

"The Complete Fighter Pilot"

George Preddy was on his way to becoming the leading ace in Europe when tragedy struck.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

THE foreword to *Wings God Gave My Soul*, Joseph W. Noah's biography of George Preddy, was written by Gen. John C. Meyer. The General, who was the fourth-ranking American ace in the European war and Preddy's squadron commander for more than a year, wrote: "George was small and slight. He was soft-spoken, without even a hint of braggadocio. [But] I have never met a man of . . . such intense desire to excel. . . . George Preddy was the complete fighter pilot."

When Preddy joined then-Captain Meyer's 34th (later the 487th) Fighter Squadron of the 352d Fighter Group in January 1943, he had flown twenty-five missions in the almost-forgotten air war over northern Australia. His combat career in the Pacific ended on July 12, 1942. During a training flight, not enemy fire but a midair collision—a harbinging of things to come—put Preddy in the hospital for three months before he was sent to the States and ultimately to the P-47-equipped 352d, which was training for assignment to the UK.

In July 1943, the group set up shop at Bodney, England. Preddy scored his first victory on December 1. Three weeks later, he won a second, fighting a superior force, as he was to do many times. He led his flight of three P-47s (one stayed up as top cover) against six Me-210s covered by ten Me-109s that were attacking a B-24 straggler. In the melee, Preddy's wingman, Lt. Richard Grow, became separated and apparently was shot down—the only wingman Preddy ever lost.

Preddy knocked down one Me-210, broke up the attack, and then lured the remaining enemy aircraft away from the damaged B-24, earning for himself a Silver Star.

The 352d converted to P-51s in April 1944. Preddy got his fifth victory on May 13 and was on his way to becoming, a few months later, the leading active ace in the ETO. (Gabreski was a POW, and Bob Johnson had gone home.) But George Preddy was running out of time as he approached the end of a 200-hour combat tour. He requested, and was granted, four successive fifty-hour extensions that kept him in the fight until early August.

Major Preddy was scheduled to lead the entire group on an August 6 escort mission. The mission was scrubbed due to forecast bad weather, and—with a free day ahead—a big party was inevitable. Shortly after midnight, the mission was on again. At briefing, the group commander judged that Preddy was not in shape to lead, but John Meyer assured him that George would be ready by takeoff time.

A few hours later, from his perch at 30,000 feet, Preddy spotted more than thirty Me-109s coming in on the third box of B-17s. He led his flight into the midst of the -109s, shooting down three in rapid succession.

At that point, four other P-51s joined the fight. Preddy shot down

two more -109s, then followed the formation down to 5,000 feet, where he found himself alone with the enemy. One of them broke to the left, followed by Preddy in his *Cripes A' Mighty*. After a hot duel, George shot down his sixth of the day. On landing, a slightly green Preddy vowed never again to fly with a hangover. That mission earned him the Distinguished Service Cross and an unsought leave in the States.

Major Preddy returned to the ETO in October 1944 as commander of the group's 328th Squadron. During the Battle of the Bulge in December, elements of the group were moved to a fighter strip in Belgium. On Christmas Day, Preddy led ten of his P-51s on a patrol. They were vectored to a formation of enemy planes, and in the ensuing fight, though the squadron became scattered, Preddy downed two more -109s. He and his wingman, Lt. James Cartee, were then vectored to an unknown number of bandits near Liège. Preddy saw an FW-190 on the deck and went after him at treetop height. As they roared over American ground troops, George Preddy—at war's end the third-ranking American ace of the European war with 26.83 victories—was hit by friendly ground fire and crashed to his death.

His letters home showed Preddy to be a true believer with a philosophy of life that seemed beyond his twenty-five years. General Meyer wrote that he was a man with a "core of steel in a largely sentimental soul." Among other virtues, Major Preddy showed boundless loyalty to the men with whom he flew and a typically American attitude toward air-to-air fighting. He once said, "I'm sure as hell not a killer, but combat flying is like a game, and a guy likes to come out on top."

Almost certainly, he would also have come out as top American ace in Europe had it not been for that tragic error on Christmas Day in 1944. ■



Maj. George Preddy racked up a total of 26.83 victories before falling victim to friendly ground fire.