

Memorial Dedication Address by Merle Olmstead

As I read over what I had written for this occasion, I was struck by how archaic it sounded as we near the end of the 1980's. It is, in a way, ancient history. Many of the names I will mention here are of men who have been dead for over 4 decades, and some will not be remembered by anyone here. Indeed, it is possible that in a few cases, there may be no one alive in this country, who recalls them at all. Nevertheless, they deserve to be remembered and honored here today, even if only briefly.

Before discussing the historical aspects of the 357th Ftr Grp., we must first look at it's parent, the U.S. Army's 8th Air Force. The old 8th, was in many ways, one of the most remarkable of military units, and one of the most powerful striking forces in history.

At it's peak strength, it could launch about 1,000 heavy bombers, and another 1,000 fighters to provide escort and support. The numbers themselves are still astounding today. It is difficult to imagine 2,000 airplanes airborne at one time. In the 1980's of course, one airplane can do more damage then those 2,000 together. This is what is known as progress.

Over the last 45 years, a great deal has been written about the 8th. Certainly some of the best of this written word comes from an English farmer who was in his mid teens when we were resident in the county of Suffolk not far from his home. His name is Roger Freeman, and many of you know him. His trio of books, THE MIGHTY EIGHTH, THE MIGHTY EIGHTH WAR DIARY, and THE MIGHTY EIGHTH WAR MANUAL, are not likely to be surpassed and should be in the library of anyone with an interest in the 8th.

As an aside, I would like to also call attention to a superb book by our own Kit Carson, the title of which is PURSUE AND DESTROY, covering not only his own experiences with the 357th but also the air war in general. Everyone, I'm sure is already aware of Chuck Yeager's best selling book.

In the conclusion of his first book, THE MIGHTY EIGHTH, Freeman says, and I quote: "PROBABLY THE GREATEST SINGLE CONTRIBUTION OF THE 8TH AIR FORCE, TO VICTORY IN EUROPE, WAS THE STAR PART IT'S FIGHTERS PLAYED IN ATTAINING COMBAT SUPERIORITY IN CONTINENTAL AIR SPACE. ORIGINALLY FURNISHED FOR BOMBER PROTECTION, THE U.S. FIGHTERS BECAME A POTENT OFFENSIVE WEAPON." As the foremost authority on the 8th, his words carry considerable weight.

The fighter force he refers to consisted of 15 groups at peak strength, of which the 357th was one. Incidentally, we were the first group in the 8th, altho 2nd in the theatre to get the Mustang, the airplane largely responsible for attaining the superiority that Freeman mentions.

Of these 15 fighter groups, the personnel of each thought and probably still do, that theirs was the best which is as it should be. However, we of the 357th, like to think that we have the facts to back up our contention.

The history of the 357th included some 14 months of combat operations, ending late in April 1945, and cannot be covered in any detail here. I will, therefore, confine my remarks to two areas - first, some comments on the statistical records and secondly - to the cost required to achieve this record.

The primary mission of the 8th AF fighters was to shield the heavy bombers from Luftwaffe fighters and in the tradition of fighter aviation from the earliest days, this was simply to destroy enemy aircraft. This mission the group accomplished in a spectacular manner.

All departments and sections of the various squadrons and the supporting units of the 50th Service group, and independent platoons and companies, were of vital importance in doing the job, and they can be proud of it. However, our aircrew, our pilots, were the cutting edge of the sword, and they deserve the majority of the credit, and all of the glory - if there is any.

The opponent was the German Air Force - the Luftwaffe, and it was a very good air force. Thruout the war, they had excellent equipment, and they had superb fighting spirit. The Luftwaffe was seldom an easy target, all of which makes the accomplishments of the 8th AF fighters, all the more impressive.

The 357th Group ended the war with about 600 air victories, and another 100 plus on the ground. These roughly 600 air victories placed the group second only to the 56th Group, and slightly ahead of the famous 4th Group, both of which had been operational much longer than the 357th. During the last year of the war, which is to say, most of the time we were operational, this group had the highest scoring rate of any group.

The 357th Group produced 46 aces. To a fighter pilot, the highest pinnacle of success - other than staying alive, is to reach the magic number of 5 victories, and thereby become an ace. Altho it is possible to argue figures, it appears that the 46 aces of this group was slightly ahead of both the 4th and 56th groups, and far ahead of the other fighter groups of the 8th.

It would not be appropriate here, to tell of the many missions flown by the group, except to mention "THE BIG DAY", and let it stand for all the others.

On the 14th of January 1945, in a violent air battle in the Berlin area, the 357th Group pilots shot down 55.5 enemy fighters, and Robert Foy of the 363rd Sqdn. destroyed another on the ground, for a total of 56.5. As far as is known, this record has never equaled by any similar sized fighter unit in any air force. Incidentally, I have often been asked how one can destroy $\frac{1}{2}$ an airplane. Well, of course, you can't, and Robert Winks, of the 364th Sqdn. is responsible for that untidy figure. He shared a FW190 with a pilot from another group, plus the two he is credited with on his own.

To make the record even better, this group lost only 3 P-51's and pilots, all of whom survived as POW's. Two of them, Jim Sloan, George Behling are current members of our association. The 3rd man was William Dunlop, whose escape from the wreckage of his P-51 must be one of the most remarkable of WW2. His present whereabouts are unknown.

Altho I have mentioned only the one mission here, there were some 300 others, and in the course of these, the group won either 2 or 3 DUC's (there is some confusion about that), and after the war the French government awarded the Croix de Guerre.

This mention of Behling, Sloan and Dunlop, who were lost on the "BIG DAY", leads me into the second part of this discussion, the cost to the group, and to the country, to achieve the outstanding record which was compiled.

I will not attempt to list, by name, those we lost but will instead, name only a few, in the hope that these few will be representative of all of our casualties. There is a bronze plaque listing our casualties, on the outer wall of the town hall at Leiston near our old airbase.

During the time the 357th Group was in existence, we lost, in round numbers, about 160 men, to accident or battle. Due to the nature of a fighter group, these would be predominately pilots, but at least two enlisted men, and one flight surgeon, died in the line of duty.

Of these approximately 160 men lost, about half survived as POW's, and altho all suffered considerable hardship as prisoners, they returned home at the end of the war, and many are here at this reunion.

There were also those who, finding themselves down in enemy territory, managed to evade capture, usually with the aid of the various underground organizations. There were approximately one dozen of these who evaded capture and escaped. Lynn Drollinger, better known as "Junior" in those long ago days, is one of these. Some years ago, Junior sent me some photos taken while he was living in Paris, under the noses of the German army. One of these photos shows him attending a party in a Paris hotel, complete with pretty girls and many wine bottles. Later, however, the party times were over, when he made his way, with many hardships, out of occupied France and eventually back to the U.S.

One of those, not so lucky, was Hershhal Pascoe, now deceased. Shot down deep in Germany, he spent the rest of the war as a POW. I wonder if Pascoe was ever aware that he had the dubious distinction of having been shot down by one of the leading German aces, a Ltcol Josef Priller, who later reached high rank in the post war German air force.

By the time this group became operational on 11 Feb. 1944, we had already sustained combat losses. Flight leaders Joe Giltner and Lloyd Hubbard were shot down while flying with another group to gain combat experience. Giltner survived, Hubbard did not.

After we became operational, the first loss was Capt. Donald Ross, from Grp. Hdqrs. but he was among those POW's who returned after the war, and he is on our current roster.

When we think of our losses, we usually think first of those who were lost due to enemy action, in air to air combat, but there were many ways to become a casualty - many ways to die.

The weather over England and the continent was often deadly, especially to pilots with marginal training and experience in flying the gauges. Jack Warren was the first pilot in the group to reach "ace" status. A month after becoming operational, he flew into a weather front, and was never seen again. Dave Perrin and Elmer Rydberg, early members of the 362nd sqdn., disappeared together in heavy weather. Consider Herman Delager. He was on a simple mission, to pick up a P-51 at Stansted and ferry it the short distance to Leiston, something like 50 miles. He reported to flying control that he was over water and heading into base. He, too, never reached homebase and his fate remains unknown. Besides those I have mentioned, there were at least a half dozen others who were victims of the weather.

Collisions were another source of loss, sometimes with enemy aircraft, such as Frank Connaghan and Ralph Donnell, who both collided with MellOs on the same day. More often, however, it was with friendly aircraft. Bill McGinley and Santiago Gutierrez collided within sight of base and went into the sea.

Ed Simpson and Donald Ferron were in collision over the battle zone. Simpson survived the crash, but was killed on the ground attempting to reach allied lines. Wendall Helwig died in collision with a P-51 from another group and there were others.

Earlier, I had expressed the opinion that the Luftwaffe was a very skilled opponent. I was referring not only to the fighter pilots and other aircrew, but to other elements as well, including the crews of the light and heavy flak guns. Having had a great deal of practice against U.S. and British aircraft, they had become very proficient and this group lost more pilots to light automatic weapons, while attacking ground targets, than we did to enemy aircraft.

Aces are made in air to air combat, but ground attack on airfields and other targets, was far more dangerous. Within two weeks, for instance, early in the war, we lost a group commander and a deputy group commander to ground fire. Henry Spicer survived, but Hubert Egenes did not. One of the worst days was late in the war, on 2 March 1945 when we lost five P-51's and pilots, four of these to ground fire with 3 men dead.

Friendly gun fire could also be deadly. I have listed six 357th pilots (and there may be others) who were shot down by other U.S. aircraft, three of them by P-51's. Frank Gailer and Chester Maxwell were two who survived this experience, altho Frank ended up in a stalag luft. John Childs was not so lucky, he died in his encounter with another P-51.

8th AF bomber crews, who had suffered at the hands of German fighters, were understandably very nervous about any fighter getting too close and often fired on any airplane which had one engine. Chuck McKee can testify to that, along with at least two others.

Losses due to some type of mechanical failure were also all too common. Usually it was engine failure, but at least three men died due to wing failure. As good as it was, the Mustang had some structural problems when it entered service. One of those lost due to wing failure was Walter Perry, altho this loss was almost surely due to overstress as the result of a very high speed dive and a violent turn in an attempt to catch a FW190.

There were freak ways to die also. Some of you may remember Jacob Giel - his P-51 was hit by a drop tank from another P-51 and went into the North Sea leaving nothing but an oil slick. This was in early April 1945 and Giel was probably the last man to die on an operational mission. William Gambill was shot down early in March 1944, became a POW and two weeks later, was killed by an allied bomb near Frankfurt.

Many of you were witness, as I was to the death of Dittie Jenkins, who buzzed the airfield at the completion of his combat tour. A fine fighter pilot with ten victories and a silver star but he made a fatal error in judgement and his Mustang hit the trees and crashed in a ball of fire, not far from the main mess hall.

Besides those lost on operations, 14 men died in training in the U.S. and at least 12 died in crashes in England - some weather related, some in training or a combination

of the two. Altho it is difficult to come up with an exact number, we have settled on 82 as the most likely figure, of men who died in the line of duty with the 357th Fighter Group.

During this discussion, I have mentioned only a few of these 82 men by name, but each one of you can think of one or several other names, and collectively in our memories, we can recall most of those who did not survive.

To all of these from Sgt. Schuneman who died in an AT-6 crash with his pilot Walter Corby to Major Ed Hiro who was missing on the last mission of his tour - to all of these, those of us who have survived this long, salute them and we hope that somehow, they can see this beautiful memorial.

Closing remarks

In closing, I want to point out that, although the 357th Group ceased to exist in the post war years, we are very pleased that it's history and traditions did not die, they were transferred by the Air Force to, and are now part of, the 178th Tactical Fighter Group of the Ohio Air Guard, who under their C. O., Col Dick Higgins, are participating in a big way, in this reunion.

A WELCOME CONTRIBUTION

In late June, we received a letter from Ernest F. De Nigris. He is a Counselor at Law and was the intelligence officer of the 363rd.

Along with his letter, he sent me a small package which contained six rolls of WWII aircraft film, eight photos of the ground officers of the 363rd and 112 photos of 363rd pilots. All of the photos were well labeled and all in alphabetical order.

Our historian, Olmsted and I have been lacking material on the 363rd Fighter Sqdn. and this gift puts us in much better shape. All of Ernie's material has been forwarded to Merle Olmsted with a few exceptions. We hope that you enjoy the photos of the 363rd Fighter Sqdn. ground officers in this October newsletter.

I have held out a few pilot photos and plan on inserting them in a future newsletter. The 363rd pilot photos held are those of men that we have seen at our recent reunions. We want you to remember what handsome guys they were back during the Leiston days and WWII.

Those of us who served in the various units of the 357th from its origin until near its ending knew that many pilots came and went serving a tour or two and "Zied" back to the states. Too many paid the supreme sacrifice.

I don't think any of us realized the number of pilots this involved. If Ernie De Nigris had photos of about 112 pilots of the 363rd, the entire 357th Fighter Group must have had well over 300 pilots in all. We have no official records pertaining to the personnel of the 357th and its supporting units. What we do have consists of various shipping orders and listings contributed by members over these past years. I suppose this is the case of all WWII military units that are organized today.

Ernie De Nigris underwent major surgery a while back and said it would be too risky for him to try to attend the Dayton reunion. He requested that we give his best to any who remember him.

Why don't you fellows who know Ernie, get out a pen and scratch out a few lines to him? Even better, I have dug up his phone number if you would like to give him a "ding on the telly". Number is area code 516-653-4655. His address is Box 854, Argyle Road, E. Quogue, NY 11942.

8TH A.F. HISTORICAL SOCIETY REUNION

The 8th A.F.H.S. will hold their annual reunion for 1987 in the city of Pittsburg, PA. on October 14th thru 18th.

Dale Karger, 364th pilot who attends the 8th reunions, and lives in the Pittsburg area, has graciously accepted to serve as Joe DeShay's alternate as the contact man for the 357th Fighter Group Association.

Dale will attend the Unit Contact Development Workshop for the unit contacts. May he and Cathy enjoy the luncheon of the contact men and their guests. Our representation will be in good hands.