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PTO/CBI Pilots of WWII

Top American aces of the Pacific & CBI

By [Stephen Sherman](#), June, 1999. Updated April 20, 2012.

The fighter pilots of the Fifth Air Force, under General Kenney, flew and fought their way up the islands of the Southwest Pacific - New Guinea and the Philippines. In the early days, many flew P-39s or P-40s, and took a real beating from the Japanese Zeros. But during 1943, some fighter groups transitioned to the superior P-38. With its twin engines, long range and heavy firepower, the Lightning was ideally suited to the long distances of the Pacific, and with appropriate "boom and zoom" tactics, the Zero couldn't touch it.

In April of 1943, flying P-38s, Major John Mitchell led the famous mission to intercept and shoot down Admiral Yamamoto over Bougainville. (Neel Kearby's 348th FG was unique in the successes it achieved while flying the P-47. In the CBI, General Chennault's fliers flew the P-40 Warhawk.)

Here are some of the stories of the high scoring aces of the 475th, 8th, 49th, and other Fighter Groups - Dick Bong, Tommy McGuire, Charles MacDonald, Gerry Johnson, Robert L. Scott, and others.

Name	Kills	Medals	Unit	Plane
Richard I. Bong	40.0	MH	49FG	P-38
Thomas McGuire	38.0	MH	475FG	P-38
Charles MacDonald	27.0	DSC	475FG	P-38
Gerald R. Johnson	22.0	DSC	49FG	P-38
Neel Kearby	22.0	MH	348FG	P-47
Jay T. Robbins	22.0	DSC	8FG	P-38
Robert Westbrook	20.0	-	18FG	P-38
Thomas J. Lynch	20.0	DSC	35FG	P-38
David Lee "Tex" Hill	18.25	SS	AVG/23FG	P-40, P-51
Chuck Older	18.0	DFC	AVG/23FG	P-40, P-51
John C. Herbst	18.0	-	23FG/CBI	P-51

William D. Dunham	16.0	-	348FG	P-47
Bill Harris	16.0	-	18FG	P-38
George S. Welch	16.0	DSC	8FG	-
Edward "Porky" Cragg	15.0	-	8FG	P-38
Cyril F. Homer	15.0	-	8FG	P-38
John D. Landers	14.5	-	see below	
<i>Landers scored 6 in the PTO flying P-40s, and 8.5 in the ETO flying P-51s</i>				
Robert M. DeHaven	14.0	SS	49FG	P-40
Edward O. McComas	14.0	-	118RCN/CBI	-
Daniel T. Roberts Jr.	14.0	DSC	475FG	P-38
John F. Hampshire	13.0	-	23FG/CBI	P-40
Bruce K. Holloway	13.0	-	23FG/CBI	P-40
Cotesworth B. Head Jr.	12.0	-	18FG	P-38
Kenneth G. Ladd	12.0	-	8FG	P-38
James A. Watkins	12.0	-	49FG	P-38
Richard L. West	12.0	-	8FG	P-40
Francis J. Lent	11.0	SS	475FG	P-38
John S. Loisel	11.0	SS	475FG	P-38
John W. Mitchell	11.0	-	18FG	P-38
Murray "Jim" Shubin	11.0	DSC	347FG	P-38
OTHER NOTED USAAF PTO/CBI FLIERS:				
Bill Shomo	8.0	MH	82TRS	P-51
Boyd "Buzz" Wagner	8.0	DSC	1FG	P-40
Robert L. Scott	n.a.	DSC	23AF	P-40
John Alison	6.0	DSC	23FG/CBI	P-40
Tom Lanphier	4.5	NC	347FG	P-38

Rex Barber	5.0	NC	347FG	P-38
Paul Tibbets	-	DSC	509CG	B-29
The Flying Tigers				
35th Fighter Squadron				

Gerald R. Johnson (49 FG)

Jerry Johnson was born in the small town of Kenmore, Ohio. He entered the U.S. Army Aviation Cadet Program in the spring of 1941, and completed his training in May of 1942. Johnson was then sent to the 54th Fighter Group of the Eleventh Air Force in Alaska. Flying P-39 Airacobras and P-40 Warhawks, Johnson was to take part in fifty-eight combat missions in gales, fog, sleet, and snow. These conditions were described as being the worst in the world! With the Japanese forces in the Aleutians being isolated by a sustained bombing campaign, a more urgent need for fighter pilots was developing far to the south.

Lieutenant Johnson was among a number of young pilots transferred from Alaska to Australia and was assigned to the 49th Fighter Group of the Fifth Air Force.

On July 26, 1943, planes from the 49th and 348th Fighter Groups flew up to the Salamaua area to intercept the Japanese. They caught 10 Oscars and 10 Tonys over Markham Valley. As they maneuvered into position, one of Johnson's flight couldn't drop tanks, another blew a supercharger, and other planes escorted these two back home. Johnson was alone. In the ensuing dogfight, Johnson chased a Ki-43 Oscar off Capt. Watkins' tail and shot it down. Suddenly an inline-type fighter came at him. Both pilots opened up instantly. The heavy, concentrated fire of the Lightning tore off the Kawasaki's wing, and as the stricken fighter tumbled over and at him, it smashed into his port tail assembly, tearing it away. Johnson regained control of the crippled P-38, and three pilots of the 39FS escorted him back to Horanda strip. Johnson was credited with two victories, but his plane, #83 *Sooner*, was scrapped.

Johnson was promoted to Captain and CO of the 9th FS, the "Flying Knights" in August, 1943.

On September 3, 1943, the P-38's of the 49th FG were assigned the job of flying escort for a formation of B-17 Flying Fortresses on a bombing mission to Cape Gloucester on the western tip of the island of New Britain. Johnson caught one of the Japanese fighters as it was coming off a firing pass at the B-17's. With a long burst from his P-38's machine guns, he sent the enemy plane into the ocean. Johnson quickly maneuvered behind another enemy plane and blew it out the sky at point blank.

The Americans quickly seized Lau and Salamaua, which caused the Japanese to mount a fierce counter-attack. The Japanese sent out a large formation of Zero fighters and Val dive bombers on October 15 to hit the Allied invasion fleet anchored in Oro Bay. The

49th was alerted to the formations, and their P-38's tore the formations to shreds. Johnson downed a Zero and a Val as well as two probables. On October 17, the Japanese mounted another strike, this time with a formation of Lily bombers protected by Oscars and Zeros. Again, the P-38's of the 49th savagely attacked the formations, with Johnson downing two more enemy aircraft. In late October, Johnson, having demonstrated his leadership and flying ability, was promoted to Major.

Having been sent home in the spring of 1944, Johnson returned for another tour of duty in the summer of 1944. He resumed command of the 9th Fighter Squadron, and was given the added responsibility of being deputy group commander of the 49th. Preparations were now underway for General MacArthur's return to the Philippine Islands. During the first two days of September, Johnson and the 9th Squadron were among the units given the job of eliminating the major enemy air bases at Davao and Mindanao. The 9th was then ordered to escort a formation of B-24's and B-17's over 1000 miles in distance (more than eight hours in the air), and allowed only one B-24 to be shot down. Another mission on October 14 was equally successful.

While leading a formation of P-38's on December 7, 1944, Johnson spotted a large formation of Japanese fighters and ordered an attack. Johnson came up fast behind one of the enemy fighters and quickly turned it into a fireball. Johnson immediately spotted another enemy aircraft and, using a perfect deflection shot, quickly destroyed it as well. That was two enemy downed at the hands of Johnson within one minute. Johnson then tore off after a Helen bomber and proceeded to destroy it as well.

Those three victories for Johnson gave him twenty total kills, and he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

During the spring of 1945, the 49th Fighter Group occupied Clark Field and were concentrating on providing ground support roles. They were particularly effective in delivering napalm bombs which devastated enemy installations, which made an invasion of the Luzon unnecessary. By August, 1945, Japan surrendered, and Johnson elected to remain in the Air Force.

A little over a month after the war ended, Johnson was to show his courage and bravery one last time. Piloting a B-25, which had been pressed into service as a transport aircraft, Johnson flew into a typhoon and was hopelessly lost in the black skies. He ordered everyone to bail out, but one person neglected to bring a parachute. Johnson immediately gave his parachute away and tried to fly the B-25 back safely. Johnson's copilot also elected to stay behind to help Johnson, but both were killed when the B-25 was on approach. Lt. General George C. Kennedy, commander of the Fifth Air Force during WWII, told Johnson's father "You are the father of the bravest man I ever knew and the bravest thing he ever did was the last thing, when he did not need to be brave." Johnson finished the war with twenty-two victories and was awarded with the DSC, DFC, Silver Star, Air Medal, and Legion of Merit.

Sources:

- Jerry Johnson article from defunct P-38 Geocities website

Robert Westbrook

Robert Westbrook was flying a P-40 Warhawk with the 44th Fighter Squadron when he was sent into Guadalcanal. The P-40's, along with some P-39 Airacobras and a small number of P-38 Lightnings, were on the island to help protect the ground forces. Henderson Field was taken eight months earlier by the Marines, but the living conditions were still very primitive. The new pilots found living quarters to be dirt floored tents and would from almost the first day begin to suffer all the discomforts prevalent in that environment. It was in these conditions that the ace of the Thirteenth Air Force would learn the deadly skill of combat.

On January 27, 1943, Westbrook would encounter his first major engagement of the war. A formation of ten enemy Betty medium bombers, covered by a large number of fighters, were heading for Guadalcanal. The P-40's were still climbing when a swarm of Zeros hit them from above. Two of the P-40's were shot down, and another had to return for home after taking severe damage. Westbrook was hit by a Zero, but quickly put the nose down and dove to get away. Westbrook made a wide circle of the area and sighted three Zeros which had not seen him. Westbrook opened up on one of the unsuspecting Zeros and destroyed it. The other two Zeros scattered, and Westbrook scored his first kill of the war.

After the Japanese lost control of Guadalcanal, they continued to hit the island with a barrage of air raids. On June 7, 1943, the Japanese sent forty to fifty Zeros down from Rabaul to hit American shipping targets. Westbrook was part of a P-40 formation and was in the air for two hours twisting and turning. During the fight, Westbrook scored two kills. Again, on July 1, eight P-40's were flying protective cover for Allied shipping in Rendova Harbor, when a formation of Japanese aircraft came in firing. Out of thirty Japanese aircraft sent on this mission, thirteen enemy fighters and twelve dive bombers were shot down. Westbrook scored two more kills during this mission with the destruction of a Zero and a Val. In September, the Allies launched a major offensive in the New Guinea area and the 18th Fighter Group was temporarily assigned to assist the Fifth Air Force in providing air support for the operation. The operation concluded a few weeks later, and Westbrook was promoted to captain, and was sent to Sydney for some rest. Westbrook was then sent to Munda, New Georgia which was home of the 18th Fighter Group. On October 10, 1943, Westbrook was part of a formation of P-38's flying escort for some B-24 Liberators on a strike against Japanese air fields at Kahili on New Ireland. The Allied formation was hit by a large number of Zeros, but Westbrook led his element in warding off the fanatical attack without a single loss. Westbrook was able to down two Zeros, which were his first in a P-38. Westbrook was promoted to Major and was given command of the 44th Fighter Squadron. During the following weeks, landings by American and Australian troops were made at Bougainville and Vella Lavella. The bombing campaign against the airfields at Rabaul and Kahili were stepped up. The Japanese were not able to interfere with the landings due to the effectiveness of the campaign. Virtually every day, Westbrook was to lead his group in protecting the bombers, and was able to score three more kills, bringing his total to thirteen. On December 23, the Lightnings of the 18th Fighter Group were again given the job of escorting a formation of B-24's striking Rabaul. The B-24's ran into a force of twenty to

thirty Zeros. Westbrook lead his formation of P-38's into the battle and spotted a lone Zero and maneuvered behind his tail and blew it out of the sky. Westbrook evaded a Zero on his tail and soon spotted another lone Zero, and quickly sent in down in flames. Westbrook now notched his fourteenth victory and was sent home on leave.

Volunteering for a second combat tour, Robert Westbrook returned to the southwest Pacific in the late summer of 1944. Reporting for duty at Thirteenth Fighter Command, Westbrook was informed he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and given a new command, the 338th Fighter Squadron of the 347th Fighter Group. On October 23, sixteen P-38's were flying a fighter sweep over the Macasser Strait area. During the sweep, the P-38's shot down six Zeros without the loss of one P-38. Westbrook was able to down one of the enemy aircraft. On November 7, Westbrook lead a formation to the same area. Sixteen aircraft were destroyed on the ground, and Westbrook downed three Nick fighters upping his total to twenty. Preparations were under way for the Allies to retake the Philippines, and strikes against Japanese airfields were ordered. Bad weather hampered the operation for most of the month. On November 22, 1944, Westbrook was again leading a formation of P-38's and spotted an enemy gunship. Westbrook ordered his formation to attack the ship, and Westbrook and his wingman were hit. Poor weather did not allow anyone to see if they were able to bail out. A PBY Catalina flying boat was sent into the area and picked up Westbrook's wingman, but there was no trace of Westbrook. Although the war would go on for another nine months, Westbrook would remain the highest scoring ace of the Thirteenth Air Force.

Sources:

- Robert Westbrook article from defunct P-38 Geocities website

Robert M. DeHaven

Robert Marshall DeHaven was born on 13 January 1922 in San Diego, California. He attended Washington and Lee University but left to join the Army Air Corps in February 1942. Earning his pilot's wings, he was assigned to P-40 training in Florida. In February 1943 he was sent to Hawaii, then on to Port Moresby, New Guinea via Australia in May. He was assigned to the P-40 equipped 7th Fighter Squadron, 49th Fighter Group at Dobodura.

Lieutenant DeHaven scored his first victory on 14 July 1943 and became an ace on 10 December. He participated in the offensives which took Buna, Lae, Markham Valley, Hollandia and Biak Islands. During these battles, he downed a total of ten enemy aircraft with the P-40, one of the highest P-40 scores for USAAF pilots, other than AVG pilots.

DeHaven liked the P-40, surprisingly, even preferring it to the highly acclaimed P-38. In Eric Bergerud's

On October 15th, fifteen Vals and 39 Zeros, attacked American vessels in Oro Bay . The 475th FG intercepted and claimed 36 aircraft. Lent made ace that day, downing two Zeros and a Val. Over the next five months, he was credited with 5 more victories:

- a Tony on Oct. 24, over Rabaul
- a Zero on Nov. 2, also over Rabaul
- a Betty on Dec. 16
- two Zeros on March 31, 1944, over Hollandia

On December 1, 1944, just before going on leave and about to be married, Lieutenant Lent crashed into the ocean off Lae during a test flight of an F-6D, the photo-reconnaissance version of the P-51. At his death, Lt. Lent had been credited with 11 destroyed and one probable. He was awarded the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with 6 OLCs.



