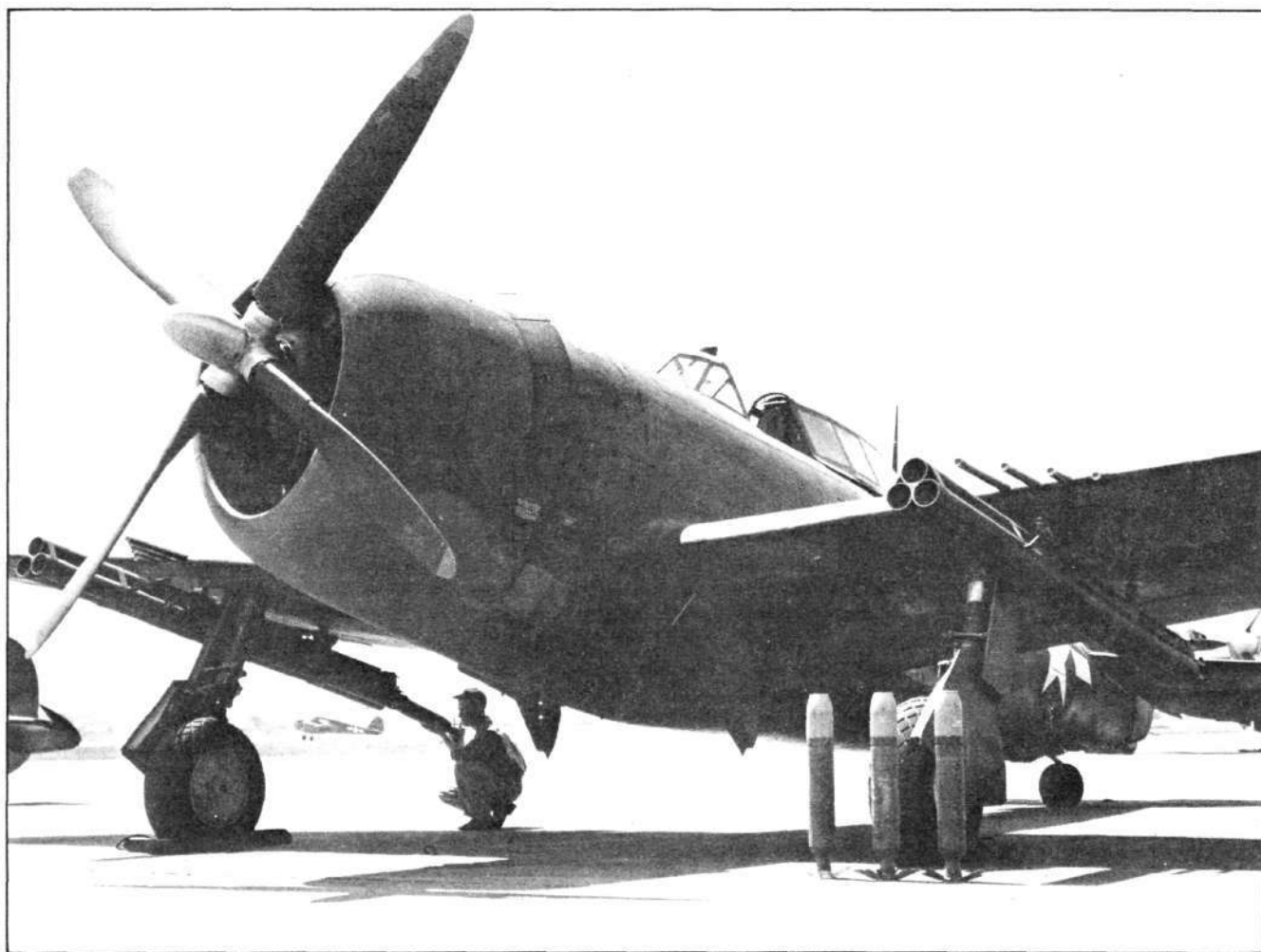

COLUMN COVER

The 366th Fighter Group in WWII

by Harold Norman Holt, Col. USAF (Ret.)

Part II



The bog-down at St. Lo was unfortunate. The enemy took advantage of the breather and marshaled all available fighting strength for commitment to the Normandy front. It was logical to assume that the longer we waited the stiffer would become their resistance. As soon as rejuvenated supply lines increased our potential fighting strength to a level more compatible with the tactical situation we would have to strike—hard! Air power was the most life saving for our troops and yet the most terrorizing means of bringing the foe to his knees before moving into such a sector of defense.

The plan for the St. Lo breakthrough was particularly impressive. Calculated to be the greatest coordination of air and ground up to that time, the scheme attracted the close scrutiny of all who were directly concerned with breaking the static condition of the front. At the briefing the group commanders and other personnel who would be planning for the part their own particular units would be playing were surprised to learn that 3000 aircraft would attempt to blast a hole in the line for our troops to charge through! That's quite a fistful of planes at any time, under any circumstances.

Seven groups of fighter-bombers were to lead off by hitting a rectangle 2000 yards long by 500 yards wide. They were to be followed by medium bombers, then the heavies, both types hitting the same enemy front-line area, but a little deeper into enemy territory. During this particular phase of the bombing the troops were to be withdrawn approximately 1000 yards as a safety measure. Following the heavies six fighter groups were to divebomb the same rectangular area simultaneously with a general advance of the ground forces up to the battle line. When the bombing had ceased, all troops were to pour into the devastated area.

The plan was big—yet simple. The enemy would certainly be pinned down, if not crippled by the bombardment. The ground forces were to carry the ball from there.

The breakdown of the plan issued to all fighter-bomber groups showed that we were to form a long string of groups and divebomb in close consecutive order. The lead group was to navigate to each home field of all other groups and pick them up one at a time. It appeared feasible enough since the target area was not more than 20 miles from any one field. The weather forecast was favorable. No weaknesses were evident. We were all set.

The next morning it didn't look so good. A thick haze approaching a fog in density had moved in during the night. We had to go anyway.

Assembling our own group over our own field was not too difficult, but navigating to and picking up our required flight strength increased proportionately with time in the air. By time and distance flying we were able to approach the flight strips, but not as accurately as contact with the ground would have permitted. The extremely low visibility added the hazard of head-on collision to our other headaches. Having set the rendezvous altitude, all ships were milling around on the same level, unseen by other aircraft less than a half mile away. If we arrived at a strip when a group was caught at a particular point in their circle of flight, they would pop out of the stuff and head right at us! Twice we narrowly avoided head-on collision with aircraft ahead.

Time was wasted by this difficulty of navigation and rendezvous, and when we arrived at the target we were six minutes late. We bombed accurately, however, and withdrew as briefed. To our chagrin we were recalled *after* having bombed and pulled away from the target!

The mission was scrubbed because the mediums and heavies which were to follow could not spot and hit the target accurately through the heavy haze. Possibly the enemy knew by now what we intended to do, but it was not feasible to hold back any longer on the basis of mere conjecture.

A mistake was made that day which has since been mentioned and re-mentioned by armchair strategists in news-writing circles. It might

be pointed out to those same hecklers that wherever the human element is involved, mistakes are inevitable. Unfortunately, if the result of the mistake brings nationwide attention, the error is considered criminal. Only those who are continually *doing* make mistakes. To sit around and ridicule the doer is easy. But to get upstairs and do it better is something else again.

On the strength of our encountered difficulties, we eliminated the mass assembly idea and planned instead to have each group pass over an initial point at an appointed time. This would eliminate a possible build-up of errors by a multitude of turns should navigation prove difficult. After passing over the initial point, each group would navigate to the target independently, bomb and pull out at scheduled times.

Once again we took off—this time in perfectly clear weather. Our route to the target was a dog-leg with the time-checking initial point at the elbow. At the end of the second leg—the target.

Chosen to lead the foray, our group checked in with the initial point on time, "Hello, Pinpoint, Rupert here—checking in—over!"

"Roger, Rupert—this is Pinpoint—you're on the nose—good luck!"

There's usually no answer to a transmission like that. We had enough to think about without filling the air with patter.

As we approached the target area we had to gasp to ourselves! Marked with recognition panels as we were told they would be were hundreds of our tanks and vehicles massed bumper to bumper—ready to surge forward on signal. It looked like a Broadway traffic jam behind our lines. Hundreds? There must have been thousands!

Immediately across the lines—enemy territory—no movement, no visible strength—they were well dug-in and camouflaged.

Already the artillery barrage with which we were to combine our bombardment barrage had started. Stretched before us was a veritable battlefield, the first we felt a part of since the assault on the beaches. Exploding shells, colored smokepots billowing red clouds to outline our bombing area, and panels providing a well-defined troop line all colorfully combined to drive the importance of the tactical situation home to us. We could imagine the hell-on-earth about to break loose below us.

We headed straight for the target and rolled into our dive from 5000 feet about 10 seconds before H-hour. Our 1000-pounders must have hit and exploded right on the second. Six other groups followed closely behind us to add the destruction of their death-dealing "babies."

The area was well saturated with bombs. The target rectangle was completely obscured by bomb smoke and dust, indicating an even and accurate bombing by all three squadrons. Each group to follow had five minutes before bombing which allowed landmarks to break through the smoke and dust. They too hit on the nose. How a grasshopper could have lived in the target area after all aircraft had bombed was impossible to conceive.

On our way back to our strip we saw the mediums going in overhead, and one of the pilots burst out on his radio with, "Nothing can stop the Army Air Corps!"—for which he was promptly silenced. Violations of radio discipline right then could be very serious, regardless of how thrilled he had become.

Our part of the mission was completed. We rolled up to our revetments, shut off our engines and sat there—watching them go over. The heavies followed the mediums, and it stirred our insides a little. Maybe it was because we knew where they were going and how important it was that made the difference. Sure, we had seen bombers before, plenty of 'em—had escorted 'em over many targets. But somehow this was different. This time the fighters, mediums and heavies, were combining to spearhead the doughboys' breakthrough. If it succeeded, anything could happen—and possibly it was such anxious anticipation that turned our gaze toward the string of bombers stretching as far as we could see.

The plan had the desired effect. Whether the bombing itself caused a weakening of resistance or whether the spectacle of 3000 planes working their troops over at once filled the enemy with awe can only be assumed. In any event, our troops were able to penetrate the area of defense to push slowly south—deeper into France.

Once below St. Lo and steadily advancing, we could breathe more easily. Our position on the continent was less precarious. It was like having an extra thousand dollars in the bank to fall back on to see the strip of land between our troops and the channel widen. It meant more security. We could fight under our own pressure instead of the enemy's. We appreciated that. At one time our unit sat, comparatively defenseless against ground attack, with its back to the channel and the enemy front line only 10 miles away.

Rather slow at the outset, our troops, gaining much-needed battle experience as they advanced, were wary and cautious to a great degree. Not until reaching the area below Carentan did the advance seem to gain momentum.

In that area, Avranches-Coutanches, a few other refinements of air-ground technique were introduced with fair success. The difficulty of locating the lead tank in an armored column became increasingly difficult as the quantity of our armor committed to the attack increased. Using all roads of the areas assigned to us, it was not easy to get over the proper column before going to work. When visibility decreased by virtue of smoke and haze, we found it helpful to have the tank leader flash a white light at the planes circling overhead to make sure communication was being made with the proper squadron. Oftentimes our attacks were confined to one road as the column advanced, therefore the coordinate system for such close coordination was slower than a quick description of the terrain ahead. For that reason we had to be talking with the unit we were observing as it rolled on the ground, or confusion would have slowed the move forward.

For instance, a tank column very often was held up by an 88mm artillery piece just around the curve in a road. After discovering that the piece could easily hold them on the road until darkness set in, or even indefinitely, the tankers would scout ahead, determine its position and radio the dope to the fighter-bombers. Knocking it out by strafing or bombing was far from difficult, since we were right on the spot when receiving the information.

A funny feeling hits a pilot when he sees his teammates on the ground being clobbered by the enemy. No matter how toughened or fatalistic a pilot becomes by virtue of combat experience, he can't help but become angered and get sympathetic when he sees our tanks, half-tracks or trucks burning. When the enemy had us in his sights, American pride as well as material suffered. Fighting spirit was aroused to the point of loud swearing in the cockpit—frantic searching for the hidden weapon—and savage attacks after its discovery, particularly by the flight leaders who were responsible for their part of the air effort.

The cool, unhurried radio procedure of the flight leaders gave no indication of their feverish concern, however. Experience quickly taught them to be unhurried, and as phonetically clear as possible with radio transmission. It saved time by avoiding the repetition of garbled, hasty, monosyllabic transmissions. An excited pilot had to get a grip on himself before pressing the transmission button on the throttle, or some mighty confusing things were likely to hit the air waves.

Following the Avranches-Coutanches fiasco, the "race across France" started. Forced to move in the open by repeated ground and air attacks, the Wehrmacht took to the highways in a mad rout. Ordinarily refraining from daylight movement because of our air cover, caution had to be disregarded as the seriousness of the enemy's situation increased. Necessary as it may have seemed, it hastened the arrival of their first humiliating defeat.

We first noticed it by picking up whole convoys of trucks, horse-drawn artillery, staff cars and some tanks upon arrival over our tank columns. Used to seeking out points of resistance, hitting them and progressing slowly, we were overjoyed at seeing lines of enemy personnel and equipment practically *inviting* us to attack!

Attack we did, destroying untold quantities of equipment and fighting strength. At times smoke columns caused by columns of burning vehicles literally covered the terrain ahead of our racing troops. The burning vehicles attracted us to the vulnerable areas surely and quickly each time we arrived in the target area.

The "target area" was not a well-defined area, as can be imagined. Each succeeding day found the bomb-line 10 to 50 miles further out. Consequently it wasn't long before we were forced to carry auxiliary fuel in belly tanks in order to fly the rapidly mounting distance to the front lines, and still be able to operate a reasonable length of time ahead of the columns.

Expendable though the fuel tanks were, we couldn't afford to drop them. The supply lines were loaded with other items of more importance, so we strafed, bombed and stooged around with them on.

Rarely were the belly tanks hit by flak fire. When direct hits and fire resulted, promptly dropping them was the simple expedient employed to avoid further damage. The fear of what would happen was removed and we used them without reluctance until we were able to move to a field closer to the front lines.

The terrific toll taken of the Wehrmacht must have broken its back. The only stiff resistance experienced after the clobbering of their armies in France was felt at the Siegfried line. Suitable terrain and prepared fortifications assisted in defending their borders, but not for long.

Here again, Column Cover sought out strong points of resistance and aided in the infiltration tactics employed to penetrate the Siegfried line. Moving warily—experiencing heavier defenses—giving supply lines a chance to catch up and strengthen—feeling out the opponent like a clever boxer, our forces advanced slowly toward the Rhine until bad weather conditions virtually forced a halt.

From the beginning weather had always been in favor of the enemy. D-Day found a low ceiling harassing our air cover; a storm had choked off supply sources during the critical period before St. Lo; intermittent non-operational days kept fighter cover on the ground, slowing advances; and now the winter climate settled in to hold up our advance by restricting supply as well as holding aircraft on the ground.

As always, the opponent with his back to the wall saw an opening. He gambled by throwing all available strength against the part of our line known to be weakly defended by resting troops. Calculating on initial success by virtue of bulldozing strength against what he had reason to believe was weak resistance, the enemy planned to capture fuel and supplies in sufficient quantity to keep rolling.

First news of the breakthrough rocked us back on our heels. The enemy advancing? Impossible! But here were the orders to take off, weather or not.

Take off we did, poor as the weather was. In four, eight, and twelve ship formations, depending on the visibility and ceiling at the moment, we hit the enemy wherever we found him.

It was an all-out offensive for them. Even the failing Luftwaffe appeared in greater strength than they had since D-Day. Our air power was their big worry. They utilized what planes they had left as well as the weather to keep us away. Their air strength never could have stopped us, but the weather did.

For days on end we had to hug the ground, gripped by conditions in which it was impossible to fly. They were advancing all the while—and it hurt. Why couldn't they hold 'em? Ground against ground should be a fair fight!

Then came the break in weather we had been waiting for! We leaped out to attack—to find another field day. Like the clobbering they got in France, the enemy troops again felt the effect of fighter-bombers in savage attack. The enemy advance slowed, stopped and went into reverse. Slowly, sullenly, they withdrew—back to the scrimmage line—pass not completed. The ball was back in our hands—and this time we would run with it!

The huddle for consolidating and re-supplying the units caught in the counteroffensive took place before our own winter offensive. During that time we flew routine missions to keep up air superiority

as well as to harass the enemy. By hitting transportation, power installations, bridges, rails and highways we started to isolate the battlefield already taking form on our maps of strategy.

Strength regained, the slow and easy push to the Rhine followed. There the Spring was really coiled for an overpowering surge ahead. Our part of the preparation took place by working with the mediums and heavies in a crippling diving and strafing mission over a tremendous area across the Rhine. A systematic and complete plan to finish the isolation of the battlefield went into effect with that mission. Railway marshaling yards, bridges, rail lines and highways were clobbered in order to trap the enemy. So extensive was the effect that even the mediums and heavies went down to strafe targets of opportunity. Besides flak, we had the additional hazard of possible collision with friendly aircraft, there were so many in the area. No supplies coming in, and unable to maneuver more than short distances, the stage was set to let the enemy feel our muscles.

The epic of the Rhine crossing approached in intensity the thrilling atmosphere of the D-Day assault on the beaches. Our unit was assigned to cover the bridgeheads as they became established, while others were given the missions of destroying flak positions and hitting targets of opportunity.

Hitting inflammable targets like oil reserves and ammunition trains caused billowing smoke columns to mix with the ever-present haze which was so typical of the season. Adding the smoke and dust of exploding bombs and that caused by burning buildings razed by the ground troops, the visibility over the Ruhr Valley area was soon restricted by the impenetrable mixture. To do any good at all, we had to reduce altitude and fly with the possibility of hitting friendly planes stooging around in the partially man-made "soup."

The paratroopers were used to spearhead and secure the enemy banks across the river—and all hats should be off to them. C-47s, flying low in the clear morning air, were excellent targets for enemy antiaircraft fire. Navigating flawlessly, they dropped in an excellent concentration. Forming up on the ground was thus made easier, and the strong fighting strength resulting saved them from annihilation.

From our roving patrol over the bridgeheads we were able to observe the fates of many hapless C-47 pilots while searching for intruding enemy aircraft. Flying at relatively slow speeds and at about 700 feet, the big ships were excellent targets. That they would be hit unmercifully was expected. The end of the unfortunate ones was tragic and heart-wrenching to see. Catching fire, they would fly on bravely—trying to get back across the Rhine. There they could belly-in with a wheels-up landing and be safe in friendly territory.

One pilot tried very hard to make it. His right engine caught fire at the point of maximum penetration into enemy territory—just before turning to come out. Flames stretched twice the length of the fuselage, but his turns indicated that he was still at the controls. Increasing in intensity, the fire spread to include most all of his right wing. In the air, fire whips the metal airfoil from the wings in a very short time, and it seemed like his right wing was being consumed at a rapid rate.

Wishing we could have done something to help him, we sat tensely waiting to see if he would get across the river. We could imagine what he was going through. He was baking in a raging inferno with only a couple of miles to fly.

Just short of the river, his other engine burst into flames! His right wing, no longer able to support the ship, went down. Flying into a wide, flat spiral he hit the ground in a ball of fire. Sherman would have yielded a bitter smile, could he have seen that.

The bridgehead secure, our troops and tanks streamed across to build up the strength needed for a big push. There our troops were surprised to find practically no resistance. Our ships returned with their bomb loads again and again. There were no targets for us. Tank columns speeded along, virtually unopposed. German farm laborers stopped work in the fields to watch with open-mouthed amazement as our columns charged by.

It was another "race across France" in speed, ease of maneuvering and amount of territory won. Repeatedly we had to change the maps in our briefing rooms and intelligence trailers to keep up with devel-

opments.

Quite often the weather held us on the ground, but it didn't matter now. With practically no opposition we weren't needed very much. Only for scaring off German pilots who might attempt a suicide pass at one of our columns were we needed. The percentage of insane men in the Luftwaffe wasn't great enough to make it a serious situation.

The boys who did the work over the troops cannot be described completely in one chapter. What caused the ground troops to be resounding in their praise for the *Thunderbolts* and at the same time brought tears of gratitude to the eyes of our commanding general could not easily be brought to the reader adequately by printed words. We'd have to go back to a pilot's birth, family life, boyhood in sports-conscious America, when he was first "bitten by the flying bug," his induction into the Air Forces as a cadet, his flying training, arrival at a tactical training unit, assignment to a fighter unit, and the spirit which was instilled within him as he assembled with his fellow airmen into a unit to train for "the big show." We would have to watch each pilot individually to notice his character and fighting heart develop and fuse into an unbeatable spirit of teamwork and willingness to die for his country. It was not fanaticism; it was not forced. It was actually the will to fight for the right.

Within the whole block of pilots it might be assumed that there are actually six basic types which can be labeled as distinctive from the others. Although it cannot absolutely be said that every pilot fell exclusively into one definite classification, he was nevertheless one of these types when he first applied for pilot training, with a touch of one or two of the others also in his makeup.

The first could be called the air-minded boy. He had dabbled in model airplanes, had hung around airports bumming rides and talking with pilots until nothing but flying could satisfy him. His burning interest alone usually carried him through to the realization of his dream.

The second can be referred to as the lover of mechanics. He liked to drive anything and had gone through all the desires of youth until the airplane caught his eye. Remember hearing a kid say, "I wanna be a railroad engineer"? This is the same lad who had zoomed around on a kiddie-car, a tricycle, two-wheeler, motorcycle, his own four-wheeled jalopy and ultimately yearned to get his hands on the airplane. With such a talent for operating things developed, he usually got his wish.

A third type could be earmarked as the adventurer. He's the same one who ran away from home a couple of times, only to return when he got hungry. It was hard to keep him from hitching rides on freight trains. He wanted to get around and see things. His drive to "get-up-and-go" helped him make the grade too.

The fourth might be called the glamor-seeker or attention-attractor. He wanted the prestige of the uniform; admiring glances (of either sex—it didn't matter *who* worshiped him, although he preferred young femininity); the title of Lieutenant; and the right to strut a little.

Fifth on the list would be the frustrated lover—the impulsive individual who didn't quite make the grade with the "one-and-only" or some other interest. If the French Foreign Legion had been more accessible he probably would have tried to lose himself in that organization. Instead, with a mental, "I'll show her!" he chose flying and ordinarily did rather well.

Finally, the sixth group might be named the undecided individual. He's the one who was caught with a high school education and possibly a year or two of college behind him when the draft started. Somewhat athletic perhaps, with a sound body, good eyes and a natural physical coordination, a member of the family or a friend probably advised taking the examinations to be a flyer. The germ injected, he tried, and found himself being trained along with thousands of others in the science of aerial flight.

When making application for flight training with the army few aspiring pilots could have felt a strong urge of patriotism or love of money, although the magazine ads attempted to stimulate both



Damage to the *Magic Carpet* during her 42nd mission May 10, 1944. German 20mm anti-aircraft shell exploded in left wing knocking out wheels, flaps and left aileron and airspeed indicator. Hydraulic fluid caught fire and burned holes in wing. (Holt)



feelings rather convincingly in order to keep the flight surgeon's office full of applicants. The patriotic urge undoubtedly flared after the Pearl Harbor incident, while the pay angle was not of particular importance until the pilot began to pay his own way—after graduation.

These comprise one estimation of the types that entered for flight training, but it cannot honestly be said that they had not changed appreciably upon graduation. The air-minded kid with a strong urge to emulate the birds found that airsickness often accompanies flight, but he was still in there pitching; the lover of mechanics was satisfying his desire to "make with the machinery" but had also been taught to do other things like standing at attention and saying, "Sir!"; the adventuresome lad had mounted the flying train to discover that he couldn't jump off whenever he wanted to; the glamor-seeker had found that humility can deflate any ego if it is employed enough—and upper-class aviation cadets knew how to employ it; the frustrated lover had forgotten his unfaithful girl (well, *almost*); and the undecided student now had an aim and an ambition.

However, when all the earlier differences of type blended into an ostensible sameness at the completion of flight training, the initiative and air of independence—which originally took the applicant to the examining board and carried the trainee pilot through his course—remained. Actually this air of independence had been strengthened by its kin, self-reliance, both of which were developed further by solo flying. To many observers this attitude was merely cockiness nurtured by those shiny gold bars and silver wings. Some of it was, but the outward appearance of those newly graduated kids was not entirely indicative of their true worth. They knew they were good. All that remained was to reduce that attitude to one more receptive to additional training—tactics in fighters.

The cocky attitude was deflated rapidly by the squadron commanders. A few remarks intended to cut them down to their true selves helped each one get started on the right path. The usual conclusion to introductions and a brief orientation sounded something like this, "Remember, you are officers first, then pilots. You are allowed more privileges and freedoms as officers; but you pay a higher price when you break a regulation. As pilots you are of no value to this until you know your airplane thoroughly and can fly, combat-style, as a good

fighter pilot. If you prove to be a shade less than that, we don't want you in this organization."

The effect was immediate. The cockiness dissipated rapidly, leaving open minds and eagerness. The spirit of self-reliance and confidence already developed remained to permit an accelerated training which our nation needed so badly.

The pilots as they came into the newly activated fighter groups from flying school were younger than those who had graduated back in peacetime. The age minimum had been lowered substantially and it wasn't unusual to receive 19-year-old pilots with a few months of flying already behind them.

Their training had been complete, even to the point of including night and instrument flying in primary school, an innovation of considerable hazard when introduced, but indispensable for early training as the ability of the junior birdmen made evident.

It seemed unusual, though, to see such youths sporting insignia as officers in the Army. Some of them seemed awkward and self-conscious when on the ground as if lost for something to do. Once in an airplane, however, the story changed. Taking off was old stuff, flying good formation was automatic and kicking 2000-hp fighters around held their interest as nothing else could have. Learning rapidly helped prepare them for overseas work in a minimum of time.

The realization that serious work was ahead created an atmosphere which helped the older and more experienced pilots teach the tactics which would be employed in the combat theatre. The young sports listened attentively and were sincere in their efforts to learn all they could before, during and after each flight. Some with a little more natural ability than others would slyly try to best their flight leaders by making a better gunnery score, by hitting the target on the dive-bombing range more often, by kicking their ships around a little better in a mock dogfight or by getting a higher grade for landing on return to the field. The leaders didn't mind being kidded when a new pilot defeated them, though it wasn't often. Competition is a healthy attitude in any team effort. It kept all of the old-timers flying hard to save face, too.

We had to work harder on the air phases of their training than should have been necessary. It was almost routine to keep telling and showing new pilots that there was much more to the Air Forces than merely flying an airplane. They were to learn all they could about

being officers and potential leaders themselves. Within a year each of them could expect to be flight leaders, operations officers and possibly squadron commanders. As it did to the rest of us when we heard it, the idea seemed a little fantastic to them.

In the air we jolted them into thinking about it. Without warning we would turn responsibility over to a junior pilot to see how he would handle it. We got into some rare situations, but it was worth it. Leaders were developed who would give a good account of themselves at any time.

The situation most painful to a pilot was that of not knowing where he was when the flight was turned over to him. After flying around for a while and obviously getting nowhere, the leader would call, "Well, bird brain, don't you know where we are?"

"No, sir, I don't," would float back over the radio in a weak and uncertain tone.

"O.K., I'll take it!"—and the leader would lead the flight back to the field, usually no more than five minutes away.

Undoubtedly the pilots must have been seething in their ships when they were caught. They were not hurt by such treatment, however. They were really disgusted with themselves for not knowing what was going on or where they were being led. Needless to say, the system worked. The new boys learned to look around, knew where they were, and could take over at any instant. It served us well in enemy territory when we lost a leader.

The rat races were the thrill of each day's flight training. After long periods of formation flying, dive bombing or ground gunnery it was found best to top off the strain of riveted attention, rapid reactions and the monotony of such precision flying with them.

A rat race is flown much the same way kids play "follow-the-leader," only instead of jumping hedges and running across the neighbors' carefully tended flower beds, we add a third dimension and do it in the air. A long single line or string of ships is formed, one behind the other, and each pilot follows the maneuver of his leader. The leader, knowing his type of airplane well, leads his boys through maximum-performance tricks which are intended to develop the technique of the junior birdmen more rapidly. Too, a semi-combat condition was introduced since each pilot had to call on all of his ability to stay on the tail of the ship ahead. By insisting that an experienced leader be at the lead of a rat race, safe performance of the aircraft was not exceeded and accidents were few. The resulting economy of lives and equipment supported the logic behind it.

Pilots often remarked that they didn't know how to fly at all until they had flown with fighter pilots who had considerable experience with such training flights. It showed in their air work, too. They took pride in their flying with the stimulation of confidence brought about by such supervised "hot flying."

Squadron spirit built up naturally in such an atmosphere. Arguments over which was the best squadron took place often at the Officer's Club, and occasionally one would end with a bent nose or two. Preposterous on the surface perhaps, but it was really a healthy attitude. Pride in their squadrons and constant competition kept everyone on his toes.

Unfortunately much time had to be directed to the ground phases of their training, too. Caused by the rapid expansion of the Air Force and the need for quick training, it was necessary to brush them up on discipline, military courtesy, personal neatness and behavior. Realizing that any institution, military or otherwise, benefits immeasurably by an efficient-looking exterior, "the-right-way-is-the-only-way" technique was employed somewhat unmercifully from the outset. The short training time of our new officer-pilots had not been adequate enough to give them the confidence, military-bearing and meticulous nature so necessary in the entire block of officer personnel of a unit about to take the combat test.

Although a certain inertia is always evident in any undisciplined or inadequately trained individual in the service, that particular individual was immediately made to feel that mental griping was really a waste of energy. He would have to comply anyway, therefore the energy wasted by conjuring up a black mental condition would be better used by applying it to the job assigned. The very democratic

freedom we were about to defend had to be sacrificed by many in order to save time. A strong and orderly regimentation of all personnel was absolutely necessary if we were to combat similar units on the battlefield.

Rather odd in one respect, since it went against an established but unofficial practice, our unit made no discrimination between ground officers and pilots. All were treated equitably as officers, regardless of job. Requirements of discipline, standards of efficiency, assumption of responsibility and the attitude of continually striving to improve were demanded of all officers alike. No pressure was exerted, however, until it was evident that a particular officer was coasting. The inevitable crackdown was not tardy in making itself felt. By keeping the pressure off until it was needed, it was possible for a conscientious officer to use his natural initiative and be happy on the job. Those who were unhappy brought it on themselves.

The inertia that had to be overcome in the newly assigned pilots manifested itself in many amusing ways. Continually testing the officers who outranked them to see how much they could get away with, the junior birdmen slyly omitted a salute here—a "Sir" there—until they were subjected to the embarrassment of correction on the spot—by the same officers they had been testing.

It was interesting to see the embarrassment take hold. Questions such as, "When did you shine your shoes last?" generally brought a red face, a stammering excuse and an obvious sense of guilt. Strangely enough, telling certain individuals once was not sufficient. They would repeatedly forego the extra five minutes necessary to look neat by hurriedly and carelessly dressing in the morning. A more stern approach like, "You've got fifteen minutes to get back here looking like an officer. Get going!" had a more immediate and lasting effect.

We were skeptical about the effect the temporary layoff would have on all personnel during the move to England. We thought a letdown in attitude and spirit would lower our firing-on-all-cylinders efficiency somewhat. It was obvious that flying ability would rust a little. We could do nothing about that. But could we do anything to keep the do-or-die spirit up?

We didn't have to try. All officers and men had been together long enough to know the idiosyncrasies and eccentricities of each other, and they were played up good-humoredly enough to keep unit spirit high. Also, the anticipation of tangling with the enemy embodied more eagerness than it did reluctance, probably because of the strong undercurrent of thought that we were about to do something big and important.

Again, contrary to what we expected, our arrival in England only to wait three months for our planes did not hurt us. Keeping all personnel, particularly pilots, busy all day served to increase our desire to start fighting. By the time our operational date arrived, such zeal had approached the eruption point. "Let's go!" became the cry, and it was heard from many quarters in addition to the pilots themselves.

Once operating on daily flight schedules over enemy territory, everyone settled down to the smooth routine for which they had been trained. It was before and after missions that a study of the pilots revealed many interesting things.

The opportunity to study the pilots closely is possible in two situations. The first, of course, is in the air. The other is in the pilots' lounge where they are relaxed and speaking their minds. Character and net worth to society is more evident in the latter situation where heart-to-heart talks or bull sessions unravel pilots' dreams, schemes, loves, hates, or what have you.

I remember having had many such discussions with one pilot in my old squadron. Just 19, he hadn't shaved yet and was still making an adolescent attempt to reach the coveted six feet. A stringbean of a kid, I was attracted to him by the logic of his arguments against almost anything. I even asked him if he had any communistic tendencies. He smiled and shook his head in the negative, but continued to blast discipline, army life, democracy (but only in spots—for he admitted that only a democracy would allow him to shoot off his mouth so vehemently) and even the institution of marriage.

That last subject got him in trouble, as the married pilots descended on him in formation. Even his nimble brain was no match for their tirade of praise for the time-honored institution. The subject would have to be important to drag the pilots away from their much-beloved poker game.

His remark, "Well, I could be wrong, you know, but they say the *second* thing the married boys will do when they get home is take off their parachutes!" The chorus of, "Well, is *that* hard to take?" squelched him into good-natured silence and dismissed the menacing circle of happily married screwballs—back to the poker table.

The kid was young and possessed a brilliant mind. After maturing he could have done much for the service and society. He was killed shortly after D-Day, defending democracy.

What did the *T-bolt* drivers do when on operational leaves? That's not too hard to answer if you visualize what you yourself would feel like doing at the age of 22 after a particularly nerve-wracking ordeal. A bath, catching up on sleep, clean clothes—then "diversion," depending on the pilot's individual desire. Did they drink? Did they bother with women? Were they good boys? Well, visualize yourself in their shoes. After one or possibly two missions a day for many days in a row, with each mission flippantly knocking the chip from Father Time's shoulder, what would *you* do? In your own mind you've answered it, for there is at least one pilot in the crowd with your desires, your tastes, your intelligence—and your appreciation for a good time. He did just what *you* would have done on an operational leave to London, Paris or the Riviera.

These kids were not tough, gave no impression of considering themselves individuals of importance. Oh, once in a while a pilot would indicate that he thought pretty well of himself, but if his pals didn't know how to cut him down, his C.O. did. He soon discovered that one-man shows are too risky in combat, and that a sense of teamwork had to be cultivated on the ground as well as in the air.

The inevitable rotation of pilots as combat time mounted was somewhat detrimental to the unit. Although only temporarily so, the old spirit suffered a little by the loss of a large percentage of the original and highly experienced air leaders.

But the rotation was unavoidable. At approximately the 70-mission mark the average pilot's nerves were showing signs of wear. He had to drive himself to go out on missions. All were intelligent enough to realize that the old "law of averages" would get them sooner or later—and a natural reticence became noticeable. Oddly enough, the opposite effect was occasionally seen in some pilots. Instead of becoming reticent, they would exhibit a foolish, stupid kind of bravery—going wild in the target area. Although definitely disheartening to the enemy, we knew our boy's end was near if we didn't pull him out of combat in a hurry.

We could set no definite number of missions to determine a tour of combat duty. Unlike other known procedures, we had to look forward hopefully to the influx of replacement pilots. Only then could we plan to send flak-happy, war-weary boys home.

After a pilot has flown an airplane for a considerable length of time he can't avoid feeling a strong respect and affection for it. Actually it is because he has grown so accustomed to flying it that he literally knows it much better than he knows the palm of his hand. This is not meant to imply that a pilot only wants to fly one specific airplane. He will willingly fly any ship of the type he has come to know so well.

Oddly enough, airplanes seem to possess personalities. Upon close examination of all the flying characteristics of each plane, it is more often true than not that each plane of the same type and model flies somewhat differently than her sister ship. One may have followed the other off the assembly line, but differences in flight can still be detected.

Arguments between pilots who fly different types of fighters are common. In the early days most such arguments ended with a challenge to dogfight for proof. Later, however, most instances found the pilots resorting to the logic that all airplanes have advantages over each other. Some can dive faster, some can maneuver better,

some can fly greater distances, others can carry heavier bomb loads, while still others can absorb considerably more punishment.

We had such an affection for our *Thunderbolts*. Starting with the familiarity of flying the same ship for a number of hours, our respect for it was augmented further by its ruggedness in flight, its ability to absorb flak punishment, and the almost miraculous manner in which pilots were able to survive accidents that occurred while flying them.

This respect for our airplane did not become evident overnight. The ship was big and heavy, rather unusual compared to previous pursuit types of aircraft we had flown. Its visibility on the ground was poor. The large, barrel-like nose housing a 2000-plus horsepower radial engine protruded far out ahead of the pilot and successfully obscured the path down and ahead of the ship in flight. Pilots assumed immediately that such an aircraft could not possibly be maneuverable. Also, its size would make it a good target for the enemy to hit from the ground. It didn't look good to us at all—but we had much to learn about the *Thunderbolt*.

Shortly after D-Day one of our pilots was caught deep in enemy territory by three FW-190 type enemy fighters. Unfortunately he was at 3000 feet, a supposedly dangerous altitude for maneuvering in our seven-ton tub. He was jumped and hit eight times by 20mm slugs before being able to out-turn the three fighters. The turn took approximately 300 degrees, almost a complete circle before he was able to look back and notice that the FW-190s had lost ground. His engine hit and smoking badly, oil all over the upper surfaces of the fuselage and canopy, it developed that one slug had passed through the main fuselage fuel tank and proceeded forward to knock off one cylinder of the engine. The tank sealed itself, holding enough fuel, but oil was being lost rapidly. With his canopy open to afford visibility this pilot got down to treetop level and flew all the way back to his base in England to land safely. Upon landing, a check of his oil tank showed it empty, yet he had been able to get home. A week later the ship was flying again.

That cleared our skepticism about maneuvering our ship against the enemy's best. Above a decent cruising airspeed, our questionable ship had come through. From then on we didn't have to worry about having sufficient altitude to dive out. As long as we kept our eyes peeled we didn't necessarily have to call on one main advantage of our airplane—a fast dive. We were able to seek out enemy fighters with much more eager anticipation after that. Our toll of fighters mounted rapidly—when the enemy appeared, which wasn't often.

It developed further that we were actually in the saddle in more ways than one. Our bombs and eight guns were terror-inspiring weapons as well as damage-inflicting ones. The ship could absorb more punishment than any other fighter and still get home. It could carry a heavy bomb load and lay then "right in there" after we had practiced enough to know our angles of dive and points of release. The klunk had an engine we could depend on. They could do it all right, and our confidence in the *T-bolts* soared in proportion to the many proven assets.

Throughout the phase of coordination with the ground forces we didn't worry particularly about flak hitting our ships. Time after time we'd bring ships back looking like sieves only to have them repaired for action again.

Service team personnel who made all the heavier repairs on operational aircraft admitted they had nothing to do when they worked with groups flying other types of fighters. The answer was obvious according to them. When hit, the other fighters just didn't come home at all. The *T-bolt* usually staggered home somehow—for repair. Consequently they were overloaded with the patchwork necessary to "get 'em back in the blue."

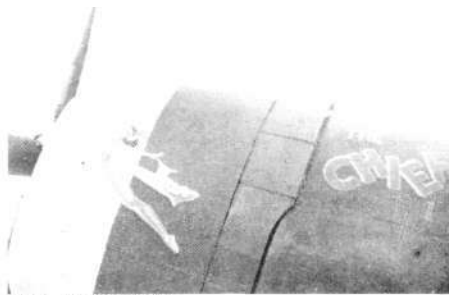
Our only concern was being hit personally by enemy fire. A natural reaction, the odds were nevertheless great in our favor. The human body is an extremely small target as compared to the target presented by the entire airplane. In addition, each pilot had the effective protection of the gigantic radial engine in front and a slab of armorplate in the rear. Vulnerability was most evident in a plane perpendicular to the fuselage or all around the cockpit except from the front and



B2-H—Col. Holt



B2-I—Russ



B2-S—Lt. Col. Smith



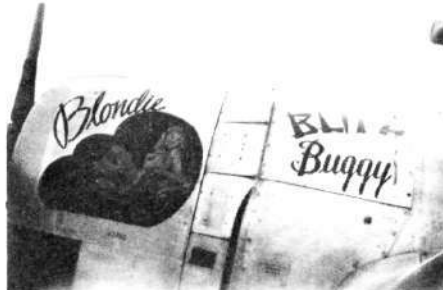
B2-W—McDonald



B2-A—Ollerton



B2-U—Factorow



B2-F—Steward



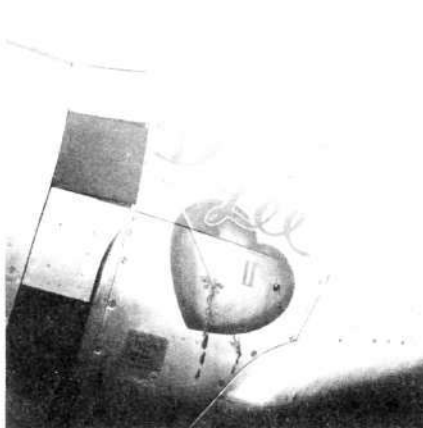
B2-Q—Gibson



B2-Z—De Wyke



B2-V—Davis



B2-E—Bretten



B2-K—Sills



B2-B—Keys



B2-M—Paisley



B2-O—S.A. Ross

The 390th Squadron planes, Munster, Germany, May 1945. (Brulle)

rear. The chance of being hit from these angles was lessened because such a hit could only result from perfect aiming and timing. The enemy weapon would have to lead the airplane by estimating speed, which isn't easy when the target is bearing down and firing all the while. It would be like trying to throw a ball into the open door of an automobile moving approximately 70 mph. Chances of succeeding would not be too good.

Only in rare cases when the pilot was hit himself did we lose both aircraft and pilot. Even then it is not safe to say that the pilot was hit personally. We can only assume such things after the plane crashes.

If a ship did happen to be vitally hit, the pilot usually had time to "hit the silk" and save himself. The warnings are quick and convincing. Controls out of commission causing bad flying characteristics, or the "hot seat"—indications that flames are licking at the pilot's feet, telegraph the seriousness of the situation to a pilot instantly. His decision must be made quickly. He bailed out only when necessary. Most situations find the pilot willing to give his ship a chance by testing it for flyability before leaving it. Many so-called wrecks have returned to land safely—only to raise the eyebrows of pilots who inspected the ship after it rolled to its revetment. The mystery of how some of them flew will remain unsolved—but they got back. That's all that mattered.

Our unit had no cases of a plane blowing up in midair with the pilot in it. The heat from the flames forced the pilots to leave before the explosion temperature was exceeded. That helped. The fact that human flesh could stand less heat than could the fuel aboard saved many lives.

Our first encounter with flak occurred while still operating from England. Centers like Rouen, Paris, and the Ruhr Valley were hotbeds of heavy flak. The black, ominous puffs rocked us often as we made a bomb run preparatory to diving on a bridge or marshaling yard. Accurate it was, too. At 10,000 feet we could look out at the horizon and watch it explode just at our level. By radar, they were able to track our flight path and lead us until we had to squirm in the sky to avoid being hit.

Sometimes the gunners were clever. They would let us fly well into a hotly defended area, then cut loose with everything they had. Oftentimes we were hopelessly boxed in by such a technique, and had to fly with dives and turns to change direction and airspeed erratically. That threw off the deadly aim, usually allowing a successful escape.

The theory behind it was simple. By changing airspeed and direction radically, we took advantage of the travel time of the projectile to reach us. By the time an aimed shot came up, we weren't there. Only lucky hits got us at high altitude.

Near the ground, however, where most of our operations took place, it was another story. We had to take our chances then. The time of flight of their flak projectiles was practically nil. We had to hope we weren't there when the round arrived. Only the style of attack we employed gave us a chance at all.

By using all the advantages under our control, we called on many potential allies. The sun, the wind, the element of surprise, and the condition of the terrain surrounding a target were used whenever possible. When used properly they were good friends. If forgotten, or misused, they turned on us—and helped the enemy.

Probably the most appropriate target for the intelligent employment of at least three of these prerequisites to successful attack was an enemy airdrome. By flying far downwind, studying the terrain all the while, we would "hit the deck" in a screaming dive, out of sight of the airdrome gunners. Navigating back along the trees by following roads, woods or any other feature that would lead us to the drome, we approached unseen and unheard by the enemy. Having checked the appropriate point to pull up and start firing, we hit the field and were gone before effective fire could be brought to bear on us. Ordinarily employing four ships abreast, we often stretched it to eight without loss. Unless the field was lightly defended, we never made more than one attack. We usually pulled off with the satisfaction of seeing four to six enemy planes burning, to return and do it just as successfully another day.



Turbo, 390th mascot.

(Brulle)

Our big worry when working over the tank columns and infantry was the enemy's formidable weapon of four 20mm flak guns mounted on a half-track. Always moving with the panzer divisions, they were extremely mobile and deadly with their fire. Tactically smart too, they rarely fired at us until we had committed ourselves to an attack. They overlooked using a little horse sense in the early phases of defense, however. For quite a few months they used tracers in their ammunition belts. We were able to locate them easily then, and quickly knock them out. Until they saw the light and realized that the tracers were doing them more damage than helping them, we had a comparatively easy time of it. But when the tracers stopped, our worries started.

However, unless the pilots themselves were hit, we did not fare too badly. Suffering damage that would have crippled most other fighter-type planes, our *T-bolts* flew on like thoroughbreds. Badly hit engines continued to function somehow. Ailerons knocked out made control difficult, but the ships were usually landed safely. Holes in the fuselage, damaged tail sections and knocked-out hydraulic systems were all common, and appeared often on the engineering status boards under the familiar title, "Battle Damage."

Battle damage! Many varied feelings were hidden in those words. The courage to hit a target defended by flak, a fear of the result, being hit unmercifully by the enemy and then staggering up from a target in a crippled ship are exemplary. Setting out on the endless flight home, figuring all the while how to land the klunk, and then testing courage once again during the ordeal of setting it down, all added to the difficulties we began to consider routine.

Damage to the control surfaces and engines were our chief concern as far as the airplanes were concerned. Flying a plane home with aileron and wing damage on the same side was a gamble. The efficiency of the wing airfoil when damaged was reduced greatly. If the aileron of the same wing were knocked out, chances of landing it successfully were slim. Only by testing the speed at which the ship stalled or became unflyable could the pilot get an idea of how it would land. Even then he was gambling with his life. Approaching to land, he would have insufficient altitude to bail out should it start to spin. He had to make a decision and stick to it—bail out or try to land—there would be no chance to reconsider!

We left it up to the pilot in each case. No one could climb in the ship and test it for him. His decision was okay with us—and it

worked out well every time. We lost few pilots once they started home with battle-damaged aircraft.

One of our pilots was outstandingly cool after flying his damaged ship all the way home, only to find after testing it "upstairs" that it could not be landed. The tail surfaces shot up badly, he found he could not maintain control below 240 mph. He was instructed to bail out a short distance from the field—but continued to circle around, his engine roaring to keep up the necessary airspeed.

"What are you doing?" called his flight leader.

"I'm trying to get the clock out!" he called back. Whatta guy! About to bail out, he was trying to take the clock out of the instrument board so he could bring it down with him. Still circling, he exhausted the patience of the leader who asked again, "Now what are you doing?"

"I'm tying on my shoes!" was his response. He was tying half of his scarf around each foot to keep his shoes from flying off when his 'chute popped. This kid wanted to land in comfort—that was evident.

Finally we saw a white mushroom behind the ship—he was out. The ship immediately whipped and started into a screaming dive. It landed a hundred yards from a Frenchman's barn, but hurt no one. The pilot landed safely right beside it, in his shoes—but without the clock.

Others took the long gamble of attempting a landing. One ship in particular had suffered damage in the right wing, with the right aileron also knocked out. The pilot, while testing it, felt the familiar turbulence around the wings indicating an imminent stall at 200 mph. Deciding to bring it in anyway, he elected to make a wheels-down, high-speed landing. He was unable to make any right turns, so by a succession of left turns he positioned himself as best he could and started in. He didn't line up perfectly with the runway since he had nothing but rudder control at the end of his turn into a straight-away approach. He came in hot, smacked it down on the strip in order to use his wheels to keep the wings level and went tearing down the runway. About halfway down, the good left wing wanted to use the rush of air to take off again, and it started up in the air. The low right wing came dangerously close to digging in the ground. Raising the tail brought the wheels down, again leveling up the ship.

By now the crippled ship had veered off the strip and was heading toward a squadron operations tent! Bumping along the uneven ground, it nosed up just short of the doorway, and fell back down into a normal three-point position.

Just as the ship nosed up in the front yard of the ops tent, a pilot came out—to stand petrified. Just in front of him stood this seven tons of uncontrolled airplane, tottering on its nose! When it fell back into a normal position, he regained enough composure to help the pilot out. It was hard to tell who had suffered more—he, or the pilot. The pilot's judgment must have been sound—or could it have been luck? Anyway, he walked away from his "landing" without a scratch. Within a week he was strapped in "his baby" again—and flying her proudly. We learned later why the pilot had tried so hard to land his ship. He didn't want to walk out on it after it had served him faithfully for over a hundred missions. Sometimes the attachment becomes pretty strong.

Although far from safe, we used another technique which was developed unofficially by a handful of rash pilots. The yearning to ride in a P-47 became so strong on the part of some crew chiefs that they asked to go up. How? By using no 'chutes, both men—pilot and passenger—occupying the same seat. The passenger got in first, then the pilot to sit on the passenger's lap. Somewhat cramped, the pilot was still able to manipulate all controls and fly safely. If trouble developed, however, they would be unable to bail out. A belly landing would be inevitable—with great hazard to both. Needless to say, the "developers" of the technique were never caught at it.

It was used successfully during the days immediately following D-Day, nevertheless. With no air units based on the continent, even though the strips were close to completion, we had two ships belly in with flak-damaged engines. Fellow pilots landed safely behind them, threw out their 'chutes, took the hapless pilots aboard and

flew them back to their units in England. The "can't do's" sometimes help relieve a situation. This one did.

Unlike ground fighting, pilots have no way of hiding their ships behind trees or in foxholes. To add insult to injury, flying down into the muzzles of enemy flak guns only served to increase the negative psychological effect. A kind of battle psychological, maybe—but let's call it flak psychology.

Its effect was far from stabilized. A week of extremely heavy battle damage and loss of pilots was bound to have a negative effect on flying personnel. Sometimes missions seemed to become increasingly tougher. Flak would hit us from all angles, and the failure of tent-mates to return, hurt—plenty. Conversely, a short stretch of practically no flak revived spirits immediately. Then everything was sunshine.

Apparently a cold, inhuman way to look at it, it was probably best that few pilots were able to fly back when wounded. The influence on personnel still flying would have been damaging. Wounded pilots nearly always bailed out promptly, to be patched up in a field hospital before returning to their squadrons. Seeing a parachute billow from a *T-bolt* in trouble made everyone feel better. He'd be okay.

Once across the German border, however, that feeling of security was not so strong. Irrate civilians thought little of killing a pilot as he descended. Looked on as a killer of women and children because of bombing and strafing strongly defended towns, our pilot could expect the worst from them. Only the Wehrmacht or SS Troopers when present could save him. Even then, an "accidental" killing was one of those "unfortunate" things in the eyes of the enemy. Our pilot was valuable if he could be made to talk. After that he was just another prisoner of war.

Sometimes flak psychology acted in such a way that a "you hit me—now I'll *hit you!*" feeling overwhelmed a pilot's judgment. He would go berserk and trade punches with the ground gunners in a grand attempt to annihilate all of them. Unless the flak batteries were few and far between, he fought a losing battle. Even if he were able to knock out two or three batteries, there were usually 10 others trained on him—taking deadly aim.

Once in awhile we would resort to "flak busting" purposely, depending on the target. If the position of the flak was known, we would fly a flight of four in a line abreast formation and spray the terrain from 2000 feet. One pass would usually pin down the flak gunners, permitting another flight to dive-bomb unopposed. Unfortunately, the flak positions were rarely known until we pulled off a target. Then we had to weave, squirm and trust to luck.

It was rough at times. Whenever the front became immobile, the enemy would move in more flak batteries. The longer a static condition existed, the thicker became the flak concentration. Unlike flying over the larger cities in the earlier days of the campaign, we never knew when to expect a flak hosing. It wasn't always necessary to attack a target, either. Merely flying around drew fire as often as attacking. Our relief at seeing our troops move in on an area bristling with flak can be imagined.

The enemy had good guns and well-trained personnel. The latter condition was inevitably so because we gave them a lot of practice. If they shot at us long enough, they were bound to learn something. We felt the effect of that practice many times. Their 88mm guns bothered all Allied aircraft flying at high altitudes. At medium altitudes their 40mm and 20mm guns gave us trouble. When flying "on the deck," small arms fire combined with both 40s and 20s to heckle us—but rarely to death.

However, if we could compile statistics to show how many tons of ammunition the flak boys threw at us as compared to the number of ships we lost by it, our money would be on the *T-bolt* to justifiably thumb her nose at flak. She came through more times than not. She was the "Queen of Column Cover."

The ground forces as well as the enemy attested to our effectiveness in the air. The doughs looked gratefully toward the pilots, although a little reluctance to concede overwhelming success to the kids in the fighter-bombers may have been noticeable on the part of

some diehard old-timers. Those who said, "... and battles will always be won only after the Infantry moves in," now will admit readily that the Infantry must first *move in*! Yes, the ones who knew conceded our value in the overall effort. We in turn looked to others with much gratitude and admiration—our own ground personnel.

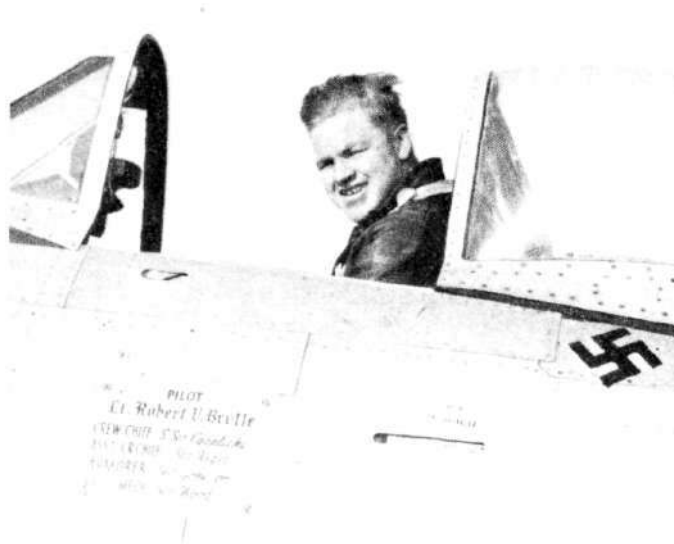
A fighter group as it operated in Europe during operations against Germany was composed of approximately 800 enlisted men, 80 ground officers and 220 pilots. Along with the fighter group were ancillary units which handled supplementary work like weather control, firefighting, military policing, ordnance repairs, disposal of bombs, antiaircraft fire and the good-sized service team which handled the heavier overhauling, repairing and modifications of our planes. The service team was actually slightly less than half of a service group in numbers and equipment, and totaled approximately 500 officers and men. The total of personnel physically present and working on the fighter strip in close cooperation with the fighter, group then comes close to 2000 officers and men. When the reader considers that a fighter group possesses only 75 aircraft, half of which are normally flying at one time, it is evident just how much work is done and how many skilled people are required for total war in only one group. Go slightly further to consider the thousands of men and women behind the lines who work toward supplying and administering to the relatively low percentage of personnel actually in combat, and the number of people supporting each pilot as he takes off on a mission approaches an ostensibly unbalanced figure.

One reason for such a condition is that most of these people have specialized work to perform and require thorough training. A subtle weakness behind it too is that the so-called specialist disdains work outside his own specialty and usually shuns such degradation with gusto. Add the wartime tendency of having two men do a one-man job, plus a smattering of the usual red tape and the subtle weakness is readily understandable. However, the latter situation was far from serious. It always exists when a tremendous project involving millions of people is tackled.

These are the people who work and *work* and work, often without any satisfaction other than seeing the group's planes take off on a mission. They see damage done only in the combat films brought back by pilots on returning. They see precision work in the air only when the planes are forming to leave or on return for landing. Often a plane staggers in with battle damage, and only for this fleeting moment do the ground echelons of an air unit sense a tinge of the atmosphere that surrounds combat with the enemy.

Nonetheless, they tackled their monotonous jobs with gusto and unflogging energy—often under the poorest conditions imaginable. Crews worked on planes in bitter cold, unable to use gloves in many cases because of the intricacy of the repairs they were making. Crew chiefs rode on wings of aircraft taxiing out to take off with icy prop wash blasting in their faces until breathing was next to impossible and tears were being whipped out of the corners of their eyes. With warmer, dry weather, dust added to maintenance difficulties just as it cut into the patience of ground crews when clouds of dirt blown into a cloud by propeller blasts settled over an exposed engine undergoing repair. Long hours—from preflight inspection of aircraft before dawn until the last operational mission at night—found all crews forever working.

A little removed from the flight lines are the service team personnel who perform many repair duties similar to those of a fighter group, although of a heavier nature. They experience more monotony and receive less thanks for a job well done than do the fighter group personnel. It was often necessary to remind them of their importance to the overall effort by addressing all the men of the team. To hear it admitted that we could not operate efficiently against the enemy without rapid repair and quick return of battle-damaged aircraft to the three squadrons made them realize that any additional effort, speed or efficiency they made evident were fully appreciated by us. An occasional written commendation for work well done expressed our gratitude more tangibly and served to heighten their self-respect. They were important to us and to the amount of damage we could inflict on the enemy, and we wanted



Lt. Halterman, just before the last mission from Y-29, Belgium, January 1945. He was lost on this mission. (Brulle)

them to realize it. The fighter pilots were the quarterbacks, but the ground crews and repair personnel were really the fighting line throughout our operations.

Next in importance to the pilot in the combat efficiency of one airplane is his crew chief, closely followed by his three crew members—his assistant or mechanic, his armorer and his radioman. These are the boys he depends on to have his airplane ready to fly, shoot, drop bombs and communicate by radio whenever they say it is in commission.

A good crew chief is entirely unselfish, good-natured, a mechanical genius and capable of absorbing more punishment than his plane.

Oftentimes unnerved pilots are unnecessarily rough on crewmen, but the young mechanics go on doing their jobs as well as they know how, anyway. They take orders from so many people it is understandable if they say, "Hell, I don't know if I'm coming or going!" The pilot, flight chief, armament chief, operations officer, engineering officer, squadron commander plus any of the group staff officers all have very definite ideas of how things should be done—and usually releasing captured airfields for our occupation.

One source of great satisfaction to all pilots was to move to a captured field with concrete runways, regardless of how badly cratered the field was from our own aerial attack. Often no buildings had escaped the bombardment, but that didn't worry us. The runway was a luxury far outweighing the other disadvantages.

Moves involving 2000 men and officers are not small tasks. Look back on the moving of merely one household with its many headaches and troubles, and you can imagine what ours entailed. Remembering that both the forward and rear echelons were carrying full loads with half strength during each move, plus the energy drain of the move itself, it can be readily appreciated how much was taken out of each group by the process.

Although hastily improvised and of a very temporary nature, the flight strips carved out of a flat field and covered with wire mesh had their advantages. Since they consisted of only one 5000-foot runway, it was easy to concentrate all sections and headquarters nerve centers compactly around the strip. Control and supervision were made easier, as were supplying and servicing of aircraft. Transportation was much relieved by the closeness of one activity to another, and the necessary inspections for efficiency were made best by merely strolling around the strip. Malpractices were picked up quite readily because all operational activities were within visual proximity of one another.

From the standpoint of our planes, however, the disadvantages were very evident, though unavoidable. Taxiing first in mud, then in dust were new to most of our pilots. Extreme care was necessary to

avoid accidents or bogging down. Landings and takeoffs were difficult and hard on the ships for the same reason, plus the added disadvantage of an uneven, bumpy surface. Also, dispersion of planes as a safety measure to avoid undue damage should the enemy make an attack was impossible. Fortunately, air attack by the Luftwaffe was practically nonexistent, hence the last disadvantage was not much more than theoretical under the circumstances.

Maintenance of such strips involved much work on the part of the aviation engineers attached to each site. Every rain found them draining small lakes from the runway; patching the wire mesh was an unceasing chore; filling in mud holes or oiling powdery dust stretches occupied all working hours, depending on whether the sun was out or if it were raining. Worse off in many cases than combat troops, these same lads built the strip under sniping fire from the enemy, then stayed on in skeleton strength to maintain them. They were hard-working boys—worthy of all the commendations they received—and more.

There is a lot to be said for the many little things resorted to by the ground personnel to keep spirits high by exhibiting cooperation and relieving tension with spots of humor. Crew chiefs helped pilots taxi by waving them on when it was clear ahead. Squadron executive officers and adjutants would make tongue-in-cheek objections when pilots accumulated too much clothing and trinkets—too hard to inventory and send home if the pilot was shot down! Invariably a friendly scuffle followed such a crack. Another half-serious, half-joshing move was to have squadron C.O.s, or any other pilot with an obligation of the moment hanging over his head, sign the appropriate papers before taking off on a mission. Having him sign just before starting his engine brought lots of profanity—with a smile. It helped everyone refrain from taking things *too* seriously.

In the eyes of some small-minded individuals, ground officers were sometimes looked down on as the lowest form of humanity in the Air Forces. What a miscarriage of justice! Without the efforts of our ground officers, we could never have accomplished our aim. Their work was as equally important to us as the air work of the pilots. Without them we would have had no order, no efficiency, no control. Without them we would have had to transfer ground responsibilities to pilots. In combat that is impossible. The exigencies of combat continually drain the energies of pilots so that not enough is left to be effectively devoted to a full-time job on the ground.

The ground officers shouldered those responsibilities and performed their monotonous, thankless jobs admirably. Often transferred to the Air Corps against their will because of this insidious discrimination, they had a battle to fight even before arriving in the combat theatre. Winning that inner fight, they had to struggle further to keep their self-respect because of the nature of the work they were doing. Pushing a pencil, checking records, inspecting areas and generally exercising control was too remote from shooting at the enemy—they thought. Our unit changed that. We were proud of the spirit and overall efficiency which resulted, too. By relieving unneeded pressure, the self-respect of the ground officers returned, and the minimum of work ordinarily gotten by goading them into action was replaced by nurturing self-pride in work well done. Everyone felt better—and much more was accomplished.

The enlisted men too felt a tinge of the same feeling. It became noticeable in their attitudes and the quality of work they turned out. Not knowing what was going on half the time, they may as well have been in New York. They would have known just as much about the war and probably most of them felt that their efforts wouldn't be missed anyway.

We blasted that feeling by having our intelligence officer brief all ground personnel weekly. Covering all fronts the world over, he would taper down until a complete review of what our unit had done the previous week had been explained. A waste of time? Not at all. The men left the briefing with straightened shoulders—they hit the typewriter a little harder—took K.P. duty more cheerfully—they cleaned up themselves and their areas—they were proud—ours was a victorious Army!

We could thank the Luftwaffe for heightening unit spirit even

more. It was toward the end of the enemy breakthrough that Goering must have realized our air power had stopped their push. His all-out effort to cripple our planes by catching them on the ground proved to be a joke.

The famous January first all-out raid by the Luftwaffe against many of our strips helped our unit more than it was designed to have hurt us. Arriving over our strip in a force of approximately 50 ME-109s and FW190s, the enemy was engaged immediately by a flight of eight of our *T-bolts* that had just taken off and assembled. Jettisoning their bombs, they attacked the enemy planes and kept them from hitting our pitifully unprotected planes on the ground. The entire air circus took place at treetop level directly over the strip. Roaring engines, spitting machine guns and flaming planes going down in destruction had brought the war right to our doorstep!

The roadways around the strip were lined with spectators who dared leave foxholes long enough to watch the show. But a plane turning into them soon caused a mad scatter for foxholes. Slugs from a friendly plane could do as much damage as enemy lead. No use taking any chances. There didn't seem to be enough foxholes, either.

The onslaught lasted for fully 45 minutes. Two of our planes, out of ammunition and low on fuel, were forced to drop wheels and land in the midst of it. Alert Nazi pilots veered in on the tails of such juicy targets, only to be shot down or scared away by our ack-ack gunners. One squadron commander in his eagerness ran out and took off in his pajamas. Sleeping late on his day off, he had leaped out of the sack to get in on the kills. ME-109s and FW190s were flaming and augering into the ground within sight of the entire group of officers and men. Beautiful!

It was quite a victory. We suffered one casualty and one plane on the ground had suffered minor damage when the few remaining attackers scampered off.

In the air we fared even better. Against such terrific odds and disadvantages our strip was credited with destroying 37 planes out of the total of 50-plus. Our eight-ship formation was credited with 12 destroyed; the ack-ack boys, four; and the 352nd Fighter Group of Mustangs, based temporarily with us, was credited with 21. Our group lost one (the pilot came charging back on a bicycle to exclaim breathlessly, "They got me, but I got two o' them first!"), and we sent two ships to the boneyard for minor damage. The P-51 outfit lost two, experiencing minor damage of a couple others. The enemy had come charging out of his corner, only to be smacked to his knees to the tune of 12 destroyed to our one.

We hope at least one of their pilots got back to tell the story. They'd think twice about trying it again.

Most important of all, our unit morale soared! Officers and men unable to fly had seen the show, had leaped for foxholes, had reached gratefully for that much-hated helmet, had heard machine gun slugs sing over their heads—had felt the war around them at last. They had seen our pilots in action against the best the Hun could throw at us, and the flaming results were gratifying to behold. Everyone felt swell!

No longer did we have to demand that each enlisted man show his foxhole before going on a pass. Foxholes pockmarked the terrain overnight. It was hard to walk around without falling in one.

Inspectors, arriving to check on the condition of our unit, left hurriedly with, "I'll be back to see you guys later!" I suppose it was hard to concentrate on our records in such an atmosphere.

For that raid we sincerely thank the Luftwaffe. Our stock was up—to stay!

This was the picture a combat pilot saw while fighting in Europe. His unit was a product of democracy, and it was a good one. Tasting nothing but victory throughout the entire European Campaign, these are the officers and men who helped make the prowess of American air might known and respected throughout the world.



THE SAGA OF THE MAGIC CARPET

GLOSSARY—Air Force terms and slang used.

Angels—a method of determining altitude. Originally based on a zero altitude as set for each day, the word "angels" indicated an altitude above this level, while "devils" was used below the altitude. For instance, if the zero altitude of the day was 5000 feet, angel 3 would indicate an altitude of 8000. Conversely, devils 2 meant 3000 feet. However, the system has since become antiquated and the use of "angels" was a hangover from the old days. The ground is used as the zero level when angels is used at all.

Clobber—slang term indicating overpowering effect of weapons—to smack down.
Controller—ground radio station with information at its disposal with which to direct fighters to target areas.

Dogfight—a fight between two or more fighter aircraft.

Echelon right—a formation of airplanes in a single line, each ship slightly in rear of the ship next to it, forming an angle with the direction of flight.

Flak—enemy antiaircraft fire. We called our own "Ack-Ack."

Klunk—an affectionate term for an airplane, used as "flivver" or "bag o' bolts" would be applied to an automobile.

Mushing—a characteristic tendency of a heavy airplane moving at high speed to react slowly to an attempted change of direction.

Needle and ball—aircraft instruments used for blind flying, also sometimes used to check smoothness of flight.

Peel off or away—to leave a flight or formation by turning away, one by one.

Pull-out—recovery from a dive to a level or climbing line of flight.

Souped-up—or suped up—taken from the influence of a supercharger to yield more power. A slang term, it is used to indicate any increase in energy, strength, power, etc.

Targets of opportunity—targets which can be damaged effectively as soon as they are discovered.

To abort—to be forced to return from a mission because of mechanical trouble before reaching the target area. (Sometimes trouble between the earphones causes return.)

Two (2) o'clock—taken from the method of directing a pilot's vision in the air. Thus, a target at 2 o'clock would indicate something to be seen toward the right-front. Similarly, an object to be seen at 7 o'clock would be picked up toward the left-rear. It takes into account the knowledge everyone has of the face of a clock, and makes directing of vision toward any quarter easy and quick.

"Wrack it around"—to kick aircraft into maneuvers violently—sometimes expressed, "wring it out," when testing a plane.

On March 1, 1944, at the 9th AAF Base at Thruxton, England, a new P-47D-20RE, having the serial number 42-76516, was delivered to the 390th Fighter Squadron (366th Ftr. Group).

This new ship in the then-adopted olive-drab color had but 7:05 flying hours to its credit. The squadron commander, Major Harold N. Holt, selected this ship as his own and the crew, consisting of S/Sgt. Clarence H. Fritz, Sgt. Edgar S. Tingley, crew chief and assistant crew chief, respectively, Sgt. Loren E. Shields, armorer, and S/Sgt. Donald Hayward, radio mechanic, found ourselves assigned to keep it flying.

The commanding officer selected as the name for his ship, *The Magic Carpet* and she was duly christened as such. *The Carpet* completed flying her 10 local hours local slow time and entered her first combat mission March 7, 1944.

Day after day, *The Carpet* flew into combat, steadily piling up her missions, divebombing, strafing, escorting, and reconnaissance flying through March and part of April. There were no aborts for we, the crew, were determined to keep an unbeatable record in her flying achievement.

On April 10, her 42nd mission, she met up with her first major damage. On this mission a German antiaircraft 20mm shell exploded in her left wing. Knowing full well the hazard involved in bringing *The Carpet* back to the base, Major Holt nevertheless babied her in. Watching her approach from the ground, we could see 2nd Lt. Victor Grisanti flying the major's wing and assisting him into a perfect three-point landing, this without the aid of flaps.

As we examined her more closely in the revetment, we found not only the flaps inoperative, but the left aileron was dangling, the airspeed indicator inoperative, and fire had at one time broken out from the severed hydraulic lines. We sent *The Carpet* to the service group and in less than a week she was back in our care, ready for further combat with a complete new right wing. She now had a total of 150:40 flying hours.

Day after day and week after week she flew into combat during the remainder of April and all through May. Mission symbols



appeared by the score upon the left side of her fuselage and all the while she kept up her flawless record of no abortions.

By the 1st of June, her pilot, Major Holt, had received his lieutenant colonelship, and had become the group commander. From this time forth the group was to be known as Holt's Hun Hunters.

A few hours before D-Day we painted *The Carpet's* belly and under wings with those broad black and white stripes that were publicized later on as "The Invasion Stripes." When she took off early on June 6, 1944, the day we now refer to as D-Day, we were, as always, confident of her return. Whatever was demanded of the ship on this day we knew she would fulfill.

About 11 o'clock we saw her slowly approaching the field. At least she was back. As the ship touched the strip we could hear her engine coughing and backfiring. Lt. Col. Holt taxied her into the revetment and we began our examination. D-Day had left its mark. This time we found that a German .30 caliber small arms fire had damaged the intake and exhaust stacks of number 12 cylinder and also cut into the propeller circuit. We immediately went to work on her and she was ready for the 5 o'clock mission that evening. *The Carpet* now had 176:70 flying hours.

Four days later, on June 10th, we were sweating her out again on another important mission. When the squadron had come in she was still missing. A few minutes afterward we spotted her at some distance with her wheels already down. She headed straight for the runway. After a perfect landing, the colonel brought her into the revetment.

We found the windshield blacked with oil. Three ME-109s had jumped *The Carpet*. She had been unlucky enough to have received two .50 caliber hits in the right gun bay, one in number 18 cylinder, one on the left cowl flaps coming out through the left accessory section, and one came in the right side of the cockpit missing the colonel's right foot by but six inches, stopping in the main gas tank. A last one damaged one of the propeller cuffs. A total of five hits of varying degrees of damage. This all necessitated the changing of the engine, prop, and main gas tank. By now, *The Carpet* had reached 194:55 flying hours.

The new engine was slow timed during the transfer of the squadron to the continent. At the completion of this time the ship was flown to the landing strip designated as Advanced Landing Ground A-1, near St. Pierre DuMont, France.

The Carpet resumed combat operations with the other ships and on July 1, 1944, she hit a 500-pound bomb that had fallen from a previously landed ship, and lay in the path of the onrushing *Carpet* as she came in. *The Carpet* suffered severe damage to the tailwheel section and this required an entire replacement of this section, which was performed by the service group.

The Carpet, again operational, went back into combat, now having accumulated 224:50 flying hours. A few days later, on July 12th, the ship was engaged in a divebomb mission when she was hit and considerably damaged in the right wing by heavy flak from German antiaircraft. Again, Colonel Holt brought her back to the

beachhead strip, using his characteristic ingenuity. As he reached the strip he notified the tower that he was to make a crash landing. He brought the ship in at 210 mph, while having little or no control of it. The ship swerved to the right, crossing a very rough terrain, causing damage to prop, engine, and both right and left wings. These damaged units were replaced by the service group and *The Carpet* was again ready for combat.

By August 16, 1944, *The Magic Carpet*, flown exclusively by Colonel Holt, had completed her 100th mission without an abort. Shortly after this, the squadron moved from ALG A-1 to A-41, near Dreux, France, from where *The Carpet* flew several additional combat missions.

Leaving A-41, the squadron moved further across France to the vicinity of Laon, becoming operational at ALG A-70. At this base the pilot was advanced to full colonelship. On November 20th, Colonel Holt returned to the States on a 30-day leave of absence. During this leave *The Carpet* was transferred with the squadron to an airstrip near Asch, Belgium, known as Y-29.

While the colonel was away, pilots ranging from F/Os to lieutenant colonels flew her on various combat missions. On January 1, 1945, Lt. Brulle took *The Carpet* off on a divebombing mission. Almost immediately after she was airborne, Lt. Brulle was obliged to jettison his bombs and engage in warding off the attack of several Folke Wolfe 190s who were attempting an attack on the base. During the ensuing air battle, she was credited with having shot down one 190 and damaging another.

Colonel Holt returned from his leave on January 20, reentering combat flying with his ship. Before leaving Y-29, Sgt. Shield was relieved as armorer and reassigned to a higher position as flight chief. Sgt. Donald Smith was assigned as the new armorer.

Leaving the strip near Asch, the ship, together with the squadron, was flown to Y-94, a reconditioned strip near Munster, Germany. Here *The Carpet* participated in the remaining missions of the war with Germany. The close of the war terminated her active service. By this time she had completed 175 missions without an abort.

Just prior to the end of the war with Germany, Colonel Holt had been relieved as group commander and assigned to higher headquarters with the XXIX Tactical Air Command.

Along with this change, the crew chief, S/Sgt. Fritz, was relieved to take the assignment as flight chief. S/Sgt. Tingley was advanced to crew chief, now having as his assistant, Cpl. Arthur Andrews.

Upon Colonel Holt's transfer to XXIX TAC, *The Magic Carpet* was assigned to its present pilot, 1st Lt. Gary J. Wozniak. At the time of this writing, *The Carpet* is being used for training and patrol missions.

It goes without further comment that *The Magic Carpet* gave an exceptional performance during the active days of the war with Germany and may now rest securely on her laurels that she and her pilots have won.

S/Sgt. Edgar S. Tingley
390th Fighter Squadron
366th Fighter Group
Munster, Germany
May 25, 1945

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