

William Robert Hemphill

Fighter Pilot, 325th Fighter Group

1st Lt. William Robert Hemphill was born 5 July 1921 in Tennessee to Herbert and Tessie Hemphill. Per the 1940 Census, William was living in Dyer, Tennessee with his parents and 3 younger siblings. Jeon, 16, Roy, 14 and Rosa, 11. 18-year-old William finished 4 years of High School and is listed as an unpaid family worker.

William joined the Army Air Force as an Aviation Cadet on 5 January 1942 at the Nashville Army Classification Facilities, Tennessee. His service number was 14076005. When he joined, he had 2 years of college, and was single without dependents. He was 5' 6" tall and weighed 144 lbs. He was in Flight Class 42-H. After Pre-Flight, usually at San Antonio, Texas, Aviation Cadet Hemphill went to Douglas, Georgia for Primary Flight training. This is where Cadets first learn how to fly. He flew a BT-17, also known as the Stearman. This was from February to 24 April 1942. He soloed after about 11 hours of flight instruction. In total he had 60:00 hours of flight time, 32:05 dual hours and 27:05 solo hours. Next, he went to Shaw Field in Sumter S. Carolina for Basic Flight. Here he flew a BT-13, a faster and more complex plane. In a BT-13 he flew a total of 73:15 hours, 22:55 dual hours and 50:20 solo hours. Then Aviation Cadet Hemphill was assigned to Spence Field in Moultrie, GA for Advance Flight on 30 June. Here he flew an AT-6 Texan. He had a total of 75:25 hours, 19:40 dual hours and 55:45 hours during this phase of training. He finished his flight training on 6 September 1942, was awarded his



Pilot Wings and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant. He was also given a new Serial # O-792117. At this time, he had a total of 208:40 flight training time. After some leave time, 2nd Lt. Hemphill was assigned to 98th Fighter Squadron, 337th Fighter Group at Drew Field, Florida for Transition Training, learning to fly a combat airplane. He soloed in a P-43 Lancer on 14 September and had 3 more flights for 7:50 hours flight time. On 7 October he soloed in

a P-40. In October he had 28 flights totaling 41:25 hours. In November he had 11 flights through the 21st, totaling 12:55 hours. After some leave time, he was assigned to the 327th Fighter Squadron, 325th Fighter Group as it was preparing for deployment overseas. From 24-31 December he had 8 flights in a P-40 totaling 15:25 hours. At the end of 1942 Lt. Hemphill had 77:35 hours in a Fighter plane,

212:00 training hours, 4:45 other hours, 2:05 hours instrument and 1:00 hour in a Link trainer.

In early January 1943 the pilots of the 325th traveled by train from Boston, MA to Norfolk, VA. They found 72 brand new P-40Fs (Merlin powered) and Navy instructors waiting to teach them how to fly off a carrier. Within a few days, all pilots 'qualified' in carrier launches, and they were loaded onto the USS Ranger. On 19 January the Ranger was within range of North Africa. The Navy, in a good will gesture towards its rival service, allowed the Army pilots 425 feet of deck to fly off while the Navy uses only 390 feet.

Soon after arriving in North Africa the 325th flew protective patrols for President Roosevelt while he was at the Casablanca Conference. Shortly after this they were ordered to transfer many of their planes to the 33rd Fighter Group. They have been in combat since Operation Torch and needed replacement planes. In January and February, he only had 20 flights for about 30 hours. As more planes became available, more flights preparing for combat were made. In March and April, he



had 30 flights for about 43 hours. In May the 317th Squadron moved up to join the others from the 325th and it flew its first mission as a Group on 19 May. On 22 May he flew on a "secret" mission, per his logbook. No other details readily available. Lt. Hemphill flew his first combat mission on 26 May, a divebombing mission. 27 May he flew his second

combat mission, escorting bombers over Decimomannu, Sardinia. Enemy fighters attacked the bombers, but the 325th shot down 5 of them. During the engagement, Lt. Hemphill's P-40 was damaged. He was able to nurse it out over the

Mediterranean where he was able to ditch his plane. Squadron mate Dick Cotlin was able to circle over him, drop a life raft, and radio for Air-Sea rescue. An RAF Walrus seaplane landed on open water and was able to pick up Lt. Hemphill. Unfortunately, the Walrus crashed while taking off, sinking almost instantly, and all on board were lost. 1st Lt. William Robert Hemphill was never found, and he is memorialized at North Africa American Cemetery in Tunisia. His family also has a marker at Rose Hill Cemetery in Obion, Tennessee.

