

Raining Thunderbolts

By Marc L. Hamel with Simon Dunham

The 352nd Fighter Group flew an unusual mission out of its Bodney airfield in England on March 8, 1944. It was unusual not in its intended bomber escort goal, but rather in the composition of the Group on the mission. Using a mixture of seven P-51 B/C's and fifty P-47D's, Mission 69 was a success in one respect for the 352nd, and an unexpected, hair-raising tragedy in another. Victories over the Luftwaffe were chalked in the win column, though these were tempered by foul weather and falling fighters.

The 8th Fighter Command began taking delivery of the Merlin-powered P-51 B's and C's in early 1944. Groups such as the 4th FG (with their hard-lobbying and respected boss Don Blakeslee) received the first Mustangs, and the 352nd had to wait a few weeks before a Merlin-powered mount nosed its way onto the field. March 1st saw the arrival of seven Mustangs, including the first two aircraft which were assigned to Group C.O. Col. Joe L. Mason ("This Is It" s/n 43-6776, code PZ-M) and 486th FS CO Lt. Col. Luther H. Richmond (s/n 43-7196, code PZ-R). The 486th was the first squadron to receive the Mustangs as Mason stabled his mount with that unit. Using a loaner P-51B for training in late February, the efficient Col. Richmond had his transitioned squadron pilots ready for action in early March. The 486th would fly the March 8th mission with seven Mustangs and 16 Thunderbolts - a very unusual occurrence due to differing performance and fuel economy profiles.

March 8th dawned ominously with typical English winter weather - full overcast from 700 feet to 3500 feet. The pilot's briefing revealed the 352nd was to provide withdrawal support for a mixed force of Second Air Division B-24's and First & Third Air Division B-17's. This comprised an aerial armada of some 600+ bombers which would be returning from the Berlin VKF Ball Bearing Factory (near the Spree river in the heart of Germany). This was a "maximum effort" for the 352nd FG, with the 328th and 487th Squadrons each launching seventeen P-47's into the gloom along with the 486th FS's twenty-three mixed birds. The 486th Mustangs lifted off first in view of their increased endurance over the P-47's. The Thunderbolts soon followed, and formed up into their typical flights of four planes and headed into the "soup" (dense cloud overcast) in trail.

As was common during the war, only the flight leader would fly by instruments through this overcast. He would maintain the flight path by careful attention to his instruments, as he had no visual clue of attitude in the dense fog. The other members of the flight would maintain visual contact with the leader, and fly formation on him (as close as possible in very bad conditions). All of this could become very hairy if vertigo reared its ugly head. Vertigo is a sense of disorientation and dizziness brought on by the inner ear sensing false movement of an aircraft when the eyes have no visual reference. This is common when flying in overcast or dark conditions. In other words, the pilot can be flying straight and level in dense clouds, but his inner ear may be telling him that he is out of control in a spiral. This is combated through

attention to, and belief in, the flight instruments and what they reveal. Of course, if a pilot is not flying on instruments but rather his leader, it is easy to become disoriented.

Taking off in the first flight of P-47's, Stanley G. "Stan" Miles of the 486th (flying his "Bundle of Joy", P-47D-5, s/n 42-8490, code PZ-S) found himself flying in extremely poor visibility conditions. At times his leader and other members of his flight disappeared from view even though they were just off his wingtip. The 486th flight led by Henry Miklajcyk was following close behind in near-zero visibility too. "Mike" Miklajcyk was piloting borrowed a 353rd Fighter Group P-47D-10, s/n 42-75157, coded LH-Y. It is not currently known why "Mike" was not flying his regular steed, "The Syracusan", code PZ-K, serial number 41-6531, a updated P-47C-5RE that was the oldest 'Bolt in the outfit. However, it was not unusual for a pilot with an assigned aircraft to fly whatever aircraft was serviceable on any given day.

"Mac"

In Miklajcyk's flight, Donald "Mac" McKibben flying his "Sneezy" (P-47D-15RE, s/n 42-76323, code PZ-Y) takes us back to what he experienced, **"Our Squadron (486th), comprised of multiple flights of four aircraft, was ascending through the thick overcast. Following the usual procedure, the flights entered the overcast one after the other. Our Red Flight had the Number One pilot, Miklajcyk, flying on instruments. Numbers Two and Three (Bond and myself) flew visual formation on Number One, and Number Four was flying visual formation on me. I did not know it at the time (due to poor visibility and my concentration on flying formation on Miklajcyk), but my wingman in the Number Four position had to leave the formation and fly on instruments due to a bad case of vertigo. Therefore, he was not involved in the ensuing incident.**

Apparently, Lt. Miles inadvertently became separated from his flight while trying to fly visual on his leader. Suddenly, I became aware of the form of an airplane where it shouldn't be (above and to my left), and numerous pieces of aircraft tumbling about.

I reacted with a violent move up and to the right. Normally I would have recovered and continued on instruments. However, my gyro horizon instrument was tumbling uselessly due to my sharp maneuver, and I knew there wasn't enough room under the overcast in which to recover visually. I opened the canopy and started out on the wing. Halfway out, I discovered that I was still attached to the plane by my oxygen hose. I tore off the mask, got out onto the wing and jumped.

I tumbled through the air for a second and pulled the ripcord. It turns out that I was upside down when the chute opened. The opening shock dislodged my escape pack from the pocket inside my flight jacket. It came up and hit me in the face, resulting in a little 'shiner' later. I didn't have much time to look around as I floated down in my parachute, due to the low overcast bottom that day. I tugged the risers a little to maneuver into a plowed field instead of a road, and saw the flaming wreckage of my plane nearby. On the

same side of the road as my plane crash was a little house and a nice lady came out and offered me some tea. On the other side of the road was a thatched roof house that had been set alight by the burning gasoline thrown from the wreckage, as well as some smoldering trees in a churchyard. Somewhere around here I still have a pin and a certificate from the ‘Caterpillar Club’ for using my chute.”

To observers on the ground, it seemed to be raining Thunderbolts. Mr. and Mrs. Lemon lived near the site where “Sneezy” plummeted from the sky and exploded. Mrs. Lemon recalled, **“We heard a loud clattering noise, and then there was silence.”** Mr. Lemon adds, **“I was working at Hapton Hall, heard the noise, and knew something was wrong. Seconds later a plane came hurtling earthwards, so I grabbed my bicycle and headed to the scene of the crash. A few moments later a pilot parachuted down and landed approximately 100 yards away from the wreck. Debris and burning fuel was flung towards a thatched cottage which eventually burned down, and the elderly lady owner Daisy Moss was trapped in the toilet outside by the propeller. My wife eventually removed it so she could escape. Ten or so fire engines from Hethel and Hardwick came to fight the fire, but a strawstack near the wreck also caught fire and eventually burnt out as well. A sycamore tree in the churchyard 250 yards away was also badly scorched.”** The gas-filled “Sneezy” certainly created a stir when it returned to earth.

Back at Bodney that evening “Mac” stopped in at the Officer’s Club. Mac’s friend and fellow pilot Ted Fahrenwald was there and recalls, **“I was in the Officer’s Club that evening at Bodney when Mac came in for a few drinks. After he relaxed, the delayed shock hit him and he turned white as a sheet. I ended up escorting him back to his bunk”.**

No “Bundle of Joy”

Stan Miles confirms this traumatic incident with, **“The day was solid overcast. I am not sure if it was raining, but I estimate the ceiling at 700 feet, though others may have differing estimates. I was not flying on instruments that day as we climbed into the overcast, as I was flying visual on my flight leader. I lost sight of my leader and was soon hit from underneath and behind by Henry Miklajcyk, flight leader of the flight following mine. I was pushed over into a dive as a result of the collision. My engine was knocked out and hydraulic fluid and oil came back all over the windscreen so I couldn’t see in front of me. I pulled out of the dive right at the tree tops, and out of my side window I spotted a large base with a beautiful runway below. I dropped the gear, as it did not depend on the hydraulic system to be lowered, and landed on that base. I rolled to a stop and it turned out to be the bomber base at Hethel. It had an exceptionally long and wide runway, not like the grass field at Bodney. Fortunately I did not try to bail out, as when I got on the ground, I discovered the canopy was stuck shut from the mid-air collision.**

I recall seeing a couple of columns of smoke at the time, which presumably were Bond, Miklajcyk and McKibben’s crash sites. A lot of Hethel’s personnel met my plane as I

stopped. They got me out and took me to base operations. I waited there for a while until someone from Bodney came over and gave me a ride back. I never went to the hospital, and I certainly didn't visit the Officer's Club as I was greatly saddened and depressed by the events of the day. I was actually in a state of shock for several days."

The USAAF "Report of Aircraft Accident" details the damage to "Bundle of Joy" as, **"Cowling torn up, Engine oil cooler line broken and further damage, and Prop tips bent."** The plane was left at the 389th BG's base at Hethel and sent off for scrap (see accompanying photograph). Stans adds, **"I believe I got a temporary plane upon my return to base, before I was assigned one of the new P-51s."**

"The Syracusan" Jumps Too

Miklajcyk was intently flying by his instruments when the collision occurred, undoubtedly preventing him from seeing Miles' aircraft. "Mike" (with a now-crippled P-47 at low altitude) quickly decided that discretion was the better part of valor as well, and took to his chute. The "Report of Aircraft Accident" flatly describes the P-47 as, **"Completely Demolished"**. This a simple way of saying that the big Thunderbolt augered into a hedgerow between Wreningham and Flordon, almost completely burying the aircraft.

A piece of "Mike's" aircraft landed just a few feet from farm worker Philip Taylor from Flordon, **"I was busy muck-spreading some 500 yards away from the crash site, and the exploding shell noise startled my horse. My brother Leslie was working in the field nearest the crash and rushed to the scene. He was also scared by the exploding shells and beat a hasty retreat. He then watched the fire burn up the plane from a safe distance, but he did not know what happened to the pilot."** Miklajcyk soon landed safely in his parachute without any injuries, thus also joining the "Caterpillar Club". Upon hitting the ground and gathering up his parachute, he was greeted by a forward young lad from Flordon who asked, **"Can I have your parachute mister?"** (This is believed to be John Griffiths, of an East London family of who had moved to Flordon to escape the Blitz of 1940).

Earl Bond

The report for Lt. Earl H. Bond recounts, **"Lt. Bond was flying Red Two when his flight leader collided with another ship in the overcast. It is believed that in pulling away from the debris of the collision, Lt. Bond lost his orientation and spun in."** It also states that this aircraft was **"Completely Demolished"**. At 1425 hours the aircraft impacted at the edge of a wood one half mile from Mergate Hall, Bracon Ash. Earl Bond was killed instantly, and his Thunderbolt burned out completely. After the recovery of Bond's body, the remains of "The Bid" (P-47D-5, s/n 42-8652. Code PZ-O) rested undisturbed for 46 years, partially hidden by a bean crop, dense woodland and ground ivy. The boundary hedge still bears the scars of the crash, and a large oak tree remains blackened and malformed in the upper branches.

Local English farmer Rex Webster recalls the collision, **“I remember it being around lunch time and hearing what sounded like aircraft in the clouds fooling around, then some noise, followed by three aircraft diving out from the cloud in violent spins. Seconds later there were three separate explosions as they hit the ground, one on the boundary of my Father’s land in Braconash.”** Another similar account from Philip Taylor adds **“I had just returned from dinner at about 13:30 and was muckspreading that afternoon on a horse drawn wagon when incident occurred. I could hear the noise of aircraft above, but could not see them as they were flying in the clouds. Then all of a sudden there was a sound like smashing crockery, and the planes came diving out of the clouds. One crashed at Hapton up by the houses, another came down up near the "Sheds" at the back of John Bett's Land in Braconash, and one landed just across the field from me on Webster's Meadow. I think another came down on the airfield at Hethel. I remember seeing the pilot floating down up there at Hapton, he looked a bit like one of them Thistle down seeds. Now the pilot of the one on the low meadow, I don't know where he came down, the wind must have carried him away from the crash because I never saw him.”**

The remaining 352nd FG fighters assembled on top of the overcast and proceeded on their mission to escort the withdrawing bombers after their attack on Berlin.

Great credit is due to parachute rigger Michael Sandorse of the 486th Squadron. Known to the pilots as “Sandy”, he was lauded for his fanatical attention to detail, and a perfect record of 25 out of 25 chutes performing when called upon during the war. The pilots had every confidence that if they had to take to their chute, it would operate as advertised. Each pilot had two or more parachutes fitted to them, and these were unpacked, dried, and repacked every two weeks, or sooner if there was any unusual use or humid weather. This presented Sandorse with an unrelenting and tedious job. Pilots such as Luther Richmond, Henry Miklajczyk, Stephen Andrew, “Gus” Lundquist, “Mac” McKibben, Ted Fahrenwald, “Jim” Gremaux and many others owed their lives to his capable hands. March 8th proved yet again the value of a well-packed and maintained parachute. As an aside, in his rare “spare time” Sandorse sewed pockets into the inside of pilot’s leather A-2 flight jackets to house their escape maps and escape pack (as described by McKibben earlier in this article).

Over in the 487th Squadron, things were little better on March 8th as the aircraft ascended into the overcast. William “Flaps” Fowler tells us his experience, **“You asked me if I recall that mission. How could I forget it! It nearly scared the life out of me. In those days, I could pull back the blackout curtains in the morning and tell instantly whether I was going to have a good or a bad day. The weather was almost always bad, and that constant threat was what worried me.**

March 8th, 1944 was my first combat mission. While waiting in our pilot’s ready room over in the 487th area that morning, Colonel J.C. Meyer (487th CO) said to me, ‘Fowler, how are you on instruments?’ I replied that I hadn’t thought much about it, but I’d had the

usual training. This query put me on guard I guess because I thought, ‘They’ll never lose me in the overcast.’ “Flaps” was piloting P-47D-2, s/n 42-22492, code HO-F.

“Well it turns out I was assigned Crowned Prince Red Two position as wingman for Major John C. ‘Curly’ Edwards, who was leading the 487th Squadron that morning. This meant we were at the front of the entire squadron, and it is a wonder that it didn’t turn out tragic with all of those P-47’s following us. After takeoff we entered the overcast, and the flying game changed. Visibility went from bad to worse. At times I couldn’t see Edwards at all, and it was like flying formation in a milk bottle. Most of the time all I could see was his wingtip, but as I said this would sometimes vanish. I eased over towards Edwards to try to keep his plane in sight, as I was supposed to be flying visual on him, and didn’t want to lose him. My Lord, it turns out I was already close enough!

I ended up with my right wingtip resting on top of Edward’s left elevator, though for a while neither of us knew this. You see the downward slipstream from his wing tended to securely hold my wing on his elevator. Of course, this blocked the control of Major Edward’s elevators, and eventually he felt his plane not responding. He tried to move his controls several times but couldn’t. He then in desperation gave his stick a big tug back to break it loose, and his plane shot straight up out of formation. Thinking about the three flights directly behind me, I eased back too and we both popped out of the overcast around 4000 feet or so. We realized that our aircraft had sustained some damage in the mishap and were not fit for combat, so we aborted and returned to base. We landed our planes, went our separate ways, and surprisingly I have never talked to him about it since the event.

Thinking back on it now, I shudder to think how close my Thunderbolt’s big prop was to Edward’s cockpit for my wingtip to have been overlapping his elevator. However in that overcast, there was just no visibility. We were fortunate that it did not turn out worse in our squadron.”

“Curly” Edwards recalls, “We were flying fairly close formation shortly after takeoff on that mission, and I do not recall it being all that unusual that we got fouled in the overcast. I remember that a wingtip was pushed up a little bit, but not much else. Of course, we were fortunate to be flying P-47’s, because they were pretty hard to damage.” “Curly” was flying P-47D-11, serial number 42-75523.

“Pappy” Scores

The remainder of the day went considerably better for the pilots of the 352nd, with an eventual 2-0-0 scoreboard. Edward “Pappy” Gignac, flying P-51B-7NA s/n 43-7022, code PZ-W (Al Wallace’s aircraft “Little Rebel”), was first to score that day. Over Dummer Lake he saw a lone B-17 being attacked by a Messerschmitt Me109. His Encounter Report fills in the action for us:

"Leading Purple Flight shortly after rendezvous with bombers, I saw a straggling B-17 at about 5,000 or 6,000 feet. At approximately 1530 I saw an E/A approaching the B-17 from 6 o'clock. I immediately called in the bounce and started down. The E/A scored several hits on the B-17 before I could get to it. As I closed in on the E/A he broke off his attack on the bomber with what appeared to be a violent aileron roll. The E/A then pulled up in a vertical climb. I reefed back violently and took a short burst. My closing speed was very high so I could not follow him up. Even though my burst was very short and at a great deflection, I claim destruction of this Me 109 as Lt. Heller, flying Green 2 saw the pilot bail out just after I fired at him, and he also saw the E/A explode as it hit the ground."
Obviously, this was the first victory using a Mustang for the 352nd FG.

Edwin "Ed" Heller, flying his P-51B-7NA number 43-6704, code PZ-Hbar (later the famous "HELL-ER-BUST"), confirmed the victory with: **"Purple Leader saw the bomber being attacked and said he was going down for a bounce. Green Flight gave cover. Right after he made his pass I saw a parachute open at about 6,000 feet, looked around for the enemy plane, and saw it going down in flames. I followed it down and saw an Me-109 explode as it hit the ground. I confirm the destruction of this aircraft."**

Sharpshooting Meroney

The other victory scored that day was credited to the highly talented and aggressive Virgil Meroney of the 487th FS. Over Meppen a few minutes after Gignac's victory, Meroney spied three enemy aircraft attacking the rear of the bomber formation. His Encounter Report allows, **"I was leading Blue Flight. We made rendezvous with the bombers on time and conducted our escort without incident. No attacks were made until after the Group leader ordered everybody out, at which time our squadron was at the rear of the bombers and on the same level – about 20,000 feet. The Me-109s came out of the sun with a lot of speed and made a 90 degree attack on the rear bombers, breaking away in rolls. I called them in and went after the lead two as they stayed together, the third having broken in a different direction. Our speed was not great as we had been escorting at reduced throttle, so it took me some time to close on the E/A's. When I was still about a 1000 yards away, two other P-47s came in very fast from my left, but the leader of the E/A's chandelled and I followed him as the other two P-47s continued chasing his wingman. I made an attack, firing a short burst at 400 yards and 90 degrees, trying to make him break, as he was trying to get in position on the two P-47's chasing his wingman. I was successful, for he broke for the deck and I was able to close to 300 yards. I fired several bursts at him at tree top level. When I got some hits he pulled straight up, and by cutting my throttle I stayed with him and fired another burst at 100 yards, getting many hits. Big pieces fell off of the E/A, and it was covered in flames. I overtook him and as I pulled up on his right wing he jettisoned his canopy. I was sitting right on his wing and got a good look at him.**

The nose was extra long, and big, so it may have been an Me-209. It was painted in the usual colors with a dark slate top and light underside, with crosses on both wings and

fuselage. In front of the cross on the fuselage was a dash and then some black chevrons pointing towards the nose.

The pilot was trying to get out of the burning plane. As he was still alive I skidded underneath to give him another burst. But before I got my sights on him he bailed out and immediately opened his chute. The burning plane spun down and crashed. My wing man, Lt. Ross, had been with me the whole time, and we climbed back up with full throttle and joined our squadron at 21,000 feet and continued home.” Luckily, Meroney was flying his assigned P-47D; the meticulously maintained “Sweet Louise/Josephine”, code HO-V, serial number 42-8473, crewed by Bronze Star winner S/Sgt. Al Giesting.

The Luftwaffe Viewpoint

Artist Troy White located a fascinating tie-up while doing some research in noted Luftwaffe researcher Donald Caldwell’s book “The JG 26 War Diary Volume Two 1943-1945”, and also in his earlier tome “JG 26 Top Guns of the Luftwaffe”. In a rare case of German and USAAF reports corresponding, it details Meroney’s encounter from the German perspective.

“At the time Hptm. Meitusch was Commanding Officer of III./JG 26 and was flying a Bf 109G-6, WNr: 162032, code Black 21 with the cause of loss listed as P-47s from the 352 FG. The location was North of Meppen.. Also lost was Uffz. Emil Kampen who was KIA in Bf 109G-6 WNr: 410743, code White 5, cause of loss listed as 352 FG. The location was Steinhuder Lake”.

The narrative reads: **“Hptm Mietusch did reach the heavy bomber stream but with only a handful of his Messerschmits. His first attempt to close with the bombers was fended off by the escort, which shot down Uffz Kampen, who crashed with his plane.**

Meitusch and two other pilots made a beam attack on the rear of the bombers of a combat wing and then rolled away. A flight of P-47s from the 352nd FG went after the three Messerschmits. Two got on the tail of Meitusch's wingman. When Meitusch went to his aid , the leader of the P-47 flight was able to damage the German plane with a burst of fire at high deflection. Meitusch broke for the deck and the Thunderbolt pilot was able to close on him easily, firing down to a range of 100 yds. Large pieces flew off the 109, which was a mass of flames. Meitusch jettisoned his canopy and jumped out. His chute opened immediately, and he landed safely but with injuries severe enough to keep him in the hospital for the next few weeks. Hptm. Staiger took comand of the Gruppe until Meitusch's return..”

The pilots of the 352nd pilots have differing opinions of the merits of the P-47 versus the P-51. All agree however that the increased range of the Mustang at that time was a distinct advantage in covering the bombers. Lt. Col. (later Major General) Richmond relates, **“I recall that March 8th was the withdrawl escort mission from Berlin, when the bombers were badly shot up**

over the target by flak and then encountered severe and unforecast headwinds going home. I remember breaking up our squadron, as the P-47s had to leave due to fuel as we neared the German border. I assigned each element to escort the B-17s that had fallen below the formation that were obviously in trouble due to feathered engines and such. I mention that mission in my log as I was greatly impressed that we were able to stick with the bombers so much longer than the P-47s could. I did not see any enemy aircraft on the mission, just a lot of flak over Holland. My wingman aborted somewhere along the line, and I escorted a B-17 to a successful ditching in the middle of the North Sea. All 10 of the bomber's crewmen were picked up by two British flying boats. The greatly increased range of the P-51 over the P-47 really made a lasting impression on me. For example, on a later mission, I logged 7:15 hours in my aircraft."

Simon and the "Digs"

"Digs", or the excavation of wartime aircraft crash sites, are very popular in England and Europe. This amounts to historic archaeology, as often the remains of the aircraft (such as the engine) are 15 feet or more below the surface. Simon Dunham, in conjunction with other "diggers" in his area, began researching USAAF crash sites near his home in the late 1980's. He has graciously provided an accounting of what was recovered at each crash location.

The first of the three lost Thunderbolts to be excavated was Earl Bond's "The Bid". The first review of the site on September 13th, 1990 brought to light the impact crater and small pieces of metal including an aileron trim tab still painted olive and grey, and parts of the Pratt & Whitney engine. A week later a large metal detector located more wreckage, which was excavated and identified. These remains include manufacturer's plates, .50 calibre ammunition, pieces of wheel rim, more engines pieces, an elevator counterweight, the propeller boss, pieces of canopy plexiglass, and sections of ammunition chute. As is usual in the case of an aircraft crash, many unidentifiable small pieces of aluminum and steel also surfaced.

On August 15th, 1992, the crash site of "Mac" McKibben's "Sneezy" was pinpointed and excavated. Due to the hard, flinty ground, the aircraft basically shattered upon impact, spreading itself around the surrounding countryside. From this site was recovered remains of the instrument panel, more .50 calibre ammo, remains of the gunsight, pieces of the Pratt & Whitney engine, the prop feathering gear, the undercarriage lever and knob, and a seat harness buckle. Also included was a folded section of cowl panel, which when opened revealed a portion of a yellow handpainted letter on olive background; the nose art from "Sneezy". This is now in the collection of pilot "Mac" McKibben.

The last of the Thunderbolts, Miklajcyk's "loaner" P-47, was located on September 1, 1999 by Simon Dunham and Nigel Beckett. It was pinpointed by Rex Webster of Flordon Hall Farm, near Mulbarton, in a narrow water meadow next to fields in the Tas River Valley. The remains of the aircraft were exhumed on September 12, 1999. Engine cylinder heads, valves, wheel rim

sections, .50 calibre ammunition, spark plugs, a .50 calibre machine gun barrel, and numerous other small bits were excavated and cataloged.

This last dig brings closure to this unusual and tragic, though ultimately successful mission for the famed 352nd Fighter Group.

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