

They called him a one-man air force. Boyd “Buzz” Wagner. The first ace of the U.S. Army Air Force. He was nicknamed Buzz because he could buzz the camouflage off a hangar. During the war, with Japanese Zeros on his tail, he once flew laps around a volcano until he came up behind them. A small-town hero of WW2 from Nanty Glo High School in Pennsylvania who looked like a movie star and flew like a killer. He had almost received a degree in aeronautical engineering before he dropped out to enlist. He got his wings in 1938. Just three years before Pearl Harbor.

The morning of December 7th, 1941, was the early hours of December 8th in the Philippines, where First Lieutenant Buzz Wagner commanded the 17th pursuit on the island of Luzon. They had been on alert for months that war with Japan was imminent. The closer it got to December 8th, the more they found themselves sleeping on the wings of their planes. Waiting.

In the hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the squadrons were in the air on high alert. Weather had delayed the arrival of the Japanese attack on Luzon, and as bad luck would have it, they caught most of our B-17s and fighters on the ground refueling. The attack was devastating. Our forces were cut in half, and back home our country was in shock.

Buzz Wagner’s actions over the next few days would become the stuff of legend. Flying into enemy fire, solo missions and dogfights where he was outnumbered 5 to 1, strafing runs on Japanese airfields... Buzz was an engineer, he knew what a Zero was capable of, and he knew what his own plane was capable of.... The Zeros had no idea what Buzz Wagner was capable of. He was performing maneuvers *then* you see in movies and airshows *now*. And he was doing it in

combat. On December 16<sup>th</sup>, he recorded his fifth aerial kill only nine days into the war.

Buzz Wagner was now—officially—an ace. He rarely spoke of his exploits. He didn't drink much, and he was a bad poker player. In his life he was calm, collected, methodical, quiet-spoken. In the cockpit he was death from above. Between his confirmed kills in the air and his strafing runs on airfields he destroyed between 15 and 50 warplanes in those dark and chaotic first days of the war. He became more than a hero back home. For an angry, grieving, devastated nation he became America's hope. A symbol that we were fighting back. Kids on their rooftops pretended to be "Buzz Wagner—fighter ace." There were trading cards and comic books. Articles in *LIFE* magazine.

Legends are born at the crossroads of history and destiny. He was the hero we needed. The right person in the right place at the right time.

Buzz was wounded after a 20mm shell burst over his cowling, shattering his canopy. He made it back to base with splinters of plexiglass in his eye. He recorded 3 more kills before being sent home to lead designs on new fighter aircraft until November 29, 1942. On a routine flight from Eglin Field in Florida to Maxwell Field in Alabama, his plane disappeared. The wreckage was discovered weeks later. How this brilliant pilot, in the same P-40 he flew during the war, went down remains a mystery. Buzz Wagner's funeral was attended by tens of thousands.

He had earned his wings in 1938. And in four short years, he was gone. Four years. In those four years, Buzz Wagner received the Distinguished Service

Cross, the Distinguished Flying Cross, a Purple Heart, became the first and youngest ace of the Army Air Forces, had two schools named after him, was promoted to lieutenant colonel at the age of 26 and in between all that managed to lift an entire country.

What will you do with four years? Or 20?

When we ask ourselves, "Where are our country's heroes?" we look to you. None of us know when our moment will come. But moments don't make heroes. Moments simply reveal them. Every day, be the Airman we expect. When your moment comes, be the hero we need.

Aim high, Airman.