

AMERICAN COMBAT AIRMAN HALL OF FAME



Colonel James B. Morehead, USAF

James Morehead ended World War II as an Ace, with eight aerial victories scored in the Pacific and European Theatres of operations, one of only a handful of Aces to score in both theatres. His decorations include the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Early Flight Training

Officially joining the service in August of 1940, Morehead was accepted into the Army Air Corps Cadet Program where he qualified in both the Curtiss P-36 and the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk.

In December of 1941, Morehead and 54 other P-40 pilots were sent to Manila to defend the Philippines. En route, their destination was changed to Australia, where the P-40s were assembled and test flown. The pilots, some of whom had only a few hours in the aircraft, were inexperienced with the Curtiss fighter.



Morehead stands beside his P-40 at RAAF Bachelor Field in Australia, June 1942.

17th Provisional Squadron

In early February 1942, Morehead arrived at the airfield on Java, where he joined the 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron. The squadron consisted of a few pilots who served in the Philippines and the new replacements from Australia.



Colonel James Morehead leans out from the cockpit of his Curtiss P-40 Warhawk.

The inexperienced airmen quickly found themselves facing an experienced, aggressive foe. In one of the few early successes for the green American pilots, Morehead downed two Japanese Betty bombers over Malang, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. By March 1942, the 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron had been decimated, suffering 50-75% losses on most missions. Morehead and the few remaining pilots were evacuated to Australia on the last B-17 to escape from Java.

49th Fighter Group

Five of the pilots of the 17th joined the 49th Fighter Group in the Pacific. Morehead was assigned to the 8th Fighter Squadron and began instructing the pilots, many of whom had no experience with P-40s.

Although losses continued to be heavy, the 49th Fighter Group began to gain momentum against the Japanese. On April 25, 1942, Morehead, leading four P-40s, engaged approximately 31 Japanese bombers and more than 50 fighters approximately eighty miles north of Darwin,

Australia. In a swirling dogfight, three Mitsubishi Betty bombers fell to Morehead's guns, while his squadron mates accounted for eight more. The victory helped to boost American morale.

From March to August 1942, Morehead shot down five Japanese bombers and two Zero fighters before he was withdrawn from combat.

Mediterranean Theater

Assigned to the 71st Fighter Squadron, Morehead began flying P-38s from bases in Italy. He flew escort and ground attack missions, including several against a heavily defended oil complex at Ploesti, Romania. On June 6, 1944, he shot down an ME-109, his eighth victory.

After the War

With the end of the war, Morehead left the Air Force only to rejoin in 1947. He flew in the Korean Conflict, served as an Air Force liaison and instructor with the Nationalist Chinese on Taiwan. Concluding his military service with a tour of duty at the Pentagon, Morehead retired from the Air Force in 1967.