

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

John F. Thornell

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Abstract:

Fighter ace John F. Thornell discusses his military service with the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. He describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time stationed in England with the 328th Fighter Squadron of the 352nd Fighter Group. Special focus on four combat missions that took place in 1944: a skip-bombing mission against a German submarine pen (March 11, 1944), a bomber escort mission against Northeim, Germany (April 19, 1944), a bomber escort mission against Brunswick, Germany (May 8, 1944), and a patrol mission over France (June 10, 1944).

Biography:

John F. Thornell was born on April 19, 1921 in Stoughton, Massachusetts. He joined the United States Army in 1940 and applied for flight training after the United States entered World War II. Completing his training in 1943, Thornell was then deployed to England, where he served with the 328th Fighter Squadron of the 352nd Fighter Group. His combat tour included combat air patrol and bomber escort missions over France and Germany. After the end of World War II, Thornell briefly left active duty to attend college at the University of California. He was recalled to active duty 1948 and served with the Air Force until 1971, when he retired as a lieutenant colonel. Thornell passed away in 1998.

Biographical information courtesy of: Boyce, Ward J., ed., American fighter aces album. Mesa, Ariz: American Fighter Aces Association, 1996.

Restrictions:

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Transcript:

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John F. Thornell

[START OF INTERVIEW]

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[Skip-bombing mission against submarine pens (March 11, 1944)]

JOHN F. THORNELL: Eric, this is Mr. Thornell—Colonel Thornell, Retired—[unintelligible 00:00:08] the mission information that you requested in your letter. Sorry to be late about getting it to you. But I'll try to do the best I can.

The first one that you requested was 11 March 1944. That was Field Order No. 265. Time of mission: 3 hours and 15 minutes. Target was submarine pens at Saint-Nazaire, France, with the strafing mission of targets of opportunity over the Pas-de-Calais area en route home to England, which would bring us out over what would later become the Utah and Omaha beaches four months later. The reason for this mission, being the first low-level ever done by P-47s, was to find out what the intense antiaircraft fire would be and what the ground forces would face during the invasion. We operated out of an advanced base of the RAF Coastal Command at RAF Station Ford, which was down in Southern England. We went down there on the afternoon of the 10th. We were a group of 36 aircrafts, three 12-ship squadrons, not the usual three 16-ship squadrons because these submarine pens were a smaller target, being dug into the side of a cliff at Saint-Nazaire. We could not operate [unintelligible 00:01:44] large frontal assault, so we were operating, like I say, in three 16-ship squadrons—three 12-ship squadron, rather.

So we went down on the 10th of March 1944. The RAF put us up for the night, armed our aircraft with 500-pound high explosive bombs, ten-second time-delayed fuses, so that would give us time enough to skip-bomb into the submarine pens with the doors were open, we had hoped, and still get up over the top of the cliffs before the bombs exploded and continue on with our mission. We had to have it timed right to the—almost to the second because the tide in that area is very changeable. Low tide, the submarines cannot come in or out. High tide, they have to close submarine pen doors because it'd be flooded. So we had to hit the target between 10:00 and 11:00 in the morning in order to be at the optimum tide and find the doors open to service—surface—service the submarines.

What we did was we left Ford on the deck all the way, carrying the, like I say, centerline bombs. No external fuel. So we came down and weather was not too good. About 1,000-foot ceiling, visibility about two miles. Joe Mason—Colonel Joe Mason was leading our group. Took us down, and we managed to get just about on target. We swung in from the English Channel in toward Saint-Nazaire. And we could see the submarine pens ahead of us, and the doors were open. But apparently they'd picked us up on radar because you could see some of the doors were starting to close. So we went line abreast in three squadrons. And I picked out a submarine pen

ahead of me. I had Bill Schwenke, was my wingman. And we went in. We dropped our bombs, pulled up over the cliff, and we were hit by 88- and 40-millimeter, both. 88s had been leveled down to fire down on us as we came in and then immediately went up and got us as we came up over the top.

We continued on the strafing mission through the Pas-de-Calais area and crossed—supposedly crossed out at what would be the invasion beaches. On the way, we were following a highway into that area, and Bill and I got separated due to visibility from the rest of the flight. But we were operating as element leader and wingman. I came upon a B-17 that had been bellied in by an American crew, and the Germans were working on it, trying to get it back into operation. I called Bill and said I was coming back and that I was going to strafe the airplane so that they wouldn't have the opportunity to put it back in commission. So we swung around, I hit it, set it on fire, and we continued on out. And we were being hit all the time. It felt like we were flying through a hailstorm because we knew we were being hit by machine gun fire and light antiaircraft.

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As we crossed the coast, Bill said he had been hit. I looked over, and sure enough, the air—his airplane was covered with oil. He said he couldn't see out the windscreen or the canopy. And I said, "Okay, we'll start to climb so you can jump out." And we climbed up to about 1,500, 1,600 feet, and he got out okay. His airplane went into the Channel, left a big oil slick. And he had a good chute. And I watched him as he hit the water, and I was waiting for him to inflate his Mae West and his life raft, which he did not do for some reason. And he went down in the chute. So I circled down, and I called the Air/Sea Rescue. And they said they'd be right out. I continued on because my emergency fuel warning light had come on. I still didn't have England in sight.

Pretty soon, in the distance, I could see the white cliffs showing up, so I knew I was down just about on course, just south of Dover. About that time, my red warning light came on, showing that I only had three minutes of fuel left. About that time, I spotted an airfield. It was a Spitfire base. And it was RAF Hawkinge. So I put my gear and flaps down and made a straight-in approach. And just about the time I crossed the end of the field, my engine quit. Ran out of fuel. So I put the aircraft down, not knowing and not realizing it, but that there was a steamroller crossing the field in front of me, hard-packing the ground for the Spitfires. Because they didn't use runways; they used hard-packed grass fields. Well, I clipped the steamroller with my left wingtip, knocking off my pitot tube and making a hole in my wingtip. But I came to a stop in front of base operations.

Talked to the RAF, they patched up the hole in my wing, but I had no airspeed indicator. They fed me lunch because, by this time, it was now 1:00 in the afternoon. So I call my base, told them I was safe at home but that I had lost my wingman, Bill Schwenke. I told them I'd be flying

home without an airspeed and to have somebody meet me over the base to bring me in on a formation landing, which they did. Earl Abbott met me over the base, and we landed together and made it home. It was—we found out later, and it's shown on page five of the aircraft group history, that—says for March 11, which was the first low-level attack by fighters in the Pas-de-Calais area, it was the most intense AA fire ever encountered by any group of fighters up till that time of the war.

00:07:30

[Bomber escort mission against Northeim, Germany (April 19, 1944)]

Okay, the next mission that you requested was the 19th of April 1944, which was my 21st birthday. Mission Field Order No. 298-B. Operational hours are—rather, 305-A was the Field Operation Order. Operational hours: 4 hours and 15 minutes. The target was Northeim. We took off—and it was my first mission in a P-51. I was flying with the 486th Squadron instead of my own squadron, 328th, in that our squadron had not converted to P-51s as yet, but we were starting to get them in. But I had already flown the airplane around the traffic pattern a few times, so they let me go with the 486th for that day.

We took off, got in—over the Ruhr Valley. And we were escorting some 17s. And all of a sudden, my engine started acting up. Felt like I had a bad sparkplug or a wire was loose or something because it kept backfiring and skipping. So I call the group commander, Willie Jackson, told him I was going to abort the mission and head back to England. He said, do I need anybody to assist me? And I said no, I thought I could probably make it alone. So I started back and was flying at about, oh, 20,000 feet, and I came upon a couple of B-17s who were really being hit hard. And they had, I'd say, anywhere from 20 to 30 Fw 190s attacking them.

So I couldn't let them be under attack without doing something, even though my airplane wasn't running right. So I went over there and made an attack on the Germans. And right away I got two victories, and then I realized I was being under fire from one behind me. Well, not being very familiar with the airplane, like I say, this being my first combat mission, I pulled it around too hard to try to do it and snapped and went into a spin. This time I was at 19,000 feet. And I had never even read the spin instructions on the aircraft, and I'd never flown it into a spin. But not knowing that the center of gravity with the fuel and fuselage tank is very detrimental to long life.

So to make a long story short, I finally got it out of the spin. I looked at my altimeter, and I was down at 10,000 feet. I looked in my rear-view mirror, looked out the side, and here was the F-190 still following me. So I switched to internal fuel so—to run that fuel out of that tank so I wouldn't have the same problem again and engaged him in combat. I finally did manage to shoot him down. And then I pulled up with one of the B-17s. It was pretty well beat up, had two engines out. And I latched onto him, and we flew back home to England together. And we didn't get attacked again, and I made it home. And I got the Silver Star that day for my birthday.

00:10:41

[Bomber escort mission against Brunswick, Germany (May 8, 1944)]

The other mission you requested now is the 8th of May 1944, which was Field Order No. 331. Time of mission: 4 hours and 30 minutes. Target was Brunswick, Germany. It was a beautiful day. It was one of the better days we had flying. We had full max effort, three 16-ship squadrons. Joe Mason leading the group, J. C. Meyer [John C. Meyer] leading 487th Squadron. And even though I was the first lieutenant, I was leading the 328th Squadron. We were escorting B-17s and B-24s both. One group going in and one to come out.

We were about almost to the target at Brunswick when I looked over and I saw, oh, anywhere from 50 to 100 German aircraft underneath the bomber formations. And they were pulling up, firing up into the belly of the aircraft, and then falling off so you couldn't see them from above the horizon. So I call Joe Mason, which was Topsy, and I said, "Topsy, I think our big friends are under attack at nine o'clock." So he looked over, and just about then, a couple of 17s blew up. So he said, "You're right." So we dropped our tanks and attacked.

Well, we—naturally, in that kind of a maneuver, where you have 48 of your own and maybe 48 or 50 of theirs, everybody gets separated. So we really got in a real tangled situation. And I managed to get three and two damaged and broke away. And I was out of ammunition, so I had to head home with my wingman. And George Davis [possibly referring to Clayton E. Davis], J. C. Meyer, Joe Mason, Carl Luksic, and myself, we got 15 of the 27 aircraft destroyed that day for our group. Our group got the Presidential Unit Citation, and all of us got the Distinguished Service Cross.

00:12:44

[Patrol mission over France (June 10, 1944)]

The other mission I'd like to mention that you didn't specifically ask for was the 10th of June, which was four days after the invasion: Field Order No. 379. Time of mission was five hours. And the target was [unintelligible 00:13:06], France, which was around Caen, and was—our troops had been moving inland slowly. They were under heavy attack on the ground. And the 1st Canadian Infantry Division was tied up at Caen, and they were under heavy attack. At that time, in those four days since the invasion, we'd been flying around the clock, practically. No German aircraft had made much of an impression. They hadn't come out, and they haven't attacked any of the American ground troops and so forth.

But I had a flight of four, and I was on patrol on the highway between Saint-Lô and Caen when, lo and behold, coming out of the east was a flight of about 30 Me 109s. And each one of them had a 200-kilogram bomb on it, which was roughly the same as our 500-pounders. And they

didn't have any drop tanks. And they were flying in real tight formation, and they were heading right for Caen, so I knew they were going to go make a ground attack on the 1st Canadian Infantry Division.

So I call the sector commander, who was a colonel, and I didn't get any answer. And I said we were going to go in and attack before they could get to the target, which we did. We attacked them from the rear. When we got—the four of us got three right away. I got two of them. And we broke up the formation. They all had to drop their bombs because they realized they were being attacked. They didn't know by how many. They didn't realize it was only four P-51s. So they all dropped their bombs and turned around to attack us, and they didn't see anybody but just the four of us. Well, we still got into a few more fights, and I got one more. And by that time, the weather had—was starting to really [unintelligible 00:14:54] on the deck. We were down to about 500, 600 feet. So I said, "Well, let's head back out across the Channel." And the Germans headed back east because they didn't have any external fuel and they'd come quite a ways, evidently, into France. So at least we broke them up, and they departed.

We made it home to England okay, and I reported what had happened. They said they couldn't believe that the German Air Force had actually decided to do some ground support work because they weren't trained for that. At least not the Me 109-type pilots. So to make a long story short, I got my second Silver Star for that mission. And of the four of us, we had managed to shoot down six of the 30 Germans.

But when I did get home, the RAF called to our base and said they wanted to see me down in London at the Air Ministry. I got down there, and they said that they had lost two Spitfires that morning and that they thought that maybe, by mistake, we had shot them down instead of Germans. But then when I showed them my combat film, it was pretty obvious that the airplanes had crosses on them, that they were Me 109s and not Spitfires. Well, then they realized that the Germans actually had started to get into the anti-invasion type warfare.

[Conclusion]

Now, this is what I can get out of my paperwork and so forth, Eric. If there is any other things that you would like to have me get for you, I'll look them up in my files and so forth and send them to you. But I'll get this off to you right away so that you can have it. Okay.

[recording stops and starts again 00:16:48]

Oh, like a P.S., supposedly, Eric, to tell you—on that March 11th mission, of the 36 aircraft that we took off from Ford to hit Saint-Nazaire, we lost ten aircraft and the ten pilots. Four of the

pilots were killed, six later turned up as prisoners of war. So it was pretty high loss ratio mission for us. Thirty-six, to lose almost a third, ten of them. Okay.

00:17:22

[END OF INTERVIEW]