

# *A* Christmas Story



Mustang combat and losses – December 25, 1944

BY JIM BUSHA

JIM KOEPNICK

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## Preface

Aviation historians fascinated with World War II fighter combat in the European theater of operations (ETO) will answer in one of two ways the following question: What happened on Christmas Day 1944?

A large percentage will state, "That's when Maj. Preddy was shot down and killed by friendly fire over Belgium." Others, who have a keen interest in the 4th Fighter Group (FG), will proclaim, "That's the day we lost Capt. Don Emerson.

But these form only a partial answer to a very detailed question. The Christmas Day loss of U.S. Army Air Forces' leading Mustang ace, CO Maj. George E. Preddy, 352nd FG, 328th Fighter Squadron (FS), was in itself one of the most tragic occurrences

of the war. Coupled with the loss of a lesser-known but equally valiant Mustang ace, Capt. Donald R. Emerson, 4th FG, 336th FS, they will forever overshadow all other aerial combat that day. But what became of the other pilots flying combat that cold Christmas morning, especially those operating P-51 Mustangs?

And why, on the day that has

become synonymous with the term "peace and goodwill to men," was there so much vicious and ravenous fighting both in the air and on the ground?

To begin to answer these important questions, we must rely on the firsthand accounts of gallant men who flew in the bitterly cold, hostile skies over Europe that Christ-

mas day. Far from "just doing their job" along with the hundreds of thousands of fellow Allied soldiers throughout the world, these four "flying horsemen" put their lives on the line, potentially sacrificing future goals, hopes, and dreams all in the name of freedom and a Christmas wish for peace on Earth. Here are their stories.



GARY LISIK PHOTOS



*The Duck* when owned by Bob Tullius, is painted in the same scheme when flown by Don Emerson.

## "A Christmas Story"

Mid-December 1944, ETO. The German Army, under the leadership of field Marshall Von Runstedt, began the "season of giving" sooner than expected. The fierce German Army smashed through the American front lines protecting Belgium and Luxembourg. Ferocious ground fighting, along with coordinated attacks by German armor and troops, caught the American front lines completely by surprise. Under the cover of harsh winter weather conditions, German troops advanced at will, pushing the horrified and overwhelmed Allied forces rearward. Thus began the Battle of the Bulge.

Allied airpower, the greatest and mightiest aerial armada the world had ever seen, was completely halted in its tracks by the nemesis that air crews feared most: weather. The Germans had received an early Christmas present in the form of some of the worst winter weather seen in years. Snow, ice, fog, and thick, low clouds blanketed much of England and the continent, effectively eliminating the possibility of assistance from the air. Allied ground forces and airmen prayed in earnest for the horrendous weather to clear. Then in the early predawn hours of December 23, 1944, prayers were answered, and with a display of twinkling stars, the weather began to break.



Valado Lench and his P-51 Moonbeam McSwine.

JIM KOEPNICK

## “Blue Christmas”

Capt. Donald S. Bryan  
352nd FG, 328th FS

**D**ecember 22, 1944. Our orders were straightforward and unmistakable: Move your planes, pilots, and crews to an airfield called Y-29 near Asch, Belgium, as soon as practical, if not sooner!

Our role in this desperate situation called for the “Blue-Nosed Bastards of Bodney” to provide constant, up-to-the-minute air coverage over the Battle of the Bulge. Our P-51s were to provide aerial protection for 9th Air Force P-47 fighter-bombers that were heavily laden with 500-pound bombs and rockets during their ground attack mission in the Ardennes battle zone. Being sent to a forward air base allowed us to be over the battlefield in a matter of minutes, where a single minute could mean the difference between life and death.

On December 23, 1944, dozens of shiny, blue-nosed P-51 Mustangs be-

gan to crank up their cold Merlin engines. Maj. George Preddy led the first section of the 328th to Asch, Belgium, flying off the frozen ground at Bodney, England, in his blue-nosed, red-tailed P-51 appropriately named *Cripes A’ Mighty*. Little did I realize it at the time, but watching him lift from the runway, his Mustang climbing effortlessly into the frigid, English sky, that this was the last time George Preddy would ever touch English soil.

Capt. Earl Abbott was to guide the second section. We had been briefed that this would be a ferry mission, not a combat one. As a result, we were all dressed up in “pinks and greens.” On start-up we began our taxi to launch, when suddenly we received a shut-



Don Bryan poses in front of his P-51—*Little One II*.

down order.

Like the ever-changing English weather and battle lines in the Ardennes, so were our plans for the day. We were now informed that this was a combat mission, and here we were, “all dressed up for nothing”! Our mission was quite simple: take care of the menacing German fighters.

With mission details in hand, Capt. Abbott led our section up and away from Bodney. My P-51, *Little One III*, was flying absolutely perfectly. My crew had polished

“their” bird up before they allowed me to take off, enhancing the performance. I awaited our airborne orders from Capt. Abbott. They never came.

Capt. Abbott had developed mechanical problems, and he aborted from the mission. The rest of us flew on into the unknown without the slightest idea what we were supposed to do. Making matters worse in an already tense situation, we had no call signs. Ninth Air Force radar, perhaps thinking a German ruse, refused to acknowledge our flight and our frantic calls.

Temporarily confused and flustered over our situation, we wondered what we were doing here! That was until we saw the Fw 190s. If there was one thing we all knew how to do, that was how to fight! I latched onto one of the 190s near Liège, Belgium, and quickly ruined another fine German aircraft, spoiling Christmas plans for its pilot. The other 190 met the same fate by a fellow bluenoser as we began our search for Y-29.

I landed on a rough field that contained 9th Air Force P-47s. As I tax-



War time photo of 352nd FG *Moonbeam McSwine*.

SAM SOX

ied up to the flightline, I wondered if I had landed in a junkyard. I parked next to a P-47 that by all accounts should have been proclaimed “war weary” or scrapped for parts! Standing next to the Jug were two 9th Air Force pilots in roughly the same shape.

As I hopped out of my bright, shining Mustang, adjusting my Bancroft Flighter on my head and checking its placement in the reflection of my P-51, I strolled up to the two pilots, my dress uniform still crisp after the three-hour combat flight. My introduction was short and to the point as I said, “Hi, where am I?” The two looked at me in my pinks and greens, then my shining Mustang, then each other, and after a long pause, one of

them said, “Goddamned 8th Air Force!” And walked away. Boy, was I mad! That was until I looked around and started comparing my airplane to the others around me. That’s when it hit me like a sack of coal! This was frontline fighting. Merry Christmas, idiot!

I flew two missions on Christmas Day—the first for almost two hours and the second one for three hours. We were all dog-tired sitting in the officers club (tent), celebrating Christmas in our own way, when a bombshell was dropped on us: Maj. Preddy was dead. I became very angry at first, asking the obvious question, “Why him?” We drank a “few” to him as he would have wanted and then got back to winning the war!

*RF*



The CAF's Red Nose flown by Keith Wood.

JIM KOEPNICK

*“All I Want for Christmas  
Is Two Fw 190Ds!”*

1st Lt. Timothy J. Cronin  
4th FG, 334th FS

Our Mustangs looked like pieces of tinsel thrown across the bitterly cold Christmas sky. With our red

noses and three .50-caliber machine guns embedded in each wing, we were more than prepared to spoil any German fighter’s holiday plans.



Escorting B-24s on a target penetration withdrawal just south of Bonn, Germany, the German fighters rose up to greet us. Not happy about the “gifts” left behind by the B-24s, the Fw 190Ds and the Bf 109s were spoiling for a fight. The Germans attacked out of the sun. This should have worked with great success, but they ran right into us on the way down.

In a matter of seconds a savage and lengthy battle erupted, and P-51s, Fw 190s, and Bf 109s were everywhere you looked. The large battle soon broke into smaller ones. Streaks of black smoke showed where someone hadn’t been so lucky.

My Mustang was named *Spurtz*, which is Swedish for “squirt.” I formed up with another Mustang, and we latched onto an Fw 190D. He was twisting and turning, rolling and reversing, but six .50-caliber machine guns shredded the 190 into pieces.

We tangled with another Fw a few seconds later, and we chased him from 25,000 feet down to 10,000 feet. Our K-14 gunsights worked perfectly—he didn’t have a chance. Suddenly we were alone. It was amazing! Only seconds before, the sky had been filled with airplanes. Now, as I looked around, there was nothing; like a slate wiped clean, there was no evidence that a battle had even taken place.

A ghostly voice crackled in my headset. “Hey, red nose up there. Come on down and help me!” Whoever this “phantom” pilot was, he sure sounded as if he was in a heap of trouble, poor SOB. A second frantic call for help caused me to jerk my stick left. Rolling over, I saw a P-51 and Fw 190D below me at treetop level, locked into a tight turning battle. Each one trying to gain the advantage on the other.

I raced down noticing that the distressed Mustang was a fellow red nose. The 190 was searching for the opportune moment to unload a combination of 20-mm cannon and machine gun fire. Luck, however, was the one thing this German pilot lacked.

He never saw me coming. I got hits  
Left: Tim Cronin in front of Sprutz-



Frasca family's Fw190.

JIM KOEPNICK PHOTOS



all over the 190 as he took evasive action and broke away. My newfound wingman also scored hits on him on the way down. After one-half hour of almost continuous aerial combat, the Germans headed for home to lick their wounds.

As my wingman and I flew back to base, I noticed the humorous caricature of a warthog with the words *Ridge Runner* painted on the nose. Numerous German crosses were also quite visible. My newfound wingman was Pierce McKennon, CO of the 335th FS.

I felt pretty good at that moment, like I really accomplished something, especially saving a CO’s butt!

Upon landing back in England, McKennon and I exchanged Christmas greetings to one another. I had also given him a gift—half credit for the 190. After all, isn’t Christmas about sharing?

A unique Christmas present of its own was bestowed upon the 4th FG, 334th FS, proclaiming them the first squadron in the ETO to destroy 300 enemy aircraft.





Lee Lauderback in Little Witch.

JIM KOEPNICK

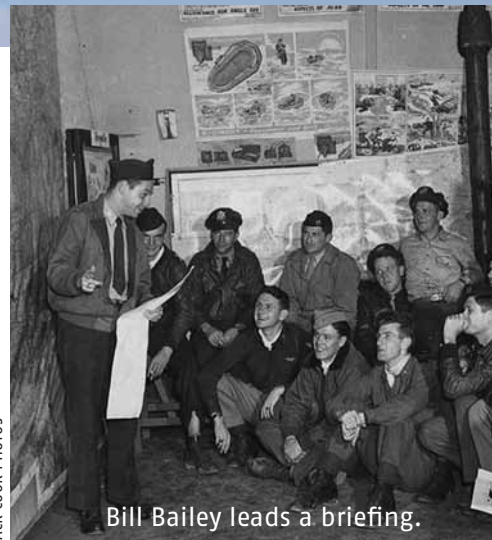
## *“Winter Wonderland”*

Col. William B. Bailey  
353rd FG, 352nd FS

**O**ur group, along with many others in the 8th Air Force Command, had an exasperating time during the Battle of the Bulge. Our base, along with most East Anglia, was socked in by freezing

fog. Ice particles could be seen floating in the air, sticking to trees, wires, and our grounded aircraft. Ground visibility varied between zero and maybe 100 yards on a “good” day.

December 23, 1944. Weather began



Bill Bailey leads a briefing.

JACK COOK PHOTOS



Bill Bailey and fellow 353rd FG pilots in front of Bailey's P-51 *Double Trouble Two*.

to clear and a mission flown as four P-51s from the 352nd FS took off to escort two F-5 Photo Lightnings on a recon flight over the Ardennes. The Germans, not wanting any “uninvited guests” at the Bulge party, sent up two of their own twin-engine aircraft to engage the party crashers—their Me 262 jets. During the aerial encounter, 352nd FS pilots claimed both 262s as damaged.

On December 24, 1944, our group launched 68 black and yellow checkered-

nosed Mustangs on several different missions. I led one of the missions on a B-17 escort to Biblis Aerodrome, a very active German fighter base involved in the Bulge operations. We ran into 20 Bf 109s that took serious offense at us ruining their Christmas season, and we argued about it awhile. The net result was seven Bf 109s failed to return home.

We were frustrated at not being much help to the GIs below, so my P-51 *Double Trouble* and I went down looking for trouble but couldn't find

it because of the damned foul weather over the battlefield!

On Christmas Day, I was tasked again to lead another escort mission: accompanying B-17s to Ahrweiler marshaling yards used in support of German Bulge operations. Fifty-two P-51s flew as guardian angels as the bombs fell on target. Six Bf 109s were encountered, but amazingly only one was shot down!

With the bombers safely on their way home, we went "downstairs" to look for targets of opportunity, but there weren't

any. We were completely frustrated by cloud, snow, poor visibility, and the simple fact that we didn't even know where our forces were. Hopeless and helpless, we flew back home.

We had a Christmas dinner of sorts; however, no one had any Christmas spirit. How could we when our fellow soldiers like the 101st Airborne were trapped at a place called Bastogne while we were sitting on the sidelines wondering and praying? Christmas 1944? Bah humbug!



JIM KOEPNICK

This is the same scheme George Preddy's Mustang wore on Dec 25th 1944.



JACK COOK

Don Strait

## *"It's Better to Give Than to Receive"*

Capt. Donald J. Strait

356th FG, 361st FS

**F**ar from home and loved ones, we still maintained a Christmas spirit. The ready room was decorated with traditional Christmas trees, holly wreaths, and a candelabra made from empty .50-caliber shells that gave a convincing look glowing in the ready-room window. With only one day before Christmas 1944, we looked forward to our

planned party the following day. There would be no rank at this party, as everyone from enlisted man to officer in our squadron would spend Christmas day together, forgetting about the war.

Unfortunately, the war did not forget about us. I was awoken in the early morning hours of December 25. Handed a Teletype message from Wing that read as follows: "Weather condi-

tions for mission of December 25 may necessitate groups taking off as soon as possible to avoid fog bound and probably landing on continent. Group leader



Don Strait in Jersey Jerk leads three other 356th FG Mustangs on a fighter sweep.

JACK COOK

*will launch aircraft an hour early if necessary. In the event that groups are forced to land on continent, they may be forced to remain there two or three days. Groups landing on continent will become freelance units. Maintenance facilities will be limited or nonexistent. Pilots will endeavor to carry spare plugs, wrenches and small parts for minor maintenance. IT'S A TOUGH DEAL, GANG, BUT THIS IS WAR AND WAR IS HELL—MERRY CHRISTMAS...*

So much for our party plans! We received our field order shortly thereafter—a fighter sweep over Bonn, Germany. It looked as if a really miserable Christmas was in the making.

As the fog was expected to roll in rather quickly, our P-51s took off at 8:40 a.m. We arrived over the Bonn area at 10:45 a.m. and immediately began receiving reports of bandits in the Bonn-Cologne-Coblenz area. Investigating these reports was a waste of time. We found P-47s but no Germans. I was glad I had given orders to the men back at Martlesham to go ahead with the party, because at this rate it was anyone's guess when we would be coming home!

At last, after droning around for over four hours, we were told to investigate bandits 25 miles southwest of Bonn. My wingman and I headed to the area and picked up another Mus-

tang on the way. The three of us arrived at the area at 19,500 feet, and I spotted 10 Bf 109s orbiting left at 18,000 feet below. As we dove to attack, three against 10, the odds were still stacked in our favor. With superior planes and pilots along with the altitude advantage, I thought we had it made. But then, I was young.

Four 109s broke into a right diving turn as I picked out tail-end Charlie. Firing a few short bursts, I saw hits on the tail, fuselage, and right wing. The 109 straightened out and went into a shallow dive. I then closed to a very short distance and got more strikes on the tail and left wing. Smoke and coolant came pouring out of the 109, and suddenly my windscreen was covered with radiator fluid. I was too damn close!

I had "given" and now I was "receiving"! I couldn't see a thing straight ahead. Cutting the throttle, I skidded the airplane from side to side in an effort at slowing down and got my speed down to just above stall. The 109's propeller had stopped, and he practically hung in midair. I had to pop my stick forward to avoid ramming him. I passed the smoking 109 just as it began a shallow glide for a field below. I was looking back at the 109 when I saw my wingman about to be bounced. Calling for him to break, I shoved in full throttle, turn-

ing back to help him. My wingman took some hits as I maneuvered into position. The 109 broke and dove for the deck just as I was about to open fire. I couldn't follow him because the coolant covered my windscreen. We climbed back up and headed for home. Of course just where home might be was anyone's guess.

Our squadron must have been "good little boys," as we received word that Martlesham was open. Upon our return, it seemed that Santa must have visited while we were gone; four kegs of ice-cold beer were left under the Christmas tree. What more could a fighter pilot want?!

### "Tidings of Joy"

With the weather clearing on December 24, 1944, the largest airstrike was launched with almost 1,900 bombers escorted by 800 fighters. The Allies continued pounding the Germans on December 25, 1944, with more than 400 bombers escorted by 400 fighters, all in support of the GIs fighting to break the German advance in the Ardennes. Momentum had now been placed into the Allied hands, turning the tables on the Germans and forcing them to retreat. Allied airpower reigned supreme once again on a day set aside for peace.

