What did it take to be a WWII fighter pilot?

The US Army Air Force (AAF) fighter pilots who flew combat in WWII just didn't hop out of their hot rods at the hamburger stand to start bombing, strafing and fighting air-to-air combat against Germans and Japanese who had prepared for battle years ahead of the war. Fliers had to be found in the cities and burgs across the land, they had to be recruited, and they had to be trained, first as soldiers, then as pilots, then as fighter pilots. Then they had to go into the fray and learn the hard way. We have had access to the records of one who went through this ordeal. We'll use his records and notes to describe what it took to win the silver wings of a fighter pilot in WWII.

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Editor's note, July 20, 2009: Since I wrote this story, I have received an extensive commentary from Charles E. Dills. Charles, now 87, is a retired professor of chemistry at Cal Poly, and a WWII Mustang fighter pilot. He has written about his experiences at Courtland, Alabama in flight training with the BT-13, Class 43-E. As I understand it, Charles went through flight training several months ahead of the pilot I use here as an example, Gerald Wergin. Charles has taken issue with some of the things I have written and has added background. I have attempted to integrate his work with mine to make mine more accurate. Thank you Charles for your support.
These are some good looking "dudes", fighter pilots with the 80th Fighter Group, 10th Army Air Force (AAF), who fought the China-Burma-India War of WWII in the Pacific. These dudes are better known as the "Burma Banshees." When they did their dive bomb runs, the Japanese could hear the wailing cries of their engines and knew death and destruction were on their way.

These pilots just didn't jump out of school or hop out of their hot rods at the hamburger stand to become what they became. Their training was grueling, and competitive. Many had never even flown in an airplane, much less fly one in combat. Each had a lot to learn, and they had to have the brains to absorb all the technical data plus the inner vision to view their world in three dimensions.

We have had access to the records of one who went through this ordeal. His name is Gerry Wergin, a WWII warrior who passed away in 1998. We'll use Gerry's records and notes to describe what it took to win the silver wings of a fighter pilot.

Gerry Wergin was much like most people living in Wisconsin. He loved Wisconsin. He was proud to be from Wausau, he loved Wausau High School, he loved his country, and when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, he responded to the call to duty. Gerry was very good at science and math, and he was a boxer. It is also clear there was
"fighter pilot" blood in him. The yearbook tells all!

"All the luck in the world to a boy who isn't an angel!" was what Dorothy said. Evelyn noted how he liked to argue in economics, and several others complained of the same. Jeannie said she always admired his wit. Kelly and Gerry apparently would "fight" a lot, and she called him a "pest," apparently a bit of a wise-cracker, while others were more kind, saying he was a "good conversationalist." But Peggy called him a pest as well. So did Marion, Eleanor, and Juanita. Gloria thought it was fun to argue with him, though she commented that she'll "get along without you very well."

Don told him to stay away from the women, Chap warned him to "watch out for that Tomahawk (Wisconsin) woman," and Mopey urged him not to let "any woman get her mud hooks on that gold boxing glove you'll be winning!" Toby recommended he become a woman hater.

Anna Mae recalled one Sunday afternoon she'd never forget, and Katie mentions his "wonderful truck." He helped make his home room a "jolly place." Alice thought he was a great dancer. His pals in school found him to be smart, always able
"to get on the good side of the teachers." Dave called him a math genius.

Perhaps June put it best: "I'm sorry I can't think of anything nice to say about you except that you're lots of fun and one big pest!"

Studies have been done of character traits of good fighter pilots. Fighter pilots have been described as people who have an "attitude," a "state of mind." They have a talent for flying by the seat of their pants. They are naturally aggressive. They want to be the best, they are highly confident, very competitive, and will always want to push the edge of the envelop. They like sports cars, and as was correctly said in the movie "Top Gun," they have a "need for speed." They like to call the shots, on their own. They have a fantastic capacity to meld into the skin of their aircraft, knowing it inside and out, top to bottom, an uncanny ability to envision the world in three dimensions. When the going gets tough, they use their attitude to get the job done. Their view is that their aircraft runs "on a mixture of kerosene and testosterone." Of course, their airplanes used gasoline but it was more fun for some to talk about kerosene and testosterone. With a bit of drink in their belly, they can be real hell raisers!

This is a photo of Lt. Gerald Wergin, USAAF, sitting in the saddle of his P-47 "Thunderbolt II," known as "The Jug," circa summer 1944 through spring 1945, in Burma, by this time a hardened veteran of war. Look at the smile on his face, thumbs up, always thumbs up, a domineering pest, one with his airplane, traveling, when he wanted, at a cool 400 mph plus with over 2000 horses in his nose, anywhere from 6-8 machine guns at his fingertip, and as much as 2,500 lbs of
bombs on his wings.

**Dills comments:** The term "Jug" came from Thunderjug, an alternate name for a toilet! Furthermore speeds such as 400 mph are routinely overstated. He doesn't believe that a P-47 could gin up a true airspeed of 400 mph unless he were in a 30 degree dive! At 10,000 ft. the P-40F cruised at about 200 mph indicated airspeed (IAS) which, because of reduced air density, meant she was flying a true sirspeed would be about 294 mph.

Young Dorothy in Wausau High School might have properly said he was no angel, but in this seat, the lad was in the 80th Fighter Group (FG) carrying the motto, "Angels on our wings" on his chest and fighting like a "Burma Banshee" by his gut.

How does a young man from Wausau get there from here?

Downtown Wausau, 1928. Photo presented by the Class of 1939, Wausau High School Yearbook, the *Wahiscan.*
Gerry's father, Paul, had begun a home-building business in Wausau in 1900 and Gerry started working for him at a young age, doing so seriously at about the age of 15. Paul built the business from the ground floor up. It was very much a success story, known as a company that builds cities.

Following graduation from high school, Gerry continued working for dad. But then Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the lives of many young Americans changed in a hurry.

Gerry had always been interested in airplanes. In early January 1942 he decided to respond to the call of duty. He got with Archie Towle, the manager of the Wausau Airport, an aerobatic pilot, and a flight trainer, and decided to pursue flying through the Army Air Force Cadet Training program.
Archie Towle where he belonged, in the cockpit of his aerobatic machine. Recalling what we just said about fighter pilots, can you read that confident smirk on Archie's face? That's what we're talking about. One with the machine. You know, this photo was taken around the 1940s. Much like those big lug football players will always say, "Hi mom" when the TV camera points at them, Archie signed this photo, "With love to mother, from Archie." Photo courtesy of Bob Wylie and presented by the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame.

This is Archie Towle standing by his Taylorcraft BL-65 at Wausau's airport, either getting ready to go up with Wergin or having just finished. Photo credit: Wergin family photo.

Prior to getting into the cadet program, Wergin took flying lessons from Archie, made his first flight with Archie on February 26, 1942, and his first solo flight on March 27, 1942. He learned to fly a Taylorcraft BL-65 (65 HP) and the Waco F-2 with 165 HP. Keep those horses in your mind to compare.
with what the lad sat on top of in the Army Air Force!

This is a 1940 Taylorcraft BL-65, NC29670 belonging to Shirley Fraser and Stefan Winkler at Taunton, MA June 2001. Presented by Taylorcraftinfo.

This is a 1933 Waco UBF-2 (165 HP) owned by Chris Woods of Tiburon, CA. Photo courtesy of American Waco Club.

It's worth noting that many young Americans of the day who yearned to be fliers flew aircraft like these in the states and then joined the British Royal Air Force (RAF) because the US had not yet entered WWII. Once we got into the fight, they still were trained on these sweethearts. Most will tell you this Waco UBF-2, traditionally used for aerobatics, was a first-rate experience before going through their aviation cadet flight training and then on to a WWII fighter.

Dills comments: Little respect for airshows, Dills sees airshows as flown by "show-offs that occasionally get caught beyond their expertise and give the crowd the "ultimate thrill," crashing and getting killed.

Fighter pilots back then discovered aerobatic flying was crucial to their fighting German and Japanese fighters. Flying
a fighter is not only stick, rudder, throttle and trim along with the aircraft's lift, thrust, weight and drag. It also has a lot to do with how this kind of flying affects the body. Aerobatic flying involves G forces, gravity on the body. Fly straight and level, you weigh one G, no matter what your weight. Present-day fighter pilots have to stop at about 9 Gs, or they'll pass out.

We believe that WWII fighter pilots would max out at about 4 to 4.5 Gs, largely because they did not have anti-G suits in those days and were subject to blacking out because of abnormal blood flows at the higher G force levels. These kinds of G force levels would be incurred mostly by fighter pilots in dives, such as dive bombing, used to reduce their vulnerability to ground fire, and power spirals when the plane would get away from and they'd have to straighten her out. Dills says they did not have G-meters so they had no idea what kind of G's they were pulling. That said, I suspect technical people calculated what the Gs I have shown here might have been.

Archie Towle is worth highlighting for a moment more. He was a significant person to Gerry Wergin and many others like Gerry, to the profession of flying, and to Wisconsin.

Archie was born in 1900 in nearby Merrill, Wisconsin. He died at the young age of 45 following a September 2, 1945 plane crash during an air show at the Alexander Municipal Airport in Wausau. Archie served in WWI. He was instrumental in early development of the Wausau airport, established in 1928. As a flying instructor, he logged over 3,000 flying hours. He has been inducted into the Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame. So too his daughter, Marie Towle Schuette, who took over the Fixed Base Operation (FBO) of the Wausau airport following Archie’s death and transformed his business into what became known as the Grimm Flying Service.
This year's Archie C. Towle Aviation Endowment Fund scholarship recipient pictured with scholarship advisory board members (left to right): Bob Wylie, Rose Towle, Logan Pittsley (this year's recipient), Marie Schuette (Towle), Dave Cabelka. Logan Pittsley is a 2002 graduate of Wausau East High School and earned his private pilot license at Wausau Flying Service last summer. He is currently enrolled in the Professional Pilot Program offered by the University of Minnesota, Mankato State, and in his first year has earned his multi-engine and instrument ratings as well as his commercial pilot license. Photo presented by Fly Wausau.

Archie took seriously helping young men like Gerry Wergin. There is, today, an Archie C. Towle Aviation Endowment Fund promoting the advancement of aviation as a career for young men and women.

Archie's daughter, Marie, helped Gerry with the classroom stuff through a course known as the Civilian Pilot Training Program, or CPTP. The program was called a civilian one, but it was really intended to train young men to be military pilots before they entered the military. FDR launched the program in 1938. The military at first didn't like it, what with civilians training potential military pilots! But when Germany invaded Poland, the military saw it was very short on pilots, and soon let CPTP graduates proceed "do-eye-rectly" to pilot training.

That's what happened to Gerry Wergin. He soloed on March 27, 1942 as a CPTP student, Uncle Sugar sent him a letter on May 11 to "Re-Port" to Marshfield on May 18, then he got another letter to get to the Elks Club.
in Marshfield four days earlier, on May 14, so he could enlist in the Army, which is what he did.

What exactly did Gerry do at the Elks Club? When he enlisted, his grade was AVN/0, which we believe means he was an aviation cadet at the lowest level with no real Army enlisted rank. This is a photo of John Christian in his Aviation Cadet uniform. We don't have one of Gerry. You can see he wears no rank and the shield on his hat is that of an aviation cadet rather than of an Army enlisted man.

When these guys became cadets, they occupied a most interesting position. If they completed the program, they would be commissioned second lieutenants and awarded their silver pilot's wings. However, while they were cadets, they were lower than dirt. They were supervised and disciplined by corporals and sergeants, though managed by officers. If for some reason they decided not to finish the program, or if they washed out, they were staring at converting to the infantry as new enlisted men. That was the hammer.

**Dills comments:** I never heard of AVN/0. I reported to the Classification Center at Nashville, Tennessee on September 2, 1942 and was given an enlisted serial number, 17 053 690. In my experience, the enlisted men never had any interactions with the cadets. They were never involved in discipline. As I remember, we were organized into flights which had an officer in charge. Cadets were a special group, neither fish nor fowl, but were destined to become officers. I don't believe enlisted men were ever in a position to discipline a cadet.

**Marek response:** You will see photos of cadets below with enlisted men patrolling the chow hall. They must have had some impact. I also doubt that officers were leading the calisthetics.

There were normally five stages in the Aviation Cadet pilot training program: classification, preflight, primary pilot training, basic pilot training, and advance pilot training. The classification step was the entry point, a place to determine...
what training was going to be given and a place to issue the
gear the cadet was going to needs. Its length was variable,
usually a couple weeks at most.

The other four stages were nine weeks or 63 days in length
each. They were divided into 4.5 week segments. Every 4.5
weeks half of them would move to the next stage and the half
that had been the underclass became the upper class. This is
where the non-flying education took place.

Charles Dills has remarked:

"We weren't people, we were packages being
wrapped on an assembly line to give a steady line
to give a steady, somewhat predictable, number of
pilots. The washout rate could not be predicted
and the Classification Center was established to
attempt to minimize this. As I remember, Preflight
to Primary, no washouts. From Primary to Basic,
we went from 145 to 85, or 41 percent. From
Basic to Advanced we went from 85 to 75 or 12
percent. Twenty went to single engine and 65
got to multi-engine ... If anyone washed out of
the flying program, he was sent to navigator or
bombardier school. I don't think a cadet was given
a choice, even there."

Each cadet had to make it through all the way, and washing
out occurred all along the way. For some, there were surprises
waiting at the end even if they made it all the way. We'll touch
on that later.

All that said, it was an honor to be an aviation cadet, because
the training was challenging and demanded a high caliber
student. Gerry's strengths in math and science stood him well.

Following his enlistment at the Elks Club, Gerry had to go to
basic training. We are not sure where he went, but the good
news is he made it through that grind.

| Dills comments: | I never went to Army basic training and
never knew anyone who did, unless, of course, they had
enlisted in the Army and then asked to be transferred to
the cadet program. |
| Marek response: | I might have erred here. I don't recall
where I got that, so I yield to Mr. Dills call on this. I've
left the statement in only to call attention to the issue. |

Once done, he went to Nashville, Tennessee in January 1943
where he underwent classification testing. John Christian has described this first phase as follows:

"The Classification stage was where we were examined and tested mentally and physically (psycho-motor exams) for a wide range of attributes. The outcome was that we received three ratings, each on a scale from zero to nine, as to our suitability for service as a Bombardier, as a Navigator, and as a Pilot. Then we waited (about two months) for the next opening to go to the Pre-Flight stage. While we waited, we were kept busy with physical training, guard duty, K-P (working in the kitchen and the mess hall from before dawn until after dark), and other duties as assigned."

AVN/O Wergin arrived at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama, on January 31, 1943, and went through preflight training there through April 4, 1943, or 63 days later.

During early 1940, aviation cadets at Maxwell Field received 60 hours of intensive physical training before entering primary flying training. Photo presented by Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

Maxwell Field also hosted a 500-man mess hall, now Bldg. 500, which served cadets. Notice how stiffly they sit to eat, and the enlisted soldiers.
walking around observing the cadets to assure they conformed to the rules. The West Point class system was used to enforce discipline. Photo presented by Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

During his preflight training at Maxwell, Gerry flew the Vultee BT-13A "Valiant."

![Vultee BT-13A "Valiant," two seat trainer used for pilot training at Maxwell Field during WWII. Photo presented by the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian.](image)

One could only hope that Archie Towle had trained young Wergin well, because the Vultee's Pratt & Whitney radial engine had about 450 horses, capable of maximum cruising speeds of 155 mph, and altitudes to about 20,000 feet. So if these young guys had a "need for speed," and some acrobatics to boot, including dive bombing runs, they got it at preflight training. Some pilots have said the Valiant resembled the Japanese "Zero."

Accommodation was for a crew of two, seated in tandem under a continuous canopy, with dual controls and blind flying instrumentation standard. Instead of the usual fixed pitch propellers, the Valiant had a two position, variable pitch propeller demanding greater skill to fly.

The student pilots nicknamed her the "Vibrator!" The radial engine was noisy and vibrated the large canopy and glass, and the "Vibrator" was known to shake glass windows of buildings when she flew by as well. The young pilots noted she was "smelly," which might be attributable to the aerobatic and dive bomb training right after breakfast or lunch. All students were told that, if caught in a predicament their stomach couldn't handle, to eat their breakfast twice or clean it up!

While at training, the student pilots learned to crank the engine manually while the trainer engaged his spinning inertia wheel to turn the
engine over. The enlisted crew chiefs wanted a good start the first time, so they taught the student pilots how to make their crew chiefs happy early on.

This was their first serious introduction to that famous clan of warriors known as the crew chief. The crew chief shown here is Sgt. Sol Greenberg, 504th FS with his P-51, "Beaver Chant." Tradition still has the pilot's name and that of his crew chief painted on the fuselage. The pilot might have the rank, but the aircraft belonged to the crew chief, and every crew chief made sure his pilot took good care of the chief's property! Crew chief ownership of the aircraft later became an Air Force tradition written into concrete, a great source of pride for them. Quite often these crew chiefs were and are young airmen and low ranking sergeants. Ack in those days, one of the distinguishing features of a crew chief was how he bent the beak of his cap upward; this tradition grew out of the need to keep the stupid beak out of his working area.

While we know that Gerry was a bit of a court jester at Wausau High School, we'll emphasize that there was no fooling around at Maxwell Airfield, and there was no fooling around at basic training before this. This is what makes training fighter pilots hard. You've got to tame them down and bring them in line, but you've also got to be sure not to wipe out their attitude or completely ruin their confidence. The student too had to learn what lines he could cross and which ones were locked in concrete. Ray Levine of Brooklyn, New York wrote a memoir about his pre-flight training in early 1943 and showed a photo of 13 cadets, of whom six washed out, and this was only pre-flight training, stage two of five. So, like we said, this was serious business.

Following preflight training, with virtually no break, Wergin headed off to Souther Field in Americus, Georgia for primary flight training. One of Souther's claims to fame is that Charles Lindbergh did his first solo flight from this field in May, 1923, with only 20 hours instruction under his belt.
What did it take to be a WWII fighter pilot?

Aviation cadets arriving at Souther Field, Americus, Georgia for primary flight training. Presented by Near Plains Georgia

Much of the flight training here was done by Graham Aviation, a civilian aviation company, though the AAF had officers and enlisted men there to take care of military discipline and paperwork. Remember, AAF pilots were in very short supply. Most primary flight training for military pilots was done by civilian companies. General "Hap" Arnold, a consummate planner, put a lot of these companies "under contract" without having contracts or money to pay the companies. He anticipated WWII and the urgent need for pilots, so he successfully pleaded with 10 civilian contractors to get going and he'd catch up with the money later. They did so, and he did so.
The Boeing Stearman PT-17 "Kaydet" was the primary flight-training airplane of World War II. Built similarly to those flown at Souther Field, this PT-17 was photographed in Texas during World War II. At the controls sits an aviation cadet. Photo courtesy of Scott Hedgland, presented by The New Georgia Encyclopedia.

While at Souther, Wergin flew the Stearman PT-17 employing the Continental radial engine. Her maximum speed was 125 mph. She too was a two-seater, in tandem. Her wings were wooden and covered with fabric. She was a nimble bird, and is often used as a stunt plane today. So there was more aerobatic training.

As you see in the photo above, there is a lot of school work involved. You will recall that Gerry was strong in math and science, and that proved most helpful in the classroom, where students needed to understand aerodynamics, angles of attack, what their plane would do and would not do, how to make it do what you wanted it to do, how to position for an air-to-air kill, how to think three dimensionally, and how to pull out from a sure crash scenario. Gerry benefitted again from early flight training with Wausau's Archie Towle, who was an aerobatic flier and training professional. Most of the other students might have been strong in math and science as well, but had little more than a casual acquaintance with the idea of flying. Most of them had never flown an airplane before, and many of them had never even flown aboard an airplane.
One of the more hair-raising lessons in the PT-17 was to take her up to about 5000 or 6000 feet, and turn off the fuel and ignition, shutting her down at that altitude. The prop would not stop immediately. The time it took to completely stop turning depended on the state of engine compression. The better the compression, the faster the propeller stopped. This is important, because the aircraft is losing altitude while the pilot is waiting for the prop to stop turning. Pilots have said it could take 2000 or 3000 feet for the propeller to stop, meaning that the cadet did not have much airspace left in which to effect a re-start. Once the prop stopped, he was to make a clearing turn, turn on the fuel and ignition, point his nose straight down until the prop started to windmill at which time the engine re-start sequence had better re-start. All cadets were told to have a backup plan in case she didn't start, like having spotted a place to glide her in and land if they could not get the engine to restart in time.

Pilots nicknamed the PT-17 "Yellow Peril," partly because she was tricky to handle on the ground, many Army versions had brightly painted yellow wings, and the Navy painted nearly the entire aircraft yellow.

With primary flight training under his belt, Wergin went immediately off to basic flight training at Courtland Army Airfield, Alabama.

At Courtland, it was back to the complex BT-13 Valiant "Vibrator." Far different than what was experienced at BT-13 preflight training, the lads would now get a workout with this bad boy that they did not see at preflight training.
Flying now was more precise, challenged to hit higher altitudes within 10 feet, turn at three degrees per second and, on landing, turn off at the first turn off. Night flying and night soloing were now on the agenda as were cross country flights, often through bad weather, instrument flying and a thorough study and application of aerial navigation flying. They also learned formation takeoffs, formation flying, and short field landings.

Practicing spins was always a heart-throbber. The challenge was to recover her out of a spin and avoid going much more than two spins; a third spin meant you had to start thinking about bailing out. Bill Goodman, a veteran cadet of this phase of "Vibrator" flying, talks about how he could not recover out of a spin, his instructor bailed out, and then Bill somehow tamed his aircraft and brought her home safe and sound. But then there was "Mitch," who tried to take his BT-13 off with his propeller in the "high pitch position," crashed and disintegrated. He also talks about how 40 percent of his original class washed out and went into the infantry as new enlisted men. He said the men were either afraid of their airplane or their instructor. Goodman went on to pilot the B-25 "Mitchell" bomber in round two of his WWII experience, after first serving as a bomber navigator.

Charles E. Dills, a retired professor of chemistry at Cal Poly, and a WWII Mustang fighter pilot, has written about his experiences at Courtland with the BT-13. He focused on the night flights, especially a night solo flown by a cadet with the last name of Langley. He described it this way:

"There is a maneuver called a 'power spiral.' If one wing dips, you start turning in that direction. You may not realize you're in a turn but you notice the slight loss of altitude. So you pull back on the stick. But this tightens the turn and you lose more altitude. You pull back again and if you don't correct the turn you can stall and spin."
Most people recognize what is happening rather quickly. But if it happens at night, on one of the blackest nights there is, only 400 feet above the ground, you have no margin for error. Langley got into such a power spiral, recognized what was happening, corrected and just clipped the top of a hill and was killed. The 400' he had was not enough, particularly for a novice."

In looking at flight training manuals, a power spiral means the aircraft is in a dive at full power, banked one way or the other. The only way to pull out of this is to roll the plane to level flight. If the aircraft remains banked, it will continue its downward spiral.

In Gerry Wergin's time, Courtland had four active airstrips and 500 aircraft, with heavy-duty north-to-south winds and strong east-west winds as well. The four strips enabled pilots to use a runway that would handle the winds, but there was a lot of flight activity going on at one time.

Well, Gerry made it through this training, so off he went to Craig Field in Selma, Alabama for advanced fight training, flying the North American AT-6 "Texan" and the Curtiss P-40 "Warhawk." We'll highlight again that there were no breaks for him between training sessions. He simply went from one to the other.

North American AT-6 "Texan" advanced trainer.

The AT-6 was a tandem two place aircraft, low wing monoplane with fixed undercarriage, and a Wright Whirlwind R-975 radial engine with about 400 horses that could push her to about 170 mph cruising, 212 maximum, service ceiling of 21,500 ft. The aircraft was built in the 1930s. The Texan was tough to handle on the ground, and few student pilots had a good time flying her either. She was a deliberately a challenging aircraft, and the student pilot had to be on his toes every second of his flight. Mental and physical exertion were the names of the game. A pilot had no choice but to become a better pilot with this aircraft, or wash out at the final stage.
Bud Davisson gives you a most exciting description of what it was like to handle this beast.

And then, the P-40, which the student pilots knew was a combat aircraft, so exhilaration levels rose high when driving her through holes in the sky.

The P-40 "Warhawk" would be one of the aircraft that Gerald Wergin would eventually fly in combat as a "Burma Banshee." It was a single engine, single seat, all metal fighter meant primarily for ground attack. She was officially called a fighter-bomber, meaning that she was good for air-to-air and air-to-ground.

In addition to the normal routines of honing flying skills in two new aircraft that would closely resemble what they might get to fight in, the cadets now did serious work at the bombing and gunnery ranges. Night cross country flights were longer, often 300 miles. Some airfields were lit only with flare pots. In-flight maneuvers had to be perfected and included lazy 8s, pylon 8s and others. Each cadet received instrument training, closing the student in so he could not see outside and forcing him to rely completely on his instruments. The training was tough, and most advanced training fields have cemeteries for those who couldn't pull their machines out. Night flying was particularly a problem. Engines would wear, tires would go flat, and wing tips often were bent.
Ground school training went over everything they had learned during their previous training, over and over. They concentrated on code, weather, internal combustion engines, physical training, intelligence, aircraft and ship identification. Ground school also included the Link Trainer, a mechanical simulator of the AT-6 cockpit and instrument panel with a lid closed over it so the pilot could not see out. Many flying techniques were simulated in the Link.

Interestingly, it was more rare to see a cadet wash out in this last phase than in any other. The feeling was that the men who made it this far had what it took, and issues and problems were generally ironed out.

Aviation Cadet Gerald P. Wergin completed his flight training on or about September 30, 1943, having raised his right hand to enlist in the AAF on May 14, 1942 at the Marshfield, Wisconsin Elks Club. All together, about 17 months in training. These kinds of guys were clearly not produced over night, even when the AAF needed them all yesterday. Former cadets will tell you graduation was a very big day.

On September 30, 1943, Gerry was honorably discharged from the Army at Craig Field. So he was no longer an enlisted man. Major B.L. Stringfellow signed the discharge and 2nd Lt. N.C. Schmidt paid him his final enlisted pay of $97.25.

But there was no chance to beat feet and get away. Promptly on October 1, 1943, the next day, Gerald Paul Wergin was
sworn in as a 2nd Lt., USAAF and awarded his silver pilot's wings. It should be said here that military planners in WWII were new at forecasting how many pilots they would need, and on occasion they produced too many 2nd Lts. with pilot's wings. As a result, what was known as the "Blue Pickle" was received by some at graduation. Instead of being commissioned a 2d Lt. pilot, they became a warrant officer flight officer, called by many, "Third Lieutenants." Their rank was the same as that of an Army warrant officer, but instead of brown enamel on their bars, their enamel was blue.

Lt. Wergin, to our knowledge, made only one note about his graduation:

"Graduation completed flight training. I am now an officer and a gentleman - Curtis P-40... Ken Mosely and I graduated and were commissioned together in the Class 43I."

It's too bad his identification card is not in color. That single lieutenant's bar he is wearing on the right shirt collar is gold, for second lieutenant, fondly known as the "butter bar." This photo of him shows about as new a butter bar as you can get. That "AUS" on his "nametag" stands for Air Corps.

While Lt. Wergin had little to note in writing about his graduation and commissioning, Headquarters Army Air Force Southeast Training Center at Maxwell Field had quite a bit to say about these events, in writing, to each new officer. The typewritten "love note" on USAAF letterhead went something like this:

"The Secretary of War has directed me to inform you that the President has appointed and commissioned you a temporary Second Lieutenant, Army of the United States, effective this date (1 October 1943). Your serial number is shown after "A" above. This commission will continue in force during the pleasure of the President of the United States for the time being, and for the duration..."
of the war and six months thereafter unless sooner terminated. There is inclosed herewith a form for oath of office which you are requested to execute and return. The execution and return of the required oath of office constitute acceptance of your appointment. No other evidence of acceptance is required. This letter should be retained by you as evidence of your appointment as no commission will be issued during the war."

In reading this, you might wonder whether Gerry did have a chance to beat feet between his discharge as an aviation cadet and commissioning as a second lieutenant. The answer remains no. In his records, for example, we found an order issued by the Army on September 25, 1943, a week before discharge and formal commissioning, which locked him in as a "butter bar" and a pilot even before the ceremonies took place. Ya gotta love the Army! The Army always knows how to make a guy's heart and mind follow.

While at Craig Field, Wergin qualified in the P-40F after only 10.1 hours flying time in the transition from the AT-6. With the P-40F Warhawk, Gerry was most certainly in the big leagues. Forget that 65 horse bug he flew with Archie Towle in Wausau. He now had a 33 foot long bird powered by a Packard Merlin V-1650-1 twelve cylinder Vee liquid-cooled engine rated at 1300 horses for takeoff and 1120 horses at 18,500 feet, with a max speed of 320 mph at 5000 feet, 340 mph at 10,000 feet, 352 mph at 15,000 and 364 mph at 20,000 feet. He could jack this baby up to 20,000 feet in 11.6 minutes, suck in GI-issue oxygen, and fly there for 700 miles clean and up to 1500 miles depending on what kind of tank he carried. He could climb her to 34,400 feet. His armament started with six 0.50-inch machine guns in the wings, and whatever the boys hung from his wings, rockets or bombs.

Well, Gerry might have qualified in this machine at Craig, and
he might have accumulated a grand total of 238 hours flight time since he began training, but the 10 hours he had in the P-40 were not good enough to go to war in Hap Arnold's Air Force. William Wheeler, a Tuskegee Airman with the 302nd Fighter Squadron, commented this way:

"The Warhawk was a gigantic step up from the North American Texan/AT-6. Once I soloed in the Warhawk, I knew I had 'arrived.' I was ready for bigger and better things."

After a week or so off to go home and see family in Wausau, it was off to bigger and better things for Gerry Wergin as well, starting at Dale Mabry Base at Tallahassee, Florida for two weeks and finishing up with intense P-40 flight training at Sarasota Army Air Base (AAB) in Tallahassee, Florida.

At Mabry, he received various orientation briefings, qualified with the 45 pistol, fired 600 rounds on the skeet range, learned about newly emerging identification friend or foe (IFF) electronics and underwent altitude chamber training.

All that done, he was assigned to the 98th Fighter Squadron (FS), 337th Fighter Group (FG) of the 3rd Air Force (AF) at Sarasota Army Air Base (AAB), Florida to fly the P-40 over and over for two months until he got it right. David Sommer, writing "The field of battle" for the Tampa Tribune published in June 2004, wrote this about the Sarasota "base:"

"H. Tom Harris (in July 1943) was a 27 year old fighter jockey from Tulsa ... 'The runways were all done, but there wasn't anything on the field but one tar-paper shack,' said Harris. Hungry for lunch, the airmen piled on the back of a flatbed pickup for a ride into Largo, about six miles away, Harris said. That night they were billeted at the Martha Washington Hotel in downtown St. Petersburg. A few days later they moved into two-man tents with shipping pallets for flooring. The airfield's first control tower consisted of a wooden box set atop four telephone poles with a ladder nailed on one side, Harris said."

While at Sarasota, Lt. Wergin accumulated just over 63 hours flying time in the P-40, flying combat formations, combat aerobatics, navigation, gunnery, instrument, night and bombing missions. Combat aerobatic missions were above 8,000 ft and above 20,000 ft. He flew low altitude (200-500 ft), medium altitude (1500 - 2000 ft) and high altitude (above 30,000 ft) navigation missions, he fired his guns at ground targets (strafing) and at aerial targets at varying altitudes to include low and high as previously defined, and he practiced
dive, skip and low level bombing. His records say he fired 5400 rounds from his machine guns and dropped 34 bombs. He flew two missions fully loaded with belly tanks and bomb loads. Lt. Wergin, when finished in Sarasota on December 28, 1943, had jumped from 10 hours in the P-40 to a total of 73.

Please note no going home for Christmas! There was a war to fight and Wergin was sent back to Dale Mabry in Tallahassee to await his orders to go to war. He got 'em on January 3, 1944. Gerry's notes recorded the orders this way:

"To the Floridian Hotel in Miami, Florida to overseas shipment to ?????? (Meaning he did not know where he was going). Departed the USA on January 10, 1944 to God knows where ????? by Air Transport Command equipped with winter gear. Plane off ground and wheels up, we could now read our assigned destination .... 10th AAF, Karachi, India."

We'll close with Gerry's before and after photos.

Young Gerry Wergin at his home in Wausau, prior to joining the AAF. Photo courtesy of the Wergin family.

So, Gerald P. Wergin, with all that was said about him in his yearbook, Wausau High School Class of 1940, son of a builder, an Archie Towle-trained pilot out of Wausau's airport, was now an AAF "butter bar" lieutenant fighter pilot charged with bringing death to America's Japanese enemies over Burma and China from bare-bones bases set up in India flying as a Burma Banshee with a bloodthirsty skull on his nose.
How could anyone imagine?

Lt. Gerry Wergin, USAAF, somewhere in India or Burma at war with the Japanese. Photo courtesy of the Wergin family.

This is the nose of an 80th FG Burma Banshee P-47, at an undisclosed airfield in the CBI during WWII. The skull signified death in the sky for opponents. The photo is courtesy of Randy Clower, whose father flew with the 80th FG Banshees.
He graduated from high school at the age of 18, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor when he was 19, he joined the aviation cadet program and the Army just after turning 20, and now he's nearly a 22 year old-plus fighter pilot ready to go to work and bring death to the Japanese. His squadron colleagues called him "Junior," as he was the youngest in the squadron when he arrived.

The girls back home will be happy to know that despite all that West Point style training under the supervision of Army corporals and sergeants, and all those stomach turning spins and swirls during flight training, the lad was still sporting a smile and had his hands on his hips exuding all the confidence he needs to hop in his Warhawk and strike a blow against the enemy for God, motherhood and apple pie. The patch on his left shoulder signifies he's fighting in the CBI, and the one on the right shoulder says he's flying for the USAAF. You can see those coveted and hard-earned silver pilot's wings on his left chest, above his left pocket. You can also see he was not eating tenderloin steak and mashed potatoes; he weighed only 138 when he was commissioned; it looks like being at war has taken some of that off.

Wergin's 90th squadron initially had the P-40K and P-40N, the latter of which was the last and most modern production version of the P-40.

Lt. Wergin later started flying the P-47D "Thunderbolt II" in July 1944. The aircraft was fondly known by the pilots as "The Jug." He now had 2,430 horses at his fingertips, could jack her up to a max speed of 433 mph and cruise at 350, he could take her up to 42,000 feet and fly her for 1,030 miles total range. He carried six to eight .50 cal machine guns, and could carry ten rockets or 2,500 lbs of bombs. The aircraft he
flew were from Block 23, so he had a bigger and better propeller that gave him more climb power, and he had better wings to carry more fuel drop tanks. He had a jettisonable cockpit canopy, a bullet-proof windshield, and he could carry more fuel inboard. And, for those who preferred to dive bomb to reduce their vulnerability, she was a "diver," better than most anything out there. There was just one catch. There were only six inches clearance between his propeller blade tips and the ground, so the aircraft had his full attention on takeoffs and landings!

If you'd like a better sense for "the Jug," here's a great photo of 5 ft. 6 in. Lt. Gerry Wergin proudly standing next to his hog, followed by his giving a thumbs up saddled in that beast (both photos courtesy of the Wergin family).
Lt. Wergin flew his last combat mission on April 16, 1945, aboard a P-47D23. His squadron was then moved to the safety of Chabua in southern India. There he bounced around among a variety of aircraft from UC-78s, AT-6Ds, P-47s from April 18 until his final flight on July 12. He noted that they practiced a lot of low level navigation and assumed they were doing that in case Allied forces had to invade Japan. The fliers in Burma were mentally preparing to fly to fields in eastern China for the onslaught of the Japanese home islands.

Either in late May or sometime during June 1945, 1st Lt Wergin was promoted to captain, which means he's been there and done that, now in the senior class of junior officers.

On July 22, 1945, the 10th AAF issued Special Order No. 203 which ordered young Capt. Wergin, now 22, to report to Replacement Depot #2 US Forces India Burma Theater, for earliest transportation to the USA! Wergin was not on the base when these orders came through, and had to catch up with the rest of his mates to take her on home.

He concluded his duty with the Army Air Force shortly after returning home, with 156 combat missions in the P-40 and P-47 tucked safely under his belt.

Men from all over the US just like this young man went through the same, and often worse, ordeal. They answered the call to duty, they faced incredible challenges, and they trained hard, fought hard, and brought victory home.

In Gerry Wergin's case, following the war, he became a successful businessman in Wausau, the founder and owner of
a construction company, a man well known and respected in Wausau. While he operated that business as intensely as he fought against the Japanese, down deep, he was a “Burma Banshee” all the way, very proud of his service. Rather than a grave stone worthy of a "Captain of Industry," his grave marker is a simple military one, black and gold bronze:

Gerald P. Wergin  
Captain United States Army Air Force  
World War II  
April 3, 1922 - July 9, 1998  
DFC & OLC AM & 3 OLC

The bottom line translates to the Distinguished Flying Cross and Oak Leaf Cluster (means two DFCs), Air Medal and three Oak Leaf Clusters (means four AMs). Without doubt, he, and many tens and hundreds of thousands of men like him, were indescribably proud of their service and their sacrifice.

May God bless these men, and may we be worthy of meeting them when we pass their way.