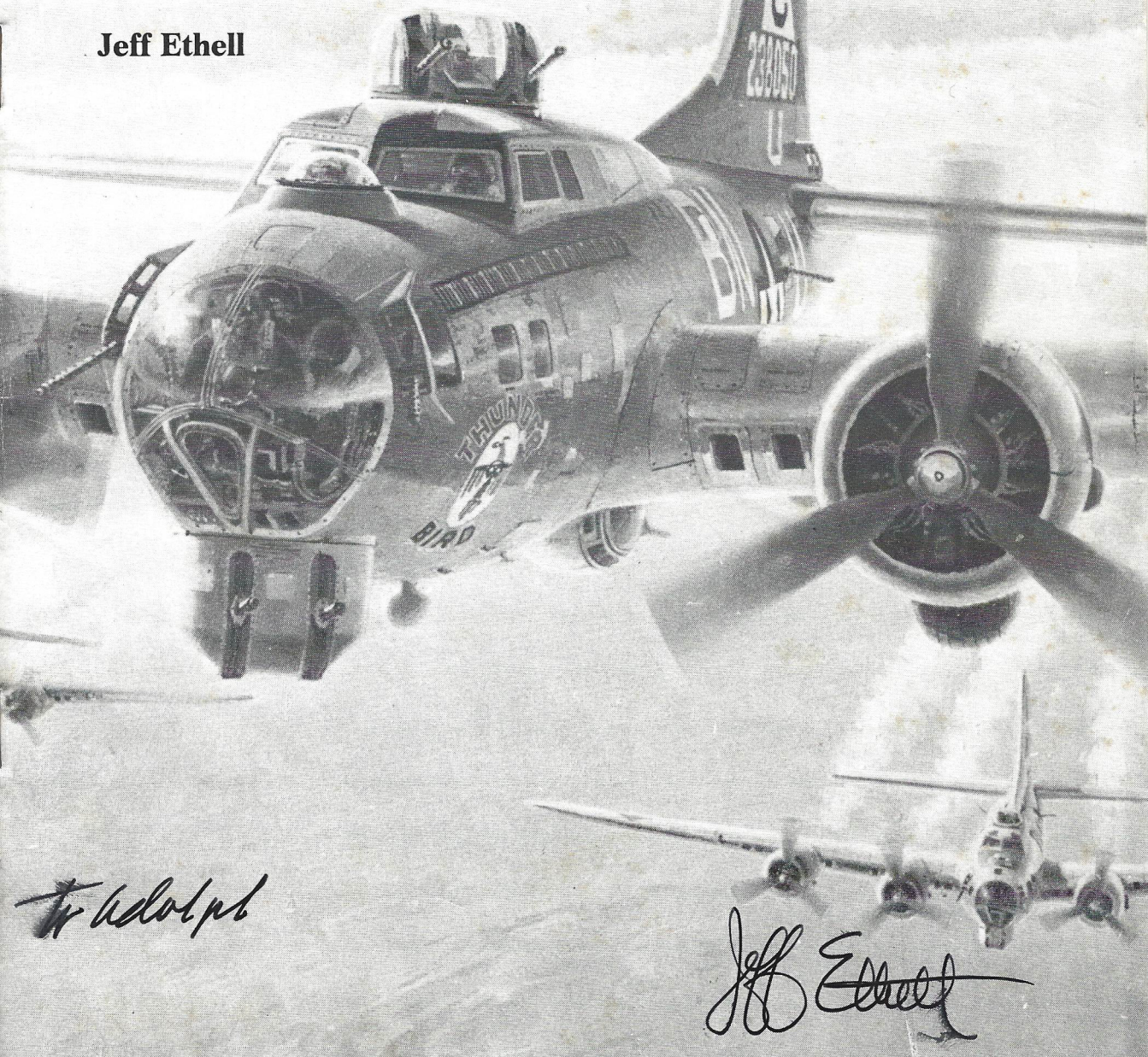


COWBOYS AND INDIANS

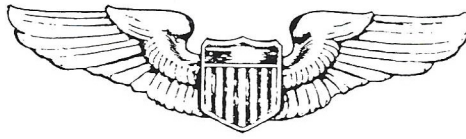
Jeff Ethell



W. Adolph

Jeff Ethell

THE STORY OF THE KEITH FERRIS B-17 MURAL



The 100th Mission.

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3012 Duke Street
Alexandria, Va. 22314

Persons having additional information concerning events described herein should contact the author at 2403 Sunnybrook Rd., Richmond, Va. 23229.

COWBOYS AND INDIANS

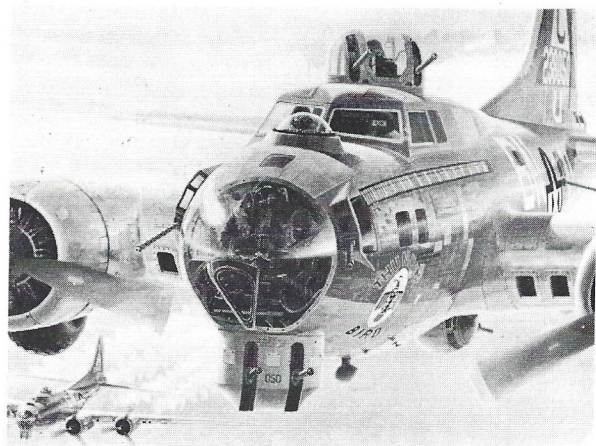
by Jeff Ethell

The sight rivaled fiction. As far as the eye could see stretched wing after wing of B-17s and B-24s. Twenty four combat wings had been dispatched by the U. S. Eighth Army Air Force against eleven Luftwaffe airfields in the northwestern parts of Germany, Holland and Belgium. The attacks were to be made in concert with the bombing of a further nine enemy airfields in Holland and Belgium by 1,004 Royal Air Force Halifaxes, Lancasters and Mosquitoes.

The vast armada was being shepherded by sixteen groups of P-51s, P-38s and P-47s—the sight of these “Little Friends” weaving protectively over the bomber formations inspired crews to write poems and sing songs that still find their way into reunions today.

The Eighth Air Force had unleashed a fantastic 1,722 aircraft upon the Third Reich from England on this day—15 August 1944.

Buried deep in the bomber stream were 39 Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses of the 303rd Bombardment Group from Molesworth, forming part of the 41st Combat Bomb Wing, First Force. The 303rd was to attack the fighter field at Wiesbaden. Faithfully carrying 2nd Lt. Jack R. Hillary and his crew to this target was a B-17G-25



built by Douglas, Serial Number 42-38050, squadron codes BN-U, more affectionately known as “Thunder Bird.” This was one of the crew’s first times into combat—it was 050’s 72nd trip into enemy territory. This sweet handling Fort was simply doing the job assigned to her...introduce new 359th Bomb Squadron crews to combat.

On this sortie “Thunder Bird” and her crew would witness German air opposition that Eighth intelligence debriefers labeled “generally slight.” Slight when compared to 24 wings—horrifying when it happens up close.

As the Allied armada made its way into the Reich, German mission planners plotted their reaction. Much to their dismay there were just over 100 aircraft and pilots available to fend off the massive formations. Three fighter wings would be thrown into battle: JG 3, JG 300 and JG 301.¹ Commanding JG 300, the primary unit to engage the formations, was Major Walter Dahl. Dahl and his pilots were Germany’s experts in knocking down enemy bombers. Flying in Sturmgruppen² of heavily armed FW 109s covered by Bf 109s, the pilots would ram bombers if necessary to bring them down, and parachute to safety if possible. Dahl’s Rammjager (ram fighters) became famous throughout Germany (and among Allied bomber crewmen!) with several of the pilots gaining a number of ram kills.



2nd Lt. Jack Hillary and his crew. This photo, as well as those of Mainwaring and Underdown, was taken on 17 Aug 1944, just two days after the mission to Wiesbaden.

(U.S. Air Force Photo)

¹ JG = Jagdgeschwader or Fighter Wing

² Storm Groups which flew in large wedges to penetrate the tight USAAF formations.

Since 0700 the Messerschmitt 109Gs and Focke Wulf 190As had been at readiness as the incoming formations were plotted—the weather was absolutely beautiful. By 0745 several Viermot pulks (four engine boxes—German slang for individual bomber sections) were reported to Dahl as entering the western combat zone of the Home Defense System. At 0900 the entire Wing was ordered to stand by for an Alarmstart in 15 minutes...the scramble order came at 0948.

Dahl was the first off with his Stabschwarm (Staff Flight) of six 190s. Following him was Hauptmann (Captain) Gerhard Stamp with 30 109s of I Gruppe to form the high cover for the interception. As the mixed formation left the field at Bad Worishofen, Leutnant Klaus Bretschneider led II Gruppe/JG 300 from Holzkirchen and Hauptmann Wilhelm Mortiz gathered IV./JG 3 together after departing Schongau.

The four gaggles rendezvoused over Augsburg at 1002 and formed the wide wedge-shaped battle formation as pre-briefed. Dahl took the lead as the Seventh Fighter Division ordered him to head for Frankfurt, about 264 kilometers away, and climb to 7,000 meters. Around 1030, after an effective feint by the Americans, the ground controllers changed the orders—head for Trier on the Moselle River to intercept three B-17 formations coming out of Germany. Using as much of the precious fuel as he dared, Dahl led his fighters the 415 kilometers to the new intercept point in just under an hour. The Germans were greeted by the sight of what they estimated to be 60 to 80 Forts.

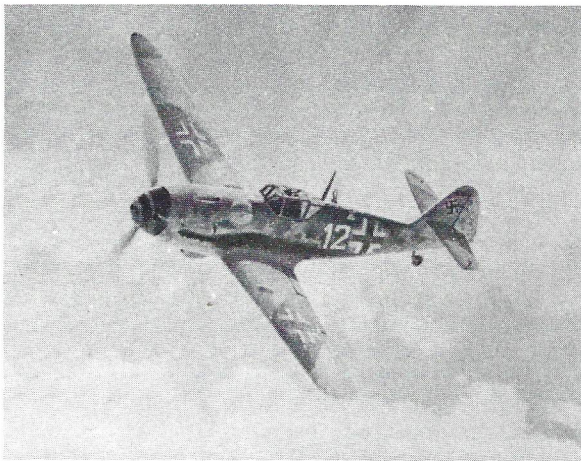
Twenty three minutes earlier “Thunder Bird” had dropped her bombs with the rest of the Group. The Wing Leader, Col. Cole, called out to the formation, “Cowboy Leader to all aircraft. Bandits at 7 o’clock!” It was 1145. The B-17s were at 25,000 feet with 10 to 15 miles visibility in a light haze. Contrails were persistent; flak was intense and inaccurate to the left.

Dahl excitedly radioed to the controllers, “Have the enemy in sight in northerly direction over Trier—6,500 meters—the pulks are without escort cover! Shall I order assault?” The Division replied quickly, “Free to attack. Take over now. Mache Pauke! Pauke!”³

Wasting no time Dahl radioed his formation, “Negus 1 [Dahl’s call sign] to all his little brothers: close up tight for storm assault! Escort group look out for Indians.⁴ Now lets beat the kettle drum. Everyone go with me. Rabazanella!”⁵

Dahl attacked from directly behind while Moritz took the box to the left and Bretschneider the box to the right. The German fighters formed an arrow-head with Dahl as the point, sweeping through the stacked B-17s as one great scythe, slicing bombers into pieces. Some of the huge Forts began to fall out of the formation. Dahl literally sawed the wing of one bomber off with his Focke Wulf’s heavy fire power—he saw three chutes.

“Thunder Bird” was sitting up in the lead box of 303rd B-17s at 1145 as the Sturmgruppe sliced



Uffz. Leopold Bigalke pushes in on the B-17 flown by 2nd Lt. Paul M. Mowrey before being shot down.

through. Nosing up after a run through the low box, Unteroffizier Leopold Bigalke maneuvered his 1. Staffel⁶ 109, “White 12,” and went after 2nd Lt. Paul M. Mowrey’s crew in the lead box flying B-17G #42-97944 (BN-I). Bretschneider came in just behind and to Bigalke’s left for 2nd Lt. Sidney L. Underdown’s B-17G #42-31483 (BN-P). Both fighters were taking advantage of the contrails as they pressed in.⁷ Hillary and crew could do nothing but

³ German — “Beat the kettle drum!” Equivalent of “Tally-Ho!”

⁴ “Indianer,” the German fighter pilot slang for enemy fighters. Ironically the Fortress wing being attacked, the 41st, was code named Cowboy this day. Hence the title “Cowboys and Indians.”

⁵ The Italianized war cry of JG 300 meaning to wreak havoc.

⁶ Staffel = Squadron. Bigalke apparently broke from his position as a part of the high cover to attack. The records specify his 109G-6/U4, Werks Nummer 441 514, as the only 109 to be lost while attacking the bombers.

⁷ This is the moment captured by Keith Ferris in his mural in the National Air & Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, World War II Aviation gallery.



2nd Lt. Sidney Underdown and his crew, posing on 17 Aug 1944.

(U.S. Air Force Photo)

watch from "Thunder Bird" as the fighters slid by.

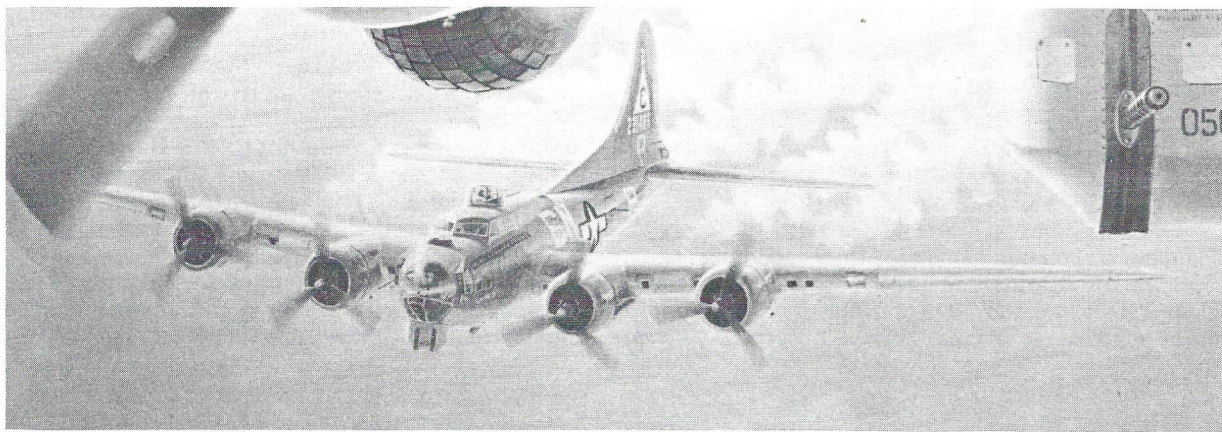
When Bigalke was 7 o'clock above to 944 the top turret gunner, T/Sgt. Robert Passenant, began to fire at a distance of 500 yards. The 109 took severe hits. A .50 caliber bullet grazed Bigalke over the left eye and another round fractured his left upper arm. Passenant and others who had their guns trained on Bigalke were making every round count—multiple strikes were lighting up all over

Against all odds Bigalke struggled free of his stricken fighter to parachute down alive. That evening he was at the reserve hospital in the town of Orb in the Spessart Mountains.

The tail gunner in 483, T/Sgt. R. G. Stevens, watched Bretschneider close in from 7 o'clock above. Stevens opened fire as the 190 closed to 800 yards—the German fighter pilot spun out at 600 yards in his heavy fighter, then pulled up to rejoin



Lt. Klaus Bretschneider presses his attack on Underdown's B-17.



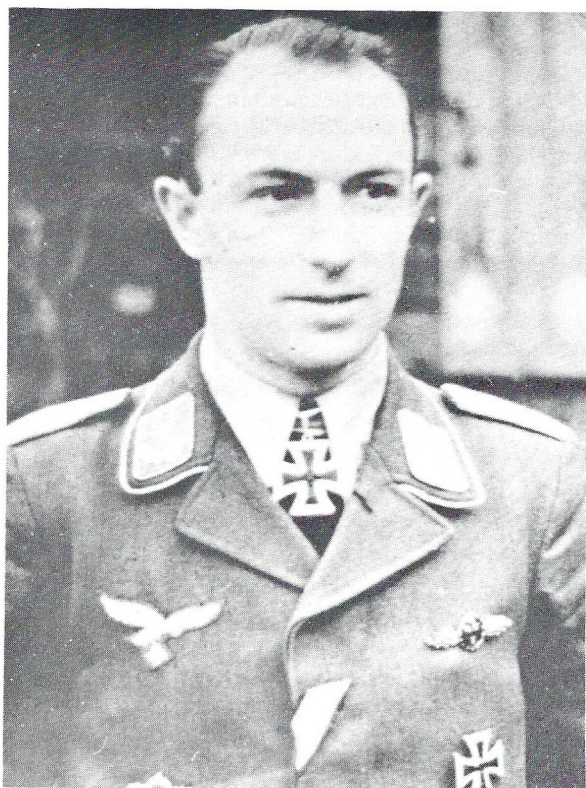
Underdown's "Bonnie B"

the Messerschmitt. A sheet of flame licked back from the right wing root...instantaneously the wing folded up and the last the crew saw of the 109 it was going down out of control on fire—no chute was seen.

the Sturmgruppe for another run.⁸

As Dahl regrouped the wedge and wheeled it around for another assault he singled out the already badly battered low box of the 303rd again. This time Dahl pressed the wedge home. A scant 80

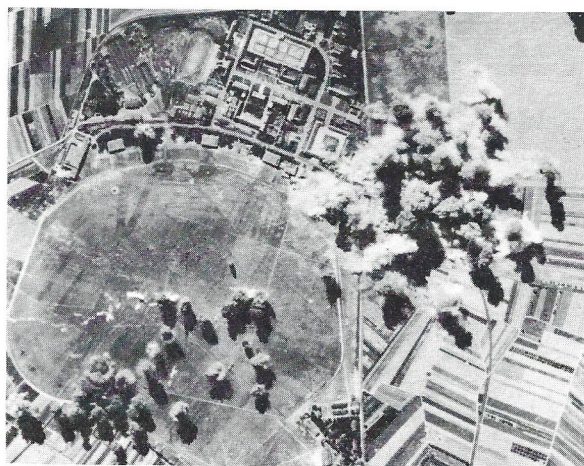
⁸ Oberleutnant (1st Lt.) Klaus Bretschneider was one of the outstanding German fighter pilots in the West. He downed 14 heavy bombers at night, most of them Lancasters over Berlin, in 20 missions as a member of JG 300 when it was a single engine night fighter unit cooperating with search-lights—the tactics were nicknamed "Wilde Sau" or Wild Boar. He was a born Berliner and his family was killed during the bombings. Becoming reckless, he later downed three bombers by ramming. His FW 190A-8, "Red 1", became a legend and he more than lived up to the nickname on its side—"Raubbautz," which loosely means a young man who likes to fight. After achieving 31 victories he was awarded the Knight's Cross on 18 November 1944. On 24 December 1944 he was shot down and killed in the Kassel area by P-51s.



Lt. Klaus Bretschneider (via Alfred Price)

meters away from his second victim fire broke out in the Fort's left wing. The stricken bomber dropped away in a steep dive as Dahl counted five chutes before it blew up.

Every member of the Stabschwarm of six 190s claimed a bomber downed, Dahl claiming two. Though the Germans claimed far more bombers than were lost,⁹ they downed nine Forts—81 men were missing from the 303rd. Fifteen bombers



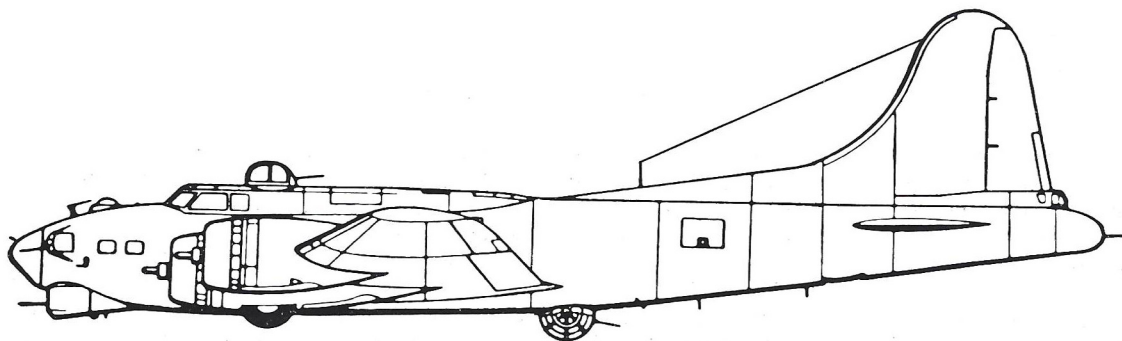
Over target, Wiesbaden, 15 August 1944 (U.S. Air Force)

came home to Molesworth damaged. The American crews reported that enemy pilots were "obviously experienced."

Before a third assault could be launched Dahl's wingman, Feldwebel (Sgt.) Walter Loos, cried out, "Indianer!" over the radio. The German commander knew the ball game was about to change, "Negus 1 to Ceasar 1 [Moritz]. Keep your eyes open! Indians!" Both Moritz and Bretschneider radioed back, "Victor."¹⁰

Shortly thereafter Gerhard Stamp brought the I. Gruppe high cover down on the intercepting P-51s and P-38s for an enormous dogfight. The Allied fighters reported encountering 65+ German fighters. Claims on both sides were exaggerated but six Bf 109s from I./JG 300 failed to return to base while six American fighters were lost to a variety of causes.¹¹

By the time the 109s diverted the Lightnings and Mustangs, red fuel warning lights were winking in the German cockpits. Bretschneider led his II.



Boeing B-17G-25 Flying Fortress

⁹ See Casualties.

¹⁰ "Roger" to the Allies.

¹¹ See Casualties.

Gruppe back to, ironically, Wiesbaden—the 303rd had inflicted only minor damage. The 190s taxied in at 1203.

By 1343 the 303rd began arriving home. The crews reported what they had seen. The 358th Bomb Squadron ground crews and what was left of those on flying status were deeply shaken—seven of the nine missing Forts came from this bunch. The other two were from the 427th.

“Thunder Bird” brought Hillary and his crew to Molesworth without a scratch. Nine days later, on 24 August, the Flying Fortress in which Hillary’s bunch was flying received a direct flak hit—no chutes were seen. The loss of this well liked crew shook the 359th badly.

Old 050, “Thunder Bird,” went on to fly until the end of the war, doing what she did best. She was in every sense of the word a “GI” airplane. Having flown her first mission on 24 January 1944 to Frankfurt, she built up a long string of successful missions with the 303rd to almost every target the Eighth Air Force bombed, from marshalling yards to a shoe factory. After her first 25 missions she became a “first mission” ship, fulfilling that role all the way to 22 March 1945 and mission number 116. By the end the control cables on the old bird had become so stretched out of shape that she gave her pilot a hard time in the tight bomber formations and her skin was patched excessively from numerous hits. Her olive drab and gray paint had become a bleached near pink, stained deeply with oil and exhaust. She had gone through more than eight sets of engines! The “WW” on her tail as she was pushed aside at Molesworth told it all—War Weary. The numerous crews that she introduced to the art of war would never forget her.

HOW IT WAS RESEARCHED

When Keith Ferris called me in late September 1975 asking me to join his team as his researcher for the National Air & Space Museum World War II hall mural I was honored and excited. I was #3 on the project—Keith had already taken on an extremely talented artist, John Clark, to assist him in the actual painting. I had known Keith since 1970 when he painted the cover for my book *KOMET*, the Me 163 history.

The job before us in the way of research could have been simple—the requirement was a 25’x75’ mural depicting a formation of B-17s representative of the war they fought in. They did not have to be nailed down to dates or missions—neither of us wanted to do that. The mutual decision was to doc-

ument a moment in time—a precise piece of history that would be accurate down to the bomb symbols painted on the nose of our main aircraft.

Our list of requirements by October 2 came to the following:

1. Veteran camouflaged B-17G of the 8th Air Force with much wear evident
2. Photos of the aircraft available for reference
3. Known battle record
4. Name and nose art in reasonable taste
5. Good combination of mission tally symbols and markings (air division, wing, group, squadron, tail number)
6. Specific mission with following ingredients: a) during height of 8th Air Force activity of July through December 1944, b) good weather, c) contrails, d) flak, e) enemy fighters

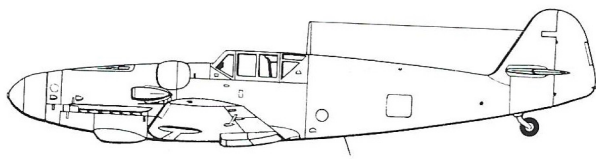
After helping Keith with standard B-17G photos for reference I jumped right into items 1 and 6 by reading extensively into 8th Air Force history. The field of B-17s was narrowed down to nine aircraft: “Nine 0 Nine”—91st Bomb Group; “Outhouse Mouse”—91st Bomb Group; “Thunder Bird”—303rd Bomb Group; “Ole Miss Destry”—305th Bomb Group; “Leading Lady”—305th Bomb Group; “Ole Gappy”—379th Bomb Group; “Fancy Nancy IV”—401st Bomb Group; “Hells Angels Out of Chute 13”—401st Bomb Group; “E-Rat-icator”—452nd Bomb Group.

Picking a particular mission was much harder since we had set severe requirements. After some initial research into the National Archives’ 8th Air Force records we decided to choose “Thunder Bird” due to her colorful markings, her long mission history, available photos—and was she ever beat up! Patches all over her skin, paint that was bleached badly, entire replacement parts that were natural aluminum standing out against the olive drab. And she was strictly “GI,” having been flown by so many different crews. Though Keith had painted her before, “Thunder Bird” emerged as our preference to represent World War II bombardment aviation.

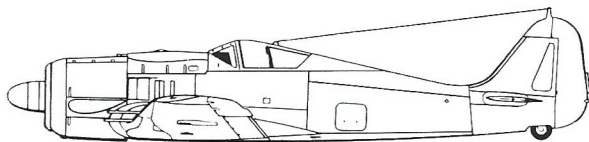
With the aircraft chosen I began the very tedious task of going through each day of the 303rd’s history from July through December of 1944. At the most I could cover 15 missions in a day. By early December we had folders for each mission our bird flew—I made up summaries and Xerox copies with the following information: date, target, time on target, bombing altitude, run-in heading, crew list, weather, contrails, flak, enemy aircraft, losses. Anything that might be pertinent was included. Keith and I spent three days going through the folders—only one mission fit all our requirements out of the 116 our aircraft flew: 15 August 1944. I spent some time after this making up a folder on each mission she flew from 24 January 1944 on. This produced a complete mission list, complete

records on the bird and the correct number of bomb symbols for Keith to paint on the nose for 15 August, mission #72.

Placing "Thunder Bird" in the desired view left three Forts visible in the rear and below according to the 303rd formation diagram. With the help of Roger Freeman in England we matched aircraft names with serial numbers. The 303rd Bomb Group Association also pitched in to help us find the surviving crew members of the three Forts in the background. Numerous trips to the USAF Aerospace Audio Visual Service turned up excellent photos of all four crews in the mural plus some great shots of the respective aircraft.



Messerschmitt Bf 109G-6/U4



Focke Wulf FW 190A-8

Our final task was to identify the German fighter pilots who flew the 109 and the 190 through the formation at 1145. By January 1976 I was pumping my best sources in Germany. Arno Abendroth and his team of researchers in Berlin performed a minor miracle, coming up with stacks and stacks of very detailed records. By May 4 they had pinpointed each fighter with its markings, pilot, and exact type, in addition to a full account of the German side of the combat.

By June 1976 Keith Ferris had finished one of the most exacting pieces of work I have had the privilege to work on as an aviation writer and researcher. To walk into the National Air & Space Museum's World War II Aviation hall is to enter a time machine—the scene suddenly shifts from

Washington, D.C. to 25,000 feet over Germany. The back wall is gone. In its place a formation of B-17s is making its way back from the target, roaring head-on into the room. All the pathos, the determination, the sacrifice of the Air War comes alive as a very rare glimpse of what it must have been like looms from behind the parked fighters on the floor. It must have been rough.

HOW IT WAS PAINTED

In March 1975, Jim Dean, Curator of Art for the National Air and Space Museum, telephoned Keith Ferris, asking him to tackle the 25'x75' mural in the World War II hall. After taking on John Clark as his painting assistant and myself as researcher, the actual work got underway.

The Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress was the Museum's choice as the mural's subject. "There was one aircraft we had when we needed it," remembered Ira C. Eaker. "It was the right plane for the job—it was available, in quantity, and it got the job done. The B-17 was the best airplane I've been associated with in my career." Carl "Tooney" Spaatz put it very simply to Hap Arnold, "The B-17 was the single weapon most responsible for the defeat of Germany." Several high ranking German officials felt the same.

Keith gathered photos and structural data from Boeing, the Air Force Museum, the Aerospace Audiovisual Service and a host of other sources—he even went down to the Confederate Air Force in Harlingen, Texas and took over 100 slides of their Fortress as a "character study." The initial result was an extremely accurate three view structural station drawing of the B-17G-25.

To explain how Keith gets from a three-view drawing to the desired view of the aircraft in the painting has to be seen to be believed. Lines are run to the drawing from a point in space representing the viewer's position relative to the aircraft in two of the three views. Using descriptive geometry, an azimuth and elevation plot of multiple key points on the airframe is formed, giving a near flawless representation in miniature of the aircraft as seen from that chosen point in space.

This small drawing is then transferred to a working surface or board by opaque projector where it is completed in detail. For the B-17, in addition to the drawing, Keith plotted a one inch square grid over the 25'x75' masonite board and had this photographed into a series of 15 black and

white 35mm slides. With the drawing properly recorded, he began to paint the entire mural scene in miniature as a work-up for the large wall.

In October 1975 the mural wall was covered with Utrecht linen canvas. A one foot square grid was chalk lined on the wall, correlating exactly to the miniature. Keith and John projected each of the 15 slides, using hydraulic man lifts to keep the projector perfectly perpendicular to the wall the entire height of 25 feet. Once the drawing was completed full scale in charcoal, the painting was begun.

Using Shiva Signature oils, a Ferris favorite, he painted the background first. A characteristic of Keith Ferris' art is his use of only the three primary colors (a carefully chosen red, yellow, blue) and titanium white. Most colors in his paintings are derived from this system.

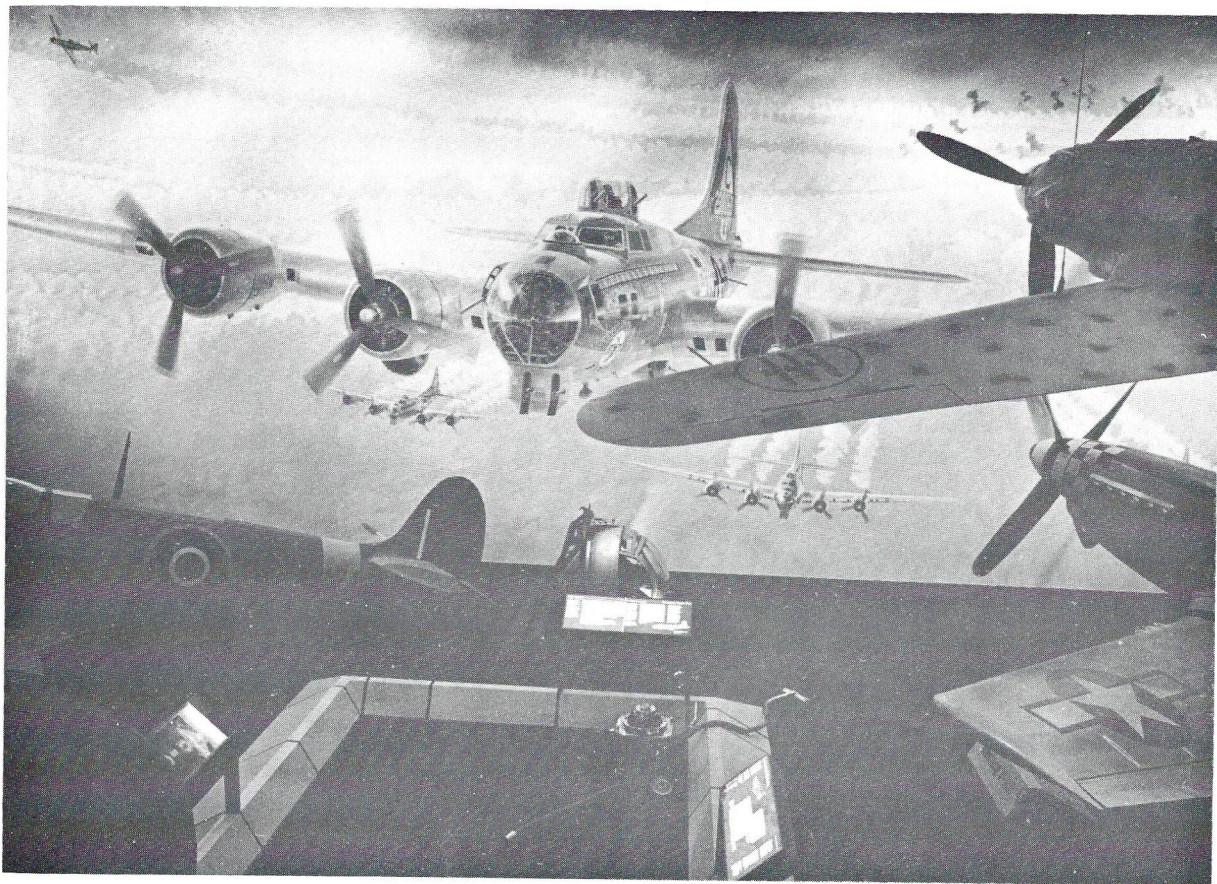
As the two artists began work each morning, John would mix up a large batch of white to get a very smooth consistency for the background. As he began with the sun and worked away from it, the sky began to take on reality. Again the two hydraulic lifts were used. Often John or Keith would have to stand at their imaginary viewing

point in space, 65 feet away to make sure the colors were matching and to assess the progress of the scene.

Upon completion of the sky with its numerous contrails and bursts of flak, the three small B-17s and the two German fighters were painted. Two smaller 109s were added later. The star of the scene, "Thunder Bird," was painted last, Keith working left to right. The mural received its finishing touches in mid-June 1976, taking close to a year from research start to finished painting.

The following amounts of painting material were consumed: 6 gallons of titanium white, 15 40cc tubes of red, 18 40cc tubes of yellow, 10 40cc tubes of blue, 2 gallons of painting medium, 18 gallons of odorless thinner, 20 palette pads, 3 one inch and 3 two inch #807 bristle brushes, 3 two and half inch household bristle brushes—and loads of paper towels.

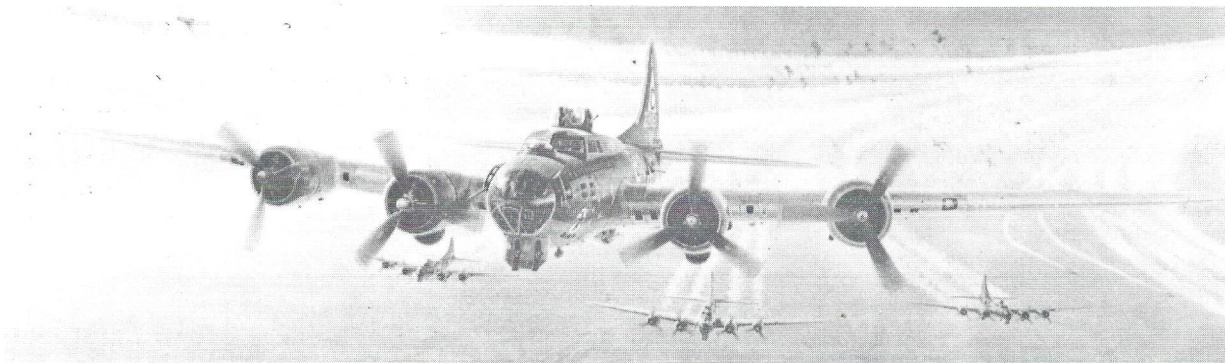
That roaring, dangerous piece of sky at 1145 on 15 August 1944 represents a natural view of the B-17 as if standing 65 feet back from the actual aircraft. The nose of "Thunder Bird" touches the wall as though it were on the outside of a large glass window about to come blasting into a room full of parked fighters.



303rd BG CREW LISTS OF MURAL B-17s

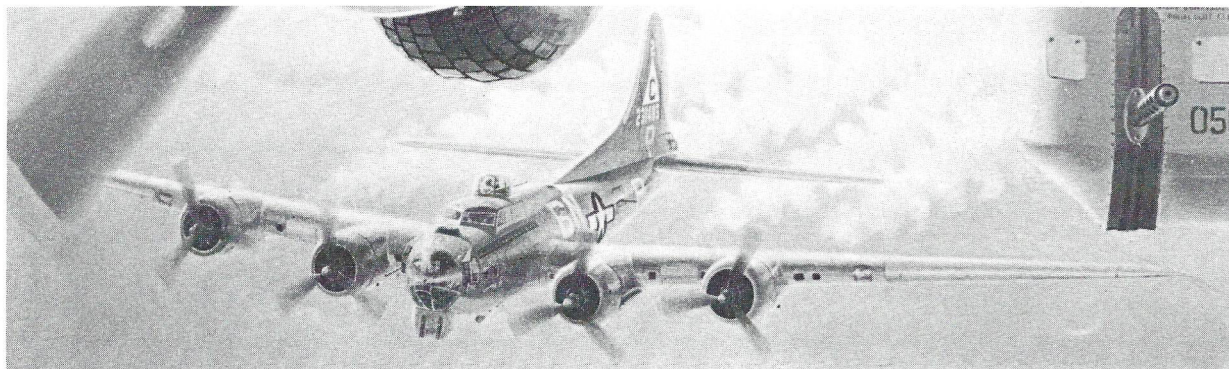
"Thunder Bird" 42-38050 BN-U

P	Hillary, Jack R.	2nd Lt.
CP	Robertson, Wm.III	2nd Lt.
N	Rice, John E.	2nd Lt.
B	DeFillipis, Rocco	2nd Lt.
E	Paul, George E.	S/Sgt.
R	Girman, Eugene E.	S/Sgt.
LT	Bishop, Neldon R.	Sgt.
TG	Watson, James R.	Pvt.
WG	Pordham, Jack F.	T/Sgt.



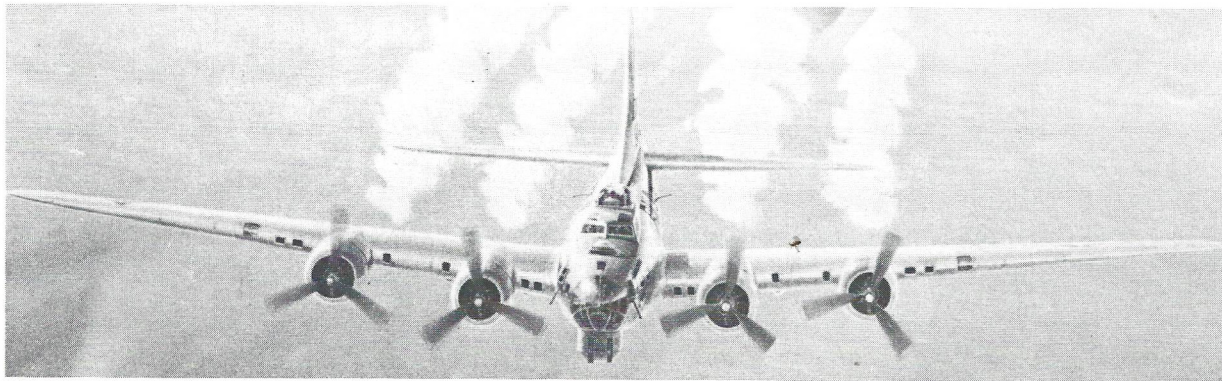
"Bonnie B" 42-31483 BN-P

P	Underdown, Sidney L.	2nd Lt.
CP	Knolle, William C.	2nd Lt.
N	Kenny, John P.	2nd Lt.
B	Tyree, Joseph C.	2nd Lt.
E	Kuwik, John J.	S/Sgt.
R	Posado, Frank G.	S/Sgt.
LT	Guptill, Walter R.	Sgt.
TG	Stevens, Richard G.	Sgt.
WG	Botton, Pius L.	Sgt.



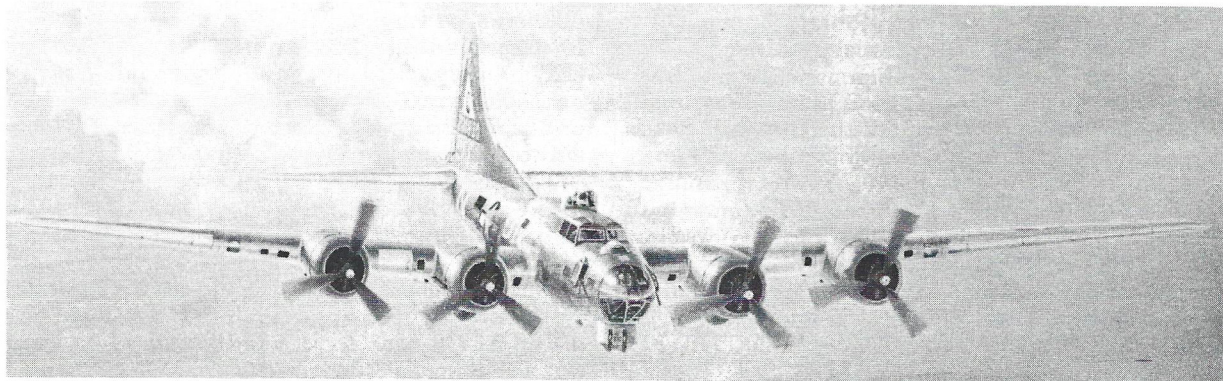
"Special Delivery" 42-102496 BN-M

P	Walker, Lewis M.	1st Lt.
CP	Doyle, Joseph J.	2nd Lt.
N	Wodinsky, Abraham	2nd Lt.
B	Codney, Thomas E.	2nd Lt.
E	Sublett, James W.	S/Sgt.
R	Lunday, Albert J.	T/Sgt.
LT	Hundley, Walter, L.	S/Sgt.
TG	Reckert, Arthur O.	S/Sgt.
WG	Mathis, Henry C.	S/Sgt.



"Marie" 42-31830 BN-N

P	Mainwaring, Charles O.	2nd Lt.
CP	Bach, Harold J.	2nd Lt.
N	Hammond, Raymond D.	2nd Lt.
B	Stone, Leonard	2nd Lt.
E	Gauthier, Leon C.	S/Sgt.
R	Tognetti, Paul A.	S/Sgt.
LT	Cottrell, Bert	Sgt.
TG	Bittman, Robert J.	Sgt.
WG	Angeloff, James P.	Sgt.



Casualties - German and American

303rd Bomb Group

Capt. Litman	43-37838	VK-A
Lt. Larson	44-6086	VK-L
Lt. Smith	44-6291	VK-E
Lt. Cathey	42-102680	VK-I
Lt. Smithy	42-31224	VK-F
Lt. Charnick	42-97085	VK-S
Lt. Goss	42-31183	VK-J
Lt. Clark	42-31423	GN-M
Lt. Cook	42-102432	GN-U

These nine B-17s represent a total of 81 men missing in action.

I./JG 300

Fw. Hans-Horst Schmidt-Hennig
Bf 109G-6 Wk.Nr. 163 399 "Yellow 2"

Oberfhr. Charli Purucker
Bf 109G-6/U4 Wk.Nr. 441 892 "Yellow 5"

Uffz. Hans Hahn
Bf 109G-6 Wk.Nr. 165 383 "Yellow 6"

Fw. Reinhold Fackenthal
Bf 109G-6 Wk.Nr. 163 128 "Black 3"

Uffz. Leo Bigalke
Bf 109G-6/U4 Wk.Nr. 441 514 "White 12"

Lt. Alfred Knörle
Bf 109G-6 Wk.Nr. 166 327 "Black 6"

It is interesting to compare each side's claims with the actual losses noted above. The 303rd lost nine B-17s and a further 15 were damaged. The German claims for bombers downed were as follows:

Sturmgruppe Moritz—IV./JG 3:	41
Sturmgruppe Bretschneider—II./JG 300:	35
Geschwaderstab JG 300:	7
	<hr/> 83

Keep in mind when looking through the claims for both sides that the numbers represent unconfirmed claims totaled at the end of that day from debriefing reports. Often these claims would be struck from the record, especially on the German side when the wrecks of the various Allied aircraft were counted. The Germans had a very thorough system for reporting downed enemy aircraft.

The 303rd claimed four German fighters destroyed and two damaged. Of the six 109s lost by I./JG 300, five were lost in aerial combat (Knörle was lost in a mid-air collision with another 109).

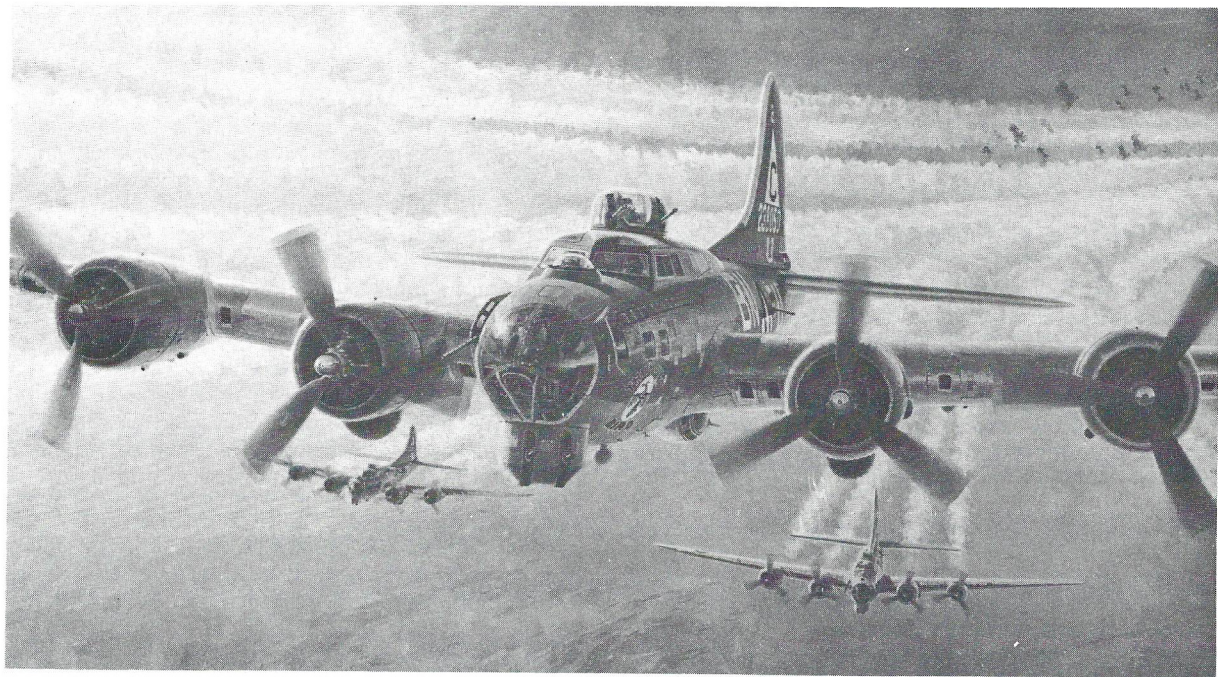
Another formation of B-24s on the mission encountered 15 Bf 109s in the Meppel area and claimed nine destroyed, one probable and two damaged. This further complicates things since the only German unit to lose aircraft on 15 August 1944 was I./JG 300.

The records on the fighter versus fighter encounters are a bit more complex. Total Allied fighter claims were 14 German aircraft destroyed and one damaged, losing two P-38s, one P-51 and one P-47 to flak and a further two P-51s to unknown causes. I./JG 301 threw a couple of Staffeln into the Mustangs and Lightnings after I./JG 300 had to break off, but no claims are available. Of all the American fighter claims only one German formation of 25+ FW 190s was engaged 25 miles southwest of Frankfurt at 1152 at 22,000 feet. The engagement lasted until 1202 and the Americans claimed

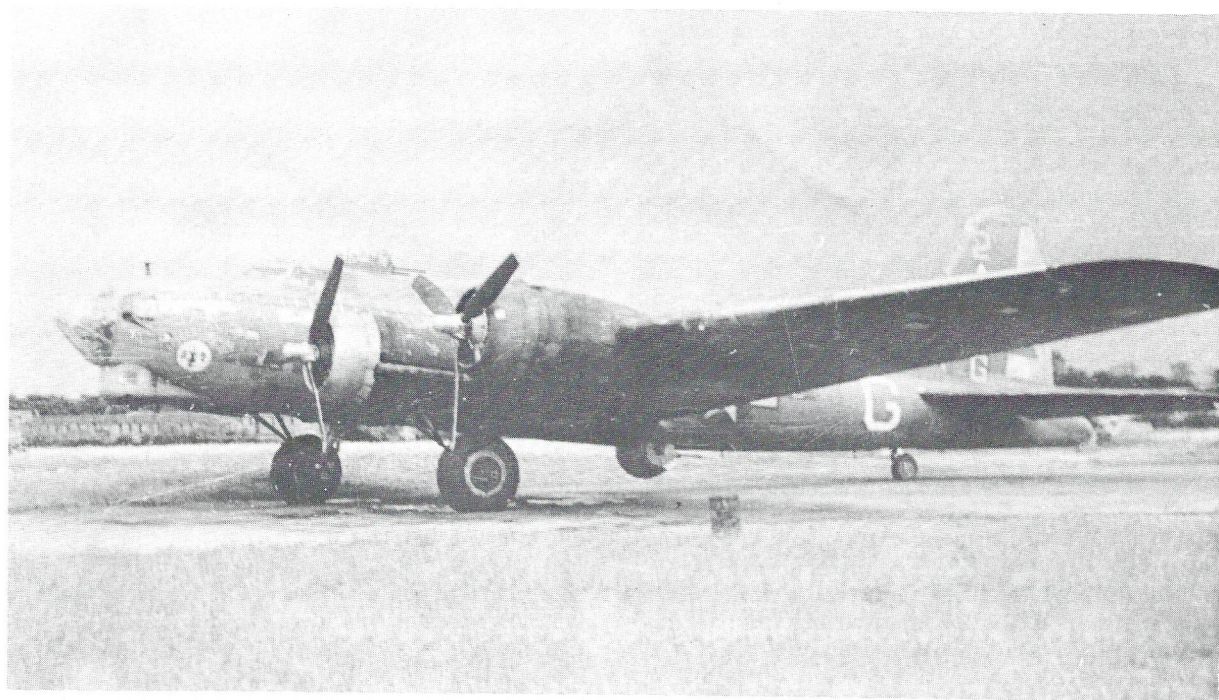
two destroyed, one damaged. The other claims on the Eighth Fighter Command roster were made much earlier than 1145.

The primary realization out of all this is just how rough it must have been for both sides when they entered the hell of aerial combat. Such a mass of exaggerated claims came from fights that saw huge formations of aircraft engage rapidly. Before a half minute had elapsed there would be flaming aircraft and parachutes, all crowded into a relatively tiny slice of airspace. When one would go down it was not uncommon for several to claim it. Also note what happened to Bretschneider when he was attacking Lt. Underdown's "Bonnie B"—at 600 yards the tail gunner, Sgt. Stevens, noted that the "enemy aircraft went into a bank then went down spinning" without taking any strikes. The FW 190A-8 aircraft that II./JG 300 flew were heavily armed and heavily armored. At high altitude in the thinner air the heavily laden fighters would be very susceptible to departures or high speed stalls—this is obviously what happened to Bretschneider. It could also have happened to several of the 190s claimed by the American fighters, had they looked for all the world like kills.

It is clear that both sides took pains to sort out the discrepancies, but, as 15 August 1944 proves, they were not always successful. Regardless, one fantastic fight went on in a tight piece of airspace over Germany that day.



1145 Hours, 15 August 1944



"Thunder Bird" when she was pushed aside at Molesworth after her last mission. Worn weary and full of patches, she had seen her last days in enemy skies. 116 missions of teaching green crews what it was all about. (Keith Ferris)

WHERE THEY ARE NOW

24 August 1944—between 0719 and 0851 hours 39 Forts from Hell's Angels were off again. The 303rd Bomb Group had been ordered to bomb the Leuna synthetic oil plant at Merseburg, Germany. Merseburg...without question one of the most feared targets within Hitler's Third Reich. The city's flak crews knew their business.

After crossing into enemy territory, Sid Underdown's number 4 prop ran away. He had to turn "Bonnie B" back and jettison her bomb load into the North Sea.

Merseburg was no problem to find. The sky above the city was filled with the fire and soot of flak bursting at the bomber stream's altitude. Jack Hillary and his crew flew into a hellish sight, this time in a new '17, "Myasis Dragon." The bomber was so new the name still hadn't been painted on the nose. "Thunder Bird," their mount of nine days before, was back at Molesworth for a much-deserved overhaul.

As Hillary and co-pilot Bill Robertson brought 42-97191 onto the bomb run, number 1 engine was hit, then another. In the top turret George Paul called Hillary and told him to feather them both as he climbed down and began to clip on his parachute.

In the next split second, an 88mm flak round came straight up through the open bomb bay and exploded in the midst of 38 100-pound general purpose bombs hanging in the racks. Split in half, 291 disappeared in the blinding flash of TNT and oxygen cylinders exploding.

Gene Girman was blown back through the fuselage, slamming against the pole above the ball turret. Unconscious, he slumped over the hatch of the ball turret with shrapnel wounds in his right shoulder, arm and leg. Reid Bishop was trapped inside his tiny ball without a parachute.

Bishop remembered seeing Girman then slide off and fall out into space. Reaching up through the freed hatch, Bishop grabbed his chute from the nearby radio box, clipping it on. Before he could react, he was thrown out of the mangled fuselage behind Girman, hitting jagged metal on the way.

Girman woke up in mid-air to find his chute hanging on by a single ring. Hooking the pack up, he pulled the rip cord. Instinctively following Army Air Force procedure, he delayed opening by holding the pack shut! At about 2,000 feet he let it deploy and noticed Bishop's chute opening nearby, although, at the time, he didn't know whose

parachute it was. As Girman touched down his knee was broken. Bishop had a bad scalp wound but otherwise made it down OK. A 10-year old boy watching in fascination ran for the local authorities and the only two survivors of Hillary's crew were captured, spending the next nine months as POWs.

Nineteen of the returning 303rd aircraft sustained major battle damage. Another seven were listed with minor damage. Though 20 enemy aircraft were seen southeast of Hamburg and in the target area, they did not attack. They didn't need to.

Gene Girman was 21 in mid-1944. Today he operates his own realty company in Highland, Indiana. Until recently he had placed those days in the back of his memory. But now the war will no longer be silently behind him because of Bill Robinson's widow, Shirley Volpe, who called Gene after seeing the mural by chance during a trip to Washington.



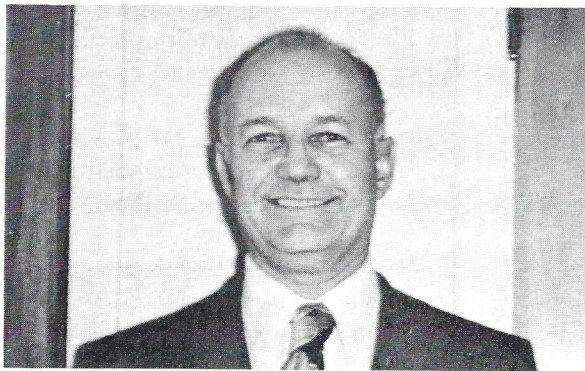
Gene Girman remembers.

Shirley, who lives in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, was visiting the Air and Space Museum shortly after it opened in July 1976. Walking into the World War II Aviation hall, she discovered the mural. It was striking enough, because her husband had flown B-17s, but what was most uncanny...she could have sworn that one of the pilots in the lead bomber was Bill, his gaze fixed squarely on her. Although that face was covered by an oxygen mask, she became convinced that it was Bill. Then, upon examining "Thunder Bird's" crew photo in front of the mural she saw Bill again! It was a jolting, unnerving experience.

A chain reaction began, set off not only by Shirley, but by others who heard about the mural. J.E. "Buck" Rice, the 85-year old father of John E. "Ed" Rice, flew to Washington from Opelika, Alabama, as the guest of Sen. James B. Allen (D-Ala.), to see the mural after Gene Girman called him about it. After 33 years he saw his only son once more sitting at the navigator's table in "Thunder Bird's" nose—and it happened to be Father's Day 1977.

Carol Lea, Jack Hillary's widow, traveled from Bellaire, Texas with her son Tom to see Dad flying his B-17. Keith Ferris met them there to tell the mural story and, for the first time, Tom got a glimpse of his father as he must have been. The crew photo shows Jack and his men goofing around with turned up hats and mixed up rank insignia. Among the hundreds of standard crew photos I researched in Washington for the mural, this was the only one with a bunch of clowns. Carol was happy that Keith had made Jack seem like a warm, fun-loving human to his son—not just, "your Dad—who was lost in the war."

Reid Bishop, the only other survivor of 050's 15 August 1944 crew, now works as a boiler maker with U.S. Steel in Orem, Utah. The mural has awakened vivid memories for him of days spent in that tiny ball turret without a parachute, firing away at German fighters intent on his destruction. His closest encounter came when a Messerschmitt 110 pulled up under his turret during a firing run—so close Reid could see the German pilot quite easily. Bishop shot him down.



Neldon Reid Bishop today.

On 13 September 1944, Hell's Angels took their B-17s back to murderous Merseburg. Lewis Walker and crew brought "Special Delivery" in over the flak congested target. It was a less violent replay of 24 August, but the Fort was mortally wounded. Walker and co-pilot Joe Doyle were killed instantly. Jim Sublett, Art Reckert, Al Lunday and Walt Hundley parachuted to safety and internment in Stalag Luft IV. They later survived another ordeal, the 87-day, 800 mile "Black March" in the bitter

Baltic winter. Wodinsky and Codney had not been aboard 496 the day "Special Delivery" went down.

Merseburg had claimed yet another mural crew, and again, the survivors began to show up after the mural gained favorable recognition. Walt Hundley wrote from Goshen, Ohio, sending a complete list of "Special Delivery's" survivors. He also commented, "I remember (13 September 1944) well as we hit (Merseburg) just three days after my 21st birthday. It is great to be alive!"

Several of "Bonnie B's" survivors have turned up as well. Her pilot, Sid Underdown, went on to become a colonel in the Army, serving at present as a military executive. At the time of the mural's completion he was stationed at Ft. Meade, Maryland and his visit to see the mural was as eventful as it had been for the others.

Charles Mainwaring, pilot of "Marie," wrote from Visalia, California. He remembered Klaus Bretschneider's determination to press his attack on "Bonnie B" on 15 August 1944. He had wondered then why the German wanted to ram the bomber. He could not have known of the grief over the death of his family in the bombings of Berlin that drove this Luftwaffe fighter pilot to become almost irrational in combat. Waist gunner Jim Angeloff, now living in Pontiac, Michigan, and navigator Ray Hammond, living in Pittsburgh, confirmed that "Marie's" entire crew survived the war, though no single crew member knew where all the others were.

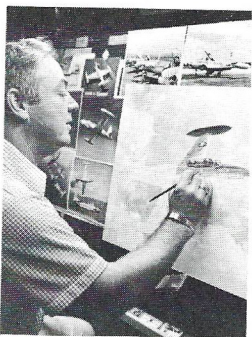
Leo Bigalke, the pilot of I./JG 300's "White 12," who faced the 303rd crews that brief instant on 15 August 1944 as an enemy, today lives quietly in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. His comrade in arms, Klaus Bretschneider, fell in combat with Mustangs the day before Christmas 1944.

The Ferris mural has awakened memories for thousands, not just for the friends and relatives connected with the 38 men depicted in the painting itself. When Mrs. Susan Hamilton saw "Thunder Bird" again in her local newspaper, she wrote, "I used to drive a tractor and cut the grass on the landing ground at Molesworth, my home. I knew the names of every plane on the base. I used to sweat them out every day.... It's nice to know someone is remembering those cold wartime days we all went through over there. I thank God for the Americans who did so much for us during the war. Hell's Angels was a wonderful outfit." Susan's family ran *The Fox*, a pub a mile from the base.

As difficult as it is to comprehend, this was a war fought on both sides by kids. Memories linger of youth caught in the crush of larger-than-life events...events, nevertheless, formed by individual human beings who did what was asked of them. The Keith Ferris National Air & Space Museum mural was painted for these men who fought the war in the air.



THE ARTIST



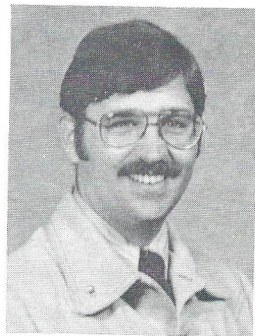
Keith Ferris has been involved with aviation all his life. His father, an Air Force career officer, flew through the biplane era as Keith grew up, imparting a fascination with aircraft. For more than 25 years he has been a professional artist specializing in aviation/aerospace subjects, flying in most of the aircraft he has painted. This first-hand con-

tact gives the impression of seeing Keith's subjects through the eyes of a pilot. The technical accuracy and attention to detail in his paintings have become hallmarks in aviation art. Active in the Society of Illustrators, and the Air Force Art Program, he has 20 paintings in the permanent Air Force Collection and has had several one man shows. His book, *The Aviation Art of Keith Ferris*, is a collection of his finest works.

(Bob O'Neill photo)

THE WRITER

Jeff Ethell has been around aircraft since childhood. The son of an Air Force fighter pilot, he was taught to fly by his father before he learned to drive. Soloing at age 18, he went on to become a Commercial Pilot and since 1972 has been cleared to fly in the aircraft of the USAF, USN and USMC. He has been writing aviation history since receiving, in 1967 and



1968, Research Grants from the National Air & Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution. He has written articles for most of the major aviation magazines and is the author of several books, including *Komet* and *P-38 Lightning at War*. A graduate of King College, Bristol, Tennessee, he is also an ordained Baptist minister and has biographical listings in *Who's Who in the South and Southwest*, *Men of Achievement*, *Dictionary of International Biography* and *Community Leaders and Noteworthy Americans*. He is a member of the Aviation/Space Writers Association and the American Aviation Historical Society.

