

What of the Bomber's on "The Big Day"

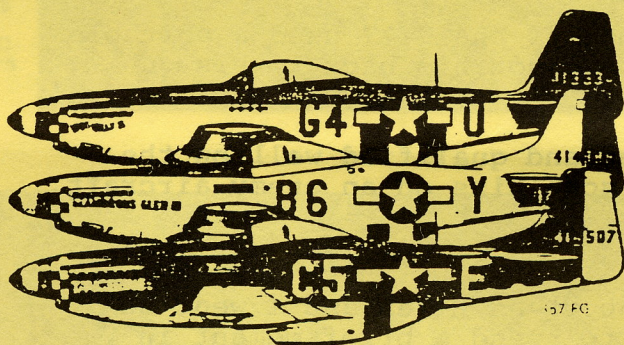
14 Jan. 1945?

by Merle Olmsted, Historian,
357th Ftr. Grp. May 1994

Based on discussions at reunion gatherings and the amount of related mail we receive, for our attention, it is evident that the Derben mission of 14 Jan. 1945 remains one of great interest to our readers.

There can't be many veterans of the 357th who are unaware of the "The Big Day", when Group pilots flew into the record books by shooting down 55.5 Luftwaffe fighters in a massive ratrace in the Berlin area. Better still, this was achieved with no fatal 357th casualties, although Dunlop, Sloan, and Behling were forced to descend in the land of the enemy and spent the next few months in Stalag Luft.

But what of the bombers who were under 357th escort on that day so long ago? Was it a highly successful day for them also? The answer has to be that old reliable "yes and no".



357th Fighter Group markings

LtCol Dregne led that momentous mission and in his report, he says: "None of the formations of E/A attacked believed to have reached the bombers, although some may have filtered through."

In a citation awarded the Group some two weeks later, B/General Harbold says: "Not one of the bombers of the formation they were protecting failed to release it's bombs because of hostile fighter activities." This statement is difficult to support by the available documents.

In his mission report, Colonel Dregne states: "R/V 1150 north of Cuxhaven 25,000 ft with 1st 3 C. Grps (combat groups) of 1st force." The first three bomb groups in the bomber column then, were those assigned to 357th escort.

There is no doubt that the lads from Leiston did an outstanding job of keeping enemy fighters away from the Big Friends of the first two combat groups, but for the crews of the third group, it was going to be a bad day.

The force that went to Derben that day to bomb oil installations, was not a large one by 8th AF standards - only 186 B-17s of the 3rd Air Division were involved. There were however another 600 heavies striking other targets in the German heartland. They were supported by almost 800 fighters - seemingly enough to keep the entire Luftwaffe fighter force apprehensive about what was behind them. However, bad timing and bad luck allowed the German Fighter controllers to vector their Me 109s and FW 190s into a patch of sky devoid of P-51s, and hack down 8 B-17s, while losing a few of their own, to the bomber gunners.

Those first three combat groups made up the 13th Combat Wing, which was an old friend of the 357th (they had gone to Russia together) and consisted of our closest neighbors, the 390th Bomb Group at nearby Framlingham, and the 95th and 100th Bomb Groups. These were the units assigned to 357th escort.

The 95th's 32 B-17s led both the 13th CW, and the 3rd Division, and crossed the enemy coast at 1144, rendezvousing with the 357th 1 minute before noon. For the 95th it was almost a textbook operation, bombing from 26,000 ft., most of the bombs were on the underground oil installations. The 95th mission report describes the fighter escort as excellent, keeping most E/A away. 10-15 FW 190s did make one pass at them, but caused no losses to the 95th, while it's gunners claimed five, including the only Me 262 which was seen. These would have been the few that Dregne mentions as "filtering through".

The 100th Group, which had had it's share of bad luck in the past, and had been tagged "The Bloody Hundreth", was second in the 13th Wing, with 34 B-17s behind the 95th. One squadron missed the primary target, but the others bombed with good results. Although their mission report tells us that enemy fighters were seen, "fighter support was very good. It broke up the enemy formations, was on time, and as briefed." The 100th Group,

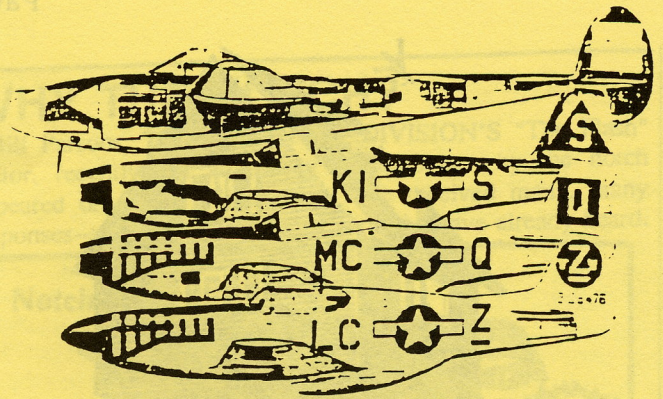
like the 95th, lost no aircraft.

The 390th was third and last in the 13th CW, but was lagging well behind the 100th, by about 5 minutes, or ten miles. This gap apparently left the 390th with no escort, and it was during this time that German fighters hit the formation. The low squadron of the 390th lost all six of its B-17s, and another two from the lead squadron. 14 chutes were seen. The only aircraft returning from the low squadron were three which had aborted early.

Even so, in apparent contradiction, the 390th mission report says: "Friendly fighters gave good support, but were unable to keep off attacking enemy fighters." The 390th had been the responsibility of the 357th, so what went wrong?

The deadly gap between the 100th Group and the 390th was a major factor, but a close look at the clock may provide another. The 390th mission report says their low squadron came under attack "about 1240 hours". This is within a couple of minutes of the time Dregne spotted the swarms of 109s and 190s and during the 30 minutes the 390th was being hacked down, the 357th's entire attention was devoted to dealing with several gaggles of aggressive enemy fighters, three times their own number. By the time this massive dogfight had simmered down, the 357th's P-51s were scattered across many miles of Europe, in singles, twos and threes, and the 390th was on its way home.

As we have seen above, the 390th mission report comments on good support from friendly fighters. These were almost surely not 357th aircraft, since they were involved at the head of the bomber stream. Whose P-51s, then, did provide support for the 390th?



20th Fighter Group markings

The 4th and 5th Combat Groups of B-17s, behind the 390th, were under escort by the 20th Fighter Group. This entry in the 20th Group's diary shows clearly that it was **Merle Nichols** 79th Squadron which engaged the 390th's tormenters and prevented further loss. They were also the ones referred to in the 390th's report that "provided good support".

The 20th Group history: "Major Nichols who was leading the 79th Sqdn. out in front of the bombers, engaged, a gaggle of 100+ E/A which had apparently been attacking the CGs ahead of our bombers and in the battle that followed the 79th accounted for 6 destroyed and 3 damaged, one of the destroyed being accounted for by **Major Nichols**".

It would appear then that the bombers under 357th escort did not fare as well as the initial reports would indicate. The reasons being the fact that the 390th was lagging badly and had the misfortune to be hit just as THE YOXFORD BOYS were fully engaged at the head of the column. 20th Group P-51s then intervened and prevented a worse loss.



357th Fighter Group floral piece at the Cambridge Cemetery for the 50th Anniversary Ceremonies of the Normandy Invasion.

Photo by Gus Clutten

AH, NOSTALGIA! ALSO COLD CHILLS, SWEATY PALMS, STARK TERROR . . .

IT WAS ONE of those wonderfully warm fall afternoons in the Central Valley of California when Sunday fliers drifted over the brown Altamont Mountains from San Jose, Hayward and Oakland, lazily circled the Tracy Municipal Airport and then landed to chat with George Hosselkus, the owner of Professional Aviation.

George, his chief pilot Gary Del Carlo and I had been observing the comings and goings of the Pipers and Cessnas from within the warm ready room and discussing, between cups of strong coffee, the various types of aircraft we had flown. Someone, I don't recall who, mentioned the Bell Airacobra.

In that moment the desultory conversation was lost to me as I was transported back in time to my youth when the United States was struggling for its life in World War II, and everywhere in the west and southwest Army Air Corps training stations were cranking out young, eager fighter pilots. I had been one of them, an idealistic kid just turned 21, a graduate of the Class of 43-F from Luke Field and recently assigned to the 328th Fighter Group at Hamilton Field, California. But not for long.

Within a matter of days all of us new Second Lieutenants were re-assigned to the 444th Fighter Squadron at Tonopah, Nevada, one of those military bases established in the middle of nowhere by a stroke of command perversity. There on the wind swept plateau of the Nevada desert we met the snarling little airplane in which we were to receive

virtually all of our combat training before assignment to overseas duty. Some of us would not survive the aircraft.

Some of us hardly survived Captain Joy, the ramrod of the 444th! Captain Joy's commanding voice came back to me through the years, and I was no longer in the ready room of Professional Aviation in Tracy, California: I was in a thin walled, tar paper barracks on the flightline at Tonopah, and Joy was speaking, loudly, which was the way he functioned most of the time.

"No one makes a skidding turn in this airplane! When you turn the P-39, you establish the degree of bank required to do the job, and you don't shove in on bottom rudder and pull back on the stick to tighten up things! Not unless you are planning suicide!"

"AND ANOTHER THING! You

don't drag this airplane in nose-high on a long, low approach. You haul up the nose of the P-39 at low speeds and it stops flying, NOW! And I don't like the idea of having to scoop you out of the desert with a shovel!"

Joy looked around the room, his face dour and grim. None of us dared breathe. He was pure menace!

"This airplane doesn't have any glide angle. You keep the throttle cracked to about 15 inches of manifold pressure and the prop turning over about 1300 rpm on your approach, and you don't chop it until you are ready to land! UNDERSTOOD? AND ANOTHER THING! This airplane doesn't stall gently with all the garbage down. It drops its right wing fast! And it snaprolls out of pure meanness. Okay, Anderson, let's go!"

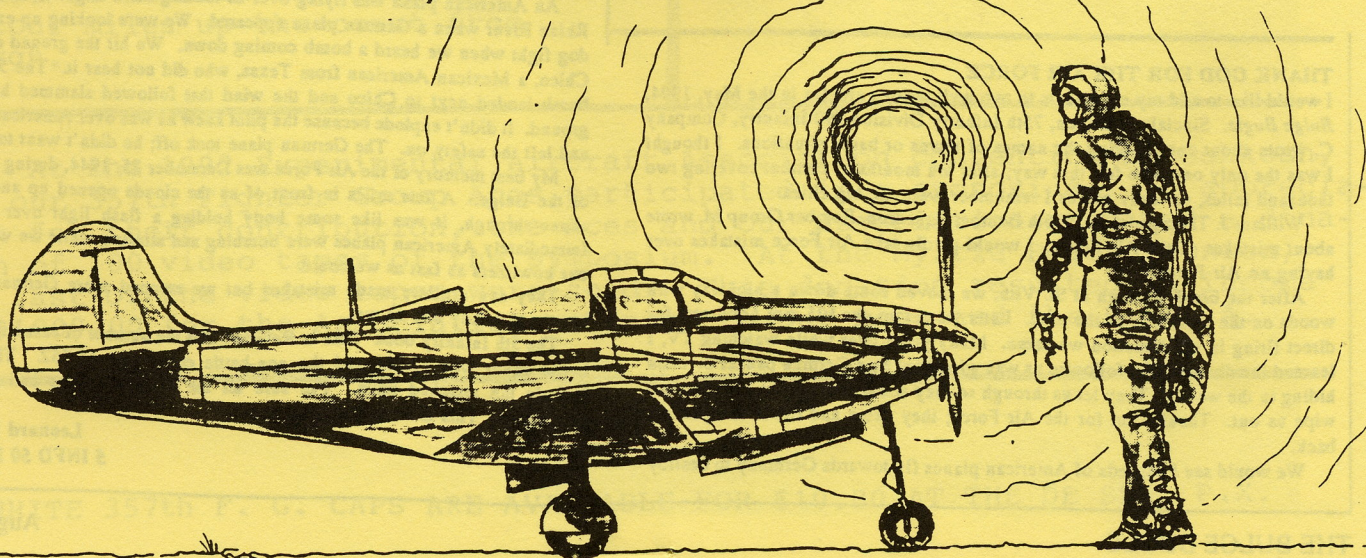
That was me! After four days of concentrated ground school which included hours of reading the P-39 tech manuals I was to be first on the line, the first to go, and now that the moment had arrived I was scared to death! I picked up my parachute and tried to swagger from the ready room, but my legs were made of jelly.

In the cold of the Nevada morning, Captain Joy and I strode out to the P-39N I was to fly. The combination of soggy pancakes and bitter coffee for breakfast and normal flight jitters contributed to a notable case of indigestion which did little to make the morning a bright one. Still, I managed a picture of nonchalance as I clambered onto the olive drab wing and dropped my parachute in the bucket seat. I squeezed my five foot

THE P-39

AND ME

By CARROLL R. ANDERSON



eleven inch frame into the narrow confines of the cockpit and buckled up. Captain Joy leaned in through the right hand door.

"Okay, Anderson, close your eyes and go through the instrument check."

I tried to protest that I had already undergone this particular bit of trial and tribulation with 1st Lieutenant K.K. Kimbro, but thought better of it. Queasy but undaunted, I struggled through the ordeal by touching each instrument and calling its name. After a somewhat hesitant conclusion to the test, Captain Joy grinned and bellowed into the crisp morning air and into a now damaged right ear:

"She's all yours, Anderson!"

I'd gladly have given her back at that precise moment.

I glanced around the cockpit. Everything seemed to be in order. I looked out at the crewchief for moral support. He was slumped against the leading edge of the wing, a figure of total disinterest. He appeared bored by the entire operation. Obviously, the first move was mine to make.

Fuel petcock on reserve. Prop pitch forward. Idle cutoff — off. Throttle cracked. Trim tabs neutral. Prime the engine. Lock down the primer. Thoughtfully I remembered the story of the novice who failed to lock the primer and came back with his feet bathed in 90 octane fuel. Switches on. Door locked.

"Switches on. CLEAR!" I yelled.

"Where'd they put the starter on this dumb thing?"

Up to this point I had been doing rather well for appearance's sake, I thought, but whatever degree of confidence I had built up swiftly oozed away. I looked again at the crewchief. His glazed eyes were looking far out into the desert. There would be no help from that man!

"ON THE FLOOR! That's right. It's a heel-and-toe job."

The energizer begins its long, build-up whine. Once more I look at the crew chief, whose expression has not changed one iota. I wonder how he can be so damned casual when obviously I am going to my death. I tip my foot to engage the starter — you have to be a contortionist to succeed — and all hell breaks loose!

A tremendous crash, followed by a loud clattering noise breaks out behind me. This is accompanied by a corkscrew vibration which wracks the entire fuselage. The airplane feels as if

it were coming apart. As I jam the idle cutoff forward, the nose of the aircraft drops and wobbles. I don't know if this is because I shoved on the idle cutoff or if it is a natural phenomenon.

I sneak a furtive look at the crew chief. He is standing well away from the airplane now but observing it with wary caution. He isn't running away, so at least I know it isn't on fire, and what I am experiencing is normal although the fillings in my teeth are beginning to loosen. With a steady flow of fuel pouring into the Allison engine behind me, the plane jumps and jerks somewhat less, but the racket is still terrifying!

I look at the instruments before me, but everything literally is a blur. The only instrument my mind allows me to contemplate clearly is the Prestone coolant gauge. Captain Joy has made explicit comments about that!

"If it reaches 125 degrees before takeoff, don't fly the airplane. And furthermore, any jerk who lets his plane heat up can sit in the damned thing until it cools down!"

That ordeal could last from 45 minutes to an hour or more, and it wasn't pleasant when the outside temperature reached 110 degrees in the shade.

Well, I couldn't sit there any longer. People were beginning to stare.

"Hello Tonopah Tower. This is Army 469. Taxi and takeoff instructions."

Tonopah tower responded, and it was time to go, but I couldn't find the brake release. No matter how hard I searched, it was gone, and when I found it I couldn't reach it because my shoulder harness was locked and I couldn't remember where the release was located, so I just sat there. Finally I found the release, and the Airacobra charged from the hardstand like a thoroughbred leaving the starting gate at Bay Meadows.

By steadily pumping the toe brakes I was able to keep up enough pressure to guide the P-39 to the end of the strip and brake it to a halt. Here I checked the mags and prop pitch and wiggled the controls as if I knew what I was doing.

By this time it is too late to begin remembering anything, for the moment has come to fly Larry Bell's pride and joy, and everything from here on in will have to be done by instinct and by rote. I glance at the

Prestone coolant gauge. It is rising rapidly toward the redline!

The slender, sloping nose of the Airacobra is pointing straight down the 5000-foot runway. The first morning heat rays are beginning to shimmer from its surface. With the brakes released and the Allison surging behind me as I ease in power, the P-39 suddenly is transformed from a weary, paint-scaling chunk of iron into an alive bird. It accelerates with abandon, the nose wavering as the torque takes affect, but I remember to gently tap the brake to remain in control until the rudder takes over.

As I wonder how far down the runway I have progressed, the tower flashes by in a blur and the sagebrush alongside the runway has dissolved into a brown smear. The airspeed indicator is approaching 120 miles per hour as I gently ease back on the stick, bringing the nosewheel off the ground. There is a moment's hesitation when the craft is neither an airplane nor a ground vehicle, when the whole thing feels heavy and reluctant to lift off, and then the thin, high pressure tires of the main gear spin free. I brake them to a halt and hit the gear toggle switch.

Although the airplane now feels as if it were in its element, the sky, it still feels lethargic and mushy. I find myself tugging upwards on the top of the stick, as if this might get us higher into the air. I fail to realize that we are more than 5,000 feet above sea level on the ground. Small wonder the P-39 feels heavy. We've lost half of its performance before leaving terra firma, yet as its speed increases to 170 miles per hour the controls become firm, and it acts like an airplane of quality.

As I break from the pattern, the Airacobra responds quickly to aileron pressures. Its rate of roll is fast, but unfortunately its rate of turn is wide. It simply refuses to make a tight turn. I find myself trying to drive it to where I want to go, but only with partial success. I climb away at high speed, reaching 8,000 feet. Tonopah is lost below.

Captain Joy had said no acrobatics on the first flight, but no one is looking, so why not an aileron roll? Why not? A slight dive, a little extra speed. Pull back gently on the stick and move it to the left. Feed in a little rudder.

WOW-E-E-E! Does it ever go around

an AT-6 never cruised this fast. I'm moving at 215 miles per hour.

A lone cloud appears ahead of me and far below. I roll the plane around and around diving at the fleecy body until I pass through it with a woosh. I look back to watch its wet outline swirl and twist from the rush of air created by my diving plane.

Then to work. Slow down to 150 miles per hour. Gear down. How does the P-39 fly with everything down including flaps? Tensely, that's how! I practice a few power on and power off stalls, just enough to know that the right wing drops and there is little or no aileron response at near-stall airspeeds. All too soon 45 minutes have passed, and it's time to head for home.

I ease the nose of the P-39 down toward the end of the runway after Tonopah tower has cleared me number one to land. I switch the fuel tank back to reserve and move the prop pitch forward. The mixture control goes forward and the fuel boost pump goes on. The field begins to come up fast. My airspeed is approaching 300 miles per hour. The wind is howling past the canopy!

At the end of the strip and not more than fifty feet from the ground, I break the airplane to the left. Peeloff! Stick and rudder make a hard, climbing turn. Isn't this thing ever going to slow down? The altimeter begins to wind up. Finally the P-39 condescends to lose some of its forward momentum. At 150 miles per hour I flip down the landing gear toggle switch. The nose waggles and wanders as the electrical system brings down the tricycle gear in one synchronous action. Gear indicator shows gear down, but to make sure I flip the clutch, then give a yank on the manual hand crank which remains unyielding. I crack the flaps and ease in power to maintain approach speed.

I can see the runway approaching with what appears to be blinding speed. My airspeed indicator needle quivers at 125 as I let down every bit of flaps I have. I wait for the P-39 to slow, but it doesn't. The nose pitches and the sink rate increases. If the damned thing is slowing down, it is doing it so imperceptibly I don't notice it.

The runway is very close now. It's got to be now or never. I chop the throttle, and that quickly the P-39 stalls and lands. The airspeed indicator is registering 100 miles per hour. The nosewheel stays off the runway with stick backpressure, but finally it drops and I discover with considerable alarm that the former 5,000 foot runway no longer is that long. The tower goes by as I start pumping on the brakes. I pump harder and I can feel the plane jitter a bit as the tires grab. Then the plane is rolling smoothly and I turn off at the last turnout. My shirt is wringing wet and my legs are quivering uncontrollably, so much so that I can hardly keep pumping the brake pedals as I swing the plane back to the revetment area.

Once again I am completely aware of the belching Allison engine behind me and the grinding drive shaft between my legs. It clatters and vibrates. The gear box in the nose whines loudly. What was it Captain Joy had said about the Airacobra? Oh, yes!

"Crack up this baby, and you get Allison stamped all over your butt." That's what the man said.

The crew chief waves me into the hardstand, coaxes me around in a turn which faces the P-39 towards the runway and gives me the hand-across-the-throat cut sign.

I run up the engine and pull back on the mixture control. Switches off as the Allison shudders to a noisy halt. As I look about I realize I am almost

stone deaf.

Suddenly I experience an anti-climactic fright. Did I forget to retract the flaps when I taxied up? I check the switch and indicator. Everything is up and normal.

I fill out the flight form as the crewchief once again is leaning against the leading edge of the wing, staring out across the desert. No malfunctions have occurred since takeoff, or at least I don't think there have been any. The sun is blazing through the canopy, and I am wringing wet.

One of my flying mates, Lt. Glenn Hubbard from Hayward, California, trudges out to the plane lugging his parachute and followed by K.K. Kimbro. He looks rather stern, I think, and his buck teeth are clinched down firmly. Had I looked that determined?

Then he looks up and grins that Hubbard grin which is more like a belly laugh. I grin back.

"Hey, Andy," he yells, "how'd it go?"

"Great, Hub," I holler back, "just great!"

I clamber off the wing and head for the ready room.

"How was it? How did the P-39 fly. Andy? HEY ANDY!"

I was back in the ready room of Professional Aviation, and George Hosselkus was looking at me carefully with a quizzical expression on his face as he repeated the question to the now 48 year old, ex-fighter pilot.

"How did the P-39 fly?"

"Oh great, George, just great! Some day I'll have to tell you about my first ride in one at a place called Tonopah, Nevada." □

Glenn Hubbard was an original pilot of the 36th Fighter Sqdrn. 357th Fighter Group.

This humorous article on the P-39 is from an unknown magazine about 20 years ago. The author, Carroll Anderson went on to fly a full combat P-39 tour with the 475th Fighter Group in the Pacific area. The author is now among the deceased.

Merle Olmsted