

P-47N IN THE PACIFIC

The final battle of air ace Ben Drew BY ROBERT F. DORR

Urban L. "Ben" Drew (left, with William Kemp and Leonard Wood) was enthusiastic about flying the P-47N Thunderbolt in the Pacific, while better known for his achievements in the P-51 Mustang (shown) in Europe. Drew holds the Air Force Cross, the second highest U.S. award for valor. (Photo courtesy of the Robert F. Dorr collection)



He piloted the P-47N Thunderbolt in the Pacific. He loved the N model. He used all of his talent at its controls to take the war to Japan, to the place U. S. airmen called "the Empire."

Still, Urban L. "Ben" Drew is remembered mostly today for what he achieved in a different aircraft in a different part of the world. Ben Drew was in Europe in the P-51 Mustang when he became an air ace, the first Allied pilot credited with shooting down two Messerschmitt Me 262 Schwalbe (Swallow) jet fighters and a recipient of the second highest U.S. award for valor. Drew achieved every goal attainable by a fighter pilot while in Europe yet he insisted later that no experience was more satisfying than his with the P-47N after Germany was defeated but before his own war had ended.

Youth and eagerness shine forth in wartime photos of Ben Drew. But he was also "gruff," "pigheaded" and "hardnosed" he said of himself in 2009. "When I arrived on Iwo Jima in mid-1945 to fly the P-47N in combat, I was the only ace on the island but I was also just a first lieutenant, even though I had more experience than higher-ranking guys around me." Being only 21 years old probably didn't make things easier. The situation involved some personal stresses, Drew said, but one positive factor compensated for all other issues. Drew "absolutely loved" the P-47N, which entered combat on July 1, 1945, and was "vastly superior," he said, to previous versions of Republic's famous fighter.

The roominess of the cockpit, the long legs afforded by extra fuel tanks in the N models clipped "wet wing" and the smooth handling capabilities all did their part, Drew said, to transform a Mustang pilot into an advocate for the Thunderbolt.

The N model was "a beautiful specimen ... almost factory-fresh in the Pacific sunshine, resplendent

with an all-yellow tail assembly including fin and elevators, and a yellow ring around its engine cowlings."

Iwo Jima airman

Drew, just 17 years old, was at the movies with his brother Earl and his mother Olive at a Sunday matinee in Detroit on December 7, 1941, and learned afterward of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He'd already wanted to fly. Now, he wanted to fight. Years later, Drew was unable to remember which motion picture they saw that day. *I Wanted Wings* was showing at the time and he remembers liking films with a lot of airplanes and flying. At the time, he could not have known that he would be flying combat missions to pave the way for the amphibious invasion of the Empire.

After training, after finishing an unwanted tour as an instructor, after fighting in Europe, Drew arrived on the rock-solid, ash-strewn island of Iwo Jima and began flying from a short, crowded strip called Field No. 2. Drew was respected by most but some "saw me as just another new guy."

"I was new to the P-47N, new to prolonged over-water flying, new to the idea that my wingmen and I might soon be flying cover for an invasion of the Japanese home islands. Before arriving on Iwo, I'd been told that when the amphibious landings in Japan began, my squadron's Thunderbolts would go ashore to the first Japanese airfield liberated by Allied troops and fly close air support missions within a few miles of the enemy."

Drew joined the 413th Fighter Squadron, 414th Fighter Group,

P-47N IN THE PACIFIC



First Lt. Urban "Ben" Drew of the 375th FS leans against the prop blade of a P-51 Mustang in England during 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

commanded by Col. Henry G. Thorne, Jr., with whom "I had a pretty good relationship." Drew was "ready to kill Japs," he said, and "eager to fly into combat in a new, long-range fighter with that 'new car smell.'" His aircraft was a P-47N Thunderbolt (44-88492), coded 892, named *DETROIT MISS II*

"This was a beefed-up fighter built explicitly for the Pacific and I took to it immediately. The P-47N was a heavyweight at 19,880 pounds on takeoff. Even though I was accustomed to a tailwheel, I decided that the P-47N was more demanding, and with less favorable visibility, when taxiing or working in the airfield pattern. The P-47N had 93 U.S. gallons of fuel in each 'wet' wing with a slightly greater span than earlier models; it was the first time a Thunderbolt carried gas in the

wing. The new, square-tipped wing introduced larger ailerons for better control in a turn. When maximum external tankage was carried [four drop tanks], the total fuel load ran up to a remarkable 1,266 gallons, which gave the aircraft a range of 2,350 miles. The P-47N was really a 'long ranger.'"

P-47Ns in the Pacific used a late model of one of the most reliable engines of the war, the 18-cylinder radial Pratt & Whitney R2800-77 Double Wasp engine driving a larger CH-5 turbo supercharger and 13-foot-diameter Curtiss Electric propeller with narrow style paddle blades. It delivered 2,800-horsepower,

Ben Drew did not go to school to learn the P-47N. "I learned the P-47N by sitting in the cockpit with the manual and studying. I decided when to make my first flight. After a few hours in the cockpit, I fired it up. The crew chief told me not to use water ejection on the first flight. Having forgotten the lag in the turbo charger, I shoved the throttle up to 45 inches manifold pressure and started down the runway. Then the turbo caught up and I had 55 inches and the water cut

in. Scared the hell out of me, but off I went. When I got back I got my butt chewed out by the crew chief."

It appeared on the morning of August 14, 1945, that a long slog lay ahead. Boeing B-29 Superfortresses had dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but no one knew how that would affect the war. By now, battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa were behind and the invasion of Japan was scheduled to begin with landings in the southernmost island of Kyushu in November 1945, to be followed with an amphibious invasion at Tokyo Bay in spring 1946. It was unclear to Americans how much the B-29 campaign had eroded the ability of the Japanese war machine to resist. Drew did not expect to be going home soon. "We figured we'd be going over the Empire almost every day."

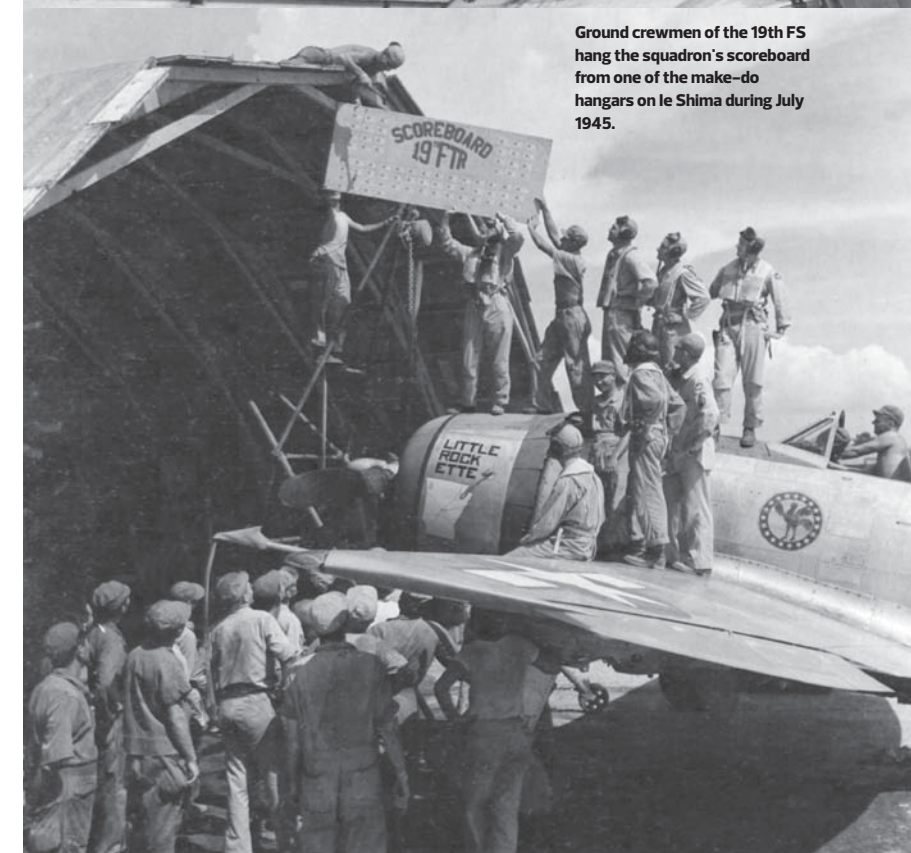
On that date, completely unaware that it would become one of the last missions of the war, Drew launched on a marathon mission to the industrial city of Nagoya. First Lieutenant Harold E. Regan flew his wing in another yellow-trimmed P-47N.

P-47NS IN THE PACIFIC USED A LATE MODEL OF ONE OF THE MOST RELIABLE ENGINES OF THE WAR ... IT DELIVERED 2,800-HORSEPOWER

Carrying two 500-pound bombs and 10 50-inch high-velocity aircraft rockets, a P-47N Thunderbolt (44-88335) taxis for the press at the Republic plant at Farmingdale, Long Island, New York in 1945. (Photo courtesy of USAF)



318th FG armorers load the M2 Brownings of a P-47N on Ie Shima during July 1945.



Ground crewmen of the 19th FS hang the squadron's scoreboard from one of the make-do hangars on Ie Shima during July 1945.



P-47Ns from the 318th FG are serviced on Ie Shima prior to a mission during July 1945. (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)

"I told him, 'When we do strafing, spread out. Don't tuck in behind your flight leader. We want our two P-47Ns to be two targets, not one big one.'

Trouble in a Thunderbolt

"For what happened that day, remember two things about the P-47N: it had the glide characteristics of an anvil and it was hard to escape from, unless you were in complete control.

"I ALWAYS BELIEVED IF YOU'RE GOING TO FIGHT THE WAR, FIGHT THE GODDAMNED WAR."

The fighters cruised toward Japan at 21,000 feet and at about 350 miles per hour, carrying no bombs or rockets but loaded with 3,000 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition, consisting of 350 rounds each in the six outboard Browning M2 machine guns and 450 rounds in the two inboard guns.

Nagoya was an industrial center — home, among other things, to Mitsubishi. Over Nagoya's Akenagohara airfield, with fuel for 25 minutes over the target, Drew peeled off to strafe Mitsubishi G4M1 "Betty" bombers. His two-plane element was the only one to depart formation. "I always believed if you're going to fight the war, fight the goddamned war." It was a favorite expression of his.

Drew never agreed with others who said the Japanese bombers were already abandoned and derelict. With time-over-target severely constricted and fuel supply a constant concern; it is unclear whether Drew talked to his flight leader before leading Regan down on a two-plane attack.

Drew saw tracer fire. Contrary to the advice, Regan stayed close to his element leader. The Japanese gunfire missed Drew but slammed into Regan's P-47N. "The 'Jug' could handle a lot of damage, but this was too much."

Regan: "I'm hit, I'm hit!"

Drew: "Can you climb, Two?"

Regan: "Yeah, doing okay. Shaking pretty bad, though."

Drew: "C'mon, buddy, let's nurse that airplane to the beach. Get off shore."

With Drew eyeballing him, Regan climbed to 11,000 feet before his R-2800 coughed, sputtered, and began to lose power. Barely across the shoreline, Regan fought to trade altitude. Another 414th group pilot, Capt. Frank Johnson, remembered: "Regan was scared. He was in serious trouble. He was flying a ten-ton airplane that suddenly possessed the flying qualities of a rock. He continued talking to Drew on the radio and seemed businesslike, but he was in a very bad

Republic P-47N-1-RE Thunderbolt (44-88104), **SHERMAN WAS RIGHT**, of the 33rd Fighter Squadron, 318th Fighter Group, in 1945, apparently on the island of Ie Shima. (Photo courtesy of the Robert F. Dorr collection)





First Lt. Barnhill of the 73rd FS launches in his P-47D s/n 42-23038 #28 *Sonny Boy* off the USS *Manila Bay* CVE-61 during the invasion of Saipan on June 24, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



Capt. O'Hare of the 73rd FS ready to launch from the USS *Manila Bay* CVE-61 in his P-47D #29 *Dee-Icer* during the invasion of Saipan. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



The latest and greatest Jug, the P-47N, had everything needed to take the fight to the enemy over the long distances of the Pacific Theater. (Photo courtesy of USAF)



Where the P-47's limited internal fuel capacity and its limited range was a serious disadvantage in the ETO, the P-47N was specifically designed for increased range with a larger wing that held fuel, the first in a Jug. When equipped with drop tanks, the airplane had so much range the pilot became the weak point. (Photo courtesy of Jeff Ethell Archives)



situation and he knew it."

Drew was thinking that Regan might make it to one of the radar picket ships that formed a ring around Okinawa. There were also friendly submarines offshore and a possibility of help from modified B-17G Flying Fortress bombers that carried life rafts they could drop to a survivor in the water. All of this required getting away from land and at least 150 miles offshore.

The two Thunderbolts left the Japanese coastline and flew toward a U. S. submarine, guided by a B-29 with a radio bearing on the fighters. Regan said over the radio, "I can't hold her any longer. I've got to get out."

"Regan waited too long," said Drew. "He held the Thunderbolt's nose up too long," said Drew. When Regan went out of the aircraft, the left elevator of his P-47N slammed into him. He appeared to bounce before he fell free and his parachute opened."

Drew felt blessed by the P-47N's generous fuel load but was running low on gas. Nonetheless,

Regan splashed, wriggled out of his chute, and struggled to climb into a dingy. His movements were sluggish, suggesting to Drew that his injuries were serious. Drew remained overhead as long as he felt able.

Heading home

Alone, far from home, obliged to navigate toward a tiny island he could easily miss, Drew spent hours straggling back to Iwo, initially missing the island, and finally landing on Field No. 2 with so little fuel he could not taxi in to park. The next day, 413th squadron commander Major Paul R. Wignall, a well-liked Texas Aggie who'd survived a similar shootdown and bailout, told Drew that a submarine had brought Regan to Iwo and that Regan was "sitting up in bed and talking" in the hospital. Other sources say a destroyer rescued Regan. Either way, the news seemed good.

The Japanese surrender was announced the next day. There would be no invasion of the Empire.

Less than 24 hours after the final P-47N Thunderbolt mission of the war, hours after the Japanese surrender, Paul Regan suffered a fatal brain hemorrhage. The doctors who'd fixed his legs had never noticed a head injury caused by his collision with the stabilizer.

Said Drew: "I got a lot of flak from Regan's family," who blamed Drew attacking the Japanese airfield. "But I always believed if you're going to fight the war, fight the goddamned war." Drew and others say they had 100 percent confidence in the P-47N, that no other fighter would have been a better performer or more survivable, and that the tragic loss of a fellow flyer was in no way attributable to any design feature of the airplane. ✈

Drew was born in Detroit March 21, 1924. The quotes used here are from interviews with him in 2009. During many of his postwar years, Urban L. "Ben" Drew lived in the Republic of South Africa but he returned eventually to the United States. He died in Vista, California, April 3, 2013.

Very few P-47Ns survived the war to be restored. In fact, the aircraft pictured was damaged after being restored and is reported to be in the restoration stages once again. The most obvious identification characteristics of the "N" model are noticeable here: the squared-off wingtips and high, blunt dorsal fin. (Photo by Bill Crump)