

496th FIGHTER TRAINING GROUP

MISSION

496th Fighter Training Group primary mission of the 496th was to train rated pilots in the Lockheed P-38 Lightning and North American P-51 Mustang for assignment to combat units in the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces.

LINEAGE

496th Fighter Training Group

STATIONS

Goxhill 25 December 1943 to 15 February 1945

Halesworth 15 February 1945 to June 1945

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

P-38

P-51

COMMANDERS

Col Harry W. Magee, 25 Dec 43-1945

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

Goxhill established as fighter training base in 1942 and served as interim station for newly arrived fighter units where personnel could be instructed in operational procedure etc. peculiar to ETO. In late 1943 became a training establishment for replacement pilots and established as 496FTG on 27 Dec. 43. 554FS operated P-38s until late 1944, 555FS provided P-51 training. Group served both 8th and 9th AF. 2nd Gunnery & Tow Target Flight attached to group.

In-theater combat crew replacement centers (CCRC) represented a brief but important stop for aircrews training as replacements for personnel lost in the European theater during World War II. The Eighth Air Force's 496th Fighter Training Group operated a fighter CCRC at Goxhill, England, and illustrated the unique challenges and successes of the CCRC mission. The 496th Fighter Training Group overcame maintenance shortfalls, aircraft shortages, and persistent morale issues to train more than 2,400 fighter pilots for combat duty in the Lockheed P-38 Lightning and North American P-51 Mustang.

The 496th served as the primary dedicated CCRC for P-38 and P-51 aircraft in the ETO. It represented a brief but vital phase in the life of more than 2,400 student pilots who completed training before joining combat units. While the group's precise contributions cannot be calculated, the recognized prowess of Lightning and Mustang crews in 1944-45 suggested the 496th successfully fulfilled a critical need.

The AAF's early fighter aircrew training concept for the ETO can be summarized as follows: Stateside AAF organizations were responsible for procuring, classifying, and training pilots who were commissioned, awarded wings, and assigned to specific aircraft types.

Next, operational training units (OTU) in the United States provided aircraft-specific transition training plus gunnery, tactics, and procedures required for combat.

Then aircrews were assigned to overseas combat units for local orientation, more specific unit training, and line duty.

This process was designed for whole units destined to train and deploy together. Attrition would cost aircraft and crews. Large numbers of replacement crews would be required, and senior leaders knew it.

Combat Crew Replacement Center The seed concept for the in-theater CCRC appeared in Brig Gen Ira C. Eaker's May 1942 plan for deploying the Eighth Air Force to the United Kingdom.

Eaker stated that "in order to supply replacement combat crews it is necessary to set up O.T.U.'s one per wing, in this theatre. The plan calls for taking the combat crew graduate . . . from our standard schools in the U.S., sending him to this theatre and placing him immediately in an O.T.U. Here he will be given transitional training so that he can fit into a combat squadron with the minimum number of freshman missions."

The AAF established a stateside replacement training unit (RTU) system in parallel with stateside OTUs to help prepare individual aircrews to replace combat losses. A postwar US Air Force (USAF) study explained that "early in the war OTU was the more important of the two types of operational training; as more and more units moved overseas, RTU became progressively of greater consequence.

By early 1944, OTU was almost at an end." But combat units still had to bridge the gap between stateside training and each replacement crew's readiness for its first combat mission. General Eaker's idea of an OTU attached to every fighter group became impractical as attrition rose. "The overseas air forces," according to the USAF study, "were anxious to reduce this burdensome amount of training to a minimum so that they might concentrate more exclusively on the performance of their mission as combat air forces." The Eighth Air Force eventually consolidated the replacement training function into dedicated training groups called CCRCs.

The CCRC concept relied on seasoned combat veterans to instruct replacement pilots in aerial warfare. CCRC organization and functions ran parallel to combat groups, and CCRCs were established separately for fighter and bomber aircraft. A commanding officer (colonel) exercised command over his station, "troops occupied in the service and supply of the station, those occupied in station complement and airdrome defense functions and those involved in the training function itself." A full-strength fighter CCRC with two flying training squadrons was designed to have a permanent complement of at least 75 officers and 280 enlisted men, plus assigned students. Since the P-38 and P-51 were single-place aircraft, the terms combat crew, student, and pilot were synonymous in the 496th.

By late 1943 the European air war was consuming men and materials at a frightening rate. The Eighth Air Force positioned itself to consolidate operational training for replacement aircrews: the time for the 496th had arrived.

The story of the 496th in 1943 is brief. The group was activated in Northern Ireland and almost immediately transferred to England closer to combat units that would need replacement pilots. The village of Goxhill became home, and Goxhill remains the principal site with which the group is associated.

The 496th FTG was activated on 11 December 1943 at AAF station F-237, County Down, Northern Ireland, under Eighth Air Force Composite Command. 1 The AAF used numerical designators (Field - #) instead of airfield names for security: airfield names were typically associated with neighboring towns and enabled the enemy to match AAF units with their exact locations. Eighth Composite Command had been established in August 1942 to provide

operational training. As the war progressed, training responsibilities shifted between Composite Command and Fighter Command based on bureaucratic prerogatives and resources. An initial report noted that the 496th's "early history in Ireland was practically nil; manned only with sufficient personnel to constitute an activated organization; it had no function." Within the month the 496th would acquire dedicated manpower and a more permanent home.

On 27 December 1943 the 496th was administratively transferred without personnel to Eighth Fighter Command and assigned to AAF Station F-345 to operate CCRC No. 8. F-345 was Goxhill airfield, located in Lincolnshire County, England, approximately eight miles south of the city of Hull and the Humber River. Figure 1 depicts the locations of Goxhill plus Halesworth (where the group later transferred) and Atcham (home of a sister training group) .

Col Harold W. McGee, F-345 station commander, assumed command of the 496th. Support units already on station but previously attached to the 67th Fighter Wing (FW) were consolidated into the new group, and Colonel McGee began CCRC preparations. He had no time to waste: classes were scheduled to begin on 3 January 1944.

The 496th's new home represented a typical station for Eighth Air Force units. Construction of the Goxhill airfield began in October 1940, and the site opened as an RAF No. 1 Group (Bomber Command) base on 26 June 1941. A succession of RAF units used the airfield until Eighth Air Force was granted control in August 1942. Six separate Eighth Air Force fighter groups then passed through Goxhill as an interim station before the 496th was assigned at the end of 1943.

Two 3,300-foot runways supplemented a primary 4,800-foot runway — all built on a flat agricultural plane a few miles from the village of Goxhill. Brick buildings housed a control tower and essential operational functions; three large steel hangars shielded maintenance functions; and Nissen huts provided housing, mess, leisure, and related space. Dispersion of the major sites provided passive defense against air attack and made bicycles a virtual requirement for shuttling between station functions.

Goxhill's location to the north — away from scores of Eighth Air Force and RAF bases in East Anglia — separated student pilots from high-density combat air traffic but allowed them to experience weather and geography matching what they would later see in operational units.

The 496th was organized according to the standard CCRC model. Headquarters and the Headquarters Squadron provided command and administration. Most 496th personnel were assigned to the training squadrons. The 554th Fighter Training Squadron (FTS) was responsible for P-38 training, operations, and maintenance while the 555th FTS was responsible for P-51 functions. Other units provided support functions (ordnance, quartermaster, etc.). The 2d and 3d Target and Tow Gunnery Flights provided ground-based and aerial gunnery services.

Potential group strength (total 686) by spring 1944 was 129 officers, 11 warrant officers, and 546 enlisted men based on a planned maximum of 250 student replacement pilots. Personnel

immediately began arriving from units in the United Kingdom, Iceland, and the United States. The new year promised rapid expansion and hard work in the months ahead.

Because Goxhill had previously served as a transient base for fighter units, the 496th was able to benefit from selected personnel who remained on station and were assigned to the new group. Colonel McGee had served as station commander for approximately six months before the 496th was assigned to Goxhill.

Administrative and support functions thus started with a strong foundation. Major challenges stemmed from the fact that previous station operations centered around the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt, while the 496th was tasked with P-38 and P-51 training. Gaining proficiency and experience with these aircraft was the group's biggest challenge.

The first major obstacle of the 496th in January 1944 was a shortage of trained personnel, particularly in the maintenance areas. The new-year effort was to consolidate Eighth Air Force fighter training according to aircraft type.

A sister group, the 495th FTG, had been established and assigned to AAF station F-342 at Atcham, Shropshire County, on 25 December 1943. Previous Atcham units had experience with the P-38, and the new 495th was assigned P-47 CCRC duties. The two groups traded P-47 mechanics for P-38 mechanics to boost their expertise in both groups. In addition, "during these formulative stages constant officer meetings were held to discuss general problems and several officers visited Station F-342 . . . to learn from its experiences." In the maintenance sections, "a strenuous on the job training program and experience gained during long days of work" also helped. Colonel McGee was not able to report satisfactory ground crew proficiency until May 1944.

The second major challenge for the 496th was a shortage of capable training aircraft. The group depended on senior headquarters for relief in this area since aircraft were allocated at the group level. The 496th gained gradually used aircraft from combat groups and other training units. Unfortunately, most of these were "war-weary" planes with high hours and commensurate maintenance requirements. By April the 496th had more than 50 aircraft that were sufficient to execute its assigned training mission without undue measures.

Once operational, the 496th supplied replacement crews to both the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces. Headquarters Ninth Air Force had been moved to England in July 1943 "to lead the U.S. tactical air force intended to support the cross-channel invasion," primarily with CAS and interdiction. In practice the division of responsibilities between the two air forces blurred over time, and their missions became increasingly complementary. The P-38 and P-51 were assigned to both air forces.

In February 1944 General Spaatz, as commanding general of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, issued a directive assigning CCRC graduates by aircraft type. His basic policy assigned heavy bomber plus P-38, P-47, and P-51 crews to the Eighth, while medium bomber, cargo, and

certain specialized crews went to the Ninth. The policy also directed that a portion of P-38, P-47, and P-51 crews be assigned to the Ninth according to the proportion of Ninth Air Force groups flying these aircraft. The exact proportion remained fluid for the rest of the war, but the 496th had to prepare replacement pilots for assignment to either air force and a variety of potential missions. The 496th's 20-day ground training syllabus (dated May 1944) illustrated this multi-mission training with instruction in air tactics, dive bombing, and ground strafing. Flying training was similarly varied. This approach afforded senior commanders flexibility to assign graduate pilots as needed based on fluid requirements.

The primary mission of the 496th was to prepare pilots for combat duty in the P-38 or P-51. Replacement pilots arrived with previous time in type (P-38 or P-51) and completed a ground school course. P-38 replacement pilots also received flight instruction. Beginning in June 1944, P-51 transition pilots were introduced to the Mustang through ground school plus flying training. Replacement and transition graduates all went on to operational groups to replace attrition losses. In addition, a small number of bomber pilots were cross trained in the P-38 or P-51 for the Bomber Scouting Force. Students were almost exclusively first or second lieutenants.

Training centered around a ground school of classroom lectures, written examinations, and practical drills (e.g., water survival and rescue), plus flying training when applicable. The curriculum evolved from student feedback, aircraft modifications, the instructor cadre, and the availability of advanced training aids. According to the USAF Air Historical Office, "as in all types of air training, the twin goals of training were individual proficiency and teamwork." The group focused on the skills and temperament needed to fight effectively and survive in the air, and assigned combat veterans as instructors. One instructor described the gravity of the enterprise this way. "A belligerent spirit and the desire to kill," he explained, "must be imbued in all replacement pilots. Lack of aggressive spirit and desire to destroy the enemy will result in hesitancy and indecision which are fatal in combat." The 496th's task was to couple this spirit with the skills and specialized information pilots required for combat.

Ground School. The replacement pilot ground school curriculum was baselined at 30 days when the 496th was established, then shortened to 20 days in mid-March. Ground school was the same for P-38 and P-51 replacement pilots except for an additional five-hour engineering block for the P-38 students. The twin-engine P-38 was more complicated than the single-engine P-51. New training aids including films and additional Link trainers (ground-based simulators), an enlarged training center, and refined lectures were credited for allowing the 496th to accelerate ground training. The 20-day ground curriculum included heavy emphasis on intelligence topics, and within the intelligence portion aircraft recognition represented the single largest block of instruction. Period photographs of CCRC and combat unit pilot lounges are telling in this respect: hanging models and posted silhouettes of Allied, Luftwaffe, and Italian aircraft reinforced combat crews' ability to distinguish friend from foe.

June 1944 featured a series of modifications in the ground school. The geography portion of the curriculum was expanded "as a result of constant and almost unanimous requests from the

Replacement Pilots." The geography phase taught student pilots key European geographic features for airborne recognition. An eight-hour block was added to the P-38 curriculum to take advantage of a newly assigned P-38 mobile training unit (MTU). The MTU provided a hands-on aircraft systems model for pilots, mechanics, and technicians. Finally, a special 10-day transition course was added for P-51 transition pilots new to the Mustang.

The P-38 MTU proved very successful for the 496th. The group reported that "the method of presentation and ability of the instructors together with the excellent facilities available made this an outstanding course from which the pilots derived considerable benefit and in which they exhibited a definite interest." The 496th promptly requested a similar device for P-51 instruction and proficiency, and this new capability arrived in August.

Flying Training. Flying training complemented the ground school and was designed to expose students to aerial combat tactics, techniques, and procedures in their particular aircraft type. The training curriculum baselined in January put little emphasis on flying hours. This policy coupled with a shortage of aircraft and severe difficulty maintaining aircraft in flying condition — limited early classes to an average of less than five hours flying time per student. In March the 496th reversed emphasis to make flying time the top priority for student pilots. By May the group could report that "the arrival of an increasing number of aircraft and strenuous efforts to improve maintenance and painstaking and accurate scheduling of flying resulted in a gradual rise to an average of ten hours or more per pilot."

The flying syllabus published in May provided a nominal training profile but allowed for the vagaries of students, instructors, equipment, and weather. Comments in the syllabus noted that it was "up to the instructor to increase or decrease instruction as to the requirements of the individual pilot." Furthermore, policy held that instructors were not to "place any replacement pilot up for posting until he is considered satisfactory in all phases of flying." The P-51 transition syllabus began with five introductory hours then continued with more advanced instruction. P-38 and P-51 replacement syllabi were identical except for an additional two hours of single engine operation time for the P-38.

By mid-April 1944 the 496th had experienced a dozen P-38 accidents. 45 During 19-20 April Eighth Air Force officials sent Lockheed chief test pilot Tony LeVier to Goxhill to help develop confidence in the aircraft. Two P-38 replacement pilots had been killed within the previous week.

A most deplorable situation had arisen over the past ten days. They were losing an enormous number of pilots in transition training that was going on up there — more than was even conceivable; even if you didn't know what you were doing you shouldn't lose them like that. I went up there immediately and the things I found out amazed me.

To begin with the base commander didn't like P-38s. He admitted at the bar that night that he was strictly a P-40 man, and we thought to ourselves it was a fine state of affairs to have the instructors against the airplane they were teaching people to fly. As a result, he had the most

misinformed group of pilots I have ever had contact with, and their feelings toward the P-38 weren't fit to print. In view of this situation, when I gave them my demonstration the next day I really poured it on. It included things I normally wouldn't do. I went all-out to prove that any young man with average intelligence and courage could fly the P-38 just as well as myself. These kids were young, twenty or twenty-one years old on the average, and all they needed was good leaders.

Before I went up I told them the manoeuvres they were going to see would prove to them that their mistakes were uncalled for, and their buddies were killed because they were not trained properly. When I came down I had never seen such enthusiasm; it was just as if they had been saved from hell. After that, I think they were all convinced, even the base commander, that the airplane had real possibilities and was far from being the killer it was tagged for.

Preparation for Combat. Knowledge of the combat environment and aircraft proficiency were only part of the 496th's training package. Determination and youthful bravado were equally important in the budding fighter pilot. Don Kocher transitioned to the P-51 with the 496th: When the instructor was satisfied that you knew the location of everything, you took the aircraft in the air for an orientation flight, alone, to learn its flight characteristics. This first flight could be hair-raising because you can't be absolutely certain of the outcome of any manoeuvre until you try it and learn how the aircraft responds. Most of our flying at Goxhill was alone practising acrobatics and just getting to know the aircraft. Flying with the instructor, we worked on combat formation flying and mock dog-fights.

The realism provided by the 496th was one of the final phases in a pilot's preparation for combat. Only a small portion of the 496th, the instructor corps, was directly engaged with the student pilots. Operating and maintaining the station, classrooms, Link trainers, and aircraft that formed the foundation for training was another endeavor.

Support and Maintenance. While flying operations were the most visible portion of the group's activities, most of the 496th's men served in background roles such as administration, station support, and maintenance.

Gunnery ranges, runways, navigation aids, ground trainers, communications equipment, the fuel depot, lodging, and mess facilities all required constant attention. Ground crews in the 554th and 555th FTSs did their best to maintain war-weary aircraft. Crew chiefs and specialists in areas such as armament, avionics, engines, and hydraulics performed regular servicing, routine inspections and adjustments, and minor repairs (first and second echelon maintenance).⁵⁵ The maintenance challenges faced by the 496th were nothing new to the Eighth, and a legacy of maintenance difficulties plagued the 496th throughout CCRC operations.⁵⁶ War-weary aircraft—coupled with aircraft shortages and constant deficiencies in experienced maintenance personnel—led the group to conclude in August 1944 that "aircraft maintenance has, during the entire history of CCRC #8 been its most pressing problem."

Group and squadron reports consistently cited aircraft war weariness as a major maintenance factor. P-38s and P-51s assigned to the group were mostly castoffs from combat units. As aircraft aged they became more susceptible to breakdowns, required time-consuming overhauls, and became outdated when more advanced models appeared. Spare parts did not appear to be a serious problem for the group. Aircraft inventory was essentially a function of two factors: excess combat aircraft available for CCRC assignment and losses due to accidents. Until August 1944 the group was hard-pressed to meet flying requirements with assigned aircraft. In August the 496th received an influx of P-51s concurrent with the transfer of P-38 aircraft and P-38 CCRC functions to another base. Goxhill's P-51 inventory then stabilized at approximately 60-75 aircraft, with one-half to two-thirds of the inventory usually mission capable on any given day. The third major maintenance limitation — experienced personnel reflected the AAF's enormous wartime challenge of classifying, training, and assigning the prodigious mechanics

and technicians needed for a worldwide inventory that reached 79,908 aircraft in July 1944. Aircraft mechanics completed a 16-week basic course plus, in some cases, advanced training in a particular subsystem. Other specialties underwent their own training ranging up to six months or more. On-the-job experience under the tutelage of senior personnel was the final training ground. The 496th used extensive on-the-job training, transferees, off-station technical schools operated by Eighth Air Force Service Command, and MTUs to address shortfalls in maintenance personnel.

On-the-job training and transferees proved especially helpful when the group relinquished P-38 responsibilities in August. Most of the P-38 support personnel were retained and cross-trained for P-51 responsibilities, and more than 12 inbound transfers brought additional P-51 experience.

The satisfaction gained from keeping aircraft in operation had a cost. The group recorded how in one stretch "the men worked far into the night, after a full day's work, to complete maintenance on their aircraft and have it in commission for the following day's flying. Men scrambled over their planes in between flights to remove paint, grease, gas, etc., and thus allow the next pilot to use the plane in as good a condition as they possibly could."

There were positive aspects to support duties. For example, an armament officer explained how "the 496th maintained an aerial gunnery range (Holmpton Range) on the coast of Withernsea. During gunnery practice, four or five people from the armament section would go to Withernsea on temporary duty to set up targets and score hits. Withernsea was a beautiful village, the people were friendly and gracious, and this was delightful duty."

Little touches helped. Outstanding effort might gain a unit a two-day pass, while coffee and donuts from the Red Cross coffee wagon brightened long hours on the flight line.

The final major factor impacting the 496th's ability to execute its training mission was weather. Weather played a profound part in all United Kingdom flying operations, and Lincolnshire

County was no exception. In October 1944 the group's historian summarized 10 months of flying operations by noting, "the weather seems to have been almost unvarying in its unsuitability." Fortunately, the local hosts were more welcoming.

Relations between station personnel and the British were generally excellent. Mutual respect and common purpose bridged minor cultural gaps. The Eighth had relied heavily on British experience, assistance, and resources from the beginning. British contributions in weather, intelligence, communications, air traffic control, and air defense for Eighth Air Force installations were common; and Goxhill airfield was no exception.

Goxhill — nicknamed Goat Hill by US soldiers — offered a mix of familiar and new for members of the 496th. The Brocklesby Hunt and Generous Briton provided a taste of British pub life. The Red Cross in nearby Grimsby was a favorite destination, where one veteran recalled he "could get a bed for 50 cents U.S., and food was also available. We could catch the train after duty hours, spend the night, and return on an early morning train in time for work. On these trips it was not unusual to see Buzz Bombs at dusk and contrails from V-2 rockets at dawn, so we always tried to get a seat on the east side of the train." The group generously opened social activities to local citizens, and soldiers were encouraged to bring food on the many occasions when locals invited them for tea or supper. Years of rationing made the British especially appreciative of treats such as fresh oranges, Coca-Cola, or a ham. The 496th's annual Christmas party offered local children small gifts and an abundance of sweets.

Routine in the 496th centered around the training mission and the support functions required to operate the station and its aircraft. The distinction between officer and enlisted was important in any AAF flying unit. The officer corps at Goxhill included permanent party plus student pilots who transited through the station for brief periods (two to four weeks was typical). Enlisted men outnumbered officers four-to-one, were paid less, and enjoyed a quality of life below officers but often far above the local populace.

Life in the 496th was not all work. Long hours were not unusual, but recreation activities lessened the burden and improved morale. In his 1942 report, General Eaker discussed at length his expectations to provide the Eighth as near as possible with food, living conditions, and activities similar to American standards. By the time the 496th was activated, the Eighth had a well-established infrastructure to satisfy the basic needs of its men. Unit histories for the 496th and subordinate units paid heavy attention to activities — including movies, a gymnasium, a library, chapel services — and athletics — including softball, volleyball, and gardening. An officers' club served commissioned officers, while the post exchange offered enlisted men a parlor for beer and soft drinks. The American Red Cross operated the Aero Club with dances, games, and various parties for the enlisted men. Local women were frequent guests at station social functions, and a number of men from the group married British women. Several factors made morale a persistent issue.

The nature of the 496th's mission, limited promotions for enlisted men, and tedium all made morale suffer. Training missions lacked the glamour and excitement of combat. The 496th was

ineligible for combat-related citations and decorations, but comparable duties in fighting units earned soldiers these rewards and the associated spotlight. A top-heavy enlisted force made promotion opportunities for junior enlisted men rare. Monotonous duties such as military drill compounded the equation. Maintaining morale was a constant challenge for station leadership.

Unit history reports discussed morale with candor. An August 1944 report illustrated how station leadership tried to assess the intangibles of welfare and morale: Venereal disease problems still plague the station and a strenuous effort to halt it has been ineffective. Military courtesy standards fell through and resulted in a three hour course being given all personnel during the month. Morale is seriously affected by lack of promotional opportunities due to filled up T.O.'s [Table of Organization], The Fighter Training Group which was activated overseas and assigned number of high ranking enlisted men left few opportunities to reward capable men resulting in some degree of dissatisfaction. That factor together with the monotonous role of a training command are difficult to overcome. The station's participation in the Eighth Air Force War Bond Drive met with success with a subscription of 159% of its quota. The purchase of bonds has effectively reduced the cash available and will minimize some of the problems arising out of excessive spending by troops.

Records indicated the 183d Medical Dispensary plotted venereal disease incidence as a primary indicator of morale and off-duty discipline. Absent without leave (AWOL) and various infringements were tracked and reported to Colonel McGee in a similar fashion. The group conducted courts-martial for offenses such as petty theft and going AWOL. The vast majority of discipline problems were minor infractions reflecting the understandable frustrations of young soldiers — mostly conscripts — assigned to low-profile duties in a support unit.

During May and June the Allied invasion of Europe was the pivotal event for the 496th. In May the group put heavy emphasis on station defense and force protection, including several major exercises plus daily ground defense alerts at the end of the month. The exercises covered a wide range of potential German threats including day or night bomber raids, airborne assault, sabotage, and poison gas attack. By June measures included 24-hour manning of anti-aircraft guns (usually nighttime only), double-strength guard units, firearms assigned to all station personnel, and tight restrictions on station access. Anxiety peaked with the invasion on 6 June. According to the group history, "D day caused a stir of excitement divided between hope and concern particularly over the weather, omni-present in the minds of airmen. As the days passed the alertness against possible counteraction lessened; not officially but in the minds of the individuals. Many of the Replacement Pilots anxious to participate in the fray welcomed the orders posting them to groups immediately, some of whom had not begun training."

By late June the 496th reduced defensive measures as threat conditions returned to a normal level. The most important event to affect the group in August was Eighth Composite Command's decision to consolidate P-38 CCRC functions in the 495th FTG at AAF station F- 342, Atcham, on 14 August. The 496th's P-38 aircraft, type-specific training materials, and P-38 instructor corps were quickly transferred to Atcham; and the 554th FTS was assigned training and maintenance responsibilities for the P-51. This new role meant P-38 ground crews had to

begin crossover training to assume P-51 duties. The move consolidated P-51 CCRC functions in the 496th and simplified training, operations, and logistics requirements at Goxhill to a single aircraft type.

Autumn 1944 began a series of command realignments affecting the 496th. The first change — announced in mid-September and effective 1 October — reassigned the 496th and its sister group (495th FTG) from Composite Command to Fighter Command. This move was designed to give Fighter Command greater control over operational training, but the decision to reestablish OTUs at operational fighter groups several weeks later made the move moot.

The 496th remained under Fighter Command until early December when it was reassigned to the 2d Bomb Division, Eighth Bomber Command, and transferred to a new station. In February 1945 the 2d Bomb Division was redesignated the 2d Air Division to reflect the attachment of fighter wings. The 65th FW was attached to the 2d Air Division, adding an intermediate level of command. By late February organizational stability was achieved — the 496th FTG reported to the 65th FW which reported to the 2d Air Division, Eighth Bomber Command. This chain of command remained in place until the 496th was inactivated in April. The realignments had little effect on 496th FTG operations since the group's primary mission was abolished in October 1944. The impact on the 496th was primarily administrative.

In October a change in in-theater operational training policy ended the group's CCRC mission. Training responsibilities for the 496th and its sister group were terminated on 26 October. The Eighth restored the concept of OTUs within operational fighter groups. This approach allowed replacement crews to train with the same group they would eventually join in combat. The advantages of the intheater OTU outweighed misgivings about the burdens imposed on combat units. Senior leaders sought a simpler, more seamless transition for new combat pilots in these "clobber colleges." According to Freeman, the value of the scheme soon made itself plain ... In that the trainees quickly became imbued with the spirit of the group and were eager to take part in combat flights. Moreover, in obtaining the necessary final polish to their art they became versed in the operational peculiarities pertaining to their particular group, and were as up to date on the latest procedures and tactics as the operational pilots themselves. This, in fact, was the idea behind the scheme, a smooth transition for the newcomer.

The end of CCRC responsibilities brought a lull to the 496th. The group transferred aircraft and training materials to other units but retained most personnel and maintenance equipment. Soldiers were kept occupied with ground defense exercises, military training, and sports.

In a quick succession of moves, the 496th vacated Goxhill airfield at the end of 1944. First, on 18 November the 2d Gunnery and Tow Target Flight was reassigned and moved by air and truck convoy to AAF station F-373 at Leiston. The 554th FTS was reassigned to the 3d Bomb Division and transferred to AAF station F-157 at Raydon with the 353d Fighter Group (a P-51 operational unit) in early December. The 333d Service Group and 1148th Quartermaster Company detachments were reassigned to the 1st Bomb Division but remained on detached service to the 496th and would accompany the group to its new station.

On 9 December the group received orders for a permanent change of station to AAF station F-365 at Halesworth, Suffolk County. Located in the village of Holton in East Anglia, just eight miles from the English Channel, Halesworth airfield had been hurriedly vacated by the 489th Bombardment Group (Heavy) several weeks earlier. The 496th quickly drew up transfer plans, sent an advance echelon on 10 December to prepare the station, and completed the move to Halesworth on 15 December. The group noted, "upon arrival at Station 365 it was found in a deplorable state due undoubtedly to the hurried departure to the Zone of Interior by the previous occupants. The station being non-operational, all personnel were employed in a large scale rehabilitation program and by 31 December, the station was made livable though a great deal of work remains."

Goxhill airfield was transferred to RAF Fighter Command on 20 January 1945, used primarily for bomb storage, and eventually inactivated on 14 December 1953.

The 496th began 1945 with a reduced mission at a new home. A unit history recorded that the group was assigned "as the coordinator of 2nd Air Division activities of Station 365. They were a unit without a tactical objective. They were engaged in preparing the Station for whatever purpose it might be asked to accomplish." In its final months the group provided manpower, maintenance, and support services for an air-sea rescue squadron and other Halesworth units. The group also serviced aircraft diverted to Halesworth by combat damage, malfunction, or weather.

During the first half of January, the 496th continued station repair and cleanup activities. 87 In mid- January the 5th Emergency Rescue Squadron, 1st Gunnery and Tow Target Flight, and 2d Weather and Relay Flight were assigned to Halesworth. The rescue squadron arrived with experienced staff and established procedures. This fact — and the squadron's unique mission (unrelated to pilot training) — allowed the squadron to function with a high degree of autonomy.

The 5th Emergency Rescue Squadron quickly became the dominant unit at Halesworth in terms of assigned personnel, aircraft inventory, and operations tempo. By 31 January it operated with nine officers and 122 enlisted men, many of these reassigned from the 555th FTS. The squadron used three types of aircraft to perform search and rescue for aircrews forced down over water. War -weary P-47 Thunderbolts modified to carry smoke markers and air-drop dinghy packs were used as spotters. Twin-engine OA-10A Catalina amphibians could land in water to pick up downed crews. Several B-17G airborne lifeboats were assigned in March. The B-17s carried a provisioned, sea-worthy, rigid lifeboat that could be dropped by parachute to seaborne aircrews. The rescue squadron remained extremely active while assigned to Halesworth, flying over 300 sorties per month and executing scores of successful rescues. One P-47 and two OA-10 Catalinas were lost during this period.

The 1st Gunnery and Tow Target Flight numbered approximately 40 personnel and towed aerial targets for various fighter groups of the 65th FW. The unit flew a variety of aircraft including the

P-47 Thunderbolt, A-35 Vengeance, A-20 Havoc and B-26 Marauder. The 2d Weather and Relay Flight, with more than 90 officers and men, used modified B-24 bombers as long-range weather observation platforms.

The 496th was inactivated on 26 April 1945, two weeks before the German surrender. The rescue squadron and other attached Halesworth units stayed and reported directly to the 65th FW. Virtually all remaining 496th FTG personnel were reassigned to the 332d Air Service Squadron to await the end of European hostilities and subsequent reassignment or discharge. Halesworth airfield was transferred to RAF Bomber Command on 5 June 1945 and closed for flying in February 1946.

The 496th FTG made its primary contributions to the war operating as CCRC No. 8 during January-October 1944. After October 1944 the group was relegated to less substantive missions unrelated to fighter training.

During 10 months of CCRC No. 8 operations, 2,481 student pilots entered training with the 496th. With the number of students assigned in each, there were four categories:

1. P-38 Lightning replacement pilots (ground and flight training)— 718
2. P-51 Mustang replacement pilots (some received ground training only) — 567
3. P-51 Mustang transition pilots (new to aircraft; ground and flight training) — 1,179
4. Bomber Scouting Force pilots (ground and flight training; aircraft not specified) — 1795

Category two, P-51 Mustang replacement pilots, included some pilots who had recently received P-51 -type training in the United States and did not require extensive additional flying training. These students only attended ground school with the 496th for theater familiarization. Category four included Eighth Bomber Command bomber pilots who cross-trained into fighters to scout weather conditions.

A total of 2,434 — or 98.1 percent — of entering student pilots successfully graduated. 96 A few graduates went to other units for additional training, but records indicated that the great majority were posted to operational groups in the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces. Table 1 replicates a table from group records, and lists descriptive data for each of the group's 43 classes.

Aircraft accidents were an unfortunate fact of life in the 496th. Seven student pilots were seriously injured, 23 killed, and 53 aircraft were lost in 117 major accidents.

The group appeared to Injuries or fatal accidents accounted for all but 18 students who did not complete CCRC training. The extraordinarily high graduation rate suggested CCRC No. 8 was not intended to sort out pilots unfit for combat; instead, the CCRC was a "finishing school" for pilots already considered suitable for fighter duty.

496th FTG students were approximately twice as likely to suffer accidents in the P-38 as the P-51 (6.2 versus 3.1 accidents/ 1,000 hours). Significantly higher P-38 aircraft loss, pilot fatality, and pilot injury rates suggested P-38 accidents were also more severe. All these figures appeared to buttress the aircraft's dangerous reputation among student pilots.

Air Force Order of Battle

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.

They Too Served 496th Fighter Training Group, 1943-45 David H. Kelley. Nd.