

10 AVIATION MYTHS OF WORLD WAR II

FACTS VERSUS FICTION

BY BARRETT TILLMAN

Seventy years later, the Second World War remains the defining event of the 20th century and for the generations who experienced it. It led to the half-century Cold War and still shapes the geopolitical map today.

Decades of lies and legends still swirl around the crucial events of mankind's greatest conflict, and many of them die hard. Herewith, we select 10 of the most significant aviation myths and briefly examine them, offering readers the opportunity to accept, modify, or reject our findings.

Facts, Fiction, and Myths

Our list focuses on broad topics rather than individuals. For instance, “everybody knows” that Ensign George Gay was the “sole survivor” of Torpedo Squadron Eight at the Battle of Midway. Gay repeated that claim for the rest of his life, yet two members of VT-8’s Midway-based TBF Avenger detachment also survived. Both were present when Gay again made the assertion at the 50th-anniversary event.

Similarly, “everybody knows” that Maj. Gregory Boyington was the leading Marine Corps ace. In fact, he was third behind Capt. Joe Foss (26) and Lt. Robert Hanson (25). Boyington’s self-proclaimed tally of 28 included six with the American Volunteer Group (AVG) in China and Burma, but

AVG records clearly show only two aerial credits. His total, recognized by the American Fighter Aces Association, is 24, including 22 credited in Marine service—the last two being unobserved.

Though it’s prior to WW II, the origin of the four-plane fighter flight composed of two pairs certainly is relevant. Conventional wisdom holds that then-Ltn. Werner Molders conceived the Schwarm while flying Bf 109s in Spain during 1938. But Condor Legion sources show that Molders probably learned of the concept in a document written by future standout Gunther Lutzow, another Legion ace. Molders, however, certainly advocated the “fighting pair” and apparently employed it before most others.



“THE GREATEST GENERATION”

In 1998, reporter Tom Brokaw published his tribute to WW II’s victors as *The Greatest Generation*. That unsupportable claim has seldom if ever been publicly examined, yet it remains a reflexive phrase whenever the war is discussed.

Neither Brokaw nor apparently anyone else has bothered to define the criteria for “the greatest.” The most obvious “qualifications” were growing up in the Depression and winning WW II.

Yet the WW I generation raised the WW II crop and dealt with the Depression as adults. And however grim things seemed in 1941–42, the Axis never had a remote chance of defeating the Allies. The United States, the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and China outnumbered Germany, Japan, Italy, and their few acolytes between five and six to one—and outproduced them by something approaching infinity.

Yet there’s more. Anyone with a modicum

Right: Capt. Joe Foss epitomized the combat fighter pilot during WW II. **Below:** Marine ace Joe Foss, in a state-side FG-1 Corsair, was made commander of VMF-115 and moved to the Pacific in February 1944. Recipient of the Medal of Honor, he would often say that he was only doing his job. (Photos courtesy of Stan Piet)



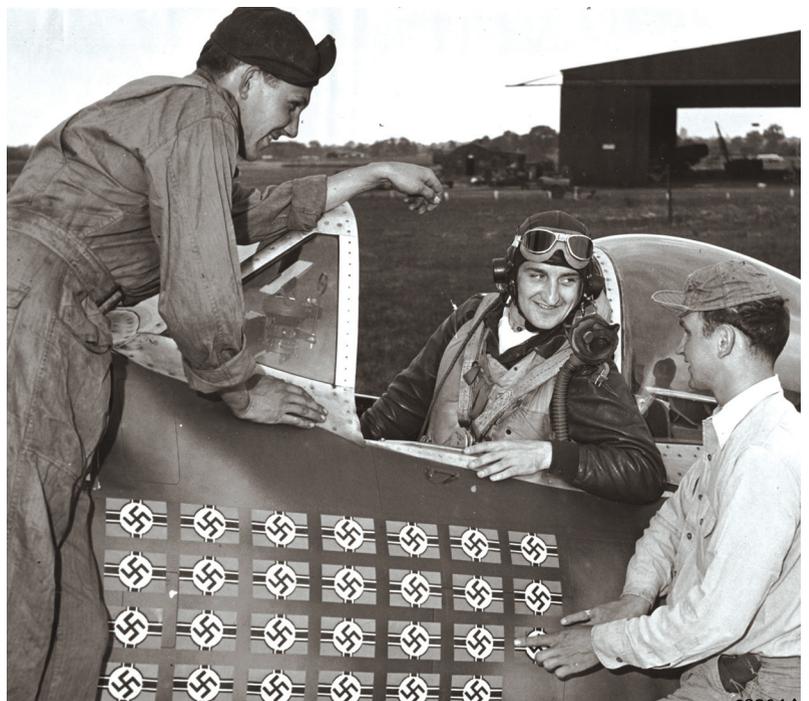
With 300 combat hours and 28 aerial victories, 61st Ftr. Sq. commander Francis Gabreski was scheduled for reassignment when he volunteered for one last mission that landed him in *Stalag Luft I*. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



of historical knowledge and objectivity recognizes that the true “greatest generation” of Americans was represented by the Founders (more like two generations) during the Revolutionary War. They risked all—“Our lives, fortune and sacred honor”—in rebelling against the world’s greatest empire and fighting against enormous odds for eight years before achieving independence.

The next “greatest generation” was that of the pioneers who trekked westward on the Oregon Trail during the 1840s and '50s, walking 2,000 miles alongside their wagons in a five-month life-or-death race against impending winter. As famed scout Kit Carson reputedly said, “The cowards never started, and the weak died on the way.” They made Manifest Destiny an historic reality.

It’s instructive that almost no survivors of WW II refer to themselves as “the greatest.” The knee-jerk response largely comes from those born since the war. Let the ultimate statement come from leading Marine Corps ace Joe Foss, who mentored Brokaw when Foss was governor of South Dakota. Foss repeatedly said, “We weren’t ‘the greatest.’ We just did what we had to do.”



Lt. Col. Francis Gabreski and ground crew displaying 27 victories on July 4, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Myth
no. 2

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN SAVED ENGLAND

Almost 80 years later, the mythic legend persists: In the summer of 1940, the Royal Air Force (RAF) staved off seemingly inevitable defeat by winning the Battle of Britain.

It's simply not true.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill's inspired oratory and literate pen lauded RAF fighter pilots as "the few" to whom so many owed so much. Amid the urgent tension of the period, the claim seemed valid, and it took root in the English-

speaking world.

Yet a reasoned assessment disproves the claim.

Although Fighter Command was outnumbered, it never lost control of the crucial airspace over southeastern England. The *Luftwaffe* air fleets in France and in Norway lacked the range and strategic punch to deal the RAF a crippling blow. And lacking heavy bombers, the Germans were never positioned to destroy British industry.

Apart from defeating the RAF in its home skies, the *Luftwaffe* would have had to deal with the Royal Navy (RN). The *Kriegsmarine* had no hope of defeating the world's mightiest fleet in a surface battle, and most of the main RN bases lay beyond German air range.

Furthermore, the proposed invasion of England—Operation Sea Lion—never got going. Hitler lacked the sealift and especially the amphibious capability to launch "D-Day in reverse."

Hitler's heart was never in Sea Lion. His racial theories saw the British as fellow Anglo-Saxons whom he hoped to bluff into an accommodation, freeing him for his true goal: the destruction of the Soviet Union.

The pilots in Hurricane and Spitfire cockpits, plus the men and women in radar stations and plotting rooms, acquitted themselves gallantly. But Shakespeare's scepter'd isle was never seriously in peril.

Britain developed and maintained an outstanding early-warning and defense system. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

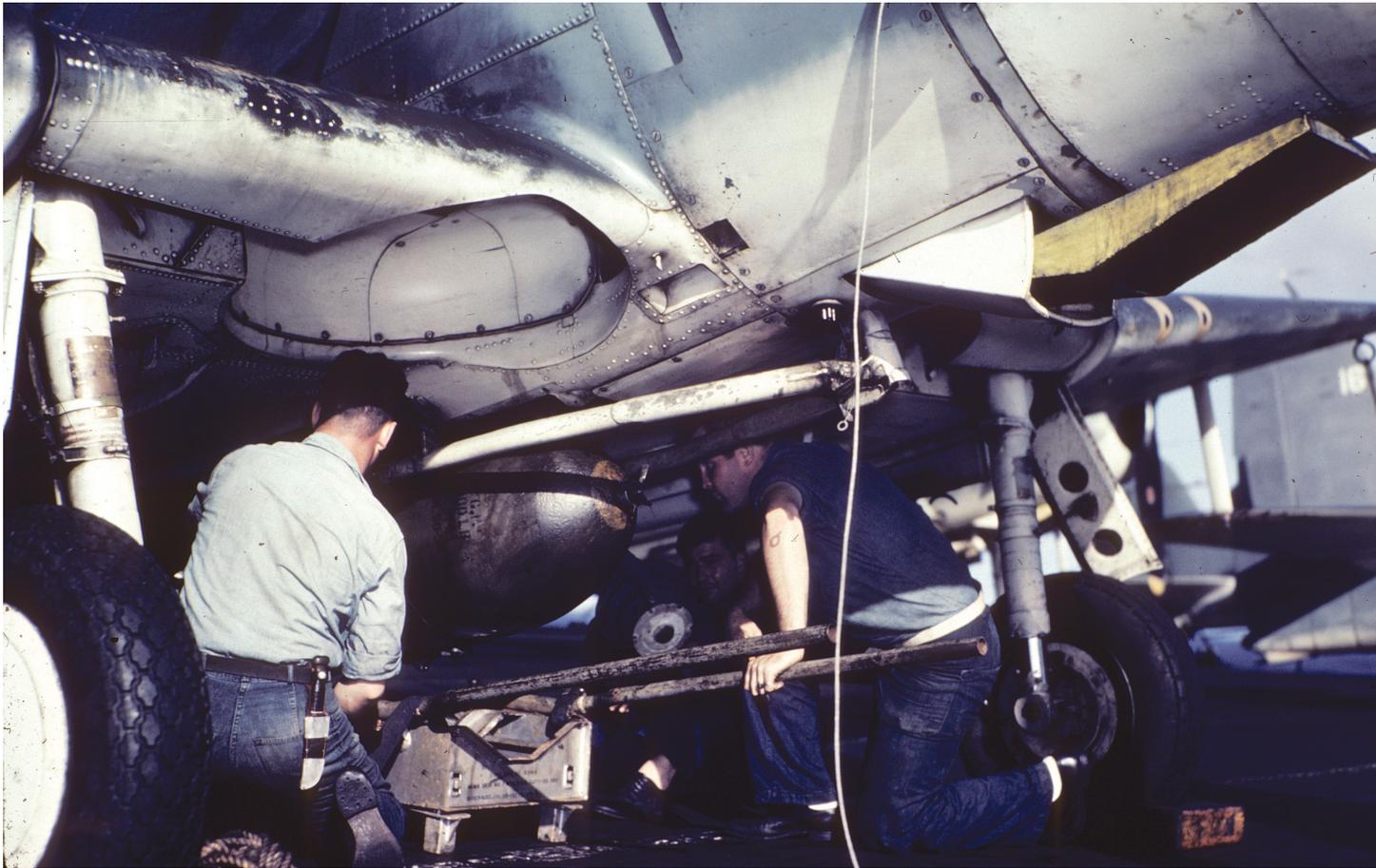


The He 111 was a versatile bomber but had neither the range nor the bomb load to eliminate England's ability to fight. (Photo courtesy of EN-Archive)



Myth
no. 3

THE U.S. MARINES INVENTED DIVE-BOMBING



Above: Ordnance men aboard the USS *Lexington* (CV-16) load a 500-lb. GP bomb under a Douglas SBD Dauntless. Note the Y-shaped “trapeze” against the belly that swung the bomb clear of the propeller. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Sometime during WW II, the notion emerged that the U.S. Marine Corps invented dive-bombing. Although specifics are seldom put forth, the vague notion still is cited that flying leathernecks “invented” the tactic during various Latin American brushfire wars from 1919 on. Presumably the “banana republics,” with outlaw gangs and quasi-armies, spawned the arena in which the Marines effectively became the action arm of U.S. corporations receiving support from Washington.

Part of the problem is semantic. True dive-bombing—typically greater than 60 degrees—was seldom possible in aviation’s early era. WW I and subsequent aircraft lacked the “trapeze” gear to toss a bomb clear of the vulnerable propeller arc. Limited to light bombs carried outboard on the wings, the early version actually was glide-bombing, largely practiced by the British.

Enter the U.S. Navy. High-altitude level-bombing posed no serious threat to ships underway, so a more-precise method was required. With aircraft carriers entering the

fleet in the 1920s, naval aviators sought an effective way of delivering bombs against fast, agile targets at sea. Early trials in the mid-1920s showed the way to the future with increasingly capable tailhook aircraft carrying heavier ordnance.

Both the U.S. and Japanese navies relied heavily upon dive-bombing in the Pacific war, but both developed their techniques and equipment independently. Marine pilots became deadly accurate at dive-bombing, but they did not invent it.

Below: The Ju 87 Stuka’s career as a dive-bomber was short-lived because Allied fighters had them for lunch. (Photo courtesy of EN-Archive)





MIDWAY DETERMINED THE WAR'S OUTCOME

In June 1942, the outnumbered U.S. Navy was committed to the defense of Midway Atoll 1,100 miles northwest of Honolulu. Reinforced by land-based aircraft, the Pacific Fleet's three aircraft carriers faced four Japanese flattops, all veterans of Pearl Harbor.

On June 4, Japan's six-month string of nearly unbroken victories came to an abrupt halt. At day's end, all four Imperial carriers were destroyed in exchange for USS *Yorktown*. The "incredible victory" (the title of Walter Lord's best seller) set the United States on the offensive two months later at Guadalcanal.

Midway, however, was not the all-or-nothing gamble so often depicted. Had America lost—possibly with Midway itself in enemy

hands—the outcome of the war would not have changed. The following summer, the new generation of American ships and aircraft began arriving in Hawaii, with the same goal as before: dropping anchor in Tokyo Bay.

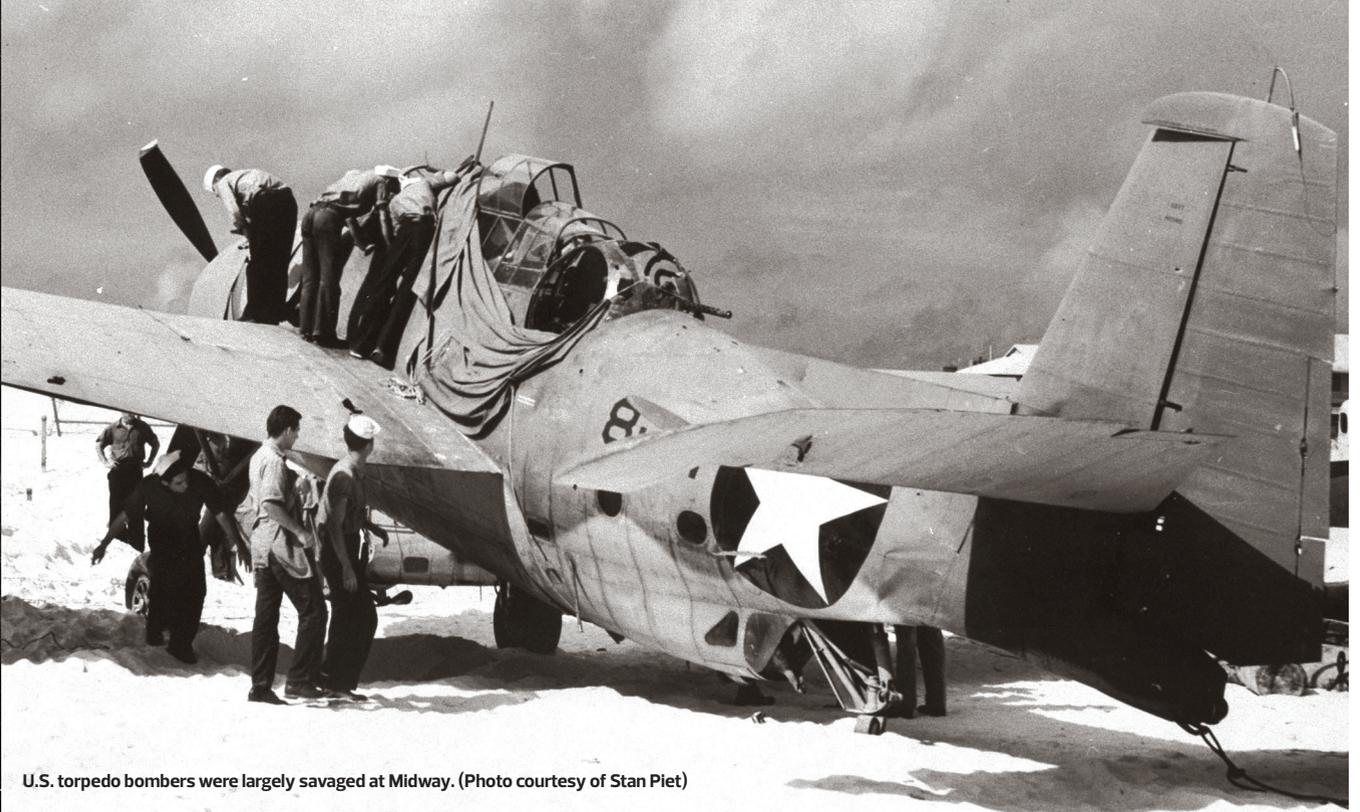
Drastic as Midway was for Japan, other battles bled her nearly dry. Off Guadalcanal in October, Japan lost more aircrew in the Santa Cruz battle than at Midway. Subsequently, the conquest of the Marianas, beginning with Saipan in June 1944, further sealed Tokyo's fate.

The real significance of Midway is that it ended Japan's strategic initiative and hastened final victory. The overwhelming industrial power of the United States permitted no other outcome.

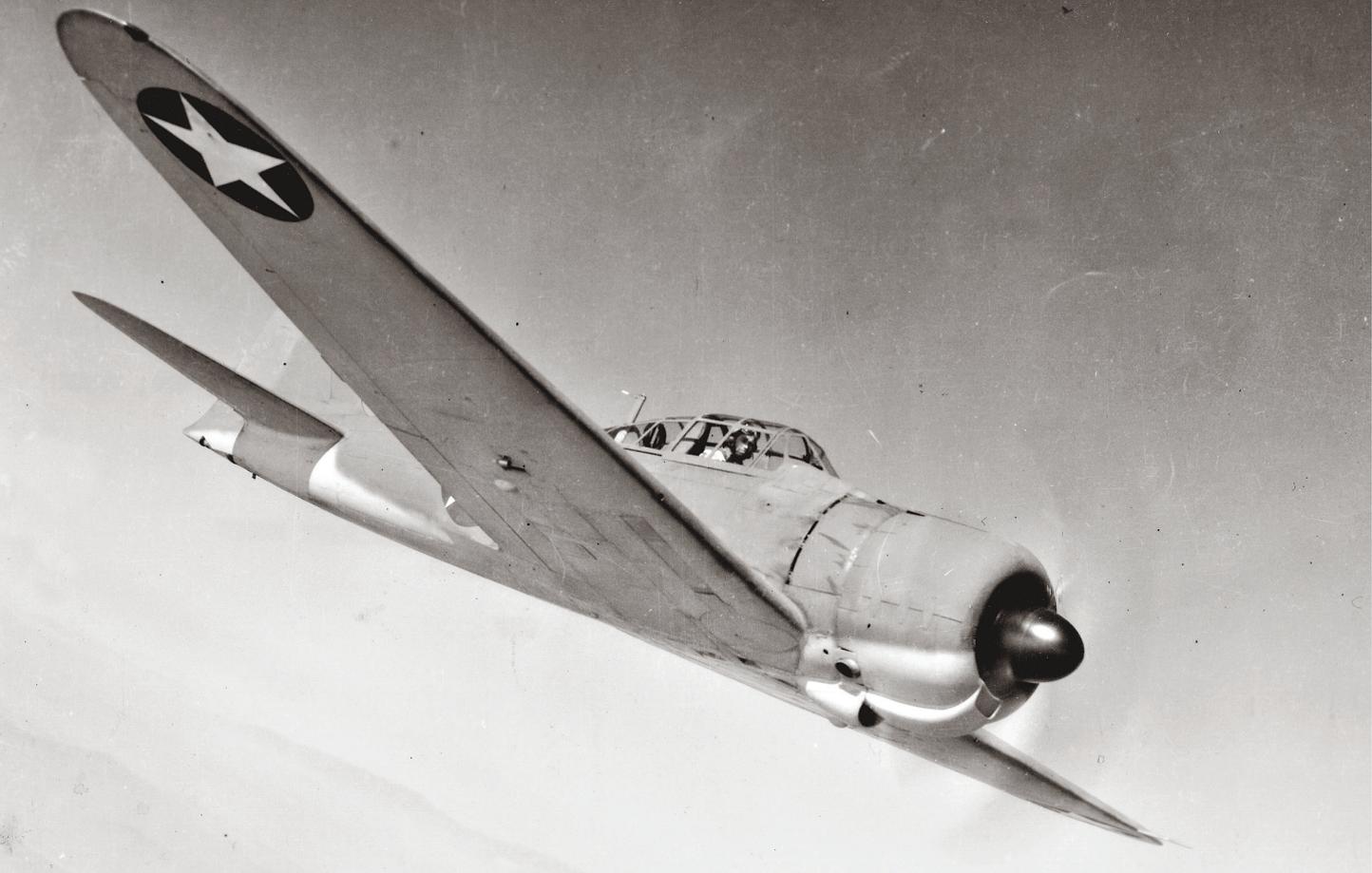
Strike photo taken from 20,000 feet shows the first attempt to sink the *Akagi* by B-17Es from the 431st BS based on Midway on June 4, 1942. High-level bombing of ships was largely ineffective. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



The battle of Midway proved the worth of dive-bombers. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



U.S. torpedo bombers were largely savaged at Midway. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



Above: The Zero that was recovered from the Aleutians after the attacks on Dutch Harbor was heavily evaluated but contributed little to the actual design of the Hellcat. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



THE HELLCAT WAS BUILT TO DEFEAT THE ZERO

"Everybody knows" that the Grumman F6F Hellcat was designed to defeat the Mitsubishi A6M Zero. Numerous books and articles have repeated the assertion for decades.

According to legend, when the United States obtained an intact Zero in the Aleutians in June 1942, the Mitsubishi's secrets were revealed and helped Grumman design the Hellcat, which

then dominated Pacific skies from 1943 to 1945. It is not remotely true.

The fact is that Grumman contracted for the XF6F-1 in June 1941 *and* was already working on the F4F Wildcat's successor well before Pearl Harbor. The prototype Hellcat first flew in June 1942, the same month the Zero wound up in the Aleutian bog. It is true that the restored Mitsubishi was flown against American fighters

for tactical evaluation, but the design and engineering had been underway for approximately a year.

Make no mistake: The Hellcat destroyed Japanese airpower, downing almost as many enemy aircraft as all Army fighters in the Pacific and China combined. But the "battle of Long Island" was fought and won long before the U.S. Navy ever saw a Zero.

Below: The prototype Hellcat flew the same month that the captured Zero landed in the Aleutian bog. Thus, the F6F design was not influenced by the "Zeke." (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



Myth
no. 6

STRATEGIC BOMBING DIDN'T WORK

For decades after the war, Western liberals and pacifists insisted that strategic bombing played little or no role in defeating Nazi Germany.

Agenda-driven historians, some undoubtedly suffering from a misplaced sense of collective “guilt,” insist that somehow Adolf Hitler’s regime could have been toppled without heavy bombing. They note what seemed an inverse relationship: the more the U.S. and Britain bombed, the more German industry produced.

And to an extent that is true.

The mere numbers of production, however, offer a simplistic “answer” to simple-minded critics. The fact is that German industry increased under the superb management of armaments minister Albert Speer, while production centers were dispersed and hardened.

What is not evident in the mere numbers is that Allied (especially American) targeting made the difference. After D-Day, which required air superiority over northern France, the Army Air Forces (AAF) increasingly struck German petroleum production. In the end, the *Luftwaffe* still possessed thousands of modern aircraft, including jets, but lacked the fuel to fly them

frequently or to train enough new pilots.

Beyond that, Axis transportation was largely immobilized. It became almost impossible to move trucks or trains by daylight.

Additionally, the Combined Bomber Offensive represented a second front long before D-Day. Allied bombers in Reich skies forced a huge diversion of Wehrmacht forces from the fighting fronts—perhaps three million personnel. And every 88mm flak gun booming away at Allied bombers was one less to oppose the Soviet Union’s massive force of tanks.

Above: Massive B-17 raids greatly limited Germany’s ability to conduct the business of war and nearly stopped petroleum production. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Below: B-24s substantially outnumbered the B-17s but suffered heavier losses. They participated in early raids on the Ploiești oil fields, among others. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)





THE TUSKEGEE MYTHS

Whether known as the Tuskegee Airmen or the “Red Tails,” the all-black, Italy-based 332nd Fighter Group has gained mythic status. In fact, by actual count, the Tuskegee Airmen have more Internet hits than any AAF unit of the Second World War, with two movies and dozens of books beside.

The situation has existed at least since the 1990s, when the first movie appeared on television. A succession of books and articles lauded the 332nd for a variety of feats, including a perfect bomber escort record, sinking a German destroyer, downing a record number of German jets, and producing at least one ace.

Starting in P-40s, the Tuskegees moved up to B/C Mustangs in which they performed excellent bomber escort but didn't have the perfect record often ascribed to them. (Photo by Moose Peterson)

None of these is true.

What is true is that the 332nd probably lost fewer bombers than other 15th Air Force fighter groups—which left the Red Tails to perform close escort while the other six groups properly kept the *Luftwaffe* from concentrating on the heavies. Consequently, the Tuskegee Airmen downed fewer German planes than the other 15th fighter groups.

What is also true is that every Tuskegee pilot and many support personnel were volunteers. In the Jim Crow era of American history, they deserved credit for showing up to defend the United States from foreign enemies while setting an example on the domestic front as well.





**Myth
no. 8**

THE B-26 WAS A PILOT KILLER

The CAF Martin B-26 flying over South Texas in 1994. This type had an exceptional combat loss record. (Photo by Bill Crump)

"One a day in Tampa Bay" was the catchphrase attending Martin's B-26 Marauder at MacDill Field in 1942–43. But although the sleek, fast twin-engine bomber established a sterling record against all three major Axis powers, it never fully shook off its early man-killer reputation.

In fact, the B-26 airframe was not always to blame for its widow-maker notoriety. The span was extended after the early B models to reduce wing loading and landing speed, with beneficial results. The Marauder used two Pratt & Whitney R2800s, arguably the finest radial engines ever made, but the main problem was the Curtiss-Electric propellers. Their pitch control could fail

at the worst possible moment—especially on takeoff—with often disastrous results. Additional care in maintenance was necessary to avoid the problem.

The Marauder established an overall superb safety record, far ahead of all AAF single-engine fighters and nearly even with the Douglas A-26 Invader (57 accidents per 100,000 hours versus 55, respectively). In Europe, the Martin's combat loss rate was less than half of that of the B-17 and B-24, and nearly identical to that of the Douglas A-20.

Nonetheless, like the much-maligned Brewster Buffalo, the Martin Marauder has never quite shed its undeserved enmity.



THE SOVIETS' CLAIM THAT LEND-LEASE WAS UNIMPORTANT



President Franklin Roosevelt lauded America as “the arsenal of democracy,” a bitter irony to which he was apparently immune considering that a major beneficiary was the despotic Soviet regime of Joseph Stalin.

During and long after the war, however, Moscow steadfastly refused to acknowledge the extent of Western largess. The reasons mainly were twofold: a nationalist reluctance to admit that the *Rodina* could not fully arm itself and the increasingly bitter postwar climate of competition between the totalitarian East and democratic West.

The United States, however, provided the Soviet Union with some \$11 billion in aid from 1941 to 1945. Merchandise included 400,000 trucks and jeeps; 12,000 armored vehicles, including 7,000 tanks; 11,400 aircraft; and 1.7 million tons of food.

The Soviet offensives of 1943–45 significantly rode on the Studebaker deuce and a half truck—a fact ignored in Soviet propaganda then and since.

Additionally, Britain sent 7,000 aircraft, 5,000 armored vehicles, 4,000 trucks, and thousands of radios and radar sets. Perhaps Britain’s greatest benefit was 15 million pair of boots.

During the war the Soviets repaid some of the American aid to the tune of about \$2 million. Those “refunds,” however, largely consisted of fees for servicing, fueling, and maintaining aircraft and equipment already provided to Moscow. The Soviet Union provided partial direct payment in gold, but nearly 30 years later, the United States settled for pennies on the dollar.

Above: While the Bell P-39 was not popular in the USAAF and the follow-on P-63 never saw combat wearing white stars, both saw plenty of success wearing red stars. The Russians liked both types. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Right: P-39s and P-400s flew with the “Cactus Air Force” defending Guadalcanal in late 1942 but were quickly replaced by other types. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



THE A-BOMBS WERE UNNECESSARY

Akin to Western liberals and pacifists who falsely claimed that strategic bombing made little difference in Europe, a cottage industry arose after WW II insisting that the two A-bombs did not force Japan's surrender.

Not all the naysayers were tweedy academics. Some senior U.S. military officers stated the same benighted opinions, including General of the Armies Dwight Eisenhower and Fleet Admiral William Leahy. Eisenhower, in Europe, never had full access to U.S. intelligence at the time, while Leahy played service politics trying to cast the Navy as more ethical than the nascent Air Force. (Leahy, FDR's briefcase carrier, also stated that, as an ordnance expert, he knew the A-bomb would not work.)

The fact is that the Hiroshima-Nagasaki debate was conducted in an information vacuum for three decades. Only after the wartime decrypts were made available in the 1970s did the truth emerge: Japan was not "about to surrender" in August 1945. In fact, Tokyo was in touch with Moscow, seeking Soviet intercession to convince the Western Allies to back off. Combined with the Soviet Union's invasion of Manchuria that month and the doom-laden Tokyo cabinet still unresponsive, Emperor Hirohito took the historic step of personally intervening.

Widely ignored by America's critics is Hirohito's specific reference in his surrender speech: "a new and most cruel weapon, the power of which is incalculable."

Absent the Emperor's decision, only one of two things would have occurred: a prolonged blockade with millions of Japanese starved to death or a horrific invasion with millions of Allied and Japanese casualties.



Meanwhile, Japanese policy continued on the Asian mainland, where as many as 50,000 or more civilians continued dying each month.

In the end, early prediction of Maj. Gen. Leslie Groves for the Manhattan Project was proven accurate. He said that two bombs would be necessary: one to get Tokyo's attention and another to prove the first was no fluke. †

Postwar examination of Japanese communications showed that Japan's military vowed to fight to the last man, which would have sent Allied casualty-figure forecasts soaring to more than a million. Seeing the effect of the bombs forced Emperor Hirohito to make a rare public intervention to stop the fighting. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



Bockscar, a Martin Omaha-built Silverplate B-29-36-MO #44-27297, after its last flight for display at the then-Air Force Museum in September 1961. It dropped history's last nuclear device to be deployed in wartime. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)