

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

June of 1944 was the month that Eisenhower stormed and breached the Atlantic Wall of Festung Europa in the greatest short-range operation of war in the history of man to that time.

In the great scheme of assault, the VIII Fighter Command, forged and tempered as the peerless high altitude fighter team of all the world's struggling forces, was slung into the rough and tumble of ground attack. Only their airplanes had the needed range before the cannon and the tactical air forces could be disembarked, and only they could choke off support from the Wehrmacht at the chosen storming place, the Cotentin Peninsula of Normandy.

So simply, is the story of June for the 359th Fighter Group told. With the 14 other groups of the Eighth Fighter Command, they isolated Normandy, hacked and splayed the German plan of reinforcement and counter-attack, and held off the Wehrmacht while ships and men tore open a bloody hole in Western Europe.

It was expensive - 14 pilots were lost on tactical missions, 11 of those in the first seven days of crisis, and this was one-sixth of the group's normal pilot strength. Yet the total casualties for the month of 17 men, 16 operationally, was below the toll of May, and was well under the depletions suffered by other groups.

These are statistics, and they did not cushion the emotional shock of the grim second week of June, when 21 missions in seven days cost 11 pilots, when foul weather, flak, fatigue and warring enemy aircraft raised the normal odds against ground strafing to a great and nerve racking hazard.

Ten old pilots and seven replacements vanished from the mess at Wretham Hall during the month, and new pilots fresh from replacement depots flooded in: faces changed and "originals" found themselves sitting at supper at tables where they knew no one. Of the 86 pilots brought overseas, 46 remained on flying status with the Group at the month's end. The cost in leaders was high too: a squadron commander, an operations officer and four flight leaders.

Yet the job - the most important task confronting mankind, it was believed at the time - was done, done gallantly, on occasion recklessly, on occasion nobly.

Totting up a list of claims to balance such a butcher's bill is not possible. Though there was no large combat against the Luftwaffe the damage done the enemy was varied: a table of statistics is appended which runs to such items as 16 locomotives destroyed and 31 damaged; or 18 armored force vehicles burnt and blasted and another 48 damaged: or two ammunition trains

wrecked in flooding pyres of smoke and flame and noise. The 128,000 rounds of armor piercing incendiary ammunition fired, with the 97 tons of bombs aimed and dropped, certainly harmed the enemy. What aerial combat occurred is described in the annexed Encounter Reports.

The more important fact was that his discourse of projection upon the German was achieved in an unrelenting snarling patrol of every highway and every railroad upon which his troops tried to move to their trapped and dying fellows at Caen, Carentan and Cherbourg. And that movement was blocked and crippled and delayed.

Appended is a table showing 473 sorties by the group in the first seven day, including one day when the weather barred all flying and the Nazis consequently built up their forces. These 21 missions are the core of the story of the month. Their achievements are listed in the cited table of statistics and are considered separately in the more detailed narrative which follows.

Before embarking upon that tale, a summary of the work of the month shows 43 missions in 25 days (six missions one day, four another, three on two days, two on six days) involving 1469 airborne P-51's, 168 early returns, 1301 sorties averaging 4:34, or about 5900 combat hours. The invasion tactical work was not all; there were, for example, four escort missions to Germany.

This effort was of very great scope. On the mechanical side, it was complicated by a number of factors. To begin with, (and inevitably) there simply was not sufficient time allotted on some days for ideal maintenance or anything approaching it: some aircraft flew 10-plus hours of combat time on 6 June, which was D-Day.

The ground crews worked their hearts out in the critical days. But their job was complicated by deficiencies discovered in over-hauled engines: nuts loose, grease plugs wrongly inserted, mating surfaces on engine parts out of parallel, flanges warped, valve clearances wrong, cracked parts, all duly reported by Captain George M. Hesser to higher authority. And at mid-month, the need of the Ninth Air Force for the best that could be had to fight the Battle of the Beaches meant that 80 of the best aircraft on the station were transferred out.

This entailed acceptance checks lasting perhaps 36 hours on the P-51-B1's to B10's received in exchange for the B15's and C3's sent out. And these checks revealed insufficient oxygen tankage for our needs. TMI changes not made in armament, gun sights, shackles -- time consuming jobs that reduced the number of aircraft available for combat.

At the same time however, re-equipment began with the bubble-canopied, six-gunned, P-51-D's, on which all modifications were complete when delivered, and of which 15 were on the station at month's end.

Equipment otherwise was satisfactory, save only for the imperative need for RAF-type quick-release parachute harnesses, a need demonstrated once more in the loss of another pilot in the English Channel. Also, the dinghy flaps were flying open, it was believed, and those now were reversed so that the flaps faced in when the pilot sat on them.

Morale, separately considered in Chaplain Ziegler's survey, flamed high at the moment of test in the invasion. On the ground side, as the initial excitement subsided, there was some discontent at the limitation on leaves, which allowed furloughs only to combat personnel, and restricted all others to 24-hour passes within a 25-mile range. This may have had something to do with the minuscule rise in the VD rate (the Surgeon's report, attached, shows only six new cases for the month) but it was generally balanced by steady improvements in the food -- both in the rations provided and in the quality of the preparation. The mail stopped, or almost so, during the invasion but that was understandable, and letters flooded in a surge soon afterwards.

The weather required courage and competence of the pilots but on the ground it was, toward the end, a lovely if a rather damp June. The last converts from "long handles" donned cotton underwear as the days reviled out to quite incredible length of light. A soda fountain *mirabile dicta*, was installed in the new Post Exchange, and although only "hand-made cokes" were at first obtainable, offered high hopes for the future. The caliber of motion pictures at the still-novel Post Theatre was regarded as excellent, the Red Cross canteen continued to hold a high place in the affection of enlisted men. In sum, the focus was on the air war. The groundlings weren't very happy when they thought of it, but few had a great deal of time to spend on the subject. For those remote from the combat pilots of the fighter group, and there were naturally many such among the 1600 on the station. The chief topic of thought was the Russian advance, which replaced the flying bomb as a main source of conversation. Changes in the status of enlisted men, and their movements, are shown in the file of special orders.

The fighter Group held its identity in the strain of battle and casualty, somehow molding the new men to a pattern in the old tradition. Perhaps the character of the Group, its atmosphere, was in fact changing and shifting, as was to be expected under the impact of new personalities with new backgrounds, but it could hardly yet be said to have happened.

At the opening of the month, the Group was the second most experienced in the Fighter Command in average combat time per pilot, its average of 152.5 hours per combat pilot ranking only below the 78th's 156.2, as opposed to a Command average of about 120. (FiCom Group Comparisons Month of May, 1944). This was logical, the 359th had sent none of its veterans home for 30-days leave. In June, the first such leave was granted Captain Samuel R. Smith, 368th Operations Officer on the 200-hour basis, and the tempo was so forced during the month that several other men rapidly progressed toward completion of the new 300-hour standard. This fact, and combat losses, meant a constant stream of promotion and duty-assignment changes, as is shown in the appended personnel tables (Arrivals, Departures, Promotions, Transfers).

As for other reward and official notice of brave work well achieved, there were two Silver Stars (Lt. Col. John B. Murphy for his fine 4 March performance and 1st Lt. Will D. Burgsteiner for the 11 April strafing), 17 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 15 Air Medals. The larger knowledge of duty done was in the hearts of the pilots fighting their lonely war in great hazard with great constancy.

With this preamble, here is June, 1944, at East Wretham, near Thetford, in Norfolk County, England.

This month began with a dull Thursday enlivened for duty personnel in the hours before dawn with a vivid electrical display in the Southern skies that misled some too-eager citizens into believing they had first view of: a) the biggest German raid of the war; b) a novel battle; c) the invasion. The rumble of thunder broke this spell, and it turned out to be the only fillip of the day, a somber affair with a dull overcast in which a release finally arrived at 1355. The whole Eighth Air Force was grounded, save for 29 special sorties (Intops No. 32).

2 June was the same kind of day, with an early release to 1200, but at 1330, Field Order 359 arrived. Dinner was moved up to 1700, for a briefing at 1740, with 43 aircraft up at 1905 to escort 3rd Division B-17's to marshalling yards in the Paris area: part of the great scheme to cut the German links to Normandy. The job was uneventful (Intops 33, FiCom Summary 200) save for the late return (2228) and the high VHF standard by this time taken for granted -- contact with Lt. Dover, the Walcott Hall controller, was never lost, although the extreme range was 275 miles (Wing Narrative 3 June).

There was no 359th show on the 3rd, although the Command put up 451 fighters on the Pas de Calais efforts (Intops 34) but now the last hours were ticking out before D-Day. Colonel Tacon was summoned to Ajax (Bushy Hall headquarters of the Command) at 0730 on the 4th to hear the plan from General Kepner, and secrecy or no, every single echelon seemed to be checking, by phone and teletype, with Captain Alfred W. Swiren, Group Communications Officer to assure themselves he really was changing crystals so that the Group could be controlled by "Oilskin" at the 66th Wing (Sawston Hall).

This was part of the scheme known as "High Flight", by which only P-38's (because of their distinctive silhouette) would be used over the invasion shipping, all P-38 groups to be under control of the 67th Wing, which concurrently gave up control of its own P-51's. The switch in crystals was made on this Saturday night, 3 June.

First Flight under 66th Control came next day, on the 4th -- Field Order 367, more of the diversion bombing to pin Rommel's forces in Picardy. The Group was up at 1345, and all was routine until, at 1432 Lt. Emer H. Cater was forced for lack of oil pressure, long tome bogey of the 368th pilots, to bail out 20 miles SE of Folkestone.

Cater, former Navy air gunner, father of two fine children, a serious and mature man, had conquered stomach ulcers to stay with the group at Camp Kilmer. He had been ill again in England and had given up his beloved cigars in the struggle with malfunctioning digestion.

Although, as an old sailor, he should have had a better chance than anyone in the water, the last heard from his was his call at 1452 "I'm at 12,000 and gliding to 5000 and I'm going to bail out." Lts. Perkins and Marcinkiewicz followed his chute down until it hit the water and 3 Spits, 4 P-47's, a Warwick and two launches were on the spot almost at once but all they found was a seat cushion and half-inflated dinghy, apparently Emer had lost his dinghy in the water.

That afternoon there was a second and hurried, mission on Field Order 368, Col. Swanson leading the A Group and Captin McKee leading the B Group in escort of bombers

striking at airdromes and marshalling yards at Paris (FiCom 202, Intops 35). Up at 1916, the trip home was a race against gathering darkness, which was closing in at 2152 with the first airplane but at 2215, all were home. Bomb results were good.

Colonel Tacon came back to Wretham that night. While with the other group commanders in General Kepner's office that Sunday afternoon the phone had rung with the news that SHAEF had postponed the great gamble another 24 hours.

June 5 opened with a chilly morning which succumbed later to a warm sun. Nine other groups were airborne but at Wretham the day was quiet until the alert flight was scrambled at 1242 for a test, to be followed at 1245 by a meeting of Colonel Tacon with his staff and the station commanders.

All passes and off-station traffic were stopped, phones leading off the field were cut off, 125 civilians building RAF installations were informed they would not be able to leave that night, the military police were alerted, and crews began painting the broad black-and-white invasion zebra stripes on the aircraft. In the midst of all this, Lt. Col. Cecil Hahn, Eighth Air Force historian arrived and decided to stay and see what developed on an operational station, though no one could give him any assurance this was not another of the innumerable tests, fakes, dry runs and assorted feints with which SHAEF had been tantalizing the Germans and testing its own preparation for so many months.

At 0930, Intelligence officers were called to Group to make up new squadron maps of the invasion flak defenses of England and to begin to put up "Plan Fullhouse", on the briefing map. The Colonel spent the evening briefing his squadron commanders. Before dark, the alert flight was airborne, since this, if ever, was the night for General Etudent's Nazi paratroopers to strike. The alert quartet was down at 2305, and the RAF took over the patrol

At once, the ground crews were alerted and told to stand by their airplanes, but before that there was a memorable briefing by Colonel Tacon. It began at 2400, 5/6 June, with the same momentous four words echoing that night through hundreds of stations over the island, "Gentlemen, this is it."

That briefing embraced the whole sweep and range of Plan Neptune, General Eisenhower's bold, simple, direct plan of attack interwoven with a hundred crafty tricks. (See Part V of Intelligence Bulletin No. 157, RAF No. 10 Group, for a brilliantly done precis of the assault from the airman's point of view.)

No one save the pilots who were to go on the first before-dawn mission and intelligence officers were at that briefing, which lasted 105 minutes and scanned through the whole of the scheme of beach and sea assault and air attack, with recognition, rescue, evasion and escape, with all the multiple directives from SHAEF, from Command, from wing (which see: Invasion File).

Aircraft were in short supply. So were pilots. The stock must be hoarded but some missions, the Colonel said, would have to be flown, and this was one of them. The weather was

grim outside, and worsening, but go they must, even if they had to go to the allotted area at the southwest corner of Normandy by individuals. He said: "At 4 o'clock this afternoon, General Eisenhower pushed a button and the greatest assaulting force in history began to move. If this attack that is beginning tonight does not succeed, you all know the war may be prolonged three years. It must succeed. It cannot succeed without us. Air power will not get the credit if it succeeds, but you know and I know that without air cover, constant air cover, and air superiority, constant air superiority, the men in the boats can't win. They've got to win, we've got to be there to give them their chance. Tonight begins a time we'll tell our grandchildren about, and say: "I was there, I helped it happen."

The weather gods were kind... the clouds broke for take-off, the moon appeared and the mission (33 pilots of the 368th and 369th) was off at 0242 into a glorious moonscape. But this was only local - a few miles away, at Bodney, the weather was vile and a pilot took off into the control tower - and the 359th pilots had to fly through an overcast at night slicing through wheeling and formatting bombers. By God's grace there were no collisions in the murky East Anglian skies for the Group that night.

At Wretham, too; the clouds closed in immediately after take-off and it was raining bitterly as the 370th's pilots and the other pilots of the group arrived at 0330.

A little earlier, at 0310, Colonel Burns, from Ajax, had warned Captain Donohue, of the Intelligence staff, that the second effort might have to be airborne earlier than expected. Colonel Murphy, who was to brief and lead this second show, accepted the news without emotion. He himself was drenched with the rain but he turned at the open door, stared back at the driving black night rain and said "I don't know how many can get through it but, we'll have to go."

Again, the weather cleared for take-off, the morning was beautiful with the afterglow of dawn at 0548 when Colonel Murphy took-off his aircraft. The briefing at which he had presided was unforgettable for the atmosphere created by the colonel's moving intellectual effort to bring all the pilots into his mind and share with them the great concept of the assault. Part of it was very much in the normal mood of the colonel, who was, in the great Gaelic tradition of the warrior, remote, polite, savage. As, in discussing the weakness of the force he would bring to the beaches, "If you think you have engine trouble, think of the men in the 4000 landing ships, and make sure in your soul the trouble's in the engine. "But the real drama of the briefing room that morning was summed up in a sudden curious surge of emotion at the end. "Fellows," the leader said directly, the strange word very normal and natural, voice suddenly abashed and weary, "I hope I've told you everything about this plan I should. I've lived with it for hours getting ready for this briefing. I want you to know what's at stake." He paused and looked at the faces of his men. What he saw there was good. There were no questions, and the briefing was over.

So the air umbrella was raised up. Perhaps the radar eyes were blinded. Perhaps the feints and the fakes had hypnotized the Luftwaffe into fear of a wrong move. Perhaps it was high policy not to attack the landing craft when they were most vulnerable. Perhaps the radar screens already wrote out the tale of the strength of the fighters patrolling the clouds and dark in

the great aerial blockade of Normandy. At any event, the Luftwaffe did not fight, the beaches were isolated by air, and the landings were made. Thus the story of the Atlantic Wall.

For the pilots, it meant hearts-in-mouth dodging in the dark amid clouds of B-17's and C-47's; it meant hours in the dark, wondering what they would or could do against Hun night fighters; it meant the occasional far-off flash of the pre-assault final bastinado of the beaches, then the dawn, and the lifeless roads and railroads below. The first mission was up six hours, 45 minutes, the second 6:35.

Back at base, the first news was the flash at dawn that 700 Troop Carrier planes had dropped their men successfully. This was raised to 1000 soon after -- and the whirling rush of fighter-bomber work then engulfed the station. Part of the Ninth Fighter Command was embarked. The RAF was assigned the beaches and the assault area. The weather was not right for the heavies; and it was left to the Eighth Fighter Command to blockade the roads, rails and canals feeding the German lines.

There were four more missions on the 6th of June, and three were fighter-bomber attacks on roads in the South, as the appended control sheet listing the work, the claims, the losses of the month duly recites. These figures, impressive though they are, do not catch the hurried atmosphere of one quick briefing after another, of the periodic counts of men and machines still fit for combat, of who was sleeping and who was ready. In the midst of it, Colonel Tacon fell ill of a cold, to be followed by Colonel Tyrrell, and both were sent to bed.

The bombing that first day was erratic. Used to dive-bombing with instant fuzing, the attempts to skip-bomb lacked technique, and pilots were disheartened to see their delayed-action 500-pounder glance off targets without exploding, but they stopped everything that moved by day and they learned the new bombing way quickly, and there was always the madly ferocious strafing, repaying the Germans for Poland, Flanders, Greece and Crete.

Everything was on the cuff: changes in plan, orders to go, to stay, reports. There were no mission summaries. Fighter Command issued no narrative. The Air Force summary, necessarily condensed (Intops 37 for 6 June) sketched only the outline.

The first mission was from 0245 to 0930, the second from 0550 to 1225, the third (ordered at 0724) from 1048 to 1450, the fourth from 1151 to 1603, the fifth, from 1318 to 1646. All the last three went to the same area (see the stat table) but the sixth mission of the day was Royal Flush; protection for airborne reinforcements. Colonel Swanson led that one (the 369th exploded a 40-car ammunition train near Beille) and take-off was not until 1805, with landing not complete until 40 minutes before midnight. For some of the pilots, it was their first night landing in England and their first night landing in a P-51.

So D-Day ended, and though the Command lost 26 pilots, the 359th Group had come through unscathed, fearfully tired, but proud of the job, their lives-on-the ground focused on sleep and the bomb line.

That first day amazing things were done by pilots and mechanics alike. The 369th Squadron history cited the D-Day performance of Bob Pherson (11 hours, 25 minutes in the air), John Oliphint (11:40), Herbert Burton (11:25) and Postie Booth (11:15). Only Burton was to survive the week. As for aircraft, IV-A of the 369th flew 16 hours on 6 June and that was topped by four aircraft in the 368th Squadron, where CV-U was airborne 16:55 for the day. The group as a whole flew 136 sorties in six missions covering 21 hours.

The drive continued on the 7th. Lt. R.B. Borg, in the 370th personally blew up another ammunition train and the 370th Squadron found its first tanks and discovered with joy the cal-50 API worked on enemy Armored Force Vehicles. This again in the face of weather, so bad that Sawston-Hall gave permission at 0420 for a 30-minute delay and at 0444 informed Colonel Murphy he could return to base even after take-off if the weather, in his opinion, endangered the group. At 0502, the Colonel took up 16 aircraft on Part II of the Royal Flush cover, but they could not assemble or fly in the soup and they were back at 0544, finally getting away for keeps at 0638.

Still there was nothing moving on the priority roads but the 368th, up at 1019 with the 369th, found nine locomotives to strafe, as well as goods wagons, a roundhouse, a 100-wagon marshalling yard and three trailers of ammunition, which last exploded with a bang.

And wherever the pilots went, whatever their targets, they saw French civilians oblivious of the snarling death in the machine guns, waving at the silver Mustangs, fluttering scarves at the Airmen, unafraid of a mushing turn, a jammed trigger, a swung bomb. The pilots were thrilled -- but at the danger to their friends, especially when the Germans began driving cars and trucks in between houses to get away from the merciless gunfire.

It was on this mid-day mission of the 7th that Lt. John S. Marcinkiewicz, a new and promising pilot, early spotted as a leader and a comer in the 368th, jumped near Fecamp. He was perfectly cool about it, trimming his airplane for level flight after he turned it upside down and only then jumping. Debris from an exploding target (the ammo trailers) had damaged his engine, it seemed.

That night, Colonel Swanson took the group out to cover the heavies attacking airfields and bridges in the western end of the Seine-Loire quadrant. There again was no enemy opposition but the pilots saw all the towns of France ablaze, with smoke to 15,000 feet over Falaise, Averanches, Vire, Argentan, Domfront. The Germans were moving on the ground but haze cloaked and veiled them.

So ended the second day, with the last plane in at 2227. And despite the tempo of the work, there were 52 aircraft ready for new operations at midnight, a tribute to the sleepless ground crews and crew chiefs and their work.

On D plus 2, the heavies went after the bridges over the Loire, seeking to snap the fabric of the railroads there as medium bombers had previously chopped every line over the Seine. There was a field order (377) but it was not in until 0425 and the effect was a hurried briefing at 0515 by Colonel Murphy.

Again the weather was execrable -- haze and low ceiling -- but Colonel Murphy discussed all that in a memorable line (“Weather is weather, and all weather is bad”) and by 0627, when 45 planes took off, the mist had in fact cleared, although scud and mist rolled back over the field for the landing at 1150. There was a great score for strafing, especially in the 369th, which caught a German convoy control point at a cross roads and wiped out 26-odd vehicles.

But by now the Germans had light flak guns by the dozen at every vulnerable point, and there were two losses -- 1st Lt. Benjamin M. Hagan, one of the 368th's originals, and Lt. Robert B. Sander, of the 369th. Sander was believed to have crashed in the woods near the control point but Hagan jumped after being hit in a wild strafing bee on a train southeast of Breteuil. Universally known as “Horrible Hagan,” the tall, lean, dour-faced jokester owned a questing mind, fortified by a rare depth of spirit. Aged 19 when he arrived in England, he had lived a curiously full life, although all of this was customarily masked in the prankery by which he was best known. He habitually explained he had become a fighter pilot to escape the perils of the explosives plant where he had been working and it was usually impossible to decide at what, if any, point, his fantasies ceased to be fact. Two friends, Earl Perkins and Bill Simmons, followed him down and though his chute was afire when he jumped, both saw it later empty in a field.

There was a freak bomb loading for the second mission of the 8th, low squadron to carry 500-pounders, middle squadron 250's, top cover 100's. Although the group had not yet encountered the Germans, there were Nazi hot shots roaming the edges of the assault area bouncing flights intent only on bomb-and-strafe and from now on out every field order and every briefing stressed and hammered at the danger of overconfidence, of forgetting that the German still had 1100 fighters in the West, even though he was hoarding them.

The bombing was better on this mission led by Colonel Swanson (Note 13 on the stat sheet) and all came home safely but the third effort cost two splendid pilots.

The afternoon mission (11th in three days) was down at 1643 and the next briefing was underway soon after that for an 1827 take-off. Colonel Murphy told the pilots the morning formation on the way out was the best he'd ever seen but that the pilots were tired, beginning to wear from fatigue, that this showed in tightening voices, in needless radio chatter, that each must protect all against this fatigue, that all must join in the conscious effort for better control.

The marshalling yards at La Fleache were bombed and trains in the area bombed and strafed on this mission, again flown in wretched weather -- so wretched that the Fighter Command recall went out after the group had been in its area 20 minutes. They stayed in to finish the job and came back at 2215 in the rain under a purple overcast to find the field only with the help of flares.

Neither Postie Booth, the shy killer who had destroyed all of the eight enemy ships at which he had fired in the air, nor John Oliphint, perhaps the ablest ground attack artist in the group, came back. Oliphint was short of coolant and knew it but as his engine died he elected to go in and use his speed to finish his bomb run on a train near Le Fleche rather than to abandon

the attack, pull up and bail out. Pilots thought he had cart wheeled after bellying in. Booth was hit by machine gun fired from the LeFlech yards. He called in the hit on the radio. Later, pilots saw a plane afire in nearby woods. Whether he got out, no one knew.

On this mission, the group fired 13,323 rounds, making a total for the day of 32,936. The pilots were tired men that night, so tired that some of them were beginning to think of benzedrine to keep themselves going, in this 12-missions-in-three-days pace continued. But the weather intervened.

All day on 9 June, the 359th, like the rest of the Command, tried to get off and at the Wehrmacht. It was not possible. Field Order 378 originally was in at 0635 but the 1030 take-off was delayed to 1130, then abandoned and a strafe-bomb show was listed for 1500. At 1650, Colonel Swanson marshalled the group for take-off but there was solid cloud over England and the Continent and Major Stevens telephoned from Ajax to say that unless a take-off was possible without going on instruments at once, to scrub the effort.

One flight got up in the rain but was on instruments before their wheels were cased and the whole job was scrubbed. The dispersed aircraft were left with their bombs hanging after a general scrub order came though at 1711 and at 2205, Ajax ordered bombs off and wingtanks on.

Early on the 10th (35 up at 0708) Colonel Swanson led an escort of heavies into Lyreux (the bomb scheme now was simply to crater the landing grounds and runways and keep them unserviceable). The fighters were asked to spot and flash bomb results. Captain Howard Fogg led the spotter flight, didn't like the system, suggested a new one, which was telephoned to Wing Intelligence. Colonel Syndey, M. Rogers, Wing A-2, presented Fogg's plan to General Anderson, who rang up Ajax, and next day's Field Order stipulated Fogg's idea; Thus the quick flow of tactical ideas from the field.

On this early 10 June mission, the only claims were an electric loco and several goods wagons strafed by Fogg and his flight. But this was the opening of an eventful day.

The only mission actively resented by the pilots as "a suicide job" on the merits of which they did not believe came up next, escort on the deck of four PRU (Photographic Reconnaissance Unit) P-38's to the Antwerp area. The PRU pilots said they had not been able to get any planes back from the heavily defended Lowlands. The 368th was ordered to take them in. Colonel Tyrrell, briefing, warned of the flak and told the pilots they could do little good attempting to intervene: keep the enemy off the PRU and let them brave the flak.

But the compulsion of the West Pointer's code of duty, honor, country led Captain Wayne Norbert Bolefahr, beau ideal of the 368th, to do more than that. As the squadron swept in over the Scheldt with the four P-38's they came under a staggering barrage: there were automatic weapons emplaced everywhere along the winding coasts and the railroads, the heavy guns were in motion at extreme slant ranges. Bolefahr, slim, dark, kindly, courteous, a soldier in whom the sense of duty replaced the killer instinct he totally lacked, felt compelled to intervene. He was there. The Air Force wanted the pictures. So all along that blazing route he flew in the van, firing at every emplacement, drawing the enemy flak while the camera-Lightnings went off

to the side, making their low obliques. It was magnificent; it was also death. "Bo" survived until 1410, four miles N of Antwerp, when his aircraft flamed under a hail of hits and augured in from 100 feet. Tom McGeever's P-51 was badly clobbered, too, but he got back to Manston. All four PRU's came home with, the group hoped, the pictures of whatever it was they wanted. On the way back, four locos were destroyed and another damaged, but it was a saddened group of pilots who sat numbly in the lounge at Wretham Hall that night, and the impact of Bo's loss fell heavily on every man and officer on the ground side who had known him. Of the seven Academy men with whom the Group had come overseas, now one was left -- Captain Lester G. Taylor in the 369th.

Before news came back that Bolefahr was gone, the 369th and 370th had been dispatched after bridges tying the southwestern tip of Normandy to the Breton peninsula. Colonel Murphy led the 370th against a bridge S of St. Malo, getting good strikes and Major Irvine led the 369th against the fabric at Avranches. Hits were seen on the span and on the embankment -- and the hunting improved for the strafing which came after the bombing.

Lt. Tuchscherer veteran of a May crash-landing near Manston survived a crash-landing at Exeter on the way home (and was marooned there for some days) and much of the Group was trapped by a sudden rain storm which brewed up so swiftly that the 352nd was driven in to Wretham, within sight, almost, of their home field at Bodney. Meanwhile, weather or no weather, at 1705 Sawson ordered an attack on railroads in the Conches-Evreux area. Wholly because of the enforced lay-off of the Fighter Command on the 9th, the situation was becoming critical. The German build-up of strength was progressing and now the order was to cut the roads and railroads for sure. The order developed one of the finest performances in the group's history, by Major Niven K. Cranfill, but it took some doing, the first problem being where to find the aircraft.

At 1845, when Major Cranfill briefed on the show, news was still trickling in from the stations at which the afternoon mission had landed, but the sun came out then and 21 airplanes (3 only from 369 and 6 for 370) got up at 1950. At briefing, Major Cranfill had discussed a tunnel he had found on the map at Canches, reputed bitterly defended, and announced he could order no one to attack it: but in the event he made the attack himself and, although the flak was precisely as intense as expected, skipped both his bombs into the tunnel. His wingman, who had to break off because of the flak, saw them go in, and PRU pictures showed the blast marks. (Immediate Interpretation Report No. K 2451 A.C.I.U. on 7GR print 3009).

The mission also developed the first aerial combat the group had encountered since D-Day. It was an eerie business. Everyone was on the deck "strafing," as the order ran, "everything that moves". Visibility in the haze and mist under a low ceiling was very bad as the evening darkened -- and Focke -Wulfs began flitting by at 100 feet. Pop Doersch got one (his sixth) and Lts. Olin P. Drake and Chester R. Gilmore another while Vince Ambrose damaged a third. Drake, one of the first two replacements pilots in the group (the other, Elmer Dunlap was officially reported a prisoner during the month) did not come back. Flak had separated him from Gilmore, the latter reported. Bomb results that night were good -- tracks repeatedly out, hits on bridges and trestles and choke points. Mist covered the field as the last planes came back at 2235.

After impatient days off ops, Colonel Tacon was released by the surgeon for duty on 11 June. There was some discussion about using a shorter delay fuse to avoid the glancing non-exploding hits which had plagued pilots risking their lives to get in on targets but the usual 8-11 second fuzing was employed on a hybrid escort to B-26's to Paris (and their flak-evasion pick-up-and-go tactics were highly educational) followed by 250-pound fighter-bombing of transport. The bombing was fairly good on marshalling yards at Poix, and at Granvillers. Compiègne flak got Lt. G.R. Ralston of the 369th on the way out and he jumped five miles off the enemy coast. An Air Sea Rescue Walrus went in to get him under coastal battery shell fire, after Lt. Sambo White, on DS with the rescue people had circled Ralston giving the May Day. The overloaded Walrus had to taxi back, being unable to take off. Ralston was the first man picked up from the water in the group despite intensive searches for Cater, and earlier, Teepee Smith.

Colonel Murphy led the Group in the second effort, which produced splendid strafing and bombing claims (Note 29, stat sheet). Perhaps subparagraph 1 (a) of Amendment 3 of FC 382, the mission directive, should be quoted: "Estimate in yesterday's Filed Order No. 379 that the enemy had seized upon Friday's bad weather to rush all possible armor, supply, and reinforcement toward the beach had proved correct. The approach roads and railroads on morning 10 June were heavy with traffic in several areas. The determined effort of this Command on Saturday disrupted much of this and inflicted very great damage. A large share of the credit for the fact that the enemy's front line strength has not been seriously augmented is given by high Headquarter to the fighters of the VIII Fighter Command."

Thus stimulated the Group used 64x250 pounders and 15,463 rounds of ammunition on bridges, railroads, trucks, troops, AFV's, horse-drawn caissons, motor transport, a radar tower and much else. The job cost another original -- Bill Simmons, of the 368th. He was last seen South of Caen near Brettyville. Lt. Hatter saw a P-51 crash and burn in approximately the same area.

Again, the early morning mission of the 12th was taken by Colonel Tacon. It turned out to be escort of the heavies to Paris -- the heavily defended suburban airfields there which were the core of the Luftwaffe's strength -- followed by strafing. The strafing was not especially productive (Notes 32) and the 369th Squadron blundered into a confused low level dog fight over the rooftops of Paris. Three pilots did not come back, and only one enemy was seen to crash. The missing Bob Pherson, stocky, calm, reflective, whose promotion to Captain came through on the 26th; Howard Linderer, a curly-haired, firm-chinned replacement pilot already promoted to first Lieutenant, and slated for bigger things, and Lt. L.D. Hess, one of the new crop. This loss whether it was to Paris flak, collision at rooftop level or enemy aircraft no one knew -- was the heaviest of the month and raised to 11 the toll of the first week of the invasion.

This 0638 mission was down at 1140 and 35 planes still were ready to go that afternoon - the first time that Wretham had a blue sky that week. But nothing developed until 1855 and that was only a warning order for next day's go. This (mission No. 130) (Intops N. 44) after some early morning cancellations, turned out to be another bomber ride to Paris with a rush briefing and take-off at 0630 in a cold rain under a gray sky. The weather was bad, so bad, that a recall went out at 1020 but the Group finished escort and then had to sit down at East Coast bases, no

airplanes getting back to base. But at 1200, all were accounted for and a brilliant sun flared in the afternoon, letting the outliers get back home, where Captain Swiren's radio men began recrystallizing back to 67th Wing control, "High Flight" being over. All hands felt better to be back under command of General Anderson, a combat pilot, and a staff which acted as firm supporters of its tactical elements.

This day, also, the group learned that flying bombs had been launched overnight from the Pas de Calais platforms against England; and though the new, fresh torment for the long-suffering people of England seemed a cruel trial in the last hour before victory, the gravity of the new attack convinced the last doubters of the worth and value of their weary hours during the preceding six months on patrol over the Noball and Crossbow sites while the bombers banged away.

When the Group was finally home, the work was speeded, which was just as well, since Field Order 387 came in at 1700, stipulating a rendezvous time that required a 1738 start-engine time. Briefing was called at once, began at 1730, was over exactly at 1738, but rather than rush and stumble Major Daniel D. McKee (promoted on the 11th) set back all time 30 minutes. The assigned areas was patrolled uneventfully, though, Caen could be seen under naval gunfire, and Sam Huskins of the 370th landed for oil check at an emergency strip on the beachhead -- first pilot to make a normal take-off and landing in France. He brought back four letters given him by RAF airmen. They were turned over to the RAF security type for Norfolk, S.L. Mason, of Norwich.

The 14th was a beautiful morning, the dawn breaking through scattered cloud, changing to an azure sky with delicate puffy high cloud glinting in the sunlight. Briefing was at 0515 by Colonel Swanson for an uneventful escort of the heavies to Paris (under Micelles flak being intense as ever) as indicated on the appended track chart of routes flown.

At 1345, a release arrived until 1700 (these brief releases were very helpful, allowing maintenance and new-pilot training) but a late show was scrubbed and the till-dawn release arrived at 1547.

A miscalculation in the briefing time on 15 June led to an unholy rush. The Duty Intelligence Officer that morning misread his table of distances in the hurried tempo of plotting, reading '110' as 1 hour, 10 minutes, in stead of 110 minutes. Consequently briefing at 0650 was hurried and Colonel Tacon, leading, "poured the blossom" all the way in a squadron race to rendezvous, which was reached on time, off the Ile de Re in the Bay of Biscay (Field Order 390). The bombers were early and were eventually picked up on the homeward track off St. Nazeire at 0925. The mission was eventful only for the magnificent weather, which gave a sightseer's view of new country, since the route back was out across Brittany, as the track shows. The operation against Bordeaux and Angouleme is described in Intops Summary No. 46 of the Air Force.

At noon, Wing notified the group that the four-plane alert flight maintained since May (see May history) was abolished, the danger of paratroop intervention to block the air cover for the invasion being considered over. It has been a tiresome chore for the pilots, sitting in cockpits an hour before dawn and at dusk and being at standby throughout the day, and it had also

complicated maintenance efforts, since the effect of the alert hold-out on the 26 missions of the first 15 days in June was to deprive the group of 104 sorties against the enemy during the fortnight. On the afternoon of the 15th, a long distance fighter bomber effort (one tank and one bomb for a 455-mile run) was planned but abandoned by Wing at 1445.

The 16th presented the usual overcast with a bad ground haze. The contemplated effort was against Bourges and Avord on F.O. 392. At 0838, Combat Operations at Walcott put in a hold order but briefing was as planned at 0910, Colonel Tacon devoting most of it to an analysis of the fighting abilities of jet-propelled aircraft and rocket aircraft. He told his pilots once more that "no one was ever shot down in a vertical turn, "discussed the danger of trying to dive away, described and diagrammed the acceleration curve of the jet planes and recommended if the new propulsion types were encountered to turn in and up to capitalize on the Mustangs' turning circle and superior fighting ability at comparatively slow speeds. New weapons must be expected, he said, reminding the men of the Flying Bombs. The mission, as expected, was scrubbed and conversation centered on the announcement that the B-29 at last was in motion against Japan and had bombed steelworks on the mainland of Dai Nippon. Incidentally, there was much envious conversation in this period about air combat against the Japanese, the general feeling being that, compared to fighting the Luftwaffe, it was pretty much like shooting goldfish.

In any event, a job of work turned up -- area patrol in support of B-24's over Ypres under MEW control. This long-range radar did not work well that day, there was 10/10 cloud, the controller could not pinpoint the group and vectors were uncertain. Colonel Swanson returned early with a rough engine and Lt. Raymond B. Janney, II, acted as Chairman for the rest of the mission, which was down at 1910 after a 1547 takeoff.

The first mission of 17 June was a curiously mixed up affair. It began leisurely with a telephoned warning from the Wing of a Liberator escort with zero at noon. This was amended at 0905 as a 1300 zero. The teletyped field order was in at 0927 with the original 1200 zero. By phone, Wing said, this should be 1300. At 1043, the teletyped said to delay all times an hour. At 1110 Wing called to say there was confusion about times. Were we adding on hour to the 1300 zero? We were, so fine, said Wing. Half an hour later, Wing was back on the line to revoke this and explain that the teletype merely confirmed the earlier delay, so Major McKee took 45 aircraft off at 1210, made rendezvous late at L'aigle but did shepherd two dozen Libs out of the continent.

Meanwhile, Colonel Tacon was going over the briefing procedure with 20-odd new pilots, describing what he expected of them. Captain Swiren discussed R/T procedures and codes and Captain Donohue described what the group had done up to date. This was an all-day "cram" mission, interrupted at 1300 by news that Major Wayne R. Brown, a veteran of Panama who had joined up five days earlier as Group Operations Officer of the 368th squadron, had been killed near Coafeld in southeast Anglia. The details of that last flight are in the attached 368th squadron history. The loss, fourth non-operational death on the station, was keenly felt, since the quiet, assured new officer had made a splendid impression.

A second mission on this 17th of June -- area patrol of Evreux while bombers attacked Tours and Laval airfields -- produced nothing save a freak target, a weather balloon shot down by the 369th over the orbit points.

18 June was a day of great disillusion for the people of Germany. The Eighth Air Force went back over the Reich, shattering the enemy hope that the invasion would divert the hail of explosives from their homeland. It was quite a show: 1160 heavies attacking with 2938 tons and the bomb-aiming, especially over resuscitated Hamburg was extraordinarily fine. The 359th's part of the endeavor consisted of escort to the airfield at Luneberg. Rendezvous was at sea off the Frisian coast after struggling against a 90-mile an hour head wind all the way. There was thick cirrus from 26,000 to 39,000 just before the target and touch was lost for ten minutes. Luckily, no enemy aircraft appeared before escort was reestablished and maintained to the English coast. Colonel Tacon led. A brand new pilot, John C. Allen, who had arrived at Wretham only two weeks before on 3 June, made an extraordinary solo trip home, bailing out just inside the English Coast, as his attached certificate narrates in a quite remarkable story. He got home with the help of his tiny escape kit compass and his engine, which signalled distress over Denmark, lasted precisely long enough to keep him out of the water. He escaped with a fractured ankle.

That afternoon, there was intensive local flying, breaking in the new men. At 1450, an accident was reported two miles southeast of the Hall. It turned out to be a Bodney mid-air collision, killing a flight leader, and held breaths sighed in somewhat selfish relief.

A fine Group job and another epic individual homing feat both came up on the 19th. The mission (Field Order 399) was to Bordeaux. Heavy stratified cloud layers ran from the deck to 29,000 feet. Some bomber formations gave up (Intops No. 50, par B-1) and two fighter groups also abandoned the attempt to get through. Only one group actually reached the target area to see the bombing -- and that was the 359th, or the 370th squadron and two flights of the 369th. The other flights escorted their bombers back when the heavies aborted. In all, though no enemy put in an appearance, 16 fighters were lost in the Command, and for hours it was feared that Pop Doersch was one of them. He was disoriented, with a bad engine, no radio, no compass, and frightful weather. But, after seven hours and 30 minutes of flight in his single-seater fighter, he came home alone. His own description of the ride is attached. He neglects only to say that the key to his homing was his decision to keep the beach off his right wing, realizing that in that case he eventually would find a recognizable landmark, whether it be Cherbourg or Schouwen. Pop also found what he thought was a flying bomb site and offered to lead some bombers back to it but his offer, forwarded via Wing, was not taken up.

This all was a highly commendable show, but, it was succeeded in the calendar by a failure -- one of the few in the group's combat history. The day was 20 June, the mission Field Order 402, the target the elusive oil works at Politz, northeast of Berlin, and the enemy -- twin engine, rocket and cannon-firing Me-410's -- got in and out with a vicious, slashing attack to knock down at least 17 Liberators in the Baltic northeast of Rugen Island. (Intops No. 51, Second Operation, Second Force).

Briefing that day was called for 0430 and the pilots were awakened at 0345. The briefing was planned to give the usual 90-minute interval between briefing and start engine, but it was decided to cut this interval, so briefing was moved back to 0530 (to the disgust of the punctual arisers) and then re-switched to 0515 when a head wind developed. Take-off was at 0610 and rendezvous at sea, off Helgoland, 11 minutes early, at 0801. The Lib formation was extended, slightly echeloned, and, after the 355th group joined at 0900 near Cape Arkone, Colonel Swanson, who had been covering the front of the force, swept to the rear and port to pick up two combat wings of unprotected B-24's flying nearer Sweden. Then all hell broke loose. The starboard side of the Liberator formation flamed and twinkled with gun fire -- and up to about 80 ME-410's effecting complete surprise, came in for a wholly free swipe at the bombers. The 369th squadron, with Colonel Swanson, was out of position. The 370th squadron tried to get up, but Major McKee's wing tanks refused to release and by the time he had turned the squadron over to Paul Bateman, it was too late. And the 368th, flying top cover, never did see the enemy attack from 4 o'clock underneath.

Only Captain Herbert C. Burton, with a new wingman, Grant Perrin, scored. They got one Me-410, chasing it down. The 355th Group, which was in better position, also could not block the first attack, but engaged the main enemy body, getting 13, while the 4th Group came up to knock down 10 of the engagement and the 357th Group destroyed seven Me 109s at Pasewalk. Of the 34 B-24's lost of the 358 despatched, 17 were credited to enemy action, 11 to flak, two to accident and four (believed landed in Sweden) to unknown causes.

The enemy had gotten in for only one good pass, true, and had paid for it (the bombers themselves claimed 10) but the standard of fighter close escort now was so high that the Group felt keenly the multiple bad breaks that had kept it from the usual 8-0-16 against 80 intervention. Bomb results at Politz were good and the preceding day's fire at Hamburg could be seen 100 miles away, which was one consolation, and there was an anecdote before the day was out.

That afternoon, the command was sent out to find and stop a German panzer division supposed to be moving up to the battle area from the Paris area. The group, led by Colonel Murphy, did a bangup job. Only one armored force train was found, but Colonel Murphy led 10 aircraft in four passes at that at Chalons at 1900, and the 368th ran a gunnery pattern over marshalling yards at Mocux and at Chateauaux Thierry. Claims are listed in Note 42 of the statistical summary. The cost was their loss of 1st Lt. Virgil L. Sansing, a soft-voiced sad-eyed pilot decorated with a magnificent Polish-cavalry upturning mustache. Recently promoted to first lieutenant, he had established himself as an able pilot, a fearless strafer and a good companion from his first mission. Hit by machine gun fire near Levignen he got out safely and his chute opened. On this mission, they burned up 18,779 rounds of ammunition, peak total for any single effort in the month.

Back at Wretham, the station was preparing to play host to the Ninth Fighter Command's 369th Group (with which Major Rockford V. Gray, one-time operations office of the 359th, was serving.) The plan was to bring up the Ninth's groups from Southern England to East Anglia and ram a tremendous show over Germany, to push three wings of B-17's into Russia on the first lap of a shuttle run. This had been expected for weeks and there was much envy of the 4th Group and one squadron of the 352nd, elected to go all the way as fighter escort to Russia.

Preparations for the 369th were complete -- a new homer on their frequency, billets in a double Nissen in the tech site, messing and transport, spare P-47 parts assembled by engineering -- when, at 2005, wing announced the visit was canceled. The weather was worsening rapidly and the strafing mission came home under a dull sky with scud at 800 feet.

This wet mist endured during the night and there was doubt at 0600 briefing on the 21st if the group could get off, 10/10ths at 705 feet. Colonel Tyrrell was chosen at the last moment to brief. He prepared himself quickly and did an admirable job in presenting a highly complex effort designed to baffle the German fighter controllers. At 0640, the weather was still bad, and Colonel Tyrrell asked Wing if he must take off at all hazard. Then the sun broke through the rain for a brief moment, and when Wing called back at 0700 to discuss scrubbing, Tyrrell already was on his way to his airplane, taking off into the scud at 0719. There were blue holes South of the field but the air was so wet that the runway dust rolled up into a brown cloud at the southwest corner, hanging there until all 41 airplanes were up.

The attack was the most successful of the AAF assaults on Berlin (for a neutral's report, see Swedish quotes, p 2, A.M. W.I.S., No. 252) and the Fourth Force under our escort lost no bombers to enemy aircraft (p 3, Intops No. 52). Escort was uneventful -- and six hours and 11 minutes long. Colonel Tyrrell had set his face against careless attacks on unprofitable ground targets, instructing his pilots in the 368th not to strafe defended airdromes unless they were ordered to. But on the way out of Berlin he saw aircraft on a field east of Wittstock and, whether out of boredom with the long ride or sudden decision the profits were worth the risk, took his flight down in a steep dive. Flak began coming up at 10,000, so intense that Tom McGeever, leading the second element, broke off, but the Colonel and wing man, Lt. James Lubien, went on in. Lubien saw perhaps 30 gliders and at least one four-engined transport before a flak hit shattered his windshield. What the Colonel fired at, Lubien didn't know. He did know that his own airplane was badly holed. He called for an assessment, Colonel Tyrrell looked the wing man's airplane over, pronounced it okay, and then flame spurted from his own engine. He called "I am going to have to bail out." Lubien kept on going, trying to get more altitude. The Colonel had at least 5000 feet when his engine flamed, was a safe distance from the strafed field, was not under fire, and presumably got out safely. Major McKee, leading the 370th took over the Group.

Colonel Tyrrell, commander of the 368th at Westover Field when the squadron was only a cadre of enlisted specialists, without either pilots and airplanes, had carried it through all the difficulties of organization, training, staging and combat orientation. He was an admirable briefing officer, an unflustered air leader, an analytical tactician, and as a combat pilot had contributed one of the fine individual performances when he climbed to 34,000 over Naunhaus on 4 February to engage and break up a superior German formation and himself destroy two of them.

His loss, first field grade combat casualty, was keenly felt not only in his squadron but throughout the Group. To take over his command, Major Clifton Shaw, who had gone through OTU as operations officer of the 368th, was sent back from his group ops post.

Before news came through from Controller that Colonel Tyrrell had jumped Colonel Tacon had already called a meeting of all the pilots who had aborted on the mission. The list of aborts had been growing -- 10 on the mission to Politz and now 16 on the ride to Berlin. This had left only 25 men in the Group over the target -- and enemy attacks were invariably coming in formations of 60-odd, plus more as top cover. Colonel Tacon felt strongly that airmen were primarily soldiers, entrusted with a gun platform, and as bound to go where and when ordered as any soldier. Yet the problem was complicated by the fact that a pilot with his radio out was a liability to the whole formation, by the fact that the earlier a man who was worried about his engine aborted, the better (since no escorts need be sent back with him across the water) and by all the delicate interplay of forces which decided an airborne pilot unsatisfied with the performance of his fighting machine either to go on or to go back. At any rate, aborts dropped off sharply for the rest of the month, averaging out to four per mission or 11 percent, better than May's record of 15.6 percent and below the Fighter Command May average of about 12 percent.

22 June opened an unhappy acquaintance with an embankment, long bridge, short bridge and tunnel at Nanteuil, France. The group went out to attack it with 500 and 250 pound bombs, being informed by the Anti-Aircraft people there was no flak there. The attack proved that the flak was in fact intense and two of the first four men to make skip-bombing runs were shot down. They were both veterans, of the 370th, and were the first losses in that squadron since the invasion began. Harold Hollis with a score of 3-1-1, and Howard Grimes, with three destroyed, both were believed to have crashed under the hail of light flak fire. The rest of the group dive-bombed without much success.

Next day, the 23rd, the Air Force sent 28 B-17's against the Nanteuil bridge (par B-1-b, Intops No. 54). These fiddled about over the target until the 359th's gas supply ran low and we had to leave, but the 13 Forts which finally attacked didn't hit the bridge either. Nor, later on, did Liberators which the 359th escorted to Nanteuil on 25 June.

Before this third attempt on the bridge, Colonel Tacon, on the 24th, led in one of the more weird escort jobs. The targets for Libs that morning were Melum and Bretigny, the Paris airdromes again. But the Liberators flew an erratic track to Creleans, their secondary, then they headed for Paris, called they would attack Creleans and finally wound up dropping on Conches. Colonel Tacon went down to strafe goods wagons and the 369th damaged a locomotive and some box cars near Abancourt in a post-bombing sweep which uncovered nothing moving on highway or rail line in the Amiens-Gicors sector.

So there arrived the morning of 25 June and what was, in many ways, the most satisfactory mission ever flown by the Group. This was escort deep into France of three wings, 36 B-17's in each, freighted with parachute supplies for the French Maquis, the bushwhackers fighting the Germans. The bombers' load made it the most novel job yet encountered. The visible proof of the existence of a strong French underground movement (there had been cynics at Wretham) was stirring, and the change from bombing and strafing to spy story supply-from-the-air was a lift. Moreover the country covered, deep down East of the Rhone Valley, was new, and flying down the valleys below the level of the Alpine foothills jutting to either side was pure exhilaration. Mission Report No. 146 of the group (In FiCom Summary 208, p 6) describes how

the drop zones were marked by signal fires and smoke pots, trucks lined along roads, partisans running to the packaged supplies as these tumbled from the B-17's at 3000 feet.

This mission had started in some hysteria, briefing was at 0515 and waiters at Wretham Hall were slow getting up, so that breakfast was hurried. This was routine enough for some pilots but it bothered others who liked a leisurely start (for a pilot's reactions on the preliminaries of a mission, see Captain Howard L. Fogg's attached little essay). But the day was glorious at take-off, 0614, and the set-course formation against a white-flecked blue sky was perhaps the most geometrically perfect one the group had achieved in 146 combat mission. The pilots were down at 1225 from this one and went back with the Libs to Nanteuil at 1726, Major Shaw leading 38 aircraft out.

Rain scrubbed operations on the 26th, the weather clearing somewhat in the afternoon, and then the month spun out to the end in four bomber escort missions the last four days.

Creil marshalling yard was the target on 27 June. Plotting was complicated by a prohibition against any flying over Southeast England, meaning Kent and Surrey, then suffering the brunt of the flying bomb attack. Originally a "Diver Defense Area" and "Diver Gun Belt" had been set up, with a three-code system limiting flight below 8000 feet. "Flabby" was the word giving fighters a free rein, guns being silent; "Spouse" freed the guns and barred fighters below 8000; "Fickle" allowed fighters in the "Defense Area" but not in the Gun Belt. Hundreds of balloons had been moved in south of London, however, and after a friendly airplane had run into one, the Command's planes were told to stay out, no matter what the altitude. A circuitous track was plotted and mission produced good bomb results but nothing more, save an improvement in the M.E.W. Controller's technique, this being judged now satisfactory.

Colonel Swanson led this one, and he also led the 28 June mission to Saarbrucken (FiCom 210). Briefing was 0530, and the last plane was down at 1054. Rain and lashing wind developed under a dull overcast 15 minutes later and a release came through until the 29th.

The 29th was the day the Air Force sent out 18 combat wings of bombers to Germany and didn't lose one to enemy aircraft; a subject for much felicitation by higher authority. Yet Major Irvine, who led 36 P-51's off Wretham at 0727 found a highly-confused and shapeless stream of Liberators over the Zuider Zee, fighter escort spread so thin over so many targets it was non-existent in spots. And there was confusion when the time came to break down to squadrons to escort boxes over Magdeburg and Oschersleben. There was so many stragglers that at 1045 General Anderson ordered off another flight as a special straggler party.

For the group it was all "uneventful". Lt. Tommy Lane of the 368th, decided to jump at 1205 when his engine quit but managed to get his gasoline feeding again and stayed in, and Gene Craig's late flight spent much time over a stranded ASR launch off Ijmuiden, but that was all except that Lt. Lubien, making an emergency landing, made an emergency stop and nose-over which was regarded as an exceptionally fine piece of crisis piloting, averting a worse crash.

The 361st Group, in roughly the same area, made a killing on the ground, however, (FiCom Summary 411) and the 357th found bandits near Leipzig, and none of the Germans did get in at the bomber boxes.

That afternoon, Dr. Robin M. Williams came down from Pinetree to give an hour long questionnaire to 60 pilots on what they thought of their jobs, their airplanes, their assignments, their training, their food, their leaves -- a remarkably adequate opportunity for the discharge of beefs and bitches. And, immediately thereafter, General Anderson arrived to present Colonel Murphy with his Silver Star and distribute Distinguished Flying Crosses (vide the attached pictures). The general told the pilots he was proud of them and the work they had done and knew they would "keep pitching".

The month ended with Mission No. 151 (Field Order 424), involving bomber escort to Le Culot, followed by fighter-bombing with 100 pound missiles. Transportation targets were assigned priority in the order but the group found a luscious collection of barracks near Nieuport and flung 72 bombs into it. Nothing could be said with certainty without pictures but the results looked good, and Ajax was highly interested. On the mission, just as Lubien had prevented a crash the day before, so Jim Cuzner, of the 369th, faced with loss of power on take-off, neatly steered down a taxi strip between fence and ammo depot. Averting what had looked like a certain pile-up.

It was a good sign, the new boys were old hands now. And they still had an enormous job of work to do.