

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

Donald S. Bryan (Part 1 of 2)

Interview Date: August 1989

Abstract:

In this two-part oral history, fighter ace Donald S. Bryan discusses his military service with the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. In part one, he describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time with the 79th and 304th Fighter Squadrons while stationed stateside and his time in Europe with the 328th Fighter Squadron of the 352nd Fighter Group. Special focus on four combat missions that took place on September 9, 1943, November 2, 1944, December 23, 1944, and March 11, 1945.

Biography:

Donald S. Bryan was born on August 15, 1921 in Hollister, California. He joined the United States Army Air Forces in January 1942 and attended flight school at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona. Bryan served with the 79th Fighter Squadron and 304th Fighter Squadron while stationed stateside and with the 328th Fighter Squadron in Europe from 1943 to 1945. Bryan remained in the military after World War II, retiring from the Air Force as a lieutenant colonel in 1964. He then started a second career as an inspector for an engineering firm and retired again in 1981. Bryan passed away in 2012.

Biographical information courtesy of: Boyce, Ward J., ed., American fighter aces album. Mesa, Ariz: American Fighter Aces Association, 1996.

Restrictions:

Permission to publish material from the American Fighter Aces Association Oral Interviews must be obtained from The Museum of Flight Archives.

Transcript:

Transcribed by Pioneer Transcription Services

Index:

Joining the United States Army Air Forces	4
79th Fighter Squadron and 304th Fighter Squadron.....	4
328th Fighter Squadron and combat tours in Europe	4
Postwar assignments and post-military life	5
Four combat missions	5
First combat mission (September 9, 1943)	6
New gunsight and a violent aerial maneuver (November 2, 1944)	6
Mission over Belgium (December 23, 1944).....	8
Last aerial victory (March 14, 1945)	10
Corrections and conclusion.....	11

Donald S. Bryan (Part 1 of 2)

[START OF INTERVIEW]

0:00:00

[Joining the United States Army Air Forces]

DONALD S. BRYAN: Three, two, one. Let's try it now. I'm Donald S. Bryan, presently living at the big city of Adel, Georgia, zip's 31620. I entered Aviation Cadets on January the 6th, 1942, in Moffett Field, California. Home time at the town was—time—the hometown was Paicines, California. I took primary training at King City, California, and basic training at Moffett Field, California. We were the last class of aviation cadets at Moffett Field, and my last flight in basic training was ferrying the BT-13s from Moffett to Chico, California. I graduated from Luke Field, Arizona in class of 1942G on the 26th of July 1942, six months and 20 days after volunteering.

00:01:27

[79th Fighter Squadron and 304th Fighter Squadron]

My first assignment was as a replace—to a replacement depot at Drew Field, Tampa, Florida. From there, I was transferred to the 79th Fighter Squadron of the 20th Fighter Group, stationed at Morris Field, Myrtle Beach, California [meant South California]. My first flight in a combat aircraft was in P-40F at Myrtle Beach on 12 August 1942. On the 29th of August, shortly after reaching the legal age to buy beer, we ferried the P-40s down to Pinellas County Airport in St. Petersburg, Florida and the—at Pinellas, the 79th pilots were transferred to the 304th Fighter Squadron of the 337th Fighter Group, and we became instructors in the P-40s. Early in September, I checked out on a P-39, and by the 5th of October, had a grand total of about 27 hours in it.

On the 5th, on takeoff, the bearing in the prop shaft passing under the pilot's seat burned out. I managed to land safely but resolved never to fly a P-39 again. I didn't. While stationed at Pinellas, I met the original Little One, my wife of more than 46 years.

00:03:04

[328th Fighter Squadron and combat tours in Europe]

In March 1943, I was transferred to the 328th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, at Mitchel Field, Long Island, New York. We checked out in the P-47s at Farnborough Airport by test pilots at Republic Aircraft. I then became a C flight leader in the 328th Fighter Squadron. The group went overseas to England in late June or early July of 1943, and I took my first flight at the

station AF—AF141, Bodney, England, on 18 July 1943. I flew with the squadron on its first so-called “combat mission” on 9 September 1943. I flew combat in P-47s until April of ’44, when I checked out in the P-51s. My first combat mission in the P-51 was on 18 April.

At that time, I—well, at the time I took off, I had a grand total of one hours [sic] in the P-51. To say I was uneasy about flying P-51 in combat was, at that time, was a little bit—putting it mildly. P-51B had only four guns versus eight for the 47. We didn’t have that great big piece of armor they called the R-2800 out in front of us in the 51. I completed my first tour in combat in May of ’44, took R&R to the States, where I married the original Little One, Frances Norman, of Tampa, Florida. I returned to the squadron and began my second combat tour on 9 August 1944, having missed the entire D-Day activity. I completed my second tour on 1 May 1941 [likely meant 1945] and was rotated back to the States.

00:04:57

[Postwar assignments and post-military life]

In the States, I served in the Air Training Command, Air University and Air Defense Command. I retired from the Air Force in 1964. I worked with an engineering firm based in Syracuse, New York, for 15 years after retirement. In 1981, I moved to a small town here in South Georgia, where one of my sons and I built a house—building a house on an eight-acre pond inside the city limits of Adel, Georgia. My primary hobbies now is [sic] trying to establish Canada geese in South Georgia. So much for all the garbage. Sorry if you had to listen to it, but I didn’t know where else to put it and you asked to include a bunch of specifics.

[Four combat missions]

Incidentally, I was credited with 13 and 1/3 enemy aircraft destroyed. You asked for details on a specific mission. To be honest with you, a lot of that stuff that long ago is a little bit hazy. Instead of a lot of details about one specific, I’ll give you as much as I can about four missions that really stand out in my mind. The first is the—the first combat mission of the group on 9 September 1943. The second is on November the 2nd, 1944, when I was credited with shooting down five enemy aircraft. The third was on December the 23rd, 1944, and the last was on March 14, ’45, when I shot down my last aircraft.

00:07:24

When we were stationed at Mitchel Field, whenever we had time and we weren’t talking about girls, we talked about combat tactics, aircraft capabilities, the enemy aircraft, enemy pilots, and so on and so forth. Thinking back on it, it was very similar to a bunch of Boy Scouts sitting

around a campfire in the winter time telling ghost stories and trying to scare the hell out of each other. We came to the profound conclusion that since our planes were about the same as the other planes, the trainings were about equal, tactics about equal. We really had about a 50% chance of surviving any mission.

We thought also that if we were lucky enough to live for over the first one or two, we probably would enhance that and increase our odds of survival. Actually, our aircraft training and tactics and aircraft in general were much better than the Germans that we encountered in late 1943. Even though we were very inexperienced, I believe one of the main things that lend to our survival is the fact that the 8th Air Force wasn't about to get us into any real combat until we had quite a bit of experience in the ETO.

00:09:01

[First combat mission (September 9, 1943)]

I think really that some of the top right ranked German pilots could have shot down any of them, any one of us, if he was flying a Piper Cub. We were pretty inexperienced and pretty poor, in general, really—so thinking back on it and everything. So now comes our first mission. It was 9 September 1943. I'm not positive what flight I was in, but I think I was flying Blue One, the lead of the last flight of the squadron. Our mission was classified as an operational patrol, and our chances of seeing enemy action is about the same as winning the Florida lottery. We didn't know that at the time, though.

We lined up for our takeoff. After I checked my mags and was giving it the throttle, I was somewhat distracted by [a] rattling noise in the cockpit. I was somewhat chagrined to find out it was my feet shaking so bad that they were rattling the brake pedals. So much for these brave pilots on our first mission. On that one, I can guarantee that the weather was [unintelligible 00:10:41]. But we had to strain even to see the Dutch coast. But it was still classed as a combat mission. I was a first lieutenant at that time.

[New gunsight and a violent aerial maneuver (November 2, 1944)]

The second mission that stands out was on 2 November 1944. I was a captain with more than 300 hours of combat. I had shot down Me 109s, 110, Fw 190s. I was flying my P-51D-10, Little One III, and it was absolutely the fastest aircraft in the group. I'm not kidding. It was. I don't know why. Maybe my crew chief, Kirk Noyes, did something to it like he did with my old P-47D-2. At that time, he pulled the turbo supercharger stops on the thing, and twice it saved my life. Both times, I saw more than 70 inches of mercury on the thing. At any rate none of the group aircraft could keep up with me.

I knew that no German aircraft could turn, dive, or climb with me, until November 2nd, that was. That was on a max effort mission to Nuremberg. My aircraft had just been equipped with a, uh—absolutely the newest gunsight out. That was a K-14 Gyro Sight. It was supposed to do about everything but paint the German crosses on the side of your aircraft. This was my first combat with it, and I was leading Yellow, with eight aircraft. All of us had a lot of combat experience.

As I recall, it was shortly after we picked up our bombers when a large number of German aircraft were spotted. Most, if not all of them, as I recall, 109s. At any rate, I picked out a 109 to start my attack. I began to run the ranging pips in the sight in to meet the 109's wingtips, and, of course, because of the G-force, I was pulling and the rough—my rough flying, the digit—or little pip started jumping around like a flea. The more I twisted the handle or kicked the rudder, the worse it got. I finally ignored the sight altogether and just pointed the aircraft, and by that time, I was so close that when I fired, I chopped it up pretty good, but by no way did I shoot it down.

00:13:47

In all my fooling around with the sight, I overran the aircraft. I didn't want to end up in front of the 109. As I—and as I chopped everything back, the only thing I could do is snap roll. I did it, and I lost the 109, but I also lost all my section. After that fiasco, I turned on the 80-mil reticle that's in that sight. It wasn't nearly as good as the ol' 100-mil that I was used to, but for close-in high-G fighting, it certainly beat the gyro. Later in that flight, I learned how to use the gyro. You use a smooth, constant Gs and take your time. I peeled the top of a 109's wing off with only two guns firing and at extreme range.

00:14:48

Shortly after losing the 109 and my section, I met up with two Me 109s. The second man was obviously a new boy, but the leader was something else. As I said, I was absolutely sure that no 109 could stay with me, but this one did. Not only that, but he constantly closed on me from 180 degrees, and in practically no time at all, he would—had his guns on me, but not through me for a lead. When he started to close on me, I broke out in a cold sweat. My oxygen mask kept slipping down off my face and down underneath my chin. I had to use my left hand to hold the oxygen mask in my—in place. Actually, I wasn't using my left hand for anything. I had everything wide open, had no use for a left hand at all.

When he had closed on me to less than a hundred yards and his guns were pointing at me, but not leading me, I figured I'd better do something. I recalled an old flying school trick that a student of mine had taught me back in P-40s at Pinellas County Airport. That, uh—was pretty sure that I could shake the pilot. It's a maneuver that I have never heard described and I certainly never heard a name for it and I'm sure that it couldn't be performed in today's jets. It uses a torque of the engine torque to flip you.

My student and I called it an “inverted vertical reversement,” for a better name, and it was absolutely the most violent maneuver I’ve ever seen. The inverted part was because of the negative Gs. It performed like this: in a rat race, when you are wide open and shuddering in as tight turn to the left as you can make it, you wait until other aircraft guns bear on you but without getting lead on you for a shoot-down. At that time, he’s very close to you and really can’t see much of you at all. At that point, with throttle fully on, snap the stick into your gut and jam full bottom left—bottom rudder, left rudder—and release both the stick and the rudder.

The aircraft does the darnedest thing you ever imagined. First, the tail snaps end to end with the nose and you fly up against the canopy and then the aircraft corkscrews around underneath. You end up going 180 degrees in the direction you were originally—were headed. Much slower but still a 100 degrees—180 degrees off the other flight path. It is absolutely impossible for an aircraft behind you to see where you were—went. I know this because we practiced this time and time again in the old P-40s. Every time we did it, we would smash our old glass goggles up against the canopy. Went through more goggles that way. When I got away, I didn’t come back for more. As I said, I shot down five that day. But believe me, the pilot of that 109 was not one of them.

00:19:05

[Mission over Belgium (December 23, 1944)]

The third flight was on 23 December 1944. This mission was supposed to have been a ferry mission for the entire group to Asch, Belgium. The weather had just cleared. This was the time of the Ardennes, and they had reactivated the 8th Fighter Command under General Doolittle. Our group—and I believe it was a 162nd or 163rd [meant 362nd or 363rd], one or the other—was being transferred over to Belgium to support the 9th Air Force fighter-bombers.

At any rate, like I say, the weather had just cleared up there. And this was scheduled to be a ferry mission, and we were not going to get any support for quite a long time and all that garbage. And so the crew chief loaded up our gun bays with everything they could think of in the way of tools and extra sparkplugs. I had a musette bag with all my goodies in it. I was not wearing a flight suit. I was wearing my pinks and greens. I had my Bancroft flighter stuck someplace. I actually had a P4—I mean, a Colt .45 strapped to me. I never could shoot the damn thing, but I still had it strapped there.

00:20:58

Anyway, we were on this so-called ferry mission. We started up and then we got a call and we shut down. Everybody stayed in their aircraft except Earl Abbott, who was the lead of the 328th Squadron, and the 328th Squadron was scheduled to lead the group that day. At any rate, he

jumped out, went down, and got his briefing. We had received a last-minute mission. We were going to go over to Belgium—or over Belgium, where we were supposed to get ground-controlled interception directions from the radar in Belgium. So fine.

Earl Abbott was the only guy that knew where we were going. We all took off. He forgot to turn his generator on, so he aborted. I was flying Yellow flight. Well, I took over the squadron, 46th and the 47th were out of position, so I hooked in behind them and let them do the lead. I didn't want any part of it. I didn't know where we were going. Nobody else did, either. Finally, I believe Green and the 46th took over. But at any rate, when we flew over there, the 9th Air Force didn't want to have anything to do with us. We didn't have the call—proper call signs. They didn't know who it was, and we just flogged around over there. We didn't know where we were supposed to go, and in fact, we didn't even know where Asch, Belgium was.

Hank White was leading. He had, I believe, was—had been in Red Flight lead, Earl Abbott in White. I was in Yellow, and Hendrian [Bill Hendrian] was flying Blue. When I took over the squadron, Hank was supposed to be flying the second section. And as usual, Hank kind of lagged far back. Long about halfway through the mission, Hank White gave me a call, and he said, “Yellow 1, you got two 190s coming in on you.” He said, “Just keep flying and I'll let you know when to break.” And I looked around. I couldn't see them. But anyway, I set all the switches, and pretty soon he said, “Break,” and I broke. And believe me, I broke hard, and we broke in place.

00:23:55

And when I come around 180, the 109—or 190 was in my windscreen—not in my gunsight, but in the windscreen. I shot, actually, a total of about five rounds per gun and hit him, and he popped the canopy and jumped. At that time, I called, and I said, “Where's the other one?” Bill Hendrian said, “I got him.” I said, “Okay. Let's form up.” I did another 180-degree turn. I looked out, and Bill Hendrian was on my left. His flight was in perfect position. My flight had stayed with me perfectly. And by this time, Hank White had gained up and was in perfect position also.

I looked out ahead of me and found the air full of wing tanks. Believe me, there's nothing quite so fun as flying through wing tanks. You know every one of them's full of gas. Maybe a fine spectator sport, but it certainly isn't nothing for participation. At any rate, we flew around, didn't know where we were going. And finally, we landed at Chièvres, Belgium. Here I was in my pinks and greens, in my Little One III, a beautiful airplane. It had 400 hours on it, but it was absolutely sparkling clean. You walked by it, and it was just like a mirror.

I pulled into the parking lot alongside a couple dirty P-47s, 9th Air Force troops and their aircraft. Filled out the form one—which, believe it or not, I was carrying—unstrapped, took my helmet off, grabbed my Bancroft flighter, and leaped out of the cockpit dressed now in pinks and greens and a Bancroft flighter. And looked to my left, and here were two sloppy, raunchy 9th Air Force fighter-bomber pilots dressed in their old dirty greens. They looked the like the last rose of

summer. And the only thing I heard was them standing there and saying, “God damn 8th Air Force pansies.” So much for that flight.

00:26:31

[Last aerial victory (March 14, 1945)]

The fourth and last mission was when I shot down my last aircraft. Let’s see, it was on 14 of March 1945. That particular mission was scheduled as an escort mission. We were escorting 9th Air Force, A-26s and B-26s, I believe. At any rate, we had followed them all the way into England—or Germany. It was almost [unintelligible 00:27:12]. Beautiful weather. They were at low altitude. I think it was 12, 15,000 feet, 12 or so. We were at low altitude. As I recall, we didn’t get an awful lot of flak and that was early in 1945 and we followed them back. And then, on our way out, I saw an Arado 234 jet. It was not the first Arado I’d seen. I had seen one of them early in 1945, at which time it flew right over the top of my flight.

I looked at it. I thought it was a A-26, and I called it into the flight as a big friend. I heard my number four man yell something but nothing more than that. When he landed, he told me that that B-26—or A-26, rather, that we saw, had German crosses on it. We went to the intelligence and looked around, and we come to the conclusion that it wasn’t an A-26 at all, but it was really a German Arado 234. So much for that. Sometime later, maybe a week or two, I encountered a second Arado, and I proceeded to make an attack on it as usual, you know—adjustment, same thing as I had done a number of occasions before.

And this time, by the time I got behind it, that Arado was almost out of sight. The fourth—or the third time I saw one, a few days later, this time I was smart enough so that I jumped way early. I just commenced my attack way, way early, much sooner than I would have with a conventional aircraft. And when I squared away behind it, I was only about a thousand yards behind him. And I did fire at him, and I actually saw one strike on the wing. It never did show up in my film.

The fourth time was, again, an Arado, and I started chasing him. We were, at that time, coming back and we were coming towards the Remagen Bridge. And if I remember right, the 56th Group was over the Remagen Bridge and a group of P-47s providing aerial cover for it at the time. At any rate, as we come by, this thing went by me. And I started chasing it. I saw him. He made a one turn, and I started to cut him off. By this time, I was back seemed like a million miles.

00:30:43

And I cutoff, and again, he outrun me. And I saw him coming and make a second turn and then I figured out what he was going to do. He was going to go for the Remagen Bridge. There was nothing I could do to stop him, and so I, instead of following him, I turned in towards Germany, looked over at him, sure enough, he made a dive run at the bridge. As far as I know, he did not

drop any bombs—at least I didn't see any explosions—and pulled up and turned. And as he come, he was coming underneath me. Instead of waiting until he got in front of me, I dove down and commenced my attack actually as he flew by me.

And fortunately, did some good shooting for once in my life and knocked out both engines on him. In fact, I had chopped him up real good, and he was a full 90-degrees off mine. In other words, he was flying flat, and I was in a full 90-degree bank at the time I hit him. Later on, I—he went in, and I pulled a little less than 8 Gs getting out from under him. All the time I was doing it, I knew he was not getting away from me because I had knocked out both his engines, and I was throttling back all the time. I'm looking back, and our squadron was right behind me. Behind that was the rest of our group, and behind that, I could see all these P-47s, and I was number one right behind him. And I'll be damned if I was going to let anybody else get [unintelligible 00:32:38] on him.

00:32:34

And so I just stayed there, and I just sit and squirt and actually I did some good shooting. There was no prop wash, had no jet wash to rack me around, and I did some good shooting. That's it. That was mission number four.

[*Corrections and conclusion*]

For your information, I do have a photograph taken some time in November of '94 [likely meant '44], I believe, of me and Little One III. In respect to the—in review of this tape, I'll let it be known that I do know that Myrtle Beach is not in California, but rather in South Carolina. And that the group that was transferred with us to Belgium was either the 362nd or 3rd, not the 162nd or 63rd.

Incidentally, as a sideline to the few seconds of combat on December 23rd, our group dropped our wing tanks. We had no replacement and as a result, our missions at Asch—Asch, Belgium—were without wing tanks for the first time ever with GCI radar. Our pilots were top of the line, averaging close to 250 hours of combat. The new boys of the squadron had over 180 hours of combat, with no tanks, smoldering boulders for pilots and GCI to direct us.

We for—for one and only time in the group's experience, acted and performed like fighter pilots, flew just under the fueling enrichment, around 40 inches of mercury, were from 20,000 one minute, down to the deck the next, back up again, short missions and radar to tell us where we were going and what was in front of us. At Asch, we shot down more than 70 enemy aircraft and lost three pilots. One, George Preddy to friendly flak. One to enemy flak and one, Earl Abbott, to an unknown cause, possibly enemy aircraft.

I hope I haven't bored you too much with this tale. You can use this for anything or everything you want to in your books. And I wish you the very best, whatever it is, on your endeavors.

00:36:10

[END OF INTERVIEW]