

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG!

THE COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY OF THE MUSTANGS OF THE 354th FIGHTER GROUP
AND THE FINAL DAYS OF THE LUFTWAFFE AND THE GERMAN REICH - PART TWO

BY STEVE BLAKE



Dick Asbury scored his final air victory in this plane on 15 April, when he shared an He 111 with Lt. Ralph Green, giving him his final total of five.

April 1945 would turn out to be the last full month of the six-year European war. It would also be a particularly eventful and successful month for the 354th FG, which was playing a significant role in the ongoing German *Götterdämmerung* — the twilight of the Nazi “gods.”

The first of the Group’s many air victories that month was scored on the first, during a sweep of the Kassel/Erfurt area by the 353rd Fighter Squadron. The Mustang pilots spotted a lone twin-engine Junkers Ju 188 that first tried to outclimb them and then dove for the deck. During the latter maneuver it was shot down jointly by the squadron leader, 1st Lt. Bruce Carr, who was flying his *Angels’ Playmate*, and 2nd Lt. Fred Canada, in his assigned FT*A.

The second of April was a big day for the 353rd Squadron, and most especially for 2nd Lt. Andrew J. Ritchey and his wingman, 1st Lt. Cary W. Salter Jr., who was flying Jim’s Keane’s FT*S. They took off from A-98 early that morning for a weather reconnaissance over the area of central Germany near Kassel into which TUSA was then moving — supported by XIX TAC, including the 100th FW and the 354th FG.

After completing their weather recon duties, they began circling the Erfurt-Bindersleben airfield, on which they spotted around 100 aircraft. Wary of the Germans’ notorious anti-aircraft batteries protecting their airfields, the two P-51 pilots decided to wait around for some airborne e/a. Soon they saw two Fw 190s below them at 1000 feet and they dove on them from 12,000 feet. Cary Salter later described what happened:

“Going down that far, we picked up a tremendous amount of speed, and I did not throttle back to slow down, which would have given me a long time to fire at the 190. Since he was in a turn to the left, I was leading him to the left when I started firing. I could see my tracers going just in front of him. I was leading him too much, so I pulled it back to the right slightly, getting some strikes. Then there was another problem: My speed was so much greater than his that had I continued shooting at him we would have collided. At the very last moment I pulled up, passing over him by probably no more than three feet. Andy



Great photo of Capt. Dick Asbury and his *Merle Maureen* 44-63782/AJ*S, which he named after his wife.



WWII Insignia for the 354th Fighter Group.



Note that the letters on *Merle Maureen*'s name have already started to fade as Dick Asbury stands by his Mustang. It must be remembered that the majority of these aircraft spent their lives in the open.