

# THE JAGGED EDGE OF DUTY

A FIGHTER PILOT'S WORLD WAR II

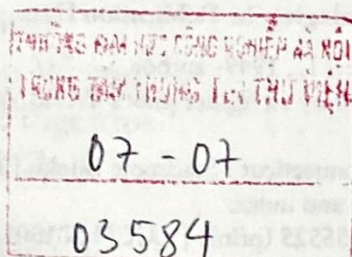
ROBERT L. RICHARDSON



# THE JAGGED EDGE OF DUTY

*A Fighter Pilot's World War II*

ROBERT L. RICHARDSON



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GIFT OF THE ASIA FOUNDATION  
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*Dedicated to peacemakers and to those who, despite their love of peace and their own natural inclinations, fought bravely in the interest of freedom and against oppressors and those who would destroy peace. And to those whose lives were ended, or altered, as a result of that fight.*

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## PREFACE

SHIRLEY DAWN FINN HAS BEEN THE ENGINE BEHIND THIS BOOK, AND finding her made everything possible. For seventy years she kept the faith, hoping that one day her brother's story would be told. I hope this will serve.

My father wrote a short memoir of his time in the service, in which he wrote: "Al and I both went missing, and they never found Al." Reading this as a young man, I was struck by Allan's having gone missing, and that he was never found. It seemed so little to say about a young man's sacrifice, especially since I knew the anguish that my grandmother went through during the time that my father was missing. I knew that if I did not do something to document this young man's service, the story of his sacrifice would just drift away into obscurity. So I resolved to find out what happened to Al, but first had to complete the manuscript about my father's service. By 2012 I had finished that work, and started to track down Allan Knepper. Finding his fate was actually a fairly easy task. I did an online search for Missing Air Crew Reports (MACR), and his name came up. I was able to obtain the MACR that pertained to his last action, and that gave me his serial number. With that information I could obtain his Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) from the U.S. Army archives. That information (coming months later) gave me the names of his next of kin. I then did a search on Ancestry at the local library, and found the names of his siblings. His father, Jess, died in 1983, and his obituary included the fact that his sister, Shirley Dawn Knepper, lived in Lewiston (Allan's hometown). I focused my search on that area, and in researching the archives of the *Lewiston Montana Tribune* I found that Shirley Dawn Knepper (Finn) had in 2010 submitted a 1951 news clipping about her third-place award at that year's Blossom Festival



Parade in Lewiston Orchards. So then I had her married name and was able to locate her after a brief Internet search. My phone call to her on December 13, 2013 came as a surprise, but she told me that her faith had been strong all the years since Allan's loss and she felt that some information would eventually develop. She and I have become close friends, and the information about Allan that she had kept over the years was of inestimable help in the preparation of this book.

Special appreciation to William Gregory and Harold Harper, two P-38 fighter pilots from the 49th squadron, exemplars of courageous, selfless service. Thanks for your many contributions to this book, and most especially, thanks for your friendship.

To Robert Vrilakas, Jim Gregory, and Bob Riley, three fighter pilots who also served in North Africa—thanks, too, for your service, and for sharing your experiences and perspectives. It's a privilege to have heard your stories and to have come to know you.

The families of the young men who served with the 49th Fighter Squadron in the summer of 1943 have been of inestimable help in the preparation of this work. Special thanks to Rick and Carole Bitter, Art Taphorn, Gary Blount, Greg and Michelle (Boatman) Branch, Karl Boatman, Delana (Decker) Harrison, Tim Harris, Dawn and David Kilhefner, Bob Kocour, Dusty Lovera, Charlane Compton, Jeanette Richard, Jim and Steve Ritter, Karen Nickerson, and Hazel Trengove. Each has provided important material about their husbands, fathers, brothers, cousins, or uncles. This book could never have been written without their contributions, and their enthusiasm has lent real impetus to the project.

To all, it is my sincere hope that this effort will serve in some measure as a memorial to your loved ones, pilots who may have been unheralded and unappreciated outside of your families, but whose service and sacrifice ranks them among the war's many heroes.

Thanks to Mr. Bert Zimmerly Jr. Special recognition to the 49th Fighter Association for keeping the spirit of the squadron alive and relevant, and thanks to John Carter, Paul Skoskie, Ron Morrisette, Brian Reno, and Joe Onesty. Thanks also to the P-38 Association, and to John Stanaway. And thanks to Steve Blake for his contributions, support, and direction; to Shirley Burden at the Hanceville Library; to Kelly at the the



## PREFACE

Natrona County High School; to the Lewis Clark State College library, to the Western History Center at Casper College, and to Wanda Wade at the Cheyenne Genealogical and Historical Society. And thanks to Kent Ramsey, a world-class photo historian, and to William Larkins, a world-class photo collector.

Among the many government and nonprofit agencies, museums, associations, and archives that contributed to this work, special recognition is due the Air Force Historical Research Agency. Their archive provided much of the organizational material that serves as the foundation for this book. And within AFHRA, special thanks to Maranda Gilmore, Lynn Gamma, Cathy Cox, Marcie Green, Tammy Horton, and Leeander Morris. Thanks, too, to Joshua Fennell and Joshua Frank of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, and to the contributors from the Army Air Forces Forum. The many technicians and librarians at the National Archives in College Park deserve thanks; the depth of knowledge among staff there is matched only by their interest in helping.

And the project would have never have taken flight without the contributions from the National Archives National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.

Thanks also to those who have provided photographs from their private collections and archives, without which the work would have been diminished.

To Mr. Salvatore Fagone, my field associate in Sicily, I would like to express my sincere thanks for your passion for this effort, and for your dedication. Clearly you will be making many more significant contributions in the coming years, and it will be an honor to follow your successes.

I will be forever grateful to David Reisch, History Editor at Stackpole Books for agreeing to take on this project, and it is an honor to be included among the iconic works of military history published by Stackpole. And to Caroline McManus and Stephanie Otto and their editorial associates, I would like to express my sincere thanks for the exemplary edit that this work has received.

And finally, thanks to my family, for their patience and loving support.



## INTRODUCTION

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW, WORLD WAR II FIGHTER PILOT WILLIAM Gregory was asked, "So you did not shoot anybody down, and no one shot you down, right?"—as though those two events could summarize the combat service of any pilot of that time and place. With an evaluating glance, and after making a mental entry about the questioner, "Greg" said, "That's right."

Over the long course of the war, most fighter pilots did not score an aerial victory, let alone become aces, and most were not downed in combat. And even pilots who did shoot down an enemy aircraft in combat often did not view that event as the defining moment of their combat careers. Harold Harper, who flew with the 49th Fighter Squadron alongside William Gregory, is credited with two aerial victories, but he himself claims only one and readily admits that he has no recollection of that action. But if you ask him, seventy years after the events, about "routine" combat operations in North Africa, or about living conditions on base, about the food or the effects of dysentery, or about his fellow pilots—those who survived combat and those who did not—he would have a full recollection and a ready answer.

While many spectacular and heroic episodes of aerial combat have been well served in literature and film, the wartime experiences of the vast majority of combat pilots, like those in the 49th Fighter Squadron, are largely unrecognized. In part, that may be because of the pilots' reticence. For many pilots, the thrill of flying and the fact of having survived combat were intensely personal and little shared. Few kept diaries or wrote memoirs. Even following combat, in the security of home and family, these pilots often kept silent about their experiences, leaving their loved ones to wonder if their service had been too mundane, or perhaps



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too horrific, to share. Fighter pilot Bob Vrillakas noted that “everybody in the military has a story,” but he had been reluctant to relate his experiences until very late in life because he did not want to bore anyone.

This book reveals much of the *Sturm und Drang* of American combat flying, focusing on one P-38 fighter squadron during the hot summer of 1943 in North Africa. It gives a broad accounting of how these young men came to be part of an extraordinarily diverse cast of highly trained and lethal pilots. It explains how they were selected for pilot training, where they received their flight instruction, and what types of planes they flew. It follows the arrival of these newly minted second lieutenants to North Africa and records their reactions to the alien world in which they now lived, and which some would never leave.

Volunteers to a man, most of the 49th's cadre of fighter pilots had joined the Army Air Corps in the days immediately following the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. What follows includes many firsthand accounts by those men, all of whom are now quite aged and most of whom would describe their service as “just doing my job.” Also included is a careful description of the context of their service—the military strategies adopted by President Roosevelt and his staff and implemented by General Eisenhower and his. It relates the state of war from the perspective of German pilots bent on resisting the Allied advances from myriad airfields in Sicily and Italy. And it describes how wrong a carefully planned mission can go, and how luck sometimes favors the prepared pilot.

As with any squadron, the pilots of the 49th were of different types, and the squadron quickly became a melting pot of ethnicities, cultures, backgrounds, and educations. Some were naturally aggressive; for them combat was a release of sorts. Others were surely less so. Some developed as leaders within the squadron. A few were natural fliers; for others flight was always a challenge. While few had planned a life in the military, all shared a commitment to their wingman and a willingness to stand up to their duty, to complete the dangerous task before them.

The following account explains how quickly any swagger or feeling of privilege fell away upon reporting to their new squadron and describes the final combat training they received from pilots who, after just a month of