

Brief History of 551st Strategic Missile Squadron (ICM-Atlas)

1942 - 1961

The original designation of the 551st Strategic Missile Squadron (ICM-Atlas) was the 551st Bombardment Squadron (H). It was constituted as such on 25 November 1942, with assignment to the 385th Bombardment Group (H), Second Air Force. The squadron was activated, along with its parent group and three companion squadrons (548th, 549th, and 550th), on 1 December 1942 at Davis-Monthan Field, Tucson, Arizona. Several months elapsed, however, before the squadron was fully manned and organized. The first body of troops, a group of 62 enlisted men, was assigned to the unit on 23 December following its activation. Yet a few days later the squadron was transferred to Biggs Field, El Paso, Texas, without personnel and equipment. During the first week of February 1943, following a transfer from Biggs Field to Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington, another relatively small group of enlisted personnel, and the first officers to be assigned to the unit, reported for duty. First Lieutenant Daniel F. Riva assumed command of the squadron on 7 February. Other increments of personnel were added at different intervals during the ensuing weeks until by 27 March the squadron had a total of approximately 40 officers and 265 enlisted men.

The 551st Squadron accomplished its training as a B-17 heavy bombardment unit at Geiger Field, where it was stationed from 1 February until 13 April 1943, and at Army Air Base, Great Falls, Montana. Having been ordered

overseas in preparation for combat, the flight echelon left Great Falls on 28 May for a staging area at Kearney, Nebraska. It subsequently flew to Dow Field, Bangor, Maine; thence by way of Labrador, Greenland, and Iceland to Prestwick, Scotland; and then on down to Great Ashfield, Suffolk, England. The ground echelon left Great Falls on 3 June for Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. After having completed overseas processing it sailed from New York aboard the Queen Elizabeth on 1 July. One week later it joined the flight echelon at Great Ashfield, which proved to be the squadron's only overseas station during World War II.

The overseas movement of the 551st Bombardment Squadron was part of a rapid buildup of the Army Air Forces in the European Theater of Operations. This expansion was regarded as necessary for large-scale strategic bombardment of Germany preliminary to the subsequent invasion of Europe. After arriving in England the 385th Bombardment Group, with its subordinate units, was assigned to the Eighth Air Force as a part of the 4th Bombardment Wing, 3d Bombardment Division.

The 551st Squadron was not long in entering combat. Its initial bombing mission took form on 17 July 1943 as an intended attack upon a Fokker aircraft assembly plant located at Amsterdam, Holland. Because of a heavy overcast, however, no bombs were dropped. One week later the squadron participated in a long flight to Bergen, Norway, for the purpose of bombing Nazi submarine pens; but once more adverse weather conditions prevented the bombardiers from releasing their bombs. Yet before the end of the month the unit took part in successful bombing attacks upon Focke-Wulf aircraft assembly plants at Warnemunde, Oschersleben, and Kassel in Germany; and a rubber manufacturing plant at Hanover.

The tempo of the squadron's combat activities continued unabated throughout the remainder of 1943. In the last five months of the year its Flying Fortresses participated in raids upon enemy-held airfields in Belgium and France; a hydro-electric plant at Rjukan, Norway; and numerous targets in Germany itself. Significant among the latter were an aircraft factory at Marienburg, the port of Emden, railway marshalling yards at Euren, a gasoline refinery at Wesseling, and a synthetic oil plant at Geleenkirchen. Undoubtedly, however, a mission to Regensburg and a raid on Schweinfurt were the highlights of the squadron's activities for this period. On 17 August bombers from all of the 385th Group's tactical units participated in a raid upon a Messerschmitt aircraft assembly plant at Regensburg, Germany. The Luftwaffe put up unusually strong fighter resistance. Yet the American bombers caused considerable damage to some of the more important buildings at the plant, and destroyed a number of newly assembled aircraft on the ground. Thereafter the aircraft involved in the mission (including some from the 551st Squadron) flew on to Africa; and on the return flight to their home base a few days later they took advantage of the opportunity to bomb the French port city of Bordeaux. On 14 October the 551st Squadron furnished its quota of a force of approximately 300 Flying Fortresses dispatched by the Eighth Air Force for an all-out bombardment attack upon ball-bearing plants at Schweinfurt, Germany. Despite heavy fighter opposition, results were regarded as exceptionally good. Around 100 direct hits were made on vital primary targets. In addition, some of the Fortresses struck also at nearby railway marshalling yards.

During the early part of 1944 the 551st Bombardment Squadron, together with the other tactical units of the 335th Bombardment Group, continued to engage primarily in strategic bombing as related to prime targets in Germany and Nazi-held territory in northern Europe. For the first three or four months the emphasis was placed upon the destruction of German air power by attacking aircraft production centers and airfields. During May the brunt of the bombing attacks shifted to German transportation systems. In consequence, combat missions were directed more and more against railway marshalling yards, rolling stock, and repair depots, with a few attacks being made on fuel and oil installations. Throughout this period, however, some attention was paid to the "invasion coast" of France. As D-Day approached such tactical missions, of course, became more and more numerous.

For the first 17 days of June 1944 combat activities of the squadron were concerned exclusively with tactical targets in the area along the northern coast of France, first as a means of helping to prepare for the Allied invasion and then in support of it. On 6 June there were three missions involving five separate target areas: Lion-sur-mer; La Breche; Periers-sur-le-Dan; Falaise; and Argentan. Within a relatively short time after the invasion from across the English Channel was under way the ratio of such tactical engagements began to decrease sharply in favor of the strategic type of mission over a wider range of territory. Soon the latter began to take precedence once again.

In the closing months of the war in Europe Flying Fortresses of the 551st Bombardment Squadron concentrated their attacks in large measure upon three major types of targets: 1) aircraft production areas; 2) railway transportation centers; and 3) oil resources and supplies. As one means

of helping to destroy Germany's ability to wage war from the air the squadron attacked aircraft factories and assembly plants, principally in such places as Frankfurt, Munich, Regensburg, Strasbourg, and Stuttgart. In continued efforts to cripple the enemy's rail transportation systems, its big bombers struck again and again at railway stations and marshalling yards, notably in Berlin, Brussels, Dortmund, Dresden, Hanover, Karlsruhe, Kassel, Koblenz, and Munster. With respect to oil, finally, there were numerous missions aimed at storage centers and synthetic oil plants in such cities as Dahlen, Duisburg, Magdeburg, Merseburg, and Hilsburg.

After 20 April 1945 the 551st Squadron was relieved of further strategic bombardment duties. Before returning to the United States, however, with a view to subsequent combat activity in the Pacific area, the unit engaged in a number of noncombat flight operations. First there was a series of missions on which food and other supplies were dropped to needy civilians in Holland. Next, aerial sightseeing tours over portions of Germany were conducted for the benefit of the ground personnel of the unit. Lastly, missions were flown for the purpose of returning liberated French prisoners of war to their homeland.

The air echelon of the squadron returned to the Zone of Interior commencing on 19 June, with all flights terminating at Bradley Field, Connecticut. The ground echelon sailed from Glasgow, Scotland, aboard the Queen Elizabeth on 6 August and arrived at New York five days later. At that time, of course, the Japanese were on the verge of surrender. Nevertheless, after processing had been completed at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, a detachment representing the entire unit departed for Sioux Falls Army Air

Field, South Dakota, an assembly station for redeployment to the Pacific area. On 28 August, however, the squadron was inactivated at Sioux Falls.

Late in August 1947 the 551st was redesignated a very heavy bombardment squadron, allotted to the organized reserves, and assigned to the Air Defense Command. Having been assigned further to the Second Air Force, the unit was activated at Selfridge Field, Mount Clemens, Michigan, on 15 September 1947. The squadron was reassigned to the Tenth Air Force effective 1 July 1948, and then to the First Air Force on 15 August following. In December 1948, however, it was reassigned once more to the Tenth Air Force, which at the same time was assigned to the Continental Air Command. Without ever having had a change of station despite its various assignments, this very heavy bombardment unit was inactivated on 27 June 1949.

On 24 October 1960 the 551st Bombardment Squadron, Very Heavy was redesignated the 551st Strategic Missile Squadron (ICBM-Atlas). At the same time it was activated and assigned to the Strategic Air Command for organization on or about 8 April 1961 at Lincoln Air Force Base, Nebraska.

LOCATION

551st Strategic Missile Squadron

STATUS

- ACTIVE
 INACTIVE
 DISBANDED

COMPONENT OF

- REGULAR AIR FORCE
 AIR FORCE RESERVE
 AIR NATIONAL GUARD
 UNALLOTTED

ASSIGNED TO

SAC

LINEAGE

Constituted as 551st Bombardment Squadron, Heavy on 25 November 1942. Activated on 1 December 1942; inactivated on 28 August 1945. Redesignated 551st Bombardment Squadron, Very Heavy, and allotted to the reserve, on 25 August 1947; activated on 15 September 1947; inactivated on 27 June 1949. Redesignated 551st Strategic Missile Squadron and activated on 24 October 1960. To be organized on or about 8 April 1961.

PREPARED BY

USAF HISTORICAL DIVISION, RESEARCH STUDIES INSTITUTE, MAXWELL AFB, ALABAMA

DATE PREPARED

20 February 1961

DATA THRU

1 January 1961

SUPERSEDES STATEMENT PREPARED

APPROVED BY

MADRER MADRER, Chief, Historical Studies
Branch

ASSIGNMENTS

385th Bombardment Group (H): 25 November 1942 - 28 August 1945

* * *

Second Air Force: 15 September 1947 - 1 July 1948

Tenth Air Force: 1 July - 15 August 1948

First Air Force: 15 August - 1 December 1948

Tenth Air Force: 1 December 1948 - 27 June 1949

* * *

Strategic Air Command: 24 October 1960 -

STATION LIST

Davis-Monthan Field, Arizona	1 Dec 42 - 3 Jan 43
Higgs Field, Texas	4 Jan 43 - 1 Feb 43
Geiger Field, Washington	1 Feb 43 - 13 Apr 43
Army Air Base, Great Falls, Montana	11 Apr 43 - 8 Jun 43
Camp Kilmer, New Jersey	11 Jun 43 - 1 Jul 43
En route overseas	1 Jul 43 - 8 Jul 43
Great Ashfield, Suffolk, England	8 Jul 43 - 6 Aug 45
En route to Zone of Interior	6 Aug 45 - 11 Aug 45
Army Air Field, Sioux Falls, South Dakota	Unknown - 28 Aug 45
* * *	
Selfridge Field (later Air Force Base), Michigan	15 Sep 47 - 21 Jun 49
* * *	
Lincoln Air Force Base, Nebraska	c. 8 Apr 61

COMMANDING OFFICERS

1st Lt. Daniel F. Riva	7 Feb 43 -	10 Oct 43
Capt. Herbert O. Hamilton	10 Oct 43 -	15 May 44
Maj. Horace T. Witherspoon	15 May 44 -	30 Nov 44
Maj. Vernon Q. Mullin, Jr.	30 Nov 44 -	Unknown
Capt. William J. Grist	24 Jun 45 -	Unknown

BATTLE HONORS*

1. Battle streamers for participation in the following campaigns:

Air Offensive, Europe
Normandy
Northern France
Rhineland
Ardennes-Alsace
Central Europe

2. Distinguished Unit Citation streamers for the following actions:

17 August 1943 - for outstanding performance of duty in action over Germany.

12 May 1944 - for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy over Germany.

The 3d Bombardment Division (H) (then the 4th Bombardment Wing (H)) is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy on 17 August 1943. This unprecedented attack against one of Germany's most important aircraft factories was the first shuttle mission performed in this theater of operations and entailed the longest flight over strongly defended enemy territory yet accomplished at that date. For 4½ hours the formation was subjected to persistent, savage assaults by large forces of enemy fighters. During this bitterly contested aerial battle 140 German fighter aircraft were definitely destroyed and many more damaged. Despite desperate attempts by the enemy to scatter the bombers the groups of the 3d Bombardment Division (H) maintained a tight, defensive formation and, coordinating as a perfectly balanced team fought their way to the assigned target at Regensburg. Though weary after hours of grueling combat the bombardiers released their bombs accurately on the target and wrought vast destruction on an aircraft factory of vital importance to the enemy's war effort. The high degree of success achieved is directly attributable to the extraordinary heroism, skill, and devotion to duty displayed by members of this unit. Their actions on this occasion uphold the highest traditions of the Armed Forces of the United States.

WDGO 36, 1944

* Listing by HQ USAF (AFMFA-12C)

Texts of Citations by USAF Historical Division

The 385th Bombardment Group (H) is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action on a successful bombing operation against enemy installations at Zwickau, Germany, on 12 May 1944. The assigned high priority target on this date was the aircraft repair factory of G. Basser, K. G. On this highly successful 8-hour operation, the 385th Bombardment Group (H) led the division forces and the 4th Combat Bombardment Wing. The flight was a distance of 1,270 miles at an altitude of 18,000 feet and 965 miles, consuming 4 hours and 46 minutes flying time, were over strongly defended enemy territory. Of the 95,000 pounds of bombs dropped on this visual operation by the 19 aircraft comprising the lead group, 97 percent struck within 2,000 feet of the preassigned aiming point, 51 percent struck within 1,000 feet, and 18 percent within 500 feet. Between 100 to 150 hostile fighters began to attack the force just south of the Coblenz area. So determined were their head-on attacks, in waves of 20 to 30, that friendly fighters were unable to break up their formations. The lead airplane of the lead squadron of the high composite group on the 4th Combat Wing was knocked out of formation. Flying in the high squadron position, the deputy leader with nine airplanes of the 385th Bombardment Group (H) quickly took over as the lead squadron and reformed the high group, thus preventing the formation from breaking up and falling prey to attacking enemy fighters. A wing formation, trailing the 4th Combat Bombardment Wing, was broken up and dispersed by these same hostile fighters. While skillfully and courageously maintaining its own aircraft in close defensive formation in the face of this fierce enemy opposition, the 385th Bombardment Group (H) purposely slowed down the entire division formation until groups of the straggling wing could reform. As a result of these attacks and anti-aircraft fire from enemy ground positions, 18 out of the 28 airplanes belonging to the 385th Bombardment Group (H) sustained battle damage. All participating aircraft of the 385th Bombardment Group (H) bombed the target. On the return journey, 2 B-17's were lost as a result of enemy action and 13 officers and men were missing in action. The 385th Bombardment Group (H) is officially credited with destroying 15 enemy aircraft, probably destroying 3, and damaging 2 more. Undeterred by the vicious enemy fighter attacks and anti-aircraft fire, the officers and enlisted men of the 385th Bombardment Group (H) displayed extraordinary heroism in fighting their way to the target. The determination, devotion to duty, and total disregard for personal safety above and beyond that of all other units participating in the mission are in keeping with and add notably to the highest and most cherished traditions of the armed forces of the United States.

WDGO 138, 1946

EMBLEM *

Description. On a yellow disc, border red, the head of a gray wolf, trimmed white, shaded black, eyes yellow, red, and black, tongue red, face expressing ferocity.

Approved. By Headquarters, Army Air Forces, 4 May 1943.

* Provided by
HQ USAF (AFMIP-120)

551st BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON

(Insert Emblem No. _____)

LINEAGE. Constituted 551st Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) on 25 Nov 1942. Activated on 1 Dec 1942. Inactivated on 28 Aug 1945. Redesignated 551st Bombardment Squadron (Very Heavy) on 25 Aug 1947. Activated in the reserve on 15 Sep 1947. Inactivated on 27 Jun 1949. Redesignated 551st Strategic Missile Squadron on 24 Oct 1960. Activated on 24 Oct 1960. Organized on 1 Apr 1961.

ASSIGNMENTS. 385th Bombardment Group, 1 Dec 1942-28 Aug 1945. Second Air Force, 15 Sep 1947; Tenth Air Force, 1 Jul 1948; First Air Force, 15 Aug 1948; Tenth Air Force, 1 Dec 1948-27 Jun 1949. Strategic Air Command, 24 Oct 1960; 818th Air (later Strategic Aerospace) Division, 1 Apr 1961-.

STATIONS. Davis-Monthan Field, Ariz, 1 Dec 1942; El Paso, Tex, 4 Jan 1943; Geiger Field, Wash, 1 Feb 1943; Great Falls AAB, Mont, 11 Mar-7 Jun 1943; Great Ashfield, England, 6 Jul 1943-6 Aug 1945; Sioux Falls AAFld, SD, 14-28 Aug 1945. Selfridge Field, Mich, 15 Sep 1947-27 Jun 1949. Lincoln AFB, Neb, 1 Apr 1961-.

AIRCRAFT AND MISSILES. B-17, 1942-1945. ICBM Atlas, 1962-.

OPERATIONS. Combat in ETO, 17 Jul 1943-20 Apr 1945.

SERVICE STREAMERS. None.

CAMPAIGNS. World War II: Air Offensive, Europe; Normandy; Northern France; Rhineland; Ardennes-Alsace; Central Europe; Air Combat, BAME Theater.

DECORATIONS. Distinguished Unit Citations: Germany, 17 Aug 1943; Zwickau, Germany, 12 May 1944.

EMBLEM.