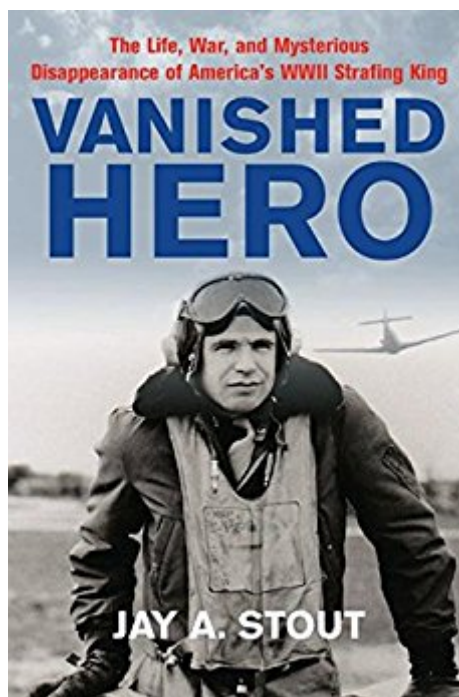




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# Vanished Hero: The Life, War And Mysterious Disappearance Of America's WWII Strafing King



## Synopsis

A hell-bent-for-leather fighter pilot, Elwyn G. Righetti remains one of the most unknown, yet compelling, colorful and controversial commanders of World War II. Arriving late to the war, he led the England-based 55th Fighter Group against the Nazis during the closing months of the fight with a no-holds-barred aggressiveness that transformed the group from a middling organization of no reputation into a headline-grabbing team that had to make excuses to no one. Indeed, Righetti's boldness paid off as he quickly achieved ace status and additionally scored more strafing victories than any other Eighth Air Force pilot. However, success came at a high cost in men and machines. Some of Righetti's pilots resented him as a Johnny-come-lately intent on winning a sack of medals at their expense. But most lauded their spirited new commander and his sledgehammer audacity. Indeed, he made his men most famous for "loco busting" as they put more than six hundred enemy locomotives out of commission in just two days! Ultimately, Righetti's calculated recklessness ran full speed into the odds. His aircraft was hit while strafing an enemy airfield only four days before the 55th flew its last mission. Almost farcically aggressive to the end, he coaxed his crippled fighter through one more firing pass before making a successful crash landing. Immediately, he radioed his men that he was fine and asked that they reassure his family. Righetti was never heard from again. Vanished Hero tells the story of this remarkable man and the air war that he and his comrades fought, while examining his possible fate.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the last paragraph of the last page of the "Author's Comments" the author asks the reader to consider the words " I hope I have done him justice". Jay Stout has more than done him justice. In a compelling accounting of the short life of one of America's greatest, Jay Stout has brought full attention to not only the loss and disappearance of Elwyn Righetti but the many airmen who perished without a trace, including two of his group lost in the same days action. In what must have been a very difficult endeavor, the author states as much, Jay has nevertheless covered this lost life with compassion and reflection. Although we know there is no happy ending, this is a story which must be told not only for the memory of Elwyn Righetti but for all those airmen who launched to an uncertain fate and who also, never returned and were never found. Thank you LTC. Stout.

I like the mystery of not knowing what happened Col.. Righetti and hoping by the end of book they could have more information on what happened to him

THIS IS A GREAT BOOK FOR INSIGHT INTO COURAGE.

This is the biography of World War II P-51 pilot Elwyn Righetti, who rose to become a Lieutenant Colonel and the commander of the 55th Fighter Group. Righetti was an ace with 7.5 kills but was best known for strafing ground targets in Germany such as trains, truck convoys, and airfields. He destroyed 27 enemy aircraft on the ground, an Eighth Air Force record. This was a dangerous business. Righetti was brought down by flak in April 1945, in the final days of the war. Though he survived a crash landing, he was never seen again and his body was never found. Why did Jay Stout choose to write about this relatively unknown pilot? Mainly, he had excellent sources - correspondence from Righetti to his family and interviews with family members, including his sisters - that gave him a real feeling for the man. This comes across very strongly in the book. Many books about combat experience in WW2 have to invent thoughts and feelings, but in this case the author has hard facts. The book describes Righetti's childhood in California, where he grew up on a dairy

farm. He had an early interest in flying, earning a certification as a private pilot in 1939, a rare achievement at the time. He became an Air Corps cadet and earned his wings in Texas in 1940. Due to the rapid expansion of American airpower in 1940-1941, he was quickly promoted to instructor. This caused him a long period of frustration because throughout 1942 and 1943 he was unable to get a combat assignment overseas. Few people know that most US Army Air Force personnel were stationed in the US during the war, on training and other duties (by the end of 1942 only 15% of its personnel were overseas, and only 30% by the end of 1943). Thus, Righetti's experience was actually very typical. There are very few accounts of stateside service in the WW2 Army Air Forces, to my knowledge, and this book is a welcome contribution to the literature from that perspective. Righetti was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel (at a relatively young age) and finally drew an overseas assignment in the summer of 1944. He arrived in England in October 1944. He was afraid the air war was over, but this was far from the case. In one sense, this was true - the Luftwaffe had been broken. Nevertheless, 46% of all Army Air Force sorties flown in the ETO were flown from October 1944 to May 1945, as American airpower exploited the air superiority so painfully gained (about which the reader will wish to consult Stout's previous book, *Men Who Killed the Luftwaffe: The U.S. Army Air Forces Against Germany in World War II*). At that point, Righetti had lots of flying experience but no combat experience, so he needed to prove himself to his new comrades. This he quickly did, sharing credit for an air-to-air kill in November, shooting up German locomotives on the ground, and getting more kills in December. Stout does a fine job of putting Righetti's individual combat actions into the context of their time, for example, the Ardennes offensive in December. Stout also explains the aircraft, tactics and technology of late-WW2 air combat from both the German and American perspective very clearly and engagingly. But this is not a dry, "high level" history by any means - the main focus is on the air combat missions in which Righetti was engaged. In early 1945, the Army Air Force began an intensive effort to strafe ground targets in Germany. These attacks (by the USAAF as a whole) had a devastating effect on the German transportation system that collapsed the German economy. Attacks on airfields destroyed thousands of aircraft on the ground, inflicted severe casualties on Luftwaffe ground crews, and reduced Luftwaffe morale. Righetti was part of this effort, and was extremely aggressive - even recklessly so - at strafing. He earned the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second highest decoration, for a strafing mission over Germany in January 1945. Unfortunately, this aggression eventually caught up with him, when he decided to make "one more pass" at an enemy airfield even after he'd been hit by ground fire. He was hit again and forced to crash land. He radio'd that he was OK, and was never heard from again. The search for Righetti was complicated by the fact that his

crash site was in Soviet-occupied Germany, and the Soviets were uncooperative. Possibly vengeful German civilians or SS men shot Righetti, but no remains were ever found, and nobody has come forward with a confession or eyewitness account of such a crime. The US government was still investigating the matter as late as February 2016, but discovered nothing definitive. This was disappointing - it would have been nice to conclude the book with "now we finally know what happened" - but Righetti remains Missing In Action. Overall, this is a very entertaining and well-written book. Anyone with an interest in military history and WW2 air combat will want to read it.

Having read dozens of books on the air war over Europe in World War II, especially ones dealing with the Eighth Air Force, I'm very familiar with lots of American aces: Gabreski, Johnson, Gentile, Godfrey, Goodson, Zemke, Schilling, Hofer and Blakeslee, just to name a few. However, when it comes to Elwyn Righetti, The King of the Strafers, I've rarely seen any information about him. Then this book came along and helped fill that void in my knowledge. Righetti was a seasoned pilot who was training pilots for the USAAF in Texas when he finally got posted to a combat unit in the UK--the 55th Fighter Group of the 8th Air Force. Flying P-51 Mustangs, the 55th FG escorted heavy bombers to targets in Europe and then went hunting for other targets, such as trains, airfields, military installations or just about anything which seemed like it was part of the German war machine. For someone of Righetti's skill and temperament, this seemed to be the perfect fit. Since Righetti already held a higher rank than normal for a new pilot, it was only a short time before he moved into the spot of commander of the 55th FG. However, this didn't affect his determination to inflict as much damage as he could when he flew combat. Under his leadership, a spirit of aggressiveness which wasn't quite as prevalent under prior commanders came to the fore and the group became one of the top scorers in strafing successes, with Righetti himself leading the way. He was an ace in aerial combat which showed he could fly and fight with anyone on the German side, but as a strafers he was without peer on the American side. It was while strafing an airfield near Dresden in the war's final days where he was hit by flak and forced to crash land in German territory. He was never seen again. A former fighter pilot himself, the author Jay Stout tells Righetti's story from his childhood in San Luis Obispo, California, through his early years in the USAAF as a trainee and then as an instructor, and finally as a combat pilot. Using personal correspondence from Righetti and members of his family, Stout constructs the tale of a gifted pilot and loving husband. Along the way he also includes little vignettes about other pilots and members of the 55th FG, so the book serves as a mini-chronicle of the last several months of the group's activities as well. The book ends with the author's attempts at unraveling the mystery of Righetti's disappearance, as well

as laying to rest some of the rumors about what happened to him after he was shot down. A really good book, and I wouldn't expect any less from Jay Stout. This is the fifth book of his I've read and he is consistently excellent.

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