



Mustang **ACE of ACES**

MAJOR GEORGE E. PREDDY

BY CLIVE ROWLEY

Squadron Leader **Clive Rowley** MBE RAF (Ret.), a former Royal Air Force fighter pilot, tells the story of USAAF fighter pilot and top-scoring Mustang ace **George E. Preddy**.



Lee Lauderback flies Kermit Weeks' P-51D over Kissimmee Florida. The aircraft is based at Kermit's Fantasy of Flight attraction. (Photo by John Dibbs/ Facebook.com/theplanepicture)



Maj. George E. Preddy, top scoring Mustang ace, in flying gear, in August 1944. (Photo author's collection)

“George Preddy was one of the greatest fighter pilots who ever squinted through a gunsight; he was the complete fighter pilot.”

—General John C. Meyer, commander of the 487th Fighter Squadron and the 352nd Fighter Group in England during World War II and the fourth highest-scoring fighter ace in Europe.

P-40s in the Pacific

When the U.S. entered WW II after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, George Preddy was completing his flying training with the USAAF at Elgin Field, Florida. He graduated as a qualified pilot five days later. He was assigned to the 9th Pursuit Squadron of the 49th Pursuit Group and on January 11, 1942, the unit sailed from San Francisco

on a troopship bound for Australia, where the squadron began training on the Curtiss P-40E Kittyhawk.

Meanwhile, the Japanese onslaught in the Pacific was gaining momentum. On February 19, the Japanese bombed Darwin in northern Australia for the first time, before invading Timor the following day, actions which were precursors to the battle of the Java Sea and the subsequent invasion of Java. In these dire circumstances, the training of the USAAF pilots for operations had to be rapid and on March 9, Preddy was declared a fully-fledged combat pilot. Along with the rest of his unit, he flew to the remote and austere Bachelor Field, near Darwin, in Australia's Northern Territory.

Barely three months after graduating from flight school, Preddy and his colleagues in their P-40s soon found themselves engaged in a life and death struggle against the Japanese, almost always fighting against superior odds. On March 30, Preddy and seven of his fellow pilots in their P-40s were attacked by a large number of Japanese Zeros escorting bombers. Preddy was lucky to escape unscathed; three of the other P-40s were riddled with enemy bullets and one pilot had to bail out. With an increasing number of contacts with enemy aircraft, Preddy was gaining valuable combat experience. On April 27, he damaged a Zero and a Mitsubishi bomber, but he could not get killing shots against either in an encounter where the P-40s were once again outnumbered by Zeros.

George Preddy

George Preddy was raised in the Dixieland city of Greensboro, North Carolina. From a young age he developed a strong desire to fly, and nothing would deflect him from that ambition. After graduating from high school, he took flying lessons and began accumulating flying time. In April 1941, having been rejected by the U.S. Navy for pilot training, he was accepted by the U.S. Army Air Corps.

At five feet nine inches tall and slightly built, Preddy was not a physically imposing man, but he was fit, strong, and athletic. He spoke softly and his voice, words, and demeanor did nothing to counter the initial

unimposing impression created by his physical appearance. Preddy's nickname in the Air Force was "Ratsy." He was perhaps not an obvious candidate to be a top fighter pilot and leader. However, he possessed a single-minded dedication of purpose and an intense desire to excel.

Handsome, dark-haired, and with his neat appearance and trimmed moustache, Preddy loved girls and it seemed that they could not resist him. He certainly lived life to the full. Early on in his time in the Air Force, he was sometimes something of a hellraiser. He had a weakness for whiskey, and he sometimes became drunk and then wanted to fight, and he was quite a scrapper. He also liked to gamble and especially liked craps games; he habitually yelled "Cripes a' mighty!" as he threw the dice, which became a phrase specifically associated with him and was used as the name for his personal aircraft later in the war.

Mid-air collision

Preddy's involvement in the war in the Pacific ended on the afternoon of July 12, 1942. A sortie with four P-40s engaged in two vs. two training began routinely enough, with Preddy and Lt. Richard Taylor playing the role of enemy bombers, against which 2nd Lt. John Sauber and 1st Lt. Jack Donalson would practice dummy attacks. As Sauber dived on Preddy's aircraft, he misjudged his distance and overtaking speed and slammed into the tail of Preddy's Kittyhawk at 12,000 feet, sending both aircraft tumbling earthward, out of control. Sauber was unable to escape from his cockpit and was killed. Preddy managed to bail out but came down in a tall gum tree, colliding with a branch on the way down and landing in thick bush, with a deep hole gouged in his calf and a badly cut hip and shoulder. He was bleeding heavily but was conscious and managed to bandage himself with his first aid kit. Fortunately, he was quickly found and rescued by Capt. Ben Irvin and war correspondent Lucien Hubbard before night fell, otherwise he might have bled to death.

Preddy was sent to a U.S. Army hospital in Melbourne and remained bedridden until July 28. Recuperating from his serious



injuries took three long months, with the first six weeks involving operations, treatment, and therapy, and the remainder, rest and recuperation. During that time, his injuries did not prevent him from meeting and dating several girls, but then he met and fell in love with a beautiful Australian woman, Joan Jackson, and they became engaged. Inevitably, Preddy was sent back to the U.S., never to return to Australia; it was to be a romance for which there was no happy ending.

During the period of enforced inaction during his recuperation, Preddy had time to think. Cheating the grim reaper led him to reappraise his life and his priorities; he was less than satisfied with his past and wanted to improve himself in the future. While not exactly an epiphany, the accident did change Preddy. From now on his entire attitude and lifestyle was orientated toward being the best fighter pilot that he could be. Amongst the 13 rules he wrote for himself on the back of his diary were: "Fight hardest when down and never give up" and "Don't make excuses but make up with deeds of action."

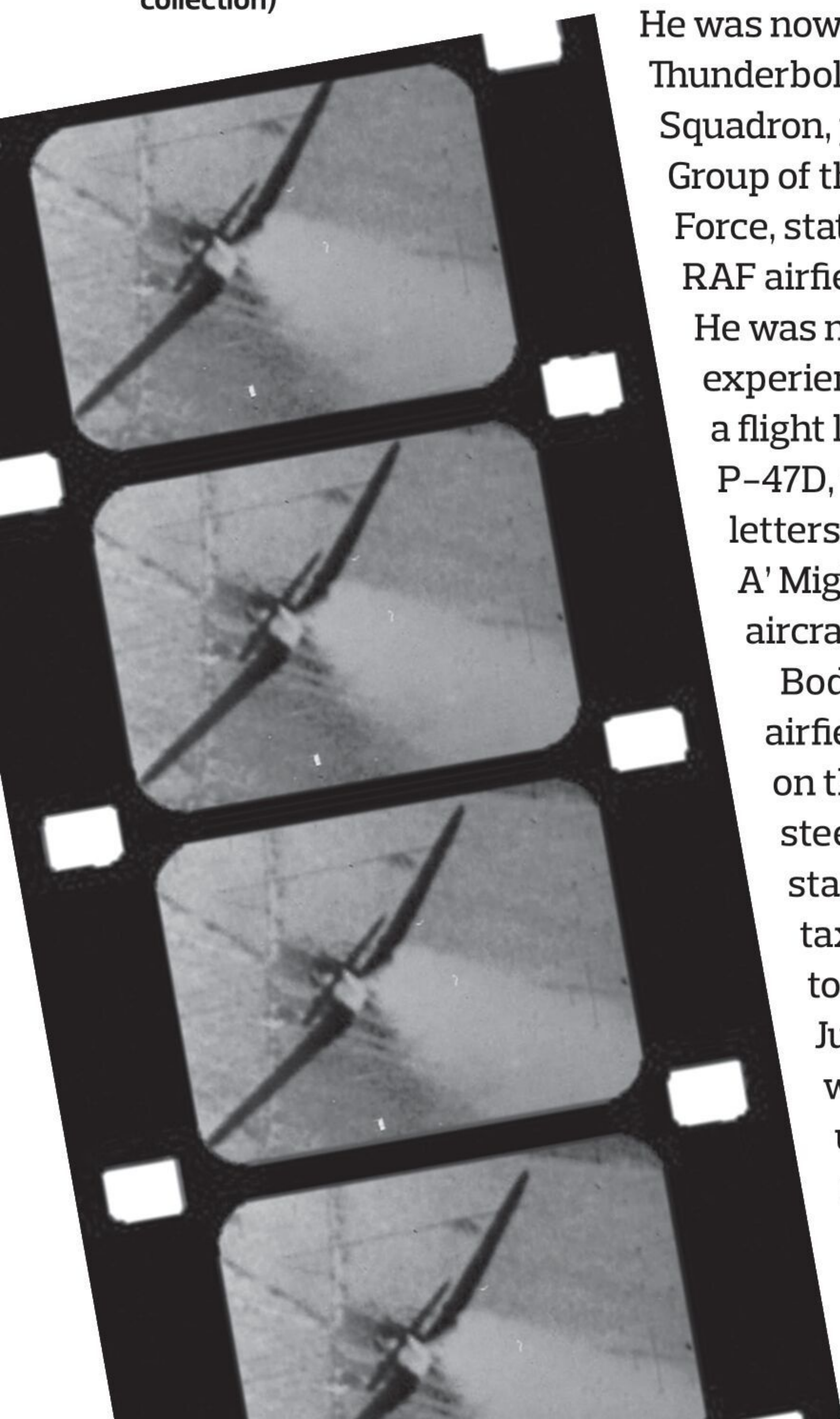
Lt. George Preddy with his P-40 Kittyhawk "85" of the 9th Pursuit Squadron at a remote airfield near Darwin, Australia, in 1942. All the unit's "Dragon" Flight aircraft wore this fire-breathing dragon nose art. (Photo author's collection)

HE LIKED TO GAMBLE AND ESPECIALLY LIKED CRAPS GAMES; HE HABITUALLY YELLED "CRIPES A' MIGHTY!" AS HE THREW THE DICE

The first of George Preddy's personal aircraft to wear the name "Cripes A' Mighty" was his P-47D Thunderbolt, serial number 42-8500, which had the 487th FS code letters HO-P, photographed here at Bodney with a belly drop tank fitted. In this photo the aircraft has one kill cross under the cockpit, so this was taken between December 2 and 21, 1943. (Photo author's collection)



George Preddy's gun camera film of his first victim on August 6, 1944, a Bf 109 shot down during a bomber escort mission to Berlin. He destroyed another five Bf 109s on this same sortie, bringing his total score for this single mission to six enemy aircraft destroyed. (Photo author's collection)



P-47s in England

It was well over a year before Preddy saw action again, having been reassigned to a different front. His first operational mission in the European Theater of Operations was flown on September 9, 1943.

He was now flying Republic P-47D Thunderbolts with the 487th Fighter Squadron, part of the 352nd Fighter Group of the USAAF Eighth Air Force, stationed at Bodney, a former RAF airfield in Norfolk, England. He was now considered to be an experienced fighter pilot and was a flight leader. Preddy's personal P-47D, which carried the code letters HO-P, was named "Cripes A' Mighty," the first of his aircraft to carry that inscription.

Bodney was a grass airfield with steel matting on the runway, pierced-steel planking (PSP) hard standings, and some concrete taxiways. The 352nd began to arrive at Bodney during June 1943, but the group was not fully operational until September. Until they received drop tanks their Thunderbolts had limited

range, and their missions were largely restricted to the enemy coast. On early missions they flew cover for out-of-ammo and out-of-fuel P-47s of other groups on bomber escort duties, as they withdrew from enemy airspace. It was frustrating to have such a limited initial role, but they would soon be in the midst of massive air battles over the Third Reich.

First kill

When the Group received belly drop tanks for their P-47s, they began to participate in longer range bomber escort and fighter sweep missions, penetrating as far into enemy airspace as possible. The very presence of the American fighters was sometimes enough to keep the Luftwaffe at bay, and initially only a few of the group's pilots encountered enemy aircraft, with none being destroyed. By the end of September Preddy had personally flown nine bomber escort missions and five fighter sweeps without any success. As the year drew to a close, through the fall and into winter, things began to heat up, and Preddy witnessed the effects of enemy attacks on the bombers and was painfully aware of losses suffered among his fighter pilot colleagues. The pilots also had to cope with some very difficult European weather

352ND FIGHTER GROUP

conditions, sometimes so bad that missions could not be flown at all.

On December 1, 1943, Preddy led his flight of four P-47s into Germany to meet a force of Eighth Air Force heavy bombers on their way home after dropping their bombs on the industrial area of Solingen. Flying at 30,000 feet, the P-47s met the bombers about 10 miles south of Rheydt, in Germany, as they were withdrawing from the target area. Preddy then spotted a Messerschmitt Bf 109 behind the rear box of bombers, about 3,000 feet below. He dived down in a quarter stern attack, and the enemy aircraft broke into a steep spiral dive to the left. Preddy followed, closing the range and firing from 400 yards down to 100 yards, seeing strikes on the wing roots and the cockpit. As he broke away, the Bf 109 disintegrated. The enemy pilot did not bail out and it is likely that he was killed by Preddy's first burst. The destruction of the 109 was witnessed by Preddy's wingman, and his gun camera film also recorded the event. There was no doubt about his claim.

Preddy had not had a quick or flashy start to his time as a fighter pilot. He had been in and out of combat for more than two years before this his first aerial victory, but now he had opened his account.

Goldfish Club

Preddy added another kill to his tally on December 22, this time a twin-engine Messerschmitt Me 210 that he shot down while it and five others were attacking a lone, straggling, and partially-crippled B-24 bomber over the Netherlands. Freed of its persecutors, a Liberator named "Lizzie" from the 445th Bomb Group made it back across the English Channel, flying on two engines to crash-land at Manston on the south coast of England, with the navigator dead and the bombardier injured. Preddy's wingman, 1st Lt. Richard Grow, failed to return from this combat, during which they were greatly outnumbered; sadly, it transpired that he had been killed. Preddy was awarded the Silver Star for the "gallantry, aggressiveness and skill" he displayed in this action.

On January 29, 1944, a day of poor weather with a thick overcast and a low

During WW II, the 352nd Fighter Group was part of the 67th Fighter Wing, VIII Fighter Command of the USAAF Eighth Air Force. The Group consisted of three squadrons: the 328th FS, the 486th FS, and the 487th FS.

In June 1943, the 352nd FG began to arrive at Bodney, an ex-RAF airfield in Norfolk, England, which was to be its base for most of its time in Europe. By September it was fully operational with the Republic P-47D Thunderbolt. It flew numerous escort missions to cover the Eighth Air Force bombing raids against industrial areas, factories, V-weapon sites, submarine pens, and other targets in German-occupied Europe. The first aerial victory for the 352nd was scored by Maj. John C. Meyer, CO of the 487th FS, on November 26, 1943, against a Me Bf 109. It was to be the first of many victories for the 352nd FG.

The Group converted from the P-47 to North American P-51 Mustangs in April 1944. The P-51s of the 352nd were identified by their blue noses and engine cowlings, which earned them the nickname "The Blue Nosed Bastards of Bodney."

In addition to bomber escort and fighter sweep missions, the Group also flew counter-air patrols, and on many occasions strafed enemy airfields, locomotives, vehicles, troops, gun positions, and various other ground targets. The 352nd's Mustangs supported the D-Day invasion of Normandy in June 1944 and also participated in the airborne assault on the Netherlands in September 1944.

After the Germans launched a counteroffensive in the Ardennes in December 1944, the 352nd was temporarily deployed to Advanced Landing Ground Y-29 at Asch, in Belgium, for operations during the Battle of the Bulge (December 1944 to January 1945) under the control of the Ninth Air Force.

In February 1945, the 352nd moved to A-84 at Chievres-Mons Belgium. From there, the Group's Mustangs supported Operation Varsity, the airborne assault across the Rhine in March 1945.

The 352nd returned to Bodney in April and continued operations until VE Day on May 8, 1945.

By the end of the war in Europe, the 352nd FG had flown 420 missions and 59,387 operational combat hours; its pilots had destroyed 776 enemy aircraft; and 29 of them had become aerial aces.



Blue-nose P-51D Mustangs of the 352nd Fighter Group on PSP matting at ALG A-84 Chievres-Mons, in Belgium, in February 1945. The P-51D in the foreground is HO-F, "Buzz Boy II" of the 487th FS. (Photo author's collection)

cloud base, Preddy and his flight provided an escort to bombers whose target was the industrial area of Frankfurt. On this mission Preddy claimed a Focke-Wulf Fw 190 that had been attacking the bombers. He and his wingman, Lt. William "Bill" Whisner, had become separated from their colleagues during the combat and so Preddy led them down through the cloud to escape from enemy airspace "on the deck." Unfortunately, he overflew a flak site near the French coast at Calais, his P-47 was bracketed by 88mm flak and the engine was hit and damaged. Over the English Channel

to save his life, and he had also become a member of the Goldfish Club for survivors rescued from the sea. He missed just one mission as a result of his enforced swim and was immediately back in the air flying operationally.

On March 22, Preddy was promoted to major and became the 487th Squadron operations officer.

Mustangs

In April 1944, the 352nd FG traded their venerable Thunderbolts for new North American P-51 Mustangs powered by Packard Merlin engines. Initially these were high-back P-51Bs, but later the bubble-canopy P-51Ds became available. Not only did the Mustang have the performance to compare favorably with the German piston-engine fighters but, with underwing drop tanks fitted, the aircraft had the range to escort the bombers all the way to their targets in Germany and back. Escort missions in the P-51s often ran to five or six hours of flying time. Preddy named his first P-51, which retained the code letters HO-P, "Cripes A' Mighty 2nd." The 352nd FG Mustangs based at Bodney were painted with blue noses over their natural polished metal finish and became known as the "Blue Nosed Bastards of Bodney." Preddy and the Mustang were to become a highly successful and lethal combination.

Preddy's first claims in his new mount were ground kills, achieved on dangerous strafing attacks against German airfields and confirmed by gun camera film. He destroyed a Heinkel He 111 bomber on the ground on April 11, and a Bücker Bü 133 Jungmeister biplane trainer on April 13. Over the next three months Preddy was credited with a total of five enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground. Most fighter pilots did not hold ground kills in the same high esteem as aerial victories and that certainly was the case with Preddy, although he included them in the kill markings on his aircraft. He once wrote, "They blow up real pretty on the ground, but it isn't as much fun as air fighting."

On April 24, Preddy assumed temporary command of the 487th Squadron while Lt. Col. John Meyer was on leave in the States.



George Preddy in the cockpit of his P-51B Mustang, "Cripes A' Mighty 2nd," talking to one of his ground crew. The five victory crosses, which include two ground (strafe) kills, indicate that the picture was taken in April 1944. (Photo author's collection)

it failed completely, and Preddy was forced to bail out.

Survival time in the water of the English Channel in winter can be measured in minutes. Fortunately, he was able to inflate his rubber dinghy and climb in for some protection from the cold, and his wingman did a brilliant job in alerting the air-sea-rescue (ASR) system to his location. Preddy was rescued by a Royal Air Force Walrus seaplane, which lost a float trying to take off in the rough seas and had to be towed in by an RAF ASR launch. He reappeared in the Officers' Club at Bodney two days later, wearing a RAF uniform and none the worse for the experience. He had now earned two caterpillar brooches from the Caterpillar Club for using Irvin parachutes



Al Schiffer flies "Cripes A' Mighty 3rd," representing Geroge Preddy's last P-51D. The red and white embellishments recognize Preddy's crew chief, who was a barber before enlisting. The radio antenna was striped like a traditional barber's pole. (Photo by John Dibbs/Facebook.com/theplanepicture)



Maj. George Preddy holding up six fingers to indicate the six victories he achieved in one sortie on August 6, 1944. This photo was taken the following day. (Photo author's collection)

Preddy's first aerial victory in his P-51 came six days later when he claimed a Fw 190 on April 30, during a bomber escort mission against targets in France. This claim was disputed for some time afterward, but modern research has confirmed it.

From May 1944, in the build-up to D-Day, Preddy's score really began to pick up, with a brace of two Bf 109s destroyed on May 13 and another two, plus a half-share, on May 30.

Preddy's personal P-51B was replaced with a bubble-top P-51D Mustang in mid-June 1944. He named it "Cripes A' Mighty 3rd." It was to become perhaps one of the most photographed of all WW II Mustangs. Ultimately, including the kills scored in it

by other pilots, it would have more aerial victories than any other Mustang during WW II.

On July 18, 1944, the Eighth Air Force launched a huge tactical bombing mission in support of Allied troops on the ground in France, involving 1,600 heavy bombers, 350 medium bombers, and 500 fighters. The 352nd FG had a big day, accounting for 20 enemy aircraft destroyed. Preddy flew on the mission and had his best day of the war so far, with four aerial victories (three Junkers Ju 88s and one Bf 109 destroyed), plus two Ju 88s claimed as damaged.

A normal tour of operations for a USAAF Eighth Air Force fighter pilot was 200

PREDDY DROPPED IN BEHIND THE ENEMY FIGHTER AND THE GERMAN PILOT JETTISONED HIS CANOPY, KNOWING HE WAS DONE FOR

operational flying hours. An extension of 50 flying hours could be granted after a satisfactory medical examination. By early August 1944, Preddy was on the fifth extension to his tour, approaching 450 hours of combat flying. At this point Preddy's score totaled 16 aerial kills and an additional half share. Not that he seemed particularly interested in chasing a score.

Six in one

After Preddy returned to Bodney from a mission on August 5, 1944, having downed another Bf 109, he was told that the weather forecast for the next day meant that no flights would be scheduled. That night the 352nd held a war bond drive party and, with the forecast for the next day promising no flying, Preddy enjoyed himself greatly. He drank rather too much and swayed off to his quarters in the early hours of the following morning. Having been asleep for less than an hour, he was shaken awake with the news that the forecast was wrong; a mission was planned, and he was to lead it!

During the briefing for the mission, Preddy was still intoxicated and actually fell off the platform. His buddies fed him oxygen until he appeared sober enough to be allowed to fly and then continued to watch him carefully as he led them airborne on a maximum effort mission to Berlin, flying his Mustang "Cripes A' Mighty 3rd." This long-range mission on August 6 was to last six hours. In his condition Preddy was hoping it would be a milk run. It didn't turn out that way!

The weather was beautiful, with mostly clear skies, and the Luftwaffe was up in force. Before the bombers reached their target, more than 30 Bf 109s intercepted the formation of Boeing B-17s which Preddy's unit was escorting. He led an attack against the enemy fighters from astern, opening fire on one of the Bf 109s that was trailing behind the others. It appeared that his first burst killed the pilot and the 109 rolled over and spiraled down in flames. Closing behind the next Bf 109, Preddy's second burst of gunfire into its port wing set the aircraft on fire and the German pilot bailed out.

Continuing into the enemy formation from the rear, the Mustang pilots picked off one enemy fighter after another.



PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL AIR & SPACE MUSEUM

P-51D MUSTANG

Powerplant: 1 x Packard (Rolls Royce) V-1650-7 Merlin 12-cylinder liquid cooled engine 1695hp at 3,000 rpm

Fuel capacity: 269 gallons internal fuel; up to 377 gallons with external underwing drop tanks

Maximum speed: 437 mph at 25,000 feet; 380 mph at sea level

Cruise speed: 255 mph

Stalling Speed: 100 mph

Range: 1,650 statute miles (2,656 km, 1,434 nautical miles) with external tanks

Rate of climb: 3,600 feet per minute, gradually reducing with altitude

Service ceiling: 41,900 feet

Armament: 6 x 0.50-inch caliber (12.7mm) AN/M2 Browning machine guns with 1,840 total rounds (380 rounds for the inboard pair; 270 rounds for each of the outer two pairs)



Meanwhile, the Bf 109s ahead took no evasive action, seemingly unaware of the destruction occurring behind them.

Preddy torched two more 109s before the remaining Germans perceived the menace from astern and dived for safety. The Mustangs followed. Preddy dispatched a fifth victim, which went down burning and spinning, as the dwindling number of German fighters descended to 5,000 feet. One of the 109s then snapped into a break turn to the left. The pilot had evidently seen Preddy's Mustang and was trying to get onto his tail. Preddy turned into the attack; he was now all alone with this 109. He set his Mustang in a tight climbing spiral at 150mph; the 109 tried to follow but fell out to the left. Preddy dropped in behind the enemy fighter and the German pilot

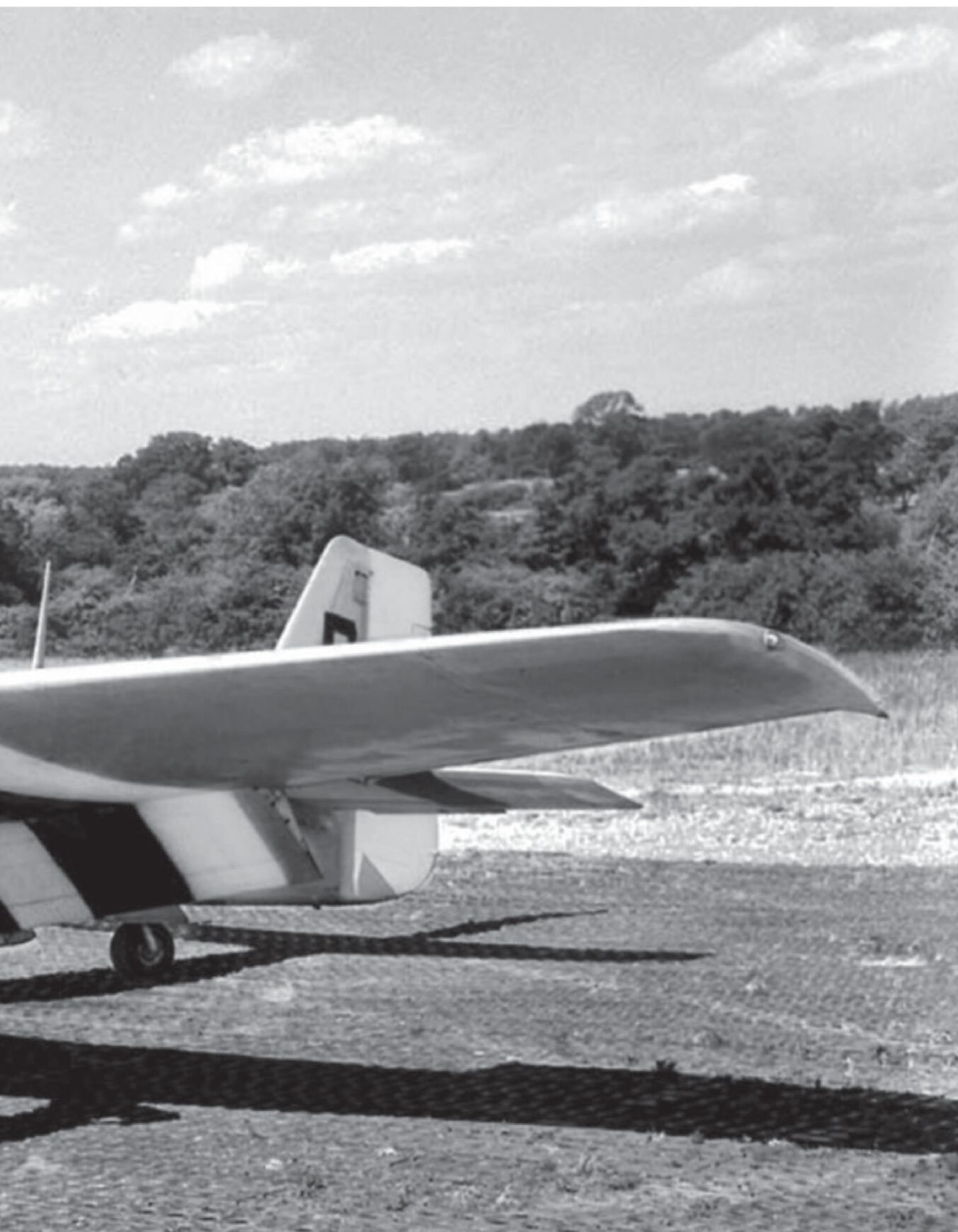
jettisoned his canopy, knowing he was done for. Preddy hit the 109 with a short burst and the pilot bailed out at 7,000 feet.

Preddy was now almost to Berlin, the bombers had reached their target and he was almost out of ammunition. He flew home alone. His six kills in one mission were confirmed by the testimony of fellow pilots and his gun camera film.

When he landed back at Bodney, the news of his exploits had preceded him and he was met by his friends and colleagues who helped an exhausted, wan, and sick-looking Preddy from his cockpit, as 1st Lt. George Arnold took some photos with his own camera.

Reporters, photographers, film cameramen and correspondents descended on Bodney the next day to photograph,

George Preddy's P-51D Mustang "Cripes A' Mighty 3rd" with ground crewmen at Bodney after August 6, 1944, with 31 victory crosses and underside invasion stripes. (Photo author's collection)



film, and interview Preddy and to spread the news of his achievements. For the next few days, Preddy was the most famous and exalted aviator in the European theater.

Lt. Col. John C. Meyer, who had now returned from leave, recommended Preddy for the Medal of Honor. However, it was the Distinguished Service Cross that Brigadier General Edward H. Anderson pinned to Preddy's chest on August 12, to add to the Distinguished Flying Cross that he had previously been awarded.

Including his ground kills, Preddy's personal score now stood at 29.5, but the extensions to his combat tour had expired and it was time for him to go home on leave. There was no need for him ever to return to frontline service, but he was not a person to leave a job unfinished.

Return to combat

Preddy returned to the 352nd FG at Bodney and took command of the 328th FS on October 28, 1944. He led the squadron on his first mission with them on October 30.

He now had a new P-51 Mustang, serial number 44-14906, with the code letters PE-P; he named it simply "Cripes A' Mighty." It had the blue nose of the 352nd FG aircraft and a red rudder, but was otherwise highly polished natural metal and, unusually, it had twin rear view mirrors. It was painted with Preddy's name and kill markings under the cockpit.

Leading the 328th, Preddy achieved two more confirmed aerial victories in November, a Bf 109 and a Fw 190. He was also credited with a Fw 190 probably destroyed and another damaged.

Christmas Day 1944

On December 16, 1944, the German Wehrmacht launched a massive counter-attack against the Allied ground forces in the Ardennes Forest, which was to become known as the Battle of the Bulge. Three days later, the 352nd FG was temporarily deployed forward from Bodney to provide air support during the battle. It moved to a newly constructed airfield just outside Asch, in Belgium, known as Advanced Landing Ground Y-29. For a full week the Allied air forces were prevented from flying in the area by low cloud and fog. The Mustangs of the 328th FS finally managed to lift off from Y-29, led by Preddy, on December 23. They found nothing to shoot at and returned empty-handed to their freezing airfield and encampment.

On Christmas Day 1944, Preddy led nine other pilots in their Mustangs on a fighter patrol over the battle area. This was his 143rd combat mission. They had been on patrol for three hours before receiving radar vectors to intercept bandits just southwest of Koblenz. The 328th FS Mustangs arrived to find a dogfight already taking place between P-51s and Bf 109s. Diving into the melee, Preddy dispatched two Bf 109s whose pilots bailed out.

The dogfight had scattered the aircraft of the 328th, but Preddy and his wingman, Lt. Gordon Cartree, resumed the patrol and

WITH ALMOST ALL OF HIS AERIAL VICTORIES ACHIEVED FLYING THE P-51, HE IS THE TOP SCORING MUSTANG ACE.

were joined by a white-nosed Mustang from the 479th FG, flown, it transpired, by Lt. James Bouchier. Radar control vectored the three Mustangs onto bandits reported "on the deck" near Liege. South of Liege at 1,500 feet, Preddy spotted a Fw 190 on the deck and went down after it. As they raced over a wooded area, chasing the Fw 190, the Mustangs were fired at by an American anti-aircraft artillery unit with fast-firing, turret-mounted, quadruple .50-inch caliber heavy machine guns and 40mm Bofors guns. All three Mustangs were hit, Preddy's by two .50 rounds. Bouchier's aircraft was so badly damaged that he had to bail out; Cartree took a tracer round into the cockpit, but his aircraft was not critically damaged.

Cartree saw Preddy pull up to about 700 feet in a climbing turn and jettison his canopy, but he did not see him bail out and believed he was still in the aircraft as it dived into the ground. American eyewitnesses on the ground later reported that Preddy had fallen from the Mustang at about 200 feet, but his parachute did not deploy. The American anti-aircraft gun crew, realizing their error, raced to the scene of the crash, some five or six hundred yards away. Preddy had been hit by a .50 round

and mortally wounded; he was dead when they reached him.

Cartree returned to Y-29 with the tragic news of George Preddy's death and was able to confirm the ace's final two aerial victories to add to his remarkable score.

Top Mustang ace

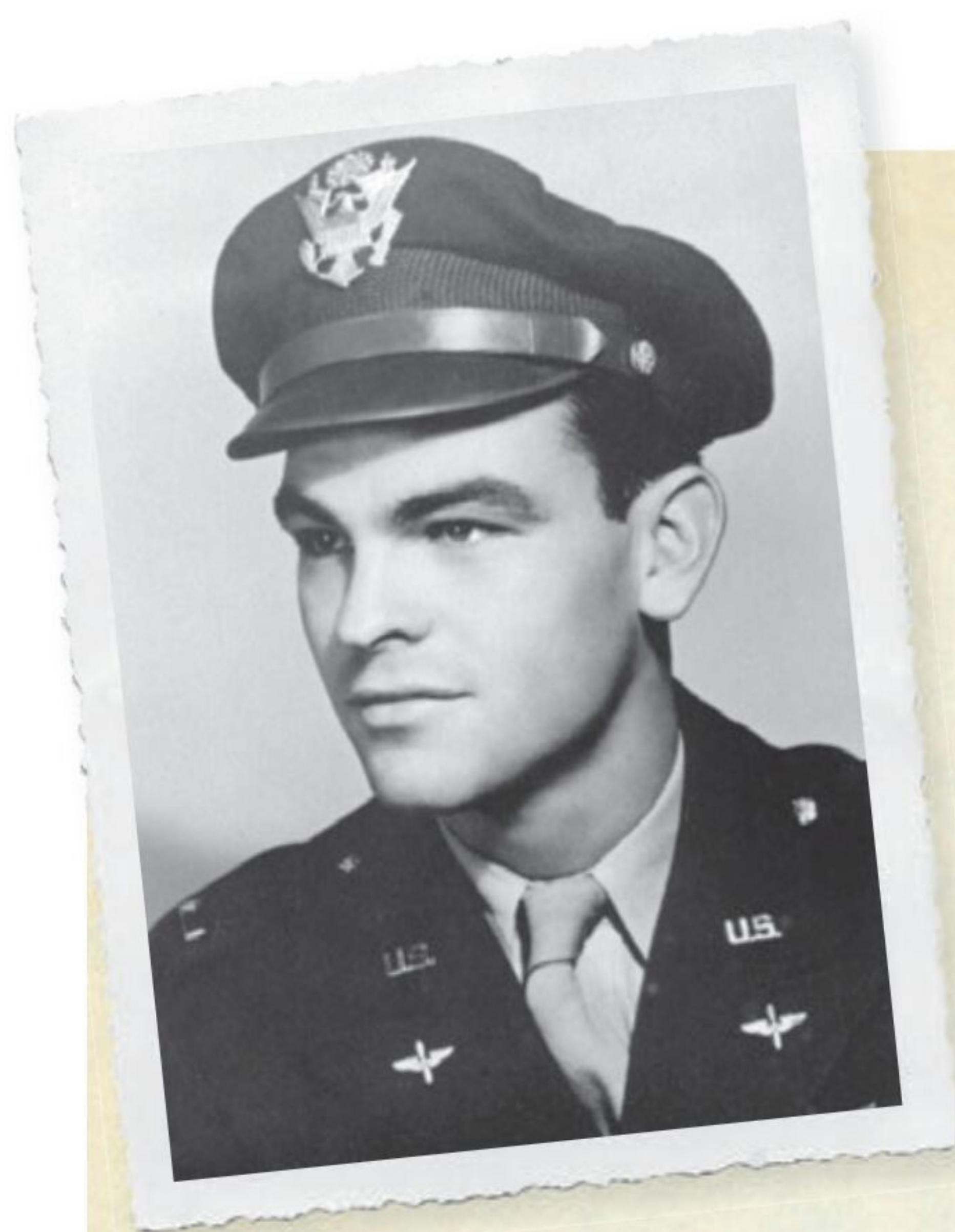
For a fighter pilot who had roamed battle-torn skies for three years, who had never known defeat in aerial combat, who had narrowly escaped death on several occasions and who had given his all to the cause, this was a truly tragic fate, wrought by the hands of some on his own side. He had fallen victim to human error and to what we today term "friendly fire."

Maj. George E. Preddy was 25 years old when he died. He was the holder of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Distinguished Flying Cross with six oak leaf clusters and the Air Medal with six oak leaf clusters. He was ultimately credited with destroying 28.83 enemy aircraft in aerial combat, a figure that included a half and a third share. In addition, he had destroyed five enemy aircraft on the ground in strafe attacks. He is ranked as the third highest-scoring fighter ace in the European Theater of Operations, and the seventh highest scoring American ace ever. With almost all of his aerial victories achieved flying the P-51, he is the top scoring Mustang ace.

It could be said that George Preddy was born for war and possibly that he was born to fall in war. He certainly deserves to be remembered.

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Preddy Memorial Foundation: preddy-foundation.org
 Imperial War Museum's American Air Museum in Britain: americanairmuseum.com
 352nd Fighter Group Association: 352ndfightergroup.com
 352nd Fighter Group Facebook: facebook.com/352nd-Fighter-Group



Lt. Bill Preddy

Valor was a Preddy family trait. George's younger brother, Bill Preddy, a P-51 Mustang pilot with the 503rd FS, 339th FG, was shot down and killed by enemy anti-aircraft fire, aged just 20, on April 19, 1945, while strafing a German airfield in Czechoslovakia. The Preddy family had lost two sons to the war in under four months.

Lt. William "Bill" Preddy, killed in action April 19, 1945, flying a P-51 Mustang. (Photo author's collection)