

FIGHTER PILOT REUNION

JOSEPH "PETE" PETERBURS REUNITES WITH THE P-51D AND RECALLS SHOOTING DOWN ONE OF THE LUFTWAFFE'S TOP ACES

BY NICHOLAS A. VERONICO

On 1 September 2024, some 80 years after graduating from pilot training at Napier Field, Alabama, Joseph A. "Pete" Peterburs returned to the cockpit of a North American P-51D — the type he flew in the skies over Nazi-held Europe during World War II. As a young second lieutenant, Peterburs flew P-51D 44-

15078, which he named *Josephine*, after his then-fiancé, with the 8th Air Force's 20th Fighter Group, 55th Fighter Squadron.

Terry Tarditi, owner of the P-51D *Comfortably Numb*, was friends with 103-year-old Wallace "Lucky"

Lowman, a WWII P-51 pilot with the 20th Fighter Group. With his Mustang down for maintenance, Tarditi approached Chris Luvara with the idea of flying Lowman in P-51D *Straw Boss 2*. Luvara

made the 20th Fighter Group connection between Lowman and Peterburs and the Warbird pilots recognized how unique it would be to fly both WWII veterans together. Tarditi and Luvara arranged to have Lowman and Peterburs fly in *Straw Boss 2*, which has a stick and rudder pedals in the back seat, at the Hollister Airport in northern California.

Before the flight, Peterburs looked at his and Lowman's list of missions flown and determined that although they were in the same group, they never met during the war. They did, however, participate in 22 of the same missions.

Growing up in St. Paul, Minnesota, during the Great Depression, Peterburs enlisted in the USAAF five days after his 18th birthday, on 30 November 1942. As a cadet, he soloed in September 1943, while

training with the 63rd Army Air Forces (AAF) Flying Training Detachment, Class 44C, Squadron 11, at Douglas, Georgia. Advanced flight training was undertaken at the 2116th AAF Base Unit, Advanced Flying School at Napier Field, Alabama, in Curtiss P-40s. Shipping out for duty overseas, Peterburs traveled to England on the former ocean liner *Ile de France*, and joined the 20th Fighter Group's 55th Fighter Squadron, based at Station 367, RAF Kings Cliffe in Cambridgeshire. During WWII, Peterburs flew 49 missions and accumulated 269 hours in combat.

FIRST LUFTWAFFE ENCOUNTER

Peterburs' first aerial victory was a head-on fight with a Focke-Wulf Fw 190. The engagement took place on 14 January 1945, a cold winter day when the 8th Air Force dispatched 911 B-17s and B-24s to attack oil infrastructure around Magdeburg, marshalling yards at Osnabrück, and roads and bridges in the Cologne area. Escorting the B-17s were 645 P-51 Mustangs along with 116 P-47 Thunderbolts on a sweep of *Luftwaffe* airfields in northern Germany. The *Luftwaffe* launched everything that could fly that day in a strong defense of the *Reich*.

Peterburs picks up the story: "The bomber formation was hit by well over 100 Bf 109s and Fw 190s. Dogfights were all over the sky, and I ended up head-on with the Fw190; his cannon fire and my .50-cals were flying at each other. I saw some hits on his aircraft as I passed some 100 feet below him. My flight leader was on his tail and as soon as I passed under the 190, my flight leader zapped him. This was not a kill for me; I only damaged his aircraft."

The 20th Fighter Group claimed 21



World War II Mustang pilot Pete Peterburs is in the rear seat of *Straw Boss 2* with Chris Luvara at the controls. Adding to Peterburs' experience, Eddle Andreini Jr. in *Primo Branco*, and Sal Rubino in *Grim Reaper* follow in trail. Photo shot from Ken Dwelle's AT-6F *Kitchen Pass*. (Jim Dunn)



B-17G 43-38606 *Moonlight Mission* was credited to the guns of Oberleutnant Walter Schuck.



B-17G 44-8427 *Henn's Revenge* also fell prey to the Me 262 flown by Walter Schuck.