

HISTORY

FOURHUNDRED AND FIFTY FIRST BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H)

CHAPTER III

Period covered:

Oct. 1, 1943 to Oct 31, 1943

The month of October was marked in the 451st Group by a series of rigid and painstaking inspections on a scale and to a degree beyond anything the Group had hitherto sustained.

A second characteristic of the month was one of tragedy: nine officers and fourteen enlisted men were killed in training flights which also saw the destruction of three airplanes. These were the first fatalities suffered by the Group since its organization.

A third note in the month was a happy one: promotions inaugurated in the Group came through.

By far the most important of these occurrences was the series of inspections, designed by higher echelons to ascertain whether the Group was in condition to go overseas to perform its combat mission. The Group received a final report of satisfactory.

The inspections started on the first day of the month with a visit by an air inspecting party from the 15th Bombardment Operational Training Wing. This unit then made a series of suggestions designed to enable the Group to pass the oncoming Preparation for Overseas Movement inspection, which was to follow shortly.

The pre-POM inspectors from Headquarters, Army Air Forces arrived on Oct. 14 and made a thorough and detailed inspection of every phase of activity in the Group - training, equipment, personnel, maintenance, etc., and pronounced the Group in a state of readiness for service overseas.

At the same time the POM inspectors recommended a few days extension for further specific air training.

On Oct. 18, the Inspector General of the War Department surveyed the Group and found it "satisfactory" for overseas movement.

At this time the Administrative Inspector of the Wing air inspection department returned to the Group and has remained with the organization since that time, working with it daily. On Oct. 24, the

Wing air inspector returned and also stated that he deemed the Group in a state of fitness for combat overseas.

On Oct. 18, the Wing Commander and the Group Commander conferred and the comments made by the Wing Commander were regarded as highly encouraging. He made additional recommendations and suggestions, and the Group set out immediately to comply with these. The Wing Commander was adjudged as pleased with the progress of the Group to date.

These inspections, from beginning to end, were exacting to extreme, and tested the metal of the Group as much, or perhaps more, than anything that had occurred to it since its formation. Knowledge of the presence of the officers from the higher echelons proved exhilarating and the entire personnel of the Group, from its senior officers down though the enlisted men, sensed that in these inspections passage overseas was being expedited.

While officers and enlisted men worked tirelessly over long hours to accomplish the requirements of the inspectors, the wave of surveys seemed in the end to raise morale to its highest peak. The Group began to get the feeling that it was "hot" and this thought tingled the spine of every man in the organization.

On Oct. 1, the Group Executive Officer summoned the key staff officers from Group and all the squadrons to the War Room for an introduction to and an analysis of the various sections of the POM manual. The manual was gone through from beginning to end, part by part, and those officers of the organization whose experience with various sections gave them some additional knowledge of those sections, presented their information to the Group. Many problems and questions were ironed out in the informal meeting, and staff officers took notes on those portions of the manual which affected them and their department.

On Oct. 16, the Group Commander again called a meeting of the key squadron and Group staff officers, and in key with his policy of translating the wishes and directives of higher echelons to those officers whose duty it is to enforce them, discussed portions of the results of the POM inspection which could be related without violating security measures.

The Group Commander pointed out some of the things the PO inspectors criticized and then added his own thoughts on how the defective points might be improved. Then the Group Commander concluded by again emphasizing his desires for strict military

discipline throughout the organization, and reiterated that it was his belief that discipline was the basis of any military organization, and that before an organization could proceed to combat this fundamental quality must be achieved.

In line with these heightened preparations for overseas movement an investigation was undertaken by several group staff officers to ascertain the basic requirements of the 21st Wing, which was scheduled to make the final inspection for the air echelon of the Group, prior to the immediate flight overseas.

The Group S-3 was in charge of the investigation, and he, together with the Group S-4, 1st Lt. Lynn J. Bartlett, acting as Air Echelon Adjutant; and 1st Lt. Ralph A. Byers, the Group Navigator, went to Topeka on September 29 and remained there for several days conferring with officers of the 21st Wing.

Upon their return, the four officers reported to Group and Squadron staff officers on their findings and each investigation officer detailed his own department.

The Group S-4 reported that all essential shortages would be filled by the 21st Wing provided every attempt had been made at previous stations to fulfill these requirements. Aircraft would be processed at the 21st Wing, he said.

Flyaways would be calibrated and checks for correct functioning of all parts would be made at the 21st Wing, he continued. The 21st Wing would pack and load all aircraft before departure and conduct a showdown inspection of all clothing, he concluded.

Lt. Bartlett then continued the report with the administrative requirements, and listed the various forms and other paper work that would have to be accomplished before the air echelon arrived at the 21st Wing. Squadron Commanders and Executive Officers set out to do the job immediately.

Lt. Byer's investigation disclosed that an Air Inspector's Department had been set up at the 21st Wing Processing Headquarters to check the training of all combat crews before they are released for overseas duty. All flight training records will be checked, he ascertained and each crew must have completed certain basic requirements of training before they can go overseas. These requirements fall into five parts, as follows, he reported:

a) All combat crew personnel must have fired a prescribed course in marksmanship with their basic ground weapon, and at least 50% of the personnel must have qualified.

b) All combat crew members except the pilot and co-pilot must have fired at least 200 rounds at a towed target at an altitude above 20,000 feet.

c) All crews will have flown at least 20 hours of formation above 20,000 feet.

d) All bombardiers will have dropped at least 20 bombs individually released at a precision target from above 20,000 feet.

e) All crews will have completed a 1000-mile navigational flight before arriving at the 21st Wing.

At the processing headquarters each crew member is then given a questionnaire and a series of tests to determine the amount of training he has received and if he is qualified in his necessary specialties.

The pilot is given a Link Trainer check and an instrument check. If he does not pass the crew does not leave the 21st Wing.

The radio operator is given a thorough check on all his equipment, and code checks. If he is not qualified he is replaced.

All flight personnel is then briefed on escape procedure and the route to be flown overseas before being sent to P.O.E.

Training through the four squadrons in the Group was more and more firmly shaped around these requirements to make certain that each crew and each crew member of each crew would be fully trained in those things deemed necessary for overseas movement.

The first fatal accident in the Group occurred at 0730 October 10, 1943, when crew 42 of the 726th Squadron was flying a routine training mission, high altitude, over Wayne, Nebraska, about fifty miles from the FAAF. There were three officers and three enlisted men aboard. All were instantly killed.

The dead were:

2nd Lt. Cecil Clayton Burr, pilot
2nd Lt. William Earl Harnish, co-pilot
2nd Lt. Melecio M. Apodaca, Bombardier

S/Sgt. Alfred C. Dublin, right waist gunner
Sgt. Wilfred Wood, assistant engineer and tail gunner
Sgt. Paul Zukowski, left waist gunner

The navigator of the crew, 2nd Lt. Merele C. Fitzgibbon, had been grounded a day earlier because of a respiratory infection. Two of the other crew members, enlisted men, had been grounded permanently and were waiting on reclassification, and the third enlisted man was in the hospital.

The S-2 of the Squadron to which the men were attached was named Summary Court Officer for the three deceased officers and Lt. Fitzgibbon was named Summary Court Officer for the three deceased enlisted men. The two Summary Court Officers made the necessary arrangements for the settlement of the estates of all the deceased, made inventories of their effects, and then prepared and shipped everything to the homes of the dead men. Three officers and three enlisted men were assigned to accompany the bodies home and to serve the relatives and friends of the deceased in their bereavement.

The Group Commander and the Squadron Commander sent letters of condolence to the families, expressing their sorrow at the tragic accident.

The tragedy was hardly forgotten by the Group when, at 1615, 25 October 1943, two airplanes assigned to the 724th Squadron collided in midair during a formation flight near the FAAF. Both A/C crashed to the ground and all personnel, save one were killed.

The dead were:

Crew 16

2nd Lt. Charles L. Brown, pilot
2nd Lt. Henry C. Frye, co-pilot
F/O Achille P. Augelli, Bombardier
Sgt. William C. Wilson, engineer
Pfc. Andrew G. Bivona, radio operator
Sgt. Albert R. Mogavero, assistant engineer
Sgt. Arthur O. Boria, third engineer
Sgt. Eugene A. Hubbell, gunner

Crew 12

2nd Lt. James H. Williams, pilot
2nd Lt. William E. Herzog, navigator
2nd Lt. Kenneth S. Ordway, bombardier
Sgt. William D. Watkins, engineer
Sgt. Wilbur H. Chamberlin, radio operator
Sgt. William G. Williams, assistant engineer
Sgt. Edward O. Boucher, gunner
Sgt. Ursulo Galindo, gunner

2nd Lt. Kenneth Boggs, navigator on crew 16, and Sgt. Walter H. Hagen, Jr., gunner, were in the hospital at the time. 2nd Lt. Ralph L. Merrow, co-pilot of crew 12, was also in the hospital and 2nd Lt.

Melvin Klein, a co-pilot awaiting assignment to a crew, was substituting for him.

By one of those inexplicable miracles, Lt. Klein alone of all the officers and men, was plummeted out of the cockpit of the plane, while unconscious, and regained consciousness while plunging to the ground. In a semi-awake state he automatically pulled the ripcord of his parachute and the silk opened in time to drop him safely to the ground. There he was picked up by a passing motorist, taken to a nearby city, and there he telephoned his squadron commander and reported the crash. He stated he had no recollection of anything after the crash and the downward plunge of the plane until that moment when he came out of his unconscious state and pulled open his chute.

The Squadron S-2 officer and two other squadron officers, 2nd Lt. Marc Ostinato and 2nd Lt. George Kelton were appointed Summary Court Officers and performed their last duties for their deceased comrades. Again the Group Commander extended his sympathies to families in bereavement, and he was joined by the Squadron Commander.

The Group was visited by the Safety Committee of the Army Air Forces in connection with this second accident, and the committee sought to determine the cause of the accident, in an effort to prevent similar tragedies in other training units throughout the country.

The first promotion to arrive in the Group on recommendations made from the Group befell 2nd Lt. William L. Finley, the Group Weather Officer. A few days later the returns on the other Group recommendations arrived, causing the usual run on the Post Exchange for cigars.

The four squadron surgeons were made captains, and other officers were brought to T.O. grade, or to one grade below T.O. The Deputy Group Commander was promoted from captain to major.

The enlisted men were not forgotten in the promotions. Many new stripes were displayed by happy men in all the squadrons and in Group Headquarters.

During the month the Commanding Officer of the 725th Squadron, Captain John P. Davis, was married in the base chapel, and was followed there a few days later by 2nd Lt. John L. Rosenfeld, who also took his vows in the same post church.

Captain George W. Reynolds, Jr., formerly Base Executive Officer at FAAF, was transferred to the Group during the month and was assigned to the 725th Squadron as Adjutant. Lt. William H. McGuire, Adjutant of that Squadron was transferred to the 726th Sq., in that capacity, filling a need made by the transfer out of the Group by that Squadron's former Adjutant.

During the month additional flyaways were received by the Group, bringing its total to 49.