

## Leo Alexander Gertin, Jr.

10 August 1924 - 11 August 1945

### Lost 3 months after war in Europe ended

Leo Alexander Gertin, Jr. was born 10 August 1924 in Las Angeles County, California to Leo Alexander Gertin, Sr., and Olive Terisa (Simmons) Gertin. He joined big sister Ruth, born 1923. Leo and Olive were married on 24 September 1921 in Rochester NY. He was an Electrician and she worked at Kodak Park. The 1930 Census showed the family back in Rochester, NY. They are renting at 99 Pembroke Street for \$40 a month and they do have a radio set. Leo Sr was an Electrician in Camera Manufacture (Kodak) and was a World War I Veteran. Olive was not working. Leo Jr is getting ready to start school in the fall. Little sister Joanne was born 1931. Sometime after 1935 the family moved to Brighton, NY. The 1940 Census showed the family owning a home at 134 Orchard Drive. It's valued at \$5800. Leo Sr was a Testing Engineer in the Film Industry. In 1939 he worked 52 weeks and earned \$2300 and was working 40 hours a week in 1940. Leo Jr has finished 1 year of High School and worked 10 hours a week as a Newsboy in the Newspaper Industry. He also ran track in high school. Leo Jr graduated from Brighton High School in Rochester NY in the spring of 1942.

Leo joined the Army Air Force on 2 December 1942. He was given Army Service #12208422. In August 1943 he qualified for Flight training and entered Pre-Flight. He was part of Class 44-D. Next was Primary Flight training, where Cadets first learned to fly. This was at E. St. Louis, Illinois from 3 October to 5 December 1943. He flew a PT-19 for a total of 65:05 hours, 31:55 dual, and 33:12 solo. Next A/C Gertin went to Basic Flight from 10 December to 31 January. Here he flew BT-14 and 15 planes for a total of 73:45 flight time. Next was Advance Training at Eagle Pass Army Air Base, just north of Eagle Pass, TX. Here he flew AT-6 for 56:40 flight time. Cadet Gertin finished his flight training on 15 April 1944. At this time, he was commissioned and awarded his wings. Now being an officer, he was given a new Serial # O-719303. Looks like 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Gertin stayed at Eagle Creek until 31 May. During this time, he flew a combat plane, a P-40, for the first time on 13 May. Next was time at Harding Field in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. This stay was short, about 3 weeks. On 26 June Lt. Gertin was transferred to the 268<sup>th</sup> Base Unit at Peterson Field, Colorado Springs, Colorado. In July he flew 36 times for a total of 59:50, mostly in P-40s. August he had 24 more flights for 51:45 time. Most flights were in P-40s, but he did have 1 in a A-24, the Army Air Force version of the famous Navy



SBD dive bomber. He flew an additional 4:00 at night. In September he flew 13 times in day and 2 night flights for about 30 hours. On 2 October 1944, Lt. Gertin was back at Harding Field for final preparation for overseas deployment.

After some leave time, he was sent as a Replacement Pilot to Italy and the 15th Air Force. On 23 November he was assigned to the 319<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, 325<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, the Checkertail Clan, flying P-51s. On 25 November, he had 45 minutes in a Link Trainer. During December 1944 Lt. Gertin flew a P-51 for the first time. He flew a total of 7 training flights for 12:15. January 1945, the pace picked up a bit. He flew a P-51 15 times, 5



of them combat missions. His first was 4 January, an escort mission over the Bolzano Marshalling Yards. February and March he flew 24 missions, most of them combat. April was a busy and unusual month for Lt. Gertin. During an escort mission on 2 April, squadron mate Lt. Paul J. Murphy called on his radio he was having issues with his oxygen system and had to drop to a lower altitude. While flying low, they strafed an enemy railroad. Lt. Gertin escorted him to a Russian controlled airbase in Hungary. After making a wheels down landing, Lt. Murphy radioed up to say he was safely on the ground, unhurt. Later, Lt. Gertin got credit for his first victory on 19 April 1945 in an unusual way. While most of the Group was escorting bombers, he flew a P-51 to “slow time” its newly installed engine. Near Florence he flew past a FW-190, first time he has seen a German plane in the air. After mutual surprise, both pilots turned into one another for a head on pass. The 190 pilot broke for home, and Lt. Gertin followed him into Northern Italy and shot him down as he was landing. I’m sure if he did not correctly ‘slow time’ the engine, all was forgiven scoring a victory.

With Victory in Europe declared on 8 May, the 325<sup>th</sup> stayed in Italy. Old timers, who have been overseas for a long time, were rotated home. Newer pilots, like Lt. Gertin, who flew only 29 combat missions, stayed and kept training. This was done ‘in case’ more fighter units were needed in the Pacific. During May, June and July he flew about 30 flights total. On 11 August 1945, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Gertin was flying a B-25 C, Serial # 41-13085 with his Squadron Commander Major Ralph F. Johnson. Also on this flight were 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Oscar L. Agee, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Bland M. Barnes, and T/Sgt. Hal F. Tomey. Soon after takeoff it suffered an engine failure and crashed about 6 miles SW of Tortorella Air Base. All five were killed in this crash. Squadron Medical staff were able to positively identify Lts Agee and Barnes, but not the others. In May 1949 Lt. Gertin was positively identified. In November 1949 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Leo Alexander Gertin Jr. was brought home and is buried at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery

in Rochester NY. However, Major Johnson and T/Sgt. Tomey never positively identified, and are buried together in a common grave at Santa Fe National Cemetery, New Mexico.