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# CASUALTIES, MORALE and the COMBAT TOUR

*From Micro Film Files*

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Which has the more dangerous assignment the Air Force combat crewman or the Ground Force fighting man?

Increasingly, in recent months, as the progress of the U.S. and British infantry has been slowed by German resistance and counter-attack, the press has built up the impression in the public mind that U.S. Ground Forces have a higher casualty rate and face greater hazards than do American combat flyers. This has disturbed Air Force combat crews primarily because they do not believe it is true and secondly because they feel that the public, in its current deep concern about the infantry, has tended to forget that the Air Force also fights grim and bloody battles almost every day.

In an effort to obtain an unprejudiced answer to the question underscored above, a comparison has been made in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations between casualties suffered by Air Force combat personnel and the combat personnel of the Fifth Army during the 15 months from 9 September 1943 to 3 December 1944. Considered as casualties were men killed, wounded, missing in action and prisoners of war, both combat and non-combat. Strength figures used for the Air included all personnel on combat flying status, and for the Ground all Fifth Army infantry divisions, field artillery brigades and tank groups. No combat support organizations were included in the strength figures used in calculating the casualty rate.

On this basis the Ground Force casualty rate for 15 months examined was 6.33% per month. The Air Force rate for the same period was 7.69% per month.

Although these rates have a slight inaccuracy due to the fact that a small percentage of the casualties were among personnel in both Air and Ground Forces excluded from the personnel strength figures, the rates are representative and essentially correct. Comparative rates of this type will always be subject to criticism because of differences of opinion as to what ground personnel should be included. Nonetheless, the evi-

dence appears conclusive that the individual combat airman faces a greater peril than the ground fighter, when we consider only those who are subjected to enemy action.

This in no sense cries down the ardors endured by the infantryman nor is meant to deprecate their magnificent courage and accomplishment. Also, of course, it must not be forgotten that total Ground casualties far exceed total Air because the larger number of Ground soldiers involved. Yet, Air casualties also have been quantitatively heavy, 21,345 since the North African invasion and continue at a fairly constant rate as the detailed tabulation at the end of this paper reveals. The individual flyer's feeling of being neglected by the public is therefore readily understandable.

The public's attitude toward Air is also readily understandable. There is something about modern air bombardment that defeats comprehension by the average mind. Whereas almost any civilian can visualize the grim and gruesome agony of an infantry attack on enemy trenches, the equally terrific sensations of flying hundreds of miles into the heart of Germany in sub-zero cold, on oxygen, through forests of flak and shoals of enemy fighters, can only be dimly comprehended by those who have not experienced it. Also, of course, the fact that by February 1944 we had defeated the Luftwaffe and established our air supremacy everywhere in Europe has led the public automatically to the assumption that strategic bombing is now a relatively routine and "easy" operation. They fail to recognize that as the Luftwaffe has waned, German flak has waxed in scale and effectiveness.

The more Hitler's Europe is compressed by our invading armies the fewer become the vital targets left to air attack and the greater becomes the concentration of flak over them. More than 800 guns now guard the Brenner pass, 600 the oil refineries in Vienna, 500 the city of Munich. In a typical three-month period last Fall 90% of wounds to American flyers in MAAF were from flak and but 10% from bullets. Thus, though the

once deadly Focke-Wolf rarely attacks our formations today, the increased AA barrage has kept our casualty rates in the Mediterranean virtually unchanged since the days when the Luftwaffe was the major hazard. Aerial bombardment is not yet just a transport service with bombs as the cargo, but remains a grim, relentless struggle calling for all the qualities of steadfast bravery which our combat crews have always demonstrated.

That bravery has never faltered. If any fact is needed to prove it, the simple statement that U.S. Flyers have never once been turned away from their target by enemy opposition should suffice. Air Force morale has always been high and remains so today. Unquestionably one of the reasons for the zest for fighting which characterizes AAF combat crews has been the policy of the "combat tour".

Yet, here again, the public labors under some considerable misapprehensions about the Air war, for the fact is that the fixed combat tour in the Army Air Forces was abolished a year ago in February 1944.

The policy that upon completion of a fixed number of missions, air crews would be relieved from combat was instituted in England in 1942 and was subsequently adopted in the Mediterranean. In those early days when replacements were few and air battles were at their climax such a policy was indispensable for the maintenance of morale and fighting efficiency. But the number of missions that made up the combat tour was always thought of as a flexible thing. There was never any promise that once his tour was done, a flyer would never have to fight again — indeed, many of the B-29 crews now hitting Japan have already served one combat tour in Europe. But the idea began to get around, all the same, that completion of one operational tour meant that combat crews would not subsequently be sent back to an active theater. And so, in February 1944, with the Luftwaffe beaten down and Allied air supremacy won, the

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