

159 LIAISON SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE

159 Liaison Squadron constituted, 23 Feb 1944
Activated, 1 Mar 1944
Redesignated 159 Liaison Squadron (Commando), 1 May 1944
Redesignated 159 Liaison Squadron, 25 Nov 1945
Inactivated, 31 May 1946

STATIONS

Cox Field, TX, 1 Mar 1944
Pounds Field, TX, 25 Mar 1944
Statesboro AAFld, GA, 1 Jun 1944
Cross City AAFld, FL 18 Aug 1944
Drew Field, FL, 6-26 Oct 1944
Leyte, 1 Dec 1944
Mangaldan, Luzon, 31 Jan 1945 (detachments operated from Negros, 1 Apr-24 Jun 1945, and Cebu, unkn-25 Jun 1945)
Okinawa, 30 Aug 1945
Kanoya, Japan, 10 Sep 1945
Itami, Japan, Oct 1945-31 May 1946

ASSIGNMENTS

II Tactical Air Division, 1 Mar 1944
I Tactical Air Division, 18 Apr 1944
3 Air Commando Group, 1 May 1944
V Fighter Command, 25 Mar-31 May 1946

ATTACHMENTS

5 Air Liaison Group [Prov], May-Sep 1945
310 Bombardment Wing, Sep 1945-25 Mar 1946

WEAPON SYSTEMS

L-5, 1944-1946
UC-64, 1944-1946

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

None

Campaign Streamers

Leyte

Luzon

Southern Philippines

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

Philippine Presidential Unit Citation

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

1 March 44 marks the activation of the 159 Liaison Squadron under the command of Captain Ray Binder. From a sizable group of volunteers 31 Liaison pilots, 30 S/Sgts and one Corporal was selected to form the flying men of the 159 who were to perform heroically in the Philippines as part of the Third Air Commando Group.

From 25 March 44 into October, the squadron trained at Pounds Field, Paris, Texas, Statesboro Army Air Field, Georgia, and Cross City AAB, Florida. In October a move was made to Tampa, Florida for final processing prior to overseas shipment. Shortly after arrival at Drew Field, Tampa, Florida, the commanding officer was hospitalized and replaced by Lt. William G. Price III a P-51 pilot from the Fighter Squadrons.

After a six day train ride to Camp Stoneman, California, the Unit underwent final processing and boarded the USS General Hersey on 7 November 44 for the three week sea voyage to the South Pacific. Stops were made at Finchehaven and Hollandia, New Guinea before proceeding to the island of Leyte in the Philippines. The 159 Liaison Squadron went ashore on Leyte 1 December 44. Air strikes by the Japanese introduced the men to the realities of war, and they soon felt like veterans. It was not until 31 January 45 that the first aircraft of the Unit arrived. In the meantime several members of the Unit volunteered their services, including piloting L-5s and kicking out supplies from the C-46s to infantry below. The 159 soon experienced personnel losses. Lt. Howard and Capt. Loomer (the flight surgeon) were hospitalized in New Guinea,

Flight "C" lost two of its pilots, S/Sgt John W. Miller was hospitalized and S/Sgt Bennie Evans suffered severe head injuries while diving in the surf.

All was not work with no play. Most memorable had to be the new Year's party! From the "Conning" of the armed guards over a stack of plywood for a dance floor, the acquisition of copper tubing from the Sea Bees for a still, the air drop of leaflet invitations into the WAC detachment, and a successful penetration of the WAC compound to make personal contact with the fair maidens, the manufacturing of a bamboo bar and drinking containers guaranteeing a grand time for all. There was at least half again as many women as men for the gala event. Cock fights, roast pig, and fried chicken capped the evening. Col. Olson, Group Commander wrote a letter of commendation for the efforts of the 159.

Never to be forgotten was the day a Jap fighter popped over a ridge at dusk with guns blazing, catching a group of 159 personnel in the middle of a bomb and gas dump. The group was in route to a movie up the beach. Some ran for a ditch while two dashed through the bombs and gas barrels like a couple of NFL wing backs and dived under a 6 by 6 on the beach. Meanwhile the fighter was spraying but hitting nothing. He then made a sharp turn over the 6 by 6 and headed up the beach at about 50 feet altitude and was immediately knocked down. Then there was the evening the gas dump went up in flames. The Japs claimed to have destroyed it; but it reportedly was caused by a buddy trying to fill his Zippo lighter from a 55 gallon drum. Then there was the Jap parachute drop which caused great excitement for awhile and "wash-machine Charlie" a Jap plane that woke everyone up about 2 AM every morning. Such was the life on Leyte while awaiting the arrival of the L-5s.

On 18 Jan 45 the ground echelon departed by sea for the Lingayen Gulf area and arrived on 31 January. The air echelon finally received the L-5s and arrived at Apache Strip, near Mingaldan on 6 February, by way of Mindoro. The flight was uneventful except for being buzzed by a couple of P-38s that made passes at and throughout the formation. The 159 was finally all together and ready for action.

The Squadron immediately launched into the Luzon operation, with individuals flying as many as 20 missions a day. The pilots flew every conceivable kind of mission, from evacuation of wounded, supply drops to isolated troops, directing air strikes, artillery fire and Naval bombardment, courier missions, dropping propaganda leaflets on enemy forces, to air and sea rescue missions. The 159 operations covered Luzon, Panay, Cebu and Negros and worked with all branches of the service including the Filipino Guerrillas.

Most of the 159 operations was conducted from Apache strip at Calasio or late later from Mabalacat. Other operations were conducted by small detachments located throughout the area from any level and clear place available.

One of the first detachments was in support of the 308th Bomb Wing. The detachment operated off a drained rice paddy adjoining the Lingayan Air Strip and was housed in a Nipa hut in the middle of a bomb dump. Activities included courier service, delivering weapons to

guerrillas behind enemy lines, search missions, marking bombing targets and air sea rescue. One aircraft was damaged when its engine quit over the trees at the end of the landing strip. The pilot S/Sgt Neil Livesay received a written commendation from 5th Air Force HQ for his outstanding airmanship. His passenger was the 5th AF Flying Safety Officer.

Another detachment operated out of Bacolod on Negros in support of Marines and the 40th Infantry Division during the Negros campaign. It was while performing a drop mission that M/Sgt Oliver M. Edwares, a Flight Leader, was shot down and later killed by the Japs. His passenger was also killed and beheaded. M/Sgt was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for his action in support of the 40th Infantry Division. He was also the first 159 killed in action.

Another detachment operated off the main street of Cebu City in support of the American Infantry Division. In addition to evacuation and supply missions, they participated in directing naval bombardment of the island, with Naval observers aboard. Many of the evacuation missions were performed at night.

A detachment on the island of Luna operated entirely in support of the Filipino Guerrillas, located in the mountains of northern Luzon. The planes operated from crude strips in the mountains, evacuating wounded, bringing in supplies and supporting behind the lines operations of the famous Alamo Scouts. The unit also directed air strikes. Three 159 pilots lost their lives in this very hazardous operation. S/Sgt Jack Smith was lost when his plane was hit by ground fire. He was carrying out two Guerrillas wedged in the back seat. Crashing and burning his passengers survived without injury. G/O Robert Hutchinson and passenger Cpl. Asfred Bennet crashed in a narrow valley near Cervantes while trying to climb out of a confined area. Ferdinand Marcos was a member of the Filipino Guerrillas and had his headquarters at Luna.

Some of the evacuations involved personal touches on occasion. Squadron Commander William Price learned from a wounded 1st Cavalry Trooper that his brother Lt. Terry Price lay wounded in a ditch along Quezon Blvd. Capt. Price flew in, landed alongside his brother and evacuated him. S/Sgt Eich ran on to an old high school buddy, a medic, while on an evacuation mission. M/Sgt Zulfer experienced four incidents as well, all from the old neighborhood and all infantrymen. Lt. Col. Kalberer Commanding Officer of the Liaison plane section reunited with a Filipino Guerrilla Lieutenant who was a Flying Cadet classmate. Col. Kalberer was delivering fuel to two L-5s that were forced to land in the mountains of Northern Luzon and the Lieutenant had found them and radioed for fuel. S/Sgts Genadek and Carney met two elderly missionary ladies from the home town of Sgt. Fogle, a Squadron mechanic. It's a small, small world.

Three days after beginning operations on Luzon S/Sgt McDonnell had both wing tips shot off over Nichols Field at Manila. He landed safely at Grace Park with only minor wounds. The name of his aircraft was: "Heaven Can Wait." S/Sgt Viking Koch was missing in action after crashing in enemy territory near Ambaguie. He was rescued by Guerrillas and after some close encounters with the Japs returned 26 days later to his unit.

About 15 April 45, S/Sgt Carmichael was forced to land on a road while in route to Grace Park, because of bad fuel. Fortunately Guerrillas were in the area. They physically carried the plane off the road and hid it in a grove of trees from the Japs. The next morning after draining water from the fuel tank, the plane was carried back on the road and he went on to Manila. On 28 April, S/Sgt Eich cracked up on take-off because of engine failure at Agoo. He suffered severe head injuries and was hospitalized. S/Sgt. Lou Huffman on 18 May crashed into a mountain side, while attempting to land in fog. He suffered broken legs and was evacuated to the US. In March Lt. T.S. Jackson while flying with the Luna detachment had engine failure in the mountains and crash landed. Fortunately Guerrillas had taken the area only minutes before. They took him to a nearby PT Boat base and he was returned to his home base. The 341st Air Drone Squadron later repaired the plane and returned it to service. During June T/Sgt O'Brien had a landing accident on a primitive strip at an altitude of over 4000 feet. Among the repairs required was a new wing. The wing was brought in using Guerrillas and hill people, along with S/Sgts Genadek and Carney, the wing was carried across a river and up the steep mountain slope through enemy lines. After repairs the Hill people fashioned a crude runway and the L-5 was flown out.

Lt. Eddy Sloan was assigned to fly comedian Jo E. Brown any where he wanted to go. On one occasion he asked to see the famous Belete Pass operation. While flying over the ridge, Brown asked what those little black puffs were. Sloan explained that they were Japanese shells. "What are they firing at?" "Us", replied Sloane. At Brown's request they "got the hell out of there." The 159 was active in supporting the ground troops of the Belete Pass operation and suffered no losses. A commendation was given to the 159 by Col. Phillip F. Lindeman, 27th Infantry Commander, "It was only through the supplies dropped by air that this Regiment was enabled to capture Lone Tree Ridge, for the seizure of the all important Belete Pass." General MacArthur was pleased to add his sentiments as well.

With the war winding down in the Philippines it was evident another move was in store; this time to Okinawa, a long distance over water and far beyond the normal range of the L-5. Through the joint efforts of Lt. Harlan Englander, Engineering Officer and M/Sgt Charles Army, the Line Chief, 75 gallon gasoline tanks were fitted in the rear fuselage giving the L-5 range of over 750 miles. The L-5 was now capable of making the flight from the Philippines to Okinawa non-stop.

On 30 August 45 the 159 led by Squadron Commander Price, set out for Okinawa led by a Navy Catalina. The 159 ran into rain and thunder storms requiring several heading changes to circumvent the weather. Near the end of the flight the Catalina directed a heading of 020 degrees. Instead Capt. Price took up a heading 270 degrees and within minutes sighted land — Okinawa! Most of the planes were out of fuel as they landed and to have followed the Catalina, many would have ended up in the sea.

One pilot S/Sgt Lou Payerl requested permission to make a straight in approach, since his tanks were reading empty. Just as his wheels touched the ground his engine cut out. In the process of landing he had cut out a C-46 on its final approach. Later the C-46 pilot wanted to know who

had cut him out. Lou identified himself and they had coffee together and started a close friendship which lasted many years. The C-46 pilot was Tyrone Power.

On 19 September 45, with the war over, the remnants of the 159 left for Kanoya, Japan. The 159 was assigned the duty of flying into various Japanese Airfields to monitor the ordered disabling of the Japanese aircraft, some humorous incidents occurred with this operation. S/Sgt. Hankison landing on one field found all the top brass out in formation and offering to surrender all the men, 100 aircraft and 50 tanks to him. At another field the pilot saw all the personnel run for cover.

Over the months following the end of the War most of the original personnel had rotated back to the States and on 29 April 45 Lt. Harlan Englander, the engineering Officer was the last war time Commando to leave for the States. On 31 May 46, the Unit was inactivated. While the 159 Liaison Squadron no longer exists, the memory of the men in this outstanding Unit, lives in the hearts and minds of all those who were a part of it and also those who were served by this Unit.

USAF Unit Histories
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Sources

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