

Gabreski's instructor snarled at him . . Gabby then crudely made the required flight maneuvers . . but he didn't quite fail.

After two partying . . indifferent years at Notre Dame, Gabreski enlisted as a pilot trainee in the Army Air Corps in 1940 . . but immediately had a tough time during flying training.

Trainee Gabreski was a shaky pilot and didn't get on well with his first instructor, Mr. Myers. Gabby was also afraid of height and was scared to death during his first solo. And even his after solo, he wasn't progressing well. Also Mr. Myers' brusque and demand-ing ways just didn't match up with his slow learning rate along and any fumbling with the controls.

Before long, Mr. Myers scheduled Gabby's ' Elimination Ride ' with Army flier, Captain Ray Wassel.

Thus in September 1940, Captain Wassel told Gabby Gabreski, America's future ' *Greatest Living Ace*', to step into the airplane and give him his best.

He flew well enough for Capt. Wassel to determine, Gabby was indeed a marginal student pilot, but probably could do better without an authoritarian instructor. Assigned to a new instructor . . he made it through primary.

Young Francis Gabreski was relieved not to let down his parents. Both of them were Polish immigrees . . He grew up in tough family circumstances. To support a family of five children, his Dad borrowed enough money to buy a grocery store, then worked at it twelve hours a day.

Like many immigrant-owned small businesses, all the family members worked at the market, His parents were determined that their children would go to college, Gabby went to Notre Dame. Unprepared for academic work, he almost flunked out in his freshman year. However, he developed an interest in flying, thinking that it would be a neat way to get back and forth between Oil City and South Bend; never mind that Oil City didn't have an airport.

He took flying lessons from flying instructor Homer Stockert, in a Taylorcraft light aircraft, but after 6 hours under Mr. Stockert's patient tutelage, he just couldn't get the hang of flying. Starting his second year at Notre Dame . . a war raged in Europe and Poland was invaded.

When Army Air Corps recruiters visited the campus, Gabby went to hear them,

largely because some friends went too. The Army's enticing offer impressed him, especially the program's waiving of an academic test, and he enrolled, reporting in July 1940 to Pittsburgh for a physical and induction into the Army.

He went to primary flight training at Parks Air College, a civilian program that the Army used for its novice cadets. Here they flew Stearman biplanes and Fairchild PT-19 low-wing monoplane. *Gabreski struggled through primary training, barely avoiding being washed out in the elimination flight described above.* But he passed, got a new instructor, and in November 1940, he completed Primary flight training.

He reported to Gunther Army Air Base near Montgomery, Alabama, for basic flight training. Unlike Parks College, this was real Army; everyone was in khaki, lots of saluting, the whole bit. Here he flew the Vultee BT-13, a more powerful and less forgiving plane . . . also so noisy that the cadets called it the Vultee Vibrator.

On this plane they learned instrument flying with a hood over the student's cockpit, which enabled them to begin learning how to fly in bad weather. Here Gabby saw his first fatality, when a student pilot named Blackie went into a spin and bailed out, but the propeller chopped his legs off and he bled to death before he reached the ground.

After completing basic training, Gabby moved over to nearby Maxwell Field for Advanced training. Here they took a big step up and started flying the AT-6. It was almost like flying a fighter.

But at Maxwell, Gabby almost washed out again, this time for fainting at early morning parade when he was badly hung over. He compounded the problem by not immediately explaining real reasons. From the Army's point of view, a pilot trainee who fainted for no apparent reason was an unacceptable risk.

However, one who fainted because he was hung over was merely a mild disciplinary issue.

But before it got to expulsion, Gabreski coughed up the actual reason. And apart from some extra guard duty and other punishments, escaped further repercussions.

He graduated in March 1941 and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant, and he was assigned to fly fighter aircraft at Wheeler Field on Oahu, Hawaii with green sod rows of Curtiss P-40s and P-36s, flown by two Fighter Groups with about 75 planes each. Gabreski was assigned to fly the 45th Fighter Squadron's single-seat

P-40 fighters.

The P-40 had a lot of torque . .



And in Gabby's first take-off, he narrowly avoided crashing it . . later bumpily . . but safely landing it.

The pilots flew about 30 hours a month, usually at 5,000 to 10,000 feet, never higher because they didn't have oxygen equipment. Flying was hard work, following all the leader's twists and turns, working the manual controls, and pulling heavy G's. After a day's flying, they hung out at the Officers' Club, mostly talking about flying, reviewing each other's performance, and trying to improve their skills.

In Hawaii, Gabby met Kay Cochrane, niece of an Army Colonel. They began dating in late 1941, and had their first argument on December 6, 1941. That night young Lt. Gabreski went to bed quite concerned about his future.

As he awoke on the morning of the 7th, shaving and worrying about his girlfriend, he heard some explosions, which were fairly common at a military base. He jumped to the door and saw a gray monoplane with red circles and fixed landing

gear flying over-head. He realized the Japanese were attacking.

He heard louder and closer explosions and saw smoke from the burning airplane and fuel dumps.

The air crews hustled over to the airstrip and pulled out some undamaged planes. The Squadron CO, ordered them fueled and armed. About 10 planes were readied, and Gabreski was one of the pilots chosen to fly against the attacking Japanese.

As they flew over Pearl Harbor, they could see that everything was a horrible, burning mess. Jittery AA crews fired away at anything in the sky, including the P-36s and P-40s. Gabby and his group searched the area for about 45 minutes, but the enemy was long gone.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, Gabreski realized that everything about his life had now changed.

They flew constant daytime patrols, which quickly wore out both men and machines. They received new planes, P-40 E model and Bell P-39.

Both were faulted airplanes. The Model E Warhawk was even heavier and more sluggish than its predecessors, and the Aircobras had an unfortunate tendency . . . tumbling in hard turns . . . due to its [heavy engine directly behind the fighter pilot's back [weight problems . . . as their knees straddled the driveshaft to the propeller.

Throughout the summer of 1942, the squadron pilots led a fairly dull life: gunnery practice and flying patrols.

After the German invasion of Poland, Gabby wanted to get into the European Theater. Capitalizing on his ability to speak Polish, he asked to be transferred to one of the RAF's Polish squadrons. And the War Department okayed the request.

In October of 1942, the new Captain Gabreski reported to Eighth Air Force in England, to finalize his assignment to the RAF Polish Squadrons. 8AF HQ seemed to him to consist of about 20 people running around in complete confusion, none of whom knew about him or his pending assignment.

After some weeks of inaction, he met some RAF Poles in London's Embassy Club. He introduced himself to them in Polish and explained his proposal to them. They were very enthused, and were interested generally in America's war plans. His new friends promised to help him. And, eventually, the Commands issued their approvals.

He reported to Group Captain Mumler at Northolt in December, 1942. Northolt held six Polish squadrons of Spitfires . . . boasting a black top runway and permanent buildings. Capt. Gabreski was assigned to 315 Sqn. . . and their new Spitfire Mark IXs. These bore standard RAF camouflage and roundels . . . but also Poland's red and white checkerboard insignia.

They outperformed the P-40s that he was used to . . . weighed less . . . had more horsepower . . . flew faster and maneuvered better. Their effective 2-speed superchargers and radio-equipped oxygen masks enabled the Mk IXs to operate at altitudes up to 30,000 feet . . . compared to the non-supercharged P-40's puny and highly dangerous 20,000 feet.

They were better than the P-40s in every respect except diving . . . where the Spitfires were just too light to power dive very fast.

At that time fighter combat was not intense . . . just fighter sweeps out over the English Channel : "rodeos" - fighter-only WW I type ' circuses ' . . . missions including a handful of decoy bombers as lures for the Luftwaffe. And the Pole's Spitfires' short range precluded any deep penetration.

Tactically, the Poles used a "line abreast" or ' finger four' formation, allowing squadronmates to zoom over to protect one another's tail.

He flew his first Spitfire mission in January, 1943 . . . a circus to Le Havre on the French coast; he was flying wing for Polish Flight Leader Tadeusz Andersz.

They escorted a small formation of twin-engine bombers. It was an uneventful mission . . . no contact with the Luftwaffe. Gabby flew several more missions in with the Poles, becoming quite familiar with the small corner of France within the range of their Spitfire's fuel.

He encountered the Germans on February 3, as a group of FW-190s jumped his squadron on a circus to St. Omer, France.

As the dogfight developed quickly, Flt. Lt. Andersz called on Gabby to shoot a German fighter right in front of his airplane; All the excited young flier could see were two small dots . . . seemingly far away . . . but he still pulled the machine guns trigger as ordered.

When they returned to Northolt and reviewed the gun camera footage, *Gabreski was shocked to see an FW-190 in plain sight in the lower corner of his gun sight.* And realized how difficult it was to estimate the range to target.

He flew another 25 missions with the 315th, but had no more encounters with the GerLuftwaffe.

In February 27, 1943, he rejoined the U.S. Eighth Air Force, assigned to Hub

Zemke's 56th Fighter Group, flying P-47 Thunderbolts.

Two things struck him (1) the immensity of the P-47 with its 40 foot wingspan and (2) the military bearing of the 56th personnel under the influence of famed ' Hub ' Zemke.

Gabreski was assigned to the 61st , commanded by Major Loren "Mac" McCollom. Its pilots had all been through training together, and regarded Gabreski, as a bit of an outsider.



Merle Eby introduced him to the P-47 and showed him its operation, especially the turbocharger that required careful monitoring. Despite its size, it was a nice handling plane, with the smooth roar of its big radial engine. Its climb performance wasn't much.

But it had outstanding roll and spectacular dive speed. Gabby liked its efficient cockpit heating system and its eight .50 caliber machine guns.

The 56th used the " finger four " tactical formation. In keeping with his rank of Captain, Gabby was made a flight commander. In April, 1943, they flew their first combat missions. They saw more combat in May; some pilots scoring, a few others being shot down. But action continued contin-ued to elude Gabby.

He was finally able to claim a damaged FW-190 on May 15, 1943, but didn't encounter any more opposition for the next month. In early June, the reserved tough ' Hub ' Zemke called Gabby into his office, explained that Squadron Commander "Mac" McCollom was being moved up to Group Exec, and offered him the command of the 61st Fighter Squadron with the rank of Major.

Forty years later Gabby could still recall his shock at this unexpected honor. . wrote in his autobiography, [*Gabby: Fighter Pilot's Life*](#) . . that he stammered his acceptance " *with as much military bearing as I could muster. A year earlier I had been a care free young Lieutenant on the beaches of Hawaii, learning how to fly . . now I was CO of a P-47 squadron, about to lead it into combat against the toughest opponents on Earth.*"

He led his squadron with skill and courage . . but victories eluded him. His frustration ended in August 1943, when Gabby scored his first victory. From that day on, victories came frequently . . often by doubles and triples . . until he led AAF fighter pilots in the European Theater.

In the book [*American Aces Great Fighter Missions of WWII*](#), Gabby described a mission on December. 11, 1943, as the most exciting of his tour in Europe. The weather was perfectly clear as he led the 61st Squadron on a bomber escort mission. Minutes after take-off, they were over the North Sea's icy waters.

His sixteen P-47s were a part of a 200-strong fighter escort that 8th Fighter Command had ordered for the raid. They continued the long climb to altitude, reached 11,000 feet and then climbed higher to 22,000 feet . . reached Holland . . to see their rendezvous bombers were being attacked by both German 109s and 110s. The twin engine -110s were firing rockets ' head on ' into the bombers.

Gabby's squadron turned into the -110s . . as two German fighters collided . .] ' blowing up ' in front of dozens of stressed faces

Many German fighters scattered in every direction. While the sky erupted into a wild melee of American bombers trying to hold formation, others going down in flames as Gabby and his buddies hurled themselves at a sky full of swirling . . shooting . . rocket-firing German attackers.

Gabreski focused on a trio of Bf-110s . . that were diving down and away from the fracas. The superior power dive of his heavy powerful P-47 allowed him to catch and shoot down " tail-end Charlie."

His comrades destroyed other two German fighters. After watching ' Charlie 'plunge down, he turned to see an empty sky. Nothing. But worse, he was now getting low on gas.

He briefly tried to join up with a group of radial engine fighters, but he ' eased away ' realizing they were Germans . . soon stared at his fuel gauges to realize he might not make it home. He headed west, and leaned out the mixture not quite enough to wipe out the exhaust valves . . slowed to most economical cruise and altitude . . sending up an earnest ' God help me' prayer.

As Gabreski was checking gauges, he spotted a lone plane coming in at 3 o'clock. It turned out to be a Bf-109. But with his uptight

low fuel, Gabby was in no position to dogfight the German. Even taking evasive action that would take him further from England.

As the German made firing passes at him, he twice . . . sharply turned into his assailant, but continued his westward course. On the 3rd pass, the German's cannon shells hit . . . shot away Gabby's rudder pedal and his boot heel.

Even worse the engine took some 20 MM cannon ' strikes . . . began running rough. And Gabby intuitively allowed the Thunderbolt to spiral down, playing 'possum' for the FW-190 pilot. But the ruse only worked for a few seconds before the German quickly dove in pursuit.

Fortunately, lucky Gabreski slipped into the low clouds just in time . . . successfully hiding out from his pursuer. Nursing the damaged fighter . . . engine sucking gas fumes . . . into an advanced combat zone airstrip.

On June 6, 1944 - D-Day. Gabreski led his squadron in long fighter sweeps over the beaches of Normandy. Three weeks later, he surpassed Rickenbacker's World War I record and on July 5th scored his 28th victory making him America's leading ace.

When Gabreski's total reached [28] twenty-eight air victories and 193 missions, he earned a leave back to the States. While waiting to board the transport that would fly him to the US, Gabreski discovered he had a combat mission scheduled for that morning.

He grabbed his bags off the transport and wangled permission to " *fly just one more time.*"

He met no opposition over the target. Seeking targets of opportunity, he spotted enemy fighters parked on an airdrome. During his second strafing pass, his plane suddenly began to vibrate violently and he was forced to crash land. Uninjured, he jumped to the ground and took-off running into a deep woods with German soldiers in pursuit.

Eluding them for five days, he began to make his way toward Allied lines. He encountered a Polish-speaking forced laborer whom he persuaded to bring him food and water. But eventually he was captured and interrogated by the famed Hanns Scharff.

Finally transferred to Stalag Luft I, a permanent prisoner of war camp holding Allied air officers, he was barracked in one of the 20-man shacks surrounded by two rows of barbed wire fence. There he shared the bad food, hunger and corporal punishments.

But he was proud of his assigned men's spirits under such miserable circumstances . . . using clandestine radios to listen to war news, had a newspaper printed under the very noses of their guards . . . also digging nearly 100 escape tunnels . . . a few tunnels leading to escape and freedom.

In the Spring of 1945, Gabreski was given command of a newly completed compound of prisoners, food was putrid and scarce. But soon he began to hear artillery to the East. When Russian soldiers arrived. Russians or not . . . the

occasion was joyous.

After the war, Gabreski spent several years in flight testing and in command of fighter units before getting an air combat assignment to Korea.

In late Summer, 1951, now-Colonel Gabreski downed his first MiG, flying an F-86 Sabre jet . . . ignoring its radar-ranging gunsight he distrusted . . . instead . . . placing his 'wad' of chewing gum right in the middle of its windscreen.

In December 1951, he transferred to the 51st FIW. And a few months later, scored his fifth kill of the Korean air war, to become one of the few pilots who became Fighter Aces in two wars.

That summer, cooperating quietly with [Bud Mahurin](#), [Bill Whisner](#) [and other commanders] he participated in clandestine air combat missions on the prohibited side [unless attacked . . . only then allowed to chase MiGs back across the Yalu River, into Manchuria.]

Gabby was credited with 6.5 kills in Korea.

Ending a distinguished Air Force career as Commander Tactical and Air Defense Wings. After his retirement from the Air Force, he held lofty positions in the aviation and rail industries . . . lived for many years on Long Island, as "America's Greatest Living Ace" . . . before heading ' West ' fifteen years ago.

Source : [Valor](#), July 1997, John Frisbee, Contributing Editor [abridged]

