

The Battle Over Misburg – November 26, 1944

The Struggle of forty seven Mustangs of the 355th FG and 2nd SF to Protect 86 B-24s from 250+ Luftwaffe fighters.

The full story of fighter coverage on the Misburg Mission, chronicled by Bill Marshall in his new book " *Our Might Always - History of the 355th FG, 355th TFW and 355th FW - Volume I*". It is reproduced here with his permission

With Special Recognition and acknowledgment of the contributions of Eric Brown whose cousin Siegfried Baer, 5.Staffel, II./JG301, fell in this battle along with 39 other JG301 comrades, of John Beaman for his detailed Luftwaffe Loss Lists, of 445th BG historian Mike Simpson, of Lynn Gamma at USAF Historical Research Center, and of 491st BG historian Al Blue.

November 26, 1944

F.O. 529-B. Major Sluga led 52 Mustangs of the 355th on a Ramrod to provide Penetration and Target support to the Second Bomb Division units attacking Misburg. They took off at 1005 and headed northeast for the rendezvous point near the Dutch coast. Group Intelligence predicted a strong reaction from the Luftwaffe in the Misburg area.

Following twelve early returns, forty Mustangs picked up the two leading boxes of the 2nd Task Force/2BD Liberators at 1120 east of Ijmuiden. The two boxes (Vinegrove 2-1 and 2-2) were the 2nd Combat Wing, comprised of the 389th plus two squadrons of the 445th BG's in the lead, with two squadrons of 445th and the 14th CW 491st BG in the trailing box.

Two other Fighter Groups would be in the general area before the day was over. The 339th FG was tasked to provide Withdrawal support to relieve the 355th east of Dummer Lake on the return route. The 361st FG would execute a Free Lance sweep 50 miles in front to the Uelzen-Salzwedel area looking for trouble. They would find it.

Preceding the 2nd BD B-24's to the Misburg refinery targets were several bomb wings of the First TF/1BD B-17s. The 364th FG was one of the fighter groups escorting this force. It would be heavily engaged before the Second Bomb Division would plow through the Osnabrück area.

All of these fighter groups would be embroiled in one of the biggest air battles of the air war over Germany. One series of battles occurred between the 8th AF bombers and fighters attacking Osnabrück/Bielefeld transportation networks and the other battles were focused all around the Misburg strikes.

Near Lingen, the trailing four combat wings of B-24s of the 2TF and their escorts turned southeast to attack the Osnabrück marshalling yards. The last of the four boxes hit the railway viaduct near Bielefeld further to the southeast on the same course.

All of JG27 and parts of JG3, JG26 and IV./JG54 would engage B-17s and B-24s of the 1st and 2nd Task Forces in this area. The 3rd TF attacking Hamm would remain unmolested by the Luftwaffe.

The 355th continued eastward with two boxes of a total of 86 B-24s tasked to bomb Misburg. They were now some 20 miles behind, and out of sight of, the 1st TF B-17s ahead. At this moment the entire 8th AF was either bound for Osnabrück or Misburg.

A complication to the escort strategy for the 355th FG occurred before rendezvous. The trailing box of B-24s to be escorted by the 355th became separated due to a navigation error over the North Sea which caused those bombers to turn east about 10 minutes late.

The two boxes were now nearly 10-15 miles apart when rendezvous was made between the 355th and the lead box. The 445th/491st B-24s would struggle to catch up but would not re-group until the bomb run.

The original plan assigned the 354FS to free lance on the port (north) side of the bomber stream with the 358 providing high middle and the 357 covering the second box over the top front.

The 2nd Scouting Force (2SF), attached to the 355th FG, was providing weather recon on the way in and tasked to perform bomb damage assessment after the 491st BG completed their bomb runs. They started with 12 ships but aborts and early returns whittled them down to seven P-51s. The reported cloud cover of 10/10ths over Bielefeld and Osnabruck and then swept ahead to report 1/10th over the Misburg refineries.

Due to the strung out formation of the Liberators tasked to hit Misburg, the 355th mission commander Major Sluga sent Captain Bille's 357FS ahead to escort the lead box several miles in front, while the 358FS moved back further behind the lead box, trying to keep the trailing box in range to provide possible assistance. The trailing box were barely in sight when the 389th led the first box past Dummer Lake at 1155.

Captain Fortier's 354FS continued on the port side to range forward and back to provide protection from the north and northeast.

The Tactical Situation

The route to and around the target was due east from Meppen, passing north of Dummer Lake, passing north of Hannover, then past Hannover/Misburg to the Initial Point near Celle. The 389th would then turn south, and then toward Misburg for the bomb run. The bombers would assemble at the Rally Point west of Hildesheim and south of Misburg and return westward over Dummer Lake.

At 1210 the 389th approached the IP with the 357th FS in front past Celle. The 361st FG was now 25 miles east-northeast sweeping in front of the B-24s. The 1st TF B-17s had already bombed Misburg. The main strike for the 3rd TF was at Hamm behind the Misburg bound B-24s.

At 1210, approximately 125 Fw 190s and Bf 109s from JG1 and JG6 were nearing Gardelegen from Salzwedel, Greifswald and Anklam. Their course was west-southwest toward Misburg. The Bf 109s, from Stab./JG1 and III./JG6, were assigned Mustang 'protection duty'. The 109s were at 30-32,000 feet providing top cover for the Fw 190s at 28,000 feet.

From the due east of the target, three more Gruppens of Fw 190A/8s and A/9s of JG301 were also inbound into the target area at 28,000 feet and would arrive between 1235 and 1240. This force also numbered approximately 125. The Fw 190A9s were assigned to attack the escort fighters while the A8s went for the bombers

In all there were approximately 225-250 German fighters in four separate waves converging on Misburg from the northeast and east.

There were two US fighter groups positioned to meet the German armada. The 355th provided direct escort to the two B-24 boxes heading for Misburg. The 361st FG was assigned Free Lance duty, 30-50 miles in front, looking for the Luftwaffe.

Additionally the 339th FG approximately 100 miles behind the 355th heading for Dummer Lake to rendezvous with the returning Misburg strike force, to relieve the 355th and provide Withdrawal support. Only the 355th and 2SF were within 30 miles of the 2nd BD bomber force attacking Misburg between 1200 and 1245.

The first contact and battles at approximately 1150-1210 were with the leading elements of JG1. This first wave was approximately 150 fighters primarily comprised of Fw 190s with Bf 109s flying high cover.

One section of the 361st FG spotted and intercepted them east of Celle and hit them at Wittingen. The rest of the 361st engaged from Wittingen to Uelzen to Brunswick. In this running battle the 361st was credited with 23-3-9 of a mix of 109s and 190s. They stayed in contact from Uelzen to Celle to south of Hannover and then to Steinhuder lake. The 361st suffered no casualties in this battle which lasted perhaps 40 minutes. They broke up the lead gaggle of nearly 70+ German fighters. Some of the survivors fled to the north, while the rest continued toward Misburg.

The remaining 75+ German fighters of JG1 and JG6 avoided the 361st and also continued toward Misburg, from the general direction of Stendal.

At approximately 1205-1210 two flights with seven P-51s of the 357FS climbed from 26,000 feet near Celle and headed east to meet that second gaggle of Fw 190s plus the two staffels of Bf 109 escorts.

The inbound force was later described by Bill Lyons of Yellow flight as a line of specks that "covered the horizon from 10 to 2 o'clock". The leading 389th BG was now northeast of Hannover, heading toward Celle and the IP.

The German force spotted by Yellow and Red flight of the 357FS was now just east of Gardelegen, and organized into two formations of 35-40 fighters each. The second batch was not yet in sight, about 20 miles behind the first. The first gaggle clashed with the small band of 357FS Mustangs over Gardelegen.

Captain Bille led Red and Yellow flights of the 357th FS into the fight. Blue and Green flights remained with the lead box of B-24s as they turned at the IP and headed in on the bomb run. One 389th BG B-24 was hit by flak just short of the target and blew up. Four chutes were seen.

Bille's Red flight attacked the high escorting Bf 109s and shot down one Bf 109 while Captain Max and Lieutenant Moroney claimed two more. Bille's claim was later reduced to a Probable.

Captain Haviland's Yellow flight bounced the leading force of Fw 190s. More Bf 109s tried to block the attack. They quickly shot down one Fw 190 and two Bf 109s. Haviland shot down a 190 and a 109 and Lieutenant 'Tiger' Lyons destroyed the second 109. Lyon's 109 was destroyed with a large deflection shot as it was closing on Haviland's tail. Lieutenant Barab got another Fw 190 a short time later. In all the two flights of the 357th shot down eight Fw 190s and one Bf 109.

The 109 pilots were described as aggressive and persistent, preventing a much larger loss of Fw 190s.

This first fight was between 1210-1225 and scattered the first formation of fighters of the JG1 Fw 190s and their escorting Bf 109s. Many German fighters in this clash dove for the deck and left the bombers alone, but at least 40+ of the Fw 190s and Bf 109s headed for the bombers near Celle. Red and yellow flights, now far away from the bomber force, began a climb to middle altitude and headed for home

At approximately 1225-1230 the second formation of German fighters from JG1 and JG6 started letting down from 28,000 feet about ten miles away from Misburg, just east of Gifhorn.

Captain Jim Duffy, leading the second section of the 354FS was positioned near the middle squadrons in the first box of B-24s when he spotted the German fighters boring in. At 1235 the leading bombers of the 445th were close to bombs away

Duffy took his seven ship section of Green and Blue Flights back over the top of the bombers and reversed course to the northeast to meet the German fighters. This bunch of German fighters was also a mix of Bf 109s and Fw 190s so it was probably the trailing part of the JG1/JG6 force that had run the gauntlet from the 361st FG earlier.

Lieutenant Hauver shot down two Fw 190s. Lieutenant McLearn shot down two of the 190s, both chasing Mustangs, and Lieutenant Priest also got a pair of Fw 190s. Duffy and Lieutenant Mellen shot down one each. These claims and credits were in the 1240-1245 timeframe and ranged from 28,000 feet to the deck from Misburg to south of Hannover.

At 1235, only two flights of 354FS, two flights of the 357FS and all of the 358FS remained intact to continue to escort the front of the lead box and the front of the trailing box of bombers. The 2SF was heading back toward the target to assess bomb damage.

At 1236, the first box had finished dropping their bombs and were heading for the Rally Point.

In the trailing box, one of the middle squadrons accidentally bombed early at 1237 and broke formation to head toward the Rally Point. Their early departure left a hole between the leading squadrons of 445th BG and the trailing squadrons of the 491st BG in the rear. The entire second box was now exposed with a gap in the middle

and were still too far behind the lead box for adequate cover by the remaining escorts.

Between 1238 and 1239 the first wave of 75+ single engine German fighters from JG301 positioned to attack the B-24s from just west of Gifhorn.

At approximately 1239 to 1240 this huge gaggle, in two separate groups, also turned slightly left in a shallow dive and raced to hit the last squadron of the 491st in "tail-end Charlie" position. The 491st had just finished bombing and now headed west.

Major Sluga still had the 358th squadron sitting high over the middle of the two boxes. The 358th was now south and east of Misburg. He had chosen not to commit the 358FS to the earlier threat that the 357 and 354FS seemed to be managing. His attention was still to the northeast looking for more threats when he spotted the very large force inbound from due east and very close to the rear of the trailing boxes. As he turned the 358FS back to Misburg to engage, the first wave of JG301 hit the trailing squadron of the 491st BG with devastating effect.

The radio chatter on C Channel was alive with pleas for help from the 491st. The 339th was nearly fifty miles away but throttled up to speed toward Hannover. Sluga's 358FS turned back toward the target, the 2nd SF throttled up to race toward the second box.

At approximately 1240, the first waves of I. & II./JG301 attacked from the rear in a 'company front' series of waves of 7-10 fighters each and took out eight B-24s of the 491st BG between 1239 and 1242. The last B-24 of the trailing squadron was seen to be hit hard and straggling. The straggler tucked in with the lead squadron.

The Sturm Fw 190s continued toward the two 491st bomber squadrons ahead. They hit the low squadron (which had bombed early) and took out another four. They would close on two stragglers and shoot them down as they sailed into the 'gap'. They heavily damaged a third B-24 but it made to Belgium where the crew bailed out over friendly territory.

Most of the downed B-24s crashed in a small area south of Misburg in the Hildesheim-Springe axis as the rest headed for the Rally Point further west.

The German fighters then continued flying along the formation track to hit both the 701st and 703rd squadrons of the 445th BG just ahead of the 491st. In less than a minute they shot down five more B-24s, then wheeled 180 degrees and came back in from 11 o'clock high to attempt another attack on the 491st BG. In all, twenty B-24s went down between 1240 and 1250.

Between 1235 and 1241 elements of the 354FS, JG1, JG6, and JG301 were concentrated in a two cubic mile maelstrom with the B-24s in the middle.

The first section of the 357 was scattered and homebound on the deck. The second section of the 357FS was still providing escort to the 389th BG. The lead section of the 354FS was racing to intercept. The 358FS was further ahead, the 2nd SF was running against the tide and heading toward the 491st.

Captain Bud Fortier, still leading the 354FS but with only five Mustangs remaining, was about three miles away on the port side of the lead box when Duffy's Blue and Green flight section hit the remaining fighters from JG1 five minutes earlier

At 1240 he spotted the new attackers from east of Misburg boring in from 5 to 7 O'clock to the trailing box. He took the remainder of Red and Yellow flights back to the northeast to engage.

Before he could get there, the first wave of JG301 had already hit the 491st and was now boring through the 445th BG. As Fortier's flight first attempted to engage the Fw 190 Sturm's, a 10 ship staffel of Fw 190s effectively blocked him from attacking. Every time he closed on a 190, another three or four would get on his tail. As this cat and mouse game continued, Molnar shot one of them down and Schultz damaged a 109 that entered the fight and got on Molnar's tail.

It is unclear whether the 190s were from JG1 or JG301, but JG301 had no escorting Bf 109s. However JG301 had two Staffels of Fw 190A-9s providing high cover to the 190s attacking the bombers - so it is probable that Fortier headed off the last of the JG1 elements and also hit part of JG301.

At this point in time, the Fw 190s and escorting Bf 109s from the first two waves were broken up in the early air battles with one section of the 354FS and one section of 357FS. The bomber crews later described the chaos of the running fight as "a sky lit up with explosions and fighters going down in flames, German fighters in steep dives with Mustangs chasing closely behind."

Although the 355th had scored 17-1-5 destroyed for no losses so far, the running fights against huge gaggles from 1210 to 1240 had stripped away all of the 355th tasked to escort the trailing bombers of the second box. They had 'run out of fighters' and the 491st were now completely uncovered with no remaining escorts left to further assist the 491st BG.

The third wave of JG301 was now poised to finish off the remaining 491st and 445th BG B-24s.

Fortunately, just one half mile southwest of the last squadron of B-24's were the two flight force of the 2nd SF racing in to meet the last attack by the German fighters. Only a minute or so earlier they flew over Misburg to observe bombing results as the 491st wheeled homeward.

Captain Bob Whitlow led the seven Mustang section of 2nd SF and closed to attack the last large bunch of JG301 Fw 190s now speeding in a shallow dive to attack the remaining 491st B-24s from the rear.

The 358th FS also engaged in support of Fortier's section and broke up the rest of the attack on the 445th BG before the remaining Fw 190s could reform. He then took his Red flight and joined the 2nd Scout Force to assist them in warding off further attacks on the trailing 491st BG.

The bold attack by the 2nd SF, against overwhelming odds, had undoubtedly saved the remaining 491st B-24's when they hit that last wave of German fighters with just seven Mustangs. They destroyed five 190s plus probably destroyed two and damaged another two. More importantly they completely disrupted the last attack.

Lieutenant Whalen of the Second Scout Force got three Fw 190s while Lieutenant Ceglarski and Captain Whitlow each shot down one. Whalen's triple raised his score to four and made him the top scorer for not only the 2nd SF, but all Scouting Forces. One of the surviving tales of the battle recounted Whalen calmly lit up a cigarette while pursuing his last victim over downtown Hannover, earning him the nickname "Gooney".

Whalen was recommended for the Distinguished Service Cross, but was downgraded to Silver Star, for his heroism and would go on to shoot down two more in the air to become the only Scout Force ace in WWII.

The 358FS destroyed four more with no losses to raise the 355th FG credits to 21 destroyed, plus the five downed by 2nd SF, with no losses in the battle. 358FS pilot Flight Officer Frank Masters got three Fw 190s and Captain Beckman nailed one more.

At 1245-1250, the 339th FG responded to the bomber force call for help and now engaged the remainder of JG 301 and JG1 all the way to Dummer Lake. They picked up the fight with the remaining large numbers of now scattered Fw 190s, claiming 27 destroyed in their fight below and in front of the bomber stream while elements of the 355th and 2SF struggled to regain altitude and continue the escort.

StaffelKaptain Oblt. Alfred Vollert, of 5./JG301, was probably KIA in the fight with either the 2SF or 358FS just southeast of Hannover, near Rethen.

This was the war's blackest day for JG301 with over 40 pilots KIA or wounded in this fight. Combined with the heavy recent losses of JG301, due to the 352nd and 359th and 364th FG combats five days earlier, it was reduced to a point of ineffectiveness for several months.

Additionally JG1 lost seventeen Fw 190s, JG 6 lost ten Bf 109s, JG 27 lost another forty seven Bf 109s and JG26/54 lost a combined three Fw 190s and three Bf 109s. All these fighters fell roughly in a line from west of Osnabrück to Salzwedel. Several of these were lost due to unknown causes.

High scorers for the 355th /2SF included Masters and Whalen with three each, McLear, Priest, Hauver, Max, Moroney and Haviland with two apiece, while Mellen, Duffy, Molnar, Barab, Lyons, Ceglarski, Whitlow and Beckman each nailed singles.

Bille (357) was credited for Probably destroyed Bf 109. Whitlow and Miller (2SF) each scored a Probably destroyed Fw 190. Those that were awarded Damaged credits included Falvey, Jackson and Molnar (354), Beckman, Sluga and Woodson (358) plus Marmon and Miller (2SF) - all Fw 190s.

Priest's and Haviland's doubles raised their air victory credit totals to the ace level of five and six respectively, and made them the group's thirteenth and fourteenth air aces.

Escort was broken at 1310 over Dummer Lake and the group headed out over the North Sea. While over the German/Holland border near Meppen, 357FS Yellow flight's Lieutenant Kelley collided with Lieutenant Barab, both aircraft exploded, and both aircraft spun out. No chutes were seen and neither turned up after the war.

Captain Stauder of the 2nd SF was last seen in an inverted dive over the Channel at about 3000 feet on the way home. He crashed into the Channel and nobody saw him again. He was not hit during the fight and the loss was believed due to either disorientation or oxygen failure.

The 364th FG also had a good day in the Steinhuder Lake area destroying eight while protecting the lead 1st TF B-17s out in front of the 355th's B-24s . The Bf 109s they encountered from Steinhuder Lake to Drummer Lake were most likely from JG27.

The 356th FG flew its first mission in Mustangs and had its best day of the war with claims of 23-2-11 in the Osnabruck to Dummer Lake area.

November 26, 1944 would be the second biggest air battle between the USAAF and the Luftwaffe.

At the end of the day, the fighter scores totaled credits of 121-10-34 air and 12-8 on the ground. The Luftwaffe had conserved its forces during October to prepare for a 'big blow' in November and gamely put a very large force of fighters in the air to try and deal a lethal blow to 8th AF Bomber Command.

The results were losses of 136-7-20 on November 2, 68.5-10-23 on November 21, 121-10-34 on November 26, 93-11-13 on November 27 and 89-13-20 on December 5, 1944.

The cost to 8th AF was also high in downed bomber crews but the ultimate price in experienced fighter pilots was too much for the Luftwaffe and resistance on this scale to the daylight bombing campaign effectively ended in early December, 1944.

A month later the Luftwaffe would put close to 1,000 fighters in the air over the Ardennes, suffer very heavy casualties, and effectively reduce the LW to a small resistance force as it shifted remaining resources to stem the Soviet assault on East Prussia.

Final score 26-3-8 with three losses (none due to air to air combat)