

# Biography - John T. Godfrey, 336

By Tim McCann

The following article first appeared in slightly different form in *The Heritage Herald*, the newsletter of the Heritage League - 2nd Air Division Association in September 2008 entitled "Rhode Island Canuck: John T. Godfrey." This updated version appeared in the October 2010 edition of *The Eagle Eye*.

John Trevor Godfrey was born on March 28, 1922 in Montreal, the youngest of four boys born to British parents. When he was a year old, the family moved to the United States, eventually settling in the mill town of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. A gregarious sort, 'Johnny' was a popular classmate who became involved in several activities while in school. He was elected president of the class of 1940 at Woonsocket High School.

While his parents had plans for him to attend college, Johnny had other ideas. During his senior year he had skipped out of school and gone to Providence in an attempt to enlist in the Canadian Army. Though this plan was thwarted, he attempted on at least two other occasions to join the RCAF, once being tracked down by his father at a train station in Boston. Each time his mother called the FBI. He took jobs at FRAM Corporation (cartridge technician), Firestone Tires (truck driver) and at the newly completed Quonset Point Naval Air Station (material checker) but was miserable. Eventually his parents relented. He would be allowed to join the RCAF, but if he did not become a pilot he would return to Rhode Island and go to college. John never made it back to school.

In October 1941 John headed off to New Brunswick and initial military training. Two weeks after the start of his initial course he was summoned to the CO's office. Once there he was informed of the death of his brother Reggie. Sailing on the SS Vancouver Island, Reggie was part of the Civilian Technical Corps, American civilians going to help man the expanding radar network in England. The ship was torpedoed and sunk off the coast of Greenland with the loss of all aboard. Having lost one son, his parents were now more concerned than ever about John's choice of career (America was still neutral at this point) and asked him to reconsider.

However, Reggie's death filled John with more resolve than ever. John resumed and completed military training and the #3 ITS (Initial Training School) course in the spring of 1942.



*Godfrey sits proudly on his first personal aircraft, a P-47D Thunderbolt. The name of his new plane has already been chalked in; S/Sgt Alfred Tomlinson would soon apply the nose art.*

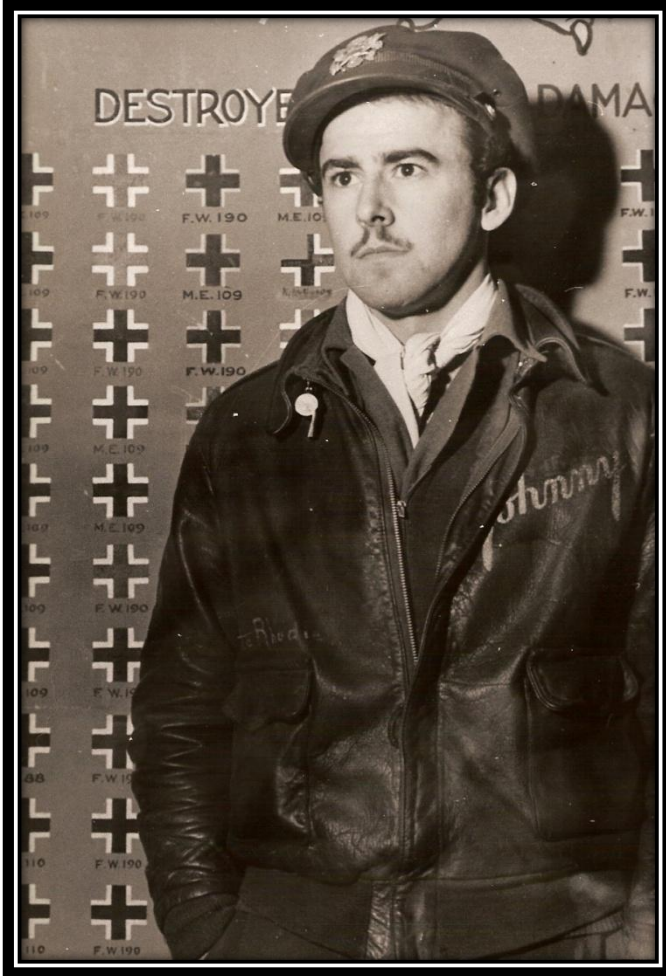
*(courtesy Bruce Zigler)*

Upon getting to secondary flight school (#8 Service Flying Training in Moncton, New Brunswick), John contracted whooping cough and again missed several weeks of class. He joined class #11 upon recuperating and graduated in October 1942. He was now a sergeant pilot in the RCAF and was sent overseas.

After arriving in England, he learned he had received a commission (one of only five of the thirty in his class to do so) and been promoted to Pilot Officer in August. Assigned to the 57<sup>th</sup> OTU (operational training unit), Godfrey would ultimately complete his training and receive his transfer to the United States Army Air Force. Upon transferring he became a second lieutenant in the United States Army Air Force. Finally in September 1943 John received orders posting him to Station 356 and the Fourth Fighter Group, located just outside the village of Debden in Essex.

He flew his first mission on September 27 as a wingman to Captain Don Gentile, a role for which he would later come to national prominence. Soon he was a regular on operations, and at the end of November had earned the right to be assigned his own personal

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*Godfrey in front of the 336 squadron scoreboard.  
Note - "Little Rhodie" over his right front pocket is  
the nickname of his home state.*

*(courtesy Bruce Zigler)*

aircraft. The engine cowling of his P-47D Thunderbolt (coded VF-P, serial 42-7884) was quickly decorated with the image of his pet pooch Lucky hanging in a gold horseshoe. In white letters just forward and below the windscreen, his fighter's name bore silent testimony to his personal mission: **Reggie's Reply**.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, he would shoot down his first enemy aircraft, an ME-109. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, he would down a second and share a third with Lt. Vasseur 'Georgia' Wynn. There was a lull in scoring opportunities after that, but in early 1944 the confluence of three events would lead John and the 4<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group as a whole to the

top of the 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Command.

First, General Jimmy Doolittle assumed command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force fighters and instituted a policy that freed fighters from sticking exclusively with the bombers for the entire mission. They would now be free to roam and hunt the Luftwaffe upon completion of their escort duties. Second, Lt. Colonel Don Blakeslee assumed command of the Fourth Fighter Group, infusing new life into the most experienced group in Europe. Blakeslee was determined to take the fight to the enemy and needed an aggressive cadre of pilots to do it. Finally, the arrival of the P-51 Mustang gave the group a fighter that could fight the Luftwaffe from the deck to 30,000 feet all the way to Berlin and back.

Godfrey flew the first mission with one of the new Mustangs on February 28<sup>th</sup> with a scant forty minutes of flight time in the new war bird. On March 6<sup>th</sup> he downed his first aircraft with the Mustang. On March 8<sup>th</sup> he flew perhaps his most famous mission of the war, an escort mission to the Erkner ball bearing works on the outskirts of Berlin. Due to the high number of aborts (for all its fame, the P-51B had a myriad of mechanical troubles when first introduced into combat) Godfrey was forced to team up with Gentile, the only other member of the squadron left.

The two rushed headlong into a mass of Luftwaffe fighters preparing to attack the bomber stream and combined to destroy six ME-109's. From this mission a legend was born. Gentile would shoot down three with Godfrey providing cover, while Johnny got two with Don protecting him. A sixth was shared between the two when Godfrey ran out of ammunition while firing at his third target. Gentile finished him off.

On their way home, the pair came across a lone 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group B-17G and escorted it back across the Channel. John became an ace this day, and was awarded the Silver Star for his actions – three weeks before his twenty-second birthday.

Godfrey's score steadily increased,

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adding 4.33 more kills before month's end. April brought further success and a new Mustang. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, his P-51B (coded VF-P, serial 43-6765) was damaged during a training mission while being flown by another pilot. It never flew again for the Fourth. This aircraft never bore the name Reggie's Reply, though it was decorated with a red and white checkerboard beneath the exhaust stacks to match the markings on Gentile's famous "Shangri La." Below the windscreen on the port side were 11 white crosses representing Johnny's tally to that time.

On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, Godfrey celebrated his first flight in his new Mustang (coded VF-P, serial 42-106730) by downing three German fighters. The new P-51 bore the name Reggie's Reply in red letters above the exhaust stacks on both sides of the nose; two rows of white crosses on a black field (which ultimately reached 20 in number) were painted on the port side beneath the windscreen. The red and white checkerboard was repeated, this time with a red arrow extending aft from it on each side. Godfrey would add another on the 24<sup>th</sup>, but his new mount's operational career was to be short-lived.

On April 26<sup>th</sup>, while being flown by another pilot, the plane crashed during takeoff from a forward base and had to be written off. John would never have another Mustang of his own.

John's first tour of duty with the Fourth Fighter group ended after he downed an ME-109 on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Promoted to captain, he was sent to meet up with Don Gentile at Chorley and



*Godfrey's second Mustang, Reggie's Reply, sits on the runway at Martlesham Heath, April 26, 1944. John had it for all of 3 missions.*

*(Association of the 4th FG)*

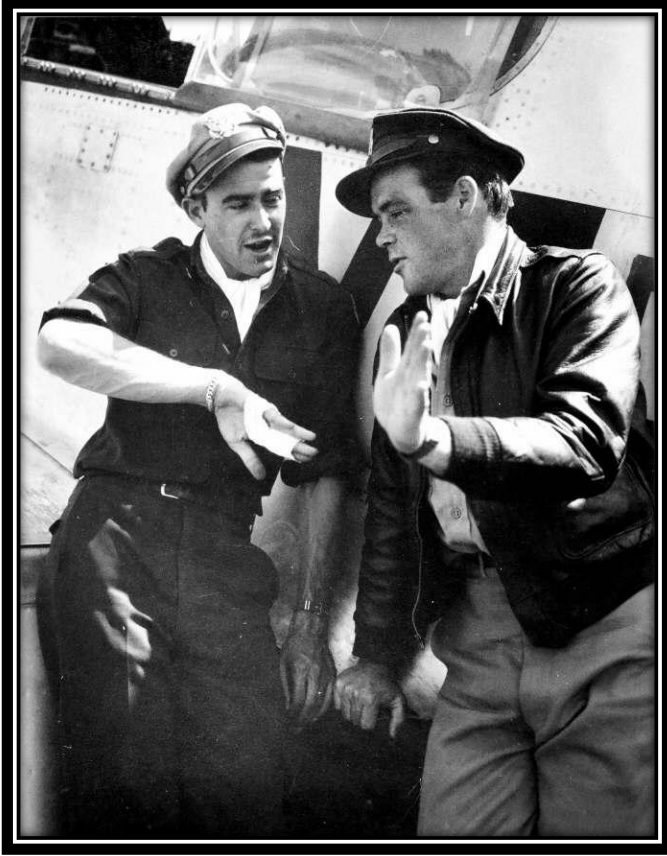


*Johnny Godfrey, his dog Lucky and crew chief Larry Krantz on Godfrey's first P-51B. The kite was coded VF-P and bore the serial 43-6765. Krantz, from Madisonville, OH was "a likeable guy, a great mechanic who got along with all the crew chiefs and assistants" according to 336 crew chief George Anderson.*

*(Courtesy Bruce Zigler)*

proceed home to participate in a series of war bond rallies. The Air Force used this opportunity to have the two men extol the virtues of teamwork in aerial combat.

Gentile, the first to surpass Eddie Rickenbacker's total of 26 enemy aircraft destroyed was feted as the quintessential fighter pilot, Godfrey the dutiful and ever present wingman protecting his leader at all costs. While the two "ate it up" according to Godfrey, the truth was he hadn't flown as Gentile's wingman for months, other than when operational situations such as mission aborts dictated it. Godfrey reckoned he had flown with Gentile for no more than 10 of his kills.



*Godfrey and Fred Glover discussing the mission of 6 August 1944. Godfrey's right hand is sporting a bandage from the injury received by continuously pumping his primer handle for over two hours.*

*(Courtesy Bruce Zigler)*

Despite the public adulation, Johnny longed to get back into action. He managed to wrangle (through back channels) another tour of duty with his old outfit. (Gentile, permanently exiled in the States because of a self-induced crash landing returning from his last mission, would never again see combat. Godfrey would ultimately destroy more aircraft than his former mentor.)

He returned to Debden in late July and resumed operations on the 31<sup>st</sup>. On August 5<sup>th</sup> he would shoot down one ME-109 and destroy three JU-52's on the ground. For good measure he and wingman Capt. Otey Glass shot up eight locomotives. On August 6<sup>th</sup> he would shoot down an ME-410, his last aerial victory of the war.

While strafing an airfield on the eastern

outskirts of Berlin his Mustang was hit in the engine and began leaking glycol, the engine coolant. With the engine temperature climbing, Johnny jettisoned the canopy and was preparing to bail out when Fred Glover, a fellow 336 squadron old-timer like John, talked him back into the plane. He instructed Johnny to inject raw fuel into the cylinders with the primer pump; by doing this he could keep his engine temperature down and remain airborne.

With an open cockpit, Godfrey flew the two-plus hours back to Debden depressing the primer handle every few seconds. He landed at an advance field in Beccles with a raw hand and a fuel tank containing just a few gallons of gas. He had dodged a bullet, but his luck was soon to run out.

On August 24<sup>th</sup>, Godfrey led his section down to strafe an airfield near Nordhausen. Through four passes, John had destroyed four JU-52 transports when his fighter (P-51D coded VF-M, serial 44-13412) was struck by fire. Despite the damage John made an additional three passes before the engine gave out and he belly-landed in a field beyond the German base. He managed to evade for a day before being captured and sent to Stalag Luft III.

While imprisoned, Godfrey made two unsuccessful escape attempts before making good on his third, reaching American lines just before the end of the war. Upon returning to Debden, he learned through watching gun camera film of his last mission that he was downed accidentally by his wingman, who flew too close to Godfrey during their strafing runs. For a man who gained fame by being the ultimate wingman, the irony of being shot down by his own was not lost on John. Godfrey's final tally stood at 30 enemy aircraft destroyed. (16.33 in aerial combat, 13.67 in strafing attacks)

Upon returning to post-war Rhode Island, Godfrey would find success in both his personal and professional lives. He married into a prominent lace manufacturing family, and learned the business well enough to branch out on his own after a short time while still maintaining positions with the family's business.

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He was elected a state senator as a Republican in 1952, and while there distinguished himself enough to garner support from GOP leaders to consider him as a potential gubernatorial candidate after another term in office. But political life wasn't for John.

In July 1954 he resigned from the various positions he held in his in-law's businesses and moved his family (now with two sons of his own) to South Freeport, Maine where he opened a small lace mill. The hard work he had put in when learning the lace business had paid dividends – at 32 he was now his own boss and running his business on his terms.

In the autumn of 1956, after months of slowly worsening symptoms, Godfrey sought treatment with his doctor. Referred to a specialist, he was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, and given 20 months to live.

He sought treatment both home and abroad to no avail. John used his remaining days to dictate his life story. His book, **The Look of Eagles**, was published posthumously. John Godfrey passed away at his home in South Freeport at the age of 36 on June 12, 1958.



*Debden, April 1944: Godfrey and Don Gentile pose for the cameras in front of Gentile's kite "Shangri-La." The press campaign covering Gentile's race to break Eddie Rickenbacker's gave Godfrey national exposure.*

*(National Archives photo A49657)*