



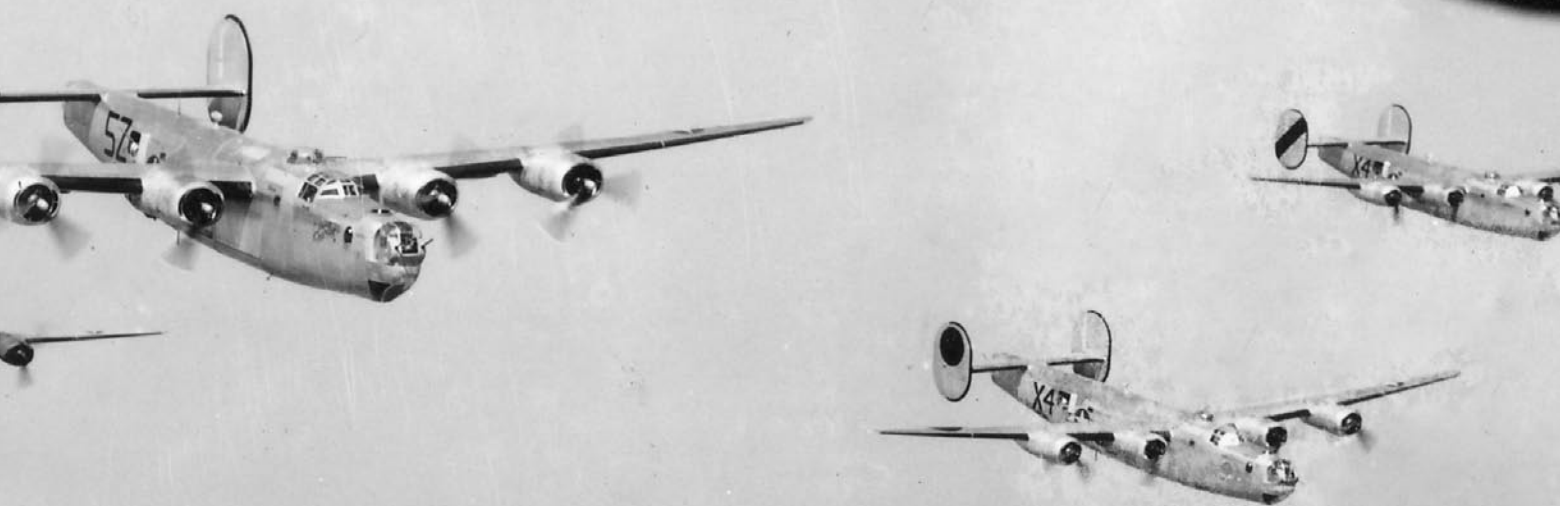
It was not the “Bloody 100th”; nor was it any one of the scores of other bomb groups stationed in England, Italy or the Pacific, which were decimated; it was the “Hard Luck 492nd” at North Pickenham, England, that lost more men and planes in a shorter period of time than any other bombardment group in the history of the US Air Force. This is their story...

The 492nd was one of seven Heavy Bombardment Groups – 488th through 494th - activated in the autumn of 1943. These were to be the last AAF heavy bomb groups of WWII. The 488th served as a B-17 Replacement Training Unit and was disbanded on 1 May 1944. The 494th was sent to the Pacific, while the others, all B-24 equipped, were destined for England and the Eighth Air Force. At this stage of the war there were no shortages of personnel or equipment, and these Groups went to war with full complements of 72

The Hard Luck 492nd

by Robin C. Janton





11 May 1944, the 492nd's first mission, the Mulhouse Marshalling Yards in France.

crews and 72 brand new B-24's. These were nearly double the numbers that had been available for the early B-24 pioneer groups that reached England in 1942.

The 492nd, on a self-imposed hurry-up schedule, beat all of the others into combat. There were those who would later say that this confirmed the old adage that 'haste can, indeed, make waste'.

In personnel, if not in official lineage, the 492nd could trace its origins to 1920 when the Flying Club of Baltimore was organized for reserve officers of that city. This club became part of the Maryland National Guard as the 104th Observation Squadron. At the outset of WWII the 104th became part of the Anti-submarine Patrol used along the East Coast, operating out of the Atlantic City Municipal Airport. On 17 October 1942, the unit's planes and personnel were transferred to the newly formed 517th Bombardment

Squadron, which a month later became the 12th Anti-submarine Squadron under the command of MAJ Joshua Rome, one of the original Baltimoreans. The Squadron, now based at Langley Field, continued their anti-sub patrols until the fall of 1943 when the Navy took over the anti-sub role from the AAF (By this time the "sub menace" had basically passed.)

On 24 September 1943, the Squadron was transferred to Blythe Army Air Field and became the 859th Bombardment Squadron. The 859th was designated as the cadre source for the new 492nd Bombardment Group that was to be formed at Alamogordo, NM. The other 492nd Squadrons were the 856th, 857th, and the 858th.

In early January 1944, 20 flight crews were sent to the 492nd from the 39th Combat Crew Training Center (CCTC) at Davis-Monthan and on 27 January two dozen more crews



LITTLE LULU following arrival at North Pickenham on 18 April 1944.

Lt. Col. Snavelly, center of photo unzipping jacket.
Photo Credit: C. Halbert.

arrived from the 331st CCTC at Casper, Wyoming. A final four crews from the 29th CCTC at Boise, Idaho brought the Group to full Strength.

On 26 January 1944 the 492nd was placed under the command of the man who would take them into combat, LTC Eugene H. Snavelly. The four Squadron Commanders were MAJ John G. Losee (856th), MAJ Donald H. Heaton (857th), MAJ Robert Hambaugh (858th) and MAJ James J. Mahoney (859th).

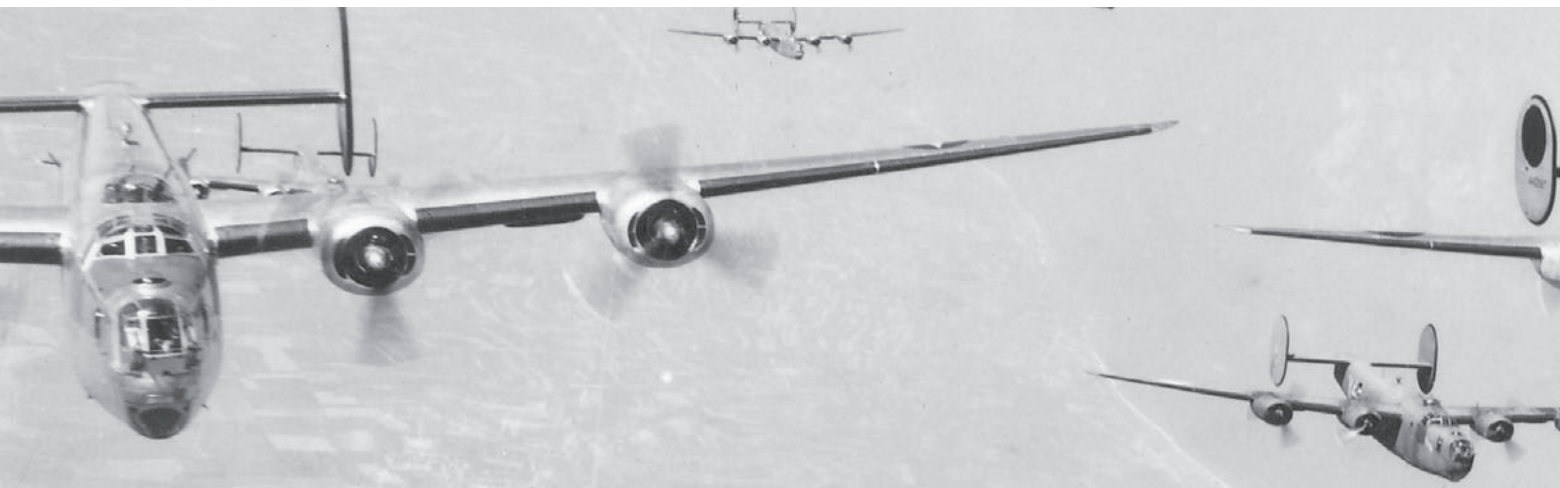
LTC Snavelly was a man on a mission. He was a long-time personal friend of Medal of Honor winner BG Leon Johnson, who now commanded the 14th Bomb Wing of the Eighth Air Force. Snavelly was serving under him in the Eighth, and since the 14th Wing was short one group it was understood that the next group reaching operational readiness would be assigned to the 14th Wing. Snavelly reportedly was told, "Go back to the States and bring one of those new bomb

groups back here. There will be a place for you in the 14th Wing." LTC Snavelly set out to do just that.

In early March 1944, an Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI) proved that 32 crews were "not sufficiently advanced to fit in with the rest of the Group." LTC Snavelly was then able to arrange that they be exchanged for a like number of crews from the 330th CCTC at Biggs Field, Texas. These replacement crews had pilots who had been instructors in the B-24 transitional training schools. They were Captains and First Lieutenants with many hundreds of hours flying B-24's. Together with the original cadre pilots, who had built up similar B-24 flight times in the anti-sub squadrons, the 492nd was able to complete its training ahead of schedule and fly the southern route to England without serious incident or loss (a record). The Group was indeed assigned to Johnson's 14th Wing, thus fulfilling LTC Snavelly's promise to General Johnson. The other 14th Wing groups were the veteran 44th and the 392nd.

The 492nd was based at a newly constructed airfield near North Pickenham, with the required 6000' runway. Experienced ground crews, drawn from other groups already in England, were assigned to the 492nd. Practice missions were conducted on 4, 7, and the 8 of May 1944 and a full dress rehearsal on 10 May that assembled 40 aircraft. Now it was time for the real thing.

The first operational mission was flown the next day against the marshalling yards at Mulhouse, France. Due to a target recognition problem, the 492nd made multiple runs over the



area and never did drop, for fear of hitting French, or worse yet, Swiss civilians. As a result of this excessive time-over-target, two B-24's ran out of fuel and were written off in crash landings. It was not an auspicious start for the Group. However, the next three missions went well and were without loss.

Then came the mission to Brunswick on 19 May. Nearing the target, German fighters fell on the 14th Wing with a vengeance, bringing down three of the 392nd B-24's. But it was the 492nd that paid most of the bill, losing eight ships - five of them from the 858th Squadron. War was real; (the wreckage and remains of one of the 492nd planes lost this day were not discovered and identified until 1998.)

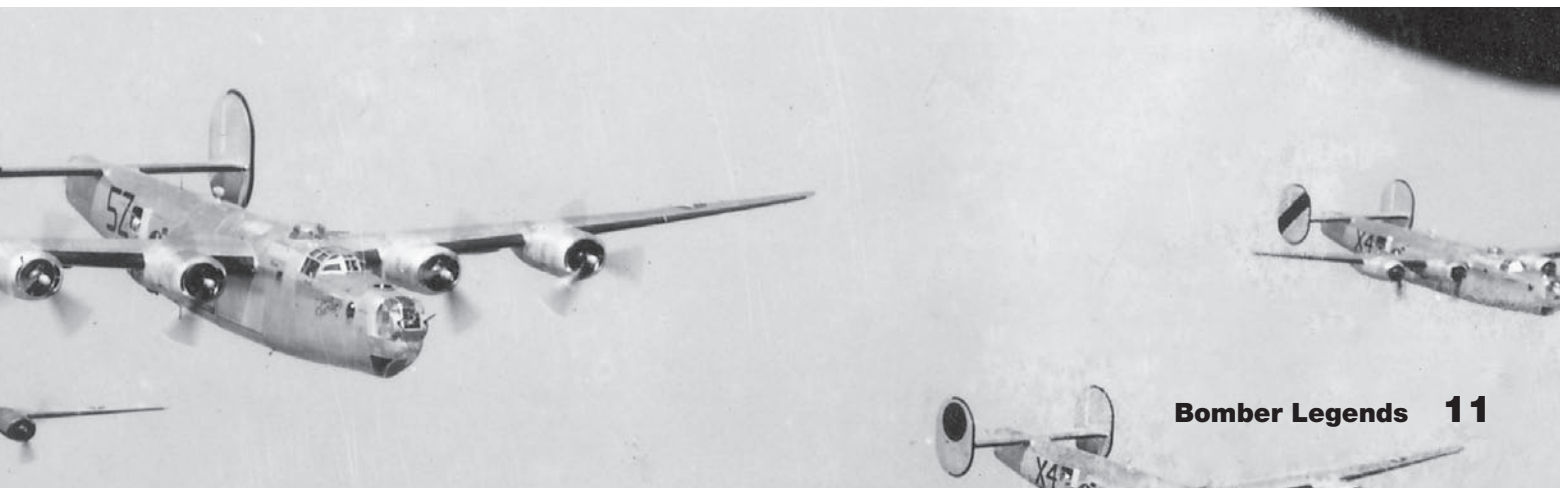
During the first week of June, the 492nd attacked airfields and V-weapon launching sites in France. On D-Day, they bombed coastal defenses in Normandy, and continued attacking bridges, railroads, and other interdiction targets in France until the middle of the month. By 19 June 1944, a total of 33 group missions had been flown to strategic targets in France and Germany. It was then that the 858th Squadron was detached and ordered to the 8th Air Force Composite Command. MAJ Robert Hambaugh was still C.O. of the 858th when they arrived in Harrington, England to become the core of what would soon be known as, "The Carpetbaggers".

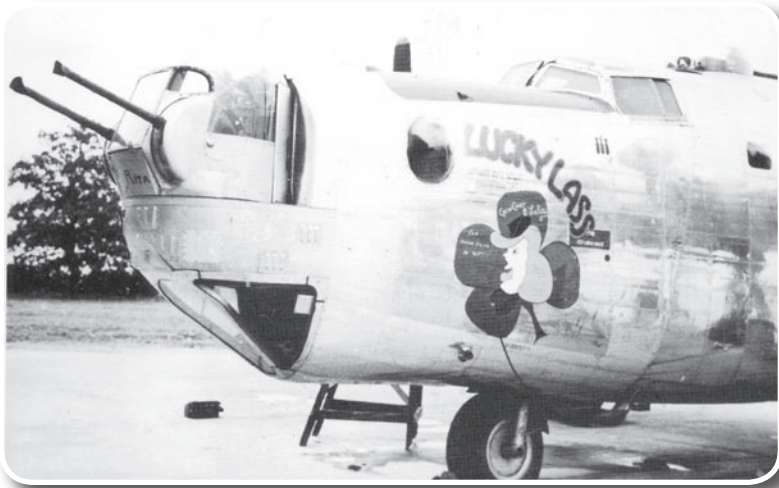
It must also be noted that beginning in June 1944 and for every month thereafter until VE Day, flak, rather than fighters, was the number one



Wreckage of Lt. Shalvoy's B-24 which crashed on a B-17 airfield during return from the 492nd's first mission. One killed, three injured and six walked away.

enemy of the heavy bombers over Europe. While the 492nd lost its share to anti-aircraft fire, it was the Luftwaffe fighter pilots who remained the Group's chief nemesis. This was the case on 20 June when the 14th Wing attacked oil installations at Politz. In thirty minutes of concentrated attacks, mostly by Bf110 twin-engine fighters, fourteen of the Group's B-24's were shot out of the sky. (Some of them managed to make it to nearby Sweden.) Every plane and crew in the 856th Squadron that participated in the mission was lost. When the following day's mission was announced, it was a maximum effort to Berlin! The force the 492nd was finally able to put up was pitifully small - only eleven aircraft. But they went, of course, including three crews that had flown the Politz mission the day before.





LUCKY LASS piloted by Wyman Bridges. In spite of severe battle damage on several occasions, this Liberator was flown home to the US after VE Day. Photo Credit: T. North

Each month seemed to bring another 'black day'. On 7 July when 14th Wing Liberators attacked Bernberg, the 492nd could put up only 23 planes so the third squadron of their formation was provided by the 392nd. In total, the 492nd lost 12, and the 392nd lost 5, all to fighters. This time it was the 859th Squadron that was wiped out, losing every plane on the mission, 9 total.

By the first week of August, 492nd mission losses had reached 58 Liberators and 578 airmen, (KIA, MIA, POW, interned or returned.)

"At this point in time the 8th Air Force had 40 heavy bomber groups operational, 21 with B-17s and 19 with B-24s. These were divided into three Bomb Divisions. The 1st Division was all Seventeens, the 2nd Division all Twenty-Fours, and the 3rd Division a combination of both, five of which were B-24 groups. Two other facts had become clear: because of the differences in their performance envelopes it was unwise to fly B-17 and B-24 formations in the same Division, and

most of the men who were running the Eighth had developed a clear preference for the Fortress over the Liberator. Applying these criteria, it was evident that there was an excess of seven B-24 groups over the twelve required to fully equip the 2nd Division which, for the time being, would have to keep their Liberators. (The main reason was lack of B-17 airplanes. If this could be remedied, General Doolittle's planning was '...hopefully, at some later date to convert the Second Division to B-17's.)"

(Added note: regardless of the preference of the Eighth's hierarchy, the men I've talked to, more than a few, that flew BOTH the B-17 and B-24, the decided choice for combat flying was the B-24. Someone else higher up, must have known this, in that, the B-24 was the most-produced aircraft in numbers the U.S. has to date known.)

The first step taken to effect a new order of battle was to order conversion of five 3rd Division Liberator groups to Fortresses. This left an excess of two, with the candidates for elimination pretty much limited to the last three B-24 units to arrive in the theatre – the 489th, the 491st, and the 492nd.

So now, one must begin to substitute supposition for fact, but history does show that the 491st was chosen as the group that would continue to bomb Germany, while the 489th was scheduled for redeployment to the U.S. to be re-equipped with B-29s for the Pacific Campaign. It would seem fairly certain that the 492nd - which at that time was incurring the heaviest losses ever recorded by the Eighth – was the obvious choice as the group for which a requirement no longer existed.

That such a decision could be made was to



some extent a measure of the Eighth's success. With some of the early groups – the 100th immediately comes to mind – the USAAF proved that the Eighth was in England to stay. At great cost, it was made utterly clear to the Luftwaffe in 1942 – 43 that no matter how badly a group might be hit and hit again, losses would be replaced and the fight would continue. But by the summer of 1944, when a similar situation had arisen and the 492nd was being hit badly and often, the point of the 8th Air Force permanency was no longer in doubt. Under these circumstances, elimination of the 492nd could well be viewed as the better part of valor, regardless of what propaganda value it might have for a now retreating enemy.

The above and other changes were made official by a sweeping series of Eighth Air Force orders during the first week of August. For the record, the 492nd had a new job. It would take over what was known as the 'Carpetbagger Operation' – dropping of agents and supplies behind enemy lines by night.

But in reality this new assignment would be largely carried out by others; the original 492nd was to be broken up and its personnel assigned to a variety of other units of the Eighth. Most of the air crews with less than 15 missions were placed in the 859th Squadron. Newly promoted to LTC, Mahoney then took these men to Rackheath where they became the 788th Squadron (2nd Org) 467th Bomb Group and compiled an exemplary record. COL Snively was given command of the 44th Group and took many of his Headquarters personnel and Lead Crews with him. Others went

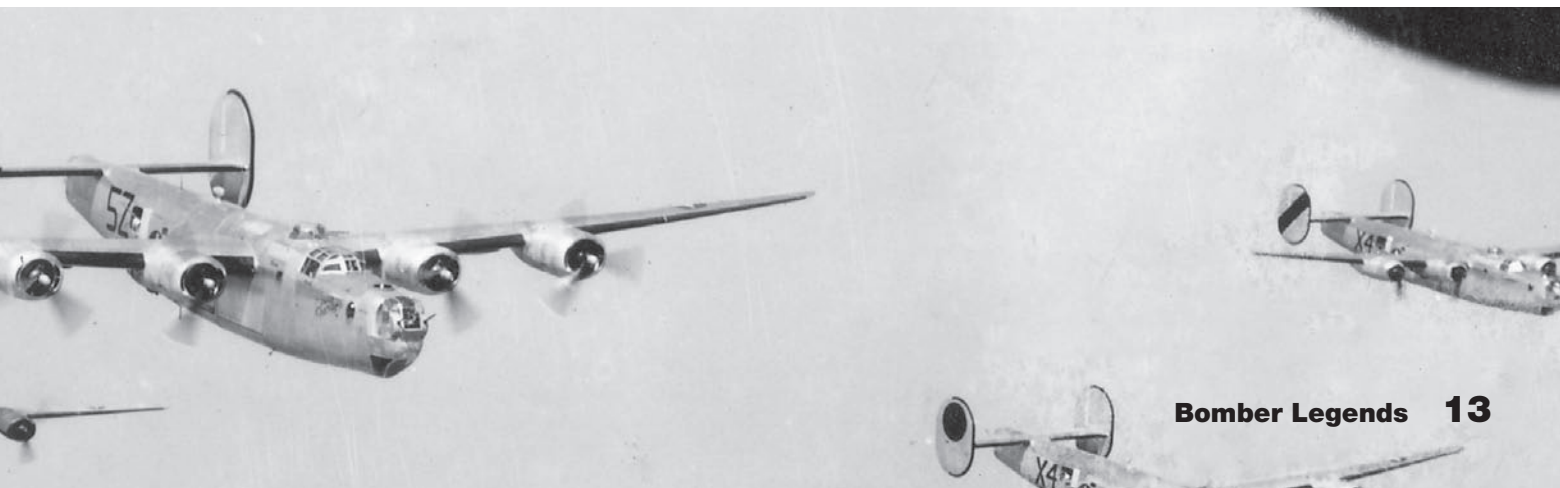


Wreckage of Lt. Kilpatrick's Liberator lost on 7 July 1944. Photo Credit: Stapfer.

to the 392nd and 93rd.

After only 89 days of combat and 67 missions, the daylight 492nd was gone.

“The pace of the air offensive was moving toward its zenith and there was little time to mourn the passing of the 492nd. Thus the beds at North Pick were hardly cold before the 491st Group moved in to fill the vacancy in the 14th Wing. The 491st picked up the load on 18 August, flying their 58th mission from North Pickenham after completing 57 from their previous base at Metfield. The incoming 491st crews were well aware of the misfortunes that had befallen the 492nd at the hands of the Luftwaffe fighter pilots, and they were not anxious to tempt fate by repainting their aircraft in the tail colors of the 492nd – as they were expected to do now that they were part of the 14th Bomb Wing. Thus, until early 1945, the consistency of the 14th Wing tail codes (black on silver) was overlooked, and the 491st Liberators continues to sport the white stripe on green tail





Engineering Section from both the 859th BS and 788th BS. Back Row (L to R): Coulter; Atkinson; Blocher; Beall; White; Smith; Darter; Scarlott; Janton; Dallan; Turcotte. Front Row (L to R): Kidney; Kowaleski; Rose; Ashmead; Bliss; Busby; Hedgpeeth. Photo taken at Alamogordo, New Mexico, just prior to shipping overseas.

colors the Group had used while a member of the 95th Wing at Metfield. Whether or not their tail markings had anything to do with it, it can be noted that during the next three months at their new home – the same length of time the 492nd flew from North Pick – the 491st lost a total of only ten aircraft, not one of which was to fighters!”

There is much speculation as to the cause of the 492nd's terrible losses... some say it was the “silver airplanes” (the 492nd was first in Europe with this no-paint, natural-metal-finish (NMF) on ALL their aircraft). Others say it was “loose formations” or “lousy position” in the overall scheme. Recently, Paul Arnett, who founded and maintains the 492nd website, discovered that on more than one occasion, the 44th Bomb Group, their sister unit, changed position in the overall formation which left the 492nd “dangling” away from the protection of the flotilla. (This was especially prevalent at Bernberg.) Still others believe it was a special

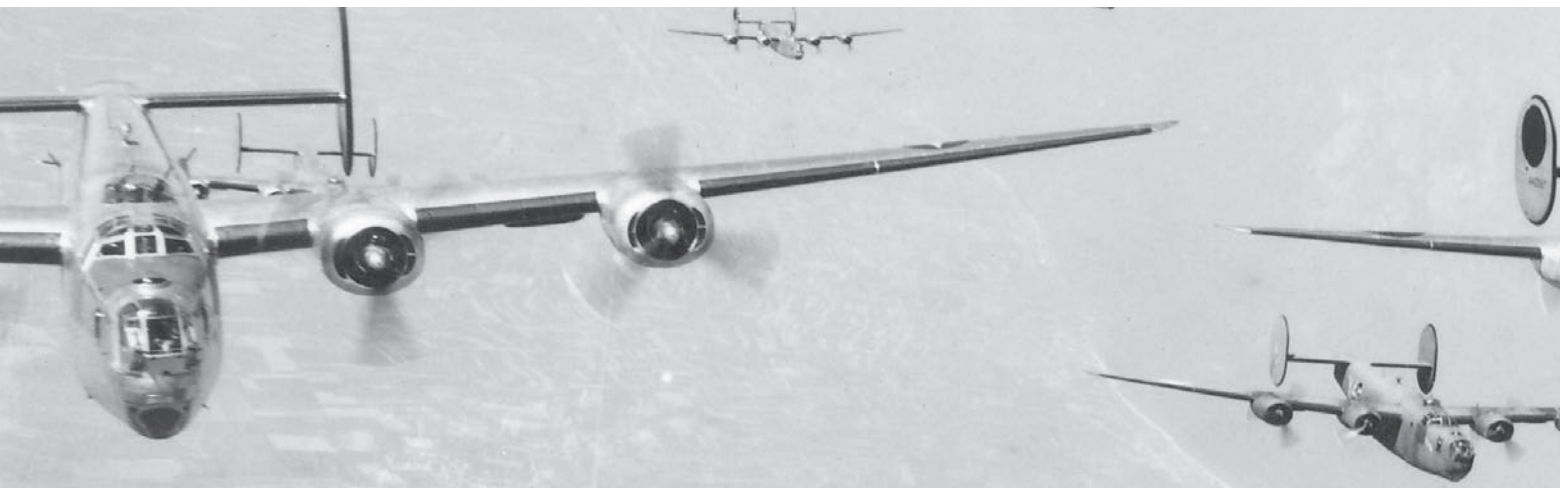
vendetta the Luftwaffe had for the 859th Squadron (anti-sub) and its spawn, the 492nd. There were others; whatever the reason or combination thereof, if it was anything besides “bad luck”, the debate continues; each survivor has his own idea of the cause(s) for these horrific losses.

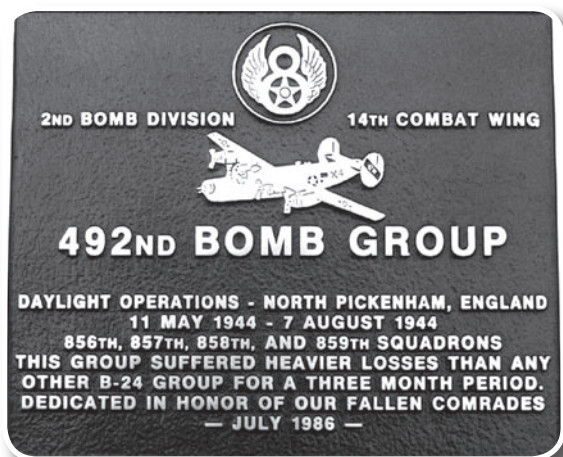
As a comparative, the US Marines in WWII lost a total of 29 per 1000 combatants... the 492nd lost 442 per 1000 ... almost HALF!

The 859th Squadron (now redesignated 788th at Rackheath) would prove to be the BEST single squadron in the 8th Air Force on at least three levels. 1) They set the 8th Air Force bombing record by putting every bomb from the squadron into a 500' radius over the target at Zweisel, Germany on 20 April 1945. 2) Their safety record (least amount of losses per aircraft dispatched as part of the 467th BG). 3) Their maintenance record (as part of the 467th BG) stands alone at the top of the entire 8th Air Force.

These statistics, along with the incredible losses sustained while at North Pick are a mute testimony to the brave men who went overseas in WWII to destroy the Axis forces of Hitler's “Fortress Europe”.

The airdrome at North Pickenham remained the home of the 491st until the end of the war in Europe. By that time the Field's first tenants were only a dim memory in the minds of a few old timers at North Pick. The 492nd personnel, who finished the war, did so as members of other organizations and thus considered themselves as veterans of those units. There was no one around to prepare and publish a souvenir album or unit





history of the 492nd. The 14th Bomb Wing History, which might well have included the story of the Group for which they waited so long, makes only a single, seven-line reference to the 492nd! Published Air Force records and histories – based on the criterion that unit continuity follows the official unit designation – merely reflects a transfer of station for the Group on 10 August 1944. They take no official cognizance of the fact that the 492nd organization that existed AFTER that date had any real relationship to the group that had borne the designation up to that point! Thus, the factors of time and circumstance again worked against the 492nd... this time to deprive it of any real recognition of its brief but eventful tour as a daylight strategic bombing organization.

To this day, no special unit citation has been awarded to this group for their 89-day service and suffering at North Pickenham.

Who will recognize the sacrifice of these brave men?

Note: some passages in this article are direct quotes from "The Fortunes Of War" 1967, 1987 by Allan G. Blue.

Books on the 492nd Bomb Group, which should not be missed...

1) *"The Fortunes Of War" – a history of the 492nd Bomb Group on Daylight Operations by Allan Blue, 1967, 1987.*

2) *"89 Days" – The 492nd BG (H) at North Pickenham by Russell Ives, 1998.*

3) *"Reluctant Witness" – Memoirs from the last year of the European Air War 1944-45 by James J. Mahoney and Brian H. Mahoney, 2001.*

4) *"The Two Squadrons That Were One" – the 859th and 788th Bomb Squadrons, England, World War II by Robin C. Janton, 2002.*

5) *"32 Co-Pilots" – The true story of a B-24 Heavy Bomber Group in England, WWII by Charles R. Bastien, 2004.*

These books are, in most cases, available on the Internet or through this publication.

