

THE SAGA OF THE COMET



By Stephen C. Ananian

July Forty-Four!



1st Lt. Evan M. Johnson, V, on July 8, 1944, poses in front of THE COMET just before Takeoff.

The Saga of THE COMET



This is the story as originally written by Charles Nethaway, then in our newsletter by James Starnes and now updated by me, your editor - Steve Ananian

In spite of its close proximity, as a New Yorker, I guess I never knew much about New Jersey before the war. While in school I worked as an errand boy and was familiar with the New York City Subways and the Hudson Tubes, - thereby giving me access to Jersey City, Hoboken and the beaches of the Jersey Shore. Once I walked across the George Washington Bridge to New Jersey and back, but that was the extent of my out-of-state travel. So the location of Hackensack New Jersey or its high school was unknown to me!

On Saturday 8th of July 1944 the pilots gathered at the Officer's Club on the Air Base at Fowlmere in England. We were preparing to attend ceremonies at the flight line. A brand new Mustang model P-51-D was about to be given a 'test hop'. It was to be some sort of public relations event and

several truckloads of personnel departed to witness the festivities at the field.

1st Lt. Evan M. Johnson, V was one of our hot pilots at the time. He was credited with having destroyed four enemy aircraft and two "½ kills" were pending confirmation. "Johnny" was on a roll! His P-51-B was an old model with four "fifties", so the "Brass" decided to reward him with a brand new model "D" with bubble canopy and six fifty caliber machine guns in the wings. After all, if you could down 6 planes with four guns think of what he could do with six!

In the cockpit of this magnificent silver bird was a type written letter.

It read: -

HACKENSACK HIGH SCHOOL

Hackensack, New Jersey

June 5, 1944.

To the pilot of this P-51 "Mustang":

During the past school year, the students of our school have worked very hard in order to sell enough War Bonds to purchase your new plane. You see, we have always wanted to feel that, though we can't fight, we have done our utmost to aid in the war effort. This plane is our humble contribution.

We would like to ask as a personal favor to us if you will name your plane "The Comet." The reason we chose this name is not only because it is such a fitting title for a plane of this type, but "Comet" is our school emblem.

All of us have a personal interest in this plane and we might say, a personal interest in you. In fact, we would be highly honored if we could call you "our Pilot," or, in other words, we would like to adopt you.

We fervently hope this plane will be as powerful and as dependable as it looked to us, and to you we wish "God Speed."

Students of Hackensack High School.

The High School students were "right on the money," in their estimate of the power of that airplane. It had been built at the North American plant in Englewood California. With the name "**THE COMET**" stenciled on its nose, it flew from California to New York in six hours and 39 minutes, setting the speed record for piston driven aircraft. That record has remained unbroken until just a few years ago. Upon its arrival in New York the wings were removed and the aircraft was prepared for shipment overseas to the United Kingdom. There it was assigned to our outfit, the 505th Fighter Squadron, of the 339th Fighter Group.

The 339th was what they called a "hot" outfit and was setting records on nearly every mission. The 505th alone had destroyed over 100 enemy aircraft in the first 100 days of combat. An accomplishment never heard of, either then or since.

Because of the Group's record, we were assigned the task of testing the new Secret "G" Suits. These pressure suits prevented pilots from "blacking out" in tight turns and gave us a decided advantage over the enemy. 1st Lt. Johnson wrote the kids at Hackensack High and thanked them for his brand new silver bird. Late in the afternoon, he climbed into the Mustang as the crowds watched! Flash bulbs flashed, shutters clicked and off roared Evan into the "Wild Blue." He pointed that nose straight up and in just a few minutes he was at twenty thousand feet performing aerobatics. Suddenly a P-47 Thunderbolt from the neighboring airfield at Duxford (the 78th FG) pounced on The COMET in an attempt to engage it in a mock "dogfight."

Evan Johnson, being the experienced fighter pilot that he was, pulled the Mustang into a sharp turn to avoid the Thunderbolt. There was a loud sickening K-E-E-R-R-A-C-K and the wings of that beautiful bird peeled off, narrowly missing the pilot and nearly trapping him in the cockpit!

Johnson's chute got tangled in the falling wreckage as he "Hit-the-Silk", with his chute oscillating violently; it took the pilot ten full minutes to come down to earth. He hit the ground in a heap ten miles north of the field and was hospitalized for a week with a broken ankle and minor injuries.

"Johnny" told the kids back in New Jersey there would always be a COMET, and indeed there was! The next replacement P-51-D was again

named "THE COMET". Evan Johnson, however, never flew it. Fighter pilots tend to be superstitious and he figured it was just bad luck! He completed his 'combat tour' flying in another P-51-D and named it after his first bird, "Pistol Packin' Mama!"

Evan Johnson destroyed an ME 109 on November 18th '44! It was his final Kill!

Where do I fit in this story? Well, after the war, Isabel and I married and moved to New Jersey. No - not Hackensack! But pretty close! We moved to the town of River Edge, just two miles away. My brother-in-law, Albert Tfrank was the president of the Hackensack Chamber of Commerce and a former student of the High School. He or his brothers probably sold bonds for the purchase of THE COMET. As far as Albert was concerned, "The sun rose and set over Hackensack New Jersey." Al and I watched the Comets of "Hackensack High" play baseball many times through the years and of course we always rooted for "our" team. He died many years ago, while still the president of the Hackensack C. of C. - I never told him this story of what I had witnessed! Just did not have the heart to tell him of the Comet's demise.

So - - what did happen to that beautiful silver Mustang called THE COMET?

What made that aircraft shed its wings and hurtle through the sky like its namesake?

There are three suppositions on this but no one will ever know for sure. Almost certainly the wing mounts were probably damaged in the shipment across the ocean. It is also possible, but not at all probable that it was not reassembled correctly upon its arrival in England. Our ground crews were just too good for that to have occurred.

The third reason is interesting to say the least. There are some that believed the settings for the "G" suit (still experimental at that time) were improperly set and the pilot, not feeling the "Gs" just pulled the wings off.

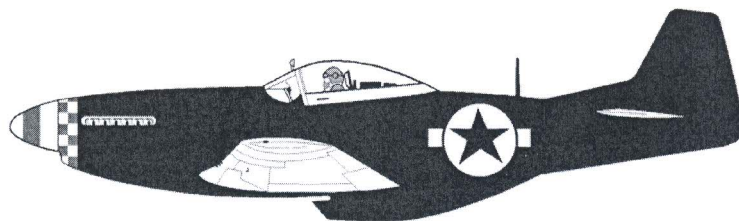
The Mustang was a sturdy aircraft Red-Lined at 575 mph in a dive. I have chased enemy jets and hit "compressibility" (the Speed of Sound). It burned nearly all the paint off the airplane and elongated the rivet holes from nose to tail, but those wings stayed on!

They say, "Every cloud has a silver lining," and in this case I believe it does! Evan Johnson was lucky! He was lucky those wings did not come off while he was engaged in a dogfight with the enemy over "The Third Reich".

The students of Hackensack High School were also fortunate! They not only had acquired a "fighter pilot", as they wished for, but they ended up with a whole fighter group! Many of us flew THE COMET in combat at one time or another.

Ten years ago I donated a copy of the 339th's History to the High School library on our behalf. I enclosed a copy of this story and conveyed our gratitude for THE COMET. This story has been told before and will be repeated over and over! It's a part of history that should be recounted on this, the 60th anniversary of the occasion! Thanks Hackensack!

Thank you Comets, unknown to you, you had indeed achieved your ambition. You succeeded in doing your utmost to aid in the war effort. Freedom is ours! SCA





1st Lt. Evan Malvone Johnson, the 5th

IT ALL STARTED IN 1775

From the files of Capt. Charles Nethaway, P. R. Officer 339th F. G.

1st Lt. Evan Malvone Johnson the 5th came from a long military line.

A chaplain named Evan M. Johnson served troops during the Revolutionary War and started it all!

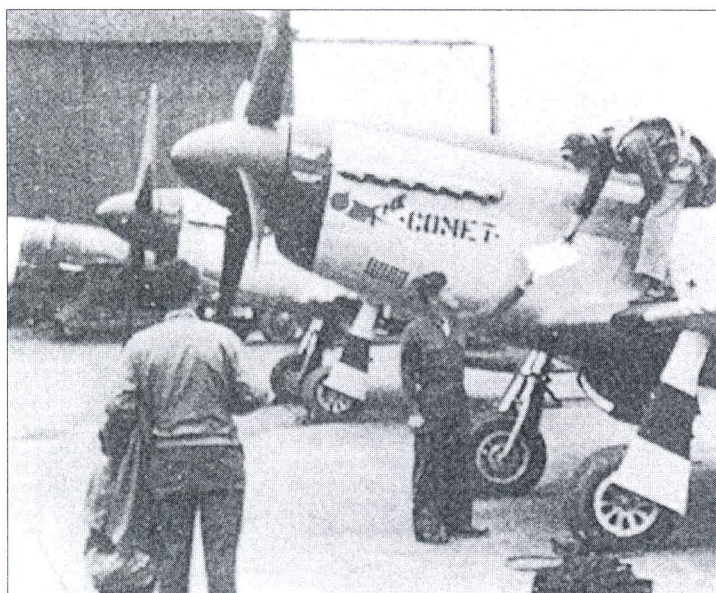
Captain Evan M. Johnson, II, served as a Union infantry officer in the Civil War and Brig. Gen. Evan M. Johnson, III, was the general officer who brought the First Army overseas and fought in the Second Battle of the Marne Leading the 77th Division in the First World War

In WW II Major Evan M. Johnson, IV, served with the Engineers in India while First Lieutenant Evan M. Johnson, V, was a fighter "Ace" credited with destroying six enemy aircraft while serving with the 505th Fighter Squadron of the 339th Fighter Group. We understand that 1/Lt. Evan M. Johnson, V, stayed in the Air Force at war's end and passed away a few years before our association was formed in 1980.

- - - I was there and saw it happen.

I talked to Evan after the crash and all he could recall was the left wing coming towards him - - - and then - - he was in his chute!

1/Lt. James Hanson, pilot 505th!



This newspaper article was recently sent to me by Nick King, Honorary Member of the 339th FG. Clipping states, "One of the 310th ferry pilots receives the paperwork for a P-51D before delivery. For some reason the words 'THE COMET' had been stencilled on the nose of the new aircraft. It was unusual for an airplane to be named before delivery."

Could that be the letter from the Hackensack High School students being handed to the pilot?



Lt. Evan M. Johnson, V and "Pistol Packin Mama"



The Comet's Demise



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