

PASSING OF AN ACE



REFLECTION ON P-38 ACE PERRY DAHL AND THE GREATEST GENERATION BY STEVE BLAKE

Among my military-aviation-history-related activities (which have also included, these past few years, writing articles for Air Classics) I am the P-38 National Association's historian and membership chairman. Just this month (January) we have learned of the recent deaths of four of our last surviving wartime Lightning pilots, ranging in age from 99 to 103.

One of those men was Perry John Dahl, one of America's last surviving fighter aces, who passed away during December 2024 at the age of 101. Born in remote North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, on 18 February 1923, as a child Dahl's family emigrated to the USA and settled in Seattle where he completed three years of high school before joining the Washington National Guard as a teenager in 1940.

Assigned to the 41st Infantry Division, Dahl would enter the Aviation

Cadet Program of the USAAF on 26 September 1942 and would win his wings and be commissioned on 22 June 1943 as a second lieutenant at Williams Field, Arizona, as part of Class 43-F.

With his multi-engine training behind him, Dahl was then assigned briefly to the 55th Fighter Group in Washington State, where he learned to fly the P-38. Later that year he was sent to the Southwest Pacific and in October he joined the 432nd Fighter Squadron of the 5th Air Force's new, P-38-equipped 475th Fighter Group in New Guinea. He scored his first aerial victory near Alexishafen, New Guinea, on 9 November 1943 when his unit was escorting an all-out attack with Havocs and Mitchells on the Japanese airbase. He encountered and quickly dispatched a Mitsubishi Zero with a long burst from the P-38's four .50-caliber Browning machine guns and single 20mm cannon.

The missions would come fast and furious and enemy aerial opposition was extensive. On 22 December 1943 and 23 January 1944, he would destroy a Zero on each mission. Weather in that part of the world can quickly turn against pilots. On 24 February, Dahl and his squadron mates took off from Nadzab for an attack on the Japanese airfield at Momote. However, they ran into a heavy storm system and turned back but could not land at their home field. Diverting to Cape Gloucester, Dahl touched down in the path of a B-24 that was taking off. Hitting the brakes and skidding the P-38 to the right, the B-24's left wing and engines slammed into the P-38. The Lightning spun around and the gear collapsed. The fighter was destroyed but Dahl was uninjured.

Promoted to a captain during April 1944, Dahl also became the operations officer for the 475th Fighter Group.



Perry Dahl in the cockpit of a Lightning.

He achieved the status of ace on 3 April during a swirling dogfight over Hollandia, Dutch East Indies, when he destroyed a Zero and an Oscar. On 8 June, he dispatched another Oscar in flames and saw it crash near Waigeo Island. Returning to base, the P-38's landing gear failed to lower and Dahl had to crank them down. When he touched down, the left main gear folded and the P-38 went off the runway, hit trees, and was destroyed. The 475th FG then moved on to San Pablo Airfield in Leyte during the Philippines campaign.

On 10 November, the P-38s were scrambled to intercept incoming enemy fighters over Ormoc Bay. Flying P-38L 44-23957, Dahl and his squadron ran into a flight of sleek Kawasaki Ki 61 Tony fighters and an aerial battle developed. Dahl shot down one of the attacking Tony fighters for this seventh victory and then rolled his Lightning in a hard left bank to go after the remaining Japanese.

However, while doing this he collided with P-38L 44-23935 flown by 2nd Lt. Grady Laseter. Dahl would recall, "I had another one all lined up and he started to turn. I threw my maneuver flaps down, I pulled through and was just about ready to unload on him. I was doing like maybe 400 knots and, all of a sudden, I was doing nothing. I had a midair collision. I looked up in the rear-view mirror and both tail booms had been knocked off. Then the right engine blew up and it fell off. So, I popped the canopy. I had on this Aussie helmet but I didn't have it strapped on and I lost it so I got burned pretty bad. The airplane



The Lightnings of the 432nd Fighter Squadron carried a variety of colorful markings. This aircraft is P-38H 42-66682.

blew up about the time I stood up to bail out. I suffered a lot of flash burns but really nothing too severe."

Laseter was killed when his plane crashed into the sea.

Hitting the water, Dahl managed to deploy his life raft and drifted the rest of the day and night. The following day he drifted through an enemy convoy. Suffering from exposure, burns, and shock, he reached Leyte's western coast. Making it to land, Dahl was rescued by Filipino guerrillas who kept him hidden until he could be returned to American lines on 10 December.

Back in action on 8 February, Dahl led four P-38s, each fitted with a drop tank and 500-lb bomb, to dive-bomb



Insignia of the 475th Fighter Group.

Mariveles on the Bataan Peninsula. Hitting their target with bombs, they then strafed the barracks at Mariveles and the jetty at Cochinos Point.

On 5 March, Dahl led eight Lightnings on a sweep over Formosa but one P-38 aborted due to a mechanical problem. Once over the target, they spotted

The Planes of Fame Air Museum's Lockheed Lightning is painted in the markings of Perry Dahl's 23 Skidoo. After the new markings were applied, Steve Hinton took Dahl aloft for a flight — his first time in a P-38 since WWII.