



An Informal Narrative History
of the 47th Bombers

(Prepared for the Bomb. Group Reunion at Dayton, Ohio 1979)

About one year before the Pearl Harbor attack, the 47th was constituted as the 47th Bombardment Group (Light) on November 20, 1940. On January 15, 1941 the Group was activated and cadres for Headquarters and three tactical squadrons, the 84th, the 85th and the 86th, were manned by experienced personnel at McChord Field, Washington out of the 17th Bombardment Group. Likewise the 20th Reconnaissance Squadron, later to become the 97th Bombardment Squadron, was manned at the same place out of the 89th Reconnaissance Squadron. In the spring of 1941 the 47th Group, with all squadrons was designated for station at Fresno, California as soon as buildings were available at the new Hammer Field east of that city.

So much for the record. What follows is an informal narrative, highlights of events experienced by members of the 47th. Much of this story is told in the first person.

Some two hundred members of the new group with a few B-18 aircraft left McChord and arrived in Fresno during July of 1941. There we were joined by several hundred new airmen who were to be trained into their various duties and tasks. Most of these officers and enlisted ranks, old and new members, were career regulars, active duty reservist or recent volunteers. None were unwilling draftees.

Out of Fresno base we flew many search missions over the deserts of the Southwest U.S. and into Mexico looking for, and finding some, lost ferry pilots (who were flying new aircraft from Southern California factories). We also engaged in infantry training over at Fort Ord, California. There, some of our pilots got Jeeps airborne, but none for more than a few seconds. Then: December 7, 1941; PEARL HARBOR!

Within hours of the attack a 47th Group task force flying a newly augmented strength of B-18 aircraft deployed into Hamilton Field above San Francisco. We loaded our own bombs long into the night. By dawn of the next day we were 300 miles out over the ocean to sweep the near Pacific waters for Japanese naval vessels. This task force, the first to perform ocean reconnaissance in the war from the U.S. consisted of all the B-18's from west of the Mississippi, all sixteen of them. These ocean patrols continued till the end of December. The 85th Squadron took over the job from Sacramento Airport. Bombs were in such short supply in those days that we landed back at home base with our live bombs. Long into the month the 85th was still carrying the same bomb loads originally hoisted-up that first night at Hamilton Field.

About the 11th of December the 97th Squadron started receiving a few four-engine aircraft from several corners of the world; six or eight planes in all. These were modified B-24's and LB-30's, British sea reconnaissance version of the Consolidated Aircraft Company's B-24. These fine aircraft were dispatched on long range missions, some more than halfway to Hawaii and return to Fresno.

Finally came the happy day when we turned over all ocean reconnaissance to others and collected our first A-20's from the Douglas factory in the Los Angeles area. It turned out that the first aircraft, about forty-eight of them, we flew home had been ear-marked for our allies, the Russians. No matter, we flew these to dispersal at Las Vegas, Nevada. From there we flew off with a new bunch of our own. We were then told to drop out the bomb racks on these A-20's and mount a big torpedo sling. This was for the U.S. Navy's monstrous Mark XIII, or similar number, torpedo. Oh, oh, Australia here we come! We no sooner had every pilot making dry runs with newly installed torpedo directing mounts and instruments than we were told, "...put back the bomb racks you're going to Oklahoma". This move took most of February.

Will Rogers Field, our new home, is at Oklahoma City. We entered on a period of intensive training here, because very soon after arrival we lost twelve of our sixteen most experienced officers to other units. The new squadron commanders then chosen had each less than three years service. But, they were to prove themselves more than worthy within the next few months and later in combat. We received also new aircrew members, gunners fresh from mechanics and gunnery schools. Here, too, top notch young pilots joined us. They were diverted from the B-17 co-pilot training program. They volunteered to come and were happy to have a pilot's seat all their own. There were some tragic crashes during this training period and sadly we lost several fine young aircrewmembers. A universal experience in wartime, we later learned. While at Will Rogers, newly acquired young Engineering officers started earning their keep, and more. Many other specialists also found their niche. From Oklahoma we moved into the Southeast U.S.

The Greensboro-Highpoint Airport is in pine-wooded hill country about midway between these two North Carolina cities. The 47th Group spent the summer here participating in the gigantic Carolina Maneuvers living in tentage deep in the woods. Thus we began our three years of outdoor life.

From the Carolina woods we were ordered overseas. By telephone we were told to write our own orders--destination "Secret". It worked out just fine. At that time all those headed for "Secret" were given priority treatment at each stopover. A few aircrews flew off each day to Kansas City to pick up brand new A-20 B's, modified for long range over-water flight, just as fast as the modification center there could turn them out. From Kansas City we flew on to Westover Field, Massachusetts for overseas processing. Later, the Operations staffs departed the woods for Fort Dix, New Jersey for staging and then New York to embark on the Queen Mary for Scotland and England. At Fort Dix four officers, veterans of World War I, joined us. These volunteer "retreads" headed our Intelligence staff and mature, wise men were never more appreciated. Our ground support and maintenance echelons were last to leave the woods for overseas staging area. They then proceeded to embarkation aboard ship in New York Harbor to sail to North Africa. In November 1942 we all came together again at Casablanca, French Morocco.

The bunch aboard the Queen Mary made a fast crossing. The great ship, unescorted, steamed at full speed and was directed in course changes from England in a way which avoided enemy submarines. These course changes were abrupt and without warning. One evening in the main salon several hundred stood awaiting evening meal. The Queen Mary made a hard turn, the deck tilted abruptly with the ship's roll and one-half of all those standing made a en masse pratfall. The salon carpeting had ripped down the middle, the entire length of the deck. This was not to be the first time the operations staff was to have the rug pulled out from under them.

The first enroute stop for the aircrews was Presque Isle, Maine. We then left the U.S. in squadron flights of 12 aircraft beginning on September 25 and landed at Goose Bay, Labrador. At our first pilot's briefing at this sub-arctic base we were told that the North Atlantic route was closed for the winter. However, that only applied to passenger carrying aircraft and would not affect us. It

was probably just as well that our gunners did not attend that briefing. From Goose Bay we flew on to Blue West-One, Greenland (BW-1); Reykjavik, Iceland; Glasgow, Scotland, and into Horham Air Station, East Anglia, England. The 47th was the first to cross the North Atlantic in squadron formation under control of unit commanders. All others crossed singly under control of Ferry Command dispatchers. The last leg of this odyssey into North Africa was from Cornwall. We flew southwest to intersect 10 degrees west longitude, then due south at minimum altitude above the waves to avoid enemy detection from occupied France. A left turn carried us through the Straits of Gibraltar. Now we were flying about 2,000 feet above the sea. Here, we were fired on! Our first flak, of all things, came from Spanish batteries on the south shore. We were not at war with them so we climbed into cloud and the firing ceased.

Reunion at Casablanca with the rest of the 47th was a great joy to all. In this near desert country there was mud everywhere, probably brought in especially for the war--all wars have mud. When we got pierced-steel-planking (PSP) down, we moved into a nearby abandoned French air station at Medouina. We then began to seek an entry into the real war in Tunisia still some 1,200 miles away. In mid-December we finally wrangled permission to send six aircraft into easternmost Algeria at Youks-les-Bains. The 86th Squadron got the honor. Then the 97th got six more into Thelepte landing area sixty, or more, miles southeast of Youks in Tunisia. We were told by HQ in Algiers that supplies were scarce in Tunisia and the U.S. Army was yet to be established there in strength. However, working with HQ in Algiers, we started our own trucks and maintenance vehicles forward across North Africa as we flew in more and more aircraft to Youks and Thelepte. When trucks finally became available to move everybody eastward the aircraft were nearly all in place. This move was completed in early January, 1943.

In southern Tunisia we bombed enemy airfields from altitude and attacked the German Panzers at low-level. Some targets were directed from XII Air Support Command at Tebessa, some from HQ at Algiers and some we found ourselves. Those pilots who got their aircraft filled with bombs, ammo. and fuel first, went on the next mission. Many flew individually back to Algiers in order to find a load of bombs. These were formative days we had to start learning somehow. There was no front line. There was not that much army around. In support of a U.S. brigade-sized force in Ouseltia Valley, we bombed enemy artillery positions by stringing our bombs along just back of a ridge crest. Algiers HQ told us later that this was the first successful counter-battery mission by U.S. aircraft in the war.

On most of our missions during these days German fighters met us. We also had fighter escort. Often on our way home we used the A-20's great speed to outrun enemy fighters and let our own little brothers have the fight they were yearning for. The German fighters also knew where we lived. This gave our ground crews a chance to see some of the war. We were strafed on the ground at Thelepte about twice a week, and less often at Youks. Nearly all of our supply was by C-47 transport aircraft at these forward bases. When the occasional flight of these "gooney birds" did land, they would kick the supplies out the door and take off. Since everything was in short supply we had mostly combat rations for food. A few scrawny cattle were around, but we were asked not to kill the French Arab's livestock since they were supposed to be our friends and allies. This made the cooks pretty unhappy until one day an ME-109 killed a cow in our dispersal area, they said. Well, we couldn't let this meat go to waste. After that the enemy fighter's aim improved remarkably and on nearly every raid they shot a beef or two.

By mid-February the U.S. Ground Forces around us were hard pressed by the Germans and we had to evacuate Thelepte and move back to Youks-les-Bains behind the mountains. About five days later deserted by our Army as well as our own Headquarters and Service Squadron, we had one of our biggest days of fighting. The last time we were to use low-level attack. Beneath low cloud in the

valleys northwest of Kasserine Pass we pounded the Germans all day. Eleven missions went out. Some aircraft flying four times over. We certainly helped turn around the enemy that day. They were approaching our airfield from two directions. Three aircrews were lost. Our heaviest casualties in one day, ever. That was on Washington's Birthday 1943. The Group was awarded its first Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC) for these combat actions.

With few aircraft and all of our people we moved further back to the well-stocked base at Canrobert. Here in the true spirit of the Casablanca Conference for "Allied Cooperation" we added several members of the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) to our group; veterans all and really great guys. Until now our bombardiers were self-trained volunteers from within the group using home-made bomb sights. Now Lead Bombardiers joined each squadron from R.A.F. flying officer ranks and brought along the Mark IX-E bombsights. Between widely spaced combat missions we put in several weeks of intensive medium altitude formation flying with many newly received replacement aircraft and some new aircrews. We were now part of the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Bomber Force leaving the XIIth Air Support Command whom we had not seen much of anyway. Later we also acquired R.A.F. Lead Gunnery Control Officers who showed us some new defensive tricks.

With this new look we were glad to return to our original desert home at Thelepte airfield. We now started hitting the German airfields in earnest. Enemy raids on us, at first intensive, gradually thinned out as we started getting the upperhand in the air. Our busiest day's work after we reoccupied Thelepte was seven attacks in strength on German airfields at La Fauconnerie, Tunisia on April 7, 1943. We were sent a personal citation by the Commander, Tactical Air Force for these effective raids. We were told that our efforts helped clear the skies of enemy aircraft over the Mareth Line as Allied Armies broke through. The Allies soon occupied all of southern Tunisia.

Shortly after the La Fauconnerie attacks we moved into northern Tunisia at Souk-el-Arbra. Here we finished the Tunisian Campaign. One of the 47th major strengths was a superior maintenance capability. Our senior N.C.O.'s had by this time trained some of the best field mechanics to be found anywhere. When asked if they could handle more aircraft they said they could. Consequently, the 47th was augmented to twice the number of aircrews and aircraft. Our record sortie day was 143. On May 6, 1943, the day of the final coordinated Allied drive which captured Tunis, we flew 96 sorties before 0930 in the morning. One Light Bombardment Group with the attack power of two Groups. This is what superb air mechanics and support personnel can do for you in wartime when you need them. Allied victory was complete on the seventh of May. Our ground forces took thousands of German and Italian prisoners. During the next few days we saw prisoners of war transported to rear areas by every sort of conveyance, even open freight cars. One train waiting on a siding especially attracted some of our Italian speaking airmen. And, lo and behold the next morning the train was gone, but we had a dozen or more happy Italian K.P.'s, a few for each kitchen. Our troops had offered them the shortest way home. Probably, one of the few humane acts of the war. During this lull in active operations some of our experienced members left for the U.S. to become cadres for new units. Others were assigned new duties in the Tactical Bomber Force staff and command.

Our next campaign in June of 1943 had its comic opera side. This was the reduction of the Italian islands of Pantellaria and Lampedusa. These islands were pounded from the air, but casualties were light because the Italian garrisons stayed underground. They fired anti-aircraft at us by remote control. An amphibious assault was mounted, but each garrison surrendered to the Air Force before Allied Amphibious Forces landed. Pantellaria surrendered through the display of panels on their airport which stopped Allied bombing as we had promised. Lampedusa surrendered to an R.A.F. Flight Sergeant who had made a forced landing in an Air-Rescue amphibian bi-plane.

Next we moved into Malta for three weeks with other light bombers of the growing Tactical Bomber Force including R.A.F. and South African Air Force (SAAF) units. Flying missions from Malta were all in support of the assault on Sicily. As Allied forces pushed north on that island we moved into an airstrip on the south coast. After we bombed the German retreat and evacuation in Messina Straits we moved into the center of Sicily on a good airdrome in the Catania Plain. After victory in Sicily things were quiet for awhile and the 47th took on a most unusual operation-- fighter escort! Yes, with those A-20's equipped with multiple .50 caliber machine guns in the nose, we flew "top cover" for Allied shipping convoys in the central and western Mediterranean. Another first for a Light Bombardment Group.

Next came preparation bombing for the Allied invasion of Italy proper at Salerno. We supported these landings and the following battles that established the Allies in Italy. We moved to mainland Italy first at Grattaglie in the "heel" of the "boot" at the end of September, then, on northward to Vincenzo on the western edge of the Foggia Plain. From Vincenzo most missions were in support of ground forces in central Italy, but there was another war to the east. We made night drops to native guerilla forces in occupied Yugoslavia. We did daylight bombing also on pinpoint targets for which we received radioed thanks from the friendly guerrillas over there, sometimes before our aircraft had returned to base.

The Group's next home was Vesuvius Airdrome southeast of Naples and next to the famous Mount Vesuvius. From here we engaged in intensive operations against road and rail bridges, enemy airfields and enemy ground forces throughout early 1944. In March of that year we saw the biggest show of all by Mother Nature herself. Vesuvius decided to join the war with a mighty eruption. It was a mountain afire at night. Lava pushed down next to our airfield; some tragedy, some damage, some excitement. We all have our own pictures of this awesome volcano.

After a short spate of operations from Capa-de-Chino airport and Ponte Galeria in Italy, it was off to Corsica in July to shorten the range to targets in support of "Overlord" the final Allied ground assault in Europe. Our part in this great operation was the landings and drive north into Southern France during July and August, 1944. The Group moved to the mainland in France for a few weeks in September and October at Salon.

Then it was back to Italy for road and rail interdiction attacks to stall enemy supply and movement. By this time the 47th was becoming very effective in night intruder attacks. This type of operation coupled with daylight bombing had telling results in northern Italy from airfields at Rosignano, Grosseto and finally Pisa from late 1944 until mid-1945. The Group was flying several configurations of the A-20 and the A-20's big brother, the Douglas A-26 at this time. A memorable operation was during three days and nights during April, 1945 when the Group bombed enemy means of transportation in the Po Valley and the alpine Breener Pass area. For sixty hours of continuous air assault, in all kinds of weather and mountainous terrain, our Group prevented evacuation of large portions of the German ground force which were attempting to reinforce German Armies in Central Europe. For these actions the 47th was awarded a second Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC).

When victory in Europe was complete, V-E day, the Group was brought home and reassembled in the Southeast U.S. Many aircrew flew home in their A-26's. The Unit was now to prepare for redeployment to the Pacific for night path finder operations against Japan. However, the early surrender by Japan in August, 1945, V-J Day, scrubbed all redeployment plans and the Group moved into home base at Lake Charles, Louisiana for about a year. Here the Group was fully equipped with the A-26. At this time many old timers found their way back into the 47th again. In 1946, the Group was reduced from four to three tactical squadrons. At this time the 97th Bombardment Squadron was deactivated.

From the fall of 1946 until late 1948 the 47th Group's home was Biggs Field at El Paso, Texas and at this place they celebrated the end of the Army Air Forces and all became members of The United States Air Force in August of 1947.

The Group moved to Barksdale Air Force Base at Shreveport, Louisiana in November of 1948. Later on a task force consisting mostly of members of the 47th performed service test of a new jet bomber, the North American B-45. On October 2, 1949, the 86th Squadron and the 47th Bombardment Group (Light) were deactivated, but members of the 84th and 85th Squadrons continued with the B-45's and moved into Virginia.

At Langley Air Base, Virginia on March 12, 1951, the 47th was activated as the 47th Bombardment Wing with tactical squadrons the 84th and 85th. The Wing was the first and only Jet-Medium Bomber Wing in the Air Force. The new Wing was assigned to Tactical Air Command. As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, built up military strength in the post-war period the 47th drew an important assignment. Trained in Special Weapons employment, the Wing moved to Sculthorpe, England in May and June of 1952 for permanent station. For nearly three years, the 47th Wing provided an in-place Atomic Air Strike Force to back up NATO Ground Forces in Europe. A third squadron of B-45's joined the 47th Wing in 1953, somehow this third tactical unit was designated the 422nd Squadron. Old timers will be happy to know the proper name, the 86th Bombardment Squadron was restored to this unit a few months later. About a year later the mission of the 47th was gradually assumed by the U.S. Strategic Air Command. The 47th Wing came home to America and on February 8, 1955, with all three squadrons; the 84th, 85th and 86th, was inactivated to be no more among active units of the U.S. Air Force.

Here ends this story of the 47th. Others could have much to add to the history of this outstanding fighting organization in World War II. First to cross the Atlantic in Squadron formation, first American Light Bombardment Group to enter the war against German Forces, over two and one-half years of combat operations, veterans of ten campaigns, winning nine Battle Stars and two Presidential Unit Citations. We can all be very proud.

Frederick Terrell

Addenda

Campaigns: American Theater; Algeria-French Morocco; Tunisia; Sicily; Naples-Foggia; Anzio; Rome-Arno; Southern France; North Appenines; Po Valley.

Decorations: Distinguished Unit Citations: North Africa, 22 February 1943; Po Valley, 21-24 April 1945.

Insigne: Shield Or, in chief, a bomb sable, point downward, winged gules, surmounting an arc, reversed and couped, azure, all above a stylized cloud indication, of the second, emitting four lightening flashes gules toward base. (Approved 26 October 1951).