

# Archie Bertis Ashcraft, Jr.

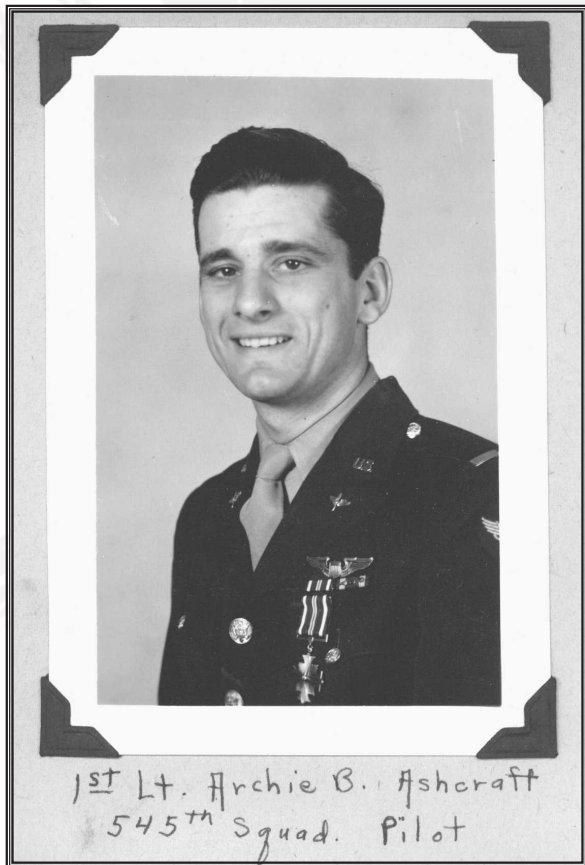
U.S. Air Force, Lieutenant Colonel

1917 - 1992

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Instructed by Richard Zukowski

Archie Bertis Ashcraft, Jr.'s long, eventful life, began on December 20, 1917, when he was born to Archie Ashcraft, Sr. and Estella Marie Jett of Enterprise, West Virginia, about fifteen miles north of the Harrison County seat of Clarksburg. Ashcraft grew up in Harrison County alongside his two younger brothers, John and Robert. His father worked as a clerk for the Consolidation Coal Company in the nearby town of Owings.



Ashcraft in World War II dress uniform. Robert Bletscher Collection, [384thbombgroup.com](http://384thbombgroup.com)

Despite the economic tumult of the 1930s brought on by the Great Depression, Archie's father was able to keep his job at Consolidation Coal. The Ashcrafts were relatively fortunate, as some West Virginia counties experienced unemployment rates as high as eighty percent during the Great Depression.

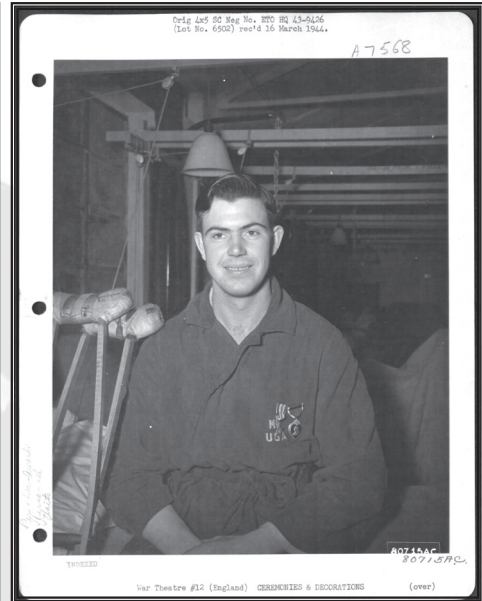
In 1938, after graduating from Fairmont State Teachers College with a B.A. in social studies, Ashcraft married Loma Faye Johnson of Fairmont. Their first daughter, Judy Lee Ashcraft, followed soon after. Archie registered for selective service in October 1940, but the U.S. military needn't have worried about drafting him. On April 14, 1942, Ashcraft volunteered for the US Army Air Force.

The Air Force (part of the U.S. Army until 1947) was still in its infancy during World War II, but was growing rapidly as the destructive potential of air power was discovered by Axis and Allied militaries alike. An innovation that grew out of the conflict was the use of strategic bombing campaigns. Instead of targeting enemy units on the battlefield, strategic bombing employed huge fleets of bombers to pulverize the enemy's industrial war effort. Destroying factories and

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**1st Lt. Ashcraft's crew in front of their B-17 bomber. Ashcraft is in the back row, far right. *Quentin Bland Collection, 384thbombgroup.com***



**Ashcraft's waist gunner Sgt. James Fields with his crutches, recuperating after his wound from the 1943 raid. *Unidentified contributor, 384thbombgroup.com***

urban depots, supply lines and railroad junctions, strategic bombing also helped shatter civilian morale, undermining the enemy population's will to fight.

Bombers could also be used to bait enemy fighter planes. Once the enemy's fighter aircraft were engaged, Allied fighter escorts could pounce and destroy them. Every enemy plane caught in a dogfight with the bomber fleets was one less pestering Allied troops on the ground. Often employing hundreds of bombers and tens of thousands of crew members, the Army Air Force constantly sought recruits. Owing in part to Ashcraft's college education, he qualified as an officer and entered flight school. Though he started out as a co-pilot, he was piloting bombers within a week.

By August 1943, the Army had assigned First Lieutenant Archie Ashcraft to a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber in the 545th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) of the 384th Bombardment Group, 8th Army Air Force. The 384th was new, having formed the same year as Archie's enlistment. In total, they would fly 316 combat missions over Europe during World War II.

Based at Grafton Underwood Airfield in England, Ashcraft participated in 30 combat missions targeting Axis military infrastructure in occupied France and Norway, as well as in Germany itself. In November 1943, about halfway through his service, he spent some time in the 8th Air Force Officers' Rest Home (known as FLAK houses) per Army Air Force Special Orders #154, which mandated aircrews a mental respite from combat.

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This brief break from the stress of the front might have been due to his plane's closest brush with disaster. During a September 1943 raid on Nantes, France—an important German naval base—Ashcraft's plane was attacked by six German Focke-Wulf fighters that "lined up" on the tail of his bomber, the *Loma Lee*. They unleashed a storm of 20mm bullets into Archie's craft, knocking out the radio and much of the plane's oxygen system. Staff Sergeant James Fields of Missouri, the *Loma Lee*'s waist gunner, was badly wounded in the leg, but struggled back to his gun to defend the plane. Archie and his crew made it back to England. Sergeant Fields survived and was awarded the Silver Star. It was the only combat injury Ashcraft's crews ever sustained.

Archie earned the Distinguished Flying Cross after completing 30 combat missions. He completed his tour of duty on March 28, 1944, and returned to the United States. But flying was in his blood now, and he stayed in the Air Force another twenty years.

The young lieutenant was soon assigned to the 92nd Fighter Squadron based in Honolulu, Hawaii. On September 5, 1950, he and Loma Faye welcomed their second daughter, Laura Marie Ashcraft. On July 31, 1965, Ashcraft retired from the U.S. Air Force as a lieutenant colonel. The family eventually returned to Shinnston, West Virginia, mere miles from the town of Enterprise where Archie was born. Ashcraft passed away on July 25, 1992, and was buried a few days later in the West Virginia National Cemetery, just a short distance away from his beloved Harrison County.



Unit patch of the 384th Bomb Group.



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## Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery  
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354  
(304) 265-2044

Section 2  
Site 206

Date of interment: July 28, 1992

## About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

**Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council**  
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