

54 AIR SERVICE GROUP



MISSION

LINEAGE

54 Air Base Group
Redesignated 54 Service Group
Redesignated 54 Air Service Group
Disbanded, 8 Oct 1948

STATIONS

Maxwell Fld, AL 1 Aug 1941-15 Nov 1941
Greenville, MS, 3 Jul 1942-11 Nov 1942
Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, FL 11 Nov 1942-18 June 1943
Avon Park Bombing Range, FL, 18 June 1943-6 Sep 1943
Lakeland AAF, FL 6 Sep 1943-15 Nov 1943
Oran, Algeria, 13 Dec 1943-Jan 1944
Bombay, India, Feb 1944
Kurmitola, India
Tezgaon, India, Feb 1944-Nov 1945

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

Maj Benjamin King, 1943
Maj James R. Allen
Lt Col Herbert M. West, Jr., 20 Oct 1943

Lt Col Philip Wilson, Sep 1944

Col Douglas Johnston, 22 Nov 1944

Col Warren H. Higgins, 14 Sep 1945

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

At Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Florida, the Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron was joined in April 1943 by the 1575th and 1576th Ordnance Companies, (Avn) (Q), which were later designated Ordnance S & M Company (Avn), both at cadre strength, and the first Group Commander, Major Benjamin King, Air Corps, was assigned in June 1943.

These three units moved by motor convoy to Avon Park Bombing Range, Avon Park, Florida, on 18 June 1943. Here they were joined by the 499th and 500th Service Squadrons (later to be designated Air Service Squadrons) which had arrived by motor convoy from MacDill Field, Tampa, Florida, on 17 June 1943; by the 2118th and 2119th Quartermaster Truck Companies (Avn) (colored) which arrived by rail from Ten Mile Station, Charleston, South Carolina, on or about 25 June 1943; and by the 1112th Signal Company (Avn) which arrived by rail from Columbia Army Air Base, Columbia, South Carolina, on 10 August 1943.

The training of an Air Service Group is based upon three phases: Phase I in which each unit is formed, filled with personnel, and the individual training of the soldier is completed; Phase II in which the units are brought together at one station, as a group, and the training and equipping of the group is performed under the guidance of a "parent" Air Service Group; Phase III in which the group simulates the performance of its mission with tactical groups, under theater of operations conditions.

The units arriving at Avon Park were, for the most part, too far understrength to have completed their first phase of training at their previous stations; and this same shortage of personnel made impossible the completion of second-phase training at Avon Park. Filler personnel were arriving, if slowly, and officers and men made the most of the situation that confronted them, under the general guidance of the "parent organization", the 40th Air Service Group.

Who, of the original personnel, will ever forget Avon Park-the tent camp in its open bivouac area, flooded by torrential afternoon showers; the swarms of mosquitoes that drove the men to bed, under mosquito nets, at dark; the shortage of vehicles -- "walk" was the rule; the early morning "belt buckle" inspections; the daily officers' lecture by the Commanding Officer of the parent Group; and those glorious Florida Sunsets. On 18 August 1943, the Group received its "warning orders".

These orders directed preparation for overseas movement, and were authority for the requisitioning of equipment not then on hand. Accordingly, "initial shortage lists" were submitted on 21 August 1943. At this time, the composition of the 54th Air Service Group was as follows:

54th Air Sv Gp Maj Benjamin King
499th Air Sv Gp 9 2d Lt Howard L Harris, Jr
500th Air Sv Gp 2d Lt Chas L Davis

On 6 September 1943 the Group moved by motor convoy from Avon Park to Lakeland Army Air Field, Lakeland, Florida, for a permanent change of station. The movement orders did not include the 2118th and 2119th QM Truck Companies (Avn) (colored) so these units were lost to the Group.

Just before departure from Avon Park, Major Benjamin King, Air Corps, was transferred from the Group and was succeeded in command by Major James R. Allen, Air Corps. Shortly after arrival at Lakeland, the Group was augmented by the 2080th and 2081st QM Truck Companies (Avn) which moved by motor convoy from their previous station at Venice, Florida.

The Base at Lakeland was nice and the housing facilities for the Group were good. All units were in frame buildings--quite a treat to the boys who had been living in tents in the marshy field at Avon Park. The officers and men working in Group Headquarters were well situated, and quite prepared for the "brace" that occurred daily at 0810.

The Group now contained all of the units to which it was entitled, and it began "third phase" training. The various units of the Group, with the exception of the Quartermaster Truck Companies, were still far below strength. It became apparent that the 54th Air Service Group could hardly begin -- much less, finish -- its third phase of training. From the very beginning, the Group had been greatly handicapped in its training. With the Port of Embarkation only two months away, there was ample cause for contemplation -- could the Group perform its overseas training? The Group thought so, and set out to prove it.

On 20 October 1943, Lt. Colonel Herbert M. West, Jr., Air Corps, was assigned to the Group, and assumed command vice Major James R. Allen, transferred. The "Port Call" was imminent now. Colonel West's first order was one restricting all personnel to the limits of the Base, and a killing tempo of training and preparation for overseas movement was begun. The day began in the darkness of early morning, with physical training; it ended late into the night after lectures, hikes and endless hours of packing and crating.

The inspectors came, the inspectors went--some said the Group could move to the Port on the scheduled date, but most said "No". Finally, the Inspector General and the POM Inspector arrived. The Group sold itself to these inspectors -- the ones who really counted -- and soon thereafter the "Port Call" was received. Neither the 1081st QM Company nor the 1112th Signal Company were included in the orders, so they were lost from the Group.

On 15 November 1943, midst the playing of Auld Lang Syne by the Base band, the Group loaded aboard two Atlantic Coast Line trains and departed for the Port of Embarkation. None will ever forget the mixed emotions of that hour -- the feeling of pride and satisfaction that comes only to those who know that they are enroute to join the boys who are doing the fighting; but the equally strong emotion of leaving home and loved ones.

The first stop enroute to the "unknown destination" proved to be Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia, where the two serials arrived after dark on a cold winter day.

The Operations Officer at Patrick Henry was efficient, and the Group was quickly unloaded and formed, amidst the barked instructions from the loudspeakers of the public address system. The march from the train to the barracks was cold, but not long. Soon everyone was bedded down in heated frame barracks. No one will forget the high cyclone fence that surrounded Patrick Henry - - it was anything but inviting.' Having passed through its portals, there was but one way out--by sea.

At Patrick Henry, the Group was joined by the 1104th Signal Company. The days which followed were hectic. It was learned that the Group, enroute to its final destination, would be "transshipped" several times and that a bare minimum of tonnage would be allowed for "TAT" equipment. This necessitated repacking some boxes and selecting others for shipment to the Los Angeles Port of Embarkation for shipment with the Group's "OEL" equipment. This, and other final chores, were completed and the units of the Group trained for the short one-way trip to Hampton Roads, Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron embarking 22 November 1943 on the Liberty Ship CONRAD WEISER, after warming themselves on cups of hot coffee served by ladies of the American Red Cross.

The 499th Air Sv Sq and the 1081st QM Co debarked at Casa Blanca, North Africa. The other units debarked at Oran, Algeria, near the sunken French warships whose superstructures rose from the waters of the harbor. Hq and Hq Sq debarked 13 December 1943.

Rising above the hulks of the sunken French ships was the towering old fort of Santa Cruz, perched atop a mountain peak which rose abruptly from the Old Harbor. The Group climbed aboard a convoy of 6 x 6 trucks and proceeded to Staging Area CP-2, a windswept and rain-soaked tent camp about 20 miles away, near the village of Fleurus. The Group arrived at the Staging Area well after darkness had fallen. It was raining and cold. A muddy, rocky hilltop, studded with furled tents, was pointed out as the temporary home of the 54th Air Service Group. That was a bad night, and one which will be long remembered--but who will forget Oran anyway!

For the most part, the Group had no mission at Oran other than to keep itself in readiness to move onward on short notice. So this became a nice orientation period; the Maison du Colon, the Red Cross Clubs, the retreat ceremonies at Place Foche, the village of Fleurus with its vin rouge and those wonderful North African oranges--all of these recall pleasant memories. But those cold, rainy days, the utter absence of fuel for heating, the long "chow lines" standing in the rain three times a day waiting with empty mess kits outstretched, and that ice cold, salty water for bathing --these present the other side of the picture!

It has been said that the Group had no essential mission in North Africa, but certain parts of the Group were quite busy. For its entire five weeks in North Africa, the 2081st QM Truck Company was utilized to capacity in hauling cargo from warehouses to the docks, for quick shipment to the Allied forces then fighting in Italy; the 1576th Ordnance Company was maintaining all of the vehicles of the Staging Area; the Engineering and Air Corps Supply sections of "both Air Service Squadrons were working at La Senia Air Base; and the Finance Section of Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron was working with the Disbursing Officer in Gran, handling "invasion currency" for their first time.

During the staging period at CP-2, the 499th Air Service Squadron and the 1081st QM Company, both of which had landed at Casa Blanca, French Morocco, rejoined the Group. There was much joy when the 1081st QM Company boys rejoined the Group, as they had been detached from the Group at Lakeland and their return was unexpected.

In January 1944, the Group continued its way toward its unknown destination. Some of the units embarked at Oran on 10 January 1944; others moved to Algiers by rail and embarked there on 24 January 1944.

All units arrived in Bombay, India, debarking during the month of February and entraining at Victoria Station for their ultimate destination. Enroute to its destination, the Group lost the 499th Air Service Squadron and the 1104th Signal Company (Avn), but on its arrival at its final station, Tezgaon, Bengal, India, it inherited two units that were already in operation there: the 89th Air Service Squadron, commanded by Major Wayne Ramsey, Air Corps, and the 1086th Signal Company (Avn), commanded by 1st Lt John D. Redmond, Signal Corps. Thus in the last days of February 1944, the 54th Air Service Group arrived at the station from which it was expected to perform the mission for which it had been activated.

The facilities of the partially constructed Base at Tezgaon far exceeded the dreams of even the most wildly optimistic. Instead of the tents and cold rainy weather at Oran, there were comfortable thatch-covered bamboo bashas, and mild but invigorating dry weather (this description refers only to the winter of course). And instead of the dehydrated foods to which the Group had never been partial, there were fresh fruits and vegetables, with some fresh meat thrown in. Quite a treat: And instead of the empty counters of the vandalized stores of North Africa, there was merchandise for sale in even the smallest and filthiest of Indian bazaars.

Operations in East Bengal and North Burma were vigorous in the spring of 1944, and the Group found itself to be the sole source of third echelon supply and maintenance of many combat units. Among these was the highly secret "Project 9" at Hailakandi-Lalaghat, commanded by Colonel Philip Cochran and later to be designated the 1st Air Commando Group.

On 10 February 1944, a detachment of approximately 200 officers and men was sent to Hailakandi to give direct support to "Project 9." This detachment remained with the Air Commandos from that date until the close of the mission of the Air Commandos in May 1944. Thus, the Detachment 54th Air Service Group helped to put into the air the planes and gliders that transported General Wingate's "Chindits" to the heart of Burma -- far behind Japanese lines. This aerial invasion was made on the night of 5 March 1944.

The 54th Air Service Group found itself supporting the following combat units:

490th Bomb Squadron (M) at Kurmitola

12th Bomb Group (M) at Tezgaon

1st Air Commando Group at Hailakandi-Lalaghat

64th Troop Carrier Group at Fenny

459th Fighter Squadron at Chittagong

Built around a cadre of the well-trained and seasoned troops of two full units, the 89th Air Service Squadron and the 1086th Signal Company, the 54th Air Service Group began in an efficient manner to serve the combat units in the Air Service Center Area. Although the Group was designed, staffed and equipped for support of only two combat groups, it was successfully supplying and maintaining the equivalent of twice that number. The men of the Group underwent their "trial by fire" period, and became veterans within a very short period of time.

To assure coordination of supply and maintenance efforts of Air Service Command troops, Colonel Douglas Johnston, Commanding Officer of the 54th Air Service Group, was appointed Field Representative to the Commanding General, India-Burma Air Service Command. This appointment, in effect, made the 54th Air Service Group the keystone of supply and maintenance activities in support of all combat units operating in East Bengal and the Arakan areas during the period 29 January - 2 April 1945. The combined efforts of all three Air Service Groups in East Bengal and the Arakan made possible maximum combat and air-supply operations of the air-arm of the Army Air Forces units listed. The fighter aircraft gave close support to the ground forces, strafing enemy positions, or bombing them with high explosive or NAPALM incendiary bombs; the medium bombers gave both tactical and strategic support to the ground forces, destroying enemy positions and interrupting lines of communications; and the planes of the Combat Cargo Groups delivered by air practically all of the supplies and munitions of war needed by the Allied ground forces, following the forward echelons as they pushed southward and eastward in the Arakan, and those driving southward from Shwebo to Mandalay to Rangoon.

The combat operations in Burma had now diminished, as Mandalay fell to the Allies in March 1945 and the liberation of Rangoon followed in May 1945. The 54th Air Service Group then

concentrated on its final big mission of the war -- the supply of munitions of war to the Allied forces in China.

This supply mission involved primarily the shipment of aviation gasoline and motor fuel, but included also considerable tonnages of Air Corps supplies, Ordnance ammunition and bombs, Quartermaster supplies, etc. Because of irregular incoming shipments and quick changes in the air-lift demands of the Air Transport Command, this supply mission was a most difficult one. At times the accumulation of as many as 6,300 drums of gasoline were received by rail, unloaded and placed in revetments in one day.

With the passing of VJ Day, there was a lull in supply operations, but as soon as the Theater Staff ascertained the continued needs of the Allied Forces in China, the mission continued on a reduced scale. This is the situation in late September 1945. Current estimates indicate that the Air Transport Command will complete its missions at Shamshearnagar on 15 October, at Kurmitola-Tezgaon on 15 November. After these dates, the ATC units will evacuate the bases and the 54th Air Service Group will close them -- the final completion of the mission for which it was activated, and to which the 1200 officers and men have given several years of their lives.

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORIES

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency, U.S. Air Force, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

Steven E. Clay. *US Army Order of Battle 1919-1941*. Combat Studies Institute Press. US Army Combined Arms Center. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Nd.