

## Don Blakeslee



Born in Fairport Harbor, Ohio on September 11, 1917, Don Blakeslee would go on to become one of the U.S. Army Air Force's top pilots and leaders. As a youth, he attended the Cleveland Air Races, where he was first bitten by the flight bug. While working at Diamond Alkali in Cleveland, he was able to save enough money by the mid-1930s to buy a Piper J-3 in partnership with a friend and obtain a private pilot's license. A crash in 1940 grounded him. It was then that he decided to join the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in order to keep flying.

When his flight training in Canada was completed and he graduated and was commissioned, Blakeslee was sent to England and the Royal Air Force (RAF), where he joined their 401 Squadron in May of 1941. His first air combat

mission was on November 18, 1941 and he scored his first kill four days later. It was in the 401 Squadron that he honed his skills, both as a pilot and as a leader. The RAF wanted him to become a flight instructor; Blakeslee wanted combat, so he then transferred to the newly formed Eagle Squadron (133 Squadron). Composed of American volunteers, Blakeslee became its commander, flying first Hurricanes and then Spitfires. In 1942 he received the British Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation for that award read: "Acting Flight Lieutenant Donald James Mathew Blakeslee, Royal Canadian Air Force, Number 133 (Eagle) Squadron. This officer completed a large number of sorties over enemy territory. He has destroyed 1, probably destroyed 2 and damaged several more hostile aircraft. He is a fine leader whose keenness has proved most inspiring."



With America joining the fray after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the men of the three Eagle Squadrons requested and received permission to join the U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF) to carry on the fight as American airmen. The Eagles became the 4<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, and Don Blakeslee, now a Colonel, would become their Commanding Officer. Their first aircraft was the P-47 thunderbolt, and it was not to Blakeslee's satisfaction – not as maneuverable as a P-51, and definitely a much shorter range of flight. He lobbied hard for the P-51 and was granted his request, with one caveat: the 4<sup>th</sup> had to be operational in them within 24-hours of receipt! He agreed, instructing his pilots to "...learn how to fly them on the way to the target." And they did.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group under Don Blakeslee's command became one of the most formidable and successful combat fighter groups in the USAF, becoming their top scoring fighter group. They scored more than 1,000 German aircraft either shot down or destroyed on the ground, also achieving a record of downing 31 aircraft in a single day. According to historian and author Vern Haugland, "Blakeslee was clearly outstanding – skillful, aggressive and possessing a masterful skill of tactical innovation. Rather than getting involved in the fight, he remained above the battle force. From his lofty observation post, he watched overall developments closely directing his pilots to promising targets." This technique was used frequently, and he became perhaps the most skillful on all air combat directors of WWII. One of his pilots described him as "George S. Patton, Jr. in a P-51."

Along with fellow Eagle, Don Gentile, Blakeslee was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of Allied forces in Europe. Colonel Don Blakeslee went on to win another DSC, seven Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Silver Stars, six Air Medals and the British DFC mentioned above. Ten years later, for his Korean War service, he received the Legion of Merit, another DFC and four more Air Medals.

In World War 2, Blakeslee flew almost 500 missions, accumulating nearly 1,000 hours of combat flying. According to a former executive secretary of the American Aces Association, this was more than any other fighter pilot of World War 2. He was recognized as one of the cadre of air commanders who blunted the edge of the German Luftwaffe and went one to lead the progressive destruction of that force. Colonel Don Blakeslee died on September 3, 2008 and was interred at Arlington National Cemetery with his wife.