

The 'Jolly Rogers': Names, Patches and Aircraft

The 90th Bombardment Group
(Heavy)



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1942-1945

Introduction

Shortly after the United States entered the Second World War (1939-1945) the 90th Bombardment Group (BG) was activated as a U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAFs), Consolidated B-24 Liberator heavy bomber unit. Within six months of its activation the group was deployed to the Pacific Theater of the war and over the course of the next three years its Airmen flew thousands of bombing missions—downed more than 400 Japanese aircraft, sank 260,000-tons of enemy shipping, and received over 4,000 individual commendations. The unit ultimately earned six WWII Campaign Streamers, two Distinguished Unit Citations and a Philippine Presidential Unit Citation. These exploits, which helped pave the way for the Allied victory in the Pacific, also cost the unit the lives of 820 of its personnel.

During its harrowing experience in the war the 90 BG adopted the moniker ‘Jolly Rogers’ and developed a coinciding ‘skull and cross-bombs’ emblem that they painted on the tail fins of their planes. This is a guide to the origins of the Jolly Roger name, the names of the group’s subordinate squadrons and the creation of their various patches.



Caption: A color photo of a ‘Jolly Roger’ B-24D Liberator battling Japanese Zero fighters over New Guinea circa 1943.

The 90th Bombardment Group (Heavy)

Official Emblem



The above emblem was designed for the War Department by Mr. Vincent T. Hamlin, a cartoonist, perhaps best known for creating a popular 1930s comic strip called “Alley Oop.” With units being formed rapidly in the opening days of WWII this emblem was assigned to the 90 BG by the War Department Headquarters Office in Washington D.C., without the knowledge of the group. In fact, even after the war, 90 BG veterans remained completely unaware of the emblem’s existence. The first time it was widely seen was when it showed up in the Air Force History Program’s seminal work *Air Force Combat Units of World War II*.

When the 90th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing was redesignated in 1952 it resurrected the pterodactyl imagery, likely believing it held more significance to its heritage unit than it actually did. Additionally, they applied the following meaning to the pterodactyl “the monstrous, awe-inspiring pterodactyl, ready to swoop down aggressively over the enemy in quest of vital information.”¹ When the unit was redesignated in 1963 as the 90th Strategic Missile Wing, the pterodactyl imagery was again used as a means of tying the wing’s new emblem to its heritage.

¹ TSgt James T. Swinning III, “Previous Wing Emblem,” 90 SMW/HO to 90 SMW/CC, 27 March 1979.

Unofficial Emblem



The 90 BG's first year in the Pacific Theater was extremely challenging. They suffered horrendous casualties, lacked adequate resources and all the while were tasked with flying missions around the clock in order to help blunt the rapid advance of Japanese forces. These challenging circumstances exacted a heavy toll on the unit's morale. However, thanks to the spirited and devoted leadership of one of its commanders, Colonel Arthur H. Rogers, the unit managed to persevere through many months of hardship. And, as of October 1943, the group came to be recognized as one of the most lethal and decorated heavy bomber units in the USAAFs.

It was from this unique wartime story that the 'Jolly Roger' name and emblem were born. As Col. Rogers himself recounted:

At this time the men got together and decided they wanted the Group to be known as the 'Jolly Rogers' in my honor. Each airplane was to carry on the huge vertical fin on the tail a 'skull and cross bombs' the one-time insignia of a pirate by the name of Rogers. They considered this appropriate since we had constantly raided the Japanese sea lanes as the pirates did of old. The insignia also helped to differentiate our unit from others and... put fear into the hearts of our enemies."²

² Col. Arthur H. Rogers, "Jolly Rogers: The 90th Bomb Group in WWII," (Self-Published Memoir) 33-34.

Regarding the creation of the emblem—one of the group's members, Staff Sergeant Leonard H. Baer, designed the main 'skull and crossed bombs' displayed on the tail of the planes. Shortly thereafter Lieutenant Ken Strong, also a member of the group, and a former Walt Disney Studios cartoonist, designed the other (unofficial) squadron patches for the 319th, 320th, 321st and 400th. Each of these were based on a mascot chosen by the men in the various squadrons and each had a particular meaning. All of the squadrons used the Jolly Roger skull and cross bombs design on the tail flashes of their planes, however they also used different colors in order to differentiate themselves. At different times the back end of these tail flashes also featured a blue vertical stripe, and several red and white horizontal stripes.



Caption: Left – Staff Sergeant Leonard H. Baer puts the finishing touches on the first 'Jolly Roger' skull and cross bombs tail flash. Right – Col. Arthur Rogers has his picture taken next to the finished product.

The 319th Bombardment Squadron

“Asterperious”

Squadron Patches

Note: None of the Jolly Roger squadrons had official patches sanctioned by the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry.



Meaning: The word ‘Asterperious’ cannot be found in any dictionary. This is because it was invented by the men of the 319th. To them ‘Asterperious’ was a state of mind—a desire to have a superior attitude in a challenging environment—and as such it came to symbolize the squadron’s desire to overcome the hardships of their operating environment. For this reason, the word manifested as a cartoon caricature of a Pacific Island aborigine smiling despite the hardships of the war and tropical environment. As told by squadron member Capt. Roger B. Kenney “...the answer is that Asterperious is our Squadron and our Squadron is—well, just Asterperious.”³

Tail Flash: BLUE

Aircraft

The Jolly Rogers flew Consolidated B-24D Liberators. Early on they were all painted in an olive drab and neutral gray camouflage scheme; however, later iterations of the plane left the paint off altogether—leaving only their shiny steel-plating. The paint actually weighed the planes down and early on Col. Rogers advocated for leaving it off.

*Note the squadron’s tail flashes below.



³ Capt. Roger B. Kenney, *Asterperious*, (Halstead Press Ltd: Australia, 1944) 2.

The 320th Bombardment Squadron

“Moby Dick”

Squadron Patches

Note: None of the Jolly Roger squadrons had official patches sanctioned by the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry.



Meaning: The only squadron to be named for one of its planes. Like Herman Melville’s legendary white whale “Moby Dick” 320th’ B-24 Liberator #41-24047 ‘Moby Dick’ garnered a legend of its own. The old Liberator single-handedly downed four Japanese planes and three ships. On a night mission over Rabaul, New Guinea, she went into a dive and pulled out at an astonishing 470-miles per hour. Additionally, once after returning to base from a bombing run on a Japanese convoy—it was found that she had over 200 large bullet holes in her exterior. Moby Dick “was always in the thick of the roughest strikes, smacked her bombs right on the target and only too often came home looking like a soup-strainer...”⁴

Tail Flash: RED

Aircraft

The Jolly Rogers flew Consolidated B-24D Liberators. Early on they were all painted in an olive drab and neutral gray camouflage scheme; however, later iterations of the plane left the paint off altogether, leaving only their shiny steel-plating. The paint actually weighed the planes down and early on Col. Rogers advocated for leaving it off.

*Note the squadron’s tail flashes below and (center) a shot of the legend herself.



⁴ Capt. Bernard E. Stockleim, *The Jolly Rogers*, (John Sands PTY. LTD: Australia, 1944) 94.

The 321st Bombardment Squadron

“Bombs Away”

Squadron Patches

Note: None of the Jolly Roger squadrons had official patches sanctioned by the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry.



Meaning: The men of the 321st named themselves for the bomber’s universal battle cry “Bombs away!” This namesake took on life in the form of an Airman dropping a bomb from the clouds.

Tail Flash: GREEN

Aircraft

The Jolly Rogers flew Consolidated B-24D Liberators. Early on they were all painted in an olive drab and neutral gray camouflage scheme; however, later iterations of the plane left the paint off altogether—leaving only their shiny steel-plating. The paint actually weighed the planes down and early on Col. Rogers advocated for leaving it off.

*Note the squadron’s tail flashes below.



The 400th Bombardment Squadron

“The Black Pirate”

Squadron Patches

Note: None of the Jolly Roger squadrons had official patches sanctioned by the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry.



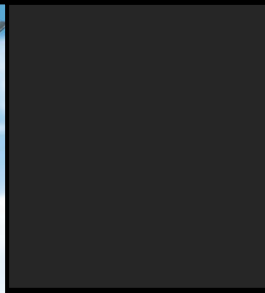
Meaning: Fully embracing the Jolly Roger name, the 400th chose to be called the “Black Pirates” leaving no doubt that they were the flying buccaneers of the Pacific.

Tail Flash: BLACK

Aircraft

The Jolly Rogers flew Consolidated B-24D Liberators. Early on they were all painted in an olive drab and neutral gray camouflage scheme; however, later iterations of the plane left the paint off altogether—leaving only their shiny steel-plating. The paint actually weighed the planes down and early on Col. Rogers advocated for leaving it off.

*Note the squadron’s tail flashes below.



Group Aircraft



Consolidated B-24D Liberator

The USAAFs employed the Liberator for a variety of missions during World War II. Designed by Consolidated Aircraft, the heavy bomber's range and payload capacity made it well suited for both strategic bombing campaigns and aerial reconnaissance. The 5th and 7th Air Forces preferred the plane for operations in the Pacific Theatre due to its 2,850-mile flight range, which was ideal for long-range bombing missions. More than 18,000 Liberators were produced during the war.

Interesting Fact: Col. Rogers played a key role in the development and testing of a front nose turret for the B-24.

Type: Heavy Bomber

Armament: 10 .50-caliber machine guns and 8,000 lbs. of bombs

Engines: Four Pratt & Whitney R-1830s of 1,200 hp each

Maximum speed: 303 mph

Cruising speed: 175 mph

Range: 2,850 miles

Ceiling: 28,000 ft.

Span: 110 ft.

Length: 66 ft. 4 in.

Height: 17 ft. 11 in.

Weight: 56,000 lbs. loaded

Sources

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