

Vincent V. Zettler, Jr.

Vincent V. “Vic” Zettler, Jr. was born in Canton, Ohio on May 19, 1922. His parents were Vincent V. Zettler, Sr., and Delyte Jackson Zettler. Vincent Senior was quite an athlete and played for America’s first professional football team, the Canton bulldogs. After young Vincent was worn, one of his father’s teammates came to the hospital and left a present for the lad; the present was to be his first football. The teammate who brought the gift was none other than the great Jim Thorpe!

Vic grew up in Canton, Ohio and was a good student and active youth in both Boy Scouts and athletics, taking after his father. He attended McKinley High School where he met the future Mrs. Zettler, Dorothy Jane “Dotty” Meyers, who was a year behind him. After she graduated, they married on January 23, 1942.

With World War II already in progress, Vic decided to join the U.S. Army Air Corps, later known as the U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF). After basic training he was sent to Foster Army Air Field near Victoria, Texas for advance single-engine flying school for fighter pilots, graduating in April of 1944 in class 44-D. After graduation, he was sent to Sebring, Florida for final pilot training.

With his training complete, Vic was sent to England, where he became part of one of the 8th Air Force’s most famous units – the Yoxford Boys – the 357th Fighter Group. This was the first fighter group to receive the P-51 Mustang fighter. 357th historian, Merle Olmsted, explains that the “Yoxford Boys” nickname was coined by British turncoat William Joyce, aka Lord Haw –Haw, who broadcast pro-German propaganda to the British from Berlin. Joyce made specific reference to the 357th in several broadcasts.

Headquartered at RAF Leiston, near the village of Yoxford, the 257th, composed of the 363nd, 363rd and 264th Fighter Squadrons, flew 313 combat missions between February 11, 1944 and April 25, 1945. They were officially credited with having destroyed 595 ½ German aircraft in the air and 106 ½ in the ground. Its victory totals in air-to-air combat were the most of any P-51 group in the 8th USAAF and the

third highest of all groups fighting in Europe, receiving two Distinguished Unit Citations. Among the notable pilots with whom Vic flew in the 357th were Bud Anderson, “Kit” Carson and Chuck Yeager, who later became the first man to break the sound barrier.

Vic arrived at the 357th in the fall of 1944, was assigned to the 364th Fighter Squadron and immediately began the dangerous job of escorting bomber missions over Germany. He flew P-51 #44-7295 C5-F, which he nicknamed the “Canton Can”. During his service with the 357th, he flew 35 combat missions, logging over 173 hours in the air.

As the war ground on and the Allies moved further and further into Germany, the mission of the 8th changed to a degree. General Jimmy Doolittle was in command and was very aware that the front lines had become more fluid due to the Allied advances. Bombing missions became more focused and, according to historian Peter Randall of Little Friends UK...Doolittle wanted to encourage pilots to attack enemy airfields and thus destroy enemy aircraft before they could attack our bomber formations. As part of the encouragement, he ordered that ground kills could be rated equivalent to air-to-air kills. This is understandable as it was often more dangerous to face the flak of well defended airfields than to engage the Luftwaffe in air-to-air combat. So all 8th Air force fighter units included “ground kills” although they were shown separately and many pilots differentiated them on their aircraft scoreboard.”

Operating under those rules of engagement, Vic scored a total of eight German aircraft destroyed – seven on the ground and one in a dogfight with a Messerschmitt Bf-109, thereby earning the 8th USAAF designation of “Ace”. Vic was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with four Oak Leaf Clusters.

After the war, Vic was assigned to the Allied Occupation Forces and his wife, Dottie, was able to join him. They were stationed at the Neubiberg Airfield near Munich, Germany. As noted earlier, Vic was a good athlete in high school and he took on a new job – helping the denazification of area Hitler Youth through sports programs. When his assignment was completed, Vic left the Air Force and he and the family moved back to Canton, where he went to work for Timken and attended Mount Union College under the G.I. Bill.

Vic was still a reserve officer, and the Korean War interrupted his new life. Back on active duty, Vic was made a production and procurement officer working with the defense industry overseeing the implementation of Air Force contracts. While on active duty for the second time, Vic and Dotty decided it would be best for them and their children (Vincent III, Angie and Jolie) to make the Air Force a career. They eventually moved to California, closer to many of the USAF contractors which were part of his responsibility, living ultimately in Redlands.

Vic retired from the Air Force in 1967 after 20 years of active duty, and was employed then by the defense industry, helping to build the second stage of the moon rocket with McDonald Douglas and parts of the B-1 bomber with Rockwell International. Vic lost his beloved Dottie on 1972 and was later remarried to June Cupp. They move to Air Force Village West in Riverside, California, where Vic passed away in 1996, having served his country bravely and faithfully since 1944.