

AMERICA'S TOP GUN

RICHARD BONG'S 101st BIRTHDAY WAS ON 24 SEPTEMBER 2021.
SADLY, AMERICA'S ACE OF ACES NEVER LIVED TO ENJOY
THE VICTORY FOR WHICH HE FOUGHT SO HARD

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NOT YOUR TYPICAL ACE

On 2 September 1942, Lt. Jay Robbins was one of 15 P-38 Lightning pilots crammed aboard an USAAF Consolidated LB-30 Liberator transport bound for the Southwest Pacific and Gen. George Kenney's 5th Air Force. As the transport winged its way to Australia, Robbins, who would score 22 victories in the coming months while flying with the 80th Fighter Squadron, became acquainted with his fellow travelers. One



Cadet Bong overflying the Grand Canyon in a Luke Field AT-6. While undergoing training at Taft, California, Bong's gunnery instructor was Capt. Barry Goldwater, future senator and presidential candidate. Goldwater would later recall, "Bong was a very bright student. But the most important thing came from a P-38 pilot who said Bong was the finest natural pilot he ever met. The pilot recalled that he could never prevent Bong from getting on his tail, even though Bong was flying an AT-6."

of them was a blond-haired Wisconsin farm boy named Bong. Robbins later related that, if someone had told him America's Ace of Aces was amongst his fellow LB-30 travelers, Dick Bong would have been the last pilot he would have picked... for good reason!

In the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood had created an image in the public eye of a typical fighter pilot, namely a two-fisted, cigar-smoking, skirt-chasing, aerial daredevil. Richard Ira Bong was none of those as USAAF publicity flacks and newspaper reporters discovered to their sorrow. On the ground, he was quiet, polite, and seldom tooted his own horn. Yet, beginning in December 1942, the young Lightning pilot began racking up kills and acquiring a reputation as "a fighter tiger."

How to explain the difference?

Richard Kirkland, a 9th FS pilot who flew with Dick in 1944, came closest to capturing the essence of Dick Bong when he stated, "Dick Bong was an enigma. A Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, so to speak. On the ground, away from a flying machine, he was indeed a modest person with an almost shy personality. But in the air, he transformed into a fearless, wildly aggressive combatant, who pursued and attacked his opponent with all the skill and deadly force at his command. It was as though once he climbed into the cockpit of a P-38 fighter, he became another person — eager and determined to accomplish his mission of destroying the enemy."