

Fighter and enemy reaction data.

Fighter support.

1. General

Fifteen fighter groups (13 P-51, 2 P-47) were available and it was decided to use them all in support of this operation. Since the 17th of December the enemy had been deploying the bulk of his aircraft on tactical ground support. The opposition to strategic bombing had been on a reduced scale but it was known that the enemy was still capable of opposing the eighth air force in the Ruhr area with approximately 700 fighters. Force I (3rd Div) attacking targets in the Ruhr was therefore given first priority while Force II (1st Div) bombing in the Frankfurt area was given second priority.

Force III (2nd Div) was bombing in the battle area and was given last priority for fighter support.

2. Specific assignments

Force I (3rd Div) was to be escorted by six split P-51 groups (357,55, 479,355,353,339) which were to rendezvous west of Liege, Belgium.

Force II (1st Div) was to be escorted by five split P-51 groups (359,356, 20,364,4) which were to rendezvous west of Liege.

Force III (2nd Div) was to be supported by two P-47 groups (56,78) and two P-51 groups (361,352) based on the continent. One P-47 group (56) was to provide free-lance support arriving at Coblenz as Force I crossed the enemy coast and was to follow MEW vectors. The other P-47 group (78) was to have its "A" unit provide free-lance support arriving at Bad Kreuznach while the "B" unit swept Force III's target area. One P-51 group (352) was to have its "A" unit provide free-lance patrol arriving at Trier while its "B" unit swept from Ostend to Brussels to Givet. The other P-51 group (361) was to have its "A" unit on free-lance patrol arriving at Bonn while its "B" unit swept through Force III's target area.

All groups were ordered not to strafe and were to fly a maximum effort, using every serviceable aircraft. The "B" units of all groups were to provide close escort and were to withdraw with their assigned bombers to O300E. The "A" units on escort were to withdraw only to O600E and were then to return to the battle area. All fighter groups were to operate under MEW control during this operation.

Penetration.

Force I (3rd Div)

Two (355,339) of the six assigned escort P-51 groups were unable to take off on time because of the base weather. One group (353) made rendezvous on time, two groups (55,479) met the bombers approximately 10 minutes early, and the group (357) assigned to escort the lead combat wings had its "B" unit arrive 15 minutes late while its "A" unit was 30 minutes late. The enemy took advantage of this unescorted formation and attacked. Approximately 60 FW-190s and Me-109s concentrated their attack on the lead combat wing in the vicinity of Namur. "Company Fronts" were formed with eight Me-109s making passes from three to nine o'clock level. Six bombers were destroyed before the escort arrived. Units of the four P-51 groups (55,479,357,353) which had made rendezvous were vectored forward. Two groups (55,357) arrived to chase off the enemy and destroyed many aircraft in the ensuing combats. The other two groups (479,353) arrived too late to lend any assistance but all four groups then came across 60-70 Me-109s and FW-190s with another 40-50 giving top cover, queuing up in the Fulda area. These aircraft were attacked and completely disorganized and routed before they could reach the bombers. Also during penetration between Coblenz and Limburg, one fighter group (353) was attacked by 12 ME-109s but the P-51s warded them off and destroyed five of them. The bombers were not under attack after the initial encounter.

Target and withdrawal.

All four groups which made rendezvous during penetration maintained close escort. One group (355) which at first was unable to take off, finally became airborne as the bombers were withdrawing and was vectored to Amsterdam and then to Luxembourg uneventfully. In the target area and during the withdrawal, the force did not encounter any opposition but the fighter escort encountered lone jet aircraft, a few of which they were able to engage. One P-51 group (55) broke escort during withdrawal to strafe rail traffic in the Saar area and succeeded in destroying several locomotives and goods wagons.

Penetration, target and withdrawal.

Force II (1st Div)

Only one of the five P-51 groups assigned to escort Force II made rendezvous on time. One group (364) made rendezvous southeast of Ghent 17 minutes early, a second group (359) made rendezvous southeast of Brussels 14 minutes early, a third group (20) made rendezvous in the vicinity of Namur nine minutes early and a fourth group (356) had its "A" unit rendezvous 25 minutes early north of Ostend and its "B" unit met the bombers 40 minutes late. All five groups maintained close escort throughout the entire mission, but squadrons of each group were vectored off from time to time by the controller to various areas. One group (356) sent units to Coblenz, Frankfurt and Marburg, another (20) went to Bonn and a third (364) to Cologne but none of these groups found any enemy aircraft apart from single jets which they could not engage. One group (4) however, found a lone ME-109 on the deck at Giessen which they destroyed and damaged another in the same area. The fifth escort group (359) had units vectored to Bonn where several FW-190s were sighted of which 12 were destroyed. This group (359) also accounted for two Me-109s near Vogelsang. The bombers of Force II did not encounter any enemy opposition but reported sightings during the entire mission mainly of ME-262 jet aircraft. Approximately 20 enemy aircraft were sighted and although some jets did circle over and around the bombers, no attacks were made.

Force III (2nd Div-Ardennes area)

One of the P-47 groups (78) on free-lance patrol with Force III was unable

to take-off. The other P-47 group (56) was vectored southwest of Coblenz and then to the Frankfurt and Hanau areas which they patrolled uneventfully. One P-51 group (352) patrolled the Giessen area and had units sweeping from Ostend to Brussels to Givet. The other P-51 group (361) supporting Force III patrolled the target area and then encountered, as the bombers were still on penetration, 7 Me-109s southwest of Coblenz. The enemy was quite aggressive but the P-51s succeeded in destroying four of them. The bombers of Force III did not encounter any enemy opposition but reported sighting three to four jet aircraft and eight to twelve single engine aircraft in the target area.

Fighter Summary

1. General effectiveness

Force I was escorted by four P-51 groups and had one P-51 on free-lance patrol while Force II was escorted by five P-51 groups. Force III had one P-47 group and two P-51 groups on free-lance patrol. One P-47 group (78) and one P-51 group (339) were unable to take-off because of base weather. Forces II and III both described the fighter escort as very good. Force I was well escorted but unfortunately the enemy was able to attack just as the fighter rendezvous was being accomplished.

2. Strafing activities.

Only one (55) of the 13 groups (12 P-51 1 P-47) participating in this operation engaged in strafing activities. This P-51 group (55) strafed five locomotives and damaged 30 goods wagons in the Saar area.

Sorties, losses, battle damage and claims.

864 fighters (813 P-51, 51 P-47) were dispatched of which 840 sortied and 823 completed their assignments. Nine P-51s were lost, three to enemy aircraft, two to accident and four to unknown causes and there were two cases of category "E" (salvage) damage. There were also three cases of other minor damage. Claims made against enemy aircraft in the air, all ME-109s and FW190s, were 72-2-9.

Scouting force.

27 P-51s were dispatched of which 26 sortied and 26 completed their assignments. one P-51 was lost to unknown causes. The 3rd scouting force (55) while in the Darmstadt-Frankfurt area sighted four ME-109s and four FW190s and dropped their tanks to attack them. Claims made in this encounter were 3-0-1.

Enemy reaction.

During this operation, the enemy had one tactical success. Up to 80 fighters from north of the Ruhr were airborne by the time Force I had crossed into Belgium and his warning system reported thin escort around Brussels. The enemy attacked and this was the first time he had tried an interception so far behind our lines. 40 to 50 of his fighters south of Liege found the lead group unescorted and the low squadron not only unescorted but a mile behind the other two. A "company front" attack followed and six bombers were destroyed. Further individual attacks were unsuccessful and then escort arrived and smashed the enemy. Besides the enemy immediately engaged with the force, a further 35 were disorganized forming up for the attack southwest of Coblenz. Meanwhile a second force coming from the more northerly bases were being vectored onto the lead combat wing of force I. By the time this force had reached the vicinity of Fulda it comprised some 60-70 fighters with another 40-50 as top cover but its rendezvous with unescorted bombers turned out to be an idle dream and one escort group immediately engaged them destroyed at least 23 aircraft. None of these fighters broke through to the bombers.

Probably another 30 enemy fighters in all were airborne in the vicinity, mostly in units of ones and twos, including up to five ME-262. One formation of 12 ME-109s bounced a squadron of P-51 escorts of Force I between Coblenz and Limburg and were badly defeated with five being shot down.

Forces II and III did not encounter any enemy opposition and a subsequent attack by the RAF to trier and Cologne was also unopposed.

This was the second day of strenuous air activity and the second successive day of heavy loss. In addition to the 200 odd aircraft encountered by the eighth air force another 350-400 enemy fighters were sent up during the day. This made a total German effort in the neighborhood of 600 aircraft which was a sharp drop of the preceding day's estimated sorties of 900-1000. It showed however that besides the enemy's inability to maintain his initial high sortie rate he was still sensitive about heavy bombers in the area of his Ardennes offensive and was willing to divert, from purely tactical purposes, a large proportion of his fighter strength.