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GRAPHIC SECTION

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Page Two

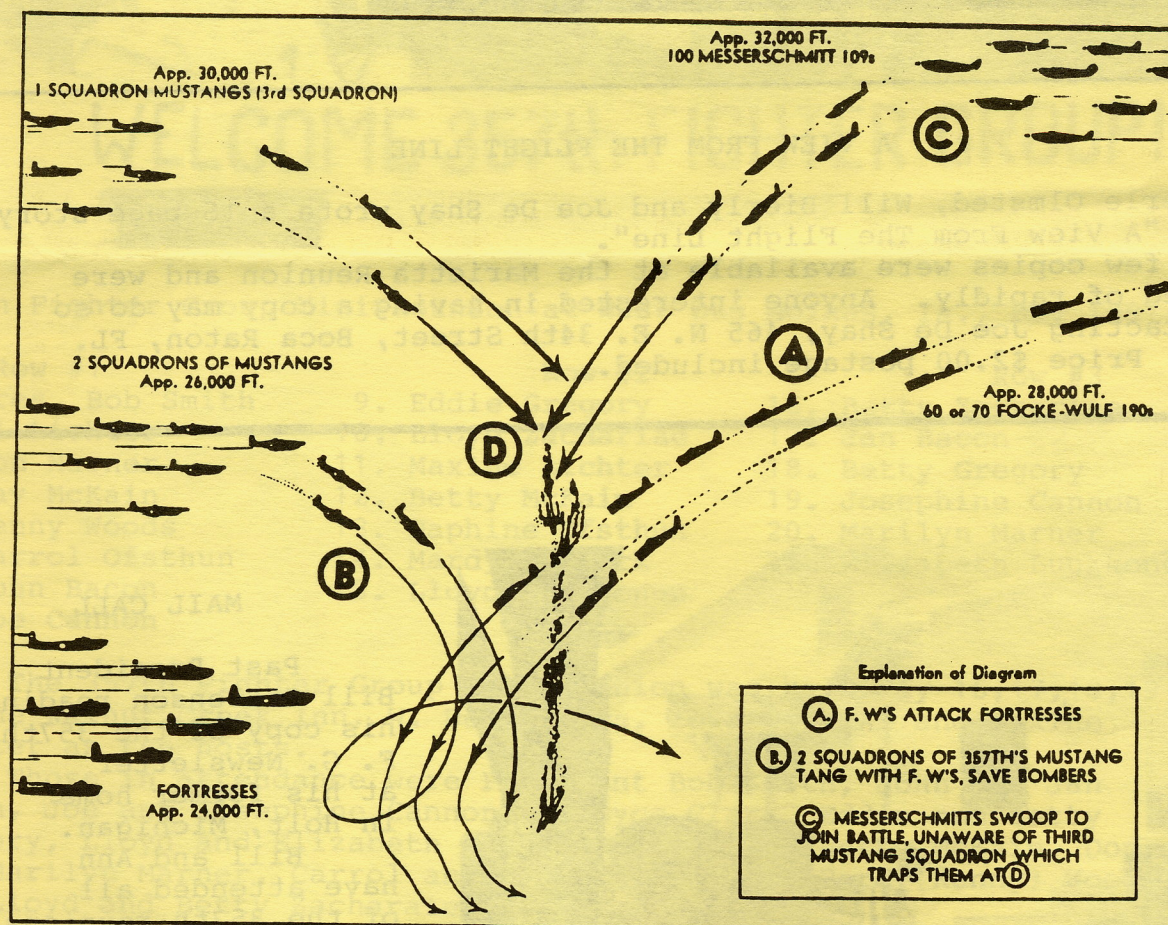
Chicago Sunday Tribune

MOUSETRAP IN THE SKY!

The story of the record-breaking battle waged by a group of American fighter pilots, many of them Chicagoland.

An 8th Air Force Fighter Base
Somewhere in England.

By JAMES E. SLOAN



(From sketch by Gary Sheehan.)

Diagram showing how three squadrons of 357th fighter group sprung the "mousetrap in the sky" on German fighter planes attacking United States bombers in Berlin area.

THE PRE-DAWN shroud of cloud and fog that blanketed this sprawling fighter station early on Jan. 14 was almost as thick and forbidding as the gloom that filled the hearts of its pilots, who had been grounded by bad weather for many seemingly endless days.

Each morning lately the flyers of the 357th fighter group had crawled hopefully from their Nissen hut cots to peer anxiously thru misty windows in search of a break in the heavy overcast, but none came, and their deadly Mustang guns had to remain silent. And so did the embryonic "Mustang bar," where they hoped to celebrate a good score in true western bronco style.

On this fateful morning, however, the weather staff received encouraging news from main headquarters—the clouds might lift sufficiently for 357 to make an "op"—flyers' slang for "operational mission." Tensely the night duty officer awaited the "go" signal. Finally it came, and immediately the weather plotters began triangulating the fighters' course as it was filtered thru from headquarters.

Out to the east it marched with hesitating, agonizing deliberation; then it turned a bit north, east again—and then the duty officer knew where it was going—to "Big B," which means only Berlin in the airmen's colorful language.

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Without even awaiting official confirmation of his speculation, he raced into the icy but brightening dawn to arouse his commander. It took little prodding, merely the mention of "Big B," to stir Lt. Col. Irwin H. Dregne from his bed to call the "first team" into action.

This was the big day for which the 28-year-old Viroqua, Wis., Nazi hunter had been waiting. Frequently he and his sharpshooting pilots had plotted a trick play to be used if ever the right time came—a clever adaptation of football's famous mousetrap play, which draws an opposing lineman out of position with a feint and then crushes him with a cross-block from an unexpected quarter.

Twenty-two midwestern airmen, including many Chicagoland, raced to their planes with Colonel Dregne that morning, which is to live long in the annals of the 357th as "the Big Day."

Notified his group was to lead the fighter escort for a fleet of Flying Fortresses in a two-way raid, Colonel Dregne gave the word that this was the day the mousetrap was to be sprung. And it snapped with such devastating fury that 57½ Nazi planes were destroyed by the 357th's guns to set a new 8th air force record for enemy craft destroyed by a fighter group on a single mission. Twenty-four and a half of the victories were scored by 13 of the mid-west airmen. Listed on page nine are the midwesterners, with



(Tribune photos.)

Lt. Col. Irwin H. Dregne . . . mousetrap commander.

the number of planes each shot down.

But the story really is that of Colonel Dregne (pronounced *dreg-nee*), who already had a great record of ferreting out German interceptors even before he took command of the 357th on Dec. 2. This is how the son of Solfert and Christine Dregne of Viroqua tells it:

"We escorted the first three boxes of B-17s on a mission to Derben, 55 miles northwest of Berlin. Making rendezvous north of Cuxhaven, the group took up position at the head of a long bomber column. The challenge produced violent enemy reaction. About 20 miles from Brandenburg a powerful enemy force was sighted approaching the bomber stream.

"The enemy comprised 60 to 70 Focke-Wulf 190s at 28,000 feet, covered by nearly 100 Messerschmitt 109s at 32,000 feet. The 357th, schooled in the type of formation to expect from the enemy, and with its squadrons, a well organized team of 56 Mustangs, disposed to meet the anticipated stab, immediately climbed to ward off the enemy host.

"The foremost squadron, led by myself, turned into the swarm of

F-W's as they swept down in wave after wave of eight aircraft abreast. Our maneuver completely broke up the enemy force, and except for scattered attacks by individual planes the F-W's passed harmlessly under the bombers and began to form up again below for another assault.

"My lead squadron, which by then had been joined by the No. 2 squadron of Mustangs, promptly followed up the advantage and swung down on the disorganized prey, utterly without regard to personal peril or the threat of the hovering Messerschmitts, which we thus hoped to draw into action.

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"The trick worked well. As the enemy's top cover force of 100 Me's dove to attack, the third Mustang squadron, coming up from the rear and timing its role as tactical reserves perfectly, bore into the fight and snapped the trap, catching the Me's completely unawares, with their attention focused on what they thought was easy game below.

"Folled of its bomber prey, the enemy force, which had enjoyed an original numerical superiority of more than three to one, found itself embroiled in a furious fight which ranged from 30,000 feet right down to the deck. It was a spectacular melee.

"In the end the persistent enemy was overcome and those Mustangs which had enough fuel and ammunition left resumed their primary mission, which was escorting the bombers.

"In the fierce 35 minute battle over the outskirts of Berlin we had shot down 56 planes, shared the destruction of one with another group, destroyed another Nazi on the ground—and lost only three of our Mustangs. An enemy air armada had been wrecked and dispersed and its plan of bagging our bombers had been crushed.

"In inflicting a humiliating defeat on Hitler's Luftwaffe the 357th had again demonstrated why American airmen still are the masters of the skies over Europe."

Colonel Dregne himself knocked down one plane while coaching Lt. Raymond M. his team in its Bank, Chicago battle tactics. . . . three in a

The fiery exploitation of Colonel Dregne's mousetrap tactics won this commendation for the 357th and its commander from the 8th air force commander, Lt. Gen. James Doolittle:



"By your outstanding performance in destroying 57½ enemy aircraft you gave the Hun the most humiliating beating that he has ever taken in the air. Extend my personal admiration and congratulations to each member of your command, both ground and air, for a superb victory."

Frequently the teletype machine in the group's operations headquarters has chattered out similar messages of praise for Colonel Dregne's "Berlin Busters." His men aptly credit him with an almost uncanny ability to flush Germans where other able commanders haven't been able to do so.

Before D-day, when the Luftwaffe challenged our raiders more frequently, "Dreg" led his Mustangmen to 106 victories in nine trips, an average of almost a dozen a mission. Since D-day, despite the Germans' efforts to avoid air combat on many occasions, his leadership has been credited with a destruction rate of almost six planes on every operation.

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Aside from the Jan. 14 jackpot, his group's best day was Dec. 24. Gunning to reach the 500 plane mark by Christmas, Dregne's 45 aces and a few others not far behind them in air kills roamed the skies of Germany with deadly success. They destroyed 31 Nazi aircraft, which was just half the total bag of the entire 8th air force on Christmas eve.

Berlin always has been a favorite target of the 357th, possibly because this group sent the first single-engined fighters over the German capital a year ago last March 4. Two days later the group destroyed 20 planes over Berlin. On May 5 it got 10 there, and on Dec. 5 22 German planes fell on Hitler's prize city. The 357th blazing guns, many of whose triggermen have been to Berlin more frequently than they've been to London, have destroyed 128 planes in 15 missions there.

Proving the potency of the 357th's pilots is the fact that Colo-

nel Dregne virtually had to queue up to get on his group's list of 45 aces, who include 13 midwesterners. And the boss is 40th on that roster! His men know, however, that his 6½ planes destroyed don't begin to reflect the importance of Colonel Dregne's ability, which is his almost uncanny Nazi-finding technique.

Colonel Dregne's lethal little Mustang, which bears the nickname Bobby Jeanne in honor of the former Barbara Francis, whom he wooed and won from other San Antonio swains while in a Texas flight school, hasn't spent all its time sniffing out Germans to be shot down. Many times the former University of Wisconsin student has led his men in strafing and dive bombing missions.

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Back in June of last year, before Colonel Dregne had enjoyed a brief home leave after 300 hours of combat operations, the 357th introduced "fire bombs" into the European theater of deadly operations. Coached by Lt. Col. Thomas L. Hayes, Pacific veteran, the Mustangmen proved able students in the art of dropping their partially exhausted wing tanks of gasoline on enemy targets and igniting them with incendiary bullets.

It was on June 17 that they showed the rest of the lads in the 8th air force how to do this trick. In a swoop on the St. Pierre freight yards near Portiers, France, they blew up an ammunition train of 30 cars and 100 box cars of material headed for the German army, and set off a gigantic Fourth of July inferno that later engulfed another hundred cars, including troop and flak carriers, and many locomotives.

However, tho such missions often are more spectacular than dogfights, it's his aerial combat



Chicagoan Lt. George J. Rice had one kill to his credit in the record-breaking battle of the 357th fighter group.



(Tribune photos.)

Capt. Ivan L. McGuire, Danville, Ill. knots scarf for 2d Lt. James E. Taylor, Flora, Ill. before latter sets out on a mission. McGuire got two planes, Taylor one, in the famous "mousetrap" battle.

MIDWESTERN HEROES

Midwest airmen of the 357th fighter group who bagged 24½ German planes of the 57½ destroyed in the big Berlin air battle of Jan. 14:

	Planes destroyed
Lt. Col. Irwin H. Dregne, Viroqua, Wis.....	1
Lt. Raymond M. Bank, 2817 S. Lawndale av., Chicago... 3	3
Lt. George J. Rice, 5039 W. Adams st., Chicago.....	1
Capt. Ivan L. McGuire, 704 Chandler st., Danville, Ill....	2
2d Lt. James E. Taylor, 132 W. 3d st., Flora, Ill.....	2
Capt. John B. Stern, R. R. 3, Noblesville, Ind.....	3
Capt. James W. Browning, Syracuse, Kas.....	3
Capt. Robert P. Winks, Sumner, Ia.....	2½
Capt. Paul B. Hataia, 10001 Dunlap av., Cleveland.....	2
Lt. Charles E. Weaver, 2474 Atkinson av., Detroit.....	2
Lt. John F. Duncan, 1305 N. Morrison st., Kokomo, Ind....	2
Maj. John B. England, Caruthersville, Mo.....	1
2d Lt. Jesse E. Frey, 1416 Bell av., Toledo.....	1
Total	24½

Other midwestern pilots who took part in the big battle and many others in which the 357th fighter group racked up 58½ victories from Feb. 11, 1944, to Feb. 1, 1945, include:

Lt. Joe W. Cannon, Mount Sterling, Ill.; Lt. Robert L. Thorke-son, 625 Wolfe st., Racine, Wis.; 2d Lt. Glenwood A. Zarnke, 132 Ross av., Wauwassu, Wis.; Lt. Byron K. Braley, 3333 N. Frederick av., Shorewood, Wis.; 2d Lt. John A. Ziebell, 142 Bowen st., Oshkosh, Wis.; 2d Lt. Howard Wesling Jr., 2952 N. Capitol av., Indianapolis, Ind.; 2d Lt. Richard E. Ecker, 1078 Carlyon rd., East Cleveland, O.; Lt. William W. Gruber, 1114 Richmond rd., South Euclid, O.; Lt. Edward J. Carr, 1449 E. 174th st., Cleveland, O.; 2d Lt. Jack O. Bussard, 195 W. Park av., Columbus, O.; 2d Lt. Merle F. Cedox, 523 E. 3d st., Port Clinton, O.; 2d Lt. Harold T. Wilhelm, 400 Celtic st., Akron, O.; 2d Lt. Vincent V. Zettler Jr., 2413 12th st. S. W., Canton, O.; Lt. Paul A. Pelon, R. 2, Fenwick, Mich.; 2d Lt. Jack Beene, 2000 Vernon av., Flint, Mich.; Lt. Robert S. Fifeid, R. R. 1, Hastings, Mich.; Lt. Gilman L. Weber, R. R. 2, Hartford, Mich.; Lt. Edward R. Fry, Kalona, Ia.; 2d Lt. Lawrence A. Westphal, R. R. 1, Aurelia, Ia.; Maj. Richard A. Peterson, 1110 Douglas st., Alexandria, Minn.; Lt. Carroll W. Ofsthun, Minneapolis; Lt. Earl W. Johnson, 928 W. 1st st., Duluth.

leadership that has won for Colonel Dregne, as commander of the 8th A. A. F.'s pioneer Mustang group, the distinguished flying cross with two clusters and the air medal with five oak leaves. His nose for Nazis proved fatal to 25 which were shot down and 10 that were damaged last April when he first led the group while still only its combat operations officer.

A few days later he masterminded the destruction of 22 Nazis, which clinched his march toward the helm of his "eager beaver" crew in which midwesterners have scored 175 aerial kills. Within 10 days after knocking off the 22 Germans Colonel Dregne had led a strafing mission which wrecked 18 planes, and, still hot, the Wisconsin Wizard, as he's often referred to, tallied scores of 20½ and 18.

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Strangely, while the 357th on Feb. 1 held second place in aerial victories among the 8th A. A. F. fighter groups with 535, its 50½ planes destroyed on the ground put it last in that category. However, the near record bag it had accumulated in less than a year's potent patrolling gave it third place laurels in total kills.

While a commendable proportion of the victories of the "Big Day" were racked up by Chicagoland, the history of the 357th can't be considered complete without a mention of the many midwestern youths who have completed their tours of operations here and headed for new assignments, are missing in action, or are members of the group's highly regarded ground personnel. They, as well as the men still here, have their dramatic stories.

The above three page story was sent to us recently by Joe Cannon. Joe obtained his copy from the Chicago Sunday Tribune.

One Morning in March

In the skies over Germany in march 1945, a young *Luftwaffe* pilot showed great skill before succumbing to the guns of USAAF P-51s. Merle Olmsted pieces the conflict together.

FIGHTER PILOT Harald Ruh, of the *Luftwaffe* home defence unit JG301, died on March 2, 1945. His death was undoubtedly a traumatic event for a family somewhere in Germany, but was, however, a small incident against the vast backdrop of World War Two.

Nothing is known of Ruh to this writer, but chances are he was just another soldier doing his duty, and did not deserve to die, an unfortunate fate shared by millions of others. Many of these small incidents of World War Two are worthy of historical footnotes, and this is the story of how Harald Ruh met his death.

The date is the 2nd of March, 1945, and the war in Europe will end, in great violence, only six weeks later. The Eighth Air Force is out in strength on this day, with hundreds of heavy bombers striking mostly oil targets in the Magdeburg, Dresden, Leipzig areas, under escort by a swarm of Mustangs. These P-51s, from five fighter groups, were to be responsible for another day of disaster for *Luftwaffe* fighter units JG300 and JG301, which attempted to intercept.

It is difficult to give exact figures after a span of forty plus years, but one *Luftwaffe* casualty list thought to be accurate, lists thirty aircraft lost. Seven of the pilots are listed as wounded the rest dead or missing.

In his book *Start in Morgengraun* (Take-off at Dawn), Werner Girbig says JG300 and JG301 lost 23 pilots dead, seven wounded, and one missing. The latter was probably Uffz Alfred Appel, of JG301's IV Gruppe who was lost with Bf 109 Red 4, and was later listed as killed in action (KIA).

Escorting Mustangs did their job well this day and few of the '109s or Fw 190s got through to the bombers, the general area of combat taking place on a line from Magdeburg south east to Dresden. The five US fighter groups, with some 300 Mustangs, were engaged in this area, and although each group can be plotted as to its area of engagement, the action was by no means this neat. Reading the pilots' encounter reports, one finds many comments concerning the confusion and the mixing of US groups, once the melee began.

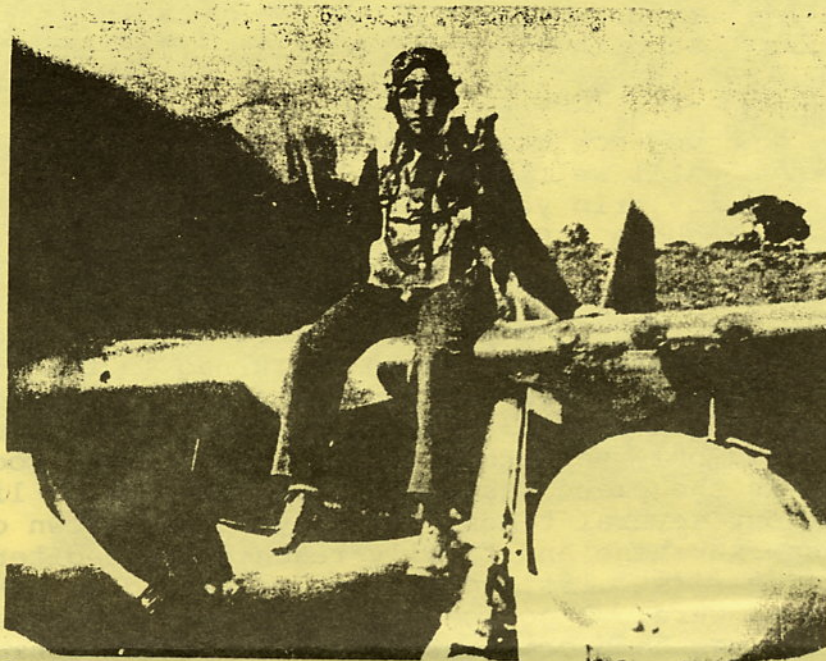
The incident we are concerned with involved the red and yellow nosed P-51s of the 357th Group, which claimed 13-0-2 single engine aircraft shot down, and another 25-0-20 on the ground plus assorted rolling stock.

Captain Donald McGee was leading the group and he reported:
R/V 0950 Rheine with 3rd, 4th and 5th Combat Groups, 2nd Force. Intercepted 25/30 Fw 190s and Bf 109s behind and below the bombers, 1010 NE Leipzig, and combat ensued to deck.

Of the air-to-air claims by the 357th, one was a 'long nose' Fw 190D shot down at low altitude by Captain John Sublett of the 362nd. The remaining twelve claims were all Bf 109s, one of which was claimed jointly by Captain Robert Schmanski and Lt Dale Karger, both of the 364th Squadron. Their encounter reports are of considerable interest because both make comment on the aircraft markings of their victim, a fairly uncommon practice.

Bob Schmanski seems to have engaged first:

I was leading Greenhouse Blue flight escorting Vinegrove 2-4 when enemy fighters were called in east of Magdeburg at about 1000 hours.



Captain Robert Schmanski, seated on the wing of his P-51, 44-14334 'C5-0', that he was flying on March 2. Schmanski's final score was six air victories. (Schmanski)



Karger's P-51, 44-72313 'C5-U' Cathy Mae II, with Crew Chief Sgt Krantz on the wing. There are nine victory marks on the canopy rim, which include part of his ground victories. (via Author)

I saw an explosion below and behind me and started spiralling down with my section following. At about 10,000 feet, I recognised a Bf 109, dropped my tanks and started to attack. This single '109 was chasing four P-51s from

the 339th Group. He had a black and white barber pole spinner, OD colour ship, with a large red and yellow stripe on the fuselage.



Lt Dale Karger, who shared the '109 of Harald Ruh, with Robert Schmanski. Karger ended the war with 7½ air victories. (via Author)

then drop out again, so I got on him again). When I hit him it must have killed the pilot because the plane dished out and pancaked into the ground; its wings came off and it caught fire, and then Capt Schmanski strafed him and I followed to get pictures. I claim one Bf 109 destroyed, shared with Capt Schmanski.

The Bf 109 had a black and white barber pole nose and bluish grey paint job with a large red stripe and yellow one on each side and also a big number '7' on the fuselage.

Four decades later Dale Karger still remembers: "This German was a rather good fighter pilot and really tested my skill. I give a great deal of credit on that one to having a superior aircraft. In the vertical turn I actually pulled my nose through the '109 in a high speed stall while pulling quite a few gs'. When I couldn't see him anymore I started firing and then slacked off my turn and when he reappeared he ran through my gunfire.

"I don't think I would have gotten him any other way. The only other thing I remember is that right before I jumped this guy, someone below me was on a '109 and it turned on its back and the shots hit his belly tank, which exploded, making a streamer of flame three or four hundred yards long. I often wondered why he was carrying an external belly tank."

From these encounter reports we know the '109 had a red and yellow stripe on the fuselage, and a number seven. The red and yellow stripes would be the late war identification markings carried by JG301, just forward of the tailplane.

The *Luftwaffe* casualty report referred to above, shows only one lost aircraft with a tactical fuselage number seven, actually Yellow 7. This was Harald Ruh, an NCO pilot of the 15th *Staffel*, IV *Gruppe*, JG301. The works number of Ruh's '109 was 491200 and his loss is listed as being near Stresow, in the vicinity of Magdeburg.

Werner Girbig, in *Take-off at Dawn* has this to say: "From the 15th *Staffel*, *Fhr* Blechschmidt and *Uffz* Hornschuh hang on their 'chutes. *Uffz* Leo Keil also falls, and *Uffz* Welsh catches it over Rakedorf, while *Fhr* Harald Ruh and his Yellow 7 is shot down near Stresow."

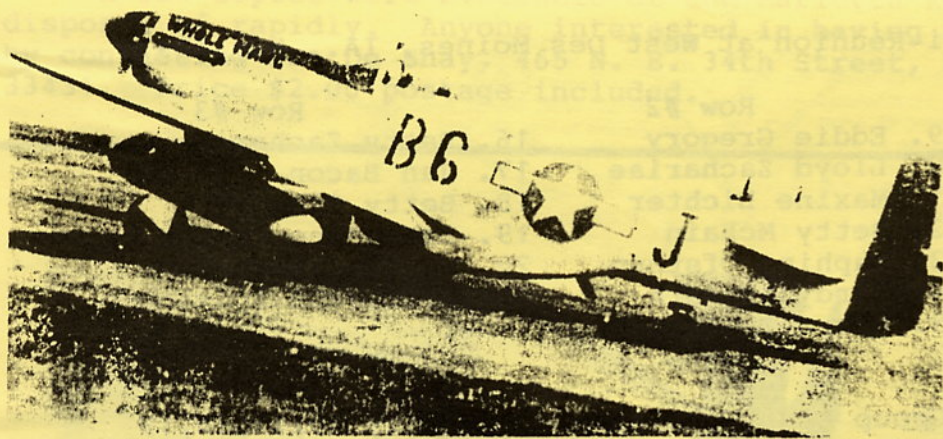
In their encounter reports Karger and Schmanski seem to disagree on the colour of Ruh's airplane, with the latter indicating it was OD - olive drab. Karger says it was bluish grey. OD would be unlikely and Karger is probably correct, but at that late date many *Luftwaffe* fighters seem to have been oversprayed a greenish colour on upper surfaces. This may very well have been what Bob Schmanski saw during the heat of a particularly violent combat. Even after this time, Schmanski still vividly remembers the skill which the pilot of Yellow 7 handled his aircraft.

Although there is probably no way to prove conclusively that Harald Ruh was this tiger who fought it out with Schmanski and Karger, and several 339th Group Mustangs, the evidence is strong that is indeed the story of how Harald Ruh met his death one morning in March, south east of Magdeburg.

Although it has no part in this story, it is a strange quirk of fate that another *Luftwaffe* pilot of JG301 who was shot down during this same general engagement, and was one of the lucky few to survive, is today a good friend of this writer!

The 357th Group suffered heavily on this date also, losing five Mustangs. F/O Patrick Mallione, of the 363rd Squadron, was last seen south of Magdeburg and was almost surely shot down in air combat with JG301. He did not survive. The other four were victims of ground fire during wide ranging strafing attacks after the aerial dogfight.

Captain Alva Murphy, an old timer with the group, and Lt Mathew Crawford were KIA. Lts Ray Bank and Rocco Lepore were both fortunate survivors.



P-51D 'B6-J' Whole Hawk - believed to be Captain McGee's aircraft. McGee led the mission on March 2, during which he shot down a Bf 109. (via Author)

This guy was exceptionally good as he could really handle that ship. After about five minutes of torrid combat, one of the 339th boys got some good strikes and the '109 snap-rolled and started spinning. The 339th then left and I followed the E/A down.

Below the clouds he recovered, and then he and I had another go at it. After five more minutes of head-on passes I was joined by Lt Karger. Both of us started to work on him, which proved sufficient. Lt Karger hit him in the cockpit and the E/A dove in with me hot on his tail strafing him on the ground. I claim one Bf 109 destroyed together with pilot, shared with Lt Karger.

Immediately after this long combat, Schmanski spotted another '109 and shot it down. No information on its markings is given,

however, so there is no way to identify this '109.

Lt Dale Karger's encounter report tells us: I was flying Greenhouse White Three south east of Magdeburg when I spotted some Bf 109s low and to the right of the bombers' trail. I called them out at nine o'clock low and we started down and dropped our tanks. I made a few violent turns and lost my wingman. Then I dived under the clouds and flew in a big circle. I then spotted a Bf 109 turning up and into me from the deck. I did not see any planes chasing him so I started to try to out-turn him. We turned violently for about two or three minutes.

With the '109 still turning, I pulled thru him in a slight stall enough to give him a good burst right in the cockpit. (It was just before this that I saw Capt Schmanski get behind the E/A and