





R.A. "Bob" Hoover

IAC's 2009 Hall of Fame inductee

Drifting alone in the cold waters of the Mediterranean off the coast of France, Bob Hoover heard the "rat-a-tat" of a diesel-powered ship approaching. After four hours adrift, with shrapnel wounds to his legs and buttocks, he could only hope the ship belonged to the Allies, but it was not to be. The German corvette maneuvered close enough for the sailors to hoist him aboard, and he was a prisoner of war. It was 7 p.m. The date was February 9, 1944. Although this was to be Bob's first time being taken into custody by the enemy, it would not be his last.



The youngest of three children, Bob was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on January 24, 1922. With a love for anything mechanical, he purchased an old Ford Model T chassis for \$7 when he was 13 years old. He got his first taste of flying when he took the vehicle to a local golf course and found that he “could get airborne if I hit some of the bumps just right.” Of course, the fun stopped when his parents found out.

Charles Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic provided the spark that ignited Bob’s lifelong passion for aviation. He spent many hours daydreaming he was at the controls of the aircraft, alone over the Atlantic Ocean. (F.F. pg. 14)

Growing up, Bob built models of World War I airplanes such as the Nieuport and Spad. These airplanes allowed him to fly in his mind and fueled his desire to fly for real.

In high school, he read anything having to do with aviation, even memorizing the handbook for the Alexander Eaglerock. But it was a book by Bernie Ley that introduced him to aerobatics. “I studied the maneuvers until I knew every one by heart.” (F.F. pg. 15)

At 15 years old, Bob worked 16-hour days for \$2 a day sacking groceries. He used this money to pay for flying lessons at Berry Field, making the 30-mile round trip on his bicycle. At \$8 per hour for flight

training, Bob had to work 64 hours at the grocery store for every hour of flight. According to Bob, “It was worth every penny.” (F.F. pg. 16) After a year of working at the grocery store, he had finally flown the requisite eight hours for solo. It wasn’t long after this flight he began putting the little Piper Cub through its paces flying loops and spins. Soon after this, Bob flew his first “air show” to show his family his flying skill.

“I decided to impress them by flying between two trees,” he recalled in his book. “Unfortunately, I had not anticipated a sudden updraft, and it lifted the airplane just enough to catch a wingtip on one of the branches. The plane jerked abruptly,



ABOVE: Hoover with his yellow P-51 Mustang wearing his business best. UPPER RIGHT: With Chuck Yeager. LOWER RIGHT: This photo of a damaged B-45 Tornado from 1950 is inscribed: “To Ole Bob Hoover, The eageerst Bastard in the world - Joe Lynch.”

A few of the aircraft Bob Hoover has flown >>>

CURTISS PUSHER REPLICA



GARLAND-LINCOLN LF-1



MARTIN B-26 MARAUDER



but I quickly got it under control and made it out of there and back to a safe landing." (F.F. pg. 17)

It may not seem possible, but Bob Hoover suffered from chronic motion sickness while taking his flying lessons. He resolved to overcome it so he could become a fighter pilot.

Soon after graduating from high school in 1940, Bob joined the Tennessee Air National Guard as a tail-gunner trainee on the Douglas O-38. When Bob first joined, it wasn't possible for enlisted men to go to pilot training. It didn't take long for that to change. When the opportunity came, Bob took and passed the written test. A little help from the flight surgeon on the eye test sealed the deal—shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he reported to Helena, Arkansas, for primary flight training in the Boeing PT-17.

His flying skills were evident early on. On graduation day, Bob was asked by the commanding officer to put on a demonstration. His performance so impressed his instructor, Capt. Bart Renno, he wrote Bob a letter 34 years later that read in part, "Your performance in that thirty minutes was the epitome of Air Corps flying and, I am certain, will never be equaled or surpassed." (F.F. pg. 23)

After advanced training, Bob was sent to Drew Field in Tampa, Florida, as part of the 20th Fighter Group. There, he would fly both the P-40 and the P-39 "widow maker."

With a reputation for getting into tumbles during dogfights, the P-39 had a bad reputation among pilots. Bob fell in love with it. Of course, he had to discover whether the rumors were true, so he took the airplane to altitude and got it to tumble. It took deployment of the gear and flaps to bring it back into a normal spin, but Bob was able to replicate the maneuver. It wasn't until later the maneuver was named the lomcevak, which is Czech for headache.



In Illinois, July of 1969 with his twin-engine Shrike Commander..

Besides flying, Bob's true love is dogfighting. When he first arrived in Europe, he was used as a flight-test pilot putting newly assembled planes through their paces before being used in combat. Although he loved this duty, his heart yearned for the thrill of the fight. He finally got that chance when he was stationed in Palermo, Italy, flying the Spitfire Mark V.

On the fateful day of February 9, 1944, Bob was on a search and destroy patrol tasked with attacking enemy

ships and trains on the French/Italian border. After destroying a German freighter, his four-ship formation returned to base to refuel. When they returned to the patrol, they found a German convoy near Nice, France, and were able to score a few direct hits while divebombing the ships.

For these missions, the Spits were equipped with both bombs and external fuel tanks, which made the airplanes cumbersome for dogfighting. If enemy fighters were

With a reputation for getting into tumbles during dogfights, the P-39 had a bad reputation among pilots. Bob fell in love with it.



BREDA 155



FISHER XP-75



FOCKE WULF FW 190



P-51A



Taking a VW ride past a crowd of admirers at the EAA Oshkosh fly-in in 1977.

Bob went to work as a test pilot at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, flying just about every high-performance aircraft the war had produced.



Receiving the Dick Schram Trophy at a chapter banquet in Chicago, Illinois.

encountered, the stores could be jettisoned to improve performance.

After their bombing run, Bob noticed four German Focke-Wulf 190s bearing down on one of his flight's tail. He yelled over the radio to warn the other pilot and simultaneously reached down and pulled the release handle to let go of his external fuel tank.

Breaking loose in his hand, the release malfunctioned, leaving him with limited maneuverability. He headed for one of the German fighters and pulled the trigger. Smoke poured from the airplane, marking his first kill. Soon, two enemy fighters came after him, but Bob thought the other two aircraft in his flight would help out.

Watching his remaining flight peel away for safety, Bob cursed the pilots with all his might as the two German fighters closed in for the kill. His fuel-laden aircraft was slower than they anticipated, causing the aircraft to overshoot. They turned back, unable to out turn his slower aircraft. Bob took the opportunity to shoot at one of them, but right as he thought he might make a hit, his own airplane got hit from below. Searing pain shot through his lower extremities as shrapnel ripped into his legs and buttocks. At the same time, another FW-190 came from behind and underneath his airplane, appearing in his sights. Bob fired off a burst from his guns just as his own engine exploded.

With the nose of his airplane engulfed in flames and oil covering the windshield, Bob knew his Spitfire was doomed. He rolled inverted and bailed out. After spending four hours in the cold Mediterranean, the German corvette hauled him out of the water.

Soon after arriving ashore in France, Bob was thrown into a local jail. He quickly discovered the bars in the window were quite loose and was able to remove them.



Dropping 10 feet to the ground, he made a run for freedom before being attacked by vicious German guard dogs. Now, he had dog bites to go with the untreated shrapnel wounds on his legs.

After being recaptured, the Germans put Bob on a train headed to Germany. While on the train with two sullen guards, Bob asked to use the restroom. While in the tiny room, he busted out the small window and jumped out, immediately becoming buried in deep snow. His attempt was quickly thwarted as he heard gunshots ring out.

After being recaptured, he was taken to an interrogation camp near Frankfurt. Here, Bob, with his as yet untreated wounds, was subjected to terrifying interrogations where his life was constantly threatened. At one point, he was led outside and faced a firing squad through the first two sequences of "ready, aim." It was here where he tried his third attempt at escape. Again he was thwarted, and this time it was off to the Stalag Luft I prison camp.

Before being shipped off to the Stalag prison camp, Bob and his fellow POWs were packed into boxcars the night before the trip. During the night, Allied bombers raided Frankfurt, and a boxcar full of prisoners four cars away was hit by friendly fire, killing all inside.

After 16 months and one more thwarted attempt at escape, Bob finally succeeded. With two companions, he was able to get away from the camp and his captors. He couldn't have imagined the horrors that awaited him as he encountered the invading Russians, but he was eventually able to work past them to a partially abandoned German airfield.

With the help of one of his companions and a .25 pistol given to him by a French conscript, Bob was able to commandeer a FW-190 while holding a German ground crew member at gunpoint. Staying



With fellow aerobat and Warbirds of America Hall of Famer, George Baker.

low to avoid detection, he landed in a field in Holland. The locals thought he might be a German defector, but the British believed he was who he said he was. Bob Hoover was finally a free man again.

Upon his return to the States, Bob went to work as a test pilot at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, flying just about every high-performance aircraft the war had produced. It was during this time that he met Chuck Yeager, during a dogfight no less. It was also during this time that he volunteered to test fly the Bell X-1 rocket plane. Little did he know that a couple of low passes for a friend would change history.

Bob was the number one pick for the X-1 program until he flew a couple of low passes over a fellow pilot's

R. A. "Bob" Hoover: OTHER AWARDS

- Distinguished Flying Cross
- Soldier's Medal for Valor
- Air Medal with Clusters
- Purple Heart
- Croix de guerre

family while a CAA (predecessor of the FAA) inspector was watching. Unfortunately for him, he was flying the only jet in the entire country that day. He was still on the program, but Chuck Yeager was chosen for the primary spot.



B-17 ENGINE TEST

BELL P-59 AIRACOMET

HE-162 VOLKSJAEGER

F-86D SABRE

"There are few opportunities to be the first to do anything, and I had missed out," he recalled. (*F.F.* pg. 110)

Bob never got a chance to fly the X-1. The engine of an F-84F fighter he was flying caught fire, and he was forced to eject because the fire had destroyed the flight control linkages. His seat failed to fire, and he was sucked out of

the airplane, striking his legs on the tail, shattering them. Six weeks later, he was cleared for flight duty, but he had already been replaced by another pilot on the X-1.

Bob Hoover's accomplishments are far too numerous to mention in the span of a magazine feature, but his career has spanned almost seven decades of aircraft development.

His contribution to aviation has been a contribution to our country and our way of life. Probably one of Bob's most high-profile deeds came about at the conclusion of the 1966 International Aerobatic Competition held in Moscow at the height of the Cold War. This comes directly from the prologue of his book *Forever Flying*:



As safety pilot, Hoover saved many pilots at the Reno Air Races with his cool advice.



RIGHT: Hoover's F-86 Sabre Jet.

BELOW: Hoover's Shrike Commander during his routine (note feathered props).



Strapped securely in the cockpit of the super-sleek Yak-18, I glanced out at the Soviet Dignitaries standing on the ramp. They were celebrating their overwhelming victory over the United States in the 1966 International Aerobatic Competition. "I've got a surprise for you, Ivan," I thought as I checked out the instrument panel in the unique Soviet plane.

Despite my years of experience as an accomplished aerobatic pilot, I'd never participated in a formal aerobatic competition. That had made it even more of an honor to be named the non-flying captain of our team.

Unfortunately, I'd experienced ten days of frustration watching the power-packed Yak out duel our nation's finest aerobatic pilots. We'd come out the big loser in the Cold War propaganda battle. Now that the competition was over, the pompous Soviets had agreed to let me, as a courtesy, fly their crown jewel.

Over a million Soviets, and reporters from around the world, were positioned at Tushino Airport in Moscow for the closing ceremonies. I was sure they all expected me to taxi out and take off in a normal fashion. Instead I added full power for takeoff and held the plane close to the ground.

The Yak had plenty of airspeed. I lifted the plane off and raised the nose slightly until the landing gear was up.

Rolling the aerobatic plane, I leveled off upside down and aimed dead center for the thirty-foot high dike surrounding the airport. It looked as if I were going to blast right through it, but an instant before reaching the dike, I raised the nose of the Yak, leapfrogged the dike, and flew out of sight still upside down.

A smile came to my face. I knew I'd caused confusion on the ground.

To stay low and out of sight of the crowd, I rolled the Yak right side up and headed back around the airfield alongside the Moscow River below the height of the dike. I was sure everyone would be looking for a fifty-foot-high fireball to blossom somewhere on the other side of the dike from where I had disappeared from sight.

I remained at ground level out of sight until I reached the other side of the airport. Then I turned back toward the dike and rolled the plane upside down again. I could feel the adrenaline rush as I flew down directly in front of the crowd. Then I put the Yak-18 through the same series of pinpoint aerobatic maneuvers that had been demonstrated for so many years at air shows all over the world. It was a delight to fly. No wonder our pilots never had a chance.

I was performing at near ground level even though I was aware that Soviet pilots were not permitted to fly aerobatic maneuvers below three hundred feet. After a touchdown on one wheel, an aileron roll, and a touchdown on the other wheel, I landed the Yak. I was a little nervous



about the reception I'd receive from the Soviets, but I'd proven my point. Now everyone would know that the American pilots were just as capable as the Russians and that the plane had made the difference in the competition.

The Soviets immediately took Bob into custody after wresting him

from a screaming, adoring mob of Russians. This time, he was released without harm. Bob Hoover is a living legend, and it's an honor to welcome him into the IAC Hall of Fame. 🇺🇸

EDITOR'S NOTE: The details for this story were taken from Bob Hoover's autobiography, *Forever Flying*.

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