

Zemke's Wolf Pack



56th Fighter Group

EUROPEAN TOUR 1943-1945

Foreword

It is of great pleasure for me to be able to once again present a large pack of skins for you and the ever popular Il-2 Sturmovik combat flight simulator. This project started well over two years ago when I first began by designing a template for the *Republic P-47 Thunderbolt*. Since then many obstacles have postponed this newest skinning effort. Both real life commitments together with several memorable requests by fellow sim enthusiasts had me delay this project time and again (how could I resist a request?), but not once did I consider abandoning it. Also the template for the T-bolt has since gone through several major upgrades. Very little remains in it reminding from the original 2011 template. So, in a way it was fortunate that this project was delayed so many times, otherwise these changes may not have happened.

“Project 56” depicts one of the most prestigious fighter units serving in the European theatre of operations during World War II. This unit flew almost entirely, throughout the war, and even after other Fighter Groups had made the popular choice of shifting to the more sleek and agile P-51 Mustang, the P-47 Thunderbolt. The unit, Col. Hubert Zemke’s *56th Fighter Group* or *Zemke’s Wolf Pack* kept its beloved Jug’s all the way until VE-day in Spring 1945.

There were several practical reasons I chose the 56th as my next project. Firstly the aircraft flown by this unit wore some of the most colorful camouflage paintings together with rich variations of “nose art” - any skinner’s dream. Secondly the aircraft of this unit are very well documented both visually and in writing. I had no difficulties in obtaining good information thanks to the excellent web site littlefriends.co.uk. Almost all the nose art seen in these 120 skins included in this project were redrawn from the photos provided by this magnificent website. I can only wish there were similar web sites for the US 9th, 12th and 15th AF’s as well. Further resources from the net which I had the pleasure of drawing information from were: Kev’s Military Aviation Pictures, 56thfightergroup.co.uk and 56th Fighter Group by Wikipedia. Books were not disregarded in this research: *Osprey Aviation Elite - 56th Fighter Group* by Roger A. Freeman 2000, *Wolfpack Warriors - The Story of World War II’s Most Successful Fighter Outfit* by Roger A. Freeman Published by Grub Street 2004, *The Fight For The Skies - Allied Fighter Action in Europe and North Africa 1939 - 1945* by Roger A. Freeman Cassel 1999 edition, *Kagero Monographs, World War II Fighters* by Jeffrey L. Ethell and Robert T. Sand published by Motorbooks Classics 2002, and last but not the least *Bomber Command*

- *American Bombers in Original World War II Color* by Jeffrey L. Ethell published by Motorbooks Classics 2003.

The following individuals also provided much valuable help by offering both information and places from the web were to find answers: Duggy, Jarink, RDDR from Axis & Allies Paintworks. Thank you. My apologies to those who may not find their names here, my thanks goes to them too.

A project this size is bound to contain errors. Trying to keep in order 120 skins some errors evidently will slip through. The responsibility of possible errors in any form in the skins are entirely mine. I welcome any correspondence to correct or complete the details of these aircraft skins.

Most of the nose art were redrawn from either genuine WWII color photographs or Black and White WWII photographs. Therefore some of the colors in the nose art remain speculative or remain hypothetical reconstructions. The exceptions were Lt. Armand A. Laflam’s P-47D 42-26293 UN-L “Belle of Belmont” and Lt. Russell S. Kyler’s P-47M 44-21116 HV-J “Lorene”. The nose art of these two I found while scrounging the internet and they are indeed copied to the skins. I believe they are originally from color profiles by Kagero Monograph? Also on a few occasions when no visual information was available to me I was forced to reconstruct nose art by basing it on written information only. Lt. Leo F. Butiste’s P-47M 44-21199 LM-X “*Josephine My Flying Machine*” and Lt. Walter J. Sharbo’s P-47M 44-21237 LM-C_ “*Marion/North Dakota Kid*” were such examples. I applied the text but the style and positioning are both fictional.

The text of the 56th FG is from wikipedia. More of this [here](#).

In order to limit file size these skins have been divided in three packs. Each one holds 40 fully marked skins. The first pack includes the early P-47B, C and D skins of the 1942 – 1943 era, the next pack includes the P-47D’s of the 1943 – 1944 era and the last pack includes all “bubbletop” P-47D and M versions of the 1944 – 1945 era. A fourth pack containing generic and blank skins will follow. In each pack is also included a readme file in PDF format. I hope you enjoy these skins and all related reference materiel as much as I enjoyed making and compiling them.

eMeL,
Helsinki,
December 2013

ZEMKE's WOLFPACK

56th Fighter Group

HISTORY

Origins

The group was activated as the 56th Pursuit Group on 15 January 1941 at Savannah Army Air Base, Georgia. Expansion of the group began after the move to Charlotte Army Air Base, North Carolina in May 1941 when they were equipped with a small number of Bell P-39 Airacobra and Curtiss P-40 Warhawk aircraft. Intensive training at Charleston Municipal Airport, South Carolina in Dec 1941 and from January to June 1942 at airfields in New York, at area headquarters at Mitchel Field. Here they flew on air defense patrols. Selected to train with the new Republic P-47B Thunderbolt, they received the first aircraft in June 1942. The group then moved to Bridgeport Municipal Airport, Connecticut on 7 July 1942 and continued testing and training with early P-47s. Alerted for overseas duty in December 1942 they sailed on the Queen Elizabeth on 6 January 1943 and arrived in Gourock on 11 January 1943. The 56th PG was assigned three fighter squadrons:

61st Pursuit Squadron
62d Pursuit Squadron
63d Pursuit Squadron

Staffed by a cadre drawn from other units at nearby Hunter AAB the 56th PG organized as a combat unit with a high turnover in personnel. On 26 May 1941, the group relocated to Morris Field, Charlotte, North Carolina, where it received 3 P-39s and 10 Curtiss P-36 Hawks, and trained, participated in training maneuvers, served as an air defense organization, and functioned as an operational training unit (OTU). During maneuvers in October 1941 it received 10 new P-39s and performed well in an air defense role.

World War II

On 10 December 1941, in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the 56th FG moved to Wilmington Army Air Base, North Carolina for air defense duties, with its 61st FS

Part III 1944-1945

Skin pack Part 3. contains 40 fully marked skins of the 1944 and 1945 era. Slip the skins to their proper folders. The skins should work the next time you start the game. Enjoy.



P-47M-1, 44-21196, HV-N, "Dee" flown by Lt. John T. Allen, 61st FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21112, UN-Z flown by Maj. George E. Bostwick, CO of the 63rd FS, Boxted, April 1945.

based at Charleston AAB, South Carolina. It received 24 newly commissioned 2nd lieutenant pilots in December and set up a makeshift assessment school using five types of obsolete fighter aircraft, including P-35s and P-43s.

In mid-January 1942 the 56th FG shifted to air defense of New York City, with its headquarters based at Bendix AAF, New Jersey, and its squadrons assigned respectively to Bridgeport, Connecticut; Bendix; and Farmingdale, New York. In April 1942 it received a full complement of new P-40F Warhawks to replace its makeshift equipment.

In May 1942 it was redesignated the 56th Fighter Group and its component squadrons were redesignated as fighter squadrons. The 56th FG received its first operational P-47B's from nearby Republic Aviation in June, in which it began training for combat. One of its most notable pilots, Major Robert S. Johnson, noted that during this "break-in" phase, in addition to numerous non-fatal training accidents 18 pilots of the 56th FG were killed and 41 aircraft destroyed in crashes, many as a result of the wholly inadequate airfield at nearby Stratford, on Long Island Sound. Group headquarters shifted to Bridgeport in July, joined by the 63rd FS in September, and the 62nd FS received its P-47s in July at Bradley Field, Connecticut.

Four fighter groups sent to England in the summer of 1942 as part of the Bolero buildup had been transferred to the Twelfth Air Force to support the invasion of North Africa, leaving the U.S. VIII Fighter Command with a single fighter group. To rebuild the fighter forces, the 56th FG was assigned for overseas duty in England. Major Hubert A. Zemke, a pre-war Air Corps pilot with experience as a combat observer with the RAF and a P-40 instructor to the Soviet Air Force, became group commander on 16 September 1942. The 56th FG was alerted for overseas deployment on Thanksgiving Day, ceased all air operations, and moved to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, on 28 December.

The 56th Fighter Group sailed from New York on the RMS Queen Elizabeth on 6 January 1943. Arriving at Gourock, Scotland, on 11 January, the personnel of the 56th FG moved by train to their first station at RAF Kings Cliffe in Cambridgeshire to await arrival of new P-47C's in late January. Shortly after its arrival in the UK, the 61st Fighter Squadron received a new pilot, Captain Francis S. Gabreski who had been seconded to No. 315 Squadron RAF, a fighter squadron of Polish Air Force pilots, to acquire combat experience. Bad weather prevented the group from flying its new aircraft until 10 February.

The 56th was one of three P-47 groups in England, and the only one to previously train on the Thunderbolt. The 4th Fighter Group at RAF Debden had been created the preceding September by incorporating the veteran RAF Eagle squadrons into the USAAF, and



P-47M-1, 44-21104, UN-F, "Shoot You're Faded!" flown by Cpt. Walter L. Flagg, 63rd FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21209, UN-B, "LOOKIN' FER TROUBLE" flown by Lt. Edgar J. Huff, 63rd FS.



P-47D, 42-28668, HV-K, "Beautiful Bettie" of the 61st FS.

the newly arrived 78th Fighter Group at RAF Goxhill had previously flown P-38 Lightnings. Consequently the 56th was the only group of the three to have confidence in their aircraft despite problems of compressibility in dives, and performance teething problems that included poor rate of climb, poor acceleration, numerous engine seizures to oil counterbalance seal failures, ignition system problems, radio interference, and lack of spare parts.

At the end of three months of breaking in new equipment, troubleshooting performance problems with their new airplanes, and training in the British tactics and procedures adopted by the VIII Fighter Command, the group moved to a new base at RAF Horsham St. Faith on 6 April 1943, which had been a pre-war permanent RAF station. The 56th received ground support there from the attached 33d Service Group, commanded by Lt. Col. Douglas Pollard, and the 41st Service Squadron.

Camouflage, unit markings, and radio call signs

The three component squadrons, the 61st, 62d, and 63d Fighter Squadrons, flew P-47C (blocks 2 and 5) from February 1943 to April 1943, P-47D (blocks 1 through 30) from June 1943 to March 1945, and P-47Ms from January 1945 to 10 October 1945. All 130 P-47M models served with the 56th FG before it redeployed from UK.

The P-47C and P-47D aircraft received by the 56th FG were finished in factory-applied olive drab (OD) with gray lower surfaces. Because the P-47 was the only radial engined allied fighter, the danger of other allied fighters mistaking it for the Fw 190 caused VIII Fighter Command to have 24-inch (610 mm) white cowl bands painted on the noses of P-47s after March 1943. Other rapid identification measures used were white banding on both the tail fin and horizontal stabilizers, and the use of oversized USAAF roundels on the undersides of both wings.

The USAAF ended the factory-applied camouflage on all aircraft produced after 13 February 1944, and the first unpainted block 21 "razorback" canopy and block 25 "bubble-top" canopy models arrived in May. The first "silver" aircraft, 42-26044, was left uncamoouflaged, given the name Silver Lady, and flown in combat by Capt. James Carter and Major Les Smith of the 61st FS. The first bubbletops, dubbed "Superbolts", were assigned to the group and squadron commanders until more became available.

The 56th applied field camouflage to most but not all of these replacement fighters. Most bubbletops were given an RAF-style "shadow-shading" (disruptive) pattern of "RAF green" (a shade similar to olive drab) overlaid on light sea gray (another RAF shade) on upper surfaces, while most razorbacks were field-painted in overall dark OD on upper and light gray on lower surfaces. Shadow sha-



P-47M-1, 44-21199, LM-X, "Josephine My Flying Machine" flown by Lt. Leo F. Butiste, 62nd FS.



P-47D-25, 42-26628, LM-C, "Rozzie Geth/Miss Fire" flown by Cpt. Fred J. Christensen Jr., 62nd FS, Boxted, July 1944.



P-47D-25, 42-26413, Z, "HAPPY WARRIOR/OREGONS BRITANNIA" flown by Maj. Harold E. Comstock, CO of the 63rd FS, Boxted, September 1944.

ding, however, appeared in a variety of schemes and colors, adding to the distinction of the group's aircraft.

When P-47M's appeared in January 1945, each squadron adopted an individual camouflage scheme on upper surfaces while lower surfaces of the fighters were left unpainted. The 61st used a matte black color that faded to a dark purple. The 62d continued the green-and-gray shadow-shading pattern, while the 63d went to a shadow-shading pattern of "deep Mediterranean blue" (indigo) applied over sky blue.

VIII Fighter Command assigned the 56th Fighter Group two-letter squadron identification codes to be painted on the fuselages of its fighters, and each squadron assigned its aircraft individual letter identifiers. (The letters chosen for the 56th had previously been assigned to the 1st Fighter Group before it went to the Twelfth Air Force.) In early February 1944 the 56th replaced its white cowl bands with a different color for each squadron. This innovation lasted until mid-March, when VIII Fighter Command adopted a color system for all Eighth Air Force fighter groups. The 56th painted its noses red and later applied the squadron colors to the tail rudders of its Thunderbolts, an innovation that VIII Fighter Command also borrowed. The 56th discontinued use of squadron colors when it changed to P-47M's.

On 23 April 1944, VIII Fighter Command changed its system of radio call signs to reduce confusion when the fighter groups, now numbering a hundred or more fighters in their inventories, deployed two groups on escort missions ("A group" and "B Group"). Station call signs (RAF Halesworth's was STURDY, and RAF Boxted's DOGDAY) were unchanged, but all previous call signs were discontinued. In 1945 provision was also made for a C Group on missions (usually only 8 to 12 fighters) and all fighters assigned to a C Group mission used the common call sign.

Like all Allied aircraft flying over the continent, the 56th applied alternating 18-inch (460 mm) black and white bands, known as "invasion stripes", to the rear fuselage and wings of its fighters just prior to D-Day. It retained the lower wing stripes and lower portion of the rear fuselage until the end of 1944, when most invasion stripes were deleted.



P-47D, 42-24417, LM-P, flown by Lt. Col. Lucian P. Dade, 62nd FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21160, UN-F, "Devastatin' Deb" flown by Cpt. John C. Fahringer, 63rd FS.



P-47D, 42-26418, HV-A flown by Lt. Col. Francis S. Gabreski, 61st FS, Boxted, 15 - 20 July 1944.

1943

P-47s of VIII Fighter Command performed three types of missions during 1943, all normally in group strength of 40–48 fighters, based on like operations used by the Royal Air Force:

Circus – a heavy escort of a small group of bombers as a diversionary tactic to draw German fighter reaction away from the main strike,

Rodeo – large-scale fighter sweeps through areas of German fighter reaction, to provoke an engagement, and

Ramrod – bomber support (escort) of heavy bomber strikes, either during penetration or withdrawal of the bomber force.

The 56th FG sent its four most experienced pilots to Debden in early April 1943 to gain experience before the group's first mission, which occurred 13 April 1943. Its first combat and casualties occurred 29 April, when Capt. John E. McClure and 1st Lt. Winston W. "Bill" Garth of the 62nd FS became POWs. The 56th flew 24 missions and 900 sorties (almost entirely Rodeo fighter sweeps and Circus diversions) in April and May, losing a total of 3 aircraft to enemy action. Its first Ramrod bomber escort mission occurred 13 May, to Saint-Omer, France.

In June the group staged out of a forward base at RAF Manston, Kent, to extend its range and registered its first victories over the Luftwaffe, shooting down four fighters on sweeps along the coast of France and Belgium on the 12th and 13th. On 26 June, providing withdrawal support for a late afternoon bomber mission to Vélizy-Villacoublay airfield, it fought a 20-minute battle with veteran Fw 190 pilots of III/JG 26 over Forges-les-Eaux, France. The result was a major setback, with five Thunderbolts destroyed, four pilots killed, and only two German fighters shot down.

In July the 56th FG was moved from its comfortable quarters at Horsham St. Faith to a much-less improved installation at RAF Halesworth, along the coast of Suffolk, both to be nearer to German-occupied territory and to allow Horsham St. Faith to be completed as a heavy bomber base. On 12 August it used partially filled and unpressurized 200-gallon ferry tanks as jettisonable fuel tanks for the first time in combat, escorting bombers headed for Bonn, Germany. In its first four months of missions, the 56th Group shot down 9 aircraft and lost 10.

The 56th provided penetration support on 17 August 1943, for B-17s of the 4th Bomb Wing headed for Regensburg in the morning, returned to base to re-arm and re-fuel, and flew withdrawal support for the 1st Bomb Wing returning from Schweinfurt in the late afternoon. It scored its first major victory, penetrating fifteen miles (24



P-47D-28, 44-19718, HV-M, "PENGIE IV" flown by Maj. Boleslaw M. Gladych, 61st FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21127, HV-M, "PENGIE V" flown by Maj. Boleslaw M. Gladych, 61st FS.



P-47M-1, 44-19937, UN-B, flown by Lt. Cameron M. Hart, 63rd FS.

km) into Germany to break up frontal attacks on the bombers. The 56th used tactics it called "dive, fire, and recover", attacking German fighters from a higher altitude, taking advantage of its tremendous diving speed, then zooming back to gain altitude advantage. In a running twenty-minute battle across Belgium, the 56th claimed 17 German fighters shot down (mainly of JG 3 and JG 26) for a loss of three P-47s and pilots. Three of those kills were made by Capt. Gerald W. Johnson of the 61st FS, who two days later (when the groups shot down 9 more) became the first ace in the group and the second in the ETO.

When the Eighth Air Force resumed deep penetration bombing missions between 2 and 14 October, the 56th FG shot down 37 Germans while losing just one Thunderbolt. Its radius of action had been considerably augmented on 31 August by the installation of new belly drop tank shackles on its P-47s that permitted use of 75-gallon steel drop tanks. The Thunderbolts were also modified to pressurize the tanks above 20,000 feet (6,100 m) by feeding vented air from the instrument vacuum pump into them, and became the norm for future operations, with range further extended periodically by the use of tanks of increasingly larger size. The use of wing tank pylons did not begin until May 1944 and because of its negative effect on maneuvering performance, was not preferred.

The addition of belly shackles also enabled the P-47 to carry bombs, and on a mission on 25 November both the 56th and 78th Fighter Groups bombed airfields in France, escorted by P-47s of the 353rd and 356th Groups. The 56th dropped from a horizontal attitude with mixed results, but the dive-bombing technique used by the 78th FG was particularly successful; the missions led to the subsequent development of the P-47 as a fighter-bomber, which became its primary role in the ETO.

Although bomber missions were cut back and contacts with German aircraft were sporadic for the remainder of the year, the 56th FG shot down 81 more Germans, including 23 on 26 November (for a single loss) and 17 on 11 December (2 lost). These actions were particularly effective in that the 56th destroyed large formations of Bf 110 "Zerstörers", twin-engined fighters that specialized in attacking bombers, without being drawn away by the more numerous single-engined fighter top cover. During its first seven months in combat the 56th FG shot down 167 aircraft (more than the 4th and 78th FGs combined), and lost 33 of its own to all causes. Ten of its pilots had become aces, and two (Capt. Walker M. Mahurin and 1st Lt. Robert S. Johnson) were double-aces (10 kills).

1944 up to D-Day

The longer range and agility of the P-51 Mustang resulted in the



P-47M-1, 44-21187, HV-W, "LIL' SNORKEY" flown by Lt. Robert W. Hoeflein, 61st FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21114, LM-P, "MIM" flown by Lt. Col. Lucian P. Dade, CO of 56th FG, Boxted, March 1945.



P-47M-1, 44-21212, HV-U of the 61st FS, Boxted, April 1945.

decision in January 1944 to give the Eighth Air Force priority in the acquisition of the Mustang. New P-51 units of the Ninth would be exchanged for P-47 groups earmarked for the Eighth, and all VIII Fighter Command Thunderbolt and P-38 Lightning groups would eventually be re-equipped with the Mustang. The sole exception to this change was the 56th Fighter Group, which decided to retain its P-47s for the duration.

On 11 January the 56th flew its first double-group mission, protecting bombers flying to targets in central Germany. Dispatching 72 fighters, the force was divided into an "A Group" and a "B Group", both with three squadron formations, each squadron with 12 fighters. At the direction of Army Air Forces chief General Henry H. Arnold, with the objective of destroying the Luftwaffe where it could be found, the Eighth Air Force released its fighters to strafe targets of opportunity while returning to base after completion of their primary escort mission. The 56th FG attacked Juvin-court-et-Damary, France, on 11 February on its first ground attack against German airfields.

The 56th Fighter Group won a Distinguished Unit Citation for a series of missions flown between 20 February and 9 March 1944. The campaign opened with Operation Argument, better known as "the Big Week", a sustained attempt to destroy the Luftwaffe in the air while attacking aircraft factories with strategic bombing. It was also the first use by P-47s of 150-gallon drop tanks, which boosted flight endurance time on the Thunderbolt from 1 hour 50 minutes on internal fuel to over three hours using an auxiliary tank. At the same time the 56th was assigned a bomber escort sector in the vicinity of Osnabrück, and the combination resulted in the shooting down of 49 Luftwaffe fighters over four days. The last week of the campaign saw the first USAAF bomber attacks on Berlin, and the group destroyed 38 more fighters in the air. The 56th Fighter Group recorded its 350th kill on 16 March, having shot down 140 German aircraft in 12 missions.

The campaign also resulted in highly publicized speculation of which among the emerging P-47 and P-51 aces would break the U.S. World War I record of 26 destroyed by Captain Eddie Rickenbacker. Pilots of the 56th who became well-known figures included Hub Zemke, Bud Mahurin, Bob Johnson, Jerry Johnson, and Gabby Gabreski, with Bob Johnson being the first to break Rickenbacker's mark on 8 May (as a result of which he was immediately grounded from further combat). Mahurin and Jerry Johnson were both shot down on 27 March, with Johnson being captured. Although Mahurin successfully returned to Allied territory, his knowledge of the French Resistance ended his combat tour.

On 15 April 1944, Operation Jackpot was initiated by VIII Fighter Command, a planned series of strafing attacks against specific



P-47D-28, 44-19780, LM-J, "Teddy" flown by Maj. Michael J. Jackson, 62nd FS, Boxted, November 1944.



P-47M-1, 44-21117, LM-J, "Teddy" flown by Maj. Michael J. Jackson, 62nd FS, Boxted, February 1945.



P-47M-1, 44-21225, UN-K, "Fire Ball" flown by Lt. Philip G. Kuhn, 63rd FS.

German airfields. The hazardous nature of the airfield attacks can be demonstrated by comparing them to the mission of 13 April (which marked the first anniversary of the 56th FG in combat) just two days prior. Escorting bombers that day, VIII Fighter Command's 676 Lightnings, Mustangs, and Thunderbolts achieved 18 air-to-air kills against just 6 losses, while the airfield strafing mission had losses of 33 of the 616 fighters involved.

The Eighth Air Force needed Halesworth for a new B-24 Liberator group, and sent the 56th to RAF Boxted on 18 April, a base the 354th FG had just vacated, moving to southern England in preparation for the invasion of France. At the same time, a significant number of original 56th Group pilots reached the 200-hour limit that constituted completion of a fighter tour. At least 13 elected to continue with the 56th on a tour extension and were granted an immediate 30-day leave in the United States before continuing in combat. Although several second tour pilots were later killed, most survived to provide a sizable core of experienced leadership that enabled the 56th to maintain its position as the leading air-to-air combat fighter group.

The emergence of the P-51 as the long-range escort fighter of choice in the Eighth Air Force sharply reduced combat contacts for the P-47 groups, including the 56th. After splitting almost 550 victories with the P-47s in the Big Week-Berlin campaign, the five veteran groups of Mustangs totally dominated air-to-air combat in April, their 310 kills outscoring the Thunderbolts 6 to 1. Kills for the 56th FG dropped from 85 in March to just 18 in April. The situation was aggravated by the completion of tours of its veteran pilots, but was partially rectified by the recruitment of volunteer bomber pilots who had completed tours and by the invitation to six pilots of the Polish Air Force, serving with the RAF, to join Gabreski's 61st FS.

In a search for ways of increasing its air-to-air effectiveness, Col. Zemke devised a tactic later dubbed the "Zemke fan" to enhance the flexibility of escorts. Instead of flying close escort with the bombers, his concept called for the group to rendezvous at an easily found landmark in its escort zone, from which it would break up into individual flights and fan out in a 180° arc, maintaining contact to respond to attacks on the bomber stream.

On 12 May, the "Zemke fan" was tried for the first time and proved successful in initiating contacts. Although the engagements resulted in 18 kills for the 56th FG, both of Zemke's wingmen were shot down by Luftwaffe ace Major Gunther Rall of JG 11 (who was then shot down by 56th ace Joe Powers and his wingman) while Zemke's flight was still badly outnumbered. Zemke modified the tactic to fan out squadrons rather than flights. The tactic was later modified and adopted by other fighter groups.

The battle on 12 May was also notable in that 1st Lt. Robert J.



P-47M-1, 44-21116, HV-J "Lorene" flown by Lt. Russell S. Kyle, 61st FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21108, HV-Z flown by Cpt. Witold A. Lanowski, 61st FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21159, HV-Q "JOY BOY" flown by Lt. Edwin B. Lightfoot Jr., 61st FS.

Rankin, responding to Zemke's call for help, shot down five German fighters during the action, becoming the group's first "Ace in a day". The feat was repeated on 7 July by Capt. Fred J. Christensen, on 23 December by Col. David C. Schilling, and on 14 January 1945, by Capt. Felix D. Williamson.

The modified tactics were put into effect on an escort mission the morning of 22 May, when the 61st FS attacked a large number of Fw 190s of JG 11 over Höperhöfen airfield near Rotenburg an der Wümme and shot down 11 without loss. (meant here is Rotenburg-Wümme airfield. There were at least two losses, C.B. Nale, HV-J near Süderwalsede and R. Heineman, HV-N, near Westerwalsede) In a second mission that afternoon, the 56th was part of a 4-group Thunderbolt raid against a railroad bridge at Hasselt, Belgium, dropping 500-pound bombs at varying altitudes and using level, glide-bombing, and dive-bombing tactics, trying to determine the most effective means of using the P-47 as a fighter-bomber.

Summer and autumn 1944

On the evening of 5 June 1944, all the P-47s of the group had their fuselages and wings painted with distinctive "invasion stripes" (see Camouflage, unit markings, and radio call signs above). Beginning at 0400 on 6 June, the 56th FG flew 16 group missions in two days in support of the invasion of France at Normandy. 12 of the missions were as fighter-bombers interdicting German lines of communication, and the Thunderbolts were attacked by German fighters on 7 June while at low altitude, but retained air superiority by shooting down 12. Five P-47s were lost, all but one shot down by ground fire. The invasion marked a change in mission priorities for the 56th FG. While the group continued to contribute to bomber escort missions, its primary tasks became ground attack, first in attacking roads and railways, then in supporting the advance of Allied armies after the breakout of 25 July. Strafing attacks in July cost the 56th FG two veteran squadron commanders and aces: Capt. Joe Egan was killed on 19 July and the next day Lt. Col. Gabby Gabreski was forced to crashland in Germany and became a prisoner of war. Gabreski had matched Johnson's 27 victories on 27 June, then exceeded it on 5 July to tie the USAAF Pacific Theater's top ace Major Richard Bong for most victories in the USAAF at 28 (Bong went to score 40).

Command of the 56th Fighter Group passed to Lt. Col. David C. Schilling on 12 August 1944, when Zemke accepted a transfer to command the novice 479th Fighter Group, whose commander had been shot down 10 August. Schilling had begun his second tour of operations at the end of July and had been group deputy commander since 19 August 1943. The ground attack missions of the 56th intensified as the group attacked Gelnhausen airfield on 5 September,



P-47M-1, 44-21115, HV-Q, "Upstairs With Maulding" flown by Lt. David L. Mauldin, 61st FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21150, UN-M, "Dottie Dee II" flown by Cpt. Charles T. McBath, 63rd FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21141, UN-N, "The Brat" flown by Lt. Randall L. Murphy, 63rd FS.

destroying 78 aircraft and damaging 19, but losing four.

On 17 September the group along with the other remaining P-47 groups of VIII Fighter Command flew ground attack missions protecting the Allied airborne landings (Operation Market Garden) in Holland. The next day the 56th dispatched 39 fighters to attack anti-aircraft positions in support of a resupply mission for the U.S. airborne divisions by B-24 bombers, for which the group was awarded its second Distinguished Unit Citation. Dueling flak sites near Oosterhout, Netherlands, despite a 500-foot (150 m) cloud ceiling and severe haze, the 56th lost 16 aircraft: 5 shot down over German-held territory, 9 crash-landed in Allied territory on the continent, and two crashed in England. Three of the 16 pilots were killed and 3 captured.

The 56th FG carried out other missions in conjunction with Operation Market Garden until 23 September. On 21 September, assigned a patrol sector between Deventer and Lochem to protect a resupply mission to Arnhem, the group attacked and destroyed 15 of a group of 22 Fw 190 aircraft. However, the 56th had been late arriving in its patrol area and had encountered the German fighters after they had already attacked RAF Stirlings of 38 Group, shooting down 15.

On 15 September, operational control of VIII Fighter Command's three fighter wings was placed directly under the headquarters of the bomb divisions, removing a layer of command, with a wing controlled by each division. After this date, the 56th Fighter Group's primary duty was protection of the B-24s of the 2nd Bomb Division based in East Anglia. On 1 November 1944, the 56th FG had its first encounter with Me 262 jets, resulting in a kill shared with another group.

During the Battle of the Bulge, the 56th FG engaged over 40 Luftwaffe fighters attempting to attack U.S. bombers supporting Allied ground forces on 23 December 1944. The 56th shot down 32 to become the first U.S. fighter group to be credited with more than 800 aircraft destroyed in both the air and starting attacks, with group commander Schilling shooting down 5.

Final operations

The end of 1944 saw the 56th become the sole remaining group of P-47 Thunderbolts in the Eighth Air Force, as the 353rd FG converted to Mustangs on 2 October, the 356th FG on 20 November, and the 78th FG on 29 December. Beginning 3 January 1945, the 56th began receiving the P-47M, built to be the fastest Allied piston-driven fighter. Externally identical to the P-47D bubbletop, the P-47M had an up-powered R-2800-57C engine and also incorporated all the range-extending characteristics previously developed for the P-47, particularly use of a 215-gallon belly drop tank.



P-47D, 44-19868, UN-H, "SCARSDALE SCOUT" of the 63rd FS, Boxted, early 1945. Lt. Russell W. Campbell was at the controls during a take off crash at Boxted in January 1945. Aircraft was written off.



P-47D-25, 42-26641, LM-S flown by Lt. Col. David C. Schilling, CO of the 56th FG, Boxted, December 1944.



P-47M-1, 44-21125, LM-S flown by Lt. Col. David C. Schilling, CO of the 56th FG, March 1945. This aircraft was destroyed and Lt. Frank Aheron lost his life in a training accident on 11 March 1945.

The 61st Fighter Squadron received the first P-47M-1-REs and immediately began encountering engine problems. Multiple engine failures, including two crash-landings, resulted in the grounding of the Ms on 26 February. Technical problems were believed resolved with the identification of brittle ignition harnesses (as experienced in the P-47C two years before) and the final D-model left the group on 1 March. On 4 March operations resumed, but four crashes in five days, three of them fatal, again led to grounding of the aircraft on 16 March. A dozen P-51B Mustangs were brought to Boxted in case rapid conversion to the P-51 became necessary, but the new problem of engine failure and oil tank rupture was traced to salt-water corrosion in the shipment of new engines overseas. By 24 March every engine and ignition harness on all the Ms had been replaced and the entire group was equipped with the new model, eventually receiving all 130 production P-47Ms.

The advent of the German jet threat and the belief by Allied intelligence that it used low grade (high flash point) fuels that resisted ignition by .50-caliber strikes led to the development of new ammunition for American fighters. The experimental round, called the T48, used a concentrated incendiary compound and had a muzzle velocity of 3400 feet (1036 m) per second, which was 20% greater than existing ammunition. The 56th FG was chosen to test the new ammunition in February 1945 but the teething problems of the P-47M postponed the tests until the mechanical problems were resolved. In April the 56th began airfield strafing attacks using the T-48 round, culminating in an attack on Eggebek airfield, in which the T48 was used extensively. The success of the tests resulted in the standardization of the new round as the M23 incendiary, issued to all groups but too late to see combat.

Colonel Schilling's extended tour ended 27 January and command of the group passed to Lt. Col. Lucian A. Dade, who had been one of the group's original pilots as a second lieutenant and had served as squadron commander, operations officer, and deputy commander of the group. During his duty as operations officer, "Pete" Dade had been forbidden to fly combat missions by Zemke and was still on his first combat tour after two years in theater. This led to some distrust of his ability as an aggressive leader among the pilots, although as one historian noted, Zemke and Schilling were "hard acts to follow". Despite this Dade led 49 fighters to Eggebek on 13 April, locating 150 to 200 aircraft parked on the field and two nearby satellite strips. Employing the 62nd FS at 15,000 feet (4,600 m) as top cover, the 61st FS orbited at 10,000 feet (3,000 m) while the 63rd FS dove on the field, its first pass to suppress ground fire, and then completed 140 individual passes on the fields, claiming 44 destroyed. The 61st then attacked, making 94 passes and claiming 25 destroyed, followed by the 62nd, making 105 and claiming 26. One Thunderbolt



P-47D, 42-28627, UN-M, "SHACK RAT" of the 63rd FS.



P-47M-1, 44-21237, LM-C, "MARION/NORTH DAKOTA KID" flown by Lt. Walter J. Sharbo, 62nd FS.



P-47D, 42-28684, LM-V, "SKIPPER" flown by Lt. Lowell C. Buchmiller, 62nd FS.

(P-47M 44-21134 UN: P, Teacher's Pet, 1st Lt. William R. Hoffman, 63rd FS) was shot down and the pilot killed when his parachute did not open in time. The totals for the day were 339 passes, 95 aircraft destroyed and another 95 damaged, and more than 78,000 rounds of ammunition expended. 2nd Lt. Randall Murphy of the 63rd FS, using T48 ammunition, was credited after a review of his gun camera film with 10 planes destroyed, the high mark for the group.

On 16 April, during another strafing mission, the final P-47 of the 56th FG went down (P-47M 44-21230, LM: A, Capt. John W. Appel, 62nd FS) but its pilot successfully returned to Allied lines, and on 21 April the group flew its final combat mission. Freeman's statistical summary lists 447 group missions; 19,391 sorties; 64,302 hours of combat flight time; 128 P-47s shot down (85 by ground fire); 44 P-47s destroyed in ETO accidents; 18 pilots awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (Col. Schilling twice); and 28 awards of the Silver Star. Three of the original group pilots—Dade, deputy commander and subsequent group commander Lt. Col. Donald D. Renwick, and operations officer Major James R. Carter—were assigned to the group at the end of the war.

Aerial victory claims

Capt. Walter V. Cook C, 62d Fighter Squadron, flying P-47C 41-6343 (LM-W Little Cookie), claimed the first aerial victory by a 56th pilot on 12 June 1943, over Blankenberghe, Belgium, downing an Fw 190. The group's final victory was an Me-262 of JG 7 shot down on 10 April 1945, by 2d Lt. Walter J. Sharbo, also of the 62d Fighter Squadron, in P-47M 44-21237 (LM-C Marion – North Dakota Kid), near Wittstock, Germany.

The 56th Fighter Group had 677½ claims credited by the Eighth Air Force for German aircraft destroyed in air-to-air combat. U.S. Air Force Historical Study No. 85 recognizes 674.5 aerial victories for the 56th. This total is the second highest among USAAF fighter groups in the ETO (behind the 354th Group with 701), the highest among all Eighth Air Force groups, and the highest among all P-47 groups of the USAAF. Eighth Air Force also credited the 357th Fighter Group with 311 German aircraft destroyed on the ground, making an overall total of 976.5, which is second among all Eighth Air Force fighter groups.

Of the air-to-air totals, 4.5 were Me-262 jets. 2d Lt. Walter Groce of the 63d FS shared a credit on 1 November 1944, with a P-51 pilot of the 352d FG for one of the first Me 262 jets shot down. P-47Ms accounted for four: Maj. George Bostwick and 2d Lt. Edwin M. Crosthwait, 63d FS on 25 March 1945, over Parchim; Capt. John Fahringer, 63rd FS, on 5 April; and Sharbo on 10 April. Two AR



P-47M-1, 44-21149, UN-T, "OLE-MISS Lib" flown by Lt. Thomas W. Smith Jr., 63rd FS.



P-47D-26, 42-28382, HV-S, "OLE COCK III" flown by Maj. Donavon F. Smith, 61st FS, Boxted, August 1944.



P-47D, 42-28543, UN-Y "Pat" flown by Cpt. Gordon S. Stevens, 63rd FS.

234 jet bombers were claimed 14 March 1945, by the 62d FS, 1st Lt. Norman D. Gould shooting down one and the other shared by 1st Lt. Sanford N. Ball and 1st Lt. Warren S. Lear.

Among the various units of the 56th, the 61st Fighter Squadron had the most victories, 232 shot down by 68 pilots. The 62d Fighter Squadron was credited with 219.5 kills by 79 pilots, the 63d Fighter Squadron with 174.25 kills by 64 pilots, and group headquarters with 39.75 kills by 4 pilots.

Aces of the 56th Fighter Group

Counting only air-to-air victory claims registered while with the group (therefore discounting air-to-ground claims), the 56th produced 39 aces, the second-most of any ETO fighter group (the 354th Fighter Group of the Ninth Air Force and the 357th Fighter Group, flying P-51s, each had 42).

Pilot	Sqdrn	Credits	Casualty Status	Personal Aircraft
Lt. Col. Francis S. "Gabby" Gabreski	61	28	POW 20 July 1944	
Major Robert S. Johnson	61, 62	27		All Hell, Lucky, Double Lucky, Penrod & Sam
Col. David C. Schilling	Grp	22.5		Whack
Capt. Fred J. Christensen Jr.	62	21.5		"Boche Buster"/Rozzie Geth, Miss Fire/Rozzie Geth II
Major Walker M. "Bud" Mahurin	63	19.75	Evaded 27 March 1944	"Spirit of Atlantic City N.J."
Major Gerald W. "Jerry" Johnson	61, 62	16.5	POW 27 March 1944	In the Mood/Jackson County, Michigan, Fighter"
Col. Hubert A. "Hub" Zemke	Grp	15.25	POW	Happy Warrior/Oregons Britannia
Capt. Joseph H. Powers Jr.	61, 62	14.5		Power's Girl
Capt. Felix D. "Willie" Williamson	62	13		Willie
Major Leroy A. Schreiber	61, 62	12	KIA 15 April 1944	
Major James C. Stewart	61	11.5		
Major Paul A. Conger	61, 62	11.5		Hollywood High Hatter/"Redondo Beach California"
Capt. Michael J. Quirk	62	11	POW 9 September 1944	
1st Lt. Robert J. "Shorty" Rankin	61	10		
Sqd. Ldr. Boleslaw M. Gladych	61	10		Pengie and four successors
1st Lt. Stanley D. "Fats" Morrill	62	9	Died in Flying Accident March 1944	Fats-Btfsplk/Debt Collector
Major Michael J. Jackson	62	8		Teddy
Major George E. Bostwick	62, 63	8		Ugly Duckling
1st Lt. Glen D. Schiltz Jr.	63	8		Pam
Capt. Robert A. Lamb	61	7		Jackie
Major Leslie C. Smith	61	7		Silver Lady
1st Lt. Frank W. Klibbe	61	7		Little Chief/Anderson, Indiana
2nd Lt. Billy G. Edens	62	7	POW 9 September 1944	
1st Lt. John H. "Lucky" Truluck, Jr.	63	7		Lady Jane
Capt. Mark L. Moseley	62	6.5		Sylvia
Major James R. Carter	61	6		Silver Lady
1st Lt. Robert J. Keen	61	6		Ice Cold Kattie
Capt. Walter V. Cook	62	6		Little Cookie
Capt. Cameron M. Hart	63	6		



P-47M-1, 44-21109, HV-K, "Sue" flown by Lt. Ernest H. Treff, 61st FS.



P-47D-25, 42-26466, UN-B, "ANAMOSA II" flown by Cpt. Russell B. Westfall, 63rd FS, Boxted, September 1944.



P-47D-28, 44-19879, LM-K, "Homesick Angel" flown by Cpt. Robert E. Winters, 62nd FS, Boxted, March 1945.

Pilot	Sqdrn	Credits	Casualty Status	Personal Aircraft
1st Lt. George F. Hall	63	6		
1st Lt. Frank E. McCauley	61	5,5		Rat Racer
Major Donovan F. "Dieppe" Smith	61	5,5		Ole Cock, Ole Cock II
Lt. Norman D. Gould	62	5,5		
Capt. Joseph H. Bennett	61	5,5		Ann II, Lucky
F.O. Evan O. McMinn	61	5	KIA 6 June 1944	
2nd Lt. Steven N. Gerick	61	5		
2nd Lt. Joe W. Icard	62	5	KIA 8 March 1944	
Major Harold E. "Bunny" Comstock	63	5		Happy Warrior
Capt. Joseph L. Egan, Jr.	63	5	KIA 19 July 1944	Holy Joe
Capt. John W. Vogt, Jr.	63	5		Lucky Little Devil

SOURCE: USAF Historical Study 85. Nickname source Little Friends website and Freeman, 56th Fighter Group. *Totals include one Me 262 jet shot down

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P-47D-25, 42-26431, Z, "OREGONS BRITANNIA" flown by Col. Hubert Zemke, CO of the 56th FG. Boxted, August 1944.



P-47M-1, 44-21175, UN-Z, flown by Lt. Paul C. Dawson, 63rd FS, Paris, August 1945. Originally coded UN-D this aircraft received a new painting to represent "Hub" Zemke's UN-Z for a display at the victory exhibition held under the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

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15. Per *Wolfpack Warriors* p. 51, the squadron call signs in April 1943 were SHAKER, HARBOUR, and MOISTURE, respectively, and changed at some point during the summer.
16. Johnson, *Thunderbolt!*, p. 131. Johnson identifies them as 61st FS pilots Maj. Loren G. McCollom, Capt. Merle C. Eby, Capt. Donald D. Renwick, and 2d Lt. Leslie C. Smith.
17. Freeman, *Wolfpack Warriors*, p. 51, says they were Zemke, Schilling, Capt. John E. McClure, and Capt. Eugene W. O'Neil, all 62d FS pilots. He is likely correct as he identifies Johnson's four as flying the first 'official' mission, along with the 63rd's Maj. Philip E. Tukey, Capt. Roger B. Dyar, Capt. Lyle A. Adrianse, and 1st Lt. Walker N. Mahurin.
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22. Freeman, *56th Fighter Group*, 50–53.
23. Freeman, *56th Fighter Group*, 81.
24. Freeman, *Wolfpack Warriors*, 158.
25. Rankin's description of this action
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