

Wilkins, Raymond Harrell ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1996

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Raymond Harrell Wilkins, *World War II* ^[2] Army Air Force officer, was born in Norfolk, Va., to William Samuel and Florida Alverta Harrell Wilkins of Columbia, *Tyrrell County* ^[3], N.C. He grew up in Columbia and attended school there in 1930–34 before entering *The University of North Carolina* ^[4] in September 1934. He registered as a pharmacy major, intending to enter medical school. In 1936 he enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army Air Force and served at Langley Field, Va. Soon promoted to staff sergeant and assigned to clerical duty instead of flight training as he wanted, he managed to enter the Cadet Training Corps at Smith Air College, St. Louis. He afterwards was graduated at Kelly Field, Tex., where he was a Cadet Corps captain, received his pilot's wings on 31 Oct. 1941, and was commissioned second lieutenant. Remaining at Kelly Field as an instructor, he also received further training at Maxwell Field, Ala.

In 1941 he was assigned to duty in the Philippines, where he arrived four days before the Japanese attacked there. He saw his first combat service under General Douglas MacArthur, but when the United States withdrew, Wilkins flew with the aerial convoy of MacArthur and his forces en route to Australia. He participated in raids over Lae and other New Guinea bases where he destroyed three Japanese planes on the ground and knocked a Zero out of the air. He was awarded the Silver Star for distinguished service in a series of successful attacks on Japanese airdromes in which seventeen enemy bombers and other targets were destroyed.

Promoted to first lieutenant, Wilkins was a member of a light bombardment squadron that flew 180 missions against the Japanese in the Southwest Pacific, attacked seventy-five enemy vessels, and became the first outfit to introduce the parachute bomb in warfare. He commanded a crew that flew 47 combat missions in Douglas Bostons.

Wilkins's daring and ability soon brought him promotion to captain, and in September 1943 he was made squadron commander. For his flying exploits and extraordinary feats of daring and courage in the South Pacific, he was awarded the Air Medal, Distinguished Flying Cross with two Oak Leaf Clusters, and Silver Star. One year after his assignment to foreign duty he was promoted to the rank of major. The promotion came, however, just a few weeks before his death. He was killed while leading his squadron in an attack against a section of the Japanese fleet on 1 Nov. 1943 over Rabaul, New Britain. His last act was to dive his plane straight at a Japanese gunboat in an attempt to silence it and save the lives of his comrades. His thousand-pound bomb struck squarely amidships, causing the Japanese vessel to explode, and then, at low level, he attacked an enemy destroyer. After that he attacked a transport of some 9,000 tons, scoring a hit that engulfed the ship in flames. Turning next to strafe a heavy cruiser his plane was exposed to heavy fire, was hit, and crashed into the sea. He had destroyed two enemy vessels and made possible the safe withdrawal of the remaining planes of his squadron. After his death he was awarded the Purple Heart, and on 5 Apr. 1944 the War Department announced that he had been posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Wilkins's successor as commander of the squadron said: "It was a privilege to serve under a man of his caliber. His ability as a combat pilot set the criterion that all of us strive to attain, but none ever equal, and his personal character was an example for every officer with whom he came in contact. His intelligence and high ideals, the high standards that he set for himself and his Squadron, and above all, his superb leadership make the task of attempting to take his place immeasurably difficult. He was truly the type of leader that could lead men anywhere under the most adverse conditions with the foreknowledge that they would follow him willingly and gladly. No other man that I have ever known came so close to achieving the standard set by ancient chivalry—that of being 'without fear and without reproach.'"

References:

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Additional Resources:

"Wilkins, Raymond H. (Air Mission)." Medal of Honor Recipients, World War II (Recipients T-Z), Center of Military History, United States Army. <http://www.history.army.mil/html/moh/wwII-t-z.html#WILKINS> ^[5] (accessed March 12, 2014).

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Powell, William S. ^[9]

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