

INTRODUCTION

The air arm of the United States combat forces in Europe was the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces. The Eighth Air Force was designated as strategic; that is, it bombed factories and towns with the view of crippling the industrial capacity of the enemy. It was composed primarily of heavy bombers and of fighters to serve as escort for the bombers. The Ninth was designated as the tactical air force; that is, its mission was the bombing of enemy transportation, enemy supplies, fortified points, and, in general, the close support of ground operations. Combat planes of the Ninth Air Force included medium bombers and fighters: B-26 Marauders, A-20 Havocs, A-26 Invaders, P-38 Lightnings, P-51 Mustangs, P-47 Thunderbolts, and P-61 Black Widows.

The work of medium bombers of the Ninth Bombardment Division of the Ninth Air Force occupies an important place in the air war against Germany. At the peak of its activities this division was composed of three combat wings, the 97th, 98th, and 99th. The 97th Combat Wing was composed of three groups of A-20 Havocs, which were later converted to A-26 Invaders. The 98th and 99th were composed of four groups each of B-26 Marauders, some of which were converted late in the war to the newer A-26 Invaders.

The 387th Bombardment Group, one of the four groups comprising the 98th combat wing, used B-26 Marauder bombers exclusively during its 393

combat missions. These strong ships proved their worth on numerous occasions in bringing back crews who might otherwise have been lost in a less sturdily constructed airplane.

In a history of any air combat group the greatest attention and publicity are, rightly, given to the combat crews. They are the men who have undergone the longest and most specialized training and who risk the dangers of enemy flak, enemy fighters and plane accidents. In the early stages of overseas training in the United States air crews and combat crews sometimes failed to understand their mutual interdependence; overseas, under stress of combat, each section learned how to appreciate more fully the work of the other.

For every combat mission run against the enemy there lies behind its successful completion long hours of work by the ground crews. Engineering crews, ordnance, armament, communications, intelligence, weather, cooks, and clerks in the orderly room play their part.

Therefore, when a member of the 387th Group thinks back over the air campaigns, he recalls, besides the combat crews, the names of ground crews who worked night and day, week in and week out, on the "line". After D-Day a mission was assigned each day to a tactical group like the 387th. Each night engineering men pre-flighted the engines; armament men loaded the planes with bombs and ammunition; ordnance men delivered the bombs and fused them; and communications sections checked over their equipment. Often at the time the mission was called in, there was a deluge of rain, a dense fog, or a snow-storm; yet the mission had to be made ready. Crews had to be fed, whatever the hour, and maps and all available data concerning weather and the target area compiled and presented by the intelligence and weather sections. Records

Yet, with all the work within the tactical group, operations could not have been carried on without the cooperation of the service group and station complement. The 387th was fortunate in having excellent help from the service team assigned to it. Shortly after the group had arrived at AAF Station 162 in England, it was joined by the 53rd Service Group and 46th Station Complement Squadron. Later, the 53rd was transferred and the 70th Service Group assigned. Then, after the move to G-87, the designation of the 70th was changed to the 463rd Service Group. These outfits did yeoman service in getting supplies and providing maintenance for the tactical group.

Thus the outstanding combat record of the 387th was achieved by teamwork - the smooth coordination of air and ground crews, service groups, and station complement. Each helped the other toward the goal which was the total defeat of the enemy. Each deserves commendation for the excellent spirit displayed in achieving the final victory. The record of achievement speaks for itself in the narrative that follows.

FROM VACUITY TO CHIPPING ONGAR

Early training at MacDill

The 387th Bombardment Group (M), with its four member squadrons, the 556th, 557th, 558th and 559th, was activated at MacDill Field, Tampa, Florida December 1, 1942. The next day personnel of the newly activated group began arriving.

The original cadre came from the 21st Bombardment Group of MacDill Field. Inter fillers to headquarters personnel were assigned from Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Third Bomber Command, Miami Beach, Florida, and Daniel Field, Georgia. The majority of the original members of the 556th squadron were recruited from the 313th Bombardment Squadron. Original personnel for the 557th came from the 314th, those of the 558th from the 315th, and the 559th from the 398th. All these parent squadrons were members of the 21st Bombardment Group (M) stationed at MacDill. Others came from Barksdale Field, Louisiana, Anti-Submarine Command, Jacksonville, Florida, 344th Bombardment Group (M), Lakeland, Florida, and 309th Bombardment Group, Columbia, South Carolina.

On December 20 Major David S. Blackwell of Third Bomber Command was assigned as first commanding officer of the group. Throughout December and January additional personnel continued to arrive. On January 19, 1943 Colonel Carl R. Storrle was assigned from Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Third Bomber Command as group commander, relieving Major Blackwell, who remained as group executive until January 22, at which time he was transferred to the newly created 391st Bombardment Group (M). By February 9 the roster of

officer, Major Samuel L. Grothwait, group adjutant, Captain John M. Campbell, group S-2, Major Thomas M. Seymour, group S-3, Captain Marvin M. Harvey, group S-4, Captain James T. Moffett, group surgeon, and First Lieutenant William F. Paulds, group chaplain.

The greater part of the personnel, who had been recruited from OTU and APT organizations, began, for the first time, to feel that they were to become part of a real combat unit. During the first phase of training, group headquarters was located temporarily in a two story barracks. The 556th, 557th and 559th squadrons were billeted in the casual camp area, rather aptly called "geontown". In the shacks the men could look through the roof and see the sky, and look down through the boards of the floor and see the sand. Some mornings in January were cold, but, in true Army style, heat was furnished only on warm mornings. Chow for the EM was lousy, but could be supplemented by meals at the PX and soda fountains. Officers ate at the swank officers club; but rates were not exactly cheap for newly made second lieutenants.

The final details of the first phase were completed by February 2, when the entire group, at Colonel Storrie's summons, met at the base theatre for his famous Hat in the Ring session. The Colonel began the meeting by throwing his hat "in the ring" in the name of the 387th, and called on all men to do their part. The answer was a unanimous affirmative.

On February 8, 1943 the group moved into Hangar 4 at MacDill. There the operations, intelligence, engineering, ordnance, and armament sections were quickly set up and the six-weeks period of second phase training began. A strenuous flying schedule was initiated with four hour periods each for mornings, afternoons, and evenings. The bombing ranges at Venice, Osprey, Mullet Key, and Avon Park were used for practice bombing missions, and select-

usually preceded all missions. Crews not engaged in flying attended ground school, which included lectures on air tactics, aircraft identification, first aid, and nomenclature of guns and ammunition. The result of this strenuous schedule was a steady welding together of the various units so that they could move quickly and fight effectively.

On March 18 Lieutenant Colonel Robert M. Stillman, group executive officer, was transferred from the 387th to take command of the 322nd Bombardment Group. At that time the ground echelon of the 322nd and the air echelon of one squadron were in England; and Colonel Stillman flew to England to assume command. It was from there that he was to take off on the fatal mission to Idkuiden on May 17, 1943. On that mission ten B-26's, led by Colonel Stillman and flying at low level, were shot down by the Germans. Colonel Stillman, fortunately, suffered only broken bones in the crash, and though taken prisoner, escaped alive.

Lakeland and Godman Field

By the end of the second week of April the group was nearing the end of second phase training. Since the third phase called for group operation by itself in cooperation with a service group, personnel of the 387th began packing technical and personal equipment for their first move - to Evans Field, near Lakeland, Florida. The move was accomplished on April 12, and in the end proved agreeable to all. At first the men missed the ornate and elaborate PX's and clubs of MacDill Field; but this loss was more than compensated for by the adoption of more comfortable and less formal uniforms and the knowledge that they were the only unit on the field. Working in the open and in tents after using the big hangars at MacDill gave them a feeling of real

combat theater.

Shortly after the group arrived at Irano Field, the second phase of training was completed and the third began. Under Colonel Storrie's able direction the combat crews and ground personnel were becoming expert in their jobs, and accustomed to operations at any time or place.

During second phase training several pilots had become quite "hot" and were flying their planes rather low over the Florida terrain. One day a lieutenant Charles B. White, now Major White, came back with leaves and twigs caught underneath the fuselage and scratches and green stain from leaves under the wings. He told the crew chief to hurry and get the plane cleaned and the scratches painted over. This the crew chief proceeded to do. Soon Colonel Storrie came around the line to look over the planes and stopped critically before Lieutenant White's particular ship.

"Sergeant, what happened to your ship here with these scratches on it?"

"My pilot hit a bird, sir," answered the crew chief, coyly lying.

"Well, what caused this green stain underneath the wings?"

"Why, he hit a parrot, sir."

The colonel closed his jaw tightly and walked away.

Before leaving Iskeland the group, because of its fine record of training during the period, received a personal commendation from Brigadier General Parker, commanding general of Third Bomber Command, stating that the training record of the 307th was the finest yet done by any medium bombardment group.

Third phase training continued into May and then slowed down because of a shortage of gasoline. On May 5 Major Philip A Sykes, of the 25th Wing

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of a third class in sight, the group was ordered to Godman Field, Fort Knox, Kentucky to complete this stage and to join the Second Army maneuvers, then in progress. On May 10 Colonel Storrie led the air echelon in a group mission from Lakeford to Godman Field. The ground echelon, under command of Major Crosthwait, left Lakeford May 11 by train and rejoined the air echelon at Godman Field two days later.

During the Tennessee maneuvers of the early summer the mission flown by the B-26's of the 37th in close support of ground troops played a large part in the losses caused by the attacking Blue Army on the defending Red Army. On May 20 during the visit of Third Air Force inspectors, a mission was flown from Godman Field to simulate an attack on a power plant at Seneca, Georgia, and the group was pronounced "ready for combat". The next day the air echelon was alerted for overseas movement, and by May 23 all air echelon personnel had left Godman Field by train for Selfridge Field, Michigan. This separation of air and ground echelons was to last until the reunion in England. There were rumors at the time that ground and air echelons were to be permanently separated, as in the case of the 344th Bombardment Group. No one wanted to believe these reports, because since December an efficient organization had been built and close friendships formed. Also, very few, after the months of strenuous training, had any desire to return to MacDill and begin training over again.

To Europe via the North Atlantic

The flight echelon arrived at Selfridge Field on May 23, 1943. There the crews found new B-26's and new personal equipment. For two weeks the crews were busy checking out the new ships, testing gas consumption, and

care of both technical work and administrative details. Pilots became adjutants, gunners first sergeants and sergeant-majors, new roles for flying crews.

On Friday, June 10, the entire flight echelon prepared to take off from Selfridge to Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia on the first leg of the journey to England. When thunderheads were reported over the mountains on the route to Savannah, there was some doubt concerning the time of take-off. All doubt was removed, however, about nine o'clock when Colonel Storrie, piloting Bat-Over-Hell II, took off leading the 558th squadron. At intervals of one hour apart the other squadrons, the 556th, 559th, and 557th followed. Some planes did not leave at that time because modifications had not been completed. The weather from Selfridge to Savannah was nasty, and before all planes could arrive, the weather had closed in on Hunter Field. Consequently, all but two 557th planes had to land at other fields and did not arrive at Hunter Field until the next day.

At Hunter the crews received all equipment necessary for overseas service, and further modifications on the planes were made. On Sunday Colonel Storrie again led the 558th on its trip to Langley Field. Others followed on Sunday and Monday, and by Monday night most planes were serviced and ready for the trip north. More bad weather between Langley Field and Presque Isle, Maine, forced the planes to land at Grenier Field, Manchester, New Hampshire; but on the morning of June 16 the entire group, except about six stragglers, took off for Presque Isle, which was the port of embarkation for planes going over the northern route. The stay, prolonged to three days at Presque Isle because of bad weather, gave the crews a chance to get their ships ready and to get thoroughly briefed on the difficulties of navigation over the north Atlantic. There could be no approximations; navigation had to be perfect. On the after-

way. The trip proved a good orientation flight for the navigators, but was otherwise uneventful. The stay at Goose Bay was only long enough to allow for eating, refueling, a short nap, and briefing.

Flying to B W 1, Greenland was by far the most hazardous part of the journey because most of the trip was made in a thick fog which limited visibility to a hundred yards. It also provided some beautiful sights; for when the planes were about fifty miles from land, the fog broke, and the crews first saw the icebergs drifting in the sea 9,000 feet below, resembling giant ice cream cones of multiple geometric designs. The landing was a difficult procedure requiring a great amount of skill. The approach is in one direction only and requires the landing of the plane on the water's edge where the landing strip, made of mesh, rose rapidly uphill to a height of 160 feet above sea level. The crunching of the wheels against the mesh was a welcome sound to all crews. Fortunately every one of Colonel Karl's Combat Kids safely touched soil on Greenland.

The weather at B W 1 was constantly closing in and lifting, but never becoming clear enough to permit a take-off. As a result, the various flights took off at intervals of from four to ten hours apart; but by the afternoon of June 21 all planes except one were off and on their way to Iceland. The trip from Greenland to Iceland was the most beautiful stretch of the trip. The sun was bright, and at one time visibility was good for 152 nautical miles. No trouble was experienced in attaining an altitude of 12,000 feet to get over the ice caps, and the scene of the planes at this height was a sight to remember. Iceland was visible forty-five minutes before the planes had arrived at the shore line, and the landmarks on which the crews had been briefed in Greenland were so clearly visible that there was no mistaking the destination.

June 23 the take-off for Prestwick was allowed. This trip, unlike the one from Greenland, was flown at an altitude of 1500 to 2000 feet, and the planes were constantly darting in and out of low flying clouds. After three hours of flying the rocky shore of Stornoway, Scotland became visible. Landing was made and permission given to proceed to Prestwick. Prestwick was reached about five in the afternoon, and the crews were fed doughnuts and chocolate by the Red Cross. After the planes had been refueled, the formation headed south and reached Aldermaston in England just at nightfall. The last planes came in with the help of landing lights. After waiting at Aldermaston a day for Colonel Storrle, who had been forced to land at Stornoway, the planes took off on the afternoon of June 25 for Chipping Ongar. The trip was short, but it gave them their first glimpse of London, which they were to see many times thereafter. On seeing the city and the installations of their permanent base, the reaction of all the crews was: "We'd like to stay here until we can return to the 'USA'". The crossing had set two records. It was the fastest trip yet made by any group, and the first group ever to cross without the loss of a single man.

To England on the Queen Mary

The ground echelon remained at Godman Field until June 10, and in that time finished training and packing. On that day the band began to play, the big bass drum began to beat, and the ground personnel of the 387th followed it right out of Godman Field onto the train for Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. After arriving at Camp Kilmer on the morning of June 11 the group put itself into the hands of the staging officials for final check of equipment, supplies, and general readiness. With the promise of passes to New York City as soon as

necessary procedure of mail censorship began. During the last eight days at Kilmer there were lectures and drilling during the day, and passes to New Brunswick and New York City for half the men at night.

On June 22 the final order for movement overseas came, and the next day all were enroute to New York harbor. The trip consisted of a train ride to Hoboken and what all would swear was at least a five mile hike with full pack and baggage to the edge of the Hudson River. Then came the ferry trip across to the Queen Mary. With the group on this gigantic liner were what seemed like two-thirds of the combined Army and Navy, but was, in reality, a contingent of about 14,000 troops. The following day the Queen pulled away from the dock and started down the Hudson, into New York Harbor, through the mine field, and out to sea. Most of the men had assumed, without saying so, that the trip would begin in the middle of the darkest night available, but, as usual, the Army had other ideas. The boat left the dock exactly at noon. To the accompaniment of whistles, bells, and fog horns the Queen Mary slipped slowly past the New York sky-line out into the Atlantic. It was felt by all aboard that the noise could be heard as far as Berlin.

For the first two days the course was south, far enough for the paint to steam off the sides, and far enough, too, for the men below decks to become thoroughly parboiled. All troops aboard had meanwhile been initiated into the ominous habit of wearing life preservers. From the very first the great number of soldiers on board gave the ship the look of a slaver. Personnel were divided into sections which changed quarters each afternoon. Those who had been on deck one night went below the next, and vice-versa. For the enlisted men and junior officers there was not much to choose between the pallets on deck and the stifling air of the hold. A dozen second lieutenants were

eight into one of the same type cabins, fared a little better. The observance of NMIP was carefully observed on up the line so that the single one-star general aboard basked alone in a single cabin.

Meals, served twice a day, were quite good as far as the officers were concerned; but to dignify the sorry stuff served to the enlisted men by the name meals would be a gross overstatement. Luckily, there was a PI on board, and the men lived largely on a diet of candy.

On the third day the course veered sharply north until weather conditions changed from torrid to frigid. During the fast trip the usual rumors of torpedoes and subs made the rounds, but nothing sensational occurred. The Queen, attended constantly by a B-24 Liberator overhead, ploughed along imperturbably, zig-zagging through a smooth sea. The first signs of land were the mountains of Northern Ireland which, on the morning of June 29, rose dimly out of the horizon off starboard. The bluish gray shadow of the crags outlined in the sunlight was the introduction to many more beauties of the older world. The big ship passed two strong convoys in military column, trailing barrage balloons behind them and escorted by destroyers. After turning south and proceeding down the Irish Sea, the Queen Mary, about dusk, made a horseshoe turn and headed northeast into the Firth of Clyde. In the last sunlight of a gorgeous cloudless day the soft light of a summer evening glanced across the hedgerows, rounded green hills, ripe wheat fields, thatched cottages, and yellow haystacks to give all objects a warm golden sheen. The sight of a girl in a red dress, walking with her dog in the fields along the shore, added the finishing touch to a picturesque sight. Maybe the scene would be that beautiful any time; maybe it only looked that good to soldiers ending an ocean

Finally the Queen Mary drew abreast of Gourock into the company of fifteen or more large ships, many ex-luxury liners, all loaded with soldiers. Almost immediately the men were transported to shore by lighter - a job that did not end until the next night. After the men had been loaded on the trains, the trip to the field began. At the end of an all night trip the train pulled into Chelmsford, Essex where the men were put into trucks and taken on a thirty minute ride to the new base. On arriving at airfield A-162 at Willingale, near Chipping Ongar, the ground echelons were welcomed by the flying crews, who spoke knowingly of left-hand driving, cycling, haystacking, thruppany bits, WAAFS, mild and bitters, and Piccadilly.

On landing at Chipping Ongar the crews had found that the field was barely ready to receive them. The air echelon had arrived in such excellent time that the runways were only partially complete. When he learned that the 387th planes were at Prestwick, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Brown, commander of the 831st Engineer Battalion, had kept his men working far into the night of the two days preceding the planes' arrival in order to get the field ready for the landings. The hardworking engineers, who had spent eight months of rain and fog to get the field ready, admitted a feeling of satisfaction at the sight of sixty-five new B-26's dropping wheels on the field. Although neither the runways nor the squadron areas were complete, the spirits of the men were high. After the ocean voyage ground and air crews alike were glad to be together again. Colonel Storrie expressed the feeling of the group when he said, "Where are the bombs? Let's go to war."

On June 27, 1943, the day after the arrival of the air echelon at A-162, Major General Ira C. Eaker, commander of the Eighth Air Force and Squadron Commander Robert C. Gardner and Francis M. Brady of the Eighth Air

ing and its fine record as a medium bombardment group, and outlined the job they were to do.

Formal dedication of the field took place on July 17 with all units of the field taking part. A review of the various units was held with music by the 342nd Engineer's band. An aerial demonstration by thirty-six B-26's flying close formation followed. Brigadier General C. R. Moore, chief engineer ETOUSA, then presented the field, in behalf of the engineers, to Brigadier General Robert C. Candee of the Eighth Air Support Command. General Candee congratulated Lieutenant Colonel Brown and his men of the 831st Engineers, builders of the field, on the fast and capable work done. He concluded by saying, "Archimedes once said, 'Give me a base on which to stand and a lever long enough and I can move the earth.' You, General Moore, and your men have given us the base, and Colonel Storrie is very eager to start moving the earth." A tour of the field was then made, followed by a luncheon with Colonel Storrie as host to some hundred visitors, including Brigadier General Candee, Brigadier General Moore, Lieutenant Colonel P. C. Brown, and General J. I. Wigan and Lieutenant Colonel E. A. W. Lake, the two latter of the British Army.

The 387th, along with other medium bombardment groups, had been assigned to the Eighth Air Force. Later, after the transfer of the Ninth Air Force to England, these groups were to be assigned to that organization and were to form the Ninth Bombardment Division, composed of three combat wings; the 97th, 98th, and 99th. This grouping was to continue until the end of the war against Germany.

During the period of fair weather in July the station was in the process of being completed. For the group had arrived several weeks ahead of

to the training period, when the squadrons had operated with a good bit of independence, group headquarters took over a larger control. Group operations, group intelligence, group personnel, and other sections in headquarters began drawing men from the squadron sections to help with their work. There was relatively little air activity because many modifications had to be made on the planes and because there was no gas until late in the month. Ground school was organized for air crews, and toward the end of July several practice bombing missions and "doughnuts" north to the Wash were flown. All efforts were made to see that the crews were sufficiently shaken down and primed before the time came for operations.