

A FEW FINAL OPINIONS:

Our own Chuck Yeager covered the P-39 training days in his usual colorful way in his book YEAGER (Bantam Books, 1985) and we quote just a small bit here. For further reading on those days, it is suggested you get his book and re-read it, along with Bud Anderson's TO FIGHT AND FLY.

CHUCK YEAGER: I was excited to be flying a real fighter plane. I remember my first morning there, Bill "Obee" O'Brien one of the squadron leaders with three hundred more hours flying time than the rest of us, checked me out in the '39. Obee was tough and demanding. I sat in the cockpit while he explained all the switches. "Okay, Yeager" he said, "when you take off, raise the nose gear at 60 mph - it'll get airborne at about 90 or 100. Then raise the landing gear and keep the son of a bitch wide open until you get out. Then cut the power back. Same way in landing. Hell, it's no problem". Then he slammed the cockpit door and signaled for me to fire up the engine. Instruction over.

The airplane performed beautifully at low altitudes, but was under-powered high up and if you stalled it, you might wind up boring a deep hole because it spun like a top going down. Once you got the feel of it and understood it, the '39 was a fun airplane to fly. Another problem was maintenance. We flew so much and there were few old hands among the ground crews working on the airplane. There was a lot of trial and error both on the flight line and in the sky. In a 1996 letter to the author, General Yeager said, "No, I would not have liked to fight the ME 109 and FW 190 with it. The single stage blower on the Allison Engine did not give the P-39 adequate performance at altitude to even keep up with the B-17's and B-24's that we escorted. It was also very limited on range".

For the final word, we turn to Tommy Hayes - Deputy Group Commander, fighter leader, ace and genuine gentleman.

TOMMY HAYES: "Despite it's weaknesses, I believe the P-39 was an excellent training aircraft. Furthermore, without it, what was the alternative to train the flow of new pilots from flight training to pilot the P-38, P-47 and P-51? Bringing it closer to home, how would the first P-51 groups, the 354th and the 357th in the 8th AF be trained by late 1943? I strongly believe that the pilots who trained in the P-39 were better pilots for it. Was it not better to eliminate the weak in the U.S. rather than later having him auger-in overseas and possibly taking a strong pilot and his aircraft with him?"
Olmsted

1943 TONOPAH, NEVADA DIARY

Sat. 15 May 1943 -- Worked until midnight on the line and a very cold night on the desert.

Sun. 16 May 1943 -- Worked in the afternoon replacing the large gear box at the nose of the #66 aircraft.

Mon. 17 May 1943 -- A cold day. It tried to rain in afternoon. Several aircraft blew tires last night as they ran off the runway practicing night landings.

Tue. 18 May 1943 -- Worked all day and till 5 A.M. in the morning. Dead tired. No mail in three days so sure feel lost.

Wed. 19 May 1943 -- Worked afternoon and caught up all work. A sad day. We learned that our Commanding Officer of our Squadron, Capt. Varian White perished in his P-39 at Burbank, CA. Went there to visit his lady friend. Fire in engine compartment caused aircraft to crash into a house. Got three letters from home. Qualified on the rifle range for marksman.

Joe D.

SATISFACTION

by Joe De Shay

As a result of the mission to the May 31, 1998 Dedication of the Leiston Airfield Memorial, there are many stories that can be told. As Ellen and I spent several days prior to the Memorial Dedication at the Caravan site which was formerly the 363rd Fighter Squadron flight line area, we were entertained constantly by our various hosts. Early in the week, one of our hosts notified me that there was an English lady who wanted to see me and to ask me some questions. She said I would be meeting her on Saturday evening at the fun program or at the affair after the Dedication.

It was after the fun night ceremony of speeches, games, prizes awarded and gift exchanges when everyone was buzzing over coffee, cake and sandwiches that my lady introduced herself and her husband. She spoke very well and was very courteous. Her reason for wanting to converse with me was as follows: During the early part of the 357th's stay at the Leiston Airfield, she was a young girl with the responsibility of caring for small children as they played out of doors in a play yard at a location near the airfield. On several occasions as our aircraft would be returning from a combat mission, there was a particular aircraft and pilot that as he circled to land, the cheerful young pilot always waved to the children. She could only learn two words of the three words on the front of his aircraft.

For the many years that have passed, this lady has always remembered those incidents and has been anxious to know what the name of that aircraft really was and who it's pilot was and did he survive the war and live happily ever after. The only clue she could give me was that the first two words on the aircraft were "Hurry Home".

The lady now has peace of mind and satisfaction in knowing that the aircraft was "Hurry Home Honey" piloted by young Pete Peterson. She is aware that Pete is a survivor of the war, happily married with a family and one of the members of the 357th Fighter Group Association.

The answers to small situations during our lifetime can bring satisfaction knowing that we finally have the answer to something that has plagued us for years. Hope this kind lady enjoyed the evening at the "Cakes and Ale". She told me that in the latter part of our days at the Leiston Airfield, she found employment at the base P. X. Today I regret that I did not obtain her name and address and hope that some member of F.O.L.A. can give it to me.

364th REPLACEMENT PILOTS

Anyone who knew Byron Braley of the Leiston Days, please contact Joe De Shay. Byron's cousin is seeking information and photos and we would like to help him out.

Phone Joe De Shay - 561-392-4864

Dear Joe -

Our men who kept 'em flying had hardly had time to lay down their wrenches and turn in their weapons after the fighting stopped in Europe - when word came to my squadron, the 362nd, to start a physical fitness program. I don't remember who appointed me to lead the thing, but First Sergeant Ramm and I did our duty.

Ramm assembled the EM, as shown in the two joined photos below. He's about three inches in from the left, holding a clipboard with the roster on it. I'm in shorts near the left, waiting to march off with the gang to the torture field - wherever that was.

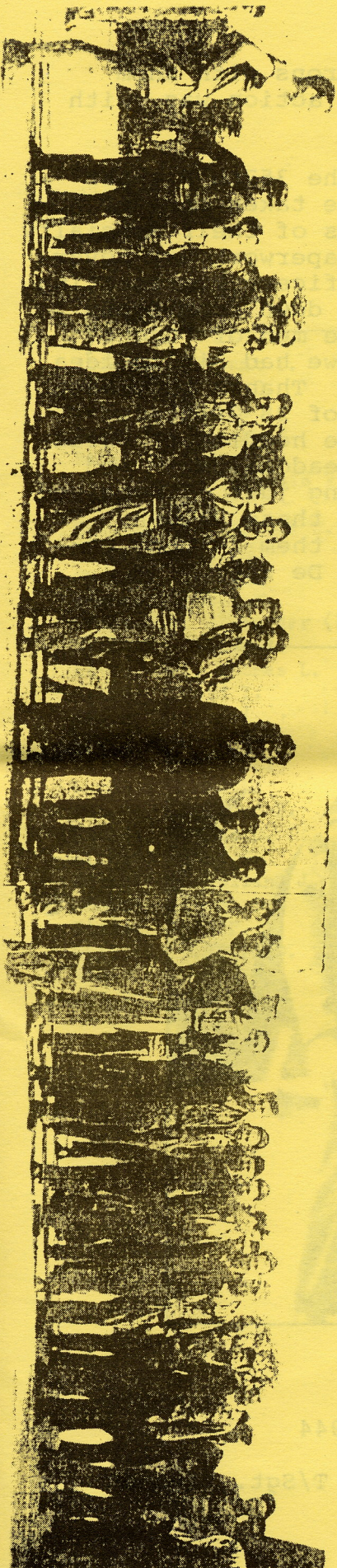
I can't recall the name of the photographer, but he and Ramm had a darkroom together when we got to Neuweiler - the bathroom just off the orderly room. When Ramm left us for the Land of the Big PX, the photographer became First Sergeant. I can see him clearly as anything in my mind - I just can't read his name tag!

The officers had a session also - I remember forming them in a big circle. I also remember sullen manner here and there, as though this whole thing were my fault. What they didn't know is that I had no interest whatsoever in PT at that time.

Anyway, we didn't have many PT sessions. Either the program was discontinued or some one else was put in charge of it, or Ramm and most of the Sergeants in charge of the Squadron's major functions left Leiston with me and went to Neuweiler as our squadron advance party.

We didn't have PT in Neuweiler that I remember.

Frederick A. Weiland
Frederick A. Weiland
(Former Adjutant, 362nd)



"GROUP"

We READ and we WRITE about the three Fighter Squadrons with whom we served in the 357th Fighter Group. That's where the action was, with the Pilots and the Aircraft and the Ground Crews.

We seldom refer to Group Headquarters Company of the 357th Fighter Group. That's where the typing and paperwork forms were taken care of in order to maintain the records. The Clerks and others of their specialty made their contribution to the war effort. The G. I. paperwork was never-ending. That's where the leading Officers and those Officers representing the section of the squadrons were located. Orders came down from Group Headquarters to the Squadrons. Since the area where the men of "Group" performed their duty was "out of area" for most of us, we had little idea as to the size of this unit of the 357th Fighter Group. Thanks to Vincent Buening, we have copies of the original G. I. listings of 28 Officers and 62 Enlisted Men serving as of 6 April 1944 under the heading of "Headquarters". For memories sake of those who served in "Headquarters" and to make the rest of us ever mindful, we print the listing just as received along with some pencil markings by the sender. Without these 90 men, we couldn't have been operational. Let us never forget them as they performed their duty with little recognition.

By Joe De Shay



357th Headquarters Company Men at Leiston 1944

L. to R. - Cpl. Carl W. Braun, T/Sgt. Newton A. Stiles, T/Sgt. Vincent E. Buening, Cpl. Robert E. Kohls, S/Sgt. Joe C. Gunn.

Photo - Vincent E. Buening