Original Orphans of the Storm

VIRTUALLY FORGOTTEN TODAY, THE MUSTANGS AND MEN OF THE 9TH WEATHER RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON (PROVISIONAL) PERFORMED A VITAL MISSION ESSENTIAL TO ALLIED VICTORY IN WORLD WAR TWO

BY JOHN J. BURGMEIER III

When the 8th Air Force commenced Martin B-26 Marauder operations from its English bases in May 1943, it encountered a formidable enemy the Marauder crews had not anticipated, and for which they had no defense — weather.

The weather over the European continent produces some of the world's most variable, unpredictable, and treacherous flying conditions. All too often, Marauders and Douglas A-20 Havocs flying from England would run the gauntlet of mechanical failures, midair collisions, enemy aircraft, and *flak;* only to discover their target, or the entire continent, obscured by clouds. Those crews who completed the return trip to England were obliged to jettison their bomb loads into the English Channel prior to landing.

All too often, the weather was the sole deciding factor on the success or failure of a mission. All too often, the weather was the sole deciding factor in the life or death of an aircrew.

THE PLAN

The 8th Air Force was quick to combat this waste of manpower and resources, however, and, on 4 August 1943, VIII Air Support Command issued a directive to institute a weather flight under the auspices of the 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Group. This then, was the seed from which grew perhaps the most unique, least known, and highly decorated combat squadrons of the European air war: The 9th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron (Provisional).

AT THE START

With the reactivation of the 9th Air Force in October 1943, the 9th AF absorbed all 8th Air Force tactical units. Thus, the B-26s and the plan of a weather reconnaissance flight now fell under the jurisdiction of IX Bomber Command.

As originally envisioned, the weather flight was to have been equipped with five British de Havilland Mosquitoes. It was felt that the Mosquito's speed, range, and the ability to carry a crew of two — the second crewman in this case being a trained weather forecaster — made it the ideal aircraft for the mission. In fact, the Royal Air Force had been using the Mosquito in the reconnaissance role over Axis Europe with outstanding success since 1941. Ultimately, the de Havilland Mosquitoes were not available at the time (although the 8th AF was to later receive 70 such aircraft for photo and weather reconnaissance between February 1944 and May 1945) and the choice fell to an American aircraft — the North American P-51B Mustang.

The choice of a single-seat aircraft precluded the inclusion of an experienced weather observer in the crew; therefore, in November 1943, the original ten pilots selected from the 107th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, 67th TRG, were given a 30-day crash course in meteorology by the staff of the 21st Weather Squadron at Zeals, England. This instruction included about ten-hours flying in a C-47 studying the actual cloud formations and weather phenomenon they would encounter when flying operational weather sorties. The pilots were also given the opportunity to fly two actual missions in Martin B-26s to become familiar with the type of weather intelligence required by the bomber crews.

MERCURY — THE BEGINNING

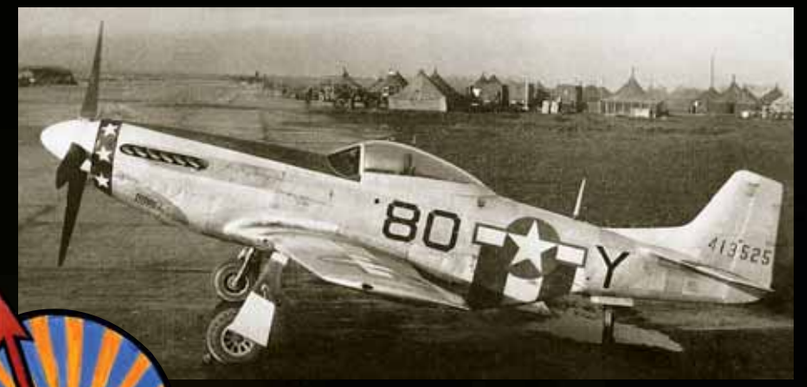
The weather flight of the 107th TRS, known as *Mercury,* began operational missions on 4 January 1944, with ten pilots and five P-51B aircraft from Middle Wallop, England.

The Mustangs of the weather flight carried standard 107th TRS markings including the 107th's AX squadron code, and were identical in every respect to the squadron's other P-51Bs including armament of four .50-cal machine guns.

Between 4 January and 3 June 1944, the 107th TRS Weather Flight flew 275 weather recon missions in support of IX Bomber Command and IX Fighter Command. The results obtained from the intelligence gathered by the weather flight were outstanding, but it was quickly apparent that a larger, squadron-size weather recon unit was required to keep pace with the ever-expanding scope of the 9th Air Force's offensive activity.

On 2 June 1944, the 9th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron (Provisional) officially came into being. Absorbing the 107th Tactical Recon Squadron's weather flight in its entirety as a nucleus, 9th WRS(P) began immediate operational sorties over the English Channel and the Cherbourg Peninsula in preparation for the upcoming D-Day Normandy Invasion.

The 9th WRS(P) was activated at Middle Wallop, England, under the command of Maj. (later Lt. Col.) Maxwell W. Roman, a meteorologist, rated pilot, and veteran of the 9th Air Force's African Campaign. Because of his qualifications as both an Army Air Force pilot and professional meteorologist, Maj. Roman was chosen as the one officer in the theater able to organize such an unusual operation. It would be a good choice.



P-51D 80*Y is seen before having the name *Kansas Aggie* applied. Note the partial D-Day stripes.

Insignia of the 107th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron. Aircraft and pilots from the 107th formed the core of the 9th WRS(P).

The squadron's unique status as a "Provisional" squadron led to many unusual administrative quandaries. The squadron had no TO and E and belonged to no group or wing; answering instead directly to IX Bomber Command HQ. All of its personnel were on "detached service" (read that as "permanent loan") from 70 different fighter-bomber and pursuit squadrons. Because they were virtual unknowns to the officers who were, on paper at least, their squadron and group commanders, they were consistently overlooked, in the early days at least, when promotions and decorations were handed out. In fact, 24 of the squadron's 25 original officers were "perennial lieutenants"; the line chief was a buck sergeant and the crew chiefs were mostly privates. It wasn't long before they named themselves the "Original Orphans of the Storm." Add to that the fact that many of the pilots were ex-Royal Air Force and Royal Canadian Air Force types and the orphan analogy is complete.

The RAF flavor was prevalent in the 9th WRS and lent the squadron its own particular style of *esprit de corps.* RAF uniform articles were frequently intermixed with GI issue, and even the hangar talk was of an RAF variety: Missions were "trips"; a mission in the offing was a "do"; a reconnaissance was a "recce"; a character was a "type" ("he's a good type"); women or mademoiselles were "baby dolls"; the possessive word, my, was "me" (such as "me arse, me shoes, me friggin' sack"), and an aircraft was a "kite."

Perhaps exceptional among the RAF/RCAF contingent was 1st Lt. Alberto A. Nido. Born in Arroyo, Puerto Rico, Nido obtained his commercial pilot and flight instructor's license at the Spartan School of Aeronautics at Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1940. When England declared war on

Information brought back by the Mustangs of the 9th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron (Provisional) was pivotal to the success of Operation *Neptune.* In this photograph, an LCVP from the US Coast Guard-manned USS *Samuel Chase* disembarks troops of Company E, 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One) onto the *Fox Green* section of Omaha Beach on the morning of 6 June 1944. The Americans encountered the German's newly formed 352nd Division and during the initial landing some two-thirds of Company E. became casualties. (Robert F. Sargent)