

THE BEGINNING: THE 50TH PURSUIT GROUP

As part of the pre-World War II force expansion, the Army Air Corps established the 50th Pursuit Group (later 50th Operations Group) on November 20, 1940 and activated the new unit on January 15, 1941. The group was first stationed at Selfridge Field, Michigan, where pilots of the 10th, 11th, and 12th Pursuit Squadrons received flight training in P-35s, P-36s, and P-39s until moving to Key Field, Mississippi on October 3, 1941.

While in Mississippi, the group formed part of the Fighter Command School, based in Orlando, Florida. Crews trained new aviators and tested new equipment and fighter tactics. The group's aircrews also conducted training in night fighter tactics using the P-70 and supplied cadre to newly forming night fighter units.

Soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the 11th and 12th Pursuit Squadrons left the 50th. The 11th moved with its P-36s on December 19, 1941 to Alaska, while in February 1942 the 12th and its P-39s moved to Cassidy Field, Christmas Island, a British-controlled island in the Indian Ocean about 310 miles south of Jakarta, Indonesia.

The Army Air Corps assigned the 81st and the 313th Pursuit Squadrons to replace the 11th and 12th in January and February 1942. In May 1942, the Army Air Corps renamed the organization the 50th Fighter Group, with the squadrons concurrently renamed fighter squadrons. Newly equipped and renamed, the 50th moved to Orlando Army Air Field (AAF) in October 1942, forming part of the Army Air Forces School of Applied Tactics. On 24 February 1943, the 445th Fighter Squadron (Special) joined the group. Flying from Orlando and other airfields, the group continued

50th Pursuit Group Emblem



its training mission using P-47s, P-51s, and lesser known aircraft including the Kellett XO-60 (later YO-60) autogiro.



US Army Air Corps Kellett YO-60 Autogiro with Plexiglas canopy for observation trials, 1942-43.

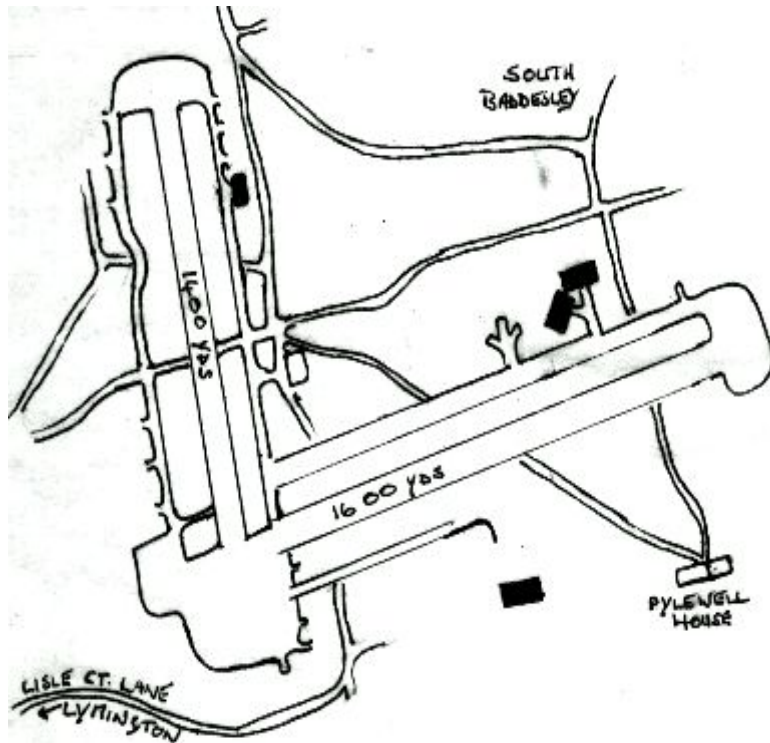
All flying squadrons in the 50th also tested procedures and equipment, seeking better ways to manage the huge efforts required to supply troops and maintain aircraft fighting overseas. Hinting at the conditions under which the group would fly when it entered combat in 1944, crews often flew from airfields with little or no infrastructure.

While the group remained headquartered at Orlando, each of its squadrons operated from different airfields in Florida during 1943. The 445th flew from Orlando, the 10th from Zephyrhills, the 81st from Cross City AAF, and the 313th from Keystone. Each of these detached squadrons returned to Orlando in January 1944. With P-47s and P-51s, the group continued to train and teach at Orlando while preparing to ship out to England, departing in March 1944.

On 5 April 1944, the group arrived at Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) #551 at Lymington, England with P-47s, the 10th reluctantly leaving their P-51s in the United States. The group's pilots began training to familiarize them with the local landscape

and existing tactics and began combat operations on May 1, 1944. In addition to fighter “sweeps” and dive-bombing missions, the group began flying fighter escort for bombers

Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) #551, Lyminster UK



destroying enemy defenses in Normandy. Crews continued these bombing and escort missions until the end of May 1944, when the group changed its focus to preparations to support the D-Day invasion of the continent.

When the invasion began on June 6, 1944, the 50th Fighter Group's aircrews flew close air support missions over the Normandy beaches, targeting enemy

troops and equipment and preventing the Luftwaffe from attacking Allied troops. After hard fighting on the ground and hard work by Army Air Forces combat engineers, the group moved to the airfield A-10 at Carentan, France on 24-25 June 1944, the first of many continental European bases the 50th would call home.

The group's next home was just a few miles away at another recently repaired airfield, Meautis, France, which the 50th occupied on August 16. From Meautis (A-17) the group moved to Orly (A-47) just south of Paris. The 313th occupied Orly on August 30, 1944 with the rest of the group arriving by September 4. While Carentan and Meautis were in the lower Normandy region of France, the rapid advance of Allied forces supported by Ninth Air Force units such as the 50th, allowed the group to make the more than 230-mile jump.

The group remained at Orly only 10 days, moving to Laon/Couvron (A-70) on September 15. Continuing to follow ground forces forward, the 50th moved to Lyon-Bron (Y-6) on September 28-29 1944. Their stay at Lyon was brief as the group and its

squadrons moved to Toul-Ochey (A-96) on November 3. From this airfield, the 50th continued to fly missions supporting the ground offensive into Germany. As the war neared its end, the 50th moved into Germany arriving at Giebelstadt (Y-90) on April 20, 1945. The group made one more move in Germany, arriving at Mannheim on 21 May 1945, after the surrender of Germany.

From Germany, the 50th Fighter Group returned to the United States on August 6-7, 1945 arriving at La Junta Army Airfield, Colorado for demobilization. Headquarters, Army Air Forces inactivated the group on November 7, 1945. During one year of combat operations, the 50th Fighter Group had earned six campaign streamers and two distinguished unit awards. Pilots had scored 51 confirmed aerial victories and Captain Robert D. Johnston had become the wing's only ace, scoring 6 confirmed victories.