



Hunting the **HUNTERS**

MEMORIES OF A NIGHT INTRUDER PILOT

BY **JAMES BUSH** AS TOLD TO BY **JAMES F. "LOU" LUMA**, FLYING OFFICER RCAF 418 SQUADRON, AND LATER FIRST LIEUTENANT USAAF 802ND RECONNAISSANCE GROUP

PHOTO BY JOHN DIBBS/PLANEPICTURE.COM

A high-angle, close-up photograph of a de Havilland Mosquito fighter-bomber in flight. The aircraft is shown from a low angle, highlighting its unique wing structure with no fuselage between the wings. The cockpit is visible on the left, showing a pilot wearing a yellow helmet. The aircraft is flying over a patchwork of green and brown fields, with a small town visible in the distance. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, suggesting a bright day. The overall composition is dynamic, emphasizing the speed and agility of the aircraft.

The seemingly endless air war over Europe did not stop when the sun went down. The skies over England came alive almost every night as British Bomber Command sent wave after wave of medium and heavy bombers to selected targets all over the Nazi-controlled continent. These bomber crews had to deal with an onslaught of blinding searchlights, deadly flak and the ruthless Night Hunters of the Luftwaffe. The Germans had perfected the use of aerial electronic equipment in their single- and twin-engine fighters to assist them in locating the British bomber stream. To counter the Luftwaffe's nightly terror reign over the incoming bombers, twin-engine de Havilland Mosquito fighter-bombers were sent out to seek and destroy the Luftwaffe night fighters. Here is the story of one such pilot who became an ace while hunting the hunters.



A chance meeting started it

In the summer of 1941, my mother and father had warned me about the dangers of hitchhiking, or taking rides from strangers, before I made my way across the U.S. from my home in Seattle. As I headed east with my thumb hanging out over the road, a fellow American who happened to be a sergeant pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), picked me up. As we drove across the country, the sergeant filled my head with flying

crewmates for the duration of my tour. We did our initial training in the Cessna “Bamboo Bombers” while still in Canada. When we arrived in England in the summer of 1943, we were assigned to 418 Squadron as night intruders. By today’s standards, I had very little flying experience; after all, I had just earned my wings and still had a lot to learn. But our commanders knew better than to leave us on the ground for too long because they thought we might run the risk of losing our edge.

THE NIGHT WAS BLACK AS WE CLIMBED TO OUR INITIAL ALTITUDE OF 100 FEET ... HUNTING TRAINS AT NIGHT WAS VERY RISKY

adventures and told me that the RCAF was actively enlisting Americans.

When he finally stopped the car to let me out, I did a 180-degree turn and headed back home to get my parents to sign a letter of permission. Soon afterwards, I found myself in Canada as a new recruit with the RCAF. In early 1943, I was reassigned to combat and told I would be flying the Mosquito. Heck, I didn’t know what a Mosquito was, let alone had ever seen one in Canada. I was just content to be able to fly something.

Enter the Mosquito

I knew at least that the Mosquito was a two-seat airplane because I was paired up with a navigator. His name was Colin Finlayson, and we would be

The Mosquito, at that time, was considered one of the fastest airplanes, if not the fastest, in the world pre-jet. The Mosquito I trained in had one set of controls as

I rode in the navigator’s seat and tried to absorb every word the instructor shouted to me over the noise of the powerful twin Rolls-Royce Merlin engines. The instructor taught us how to take off, bring it back around and then land it. Needless to say, the checkout was very minimal—it was the one and only time I flew with him. After that, I was all on my own.

A couple of things about flying the Mosquito took some getting used to. In order to get to the cockpit, you had to squeeze through a small door on the right side of the nose. Because the pilot sat higher in the left seat, the navigator sat lower in the right seat with all his navigational equipment directly in front of him. If the Mosquito had been hit and the debris or flak struck the navigator,



killing him or knocking him unconscious, it would be very dicey, if not impossible, for me to get out of the cockpit.

Once I got into the cockpit and sat in my seat, I found the layout of the instruments and flight controls to be quite pleasant. The control stick was a combination of a yoke with a single short stick mounted on top of it. On the stick itself, a series of buttons controlled the four 20mm Hispano cannon and four .303 machine guns imbedded in the nose under my feet. In the Mosquito, all you had to do was point the nose at your target and squeeze the trigger. When I flew the Mosquito at night, I was careful not to squeeze the trigger for more than one and a half seconds, as I didn't want to risk burning out the barrels from the hot lead racing out of them.

Another issue I had to deal with was the awesome power of the two Merlin engines turning two, three-blade big propellers in the same direction. Because the Mosquito had such a relatively small rudder, there was always a big swing of the nose on takeoff, and one foot had to rapidly move forward. Once I got the knack of it, it became second nature.

A Yank in the RCAF

In July 1943, I was reassigned to the USAAF as a first lieutenant, however, I ended up staying with the RCAF because I had already gone through operational training with Colin, and they didn't want to split us up. Besides, we became a very

close team as we prepared to make our first combat flight together.

The Mosquito Colin and I usually flew in had the nose art of a character from the comic strip "Lil Abner." Our Mosquito was adorned with the lovely, pipe-smoking, shot-gun-toting hillbilly girl named "Moonbeam McSwine." Because the Mosquito was made out of wood, some of the chaps in 418 Squadron referred to them as "Flying Furniture." But there was nothing fragile about this twin-engine fighter/bomber that could fly low and fast, in all kinds of weather, carry a hefty bomb load both internally and externally along with extra fuel in wing-mounted slipper tanks. All in all, I was delighted to fly the twin-engine wooden wonder.

Flying blind

The difference between the intruders we flew and the British night fighters was that they had onboard AI (airborne interception) radar and we didn't. The night fighters also had a line in the sand they couldn't cross, usually just before the continent, for fear that the AI radar they carried in their nose would fall into German hands. We, on the other hand, flew all our missions over the continent looking for targets of opportunity, German airfields and, of course, our counterparts—the Luftwaffe night fighters.

When we took off from our base at Ford, the night was black as we climbed to our initial altitude of 100 feet and proceeded towards the Channel.

British Aerospace Heritage Flights Mosquito T.III, RR299, seen prior to a display at the Flying Legends Air Show at Duxford Airfield in 1996. It was flown by test pilot Jon Davies. The last flying example of the type, prior to its accident the same year, this training aircraft lacked both armament and the glazed bomber nose, typical of the airtime examples. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

We also had a radar altimeter in the Mosquito to assist us as we neared the French coast, and Colin would call out the altitude to me. When we thought we were out of German gun range, we climbed to 1,000 feet and went looking for trains or anything else that moved in the shadows below. The German trains were easy to spot at first; you just looked for the open firebox as the engineer shoveled coal into it. But hunting trains at night was very risky. When we saw the glow of the coal fire, I would push the Mosquito over and aim for the flickering flames of the fire. Usually, a short burst from the cannon and machine guns was all it took, and Colin would yell for me to pull up. I remember one time after we had hit a train and it blew up, the ensuing explosion lit up the area as we raced overhead with our wings below the hills and treeline.

After a while, the Germans figured out our tactics and parked a decoy train near a bend in the tracks. As the unsuspecting Mosquito came down to attack the dummy train, the crew couldn't judge the rise in terrain fast enough and would slam into the side of the hill. After we began incurring Mosquito crew losses more frequently, we were ordered not to attack the trains anymore. In reality, it wasn't a very profitable operation. What was profitable, however, was hunting the Luftwaffe.

First victory

We took off from Ford at about 10 p.m. on a night intruder mission to the Steinhuder lake area in Germany near Hannover. Because of low-cloud haze, it was difficult for Colin to pick out our pinpoints on the way to the target. As we drew closer, we found an airfield with two sets of lights burning near the perimeter of the field. We orbited for a little while as we obtained our fix and found we were overflying Wunstorf. Nothing seemed to be moving as we headed south over the lake. Suddenly, we spotted two small white lights behind us on the far side of the airfield and turned around to investigate. The light was moving upward, and



I knew it was a German aircraft taking off; but why had the pilot left its light on?

But that was his worry not mine, and I began to stalk him from 5 miles away. As he began his climbout to reengage the bomber stream, I stayed 500 feet below his altitude and began to match his speed so I would not overshoot him. I saw he had one light on under the nose and one under the tail. I must have followed him for 15 to 20 miles as I began to close in. For whatever reason, I misjudged his speed from below and overshot him and did a quick figure-8 to port and another one to starboard, finding myself back on his tail. By this time, I could see the flame from his exhaust as I eased the nose of the Mosquito into him. Colin was along for the ride at this point and was busy keeping his fingers crossed as I brought my nose up from 500 feet below; at 250 yards away, I opened fire with both cannon and machine guns. In less

The Mosquito T.III RR299, powered by two Merlin engines, had astonishing performance, and could easily outpace and out climb a Spitfire fighter on takeoff. (Photo courtesy of John Dibbs/planepicture.com)





de Havilland Mosquito, EG•T MM417, No. 487 Squadron. The plane was finished in standard day fighter markings including sky codes and Medium Sea Grey spinners (illustration by Tom Tullis)

than three seconds, the once-dark silhouette I was chasing turned into an Me 410 engulfed in flame.

Colin observed it dive down and explode below. After finding no other night fighters, we turned for home and landed back at Ford around 3 a.m. The ground crew found some pieces of Me 410 embedded in the leading edge of my starboard wing; I guess I was closer than I thought!

I learned later that the 410 pilot had shot down a handful of British bombers that night and had returned to refuel. What he forgot to do, however, was turn his lights back off on takeoff and ended up committing the ultimate sin of a night fighter. His mistake was my fortune, as the Luftwaffe lost one more night fighter. This same scenario would be repeated again and again.

Second victory

Colin and I were scrambled to intercept a twin-engine, long-range He 177 maritime bomber that was returning from an Atlantic submarine patrol. British intelligence had found out where it was heading and the exact ETA (estimated time of arrival) of his intended landing back on occupied French soil; he never made it. Near Bordeaux, France, we found him as predicted and set him on fire easily; he crashed below. That was a relatively easy mission compared with our next aerial victory.

We almost shoot ourselves down

We were sent to Toulouse and Mont-de-Marsan in southern France on an anti-Luftwaffe training patrol. The Germans were using the cover of darkness to train their pilots and thought the skies around these bases would be safe. They thought wrong. As we flew near Pau on the Spanish border, Colin and I spotted an aircraft with a red light on its port wing. Colin identified it as an Fw 190 as we maneuvered in behind the single-engine

fighter and shot it down as if it was routine. In the ensuing explosion, however, we picked up a large piece of debris from the Fw 190 that tore into our starboard radiator. Five minutes later, while cruising in the darkness at 800 feet, we lost our starboard engine due to overheating.

I feathered the propeller and shut the engine down to let it cool. A little while later I unfeathered the prop, started the engine and climbed to 2,000 feet, when the engine quit for good. It would be a long trip on one engine over occupied territory as Colin plotted a course for home. Lucky for us, the German night fighters were flying elsewhere as we neared the French coast at St. Briec. I pushed

I OPENED FIRE WITH BOTH CANNON AND MACHINE GUNS. IN LESS THAN THREE SECONDS, THE ONCE DARK SILHOUETTE I WAS CHASING TURNED INTO AN ME 410 ENGULFED IN FLAME

Mosquito's nose over and dropped to 500 feet and flew at our usual Channel-crossing altitude.

The worst was yet to come, as we had to overfly one of the most heavily fortified areas on the coast. It reminded me of an earlier mission when we were returning to Ford, and our compass went out as we overflew Dieppe, another heavily defended town.

The pitch-black night sky was soon filled with searchlights and flak as every gun in the port city opened up on us, and night turned to day. To protect my vision, I ducked my head under the instrument panel as Colin held the map over my head so I wouldn't be blinded by the searchlights. Colin then guided me through the searchlights and away from the flak. I was twisting and turning the Mosquito, and at the same time I climbed and



Above: The Mosquitos of the 25th Bomb Group (R) were used in a variety of tasks where fast two-seater aircraft capable of carrying a reasonable payload were needed. This Mosquito XVI, MM345 of the 653rd Bomb Squadron was one of the first machines to be equipped with equipment capable of dropping “window” (strips of metallic foil used to confuse German radar). As these aircraft normally flew ahead of any bombing formation, they were painted with a red tail to try and avoid Allied fighters from mistaking them from a somewhat similar-looking German aircraft, the Me 410. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection) **Below:** Because of their rather fragile wooden structure—plywood skin over formers—Mosquitos didn’t fair well if left out in the weather unattended, so, once they were out of service they deteriorated quickly. The USAF Museum’s Mosquito is one of the few in the states to survive. (Photo courtesy of Museum of the USAF)



dived 500 feet at a time. All we could do was corkscrew through the barrage, and we made it out of there by the skin of our teeth.

Thankfully, this mission was less troublesome even though one of my fans was standing still. We tried to communicate with British control and soon found out we had lost our radio, too. Because of our uncertain condition, an Air-Sea rescue Beaufighter was waiting in the blast bay with a crew on board and engines running, awaiting the word to scramble. We were grateful for the offer of assistance, but thankfully it was not necessary. We landed back at Ford minus one engine and another victory under our belt.

My hardest victory

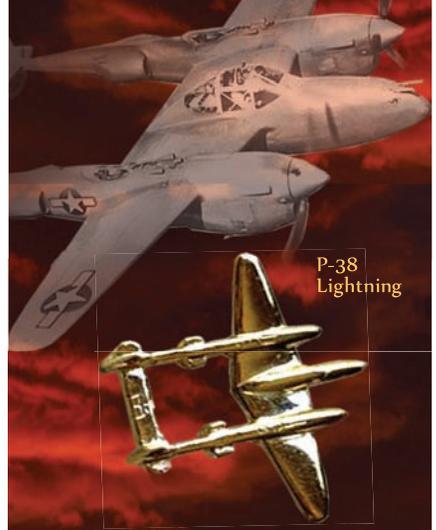
My Mosquito missions were not limited to flying just at night. On our days off, we could volunteer for daylight “Ranger Missions,” which consisted of a pair of Mosquitos flying as a freelance team looking for trouble. We could pick our own targets and tried to go out on days with low overcast but good visibility underneath the cloud layer. There was no way we wanted to be over a target in clear skies with a bunch of German fighters buzzing around above us. We picked a good target that day, better than we both expected, as we took off in the afternoon and raced low-level over the Channel crossing into France.

Our primary target was the German



This Mosquito XVI, MM388 was one of the oldest machines of this type stationed at Watton in Norfolk, England in May 1945. It was destroyed later in the same month following an accident. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)

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Right: After capture, this intact de Havilland Mosquito, a bomber B IV, was delivered to the 2./ Versuchverband OKL, nicknamed the *Rosarius Circus* for combat evaluation. It was displayed at the Rechlin test center on September 19, 1943, together with many other captured Allied aircraft, and carried the unit code T9+XB. All the Allied aircraft tested by this unit were painted with yellow tails and underside surfaces, to make them easily identifiable by Luftwaffe pilots. **Below:** An illustration showing the cockpit instrument layout of the first production night fighter version designated Mosquito NF.Mk.II. **Below:** Illustration of cockpit instrument layout of the Mosquito B.Mk.IX bomber variant of which 54 were built. (Photos courtesy of EN Archive collection)



airbase at Strasbourg in southern France; we had intelligence that this airfield would contain a variety of aircraft. We weren't disappointed when we arrived. Luftwaffe fighters, bombers, transports and gliders were strung out all over the field as we came roaring over the fence. It was hard to miss that day; I destroyed a Do 217 and an He 111 on the ground along with damaging two Go 242 gliders and two Me 109s parked nearby. The other Mosquito I flew with also racked up an impressive

score by damaging or destroying a Bucker 131, a Do 217 and six more Go 242 gliders. We didn't leave the airfield unscratched, however, as I slightly damaged my Mosquito.

I was making my gun run in on one of the big Gotha gliders, when Colin called out and told me about an He 111 parked off to

the side near another group of gliders. When I turned towards it, my slipper tank struck one of the Gotha glider's twin tail and tore the drop tank from my wing. It's kind of ironic because in order to survive an attack on an airfield, you had to stay low to avoid the German flak and perimeter guns, but you also had to be watchful that you didn't fly too low and risk striking a parked aircraft.

As we headed back towards home, I spotted a Junkers W 34 single-engine transport and gave it a quick squirt, and it went down in flames crashing below. It wasn't long after that, however, when I encountered one of my toughest opponents of the war: a Junkers Ju 52 trimotor. It was big and slow and made of corrugated metal. I tried to get behind him but was having a very difficult time of it—not because he was fast but because he was so slow!

I slowed the Mosquito way down and worried about stalling it out as I began to fire at the Ju 52. What I saw next shocked me; I was hitting him, but he wouldn't go down! I was so used to firing my guns at night and seeing the airplanes I hit explode in front of me, but the Junkers was one tough old bird and kept on flying while taking my hits. It took a lot of cannon shells to finally put him down as he started on fire and went straight in. Even though I was now an ace, that was by far my hardest victory.

And it came to an end

I finished my tour with 418 Squadron in April 1944, after flying 30 missions and was awarded both the British and American DFC. I had hoped to join an AAF P-51 Mustang squadron but was instead assigned to a weather recon squadron that flew unarmed Mosquitos. It bored me to tears, to say the least, especially after flying combat missions at night. I received more bad news later in the war, when I was informed that my good friend and navigator Colin Finlayson had been shot down and killed with another Mosquito pilot. They, along with so many others, had paid the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our freedoms.

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