

EARLY OPERATIONS WITH THE 31st AND 350th FIGHTER GROUPS

by

Lt. Col. Gerard DuKet as told to John Sloan

The 31st Fighter Group was composed of the 39th, 40th and 41st Pursuit Squadrons and, prior to our entry into the War, was based at Selfridge Field, Michigan. Our equipment was the Bell P-39, which we took on maneuvers in North Carolina in 1939, but this was modified to half P-39's and half P-40's in 1941. The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor brought an intensified period of training ending in our embarkation for England in May, 1942.

The 31st was the first fighter group of the Army Air Forces to arrive in England. It was followed by the 52nd in July, and later by the 14th and 1st Ftr Groups. Our outfit was sent to Tangmere, Northeast of Portsmouth, which had been an R.A.F. fighter base for a number of years. A quantity of P-39's had been sent toward Russia, under lend-lease, but had been turned back in the Baltic Sea and we got them to reassemble at Tangmere.

In the first week in July we went on our first sortie over the Continent; 12 went out and only 6 returned. During June we had been given some instruction by the local R.A.F. squadrons in fighter tactics over Europe but this very first sortie indicated that the P-39 was no match for the ME109. A pilot who cannot turn inside his opponent is at a disadvantage. Later flights proved that the P-39 was entirely unsuitable for medium or high-altitude escort duty. We lost, among others, Bub Clark, now a Colonel in the USAF, as a prisoner of war on this first mission.

Both the 31st and 52nd Ftr Groups were re-equipped with Spitfires under the exchange program. The 52nd was at Hull with an R.A.F. wing, I think from August to November of 1942. The 31st stayed at Tangmere and had for one of our best instructors Johnny Walker, later on a famous ace of the R.A.F.. At this time, November, 1942 about 30 percent of our pilots, those with the most P-39 experience, were taken to form the 350th Fighter Group. I left with them, and we were to be a ground attack outfit under Col. Klocko, a West Point officer. The 31st Ftr Group left in late November for North Africa aboard a carrier to provide cover for the invasion forces. It landed at Oran Airport just after its capture. One of the squadrons of the 31st later went to Malta to aid that tiny island in its daily, almost hourly, battle with the Italian and German air forces. The other two squadrons went on across Africa toward the East as high-altitude support cover during that campaign.

The 350th Ftr Group went to Duxford during November 1942 to January 1943, then to Land's End. Here we put 160 gallon belly tanks under the P-39's and attempted to fly to Lesena, on the West coast of Africa south of Casablanca. This was a flight of 1350 miles, with no cut-in over Spain allowed, and over water all the way. Two of the three flights in my squadron were attacked about halfway down by some JU-88's from Spain. In the fight 2 of the JU-88's were shot down without any loss to ourselves but we ran into a tremendous storm near North Africa. One other pilot and myself were the only ones to make it.

The Group reformed at Lesena and went on to Oran. Here we operated as a ground support group, attacking convoys of enemy troops and gun emplacements, some days from dawn till dusk. These sorties were all carried out below 500 feet altitude and there were lots of bent propellers. We lost Col. Klocko in a raid in March 1943. During an attack on some 50 trucks he was shot down from 10 ft. altitude but managed to get in a belly landing away from the convoy he was shooting up. The recipients of these attacks were generally pretty mad and didn't treat their prisoners well at all. The Colonel was taken prisoner by another convoy a little later and spent the rest of the War in prison camp.

The 350th went on to Algiers, Constantine, Tunis, and to Sicily. I left the Group about September 1943 for Gen. Spaatz's Headquarters to develop what we called Combat Table II Requirements. This had been a dream of Spaatz's, to provide for a squadron in the field its complete combat requirements from spark plugs to carbon paper sufficient to carry it for 30 days, and a method of automatic replacement. It was my job to visit all of the squadrons in the area and develop parts lists and other requirements.

At this time the 1st and 14th Fighter Groups, with P-38's, were in the North Africa/Sicily area. There were also two P-40 Groups and two A-36 Groups, one of which was the 319th Fighter Group. The 31st Ftr Group was now all deployed out of Malta, with Spitfires (September 1943) and the 350th was based in Sicily with P-39's, still on ground support. Our point of invasion was Batapaglis, Italy. In early October the combat engineers landed with bulldozers, leveled a square mile of vineyards and laid down steel matting for three airstrips.

The two A-36 Groups were the first to go in. I landed with them for information. The first day a heavy rain set in and then we couldn't get off the ground for two weeks. The field was inland about three miles but German guns were well deployed in the hills not over 20 miles inland. These hills were about 2500 feet high and four 88 mm. guns were looking down our throat most of the time. Fortunately the American and British cruisers, by the dozen, and two battleships, kept the German guns pretty well occupied during the invasion. They made a continuous egg-shaped loop turning toward the shore cruising along parallel to it and then turning away from shore. This lasted for 10 straight days with shells going over our heads constantly. We had set up pup tents but in two nights the rains and high winds washed us out each night. There were no lights or heat so it was rather miserable for awhile. When the rains finally stopped the navy guns had driven the Germans over the hills and we spent the next week getting our planes out of the mud.

Naples was secured by the ground forces and in November the 31st Group went to a field near Naples. The two P-40 and two A-36 Groups deployed along the coast north of Naples as far as a large airfield southwest of Rome on dive-bombing missions with the 31st supplying top cover. I went along on an occasional sortie but spent most of my time in contacting the supply personnel. I gave a notebook to each of the crew chiefs to note his wants in regard to aircraft supply items and in December collected all these for collation.

Five days before Christmas I was ordered home, for 21 days leave, and to report to Wright Field to justify the need and requirement for 30-day kits. I tore up my boat ticket and hitch-hiked via Casablanca, Dakar, So. America, Miami and Washington by C-54 and C-87, then by auto to my home in Chicago. Arriving on Christmas Eve I greeted an overjoyed but mildly shocked wife, and my year-old son whom I had not seen.