

216 AAF BASE UNIT (SPECIAL)

MISSION

LINEAGE

216 AAF Base Unit (Special)

STATIONS

Wendover Field, Utah

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

COMMANDERS

Col Clifford J. Heflin

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The 216th Army Air Force Base Unit was already in existence as it was originally affiliated with the original mission of Wendover Field as a training base for B-17 and B-24 bomber groups and even a wing of P-47 fighters. The P-47s would be the last conventional unit to be trained at Wendover field, departing in August or September 1944. During this interim time period in August 1944 only the permanent cadre and a half dozen administrative aircraft remained. There was some confusion at Wendover as training operations were being suspended and

there was some speculation among base personnel that the base might be closing. During this odd period at Wendover, a lone B-29 landed and the pilot came into headquarters declaring his desire to inspect the general facilities of the base. This pilot was at the time Lt. Col. Paul Tibbets on his mission to select a home for the 509th CG, unknown to base personnel Wendover had already been placed on a very short list of possible homes for the 509th CG. At the time of this visit the ranking headquarters officer was Captain Thomas L. Karnes who provided the tour of the base for Lt. Col. Tibbets.

Tibbets returned a few weeks later having made up his mind that Wendover was the perfect location to headquarter the 509th CG. Tibbets again met with Karnes this time explaining he was organizing an unusual bomb group that would have a large number of men with rare qualification, but thought many of the base cadre could be utilized as the nucleus of the group and offered Captain Karnes the job of 509th CG Headquarters Adjutant, which Karnes immediately accepted. This resulted in the genesis of the 509th CG at Wendover before the official activation of the group. Upon activation on 17 December 1944 approximately 800 personnel from Wendover were immediately transfer into the 509th CG. From this point forward crews and personnel started to flow into Wendover from all over the country after meeting the strict background security evaluations imposed on all new members.

216th Base Unit, Flight Test Section

As indicated by its name the function of this section was to drop test prototype bomb shapes, as the designs evolved for both Little Boy and Fat Man up to the final nuclear weapon designs as well as pumpkin bombs, the non-nuclear variant of Fat Man. In CONUS there were three bomb assembly locations; Los Alamos, Wendover and Inyokern; the latter two had their own bomb loading pits; The loading of Los Alamos assemblies were performed at Kirtland Field near Albuquerque with its own loading pit. Test drops were performed in a number of locations including the west desert near Wendover, Sandy Beach-(Salton Sea), Inyokern as well as early tests at Muroc Army Air Field.

216th Base Unit, Special Ordnance Detachment

This Detachment had the duty of assembling test units at Wendover under the stick guidance of the Los Alamos Ordnance Group designated as Z-Division by July of 1945. As changes in design evolved Z-Division would evaluate drop test data adjust designs again and instruct the Wendover Special Ordnance Detachment about what change to incorporate in the next test units and provided the test schedule which was generally updated weekly and near the end, close to combat use the schedule was beyond hectic as answers were needed before combat use. The 216th initially assembled inert bombs or "shapes" which were dropped by B-29s to furnish information on ballistics, electrical fusing and detonators, release mechanisms, and flying characteristics of the aircraft. As the design progressed, personnel assembled more and more complex versions of the "Little Boy" and the "Fat Man" bombs. The 216th base unit at Wendover also continued to improve the assembly procedures and techniques on the "Fat Man". Pits were constructed with hydraulic lifts to hoist the huge bombs into the bomb bay and between October 1944 and August 1945, 155 test units were dropped.

Security and secrecy were paramount with fraternization between the bomb assembly teams and the flight test crews being strongly discouraged. The 216th Base Unit was never deployed to Tinian as test drops continued right up to combat use. After the 509th CG was deployed to Tinian the majority of the Wendover Special Ordnance Detachment was transferred to the 1st Ordnance Squadron Special (Aviation) and deployed to Tinian. This resulted in an influx of new personnel in the SOD to replace them at Wendover. It would appear that the majority of the Flight Test Section remained behind in Wendover continuing their flight test duties.

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