

SECRET

January Installment
Unit History

NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF THE MONTH'S
OPERATIONS

So the first year of operational flying for the 357th Fighter Group ends. Well, almost a year, anyway. Pilots of the Group were flying operational missions with other fighter groups in January of 1944 and the 357th was declared operational on 9 February 1944. So just to keep the reporting in good round months the last day of January 1945 is close enough to one year.

This January was another month during which the number of missions flown was not nearly as many as anyone would have liked, but more than should have been flown using the weather as a judge. Only 15---and they were mostly flown in weather that would have grounded even the jeeps while the Group was in the U. S.

As usual, by reason of organization assignment, all of the missions were of an escort type. Area patrol for heavy bomber operations, close escort for heavy bombers, or escort of a few planes for PRU missions. Right from the first of the month, though, the pilots went on their own after completing their escort assignments. While coming home they went down to the deck and destroyed 26 locomotives, some German soldiers, trucks, barges, tug-boats, and other German property during the month.

Morale is pretty good as a result of some statistics received from the 66th Fighter Wing. This is only the second month these figures have come down in this form, but 357 Group is not ashamed in their standings for either month.

NUMBER OF AIRCRAFT

	No. Airborne	Number Completing Mission	Per Cent Completing Mission
357 Fighter Group	712	649	8.9%
65th Fighter Wing	3812	3488	7.5%
66th Fighter Wing	3981	3557	9.8%
67th Fighter Wing	3557	3278	7.8%

CLAIMS

	Air	Ground	Ratio of E/A to A/C Lost	Ammo Expended
357 Group	61 $\frac{1}{2}$ -0-4	7-0-0	11.4 to 1	97,211
65th Wing	46 -0-2	49-0-27	8.6 to 1	214,026
66th Wing	98 $\frac{1}{2}$ -0-16	33-0-11	5.7 to 1	399,749
67th Wing	85 -0-10	1-0-1	8.6 to 1	167,895

The first 17 of the highest scoring pilots in the 66th Wing contained 10 of the 357th Group's ACES. Of the total of 119 ACES within the Wing 39 of them are the 357th's.

The month started very slowly. Other than the attacks on ground targets, the first missions of January yielded only 2 enemy aircraft destroyed in the air and 6 on the ground---with 3 losses. F/O Sitzer was last seen near Weitzlar, Germany, on the deck. Lt. McCall crashed after being hit by light flak while strafing Paderborn Airfield. They were listed as MIA. Lt. Schliker crashed near Woodbridge, England, returning from a mission in very heavy weather. He is listed as KIA.

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Not as good a record as the Group was accustomed to having. Everyone was getting a bit discouraged about even having a chance of getting 600 Nazi planes by the end of the first year. A goal the Group had set for themselves and were striving hard to reach. The pilots were even fed up with getting up in the mornings to come to briefings, because so many of the missions were scrubbed before the actual briefing even started.

Attitudes on the morning of the 14th were no different. The pilots came in to the briefing room with comments such as, "Well, is it scrubbed yet?". "So Derben is the target. Where in the hell is Derben?". "What if we do get off. It will be so bad over there Jerry can't and it will be just another milk-run." Briefing was completed and at 1010 hours on Sunday, the 14th of January, 1945, the first of 66 P-51 Mustangs, piloted by Lt. Colonel Dregne, was airborne on a record-breaking mission.

All of the 1500 or so men that remained on the station after the mission was gone carried on with their routine Sunday duties the same as they had done on dozens of other Sundays when the planes were out on a mission. The abortives and their escorts began to straggle back to the base with the usual mechanical troubles. This one had a mag out, the next one's landing gear was inoperative, others had rough engines, hot coolant, and like troubles. Still it was just an ordinary mission to those not flying with the bombers.

Then after four hours or so the mission began to return and the squadron telephone reports began to come to Group Headquarters. One could hardly believe them. There were so many claims----surely there was a mistake somewhere. Maybe the same planes were being reported twice? No, there was no mistake. The total actually was 56 1/2 enemy airplanes destroyed in the air, plus 1 plane and 2 locomotives on the ground; and claims for damaged enemy aircraft also. No individual scored an excessive amount but nearly everyone on the mission did something to help the final score.

The report went to higher headquarters and they didn't believe it, either. Wanted it rechecked. It was unusual to say the least. It broke the old record of enemy aircraft destroyed by a single fighter group in this theater on a single mission by 19 1/2 planes. The old record was 38 destroyed. Finally everyone concerned was convinced that the reports were correct.

The pilots that came to headquarters all wanted to tell their account, and did. Most of them at the same time. Even reserved men such as Lt. Colonel Dregne (who directed the attack and got 1-0-1 besides), Lt. Colonel Evans (who got four), Lt. Colonel Clark (who got 1 while flying the Group Leader's wing), and Major (then Captain) Foy (who went down to the ground on the way home for his third and the Group's only one on the ground), were making their right hands attack their left ones and trying to describe their maneuvers during the greatest aerial battle in which the 357th has ever taken part.

A battle in which those planes at a lower level were in great danger from the falling wrecks that had been shot down above them. A battle that covered thousands of acres to a height of 30,000 feet. A battle that literally filled the skies with the roar of machines, a roar that alternately changed to a shine as the wind would slip past. The whole horrible cacophony broken by the swift crackle of machine-gun fire that nearb the ground would probably receive another wreck soon.

After all of the excitement died down around Headquarters the actual story of what happened was pieced together. It is quite a story, even in report form.

The Group, with Lt. Colonel Dregne leading, was escorting the first three combat wings of B-17 Fortresses on a mission to Derben, located northwest of Berlin. Approximately 20 miles from Brandenburg two gaggles of enemy fighters were sighted coming towards the bomber stream at one o'clock. The low gaggle consisted of more

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than 70 Focke Wulf 190's flying eight abreast in a company front formation at 28,000 feet. This gaggle was covered by another consisting of more than 60 Messerschmitt 109's flying at 32,000 feet. The Group's lead squadron, the 364th, attacked the low gaggle and forced them to pass beneath the bombers. The 362nd squadron then joined the 364th and the two of them pursued their advantage of height over the low Nazi formation, completely disregarding the threat of the enemy's top cover over them. The top Nazis came down on the two squadrons and the 357th top cover, the 363rd squadron, dropped onto the Nazis. A furious rat-race was then in progress. The Germans, having a numerical advantage of more than 3-to-1 chose to fight instead of withdrawing and regrouping for another shot at the bombers, their primary target, as they usually did. Obviously that was an error in judgement as they lost at least 57 planes and no one knows how many pilots, against 3 planes and pilots of this Group.

Five pilots did not return with the mission but two landed on the continent. Lt. Maxwell was one of these. He made a big effort and got his three claims counted on the report, knowing that it was probably a record breaker. Lt. Delager was the other that landed on the continent. Those that are listed as MIA after being last seen in the combat area were: Lt. Behling, 362 Squadron, Lts. Dunlop and Sloan, 363 Squadron.

Following the sending of the reports, General Woodbury, CG of the 66th Wing, sent a message that reads as follows: "The 357th Fighter Group have today written one of the greatest pages in the history of the United States Army Air Forces - certainly the most outstanding in the history of this command. For this, for the many triumphs of your comparatively brief past, and for those I am certain are yet to come - my heartiest personal congratulations to your gallant commander and to all personnel who share his magnificent obsession - Victory. Woodbury."

General Doolittle, CG of the Eighth Air Force, sent a message that reads: "For your outstanding performance in destroying 57 enemy aircraft on today's mission, I am recommending the 357th Fighter Group for the award of the Individual Unit Citation. You gave the Hun the most humiliating beating that he has ever taken in the air. Extend my personal admiration and congratulations to each member of your command, both ground and air, for a superb victory. Doolittle."

Following the record-breaking mission any thing else that would happen during the month would be anti-climatic. Missions continued to be flown, though not one was so profitable as the one on the 14th.

The weather was not good for air operations and only six missions were flown the rest of January. Three more enemy aircraft were destroyed in the air. Two of them were jet-propelled planes. Lt. Thompson was killed in a crash in England on 16 January while he was returning from a mission. Lt. Hayden is MIA from the 20th. He is believed to have bailed after being hit by flak that caused his plane to catch fire.

The last mission of January was on the 29th. It was an escort, but Lt. Colonel Dregne later took them down on the deck to attack 8 different types of targets on the way home.

A good operational month was made not so good because of losses. Six were listed as MIA and two as KIA while on operational missions. Five others were killed or are missing on training, ferrying, or other non-operational flights. Nearly all of the losses can be directly attributed to the weather.

The stories of individual acts of heroism are the greatest to come out of this war. It was skill and a good old American quality of guts that enabled the pilots to set a record for this theater and perhaps for the Army Air Forces. The pilots' encounter reports read like the daring exploits of dime novel heroes in that they are difficult to believe and are included as part of the month's station record. They did happen, however, and a disastrous day for the bombers was averted. If this force had carried out its planned attack on the bomber formations, the losses to the heavies would have been the greatest in many months. The pilots fought their

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hearts out---and for the rest of January the Luftwaffe has not dared to come up in force. Perhaps it is finished as far as the daring and will to fight is concerned.

Often during the encounter attacks were made by individuals and flights when the odds were 4, 5, and 10 to 1. Numbers did not matter. Lt. Col. Dregne's flight attacked 50 190s. Lt. Col. Evans almost "had it" and remembered almost too late that it was Sunday and he should have been in church. He got four. Lt. Col. Clark, executive officer of the 66th Fighter Wing, shot one down on his first combat mission. For 30 minutes it was the most remarkable melee in the history of Air War.

Capt. Maxwell of the 364th Fighter Squadron, after a most heroic effort, in which he destroyed three aggressive Krauts was lost from his Group and Squadron. Heading for the nearest friendly territory he sighted a lone 190, went down to engage and was himself bounced by a yellow-nosed P-51 which almost destroyed him. The P-51 pilot, evidently was not so hot at recognition, shot off Capt. Maxwell's canopy and so damaged his plane before he could escape that he was forced to crash-land near Brussels. He was royally received and entertained at a British Base, where his host turned out to be none other than the famous ace, Wing Commander Johnny Johnson.

The German pilots were courageous and fought it out. The Germans weren't the only problems, however, as shown by Capt. Maxwell's experience. During the battle one 362nd pilot, Lt. Gruber, burned 110 gallons of gasoline trying to shake another yellow-nosed P-51 off his tail. It is probably a tribute to the skill of our pilots that he was not shot down.

A complete pilots' roster, showing the arrangement of flights, is attached hereto so that those who took part in that historic battle may always be remembered.

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