

HEADQUARTERS, 20TH FIGHTER GROUP
AAF Station 367, APO 557, U. S. Army.

5 November 1944.

SUBJECT: Proposed Presidential Citation of 20th Fighter Group.

TO: Commanding General, 67th Fighter Wing, APO 557, U. S. Army. Attn: A-2.

1. In compliance with telephone request of Capt. Robert H. Kelly the enclosed combat narrative and operational data to support proposed citation is herewith submitted.

For the Commanding Officer:

E. G. FINDLEY,
Major, Air Corps,
Adjutant.

1 Incl: Combat Narrative and Operational Data to Support Proposed Presidential Citation.-Faws (4) Copies.

COMBAT NARRATIVE AND OPERATIONAL DATA TO SUPPORT PROPOSED PRESIDENTIAL CITATION
-- FOR 20TH FIGHTER GROUP --

The 20th Fighter Group became operational on the 28th of December 1943 and was one of the pioneer P-38 and long range escort fighter groups in the European Theater of Operations. It has participated in many gallant and successful operations against the enemy, often against heavy odds and in the face of persistent loss of aircraft and pilots because of mechanical difficulties encountered at high altitude and in intense cold. Perhaps the action most representative of the Group's fighting spirit, its skill in combat, and its relentless pursuit of the enemy is that narrated below, on which this recommendation is based.

On the afternoon 8 April 1944, the 20th Fighter Group, then flying P-38 Lightnings, carried out a devastating attack against the enemy, unique in the history of the Eight Air Force Fighters. On the morning of that day the heavy bombers of the Eight Air Force with full fighter escort had been dispatched to attack important targets in Western and Central Germany. The 20th was to form part of the escort, but weather conditions at base prevented take off that morning, so the Group's assignment was turned over to the 55th Group.

Impatient for a chance to lead his pilots against the enemy that day, Colonel Harold J. Rau, the Group Commander, obtained permission from Eight Fighter Command to carry out a low level attack against enemy airdromes and ground installations in a large area in Central Germany lying between Hanover and Salzwedel, 80 miles west of Berlin. The Group was to make the attack deep in enemy territory on its own, unsupported by any other friendly units. The only other Allied aircraft operating that afternoon were those of the 78th Group, assigned to attack targets in the Koblenz area, 200 miles to the southwest.

The Group took off from its base in England at 1402, arrived at Salzwedel at 1554 at 7,000 ft. and the squadrons separated as planned. One squadron, led by Colonel Rau, immediately attacked the airfield just north of Salzwedel, another squadron hit an airfield southeast of the town, about 15 miles away. Four or more passes were made at these airdromes, the ground fire becoming more intense with each pass. One of our aircraft was destroyed and 3 more damaged, but the results of a relentless attack were justified. 20 German aircraft were destroyed and 23 more were damaged. Just prior to the attack a HE 177 and an unidentified twin engined aircraft were surprised while making an approach to the fields and both were destroyed.

Visibility was very poor throughout the attack, low clouds covering the entire area, and a heavy haze lay on the ground. After the two squadrons strafed the airdromes, the Group leader deployed them on a broad front and the assigned area was swept to the westward on withdrawal. The third squadron had in the meantime let down through overcast to the deck in the vicinity of Ulzen and strafed targets in that area. Attacks on ground objectives were pressed home at every opportunity and often with spectacular results.

A large barracks area discovered 10 miles east of Salzwedel was effectively strafed, numerous barracks and administration buildings being damaged, some fired by incendiary bullets. A column of 300 German soldiers on parade in the barracks square was surprised and an estimated 100 were killed and many more wounded.

An oil tank train of 20 cars was caught and left burning from end to end. Three different oil storage dumps of 10 to 12 tanks each and two derricks nearby were set ablaze and believed completely destroyed.

In the vicinity of Celle 7 ME 109s and FW 190s attempted to intercept the Group. They were quickly engaged and in the ensuing combat 5 were destroyed, one by mid-air collision with one of our aircraft.

The interception by the Hun having failed, the Group continued on the deck and successfully sought out transportation targets on the Berlin-Bremen and Hamburg-Hanover railroad lines, destroying 11 locomotives and damaging 7, destroying and damaging many freight and tank cars, destroying 2 railroad switch towers and a bridge. Four high tension towers, 2 hangars, a power house and transformer, 6 factory buildings, 1 railway station, 1 bridge, 1 barge, and 16 flak towers and gun positions were also damaged. The attack was not given up until many pilots had fired all their ammunition and a shortage of fuel necessitated withdrawal.

Of the 42 planes that participated in the operation and returned to base, 40 fired their guns on enemy aircraft and ground installations, expending a total of 21,475 rounds of 50 caliber machine gun ammunition and 3,580 rounds of 20 mm cannon ammunition. This tremendous firepower accounted for the many ground targets in addition to the 27 enemy planes destroyed and 23 damaged. The Group lost 4 aircraft: 1 to flak, 1 to enemy aircraft, 1 in a mid-air collision with enemy aircraft, and 1 to unknown causes. 3 more sustained battle damage.

Other actions in which the 20th Group has distinguished itself include the following:

The destruction of 16 and the damaging of 9 enemy aircraft in the air, without loss, on 9 August 1944.

The destruction of 30 and the damaging of 21 enemy aircraft on the ground and in the water at Parow Airdrome and Seaplane Anchorage on Kubitzer Bay on 25 August 1944.

The destruction of 39 and damaging of 14 enemy aircraft on several airdromes and seaplane anchorages between Stettin and Lubeck on the Baltic Sea coast on 6 October 1944.

The destruction of 28, probable destruction of 1 and the damaging of 5 enemy aircraft, all in the air, in the vicinity of Merseburg on 2 November 1944, for the loss of 3 aircraft, only one of which was possibly due to enemy action.

In evaluating the combat efficiency of the 20th Group the following should be borne in mind:

1. The 20th was the most successful P-38 Group in the Eighth Fighter Command. (Group was equipped with P-51s on 24 July 1944.)
2. Though statistics are not available, it is believed that on the

destruction of enemy transportation, accounting for 225 locomotives destroyed, 41 in a single day. Almost 100 ammunition cars, 50 oil tank cars, 200 freight cars and 200 motor vehicles (including armored vehicles) were destroyed. 90 locomotives, 900 freight cars and 170 motor vehicles were among targets damaged. This rate of destruction was maintained with the P-51 and at the end of September the Group claimed 316 locomotives destroyed.

3. Though the Group's primary role was the escort of heavy bombers, it engaged in many bombing and strafing operations against enemy ground installations, particularly in the weeks preceding the Normandy invasion, and immediately afterwards. The destruction wrought upon objectives of immediate tactical importance to the enemy's ground forces was enormous. In the month of June alone, 18 bombing attacks were carried out against vital rail and road bridges behind the German lines in France. The Group dive-bombed, skip-bombed, glide-bombed, and high-level-bombed, sometimes carrying as much as 20,000 lb. bombs per airplane. The 20th was the first group to experiment with high-level precision bombing by fighter planes. Nine so-called "Droopsnoot" missions were flown against German airdromes, aircraft repair plants and bridges.

4. In its first month of operations with P-51s (August) the 20th destroyed 67 enemy aircraft, to place third in the command. In the month of September the Group was in Russia and Italy during the period when the Luftwaffe was putting up opposition to our Air Forces over Germany. Throughout October, however, the Group was on the scene, and led 8th Air Force Fighter Groups in the destruction of enemy aircraft.

5. Able, effective leadership and a gallant, aggressive fighting spirit among combat pilots is, of course, in largest measure responsible for the successes of the 20th Fighter Group. But the contribution made by the ground organization behind them must not be overlooked. In the maintenance of aircraft of a fully operational status the 20th consistently led the other P-38 Groups in the 8th Air Force. The difficulties encountered in the operation of P-38's in this theater during the winter months were extremely severe, and it was only through the exceptional ingenuity, skill and devotion of engineering, and maintenance personnel that these difficulties were overcome and the aircraft made serviceable at the high altitudes and in the extreme cold that it was required to operate. The fact that in January of this year it was not uncommon for one third of one half the number of P-38's airborne in this theater to be forced to abort on account of mechanical failures is convincing evidence of this fact.

In its first month of operations with P-51's the 20th Group led all fighter groups in the 8th Air Force in the percentage of available aircraft maintained fully operational, and in subsequent months its standing in this regard has been far above the average for the Command and within a fraction of 1 percent of the top.