

HEADQUARTERS 359TH FIGHTER GROUP  
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The 359th Fighter Group in January, 1944

January, 1944, produced the 359th Fighter Group's first victories in aerial warfare -- and its first combat losses. Ten group missions were flown against the Luftwaffe, and of the 557 aircraft dispatched in the month, four did not return.

These losses were suffered 11 January 1944, when bad weather, a partially executed recall and a violent reaction by the German Air Force, resulted in one of the great days of air combat in the history of the war, 60 bombers being lost in assaults on Coheralaben, Halberstadt and Brunswick. The GAF lost more than 247 fighters.

Of the four pilots lost by the 359th that day, one was last seen entering cloud over enemy territory at 15,000 feet with Me 109's on his tail; one fell off into a compressibility dive near the English Coast, apparently a victim of anoxia, and two were killed in bad weather crashes in England.

The group had to wait ten days before beginning to overcome those men. A single enemy aircraft was destroyed on 29 January -- more than a dozen Thunderbolts of the group collaborated in a savage and overeager assault which resulted in claims by four separate pilots for credit for the victory -- and the next day the numerical score against the Luftwaffe was equaled by a claim of 3-1-3: two Me 109's and a Junkers 88 destroyed, another JU-88 probably destroyed, and three other enemy aircraft damaged.

In another direction, the group prepared rather apprehensively for its first dive-bombing, but since these missions invariably were improvisations arranged when bad operational weather scrubbed larger enterprises, an atmosphere of comic opera crept into the general attitude toward this part of the fighters' job.

And, indeed, although sweating ground crews repeatedly "bombed up," for thunderbombing assignments, and the group even flew 330 miles to Leeuwarden on 28 January (to find the target obscured by cloud) the month ended without any of its 500 pound OP bombs being cast upon the enemy.

Life in the ETO during January 1944 began to be both simpler and more complex, as the group's personnel completed acclimatization, broadened the social base of their off-duty life, found their menus improving on the station, and in visible token of their status as semi-veterans, completing three-months ETOUSA service and began to go on seven-day leaves.

Wretham Hall was invaded by determined parties of Engineer Corps Officers planning its transformation into a bomber command station, and the usual rumor of imminent departure freshened anew, but life in the Hall (for those who stayed there) took on a new blossom. Ground officer's encountered hardships in new Nissen hut quarters but those remaining at the Hall had more room.

Two Saturday night officers' parties were held, and both of those were considered smashing shows, in the patols of the period. Motion pictures began to be shown thrice weekly for the officers at the Hall, restrictions on leave (which had been limited to 48 hours off the station per month) were relaxed, and partly because of the introductions achieved at the two dances social life on leave noticeably improved for the pilots.

The weather defied the gloomy prophets of misery and remained good on the ground, although cloud just permitting take-off and landings made missions a matter of hours of instrument flying. Nevertheless, as the season marched toward Spring and the gloom of the late mornings and early afternoons of December began to vanish, the spirits of all Yanks throve. Health generally was good (vide the Group Surgeon's appended statement) and the mess improved in the general betterment in the supply of all the thousand varied items needed to keep the group functioning.

Feeding the station was a major operation. 1st Lt. David Steine, the Station Quartermaster, reported that foods consumed at Wretham from 1 January to 31 January involved these totals:

- Chicken, 3807 pounds.
- Turkey, 1800 pounds
- Steak, 6644 pounds.
- Other beef, 20,409 pounds
- Pork, 6134 pounds.
- Frankfurters and other luncheon meats, 3363 pounds.
- Bread, 27,900 pounds.

Fowl and fresh meats were served at 34 meals, as against the 22 such servings in December (partially invalidating the general unofficial nomenclature of "Spam Medal" for the ETO ribbon) and fresh eggs and fresh oranges were twice served to all station personnel, while pilots continued to receive their normal issue of three fresh eggs and as many fresh oranges per week.

Since the combat efficiency of the group in the air depended, in the final assessment, on the efficiency of all the varied activities on the station, a brief statement by Lt. Steine of the supply situation on the station as of 31 January, 1944, may be of interest:

- b. Class II and IV (Clothing, Stationery, Cleaning & Preserving Materials, etc.)
  - 1. Organization on the station currently reports a combined average percentage of 93% for T/BA equipment received and on hand.

2. Individual Clothing and Equipment is currently reported by the same organizations as approximately 99% complete. All personnel on the station have their complete modified clothing allowance for this Theater of Operations as authorized under Amini. Cir. No. 97, Hq, ETOUSA, dated 18 December 1943.
  3. Office Supplies, Stationary and Cleaning and Preserving Materials are requisitioned on a 30 day basis. Items generally in short supply in these categories are Mimeograph Paper, Envelopes, Brooms, Brushes, and Insecticides.
  4. This station has on hand all Barracks Equipment laid down in RAF Scales of Entitlement (with the exception of 100 Officer's Mattresses, which are no longer in production) to which it is entitled.
- c. Class III (Petrol, Coal and Coke)
1. During the month of January 20, 956 gallons of MT Petrol were issued compared with 20,936 gallons issued in December 1943.
  2. Inventory, or Stock on Hand, of Coal and Coke, as of 28 January 1944, totalled 470.13 tons of coal and 278.13 tons of coke respectively. During January 138.10 tons of coal and 121.4 tons of coke were received. Total issues of coal and coke for the month totalled 230 tons. Based on inventory on hand, a continuance of the present rate of consumption, this station has approximately 12 weeks supply on hand.

Similarly, with Air Corps Supply, the position was much improved over December. Processing efficiency improved with a move to new offices next to the warehouse, the depot at Wattisham inaugurated a daily delivery service and although aircraft parts remained closely controlled, they could, with persistence, be obtained.

There were sundry exceptions to this general rule: winter flying jackets for pilots, for example, were unobtainable. The squadrons remained short of both hydraulic pumps and aircraft jacks, but most things could be found if one looked long enough.

An example of a supply problem not recently encountered arrived on 25 January, when Avelin P. Tacon, Jr., the station commander, was notified of his promotion from lieutenant colonel to a full colonelcy. At a meeting of officers at the Hall where Lt. Col. Grady L. Smith, the station executive, announced the fact, Colonel Tacon made a somewhat oblique reference to the "chickens" which would now adorn his shoulders.

But the eagles were, in fact, nowhere to be found: the officer most intimately concerned had not so protected himself against the requirements of promotion, there were not other budding

colonels storing insignia against the happy day, and a number of volunteer missions to London began to be organized to obtain the silver birds.

At this point, Lt. Duane H. DeMarcus, the station Air Corps Supply officer, went to work, and 24 hours later turned up with eagles obtained from the 359th's neighbors at Bodney, where the insignia had been reposing in an air corps supply stockroom.

Of the other officer promotions of the month, most were in the 368th squadron, as is seen in the appended list, while the changes in enlisted rank, which were numerous, are reflected in the attached Station special orders, which also show transfers and duty reassignments.

Briefing developed a new aspect; the award of medals and decorations by the Group Commander, in token of past combat duty just before announcement of the new mission for the day, of the decoration. Recipients of Air Medals are stated in an attached roster.

At this period, the Air Medal was awarded for a single victory or, in the ETO, for ten sorties against the enemy. By VIII Fighter Command standards, a belly-tank mission to the limit of endurance in support and escort of heavy bombers counted as a double sortie. Major Murphy, who first received the Oak Leaf Cluster to this medal, had won the award originally in the Aleutians, where he had shot down a Japanese plane in combat. The first such victory by a pilot of the group.

The first victory by a pilot in the group came on the 17th mission flown by the 359th. This calculation counts, as a mission, the deep penetration by four aircraft led by Lt. Lester G. Taylor, 369th Squadron into Holland on weather reconnaissance for the scheduled dive-bombing of Leeuwarden 28 January -- Taylor's plane being hit by flak off-course near Mardyok on the run home.

Claims for this first group victory were filed by four pilots, as will presently be recounted, but many hours of hard flying were first recorded.

January first, to be sure was a rare day, since a release until 8 a.m. 2 January had arrived late on 31 December. The group's pilots relaxed, but the next day there was considerable, and, as it turned out, unfruitful activity, revolving around a proposed practice dive bombing on the southern sands of the Wash.

This was eventually scrubbed by the 67th Wing before the aircraft took off. That day, also, new call signs ("Jackson" for the 368th and "Wheeler" for the 370th) came into effect, and Colonel Tacon confirmed selection of "Cum Leone" with its reference to collaboration with the RAF, as the group motto.

The first mission of the year did not, in fact, materialize until the fourth day of the month, when an early (0730) briefing prepared the group for a ramrod penetration on the way to Munster. (Issue No. 93, VIII Fighter Command Narrative of Operations).

The group's share of the mission was unremarkable. Colonel Tacon, who led the mission, was displeased by the twelve early return, by what he considered bad formation flying, and the general snafu condition of the mission when the 359th arrived to take up escort of a scattered bomber task force.

This displeasure was increased by the pride with which he had complimented the group at the briefing on its performance in the 31 December assault on the Paris ball-bearing works (for which see the December section of this narrative.) A handsome testimonial from the 45th Combat Bombardment Wing later was to fortify the pride felt in the day's work.

After the run on 4 January, Mission No. 9, next day, 5 January, was a better show, from the group's point of view, though, as it latter turned out at subsequent critiques, the bombers were lost and were never sure of their positions or targets. The immediate official story of the mission, which ended with bombs away on five targets of opportunity, is in Mission No. 5, "VIII Bomber Command's Narrative of Operations, 176th Operation, for 5 January.

The fighter part of the story, including the 359th's narrative, is in Issue 94, VIII Fighter Command Narrative of Operations. The pilot who was fired on by the B-17 as herein recited was 1st Lt. William N. Tucker, Jr. of the 370th, one of the pilots killed six days later in the 11 January operation.

But Mission No. 10 on 7 January intervened before that day. And this was generally regarded as a good job of work: shepherding five scattered combat wings of bombers along their withdrawal from Ludwigshafen. The VIII Fighter Command Field Order was No. 215, and the general story is in the Bomber Command's Narrative of its 178th Operation.

The Group's mission report may be found in Issue 95 of the Fighter Command's Narrative which perhaps does not sufficiently emphasize the achievement of leaving the briefed course to duck and dodge through holes in the overcast, arriving at the schedule rendezvous at the scheduled time. Spitfires were late in arriving, so the group stayed with its big friends until the RAF did appear.

The weather was very bad and the conventional field order injunction "remain to the limit of endurance" had been scrupulously obeyed, with the result that 30 of the 59 aircraft which flew the mission landed at other fields, and it was hours before the welcome news "all accounted for" could be circulated through the squadrons.

Weather now restricted operations but a RAF circus of Typhoons and Spitfires visited Wretham, as did Captain Jorgenson, Ajax of the recognition, for both pilots and ground defense crews manning machine guns, was a constant anxiety.

The mission of January 11 was defined in FO 216 of the VIII Fighter Command: to support the rear elements of the First Air Task Force (300 B-17's from Diepholz to the Dutch Coast as the bombers returned from attacking the Focke-Wulf 190 plant at Oscherleben and the Ju 88 wing manufacturing factory at Halberstadt.

There resulted one of the great struggles of the air Battle of Germany. And this Battle was fought by the Americans under a grave handicap; the weather “socked in” at the bombers’ home bases and the recall signal was given by the controllers while the Liberators of the 2nd Division had just crossed the Dutch frontier entering Germany. As a result, all the carefully arranged scheme of escort and support had to be jettisoned and combat decisions made in mid-air.

Visibility aloft was poor due to a heavy haze hanging from 20,000 to 27,000 feet and there was 10/10 cloud from the English Coast all the way to the continent and inland. Colonel Tacon’s blind flying instruments went out and he was forced to abort near the Dutch Coast, command of the group passing to Major Swanson. The group was broken up by a combination of the overcast and the bombers in distress encountered soon after landfall, and elements of the 359th, as it turned out, helped protect bombers in every one of the three division, driving off a number of enemy attacks.

Major Albert R. Tyrrell, of the 368th Squadron, led a section of eight ships into the briefed rendezvous, while Major Swanson’s section escorted first B-24’s and then, returning inland, B-17’s out of the enemy-held area.

The only combat casualty of the day was 2nd Lt. Edward J. Hyland, of the 368th, who spun out of a Luffberry after a bounce by Me 109’s and disappeared into the overcast with enemy fighters pursuing him. Encounter reports are appended with the squadron’s history.

But there were three other losses. One was Captain James E. Buckley, a West Pointer and like Hyland, a Philadelphian, who was last seen in a compressibility dive from 22,000 feet over the North Sea. The other two were 370th squadron mates of Captain Buckley’s.

These were Lieutenants Lynn W. Hair, of Dallas, Texas, and Lt. Tucker. Both were victims of the weather and of their inability to get satisfactory homings under the ceiling that at times was down to less than 500 feet.

Lt. Hair crashed into a tree in the middle of England, near Chipping Wardon, miles past and south of his base. Flying with Lt. Ray S. Wetmore, he obviously had decided against re-entering the overcast to gain altitude for a fix -- the course adopted by Lt. Wetmore -- and crashed soon after he peeled off from Wetmore’s wing. The latter testified his altimeter “showed 300 feet” when he landed at Molesworth, and this may have deceived Hair.

Lt. Tucker, equally lost, flew west into Wales, where he crashed near Rednal Shorpes in the Shrewsbury area. Appreciation of all four pilots are to be found in the squadron histories. A light on Buckley’s character and worth is given by a poem found in his effects:

“Thoughts”

The green of the grass, the glitter of lakes,  
The things I call my own  
Are gone away, nor will return

Till the seeds of faith are sown.

The sun that shines, the trees that sigh,  
The loves that I have known  
Will never smile or speak again  
Till I am heading home.

The peace I know, the faith I have,  
In which I'm not alone  
Will stay within all of us  
Till from this Hell we've flown.

Please God that we may leave this place  
As swift as we have come  
To find the things we love the best,  
When here our work is done.

Another difficulty with the 67th Wing homing system developed in the case of 1st Lt. Glenn C. Bach, 369th Squadron, assigned to a relay patrol over the North Sea. An incorrect vector sent him on a course out in the North Sea for 35 minutes before he decided to fly due west -- which he did for half an hour, eventually crashing, gasoline almost gone, in a sheep field in Northumberland, near Hexham. A statement by the pilot, describes his experience. He was regarded on "NYR" -- the symbol for "not yet returned" -- until 6:13 P.M. on the 11th, when, within 15 minutes, the news of his crash and those involving Hair and Tucker were relayed to Combat Intelligence by Captain Robert F. Maley, the Station Flying Control Officer.

Only two of the four losses on the 11th were officially listed as missing in the air combats of the day, but the Group felt that it had lost all four men to the Germans, and as Colonel Tacon said at the next briefing, that they would get their own book and some more from the Luftwaffe. (They felt also that their share of the escort was well done, finding testimony thereof in the official story of the mission, Issue 96 of the Fighter Command Narrative, and in the official tributes to the work of the Eight that day, including General Doolittle's view, as given in General Kepner's letter of 27 January, 1944 (221, x291,22: Operation of 11 January).

The next chore the group tackled was the assignment that came to be known as "the milk run," which is to say Plan Eye Que and its constant (and as custom staled the initial thrill of the task) dull patrolling of the Pas de Calais Area. This time, 14 January under VIII Fighter Command Field Order 217, the Group stayed in the area for 97 minutes until the bombers had made their final practice run over the last patch of woods and all bombs were away and bombers out, 36 minutes late.

There was intense flak, which hit and caused minor danger to Colonel Tacon's airplane, as well as the ship flown by his wingman, Lt. Charles V. Cunningham. Otherwise the only interest of the day focussed on the identity of the airplane bounced a 7,000 feet by a section of the 368th led by Major Rockford V. Gray, the Group Operations Officer. Major Gray fired nine rounds from each gun before he saw an American insignia on the aircraft and he returned home

still not sure of its type, although the other pilots believed it a P-51. His gun-camera film showed no image.

Bad weather scrubbed operations projected immediately thereafter. Major John R. Fitzpatrick, Combat Intelligence Officer, warned unit commanders on the station to prepare for biological warfare by the Germans. The long-delayed arrival of an opeidoscope allowed the launching of Lt. John E. Regan's recognition training schedule. Investigation of "sabotage" incidence of the previous month continued -- and field orders were scrubbed with great regularity.

The first mission that was flown after this period was again an Eye Que patrol, on 21 January, under VIII Fighter Command Field Order 221. The feature of this assignment was the launching by the gunners at Clacton-on-the-Sea of a somewhat personal vendetta against pilots of the group, although Zed Battery rockets fired at the bombers in France were reported by the Group's flights for the first time. The patrol time in the target area -- 115 minutes -- also was a new high.

A dive-bombing practice was run on 23 January. During the bombing run, Major Sam R. Marshall, Station Ordinance Officer, and 2nd Lt. John Lee Downing, pilot saw from a Lysander a submarine that hurriedly submerged. Coastal Command was notified through Wing A-2.

On the 24th, the Group found the patrol technic extended to deep penetrations. Another innovation was the creation of a "bouncing squadron" to attack enemy formations some distance from the bomber course. An order had already been received to take down signs declaring the fighters' first objective to be the number of bombers safely brought home, and this obviously was the beginning of a new and determinedly offensive fighter policy.

It received no very fair test on the 24th, since once more the weather closed in unexpectedly and the bombardment formations were recalled. The fighters, however, patrolled their assigned areas. Neither bombers nor enemy aircraft were seen in the 359th sector, and the group spent an uneventful 86 minutes over enemy-held land.

On 25th January, a fighter sweep was in prospect until 1003, when Wing told the group to practice dive-bombing. Uncertainty about cloud over the practice ranges lasted until midafternoon and then, with the group "bombed up" and ready to go, difficulty in effecting a clearance through the 12th Group of the RAF led Colonel Tacon to scrub the whole show. It was, all hands agreed, a wearing day. Equally so was the 26th, when two bigger shows were ordered and scrubbed by 0640. At 0806, Wing ordered Thunderbombing on a Dutch airdrome and the Group briefed on this mission, only to have another scrub message at 1007. That afternoon, John Houbolt, chief of the OWI section on Holland, talked to the pilots on his native land: a part of the general reemphasis on geography in pilot training.

Next day, Flt. Lt. Clifford A.S. Anderson, 401 RCAF Fighter Squadron, talked about night fighting to the pilots in another meeting at the Hall, emphasizing the lay-out of the Drem System and the procedures for night flight used by the night fighter pilots.



The Group once more briefed for Thunderbombing on the 28th of January. This was another hurry-up job with considerable uncertainty about the weather. A four-ship weather reconnaissance got off at 1305 to look at the weather over Leeuwarden, but they were still on their way home when the Group, carrying 31 500-pound bombs, took off on the main run. The Group found the target areas obscured by cloud, and never did see the 352nd Group (then based at the neighboring station of Bodney) which had flown over Wretham during our take-off. A rendezvous 19 minutes after our take-off had been scheduled.

Wing Intelligence sources reported the 359th south of its briefed course, in the middle of the Zuider Zee, and then said the group had later, at 1603, been over Leeuwarden. This was an anomaly, since no port turn was made. Equally mysterious was the exit of the four weather ships, which landed at Manston after finding themselves far south of course, being fired upon from Mardyck. Flak hit Lt. Lester Taylor's airplane. His knowledge of geography had prevented him from going in for a landing, although he had for a moment believed he was nearing the southern edge of the Wash.

The Group's first claims were made as the month ended.

The first score was on 29 January, when an errant Me 110 was savagely attacked and destroyed in a wild melee which made prophetic an amusing cartoon 1st Lt. Howard L. Fogg, the 368th's artist-pilot had drawn weeks before: P-47's converging from every altitude and heading on a stunned enemy pilot. A dozen men took squirts at the Me 110. Claims were filed by four. The enemy was, in any event, thoroughly destroyed, one pilot going into and below the overcast to take pictures of the pilot bailing out and the aircraft crashing.

The claimants were Captain Clifton Shaw, of the 368th (which had first crack at the 110) and Major Rockford V. Gray, 1st Lt. Clifford Carter and 2nd Lt. John H. Oliphant, all of the 369th.

This Me 110 was the only enemy airplane sighted. The mission was otherwise uneventful: the by-now-customary overcast delayed our setting course five minutes and the bombers were five minutes late. The story of the mission may be found in Fighter Command Narrative, Issue No. 103.

Next day produced more claims. A flying visitor that day was Lt. Colonel Harold J. Rau, A-3 of the 67th Wing, but he flew the mission with the 370th top cover squadron and saw none of the action found by the 369th, which bounced eight Junker 88s formatting line abreast to the left rear flank of the bombers and also attacked six Me 109's which dove headlong through the bomber formation. Three were claimed destroyed, with another a probable and three others damaged. Encounter reports are appended. That day, incidentally, 49 aircraft got off the ground in five minutes, 40 second.

The month ended with another day of indecision forced by the weather. The penetration originally listed was canceled early -- at 0710. Orders to bomb up were received at 0955, and briefing was held at 1330. The lights had just been flashed on after viewing the target and bomb

runs on the opeidoscope screen in the briefing room when word that this mission, too, was scrubbed, was called up to Colonel Tacon.

“Chaplain,” he called at once -- and Chaplain Ziegler gravely walked to the briefing dais to notch, with his ticket-taker’s punch, the T.S. card that the Colonel, like every other pilot, had providently been equipped with by the Chaplain for just such contingencies.

News later that day that another group had gone in and bombed the same target with good effect (fires visible 50 miles with a 3000-pillar of smoke) and had in addition shot down six enemy planes did not improve tempers that evening.

But the message of congratulation from General Kepner on the achievements of the 29th and 30th, a teletype appended, fortified the Group’s conviction that it was in fact ready for the hazards of the future.