

603 SPECIAL OPERATIONS TRAINING SQUADRON



MISSION

LINEAGE

3 Fighter Reconnaissance Squadron, constituted, 25 Apr 1944
Activated, 1 May 1944
Redesignated 3 Fighter Squadron (Commando), 2 Jun 1944
Inactivated, 25 Mar 1946
Disbanded, 8 Oct 1948
Reconstituted, redesignated 603 Fighter Squadron, Commando, and activated, 15 Apr 1963
Organized, 1 Jul 1963
Redesignated 603 Air Commando Squadron, 8 Nov 1964
Redesignated 603 Air Commando Squadron, Strike/Reconnaissance, 15 Jun 1966
Redesignated 603 Special Operations Squadron, 8 Jul 1968
Inactivated, 15 May 1971
Redesignated 603 Special Operations Training Squadron, 1 Mar 1973
Activated, 1 Jul 1973
Inactivated, 1 Jul 1974

STATIONS

Lakeland AAFld, FL, 1 May 1944
Alachua AAFld, FL, 7 Aug 1944
Drew Field, FL, 6-24 Oct 1944
Leyte, 1 Dec 1944
Mangaldan, Luzon, 26 Jan 1945
Laoag, Luzon, 19 Apr 1945

Ie Shima, 9 Aug 1945 (operated from Atsugi, Japan, 20 Sep-7 Oct 1945)
Chitose, Japan, 27 Oct 1945-25 Mar 1946
Eglin AF Aux Fid #9, FL, 1 Jul 1963
England AFB, LA, 15 Jan 1966
Eglin AF Aux FLD #9, FL, 15 Jul 1969-15 May 1971
Eglin AF Aux Fid #9, FL, 1 Jul 1973-1 Jul 1974

ASSIGNMENTS

3 Air Commando Group, 1 May 1944-25 Mar 1946
1 Air Commando Group (later, 1 Air Commando Wing; 1 Special Operations Wing), 1 Jul 1963-15 May 1971.
1 Special Operations Wing, 1 Jul 1973-1 Jul 1974

WEAPON SYSTEMS

P-40, 1944
F-6, 1944
P-51, 1944
A-1, 1963
B-26 (later, A-26), 1963
A-37, 1969
C-123, 1963
O-1, 1965
U- 10, 1966
AC-47, 1967
C-130, 1967
C-47, 1973

COMMANDERS

Maj Albert Snider, 1 May 1944
Maj Richard L. Orr, 6 Jun 1944
Maj Walker M. Mahurin, Jul 1944
Capt Charles B. Adams, Mar 1945
Capt Thomas J. Williams, 5 Jun 1945
Capt Donald E. Songer, Jul 1945-unkn
Capt Quintin H. Evans, 1Jul 1963
Lt Col Eugene H. Mueller Jr., 1 Aug 1963
Maj Eugene B. Lancaster, 1964
Lt Col Robert D. Naylor, Feb 1965
Lt Col Albert R. Howarth, 1966
Maj Edward M. Robinson, 8 Jun 1966
Maj Billie R. Keeler, Aug 1966
Lt Col Alvert R. Howarth, Jan 1967
Lt Col Dean C. Crane, 29 Dec 1967
Maj Kenneth F. Somers, 16 Nov 1969

Maj Richard V. Secord, 12 Dec 1969-May 1971
Lt Col Jimmie R. Robertson, 1 Jul 1973
Maj Albert J. Chasse, 5 Jun-1 Jul 1974

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Air Offensive, Japan
China Defensive
Western Pacific
Leyte
Luzon
China Offensive

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards
Jul 1963-Jun 1965
1 Jul 1969-15 Apr 1971

Philippine Presidential Unit Citation

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm
1 Nov-30 Jul 1968

EMBLEM



Approved, 25 Jun 1969

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

Operations. Combat in Southwest and Western Pacific area, 8 Jan-27 Jul 1945; flew patrol and escort missions over Ryukyus and southern Japan, 28 Aug-2 Sep 1945.

The cadre of the 3rd Fighter Squadron was composed of personnel of the 76th Tactical Reconnaissance Group, 23rd Tactical Recon Squadron inactivated at Thermal Army Air Base, California in early spring of 1944. This cadre traveled by troop train to Lakeland Army Air Base, Florida, where they formed the 3rd Fighter Squadron of the 3rd Air Commando Group. The squadron was soon brought to strength by volunteers and hand-picked personnel from throughout other Air Corps units. Most of the pilots arriving in the outfit were experienced, coming from instructor status and some had already returned from a previous combat tour.

Major Walker Mahurin was designated the commanding officer of the 3rd Fighter Squadron. He had extensive experience in the European Theater as a fighter pilot having shot down 21 German planes prior to returning to the States. Other pilots of the Unit were all previously trained in fighter type aircraft and quickly became familiar with the flight characteristics of the P-51.

In early April this group of people gathered at Lakeland Army Air Base Florida and began working together and training for their eventual overseas tour. The whole squadron launched into a vigorous and full time training schedule. The morale was very high since the training was for a special and unorthodox mission for those days.

Older P-51s (B & C models) were requisitioned from other units as well as some old P-40s. Aerial gunnery, aerial combat maneuvers, dive bombing, strafing and other ground support missions were the major types of maneuvers the squadron pilots practiced.

Because of the humidity and heat of the Florida summer usually two flights per day were scheduled one launching about 7 or 8 in the morning and second about 10:30. Upon completion of the second flight pilots were normally released for the rest of the day. They usually found a pool for swimming and tried their best to keep cool, (no air conditioning in those days!)

In August the 3rd Fighter Squadron along with the 3rd Air Commando Group moved to Alachue Air Base at Gainesville, Florida for more intensive training in combat type activities such as aerial gunnery, ground gunnery, dive and skip bombing, and aerial combat. Formation take-offs and rapid landing techniques were also perfected.

In November 1944 the unit departed for the Pacific area of operation. A complete troop train took us up the east coast before heading for the west coast as a feint so that enemy

intelligence would have a difficult time anticipating our final destination. After approximately 7 or 8 days on the troop train the unit arrived in Pittsburg California. The troop trains in those days were quite primitive. The train consisted of approximately 15 Pullman cars with two Kitchen cars in the middle and a caboose on the end. We were shunted on sidings every time a train with priority freight came along, hence the cause of the long trip. After processing the ground element boarded the U.S.S. Hersey in Oakland, Calif and was on the high seas approximately 30 days before landing in Finschaven New Guinea to offload mail and supplies. They then proceeded to Hollandia for refueling. The final destination was Red Beach on the island of Leyte, P.I. where a unit area was established awaiting arrival of the air element from Nadzab, New Guinea. This was shortly after our forces had landed and established a beachhead. Upon approaching Red Beach at Leyte the Captain of the U.S.S. Hersey evidently lost some of his nerve and offloaded the troops hurriedly on scattered beaches in the mud. It was a very confusing and trying time for the ground echelon. To quote one on-the-spot observer, "It seemed that no one knew who we were or why we were there." The unit as one historian put it, "Arrived unknown, uninvited and unwanted." An interesting side note here. Our squadron commander Major Mahurin also participated in the Korean conflict. He was shot down and spent a long time as a POW. When he was released he returned to the States on the U.S.S. Hersey which had been converted to a hospital ship. The unit's entire organizational supplies and equipment were shipped on a boat other than the Hersey and had been off-loaded at Lae-Finschaven, New Guinea. This equipment never reached our unit having been filched by other units in the supply depot there.

The air echelon meanwhile spent some time at Hamilton Field, Calif, before obtaining transportation to the combat area. There were some high times and 24 hour parties going at the Top-Of-The-Mark and other San Francisco hotels. For those not participating in this kind of activity, there was always the 24 hour continuous poker game in the Officers Club. The air echelon consisted of the pilots, some of the ground officers and several of the crew chiefs. After many hours in the air (C-54 transports) the air echelon finally landed at Nadzab, New Guinea in mid November, 1944. New P-51's (D models) which had been shipped to Finschaven assembled and checked out there were flown to Nadzab and assigned to the squadron. Pilots and crew chiefs were assigned individual aircraft and both worked diligently to make it the best and cleanest airplane in the squadron from Nadzab, mainly surveillance missions to New Britain, Rabaul and Wewak.

The unit finally moved forward from Nadzab the first week in January 1945. The first leg from Nadzab to Biak was led by a B-25 Pathfinder. Whether the B-25 navigator became disoriented or lost is questionable. Both squadrons (3rd & 4th) were on this flight and we had between 28-32 aircraft. We ended up milling around huge cumulus clouds over the Owen Stanley mountain range in the interior of New Guinea. After an eternity (it seemed) we finally landed at an Australian Air Base with Boomerang fighters located some forty miles from Hollandia. Everyone had sweated out our fuel supply and were mighty thankful to be on the ground. I recall the Aussies served us some delicious roast wild boar that evening. The next day was an uneventful flight and we landed at Biak. Then on into Morotai the next day. Maintenance of all sorts were performed by the pilots as we were the first P-51's to land at these bases and

the maintenance people there had no experience with them. The final leg was into Tanuan strip on Leyte, P.I. on January 7th 1945. The unit began flying combat missions the following day. Despite primitive conditions and limited lighting facilities the ground crews performed a herculean effort and readied all aircraft for launch the next day. These early missions consisted of ground support of troops, escort duty for Navy PBY's on rescue missions, bomber escort and target of opportunity fighter sweeps. Enough credit cannot be given to all the ground support personnel during these very difficult early days in the combat zone. The line chief and many of the crew chiefs had been working for Capt. Townsend (Maintenance Officer) since early 1943. As Capt. Townsend put it in a letter to me, "I can't say enough good about the enlisted men and the hours they worked. They believed in one thing — a solid and safe airplane." The unit suffered its first combat losses while flying from Tacloban air strip on Leyte. Lt. Thibodeau and his wing man Lt. Tudor collided while strafing a beached Japanese Landing craft on one of the islands south of Leyte. Lt. Isgrigg was also lost on a ground support mission during these early days.

On January 14th the unit scored its first aerial victories on a B-25 escort mission to Appari Airfield on the northern tip of Luzon. While on the return flight two aircraft were sighted heading north. Major Mahurin gave chase (about 10 min) and shot down a Dinah Photo Recce aircraft. Capt. C.B. Adams downed a Betty bomber also. This was in the Cagayan Valley near the Tuguegarao airfield. A few days later Capt. Adams received heavy ground fire on a mission over Negros and had to bail out. He was picked up by friendly natives and returned a few days later.

On 16 January a flight of four were on a bomb and strafe mission over Clark Field. They caught several aircraft on the ground by surprise and destroyed eleven. Lt. Glenn Larimore was credited with seven, with a direct hit with a 500 lb. bomb. The unit can well be proud of its record — in the first 23 days of combat they flew 407 sorties for a total of 1635 combat hours. On some of the ground support missions the planes carried two 1000 lb. bombs which was a first for the P-51's in the area. This was no mean feat because of the sloped PSP runway which was normally wet from the constant rain.

On 24 Jan '45 the Unit moved to Honey Strip near Lingayen Gulf on the island of Luzon. It was a converted rice field which had dried out and had been partially leveled by the Army Engineers. It was here the 3rd squadron pioneered the 4 ship formation takeoff. One reason for this was because of the horrible dust conditions on this dirt airfield. If heretofore normal 2 ship takeoffs were made the 2nd and succeeding elements would have to wait an excessive amount of time for the dust to clear before starting their takeoff roll. At Honey strip the larger number of missions were in ground support of the infantry. Strikes along the Villa Verde trail and the Cagayan Valley became commonplace. With the distance to the strike area being only 50 miles or so, many pilots drove by jeep to the front lines and watched the air strike of their comrades. This gave the pilots a better perspective of the combat area and improved the cooperation between the fighter pilots and the ground controller. Often the pilots would fly three or four missions in one day. The surprisingly weak resistance of the Japanese forces in

the final stages of the conquest of Luzon was attributable to a great degree to the relentless air strikes against the virtually isolated enemy forces.

The squadron became extremely busy here at Honey airstrip. The ground forces were pushing toward Manila and eastward toward the Villa Verde trail and Baguio in the mountains. The front lines were as close as 30-40 miles to our airstrip. Because of the proximity of the battle it was not uncommon for pilots to fly 3 or 4 missions a day in close support of the troops. The unit started sending pilots to forward army units to act as liaison between the ground forces and the attacking P-51's. This might not have been the first time it had been done, this procedure is still used to this day with only minor changes. FACS or Forward Air Controllers, whether operating from the air or ground, is still the accepted procedure for directing air strikes against enemy forces in close proximity to our friendly troops. Much of the squadron's work with the ground forces was in support of the 32nd Infantry Division commanded by Maj. General Gill. Most gratifying to the people of the squadron was his official request that "The Air Commandos be used on all ground support missions with the 32nd Division." The unit's support of the 32nd Division was recognized by M/Gen. Gill in a letter of commendation to the Commander 3rd ACG which stated in part "The close air support missions by your command have materially aided the advance of the 32nd Infantry Division on the difficult terrain of the Villa Verde Trail — It is my belief that our unit is the first one in this theatre from which pilots of the supporting air force have voluntarily visited the forward ground units to view the terrain and study the tactical situation prior to their employment. — I will be pleased if you will convey to the officers and men of your organization the sincere appreciation of all ranks in the 32nd Infantry Division for the splendid help you are giving us in our fight against the Jap."

In addition to our ground support role the unit flew many missions escorting PBY's on rescue or standby for rescue to the China Coast. This was approximately a 600 mile overwater flight one way. (Quite an experience for the pilot of a single engine plane the first time!) The duration of these flights was usually 6 to 7:30 hours. The unit adopted the techniques of long range flight with the in-line engine developed by Charles Lindberg who flew some P-38 units in the area. It was: Attain flight altitude as soon as possible. In our case about 18 to 20,000 feet. Advance to full throttle and pull back prop pitch to a designated airspeed. The prop revolutions would be approximately 1200-1600 RPM's. You could almost see the shadow of the big 4-bladed prop turn. This would result in an average fuel consumption per hour of about 35-40 gallons.

On 19 April 1945 the unit moved to Gabu Airfield Luzon, a dirt air-strip near the city of Laoag on the northern tip of Luzon. This was the most forward airfield at the time, being approximately 150 miles behind enemy lines. The squadron flew 16 airplanes on a bomb and strafe mission against Baguio and landed at the new airstrip on this day. The ground element meanwhile was transported via C-47's to the new airstrip. The movement was accomplished without the loss of one day's combat which is believed a record in the theater. Here the unit continued flying ground support missions in support of the 37th Division and the Philippine Army on their drive north through the Cagayan Valley. The surprisingly weak resistance of the

Japanese Forces in the final stages of the battle was attributed in part to a great degree on the relentless air strikes against the virtually isolated enemy forces. In addition to these ground support missions on northern Luzon the unit flew a major portion of its missions on air strikes and escort duty with B-24's to the island of Formosa (now Taiwan). The island was located approximately 250 miles north of the airfield. Enemy ground fire and flak were quite intense and accurate on these missions. The unit suffered several casualties and lost quite a few aircraft on these missions. On one of these missions Lt. Alexander and F/O Everhart were badly shot up while strafing a radar station on the southern tip of Formosa. Both had to bail out. It is believed F/O Everhart's chute never opened. Lt. Alexander caught his foot in the controls on bailout, but finally managed to clear the aircraft. He was picked up by a Navy Cat despite high seas and was returned to the unit. He was quite badly injured, and was returned to the states. Toward the end of July the unit began preparations to move forward to the island of Ie Shima. An advanced echelon departed by air for Ie Shima to set up housekeeping and operations areas, while the bulk of the enlisted men and equipment were loaded on LST's and shipped out. The aircrews evacuated their nice living area and were sent to a transient area to await orders to move forward. It was while there the atomic bomb was dropped on August 6th and we later received word the Japanese had capitulated and the war was over. Finally on 26 August the aircrews took off from Gabu airstrip for Ie Shima. Most of the missions flown out of Ie Shima were Recce and "show of Force" over the Japanese islands of Kyushu, Shikoku and southern Honshu.

On 20 September the unit took off from Ie Shima and a short time later landed on Japanese soil at Atsugi Airfield in the Tokyo area. During the 2¹/₂ weeks there a few flights were made over Tokyo and other populated areas, more to impress the Japanese people with American Air Power than anything else.

On 7 October 1945 the unit departed for Chitose Airfield on the Island of Hokkaido to set up shop for occupation duty. Chitose had been a Japanese Naval training base. Because of the northern location of this base and the large amount of snowfall received, large steam heated buildings housed the troops and most of the base functions. The majority of the missions flown here were surveillance and patrol missions. Also several "show of force" missions so that the Japanese people could get a look at our Air Force. Most of the original pilots and enlisted men had already left or were in the process of leaving the unit during this time period to return to the U.S. Because of the tremendous turnover in pilots a comprehensive training program was initiated. The squadron flew 514 hours in November — before the snows came. This was the most flying time by any fighter squadron in the theater for the month of November. The squadron continued with normal occupation forces duty during the winter. In February 1946 the unit was inactivated and was absorbed by the 49th Fighter Group.

ORDINANCE EXPENDED

1 Jan — 31 Aug 1945

1000lbs bombs: 88

500lbs bombs: 2134

260lbs frags: 322

Napalm bombs: 101
50 Cal ammo: 1,710,000 rds.

CONFIRMED AIR VICTORIES

Maj Mahurin: 1 Dinah
Capt C.B. Adams: 1 Betty
Lt Mooney: 1 Kate
Lt Wagner: 1 Zeke

Trained aircrews for special air warfare operations, 1963-1971 and again 1973-1974.

USAF Unit Histories
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Sources
Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.