

Heinrich stood paralyzed in the middle of the road, not believing what he was seeing. Yes, that was a fighter plane flying low and straight toward him, seemingly navigating the same road he was on. His heavy boots were rooted to the packed dirt of the country road, and he strained to hear what he should have been hearing. But there was no engine noise. The propeller of the P-51 Mustang was stuck in an X configuration as it careened ever closer. Heinrich couldn't divert his eyes, even as he dove off the road into the ditch to avoid being hit.

The boy raised his head just enough to look as the plane zoomed by. He could see the pilot's face, mouth twisted in a grimace as his hands gripped the yoke, trying mightily to keep the plane from taking a nosedive into the German countryside. It was a scene frozen in time. As the plane passed, Heinrich felt the hairs rise on his head.

About 15 meters down the road the Mustang's nose hit the ground, sending the plane into a somersault. Heinrich rose partly from the ditch, heart beating at a near-fatal cadence, and watched the destruction in a theatrical mix of slow-motion and rapid-fire action. Fast action: The plane cartwheeled past a tree. Slow motion: A wing separated, twirling through the air against the ominous gray sky before it fluttered to the ground. Fast action: The plane slammed into another tree. Slow motion: The tail peeled away from the fuselage, trailing wires and strips of sheet metal.

The plane skidded across the field and into the woods upside down, leaving a long swath of loose dirt and broken trees behind it. Heinrich shielded his face from the grit, but he could taste the sap from the broken trees on his tongue.

The whole incident took only seconds. And it was eerily quiet, only the whoosh of air and the cracking of trees giving any indication that something catastrophic was happening.