Any person that served their country in the Second World War deserves recognition. I know what your first thought is: but what about the SS and the Japanese who committed war crimes? In my mind, those who perpetrated war crimes did not serve their country at all, but in fact brought shame to their nation and brought down its reputation. With that being said, many soldiers in WWII were merely fighting for their home country and for what they believed to be right. One such person is Joseph Thompson Jr., also known as Tiger Joe. His awards summarize his massive contribution to the allied war effort, as he received honors from not only his home country of the United States, but also Great Britain and France. Despite starting from humble origins, Joe made the rank of major and quietly made a large influence on WWII. Joe Thompson Jr. was an integral part of the Allies air recon force, undertaking dangerous missions to help with the success of two of the most important instances in the war, the Normandy invasion and the Battle of the Bulge, as well as a great many other recon missions that helped the Allied war effort.

Joe Thompson Jr. had deep roots in Nashville. Joe's great-great grandfather, Thomas Thompson, signed the Cumberland Compact, which granted land to settlers when they arrived on the Cumberland River and settled Fort Nashborough[1]. This is the site that would later be known as Nashville. Thomas received a Revolutionary War land grant of 640 acres in 1780, where his descendants' ancestral home, Glen Leven, was built on the property in 1857.

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[1] The Tennessean. Jr., Joe. 2016. "Joe THOMPSON Jr.'S Obituary On The Tennessean". The Tennessean. http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/tennessean/obituary.aspx?n=joe-thompson&pid=156738352.

Joe Thompson Jr. was athletic and fiery as a youngster. Joe's story begins at Glen Leven, where he was born on 8 June 1919[2]. He would go on to attend primary school at Robertson Academy, where he would often be seen riding his pony to and from the brick schoolhouse. When he was 14 or 15 years old, a bigger kid at summer camp made fun of his purported girlfriend. Even at this young age, Joe would not have his girlfriend's honor tainted, so Joe fought this brute[3]. Despite his smaller size, Joe pummeled the other kid, and his ferocious performance in the boxing match earned him the nickname that would follow him around for the rest of his life, "Tiger Joe"[4]. In high school, Joe was a wiry boy over 6 feet tall. Joe said his thin, tall frame and his number one football jersey made him look like a thermometer[5].

In 1937, Joe graduated Wallace School and attended Vanderbilt University. As Joe grew up he still was very tall and skinny, with large rounded ears, a sharp nose, and a quiet, yet confident demeanor that many southern men possessed. Vanderbilt is where Joe would find his love of photography. Joe was quite obsessed with girls, but did not initially have the confidence to just go up and talk to them. Joe decided the best way to start talking to pretty girls was to ask if they would like their picture taken[6]. Joe was a clever boy, but his social life may have gotten in the way of his grades. He was a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity and in letters home to his mother he would describe all that was good about being in the fraternity[7]. Though, in letters back to his sister he would describe wilder times and that his grades were most likely not good

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[2] The Tennessean
[3] The Tennessean
[4], Tom Delvaux and Thompson, Joe. Tiger Joe: A Photographic Diary of a World War II Aerial Reconnaissance Pilot. Nashville, TN: Eveready, 2006. Print.
[5] Delvaux
[6] Thompson Jr., Joe, *Autobiographical Material Box 1* Vanderbilt University Archives
[7] Thompson Jr.

enough to get into medical school, especially in chemistry[8]. While at school, Joe also developed his fascination for flying, and like many others, Joe's first experience with flying was a Piper Cub. In 1941 Joe graduated Vanderbilt with a degree in Pre-Med. Joe believed that it was inevitable that the United States would enter the war in Europe. Rather than waiting to be drafted into service, he chose to join the Army-Air Force (it was only one branch at the time), so that he would be able to do what he would be able to combine his love of flying and photography by becoming an aerial reconnaissance pilot[9].

A few years earlier across the Atlantic Ocean, Europe was on the brink of war. On 12 March 1938, Hitler declared unification of Austria with Nazi Germany in the Anschluss[10]. Hitler then turned his attention to the ethnic German population of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. On 29 September Hitler, Neville Chamberlain, Édouard Daladier, and Mussolini attended a one-day conference in Munich that led to the Munich Agreement, which handed over the Sudetenland districts to Germany[11]. Chamberlain was satisfied with the Munich conference, calling the outcome "peace for our time", while Hitler was angered about the missed opportunity for war in 1938. Chamberlain practiced this policy of appeasement because the public opinion of Britain was vehemently against another war due to the massive death toll of the Great War. Even with this sentiment, the Western superpowers could no longer stand by and watch when on 1 September 1939, German forces invaded Poland; Britain and France joined the

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[8] Thompson Jr.
[9] Thompson Jr.
[10] Keegan, John. The Second World War. New York: Viking, 1990. Print.
[11] Keegan

war against Germany[12]. Chamberlain's conduct of the war was not popular and, on 10 May 1940, Winston Churchill became Prime Minister[13].

Germany made quick work of mainland Europe, and then only Britain stood in their way. The Blitzkrieg strategy allowed Germany to swiftly move through Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and France. The Maginot Line, the very expensive fortification specifically built to keep the Germans at bay, proved no match for the Wehrmacht. Instead of attacking directly, the Germans invaded through the Low Countries, bypassing the Line to the north [14]. French and British officers had anticipated this: when Germany invaded the Netherlands and Belgium, they carried out plans to form an aggressive front that cut across Belgium and connected to the Maginot Line. However, the French line was weak near the Ardennes forest, a region whose rough terrain they considered unlikely for the Germans to traverse; the German Army took advantage of this weak point to split the French–British defensive front[15]. Realizing France was lost, the Allies enacted Operation Dynamo, also known as the Miracle of Dunkirk. Between 27 May and 4 June 1940 a hastily assembled fleet of over 800 boats rescued a total of 338,226 soldiers [16]. On 18 June 1940, Winston Churchill gave his "Finest Hour" speech to the House of Commons beginning with, "The Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin."

The Battle of Britain was won mostly due to Hitler's thirst for vengeance. The Battle of Britain was the first major campaign to be fought entirely by air forces. The Royal Air Force (RAF) faced off against an onslaught by the German Air Force (Luftwaffe) which began at the end of June 1940. The primary objective of the Nazi German forces was to force Britain to agree

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[12] Bess, Michael. Choices under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II. New York: A.A. Knopf, 2006. Print.
[13] Keegan
[14] Keegan
[15] Keegan
[16] Bess

to a negotiated peace settlement. An air and sea blockade began in July 1940, with coastal shipping convoys, ports and shipping centers such as Portsmouth the main targets of the Luftwaffe[17]. The situation did not look good from the outside for Britain, but they possessed an effective air defense system, first-rate fighter pilots, and a great military leader in Air Marshal Hugh Dowding. German air strikes did substantial damage to radar sites, but the Luftwaffe soon abandoned that avenue and turned to attacks on RAF air bases. A battle of attrition ensued in which both sides suffered heavy losses, with an average loss of 21 percent of the RAF's fighter pilots and 16 percent of the Luftwaffe's fighter pilots each month during July, August, and September[18]. The whole battle was changed by a single mistake. On the night of August 24, 1940, Luftwaffe bombers aiming for military targets on the outskirts of London drifted off course and instead dropped their bombs on the center of London destroying several homes and killing civilians[19]. Amid the public outrage that followed, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, believing it was a deliberate attack, ordered Berlin to be bombed the next evening. After three successful bombing raids, Hitler was furious. Beginning 7 September 1940, London was bombed for a total of 57 consecutive nights[20]. Up to that point, the Luftwaffe had targeted Royal Air Force airfields and support installations and had nearly destroyed the entire British air defense system. Switching to an all-out attack on British cities gave RAF Fighter Command a desperately needed break and the opportunity to rebuild damaged airfields, train new pilots and repair aircraft[21]. As a result, the Luftwaffe never gained air supremacy over England, a vital prerequisite to a land invasion. Failure to achieve air supremacy eventually led Hitler to

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[17] Keegan
[18] Keegan
[19] Bess
[20] Keegan
[21] Bess

indefinitely postpone Operation Sealion, the planned Nazi invasion of England[22]. The Blitz came to an end as Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe transferred to eastern Europe in preparation for Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR. Churchill, summed up the battle when in one of his most famous speeches that gave tribute to the fallen, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

Back in America, Joe Thompson Jr. headed down to Hick's Field in Texas to begin his Air Force training. On 26 August 1941, Joe took his first flight in a Fairchild PT-19 Cornell[23]. Because it is so easy to fly and land (as it has wide-fixed landing gear), it was the starting plane for many in the Army and became known as the "cradle of heroes". He sent a letter back to his mother that day stating, "The planes are clean, fast beautiful things, as delicate and touchy as a young mare… and really fun to fly."[24] His first flights were accompanied by a foul-mouthed lieutenant, who would say delightful anecdotes such as, "I wish I was shooting Japs out of the air instead of being up here with you [explicative]"[25]. Joe was not a fast learner and especially struggled when flying "under the hood", meaning solely utilizing the instruments. At times he would write back to his mother stating that he was mulling over the idea of leaving the camp to take up photography at the university of Boulder[26]. Despite these moments of self-doubt Joe kept at it and eventually began to improve. Though his time at Hick's Field was mostly rigorous military training, there was plenty of poker playing and hitting the town when they had the chance. One of the friends that Joe made during his tenure was named A.J. Scates. Scates was the type of fellow who was very whimsical and would never get in trouble for the pranks he

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[22] Bess
[23] Thompson Jr.
[24] Thompson Jr.
[25] Delvaux
[26] Thompson Jr.

pulled. One day Scates was doing a solo flight in an AT-6. As he was getting close to landing, someone in the control tower noticed that Scates had not yet put down his landing gear. Tried as the might, they could not get in contact with him to save him from smashing the propeller on impact. The reason they could not get in contact with him was that Scates had been messing around with his radio, had found a Mexican music station, and put it on full blast. While that was hilarious for everyone besides the C.O. and the mechanics, mistakes like this one would not fly at Joe's next training ground, Randolph Field.

Joe went through a turbulent time at his next training ground. In November of 1941, Tiger Joe transferred to Randolph Field, the "the West Point of the air". Joe observed that, "West Point should be considered the Randolph Field of the ground" in a letter to his mother[27]. He continued to say that the whole of Randolph "is beautiful, excellently kept and unbelievably large"[28]. While he had gotten used to being respected at Hick's field, he was once again bottom of the totem pole at Randolph. As a joke, the more experienced pilots made Joe and a few others sweep rain off a runway during a storm. In a letter to his sister he said it reminded him of the fraternity hazing he had endured at Vanderbilt[29]. The training regime was taxing, with the troops not even getting Sundays off. He said in a letter home that they had been "drilling all day-every day since we arrived"[30]. The camp was also a tightly run ship. For example Joe stated, "beds have to made up absolutely wrinkleless, and stretched so tight that when you poke one edge of the blanket, it will send a ripple all the way down the bed to the other end"[31]. Training was not the only difficult thing that Joe was going through at the time. A few weeks before Joe had asked

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[27] Thompson Jr.
[28] Thompson Jr.
[29] Thompson Jr.
[30] Thompson Jr.
[31] Thompson Jr.

a woman named Betty to marry him. She had originally said yes, but then sent him back the ring because she was not sure. As if that answer did not scream that this was not going to work out, when he was on leave, Joe met up with her and she said that she wasn't sure she loved him enough to marry him. On December 7, Joe was on the phone with Betty when the news about Pearl Harbor struck. As Joe did not have a radio at the time, he was the first of his fellow troops to hear about it[32]. This event confirmed his suspicions that the United States would once again be at war. A few weeks later Joe came back to Nashville for a wedding and to see Betty once again. She had married someone else and did not know how to tell Joe. So this chapter of his life closed as they kissed one last time, but only as old college friends. While Joe's involvement with Betty was at an end, America's involvement in WWII as a belligerent was just about to begin.

Pearl Harbor was a tactical blunder by the Japanese that may have just saved the Allies. Just before 8 a.m. on December 7, 1941, hundreds of Japanese fighter planes attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor near Honolulu, Hawaii[33]. The barrage lasted just two hours, but it was devastating: The Japanese managed to destroy nearly 20 American naval vessels, including eight enormous battleships, and more than 300 airplanes[34]. More than 2,000 Americans soldiers and sailors died in the attack, and another 1,000 were wounded[35]. The day after the assault, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war on Japan; Congress approved his declaration with just one dissenting vote. Three days later, Japanese allies Germany and Italy also declared war on the United States. This was hugely significant because Roosevelt was going to have to fight an uphill battle to get congress to agree to fight the Germans at all, let

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[32] Thompson Jr.
[33] Keegan
[34] Bess
[35] Keegan

alone before the Japanese[36]. Because Hitler declared war on the U.S., Roosevelt was able to enact the Europe first plan, meaning the United States and the United Kingdom would use the preponderance of their resources to subdue Nazi Germany in Europe first, while fighting a holding action against the Japanese. Joe would soon learn about the Europe first plan directly.

Joe was reminded about how prevalent death was, and how it could so very easily happen to him during his time at Brook's field. After moving on from Randolph field, in March of 1942 Joe next attended Brook's Field in Texas[37]. It was there that Joe made his first cross-country fight. That night was cold and foggy, and Joe was understandably nervous, as it was his first time flying an extended distance by himself. The flight took a turn for the worse when he got lost. Eventually finding his way back on course, he realized that his involuntary detour had wasted too much of his fuel and he was running dangerously low. Joe was smart enough to stay calm, follow his training, and when he saw flashing orange lights, made an emergency landing in a large field. When Joe called the base, they informed him that they cancelled the training exercise only 3 planes later after Joe had left[38]. The fog provided a lower ceiling, thus much more difficult flying than expected. Joe also learned that others had not been as lucky as he had; two pilots never made it back to the base. Two months later, it was time for graduation. It was made out to be a big event with a grand party thrown afterwards. Joe's parents decided to attend, but could not have prepared themselves for the colonel's commencement speech. In his speech, the colonel said, "Men, I want you to look to your left and your right. A year from now one of the three of

[36] Bess
[37] Delvaux
[38] Delvaux

you will be dead, and the other two captains!"[39]. Joe's parents were understandably upset, but that did not stop Joe from going on to the next phase of his training.

Joe Thompson Jr. went through much uncertainty about his position in the army, just a few months before heading to Europe. After graduating Brook's field, Joe spent a few more weeks there to learn the nuances of aerial reconnaissance flying in the ancient O-52's, which were used in WWI[40]. It wasn't long before Joe was transferred to the 109th tactical squadron in Atlanta, the group he would spend the rest of the war with. Originally, Joe started with the O-47, but military high-ups decided that twin-engine pilots were necessary. This meant Joe was rushed into the air, and after only 7 hours of co-pilot training, he found himself alone flying an A-20, which was a light bomber. Joe was not impressed with his new squadron. He got the feeling that these men did not actually expect to fight in this great conflict[41]. They were far too apathetic and easy-going for Joe's liking. This may have something to do with how Joe felt every time he got in a plane. In a letter back to his mother, Joe describes the feeling of being in the air like that of a very close football game, a mixture of anxiousness and wanting to just be over[42]. He seemed distressed that he had trained as much as he had, yet was still very nervous every time he was behind the controls. That apprehension was qualified while on a training mission just 75 miles outside of Nashville, when Joe had his first crash. Luckily for Joe, he walked away with only a few stitches, but his co-pilot broke a vertebrae[43]. This moment was very sobering for Joe, and only played into his self-doubting tendencies, but to his credit he did not give up. Soon after the crash, he was transferred to Alexandria, Louisiana, where he flew a host of planes. Joe moved

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[39] Thompson Jr.
[40] Delvaux
[41] Thompson Jr.
[42] Thompson Jr.
[43] Delvaux

from the B-25 to the A-20, then back to a single engine aircraft, the P-40, and then finally on to the plane that he would spend the most time in, the mercurial P-51 Mustang[44]. By the time he was in the Mustang, he was finally no longer nervous when it came to flying. This was good timing because after only 15 hours of flight training, orders came that they would be shipping out of New York in only a few days time to train in England with the British Royal Air Force (RAF).

Joe's trip to Europe was marred by his lack of compassion for his family. After Joe received orders to head to England, he quickly was sent to New York. While he asked his parents to come see him off, he somewhat selfishly volunteered to go early. He said in a letter back to his sister that this was because he did not like goodbyes, but vehemently promised that this would not be the last time he saw the family[45]. With no way to let his parents know about his whereabouts, they patiently waited in New York for his call that never came. This was a cowardly thing to do by someone, who by the volume of letters home to his mother would be considered to be a good son, but the possibility of it being the last time he saw his parents was too much for him to face them. On 24 September 1942, a mere 13 months after the beginning of his training, Joe was on his way to Europe[46]. The trip over was a mixture of patriotic excitement and real fear and nervousness. Joe was scared that he would not get enough practice and would just be sent out to fight almost immediately. Not only were the troops and nurses on the trip worried about what may happen to them once they were in Europe, but also this was during the time where Nazi U-boats patrolled the waters. A U-boat sank one of the ships in Joe's convoy, so it was a fantastic relief when they reached England (Delvaux).

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[44] Thompson Jr.
[45] Thompson Jr.
[46] Delvaux

Trips across the Atlantic were extremely hazardous at this time because of German U-boats. Winston Churchill said after WWII had concluded that "the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."[47]. The Battle of the Atlantic, which lasted from September 1939 until the defeat of Germany in 1945, was the war's longest continuous military campaign[48]. During six years of naval warfare, German U-boats and warships (and later Italian submarines) were pitted against Allied convoys transporting military equipment and supplies across the Atlantic to Great Britain and the Soviet Union. From 1940 onwards, the German navy focused on escalating the U-boat war. Attacking on the surface at night (where they could not be detected by Allied sonar, or ASDIC), U-boats had great success against Allied convoys, sinking merchant ships with torpedoes and then submerging to evade the counterattack by escorting warships[49]. During 1941, tactical advantage began to shift towards the British. They had received 50 American destroyers in exchange for US access to British bases. The capture of U-110 (complete with Enigma machine and codes) in March 1941 helped the Allies track the movement of German U-boats[50]. From April 1941, US warships began escorting Allied convoys as far as Iceland, sparking a number of skirmishes with U-boats[51]. This provoked controversy, as the US had not officially entered the war. Technological developments, including radar for escorting warship from August 1941 (which could detect a U-boat periscope at a range of one mile) also worked in the Allies' favor. In 1942 the balance tilted once again in favor of the Germans. New submarines were entering service quickly, at a rate of 20 per month. Although the US Navy entered the war at the end of 1941, it was unable to prevent the sinking of almost 500

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[47] Keegan
[48] Keegan
[49] Bess
[50] Keegan
[51] Keegan

ships between January and June 1942[52]. Allied losses in the Atlantic reached their peak in 1942. As 1,664 ships were sunk, supplies of petrol and food to Britain reached critically low levels[53]. In 1943, advantage shifted to the Allies once again. By now, the Allies had sufficient escort aircraft carriers and long-range aircraft to cover the Atlantic Gap, which was a 'black pit' in the mid-Atlantic which was not covered by anti-submarine aircraft earlier on[54]. The battle reached its peak between February and May 1943. By 'Black May' of 1943, U-boat losses were unsustainable (one quarter of their strength in one month), and almost at the same rate as Allied shipping[55]. U-boats were withdrawn from the Atlantic, and the battle was won.

Once they had made it to England, it did not take long for Joe to assimilate to the culture. The vine-clad homes reminded him of his home in Tennessee, and he soon fell in love with the English countryside. Chimney pots, stern lined houses, blackouts, clothing coupons, and left-handed traffic soon became ordinary parts of life for him[56]. The first part of Joe's training with the English was quite relaxed. He said that in the early days of his tenure across the Atlantic had more to do with "poker, liquor and women than flying"[57]. To receive extra pay, they only needed to register 4 hours of flight per month, so this meant Joe had plenty of time to fraternize with the locals. He found that English people were often taken aback by yank frankness, but would eventually speak on all topics. Common debates would include Beverige's plan, world peace and responsibilities each country had, racial problems in the U.S. and Great Britain's empire, and difference in standard of living. Joe was baffled by the apparent lack of a middle class in this

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[52] Keegan
[53] Keegan
[54] Keegan
[55] Bess
[56] Thompson Jr.
[57] Thompson Jr.

country[58]. He also observed that it would take a while to gain an Englishman's confidence, but it would be worth the wait once he had. As Joe was now completely single, he spent a lot of time with the English girls, many of who enjoyed the experience of all the American GIs giving them so much attention. Joe filled his other time with scenic tours of London, biking through various villages, and trips to Scotland that expanded his view on Britain[59]. This was also a time for great personal growth for Joe. Lest we not forget that Joe was only 23 years old at this point in his life. Because he had no distracting detail, Joe was able to see his own shortcomings and reflect on what really mattered to him[60]. In his diary, Joe wrote that "any person unable to look askance at himself is lost…and I kept a close eye on Joe."[61]. The only downside to all this free time was that the inactivity lulled the whole group, especially the officers, into a false sense of security and softness. While this was the time that Joe looked back on most fondly during the war, it was only a matter of time until the war was much more prevalent in his life.

Training with RAF was the most pivotal moment in Tiger Joe's military career. While at the Membury Airdrome in Berkshire, England, Joe practiced as many of the RAF pilots had, in an open cockpit bi-plane called the Tiger Moth[62]. Eventually, the American lend-lease act allowed for Joe to fly in a mark 5 Spitfire, the plane heralded by the British as the reason they do not speak German today[63]. Weeks went by and training intensity increased, but there was still a lot of down time. In retrospect, Joe found that the year gap between arriving in England and his first real combat mission was important for his development[64]. Along the way, he learned how to

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58 Thompson Jr.
59 Delvaux
60 Thompson Jr.
61 Thompson Jr.
62 Delvaux
63 Thompson Jr.
64 Thompson Jr.

be a real pilot from the RAF boys. These were men who had survived the Britain's biggest test and had triumphed in its "finest hour". Joe believes it was these men who changed him from being merely a pretender into a full-fledged ace. Joe went on missions with the RAF squadron at first in a Spitfire, and later in the P-51 Mustang[65]. During these missions, the experienced RAF pilots would do their best to look out for the novice Americans. Joe became a much more skilled flyer under the tutelage of RAF pilots. This was one of the main reasons why he went on to be so successful as recon pilot in the years that followed.

The reshuffling of Joe's squadron must have been demoralizing at the time, but was in their best interests. While training was in effect, the U.S. Army Air Force decided to disband Joe's 109th squadron[66]. Many in the group were bitter about this because there was a good sense of comradery among the men. That being said, the squadron benefitted as a whole because experienced men took the place of these who moved out. The late additions realized that the group had lost friends because of them, so they came in apologetically. The squadron also moved locations from Membury to Middle Wallop where there was a prewar RAF drome[67]. These were the best living conditions Joe had during his stint with the Air Force and with the move, some of the enthusiasm came back into the group. Just after the turn of the year in 1944, Joe went on his first mission without RAF squadron leaders. The mission was a success with Joe taking the required photographs, but as they were headed back to England, some of Luftwaffe spotted them. Joe began to high tail it back towards the channel, but his compatriot Jones radioed in "Hey fellers, wait for me!"[68]. Jones made it back unharmed, but was never able to escape being made

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[65] Delvaux
[66] Thompson Jr.
[67] Thompson Jr.
[68] Thompson Jr.

fun of for that story. Joe's importance in WWII came from the increased attention on aerial reconnaissance.

Britain was the first nation to see the massive military potential of aerial reconnaissance. In the interwar years, reconnaissance languished as a mission type and tended to be overshadowed by routine aerial mapping[69]. This was despite the growth (in the United States and Britain) of a doctrine of strategic bombardment as the decisive weapon of war. Experience would soon prove that bombing was completely ineffective unless accompanied by intensive aerial reconnaissance. At the start of the war, the RAF did not have a specialized photoreconnaissance aircraft. Such was the mortality rate among early reconnaissance flights that Fred Winterbotham and Sydney Cotton, now an RAF Flight Commander, made their call for a specialized reconnaissance aircraft[70]. Winterbotham and Cotton took their appeal for a reconnaissance aircraft directly to Air Marshall Hugh Dowding. As this was before the Battle of Britain, Dowding knew that they would need every aircraft available to fight the Germans, but he also had the vision to see the benefits of air recon, so he begrudgingly gave them two Spitfires. Each Spitfire was stripped of guns, radio and all unnecessary equipment, thus reducing its total weight by 450 pounds, and the engines were also modified to optimize performance at very high altitude and give them an effective ceiling of up to 40,000 feet[71]. Although the first two Photo Reconnaissance Spitfires proved the concept, they also revealed problems and issues with both process and equipment. First, operating at high altitude often resulted in frozen cameras, fogged lenses or cracked film. Second, a Spitfire lacked the range to penetrate deep into German held territory. A final problem identified by the prototype Spitfires concerned the quality of

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[70] Keegan
[71] Keegan

photography rather than the aircraft itself. The overwhelming majority of Spitfire reconnaissance sorties collected photographs vertically from high or very high altitude, but when an air photo suggested the presence of a significant target, it often necessitated a second, more detailed photo be taken from low altitude for verification. The dangers of low level air reconnaissance were obvious: it put the aircraft back in range of anti-aircraft guns, and below the watchful gaze of German fighters who circled like hawks above high value targets. These Spitfires collected an abundance of valuable intelligence, but their routine sorties were among the most hazardous missions of the war. In all, thirteen versions of reconnaissance Spitfires were produced, each building on the range, ceiling and collection capability of its predecessor. By the end of the war, reconnaissance Spitfires enjoyed an effective range of over 2000 miles, a service ceiling of 42,600 feet, and a top speed of 445 mph[72]. Other countries soon picked up on the importance of air recon, and those who did not suffered.

In sharp contrast with the case during the pre-war years, by 1945 aerial reconnaissance was widely recognized as a vital, indispensable component of air power and military strategy by most nations. Hermann Goering, leader of the German Luftwaffe, had very little interest in air photoreconnaissance. The Luftwaffe Air Intelligence Branch was given very little latitude to pursue new technologies and techniques, and German Air Intelligence officers were often given additional duties such as propaganda and censorship[73]. It can even be argued that the Luftwaffe's primary reason for existence was support of ground forces. This is the reason they never developed the heavy strategic bombing capability they lacked during the Battle of Britain, and it was the reason Luftwaffe Air Intelligence focused almost exclusively on tactical, rather than

[72] Keegan
[73] Keegan

strategic intelligence[74]. The Americans followed the British when it came to how much importance they placed on aerial reconnaissance. The earliest American attempt to replicate Spitfire reconnaissance capabilities was the F-4, a factory modified Lockheed P-38 which replaced the Lightning's guns and cannon with four high-quality reconnaissance and mapping cameras. The F-4 had inherent speed, altitude and range qualities, and was a favorite of both pilots and maintenance crews. In all, over 200 F-4 and F-5s based on the P-38 would be produced, and hundreds more stock P-38s were field modified to accommodate photoreconnaissance[75]. In mid-1943, the North American P-51 Mustang arrived and quickly established itself as the premier air superiority fighter of the war[76]. Its reconnaissance variant, the F6, eventually became the dominant reconnaissance model flown by the USAAF in Europe.

The pilots that were assigned to aerial reconnaissance had to deal with a multitude of difficulties on top of the great underlying danger of taking photos in enemy territory. Sitting alone in a freezing cold cockpit for hours at a time, wartime air reconnaissance pilots risked death every time they took off on a mission. Navigation was a special challenge for reconnaissance pilots. Early in the war they would be flying without radio contact, and the pilot had only a map and a compass to find his way deep into enemy airspace, locate his assigned targets, and return safely to his point of origin[77]. Each weather situation had its inherent danger. A pilot might have to fly above a cloud bank for hours without seeing a landmark, or he might have to burn fuel reserves flying an endless zigzag pattern when the weather was clear. Fuel was a constant consideration. A pilot had to monitor the fuel gauge and continually calculate fuel consumption rates in order to return home safely. The extremely high altitude required of a

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[74] Keegan
[75] Keegan
[76] Bess
[77] Keegan

typical reconnaissance flight held other unique challenges. Prior to the war, very few pilots had any experience flying above 20,000 feet. At 35,000 feet, the new reconnaissance pilot suddenly found himself trying to manipulate aircraft controls in a sub-arctic environment where the temperature could easily fall to 50 degrees below zero[78]. Pilots often wore so many layers of clothing that they had to be hoisted into the aircraft by helpful ground crews. Oxygen deprivation was another constant hazard of high altitude flight. Oxygen masks and filtration systems were very primitive in 1940, and hypoxia, a loss of consciousness or coherence due to oxygen deprivation, was a very real danger[79]. If the cold and altitude sickness weren't enough, an even greater peril of high altitude missions was the condensation trail that could appear at any time behind the aircraft. A contrail sent an open invitation to enemy fighters[80]. If an air predator could not climb to reconnaissance altitude in time to engage, it would certainly be waiting on the return flight. Joe Thompson Jr. faced many of these perils when his military career really started picking up.

Before the invasion of Normandy, Joe had many responsibilities in keeping the Germans at bay and preparing for D-Day. In his first few months as an air reconnaissance pilot, Tiger Joe preformed various tasks to thwart the Germans. One of his most common mission types would be taking pictures of areas that the Allies planned to strategically bomb. These flights were inherently dangerous as they were often protected by a host of Nazi pilots. In the beginning, Joe was nervous about going to Abbeville, where the flight that was only 10 miles deep into France[81]. The missions became longer with time. Some specific missions included flying over

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bridges of the Seine in Paris and railroad lines that connected France to Germany[82]. The return trip from Paris was over 100 miles and the trips back from the French border were over 200 miles (Thompson Jr.). Many missions were for defensive strategic purposes also. Joe would fly over the harbors of France, Belgium, and Holland to intercept enemy convoys before they could reach the straits of Dover. From Ijmulden to Cherbourg, Hasselt to Rennes, Joe's missions had him flying all over the continent. Eventually, Joe and his squadron figured an invasion was coming. The missions went to further and further airdromes showing that the Luftwaffe had been pushed back[83]. On 4 June 1944, Joe took pictures of coastal gun positions, at a place that would come to be known as Omaha beach, a mere two days before D-Day. This was hugely significant because the photos Joe took gave General Eisenhower the confidence to invade at this time. The Normandy invasion was a sobering experience for Joe as he lost many friends that day, but the intelligence he provided was crucial to its success.

Joe and the rest of his squadron provided very necessary support for the troops on the ground in France. Once the Normandy Invasion ground forces had mad enough ground, Joe operated out of a makeshift, hastily built airbase at Le Molay. While at the base, he would occasionally see Winston Churchill and Dwight D. Eisenhower together landing on this on airstrip[84]. Being the photo enthusiast he was, Joe had to take a few pictures of these living legends. While at Le Molay, Joe's main objective was to run photo recess to report enemy movements in the Cherbourg Peninsula[85]. This information was invaluable to commanding officers on the ground because they would know when the Germans were about to attack and could meet them in a place where the Allies would have the strategic advantage. Irrespective of

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flak, fighters, or weather, Joe would make these searching flights every day. Some of these missions he was very lucky to come back from at all. Joe's plane was badly shot up after being spotted by Luftwaffe on a photo recess run over St. Lo, which became known as flak alley due to fighters repeatedly getting shot at. Joe had narrowly escaped death, had to make a hurried landing as coolant gushed out of his Mustang, and there ended up being 140 bullet holes in his plane[86]. This was towards the end of the Falaise pocket fighting, but this was the beginning of a marked decline in Joe's ease of mind. This was not helped when Joe had his closest call with death a few days later. Joe had to fly low to the ground to pictures of a Wehrmacht division so they would be able to tell what types of weapons they were going to be dealing with. Joe was spotted and as he was about to pull up and left, like he had many thousands of times he had flown, Joe claimed to hear a voice that said "go up and right". [87] Joe listened to the voice and that was the reason he was able to return home from the war, as an RPG exploded exactly where he would had normally turned. Whether it was God, as Joe claimed, or his subconscious picking up on clues that the Germans were about to shoot right there, no one will ever know. All Joe knew was that listening to that advice saved his life. These trips were very much worth the risk though. The English General Montgomery was having a difficult time moving forward due to German railroad guns. To avoid enemy fire, Joe went searching for these guns at treetop level. Once he had found them, he circled them in the very grim St. Lo, waiting until bombers had spotted him to come over and take out the target[88]. Joe spotted an armored Panzer tank division barreling toward Allied lines on another mission while over Mortain. Joe located a group of friendly bombers, signaled with his wings for them to follow, and had them unleash a full attack on the

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[86] Thompson Jr.
[87] Thompson Jr.
[88] Thompson Jr.

division[89]. Through Joe's efforts, the bombers destroyed 150 tanks in a matter of a few hours. Victories like these led to a breakthrough at St. Lo and a rapid march onto Paris. Though Joe had served his country valiantly, the underlying stress and dread that he felt every day eventually caught up to him.

Tiger Joe took on new responsibilities for his country as the Allies approached Berlin. After the Americans, Brits, and other Allies had taken Paris, Joe and what was now known as the Reece boys moved to airdrome in Versailles on the 31 August 1944[90]. This was the first time Joe had really come in contact with dead enemies, as there were rotting Germans in the street. At the airdrome, Joe saw German planes in ashes, self sabotaged so to not fall into Allied hands[91]. In a stroke of good fortune, bad weather allowed for a trip to Paris. In a letter back to his mother, Joe described the women in Paris as the most beautiful in the world due to a combination of Air Corps thirst and recent experience[92]. Joe's position in the army was about to change. With every passing mission Joe's anxiety got worse in the air. He was eventually diagnosed with "combat fatigue", which is a post-traumatic stress disorder occurring under wartime conditions that cause intense stress[93]. At the same time of this diagnosis, the commanding officer position opened up for the squadron. Joe realized that everyone else qualified for the position had been killed, captured, moved to another squadron or sent to form a new one, sent home on section 8 (mentally unable to continue), or moved to higher command[94]. Joe had already flown 82 missions at this point, and took the position to limit his own flying. Whereas bomber pilots would have a cap of 25 or 50 missions, USAAF high ups arbitrarily put the recon pilot end goal

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at 75 missions, and then proceeded to increase it to 80, then 85, then 90 to ensure their was no shortage of recon pilots[95]. Soon after taking over as Major, the Reece boys moved to Gosselies, Belgium. This was the first and only time Joe was given a hero's welcome during the war. It was immediately obvious why the Belgians were grateful to the Americans. In the middle of the airstrip that they were meant to use, there was a shallow grave of 190 townspeople[96]. Despite it being such a disturbing sight, Joe did not mention it any of his letters back home, most likely out of consideration of his family and friends, not wanting to expose them to the atrocities he had seen.

According to Joe, his squadron was vital in stifling the last meaningful German counter attack. The Reece group was still on top of their game when it came to documenting troop movements. In fact Joe claims that the pictures they took should have tipped off high command that a German counter attack was coming, but as the Germans did their utmost to keep their plans in secrecy, one can only speculate whether Joe was right. This ended up being the largest and bloodiest battle fought by the United States in WWII, called the Battle of the Bulge, fought in the densely forested Ardennes region of Wallonia in Belgium, France, and Luxembourg[97]. According to Tiger Joe, two pilots under his command, Cassidy and Jaffee saved the allies from certain defeat[98]. These two pilots flew in very heavy fog and located panzer armored divisions trying to take Liege. Had the Germans gained control of Liege, it would have forced a retreat, but Cassidy and Jaffee spotted the advancing tanks and then called in P-47's to obliterate them[99]. While it is hard to distinguish whether Joe was just very enamored with his own squadron or

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whether the entire battle did just hinge on stopping the Germans at Liege. Whatever the case may be, after this date, the Allies had relatively little trouble on their way to Berlin.

Everyone recognized Joe's contribution to the war effort. Joe flew his 91st and final mission in Limberg, 30 miles east of the Rhine in his faithful Mustang P-51[100]. It must have been weird, but much preferable, knowing that no German FW-190s were going to sneak up on him to try to attack. Joe felt in a weird limbo for a few weeks at an airdrome in Kassel, Germany, making sure the Russians did not start World War III and not knowing if he was going to be shipped out again to the Pacific. Joe went back to France as he prepared to be shipped home, and while on a farm had a very personal, visceral moment when he realized "Nobody is going to shoot me. I'm safe."[101]. It was so personal in fact he did not even tell his own family about until 30 years after the war. After a short stop in England, Joe was on a ship headed for home. After a few weeks leave in Nashville, Joe went to a redistribution center on the west coast to determine whether he would need to go to Japan or not. The man he spoke with said that he was able to go home if he had 75 mission points, but Joe did not know how many he had. After doing a quick check, Joe found out that he had 192 points and promptly went home after that. When the war was completely finished, Joe ended up receiving medals of Honor from three different countries for his efforts. Joe was given the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, with fifteen oak leaf clusters and six Bronze Stars, The Distinguished Unit Badge and the French Croix de Guerre, and in 2012, President Sarcozy of France honored Joe with the country's highest decoration, the Legion of Honor[102].

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[100] Delvaux
[101] Delvaux
[102] The Tennessean

Joe had given his very best to his country. Many people would have given up had they been as slow learners as Joe was in his training days, but he persevered. With the help of Battle of Britain survivors he was turned into an ace pilot, and flew 91 missions when it was all said and done. He became the major for the 109th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron and trained fresh pilots on the nuances of "airspionage". Not only was he a good leader, but he did not lose his way during the war, staying the same southern, photo enthusiast that he was when he started training camp at Hick's field. In his writings about his squadron, the feeling of pride and honor he had in serving with his fellow countrymen is palpable, and he perhaps would get carried away in describing how vital his group was to the entire fate WWII. It is extremely difficult not to be biased when emotions mix with the facts of life. One can only try their best to serve their nation in times of war. Joe tried and no one can doubt that he did not succeed in that.