

John Alison shot down two—or perhaps three—enemy aircraft in his first aerial combat, and went on from there.

The All-American Airman

By Walter J. Boyne

IN late 1940, a delegation from Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was in the United States to buy airplanes for what would become the fabled American Volunteer Group, the Flying Tigers.

A demonstration of the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk was laid on at Bolling Field in Washington for the Chinese visitors and their American advisor, Claire L. Chennault. The pilot for the demonstration was 2nd Lt. John R. Alison.

As Chennault would later recall in his book, *Way of a Fighter*, Alison “got more out of that P-40 in his five-minute demonstration than anybody I ever saw before or after. ...

“When he landed, they pointed at the P-40 and smiled, ‘We need 100 of these.’ ‘No,’ I said, pointing to Alison, ‘you need 100 of these.’”

As always, Chennault was an excellent judge of people.

Within a few years, Alison would be flying P-40s for Chennault in China—where he would shoot down two Japanese aircraft (a third was unconfirmed) in his first aerial combat. Later, along with his friend, Phil



Standing (l-r) beside a Curtiss P-40 are Maj. John Alison, Maj. "Tex" Hill, Capt. "Ajax" Baumler, and Lt. Mack Mitchell. They were serving with the 23rd Fighter Group in China at the time, in an environment described as "the end of the line."





An unusually skillful pilot, Alison said if you could fly one airplane, you could fly them all. Among the lesser known aircraft he flew: a P-37 like this one, a variant of the radial engine P-36, designed around an Allison V-1710-11 engine.

Cochran, he would organize the first air commando unit in history and personally lead it into combat.

And those are just a few of the things that John Alison went on to accomplish.

After the war, he became the youngest-ever assistant secretary of commerce for aeronautics. He returned to the service during the Korean War and eventually retired as a two-star general in the Air Force Reserve. He was national president, then chairman of the board, of the Air Force Association. He retired from Northrop Corp. as a senior vice president.

Alison's wartime achievements can be measured by many things, including his seven victories (six in the air, one on the ground) and his many decorations. A telling indication of his stature, however, is that he is perhaps the only person ever to land after a combat mission and have two messages waiting, each reading "Report to me without delay," and signed respectively by Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. Of this more later.

P-40s to Britain

Alison was born in Florida in 1912. He graduated in 1936 from the University of Florida with a degree in industrial engineering and an ROTC Army commission (received in 1935). After flight training at Randolph Field, Texas, in 1937, he went to Langley

World War II fighters, it was in fact a fine airplane when flown so that its strengths could be maximized and its weaknesses minimized. It achieved an early wartime importance far beyond its comparative merit simply because it was the only American fighter available in quantity.

When P-40s were sent to Great Britain as one of the initial Lend-Lease efforts, the Army Air Corps tapped Alison and his friend, Lt. Hubert A. "Hub" Zemke, to go along to assist the Royal Air Force in their use. Although officially designated as observers and operating under the title of assistant air attachés, they soon became involved in operational tasks.

They obtained insight into how a wartime air force had to operate. They quickly saw that the RAF



In China, a captured Japanese Zero sits near a Flying Tigers P-40. Alison recalls one air battle in which a Zero's bullets rang "like a bell" against his P-40's armor plate.

Field, Va., where he flew a dazzling succession of fighter aircraft.

Besides the Boeing P-12, which he had flown in flying school, Alison became proficient in some less well-known aircraft, such as the high-performance (but low utility) Consolidated PB-2, the Martin B-10 bomber, the exotic twin pusher-engine Bell YFM-1 Airacuda, and the long-nosed Curtiss P-37. He also flew more conventional types, including the Curtiss P-36 and its successor, the P-40.

While the P-40 has not received the accolades of other first-line

had much to teach them, and they soaked up everything they could on combat operations. In return, they went far beyond the observer's role in helping the RAF assemble, fly, and maintain the P-40. This training gave Alison a basic conviction that he demonstrated often and maintains today: Airplanes are all alike, and if you can fly one you can fly them all. That belief—and the skill that backed it up—enabled him to forge an unbelievably broad-based flying career during World War II.

By the time he and Zemke were in

place, the production of Spitfires and Hurricanes had begun to meet British needs. The inferior high-altitude performance of the P-40 took it out of combat operations against the Luftwaffe in Europe. Nevertheless, the airplane was still required for duty elsewhere, especially in North Africa, and Alison not only demonstrated it, he got to fly mock combat against RAF aces in Spitfires and Hurricanes. In those low-altitude battles, the P-40 could more than hold its own.

Mission to Moscow

In July 1941, he and Zemke were mysteriously summoned to the American Embassy in London. Still lieutenants, they were dumbfounded when they were ushered in to see Ambassador John G. Winant and W. Averell Harriman, who was in England on a mission for President Roosevelt and would be the future ambassador to the Soviet Union. Also present was Brig. Gen. Joseph T. McNarney, chief of staff of a special Army observer group in London.

It was heady company, and the two lieutenants learned that their top-secret mission was to go to the Soviet Union where they would instruct their Soviet counterparts in the assembly, maintenance, and operation of Lend-Lease P-40s. One hundred and forty were to be shipped by sea in a convoy from the United Kingdom; Zemke would accompany them. Another 60 would



A drive to push the Japanese out of Burma led to organizing the first air commandos. Lt. Col. Phil Cochran (left) and Alison (center) led the project. At right is Lt. Col. Arvid Olson.

be shipped via the Persian Gulf. Alison flew to Moscow in an RAF Catalina, with Harry L. Hopkins, confidant, advisor, and right-hand man to President Roosevelt, and McNarney.

An incredibly primitive assembly site had been set up in Arkhangelsk, with a wooden runway laid on pilings driven into the tundra. Alison and Zemke found crude working and living conditions. There were few tools but an ample supply of manpower, including many prisoners. The food was simple but far more plentiful than in England. They lived in railcars that

were warm—but also the home to many, many bedbugs.

They found the Soviet troops to be deadly serious, intent on getting the P-40s into combat immediately. Test-flying the P-40s was inherently dangerous, in part due to the mix of changes made while they were in service with the RAF and the low level of Soviet expertise in assembling the aircraft.

Both men wanted to see the Soviet air force in action, but their suspicious hosts kept them away from any operational areas and flatly refused to allow them to fly a Soviet aircraft.

In December after the P-40s had been assembled and test-flown, Alison and Zemke were ordered to Moscow. They had watched the Luftwaffe bomb London, and now they climbed to the roof of the ambassador's residence to see bombers dumping their lethal loads. Soon, however, the German army had pushed to the city's outskirts, and the two men assisted the American Embassy in its move to Kuybyshev on the Volga River, 550 miles southeast of Moscow.

There on Dec. 7 they learned of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Both men immediately asked to be released to return home to combat duty.

Persian Gulf War, 1942 Style

Zemke received orders to return to the United States, where he was soon given command of a unit he would make famous, the 56th Fighter Group. Alison



The Burma air invasion involved transporting British Brig. Gen. Wingate's assault force and equipment, including mules. Here a mule is being coaxed aboard an aircraft by British Chindits.



The air commandos included (l-r) Maj. Walter Radovich, Olson, Alison, Col. Ralph Smith, and Cochran. Olson and Smith were AVG veterans. Alison had been a fighter squadron commander under Chennault.

also wanted a combat assignment, but fate dictated otherwise.

Acting on the verbal orders of the American ambassador, Alison got on an airplane that ultimately deposited him in Tehran, Iran. A captain now, he landed without a kit, orders, or money.

By train and riverboat, Alison made his way to Basra, Iraq, where he went to the American military engineering detachment there and was promptly outfitted with a new uniform and given a brand new job: seeing to the official transfer of Lend–Lease aircraft to the Soviet Union via Basra.

He still was not receiving any pay, but the \$6 per diem he drew was ample, the food was good, and there was a constant stream of airplanes for him to fly—North American B-25s, Douglas A-20s, a Fairchild 24, and a Lockheed Electra. His checkout in the B-25 consisted of three landings with the Pan Am ferry pilot, and he had no checkout whatsoever in the Electra.

His principal task was to “sell” the airplanes to the representatives of the Soviet Union, then check them out.

The Russian pilots were tough customers who insisted on absolute perfection before accepting the aircraft. Nothing could be wrong, not a single burned-out bulb on the instrument panel, not the slightest crack in the tires; if they accepted any imperfection they were subject

to instant discipline on their return to the Soviet Union.

Completely outside any AAF hierarchy, Alison reported on his activities by sending penciled messages to Hap Arnold himself, each one with a plaintive postscript requesting a combat assignment. Eventually, it worked.

Combat at Last

Alison’s orders to report to China for combat duty came directly from Arnold. Chennault’s Flying Tigers had been merged into the Army Air Forces as the China Air Task Force. In mid-July 1942, Alison landed at Hengyang, where he was assigned to the 75th Fighter Squadron. It was one of three squadrons in which Chennault concentrated his best pilots, and it was commanded by Maj. David Lee “Tex” Hill, an ace and a member of the original Flying Tigers. Alison was soon chosen to be deputy commander.

On the night of July 28, he and his colleagues were awakened by Chinese houseboys coming through the barracks, beating their chopsticks on coffee tins to announce an air raid. They went outside and watched a flight of Japanese bombers attack the field with impunity, crossing directly over it to get their bearings, then doing a 180-degree turn to come back and drop their bombs. They did not do much damage, but Alison vowed that if they came back the next night, he would be in the air, ready for them.

The next night, Alison and his colleagues had their P-40s positioned at



Alison received a Purple Heart in a February 1943 ceremony at Kunming, China. In his military career, he earned a Distinguished Service Cross, Distinguished Service Medal, and Silver Star, among many awards.

the edge of the field ready for takeoff. The P-40 was not equipped as a night fighter, for it had no flame dampeners on its exhaust stacks and only minimal cockpit lighting. Nonetheless, when the alarm was given, they took off, Albert J. "Ajax" Baumler to orbit at 9,000 feet while Alison climbed to 12,000 feet.

A radio call from the field advised him that three bombers had just passed overhead. Alison realized that the bombers were above him and turned to climb and cut them off when they made their turn for the run-in.

He misjudged the distance as he dove to attack. "The radio was out—it had been holed by a bullet—and I couldn't talk anymore, and one bullet grazed my left arm. There was also a bullet hole through my parachute. But by this time I am now slowed down right in the middle of their formation. I chose the bomber on the left, and from point-blank range I aimed right at the fuselage and he pulled straight up; I'm sure I killed everyone on board, so I claimed that one as a probable. Then I turned to the airplane that was hitting me and blew him up. Then I turned on the leader and blew him up."

Now Alison was at 15,000 feet, with the P-40 still running but badly damaged. "I came down as fast as I could, but when I got down to 3,000 feet, right above the airport, the airplane began to catch fire. It was an oil fire not a gasoline fire, but a fire in an airplane is a worrisome thing. My airplane is on fire and I've got to make a decision whether to jump out or stay with it. I decided I could slide it on the belly, but I was a little too high and now I'm so fast there is no way I can put it on the runway. So I pull the nose up and open the throttle, and fortunately it is still running and I know there is a river out about two miles ahead."

The P-40 sputtered over some hills and a railroad trestle, and Alison headed for the water. His P-40 had no lap belts, and he refused to wear the shoulder harness because it restrained him too much, so he cut the throttle, kept his right hand on the stick, and put his left on the cockpit coaming so he would not smash his teeth into the gun sight. When the airplane hit the river, his head was rammed against the gun sight, lacerating his forehead but saving his teeth.

A young Chinese man ran out across



Pilots dash to their P-40s in China, where Alison became an ace while flying with Chennault's 75th Fighter Squadron. Chennault recalled, "He ran up a brilliant combat record."

a log raft and pulled him up out of the river to safety. When Alison got back to Hengyang, a doctor from a missionary hospital sewed up his cuts, and by that afternoon he was back at the squadron, ready to fly.

Figuring the Odds

During Alison's tour the odds still favored the Japanese numerically by a ratio of as much as 10-to-1, but the Americans now had the initiative. Alison recalls an occasion when he led 16 P-40s against "only" 47 enemy fighters and felt the odds were with him, given the quality of American pilots and the brilliance of Chennault's prescribed tactics.

As the war progressed, Chennault's forces grew and became more and more aggressive. On May 31, 1943, Alison led a flight of nine P-40s as escort to nine Consolidated B-24s in a raid on Ichang. Alison had one American pilot and seven Chinese pilots in his flight. The mission was complicated by the fact that neither American spoke Chinese, nor did any of the Chinese pilots speak English fluently.

A swarm of 20 Zeros attacked the bombers, "popping up like a handful of black pepper through the clouds," and Alison immediately turned into them, shooting down one fighter that he later claimed as a probable. He turned back in toward the bombers and fired on another Zero, which exploded. At

that moment he came under fire from a Zero, whose first bursts blew most of the rudder off Alison's P-40.

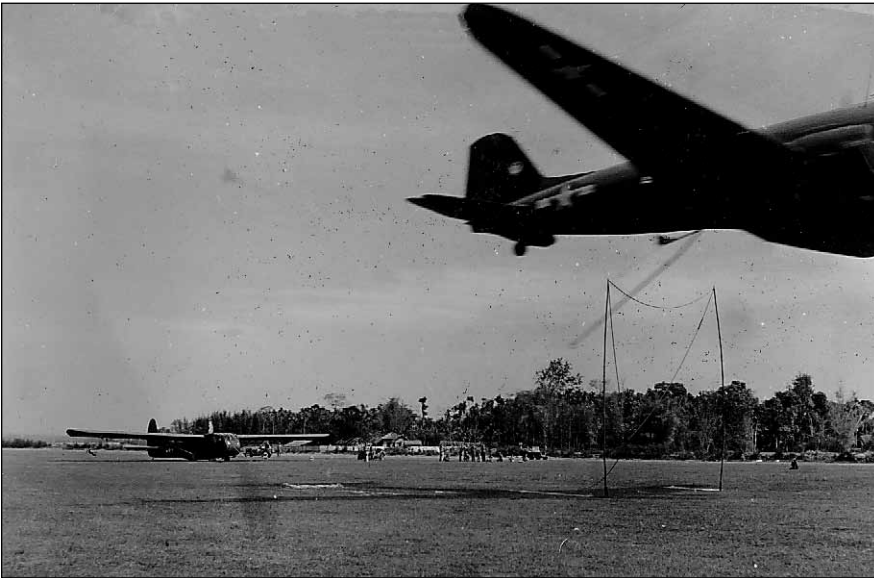
Alison today hunches his shoulders as he recounts how he could feel the Zero's bullets "ringing like a bell" as they hammered into the armor plate that protected him. He called for help, and a Chinese pilot came roaring in, shooting down the Zero, but spraying Alison's P-40 with hits as well.

Alison nursed the airplane back to his Chinese base and managed to get the wheels down—but his riddled tires came off when he landed, causing him to nose up. When he climbed down out of his airplane he was amazed that the first man he ran into was none other than Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, who had just arrived aboard a Douglas C-47.

Alison returned to the United States in May 1943 but was soon on his way to Asia again.

The Air Commandos

The war in the China-Burma-India Theater had a bitter quality to it, for both the Japanese enemy and the jungle environment in which the war was fought were totally without mercy. They were in fact almost as merciless as the inter-Allied command squabbles, which had in large part contributed to a massive defeat in Burma. When the renowned Brig. Gen. Orde C. Wingate of Great Britain attempted to redress the situation with unconventional warfare



For the Burma invasion, C-47s towed two gliders at a time. Several problems resulted—tangled or broken tow lines and fittings yanked out of the aircraft—compounded by overloaded aircraft and turbulence.

tactics, his Chindit long-range penetration forces showed great promise but suffered severely from the lack of air support. Wingate wanted a second chance to defeat the Japanese. This time, however, he not only wanted adequate airpower and resupply, he also demanded that provisions be made for the removal of his sick and wounded, who had to be left behind to almost certain death in the previous campaign.

Wingate surmounted the command struggles in 1943 by going directly to Prime Minister Winston Churchill to ask for extensive American support. Churchill had Wingate brief President Roosevelt personally, and Roosevelt called upon Hap Arnold to assist Wingate.

With his typical enthusiasm Arnold embraced the idea and selected two outstanding officers to head what became known as “Project Nine.” One was the legendary Lt. Col. Philip G. Cochran, who was immortalized by Milton Caniff as “Flip Corkin” in the comic strip “Terry and the Pirates.” The other was Lt. Col. John Alison. Arnold briefed the two men on their duties, then gave them the most welcome farewell line they had ever heard: “To hell with the paperwork, go out and fight.”

The two combat veterans were good friends and possessed complementary personalities. Each tried to persuade Arnold to appoint the other as commander; in an unusual, and decidedly unmilitary manner, Arnold appointed

them as co-commanders. Alison today remembers that it worked well for them personally but was difficult for outsiders to plumb, so they agreed that Cochran, senior by a few weeks, would be commander and Alison his deputy. It was a perfect arrangement.

They had the highest priority and Arnold’s full backing for the creation of a unit that would permit Wingate to carry out his plans to wrest Burma from the Japanese with long-range penetration forces. Among the innovations that Cochran and Alison brought to the 1st Air Commando Group were the first

combat use of helicopters for rescue and the use of C-47s to snatch gliders off the ground from difficult locations behind enemy lines. Alison also flew as Wingate’s personal pilot on many occasions.

Air Invasion of Burma

The mission was unprecedented: Cochran and Alison were to help Wingate conduct an air invasion of Burma by ground troops.

“We had a small air force of our own,” Alison says. “We put 12,000 infantry troops behind enemy lines in Burma, and we sustained them with airpower. Wingate had no armor, no heavy artillery. So we provided him his heavy artillery, from the air.”

They launched the invasion the evening of March 5, 1944, carrying most of Wingate’s assault force, its equipment, and mules on Waco CG-4A gliders, towed two at a time behind C-47 transports. It took 45 minutes to climb to the altitude of about 8,500 feet, necessary to clear the mountains between India and Burma.

Alison had never flown the CG-4A, nor had he ever made a night double-tow takeoff. Nevertheless, he piloted a glider in the first wave, carrying 15 men of the assault team to the landing area designated “Broadway.”

Airspeed proved difficult to control. When Alison cast off from the C-47 over Burma, he was gliding at 80 mph, and he touched down at a brisk 70. He bumped,



Alison (left) and Cochran (right) flank a painting showing Broadway, the gliders’ main landing site in Burma. Alison piloted a CG-4A glider, for the first time, during the invasion.

unharméd, to a halt, grabbed his carbine and a sack of grenades and leapt out, ready to do battle with the Japanese infantry.

Two Messages

After three weeks in the jungle in Burma, Alison was recalled by a radio message from Cochran. To get back, he flew out solo in a damaged British C-47 Dakota, although he had never flown a C-47 before. When he got to back to his home base at Hailakandi, India, he had to call the tower to ask for instructions on lowering the gear.

Two telegrams were awaiting him. The first said, "Report to me without delay" and was signed Arnold; the second said the same thing and was signed by Eisenhower.

Alison wired Arnold, who authorized him a delay en route of two days to



Overcoming many challenges, the air invasion was a success. Alison (at left), armed with a carbine, poses with Wingate (center) and others at Broadway.



P-51s fly over a B-25 taxiing at an airfield in India, where the air commandos had their main operating base. After the success in Burma, Eisenhower asked Alison for advice on gliders for the upcoming Normandy invasion.

confer with Eisenhower, who was only a few months away from launching the D-Day invasion of Europe across the English Channel. He planned to use gliders to fly some of his invasion force into Normandy. He and his staff pumped Alison for all he could tell them about his experience in taking Wingate's force into Burma with gliders.

In Washington, Alison learned that Arnold had also been following the 1st Air Commando operation with keen interest and was now prepared to field four more air commando groups. He wanted Alison to be in the middle of the expansion.

As fast-moving events of the war developed, though, only two more air

commando units could be used profitably. Arnold sent Alison with one of these, the 3rd Air Commando Group, to the South Pacific, where—as usual—his duties soon expanded.

During the last year of the war, Alison served as operations officer for Fifth Air Force, participating in the landings in the Philippines and in the air operations against Japan from Okinawa.

Today, at age 87, Alison has the movements and the vitality of a vigorous man in his middle years. He stands just under 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighs only a little more than he did in flying school, about 140 pounds. Until recently, he worked out in the gym, including a run on the treadmill, three times a week. He is busily engaged, with a group of colleagues, in the production of a new high-technology internal combustion engine.

For all that he has done, Alison is remarkably soft-spoken and genuinely modest. It is only with prompting that he recounts his experiences, and even then talks more about others than about himself.

In 1996, the Air Force Association considered various historical figures as keynote speakers for its 50th anniversary convention but concluded that the only real choice—best symbolizing the achievements and ideals of the nation's air arm as it grew to maturity—was John Alison, the all-American airman. ■

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