



GEORGIE BOY

INSPIRATION TO A FIGHTER PILOT

BY CAPTAIN KENNETH G. HELFRECHT USAAC (RET.) AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

The "greatest generation" as a whole did not need a reason to fight. Provoked by a ferocious Axis that threatened to enslave the world, hundreds and thousands of young men answered the call to arms. Preserving freedom, peace and security for future generations were the primary reason men signed up for service. Others saw it as a patriotic duty to their country, while some saw glamour in war. For whatever reason each man had, all were inspired in some fashion or another. And for one young flier, **it took the unselfish act of a six-year-old boy to realize what he was fighting for.** This is Ken Helfrecht's story.

An aviator at the beginning

Shortly before turning eighteen, I had enlisted in the Army Air Force. I acquired an illness that sidelined me for a couple of months. My original class went on ahead without me and when I recovered, I was placed with a group of prior service men. They were a grisly bunch and filled me with a lot of baloney! Training with these rogues caused me to grow up fast, but they also taught me things that saved my butt!

After earning my wings I was selected for fighters. Here I was, not even old enough to drink and barely old enough to shave. The closest thing to any real horsepower I touched before the war was tinkering on used cars. And now, blindfolded with minimal flight time under my belt, they put me into a real hotrod called a P-40.



I really enjoyed checking out in the P-40. I found landings to be real simple, even with the narrow gear. Not only did they give me horsepower, but they gave me guns, too! Learning to shoot with a fixed sight, a trigger on the stick along with a tit on top for dropping bombs all became second nature to me. Unfortunately, I had to unlearn those skills when I arrived in Europe.

Joining the 4th Fighter Group

The pipeline of replacement pilots was starting to build when I was deemed combat ready. I arrived in Goxhill, England, on September 12, 1944, where I was introduced to the P-51B Mustang. I had never been close to one, let alone flew one before. With all the glass and bars over the canopy, it looked like it was dressed with

Opposite page: Ken Helfrecht talks to "Georgie" before his next mission. Above: Ken and Georgie in Madison, Wisconsin just before Ken was shipped overseas. (Photos courtesy of author)

THE ADRENALINE WAS REALLY FLOWING INSIDE OF ME. THE CHASE OF THE 190 STARTED UP HIGH AND NOW WE WERE BELOW THE CLOUDS AS I PULLED BEHIND THE 190 FOR MY SHOT.



The red nose of the 4th FG Mustangs could be readily identified from a long distance. If an enemy pilot had this view of a Mustang in his rear-view mirror he was in serious trouble. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

French windows; I just hoped I could see out of it. After completing my checkout and orientation of the English coast, I was placed into a fighter group.

I found my name and assignment posted under "Fourth Fighter Group." I rejoiced at the prospect of being a member of the oldest fighter group in the ETO. The heritage of knowing that the Fourth, having been formed around the original three Eagle Squadrons, caused a beaming proud smile across my face. Men next to me thought otherwise. "They kill them left and right there!" "You'll never survive," came the words of "encouragement" from the non-believers gathered around me. It didn't bother me a bit. Besides, I was young and dumb.

Arriving at Debden Airfield, I joined the 334th Fighter Squadron. I began flying combat in late October 1944, but there was something different about the P-51B I was flying. It was still hard to see out of and was colder than an icebox inside, but up front on the dash was a brand spankin' new gyro gunsight; I had never seen one in my short fighter pilot life as all my gunnery training was with fixed sights. I guess during wartime, some things are less formal. I was shown my airplane, given words of encouragement by my crew who said, "Good luck and don't get your ass shot off," and off I went into the unknown world of aerial combat.

Baptism of combat

November 6, 1944. I had survived my first mission and was now cruising along at 20,000 feet on my second mission. I couldn't take my eyes off the fancy gunsight, trying to figure how it worked. Shortly after 11:00 a.m., a Fw 190 came roaring at us from behind and shot down Second Lieutenant John Childs who was up ahead in his Mustang, QP-Z. I was flying wing on my flight leader Bob Dickmeyer as we poured on the coal to catch the fleeing bandit. R/T chatter became unintelligible as people began talking and screaming when they shouldn't have. Dickmeyer was trying his darndest to get hits on the fleeing 190 when he unloaded his guns and began firing tracers, indicating he was almost out. Although the R/T chatter was garbled at times, I could clearly hear Dickmeyer yell at me to "Come up here and get that German SOB!"

The adrenaline was really flowing inside of me. The chase of the 190 started up high and now we were below the clouds as I pulled behind the 190 for my shot. Sensing that I was near, the German jinked his stick back and climbed to reach the scud layer above. Instinctively, as I had been trained, I pulled the trigger. No recoil, no tracers, no hits, no nothing. I pulled the trigger again as we both entered the cloudbank. Were my guns even loaded? Jammed maybe?

Although I was in a cloud, the cloudiness in my brain cleared and I figured out what I was

doing wrong. The Fourth Fighter Group was a descendent of the Eagle Squadrons which had flown Spitfires, and therefore did not use a trigger for firing the guns. They used the button on top of the stick to fire their guns. The trigger on my stick was for dropping bombs. As I exited the clouds, I was ready to shoot anything that moved, including the bandit in front of me! There he was, dead ahead. My finger resting on the tit, I lined up the enemy airplane using my “super duper gyro sight” and fired at him. The “enemy” turned out to be a fellow Fourth Fighter Group red-nosed P-51! Untrained on the gyro sight, I missed him of course. Thank God!

Big shoes to fill

Here I was, part of the elite Fourth Fighter Group that contained so many noteworthy pilots like Don Blakeslee, Deacon Hiveley, Pierce McKennon, Louis Norley, James Goodson, and countless others. And yet the way I had flown in combat that day made me worry that the rest of the fellows would think the Germans sent me here — especially after shooting at one of our own! I was told it was natural and with a few more missions under my belt, the “jitters” would go away.

And for the most part they did, except on one mission when things went spiraling out of control. Most of our missions were bomber escort. Loaded up fuel and ammo, the Mustang at times was a real handful until you burned some of the internal gas off. I learned this the hard way during my fighter pilot schooling as I formed up with my wingman on another bomber escort to Germany. I was fully loaded with papier mâché drop tanks under each wing. During climbout, my engine began to cut in and out. I tried to stay with the other Mustangs beside me, but my engine would not respond to my inputs. Suddenly, the engine just up and quit. For a second, I felt as if the P-51



Col. Don J. M. Blakeslee, 14.5 kill ace and CO of the 4th FG, stands by his P-51D Mustang at Debden Airfield during August 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

just hung there in the sky, as I helplessly watched my fellow Mustangs accelerate away.

I got the Merlin restarted and applied boost to catch up. Problem was, I put way too much boost in as my closure rate on the bomber formation was faster than I wanted it to be. I began turning the P-51 from side to side in attempts to slow down. With all that extra weight from the drop tanks and my internal fuel, the Mustang became hard to control. I tried S-turns back and forth and went into a high-speed stall. I was behind the curve again and didn't expect it. As I lost my lift, I immediately started to spin with my drop tanks still attached.

The golden rule was that if you were in a spin



4th FG Mustang Georgie flown by Ken Helfrecht

with drop tanks, you were to release them before you over-stress the airframe. As the ground rushed up at me I forgot all about the rule as I fought to control my spinning mount. There was no way I was going to abort this mission. If I punched the tanks off now, I would have to head back home and I was not a quitter! I somehow managed to break out of the spin with my tanks still attached and rejoined the formation. If I was going to survive this war I needed to focus on the tasks at hand, or I needed one “helluva good luck charm!”

Georgie Boy

My good luck charm came in the form of a letter from home. I came from a family of patriotic beliefs and moral obligations. My brother Don was stationed in the Philippines and my sister Rose was a WAC in Michigan. My mother, who was widowed when I was a young boy, was left home alone while her children fought abroad. Enclosed in the letter from my mother was a picture of a little six-year-old neighbor boy named Georgie Armstrong. Georgie used to tag along with me and the older boys in the neighborhood back in Madison, Wisconsin. Although he was quite a bit younger than we were, we tolerated his presence. My mother informed me that since last spring, when I along with most of the guys from the block were in the service, Georgie would help her around the house, doing the dishes, raking leaves, sweeping the front porch and other odd jobs. After months of constant help from Georgie, my mother finally asked him why he was helping her. Georgie answered very matter-of-factly, “Somebody's got to take care of you now that the big boys are gone.” That practically tore my heart out. I also became focused on the task at hand.

Due to combat losses and men finishing their tour, the turnover rate was quite rapid in the 4th FG. Therefore I was issued my own P-51D. With its prominent red nose out front and its bubble-top canopy, it was a sight to behold. It just seemed to be missing something. Some of the other fellows had bathing beauties and pinup girls painted on their aircraft, while others had cartoon characters, wives or girlfriend's names and an assortment of other artwork. Not wanting to be left out, I begged

our “ace painter” Staff Sgt. Don Allen, the best in the ETO, to paint the nose of my plane. I showed Don the picture of Georgie and where I wanted his name placed and pointed out where I wanted his face to be.

After it was all said and done, I stood back and marveled at the sight before me. The face looked just like the photo accompanied by his name in large red letters. “Georgie” and I were destined to

THE FACE LOOKED JUST LIKE THE PHOTO ACCOMPANIED BY HIS NAME IN LARGE RED LETTERS. “GEORGIE” AND I WERE DESTINED TO DO GREAT THINGS.

do great things. There was a lot of snickering and laughter from some of the other pilots. “A little boy's face on a fighter plane!” “Don't you have a girl back home!” The laughter stopped after they read my letter and it was replaced with pats on the back.

The only person who had some concerns over the nose art was my crew chief, Sgt. Robert Lewis. Not because he didn't like it. Actually he thought it brought good luck to “his” plane. His concern was that the face was painted too close to the

Ken and crew chief, Sgt. Robert Lewis admire Georgie nose art. (Photo courtesy of author)



Ken inside his Mustang being readied for combat by his ground crew. (Photo courtesy of author)





Above: First Lt. Darwin Berry of the 335th FS is ready for takeoff on a combat mission during early July 1944 from Debden, A/F, England. Berry is flying P-51D s/n 44-13641 WD+A which was lost on a takeoff crash on July 22, 1944, killing the pilot. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)
Below: Major "Red Dog" Norley pins the DFC on after a late war attack on a German airfield. (Photo courtesy of author)

exhaust stacks and keeping Georgie's face clean was no easy job! He even made me write a letter to Georgie's mom explaining the fact that "Sgt. Lewis has more trouble keeping Georgie's face clean than you do!" I also wrote a letter to Georgie and said, "Your gift to my mother is just another reminder of all the good deeds you have done for me. You can't realize how much strength your little heart gives my mother and I."

Targets of opportunity

As the war progressed into 1945, Georgie's face became a lot dirtier. Less and less German opposition was encountered on our bomber escort missions. With are ammo bays stuffed full of rounds, we were released from our escort duties to go down and sweep the area looking for targets of opportunity. Georgie and I shot up trucks, trains, canal barges and anything else that moved. We also shot up German airfields that were heavily defended by anti-aircraft fire. When I saw flak it scared the daylights out of me especially when it came spiraling up at us. I really liked flying the P-51D but I never liked using it as a strafing. With those coolant lines running

two-thirds of the way down the fuselage, pumping the Mustang's life-blood of glycol, one little nick could put you out of the game. There were airfields I over flew that had the German wonder weapon Me 262 jets parked wing tip to wing tip but the flak was so intense we never got close to them. It didn't matter, though, because by that time the Germans were out of fuel and pilots.

April 16, 1945. One airfield I really became "close" with was Gamblingen Airdrome in Germany. Our group that day was led by Major Louis "Red Dog" Norley on a target withdrawal support/strafing mission. After we were released from the bombers, Major Norley led us down on the deck looking for targets. Gamblingen Airfield was packed full of aircraft as we made our first pass. Flak was light and suppressed quickly. A racetrack pattern was set up as Mustang after Mustang made gun runs across the aerodrome, shooting and annihilating everything in sight.

My "trusty old" gunsight worked flawlessly as I made repeated runs over the airfield. Burning German aircraft were everywhere as my .50 caliber rounds found their mark. My sight was filled with targets that day as I beat up Gamlingen. After it was all said and done, I set five German aircraft on fire; two Me 410s, two Fw 190s and one He-177 were destroyed. All told for that day, our flight of 16 Mustangs destroyed 44 German aircraft without a single loss.

Back at Debden I received the DFC from Major Norley for my actions that day. Georgie and I really made a good team as we helped shorten the war in our own little way. With the war finally over in Europe and abroad, I eventually rotated home. After all, Georgie was entitled to some well-deserved R and R now that the big boys were back home! †

