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All through the spring of 1944, the air assault on German-held Europe had steadily increased in tempo, building up through the months as a noisy overture to the all-important spectacle--invasion. May reached a thundering crescendo when the 8th and 9th USAAF combined with the RAF to fly more sorties and drop more bomb tonnage than in any previous period. Surveying the statistics at the end of May, one could not help but feel that the lights were going down, the curtains twitching and that the long-awaited drama of liberation was about to begin.

The strategic assault - the long-range, systematic reduction of the German war potential- was not yet over (the 92nd Group went to Berlin 4 times during May) but the emphasis was gradually switched to tactical targets, to the marshalling yards, airfields and gun emplacements of Northern France.

The 92nd Bombardment Group flew 19 missions- 3 more than the previous high record set in March- was alerted 26 times and briefed 23. 449 planes were dispatched (see APPENDIX A), a figure representing about 15% more than in any other month, of which 339 successfully attacked targets. Combat losses were extraordinarily low; 5 aircraft were lost in flight, or approximately 1% of the planes dispatched. Abortives totalled 22, or about 5% of the aircraft dispatched.

Crew chiefs outstanding during the month were T/Sgt J.A.

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Rodrigues of the 327th Bombardment Squadron and M/Sgt P.A. Nichols of the 326th Bombardment Squadron, whose Fortresses completed the greatest number of missions-13- by individual aircraft during the month. Success of the month was confirmed by the following teletype received on June 2 from Lt. General Carl G. Spaatz:

"The weight and effectiveness of your attacks during the past month represent full exploitation of the power within your force. These attacks have not only continued the excellent operations of previous months in wearing down the German air strength which stands guard over their war machine but have struck heavily at its heart. Particularly successful have been the attacks on the enemy's limited oil resources, both against the Floesti refineries and the synthetic oil plants in Germany. Please extend my commendations to the air crews and all others of your command."

The 92nd Group flew two of the "double-headers" inaugurated in April; one of May 1 to LeGrismont and Reims, the other on May 27 to Mannheim and Fecamp. Much-battered Berlin was visited 4 times; the largest raid on the enemy capitol coming on May 7 with 30 planes over the target. On May 28, 38 planes- largest number of the month- were dispatched to attack the synthetic oil plant at Ruhland; 34 successfully bombed the target.

The month's first losses were sustained on the May 8 mission to Berlin, when the aircraft flown by 1st Lt Thomas W. Fishburn of the 327th Squadron was knocked out of formation shortly after bombs away. Col. William M. Reid, Group C.O.,

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flew as co-pilot in the lead ship on this mission, and was forced down at Seething on the English Coast, with the #1 engine on fire, the #2 engine barely functioning, all navigational equipment shot out and his navigator, 1st Lt Vincent P. Purcell of the 327th Squadron, wounded in the back-- eloquent testimony to the intensity and accuracy of the flak encountered.

On this same raid, 2nd Lt Jack Pearl of the 326th Squadron was forced to break formation and turn back before the target, when all four superchargers ran away. Severe flak was met in the vicinity of Ostend on the way back to England, and just past Ostend 2nd Lts Robert J. Marcus, Carl Palumbo and F/O Fred C. Grant, the co-pilot, bombardier and navigator respectively, bailed out, presumably landing in the sea. Reasons for the bailing-out were unknown and Lt Pearl could offer no solution; he had not ordered such action and was too busy flying the plane at the time to notice their disappearance. The top turret gunner acted as co-pilot, and the tail gunner as navigator, and Lt Pearl landed the ship safely, one engine prop feathered and another engine cutting out upon landing. The mystery of the missing men was heightened upon the discovery that only two parachutes were missing.

The third mission to Berlin came on May 19, with 18

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B-17's successfully attacking the target, and with no losses other than the usual flak damage. The Fleiger Abwehr Kanonen- or flak- defenses of Berlin were perhaps the most extensive in all of Europe, and a raid on the German capitol was never considered a "milk run." Commenting on the mission at the interrogation, a young pilot said, with rueful good nature:

"I've put in 4 missions since I joined the Group, and every one of them's been Berlin. So tomorrow, sure as hell, it'll be a milk run to France, and I won't be on it."

The pilot was Lt Jack Pearl of the 326th Squadron, who had figured in the bizarre bail-out of the week before.

So tomorrow, sure as hell, it'll be a milk run... It was: scheduled for the Orly airfield, south of Paris, and a last-minute change put the young pilot on it. He was wrong in his prophecy and it cost him his life; speeding down Runway 23 through a cold and patchy fog, his ship crashed in the woods and set the stage for the 92nd Group's second great disaster, almost a year to the week later than the tragedy at Alconbury.

The date was Saturday, May 20. 36 planes were scheduled to take-off, in groups of 12 each, starting at 0655 hours. The high group was successfully airborne and at 0711 hours, the lead group began taking off. Lt Pearl's ship was the seventh in his group and he crashed off the end of the runway.

The next B-17 in line, piloted by 2nd Lt William W. Seitz

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of the 326th Squadron had begun its run, but stopped approximately halfway down the runway, apparently having seen the red warning flares fired by the take-off controller and heard the radio order from control tower to stop take-off. Lt Seitz turned his plane around and started back up the runway toward death.

The following ship in line, piloted by 1st Lt James E. Wiggins, also of the 326th Squadron, did not stop its run. Presumably Lt Wiggins could not see the flares through the low hanging fog, and when he did see Lt Seitz's Fortress it was far too late. The aircraft collided head on, and burst into flames. Five crew members managed to escape from each plane- all being near the rear- before the first of five terrific explosions began about three minutes after the collision. The final explosion was Lt Pearl's ship, which had been the first to crash. All aircraft were carrying 6 X 1000 lb. GP bombs.

Medical personnel were in attendance at the time of the crashes, and when Lt Pearl's ship careened off into the woods, the ambulance left the control tower and started around the perimeter track toward the scene. Due to the fog, and the position of the aircraft deep in the woods, they had not located it at the time of the second crash. Directed there, the ambulance arrived at the time of the first explosion, suffering slight damage from flying particles. The ambulance picked up

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the five survivors of Lt Seitz's crew.

11 Officers and 9 enlisted men were killed outright, and one officer, 2nd Lt Robert E. Keyser, died the following day. (See APPENDIX C). 4 enlisted men were severely injured, 5 mildly injured. 3 aircraft were completely destroyed, and the runway so badly damaged as to require a platoon of the 831st Engineering Battalion(Avn.) for three nights, in addition to the work of 45 Air Ministry employees in the daytime, to restore the defective concrete sections, and to resurface with tarmac.

34 planes were over the target at Ruhland on May 28, and Captain Edward T. O'Grady of the 325th Squadron, lead bombardier, was awarded the Oak Leaf Cluster- his third- to the DFC, for his part in the successful attack. Heavy cloud obscured the target area, and with a high degree of resourcefulness, Captain O'Grady made intricate bombsight corrections while flying a course parallel to the briefed bomb-run. Then, leading the Combat Wing into the target area, he found a break in the clouds and with a bombing run of less than a minute the Group was able to drop its bombs squarely on the aiming point with devastating results to the oil plant.

Of the 5 aircraft lost in combat during the month, the 327th Squadron suffered most severely with 4, the 325th losing 1. (See APPENDIX C).

Awards for the month included 1 Silver Star, 41 DFC's,

of which 36 were for completion of missions, 1 Soldier's Medal, 15 Purple Hearts, and 74 Air Medals. Oak Leaf Clusters were awarded as follows: 1 to the Purple Heart, 2 to the DFC and 107 to the Air Medal. (See APPENDIX B).

T/Sgt Edward E. Richardson of the 325th Squadron was presented the Silver Star and the Purple Heart by Col. Howard Turner, 40th Combat Wing Commander, at a ceremony at the base during the month. Wounded painfully by both flak and a 20 mm. cannon shell during the March 23 mission to Herbern (Hamm), he continued to man his machine gun during a severe fighter attack. Following the attack, Sgt Richardson returned to his radio and operated it during the return trip, materially aiding the safe return of the Fortress.

T/Sgt Romeo R. Bellevance of the 446th Sub Depot, was presented the Soldier's Medal for heroism in preventing the possible explosion of two aircraft on March 31st, when a fuel truck carrying high octane gasoline overturned and ignited on the edge of the flying field, not far from where the loaded aircraft were parked. Realizing that the Fortresses were loaded with high explosives, and disregarding his own safety, Sgt Bellevance ran to the nearest plane. With the intense heat and flames only 35 feet away, he climbed into the plane, started the engine and taxied it safely out of range. Then he returned to the second plane and repeated the performance.

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Officer promotions during the month were 2 to Major; 8 to Captain; 43 to 1st Lieutenant. (See APPENDIX E). An Officer's Roster published at the end of the month listed a total of 413 names, divided by rank as follows: 1 Colonel; 5 Lt. Colonels; 21 Majors; 45 Captains; 113 1st Lieutenants; 205 2nd Lieutenants; 10 F/O and 3 W/O. (See APPENDIX F). During the month, 20 officers and 32 EM completed tours of duty. (See APPENDIX D).

A source of considerable satisfaction to members of the Group was the commendation received on May 20 from Brigadier General Robert B. Williams of 1st Division, which pointed out that in all categories- bombing results, bombing average, abortive rate, loss rate, etc.- the 1st Bombardment Division led all other divisions of the Eighth Air Force. (See APPENDIX G).

Around the first of the month, several personnel changes occurred in the Group Radar section. 1st Lt Robert Oeder, who had been Group Radar Officer for nearly a year was transferred, and 1st Lt Ben Schottenfels, Jr., former assistant Radar Officer, succeeded him. At the same time a Radio Counter-Measures section was added, and 2nd Lt William J. Horvath was assigned as RCM Officer. This brought the strength of the section to 2 officers and 25 EM.

Capt. John C. Prosch, Group Gunnery Officer, returned to the US during the month to attend a new type of school for Gunnery officers, and was temporarily succeeded by 1st Lt Vernon E. Koch,



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who continued also his duties as Squadron Gunnery Officer of the 326th.

Highlight of the CWS activity for the month was the series of lectures given on methods of recognizing and combatting enemy use of various gases, as well as the decontamination of personnel, equipment and aircraft. About 50% of the personnel attended, almost entirely enlisted men. The lectures, delivered by 1st Lt H.H. DiPiero, Station Gas Defense Officer, were highly successful, largely because the witty manner of the presentation commanded attention. Further lectures were planned for the future.

With the formation on May 12 of a station "Alert Detachment," a new security program for the defense of the field was instituted. The possibility of enemy paratroopers seeking to destroy aircraft and disorganize airfields in England as a counter-invasion measure had long been recognized, and steps had been taken from time to time for added security. The "Alert Detachment" consisted of approximately 50 men, drawn from all squadrons, and 2 officers, 1st Lt Charles D. Mitchell, and 1st Lt Adolph A Gundelfinger. This was in addition to each squadron's defense detachment. At the same time, three men were assigned from each squadron each night- 2 ground personnel, 1 combat- to guard an individual plane. Guards worked 3 hour shifts, beginning at 2115 hours, the last shift ending at 0615 hours. Relief guards slept in the aircraft.

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There were two dances during the month, an Officer's dance during the first week, and an EM dance at the Red Cross AeroClub on May 26. The latter was the largest in attendance since the AeroClub began operation in January. The Station Quiz Team-undefeated in six successive matches- journeyed to Station 106 to easily win their seventh victory on May 14.

Miss Patricia Neal, popular Program Director of the Aero-Club, was transferred on May 15 to assume direction of a somewhat smaller Red Cross installation for the 320th Field Artillery Battalion. Although a promotion, Miss Neal left with some misgivings, vowing that her "heart would always be with the 92nd." Not alone her heart, but the rest of Miss Neal's anatomy- some of it swathed in casts and bandages- turned up at the 92nd a week later. Cause: a broken ankle, hospitalization, return to active duty while convalescing.

The Station baseball team dropped a tight game to Station 107, 4-3, thus opening the season inauspiciously on May 28. 3 USO shows played the Station during the month- the first one, featuring Johnny Wood and Joe Termini drawing a record crowd of about 1200 in two shows to formally open the Arena on May 1st. On May 10, an amusing gagster named Al Bernie appeared in a fast moving show called "Flying High," again presented at the Arena. On the 31st a GI show was presented, and because of weather conditions, played in the theater to a capacity crowd.

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Profits from the enlisted men's bar paid off the 260 pound deficit which construction of the Arena had originally entailed.

Sales figures for the month in the PX were 2988 pounds, a substantial increase over the month of April. Due to larger stocks available, rations of American candy bars were increased. The new "cashier" system, installed the month before, reduced the overage previously present each month, although a small overage still continued, attributable apparently to the fact that soldiers will not wait for small change.

On an afternoon late in the month, the King and Queen of Yugoslavia dropped out of a clear sky to fulfill a dinner engagement in the vicinity, re-embarking several hours later.

In mid-afternoon on May 26, a fire gutted an officer's barracks in Site 1, causing damage to the extent of \$1080, plus personal losses not calculable. The fire started in a trash pile at the south end of the building, presumably the result of spontaneous combustion.

The Prisoner of War Fund, voluntarily subscribed to by all personnel on May 31, realized a total of almost 500 pounds, well in excess of the 350 pound quota. These funds were earmarked for the purchase of gift boxes through the American Red Cross. As of May 31, the PW list of the 92nd Bombardment Group totalled 348. (See APPENDIX H). Total MIA list was 394.

Successful escapes from enemy-held territory have been

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made by 54 officers and men of the 92nd Group, or  $8\frac{1}{2}$  %. (See APPENDIX I) This percentage was the best in the 1st Division, and probably in the entire 8th Air Force. While obviously the factor of luck plays an important role in the successful escape, a certain amount of credit was due to the evasion training program in effect, directed by Capt. Ray H. Moneymaker, S-2 Officer of the 325th Bombardment Squadron.

Save for the shocking accident of May 20, the 92nd Group could look back, at months' end, at a most successful month. It was the greatest operational period in Group history; combat losses were lowest not only by percentage to planes dispatched, but by actual number, than in any previous month of the year. The long-awaited invasion could not be far off; it was drawing closer, day by day. When it came, the 92nd Group was ready to play its part-- it was in full stride now.

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