

April 11, 1944 A tragedy in Rennes. (Part 1)

By **Frédéric Hénoff** (photo American Air Museum - Profile Jean-Marie Guillou)

During spring 1944, missions within the framework of the Point Blank operation continued, this one with the aim of, among other things, to wipe out the Luftwaffe from the sky while to do harm to its infrastructure in order to gain supremacy in the air as a prelude to the coming invasion of Europe by Allied ground troops.

In April, targets of the 9th Air Force were, in order, marshalling yards, V1 rocket sites and airfields, without forgetting a few heavy bomber escorts for the 8th Air Force. Airfields were the most important targets visited by the 9th during this month, and P-47 Thunderbolts were in the front line for this kind of operation.

Twenty-six dive-bombings and six strafing attacks were carried out on the airfields, while the B-26 Marauders medium bombers struck nine times. The servicing facilities of the airfields were the priority targets and they were the ones targeted during mission #51 carried out by P-47s belonging to the 358th Fighter Group on 11 April 1944.



Republic P-47 Thunderbolt, 358th Fighter Group
Photo © American Air Museum - [Roger Freeman Collection FRE 9488](#)

April 1944, the Luftwaffe at Gaël and Rennes Saint-Jacques.

In April 1944, Gaël airfield was no longer used by any Luftwaffe operational unit, although a great deal of construction work had been carried out there between mid-1940 and mid-1943, including levelling, installation of an artificial drainage system and the camouflage of the landing area. In May 1944, levelling work continued on the northern and eastern boundaries and a refuelling area was built on the western boundary.

The last units to have occupied the airfield are the 1. Staffel of the Seeaufklärungsgruppe 128 or 1./SAGr. 128 and the 12. Staffel of the Jagdgeschwader 2, or 12./JG 2, both fitted with Focke-Wulf 190 of various

¹ also called Jagdkommandos Brest, whose main task is maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare on the Atlantic but which can be punctually used to face the Allied airplanes incursions

various types². The 12./JG 2 left Gaël at the beginning of March 1944. For the Allies, Gaël (with Vannes and Lorient) was one of the three Breton airfields considered as very dangerous in case of use by the Luftwaffe against the bridgehead and while a landing in the West was becoming more and more precise, and the airfield was therefore the subject of all the attention from the British RAF and the American U.S.A.F.

As for the Rennes/Saint-Jacques airfield, it was occupied by the Wetterkundungsstaffel 51 or Wekusta 51 and the 3. Staffel of Aufklärungsgruppe 123 or 3.(F)/123. The first one was a weather reconnaissance unit fitted with 10 Junkers Ju-88 of various types plus 3 Messerschmitt Me-410 A3. The second was a long-range reconnaissance unit with 13 Junkers Ju-88 of various types³. The Allied air supremacy considerably hindered reconnaissance operations, as the aerial space over the airfields was under enemy fighters control, which could only be avoided by taking off and landing the airplanes previously warned by the air traffic control. As a proof of this, the Junkers Ju-88 H1 Werk-Nr. 430 898 of 3.(F)/123, which was shot down on April 6 by Typhoon fighters belonging to No.266 (Rhodesia) Squadron during a test flight around the airfield.



Hawker Typhoon Mk IB R8802,
266 (Rhodesia) SQN, R.A.F.

The Flak, the German anti-aircraft defense.

For coping with low-level fighter attacks, the Germans developed a quick-fire gun designed in 1930 (and improved in 1938), a single-tube gun called Solo in the Flak slang and which is supplied with ammunition by magazines containing twenty alternating explosive, perforating and incendiary shells. These shells are also tracer, which allows to adjust the fire on sight during the combat.

In 1938, this 20 mm gun was perfected and transformed into a four-tube gun called Vierling. It is a formidable weapon and feared by the allied pilots when they attack at low altitude targets defended by this

² For the 1./SAGr. 128, only a handful of fighters were ever counted on site

³ number of airplanes at the beginning of the month

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kind of weapon. Weighing 1400 kg, this gun has a theoretical rate of fire of 1200 shells/minute and well handled, it can in live-fire send from 300 to 400 shells per minute.



2 cm Flakvierling 39, 1943

Photo © Bundesarchiv Bild 183-J08339 - photographe Ernst Schwahn 5.11.1943

It really shows what kind of wall of fire an allied pilot has to cross if half a dozen of Vierlings are protecting the target to be attacked ! In April 1944 it was the Flak-Regiment 15 which was in charge of the protection of the Breton sky, in particular in Rennes and its surroundings. It was subordinated to the 13. Flak-Division and was composed of several leichte-Flak-Abteilungen⁴ and gemischte Flak-Abteilungen⁵. In Rennes these batteries were scattered around the city with a strong concentration around the railway station and the Saint-Jacques airfield. German gunners protecting the latter, still had in mind the attack of last April 6 and their inability to protect their comrades of the 3.(F)/123, so when the air raid alert was given on April 11, they are determined to have their revenge if allied airplanes should get too close.

Gaël airfield

Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil L. Wells aboard his P-47 nicknamed "Martha Ann", after his little sister, took off that day at 4:50 pm (British time) from Raydon airfield to lead a group of at least 25 fighter-bombers towards the two targets that had been assigned to his unit for the afternoon, i.e. the Gaël airfield for a dive-bombing and the Rennes airfield for a strafing attack.

At Gaël, the bombing took place without any incident, a few failures having occurred at the start of the mission as reported by 1st Lt. Alen V. Voorhees, 367th Fighter Squadron :

⁴ light Flak batteries

⁵ ua mix of light and heavy Flak batteries

"I was flying Blue-3, pilots in Blue-1 and Blue-4 had aborted before the group headed for France.

Lt. Ballinger as Blue-2 and myself continued the mission as Blue flight in the expected scheme and during the bomb run on Gaël ; we followed the airman placed Yellow-4 in his flight. After this bomb run, we made a left turn to move toward the second target."



The badge of 367th Fighter Squadron

On the airfield, hangars, buildings and runways were hit, but if no German aircraft - and for good reason - was hit during the attack, it was in the air that an aircraft was claimed by two pilots of the 365th Fighter squadron.

Here is what the two pilot lieutenants told about the attack through their respective reports - 1st Lt. James F. Hackler, Jr. :

"I was flying as Snowpass Yellow Leader at approximately 10,000 feet when I spotted what I thought to be a Ju 88 flying on the deck. I took my flight down on it, opened fire at dead astern and pulled up to keep from crashing into him. It turned to the left and went into the ground on its left wing, bursting into flames. My wing man, Lt. Floyd, fired on the aircraft at the same time."

And 2nd Lt. Paul D. Floyd :

"I was flying as Snowpass Yellow Two when the leader rolled over and went down on what I thought to be a Ju 88 on the deck. We were in a 40 degree dive doing about 400 mph. I shot about 300 rounds at the plane. He burst into flames, turned left and crashed into the ground. Lt. Hackler leading the flight fired on the plane too."

The combat was unequal from the start, because this aircraft was not a Junkers Ju 88 as mentioned by the two U.S. pilots but a Focke-Wulf Fw 58 "Weihe" unarmed. The German aircraft (Werk-Nr. 58325) belonged to Jagdgeschwader 5 "Eismeer" and was on a mail flight for Jagdfliegerführer Bretagne or Jafü Bretagne, whose headquarters were located at Rennes. By lack of luck, the aircrew of three men approached the airfield of Gaël while the American attack occurred. The airplane crashed at a place called Queneleuc in Saint-Gonlay, killing Obergefreiter Herbert Burkhardt instantly.

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Oberleutnant Edgar Habermann and the other passenger, Gruppe's Technischer Offizier, Leutnant Dr. Hugo Ritter - the latter badly burned to the face - were sent to the Kriegslazarett in Rennes, but Habermann died of his wounds the day after. He was buried first in the Eastern Cemetery in Rennes before his remains were transferred to the German military cemetery at Mont-de-Huisnes (France) after WWII.



A Focke-Wulf FW 58 - Photo source unknown

Rennes Saint-Jacques airfield.

The mission continued and led the P-47s towards Saint-Jacques airfield, which they had to strafe at low altitude in order to do as much damage as possible. But while the attack on the previous target could be qualified as a "milk run", the one that was to come left a bitter taste to the pilots that would come back to England and who landed at Raydon at about 7:50 pm (English time).

Indeed, the German aerial warning service had put the airfield on alert for some time and Flak gunners were now waiting for the Allied fighters flying at full speed over the airfield. Their targets ? Hangars, control tower, but also anti-aircraft gun positions.

The fight back was violent, but some turned out all right, as Captain Charles T. Kimball of the 366th Fighter Squadron, who flew the P-47 named "The Missouri Mule", told us :

"I was flying about fifteen feet off the ground when two 20-millimeter shells and some small stuff hit my ship. Two cylinders were knocked out and my engine quit. I had enough speed so I pulled up and was going to bail out, but somehow the doggone engine started again. I guess the engine just ground the knocked out cylinders into powder, and kept on going. But it sounded like a broken down Maytag washer !

I decided to nurse the old Mule home. The engine

was throwing oil all over the canopy, so I had to fly blind. I couldn't get more than 150 miles per hour out of her and couldn't get above 5,000 feet. I could hear some heavy Flak exploding near me when I reached the coast and again I thought of bailing out but I got through all right and finally made it to an emergency field in England. "

Under this hail of fire others were not so lucky, such as Major Frank M. Ross, commander of 365th Fighter Squadron, one of his wingmen, Captain John W. Dickson and to a lesser extent, 2nd Lt. Philip R. Ballinger of 367th Fighter Squadron.

"The Chief", the nickname of Major Ross's P-47, was severely hit during the strafing run, and the pilot, who was probably seriously wounded, could only belly land his plane near Nouvoitou, at a place called La Drouais. The airplane hit, broke and tore up trees, and crashed into a gable of a farmhouse, with debris killing a few chickens and setting fire to a few acres of wheat. At that moment, the pilot was unconscious but still alive, and he died only a few moments later, after the arrival of the local German forces on the scene.

Pathetic anecdote, Emile D. from the village of Saint-Armel was arrested and imprisoned by the Germans on the grounds that he had relieved the American airman of the objects, papers and money he had.

1st Lt. Howard L.

Gurley, one of Ross' wingmen that day, and many, many years later, still remembers that terrible afternoon :



2nd Lt. Howard L. Gurley Jr in April 1944. Between his first flight on December 20, 1943 and his last on May 7, 1945, he flew an impressive 141 combat missions, which earned him two Distinguished Flying Crosses and to be promoted to Major.
Photo © family Gurley

"We paid a terrible price [during the war], even losing our Group Commander and two Squadron Commanders, including Major Ross, our own 365th Squadron commander ⁶.

⁶ Major Donald A. Younglas, 367th Fighter Squadron commander, killed on January 7, 1944 and Colonel Cecil L. Wells, 358th Fighter Group commander, killed on September 13, 1944.

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I was flying on his wing when we strafed a German airfield at a very low altitude. The Germans [ground anti-aircraft defense] were waiting for us as we flew over the airfield. His aircraft exploded right in front of me and to my left. Major Ross was killed instantly, he never knew what hit him".

Major Frank Moore Ross III



Major Frank M. Ross, smiling aboard his P-47 nicknamed "The Chief". Note the 15 broom symbols that indicate the number of Sweeps, in other words, offensive missions. - Photo © Kent Miller

Major Frank M. Ross III, born February 15, 1917 in Smyrna, was an experienced pilot, belonging to the Air Corps for five years. After attending high school in Smyrna and then studying engineering at the University of Delaware, where he took flying lessons and obtained his pilot's license, he served three years in the National Guard Coast Artillery in Dover, Delaware and two years in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps before joining the Air Corps on August 5, 1940.

As a Flying Cadet he first studied in Chicago, Illinois, at the School of Aeronautics at Glenview and then went to Randolph Field, Texas. He obtained his wings and the rank of second lieutenant on March 15, 1941 at Maxwell Field, Alabama, and after a few days of leave with his family, he left for Mitchel Field, Long Island where is housed his unit, the 33rd Pursuit Squadron, fitted with Curtiss P-40C Warhawks. Early August 1941, with this unit, he was part of the first American occupation forces to land in Iceland and it

was during his 13-month tour of duty that he met his future wife, Miss Sigrídur Sturlangsdóttir of Reykjavík. After he returned home, she joined him a few days before their wedding in Dundalk, Maryland on May 8, 1943.

At that time, he was commander of the **365th Fighter Squadron (badge ▼)**, one of the three Squadrons that



made up the **358th Fighter Group** equipped with P-47s Thunderbolts, a fighter group that was activated in January 1943. On October 8, he embarked for England with his group on the "SS Monterey", where the following weeks were dedicated to training and to

the various flight procedures over England.



358th Fighter Group

The group was drafted into the 8th Air Force and began its tour of operations on December 20, 1943, mainly with heavy bomber escort missions. At the end of January 1944, the unit was "traded" with a Fighter Group fitted with P-51s Mustangs and drafted into the 9th Air Force.

Missions, however, did not change at all. On February 8, while escorting Flying Fortresses returning from a raid on Frankfurt, Germany, Frank M. Ross claimed an aerial victory against a Messerschmitt Me 109 G6 belonging to II./JG 26 - this was confirmed by his wingman 2nd Lt. David W. Johnston.

Ross said :

"I was leading the group over northern France when we were attacked by a flight of four Me-109s. It happened just as we were about to make "rendezvous" with the bombers. One German passed in front of me and I followed him down, closing slowly. He levelled off on top of the clouds. I closed the distance between us and fired a long burst from dead astern. I saw hits on the cockpit and a wing, and pieces of his plane flew off as he slowed up. I had to turn sharply to avoid hitting him. The last I saw, he was going down in a gentle dive, with smoke pouring from his engine."

In March, with a few other pilots of the 9th Air Force, he left for Italy, detached to the 66th Fighter Squadron, 57th Fighter Group, which operated on the Anzio and Monte Cassino fronts. The goal was to gain experience in preparation for a landing in the West, and he had to learn about close air support missions with the

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Army and the successive moves from one landing strip to another inherent to this type of cooperation. Frank M. Ross has left a testimony of this period :

"The infantry phoned us they wanted a railroad station removed. We bombed up, located the place... it was right on the lines near Cassino... and we hit it, we scored several direct hits, and could see flames and smoke coming from the anti-aircraft firing at us as we flew away. All we could see of the station was a tower of smoke and dust. After we landed, the infantry reported they had taken the station. On a dive-bombing mission to monastery hill, we flew right over the battlefield. It was a tremendous sight. Laid out beneath us were the German lines to the left, and the allies to the right. Puffs of flame and smoke, and dust clouds, were everywhere.

*Then we bombed a sniper's house and big gun locations that were shooting up the Anzio beachhead. The only other aircrafts we saw over the beach were British Spitfires. We looked for Jerry every day but we had such air superiority that we didn't see one enemy plane. The Group I was with flew from a landing strip in the foothills of **Mount Vesuvius**. She threw up clouds of smoke and ashes, while we were there, and we could see the red molten lava eating the town of San Sebastian. It wrecked up the villa the pilots were staying in, two days only after they moved out !*

Although the weather was pleasant and warm while we were there, the living conditions were rugged, nothing like we used to have. There was so much dust that, after each aircraft took off, the next plane had to wait a minute or so till the dust settled. That dust got into everything... teeth, air, eyes and food."



The **Mount Vesuvius** erupted during the passage of B-25 of the 12th AF in March 1944 - Photo USAF - Reference NARA 342-FH-3A23947-50460AC

Frank left Italy on March 29, and had rendezvous with his destiny less than fifteen days later, on April 11, when he led his Squadron on a low-level strafing pass over the German airfield of Saint-Jacques. During his tour of duty, Major Frank Moore Ross was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (March 31, 1944), the Air Medal (January 20, 1944) with six Oak Leaf Clusters⁷ and the Purple Heart posthumously. Buried at first in the Eastern Cemetery of Rennes, grave 573, after WWII and on request of his family, his body was repatriated to the United States. On July 10, 1948, he was buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery at Smyrna, his hometown, where he will rest for eternity.

Irony of fate, Frank M. Ross, at his wedding on May 8, 1943, had as best man Captain John W. Dickson who less than one year later disappeared in the same conditions as him, on the same day and during the same mission. (to be continued...)

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⁷ that means this medal was awarded to him six times !