An Ordinary Day in 1945
Author’s preface ................................................................. 3
Introduction ........................................................................... 4
Morning intrigue: Luftwaffe vs. 2nd TAF. ............................... 5
Propellers and jets .................................................................. 14
8th AF – Mission #859 .......................................................... 18
  Task Force I ........................................................................ 18
  Task Force I fighter escort .................................................. 22
  Task Force II ....................................................................... 26
  Task Force II fighter escort .................................................. 30
  Task Force III ..................................................................... 42
9th AF vs. I/JG 2 .................................................................... 45
Annex .................................................................................... 48

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Author’s preface

This work discusses aerial combats fought over Europe on 2 March 1945. It should not be considered the final and ultimate study of the events it describes. While finding out details of the encounters between the 8th AF and German fighters, the research proved so wide that it was possible to piece together the mosaic of other aerial engagements of the fighting powers.

This work mentions aircraft and fates of famous aces, as well as those of less known airmen who have carried out their duty. Ordinary men on both sides displayed uncommon courage, facing the confusion and fear of their daily duties. Therefore, I would be glad if this work could be treated as small monument to those men who fought and died unknown.

In my research I was able to contact many co-workers, yet not all units have been confirmed by historians, not all archival materials survived to date, not all documents are available in archives (that is why Soviet units are not mentioned), and most of the eyewitnesses have, sadly, already ‘flown their last sortie’. Still, those whom I was able to contact, gave their testimony of the day that was quite usual for others, but so exceptional for them that they kept the memory of its details for over half a century. This is their story…

Title page:

Introduction

The date of 2 March 1945 does not appear particular in any way, compared to other days. A typical day of the seventh year of the war. And yet, the day was different and more interesting. The day saw one of the last ‘blood-lettings’ of the German Luftwaffe. One of the last major encounters of the opposing air forces.

In the west, Allied forces fought to establish control of the western bank of the Rhine. The US 3rd Army captured Trier. In the east, with
help from partisan forces, Soviet troops crossed the Slovak mountains and headed towards Bratislava and Vienna. Further north, Soviet troops reached Breslau (Wroclaw).

Experienced “war horses” on the German side, and old soldiers among the Allies, already knew that the end of the war was imminent. But the supreme headquarters of the Luftwaffe did not accept the possibility of a defeat, and the German piston-engine fighter pilots were constantly experiencing the discomforting feeling under the guns of US Mustangs, Thunderbolts and Lightnings, or RAF Tempests and Spitfires, that enjoyed ten-fold superiority.

Pilots of the ‘turbines’ did not have to worry about their tails while in the air. They could always accelerate and dictate the terms of engagement. But it was the high speed that made landing difficult. The approach and speed reduction procedures were longer, so the pilots were more prone to being hit during landing than ever before. This was one of the reasons why the Allies left nothing to chance, and the bases of the jets were visited almost daily. Also any report of ‘propellerless aircraft’ flying across the lines was never left without reaction. ‘Rat patrols’ took off immediately to knock the enemy out of the sky.

\(^1\) Nickname of the first operational bomber with jet engines.
hit the Messerschmitt’s fuselage, starboard engine, and cockpit area. The pilot of the Messerschmitt dropped his canopy, but due to the low altitude the German pilot was not able to bale out. He decided to force-land, but upon touch-down the damaged machine exploded, killing the pilot. On 2 March 1945 the Luftwaffe lost in that area Me 262A-1a W.Nr.110655 from I/EKG(J) 1, and its pilot Ofhr. Horst Metzbrand was killed. It seems certain that it was Ofhr. Metzbrand who fell prey to Lt Sedvert. The leader of the sweep, Capt. James P. Keane, claimed destruction of a German Fw 44 at 10.00 in the area of Illesheim aerodrome. German records mentioned the loss of the Fw44 W.Nr.2953 from I/EKG (J), but the name and fate of the pilot is not known.

More Messerschmitt 262s destroyed were claimed by pilots of the 354 FG. Capt. Bruno Peters led a sweep of the 355 FS in the area of Fulda and south of Kassel:

‘I was the leader of two flights of P51s, four airplanes in each flight. We were on a mission to Seek and Destroy also known as Targets of Opportunity. We used some of our ammo earlier but I can’t recall the targets. We were on our way to home base, Toul Rosieres Air Base TRAB. At 10,000 or 12,000 feet above a cloud cover, with some breaks, we passed over an airport. We noted that 4 aircraft were taking off.

I directed one flight to stay up for top cover. I took my flight to engage the 4 ‘bogies’. In the descent through the clouds, my wingman, Lt Delgado and I ended up right on the tails of what turned out to be Me 262s. With speed built up in the dive, I advised Delgado to attack the #4 aircraft. I moved in on #3. While we are both firing, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the pilot of Lt Delgado’s target bail out. My target went into a descent, allowing me to pull up on #2 aircraft and fire upon it, which also went into a descent. About this time the leader spotted a P51 on each side of his Me 262. He poured on the power & our speed was dissipating from the descent. I yelled ‘let’s get out of here’. I was concerned we hadn’t any ammunition left. We received no anti aircraft fire until we left. On return to our base, calculating time & heading from the target, I estimated that we were over Kassel.’
and after the attack they turned to the port of the formation. Immediately after them, three Messerschmitts attacked from the starboard side. The attack was effective and resulted in the loss of three bombers in positions 3, 5 and 6.

Position no. 3 was Kenneth G. Tipton in B-17G 44-8417 from the 550 BS. The machine was hit near the radio-operator’s compartment and in the tail. Engines nos. 1 and 4 started to burn. Controls were half shot away. The tail gunner John Nostin was killed in the crash on the ground, but the other members of the crew survived and spend a short while in captivity. The machine crashed near Fictenburg.

Leon E. Tripp in B-17G 43-38148 from the 549 BS flew as no. 5 in the formation. When the bomber was hit, only the co-pilot, Lt Edward L.C. Batz managed to bale out and was taken prisoner. The bomber crashed near Jüledorf killing the other crew members.

No. 6 was B-17G 42-97979 from the 550 BS flown by Eugene J. Vaadi, with Neil G. Duell as the upper gunner: ‘When we started to burn, I remember looking to check the waist and rear gunners. Tony, our engineer, and I checked the fire. The navigator had already left the ship, and we also baled out, seeing how much we were on fire. During the free fall I could see our Fortress ‘Leading Lady’ explode. I landed directly on the aerodrome of the fighters that were landing at the time. As I touched down strong wind threw me against the ground and I hit myself bad. I could not move for almost a month’.

The ventral gunner, Jino O. DiFonzo, broke his ankle during the bale out, but all the members of the crew survived the loss of their bomber and became German prisoners.

Enemy aircraft re-formed for another attack. It seemed that they would attack the formation of 385A and B, but they flew over the machines of this close formation and attacked head on the Low squadron in groups of 3 or 4 aircraft. The second attack sealed the fate of B-17G 43-37871 from the 551 BS, flown by 1/Lt Robert Krahn. This was his 30th mission. Krahn recalled how he was shot down: ‘We heard on the radio that the Low squadron was attacked by enemy fighters. Next thing that I noticed was that all the Mustangs of the escort turned back to chase the enemy. The first sign of problems came immediately, when the upper gunner Flem Williams started

Left:
390th Memorial Museum Foundation
Due to bad cloud cover over the primary target the 446 BG decided to attack the secondary target. But en route the CO located a gap in clouds which allowed the crews 446 BG to carry out their primary duty and they dropped their bombs over the primary target, inline astern.

The secondary target, the marshalling yard at Magdeburg/Buckau was attacked by most machines of Task Force III. A total of 227 B-24s dropped their bombs using the H2X system from an altitude of 21,400-24,000 feet (6,500-7,300 m) between 10.34 and 10.46. The station buildings and neighbouring areas were destroyed. Also hit was the Fried Krupp Werke factory, situated not far from the station. Virtually all buildings and equipment in the target area were hit.

Bombers of Task Force III also attacked some targets of opportunity. A complete combat formation of the 466 BG attacked a refinery in the town of Schonebeck. At 10.46 bombs from 21 aircraft fell from 22,500-23,000 feet (6,900-7,000 m) and exploded on the ground. This attack lasted three and a half minutes.

Task Force III bombers dropped a total of 456 tonnes of bombs on their targets. Of this 108 tonnes was dropped by 45 aircraft on the primary targets, 573 tonnes of bombs from 227 aircraft on the secondary targets, and 21 aircraft dropped 75 tonnes of bombs on targets of opportunity.

The Task Force III fighter escort which, as mentioned before, consisted of four Mustangs groups and one Thunderbolt group, was supposed to defend its bombers as best it could. For this reason one section of Mustangs of one group detached and flew far ahead to the Berlin area, in order to attack the Germans already on the way in and to break their formations. But not a single Luftwaffe fighter waited for the approaching bombers over Magdeburg or the neighbouring area. Task Force III bombers dropped their bombs and headed for home. They were the first to cross the English coast, which serves as a proof that they were not slowed down by enemy activity. Only one group was behind its schedule by some 10-35 minutes. This was due to a navigation error. The crews corrected this in time and returned safely home. The fighters that escorted the Liberators spotted one Fw 190 attacking a marauding bomber south-east of Magdeburg and easily chased it away to a safe distance.

Despite the problem-free mission, escort pilots from the 355 FG claimed 5-2-0 victories. Between 10.20 and 10.45 in the area of Dummer Lake up to north-east Koblenz, just one pilot of the 358 FS 355 FG, 1/Lt

**Damaged Mistel Fw 190/Ju 88 partially hidden under the trees on the abandoned field.**
An Ordinary Day in 1945

FW. Günther Hollwitz. Born on 15 April 1923 in Berlin Schloßberg.


from Florennes/Juzanne in Belgium (A-78) for an armed reconnaissance along the route of Bonn-Dresseldorf-Dillenberg-Wetzlar and in the Rhine area. Five machines were armed with two 1,000 lb bombs and three carried two 500 lb bombs. The first flight destroyed a locomotive and eight rail cars were thrown by the explosion onto the neighbouring track. Then the pilots attacked another locomotive and five passenger cars. 2/Lt George W. Alge in his first mission flew as a wingman to the wing leader. He followed his commander Capt. Hanson while attacking ground targets and he was a victim of the shock wave. He crashed with his machine not far from the town of Selters. He is buried at the Netherlands American Cemetery Margraten, Netherlands (plot H, row 4, grave 4). Within a few moments 2/Lt Robert H. Strong who flew as no. 4 in the first flight was hit by Flak. He failed to bale out of his fatally hit machine and he crashed and burnt with it near Mundersbach. He was buried, like his colleague from the 474 FG, at the Netherlands American Cemetery Margraten, Netherlands (plot J, row 16, grave 2).

On 2 March 1945 the 524 FS 27 FG bombed targets in the Homburg area in Germany. The Thunderbolt ‘Mini Nr. II’ flown by 2/Lt Harold K. Wolf was hit by an 88 mm Flak battery at Kleinottweiler. The spot where the machine crashed is not known. The pilot managed to bale out, but his landing was very hard. His parachute was damaged by rounds fired by the SS unit at Kleinottweiler. Upon landing the American pilot broke his thighbone. He was taken to the hospital at Homburg. During his treatment he suffered from complications and he died of his injuries on 14 March 1945. He was buried on the local cemetery. Then exhumed, he is now buried at the American Military Cemetery at St. Avold, Lorraine.

RAF Bomber Command sent 858 bombers out on 2 March 1945. A formation of 531 Lancasters, 303 Halifaxes and 24 Mosquitoes attacked Cologne in two waves. The first attack was carried out by 703 aircraft and the second by 155 Lancasters. During the second attack, due to failure of the G-H station, only 15 machines dropped their bombs.

The main raid was truly destructive. Pathfinders marked the target perfectly in very good weather. Bombs hit the centre of the city on the right bank of the Rhine. Hundreds of civilians were killed in the attack. This was the last RAF raid on Cologne, as four days later the city was captured by American units. US troops, that entered the city four days later, removed some 400 bodies from the streets. Sirens did not sound until two minutes before the attack. Five bombs hit the police HQ where the local radar station HQ was set up. At least 160 German soldiers were killed there, mostly Waffen SS.
Losses included six Lancasters: NN800 PH-A of 12 Sqn, LM723 HW-H (F/O Evans) of 100 Sqn, NG501 BH-I and PB854 BH-U of 300 (Polish) Sqn, RA524 AR-V of 460 Sqn, HK769 GI-D of 622 Sqn, PB158 CF-G2 of 625 Sqn; as well as two Halifaxes plus a third that had to forced-land in Belgium (MZ451 MH-F of 51 Sqn; RG472 EQ-T of 408 Sqn; NP965 C8-Y of 640 Sqn.).

The attack on Cologne involved a Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) contribution. 98 Halifaxes from 408, 415, 420, 425, 426, 429 and 432 Squadrons plus 84 Lancasters from 419, 424, 428, 431, 433 and 434 Squadrons RCAF took part. They dropped 1,697,000 lbs of bombs on the target. The RCAF suffered one loss: F/O H. Sproule (POW) and his crew Sgt A. Dennis (POW), F/O J. Moran (POW), F/O V. Mousseau (POW), P/O J. Paxton (KIA), P/O J. Street (KIA), and F/Sgt V. Hunt (POW) flying in the Halifax B.VII RG472 (EQ-T) failed to return after the machine was hit by Flak. Two airmen were killed, five others were captured. It is worth noting that the escort of these raids included 310, 312 and 313 (Czechoslovak) Squadrons RAF. This was within operation Ramrod 1479 and 1480.

The Mosquito of 544 (Photographic Reconnaissance) Squadron RAF with a crew of pilot P/O Ferdinand Kepka and navigator F/Lt Karel Vokoun was sent to a target near Stettin (Szczecin). When crossing the Danish coast the navigator spotted three unidentified aircraft some 12 km behind to port. He gave the pilot a heading south, thus the Mosquito PR.XVI (no. RG 115) flew into the sun. After a moment the navigator lost the unidentified aircraft from sight and directed the pilot onto his previous course. Over Langeland, east of Denmark, the navigator spotted three Fw 190s, one of which attacked from port and behind. The navigator guided the pilot in evasive manoeuvres and led him trying as much as possible to head south, towards the sun and to lower the flight at full throttle, as some 20 miles (30 km) south a cloud formation was present, 6-7/10 stratocumulus with the top at an altitude of 8,000 feet (2,400 m). In a few minutes the intercom failed and the navigator guided the pilot using gestures. Having entered clouds, the navigator tried to fix the intercom, but failed. After they emerged from the clouds they could see no enemy machines, and they flew home.

During the day, at an unspecified time, a Fieseler Fi 156C-3 from 11(H)/12 was shot down with Ofw. Florian Adler at the controls. The pilot is still missing today. Apparently this happened in the area of Danzig-Graudenz. It is not impossible that the Storch was shot down by Mustangs.
‘En route to target engine no. 4 started overheating. I opened fully the cooling flaps, but this did not help. Over Landau, about 3 minutes from the I.P. no. 1 engine became uncontrollable and had to be switched off. Over the target we dropped our bombs and turned back. But without two engines we could barely keep formation with other machines. In the company of a few Lightnings we got over Yugoslavia. The machine stayed in the air with its last effort. When we were sure we were over friendly territory, I gave the order to abandon ship. All eleven of us baled out safely’.

Another machine lost by the 15th AF, B-24H 42-52762 from the 781 BS 465 BG, was flown by 1/Lt Robert E. French. En route to target the bomber was hit in an engine by AA fire. The remaining engines also damaged, the pilot ordered the crew to abandon the bomber. Six airmen baled out immediately and landed at Lápafo, Szakcs, Kocsola in Hungary. The pilot and the co-pilot Kenneth L. Parkhurst baled out a few seconds later. Donahue and Wood were wounded during the jump. Upon landing they were treated in a Soviet field hospital.

The abandoned bomber continued to fly from Ujregi westwards, made a smooth turn and crashed into a mountain top. The nose part with the wings fell into the valley, while the rear part was left on the slope.

Thirty one P-51s from the 52 FG 15th AF flew on a mission against railway and water facilities in the area from Linz to Regensburg in Germany. As a result of the action two locomotives and two steam ships were destroyed, and 42 rail cars, trucks, cars, a train with a military crew, three factories, six electric lines, and many other buildings and devices were damaged. Lt Bray who participated in the action was awarded the DFC for the results. This is his DFC citation:

‘Lt Bray led the flight of sixteen P-51s on a mission to strafe targets along the railroad between Linz, Austria and Regensburg, Germany. Before arriving in the target area the squadron split into two eight-plane formations.

Lt Bray led his flight through the undercast and levelled out at 5000 feet. They immediately encountered intense, accurate, light Flak. Taking evasive action they flew toward Linz and let down on deck as they approached the double-track main line.'
**Tempest Mk. V NV700 W2-A, 80 Sqn, 2nd TAF.** Standard RAF/2nd TAF camouflage – black spinner, fuselage band painted over. While flying this plane S/L Mackie took part in combat on March 2nd but without success.

**Tempest Mk. V NV670 ZD-X, 222 Sqn, 2nd TAF.** Standard RAF/2nd TAF camouflage – black spinner, fuselage band painted over. With this plane F/L McAuliffe shot down a Bf 109 from III/JG 27, although his personal mount was ZD-S NV774.
An Ordinary Day in 1945

Spitfire FXIVe RM914 AP-D, 130 Sqn, 2nd TAF, F/O A W Heale. Standard RAF/2nd TAF camouflage – black spinner, fuselage band painted over. This a/c was shot down by a Bf109 from III/JG 27, the pilot became POW. This is how the aircraft POSSIBLY looked!

Ta 152H-0 W.Nr 150?? “yellow 1”, 7./JG 301. Camouflage RLM 75/82/83/76, black spinner, fuselage number and II./Gruppe bar yellow, JG 301 band yellow/red. It is quite possible that this a/c took part in the inaugural action of JG 301’s Ta 152Hs on March 2nd.
**Fw 190A-9** W.Nr 490044 “red 22”, 6./JG 301, pilot unknown. Camouflage RLM 74/75/76, black spinner with white spiral, fuselage number and II.Gruppe bar red, JG 301 band yellow/red. This a/c was captured by US troops in April ’45.

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**Fw 190A-8** W.Nr 960522 “green 2”, 8./JG 300, Uffz Richard Löffgen. Camouflage RLM 82/83/84, black spinner with white spiral, fuselage number and II.Gruppe bar green 25, JG 300 band blue (lighter shade)/white/blue. This a/c was shot down by a US fighter, its pilot killed.
**Me 262A-2a** W.Nr 110913 B3+YL, 3./KG(J) 54, Fhr Heinrich Griems. Camouflage RLM 81/82/76, fuselage nose, individual letter and vertical stabiliser tip painted red. This a/c was shot down by a Mustang from the 354 FG flown by Capt. Peters, its pilot KIA. This how the a/c POSSIBLY looked!

**Me 262A-2a** W.Nr 110553 9K+EN, 5./ KG 51, Hptm. Fritz Abel. Camouflage RLM 81/82/76, fuselage nose, individual letter and vertical stabiliser tip painted red. This a/c was shot down by a Mustang from the 354 FG flown by Capt. Peters, its pilot KIA. This how the a/c POSSIBLY looked!