

★ OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES • 24 ★

P-47 Thunderbolt Aces of the Eighth Air Force

Jerry Scutts



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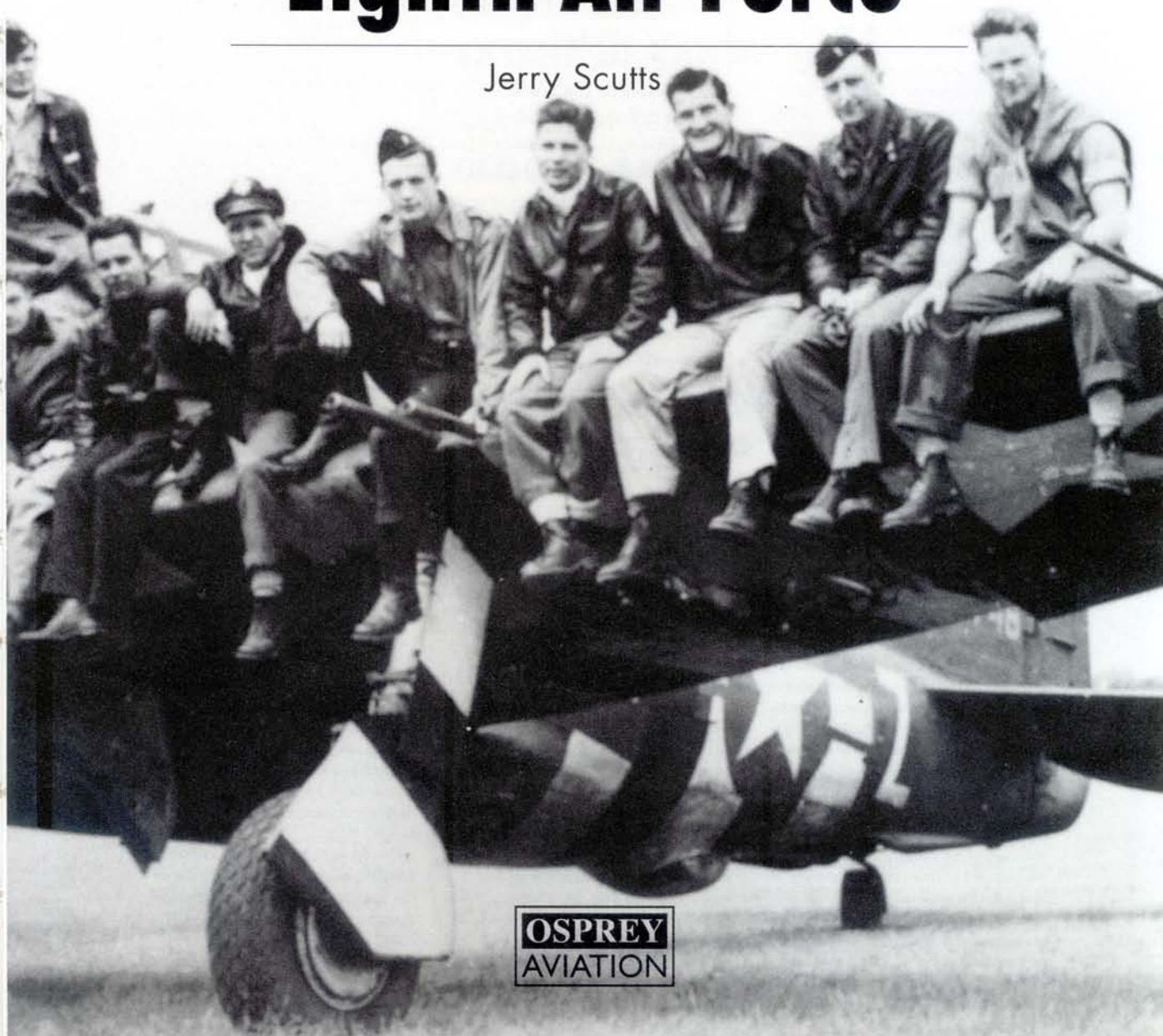


SERIES EDITOR: TONY HOLMES

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OSPREY
AVIATION

Front cover

On the morning of 23 December 1944 Col Dave Schilling, boss of the 56th FG, led 56 P-47s of 'Zemke's Wolfpack' in support of a maximum effort raid by VIII Bomber Command which had been hastily organised in response to Hitler's Ardennes offensive. The mission took the fighters across Holland and into Germany where, at 1145, the Thunderbolts clashed with at least 90 Fw 190s and Bf 109s of JGs 4, 11, 27 and 54. Schilling (flying his personal P-47D-25 42-26641, decorated with the cartoon character 'Hairless Joe' on its engine cowling) describes what happened next in this extract taken from his combat report;

'I flew straight ahead, pulled up, applied full power, and made a slow diving turn to the left to position my flight on the outside and allow the other three to cross over inside so that we might bring as many planes into position to fire as possible. In so doing I managed to hit the rear right Me 109 with about a 20-degree deflection shot at a range of about 700 yards. There was a large concentration of strikes all over the left side of the fuselage, and he fell off to the left. I then picked out another more or less ahead of the first and fired from about the same range as the first, causing him to smoke and catch fire immediately. By this time the first Me 109 was slightly ahead, below and to the left, at which point he started to smoke and caught fire. I then picked another and fired at about 1000 yards and missed as he broke right and started to dive for the deck. At about 17,000 ft I had closed to about 500 yards and fired, resulting in a heavy concentration of strikes, and the pilot bailed out.

'At this point I had become separated from the other three flights and had only my own with me. I heard Maj Comstock of the 63rd FS in a hell of a fight and called to get his position. As I was attempting to locate him, I sighted another gaggle of 35-40 Fw 190s 1000 ft below circling to the left. I repeated the same tactics as before and attacked one from 500 yards' range and slightly above and to the left. The plane immediately began to burn, spinning off to the left. I then fired at a second and got two or three strikes. He immediately took violent evasive action, and it took me several minutes of manoeuvring until I managed to get into a position to fire. I fired from about 300 yards above and to the left, and he

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EDITOR'S NOTE

To make this best-selling series as authoritative as possible, the editor would be extremely interested in hearing from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the elite pilots, and their aircraft, of the various theatres of war. Any material used will be fully credited to its original source. Please write to Tony Holmes at 10 Prospect Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 3UA United Kingdom.

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forced me to pull through him and fire as he went out of sight over the cowling. I gave him a five-second burst and began getting strikes all over him. The pilot immediately bailed out and the ship spun down to the left, smoking and burning, until it blew up at about 15,000 ft. By this time I was alone and saw a 63rd FS plane. I called, and he joined up just as a 35-40 plane formation of Fw 190s flew by heading west about 1000 ft above. I had hoped to sneak by and turn upon their tails, but they saw me just as I started my climbing turn. I knew I would have to hit the deck sooner or later, but I thought I could get their tail-end man before I had to.

My wingman lagged back, and just as I was getting set, he called and said two were on his tail. I thought I saw him get hit and told him to do vertical aileron rolls and hit the deck. At that time two got behind me and were getting set, so I did several rolls as I started down, hit the switch and outran them by a mile as I got to the deck. I lost them and zoomed back up to 8000 ft.'

This artwork by Iain Wyllie shows Schilling destroying his fourth kill of the five he claimed on 23 December - these were his only successes in 42-26641. In total, pilots of the 56th FG claimed 34 victories during the group's last big dogfight of the war

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EARLY DAYS

By the early spring of 1943, three USAAF fighter groups – the 4th, 56th and 78th – were flying the P-47 Thunderbolt from bases in England. Having American rather than British fighters (the 4th had flown Spitfires from September 1942) in the hands of Army Air Force units undoubtedly gave the planners of the Eighth Air Force's bomber offensive a little more confidence. The P-47 was capable of escorting heavy bombers further than was previously possible with Spitfires, although the operational doctrine of using fighters in this role had hardly been addressed. How best fighters could protect the B-17 and B-24 formations on their daylight heavy bombing missions would remain a matter for discussion throughout much of 1943.

But at least with the re-equipment of the in-theatre 4th Fighter Group (FG) at Debden and the arrival in the UK of the 56th and 78th FGs, bomber escort would be handled by fighters with similar capability and slightly more range than Spitfire Mk IXs. The latter aircraft still escorted the Eighth's 'heavies' to targets in the vicinity of Paris, however, and the RAF would continue to offer short-range penetration and withdrawal support to American heavy and medium bomber crews, who were more than welcome comrades in the Allied struggle to defeat Germany.

Of these three US fighter groups, only the 4th had combat experience, its component units tracing their lineage back to the volunteer 'Eagle' squadrons of the RAF. Inevitably comparing the newcomer with the Spitfire, the 'Debden Eagles' looked askance at the huge and portly Thunderbolt, with some pilots seriously doubting its ability to fight on equal terms with the Luftwaffe's small, highly agile and deadly Bf 109s and Fw 190s. RAF pilots were equally sceptical of its potential.

As early as December 1942 the 4th FG got the word that it would receive the P-47 for heavy bomber escort missions. There were some

Title pages

Practically the entire pilot complement of the 62nd FS/56th FG pose on and around a camouflaged P-47D in a photo taken almost certainly in late 1944 (via Tony Garner)

When the first P-47Cs came to Britain, not only had there been little attention paid to the role they might play over Europe (apart from the vague phrase 'bomber escort'), nobody had devised a system of identity markings for them. In the event the excellent RAF system of two letters to identify the squadron and one to denote the individual aircraft was chosen. In the meantime, the traditional USAAF method of identifying aircraft by numbers rather than letters had to suffice. This P-47C-5 (41-6209) was photographed whilst being shown to the press in the spring of 1943, the white recognition bands on the nose, fin and tailplanes that became synonymous with ETO operations having already been applied. It also has the then-current USAAF star insignia with a yellow surround, and a temporary three number fuselage code. Early Thunderbolts were assigned to the 4th FG, which was the only operational group in England at that time



pilots who felt great relief at being released from the endless convoy patrols they had been flying in Spitfires, although the 'Rhubarbs' and medium bomber escort sorties had occasionally brought excitement. In the event, there was little contact with the P-47 until enough aircraft had been delivered and conversion training had been completed in April 1943.

Before any of the Thunderbolt groups got into combat, the question of minimising risks to pilots as result of faulty recognition had to be addressed. The RAF liaison personnel attached to the Eighth Air Force thought that the P-47's superficial resemblance to the Focke-Wulf Fw 190 should be offset by painting white nose and tail bands on all operational Thunderbolts. This work, initiated at depots as early as 6 February 1943, was to serve P-47 groups well, particularly on bomber escort missions where gunners usually adopted the rule of shoot first and ask questions later. The highly visible recognition markings saved numerous pilots from being shot down by accident.

As the original group to equip with the type in the USA, the 56th was much more sold on the capabilities of the P-47 than the units comprising the 4th FG. Having extensively flown the Republic fighter, the group had materially assisted the manufacturer in developing the early production models into something that (unlike previous US fighters) was estimated to have an even chance when the time came to take on the Luftwaffe.

The last of the original Thunderbolt groups to form up was the 78th FG. Having trained on P-38s in America, its component units came to England without aircraft, and they soon found themselves flight testing its first P-47s. Initial impressions of the aircraft were mixed, with a number of pilots drawing unfavourable comparisons between the Thunderbolt and the Lockheed twin – such reaction was not uncommon at the time, and it soon passed. In any case, there were simply not enough P-38s available at the time to equip the 78th, this situation causing much consternation amongst certain individuals in higher echelons, who viewed the Lightning as a better aircraft for escort missions in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO) – see *Aircraft of the Aces 19 - P-38 Lightning Aces of the ETO/MTO* for further details.

Training flights occupied the groups during the early part of the year, 50 hours being specified before a man could be considered proficient on the P-47. Pilots had to come to terms both with numerous technical malfunctions suffered by the early 'combat worthy' P-47Cs and the huge challenge to navigation and formation flying posed by England's weather. Few Americans had ever seen anything like the solid cloud cover, freezing rain and fog that prevailed over this part of the world, and that the weather could be just as lethal to single-seat fighters as the Luftwaffe was grimly proven on numerous occasions. Training flight accidents, often to weather-related causes, inflicted a steady toll right through to VE-Day.



Once the groups had finished painting their early P-47Cs with full three-letter codes, each aircraft was allocated to a pilot – who, judging by the nose art visible on these Thunderbolts, clearly lost no time in personalising their aircraft. This formation shot was one of a number taken for publicity purposes depicting Thunderbolts of the 62nd FS/56th FG. Flying P-47C-5 LM-O (41-6347) is Capt Eugene 'Gene' O'Neill, who had joined the then 62nd Pursuit Squadron within the 56th Pursuit Group in December 1941. During his tour of duty in the ETO – which lasted until 20 February 1944, and saw him tally 200 combat hours – O'Neill claimed 4.5 kills (he has often been erroneously credited with five). All but one of these victories was claimed in the aircraft featured in this photograph