

## Historical Overview **303rd Bombardment Group (H) "Hell's Angels"**

by Carlton M. Smith

**T**he 303rd Bombardment Group (H) was constituted on 28 January 1942 at Savannah, Georgia, was activated at Pendleton Field, Pendleton, Oregon, on 3 February 1942, and received its initial staff and training at Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho on 13 February 1942. Training for its combat missions took place at Alamogordo Air Base, New Mexico and Biggs Field, Texas. On 23 August 1942, the ground echelon moved to Fort Dix, New Jersey, to board the *Queen Mary* for overseas deployment. They arrived at Molesworth, England, on 9 September 1942. The air echelon arrived in late October and the stage was set for entrance into combat.



*Carlton M. Smith*

The first combat mission was flown on 17 November 1942, with a planned strike at the St. Nazaire submarine pens, but weather obscured the target, resulting in a return to base with no bombs dropped. It was a disappointing beginning, but only the first of 364 missions to come. Over the months and years that followed, lessons were learned, equipment was improved, and the tale of Hell's Angels "Might in Flight" evolved.

First targets were usually airfields and marshalling yards in France and the Low Countries. Several targets in Paris were struck in 1943 and, although it was defended by about 250 flak guns, only one plane was lost in six attacks. The 303rd formations often encountered the "Abbeville Kids," the yellow-nosed FW 190s flying out of the airfield just north of Abbeville, France. Their attacks were in retaliation to the 303rd's bombing of Abbeville on 10 July 1943. They didn't take kindly to our bombing and took great joy in finding a 303rd BG formation.



*"Abbeville Kids" by Jerry Crandall*

Soon, many German targets were hit and, to mention a few, Mannheim and Ludwigshafen were attacked 12 times with only five losses. The transport and industrial center of Frankfurt was bombed nine times in 1943 and 1944, in which only three aircraft were lost. The 15 August 1944 attack on the Wiesbaden airfield cost the group nine

bombers. Cologne rail lines and industry were the targets on 10 missions, including the famous glide bomb attack. The largest marshalling yard in Germany, located at Hamm, was hit six times and its flak defenses accounted for two aircraft down. In the later stages of the war, the 303rd bombers struck industrial sites, transportation hubs, and oil refineries at Munich, Magdeburg, Hamburg, Gelsenkirchen, Merseburg, Leipzig, Essen, Schweinfurt. Bremen, Stuttgart, Kiel and Brunswick with increase in efficiency and decreasing losses.

As part of the joint USAAF - RAF objective to eradicate the "buzz bomb" threat, 303rd crews attacked 12 sites between 28 February and 30 August 1944 at altitudes of 12,000 and 14,000 feet. On 11 January 1944, leading the First Division, the 303rd hit Oschersleben, Germany, after most of the 8th Air Force and its fighter escort had aborted due to weather. The devastating strike was the beginning of the end for the German Air Force, but cost 10 aircraft (42 altogether in the First Division). For this valuable contribution to the war effort, the men of the Hell's Angels Group, both air and ground echelons, wear the badge of a *Distinguished Unit Citation*.

On 6 March 1944, the Group participated in one of the first strikes on Berlin. Later, they carried their bombs as far east as Poland, where one of the most compact bombing patterns of the war destroyed an industrial site. The 303rd was, of course, part of the aerial support on D-Day, 6 June 1944. On that date, the crews flew three separate missions between dawn and dusk in a ground support role rather than a strategic bombing force. Bombing almost around the clock occurred in June when 29 missions and 1000 sorties were flown.



*B-17F #41-24577 Hell's Angels*

In tribute to one of the most famous Flying Fortresses of World War II, B-17F *Hell's Angels* (#41-24577), the 303rd Bombardment Group took its name "Hell's Angels." In the inventory since the Group's beginning, this aircraft was the first heavy bomber in the 8th Air Force to complete 25 missions.

The success of the 303rd Bombardment Group (H) was not the result of any one person, aircraft, or unit. It was and is the story of many individuals taking pride in their assigned duties and contributing the most they could to the mission. Ground crews often worked on their "birds" with little or no sleep to repair enemy damage and keep their charges armed and ready for the next combat mission. The 303rd BG(H) effective intelligence staff was possibly unique among 8th Air Force groups in that several of its members volunteered to fly combat missions in order to gain first-hand experience and to provide more precise briefings for the combat crews. The supplies – everything from aircraft parts and ammunition to food and PX items – were available, thanks to the effort of support elements. This was not an easy task in the early days, but the 303rd "conveyor belt" never failed.

When the Hell's Angels Bomb Group was deactivated in Casablanca on 26 July 1945, it could look back to an outstanding record of several honors and "firsts" during its tour of duty:

- # First B-17 to complete 25 Eighth AF combat missions - Hell's Angels
- # First B-17 to complete 50 Eighth AF combat missions - Knockout Dropper in tight competition with S for Sugar and Hell's Angels
- # First B-17 to complete 75 Eighth AF combat missions - Knockout Dropper
- # First Eighth AF Bombardment Group to complete 300 missions from bases in England
- # Two combat crewmen were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor
- # Four combat crewmen were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross Medal
- # An Eighth Air Force combat score of:
  - 364 combat missions - most flown from England by any bomb group
  - 10,721 aircraft sorties flown - second highest in the Eighth Air Force
  - 26,346 tons of bombs dropped - second highest in the Eighth Air Force
  - 378 enemy aircraft destroyed - third highest in the Eighth Air Force
  - 104 enemy aircraft probably destroyed - third highest in the Eighth Air Force
  - 182 enemy damaged