

# A Brief History of the 460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H) 760<sup>th</sup>, 761<sup>st</sup>, 762<sup>nd</sup> & 763<sup>rd</sup> Squadrons

by

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The Fifteenth Air Force was formed as a result of the *Casablanca Conference* in January 1943. There it was agreed that once the Germans were driven out of North Africa, the Mediterranean Sea lanes should be secured as the next step in defeating them. Churchill wanted to invade Italy, then the Balkans, but President Roosevelt felt that Corsica and Sardinia should be invaded, leaving the Balkans to Stalin. They did agree that if Germany was to be defeated, its war production and defensive capability had to be eliminated. Many of the strategic targets were out of the range of the *Eighth Air Force* based in England, so by early October 1943, plans were underway to establish the *Fifteenth Air Force* in Italy under the *overall* command of General Eisenhower. Originally, General Doolittle was in command, but once the new air force was in place, he was given command of the *Eighth Air Force* and General Twining was brought in from the *Thirteenth Air Force* in the Pacific to be its commander. The *Fifteenth Air Force* was activated on 1 November 1943 at Tunis, Tunisia as part of the *Strategic Air Forces* in Europe, with its first missions flown from there. On 1 December 1943, Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters was moved to Bari, Italy to occupy the former Italian Air Force Headquarters building. It remained until the end of the war in Europe.

The 460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H) with the 760<sup>th</sup>, 761<sup>st</sup>, 762<sup>nd</sup> and 763<sup>rd</sup> squadrons, was constituted on 19 May 1943, and activated on 1 July 1943 under the command of Robert T. Crowder at Clovis, NM. as an Overseas Training Unit. From the start, Col. Crowder insisted on the highest degree of discipline, and he had an eye for making the *460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group* stand out. His efforts included the *Black Panther* insignia worn on jackets and displayed on aircraft, and the formation of the 460<sup>th</sup> Fife and Drum Corps. The *Black Panther* insignia still lives, but the life of the Fife and Drum Corps ended when the plane carrying the band instruments crashed in Italy. While there was no Fife and Drum Corps, there was baseball, volley ball, ping-pong tournaments, USO shows and even a Barber Shop Quartet.

On 10 September 1943, orders were received for movement to Camp Kearns, Utah, and it was there that the air and ground personnel came together. The stay at Kearns was brief, and on 18 October 1943 the Group was ordered to Chatham Field, Georgia with the warning of “overseas shipment on or about 1 January 1944”. While at Chatham Field the full complement of aircrews were assigned and trained along with the ground crews. Between 4 and 12 January 1944, the Group’s air echelon moved to Mitchel Field, New York, the Port of Embarkation. Before leaving Chatham Field the Group

received sixty-two B-24 aircraft. On 3 January 1944, the ground echelon left Chatham Field for their POE at Hampton Roads, Virginia where they boarded Liberty ships on 13 January for a nearly month long journey to Italy. The 760<sup>th</sup> Squadron boarded the *Thomas R. Marshall*, the 761<sup>st</sup> Squadron the *Nicholas Gilman*, the 762<sup>nd</sup> the *Ethan Allen* and the 763<sup>rd</sup> the *Jonothan Edwards*. The original plan called for all four ships to dock at Bari, Italy, but the 2 December 1943 bombing of Bari harbor forced a change of plans. The *Thomas R. Marshall* with the 760<sup>th</sup> squadron put in at Taranto, Italy on 8 February 1944, with the other three squadrons docking at Naples, Italy on 13 February 1944.

The aircrews flew overseas from Mitchel Field, New York by the way of Morrison Field Florida, Waller Field, Trinidad on to various fields along the east coast of Brazil. From there they crossed the Atlantic to Dakar in Senegal, then on to Marrakesh, Morocco and over North Africa to the Oudna 1 Air Base, about ten miles southeast of Tunis, Tunisia. By 18 February 1944, most of the ground crews were in place at the Spinazzola Army Air Base in Italy. About this time, the aircrews began arriving and nearly all were in place by 19 February. All of the planes made the overseas flight safely, but two planes of the 760<sup>th</sup> Squadron were lost en route to Italy from North Africa.

On its arrival in Italy, the 460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H) became the first operational group of the newly formed 55<sup>th</sup> Wing of the Fifteenth Air Force, with headquarters in the small town of Spinazzola, about ten miles from the 460<sup>th</sup> base site. The early days of 460<sup>th</sup> life in Italy are best remembered by the ever present mud. On their arrival at what was known as the “*Spinazzola Army Air Base*”, personnel were greeted by a large, muddy field that sloped from the road on the north to a small creek on the south, in between were partially erected eight man tents blowing in the wind. The tents had been dropped off of six by six trucks, and then set up over deep, water filled ruts made by the trucks as they plowed their way across the muddy field. For the next two months, mud was part of daily life. On 22 March 1944, personnel awoke to find their tents, trucks and everything else covered with what appeared to be a reddish brown layer of mud. They soon learned that this was from Mt. Vesuvius which was erupting and spreading volcanic ash over all of southern Italy. Breakfast that morning was a bit “gritty” as the ash laden snow fell on mess kits and food.

Living conditions were primitive at best, but Yankee ingenuity took over to turn food cans into smokestacks, bomb fin crates and barrels into stoves and all sorts of “comforts of home”. Over time the few trees in the area took on leaves, the mud went away and warmer weather made life more comfortable. Small houses made of “tufa” blocks began showing up as did mess halls and other buildings.

The two story farm home of Commendatore Lorusso, owner of the 1,000 acre farm, where the base was located was taken over to serve as Group Headquarters. Eventually,

the camp area grew into a small village known as *Bomber City* and was featured in a December 1944, Sunday supplement of *Stars and Stripes*.

The 460<sup>th</sup> got off to a slow start, flying its first combat mission on 19 March 1944 to the Metkovic Marshalling Yard in Yugoslavia. It did not go as well as had been hoped, for the Group was declared nonoperational five days later. For the next week there was an intense period of “trying to get it right”. This involved flying all day, everyday, with the emphasis on flying very tight formations. These became a trademark of the *460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group*. On 30 March 1944, Col. Crowder successfully led the Group to Mostar, Yugoslavia for its second mission. The intense training paid off and the 460<sup>th</sup> was on its way to becoming one of the leading bomb groups in the Fifteenth Air Force. Unfortunately, Col. Crowder never got to share this achievement; he was killed on 15 April 1944 when his aircraft was shot down on a mission to Bucharest, Romania.

Over the next thirteen months the Group flew 207 missions to Germany, France, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy. These missions were mainly strategic in nature, designed to destroy German oil and gasoline production facilities, aircraft and engine factories, chemical plants, communication and marshalling yards.

For the last month of the war, 460<sup>th</sup> targets were mostly tactical in nature, aimed at preventing German forces from retreating back to Germany with their equipment. The Group’s last combat mission was flown on 26 April 1945 to northern Italy. The Group was awarded a *Distinguished Unit Citation* for the 20 July 1944 mission to the Zwölfaxing, Airdrome in Austria. It received twenty-one commendations from Secretary of War Stimson, Generals Marshall, Spaatz, Eaker, Doolittle, Twining and Acheson. Individual personnel of the Group were recognized for their contributions.

#### **Individual Awards**

Distinguished Service Cross	1	Legion of Merit	3
Silver Star	21	Distinguished Flying Cross	3
DFC Oak Leaf Cluster	26	Soldier's Medal	29
SM Oak Leaf Cluster	1	Bronze Star	8
Air Medal	2279	AM Oak Leaf Cluster	3388
Purple Heart	279	PH Oak Leaf Cluster	8

Total = 6,591\*

\* Does not include Purple Hearts awarded on General Hospital Orders.

A high price was paid for these awards. According to the records available, 388 individuals were killed in action, and by coincidence, 388 became prisoners of war. An unknown number of aircrew members were Escapees and Evadees.

Those who served with the Group the entire time it was overseas are entitled to the following awards: *American Campaign Medal*, *European-African-Middle Eastern*

*Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal and the Army of Occupation Medal (Germany).*

At the conclusion of the war in Europe it was soon time for the 460<sup>th</sup> to close down the base and move on. The steel runway matting was taken up, the control tower and other buildings were torn down. What had been a very active military air base, now returned to its peacetime role as a farm field. Aircrews were returned to the United States, but ground personnel were sent to various bases in Brazil to assist in bringing personnel and aircraft back from Europe. The Group was deactivated on 26 September in Brazil. The 460<sup>th</sup> identification was reactivated during the Korean War as the *460<sup>th</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Group*, and during the Vietnam War it was back as the *460<sup>th</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Wing*. On 1 October 2001 it was again reactivated as the *460<sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing* at Buckley Field, Colorado.

After a period of thirty-seven years, several former members of the Group got together to remember and share memories of their days in Italy. This grew into the *460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H) Society, Inc.* which published a newsletter, and had a reunion once a year. The last reunion was held in 2005. A number of individuals have made trips back to the base, and there have been three organized group returns. Each time, the Lorusso family hosted a visit to the “farm”. With the passing of each day the ranks of the *460<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H)* are reduced, but the memory of its service and accomplishments during World War II lives on.