

# "He Was Someone Who Was Trying to Kill Me, Is All"

The following article is excerpted from the book "To Fly and Fight: Memoirs of a Triple Ace" by Col C. E. "Bud" Anderson with Joseph P. Hamelin.

See also: <http://www.cebudanderson.com/ch1.htm>



Colonel Clarence "Bud" Anderson

The sky above was a bright crystal blue, and the land below a green-on-green checkerboard divided by a silver-blue ribbon. Below was occupied France, beyond the river lay Germany, and it all looked the same, rolling and peaceful and bursting with spring.

But this was an overpoweringly sinister place. From our perch six miles up, we couldn't see the enemy, some huddling over their guns taking aim, some climbing into their airplanes to fly up and get us, and some, on the far side of the river, waiting with pitchforks and hoping we'd fall somewhere close. All we could see was the green of their fields and forests. But we knew they were there, looking up, watching us come, and thinking how they could kill us.

The day was unusually, incredibly clear. In better times, it would have been a day for splashing through trout streams with fly rods, or driving so fast that some giggling girl would beg you to slow. But these weren't those kinds of times. These were the worst times God ever let happen. And so the trout streams were left to the fish, gasoline was a thing you used sparingly, and it was just one more day for flying and fighting and staying alive, if you could, six miles high over Germany.

Staying alive was no simple thing in the skies over Europe in the spring of 1944. A lot of men couldn't. It was a bad thing to dwell on if you were a fighter pilot, and so we told ourselves we were dead men and lived for the moment with no thought of the future at all. It wasn't too difficult. Lots of us had no future and everyone knew it.

This particular day, out of the year I flew combat in Europe, is the one I have thought of on a thousand days since, sometimes on purpose and sometimes in spite of myself. Sometimes it's in cameo glimpses, other times in slow motion stop action, but always, in Technicolor. I sit on my porch, nearly a half-century and half-world removed from that awful business, looking out over a deep, green, river-cut canyon to the snow-capped Sierra, thinking about getting tires for the Blazer or mowing the lawn or, more likely, the next backpacking trip . . . and suddenly May 27, 1944, elbows its way to the front of my thoughts like a drunk to a bar. The projectionist inside my head who chooses the films seems to love this one rerun.

We were high over a bomber stream in our P-51B Mustangs, escorting the heavies to the Ludwigsbafen-Mannheim area. For the past several weeks the Eighth Air Force had been targeting oil, and Ludwigsbafen was a center for synthetic fuels. Oil was everything, the lifeblood of war. Nations can't fight without oil. All through my training, and all through the war, I can't remember ever being limited on how much I could fly. There always was fuel enough. But by 1944, the Germans weren't so fortunate. They were feeling the pinch from the daily bombardments. Without fuel and lubricant, their war machine eventually would grind to a stop. Now that the Mustang fighters were arriving in numbers, capable of escorting the bombers all the way to their targets and back, Germany's oil industry was there for the pounding.

The day would come, and it would be soon, when the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, would begin picking its spots, contesting some missions and not others; or concentrating on isolated bomber formations, to the exclusion of all the rest, largely at random from what we could tell. The Luftwaffe's idea was to conserve fuel and pilots. But for the moment, at least, there seemed no great shortage of fighter planes between us and the target.

We'd picked up the bombers at 27,000 feet, assumed the right flank, and almost immediately all hell began breaking loose up ahead of us. This was early, still over France, long before we'd expected the German fighters to come up in force. You maintained radio silence until you engaged the enemy, and after that it didn't much matter since they knew you were there, and so people would chatter. They were chattering now, up ahead, and my earphones were crackling with loud, frantic calls: "Bandits, eleven o'clock low! . . . Two o'clock high, pick him up! . . . Blue leader break left!" It sounded as though the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs were everywhere.

You knew how it was up ahead, and you knew it would be like that for you any minute now, the German single-seat Fw 190s and Me 109s coming straight through the bombers, mixing it up with the Mustangs, the hundreds of four-engined heavies and the hundreds of fighters scoring the crystal blue sky with their persistent white contrails.

The Germans liked to roar through the bombers head-on, firing long bursts, and then roll and go down. They would circle around to get ahead of the bomber stream, groping for altitude, avoiding the escorts if possible, then reassemble and come through head-on again. When their fuel or ammunition was exhausted, they would land and refuel and take off again, flying mission after mission, for as long as there were bombers to shoot at. They seldom came after us. Normally, they would skirmish the escorts only out of necessity. We were an inconvenience, best avoided. It was the bombers they wanted, and the German pilots threw themselves at them smartly and bravely. It was our job to stop them.

It seemed we were always outnumbered. We had more fighters than they did, but what mattered was how many they could put up in one area. They would concentrate in huge numbers, by the hundreds at times. They would assemble way up ahead, pick a section of the bomber formation, and then come in head-on, their guns blazing, sometimes biting the bombers below us before we knew what was happening.

In the distance, a red and black smear marked the spot where a B-17 and its 10 men had been. Planes still bearing their bomb loads erupted and fell, trailing flame, streaking the sky, leaving gaps in the bomber formation that were quickly closed up.

Through our headsets we could hear the war, working its way back toward us, coming straight at us at hundreds of miles per hour. The adrenaline began gushing, and I scanned the sky frantically, trying to pick out the fly-speck against the horizon that might have been somebody coming to kill us, trying to see him before he saw me, looking, squinting, breathless . . .

Over the radio: "Here they come!"

They'd worked over the bombers up ahead and now it was our turn.

Things happen quickly. We get rid of our drop tanks, slam the power up, and make a sweeping left turn to engage. My flight of four Mustangs is on the outside of the turn, a wingman close behind to my left, my element leader and his wingman behind to my right, all in finger formation. Open your right hand, tuck the thumb under, put the fingers together, and check the fingernails. That's how we flew, and fought. Two shooters, and two men to cover their tails. The Luftwaffe flew that way, too. German ace Werner Molders is generally credited with inventing the tactic during the Spanish Civil War.

Being on the outside of the turn, we are vulnerable to attack from the rear. I look over my right shoulder and, sure enough, I see four dots above us, way back, no threat at the moment, but coming hard down the chute. I start to call out, but . . .

"Four bogeys, five o'clock high!" My element leader, Eddie Simpson, has already seen them. Bogeys are unknowns and bandits are hostile. Quickly, the dots close and take shape. They're hostile, all right. They're Messerschmitts.

We turn hard to the right, pulling up into a tight string formation, spoiling their angle, and we try to come around and go at them head on. The Me 109s change course, charge past, and continue on down, and we wheel and give chase. There are four of them, single-seat fighters, and they pull up, turn hard, and we begin turning with them. We are circling now, tighter and tighter, chasing each other's tails, and I'm sitting there wondering what the hell's happening. These guys want to hang around. Curious. I'm wondering why they aren't after the bombers, why they're messing with us, whether they're simply creating some kind of a diversion or what. I would fly 116 combat missions, engage the enemy perhaps 40 times, shoot down 16 fighters, share in the destruction of a bomber, destroy another fighter on the ground, have a couple of aerial probables, and over that span it would be us bouncing them far more often than not. This was a switch.

We're flying tighter circles, gaining a little each turn, our throttles wide open, 30,000 feet up. The Mustang is a wonderful airplane, 37 feet wingtip to wingtip, just a little faster than the smaller German fighters, and also just a little more nimble. Suddenly the 109s, sensing things are not going well, roll out and run, turning east, flying level. Then one lifts up his nose and climbs away from the rest.

We roll out and go after them. They're flying full power, the black smoke pouring out their exhaust stacks. I'm looking at the one who is climbing, wondering what he is up to, and I'm thinking that if we stay with the other three, this guy will wind up above us. I send Simpson up after him. He and his wingman break off. My wingman, John Skara, and I chase the other three fighters, throttles all the way forward, and I can see that we're gaining.

I close to within 250 yards of the nearest Messerschmitt--dead astern, 6 o'clock, no maneuvering, no nothing--and squeeze the trigger on the control stick between my knees gently. Bambambambambam! The sound is loud in the cockpit in spite of the wind shriek and engine roar. And the vibration of the Mustang's four .50-caliber machine guns,

two in each wing, weighing 60-odd pounds apiece, is pronounced. In fact, you had to be careful in dogfights when you were turning hard, flying on the brink of a stall, because the buck of the guns was enough to peel off a few critical miles per hour and make the Mustang simply stop flying. That could prove downright embarrassing.



*Capt. Eddie Simpson*

But I'm going like hell now, and I can see the bullets tearing at the Messerschmitt's wing root and fuselage. The armor-piercing ammunition we used was also incendiary, and hits were easily visible, making a bright flash and puff. Now the 109's trailing smoke thickens, and it's something more than exhaust smoke. He slows, and then suddenly rolls over. But the plane doesn't fall. It continues on, upside down, straight and level! What the hell . . . ?

The pilot can't be dead. It takes considerable effort to fly one of these fighter planes upside down. You have to push hard on the controls. Flying upside down isn't easy. It isn't something that happens all by itself, or that you do accidentally. So what in the world is he doing?

Well. It's an academic question, because I haven't the time to wait and find out. I pour another burst into him, pieces start flying off, I see flame, and the 109 plummets and falls into a spin, belching smoke. My sixth kill.

The other two Messerschmitt pilots have pulled away now, and they're nervous. Their airplanes are twitching, the fliers obviously straining to look over their shoulders and see what is happening. As we take up the chase again, two against two now, the trailing 109 peels away and dives for home, and the leader pulls up into a sharp climbing turn to the left. This one can fly, and he obviously has no thought of running. I'm thinking this one could be trouble.

We turn inside him, my wingman and I, still at long range, and he pulls around harder, passing in front of us right-to-left at an impossible angle. I want to swing in behind him, but I'm going too fast, and figure I would only go skidding on past. A Mustang at speed simply can't make a square corner. And in a dogfight you don't want to surrender your airspeed. I decide to overshoot him and climb.

He reverses his turn, trying to fall in behind us. My wingman is vulnerable now. I tell Skara, "Break off!" and he peels away. The German goes after him, and I go after the German, closing on his tail before he can close on my wingman. He sees me coming and dives away with me after him, then makes a climbing left turn. I go screaming by, pull up, and he's reversing his turn--man, he can fly!--and he comes crawling right up behind

me, close enough that I can see him distinctly. He's bringing his nose up for a shot, and I haul back on the stick and climb even harder. I keep going up, because I'm out of alternatives.

This is what I see all these years later. If I were the sort to be troubled with nightmares, this is what would shock me awake. I am in this steep climb, pulling the stick into my navel, making it steeper, steeper . . . and I am looking back down, over my shoulder, at this classic gray Me 109 with black crosses that is pulling up, too, steeper, steeper, the pilot trying to get his nose up just a little bit more and bring me into his sights.

There is nothing distinctive about the aircraft, no fancy markings, nothing to identify it as the plane of an ace, as one of the "dreaded yellow-noses" like you see in the movies. Some of them did that, I know, but I never saw one. And in any event, all of their aces weren't flamboyant types who splashed paint on their airplanes to show who they were. I suppose I could go look it up in the archives. There's the chance I could find him in some gruppe's log book, having flown on this particular day, in this particular place, a few miles northwest of the French town of Strasbourg that sits on the Rhine. There are fellows who've done that, gone back and looked up their opponents. I never have. I never saw any point.

He was someone who was trying to kill me, is all.

So I'm looking back, almost straight down now, and I can see this 20-millimeter cannon sticking through the middle of the fighter's propeller hub. In the theater of my memory, it is enormous. An elephant gun. And that isn't far wrong. It is a gun designed to bring down a bomber, one that fires shells as long as your hand, shells that explode and tear big holes in metal. It is the single most frightening thing I have seen in my life, then and now.



But I'm too busy to be frightened. Later on, you might sit back and perspire about it, maybe 40-50 years later, say, sitting on your porch 7,000 miles away, but while it is happening you are just too damn busy. And I am extremely busy up here, hanging by my propeller, going almost straight up, full emergency power, which a Mustang could do for only so long before losing speed, shuddering, stalling, and falling back down; and I am thinking that if the Mustang stalls before the Messerschmitt stalls, I have had it.

I look back, and I can see that he's shuddering, on the verge of a stall. He hasn't been able to get his nose up enough, hasn't been able to bring that big gun to bear. Almost, but not quite. I'm a fallen-down-dead man almost, but not quite. His nose begins dropping just as my airplane, too, begins shuddering. He stalls a second or two before I stall, drops away before I do.

Good old Mustang.

He is falling away now, and I flop the nose over and go after him hard. We are very high by this time, six miles and then some, and falling very, very fast. The Messerschmitt had a head start, plummeting out of my range, but I'm closing up quickly. Then he flattens out and comes around hard to the left and starts climbing again, as if he wants to come at me head on. Suddenly we're right back where we started.

A lot of this is just instinct now. Things are happening too fast to think everything out. You steer with your right hand and feet. The right hand also triggers the guns. With your left, you work the throttle, and keep the airplane in trim, which is easier to do than describe.

Any airplane with a single propeller produces torque. The more horsepower you have, the more the prop will pull you off to one side. The Mustangs I flew used a 12-cylinder Packard Merlin engine that displaced 1,649 cubic inches. That is 10 times the size of the engine that powers an Indy car. It developed power enough that you never applied full power sitting still on the ground because it would pull the plane's tail up off the runway and the propeller would chew up the concrete. With so much power, you were continually making minor adjustments on the controls to keep the Mustang and its wing-mounted guns pointed straight.

There were three little palm-sized wheels you had to keep fiddling with. They trimmed you up for hands-off level flight. One was for the little trim tab on the tail's rudder, the vertical slab which moves the plane left or right. Another adjusted the tab on the tail's horizontal elevators that raise or lower the nose and help reduce the force you had to apply for hard turning. The third was for aileron trim, to keep your wings level, although you didn't have to fuss much with that one. Your left hand was down there a lot if you were changing speeds, as in combat . . . while at the same time you were making minor adjustments with your feet on the rudder pedals and your hand on the stick. At first it was awkward. But, with experience, it was something you did without thinking, like driving a car and twirling the radio dial.

It's a little unnerving to think about how many things you have to deal with all at once to fly combat.

So the Messerschmitt is coming around again, climbing hard to his left, and I've had about enough of this. My angle is a little bit better this time. So I roll the dice. Instead of cobbing it like before and sailing on by him, I decide to turn hard left inside him, knowing that if I lose speed and don't make it I probably won't get home. I pull back on the throttle slightly, put down 10 degrees of flaps, and haul back on the stick just as hard as I can. And the nose begins coming up and around, slowly, slowly. . .

Hot damn! I'm going to make it! I'm inside him, pulling my sights up to him. And the German pilot can see this. This time, it's the Messerschmitt that breaks away and goes zooming straight up, engine at maximum power, without much alternative. I come in with full power and follow him up, and the gap narrows swiftly. He is hanging by his prop, not quite vertically, and I am right there behind him, and it is terribly clear, having tested the theory less than a minute ago, that he is going to stall and fall away before I do.

I have him. He must know that I have him.

I bring my nose up, he comes into my sights, and from less than 300 yards I trigger a long, merciless burst from my Brownings. Every fifth bullet or so is a tracer, leaving a

thin trail of smoke, marking the path of the bullet stream. The tracers race upward and find him. The bullets chew at the wing root, the cockpit, the engine, making bright little flashes. I hose the Messerschmitt down the way you'd hose down a campfire, methodically, from one end to the other, not wanting to make a mistake here. The 109 shakes like a retriever coming out of the water, throwing off pieces. He slows, almost stops, as if parked in the sky, his propeller just windmilling, and he begins smoking heavily.

My momentum carries me to him. I throttle back to ease my plane alongside, just off his right wing. Have I killed him? I do not particularly want to fight this man again. I am coming up even with the cockpit, and although I figure the less I know about him the better, I find myself looking in spite of myself. There is smoke in the cockpit. I can see that, nothing more. Another few feet. . . .

And then he falls away suddenly, left wing down, right wing rising up, obscuring my view. I am looking at the 109's sky blue belly, the wheel wells, twin radiators, grease marks, streaks from the guns, the black crosses. I am close enough to make out the rivets. The Messerschmitt is right there and then it is gone, just like that, rolling away and dropping its nose and falling (flying?) almost straight down, leaking coolant and trailing flame and smoke so black and thick that it has to be oil smoke. It simply plunges, heading straight for the deck. No spin, not even a wobble, no parachute, and now I am wondering. His ship seems a death ship--but is it?

Undecided, I peel off and begin chasing him down. Did I squander a chance here? Have I let him escape? He is diving hard enough to be shedding his wings, harder than anyone designed those airplanes to dive, 500 miles an hour and more, and if 109s will stall sooner than Mustangs going straight up, now I am worrying that maybe their wings stay on longer. At 25,000 feet I begin to grow nervous. I pull back on the throttle, ease out of the dive, and watch him go down. I have no more stomach for this kind of thing, not right now, not with this guy. Enough. Let him go and to hell with him.

Straight down he plunges, from as high as 35,000 feet, through this beautiful, crystal clear May morning toward the green-on-green checkerboard fields, leaving a wake of black smoke. From four miles straight up I watch as the Messerschmitt and the shadow it makes on the ground rush toward one another . . .

. . . and then, finally, silently, merge.

Eddie Simpson joins up with me. Both wingmen, too. Simpson, my old wingman and friend, had gotten the one who'd climbed out. We'd bagged three of the four. We were very excited. It had been a good day.

I had lived and my opponent had died. But it was a near thing. It could have been the other way around just as easily, and what probably made the difference was the airplane I flew. Made in America. I would live to see the day when people would try to tell me the United States can't make cars like some other folks do. What a laugh.

I didn't wonder if I'd just made a new bride a widow, or if he might have had kids, any more than I would have wondered about a snake's mate and offspring. I may have given some thought to how many of my friends he had killed, or might have killed in the future, or how many bombers he might have shot down had he lived. But that's as far as it went. From what I could tell, he hadn't been overly concerned about me.

People ask about that all the time. People usually ask it hesitantly, as tactfully as they can, but they ask it. Did I wonder and worry about the mothers and children and wives of the men I shot down? Did I carry any guilt or regret?

No.

Not then, and not now.

World War Two was a total thing, us against them, when being against them was unquestionably the right thing to be. I flew for my country, and was proud I could help in any way that I could.

Besides, all of my opponents were trying to kill me. And frankly, I always was elated they hadn't.



*Colonel Clarence "Bud" Anderson*

This one had almost gotten a bead on me. He'd come as close as anyone would. When it was done, the 480 hours of combat flying in P-51s, and another 25 or so missions in Vietnam, almost all of those in F-105s, I never once suffered a bit in air-to-air combat. The sum total of the damage all my aircraft absorbed amounted to one small-arms round that found one of my wings during a strafing run after D-Day. It bored a hole the size of my little finger. It didn't even go all the way through, just punctured the underside's skin. Nobody noticed it until the next day. Needing a patch the size of a coin, that's exactly what my crew used--a British shilling.

People on the ground often shot at me. Flak batteries. Machine gunners. Foot soldiers with rifles and pistols. There may have been some who threw rocks, who can say? But this man, on that day, was the only opponent who was ever behind me, and he couldn't quite bring me into his sights, and never did fire.

To my knowledge, I never was fired upon by an airplane in combat.

Skill had something to do with that, I suppose. But there was certainly something more to it than skill. Lots of hot pilots never came home. I guess I was lucky. Or blessed.

That night, back at our Leiston base, in the "half-pipe" Nissen but where the flight leaders bunked, we stoked our little stove with coke and made toasted cheese sandwiches. And afterward, after twirling the poker through the coals until it glowed, we ceremonially burned two more little swastikas beneath my name on the hut's wooden door.



*Capt. Jim Browning*

O'Bee O'Brien's name was up there, Ed Hiro's, Jim Browning's, Don Bochkay's, Daddy Rabbit Peters'. Chuck Yeager, who, three years later would become the first man to fly through the sound barrier, would have his name up there too, along with some others. Already, there were a lot of little swastikas burned into that door. Fortunately, there was still lots of room. It would be a long war. There would be a lot more.