

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Honest John

Superace Bud Mahurin faced a greater challenge in Korea than in the skies of Europe and the Pacific during World War II.

AFRIEND of Walker M. “Bud” Mahurin observed that this handsome, ebullient young man could have made it in Hollywood, but that was not to be his destiny. In September 1941, he was in the uniform of the Army Air Forces. After completing training as a fighter pilot, he was assigned to the 56th Fighter Group, the “Wolf Pack,” led by Col. Hubert A. “Hub” Zemke.

The group arrived in the UK in January 1943 with no combat experience and soon to go into battle against some of the best and most experienced fighter pilots in the history of air warfare. A fast learner, by March 1944 Bud Mahurin had become the leading AAF ace in Europe.

On March 27, Mahurin shot down a Dornier Do 217 bomber. His P-47 was hit and set afire. Mahurin bailed out and spent several adventurous months with the French underground before being flown back to England in an antique plane operated by the underground. Because of his knowledge of the underground, he was not allowed to continue flying combat over Europe and was sent home.

By pulling all the strings he could reach, Mahurin got an assignment as commander of the 3d Fighter Squadron, 3d Air Commando Group, which was about to deploy to the Pacific. By early 1945, there were few enemy fighters left in the Philippines. Mahurin did down one of them, ending the war with 20.75 confirmed victories even though his time in the hunting grounds of Europe had been cut short a year before that war ended.

When the Korean War broke out, Bud Mahurin was serving in the office of the Air Force Secretary—no place, in his mind, for a fighter pilot

when a war was going on. Some deft maneuvering got him an assignment in 1951 as commander of the 1st Fighter-Interceptor Group, an F-86 unit at George AFB, Calif., a step toward returning to combat. The next move was to convince his superiors that he could do a better job training fighter pilots if he were allowed to spend 90 days on temporary duty in Korea. Again a winner, he arrived at Suwon AB, South Korea, early in December 1951 and became special assistant to the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing’s commanding officer, his old friend Col. Francis S. “Gabby” Gabreski.

While helping Gabreski develop tactics and solve logistics problems, Bud Mahurin shot down two MiG-15s and later was credited with 1.5 more, bringing his total to 24.25 and becoming the only Air Force pilot with victories in the World War II European theater of operations, Pacific theater, and Korea. Before his 90-day TDY was up, he was given command of the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing at Kimpo AB, South Korea. His call sign was “Honest John.”

Mahurin conceived and developed the idea of using the F-86 for dive-bombing as well as air-to-air combat and strafing. Low-level operations proved to be his ticket to a catastrophe that would test his heroism beyond anything he had experienced in hundreds of combat engagements.

On May 13, 1952, while strafing in North Korea, he was hit, crash-landed (breaking an arm), and was captured by the North Koreans. For more than a year, he was kept in solitary confinement in a tiny cell, fed only enough to keep him alive, inadequately clothed in subzero weather, deprived of sleep, and interrogated for hours at a time, often all night, while forced to stand at attention, threatened with execution if he did not answer his captors’ questions.

What the enemy wanted most was a “confession” that Mahurin and others had waged germ warfare, never mind that both sides knew it was not true. Af-

ter weeks of interrogation, propaganda, and psychological torture, Mahurin feared that he was losing control and might give in. He attempted suicide but was discovered in the act and thwarted, though he had lost so much blood that he barely survived.

The interrogators finally gave up, to be replaced by a well-educated Chinese officer who spoke fluent English, brought Mahurin books, arranged for better food, and generally improved his conditions. Eventually the Chinese officer’s real purpose emerged—to get a confession of germ warfare by persuasion rather than threats. He reminded Mahurin that the allies did not know he was a POW, so he could be held until his death, never to see his wife and children again. Bud Mahurin at last agreed to write a “confession” so full of inaccuracies and implausible information that any Western reader would know it was fiction. Unknown to him, the war had already ended.

After his release and return to the States, Bud Mahurin and other former POWs were shocked to learn that some Americans, including Sen. Richard B. Russell (D-Ga.), thought that those who signed confessions should be discharged under conditions other than honorable. The Defense Department thought otherwise. All but four who had signed confessions were cleared of wrongdoing by a board of senior Air Force officials.

Colonel Mahurin was assigned as vice commander of the 27th Air Division. Because of his position on the promotion list, it seemed unlikely that he would be promoted to regular colonel and be considered for a star and a higher command in his remaining years of service. He therefore resigned his commission to accept a senior position with the aircraft industry.

Bud Mahurin served this country with distinction as a fighter pilot in two wars and as a prisoner of war in Korea. He will always hold a special place in the Air Force galaxy of heroes. ■