

Captain Gross named all
of his mounts *Live Bait*.
(Photo courtesy of Kelly
Gross via author.)



Great Day for a FIGHTER PILOT

Kelly Gross battles an
Me 262 over the Reich

BY ROBERT F. DORR





After the Allies invaded Normandy in June 1944,

American fighter pilots began to operate from small captured airfields in Europe. Former Capt. Clayton Kelly Gross—who sadly passed away in 2016 at his home in Vancouver, Washington—flew P-51 Mustang missions as a member of the 354th FG. “My experiences included shooting at Germans and getting shot down,” Gross said. He eventually became an ace.

This beautiful Mustang restoration represents the markings from one of Capt. Kelly Gross's sister squadrons, the 353rd, as it would have appeared in late 1944. Gross's 355th FS had blue spinners with a 12-inch-wide white and blue checkerboard nose band just behind the spinner. Paul Ehlen's Mustang's paint scheme is a tribute to P-51 triple-ace Maj. Kenneth Dahlberg. (Photo by Paul Bowen/Paul Bowen Photography Inc.)

GREAT DAY FOR A FIGHTER PILOT

Gross's 354th FG was known as the Pioneer Mustang Fighter Group because it was the first one to receive P-51s for air combat and bomber escort. These pilots have gathered on a 355th FS Mustang before a mission. Note that the white ID spinner and the bands on the nose, wing and tail (not seen) have been painted to distinguish it from the Bf 109. (Air Age Archives.)



Fighting on the continent sometimes meant surviving more like a soldier than an airman, living in tents, mud and the elements, but the experience also enabled fliers such as Gross to meet the people of France. Some pilots regarded life in the town of Gael in the French province of Brittany as “the lushest days of their career on the continent,” as one put it. In 2002, residents of the town dedicated a monument to the American airmen.

Gross considered himself typical of those airmen, “Not a hero, that’s for certain, but a real fighter pilot.” Like so many, Gross was a citizen soldier who donned a uniform when there was a war to be won and then came home afterward.

“I wanted to fly at a very young age.” When he signed up in 1941 for duty in the Army Air Forces, Gross had already accumulated 90 flying hours in a civilian WACO UPF-7 biplane. He was a member of Flying Class 42-H, the first to graduate new pilots after the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Gross, who was 5 feet 11 inches in height, pinned on his wings and was handed a set of instructions saying, “If you are five feet eleven or taller, you may not request [duty in] fighters.” He made the request anyway, and no one ever came around with a tape measure. For fighter training, the Army assigned him to the 328th FG at Hamilton Field, California, flying the P-39 Airacobra. “We lost many pilots in training,” Gross recalled. He served in other U.S. locations before going overseas.

His overseas group, the 354th, became the first to fly the P-51 Mustang and adopted the name “Pioneer Mustang Group.”

“I was one of three pilots sent to a British base to check out the new fighter during the period November 7 to 16, 1943. We flew the A-36 version (a dive-bomber) and the P-51A for several flights and then headed back to check others out in the P-51B.

While flying from bases in the UK and France during his first tour, he shot down four Bf 109s: two on May 11, 1944, and one each



The 354th FG's emblem.

on May 28 and June 14.

“I flew 200 combat hours [considered a combat tour for fighters] and finished on June 28, 1944. I had four confirmed aerial victories at that time. We were flying from airfield A-2 near Omaha Beach, having made the move about 10 days after D-Day. I was sent home for a 30-day leave and then returned for a second tour.

“My first flight back in combat took place on October 28, 1944. On my second mission on October 29, I destroyed a Bf 109 to become an ace. Three weeks later, on November 18, I was shot down by ground fire while destroying six German motor vehicles. I bailed out east of Metz, which the Germans still held, but was picked up by one of Patton’s Armored units and returned to my base 24 hours later after spending the night with them. I flew one more mission in a P-51 after returning, and then on December 1, 1944, our group transitioned to P-47s.”

Gross flew the P-47 Thunderbolt in combat for a little more than two months. It was one of the most impressive fighters of the War, but Gross was a critic. He said the P-47 was less vulnerable to ground fire, but the P-51 performed better in air-to-air action.

“We shifted to the P-47 at an odd time. We were fighting on the continent of Europe. My group was now at airfield A-66 in Gael, France, after the move from England, when my fellow pilots and I were told we must change to the Jug.

“We were told that Eighth Air Force was converting to P-51s and wanted our aircraft for Col. Hubert Zemke’s 56th FG, which was the last outfit in the Eighth that hadn’t transitioned to Mustangs. It was like stepping out of a racing car and climbing into a two-and-a-half-ton truck. It had an impact on our morale and on our production as far as aerial victories was concerned.

“Up to that time, our commander, Maj. Gen. Elwood ‘Pete’ Quesada, was very proud of our aerial victories with Mustangs. The P-47, however, was very effective for air-to-ground work, and that became important after the invasion of Normandy, but it wasn’t

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Kelly Gross, near the wing, chats with two of his squadron mates after a mission. Judging by the Mustang's markings, he is still based in the UK and flying the B-model. (Photo courtesy of Kelly Gross via author.)

as good a dogfighter as the Mustang.

"In February 1945, we got our Mustangs back and finished the War with them. Having flown both, I have a definite preference, and it isn't the P-47. Still, I respect the P-47, having used the tremendous firepower of those eight .50-caliber machine guns on the enemy. I also know how much punishment the P-47 can take. It wasn't my favorite, but it was a great aircraft. And

while many pilots swore by the P-47, I was not an advocate for the airplane."

Five of Gross's aerial victories are in an Air Force internal document listing of victory credits. His sixth aerial victory, on April 14, 1945, is not listed in the document but was

recognized during the War and is recognized by the American Fighter Aces Association and by historians today. It was remarkable because it was an Me 262 jet fighter, an aircraft that was especially difficult to defeat.

"It was the third time I had seen one of the German 'wonder weapons.' The first time, I saw a thing that looked like a beer barrel with flaps sticking out of it. That was an Me 163 Komet rocket plane. The second time, I was escorting bombers. I was on the right side of a box of B-17 Flying Fortresses. Someone hollered. 'Bogie at two o'clock!' I said, 'I've got him!' I turned into him, but I didn't have him. He went right by me. We were not briefed about these aircraft, and I was startled by the speed as one made a pass at the bombers. It seemed that we had zero chance to intercept or chase. We pilots discussed these new aircraft among ourselves as more of our group saw or had contact with them. They were recognizable from silhouettes eventually furnished by our intelligence people.

"This last time, I was leading a flight of eight P-51s with orders to find anything at which we could shoot. I sent one flight south and kept mine north near the Elbe River. We were



NORTH AMERICAN P-51D MUSTANG



MESSERSCHMITT ME 262A-1A SCHWALBE

TYPE	Single-seat fighter and fighter-bomber	Single-seat air superiority fighter
POWERPLANT	One 1,590hp Packard V-1650-7 (Rolls-Royce Merlin) liquid-cooled in-line engine	Two Junkers Jumo 004B-1/2/3 axial-flow turbojet engines each providing 2,000 pounds of static thrust
PERFORMANCE	Maximum speed 437mph at 20,000 ft.; initial rate of climb 3,475 ft. per minute; operating radius with maximum fuel, 1,300 miles	Maximum speed, 521mph at sea level; 530mph at 9,845 ft.; 532mph at 26,246 ft.; initial rate of climb, 3,937 ft. per minute; service ceiling 38,000 ft.; range 652 miles
WEIGHTS	Empty 7,125 lb.; loaded 11,600 lb.	Empty 8,500 lb. (3,855 kg); empty equipped 9,742 lb. (4,413 kg); gross 14,080 lb. (6,387 kg)
DIMENSIONS	Span 37 ft. 1/2 in.; length 32 ft. 3 in.; height 13 ft. 8 in.; wing area 235 sq. ft.	Span 40 ft. 11 1/2 in. (12.5 m); length 34 ft. 9 1/2 in. (10.57 m); height 12 ft. 7 in. (3.83 m); wing area 234 sq. ft. (21.73 sq. m)
ARMAMENT	Six .50-caliber Browning M3 machine guns with 400 rounds for each inboard gun and 270 rounds for each outboard gun; provision for two 500-pound bombs, eight rockets, or other underwing ordnance in place of drop tanks	Four 30-mm. Rheinmetall-Borsig Mk. 108A-3 cannon with 100 rounds per gun for the upper pair and 80 rounds per gun for the lower pair; ordnance station for 12 R4M air-to-air rocket projectiles

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM TULLIS



A captured Me 262 is out on a test flight over Ohio. Some captured Schwalbes were taken to Wright/Pat AFB for evaluation after WW II. (Air Age Archives.)

cruising at 12,000 feet. I saw movement below me and recognized it as a 262.

"It had a big red number '1' painted on it. The Germans identified their planes by ranking number. The Staffel commander's aircraft was number 1. His second in command was 2, and so on. The bigger the number, the lower in rank was the pilot.

"He was at 2,000 feet. I rolled over and went down and entered compressibility. My control surfaces stopped working. I don't know how fast I was going, but it was very, very fast. I did a little praying. At lower altitude, I at last regained control and, lo and behold, the 262 was right in front of me. I shot at very close range and saw strikes on his left side. A fairly large piece of his left wingtip came off, and the left jet engine began to burn. I had to pull off right to avoid a collision, and when I rolled back, I found the 262 climbing straight up.

"I hit it again, and it burst into flames. Then

I shot again, and it burned some more. I had sight of the pilot in his cockpit. He climbed another thousand feet or so and then seemed to stop in midair. The canopy came off and the pilot ejected. I was thrilled as hell. His aircraft fell apart and went down in flames and smoke.

"I tried to make a pass around the parachute, but we were over a German airfield by this time and the anti-aircraft was opening up at me. I thought the guy lived. I was told [incorrectly] after the War that he had been killed that day.

"Years later, I was at a reunion of German fighter pilots, and I met that pilot I had shot down. A German commander by the name of Kurt Lobgesang had the big red '1' on the nose of his jet. He thanked me for saving his life. He had been wounded in the left side and didn't have to fly anymore, which meant he lived through the War—something a lot of his mates did not do. †

FACT

To save aluminum, 262s had many steel stampings, including the engine cowlings.

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