

# NIGHT FIGHTERS in the Battle of the Bulge

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS AND PHOTOS FROM  
THE 422 SQUADRON'S PILOTS AND CREWS**

BY **WARREN E. THOMPSON**

The Battle of the Bulge was the final German offensive campaign on the Western Front in World War II. Hitler's orders were to split the Allied Forces and halt Allied use of the Belgian port of Antwerp, and so the action was slated for the densely forested Ardennes region of Belgium. The Germans began their assault on December 16, 1944 with over 400,000 troops, together with 1,400 tanks and other military assets. By January 25, 1945, when the attacks were finally subdued, close to 85,000 Germans were dead and the Allies had lost nearly 20,000 lives during the actions. These staggering final figures show that the Battle of the Bulge was the largest and bloodiest single battle fought in World War II, and the second deadliest campaign in American history!

A 422nd Black Widow takes off after some minor maintenance. Note the invasion markings that appeared on all planes starting with D-Day. (Photo courtesy of Bob Bolinder.)

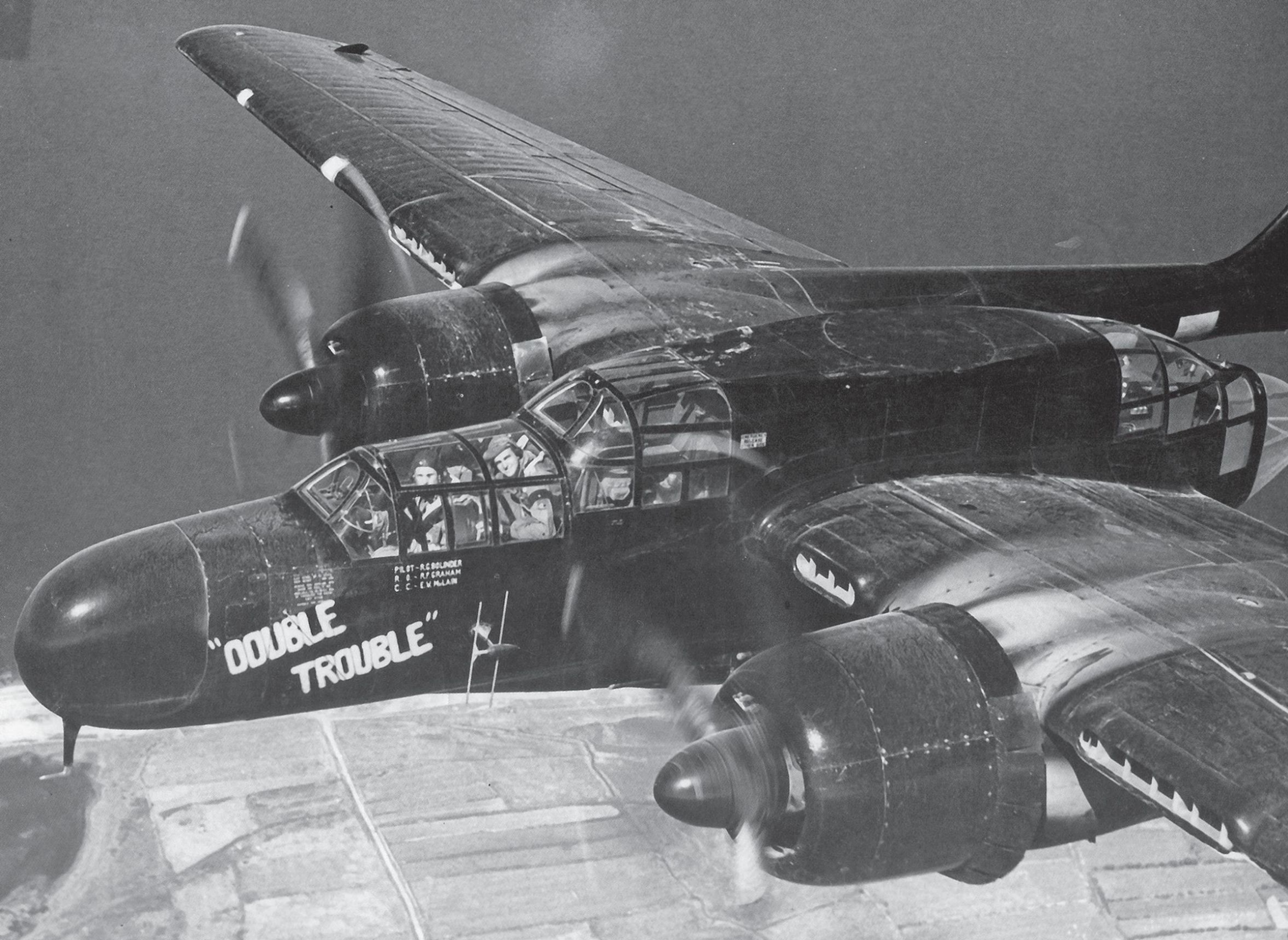
The campaign launched at the onset of winter, with brutal weather that severely limited tactical reconnaissance. This, combined with Allied overconfidence, gave the Germans the opportunity to build up a significant force to begin the campaign. It was the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron (442nd NFS) that took on the Luftwaffe at night over the Bulge. They scored a total of 17 kills and one enemy plane damaged. It was their stint during this short period that put the total kills at 43 enemy aircraft, making the 442nd the top fighters after dark.



The maintenance crews were exceptional in both of the England-based squadrons (422nd and 425th NFS). This photo was taken in late summer 1944. (Photo courtesy of USAF Historical Archives)

These two aircrews recorded many kills during the war. Left to right: Lt. John Anderson and his R/O, Lt. James Mogan; Capt. Robert Elmore and his R/O, 2nd Lt. Leonard Mapes. Anderson had two kills and Elmore had four kills. (Photo courtesy of Robert Elmore.)





*Double Trouble* flown by 1st Lt. Robert Bolinder, had four kills during the war with two of his kills coming in late December 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge. This scene was taken right after the 422nd set up in Florennes, Belgium. (Photo courtesy of Bob Bolinder.)

### **“All Hell Broke Loose”**

In early September 1944, the 422nd NFS had just moved their P-61A Black Widows from the air base in Chateaudun, France to the new airbase at Florennes, Belgium (known as A-78), which had recently been captured from the Germans. By early in November, winter weather had started to build up, and on the night of November 26, all hell broke loose. On this particular night, P-61A *Double Trouble* was up with Lt. Bob Bolinder and Lt. Robert Graham. They were flying a defensive patrol over the area that the American VIII Corps was occupying. Halfway through the mission, their ground-controlled interception, GCI Marmite (Marmite was the radar station that was monitoring their patrol), radioed that there was an unidentified aircraft at a distance of 13 miles. Lieutenant Graham gave his pilot the vector, and closure was quick. At a distance of three miles, the radar observer's (R/O) airborne intercept radar picked up the bogey, and they continued to close in until they were at point-blank range. There was still no positive visual identification, and in an

effort to pull up underneath, the P-61 overshot its quarry. Lieutenant Bolinder immediately did a tight 360 but lost the target! Backing off, they waited for GCI to pick it up again, which didn't take long. With the new information, they closed in on the target again and this time drew to less than 100 feet, allowing a positive visual—it was a Heinkel He 111 flying at about 180mph.

Lieutenant Bolinder picks it up from there: “The enemy aircraft suddenly peeled off sharply to port and did a 360 turn, which rolled him right back on his original course. As I steadied, I lined him up and gave him a long burst with my 20 mm cannons. [The P-61A did not have the .50 caliber top turret at this time.] The distance between us at this point was about 400 feet, with the enemy aircraft ahead and slightly above us. My first burst hit him along his port wing root. I fired a total of four long bursts into the He 111 and was forced to pull up abruptly to avoid flying debris. Three seconds after pulling up, the enemy aircraft exploded and fell to the ground with pieces of it scattered over a wide area. I

did not see any parachutes and the explosion was so violent that the crew would have had a hard time trying get out." This had been the 422nd's first kill, and the first enemy aircraft destroyed during the brief but intense Battle of the Bulge.

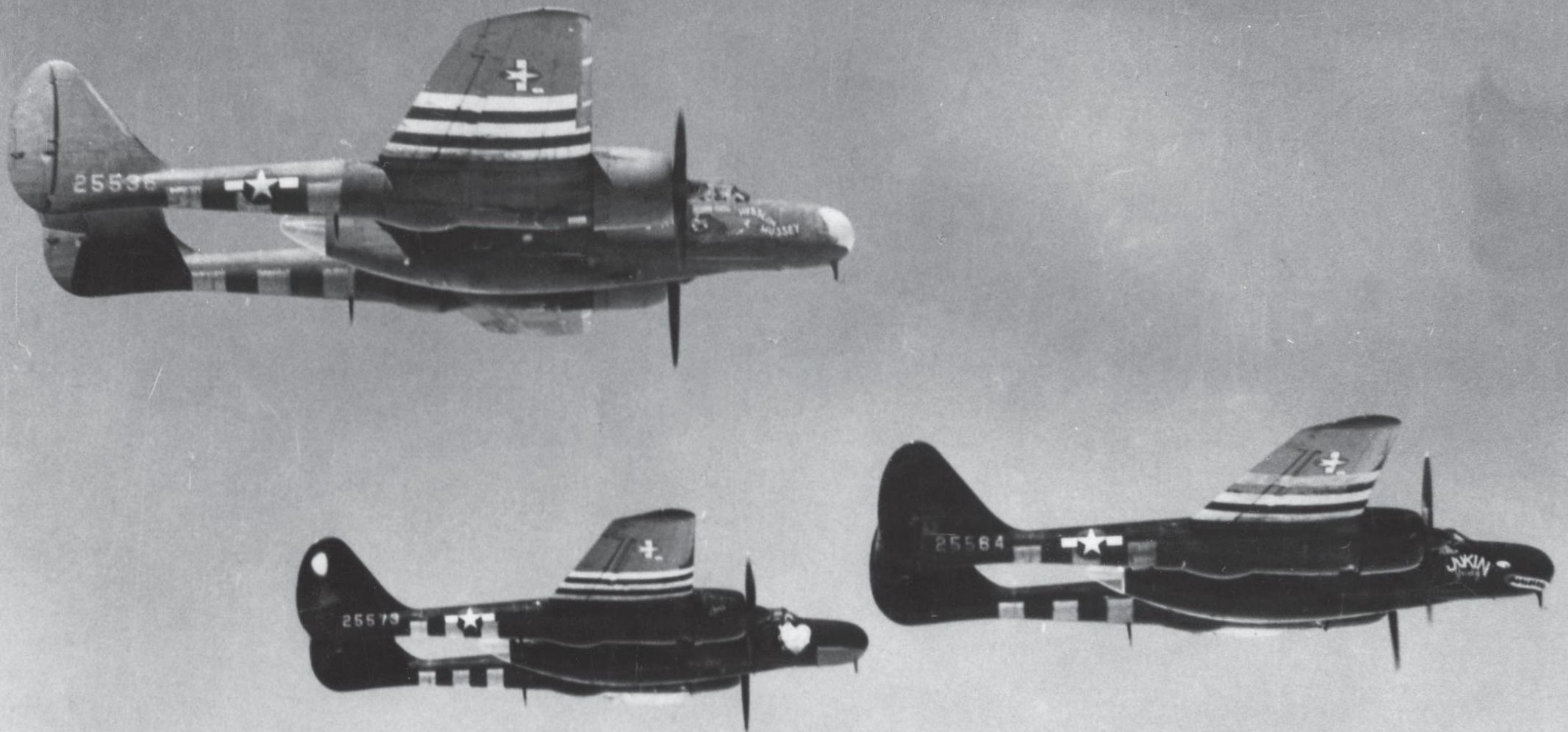
### Threat Lurking in the Shadows

There was a serious threat to the Allied aircraft lurking in the shadows. Back in July 1944, the Germans had let it be known that they had a jet aircraft. It turned out to be the Messerschmitt Me 163 Komet. Accurate guesses were that it could do 600mph and that the American's P-51 Mustang was no match for it. On the night of November 15, 1944, the team of Cpt. Robert Elmore (pilot) and

R/O Lt. Leonard Mapes recorded a first while flying in their Shoo Shoo Baby: a nighttime confirmation of the night-flying Me 163. At the time, they were near Bonn, Germany. Lieutenant Mapes comments on that mission: "I picked the bogey up and he was coming toward us at a terrific speed and he was quite a bit higher than we were. As it was about to pass over us, he made a hard 180-degree turn. I could not find him on my radar but remember seeing him, and it reminds me of a piece of pie-shaped figure with a long tail of flame coming from the rear end. I was busy keeping Lieutenant Elmore [informed] about it, when all of sudden the flame from the rear quieted down to just a glow and the Me 163 began to spiral down, coming straight at us."

The crew of the P-61A *Shoo Shoo Baby* pose at their base in Belgium. Left to right: R/O Lt. Leonard Mapes, crew chief P.J. Nichols, pilot Lt. Robert Elmore. (Photo by John Anderson.)





A flight of three P-61s move into the Bulge area. Every one of its planes had nose art painted on the fuselage. The 422nd scored a record of 17 kills and one probable during the time that the German's fought in late December 1944. (Photo by John Anderson.)

Mapes continued, "I could see intermittent bursts of fire from its nose, which meant he was firing on us. As I kept telling Lieutenant Elmore what he was doing, he started taking hard evasive action. All of a sudden, the Me 163 broke off and went into a just about straight up climb with a long tail of flame shooting out from its rear end. We never could get into a position to fire our cannon. But we stayed in the area and went below the cloud layer and managed to strafe several trains. This was the first Me 163 to be sighted by a night fighter, according to our squadron's knowledge. A few days before ours, there was an in-the-air encounter; rocket-powered German aircraft were observed by American bomber crews while in a mission over Germany."

### Fire, Fog, and "Category A" Damage

That same crew was also in the air on the night of December 22, 1944. They had taken off from Airfield A-78 in a P-61A [#5565] on a patrol area that encompasses the Meuse River and St. Vith to Malmédy. After some time on patrol, they were given the location of a bogey heading straight for them at 7,000 feet and a range of eight miles. After much maneuvering around they got a visual but could not identify the bogey because of the position of the moon. Captain Elmore said, "We pulled off to one side, and at 500 feet identified the aircraft as

a Me 110, flying on a course of 300 degrees at 8,000 feet and speed of 190mph. Dropping back to dead astern and at 100 feet, I started firing with one long burst of 20 mm cannon fire, causing the aircraft to explode in midair." Five days before this mission Captain Elmore had shot down a Ju 88, so this was their second kill along with a V-1 they had shot down.

Lieutenant Mapes went on: "Flying through the debris and flames from the explosion caused Category A damage to our aircraft. Our left engine was on fire, however I maintained control of the aircraft. We were going to bail out, but it appeared the left engine fire was burning out in a dive to accomplish the same! Finally it did go out but the engine was inoperative. On one engine, which was not running at 100 percent, we were ready to return to base when we were advised that every base in our area was socked in zero! We were informed that a Royal Air Force base at Brussels had barely minimum ceiling so we headed for it. We had never been there but found the base through my radar interpretation and GCI help. At this time, we were extremely low on fuel and the ceiling was around 100 feet, but I was able to get us on the ground safely. The next morning they showed us high level obstacles that we flew through; smoke stacks, high buildings, water towers, etcetera."

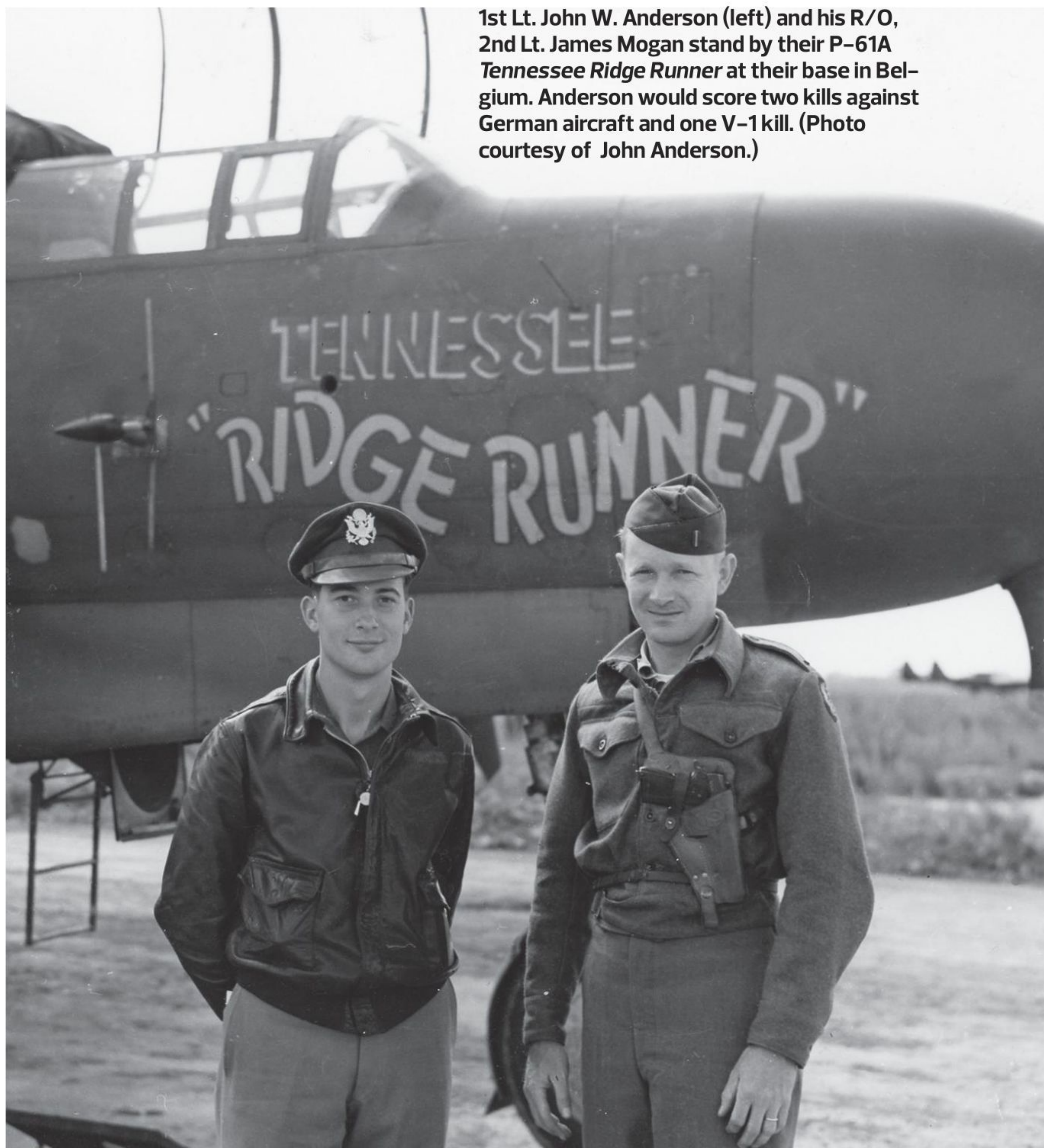


Keeping the Black Widows in optimum shape had to be done outdoors. This made the time almost impossible during the winter months, especially when so many of the night fighters had to be in the air throughout the Battle of the Bulge. (Photo by Raymond Anderson.)

### **The Tennessee Ridge Runner Mission**

On Christmas Eve in 1944, the P-61s were running at full speed as they had already shot down six aircraft during the first week of the Bulge. Pilot 1st Lt. John Anderson was up with his R/O, Lt. James Mogan, flying in their *Tennessee Ridge Runner* after taking off from Airfield A-78. Their patrol area would be between the Meuse and the German border. There had been a lot of traffic coming through this region. After about 30 minutes of patrolling, GCI vectored the aircraft onto a bogey. Within a few minutes Anderson saw navigation lights and shortly thereafter, his R/O stated that they were three miles behind the unidentified aircraft. Anderson took over the pursuit. Closing to 800 feet, with the target at 12 o'clock, 50 degrees, they identified the target as a Junkers Ju 88 Schnellbomber. It was flying on a course of 200 degrees at 5,000 feet. It was showing an airspeed of 170mph and its pilot was taking violent evasive action, pulling up to 12 o'clock, 10 degrees, two bursts were fired at 500 feet with strikes on the right wing at roots.

Lieutenant Anderson recounts: "Guns then jammed, whereupon the enemy pilot tried to drive the hostile aircraft in to the ground but failed. The P-61 pilot fought him down to 500 feet. When our guns cleared and fire



1st Lt. John W. Anderson (left) and his R/O, 2nd Lt. James Mogan stand by their P-61A *Tennessee Ridge Runner* at their base in Belgium. Anderson would score two kills against German aircraft and one V-1 kill. (Photo courtesy of John Anderson.)

again opened up. Strikes were obtained on the right engine, which started to smoke. Fire was continued until ammo was exhausted, but the Ju 88 would not explode, though debris were flying off the aircraft and his navigation lights went out. When our ammo was exhausted, we broke off combat and when last observed, the JU 88 was at 1,500 feet and losing altitude in a lazy orbit." Although no explosion was seen, it was determined probably destroyed. Combat terminated at 1955 and no parachutes were seen to open and no combat film exists. However, Anderson was given credit for the kill as the plane hit the ground minutes later.

V Corps area between the bomb line and the Rhine River. At 2245, after unsuccessful chases under Marmite control, we were told that a bogey was located at 20 miles out, headed west. Several vectors brought us within range, and at three miles my R/O took over the chase. Our target was flying at 4,500 feet with an IAS of 190mph. The intruder was weaving gently, in kind of a weak evasive action. A visual was obtained at 2,500 feet, and upon closing to 800 feet, the bogey was [identified as] a Ju 188 by observing the fuselage and pointed wingtips. We pulled to 12 o'clock dead astern of the enemy aircraft, when I opened fire at

WE PULLED TO 12 O'CLOCK DEAD ASTERN OF THE ENEMY AIRCRAFT, WHEN I OPENED FIRE AT 600 FEET. THE FIRST BURST OBTAINED STRIKES ON THE RIGHT WING ROOT, CAUSING THE JU 188 TO START A GENTLE TURN TO PORT. A SECOND BURST EXPLODED IN THE RIGHT ENGINE

### **A Christmas Like No Other**

The squadron scored three kills between December 24 and 25, 1944. This was a very difficult time to keep the aircraft flying due to the required maintenance and heavy snowstorms. The outstanding performance by their ground crews could never be overstated.

The aircrews never let up in their effort to slow down the German attempts to make a run in the Bulge. Lieutenant Anderson tells of their next mission, which was a day later, on Christmas Day 1944. This time it involved the Ju 188 night fighter with his R/O, James Mogan. Anderson remembers, "At 2111 hours, we took off to fly a defensive mission over the

600 feet. The first burst obtained strikes on the right wing root, causing the Ju 188 to start a gentle turn to port. A second burst exploded in the right engine, splattering oil all over the canopy of our P-61. I continued firing, and the final burst caught the left wing, outboard of the engine. The debris from this hit caused Category A to the Ju 188. The bandit fell off to port on his back, constantly losing altitude rapidly. We continued port orbit and quickly saw the enemy aircraft explode as it hit the ground. Combat terminated at 2300 and no parachutes were seen to open." This gave *Tennessee Ridge Runner* another confirmed kill.

This photograph was taken during the Bulge, when snow had blanketed the countryside. These P-61s are ready to take off to score multiple victories during that time in late December 1944. They were operating from an airfield in Belgium. (Photo by John Anderson.)



## A Critical Flaw

The most critically weak component for the Black Widow's effectiveness was its radar. A lack of parts and reduced efficiency of each radar unit had jeopardized even the few that remained in the air. There were thousands of Allied aircraft used daily over the entire European theater. The two squadrons that operated with the Ninth Air Force (422nd and 425th) had a total of less than a dozen workable aircraft that were not waiting in line for major repairs. The impact of the inability to be up at night, in force, was validated at the end of the war by accounts of Germans who had been captured in the early spring of 1945. If the P-61s had been able to maintain a 90 percent in-service rate during those critical months, the enemy would have paid a very high price in manpower and equipment. For some reason, the 422nd was able to get a lot of sorties up around Christmas, as they got at least 11 confirmed shootdowns during the four-day period from December 24 to December 27.

## The Final Flare

One very unusual mission was recorded by Black Widow ace, Lt. Herman Ernst and his R/O, Lt. Edward Kopsel. They were flying in their assigned P-61A called *Borrowed Time*. On this mission, they had the squadron's Intelligence Officer, Lt. Phillip Guba, riding in the empty gunner's seat. Lieutenant Ernst recalls what happened on that mission: "We were flying at 8,000 feet in a westerly direction toward our base. Lieutenant Guba noticed an aircraft below us at 2,000 feet with its red and yellow navigation lights on. This was new to me, and it was dropping flares! I peeled off and quickly reached the unidentified bogey, approaching from the rear. I pulled in behind him to a distance of about 1,500 feet. With the help of night glasses, Lieutenant Guba was able to positively identify the aircraft as a Ju 88. By this time, the enemy aircraft had altered course to true north and was flying straight and level at 2,000 feet with an airspeed of 250mph. At that moment, we were spotted, and the German pilot initiated violent evasive action. I still had him in my sights and the gap was steadily closing. From 500 feet directly behind, I gave him a short burst. I observed many hits over the target's fuselage. About that time, the Ju 88's dorsal turret



opened up on us as I moved to the right side to prevent us from over-shooting. I dropped slightly low and began lining him up again, and squeezed off three short bursts. The hits caused both of the Ju 88 engines to explode and the bomber fell away to the left and down. It impacted with the ground in a huge ball of fire. A second before it hit, I vividly remember seeing it fire off another red flare!"

Lt. Ernst flew too close to the V-1 he shot down and the results are shown here. He managed to return to base. The squadron pilots shot down a total of five V-1s before moving to their base in Belgium and the beginning of the Bulge. (Photo courtesy of USAF Historical Archives.)

1st Lt. Herman Ernst poses in the pilot's seat before takeoff. Ernst finished his tour as an ace with five kills and a V-1. He was the first pilot in the squadron to shoot down a V-1, which was on July 15, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Herman Ernst.)







P-61 *Lady Gen* was flown by 1st Lt. Robert A. Smith and his R/O, 1st Lt. Robert E. Tierney. They scored three victories during the Bulge, finally getting more than six kills. (Photo by Gerald Balzer.)

### ***Lady Gen* Hunts Ground Targets**

The 422nd NFS had become proficient in other things besides hunting night flying intruders—the crews had developed a knack for hunting down targets on the ground, disrupting the enemy by targeting train locomotives and railroad tracks. The Black Widow *Lady Gen* not only shot down five enemy aircraft, but also destroyed five locomotives. The crew of the *Lady Gen* was 1st Lt. Paul Smith and his R/O, Lt. Robert Tierney. They would be responsible for covering a large patrol sector that was known to be busy with enemy air traffic, particularly since the start of the German offensive. Lieutenant Smith remembers one mission well: “About 40 minutes into the patrol, Marmite’s GCI vectored the crew of *Lady Gen* toward a bogey flying at 7,000 feet (2,150 meters), which was 3,000 feet below the normal altitude for a P-61 on patrol. Dropping the nose, Lieutenant Smith eased close enough to get a visual on a Ju 188 twin-engine bomber, a type frequently encountered during the

Ardennes offensive. It was produced in fewer numbers than the Ju 88 and could fly at more than 300mph while carrying a bombload of up to 6,600 pounds. This made it a very dangerous threat to Allied ground troops.”

Smith continues: “Having received GCI’s go-ahead, I set up my attack while Lieutenant Tierney took over the pursuit on his radar scope. It was possible that the German aircrew knew that they were in an area patrolled by American night fighters because the Ju 88 kept making abrupt course changes. These moves probably did not constitute evasive action as such, but represented defensive maneuvers intended to lessen the chances of being shot down. The air speed remained at 240mph and his altitude was steady. By the time I had locked on and pulled up into firing range *Lady Gen* had obviously been spotted. The Ju 188’s pilot had already started violent evasive action, which consisted of peeling off, weaving, and sudden changes in altitude. It was like trying to track a yo-yo in the dark. Closing to less



## THE GERMAN NIGHT FIGHTER

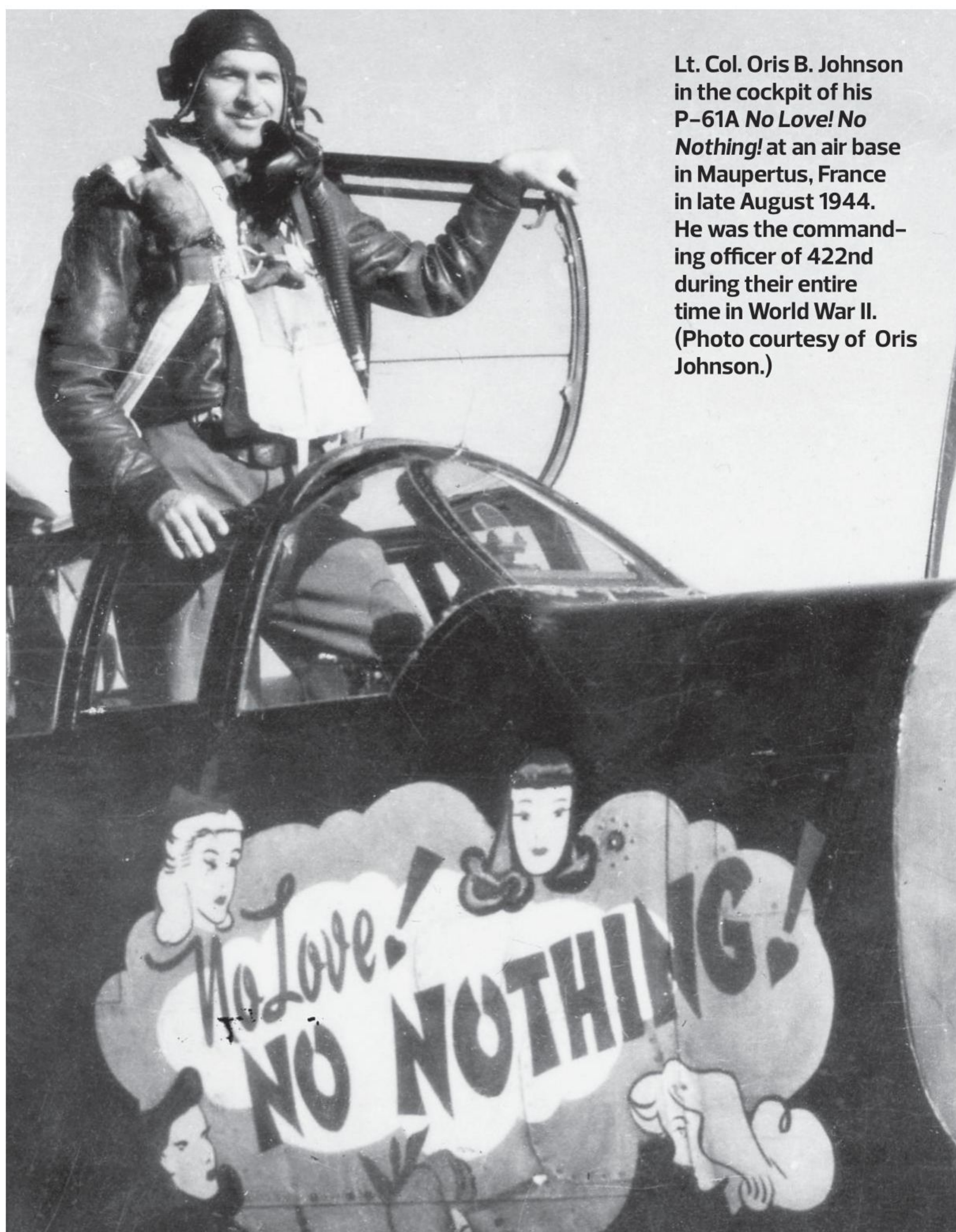
The JU-88 shown here was one of the many types that went down under P-61 fires. The night fighter types were in high demand during the Battle of the Bulge. The Allied airpower dominated the daylight hours, so the Germans had to use their night fighters to support the German movement. (Photo by Dave McLaren.)

than 200 feet in a hard turn to port, I fired a burst of 20 mm cannon fire with 60-degree deflection. With the element of surprise compromised, an easy straight and level shot was out of the question. The cannon rounds exploded on impact with the Ju 188 canopy area. The intruder straightened out, prompting another quick burst of fire from *Lady Gen*, this time with 30-degree deflection. The round converged on the Ju 188's starboard wing root, triggering a minor explosion and fire. The aircraft went into a gentle climb, before falling off on its starboard wing. Circling the now descending bomber, both Tierney and I kept a wary eye on it as its pilot tried in vain to pull out of the dive. A minute later it hit the ground and exploded."

It should be noted that while day fighters could spot their targets two to three miles off and set up their attacks, night fighters had to identify the target by getting to point-blank range, then backing off long enough to get their target lined up for their first shot. †

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*Warren E. Thompson is the author of several books on military aviation history. As a member of the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron Association, he had the opportunity to interview many of the pilots and crewmembers who participated in the Battle of the Bulge. We are honored to be the first to publish them.*



Lt. Col. Oris B. Johnson in the cockpit of his P-61A *No Love! No Nothing!* at an air base in Maupertus, France in late August 1944. He was the commanding officer of 422nd during their entire time in World War II. (Photo courtesy of Oris Johnson.)