

# April 11, 1944 A tragedy in Rennes. (Part 2)

by Frédéric Hénoff

Captain John W. Dickson was killed when his P-47, nicknamed "The Thunderbolt", was shot by a direct hit from Flak. Disabled, his fighter crashed close to the airfield, near the Teslais farm<sup>1</sup>. Antoinette Diraison, 15



Captain John W. Dickson ready to climb into the cockpit of his P-47. He wears an AN 6510-1 parachute-seat, with an opening handle which can be seen on his left side, as well as a Mae-West B-4 type. Photo Fried's family

years old at the time, still remembers this tragic event : "The plane, which was flying very low, was caught in the fire of the German anti-aircraft batteries. The ejected pilot's parachute didn't have time to open and his body collided trees violently. Terribly mutilated, his body was quickly recovered by the Germans."

While searching the airman for identification, the Germans found on the unfortunate pilot, Dutch Florins, Belgian and French francs, personal pictures and an escape kit containing money, two maps printed on cloth, a metal file in a case and a small compass.

## Captain John Winfred Dickson

Captain John W. Dickson, born on October 2, 1920 in Henryville, is the son of the principal of Henryville High School and a schoolteacher who put apart her profession to educate her eight children. After completing his school education, and while employed as a paperboy, he enlist the Air Corps on March 17, 1942 at Bowman Field, Kentucky. It was close ! On his first

attempt at the recruitment office, he doesn't reach the minimal required weigh for his height. So, John goes to a grocery store to buy a large amount of bananas and after eating them, he went before the recruiter a second time, asking to be weighed immediately. This time he is found fit for duty, exceeding the required weight by only 450 grams ! And after that, most certainly forever disgusted of bananas.

He attends, amongst others, Merced Army Flying School, California, and at the end of his training course, on October 30, 1942, at Luke Field, Arizona, he was promoted to second lieutenant and received his pilot's wings. After a short leave, he joined the 323<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadron of the 327<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group then based at Richmond Army Air Base, Virginia, a unit fitted with Curtiss P-40F Warhawks. This unit is one of the elements of the United States air defense but also an operational training unit that transforms pilots on operational aircraft.

In November John wrote to his family : "Nothing seems to be cooking. Tomorrow I go up in an airplane all by myself for the first time since October 25. I hope I haven't forgotten how to fly. I guess I'll be around the East Coast for about three months yet I'm not here permanent. I may go to Washington, D.C., or Baltimore later."

February 1943 saw the arrival of a new type of plane in the Squadron, the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt, a plane that John dreamed of flying, as evidenced by the picture of the "beast" taken from a February 2, 1942 LIFE magazine article that he pasted into his personal scrapbook<sup>2</sup> (photo below ▼). In April 1943,



<sup>1</sup> the farm no longer exists, the site is now part of the PSA La Janais-Rennes automobile plant

<sup>2</sup> his album of memories

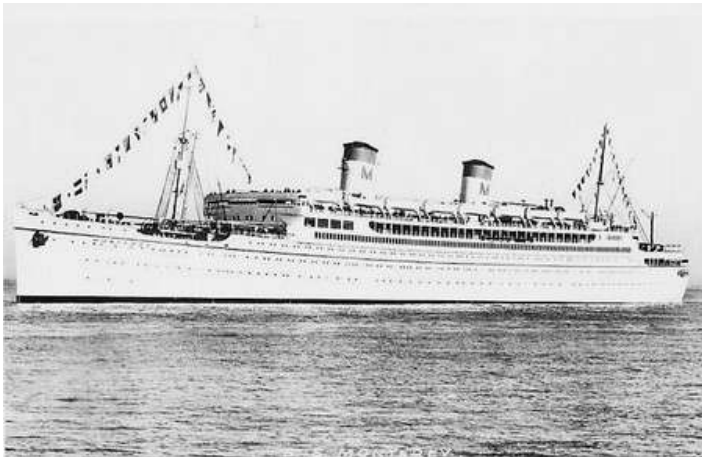
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one finds it as pilot with the 365<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, part of the 358<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, a new unit formed in December 1942 and activated at Richmond on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1943. This unit naturally drew most of its personnel from the 327<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group.

This results for John a period of intense training onboard a P-47, which he shared with his family in an enthusiastic letter of April 23, 1943, in which - and with many sketches to support its words - he described it :  
*"The traffic is terrific. We call in for landing instructions and they radio back that I we are number 15 for land so we wait around until it is time for to come in. Then we come screaming down about five feet apart of over the runway at 300 mph and then pull up and let our wheels down and come around again and land. We come in to land at 135 mph. This plane won't fly under 100 mph."*

In May, he is promoted to first lieutenant. Rumors of a transfer overseas became stronger and stronger, and on October 8, 1943, the **SS Monterey**, transformed into a troop transport, left the United States with the 358<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group aboard. When John reached England,



Le liner « SS Monterey » - Photo \$ 1LENCE D00600D, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

his course was similar to that of his friend Major Ross - although he did not go to Italy - and he also won an aerial victory on the February 8, 1944 mission. John's life ended abruptly on April 11, 1944, when his aircraft was shot down by the German Flak protecting the Rennes Saint-Jacques airfield.

During his tour of duty, Captain John Winfred Dickson was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (March 31, 1944), the Air Medal (January 17, 1944) with five Oak Leaf Clusters<sup>3</sup> and the Purple Heart posthumously.

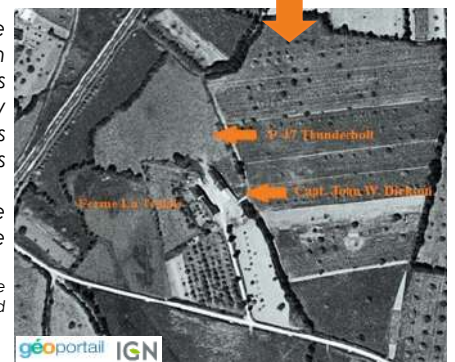
<sup>3</sup> this means she was awarded to him five more times



Above and opposite the crash site of John Winfred Dickson ; his body was found a few dozen meters from his plane, near the Teslais farm.

Below is the same place today, occupied by the PSA group factories.

Photos : above and opposite source Geoportail © IGN and below source Google Earth.



He was first buried in the Eastern Cemetery at Rennes, grave 572. After WWII and at the request of his family, his body was repatriated to the United States. He has been this time buried on July 25, 1948 in his hometown cemetery, Henryville, in Mt. Zion Cemetery, where he rests for eternity.

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On May 12 and 13, 2012, the city of Chartres-de-Bretagne paid a magnificent tribute to the valiant pilot during a religious and civil ceremony in the presence of part of his family (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8TP-3HMmv0>) and by naming for this occasion one of the squares of the city "Captain John W. Dickson square".



[tube.com/watch?v=t8TP-3HMmv0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8TP-3HMmv0) ) and by naming for this occasion one of the squares of the city "Captain John W. Dickson square".



### The lucky ones

Like Captain Charles T. Kimball, other pilots were to varying degrees happier. The plane of 2nd Lt. Albert P. Gsell Jr. nicknamed "Lucky Fran" was also hit hard but the young pilot managed to bring his Thunderbolt back to England where he made a nice belly landing.

If he thought he could reach home too, 2nd Lt. **Philip R. Ballinger** quickly realized that his wounded P-47 (s/n 42-76328) could not. Wingman of 1st Lt. Voorhees during his attack pass at full speed and deck level over the airfield, his plane was hit like others by Flak and as he pulled up his engine suddenly stopped - a real deathly silence Phil recalls. The young pilot checks his dials and his fuel supply system when the first smoke fills the cockpit and the first flames appear.

This critical situation left him with no choice but to bail out and he radioed his teammate, whom he had lost sight of. Phil Ballinger was at that time east of Rennes, in the Chateaubourg area. He landed south of the city on the La Pouardière farm, his plane crashing nearby, a little further north, near the La Goultière farm. Phil went to the nearby farm and was greeted by Mr. François Pirot who, despite the danger involved, hid him for the night, providing him with civilian clothes at the same time. The next morning, the farmer went to bring him food in his hiding place, but he could only see that the American had left.

The airman's journey - who certainly left his hideout during the night - until his capture four days later is not known, but in a post-war document Phil Ballinger



Lt. Philip R. Ballinger proudly poses in front of a P-47 nicknamed "Rebuttal". It could be his personal plane (according to his family) although the engine cowling indicates an aircraft belonging to the 365<sup>th</sup> Squadron - the 367<sup>th</sup> Squadron wore a red color.  
*Photo Ballinger's family*

specifies that he has also taken trains as means of transportation. In any case, Phil is caught<sup>4</sup> at Carquefou, a city located near Nantes in the Loire-Atlantique (the name of one of the numerous French administrative departments) on April 15. Caught in civilian clothes, he was considered a spy. He was sent to Nantes for the night and then directed for interrogation to the offices of the Sicherheitsdienst IV E detachment in Angers - in other words, the Gestapo. He remained at Angers for five days before being transferred to Paris, to the

<sup>4</sup>in an audio testimony (given kindly to the author by the family), Phil Ballinger tells of being betrayed by the farmer of Carquefou who was sheltering him and given to the Germans. An investigation is underway to clear this point.

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Fresnes prison for further questioning, but always refusing to give any information other than his name, rank and service number - as a document of the time attests.



2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Philip R. Ballinger, pictured in a line of prisoners when arriving in the camp - Photo Ballinger's family

One of his contemporaries, Sgt. Harold E. Owens, left an account of his own Parisian stay : "At Gestapo headquarters I was given a 10-minute trial at which I wasn't allowed to speak and forced to stand naked "except dog-tags and a pair of handcuffs". Because I had been given civilian clothes by a French farmer, I was found guilty of spying and espionage and told I would be shot. But the Nazis were not through with me, because they wanted to know who had helped me. During 72-hour period I had to stand handcuffed in a cell with no rest. I also made three visits to the "Black Box", a chamber two feet wide and five feet tall, for five hours at a time."

Seven weeks later, Phil Ballinger was sent to Germany, but instead of being sent to the Dulag Luft or Evalua-

tion Center in Oberursel, as every airman caught in the Western Theater of operation was sent there beforehand, he was sent to the Wiesbaden prison. His status as a spy was obviously the reason for this and the Gestapo was still looking for those who had helped him in France.

About Wiesbaden, Sgt. Harold E. Owens recalls: "I remember the guard who taught me "Links" and "Rechts" by hitting me on the side of my head with a rifle butt. "I figured I learned two words with a bang." But I also remember the officer who had lost his family in an Allied bombing raid, but who smuggled in two containers of water for the prisoners. "I should not help you," he said, "you killed my wife and two babies in Frankfurt." Then he hesitated, and said, "But I guess it is war. My death sentence was overturned and I was sent to a prisoner of war camp in Germany."

The same sentence was applied to Phil Ballinger and after a 29-day stay in Wiesbaden, and still not having spoken, he was handed over to the Luftwaffe and finally reached the Dulag Luft. He stayed there for less than a week, because the useful information that



Wiesbaden Prison where 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Philip R. Ballinger was sent. Photo Hessisches Staatsarchiv Darmstadt

could be drawn from him were somewhat outdated due to the time that had flies since his capture. Phil Ballinger was directed to a permanent prison camp, the Stalag Luft III near Sagan<sup>6</sup>, then at the end of January 1945 and because of the advance of the Russian troops, he was moved with all the prisoners to Stalag VII-A near Mossburg.

<sup>5</sup> « left » and « right »

<sup>6</sup> the camp where a massive escape took place on March 24, immortalised in the movie "The Great Escape"

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It was there that he was liberated on April 29, 1945, when the first elements of the 14th Armored Division of U.S. General Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army came in.

After WWII he carried on a successful career in the USAF (in Japan, Korea and Europe among others) and then, at the end of this military course, joined the Chamber of Commerce of the city of Sumter, South Carolina where, as President and General Manager, he boosted the industrial development of the city and its area. His main passion in life was golf and he has played on the best courses in the U.S. and Scotland, even going so far as to write a novel on the subject which mixes fantasy, pleasure, philosophy and humor.

At the end of a full life, Phil Ballinger passed away on July 1, 2011 after a long illness, he since rests at Evergreen Memorial Park Cemetery in the city.

To conclude this terrible day for the 358<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, we could quote one of Richard E. Turner's sentences taken from his book "Fighter Pilot" in which - about the risks involved during a strafing at deck level - he writes [...] it is much more difficult to attack a German aircraft on the ground than in a simple aerial fight [...]. ■

*Acknowledgements : Erik Mombeeck, Gurley's family, Ballinger's family, Kent Miller and Jean-Paul Favrais.*

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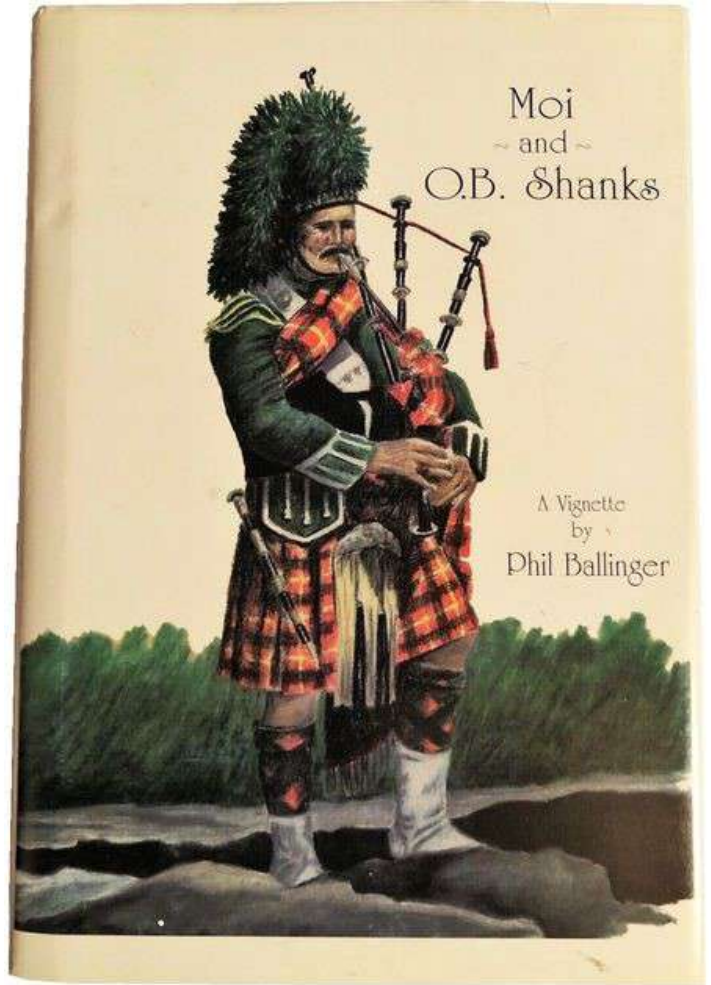
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Cover of the book written after the war by Phil Ballinger