

# THE 44<sup>th</sup> FIGHTER SQUADRON

## 1940-PRESENT Fact Sheet

### COMMANDING OFFICERS - WWII

The 44<sup>th</sup> was blessed with a succession of excellent commanding officers during the WWII period, providing solid leadership during a very difficult time. A brief list of the commanders and the date they assumed command follows:

Capt. Joe McBride	11-07-1941
Capt. Everett Stewart	5-07-1942
Maj. Kermit Tyler	9-09-1942
Maj. John Little	5-24-1943
Maj. Robert Westbrook	9-25-1943
Maj. Peyton Mathis	2-06-1944
LtCol Charles Walton	6-03-1944
Capt. Joe Lesicka	6-01-1945
Capt. Robert Dow	9-04-1945

A standout in leadership was **Maj. Robert "Westy" Westbrook**. He was a "fighter pilot's pilot" leading not only by example but also by intense interest in his pilots and crewmen. He was a leader who inspired his men to go beyond their duty.

LtCol William H. Starke, in his book *Vampire Squadron* is quoted: "Westbrook compiled one of the most impressive records in the history of the AAF. His overseas flying included 367 combat missions, totaling 554 hours. If any pilot was, he was the wheel horse of the 13<sup>th</sup> AAF - and this his superior commanders recognized. In less than 20 months, he rose from 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant to Lieutenant Colonel!"

Westy was, despite his accomplishments and honors they brought, one of the most amiable of fighter pilots. "Good show," was a favorite expression of his. It covered a wide range of meanings: his willingness to help a young pilot seeking advice, his commendation of a mechanic's extra effort, or his description of a particularly successful mission.

One thing, however, was never a "Good show." That was any attempt to glamorize him. Once Fred Hampson, AP war correspondent, wrote: "He is sometimes referred to as the Adonis of the 13<sup>th</sup> fighters. He is one of the very few pilots who looks like the movie version - tall, handsome, mustached, debonair." The adjectives were quite accurate, but nevertheless Westy's temper was for once ruffled. No pilot was ever more confident of his abilities. Westbrook's confidence, though, was tempered with a realistic and healthy respect for teamwork.

*"With us," he once said, "no pilot goes up on a pedestal just because he shoots down a bunch of Japs. We aren't supermen. We're a team. When one of us hits the jackpot, it is partly luck in being in the right spot at the right time, but mainly the work your wingmen and the other boys do in protecting your tail." - "We're well trained. It's instinctive for us to protect each other. That's our big advantage over the Japanese. They lack the team-work spirit American flyers have."*

That was what Westy believed, and that was the way he lived and fought. It was all epitomized on November 22, 1944 - his last mission.

LtCol Westbrook was assigned as Deputy Group Commander of the 347 Fighter Group, and was flying with the 339<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, leading a formation of P-38s on a long range fighter sweep over the Makassar Strait. After two passes over freighters in Makassar Town harbor, he and his wingman attempted to silence the AA from a 140 ft. Japanese gunboat. The gunboat got him.

The death of LtCol Robert B. Westbrook of Hollywood, California sent shock waves through the sprawling Pacific battle front, filling thousands of Allied fighting men - both pilots and "paddlefeet," Yanks and Aussies - with a feeling of personal loss.



## **SQUADRON LINEAGE**

The 44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron was originally constituted as the **44<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor)** on 22 November 1940 and activated on 1 January 1941 at Wheeler Field, Territory of Hawaii, and assigned to the 18<sup>th</sup> Pursuit (later, 18<sup>th</sup> Fighter) Group. It was redesignated as the **44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron** on 15 May 1942.

The unit did not see combat during the Korean War, but, redesignated as the **44<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron**, began to see combat in Southeast Asia during late 1964 and 1965, then 1967 through Nov. 1970. The unit was based at Korat RTAB and later Takhli RTAB, Thailand flying F-105D/F aircraft. (The squadron resumed the designation of **44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron** in 1991.)

The squadron has remained in the Pacific and Far East since its inception, staying in the Philippine Islands after WWII, providing Air Defense, until July 1955. The squadron then made a final move to **Kadena AFB, Okinawa where the squadron is still stationed today, flying the F-15 C/D Eagle.**

## **TRIVIA**

One of the post-WWII commanders of the 44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron was one of the famous Tuskegee Airmen - **Maj. Charles E. McGee** (now Col. USAF Ret.). Maj. McGee assumed command of the 44<sup>th</sup> in mid-1951 after returning to Clark Field, Philippine Islands, from active combat in Korea. The 44<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> squadrons were solely responsible for the "aerial protection" of the entire Southwest Pacific area, flying short-range Lockheed F-80C aircraft during the Korean War period.

Col. McGee's biography from the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum Website states:

*"Charles E. McGee, Colonel, USAF, Ret, is a veteran 137 mission WWII P-51C Mustang combat pilot of the European Theater; a 100 mission 19<sup>th</sup> Fighter-Bomber Wing (67<sup>th</sup> Fighter-Bomber Squadron), P-51D pilot in Korea, plus 173 Tactical Reconnaissance missions in F-4s over Vietnam; he was Commanding Officer of the 44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, is a life member of the 18<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing Association, and is current President of the renowned **Tuskegee Airmen Inc.**"*