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Project Summary

In early 2023, The Center for Applied History LLC located and digitized records of the 434th Fighter Squadron, 479th Fighter Group, at the National Archives (College Park, MD) for Bradbury Sears, son of Lieutenant Eugene E. Sears. In addition, The Center for Applied History LLC collected sources from the Library of Congress and US Air Force Historical Research Agency (Maxwell AFB). All documents are now available on Dropbox.

The attached paper, “Eugene E. Sears and the 434th Fighter Squadron in World War II, 1944–1946,” delivers a framework for interpreting the primary sources—and understanding Lieutenant Sears’s wartime experience. Additional material, such as Sears’s 201 personnel file and family papers, will sharpen our understanding of his story.

Eugene Sears entered federal service with the Nebraska Army National Guard’s 134th Infantry Regiment on December 23, 1940. Later, in 1942, he transferred to the US Army Air Forces pilot training program. Lieutenant Sears flew combat missions with the 434th Fighter Squadron in Europe from October 1944 to April 1945. According to his obituary, Sears served as a US Air Force Reserve officer until 1979.

Air superiority significantly contributed to the Allied victory during World War II. Lieutenant Eugene Sears and the 434th Fighter Squadron hastened the ending of the European War by protecting US bombers. The strategic bombing campaign wrecked the German fighter command, immobilized German ground forces, and damaged the German economy. In Europe, Lieutenant Sears developed a deep appreciation for the tragedy of war. “If all the people fully realized the horrid sight of obliterated cities and could see the immense cemeteries of our war dead, there’d be no more wars,” Sears wrote in 1946. “But mere pictures or words cannot tell it all.”

We come to learn something important about ourselves by studying the military history of our ancestors. To be sure, “mere pictures or words cannot tell it all.” This paper is nevertheless an important step toward developing a deeper understanding of the life of Eugene E. Sears—and of ourselves. Ryan Edgar, Timothy Schultz, and M. Houston Johnson reviewed an early draft of “Eugene E. Sears and the 434th Fighter Squadron in World War II, 1944–1946.” Their feedback improved the final product. Any errors in fact or interpretation belong to the author.

Bradley Lynn Coleman
Atlanta, GA, May 29, 2023

Eugene E. Sears and the 434th Fighter Squadron
in World War II, 1944–1946

Bradley Coleman
May 29, 2023

American fighter pilots at Wattisham Air Base in Suffolk, England, split into two groups for the mission on December 25, 1944. U.S. planners ordered Group B to escort American B-24 bombers on a mission to Prüm, Germany. Meanwhile, expecting heavy opposition, Group A would roam the target area—ready to intercept enemy aircraft before German pilots reached the US bomber formation. Second Lieutenant Eugene E. Sears took off in his North American P-51 Mustang with Group A around 9:00 A.M. Over the continent, American aircraft encountered “intense heavy accurate” ground-based German antiaircraft fire, known as flak. Later, southwest of Bonn, US air traffic controllers directed Group A to engage a swarm of about fifty German aircraft moving toward the US bombers.¹ The P-51 pilots from Group A dropped their external fuel tanks and proceeded into action. But the automatic release on Sears’s aircraft failed, forcing him to uncouple the spare tank using a hand crank. In the process, Sears became separated from his flight. Undeterred, finally shedding the tank, he moved into the fight. “I dived down to about 22,000 [feet] in a left-hand spiral when a Me 109 passed in front of me, evidently intent on bouncing some P-51s below.” Sears immediately opened fire on the German fighter—striking the opposing aircraft’s tail and tail wheel. He then adjusted his guns: “I moved my line of sight up the fuselage, observing strikes all the way up to the point just back of the cockpit, when black smoke began to pour out and some stuff, evidently coolant, sprayed back and got all over my windscreen.” The German Me 109 collapsed into a violent nosedive toward the ground below. “I was unable to see if the pilot bailed out, due to the coolant on my windscreen,” Sears remembered, “but I believe that he may have, because I saw a pilot chute immediately afterwards, and couldn’t see any other A/C [aircraft] from which he could have come.” Thereafter, alone in the swirl of combat, Sears climbed “up toward the bomber contrails until the wind cleared the stuff off my windshield.” Then, unable to locate others from the American fighter group, Sear reported, “I came on home alone.”² Overall, 479th Fighter Group pilots downed fifteen German aircraft on Christmas Day, aerial combat involving nearly 100 fighter aircraft. It was Sears’s first confirmed victory of the war.³

Lieutenant Eugene Sears served with the 434th Fighter Squadron, 479th Fighter Group, during World War II. He distinguished himself as a combat pilot, October 1944 to April 1945, earning the Air Medal with Eight Oak Leaf Clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. Historians have devoted considerable attention to the course and conduct of World War II; much of the literature,

¹ Combat Mission Report, Field Order 1451-A, 434th Fighter Squadron, December 25, 1945, Box 3773, Record Group 18, “Records of the Army Air Forces,” National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. (Hereafter cited as RG 18, NARA)

² Combat Report, Field Order 1451-A, Eugene E. Sears, January 2, 1945, Box 3773, RG 18, NARA.

³ Confirmation of Victory Credits Board, Report No. 1, January 24, 1945, 65th Fighter Wing, Box 3771, RG 18, NARA.

directly or indirectly, concerns how (or why) the Allies won the war.⁴ Airpower figures prominently into these histories of the war. Indeed, immediately after the war, historians hired by the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) began arguing that airpower played a key role in the outcome of the war. In doing so, they produced a series of studies in support of the creation of an independent US Air Force. Many contemporary scholars continue to emphasize the importance of airpower; Philips Payson O'Brien, for example, insists that air [and sea] power decided World War II.⁵ Nested inside these debates, the North American P-51 fighter aircraft, flown by Sears, assumes special importance. The high-performance, long-range P-51 fighter represented a technical breakthrough that dramatically enhanced the US strategic bombing campaign against Germany. Although obsolete before the war ended—as 434th Fighter Squadrons pilots tangling with Germany fighter jets during the spring of 1945 affirmed—the P-51 has been the subject of numerous books and articles, many with remarkable titles, such as Marshall Michel's "The P-51 Mustang: The Most Important Aircraft in History?"⁶ Two popular historians have written about the 479th Fighter Group, with which Lieutenant Sears served. Terry A. Fairfield's coffee-table book, *The 479 Fighter Group in World War II* (2004), is encyclopedic, with facts, figures, and photographs, but provides little analytical structure.⁷ John Stanaway's lean *479th Fighter Group* (2009) is more interpretative.⁸ Yet neither author devotes much attention to Lieutenant Sears. Combining these secondary sources with archival records, this paper focuses on Sears's wartime experience. A P-51 fighter pilot, Lieutenant Eugene E. Sears principally flew long-range bomber escort missions over Germany between October 1944 and April 1945. By the time he returned to the United States in 1946, he had developed a deep appreciation for the tragedy of war.

434th Squadron Assignment: "A welcome addition to the unit."

Eugene Elmo Sears, born June 12, 1919, in Tecumseh, Nebraska—about 50 miles southeast of Lincoln—joined the 434th Fighter Squadron, 479th Fighter Group, in England in September 1944. Before the war, according to his draft registration card, Eugene was a self-employed designer at Elmo Displays in Beatrice, Nebraska. He entered federal service with the Nebraska Army National Guard's 134th Infantry Regiment on December 23, 1940, roughly a year before

⁴ See, for example, Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Northon & Company, 1995); and Williamson Murray and Allen R. Millett, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

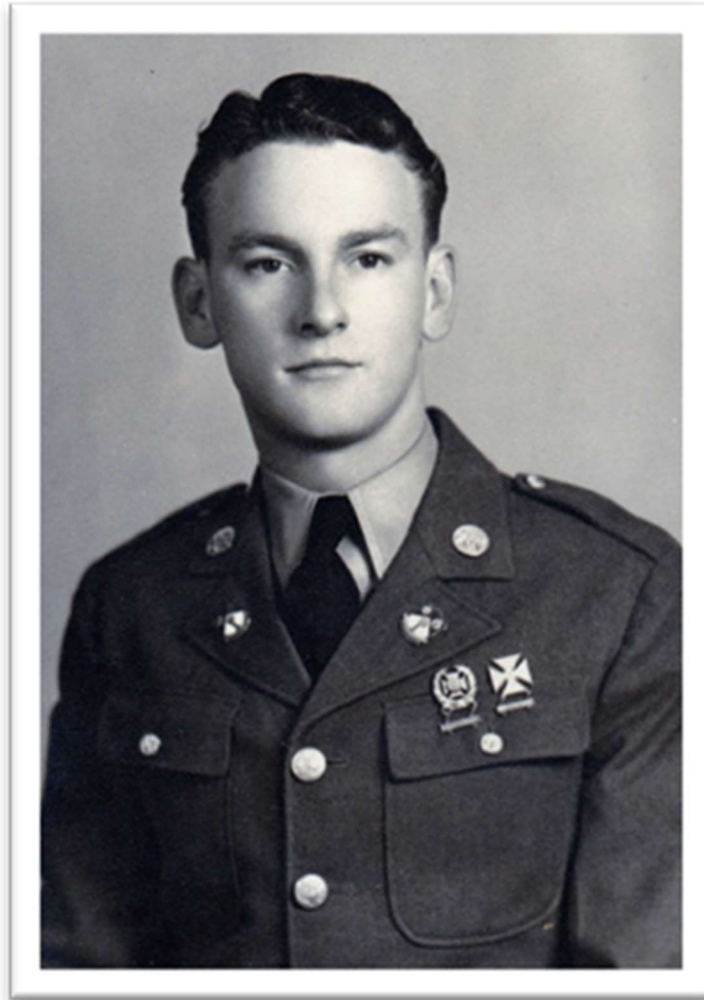
⁵ Philips Payson O'Brien, *How the War was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See also, M. Houston Johnson, Chapter 13, "The Air War: Germany and Italy," in G. Kurt Piehler and Jonathan Grant, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, June 2023); Richard Overy, *The Air War, 1939–1945* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005); and Walter J. Boyne, *Clash of Wings: World War II in the Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

⁶ Marshall L. Michel, "The P-51 Mustang: The Most Important Aircraft in History?" *Air Power History* 55 (Winter 2008): 46–57.

⁷ Terry A. Fairfield, *The 479th Fighter Group in World War II: In Action Over Europe with the P-38 and P-51* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2004).

⁸ John Stanaway, *479th Fighter Group: 'Riddle's Raiders'* (Oxford, New York: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2009).

US entry into World War II.⁹ Private Sears served as a rifleman in the 134th Infantry Regiment, an element of the 35th US Infantry Division, comprising National Guard elements from Kansas, Nebraska and Missouri. After the Japanese attacked US military facilities in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, US officials moved the 35th US Infantry Division to Fort Ord, California. There, Private Sears trained for ground combat in the Pacific Theater.¹⁰



Private Eugene E. Sears, Nebraska Army National Guard, ca 1941. (Source: Bradbury Sears)

⁹ Ryan Edgar, “Eugene Sears Timeline,” May 2, 2023; and “Eugene Sears,” Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, 1938–1946, online at <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/fielded-search.jsp?dt=893&tf=F> (accessed May 12, 2023)

¹⁰ Butler B. Miltonberger and James A. Hutson, *134th Infantry Regiment: Combat History of World War II* (Baton Rouge, LA: Army & Navy Pub. Co, 1946), 17–25. Rather than the Pacific Theater, the 134th Infantry Regiment, 35th US Infantry Division, would instead fight in Europe during World War II. It landed at Normandy, France, in July 1944.

In California, during the first months of the war, Eugene Sears resolved to be a pilot, not a combat infantryman. Through a competitive process, he secured a position in the USAAF flight training program. He left the infantry regiment soon thereafter. In December 1942, he graduated from the US Army Air Forces Basic Flying School at Marana Army Air Field near Tucson, Arizona.¹¹ Upon the successful completion of Advanced Flying School, likely at Luke Field in Phoenix, he received a commission as a second lieutenant in the US Army Air Forces. In 1944, Sears traveled to England as a replacement pilot. Like many other young pilots, he immediately reported to the USAAF combat training unit at Goxhill, across the Humber River from Hull, on the northeast coast of England. There, Sears received additional instruction before his assignment to a combat unit.

Second Lieutenant Sears joined the 434th Fighter Squadron at Wattisham Air Base in late September 1944. “Six new pilots reported in to [sic] the Squadron in the tag [tail] end of the month,” 434th Fighter Squadron commander Lieutenant Colonel James Herren Jr. wrote. The group included Sears and two officers (First Lieutenants Douglas T. Holmes and John T. Golden) who had served as flight instructors in the United States. “They are all single engine pilots,” Herren noted, and “should prove a welcome addition to the unit.”¹² Historian John Stanaway described Sears as one of “the original group of [P-51] Mustang pilots”—seven others had arrived about two weeks before Sears.¹³ Collectively, these single-engine men played an important part in the 434th Fighter Squadron’s transition from P-38 to P-51 fighter aircraft.

The Transition to P-51s: “Eager is hardly the word for it!”

US military officials activated the 479th Fighter Group at Grand Central Air Terminal in Glendale, California, in October 1943. The group included three squadrons of combat aircraft—the 434th, 435th, and 436th Fighter Squadrons—and various supporting elements. The first personnel came from a disestablished combat training unit in Glendale; others joined the 479th following assignment in the Pacific and North Africa. In the United States, the pilots flew the versatile, twin-engine Lockheed P-38 Lightning, a fighter aircraft distinguished by its unique twin-boom design. The 479th Fighter Group joined the Eighth US Air Force [strategic bombing force] in England in May 1944. Among the last USAAF combat units deployed to the European Theater of Operations, the group’s earliest combat missions involved coastal sweeping operations during the Allied landing at Normandy in June 1944.¹⁴ The 434th Fighter Squadron

¹¹ “In Uniform,” *Beatrice Daily Sun*, December 7, 1943, 3.

¹² Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, September 1944, Frame 519, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, Record Group 342, NARA. (Hereafter cited as RG 342, NARA) The original squadron histories are now located at the US Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base, AL. Citations to microfilm copies at the National Archives.

¹³ Stanaway, *479th Fighter Group*, 92; and Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, September 1944, Frame 519, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

¹⁴ Stanaway, *479th Fighter Group*, 7–20. Records related to the early history of the group are on Reel B0635, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

received a Distinguished Unit Citation for its performance during that period. The pilots flew those and other early combat sorties in P-38s.¹⁵

During 1944, Eighth US Air Force officials systematically replaced P-38 [and P-47] fighter aircraft with the long-range, single-engine North American P-51 Mustang. Designed by a US manufacturer for the Royal Air Force, the new fighter [P-51B] included a state-of-the-art Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. It offered superior performance to other Allied and German fighter aircraft, especially at high altitudes; exceptional range when outfitted with an external fuel tank; and pilot-friendly features, such as a heated cabin, important while accompanying US bombers above 30,000 feet.

The 434th Fighter Squadron began its transition to North American P-51 Mustang fighter aircraft in September 1944—a process ongoing upon Sears’s arrival. Veterans of the 434th Fighter Squadron resisted the change. “It was with some apprehension that the Squadron viewed the first lot of P-51s,” the squadron commander wrote. “They are supposed to be the hottest thing in the ETO [European Theater of Operations], but seeing as how we are confirmed Pee dash three eight men we will have to be convinced.” To be sure, the P-38 offered appealing features, such as the location of its guns [in the nose of the aircraft]; speed and maneuverability below 30,000 feet; and durability. But the P-38 Lighting could not match the P-51 Mustang at altitude; the mandate for change came from the highest levels of the US Army Air Forces.¹⁶ On the ground at Wattisham, the transition to the “Spam Cans,” as detractors called the P-51s, stressed pilots, flight crews, and support personnel. “The newer men,” like Sears, however, led with their enthusiasm: “Eager is hardly the word for it!”¹⁷

For the 434th Fighter Squadron, the training and early operation of the P-51 Mustangs involved the loss of life and property. “We are finally getting the hang of our new P-51s, although the cost of learning has been terrific,” Lieutenant Colonel Herren reported.¹⁸ In late September, squadron pilots crashed four new airplanes. Two 434th Fighter Squadron flyers died while training on the P-51 Mustangs. Then, on October 2, 1944—during one of the unit’s early combat missions employing a mix of P-51s and P-38s—First Lieutenant Quentin S. Pavlock crashed his P-51 Mustang upon takeoff. The ensuing aviation fuel fire consumed the pilot. The accident, visible to all the men at the USAAF station, just days before Sears’s first combat mission, deeply affected the men. Thereafter, officers organized a period during which “no operational missions were flown, the Squadron confining all activity to training flights and turning over the last of the P-38s to [US authorities stationed at] Burtonwood.”¹⁹ By the time Second Lieutenant Sears flew his

¹⁵ Maurer Maurer, ed., *Combat Squadrons of the Air Force, World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1982), 536–37.

¹⁶ For a comparison of the airplanes from the 434th Fighter Squadron perspective, see Stanaway, *479th Fighter Group*, 63–72.

¹⁷ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, September 1944, Frame 519, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, October 1944, Frame 628, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

first combat mission on October 7, 1944, the squadron exclusively employed North American P-51 Mustangs.

The Air War: “Flak is very scary.”

Part of the Eighth US Air Force, the 479th Fighter Group’s primary mission involved protecting US bombers over Europe.²⁰ American bombers struck targets on the continent during the day; British aircraft bombed Germany at the night. In 1942 and 1943, the German air force inflicted heavy losses on American bomber formations. Prewar US strategic bombing doctrine held that bombers could protect themselves from enemy attacks. Early results upset those assumptions and demonstrated the need for fighter escorts in enemy airspace. Thereafter, American fighters began flying with the bombers; early fighter escorts stayed near their “big friends” to defend against German fighters. Then, in 1944, USAAF officials adopted an innovative approach bomber protection: close *and* roving long-range fighter escorts. The new system continued the practice of dispatching fighters to stay with the bombers while adding roving US fighter squadrons to intercept, pursue, and destroy opposing aircraft. In short, USAAF officers used the bomber formations as bait to draw out German fighters—now targets for the roving escorts, untethered from direct responsibility for defending individual bombers. The new US approach decimated the German fighter force. In short order, the Allies achieved air superiority over Europe: a function of new tactics (roving escorts), planes (P-51s), and industrial output (overall aircraft production). For Eugene Sears and other USAAF flyers, however, the air war remained a very dangerous affair.

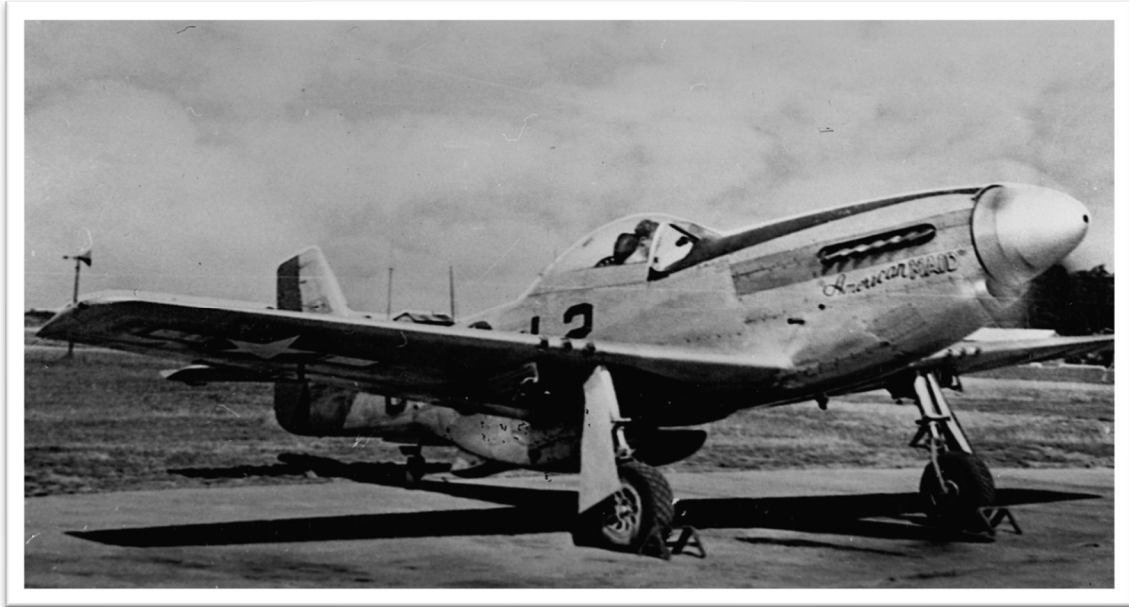
Given the 479th Fighter Group’s mission, Lieutenant Eugene Sears mostly flew escort missions during World War II—close or roving assignments as ordered by Eighth US Air Force mission planners. Periodically, the 434th Fighter Squadron also undertook strafing, sweeping, and photo reconnaissance sorties. At any given moment, the 434th Fighter Squadron included about 60 officers and 260 enlisted men. In addition to combat pilots, the unit included mechanics, air traffic controllers, quartermaster personnel, cooks, communication specialists, intelligence analysts, and mission planners. On a typical mission, the 434th Fighter Squadron deployed four flights (groups of four aircraft), or a total of sixteen airplanes. The unit often dispatched two spare airplanes on standby—to plug into the mission if one of the sixteen encountered mechanical problems before reaching the continent. An average mission for a P-51 pilot lasted between four and six hours. According to USAAF records, Lieutenant Eugene Sears logged 291 combat hours, about 60 missions, between October 1944 and April 1945.²¹

Fighter pilots flew a combat mission every two or three days. The routine began early—around 4:00 A.M.—with encrypted mission orders from Eighth Air Force headquarters. The 434th Fighter Squadron flyers woke up a short time later. As they made their way to the briefing room, one pilot remembered, “You could already hear the bombers forming up . . . because it took them so

²⁰ The Ninth US Air Force flew tactical missions in support of Allied ground forces.

²¹ Combat Mission Record, 434th Fighter Squadron, April 19, 1945, Box 3773, RG 18, NARA. For a complete list of Sears’s combat missions, see “Sears Missions, 434th Squadron, WWII,” Bradley Coleman, Excel Spreadsheet, March 6, 2023.

long” to get the large, four-engine airplanes aloft above southern England.²² After the mission brief, the pilots waited in the ready room; some played games to relax, other attended church services. “I prayed a lot,” Second Lieutenant Walter Milton Drake, a 434th Fighter Squadron pilot, recalled. “If you weren’t religious when you came [to the war], you became [religious] . . . you found it up in the air” during combat.”²³ When it was finally time to depart, the pilots moved to their aircraft on the flight line. There, mechanics, assigned to individual airplanes, helped the pilots prepare for takeoff. Tech Sergeant Eugene H. Shafer (Owen, WI) served as crew chief for Lieutenant Sears’s P-51, dubbed *American Maid* [P-51D-15 44-15317].²⁴



Lieutenant Eugene E. Sears in the cockpit of his P-51D Mustang American Maid at Wattisham Air Base, England, no date. (Source: Tabatt Collection, Cole Molesworth.)

Airborne, the squadron formed into flights, each with four aircraft. They then raced forward to connect with the slow-moving bombers, often over the English Channel. If assigned close escort duty, the fighters employed a box-shaped weaving maneuver to protect the bomber formations, ready to block incoming aircraft. Roving escorts would hold back, awaiting opportunities to ambush and pursue enemy flyers. Over the bombing target, the P-51s often maneuvered to observe ground damage for USAAF assessments (bomb damage reports) of the mission’s success. The fighters then escorted the bombers back to England. At the end of the mission, the pilots returned to Wattisham Air Base. There, the ground crew greeted the men and ascertained

²² Richard M. Lunstrum Oral History, Video, 00:21:00, Richard M. Lunstrum Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²³ Walter Milton Drake Oral History, Video, 00:24:50, Walter Milton Drake Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁴ Sears pictured with T/Sgt Shafer in *479th Fighter Group* (US Army Air Forces, 1946), 73. The 479th Fighter Group pictorial history is available at Frame 336, Reel A1718, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA. Sergeants Frank M. Kinney and Alfred A. Atwell also worked to maintain the airplane. Fairfield, *The 479th Fighter Group in World War II*, 479.

the condition of the aircraft. USAAF intelligence officers debriefed the pilots at the end of the day.²⁵

Lieutenant Sears flew his first combat mission on Saturday, October 7, 1944. Following the predawn mission brief, the squadron took off at 9:15 A.M., to escort B-17 bombers to Brux, Czechoslovakia. It was the longest mission assigned to the 479th Fighter Group since joining the war. The operation involved forty-nine aircraft from various elements of the 479th Fighter Group, including seventeen P-51s from the 434th Fighter Squadron. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Sidney Woods, the fighters raced forward to rendezvous with a formation of B-17s bombers. Lieutenant Sears flew as a wingman to Red Flight leader Lieutenant Claire A. Duffie, one of the original 434th Fighter Squadron [P-38] pilots. In the sky above the continent, among a vast column of heavy bombers, the 434th Fighter Squadron had trouble locating the exact group of US bombers they had been assigned to protect. They moved up and down the formation, comprising hundreds of bombers, for over an hour before finding their “big friends.” Above Leipzig, Germany, a group of 30 enemy aircraft jumped the column. Major Arthur Jeffrey, Yellow Flight leader, gave chase, shooting down one Me 109. As instructed, Lieutenant Sears stayed close to the B-17s. At several points—especially above the target—the Americans encountered heavy, albeit inaccurate, antiaircraft fire. Pilots with the 434th Fighter Squadron observed at least seven B-17s lost to ground fire at Brux. On the flight back to England, the fighter pilots stayed with the bombers, several of which were in distress. At least one heavily damaged B-17 crashed on the return flight; the fighter pilots reported that four (of ten) B-17 crewman parachute to safety. Around 2:00 P.M., near the English Channel, the 434th Fighter Squadron broke from the formation, sweeping along the Belgium coastline to locate a downed US flyer—and other targets of opportunity. Finding none, the fighter pilots returned to Wattisham Air Base, landing at 3:28 P.M. All the 434th Fighter Squadron flyers survived the mission. For Sears, it was an eventful introduction to the European air war.²⁶

By the time Sears started flying over Europe, the Germans lacked the resources to contest most Allied bombing missions, although the American pilots occasionally tangled with large numbers of German fighters. The 434th Fighter Squadron also encounter German jet fighters; the first 434th Fighter Squadron sighting of a Me 262 occurred during the autumn of 1944. Sears likely saw a German jet fighter for the first time during a mission on November 11, 1944. To be sure, twin-engine Me 262 remained an experimental platform. Referred to as “Blow-jobs” by 434th Fighter Squadron pilots, the Me 262s nonetheless represented a major leap forward in aircraft technology. “For their sheer speed at altitude these Jerry craft seem to have us outclassed,” a squadron officer wrote in October 1944, “but . . . they cannot turn and maneuver with an Allied aircraft, so we are not afraid to tackle them.”²⁷ Other pilots in the 434th Fighter Squadron reacted differently. “The first time I saw one of these babies [Me 262] go through our squadron, it scared

²⁵ *479th Fighter Group* (US Army Air Forces, 1946), 11–18.

²⁶ Combat Mission Report, Field Order 600, 434th Fighter Squadron, October 7, 1944, Box 3771, RG 18, NARA.

²⁷ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, October 1944, Frame 628, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

the hell out of me—what in the hell was that?” Lieutenant Richard Lunstrum recalled.²⁸ A P-51 enthusiast, Lieutenant Sears must have respected the capabilities of the new jet aircraft.

German antiaircraft fire posed a greater hazard to American flyers during Sears’s time over Europe. “Flak is very scary,” a 434th Fighter Squadron pilot admitted. “You’re flying along and all of the sudden you’re surrounded by black puffs [of deadly shrapnel]—you don’t know they’re coming. With the enemy [aircraft], you see them coming and you’re prepared for it . . . but flak” came with no warning.²⁹ Antiaircraft fire ripped bombers apart, especially near heavily protected military and industrial targets. The North American P-51 Mustang, critics noted, was especially vulnerable to flak because it had only one, liquid cooled engine. Even an indirect hit on a P-51 engine imperiled the aircraft and pilot.³⁰

German flak strikes B-17 bombers from the Eighth US Air Force over Europe, no date. (Source: US Air Force Photo Number 26507AC, NARA)



Friendly fire also posed a risk to American fighter pilots. On Christmas Day, 1944—as Sears downed an Me 109—American ground forces shot down two low flying P-51s from the 434th Fighter Squadron. As the Battle of the Bulge raged, Americans mistook the P-51s for German aircraft. The incident killed one American pilot and landed another in a German prisoner of war

²⁸ Oral History Richard M. Lunstrum, Video, 00:24:50, Richard M. Lunstrum Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁹ Clarence Gilbert Haynes Oral History, Audio, 00:11:50, Clarence Gilbert Haynes Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁰ See, for example, Stanaway, *479th Fighter Group*, 65.

camp. Skittish gunners aboard US bombers, too, occasionally fired on escort aircraft during World War II. During a mission on February 21, 1945, for example, gunners aboard three B-24 bombers blasted Sears and others in the 434th Fighter Squadron.³¹ None of the fighter aircraft sustain serious damage.

The challenges of long-range, high-altitude missions likewise posed risks to the US fighter pilots. On at least two occasions, mechanical problems forced Lieutenant Sears to abort—and return to Wattisham. During a bomber escort mission on November 11, 1944, Sears and seven others from the 434th Fighter Squadron ran out of fuel. They landed at a US airfield near Brussels, Belgium. The layover in Brussels was likely an acceptable diversion from Lieutenant Sears's normal routine.³² "Several pilots landed at Brussels and other places on the continent," the squadron commander reported earlier. "As a result of their descriptions all are now clamoring for the right to spend a six-day leave there."³³ Then, in January, Sears and another pilot encountered problems with their onboard oxygen systems, necessary for flying at high altitudes. The two pilots therefore dropped down to the ground and searched for "targets of opportunity." In the process, Sears destroyed a railroad locomotive and "goods wagon."³⁴

The weather shaped the tempo of combat operations, especially during the winter of 1944–1945. According to unit records, conditions were particularly disagreeable in late January 1945. "There was a week's idleness from the 21st to the 28th" of January 1945. "The weather did not permit any kind of aeronautical operations," the squadron reported. "With fog so thick that it could be cut with a knife, and such an abundance of the stuff! There was not even a liberty run, much less a combat mission! Then, there is the snow to content with. This is reported to be the coldest winter in 47 years in Europe . . . and everyone is inclined to agree. The word 'cold' does not adequately describe the weather, so these are added: freezing, unbearable, intolerable, marrow-biting, spine-chilling." The squadron conducted an uneventful, "routine [escort] mission" on January 29. Thereafter, "we did nothing but sit and watch the snow melt and hope for the return of mild weather."³⁵

In early 1945, USAAF commanders promoted Eugene E. Sears to first lieutenant. With the promotion came additional leadership duties, such as assistant flight commander and flight commander responsibilities.³⁶ The promotion reflected his skill and ability as a combat pilot and

³¹ Combat Mission Report, Field Order 1647-A, 434th Fighter Squadron, February 21, 1945, Box 3772, RG 18, NARA.

³² Combat Mission Report, Field Order 1323-A, 434th Fighter Squadron, November 11, 1944, Box 3772, RG 18, NARA.

³³ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, October 1944, Frame 628, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

³⁴ Combat Mission Report, Field Order 1521-A, 34th Fighter Squadron, January 16, 1945, Box 3772, RG 18, NARA.

³⁵ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, January 1945, Frame 1456, Reel B0636, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

³⁶ See, for example, General Order No. 4, 434th Fighter Squadron, March 2, 1945, Frame 618, Reel B0637, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

leader. It was also an expression of the 434th Fighter Squadron commander's trust and confidence in Eugene Sears. Along those lines, in February 1945, USAAF officers sent Lieutenant Sears to the Rolls Royce Company's Pilots Engine Handling Course in Derby, England.³⁷ Back in action in late February, First Lieutenant Sears participated in a dangerous attack on a German air force base. To maximize USAAF losses to ground fire, the German fighter command concentrated operational and dummy aircraft at remote sites; they surround the airplanes with antiaircraft guns, rightly expecting to inflict heavy losses on American attack fighters. During a sweeping mission on February 20, 1945—Sears's first mission as a flight leader—the 434th Fighter Squadron struck one of the new German air force installations. Amid a harrowing barrage of flak, Sears destroyed one German Do 217 twin-engine light bomber on the ground.³⁸ It was Sears's second of two confirmed victories of World War II.³⁹



A P-51 Mustang (top) flies close escort for B-17 bombers from the Eighth US Air Force over Germany, March 20, 1945. (Source: US Air Force Photo Number K3222, NARA)

³⁷ Special Orders No. 34, 479th Fighter Squadron, February 3, 1945, Frame 137, Reel B0637, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

³⁸ Combat Mission Report, Field Order 1642-A, 434th Fighter Squadron, February 20, 1945, Box 3772, RG 18, NARA.

³⁹ Confirmation of Victory Credits Board, Report No. 5, March 6, 1945, 65th Fighter Wing, Box 3771, RG 18, NARA.

Lieutenant Sears flew his last combat mission on Thursday morning, April 19, 1945—patrolling the area between Brandenburg (near Berlin) and Leipzig, Germany. The German air force offered no resistance. The mission leader, Captain Donald Pierce, described the sortie as “absolutely uneventful,” noting that “reported bogies turned out to be us.” Sears served as a flight leader during that mission, during which the flyers “encountered two [Soviet] MIG 3s who almost spun out wagging wings in their anxiety to be recognized. Appeared to be a handy little crate.”⁴⁰ The European War ended nineteen days later.

Overall, the 479th Fighter Group lost forty-four pilots during combat operations in World War II. Many others were taken prisoner after being shot down over Europe; several died as the result of flying accidents.⁴¹ For his service, First Lieutenant Sears received the Air Medal with Eight Oak Leaf Clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. USAAF airmen received the Air Medal for “meritorious achievement.” In England, Eighth US Air Force fighter pilots, such as Sears, received the Air Medal upon the successful completion of ten combat missions. Thereafter, flyers received an Oak Leaf Cluster for every additional set of ten missions and/or victory (destruction of enemy aircraft) in combat. Sears received the Air Medal on December 4, 1944.⁴² Thereafter, commanders added Oak Leaf Clusters during the spring of 1945. Later, after Germany surrendered, Eighth US Air Force leaders awarded Sears the Distinguished Flying Cross, a higher award for “heroism or extraordinary achievement.” USAAF commanders may have delivered the Distinguish Flying Cross to Sears for a specific, heroic action during combat. More likely, he received the award for his overall record of performance during combat.⁴³

Life at Wattisham: “It was a beautiful place.”

When not flying, Lieutenant Eugene Sears lived at Wattisham Air Base in southeast England. The Royal Air Force built the base during the 1930s. It included modern infrastructure, brick quarters, mess hall, and a theater. The British turned the base over to USAAF officials in September 1942.⁴⁴ “I almost feel guilty when I tell you where we stayed in England,” one pilot from the 434th Fighter Squadron admitted. “It was a beautiful place.”⁴⁵ Many USAAF pilots and crew lived in tents across southern England; the 134th Infantry Regiment, Sears’s original unit, endured rough conditions on the front lines. At Wattisham, however, the pilots and groundcrew

⁴⁰ Combat Mission Report, Field Order 2024-A, 434th Fighter Squadron, April 19, 1945, Box 3772, RG 18, NARA.

⁴¹ Appendix 7, “Pilots Lost,” Fairfield, *The 479th Fighter Group in World War II*, 477–478.

⁴² “Awards and Decorations,” 434th Fighter Squadron, December 1944, Frame 1341, Reel B0636, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

⁴³ Barry L. Spink, “Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal Criteria in the Army Air Forces in World War II,” US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, March 4, 2010. Online at <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Timelines/World%20War%20II/WWIIDFCandAirMedalCriteriaChronological.pdf?ver=2016-09-16-111147-907> (accessed May 11, 2023)

⁴⁴ See photo essay “Wattisham AAF Station F-377,” in Fairfield, *The 479th Fighter Group in World War II*, 36–53.

⁴⁵ Richard M. Lunstrum Oral History, Video, 00:36:30, Richard M. Lunstrum Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

occupied steam-heated buildings. In the officers' quarters, where Sears lived, two pilots shared a room; the hall included communal showers and bathrooms. According to historian Terry Fairfield, Sears roomed with Cecil "Gail" E. Jacobson, one of the other young pilots who joined the 434th Fighter Squadron in September 1944.⁴⁶

Lieutenant Sears's arrival coincided with the onset of cold weather. "The advent of winter [in early October] necessitated a frantic delving into barracks bags, bed rolls and parachute bags for the much-desired GI long drawers, woolen," a 434th Fighter Squadron officer wrote. The men shuffled around the base "garbed in long underwear, a heavy shirt, several jackets and a scarf." On the night of October 6, the eve of Sears's first mission, several experienced officers, including Captain Robin Olds, one of the most celebrated US fighter pilots of World War II, talked to the newer pilots about "their personal experiences in combat." Lieutenant Sears likely attended the event, which "include chocolate ice cream and devil's-food cake . . . and the ubiquitous buzz-bomb alert."⁴⁷



434th Fighter Squadron pilots in the ready room at Wattisham Air Base, no date. (Source: 479th Fighter Group [US Army Air Forces, 1946])

Wattisham Air Base lay in the flight path [Calais to London] of German V1 long-range rockets, powered by pulse-jet engines, commonly referred to as "buzz bombs" or "doodlebugs." The rocket attacks on southeast England were frequent around the time of Sears's arrival. "For the past few days, as regular as clock work, the 'Buzz Bomb Express' roars over the field," one officer wrote in September 1944. "Most of them continue on their way and explode so far away that we don't notice, but a few have had their engine cut out close enough so that the explosions

⁴⁶ Fairfield, *The 479th Fighter Group in World War II*, 218.

⁴⁷ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, October 1944, Frame 628, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

shook the buildings.”⁴⁸ The V1 attacks continued until Allied ground forces overran the launch sites along the European coast; later, more sophisticated V2 missiles hit England. No reports of losses at Wattisham Air Base due to these attacks.

During his spare time, Lieutenant Eugene Sears enjoyed sketching and painting. He must have taken a sketchbook to England in 1944; he might have bought additional art supplies from local stores. In 1944, Sears used his artistic skills to customize three P-51 Mustangs. “Lt. Sears did his own artwork on the nose of the plane [American Maid] he flew” during World War II, historian Terry Fairfield noted. “He also did the art on two other P-51s”—Gail Jacobson’s *Burn ’n for Bernie* and Richard D. Creighton’s *Super Wabbit*.⁴⁹ “My dad was an artist, all of his life, including prewar, and even during high school,” Bradbury Sears remembers. “He [Eugene] ended up being a commercial artist and photographer” after the war. “In today’s terms, that would be a graphic designer without the computer,” his son added.⁵⁰

Personnel from the 434th Fighter Squadron enjoyed holidays at the base. “Thanksgiving Day—Thursday, 23rd November—and turkey with all the trimmings. Life is indeed rough in the E.T.O.,” Major Arthur Jeffrey concluded.⁵¹ They also organized social events at the base. “We would have squadron parties,” Lieutenant Lumstrum remembered, involving “dance and dinner.” “We would find dates to come in—and we had a place on the base for them to stay over [night].” But whereas other units relied on English companions, the 434th Fighter Squadron attracted American women from London. According to Lumstrum, the father of one 434th Fighter Squadron pilot worked at the US embassy in London, providing introductions to female employees. “So we would have the *American* girls—who worked as clerks and secretaries in the embassy—come up and be our dates.”⁵² The squadron threw one such part on Sunday evening, December 2, 1944. “They [officers] brought their lovelies from London and all over the East Anglian sector and dined, danced, and drank,” according to Major Jeffrey. “The shin-dig took place in the Pilot’s Room, and overflowed into the Operations and Engineering sections, where the couples danced to the tunes that the Hitcham dance-band beat out. Whattatime, whattatime!”⁵³

Wattisham Air Base offered USAAF personnel an assortment of amenities and recreational activities, such as a sports field, lounge, and movie theater. The ready room for pilots included books, games (such as chess), and magazines—and a very popular ping-pong table. Men listened to the British broadcast (and Germany’s English-language propaganda) on radios around the

⁴⁸ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, September 1944, Frame 519, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

⁴⁹ Fairfield, *The 479th Fighter Group in World War II*, 218.

⁵⁰ Brad Sears to Ryan Edgar, email, April 15, 2023.

⁵¹ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, November 1944, Frame 628, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

⁵² Richard M. Lunstrum Oral History, Video, 00:36:30, Richard M. Lunstrum Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵³ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, December 1944, Frame 727, Reel A0809, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

base. Popular movies played at the theater on most nights. In early 1945, USAAF morale and welfare staff began offering academic classes to members of the 479th Fighter Group. The courses in February 1945 included French, psychology, and small business administration.⁵⁴ The men of the 434th Fighter Squadron enjoyed liberty in the nearby town of Ipswich, England, the site of a large United Service Organization (USO) facility. “The [USO] girls were good looking,” Lieutenant Walter Drake remembered. “It was a fun place to go to.”⁵⁵ USO shows at Wattisham Air Base during World War II included appearances by Bob Hope and other famous American entertainers. On occasion, men from the 434th Fighter Squadron received permission to explore the United Kingdom. Most US servicemen went to London, an easy train ride from the station in Ipswich. The men typically stayed at the Red Cross building in Piccadilly Circus.⁵⁶ Overall, considering the facilities, amenities, and entertainments, one 434th Fighter Squadron pilot concluded, “We were fortunate to be stationed at a permanent British fighter base.”⁵⁷

Victory in Europe: “The horrid sight of obliterated cities.”

The European War ended on Tuesday, May 8, 1945. “Mr. [Winston] Churchill announced over the wireless [radio] the end of hostilities in Europe,” known as V-E Day, Captain Donald D. Horton, 434th Fighter Squadron, wrote. Immediately thereafter, 479th Fighter Group commanders addressed the men at Wattisham. As Major Robin Olds spoke to the 434th Fighter Squadron, Horton noted, “the churchbells in all the remote little churches scattered throughout the [English] countryside gave way to wild and frantic ringing.” Then, “everyone proceeded to get as blotto [drunk] as possible.”⁵⁸

During the weeks that followed, the 479th Fighter Squadron prepared for redeployment to the Asia-Pacific Theater. Some 434th Fighter Squadron pilots, held as prisoners of war in Germany, returned to the base to visit friends before transitioning home. The daily regimen included lectures and films on the Pacific War; physical exercise; and flight training. But as the weeks progressed, the prospect of further combat diminished. Many experienced men returned to the United States for discharge. Wattisham Air Base, in turn, became a collecting site for unwanted aircraft and equipment from other units—their personnel returned to the United States. Then, in August 1945, following two USAAF atomic strikes on Japan, Tokyo surrendered, ending World War II. A short time later, First Lieutenant Eugene Sears left the 434th Fighter Squadron for

⁵⁴ “Leisure Learning,” February 18, 1945, 479 Fighter Group, Frame 1784, Reel B0636, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA.

⁵⁵ Walter Milton Drake Oral History, Video Recording, 00:27:00, Walter Milton Drake Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵⁶ Richard M. Lunstrum Oral History, Video, 00:38:20, Richard M. Lunstrum Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵⁷ Clarence Gilbert Haynes Oral History, Audio, 00:18:50, Clarence Gilbert Haynes Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵⁸ Squadron History, 434th Fighter Squadron, May 1945, Frame 663, Reel B0637, Microfilm Collection, RG 342, NARA. Major Olds served as squadron commander from March to August 1945.

another assignment. As the 479th Fighter Group prepared for deactivation, Sears volunteered to stay on duty with the US military in Europe.⁵⁹

*German civilians walking
through the ruins of Wiesbaden,
Germany, 1946. (Source: US
Air Force Photograph Number
60569AC, NARA)*



In early 1946, Eugene sent an update to his mother in Beatrice, Nebraska. The text of the letter, written from Wiesbaden, Germany (near Frankfurt), appeared in the local newspaper on January 23. The building next to his hotel, Sears reported, “is now a heap of rubble as is much of the city. . . which has a bad smell from breaks in the sewage lines due to bombing. After watching our bombs fall on this city it is interesting to visit it.” Sears continued:

Noticed many American cemeteries on our way here [to Germany]. They are very nicely laid out. From the air the rows on rows of white crosses stand out against the lawn and clipped hedges. They appear to be very well kept up. Also all through western France and Luxembourg can still very clearly be seen the hundreds of trenches in crooked crawling lines, grim reminders of the 1914–18 war [World War I]. Here and there are the newer looking holes and bomb damage of the war just ended.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “With our Neighbors in Uniform,” *Beatrice Daily Sun*, January 6, 1946, 8.

⁶⁰ Eugene E. Sears, “Photos, Words Can’t Tell All,” *Beatrice Daily Sun*, January 23, 1946, 8.

The Allies achieved aerial superiority over Europe during World War II, a necessary precondition for victory. The strategic bombing campaign wrecked the German fighter command, immobilized German ground forces, and damaged the German economy. Lieutenant Eugene E. Sears and the 434th Fighter Squadron hastened the ending of the European War by protecting US bombers. Sears returned to the United States aboard the troop transport ship USS *General Anderson* in March 1946.⁶¹ Like many other veterans, he did not talk much about his wartime experience.⁶² Even so, his service advanced the Allied cause; it likewise shaped his interests and character during the years that followed. “If all the people fully realized the horrid sight of obliterated cities and could see the immense cemeteries of our war dead, there’d be no more wars,” Sears concluded. “But mere pictures or words cannot tell it all.”⁶³

⁶¹ “With our Neighbors in Uniform,” *The Beatrice Times*, February 21, 1946, 3.

⁶² Cynthia L. Hallen, “The Essence of Elmo,” May 1, 2023; and “Eugene Sears Obituary,” *The Arizona Republic*, September 20, 2017.

⁶³ Eugene E. Sears, “Photos, Words Can’t Tell All,” *Beatrice Daily Sun*, January 23, 1946, 8.