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Francis Gabreski, Ace Fighter Pilot



Photo - Francis "Gabby" Gabreski

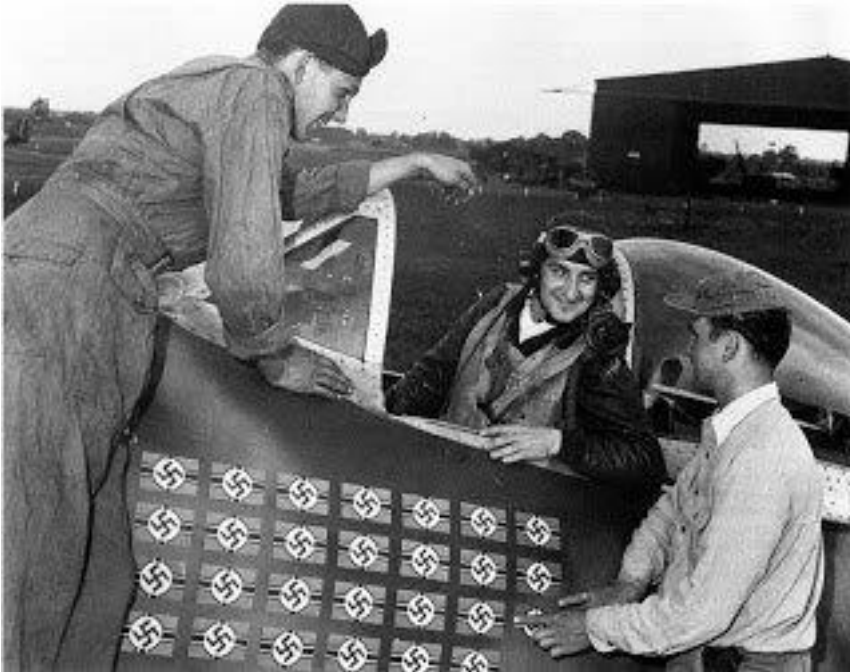
Francis "Gabby" Gabreski, a native of Pennsylvania, became one of only seven pilots to become an Ace (five or more enemy planes shot down) in both World War II and the Korean War.

Gabreski was born in Oil City, PA in 1919, his parents were immigrants from Poland. He enrolled in Notre Dame University in 1938 and while there, Gabreski took flying lessons but did not solo or achieve a pilot's license. Unfortunately, he withdrew from school after only two years due to low academic grades. Subsequently to that, He enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1940.

Gabreski graduated from flight school in 1941 and was commissioned as an officer. His first assignment was in Hawaii, flying the Curtiss P-36 Hawk and the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk. On December 7, 1941, Gabreski, in addition to a few other pilots, managed to get airborne from Wheeler Field in a P-40 to challenge the attacking Japanese aircraft.

In late 1942, Gabreski requested a transfer to Fighter Squadron 315 in England. This was a Polish squadron serving with the Royal Air Force. In addition to flying combat missions in the Spitfire fighter aircraft, Gabreski served as an interpreter due to his fluency in the Polish language.

In 1943, Gabreski was assigned to the newly formed 56th fighter group flying the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. The P-47 was mainly used to escort the B-17 bombing missions over Germany. The P-47 was considered to be inferior to the German fighters, but Gabreski achieved an excellent record. During 166 missions he downed 28 enemy aircraft. This record made him the highest scoring American Ace during World War II in the European theater.



In July 1944, Gabreski was ordered to go on 30-day leave after his 166 missions. Rather than board the transport plane, he decided to go on one more mission. By this time in the war, the Air Force fighters were not seeing many airborne German fighters. The pilots started to look for German planes parked at military airfields. On the way home, Gabreski spotted a German airfield with parked aircraft. On his second pass, the propeller struck the ground and he ditched the fighter in a field. After 5 days of running and hiding, he was captured and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of war in a German camp. Later investigations showed that Gabreski and other pilots misjudged the low altitude performance of the newly delivered P-47D-25 model. This model had additional fuel capacity, which altered the aircraft performance compared to previous models. Luckily, he would survive his imprisonment.

After the war, Gabreski transitioned to flying jet aircraft. In 1949, he was assigned as commander of the 56th Fighter Group. The 56th Fighter Group was flying the Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star, the first jet fighter used by the Air Force. During his command he managed the group's transition to the new North American F-86 Sabre.



Gabreski was sent to Korea in 1951 as commander of the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing. He managed the transition of the wing to the F-86 Sabre. He continued to fly the F-86 in addition to serving as the wing commander. The main threat to the F-86 was the Soviet MiG-15 fighter. The MiG-15 was flown by Soviet pilots from airfields across the border in China. The MiG-15 outperformed the F-86 in terms of climb rate and altitude. The F-86 had a better turning radius and low altitude performance. The American pilots appeared to be more skilled than the Soviet pilots and employed a highly accurate gunsight for the .50 caliber guns.





Gabreski flew a total of 123 missions in Korea. He achieved the Ace designation by downing 6.5 enemy aircraft. He deliberately skipped recording some of his missions in order to stay in the combat zone for a longer period. Gabreski was sent home after the 123 “recorded” missions, and this time did not try to fly “one more mission!” Only six other American pilots became Ace’s in both World War II and the Korean War. Gabreski was awarded 13 Distinguished Flying Crosses, the most earned by any American pilot.

His Air Force career continued for another 15 years after the Korean War, including holding several staff positions. Additionally, he served as wing commander for 354th Tactical Fighter Wing, the 18th Tactical Fighter Wing, and the 52nd Fighter Wing, for 9 of those 15 years.

At the rank of full Colonel, Gabreski retired on November 1, 1967. He retired with more than 5,000 flying hours, including 4,000 hours in jets. Gabreski passed away in 2002 and is buried at Calverton National Cemetery on Long Island, NY.

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