

DON'T EVER LET ANYONE TELL YOU THAT SIZE MATTERS, BECAUSE ONCE I STRAPPED ON MY P-47, THERE WAS NOTHING THAT STOOD IN MY WAY.

I was only 5 feet 4 inches tall when I graduated from flight training in 1943, but my instructors saw something gigantic inside of me. I was one of 60 Second Lieutenants selected out of 400 to go into fighters—P-47 Thunderbolts to be exact. When I first saw the airplane I would fly in combat, my only thought was, “Why in the heck did I ever ask for this behemoth!” But after I flew the Jug for awhile, I really liked it and thought it was a piece of cake to fly—easy to handle, reliable and stable. There was nothing out there

that could beat the Jug in a dive; not even a rock! What I admired most about it though were those eight .50-caliber machine guns that stuck out of the wings like great big broom handles.

By the time I had arrived in England in 1943, I had 130 hours of P-47 time under my belt, just barley enough to keep me out of trouble. I had great confidence in the airplane and in my abilities as a fighter pilot—you had to have these traits because anything less and you were dead! I also had 20/10 vision, so I could usually spot the Luftwaffe before they spotted me.

BY COL. ROBERT “SHORTY” RANKIN USAF (RET.), AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

Runt OF THE LITTER

Size doesn't matter to a fighter pilot

The third-ranking ace of the 56th Fighter Group, Col. David Schilling was credited with 22.5 air victories, most of them flying his P-47D *Hairless Joe*, named after a “Dogpatch” cartoon character. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



Joining the Wolfpack

I was posted with the 61st Fighter Squadron of the 56th Fighter Group—the premier P-47 unit of the entire war. I flew with all of the great leaders including Col. Hub Zemke, Gabby Gabreski, David Schilling and the rest. But the person I was most

impressed with was Bob Johnson, the first pilot of the European war to break WW I ace Eddie Rickenbacker's record. In my mind, Bob was the best of the whole outfit. He was gutsy, aggressive and he would mix it up with the Germans as if he didn't have a care in the world.

I flew my first combat mission on his wing, and when he spotted the enemy, he turned into me so hard as he went after a Bf 109. I lost track of him for a few minutes as I was pushed into a cloud, but I was thrilled to death when I found him again. He increased his score and in turn, decreased the Luftwaffe's numbers as they were minus one 109. I learned a lot from these guys and eventually, I too became a flight leader.

I was what you call "conservative-aggressive"—I didn't stick my neck out when I thought it would endanger my wingman. The thing I learned very quickly in combat was regardless of how many airplanes you attack, the leader can usually get through, get a kill or two, and be out of harm's way in a flash. It was the guys following behind who would get shot down. I flew 75 missions as flight leader and I am proud to say that everybody in my flight came home. But it was on a mission on May 12, 1944, that my streak almost came to a crashing halt.

Zemke Fan

We knew through our intelligence people that the Luftwaffe was using very prominent landmarks inside of Germany as rendezvous points for their scrambled fighters sent up to attack inbound Allied bombers. The Germans also used an airborne commander in either a Bf 109 or Fw 190 to direct the various assembled fighters on what group of bombers to hit. Col. Hub Zemke, knowing the German tactic, decided that we would do something to outfox the Germans. He called it the "Zemke Fan."

Col. Zemke arranged for our group to fly in three very tight formations on a specific tract—the same one to be used by the inbound bombers that

day—and to fly 45 minutes ahead of the actual bomber stream. The plan was for our group to get there just as the Germans were arriving at their rendezvous point, ready to hit the bombers, which in reality, was us. The plan worked so well that day that the Germans were completely fooled, thinking we were easy prey.

I was leading "Whipper White Flight" in my olive drab P-47 I had named *Wicked Wacker Weegie* after my wife. I was leading the western most flight of P-47s as we fanned out near Frankfurt when all of a sudden, the RT went crazy with people calling out bogies all over the sky. We were at 25,000 feet when I looked out in front of me and saw a great big gaggle of 25-30 Bf 109s in tight formation, all of them with drop tanks still attached. I ordered my flight to make a bee line for the 109s and press on the attack. They must have seen us coming because all of a sudden there were drop tanks fluttering and tumbling downward as the 109s split-Sd into every direction imaginable. I was kind of mesmerized by the floating drop tanks and the 109s scattering about like chickens; that was until a little voice in my head woke me up.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" I thought. "Wake up, stupid, let's get on up there and press on the attack!" I quickly latched on to two of the 109s that were heading down hill fast. As I chased after them, the one on my left scooted away from my line of sight so I concentrated on the right one as our speed increased. I had been told long ago that if a 109 pushed over and went straight down, it would not be able to pull out of its dive when it got below 5,000 feet; knowing that saved my life. I pulled the nose of the Jug through the 109 and gave it a quick squirt. With my attitude I couldn't tell if I hit him or not, but I knew we were building up speed as his wings began to vibrate violently and flutter.

Flying brick

I glanced at my airspeed indicator and saw the needle passing through 575mph; just on the verge of compressibility. I knew it was time to pull out of my dive, but when I pulled back on the stick with both hands, it felt like it was buried in concrete. The 109 went straight in and disintegrated before burying its remains deep under ground. I looked at my altimeter and saw that it had hung up at 1,500 feet as I pulled out of my dive, just barely brushing the treetops. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that my wingman, Lt. Cleon Thomson who happened to be on his first mission, was still with me.

Cleon and I started climbing for altitude and

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as we got to 2,000 feet, there was a 109 all by itself flying straight and level, like it was out for a Sunday drive. I pulled right behind him and gave him a hard burst as my rounds tore into his cockpit and engine. The 109 did two violent snap rolls and went straight in. I turned to climb once again and as I reached 5,000 feet I heard a call from Col. Zemke. "Fairbanks leader, I'm 10 miles north of Koblenz and I'm over the whole Luftwaffe! There's enough here for everybody!" I was 15 miles away as I raced to help out Col Zemke.

Controlled chaos

By the time I got to 10,000 feet, I could see the biggest mass of airplanes I had ever laid eyes on, up ahead. There were German fighters with big black crosses on their wings going around in a circle like flies over a piece of meat. I looked up above and saw a lone P-47 being flown by Col. Zemke, hovering over the cloud of German airplanes. Zemke, for what ever reason, was all alone. I knew earlier in



Above: Lt. Col. Francis "Gabby" Gabreski CO of the 61st FS is shown with his ground crew. From left to right, SSgt. Stafford (crew chief), Cpl. Schackl (assistant crew chief) and Sgt. DiFranza (armorer) in front of their P-47D s/n 42-26418 HV+A on July 5, 1944 at Boxted, England. Gabreski has just returned from a mission near Evreux, France and downed a Me 109 for his 28th and final WW II kill. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook) Left: Col. "Hub" Zemke CO of the 56th FG poses by the M2 .50 cal MGs in the left wing of his P-47C Thunderbolt at Halesworth, England in October 1943. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook) Below: Queuing up for takeoff is a mix of P-47s from the 63 FS at Boxted in September 1944. *Anamosa III*, in the foreground, was piloted by Capt. Russell Westfall. UN-B would later be transferred to the 48th FG of the 9th AF, being written off in Belgium in March 1945. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)





The Planes of Fame Air Museum's Curtiss-built P-47G Thunderbolt (license-built P-47D-10), which is finished and coded UN-M to represent the P-47D flown by 56th Fighter Group ace Walker "Bud" Mahurin. (Photo courtesy of Frank Mormillo)

the flight that one of his wingman aborted, so his flight became a flight of three, but where were the other two? It was not until a long time after the war had ended when I found out the answer.

I received this information directly from my friend Gunther Rall, the high-scoring German ace, who was also on that mission that day and had his left thumb shot off, before he too was shot down by P-47s of the 56th Fighter Group. Gunther told me that there were almost 90 German fighters orbiting the rendezvous point when the German airborne commander lost his radio. Gunther, who was up on top in his 109 was providing cover for

I MANEUVERED IN BEHIND THE 109 ... AND I WENT TO SQUEEZE THE TRIGGER AGAIN; NOTHING, JUST SOME CLICKING NOISE, I WAS OUT OF AMMO!

the Fw 190s that were going to hit the bombers. Gunther was ordered to go down and take control and command of the assembled fighters. On his way down, Gunther encountered a flight of three P-47s—Zemke's flight—and shot down both wingmen. Zemke pushed his Jug over and dove for the deck. Gunther thought he got Zemke too that day, but he didn't. In fact, after the war, Zemke was able to confirm the two P-47 kills for Gunther, increasing his incredible score to 275 victories.

Evening the odds

Col. Zemke was able to get away from that mess and snuck back up above the swirling German

fighters. When I arrived on Zemke's wing he said to me, "Ok, you cover me when I go down through them. I'll climb back up and then you can have a go at them." As Zemke dove down, he immediately found a 109 that was climbing towards my altitude and tore the 109 apart. That was the first time in combat that I had actually seen a German aircraft engulfed in flame, and I mean, just a huge ball of fire. I had seen plenty of black and white combat film, but this time it was in living color.

Now it was my turn to go down, so with Cleon still on my wing, we pushed our Jugs over and went looking for something to latch onto without being seen. I made a great big wide orbit that was measured in miles as I descended looking for my next prey. It didn't take long and I spotted two 109s flying line abreast, 50 feet apart. I looked around, and saw that Cleon was still with me, and I felt as though I could now get behind these two without getting my own tail shot off. I slithered in behind the one on the left and gave him a quick burst. The 109 began to smoke right away as his right landing gear flopped down and he rolled over into a slow spiral. I eased over behind the other 109 by using some right rudder and the guy didn't move!

There was no evasive action whatsoever from this guy. Maybe he was in shock seeing his leader shot down or maybe he never saw me. Whatever the case, I gave him a short burst and the same thing happened. His right gear flopped down, his engine was pouring out smoke and he too went over into a spiral. Both 109s stayed together, not

too far apart, as they headed down in their death spiral. That was number 3 and 4 for the day, but I was far from over. I was turning and climbing and at the same time, getting myself cleared again, when I saw a 109 climbing right underneath Col. Zemke's tail.

Ace in a day

I called to Zemke, "Fairbanks, break hard left!" Zemke called back and asked, "Where is it?" I replied, "He's climbing right up under your ass!" "Oh boy," I thought, "He's going to get me for poor RT procedure when I get back from this one!" At the same time I maneuvered in behind the 109 and gave him a quick squirt from my guns. I saw some hits in the wing root and canopy area and I went to squeeze the trigger again; nothing, just some clicking noise, I was out of ammo! I didn't think I hit him enough to do any damage, but I was tickled to death when the guy eased off to the right, popped his canopy and bailed out.

Although I had shot down five aircraft, I was not about to start celebrating. I was a long way from home, out of ammo and without any of my buddies to speak of flying nearby. Cleon

thankfully was still there with me as we turned for England. Trouble was, two 109s blocked our way as they came in for an attack. All four of us went into a Lufbery Circle as we went round and round. One of the 109s was gaining on Cleon, so I told him to break down and out of the circle, climb back up and get behind them. Well, with Cleon's lack of experience, he didn't quite follow directions. He came back down all right, problem was, he right in front of a 109.

He got out of there by the skin of his teeth and tried it again; same thing! On his third attempt, he broke down and when he came back up, one of the 109s went head to head with him. Cleon let him have it as they went nose to nose. Shooting down an airplane is hard enough, but shooting one down head-on is one tough shot, even for an experienced pilot. Cleon sure experienced a lot



Cpl. Koval and Cpl. DiFranza load the left wing gun bays with .50 cal ammunition on P-47D s/n 42-26418 HV-A flown by ace and 61st FS CO Lt. Col. "Gabby" Gabreski in July 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

"JUG" SPOKEN HERE

More than 15,600 P-47 Thunderbolts were produced from 1941-1945 in a wide variety of models, so we'll try to sort them out.

The XP-47A was an Allison-powered experiment that led to the initial production P-47B, first flown in May 1941.

Wartime required mass production, initially with P-47C variants featuring a strengthened airframe and some engine changes. However, the Farmingdale, New York, factory could not meet demands so Republic opened the Evansville, Indiana, plant producing nearly identical D models. The factory-specific designation mirrored the P-51B/C at two North American factories. However, for reasons equally obscure, the Army dubbed the Curtiss-built Jugs the P-47G.

Meanwhile, tests were conducted on the P-47E with a pressurized cockpit and the F with a laminar-flow wing.

Fighters needed greater range for bomber escort, so a succession of D models accepted external fuel tanks, and late-block razorbacks (D-22 onward) received broader propellers.

The classic Jug of course was the bubble canopy D, determined after experimental K and L models. The P-47D-25 appeared in early 1944, the blown canopy being selected by Republic test pilot Ken Jernstedt. The D-30 added a ventral fin for enhanced stability.

Other experiments were the liquid-cooled XP-47H followed by the lighter J model with a more powerful R2800.

Additional bubble D models were produced through the war, but two additional versions saw combat. The M was built for additional speed, delivered to the 56th Fighter Group in England.

The last Thunderbolt was the long-range N sent to the Pacific in 1945. —Barrett Tillman



The cockpit of the initial test YP-47M, serial 42-27385 clearly showing the K-14-style computing gunsight. (Photo by Brian Silcox)



P-47D 42-75121 flown by Group Commander Col. Hub Zemke 61st FS, 56th FG, April-May, 1944



Lt. Col. Francis Gabreski, 61st Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group >Boxted, England, July 1944. (Illustrations by Tom Tullis)

on that mission and got his first victory—head-on! In the meantime, I was stuck in the circle with the other 109, who I am sure, had plenty of ammo. I even got right behind him, dead astern, only 40 feet away from chewing his tail off. It was probably a smart move on my part when I told Cleon to break hard, and head west as the 109 was still heading east in his turn.

I SAW A HUGE GAGGLE OF AIRPLANES ON A CONVERSION INTERCEPT, RIGHT ON THE SAME COURSE I WAS ON. ALL I COULD THINK OF WAS, "OH, GOD, AFTER ALL WE HAD BEEN THROUGH, WHAT IN BLAZES IS GOING TO HAPPEN NOW?"

Making a break for it

As we increased our speed and distance from the 109, I pulled my chart out and spread it across my lap looking for the best place to cross the channel. I was sweating it because I knew that the wingman were always shorter on fuel than the leader, because of all the throttle adjustments they had to make trying to stay with me. I had my head down

inside the cockpit and froze for a second when Cleon called and said, "Break!" I quickly answered him and asked, "Fighters or flak?" Luckily, it was only flak, but the problem was we were only at 10,000 feet, prime territory for flak guns. I couldn't afford to waste precious fuel by climbing so we just made some heading changes. I looked back and saw the puffs of flak burst were I would have been had I kept it straight. The anti-aircraft gunners couldn't keep up with us as we zigzagged home.

I looked up ahead and saw the North Sea, and I knew we were almost home. At the same time, I saw a huge gaggle

of airplanes on a conversion intercept, right on the same course I was on. All I could think of was, "Oh, God, after all we had been through, what in blazes is going to happen now?" I relaxed when I saw it was a flight of P-47s in close formation; why they flew like that over enemy territory, I will never know, and didn't care at the time!

As we crossed the Channel, we pointed our noses for the long, wide runway at RAF Manston and touched down on British soil. On the roll-out I taxied off the runway, but Cleon was nowhere to be found. He had run out of fuel when he touched down and was stuck on the runway.

I ran into the British Operations building while they towed Cleon back in and called back to the 56th FG headquarters. Zemke was laughing and beside himself when he got on the phone and told me what he had informed the rest of the pilots. "We won't be seeing Rankin and Thomson again. They got themselves bottled up and there were just too many German airplanes around. There was no way they were going to get out of that big mess! He had written us off! He told me to get back to base and he would hold the rest of the pilots so I could give the debrief.

When Cleon and I arrived back at our base base, there was a lot of handshaking and applauding as we critiqued the mission. The 56th got 19 enemy airplanes that day, and I received a "big reward" from Col. Zemke for shooting down five 109s. Col Zemke announced to all my fellow squadronmates, "Make sure Rankin gets a whole chicken at the officer's mess tonight!" I was happy I got five that day, but I was even more delighted to be sharing my chicken with my wingman that night!

Bob Rankin ended the war with 10 victories, all of them Bf 109s, and all of them in P-47 Thunderbolts. His last victory was one day after D-Day, June 7, 1944. Look for Robert Rankin's book he is writing about his life and times inside the 56th FG "Wolfpack." †

Capt. Robert "Shorty" Rankin climbs from the cockpit of P-47D s/n 42-26044 HV+Z Silver Lady on May 12, 1944 after downing five Me 109s near Coblenz, Germany. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

