

## 376<sup>th</sup> EXPEDITIONARY OPERATIONS GROUP



### MISSION

376th Expeditionary Operations Group executes rapid transport of cargo and passengers as well as the aerial delivery of fuel to U.S. and coalition combat aircraft performing operations in Afghanistan. The group's assigned units consist of one KC-135 tanker squadron and an operations support squadron. The support squadron's functions include airfield management and operations, air traffic control, intelligence, and weather.

Spanish "Mizar" Detachment: Provides support for Spanish forces assigned to International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as well as Coalition forces when needed. The detachment of personnel and C-130 aircraft provide tactical intra-theater airlift and is specially equipped to support medical evacuations and casualty evacuation.

French Detachment: Provides aerial refueling for Coalition aircraft supporting Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF with the French version; the C135FR.

### LINEAGE

376<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (Heavy) constituted, 19 Oct 1942  
Activated, 1 Oct 1942  
Redesignated 376<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, Very Heavy, May 1945  
Inactivated, 10 Nov 1945  
Redesignated 376<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Group and activated, 23 May 1947  
Inactivated, 20 Sep 1948  
Redesignated 376<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, Medium and activated, 1 Jun 1951  
Inactivated, 16 Jun 1952

### STATIONS

Lydda, Palestine, 31 Oct 1942

Abu Sueir, Egypt, 8 Nov 1942  
Gambut, Libya, Jan 1943  
Soluch, Libya, 22 Feb 1943  
Bengasi, Libya, 6 Apr 1943  
Enfidaville, Tunisia, 26 Sep 1943  
San Pancrazio, Italy, 17 Nov 1943-19 Apr 1945  
Harvard AAFld, Neb, 8 May 1945  
Grand Island AAFld, NE, 25 Jun-10 Nov 1945  
Gravelly Point, VA, 23 May 1947-20 Sep 1948  
Forbes AFB, KS, 1 Jun 1951  
Barksdale AFB, LA, 1 Oct 1951-16 Jun 1952  
Manas AB, Kyrgyzstan

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

Ninth AF, Nov 1942-Sep 1943  
Twelfth AF Sep-Nov 1943  
Strategic Air Command

### **WEAPON SYSTEMS**

B-24  
B-29

### **COMMANDERS**

Col George F. McGuire, 1 Nov 1942  
Col Keith K. Compton, 20 Feb 1943  
Col Theodore Q. Graff, 9 Jan 1944  
LTC Richard W. Fellows, 10 Jul 1944  
Col Theodore Q. Graff, 29 Sep 1944  
Col Robert H. Warren, 22 Feb 1945-unkn  
Unkn, 23 May 1947-20 Sep 1948  
Col Cecil E. Combs, 1 Jun 1951  
Col Frederick J. Sutterlin, May-16 Jun 1952

### **HONORS**

#### **Service Streamers**

#### **Campaign Streamers**

Air Combat, EAME Theater  
Egypt-Libya  
Air Offensive, Europe  
Tunisia  
Sicily  
Naples-Foggia  
Anzio

Rome-Arno  
Normandy  
Northern France  
Southern France  
North Apennines  
Rhineland  
Central Europe  
Po Valley

### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

#### **Decorations**

Distinguished Unit Citations

North Africa and Sicily, [Nov] 1942-17 Aug 1943

Ploesti, Rumania, 1 Aug 1943

Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, 16 Jun 1944

#### **EMBLEM**



376<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, Medium emblem: Azure, in base, a stylized winged sphinx or, shaded tenné, and fimbriated azure, on a terra cotta mound sanguine, in dexter chief, a bomb or, point downward, charged with a roundel and a lozenge, sanguine, a triangle azure and a square sanguine, all within a diminutive of a border or. **SIGNIFICANCE:** The blue and yellow are the colors of the Air Force. The winged sphinx in yellow is symbolic of the service in the Middle East Theater where the Group began its first historical tradition. The diamond, circle, square and triangle are for each squadron's service in Palestine. The blue of the field is also emblematic of the intense blue of the African sky at night and represents the theater where heroic missions were successfully accomplished. The terra cotta red beneath the winged sphinx is symbolic of the desert around Gambut, Soluch and Benghazi. The motto "LIBERANDOS", is a romantic coining from the B-24 Liberators. The bomb in the right side of the shield is emblematic of the missions of the 376th Bombardment Group (H). (Approved, 8 Nov 1951)

376<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Operations Group emblem: Azure, in base, a stylized winged sphinx Or, shaded Tenné and fimbriated Azure, on a terra cotta mound Sanguine, in dexter chief, a bomb Or, point downward, charged with a roundel and a lozenge Sanguine, a triangle Azure and a square Sanguine, all within a diminutive bordure Or. Attached below the shield, a White scroll edged with a narrow Yellow border and inscribed "376TH EXPEDITIONARY OPERATIONS GROUP" in Blue letters. **SIGNIFICANCE:** Ultramarine blue and Air Force yellow are the Air Force colors. Blue alludes to the sky, the primary theater of Air Force operations. Yellow refers to the sun and the excellence required of Air Force personnel. The winged sphinx in yellow is symbolic of the service in the Middle East Theater where the Group began its first historical tradition. The diamond, circle, square, and triangle are for each squadron's service in Palestine. The blue of the field is also emblematic of the intense blue of the African sky at night and represents the theater where heroic missions were successfully accomplished. The terra cotta red beneath the winged sphinx is symbolic of the desert around Gambut, Soluch, and Benghasi. The bomb in the right side of the shield is emblematic of the mission of the 376th Bombardment Wing (M).

#### **MOTTO**

LIBERANDOS

#### **NICKNAME**

#### **OPERATIONS**

Following the 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the Army Air Forces to mount retaliatory raids on the Japanese home islands. A task force, commanded by Colonel Harry E. Halverson and composed of 231 officers and enlisted men and 23 B-24D Liberator bombers, was assembled at Fort Myers, Florida. The unit was given the code name "HALPRO" for Halverson Project. This organization, destined to be the parent unit of the 376th Bombardment Group, departed the United States on 20 May 1942 to begin attacks on Japanese targets from a base located in China. When HALPRO arrived in the Middle East, the unit learned that its' proposed base had been captured by Japanese forces. To make matters worse, the German Afrika Korps under General Erwin Rommel was poised to attack Allied forces in North Africa.

HALPRO was quickly diverted from its' original mission to a new one: interdiction raids from airfields in Egypt against shipping and North African ports supporting Axis operations. On 20 June 1942, the Halverson Project was dissolved and the organization was renamed the First Provisional Bombardment Group. In subsequent organizational change, all First Provisional personnel and B-24s were transferred to the newly activated 376th Heavy Bombardment Group. The order became effective on 31 October 1942 and as a subsequent gesture of unit identity, members of the 376th adopted the nickname "Liberandos". Rapid build-up of personnel and aircraft in early 1943 resulted in the formation of a fully formed group composed of the 512th, 513th, 514th and 515th Squadrons.

Attacks by the fledgling 376th, the first heavy bombardment group to operate in the Middle East Theater, were focused on Axis supply lines between Italy and North Africa, airfields, and port facilities. Later, longer range raids were made against oil refineries, marshalling yards, and

ordinance factories in Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The Liberandos were also chosen to lead four other B-24 bombardment groups on the daring 1 August 1943 low level raid against Romania's Ploesti Oil Fields. After the liberation of North Africa late in 1943, the Group moved to San Pancrazio, Italy where it participated in an accelerated campaign against Axis targets in southern Europe and the Balkans. Group sorties extended as far as Vienna, Austria and Regensburg, Germany.

During four years of operations, the 376th and its parent units became integral elements of the 9th, 12th, and 15th Air Forces. The Group flew 451 missions, was awarded three Distinguished Unit Citations and earned 15 campaign awards. The Liberandos destroyed 220 enemy aircraft in aerial combat and suffered casualties totaling 1479 officers and enlisted personnel and 169 aircraft.

The Heavy Bombardment Group, now known as the 376th comprising the 512, 513, 514, and 515th squadrons, were originally designated as a special task force under the command of Colonel Harry Halverson. The organization was composed of 231 officers and men with a complement of 23 B-24 Liberator bombers. They were assembled at Fort Meyers, Florida, to take off on a remarkable flight--the ultimate destination of which was unknown. Early dawn on the morning of May 20, 1942, saw this hand-picked task force wheel their heavily loaded aircraft into the rising sun. Sixty-five flying hours later the entire fleet of these "Flying Stone Crushers", (as they have been so described by many who have seen them at work), descended June 4th upon the airdrome at Fayid, Egypt. Without the loss of a single hour of flying time, or man, all 23 bombers completed the hazardous journey across the waters of the Atlantic, the fever-ridden swamps and jungles of the Gold Coast, then on into the dry, hot highlands of the Sudan. Thence, they winged on to the land of the ancient Pharoahs. Over 6000 miles of difficult, treacherous, and uncharted flying was accomplished by this organization who called themselves "The Halpros", in recognition of the outstanding personality of their leader, Colonel Harry Halverson.

Only a few days elapsed between the arrival of this force and the call for their first mission, that of bombing and pulverizing the vital Axis-held oil refineries at Ploesti and Constanza in Romania. This was a far different target than many of the unit had anticipated, for it was generally known that the "Halpros" were destined to fly on to China and from a securely hidden air base, conduct harassing and annoying raids on the forces of the Japanese Mikado.

Their first combat mission was a 13 bomber attack on the Ploesti refineries, on June 12, 1942. Little did they realize that more than two years were to elapse before Ploesti was finally eliminated as a high priority target. Like later missions to Ploesti, this initial one was costly. Five bombers failed to return and were believed to be lost or interned in neutral countries. The dramatic escapes, the exchanges, the diplomacy exercised on the behalf of the fever-ridden survivors of this, the first of a long series of missions against big "P", will some day form a volume of brave deeds in itself.

Thus, their first mission accomplished, the "Halpros" were eager to get on with the business in Asia. But, disaster faced the heroic British Eighth Army as Field Marshall Rommel and his devastating Afrika Korps, flushed with success, threatened the last stronghold of the Allies in Eastern Africa. Here, close at hand, was urgent need for the pregnant destruction contained within the belly of the

B-24. The extreme pleasure of pulverizing the abode of the Sacred Son of a Heaven could come later on. That pleasure was mentally filed under "unfinished business."

So, "business before pleasure", was the thunderous roar omitted by the spitting engines as they warmed up for the take-off on the morning of June 15, 1942.

It was only their second combat mission but it was, perhaps, the most sensational of any bombing attack ever performed to date. The entire striking power of this small handful of bombers directed towards the powerful Italian Fleet who were causing trouble in the Mediterranean Sea just east of the Straits of Gibraltar. Seven Liberators taking off to do battle with the entire Italian Fleet! How pitiful! How inspiring! How audacious! Yet, so business-like was their performance that day that the proud Italian Navy licked their terrible wounds as they streaked for home and the safety of Taranto Bay. They were never to emerge again as a fleet until their surrender over a year later. So many hits were scored that day that the 376th bombardiers coined the famous expression: "'Twas just like shooting fish in a rain barrel." All our aircraft returned.

Then began the many and tiresome raids (they were called 'raids' in those days) carried on against harbor installations and enemy shipping in Tobruk and Benghazi. These raids became so much of the daily life of this pitifully small U.S. Air Force that a bombing mission to Benghazi was called the 'mail run'. That to Tobruk was called the 'milk run'. But both the 'mail' and the 'milk' were delivered on time, and when most needed. The fact that both 'milk' and the 'mail' were carelessly camouflaged as 500 and 1000lb bombs does not alter the general picture. Benghazi first received its quota of 'mail' on June 21, 1942. On the 23rd, Tobruk got its 'milk'. Neither liked it, but, like spinach, it was good for what ailed the Axis. Then on and on, unceasingly from June 21 to Halloween Night on the 30th of October. Tobruk, Benghazi, enemy convoys and tankers in the Mediterranean Sea, airdromes and landing grounds in Crete and Greece, were all equally pounded, harassed, and blasted without fear or favor.

However, during this time, the enemy under the leadership of Marshal "Desert Fox" Rommel was not unduly lax in their military prestige and endeavors. The advance of the "Desert Fox" towards the rich cities of Alexandria and Cairo made it seem wise for the U.S.A.A.F. to get the hell out of Egypt and head for Palestine. Unbeaten, their shield of battle untarnished, they gracefully withdrew (not retreat, mind you) to an excellent air base at Lydia, Palestine. Here, in Palestine, was, for the first time in history, raised The Stars and Stripes. And raised, neophytes all, by the puling, squawking, lusty infant which was, later on after a diet of sand, sweat, blood and guts, to be known as the 376th Bombardment Group.

Operations were carried on from this new base. But, after the mission of July 1st, 1942, the "Halverson Detachment" was reformed into a new unit, The First Provisional Bomb Group. And, (this may surprise some of you) their numbers were augmented by the arrival of several B-17's (Flying Forts) with their eager-beaver crews. These new arrivals, the 9th Squadron, hot off the plains of India, received a hotter welcome at Lydia Airport. Things went on and on from the new Palestinian base.

The 30th day of October witnessed the last mission performed by the 1st Provisional Bomb Group when a formation of 9 B-24's and 6 B-17's started out on their 62nd and 63rd mission to bomb the airports of Maleme and Tymbaki on the island of Crete. Although the results of this attack were unobserved due to poor visibility, all the planes returned to their home air base after fighting off ambitious Axis fliers equipped with the best (at that time) fighter planes.

Came the morning of November 1st, 1942. Out of the loins of the pregnant 1st Provisional Bomb Group came the 376th Bombardment Group, sired by the now-famous Halpros. It was a lusty, husky, trouble-making, and highly destructive infant.

No time was lost in celebrating the birth of the 376th. Though young in name they were already veterans of almost six months desert fighting. That same morning of Nov. 1, 1942, saw them winging their way to make another successful attack on the Malome, Crete, airdrome with 8 B-24's.

Conditions becoming more and more favorable in the progress of the Libyan campaign, the 376th was moved to Abu Sueir, Egypt, on November 8, 1942. The ceaseless pounding at harbor installations, fortifications, enemy shipping and convoys, as well as Axis airdromes at Benghazi and Tobruk continued on an ever increasing scale.

After the fall of Tobruk on Nov. 15, 1942, and Benghazi shortly after, the 376th began again their old systematic and methodical bombing of enemy targets. This time it was conducted in newer fields and waters. The enemy had been chased westward to Tripoli, Soussa, Sfax, and Bizerta. Here they held their last stand in North Africa, punch-drunk, but still as vicious and dangerous as a wounded panther. These strongly held installations, harbors, pill-boxes and airdromes were bombed consistently until the capture of Tripoli. One of the most successful missions carried out during this period was the "sharpshooting" of the bombardiers when they attacked the harbor of Sfax on December 16, 1942. This was a feat, now at that time, in precision bombing. Sixty-nine bombs out of 72 carried were dropped exactly in the bull's eye.

The next base of the 376th was into the Western Desert of Libya where they were based at Gambut Main Landing Ground #139 on February 6, 1943. Here the lusty, healthy, and rapidly growing 376th continued to show its ill manners by causing wholesale destruction and devastation when visiting over the mainland of Italy and Sicily.

During the month of February 1943, punishing and destructive missions were carried out against shipping and harbor installations at the ports of Naples, Palermo, Crotrons and Messina. Many hundreds of tons of shipping and vital military stores were destroyed by these raids upon the enemy's dwindling supplies and resources.

On the 27th of February, 1943, the group again moved, this time farther west into the Libyan Desert to a little town of Solluch. This native town was once an important Italian military outpost, now it had reverted back to its rightful owners. They were of the Senussi tribe and soon came back to town from their hide-outs in the hills and deserts. Solluch was about 30 miles south of Benghazi, the largest city and only port in Libya. Despite the adverse winter weather conditions and the big

cloudburst at Solluch, operations were continued against the high priority target of that time-the Messina Ferry Terminal on the north-west tip of Sicily. Due to its strategic value in being the funnel through which troops, arms and supplies were shipped from the mainland of Italy to Sicily, and thence to North Africa, every effort was made to destroy it.

In the middle of April 1943, the 376th again moved their base to within a few miles south of Benghazi, to the field called Bonina No.2. From this new base the sensational and successful bombing attack on the airdrome at Bari, Italy, was carried out on April 26. This mission was led by Colonel Keith K. Compton who had been assigned as the new group commanding officer on February 20, 1943. Previously the group had been commanded by Col. George F. McGuire, who, since July 30, 1942, had succeeded in welding his little unit into a hard-hitting, hard-fighting, combination Task Force, Desert Air Force, Tactical and Strategic Bombing Force, and almost every other designation that could be imagined.

These men of the 376th were willing to try anything once, so, when it was suggested that in order to destroy the Messina Ferry Terminal, "skip-bombing" should be tried, they were all for it. The Ferry Terminal was the receiving end of ferries carrying freight and passenger cars across the Straits of Messina. Upon arriving at the Terminal they passed under the Terminal into a tunnel protected by many feet of re-inforced concrete. Impossible to blast from above and thus reach the mechanism that controlled the hauling of the freight trains from the ferries on to the land tracks, it was decided to fly in low and try and skip the bombs into the open mouth of the tunnel. Due to the intense and highly accurate anti-aircraft fire protecting the Straits of Messina, the original "ack-ack alley", it was decided best to make the attacks at sundown, coming in low towards the Ferry Terminal with the sinking sun low on the horizon to blind the ground gunners.

It would take many pages to describe these hair-raising, low-level missions against Messina and we have only room for one or two incidents. Jerry DuFour was piloting one of the big Liberators for the entrance of the Ferry Terminal opening on one occasion. He had just skidded his bombs into the tunnel's mouth when he saw, dead ahead of him, a flight enemy Junkers cruising his way. Both were surprised as it was an accidental meeting. There was nothing else for DuFour to do but plow straight ahead with all his machine guns firing right and left. Right into the middle of the enemy planes he flew, shooting down one and scattering the rest. The enemy was so caught by surprise at seeing this terrible, spitting monster coming at them where none was supposed to be that not one shot was fired at Jerry's Lib!

The installations at Messina were entirely wrecked by these daring attacks. Came next the systematic pounding of Reggio di Calabria (across the Straits on the toe of Italy), and softening-up and pulverizing of all the supply dumps, harbor installations and airdromes in preparation of the invasion of Sicily. Other notable missions followed, the bombing of the Littorio Railway Yards in Rome is one in particular. The day before the Rome mission British planes circled over the Eternal City and dropped leaflets telling the inhabitants to get up on their roof-tops next day at noon and see a good example of the American's precision bombing. The leaflets told the natives to keep away from the Littorio rail yards as that was to be the target for the coming day. The next day, July 19, 1943, at high noon the drone of B-24's could be heard over Rome. Swinging surely towards



their assigned target, with all the confidence in the world in their ability to squarely hit their objective, the bombs were sent hurling downwards with such grace and precision that the yards were rendered entirely useless for further movement of enemy supplies towards the Americans, Canadians, and British forces.

Then came the most daring and outstanding mission of all time, the historic low-level bombing attack against the oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania, on August 1, 1943. For 14 months, or since June 12, 1942, Ploesti had been untouched by warfare. Not only was this attack to be famous on account of its daring and audacious low-level approach, it was also to signal the re-opening gun of The Battle of Ploesti which was only to end a year later with the loss of 276 bombers and 2,200 airmen missing. Historians in years to come will elaborate more fully on this historic attack, and the attacks that followed. Just as the 376th had been cited by the President of The United States for its efforts in North Africa, so was it again to be cited for the devastating bombing attack of Sunday, August 1, 1943.

This low-level attack was planned for a Sunday afternoon when the pleasure-loving populace of Romania would relax their guard and be indulging in pastimes other than war. The flight across Romania "on the deck" towards Ploesti had its amusing moments. One crew reported passing over a small river where many young men and girls were lolling on the sand after an enjoyable swim. What particularly attracted the attention of the men of the 376th was that these parties were as entirely naked as a jay-bird. Others were engaged in an interesting and highly pleasurable biological act. Imagine, if you can, being caught yourself in this dilemma! Suddenly, out of nowhere, came the first of the thundering herd of eager bombers directly headed for them, or so it seemed. Never before in all history had the curtain been run down on shorter acts as the lovers scattered themselves like coveys or quail and either rolled into the bushes, or dived into the river, to escape the terrible pre-historic monsters overhead.

In one field a farmer was spreading manure from a farm wagon drawn by two horses when the bombers swept over the tree tops behind him. He and the horses gave one terrified look. Then, the peasant's pitchfork went one way and he headed, full speed, for the shelter of the woods. The horses, being unable to decide which way to run together, decided to part company and go their separate ways, also at full speed, with the wreck of the wagon bumping and trailing behind.

One Liberator came home with cornstalks wedged in the engine cowling, while parts of some black and white bird were found in another. It was either a chicken or magpie with the odds being in favor of chicken. Other Liberators came home with hay and small tree branches and leaves decorating the cowling. Many of the Liberators didn't come home that night.

After Ploesti came the bombing attacks on ball-bearing and aircraft factories in Germany and Austria. The mission to Weiner-Neustadt, Austria, on Aug. 13, 1943, was, perhaps, the longest mission carried out from the base at Benghazi.

The war progressing favorably to a point where it was believed the 376th should again move forward, about the middle of September this movement was started. The new base was near

Enfidaville, in southern Tunisia, at the base of a range of purple and gold mountains. One of the things most distinctly remembered about this new base was the hunting of chukkar partridges, the beautiful sunsets reflected on the mountains, and another of those terrible, desert cloudbursts.

Operations carried on from Enfidaville took the group again to Weiner-Noustadt, and other targets in that vicinity. As Colonel Compton was still commanding the group, several more requests were made of him to again use his famous low-level, skip-bombing, hit-and-run tactics against several railroad bridges and viaducts along the east coast of Italy. One in particular was the mission of October 19, 1943. The following is a newspaper account of that daring affair: "Early today, echoing the thunderous blast of exploding 2000-lb bombs aimed at four enemy-held bridges, came Colonel K.K. Compton's terse radio message back to his home air base: "All bridges busted beautifully!"

"Briefed to destroy these four bridges, vital links in the only railroad on the east coast of Italy, and the destruction of which would cut off reinforcements to the hard-pressed enemy, the Liberandos struck at dawn. "Sweeping in from the sea in a surprise attack they skidded their huge bombs into the piers and abutments of four separate bridges, some spanning miniature 'Grand Canyons', and swept out to sea again to escape the awful upheaval that followed. From this operation all our planes returned safely."

On the 17th of November, 1943, the 376th took to the air again. This time it was headed to Italy for a long stay. The combat personnel, as well as the important ground personnel were all flown to southern Italy where their new air base was to be set up. It was during this movement by air that occurred a most laughable and memorable incident. Laughable, yet it had all the possibilities of a disaster save for Lady Luck.

It was this: Two B-24's took off, one shortly after the other, for the hop across Sicily to the new base. The navigator of the second B-24 had no navigational aids other than a map, so he was told by the pilot of the leading bomber, "Just follow us." Follow they did, until over Sicily they experienced dense cloud cover and each became separated. The first B-24 proceeded on course while the second one took this most inopportune time to have trouble with the radio compass and almost everything else and became lost...utterly lost. It was rapidly getting dark. The plane was heavily loaded with kitchen stoves, pots, pans, kettles, and all the 515th Squadron's contingent of Mexican-American cooks and helpers. Imagine their consternation when enemy anti-aircraft guns opened fire on them. They high-tailed it for some other less hostile area. Their next alarm was when two ME-109's came out of the dusk with all their guns winking and blazing at the lost Lib. On board was a crew chief who sprang into action at this new threat to their welfare and succeeded in driving off the ME-109's in short order. After flying aimlessly around for sev- hours they eventually got in contact with a friendly ground radio station and were guided in to the new air base where their Odyssey of the Clouds was related to bug-eyed skeptics.

In January 1944, the 376th reverted to the close ground-air support tactics developed and conducted a year or more before in the Western Desert. Almost the entire month of January was spent in an extensive training program in preparation of the coming Spring offensive when these tactics would be used.

Then began the missions to the Anzio beachhead where German troop concentrations and gun positions were blasted. Subsequently, one mission was flown against bloody Cassino-on the day when more than 3,000 Allied aircraft participated in an attack against this mountain monastery stronghold.

It was during the many missions flown against enemy positions and troop concentrations that one of the bravest acts of self-sacrifice in the history of the 376th occurred. On May 23, 1944, a mission was sent out to bomb enemy troops and supplies at Frascati, Italy. The anti-aircraft fire was both accurate and intense. Aircraft 85, piloted by Bob Gallagher, received a direct hit underneath the waist windows which traveled upwards and exploded. The entire top of the bomber was blown out from the radio antenna to aft of the waist windows. Two life rafts and several parachutes were blown out by the explosion and several of his men were wounded. Other serious damage was rendered to the bomber. Here was a choice no man should have to face. Should the unwounded men, and the men with parachutes, bail out and save their own lives while the wounded, and men who had lost their chutes in the blast, remain and go down with the stricken ship?

Despite the terrible damage inflicted to their bomber, Bob piloted it out to sea and rid himself of his load of bombs and then headed his crippled aircraft for Naples. All went well until within sight of the airfield at Naples, when suddenly, the crippled bomber went out of control and crashed to the ground. The frayed controls could hold no longer. No survivors was there to tell of those terrible hours in the air. Radio facilities had been blasted out of Gallagher's bomber when it was hit. No one knows the heroic acts that occurred aboard the stricken ship. What went on up there in the air between these doomed men and their God...God alone knows. Our story is based on eye-witness reports of other pilots who tried to escort Bob and his heroic "One for all and all for one" crew safely to a friendly base. Bob Gallagher, the little, happy-go-lucky, smiling Irishman received a posthumous award of The Distinguished Service Cross. His crew received posthumous awards of The Silver Star for gallantry in action.

Throughout the year, oil installations, ball-bearing and aircraft factories, engine and tank factories, airdromes, harbor installations, railway lines, yards and bridges, troop concentrations and other strategic targets were blasted in Germany, Austria, Hungary, France, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. All these and many more were on the 376th intensive bombing program.

The group gave air support to the Russian Armies both in Romania, and southeastern Poland when it led the entire 15th Air Force in the attack on the Bucharest railyards. The group participated in the invasion of southern France when coastal batteries, barbed-wire, pill-boxes, mine fields, fortifications and other strongholds were neutralized before the waves of infantry, engineers and artillery swarmed ashore.

For the outstanding and highly successful mission on June 16, 1944, when the entire set-up of tanks, oil refineries, distillation and cracking plants at Bratislava, Czechoslovakia were utterly destroyed, the 376th won its third citation as a Distinguished Unit.

Other oil targets were hit repeatedly to prevent any great German recuperation of these industries. The vitally important Breener Pass railway lines, tunnels and bridges in north Italy, as well as supply depots, were bombed in the closing months of the year of 1944. Rail installations and bridges were attacked in Hungary and Yugoslavia repeatedly in order to check the flow of vital supplies to the German fronts. Troop movements were attacked also. On Nov. 8, Colonel Graff led a successful mission to destroy troop concentrations at Prijepolje, Yugoslavia. Just as a sample of precision bombing dealt out to other targets, this day the 376th dropped every bomb directly within a 1000 foot circle and scored a 100% record. How this perfect record affected the enemy troops concentrated in that 1000 foot area is no military secret for they are long past caring.

On February 1, 1945, another milestone in the long and gallant career of the 376th was set up when Colonel Graff led the unit on its 400th combat mission. It was also the Colonel's last sortie against the enemy before being eligible to return to the United States for reassignment. The group felt his loss very keenly as he had been responsible for building up his group to a high state of efficiency.

The unit was reactivated in June 1951, as the 376th Bombardment Wing, Medium, under the command of Colonel Cecil E. Combs. The Wing was placed under the guidance of another wing (for 120 days TDY) at Topeka, Kansas, after which the 376th returned to Barksdale and was on its own. The Wing rapidly became a hard-hitting, tightly-knit weapon of the Strategic Air Command. Special missions were flown to North Africa and Alaska and earned the 376th the praise of General LeMay, Commander of the Strategic Air Command. In addition, Major Carrington of the 513th Bomb Squadron won the Mackay Trophy, and Major Holman's crew, also of the 513th, was commended by General Walker for their exceptional showing in the SAC Bombing Competition for 1953.

In 27,000 flying hours in B-29s the Wing compiled a spectacular safety record. In 31 months of intensive flying the Wing was completely free of aircraft accidents.

During the last part of 1953 the 376th began to receive its flying gas station, the big KC-97s, and a few months later the B-47s arrived. This was a time of considerable activity, for while transitioning to the jets, the unit continued to remain combat ready with the B-29s.

By mid-1954 the B-29s were phased out and the 376th became an all B-47 wing. At this time the Wing is deeply engaged in the job of becoming a full-fledged combat ready member of SAC.

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Air Force Order of Battle

Created: 16 Feb 2012

Updated: 19 Jun 2018

#### Sources

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