

FOREWORD

This is the story of the men of the Second Bombardment Group (Heavy) during their training and combat in North Africa and Italy during World War II. Their aircraft was the famous B-17 "Flying Fortress," designed and built by the Boeing Aircraft Company in Seattle, Washington. The B-17 was one of the two heavy bombers of the Air Corps flying combat missions in the European Theater of Operations. The B-24 was the other bomber in use at that time. Eventually the B-29 was put into service but only saw action in the Pacific.

The B-17 was a remarkable sturdy aircraft, one that could withstand heavy punishment and still bring her crews home. But unlike the modern aircraft of today, it was not pressurized and the men were required to wear heavy clothing to protect themselves from below zero temperatures and also wear uncomfortable oxygen masks at high altitudes. Many were the times when men lost their oxygen systems and died from lack of oxygen. Anoxia and frost bite were common.

This story could well apply to any of the four B-17 Groups that first served in North Africa as part of the 12th Air Force, and then in Italy with the 15th Air Force. The 97th and 301st Bomb Groups had already seen action over the European Continent; flying from bases in England. They had been ordered to North Africa after the invasion of North Africa. The 99th Bomb Group was the next to arrive, from the United States, and soon after, the 2nd Bomb Group arrived, also from the United States.

Living conditions in North Africa were terrible. Malaria, dysentery, sand storms and the terrible heat took a toll on both ground personnel and the air crews. There was a shortage of everything; food, supplies, equipment, etc. Badly damaged planes became "Hanger Queens," stripped to keep other planes in the air. There were no hangers, all work was done in the open. Airstrips were dirt, and eventually a steel matting was laid down on some airstrips.

Walt Clausen, a bomb loader in the Ordnance Section of the 96th Squadron, describes the conditions best in his book, *G. I. Journey*. "Seemingly left unsung, however, have been the battle efforts of the many thousands who, collectively, formed the Mediterranean Bomber Command. Their contributions will long be remembered by those former ground crew members, who, toiling doggedly by day through the broiling desert heat and braving by night the nerve shattering blasts of cascading German bombs, were, nevertheless, profoundly determined that nothing short of judgement day itself would prevent them from keeping the planes in the air. Without the whole hearted cooperation of all of the ground echelon, not a ship would have left the runways to spread over the enemy's battlements its cargo of destruction and death.

"The glamour of the air action -- if glamour is to be found in the vicious air battle -- lays siege to and holds fast, the imagination. Fiery slugs spewing their angry song along the high sky-trail leave little to be desired in the makeup of any tale. Living each day on the brink of eternity, the combat crew drew strength from the boldness of their decisions, which sustained them during their fighting hours.

"Things were different for those on the ground. War to a weary mechanic meant the overhaul of a balky motor through a sleepless, enemy filled night. Combat seemed to those in Communications dreary, unending hours receiving and passing on the thousand and one directives so necessary to the successful completion of the following dawn's mission. To men of the Ordnance Section, battle against the enemy meant a nightly, back-breaking effort, manhandling an enormous amount of bomb tonnage from dispersal area to the open-belly doors of the ever hungry Flying Forts. The sweating bunch in the Armament shack viewed its slow passing through the broken sights and burned out barrels of the numerous battle ruined machine guns. To the cooks trapped in the bake-oven heat in the confines of the Squadron's mess, the great tumultuous upheaval appeared as a never-ending procession of grimy,

unwashed air personnel waiting out endless miles of winding chow lines. War to the Medical Department, ensconced in its quarters of canvas, meant the repair of broken bodies, the restoration of a shattered faith. Too often, to the men in Operations, the true meaning of discord between nations was most fully realized by the dispatching to the nearest kin the pitifully small pile of belongings so poignantly stacked alongside an empty bunk, yes, the tornadic winds of aerial warfare beat strongly upon all in the Group.”

The move to Italy was a most welcome change. Food, supplies and equipment became more readily available. Two more B-17 Groups, the 463rd and the 483rd, were added to the 5th Wing, and with the addition of fifteen B-24 Groups, the 15th Air Force became part of a great striking force. Seven Fighter Groups eventually flew fighter escort.

Living conditions also improved. Although tents were the living quarters, many men eventually made improvements by adding “Tuffa” block walls with the tent as a cover. Doors, windows, flooring and make-shift stoves were added for greater comfort. The eventual building of permanent offices, mess halls and recreation halls made life more liveable.

The weather presented problems. Winters were long. Rains, snow, windstorms, and the mud made conditions, especially on the line, extremely difficult. Nights and days were still long, tasks were still the same. For the flight crews, the missions became longer, the flak increased in intensity, and the enemy fighters were being encountered in greater numbers. Most missions were still over water, the Alps, and other mountainous regions of the Balkans making emergency landing virtually impossible. Weather forced many missions to be aborted, some of a very long range, which was just as exhausting to crews had the mission been completed.

So, this book is dedicated to all those men of the 2nd Bombardment Group, both the living and the dead, who shared the good times, the bad times, the laughter and the tears. Bless them all! Bless them all!