



November, 1942; newly commissioned AAF 1st Lt. Duane W. Beeson poses here for his official portrait for the Group files. (A4FGWW2)



"BOISE BEE"

The Duane Beeson Story

by Garry L. Fry

Duane's "Bee" emblem as drawn by him and printed on his personal stationery during his service in the 4FG. (Zelda Beeson)

IT WAS A STICKY, hot night on July 16, 1921, in Boise, Idaho. The townsfolk were sipping lemonade, and happy to get water onto their lawns. Carl Beeson, a bookkeeper who had moved to Boise a year previous, was at home having a cold supper. He was a proud man of pioneer stock, who was fond of good music and who sang in the same church choir for 37 years. His wife Zelda was at St. Luke's Hospital waiting for that happy moment, the birth of their first-born. The telephone rang and a voice said, "You better get over here right away, things are going to happen very soon." Carl jogged most of the way and soon afterwards Dr. Boeck said, "It's a boy."

The little fellow was christened Duane Willard Beeson. Five years later he had a sister, Elizabeth. Another sister, Louise, came five years after her and yet another sister, Esther, arrived three and a half years later. Thus early on in life Duane was cast in the role of defender of the less capable and was called on to look out for their welfare. He once told a boy picking on Elizabeth after lighting into him, "I'm her brother, I can fight with her, but you can't."

Duane's young years were fairly typical. He joined the Boy Scouts, loved to ride bicycles, got a kick out of catching frogs and snakes out of the mill ditch beside school and pestering the girls with them. Eldon Ryals, a boyhood chum, recalls, "Duane and I were on the football team at Garfield school; a good marble shooter, he would win all of mine; he went into ROTC as a bugler and was very active in boxing. He was in speech class and went to quite a few debate tournaments with them. A very quiet fellow, he was never involved in any trouble."

His mother remembers, "Duane loved music. He took piano for several years and then decided he wanted to be in the high school marching band, so he got to do very well on trumpet, but he had so much trouble with cold sores on his lip that he missed too much practice, and he finally gave it up and went back to the piano. He wouldn't play jazz and would spend all Saturday afternoon listening to the radio classical matinees with the family. While he did well in school subjects he was interested in, there was a bit of problem with teachers of subjects he didn't like. Duane was an avid reader, but not of fiction, always history, politics, and later of law. He read Blackstone cover to cover while in high school."

Elizabeth, Duane's sister, writes, "One of my most vivid memories is the type of books he read from the library, which he checked out in profusion. They were on philosophers and great men of history. Men like Lin Yu Tang, Napoleon, and he knew a great deal about Hitler. He put quotes on his room wall, which impressed me so much I would copy them in my school notebook. One is all I can recall now. It went, GOOD, BETTER, BEST, NEVER LET IT REST, TILL YOUR GOOD IS BETTER AND YOUR BETTER BEST."

After high school graduation in 1939 from Boise High School, Duane wanted very much to go to college, but it was in the midst of the depression and his father had been ill for several years, so there were no funds available for it. It would have been possible to attend Boise Junior College, but he wanted to do it on his own, so he made plans to go to Oakland, California, to his mother's sister's family and to work on getting into the University of California Law School while rooming with them. The trip was to be made by hitchhiking, so he fashioned a canvas cover for his suitcase and printed SAN FRANCISCO on it in big let-

ters. En route he was lucky enough to get a ride with one gent who even bought his meals.

Duane's first job in Oakland was at a motor bearing factory, which didn't last too long. Then he obtained a job as a clerk at the Piedmont Hotel on Piedmont Avenue. This allowed him to have a place of his own. Besides figuring how to get into the university, he found diversion by renting a piano and taking lessons on it. Recreation was provided by standing room tickets to the municipal opera and symphony when the funds could be found. It probably helped stave off homesickness too, as the Beeson children were raised on music and the weekly radio opera at home. Finally he obtained a setup where he could enter college. By this time, however, it was plainly evident to Duane that the European War would soon drag the U.S. into it. He found that without two years of college he couldn't become an Air Force pilot, so he paid a call to the British Consulate. They informed him that in the Canadian Air Force the top third were graduated as pilots. That was good enough for him and on June 23, 1941, he enlisted in the RCAF at Vancouver, B.C.

Several months were devoted to learning the basic military regime. In his faithful weekly letter home he often spoke of the math and other studies which were crammed into him in such a short space of time. Before long, however, the magic day arrived and L.A.C. Beeson, D.W., began his air work at No. 6 Elementary Flight Training School, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The first flight was September 15, with Mr. Salinske in DH Tiger Moth No. 5101.

By the week's end he was the better for 5:25 hours of air work. October 6 was the fateful day every would-be aviator reaches. Duane took Tiger Moth No. 5101 aloft for his thrilling first solo of 45 minutes. Solos and dual work speeded up and with 36:40 hours solo time he made his first solo cross-country flight to Vonda and back. November 5 saw the finish of Tiger Moth work with 73:55 hours aggregate time and a transfer to No. 11 SFTS at Yorkton, Saskatchewan.

At No. 11 SFTS, Duane was introduced to the twin-engine Cessna aircraft and achieved his first solo on this type on December 6 after 12 flights. January 16 brought a change to a well-powered single engine with a 30-minute hop in a Harvard. Finally, after steady work, he completed the school course No. 42 with a grand total of 201:25 hours on February 26, 1942. The O.C. of No. 1 Sqd. wrote in his logbook, "A good average pilot and is slightly overconfident. No outstanding faults." His CO told him he had only one other man with such self-discipline, but he lacked one thing for a good officer, and that was knowing how to relax. Graduation brought his commission and a proud Pilot Officer D.W. Beeson J-10522 departed for a week's leave at home in Boise with the RCAF wings gleaming on his smart blue uniform. Sister Elizabeth recounts, "His first visit home after joining the RCAF was one of the proudest times of my life. He looked so handsome in his uniform. Nothing he did in the future could beat that."

When Duane left home for Canada after leave, his parents knew that serious times were ahead, and that they would not be seeing him for an indefinite period. Shortly thereafter he embarked for Britain on March 20 and arrived on March 29 at No. 3 Personnel Reception Centre, Bournemouth, Hampshire, U.K. He seems to have languished there a bit while the powers sorted out how to employ him, but then they decided he was fighter

pilot material after all and his posting to No. 5 Advanced Flying Unit, Ternhill, Shropshire, came on May 19.

It was great to get into the air again when he took his first hop on May 21 with P/O Bush in Miles Master No. 43 serialled W8825. Five days later he was solo in Master III No. 25 W8510. Study and flight drill were the strict diet and it centered on learning the systems and procedures pertinent to flying that famous first-line fighter of the epic Battle of Britain two years previous, the Hawker Hurricane. June 3 was the day Duane knew he was at last in the big league as he taxied out for his first flight in Hurricane No. 9 L1721. That one-hour hop marked a milestone for him. Once you flew a high-performance machine such as the Hurri, you were spoiled for anything less.

With his logbook stamped "good average" by No. 5 AFU, June 9 brought a posting to the next step towards combat, No. 55 Operational Training Unit, Annan, Dumfriesshire. Three days later he got in 30 minutes of circuit time on Hurricane W6926 to start his operational combat training. Combat operations training at 550TU was comprised mainly of these various exercises: machine gun practice, air attacks with live ammo, cloud flying, aerobatics, formation flight, DF homing, low flying, navigation and cross-country. The course was completed without major mishap—no "Prangs"—except for July 14 when the Hurri's throttle jammed open and he landed by cutting switches.

At this point in his flying, a fighter pilot had come as close to combat as he was going to without the actual fact. He was forced to come to terms with any doubts or ideals that might have stood in the way of duty. With Duane there was never any doubt but that he was going to give it all his very best "shot." And he meant that literally as now he began his intense study to perfect his shooting ability. If a fighter pilot was not only to stay alive, but to achieve any measure of success at it, he must develop into a "shooter." Duane soon acquired the label of a "gun-lover," one who was a fanatic about accurate aerial gunnery in all its forms, but predominately at deflection shooting.

On August 26 he completed his last OTU flight for a total of 77 hours mostly with the Hurricane. W/Cdr. W. David signed his ability assessment form with, "Above the average; Points which should be watched—Nil." S/Ldr. J. Storrar signed his gunnery form, "Above average." His logbook at training's end showed 295:45 hours of career flight time. The fine marks and impressions given by his commanders must have put him in good stead, because on September 5 he received his posting to a combat unit, and not just the average one, but to the famous and much-publicized first American Eagle Squadron, No. 71 at Debden, Essex. The glamorous Eagles had just claimed further glory in the vicious airfighting over Dieppe several weeks previous.

P/Officer Beeson was delighted with his posting and he realized the company he would be flying with and having to measure up to. The S/Ldr. was Chesley Peterson, an ace and elder Eagle vet, although he was only 22 years old. Others were Gus Daymond, Oscar Coen, Vic France, Bill O'Regan, etc.

Soon after unpacking his kit in the comfortable room of the brick officers club, he was airborne for the first time in the fighter flown by the squadron. This 1½-hour hop on September 7 was in Spitfire BL488, which carried the code letters of XR-E. His A Flight commander, F/Lt. Bob Sprague, soon had him mock-dogfighting and doing formation work as he adapted to

squadron life. This process was more or less difficult depending on one's personality and attitude. His fervor to "get on with the job" and his intense analytical approach to things may have caused some to regard him less serious, but he was sincere and slowly his comrades realized it and knew he could be depended on when it came to the fight.

His arrival at Debden coincided with the transfer of the three Eagle Sqds. en masse to the USAAF as the newly activated Fourth Fighter Group. Not adverse to joining the AAF, he relinquished his RCAF commission on September 23 and became newly commissioned as a 1st Lieutenant in the AAF. No. 71 Sqd. became the 334th Ftr. Sqd. and the Spitfires got U.S. markings, while the pilots donned the brown uniform and put their RAF wings over the right pocket. Maj. Gregory Daymond took over as Sqd. CO.

Finally the longed-for day arrived, the first combat mission. It was a diversionary sweep around Dieppe, France, in Spit BL422 XR-J that lasted 1:40 hours. Duane wrote in his logbook, "We didn't see a thing." Eight days later he helped "beat-up" (buzz) J.C. Harrington's wedding party. The second mission came on September 21 (BL346-B)* when they rendezvoused with six Venturas and took them north from Selsey Bill over the sea. Low ceiling caused an abortive escort to Bostons from Selsey Bill on the 25th. (BL422-J)

No doubt about his offensive spirit remaining after November 6 (W3636-C) when he returned from what was to be a simple gun test firing. Since no one told him "where" to test them, he flew across to Knocke, Belgium, and fired them into a German lorry and a gunpost, returning with two shellholes through his railplane. Two days later (AD127-F) Duane fretted because the many FW-190's they saw above them on a rear support to Calais, France, wouldn't come down and fight. On the 11th, he helped patrol London at 12,000 feet while Mrs. Roosevelt and Churchill had lunch below. At the end of November his new A Flt. CO, Capt. Dick McMinn, signed his monthly log total of 14:30 hours, of which 2:55 hours were actual combat time. While this was a snippet compared to the days ahead, valuable experience was being gathered that showed up when it was really needed.

The ETO weather delayed his next offensive flight until December 11 (AD464-L) when Stan Anderson and Duane used the atmospheric "crud" to hide their two-man Rhubarb sortie to Knocke/Ostend, Belgium, where they machine-gunned Nazi troops on a parade ground before hightailing it home. The next day (AB899-J) he spent 1:35 hours escorting a Circus (bomber attack to draw up enemy aircraft to fight) of AAF Liberators to Abbeville, France, but the Hun refused to play. His fourth convoy patrol off Clacton on the 29th (AD464-L) brought the month's flight time to 8:20 hours.

January 13, 1943, marked Duane's first double-show day. On the first one (AD464-L) they saw some light Flak escorting Bostons to St. Omer, France, at 13,000 feet. On the second show (AD464-L), a rear support to B-17's over Dunkirk, France, he disgustedly notes, "100-plus 190's above behind Calais, no attack!" Two days later he was temporarily transferred for operations only, to 335FS as 334FS became an OTU unit to train the 4th pilots to fly the new P-47 Thunderbolt being debuted into 8AF service by the group. January 18, Duane shot down a stray barrage balloon. From the 20th to the 26th, Lt. Beeson com-

*Denotes serial no. and code letter of a/c flown on mission from here on.



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- 1 Approximately 1928; Duane Beeson and his sister, Elizabeth, at the ages of approximately 7 and 2 years. (Zelda Beeson)
- 2 November, 1942; Duane admires the 20mm punch packed by Spit named "Stinky." Since he was not senior enough at this date to rate naming his aircraft, it is doubtful the craft was his. (Edward Hedrick)
- 3 September, 1942; Sgt. John DeKay, 334FS intelligence section, poses by an XR coded Spit VB such as Duane is now flying. (John DeKay)
- 4 February, 1943; Duane flew this 335FS Spit VB AV-J AB974 on several occasions when he was detached to the sister squadron during P-47 conversion days. (Edward Hedrick)
- 5 Late February, 1942; Carl and Zelda Beeson flank their son Duane, who is home on his first leave from the RCAF. He proudly sports his new pilot's wings. (Zelda Beeson)

pleted a gunnery flight course involving all manner of attack situations.

A bomber escort he flew February 2 turned back at the French coast due to weather. Some 190's were seen at a distance and a Ventura bomber went down on a close escort to St. Omer, France, on the 3rd (AB974-AV-J). The next show was a milk-run sweep to St. Omer, France, on the 19th (AB975-AV-A). Heavy flak too darned close almost knocked him down in the same aircraft when they escorted Venturas to bomb a merchant raider in Dunkirk harbor on the 26th.

March began with a fighter sweep to St. Omer, France, where plotted e/a could not be found on the 9th (AB975-AV-A). March 12 (AV-A) was a quiet sweep to Rouen, France. Another sweep the next day (AV-A) to Dieppe, France, was a "grand and glorious Balls Up by the Forts! They got lost and went to the wrong place." There were no combat operations for Duane for awhile, because his DS to 335FS ended on the 22nd and he returned to 334FS to convert to the P-47. He made no comment about his first Jug hop in 41-6195 "95" that same day. As was his way, he preferred to study all the angles and then reach a calculated decision about the P-47's merits and faults. Not so with others in the 4th, who openly deprecated the bird as a bad idea. Several pilots refused to fly it and were taken off flight status.

Duane's P-47 training progressed slowly and he only managed an hour or so each day through most of April. Luckily he avoided the troubles others had with the Jug—crashes, dead-stick landings from altitude, midair engine fires, bailouts, gear collapses on the runway, etc. Pilots were both injured and killed trying to get the Jug operational for the first time in the ETO.

The first Jug combat show was March 10, but Duane's first show with it (QP-C) did not come until April 29 on a sweep to St. Omer, which he called "a Cook's Tour of France." He took the same aircraft on May 3 and commented, "Squadrons split up in cloud over Flushing, balls up." The next day (QP-L) they escorted 80 Forts out of Antwerp, Belgium, and lost Pappy Lutz in the Channel. Sweeps on the 7th (J) and 16th (G) were "bus runs." Then came the magical day he had worked over 23 months for—his first aerial victory over an enemy pilot. At 5:02 P.M. on May 18, Duane was at 35,000 feet in QP-1 41-6212 over the North Sea off Blankenberghe, Belgium, in a clear blue sky. He was Jim Clark's wingman on the way home, when a dozen ME109's were spotted climbing up behind them from the east, with another small group closing from the North slightly below. The flight with Duane as "ass-end Charlie" broke back into the ones coming from the east and in the dive, two more 109's came at Jim and Duane from the left side. The two 334FS pilots turned into them and Jim fired at one which dived towards Ostend. Duane got on his tail from a high-speed dive inland east of Ostend at about 3,000 feet. He hit the Hun with short bursts in the fuselage and wings until he was point-blank and then broke off. The Hun's engine exploded and he dove at the ground. The 109 pilot bailed at 100 feet before the crash. A brush with light flak as he sped home could not have dampened his spirits on this evening. He had finally crossed swords and found that he could win.

An escort, the 19th (G), to Holland was uneventful, as was a sweep on the 25th (A). The May 28 sweep to Walcheran Island, Belgium, brought changes. Duane had a new aircraft, QP-B

42-7890, and a new command as White 3, element leader, in Bill O'Regan's B Flight. A 31st (B) sweep to Ypres, Belgium, was quiet.

The first week of June was spent with his new crew chief, S/Sgt. Willard Wahl, getting QP-B tested and brought up to operational status. Then he took the kite on an hour and a half show to Walcheran, Belgium, on the 11th. Bad weather on the 15th aborted a show from Tangmere, U.K. They saw lots of Spitfires, but no Huns on the 17th (B). June 26 (B) he was Green 3 and in the luck. His section chased some ME109's inland from the coast near Dieppe, France, but lost them. Coming back out across the coast alone, Duane ran into two 109's with a P-47 attached to one of them. The other came at Duane, who stalled after a head-on pass and got on the Hun's tail in a vertical dive. The P-47 easily caught him up so that Duane's fire hit him at close range. The yellow-nosed 109 flamed in the engine and streamed heavy smoke. Duane overshot him at 3,000 feet and only barely missed hitting the sea in his pullout. Looking back in the Hun's direction, all he could see was a large disturbance in the sea where the 109 dove in. The fight used 400 rounds of API ammo from QP-B's wingtrays, and took place at 7:00 P.M. with five-tenths cloud at 6,000 feet.

June 28 (B) found him flying out of Warmwell, an advance base on the coast. The next day they flew out of Thorney Island (B), another coastal base. The coastal bases allowed the group to achieve greater range, the lack of which was the P-47's biggest shortcoming. The two shows were to French coastal regions around Dieppe and Guincamp that were quite distant from Debden.

The first of July (B) on a sweep to Cayeux, France, he remarked, "One 109 came head-on through the squadron. Everyone was too damn surprised to shoot!" The U.S. birthday was occupied with an abortive escort (B) to Fecamp, France, which precluded a series of uneventful shows for "Pecktin 51" as Duane was known in squadron callsign. These shows were flown on July 6 (B), 9 (B), 10 (Q), 16 (B), 17 (B), and 26 (Q). The latter date also brought the award of his first significant "Gong," the DFC, in recognition of his 37 missions and 2 victories. On the 27th he took QP-Z on a B-26 escort to Dieppe, France, while his "B" was being fitted with the new 200-gallon belly tanks with which 8FC hoped to increase fighter escort range for the shepherding of the bombers.

The 4th FG achieved a truly historic pioneering feat on the 28th (B), when it became the first 8AF fighter group to penetrate German airspace. The first combat use of the new belly tanks permitted escort to Emmerich, Germany. On the withdrawal about 30 miles east of Rotterdam, Netherlands, the group came upon bombers being attacked by Hun fighters. Leading Blue Section, Hank Mills dove from 21,000 feet with Duane in the Blue 3 slot, on e/a below at two o'clock. Duane spotted a single ME109 bouncing the section in the dive from 9 o'clock and turned into him. He got on his tail and closed to 75 yards firing. QP-B's eight .50s hit the Hun all over, blew off his left wingtip, exploded his engine cowl, and left him in a smoke streamer for the ground. As Duane climbed back to Blue Section covering him above, Bud Care shot an FW190 off Duane's tail, making the Hun hit the silk abandoning his bird. A few minutes later Duane bounced an FW190 out of the sun as the Hun was heading for the bombers. Before the e/a got out of



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- 1 April, 1943; Duane's fellow sqd. mates pose by a new sqd. P-47. Left to right: A. Bunte, V. Boehle, D. Booth, R. Care, and C.D. Smith. Two were POWs, two went home okay, and one was KIA. (Edward Hedrick)
- 2 July 28, 1943; the first ETO belly tank show and the first escort into Germany takes off. Hank Mills QP-Q struggles for height lugging the bulbous 200-gallon tank. (Edward Hedrick)
- 3 Date unknown; a rather poor, but nonetheless rare picture of a 121 Sqd. (Eagle) Spit VB in flight. 121 was a sister to Duane's 71 Eagle Squadron when he joined them in their last RAF days. (Don Young)
- 4 London, 1942; Duane's fellow RCAF American pilots on leave in the big city. Left, Nick Megura, later Duane's famous wingman, and Right, Larry Gray, later a fellow 334FS mate. (Nick Megura)
- 5 July, 1943; 334FS commander, Oscar Coen, as crews fit new belly tank. Oscar is just back from recuperative leave in the U.S. Broke some bones bailing out of burning P-47 during changeover to Jug. (Edward Hedrick)



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range Duane put strikes into his left wing. Thus this noontime "kill" put Duane in the lead as the 4FG's top AAF period victor (surviving). His two other sqd. mates with three victories each, Boock and Anderson, were now dead in combat. While some pilots bemoaned their fate in flying the Jug, Duane was proving by his study and insight that it was possible to best the wily Hun with it after all. Not content with their day's record of nine kills, the 4th sent Duane off on a quiet sweep to Gravelines, France (B). A sweep the next day to Ghent, Belgium (B), netted nothing. The belly ranks went back on for another long show to Emmerich, Germany, on the 30th (B), which saw 334FS's bombers not attacked. 335FS got five kills anyway. The 2:25-hour ride brought Duane's flight time up to 558 hours.

The advent of the belly tank brought a new condition to the ETO fighter war that would continue until VE Day. Now the German Air Force was forced to fight over its home ground, if they wished to stop the bombers. This was what Duane and the rest of the 4th pilots were waiting for, an end to the Hun's hit and run. Now he had to stand and slug it out on the spot, and the hunt promised the reward of game in their sights. Even if it meant long hours of cold high flight with oxygen on a hard dingy pack, Duane and the others were eager for the fight. August 12 (B) was a rear support to Sittard, Germany, of 2:25 hours. They bounced 15-plus ME109's at rendezvous, but the Hun Duane fired at got away okay. He had an even worse piece of luck when he went on leave August 16. The boys took the Forts to Paris and shot down 18, of which his B Flight got 8. He wished he'd been there. The next two escorts on the 17th and 19th were pretty quiet (2-B), as was a short haul to Lille, France, on the 27th (B). Briefing on the afternoon of the 31st (B) held the hope of engagement as they were again going to Paris, but 9-10/10ths cloud messed up the show.

September started out with four ramrods (bomber escort) on the 3rd, 6th, 7th, and 9th (4-B) that left no mention in the log. On the 15th (B) Duane saw two Forts die in flames over Paris due to heavy flak. Duane's 65th sortie on August 23 was a ramrod to Nantes, France (B). 334FS bounced a section of Huns in cloud over Paris on the 26th (B), but lost them in heavy vapor trails. Maj. Jim Clark, squadron CO, paid Duane a worthy compliment on the 25th, when he promoted him to the duty of squadron Gunnery Officer. Thus his study and shooting skill were acknowledged within the unit.

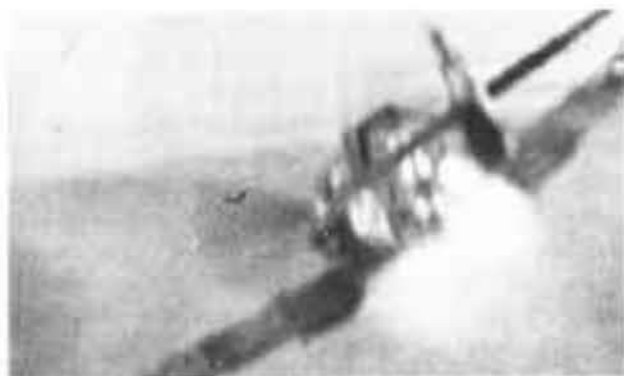
The first day of October heralded news of fame to come. He was awarded the Silver Star for his three victories and one damaged in four encounters with the enemy. The next afternoon on the 2nd, L/Col. Blakeslee led the 4th and Duane off the runway at Hardwich, the forward base, to escort B-17's to Emden, Germany. At 4:00 P.M. Duane was White 3 of Pecktin (334) sqd. sweeping out to the front of the lead bomber box east of Wilhelmshaven, Germany. He spotted a Staffel of FW190's below positioning themselves for a head-on pass through the bombers. Since they were attacking, Duane took the bounce on them as he R/T'ed their attack. Pulling in behind their tight gaggle, he was spotted and the Huns broke in several directions. Once he was satisfied they weren't boxing him in, he tagged onto their tail-end Charlie as they split-ess for the deck and began to give him bursts. Pulling up to 150 yards, he hit the Hun in the cockpit and engine in the dive. The Hun jettisoned his canopy as large chunks of his FW were blown off. As he was getting too low,

Duane broke off and climbed back to the rest of the squad, rejoining them on the left side of the bombers. Deacon Hively reported a parachute in the position of the departed Hun which could not have come from the bombers, so the Hun evidently made his bailout okay. The Victory Credit Board No. 16 decided this was the case and awarded the kill to Duane.

Another sign of things to come took place the next day when Duane got in 45 minutes' time with a P-51B Mustang which was on DS with 334FS to do some tests. His comment on this first try with the aircraft was, "A very sweet a/c." October 8 (B) found Duane leading Green section at 2:55 P.M. under high cirrus cloud in the Meppel, Netherlands, area by the Zuider Zee. As the sqd. came up behind the bombers at about 23,000 feet, 30-plus ME109's were sighted above trying to get into the sun to bounce the squad. 334FS turned to outposition the Huns, but then Duane spotted two other 109's sneaking in behind Blue Section. He called for them to break, but one ME was already firing into C.D. Smith, who went down on fire. Duane's violent turn put him on the tail of Smith's victor, where he began clobbering him at 200 yards. His strikes hit the Hun in the left wing root, then flames and smoke came out of his engine. The Hun slowly turned over with his prop windmilling and glided downward. Duane then broke off and took a good look around to clear himself. He saw a parachute which was probably C.D. Smith. Lt. Fraser, Duane's wingman, saw another one which he felt came from the 109 Duane got. Just then Duane was forced to deal with two more 109's coming down from above. He put strikes into one at 45 degrees head-on. A bit later the section was coming out across the coast at 19,000 feet when a lone ME109 stooged by in front with "his finger well up." Duane closed up to 150 yards and shot him down, observing him crash and explode on the ground.

When Lt. Beeson landed back at Debden at 3:50 P.M., he was no longer the same. From that moment on he had joined the ranks of those immortal aviators who proudly bore the appellation of "fighter ace." His sixth victory placed him with 11 other top 8AF pilots bearing that distinction. It also made him the first WW2 4FG ace. It was also a semi-victory for the P-47. Duane had shown them that it was a fine aircraft which not only brought you home when heavily damaged, but that it would outfight Hun aircraft. The intense lad with a passion to "get at Huns," had outshot and outflown the older experienced Eagle vets in that "suicide" Jug! Some gave partial credit to his gunnery contraption which he practiced on constantly in the 334FS shack. It was rigged up with a seat, stick, foot pedals, gunsight, and model plane target, with its main part being a bicycle wheel.

October 10 (B) the group made its deepest penetration to Munster, Germany. Duane bounced an FW190 with Archie Chatterly, but it got away damaged. On the 18th (B) they did a sweep when the bombers didn't show. His section brought a crippled Fort home on the 20th (B). His wingman, Nick Megura, was bounced by friendly P-47's and shot up. The squad was jumped by Huns over the Zuider Zee on November 3 (B) and lost two pilots killed. November 5 (B) they caught a lot of flak over the infamous Ruhr on a trip to Dortmund, Germany, that stretched their gas out fine. November 10 (B) was a fighter "do" at 12,000 feet—"too damn low!" Armistice Day (B) was a ramrod to Wesel, Germany, where the R/V didn't take place.



- 1 Spring, 1943; Duane's sqd. mate, Vic France, poses by his QP-K "Miss Dallas." The aircraft crewchief, S/Sgt. Don Allen, was the artist responsible for Duane's "Boise Bee" emblem and many, many other art in 334FS. (Don Allen)
- 2 Probably July 28, 1943; this is doubtless a frame of Duane's gun-camera film from the historic first belly-tank show, where he dispatched an ME109 in his style of short-range shooting. (John Romack)
- 3 July, 1943; 334FS ground crews await the mission's return in the squad pilot's shack. Fun was dropping a dingy flare down the chimney. (Leroy Nitschke)
- 4 July-August, 1943; 4FG Jugs roll to the runway very gingerly, trying not to break the fragile glass elbow piping of their "Babies" or belly tanks. (Larry Hendel)
- 5 March, 1943; Armament Sgt. L. Nitschke poses with a very early example of 334FS Jug noseart. Note early serial number cowl lip marking. (Leroy Nitschke)

No Forts again on the 13th (B), with 150-mph headwinds coming home. November 29 (B) a couple of intrepid 109's attacked 15-plus P-47's. Duane tagged onto one and chased him down to claim a probable destroyed. The next day (B) he led Red Section which came home alone after not finding the bombers.

Back home Duane was in the spotlight. 4FG PR Off. Grover Hall's press releases were being columned in hometown and national papers. A new "Ace" was always good copy and it brought the luster of glory with it. The folks at home on Orchard Street in Boise received a letter from the Governor of Idaho saying, "Idaho is mighty proud of her ace pilot, etc., etc., relay to him this message of our pride in his valor and heroism." A bundle of new clippings were added to the scrapbook his father was keeping on him. His success in the group brought new recognition and responsibilities. On November 15, Col. Peterson and Lt/Col. Blakeslee assigned Duane the duty of Group Gunnery Officer. Upon this new job, a check of his records showed that he would have to be detached to undergo a gunnery instructor's course before he could fill his duties as group instructor. There were those in 334FS who felt this was a stratagem to remove Duane for awhile so that other pilots could catch up in the scoring race, since his nearest rival was some ways back. In any event, it did little to even things as only a half-dozen kills took place while he was away, and Don Gentile only got one-third of a kill in that time.

So the first of December found him flying with Doc Blackburn and Vic France in the group Fairchild back to the RAF Central Gunnery School at Sutton Bridge. The one-month course was run by the famous W/Cdr. Al Deere, and it gave him a chance to pit his skills against RAF notables such as Johnny Checketts. Duane finished the course on January 12, 1944, with some 40 more hours of Spitfire time and received the highest mark of A, above average instructor and marksman.

January 14 (B) he was back in the saddle as the new C Flight Commander leading Green Section on a free-lance to Soissons, France. 334FS was at 28,000 feet in good visibility near Soissons, when approximately a dozen FW190's were spotted 8,000 feet below diving eastward. Duane was always extra quick in the bounce and he was first to catch up to the rear four 190's with about 100 mph closing speed in the dive. He inadvertently flew through Bud Care's opening burst and received some friendly 50-calibre shells in his port wingtip as a result. Firing from 250 down to 50 yards, he overshot the Hun and pulled up over him into the sun. His bursts staggered the Hun with mortal strikes in the wing root and fuselage by the cockpit. A large hole in the Hun's canopy was noted as he went by him. The enemy pilot was probably dead then, as the FW fell off in a dive, rolling on his back, and exploding into the ground on impact. The time was 3:20 P.M. in a low winter haze over the French countryside, as 10 columns of black smoke rose from the remains of the group's victories that day.

Two dull trips to Beauvais, France, and Aachen, Germany (B) each consumed 2:45 hours on the 21st and 24th. January 29 (B) was a ramrod for B-17's to Aachen, Germany. The sqd. was returning along the bomber track at 11:00 A.M. over thick cloud below at 3,000 feet near Aachen. The visibility was 100 miles on top. Approximately 15 mixed 190's and 109's were sighted near the bombers and Pecktin sqd. dove to attack them as the e/a dived. Duane noticed six more ME109's coming in to get on the

tails of 334FS in the dive. He and his wingman, Archie Chatterly, turned into these new Huns, but not before one shot a hole through Duane's tailplane. Coming out of the turn, the Huns made their usual fatal mistake and went into a dive, giving Duane a tail-shot at the nearest one. He poured in armor-piercing incendiary ammo, closing to 50 yards. Very severe strikes exploded on the Jerry's fuselage and wing root, when a large flash in the cockpit area flicked the aircraft violently to the right. When last seen the Hun was trailing a long stream of grey/black smoke straight down through the 10/10ths cloud below.

Duane cleared himself and noted that he had lost his wingman in the chase. Then he spotted a fight far below and was starting down towards it when he saw a diving aircraft off to the right. Going over to investigate, it was a yellow-tailed FW190 with a belly tank slung under it. Duane closed slowly in the dive out of the sun and fired a burst to try and slow up the Hun. At 3,000 feet they dove into cloud. When they burst out below it, Duane was 300 yards behind and opening fire. Many strikes on the e/a's fuselage made it drop its nose at 200 feet and smash into the ground. The "zoom" pull-up to 5,000 feet placed Duane in the midst of 335FS "Greenbelt" and he rode home with them. Higher authority decided he had been courageous in tackling the six ME109's bouncing 334FS in the dive and he was awarded the DSC for that action.

The 30th of January he took QP-C on a ramrod, but no bombers showed up. The 4FG made its first venture into dive-bombing tactics the next day, January 31. Duane and his QP-B BOISE BEE were part of the top cover for Pecktin sqd. at 2:55 P.M. near Gilze/Rijen A/D, Netherlands, above a low haze. Orbiting the target and bombing P-47's below, his section spied 20-plus ME109's ready to bounce them from above. He dived after a lone 109 which was in a dive to attack the lower P-47's. The Hun spotted him, but started his turn into Duane too late. After flicking out several times, Duane was on his tail. The Hun began to climb, but Duane's strikes in his cockpit and engine caused the Hun to fall off into a dive. Smoke and flame came out of the right side of the e/a engine covering the fuselage in fire. Joe Lang, Duane's wingman, observed the flaming 109 to dive vertically into the ground. With this tenth victory, Duane now joined the ranks of the "Double-Ace."

On February 3 (B) the logbook notes, "Penetration support to Emden, Germany, for the Libs, heavy cloud, no bombers." The main comment for February 4 (B), a B-17 escort to Frankfurt, Germany, was that the flak was very good near the Ruhr. A Type 16 area cover to the Paris neighborhood on the 5th (B) was uneventful for Duane. In the "Gong" department, he was awarded a second Oak Leaf Cluster to his DFC this day. Romilly, near Paris, was the target the next day, the 6th (B). Elements of the group got in a mix-up with some FW190's, but it was over before Duane could join in. After landing, he learned he'd been promoted to Captain. Two days later (B) they took the Forts back to Frankfurt, Germany. February 12 (B) was another Type 16 to the Paris area. Sortie No. 80 for Duane was the infrequent fighter sweep to Amiens-Rouen, France, on the 15th (B).

After almost a month of drought for Duane, his luck changed on the 20th (B). The scene was near Aachen, Germany, at 3:00 P.M. He was Green Section lead as usual, which was pulling contrails in escort curves above the B-17's. The bombers were flying



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1 Summer, 1943; 334FS's B Flight poses by Sqd. CO Coen's QP-V. Left to right: W. Sobanski, V. Boehle, D. Booth, B Flight CO W. O'Regan, S. Pisanos, Duane Beeson. Kneeling: R. Douglas and R. Priser. (Edward Hedrick)

2 Fall, 1943; 4FG P-47's converge at the east runway start-line to take off by twos for a show. 334FS is about off, as 336FS waits on the grass next to the macadam. (USAF Photo)

3 October 8, 1943; the 4FG's first WW2 ace, Lt. Duane Beeson, poses by the nose of his P-47 QP-B "Boise Bee," for his official photo by the Group photographer to send off to the newspapers back home. (Zelda Beeson)

in the clear over solid cloud at 5,000 feet far below. First the sqd. sighted some e/a coming for the bombers from their 5 o'clock below and dived for them. Duane's section spotted two FW190's off below at 7 o'clock coming in and turned for them. After several dive and zoom attempts at the maneuvering FW's, Duane was able to close on the FW wingman after his leader split-essed for the deck. Firing down to 100 yards, he bracketed the FW in the fuselage. As Duane overshot him (he always kept his speed in an attack as a safeguard against the unseen foe), the FW pulled straight up and bailed after dumping his hood. Jim Goodson was all set to blast him just as he bailed and was able to fully confirm the kill.

Bad weather caused the bombers to be escorted to abort on the 22nd. The show was repeated on the 24th (B) and the weather didn't stop the flak from being excellent over Koblenz, Germany. February 25 (B) was the climax of the 8AF's renowned BIG WEEK, the fifth major attack in six days to roar across Germany in the maximum effort to knock out the GAF's production. Duane was glad he could claim one of the 59 e/a destroyed that day, but no doubt even sorrier that he wasn't able to save one of the 30 bombers lost in the giant air battle. 334FS was assigned to penetration support along the bomber track this day. As they approached the leading box of Fortresses at 25,000 feet near Beckingen, Germany, at about 12:45 P.M., Blue 1, Bud Care, spotted bandits off at 3 o'clock level. Turning to check it, Peckin Green Section discerned four FW190's ganging up on a lone straggling B-17. The Fort fell into a spiral as the vultures circled around, but spying the escort falling on them, they split up. Duane picked one turning and missing in his first burst, he used his zoom speed to get height on the Hun, who then dove for the deck. Duane followed the Hun to the ground, where they circled a small town and then as the FW leveled out along a small stream bed, he hit him good in the fuselage. The Hun's right wheel dropped down as he headed for the ground. Duane overshot at this point, but Archie Chatterly and Shel Monroe watched the Hun do a couple of spirals and explode in a storage tankyard in flames and black smoke. Hopefully the victory was some consolation to the eight or nine American bomber crewmen hanging in their parachutes as the P-47's climbed past them to resume the mission.

The next couple of days were momentous hours for the 4FG. Col. Don had finally won his pleas to have the group re-equipped with the newer North American Mustang P-51B, which several other groups were having notable success with. The long-legged inline-engined thoroughbred was the perfect blend of Anglo-American technology that provided a fighter capable of escorting to the limit of penetration. No one was going to beat Don Blakeslee out of the victory-claim flush such a capacity as that ensured. Chilled and thrilled by the impending "Grand Hunt" promised by the Mustangs and Blakeslee, the pilots and ground crews worked non-stop to inspect and test-hop the kites. Not only did Capt. Beeson have the task of familiarizing himself with a new type aircraft virtually overnight, but somewhere in the process he also became the latest CO of B Flight. He thoughtfully retained his trusted wingman, Nick Megura. Duane knew the odds were tough enough up there and he appreciated the added security of a top-notch wingman he could count on to be there looking after his tail, so he could concentrate on shooting. If the truth be known, numerous were the

WW2 pilots who suddenly found themselves alone with a gaggle of Huns as the rest of the friendlies beat it for the deck, the clouds, and home in the face of superior odds. A good wingman was guarded as a prize.

Duane also knew the value of a master crewchief and his faithful S/Sgt. Willard Wahl reflected that judgment. They became an inseparable team way back early in '43, when Duane was assigned QP-B. As a young lad, Sgt. Wahl had worked in his dad's garage and later as a knitting machine repairman. Then the Civil Service paid him \$300 a month to go to school and become an aircraft engineer. Uncle Sam snatched him two weeks prior to graduation. He skipped the Air Force schools and was shipped straight to England after his three months' basic training. Wahl was extremely proud of his pilot's exploits and no amount of care was spared their kite. The testimony of that fact is that Duane flew virtually all his sorties with QP-B and an abort was almost unknown.

The third part of the Beeson success trio was of course, BOISE BEE, his nicknamed aircraft QP-B. There were two of them, first the P-47D 42-7890 which was called BOISE BEE, and the second, the P-51B 43-6819, which was only called BEE. Both aircraft carried the emblem Duane designed. He was a pretty fair artist himself, and even penned the emblem in ink for his personal letterhead when he was at Debden. The emblem which was painted on both of his planes by S/Sgt. Don Allen, 334FS, was a bumblebee in AAF cap, Mae West, and RAF flying boots. The Bee was levelling two revolvers and had a dagger in its boot. It stood on a cloud base with a blue shield behind it and the name BEE underneath. Lightning bolts shot from the stinger. The BOISE was omitted on the P-51B and slight variation occurred in the BEE and cloud base between the two emblems. Duane also had a BEE name and emblem of bee eyes and antennae painted on the forehead of his flying helmet. In early April the P-51B had 20 black/white kill crosses on the cowl aft of the emblem. He was assigned the P-47 on June 26, 1943, and the P-51B on February 26, 1944, at which time the Jug was transferred to another unit. Both aircraft were painted in the standard AAF ETO colors of their period.

Thus on February 26, Duane and Wahl received a new P-51B from the hangar crew and immediately began to inspect and test hop the aircraft to locate possible "Gremlins" prior to ops. flying it. The artwork emblem was not painted on it until sometime in middle March. Right then the pressure was on to get the sqd. and group ready for their first show on the 28th, a bare couple of days off.

At 1:10 P.M. on the 28th, Duane gunned his new Mustang QP-B down the west runway on Field Order 254, a free-lance patrol to Compiegne, France, as part of the first 4FG P-51 show of WW2. He was luckier than a good number of pilots in that he did not have to abort with some sort of malfunction and he finished the full mission. At approximately 3:00 P.M., he and three other pilots located an enemy airdrome near Soissons. They dropped to the deck to strafe a JU-88, which they left burning brightly. All four shared the ground victory. Duane's comment after the show about the P-51 was, "Very sweet a/c!"

The next few days were spent getting the newfound bugs out of the Mustang. He was not scheduled to fly on the 3rd of March and missed the epic fight of 9 4FG pilots alone in bad weather, who had to fight wildly to survive over 100-plus Huns who

bounced them after the rest of the group aborted the show. He made sure he was on the flight board for the first 4FG escort to Berlin, Germany, on the 4th (B), though. However, after being airborne over an hour outbound, his radio conked out and he had to miss the 4FG's pioneer first fighter escort of bombers across the great Nazi capital. As the new assistant sqd. operations officer effective from March 1, he posted himself for the next in the series of "Firsts" the 4th was racking up these days. This was a March 5 (B) deep escort as target support beyond Bordeaux, France, just a sample for the Jerries of the Mustang's seven-league boots. At 11:55 P.M. he found himself 60 miles south of Bordeaux above 7/10ths cloud, in the lead of 334FS after Col. Blakeslee aborted. As the bombers turned for home off the bomb run, a half-dozen ME109's went through their combat boxes. Duane took the bounce on them and exchanged several head-on passes with the aggressive Huns. As more Mustangs arrived the ME's dove and Duane was able to latch onto one's tail by virtue of keeping his speed high in the fighting. He and Steve Pisanos cut out some other P-51's and closed to minus-100 yards, getting good strikes on the two Huns. Duane's ME began to smoke quite badly and as he overshot the enemy pilot bailed out. This was by no means the end of the shooting.

Orbiting at 7,000 feet, he reformed the sqd. and climbed to 12,000 feet on a heading which took them over an alerted airfield near Bordeaux that was fat with sitting e/a targets, but too dangerous to strafe. However, 60 miles north of Bordeaux, another drome hove into view and the sqd. went down on the deck and approached indicating about 400 mph. Duane fired some bursts into a parked FW200, but it didn't burn. A little flak was spraying and as he crossed the far boundary of the drome, a burst caught his QP-B right in the vertical stabilizer. The 20mm shell blew out about 2 1/2 square feet of fin tip surface and threw the Mustang on its side. Duane fought to regain control and check his gauges for damage. Still airborne, he throttled

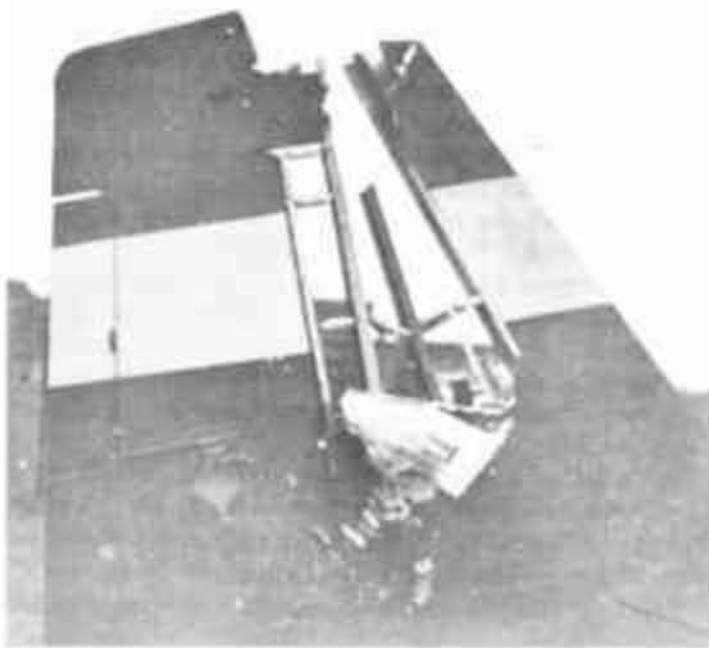
back and found that hard left rudder kept the kite on an even keel. Ken Peterson and Chuck Carr escorted him for three hours as he strained his leg trying to keep the bucking rudder under control. After the safe landing, a photographer snapped a picture of a weary but thankful Capt. Beeson viewing the shredded tail feathers of his aircraft. He had reason to appreciate the Mustang's great range this day. He had been airborne 6 hours and 20 minutes! The mobile repair unit had the aircraft rebuilt and back on ops. by the 9th. While he rested his leg, Duane took over as Squadron Operations Officer. He was okay on the 8th when he took Megura's QP-N to Berlin. 334FS got five kills, but Duane returned early empty-handed with a bum a/c. Duane must have been forced at his time to reflect on how much longer his luck was going to hold out. The advent of the P-51 had sorely hit the 4th with losses due to failures in the aircraft and in the heavy fighting due to increased range. His good pal since Ternhill days, Hank Mills, had gone down on the big Berlin raid of the 6th. Far too many of the "Old Heads" were now "buying a packer" in one form or the other. Nerves were getting tense and vocal were the doubts about the Mustang's bugs, an "experimental a/c" as one ex-4th'er called it to this author.

The scoring race increased in earnest, as it became clear that soon an ETO pilot might reach the magic total of victories Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker scored in WW1 and thus become the top American Ace. A "first" such as that would ensure the winner of a position in aerial history. Small wonder there developed an intense rivalry between the high-scoring aces in the 4th and the ETO. The race was abetted by numerous correspondents waiting in England for D-Day and they descended on Debden during the month. The Rickenbacker record was probably incidental to Duane. He was really battling his own limitations in his quest to be the very best at anything he set his hands and mind to. He saw the downing of Hun fighters mainly as a shortening of the war and the prevention of his pals and the bomber boys being killed.

Duane's closest 4FG scorer was Don Gentile, who had 12 kills by March 8. As the Beeson-Gentile "Horse Race" built up, the rival sqds. laid bets from day to day on the show's scoring leader. It also gave other 4th pilots incentive to build their own scores. Faulty Mustangs or not, as one 4th pilot told this writer, "We all lived to get on the next show." For a good many, it was the "last show."

Sgt. Wahl had BEE on the board for the show of March 9, a target support deal over Berlin. The 5:45-hour trip was summed up in Duane's cryptic note, "10/10ths cloud—quiet show—couldn't get lined up on one—L/Col. Edner missing." No shows were flown for the next week due to various reasons, numerous glycol leaks in the aircraft, motor mount defects, spark plug fouling problems, and bad weather. The aircraft were in the hangars and while there, each including QP-B, received the new red nose coloring that became the 4th's famous aerial recognition marking. March 15 was a red-letter day for Duane, who was promoted 334FS commander (Peckin Leader) as Jim Clark moved up to Grp. Ops. Officer.

Col. Blakeslee reached Munich, Germany, with only six aircraft of the whole group on March 18. 334FS with Duane at the head were not with them as they were successfully mixed up with ME109's on the way in. It happened east of Mannheim, Ger-



March 5, 1944; the flak-blasted vertical stabilizer of Duane's QP-B as seen late in the day after his safe return from the Bordeaux strafing. A sign of the times in the 4th. (A4FGWW2)

many, between two thick layers of cloud at 17 and 10,000 feet at about 1:35 P.M. Sighting nine ME109's right below the sqd., Duane called the bounce and they dropped on the bandits, cutting loose their wingtanks at the same time. Picking one which was darting in and out of cloud, Bee's second burst hit the ME's belly tank and it blew up in his face. He plunged through a ball of flame and pieces of the ME109 hit his aircraft. The heat was noticeable in Duane's cockpit. Archie Chatterly said the ME turned on its back and fell into the cloud burning. After chasing the other ME109's through the clouds and watching one get downed by its own flak gunners, he reformed the sqd. and came home to file claims.

While QP-B was under repair from its scorching, Duane took QP-Y on March 21 for an hour and a half towards Bordeaux, before he was forced to abort the show. The rest of the 4th flamed 21 enemy aircraft. The next day he returned from a 5:05-hour ride to Berlin in QP-B, rather bewildered that he didn't see one Hun. Log comment was, "No Huns up, what's wrong with them?" His post-mission remark made the national newspapers back home several days later as, "'Can't do business with Hitler,' says Flier."

The pickings improved 24 hours later on the 23rd (B). He wrote, "I got two 109's and damaged a train. Had a hell of a fight with one of them. Lots of fun!" The fun began at 11:05 A.M. east of Munster, Germany, with clear sky above and below a 7/10ths cloud layer at 6,000 feet. Duane's own words can tell it best: "I was flying White 1 as we made a starboard turn near Hanover and sighted a box of bombers west of us. As we approached them we could see that they were heavily under attack, and I saw several bombers going down, one in flames, another minus a wing. P-38's could be seen circling above and around the bomber formation. There were many e/a around and then an ME109 made a head-on pass through our sqd., circling around behind as though to come in again, so I turned after him. He dived to about 12,000 feet and as I started to close on him, he suddenly pulled up into a steep climb, so I opened everything and went after him. Closed slightly at first, then fell back a little between 15 and 18,000 feet, where I operated the 2nd blower manually to get full boost and was able to close again. At about 25,000 feet, was in range and got good strikes on him, he began to smoke and dived for cloud at 6,000 feet. I got on his tail as he came out of cloud and clobbered him again, but he stuck to his a/c and crash-landed in a field. I strafed the a/c on the ground, but as I came around again, I saw the engine beginning to flame and the pilot getting out of the cockpit. He ran very fast across the field and fell behind a fence post as I came over again.

"Made a pass at a freight train and got good strikes on the locomotive. Climbed to cloud level at 3,000 feet and saw an ME109 flying with its wheels down so turned after him, but he went into cloud. Saw tracers going past my port wing, so made a quick break to starboard and saw another 109 behind. He pulled up into cloud and as I came around in the turn he dived down, allowing me to get on his tail. Fired short bursts and saw many flashes, and he jettisoned his hood, so I fired again, got more strikes and oil from the e/a covered my windscreen. The pilot bailed out at about 1,000 feet, but the chute did not open, his a/c crashed nearby and burst into flame." Ammo—935 rounds fired.

Duane's 93rd combat sortie took place on March 27, when he led his sqd. to the Bordeaux, France, area as target free-lance support. After breaking escort he directed a strafing attack on Cazaux airdrome. The 334FS received a commendation from 65th Fighter Wing on this attack, for scoring the highest theatre claims to date by a squadron, 18 destroyed and 6 damaged. In the claims, Duane got a JU88, a HE126, and shared a JU88 with Tommy Biel. Archie Chatterly went down to flak, just one of the friends Duane was losing daily in these dramatic days of 4FG history.

April Fools' Day (B) briefing was by Col. Blakeslee, who gave the "Gen" as target support at Ludwigshafen, Germany. Don would lead with 336FS and Bee would lead 334FS. By 10:44 A.M., Pectin sqd., was escorting several boxes of B-24's near Lake Constance (same day 8AF bombed Switzerland by mistake). As the Libs turned north, Duane spotted some dots way ahead making head-on passes through distant bomber boxes. Opening up airspeed, it took awhile to get in recognition range, where the dots turned into ME109's. A B-24 fell out of formation smoking badly and then the crew bailed out. The empty Lib climbed with four MEs after it. As Duane closed on one, a Mustang scared the Hun into a dive for the deck. Following through several flick rolls, Duane got on him with bursts to 50 yards before break off. The next moment the Hun half-rolled and went into a flaming out-of-control dive into the ground from 7,000 feet where it exploded on impact. Vic France, who had covered Duane in the diving fight, confirmed the crash. Perhaps this kill would enable Duane to tie Don Gentile, who got one-up on him when Duane went on pass to London on March 29. The 4FG passed 300 victories on that day. No passes to London now for Duane until he regains his lead on Gentile.

On April 5 the "Met" boys were finally making favorable noises after three days of bad weather that had kept the group on the ground. It had been even more fretful for Duane and Gentile, as they eagerly strained on the leash like prize hunt dogs in the field. A little luck and a bit of good shooting could shortly make one of them a legend. Late in the morning the Dodge personnel carriers hauled the pilots the few blocks from the club to the briefing room between the hangars across the track from the tower. Col. Don was going to be "Horseback" lead again today and he caustically outlined the show. It was a "Jackpot" (air-drome strafe in a defined area) operation near Berlin. From briefing the 334FS pilots rode out to the line dispersal shack where Duane ran over the plan quickly, but precisely, and added his own comments. The pilots checked the disposition board to see who was going and what ship he had. Those up on the board donned their equipment and collected their escape kits from the Intelligence sergeant. Then the trucks rolled down the line dropping off pilots at their hardstands where the kite they were taking rested. *Kite* was an RAF term used only by the 4FG to denote aircraft.

Sgt. Wahl had been up earlier than the pilots going over QP-B per the tech and maintenance orders. Then he gave it a bit of his own personal attention. He warmed up the motor and checked everything he possibly could without a teardown. Duane arrived and gave the plane his usual precise checkout. He quipped with Wahl as he loved to do, but missed nothing in the walk-around check. Then he mounted up and Wahl helped strap him in as he checked the cockpit and instruments. Wahl wiped the wind-



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- 1 Early March, 1944; 334FS crews crowd around Duane's QP-B just down from a show to hear his score. Note high ground in center of field almost blocks out view of hangars and control tower. (Leroy Nitschke)
- 2 Fall, 1943; dud weather provides a chance to award the latest batch of "Gongs" to the junior birdmen. Duane is on the right of front three oficers, Miley, Evans, and Beeson. (4TFW)
- 3 September, 1943; 334FS personnel pose with their sponsored orphans of the London Blitz. Each sqd. funded the care of such youngsters. Duane is on the lower right. (A4FGWW2)
- 4 Fall, 1943; 334FS pilots walk through early twilight to sqd. shack as they determine events of show. Left to right: Duane Beeson, Hank Mills, Bud Care, and Dick Douglas. (Larry Hendel)
- 5 March, 1944; just down from a show, Duane gives details to the eagerly waiting ground crews. Note Bee design on helmet front and outline of the oxygen mask still marking his face. (Nick Megura)

screen for the third time and stayed close in case Duane wanted him. A brightly painted little Bee pendant hung on the gun-sight, a gift of good luck from Bud Care and his fiancée, whose wedding Duane was to be in several days later. As start-engine time neared, Wahl manned the little gas generator cart and Duane kicked over the engine as the tower flare went up. A bit of checking and he taxied out of his bay at the northwest corner of the runway intersection and led the sqd. to the active runway for a quick takeoff by twos. The group formed up in seven minutes and set compass course over the tower on climb out to penetration altitude. Sgt. Wahl puttered around the bay a bit and went off to the line hut to wait with the other crews and maybe hang around the combat radio set up in the sqd. HQ shack.

By 3:45 P.M., 334FS was orbiting low in the Brandenburg, Germany, area trying to locate Briest airdrome, their target. While they were searching, Allen Bunte was hit by flak and crashed into a lake, but survived as a POW. Soon they found the field and went in on the deck strafing the parked JU88's. Duane picked out three JU88's sitting by the perimeter and flamed the first one. The second was hit with no result. When his shells ran into the third JU88, it was consumed in a violent explosion. The squad then set course towards the west. A few minutes later they came upon a JU88 alone in the air, which Duane and several others "queued" up on to shoot down. He got a lot of strikes in the cockpit and engines before it struck the ground and burst into flames. Duane took gun camera pictures of it burning and then reformed the sqd. They began climbing westerly to 4,000 feet when Gardelegen airdrome was spotted. The drome was loaded with many JU88's parked wingtip to wingtip.

Duane picked out the nearest JU88 to his approach and clobbered it into flames which Biel and Carr confirmed. He kept on down the line getting strikes on six more JU88's along the track. At the end of the line was a giant six-engine ME323 transport, which he fired into from 300 down to 50 yards, before he hopped over it.

Just then all the luck of the preceding years and months ran out in a ghastly instant. A wall of orange antiaircraft "Golf-Ball" flak flashed past his cockpit and his BEE jolted from a mortal wound in the vulnerable radiator under the fuselage. He quickly weaved violently right down on the deck for several seconds to avoid another hit, but it was too late for that. Duane snapped over the R/T that the rest of the sqd. was to break off the attack because the flak was too bad. Chuck Carr was following close behind Duane and told him that he also had been hit and that he would have to soon part company with his Mustang. Chuck got a shell right in the glycol header tank that streamed out. Next Duane heard the dreaded statement in his headphones from Chuck: QP-B was trailing that telltale greyish-white plume of glycol that meant the end of all his efforts to outscore Gentile and to stay in the airwar.

Climbing to 1,000 feet, Duane tried to keep his engine running cool, but the temperature rapidly went off the gauge and the Packard Merlin seized up tight. As the prop locked solid in front of him, he kicked the stick forward and bunted head-first out of the plane. As he went out he noted the altimeter read 200 feet. His last words to the sqd. on the radio were, "Damn it," and then he was out. As he described it later, "The chute opened just in time to carry me over a fence and deposit my car-

cass in a field surrounded by many members of the "Super Race"—including one blond fraulein on a bicycle." The parachute pulled him into a wire fence which cut him slightly and he sprained his ankle when he hit. After the war he was reluctant to admit that the fence collision earned his Purple Heart medal. The German police took him to nearby Gardelegen airdrome where the Luftwaffe took custody of him.

POW's were not supposed to let on if they knew each other, but when the Germans later brought him in, several other 4FG pilots were waiting their turn at interrogation and they all unzipped grins as the second-ranked ETO ace added his misery to their company. It didn't make any difference because the Germans had files on each of them anyway. In fact, they had albums of photographs taken on Debden itself. A German spy network in London even managed to photocopy Lee Gover's Eagle sqd. album when he took it to their photoshop front unbeknownst near the Eagle Club. Roy Evans was shown this album on his capture as a POW and was stunned by it.

Thus ended Capt. Beeson's chance to climb higher in the scoring race. Now his was a ground war and the lot of the "Kriege," as POW's were named. Back at Debden, Don Gentile became the first ETO pilot to break Rickenbacker's score and reap the laurels. Sgt. Wahl only began to emerge from his loss/grief after he learned that Duane was safe.

It was eight days later at 8:34 P.M. that a Western Union messenger appeared at the front door of 211 Orchard Street in Boise. Carl and Zelda Beeson could probably tell from the runner's face as they accepted the missive with hearts in their throats and read the words, "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son, Capt. Duane W. Beeson, has been reported missing in action since five April in the European area. Letter follows. Dunlop, Acting, the Adjt. General." A short two-paragraph letter came from the 4FG base chaplain and other letters from the Army with instructions. The family took hope from the newspaper articles which said his comrades believed he was safe.

His sister, Elizabeth, wrote a poem: "My Brother. The night closed in, a hand shot out and gripped my heart with fear, I should have known it could not last, and I should shed a tear." Then after two haunting months of uncertainty, came another telegram at 5:33 A.M., "Report just received through the International Red Cross states that your son, Capt. D.W. Beeson, is a prisoner of war of the German government."

Duane was now POW No. 4170, Stalag Luft No. 3, Stalag Luft No. 1 Subsidiary Camp, Rostock, Germany. His parents received a letter of June 22, 1944, which said he had heard of the invasion and was fretting because he missed it. Noted he was well and comfortable. It was full of praise for the way Sgt. Wahl served his aircraft. This news and other was relayed back to 334FS by his parents, who supplied Sgt. Wahl with news on Duane.

Like most POW's, Duane spoke very little about his months behind barbed wire. Some of his own remarks on the topic were made in postwar civic speeches. They were, "I lost considerable weight. The food was meager. We got about 1300 calories a day. I owe my health to the Red Cross packages we received. The YMCA athletic equipment gave us an opportunity to exercise and while away the long hours. We were treated moderately well in the camp. Aside from hunger, the only real torment is bore-



- 1 Date unknown; Debden airdrome as seen through a typical English haze by a 4FG pilot approaching from the east coast. Duane's hardstand is at junction of taxiway which crosses north runway, where it meets the taxiway along west side of north runway. (Glesner Weckbacher)
- 2 June 15, 1945; the famous home of the Eagles, Debden airdrome, in a postwar view looking northwest. 334FS dispersal areas looped around the north runway in the background. (Isadore Swerdel)
- 3 April 8, 1944; Duane's rival in the Rickenbacker scoring race, Don Gentile, passes the 334FS shack in a low buzz-down the north runway for the press cameras in his VF-T "Shangra-La." (John Romack)
- 4 April, 1944; Lt. Allen Bunte, Duane's fellow POW, shot down by flak on the same mission Duane was. He had a narrow escape from his aircraft sinking in a lake. (Nick Megura)



February 19, 1947; on this date, L/Col. Duane W. Beeson is laid to rest by his former comrades in Arlington National Cemetery. One of our greatest aces and aerial warriors, he is with our nation's heros. (Beeson family)

dom." His letters home asked for cigarettes, which were used for money. He told how they made a cake of what they could find and used tooth powder to sweeten it. One story came from the late David Van Epps, a 4FG pilot also in the camp with Duane. Hub Zemke, the camp POW commander, was a former Golden Gloves boxer, and he organized boxing matches on one occasion to liven up the daily routine. Duane entered the boxing and was paired off with a 4FG pilot who had been an experienced boxer and who weighed a good bit more than he did. Duane fought well in his bout, but he was overmatched and faring badly. However, he refused to throw in the towel and he stayed in the ring the full bout though he was being punished heavily in the fight. This was just one facet of his indomitable spirit, which refused to accept defeat even in captivity. Another facet of that character came through in another situation. When prisoners worked on their diaries or escape projects, someone stood guard and warned, "Hun Up!" if a German should appear. On one occasion Duane received 21 days in solitary confinement for "Hunning." Later a new phrase was coined when the Germans caught on to Hun. It was G.O.O.N.—German Officer or Non-com! He told how the POW's used to watch the German JU88's take off from an adjacent bomber field with full bomb loads right over the camp, "We kept wondering what would happen if an engine would konk out on takeoff!" Duane's duty was S-4 for Col. Zemke—supply officer—there wasn't much to supply!

Finally the war in Europe drew to a close in April 1945. The German guards ran away a day before the Russians got to the camp. Those that did not run away donned civilian clothes, denying any connection with the German Army. Maj. Beeson and the other prisoners went strolling through the streets of Barth, whose citizens put red flags in their windows to show their pro-Russian attitude so recently acquired. The Russians came pouring into town, "roaring tearing drunk" on April 29. Col. Zemke requested meat for the camp and two hours later the Russkies produced a herd of cattle and trimmings for a feast. A couple of POW butchers soon de-steaked the cattle. In their 14

days with the Russians, the POW's helped them clear the airfield of bombs left behind by the Germans to forestall its use by the Allies. POW ex-paratroopers defused the bombs and saved many lives and much time in the clean-up process.

It was a wonderful day on May 14, when the silver B-17's landed at Barth, Germany, to evacuate Duane and the other Kriegies to Reims, France, where they were processed and soon returned to England. After sending a cablegram home giving news of his return, he took a few days visit to Debden. The first thing he took up a shiny new P-51D QP-M to see how rusty he had become in the past months. Most returning 4FG POW's spent little time at the base. They were anxious to get stateside and the 1945 4th was a new unit. The old buddies were either dead or long since returned to "Uncle Sugar." The planes were a different color and even the red nose was changed in style. Only the real estate and the ground echelons were the same. Sgt. Wahl was pleased to see him and they vowed to keep in touch. After Duane filed claims for the kills of his last mission, he collected some combat reports and data for his logbook, and then visited his old intelligence officer at Wing HQ. A promotion to Major came through during his POW stay, as well as new decorations. His awards included the DSC, DFC with five clusters, Silver Star, Air Medal with five oak leaf clusters, Purple Heart, Belgium Croix de Guerre, and the various theatre victory medals. Some of the medals were presented to his parents at Gowen Field, Idaho, during his internment.

The SS SANTA PAULA docked in New York on June 21, 1945. On it was Duane and about a thousand other ex-prisoners and wounded soldiers. After a quick checkup at Camp Shanks, N.Y., he returned to Boise for a joyous 60-day leave. As with any hometown celebrity, he was the main attraction at various fetes, such as the Jaycees, Kiwanis, and the honored guest at the country club dances. Duane spoke before the VFW and American Legion about his service and he was made a member of both. He decorated a flier at Gowen Field as well. Underneath he was anxious to get to the Pacific and resume building his victory tally, but it was to be denied him.

When he reported to the reassignment center at Santa Monica, California, the war in the Pacific was over. He re-enlisted in the AAF and was sent to Sarasota, Florida, for advanced training on September 27, 1945. While stationed at Sarasota, he met a pretty young civilian secretary working on the base named Tracey Waters. On November 12, 1945, Duane was promoted to Lt. Colonel at Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He had just been assigned there as Liaison Officer of the 3rd Air Force, where he was in charge of the demolition of surplus war-time aircraft. The job was heart-breaking to Duane, seeing the planes he loved go under the wrecker's bar. His heart was aching

April, 1944; Fellow squadron ace, Ralph "Kidd" Hofer, with POW William's dog, Duke, beside Mike Sobanski's QP-F (note thin red border to sqd. code sometimes used at this time). (Edward Hedrick)





No date; Duane's "Diploma" from the most dangerous, courageous, and skilled "School" of WW2. He graduated with highest honors from the aerial fighter war over Hitler's Europe. Few could boast such a profusion of America's military awards. (Zelda Beeson)

for another reason, too—the lovely Tracey Waters and he were in love.

In Baltimore, Maryland, on January 25, 1946, Tracey became the wife of Lt/Col. Duane Beeson. She was given in wedlock by her father, Burns H. Waters, a prominent Baltimore businessman, who was in the tire and rubber products industry. Duane's best man was Willard Wahl, his former crewchief in the 4FG, now working as a civilian for the Air Force in Pennsylvania. They remained close friends after the war. Duane took his bride back to Oklahoma City, but soon thereafter he was transferred to San Antonio, Texas. On May 5, 1946, the happy newlyweds came home to Boise for a visit en route to Washington, D.C., where he had a brief assignment. Early Fall, 1946, found them in Phoenix, Arizona, while Duane went through a course at Williams Field in jet fighter orientation. Thanksgiving holidays were shared with the folks in Boise when he was in transit to a new station. Duane took this opportunity to promote a separate Air Force in the hometown papers. In December 1946 they were settled in at his new post at 9th AF HQ in Greenville, S.C. There were visits home to Baltimore and with friends and Beeson relatives in Washington, D.C., during Christmas.

The New Year of 1947 promised a bright new future for the young Beesons. He was enjoying his peacetime career and no couple could have been happier. Suddenly during the first week of February, Duane became ill and soon he was confined to the Oliver General Hospital in Augusta, Georgia. The doctors diagnosed his condition as a brain tumor requiring a delicate operation. The decision was reached to fly him by air transport to Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, D.C., for the operation. His wife Tracey accompanied him on the plane that afternoon of February 13, 1947. En route Duane's condition worsened and as the landing gear of the transport touched down on the runway at Washington, D.C., Duane W. Beeson passed quietly from this earthly realm at approximately 6:00 P.M. A few more minutes and he would have been in the operating room, but it was all too late.

The grief-stricken Tracey decided to have him interred with the other great soldiers of our nation and he was laid to eternal rest on February 19, 1947, at Arlington National Cemetery. His

pallbearers were his old comrades of 4FG days and his companions in prison camp, who flew in from all over the nation to pay a tearful last goodbye to their BEE. Tracey was escorted by the faithful S/Sgt. Wahl, taking care of Duane and his loved ones even to the final moment.

Duane's brother-in-law, Richard W. Waters, himself an ex-P-51 Mustang pilot, might perhaps have penned the best epitaph to him: "I believe he was a low-profile individual, very mature for his young age, who avidly avoided any aura of flamboyancy. He was more like the recently returned combat infantryman who had been through the rigors of all that it entails and was more interested in forgetting it than recalling any of it. Briefly, he was a young unassuming gentleman. It's possible that he was more open with those who shared similar combat experiences, but I wonder if he just wasn't one of those persons who was dedicated to doing his best regardless of the task. Without question, he firmly believed in the moral aspects of what he fought for, and he was a patriot. Of this, he was not bashful! To have known Duane was an honor."

In lethal contest among brave men, Lt/Col. Duane W. Beeson, 24.08 victories, was a superior winner. Actual achievement is its own statement and remembrance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND REFERENCES

In my studies of the AAF ETO combat experience over the past years, I have felt that certain of the more important fighter aces were overshadowed by others and that D.W. Beeson, in particular, had never received the coverage in print due to him. It was a goal of mine for over 10 years to see his story in print. With the kind and generous aid of the following persons, this has now been seen to:

Mrs. Carl (Zelda) Beeson, Duane's mother; Mrs. Elizabeth Taylor, sister; Mrs. Louise Morell, sister; Mr. Wesley Beeson, cousin; Mr. Eldon Ryals, boyhood friend; Mr. Richard Waters, brother-in-law; Duane's widow, Tracey; Lt/Col. David Van Epps, deceased, interviews prior to death; Mr. Willard Wahl, ex-crewchief and faithful friend.

Numerous ex-4FG members, too many to list here, my true thanks.

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Publications, books, and other sources were:

D.W. Beeson WW2 flight logbook; Beeson family news clippings, file; 334FS monthly combat diary; *1,000 Destroyed*, Grover C. Hall, Jr.; *Debden Eagles*, Garry L. Fry; *War Eagles*, James Chiders; *Escort to Berlin*, Jeffrey Ethell and Garry Fry, soon-to-be-published book; *Air Force* magazine, December 1944, "Portrait of a Crewchief" D.W. Beeson combat reports.

To all the preceding persons and agencies, I wish to extend my true thanks for your interest and aid in this project. God bless you all.

Garry L. Fry, April, 1978

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garry Fry, *74 Pauline Drive, Elgin, Illinois 60120, is a senior meatcutter with Eagle Food Centers, married with two daughters. His hobby is the study and writing of AAF ETO fighter history and the organization of 8AF veterans fraternities. In 1967 he co-founded the 4FG Association and in 1971 authored *Debden Eagles*, a 4FG history, as well as serving as an officer of the association. His most recent work is an exhaustive 10-year study of WW2 4FG history, *Escort to Berlin*, soon to be printed. In addition, he has written various articles and lectured on 4FG history. Currently serving as an officer of the Duxford 78th FG Association—WW2, and producing a history of this unit

