

## Four-Star Ace

There's an old saying among fighter pilots, "I'd rather be an ace than a general." John Meyer was both.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

**S**EVERAL World War II fighter aces who remained on active duty became general officers, but only a few reached four-star rank. One of them was John C. Meyer, fourth-ranking US ace in Europe, with twenty-four confirmed air-to-air victories, including one German jet. Of the top fifteen Eighth Air Force aces, Meyer also was the leader in aircraft destroyed on the ground, the most hazardous of fighter operations.

During the Korean War, General Meyer, then a colonel with the 4th Fighter Wing, added two jet victories to become the seventh-ranked all-time Air Force ace. He was the only Air Force officer to be three times awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, predecessor to the Air Force Cross and second only to the Medal of Honor.

Like all successful fighter pilots, John Meyer was an aggressive hunter with complete confidence in his own ability. He was also a smart pilot and an imaginative combat leader. One of his college professors said Johnny Meyer had the best mind of any student he ever taught at Dartmouth.

General Meyer's career as a fighter pilot began in July 1940 when he graduated from flying school. Three years later, when the 352d Fighter Group arrived in England during the summer of 1943, Meyer was in command of its 487th Squadron. He had earned a reputation as a no-nonsense commander, but he demanded no more of his men than he did of himself. That approach was to pay off in the highly disciplined arena of air

combat. On November 26, 1943, Major Meyer won his first victory, flying a P-47.

For a mission on May 8, 1944, Meyer was awarded the first of his three DSCs. Leading a flight of eight P-51s, to which the group had converted the previous month, he attacked a large formation of enemy fighters that was about to intercept a stream of Air Force heavy bombers. During the engagement, which dispersed the enemy fighters, Meyer and his wingman became separated from the rest of the flight. While climbing back to altitude, he sighted fifteen enemy fighters closing on the bombers. Meyer attacked immediately, shooting down two Luftwaffe fighters and breaking up their attack. He then destroyed another fighter before heading for Bodney, the group's base in England, low on fuel and ammunition.

Meyer, now a lieutenant colonel, was awarded an oak leaf cluster to the Silver Star for downing three Me-109s and one FW-190 on November 11, 1944. Ten days later, he earned his second DSC for leading eleven P-51s in an air battle east of Leipzig, Germany, against more than forty enemy fighters. Meyer

maneuvered his formation into position for a surprise attack, himself shooting down three FW-190s. In one case, he used the contrail of an FW-190 for cover, firing at the unseen enemy until he could see strike flashes through the contrail, then breaking off just before ramming the burning enemy plane.

John Meyer was awarded his third DSC for a mission on January 1, 1945, during the Luftwaffe's desperate mass strike on airfields in Belgium and Northern France. The 352d Group, of which Meyer was then deputy commander, was operating temporarily from a field in Belgium under IX Tactical Air Command. As Meyer was about to lead twelve P-51s off the runway, the field was attacked by an estimated fifty enemy fighters. Taking off with full wing tanks, Meyer shot down one FW-190 just after he had raised his landing gear. Then, in a forty-five-minute running battle, he downed another -190. The 352d was credited with destroying twenty-three enemy fighters that day.

On January 9, 1945, after completing 200 combat missions, John Meyer was en route to Paris to make a radio broadcast when he was seriously injured in an automobile accident that ended his World War II career. He would not see combat again until 1951 in Korea.

After Korea, General Meyer served in Air Defense Command, led SAC divisions, and commanded Twelfth Air Force. Later he was appointed Director of Operations on the Joint Staff, then was Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force before his final assignment as Commander in Chief, Strategic Air Command. He was the second fighter ace to command SAC, following Gen. Bruce Holloway who had been the leading ace in China during the early days of World War II.

General Meyer retired in July 1974 and in December of the following year suffered a fatal heart attack. ■



England, January 1945: Lt. Col. John C. Meyer sits in the cockpit of his P-51D, a few days after the mission that earned him his third DSC.