



Pilot Profile

All too often we read the very sad story about a brave pilot who made the ultimate sacrifice whilst serving his country, however, we see far fewer stories about the equally brave pilots whose airmanship and luck combined to enable them to survive their experience of war.

This is one such story.

Colonel Jim K Harrison DFC



James K. Harrison (Jim) was born in Lubbock, Texas in 1924. As a teenager during the Great Depression of the 1930s he worked as a cowboy, agricultural worker, and automotive mechanic.

Jim entered military service on his 18th birthday in September 1942 and was trained to fly the Republic P-47 "Thunderbolt". Having completed his training Jim was assigned to the 404th Fighter Squadron of the 371st Fighter Group, U.S. Army Air Corp.

Second Lieutenant Harrison arrived at RAF Bisterne advanced landing ground in the New Forest in April 1944. As part of the Group, Jim's first missions were over the Normandy

Beaches and Cotentin Peninsula as preparations were being made for Operation Overlord, and what we now know as D-Day.

After initial providing bomber escorts, the 371st Fighter Group quickly changed mission focus to the new air strategy of close ground support for infantry and armored units. Operating as “dive bombers,” they were very successfully employed against ground infrastructure preparing the way for the D-Day landings and then providing close ground support for our troops as they moved forward through Normandy and France.

The 371st Fighter Group were always as close to the fighting as logistics would permit. Jim was in the first wave of pilots sent to Europe moving from Bisterne to Advanced Landing Ground A-6 (Beuzeville/Ste Mère Eglise) 11 days after D-Day, to become one of the first operational air units on the continent.

During the slow move east across France, the 371st Group participated in six campaigns across Northwestern Europe during 1944-1945. Jim Group provided aircover for Gen. Patton’s Third Army, participated in key resupply efforts at Bastogne as well as providing armed interdiction during the Battle of the Bulge. The 371st Group became especially adept at the destruction of bridges and railway infrastructure, and, along with other similar units, became known as “Train Busters”.

Jim returned to the United States three weeks before victory in Europe was declared. He was in the process of being redeployed to the Pacific Theatre when the war came to an end.

During his time in Europe, Jim Harrison had flown 111 combat missions, earning the Air Medal (with 17 Oak Leaf clusters), the Distinguished Flying Cross, and, as part of his unit, the Presidential Unit Citation.

Jim initially stayed in the armed forces and became part of the new U.S. Air Force in 1947, however, later that year he left to enroll at Louisiana State University to complete an undergraduate degree in Geophysics.

Jim was called to active duty during the Korean conflict, and he remained in the active reserve forces until his retirement as a full Colonel in the 1986.

Jim Harrison died in 2008, two months short of his eighty-fourth birthday.