

Background to Lt. Charles F. Gumm's arrival and service in England



Image From: Newsweek, 1st October, 1943

355th Squadron Log (extract)

Personal Account By 1st Lt. Donald F. Snow

When he was given the assignment of organizing and training fighter-pilots and men for combat, the nucleus of the 355th Fighter Squadron, at Hamilton Field, California. Captain George R. Bickell was looking toward the Land of the Rising Sun. He hoped that through his leadership, his pilots would make a name for themselves in smashing back at the Jap. This month of November, 1942 was less than a year after the Pearl Harbor disaster. . . Captain Bickell had seen that holocaust and had flown P-40 aircraft off Navy carriers during the Battle of Midway. But there was another Big League shaping up in the skies of Europe in which he was to play a major role. "Uncle George", Commanding Officer of the 355th Squadron, was slated to eventually be Group Commander of the Pioneer Mustangs, not only in the latter days of the Air Battle over Germany, but as the Pioneers supported the Army in the invasion of France. He would stand before this Group on May 7, 1945 to announce to his men the Victory in Europe.

Organization at Hamilton Field was completed by the middle of January 1943. An advanced detail of officers and men were sent to the Tonopah, Nevada, Bombing and Gunnery Range for training in P-39 Airacobra aircraft.

Second Lt. Bowers Espy, Squadron Adjutant, established a working administrative system, and basic training program for the enlisted men of the squadron. During this transition period, in the lonely, barren, desert country, new friendships sprang up; the new Squadron insignia, the "Pugnacious Pup," stamped an individuality of intrinsic value into the growing 'esprit de corps' of the 355th Squadron.

On the first of March, with gunnery training completed, the officers and men of the 355th Squadron, now better acquainted, moved on to another station. The new set-up at Hayward Army Airdrome, Hayward, California developed within the outfit a rich personality. The 355th was to continue as a very separate and distinct entity for awhile . . . on its own.

It was an unique opportunity to operate 80 miles apart from the parent Group and affiliated squadrons at Santa Rosa, Calif. At Hayward the Squadron attained the Group's highest training efficiency record, proving that the almost laissez-faire policy of Group was actually an incentive to the men of the 355th Squadron. Americanly, freedom was appreciated obvious by the outstandingly superior work accomplished at Hayward.

By the first of June our personnel, ready for final training, moved to Portland, Oregon Army Air Base. Many new pilots were joined to train for combat. By intense work, loyalty and cooperation in every department an impressive and highly commendable record was attained by the Pugnacious Pups as they readied themselves for the big job ahead. Flights were being made to all points in Oregon and some missions even took the pilots out to sea.

We were a part of the defense set-up in the Northwest, being on the alert for possible attacks by units of Emperor Hirohito's dishonorable fleet. On the 18th of August the Squadron moved to Troutdale, Oregon, for maneuvers to simulate combat conditions. With this experience, the junior pilots had completed the last course in the training program qualifying them for combat.

September was the month of parties and goodbyes. Wondering, speculating as to whether crossing the Atlantic or the Pacific was in the offing. On October 6th we departed from Portland, Oregon, by train, making our way across the United States to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

On October 20th, after being refitted at Kilmer, we walked up the gangplank into the liner Athlone Castle.

We were headed for England, a large number of merchant ships made up convoy, we were protected by men-of-war. Everyone was glad to see Liverpool. After two weeks at sea in crowded, uncomfortable quarters, stepping on solid earth was quite a satisfaction.

Greenham Commons was the first stop, affording a slight orientation to life in England before we journeyed to Colchester, in East Anglia, the site of one permanent station, Boxted Airdrome [Station 150].

Scarcely two weeks after getting settled in the cold, damp Nissen huts at Boxted, the pilots of our Squadron had completed transition training with a new type fighter, the P-51B.

Our first mission was flown on the first of December. Led by Lt. Col. Don Blakeslee of the 4th Fighter Group, the Group flew over St. Omer airdrome in France. The 355th Squadron line-up, headed by Major Bickell, included Lts. M. G. Long, "Deacon" Talbot, "Bob" Stephens, "Cousin" Lasko "Peter" Nancy, Crocker, Dieterich and Pate.

On December 13, just a month after the first pilots had checked out in the Mustang fighter, we made history by escorting bombers all the way to Kiel, Germany. On the 16th of December, near Bremen, Germany, Lt. Charles F. Gumm shot down the first enemy plane to be destroyed by the P-51B Mustang.

In the first month of 1944, our pilots were probing even more deeply Krautland, with missions being flown to Frankfurt, Brunswick, and the Halberstadt-Oschersleben area. [this was when the air war went all out - see Newsweek picture [below](#)].

March first marked another tragedy which clouded our spirits. Lt. Gumm first ace of our Group was killed at the little Village of Nayland, not far from our field. He experienced engine trouble [in his P-51 42-106749] while on a training flight. While avoiding crashing into the town, his aircraft struck a tree, was thrown out of control and destroyed.

The above details have been obtained from the excellent [354th Fighter Group website](#), where the complete squadron log can be found.

Note: By April 1944, the 354th had completed over 30 missions and downed 200 enemy aircraft. On 17th April, the

Pioneers moved to Lashenden in Kent to prepare for D-Day. (Source: *A Short History of Boxted Airfield*, Michael Smith)

345th Fighter Group and the Combined Bomber Offensive

The operations undertaken by the 345th from Boxted were part of the *Combined Bomber Offensive* (CBO) that was authorized at the Casablanca conference Jan. 1943, to integrate American and British forces, against key targets. This resulted in a major escalation of battle in the air. By the time the 354th Fighter Squadron arrived in England in November that year, the CBO was well established and achieving good results. Lt. F. Gumm flew with the following offensives:

Dec 1, 1943 - Raid over Belgium and Pas de Calais, France

- 24 Mustang P-51's fly first mission.

Dec 5, 1943 - Raid over Amiens area of France

- 36 Mustang P-51's (along with 34 P-38s and 266 P-47s) fly their first bomber support mission escorting 452 B-17s and 96 B-24s.

Dec 11, 1943 - Raid over Emden, Germany

- 44 Mustang P-51's provide a escort to 583 Bombers. All went well until Lt. Norman Hall of 353rd Fighter Squadron was downed on the return leg.

Dec 13, 1943 - Raid over Kiel, Germany

- 41 Mustang P-51's provide an escort to 710 bombers

Dec. 16, 1943 - Raid over Bremen, Germany

- Lt Col Blakeslee was leading the group again on 16th December, with 39 Mustangs helping to provide penetration support for 631 bombers attacking the German city of Bremen. This time the 354th scored its first confirmed victory when Charles F. Gumm sighted Bf 109s queuing up to the rear of some fortresses. He later reported;
- "Lt. Talbot and I climbed after them, and when within 400 yards range two of the enemy aircraft saw us and broke left and straight down. We closed on the other two and I dropped back a little to cover Lt. Talbot's tail, but the enemy saw him and broke left and down. By then I was almost in a position to fire on my '109, which was still flying straight for the bombers. Lt. Talbot pulled up and to the right to cover my tail while I closed to about 100 yards and fired a two-second burst, noticing no effects. I then closed to about 59 yards and fired a three-second burst, noticing a thin trail of smoke coming from the right side of the engine. I fired again at very close range and was showered with

smoke and oil and pieces which I pulled up through and glanced back to see the fighter going down to the left with a large plume of smoke coming from the right side of the engine. Then I looked for Lt. Talbot again, and saw him chasing an Fw 190, with another '109 closing on him. I went down after the latter fighter and they both broke down and away, so we went back to the bombers." (Source: William N Hess, 2002, *354th Fighter Group*, Osprey Publishing).

- Lt. Gumm credited with first actual enemy kill by a P-51 Mustang pilot over Europe.. He returned to base with a claim of one JU 88 damaged and one Bf 109 shot down at 1330 hours.
- The Focke-Wulf aircraft works and the Bremen submarine base were the main targets.

Dec 20, 1943 - Raid over Bremen and Wilhelmshaven, Germany

- Lt. Col Martin leads Mustang P-51's provide an escort to 546 bombers. Heavy opposition when the Luftwaffe sorties all manner of aircraft. The 354th scored a number of kills but sadly lost three pilots including Maj. Owen Seaman, CO of the 353rd Fighter Squadron.

Dec 30, 1943 - Raid over Ludwigshafen, Germany

- Scattered enemy opposition was encountered. The interception did not go well and only one Dornier Do 217 was destroyed. Due to an unfortunate quirk of fate two Mustangs were lost when Lt Hays Appell of 356th FS and Lt. Bill Turner of 355th collided over Germany. Parachutes were sighted coming from both aircraft and the pilots were duly taken prisoner.

Dec 31, 1943 - Escort Duty

- The group provided escort to bombers returning from targets in France. Two enemy fighters were downed.

Jan 4, 1944 - Raid over Kiel, Germany

- Maj. Bicknell led 42 Mustangs in support of 569 bombers.

Jan 5, 1944 - Raid over Kiel, Germany

- Maj. Howard led 41 Mustangs as part of 111 fighter escort to 245 bombers. After intense activity, the 354th chalked up 14 confirmed victories without loss.

Jan 11, 1944 - Raid over Halberstadt and Oschersleben, Germany

- Maj. Howard led the Fighter Group to Halberstadt (where the a plant producing parts for the Ju88 was sited) and

Oschersleben (home of a large Fw 190 factory). Maj. Howard scored two enemy kills and two damaged. The total for the 354th was 16 destroyed, 7 probable and 19 damaged. Following this successful mission, Maj. Jim Howard was commended for his heroic action in tackling between 30- and 40 enemy fighters in protection of a flying fortress with no chance of receiving assistance. He was acclaimed by the Fortress flyers and was subsequently awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Jan 14 , 1944- Raid over Pas de Calais, France

- Maj. Bicknell led 43 Mustang P-51's as part of a fighter force of 645 to provide an escort to 552 bombers. One victory was scored and one pilot lost - causes unknown.

Jan. 21, 1944 - Raids along French Coast

- No enemy aircraft encountered.

Jan 24, 1944 - Raid over Frankfurt, Germany

- Col. Martin led the group and although limited action was seen, a skirmish with four Fw 190s near Brussels resulted in two pilots being downed.

Jan 29, 1944 - Raid over Frankfurt, Germany

- Maj. Howard led the group and on the return in the vicinity of Kirchberg they engaged the enemy and downed four Fw 109s with two probable and no losses.

Jan 30 , 1944- Raid over Brunswick, Germany

- Five enemy fighters downed with no losses. The New Year had started well with the 354th credited with 42 official victories for the loss of three pilots.

Jan 29, 1944 - Raid over Frankfurt, Germany

- Maj. Howard led the group and on the return in the vicinity of Kirchberg they engaged the enemy and downed four Fw 109s

Feb 8, 1944 - Raid over Frankfurt, Germany

- Maj. Howard led 41 Mustangs where after clearing the target area, they strafed locomotives, airfields and other

targets of interest. However, flak was very intense and they lost four pilots. Strafing action was halted until further notice.

Feb 10, 1944 - Friendly Fire during Mission to Brunswick

- One of the most frustrating, and potentially deadly, threats that the group had to face was from attacks made by P-47s and, at times P-38s. Unfortunately, the silhouette of the P-51 closely resembled that of the Bf109, and although Mustangs had visited all VIII Fighter Command bases so that pilots could view the aircraft close-up, the attacks continued. During a skirmish with some Bf109s over enemy territory, future ace Lt Glenn Eagleston's Mustang was badly damaged by P-41s that inadvertently mistook him for the enemy and attacked his P-51. The oil system began to haemorrhage as he headed back over the English Channel. Fortunately, Eagleston was able to bail out just miles from Boxted at Ardleigh. He descended by parachute during a heavy snowfall and was picked up by some Homeguardsmen who duly drove him back to his base.

Feb 11, 1944 - Raids over Frankfurt, Ludwigshafen and Saarbrücken, Germany

- The 354th notched up its 25th mission. Col Martin led 38 Mustangs that were tasked with escorting 223 B-17s sent to hit targets in Frankfurt, Ludwigshafen and Saarbrücken. The 354th had run into a large formation of twin-engined fighters just as the bombers had approached Frankfurt. Now very much combat veterans, the Mustang pilots acquitted themselves well with claims for 11 enemy aircraft destroyed - Lt Charles Gumm top scored by downing an Me410 and a Ju 88, leaving him just one victory short of ace status.

Feb. 13-26, 1944 - "Big Week" - op. ARGUMENT

- 3300 planes from 8th AF and 500 from 15th AF dropped 10,000 tons to destroy Luftwaffe factories in central Germany.
- Germany lost many pilots and 500 planes, moved factories underground, built fake Skoda factory at Pilsen in Czech to fool bombers, added more AA flak by 88 mm guns able to reach 6 miles high.
- The 500-lb bombs used by the Allies were not large enough to inflict significant damage on Germany factory building interiors, usually only causing damage to rooftops.
- The city of Nijmegen in the Netherlands was bombed by mistake on Feb. 22, killing 200 Dutch civilians.
- 21st February, Lt. Gumm became the first of many 354th Fighter Group aces (five kills) by downing a BF 110 over Brunswick at 1430 hours - the accepted definition of a fighter pilot ace is one who has shot down five or more enemy aircraft.
- 25th February, Lt. Gumm scores again on a mission to Nuremburg, bringing his confirmed kills to six.

Mar 1, 1944 - Tragedy Strikes

- Lt. Gumm dies in tragic accident during a routine training flight whilst heroically steering his stricken aircraft from

the houses in the village of Nayland on which it would certainly have crashed.

- Tragedy struck the group on the first day of March when the 355th's Lt Charles Gumm met his fate in a desperate attempt to save others. Ironically, having scored the 354th's first victory, and duly become one of its early aces whilst completing more than a dozen missions deep into enemy territory, Gumm was to lose his life on a routine training sortie over Norfolk when his assigned P-51-1 (43-106749) suffered engine trouble.

He could easily have bailed out, but instead he made an attempt to bring his ailing Mustang back to Boxted. Gumm was within visual distance of his base when his engine finally quit just as he was approaching Nayland, on the Essex-Suffolk border. The ace continued to fight the controls of the rapidly descending Mustang in an effort to clear the rooftops of a small terrace of houses that lay directly in his path. He succeeded in guiding the fighter away from the village, whereupon he attempted to land in a nearby field, but one wing hit a tree and the P-51 smacked into the ground, killing Charles Gumm. He had saved the villagers at the cost of his own life.

Apr 17, 1944 - 354th Moves to Lashenden in Kent

- The 354th moves to Lashenden in Kent to prepare for D-Day.

The CBO continued until February, 1945.

Sources:

- 1) [Combined Bomber Offensive](#) website.
- 2) William N Hess, 2002, *354th Fighter Group*, Osprey Publishing.



Bombs for Hitler: The Air War Goes All Out

B-17s in formation.

Image from: Newsweek, 1st January, 1944

A Personal Recollection.

"You couldn't go to a town or village in East Anglia and not hear an American accent," said Roger Freeman, author and expert on the 8th Air Force. "In Suffolk, there was an airfield every five to 10 miles."

"The spectacle of seeing hundreds of aircraft trailing formations was an extraordinary sight," said Freeman, who was a base rat at Boxted near Colchester. "On one cold and freezing day, early in 1945, when I was 15, I saw the contrails of a thousand bombers forming in the sky at one time. I didn't count a thousand, but there were 28 groups, and I knew that each group had 30 to 40 in each formation.

"At the time I didn't quite appreciate it," Freeman said. "But there were 25,000 young airmen up there going to war. A lot of times people talk about the number of aircraft going to war, and they don't quite appreciate the cost in human lives."

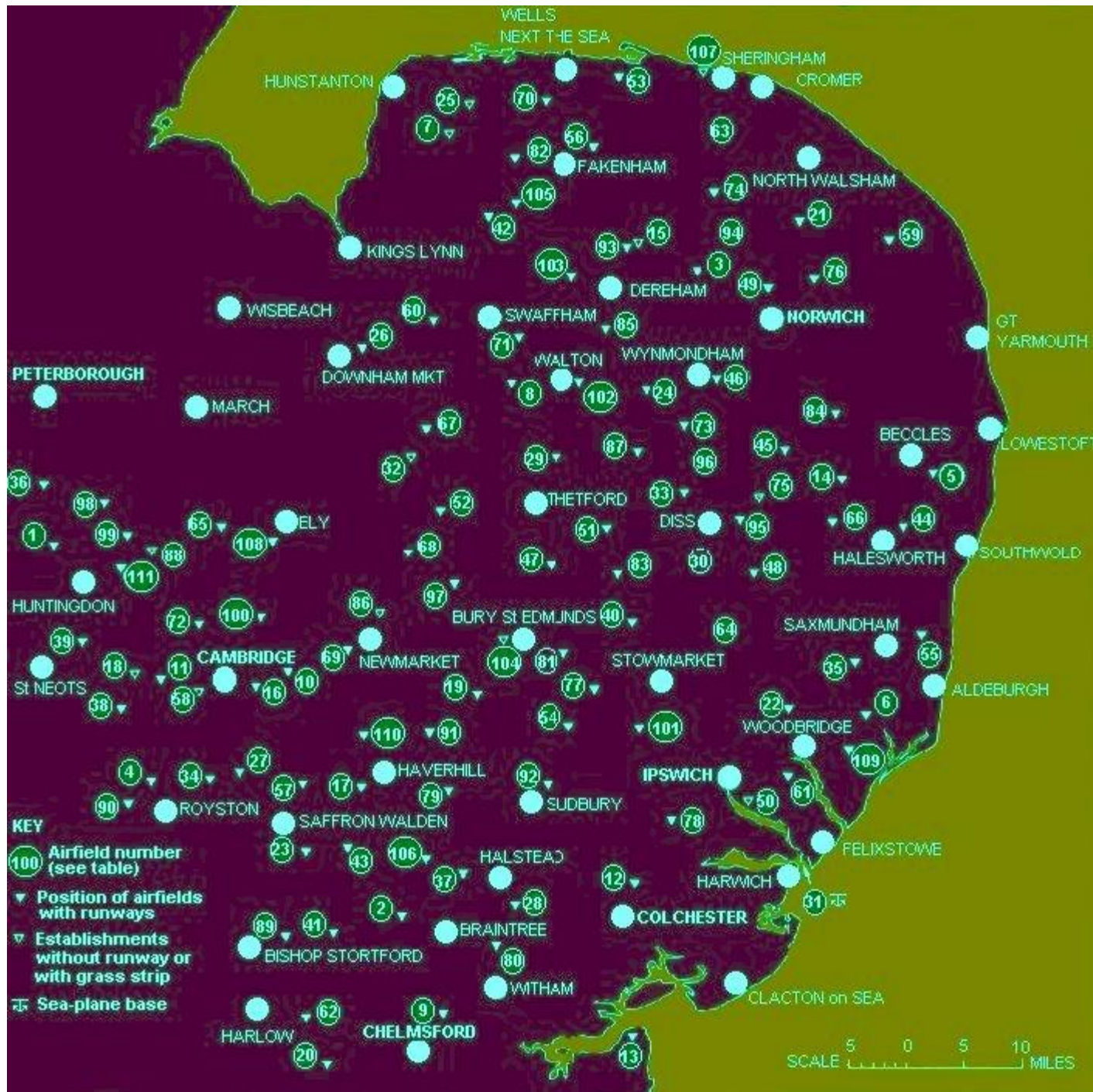
Although the average age of a bomber crew member was 22, flying still took a physical and mental toll on them. A combination of extreme cold, fluctuating air pressure, constant noise and vibration, 10-hour missions and stress caused by the fear of being shot down by fighters or flak exhausted the crews, and, as a result, most of them literally slept when not flying.

A standard tour for a heavy bomber crew was 25 combat missions; however, most didn't make it half way. After the U.S. Army Air Forces gained air superiority, the magic number was raised to 30 and then 35 missions. Aircrew members completing their tour were inducted into the "Lucky Bastards Club."

Source: [The Mighty Eighth](#) website

WW2 Air Bases in East Anglia

Boxted was not the only airfield in the vicinity. In fact, there was a vast array of air bases spaced approximately 10 miles apart throughout East Anglia, see map below.



Map Showing the WWII Distribution of Air Bases in East Anglia
 Lt. Charles F. Gumm was stationed at Boxted, Airfield Number 12

Design
and
production
by
Graham
W
Griffiths
© 2003-
2016. All
rights
reserved