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Double Nickel Killers

LATE WAR AERIAL COMBAT WITH THE 55TH FIGHTER GROUP

BY **JAMES P. BUSHA**

The early strategy of the 8th Air Force fighter groups was to stay with the bombers, escort them, save them, and to not leave them and go chasing after the Luftwaffe. That all changed when General Jimmy Doolittle took over in early 1944. The motto quickly changed to "Get rid of the Luftwaffe!" We were turned loose to go down on the deck and strafe our way back home. We went looking for everything—boats, trucks, troops, flak towers and airfields—especially airfields.—*Maj. Gen. Edward B. Giller, USAF (Ret.)*

Achtung **Mustang! The last view many Luftwaffe pilots had before being shot down. This P-51 is painted in the markings of the 55th Fighter Group that was flown by R.E. Welch. (Photo by Jim Koepnick/EAA)**

Mistels in the mist

February 3, 1945

2nd Lt. Richard G. Gibbs

343rd Fighter Squadron, 55th Fighter Group

I was flying my third combat mission of the war as Tudor White 2 on a bomber escort mission near Boizenburg, Germany. I was flying a P-51 Mustang on the right wing of Group Commander Lt. Col. Elwyn Righetti, with two other Mustangs flying on his left wing. Our squadron was released from the bombers and we began to let down through the overcast and broke out at around 2,000 feet looking for targets of opportunity. Our section was about to go after some locomotives when Lt. Col. Righetti called out a gaggle of three Fw 190-Ju 88 bomber combos. We called them Mistels or Pick-a-Backs—an Fw 190 perched atop an explosive-packed pilotless Ju 88 flying bomb. From a distance, they resembled a swollen bomber to me.

The three of them were in a sloppy V formation at about 600 feet flying through the mist as Lt. Col. Righetti and I broke away and went after them while the other two Mustangs went after the trains. Lt. Col. Righetti went after the middle combo of the three Mistels and told me to take the third one. I put the proper wingspan in my ranging K-14 gunsight and cranked the handle around to get the correct piper size around the Ju 88. I began to fire and observed hits dancing around the left engine and wing root as the Ju 88 began to burn. As soon as my rounds impacted the Ju 88, the Fw 190 turned himself loose and

pulled up fairly steeply. For a moment I thought he stalled out as he went into a left-hand turn.

I was really moving and was closing on him pretty fast as I began to fire. I observed hits along the right rear and right wing root area and observed parts of the cowling and canopy fly off. I quit shooting at about 100 yards away and went zipping by him as I ducked under his right wing, missing him by 25 feet. My concern was that this guy was now behind me and he would start shooting at me at any second. I reefed the Mustangs nose up hard and pulled into the overcast. I rolled over and came back down inverted, making a hard

Right: Ju 88/Mistel is caught by 1Lt. Dick Gibb's gun camera during the air combat of February 3, 1945. Already smoking, the Junkers Flying bomb is soon to be going down in flames. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

Below: One of a number of "flying bomb" concoctions attempted during WW II, the Fw 190/Ju 88 parasitic fighter-bomber conversion was technically successful, but operationally non-effective. Over 250 were assembled, but only a few hard targets, primarily bridges, were destroyed in combat. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

turn and saw the two fires from the Ju 88 and 190 burning on the ground. It was only after I saw my combat film later that I saw that the German 190 pilot was in the process of bailing out when I went zooming past him. Lt. Col Righetti claimed two Ju 88 and an Fw 190 destroyed. Unbeknownst to us at the time, another wave of Mistels was behind us and these were attacked by the other Tudor White Mustang element.

Fiery encounters

February 3, 1945
1st Lt. Bernard H. Howes
Tudor White 3

At about 1230 we dropped to the deck to strafe. On pulling up from the first pass on a locomotive, I sighted a formation of three Pick-a-Backs, Fw 190s on Ju 88s, in string formation at about 400 feet. I turned into the second combo with my wingman, Lt. Moore, behind me. I fired a short burst from 90 degrees at about 350 yards, observing a few strikes on the 190. As I fired on this, the 190 on the third unit was released. The prop was windmilling, and on release, the 190 seemed to nose up for a minute and then, apparently out of control, the nose went down and it headed for the ground. I claimed this Fw 190 as destroyed.

As soon as the 190 was released, the 88 turned sharply left. I followed, firing a short burst, but observing no strikes. I fell outside the turn and lost sight of the 88 momentarily. My wingman behind me was in position and shot the 88 down. When I looked back, I saw it crash into the ground. On pulling up, I saw the first unit I had fired at about 300 yards in front of me. There were flames coming out of the 190, so I went after it again. I fired another large burst and flames came from the 190. On making a second pass, the right engine of the 88 burst into flame, and I saw them both crash into the ground. From this entire encounter I claim two Fw 190s and one Ju 88.

April showers

April 9, 1945
Maj. Edward B. Giller
343rd Fighter Squadron

I had been leading Tudor White flight and we had just been turned loose from the bombers somewhere south of Munich at about 20,000 feet. I looked down and observed a Me 262 being chased by a pack of Mustangs. By this time in the war we had been well versed on the 262's tactics of drawing the Mustangs away from the bombers, dropping our tanks to give chase while the 262 zoomed away from us. After we turned for home, low on fuel, they had free reign on the bombers. The great weakness of the 262 though was its lack of fuel capacity and I knew this guy below me would run out of gas soon; sooner or later they had to go in and land and that was the only way to catch them, unless of course they were asleep at the wheel.

With our bombers being escorted by another group, I thought, "Ok. Let's just see what we can do with this guy."

My wingman and I dropped our tanks, pushed our noses over and poured the coal to our Mustangs. We certainly had the height advantage as the 262 was now at 5,000 feet. As I went zooming down, I looked at my airspeed indicator and saw that I was doing 500mph as I quickly overtook the pursuing P-51s and kept on going. I finally caught up to the 262—he was on final to land at the Munich-Riem airfield with his flaps down and wheels hanging out. He was still in the air when I gave him a pretty strong burst from my six .50 caliber machine guns. I stayed on the deck as I zipped past him while every German on the ground with a gun began to fire at me. I was moving way too fast and the gunners couldn't compensate as their rounds stayed 10 feet behind me. I looked back and saw the 262 belly in hard at about 200mph. I stayed low and fast for the next 30 miles and then rejoined my flight.

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It was after the war that I had the opportunity to speak with Luftwaffe Gen. Adolf Galland while he was a POW on our airbase. Through an interpreter at dinner one night, I told Galland about my jet encounter and he said he remembered the incident. Galland told me the 262 pilot survived the crash but he disappeared the very next day, hightailing into Switzerland, never to be seen again. I kind of felt sorry for the 262 guys who were always outnumbered, always low on fuel and knew that when it was time to land, they would have six to eight Mustangs circling overhead ready to pounce on them.

Having dispensed with the jets on Munich-Riem and discovering that the flak was very heavy, White and Red flights of our squadron flew

Below: Discovered in the forests around "Dreaded Merseberg," this unmarked Me 262 was possibly assigned as a last ditch effort to protect the vital Luana Oil Refinery corridor that was the target of numerous 8th AF raids. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

to 3,000 feet south of Munich, waiting for the bombers to knock out some flak on the airfield. While I was down low, I observed a tug towing an He 111 south along the autobahn. He was heading for the woods, which were on both sides of the road. I noticed 75 to 100 enemy aircraft of all types dispersed in the woods on the shoulders of the autobahn. After receiving permission to shoot up a few, I called my Red flight, led by Capt. Welch to set up a pattern from west to east, and then I started down.

a 20mm shell came through my canopy and detonated above my left shoulder. It felt as though I had been hit by a sledgehammer!

The first aircraft was at the south end of the woods and I got some good strikes but could start no fire. I made a total of four passes from east to west, hitting a different target each time. My second pass was made on a Me 262; I observed a good concentration of hits and it burst into flame. The next pass was against a Me 410; there were strikes all over it and it too began to burn. On the last pass I hit another 410 and observed many strikes and a large plume of heavy black smoke rising from it. As I pulled up from my last pass, I saw a He 111 with the tug still attached. It was sitting on the north side of the woods and I put a short burst into it as I received a nice explosion in return in the right wing root and engine nacelle area. Since I was now out of ammunition, I called the flight together and we started out for home.

Above: An impressive post-war lineup of the 55th's 343rd FS Mustangs as they lined up for an inspection at Wormingford prior to moving to occupation duties at AAF Station Kaufbeuren, Germany, on July 22, 1945. With 600 combat missions, the 55th's pilots destroyed over 400 enemy aircraft with 16 aces credited with 90 victories. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

over **752**
number of German aircraft destroyed on the ground by 8th Air Force Fighter Groups on April 16, 1945—the largest single day total of the war.

Flak trap on the autobahn

April 16, 1945
Maj. Edward B. Giller
343rd Fighter Squadron

There was an old saying that used to be written on the wall behind our squadron bar that read, "Just One More Pass"—the last words of many fighter pilots who thought they could fool the German gunners just one more time. Our fighter losses were much higher during strafing attacks than they were during air-to-air combat—you were always flying through a gauntlet of German guns. And on this mission it seemed as if every gunner in Germany was waiting for us. The trouble for me was that I thought I could get away with it—boy, was I wrong!

From those deep penetration missions we would tour Germany at 200 feet cruising along at 250mph only pulling our noses up to avoid tress and church steeples hoping to catch a German airplane flying along. We were south of Munich on a big fighter sweep looking for airfields to shoot up. The Germans must have got wise to our tactics and began to disperse their aircraft elsewhere. I separated my section into elements as we went tooling along above the autobahn. We hit pay dirt when we spotted all kinds of airplanes parked along the roadway. I called the others and told them to set up a race track pattern as I dove down and started shooting up airplanes. I hit a He 111 and a 109 on my first pass and returned for a second where I bagged a Ju 52. Feeling lucky, I made a third pass and sprayed a Ju 88—that's when my luck ran out.

I was only at 400 feet when a 20mm shell came through my canopy and detonated above my left shoulder. It felt as though I had been hit by a sledgehammer! I pushed the throttle forward and jerked my stick back as I zoomed out of there. There were metal fragments that made a fan shape throughout my cockpit and were embedded everywhere including my arm and shoulder. Most of the shell's energy was a single piece that slammed into the top of my parachute harness. Thankfully, there was a lot of nylon that absorbed the brunt of it because by the time it entered my shoulder, skidded across the front of my rib cage and exiting back out; most of its energy was gone. With my cockpit covered in blood, I called my wingman and said, "We're going home" and pointed the Mustang's nose west. I eventually made it back to England, but my combat flying was kaput—the war had ended before I could get back in to it.

Although strafing was a dangerous and often deadly thing, it was the bomber boys I felt most sorry for. It was said that you could plop a complete stranger down in a bar at any Allied base and within 30 seconds or less, they could tell the difference between a fighter base and a bomber base. One bunch of pilots was lively and full of excitement, smiling and slapping each other on the back saying, "We're going to fly again tomorrow!" Whereas the other group was less than enthusiastic and said, "Good god, I have to go back through that flak again tomorrow?" We at least could shoot back, zig and zag and zoom away. They unfortunately had to grin and bear it, so to speak.

Maj. Edward Giller CO of the 343rd Fighter Squadron is seen by his P-38 Lightning at Nuthampstead, England. One of the most respected pilots in the 55th Fighter Group, Giller flew 420 hours in combat and destroyed nine German aircraft. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

One pass too many

April 17, 1945

1st Lt. Richard G. Gibbs

343rd Fighter Squadron

I was flying Tudor White 3 and we had left the bomber stream in the target area as planned and set out hunting targets of opportunity. We headed about 160 degrees for 10 to 15 minutes when we sighted Kamenz airfield. We were at 9,000 feet and proceeded to the south side of the field. Two enemy aircraft were seen taking off, so Tudor Leader, Capt. Welch, and his wingman, Lt. Erby, started down after them. I started down, but seeing only the two enemy aircraft and lots of flak, I pulled back up to about 4,500 feet and started circling around the south and east side of the field. My wingman had gotten separated from me in the flak that was thrown up from the field. As I got to the north side, I saw more enemy aircraft taking off into the west. I picked one out and waited until he had gotten beyond the perimeter of flak. I dove on him from 3,000 feet, closed to about 500 yards and started firing. The 190 burst into flames and did a half-roll into the trees. We were only at about 100 to 200 feet high when he rolled in.

Right: Lt. Col. Elwyn "Eager El" Righetti CO of the 55th Fighter Group by his P-51D s/n 44-72227 CL+M *Katydid* at Wormingford, UK, February, 1945.
Below: Under attack by Lt. Col. Righetti, the German pilot bails out of his Mistel near Boizenburg, Germany on February 3, 1945. (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)

My Mustang became covered in oil so I pulled up to check it. I soon decided it was oil from the 190 I had just shot down, so I started a few climbing turns looking around for something else to latch on to. I spotted another 190 above me at about 4,000 feet and he was coming in about 90 degrees to me so I pulled my nose up and fired a burst into him from 200 yards away. I saw quite a few strikes on his wing as I passed underneath him and turned hard to the starboard. The 190 also did a 90-degree starboard turn and was now in a slight diving turn. I came in behind him and started to fire, getting strikes along the fuselage. The 190 continued in his dive and I passed him up at about 1,000 feet. I saw holes in his tail and the canopy had been jettisoned. The pilot was still inside looking out at me and by the time he hit the ground, the 190 caught fire immediately.

With my windscreen covered in oil and the rest of my squadron god knows where, I turned for home all alone and climbed to 15,000 feet. As I was flying along, looking for enemy fighters that might be lurking above me, I glanced out the side of the canopy and noticed these funny-looking things below me. I looked up through the clear top canopy and was stunned to see a box of B-17s above me with their bomb bay doors open—I was flying right over their target—Dresden! As I pushed the nose over, I realized that the funny-looking things I saw were bombs bursting below. After all I had been through, I certainly didn't want to become a victim of friendly fire!

That mission was bittersweet for me that day. Although I bagged a pair of Fw 190s, our 55th Fighter Group lost Lt. Col. Righetti that day to ground fire. He ended the war with 27 strafing victories and 7.5 aerial victories and although he had successfully bellied his Mustang in, his last words over the radio to us were, "I broke my nose, but I'm okay. I got nine today. Tell my family I'm okay. It's been swell working with you, gang. See you shortly."

That was the last time any of us heard from him. He had made multiple passes on that airfield and paid the ultimate price for it—making "just one more pass" before his death. ✢