

Marauders At Bay

By Tim McCann

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When the weather closed in over their base at Chipping Ongar, 387th Bomb group B-26 Marauders were diverted north to Debden for what was expected to be a brief stay. However Mother Nature and a quick assimilation to the Debden lifestyle by the bomber boys soon conspired against expectations. Here a Debdenite looks over the 558th Bomb squadron ship **Hot Rock** while the gas truck prepares to refuel the 557th's **Ollie L**.
(Association of the 4th FG)

14 January 1944 was anything but a typical Monday at AAF Station 356. There was a buzz in the air as the last few Thunderbolts touched down at 1630. The afternoon's Free Lance mission had resulted in a running battle from which nine pilots would ultimately submit claims. Don Gentile had nearly been clobbered, barely escaping a pair of FW-190's in a dogfight on the deck near Compiegne.

With adrenaline still running high, it is likely the victorious pilots paid little attention to - if they even noticed - the mass of twin engine bombers parked around the infield near the control tower. By week's end however, everybody on the base, including the 4th's pilots, would be familiar with their unexpected guests.

The guests in question belonged to the 387th Bomb Group (Medium), an outfit flying Martin B-26 Marauders out of Chipping Ongar. Made up of 4 squadrons (the 556th, 557th, 558th and 559th), the 387th had originally been an 8th Air Force unit, but was transferred to the 9th Air Force in the Fall of 1943. The group was known as the "Tiger Tails" because of the black and yellow stripes that covered the top of their tails

and rudders.

After completing their mission on the 14th to hit V-1 targets, the group returned home to find their field fogged in. With several other area stations also shut down, the group was diverted north and directed to disperse to several stations. Ships from all but the 556th ended up at Debden. After securing their aircraft, the crews made sure their bombers were gassed up and readied for departure the following morning. Or at least that was the plan...



The 557th BS Marauder **Five by Fives** (serial number 41-31707, coded KS-R) soaks up the late afternoon sun on the infield near the control tower.

(Association of the 4th FG)

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The advantages the 4th enjoyed of being based at a pre-war RAF station were immediately apparent to the 9th Air Force contingent. Permanent buildings, great mess facilities and primo entertainment made the ‘hardship’ of their stay away from home more than tolerable.

Come Tuesday afternoon it was obvious the weather was not going to clear over their base anytime soon, the bomber boys began to settle in. After all, 336 was a throwing squadron party that night for the enlisted men in the Sergeant’s Mess, and the rumor was the guest list included “100 girls of the WAAF.” Many officers would also attend - as guests. And there weren’t many other bases - bomber or fighter - in England that could claim to have an in-house orchestra on a par with *The Flying Eagles*.

On Wednesday, the Marauder pilots sent GI’s in their crews back to Chipping Ongar by truck to “fetch their blouses and toothbrushes from their home base,” according to Grover Hall. When the number of 387th GI’s returning from Chipping Ongar was suspiciously greater than the number that had initially been dispatched, the discrepancy was attributed to them being “mechanics needed to work on the bombers.”



Hoot's Zoot Shooter, a veteran of 30 missions, belonged to the 559th Bomb Squadron. (serial number 41-31676, squadron code TQ-G)

(Association of the 4th FG)

The Tiger Tails had also caught wind of the mess secretary’s plan to have a fried chicken dinner that week, courtesy of the 4th’s very own chicken farm, and they were determined to partake of the rare feast before leaving. The mess secretary was equally determined to hold off the special spread until “the bombers who came to dinner went away.”

Playing no favorites, the weather was also keeping the 4th off operations and from the 15th through the 20th the three fighter squadrons flew no missions. During this lull, the Marauder



Mitch's Bitch, a B-26B from the 387th Bomb Group’s 557th Bomb squadron. (serial number 41-31715, coded KS-P) Note the .50 caliber machine guns below and slightly behind the cockpit. Parked to its left is another 557th ship, *Alfy Snafu*. (serial number 41-31834, coded KS-S)

(Association of the 4th FG)

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My Gal Friday during her stay at Debden. She was another 557th Bomb Squadron aircraft. (serial number 41-31663, coded KS-D) Note copilot "Yankee" McIvor's hatch is open atop the cockpit. (Association of the 4th FG)

boys decided to indulge their hosts by providing ships for what was officially termed "bomber affiliations," but what really amounted to games of "cop and robber" according to Grover Hall. It wasn't long before the Thunderbolts and Lightnings from nearby stations were also showing up to bounce the B-26's during these 'missions.'

Each day brought something new to the 387th's experience at Station F-356, and they were determined to take it all in. The 4th frequently played host to the Press, and soon the Marauder boys began to avail themselves of the reporters visiting the base, in particular one Cleveland Plain Dealer correspondent who had been sent to Debden to do a story on the group's fighter pilots.

"Presently," wrote Hall, "the bomber boys, taking full advantage of Debden facilities, had the reporter doing stories on themselves."

Come Saturday the 20th, "the Marauders were still parked around the control tower, looking like great wasps sitting on a clod of clay," according to Hall. But eventually even Mother Nature had to relent and that afternoon the "Tiger Striped Marauders" were informed they would be able to return to their base in the south.

With the weather clearing and their vacation coming to an end, the men of the 387th Bomb group prepared their aircraft for departure

on Sunday, 21 January.

It was just as well, as the 4th returned to work on the 21st, executing a Free Lance - Support mission to the Soissons-Amiens area in France. The 387th would not actually fly another mission until 23 January, when they resumed their attacks on V-1 sites.

As for the poultry stalemate between the mess secretary and his twin-engined guests? Turns out the mess secretary's plans ran afoul of the Tiger Tails from Chipping Ongar. Upon their departure, wrote Hall, the bomber boys were able to say:

"Well, anyway, we stayed until you killed your damn chickens."



Five by Fives on the infield at Debden. Yet another 557th Bomb Squadron aircraft. (serial number 41-31707, coded KS-R) (Courtesy Don Groomer)