

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

## AAF's First Ace

In his first week of combat, flying against Japan's battle-tested veterans, this young American achieved every fighter pilot's goal.

**F**EW who have not served in the Air Force—and not all who have—will remember that the first Army Air Forces ace of World War II was 1st Lt. Boyd D. "Buzz" Wagner. He should be remembered not only for that distinction but also for his leadership and willingness in combat to go far beyond the call of duty, regardless of risk to himself. His name is missing from several histories of the Air Force.

Wagner studied aeronautical engineering at the University of Pittsburgh for three years before joining the Air Corps and completing flight training in June 1938. He rapidly established a reputation as an exceptional pilot and tactician and as a strong leader. In December 1940, he was assigned to duty in the Philippines with the 24th Pursuit Group and soon was given command of its 17th Pursuit Squadron, equipped with P-40s. A year later, on December 8, 1941 (December 7 at Pearl Harbor), the Japanese struck with an overwhelming armada of bombers and fighters. Nearly half the US bombers and fighters were destroyed on the ground.

The surviving B-17s were flown south to the island of Mindanao. By December 10, the twenty-two remaining fighters, which no longer could offer much resistance to the enemy without excessive losses, were restricted to essential reconnaissance duties. By that date, the air battle—if it could be called that, since the Japanese held a more than ten-to-one superiority in fighters—was over.

The Japanese immediately began landing troops at Aparri, on the northern tip of Luzon, and at Vigan, on the island's northwest coast.

The following day, Buzz Wagner took off from Clark Field on a solo

recon mission to Aparri about 225 miles to the north. Offshore near Aparri, two enemy destroyers escorting the invasion fleet opened fire on him. As he dove toward the sea, he was bounced by five Zeros. Wagner had already found out that a P-40 could outdive and outrun the Zeros. He eluded the five, which turned back toward their new landing strip at Aparri. Now the pursuer, he overtook the Zeros, shot down two, then



made two strafing runs on the dozen enemy aircraft parked along the runway. The Zeros he had met minutes before now attacked him from above and behind, two of them sticking with him as he headed back to Clark. As the enemy closed in to fire, Wagner throttled back, the Zeros overshot, and he downed both of them. Four shot down and ten more destroyed or damaged on the ground—not a bad day.

Four days later, reconnaissance reported twenty-five enemy planes on a new strip near Vigan. Before dawn the next day, Wagner and two of his pilots, Lts. Allison W. Strauss and Russell M. Church, Jr., took off for a surprise strike on Vigan. Flying offshore at a minimum altitude, they approached the airstrip armed with fragmentation bombs. Wagner directed Strauss to fly top cover while he and Church hit the field.

Wagner went in first, laying his bombs on the parked aircraft. As Church began his run, his P-40 was hit by enemy fire and burst into flame, but he continued his attack until his P-40 dove into the ground and exploded. He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service

Cross. [See "Valor at Vigan," September 1984 "Valor," p. 204.]

Resolving to make the Japanese pay for downing his wingman, Wagner strafed the enemy field repeatedly, destroying nine planes on the ground and damaging seven more. As Wagner made his last pass, one Zero managed to get off the ground, partially concealed beneath Wagner's wing. Wagner rolled his P-40 inverted to pinpoint the Zero—not an on-the-deck maneuver for beginners—rolled back, reduced throttle to let the Zero get ahead of him, and shot it down to become the first AAF ace of the war and a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross.

A few days later, while attacking an enemy landing force, a shell exploded ahead of his P-40, shattering the windscreen. Glass fragments were embedded in his face and chest, one shard entering his left eye. He was flown to Australia for medical attention, on one of the few planes able to leave Luzon. There, Buzz Wagner was promoted to lieutenant colonel and made director of pursuit aviation for southern New Guinea.

As soon as partial sight was restored to his injured eye, Wagner led a combat mission flying a P-39. His flight was hit by enemy fighters that shot down four of the P-39s. Before the action ended, four enemy fighters were downed, three of them by Wagner, bringing his victory total to eight.

Five months into the war, not many fighter pilots possessed the varied experience Buzz Wagner had accumulated. Headquarters decided his experience would be most valuable in the States, training fighter pilots. Despite his protests, Wagner was sent home to a combat-training assignment. Like so many other outstanding fighter pilots, Buzz Wagner did not survive the vagaries of flying in the peaceful skies of home. In November 1942, his plane went down on a routine flight from Eglin Field, Fla., to Maxwell Field, Ala. The Air Forces lost a superb pilot who surely would have become a leader in the burgeoning AAF. ■