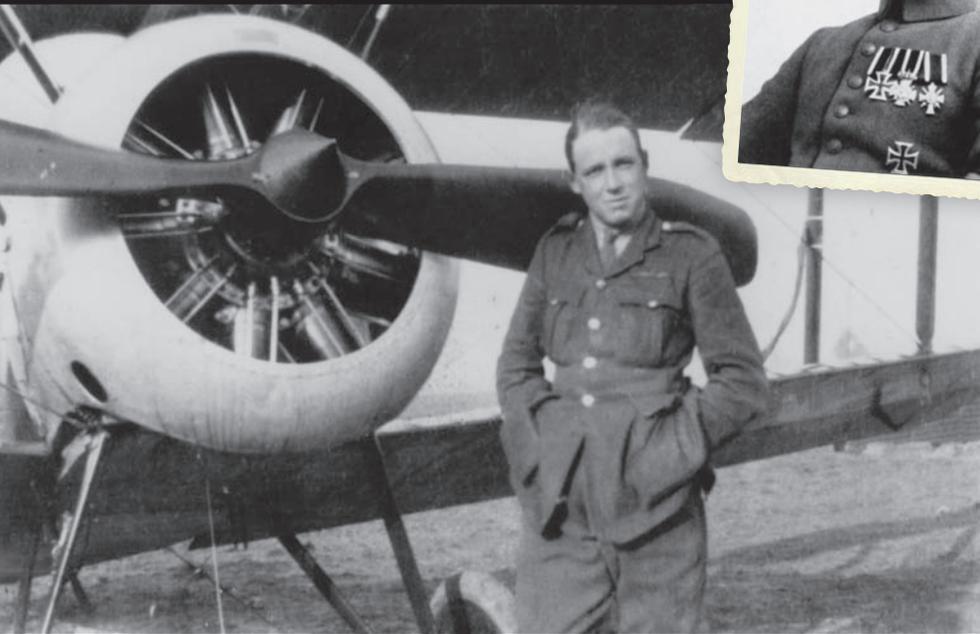


ACE IN A DAY

The kills and claims of the top shooters

BY BARRETT TILLMAN

On the morning of April 7, 1943, American fighter pilots on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands responded to a red alert. More than 100 Japanese aircraft were inbound, sending Wildcats and P-40s scrambling to intercept. In a prolonged combat, the defenders claimed 39 victories and actually got 29—a better than normal ratio of actual kills versus claims. The belle of the brawl was 1st Lt. James E. Swett, a 22-year-old Marine entering his first combat. Fifteen minutes later, he was fished out of the bay, having ditched his shot-up F4F-4 perforated by Japanese and American gunfire.



Above: Sopwith Camel “merchant” John Trollope, credited with seven victories in two sorties in one day during 1918. (Photo courtesy of Rainer Absmeier)

Inset: Fritz Otto Bernert downed five British aircraft in 20 minutes on April 24, 1917. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive Collection)

When the scores were totaled, “Zeke” Swett was credited with seven Aichi dive-bombers destroyed and one probable. In fact, the number of Vals claimed matched the Japanese loss records. Swett received the Medal of Honor, and from that day on, the goal of naval aviation cadets was “to do a Jimmy Swett.”

During WW II, over 100 U.S. fighter pilots were credited with five or more victories in one day, mostly in one sortie. But the “ace in a day” feat was established long before the Second World War.

Great War air warriors

Probably the first ace in a day was Austro-Hungarian Stabsfeldwebel Julius Arigi. On August 22, 1916, with his gunner Feldwebel Johann Lassi, he intercepted Italian aircraft over Albania’s Adriatic coast. The Austrians downed five Farman two-seaters, destroyed or abandoned on the water. However, a single-seater pilot contributed to two of the victories. Arigi ended the war as Austria’s second-ranking ace with 32 victories.



Almost certainly, the first pilot downing five opponents unaided in one day occurred during April 1917. Though wearing glasses, Leutnant Fritz Otto Bernert became a fighter pilot. During “Bloody April” he was on a roll, accounting for 15 of Jasta Boelcke’s 21 victories. On the 24th, the day after receiving the Pour le Merite, he led an Albatros patrol. In only 20 minutes, he downed a Sopwith 1 ½ Strutter plus three BE-2 bombers. Then he bagged a DH-4, all verified by records of three British squadrons.

Germany’s other ace in a day was Leutnant Fritz Roth of Jasta 16. Already a double ace, on May 29, 1918 in a carefully planned mission he claimed five Belgian and British balloons in 15 minutes, destroying at least four. He finished as Germany’s top balloon buster with 20 gasbags.

The British also produced multiple victories in one day. Twenty-year-old Capt. John L. Trollope, a “Camel merchant” of No. 43 Squadron, claimed seven enemies during two sorties on March 24, 1918.

He began with two DFWs (one shared) and an Albatros in the morning, plus four Albatros two-seaters that afternoon. The day’s actions nearly doubled his previous score as he related, “This has been the most wonderful day of my life. I myself have destroyed six Hun machines—three this morning and three this afternoon. The first this morning I shot to pieces, and it broke up in mid-air; the second went down in flames—both of them two-seaters. The third, a single-seater, which literally exploded in mid-air and fell in pieces.”



In late March Trollope was shot down and captured, finishing with 13.5 victories.

Trollope's squadronmate, Capt. Henry Woollett, made a similar record. On April 12 the former DH-5 pilot claimed two Albatros(es) and a two-seater in the morning patrol, adding three "Albatros" that afternoon. He the war with 35 victories, all but four credited as destroyed.

The record for one-day claims was set by the top Allied ace, Lieutenant Rene Fonck. The self-confident young Frenchman scored sextuples on two occasions, and in fact he recalled, "I had been dreaming for some time of downing five adversaries within a 24-hour period."

On May 9, 1918, Fonck logged three two-seaters in the afternoon and three more that evening. The unprecedented feat was the result of a champagne bet with two American squadronmates, who paid their debt.

Fonck repeated his record in two more sorties on September 28. With 67 victories, his position atop the Allied ace roster was unassailable, and he ended the war with 75.

America's first ace in a day was the mercurial Second Lieutenant Frank Luke. His "September rampage" in

1918 produced a spectacular record—18 credited victories in as many days. On the 18th he shared two balloons, then added two Fokker D.VIIs and a Halberstadt two-seater. But his wingman Lt. Joe Wehner died in the action, and 11 days later Luke followed in his slipstream.

The second generation

With the advent of monoplanes, some pundits theorized that WW I-style air combat was not possible at speeds approaching 300mph. But fighter pilots paid little attention and got on with the next war.

The world standard for verified a multi-kill sortie was established in an unusual clime—during the "Winter War" between Finland and Russia. On January 6, 1940, a formation of unescorted Soviet bombers was sighted over southern Finland. Pilots of Fighter Squadron 24 scrambled in their Fokker D.XXIs, with an airborne pilot chasing down one Ilyushin DB-3. Lieutenant Jorma Sarvanto pursued the others alone, destroying six in four minutes. The wreckage of all six victims from the 6th Bomber Regiment were found and photographed. A pilot since 1937, Sarvanto became Finland's leading ace in the Winter War with 12.83 kills.

At least two other Finns became aces in a day, flying Bf 109Gs. In June 1944, during the "Continuation War" against Russia, Lt. Olavi K. Puro

Probably the first ace in a day was Austro-Hungarian Julius Arigi who downed five Italian aircraft with his gunner in 1916. (Photo courtesy of Rainer Absmeier)



Flying the Albatros series of fighters, German pilots achieved air superiority over the Western Front in 1916 and 1917. (Photo by Luigino Callaro)



Probably the world's champion ace maker, the Bf 109 was flown by scores of *Experten* who downed five or more enemies in one day. (Photo by John Dibbs/planetpicture.com)

claimed two LaGGs, a P-39, a Pe-2 bomber and a Sturmovik. And Lt. Eino Juutilainen downed two Yaks, two P-39s, a LaGG, and an Il-2.

WW II

No ace in a day performance occurs in a vacuum, especially within a large-scale air battle or campaign. So it's helpful to place some events in context. Two examples will suffice.

In the Battle of Britain (July-October 1940) the Royal Air Force lost 1,087 fighters (including 129 besides Spitfires and Hurricanes) and the Luftwaffe a nominal 1,733.

Conversely, the RAF fighters claimed about 2,700 shootdowns and German fighters 3,200. Thus, ignoring British anti-aircraft artillery, the British overclaimed by about 58 percent; the Germans by nearly three times as much.

The likely RAF exchange rate was 1.6 to 1 (versus the claimed 2.4 to 1) while the Germans thought they were winning 2-1 yet lost 1 to 1.4.

Applying the campaign error to individuals, RAF pilot scores could be reduced to roughly 40 percent of those credited and Luftwaffe scores by two-thirds. However, the simple mathematics are just that—overly simple. The more experienced pilots certainly gained a larger ratio of actual kills than the statistical average. Therefore, the top RAF shooter, Flight Lt. Eric Lock, likely downed more than 40% of his 23 claimed, which would be 10 “actual” victories.

Similarly, Lt. Col. Helmut Wick, CO of JG 2, probably accounted for more than 1/3 of the 42 Battle of Britain victories credited to him, or 14 Abschüsse.



A genuine ace in a day was Finland's Jorva Sarvanto who downed six Soviet bombers flying a Fokker D.XXI in January 1940. (Photo courtesy of Karl Stenman)

The Pacific war's greatest one-day clash occurred on June 19, 1944—the fabled Marianas Turkey Shoot. Supporting the occupation of Saipan Island, 15 U.S. fast carriers fought a day-long battle against nine Japanese carriers and land-based planes from Guam and environs. At the end of the day, U.S. naval aviators claimed 380 enemy planes splashed while losing 31 to all causes.

Postwar assessment of Imperial Navy records indicates in-flight losses of 260, a 57% accuracy figure. However, Hellcat claims against the day's second raid proved uncannily accurate. They were paced by Lt (jg.) Alex Vraciu off USS *Lexington* (CV-16) who claimed six Judy dive-bombers in eight minutes. Discounting the work by shipboard gunners, the F6Fs likely got nearly all the 80 planes they claimed in that action.

British Commonwealth

Throughout WW II at least 20 British Commonwealth pilots were credited with five or more victories in a day.

The record was attributed to Flying Officer Charles “Deadstick” Dyson, a Hurricane pilot

of No. 33 Squadron in North Africa. On December 11, 1940, he attacked a formation of Italian aircraft, claiming six Fiat CR.42s. But an army unit said one of the Falcos collided with a Breda bomber. Examination of Regia Aeronautica records showed one Fiat lost.

More tangible results occurred the next year during the battle for Greece. Squadron Leader Marmaduke Pattle, also of 33 Squadron, was a veteran on top of his game, with more than 40 victories by mid-April 1941. On the 14th he was credited with five Axis aircraft—two Ju 88s, a Bf 109, 110, and an SM-79 bomber. Only five days later, he added 6.33 more—three Ju 88s, three 109s, and a shared Henschel 126. He was killed by a Bf 110 on April 20. Subsequently, historian Christopher Shores determined that of Pattle's 50 credited victories, at least 19 and perhaps 30 were genuine.

Other claimants fared poorly. On December 5, 1941 two RAF Curtiss Tomahawk squadrons waded into a gaggle of 30-plus Stukas near El Adem, Libya. The Axis formation was escorted by Bf 109s, Fiat G.50s and Macchi 200s. Of the 16 dive-bombers claimed, Flt. Lt. Clive Caldwell, later Australia's leading ace, was credited with five Stukas.

Throughout the day, the Commonwealth fliers claimed 25 destroyed and nine probables, while the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica lost six planes destroyed or force landed, including two Stukas.

Conversely, the Luftwaffe likely accounted for all five Tomahawks lost while the nine Italian claims clearly were excessive.

That month—so vital to the course of the war—provided a microcosm of aerial victory claims and losses. The British credited 164 victories and likely got 59, or 28%. The Axis units claimed 170 for 120 definite Commonwealth losses in the air, a 70% ratio. The relative claims changed little into the new year. In June 1942, the RAF actually got 15 of 39 credited kills while the Axis pilots downed 42 of their 52 claimed.

The North African air war contains a useful lesson. While the Luftwaffe and its partner proved consistently more accurate in its combat claims than the British, it did not matter. The Axis out-shot the opposition by two or three to one but still lost the campaign, largely owing to Allied numerical superiority. The lesson: stellar individual performers could not reverse a strategic imbalance.

Luftwaffe experten

Of some 2,500 Luftwaffe pilots with five or more victories, by one reckoning some 260 claimed five or more Abshusse in one day. More than 30 turned the trick at night.

The star performer in North Africa was *Oberleutnant* Hans-Joachim Marseille, a virtuoso Bf 109F pilot in JG 27. He stunned the Luftwaffe with a claim of 17 kills in three sorties on September 1, 1942: four RAF fighters in the first com-

The Hawker Hurricane was expertly flown by South African "Pat" Pattle who downed five or more Axis planes on each of two days in 1941. (Photo by Budd Davisson)





The world's ace of aces, Maj. Erich Hartmann, downed five or more Soviet aircraft in a day on 17 occasions. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive Collection)

Left, top: "The Star of Afrika" was Hans-Joachim Marseille, credited with 17 British aircraft on September 1, 1942. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive Collection)

Left, bottom: The one-day world record was established by Fw 190 pilot Emil Lang who claimed 18 Russian planes on November 3, 1943. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive Collection)

bat; eight in the second; and five Hurricanes in the third. The day's claims brought his record to 121 of an eventual 158.

Marseille's performance has been closely scrutinized, and evidence points toward an actual toll of eight. Certainly he had paid his dues, claiming five or six victories on three previous occasions.

The world record was recorded far from the desert of North Africa. In November 1943, the Green Heart wing, JG 54, was heavily engaged in Russia. Lieutenant Emil Lang, who entered combat early that year, flew Focke Wulf 190s. Stocky and aggressive, the 34-year-old prewar airline pilot was a fast learner. On November 2 he claimed eight kills, setting the stage for the next day. On the 3rd he made claims in three sorties, accounting for seven Soviet planes, then two, and finally nine—an astonishing 18 kills in one day.

Lang had scored 72 kills in three weeks around Kiev in October and November. But his string played out, as he died fighting the Western Allies in September 1944.

The "Green Hearts" were loaded with talent, led by Colonel Johannes Trautloft who had flown in Spain. *Hauptmann* Walter Nowotny was the first to reach 250 victories, inspiring awe for his consistent multiple kills. He claimed 104 of his total 258 on only 15 high-scoring days, for 40% of his total. In the summer of 1943 he was routinely downing more than a plane a day: 41 in June, 49 in August, and 45 in September. He missed July entirely.



Another JG 54 star was *Hauptmann* Erich Rudorffer. Twice previously he claimed seven in a day but on November 6, 1943, he ran his score from 107 to 120—13 claimed kills in 17 minutes. He finished the war flying Me 262s with 222 credited victories.

The world's ace of aces also scored in batches. Major Erich Hartmann made ace in a day 17 times, starting with a seven-kill day in July 1943. His 114 victories on those days represented one-third of his 352 total. On February 26, 1944, he claimed 10 kills (numbers 193-202) but he passed 300 with his peak performance, 11 kills during two sorties on August 24. Hartmann's closest

rival, Major Gerhard Barkhorn, logged seven ace in a day performances en route to 301 total.

A pattern emerged among the super aces with spectacular victory claims in single sorties or during one day. Broadly, they were extremely experienced fighter pilots with long victory strings. Lang had 100 kills before his big day with 18 credited kills. Marseille had 105 when he began his 17-victory day. Rudorffer had 106 when taking off for his 13-victory sortie. In all, he had 13 days with five or more victories.

The accuracy of Luftwaffe claims against the

Sleek and lethal, the P-38 Lightning produced six aces in a day versus Germany and Japan. (Photo by Budd Davisson)



Maj. William Leverette downed seven Stukas in one October 1943 mission. (Photo courtesy of Barrett Tillman)

Soviets can only be assessed with access to Russian archives. However, as many as 16 Red Air Force pilots were credited with five or more victories in one day, and undoubtedly some of them were valid.

American aces

Officially, 104 American pilots were credited with five or more victories in a day: 39 Army, 55 Navy, and 10 Marine.

Jim Swett's seven kills first time at bat was un-

usual. Like the Germans, most of the largest U.S. single-mission and one-day scores were posted by experienced gunfighters who had previously carved multiple notches. A case in point was the all-time Navy ace, Cdr. David McCampbell. At 34, he was an accomplished professional, a pre-war gunnery star who said, "I practiced until I couldn't get any better. On the last gunnery hop before deploying, I shot the tow cable in two."

McCampbell scored his first two kills in early June 1944. Then, during the "Turkey Shoot" he downed two planes on his first launch and five

Confirming the Kill

"Unconfirmed by Army means unconfirmed, Stachel."
-- Hauptmann Heidemann in *The Blue Max*.

Apparently no air force entered WW II with an established procedure for claiming or crediting aerial victories. The Royal Air Force, which had helped establish the process 25 years earlier, did not begin standardizing procedures until the Battle of Britain. Retroactive changes sought to impose some order upon administrative uncertainty. But a common flaw was treating shared victories as wholes, hence AVM Johnny Johnson's 38 was actually 36.16.

The Luftwaffe had an orderly, highly bureaucratic system for processing pilots' claims from Staffel up to Geschwader, thence to the air ministry. Once verified (accurately or wrongly) a confirming document was sent back to the unit. The process could take several months, and in the final phase of the war often no claims were handled.

Japan, a collaborative culture, reflected that fact in its military. While many units noted individual successes, apparently the Imperial Navy and the Army Air Force largely stopped recognizing personal scores in 1943. Most of what we know today has been assembled from raw material.

The global organization of the U.S. Army Air Forces produced no single method of handling victory claims. By far the most thorough was the 8th Air Force and the Tactical Air Force in Northwest Europe. Both had victory credit boards that evaluated combat reports and viewed gun-camera footage. In contrast, the less well equipped units in North Africa, China and the Pacific were forced to rely upon unit-level assessment without much review.

Navy and Marine Corps units usually operated away from higher echelons. Aircraft carrier squadrons lived in physical isolation from any headquarters, and relied on each unit's intelligence officers to assess claims. A similar situation existed in many island campaigns, sometimes with a shortage of paper. Absent a higher review board, unit reporting was subject to peer pressure or rivalry, and sometimes command influence. When a squadron CO wearing wings leaned over a 90-day wonder and vocally insisted "I got two today," the "paddlefoot" might not object. To career-minded officers, carving another notch could have professional benefits whereas the intelligence guy often wanted one thing: out.

Thus is history sometimes written.



America's first seven-kill one-day ace was Lt. "Swede" Vejtasa of USS *Enterprise* in October 1942. (Photo courtesy of Barrett Tillman)



Above: America's champion ace-maker, the F6F Hellcat, also produced the most aces in a day. (Photo by Heath Moffatt)

on the second. Four months later, he set the all-time American record by splashing nine enemy fighters plus two probables in a blazing 90 minutes over Leyte Gulf. He remains the only American two-time ace in a day, a record now impossible to match, let alone exceed.

Another carrier aviator had set the bar extremely high two years before. During the Battle of Santa Cruz off Guadalcanal on October 26, 1942, Lieutenant Stanley "Swede" Vejtasa intercepted an attack against USS *Enterprise* (CV-6). Though he first switched off two guns, he still ran out of ammunition in claiming two Vals and five Kates.

Major William Leverette was another *rara avis*, scoring big his first time. Over the Mediterranean on October 9, 1943, he led his P-38s into a formation of Ju 87s and, in RAF parlance, staged a Stuka party. Leverette gunned nine crank-winged Junkers, credited with seven destroyed. Second

Lt. Harry Hanna added five while three other pilots splashed five more.

A tactical reconnaissance pilot made headlines when Capt. William A. Shomo and his wingman encountered a formation of Kawasaki Tonys trailing a bomber over Luzon on January 11, 1945. Flying F-6D Mustangs, the pair claimed ten kills with seven credited to Shomo, who received the Medal of Honor.

Another formidable duo was Lt. Philip Kirkwood and Ens. Alfred Lerch, VF-10 pilots off USS *Intrepid* (CV-11). Intercepting kamikazes off Okinawa on April 16, 1945, the Corsairs executed 13 suicides between them, seven credited to Lerch.



Below: North America's hard-charging Mustang was the mount of 19 one-day aces including Maj. George Preddy who flew *Cripes A Mighty*. (Photo by Budd Davisson)

Inset: Capt. William Shomo, a Mustang recon pilot, was credited with seven Japanese planes in one January 1945 mission. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)





The only U.S. pilot to approach Davis' single-sortie record was a naval aviator. On November 18, 1952, Lt. Royce Williams off USS *Oriskany* (CV-34) tangled with seven Soviet MiGs and downed at

Above: The McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom was flown by ace crews with multiple one-day kills over Vietnam and the Middle East in the 1970s. (Photo by Tyson Rininger)

Inset: Perhaps the deadliest F-86 pilot was Maj. George Davis who twice claimed four kills in one day during Korean missions. (Photo courtesy of Barrett Tillman)

Japanese aces

The Japanese produced world-class airmen who consistently overclaimed. On May 7, 1942, second day of the Coral Sea battle, Petty Officer Kenji Okabe of the Shokaku Fighter Unit received credit for three Grummans and three dive-bombers plus two probables. Between them, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* Zeros claimed 39 U.S. carrier planes but actually downed three F4Fs and two SBDs. As Pacific War historian John Lundstrom summarized, "The Japanese certainly were enthusiastic claimants."

At Midway a month later, during the attack on the American-held island, Zero pilots claimed 40 confirmed kills against 25 Marine fighters, of which 10 survived.

Aces in a Day: The Fighters

During WW II, 101 U.S. fighter pilots were credited with five or more aerial victories in one day. This listing shows the aircraft flown by those aces.

Grumman F6F Hellcat	47 *
North American P-51 Mustang	19
Vought F4U Corsair	9 (7 USMC)
Republic P-47 Thunderbolt	9
Lockheed P-38 Lightning	6
Grumman F4F/FM Wildcat	6 (3 USMC)
Curtiss P-40 Tomahawk/Warhawk	5
Total	101

* Cdr. David McCampbell is counted once.

Top scores in the Jet Age

With higher speeds and fewer aircraft, opportunities for one-day scores were reduced in the jet age. However, during the Korean War (1950-1953) some standout pilots

emerged.

On November 30, 1951, Major George A. Davis, a WW II ace, claimed three jet Tu 2 bombers and a MiG-15. Then on December 12 he flew twice and scored doubles each time. He was killed on February 10, 1952, after his 14th victory.

least three, likely four. Due to intelligence concerns, his record went unreported for three decades.

Among the Russian "honchos" in Korea was Capt. Mikail S. Ponomarev, a WW II veteran. On September 12, 1951, he was credited with three F-80s and an F-84, though U.S. records cite only the Thunderjet.

A rare event occurred during the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. An accomplished "Paki" F-86 pilot, Sqn. Ldr. Muhammad Alam, engaged several Hawker Hunters on September 7. He hit five with .50 caliber fire and was credited with each of them. Two returned to base heavily damaged, but still, three kills in one sortie was a rare feat.

In Mideast clashes the Israel Air Force produced multiple one-day scores. During the 1973 war the F-4E crew of Major Shlomo Egozi and Capt. Roy Manof downed five Egyptian Mi-8 helicopters on October 6. Lt. Col. Amir Nachumi twice scored four kills in one mission: flying a Phantom in 1973 and again in an F-16 in 1982.

During NATO operations in February 1994, four USAF F-16s engaged Serbian Galebs, armed trainers attacking a factory in Bosnia. The "Vipers" attacked and downed four. Three were credited to Capt. Robert "Wilbur" Wright who used Sidewinder and AMRAAM missiles.

Today, when air combat no longer exists, fighter pilots can only marvel that within living memory, airmen often engaged in combat to emerge as an ace in a day. ✈

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