

We lived in tents, sometimes with the flaps rolled up. It was warm and the weather was beautiful. Occasionally we had a welcome rain which settled the dust and made everything fresh & green again.

They had a tough time trying to break through St Lo and I shall never forget July 24th and 25th for two great reasons. July 24th at noon a great armada of planes were overhead and one let his bombs loose. Just one or two more would have wiped out our company because our mess hall was just in line and our main living area next in line. One bomb landed in the pasture next to us and killed two cows. I clutched the ground and almost buried myself trying to hug it. I think I said about five hundred prayers in the slot space of a half a minute. I couldn't eat after that I was so upset, but by night we had learned what it was all about and as Americans we laughed and joked about our near misfortune.

The next day July 25th was the start of the St Lo breakthrough which was preceded in the morning by more than 3000 bombers concentrated in a small area. We watched planes flying towards St Lo which was five air-miles away from 9:20 until 11:50. I never in all my life saw so many planes in the sky all at once.

We could see the smoke rising from the nearby barrage. Shortly after that raid we had a chance to go through the city and I must say they did a thorough job of demolition. The breakthrough had been accomplished. Patton was on his tank ride

LEAP OFF



404th Fighter Group Combat History

*Leap off, leap off, leap off!
The mission's rough, the flak is tough,
But we are tougher!
Leap off, leap off, leap off!
The guns may puff, that's not enough,
We'll make them suffer.*

*The formation's perfect with the planes all in place,
The ships all in echelon are such a pretty sight;
The target is spotted and the flak's in our face,
As the leader takes the Group down flight by flight.*

*Leap down, leap down, leap down!
Release we must, the target's dust—
My tail is busted!
Leap out, leap out, leap out!
Now I'll be stuffed in Stalag Luft
For the du-ra-tion!*

(Apologies to the popular song, "Amor, Amor," vintage 1944)

A sudden series of explosions, like heavy-sounding machine gun bursts, sent everyone scurrying for foxholes. Colonel McColpin hopped out of the "Short Squirt" and jumped into a foxhole to find Lt. Col. Johnson, deputy group commander, and Staff Sgt. John Sulzynski, "Short Squirts" crew chief, already there. Near the officers' mess and the Group Headquarters tents, through part of the 508th Squadron dispersal area, five distinct fires were burning fiercely; white phosphorous bombs slung on our planes for the mission were going off in some of the revetments, enveloping the area in stifling white smoke. Machinegun ammunition and fragmentation bombs on burning P-47's started popping, throwing bullets and jagged steel fragments in all directions.

Men appeared in helmets, gas masks, and carbines, all looking up expecting another attack. Wounded men began calling, moaning and screaming; ambulances from the Group and squadron dispensaries arrived, followed by crowds of shaken enlisted men, pilots, and ground officers, emerging cautiously from foxholes, slit-trenches and hedgerows. Count Colwell's plane was damaged; Bill Kerr was slightly wounded when a steel fragment hit him, while sitting in the cockpit. Jack Conner jumped out when his ship caught fire, saw flames covering Chuck Viccellio's plane, pinning Vic inside. With gasoline tanks flaring up suddenly, bombs bursting and machine guns still firing, Jack hauled Vic out of the cockpit and away to safety, then returned to help wounded armorers and mechanics. Al Yetter and Carmen Moreali picked up one seriously wounded man and carried him away from under the wing of his plane where he had fallen, just before the aircraft exploded. Staff Sgt. Edward Botte and Cpl. Robert Hopkins were killed instantly, and Chuck Viccellio and Pfc. Hickman died of injuries. Fourteen others were injured, three planes were totally destroyed and eight damaged.

Three "duds" were found-unexploded American 100-pound bombs. It was finally determined that an American bomber, probably one of two B-24's sighted by an antiaircraft gunner through a hole in the clouds over the field at that time, had accidentally released a string of 20 bombs. The Luftwaffe never did us as much harm.

We were distraught over our casualties, but could understand how an error even of ten miles, could have been made in such overcast weather conditions.

The fighter-bomber missions were scrubbed; the heavies were recalled after only one-fifth of the scheduled 1,500 had bombed. We wondered throughout the evening whether the entire show had been completely snafued for all time.

eight earned when Col. McColpin was in the R. A. F., and three added with us. During the early days "Sully" changed so many carburetors that today he may be considered an authority on the subject. Y8-C was crewed by Earl J. "The Character" Thomas, and George A. "Muscles" Donaldson. That was really a tough ship. It was the first to undergo major maintenance, when it became involved in an accidental collision on the ground just before takeoff. Time after time it came back from missions with flak damage big enough to require a change of wing or empennage. In spite of the beating it took, old "Ginna J." was one of the two ships in the squadron that lasted through the entire campaign.

Staff Sgt. Cade E. "Katy" Willis, with Sgt. "Slick" Harris and Sgt. John "Hap" Houser, crewed lucky "H", which never needed any major maintenance outside of a couple of engine changes, Willis kept "Angie" in the air for approximately 240 missions, and it was still in commission when hostilities ceased.

By contrast Staff Sgt. Ignatius "Ignition" Coppola, working with Harris and Houser, crewed 13 different planes. Some were lost to enemy action, some were claimed by high-ranking officers, and a few were lost in accidents. For a long time Coppola wasn't troubled with an engine change. That luck broke with a vengeance when he was assigned to "L" which needed six engine changes in quick succession, four of them handled by Coppola. Next time try knocking on wood, Sarge.

Staff Sgt. Deon J. Gillen, the "Desert Fox" from Oasis, Utah, and Hans L. "Hansel" Hole, later known as the "Beau Brummel of Brussels", kept V, "Peggy", in flying condition for many months until a later-model plane was assigned to their care. Staff Sgt. Tony Hollendorfer and Sgt. Lloyd "Red" Smith could probably qualify as oil-leak detectives; we know they should be successful in civilian life as oil-well drillers. This much we know: by diligence and patience they mastered those leaky engines and kept their planes ready for combat.

At A-5, when we were accidentally bombed by our own air force, "Sully's" pilot, Col. McColpin, was about to leave on a mission. Nearby watching the projected departure stood Lt. Col. Johnson, deputy Group commander. As the bombs began to fall, everyone headed for the only shelter in sight, a shallow ditch. In they went Corp. Leroy Sherman, Sgt. Sulzynski, Lt. Col. Johnson, and Col. McColpin, all according to rank. Of course, the fact that the colonel was strapped in the cockpit may have had something to do with his being last.

That was the time John Duke, A-Flight's refueling man, broke his own record for hitting the dirt. With the power of 100-octane fuel, he dove through a hole in a hedge and into the ditch beyond. It took the able assistance of several of his comrades to pull him back through the same hole.

At A-92, A-Flight built a shanty that just couldn't be beat. Large and roomy, warmed by a good stove, illuminated by many windows and decorated with beaucoup pinups, it was our pride and joy as well as a haven of rest from the snowy winter weather.

Staff Sgt. "Sammy" Samu and Sgt. John Wells, who crewed D, the famous "Snortin Bull", for Lt. Col. Mullins, wired the shanty for sound, using a discarded headset to pick up music and news which came over the field phone line. The sounds were amplified with megaphones made of scrap metal. One defect in the building was noted a little too late. The door seemed too small during the buzz-bomb rushes, and was damaged a number of times during the crush. It was also damaged when we locked Sammy outside and he opened it up with an axe!

At St. Trond "Jug" Poole became ill and was sent to the hospital at Liege. He was evacuated from there during the Battle of the Bulge, and after being in several other hospital's was sent to an infantry replacement center where he really sweated it out. After returning to the flight, Jug was so thankful for his escape that he tried to do all the work on all six planes. He soon calmed down.

And then came New Year's day of '45 and those famous last words, "Look at those Spits coming in for a buzz job!" After the strafing was over, A-Flight had five of its six planes out of commission because of enemy action. But all our planes were back in action the next day except R, which Sully was crewing at the time. It was really peppered, and out for several days. Speaking of action, you should have seen A-Flight vacate that shanty. "Slick" Harris and "Hap" Houser were found hiding under a bulldozer half an hour later.