

# **PIANO BURNING**

and Other

Fighter Pilot Traditions

- Rob Burgon -

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## Tradition 101

One balmy afternoon in 1944, Captain Robert W. Aschenbrener's world stood still over the South Pacific. Professional athletes often say that time seems to slow when they're in *the zone* the way it did when Neo dodged bullets in the movie *The Matrix*. On this day, Robert Aschenbrener – known to members of the 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron as Asch – was in *the zone*.

The distorted perception of time made the Japanese Ki-61 Tony in Asch's gun sights an easy target. The propellers of the single-engine, Kawasaki-built aircraft turned in slow motion and slowly disintegrated before his eyes as multiple .50 caliber bullets impacted the enemy fighter. The rounds continued to pick apart the doomed aircraft, tearing through the engine cowling, the canopy and a portion of the left wing. The acrid smell of gunpowder filling Asch's cockpit brought with it memories of his two air-to-air kills nearly a year earlier.

The powerful 12-cylinder Allison engines of Captain Aschenbrener's P-38 Lightning hesitated

slightly upon ingesting smoke from the destroyed enemy fighter but continued to march resolutely to the orders of their pilot in command. Asch effortlessly dodged the debris from his slain opponent and turned his sights to a glint of sun reflecting from the canopy of another aircraft: the wingman of his recently fallen enemy.

Over the next several minutes, the sky became a swirling mess of airplanes, smoke, and falling debris punctuated by the occasional parachute. When the day was over, Asch had single-handedly downed four enemy aircraft. Combined with the two previous kills under his belt, Captain Aschenbrener's work on November 24, 1944, would earn him a title won by few aviators: that of *Ace*.

Asch didn't have much time to revel in the glory of his victories, for the work of a fighter pilot is never done. One month after Captain Aschenbrener wreaked havoc on the Japanese Air Force, he found himself over the Philippines executing another demanding mission. Sweat dripped from Asch's brow as he rolled in hot for a Christmas Day strafing run on an anti-aircraft battery at Clark Field.

The airfield, built by the Americans, had been overrun by Japanese forces several months earlier and was now a high priority target in the struggle to turn the tide of the war in the South Pacific. The members of the 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron "Black Sheep" had been

fighting hard for several months to force the Imperial Army to leave the key island.

Asch had visited the base once before it was taken over by the Japanese. He hardly recognized it now from the air due to the cratered runways and the rubble piles from the hangars damaged in previous attacks.

The sky around the young captain's aircraft was dotted with percussive clouds of black smoke; visible indications of the incendiary rounds fired from the anti-aircraft batteries below. Asch concentrated on locating the source of the incoming fire. The battle-hardened warrior had already made one successful strafing pass on the airfield. Without the element of surprise, his next attack would be much more difficult.

Squinting through the glare of the sun on his canopy, he could barely discern the minuscule gun emplacements from the surrounding rubble of the battered airfield. Asch briefly caught sight of what appeared to be men reloading one of the powerful surface-to-air cannons as he peered through the smoky haze hanging over the field. That split-second view of the target area was all the intrepid fighter pilot needed to plan his strafing run and begin his attack.

Asch sharply banked his P-38 and pulled the nose of the sleek killing machine in the direction of his target. He had about 45 degrees of turn remaining before the gun emplacement would be in his sights. Asch intentionally over-banked the aircraft and set the

dive angle for his strafing run. Upon reaching a 30-degree nose-low pitch attitude, and just as he began to roll his aircraft upright, the mighty warplane shuddered as flak from a nearby anti-aircraft round sprayed the P-38's empennage and right side.

Asch had been hit. He wrestled the aircraft out of the dive and turned away from the airfield. The controls were becoming less responsive as the right engine burst into flames. It wouldn't be long before the aircraft was a giant fireball. Captain Aschenbrener trimmed the aircraft for level flight as best he could and slid the canopy back in preparation for bailing out. If he jumped out at his present position, he would immediately be surrounded by the enemy. With the patience of a combat-seasoned aviator, Asch waited until the absolute last moment before he released his restraints and leaped into the air.

Once his body was separated from the crippled aircraft and falling freely towards a rice paddy below, Asch pulled his parachute's ripcord. The opening shock of the canopy vibrated through his body as he watched his once beautiful P-38 impact the ground to become a pile of twisted metal and burning fuel.

For a moment, Asch heard nothing but the rush of the wind around him and the din of the battle raging behind him. For just a moment, there was beauty in the chaos. Asch's mind drifted briefly from the need to prepare for a parachute landing and enjoyed the view of the Philippine landscape below him. Those few

seconds of tranquility ended abruptly as he splashed down in an expansive rice paddy. In a tangle of mud and nylon, he tumbled to a stop. His heart racing, Asch scrambled to free himself from the entanglement. At first, his moves to break loose from the twisted lines of his parachute were slow and deliberate. The sound of men cutting through the undergrowth of the nearby forest spurred Asch to work faster. What would happen if he were caught? Would they torture him? Would they kill him? He didn't want to find out and tried to put the thought of failure from his mind.

Just a few more twists and turns and Asch was free. With a small survival kit hanging from his waist, he stumbled through the rice paddy and into the forest opposite the noise of his pursuers. He needed to get some distance between himself and the enemy. Once he had time on his side, he could take a quick rest, get his bearing, and come up with a plan. Fighter pilots have a knack for confronting impossible situations, and Asch was confident he'd find a way out of this mess.

Asch only made it about 100 yards before he stopped. There were noises all around him, but he couldn't tell if they were natural or man-made. He didn't have to wonder for long, as several dark figures emerged from the shadows of the trees; each accompanied by a rifle pointed at directly at Asch.

One man walked up to the captain, looked him over, and shouted something to the others in a language foreign to Asch. Slowly, the armed men



lowered their firearms, and a young boy approached the downed fighter pilot.

“You are American?” asked the boy. Asch didn’t speak, his eyes darting nervously around the group of his captors.

“It’s ok. We are no Japanese. We are the Huks! Come with us; we can help you.”

The Huk Guerillas were a group of communist resistance fighters. They didn’t like Americans much, but they liked the Japanese even less. The Huk had decided that helping the Americans was the lesser of two evils. The group roamed the jungles fighting the Japanese and helping downed pilots like Asch whenever they could.

Robert Aschenbrener would spend the next 27 days with the Huk Guerillas evading the Imperial Army before being safely returned to a U.S. naval vessel. Over the course of his time with the Huk, Asch would be joined by several other American aviators who were also on the run. Among the other downed pilots was Alexander Vraciu, a U.S. Navy F-6F Hellcat ace, who became fast friends with Captain Aschenbrener.

Following his triumphant return to the Black Sheep, Asch could have easily gone back to the States to rest from the traumatic experience of being shot out of the sky and being on the run for nearly a month.

Instead, Asch did what every self-respecting fighter pilot would do: he asked to get back in the cockpit.

After his request to remain in combat, *Captain* Aschenbrener became *Major* Aschenbrener and assumed command of the Black Sheep's sister squadron: the 7<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron "Screamin' Demons." He would serve nearly another year of combat before retiring with 345 combat missions under his belt and 850 combat flying hours.

You would think that just being an ace fighter pilot and a combat-hardened veteran was enough to call Robert Aschenbrener a true American hero. But Asch had one last act of fighter pilot awesomeness to perform; one that was unrelated to combat, but demonstrated how this alpha dog approached life.

On August 20, 1945 – about eight months after he returned from his time evading with the Huk Guerillas – Robert Aschenbrener went back to Clark Field, which had been reclaimed by American forces. He was accompanied by Ms. Laura Ann Middleton, whom he married on a spot just a couple of miles from where his crippled P-38 had impacted the ground less than a year earlier. Talk about establishing dominance!



For me, flying fighters isn't just a career, it's a way of life. Any of my cohorts will tell you that. Being a part of this exclusive fraternity changes your outlook on life and leaves a deep mark upon your soul.

The fighter lifestyle is one steeped in tradition. New members of this unique circle must learn its history and carry on its traditions, for they will be the ones to instill pride in the future generations of pilots that follow them.

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