

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

Eugene P. Roberts

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Abstract:

Fighter ace Eugene P. Roberts 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 in England with the 84th Fighter Squadron of the 78th Fighter Group. Special focus on a bomber withdrawal mission over the Netherlands on July 30, 1943 in which Roberts and his squadron scored several aerial victories. Roberts notes that this was the first mission in which his squadron utilized belly tanks, allowing them to fly farther into mainland Europe and surprise German forces.

Biography:

Eugene P. Roberts was born on September 12, 1917 in Wallace, Idaho and grew up in Spokane, Washington. He joined the United States Army Air Corps in 1940 and graduated from flight training the following year. After an initial assignment with the 20th Pursuit Group, Roberts joined the 14th Fighter Group, later split into the 78th Fighter Group. He served with the group in England as commander of the 84th Fighter Squadron, flying missions over Belgium, the Netherlands, and other areas of the European Theater. Roberts subsequently served with VIII Fighter Command, the 67th Fighter Wing, and as commander of the 364th Fighter Group. After the end of World War II, he left active duty but remained in the Air Force Reserve, retiring as a colonel in 1963. In his civilian life, he worked as a stockbroker until his retirement in 1982. Roberts passed away in 2008.

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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Eugene P. Roberts

[START OF INTERVIEW]

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[Introduction and service history]

EUGENE P. ROBERTS: Hello, Eric. My name is Eugene Roberts. I live in Spokane, Washington. You have the information on your letterhead. Incidentally, I'm delayed in responding to you, but since your letter was mailed to me in July of this year, I have been back to Duxford, where I flew my missions in 1943. It was quite an interesting return.

My background in the Air Force began in June of '40, when I went in to Flying Cadets—and that was the old Air Corps—and was commissioned February of '41. My first assignment was as a fighter pilot with the 20th Pursuit Group at Hamilton Field, California. And I spent a year with that group flying P-40s. Naturally, December 7th of that year changed everything, and in the spring of '42, I was assigned to a squadron in the 14th Group, which subsequently split. And I went into the 78th Group, a new group, initially as operations officer in the 83rd Squadron and, in July of '42, as squadron commander of the 84th Squadron at Oakland Airport. At that time, we were flying P-38s. We trained up and flew to England with our P-38s.

However, in early March of 1943, the need for replacement aircraft and pilots in Africa was such that they took all my pilots except for three flight commanders and all our airplanes and shipped them to Africa. We were reequipped with P-47s and had one month to train brand new fighter jockeys in the P-47. We had to check off ourselves before we could train them. We went operational in April from Duxford, which is just outside Cambridge. And our many early missions were nothing more than sweeps, since our airtime was limited because we had no belly tanks or tip tanks.

Our activities, as I say, were mostly sweeps along the coast and in not much further than Antwerp—areas, you know, near the coast where we could get back on schedule. On one of those missions, I did get into a shooting bee and claimed a probable, which was recorded. But other than that, we didn't see the Germans unless they had a big advantage. We did get a lot of experience, however, and I had flown a number—approximately 46 missions before we really got into the action that I am going to recount here in just a moment. I'm going take a break here.

[recording stops and starts again]

00:03:31

[Bomber withdrawal mission (July 30, 1943)]

EPR: On the 30th of July 1943, we were able for the first time to use what we referred to as “bathtub belly tanks” on the P-47s. They were not pressurized, and they gave us a lot of problems, but they did give us a chance to add another 150 to 200 miles’ range to our operation. We were given the assignment to provide withdrawal support for the bombers—for the B-17s and B-24s that were bombing Kassel in Germany. At that time, there were only three fighter groups operational in England: the 78th, the 56th, and the 4th or Eagle Group. I have the—my flight report, the mission report, and probably it’s just as easy if I read it since it gives pretty much the activity that took place.

We crossed the Dutch coast south of Hoek Van in Holland at about 29,000 feet. We dropped our belly tanks about 15 miles offshore at 23,000 feet. One of the reasons that we were unable to go higher because, without pressurization, we couldn’t get gas to keep the engines running. We arrived in the area where we were to pick up the bombers, but we didn’t see them initially and so we turned south and [unintelligible] they sighted the bomber south of Raesfeld. We turned 90 degrees and picked them up near Winterswijk and discovered that there were a number of enemy aircraft attacking them. There was one bomber beneath the main formation, and he was being attacked by about five enemy aircraft and was pouring smoke and was in deep trouble.

I was leading the group on this particular day, and we had a total of 40 aircraft, since eight others had had to return due to prop troubles or aborts. I dove down on the enemy aircraft that were attacking the bombers, and they picked us up, saw us, and broke away and dove for the ground. There wasn’t much we could do to help the bomber since we drove away the enemy aircraft, so I pulled up on the starboard side of the bomber formation, about 1,000 yards out from their formation.

I discovered on reaching this position to the starboard side of the bombers that my second element had broken away and was no longer with me. I had only myself and my wingman, Flight Lieutenant Koontz [Glenn Koontz]. We saw several enemy aircraft ahead of us and above the formations, judging perhaps, oh, 100 enemy aircraft in the area, as compared with our 40. I did sight ahead of me a single enemy aircraft at about our level, but about 1,000 yards ahead—1,000 to 1,500 yards ahead. I dove slightly below so that he couldn’t see me and opened full throttle, closed to about 400 yards, and opened fire. I saw several strikes and observed his wheels dropping, and he spun down trailing smoke and flames. It became apparent that the Germans were not in radio contact with each other, or at least weren’t using it, because we seemed to be flying right along with them and they, not expecting us, didn’t even notice us.

I looked ahead and again saw two more enemy aircraft about 2,000 yards ahead—you know, heading out in the queue to the front of the bombers, where they would peel off and come back through the formation. I used the same tactics: dropping down, giving full throttle, and closing to about 400 yards, then pulling up to slow down and I opened fire. I observed several strikes, and the enemy aircraft billowed smoke and flame, rolled over, and went down. I was closing actually too fast and had to pull up to avoid hitting him. I observed my wingman, Flight Officer Koontz, firing at the second aircraft, but I did not see the results, as he was under me. Both of these aircraft were Focke-Wulf 190s.

After the second engagement, we were about two miles ahead of the bombers, still well out to their starboard side. About this time, I observed one enemy aircraft on the portside of the bomber formation and ahead of the bombers, so I dropped below the bomber formation, crossed over to the portside, and pulled up behind this aircraft at full throttle. We were closing again using the same tactics as before, but this enemy aircraft peeled to the starboard to attack the bombers head-on. I followed and closed to 400 or 500 yards before opening fire. Two of my—my first two bursts were behind, but the third burst caught him and he spun down trailing smoke and flame some 150 yards ahead of the bombers. I now found myself at the same level as the bombers and approaching them head-on with no alternative other than to fly between the two main formations. Bless their hearts, they did not fire that I could recall.

This action took place about the vicinity of Rhenen, Holland. After flying through the bombers, I pulled to the left out of their starboard side, flying parallel and on their level, heading home. I then observed two enemy aircraft attacking a P-47 ahead and above me. They were flying 180 degrees to me, so I could not close effectively to help but did file a burst at the—fire a burst at the leading aircraft with not enough deflection to be effective. The P-47 dove and passed under me, taking evasive action in the dive. I did not see him again. I headed out and joined another element led by Captain Irvin [John Irvin] and proceeded home over Overflakkee Island at 23,000 feet.

I found this a particularly exciting mission since it was the first time that any group had gotten mixed up with a large number of enemy aircraft and come out with an overwhelming victory. I claimed and was approved three German airplanes: two Focke-Wulfs, and a Messerschmitt 109. Captain Price [Jack Price] in my squadron got two 190s—Fw 190s. Captain Irvin, an Fw 190 and an Me 109. Lieutenant Bertrand [John Bertrand]: one Fw 190. Lieutenant Fleming [Edward Fleming]: one Me 109. Flight Officer Pompetti [Peter Pompetti]: one Me 109. And my wingman, Flight Officer Koontz, bless his heart, an Me 109.

I think it was particularly—the most interesting mission, also, because the Germans didn't anticipate us being that far into the country and consequently were not geared up

or expecting us, lacking radio contact with each other. We were heavily—we were overpowered as far as numbers were concerned, but we moved at will and came out of the operation looking real good.

00:12:39

[Other service details]

EPR: I flew 89 missions with the 78th Fighter Group, ultimately ending up as the executive—group executive officer. Then I was in the VIII Fighter Command for six months in the combat operations section. I was in the 67th Fighter Wing for six months as the A-3. And in January—January 2 of 1945, I was given command of the 364th Fighter Group at Hannington, flying P-51s. I had another 120, 125 hours of combat time with the 364th when the war ended. And ultimately I brought the group home, and it was disbanded. I have been out of the service since December of '45, other than the fact that I did stay in the reserve program here in Spokane. But this particular mission was one that I thought was most interesting.

I had a total of nine enemy aircraft destroyed. I shot down a Focke-Wulf 190—no, an Me 110 on August 17th. I shot down an Fw 190 and an Me 109 on August 24th. I shot down an Me 210 and an Me 110 on October 10th. I shot down an Me 109 on October 20th of 1943. I was taken off operations at the behest of General Kepner [William Ellsworth Kepner] with five hours remaining on my tour of duty and reassigned to VIII Fighter Command. Had I completed my tour at that time, it would have been obligatory that I be sent home, and this was a method of keeping me in Europe for other duties. At the time that I was taken off operations, I was the leading fighter ace in England flying against the Germans.

My awards while on combat duty: I received the Air Medal with five clusters, the Distinguished Flying Cross with three clusters, the Silver Star, the Distinguished Service Cross, the British Distinguished Flying Cross, and the French Croix de Guerre with palm.

I don't know what other information you might wish or want relating to this mission or any other mission. I do have a record of all my missions with the claims and the confirmations—or the confirming letters of other pilots who saw the action. If you have need for any more of that type of information, give me a call at my home. I'm not much at being on tape, but perhaps I can answer a few questions if they'll help you. Good luck and God bless.

00:16:44

[END OF INTERVIEW]

