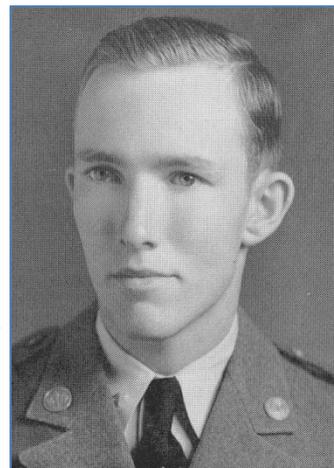


Griffin and the *Gabelschwanz-Teufel*

The Germans nicknamed it the *Gabelschwanz-Teufel*: the “forked tale devil.” American pilots called it a “sweet flying” airplane, but the Lockheed P-38 Lightning was slower than its German adversaries and this presented a problem. British test pilot Eric Brown recalled “that the [Messerschmitt] Bf 109 and the [Focke-Wulf] 190 could fight up to a Mach of 0.75, three-quarters the speed of sound. We checked the Lightning and it couldn't fly in combat faster than 0.68. So it was useless.” Even so, the Lightning, distinguished by its twin engines and twin tail booms, was the only US fighter aircraft in production from before Pearl Harbor until after V-J Day.



Clemson alumnus John Robert Calhoun Griffin of Anderson was one of the thousands of young men trained by the Army Air Force to fly P-38s during World War II. Johnny was a member of the Class of 1942. As a cadet, he was a member of Phi Psi-- the national honor textile fraternity, the Honor Council and the Flying Cadets. He attended ROTC Camp where he qualified as a marksman. He entered the Army the August following his graduation and earned his pilot's wings in March of 1943 at Spencer Field in Alabama.

Griffin was assigned to the 82nd Fighter Group, the top ranking fighter group in Italy, which in 1944 was escorting the heavy bombers of the 15th Air Force. The 15th's B-17 and B-24 bombers attacked transportation, manufacturing and petroleum facilities in southern Europe—including the oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania, Europe's third most heavily defended target behind only Berlin and Vienna. Bomber raids on the refineries had proven extremely costly, prompting Air Force planners to attempt a new strategy.



On the morning of 10 June 1944, P-38Js from Griffin's 82nd Fighter Groups took off from Italy for Ploesti. Instead of bombing from high altitude as had been previously tried by the Fifteenth Air Force's heavy bombers, Army Air Force strategists planned a dive-bombing surprise attack. Beginning at about 7,000 feet the mission was performed by 46 P-38 fighters, each carrying one 1,000-pound bomb. Army Air Force commanders hoped this tactic would yield more accurate results with smaller losses. An added benefit was that the fighters could strafe targets of opportunity on the return trip.

More than 80 fighters arrived in Romania to find enemy airfields alerted, with a wide assortment of aircraft scrambling for safety. P-38s shot down several enemy aircraft, but the defense forces were fully alert, and the target was concealed by a heavy smoke screen and intense anti-aircraft fire. Griffin was likely part of this mission in which the Americans lost 22 aircraft, almost certainly more than the defending Germans and Romanians. Eleven enemy locomotives were strafed and left burning, and flak emplacements were destroyed, along with fuel trucks and other targets. Results of the bombing were not observed by the American pilots because of the smoke. The dive-bombing mission was not repeated, though the 82nd Fighter Group was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for its part.

On July 22, Griffin's 82nd Fighter Group, based at Vincenzo, Italy, was again alerted for a mission into Romania. This time the objective was the airfield at Zilistea where the American flyers hoped to strafe and destroy enemy aircraft before they could take to the skies. According to an eyewitness, likely one of the other pilots in his squadron:

Lt. Griffin's plane was attacked by 5 FW 190s from 5 o'clock. He turned into them then the P-38 J was hit in the right engine and the right wing caught fire and then broke off. The plane crashed from 200 feet and exploded. Lt. Griffin attempted to bail out but was unable to.

John Robert Calhoun Griffin was survived by his mother, three sisters and three brothers. He was awarded the Purple Heart, Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with eight oak leaf clusters. Following the war, Lieutenant Griffin's body was returned to the United States and buried at the Silver Brook Cemetery in Anderson.

