

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE 357th FIGHTER GROUP

by

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This document does not pretend to be a complete history of the above unit. The author has no access to official records, and it is merely the recollections of a former member of this unit, backed up by personal notes and photographs. Since memories get dimmer and dimmer as time goes on, it seemed a good idea to put these recollections on paper. Since the author was a member of the 362nd Squadron the emphasis will be on this unit.

The 357th Fighter Group, U.S. Army Air Forces, was composed of the 362nd, 363rd, and 364th Fighter Squadrons, and was born at Hamilton Field, California, in the winter of 1942/43. At this time it was merely a collection of personnel, no aircraft and little equipment being assigned. Since almost all of the maintenance people, including the author, were newly graduated from technical schools, and had no practical experience, these people were assigned to the flight line to assist the mechanics of the 326th Fighter Group which was based at Hamilton Field. This unit was equipped with an assortment of Bell P-39 aircraft, mostly "D" models. Some, but not much, practical experience was gained in this manner.

The unit's stay at Hamilton was short, and the entire group moved in the Spring (March or April) of 1943 to the desert country a few miles from the old silver mining town of Tonopah, Nevada. At this time the group became fairly complete with the assigning of most of the remaining people, and also much equipment showed up, including a motley assortment of well-used P-39D's. Some of these were 41-28332, 41-36241, and 41-38257, the former carrying the number "74" on it's nose. All aircraft were painted olive-drab, and had white propellor spinners. One North American AT-6 was assigned to the 362nd sqdn. This aircraft was in natural finish with it's engine cowl painted green and carrying the number "U-542" on the sides of the engine cowling. As mentioned above, most of the personnel, both enlisted and officer, were recently out of school and this lack of experience restricted the flying to a great extent and caused quite a number of accidents, some of them fatal. The first fatality of the 362nd sqdn was the sqdn flight surgeon who was killed in the crash landing of the AT-6, after the engine failed in flight. The pilot, who I recall was Lt. R.W. Brown, was seriously injured, but recovered and remained with the unit until his internment in Switzerland. During this time there were several calls for air gunner volunteers, and one draft of men for gunner. Several men left the unit in this way. Recreation was rather limited, but most men took the opportunity to "go on the town" in nearby Tonopah, which was a most interesting old desert town, especially on Saturday nights, the favorite hangout being the "Tonopah Club". During this time there were several trips to see Scotty's castle in Death Valley. However, the desert was not an ideal place to be stationed, and when, in May or June, the group left it behind there were few who could say they were sorry.

At this point the group broke up, the three squadrons being assigned to various bases in California. The 363rd went to a base at Santa Rosa, while the 362nd moved into an interesting little airstrip at Hayward, south of Oakland. This strip consisted of two concrete runways, concrete taxiways, a control tower, an apple orchard, and an old house used for the radio shack. (Editors note: this field is currently the municipal airport for the city of Hayward, basing some 100 private planes, and is also the home of the 144th Fighter Wing, California Air National Guard) Major aircraft maintenance was done in an old tractor shed. There were no

living quarters at all, these being located about two city blocks down the road toward Hayward, in a vacant lot in a residential district. This was more like it, and all personnel enjoyed the situation to the utmost. The squadron was assigned to the 4th Air Force and flew some coastal patrols, besides carrying on its training. Newer models of the P-39 began to show, both "N" and "Q" models, one of the latter being serial number 42-19595. This aircraft carried the number "125" in large white numbers on the nose, and its tail section up to the exhaust was painted white. At this time squadron identification colors were assigned, these being white for the 362nd, red for the 363rd, and yellow for the 364th. These colors were primarily carried on the rudders only, although a few aircraft had the color painted all the way up to the engine exhaust. These rudder colors were used throughout the group's life but were sometimes omitted after the unit was in Europe. Most of the old "D" model aircraft were taken away, no doubt to be given to some other "rookie" outfit. Good weather prevailed and much flying was done, with the loss of a few aircraft, one of which was bellied in on the runway because the pilot forgot to lower his landing gear. The stay here was to be short also, and after most of the people had a furlough home the three squadrons came together again sometime around September, at Pocatello, Idaho.

By now it was obvious to most that our state-side training must be drawing to a close. The period at Pocatello was at least partly to familiarize the pilots with the problems of working with bombers, as a group of B-24's was based here also. There was a noticeable lack of harmony between fighter and bomber personnel, a lack that was to disappear when the units were operating together in combat.

In late October it all came to an end, and leaving the P-39's behind the group entrained for Camp Shanks at the Port of New York. The approximate two weeks spent here was a time of confusion, mixed feelings, issuing of last minute equipment, and also a time of many rumors and much letter writing.

In early December the group went aboard the British liner "Queen Elizabeth", along with almost 15,000 other U.S. troops, mostly destined for the 8th Air Force in England. The trip to Glasgow, Scotland, was fast, requiring only five days, but it was not smooth, the North Atlantic being anything but smooth in the winter. The voyage was made alone, without escort, the "Queen" being very heavily armed with 20 m/m cannon and .50 cal machine guns against air attack. Five inch guns on the bow and stern provided some protection against sea attack. Rumors of German submarines were rampant, but none were sighted, at least by the passengers, and the only aircraft sighted was a Catalina flying boat of unknown nationality seen one day out of Glasgow.

The "Queen's" entry into the Firth of Forth was of great interest as many naval units, including aircraft carriers, were at anchor in the harbor. Immediately upon debarking we entrained for an overnight ride to our first base in England which turned out to be Raydon Wood Airdrome, near Colchester in East Anglia. This was a new airdrome and we were its first occupants. The ever present mud must be mentioned as it seemed to be a normal part of English winters, and was especially prevalent on a new airdrome where only the necessary concrete had been laid. It was here at Raydon Wood that we got our first taste of many things, besides the aforementioned mud. The strict blackout was impressive, as were the air raid sirens which produced an eerie sound not easy to forget. One night we saw flashes in the sky and heard gunfire, which we assumed to be the clash of British nightfighters and a German raider.

Soon after our arrival here we began to get the aircraft that we were to fight a war with. These planes were a new type to us, being North American P-51B's, most of which were diverted to us from the British sources as their R.A.F. markings were

visible under a coat of paint. One of these aircraft was 43-6370. They were nearly new and in good shape, and it did not take long to get on to them. Most of the pilots got their checkout rides in the P-51 while at this base. New group markings were assigned at this time, although the old rudder colors were still in effect. The squadron identification was a letter and a number, the 362nd being assigned G4, the 363rd B6, and the 364th C5. These were painted on each side of the fuselage just forward of the national marking. The individual squadron aircraft number, which was a single letter, was painted on both sides aft of the national marking. Each squadron then had aircraft letters running from "A" through "Z", and in some cases where more than 26 airplanes were assigned the first letters were used over with a bar under them, such as "A", or "A bar".

Early in its stay here the group had been assigned to the 9th Air Force which was just beginning to form, and was used for tactical support during and after the coming invasion. There was, at this time, only one other P-51B group flying with the U.S. forces in Europe, this unit being the 354th which had gone into operation in November of 1943. This group was also a part of the new 9th A.F. and it was to remain so, but the 357th soon was transferred to the 8th Air Force, the reason being that an official decision had been made to utilize as many of the forthcoming P-51 groups as possible for high altitude bomber escort. Long before the advent of the P-51B it had become painfully clear to most everyone concerned that 8th A.F. heavy bombers would be unable to continue doing their job without unacceptable casualties unless they were provided with fighter escort all the way to the target and back. Until the P-51B came along there was no aircraft suitable for this purpose. The best allied fighters available were the Supermarine "Spitfire" and the Republic P-47B. The former was a superb fighter, but being an interceptor it had nowhere near the necessary range. The "Thunderbolt's" range was better, but still not enough. Further, the P-47 was not really fast enough or agile enough although it later made an excellent ground support aircraft. The Lockheed P-38, which became available in the summer of 1943 (the 55th group became operational on the 15th of October) had the required range, but being a twin engine airplane it was no match for German single engine fighters. With the arrival of the Rolls Royce powered P-51B's the 8th A.F. finally had the airplane to do the job. This was really a superb combination of airframe and engine.

So, with all of this as a background, 357 moved again. This time we traded bases with a Thunderbolt group (I believe the 353rd) and we became part of the 8th U.S. Air Force. The new base was near the little town of Lieston, not far from Ipswich, and was to be the place of our longest stay. Approximately one more month was spent on getting settled into the new base, bringing our aircraft strength up to that specified, and polishing up on final training. On the 11th of February the group became operational and flew it's first mission, a shallow penetration into enemy held territory, led by Major James Howard. The shallow penetrations soon deepened, and on the 20th of February Capt. Calvert Williams of the 362nd drew first blood when he shot down an Me 109. Several of these early missions were led by Colonel Blakslee of the 4th Fighter Group, the old R.A.F. Eagle Squadron.

About this time, in March, new group markings were assigned, consisting of red, yellow, red bands (three) on the prop spinner, and red and yellow checker-board from immediately aft of the spinner back to the leading edge of the engine exhaust stacks. Each of the squares measured about six inches to the side. Squadron markings remained the same and many aircraft blossomed out with names on the side of their engine cowlings. Some of these were "Y've Had It", pilot John England; "Passion Wagon", pilot Capt. Weaver; "Nooky Booky", pilot Len Carson;

"Joan", pilot Lt. Wallen, a/c serial number 42-106829.

On the 6th of March the group flew a successful escort mission to Berlin, with 36 aircraft airborne. 20 enemy aircraft were credited as destroyed, with no losses. On this same mission lack of oxygen forced some machines to lower levels where they engaged in strafing attacks on targets in Germany. The unit engaged in quite a bit of strafing throughout the war, but these were mostly "targets of opportunity", escort being the big job. One of the groups early strafing attacks was to make history. This occurred when they dropped their almost empty belly tanks on a marshaling yard, and set fire to the whole thing with their machine guns. Much damage was done in this first case of belly tanks being used as fire bombs.

Things were moving fast now, any units equipped with P-51's were in great demand. By the end of March the 8th had three groups flying this type; the 4th, the 355th, and the 357th.

Victories came fast in these early days, but not without loss. 1st Lt. Alvin Pyeatt, a popular young fellow, but one who was considered entirely too reckless, was shot down on the 24th of March and died later in a German hospital. Four days later, on the 28th, 362 lost it's commander Lt. Col. Hubert Egnès, who was killed on a strafing mission. Col. Egnès was a quiet type, and well liked by all including the enlisted men, and his loss was deeply felt.

"D" Day, the invasion of France, started out for most of the personnel on the late afternoon of June 5th when orders came through that black and white invasion stripes must be painted on all aircraft by 1 A.M. the next day. A frantic search for paint brushes and the required paint brought to light only a few brushes, although sufficient paint had been provided. (See photo on page 38) These consisted of three white and two black stripes alternating, and being about a foot and a half wide. On the fuselage they started just aft of the cockpit and ended just forward of the tail group. On the wings they started at the wing root and ended about a foot and a half outboard of the bomb racks. The job was hurriedly done and not very neat.

The job was done on schedule, and the group flew it's first "D" day mission several hours earlier than usual with briefing taking place at approximately 3 A.M. and takeoff just before dawn. In all eight missions were flown on the 6th, in the longest one, the aircraft were airborne for a little less than eight hours. Little excitement was encountered however as enemy opposition on "D" day over the beaches was almost non-existent.

(To be continued in the next issue, starting with the V-1 etc.)

The photo on page 38, of the Curtiss SBC-3, is to remind those of you who like plastic models that there is a new 98¢ kit for the SBC-3 now available. It is a beautiful job, complete with minute detail and movable controls. Bi-planes are something new in this field and are starting to appear more and more. Other new plastic kits are the Albatross D-5, Fokker D-7, and Sopwith Camel. In addition a new kit, still not out, is due on the Ford Trimotor complete with corrugated skin and skis! Be sure to see these new kits now coming out, and watch for further kits from the 1920-1940 era.