

"Always a Bridesmaid" Let's Talk About the 56th Fighter Group P-47's

by Ralph J. Ferrusi

Whether they liked it or not, during World War II in Europe the Eighth Air Force P-47 Thunderbolt and the P-51 Mustang were "joined at the hip". They were two very different aircraft, and both had their strengths and, weaknesses. The "Jug" was BIG, heavy, with a big radial-engine. The Mustang was light, maneuverable, and, graceful. The Thunderbolt had eight 50-caliber machine guns, with a combined rate of fire of 100 rounds per second. The Mustang had—pretty much the standard at the time—six 50's. The Mustang had RANGE: it could escort B-17's all the way to Berlin, and back: longggg missions. On the debit side, the Thunderbolts had to turn back, at a certain point, and, the Germans knew this and took advantage of it...

The Thunderbolts could attack ground targets and sustain a lot of damage and return to England. The cooling system of the water-cooled Rolls Royce Merlins was one of the Mustang's weak points, particularly to ground fire: one bullet, or cannon shell in the cooling systems would be fatal.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of the 56th and the Thunderbolt, let's kick around some interesting facts and figures. Many of the house-hold name Mustang pilots—Dominic Salvatore Gentile, Don Blakeslee, Ratsy Preddy for example—flew Thunderbolts, and shot down their share of ME-109's—before their units switched to Mustangs.

And, here's something I had never thought of until I began writing this: I can't think of a single "famous" Thunderbolt!!! I practically grew up knowing about the "Shangri-La", "CRIPES A' MIGHTY", "OLD CROW", "Nooky Booky IV", "Moonbeam McSWINE", "ALABAMA RAMMER JAMMER", "JERSEY JERK". Not one—not a single—P-47 name comes to mind.

And, thinking out loud, the "always a bridesmaid" P-47 was to the much-more-glamorous P-51 what

the B-24 was to the much-more-glamorous B-17. Everybody knows about The Memphis Bell, and, Twelve O'clock High. Name a famous B-24??? Know of any B-24 movies??? Case closed.

OK, let's get around to the P-47, and the 56th Fighter Group. Who were the Thunderbolt aces??? Did they name their planes??? How many air-worthy Thunderbolts are there today??

The P-47 Thunderbolt, produced by Republic Aviation, of Farmingdale, Long Island, and, Evansville, Indiana, from 1941 through 1945, was one of the main—and one of the heaviest: when fully loaded weighing up to eight tons, making it one of the heaviest fighters of the war —United States Army Air Forces fighters of World War II.

It was designed by Alexander Kartveli (!!!), a Russian immigrant of Georgian descent, who had fled from Tbilisi, Georgia to escape the Bolsheviks (an interesting aside: Kath and I visited Tbilisi in 1987). It was designed around the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp two-row 18-cylinder air-cooled engine producing 2,000 hp, that also powered the Navy F6F Hellcat and the Marine's F4U Corsair.

The first Thunderbolt prototype was produced in 1941, and a grand total of 15,686—variants "A" through "M", with the "bubbletop" "D" being the most well-known—were eventually produced.

The final P-47 rolled off the production line in December 1945. According to Wikipedia, as of August 23, 2021, P-47's survive in 14 countries, including Croatia and Serbia. In the U.S.A 10 "D's", two "G's", and a YP-47M are listed as airworthy. No "N's"... A standout P-47 name: "No Guts-No Glory".

The first P-47 combat mission took place March 10, 1943 with a 4th Fighter Group (FG) fighter sweep over France. The first P-47 air combat took place April 15th with Major Don Blakeslee of the 4th FG (later famous for its Mustangs) scoring the Thunderbolt's first air victory: an FW-190.

The Thunderbolt ended the war with 3,752 air-to-air kills claimed in over 746,000 sorties of all types, at the cost of 3,499 P-47's to all causes in combat. By the end of the war, the 56th FG was the only 8th Air Force unit still flying the P-47, by preference, instead of the P-51. The unit claimed 677.5 air victories and 311 ground kills, at the cost of 128 aircraft. Despite being the sole remaining P-47 group in the 8th Air Force, the 56th FG remained its top-scoring group in aerial victories throughout the war.

Famous 56th FG Thunderbolt pilots included Lieutenant Colonel Francis S. Gabreski, 28 victories (I had the honor of meeting Francis Gabreski at a Dutchess County Airport warbirds air show, and shaking his hand); Captain Robert S. Johnson, 27 victories (with



P-47 Thunderbolt

one unconfirmed probable kill leading to some giving his tally as 28); and 56th FG Commanding Officer Colonel Hubert "Hub" Zemke, 17.75 victories.

Gabreski flew five P-47's, none of them named, but all with the fuselage id codes HV-A. It appears Johnson flew four P-47's: a "C", Half Pint; and three "D's": Lucky, All Hell, and Penrod and Sam. Zemke flew Happy Warrior and Oregon's Britannia.

Both Gabreski and Zemke finished the war in German prison camps. On July 20, 1944, during a strafing run Gabreski's prop clipped the runway and he crash landed and was captured. He had flown 166 combat sorties, and was credited with 28 air and three ground kills.

Zemke nominated himself for transfer to the 479th FG in order to fly the Mustang in combat. On October 30, 1944, the wing of Zemke's P-51 was torn off due to turbulence, and he bailed out over enemy territory and was captured, after 154 missions and 17.75 confirmed aerial victories.

Johnson had some close shaves, but on May 8, 1944, on the last mission of an extended tour scored his final kills, breaking Eddie Rickenbacker's World War I record. He flew 89 combat missions between April 1943 and May 1944, and was credited with 27 aerial victories.

Specifications (P-47D-40 Thunderbolt)

- Length: 36 feet ¾ inches
- Wingspan: 40 feet 9 5/16 inches.
- Height: 14 feet 8 1/16 inches.
- Empty weight: 10,000 pounds.
- Maximum takeoff weight: 17,500 pounds.
- Maximum speed: 426 miles per hour at 30,000 feet.
- Range: 1,030 miles.
- Service ceiling: 42,000 feet.

Fun Facts

The Thunderbolt was nearly twice the weight of a Spitfire. A 4th fighter Group pilot, after transitioning from Spitfires, said "it was like flying a bathtub around the sky", and Thunderbolts were likened to "seven ton milk bottles".

On the Plus Side, pilots felt they could fly a P-47 through a brick wall and live.

Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu wrote an orchestral scherzo in 1945 entitled P-47 Thunderbolt in tribute to the aircraft and its role in World War II.

In 2015, the P-47 Thunderbolt was named the state aircraft of Indiana (!!!) due to its Evansville roots. Evansville produced a total 6,242 P-47s, almost half of the P-47s made nationally during the war.

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