

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

BUZZ AND BONG: BOOKEND ACES

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KEY WORDS: Ace Buzz Wagner Dick Bong P-40 P-38

No, this is not a rejected treatment for a Cheech and Chong movie!

Buzz Wagner was the first AAF Ace of WWII, and Richard Bong was the highest scoring American Ace of WWII. Their personalities, and their fate, were remarkably similar. This is their story.

THE “ACE”

Much of the combat in WWI involved massed troops in trenches, using ‘over the top’ charges, often into the face of then-modern weapons. Finding a few heroic figures around which to rally was difficult. Except for the pilots. It was easy for propagandists to paint fighter pilots in terms of the days of individual, highly-skilled knights of old, in a new context. Most of the aerial victories in that war were made by only a few percent of the pilots employed. Keeping “score” was a way of evaluating their merit, and a source of competition the public could understand. The Red Baron’s 80 victories illustrated an understandable prowess, matched to a lesser degree by Eddie Rickenbacker’s 26. But these two represented the best of the best; how could those whose accomplishments, though less, be explained as “exceptional?” How could such a serious professional rivalry amongst “sky knights,” friend or foe, be best expressed?

Americans and French aviators settled into a system that had five certain victories as the standard of excellence; pilots with five were considered “Aces,” a reference from the top value of a playing card. The Brits tended to call their top pilots “star turns,” their term for the featured performer in theater.

Some wartime pilots took great pains to establish their victory tallies, taking greater risks to build their scores past five to ten and other round-numbers. Other pilots disdained such. But heroes were important, and the public could identify with the military barnstormers, alone in the sky, fighting for Uncle Sam, John Bull, or the Kaiser.

The Americans were all-in on the concept of revering the Ace. This story is about the first AAF in WWII and the AAF Ace who finished with the highest score. Buzz and Bong were a lot alike, even if the planes they flew were not.

BOYD DAVID “BUZZ” WAGNER

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Boyd Wagner was born on October 26, 1916, in the small town of Emeigh, in south-central Pennsylvania. He spent his boyhood days in Nanty-Glo, near Johnstown. He was interested in all things mechanical, especially flying things. He majored in aeronautical engineering at the University of Pittsburgh but left after three years to join the Army Air Corps. He earned his wings in 1938. He earned his nickname the way most who've earned it: flying very low and fast.

Buzz established a reputation over the next two years as an excellent pilot and as a capable leader. He was assigned to the 24th Pursuit Group, based at Clark Field in the Philippines in December, 1940, and soon was given command of the Group's 17th Pursuit Squadron. The 17th was flying [P-26 Peashooters](#) at that time, but they would receive new P-40Es on November 25, 1941.

A year passed, with Buzz training his pilots in fighter tactics and patrolling. They were at the end of a long supply line, and there were only 35 early model B-17s and 72 early model P-40s available, along with some P-26A Peashooters in the Philippine Air Force. Everyone was expecting war, and fighters and bombers were launched on the morning of December 8, 1941, when the word came of the attack at Pearl Harbor (December 7 east of the International Date Line). Most of the fighters and bombers at Clark were launched to repel the expected onslaught, or at least get the aircraft out of harm's way. Alas, the Japanese aerial assault that Buzz and company rightly expected had been delayed by bad weather. They arrived just as most of the aircraft had landed to refuel, and half our planes were destroyed on the ground.

The surviving bombers had to retreat south to an alternative base on Mindanao. The surviving P-40s stayed at Clark, but were to only conduct reconnaissance, since they were so outnumbered. However, things immediately heated up when Japanese troops began going ashore at Aparri and Vigan, both on the north side of Luzon, about 200 miles away.

Buzz flew a solo reconnaissance flight to Aparri, where he saw two destroyers of what had to be part of an invasion force. They opened fire on Buzz, who dove for the sea, followed by five fighters. The P-40 couldn't begin to outfly the nimble fighters, but it was faster. The Japanese gave up pursuit and turned to Aparri's landing strip. Buzz turned and overtook them and shot down two. The other three temporarily scattered, giving Buzz a chance to make two strafing passes against parked fighters at the new Japanese base. Two of the Japanese fighters came back to challenge Buzz's withdrawal to Clark. Buzz calmly watched their approach, then suddenly chopped his throttle, surprising the Japanese behind him enough for them to pass Buzz, right in line with his guns. All four Japanese fighters were adjudged "shot down." The damage to the planes he hit on the ground did not count in the "score."

Twenty-five Japanese planes were found on the airstrip at Vigan by arial reconnaissance on December 15. Buzz and two squadron mates were assigned to make a morning attack the next day, strafing and dropping small fragmentation bombs from racks attached to their wings. Buzz would lead wingman Russell Church on the initial strafing/bombing runs, while Allison Strauss provided top cover. They approached from the sea at very low altitude, Strauss climbing during final approach to protect the other two from surprise attack. Wagner led, dropping his bombs into a row of Japanese fighters. Church followed, but the anti-aircraft gunners were more

ready, and his plane was hit hard. Nose aflame, Church maintained his attack, dropping his bombs before crashing in flames (he would receive a posthumous DFC). Enraged, Buzz made repeated passes, eventually claiming 9 planes destroyed and 7 damaged on the ground. A few Japanese planes struggled to take off and fight back. One plane, still climbing out, tried to get on Buzz's tail. Buzz did the chopped throttle trick again and barrel rolled, coming out smoothly on the brave enemy's tail. A burst of Buzz's guns and he had his fifth victory, becoming the first "Ace" for the AAF in WWII.

Record-keeping in those days was usually inaccurate. Pilots and their commanders liked to report optimistic numbers, especially in the dark days after Pearl. But the fact was that neither submarines nor planes made much of a dent in the overall invasion forces, in spite of the heroics of Wagner and his fellow pilots.

NOTE: I have refrained from identifying the aircraft Buzz downed because, while some accounts call them "Zeros," they were probably incorrect. Buzz himself identified his opponents over Aparri as having fixed, not retractable, landing gear. An earlier-model aircraft, the Nakajima Ki-27 (code-named "Nate"), has the type of fixed gear Buzz reported, and it was in common use at the start of the War. A pilot with five victories still deserves "Ace" status, but they likely weren't against the more-capable "Zero," a name generally given to any Japanese fighter earlier in the Pacific War.

Wagner's time in the Philippines would soon come to a close. An anti-aircraft shell exploded in front of Buzz's P-400 during a mission flown a few days after his becoming an Ace. Fragments shattered his windshield, with shards of glass hitting him in the face and chest, damaging his left eye. He was still in the hospital when Manila was declared an "open city" on December 26.

Buzz knew he would be captured if he didn't leave right away, so he and another patient, Jim Bruce, snuck out to Manila Bay, where they hitched a ride on boats loaded with explosives and ammo bound for Bataan. From there, they were sent to Australia in the hopes they could ferry back more P-40s for the defense of the Philippines. Their journey took many twists and turns, but after ten days or so, our hero was in Brisbane.

Buzz helped the 17th Pursuit Squadron there re-form and train new pilots. On January 29, he was put in command of all P-40 pilot training in Brisbane and promoted to Captain. He would become the CO of the 13th Pursuit Squadron a few days later. Buzz and other pilots were invited on board the *USS Langley*, the Navy's first aircraft carrier, converted from a collier named the "Jupiter." The carrier was to support the defense of Java, but Buzz received notice that he was to not participate, but rather remain in Australia.

Good thing for Buzz, because the rampaging Kido Butai task force sank the *Langley* a week later!

Buzz was promoted again, to LtCol, and spent the rest of March, 1942, with the 5th Fighter Command in Port Moresby, New Guinea, where he began flying combat again. On April 30, Buzz led a group of 12 P-39Ds on a strafing mission against Lae Airfield on the north side of New Guinea (the very same spot from which Amelia Earhart made her final take-off). They shot up

some planes on the field, but did not immediately encounter aerial opposition. That changed quickly as our guys flew over the nearby base at Salamaua, where Zeros from the hottest Japanese fighter group, the Tainan Kokutai, found them. These were, indeed, Zeros, and the Tainan group was the best the Japanese Navy produced, and they still had their top pilots intact, folks like Sakai, Nishizawa, Sasai, and others. It's amazing that any of the P-39s survived, but they did. Our pilots claimed a total of four Zeros, with three falling to Buzz, bringing his victory total to 8.

Buzz's final contribution in New Guinea came on July 11, when he was aboard a PBY Catalina that flew over both a place called Dobodura and the Buna Airfield near the garrison town of Buna on the north coast of New Guinea. Buzz and the others agreed that Dobodura would be the better site to construct a supporting air base.

The AAF was still learning about Japan's pilots and planes arrayed against them in the southwest Pacific. Buzz had more knowledge and experience than anyone, so he was sent home, over his protest, to help season newly-produced pilots and to provide important tips to aircraft manufacturers. He did so effectively for a number of months. He had earned a DSC, a DFC, and the Purple Heart. On top of that, he received a LOT of positive publicity. Trading cards, comic books, and article in *LIFE Magazine* and more; all were his. He was our knight in shining armor!

Buzz made a routine P-40 flight on November 29, 1942, from Eglin Field in Florida to Maxwell Field in Alabama. His plane went missing, and the wreckage wasn't discovered until several weeks later, about five miles north of the town of Freeport, Florida.

LtCol Wagner was buried in Grandview Cemetery in Johnstown. Over 15,000 mourners attended, and the event was covered by both *Life* and *Time* magazines. The crash site was rediscovered in 2008, and additional human remains were found. The remains were identified as Wagner's in 2010, and they were buried with full military honors with those earlier at Grandview. His [gravestone](#) is impressive, with the epitaph reading, "Out of these hills deep-rooted in the Earth, yet always reaching for the beckoning sky, he drew the quality which gauged his worth, his lowliness as prestige, mounted high."

RICHARD BONG

Richard Ira Bong was also born on September 24, 1920, in Poplar, Wisconsin, near the southeastern tip of Lake Superior. He was one of nine children, living on a small farm. Young Dick enjoyed fishing, hunting, and hiking when he wasn't working on farming or repairing farm equipment. He played baseball, basketball, hockey, and the clarinet in the marching band while in high school. Like many young men, he developed a keen interest in aviation, so much so that he enrolled in the Civil Pilot Training Program while an undergraduate at the Superior State Teachers College, which allowed him to learn to fly and obtain a pilot's license. From there, Dick applied and was accepted into the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet Program in February, 1941. He entered military service formally in the following May (one of his instructors there

was future Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater). He would be commissioned into the Army Air Force Reserves as a 2Lt in January, 1942, angry about Pearl Harbor.

Dick Bong proved to be a “natural” when it came to piloting and aerial gunnery. His first posting was as a gunnery instructor at Luke AFB outside Phoenix. He was transferred to Hamilton Field near San Francisco on May 6, where he learned to fly the P-38 Lightning.

The AAF realized the importance of building a high level of aggressiveness and competence in their fighter pilots. Things that would ground a pilot permanently today were tolerated, perhaps even tacitly promoted. Dick Bong didn't need any such encouragement. He was already very adept in handling the Lightning, and he further honed his skills, and his reputation, by flying a loop around the middle span of the Golden Gate Bridge and flying down Market Street in San Francisco below building top level, waving at the secretaries as he passed by. Later, when he was flying support for a pilot rescue in New Guinea, he spied a crocodile showing interest in the proceedings, so he dropped to water level and hit the croc with a single shot from his 20 mm cannon.

General George Kenney commanded the Fourth Air Force in while Dick Bong was at Hamilton Field. 2Lt Bong was just the kind of fighter pilot he wanted on his team, so he issued a reprimand to Dick for his loops and low passes, then invited Dick to join him as he moved to his next assignment, commanding the Fifth Air Force working with (for) General McArthur. I suspect that Gen Kenney smiled while dressing Bong down for his Golden Gate loop, since he himself had flown underneath New York City's East River bridge on his first solo flight!

Dick Bong's favorite combat tactic was similar to the one he used on the croc, get in so close before firing that a miss was unlikely. Having four .50 caliber machine guns and that cannon grouped together directly in front of him helped with the aiming process, too. General Kenney would soon have cause to celebrate his selection of Dick Bong; and after the War, he would even write a book about him.

Kenny was promoted to LtGen on October 21, 1942. He butted heads with McArthur's staff, but won most of his points; he had free reign to organize his units as he pleased. Kenney was knowledgeable of the prowess of Japanese fighters, that combined with the fact that New Guinea was at the end of the supply line, made him cautious with his assets, particularly bombers. He would instead focus on getting and maintaining air superiority over all of New Guinea, a task that would fall heavily on the shoulders of the P-38 squadrons under his command. Interdiction of convoys making supply runs to Japanese forces in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and their vicinity would be handled by specially-modified B-25 medium bombers, turning them into amazingly-powerful anti-ship strafers (see the previous Item of the Week in the reference list).

Bong arrived in Australia and placed into a new P-38 unit, the 17th Fighter Squadron, then soon moved over to the 9th FS in the 49th Fighter Group, where he helped other pilots transition to the P-38. The squadron did not have its full complement of Lightnings at that time, so Bong and the other guys assigned the P-38 flew temporarily with the 35th FG's 39th FS, to gain combat experience. It worked; Dick Bong shot down a Zero and an Oscar over Buna on December 27,

during the Battle of Buna-Gona, both places on the northern shore of New Guinea, a feat that earned him a Silver Star.

The loaned P-38 pilots returned to the 9th FS in January, now fully outfitted with Lightnings, basing outside of Port Moresby. Bong was promoted to 1Lt on July 26, then on July 26, he shot down four fighters over Lae, making him an Ace and earning him the DSC. He was promoted to Captain the next month.

In addition to his medals and promotions, Capt Bong had earned some home leave. While back in Wisconsin, he met and was smitten by Marjorie Vattendahl. He promised to marry her as soon as his military commitment was over. When he got back to the SW Pacific, he had a big picture of his beau and her nickname, "Marge," emblazoned on this side of his Lightning, alongside the small Japanese flags showing his growing victory total.

The later models of the P-38 were a much better aircraft than the Zeros that were their typical opponents. The Zero could still out-maneuver it, if the P-38 pilot tried to fight that way. But with a service ceiling ~3000' higher than the Zero, a P-38 pilot could choose the time and geometry of their attack to great advantage. Superior diving and level speed, superior pilot protection, and self-sealing fuel tanks led to lopsided victory vs. loss numbers.

Bong's score continued to grow after his return from leave. He shot down numbers 26 and 27 on April 12, 1944, tying him with Eddie Rickenbacker's best-in-the-Army record set in WWI. He was immediately brought back home and promoted to Major, and was assigned to make a number of inspirational visits to Air Bases and going on a 15-State bond drive. He returned to New Guinea in September. His primary role was to be an advanced gunnery instructor for the 5th FG, with permission to fly missions again, but "not to seek combat."

Silly brass. Thirteen more Japanese planes fell to his guns by December 17. Maj Bong's total of 40 victories still makes him the "Ace of Aces" for the United States Air Force. Bong's record (and continued combat flying) persuaded General Kenney to send him home for good. Before he left, Maj Bong received the Congressional Medal of Honor from General MacArthur himself.

He got home after the New Year. He kept his promise to Marge by marrying her on February 10, 1945, then was off on a whirlwind of public appearances and bond sale rallies.

The P-38 Lightning was built by Lockheed. Having a war hero on staff was an attractive prospect for Lockheed, so Dick became a test pilot at Lockheed's factory in Burbank, California. He also tested planes at Wright Field, near Dayton. Improvements were being made all the time on the Lightning, even this late in the War. Maj Bong got to test some of the new ideas. One potential improvement was to interconnect the throttle and propeller controls. He took off at Wright on April 16, 1945, planning an hour-long test of the new controls set-up. However, the flight had barely begun when the right engine blew up, causing a mission abort. Failures of the tightly-ducted Allison engines used in the Lightning was a problem throughout the Lightning's entire period of service. That particular aircraft, a P-38J model, is presently on display in the Udvar-Hazy Center of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

The jet age had just begun. The German Me-262 twin-engine jet had shown everyone the future of military aviation was not propeller-driven, and Lockheed had developed the first capable American jet fighter, the P-80A Shooting Star. Maj Bong wanted to fly that one, too!

Some successful military pilots make good test pilots. But the skill sets required for those two roles are quite different. Military pilots have to have the flying and shooting skills to score aerial victories; test pilots have to take a slower, more engineering-oriented approach. Really successful fighter pilots sometimes had a “know-it-all” attitude due to their success in the crucible of war; relying on their past successes rather than get concerned about reading the Pilot’s Manual, or any of the other “minutia” of testing new aviation technology. According to Chuck Yeager, Dick Bong certainly fell into that category.

Even though the military was accepting production of the Shooting Star and using them for non-combat purposes, it was a very different type of plane than almost all pilots were used to. And the kinks had not yet been worked out of the Shooting Star’s design. One of its more serious deficiencies was the pump that supplied fuel to the P-80’s jet engine. It was somewhat under-designed and could fail during heavy use. Flight testing had begun in earnest in 1944, and there had been a dozen P-80 crashes since then, with several test pilots killed.

Dick Bong really wanted to fly this hot new aircraft, and began acceptance test flights in June, 1945. He flew a P-80 successfully 11 times.

On August 3, a YP-80A assigned to the 1st FG exploded in mid-air during a routine test flight, cause unknown, killing pilot Major Ira Boyd Jones, a veteran of the CBI Theater. On August 3, a fuel pump failure just after take-off killed another test pilot, after which switching on the back-up fuel pump was added to the pre-flight checklist. On August 6, 1945, Dick Bong took off from Lockheed’s Air Terminal in Burbank (now Hollywood Burbank Airport, after being known as Bob Hope Airport).

The Shooting Star taxied normally, and made a smooth take-off roll, but as it started to climb, the fuel pump failed and the engine flamed-out. There was no time for Major Bong to switch on the auxiliary pump and getting the jet engine even started, let alone running fast enough to keep the now-slowng P-80 from crashing back to Earth. It was full of fuel, and falling from the height it had attained would collapse the landing gear, resulting in a massive fire.

Major Bong knew that he had mere seconds to get out of the dying aircraft. However, the P-80A had no ejection seat. Bong quickly popped the canopy, stood in his seat, and pulled the ripcord on his parachute. It streamed enough to pull him from the cockpit, but it snagged on the P-80s tail and he was pulled to his death.

Major Bong’s fame was such that on any semi-normal day, his death would be a bold headline item in any American newspaper. It did rate a prominent spot on the front page on August 7, but was understandably crowded out of the topmost spot by another event on August 6: Hiroshima. Major Richard Ira Bong was buried in his hometown at the Poplar Cemetery.

His medal tally: The Congressional Medal of Honor; the Distinguished Service Cross; a Silver Star with one Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster; two Distinguished Flying Crosses, one with Silver Oak Leaf Cluster, the other with Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster; and several Air Medals.

His Medal of Honor citation: "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action above and beyond the call of duty in the southwest Pacific area from 10 October to 15 November 1944. Though assigned to duty as gunnery instructor and neither required nor expected to perform combat duty, Maj. Bong voluntarily and at his own urgent request engaged in repeated combat missions, including unusually hazardous sorties over Balikpapan, Borneo, and in the Leyte area of the Philippines. His aggressiveness and daring resulted in his shooting down eight enemy airplanes during this period."

SUMMARY

Our two pilots make a fitting bookend to WWII aviation, especially in the Pacific. Buzz Wagner was the first Ace, and Dick Bong was the one with the most victories. There were a lot of Aces in between, it doesn't alter the impact of the first and most, especially Wagner, when America really needed a hero. Both men had similar backgrounds, rural youths that liked robust living, and both met an untimely end away from combat.

There were other Aces soon after Buzz, war reporting was in its infancy, and Buzz, while decorated appropriately, did not have the Medal of Honor, so he is lesser-known today. Both would have contributed much more to aviation if they had lived.

Buzz Wagner had two schools at Clark Air Base named after him, but his fame was seriously eclipsed by the rest of the news from WWII.

The Richard I. Bong Veteran's Historical Center opened in Superior, Wisconsin. Marge Bong Drucker helped raise funds for the Center and donated a number of artifacts relating to her late husband.

Bong's biggest memorial would have been to have a major Air Force Base named after him. One was started, in his native Wisconsin. It was originally planned as a fighter base for Air Defense Command, serving the Chicago and Milwaukee areas. The military situation changed in the mid-1950s, just as Bong AFB construction began. The nascent base was transferred to the Strategic Air Command, who wanted it as a (prospective) base for the new supersonic B-58 Hustler bomber. Before the base was finished, USAF officials determined that the Bong AFB site wasn't needed, and abandoned the uncompleted facility in 1959. A very long runway had been prepared (but not paved), and a few buildings and infrastructure facilities had been built, but the base was far from completed. The USAF disposed of Bong in 1960, and the state of Wisconsin acquired it, and turned it into the Richard Bong State Recreation Area.

The Bong Recreation Area is located in Kenosha County, a few dozen miles west of Milwaukee, and near the border with Illinois. Back in high school, I was an avid snowmobiler, and we would occasionally make the 90-minute drive to the site. The runway was more than two miles long

and in great shape; it made for a great place to rat race and see how fast we could go. The site had other trails to explore – it was a lot of fun.

Today, the Bong Recreation Area has a nice Visitor Center, camping, picknicking, fishing, hunting, mountain biking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing. Hang gliding, hot air balloons, model airplanes, and rockets are also welcome.

One curious thing however: The Wisconsin highway people are having a devil of time with people stealing the exit sign for the Bong Recreation Area. Go figure.

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