

A USAAF Bomber Station Somewhere in England: There is a bloody war going on in the air over Europe. It's no Hollywood war; it's tough, and American airmen are being lost regularly. Though our losses are small in proportion to the numbers flying against the enemy, a certain number of healthy young men from Texas, Iowa or Brooklyn are losing their lives fighting the Hun over here, several thousand miles from home.

As this is written, I have been in the British Isles only about two weeks. But in that time I have visited fighter and bomber stations in many parts of Britain and have stayed up late evenings talking with those kids from the States. Their first question, without exception, is the same: have the people back home snapped out of it yet? By all odds the one thing our airmen are angriest about is the strikes of labor at home — and the manner in which Washington has handled the situation. All the pilots, navigators, radiomen, bombardiers, gunners and ground crewmen at one bomber station here had to be restrained from sending John L Lewis a blunt invitation to come to England at their expense, and accompany them on just one mission over Germany. Strangely, that seems to be the attitude of RAF airmen with whom I've talked, though they are a good deal more restrained about it. They can't quite comprehend why it's permitted to exist; unlike the American boys, they seem to think there must be some sort of political strategy behind it all that justifies it, even though there's a war on.

It was something of a surprise to find such a national question uppermost in the minds of boys who ordinarily care little for anything other than flying. The fact remains, however, that the subject of John L. Lewis and his strikes are talked about just as much as the newest tactics of the Focke-Wulf pilots.

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Because of the great amount of talk around the States about the Republic *Thunderbolt* (P-47), one of my first visits here was to a *Thunderbolt* station. Nearly all the pilots had previous experience on other US fighters, so their opinions of the *Thunderbolt* are based on fact. In addition, they have flown a considerable number of missions against the enemy, have fought the best the Germans have, and have shot down a substantial number of them. These are the conclusions I have found:

LIABILITIES: — The *Thunderbolt's* rate of climb at low and medium altitudes is not what its pilots would like it to be. At its best altitude, however, this airplane can match any other plane in the world.

It does not have enough range. Both the pilots of the *Thunderbolts* and those of the bombers they are designed to escort complain about this. While bomber losses are well below the maximum our Air Forces could afford to lose, and the *Flying Fortress* has a phenomenal record for being able to take care of itself, bomber pilots feel their losses could be even further reduced by the presence of heavily armed fighters like the *Thunderbolt*.

ASSETS: — As a sheer fighting aircraft its pilots say it is the most formidable of its type — and that takes into account all Allied and enemy fighters. Much of this statement is based on the *Thunderbolt's* eight .50 caliber machine guns. I lived at this station for two days and, without exception, every pilot to whom I put the question gave the same answer.

The airplane is one of the most rugged ever produced in the United States. In making forced landings *Thunderbolts* have chopped down small trees with their wings without injuring the pilots. Several pilots felt that the airplane could spare some of its structural strength so as to reduce its overall weight and thereby increase its rate of climb at low and medium altitudes. The *Thunderbolt* can out-dive any aircraft known today. This is due partially to its great structural strength and partially to the fact that it is one of the "cleanest" airplanes flying.

At its best altitude this fighter can outmaneuver and outperform anything else. Its maximum speed is over 400 mph.

In a sense, it is unfair to list assets and liabilities so bluntly. Like any other airplane, the *Thunderbolt* can only be expected to do the job for which it was designed. In the case of this fighter, that job is to escort high-flying daylight bombers. To achieve this, performance at low and medium altitudes must be sacrificed. Bearing that in mind, then, the *Thunderbolt* could only be criticized fairly in that it lacked sufficient range. This was obvious to the AAF as soon as the *Thunderbolt* went operational in this theater, and steps already have been taken to correct it.

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Indications here now are that four four-engined bomber types will win for the Allies in this theater of operations. This prediction is made because so many people in the United States are waiting for new bombardment giants to come over here and win the war overnight.

Those four bombers are the Avro *Lancaster*, Boeing *Flying Fortress*, Consolidated *Liberator* and Handley Page *Halifax*.

It is a common tendency in the States to discount the efficacy of types of aircraft that have been in use for some time. That this tendency is not justified by the facts is the AAF attitude toward the *Flying Fortress* and *Liberator* here, from generals to mechanics. For the job they are doing — and will be expected to do from now on — they are the best aircraft of their type in the world. Everyone over here has just one request, and that is that they be sent twice as many of these aircraft as they already have.

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The sloppy, oil-spattered, stubble-faced mechanic is, by all odds, a 14-carat hero over here. And if you think the pilots and their crews who risk their necks over Germany resent such a statement, you're mistaken. On the contrary, they sing the praises of the "grease monkey" in an unending chorus.

The mechanics I have seen over here so far are real guys. Some had been working steadily for 16 hours and, instead of knocking off for some sleep, insisted on pacing the airport nervously awaiting the return of their planes. Being a mechanic on their own special bomber or fighter does something to their outlook on life. They spend 50 per cent of their time getting their planes to stopwatch perfection, and the other 50 per cent trying to figure out ways to give their flight crews even more perfection.

Many pilots say their mechanics deserve medals just as much as the combat crews. They feel that, although they (the flyers) do the fighting and shooting for which medals are awarded, their chances of even being around to collect the medals would be tremendously lessened if it weren't for the fanatical devotion of the mechs. They told me of a number of mechanics who frequently refused to take their regular leaves because their planes would be turned over to other ground crews to maintain.

It has been suggested here that a mechanic should be given a decoration after his particular plane has completed a certain number of missions successfully. This, many pilots feel, is the only fair thing to do, especially in view of the fact that air crews automatically are given medals for completing certain numbers of missions.— M.K.

Max Karant, managing editor of *Flying*, sent the foregoing dispatch from England, where he is visiting Allied air bases and acquiring first hand knowledge of current aerial combat operations.— ED.

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