

8<sup>th</sup> Air Force Historical Society, Oregon Chapter

**February 12, 2022**



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[Photo taken by Joan E. Hamilton]

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## **The 388th Bomb Group in World War II: Fortress for Freedom**

**By Lt. Col. Terrence G. Popravak, Jr., USAF (Ret.)**

On Feb 12, 2022, Lt Col Terrence G. Popravak, Jr. USAF (Ret) presented “Fortress for Freedom” a history of the 388th Bomb Group in WWII. His association with the 388th began back in 1985 and he later served on active duty with the 388th Fighter Wing in the 1990s. This is his excellent article based on his presentation.

The 388th BG, one of 26 B-17 Groups in 8th AF, activated at Gowen Field, ID on Christmas Eve, 1942. By Feb 1943 it moved to Wendover Field, UT for operational training, then in May to Sioux City AAB, IA where brand-new B-17Fs were issued. In late May, 35 B-17s flew to McChord Field, WA to fly three training missions and show the group was ready. The air echelon went to Salina, KS in Jun for final checks, whilst the ground echelon went to Cp. Kilmer, NJ to ship out.

Overseas Movement by 41 B-17s was in Jun/Jul, and most personnel by RMS Queen Elizabeth, arriving in Britain in Jul 1943. The group settled in at Stn. 136, Knetishall. The 388th's first combat mission was against an aircraft factory in Amsterdam, Holland on Jul 17, 1943.

A week after the 388th's BG's first mission it joined in Blitz Week - by the end of the week it lost 11 aircraft and was exhausted. After two weeks to recuperate and receive replacement aircraft and crews, the group flew the 17 Aug Regensburg part of the Double Strike raid; for this action it received its first DUC. A second DUC soon followed for a mission to Hannover on Jun 26.

On Sep 6 the 388th went to Stuttgart; 11 Forts including the entire 563rd BS didn't come home. In Oct the group went to Schweinfurt - a non-combat takeoff crash was the only loss that day.

As part of the effort to defeat the Luftwaffe for the Allied air offensive to succeed, as well as for the landings in occupied Europe, the group participated in Big Week in Feb 1944. USAAF heavies dropped 10,000 tons of bombs on German aviation industry - more ordnance in one week than the 8th had delivered in 1943, and destroyed 75% of the structures in facilities that accounted for 90% of aircraft production. A deeper result came from Luftwaffe fighter pilot losses in intense air combat against the bombers and escorting fighters.

The 388th struck Berlin with the bulk of 8th AF on the Mar 6; it cost 69 bombers, 7 from the 388th. This is considered the highest number of aircraft 8AF lost in a single mission. The Luftwaffe defended its capital, and Mustang escorts added to enemy fighter losses. German fighter pilot attrition peaked at 16% in 1943. In the first five months of 1944 it was 25%.

The 388th attacked the German synthetic oil industry, hitting Brux in western Czechoslovakia in May as part of 8th AF's first concerted attack against oil targets. The group launched 43 aircraft and achieved excellent results, losing one aircraft to fighters; the group received its third DUC.

In preparation for the Allied landings in France, the 388th BG attacked transportation targets and forward airfields on the Continent. The group took after enemy V-weapons sites too. When D-Day came, the 388th led all of 8th AF on the first mission that morning. The heavies of the group later aided the St. Lo breakout (Jul 25). In Op. Cadillac, the unit flew three resupply missions for French resistance/Maquis forces in Jun/Jul/Aug. Later battlefield support missions helped airborne ops in Holland (Sep) and ground forces in the Battle of the Bulge (Dec 44).

On Jun 21, the 388th flew in Op. Frantic versus a synthetic fuel plant at Ruhland, SE of Berlin, continued on to landed at Poltava Airfield in Ukraine in 8th AF's first shuttle mission to the Soviet Union. That night the Germans attacked and destroyed 47 B-17s on the ground, 11 from the 388th. Counting other 8th AF losses in attacks around Berlin that day, 45 heavy bombers, adding 47 at Poltava make it a loss of 91 heavies, much higher than the recorded 69 at Berlin on Mar 6. But it all depends on how you count it. Award of a fourth DUC came for this mission.

The 388th's 560th BS played a prime role in Project Aphrodite, the radio-controlled flying bomb. It wasn't very successful, but was a predecessor of today's precision guided munitions.

In the Battle of the Bulge, bad weather prevented much air support. But on Christmas Eve, skies cleared and 8th AF with daytime help from the RAF put on the largest show of the war, altogether over 3,300 combat aircraft. The 388th put up everything that flew, 71 B-17s, including five bombers from other groups which happened to be at Knetishall at the time.

As 1945 began, Nazi Germany was on the ropes. The 388th flew its last combat mission on Apr 21; The Mighty Eighth finished its strategic bombing campaign on April 25.

As the war in Europe wound down in May, 1945 the 388th flew "Angel of Mercy" missions, including 5 Chow Hound missions to drop relief supplies to starving Dutch citizens still under Nazi occupation. After the war in Europe ended, the Group flew three Op. Revival missions, transporting nearly 2,000 French and Belgian soldiers back to their native lands from Austria.

With the war still on in the Pacific, it wasn't long before Op. Lucky Strike saw the group's flying echelon depart for the US in waves starting on Jun 9 - by Jul 5 all 72 B-17s had left. In late Jul the ground echelon departed and boarded the Queen Elizabeth, arriving Stateside on Aug 11.

After leaves and furloughs, group personnel reported in at Sioux Falls AAB, SD to prepare for Pacific operations. But with the Pacific War's end, the 388th BG inactivated on Aug 28, 1945.

In two years of combat the group flew 333 total missions: 306 in combat, 19 Aphrodite, 5 Chowhound, 3 Revival. It flew over 8,000 sorties, dropped over 18,000 tons of bombs and was credited with some 222 enemy aircraft destroyed (plus 80 probable, 116 damaged). The 388<sup>th</sup> BG received credit for six campaigns in the ETO and received four DUCs.

The cost of victory was significant. Somewhat over 500 combat crews were assigned to the 388th during the war. Many survived to complete 25, 30 or 35 missions. But 135 Combat Crews were lost; 2012 figures indicate 524 KIA, 801 POW, 2 MIA, a total of 1,327 casualties.

Altogether 142 B-17s of the 388th BG were MIA or ditched at sea in combat ops. Another 81 were lost to other causes (3 AOC, 18 war weary and retired from frontline duty, 34 lost to operational reasons and 26 non-operational losses) for a total of 223 B-17s lost, or about 1 out of every 57 B-17s built (12, 731), or 1 out of every 54 built if counting only F/G-models.