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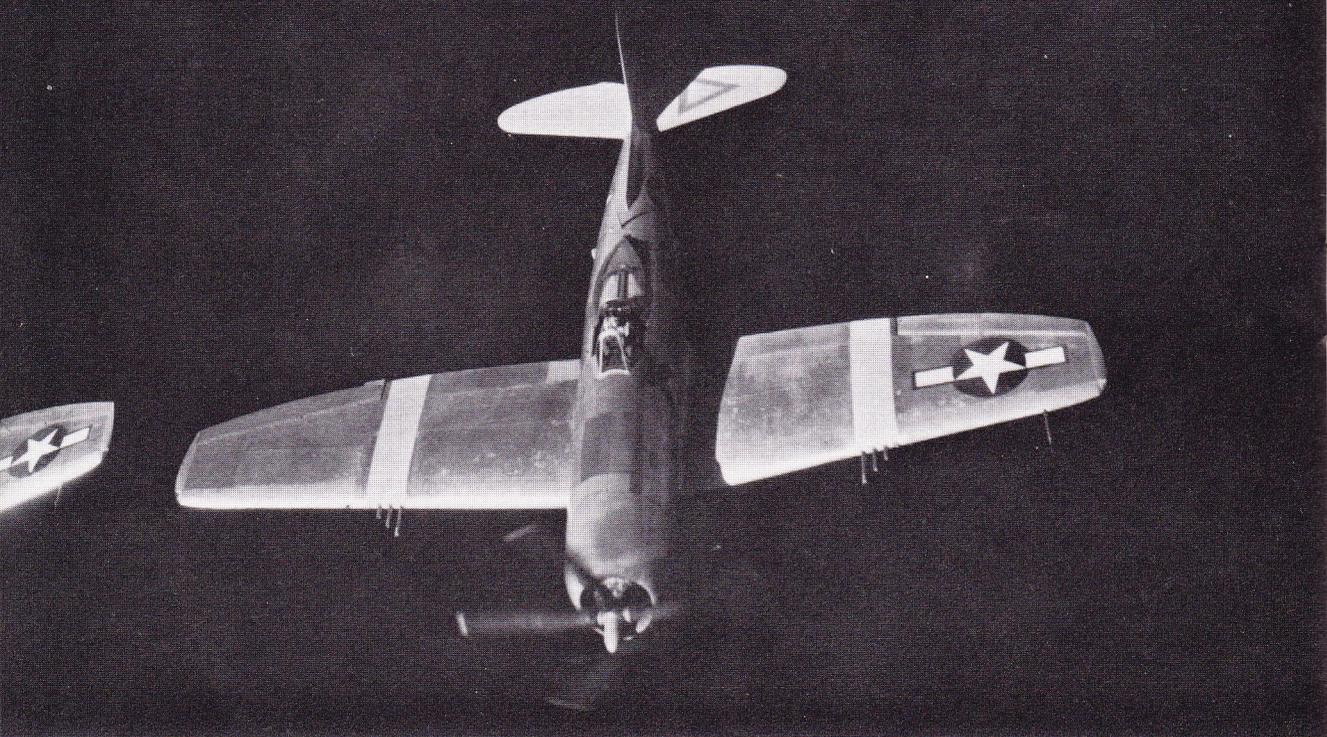
AIR COMBAT

1939 · 1945

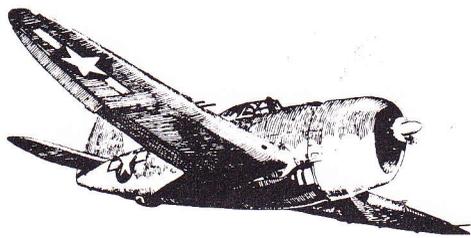


- AIR WAR OVER N. W. AFRICA
- THUNDERBOLTS OVER IE SHIMA

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Thunderbolts over Je Shima



Greg Moreira

In the final weeks of World War 2 the United States Army Air Force amassed overwhelming air strength in the Western Pacific for operations against the Island Empire of Japan. One of the units so deployed was the 507th Fighter Group equipped with the ultimate operational version of the Thunderbolt, the P-47N.

This group, comprised of the 463rd, 464th and 465th Fighter Squadrons, was based on the little island of Je Shima. In the battle of Okinawa, plateau topped Je Shima was a Japanese air base, the scene of desperate conflict. There, a machine gun burst snuffed out the life of war correspondent Ernie Pyle, whose dispatches had made him a household name. Today, a simple marker bears the words: "At this spot the 77th Infantry Division lost a buddy, Ernie Pyle, 18 April 1945".

We extend our appreciation to Mr. Robert T. Forrest of Madison, N. J. for this fine photographic presentation of the 507th Fighter Group. Mr. Forrest was a captain and flight leader in the 463rd Fighter Squadron during the campaign.

It was a bright August day in 1945 when a flight of heavily armed Thunderbolts made its way through Imperial air space toward Matsuyama on Shikoku. With radio silence in effect there was little to do except maintain formation and keep a close tab on possible enemy interference. Flight leader Bob Forrest, preoccupied with mission details, suddenly blinked his eyes in the brilliant glare which filled his cockpit. Instantly his attention was drawn to the left. There, in the distance, an enormous black eruption slowly worked its way up to his own 20,000 foot altitude. Unable to control their emotions stirred up by this fantastic phenomenon, all four pilots in his flight broke radio silence, their voices filled with excitement. It never occurred to the four flyers that this could be another atom bomb. To them, there was no explanation. When the mission to Matsuyama was completed and the big Thunderbolts headed home some two hours later, the great black cloud was still visible; an eerie sight to behold. Not until the four fighters taxied in did Bob Forrest and his young companions learn that they were a witness to the Nagasaki tragedy.

What was the P-47N like to fly? Bob Forrest has this to say:

" . . . Below 10,000 feet the Jug was very sluggish, especially when fully loaded with fuel and external stores. Manoeuvrability was almost nil. It was, on the other hand a very steady gun platform; very stable. As the altitude increased, so did the handling qualities improve. At very high altitude she was great. Her performance was directly affected by the turbo-supercharger. The N model was actually very much like the D, only more so. It was faster, but heavier.

At one time I checked out in the Grumman F6F Hellcat. In several dogfights against the Thunderbolt below 10,000 feet I put the Jug to shame. The Hellcat could easily out-turn the Jug. Even with the flaps down, the big fighter would skid in turns. I found even the old Helldiver could out-maneuver the 47 at low altitude.

This type of dogfight was not uncommon. They were usually not arranged. It was almost irresistible to mix it up with another fighter, army or navy . . ."

" . . . For a fighter, the Thunderbolt was comfortable. The cockpit was big and roomy. We joked about walking around in it. Temperature control was fine . . ."

" . . . I never did meet any Japanese aircraft although other pilots in our group did. We received a Distinguished Unit Citation for one big battle in which one of our boys received five confirmed victories. Mostly we escorted Liberators, only once did we escort the big Superfortress . . ."

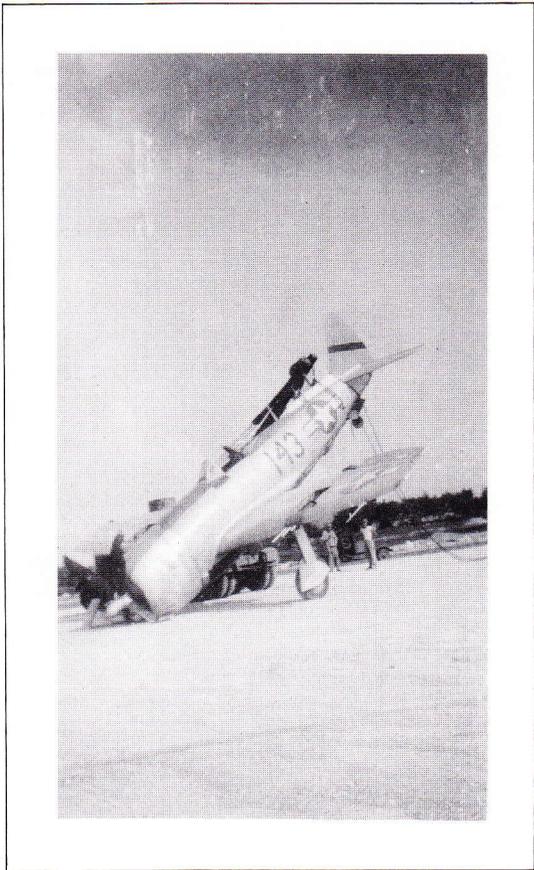
Robert T. Forrest is President of the Thunderbolt Pilots Association.

" . . . Our aim is just to meet with old friends occasionally and renew our spirits. The only membership requirement is logged time in the Thunderbolt . . ." Membership dues are \$10.00 per year, \$100.00 for life. Headquarters is in the Wings Club of Hotel Biltmore in New York City. A very attractive Newsletter is published. All ex-Thunderbolt pilots are invited to write to Robert T. Forrest, 16 Overhill Drive, Madison, N. J. 07940.

Photo series above: Fully loaded it took the P-47N some 5000 feet of runway to become airborne. With his visibility limited by the big engine the pilot would taxi his machine into position by relying on the ground crew. On signal, the pilot would proceed at full speed down the runway.

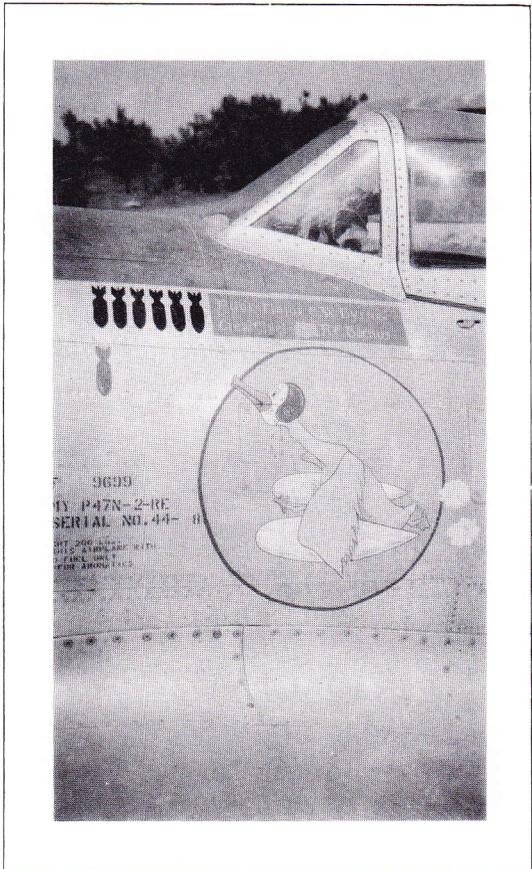
Bottom photo: A tough man from the E. T. O., Chuck Reed was one of the few flyers to serve against Germany and Japan both. To the four victory crosses displayed on his plane he added a red Hinomaru before the war was over.



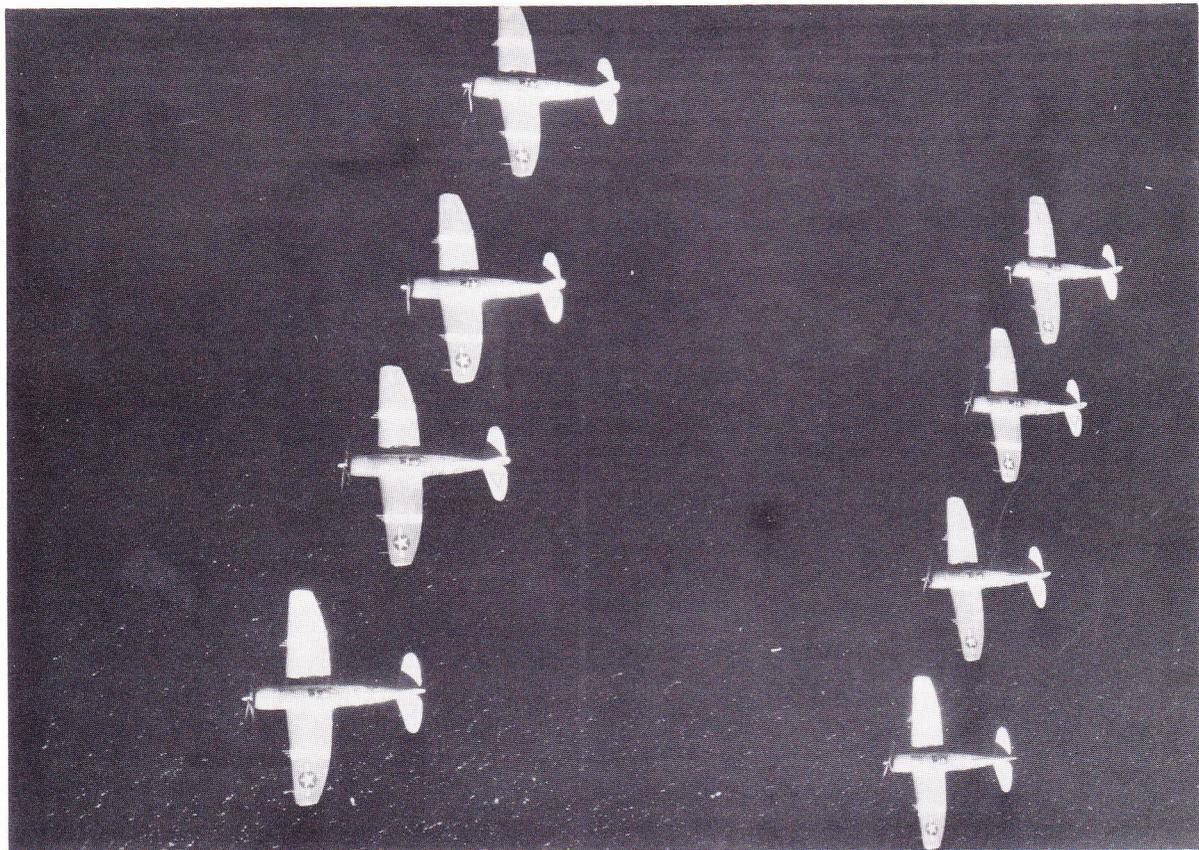


Above left: Texan Larry Lee, wearing his .45 in typical western fashion, was, like Chuck Reed, imported from the E. T. O. Naturally, his initials were branded on the wheel covers of his Thunderbolt.

Photo above right: Some days it just doesn't pay . . . Thunderbolt of the 464th Squadron shows what generally happens when sudden braking is required. This squadron carried a diagonal blue stripe on the all yellow tail section.



Left: Never take yourself too seriously. Here is the heraldic symbol of the 463rd Fighter Squadron on the Thunderbolt flown by Major Eugene W. Byrne.



Purpose and power are etched by light and shadow. Two flights of Thunderbolts stand stark against the shimmering Pacific. The distinctive wing plan of the 'N' model is very clear in this view. In spite of its bulkiness the big Thunderbolt does not lack grace and has considerable esthetic appeal.



Active to the very end, Captain Forrest taxis his "Shell Pusher" out to the runway for a napalm mission to Miyazaki only two days before war's conclusion. An interesting sidelight to his career: in all probability he was the last American to return from an operational flight in World War 2. Returning from a sortie over Korea and knowing it would all be over shortly, he released the remainder of his flight and spent considerable time buzzing the ruins of Hiroshima. When his Thunderbolt finally landed, the war had ended.



MARKINGS OF THE THUNDER-BOLTS OF THE 463rd FIGHTER SQUADRON.

Fuselage: Aircraft number in black under cowling and fuselage sides.

Wings: Yellow band outlined in thin black borders.

Tail unit: Entire section in a yellow color. Blue triangle on each side of the fin and left horizontal tail plane, top only.

Spinners: Often yellow.

Emblem: Not carried on all aircraft. See page 182.



Crew chief Sgt. Ray Ehle tends to the 2800 horsepower Pratt and Whitney. If the Jug was famous for any feature, it was power! The enormous engine makes man seem small indeed. The Jug was christened "Shell Pusher" in memory of Bob Forrest's brother, an artillery officer, who was killed in the crash of a spotter plane.