

## Not All the Danger Was in the Skies

### Billy Mooney survived being shot down only to meet his fate on the ground.

It was the largest 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force raid of the war. Billy Mooney, in an olive-drab P-51 Mustang fighter nicknamed “Libby-B,” was flying escort for the 2,000 B-17 and B-24 bombers heading toward Germany to deliver early Christmas presents to Hitler’s Third Reich. It was Sunday, the day before Christmas 1944.

Four miles below, Hans-Peter Koller was wondering what kind of Christmas this fifth year of war would allow his family to celebrate. Koller, just 11 years-old, was about to experience a Christmas Eve he’d not soon forget.

William Henry Mooney, Jr., was born on October 3, 1916 in Hawkinsville, GA. His father and grandfather had purchased a cotton mill and once Billy was old enough, he worked in the business. In high school, he attended school half-a-day and worked in the afternoons. After graduation, Billy attended Clemson College for two years; then headed to Griffin, GA to again work in the textile industry. As the threat of war grew, Billy was drafted into the Army Quartermaster Corps. He entered the service on February 4, 1941 at Fort McPherson in Atlanta, Georgia. Billy attended Officer Candidate School and was accepted for Aviation Cadet training. He probably graduated in the fall of 1943 and was assigned to the 357th Fighter Group. When this unit deployed to England in December 1943, he was on its roster.



Mooney was eventually assigned to the 363<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadron based at Leiston in England. Its primary mission was to fly escort for the heavy bombers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force as they attempted to destroy Germany’s ability to wage war. Apparently, Billy Mooney was pretty good at his job. By the time he took off on his Christmas Eve mission, he was already a captain and at 28, the oldest fighter pilot in the squadron. He was also an ace, having shot down 8 enemy fighters and having shared kills on two others.

Mooney and Lieutenant Jesse Frey were “spares” on the Christmas Eve mission. They were along to fill in any gaps created if another pilot’s aircraft developed mechanical difficulties on the way to their rendezvous with the bombers. None did, but both Mooney and Frey continued the mission anyway. The two were flying above and behind their formation commander, when a swarm of Focke-Wulf 190 enemy fighters was sighted near Fulda, in central Germany. Mooney executed a split-S diving turn to engage the enemy fighters. Frey last saw him “tacked on to a FW 190.” Other squadron pilots reported seeing an olive-drab P-51, like the “Libby-B,” on fire and saw its pilot bail out. It was about 2:30 pm.



The Luftwaffe, the German Air Force, reported that Mooney’s aircraft had been totally destroyed and that he was dead. No other details were revealed.

As soon as the Allies had invaded Normandy the previous June, Army Graves Registration units began the arduous and solemn task of identifying service members fallen in battle. As the front lines advanced, so did the Graves Registration teams. Their work continued even after Germany surrendered. In August, one such unit came across the unmarked grave of an American soldier in the small village of Laubach, Germany some 30 miles northeast of Frankfurt. Members of the company began a routine investigation. During the inquiry, the mayor of the village stated that the pilot had successfully parachuted from his mortally-damaged fighter, but had then been shot in the back by a man named Hoffman.

On that fateful Christmas Eve, Billy Mooney had in fact floated to earth beneath the silk canopy of his parachute. As the ground grew closer, he watched a crowd of German civilians gather—an unfriendly crowd at that. Otto Heene, an armed Land-Guard Leader, was the first to reach him. Realizing that he was badly outnumbered, Mooney tossed his side arm away and gathered his 'chute to keep from being dragged by the wind. He asked for a cigarette, but the crowd shouted and threatened to punch him if anyone gave him a smoke. Within a few minutes, Emil Hoffman, the local Nazi Party leader arrived and took charge. He instructed Heene to escort Mooney to the jail in nearby Laubach, to be held there until after the holiday passed.

Heene and Mooney began to walk toward Laubach. Hoffman, instead of accompanying them, returned to his home. There he donned his party uniform, complete with pistol. Catching up with the guard and his prisoner, Hoffman pulled the pistol from its holster and shot Mooney in the back. Mooney fell to the ground, but struggled to get back up. Hoffman fired a second shot, striking Mooney in the head. Hoffman then retrieved a horse-drawn cart to carry Mooney into the village where he was pronounced dead. Armed with this version of Mooney's death, the Army charged Hoffman, who was already in custody in a prison near Marburg, with murder.

Young Hans-Peter Koller testified at Hoffman's war crimes trial in Nuremberg. His testimony, along with the pathologist's report of the two gunshot wounds and the fact that Mooney at no time tried to escape, doomed Hoffman. Convicted of the murder of Captain William Mooney, Jr., Emil Hoffman was hanged at Landsberg Prison in August 1946.

Billy Mooney's remains were reinterred in Holland. At his family's request, his body was eventually returned to the United States and buried in the Riverside Cemetery in Columbus, Georgia.

