

Winter 1943 vs. Winter 1944

In the month of November the 385th Group went into its second English winter. (As I recall, the astronomers don't call November winter, but we argue about that technicality. As far as we of the 385th are concerned, November in East Anglia definitely is winter.) The comparisons in living conditions and in operating conditions this winter as compared to last are rather striking. Without trying to portray the comparisons statistically and in great detail, I should like to comment generally on our improved condition.

First of all, last winter I was not a member of the 385th, but I was only about 10 miles away. Col. Vandevanter being an old friend of mine, I elected the 385th to be the organization from which I, then operations officer of the newly arrived 447th, should learn "the ropes" and the tricks of the trade. In consequence I was over here often, observing, trying to learn, hence my personal knowledge of the 385th in its winter agonies.

Just to complicate everything, November of 1943 found the 385th on a station only partially completed. The industrious employees of the ministry of works were evident at 3 PM of any day brewing tea under every unfinished roof that offered a semblance of protection. The contractors' lorries beat back and forth in groaning protest. The narrow roads built to RAF specification must have been there, undoubtedly were, but no one could tell; they were buried in the mud splashed up by the numerous vehicles which got off the concrete.

MUD: If ever any substance, any thought, will remain always in the minds of us synthetic citizens of East Anglia, that substance, that thought, will be mud. There was mud in our shoes, on our clothes, on our hands, even in our hair. There was mud in our airplanes. There was mud in our quarters. As we set down in the early hours of the morning, cold, wet, tired after all night of trying to get the airplanes ready to fly, we thought, "Lord, if only You had seen fit not to make so much mud, this war would be much easier to bear!" One word epitomized all of our troubles - that word was "mud."

This winter, although there still is plenty of mud, mud no longer really troubles us. In a year we have widened our roads. Although not completely rid of the Ministry of Works, we have a station complete. All around the station walks of cinders or of concrete slabs have replaced the slippery mud holes through which we tried last winter to pick a sloppy way. No, the mud really isn't so bad anymore.

Mud wasn't the only source of confusion last winter. There was another potent source of confusion. The 385th had been operational for only four months and had just become an augmented, double-strength, group. The problems still were new. The engineering and operation sections were still trying desperately to find the explanation, the magic formula which could get the airplanes running and get the missions into the air. Everybody stayed up all night; in trying to help, everybody got in the way of everybody else. Now we know the magic formula. As I go to the line at night the quiet orderly, business- like efficiency

is a revelation as I enter the operations office at night the quietly methodical precision is actually soothing. I often smile thinking of last winter's frenzied rushing around, trying to realize that then, in all the clatter and tearing of hair we were only accomplishing the same things which now are so calmly routine. The temper of the crews, too, is different.

Last winter there was a quiet, despairing sort of resignation evident in the combat men. The long-range fighters escorts, a new thing, were still too few in number to cover us completely. On every mission we expected, and usually get, a terrific reaction from the fighters of the Luftwaffe. Our losses were high. This war in the air was a deadly thing. Of those who went into action few ever got back home to the United States.

This winter the fighters still hit us occasionally, more often than not, the combat crews chances of returning home are good. Their winter psychology is better. The war isn't over. We don't pretend to know when it will end. But most of us are sure that this will be our last winter in England, and are appreciative of the fact that it is immeasurably better than the winter of 1943-44.

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Commanding