

171st Squadron World War II Overview

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The 171st Air Refueling Squadron was created during World War II and did not become assigned to the Michigan Air National Guard until several months after the end of the war.

The squadron was constituted on paper as the 374th Fighter Squadron on 28 January 1943 and activated on 10 February 1943, more than a year after the U.S. entry into World War II. The squadron operated throughout the war as the 374th and was a component of the 361st Fighter Group, 8th Air Force.

After initial training at bases in Virginia, Maryland and New Jersey, the squadron was forward deployed to RAF Bottisham, England on 30 November 1943. The 374th, flying P-47 Thunderbolt fighter aircraft, was tasked with providing fighter escort to the B-17 Superfortress and B-24 Liberator bombers assigned to the 8th Air Force, which were operating from England and assigned to bomb locations in Germany. While the unit served primarily as a bomber escort, the 374th, then a part of the U.S. Army Air Forces, did engage in other missions, at times assigned to strafe and dive-bomb strategic sites in Germany and in the German-controlled Netherlands.

Among the major battles that the 374th participated in were the bomb attacks against the German aircraft industry during "Big Week," 20-25 February 1944. Prior to the 6 June D-Day landings, the 374th was assigned to numerous attacks on enemy transportation facilities, meant to stymie the Axis Powers' ability to respond to the invasion.

While principally assigned to RAF Bottisham and RAF Little Walden in England, the unit operated from air fields in France and Belgium from 23 December 1944-7 April 1945.

The 374th flew its final combat mission on 20 April 1945 and was demobilized while still on station in England. The unit was officially de-activated on 24 October 1945. The unit remained dormant for about six months and then was re-activated, designated as the 171st Fighter Squadron (Single Engine) and allotted to the Michigan Air National Guard on 24 May 1946, initially assigned to what is now known as Detroit Metropolitan Airport, where the unit was stationed until 1971 when it moved to Selfridge Air National Guard Base, where it remains today.

The 374th began the war flying the P-47 Thunderbolt. In May 1944, the unit transitioned to flying the P-51 Mustang. After being assigned to the Michigan Air National Guard, the new 171st squadron continued to fly the P-51 until 1950, when it then transitioned to its first jet-powered aircraft, the F-84 Thunderjet. It flew F-51 Mustangs again from 1952-1953.

Key Dates – 171st Squadron in World War II

January 28, 1942

The 374th Fighter Squadron is constituted at Richmond Army Air Base, Virginia. The unit is assigned the P-47 Thunderbolt.

November 30, 1943



A P-47 Thunderbolt flown by 1st Lt. Vernon R. Richards is seen in this undated photo from World War II. This aircraft was operated by the 374th Fighter Squadron, 361st Fighter Group, 8th Air Force, at Bottisham Airfield, England, at the time of this photo. The 374th is the direct predecessor of the 171st Air Refueling Squadron, which is now assigned to Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Mich., as part of the Michigan Air National Guard.



World War II-era emblem of the 171st/374th Fighter Squadron.

The squadron is deployed to RAF Bottisham, England.

January 21, 1944

The squadron's first combat patrol on an area patrol west of St. Omer, France.

January 29, 1944

On the squadron's 4th mission, the squadron suffers its first combat loss: Lt. Charles B. Screws of the 374th was hit by flak and crash-landed his plane north of Amiens. He survived. The next day, the squadron claimed its first victories during the first of two bomber escort missions when 374th Squadron pilots destroyed four Me109s near Rheine, Germany, but Lt. Ethelbert F. Amason was killed in action, the first of 20 374th pilots and one enlisted man to make the ultimate sacrifice during the war.

May 1, 1944

The squadron receives its first P-51 Mustangs.

September 28, 1944

The squadron is assigned to RAF Little Walden, England.

December 23, 1944

The squadron is assigned to St. Dizier Airfield, France.

February 1, 1945

The squadron is assigned to Chievres Airdrome, Belgium.

April 7, 1945

The squadron returns to RAF Little Walden.

October 24, 1945

The squadron is inactivated.

May 24, 1946

The squadron is redesignated as the 171st Fighter Squadron (Single Engine) and assigned to the Michigan Air National Guard at Detroit-Wayne Major Airport (now Detroit Metropolitan Airport).