

## 369TH FIGHTER SQUADRON HISTORY FOR THE MONTH OF JUNE 1944

The events of June 1944 will be reported in modern history as the most critically important in the affairs of men. To this cause of freedom the 369th Fighter Squadron contributed heavily in keeping destruction on the enemy and in personal sacrifice. The pilots flew a record total of 37 hazardous Escort-Bomb-Strafing missions, sometimes chalking up two or three flights daily, frequently taking off and landing in darkness and rain. Seven of our pilots failed to return from missions during this month. They accounted for one Me 410, countless trucks and freight cars, many locomotives, railroad bridges and staff cars, and enemy troops. The primary mission in battle, destruction of the enemy was furthered by the efficiency and diligence of all the ground personnel in their unceasing efforts to "Keep 'em Flying".

On 1 June the squadron strength consisted of 244 enlisted men and 37 Officers with Major Chauncey S. Irvine in command.

During the first five days of June a business-as-usual atmosphere prevailed. Captain Karl R. Kirk, a 359th Group pilot on D.S. at Bircham, was assigned to us on the 1st. The squadron flew two routine escort missions on the 2nd and 4th guarding the "Heavies" while they plastered airfields in France and softened up the invasion coast. On 3 June two new officers joined the organization, 2nd Lt. Ferris C. Suttle Jr. and Flight Officer Charles R. Breuning, increasing the strength to 39 Officers.

The day all of us had been preparing for during the past three years was at hand. D-Day dawned early in this unit with briefing at 1230 on the morning of 6 June 1944. Spirits ran high and one idea prevailed, "This is it". The squadron took off under moonlight at 0245 and uneventfully patrolled the Normandy coast until 0935. After refueling and taking on bombs the squadron accomplished two more missions during the day striking priority targets near Le Mans France. The score by day's end: Three (3) Locomotives, 55 box and 8 oil cars, 1 Staff car and two stone bridges. The squadron morale on D-Day hit an all time high. It was kept from dropping off too sharply later in the month by the appeasement policy of granting the men 24 hour passes within a 25 mile radius limit of the Post. It was also augmented by the activities and facilities of the Aero Club, the daily movies, the monthly party, and a winning Softball team.

After a lucrative strafing mission on the 7th the squadron engaged in three similar operations in France on 6 June. This proved to be the costliest day of the campaign. On the first mission 2nd Lt. Robert B. Sander Jr. was lost while strafing a convoy of ammunition trucks. During the third strafing mission two of our "original" pilots failed to return. 1st Lt. John H. Oliphint after making a bomb run on a marshalling yard and destroying numerous freight cars pulled up, then bellied in his injured plane. Shortly after this 1st Lt. Robert J. Booth was heard on the radio saying his plane had been hit by flak. These boys were truly great fighter pilots and in their long stay with the squadron were loved and respected by all. The refreshing modesty, simplicity, and naive fearlessness of Lt. Booth contrasted strongly to that of Lt. Oliphint, the colorful, dramatic and enthusiastic "Mad Rebel" from Texas. Before a faulty coolant system and a piece of flak halted their careers in the air Lt. Booth had downed nine "Jerry" planes, while Lt. Oliphint destroyed four and countless enemy ground targets.

The planes were given a chance to cool off on 9 June while the engineers and armorers repaired them. The following day the squadron clocked off another three havoc raising missions on enemy shipping and transportation without loss. And twice on the 11th of June they strafed and dive-bombed. However, on returning from the first mission Lt. Gilbert R. Ralston's plane was hit by flak. Rolling his plane on its right side at 2,500 feet. after the engine stopped he loosened his straps, jettisoned the canopy, and dropped out over the English Channel. His chute opened at 1,500 feet and he noticed the dinghy strung out beneath him. Examining it in the air he noted a large hole where the carbon dioxide bottle had been. After hitting the water and submerging he unfastened his leg straps, unhooked the dinghy, cleared the shroud lines from around his head, came to the surface and pulled his Mae West cords. Air Sea Rescue picked him up about 1/2 hour later. He suffered minor shock and exposure. Lucky Boy. Also on 11 June five pilots were promoted to First Lieutenant, Lts. Harry F. Cuzner, Robert W. Campbell, Frank S. Fong, Virgal E. Sansing and Howard A. Linderer.

On 12 June three pilots were lost in combat and three new officers were assigned to the squadron. After escorting the bombers safely back to the coast on this day, the boys turned back towards Paris shooting up targets of opportunity. However, shortly after their ammunition was expended they were bounced by eight FW 190's and in the resulting melee Lt. Robert L. Pherson, Howard A. Linderer and Leroy D. Hess were lost. On this particular day we received into the organization three new pilots, 2nd Lts. Grant M. Perrin, Edwin L. Sjoblad, and Edward J. Thorne.

From 13 to 19 June the squadron engaged in nine uneventful but effective bomber-escort missions over France. On 14 June Captain Lester G. Taylor rejoined the organization and was assigned the position of Flight Leader in A Flight. His compatriots also named Flight Commanders on this day were as follows: Lt. Herbert C. Burton, B-Flight, Lt. Eugene R. Orwig, C-Flight, Lt. Charles H. Kruger, D-Flight, Lt. Robert L. Thacker, E-Flight and Lt. Harry L. Matthew F-Flight. Lt. Robert C. Thomson was named Assistant Operations Officer.

Our fighting personnel was augmented on the 16th by the assignment of the following new pilots, 1st Lt. Jack D. Stevens and 2nd Lts. Donald E. Cannon, Frank A. Holliday, Donald S. Melrose, Paul E. McCluskey, John E. Keur. On the 20th the squadron returned to long range escort work. While guarding the bombers in a raid near Berlin Lt. Herbert C. Burton and Grant M. Perrin shared an Me 410. Later on this same day while flying the second mission Lt. Virgal E. Sansing's plane was struck by flak near Versailles, France. He immediately hit the silk and was last seen peacefully floating towards earth. Of the newcomers to this squadron this pilot possessed considerable promise. His genial personality and nonchalant manner was as much envied as his prodigiously dapper, handle-bar mustache. The contributions he and his fellow pilots made toward establishing a beach-head and hastening the war's end were large and generously given. Their memory and accomplishments will not be forgotten.

During the latter one-third of the month bomber escort and area support missions were the order of the day, except for a diversion on the 22nd when the squadron dive-bombed a bridge in France. A double mission on the 25th made up for a day's rest on the 27th. Two trips to Berlin on the 21st and 29th painfully reminded the Germans of Fighter Command's strength and versatility in giving tactical support to ground troops and still protecting the bombers on their strategical duties deep in the heart of Germany.

At the close of the month an examination of records indicated an astounding amount of iron man feats. A few of the more outstanding were: 11 hrs and 45 minutes of operational time logged by Lt. Robert L. Pherson, 11 hrs and 40 minutes by Lt. John H. Oliphint, 11 hrs and 25 minutes by Captain Herbert C. Burton and 11 hrs and 15 minutes by Lt. Robert J. Booth. The pilots leading in amount of combat time flown during the month were: Lts. Floyd J. Crenshaw, 83 hours and 20 mins, Ivan B. Hollomon, 79 hrs and 35 mins, Harry F. Cuzner, 76 hrs and 15 mins, Eugene R. Orwig, 73 hrs and 05 mins, Charles W. Staley, 72 hrs and 40 mins, and Harry L. Matthew, with 72 hrs and 0 minutes. The average time per pilot logged during the month including new pilots and those who were Missing in Action during the month was slightly in excess of 40 hours. Further examination of the records revealed that one of our planes, A/C No. 6803, IVA, which is crewed by Pvt. James A. Papagiannes flew 16 hours of Operational time on 6 June. Another one of our planes, A/C No. 4798, IVt, crewed by S/Sgt. Charles H. Miller, flew the amazing total of 130 hours and 20 minutes of Operational time during the month of June.

Under the wise guidance of Squadron Commander, Major Chauncey S. Irvine, and the untiring efforts of the Operations Officer, Major Niven K. Cranfill the air echelon distinguished itself greatly during the Invasion; while on the ground under the mature and efficient direction of Major Cecil W. Henderson, the Executive Officer, the squadron functioned in a smooth and coordinated manner. On 30 June the squadron strength was 244 enlisted men and 43 Officers with Major Chauncey S. Irvine in command.

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