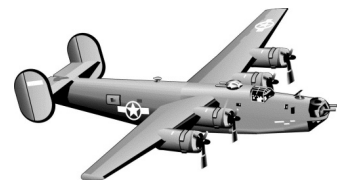




Flightline



Newsletter of the 780th Bombardment Squadron of WWII

December 2024

Favorable reports to medals, missions, replacements

Squadron cruises through Autumn 1944

This is part six of the official history of the 780th Bombardment Squadron, drawn from unclassified military records obtained from the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama, and 780 Memoirs, the squadron history book. Editor

Among the promotions which occurred during the month of August 1944 were those of Commanding Officer, Major Cook, to Lieutenant Colonel; Capt. Zawadzki, Operations Officer to Major; and Lt. Carr, Adjutant, to Captain. On Aug 21, 1944 Lt. Fox, Personnel Equipment Officer, was transferred to 464th BG Headquarters, being replaced by Lt. Williamson.

It is to be noted that from August 12 through 15 the Squadron, together with the Group, Wing and Air Force, participated in several missions in direct support of the successful invasion of Southern France. Another mission of interest occurred when on August 18 the target was again Ploesti, Rumania, the main source of Hitler's oil supply. This, the 65th mission flown by

the Squadron, proved to be the final bombing of this vital target, as shortly thereafter Ploesti fell to the successful drive of the mighty Russian steam roller, thus eliminating one of the highest-priority targets on the program of the Air Force.

As August 1944 ended, the Squadron strength figures read: 91 officers and 408 enlisted men.

A total of thirteen combat missions were flown during the month of September, bringing to a total of 88 the number of missions flown since becoming operational. The 85th mission, on September 20 over Hatvan, Hungary, produced the finest bombing score yet at-

tained by the Group with 97 percent within a 1,000-foot circle.

On his 50th and final mission, Capt. Blackburn and his crew, flying over Vienna, Austria on September 10, failed to return. On the next day, flying over Munich, Germany, Lt. Depp and his crew also failed to return. Capt. Blackburn's airplane was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire. It first



A typical crew tent prepared for winter. Credit: 456th Bombardment Group.

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went into a steep climb with bomb bays burning. While climbing, four persons were seen to leave the plane. Suddenly the plane went into a spin with all four engines still running. According to an eye-witness report it is possible that other men left the plane before it crashed.

Reports brought back on Lt. Depp's airplane indicated that two engines were smoking before it went over the target, but that the smoke had subsided and the plane went over the target successfully. However, on the return, while

the formation was passing over the Alps, it began losing altitude and falling behind the formation. After leaving the formation the plane was following the valleys of the mountains below the peaks and it appeared to be under control. Since the plane was not apparently hit by flak nor had it been attacked by enemy fighters, its inability to stay in formation was probably due to engine trouble and it is quite possible, therefore, that the pilot was able to bring this plane to a safe landing area.

Noteworthy during the month were some awards made as follows: S/Sgt. Miguel M. Garcia was the first member of the Squadron to receive 5 Oak Leaf Clusters (or 1 Silver Cluster) to the Air Medal. Capt. Robert H. Morrison was the first to receive an Oak Leaf Cluster to the Distinguished Flying Cross. T/Sgt. Fred L. Boling, Jr. was the first to receive the award of the Bronze Star Medal. Medical officer Capt. Eldred J. Stevens received the Air Medal, having completed five combat missions.

To further indicate the veteran proportions to which the Squadron was now running, 108 officers and enlisted men completed their combat tour of duty during September 1944, being subsequently transferred to the 7th Replacement Depot at Naples, Italy awaiting shipment back to the United States.

Airplane "Red H", otherwise and more fondly known as *Agony Wagon*, (*Shades of "Marcellus"*) became the veteran airplane of the Squadron and Group by successfully completing its 60th combat mission over enemy territory. As the month ended, the Squadron strength was 83 officers and 381 enlisted men.

October 1944 saw virtually a complete turnover in personnel of combat crew members. During the month 93 new members arrived from the United States to take over. It was their heritage to carry on the splendid record and traditions which made this one of the outstanding heavy bombardment squadrons of World War II. An intensive training program was set up to give these new men the necessary experience and confidence to carry on the task.

MIA *Flightline* editor returns to flying status

My deepest apologies, 780th family. I have not published a *Flightline* since last December. The good news is I hope to be publishing again more regularly now. One of the reasons why I haven't printed an issue this year until now is that content was hard to come by. I have been reprinting the squadron history but other than that and a few brief current event items it was difficult to find enough material for even four pages. Life also got in the way a bit.

I recently started looking through my 780th files and containers and found some old newsletters and other documents. I will continue to publish the 780th history (about half has been published already in *Flightline*) and I will highlight content from past newsletters. By "past" I mean newsletters published before my editorship which started in 2009. Look for clips from past newsletters in the feature *Flightline Flashback*. See next page.

I hope this new editorial approach to publishing *Flightline* will be of interest to all readers. As always, if you have some news or stories to share, questions, or just want to say hello to the squadron, please email or mail them to me. My address is in the address area and my email is johnkath5@comcast.net.

Kathy Le Comte, Editor

Flightline Flashback: July 1996

Ground crewman hears familiar sound overhead

Letter from Joe Sullivan to Editor Bob Bleier, with reponse:

Saturday afternoon, leaving a wedding reception in Sacramento, I received what movie people exploit (sic), a flashback. As Kay and I came out the door I heard a sound that anyone connected with heavy bombers during WW II will always remember, the heavy rumble of Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasps.

I looked up and directly overhead, low, was a B-24 and a B-17, flying close formation, on what was obviously a landing approach turn. The 24 was the *All American*, but what caught my eye and filled them with tears were the red cowls and tail marking of the 465th Bomb Group. I froze, and was pulled back 51 years, remembering the too many times we ground people watched, counted and prayed that all our planes and their crews were coming back to the base. It tore me up!

The next day, working in the back yard, I heard the same rumble and overhead, this time alone, was the *All American*, probably flying to its next base display. I watched her until she was out of sight, and once again was brought back to the twin runways and our hill overlooking the Pantanella Airfield. Later that day I learned the *All American* and the B-17 were at Mather Field for display in honor of Armed Forces Day.

Will see you in Las Vegas next September, God willing and the creek doesn't rise.

Response from editor Bob Bleier: *Joe, they had just left San Jose, where Jim Althoff, Ben Donahue, and I, among others, had acted as "docents," if you will, guiding the public through and around the planes, trying to answer a million questions, etc. It is a fun experience because you meet a lot of interesting people. I even met an ex-Luftwaffe fighter pilot! We determined that we'd never shot at each other as he was in the Netherlands flying a Focke-Wulf 190A. Never saw one of those! Looking forward to seeing you in Vegas!*

With the full realization that the Squadron was destined to spend the winter in Pantanella, winterization plans were started. Tuffi-blocks by the thousands were hauled in while lime, sand, cement and other building materials were "procured." "Ligne," as the natives called lumber, was virtually non-existent in Italy, so all winterization materials centered around the native-mined tuffi, a sand-like substance cut from pits nearby.

Some of the more fortunate, who could procure roofing materials, had small homes in process of completion as the month neared its close. Most, however, improved their tents by adding tuffi-rock walls. With the addition of wooden or cement floors and home-made stoves comfort was improved for the approaching colder weather. And with good weather continuing

it seemed certain that the building program would be completed before the wintry blasts set in in earnest.

Meanwhile bad weather over target areas permitted only nine combat missions to be flown during the month of October, the fewest number for any month since becoming operational. No fighter opposition whatever was encountered, indicating how utterly impotent the once-famed Luftwaffe had become. Oil was Hitler's greatest need and it was being denied him to such an extent that the lack of it was slowly but surely losing the war for him. The continual hammering of Ploesti and the synthetic oil plants of the Reich was at last beginning to stifle all his mechanized equipment.

This series will continue in the next issue of Flightline.

80th Anniversary of 'Black Thursday'

Loconia, Italy event, book to mark 1945 explosion

On March 4, 2025, the Arma Aeronautical Association (IAAA) in Canosa, Italy, will hold ceremonies in remembrance of the March 1, 1945, ordnance depot explosion near Pantanella.

In the mid-afternoon of March 1, 1945, a defective bomb is believed to have caused Bomb Dump #18 of the 517th Air Service Group to explode. The depot was located about six miles from Pantanella and was used by the 464th Bombardment Group which shared the Pantanella airstrips with the 465th Bombardment Group.

According to the book, *The 464th Bomb Group in World War II*, personnel from the 464th and local Italian workers were loading trailers with bombs for the next day's mission when a spark ignited and caused the explosion. The concussion wave was felt six miles away and the resulting crater was large enough to fit a small two-story house. According to the IAAA, 21 Americans and nine local citizens between the ages of 16 and 19 were killed. Due to the intensity of the explosion, from roughly 4:30 to 5 p.m., planes returning to Pantanella from the day's target of the Linz marshalling yards had to scatter, reform, then land. That day the 465th's target was Maribor, Yugoslavia. No doubt those crews and especially the ground echelon were affected by the explosion and grieved the loss of life. There is no mention of the explosion in *'780' Memoirs*.

The IAAA is putting together a book on the history of Pantanella during World War II. The book also will cover the story behind the commemorative plaque that was installed in Loconia, Italy, the village closest to Pantanella, and the visits by representatives of the 464th and 465th Bombardment Group Associations in



Top: the commemoration ceremony held July 2024 in Loconia. Left: the plaque dedicated in 2023. Credit: IAAA

2023 and 2024. The plaque dedication was attended by members of the 464th, the 465th and the 781st associations in June 2023. The IAAA held another commemoration in July 2024 and plans to hold annual remembrances of the airfield and the men who served there.

The IAAA is gently requesting funds to help with the remembrance and book publishing. If any members of the 780th would like to contribute please contact Tom Will, president of the 464th Bombardment Group Association, at tewill@outlook.com.

Did you know?

The first issue of the squadron's newsletter was published at Pantanella on March 10, 1945. It was called *Squoop*. This might be a portmanteau of "squadron poop." There were three editors, two art editors and a feature editor.

"Smoke 'em if you got 'em," Santa says

Today the phrase "smoke 'em if you got 'em" means to take action if the opportunity presents itself but during World War II it had the opposite meaning - to relax and, specifically, take a 15-minute smoke break.

Cigarettes were supplied to troops in their rations. A number of brands were provided including Lucky Strike, Camel, Old Gold, Pall Mall, Phillip Morris, Wings and Fatima. But one brand stood above the rest in recognition and advertising - Chesterfield.

Chesterfield cigarettes were very popular during World War II. They were included in rations to the men abroad and were heavily advertised at home in advertising campaigns supporting the troops. Ads appeared in magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* pictured center, radio show sponsorships, movies, and later, television, making them widely recognized among soldiers and civilians alike.

Chesterfield also utilized celebrity endorsements to further boost their popularity. Big band leader Glenn Miller was sponsored by Chesterfield in the early 1940s. He was billed as Glenn Miller and his Chesterfield Orchestra. At one point during the partnership the music stands were designed to look like packs of Chesterfield cigarettes. It was

during the Chesterfield radio broadcasts on Sunday afternoons with Glenn Miller that the female trio The Andrews Sisters gained popularity. Ronald Reagan, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Perry Como and Arthur Godfrey were among Chesterfield's official spokesmen.



In the 1930s through the 1950s, Chesterfield also sponsored popular radio programs including the radio series *Music That Satisfies*, *The Chesterfield Hour*, *Johnny Mercer's Chesterfield Music Shop* and the *Chesterfield Supper Club*.

After the war Chesterfield continued to stay in front of the public's eyes on television. Liggett & Myers sponsored *Dragnet*, both on radio and on TV, during the 1950s but soon Jack Webb as

Sgt. Joe Friday was seen smoking Chesterfields in the movie and TV series. *The Martin and Lewis Show* on radio was sponsored or co-sponsored for most of its run by Chesterfield, and *Gunsmoke* on both radio and TV was similarly sponsored primarily by Chesterfield and L&Ms.

Today smoking isn't encouraged but in the 1940s and earlier, cigarettes were part of wartime culture, relieving stress for those on the front or who were injured, as well as the mental and emotional burdens at home.

Kathy Le Comte
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Flightline



Imagine having to mail your Christmas presents by October 15! And the gift being unbreakable, nonperishable, with no gift card options!! I hope this holiday newsletter reaches you undamaged, unspoiled and on time. But I must admit - there's no gift card inside.

*Happy Holidays
and
Merry New Year!*

Kathy, editor