

Jim Gardner's Crew
The Joe Bananas Bunch
745th Bomb Squadron
456th Bomb Group
304th Bomb Wing
Fifteenth Air Force

We were assembled in September 1944 at Gowen Field, Boise, ID as part of the 745th Bomb Squadron, 456th Bomb Group. Another “famous group,” the group actor James Stewart was in, had just left Gowen field for England.

Our crew consisted of the following:

Pilot	James Gardner
Co-Pilot	William. W. Boyd, Jr.
Navigator	John J. Weber
Bombardier	Thomas C. Norris
Eng/Gunner	Lloyd C. Kraft
Eng/Gunner	Frank Coupe
Radio Op	Robert E. Field
Gunner	Robert J. Sciacqua
Gunner	Frederick R. Robinson
Gunner	Arthur S. Rosenthal

Joined later, Gunners	Paul L. Fleener
	Paul J. Spurgeon

In mid-September, the crew went by troop train to Salt Lake City and, after 36 hours, was given a 10-day delay enroute to Muroc AB, Muroc, CA (population 23). The 456th Group was on the South Base for operational training in preparation for overseas assignment. The North Base, Edwards AB, was being used for experimental flying as it is today. Among the aircraft at Edwards were a flying wing (wingspan 25’) and a small jet. It was quite something to watch these darting around the sky.

One of our earliest crew flights was the test flight of a B-24 that had been repaired after a wreck. Jim thought it would be a good time for co-pilot landing practice. After the first landing, as the aircraft slowed to 70 mph, the shimmy damper went out, and the resulting vibration shook the radio equipment out onto the flight deck. Jim took over the controls and let the plane roll off the end of the runway into Muroc Dry

Lake to save the nose wheel. So much for a co-pilot's first landing! But we did beat the astronauts "into" the dry lake!

Highlights of operational training included a searchlight mission over Los Angeles, even though we couldn't get them to turn the searchlights on us, as well as an unscheduled "rat rave" with some P-38s over Bear Lake outside Riverside, CA. Other highlights—of a slightly different nature—included trips into LA and the adventurous trips to Poncho's or to Palmdale, Rosamond, and Lancaster.

Following operational training, the Group went by train to Hamilton Field just across the bay from San Francisco. It was mid-December and a permanent fog had set in. A brand-new B-24E was assigned to us, and we made several flights checking instruments and fuel consumption. Bob Sciacqua came up with a perfect name for the plane—or perhaps perfect to describe our crew—*Joe Bananas*.

Most memorable during our stay at Hamilton Field were the dinners prepared for small groups of crewmembers on different nights by Bob Sciacqua's mother in Oakland. Bob's parents owned a grocery store and deli in Oakland and "mom" really knew what "That's Italian" meant! Those genuine Italian meals were absolutely scrumptious. On occasion, the dinner was followed with a trip to the Top of the Mark in San Francisco to dance to great jazz and to watch the lights around the Bay area twinkle like another galaxy to be conquered!

Another memorable event was the Christmas Eve flight to check the guns and bombsight on the ranges at Tonopah, NV. How sweet were the words from the Tonopah Tower when we called to clear the range: "Roger. You are cleared off the range. We are advised that Hamilton Field is closed due to weather, and you are cleared to land at Tonopah Air Base. Merry Christmas!"

One of the members of the 745th Squadron, Lt. Richards, spent the night at the Operations Office, hoping to get out as soon as the weather cleared in San Francisco. This inspired the weather personnel at the base to write a poem:

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the station
The pilots were cussing a sad situation.
'Twas to dear ole' Frisco the flyers would go
But the weatherman said there was going to be snow.
And their protests increased at a noticeable rate.
As Christmas at Tonopah loomed as their fate.
But old man weather just kept on brewin'
And all of the pilots just kept on stewin'

And some reached the point of high indignation
And spent the night at the base weather station!

We arrived back at Hamilton Field about noon on Christmas Day.

Sometime in late December, we were to head overseas via Palm Springs, Midland/Odessa, Memphis, and Palm Beach. After going to the flight line every morning for over a week and being aborted by the weather each time, we finally left on January 6, 1944. Despite a bit of a “hairy” landing on an ice-slick Memphis runway, Palm Beach, showed up right on time.

Tail gunner Robinson became ill, and we departed the U.S. without him on January 12, 1944. The co-pilot had the secret, sealed orders with our destination that were marked “not to be opened until 5 minutes after takeoff.” When the dramatic moment came to open the orders, as typical for the Army, the final destination was blank! Rumor had it that we were headed for India.

One crewmember, who will remain anonymous, took a piece of brown paper and announced, “When the natives are that light, I’ll date them.”

We were briefed to fly to Trinidad but were to check our fuel as we passed Puerto Rico. If running low on fuel, we were to land at Borinquen Field where there was cheap, tax-free booze. Being an All-American pilot, Jim followed orders and flew right on by!

On January 13, we flew to Belem at the mouth of the Amazon River. Our Squadron Commander, Capt. Abernathy, and his boxer dog were with us as passengers. The captain developed ear trouble when we let down sharply through a hole in the clouds, and we lost him to the Belem hospital. The dog flew on to Africa with us.

Before we left Belem, our anonymous crewmember checked the natives against brown paper and announced, “Not yet.”

It was on to Natal the next day, and we thought we would have a brief vacation there when the ground crew raked a wingtip off *Joe Bananas*. No such luck. A wingtip was borrowed from another plane with serious problems, and we departed for Dakar on the 16th.

It was a 10- or 11-hour flight to Dakar (Weber best ETA). About halfway out, with Jim asleep in the bomb bay and Boyd almost asleep in the cockpit, three engines quit. With the auto pilot still engaged, the rudder pedal jerked and caused Boyd to almost kick himself in the chin with his knee. What an alarm clock! No major problem, however. Kraft was transferring fuel from the “Tokyo” tanks to the main tanks and

when the “Tokyo” tanks were pumped dry, an airlock occurred in the cross-feed system. When the cross-feed was switched off all engines came back on.

As we deplaned in Dakar, our brown-paper-friend took one look at the natives there and exclaimed, “Where the hell was I in South America?”

On January 17, it was Marrakech where pilot Jim had his first and last taste of an olive fresh off the tree. He discovered that olives need a good deal of curing before being eaten. Man, what a puckering experience!

From Marrakech, we flew to Oudna AB, 20 miles south of Tunis on January 18. We spent a couple of weeks at Oudna waiting for the field to be completed at Cerignola, Italy. All the brass were already in Italy, so the two weeks were spent practicing formation flying and tactical landings to see who could do the best buzz job on the field. Lt. Richards won the prize when he sucked the fire out of the mess hall chimney. Quite a feat for a preacher!

When we arrived in Italy in early February, *Joe Bananas* was assigned to another group as a replacement aircraft. We were scheduled to fly box lead or alternate section lead and to use the planes of crews that were standing down on the days we flew. On February 14, 1944, our first mission was to Grataferata, Italy, where we met Goering’s yellow-nosed boys and lots of flak. Lt. Eidson’s plane was out of formation and was picked off by the fighters to become our first squadron casualty.

On April 23, 1944, we were briefed to attack the airfield at Bad Voslau some 60 miles south of Vienna. By now, Fleener and Spurgeon had joined the crew to replace Robinson and Kraft who had bailed out while substituting with another crew.

Twenty minutes before target time, at 22,000 feet altitude, our Group was attacked by an estimated 200 fighters. Our plane sustained considerable damage. Bob Field later remarked that there were holes in the rear section large enough to drive a truck through. Damage included a half-jammed elevator and a severed rudder cable that made it impossible to fly formation. We headed for the ground at over 1000 fpm rate of descent and 290 mph air speed. Redline speed was 235 mph, but we had 12-to-15 German fighters in pursuit. At about 14,000 feet, the alarm bell was sounded to release crewmembers from their turrets so they could put on parachutes. As we approached the ground 6 crewmembers from the nose section and the rear compartment left the plane. When this occurred, all but one of the fighters discontinued pursuit.

At ground level, it was determined that the plane was flyable, and we headed toward Italy with the one German fighter doing figure 8s around us, firing first from one side and then the other. After 6 or 8 passes and while Boyd and Weber were headed to the rear compartment to man the waist guns to increase firepower, Fleener downed the fighter from the top turret.

The flight home was made at treetop level to avoid detection. At home base, we twice attempted a belly landing but encountered propwash from other planes both times. Jim used the throttles to compensate for the lack of a rudder. After the second attempt, Jim pulled up to 2500 feet altitude south of the field and headed the plane east. The remaining four crewmembers bailed out. One of our fighters shot down the plane over the Adriatic Sea.

Bad Voslau was clobbered by the Wing. All four groups had 100 percent within 2000 feet and over 90 percent within 1000 feet of target center. We flew over Bad Voslau sometime later and observed that the Germans had abandoned it.

As a side note, the plane we flew at Muroc with the bad shimmy damper, Lt. Eidson's plane, and the plane we flew on April 23 were all crewed by John Scarpa's ground crew. Several squadron members told us that Scarpa was extremely worried as he watched us try to land following the Bad Voslau mission. The next time we flew one of his planes, he told the crew to bail out if we had any trouble with the plane. "Waste the plane," he said with emphasis.

Frank Coupe was reported killed in action April 23, 1944. Norris, Rosenthal, Sciacqua, Spurgeon, and Field spent the remainder of the war as POWs. Weber had some health problems following his bailout experience and did not rejoin the crew. Fleener completed 51 missions. Gardner finished his missions in early August and Boyd still had 5 to go. One day, just for fun, Boyd in the left seat, Gardner in the right, did some touch-and-go landings. After 5 pretty good landings by the co-pilot-turned-pilot, Gardner took over and came in with a really smooth landing—his first from the right seat in no telling how long. With just the hint of a smile and the old Gardner humor, he remarked, "I just didn't want you to forget who the ole' Maestro is."

Amen to that!

And that's a capsule history of the Joe Bananas Bunch.