

# CONFIDENT COMBATANT

Col. Joseph Peterburs downs a Luftwaffe top ace

BY JAN TEGLER



**JOE PETERBURS ENJOYED "EVERY MINUTE"** of his combat experience during the late stages of World War II. Becoming a five-victory ace and shooting down an Me-262 flown by a famed German pilot was simply part of four intense months of combat, days as a POW, and fighting alongside a Russian tank unit.

And that's just one period of an Air Force career that lasted 36 years, including combat in the skies of Korea, ejecting from a jet during the Cold War, and an assignment to Vietnam that nearly cost him his life during the Tet Offensive.

Eighty one years after it all began when he was called to active duty in January 1943, 99-year-old Peterburs is buoyant, congenial, and modest about his incredible career.

Ridge Runner is a beautiful restoration of Maj. Pierce W. "Mac" McKinnon's P-51D. McKinnon flew with the 335th FS, 4th FG from Debden, England, where he flew seven different Mustangs and scored 17.67 damaged or destroyed enemy aircraft. (Photo by John Dibbs/Facebook.com/theplanepicturecompany)



**Prepared and eager to fight**

There was a tradition of military service in the Peterburs family. Joe Peterburs father was a U.S. Army cavalry officer who fought in the Philippines during the Moro Rebellion, then served with General John “Black Jack” Pershing’s troops during the 1916 Mexican Punitive Expedition chasing Pancho Villa. He worked in intelligence and counter-espionage during World War I and rejoined the military during WW II to fight in the Philippines once more at over 60 years of age.

His brothers also served in the war, but Joe Peterburs initially set a different course. He was studying to become a priest at a seminary when Pearl Harbor took place. Like his father and brothers, he immediately volunteered to join the war effort. But he had to wait until turning 18 years old to take a competitive exam to be accepted into the Army Air Corps. He passed and was sworn in in November 1942.

By January 1943 he was called to active duty as an aviation cadet and began an extended flight training process with basic training in Boeing PT-17s at Cochran Field near Douglas, Georgia that September. At Cochran, he progressed to the Vultee BT-13 before transferring to Napier Field in Dothan, Alabama for training in North American AT-6s equipped with .30 caliber machine guns.

“I really honed my skills there,” Peterburs says. “And there you realized that things are not just play anymore. You’re going to be in the war pretty soon.”

Unfortunately for Peterburs, he didn’t get into combat as soon as he would have liked. Training backlogs spurred by the massive number of cadet pilots the Army Air Force was ingesting delayed his transition from basic to advanced flight training. He had been hoping to join the air war in Europe before D-Day but it wasn’t until April 15, 1944 at the age of 19 that he won his wings and a commission as a Second Lieutenant. For the next several months he was assigned to a replacement training unit at Paige Field in Fort Myers, Florida flying Curtiss P-40Ns, building up more than 250 hours in the Allison V12 powered fighter.

Peterburs routinely flew another aircraft—the A-24 Banshee—at Paige Field as an instrument trainer. If the A-24 designation is unfamiliar to you, that’s not surprising. The Banshee derived from Douglas’ SBD Dauntless, widely known for its service as a U.S. Navy dive bomber. Of the nearly 6,000 Dauntlesses produced, 948 were purpose-built for the Army Air Force without arrestor hooks as the A-24.

“We flew instruments in it but we also could fly it when we wanted to,” Peterburs remembers. “It was pretty loose back then. I

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used to like to practice landings in the A-24 with those big pierced steel flaps on it.” By the time Peterburs finally shipped out to England in November 1944, he had amassed about 600 hours of flight time. He says, “I was ready to go to war!”

RAF Kings Cliffe, 90 miles north of London, was his destination. There, he was assigned to 20th Fighter Group’s 55th Fighter Squadron. The 20th had only recently converted from the P-38 Lightning to the P-51 Mustang.

Peterburs was delighted to be sent to a unit flying P-51s and checked out in the Group’s assorted B, C and D Model Mustangs, flying about 20 hours before his first combat mission.

“I enjoyed the P-40 for its aerobatic capabilities and maneuverability. But the P-51, all around, was a better aircraft. Checking out in it was simple. The basics of flying a P-40 and a P-51 are the same. I always thought of the P-40 as a big Stearman.

“Seven of us with time in the P-40 arrived together and we were probably well ahead of the 20th guys who had been flying the P-38 in terms of flying the Mustang.”

**First combat in “Josephine”**

Peterburs, like his fellow 55th FS Mustang pilots, was assigned a D model, serial number 44-15078. He named the airplane “Josephine” after his fiancée Josephine Heffner “who was waiting for me back in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.”

His first mission was a bomber escort sortie on December 13, 1944. Peterburs says he felt no apprehension. “I was anxious and ready to go.”

A month would pass before he’d come face to face with a German fighter, but he remembers it vividly. On January 14, 1945, the 20th FG was tasked with escorting 903rd Air Division B-17s to attack synthetic oil plants near Magdeburg, Germany. It was one of seven targets that day for a total force comprised of 700 B-17s and B-24s and 900



escort fighters.

On approach to the target area, the bombers were attacked by 200-plus Focke-Wulf Fw-190s and Messerschmitt Me-109s with air battles breaking out between 31,000 feet and the deck Peterburs says. The 20th FG destroyed 19.5 enemy aircraft on the mission.

"The 109's tactic was hit and run," Peterburs explains. "They'd come through the bombers to make hits then try to draw the escort fighters away. If our fighters were drawn away then the Fw-190s would come down and chew up the bombers."

The 20th FG Mustangs stayed put with the bombers, Peterburs says, resisting the urge to chase the first wave of fighters. But what

attackers. The entire mission last more than six hours.

I asked Joe if he was exhausted by the time he returned to RAF Kings Cliffe.

"No. I was ticked off because I didn't get a couple Germans! It was the time. This was our daily life. It was what you were doing." More missions followed, including a fighter sweep during the Battle of the Bulge. Aerial combat was becoming more sporadic as German forces were depleted and retreated. But one of the last big air battles of the war was still to come. Joe Peterburs was part of it.

### 1450 hours, April 10, 1945

By early April, Peterburs had 48 combat missions to his credit. His 49th would be the

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the 19-year-old fighter pilot saw from his cockpit was chaos.

"There were bombers blowing up all over the place, parachutes in the air, wings falling, engines falling. Your mind really couldn't get hold of it. It was just pandemonium. I was more concerned about the falling parts and maybe running into a parachute than I was of the enemy aircraft. That's just how it struck me."

When Fw-190s attacked the bomber box, the 55th FS Mustangs went after them. "I came head-on with an Fw-190, playing chicken, firing and doing about 400 mph with him doing about 400 mph—about an 800 mph closing speed. My .50s were going toward him and his 20mm rounds were coming at me."

Peterburs' flight leader was behind the 190, chasing it. "He couldn't shoot at the 190 because he was afraid he would hit me. I got some hits on the 190 but passed under him and as soon as I did, my flight leader popped him and he started down. That was a really exhilarating encounter and actually, I was laughing. I was thinking, 'what kind of thing am I into here?' It was wild!"

The German attack lasted for at least 15 minutes, Peterburs says. But the American fighter escort effectively bloodied the

last he would fly during the war.

Russian forces were advancing on Berlin from the east while Allied troops were closing in from the west. On April 10, the USAAF assembled a force of 1,300 bombers and 905 fighters to bomb targets around Magdeburg, Potsdam, and Oranienburg just north of Berlin.

Peterburs and the 20th FG escorted a group of bombers bound for Oranienburg.

"We rendezvoused at Osnabruck, well inside Germany before we met up with the bombers," Peterburs says. "From there the whole force was together heading east towards Braunschweig. That's where the bombers started splitting up for their targets."

"It was a very uneventful mission up to that point. The bombers started dropping their loads and almost simultaneously we were hit by a swarm of Me-262s."

It wasn't the first time 20th FG Mustang pilots had seen Germany's advanced jet fighter, Peterburs notes.

"We had seen them off in the distance before and heard radio conversations about them from other fighter groups. Most of the time they made hit and run passes on the bombers. We were told 'don't even try to chase them, you'll burn your engine out.'





"There were only three ways that you'd engage them: on landing or takeoff or from above with an altitude advantage that would compensate for the difference in speed.

"I was flying high cover, about 5,000 feet above the bombers right around 30,000 feet. The bombers were flying at about 25,000 feet. I looked down and I see an Me-262 start making a run at the bombers."

Though he couldn't have known it, the fast, menacing jet Peterburs had spotted was being flown by one of the Luftwaffe's top aces: *Oberleutnant* Walter Schuck.

By April 1945, Schuck had racked up 206 aerial victories, mostly on the eastern front, flying from Finland. He had been awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaf Clusters for 198 missions flown in the Me-109. He flew just eight missions in the Me-262.

As soon as Peterburs spotted the Me-262, he rolled "Josephine" over and dived after Schuck with his throttle wide open, pushing past the wire detent that had to be released to give the Mustang added boost and rpm for what was referred to as "war emergency power."

"Just as I rolled over, he blew up one B-17 and was switching over to another one. I was

diving at him at an extremely high rate of speed.

"For some reason, I glanced at my airspeed at 20,000 feet. The aircraft was starting to feel strange. I was doing 420 knots indicated at 20,000, which equates to about 500 knots [approximately 575 mph]. I think I was hitting compressibility.

"I pulled back on the stick to get into position at his six o'clock and started firing. I saw a little bit of smoke and fire coming out of his left engine just as he blows up a second B-17.

"As soon as he noticed the hits on his aircraft, he started diving for the deck. I'm chasing him, losing my speed advantage. I reduced throttle because the engine was overworking itself. He hadn't realized I was behind him until I scored some hits."

Schuck would later explain to Peterburs that rounds from the Mustang's .50 caliber machine guns struck a small fuel transfer pump in the Me-262's left wing that transferred fuel from it to the engine.

"He said that I had hit that with a couple rounds and 'the skin around it peeled back like a sardine can.' Fuel was escaping, a small amount at first but by the time he lost more altitude the fuel was igniting and the engine

**Need caption 4 (Info on photo reads: 1st Lt. Joe Petersburg, 20th FG 55th FS Kings Cliff RAF Station, England, February 1945)**

caught fire and disintegrated.

"At about 3,000 feet there was a lower level of clouds and he disappeared into it. I decided not to follow him in and that was it," Peterburs says.

"I didn't know I'd shot him down. I had seen some fire from his left engine but I didn't see him again and I forgot about him. I was looking for something else to do at that point. I didn't claim the 262 as a kill."

### Schönwalde Aerodrome

Several miles southeast of Oranienburg near the outskirts of Berlin was a Luftwaffe air base known as Schönwalde, home to the 14th Air Corps. Reportedly, some of Adolf Hitler's personal aircraft were stationed

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there until April 22, 1945.

"My flight leader, Captain Richard Tracy had followed me down," Peterburs remembers.

"He was a couple thousand yards behind me. I looked down and to the side and saw this German airfield just loaded with German aircraft. I called Tracy and said, 'Do you see what I see?'

"He said, 'Yes.' And I said, 'Let's go!'"

Peterburs had spotted Schönwalde. Strafing targets of opportunity had become common for American fighter forces by this time and German airfields were decimated by USAAF Mustangs, P-47s and light bombers.

"We both made two strafing runs," Peterburs explains.

"Tracy didn't fire on the first pass because he said he'd seen roundels on the aircraft on the ground and thought they were British. He told me not to fire but I'd already made a pass. So he came around again and took 20 mm hits on the second run. I saw a puff of smoke from his airplane and saw his canopy fly off, then saw him bail out. He had to bail out just 350 feet above the deck. But I saw his chute open and saw him land in a lake. "Then I was by myself. So I decided to make some more passes on the airfield. I did a lot of damage and I was coming in on my last pass, strafing an Fw-200, a Condor, a big four

engine aircraft."

Peterburs had destroyed five aircraft on the ground and set a hangar afire.

"I'm firing and the Condor blows up. But I felt a thud as I was attacking. I pulled up off him and felt another thud.

"Now I've got oil all over the windscreen and I know I'm hit bad. I continued pulling up and was able to climb up to about 10,000 feet. Then I had to make a decision: whether to turn east or west. We were briefed that the Allied forces were in the Magdeburg area and the Russians were in Berlin.

"Do I head for the Russians who were closer or Magdeburg 80 or 90 miles south of where I was at that moment? I decided to try to make it back to Magdeburg."

Peterburs adjusted the throttle of "Josephine" as much as he could but dropped down to about 1,000 feet by the time he was over Burg, Germany near Magdeburg.

"I unstrapped from my harness to bail out and just then I see an Fw-190 coming at me at my 3 o'clock position!

"I did all I could to turn into him. I was able to do it as he made his pass and fired rockets. He misses and just goes on and disappears. I'm burning and I'm now down to about 500 feet.

"I decided I was too low to bail out. This was all happening in milliseconds. I was going to have to belly-land. But I immediately realized, 'Oh hell, I'm unstrapped! I'll kill myself if I try to belly land the airplane!'

"So I went out of the left side of the cockpit because the right side of the airplane was burning. I was probably down to about 350 feet by that time. I let go and tumbled out. I hit my knee against the horizontal stabilizer, pulled my rip cord, the chute opens and I swing once, then land hard!"

Peterburs survived the bailout, but it led directly to the next part of his experience, surviving behind enemy lines in the chaos overtaking an almost-defeated Germany. Look for the continuation of Peterburs' extraordinary combat career in a future issue. ➔