

FONFA Heritage Centre Models “Happy Jack’s Go Buggy”

Coming across a model without a description label, at the centre, (see picture below) a quick search on the internet revealed a fascinating story.



The search using the words “Happy Jack’s Go Buggy” revealed the wartime career of Jack Milton Ilfrey.

Jack Milton Ilfrey was born July 31, 1920, in Houston, Texas, graduated from Mirabeau Lamar Senior High School there and went on to Texas A&M, where he learned to fly in the first Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) in 1939. He had secondary Civilian Pilot Training Program at the University of Houston in 1940 while working for the Hughes Tool Company at night. Jack entered the Army Air Corp as an Aviation Cadet in April, 1941

and graduated at Luke Field, Arizona in the first wartime class (12 DEC 41). He was assigned to the 94th Pursuit Squadron, 1st Pursuit Group, flying the P-38 Ds and Es in defence of the Southern California coastline.

In the spring of 1942, the 1st Fighter Group (as they were now designated,) were equipped with new P-38 and were ordered to Dow Field, Maine, to prepare for the “Bolero Mission” — the first mass flight of fighter planes and bombers to England. “We called it the Guinea Pig Mission, cause that is what we were.” Ilfrey said. On July 4, 1942, the 94th. “Hat In The Ring” squadron took off on the first leg of the mission, from Presque Isle, Maine to Goose Bay, Labrador. Four P-38 were assigned to each of the 97th Bombardment Group B-17s that joined them on the mission. On July 6th, the second leg was flown from Goose Bay to Reykjavik, Iceland. It was on this leg of the mission that six of the P-38 and two B-17s ran low on fuel and were forced to land on an ice cap in Greenland. While all of the crewmen survived, all eight aircraft had to be abandoned. In the summer of 1992, one of the P-38s was removed from beneath its 270-foot tomb of ice, and later dubbed “Glacier Girl.”

On July 26th, most of the 94th FS (including Ilfrey) landed at Kirton, in Lindsey, Lincolnshire. On the 24th August they left for Ibsley Airfield near Bournemouth on the English south coast. It was from here on September 1 the 1st FG made the first all-American fighter sweep over northern France. This was also the first mission of the US 8th Air Force against the enemy.

Ilfrey was known as “Happy Jack” for his cheerful disposition, and his ground crews in England nicknamed each of his planes “Happy Jack’s Go Buggy”

Many other missions soon followed. On November 14th the 1st FG departed Ibsley to fly to Chivnor in the Lands’ End area of England. This was to be their departure point, on the following day, for “Operation Torch,” the invasion of North Africa.

Unfortunately, during this flight. one of the drop tanks on his P-38 malfunctioned and he ran low on fuel. He was forced to land at an airfield in Portugal. On landing he was informed, as Portugal was a neutral country, that he would be interned for the duration of the

war. Ilfrey did not wish this to happen. Therefore, he managed to convince the Portuguese to refuel his plane. When a major asked to inspect it, Ilfrey agreed. Ilfrey was seated in the cockpit showing him the controls when he suddenly pushed the throttles forward, knocking the major off the wing and roaring down the runway. Ilfrey landed in Gibraltar from there he flew on to North Africa. There he was berated by his commanding officer for nearly causing an international incident, However the commander of the Twelfth Air Force General Jimmy Doolittle stepped in on his behalf. During the time in North Africa he flew a P-38F-1-LO nicknamed "Texas Terror" (left tail boom)/"The Mad Dash" (right tail boom). He scored five and a half aerial victories and damaged two enemy aircraft, becoming what many believe to be one of the first, if not the first, pilot to reach "ace status" while flying a P-38. During 1943, he was sent back to the United States to become a P-38 instructor in California. He completed 72 combat missions and 208 flying hours with the 1st Fighter Group. He was promoted to captain on April 5, 1943.

20th Fighter Group P-38 Lightnings in June 1944

In the spring of 1944, he was posted as squadron commander of the 79th Fighter Squadron part of the 20th Fighter Group the famous "Loco Busters". Here Ilfrey was known for his fearlessness. He flew a P-38J-15-LO, serial number 43-28431, nicknamed "Happy Jack's Go Buggy". On May 24, 1944, he scored two more confirmed aerial victories on a mission over Berlin. One of them collided with the right wing of Ilfrey's P-38 during aerial combat manoeuvres, tearing off four to five feet of the wing tip; the German plane crashed, but Ilfrey managed to return to base in England. On June 13, 1944, after attacking the La Possonniere (Maine-et-Loire) railway bridge, he saw a locomotive at the Lion-d'Angers station. While attacking this objective, his aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft artillery fire. One of his engines caught fire and he bailed out. Landing heavily on a farm building, his parachute having opened too low. Ilfrey found himself deep behind enemy lines.

Luckily, he was taken in by a friendly French family, who gave him shelter, food, a bicycle, and false identity papers as a deaf-mute farmer named "Jacques Robert". He eventually reached the Allied

front line after travelling approximately 150 miles. This meant by June 20, 1944, he was back in England less than a month after being shot down.

After an escape of this type a pilot would normally he would of been taking of flying over enemy territory. This was to prevent the enemy from extracting valuable information about resistance networks from them if they were captured again. However, Ilfrey returned to the 79th Fighter Squadron which was converting to the P- 51 Mustang. He flew a P-51D-5-NA obligatorily nicknamed "Happy Jack's Go Buggy". The last memorable incident to happen was on 20 Nov 44 when he landed behind enemy lines, near the front, around Maastricht, Holland, and successfully picked up his wing man for a short ride to Brussels. In early December 1944, his tour ended Jack returned to the United States. He had completed 70 combat missions and 320 hours of combat flying hours with the 20th Fighter Group. Ilfrey spent the rest of the war in the States, where he became a Troop Commander at McChord AFB.

He was discharged on December 28, 1945, with the rank of major. His final tally was seven and a half confirmed aerial victories, with two enemy aircraft damaged.



In two tours, he completed a total of 142 missions with 528 combat hours.

Medals and Decorations

Silver Star Medal

Distinguished Flying Cross (5)

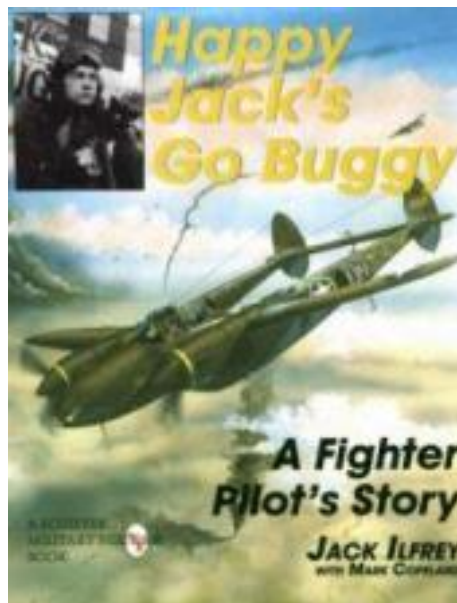
Air Medal (13)

American Defence Service Medal

American Campaign Medal

European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal (4 battle stars) World War II Victory Medal

In 1946 he wrote his autobiography “Happy Jacks Go Buggy” A Fighter Pilots Story. Below is the cover of the 2004 ! reprint.



HAPPY JACK'S GO BUGGY

By Jack Ilfrey & Mark S. Copeland

Jack Ilfrey passed away October 15, 2004, in Houston, Texas, at 84 years old.