

Top Gun

Nearly half his victories came as a volunteer, after he had completed a 158-mission combat tour.

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QUIET, modest, with a turned-up nose and the face of a cherub, he was far from Hollywood's vision of a fighter pilot. But looks can be deceiving. Maj. Richard Ira Bong was the leading American ace of World War II, of all-time, for that matter, with forty victories in the Pacific.

Dick Bong's career was shaped by his association with Gen. George Kenney, who, in June 1942, reprimanded him for a P-38 buzz job in the San Francisco area. Kenney took an immediate liking to the farm boy from Poplar, Wis. A few days later, Hap Arnold sent Kenney to Australia to command Fifth Air Force, with a promise of P-38s and pilots to go with them. Kenney asked for Bong. Planes and pilots arrived during August 1942.

In early November, Dick Bong, with virtually no Stateside training in tactics or gunnery, joined the 39th Fighter Squadron on New Guinea. On December 27, after two months of uneventful patrols, the P-38s saw their first combat. Bong got separated from his flight in a battle with forty Japanese fighters, dove into a gaggle of enemy planes, and shot down two of them. An overjoyed Kenney predicted that this young lieutenant would become the top ace in the Pacific.

For days at a time, the Japanese didn't show over New Guinea. When they did, the hunting was good, but unlike some Pacific aces—Neel Kearby, for example, who had six victories in a single mission (see "Valor," August '87 issue,

p. 105)—Bong's string grew slowly but steadily. Most of his scores were singles or doubles, with one four-victory mission on July 26, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Ten days later, another kill put his score at sixteen, making him the top ace in the theater. At the end of his first combat tour in November 1943, he had twenty-one victories and five probables in 158 missions. Kenney sent him home on R&R.

Bong undoubtedly could have stayed in the States, but that was not his way. He was glad finally to escape media attention and return to the Pacific as assistant to Tom Lynch, the operations officer of Fifth Fighter Command. General Kenney gave orders that the two be allowed to fly combat as often as they wished; hence, nearly half of Bong's victories came on volunteer missions. Lynch and Bong frequently flew together as a two-man team.

On March 8, Bong suffered "the worst single blow I took while flying combat." He and Lynch, finding no enemy aircraft, strafed enemy barges along the coast. Lynch, a twenty-victory ace, was shot down by flak. A saddened Bong scored three more kills in April, passing Eddie Rickenbacker's World War I record of twenty-six to become the all-time top American ace. Kenney promoted Bong to major and again sent him home to make public appearances and then to attend gunnery school. Bong admitted to being a poor shot.

By early September, Bong was back in New Guinea. He was allowed to fly missions of his choice "to observe the results of a gunnery training program" he was setting up, but was told not to engage in combat unless attacked. Apparently, he was "attacked" frequently, as on a ten-hour mission, escorting the first bombers to hit oil refineries at Balikpapan, Borneo, when Bong felt obliged to down two enemy fighters.

American forces returned to the Philippines in late October 1944. General Kenney was not surprised



Back home on May 11, 1945, Maj. Dick Bong, AAF's top ace and Medal of Honor winner, gets Gen. "Hap" Arnold to sign his "short-snorter" bill outside the Pentagon. Bong died three months later.

to find Bong with the first element of the 49th Fighter Group to touch down at Tacloban on Leyte. Since the Americans were greatly outnumbered in the air and on the ground, Kenney agreed to let Bong fly combat regularly. On Pearl Harbor Day, Bong's score stood at thirty-eight.

Kenney had recommended him for the Medal of Honor, which was presented at Tacloban by General MacArthur. Kenney also decided that when Bong's score reached forty, he would go home for good. That day arrived December 17, and on New Year's Day, 1945, Dick Bong landed at San Francisco, a national hero.

After many public appearances and his marriage to Marjorie Vattendahl (for whom his P-38 *Marge* was named), Dick was assigned to the Lockheed plant at Burbank, Calif., to do test and acceptance flights on the then-trouble-plagued Lockheed P-80 fighter. On August 6, after a little more than four hours in the new jet, Dick Bong, who had survived 200 combat missions, crashed and was killed, an ironic fate that befell several other noted combat veterans.

It was doubly ironic that his tragic death shared the headlines with an event of the same date that took place half a world away at Hiroshima—an event that was to change the world Dick Bong fought for, in ways that neither he nor others could have imagined. ■