

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

Re-equipped in shining silver P-51's, the 359th Fighter Group fought a savage battle of attrition against the Luftwaffe in May, 1944. These were the long grim weeks of air assault on the German designed to prod and lance and ferret out his invasion air defenses and hack them apart before the Battle of the Beaches began.

It was magnificent and it was war, but it was costly to the young pilots flying 500 miles into combat: more costly than most of them realized in the day-to-day excitement of new missions, new objectives, new tactics, new records.

Sixteen men were lost over the continent in the 25 missions flown in 22 days of May. This was 125 percent of the total 13 lost in the preceding four and a half months of combat flying in P-47's. And even greater tragedy, two other pilots lost their lives, the first two days of May, in transition training accidents in the sleek Merlin-motored Mustangs. From all causes the group had lost 15 men on 1 May, by 31 May, the total was 33.

Of the 18 lost in May, 13 were "originals" who had trained together in the States. Five were replacement pilots, one of them (Lt E.J. Maslow) an experienced veteran of the Iceland Interceptor Command and PRU flights in England. The toll of the month included a squadron operations officer and six flight leaders, and took from the group three of the six West Pointers of whom it had been so proud, as well as the cherubic "Bunky" Hudelson whose application for appointment to the Academy was pending. Six, possibly seven of these men may have been shot down by enemy fighters. This estimate is generous to the Luftwaffe since it is probable that some of the seven were lost to engine troubles having no direct relation to combat. Eight others were knocked down while strafing. Two were killed in non-operation accidents. And one was hit by German flak at 25,000 feet and jumped. By a supreme irony, this latter victim of the wedding of trigonometry, electronics and ballistics was Capt. Charles C. Ettlesen, commander of the VIII Fighter Command's experimental strafing squadron and low-level attack specialist of the group.

Thus, the casualties. The price paid by the Germans was heavy. In air combat, the group's score was 40-3-4. Ground strafing produced claims of 20-0-26, plus 41 locomotives, six barges, two tugs, and a variety of radar and signal towers, barracks, ammunition cars, and assorted miscellaneous targets on the ground. All of this in addition to the group's special mission in the war.

This basic job was the deep escort of heavy bombers into targets which the Germans believed to be unreachable. That job was done 15 times, including four long trips to and beyond

Berlin, to the Swiss frontier, to Saxony, to Anhalt. The track on the appended map weaves a web across the Reich and the bombers crawled round this lattice frame of protection to hurl thousand of tons of explosives upon the enemy's homeland.

With an audacity that defied every previous concept of the role of fighter aircraft, the Eighth was sent in May to beat up the railroads of Germany, and the 359th's assignments were Meklenburg, on the Baltic, an area well covered on 21 May, and Baden-Wurtemberg to the South, on the shores of Lake Constance, to which, as the month ended, it still awaited despatch.

In May, escort of the bombers along the penetration route to such a target as Brunswick in the heart of Germany, with direct support at the target and subsequent withdrawal cover, became commonplace: and it was a very different thing than the old 20-minutes-of-escort allowed by the huge petrol consumption of the P-47. The scoop-bellied Mustangs, IFF sets replaced by a fuselage tank and two 75-gallon tanks on the wing bomb-racks, permitted endurance of up to six hours. And "endurance" was the right word, as pilots cramped in the crowded cockpit, unable to move more than a cautious inch or two in any direction, soon discovered. "Dinghy tail", caused by sitting squarely on a Mark K dinghy with type C pack for six hours, became a recognized occupational disease, cause for grounding by the flight surgeons, even though the old seat-type parachutes were universally supplanted by the newer flat back chutes.

Even including such brief errands as the 65-minute bomber abortion of 10 May, the unsuccessful skip-bombing experiment of 23 May and three comparatively brief rides into France, the average time in the air for the 25 missions of May was four hours and 18 minutes.

In summary, the month embraced 15 deep escort jobs, four more shallow bomber escorts, three area patrols modelled on Play "Eye Que", the aforementioned fighter-bombing, one Air-Sea Recuse Search and one "Chattanooga" strafe mission, of which more later.

Maintenance was trickier on the P-51B than on the rugged Thunderbolts, the mechanics on the line were unfamiliar with the airplane and the battle loss higher. These factors resulted in fewer aircraft airborne: 1014, or 40.5 per mission -- and an increase in the number of early returns: 124 or five per mission. The 889 sorties flown accordingly represented 35.5 ships a mission, or three 12-plane squadrons. Two factors make this figure artificially low: first, the fact that during transition to the P-51 during the beginning of the month, only two squadrons were operational for four missions, and, second, the special ASR search flown 22 May, in which only four aircraft were put up. Deducting this latter mission, the figures would be: 24 missions, 1009 airborne, 124 early returns, 835 sorties, or 42 up, 5 back and 37 on the job in an average mission.

From 15 May onward, the problems of maintenance were aggravated by the Command's decision to keep four aircraft alerted for local defense against sneak German raids and/or suicide parachutist missions. This was tiresome for the quartet of pilots elected for stand-by duty from half an hour before first light until last light, but its more important effect was in decreasing the number of aircraft flown against the enemy. With 33 operational groups in the theatre, the local

defense of four planes each represented 132 operational ships -- or three combat groups -- out of action every mission day.

The enemy was sighted in strength five times and was engaged in force on four of these days, (for which see the appended tabulation). The scoring was concentrated in three of these engagements and in the flashing ground attack on Mecklenburg on 21 May. Similarly with the losses. With one exception, they came on each of the four scoring days. The exception was the near disaster of an impromptu strafing run by two flights of the 370th on the heavily defended Reims-Champagne airdrome 11 May. Both flight leaders, as well as Lt. Maslow, were lost, another pilot crash-landed in England, and Lt. G.A. "Pop" Doersch did one of those incredible things by pretzelling his propeller on the enemy airdrome surface and somehow egg-beating his way to the emergency field at Manston. For all of this the group got one enemy aircraft on Reims-Champagne airdrome.

These losses, statistically, represented 1 operational loss per 3.75 enemy aircraft destroyed, (1 loss in combat with enemy aircraft per 6 enemy aircraft destroyed in the air is the most accurate combat ratio now possible of construction), 1 loss per 55.5 sorties flown or .64 loss per mission. Including all sightings, whether engagable or not, the total of 401 airborne enemy aircraft seen figured to 16 per mission, with an average mission score of 2.4-1-1.2.

At month's end, the group's casualties by squadrons were: 368th, 9; 369th, 9; and 370th, 14. Of these three were "routine" accidents, one a Detached Service loss (Lt Carter: vide April's history) and 29 were operational. The groups scoreboard read: 124-11-70, of which 46-8-39 were officially confirmed and 78-3-31 awaited assessment.

The group learned during the month that both Captain Ben H. Albertson, who bailed out over Picardy (see March history) and Lt. James R. Pino, who bellied into a Holland field 11 April were Prisoners of War in Germany. Lt. E.J. Hyland was known to have been killed in the 11 January fight. The news of Pino and Albertson in captivity left 22 unaccounted for, of whom 7 were known with varying degrees of assurance to have successfully parachuted and two seen to safely bellied in, with seven known dead and two, Lt. Cecil R. Brown and Captain James E. Buckley, believed lost in the North Sea.

Of the 86 pilots brought to England, 24 had been lost to combat or accident by May's end, three (Major Rockford V. Gray, Lts. H.E. King, Robert D. Hall) had been transferred to other organizations, one, Lt. J.H. O'Shea was flying a P-47 in a recognition "circus", and four were on detached service with a special air-sea-rescue search organization formed during May. These four flying P-47's festooned with smoke bombs, two five man dinghies and two 108-gallon wing tanks, were: Captain Karl H. Kirk, asst group operations officer; and Lt. Samuel A. White 368th; Jefferson C. Painter, 369th; and Jack Bateman, 370th. The group accordingly had 54 of its old pilots at the end of the month.

These men were confronted with a new airplane in May, the P-51; with a new problem, the deep penetrations which multiplied slight navigational errors geometrically, and with a new enemy tactic, the massing of German fighters in "combat wings" of enormous shock strength

against the bombers, harking back to decade-old U.S. Air Corps pursuit ideas of massed firepower.

The result was that the American fighters were always out-numbered by the enemy at the decisive point of contact and frequently were sandwiched in between German striking force and German top cover as well. Superior flying ability and a better airplane preserved their lives (see the attached PRO account of Major Clifton Shaw's one-against-eight fight near Sweden 19 May) and scored remarkable successes, such as Lt. R.J. Booth's triple kill on 8 May and the doubles scored by Lt. R.S. Wetmore. (Encounter Reports attached). But a change in the group's doctrine to meet the enemy massing was inevitable and as the month progressed, the squadrons which formerly had searched to front and sides of penetration and to side and rear on withdrawal were stacked up, one atop another, with a stipulated combat wing of bombers the moving reference point for the whole show. Nasty experiences with the Hun top cover also resulted in sending the top squadron up to new levels - 32,000 feet being the usual briefed height. On the next to last day of the month, this top squadron (the 368th that day was bounced from 36,000 feet and had combat at 34,000 feet, showing that the end was not yet reached. The objective was to break up the massed gaggles of Germans (the mathematical base, if any, of their formation was not yet discernible) before they struck the bombers, in the conviction that proven AAF Superiority in combat would do the rest once the bludgeon stroke of the first assault was blunted. Defense by flight and section against the German masses was not possible. The U.S. Fighters were absorbed without checking the first massive blow.

On the ground, there was the weather, which was magnificent most of May, after unseasonable chill and rain at mid-month; the off-again, on-again theatre policy of permitting and rescinding leaves and passes, (the 370th squadron history gives the dates), which made all "social life" haphazard, and, on 15 May, the announcement that the fighter tour of duty in the ETO had been extended from 200 to 300 hours. The deadline for application of the rule was 180 hours and no pilot in the group had amassed that total, although Lt. Wetmore lacked less than two hours, and Lt. Charles W. Hipsher, also of the 370th, lacked less than an hour, and had normal missions been flown on the 14th and 15th, many more men would have been over the line. There was, however, neither surprise nor resentment at the decision so obviously dictated by the tactical requirements of the grand climacteric on which the world, as was believed, then stood. The pilots did, it must be stated, resent the declaration the tour had been extended because "things aren't as tough as they were when you had to fight over the North Sea". They failed to see the superior easiness of flying two hours into Berlin for combat and then having to nurse airplane and engine two hours to get to the North Sea and the over-water ride home.

In preparation for the invasion, there was much practice of dive-bombing and much rehearsal of recognition factors in the intelligence program, which embraced preparations for transfer to the Army-Air 1/250,000 map series, use of the modified British grid instead of geographical co-ordinates, and emphasis on ship type recognition. As part of the anti-parachutist     rin a special mobile defense detachment was formed, all personnel on the station were ordered to carry arms, ammunition, helmet and mask, aircraft were wheeled into barbed wire lagers every night, squadron ground personnel mounted special night guards, and construction of a reasonably elaborate "Tacon line" of defenses of essential building began.

The missions were long, and frequent, and there was much to be done on the ground, but the daylight lasted until well after 10 p.m. and the one great non-combat interest was baseball. Gambling waned, for no apparent reason -- perhaps six months of it was enough -- but softball flourished. The battery of Shaw and Tacon (group operations officer and station commander) should have assured the group headquarters team an undefeated season but it was twice beaten, which was healthy for competition.

In all truth, England was beautiful, and there were days when Texans and Georgians complained of the heat. The heat, in fact, became on some evenings a problem at the new station theatre, which (as the Special Service report narrates), grew in popularity and efforts were begun to install a blower there. Popular as the theatre was, the Red Cross Aero Club was the greatest single thing on the station for enlisted men. The officers' corresponding development, if there was one, was the remarkable food served at the now flourishing "Purple Shaft" Nisson Hut cantonment for ground officer, to which personnel billeted at Wretham Hall went for meals whenever they could contrive it.

At the Hall there was comparative room because of the decision to move all save flying, and group intelligence, medical and communications officers to the Purple Shaft. The principal room at the Hall, which had been the lounge, was converted into a game room, with a tiny boys' billiard table, ping-pong, shove-no-penny and darts. A large air combat mural, by Sgt. Makoske, adorned one wall. At month's end, a 1350 snooker table, on loan to the club, was moved into the old study, and the old bar, repainted and refurnished, became a reading room. The results were excellent, especially in the new bar, which survived removal of its neon lights to their original signals truck, and which afforded pastoral views of Wretham Park from every window.

By all accounts, life at the Hall was positively demure compared with other stations in England, but there was a satisfactory party on 20 May, the usual 100 girls riding down in trucks from Norwich, and an all-male celebration the Saturday before that was so vigorous that the bar was closed for four days. Colonel Tacon, who ordered the closing, told the officers he proposed to have no relaxation of the standard of conduct befitting Officers and gentlemen, and there was, in fact, little drinking at the Hall, save on the party night, which seemed clean fun.

As for morale and health in general, there are appended reports by two specialists, Chaplain Zeigler and Flight Surgeon Montimore C. Schwayder, the latter a veteran of 10 months with the 78th Group at Duxford, who succeeded Major Charles C. Hiles, promoted to assistant Wing Surgeon at Walcott. Health was good and there was no question of the pilots morale, although enlisted men and some ground officers perhaps had a harder struggle against the boredom of monotony. As for religion, it flourished. More than 450 men were regularly attending services, compared to the 100 communicants of all faiths the preceding Fall, and the number was rising. By decision of higher authority, unexplained, prayers were forbade in the briefing room, which resulted in a more devout and voluntarily unanimous attendance by all pilots at prayers said after every briefing by Chaplain Zielger from the runningboard of a pilots' truck outside the briefing room. Every pilot, from the station commander to newest replacement, made it a point to be there.

The month was notable for completion of the 100th combat mission, and scoring of the 100th victory ( as witness the appended teletyped congratulations from Brigadier General Edward W. Anderson, 67th Wing Commander). General Anderson visited the station on Sunday, 12 May, and the group turned out in parade formation for the first time since Westover for presentation by the General of Distinguished Flying Crosses. A list of such awards won by group aviators during the months is annexed, together with the usual tables of officer movement, promotion and schooling.

There was high excitement at the beginning of the month because of the impending changeover to the P-51's. Briefing on 1 May was very early, to allow for an 0740 take-off on VIII Fighter Command Field Order 322 (Command Intelligence Summary 173, Air Force 332nd Narrative). Colonel Swanson led a Crossbow area patrol that was snafued by the bombers' remaining at 27,000 feet, apparently unaware that the base of the overcast was 25,000 feet. The 369th was off ops, refitting and only 30 P-47's were put up.

At noon, Wing ordered a deep reconnaissance -- of the Nancy area -- and Captain Carey H. Brown, of the 370th was chosen to lead the eight airplanes despatched. It was his last mission. They were away at 1315 and back at 1618. Meanwhile, Field Order 323 had arrived. Supper was early, 1630, as breakfast had been, and 29 aircraft took off in a bad ground haze at 1803 escorting 1st Division B-17's attacking Troyes (Air Force 333rd Narrative, Part II of the Command's 173 Summary). The landing was late but by 2040 everyone was safely down. Twenty minutes later, there was news of a tragedy; the death at 1900 near Knettishall, the bomber station 10 miles away, of Captain Brown. He had spun in from 10,000 feet, witnesses said. A careful study of all available facts and an equally careful study of the wreckage led Colonel Tacon to the conclusion Captain Brown had spun out of the top of a loop while practicing aerobatics in his new P-51, had tried to recover from the spin without chopping his throttle, and, in consequence, had gone straight in. There was, it seemed, no evidence of material failure.

This accident shook every young pilot in the group and the loss of Brown affected all who knew him. Of the Class of '41 at the Military Academy, the deep-voiced, burly young man with the crew haircut was a leader, a fighter and a companion with a rare sense of fun. He had played a great role in the life of the group, whether as toastmaster of its first dinner in Manchester, N.H., 54 weeks before, as table tennis master of Wretham Hall or as crack flight leader in a crack squadron. He was pilot, poet and man.

Next day, fine and sunny, the Group was released for training in its new P-51's. At 1330, Thetford police telephoned work that 1st Lt. Raymond L. Botsford, of the 368th, had been killed in another Mustang training flight accident. Botsford, a shy and smiling boy from the state of Washington, who neither smoked nor drank, was generally regarded as one of the best of the wingmen, as well as the finest type of clean and capable American young man. He had taken off on a training flight with Colonel Tacon and Major A.R. Tyrrell, his squadron commander, to fire in the guns on the new planes.

Colonel Tacon again made a personal investigation and found the apparent cause: one of the hundred minor things that can mean disaster for a pilot. By old habit, dating to his training

days, Botsford had switched his fuel selector handle from right main to left main soon after take-off. The notch on the selector panel had not clicked firmly and by a fraction of an inch too much the selector had moved part way between right hand wing and left main tank. But the wing tanks were not hung on this practice flight. The deduction: petrol was drawn from the left main air from the right wing connection and an air lock had starved and killed his engine. The swathe through treetops showed how he had tried to get the airplane into an open field, missed a house and stalled in.

The same afternoon, Lt. John H. Oliphint damaged a wing in landing in a gust wind at Wretham. Obviously, there was much to be learned about the new airplane.

Accordingly, next day, 3 May, Colonel Tacon called a pilots meeting at the briefing room, where he reiterated his opinion the P-51 was the finest fighter airplane he had ever flown, discussed the two fatal accidents of the preceding day, and called for reapplication of principles learned in flying school but overgrown by habit, perhaps, in long hours in the Thunderbolt. Lt. Colonel John C. Meyer, of the 352nd of Bodney, talked about the performance of the P-51 in combat and there was a 90 minute question-and-answer period on the characteristics of the airplane and how it should be handled. The rest of the day was devoted to more transition training.

P-51's were flown over Europe by the group for the first time on 4 May, when the 369th put up 13 in a hybrid formation of 28 which flew into Holland on Field Order 326 (Command Summary 176, Air Force Narrative 338) only to find the bombers aborting because of thick cirrus. Genemuiden was strafed by a flight of the 368th as a parting gesture in their P-47's, but no enemy aircraft were found on the field.

On 5 May, rain all afternoon resulted in a release and there was a high wind overnight followed by rain at the 0715 briefing on 6 May, but by 0831, take-off time, sunlight pouring through a break in the clouds bathed the field in a melodramatic glow of amber that seemed quite too sharply defined to be aught but artificial. The scene was theatrical but unforgettable -- a crisp moment of golden glory in the drama of our times.

This was the first all P-51 mission, a Type 16 patrol of the Pas de Calais in another of the interminable series of assaults on the German secret weapon at Siracourt. There were 33 airplanes up (the 368th being then non-operational) and the mission was uneventful, no bombers being lost (Air Force 340 Narrative, Command Summary 178).

There was a rush briefing at 0715 7 May for the group's 88th Mission and its first full, 3-squadron P-51 show: penetration, target and withdrawal support on Osnabruck under Field Order 329 (Air Force 342, Command 172). Colonel Swanson briefed, but returned early with his radio out and Major Tyrrell led the mission. The continent was 10/10 and no enemy aircraft were sighted although flak at the target was notably responsive to evasive action and followed the fighters closely.

Next day, 8 May, was a very different story. The group, led by Colonel Tacon, saw practically as many Huns in one formation as had been seen throughout all of April. The whole

story is in the Air Force Narrative 344 and the Command's 180th summary. The group's part began at 0545, when Field Order 331 arrived. Briefing was delayed until 0700 and, since start engine time was 0728, all went in a tearing hurry. It was Colonel Tacon's 50th combat mission. At 0725, the 369th still was servicing oxygen, but 43 ships got up at 0742, and rendezvous was at 0905 over Hasselt. The enemy struck 35 minutes later, bursting head-on at the bombers with rockets and time-burst cannon. The group intervened promptly and only some 30 bandits got through for a single pass. They never were allowed to reform but instead were fought from 24,000 feet to the deck.

This was the day that "Postie" Booth, of the 369th, scored his triple and came home to tell intelligence officers how beautiful the tulips were in Holland and how ugly the drably-dressed people looked tending the lovely fields of blossoms. This also was the day that Pop Doersch, out of ammunition, hornswoggled a German into jumping. Both stories are done justice in the accompanying PRO released by Lt. Thomas H. Raines, Group Public Relations Officer.

The mission report that day, relaying to high authority Major Chauncey S. Irvine's complaint that P-38's present had not helped out in the combat but instead had bounced his squadron, produced reverberations, since the 20th Group took umbrage, and an order by Colonel Tacon that a reporting policy be established of saying nothing critical about any other friendly force, whatever the circumstances. Major Sydney M. Rogers, Wing A-2, was among others concerned by the incident, suggesting that such difficult situations be adjusted by telephone without any written record.

The group's total that day was 11-1-3 in the air, plus two locomotive. Two men did not come back: Lt. Stanley E. Sackett, one of the 369th originals, and Lt. Alan C. Porter, 370th, a tall, thin faced newcomer whose quick intelligence and eager keenness had made a fine impression.

On the 9th there was another early briefing, for a freakish show which involved strafing of Laon-Couvren airdrome by a section of the 368th after the airfield had been bombed. This was an expedient designed to destroy dispersed aircraft (use of fragmentation bombs was another) but on this day it did not work out: Captain Charles C. Mosse led the strafing section on its only run but a lapse in the bombing resulted in the run being made between bomber waves almost literally between bomb bursts and there was so much smoke and dust on the field no worthwhile targets could be found. The section strafed the shattered building anyway. A testimonial to very high frequency radio was the readability that day of Captain Alfred M Swiren's station at East Wretham while the group was over the target, 250 miles away. The whole story of the mission is in Air Force 347 Narrative and Command's 181st Summary).

The afternoon of the 9th was devoted to dive-bombing practice on the Thetford range. And after the bombers aborted over the North Sea on 10 May on Field Order 334, the group was recalled and there was talk of a dive-bombing mission to be concocted by Wing, but nothing came of it, and a release was in at 1345.



The 11th was a confused day that turned out badly. Field Order 335 was preceded by a warning order at 2040 on the 10th that was canceled at 2357 and revived at 0410. The order itself was in at 0755. At 1030, Wing canceled the group's assignment and put it on notice to support heavy bombers at 1700. At 1108, this cancellation was in its turn canceled, and 51 ships were airborne at 1325. A briefed preliminary sweep merged into an early rendezvous at 1507 near Besancon and support around the target at Mulhouse, where the group withdrew at 1555. Then came trouble. In obedience to an injunction in the field order the group had not carried wing tanks, and many men, especially the new pilots, had "a sweat job" to get home.

Worse that, the debonair Ralph E. Kibler, slim, sandy, politely aggressive young graduate of the Citadel and -U.S. Anti-Aircraft office, and the equally nonchalant, black-haired William R. Hodges, both led their flights down on Reims-Champagne on the homeward journey. There was no cover for five miles. The Germans saw them coming, and there was vicious flak all the way. The soft-voiced Hodges, chatting casually on the radio about it, bailed out at Peronne at 1659, and his chute opened. Kibler, sure, suave, married just before he left the States, did not come back -- and there was no radio chatter to give clue to his fate. Nor was there any word from E.J. Maslow, who had applied for transfer to the group to get away from what he thought lack of excitement in unarmed photo-reconnaissance.

In addition to all this, Doersch almost flew into the ground and staggered to Manston with his propeller looking like four scythes, D.R. Tuchscherer crashed near Manston; Wetmore, the group's leading ace, landed away from base at Manston, and so did Lt. Borg. For all of these facts, there was on the other side of the ledger, one enemy aircraft found and strafed on the field, an Me-410 destroyed by Lt. Harold D. Hollis.

The whole episode strengthened Colonel Tacon's frequently-briefed conviction that strafing was not profitable unless the targets were clearly juicy and unless a satisfactory one-pass surprise attack could be planned and executed.

By some irony, this day 11 May, was one of the loveliest the group had yet seen in England, flowering into splendor after a chill morning.

At briefing on the 12th (the time was 0930 on Field Order 337) Colonel Tacon reviewed the losses of the 11th, and, without minimizing the courage and dash of the lost men who had led the attack on Reims, said he would hold flight commanders responsible for limiting attacks on fields to situations where the targets plainly justified the loss of a man on these attacks, though that risk must be accepted if the aircraft were there to be destroyed. He also briefed on the growing necessity of frequently re-setting gyro compasses to protect men deep in enemy territory against a sudden compass failure, and on the movement of enemy aircraft in France away from our sweep whenever Allied planes penetrated near the "invasion air depots."

The show of the 12th (command 184, Air Force 353) involved a long-planned assault on the synthetic oil plants of Saxony and the Sudetenland. The group patrolled a 50-mile stream of bombers until the leader, Major Shaw, identified the B-17's bound for Merseburg, escorted them 'round that target and came out by way of Frankfurt. On the way home Captain Ettleson took his flight down on Langensalza and scored 2-0-1 in a sudden, perfectly-executed attack that

drew no flak but resulted in two battle damage cases. Ettlesen's own plane was hit by a 50-calibre slug from a wingman and Lt. Herbert C. Burton wrenched a wing on a flagpole he didn't see in time to clear. Both these mishaps and the success of the bounce exemplified Colonel Tacon's convictions on the hazards and profits of correctly executed strafing.

13 May was the first time the group had found it necessary to brief on the 1/500,000 Order of Battle map instead of the larger 1/2,500,000 scale. Field Order 338 ordered withdrawal support for B-17 attacks on the Focke-Wulf plants at Poznan and nearby Krzesinki in Poland which had proved such difficult 8th Air Force targets. This was a long ride, as is evidenced by the fact that four early returned logged four hours apiece, coming back from well past Bremen, and still they were classed as abortive.

Deep as the ride was, it was largely purposeless. The bombers saw cloud cover over the target area and turned back to their secondaries without entering Poland. The result was they were 40 minutes early and though Colonel Tacon reached Dramburg, East of Stettin on schedule, there was nothing to do but pursue the Forts up over the Baltic and into Denmark, leaving by way of Husum. Two bandits over Kiel were lost in the haze. For the whole story, see Air Force 355, Command 185. The group came home in a bad haze, the last ship landing at 1837 with the red runway pundit light glowing through the gathering murk.

Next day was Sunday, 14 May, and the principal business was the afternoon parade for General Anderson and the DFC winners. It was chill, and a keen wind numbed the bloused and trusting officer who had shed their woolen underwear. On the 15th, a field order was scrubbed by 0530. News of the extension of the tour was circulated that day, and the aircraft alert plan went into effect. It had its first trial on the 16th, when a practice scramble out the 369th's quarter of planes in the air 11 minutes from the time flying Control got the word from wing. The system was for the tower to fire two braces of flares as signal for crew chiefs to start the engines while simultaneously the pilots were ordered up by telephone. The 17th was another dull day, and it was still raining on the 18th. But from that point on, the one exception (26 May), the group had a mission a day, opening with its first mission to Berlin.

The first Big "B" day came on the 19th, with bad ground fog and haze, which persisted until an eerie landing at 1555 with pundits lit, despite flecks of blue in the overcast, and haze.

The Field Order was 342 (Air Force 358, Command 187). Colonel Tacon briefed and led, rendezvousing at Henstedt at 1315. There was combat from 1340 on with more than 100 enemy aircraft trying to smash in at the bombers throughout the Pritzwalk-Wittenberge-Liebenwalde area. The air score was 11-0-1 for three NYR against shrewd and experienced pilots. Both Major Shaw and Captain Ettlesen had memorable adventures, as the attached PRO stories relate, and Lt. Emer H. Cater, 368th, barely survived the explosion of an ammunition car he blew up. Captain Charles C. Mosse, the universally popular operations officer of the 368th, newly transferred to that job from group, did not come back. The Chaplain and Lt. R.B. Janney III, who had flown in Mosse's old 368th flight, broke the news to Mosse's pretty little Scottish wife, whom he had married in Cambridge in the Spring and with whom he had created a much-admired idyll of life near the station. Lt. J.B. Smith, soft-spoken Georgian flight leader of the

368th, and Lt. D.H. Laing, another of the 369th tall, bright replacement pilots, both parachuted over Germany.

All previous Jackpot areas assigned for mass strafing were canceled on this day, a blow to intelligence staffs who had done much work on them, and new areas were assigned. And, in view of the havoc wrought by such train-busters at Ettlesen, the Command now also ordered preparations for assault on German railroads. The code-word for the Operation was to be "Chattanooga," presumably in tender memory of the renowned Choo-Choo. S-2 officers worked that night preparing maps and target data on the new areas but the 20th May effort turned out to be a bomber smash at the same Reims-Champagne airdrome which had cost the group three pilots on the 11th.

Fog closed in on Wretham early but the whole show was pushed back an hour so that take-off at 0940 was possible and the mission itself uneventful. (Air Force 359th Operation Narrative, Command Summary No. 188), That afternoon, Colonel James, at Command, vetoed Colonel Tacon's proposed method of fighter-bomber attack on bridges (individual dives from 10,000 to 5000 feet) and instead proposed skip-bombing with delayed action bombs, by element, at 300 mph from 500 feet, the method developed by the Ninth Fighter Command with success. Two bridges at Hasselt and three at Liege in Belgium had been nominated as the official "Eighth Fighter Command experimental bridges" and bomb runs on all were now planned.

Came 21 May and the Chattanooga in the Holstein-Mecklenburg area around Lubeck, northeast of Hamburg. The whole Command (Field Order 344 and Summary 189) did a staggering job, destroying or damaging 225 locomotives, a paragraph full of other ground objectives and getting 20-0-2 aircraft in the air and 102-0-76 aircraft on the ground for the expenditure of 26 pilots. Of these the 359th lost four. One, the sideburned Homer Rodeheaver, 369th, was killed when he spun in from a gunnery pattern over a train.

Apparently he had failed to burn down his fuselage tank to the recommended 30 gallons on the ride into the target, electing instead to use wingtank petrol. The result in the P-51, as all pilots had discovered in their two earlier major fights, was an alarming tendency to flick into a stall at the top of a turn, because the extra, unplanned weight of the fuselage gasoline changed the centre of gravity.

Two pilots bellied in that day after being hit by ground fire. They were Arlen R. Baldrige, 368th, a quiet, reticent analyst, with the calm curiosity of a test-pilot. In the anxious days of Spring, 1943, he had been a pioneer in the exploration by young pilots of what the P-47 would and would not do. Another to belly in was 2nd Lt. Joseph E. Shupe, of the 370th, "a new boy" who had piled up a record of 7-0-4 and rapidly earned a place as one of the outstanding winners in the group. The fourth man lost was 20-year-old Clyde M. Hudelson, youngest and smallest, physically, of the originals. His red-checked, yellow-haired youth created a startling impression of adolescence belied only by the glint sparking like flinted steel in his blue eyes. "Bunky", as he was universally known after Billy DeBeck's precious child, was heard to call he was bailing out after a ground flak hit. So ended his hope of resigning his commission at the completion of his tour and entering West Point.

In exchange for these four men, the group exacted from the Germans a ground score of 17-0-24, plus two caught in the air, and, in the attack on the railroads, 31 locomotives, six radar towers, five signal towers, a transformer station and assorted other targets.

Early next morning, an intruder shot down over the station a Lancaster returning from Duisburg, the RAF plane crashing on the 39th Service Co. area with six of its seven crewmen killed. The one survivor was treated at the station hospital. The crashed ship was at first thought to be a German.

At 1004 on the 22nd, 27 Mustangs were airborne to another Type 16 patrol of Picardy while the bombers attacked Siracourt once more. It was uneventful, (Command Summary 190, Air Force 361) as was a special mission of four P-51's led by Lt. Wetmore in support of B-17's despatched on a long search of the North Sea off the Frisian Islands, apparently looking for crewmen from ditched bombers. At 1705, the alert flight was scrambled again. Three ships were airborne in five minutes, 30 seconds, the fourth requiring 90 seconds more.

Mission No. 100 was flown on the morning of 23 May. Up at 0713, the errand was to Metz, where nothing notable developed, save for a single diving pass by eight enemy aircraft at the bombers at Lure. The enemy promptly broke for cover and could not be engaged. (Command 191, Air Force 366).

That afternoon, Colonel Swanson led an abortive skip-bombing mission to Hasselt. The Colonel went down on the wrong canal in the maze of Belgian waterways. His radio was weak and the result was that there was no positive control over the group when flights eventually found Hasselt -- or what they thought was Hasselt. One flight reported the bridge destroyed and someone suggested that the bombs be not wasted. This was interpreted as an order and everything went fubar. No bombs were dropped and the group returned home at 1754 to report the Hasselt bridge was done for -- only to have the 361st Group come in on the same target 45 minutes after our departure and find the structure very much in being, as indeed it was after the 361st finished bombing. On the whole, all hands agreed, an extremely poor show.

The second Berlin mission was flown 24 May. Lt. Charles H. Kruger made an emergency landing immediately after take-off, and his airplane crashed and burned but he escaped with only slight injuries.

The mission itself produced little enemy opposition, the air score being 1-0-0, although two gaggles of 30 each were seen in the distance, too far to be engaged. But three flights of the 369th, with the Buzz Boy veterans -- Ettlesen, Oliphint and Thacker -- in the van, did a satisfactory ground attack job, blowing up eight locomotives, six tank cars and damaging two tugs, three barges, etcetera. Details are in the mission summary (Command Summary No. 192). and the attached encounter reports.

Field orders had been arriving later and later, and the inevitable occurred on 25 May: the order came in so late that the group was 30 minutes slow getting away and could not execute the prescribed Zemke fan, a wide sweep of the type invented by Col. Hubert Zemke, of the 56th Group. The bombers were met leaving the target, Mulhouse, and later Captain Ettlesen was hit

by flak at 25,000 over Saarbrücken. He nursed the plane as far west as he could and finally left it at 3000 over Sarrenbourg.

As usual, the radio conversation was memorable, the jewels being the anxious injunctions from his flight: "Remember what they told you" -- referring to the briefing on escape and evasion techniques -- and the solicitous inquiries "Got all your stuff, Chief?" -- again in reference to escape kit, purse, maps, dogtags. Ettlesen seemed, also as usual, only moderately disgusted by the turn of events. He was the second West Pointer lost thus far in May. The third, Captain Richard H. Broach, bailed out 30 May when hit while strafing a train in Holland. This left only two of the original six men of the Class of 41 -- Captains Edwin Pezda and Wayne N. Bolefahr, plus Captain Lester G. Taylor Jr., of the next class at the Point. This however, anticipates, since three missions intervened before Broach's loss.

There was no show on the 26th but on the 27th a wild goose chase for bandits ordered by the Controller sent the 359th careering from Chateau-Thierry to Amiens, with the result that the group missed a rousing combat farther along the route, in which the 352nd scored heavily. By the time the 359th had obtained permission to rejoin the bombers the combat was all over, though our group rendezvoused over the target, Mannheim, and took the B-17's out to landfall at Ostend. For the picture of what the Bodney Mustangs encountered see Command's Summary No. 195.

The 359th again found no airborne opposition on the 28th, a long 5:23 mission to Madgeburg in which the return was by way of Frankfurt. A 368th section went down on Schonebeck but found no enemy aircraft there. Wetmore saw what he estimated to be 150 parked on Wittenberg but he was in the top cover squadron at 32,000 and could make no attack. A total of 1125 fighter escorted the bombers on this mission into the heart of Germany. (Command Summary 196).

But another major air combat of the month occurred on 29 May: a savage running series of fights north and east of Berlin from Malchin to Stettin. The action was by squadrons and the score for 12-1-0 for two -- Lowell "One-Eye" Brundage, a sophisticated humorist, and Myron C. Morrill, a new pilot, both 369th. One of these was seen shot down by a veteran Luftwaffe expert wearing two chevrons on his ship. The German, our pilot and Lt. R.K. Butler of Bodney, went into a 12-turn Lufberry, and when our pilot broke, the German got him. Lt. Butler came over from Bodney to tell S-2 about it. The mission report (Command Summary 197) tells the details and these are amplified in the encounter reports. Wetmore scored another double, raising his total to 13; Colonel Murphy scored two, sharing one with Doersch, and the latter shared another victim with Siltimaki.

Another victory was recorded by Postie Booth, his eighth, preserving his remarkable record of never having fired upon an enemy without destroying same. He had fired his guns on six missions and had shot down eight, plus scoring on a number of ground targets.

A spasm of abortions came on 30 May. Of the 39 airplanes up, 12 came back early, leaving 27 to meet the bombers at Einbeck. There was a mixup here. The assignment was to pick up two wings on Dessau. These wings called they were on course, on time and happy, but

they executed a sliding left oblique turn near the target which reversed their positions and put the lead wing over Dessau 10 minutes early. The 359th, which had been flying en masse on the starboard wing as guard against the expected attack, was surprised by the maneuver and could not get up to the target to clear the front for the bomb run, since the fighters had been watching the clock and knew they should have 10 extra minutes. They didn't have it and so, when the Germans struck from the front, could only meet them coming through. The result was not satisfactory, either from the point of bomber escort, although several gaggles were fended off, or aerial combat, and claims were limited to 3-1-0. Booth, incidentally, went down to strafe an Ju-88 at Hallerslebee but saw no fire, claimed only a damaged and so ended his infallible gunnery record, although it remained valid for air combat.

Broach was lost escorting an early return, Lt. Frank S. Fong, the Chinese-American, home. Broach sent Fong out to sea, explaining he was going to hit a train and later was heard to call that flak had damaged his plane and he would have to bail S of the Zuider Zee. The group almost lost another pilot on the landing as Lt. Andy Lemmens came in for a normal approach and flopped over on his back: his wheel had frozen, apparently from heated brakes, and did not make one revolution, as skid marks showed. Fortunately there was no fire, as it required 10 minutes to get Lemmens out. He was jarred but unhurt. The plane was fit for salvage only.

Colonel Tacon led a flight down on a field near Paderborn but the targets turned out to be dummies, and the attack was broken off. The dummies were well done and it was believed that real planes might be interspersed among them, but that was left for later investigation.

The month closed with a visit to the Ruhr, or the Eastern fringe thereof, where the marshalling yards at Soest and Schwerte were seen well-hit.

There was news also, the higher authority, had allowed Captain Samuel R. Smith (transferred to be operations officer of the 368th in succession to Captain Mosse) credit for the 24 hours of combat time he had amassed in B-24's before transferring to fighters. This 24 hours put him over the 180-hour deadline on 15 May, and his subsequent fighter time completed the stated tour of 200 hours. Accordingly at the end of May he was taken off ops while his application for 30 days home leave before beginning on a 100-hour extension was considered.

This, by and large, was the goal of almost every pilot in the group. It was the core 'round which was wrapped the stern air discipline that gave them strength, coherence and success in their out-numbered struggle against the German: the thought of home. There was little brooding about it; the demands of the crisis hours of flight and combat did not permit that; but it was the dream that made all the hazards of present and future possible of acceptance. Sustained by that dream, they flew well and they fought well, and prepared for more of the same.