

Farewell Bob Johnson

We will miss you....



A fitting tribute to an American hero

By Fred Alexander

"He just took his last flight," a nurse told Sue Roth about her Uncle Bob. "All I could think was how beautiful that was," said Roth in a Charlotte Observer (NC) story. Uncle Bob, 78, died in Tulsa, Oklahoma on December 27, 1998 where he had been visiting his nieces and nephews. He was buried in the cemetery of River Hills Community Church in Lake Wylie, S.C. In an era of severe military budget cuts, the Air Force did the right thing. Three F-16 Fighting Falcons streaked across the cloudy sky in the missing man formation. The honor guard from Shaw AFB fired a 21-gun salute and played taps.

While the mourners paid homage on that cold, icy day, one of America's greatest fighter pilots had doubtless finished that last flight. Here is the story of Col. Robert S. Johnson:

There are many reasons why some flowers live and others do not. Animals grazing, a lover's plucking, or drought, just to name a few.

Some B-17 and B-24 bomber crews are alive today because some flowers died in the mid-1930s, when young Bob Johnson lay in fields with his .22 rifle. He honed his marksmanship skills by shooting off daisy tops as they blew in the wind.

In his 23rd and 24th years, 28 German fighters were downed in aerial combat because of Johnson's extraordinary eyesight, marksmanship, and flying abilities. He was the first 8th Air Force pilot to pass Eddie Rickenbacker's World War I score of 26. When he returned to America in May 1944, he was our top ace. At war's end his squadron commander, Francis Gabreski, and he were tied for fourth place among all American aces. Only pilots who flew in the Pacific had higher scores.

But, this great record could never be guessed from a review of Johnson's early career: He was trained as a bomber pilot, but received orders to a P-47 fighter squadron. The first time he flew a P-47, mechanical problems on take off and landing could have killed him. He flew his first combat mission before ever firing the machine guns of a P-47. Afterwards, he was sent to gunnery school and flunked. During his first enemy contact, he lost his unit and nearly joined a German formation. Flying for his life, he made it to home base where he was already listed "missing in action."

Fellow pilots bet that he would be the next one shot down.



Still not technically qualified to fly fighters or be in combat, he scared himself badly when attacking a German Focke-Wulf 190 fighter on June 13, 1943. Johnson's plane trembled and he nearly jumped out of his seat. It was the force of all eight guns firing--something he had never experienced before!

Suddenly it was all over and he'd scored his first victory, the fourth of Zemke's Wolfpack, the famed 56th Fighter Group. He received an unforgettable chewing out for breaking formation from both his group and squadron commanders.

Before long, he nearly lost his life by obeying the order not to break formation. His plane blasted by the 20 mm cannon of a ME-109, he was blinded by hydraulic fluid and burned by a cockpit fire. The canopy on his spinning plane wouldn't budge. Miraculously, the fire went out while he desperately tried to smash through the canopy frame. As he descended lower, the increase in oxygen began to clear his head. He realized the plane was somehow still flying. Overcoming his panic, he steered for home.

Near the English Channel, another German fighter attacked him three times. Machine gun bullets pelted his armored seat and stitched the rugged P-47 that continued to fly. His ammunition exhausted, the German pilot gave Johnson a salute and turned for home convinced the big fighter would never make it back to Britain. But, the Thunderbolt never faltered.

After landing, mechanics and doctors inventoried the damage.

Pilot: burns, bullet-nicked nose, cannon shell fragments in both hands, and two machine gun wounds in the right thigh.

Verdict: return to flight duty soon.

Plane: 21 cannon shell holes, more than 100 machine gun holes, five holes in the propeller, three cannon shells burst behind armor plate less than an inch from Johnson's head. The lower half of the rudder is shot away.

Verdict: junk it; will never fly again.

Born in 1920, Robert S. Johnson grew up in Lawton, Oklahoma, near the Army artillery school at Fort Sill. Like many young men of the 1930s, he was intensely interested in aviation.

At 14, he had worked four years in a cabinet shop and purchased his first flying lessons at \$6 per hour. After 6 hours 45 minutes and \$40.50, he soloed. Active in Boy Scouts, he was the champion troop wrestler and boxer. Johnson attended nearby Cameron Junior College, where he was the lightest man (5'7", 145 lb.) on the football team.

Encouraged and given a \$55 loan by his college dean, he took the Civilian Pilot Training program. By 1941, the 21-year old had more than 100 hours and was admitted to the Air Corps cadet program. There he was surprised by the power of his 225 h.p. Stearman biplane. Later he would be awed by the 2000 h.p. fighter he would fly in combat.

His instructors said that a bomber or cargo pilot would have a better chance at continuing a flying career after the war with an airline. And so he, still wanting fighters, asked for multi-engine training.

At Kelly Field, Texas in May 1942 he began bomber pilot training. Only one thing was wrong--all they had was single engine planes! Even so his class completed the course. On July 3, 1942, Bob Johnson received his pilot's wings.

Dutifully, he filled out his assignment form, requesting as each of his three choices A-20 schools in different locations. He thought the agile, twin-engine attack bomber would be the closest he could get to fighters.

Not surprisingly, he was a second lieutenant who got none of his choices and was instead assigned "to meet the needs of the Army." He could have gone anywhere. But, he was ordered to Stratford, Connecticut to fly fighters!

Johnson was assigned to the 61st Squadron, 56th Fighter Group, 8th Air Force. He considered 105 mph a respectable speed in the planes he had flown so far. The awesome Republic P-47 Thunderbolt stalled at 105 mph! Its eight .50 caliber could throw out 7200 rounds per minute. The P-47 is considered the greatest of the heavy single-engine, single-seat fighters of the war. An exceptional bomber escort after practical drop tanks were introduced, it was also a great ground-attack bomber.

The P-47C model flown by Johnson weighed nearly 14,000 lbs. when fully loaded (more than two British Spitfires) and could reach 433 mph at 30,000 feet. Its ceiling was 42,000 feet and range, 550 miles. No beauty, the P-47 was also called "Jug" since it resembled a bottle flying bottom first, or "Lead Sled" because of its weight.

Commanded by Col. Hubert "Hub" Zemke, the 56th Fighter Group arrived in England in January 1943 and was soon known as Zemke's Wolfpack. Throughout the most of the war it was the leading fighter group. On final tally, it was bested by a half-victory awarded to another group. The Wolfpack destroyed 1006 German aircraft with the loss of 128 Thunderbolts in combat operations. But, no other group matched its record of 665.5 aerial victories.

Soon after that first mission on June 13, 1943, Bob Johnson was one of the first five American pilots to become an ace (five victories). By March 15, 1944, he was the leading American ace of Europe with a score of 22. Though pilots were normally rotated stateside after 200 combat hours, he was granted an extension of 25 hours. On his last mission on May 8th, he downed two more planes, bringing the total to 28.



President Roosevelt invited Johnson to visit the White House on his return to the states. As his friend recalled at Johnson's funeral service, Johnson said he couldn't go. He had to see his wife Barbara first. Roosevelt reportedly responded, "Bring your wife with you, but please come now."

In "Fighter Aces," aviation historians Raymond Tolliver and Trevor Constable compared Johnson's record with that of two German aces. Werner Molders was the first ace to score 100 aerial victories and Erich Hartmann is the top scoring ace of all time with 352.

The authors noted that Johnson "emerges impressively from this comparison." He downed 28 planes in 91 sorties, while Molders took 142 sorties to do the same, and Hartmann, 194.

After the war, Johnson was chief test pilot for Republic Aviation, maker of the P-47. Later he became an insurance executive and lived for the past 20 years in Lake Wylie, S.C., near Charlotte, N.C. Johnson and Martin Caidin told his story in "Thunderbolt!"

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