

On February 20-25 1944, the Eighth Air Force launched "Big Week" with attacks on German aircraft plants and airfields. For the first time, over 1,000 bombers are dispatched. During these raids and for weeks prior rumors had been spreading throughout the 8th Air Force that it would soon be sent to bomb the Nazi capital, Berlin. But hitting "Big B" in winter would prove difficult. The first raid was sent on March 3, 1944, but it was recalled because of bad weather. The 55<sup>th</sup> FG flying their P-38 Lightnings with long range drop tanks never got the word of the recall so they continued on and were the first Americans over Berlin, dubbed the Berlin Buzz Boys. Another raid was dispatched the next day, but bad weather again intervened.

On March 6, a major effort was made on Berlin to hit industrial areas in the suburbs as 504 B-17s and 226 B-24s took off from their bases in England. Eight hundred and one fighters from both the VIII and IX Fighter Commands relayed shifts on escort duty. It was a tough mission. Weather was bad, and the Luftwaffe came up in large numbers to intercept. None of the primary targets were hit. The bomber stream extended more than 60 miles from head to tail. Though the United States had more fighters, the Germans were able to better concentrate their effort because of the long range and the large area to cover. Thus American fighter pilots were usually outnumbered in combat. The Germans were using a new tactic, sending large "gaggles" of fighters in mass attacks against the bomber boxes. They would roar in from head-on "12 o'clock high" and weave through the bomber formation, then go after targets of opportunity before diving to the deck to regroup and come up again. fierce fighter opposition claims 69 bombers (the highest number lost by the Eighth Air Force in a single day), although the bombers claimed 97 destroyed, 28 probable, and 60 damaged Luftwaffe fighters. The fighters claimed 82 destroyed, 8 probable, and 33 damaged with a loss of 14 fighters. There were 33 air crew reported wounded, 17 killed and 697 reported missing in action.

On the March 8<sup>th</sup> mission to Berlin Lt. Joseph (Mac) Fluty along with his 55<sup>th</sup> FG and 890 other fighters were tasked with escorting 414 B-17's & 209 B-24's bombers safely to the primary target which was a ball bearing plant at Erkner, a suburb of Berlin; enemy opposition was fierce and 28 bombers and 18 fighters are lost. The bombers claim 63 destroyed, 17 probable, and 19 damaged Luftwaffe fighters. The fighters claimed 87 destroyed, 17 probable, and 19 damaged. It was Fluty's 31<sup>st</sup> combat mission over six months time. The details of what happened in Germany will remain shrouded forever in mystery, however, it is believed that Fluty was involved in a dogfight with the Luftwaffe and his P-38's left engine was damaged. He returned across the channel with his left engine shut down and having lost his wing-man and flight leader during the dogfight he was being escorted home by a P-38 from another squadron. The P-38J-10-LO model he was flying had only one engine driven generator and it was on the left engine. With that engine shutdown he had very little battery power left to transfer the fuel he had in the left tank to the right engine. Fluty's mission had already taken him approximately 1100 miles and he had somehow stretched his range just long enough to reach the English coastline. It is likely that he exhausted his fuel in the right tank and subsequently lost power on his good engine just as he hit the coastline. In attempting to stretch his glide just as he cleared the coastal city of Harwich and perhaps save his ship and the town from disaster, Fluty stalled his P-38 which likely resulted in a spin due to the major fuel imbalance in his wings. He did not have enough altitude to recover because he was flying low under an overcast and crashed going straight in. The ground was wet farmland and his ship went deep into the soft earth. His body was recovered but his P-38 was left until a 1972 excavation.

A sign of how badly the Luftwaffe had been hurt in these air battles was that when the bombers again hit Berlin on March 9, opposition had markedly lessened, though there were still several hot air battles. Bomber losses were reduced to a total of 8 for the the raid. And on March 11 not a single enemy fighter was encountered on the raid against Munster. The German fighters could still inflict damage, but the superior performance of American pilots and planes was becoming evident to all.