

HISTORY

FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY FIRST BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H)

CHAPTER IV

Period Covered:

Nov. 1, 1943 to Nov. 30, 1943

Appropriately enough, this was the month for thanksgiving by the personnel of the Group; but it was also a month of sweat and toil, sweat in the physical and the army sense of the work. It was a month of Victory as far as the training program was concerned, both administratively and tactically.

The continual inspections became more and more earnest as the time for "shipment" drew near. Days and nights were spent bringing all administrative records of each individual of the Group to their completion; final physical check-ups were made to ascertain the fitness of the men for overseas service; supplies of clothing and equipment were issued according to the rules set down, and each piece marked or stenciled. Whatever personal luggage, excess clothing and equipment, and unnecessary articles there were, were shipped to the men's individual homes. The required baggage for overseas movement was prepared, properly marked and stenciled. So on the ground.

Meanwhile, the requirements of the 21st Wing and the 2nd Air Force for flight training were completed during the first part of the month, partly in Group formation flights, and partly in individual missions. Flyaways kept coming in, and were "broken in" during the training and inspection programs; a full total of sixty-two planes was acquired by the Group, and meted out sixteen each to the 724th and 725th Squadrons, and fifteen each to the 726th and 727th.

It seemed clear from the type of formation flying of which the Group showed itself capable, that the 451st was ready. On November 11th a practice POM mission was staged. A photo target was selected, and bombs were to be dropped on the Stanton Bombing Range from an altitude of 20,000 feet. The crews participating were not told at briefing, and were still unaware at take-off time, that Major General St. Claire Street, Commanding General, 2nd Air Force, was present in the company of the Group Commander, to witness the take-off, assembly and return of the planes. Despite difficulties, due largely to an extremely cold spell of weather, and the fact that emergency landings were necessary in between take-offs of planes, the mission was flown as briefed, although complete cloud coverage prevented the actual

dropping of the practice bombs carried. General Street addressed the participants in the mission after they had landed, and complimented their work under the difficulties.

He commented that the Group had shown itself prepared for action against the enemy, commending the Group Commander and his men, and declared himself convinced that we would successfully meet the actual POM Inspection which was to be held on November 16th. Needless to say, the men looked forward with redoubled energy to the completion of all requirements, both on ground and in the air.

The intervening period between the 11th and 16th of the month, were beyond doubt the most hectic the Group had seen yet. The procuring and dissemination of supplies, clothing and equipment provided the larger share of headaches. A good example: Orders were issued by inspectors of the 21st Wing to the effect that two barracks-bags would be issued to each man of the organization. The same was done, almost instantly, and the various squadron supply officers immediately set about stenciling and properly marking the bags. They finished in records time, only to find out that the orders had been changed so that one duffel bag would replace one of the Barracks-bags. Other matters that took quick and accurate work included the weeding out of those physically and otherwise unfit, and the securing of replacements, last minute inoculations, and the preparation of records to accompany the crew of ten and the four passengers who would make the overseas trip in each of the sixty-two planes.

The various departments were faced with the necessity of packing those things which they would take with them, while still leaving at hand's reach the required items for daily operations. Flying continued as usual, with concentration on formation flights by the group; individual flights in furtherance of the training program continued. It was not considered that we had any time for rest and relaxation. And the program worked; for the 16th found an eager bunch of men ready to prove their worth to join fellows against the enemy overseas.

And the big air inspection went off well. The briefing assimilated an actual combat mission, having been carefully selected by the Group Commander and the various inspectors from several submitted by the S-2 section. The mission was of about five-hour flight, with a simulated target of which pictures were to be taken to demonstrate the accuracy of the bomb run, and practice bombs were to be dropped on one of the ranges. The mission was carried out flawlessly. As a matter of fact, the formation assembly was of such a

nature that many department heads decided then and there that final packing and crating should be done instantly.

That evening there was relaxation. And with it a stag party given by the Group Commander for all officers of the organization. Amidst flowing liquor and beer, delicious foods and hearty songs, the Group Commander professed his pride in the accomplishments of the unit and thanked all concerned for their work. He stated that we were on our way, but his last words were drowned out in hurrahs.

Meanwhile the enlisted men of the organization celebrated with their own party, held in one of the hangars. For the first time since the formation of the Group, there was only a handful of the two thousand odd members on duty.

On the morning of the 17th there was new work to be done as there was advance notice indicating that part of the air echelon would be leaving the following day for staging at Lincoln, Nebraska, only sixty-five miles away from Fairmont. As a result, there was a mad scramble to pack up all clothing and equipment, and send home or given away as the individual owner saw fit. And there were good-byes to be said to wives and families, suddenly aware that this finally was to be the real parting of the ways. On the morning of the 18th, eleven planes of the 724th Squadron, their baggage racks crammed with the luggage of the crew of ten and the four passengers took off for Lincoln. The Group Commander accompanied this movement, which for the purpose of overseas movement became known as Flight "1", and similarly each morning for the next five days, until November 23rd, a flight of ten or eleven planes took off for Lincoln to be staged, until the runways and aprons were cleared, and the ground echelon alone remained at the base.

However, flight for the remaining planes was not discontinued and while on a fuel consumption test on the night of November 20th, plane number "084" of the 727th Squadron with 2nd Lt. Paul R. Pfau as pilot and 2nd Lt. Arthur Wartman, co-pilot, had two runaway props which necessitated feathering of the two outboard engines. The plane was at the time approximately 100 miles from Grand Island Air Base. Because of the fact that one of the inboard engines was acting up, and the plane was fast losing altitude, Lt. Pfau ordered the eight members of his crew and the two passengers, both of the armament section, to bail out. They did at altitudes between eighteen and fifteen hundred feet, leaving the two officers alone at the controls. Despite their difficulties, a successful landing was made at the strange field at Grand Island. Immediate searches led by Captains Kendall S. Yound and Joe W. King, Operations Officer and Flight Surgeon of the 727th

Squadron, who flew down to Grand Island upon hearing of the emergency, resulted in all ten men who had parachuted being found safe before the next morning.

The 23rd of the month found all of the six flights with all members of the Group who were to make the voyage overseas by plane, under the command of the Group Commander, at Lincoln Army Air Base. The ground echelon was left commanded by Major Donald T. Jones, Group Executive, which the four squadron executive officers assumed command of their respective squadrons pro tempore. From this day until January 20, 1944, when both echelons were once again brought together in Italy, the history of the air and ground echelons must be told separately. The Air Echelon was taken into hand by the 12th Heavy Bombardment Processing Headquarters which did a magnificence and well-coordinated job in staging the planes and the personnel for departure to overseas destination.

The major tie-up was caused by the fact that several new major technical order compliances necessitated serious modifications on the planes. Consequently, only one-fourth of our planes pulled out of Lincoln for Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, our jumping off point, by the end of the month. Nevertheless, all other items were covered during this period, such as the final processing of the personnel, the segregation of equipment and clothing which was to go by boat and that to accompany the fourteen men on the plane, final physical inspections, and the examinations of the qualifications of the various members of the crews. Not one member of the Group was deemed unsatisfactory for his relative position because of a lack of training.

While the majority of the air echelon took good advantage of a relatively easy and free period at Lincoln, the number one ship of the Group, piloted by 1st Lt. Claude U. Vail, of the 724th Bombardment Squadron, departed the United States from Morrison Field on November 27th, 1943. Meanwhile the Group Commander was detained a few days at Lincoln, and consequently was not, as scheduled, on the first ship of the Group.

There were no incidents insofar as the air echelon was concerned for the balance of the month, unless it was the fact that the only concern of all, beyond the fulfillment of the necessary requirements of staging, was in enjoying the hospitality of Lincoln.

The ground echelon was not so fortunate. For this period was spent by them preparing for the departure for the P.O.E. at Hampton Rhodes, Virginia. The enlisted personnel of each squadron were

divided into platoons, each squadron being supplied with one troop train for it. All troop trains were boarded on November 26th, and Dyersburg and Wendover and Fairmont became things of the past. The entire group was now on its way.

The trip by train to Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia, the staging area for the P.O.E. took two days, the ground echelon arriving during the dark hours of the night of the 28th. The next two days were spent requisitioning supplies and organizational equipment in furtherance of show-down inspections, in final physical inspections, and in filling in vacancies of personnel of the group. The entire echelon was kept under strict censorship and restricted to the Camp itself until departure for P.O.E.

And so ended the month, with major part of the group personnel waiting patiently and with great anticipation the order to move on. It was best that way that this month of severe stress and strain, of labor and accomplishment, should have ended in a peaceful and lazy note, the rest was well-needed.