A World War II Story about

Cliff Armstrong, John Zolner
and the
P-47 Thunderbolt Aircraft

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DEDICATION

To the Thunderbolt pilots who made the ultimate sacrifice

This is the grave of a P-47 pilot who was caught in an ammunition explosion during a strafing pass and crashed in the German countryside. A refugee Frenchman and his wife created the site, within Germany, to honor the fallen American airman. National Archives
The Fighter-Bomber Boys

A World War II Story about Cliff Armstrong, John Zolner and the P-47 Thunderbolt Aircraft

Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor two young men from the local area made a decision to apply for the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet Program in hopes of becoming fighter pilots. Cliff Armstrong (born January 12, 1920), a 1938 graduate of Coeymans High School and resident of the Town of New Baltimore and; John Zolner (born March 29, 1921), a 1939 graduate of Ravena High School and a resident of the Village of Ravena – both were successful at passing the necessary preliminary tests to qualify for the Aviation Cadet Program.

Coeymans High School Class of 1938

CLIFFORD ARMSTRONG
“Clif”
“His mind, his kingdom; and his will, his law.”
Likes—Driving a car.
Dislikes—Back seat drivers.
Expression—Heck.
Band 2, 3, 4; Basketball 3; Year Book Staff 3.

Ravena High School Class of 1939

JOHN ZOLNER
“Rush”
“Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we graduate”
Football 2, 3, 4; Bowling 2, 3, 4; Dramatics Club 3; Vice President 2; Interclass Basketball 1, 2, 3; Student Council 2.

But for those men seeking to be military pilots, the transition from civilian life to aviator did not happen over night. Regardless of the type of aircraft flown in World War II, the total time from civilian life to pilot in the Army Air Force exceeded one year of intense training in the Aviation Cadet Program. Prior to Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), men selected for the Aviation Cadet Training Program had to have a minimum of two years of college. With the declaration of war against the Axis Powers, the United States Army eliminated the college requirement and replaced the preliminary screening process with a series of written and physical examinations.
Upon successful completion of these preliminary examinations, potential candidates would be notified and be sworn into the U.S. Army Reserve. The first phase of this training would be the traditional indoctrination into Army life, often referred to as “Boot Camp.” In Boot Camp the men would be given the usual initiation to military life and would last for 6 weeks. From completion of Army Boot Camp recruits were sent to a special training facility where they learned basic physics and mechanics, a program initiated when the two-year college recruitment was eliminated. Upon completion of this academic period, comprehensive tests and examinations were administered to decide the type of aircrew training path that would be followed for each recruit. The general assignments would be for (1) pilot, (2) navigator or (3) bombardier. Those recruits having been selected for pilot training would now enter the four-phase (8 month) Aviation Cadet Program. These four phases were enumerated as: (1) Pre-Flight Training; (2) Primary Flight Training; (3) Basic Flight Training; and (4) Advanced Flight Training.

The Pre-Flight Training curriculum included courses in Morse code, ship and aircraft recognition, aerodynamics of flight, navigation, weather and other military-related subjects. Physical fitness also remained part of the Pre-Flight Training phase.

The next three phases of Aviation Cadet Training would include a progression into more and more sophisticated aircraft. The final phase: Advanced Flight Training is where the Aviation Cadets were either selected for bomber (multi-engine) or fighter (single-engine) aircraft. Classroom training would continue in parallel with actual flight training.

Aviation cadets who successfully completed this rigorous training were characterized by their mechanical aptitude, unusually quick reflexes, physical coordination and the ability to make rapid decisions. Successful candidates were given an Officer’s commission as 2nd Lieutenants and awarded their pilots wings. After Cliff and John received their commission and pilot wings they went into the transition phase of becoming a fighter pilot by learning to fly a complex, high performance aircraft. In John and Cliff’s situation that would be the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bomber.

**Cliff & John receive their Army Officer's Commission & Pilot Wings**
U.S. Army Air Force Pilot Wings

Republic P-47 Thunderbolt – A Fighter-Bomber

When Cliff and John were assigned to fly the Thunderbolt, they were considered fighter-bomber pilots. The fighter-bomber pilot was different than the traditional view of a fighter pilot. Prior to World War II fighter pilots were often characterized as those aviators who would make contact with enemy aircraft with the goal of destroying them (often referred to as pursuit aircraft). If the enemy aircraft were a bomber, the fighter pilot would seek to intercept the bomber and destroy it before it could release its bombs on prospective targets. If the enemy were in the fighter or pursuit category of aircraft, the combatants would enter into what has become what is traditionally known as a “dogfight”. This sort of combat pitted the technical capabilities of each aircraft along with the training and experience of the pilots in an aerial duel that could lead to the destruction of one of the planes and the possible death of the unlucky pilot sitting at its controls.

But the fighter-bomber role emerged due to the strategies and technologies inherent with the increased participation of aviation as a critical component of specific combat situations. There still was a need for the traditional fighter pilot; one who escorts bombers to their targets as well as defends against enemy fighters and bombers. The war in both the European Theater as well as the Pacific Theater would require pilots who would also fight enemy infantrymen, tanks, and armor near the ground. Likewise the fighter-bomber role expanded to include the destruction of enemy assets such as personnel, artillery, tanks, trains, bridges, tunnels, airfields (airdromes) and roads. This latter role is sometimes referred to as close air support.

The name was probably coined to identify aircraft used for close air support missions because that work combined dropping bombs, a job normally done by bombers, and aerial combat plus strafing (firing at specific ground targets), a job normally done by fighters. Hence, when one plane was able to do both, it became a fighter-bomber – the label given to the P-47 Thunderbolt flown by John Zolner and Cliff Armstrong.
The P-47 Thunderbolt

P-47 Armament & Performance

The Thunderbolt was installed with eight 50 caliber machine guns, four in each wing outboard of the landing gear. The machine guns were electronically fired and sighted to converge at a specific distance in front of the aircraft. This convergence point where the bullets would hit would be about 10 or 12 foot square – a virtual killing zone. The gun specialist (known as an armorer) would bore sight the machine guns for 250 yards when preparing Thunderbolts for bomber escort and aerial combat. For ground strafing missions, the range would be increased to 400 yards. The Thunderbolt could throw out 773 pounds of lead per minute when the trigger button was pushed by the pilot. The belts of ammunition were mounted within the wings of the aircraft and could carry 425 rounds per gun.

One combat camera was installed in the right wing. Bombs could be carried under the fuselage (belly) or on brackets underneath the wings. The maximum bomb load was two 1,000 bombs, one under each wing and one 500 pound bomb under the fuselage. The Thunderbolt could also be armed with ten 5-inch high velocity rockets.

The Thunderbolts maximum speed was rated at 440 mph and had a service ceiling of 40,000 feet (pilots were required to wear oxygen masks). The Thunderbolt could climb to 15,000 feet in approximately 5 minutes (a definite performance limitation in aerial combat). Speeds could be obtained that exceeded 440 mph when the aircraft was in a high altitude dive. Excessive speeds over the performance envelope could result in a condition called “compressibility” where flight controls could freeze up, causing the plane to crash.

When the P-47 Thunderbolt was armed for combat with a highly trained and skilled pilot such as John Zolner or Cliff Armstrong in the cockpit, the combination became a virtual killing machine.
P-47 Thunderbolt Power Plant

To provide the needed power for the large fighter-bomber, a Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp engine was selected. It had eighteen cylinders, was air cooled and supercharged with a horsepower rating of 1,625 horsepower at 30,000 feet. 2,300 horsepower was available at takeoff. Water injection equipment provided for War Emergency Power (WEP) that would increase horsepower to 2,535 but only for a limited time frame. There was a General Electric turbo supercharger located in the rear fuselage. A four bladed Curtiss Electric constant speed full-feathering propeller was initially installed but later replaced with a wider blade (paddle) propeller for increased performance.

Besides providing sufficient horsepower, the 2,360 pound engine proved to be dependable, even when it had sustained terrible damage. In combat, Thunderbolt pilots returned home with entire cylinders blasted away or with the engine block ruptured and a large portion of the plane’s oil sprayed over the fuselage. The pilot’s manual for the P-47 listed the engine in the section covering pilot protection. The Double Wasp’s bulk and size (more than fifty-two inches in diameter) helped protect the pilot when attacked from the front.

P-47 Thunderbolt Fuel System (a P-47 liability)

The P-47’s fuel capacity was always an issue. The army wanted 315 gallons. Initially, Republic Aviation was able to squeeze in 298 gallons into the fuselage. The number soon increased to 305, carried in two tanks. The main tank, an L-shaped affair, held 205 gallons extending from in front of the cockpit to under the cockpit floor. The second, called the auxiliary tank, was aft of the main tank under the rear cockpit floor and held 100 gallons. These self-sealing tanks were baffled to minimize surge.

Under operational conditions, the 305 gallons carried internally allowed one and a half to two hours in the air and about fifty more miles of range than the British Spitfire. Flying from Britain, the P-47 had a radius of up to two hundred miles without external tanks. While escorting American bombers, the P-47’s lack of loiter time frustrated B-17 and B-24 crewmen. They recognized that Luftwaffe pilots knew the P-47’s range and fuel capacity. The Germans often attacked the bombers as the Thunderbolts turned toward home.

To stay with the bombers as long as possible, the Thunderbolts began carrying a variety of external fuels tanks, known as “drop tanks” by pilots. The tanks, comonly 75 or 108 gallons, hung from the Thunderbolt’s belly or wing pylons. The wing attachments could carry various sizes up to massive 300 gallon tanks. An exhaust vacuum pump pressured most tanks. The pilot could jettison all external tanks when entering combat. Some external tanks were made from chemically impregnated paper.

Into Combat with the 353rd Fighter Group (8th Air Force)

Cliff and John were both assigned to the 353rd Fighter Group within the 8th Air Force. John was assigned to the 350th Fighter Squadron, while Cliff went with the 352nd Fighter Squadron (the 353rd Fighter Group was made up of 3 fighter squadrons). The 8th Air Force was assigned to the European Theater of the war. The 353rd Fighter Group arrived in England in the summer of 1943. The 353rd operated in combat over Europe from August 1943 until April 1945. They provided bomber escort services in 1943 and 1944 for targets in Western Europe and made counter air sweeps over France, Belgium and the Netherlands. The Group provided cover over the beachhead and close air support for the Normandy Invasion in June 1944 and supported the
breakthrough at St Lo in July. In September 1944 the Group converted to P-51 Mustangs, participating in the Battle of the Bulge from December 1944 through January 1945.

The 353rd Fighter Group was credited with over 800 enemy aircraft destroyed in the air and on the ground. Other military targets destroyed included locomotives, rail cars, motor vehicles, gun positions, bridges and tunnels.

Cliff & John join the 353rd Fighter Group

Fighter Squadron Composition

Each squadron had approximately 35 plus pilots and 25 planes, and it required about 225 people within each squadron to keep both pilots and planes in operational readiness. The total complement of the 353rd Fighter Group was approximately 850 officers and enlisted men. Approximately 70 of the 850 men were assigned to support the 353rd Fighter Group’s command and control functions.

When the squadron was in the air, it encompassed three flights of four planes each. Thus a squadron mission involved 12 planes and a group mission 36 planes. Before D-Day, most strafing and dive bombing missions were group missions, and typically the targets were bridges, marshaling yards, troop concentrations, German airfields (aerodromes), armored depots and rail terminals.

Another important mission of the 353rd Fighter Squadron was to fly escort duty to the daylight bombing raids conducted by the 8th Air Force bombers. This latter mission proved to be not as effective as the first mission, as the P-47 Thunderbolt flown by Cliff, John and their squadron mates did not have the range needed to accompany the bombers to the bombing site and back for targets in Germany. This would leave the bombers vulnerable for some time over occupied territory until the arrival later in the war of the P-51 Mustang which did have the range to escort the bombers for the complete run. It wasn’t until after John and Cliff returned to the states that the P-51 Mustang took on the primary role in the bomber escort mission. In fact, the 353rd Fighter Group transitioned to the P-51 Mustang shortly after John and Cliff finished their tours of duty in Europe in 1944.
Each pilot in the 353rd Fighter Group wore a parachute, a Mae West life preserver and sat on an inflatable raft that was attached to his parachute harness. Because of the water temperature of the English Channel, the chances of survival began to diminish rapidly after 10 minutes. The one-man life raft extended that time, if the pilot wasn’t injured too badly and could get himself into the raft. He would have a fair chance of rescue by the British air/sea recovery airplanes that continuously monitored the status of aircraft crossing the English Channel.

Each pilot was equipped with an oxygen mask for use at high altitude flight. Oxygen was essential for altitudes above 10,000 feet. This was particularly important when the 353rd pilots were performing escort duties where the altitude of the bombers ranged from 25,000 to 35,000 feet. The consequences of oxygen deprivation at high altitudes were often fatal unless detected quickly and corrective action taken. The condition of oxygen deprivation is referred to as anoxia or hypoxia and can quickly render an individual unconscious.
Another condition experienced by fighter-bomber pilots was the excessive force exerted on them when they conducted high speed, radical moves during aerial combat. This excessive force was termed g-force and could cause a pilot to black out because of blood rapidly flowing into the head (negative g-force) or being drained from the head (positive g-force). In 1944 a piece of flight gear called a g-suit was introduced for fighter pilots to use that would reduce the rapid flow of blood to or from the head area, depending on the flight maneuver being executed. It is not known if Cliff or John had access to this flight gear.

**Fighter pilot's g-suit**

![Fighter pilot's g-suit](image)

**World War II fighter pilots wearing g-suits**

![World War II fighter pilots wearing g-suits](image)

Within the squadron each pilot was assigned to a flight. Under ideal conditions the squadron had 36 pilots. It took three flights of four planes and pilots to get the squadron into the air to conduct a mission. With 36 pilots available, that meant each pilot would fly every third mission.
Some pilots within a squadron were assigned as primary pilot of a specific aircraft. When this situation occurred, a pilot was given some latitude in creating his own artistic design to be applied to his aircraft – usually around the nose cowl or beneath the cockpit canopy. Cliff Armstrong had two aircraft assigned to him in this manner while he was overseas. His first aircraft was called “8-Gun Melody,” while his second aircraft had the nickname of “Hun Buster.” Unfortunately both of Cliff’s planes were destroyed when other pilots were flying them in combat situations. Both pilots were listed as “killed in action.”

Cliff Armstrong and "8-Gun Melody"

Each plane had an experienced enlisted man in charge of its overall physical condition. This individual was referred to as the crew chief and had a distinctive loyalty to “his” aircraft and took special pride in seeing that it was in top operating condition for each mission flown. Generally speaking there was a special bond between the primary pilot of an aircraft and his crew chief.

Each squadron was a self-sufficient organization. It had its own mess (chow hall), supply, chaplain, doctor (flight surgeon), and dispensary. It maintained its own vehicles, disciplined its own troublemakers, and ran its own post office. It had photographers, artists, clerks, mechanics and aircraft and armament repairmen of all descriptions. Each squadron had its own insignia and squadron aircraft had their own lettered identifiers. Cliff’s squadron aircraft identifier was SX. John’s squadron aircraft identifier was LH. The 351st squadron aircraft identifier was YJ. For the Normandy Invasion all allied aircraft were painted with wide white stripes to help identify them from German aircraft.
Cliff Armstrong and "Hun Buster"
(Cliff seated in Cockpit)

John Zolner
(prior to being shot down on March 8, 1944)

John Zolner was shot down over Germany in March 1944. He coaxed his crippled plane as far as Holland before forced to bail out. He evaded capture with the help of the underground, eventually escaping to Switzerland.
The 353rd Fighter Group's Role in the European Theater

Bomber escort, strafing and dive bombing remained key missions while John and Cliff were on active duty in the European Theater. Often the German fighter planes would not engage the Thunderbolts during bomber escort missions. The German fighters would wait until the Thunderbolts had to turn back from escort duty because their fuel consumption did not allow them to continue on to the bomber’s target area. The German fighter planes would then attack the bombers without the benefit of fighter escort (as mentioned previously, this would change once the supply of P-51 Mustangs increased after D-Day).

Given this situation, Cliff, John and other members of the 353rd Fighter Group took the action to ground level. They would seek out German aerodromes and dive down and strafe and bomb German aircraft as they were parked on the tarmac or in their hangars. The Thunderbolt could fire approximately 750 rounds of ammunition per minute with an effective range of 3,500 feet. This set up a devastating cone of fire converging at approximately 400 feet (depending on how the bore sighting of the guns were set).

Strafing was inherently a dangerous business because they exposed pilots to accurate flak at close range, even small arms fire from troops on the ground. Strafing took place at tree top level (or lower). There are many anecdotal observations documented about Thunderbolts returning to their air base, bullet riddled and parts missing. In some cases there were branches from trees, wires, pine cones and other surface debris found in the engine cowling of the Thunderbolts coming back from a strafing mission.

Flights commonly attacked line abreast at high speed (in excess of 300 mph). Machine gun firing bursts were short, 2-3 seconds at most. There were times when a pilot would become so fixated on his target, he would become inattentive to his altitude, speed and the local surroundings. This would sometimes end, tragically, with the plane crashing into the ground. Sometimes if heavy opposition was expected from German flak guns a specific squadron might be charged with the responsibility of suppressing ground defenses to enable safe attack of the targets by other squadrons. Cliff and John would have been involved in all aspects of this type of offensive strategy. Destroying German aircraft on the ground was a key element in eventually establishing air superiority along the Normandy coast prior to the D-Day invasion.

Dive bombing as a form of ground attack was complex, difficult to carry out and often achieved mixed results. In fighter-bomber attacks low angle attacks were seldom if ever profitable due to the fact that the bombs bounce unless there is a direct hit. All Thunderbolt bombing was done from steep dives, even at a vertical angle if conditions permitted it. After releasing the bombs in this manner, the excess speed gained in the dive was used in getting away faster to avoid being hit by flak defenses.

Cliff and John would also seek out targets of opportunity once their squadron turned back from flying their leg of a bomber escort mission. On their way back to England, they would descend and locate and destroy aircraft, locomotives, rail cars, convoys, and barges using their 8 - 50 caliber machine guns.
"This is what was left of a row of German transport planes after they were riddled by Eighth Air Force fighter planes engaged in the most dangerous game that fighter pilots play – strafing"
(Source: Stars & Stripes 18 May 1944)

The 353rd Fighter Group's Squadron's Insignias

350th Fighter Squadron

351st Fighter Squadron

352nd Fighter Squadron
Cliff Armstrong and John Zolner – a contrast in their final months of combat duty

John Zolner

While much of the combat missions that John and Cliff participated in were very similar, by March 8,1944 things would begin to change in regard to each man’s final months in the European Theater. On March 8, 1944 John Zolner was shot down close to the western border of Germany and eastern border of Holland. His Thunderbolt took a direct flak hit to his internal fuel tank. Even with self-sealing tanks, the flak projectile was large enough to cause rapid loss of fuel. John was able to nurse his Thunderbolt westward toward Holland, while continuously losing altitude. Knowing that he was not going to make it back to England he made the decision to bail out while he had enough altitude for his chute to deploy. John’s chute did deploy and he landed in a tree, not knowing where his exact location was.

John had remained in constant radio contact with two of his squadron mates after he took the flak hit and realized his precarious position. These other Thunderbolt pilots remained with him, circling above the terrain where John had landed. Shortly after John landed in the tree, a large black car drove up and stopped nearby. One of the Thunderbolt pilots wanted to strafe the car, but the other pilot suggested they wait and observe before taking any aggressive action to defend John’s chance of survival while on the ground.

Nothing happened. No one got out of the car so the Thunderbolt pilots monitoring John’s situation made the decision to depart the area because their own fuel supplies were low and they could no longer remain in a support and surveillance role. In retrospect, the decision not to shoot the car proved to be a good choice. The man in the black car was a Dutch doctor. The doctor offered John assistance. John declined the invitation but did ask the doctor for directions to Belgium. After hiding his parachute in a culvert, John took off on foot in the direction given to him by the Dutch doctor.

While details are not clear from this point on, it appears that the Dutch underground monitored his movements and, sometime after dark, made contact with him. Over time various scenarios have played out as to the details of John’s escape & evasion (E&E) adventure. One thing is clear however, if it were not for the various underground organizations in the Netherlands, Belgium and France, John may not have made it home. Allied air crew members who were forced down over German-held territory could receive different fates depending on whether they were captured by regular German soldiers or; members of Hitler’s Gestapo (SS). German soldiers would capture downed airmen and turn them over to the closest POW processing facility. If captured by the Gestapo, the results meant almost certain torture and death.

In a recorded interview John conducted many years ago, he said there was numerous occasions when his heart jumped as it seems impossible that they would escape capture. John’s first attempt was to get back to Allied territory through Spain. When that strategy did not work out he headed for Switzerland with a group of other individuals also trying to leave the German occupied territories. After some rather harrowing moments with a border guard, John and the group he was with managed to make it into Switzerland. Here they were interned in a hotel until southern France was invaded. As soon as possible John got across a lake into southern France and, with the help of the French Resistance, got to the American lines near Grenoble and ultimately a flight back to England (albeit a circuitous route through Italy and North Africa).

When John was reassigned to the 350th Fighter Squadron upon his return to England he was subjected to many intelligence debriefings. He was not permitted to conduct any more combat
sorties in Europe. This was a military policy set up to protect the underground support people in various countries who continued to rescue Allied aircrew. John left the 350th Fighter Squadron on or about October 6, 1944 to return to the United States having conducted 55 combat missions. On the day that John was shot down he was credited with an aerial kill of a German Focke Wulf 190 fighter aircraft.

Astonishingly, the Army felt it was necessary to write John’s parents, Semen and Anna Zolner, informing them of John’s death. The contents of the letter written by Major General W.E. Kepner on 24 March 1944 follows:

_Highquarters  
Eighth Fighter Command  
24 March 1944_

_My dear Mr. Zolner:_

_It is my sad portion to write that your splendid son is no longer with us. While this is not official, I hasten to extend my heartfelt and personal sympathy. He was a superior man and son of his great country. We shall miss him and the strong help he always gave us in full, more and more as our battles become increasingly difficult. His comrades have only the deepest affection and respect for the memory of such a man. Our country is being preserved for all of us by such men as John. May it be of some solace for me to say that he went as a red blooded man, his colors flying and in honor; with his eyes fixed forward on a great ideal. We pilots know that his blood, and indeed the blood of each of us when it happens, will not be spilled in vain. The memories held by those we leave behind make it worth while, for they – our loved ones – will keep us alive until we meet again._

_I personally want you to know that I, as his Commanding General, am thinking of you with the hope you may find courage and fortitude to bear your great loss. With deep sympathy, I am_

_Most Sincerely_  
W.E. Kepner  
Major General, U.S. Army  
Commanding_

A follow up letter was written to John’s parents dated 4 May 1944. This second letter was from the War Department, Adjutant General’s Office in Washington. This second letter, announcing to John’s parents, that John was alive in Switzerland. The contents of this second letter follows:

_War Department  
The Adjutant General’s Office  
Washington_  

_4 May 1944_  

_Dear Mr. Zolner:_

_A report has been received that your son is safe and interned in Switzerland._
You may send him personal messages via commercial radio or cable facilities when addressed as follows:

1st LT John Zolner  
c/o American military Attache  
American Legation  
Berne, Switzerland

At the present time the only available communication is by V-mail which may be addressed by you and members of your family as follows:

1. place on the inside address section of each V-mail sheet:  
   1st LT John Zolner, 0-793,578  
   Department M  
   c/o American Military Attache  
   Berne, Switzerland

2. insert all V-mail sheets in an envelope addressed to:  
   Military intelligence Division, Dept “M”  
   Room 1C-774, The Pentagon  
   Washington 25, DC

Letters written on other than V-mail paper cannot be accepted for transmission and will be returned to the sender.

Owing to limited facilities for handling, letters to him must be restricted to those written by his immediate family.

Publicity of letters received from him or of the fact that he is in Switzerland is not desirable from a military point of view. You are, therefore, urged to take the necessary precautions to prevent it.

It is hoped that you will find comfort in the realization that your son is not in unfriendly hands, and that he enjoys many advantages not available to those held in enemy territory as prisoners of war.

Sincerely yours

Robert H. Dunlop  
Brigadier General Acting, The Adjutant General

Sometime within this period of time, John Zolner did correspond with his parents. A handwritten letter was saved by his family dated April 27, 1944. There is no evidence available to determine when his family actually received this letter in relation to the two official letters transcribed above. The contents of his letter follows:
April 27, 1944

Dear Folks

I’m just dropping you a note to let you know that I’m still alive and feeling very well. I won’t go into any detail in describing by arrival here but you must have heard by this time that I’m in Switzerland. I might add too that I’m being well taken care of. I was never injured in any way so you have nothing to worry about on that score.

I suppose there has been a lot happening about home that would be real news to me. After all I have not been in contact with you for quite time, but I see no reason why you cannot keep in contact with me from now on out.

You see you don’t have a thing to worry about now. Be sure to let all of my old friends know that I’m okay. Maybe some of them would care to write.

I’ll have to say good by for now but will write again the first chance I get.

Love to all

Johnnie

Cliff Armstrong

Cliff Armstrong, on the other hand, would continue combat flights either in the role as fighter escort for 8th Air Force bombers or as a fighter-bomber in strafing and bombing tactical and strategic targets in the occupied territories of Germany. Cliff provided air cover and close air support during and after the Normandy Invasion on June 6, 1944.

Just about a month before John was shot down, Cliff filed an Encounter Report at a debriefing of a flight his squadron had flying bomber escort duty on 10 February 1944. Encounter Reports were required of all contacts pilots had with enemy aircraft. Cliff’s report reads as follows [parenthesis added to clarify abbreviations]:

10 February 1944

I was flying Wakeford White 2 [flight formation location] we had made R/V [rendezvous] with last box [formation] of bombers at 28,000 feet. I spotted an Me110 [German aircraft] and called Wakeford Leader. We started to make a pass at the 110 but another flight cut us off and so we pulled off up to be to cover. About this time I heard someone call that there was an E/A [enemy aircraft] on his tail. I glanced to my left and a P-47, followed closely by an Me 109 [German aircraft], went by. I didn’t have time to call Wakeford Leader and I immediately did a half-roll and went down after the Me 109. I followed down in approx. a 45º dive. I fired several short bursts out of range, probably about 800 yards, hoping to get the 109 off the 47’s tail. At about 15,000 feet the P-47 broke to the left and the 109 continued in the dive. I followed the 109 down, gradually closing to approx. 250 yards at 350 to 450 M.P.H. I got several hits on the E/A on the left side of the fuselage; at this time I was down to 2,000 feet The E/A started to smoke and did sort
of a half-roll to the left and crashed into a field in the vicinity of Lingen. I went back up to 4,000 feet into a layer of clouds and flew instruments most of the time until I made Landfall out. There were several breaks in the clouds and I could see pretty well where I was. I claim one Me 109 destroyed.

Clifford F. Armstrong
1st LT, AC,
352nd F Sq.

Reviewing some of Cliff’s press clippings, kept by his mother in a scrapbook, provide for some anecdotes regarding his combat experiences:

Area Servicemen Meet on Fighting Fronts [no date]

Lester Armstrong was telling us about his brother Cliff who is a Lt. In the Air Corps and is a pursuit pilot in England. He says that his brother doesn’t say very much but this is what we learned about his flying. He flies a P-47 or Thunderbolt which is the heaviest of all pursuit ships. Its ceiling is as high as the pilot is physically able to fly it and Cliff has been up to 38,000 feet. They leave the ground with their flying mask on and usually travel at about 30,000 feet at a fair rate of speed. This plane can hit over 400 miles per hour and in a dive has set a new speed record. Cliff has hit about 635 in a power dive and says the blacking out sensation is really something. He has been over France and the low countries but has yet to be in actual combat. They have seen many planes but the enemy would not fight or else our boys had a special job and could not bother to dive at them. Cliff says that they make one dive at the enemy and if they miss they head for higher altitudes and home for the P-47 is not as maneuverable as the lower altitude planes of the enemy, and to stay and fight would be foolish. However, with 8 machine guns to use, they don’t miss very often. Cliff has seen one fellow from home. He ran into King Hazelton of Coeymans who is working in the finance office at the field from which he flies. Johnny Zolner is stationed not far from Cliff but he did not mention seeing him.

West Coxsackie Flier Decorated at Air Base in England (April 18, 1944)

First Lt. Clifford F. Armstrong of West Coxsackie was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the third Oak Leaf Cluster of his Air Medal in a special ceremony at an Eighth AAF Fighter station in England recently.

Lt. Armstrong, 24, a Thunderbolt fighter pilot, was decorated by Brig. Gen. Murray C. Woodbury, fighter wing commander, for “Meritorious service in aerial flight over enemy occupied Europe.”

A member of a group recently commanded by Lt. Gen. James A. Doolittle, Jr., Lt. Armstrong and his unit were recently commended by the Tokio [sic] raider for “outstanding bomber support and splendid teamwork.”

His was the first England-based fighter unit ever to carry out a dive bomber mission against German installations in France.

Lt. Armstrong is the son of Mr. And Mrs. Joseph Armstrong of RFD 1, West Coxsackie. He was graduated from Coeymans High school in 1938. He was commissioned in November, 1942, and has been flying in the European theater since June 1943.
New Baltimore Pilot Hits Jackpot Over Germany (June 9, 1944)

1st Lt. Clifford Armstrong, 24-year-old Thunderbolt fighter pilot of New Baltimore, killed the proverbial “three birds with one stone” while on a recent dive bombing mission over a Nazi airfield, according to a dispatch from an Eighth AAF Fighter station in England.

Pulling his P-47 fighter-bomber out of a screaming power dive thousands of feet above the aerodrome, he released a bomb. Five hundred pounds of high explosives hit between two hangars and a parked plane, destroying the plane and damaging both hangars.

Son of Mr. And Mrs. Joseph Armstrong of R.D. 1, New Baltimore, Lt. Armstrong was graduated from Coeymans High school in 1938 and was engaged in farming before entering military service in 1942.

He has been on active flying duty in the European theatre of operations since June 1943, and is a veteran of many combat missions. He has destroyed two enemy aircraft and holds the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters.

Armstrong Gets Fifth (June 29, 1944)

First Lt. Clifford Armstrong of New Baltimore, a fighter pilot with the Eighth AAF in England, shot down his fifth plane recently in a dogfight over France. And he did it the hard way – with two 500 pound bombs attached to his plane.

“We were ordered to knock out a certain railroad tunnel,” said Armstrong. “We located the place without any trouble, but just as we were about to start our bomb run, I spotted an enemy plane on the deck. I called by flight over the inter-com and told them to hold everything, I’d be back in a minute. Then I dived on the Jerry and started shooting. He nosed over, crashed to the ground and exploded.”

Lt Armstrong, 24, is a member of one of the American fighter groups which helped to provide air support for Allied troops as they landed in France. He has been overseas since June 1943 and holds the Distinguished Flying Cross and one Oak Leaf Cluster and the Air Medal with three clusters.

Greene County Boy Takes Part in Devastating Raids (no date)

Capt. C.F. Armstrong of New Baltimore, Aids in Savage Attacks

An Eighth AAF Fighter Station, England – Captain Clifford F. Armstrong of New Baltimore, New York flew his Thunderbolt with one of the Eighth Air Force’s outstanding fighter-bomber groups in a series of devastating attacks on enemy road and rail transport as part of the biggest air offensive of the war.

In two days while General Van Kluge’s reeling armies were being hammered in France this veteran group, led by Lt. Col. Ben Rimerman, of Omaha, Nebraska, destroyed or damaged the following: 300 railroad cars. 268 army vehicles – many laden with ammunition; thirty-seven locomotives; and thirteen aircraft.

Previously, the hard-hitting Thunderbolts set a record for P-47’s in the European theater by destroying forty-one German planes in a single day.
In the two months following the invasion of the continent a total of 155 enemy aircraft fell to the Rimerman group. In addition the group accounted for the destruction or damage of 1190 railroad cars; 615 trucks; and 265 locomotives.

On the ground five strategically important railway tunnels were destroyed while ten bridges and six key marshalling yards were blasted beyond immediate use.

Capt. Armstrong, 24, is the son of Mr. And Mrs. Joseph Armstrong, RFD 1, New Baltimore, N.Y.

At the end of Cliff’s combat duty in the European Theater of operations, he received credit for 3 aerial and 2 ground kills of enemy aircraft – the 8th Air Force criteria for holding the acclaimed and enviable aviation combat title of Fighter Pilot Ace. Cliff accumulated over 300 hours of Combat Operational Time. He had a total of 94 combat missions when his tour of combat duty was completed in July of 1944.

**Homeward Bound**

Cliff was the first to leave the European Theater for home. According to his separation papers, he departed England on 25 July 1944. Because John was not repatriated back to England from Switzerland until September 1944, his departure from the European Theater did not occur until 6 October 1944. He did rejoin his squadron for a brief period, but was also involved in intelligence debriefings with regard to his experiences dealing with the various underground networks he encountered in Netherlands, Belgium and France.

Both men eventually returned to their hometowns, married and raised families. Cliff would marry Billie Jones and they would have two daughters Karla and Elaine. John would marry Marilyn Marshall and they would have three daughters: Terry, Cynthia and Wendy; and a son John.
Cliff would rejoin his brother Lester to operate their family farm in New Baltimore, NY. John would be employed as a manufacturing supervisor for a brickyard in Coeymans, NY and a concrete block plant in New Baltimore, NY. His final position would be as an auto mechanic, working for Marshall’s Garage in Ravena, NY.

Cliff died March 23, 2006 at the age of 86. John died August 22, 2006 at the age of 85. Both men are buried in the Chestnut Lawn Cemetery in New Baltimore NY. Their burial locations are just a couple of P-47 Thunderbolt wingspans apart.

Both WW II Fighter-Bomber pilots were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal. Both men had several Oak Leaf Clusters relating to these two prestigious, air combat honors.
Distinguished Flying Cross
and
Air Medal
Cliff Armstrong
Fighter-Bomber Pilot

John Zolner
Fighter-Bomber Pilot
John Zolner with other 350th Fighter Squadron Pilots (Summer 1943)
(individual identified as "me" is Bill Price)
P-47 Thunderbolt Dive Bombing with Two 500 Pound Bombs

P-47 Thunderbolt Providing Close Air Support for Allied Infantry
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