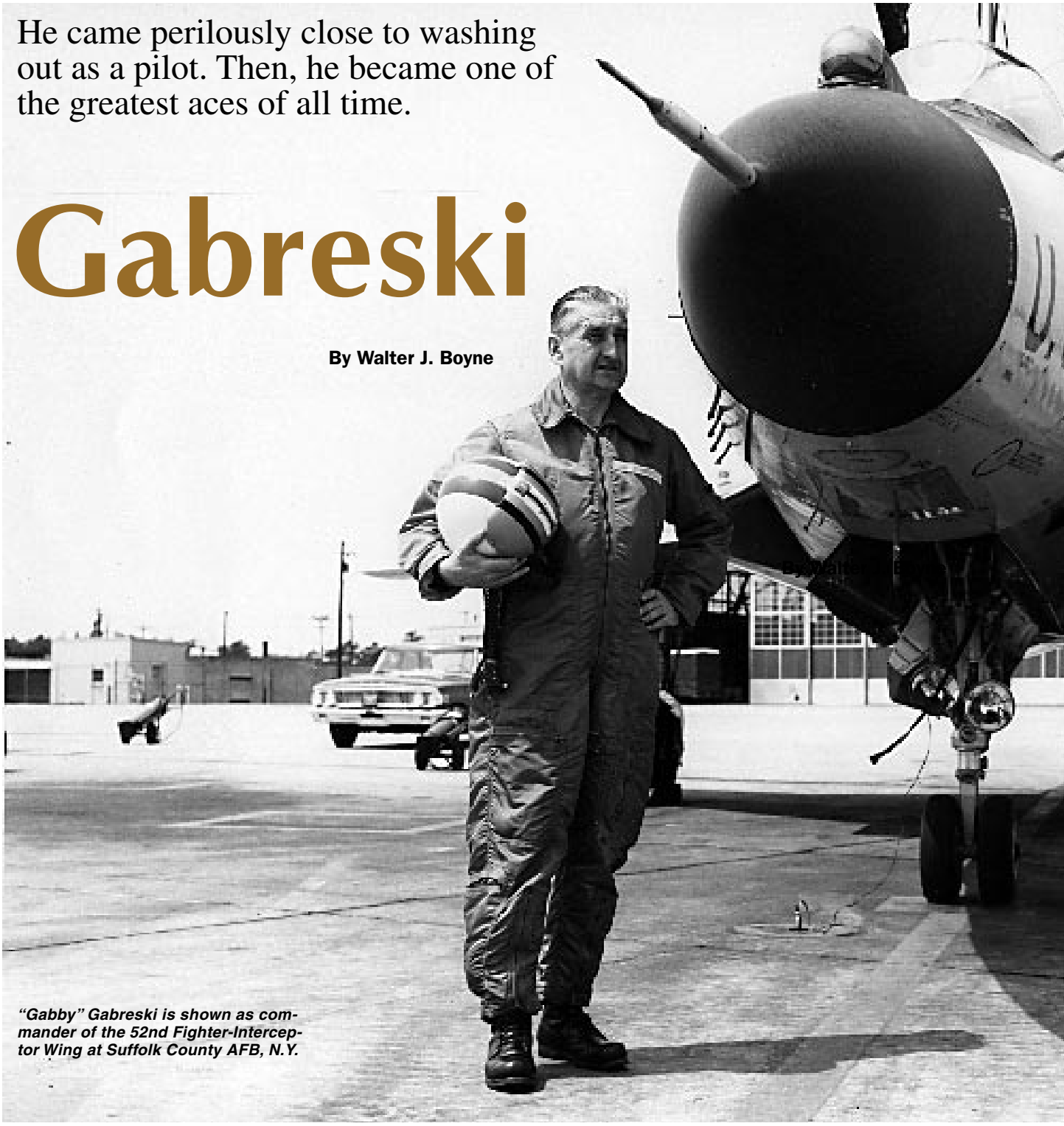
He came perilously close to washing out as a pilot. Then, he became one of the greatest aces of all time.

Gabreski

By Walter J. Boyne



"Gabby" Gabreski is shown as commander of the 52nd Fighter-Interceptor Wing at Suffolk County AFB, N.Y.

JUST as Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker fought his way up from humble circumstances to become the top American ace in World War I, so did Col. Francis S. "Gabby" Gabreski surmount many major obstacles to rise to the peak of the fighter pilot profession. Gabreski, with 28 aerial victories, became the top-scoring American ace in Europe in World War II. He added 6.5 victories in Korea.

Gabreski's life was, in many ways, a classic American story. Many of the details presented here are drawn from Grabreski's 1991 autobiography, *Gabby: A Fighter Pilot's Life,* which was written in collaboration with Carl Molesworth and published by Orion Books. Others come from official sources.

Gabreski's father, Stanley Gabryszewski, came over from Poland in 1909 and, despite poor health, worked hard in Oil City, Pa., to create opportunities for his five children.

Like many American towns of the period, Oil City was ethnically divid-

ed. Various groups—Polish, German, Italian, Irish—stayed in their own communities, speaking their native languages at home, in their parochial schools, and in their churches. (In all her life, Gabreski's mother spoke just a few words of English.) Gabreski spoke Polish at home, in the streets, and in school. It was his facility with language that eventually put him into position to become a fighter ace.

It was often tough during the Depression when Gabreski was growing up, but his father purchased a grocery store, the Purity Market, and the entire family worked to make it a success. The elder Gabreski later parlayed the profits from the store into real estate and other investments to make himself a wealthy man in Oil City.

During his youth, Gabreski's chances for future success seemed dim. Something of a ladies' man, he had trouble keeping up with his brothers academically, graduating from high school in 1938 with mediocre grades and faring poorly as an undergraduate at Notre Dame.

The Flying Bug

Gabreski frequently stated that in high school and college he was a bit of an outsider, not quite "one of the boys." Consequently, he was quite depressed when he did not do well at something he found he loved, flying. In 1938, Gabreski took lessons from Homer Stockert in a Taylorcraft, the little brother of the Piper Cub. After six hours of instruction, the young Gabreski reluctantly accepted Stockert's judgment that he didn't have the touch to be a pilot.

Gabreski was struggling through his second year at Notre Dame when Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. The attack infuriated him, for strong loyalty to his Polish heritage made him feel as if Germany had insulted him and his family. In the following year, he volunteered for flying training in the Army Air Corps, hoping to prove Stockert wrong.

After passing his physical, Gabreski went to Parks Air College near East St. Louis, Ill., for primary flight training, part of the Civilian Pilot Training Program that did so much for the war effort. For Gabreski, this was a do-or-die test. He knew his father was disappointed about his performance at Notre Dame; washing out of flying training would be the last straw.

Unfortunately, he found that he was no more talented in a Stearman PT-17 than he had been in the Taylorcraft. He soloed, but, in September 1940, his civilian instructor gave up and recommended him for an elimination flight with an Army flight examiner, Capt. Ray Wassel. As many an ex-aviation cadet knows, elimination rides are all too often just that. However, Wassel was a good instructor and, even though he probably didn't see Gabreski as a future ace, he considered him worth keeping in flying school.

Things immediately improved for Gabreski, and he was sent to Gunter Field at Montgomery, Ala., for basic flight training, then to Maxwell for advanced training. In March 1941, his proud family came to Maxwell to see him collect his wings and his commission as a second lieutenant.

Gabreski often reflected that his happiest assignment was his first one, as a fighter pilot in the 15th Fighter Group at Wheeler Field, Hawaii. To a poor boy from Oil City, the islands were too beautiful for belief, and the duty was perfect. He got to fly Curtiss P-36 and P-40 fighters virtually every day and spent the evenings talking, drinking, and otherwise relaxing.

Things got very serious in December, however. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Gabreski got airborne in a P-36 on that day, but attacking Japanese aircraft had long since returned to their carriers, and he and his colleagues spent their sorties avoiding friendly fire and agonizing over the still-burning ships and airfields.

Over the next year, Gabreski continued his flying. The war was where he wanted to be. He put in a request to be transferred to Britain to serve with one of the Royal Air Force's Polish squadrons. He argued that his command of the language would enable him to fly with the Poles and pick up valuable battle experience.

Fast Burner

Gabreski's persistence paid off, and in December 1942, he was assigned to the famous RAF 315 Squadron. Manned by Polish pilots and flying Spitfire Mk IX aircraft, the best Allied fighter at the time, it was exactly what Gabreski wanted. He also was promoted to captain only 17 months after he was commissioned.

After the German invasion of Russia on June 22, 1941, the air war in Europe shifted, and the majority of the Luftwaffe was being employed on the Eastern Front. Only two German fighter units, the famous Jagdgeschwader 26 and Jagdgeschwader 2, were positioned to defend Western Europe. While the RAF carried out almost daily attacks to provoke German fighters, the Luftwaffe reacted only to threats to targets it perceived as vital.

Gabreski flew more than two dozen

On Jan. 30, 1944, two days after his 25th birthday, Gabreski (right) got his 10th and 11th victories while flying with Eighth Air Force's 56th Fighter Group. Here, Maj. Sylvester Burke greets him after a mission on Jan. 25.

missions with the Poles, but saw combat only once. Nonetheless, he learned the latest RAF tactics and methods. On Feb. 27, 1943, he left 315 Squadron to resume duty with the US Army Air Forces, joining the soon-to-be-famous 56th Fighter Group under Lt. Col. Hubert "Hub" Zemke.

The 56th would carve a fantastic record in the skies over Europe, scoring 677 aerial victories. Known as "Zemke's Wolfpack," the unit carried on a long and ostensibly friendly rivalry with the 4th Fighter Group over which was the top scoring outfit. The 4th claimed more than 1,000 destroyed, with 539 aerial victories and the remainder destroyed on the ground. Later analysis revealed that the record for aerial victories probably went to the 354th Fighter Group, which claimed 701. The point is moot. They were all crack outfits.

In the 56th, Gabreski's experience proved invaluable to him personally, because at first he was viewed again as an outsider. Famous ace Gerald Johnson commented later that he felt Gabreski was not treated fairly by the group. Most of the men had been with the 56th since its activation in early 1941, and together they had brought the brand-new and unproven Republic P-47 to operational status. In that long hard process, almost a score of young pilots had been killed. The survivors—including such illustrious future aces as Walker M. Mahurin, David C. Schilling, Robert S. Johnson, and Gerald W. Johnson—viewed Gabreski as a "green bean" with the P-47.

Nonetheless, he had to be assigned a position commensurate with his rank. Assigned as B Flight commander of the 61st Fighter Squadron, Gabreski went into combat again in April. The P-47 seemed huge compared to the lithe Spitfire, but he soon came to appreciate its diving speed and firepower. Later, when it was equipped with a paddle-blade prop, its new-found climbing ability would save his life.

On June 9, 1943, Zemke picked Gabreski to command the 61st FS, despite his lack of seniority. It was a tough call for Zemke, who had to pass over some pilots who had been with the squadron since its inception. Yet Zemke liked the way Gabreski had imposed his aggressive flying style on B Flight and how he handled his new duties as squadron operations officer.

In return, Gabreski looked up to Zemke as the ideal commanding officer, leading from the front. He approved of Zemke's strict disciplinary policies.

The 56th scored its first kill on June 12, when Capt. Walter Cook blew the wing off a Focke-Wulf FW-190. It was the start of a long hard battle that would not end until the 56th's last combat mission on April 21, 1945.

Festering Disappointment

Gabreski scheduled himself to fly as many sorties as possible, gaining the confidence of his squadron in the process. His festering disappointment about not scoring a victory was assuaged on a bomber-escort mission on Aug. 24. Flying at 27,000 feet, he spotted a formation of seven Focke-Wulfs some 10,000 feet below, preparing for an attack on the bombers. Gabreski immediately engaged, leading his flight of four down to come behind the German fighters. Remembering his

A ground crew reloads Gabreski's P-47. The 24 victory flags indicate Gabreski was nearing his World War II final total. "One last mission" left him a POW in Germany.

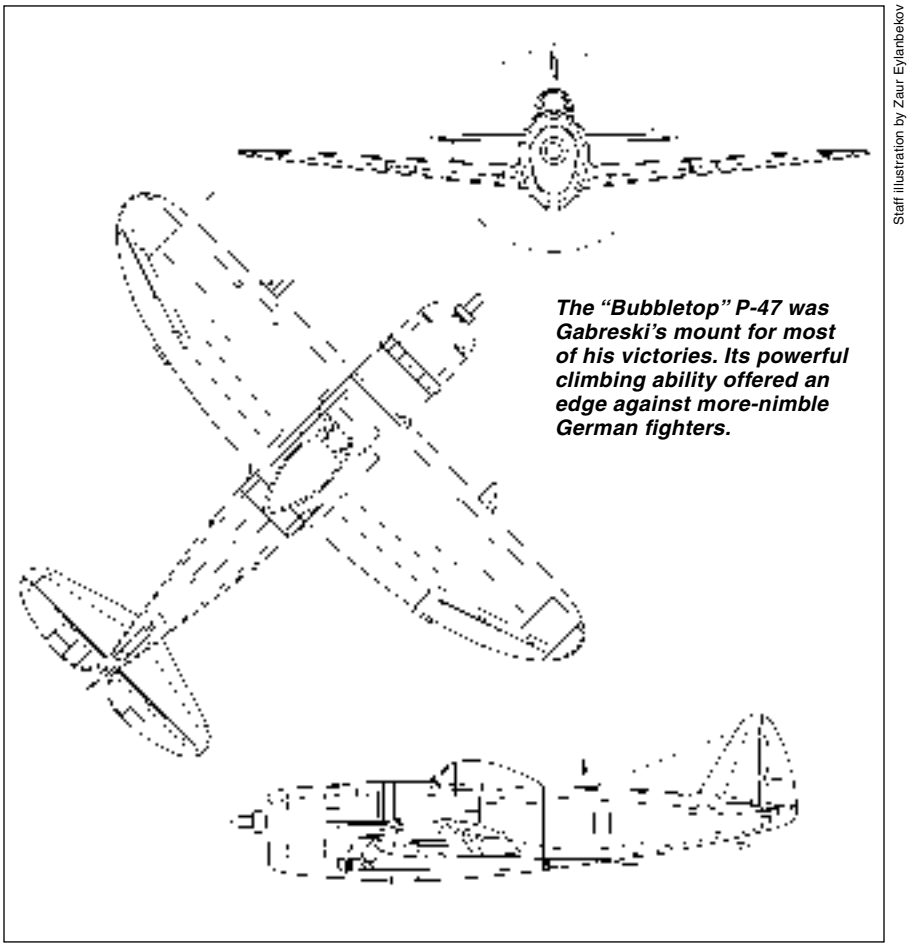
training with the Polish 315 Squadron, he kept firing on the German flight leader until he closed to within 250 yards. The badly damaged FW-190 dove into the ground.

Gabreski celebrated, but there was a slight edge to the celebration. His wingmen complained that his attack had been so swift and direct that they were unable to inflict damage on their own targets. As his career developed, it became apparent that Gabreski was a shooter, and his wingmen would have to adjust to that fact.

His second victory came on Sept. 3. It was another 190, and then he hit an aggravating dry spell while watching Zemke, Schilling, Mahurin, Bob Johnson, Jerry Johnson, and Frank E. McCauley all become aces.

On Nov. 5, while escorting bombers on a mission to Munster, Germany, the dry spell ended. The entire 56th was airborne, with Zemke leading. Gabreski spotted a formation of 20 enemy fighters and immediately signaled for the 61st FS to attack head-on.

The German fighters rolled and dove for the ground, a fatal error in a dogfight with Thunderbolts. Gabreski opened fire early, from about 500 yards, and continued to blaze away until the 190 adversary rolled over into a spin, spewing smoke. Gabreski shifted his fire to another 190, but after a short burst he was out of ammunition. His wingman, 1st Lt. Eugene E. Barnum, finished off the 190.



Staff illustration by Zaur Eylanbekov

The "Bubbletop" P-47 was Gabreski's mount for most of his victories. Its powerful climbing ability offered an edge against more-nimble German fighters.

Becoming an Ace

Three weeks later, Gabreski shot down two Messerschmitt Bf-110s on a mission near Bremen, Germany. He opened fire from 700 yards on the first of the twin-engine fighters (which are sometimes recorded as Me-210s), firing all the way in until he had to dive to avoid ramming the burning aircraft. Minutes later, he attacked another Bf-110, hitting it in the wing root and sending it down to the ground in a massive fireball. He was now an ace.

Gabreski continued to score but often with long intervals. He took hits as well, being almost shot down by the gunner in a Junkers Ju-88 on Dec. 1, 1943. Then 10 days later, he was bested in a battle with a Bf-109 that caught him low on fuel and ammunition. Gabreski persistently evaded the initial attacks by the 109, but the German pilot put a burst into Gabreski's airplane that shot his rudder pedal away, numbed his foot with a glancing blow, and knocked his turbocharger out. The big Pratt & Whitney R-2800 stopped, and Gabreski prepared to bail out. Fortunately he stayed with the airplane until it reached a lower altitude where the turbocharger was not needed, and the engine began running again. He nursed the P-47 back to an emergency landing in Great Britain, where he was relieved to find that he was not wounded.

As the character of the air war changed in early 1944, things improved for Gabreski. Ever newer fighters were available, and the P-47's range was extended by larger external tanks. Tactics changed as well, for the new commander of Eighth Air Force, Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, had decreed that the mission of fighters was no longer simply to protect the bombers. They were now charged with destroying the Luftwaffe.

This suited the 56th Fighter Group to a T, and Gabreski's victories came more rapidly, often in multiples. On Feb. 20, 1944, he destroyed two Bf-110s in a single sweeping attack, using his now-standard technique of firing from a distance and keeping on shooting until he was within 50 yards of his quarry. His next victory, on Feb. 22, was his 14th and one of eight scored by his squadron that day. It was doubly a red-letter day for Gabreski, for his 61st Fighter Squadron's eight kills brought its total to 100.

He also began to strafe. Strafing enemy airfields was extremely dangerous, and the iron rule was to make one pass and leave. Gabreski enjoyed getting down on the deck and shooting up airplanes on the ground, getting his first confirmed success on March 8.

By May 8, Bob Johnson had raised his score to 27, besting Rickenbacker's World War I score and making him the top American ace. He was soon shipped home to go on a war bond tour, leaving Gabreski, with 19 victories, in a position to catch him.

On May 22, Gabreski scored his first and only triple, on a bomber escort mission to Kiel. While flying top cover at 15,000 feet for another flight strafing an airfield, Gabreski spotted an air base from which FW-190s were taking off. He dove to attack, coming behind a flight of eight. His first burst blew up a 190, and he switched to a second and shot it down as well. When he was attacked by two Focke-Wulfs, he used the P-47's new paddle-blade climbing

power to pull up out of trouble. A few minutes later, he led his flight of P-47s to attack another group of 190s and shot down the last aircraft in the formation. Now he had 22 kills.

The High, Then the Low

Gabreski scored six more victories by July 5, and the outsider from the Polish 315 Squadron had become the top American ace in the European Theater. This catapulted him into an endless round of public relations events scheduled to culminate in a trip home to the United States to sell war bonds. However, Gabreski's persistent aggressiveness intervened.

On July 20, Gabreski was packed and ready to be flown home on a USAAF transport. He stopped by group operations and scanned the field order—an escort mission to Russelheim, near Frankfurt. On an impulse he volunteered to fly "one last mission," which is exactly what it proved to be.

The mission was relatively peaceful until Gabreski saw an airfield and led his flight down to attack. Coming in fast, at treetop height, he began firing on a Heinkel He-111 bomber. When he missed, he violated his own strict rules and did a 180-degree turn for a second attack. This time his bullets seemed to be going high over the He-111, so he lowered the P-47's nose to compensate. When he did, his props struck the ground, bending the tips back and wrecking the control mechanism.

Gabreski made a successful crash landing and evaded capture for five days, until, weak from hunger and fatigue, he was captured and became a prisoner of war.

After the usual formalities, including an interview by the interrogator Hanns J. Scharff, he was sent to Stalag Luft I. There he met some colleagues from the 56th, including Jerry Johnson. They were joined a few weeks later by Zemke, whose P-51 had come apart in a thunderstorm over Germany.

Prison life was never good in Germany, and it deteriorated badly toward the end of the war, when food and fuel rations continually declined. Gabreski's tough constitution enabled him to survive, and when the war in Europe ended, he was flown out of Germany on May 14, 1945. He worked his way back to his old outfit, the 56th, then flew to New York in a C-54. Things were in a postwar turmoil, and he did not receive the customary hero's welcome.

Gabreski was promoted to colonel, but his postwar assignment to flight testing was not as satisfying as he wished, and he elected to leave the service in May 1946. He joined the Douglas Aircraft Co. to sell DC-6s in South America. It was a short-lived experiment, and on April 7, 1947, he rejoined the Army Air Forces with a permanent rank of lieutenant colonel.

After a variety of assignments that he liked, including command of the 56th Fighter Group at Selfridge AFB, Mich., the World War II ace entered the jet age, flying both the Lockheed F-80 and North American F-86. When the 4th Fighter Wing was sent to Korea to contest the arrival of communist MiG-15s, Gabreski immediately volunteered.

Somewhat understandably, his wife, Catherine Gabreski, was upset. After having been home for only five years, he was going to war again—and she was pregnant with their fourth child (out of a future total of nine).

Jet Victory

Gabreski compromised. He waited until the baby was born. On June 17, 1951, he embarked on his first combat sortie of the Korean War as deputy wing commander with the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing. Flying out of K-14 at Kimpo, he was worried whether his eyes and reflexes would meet the demands of jet combat. On July 8, he answered his own question by shooting down a MiG-15 just south of the Yalu River. The MiGs were not making their presence felt so much at the time, but he shot down two more before being assigned to command the 51st FIW, on Nov. 8, 1951.

It was a perfect job for Gabreski, supervising the conversion from F-80s to brand-new F-86Es and scheduling himself to fly as many missions as possible. In addition to his flying, Gabreski was an effective wing commander.

The 51st operated out of K-13 at Suwon, about 20 miles south of Kimpo. The outfit flew its first combat mission with Sabres on Dec. 1, 1951. Gabreski had a good eye for talent and brought veterans such as George Jones and William T. Whisner Jr. along with him. He selected an old colleague from the 56th, now-Col. Bud Mahurin, to be his deputy wing commander.

Under Gabreski's leadership, the 51st came up with new tactics, including the "fluid four" formation, and soon was gaining victories at a prodigious rate. Gabreski shot down his fourth MiG on Jan. 11, 1952. On Feb. 20, he shared a victory with Whisner, a 15.5-victory ace from World War II who became the 51st's first jet ace on Feb. 23, 1952.

Gabreski became the unit's second jet ace on April 1, 1952, knocking down a MiG across the Yalu River. He scored again on April 12, bringing his total to 6.5 in Korea, and placing him with only five other USAF pilots who have been aces in two wars. (The others include George A. Davis Jr., Vermont Garrison, James P. Hagerstrom, Harrison R. Thyng, and Whisner.)

When Gabreski approached his 100-mission limit, he simply stopped logging missions, afraid that he would be sent home. His ploy worked for about a month, but he was grounded and on June 4, 1952, ordered home, the highest-scoring US ace then alive.

This time the returning ace got a true hero's welcome, with a ticker-tape parade in San Francisco, a meeting with President Truman, and a great reception in Oil City.

Gabreski naturally entertained hopes for flag rank, but it was not to be. Instead he had a series of operational and staff jobs, retiring on Oct. 31, 1967, as commander of the 52nd Fighter Wing at Suffolk County AFB, N.Y. He went to work for Grumman Aircraft the next day and remained there for 20 years, retiring in 1987.

In his more than 266 combat missions, Gabreski earned many US and foreign military awards, including the Distinguished Service Medal, Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star with one Oak Leaf Cluster, and the Distinguished Flying Cross with 12 Oak Leaf Clusters. He was always conscious and grateful that his life, which had begun with so little luster, would come to personify the American dream. ■

Walter J. Boyne, former director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., is a retired Air Force colonel and author. He has written more than 400 articles about aviation topics and 40 books, the most recent of which is Today's Best Military Writing: The Finest Articles on the Past, Present, and Future of the US Military. *His most recent article for* Air Force *Magazine, "The Low-Drag World of Jack Northrop," appeared in the October issue.*