

Little Friends **OVER THE BEACH**

THE FIGHTERS GET DOWN AND DIRTY

BY JAMES P. BUSH

They must have been a sight for sore eyes to the soldiers on the beach as wave after wave of fighters, bombers, and paratrooper-stuffed transports, some towing gliders, passed overhead, all of them adorned with black and white painted stripes. The invasion was on, and many of the fighter pilots expecting a Luftwaffe slugfest were disappointed by the dismal numbers that showed up. But there were still plenty of targets both on the ground and in the air for those lucky enough to be at the right place at the right time. Follow along with these "little friends" about the historic day known as D-Day: the 6th of June, 1944.



One of the most colorful fighters of WW II, Lt. Ike Davis's 'Tarheel Hal' was attached to the 366th FS, 358th FG in the 9th AF. P-47 "Jugs" were superb in the behind-the-lines role of ground attack on D-Day. This aircraft is owned and operated by the Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston, TX. (Photo by Scott Slocum)



Everything that could fly was called into action on D-Day. The Lightnings were greatly outnumbered by other Allied fighters and their most important contribution may have been the F-5 versions in the photo recon role. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Twin-Tailed Trouble

CAPTAIN STANLEY P. RICHARDSON, JR

338th Fighter Squadron, 55th Fighter Group, 8th Air Force

In early June of 1944, my original P-38J, CL-X, had been wrecked by a fellow pilot while I was on leave. I returned to see my pride and joy lying on its belly from a combat encounter. My bunkmate, who was at the controls of my Lightning, told me he had an engine shot out while tangling with the Luftwaffe and made it all the way back to base in England when he got cut off by a landing B-17. With wheels down, flaps out, and only one prop turning, he ran out of options, raised the gear, and bellied it in. Thankfully, with a war going on, there were many P-38s sitting around waiting to be assigned.

I was issued a new P-38 and my ground crew got it ready to fly. Unfortunately, the day I was supposed to give it a test hop, everything was grounded so the ground crews could paint black and white stripes on our airplanes — invasion stripes. I would have to perform double duty on my next flight, a combat mission and test hop all rolled into one.

On June 5, I was slotted to fly a night mission over the English Channel to cover the invasion beaches along the French coast. The P-38s were selected because they were extremely recognizable with twin engines and twin tails, and nothing else looked like them. Our instructions were simple: “If you see anything flying over the

beaches, shoot it down — no questions asked. Destroy anything that is not a P-38 entering your assigned patrol area.”

We departed our base at Wormingford very late in the afternoon. The weather was terrible with low ceilings and heavy rain as we struck out for our patrol area. From 1,500 feet, I saw countless numbers of boats of all shapes and sizes all over the channel heading for France. What a sight! We orbited the beaches and I saw some sporadic gunfire, but nothing that would compare to the next day. We landed well after dark and trudged to our bunks for some rest.

It was short-lived, however, because very early the next day, June 6, we were rolled out of our bunks at 3:00 a.m. and, after eating breakfast and receiving our briefing, we were once again over the beaches by 5:30 a.m.

There were P-38s all over the sky with the 20th and the 479th Groups milling around overhead with us. There was not a German airplane in the sky that we saw, but had one shown up, it would have been torn to shreds with the combined firepower of our cannon and machine guns we carried in our noses. I flew three missions on D-Day and am proud to say the Allied air forces owned the airspace above the beaches. But as our troops on the ground moved inland, we followed from above and went after targets of opportunity.

Personally, I liked going after trains, but the Germans didn’t take too kindly to that. Early in

the war it was a piece of cake to shoot up locomotives and freight cars; that was until the Germans added “Q-cars” (like Q-ships) to the mix. They looked like any other freight car until the sides dropped and exposed quad 20mm cannons able to fire in all directions. Our loss rate of fighters shot up dramatically with these Q-cars. Strafing trains became dangerous work and a lot less fun!

Live Bait: Fighting with the Pioneer Mustang Group

BY CAPTAIN CLAYTON “KELLY” GROSS

355th Fighter Squadron, 354th Fighter Group, 9th Air Force

Because of the war, new fighter groups were forming at a rapid pace. With 65 hours of P-39 time under my belt, I was assigned to the newly formed 354th Fighter Group and became a flight commander with the 355th Fighter Squadron. We continued to train in the P-39 until we received our orders to ship out and head to England, where we would join the fight. Although we flew Airacobras, we were told we would not be flying them in combat, but instead would be flying a “new fighter” that was just coming on line. We arrived in England in early November of 1943, and that’s where I met the airplane of my dreams: the P-51 Mustang! Actually, the first model I checked out in was the dive-bomber version called the A-36 Apache. This early model, with the Allison engine, had only three propeller blades, had machine guns in the nose and wings, and had dive brakes embedded in both the upper



Above: First Lt. Kelly Gross of the 355th FS sits in the cockpit of his P-51B Mustang at the 354th FG’s base at Lansshenden, England, during May 1944.

and lower surfaces. It looked fast just sitting on the ground!

After spending two days going over a very thorough cockpit checkout and some last-minute demands by my instructor to emphatically, “Leave the dive brakes alone,” I was sent on my way to check out this new thoroughbred. This was definitely no P-39! I guess I had become spoiled with tricycle-gear airplanes and had to go back to my early tail-dragger days to taxi the Apache without hitting something. The A-36 had a long, slender nose and you couldn’t see out the front end. We had to “S” turn from side to side until we were ready for takeoff. I felt the power to be somewhat

Below: C-51B Mustang s/n 43-12451 GQ+I *Peggy* has 75-gallon drop tanks fitted on by Sgt. Segar and SSgt. Smith at Boxted, England, during April 1944. “Peggy” was SSgt Smith’s wife while the left side of the P-51B carried the name *Live Bait!* (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)



similar, especially with the familiar Allison engine out in front of me (instead of behind) like it was in the Airacobra. But once airborne, it was quite different. I could tell right away that it was much more responsive and lighter on the ailerons. After two flights in the A-36, I was deemed ready to check out the rest of the squadron pilots.

We continued to train, and this time it was in the P-51A models — same as the A-36 but without dive brakes. We only spent a couple of hours on the A model before the more powerful P-51Bs arrived in mid-November of 1943. From then on, the 354th FG would always be known as the Pioneer Mustangs — the first U.S. Army Air Force group to take the new Mustang into combat.



Ground crews from the 401st BG give a newcomer to the ETO the once-over in December 1943 shortly after the introduction of the P-51B to the pioneering 354 FG that would soon provide the long-range fighter escort to targets deep in Germany. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

The P-51B was an entirely different animal. It was powered by the well-built and reliable Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, and instead of getting tired above 12,000 feet, it only became stronger as it literally took us to new heights. The B model had four propeller blades instead of three, but only carried four guns instead of six. With less weight, we were able to carry more gas and we could now escort the bombers to and from the target area. With the entire group checked out and equipped with P-51Bs, we were moved to our first airfield called Boxted, near Colchester. Before we went on our first combat mission we were visited and instructed by the commanding officer of the 4th Fighter Group, Colonel Don Blakeslee. He was already considered an “old hand” as he had been

fighting in the Eagle Squadrons after the Battle of Britain. The thing I remember most was that he emphasized to us that during a head-on attack, the guy who broke first would be at a disadvantage. I silently thought it would be more of a disadvantage if we rammed into one another!

Baptism of fire

On December 11, 1943, I flew my first combat mission — a B-17 escort over Germany. Some of the guys in the squadron already had nose art on their Mustangs, and at first, I was going to put my wife's nickname, “Lil Pigeon,” on it. The problem was, it had a history of bringing bad luck. I had given my first P-39 that name and someone made a wheels-up landing. The second P-39 suffered a worse fate when the pilot cartwheeled it. The third time was not the charm when another pilot crashed that one as well. I agonized over it until the name came to me on one of my missions.

We had been out on an escort and I became separated from the group. I was able to latch onto another Mustang flown by Bob Stephens as we turned for home. Bob suddenly called me over the R/T and said, “You stay where you're at and I'll climb above you into the sun and then hopefully we can draw some action.” Although I relished the thought of tangling with the Luftwaffe, I wasn't too thrilled with being the lure. I replied to Bob, “What the heck do you think I am? Live bait?” He just said yes, and because he outranked me, that's what we did. My neck was never the same after turning it from side to side looking for an attack-

ing German! When we got back, I had my crew chief paint the name “Live Bait” on the side of the Mustang. Our missions increased during that time frame as things were really getting busy during the spring of 1944.

Work up to the big day!

Our group continued to fly escort missions during the entire month of May 1944. You could tell something was in the works as more and more ships were seen in and around the harbors of England, and countless supplies filled up their docks. Most of my time was spent over Germany at places like Berlin, Frankfurt, and Magdeburg as the bombers continued to pound the Axis hard. The Germans, however, did not simply lie down

"STAY WHERE YOU'RE AT AND I'LL CLIMB ABOVE YOU INTO THE SUN AND THEN HOPEFULLY WE CAN DRAW SOME ACTION."



Bud Anderson and his well known P-51B, Old Crow, were hyper-active over the beach although he, like other fighter pilots, was frustrated that the Luftwaffe had declined joining the party. (Photo by Jim Koepnick/EAA)

Like the AD Skyraider and A-10 Warthog after it, the P-47 earned the everlasting thanks of the GIs below for the role they played in close air support. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



A badly wounded First Lt. Jake Blazicek of the 367th FS 358th FG is lifted from the cockpit of his P-47D s/n 42-76436 CP+D at A-3 airstrip, France. First Lt. Blazicek's Thunderbolt was hit hard by light flak while strafing a German vehicle column on June 16, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



and take our attacks lightly. On May 28, the Luftwaffe thickened the skies over Germany as swarms of fighters, like fireflies on a hot summer night, came roaring into our bomber formations.

I picked out an Fw 190 and almost got him before I had to disengage for fear of ramming another fighter that crossed closely in front of me. Separated from my flight, I latched onto another Mustang as we set a course for home. On our way out, our flight of two encountered a stricken B-17

that was having engine troubles — probably due to all the cannon and machine gun rounds it absorbed from Luftwaffe attacks. Suddenly, an Me 109 was coming in fast from 6 o'clock, hell-bent on finishing him off. I rolled the Mustang over and shoved my throttle forward. I was still over 200 yards away when I noticed the 109 let loose with his cannon and machine guns. I responded with my own machine guns and saw them tear into his wing root and cockpit area; he snapped over and dove straight down before crashing.

I flew two missions on D-Day, and although we didn't encounter any German airplanes, the scene below on the beaches of Normandy was surreal. There were ships of every shape and size out in the channel with landing craft zig-zagging back and forth. Intense ground fire and flak were everywhere, and we did what we could to help the guys on the ground. We continued to fly in support of our advancing troops, sometimes three missions a day as they pushed inland and pushed the Germans back.

On June 14, we were escorting some B-26 Marauder medium bombers over France and the Luftwaffe finally showed back up. We had a heck of a fight and

I tacked onto a 109. Closing fast, I let him have it at less than 100 yards. He turned over slowly as flames shot out from beneath his engine cowlings. I saw no parachute, and he crashed below. I was one away from becoming an ace.

By the end of June, the Pioneer Mustang Group had already shot down 370 enemy aircraft. And we weren't done yet! With over 200 combat hours under my belt, I was sent home for 30 days of rest and relaxation. There would be plenty of war left when I returned.

Captain Gross ended the war with six victories during his two tours and owes his survival to the P-51 Mustang. The Pioneer Mustang Group was officially credited with 701 aerial victories and was crowned the top-scoring Fighter Group of the European Theater of Operations.

Big Stud

LT. COL. F. C. GRAY

78th Fighter Group, 8th Air Force

June 6, 1944 Encounter report; Plan "Stud" 1540 hours near Alencon

I led the 78th Group flying P-47s to the Alencon area with the mission of destroying of lines of communication. We arrived over the area at 12,000 feet and stooged around a couple of holes in the overcast. My wingman saw a train and I sent him down for it, following on his wing since I had not seen it. We broke out at about 3,000 feet and dropped our bombs at the train

with poor results, getting only near misses and a few on the track. We then strafed it and allowed it to blow off steam. While the rest of the section was working it over, I moved north and located a loco in a small marshaling yard in Le Hutte. I moved in on it and got a considerable number of strikes all over it. It practically blew up. While my wingman Lt. Massa was strafing it, I found another in the other end of the yard, which I also got. I got dozens of strikes, as did Lt. Massa, but it was cold.

I then took my flight up the line to Alencon and out each rail line from the city for about 20 miles without sighting any rail traffic other than two locos in the marshaling yard at Alencon, which I passed up due to the presence of many civilians in the immediate area who were waving at us.

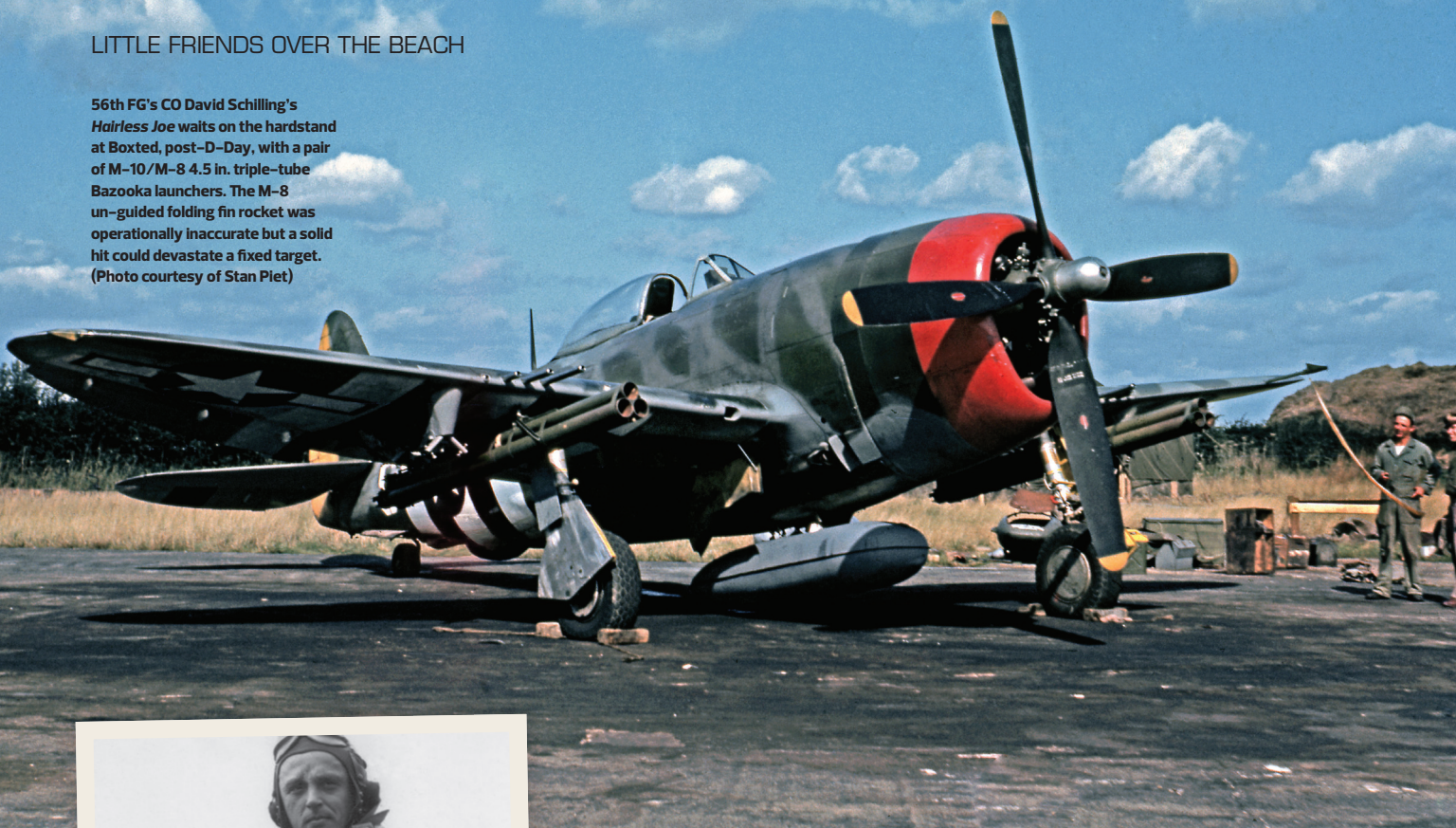
At this time, my Red Leader sounded off on a gaggle of Fw 190s on the deck moving south near the city. I finally saw them and tagged on, passing him and coming up on tail-end Charlie. I was catching the German without water injection until he threw his supercharger in when I had hit mine. I caught him easily and he started turning. All those boys I taught back at Matagorda (a bombing and gunnery range in Texas) would have got a kick out of my sorry deflection shooting. I finally got him going straight and got four pretty good bursts into him. He jettisoned his canopy as his engine cut and started out. I was about to overshoot him and skid out to the

An unassigned P-47D-22 from the 63rd FS, 56th FG taxis out from its Station 150 Boxed hardstand outfitted with a pair of 215 gal. steel ferry tanks. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



LITTLE FRIENDS OVER THE BEACH

56th FG's CO David Schilling's *Hairless Joe* waits on the hardstand at Boxted, post-D-Day, with a pair of M-10/M-8 4.5 in. triple-tube Bazooka launchers. The M-8 un-guided folding fin rocket was operationally inaccurate but a solid hit could devastate a fixed target. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



Capt. Boleslaw "Mike" Gladych of the 61st FS climbs into the cockpit of his P-47D Thunderbolt at Boxted, England, during May 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

side, when Lt. Massa gave him a burst. He overshot him, eased up alongside, and watched him laboriously crawl out, his jacket and helmet on fire. He got out about 600 feet and his chute worked beautifully.

I then broke for another, but just as I was about to try my deflection shooting again, my second element leader Lt. Caulfield beat him up. The German turned into me and snapped into the ground, making one hell of a beautiful explosion that I caught on my camera —

only now they tell me the damn thing jammed!

I claim three of the damaged locos as shared and one destroyed Fw 190 as shared with Lt Massa. I also confirm the destruction of one Fw 190 by Lt. Peter A. Caulfield. I think these were the ones (the Fw 190s) Spicer referred to when he said, "They fly like Basic students."

Hit the deck!

2100 hours near Croisy

BY POLISH AIR FORCE CAPTAIN MICHAEL GLADYCH

Encounter Report-June 6, 1944

61st Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group, 8th Air Force

I was flying Red 3 (Whippet Red Three) to Capt Rutkowski. We were circling the convoy on the road (in P-47 Thunderbolts) when I saw

four aircraft that I thought were Me 109s. I called my flight leader and dove on them. After about a two-minute chase, I was close enough to recognize the aircraft as P-51s. I started to turn, as I intended to rejoin the squadron, when I saw four or five Me 109s coming from the east at 100 feet. I reversed my turn to meet them. The nearest one of the enemy aircraft apparently spotted me against the ground and peeled toward me in a shallow dive. The rest of them proceeded to climb in a wide, slight turn. I turned with the attacking enemy aircraft and had no difficulties in closing on it. I had switched the water on, and after a couple of seconds, I began to overtake the enemy aircraft. I slid on the outside and then kicked the bottom-rudder, getting on the enemy's tail. I fired and didn't see the strikes, but the enemy aircraft reacted by tightening the turn. I pulled some more deflection and gave him another burst. The enemy aircraft spun and hit the ground.

In the meantime, the remaining enemy aircraft were scared by eight P-51s, which came from the south. I tried to get another one of the Me 109s. I pulled up, closed in from underneath and astern, and fired a short burst at the last one. The Hun emitted some black smoke but kept flying. I abandoned the pursuit because my gas was running low. I headed for home, flying on the deck.

I claim one Me 109 destroyed. ✚

The combat reports that debriefing officers had to filter through after D-Day, and the following weeks could fill a very fat book. They give a three-dimensional window into the fall of Fortress Europe.