

## Joe Griffin : Memoirs of summer 1944 : 367th USAF Fighter Group

Joe Griffin, a retired US Air Force Colonel, was based at Stoney Cross during the spring and summer of 1944, leading up to D Day. When I met him on the first of several occasions, he was quietly spoken, slim, modest and 86 years young, with a small frame and a full head of snow white hair. I was privileged to meet him first at the September 2003 Reunion of the 367th Fighter Group Veterans, in Pittsburgh, USA, where he kindly agreed to write about his experiences, while training in California and at Stoney Cross. They were serialised monthly between April and June 2004, in the New Forest area journal, 'Forest Views', exactly sixty years on from those momentous months of April, May and June 1944, when personal danger was a daily experience. His memoirs of that time are reproduced here as a lasting tribute to Joe and to all the 367<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group pilots who lost their lives defending our freedom.

**Dr Henry Goodall – February 2016**



Joe Griffin 26<sup>th</sup> August 2007, aged 89, 367<sup>th</sup> FG Reunion, San Diego, (Henry Goodall)

Born Joseph H. Griffin on 18th November 1917 in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma, USA, Joseph attended the University of Oklahoma for two years prior to joining the US Army Air Corps (years later, he attended Ohio State University and received a Master's Degree in Business Administration from Harvard). He graduated from flight school at Mather Field, California on 31st October 1941. He was assigned to the 51st Pursuit Group, and later to the 78th Pursuit Group. On the 13th June, he was attached to the American Volunteer Group in Kunming, China. On 4th July 1942, he was assigned to the 75th Squadron in the 23rd Pursuit Group in China, the famous 'Flying Tigers'.

P-40K (subtype and serial unknown) 'White 162' of 1Lt Joseph H Griffin, 75th FS/23rd FG, China, Spring 1943



*Aces High Bulletin Board* Flying a P-40 Warhawk single seat fighter, Lieutenant Griffin was credited with his first victory on 23rd November 1942 when he downed a Japanese bomber over Kweilin at night. He didn't score again for five months, when he downed a Nakajima Ki-43 *Hayabusa* 'Oscar' southwest of Kunming on the 28th April. He destroyed another 'Oscar' four days later, 30 miles north west of Henyang, just before leaving China, in June 1943, having flown a total of 75 combat missions.

Following a rest in the States and by then promoted to Captain, he was assigned as Commander of the 393rd Fighter Squadron, 367th Fighter Group, based at Hamilton Field, California. There, they trained in single-engine P-39 Airacobras, an unconventional aircraft with a mid-engine configuration, in which the engine is located behind the pilot.



*Henry Goodall* When the group moved to England in late March 1944, they were equipped with twin-engine P-38 Lightnings. On arrival at their base at Stoney Cross, in the New Forest, England, the pilots were stunned to discover over eighty twin engine P-38s on the airfield, in various states of disrepair. Only three pilots out of more than eighty had ever flown a twin engine aircraft. Nevertheless, they were ready for combat five weeks later.



*RC Powers* They were assigned to the Ninth Air Force, entering combat in May. Capt. Griffin brought down a Bf109 near Evreux, France on 17th June. Promoted to Major on 22nd July, he became an ace on 14th August, when he shot down two FW190s, again near Evreux. Flying his P-38J "Hellzapoppin", he completed his scoring nine days later with the destruction of a FW190 over Clastres Airfield, France. On his return to the United States, he had flown a further 75 combat missions in Europe, 150 missions in total, in just over two years.





He remained in the Air Force after WWII and was promoted to full Colonel on 6th April 1955. He was Director of the Titan Missile Programme during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the race for the control of space with the Soviet Union. He retired in January 1970.

His Decorations are a Silver Star, Legion of Merit with one Oak Leaf Cluster, Distinguished Flying Cross with one Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal with fifteen Oak Leaf Clusters, Presidential Unit Citation and the Belgian Croix de Guerre. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Air & Space Museum Hall of Fame in 1995.

Following WWII, he married Dorothy Georgette and became a successful Pecan farmer. After his first wife died, he married again, this time to Kitty Barnett, General Jimmy Doolittle's niece.

"In June 1943, I was in China as a member of the 75th Fighter Squadron, in the 23rd Fighter Group. We received orders from Headquarters Army Air Corps to send a group of about six fighter pilots to the United States to form the nucleus of a Fighter Group to be trained and sent to the European theater of operations. I was picked as one of that group and reported into Hamilton Field, just north of San Francisco, in July. We activated all three squadrons and started training of our ground personal there. I was assigned as Squadron commander of the 393rd Fighter Sq., and Col. John Alison was our first Group Commander. Our squadron received our first airplanes, (P-39's) at San Francisco's municipal (now San Francisco International) airport.

"We only had about six pilots at that time. All of us checked out in the P-39 and got a few hours flying time when we were transferred across the bay to Oakland municipal airport. We were there for only a short time, when we were transferred to Santa Rosa air base in northern California.

"Col. John Alison was transferred to 'Merrill's Marauders' and was sent to Burma. Our second Group Commander was Lt. Col. Tuavo Aloha. He was replaced after a short time by Lt. Col. Moe Crossen, who was later replaced by Col. Harry Young, just before we shipped overseas. The major part of the 393rd training was received at Santa Rosa. That was an interesting base because it originally belonged to the Army Corps of Engineers. They had used it to develop and test different kinds of camouflage for airports. The landing strip was across the rows of grape vines. The concrete was the same color as the surrounding ground, and the vines were painted on the concrete in such a way that you couldn't tell where the vines left off and the concrete began. They did such a good job that it was almost impossible to tell that there was a landing strip there. I would know exactly where the strip was in relation to the town but I would be on final approach with wheels and flaps down and only fifteen or twenty feet high, before I could distinguish the landing strip. We had to take our new pilots to a nearby Navy landing strip to check out for the first few times. I was transferred from Squadron Commander to be the Group Operation's Officer.

"In mid- March 1944 I was transferred from Squadron Commander of the 393rd Fighter Squadron, to Group headquarters as the Operations Officer. Major Moe Crossen, our Group Vice Commander, Major Roberts, our supply officer, and myself were directed to fly to England as the Group advance echelon. We were to make certain that our new base to Stoney Cross was adequate for our Group.

"Our assignment was to inspect the facilities at Stoney Cross and make sure that the base was well equipped to take care of our group when it arrived by boat. This included quarters, supplies, and all the things necessary for an operational Group. Our Group was to be assigned to the 9th US Air Force. This job was completed in short order and, rather than hang around our new base, waiting for our unit to arrive by boat, Moe Crossen and I finagled orders from headquarters of the 8th Air Force assigning us, temporarily, to one of their fighter groups. We were assigned to different units.

"The unit that I was assigned to was flying P-47s. It was rather easy for me to check out since it was very similar to the P-40s that I had previously been flying. The major difference was the larger engine, bullet proof gas tanks, armor plate and four fifty-caliber machine guns in each wing. It was also about twice as heavy.

"My check out flight was an hour long and went quite well. My second flight was a combat mission escorting B-24 bombers on a bombing mission to France. They were dropping their bombs from about 10,000 feet onto a heavily defended target, just south of Paris. The flack was quite accurate, and I saw four of our bombers going down in flames at one time. It was a fairly safe mission for our fighters because we could stay outside of the heavy flack area and still accomplish our mission of protecting our bombers from enemy fighters. My third flight in the P-47 was another bomber escort mission and was quite scary for me. Just after we crossed the Channel and passed into France, my propeller RPM started decreasing. I was unable to increase it, and since it was decreasing, I was gradually losing power. I called my flight leader and told him I was aborting the mission and returning to our base in England. Because of the loss of power I was gradually losing altitude, and by the time I reached the coast of England I was down to less than five hundred feet. "The base we were flying from had previously been used by the British Royal Air Force. Instead of runways it was just a large flat pasture. I sighted our field immediately and made a straight in

approach, lowering my landing gear at the last second because that would slow me up even more and I was already going so slow that I was about to stall. My wheels immediately hit the ground but I was part way down the field and was heading directly toward a line of parked planes at the far end of the field, at 90 degrees to the direction that I was going. I was going too fast to lower my tail so I sparingly used my left brake and made a ninety-degree turn to the left before reaching the parked airplanes. After the turn I had slowed enough to get my tail down and could use both brakes to stop without any damage.

"I then got transferred to a group using P-38s. Although I had previously flown the P-38, they had a special training session that I would have to go through before they would let me fly on a combat mission with them. Since the members of our group from the States were arriving shortly, I didn't have time to attend their indoctrination course. I had to be at the airfield at Stoney Cross to meet our arriving group and thus didn't get the chance to fly the P-38 in combat with that Group. I had previously flown the P-38 in the VS (*Volunteer Squadron*) prior to going to China ".

"The main body of the Group travelled the 3,000 miles across the USA by rail and then boarded 'The Duchess of Bedford ' for the voyage from New York to Greenock, Scotland. Wallowing along in a slow North Atlantic convoy, she soon became known as 'the drunken duchess' to the unfortunate passengers, who suffered accordingly. Lashed to the deck were P-51 Mustang aircraft, which the pilots hoped they would fly, once in England. They travelled south by train, from Greenock, Scotland, arriving at Ashurst New Forest station in darkness; the last few miles of the journey being made in Army trucks. When they emerged from their Nissen huts (fourteen men to a hut) the next morning, they were amazed to see the airfield covered with 85 twin-engined, twin-boomed, P-38J Lightning single-seat fighters. Only three of the pilots had ever flown a twin-engined aircraft before.

"We had trained all of our pilots in the P-39s and changing to the P-38s was a major change. Going from a single engine to twin engine (aircraft), which was much larger and heavier, was a traumatic experience. Because of our lack of flying time in the P-38, we had to undergo a rigorous training program before we could fly any combat missions. We got off to a very poor start in checking our pilots out in the P-38s. Capt. Jimmy Peck, the commander of the 394th (Fighter Squadron), was an experienced single engine pilot. He was a fighter ace who had flown with the RAF during the battle of Malta. He wasn't familiar with flying a twin-engine airplane. After a two-hour flight he came in for a landing. He was too high and too fast when he throttled back to make a zooming 360-degree turn to the runway. Realized he was too high and fast to land, he put full throttle to both engines to go around, but one of his engines had cooled off so much that it wouldn't take the gas and cut out. As a result of having wheels and flaps fully extended and full power on only one engine the plane went inverted, stalled and crashed on the runway. Jimmy was killed; he was the ninth pilot to be killed in the group before we even got into combat.

"Our newly assigned planes were used planes with many hours on them. They had very poor maintenance in the past and required our ground crews to spend an inordinate amount of time in eliminating deficiencies. In addition, they were early production models and required many modifications before being combat ready. One of the modifications was the installation of the dive flap. Without the dive flap, the plane in a vertical dive would reach compressibility. When that happened, the plane could not be pulled out of the dive and would crash going straight down. With the dive flap you could extend it, when you got into compressibility, and the pilot could regain control and recover from the dive. On top of this, we had a very limited supply of spare parts and to keep most of our planes flyable we had to cannibalize some of the other planes to furnish parts for the others. These problems, coupled with the fact that our pilots had a very low confidence in the plane, were factors detracting from the spirit of the group and delaying our start of flying combat missions.

"During this time, our pilots were having lots of trouble with the P-38. One pilot attempting to make a single engine landing got on the runway OK, but was too fast and couldn't stop and hit a building destroying both the building and plane. A few days later another pilot had to bail out when one of his engines caught on fire. Shortly after that another pilot lost both engines and made a belly landing. Although the pilot was OK the plane sustained major damage. On three separate occasions the pilots had to make a single engine landing and each time it ended up with a crash. We lost three airplanes and one pilot. On another occasion one of the pilots attempted to make a 'hot dog' take off. A hot dog take off is when the pilot raises the landing gear handle before becoming airborne. A safety switch in the wheel retraction system won't allow the wheels to retract until the weight is off of the wheels. In this case a bump in the runway caused the plane to bounce off the ground before reaching flying speed. When the weight came off the wheels the gear started up and without sufficient speed to fly, the plane settled back on the runway with the wheels retracting. This resulted in a belly landing and another plane sustaining major damage.

"Because of all these troubles, our pilots had lost all confidence in themselves and the P-38. Because of this the powers to be had Tony Levier visit our base to show us just what the P-38 could do, with a seasoned pilot at the controls. Tony Levier was a factory test pilot and a very good one (*Tony Levier was the Chief Test Pilot at the Lockheed factory, in California, and was flown over specially to England, to demonstrate the P-38 aircraft to USAAF*

*pilots. The factories in the USA were producing many more P-38s than P-47s and P-51s, at that time, so there was an urgent need to convert the pilots on to the twin engine P-38).* We had always heard that if you turned into a dead engine the torque from the other engine would put so much force on the turn that the plane would roll onto its back with the pilot losing control and spin in. Tony eliminated that fear when he came over the field at tree top level and feathered one engine and then did two slow rolls into the feathered engine. He then brought it around into a perfect single engine landing. He performed many different manoeuvres, showing us the capabilities of the airplane. He dove at the runway at a high speed and as he crossed the end of the runway he shut down both engines and feathered them. He then pulled up into a loop and at the top of the loop he lowered the landing gear and flaps, completed the loop and landed with both engines still feathered. After his demonstration most of the pilots accepted the good qualities of the plane and readily learned the many good features of the plane.

"Half of our days were spent flying and the other half in ground school. The ground school consisted of lectures from pilots who had been flying combat missions for some time. We received lectures on German anti-aircraft defenses, combat tactics and escape and evasion procedures. We had our pictures made wearing French style clothing, which could be used by the French underground to produce French identification papers, for use in case we were shot down over France. About this same time, we were flying simulated combat missions, of squadron and group size.

"On the ninth of May we flew our first combat mission. The group with forty P-38s went on a fighter sweep over the southern part of France. We crossed the French coast at Cabourg at about 18,000 feet over a solid overcast. We proceeded on to Alençon and then on to Avranches, our deepest point of penetration. We found several holes in the overcast and dove down through the holes. We didn't see any sign of the enemy other than a few random bursts of flack. Which was enough to let us know that we were over enemy territory and start our adrenaline flowing. I went on another fighter sweep that afternoon and it was about as uneventful as the morning mission. We did get a call from our controller telling us that there was a small aircraft flying very low about 15 miles at one o'clock. We were unable to make contact and the return to base was uneventful. I found out later that the controller was using radar to be able to give us that information. That was my first experience with radar.

"During the month of May I flew a total of ten combat missions, consisting of bomber escort, fighter sweeps, and dive bomb missions. On the dive bomb missions we usually carried two 500 lb, or two 1,000 lb demolition bombs. On a couple of missions we carried two 2,000 lb demolition bombs (this was the same bomb load as the B-17 bombers were carrying, at that time). On the dive bomb missions we would go out and destroy specific targets such as railroad marshaling yards, bridges etc. On the bomber escort missions we were escorting B-24's, B-17's, A-26's and B-26's flying to targets all over the continent, including Germany. On fighter sweeps, we flew over German airfields looking for an aerial fight. On several missions we escorted our light bombers. On these missions our job was to protect them from enemy fighter aircraft, on the way to and from the target. There were several times we carried bombs while we were escorting and if the bombers didn't destroy the target, we had to go down and dive-bomb it. On two occasions we were the ones that destroyed the target. When the bombers did destroy the target we went looking for targets of opportunity to drop our bombs on.

"Quite often the weather in England is cloudy and rainy, but we could not let that have an impact on our carrying out the missions that had to be performed on a daily basis. At the briefing for the mission we would synchronize all of our watches. Everyone would start engines at a set time. The leader and wingman would taxi into place on the end of the runway and hold until given the signal by the control tower. At that signal the leader and wingman would take off. The leader would go on instruments while the wingman would only look at the leader and not at his instruments. The leader would fly on the same compass heading as the runway. He would fly at a specified air speed and rate of climb until he got above the cloud layer. When he broke out above the clouds he would go into a left turn and keep circling until the rest of the squadron had joined him. Once the leader took off, the tower would release the next two airplanes at a specific time, usually one minute apart. All of the airplanes would climb at the same speed and rate of climb. The above procedure allowed the squadron to be assembled above an overcast at a specific time. Those factors went into the equation required to meet with the bombers at a specified time and place and give them protection from German fighters.

"On the return to base there were times when the squadron would be split up, returning as singles, pairs, or a flight of four. In bad weather we would let down over the Channel and just above the waves where we would have some visibility. We could usually see the coast of England. When we made landfall we had a general idea of where the base was. If we couldn't identify landmarks we would call our Group homing station and after a short transmission they would give us the heading for us to fly to reach Stoney Cross. Flying at 250 miles per hour with limited visibility it was almost impossible to get lined up with the runway. To overcome this dilemma, tall poles with a light on top encircled Stoney Cross about fifty yards apart and half a mile outside the perimeter of the field. This made the field easier to find in inclement weather. Once the pilot saw the lights he would start a left turn following the circle of

lights, lowering his wheels and flaps. With the flip of a switch the control tower would turn on another set of lights that would act like a funnel leading the pilot from the circle to the end of the runway and lined up with it. As far as I know we never had any problems with this system and we used it in all types of inclement weather.

"One type of escort mission that we really hated to go on was when we escorted the bombers up until five minutes before reaching the target. We would break off from escorting and race ahead of the bombers and dive bomb the flack installations around the target. Our reasoning was 'leave the bombers at home and let us knock out the target'. Any time we were carrying bombs and encountered enemy aircraft, the first thing we did was jettison our bombs, to improve our manoeuvrability and speed. We certainly wouldn't want to drop live bombs on the friendly French, so we would not arm our bombs before dropping them. There was a small propeller on the nose of each bomb that would spin out. When that happened the bomb would be armed and would explode on impact. There was a long stiff wire going into the propeller that prevented the propeller from twirling while we were flying. There was a toggle switch that controlled whether the wire stayed with the plane when the bomb was dropped or whether the wire fell with the bomb. If the bomb fell with the wire still attached to the propeller, the bomb was safe and would not explode on impact. With the toggle switch in the other position the wire would stay with the plane when the bomb was dropped. The propeller would spin out of the bomb and it would be armed to explode on impact. Another reason for this type of arming system was to allow the bomb to get quite a distance from the airplane before the bomb was armed. Just in case something went wrong and the bomb exploded when the detonator was first armed.

"After becoming airborne and after getting over the ocean the pilots would check fire their guns to make sure they were working OK. On one mission a bullet ricocheted from the ocean and hit a plane in front and knocked out one engine. The pilot promptly feathered the engine and returned to our field at Stoney Cross. With the gear and flaps down the pilot decided that he couldn't land without running off of the far end of the runway. So he gave the plane full throttle and started a slow turn to go around. About half way around he lost control and crashed and blew up in some trees next to the runway. The emergency crew immediately responded and just hoped they could get the body out before it was burned. They were surprised before getting to the plane they encountered the pilot walking out of the trees rubbing a slight knot on his forehead. That was his only injury, and he got that in getting out of his plane. On returning from another mission another pilot had the same thing happen to him and his plane hit in the same general area and blew up, with the same results and this time the pilot got out without any injuries. On another mission there were four of our P-38's airplanes returning from a bomber escort mission and they started letting down through a thick overcast over the English Channel. When the flight leader broke out under the overcast there were two planes missing from his flight. Both pilots were found a few hours later floating in their Mae Wests. Both died from exposure to the cold water of the North Sea, before Air Sea Rescue could get to them. The extremely cold water in the North Sea would kill a person in thirty minutes to an hour.

"I will never forget going to Southampton and doing some shopping. It was quite late when we finished and decided to get some fish and chips at one of the local restaurants. When we finished our meal it was late and we had to drive back to Stoney Cross after dark. No lights were allowed because of the German night raids. We had two small running lights that could not be seen over fifteen feet away. Since we hadn't been there before we were not familiar with the streets. On several occasions, we stopped at an intersection and one of us would climb out of the jeep and climb the Street pole, get out a cigarette lighter and read the street name by the light of the cigarette lighter. Needless to say, after that, we always returned to our base before dark.

"Major Bill Jones was an excellent pilot and a good leader. He was a very good Christian and never had a drink of alcohol in his life. He also did not speak any foreign language. In late May, he was leading his squadron on a dive bomb mission to an airfield near St. Brieuç, France. The German flack zeroed in on his plane and set it on fire. Some of our pilots saw his plane hit and did not see any parachute, so it was assumed that he had been killed. His chute did open however, just before he hit the ground. Once on the ground, he was able to get out of his parachute harness and evade the German troops. After hiding and running for two days he was finally able to get with the Maquis (the French Resistance). He was able to make motions of eating and the French would feed him. He said that every time he made motions of wanting a drink of water they would give him a bottle of wine. He would shake his head 'no' and they would give him another type of wine. After about three weeks he was able to get out of France and back to our Group. He told us he stayed drunk for the full three weeks he was with the Maquis. The language barrier was too much for him to get across the idea that he would rather have water than good French wine.

"There were several occasions when we would be given a few days off for a little R&R (rest and recuperation). On one of those occasions, I spent several days in London. I am not sure that I got much rest. Each night the sirens went off. The first night I followed the crowd and went to the subway and spent the night sleeping on the concrete floor. The bombs hit quite some distance from where we were staying. On the following nights I took my chances with many other souls who were praying they wouldn't be hit by a bomb, and stayed in bed. Once we had a couple of

buzz bombs come over us. The buzz bombs were all targeted for London. We could see and hear them coming and would keep a fearful watch. When they were out of gas, they were programmed to make a 45-degree dive and explode on contact. As soon as they were overhead we would let out a sigh of relief, because we knew that we would be safe from that particular one. On two other occasions, I spent the weekend with a family just south of London. Their name was Handerside. The father had been an engineer on the Wellington bombers, and his son was a test pilot for the same company. On one of my visits, I flew there in a P-38. The field I had to land in was inside of a stadium. The approach had to be very steep with the use of full brakes at touch down. The take-off was quite exciting also. Brakes locked with full throttle, release brakes and at the last second of the run pull back abruptly on the elevator and stagger over the bleachers (*seating*) without much room to spare. I never flew into that field again. (*N.B. The airfield described was most probably Brooklands, at Weybridge in Surrey*)

"On a bomber escort missions, the fighters could not stay airborne as long as the bombers because of our fuel supply. We would join the bombers as soon as they reached enemy territory and escort them until we only had enough fuel left to return to home base. Another fighter group would be scheduled to pick them up at that point and protect them on the next leg of the flight, etc., etc. According to the target to be bombed, there might be six groups of fighters required to escort the bombers to and from the target. The German anti-aircraft units were very good and regardless of your altitude they would hit you with flack. If they shot at you three times and you stayed flying straight and level their next shot would hit you. Any time you saw a burst of flack nearby you would change both altitude and direction. On one particular mission our group of 48 planes was supposed to pick up the bombers on the second leg of their flight. To get to the rendezvous we had to fly over the Ruhr valley, which had the largest concentration of anti-aircraft guns in Germany. When the flack started bursting around us we naturally started evasive manoeuvres. One time I did a fairly steep dive and then pulled up into a steep climbing turn and looked back and saw bursts of flack following, where I had just been. The concentration of flack was so bad that the largest formation of P-38s was four, and these were scattered all over the sky. Because of our dodging flack we were late for our rendezvous with the bombers.

"On one mission we were to rendezvous with a formation of B-24 bombers on their way to Berlin. We sighted them at the designated point and started escorting them. I was leading the squadron at the time and assigned two flights to the right side of the bomber formation and I led the other two flights to the left side of the bombers. The bombers fly much slower than the P-38s. We would not want to fly at the slower speed because it would put us at a disadvantage if we encountered the enemy fighters. We kept our speed up to our normal cruising speed and to keep from running away from the bombers we would weave. We in effect were flying many more miles than the bombers. It was a 'milk run' insofar as seeing any enemy airplanes. At the termination of our escort we had to join the other two flights on the other side of the bomber formation, and to do so I cut across over the top of the bombers. Every top turret gunner on all the bombers started shooting at us. Thank goodness they were very poor shots and didn't hit any of us. Although we had been escorting them for almost an hour they didn't know if we were friends or not, and opened up on us. In the past, the Germans had captured several of our P38's and had used them to get into close range of the bombers and shoot down several of them. That was probably why they were shooting at us.

"On 4th June we painted white and black stripes on the wings and tail of our planes. They were then covered so the Germans couldn't see them and we couldn't fly them until D-Day. Any plane seen after D-day without those stripes would be shot at by our troops, because it would be German. On the night of 5th June we escorted the invasion fleet out to mid-Channel. We returned to home base about midnight. The next morning, D-Day, we furnished cover for our ships and troops, over Omaha beach (*In 2003, Joe told me that he was patrolling over the Invasion Beaches at 0600 hrs on D-Day*).

"Our assignment was to destroy any enemy aircraft over the Normandy beach. We had been told to fly above 500 ft because the Navy had been told we would stay above that altitude and they were free to fire on any airplanes below 500 ft. The only problem was that there was overcast at about 400ft. We had to fly below the clouds to be able to defend our forces. We held our breaths and said a few prayers and our Navy did not try and shoot us down.

"We stayed over the invasion beaches for over two hours and did not see any enemy aircraft. I heard later, that there were no German aircraft over the beaches, that first day. Recently, I talked to a soldier who was on the beach on 0- Day. He said that two German fighters strafed him and his buddies at dawn. We certainly didn't see them, but I guess that would be possible.

"On 17th June I led a squadron of sixteen planes on a bombing mission to a target near Evreux. Just before we got to the target, we were bounced by a large group of Me109s. We immediately jettisoned our bombs and tangled with the Germans. I got in several shots at two of the Germans without apparent effect. I saw a P-38 in a dogfight with a Me109 about two miles north of my position, with the German getting into position to the rear of the P-38. I gave



my plane full throttle going to the help of the P-38. The P-38 went into a spin and crashed into the ground, before I could get there. I made a vow to myself that I would get that Me109 or die trying.

"I tagged on behind him but each time I started to fire he made a quick turn, only giving me a quartering shot, which meant that I would have to be aiming way in front of him to hit him. He was continually skidding and turning. I saw a few of my bullets hitting him but with no apparent effect. About every fifth bullet in our guns was the type that would explode on contact with a foreign object, thus we could see our bullets hitting. He pulled up into a vertical climb and disappeared into the cloud cover. I went up after him and when I broke out of the cloud cover I saw him diving back into the clouds. I split-essed and followed him down through the clouds. When I broke out below the overcast I was able to see him again. I lined him up in my gunsight and started firing.

"All of a sudden my 20mm cannon stopped firing. I knew that there were a few less rounds of the 20mm cannon than were loaded for the .50 caliber machine guns, so I knew that I only had a few rounds of .50 caliber left. I had used quite a few rounds earlier in the fight. I was determined that I was going to get within 40 or 50 feet of the Me109 before I used my last few rounds. That way I knew that I would destroy him. At that time we were flying just above the treetops. As I got very close to him, he did a violent 270-degree left turn around the steeple of a church. I stayed with him all the way. He straightened out and just before I had him lined up in my gunsight he made a violent left turn and hit his left wing tip into the ground. He recovered showering dirt all over the place and then bellied into a plowed field. His plane did not break up and he didn't get out. I made two passes taking pictures of the Me109 on each pass. There weren't any other airplanes around so I flew a course that would take me back to England. I stayed on the deck because it is much safer to fly at a very low altitude, over enemy territory.

"About ten minutes after I started for home I saw four Me109s cross my path at a ninety-degree angle, about half a mile in front of me. I watched them out of sight and thought they had not seen me. I decided to climb and turn the way they had gone and maybe get a shot at them. When I had gotten high enough to see them they had disappeared. Like a good fighter pilot, I cleared the area behind me and there they were, diving in on my tail. I dove back to the deck and gave both engines full throttle. At the same time I tried to scrunch down as small as I could, to take advantage of the armor plate that was behind my seat. I never saw them again. This was proof to me that the P-38, on the deck, was a faster airplane than the Me109. We destroyed three Me109s and lost three of our pilots on that mission. We don't like that type of odds."

"As a method of destroying low flying allied airplanes the Germans built quite a few flak towers. These towers looked exactly like many of the French water towers. Instead of water they contained multiple machine guns. When a pilot was flying down low and saw one of these towers ahead he had a choice of two methods of trying to stay alive. If he turned or zoomed violently, he might be able to stay out of range of the German guns. Traveling at about three hundred miles an hour, his chances of staying out of range were very small. The other method was to assume that the structure was a flak tower and fly directly toward it strafing it. Chances were that if it was a flak tower that you could either kill the German gunners or keep them from effectively using their guns. Because of this situation there were quite a few innocent water towers destroyed.

"By 22nd June 1944, sixteen days after D-Day, our Ground forces had cut off the Cotentin Peninsula and isolated 20 to 30 thousand heavily armed German troops who were defending Cherbourg with automatic weapons. Cherbourg was a major port facility, which we desperately needed to off load supplies. We were losing a high percentage of the supplies that were being off loaded on the beaches. It was imperative that Cherbourg and the port facility be captured.

High Command decided to send twelve fighter bomber Groups in to bomb and strafe targets of opportunity in a long narrow corridor. We were to be followed by the medium bombers hitting specific targets.

"At the completion of the strafing and bombing the ground troops would go in and capture the port. This was fine, except they sent the fighters in on the deck and in trail and penetrating at the same point on the coast, with each group of forty-eight planes one minute apart. They had us flying down the long corridor rather than across it. Our group intelligence and operations officers briefed us that this was going to be a 'milk run'. "Although our planes had shoulder harnesses, I had never used mine since it hindered me turning my head to make sure there wasn't a bandit on my tail. I knew that this was going to be a turkey shoot for the Germans and not for us. Because of my premonition, I wore my shoulder harness for the first and only time on any of my missions. The first couple of groups might not have had too much difficulty. When the following groups arrived, there were thousands of Germans with automatic weapons all lined up behind walls and trees, waiting for the next pigeon to fly down their shooting gallery.

"We penetrated on schedule, but flying at over three hundred miles an hour, at tree top level, it was almost impossible to get your gun sight on a specific target before you passed it. Before I even had a chance to fire my guns or drop a bomb, there were two P-38s in front of me that crashed. The ground fire was the worst that I had ever

experienced. I could feel bullets constantly hitting my plane. Instead of looking for targets, I was desperately trying to avoid being shot down by continually turning, skidding and jinxing all over the place. My efforts to avoid getting hit were highly unsuccessful and one of the bullets punctured the coolant radiator on my right engine. I started trailing a stream of liquid coolant that looked like smoke. When there is a cripple, it seems as though all the firepower in the area is concentrated on that one airplane. Within seconds they shot out my right engine and I had to feather it. Finally, the bullets from the ground fire became so intense that I jettisoned my bombs and zoomed trying to get above the small arms fire.

"I picked the wrong place to zoom because I was on the outskirts of Cherbourg where there were lots of flack installations. When they hit me repeatedly, I made a diving turn to the west to get away from Cherbourg and to get over our troops. What a relief it was to get out that intense anti-aircraft fire. I had an uneventful single engine flight back across the Channel to our base at Stoney Cross. I had no trouble making a single engine landing there. The top half of my right stabilizer (*fin*) and right rudder were missing, my right engine was destroyed, and I had over four hundred holes in my plane. My plane went to the junkyard as not repairable. Our Group sent forty-eight planes on that mission and there were only thirteen that were still able to fly. There were twenty-four fighter pilots killed on that mission, seven from our Group. Our group was taken off of operational status for several days, awaiting replacement planes.

"I condemn our leaders who planned that mission for not recognizing that their plan eliminated the element of surprise, exposing our planes to very concentrated and deadly ground fire, with little if any positive results. We should have been sent over the target area from different directions to have (at) least caused the enemy confusion. Our troops did capture Cherbourg shortly after our strafing and bombing mission. On 5th July the 357th Fighter Group and all three squadrons were transferred to Ibsley. On 27th July the total Group moved to France".

Very unusually, Joe Griffin went to War in Europe with his brother James, who was a Technical Sergeant and his Crew Chief, responsible for all aspects of the maintenance of his aircraft, throughout the time that he flew in Europe, during World War II. This pairing is most probably unique.

At a later Reunion in San Diego, in 2007, Joe told me that, several years after the War, James told him of his mixed feelings, every time that Joe took off on another mission, never knowing whether he would ever see his brother Joe again. Joe had never before realised what he had put his brother through, on every one of his 75 missions in Europe.

Joe remained in the US Air Force following the war and was promoted to full Colonel on 6th April 1955. He was Director of the Titan Missile Programme during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the race for the control of space with the Soviet Union.

He retired in January 1970 and passed away on 23rd July 2009, aged 91.

His Decorations are the Silver Star, Legion of Merit with one Oak Leaf Cluster, Distinguished Flying Cross with one Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal with fifteen Oak Leaf Clusters, Presidential Unit Citation and the Belgian Croix de Guerre.

Joe was a man of many pursuits, becoming a successful pecan farmer after he retired and an active Rotarian, but always finding time for skiing, cycling, golf and bowling, dancing and gardening. He loved music and theatre. He and his first wife Dorothy hosted seven year-long foreign students living with them in their home. After Dorothy died, Joe married Kitty Barnett, General Jimmy Doolittle's niece, who survives him.

If you would like to know more about the US 367th Fighter Group (392nd, 393rd & 394th Fighter Squadrons) in WWII, 'The Dynamite Gang', the website is at [www.367thfightergroup.com](http://www.367thfightergroup.com).

Dr Henry N Goodall, FONFA Chairman of Trustees

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