



HARD TACK

This book is dedicated to Colonel Avelin P. Tacon Jr., commander of the 359th Fighter Group from Jan. 1943 to Nov. of 1944. Tacon was a West Pointer and ran a tight ship. Aggressive pilots like John Oliphint all too often found themselves standing in front of Hard Tack's desk receiving a lecture on combat discipline. It must have been difficult for commanders to hold youthful tigers in check and not destroy the edge that made them fighter pilots with very few equals in the world. The pilots felt like Tacon was preventing them from winning the war single handedly but in truth the mental discipline he instilled in the Group kept many of them alive, while those who broke ranks to do combat with the Hun often failed to return. Oliphint and Tacon joined forces during 1994 to have a plaque displayed at West Point commemorating the 359th Fighter Group's eight West Point men (the most in any fighter group during World War II).



Capt Lester George Taylor of the 370th FS was one of eight West Point graduates to see action with the 359th FG in the ETO. Serving with the unit from April 1943 through to September 1944, he was the only 'West Pointer' to complete a full operational tour. Three were killed in action, three were captured and one died in a flying accident. Taylor scored his only kill on 5 August 1944, when he shot down an Fw 190 over Tarmstedt

left in each fighter. Col Tacon was livid when informed of the loss of three pilots and their perfectly good aircraft. Lancaster, Baker and Rabb were returned to the US a few weeks later.

The following day Maj Edwin F 'Swami' Pezda led the the 359th as it escorted B-24s sent to bomb an airfield at Halberstadt, in Germany. At 1210 hrs Red Flight of the 369th took on up to eight markingless Bf 109s between Bremen and Hamburg. Lt Frank W Holliday damaged one fighter and Lt Harold R

Burt scored hits on another machine, which went into a vertical dive. He followed it down, registering 630 mph prior to pulling out at 500 ft. The Bf 109 failed to recover, hit the ground and exploded in flames.

At 1220 hrs Red Flight spotted about 20 fighters several miles away at 'nine o'clock' to the bombers and attacked. Capt Lester Taylor scored good hits behind the cockpit of an Fw 190 that went into an uncontrolled dive, its pilot probably dead. Meanwhile, White Flight made a diving attack on two Bf 109s, Maj Pezda chasing a diving Bf 109 and nailing it. As he pulled up and over the fighter, Pezda could see the pilot kicking the rudder pedals before bailing out. Lt Edwin L Sjoblad also bagged a Bf 109 and its pilot bailed out too.

Munich was the group's destination on 9 August, as Lt Col Murphy's men looked after a formation of B-17s. Following their meeting at 1006 hrs at Hagenau, in France, the weather got progressively worse as the aircraft made their way across Germany – many of the 'Forts' opted for bombing targets of opportunity instead. At 1100 hrs, near Gunzburg, just east of Ulm, the 368th tackled 30 enemy fighters that appeared head-on out of the sun. Lt John Keesey nailed an Fw 190 and the pilot jettisoned his canopy before disappearing into the clouds. Keesey was later awarded a probable. Flt Off Emory C Cook could only damage a Bf 109 despite firing off 1070 rounds of armour-piercing incendiary.

At 1115 hrs, in the same area, the 370th took on 20 Bf 109s. Lts Robert M York (who had to secure the manual high blower switch in the on position with his necktie), John W Wilson and Frank O Lux each destroyed a Bf 109 apiece, and Lt Col Murphy got an Fw 190. The latter kill gave the 370th FS CO ace status, boosting his tally to 5.75 victories. It was also a good day for future ace Lt Cyril W Jones Jr, who destroyed a Bf 109 and damaged another on his very first mission with the 370th FS.

The following day the group performed a dive-bombing mission against railway targets from Bar-le-Duc to Strasbourg, in France. The 368th attacked the marshalling yard at Bishwiller, scoring 25 hits on buildings and tracks. The squadron lost Lt Lester W Hovden in return, when he made a quick 45-degree turn to line up on his target and overstressed his Mustang's bomb-laden airframe. Both wings (of P-51B-10 42-106702) folded up and ripped off, and Hovden was killed.