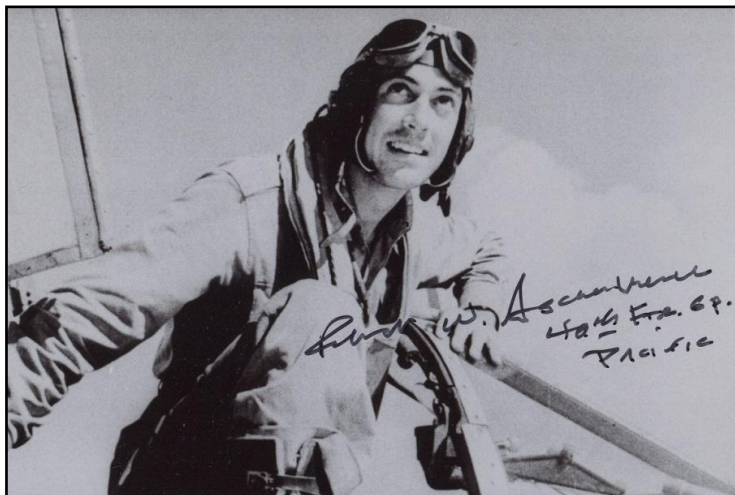


Major Robert W. Aschenbrener, Army Air Forces World War II Ace, South Pacific

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Robert W. (Ash) Aschenbrener of Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, enlisted in the Army Air Forces on January 12, 1942, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. He received his basic training at various airfields in Texas. Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, originally a part of Kelly Field, was just being built and he was in the first group to occupy the barracks there. Ash, as he was known in the service, earned his wings at Moore Field in Mission, Texas, a few miles north of the

Mexican border, and was commissioned as a second lieutenant on September 6, 1942. Ash then went to Pinellas, Florida to receive his training in P-40 fighter planes.

Later in the fall of 1942, after only 40 hours in fighters, he was ordered to the South Pacific. His first base was in Australia. Then he moved up to Port Moresby, New Guinea. For the next eighteen months, he flew P-40 Kittyhawks and P-47 Thunderbolts in the New Guinea campaign. Combat missions were undertaken to escort bombers and transport aircraft, to intercept or attack enemy missions and to strafe enemy installations. During that time, and while Aschenbrener was flying a P-40, he destroyed three Japanese zeros in aerial combat. His plane was named the Naughty Marietta after a popular song. Coincidentally, Marietta was also his mother's name.

After flying 272 combat missions, totaling 600 combat hours, with the 8th Fighter Squadron, known as the Blacksheep Squadron, of the 49th Fighter Group, Captain Aschenbrener returned to the United States for a furlough in the summer of



Captain Robert W. Aschenbrener with his P-40 Fighter in the South Pacific



Aviator Robert W. Aschenbrener, wearing the jacket showing the Black Sheep emblem of the 8th Fighter Squadron.

1944. At the end of his leave, he again went to Pinellas, Florida to instruct new pilots on the P-51 Mustangs. In November of 1944, after three months as an instructor, Aschenbrener managed a reassignment to the 49th Fighter Group in the South Pacific, which had, by then, moved from New Guinea to Tacloban on the Philippine island of Leyte.

Manila had become the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting of the war in the Pacific. Aschenbrener's outfit had shifted to P-38 Lightnings for the fierce fighting. After only ten hours flying time in a P-38, and in the Battle for Leyte, he added four Zeros to his credit in one day. The action occurred November 24 in an allied smash at a Japanese convoy, protected by a swarm of Japanese fighter planes. A few days later, Captain Aschenbrener added three more Zeros to his credit.

On Christmas day of 1944, Aschenbrener was forced down in a crippled plane in Japanese-held territory over Clark Field, some 50 miles north of Manila on the main island of Luzon in the Philippines. Bringing his plane down in a pancake landing in a rice paddy, he hit a dike. It felt like hitting a brick wall. The jolt fractured the tips of two vertebrae and compressed two spinal disks, he later learned. He was able to pull himself out of the cockpit, just as it caught fire. A group of Filipino Hukbalahap guerrillas (Huks), communist guerrillas who lived in the hills, had seen the plane go down, found him and took him back to their barrio. They nursed him back to health, sharing with him their meager meals of little more than rice, raw eggs and a little fish or menudo (a spicy stew made from water buffalo intestines). For drink, they gave him a healing tea, made from the leaves of the guava tree. He rested and recuperated on grassy slopes next to the Huk encampments, bathing in mountain streams as necessary. For two weeks, Huks transported him from village to village, sometimes by water buffalo, to hide him from the Japanese patrols. The natives learned that the Yanks were at Lingayen Gulf and moved him in that direction, handing him over to the American-backed USSAFE guerrillas, who could deliver him to the U.S. forces at Lingayen. Before leaving him,



Major Robert W. Aschenbrener in front of his P-38 Lightning, showing 10 planes downed.



Newspaper clipping from Minocqua, WI; July 27, 1945

the Huks gave Aschenbrener a Japanese samurai sword. It was a gift from his rescuers that would always have special significance for him. After a total of 27 days with the two groups of Filipino guerrillas, who were also at war with the Japanese, Aschenbrener was returned to his own fighting unit.

Shortly after his return to the 49th Fighter Group on January 23, 1945, Captain Robert Aschenbrener was given command of the 7th Fighter Squadron. A few months later, he was transferred to a fighter command position with the Combat Replacement Training Center in Nadzab, New Guinea. (It was there that he met his future wife, Ann Middleton, an American Red Cross staff assistant from Illinois.) In late Spring, Aschenbrener moved back up to Clark Field in the Philippines, with the newly trained pilots under his command. During his stay there, he took a group of twenty pilots to Kunming, China (200 miles inland in southern China) to pick up P-38's not needed in that region. World War II ended in the Pacific Theater in August, 1945. That same month, Robert Aschenbrener and Ann Middleton were married at Clark Field. September saw them on a ship returning to the States.

Before leaving the service, Aschenbrener had flown a total of 345 combat missions, amounting to 850 combat hours. This was a record number of combat hours. He flew missions from New Guinea to China. Aschenbrener was credited with downing 10 Japanese fighter planes, making him a Double Ace, and was promoted to Major in the spring of 1945. In recognition for service and heroism, he received a total of 21 decorations. For action over Leyte, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second highest award (ranking under the Medal of Honor). Other medals were the Distinguished Flying Cross with five oak leaf clusters; the Air Medal with nine oak leaf clusters and the Purple Heart for injuries received in aerial combat. The 49th Fighter Group also received three Presidential Unit Citations for service during the Papuan campaign.

ASCHENBRENER, ROBERT W.

Synopsis of the Citation for the award of the Distinguished Service Cross

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Robert W. Aschenbrener (AO-664120), Captain (Air Corps), U.S. Army Air Forces, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving as Pilot of a P-38 Fighter Airplane in the 8th Fighter Squadron, 49th Fighter Group, FIFTH Air Force, in aerial combat against enemy forces on 24 November 1944, over the Philippine Islands. On this day Captain Aschenbrener shot down FOUR enemy aircraft in a single mission. His unquestionable valor in aerial combat is in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflects great credit upon himself, the 5th Air Force, and the United States Army Air Forces.

Headquarters: U.S. Army Forces in the Far East, General Orders No. 99 (1945)
(Downloaded from www.homeofheroes.com on November 18, 2014)

Robert W. Aschenbrener's war record can be found in the following books:

Ferguson, S.W. & William K. Pascalis. *Protect & Avenge: The 49th Fighter Group in World War II*. PA: Schiffer Military/Aviation History, 1996.

Hamel, Eric. *Aces Against Japan: The American Aces Speak, Volume I*. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1992.

Hess, William N. *49th Fighter Group: Aces of the Pacific*. UK: Osprey Publishers. 2013.

Whelan, James R. *Hunters in the Sky: Fighter Aces of WWII*. Washington D.C. :Regnery Publications, 1991.

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