

Don Gentile



December 6, 1920, an unusual day for Piqua, Ohio. No snow, a high in the '40s and the birth of one of America's future air combat aces – Dominic Salvatore (Don) Gentile. Gentile was a first-generation American, the son of Italian immigrant parents who arrived in 1907. He grew up in Piqua, attending Piqua Central High School, where he participated in sports, lettering in football. Fascinated with the concept of flying since boyhood, he also took flying lessons at that time. His father bought him

his own plane, an Aerosport biplane, in which he logged over 300 flying hours and earned a private pilot's license by the summer of 1941, the year of his graduation from Piqua Central High School.

With that background and experience, he tried to join the United States Army Air Corps. However, one of the requirements to become a pilot was two years of college. Lacking that education, but desirous of flying, Gentile joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), which required only a high school diploma. He joined in Cleveland, Ohio, one of the major recruiting offices for men who wanted to fight for England as World War II heated up.

Posted to England in 1942 after training, Gentile became a member of the third squadron of American pilots flying for the Royal Air Force (RAF). The RAF 133 Squadron, originally a World War I training squadron, was re-formed in July of 1941 and the 133rd (Eagle) Squadron). While first assigned the Hawker Hurricane Mk IIB, the 133rd then received, in order, the Spitfire IIB, VA, VB then the Spitfire IX. Originally led by British officers, the 133rd was assigned its first American flight leader in 1942, Don Blakeslee, of Fairport Harbor, Ohio. The Dieppe Raid of August 19, 1942 saw the only time that all three "Eagle" Squadrons participated together in action with both "Buckeye" Eagles in the air together. Gentile scored two kills that day.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, America entered the war and the American Eagles wanted to become members of their own Air forces. That transition was completed on September 29, 1942 when the Eagle Squadrons became members of the 4th Fighter Group, the 133rd becoming the 336th Fighter Squadron.

Now in a U.S. Army Air Corps uniform, Gentile re-entered the war. However, the first aircraft assigned to the 4th Fighter Group was the P-47 Thunderbolt (known as “The Jug” to pilots), hardly the agile fighter that the Spitfire had been. Even in the P-47, Gentile had several kills. The unit commander, fellow Eagle Don Blakeslee had been requesting that the 4th Fighter Group be equipped with the P-51 Mustang, and by February of 1944 that lighter, more maneuverable fighter was the pride of the Group. For Gentile, it was the perfect tool for his skills.

A skilled athlete with a tremendously competitive spirit, Don Gentile was well-suited to his task – eliminate German fighters threatening U.S. bomber formations. Add to that skill the P-51 Mustang and it was the perfect combination for this future ace. He was an eager participant in what became known as the “ace race”, so much so that he gave up a well-deserved leave in order to continue that race against Duane Beeson, his closest competitor. In the end, Gentile became the ace of the 4th Fighter Squadron with a total of 22 kills in air combat. General Dwight D. Eisenhower personally awarded Gentile the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest American award, calling him a “one-man air force”. Gentile was also awarded a Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Croix-de-Guerre, the Air Medal and the British Distinguished Flying Cross.

Don Gentile elected to stay in the Air Force after the war. He was first a test pilot at Wright Field (today’s Wright-Patterson Air Force Base), then a training officer in the Fighter Gunnery Program and a student officer at the Air Tactical School. In 1949, he enrolled at the University of Maryland as an undergraduate studying military science.

On January 28, 1951, Don Gentile was killed in the crash of a T-33 trainer, leaving behind his wife Isabelle and three sons: Don Jr., Joseph and Pasquale. In 1995, he was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame.