

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

**John S. Stewart (Part 1 of 2)**

**Interview Date:** circa 1960s

Abstract:

In this two-part oral history, fighter ace John S. Stewart discusses his military service with the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. In part one, he describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time in the China-India-Burma Theater with the 76th Fighter Squadron of the 23rd Fighter Group. Topics discussed include his service history, notable combat missions while stationed in China, and his aerial victories.

Biography:

John S. Stewart was born on September 13, 1919 in Basin, Wyoming. He joined the United States Army Air Corps in 1941 and graduated from flight training the following year. After serving briefly in the Panama Canal Zone, Stewart joined the China Air Task Force, the successor of the American Volunteer Group. He served with and eventually commanded the 76th Fighter Squadron, flying missions over China, Formosa, and other areas of the China-India-Burma Theater. Stewart remained in the military after the end of World War II and went on to serve as command director of the North American Air Defense Command Combat Center. He retired as a colonel in 1970.

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

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Transcript:

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**John S. Stewart (Part 1 of 2)**

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

***[Military life and conditions in China]***

JOHN S. STEWART: Gene, this is Colonel John Stewart. I'm going to try to put on tape for you the—from the best of my memory, the most interesting experience that I had in combat from World War II—aerial combat. I guess the first one is probably always a man's most interesting. It certainly was for me because I had been in China along with some-42 others of us that had gone over and formed the 23rd Fighter Group when the AVG, the American Volunteer Group, were disbanded in the summer of 1942.

In order to set the scene a little bit for this, I might give just a brief history of where we were and how we were operating. I was a flight leader by this time in the 76th Squadron, which was commanded up until the 1st of July by Major Grant Mahony, and then Major Robert Costello took over from him. The squadron itself was based at Lingling in south-central China, but Lieutenant Jim Williams [James M. "Willie" Williams], another ace, had a detachment at Hengyang, some 100—maybe 150 miles north of Lingling. This is due south of the twin cities of central China, Hankou and Wuchang, and south of the city of Changsha.

The time was July of 1943. As I say, we'd gotten there the summer before. All of us had been in—had a good many missions, 50 or 75 missions under our belt. But very few of us had seen any enemy aircraft. Some of the boys had two or three confirmed. I had been in a couple of fights, but as yet hadn't been able to score on anything except locomotives and trucks and so forth, where I had made ace in each of those. And we were counting everything.

In order to give you a little bit of the idea of how we operated, we had P-40Ks. Willie had a flight of four, I had a flight of four, and he was detachment commander at Hengyang. And Hengyang sits on a river that runs north and south. It runs up and joins the Yellow—the Yangtze River at Hankou. It was extremely hot that summer and had been hot for some two or three months. We had no refrigeration. We were living off the land. We had pretty well used up what clothing—worn out what clothing we had. We were down to one set of khakis apiece. We got absolutely nothing from the States other than mail about every month or six weeks and an occasional carton of cigarettes. We lived off the land: Chinese eggs, pork chops, rice, pancakes made with no baking soda. And boy, they were delicious. And with the lack of refrigeration, most of us had dysentery, had lost a lot of weight, were none-too-healthy specimens.

However, morale was pretty good. We'd gotten to fly a bit. We'd sat out all winter while they stocked us up with gas, flying it in over the Hump in C-47s. Five-hundred-mile fight from Chabua in India to Kunming and then transferred by drums that were carried in yo-yo sticks and trucks and railroads and any way to get it to us. Supply line at Hengyang was about 13, 14 months long.

So with the heat and so on—and the fact that, in the months of May and June, we'd done considerable ground support to the Chinese armies up in the Dongting Lake area, just north of Hengyang about 100 miles, which perturbed the Japs a bit. The usual propaganda: they were going to decimate the Fourteenth Air Force and wipe Chennault [Claire Lee Chennault] and his forces off the map. So we were getting more and more aerial activity on the part of the Japs. And while a big fight hadn't taken place in some months, we were expecting one daily and, of course, were standing alert from before daylight until full dark. Well, Willie and I would alternate. His flight would go down early in the morning, and my flight would come down around 6:00. It got daylight around, I suppose, 4:00 or 4:30. And then the next morning we'd rotate.

00:04:58

***[Suffering from hypoxia during a Japanese bomber attack (July 23, 1943)]***

JSS: Well, the 22nd of July, we'd gotten one of our infrequent gooney birds in. Instead of having mail, gasoline, and maybe a carton of cigarettes or some food—C-rations or something—we had a little of it. As I remember, I got half a dozen letters from my wife, which were quite welcome. But there wasn't a cigarette in the crowd. And the thing that really disgusted us, a good share of the room was taken up with a bunch of troops out of headquarters who were up to see that we had, of all things, gas masks. But we—I don't think there was a gas mask in all of China. And we didn't need them, didn't want them. We were rather disgusted that somebody took up that valuable space. We called them "feather merchants." The colonel in charge of this outfit had quite a session with Lieutenant Jim Williams and myself because we had—we didn't have side arms for the men. We didn't have carbines or rifles. Each pilot had a .45, and that was the sum total of what arms there were, other than the 50-calibers in the P-40s.

Anyhow, after an hour or two lecture by this old gentleman—and I say "old." We were probably 22 or 23, 24 years old, something like that. This old gentleman must have been all of 45 or 50. [laughs] But he made it quite pointed that we lacked a whole lot of being the commander that one should expect of this type of an operation. Well, anyhow, we got the guys fed and bedded down in the hostel about a mile from the field. And the next morning, as I—about the time I got up—as I remembered, I was just getting out of bed. Willie had gotten up with his flight and had gone on to—down to the line and was on

alert. So as I was getting up, why, the jingbow sounded, which consisted of the Chinese pulling three big red balls up on the pole. They called it a jingbow. A one-ball, two-ball, or a three-ball alert. One ball went up when the Japs took off at Hankou, two-ball alert when they crossed the lines—came into Free China—and three balls when they got within 15 minutes of the field. Well, this was a three-ball alert, so somewhere, the net had failed to give us the warning of when they crossed into our territory.

So I yelled for the rest of the flight, chased downstairs. I had on a pair of khaki shorts and that was it. Grabbed the rest of the flight, jumped in the old Ford station wagon, which had been converted to burn charcoal, chugged on down to the line. By the time we got down there, the P-40s were cranked up. The crew chiefs had cranked them. We jumped in and took off.

Now, the field at Hengyang was 2,800 feet of compacted earth and gravel on a bluff above the river that divided the field from the city of Hengyang. Well, Willie, by this time in his flight, were at about 10,000 feet, climbing for altitude. We took off and maneuvered under them and climbed up. And we climbed till we got to the absolute maximum of a P-40K, which—as I remember it, we got about 27,000 feet that day, and we were just hanging there on the props. We flew in baseball caps, shorts, and headsets. There was no such thing as sunglasses or wristwatches or helmets or gloves or anything else. They were non-existent in China.

Well, I remember the first thing that happened after we got to altitude—I had no knowledge that I was feeling bad or had hypoxia or anything. But Willie noticed it, called me over the radio and he said, “Stew, head down. I think you’ve got hypoxia. You’re not flying smooth.” By this time, my flight had joined his, and we had the eight P-40s together. So I signaled my flight to join Willie, and I peeled off and headed down.

Well, by this time, the warning net was calling the Japs as 15 miles west of the base. So I was right over the city. I turned to the west, and, of course, I was seeing black spots by this time. I suppose I was 24,000, 25,000 feet, headed down and going down as rapidly as I could get that P-40 to go, which was straight down, wide open. And if you’ve ever flown a P-40, you know that at high speeds it rotated around its longitudinal axis, even with both feet on the right rudder pedal to counteract the torque. Well, it began to wind up and twist, so I’ve shallowed the dive and started to level out somewhat. I looked out, and these black spots were beginning to sort of coagulate, you might say. Sure enough, here was the Jap bomber formation dead ahead of me, and I was coming in on their tail. They had—were headed south, I was headed west, and I just swung in behind them. They were on the wide swing to come in and bomb on a northerly heading and head out towards Hankou.

So as I got closer, I saw then instead of black spots that were these Jap bombers at about 20,000 feet. Well, being hypoxied, I didn't think that there were accompanying fighters, and I didn't think anything except, "Oh boy, here's my chance to get one." So I pulled up behind the formation some couple hundred yards behind, pulled the power off, started shooting. Well, that close and dead astern, even I could have hit something, and I did. I got the port engine on the bomber on the right side of the formation, flamed it, and moved my point of aim over and got the starboard engine and flamed it. I don't suppose I used more than 50 rounds on each engine. Just a—[makes sound effect]—they'd flame.

Well, this bomber flamed out and let the formation go down. I moved over to the next one in line, did the same thing on him. He flamed and peeled out. Two short bursts. Moved over to the third one. And I got the strikes on the right—the left wing, but no flame, when suddenly—not suddenly, but finally, it penetrated my mind that—the idea that maybe I better get the hell out of there. Things weren't—were going too smooth. And besides that, it was a clear day, and there was an awful lot of hail. So I peeled off—down, broke away from the formation, leveled at, oh, 17,000, 18,000. Looked out, checked my aircraft, and I was just sieved. They had just shot me to pieces. And as I was watching, looking at the wings and trying to see if they'd hang on, why, the prop froze right in front of me. And I realized then that somebody had hit the coolant and the engine had frozen. I looked back to see if any of the fighters had chased me down and they hadn't. I couldn't see behind me too well to see if the tail was shot up or anything, but there were no fighters back there, Zeros, that I could see.

So then the next job was to figure out whether to bail out or belly in or whether—where and what to do. But I finally decided I had better belly it in on the field. And I looked over at the field, and it was a mass of dust. Obviously, the Japs had bombed it, which meant it would be cratered, rather hazardous to even attempt a wheels-up landing. But the other alternative was to bail out, and the chute I had had belonged to R.T. Smith [Robert T. Smith]. If you know R.T., he's six-foot four or five, half again as big as I am, and I had cut and whacked the straps to make it fit. But I wasn't too sure when this chute had been packed. It had either been 1940 or 1941. This was 1943, and I wasn't too happy about trusting it.

So I decided to belly in. And I circled around and made an approach. And then, of course, like all young squirts in a hurry, why, I came in about 20 knots too fast, ran the nose in the ground to slow it up—and that old scoop on a P-40 makes a real good stop—bounced over one bomb crater, skidded along on the ground, finally came to a stop. No damage to me or the plane other than the dent of the scoop, except for the bullet holes. And I got out and was looking at those, and it was—I just can't describe it. I've never seen so many holes in one piece of equipment in my life. We counted them later, and there were 180-some, including the 20-millimeters. Three or four of them come right up the tail and

blasted against the armor plate right behind me in my seat. None of them had penetrated. I didn't have a scratch.

But while I was standing there looking at this wreck, I—the crewmen came running over from the side of the field, climbed out of the slit trench yelling at me and, “Come on, Stew, get in the slit trench. Another wave due in.” And I looked off to the west, and sure enough, here came another wave. You could actually see them. They were also about 18,000, 20,000. So on a high run, I took off for the edge of the field. It must have been 200 or 300 yards. As I say, we weren't in too good a physical condition. By the time I got to the edge of the field, these bombers were right up where they should be dropping. And I could imagine I could hear bombs coming, so the first slit trench I saw, 10 or 15 feet ahead of me, I didn't stop to look in it or anything. I just dove for it head first. Well, as I went in—of course, it was the rainy season—it was a mass of mud and all full of things—the Chinese using it for a latrine or what have you. But there was one piece of white in it, and I hit this just head-first going in. Well, then no more got in. And the bombs did start dropping. We got a pretty good bombing out of it. Fortunately, no one got hit in the slit trenches, but they plastered the field again.

After the bombing ceased, why, I climbed out and wiped the mud and crud out of my eyes, sat up on the edge of this slit trench, and reached down to help this other person out who was—had had the white undershorts on that I had hit dead-center going in. And I got him up and wiped the mud off of him, and it was this colonel that had come in about the—raised hell about the gas masks. And all he had on—of course, he'd been sound asleep when it had happened. The first time he'd been around a bombing. All he had on was these—his undershorts that he'd slept in. And I couldn't resist asking him where his gas mask was. And if you've ever seen a man get a dirty look, I got it. [laughs]

Well, then that result was, of the raid, my two bombers crashed in a small village north of Hengyang. The family was eating breakfast. It killed three members of a family of six. And they crashed together within seconds of each other. The probable never was confirmed. On our side of the lines, however, there was one crashed up beyond the lines that we—was reported by the Chinese. However, I was officially credited with two Betty bombers for that morning fight. Willie and the rest of the flight got several of the fighters, and Lieutenant Vern Kramer got the Distinguished Service Cross for making a pass at this same bomber formation all by himself up at Changsha. I received the Silver Star. And of course, none of the planes could land at Hengyang. They scattered. Some of them went to Lingling. Some of them landed at auxiliary strips out through the countryside. But we did have one P-40 left that the boys repaired that—the rest of that morning. And by noon, I took it off and went on down to Lingling and rejoined the rest of the squadron since Hengyang was unusable. We had another raid that afternoon. I managed to get one Zero that afternoon, which gave me a score of three for the day.



But that, I think, was probably my most interesting day in aerial combat. It certainly was an indoctrination to aerial combat that I wouldn't want to attempt again. It started six weeks of intensive aerial fighting, the only six weeks in my two years in China. By the 13th of September, we'd shot down nearly 100 aircraft with our little detachment up there, and five of us were aces, running from five to eight aircraft apiece. And by the middle of September, the activity ceased, except for an occasional fight.

I hope that this off-the-cuff narration can serve your purpose, Gene. If there's anything that I can add to it in the future, please drop me a line and let me know. I hadn't—I have had not access to any of the official records, of course. I'm trusting to memory. I do have the dates in my Form 5 of the flights, so I know that—I'm quite sure that the date is accurate. My memory, of course, of the actual activities during the fight has been augmented by the remarks and the comments of the other members of the squadron because I, frankly, was about out of my head from lack of oxygen. I remember very little of it, other than—I think it's more instinct than anything else that caused me to pull up behind and actually start shooting. Certainly, if I had had any—if I had had oxygen and had my wits about me, I never would have—I'd have gone in and made a pass and might have gotten one, but I certainly wouldn't have sat there and pulled the fool stunt I did of getting shot down.

[recording stops and starts again]

Well, have [unintelligible]—

[recording stops and starts again]

00:20:11

***[Bomber escort mission to Hankou (August 1943)]***

JSS: Gene, in answer to number 5, description of the most humorous combat experience, I would probably have to add an addition to the one I just mentioned, depending on what your idea of humor is. That old boy with his gas mask I thought was quite funny at the time and still do. Actually, we had several very humorous experiences over there.

As I say, we had this detachment at Hengyang. Shortly after the 23rd of July, we brought the rest of the squadron from Lingling up to Hengyang, and the 75th Squadron moved into Lingling. One of the other members of the squadron, Lieutenant Martin M. Lubner [Marvin "Marty" Lubner]—now Lieutenant Colonel Lubner—and Marty and Jim Williams and I led all of the fighter flights in Eastern China during the summer of 1943 out of Hengyang. Marty was—also made ace, was quite a dependable pilot, very good set of eyes and absolutely without fear. There wasn't anything that bothered him. Every fight

that we got in, of course, we were vastly outnumbered. We had a total of 12 to 16 P-40s in the squadron. We would escort the 11th Bomb Squadron, which had B-25s and had been formed from Doolittle's Tokyo raid. Not his aircraft, but some of his people had stayed on in China, as had some of the AVGs into the 23rd Fighter Group.

Well, along about the 1st of August, we started escorting B-25s to Hankou and bombing the main airfield the Japs had at Hankou. And this was always good for some furious aerial activity. We'd always get intercepted by 50 to 75 Zeros, and it was pretty good hunting. And Marty Lubner was one of those individuals that played it real cool and calm. He'd keep his flight together, attacked in a formation. All of his pilots got kills. Marty himself ended up, I think, with seven by the end of September when he came home. And so long as he could keep altitude on the Japs—or we could, why, we were all right. However, the Zero could out-climb us, could outrun us, except right on the deck, and while we could out-dive it—the early Zero, that is, the Oscar and Zeke and those that we were fighting at that time—in late August, we ran into the Tojo, and the Tojo we couldn't do anything with P-40s.

But this one day—and I don't have the exact date, but it was around the 1st of August 1943—12 of us in P-40s had escorted either eight or ten B-25s to Hankou and had gotten the bombers in. And they had bombed very accurately, hit the field, when we were jumped by some 60 escort—Zeros that had climbed up. Well, we saw them climbing up, spotted them at about 16,000 feet, rolled in and met them on a head-on attack in the climb. And our flight of 12—the 12 of us got a total of, I think, 16 that day. Marty dove down leading his flight, got one, climbed back out, dove down again, and got another one. And on the climb out of the second dive, of course, other Zeros had, by this time, climbed above him, and he was in a [unintelligible] position. The net result that, with that many Zeros, each P-40 seemed to all of a sudden become a flight leader. He was leading a flight of Zeros and either heading for the bombers for protection—the bombers could take care of themselves very well. They flew excellent formation, stayed together, and, of course, with bombs gone, they'd dive for the front lines and wide open. And if we needed help, we could just pull in behind them, and they'd keep the Zeros off our tail. As I say, at altitude we had a rough time running away from them.

Well, anyway, we'd started for home. By the time we crossed the lines, things had quieted down a bit. The Japs disappeared, so we had no worry about getting on home. And we gathered the fighters together and got a call from Marty and assessed that we had no losses. And Marty broke into his famous method of coming home, singing "Bell Bottom Trousers" at the top of his voice. It seemed to be his release from the tension of combat. Of course, nobody else could talk, but there wasn't anything to talk about or do anyhow. Marty had not rejoined the formation. He was off to the west.

In the midst of this song, we could hear him singing his song of “Bell Bottom Trousers.” And he was probably 15,000 feet when his song was interrupted. He called, “Willie, this is Marty. I need a little help.” Well, Willie answered and says, “Yeah, where are you?” And he gave direction. Pretty soon, his voice got a little more perturbed. And, “Stew, this is Marty. Get on over here. I got a bunch of Zeros.” Well, by the time we got over to where he was, some probably 20, 25 miles to the west of us, well, Marty was in a full screaming fight all by himself. He had gotten jumped by five or six Zeros, and they were just giving him all he could stand. We called and asked him what his altitude was, and he says, “Well, I’m right down on the deck. I’m in a valley. And you better come on over because I’ve got five of these little mothers cornered.” Well, this—you could just see this boy getting chased around and around in that valley with five Zeros shooting at him. And here he was, he had five of them cornered. He got quite a laugh out of everybody, even though there was a good chance of Lub getting shot down at any moment. We never did make contact with him. He actually broke out by himself and came on home. I don’t remember whether he got one or not.

But after a very, very fine mission to Hankou in which we’d shot down, as I say, I think 16 Zeros with no loss to ourselves and no loss to the bombers, and then to be over friendly territory and headed home, feeling relatively safe, and have some character come out in the middle of nowhere and say, “Come on over. I’ve got five of them cornered,” when you knew darn well all he was hunting was a way to get home, provided one of those bits of humor that seemed to show up in World War II.

00:28:06

### **[Overview of aerial victories]**

JSS: In answer to question 15, the dates of my aerial victories: the two Betty bombers and one Oscar-Zero confirmed on 23rd July. I confirmed two Oscar-Zeros about the 1st of August to make me an ace. These two were over Hankou. Tactics there: we were escorting, as I had mentioned, B-25s, and they were on head-on passes. And the next victory I got was over Lingling, another Zero, which raised my total to six. And the next one was a Betty bomber on a raid into Hankou in the middle of August. The seventh was a transport. We were on a—by this time, we’d gotten the 449th Squadron in with P-38s from North Africa. Tommy Harmon and Lieutenant [Greg?] and a group of boys would come in. We were using the P-38s to carry 1,000-pound bombs up on the shipping of the Yangtze and were escorting with the P-40s. We’d made one—made a mission up [unintelligible] and were headed home when I spotted this Jap transport. And it was a straight tail chase into him, shot him down, which gave me number seven.

And that pretty well took care of the fighting for that period of time. I'd been moved out to Sichuan further east and took a detachment out there. By this time, Jim Williams and I were both captains and Jim was the squadron commander. And out at Sichuan, along in November—or about the last of November, I guess—the middle of—last of November—we had a raid by three Betty bombers and six escorting fighters. I got another Betty bomber over Sichuan to make number eight. And I'd had two or three probables in Zeros. We shot down all three of the bombers, the squadron did, as well as a couple of the escorting fighters

The last victory that I got—we had gotten P-51As. Willie had in the—had gotten 11 of them back at Hengyang the latter part of October. And on the—Armistice Day of 1943, he and Tex Hill [David L. “Tex” Hill] and a group had come out and landed at Sichuan to refuel, and I sneaked my way into one of the P-51s there. And on my checkout ride, went with them while we made the Armistice Day raid on Formosa. That was the first time Formosa was hit in World War II. Took P-38s and P-51s from Sichuan, B-25s—I think we had a total of about 30 fighters and bombers—and hit them with low level. The P-38s went in first and shot down 11 that were in the traffic pattern, and we got the rest of them on the ground. A total of 57 confirmed enemy planes from that raid.

And my ninth victory came after the 1st of the year in early '44. We had gotten P-51Bs by this time. And on this particular mission, I had tied into a Zero at about, oh, 32,000 feet, I guess. And with the 51, its speed and altitude capabilities, why, we had a—just had a field day. I played with this boy for five or ten minutes. Finally chased him all the way to the deck just to—as long as I kept speed up, I could outturn him at above 300 miles an hour. Of course, at the slow speed, they'd outturn us quite easily. But I—by use of altitude and so on, kept above him, drove him down to the ground, then shot him down—which became a standard—[dog barks in background]—tactic, was to use high-speed in the P-51s for the rest of the war.

00:32:53

**[Other service details]**

JSS: As far as losses are concerned in aerial combat, we had a good many aircraft shot down. Our ratio of losses was we lost one P-40 for every 20 Japs that we got. I only had one boy lost in the squadron. I became squadron commander on the 1st of December of '43 until I came home in May of '44, and I had one boy killed in the squadron while I was a commander. We found—killed near the base. He had one bullet hole in him. He'd got hit in the head with an odd bullet.

We had used both P-40s and P-51s. 50-calibers is the ordnance we used. What bombs we dropped were—had been shipped in long before the war had started, back in '37, '38. We

actually used Russian bombs—Russian-manufactured bombs with American fuses. All of my fighting took place at Lingling, Hengyang, and Sichuan, China, which was in Eastern—Southeastern China, north of Canton. So far as photographs are concerned, I don't have any of—taken during combat. I have some that I'll send you that were taken privately. There are no official photographs or anything because we didn't have a photographic service.

00:34:22

[END OF INTERVIEW]