

HEADQUARTERS 359TH FIGHTER GROUP
Office of the Group Historian
APO 637 U.S. Army

4 March 1944

The 359th Fighter Group in February, 1944

Sixteen enemy aircraft were destroyed by the 359th fighter Group in February, 1944, as a hard year of work and preparation paid off in results: a high standard of combat efficiency.

Out sixteen times in fourteen days, the Group distinguished itself twice in getting its Thunderbolts back into the air quickly to fly double missions. Although never up to its rated strength of 75 aircraft, it consistently put more fighters over enemy territory than any other single group in the theatre and its pilots demonstrated a remarkable ability in instrument weather flying.

February, 1944, saw the launching of a savage Anglo-American effort to knock out the Luftwaffe -- its factories, air parks, control stations, ground installations and airborne strength -- before the invasion. To that effort, the 359th Group contributed 766 sorties.

Two pilots were lost in action. A third was killed in a local flying accident. Flak was the deducted cause of one of these losses -- that of 1st Lt. Cecil W. Crawford, 369th Squadron, on 3 February -- and almost every combat pilot in the Group had one or more close calls from the German anti-aircraft artillery. In consequence, a declaration frequently heard in training -- "Flak never bothers fighters" -- became quite the favorite epigram of the group, if delivered with a properly satiric sneer.

The 16 claims of victories -- averaging one a mission -- were achieved in four days. There were also claims of two enemy fighters damaged, but major emphasis, as always in the group, was in complete fulfillment of the specific mission stated in the field order and here the group believed it had acquitted itself well.

Although flying conditions were all too often barely operational, ground weather was remarkably fine for East Anglia in February. Health improved, as the Group Surgeon's appended statement indicates, and so did the food. No Spam was served at east Wretham throughout the month, in itself a high point of the war in the ETO.

Scotland, and more especially Edinburgh, became the standard place for leaves, by both officer and men, while London, hitherto the immediate goal of almost all personnel on pass, lost popularity as the tempo of German raids increased and German raiding efficiency improved.

Two tiny items in "Stars and Stripes", monopolized conversation among enlisted men for a period of the month. One was announcement by a Tennessee farmer-prophet that the war

would be over by 9 April. The other was a declaration by the Surgeon of the Navy that he was preparing for five years more of war.

Merits of both these views were sagely debated, as was the prospect of more and better food. The food did improve, in fact, Captain David Steine, the Station Quartermaster, reporting that fowl or fresh meat was served 38 times (four more than in January) while fresh oranges were served thrice, fresh apples once and fresh eggs once to all station personnel. Pilots continued to receive their normal issue of three fresh eggs and three fresh oranges each per week.

Chicken, ice cream and cake became normal for Sunday dinner. For the month, 3989 pounds of chicken were served. Other food poundage were: steak, 6944; other beef, 8924; pork, 7758; frankfurters or luncheon meats, 3220; bread, 21,272, and potatoes, 27,600. Menus at Wretham Hall improved noticeably with the accession of 1st Lt. Roger Van Gorder, 369th adjutant, as mess officer there.

As for quartermaster equipment, Captain Steine said units on the station reported a combined average of 95 percent for T/BA equipment received and on hand and 99 percent of individual clothing and equipment. Another record of a kind was established when, for the third consecutive month, no shortages in laundry and dry cleaning for the enlisted personnel of the station were reported.

Efforts of the Station Executive, Lt. Col. Grady L. Smith, to conserve use of transportation -- involving a return en masse to bicycling and emphasis on use of bus-trucks running 'round the field on 30 minute headway -- were reflected in the reduced issue of MT petrol: down to 18,143 gallons, as compared with 20,958 gallons in January. Although the national coal crisis reduced delivery of coal to 44 tons and coke to 106 tons, stocks on hand on 29 February were 440 tons of coal and 210 of coke, a 10 week supply.

The position of the Air Crops supply also improved, 1st Lt. D.H. DeMarcus reporting more efficient service from the Wattisham depot which had canceled all the obligations and required resubmission of all requisitions.

In consequence, the number of aircraft grounded because of lack of parts, which had averaged 3.5 a day in January, was reduced in February to 2.6.

The U.K. Battle Jacket issued to pilots -- and very popular with them -- was supplanted in their affections by a new issue late in the month of the Armored Force Combat Suit, relieving the shortage of flying clothes. The Battle Jackets were issued to enlisted men in lieu of the D-1 Mechanics jacket, in short supply because of lack of repair facilities and lack of zippers.

A critical shortage of bolts, straps and channels for the 108 gallon belly tank developed in the last 10 days of the month and all such expendable items for the droppable tanks were placed on the controlled list by the depot.

Installation of water injection systems in the group's aircraft, assuring 15 minutes of extra power for combat, was completed under direction of 1st Lt. George M. Hesser, the Station

Engineering Officer. The Service Squadron on the station, working with the Service Command's mobile unit, made the complete installation in 18 hours and finished the job on aircraft needing only connection of the device in four hours. Throughout the month, a constant average of 10 aircraft were at modification centers being fitted for wing tanks.

On occasion, higher headquarters notified Lt. Hesser that complete drainage of water from all aircraft would be necessary nightly to avoid freeze-ups.

His answer, characteristically, was to suggest that the station at once be supplied with "the necessary equipment to turn the airplanes upside down in order to get all the water out of the lines." The result was that alcohol was made available for use in all aircraft.

Lt. Hesser's wrecking crew, which had engines running during all take-offs and landing, also gave a good demonstration of fast work on 11 February, when 1st Lt. Clifford E. Carter hit a tree on take-off. A great gash was torn in the wing of the aircraft near the root and a tire wrenched off the landing gear but the rugged P-47 staggered around the landing pattern and Carter belled the plane in just as the last ships in the group took off. Hesser's crew got the airplane off the landing ground in quick time.

There were important intra-station transfers of personnel, including appointment of Captain Aaron W. Nelson, executive of the 368th Squadron, to be station adjutant, and of Captain Jefferson W. Fraley, 369th executive, to be Station S-4. These and other such transfers are listed in the appended file of station orders.

Transfers involving departure from the group and the station also were announced during the month. One of these sent Major Rockford V. Gray, group operation officer, former commander of the 369th, and the first pilot to score a victory, to the new 369th Fighter Group. Major Chauncey S. Irvine, a veteran of "The Rock" of Ascension Island anti-submarine patrols, came up from the 370th Squadron operations job to Group operations.

Other changes involved the combat intelligence officers. 1st Lt. Harry I. Hammer, of Group S-2, went to the 353rd Fighter Group at Metfield, 1st Lt. Leon W. Stackler coming here and 2nd Lt. Henry Schareff went to the 78th Fighter Group at Duxford. 2nd Lt. James Burgess was sent from the 67th Fighter Wing at Walcott Hall to replace Lt. Schareff. The list of all such transfers and of officer promotions in the month follows:

2nd Lt. James Burgess, 67th Fighter Wing, assigned to 368th Fighter Squadron, 6 February 1944

2nd Lt. Henry Scharoff, 368th Fighter Squadron, transferred to 78th Fighter Group, 7 February 1944.

1st Lt. Leon M. Stackler, 353rd Fighter Group, assigned to Hq 359th Fighter Group, 7 February 1944.

1st Lt. Harry L. Hammer, 359th Fighter Group, transferred to 353rd Fighter Group, 7 February 1944.

1st Lt. David C. Clark, 370th Fighter Squadron, transferred to 1st Bombardment Division, 8 February 1944.

2nd Lt. Herman E. King, 455 Fighter Group, assigned to 370th Fighter Squadron 11, February 1944.

2nd Lt. John E. Kerns, 495th Fighter Group assigned to 370th Fighter Squadron, 11 February 1944.

1st Lt. Raymond B. Lancaster, 370th Fighter Squadron, assigned to 369th Fighter Squadron 11 February 1944.

Major Rockford V. Gray, 359th Fighter Group, transferred to 9th Air Force, 19 February 1944.

2nd Lt. Thomas P. Smith, assigned to 370th Fighter Squadron, 21 February 1944.

2nd Lt. Cecil K. Brown assigned to 368th Fighter Squadron, 21 February 1944.

1st Lt. William H. Barron, 49th Station Compliment, assigned to 370th Fighter Squadron, 24 February 1944.

1st Lt. Lester Taylor, 369th Fighter Squadron appointed Captain, 31 January 1944.

2nd Lt. John E. Regan, 369th Fighter Squadron, appointed 1st Lt. February 1944.

2nd Lt. Thomas R. Raines, 370th Fighter Squadron, appointed 1st Lt., 1 February 1944.

2nd Lt. John M. Benton, 370th Fighter Squadron, appointed 1st Lt., 1 February, 1944.

2nd Lt. Glen E. Wiley, 368th Fighter Squadron, appointed 1st Lt., 1 February 1944.

Capt Clifton Shaw, 368th Fighter Squadron, appointed Major, 1 February 1944.

WOJG R.L. Swaney, 359th Fighter Group, appointed Chief Warrant Officer, 12 February 1944.

2nd Lt. Larry L. Matthew, 369th Fighter Squadron, appointed 1st Lt., 13 February 1944.

The Air Medal was awarded during the month to 10 officers, and 29 other pilots received clusters to air medal previously awarded. A list is appended. These medals and clusters were presented by Colonel Avelin P. Tacon, Jr. the Station Commander, during briefings. All were

awarded on the basis of an Air Medal for 10 sorties, belly tank bomber escort to the limit of endurance being counted for this purpose as a double sortie.

Months of waiting by enlisted men hoping to qualify as officer candidates approached the beginning of the end with appearances before the station CCS Board. Seven prospective candidates successfully passed interviews with the board, discussing the Italian campaign especially with Colonel Grady L. Smith, Chairman of the Board. The seven, who now awaited further interviews at higher headquarters, included five men from the Group, all of them “frozen” in their enlisted status in the states, an unhappy result of the urgent need for fully trained fighter groups which had resulted in no 359th Fighter Group enlisted men ever being commissioned. The seven who passed the board were:

M/Sgt. Jay H. Hubach, Chief Clerk (052), 1833rd Ordinance.

T/Sgt Anthony Incontrera, Foreman, Labor (356), 1833rd Ord.

T/Sgt Stephen F. Martine, Public Relations Man - Manger Advertising Agency (274), Hq 359th Fighter Group.

S/Sgt James D. Beckwith, Manager Production (369, Hq 359th Fighter Group.

S/Sgt Dominion F. Adessi, Credit Investigator (010), 368th Fighter Squadron.

Sgt. John H. Heuer, Chemical Lab Assistant (411) - Assistant Technical Director, Hq 359th Fighter Group.

As the month ended, T/Sgt Harry W. Davis, non-commissioned chief of the group supply section, went to London, there to pass his final tests for acceptance as an Aviation Cadet.

Ground training went on, especially for the new Pilots joining the Group from the replacement pool at Atcham. A typical program is that listed in the accompanying 368th Squadron history. Lectures on a group basis included a discussion by Capt. Robert Abbey, ETOUSA Air Tech Section on recent German fighter airplane development, and showing of the new RAF Prisoner of War picture, “Information Please.” Flight Lt. Clifford A.S. Anderson, the courteous Canadian, who had smilingly bewailed his two years as night fighter without ever firing a shot, became moderately famous soon after his talk to the pilots at Wretham. He shot down two raiders on London in a signal night, was promoted Squadron Leader and had his picture played prominently in the grateful London newspapers.

The general subject of morale in February is considered by Chaplain Ziegler in an appended note, which lists organized activities. Two of the now regular fortnightly officers’ parties were held at Wretham Hall. Blackjack remained a constant part of every evening at the Hall, as did intra-squadron poker games in bedrooms. The chess tournament ended with 1st Lt. Maurice F.X. Donahue winning, Colonel Tacon runner-up, and Capt. Cary H. Brown defeated Capt Edwin F. Pezda, a West Point class-mate, in the table tennis finale. Bridge and cribbage tournaments were abandoned because of dispersal of many ground officers to the 370th

communal area, more informally known as “the disciplinary barracks.” The original settlers there organized a bar, improved the furnishing and at the end of the month were almost belligerently boastful about their superior accommodations.

In the 16 missions flown in February, 804 aircraft were airborne, an average of 50, and early returns totaled 48, 5.9 percent. The 766 complete sorties flown averaged 47.8 aircraft per mission, with the 16 victories representing 2 percent of that total and the two combat losses, .26 percent.

The month opened with a general belief that six or seven operational February days was all that could be hoped for. Actually, the Eighth Air Force, flying in the most rugged weather imaginable, was operational on 19 days. This successful attempt to maintain the grinding pressure of January on the Luftwaffe involved a certain degree of improvisation, as fighter sweeps and Thunderbombing efforts were arranged at intervals when heavy bomb shows were canceled. And this led to a series of scrubbing of these minor enterprises, with the result that the Group ended the month without having dropped a bomb.

The first scrub arrived on 1 February, when a heavy assault on Frankfurt, in which the group was scheduled for withdrawal support, vide FO 230, in at 0122, was canceled at 0740. A release until next day came early, 0855, which was a novelty, and the balance of the day was taken up with a variety of enterprises.

T/Sgt. Walter E. Koehler, 49th Station Complement, arranged with Combat Intelligence for station-wide distribution of the stenographic summary of the 0800 BBB news bulletin. The squadrons were asked, at request of Wing, to be particularly watchful for daytime appearance of radar-equipped night fighters - an early awaited evidence of strained GAF resources. At 1600 that afternoon, Major Gray went to Horsham St. Faith, and Bomb Division Headquarters, for a critique on the last four missions. Capt Robert F. Malley, Flying Control, meanwhile talked to new pilots on Secret Document 158; the bible of identification. The warning order to FO 231 was in at 2155. A direct telephone ran from the Combat Intelligence office to Major John R. Fitzpatrick's room at Wretham Hall and the “drill” on such warning orders was to circulate the word via squadron intelligence orders to commanding and engineering officers.

The next day, 2 February, was a harried one, as was usually the case when the job involved VIII Fighter Command support to IX Bomber Marauders. Colonel Tacon was at group commanders conference at Ajax, Command headquarter, Bushy Hall outside London. Major William A. Swanson 369th Squadron commander, made what decisions were open, position of the squadrons and plan of escort; but the order did not arrive until 1150, when Combat Operations at 67th Wing, Walcott Hall near Stamford, telephoned that the mission was high cover for B-26's attacking Tricqueville in the LeHavre area, zero hour 1410.

Briefing was called for 1220, but mild hysteria ensued. By the time 2nd Lt. Ralph A. Platt, Weather Officer, had been called, had bicycled to his office and computed the winds aloft, it was 1220. It was quickly obvious to the plotters that start engine time should be 1235, an impossibility, so that the waiting pilots were sent back to their dispersals to pick up chutes, Mae Wests and other flying gear, while Wing was informed we would be at least 10 minutes late.

This, Wing said, was satisfactory. But the weather had coarsened, this was reported, and a final decision from Wing - go in and sweep the area what-ever takeoff time is - was not had until 1240. The group briefed hurriedly, pilots were trucked to dispersals, engines spun at 1300, and 45 aircraft got off at 1310.

The bombers were seen leaving the target area, a vision denied the 20th Group of P-38's, scheduled for close escort, but the only incident of real note was reported by 2nd Lt. John H. Oliphant, 369th Squadron, whose aircraft collided in bad weather with a barrage balloon cable at 100 feet near Southend. The P-47 won the collision and the balloon, hidden in the overcast, was freed. The aircraft was almost unmarked, save for minor dents and a skinned propeller.

On mission 20 against Wilhelmshaven next day, described in Eight Air Force Narrative of its 206th operation and VIII Fighter Command Issue No. 107 of its Narrative, the Group lost a pilot to intense flak over Emden, and won a victory in isolated combat between an element of two aborting Thunderbolts and two FW 190's. The victory was not discovered until next day, as the claimant, 1st Lt. Robert C. Thomson, 369th Squadron, landed at Woodbridge with battle damage. His story is told in the appended file of encounter reports.

Lt. Crawford, flying on Major Swanson's wing, ran into heavy flak at 24,000 feet at Emden, He did not return from the mission, and all three other aircraft in the flight suffered flak damage. As the mission summary reports, the weather was brutal, the group stayed to the limit, and 23 of the 54 on the mission landed at other fields.

On February, the group was congratulated by Ajax, via Wing, for its fulfillment of an impromptu second mission. The congratulations, for getting five flights back into the air, was delivered with 12 flights actually up!

The general story is in issue 108 of the Command Narrative. The group's first effort was normal enough, save for a last minute warning of a 160 mile-an-hour wind aloft on the return home. Take-off of 52 ships required only 5:47. The group was down at 1248, and as Colonel Tacon left his airplane, Combat Operations telephoned instructions to fuel and take off by flights as soon as could be. Courses were passed at the squadrons at 1305, and the first flight of four was off for Dunkerque to sweep the area for stragglers at 1328. By 1355, the group had 46 ships on the way. The patrols, which covered as far south and west as the Pas de Calais, were without incident. Command's sweet words for managing to get as many as 20 ships back up reached the station at 1400.

Six airfields in France were the targets on 5 February. The story of the mission is in Issue 109 of the Command Narrative. The group's order was not until 0650, annoying for intelligence staffs since the dispersed targets made the briefing one of the most complicated yet encountered. Take-off was at 0958 as a light snow fell but the mission went very smoothly, the bombers' excellent formation helping greatly, and after escort, the group swept uneventfully from le Forte Bernard north to the French coast.

Four French airfields were again bombed next day, when 10/10 cloud concealed primary targets. The 359th part of the show involved escort for the first Air Task Force. Colonel Tacon

and two 368th Squadron flight bounced 20 FW 190s flitting in and out of a low overcast. The encounter reports tell the story, relating also how 2nd Lt. Howard E. Grimes, going home alone, found he could out-dive three pursuing FW 190's but could not out run them in level flight.

7 February was a busy day, since a release to the 8th was on the station at 0830, giving the harried ground crews a full day in which to work on their aircraft.

Next day, 8 February, the group provided sole support for 110 Liberators which attacked military installations in the Pas de Calais, as narrated in Issue 111 of the Command's operational story on FO 237. No. B-24's were lost, which was splendid news, but the mission itself was a headache, since distress calls on C radio channel - the frequency common to fighters and bombers - were heard throughout the run, and no bombers could be found in trouble. Men in the bombers guarding C channel complicated the group's job by neglecting to identify the box from which they were calling.

The mission was over by noon, and that afternoon Colonel Tacon went to Warmingford for a reunion with Colonel Magoffin, former executive of the 359th in the early days at Westover Field and now commander of the new 362nd Fighter Group.

Another early job came up next day, and pilots were awakened early for an 0740 briefing, which involved a rendezvous at Egmond at 0955 with 360 B-17's bound for Leipzig. Eighteen minutes before start-engine time, the whole show was scrubbed, and the group was put on readiness. At 0942, Wing ordered two squadrons to "bomb up", the third to be top-cover and the "of-with-the-tanks on-with-the-bombs" routine was on. The group briefed for the job - dive-bombing Gilze-Rijen a Dutch airfield - at 1000, and was unsurprised when this show was itself scrubbed at 1148 because of cloud over the target.

The following day was 10 February and very different. The Field Order stipulated a "milk run" - 169 bombers against Brunswick - but the Luftwaffe reacted violently, 10 of the 11 fighter groups had combat, knocking down 55, probably getting two more and damaging 42 for a loss of 29 bombers and 11 fighter pilots.

Issue 112 of the Command Narrative gives the fighters' reports. A letter dated 12 February from General Kepner forwarded commendations from Generals Spaatz and Doolittle on the Command's whole performance.

The Group's share in all this was six victories and 26 more minutes of escort of 180 3rd Division B-17's than had been planned. The day began with a headache (the Teletype machines went out) and ended with a heartache; the death, after evil weather and all the kindred hazards of combat had been surmounted without loss, in a local flight of Lt. Alexander M. Cosmos, 370th Squadron.

Lt. Cosmos, one July day in 1943 over Long Island, had dived a Thunderbolt longer and faster than any other human being, the group believed, 800 miles plus per hour in a compressibility dive that began above 30,000 feet, and ended at 3,000 in a whistling shriek heard for 10 miles. That was a distinction of a kind but the group thought mostly of the black-haired,

serious-browed California boy in terms of his quiet unvarying courtesy and determination to his job as well as he possibly could.

Snow was falling as the pilots rode to the line in their trucks from the Hall but the day cleared just before briefing began at 0815. In token of the preceding day's miscarriages, Captain Brown presented Lt. Donahue of the intelligence staff with the Royal Order of the Scrub,: a GI brush, but there was more serious news a moment later from Colonel Tacon.

The group, he said, had achieved the worst accident record of the command with 17 separate accidents, most of them due to fast taxiing. He complimented the 368th Squadron, which had a spotless accident records, and announced that fines would be imposed for fast taxiing as well as for unauthorized low-level rhuarbs.

A total of 51 aircraft got up at 0942. Low cloud at base interfered with setting course, but there was worse to come; cumulus beginning at 8,000 feet in which the group flew for 20 minutes before breaking cloud at 20,000 feet. Five pilots never did find the rest of the group and were among the 9 early returns. Encounter reports describe the ensuing combat and claims.

The group was down at 1237 but it seemed hours before the 13 aircraft that landed at other stations were accounted for, and a report was even prepared listing Major Ivrine as "not yet returned". He was almost within shouting distance, at Horsham St. Faith, but could not get through on the overloaded telephone lines, until 1410, when all were safe and six good claims in.

A jubilant group went to supper, to be saddened at 1825 by the news that Lt. Cosmos had gone into the ground from a 300 foot ceiling near Somersham at 1714. He had taken off at 1645 for an hour's test flight, and was overdue 29 minutes when killed.

"Pick and shovel work," in Colonel Tacon's phrase, comprised the group's 27th mission, on 11 February. Lt. Carter's tree-surgery marked the take-off, in which 52 ships got up in seven minutes, and on arrival in the rendezvous area, where four combat wings of B-17's were supposed to be returning from Frankfurt, the group found bombers scattered in gaggles over an area of 200 square miles with 2 and 4 plane enemy elements nipping up and down from the undercast for quick darting pecks which could not all be countered in time. Fifty intriguing minutes were spend in this will-o-wisp hunting, and two B-17's were seen to stumble out of their "formations" and unload their crews by chutes - next to a bomber explosion an escort fighter's most discouraging sight. There was consolation in the fact that other groups assigned the same job could not find the bombers at all, so our escort undoubtedly had saved some big friends. The pertinent reference is "Mission No. 1" in the Eight Air Force Narrative of its 218th operation.

A warning to FO 241 was canceled at 00554 on 12 February, and there followed nine non-operational days, as weather interrupted the air assault on Germany. Field Order 243 was scrubbed early (0400) on the 14th, a day on which Wretham was socked in under a 500 foot ceiling. On the 15th, Captain Niven K. Cranfill and 2nd Lt. Charles H. Kruger of the 369th flew a weather recon into the LeHavre area where a B-26 show was proposed, and the wryly-predicted order from Wing to bomb-up arrived later in the day. The 369th and 370th were to

bomb, but Lt. Platt told Wing the weather was 10/10 over the Dutch targets, and the bomb order was eventually reduced to readiness waiting for a break in the target clouds.

The weather did not clear, but new excitement appeared in the shape of a warning at 1500 to prepare to move to a forward base at 1630. Pilots were sent to the Hall for musett bags, returning to the briefing room to learn the news. The move was scrubbed at 1720, but briefed proceeded in strained solemnity as Colonel Tacon announced that parachutists had captured St. Omer and the group would at once fly there. The atmosphere relaxed when he gravely proceeded that on landing at the French airdrome, the group would at once refuel for a fighter sweep, take-off time: midnight. Though our part in the move was scrubbed, Bodney did make the ride, and was marooned in the South of England by socked in weather the next day.

Wing called at 2024 that day to say that “the confusion of this afternoon was unavoidable, occasioned by a combination of circumstances, which we’ll try to avoid next time.” The group considered it all a fairly routine bad weather day.

The orderly calm (from the group’s standpoint) of the major-effort Eighth Air Force assault, as exemplified in VIII FG Field Order 245 on 20 February (Issue 118 of the Command Narrative), was a welcome relief. The group’s Mission Report No. 28 tells the story, the most interesting point from the pilot’s point of view being the success of the anti-jamming device built in their radios by Capt. Alfred M. Swiren, Group Communications Officer. The jamming whine created by the Germans (generally read as “Goering says you’ll never get back”) had imposed a heavy strain on concentration in the air and was now practically eliminated.

1st Lt. Ralph E. Kibler, flying radio relay, thought he saw a strange daylight focussing beam, and this was reported to Wing, although later observations tended to confirm the first analysis that it was all simply reflected light from the Dutch greenhouses four miles below.

On the 21st, the group saw Bramsche and Diepholz well hit (VIII FG Narrative No. 119) and Lt. Paul Bateman, of the 370th Squadron, by accident fired a brief burst on one of the 56th Group’s erratic yellow noses in the continuing attacks on our group by the Halesworth pilots, who during this month told one of our airmen that the way to get victories was to stooge around like a German and thus attract Nazis to their doom.

Early next morning, the 22nd, Major Fitzpatrick and Lt. Donohue went to Snetterton Heath, 7 miles away, to watch the 96th Heavy Bomb Group brief for a return to Schweinfurt. They were greeted with shouts of joy from the bomber navigators, who urged immediate nomination of a P-47 pilot for president. The 96th’s share of the show was scrubbed as it turned out, (VIII FC Narrative No. 120) but the 359th had a highly exciting time.

To begin with, the group was introduced to “Happy Valley”, the Rhur, as the bombers, south of briefed course, with the result that many pilots were under accurate and intense gun fire for 10 minutes without a break. Colonel Tacon shared a long-nosed FW 190 destroyed with his wingman, 1st Lt. George A. Doersch, as encounter reports narrate, and was so pleased with Doersch’s performance on the violent flak-evasion and combat that he nominated Doersch his permanent wingman. Doersch, “Pop” to the whole group, was promptly dubbed “Floorpaint”.

Captain Abbey, the Air Force specialist on new German types, was present at the interrogation in which Colonel Tacon described how the P-47 had out-performed the long awaited new Focke-Wulf, the tables between lecturer and lectured being thus reversed. Major Albert R. Tyrrell whose 368th pilots scored three of the day's five victories, filed another protest against the romping playfulness of the 56th Group's pilots.

A B-17 crew bailed out near Wretham late that afternoon, but landed nearer to Snetterton than to the Group's station.

Another blow at Schweinfurt was projected on the 23rd, and the 359th was asked to fly two missions. This effort was abandoned at 1900, an hour before briefing on the first effort, and at 0908, a release came through, permitting work on water injection installation.

The best performance of the month materialized on 24 February.

On their third try, the B-17's got to Schweinfurt, where 263 bombed the remaining ball bearing works with excellent effect. They were taken into the continent by the 359th, which destroyed four enemy fighters in the process, and, three hours and 18 minutes later were escorted out of the continent by the group.

According to plan, the 369th left the bombers on the first effort of the day seven minutes before bulk of the group, which continued on to the German frontier. As a result, the 368th was on the way to Belgium in its second mission of the day, six minutes after the last airplane of the other two squadrons touched down at Wretham from the first ride. The 368th Squadron took the air as a unit 28 minutes after landing.

After clearing the briefed withdrawal area of all visible stragglers, Colonel Tacon made an elaborate sweep of the Pas de Calais, staying in until convinced that no staggering Fort or Lib was still exposed to the enemy fighters.

In part of this day's work two victories at altitude by Major Tyrrell ended a stern climbing chase in which he and his flight accepted heavy odds but the general satisfaction at the results of the day were tempered by the absence of Lt. Albert T. Niccolai, of the 370th. Big, dynamic, aggressive, he had been grimly determined "to score", and disappeared from the group's ken on the tail of an Me-109. The men who knew him were confident that if he had not run into a low-level booby trap, he would come walking back to them over the Pyrrennes, burly confidence and sardonic humor intact.

Mission No. 33, on the 25th, was noteworthy because Colonel Tacon that day began a policy of giving squadron commanders experience in conducting the briefing and leading the group.

Major Swanson was in command of an uneventful trip ordered by VIII FG FO 251, but there was anxiety for some hours about the whereabouts of 2nd Lt. William E. Simmons, 368th, a spotter who over shot the field and could not be plotted by the Wing's "fixer" system on

Channel D. The last Fix placed him near Nottingham and it was 1550 before news that he was safe came in.

Next day, Colonel Tacon led a section, Major Murphy of the 370th conducting the briefing and leading the group. Mission Report 34 tells of the hard work done sheperding stragglers across Holland. An unsolved mystery was a 7.0 mm bullet hole in the Colonel's airplane cowling when both he and his section were confident no enemy aircraft had been within five miles, up, down or sideways.

There was no mystery, however, about the feeling of the group on its month's work. The results, they felt, showed the fruit of devotion to duty, air discipline, and untiring emphasis on tight formation flying.

The future held much: Wing authorities permitted revelation of the news communicated to Colonel Tacon early in the month that the group would be re-equipped with P-51B aircraft.

The response was conflicting. The P-47, never popular in training with pilots most of whom were fresh out of flight schools and AT 6's now was venerated. Ten weeks of combat flying had proved its solid worth, its near invulnerability, its combat superiority to German equipment. But the P-51 had been the dream airplane of most of the pilots before they ever had a P-47 cockpit check. It was "good downstairs as well as up", the pilots knew, and basic fact, it had the range.

There had been jealousy about deep withdrawal assignments going elsewhere. With P-51's, that would be no more, and as for the losses other P-51 groups had suffered, the 359th felt that formation flying was the cure for that.

Anyway, the future was going to be new and different.