

RUFF

STORIES

MEMORIES OF AN EARLY WAR SOUTH PACIFIC FIGHTER PILOT

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AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

By the time newly minted U.S. fighter pilots entered WW II in late 1941, they faced a Japanese adversary whose pilots had been flying combat since 1937. Not only were these “flying Samurai” pilots old hats, but they also flew a trump card in the form of the Zero. As the rays of the Rising Sun extended over the vastness of the South Pacific, the two things that stood in their way of reaching the Australian shores was a jumping-off point near the southern tip of New Guinea and the untested, untrained and out-gunned fighter pilots of the Army Air Corps. Follow along as a farm boy turned fighter pilot slugs it out with the Japanese in a life-and-death struggle to hold New Guinea at all costs.

Norb Ruff survived 75 combat missions in Bell Airacobras before transitioning to the P-38 where he flew another 50 missions and scored four kills. When brought back to the States to be a combat instructor on Lightnings, he was the last original member of the 80th Fighter Squadron to survive and leave combat. (Photo by Jim Koepnick/EAA)





In my opinion, the P-38 Lightning did more to win the air war in the South Pacific than any other airplane, including what the Navy had. Although the P-38 was big and heavy, it could whip a Zero in a dogfight so long as you kept your speed up. But best of all, you could still make it home if you lost one of your engines. No other fighter in the theater could make that same claim.—Norb Ruff



PHOTO COURTESY OF NORB RUFF

Rough, tough and ready?

December 6, 1941, was a day I would never forget. After months and months of enduring the various rants and complaints of my Army Air Corps instructors, most of whom had shouted at me from the backseats of PT-17s, BT-14s and AT-6s, I turned the tables on them as silver wings were pinned to my chest. A brand-new second lieutenant, I carried a set of papers that proclaimed I was to be sent to Selfridge Field in Michigan to learn how to fly fighters. Less than a day later, my whole world, along with everyone else's, was turned upside down.

We received word that the Japanese had bombed a place called Pearl Harbor; I thought it was up near Alaska. What did I know—I was just a farm kid from Wisconsin. I realized it was serious when they told us to report back to base, and I knew these were desperate times when they sent me to Florida to learn how to fly P-40s with the 49th Fighter Group. But by Christmas of 1941, having yet to sit in a P-40 let alone fly one, our airplanes were crated, and we were told we were being sent to California for deployment to a combat area; the

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Only a very small number of Bell Airacobras still fly, including the P-39Q that belongs to the Commemorative Air Force. (Photo courtesy of Bill Crump)

military could not afford to wait to train us while the Japanese were ravaging the Pacific.

On February 1, 1942, after 21 days at sea, our convoy landed at Melbourne, Australia. Most of us were overzealous and cocky. Some in the group thought the Japanese were all inferior pilots, wearing thick glasses, and flying airplanes that couldn't handle the simplest turning maneuvers. It didn't take us very long to realize that we were the inferior ones—in pilots and aircraft. After a blindfold checkout and a few prayers, at last I got to fly a real fighter, a P-40N Warhawk. But by

April 1942, after a whooping 24 hours total time in the P-40, never firing its guns or learning air-to-air combat maneuvers, I was reassigned to a newly formed fighter squadron, the 80th.

The 80th Fighter Squadron was part of the 8th Fighter Group that also included the 35th and 36th FS. Instead of P-40s, we were assigned P-39 and P-40 (British versions with a 20mm cannon) Airacobras. Built by the Bell Aircraft Corporation, the P-39 was the first tricycle-gear fighter ever produced. It had a door on each side that opened like a car door and windows that rolled up and down. Once inside the roomy cockpit, the forward visibility was excellent. The Cobra had plenty of guns, too; a 37mm cannon (20mm on the P-40) that fired through the propeller shaft, a pair of nose-mounted .50-caliber machine guns synchronized to fire through the propeller arc, and four .30-caliber machine guns, two on each wing. On paper, the P-39 appeared to carry quite a punch, but in the air it wasn't worth the paper it was written on. We struggled to get them up to 18,000 feet. Needless to say, the Japanese fighters and bombers operated well above us, and they held the upper hand on when and where they wanted to fight.

Airacobra combat

In mid-July 1942, our squadron was sent to 12 Mile Aerodrome near Port Moresby, New Guinea. The island of New Guinea lay just to the north of Australia, and it was all that stood in the way of the conquering Japanese. In fact, most of New Guinea was already under Japanese control when we arrived, and the only things that stood in their way of taking Port Moresby were the 13,000-foot peaks of the Owen Stanley Mountains that cut the south end of New Guinea in half and a bunch of determined P-39 Airacobras.

Most of my early combat was "on-the-job training," as I went out on strafing missions in P-40s with our already-seasoned sister squadron. The Japanese were attempting to land troops at a place called Buna, which was only 20 minutes away by air on the other side of New Guinea. We caught them out in the open as six of us in our Cobras came roaring over the beach firing our guns, while geysers of water erupted around the dozen landing barges as the Japanese troops on the ground scattered every which way. But we were the lucky ones that day because the Zeros failed to show up to protect their troops on the ground; their rain-soaked field was too muddy to take off on.

As a ground-strafer, the P-39 was king, especially at treetop level. But as an air-to-air dogfighter, it was absolutely, positively a non-maneuverable "brick" compared with the Zero. To make matters worse, only a handful of pilots among us had any combat experience, and those who did had come from England, teaching us how to fight the "Battle of Britain" way. The tactics we were taught might

have worked against the heavier Me 109s or Fw 190s but not against a tight-turning Zero. Without a supercharger we couldn't get to their altitudes even if we tried, especially when they escorted their bombers in a perfect V-formation over our field on an almost daily basis.

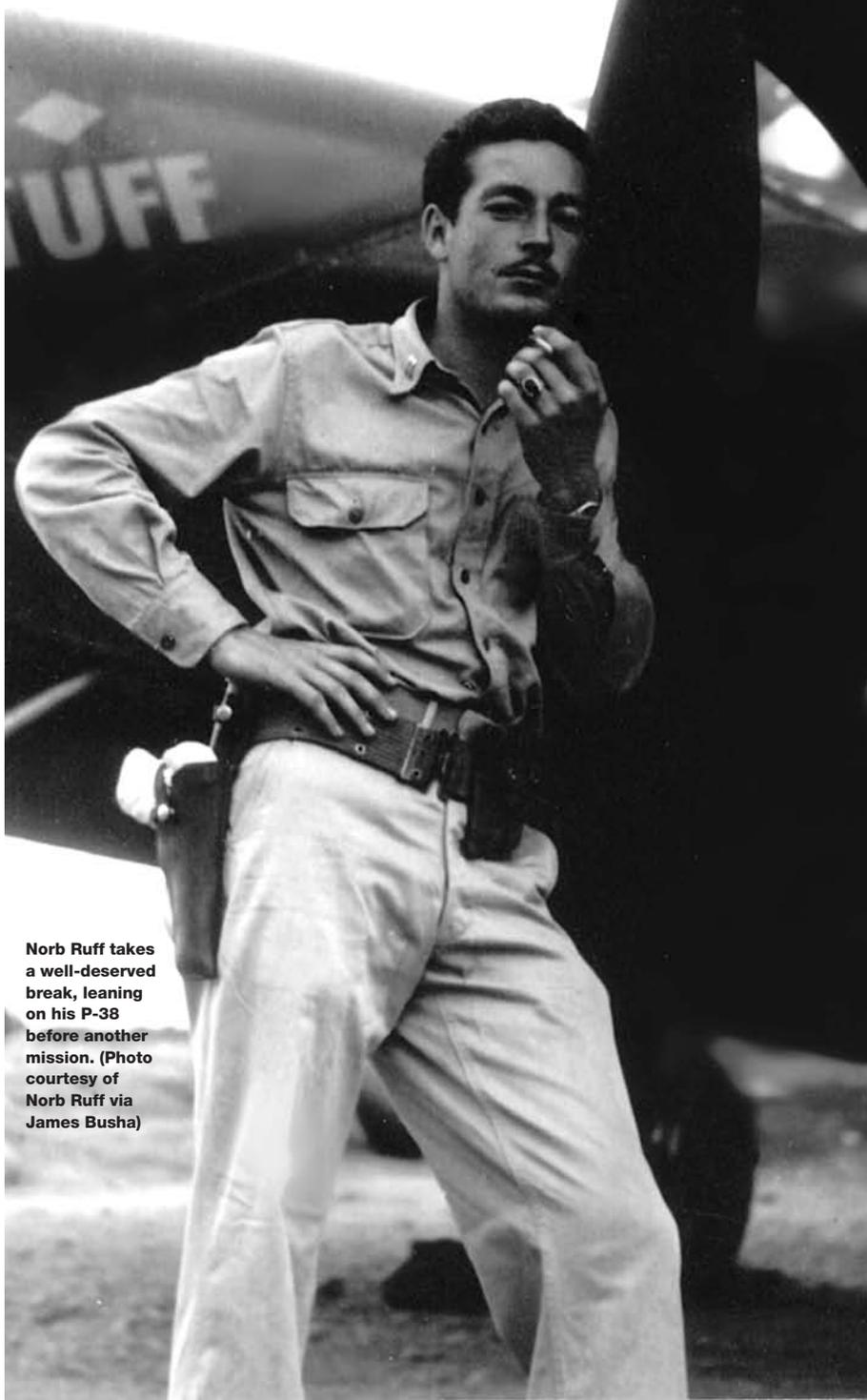
When we weren't dodging falling Japanese bombs, we flew escort missions for B-26 Marauders, B-25 Mitchells, or C-47 transports as they dropped bombs, troops and supplies to the jungles below. We got in on the bombing campaign ourselves during September 1942 when we changed from strafers to dive-bombers, hitting Japanese positions near Myola Lake with 100-pound belly-mounted bombs. As we slogged through month after month of continuous combat, our squadron was redeployed to Milne Bay, which lay on the eastern-most tip of New Guinea. Although we had originally been scheduled to be in combat only six weeks, we were now approaching our five-month anniversary, and our biggest enemies—malaria and dengue fever—were taking its toll on our squadron. Half the men, including our CO "Coon Dog" Connor, were sent back to Australia to recuperate. Those of us left did what little we could to fend off the daily Japanese bomber attacks. Times were tough, the mosquitoes and sweltering heat were tougher, and with no fresh food of any kind, we became desperate.

In January 1943, the Japanese bomber campaign intensified, and our base took a real beating on the 17th, as Sally bombers escorted by Zeros roared over our field and just about decimated us. A couple of our P-39s were able to get airborne and clobbered a few of the Sallys before they got out of range. When the smoke had cleared, two B-17s, one B-24, two Lockheed Hudsons and a P-39 lay in ruins, while over 10,000 gallons of aviation fuel burned nearby. More than 150 bombs rained down on our field, tearing up our runway and entire camp. When we didn't think it could get any worse, a shot-up B-26 Marauder, appropriately christened *ShittenGitten*, came limping in and bellied-landed in between the bomb craters. A few days later, with 75 Airacobra missions under my belt, and with only a third of our original squadron left, we were finally withdrawn and sent back to Australia. Not just to rest, though, but to get checked out in a new fighter—the P-38 Lightning.

P-38 checkout

The Lightning was a helluva lot bigger airplane than the P-39, especially in wing area, overall height, length and weight, but it could fly circles around the Cobra in combat. What a difference a pair of twin engines makes, and with superchargers to boot! We could now climb into the 40,000-foot range, with enough power left over to tangle with the Japanese fighters. Instead of the Zeros knocking on our front door, we smashed theirs open on our terms. The nose contained four

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A PAIR OF TWIN ENGINES MAKES, AND WITH SUPERCHARGERS TO BOOT!



Norb Ruff takes a well-deserved break, leaning on his P-38 before another mission. (Photo courtesy of Norb Ruff via James Busha)

.50-caliber machine guns and one 20mm cannon. It was an awesome, powerful gun platform with lots of ammo: just point the “fire hose” at the target, and let the stream of lead find its mark.

The P-38 had self-sealing tanks, and even if we lost an engine, we could still make it back to base. That was a comforting fact, especially during those long over-water flights. The Lightning was quick and agile, and even though the Zero was lighter, more maneuverable and could turn tighter at slower speeds, we were faster, tougher and better armed. The Zeros always wanted to sucker us into a slow-turning duel. But if you kept your speed up, we could turn with them so long as you did it on your terms, not theirs.

Our checkout in the Lightning was quite simple. You flew it automatically with the throttles, and you flew it just like you would drive a Caterpillar tractor. If you wanted to make a hard left turn, you simply pulled the throttle on the inside engine and pushed the throttle of the outside engine to the stops at the same time; it would simply roll on over. You never took your left hand off the throttle knobs. So long as you performed all of your combat maneuvering at high speeds, the P-38 held the advantage. Woe to the pilot who cut his speed to turn with a Zero; the advantage was lost, and in some instances, so too was the pilot. The airplane was very true in all of the inputs it received from the pilot, who had to remember the golden rule: always check your six o’clock. Ninety percent of the pilots shot down, no matter which side they were on, never saw their adversaries. A fact I exploited a handful of times during my P-38 combat tour.

Turning the Tide: Revenge of the Headhunters

In early April 1943, not only did we have a new fighter to fly but we also had a new CO—Capt. Edward “Porky” Cragg. I never saw Capt. Cragg turn away from a fight, no matter the odds. He was tough and aggressive and flew the P-38 to its limits and beyond, especially during combat. Capt. Cragg also gave our 80th Fighter Squadron the infamous name of “The Headhunters,” named after the local tribes that rescued downed Allied pilots and killed Japanese ones. We returned to the front lines and were based at a very familiar place—Three Mile Aerodrome in Port Moresby. Although on the ground we were in familiar surroundings, things in the air would be totally different. I was assigned an olive-drab P-38 that I christened *Ruff Stuff* on the nose. It was more or less a play on words as to the world of aerial combat. Most of which I would soon encounter.

May 21st 1943. Our squadron was sent out to fly top cover for a bunch of C-47 transports on their way to Wau. As soon as we started climbing after takeoff, we were sent to intercept bogies over Salamaua. There were 11 of us in our P-38s as we made a quick climb to 23,000 feet. Someone called out two dozen Zekes, Oscars and Hamps above us. As the order to drop tanks came across the radio, we pushed our throttles forward and our noses upward. We split up into sections and tore into the Japanese fighter formation. All around the sky were burning airplanes falling and spinning downward. When it was all said and done, there were six fewer Japanese airplanes in the sky that day, as 11 P-38s returned to base. Although I didn’t get any that day, my turn would soon come.

BIG BUT EFFECTIVE: LIGHTNING VERSUS ZERO



PHOTO BY EAA/JIM KCFENICK

Two competing fighters could hardly represent such vastly different design philosophies. The Japanese navy’s small, single-engine Mitsubishi A6M Zero and Lockheed’s big, twin-engine P-38 Lightning fought each other for three years. The Japanese design featured light construction and extreme agility versus the P-38’s speed and power.

In the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, range was a critical factor. The Zero and Lightning both met that requirement, often flying 1,000-mile round-trip missions. But when the fighters met, the differences were startling. A loaded 5,300-pound A6M5 possessed less than half the wing loading of an empty 12,800-pound P-38L, giving the Japanese unexcelled maneuverability. However, the Lightning could beat the Zero in a sustained climb.

Armament also favored the Lightning. With four .50 calibers and a 20mm cannon, its heavy battery could shred a Zero. The A6M series fielded different weapon combinations, but two 20mm and two machine guns were typical. Japanese pilots found that well-

built American fighters could take a lot of killing.

The critical differences between the two were top speed and altitude. The P-38 was among the first production aircraft to encounter compressibility, whereas the Zero was redlined at barely 400mph. The Zero and the Japanese Army’s comparable Nakajima Ki-43 Oscar were limited to around 220mph for optimum maneuvering, a fact exploited by American pilots.

Lightnings were flown wholly or mainly by six of the Army’s top seven Pacific Theater aces. Majors Richard Bong and Thomas McGuire shot their way to the top of the ladder with 40 and 38 victories, respectively, joined by Colonel Charles MacDonald (27) and Captain Jay Robbins (22), plus Lieutenant Colonels Gerald R. Johnson (20 of 22), Thomas Lynch (17 of 20) and Robert Westbrook (13 of 20).

Thus, Lightning pilots employed their strength against the enemy’s vulnerability, relying on highspeed “boom and zoom” tactics, denying the Zero a maneuvering target. —Barrett Tillman



PHOTO BY JOHN DIEBS

WE SPLIT UP INTO SECTIONS AND TORE INTO THE JAPANESE FIGHTER FORMATION. ALL AROUND THE SKY WERE BURNING AIRPLANES FALLING AND SPINNING DOWNWARD.



Kevin Eldridge piloted *Ruff Stuff*, owned by Ron Fagen, while photographer Paul Bowen was shooting from a Beechcraft Baron with the doors removed. He lit the target with a portable Canon strobe. (Photo by Paul Bowen)



Ruff Stuff was a P-38F with the flush inlets below the spinners and early canopy. Note the modified national roundels that have had white bars added to the original marking. (Illustration by Tom Tullis)

Unique among American fighters of WW II, the P-38 uses a control yoke, which pilots acclimated to almost immediately. The impressive visibility over the nose is compromised by the engines blocking the side view, but again, it's something pilots quickly learned to work around, especially since the pilot sits so high in the cockpit. (Photo by Paul Bowen)



In late July 1943, we were sent out again on another bomber escort mission near Madang. As we were stoozing around focusing on our escort duties, we were jumped by Zeros and Oscars. I tacked onto the tail of one Oscar as he tried to shake me with his wild maneuvering. I held on for the ride and at last was able to get some good hits on him. I saw him start to burn and watched as his canopy slid backwards. He bailed out of his stricken fighter, and as his chute opened and began to blossom, I became completely awestruck by this sight. I had been flying combat for more than a year and had seen a lot in that time. But now I was in shock—I was amazed that there had been a man attached to the airplane! To me, combat had always been airplane against airplane; nothing more, nothing less.

September 13, 1943. Our mission that day consisted of 15 P-38s sent out on a fighter sweep ahead of a formation of incoming B-24 Liberators. Near Dagua, New Guinea, I was leading a flight of three other Lightnings at around 20,000 feet, when we spotted an equal number of Japanese fighters

nearby. I ordered our flight to “strip tanks” as we dove into the Oscars. I quickly maneuvered behind a fleeing Oscar and gave him a quick squirt. He started to burn and bailed out almost immediately. I almost became a victim of my own golden rule; I became so engaged in that Oscar that I failed to see two more behind me trying to avenge their buddy, whom I had just shot down. Thankfully, my wingman did his job as he let loose on the pair of Oscars, scoring hits on one as it rolled over and headed downward.

The other guy must have figured someone was behind him, and he too rolled his Oscar

over and headed for the deck. I followed him, and we swirled around slugging it out, each of us trying to get on the other's tail. I finally gained the advantage at 5,000 feet as my rounds tore into him, and he crashed into the jungle below.

On September 15, 1943, 16 of us were sent out to cover B-24 Liberators near Wewak. The bombers stayed at 15,000 feet, while we cruised back and forth above them at 18,000 feet. At about 20 miles from the target area, someone called out a lone Oscar below us just above the undercast. Suddenly, other Oscars and Hamps began to appear, and their numbers grew to more than 25. We stripped our tanks and dived on them as I tacked onto a Hamp about 250 yards away. I gave him a long burst and closed on him rapidly. At 60 yards, the



L to R: Owner and pilot Ron Fagen, restorer Erik Hokuf, and the late Norb Ruff, pilot of the original Ruff Stuff. (Photo by Paul Bowen)

Hamp disintegrated in front of me and exploded. That was my last victory during a very long war.

In October 1943, after 125 combat missions in 18 months, I was sent back home and wound up teaching brand-new fighter pilots the finer points of P-38 combat. I was the last 80th FS pilot left in the group from the original cadre that landed on New Guinea in 1942. I guess I never got over playing with Bell-built, tricycle-gear airplanes because in April 1945, I became one of first five pilots selected to fly the Bell P-59 jet. Although it gulped fuel by the truckload and flew about as fast as a P-38, it nevertheless ushered in the jet age for the U.S. What we could have done with them back in early 1942! ✚