

Unit History

“Gentlemen from Hell”

487th BG, Station 137 Lavenham, England

In September, 1943, a General Order emanating from Headquarters Second Air Force, constituted authority for the activation of the 836th, 837th and 838th Squadrons of the 487th Bombardment Group. From the same Headquarters another General Order redesignated the 8th Antisubmarine Squadron to the 839th Bombardment Squadron which was later assigned to the 487th on October 1, 1943. Major Charles E. Lancaster came to the Army Air Field in Bruning, Nebraska to assume command of the 487th on September 25th. By the middle of November, a total of 113 officers and 512 enlisted men were assigned to the 487th. Squadron Commanders and their staffs had been appointed and the organization, although in its infancy, began to assume the identity and functions of an active bombardment group. During the remainder of November, the manning of the group continued at an accelerated pace. Seven crews from Pocatello, Idaho augmented the personnel which was rapidly approaching the authorized strength of 165 officers and 1,100 enlisted men. They were assigned to the 487th as of November 1943.

Early in December, thirteen more combat crews joined the 487th from Clovis, New Mexico. On the 19th of December, the entire group effected a movement by air joined by ground echelons from the Army Air Field

in Bruning, Nebraska, proceeded to the Army Air Base in Alamogordo, New Mexico where phase training was to be accomplished. As the organization approached its authorized strength during December, assignments continued at a diminishing rate, with 243 officers and 1,294 enlisted men being assigned as of the close of 1943. By the end of January 1944, the authorized strength had been exceeded slightly. There being 405 officers and 1,641 enlisted men assigned.

The 487th commenced third phase training on February 3, 1944, with Pre-POM inspection, conducted by the Second Air Force, being held the following day. War POM inspection began February 6th for the Air POM and a hastily prepared mission to El Paso, Texas was flown.

Several changes of command occurred during February. The group command changed hands on three occasions. Lt. Colonel Lancaster was replaced by Lt. Colonel Carl Goldenburg. The following day, Lt. Colonel Lancaster was reinstated and held the command until February 27th. With the assignment of Lt. Colonel Beirne Lay, Jr., and with the establishment of a definite program, group training and morale improved greatly.

The first flyaway aircraft, B-24s, were received on February 2nd and continued to be received during the entire month. 71 of the 72 required aircraft had been received by the end of February. Approximately 80% of ground training and the minimum flight requirements had been completed by the end of February. On March 10th the ground echelon, each squadron a separate unit, left Alamogordo, New Mexico by train. The air echelon remaining behind.

On March 13th ground echelon arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and proceeded to the Port of Embarkation on March 22nd. Upon arrival, they boarded the British passenger ship, “Duchess of Bedford”, to the accompaniment of a military band. The men were inwardly fortified with coffee and doughnuts supplied by the American Red Cross.



The “Duchess of Bedford” put to sea on March 23rd. She left the convoy accompanied by single escort vessel on April 2, 1944. The Duchess, speed no longer governed by that of the slower ships, steamed into Gurrock, Scotland that evening. The group arrived in the town of Melford, Suffolk, East Anglia at approximately noon the following day. Melford was to become an integral part of every pass to London and to their home, Lavenham Air Base.

Under the command of Lt. Colonel Beirne Lay, Jr., a group of fifty-seven B-24 aircraft of the flight echelon of the 487th left Alamogordo, New Mexico for Herrington, Kansas with all aircraft being airborne in a remarkably short period of forty minutes. A second section, consisting of twelve aircraft followed and all landed at Herrington the same day, March 23rd. Processing was accomplished with great dispatch at Herrington. Most crews “weathered in “ for a few days after being processed.

In the latter part of March, aircraft began to take off for Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida for the final processing with the Air Transport Command. From Morrison Field, our aircraft were widely dispersed along the southern route to England. Some crafts ran low on gasoline en route to Waller Field, Trinidad and stopped in Puerto Rico for refueling. The second leg of the journey was a stop at Belem, Brazil. From this point, the air crews moved on to either Natal or Fortaleza, Brazil. In early April most of the crews had already arrived in Dakar, Africa after the transoceanic hop. Shortly after their arrival, the aircrews moved north to Marrakech, French Morocco. Next stop, England.

Aircraft arrived in the United Kingdom from the 12th through the 15th of April. Some landed in Breswick, Scotland, others in Valley Wales and still others in Nutt Corner, Northern Ireland. By the 17th of April all aircraft and crews had arrived at their station in Lavenham, Suffolk. The last crew to land that day was under the commands of Buford E. Collings Jr. and John Wiley. Once at Lavenham the group assumed a single identity. Noteworthy, is the fact that through all the training and the trip overseas there were no casualties sustained by personnel of either the air or ground echelons. Training missions became the order of the day for the remainder of April. Ground crews were familiarized with the maintenance requirements peculiar to combat operations.

The month of May, 1944 was one of mixed emotions for the 487th. The group became operational at last, and all personnel were elated with the role each was playing in the war against the enemy. They made mistakes typical of new groups in a war theater and learned to correct errors and profit from them. The overall picture during May was one of great activity.

On the 7th of May, the 487th participated in its first combat mission to Liege, Belgium, with the feeling that at last the “blue chips” were down. On the ill-fated mission of May 11th, three aircraft were lost and among the missing personnel was Group Commander Lt. Col. Beirne Lay Jr. That evening, the 487th received a new commanding officer, Colonel Robert Taylor, III, who immediately set himself to the task of restoring the group to operational condition.

June was the second month of operations for the 487th, which was credited with twenty-two missions. On D-Day, June 6th, the 487th flew three missions against the enemy. Because of adverse weather only one of the missions was able to drop its bombs. Several days after D-Day, the German V-1 weapon was in evidence and men, on pass in London for the first time, experienced being bombed rather than bombing.

The month of July found the 487th playing a number of varied roles in the air warfare against Germany. While the group was only operational for 21 days of the month, formations were dispatched on 14 occasions. The varied targets assigned to the group, found them doing strategic and tactical bombing, and giving close support to the ground troops. Among their targets were flying bomb launching platforms, industrial plants, airfields, roads, bridges and transportation facilities. At this level, it was difficult to see the overall strategy from the target assignment.

The outstanding mission of July 17th came when the group flew in close support of the ground troops in the Caen, France area. Bombing the German troops in this sector enabled General Montgomery to break through on that front. Thus the type of bombing done by the 487th on this occasion had the effect of flying artillery for the first time in World War II against the Germans. General Partridge, Commanding General of the 3rd Air Division, commended the 487th for their work in the mission to Caen, saying,

"The precision results you attained effectively eliminated enemy gun emplacements which could have exacted a heavy toll of life from our ground troops. This highly successful operation prepared the way for an important advance toward ultimate victory."

On July 21, 1944, the 487th was removed from operational status and informed that it would fly B-17 Flying Fortresses. The B-24 Liberators were taken away and the transition to B-17's began. There were those, however, who were reluctant to see the B-24 Liberators go, having formed an enduring comradeship which comes from mutual stress in battle. With the transition from B-24's to B-17's, we lost many of the original crews, and they were replaced by ones from the B-17's.

During the month of August, the 487th attained its highest proficiency, thus far, as a heavy bombardment group. In August the group had the largest number of missions in which bombs were dropped, eight of them to Germany, since it became operational. The group was in direct support of ground troops in Northern France on three occasions. Bombing results soared far above the records of the previous months with fourteen attacks being rated good, very good, or excellent.

On August 22, 1944, the 487th received the following commendation from General Hap Arnold: "The continued all out effort by your heavies day after day is most gratifying. It shows to all of us that your combat and maintenance crews are true teams. Please convey my appreciation to all concerned for their untiring efforts and my congratulations for the splendid results obtained." Other commendations were forthcoming from HQ 3rd Division.

Many of the older combat crews finished their tours during August, with replacements from the B-17 Combat Crews Replacement Center arriving at the station. The influx of new crews worked out smoothly.

Indicative of the overall improvement the 487th showed in August are the following statistics: The group averaged 50% of bombs targeted within 1,000 feet of the main point of impact and

97% within 2,000 feet; giving them the second highest rating in the 3rd Bomb Division. The average length of the bomb patterns was 1,650 feet and width 1,650 feet, which as the smallest pattern for the entire Eighth Air Force.

During the month of September, the weather was an insuperable obstacle in duplicating the splendid bombing results achieved the preceding month. Of the sixteen missions dispatched, fifteen were completed with one recalled due to weather conditions. Of the fifteen completed missions only four were led visually, while eleven were Pathfinder, or PFF missions. Eight of the missions were hindered by an 8/10 cloud coverage or worse.

For the second time since arriving in the European Theater of Operations, the 487th passed a transition period. The emphasis was now on instrument bombing. In October we put the new techniques into operation and matched the record of the rest of the 3rd Division. During the month of November, the 487th completed eleven missions over enemy territory. A single target was bombed visually, the rest being PFF. The mission to Oberlahnstein, Germany was Micro-H, and had the further distinction of being our 100th mission. The results of our bombing attacks were above average instrument bombings for the 3rd Division that month.

Adverse weather again prevailed in December, calling for almost exclusive use of instrument. Special navigational and bombing techniques were studied. Eleven of the briefed missions became operational over enemy territory in December. Toward the end of the month, the weather permitted more missions to be flown, some of which were visual. Considering the numerous night takeoffs and poor visibility conditions, the 487th attained an excellent record of having no accidents. December will long be remembered by the men assigned to the truly historic mission of December 24, 1944. For more than a week, the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes, aided by an impenetrable blanket of fog which grounded allied aircraft, had been reaching out towards Ligé and the Meuse River. The situation of the

American First Army was admittedly serious. When Christmas Eve dawned bright and clear, the Eighth Air Force dispatched the greatest aerial armada seen to date in this or any other war. Over two thousand bombers and nearly one thousand fighters comprised this mighty force.

When at last the huge fleet turned back towards its bases in England, the supply depots and communications systems feeding the German



offensive lay shattered. The command of this mission fell upon Captain Mayfield R. Schilling when the aircraft bearing the original leader, Brigadier General Frederick W. Castle was shot down. The group suffered its first major attack by enemy fighters, with 9 of our bombers not returning from this mission.

Despite the snow, the icing conditions, the temperature, which was the lowest in fifty years and the cloud cover which hampered visual bombing and navigation, the 487th dispatched fifteen missions to Germany. PFF missions were predominant: There were twelve. We bombed ten times with unobserved results. The majority of the missions were directed against German marshaling yards. Others were to jet aircraft plants, oil plants and depots. The best mission was on January 2, 1945 when forward maintenance and refueling sections located in the Siegfried Line near Halbach were attacked with results adjudged to be excellent.

During February, the 487th realized once again the bombing effectiveness which made it one of the "crack" units of the Eighth Air Force. The satisfaction over the accomplishment of our bomber crews was both deep and widespread on our station. March saw the 487th fly 21 missions; its second most intensive period of operations. Despite the severe task imposed upon its flying personnel and ground crews, the group maintained the premier position in the 3rd Air Division for putting bombs on the target in visual sighting operations for the third straight month. Targets during March were principally rail sidings, airfields and oil storage depots. Nine missions were visual, and of these, the blows struck at Wittmundhaven, Kepferdreb, Holzwickede, and Varrelbusch were particularly successful.

The 487th flew its last fifteen missions in April; bringing its total since arriving in the European Theater to one hundred and eighty five. The final mission was flown on April 21, to Ingolstadt, more than two weeks before VE Day. This period of inactivity was attributable to the ever constricting bomb line which reduced the number of potential targets daily and to bad weather which grounded our aircraft towards the end of the month.

May 1945, VE Day, found few spontaneous outbursts of joy and enthusiasm among the men of the 487th, as it had been expected for some time. Moreover, the knowledge that this was the end of just one half of the war had a sobering effect.

The men assigned or attached to the 487th Bombardment Group received all Major Awards for Bravery and Valor - including the Congressional Medal of Honor that was awarded to Brigadier General Frederick W. Castle for his action while leading the 487th on December 24, 1944.

- Redeployed USA: July/August, 1945
- Aircraft left Lavenham, first week July, 1945
- Ground echelon sailed on Queen Elizabeth August 25, 1945 arriving New York September 1, 1945
- Personnel 30 days R & R.
- Group established Drew Field, Florida, September 3, 1945 and inactivated there on November 7, 1945

487th Bombardment Group (H)

Assigned Eighth Air Force: April 1944

Wing & Command Assignments:

3 rd 92 CBW	April 5, 1944
3 rd 4BW(P)	November 18, 1944
3 rd AD 4BW(P)	January 1, 1945
3 rd AD 4 C&W	February 16, 1945

Component Squadrons:

836th, 837th, 839th, Bombardment Squadrons (H)

Combat Aircraft:

B-24H/B-24J From February 1944 to July 1944
B-17G From August 1944 to re-deployment Nov. 1945

Total Missions: 185 (46 with B-24s) (139 with B-17s)

Total Credit Sorties: 6,021

Total Bomb Tonnage: 14,641.4 tons (158 tons supplies, etc.)

Aircraft MIA: 33. Other Operational losses: 24.

Enemy aircraft Claims: 22 destroyed -6 probable
- 18 damaged

Donald Frantz Partain

836th Bomb Squadron
487th Bomb Group
8th Air Force

(This history is dedicated to the men of the 487th Bombardment Group, Station 137 Lavenham, England. "Those Magnificent Men of the 487th BG (H) and Their Flying Machines" Gentlemen from Hell)