

## Mustang Ace

By Robert J Goebel



Robert Goebel in the cockpit of a P-51B

Captain Thomas Byrnes had become the Squadron Operations Officer at the beginning of June. He had completed a combat tour in the A-36, a dive-bomber version of the Mustang, while in the Twelfth Air Force and had joined the 31st shortly before the group moved to Castel Volturno. He was a combat veteran who learned quickly and flew boldly. Byrnes knew Stick Thorsen from somewhere. I assumed that Stick had something to do with bringing Byrnes into the 308th Squadron. Byrnes brought the nickname Twig with him. It had been given to him as the diminutive form of Stick-Little Stick, so to speak.

A diminutive name was appropriate for Byrnes. He was short, like my cadet pal, Brown Forbes. And, like Brown, Byrnes must have squeaked by the minimum height requirement with nothing to spare. His boyish face radiated good humor. His slightly protruding front teeth giving him a vague resemblance to Mickey Rooney, a youthful movie star of that period. Twig and I had hit it off from the first. We thought alike, liked to fly together, and enjoyed each other's company on the ground as well.

Byrnes had scored his first victory on the group's second P-51 mission, and he had gotten a second enemy fighter a month later, up near Vienna. On June 23, he was leading the squadron to Ploesti when he bagged his third, an FW-190. I never knew Tommy Byrnes to shirk a fight or his responsibility as a leader in the air. Perhaps that was his undoing.

On June 26, 1944, on a mission to Vienna, he had taken it upon himself to play guardian angel to a lieutenant colonel, newly arrived from the States. Twig was going to lead Blue Flight and had scheduled the colonel to fly on his own wing so that he could look after him. At the post-flight debriefing, I learned what happened. Some 15 miles northeast of Lake Neusiedler, Twig's flight got into it with a formation of Me-109s. Twig shot down one of them and was hotly pursuing a second one. The colonel saw another 109 lining up on Twig and called for him to break, which he appeared to do. The colonel last saw him in a steep dive at low altitude.

The Operations Report said: "Captain Byrnes was last seen

near 48 degrees 05 minutes North, 16 degrees 55 minutes East going in from 2000 feet." Not much of an epitaph.

I felt the loss of Twig keenly, and in my own mind I held the Colonel responsible for his death. This was patently unfair. It was an accepted fact that, with a new guy on your wing- regardless of his rank-you had better look after yourself; he would probably be too excited and confused to be of any use. But I was not interested in being fair. I had to blame someone, and the Colonel was it. Turning my anger on the German pilot who killed Twig never entered my head. That was different; that was one of those things. But the colonel-he should have done better by Twig, I thought, and I did not forgive him. But there was no time for mourning or recrimination.

The war went on. The next day, June 27, saw my fifth go in as many days. The assignment was a target-cover mission to Budapest. I had been to Budapest once before, in early June. We encountered no fighter opposition then, so I had been able to get a good look at the route and the area around the city. Budapest was about 450 miles from San Severo in a northeasterly direction. Lake Balaton was the principal landmark, lying to the west of the direct course, about 75 miles southwest of Budapest. The city straddled the Danube River and was really two different cities, Buda and Pest. This time the B-17s of the 5th Bomb Wing were to attack the marshaling yards; the 31st was to provide target-area cover. The new group CO, Lieutenant Colonel Yancey Tarrant, was flying with our squadron. I was flying as his number 3. He was another alumnus of an A-36 group and had come over to the 31st as deputy group CO a month before. Everything went as scheduled, and soon we were patrolling the target area at 28,000 feet. I called out an Me-110 twin-engine fighter that was passing beneath us. Since the Colonel had only started a steep turn, I cut inside him; dropped down on the German fighter; and, from almost dead astern, cut loose. I lighted him up pretty well; easier to lose your edge, to get complacent. Finally the bombers made their left turn off the IP and began the assault from east to west. As the first bombs began to fall, the lead squadron broke radio silence by calling out fifteen