670 lbs.  
**Span:** 34 feet 5 1/3 inches.  
**Length:** 33 feet 5 1/4 inches.  
**Height:** 11 feet 1/4 inch.



Source: *The Marshall Cavendish Illustrated Encyclopedia of WW II*, Vol. 1, pp. 32, 245; Vol. 7, p. 1816.

the Army Air Forces, WW II Combat Operations Reports, 1942-46" (Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Robert K. Oliver mission weather forecast

<sup>8</sup> McCoid History, 15

<sup>9</sup> Don McCombs & Fred L. Worth, "WW II Strange and Fascinating Facts," (Random House Value Publishing 1983) p 189

<sup>10</sup> McCoid History, 15, 16

<sup>11</sup> Koller Diary.

<sup>12</sup> Records of the Army Air Forces World War II, Combat Operations Reports 1942-46 Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD) Mission Report.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, Mission Report.

<sup>14</sup> McCoid, Group History, 17

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 18

<sup>16</sup> Carl R. Grubb "2nd Bomb Group Diary" (Washington Nat'l Records Ctr.)

<sup>17</sup> Charles W. Richards, "Missing Crew Reports"

<sup>18</sup> Clarence W. Godecke, Jr. Interview August 20, 1994

<sup>19</sup> Henry A. Heim, Interview August 14, 1994; James G. Ellis, Maj. Commander, 20th Bombardment Squadron letter, 25 April 1944, subject: Placement of

Experienced Combat Flying Personnel on Detached Service in the United States; General Order No. 3714, 29 September 1944, Headquarters Fifteenth Air Force, Awards of the Distinguished Flying Cross.

<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Ruth Jones, Interview February 5 1995; Victor Mack, Lt. Col. USAF (ret), Interview February 6, 1995

<sup>21</sup> Ernest L. Blanton, Individual Combat Crew Member's Record (Washington Nat'l Records Center, Suitland, MD)

<sup>22</sup> MPACT, June 1943, page 22

<sup>23</sup> McCoid, Group History, 20 - 22

<sup>24</sup> McCoid, Group History, 21, 22

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 22

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 22, 23

<sup>27</sup> IMPACT, Book I, April 1943, p 6; June 1943, p 24

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 24

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 24

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 24, 25

<sup>31</sup> Craven and Cate, Vol II, 149

<sup>32</sup> McCoid, Group History, 25, 26

<sup>33</sup> Mission Report, (Washington Nat'l Records Ctr., Suitland, MD)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, Intelligence Briefing & Mission Report



<sup>35</sup> Craven and Cate, Vol II, 434  
<sup>36</sup> Ibid, Intelligence Briefing & Mission Report.  
<sup>37</sup> Winston S. Churchill, "The Hinge of Fate", (Houghton Mifflin Company Boston 1950) 810, 811, 817-826, 828,829  
<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 816  
<sup>39</sup> McCoid, Group History, 31  
 Mission Report, (Washington Nat'l Records Ctr., Suitland, MD)  
<sup>40</sup> McCoid, Group History, 34 - 35  
 Mission Reports  
<sup>41</sup> Craven and Cate, 431  
<sup>42</sup> IMPACT: "The Army Air Forces' Confidential Picture History of World War II" Book 2 (James Parton and Co., Inc. New York, 1980), ix  
<sup>43</sup> This introductory summary, except where otherwise noted, drawn heavily from:  
 Craven and Cate, Vol II, 434 - 438, 440 - 442  
 Davis, "Carl A. Spaatz . . .," 239 - 241  
<sup>44</sup> Mission Reports, (Washington Nat'l Records Ctr., Suitland, MD)  
<sup>45</sup> McCoid, Group History, 35, 36  
<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 36  
<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 37  
<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 37 - 39  
<sup>49</sup> Mission Report, (Washington Nat'l Records Ctr., Suitland, MD)  
<sup>50</sup> McCoid, Group History, 156 - 7  
<sup>51</sup> Charles W. Richards, Compiler of missing crew reports  
<sup>52</sup> Craven and Cate Vol II, 435  
<sup>53</sup> McCoid, Group History, 40 - 43; Mission Report, (Washington Nat'l Records Ctr., Suitland, MD)  
<sup>54</sup> Richards, Missing crew reports  
<sup>55</sup> Mission Report  
<sup>56</sup> McCoid, Group History, 43; Craven and Cate, 437  
<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 44  
<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 45  
<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 52 - 3  
<sup>60</sup> McCoid, Group History, 46 - 49; Richards, Missing crew reports  
<sup>61</sup> Mundy, 96th Squadron History  
<sup>62</sup> McCoid, Group History, 50  
<sup>63</sup> Kenn C. Rust, "Twelfth Air Force Story", (Historical Aviation Album, P.O. Box 33, Temple City, CA, 1975) 21  
<sup>64</sup> McCoid, Group History, 51, 52  
<sup>65</sup> McCoid, 429th Squadron History  
<sup>66</sup> McCoid, Group History, 55  
<sup>67</sup> Craven and Cate, 446, 447  
<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 449  
<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 449 - 450  
<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 453 - 4  
<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 454 - 5  
<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 455 - 6  
<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 458  
<sup>74</sup> McCoid, Group History, 57,58  
<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 58,59  
<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 59,60  
<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 60,61  
<sup>78</sup> Richards, Missing crew reports  
<sup>79</sup> Craven and Cate Vol II, 458  
<sup>80</sup> McCoid, Group History, 64  
<sup>81</sup> McCoid, 429th Squadron History, 27  
<sup>82</sup> McCoid, Group History, 64 - 66  
<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 66, 67; Craven and Cate Vol II, 463  
<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 67  
<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 68  
<sup>86</sup> Craven and Cate, 464  
<sup>87</sup> IMPACT 2, September 1943, page 43  
<sup>88</sup> McCoid, Group History, 68  
<sup>89</sup> IMPACT 2, September 1943, pages 44 - 5  
<sup>90</sup> Davis, "Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe", 261  
<sup>91</sup> McCoid, Group History, 68  
<sup>92</sup> Mission summary drawn from:  
 McCoid History, 68, 69  
 Craven and Cate Vol II, 463 - 465  
 IMPACT: "The Army Air Forces' Confidential Picture

History of World War II" Book 2 (James Parton and Company, Inc., New York, 1980) Sept. 1943, 43-48  
<sup>93</sup> Winston S. Churchill, "Closing the Ring" (Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1951) 47  
<sup>94</sup> McCoid, Group History, 70  
<sup>95</sup> McCoid, Group History, 71 - 75  
<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 77  
<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 78 - 79  
<sup>98</sup> Mundy, 96th Squadron History, Jul, '43, 32 - 33  
<sup>99</sup> McCoid, Group History, 79  
<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 79 - 80  
<sup>101</sup> IMPACT, Vol 2, No. 10, Oct 1944, p 31  
<sup>102</sup> IMPACT, Book 2, Dec. 1943, 46-48  
<sup>103</sup> Melvin W. McGuire and Robert Hadley, "Bloody Skies," (Yucca Free Press, Las Cruces, NM, 1993) 151, 152  
<sup>104</sup> IMPACT, Book 1, May 1943, p28  
<sup>105</sup> Ibid, Book 2, Dec. 1943, p46-48  
<sup>106</sup> Mission Reports; Crew debriefings

## CHAPTER XI

### NORTH AFRICAN BIVOUACS

Depending on their date of arrival in Africa, members of the Group spent between seven and nine months in their four encampments. Like typical American troops they never passively accepted the bare essentials authorized by the Army for field operations if better alternatives could be devised. They repeatedly use their ingenuity to improve creature comforts. This struggle seldom produced permanent results. Gains were often nullified by successive moves, changes in weather and lapses in official planning.

One of the first priorities was to get beds off the ground and into larger shelters. The first troops at Navarin, though there only temporarily, and those at Chateaudun, started with bed rolls under pup tents and shelter halves. The pyramidal tents didn't become generally available until the ground echelon arrived at Chateaudun at the end of May. One of the early improvements in sleeping comfort came from mattress covers stuffed with straw purchased from local farmers.<sup>1</sup> After the Group started flying missions regularly, there was a steady and growing supply of metal bomb fin cases. Several of these set together made a crude platform for the straw mattresses and bed rolls. As scrap lumber became available, wooden platforms were constructed to hold beds. These usually had a wooden "T" bar at each end to hold mosquito netting. Some troops improved on these hard bed-tables by

building wooden bed frames and attaching a flexible webbing of rubber inner tube strips to the frame. The first canvas army cots were issued July 24<sup>2</sup>, but such cots did not become generally available until October.<sup>3</sup>

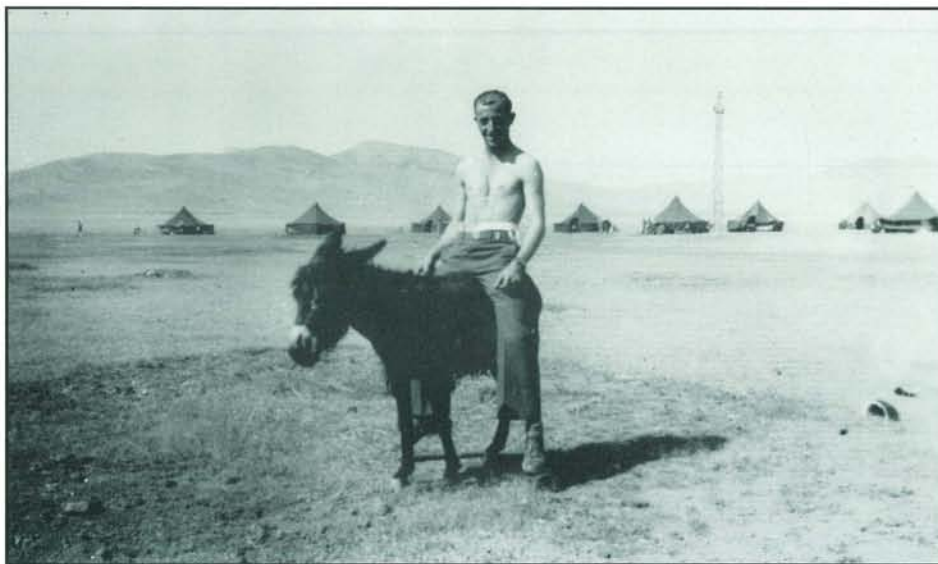
Scrap lumber became more plentiful after the Group began using fragmentation bombs on air-dromes in Sicily and Italy. The first five such missions were flown between May 10 and May 26. Fragmentation bombs came packed in wooden cases that were about one foot square and five or so feet long with hinged lids. A combination of two or more of these, stood on end with a clothes hanger bar near the top, made excellent wardrobes complete with hinged doors. Even without modification, a fragmentation bomb case made a convenient footlocker. The use of wood expanded in direct ratio to its availability. The men built furniture for their tents such as tables, chairs and outside wash stands that held steel helmets, and some kind of water container, and had a shelf for toilet kits or perhaps just a vertical strip of wood with a nail in it to hold a mirror. A few managed the luxury of wooden floors and on rarer occasions even wooden side walls. Others found woven, reed-like mats from the local economy, and spread them on the ground.

Latrines slowly graduated from mere slit trenches to wood covered, multiple "holers" much like open privies of yore. One amenity was added when the toilets were removed from the airplanes and mounted over the slit trenches. The justification for removal of the airplane toilets, whether true or not, was that the metal commodes could turn into shrapnel when hit by flak or a cannon shell. Their removal made for considerable improvisation when the urge to go could not be denied on a long mission. Normally, the airplane toilets were used with disposable paper liners or bags. After the toilets were removed, these bags were used by putting them inside an empty 50 caliber ammunition box or any other convenient receptacle. Of course in dire emergencies there was always the ever versatile steel helmet. On a few occasions these laden bags were tied or folded shut and set atop one of the bombs with the donor making a mental dedication of the contents to Hitler or someone else symbolic of the enemy. This practice was quickly stopped when experience demonstrated what should have been obvious — that a paper bag didn't have the same



20th Squadron camp area, Massicault, Tunisia. (Courtesy of R. Amos)





*S/Sgt. Charles L. DeVito, LTG. (Courtesy of A. Dowsing)*



*Capt. Ira Allen, chaplain, outside Group Hq. shower. (Photo Section)*

to manually refuel airplanes before Group fuel trucks arrived, was used to pump water from the supply barrels to the shower barrel on the platform. A shower hose ran from the shower barrel to a can with perforated holes in the bottom. There are no design drawings to show how the shower was turned on and off. The water was solar heated by the hot African summer sun. The water truck resupplied the reserve barrels. A slatted wooden floor kept feet out of the mud. Users were on their honor to conserve water and to replace usage from the shower barrel. A piece of tarpaulin was wrapped around part of the tower to give nominal privacy. Larger and more sophisticated designs followed, but most were based on the same principle used by Stoeger. One had the shower drum mounted on top of a wooden engine stand case, which provided a partially enclosed shower stall. The 96th Squadron constructed a large shower. It consisted of a wooden platform seven or eight feet high which supported three 50 gallon barrels. Each barrel had a spigot with a tin can punched full of holes hanging from it. It was an open area shower. Privacy was foregone in the camp remote locations.<sup>5</sup>

Not far from Chateaudun there were some natural hot springs which the Group arranged to take advantage of. In his memoirs, William G. Covell describes his experience with these hot springs. "Several evenings each week, a couple of truck loads of men would get to take a dip. I signed up and went once, not so much to see the place as to take a real, wet-all-over bath. Over a month of taking baths out of a helmet was enough for me!

The truck followed a road that wound back through the hills and after about a half hour, pulled off at a wide spot where there were a couple of buildings squeezed in between steep hills and the road. The buildings were of stone and looked as if they had been there for a long time. The largest was the bath house and it was just a few steps from the truck to a door which led into the bath house dressing room, a square room with stone walls and a tiled floor. Benches lined the walls with wood pegs above. We sat down, undressed, hung our clothes on the pegs, stacked clean clothes on the benches and went through a second door into the bath room.

This was a dimly lit, stone walled room with a ledge on two sides. The rest of the room was taken up by the pool. Stone steps led down into the water. In one corner, a large pipe poured a continuous stream of warm water into the pool. On the opposite side, an overflow pipe carried water away and kept the level constant – about chest deep.

This was an all male gathering and we filed into the bath wearing only our dog tags and a smile. I wasn't too thrilled with sharing a bath with 30 or 40 dirty, sweaty GIs but there wasn't much choice and the warm water felt good. The walls of the pool looked as if they had soaked up dirty water for generations. I was careful not to put my head under. I soaked for 15 to 20 minutes, climbed out, dried off and put on a clean set of khakis. It was great riding back to camp in the cool evening, feeling clean all over.<sup>76</sup>

The Group stayed at Chateaudun for only fifty days. This, plus the fact that the springs were thirty minutes away by vehicle, limited availability and use of the hot springs for general bath-

aerodynamics as a 500-pound bomb. The bags usually ended up somewhere among friendly airplanes to the rear.

At Ain M'Lila the officers of the 96th Squadron decided they wanted some privacy at their latrine. They had a screen made of canvas mounted on wooden frames to put around the latrine. The first dark night the screen disappeared. So a replacement screen was made and a guard was posted during the night hours. That worked fine for several nights and it was decided that the guard was no longer needed. As soon as the guard was gone the screen disappeared again. After that the pursuit of privacy was abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

The rains and mud of April and early May gave way to the inevitable African summer of heat, dust and insects. No rain fell from early May until late September. Bathing, both for personal comfort and as a courtesy to associates, became an increasing necessity. An early and welcome innovation was the home-made field shower. One of the first was designed and built by Capt. Donald Stoeger of the 20th Squadron. It was a masterpiece of simplicity and function. He mounted a 50 gallon fuel drum, or barrel, on a platform atop a wooden tower. Three resupply barrels were placed at the base of the tower. A hose with a hand pump, looking suspiciously like the ones used on the flight line when crews had





*Bob Hope at Massicault. 2nd bomb Group camp in background. (Courtesy of U.S. Army/W. Covell)*

ing. Covell and some of his buddies found and used, on one occasion, a clean, commercial Turkish bath in Ain M'Lila.<sup>7</sup> There is no indication that this facility was used to fulfill the Group's need for baths, but others were known to have used it.

The French farmer, on whose land the Massicault landing ground was located, had a large, rectangular, concrete irrigation reservoir about the size of a good private swimming pool. The water came from deep-well pumps and was clear and cold. The farmer graciously allowed the Group to use the reservoir as a swimming pool. A dip in the pool was a quick refresher from an emotion-draining mission or the sweaty toils about the camp and the flight line.<sup>8</sup> As the fall and early winter chills set in, the "swimming pool" became less enticing. It was time for hot showers.

On October 12, 1943, hot showers became available. The 301st Quartermaster Battalion Sterilization Unit of the 7th Army set up field showers, and a blanket steaming compartment next to Group Operations and Intelligence in the farm house at Massicault. The unit was a large truck-like van with twelve shower heads, the blanket steaming compartment and an undressing and dressing tent at each end. The showers were open from 1:00 to 8:00 P.M. each day. The procedure was to undress in the one tent, put one's clothes in a numbered bag with a numbered tag, take a shower, and go to the dressing tent to retrieve your clothes from an attendant who had brought them from the undressing tent.<sup>9</sup>

Nothing spoils morale or dispositions quite as quickly as poor food. It didn't take repeated consumption of the modified B-rations long to do both. Having to eat this chow from a mess

kit, standing up or sitting on the ground, in competition with hordes of the ever-persistent African flies, heaped gall on rancor. Powdered eggs rated especially high on the list of despised rations. Some troops soon found and bargained for fresh eggs from the Arabs. They also acquired small oil burners on which to set a gallon can, from mess hall trash, filled with water, and fresh eggs, and have a ready supply of hard-boiled eggs. Salt and pepper, perhaps some mustard, and on occasion, some pickles from the mess hall provided the ingredients for a reasonable substitute for a deviled egg. But success in the search for "decent grub" was spasmodic and short-lived. Food sources from the war-ravaged local economy were scarce, expensive, and fraught with doubt about sanitation and fitness for human consumption.

The 96th Squadron was the first to look for a spam and Vienna sausage alternative, by going into the local cattle market around Chateaudun. Lt. A. J. Tyborski, the Squadron mess officer, took up a collection from the Squadron officers and men. With money in hand, a small party set out in a truck to find fresh beef. The supply wasn't very plentiful, the market having already been shopped by other troops in the area. Ranging about in a random search of the countryside, the party's first trip almost ended in disaster. They were driving their truck on a back road when a farmer came running after them screaming, "Mines! Mines!" They had strayed into an area that was still mined and booby-trapped. The farmer led the truck back to safe ground while the passengers in the party followed on foot in the truck's dual tire tracks.

Determined to risk their luck again, the party

set out two days later and succeeded in buying a young bull from a farmer. They were then faced with the task of getting the scared and recalcitrant animal into the truck. Finally, they backed the truck up to the bank of a gully so that the truck bed was essentially level with the top of the bank. The frightened animal still balked, so they snubbed a rope around its nose, in addition to the one around its neck, and by pulling and pushing forced the animal into the truck and headed back to base. By the time these "cowboys" arrived at the base, the bull was dead, having apparently suffocated from the noose around its nose. Nevertheless, the beast was dragged from the truck, lifted by its hind legs and eviscerated into a pit using a hoist previously erected for the purpose. The 96th enjoyed a brief repast of fresh beef.<sup>10</sup>

Lt. Tyborski went back into the cattle market at Ain M'Lila. Instead of taking a collection, he used money from the Squadron's recreation funds. He took Cpl. William Baxter, who spoke a smattering of French, and a jeep, and started his search among local French farmers. This time he bought a steer, which the farmer butchered in exchange for the hide and other parts of the carcass, leaving the good beef for the Squadron.<sup>11</sup> Some other squadrons emulated the 96th's example.

Fruits and vegetable were not to be purchased unless approved by the area Quartermaster. The troops did not always abide by this prohibition. The temptation to have some fresh fruit, in season, overcame the precautionary warnings. Many purchased oranges, grapes, figs, dates and musk melons from local farmers. Some measure of the limited success of these attempts to improve the diet can be made from the fact there was only