

PRESS RELEASE

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NORTH AFRICA, July 16, 1942 --- Lean, sun-tanned combat crews of a Flying Fortress Group, "The Fighting Ninety-Ninth," taxied their dust-covered B-17's to rest today at the end of their 50th Bombing Mission and looked over their record.

Here is what they discovered:

1. Of 518 enemy fighters encountered, they shot down, probably destroyed or damaged 162 or 31.27 per cent. 114 of these were destroyed, 28 probably destroyed and 20 damaged. They have destroyed or damaged 433 enemy planes in the air and on the ground.
2. Their bombs had destroyed 271 enemy aircraft on the ground.
3. They had dropped 3, 089, 710 pounds of bombs on enemy objectives.

In winding up their 50th mission, the combat crews found they had traveled 44,886 miles to and from targets --- over water, jagged mountains, and desert, and that is nearly twice around the world. It took them 292 hours or more than 12 days and nights of combat flying to pile up this mileage. The average mission lasted six hours --- six hours of continuous, nerve-wracking vigilance. Watching formation flying, watching for flak batteries, watching for enemy fighters, watching for aerial bombing from above and always watching the weather.

One day this group encountered more than 100 fighters over Gerbini Airdrome. When they had finished with the fighters, 38 enemy planes had been destroyed, 14 probably destroyed and one damaged. One waist gunner shot down seven that day. In their 50 missions this group shot 704,995 rounds of .50 calibre ammunition.

Naturally these Fortresses didn't always come out with whole skins. Flak damaged 107 of these mighty airplanes and enemy fighters managed to put holes in 31 of them.

This group, like many others, started operations under severe handicap. The flight echelon was separated from the ground echelon when the group first went into operations. Flight personnel did all the work connected with a bivouac area after flying all day. The colonel and the combat intelligence officer dug the first latrine on their new airdrome when they moved in.

The group was organized back in the states on September 25, 1942. Colonel Fay R. Upthegrove, (016855) 2222 East 2nd Street, Tucson, Arizona, was given command. His deputy commander was Colonel Leroy A. Rainey, (021610), 230 North Drive, San Antonio, Texas, who has since been given a group of his own (the 97th B.G.). The group was on paper then, but later it moved to Walla Walla and through various stages of training at Sioux City, Iowa, Salina, Kansas, De Ridder, La., Morrison Field, and then on to Africa.

Maintenance of the airplanes was a problem. Flight crews loaded bombs at night after flying all day. Dust permeated every working part of the engines, yet the airplanes kept flying. 1163 of them went over the target out of 1249 that took off. That is a good record. In all, 11 airplanes have been lost since the Group left the states.

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There was that memorable night on May 3 when only three airplanes reached their home base after a bombing mission to Bizerte. Weather, the implacable enemy of all flying men, scattered the group like a hawk after a flock of chickens. Men parachuted to earth; crashed landings were made in the sea and in the mountains. One crew was forced to land with a full load of bombs with an engine on fire. They managed to get out of the airplane and dashed about 200 yards behind a sand dune when the bombs let loose. They escaped unhurt. Seven men were lost in the sea in the anxious two days that followed. Many were the tales of dogged determination to save airplanes and crews; the bravery of these American lads as they wended their way down precipitous mountain sides on mules and camels after cracking silk in the darkness.

This display of courage has not gone unrewarded. The group has been awarded 585 air medals and oak leaf clusters; seven purple hearts with more on the way and at present there are numerous recommendations passing through military channels for Distinguished Flying Crosses, Distinguished Service Crosses, Silver Stars and Soldier Medals.

Up to July 5 this group had lost only one plane in actual combat. Three were lost the day that Jerry ganged up with more than 100 ME 109's and other enemy fighters. That day three planes were reported missing, but many of the crew members were seen to bail out over enemy territory and one plane was observed to make a crash landing on the beach. Many of these crew members probably are alive today, as prisoners of war. In all, 42 men are listed as missing in action, 4 were killed in action and only 21 have been wounded. That makes 67 casualties for 50 missions. The toll of May 3, due to weather, was two dead, 12 wounded and 5 missing.

Six times, high command has seen fit to issue special commendations to this group and twice the group has been included in blanket commendations with other airforce tactical groups.

In the present campaign, the group has been in operation every day since July 3. They have gone out in the early morning hours with the sun barely peeping over the circle of hills around their desert airdrome. They have taken pictures of their missions so that high command can put experts to work interpreting the photos and assessing the damage. More than 7,000 photographic prints have been passed on to higher headquarters.

Now these young Americans are starting on the next 50 missions. There was no celebration at the end of the first 50. The crews came in, hurried over to the Red Cross Wagon where smiling, blonde "Peggy" gave them coffee and doughnuts and then "hit the sack" for a little rest before taking off again.

There are hundreds of bombers crews like these --- flying, fighting and working to defeat the enemy --- and they will succeed.

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