



JUG ACE

High-scoring P-47 Thunderbolt pilot
Lt. Col. Robert “Bob” S. Johnson BY CLIVE ROWLEY, MBE RAF (RET.)

June 13, 1943 “I lifted the wing, slid the P-47 through a gentle curve in her dive and lunged for the Focke-Wulf 190. Closer, closer, the square wings, big black crosses in the sight, growing larger, clearer. Trigger squeeze, stick steady, the lead is exactly right, he’ll fly into the bullets, hold it down. Crash! Something’s hit me! The Thunderbolt trembled so violently my finger flew from the trigger and the explosion stopped. It was my own guns. All that noise and vibration, the flame and smoke, had come from the eight heavy .50-caliber guns blasting away. I was so scared I nearly jumped out of my seat. Then violent flame, a sudden mushrooming flower of bright fire, jagged pieces of metal twisting crazily, black smoke. There goes the Focke-Wulf, torn into pieces from my first burst! My Thunderbolt flashed through a spinning torrent of fire, smoke, and debris, the remains of the disintegrating 190.”



Planes of Fame Air Museum's razorback Curtiss-Wright P-47G-15-CU (license-built version of the Republic P-47D) 42-25254, in the colors and markings of P-47D-5-RE 42-8487 UN-M "Spirit of Atlantic City N.J." This was the aircraft of Capt. Walker "Bud" Mahurin of the 63rd FS, 56th FG, a colleague and friend of Bob Johnson based at Halesworth, England. (Photo John Dibbs/Facebook.com/theplanepicture)

This is how Robert "Bob" S. Johnson, a P-47 Thunderbolt pilot with the 61st Fighter Squadron, described his first aerial kill over France on June 13, 1943. He was flying his personal aircraft, razorback P-47C 41-6235 HV-P, named "Half Pint." It was the first time that he had fired all eight of the Thunderbolt's .50-inch caliber guns and witnessed their devastating destructive power, as well as experienced the amazing noise and effects in his own aircraft. Previously, in training, he had only fired two of the guns at towed target sleeves, and then only a couple of times. In fact, he had not passed the gunnery course and theoretically had not qualified as a fighter pilot. Yet he was destined to become the second highest-scoring Thunderbolt and European Theater of Operations (ETO) ace of World War Two, with an eventual total of 27 aerial victories.

Oklahoma boy

Robert Johnson was born in February 1920. He grew up in Lawton, Oklahoma, and took an early interest in aviation. As a young teenager he took jobs to earn money to pay for flying lessons. He flew solo at the age of 14, by the age of 16 he had 35 hours flying

time, and at 18 he completed the Civilian Pilot Training program.

Meanwhile, owning and shooting a .22 rifle and hunting small game familiarized him with aiming a gun, compensating for gravity drop and assessing the necessary lead against a moving target.

At high school and college, the young Bob Johnson was a good sportsman. He boxed competitively and played football as a blocking guard, experiences that improved his physical conditioning and developed his courage. His football coach told him that the opposition were not supermen and "they put their pants on one leg at a time just like you do." He remembered those words and sometimes thought of them in combat.

Cadet pilot

In November 1941, at the age of 21, Johnson enlisted with the U.S. Army Air Corps, completing his pre-flight training as a cadet at Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas.

Johnson's primary flying training on Fairchild PT-19A Cornells and Boeing-Stearman PT-18 Kaydets began in December 1941 at Sikeston, Missouri, immediately after Pearl Harbor and with the U.S. now at war. At the end of the course, having discovered it was permitted, he married his college sweetheart, Barbara Morgan, on February 21, 1942. He would now be going to war as a married man, with a wife waiting for him back home.

Group photo of pilots of the 61st FS, 56th FG with a P-47D at Halesworth. Squadron commander Maj. "Gabby" Gabreski is fifth from left, "Bob" Johnson is fifth from right. (Photo author's collection)



FOR A NEWLY QUALIFIED PILOT WHO HAD FLOWN ONLY RELATIVELY SMALL TRAINING MACHINES, THE HUGE SIZE, BULK, AND POWER OF THE P-47 MUST HAVE BEEN DAUNTING.

Five days later, he began his basic flying training at Randolph Field, Texas, flying the North American BT-9 Yale. On graduating, although he really wanted to be a fighter pilot, Johnson's instructors persuaded him that flying multi-engine bombers would provide commercial aviation opportunities after the war, so he volunteered for bombers. His advanced flying training to become a bomber pilot took place at Kelly Field, flying single-engine North American AT-6 Texans.

On July 3, 1942, with a total flying time of 300 hours, Johnson was awarded his silver pilot's wings and commissioned as a second lieutenant. Things then got even better as he was posted to fighters.

P-47 Thunderbolt

On July 19, 1942, Johnson reported to the newly designated 56th Fighter Group and to the 61st Fighter Squadron, at Bridgeport, Connecticut. The 56th FG consisted of the 61st, 62nd, and 63rd Fighter Squadrons and was the first USAAF outfit to receive the new Republic P-47B Thunderbolt fighter, the "Jug" as it was to be nicknamed. It operated initially as an operational evaluation unit, bringing the new aircraft into service and ironing out the many technical bugs. The group quickly moved to Bradley Field, Windsor Locks, Connecticut, where the runways were twice as long. The work-up and operational training program with the new aircraft was to cost the lives of 18 of the group's pilots.

For a newly qualified pilot who had flown only relatively small training machines, the huge size, bulk, and power of the P-47 must have been daunting. That is borne out in Bob Johnson's own description of his first impressions of the Thunderbolt:

"In every respect the Thunderbolt was



an airplane that lived up to its name; it was a giant! I had been accustomed to 600 horsepower, but beneath the P-47B's massive cowling was a great engine capable of 2,000 horsepower. She was big, and on the ground she wasn't very pretty, but every inch of her structure was power, a rugged and sturdy machine with all the mass of a tank. A tremendous four-bladed prop, wide and straddling landing gear and in each wing four .50-caliber guns, giving the Thunderbolt a fantastic punch, the ability to throw heavy lead at the rate of 7,200 rounds per minute! It was love at first sight. Somehow I knew that this machine and I were meant for each other."

In mid-September, the 56th FG received a new Group Commander, 28-year-old Major Hubert "Hub" Zemke, who was to become perhaps the greatest of the USAAF Fighter Group commanders. He was a strict but fair disciplinarian and proved to be a brilliant combat leader and tactician. Under his leadership, the 56th FG developed "dive, fire, recover" tactics that capitalized on the P-47's strengths, particularly its excellent diving performance and superior roll rate.

In November 1942, the 56th FG was alerted for overseas deployment to England and flying ceased in order to prepare for the move.

A P-47 firing its eight .50-caliber machine guns on the ground. The Jug's firepower could be devastating. (Photo courtesy of John Dibbs/Facebook.com/theplanepicture)



P-47 Thunderbolts of the 62nd Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group, flying in formation with a B-24 Liberator in May 1943. (Photo author's collection)

England

The 56th FG arrived in England in January 1943, having sailed across the Atlantic unescorted in the fast Queen Elizabeth liner, now being used as an overcrowded troopship. The group's first base was RAF King's Cliffe, in Northampton, some 12 miles west of Peterborough in Cambridgeshire.

Brand-new P-47Cs began to be delivered to the group in late January, and the first training flights in theater were made in February. The 56th spent its time at King's Cliffe learning RAF procedures and training for combat.

Future top-scoring P-47 and ETO ace Francis "Gabby" Gabreski joined the group while it was at King's Cliffe and was assigned to the 61st FS. He quickly became a flight leader and in May he was promoted to major. He took command of the squadron in early June 1943 and remained its CO until January 1944.

By April 1943, the 56th FG was ready for bomber escort operations. The group moved to RAF Horsham St Faith, near Norwich, Norfolk, closer to the North Sea and in easier range of German-occupied Europe. It was time to prove what the P-47 could do in combat and whether Zemke's training methods and tactics would match the challenges.

Zemke had a few pilots that he was worried about. A few were too aggressive

and some had failed to qualify at gunnery school. Of these, Zemke doubted that one young man in particular would last very long in combat. Bob Johnson nearly proved Zemke correct on his early missions. However, he would survive his first brushes with the enemy and go on to terrorize the Luftwaffe like almost no one else in the 8th Air Force.

Early operations

The 56th FG flew its first operational mission, an uneventful fighter sweep to St Omer, on April 13, 1943. Johnson flew his first combat mission, the third for the group, on April 17. This mission, a fighter sweep over the coast of the Netherlands, also proved entirely uneventful.

After his return from his first operational sortie, Johnson and four other novice pilots were sent to RAF Goxhill to complete their air-to-air gunnery training. Initially, Johnson "couldn't hit a thing," as he admitted to himself, but he was learning. On the last day he had grasped the basics and scored 4.5 percent. As the score to pass gunnery school was 5 percent, the second highest-scoring ace of the ETO never officially qualified as a combat pilot.

The 56th FG experienced its first combats during a mission on April 29, losing two P-47s and their pilots. Johnson was not scheduled for that mission and did not

resume combat flying until May 3. On May 14, he encountered Luftwaffe fighter aircraft for the first time, on a mission to escort Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses to bomb Antwerp. Several Focke-Wulf Fw 190s broke up his squadron's formation, Johnson became separated and, finding himself alone, he broke off the engagement against a superior number of Fw 190s and dived for home. When he landed, he found that he had erroneously been reported as missing in action. He was chewed out by Zemke for breaking formation, and this was the start of an unwanted and possibly undeserved reputation that Johnson developed for wild and undisciplined flying.

During their early operations, P-47s without drop tanks lacked the range to escort the bombers far into enemy airspace. In addition, the group's pilots were still green and learning to fight and survive. Early losses were high and did not stack up well against the limited number of enemy aircraft being shot down.

On May 19, Johnson's flight of four P-47s was ambushed by German fighters over the

Dutch coast and he experienced for the first time what it was like to be shot at. In his own words, he "apparently set some sort of unofficial speed record over Europe" as he ran for home.

First kill

Johnson's first combat kill, against a Fw 190 on June 13, 1943, was described by him in the lead paragraph. The 56th had scored its first confirmed kill just the day before and, as Johnson himself admitted, he broke all the rules and regulations to get the second. He later said: "I was supposed to fly top cover, but I flew past Colonel Zemke to shoot down the leader of an eight-plane formation of Focke-Wulf Fw-190s. With more experience I might have been able to shoot down two more. I arrived home late because I was looking for more enemy planes, and upon my arrival I was thoroughly chewed out by my group and squadron commanders and by my flight leaders Zemke, Gabreski, and 'Gerry' Johnson. I was congratulated for getting the kill, then reprimanded."

Pilots of the 56th FG in the briefing room at Boxted, England, in early May 1944. This photo appeared in the Saturday Evening Post of June 3, 1944. Bob Johnson is second from right. Other notable aces are: "Gabby" Gabreski (back row, far left), Frank Klibbe (fourth left), then David Schilling and "Hub" Zemke. Seated front left is Fred Christensen, below Klibbe is "Gerry" Johnson and below Bob Johnson is Walker "Bud" Mahurin. (Photo John Dibbs / Facebook.com/theplanepicturecompany)





Lt. Robert S. "Bob" Johnson (left) and Capt. Walker Melville "Bud" Mahurin (right) beside P-47D 42-8487 UN-M "Spirit of Atlantic City N.J." in early March 1944. This was "Bud" Mahurin's aircraft in which he claimed at least five of his total of 20.75 aerial victories during WW II. (Photo author's collection)

Near-fatal mission

On June 26, 1943, Johnson flew one of 48 Thunderbolts of the 56th FG, taking off from the forward operating base at RAF Manston on the Kent coast to escort Boeing B-17 bombers returning from a mission against Villacoublay airfield on the outskirts of Paris. He was the number four in his flight, exposed at the rear of the squadron formation and, having been criticized previously for poor discipline, he was determined to hold his position.

As the P-47s approached the rendezvous point at around 30,000 feet, Johnson, with his exceptional eyesight, spotted some enemy fighters and reported them on the radio, but the squadron continued straight on. They were then jumped from above and behind by 16 Fw 190s of JG 26. Johnson's P-47 "Half Pint" was hit and seriously damaged by an accurate burst of cannon and machine gun fire as the squadron scattered. Shells smashed his P-47's canopy and instrument panel, ruptured the hydraulics and knocked out the oxygen system. The engine was damaged and running rough, and oil was spraying onto the windscreen. One round nicked Johnson's nose, spinning his head to the left, and he was slightly wounded in the right leg by shrapnel. Then the hydraulic fluid spraying around the cockpit ignited and the cockpit filled with smoke and flames.

Johnson attempted to bail out, but found the damaged canopy would only open about six inches, insufficient for him to escape, regardless of how much physical force he applied to it. Suffering from the effects of hypoxia due to the failure of his oxygen system, he tried to squeeze out through the shattered canopy but found that his parachute snagged and he could not get out while wearing it. Meanwhile, his aircraft had fallen into an uncontrollable dive and he flashed down vertically through the bomber formation, miraculously without hitting any, before he was able to regain control at about 20,000 feet. Equally miraculously, the fire went out, but now he was subjected to hydraulic fluid spraying into his eyes and scorched face. He was flying without his goggles as he had put them in for repair having broken a lens. He was now being almost blinded and his eyes and scorched face were puffing up. However, he found that the P-47 was still flyable and throttling back reduced the thumping from the engine. He set the shot-up Thunderbolt into a gradual low-powered descent towards the coast and home, now quite alone.

As he approached the Channel coast, Johnson spotted a single fighter bearing down on him. It was a Focke-Wulf Fw 190, and Johnson's crippled Thunderbolt was in no condition to fight. All he could do was lower his seat and huddle down, seeking refuge behind the inch-thick armor plate behind the pilot's seat and continue on his way. The Fw 190 slid in astern and from very close range pumped machine gun rounds into the helpless P-47. Fortunately, it seemed that the Fw 190 had already expended all its cannon ammunition, but Johnson jumped every time a bullet hit the armor plate as the Thunderbolt was chewed up. Unable to take any more, he stomped on the rudder pedals, slewing the Jug from side to side, and the sudden loss of speed caused the Fw 190 to overshoot. It settled into tight formation alongside. The German pilot made eye contact, shook

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his head in astonishment that the shredded P-47 was still flying, and waved his hand before peeling away.

However, this was not "A Higher Call" chivalrous moment because the German pilot slotted in behind and proceeded to pour more bullets into the Thunderbolt before pulling up alongside again. How the P-47 stayed together and kept flying is a mystery but it did, much to the amazement of both Johnson and the German fighter pilot, who modern research suggests was Feldwebel Wilhelm Mayer of JG 26. At this point of the war, Mayer already had four confirmed kills. He was eventually credited with 27 confirmed aerial victories but was shot down and killed by an RAF Spitfire on January 4, 1945.

By now the pair of aircraft were down to 4,000 feet and passing over Dieppe, normally a hotbed of flak, but the anti-aircraft guns could not fire. The Fw 190 alongside was unwittingly protecting Johnson. As they coasted out over the water, the Fw 190 once again slid behind and pumped more bullets into the helpless Thunderbolt. Then silence. The Fw 190 was out of ammunition. For the third time, Mayer flew up alongside, shook his head in wonderment and peeled away for the last time, leaving Johnson to escape.

With some help from the British distress homing system, Johnson managed to reach England and land his wrecked Thunderbolt at Manston without flaps or brakes. Fortunately, the undercarriage lowered normally and the tires were undamaged.



The cannon-shell-damaged canopy of Bob Johnson's P-47C, "Half Pint," after landing at RAF Manston on June 26, 1943. The jammed canopy had prevented him from bailing out. (Photo author's collection)

Once stopped, Johnson crawled out through the smashed canopy, dragging his parachute behind him. He was a mess, with blood from his nose smeared over his face, which was puffed up from the stinging hydraulic fluid and burns. Splinters from cannon shells were embedded in both of his hands, and his watch had been shot off his wrist. He also had two flesh wounds in his right thigh. His Thunderbolt, "Half Pint," had 21 gaping holes and jagged tears from 20mm cannon shells. Three had burst against the armor plate behind his head, while there were more than 200 bullet holes in the airframe. The aircraft looked like a sieve with holes in the wings, nose, fuselage and tail, and five in the propeller. It was beyond repair and never flew again, but this was surely a graphic demonstration of the strength and resilience of the P-47.

Four pilots of the 56th FG were killed in action that day, one of them a close friend of Johnson's. A fifth pilot had to bail out over the sea but was rescued, another P-47 was damaged beyond repair, and five more were seriously damaged. The debt was growing larger, but the Germans' failure to kill Johnson on June 26, 1943, was to cost them dearly. He was back flying on July 1 and named the new P-47D, 42-8461 HV-P, which was allocated to him, "Lucky." It was given nose art of a hand with the middle finger raised. He was to score 21 of his victories in "Lucky."

Ace

In July 1943, the 56th FG relocated to RAF Halesworth, just seven miles inland from the North Sea coast of Suffolk.

Johnson did not see combat again until August 17. The P-47s were now flying with 108-gallon belly tanks to increase their range, allowing them to escort the bombers to targets in the Ruhr Valley. On the operation that day, several combats occurred and, although Johnson did not get the chance to engage the enemy, the 56th FG claimed 17 enemy fighters for the loss of two of their own.

Johnson's second confirmed kill, this time against a Bf 109, came two days later on August 19, during a fighter sweep over the Netherlands. Not for the only time his kill was achieved when he caught the enemy aircraft during a high-speed dive, where the Thunderbolt was much faster.

In five weeks of bomber escort missions up to the end of September 1943, the 56th FG claimed 43 enemy aircraft destroyed in aerial combat for the loss of eight of their own pilots. The balance sheet was gradually being restored into credit.

On October 8, Johnson destroyed a Fw 190 over Lingen, Germany. Modern research has suggested that his victim was the commander of JG1, Oberstleutnant (Lt. Col.) Hans Philipp, who was killed when he bailed out too low for his parachute to open. Two days later, Johnson shot down a twin-engine Bf 110 and a Fw 190 on the same mission, during a mass aerial combat over Muster, Germany. Johnson's rudder cable was shot away by another enemy fighter and he was forced to fly home without any rudder control and to land pulling on the cable with his hand. However, with five kills to his credit he had become an official ace, something he had achieved while flying primarily as a wingman. He had also overcome the unwanted reputation of being a lone wolf.

Zemke's Wolfpack

The P-47s had now received 75-gallon underwing drop tanks and the 56th FG began to reach deeper and deeper into Germany. With some experienced combat

FLYING THE THUNDERBOLT

BY LT. COL. BOB JOHNSON

TAKEOFF AND CLIMB

“On the runway, ready for takeoff, ease the throttle forward. The sustained rumble ahead changes immediately in pitch, growling its way up to a deep-throated roar. Foot brakes off and keep moving the throttle forward, constantly increasing power, until it is all the way forward. The acceleration shoves me back in the seat as the Thunderbolt hurls itself forward. Ease forward on the stick, the tailwheel lifts, the engine torque is terrific; the fighter keeps trying to swing to the left. I keep increasing right rudder pressure to keep her headed down the center of the runway. I check the airspeed indicator and at 110 mph I ease back on the stick to lift her off the ground. Gear up, flaps up, canopy closed and locked. The Thunderbolt climbs, the altimeter needle keeps winding and soon the big fighter has a different feel, due to the fading air resistance, and then we’re at 31,000 feet. The Thunderbolt is no angel, but how she can run into the blue.”

IN COMBAT

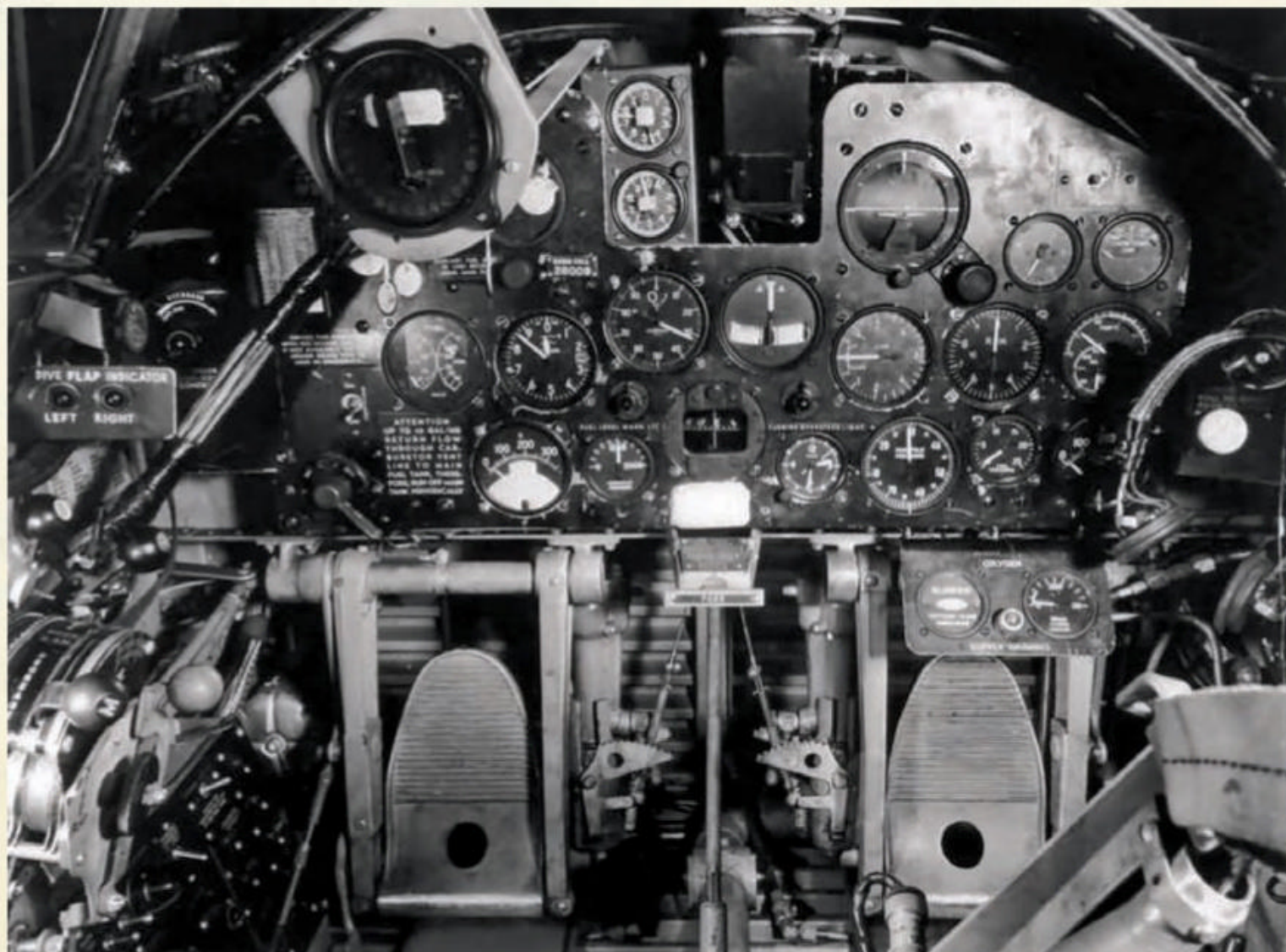
“The P-47 was as fast, if not faster, than anything else in the air at the time. Its roll rate was very good; it could out-roll any plane in the air, bar none, and it could out-dive anything. It was very rugged and could take quite a beating. The Thunderbolt carried eight wing-mounted, .50-caliber machine guns which were very, very destructive. In its first year of combat, it was equipped with a thin, feather-tip propeller which was great for level speed, but helped not one bit in a climb or zoom.

In very early 1944 we received the big, paddle-bladed prop with 14-inch-wide blades. This helped tremendously in the Thunderbolt’s climb and zoom. You could literally hang the airplane on its prop! The P-47 was not a very tight-turning aircraft and not particularly maneuverable at low altitude. It was originally designed as a high-altitude fighter, so we could go all the way up to 44,000 feet if we wanted to, but most combat started at 25,000 feet where we were very maneuverable and held every advantage over all enemy fighters, except in a level turn. So, we learned to stay out of turning fights. We made the enemy come to our level and fight our kind of fight. In combat, we defeated every type of enemy aircraft from 30,000 feet right down to tree-top level. In a fight we knew that the Thunderbolt would never fail us, that we could literally hurl the airplane in any attitude through the sky. Thunderbolts fought the best pilots in the Luftwaffe at its peak and defeated them. Many pilots survived the war flying the P-47 who might not have in another aircraft. I know I did.”

LANDING

“Heading home, ease back on the throttle and drop the nose. Several tons of fighter slip earthwards, steady as a rock. Maintaining an approach speed of 120 mph because so big and heavy a fighter stalls out at 105 mph. Gear down, flaps down on the final turn, and set her down at 110 mph, just above stalling speed, in a three-point landing.”

P-47D Thunderbolt cockpit. This was Bob Johnson’s place of work while on operations in the ETO in 1943–44, sometimes on long missions over enemy territory. (Photo author’s collection)



JUG ACE

Maj. Robert "Bob" S. Johnson shakes hands with his crew chief, S/ Sgt. J C Penrod, from the cockpit of his P-47D LM-Q, "Penrod and Sam," in which he scored his final two victories flying with the 62nd FS. The name came from Booth Tarkington's boys' novel of the same name, matching Johnson's crew chief's surname (Penrod) and his own middle name (Samuel). (Photo author's collection)



pilots and aces among its pilots and with increasing successes, the group was now being referred to as "Zemke's Wolfpack."

On November 26, 1943, Johnson was made a flight lead and by the end of December that year his score had risen to 10 confirmed aerial kills. In fact, between December 22, 1943, and January 5, 1944,

Johnson was the only member of his squadron to score victories, shooting down five German fighters.

On New Year's Day 1944, Johnson flew his Jug "Lucky" to a maintenance unit at Wattisham to have it modified. The P-47s were being fitted with broad-chord paddle-bladed propellers, which significantly improved their performance all around, particularly their climb and zoom capabilities.

Top ace

Johnson's score continued to mount: during January 1944 he destroyed two Fw 190s, a Bf 109, and a twin-engine Messerschmitt Me 410.

In February 1944 the 56th FG, which was still flying razorback P-47s, began employing 150-gallon underwing drop tanks, enabling them to escort heavy bombers to target areas on deep penetration missions. On four missions in February and March, when the 56th FG was assigned a patrol sector west of Hanover in the vicinity of the Dümmer See Lake,



56TH FIGHTER GROUP IN WW II

The 56th FG, known as "Zemke's Wolfpack" after its legendary commander, flew the P-47 Thunderbolt throughout its time stationed in England (January 1943 to October 1945) by preference. It was the only fighter group in the 8th Air Force not to trade its P-47s for P-51 Mustangs.

By the end of the war in Europe, the 56th FG was credited with 677.5 German aircraft destroyed in aerial combat, the second highest total for all USAAF fighter groups in the ETO, the highest among the 8th Air Force fighter groups, and the highest among all the P-47 groups of the USAAF. The 56th was also credited with destroying 311 enemy aircraft on the ground, making an overall total of 976.5.

By the end of the war in Europe, counting only air-to-air victories, the 56th FG had produced 39 aces, the second most of any ETO group. The two top USAAF aces of the ETO, "Gabby" Gabreski and "Bob" Johnson, both flew with 56th FG.

The 56th FG flew 447 combat missions, with some 19,000 combat sorties and over 64,000 combat flying hours,



Three high-scoring P-47 aces of the 56th FG after a successful mission in February 1944. Left to right: Capt. Robert "Bob" S. Johnson, Col. Hubert "Hub" Zemke (Group Commander) and Capt. Walker "Bud" Mahurin.

expending more than three million .50-caliber rounds of ammunition.

The 56th FG lost 128 P-47s in combat and another 44 in accidents, while a further 10 were written off with battle damage too severe to repair. Eighty-four of the 56th FG pilots were posted killed or missing in action, another 30 were killed in flying accidents, and 34 were captured as POWs.

Johnson shot down eight more German planes during mass aerial combats, making him the leading U.S. ace of the war at that time.

His 200-hour combat tour was now nearly over, and he applied for and was granted a 25-hour extension. Promoted to captain on March 15, he scored three more victories before being transferred to the 62nd Fighter Squadron as its operations officer. In mid-April 1944, the 56th FG moved to RAF Boxted, near Colchester, Essex, which was to be the group's base for the remainder of the war.

Johnson was promoted to major on May 1, 1944, and on the last mission of his extended tour, on May 8, 1944, he recorded his final two kills, bringing his total score to 27 and breaking World War Two fighter ace Captain Eddie Rickenbacker's record of 26 aerial victories. Bob Johnson had flown a total of 91 combat missions between April 1943 and May 1944. His total of aerial victories in the ETO was exceeded only by Lieutenant Colonel Gabby Gabreski with 28 kills.

Back home

With his combat tour finished, Johnson was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross to add to his DFC (U.S.) and DFC (UK). He returned to the United States to be reunited with his wife and to a hero's welcome. He saw the war out in PR roles. He subsequently became a test pilot and engineering executive for Republic Aviation and eventually retired from the USAF Reserve as a lieutenant colonel in 1962. He then became an insurance executive. Robert S. Johnson died on December 27, 1998, aged 78, considerably later than he might have done.

What makes a top ace?

Many facets contributed to Bob Johnson becoming such a successful fighter pilot. One of the most vital, often cited by those who flew and fought with him, was his phenomenal eyesight. This allowed him to spot enemy fighters in the sky where his fellow pilots saw nothing and allowed him to maneuver into the most advantageous position to attack, before the enemy saw

his flight of Thunderbolts.

Johnson was an aggressive and courageous fighter pilot, always eager for a fight in the air, and he possessed tremendous skill as a pilot. He was also the beneficiary of some good luck. To those who flew with him he appeared fearless, but he said that he was always scared; it just seemed that he was able to control his fear.



All of the 27 confirmed aerial victories with which Johnson is credited were against German fighters, only four of those were twin-engine fighters; the rest were single-engine Focke-Wulf Fw 190s and Messerschmitt Bf 109s, many of them flown by expert and deadly Luftwaffe fighter pilots.

His greatest number of aerial victories was achieved leading a flight of four Thunderbolts. Under his leadership, any one of the four pilots in his flight was free to attack German fighters that they had seen first, with the others providing protection. Because of this leadership style, his flight's pilots scored more kills and the flight destroyed more enemy fighters.

Remarkably, Johnson never lost a wingman to an enemy fighter, even when the wingmen were novices. That is an exceptional feat. ➔

A hero's welcome! Bob Johnson gets a rapturous reception at the Long Island Aircraft Plant after returning to the USA with his combat tour finished in 1944. (Photo John Dibbs/Facebook.com/theplanepicture)