

Robert “Bob” Bolinder

Mr. Bolinder enlisted in the Army Air Corps in Feb. 1942 at the age of 18. He volunteered so that he would have a choice in what branch of service he would serve. He wanted to be a pilot so he chose the Army Air Corps.

He enlisted in New York City but because of the great number of men enlisting and a shortage of available training resources meant that he wasn't called to duty until April 1942. He was only called then so that he might be sworn in to the AAF to prevent other services from drafting him! He didn't actually enter pilot training until August 1942.

From New York City Mr. Bolinder traveled to the West Coast for his training. He attended Advanced Flying School in La Junta (sp?) Colorado, graduating on May 20, 1943. Next he traveled to Orlando Florida for Night Fighter training, completing that in November 1943.

In March 1944 Mr. Bolinder was shipped to England to join the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron. At that time he was trained to fly the P-61 Black Widow night fighter, an aircraft that was specifically designed as a night fighter. He had been trained on an earlier type of night fighter and had to retrain on the P-61.

The 422nd entered combat in July, 1944, initially they were stationed in Darlington in Northern England. Their first assignment was to intercept V-1 “buzz bombs” heading to London. These were jet propelled ballistic missiles that traveled at nearly 400 miles per hour. Only a few aircraft, including the P-61, had the speed to catch them. Mr. Bolinder's squadron was successful at this mission shooting down 4 V-1s. However it was decided that this was not an economical use of such an expensive and capable aircraft as the P-61 so they were shipped to France.

They were initially based in Cherbourg France where they flew missions to protect Allied ground troops from German night raiding aircraft. They were there for only 3 weeks before Patton led a breakout from the Normandy beachhead and Allied forces began a very rapid advance across France. During this time air operations in support of the ground forces was difficult because they were constantly moving. Aircraft could not bomb within 200 miles of the ground forces for fear that the men on the ground may have moved and because there were reconnaissance units roving all over France.

Mr. Bolinder's next move was to Chateaudun with his squadron. The mission was to protect Paris from German aerial attack. No attacks materialized and it was a quiet three weeks for the squadron.

They then moved to a base in Florennes, Belgium where they again had the mission of protecting allied ground troops from German night raiders. At this time the frontlines had stabilized allowing the allied air forces to provide better support for the ground units. In fact during the next 9 months the 422nd Night Fighter Squadron shot down 47 enemy aircraft and became the highest scoring U.S. night fighter squadron.

The most intense period of flying for Mr. Bolinder, and probably the whole squadron, occurred during the Battle of the Bulge. On the first night of the battle Mr. Bolinder took off at midnight and intercepted a Focke Wulf 190 single engine day fighter. He figured since it was a day fighter and was flying way behind enemy lines and not taking serious evasive action that it might be a defecting pilot. Regardless he got close enough to see the German crosses on the fuselage and then shot down the aircraft.

His second mission that night began at 3am. He was ordered to go up again because of high enemy activity over the front line. As soon as he took off he and his radar observer could see lights and flares over the frontline 60 miles to the east. As he got closer he could see that the activity was all taking place at 1,500-2,000 feet altitude, an altitude that was lower than where he was trained to operate. This was because reflection from the ground (ground clutter) made the radar difficult to operate.

The next hour was the most violent in Mr. Bolinder's flying career. The sky was full of targets and his radar man asked him which one he wanted to go after first. He said the nearest one. He closed on what turned out to be a Messerschmitt 110, twin engine fighter and shot it down. Seconds later his radar observer picked up another target, this time a Heinkel 111 twin engine bomber. They then closed in on it and shot it down also. Both aircraft had been shot down with the less than 50 rounds of ammunition. The P-61 was armed with 20mm cannon that fire a high explosive shell. Even one of these could do a lot of damage to an enemy aircraft. The third aircraft that Bolinder brought down almost took him with it. He was flying in a tight right hand turn when he noticed a shadow directly in front of him closing on him. He straightened his turn and pulled up to avoid a collision while the German aircraft flew under him and rolled over on its back. His radar observer thought he saw it crash so Bolinder was credited with a probable.

As he recalled "there was sweat pouring off my brow" during the encounter! He was sure that the two aircraft had touched wings and felt the aircraft was not responding correctly in flight. He decided to abort the mission and return to his base. Once there his ground crew examined the aircraft but could find nothing wrong with it. "It was my imagination" reflected Mr. Bolinder.

During the Battle of the Bulge the 422nd shot down 17 enemy aircraft while carrying out the main mission of protecting the 101st Airborne Division holding the key town of Bastogne. They were surrounded by German forces and the 422nd was tasked with preventing German night bombers from harassing them. For their role they received a Presidential Unit Citation.

In early 1945 during a routine physical Mr. Bolinder was found to have a vision defect and taken off of combat operations. He was assigned as transport pilot and found himself flying high ranking officers around Europe. He had two memorable missions during this time. On the first he flew Gen. Courtney Hodges, the U.S. First Army commander to Torgau in Eastern Germany to meet with Soviet Marshall Zhukov. It was the first official meeting between the armed forces of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Mr. Bolinder remembers being told to land on the ground next to the runway since the airfield had only recently been captured by the Soviets and the runway was still mined.

His second memorable mission was one in which flew high ranking officers to a send off party for General Omar Bradley, who was being sent back to the states. At the airfield he was able to see many historical figures; Patton, Eisenhower, Bradley, and Walter Bedell Smith among others.

It was around this time the he decided that he did not want to make a career out of flying generals around and he decided to try to get back in his old squadron which he knew was due to go back to the U.S. to train for the invasion of Japan. His current unit, the 9th Air Force, was due to transfer to the Pacific immediately and he wanted some time in the U.S. first. He had been away for a long time and had a girl he really wanted to see! His old commander got him transferred to his old unit. They were in Rheims, France on their way back when they heard about the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. On Oct. 6, 1945 he arrived in Boston aboard a troopship and was out of the army 5 days later, though he did decide to stay in the reserves.

In 1951 he was called to active duty to help train nightfighter pilots for the Korean War.

For Mr. Bolinder the war was an experience that forced him to mature quickly.

He recalled about his involvement in the war and in combat that “it was a battle for survival” in an “honorable war” and that he had “no regrets.” In fact he felt the job of the infantry and the face to face nature of struggle on the ground would have been much harder for him to handle than being a pilot.