



THE  
NINTH

# FLYER

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER 9TH AFA Inc.

## 327<sup>th</sup> FIGHTER CONTROL SQUADRON MAKES ITS OWN HISTORY

Story Behind Recent Find Shows Cold War Began on V-E Day 1945

By Major Fenmore R. Seton, USAF (Ret.)

### Weimar, East Germany - 1961

Paper is at this time a precious commodity, and the Communist government recycles every available scrap. Those who collect and turn it in receive a modest reimbursement. Members of the Communist Youth Organization known as the *Young Pioneers*, seeking to earn a few marks while performing a patriotic duty, go from house to house collecting as much paper as they can.

One *Young Pioneer*, Gerolf Zahn, while picking up donations from an elderly couple comes upon an interesting bound manuscript in their pile of old books. It is illustrated with group photographs of young U.S. Army Air Corps officers and airmen. With his very limited English, Gerolf opens to the dedication and reads:

*"This is dedicated to all the little guys who didn't need to be told that man should walk in dignity and in justice and in peace. It is dedicated to the smaller things like mail from home, and the larger things like the steadfast faith of the people back home. It is dedicated to our Allies, too, because we're all in this thing together."*

Intrigued, Gerolf decides to keep his find.

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### North Haven, Connecticut - 2000

On a December afternoon, while reading with interest the fall issue of the quarterly

Newsletter (The Ninth Flyer) published by the Ninth Air Force Association, I spotted a small Editor's query asking whether any reader had knowledge of a volume printed in Weimar entitled "*Record of the 327<sup>th</sup> Fighter Control Squadron*"?

Memories long-buried wrenched into life, because there is nobody now alive who knows more about the origins of that volume than I. With help from the editor of The Ninth Flyer, I was directed to Bernd Smith of Weimar, Germany, a collector of WW II memorabilia and head of the German chapter of the U.S. Veterans Friends Germany. E-mailing back and forth, Bernd and I stitched together the fabric of a compelling story. What it showed, unnoticed in the celebrations of victory on May 8, 1945 "V-E Day", was that even as the Allies in Europe were exultantly hoisting flags of victory, the Cold War had already begun!

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On V-E Day, I was a first lieutenant serving with the 327<sup>th</sup> Fighter Control Squadron (327<sup>th</sup> FCS), known to Ninth Air Force pilots by the code name of *Sweepstakes*. From our mobile Command and Control center in Weimar we were engaged in close air support for the U.S. ground forces a short distance ahead. We still maintained our battle stations for the weeks following V-E Day --- but with the enemy routed, there was much lessened activity and we had our first free time in almost two years.



Taking advantage of this leisure, our commanding officer ordered a small group of squadron officers, as an additional duty, to publish a history of our 327<sup>th</sup> FCS.

It was to cover our movements from the United States to England by convoy; our eight months of invasion training there; our hazardous English Channel crossing in a Liberty ship; our landings from LCPs on D plus 3 on the Bloody Red Fox sector of Omaha Beach; and our 11 months of air-ground support for the combat troops of the First Army.

As recorded in the Squadron history:

*"Then there had been the days in Normandy --- days of indecision and doubt; days of sickening impatience. There were days in the field when the comforts of a 'lost' civilization wistfully recalled themselves to memory. There were endless days of K-rations, cold, rain, discomfort. There was the rough edge of operations --- demanding more and more each passing day. There were days of hard, bitter work, and nights of restless wonder as the German planes strafed and the shells came whistling over head. There was the ironic comfort of the whump of our ack-ack; there were muddy fox holes, and work, work, work!! There was the thrill of the breakthrough at St. Lo, and the satisfaction of a job well done as the commanding officer in proud and glowing terms congratulated the squadron."*

*"There was the relentless chase through France --- the liberation of Paris, and the hysterical, ecstatic welcome that made every airman feel a hero. There was the sober 'sit-down' in Belgium: the nightmarish withdrawal during the Battle of the Bulge; the blows of our Air Force that helped break the back of the once-vaunted Luftwaffe for all time. There was Germany itself; the demands of the Ruhr pocket, and the ever-moving front, which tried the talents and the adaptability of our squadron."*

The history was written and approved, and prompt arrangements were made with local printing firm, *Weimarer Druck u Verlagsanstalt*, to print and bind 300 copies with the paper to be furnished by the squadron since none was available. German printers in those tumultuous days after the Nazi defeat. As the time for picking up the histories drew near, our squadron suddenly received orders to pull back westward from Weimar immediately.

The high-level decision to divide Germany into British, Russian and American zones of occupation had just been put into effect. Ordered to leave just a few weeks before the histories would be ready, our squadron officers were not troubled. After all, we reasoned, the Russians were our allies. Once we explained our good-faith mission unquestionably the Russians would allow us to cross back into Weimar for a quick pickup from the printer.

What actually happened is as vivid to me now, 56 years later, as it was then. In June 1945 my commanding officer had detailed me to take a small truck with a driver and proceed to Weimar, nearly 100 miles to the east, where I was to pick up and to pay for the squadron histories. I was conversant in French and my driver, Corporal Javornicky, spoke a passable Russian.

No one had any qualms about the trip except for one lone fellow officer. Crinkling his nose, he said, "Seton, when you get to that Russian Zone barrier, all you're going to get is a kick in the ass." I worried not and took off with the driver as ordered.

What we both expected when we reached the border point was that we would receive a warm welcome from our Russian comrades-in-arms. What actually happened was completely unanticipated and even today, as I recall the incident, nothing less than shocking.



As Corporal Javornicky and I approached the border crossing --- the Russian guards pointed their guns at us and indicated that we should immediately turn around and leave.

It was my quick impression that perhaps the guards did not fully understand Corporal Javornicky and so I requested that they bring to the border-crossing one of their officers who could speak English. We were kept waiting (on our side of the border) for about a half hour until a Russian Lieutenant arrived, walked up to our vehicle --- and without any discussion told us in broken English to turn around immediately and leave.

I was astounded. I continued to reason that they very likely did not comprehend the simple errand we were trying to complete. Corporal Javornicky kept telling me that there was absolutely no question that they understood that we just wanted to be allowed within their Russian Zone for about one hour.

I asked the Corporal to explain to them that our unit had been stationed in Weimar just a matter of weeks before and only had recently withdrawn westward on orders from our higher headquarters. I asked him to emphasize that we were friends and allies --- and that our request was hardly unreasonable.

The Corporal was also to point out that if the situation was reversed and the Russians wished to pick up their squadron histories in our U.S. Zone --- we would welcome them.

The Corporal conveyed those messages but they fell on deaf ears. The Russian lieutenant wasn't the slightest bit interested and again ordered us to turn around. For the first time I raised my voice and let my own displeasure be known. I absolutely insisted that we be allowed to speak to the Russian lieutenant's superior officer.

The Russian lieutenant was not inclined to

grant that request, but I asked Corporal Javornicky to demand that I be allowed to speak to a higher ranking officer. The Lieutenant finally gave in but first he called to his guard house and there appeared at once two Russian vehicles ---- each with three armed soldiers.

They opened the barrier gate; one vehicle pulled in front of our light truck and the second Russian vehicle directly behind us.

Thus we entered Russian territory under armed guard and drove about 20 minutes to a Russian headquarters building. There Corporal Javornicky and I were brought into a small room outside the Russian colonel's office and kept waiting for about 20 minutes. Finally we were directed in to see the Colonel who sat behind a desk ---- and who with no friendly greeting of any kind asked us in English whether we had or had not understood the Russian lieutenant's order to us to turn back.

At this point (because English could now be understood) I politely explained to the Colonel that because what we were requesting was so simple and so innocuous and so above suspicion --- that I was quite sure his lieutenant had not understood our mission.

The Colonel had no inclination to discuss the situation. He stood up and bellowed at me as though I were one of his underlings who was guilty of a serious infraction. His message was that what I was requesting was not even to be considered. He ended his loud and rude tirade by shouting, "I SAY NO" --- and he slammed his fist down on his desk; "EISENHOWER SAYS NO"--- slamming his fist down a second time; "AND ZHUKOV SAYS NO" ---- and he slammed his fist down once more.

He then turned to the Russian lieutenant and ordered him to take us back to the border and to make sure that we left the Russian Zone once and for all.



Later in the day when I reported back to my own commanding officer, he too was flabbergasted. He immediately called his own superior officer and had me recount on the telephone the details of the incident. My C.O. was told that headquarters would get back to him after giving the matter close consideration.

It was not until the third day after the incident that my C.O. summoned me to his office. He had been called by higher headquarters and was told that although they too were dismayed by my story, they had been advised by their own higher authority that the incident was too small in nature to do anything but forget. It was further explained that Russia's behavior in their own zone was something that we were not in a position to argue. We were directed to drop the subject --- and it was further suggested that the 327<sup>th</sup> FCS make an effort to reconstruct the squadron history and have it printed in the U.S. Zone.

Reprinting the squadron history was not a simple task --- for the photos we had especially taken had been left with the printer. Thus, weeks later, we were only able to have printed an abridged history which included nine (9) pages of text, one (1) map and fourteen (14) pages listing the home addresses (but no photos) of our 327<sup>th</sup> FCS personnel.

And so, the final result of the aborted trip to Weimar was that no one from the 327<sup>th</sup> FCS to date has ever seen one of those histories --- and the poor printer was never paid.

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Fifty-six years later, the concluding chapter of the "Record of the 327<sup>th</sup> Fighter Control Squadron" finally unfolded. The Young Pioneer Gerolf Zahn, now in his 70s, decided to present to his good friend

Bernd Schmidt, the copy of the 327<sup>th</sup> FCS history he had salvaged in 1961 and had treasured for nearly 40 years.

Thanks to the determined efforts of Bernd Schmidt to locate a U.S. veteran from the 327<sup>th</sup> FCS, I now hold in my hand a copy of the squadron's original WWII history. Scanning the final pages of the long lost history, I am transported back to V-E Day 56 years ago:

*"And now, high on a lovely hill overlooking a quiet valley scene that belied the festering sore of nearby Buchenwald, the men of the 327<sup>th</sup> FCS gathered to hear the dramatic voice of England's eloquent Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill. The speech ended. The BBC announcer told of the celebrations touched off 'in all the old familiar places: Paris (remember the liberation); London (wonder what the Piccadilly is like tonight); New York (Broadway, Times Square . . . home!). But there was no celebration in the squadron. Only a deep weariness and thankfulness. Only a reminder of those men who could never celebrate, who had seen the promised land but did not live to enter it. The 26 months had been long and hard. But none could say they weren't worth the effort. They had been thrill-packed months. The Airmen of the 327<sup>th</sup> FCS had participated in the making of history. For that they could be forever proud."*

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This isolated incident at Weimar served perhaps as a small portent of the years of the Cold War that were to follow. My one small personal regret is that I cannot reach the unyielding Russian colonel to tell him that in spite of his miserable intransigence -- the 327<sup>th</sup> Fighter Control Squadron's history has finally come home!

(June 2002)



## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The just told story concerns the history of the 327<sup>th</sup> Fighter Control Squadron. It may be of some interest to describe the assigned battle mission of a WWII Fighter Control Sq.

Such a Tactical Squadron generally consisted of 50 officers and 250 airmen. Forty of the officers (those designated as Fighter Control Officers) undergo months of special training at the Army Air Force School of Applied Tactics (AAFSAT) at Orlando, Florida. They are trained in the use of the top secret radar systems originally developed in the United Kingdom. Those were the radar detection techniques that in a large measure accounted for England's hard-won victory over Germany's *Luftwaffe* during the Battle of Britain.

The official description of the duties of a Fighter Control Officer were specified as follows: "To direct interception of enemy air raids reported directly or through an air warning service. To instruct friendly fighter planes as to place, time, and altitude to meet attacking aircraft. To determine whether anti-aircraft defenses are to handle partial or total defenses."

"To keep friendly airplanes informed on location, speed, direction and altitude and to assist them in returning to their own or other friendly airdromes after missions. To supervise operations of fixed or mobile central area control rooms.

"Must be familiar with types, speeds and capabilities of friendly fighter aircraft and of enemy bombardment planes. To be able to evaluate relative strengths of enemy air attacks and to determine the number and type of aircraft to successfully meet them."

"To be skilled in the use and interpretation of radar information. Officers must be selected for this responsible work on the basis of alertness, quick thinking and capacity to take accurate decisions based on quickly observed data."



Lt. SETON READY FOR DUTY - 1944

The author was involved in the D-Day Invasion and in five battle campaigns: (Normandy; Northern France; Ardennes; Rhineland; and Central Europe) because by "luck of the draw" he was assigned to the 327<sup>th</sup> FCS of the 70<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing of the Ninth Tactical Air Force which furnished close air support to the U.S. First Army. Due to its participation in both the D-Day landings and in the Battle of the Bulge, the 70<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing was honored with a special citation for Meritorious Service. Additionally, the King of Belgium honored the 70<sup>th</sup> Wing with the presentation of his royal "Fourragère d'Honneur"--- a shoulder decoration braided in the tri-color of the Belgium flag.

The author looks back on his extensive World War II experiences with tremendous gratitude that he returned home safely. It is his hope and prayer that our country will never be involved in such a war again. It is said: "In war, there is no winner."

(June 2002)