

QUADRUPLE PTO ACE-KIA

ROBERT "WESTY" WESTBROOK

BY STEVE BLAKE



Makassar Bay, Celebes, November 22, 1944. P-38 pilots of the 347th Fighter Group are strafing some Japanese ships. Two of them target what turns out to be a heavily armed gunboat. Although the vessel is seriously damaged in the exchange of gunfire, so is the lead P-38—its right engine bursts into flame. The Lightning levels out as though it is going to attempt a water landing but then slams nose first into the sea, killing its pilot, Lt. Col. Robert Westbrook.



Guadalcanal, April 1943:
1st Lt. Robert Westbrook and his P-40M. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



Robert Westbrook scored 13 of his 20 victories in the P-38.
(Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Hero at the Beginning

Robert Burdette Westbrook Jr. was born in Los Angeles on November 9, 1917, and attended Hollywood High School, where he was an ROTC cadet captain. It was fitting that he was raised in the world's cinema capital as he had movie-star good looks and a personality to match. Associated Press war correspondent Fred Hampson wrote about Westbrook that he "is sometimes referred to as the Adonis of the 13th fighters. He is one of very few pilots who looks like the movie version—tall, handsome, mustached, debonair." At six foot two, he was considerably taller than the average fighter pilot.

After graduating from high school, Bob attended UCLA and joined the California National Guard, with which he was commissioned as a second lieutenant. His unit was called to active duty (federal service) in March 1941, but he had always wanted to be a pilot, so he applied for Air Corps flight training later that year and was accepted. He was awarded his wings with Class 42-G at Luke Field, Arizona, on July 26, 1942, and then ordered to Hawaii. On August 15, he joined the P-40 Warhawk-equipped 44th Fighter Squadron of the 18th Fighter Group at Bellows Field on Oahu, with which he was soon being addressed by his new nickname, "Westy."

He was promoted to first lieutenant in October, and on the 20th of that month, the squadron's pilots and ground crews were transported to the South Pacific island of New Caledonia. Shortly thereafter, its P-40s arrived at the port of

Espiritu Santo, north of New Caledonia in the New Hebrides. When the planes were operational, the pilots flew them from Espiritu to their new base on the nearby island of Efate.

The 44th FS became part of the 13th Air Force when it was activated on January 13, 1943. A week later, its pilots flew their planes to Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, from which they began flying combat missions.

The Fight Begins

The squadron engaged the enemy for the first time on the morning of January 27, when 10 P-40s, six P-38 Lightnings of the 339th FS, and a dozen U.S. Marine Corps F4F Wildcats were scrambled to intercept a Japanese Navy Air Force raid on Guadalcanal comprised of nine Mitsubishi G4M "Betty" bombers escorted by 30 Mitsubishi A6M "Zeros."

Two of the Warhawks were shot down by Zeros as they clawed for altitude, as were two of the P-38s. The remaining P-40s downed five of the enemy fighters (one of them by Westbrook), probably destroyed two, and damaged another. The P-38s were credited with three destroyed and one probable Zeros and the Wildcats with two destroyed.

Westy's plane was also hit, whereupon he dove away to evade another pass by the Zeros. As he climbed back up into the fight, he spotted three of them that had evidently not seen *him*, turned into one of them, and fired. It burst into flame and crashed into the sea.

Although the P-40s Westbrook flew at Guadalcanal were not as maneuverable as the Zeros, they were more durable and pilots learned to capitalize on their strong points. Six of Westbrook's seven kills in the P-40 were Zeros. (Photo courtesy of Steve Blake)



LEADING ACES

AS OF 23 APRIL 1945

	NAME	RANK	ADDRESS	AIR FORCE	SCORE
	BONG, RICHARD I.	MAJOR	POPLAR, WIS.	5 AF	40
★	MCGUIRE, THOMAS B.	MAJOR	SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS	5 AF	38
▲	MEYER, JOHN C.	LT. COL.	FOREST HILLS, N. Y.	8 AF	37½
	GABRESKI, FRANCIS S.	LT. COL.	OIL CITY, PA.	8 AF	28
★	PREDDY, GEORGE E.	MAJOR	GREENSBORO, N. C.	8 AF	27½
	JOHNSON, ROBERT S.	MAJOR	LAWTON, OKLA.	8 AF	27
	MACDONALD, CHARLES H.	COLONEL	ARLINGTON, VA.	5 AF	26
	SCHILLING, DAVID C.	COLONEL	TRAVERSE CITY, MICH.	8 AF	24
	JOHNSON, GERALD R.	LT. COL.	EUGENE, ORE.	5 AF	23
	GENTILE, DON S.	CAPTAIN	PIQUA, OHIO	8 AF	23
	WETMORE, RAY S.	CAPTAIN	KERMAN, CALIF.	8 AF	22½
●	KEARBY, NEEL E.	COLONEL	SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS	5 AF	22
	CHRISTENSEN, FRED J.	MAJOR	WATERTOWN, MASS.	8 AF	22
	DUNCAN, GLENN E.	COLONEL	HOUSTON, TEXAS	8 AF	21½
	MAHURIN, WALKER W.	MAJOR	FT. WAYNE, IND.	8 AF	21
	ROBBINS, JAY T.	MAJOR	COOLIDGE, TEXAS	5 AF	21
	VOLL, JOHN J.	MAJOR	CINCINNATI, OHIO	15 AF	21
★	LYNCH, THOMAS J.	LT. COL.	SWISSVALE, PA.	5 AF	20
★	WESTBROOK, ROBERT B.	LT. COL.	NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS	13 AF	20
▲	ZEMKE, HUBERT	COLONEL	MISSOULA, MONTANA	8 AF	19½
	EAGLESTON, GLENN T.	MAJOR	ALHAMBRA, CALIF.	9 AF	19½
	GLENN, MAXWELL H.	MAJOR	COLUMBUS, OHIO	10 AF	18½
	CARSON, LEONARD K.	CAPTAIN	LAGRANDE, OREGON	8 AF	18½
	HILL, DAVID L.	COLONEL	VICTORIA, TEXAS	14 AF	18½
	OLDER, CHARLES H.	LT. COL.	BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF.	14 AF	18½
	HERBST, JOHN C.	LT. COL.	BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF.	14 AF	18
	GREEN, HERSCHEL H.	LT. COL.	MAYFIELD, KY.	15 AF	18
▲	BECKHAM, WALKER C.	MAJOR	DEFUNIACK SPRINGS, FLA.	8 AF	18
▲	BEESON, DUANE W.	CAPTAIN	BOISE, IDAHO	14 AF	18
▲	GODFREY, JOHN T.	CAPTAIN	PROVIDENCE, R. I.	8 AF	18

★ KILLED IN ACTION

● MISSING IN ACTION

▲ PRISONER OF WAR

As of the last week of April 1945, Westbrook, who was already killed in action (KIA), was tied as the 18th highest-scoring U.S. Army Air Forces ace with Thomas Lynch, another P-38 pilot who was also KIA. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

The P-38 was unique in that it used a control yoke, rather than a joystick, as is usual with fighters. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force)

On February 13, seven P-40s and four P-38s escorted some B-24 Liberators to Bougainville Island. Three of the Warhawks and two Lightnings turned back, leaving just six American fighters to deal with several dozen Zeros that were covering the targeted ships. The P-40 pilots shot down four and probably destroyed two others, but two of *them* also went down. The P-38 pilots destroyed two Zeros, but only one of them returned to Fighter Two (Kukum Field), the airfield for them and the 44th FS. Three of the B-24s were also lost. Westy, who scored one of the confirmed victories and a probable, was awarded a Silver Star for this mission.

On April 14, the 44th was reunited on Guadalcanal with the 18th FG, which had moved to the South Pacific the previous month. Since arriving on “the ‘Canal,” the squadron had been under the operational control of the 13th’s other fighter group, the 347th.

Westy received his promotion to captain in early May. He saw his next air combat on June 7,

when 40+ Zeros heading for Guadalcanal were intercepted by an equal number of Warhawks, Wildcats, and Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) Kittyhawks (Lend-Lease P-40s).

After making a pass at the Warhawks, a pair of Zeros pulled up sharply and Westbrook took a shot at one of them, which “blew up.” He then shot another Zero off the tail of a P-39 Airacobra; he saw his tracers flashing along its fuselage and pieces falling off as it went down.

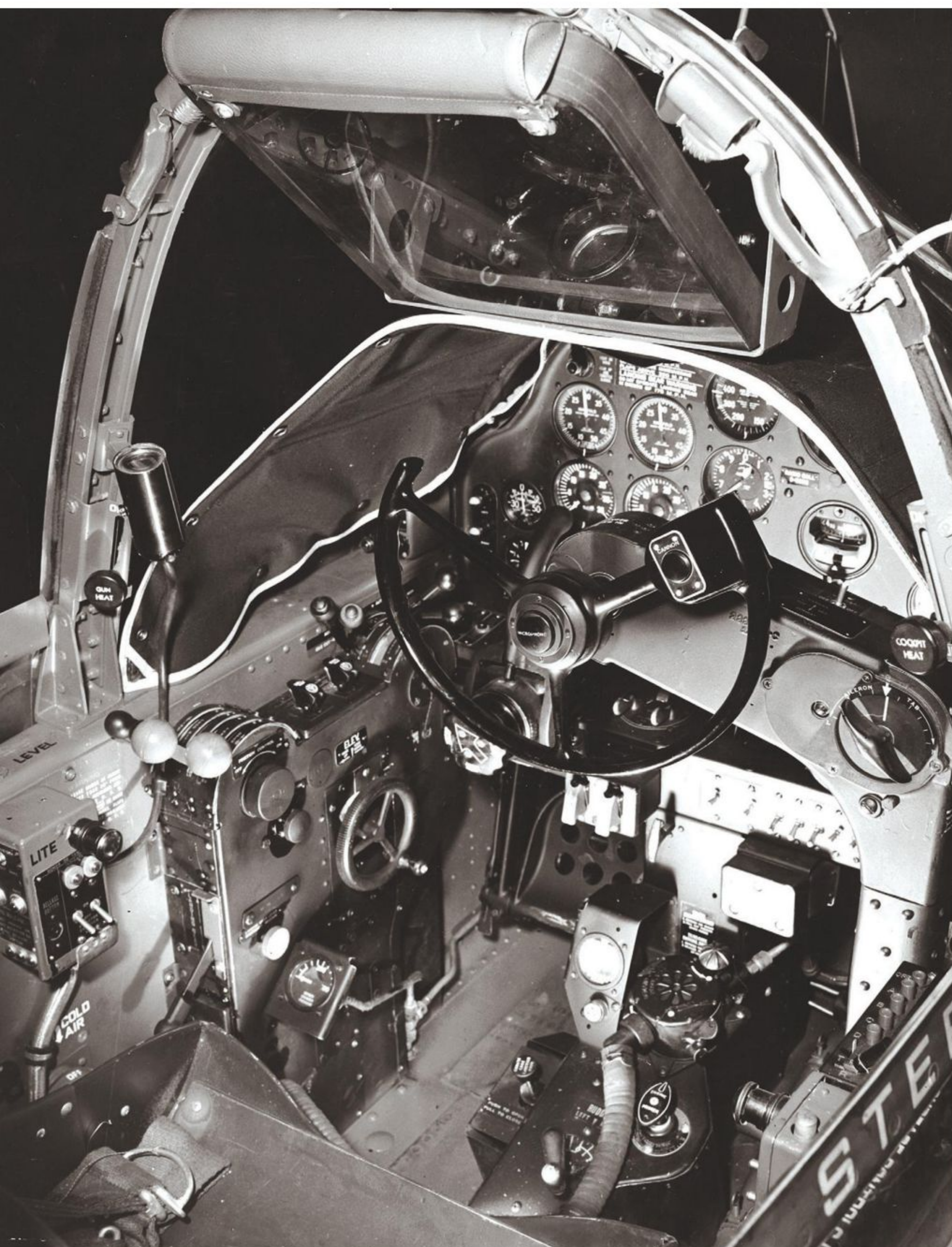
The American and New Zealand fighters claimed 23 Zeros destroyed, eight of which were credited to the 44th FS (two of them to Westbrook), plus five probables. On the debit side, a 44th FS P-40 and 10 other Allied aircraft were lost.

Westy became the squadron’s first ace on June 12, when he claimed one of the three Zeros shot down by his flight near the Russell Islands, northwest of Guadalcanal. Later that month, he was promoted to major.

He scored his last victories with the P-40 on July 1, when the 44th racked up 16 kills while protecting Allied ships that were supporting the landings on the island of New Georgia and nearby Rendova Island—along with some Wildcats and Kittyhawks—from attack by a large formation of “Vals” (Aichi D3A dive-bombers) escorted by Zeros. His share was a “Hap” (“clipped-wing” A6M3) and a “Zeke” (A6M2). Westy submitted a detailed report on this mission:

“Upon accurate warning from [controller] Vega (who sent my flight up) we spotted some 10-12 dive bombers and 15 or so Zeros a few thousand feet above and south of Rendova. We dropped our belly tanks, poured on the coal and continued climbing. Saw the dive bombers peel off so gave the gang a ‘tally-ho’ warning on the radio and started down. The flight was echeloned to the left in the dive and we were nearly on the bombers when my windshield fogged up. I pulled up in a wing-over to the left, wiping my windshield and canopy off as best I could (later found that my wingman was picked off at this point and my element continued after the bombers, which I’d overshot), and then located the dive bombers down to my left scooting over the water. I went down after them but they were either all burning or some friendly plane was securely latched onto their tail.

“The Zeros were out of the fight milling around together, seemingly waiting for us to finish off the dive bombers. I called my flight and Lt. [Elmer] Wheadon, telling them to start climbing for altitude after me. An opportunity presented itself and I went into the edge of the Zeros, getting one and pulling out just below the other P-40s, who were now mixing it up. I climbed back in, hunting for my wingman, thinking he was perhaps with Wheadon, joined with an F4F and tangled again, this time with negative results. Pulled up again, leveled in and took a Zero head-on from an



F4F, heard the F4F say, rather peeved, 'nice work 40!' Nearly out of ammunition and low on fuel, I joined with Lt. [Charles] Sacket (from Wheadon's flight) and rendezvoused with the other P-40s."

Three of the squadron's Warhawks were lost. The Kittyhawks and Wildcats were credited with 12 destroyed.

Enter the Lightnings

Westbrook assumed command of the 44th FS on September 25. It traded in its P-40s—with which it had scored 125 confirmed victories—for P-38s in November, but its C.O. got a big head start on that transition. Westy had already learned to fly the Lightning and had flown his first combat mission in one with the 339th FS on October 10.

This was a B-24 escort flown by 16 P-38s from the new Allied air base at Munda on New Georgia to the enemy airfield at Kahili on Bougainville, during which 15 Zeros attacked the bombers, shooting one down. Westbrook then destroyed one of them and shared another, credited as probably destroyed, with the 339th's leader, Capt. Bill Harris, on whose wing he was flying. Harris, who ended up as the 13th AF's second-ranked ace, with 15 1/2 kills, was credited with three of them in this action, for which the total was 10 enemy aircraft destroyed and four probably destroyed. He later recalled his wingman's participation:

"Westbrook stayed on my wing tip like he was glued there, and together we shot down some of the most aggressive Japanese fighter pilots I had encountered to date. Naturally, as flight leader, I got the first shot and knocked three off [an] isolated bomber the first time I fired on them. A fourth [the shared probable] was smoking and passed in front of Westbrook, and he hit it dead center. There was another 'Nip' just above me and I couldn't pull up or turn sufficiently to get in a burst. I didn't have to worry about that, for Westbrook pulled his nose up, tilted his right wing tip up higher, got the Zero in his sights and shot it out of the sky."

It was around this time that the 44th's personnel chose a new name for it: "Vampire Squadron." It had converted to Lightnings in time to utilize them in the climactic aerial campaign against the infamous Japanese stronghold of Rabaul on the island of New Britain. Both of the 13th AF's P-38 squadrons were now operating from the forward airfields at Munda and on Stirling Island, just south of Bougainville.

A String of Victories

Starting with December 23, Westy would score on three consecutive days, all missions of which were flown from Munda. On the 23rd, 27 Vampire Squadron P-38s, along with three Marine F4U squadrons, escorted Liberators to Rabaul. As the bombers came off their targets, the Lakunai and Vunakanau airfields, they were attacked by



60+ Zeros. Westbrook's was the sole P-38 flight to engage them, and only he and his wingman, 2nd Lt. Raymond Fouquet, scored in the ensuing fight. The mission report describes what happened after Fouquet shot down one of the Zeros:

"Major Westbrook, with a Zero on his tail, was employing evasive action with no success until this Jap pilot saw Lt. Fouquet flame [his] Zero, at which time he peeled off and vanished. Major Westbrook, pulling up to rejoin the formation, saw another Zero in front of him and gave it a long burst. The Zero went down spiraling in flames. Major Westbrook then observed a Zero on Lt. George Conder's tail, firing. He made a pass at it, gave it a long burst and observed tracers enter the fuselage. The Zero peeled off smoking but was not seen to flame or crash." (The latter was credited to him as damaged.)

The Marines scored 18 kills for the loss of three Corsairs, and the B-24 gunners claimed six more Zeros.

The following day, 17 of the squadron's pilots

Lt. Col. Westbrook poses with his P-38, *Florida Thrush*, on Middleburg Island shortly after scoring his 16th victory on September 25, 1944. He named the plane after singer/actress Frances Langford, with whom he had become friendly after meeting her at a USO show on Guadalcanal. (Her hometown was Lakeland, Florida.) He even took her up for a ride in a "piggyback" (two-seat) P-38. Although it cannot be confirmed conclusively, this was probably the aircraft in which Westy was killed two months later: P-38J-20 44-23394. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force)

accompanied the Liberators to the same two airfields. After the bombing, they escorted them to a safe distance on the way home and then returned to Rabaul to hunt for Zeros. They got into a big fight with two dozen of them and were credited with eight confirmed and two probable victories, without loss. Westy was credited with four of the former, two of which were shared. According to the mission report:

“At 1330 hours, Major Westbrook saw a single Zeke 1,000 feet below and dived to attack—his fire brought smoke from the Zero and Lt. Howard Cleveland finished it in flames. Major Westbrook promptly turned onto another enemy plane and exploded it, then immediately smoked a third which was flamed by Lt. Byron Bowman. A few seconds later a flight of three Zekes was observed—Major Westbrook picked one, dived on it, fired a medium burst and the Zero went down flaming.”

Christmas Day found the 44th FS's P-38s again providing top cover for B-24s bombing Rabaul, with RNZAF Kittyhawks and Marine Corsairs below them. The mission report states:

“Major Westbrook saw 18 Zekes almost over the town of Rabaul—about half of these peeled off to attack the bombers. The others broke up and started away from our planes. Major Westbrook picked out the third Zero from the left and pursued it; it made a 180-degree turn and he sent



The 347th Fighter Group's "wheels" on Middleburg in October 1944. From left to right: Maj. Leonard Shapiro, 68th FS C.O.; Maj. Don Lee, 67th FS C.O.; Lt. Col. Shelby England, 347th FG Executive Officer; Col. Leo Dusard, Group Commander; Lt. Col. Westbrook, Deputy C.O.; and Maj. John Endress, 339th FS C.O. England was later killed as a passenger in a C-47 accident. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



Princess Pat II/#129, P-40M-5, serial number 43-5684, was photographed at Munda Air Base on August 14, 1943, with Flight Officer Rex Byers at its controls. This Warhawk has sometimes been identified as Westbrook's aircraft, but it was, in fact, assigned to Capt. John Voss, who named it after his infant daughter—although it was also flown by other pilots. It reportedly shot down 12 enemy aircraft, and was returned to the United States to participate in a war-bond tour. 43-5684 was destroyed in a crash at Luke Field, Arizona, on June 6, 1944. Voss was killed in action on November 8, 1943; he had been credited with 3 1/2 kills. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

several bursts toward it, seeing his tracers go into the fuselage. The Zeke, as it completed the turn, went into a shallow dive—Major Westbrook followed, firing until he was over on his back, then saw flames and black smoke come from the Zeke's engine cowling. Pulling up, with F/O [Flight Officer] Rex A. Byers on his wing, he fired at several individual Zeros without observing results."

Every Fight Was a Hard One

The mission report continues: "Approaching Duke of York Island, one Zero came around onto Byers' tail—Major Westbrook pulled up in the rear, fired and saw it go down in a slow spiral, then spin, smoking heavily and shedding pieces. At this point F/O Byers shot one Zero off Major Westbrook's tail, and the latter saw both enemy planes make splashes in the sea to the east of Duke of York Island. At the completion of this action, Major Westbrook's left engine started burning. He saw F/O Byers turn away from him and go into a cloud over Duke of York Island, pursued by three Zekes, his right engine smoking and leaking Prestone.

"In striving to reach the clouds, Major Westbrook, now attacked by several Zekes, was joined by an F4U, which dispersed the enemy planes. Major Westbrook cut all switches, the fire in the

right engine was somehow extinguished, and he returned to Barakoma [the Marine airfield on the island of Vella Lavella] and landed at 1430 hours."

Byers and another 44th Squadron pilot were missing in action, against four confirmed kills—two of them by Westbrook. The Marine pilots claimed eight Zekes and Hamps destroyed for the loss of one Corsair. Westy later described the December 25 action as "the worst scrap I was ever in." He was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for these three missions.

On January 6, 1944, 16 Vampire Lightnings took off from Stirling and joined up with 56 Corsairs and U.S. Navy F6F Hellcats for a fighter sweep to Rabaul. Although all the P-38s made it to the target through some bad weather, none of the F6Fs and only eight of the F4Us did. They ran into three dozen Zeros near the Rapopo Airfield, and in the fight that ensued, the P-38 pilots were credited with nine destroyed and five probably destroyed for the loss of two of their own. The Marine pilots claimed two and lost one. Westbrook's share was a confirmed and a probable. He reported:

"We had a tough time of it and I tried to get the flight out, but as my radio was bad couldn't contact them. We went almost to Lakunai, fighting all the way. The longer we stayed the more they



In this photo, taken at the same time as the previous shot, Lt. Col. Westbrook chats with two of his ground-crewmembers. A 13th AF press release following Westy's death noted "his sincere friendliness, his habit of always finding time to shoot the breeze with both officers and enlisted men." (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

"With us, no pilot goes up on a pedestal just because he shoots down a bunch of Japs. We aren't supermen. We're a team."

came, so near Lakunai we did a 180° and fought our way to Cape Gazelle. I observed a P-38 in a steep dive, which exploded when it hit the water.

"A few seconds after we reached Cape Gazelle I made a head-on pass at a Zeke and it started smoking badly. I couldn't observe if it went down. I then saw a plane making a 60° to 90° pass on a P-38. I started towards it and he came head-on towards me. I fired a burst into him and he burst into flames and went down. I observed five to six splashes in the water and saw three planes burning on the northwest shore between Rapopo and Lakunai on Blanche Bay."

The confirmed kill brought his total to 15, seven of them with P-40s and eight while flying P-38s.

A Well-Earned Promotion

The January 6 mission was Westbrook's last with the 44th FS. Two weeks later, he was back home on a 30-day leave. He then returned to Guadalcanal and, in May, was appointed Deputy C.O. of the 347th FG and promoted to lieutenant colonel.

The 347th was then based on Stirling Island, but it moved to Sansapor, on the western tip of New Guinea, in August and then to nearby Middleburg Island in September. The group's main task was to fly seven-hour sweeps to enemy airfields on the island of Celebes and destroy as many aircraft and as much other materiel as possible, in the air and on the ground.

On these missions, Westy shot down five Japanese Army Air Force fighters—all of them Nakajima Ki-43 "Oscars." They included one near the airfield at Kendari on September 25 and another five days later near the Boroboro Airdrome (A/D). On October 23, he was credited with three of them over the Boelodowang A/D near Makassar. He nailed one

Oscar at 2,000 feet and the other two on the deck right after they took off. He also destroyed one on the ground by strafing as it was about to take off.

The Westbrook Saga Ends

The 347th FG was awarded a Distinguished Unit Citation for three similar missions in November. The last of these was flown on the 22nd by two squadrons, the 68th and the 339th, led by Westbrook, who was flying with the latter. They spotted a convoy in Makassar Bay and proceeded to destroy or heavily damage 13 vessels by strafing. The cost was high, however, as three of the Lightnings were shot down by the anti-aircraft fire emanating from the ships. One of them, P-38J-20 serial number 44-23394, was flown by Westbrook. His wingman, Lt. Simon Snider, reported what happened:

"Westbrook and I were in high-speed dives, firing all guns as we descended toward the boat he had selected. I could see our fire was tearing chunks out of the boat's decks and superstructure. Our target turned out to be a decoy barge and was, instead, a gunboat. Enemy fire was coming directly at us with intensity I had never seen before. Even so, Westbrook stayed on target, and our combined fire silenced all the decks guns before we passed over the boat. Westbrook's right engine was burning. Apparently the Japanese gunners were focused on him. As we streaked past the boat Westbrook was feathering his prop and trying to put the fire out. Major [John] Endress [C.O. of the 339th FS] radioed for him to take preventative action, and Westbrook replied that he thought he had everything under control. His P-38 leveled out as if he was going to make a water landing. There was a lot of smoke pouring out of his cockpit. Suddenly, his plane turned its nose down and slammed into the water, breaking into many pieces. Other P-38s in our group buzzed the crash site and observed fragments of his plane's tail section and an open parachute in the debris, but Westbrook was not visible."

Thus died the 13th AF's leading ace—and one of its most popular leaders—at the age of 27. Westy's remains were never recovered, and his name appears on one of the Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery. His final score in the air was 20 destroyed, 2 1/2 probably destroyed, and 1 damaged. His decorations include a Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, and 16 Air Medals. He flew an amazing total of 367 combat missions.

A quote from one of Westbrook's interviews sums up his contributions: "With us, no pilot goes up on a pedestal just because he shoots down a bunch of Japs. We aren't supermen. We're a team. When one of us hits the jackpot, it is partly luck in being in the right spot at the right time, but mainly the work your wingmen and the other boys do in protecting your tail."

Well said. †