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## A Thyng of Valor

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Contributing Editor

Harrison Thyng's unique career pitted him against fighter pilots of five nations.

From July 1939 to September 1945, the Army Air Forces trained 193,440 pilots. About 36,000 became fighter pilots, but of that number only 697 achieved the honored status of ace during World War II. Many of those aces flew again in the Korean War. Six of them shot down five or more enemy jets to form the elite circle of Air Force prop and jet aces. One of the six was Harry Thyng, a member of Flying School Class 40-A, whose career was studded with distinctions.

In the late spring of 1942, the 31st Fighter Group arrived in the UK to be equipped with Spitfires. Seven of its senior officers were detached to an RAF fighter group to gain operational experience. Among them was Maj. Harrison Thyng, commander of the 309th Squadron. On July 26, 1942, the 31st pilots flew on an RAF fighter sweep over northern France to become, according to several sources, the first AAF fighter pilots to see combat in Europe. Three weeks later, Thyng was awarded the Silver Star for protecting one of his pilots downed in the Channel while Thyng himself was under attack by enemy fighters.

Early in November 1942, the 31st Group moved to Gibraltar to support the Nov. 8 Allied invasion of North Africa (see [November '88 "Valor"](#)). On D-day of Operation Torch, Thyng led his squadron to a field in Algeria. There, American aircraft in the landing pattern were under attack by Vichy French Dewoitine 520 fighters. The 309th pilots downed three of the four Dewoitines, one of them falling to Thyng's guns for his first confirmed victory.

During that cold, wet North African winter, the 309th moved frequently from one improvised strip to another, living under primitive conditions and averaging three missions a day in support of ground operations and against the cream of the Luftwaffe and the Italian Air Force. On one mission, Thyng crash-landed his battle-damaged Spitfire behind enemy lines, suffering a back injury. Armed only with a pistol, he fought his way through an Arab patrol to the sanctuary of a friendly tank.

Another day, while Thyng was on the tail of an Me-109, a British antiaircraft unit, wishing to be helpful, opened fire on the enemy plane but shot down Thyng's Spitfire. After his rough parachute landing, apologetic Brits put the bruised pilot in a jeep for return to his squadron. On the way, the jeep driver went over an embankment. Thyng was thrown out, breaking his ankle.

The next morning, as he hobbled to operations with his ankle in a cast, he was met by his crew chief, standing beside a Spitfire, "borrowed" during the night from another squadron, with Thyng's name painted on the nose. The crew chief had rigged a sling on the rudder bar "so we won't have to miss a mission." Years later, in February 1975, retired Brig. Gen. Harrison Thyng wrote about that crew chief in one of the most engaging stories *AIR FORCE Magazine* has ever published.

Thyng ended his tour in England and North Africa with 162 combat missions, five enemy aircraft confirmed, several probables, and an Oak Leaf Cluster for his Silver Star. He was cited for inspirational leadership that made his squadron one of the most effective in the theater.

In May 1945, Colonel Thyng took the 413th Fighter Group, equipped with long-range P-47Ns to Ie Shima, near Okinawa. To the end of the Pacific war, they bombed and strafed targets in the Japanese home islands. Thyng is unofficially credited with shooting down one Japanese fighter. At war's end, he had been in combat with pilots of four nations--France, Germany, Italy, and Japan. That string was to be extended to five while he commanded the 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing in Korea, going against MiG pilots of the Chinese People's Republic.

While leading the Wing from November 1951 to October 1952, Thyng flew 114 combat missions, shot down five MiGs, and was awarded a third Silver Star. But his combat career was not yet over. In 1966, on a special assignment in Vietnam to test air-to-air missiles, he flew several missions as a brigadier general, retiring later that year with a total of 650 combat hours in three wars.

Thyng ran for the US Senate in his home state of New Hampshire, losing by a narrow margin. He served as president of a junior college and as president of the American Fighter Aces Association. General Thyng died in 1983, honored as a superb leader in peace and in war.

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