



JIM KOEPNICK

# Hoods Over Normandy!

D-Day combat in zebra-striped P-51B Mustangs

BY JIM BUSH

**J**une 1944. Allied heavy bombers and fighters had been hammering away at Fortress Europe since early in the year. Around-the-clock strategic bombardment coupled with low-level "Chattanooga Choo Choo" bombing and strafing missions by Allied fighters helped soften up intended targets.

Hitting railways, airfields, and German emplacements along with knocking the Luftwaffe out of the sky was the main objective for the Allied fighters. The battle-tested P-38s and P-47s of the U.S. Army Air Corps were recently joined by a newcomer: the P-51B Mustang.

With its long legs, the Mustang could stay with the bombers all the way to the target. Once released from escort, these "Killer Bs" were free to roam, search, and destroy targets of opportunity.

With fighting on two fronts, Hitler's Nazi Germany was in a stranglehold. It was also the eve of the greatest and mightiest invasion the world had ever known. The final knot in the figurative hangman's noose was about to be tightened. And for three hangmen flying P51Bs, they had a front-row seat to Operation Overlord. Here are their stories.

# 'Longest Mission/Longest Day'

CAPT. C.E. "BUD" ANDERSON, USAAC

357TH FIGHTER GROUP 363RD FIGHTER SQUADRON



JIM KOEPNICK

**D**uring the spring of 1944, I could see the military buildup in England and figured the invasion would take place soon. I was returning from a mission on June 5, 1944, and as I neared Pas De Calis I noticed more boats than I had ever seen before. I shouted "Oh, wow!" over the R/T. The group leader ordered radio silence; he didn't want me tipping off the listening enemy!

After we landed our P-51Bs were swarmed over by ground crews carrying paint buckets and brushes. They painted black and white bands around our wings and fuselage, turning our olive drab Mustangs into hybrid zebras. We figured something was up for them to go to all that trouble. We learned hours later that the boys on the ground would be landing on Normandy early the next day. The invasion was on!

Our group was assigned to launch 32 P-51Bs at 2:15 a.m. We were to patrol an assigned area south of Normandy waiting for some action. It never came, as the Luftwaffe missed the invitation to the party and never showed up. I was so excited to be on such a historic mission that I did a very poor preflight of my P-51B Old Crow.



COURTESY JACK COOK

C.E. Bud Anderson relaxes on the wing of *Old Crow*

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COURTESY JACK COOK

Bud with ground crewman.



KEN DAWSON

The distinctive bulge of the Malcolm Hood.

I didn't notice that the coolant radiator doors were in the automatic position. Normally, my ground crew ran up *Old Crow* and left the radiator door in the manual position. A Mustang could overheat if it remained on the ground for extended periods of time with the prop turning.

Besides, *Old Crow* and I never had an abort, and I didn't want to break our record on the greatest day in history!



KEN DAWSON



KEN DAWSON

I was the fifth Mustang to take off and didn't think I was on the ground all that long. As I advanced the throttle forward my P-51B raced down the runway, gaining flying speed. I was fully loaded with gas and ammo as I lifted off into the black moonless night. That's when the radiator cap blew. The vapor spread across my windscreen, blinding any forward vision I had. I quickly opened the coolant doors, and the temps came back into the green. My mind raced back and forth: Why didn't I do a better preflight? What the heck should I do now?

There was no place to land, as all the runways were clogged with other Mustangs waiting to take off. The coolant temperatures were holding steady, and I decided to take the risk and keep on flying. Besides, *Old Crow* and I never had an abort, and



JIM KOEPNICK

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My windscreen began to clear as I gathered my flight together and tucked them in close trail behind the group leader. There were red and green navigation lights all over the sky; it looked like a bunch of crazed fireflies buzzing around. After the group was assembled, with every flight in its proper place, the group leader announced, "Turn out your navigation lights and start patrolling!" That's when it all fell apart.

I kept close watch over the blue exhaust flame on the lead Mustang ahead of me. I looked around for my fellow wingmen and found they had disappeared. I wondered who else was lost as we droned around over parts unknown. Then the Germans opened up with their anti-aircraft guns; I knew we weren't over England anymore!

The early-morning light began to push the darkness away. There were more than 30 Mustangs that

launched from our base at Leiston, and now, counting myself, there were only four. Either we were really lost or we were a bunch of cracked navigators! At that moment, through the breaks in the clouds, we saw the entire Normandy beach area.

It was an awesome sight. The landing barges were still approaching the beaches, and I could see the white wake following each vessel. We were a long way away, but I could see the fighting and activity on the ground below. I could only wonder how the guys on the ground were doing and prayed for their success.

After six hours and 55 minutes of flying, I touched down at Leiston. It was the longest mission I had ever flown during the war. D-Day had been a dull day, as far as enemy action was concerned, but we had been part of history and that was satisfying to me. (To learn more of Bud Anderson's combat experiences, please read his book *To Fly and Fight: Memoirs of a Triple Ace.*)

## 'Death of a Princess'

1ST LT. ROBERT K. BUTLER

352ND FIGHTER GROUP 487TH FIGHTER SQUADRON

**H**aving one mission already under my belt, I was about to depart on the last flight out of Bodney on D-Day. I had been on the first mission and was in the group behind the 486th Fighter Squadron when one of their guys crashed into the dark control tower. It was a horrible and tragic loss that took the life of a fellow blue-noser. But his human torch enabled the rest of the flights to take off safely.

At least there was still daylight as we climbed aboard our P-51B Mustangs. Because so many Mustangs were flying that day, we were assigned what was available. I drew Lt.

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GREG MOREHEAD





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Bill Whisner's Princess Elizabeth. Already a proven "fighter," it carried a handful of German crosses on its side. I hoped to add a few of my own as we prepared to go hunting.

Originally, 16 P-51Bs from our squadron were to escort nine P-38s on a dive-bombing mission south of Paris. I was to fly wing on my element leader in the last flight of four Mustangs. For whatever reason, he had to abort due to mechanical problems. I then became the element leader with a P-51B on either side of me. The P38s were worried that the Luftwaffe would try to jump them on their way in, forcing them to prematurely dump their bombs. No German fighters were encountered as the Lightnings' bombs fell.

We were now cleared to leave the P-38s and drop down to the deck for a little house-cleaning of our own. German vehicles were all over the place, heading toward the coast. We strafed and chewed up trunks, tanks, and convoys and cut a swath through the French country-



Butler on the wing of his P-51D after his return to England.

side. Anything that moved prior to a pre-set line from the beachhead was fair game. The Germans threw a lot of flak and small-arms fire at us as we screamed overhead.

As our flight climbed back up to altitude, we began heading for home with the three of us in the tail-end Charlie position. I spotted a train out of the corner of my eye. This train was sitting in a valley on a turnaround



GREG MOREHEAD



Robert Butler

## We had flown into a trap, and I was the "rat" in the valley of death!

with a bunch of boxcars attached to it. It looked like easy pickings! I called the "boss man" leading the squadron, and he gave the okay for the three of us to "shoot it up."

We flew on about a mile ahead of the train and then dropped down to the deck. We were "cuttin' grass" through the valley floor. The train was at the other end of the valley. Surrounding the valley was a church and cemetery built atop the hills. Trees lined the other side as we roared on ahead. Nearing the church on the deck the flak opened up on either side of us. Twenty-mm, 40-mm, and small-arms fire erupted from the trees, the church, and the headstones! We had flown into a trap, and I was the "rat" in the valley of death!

Because we were so low, the gunners misjudged our height as tracers streaked over my canopy. Things went from bad to worse as we neared the train. The boxcars soon turned into "flak flat cars" as their canvas sides dropped and their guns swung in our direction. We were still lower than the train's guns as their shells rocketed over our heads.

There were two options available to me. Fly over the top of the train and get "chewed up," or fly through the train and die! I may have been young and foolish, but I wasn't stupid. Both wingmen were able to pull up and away as the train's guns seemed to focus on me. Jinking the stick back, I took one hell of a hit in the belly. Hot oil streamed into the cockpit through the ventilators. I painfully pulled back on the stick to gain as much altitude as possible, all the while taking a scalding, hot oil shower.

One of my "observant" wingmen pulled up next to me and said, "You've got oil leaking all over the place." If he

had been any closer I would have reached out and wrung his neck! I was trying to make the beach, which was about 9 miles away.

I was at 1,500 feet, and I could see all the "hell-raising" going on up there. That's when the prop stopped. I opened the canopy and kicked the Mustang around a little. I got sucked out and pulled my rip cord. As I floated under the billowing canopy, I watched *Princess Elizabeth* arching downward, trailing black smoke. She slammed down right into a set of train tracks. How ironic; I got shot down by a damn train, and in its last dying act, the Mustang hits some tracks. You take what you can get! (French resistance fighters rescued Lt. Butler the following day. For the next 79 days he participated in clandestine operations before he was turned over to advancing Canadian ground troops. Lt. Butler rejoined the 352nd and flew missions until V-E Day.)

# 'Trains, Planes and Convoys'

1ST LT. JAMES R. STARNES

339TH FIGHTER GROUP 505TH FIGHTER SQUADRON



Jim Starnes poses in a P-51B after his first victory.

**J**une 8, 1944: D-Day plus two. I had flown three missions on D-Day as a second lieutenant. Now two days later I was a brand new first lieutenant! That and two bits should have bought me a cup of coffee. We were going nonstop in support of the guys on the beach, trying to push their way through. Our targets were transportation, trains, and convoys as the Germans rushed troops to the beachhead.

On the first mission of the day, we had been given a sector well inland from the beachhead. Taking off in the predawn darkness, my red-and-white-checkered P-51B Tarheel had a 250-pound bomb hung below each wing. In the clouds and darkness I became separated from the rest of the squadron. I proceeded to our "block of France" knowing full well there would be plenty of targets to choose from. It was barely light out when I spotted a train parked at a rail station down below. I rolled it on over and began my dive toward the target. I released both bombs and had good hits on the train. With my target now burning, I came screaming back around for one strafing pass. My .50-calibers danced across the station as I roared overhead.

I began my climb back up to altitude. When I reached 5,000 feet I glanced to my left, noticing a thick patch of ground fog. Suddenly, the fog began to vibrate and out popped a Bf 109. The 109 was very easy to identify with its distinctive outline. This German pilot was definitely not a



339th FG P-51D's and a B model form up over England.

morning person! He was oblivious to me overhead and just continued in a straight line, zipping along half asleep.

With my altitude advantage I simply pushed the nose over and initiated a bounce. I fell in behind him closing, in on his tail. I gave him a few short bursts and quickly ruined a fine German aircraft.

Later that afternoon I caught the third mission of the day. It was another bombing run behind the beachhead. This time I stayed with the squadron, and we spotted a convoy of armored vehicles and trucks on a highway. Our P-51Bs fell into trail to bomb them.



Jim Starnes' ground crew pose in front of his P-51D *Tar Heel*.

The commanding officer (CO), Maj. Don Larson, began to fishtail as we all followed him down on the bomb run. Just as we were ready to release our bombs, a bunch of Fw 190s jumped us. The CO was having radio problems, and I called for the rest of the flight to "break and release bombs." I fell into a Fw 190 that was trying to get Larson's plane. As I went round and round with him, a 190 fell in behind me.

Our No. 3 man fell in behind that 190, and he had another 190 on his tail. Our No. 4 tacked onto him. With every other airplane being a P-51B, we rat-raced over the French countryside, in a round and round swirling dogfight. We were only at 5,000 or 6,000 feet when we got bounced. In less than five minutes, when it was all said and done, we lost one man and the Germans lost seven. I got credit for one and a half. As we joined up with Maj. Larson again, he still had his damn bombs hanging under his wings! We followed him down as he bombed the convoy below. The rest of us strafed it with what little ammunition we had left. We flew on back to England and prepared to do it all over again the next day. (On August 4, 1944, Lt. Starnes not only downed a Bf 109 near Hamburg, but he also became the first pilot in the 339th Fighter Group to reach 300 hours of combat. Not missing a beat, he immediately requested 50 more! He ended the war with six victories.)



# WARBIRD TOONS

by Jean Barbaud

<http://jeanbarbaud.blogspot.com>

