

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE 357th FIGHTER GROUPPART II

C/Sgt Merle Olmsted

A few days after "D" day the personnel of the station were exposed to a most interesting situation, the beginning of the German V-1 robot bomb attack on London. These bombs were actually a small non-piloted airplane with a pulse jet engine mounted above the fuselage, which contained the control mechanism, and the war head in the nose (a little over 2000 lbs of high explosive). The first of these "Buzz Bombs", as they were called by most people, was fired into London on the night of 12/13 June, and heavy attacks continued for several months thereafter. Fortunately, the 357th's station was directly in line with the bomb's route to London, and provided all personnel with many spectacular shows. These bombs were launched almost always at night, and altho we did not know exactly where they originated, it was probably in the Netherlands, as there were launching sites in this country. We also heard that some of these were being air-launched from modified Hell's. The first one the author saw remains vividly etched on his memory, as he had just stepped out of the barracks one evening enroute to the latrine, when the bomb appeared bearing down on him at a very low altitude, possibly 300 feet. The impression was quite startling with the terrific racket of the bomb's engine, and the long streak of flame from its tail pipe. Being too startled to do anything else, the author merely stood and watched until it disappeared toward London. At this time there had been no air raid alert, since the base was quite close to the sea (about 20 miles) and there was insufficient time for an alert.

Few of these early bombs were shot down, altho one, whose gyro was out of adjustment, came in too low and hit a tree near the base, the ensuing explosion shaking everyone up, but causing no casualty or damage to equipment. In a very short time the British had moved a tremendous number of guns into the area between our base and the coast of the North Sea. Some rumors said as many as 2,500 guns were in the area, but this seems rather high. For some reason or another, the bombs seemed to come in fairly well grouped, usually in fives. In a short time after the arrival of the guns, an average of four out of five was being shot down. Those that were hit usually exploded in the air, providing a beautiful brilliant orange flash. Another incident that comes to mind took place late one night when about eight of us were standing in front of the hangar watching the searchlights, as an alert was in progress. Soon we saw one of the buzz bombs headed directly in our direction, with the guns putting up a terrific barrage in an attempt to knock it down. Although no one was particularly worried about the bomb, as its engine was still running and it would no doubt go on over us, it occurred to everyone at once that all of that gunfire they were throwing up at it had to come down somewhere. So, as one man, the little group turned and made a dash for a nearby bomb shelter trench, leaping in and looking up just in time to get a fine view of the bomb itself, bathed in the glare of the searchlights. Later on that spring the author had the chance to examine one of these machines which had landed intact and was on display in London.

By August of 1944 the threat of the V-1 buzz bomb was over. Allied troops had captured the launching sites and ended London's ordeal from this particular enemy. However, that city was soon to fall under the shadow of a much more formidable

weapon, the V-2 rocket, against which there was no known defense.

In the spring of 1944, even before "D" day, the group had begun to receive a much modified model of the P-51. This was the "D" model which had a modified after fuselage, and a bubble canopy instead of the old "bird cage" type on the "B" and "C" models. The leading edge of the wing had been changed where it joined the fuselage, and one of the main faults of the "B" had been remedied. This was in the positioning of the guns, the "B" having only four .50 cal mg's, two in each wing. Even worse, the guns were laid in the gun bay half way on their sides, or at a 45 degree angle. This method of mounting put an undue stress on the ammunition belts, and during violent maneuvers the belts had a tendency to break, and it was not unusual for aircraft to return from missions with only one, or maybe no guns operating. In the "D" this was remedied and the guns were now mounted upright in the gun bay, and the number increased to six. Some of these "D" models rec'd in the spring and summer of '44 were; G4-X named "Libby B", serial 44-11198; G4-C, named "Nooky Booky", serial 44-13316 (this machine was flown by Capt. Len Carson, top scoring pilot of the sqdn); G4-Z, serial 44-14612. Most of these machines came through in natural finish instead of the olive drab of the earlier "B" models, although some "D"'s carried the camouflage. G4-W, "Cooter", serial 44-14153, with blue-gray undersurfaces was one of these "D"s which was full olive drab. This might be a good place to mention the "Spirit of St. Louis". This was a Noorduyt Norseman UC-64 which was assigned to the 362nd sqdn as a "hack". It was painted silver and carried the red and yellow checkerboard markings on it's engine cowl, and the name was painted on the right side of the forward fuselage. Serial number was 43-35444.

During the long days of the European summer the group flew a mission almost every day. Altho the number of P-51 gps in the 8th had increased rapidly until all fighter grps were equipped with this type, the pace had quickened also, and there was little rest for any group. Long range escort was still the order of the day, and the drop-pable wing tanks were fitted every day on the return of the aircraft. These tanks were British built, some being made of cardboard, and some of metal, the former being less likely to leak. The metal tanks had a tendency to leak at the welded seams. These tanks fastened to the bomb racks, and each held 108 US gallons, giving a total tankage of 485 gallons. This resulted in a maximum range of about 1,600 miles, or around 800 miles from base and home again. This was an unheard of range for fighters until the P-51 arrived to show how it was done. During this time the group participated in the second shuttle bombing mission to Russia, this being the most successful. The first shuttle mission had resulted in rather heavy losses to the B-17's on the ground in Russia, during a heavy raid by German aircraft.

During the summer and fall the victories piled up, and so did the losses. Some pilots were killed in action, such as Lt. Holmberg whose machine exploded during a dogfight. Others bailed out to become prisoners. Some of these latter, such as Lt. "Junior" Drollinger, the sqdn "baby" were returned to England by the "underground". Lt. Lichter of the 362nd was not so lucky and spent the rest of the war in a prison camp. By the fall of 1944 the group had built up quite a cadre of high-scorers, of which the most outstanding were Capt. Carson, and Major England, both of the 362nd, and Majors Peterson and Anderson.

With the coming of fall and winter, not quite so many missions were flown as bad weather conditions prevailed. However many missions were flown when very bad weather conditions existed at Lieston, but when the targets in Europe were clear. With the arrival of the dark winter days, a feeling that the war could last forever set in with it. By February of 1945, on the unit's first operational birthday, it took stock and

found that it stood second in the ETO in the number of enemy planes destroyed in combat. At that time the 56th Group was leading, but it had been in combat almost twice as long. After one year the group was credited with 586 $\frac{1}{2}$ enemy aircraft destroyed, and had in its ranks 45 pilots who had more than five victories and therefore were "aces". Probably the day the personnel of the 357th were proudest of was the 14th of January 1945. On this day, with 56 machines airborne the group flew an escort mission to Derben, only a few miles from Berlin. The three sqdns were flying at different levels with the possibility in mind of setting up a mousetrap play. The chance came near the target when a large number of German fighters, both Me 109's, and Fw 190's jumped the bombers. The trap was sprung and in a wild rat-race lasting about 30 minutes, 56 $\frac{1}{2}$ German aircraft were shot down, with a loss of three Mustangs. The "1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " was a machine shared with another grp. Most estimates of Luftwaffe aircraft engaged ranged close to 200. For this action the group rec'd the Unit Citation for what was a record number of enemy aircraft shot down in one day.

During the middle and latter half of 1944 the "D" model aircraft had been rapidly replacing the older "B" models, and a few "K" model machines were delivered. The only visible difference between the "D" and the "K" was the propeller, the former having a Hamilton, and the latter having an Aeroproducts. By the end of the year almost all airplanes were in a natural finish, and the invasion stripes had all but disappeared.

During the first year in action the group had had a number of commanders, the first operational commander being Col. Henry Spicer, until he was shot down and became a prisoner. Col. Irvin Dregne was commander at the end of one year. As for the 362nd Sqdn, Major Broadhead had been commander for most of the time after the loss of Col. Egnes. After Major Broadhead finished his tour and returned to the Zone of Interior, Major Len Carson assumed command, a position he held until the end of the war. At the end of the first year in action Major Carson was the grp high scorer with 22 victories. Major England was close behind with 19, as were Majors Peterson and Anderson. With the coming of spring 1945 the victories, and the losses, piled up more slowly. The Luftwaffe was not fighting so often now, preferring to pick the time and place, they appeared to be defending only certain targets of value to them. Late in March the 362nd lost one of its favorite pilots, Lt. Otto "Dittie" Jenkins. Of Indian extraction, "Dittie" Jenkins was an excellent fighter pilot, and at the time of his death was credited with 12 victories. On the 24th of March he flew his last mission before he was due to return to the states; and on returning from this mission he buzzed the operations shack. In doing so he struck a tree and crashed, killing himself instantly. The aircraft, G4-X, named "Toolin' Fools Revenge" was completely destroyed and burned. Years later, in 1952, bits of the wreckage were still to be found in the area.

And so in mid-summer of 1945 as the war rolled to an exhausted stop, so did the 357th Fighter Group, and all of their brothers at arms in the other Allied services. On VE Day, and on the following day, there was much celebrating, and much discussion of how soon we would be going home, or would be going to the Far East to help subdue the Japs. With the collapse of this nation, soon after, this trip was spared us. It was not long after the end of the war that 357 found it was one of the few grps being sent to Germany on occupation duty. For the next month there was feverish activity getting ready to move, and one and all were amazed at how much junk could accumulate over a period of a year and a half. But along with the moving preparations the grp had time to sum up the work of the last year and a half, and see how it stood. Summed up in a few cold facts, it worked out like this: 314 missions had been flown, during which 709 enemy aircraft had been destroyed, 600 of these in the air, 180 more

were listed as damaged, with our losses running about 1/5th of the victories. 357 was the first grp to fly single engined allied fighters over Berlin, and it carried out the most successful shuttle bombing escort mission to Russia and back. The figures of enemy aircraft shot down were official at that time, but since the war, after much study, it was found victory claims by all the engaged air forces were too optimistic. If a study of the individual groups was made to reevaluate their victories, it is unknown to the author.

The groups move to the continent was made in two parts, one part going by ship across the channel, and then by road convoy, to take the heavy equipment and the units vehicles. The remaining equipment and personnel were moved by the 100th Bomb Group, which had installed cargo racks in the bomb bays of its B-17G's. The author was among those flying over, arriving at the new base in July, which the old Luftwaffe base at Neubiburg, a small town about ten miles south of Munich on the Salzberg autobahn. The change in stations was certainly for the better, the living quarters at Liepton had been nisson huts, but here we had two story stucco barracks with two and three man rooms, steam heat, and tile baths. Better hangar and maintenance facilities were available also, with each sqdn being assigned it's own hangar. The late summer and fall months were ones of great interest, spent looking over the countryside, and the results of the work of the 8th Air Force and of the RAF Bomber Command, these results being quite evident in Munich and other large cities. There were many German aircraft to be examined, and there was much activity with captured small arms of all types, there being an almost unlimited supply of both arms and ammunition. Much of the increased spare time was spent consuming the good German beer, which was hauled out to the base in kegs on GI trucks.

There were many German aircraft on the field when we moved in, including about 40 Me 109G's, and Fw 190A's. Most of these were parked in orderly rows out in the middle of the field, in excellent condition, complete with loaded guns. In the base junkyard there was quite an assortment of aircraft, many of them in fair condition. One of these, a Junkers Ju 88G, was lacking it's starboard engine, and there were about ten Junkers Jumo 211 power eggs which had been removed from Ju 88's. Other a/c in the yard were Me 109's, Me 110's, Ju 87's, He 111's, Me 262's, and a Fw 44. The Me 262 were of special interest since most of us had never seen a jet-propelled a/c close up before, altho we had seen Gloster Meteors in flight over our base in England. About a month after arrival two interesting aircraft were flown into the base by a German test pilot. These were two versions of the Dornier Do 335, one a single-seater which was the Do 335A-1, and the other was the Do 335A-10, a two seat trainer and night fighter. The single seater was in natural aluminum color, and bearing U.S. markings, but the A-10 was olive drab, and still carried it's black crosses, with the number "112" painted on the upper part of it's top vertical fin. During the time these machines were present the German pilot flew them several times in mock combat with our Mustangs. The Dorniers were quite fast, but due to their size were rather clumsy and no match for the P-51 in a dogfight. Of course they were not designed for dogfighting, but for bomber interception, a job which they would no doubt have been rather good at if finished in time to see combat. Both aircraft were later flown away, and at least one of them was turned over to the R.A.F. For awhile after arrival there was an Me 109G in one of the hangars which was undergoing inspection with the help of a German mechanic, the plan being to fly it, as all of the pilots were eager to try out some captured airplanes. However before it was ready a pilot in another group was killed while flying an Fw 190, and orders came thru that no enemy aircraft would be flown, so ours was towed to the junkyard.

In October the author's turn came, and possessing enough points he started the trip home. The 357th Fighter Group ended it's days here in the shadow of Munich, over which it's aircraft had flown so much, both in war and occupation. In 1946 the group was deactivated on paper, and the 33rd Fighter Group activated to take its place. This was also soon disbanded, and the 86th Fighter Group was formed. The author served again with this latter unit in 1948/49 at which time they were equipped with F-47D Thunderbolts. This group is still in Germany, although not at Munich anymore.

End

THE AIR FORCE MUSEUM

The official Air Force Museum, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, is a continuation of the old McCook Field Museum established in 1923. The Museum was closed to the public during World War II, and opened again in a new location after the war. At present the Museum is located in Building 89, a large war-time engine overhaul shop, with approximately 175,000 sq. ft. of floor space available for exhibition purposes. The Museum, with its 20,000 or more items of early and recent equipment pertaining to aircraft and aviation, is said to be the most complete collection of its kind in the world. In addition to the material equipment in the museum proper, the museum library contains approximately 675,000 separate documents and photographs, some of which date as far back as 1903.

Aircraft on exhibit in the Museum include a Consolidated PT-1, SPAD VII, Lockheed F-80R, a Russian Yak, a Zlin 26, a prototype of the X-3, and various experimental helicopters, gliders, and parasite planes. In addition Lindbergh's Lockheed "Sirius" has recently been given to the Museum. We will publish a more complete list of the aircraft as soon as it becomes available.

Admission is free and the Museum is open daily, except Saturday, from 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM. It is also open each Sunday afternoon from 1:00 to 5:00 PM. Closed on legal holidays. The Museum is located in Building 89, Area C, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Please enter through Gate 35-C, which is at the west end of Main Street in Fairborn, approximately 11 miles east of Dayton on State Route 4. Bus service is available to and from Dayton and Springfield along State Route 4. In addition adequate free parking space is available for automobiles.

See page 99 for photograph of entrance to Museum.

U.S. ARMY -U.S. AIR FORCE FIGHTER PLANES

A most interesting new book, by member Ed Farley, containing three view scale drawings of all available fighters from the P-1 to the F-100 has just been published. In addition to the drawings many pertinent points on colors, model designations and modifications, are also included.

Copies may be purchased from E. J. Farley, 5480 Allamanda Dr., Jacksonville, Florida. Price \$1.00 per copy.