

P-47 Pilot

Edward Powell Lee, Jr. was only seventeen years-old when he enrolled at Clemson College in 1940. He was too young to vote and too young to drink, but when his country went to war, Powell Lee was old enough to fight.

Lee was a mechanical engineering major from Anderson, where his father was educational director at First Baptist Church. At Clemson, Lee was assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment. He remained at Clemson for two years and then left for military service, joining the Army Air Force.

During flight training, Lee was designated as a fighter pilot. After earning his wings and his second lieutenant's commission, Lee was assigned to the 361st Fighter Squadron of the 356th Fighter Group at Martlesham Heath, England. The location of his new base, between Ipswich and Suffolk's English Channel coast, was ideal for the group, which conducted both bomber escort and fighter-bomber missions.

Throughout the winter months of 1944, the American 8th Air Force focused on luring the fighters of the German Luftwaffe into the air where they could be engaged in combat and destroyed. The strategy worked. By D-Day, the Luftwaffe had been virtually chased from the skies. The absence of a strong enemy fighter presence cleared the way for Allied fighter-bombers, like the P-47 flown by First Lieutenant Lee, to wreak havoc on the German forces defending France.

"From D-Day Plus One onward, whenever the weather was suitable for flying," wrote historian Stephen Ambrose, "the P-47s forced nighttime movement only on the Germans, at an incalculable cost to their logistical efficiency." German vehicles or troops caught out in the open during daylight paid for their exposure. "The *Jabos* were a burden on our souls," one German veteran of the Battle of Normandy recalled, using the German nickname for the P-47.

On June 8, D-Day Plus Two, Lee and two of his squadron mates were dispatched on a dive-bombing and strafing mission in support of the ground forces which were battling to expand the Normandy beachhead. Their mission was to shoot up any German vehicles, troops, and equipment moving toward the beaches, and in so doing, isolate the Germans' forward units and prevent their reinforcement.



At approximately 1900 hours, on their fifth mission of the day, Lee and his two wingmen discovered a German armored convoy near Montdidier, north of Paris. Keeping enemy tanks from counterattacking the beaches was a priority. The three P-47s strafed the convoy. While the Luftwaffe was not a factor in the battle, the Germans still packed a wallop in their anti-aircraft weapons, especially the much-admired 88 mm gun which could be used against both tanks and aircraft. As they pulled out of their strafing runs, Lee's comrades saw his fighter climbing, but on fire. Within moments, the aircraft stalled and crashed to the earth.



On June 8, the 8th Air Force's fighters flew more than 1,400 sorties to help protect the invasion forces. They attacked nearly 75 targets, but in doing so lost 22 pilots either killed or missing in action—including Powell Lee. At the time of his death, he was 21 years-old, old enough to vote, to drink, and to die for his country and for freedom.

First Lieutenant Lee was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with oak leaf cluster, the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters, and the Purple Heart. He was survived by his parents and his brother, then serving with the Marines in the Pacific.



See also *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945*, by Stephen Ambrose, 1997.