

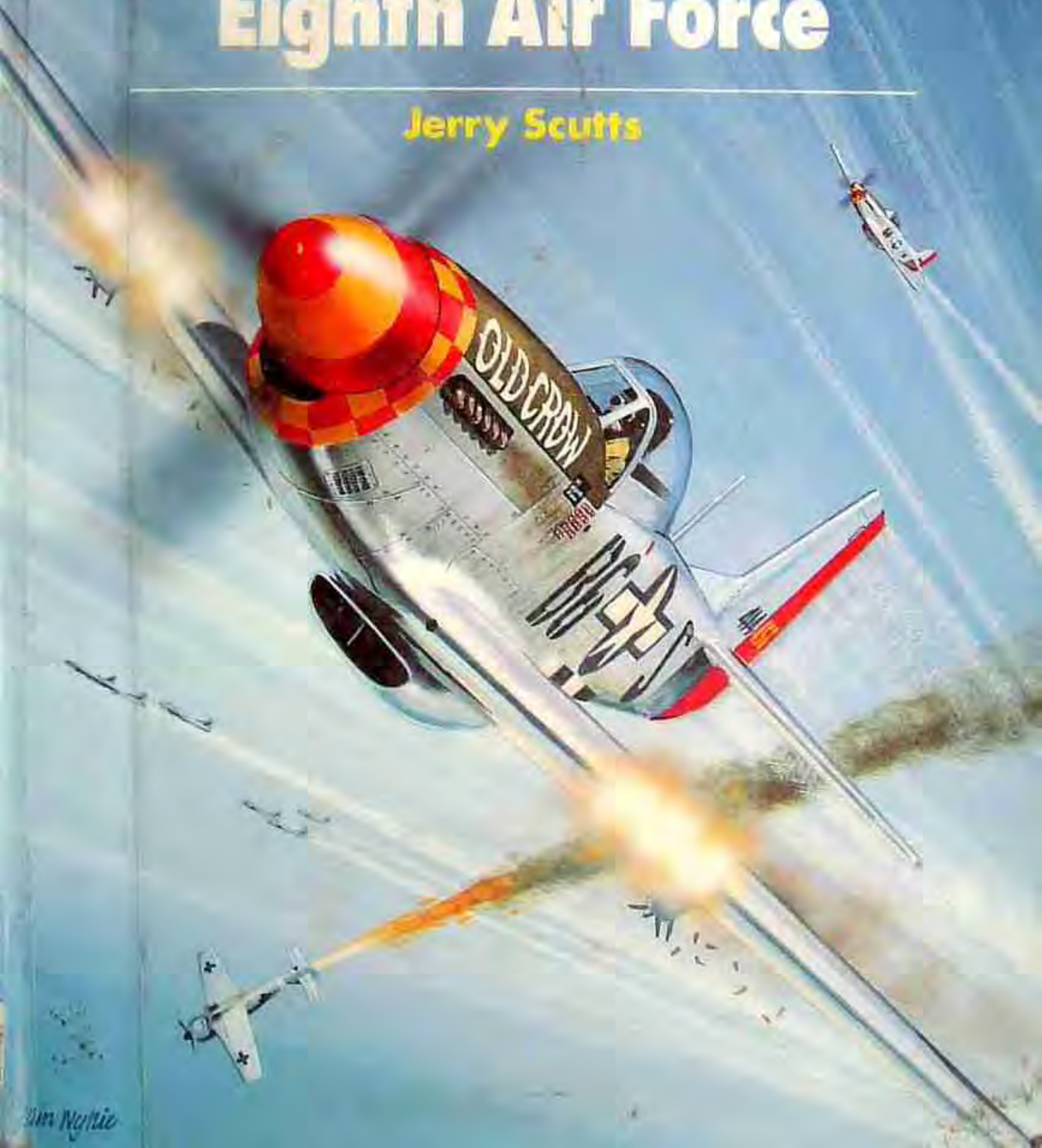


OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES • 1



Mustang Aces of the Eighth Air Force

Jerry Scutts



Jim Negley

SERIES EDITOR: TONY HOLMES

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EDITOR'S NOTE

To make this new series as authoritative as possible, the editor would be extremely interested to hear from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the elite pilots, and their aircraft, of the various theatres of war. Any material used will be fully credited to its original source.

ARTIST'S NOTE

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Front cover

Having already despatched a Fw 190A-8 of IV./JG 3 just short of it breaking through to the main bomber stream, Clarence 'Bud' Anderson of the 362nd FS/357th FG goes after his second kill of the sortie in F-51D 44-14450 OLD CROW. Anderson finished the war as a triple ace with the 362nd, having flown both P-51Bs and Ds during his 18-month tour of duty. (Cover Painting by Iain Wyllie)

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

MERLIN'S REACH 6

CHAPTER TWO

NEW BLOOD 16

CHAPTER THREE

A WILDER PONY 28

CHAPTER FOUR

OUTCLASSED 56

CHAPTER FIVE

MISSION COMPLETED 64

CHAPTER SIX

THE 'BLUE-NOSERS' 74

APPENDICES 81

TOP ACES OF THE EIGHTH 82

COLOUR PLATES COMMENTARY 88

MERLIN'S REACH

By the autumn of 1943 the bomber groups of the Eighth US Army Air Force (USAAF) based in England faced a crisis. For over a year an increasing number of B-17 Fortress and B-24 Liberator groups had waged war on German industry both at home and in occupied Europe. Since the B-17's combat debut in August 1942, much destruction had been wrought by precision bombing of key industrial targets, and it was clear that the USAAF experiment of sending heavily armed bombers over Germany in daylight would not be curtailed unless drastic circumstances dictated it.

Unfortunately, the Luftwaffe's fighter force and the German flak defences were making that event a possibility. Losses of American bombers had risen to the point where, after the notorious double mission to Schweinfurt and Regensburg in October, VIIIth Bomber Command had to carefully marshal its resources. The loss figure of 60 bombers on each mission was the subject of much debate in Congress, and the US government began to question the merit of continuing the offensive if such wastage was to become the norm. For some weeks no deep penetration missions were flown from England, leading the Germans to believe that the offensive had been fatally weakened. But this was not the case – it was Europe's deteriorating weather more than any other factor that prevented the bombers penetrating Reich airspace, for there was little point in flying sorties if bombardiers could not see their targets.

While there was no doubt that the Eighth's bomber force had taken a terrible beating, most of its worthwhile targets lay in central and Eastern Germany, and to fulfil the avowed Allied policy of defeating the Third Reich before the full weight of America's might was turned against the Japanese in the Pacific, the strategic bomber force had to hit those targets. Reducing the Eighth to a short- to medium-range force would yield little.

The realisation that bombers, however heavily armed, could not battle their way alone into German airspace without heavy losses had belatedly brought P-38 Lightnings to England in 1942, primarily to act as escorts for the bombers. There was some irony in this as early plans for the 8th Air Force had envisaged the need for an escort, albeit with short-range Spitfires. The ability of RAF fighters to cover the bombers only as far as Paris was soon overtaken by events, as the Eighth quickly extended its reach to take in targets in Germany.

But the transfer of P-38 groups from England to North Africa soon after the Lockheed fighter's arrival in Europe led to few bomber missions being flown in early 1943 that were protected by anything more than short-range fighter cover. Bombers would be well protected as far as an imaginary arc drawn through the French capital on the outward leg, whilst the remnants of the force would then be picked up on the return flight and escorted for the last 200 miles or so.

With little prospect of more P-38 groups being assigned to the 8th in the immediate future, the USAAF turned to a new type, the P-47 Thunderbolt. From March and April 1943 respectively, the P-47-



Eager to get P-51s the minute the type was introduced to the ETO, the 4th FG at Debden experienced a great change of luck when Mustangs finally re-equipped the group in February 1944. Among the early exponents was Duane Beeson, seen here on the wing of his only P-51B, 43-6819, nicknamed *BEE*, in the spring of 1944



Many pilots kept pet dogs and John Godfrey's own mutt was named, appropriately, *Lucky*. Godfrey flew two P-51Bs (*H Holmes*)

equipped 4th and 56th Fighter Groups (FGs) began rebuilding the Eighth's fighter force.

While the P-47 did sterling work, there were limits as to how far it could fly even with external fuel tanks without becoming excessively heavy – as with all Republic products, the Thunderbolt was somewhat on the weighty side to start with! Nevertheless, P-47s flew their first full escort mission equipped with pressurised belly fuel tanks on 12 August 1943, and by October they were able to accompany the bombers as far as the German border, a distance from England of over 350 miles. That, however, still left a dangerous gap if the bombers' targets lay beyond Berlin. The significance of the German capital itself could hardly be overlooked, for if the fighters could reach that far, their effect on the morale of the hard-pressed bomber crews would be considerable.

Much hope was therefore pinned upon the P-38. Two groups, the 55th and 20th, were flying Lightning missions over Europe by year's end, and with its potential to reach Berlin, the big 'twin' seemed the ideal aircraft to close the 'escort gap'.

However, because of the vagaries of the European weather the P-38's fuel system and engines proved to be chronically unreliable, resulting in no end of malfunctions and poor mission effectiveness. As 1943 ended, 'all the way' escort seemed an almost unattainable goal; no other US Army fighters were readily available despite USAAF planners having considered them all, including Navy types. The only glimmer of hope was the outcome of experiments being made in England and the US to mate the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine to the airframe of the North American Aviation (NAA) P-51.

At command level VIIIth FC had a new leader from 3 August – Gen William Kepner. He refused to accept that single-engined fighters had reached the limit of their range capability in the P-47's absolute maximum of 375 miles. This figure was widely believed in USAAF and RAF circles to be unbeatable, and Kepner's predecessor, Gen Russell O'Dell Hunter, had tended to believe British doubts – after all, they had been at this game considerably longer and had given the Eighth immeasurable help right from the word go. Fortunately for B-17 and B-24 crews the RAF were, on this occasion, proved wrong.



Johnny Godfrey framed by the Debden scoreboard. Two items of personal kit visible in this portrait are the silk scarf to prevent neck chafing, and a whistle to summon help in the event of a ditching



The early Mustang groups like the 355th (who flew this P-51B from Steeple Morden in Cambridgeshire) applied only the simplest of unit markings to their aircraft. Photographed departing on another escort mission in the bloody month of March 1944, this Mustang boasts the group's distinctive white spinner and 12-in nose band. Obscured by the wing are the 'OS' squadron code letters of the 357th FS



Don Gentile, groundcrews and assorted 'top brass' discuss the way the mission went soon after the pilot's return from an escort mission over Germany in early March 1944. Gentile's personal P-51B, *Shangri-La* (43-6913), forms the backdrop for this famous photograph

The Gentile/Godfrey team helped 'sell' the leader-wingman idea to other pilots, for there was no disputing how successful it was. *Shangri-La* is seen here resting on steel planking, which makes the location somewhere other than Debden



The autumn arrival in the ETO of the 352nd and 355th FGs had enabled Kepner to reorganise his force, which then comprised ten groups. Formed into wings, and thus making the massed ranks of fighters easier to control once in the air, each group was able to make the best use of advance warning information, via radar and *Ultra* intercepts, and to ensure that a relay system provided adequate forces for all tasks, which were about to be broadened.

ATTACK OR ESCORT?

Extremely long range was not a criteria in the original specification for the P-51. Ordered as a tactical reconnaissance type for the RAF by the British Purchasing Commission in 1940, it initially aroused little interest in USAAF circles. When it proved to offer a useful capability as a low altitude (below 10,000 ft) fighter and dive bomber, the Army placed orders, intending to deploy the new type in the attack role. As the A-36 Apache and P-51 Mustang, the NAA design went on to carve an enviable reputation as a rugged close-support fighter for the troops on the frontline during the Twelfth AAF's campaign in Tunisia and Sicily.

The Mustang story might have ended at that point, had it not been for the success of a series of test flights, beginning in October 1942, that proved the Rolls-Royce Merlin 61 engine to be capable of outstanding performance when mated to the Mustang airframe. The most important attribute of the conversion, which was immeasurably helped by the P-51's extremely efficient wing, was a hitherto undreamed of range.

Careful fuel metering of the Packard Merlin showed that it could not only run on the Mustang's full tankage of 100 octane for eight-and-a-half hours, consuming only 60 gallons an hour at a 260-mph cruise setting, but it could also provide enough power in hand for five minutes' combat. That meant that P-51s could escort bombers from the UK to the farthest point in Germany, fight off the attacking Luftwaffe, and return safely.

Unfortunately, this awesome realisation took some time to materialise in the form of new aircraft. Fitting a foreign engine in a perfectly sound American design was an idea that took some explaining to certain parties. This was perfectly understandable as the P-51's original powerplant, the Allison V-1710, was a good engine, but it was not designed for high-altitude, long-range, patrol work. Also, due to a lack of funds Allison had been unable to improve the V-1710, despite the fact that its development had begun three years earlier than the Merlin!

Widespread acknowledgement of the critical point the daylight bomber offensive had reached led to the Merlin Mustang project eventually receiving enthusiastic backing at the highest levels on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the personalities who became involved were Sir Wilfred Freeman and USAAF Commanding General, H H 'Hap' Arnold. With this kind of support behind the project there was little chance that the 'marriage would not be blessed. . .'

Development work at Rolls-Royce had produced the Merlin 65 by the end of 1942, this engine offering 600hp more than the Allison V-1710-39. Fortunately, agreement had already been reached between Rolls-Royce and the Packard company to build Merlins under licence, and by the time the XP-51B was ready for flight testing in November 1942, US engine supply was fully guaranteed. North American Aviation tooled up to build Mustangs both at their vast Inglewood plant in California – they rolled out their first P-51B in June 1943 – and in Dallas, Texas, where the first near-identical P-51C flew two months later.

Despite the Merlin Mustang being seen as the answer to the long-range escort problem, the initial P-51B group, the 354th, was still locked into the USAAF's procurement policy as a close-air support unit. Allison-engined P-51s were proving their worth in the Italian campaign, and the USAAF continued to consider the Mustang purely as a ground attack type. They viewed the 'Pioneer Mustang' group as the ideal cadre for the newly constituted tactical Ninth AAF (reformed in England on 7 September 1943) to cut their teeth on the type.

However, much behind the scenes wheeling and dealing brought a transfer of the 354th into the 8th in exchange for the 358th FG, who were equipped with Thunderbolts. This move had many long-term benefits for it not only focused the P-51B primarily as an escort fighter, but revealed the potential of the radial-engined P-47 in the ground attack role – its air-cooled Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp powerplant was more survivable when it came to enduring light flak damage than the liquid-cooled Merlin. Both types were to serve their respective air forces well.



Gentile shows how cramped the P-51B's cockpit could become once the pilot had swathed himself in flight/survival gear

The sad wreck of *Shangri-La* which Gentile crash-landed at Debden on 13 April 1944 – just days before he was due to go home. Had it survived the accident it would undoubtedly have been shipped to the US for demonstration purposes. As it was the aircraft was good only for the scrap pile. The 4th FG commander, Lt Col Don Blakeslee, was livid when the carefully-staged press show for Gentile was abruptly terminated following the crash. Rumour has it that the wreck was bulldozed into a farmer's pond near to the Essex airfield, where it remains to this day



Initially, it was agreed that the 354th would operate as part of the Eighth for an indefinite period, or at least until enough Mustangs were available to re-equip its own assigned groups. To innumerable American bomber crews that change was to be a vital lifeline for the remaining 18 months of the war.

Due to the critical nature of the daylight bombing campaign in Europe in the autumn of 1943, the 354th were thrown into combat without the benefit of any stateside training on the P-51. Commanded by Col Kenneth Martin, the group had to work hard to prepare itself for the first shakedown escort mission prior to being blooded over Germany. Having flown P-39 Airacobras in the US, the 354th found the ETO a very different prospect. The first P-51Bs were shipped into Liverpool and the group began reorganising at Greenham Common, Berkshire, in early November 1943, before moving to Boxted later that month.

Few new aircraft make an entirely trouble-free operational debut, and the P-51B was no exception. European weather, which often appeared to side entirely with the Germans, contrived to plague the early Merlin Mustang missions almost as much as it had earlier done with the P-38. A long catalogue of technical faults also kept the 354th's groundcrews, and NAA's engineers, who received full reports, more than busy. Fortunately, few of these were serious enough to ground the P-51B for any length of time.

Gradually most of the bugs were eradicated, although a few were inherent in the design and could only be compensated for. Among the worst of these was the modest armament of four Browning .50 in machine guns. As a result of the P-51's slender wing profile, each pair of guns was canted over to allow the weapons to fit within the cramped confines of the flying surfaces. This arrangement resulted in the ammunition having to negotiate an acute angle as it fed off the belt tracks into the guns' breeches. Prone to freezing in the cold, thin, air 25,000 ft over Germany, the belt feed design caused rounds to jam on the tracks, resulting in numerous stoppages. On countless occasions, pilots suddenly found they had only half their original firepower or less.

Neither did the highly-tuned Packard Merlin take kindly to the hostile conditions. Coolant leaks became almost routine 'fixes' for the Boxted groundcrews, as did fouled spark plugs and hose joints that cracked under the ultra-low temperatures. There was also a lengthy list of other minor irritations.

Nevertheless, the P-51's performance was clearly superior to any other Army fighter, and it soon



Don Blakeslee commanded the famous 4th FG at Debden for much of 1944. Rated as one of the finest fighter leaders of the war, he ended the conflict with 15.5 victories to his credit, four of which were ground kills. Don's regard for his pilots also made him one of the most popular COs in the Eighth AAF (*Harry Holmes*)

Everett Stewart, like other commanders, had a busy war passing on his skills to others. Stewart flew with three groups, the 4th, 352nd and the 355th



RAF slang personified on a 355th Group P-51B at Steeple Morden. Mission markers on early Eighth AAF Mustangs commonly took the form of yellow bomb stencils, this aircraft also boasting five 'brooms', which denoted successfully completed fighter sweeps

Walter Karoleski Jr of the 354th FS/355th FG made ace with a score of 5.54. Visible are salient features of the early model Mustang. Rear-view mirrors, though non-standard, were adopted by many pilots to reduce the possibility of an enemy fighter 'bouncing' them, as vision aft through the framed 'greenhouse' canopy was limited to say the least



Henry Brown was top ace of the 355th FG, with a final score of 14.20 in the air – the fifth of a kill denotes a shared victory with another pilot. His most successful day in combat was 27 September 1944 when he downed four aircraft in P-51D-5-NA 44-13305. In total, strafing victories brought his score to 28.70



made its mark. To the horror of the German *Jagdflieger*, the P-51B, which bore a marked resemblance to their own Bf 109G, also appeared the equal of not only their best aircraft, but also their most highly experienced pilots, too. Worse, the new Mustang was clearly superior to the Luftwaffe's twin-engined types, which were frequently used on bomber interception to back up the single-seaters.

One of the first pilots to demonstrate this latter point was Jim Howard of the 354th who, on 11 January 1944, despatched eight Bf 110s in short order. And he performed this remarkable feat with a gradually dwindling number of guns in his P-51B – by the time that he eventually broke off combat only a single Browning was functioning. For this feat, Howard became one of only six Army fighter pilots to be awarded the Medal of Honor in World War 2.

News of the 'hot' new Mustang spread quickly. At Debden, Lt Col Don Blakeslee, CO of the 4th FG, asked, pleaded and cajoled for his 'Eagles' to be allowed to replace their P-47s with P-51Bs. This famous group had earlier been weaned on various marks of Spitfire during their individual 'Eagle Squadron' days within the RAF and, as a result of this experience, had never felt fully confident with the immense Thunderbolt.

Blakeslee eventually got his way. As one of the most experienced fighter commanders in the ETO, he was temporarily seconded to the 354th to gain experience on the Mustang that would in turn allow his own group's combat debut to be as painless as possible. He led the first 24-ship mission on 1 December, and ten days later, following the arrival of 75-gal drop tanks, the 354th's Mustangs escorted bombers to Emden. On the 12th the target was Keil, where again the P-51Bs covered B-17s bombing the naval base and shipyards throughout the 960-mile round trip from England. Don Blakeslee led the 354th on a further four missions before returning to Debden, convinced beyond all doubt that with Mustangs, the 4th FG, which was having a lean time in terms of aerial victories, could become the scourge of the Luftwaffe.

Few P-51Bs were earmarked for other theatres at this time as the P-38 was performing well in the Pacific and the P-40 and P-47 were available in sufficient numbers to fill most other immediate requirements. Once the Merlin Mustang entered service, it was realised that the success or failure of the daylight bomber offensive in the ETO – a key element in the Allied plan to bear Germany first – rested almost entirely on having



Besides being a good all round combat aircraft, the P-51 could also endure rough handling. The Packard Merlin often protected the pilot during a hard landing, or indeed an overly low strafing pass against a ground target – this 339th FG P-51B, nicknamed *Sally*, returned from France with electricity cables snagged around its spinner! The 339th proved to be particularly adept at strafing, claiming more than 100 aircraft destroyed on the ground on two separate occasions – 105 on 4 April 1945 and 118 a week later. No other group ever topped the century mark more than once.

An orderly group take-off involved much work by the groundcrews, including placing the drop tanks near each aircraft ready for attachment. *Buzz Boy*, a P-51B of the 355th FG's 358th FS, will obviously fly the next sortie fitted with the tanks lying in the foreground. Its nickname came from the slang term 'buzzing', a word which summed up the strafing role of the Eighth. Indeed, pilots who indulged in this practice dubbed themselves 'Bill's Buzz Boys' after their boss, Gen Bill Kepner.



enough Mustang groups in England. It was as simple as that.

As Gen Kepner said at the time, the P-51B is 'distinctly the best fighter that we are going to get over here. They are going to be the only satisfactory answer.'

FIRST ACE

The Eighth AAF began 1944 confident that its existing fighter force would soon be boosted by new P-51 squadrons, then training in the US. Ten groups equipped with either

the P-47 or the P-38 formed the backbone of the fighter force, with the 354th then the sole Mustang group. All had seen some action by the end of 1943, although the lion's share of confirmed victories had understandably fallen to the numerically superior P-47 squadrons. The first ETO ace was Charles London of Duxford's 78th FG, who achieved the magic five down on 30 July 1943. Since then, the 'ace race' had acquired a number of favourites for top honours. Maj Eugene Roberts, also of the 78th, was the second pilot to score five confirmed kills following a successful mission on 31 August.

Membership of this select band of pilots had, by the end of 1943, been expanded to include Col Hubert 'Hub' Zemke, Maj Dave Schilling, Capt Walker Muhurin, Lt Robert Johnson and Capt Gerald Johnson, all of the 56th; Walter Beckham of the 353rd; and Duane Beeson and Maj Roy Evans of the 4th. Jim Howard's victory over the Bf 110G-2s of *Zerstörergeschwader* (ZG) 76 made him the world's premier P-51 ace, and the first of many 'aces in a day' in the ETO.

During the winter months of 1943/44, the P-51B steadily proved that it had a marked superiority over the P-47 and P-38 in the escort role, although both of the latter types were subject to a lengthy programme of technical improvements. This meant that the Lightnings and Thunderbolts of early 1944 were far more capable combat aircraft than they had been only six to eight months before. The P-47, for example, could now easily cover the bombers on their return leg, and providing a separate withdrawal support force soon featured as a regular mission for the groups still equipped with the type. These sorties gave Thunderbolt pilots the chance to gain air combat victories, thus preventing the P-51 groups from stealing all the glory.

But it was the basic fact that the Mustang was the only type that could stay with the 'heavies' all the way to their targets and back that endeared it so highly to VIIIth Bomber Command. Enemy fighters still penetrated the escort screen, but now the bomber gunners, who despite their entirely circumstantial over-claiming of kills, were also

helping to gradually whittle down the pilot strength of the *Jagdwaaffe*.

BIG WEEK

With Don Blakeslee assigned to command the 4th FG from 1 January 1944, the day when an original Eighth AAF unit would receive its first P-51Bs came that much nearer. In a determined effort to reduce German opposition in the skies over Europe, the AAF launched an all out attack on fighter production sites and airfields, giving its pilots *carte blanche* to hunt the *Jagdwaaffe* across Germany and the occupied countries. Codenamed the 'Pointblank Directive', and dubbed 'Big Week' by the fighter groups, this offensive was scheduled for February.

Meanwhile, more skullduggery was being perpetrated to delay the Mustang reaching the 4th FG, or so it seemed to Don Blakeslee. A second Ninth AAF P-51 group, the 357th, had been despatched to the ETO primarily as a ground-attack wing, but once in-theatre they were quickly swapped with the P-47-equipped 358th FG, who had only recently arrived in the UK as part of the Eighth AAF. Installed at Raydon, the 357th moved to Leiston, Suffolk, and by 22 January had 15 P-51Bs on strength. At the end of that month it was announced that the Eighth AAF had finally received its first Mustang group. The 357th was in fact the twelfth fighter group to be assigned to the Eighth, and they flew their first mission on 11 February.

The 4th needn't have worried for it also received Mustangs in February, and eager to put the new type through its paces, the group began pilot conversion onto type in the middle of flying 'Big Week' (20-25 February) sorties in their P-47s. With more than 50 P-51Bs on hand, the 'Eagles' were ready to fly their shakedown Mustang mission on the 26th. The weather decided otherwise, however, and the long-awaited day came on the 28th.

One hazard that an infinite number of P-51s could not overcome was Europe's notorious winter weather. Fog, mist and thick cloud often pinned aircraft to their hardstands when they should otherwise have been covering bombers. There was little point in launching on a mission if the weather prevented any hope of a rendezvous between the fighters and the 'heavies', even with the assistance of England's excellent system of radio direction. The toll of lost pilots wasted through either collision or the not inconsiderable hazard of becoming lost and running out of fuel, rose steadily during the winter months. It often happened, of course, that both bombers



After D-Day the USAAF circulated a directive indicating that full camouflage paint no longer needed to be worn by combat groups. The 357th FG preferred a top coat of green, however, and retained this modification to the standard polished metal through into 1945. This particular P-51B-10-NA was the first of four Mustangs used by the 357th's second top scoring ace, John B England, and contrary to other published works on the aces of the Eighth AAF, the aircraft actually wore the serial 42-106462 on its fin, not '463. England's most successful day in combat came on 27 November 1944 when he downed four aircraft whilst flying in a P-51D of the 362nd FS.

Tactical camouflage was also widely used by the 361st FG, as perfectly illustrated here by P-51B-15 42-10692 of the 374th FS. This aircraft was the first Mustang assigned to Maj Wallace Hopkins, who finished the war with four aerial victories and four strafing kills. Unlike Hopkins' later P-51s, this machine isn't adorned with his famous sobriquet, *Ferocious Frankie*.



Photographed in mid-1944 whilst still a squadron boss, Col Irwin Dregne took over command of the 357th FG on 14 January 1945. He finished the war with seven kills (Olmsted via Bowman)

and fighters took off in clear conditions, only to have the elements turn nasty en route to, or actually over, the target. In that case, the bombing would invariably lack a good concentration, leading to an inevitable return to the same target at a later date.

For the fighter pilots, more escort missions meant greater chances to rack up victories, and to perhaps achieve the minimum five kills to earn 'acedom'. Eighth AAF headquarters, whilst not exactly encouraging the cult of the fighter ace, nevertheless did little to prevent groups compiling tallies of their most successful pilots, believing that this fostered a healthy *esprit de corps* and inspired all pilots to try to emulate the high scorers.

'Acadom', however, remained an unofficial accomplishment, and provided that such enthusiasm for personal scoring did not compromise teamwork, group commanders had little choice but to concur. They did stress, however, that an escort group had to have its main task – the protection of the bombers – in mind at all times.

While this was something of a compromise in that individual pilots rightly believed that chasing away the enemy and shooting them down, even well away from the bomber stream, prevented that particular aircraft from rising to battle on a subsequent sortie, their charges could consequently remain unguarded for vital minutes. This problem was soon solved by the groups dividing their forces.

The relatively low level of activity during the closing weeks of 1943 had seen an influx of replacement bombers, so that by early 1944 Eighth AAF groups could be sent to a number of targets simultaneously. This confused and spread the defending German fighters and on occasion, gave the US escort a useful element of surprise.

On 14 January Capt Don Gentile of the 4th's 336th Squadron had shot down two Fw 190s to achieve ace status. A hazardous dogfight ensued when Gentile's P-47 was attacked by other Focke-Wulfs soon after shooting down his second kill, but he made it home. Afterwards, he viewed the experience as having been highly valuable. Having been on the receiving end of an attack by a pilot who was clearly a German *experten*, Gentile reckoned that he would find air combat that much easier in future! The law of averages had it that you couldn't always be up against the best *experten* in the *Jagdweh* all that often.

That said, air combat was not in any way guaranteed on every single sortie. There were days when the *Jagdweh* simply did not show at all, and pilots could quite easily fly a series of operations and hear about tussles with the Germans only by proxy. Overall though, January 1944 was an encouraging month for VIIIth Fighter Command, who claimed 172 enemy aircraft shot down for the loss of 65 of its own. However, bad weather had reduced the bomber offensive to only nine effective raids that same month.



Refuelling and an engine check for P-51B 42-106923 of the 364th FS/357th FG at Leiston, Suffolk, in July 1944. The barely readable 'nameplate' on the ground indicates the aircraft may have been nicknamed *Pistol Pete*. Few groups in Eighth AAF adorned their Mustangs with full wraparound invasion stripes as shown here, most restricting their application to the wings and fuselage beneath the 'star and bar'



ON THE DECK

Following the avowed policy of attacking the Luftwaffe at every opportunity, VIIIth FC also introduced ace status for pilots who destroyed five or more enemy aircraft on the ground. This new concept received a mixed reception when it was announced on 8 February as ground strafing, while effective, was very hazardous. No other air force counted ground victories in this way, and it was to remain a controversial decision.

Command, however, knew that aerial kills could be elusive, particularly for average pilots. There were also periods when some units were just not in the right place at the right time, a situation that could cause a morale problem if pilots consistently failed to score on multiple missions. By encouraging ground strafing victories – and therefore aces – Bill Kepner knew that more enemy aircraft would be destroyed, which was, after all, the whole point of the exercise.

Kepner himself believed in the value of strafing, but realised that not all pilots had the skill to carry it out to maximum effect. He therefore urged group commanders to select their best crews to thoroughly learn the technicalities of ground attack work as an adjunct to regular escort operations.

By early March, VIIIth FC remained predominantly equipped with the P-47, although most groups were slated to receive Mustangs at the earliest opportunity. Standardisation of fighter and bomber types was a goal never achieved by the USAAF in England, but availability of more P-51s made the prospect of all groups flying this type much more possible than it had been in 1943. Similarly, a command preference for the B-17 over the B-24 began working through during 1944. Having all units fly one type of aircraft aided serviceability and reduced the number of spares that needed to be stocked – most parts had to be initially shipped in from the US. Establishment of base air depots in the UK, notably that at Burtonwood (county), eased reliance on the vagaries of North Atlantic convoys, and enabled many aircraft to be repaired in-theatre. New P-51s were usually shipped by sea as deck cargo on transports or escort carriers, a process that saw the aircraft 'cocooned' against the ravages of salt water and then thoroughly cleaned upon arrival in the UK.

The conversion of all groups to P-51s lay in the future and one unit, the 56th, resisted all attempts to part it from its beloved P-47s. As one of the original saviours of the Eighth, the 'Wolfpack' was allowed this indulgence. Not that 'Hub' Zemke's outfit was the only one to protest at the impending conversion. In particular the 364th and 479th FGs, which arrived in the ETO with P-38s during early 1944, howled loudly at the decision. However, most complaints were forgotten about once crews had experienced the superiority of the P-51 over the P-38 in combat.



Although not an ace in the true sense of the word, Capt Lee Eisenhart nevertheless flew a full tour of duty with the 339th FG's 505th FS from Fowlmere, in Cambridgeshire, during the height of the daylight bombing offensive in spring 1944. Looking pleased with life during a camera session at the East Anglia base, Eisenhart christened his P-51B (42-106833) *Bonny Bea* after his sweetheart back in America. He is wearing the standard summer flying rig of the day, with his parachute pack perched on the wing alongside him (USAF)

NEW BLOOD

As the Mustang had originally been ordered for service with the RAF, it was duly 'blooded' by the British first. Numerous tests were carried out by Rolls-Royce and the A&AEE (Aircraft & Armaments Experimental Establishment) at Boscombe Down to 'improve the breed', and a number of modifications were made to service machines.

Early models fitted with the 'greenhouse' canopy came in for criticism as the high angle of the nose made ground manoeuvring quite demanding, and this was not improved by the multiple framing of the hood, which was manufactured in three sections. Other modifications were made to British aircraft, including the adoption of a new clear-view plexiglass canopy centre-section designed by a Sqn Ldr Robert Malcolm of the RAF, which virtually eliminated any visibility problems.

First tested at Boscombe Down in February 1944, and subsequently fitted to most RAF P-51Bs (Mustang IIIs), the Malcolm hood was extremely popular with pilots, and as the number of USAAF aircraft in the UK increased, there was widespread demand for it. Production in Britain remained modest, however, with many deliveries going not to the Eighth Air Force but the Ninth, who widely fitted the hood to their tactical P-51s. That left the Eighth's service depots scrambling to acquire stocks of Malcolm hoods unofficially, and although a number did work their way through to service units, and thence to operational fighter groups, there were never really enough to meet demand.

In November 1943, as the Base Air Depots in the UK issued the first of a series of modifications and servicing requirements for the P-51B, NAA flew the prototype of a new Mustang model. On the 17th of that month a modified P-51B (43-12101), reconfigured as the XP-51D, made its first flight. This aircraft would eventually rectify or eliminate most of the drawbacks experienced with the early Merlin Mustangs.

GUN POWER

In comparison with British practice, which as far as fighter armament was concerned tended to concentrate on two broad extremes of the rifle calibre (303 in) machine gun (MG) and the shell-firing 20 mm cannon, American aircraft armament slotted admirably between the two. The



Early P-51D-5s lacked the dorsal fin fillet, as 44-13573 of the 357th FG's 363rd FS clearly shows. Although this sub-type successfully flew numerous combat missions, fillets were sent to the UK by NAA for adoption as 'field modifications'. The dorsal appendage was designed to correct minor directional stability problems encountered with the P-51B. *Isabel III* wears two victory crosses under its windscreen (Via T R Bennett)



Alice Marie II also hailed from the 363rd FS, and was photographed in spring 1945 in one of the unit's rural-looking revetments that were specially built for the aircraft at Leiston, in Suffolk. This machine boasts a solid red rudder as applied to all 363rd FS P-51Ds in November 1944. The previous OD green scheme worn by most 357th FG Mustangs was removed in the autumn of 1944 when VIIIth FC realised that its groups were not going to France (Ethell)

Colt-Browning .50 in MG became the standard US aircraft weapon (with all the advantages of commonality), and used in batteries of four or six in the P-51B and D respectively. It could deal effectively with virtually any adversary.

The weight of fire possible with such heavily-armed German aircraft as the Fw 190A-3 and Bf 109G, by comparison, was far higher than a battery of 'fifties', and when the Luftwaffe was able to fit the 30 mm MK 108 in their main fighter types, the long-suffering bomber crews faced one of the most devastating cannon ever used operationally. This gun was quite capable of destroying a fighter such as the P-51 with a single round if it hit the right spot.

The main drawback of such heavy calibre guns, however, was their weight, both in terms of the weapon itself and its ammunition. Similarly, only a limited amount of space was available to designers for the fitment of such large weapons, as a fighter's aerodynamics could be critically compromised by the sheer bulk of these guns. Whereas the P-51B carried a total of 1260 rounds for its quarter of MGs, the Fw 190A-3 typically carried 2520 rounds for its four 20 mm cannon and two MGs. However, despite boasting this fearsome firepower, the average German pilot using his 'main battery' of cannon on bombers consistently scored hits with only two per cent of rounds expended primarily because he fired from too far out.

Provided, therefore, that an American pilot closed with the German fighter to the average 300-400 yards, and his gunnery was up to the mark, the fact that the enemy had more firepower was not a great advantage. 'Get in close, then you can't miss', was a maxim that rarely failed.

Throughout the early months of 1944, deliveries of the P-51B to England increased, the priority being to eventually equip all the in-theatre fighter groups assigned to the Eighth Air Force, as well as a number that were part of the new tactical Ninth Air Force. By the end of May 1944 VIIIth FC had its full complement of groups; the arrival of the 479th, the highest numbered fighter unit to be assigned, gave a



A close-up view of *Isabel III*, as featured on the preceding page. Proudly posing in front of 'their' machine, the crew chief, armourer and armourer's 'mate' are joined by the group's RAF liaison officer. Secondment to the Eighth of experienced RAF personnel helped smooth over many of the ETO's unique challenges (Via T R Bennett)



Lt Albert Hanson of the 339th FG strikes a pose in front of his personal P-51B, *Miss Priss* (44-13911). Like all Mustangs flying out of Fowlmere in the spring of 1944, this aircraft is adorned with high-visibility D-Day invasion stripes (USAF)



A pair of P-51D-5s assigned to the 4th FG's 335th FS are joined by an example from the 336th FS. All three Mustangs are equipped with the British-manufactured 108-gal 'paper' drop tanks

Tika IV of the 361st FG peels away from the camera-ship to give a clear view of the P-51D's lower surfaces, which despite constant attention by the groundcrew, were always streaked with oil and grime from operational flying at high altitude (USAF)



total of 15, plus the 354th, which would remain under its control for the time being. By then the 352nd at Bodney, the 355th at Steeple Morden, the 359th at East Wretham and the 361st at Bottisham had all switched to the P-51B. With the bomber force also strengthened, future prosecution of the air war over Europe without prohibitive losses was now a far sounder prospect than it had been just six months previously.

RAF FIGHTER METHODS

When it came to England the Eighth Air Force 'borrowed' RAF Fighter Command techniques and procedures, with USAAF fighter groups flying operations similar in composition to those of their Allies – these early sorties thus retained their British codenames. In time, variations to these missions were introduced, with a few American appellations being added as certain types of fighter sweep were more or less unique to the Eighth Air Force. The most common sorties were codenamed *Ramrod*, *Circus*, *Jackpot* and *Rodeo*. VIIIth FC also adopted the RAF fighter pilot's standard tour of duty of 200 flight hours. Tailored to the short-range sweeps undertaken by most British units over western Europe, this yardstick had some drawbacks for the Americans as it often took four hours to complete an escort to Berlin – thus individual pilots soon became 'time-expired'.

The USAAF therefore raised the number of hours for one tour to 300, or 75 missions. Pilots could (and many duly did) volunteer for an extension, but the system meant that there was a constant rotation of fresh pilots coming into frontline squadrons. Given the choice between risking their necks further, or going home, many combat veterans naturally opted for the latter. Surprisingly perhaps, this did not work against the

fighter force, but it did mean that relatively few American pilots, in common with all the Western Allied air arms, were able to achieve high air combat scores. Only ten pilots in fact shot down 20 or more enemy aircraft, and most of these did so only by flying extended tours.

Actually, there was little pressure for even the top combat pilots to stay. As the war progressed the Allies processed so many pilots through training schools in the US and the Commonwealth that there was never a shortage in the combat units. Theatre training and the regular practice of easing newcomers into the demands of the ETO by 'shakedown', shallow penetration missions on which the enemy was not expected to show in force, additionally helped make their transition as trouble-free as possible.

Nor that this could ever quite quell the feeling of apprehension

that a new pilot felt on his debut to combat. The ETO had an awesome reputation which preceded it throughout the war. The Germans were the most formidable of foes, and triple ace Col Clarence 'Bud' Anderson aptly summed up how it felt to prepare for that first mission.

'My pulse was playing a Gene Krupa solo as I walked to my plane that morning and climbed into the cockpit. Once you were strapped in and sitting there, so very alone, waiting to fire up and taxi away and take-off in line, the minutes were soldiers crawling on their bellies in mud. I never was one to dwell on bad possibilities and would generally use this time to focus on the mission, thinking about what lay ahead, and preparing the way an athlete prepares for a game. But on 8 February 1944, I was a little less sophisticated about that sort of thing. I had logged 893 flying hours already, better than an hour and 20 minutes a day for two years. But only 30 hours and 45 minutes of that was in P-51s. I knew I had lots to learn. And what I was thinking about before prodding the Merlin to life was of not getting lost, not screwing up. I was more afraid of screwing up than of dying.'

Anderson's final remarks reflect the the fundamental attitude essential for any military force to operate efficiently, thus achieving an *esprit de corps* second to none. Nobody wanted to fail at his chosen contribution to the war effort, to let down his country, family and friends back home. When a man volunteered, he wanted to see the thing through. And by channelling a youthful confidence and the unquestionable excitement of flying a range of magnificent aircraft as part of the overall war effort, the US Army got its fighter pilots in abundance. For young men brought up in a machine-orientated age, the desire to fly in combat – and get paid for doing so – was an irresistible challenge.

Once assigned to one of the VIIIth FC groups a new pilot quickly realised he had joined a highly professional outfit. This special attachment to one's squadron extended to the groundcrews, who usually signed



The mount of 374th FS, 361st FG ace Wallace Hopkins was well photographed throughout mid to late 1944, usually carrying a pair of dummy 500 lb bombs, as in this case. Ordnance other than guns was used by Eighth Air Force Mustangs on an irregular, 'as required' basis, as generally there were more than enough Ninth Air Force tactical fighter bombers on hand. Hopkins shot down six aircraft during his 76-sortie tour, with this P-51D (44-13704), nicknamed *Ferocious Frankie* like his previous B-model, being his personal mount from June 1944 onwards (USAF)

The first of 364th FS ace Richard Peterson's P-51Ds, 44-13586 shows 14 of his 15.5 kills and, like his second Mustang (44-14868), is christened with the phrase his wife used to sign her letters. Born in Alexandra, Minnesota, Peterson scored almost all of his kills between September 1944 and April 1945 (via J Ethell)





Lt Col Andrew Evans Jr poses for a propaganda shot in full long-range escort kit in a P-51D of his parent unit, the 357th FG, at Leiston, in Suffolk. A seasoned combat veteran, he finished the war with six kills (M Olmsted via M Bowman)



Evans Jr commanded the 362nd FS from late 1944 onwards, his own personal P-51D (44-64851) being christened *Little Sweetie 4*. As can be clearly seen, its pilot's combined scoreboard of air and ground kills is proudly displayed beneath the cockpit. The 357th FG was the first P-51 outfit assigned to the Eighth, and it duly scored more aerial kills than any other Mustang unit in the ETO – its 609 victories placed it second overall only to the 56th's Thunderbolt squadrons, who claimed 674 (M Olmsted via Bowman)

up for the duration and were not subject to set tours of duty like the pilots. Unit pride was reflected in a variety of ways, including paintwork. When VIIIth FC introduced highly visible group colours for squadrons in 1944, it was for the practical purpose of aerial recognition both by fighters of the same unit and bomber crews. Additionally, the well-decorated Mustangs were in a way the equivalent of the pilots' personal transport back home, and similarities did not end there. A buffed-up automobile lasted longer, and a polished P-51 had the more practical bonus of adding a few knots of speed, which often made the difference between life and death in mortal combat over occupied Europe.

Personal embellishment of fighters was tolerated, if not officially condoned. Most commanders realised that aircraft decorated with German flags to represent victories bred a fine competitive spirit, particularly among the groundcrews who would boast that 'their' ace pilot was numbered with the best in the entire squadron or group. They would proudly show off the kills which were just as much a tribute to their hard work as the fighting spirit of the pilot in question. Congressmen and other 'top brass' who visited the bases were also impressed by such markings, although the more risqué examples of aircraft art would be prudently hangared to spare anyone's blushes. War correspondents liked nothing better than to photograph and film pilots in cockpits framed by a row of swastikas, for there were few better ways to show how Americans were contributing to the war effort in Europe.

Groundcrew, rather than pilots, decorated the aircraft usually during stand-downs or maintenance periods, and on certain bases there were individuals whose artistic talents were so much in demand that they were employed on an almost full-time basis dealing with requests. A more practical use of paint, outside of tactical markings, was to apply the names – the pilot, crew chief and armourer – of those associated with a particular machine on a daily basis.

When VIIIth FC began adding ground strafing to the fighter

groups' repertoire, there were some unexpected challenges; the Luftwaffe had long since pulled the bulk of its fighter force back into Germany to stay largely outside the range of the P-47, whilst conversely strengthening flak defences to deal with bombers over occupied France. Also, it was one thing for the command to draw up a plan to strafe German airfields, but quite another to locate them all; RAF maps were used to plot those that were known, but group commanders stressed that pilots would have to be prepared to find, and possibly to fight, their way home individually after attacking them. Navigation over hostile territory, with a sea crossing before landfall in England, was quite a challenge, and an aspect of combat that had not been over-stressed in training.

It also took time to perfect the technique of ground strafing if parked aircraft, installations and vehicles were to be destroyed, rather than

merely receiving a few repairable holes. This was not an easily acquired skill as most groups had been trained to perform high altitude flying, not ground attack. And while all German airfields were defended by AA installations, at that stage of the war the most forward ones were not exactly crammed with fighters.

Therefore, pilots duly found themselves taking a steadily rising toll of bombers, transports and liaison aircraft, not the all important fighters; it was true that Kepner's idea was to deny the Luftwaffe aircraft of any kind, but a lack of quality interceptor targets on the ground meant that the P-51 groups now performing bomber escort missions were still opposed by strong enemy fighter formations. However, the Mustang's range meant that pilots were now quite capable of taking on the *Jagdflotte* 'in its own back yard', as some of the early missions were to show.

A number of German fighters were definitely being destroyed on the ground, although again it wasn't realised that the enemy would continue to produce aircraft at an ever-increasing rate, irrespective of the bombs dropped on industrial plants. Of equal, if not greater importance was that the Allied pilots occasionally got amongst German training aircraft and shot the hapless *Jagdfliieger* of tomorrow down with ease.

As time went by an extremely accurate picture of Luftwaffe airfield util-



One of the first units assigned to VIIIth FC back in August 1943; the 20th FG had persevered with the P-38 right through until the arrival of P-51Cs in July 1944. These 77th FS Mustangs were photographed on the dispersal at the eastern end of their base at Kingscliffe, in Northamptonshire, soon after the group picked up P-51Ds in the late summer of 1944 (Ethell)

Fine formation flying for the camera by a quartet of 362nd FS, 357th FG Mustangs led by Capt Harvey Mace at the controls of *Sweet Helen*, alias 44-13558/G4-B. The second P-51 in the line up (nicknamed *Wee Willy*) wears four kill markings



ination was built up, but as with any highly mobile force, the Germans could switch bases rapidly, and a constant watch had to be maintained by photo reconnaissance. It was in this area too that *Ultra* intercepts were so valuable to Eighth AAF commanders, for German unit movements inevitably created a considerable degree of radio traffic before and during the transfer. With this intelligence in hand it became relatively easy for the Allies to plot where units were stationed, and which aircraft they flew.

Strafing soon began taking its toll on the Mustang force though, fighters often being downed by only a few well-placed rounds, particularly if the Merlin's coolant system was hit. Capt Duane Beeson, an early P-51B ace with the 4th FG's 336th FS, was hit by flak and shot down on 5 April during a strafing run across an aerodrome west of Brandenburg – he spent the rest of the war as a POW.

GENTILE FAREWELL

Another major loss for the Eighth barely a week later was Capt Don Gentile, although he was not claimed by the Germans, rather the US rotational system for pilots. April 13 1944 was a day of mixed emotions for both Gentile and his CO, Lt Col Don Blakeslee. The former had won the first 'Ace Race' by beating the legendary Eddie Rickenbacker's Great War score of 26 kills (6 of Gentile's 27.83 victories were strafing kills, however), and a huge throng of local and US media representatives gathered at Debden to meet the Eighth's then leading ace following his last sortie.

Upon his return to the Essex base, Gentile buzzed the field in time-honoured fashion, the well-decorated *Shangri-La* 'pouting on the coals' and giving the assembled crowd a real thrill. But Gentile's last low pass was a little too low, and the red-nosed Mustang scraped the ground with its radiator as it shot past the press. Fighting for control, Gentile managed to belly land the P-51B and walk away virtually unscathed – the aircraft, however, was totalled. Blakeslee had earlier said that if anyone in his group wrote off an aircraft through mis-adventure they would be immediately transferred home. Time-expired in any case, Gentile was duly despatched back to America.

Two days later, a full-scale *Jackpot* mission netted a record bag for VIIIth FC. Fifty-eight victories were claimed (18 in the air and 40



The 353rd FG at Raydon, in Suffolk, flew yellow and black chequer-nosed P-51Ds in combat from November 1944, the unit having been previously equipped with P-47s. *Stasia II* (44-15587) was part of the 352nd FS and was regularly flown by Capt A R Rosatone

Lt Leroy Pletz brings *Donna-Mite* (44-11624) of the 353rd FG's 352nd FS home to Raydon in early 1945. His mount is a relatively rare Dallas-built P-51K, fitted with the none-too-successful Aeroproducts propeller in place of the Hamilton-Standard device found on most Mustangs. The new prop was built primarily because Hamilton-Standard could not keep up with demand, and although it incorporated several new innovations, it suffered from excessive blade imbalance





George Vanden Heuvel, a 5.5 victory ace with the 361st FG, flew P-51D *Mary Mine* with the 376th FS. This photograph was taken in March 1945 at a very muddy Chievres when the group transferred to Belgium for a spell of duty under Ninth Air Force control



Aircraft damage from flak (as here) and all other causes was methodically photographed by the USAAF for accounting purposes during the war. This picture shows the tail of P-51D 44-142541 of the 364th FG, which got home on 24 October 1944 despite reduced rudder control. Markings on the trim tab are believed to have denoted a P-51 of a flight leader (USAF)

on the ground) as fighters hit airfields in France and the Low Countries.

Bomber escort was resumed on 18 April, a day that took the 4th to Berlin. Nobody ever thought of the 'Big B' as a milk run, and on this sortie the Luftwaffe showed just why. Maj George Carpenter, a 335th FS ace with 11.3 kills already to his credit, waded into a mixed force of Bf 109s and Fw 190s. He quickly despatched two fighters before being badly hit by a well-handled Bf 109G, several cannon strikes wrecking his engine.

Carpenter rapidly lost height in his smoking Mustang, and although he managed to shake off his initial assailant, the American was soon finished off by a lone Fw 190 – he 'took to the silk' just as the Merlin was on the point of bursting into flames. The 4th also lost Lt Lloyd Henry and ace Capt Vic France on the this sortie, the latter being killed when he hit the ground whilst attacking Fw 190s in the circuit at Genthin airfield.

But the following day the 4th's fortunes changed marginally for the better. Sharing bomber escort duties to Kassel with the 352nd, 355th and 357th FGs, the 'Eagles' downed five – this score was equalled by the 357th, whilst the 355th came home with three, as did the Bodney outfit. Two of the 352nd's kills were claimed by the Group's eventual third ranking ace, 1st Lt John Thornell. One major loss during this mission, however, was that of 4th FG double-ace Capt Charles Anderson, who had been shot down in the mêlée of combat that had included a good few rounds aimed in error at Mustangs by the B-17 gunners.

The 357th FG, whose pilots became 'top dogs' amongst the Eighth's Mustang groups in terms of aerial victories, had a good 24 April. Shepherding the bombers during the 'target support' phase of the operation, the 355th and 375th (the former also building an enviable reputation for its prowess in ground strafing) destroyed 42 enemy fighters between them. The Luftwaffe's folly of sending twin-engined aircraft after the bombers was dramatically highlighted when seven were shot down by the 357th. This was yet another occasion when the enemy persisted in performing their split-S and power dive manoeuvre in order to escape from the P-51s, but which often led directly to their demise due to the latter's speed advantage. American pilots easily kept pace with the fleeing enemy, picking them off at will as soon as they levelled out of their dives literally feet above the ground.

At this height the P-51B could usually overhaul either of the German single-seaters, often with terminal results. By simply out-flying their opponents, Allied pilots drove their quarry literally into the ground. At zero feet there was no margin for error, with all sorts of obstacles to avoid, and the *Jagdflieger*, who were by now showing distinct signs of inexperience, often failed to see trees, rising ground or buildings in their path.

Following an enemy aircraft down and away from the bombers could,

however, give Allied pilots problems of their own, as the rest of the formation would simply disappear when, intent on the chase, the charging fighters would shoot off in pursuit of the enemy. Often a re-join could be affected, although numerous pilots simply high-tailed it home alone.

In combat great store was put on the leader-wingman team, and the aces would be the first to acknowledge that mutual support was vital to scoring kills, as without a 'second pair of eyes', pilots, no matter how good they were, risked being bounced by marauding Fw 190s or Bf 109s.

The old 'one-two' punch was practised to great effect throughout the Eighth's tenure in the UK, with one of the first such fighter teams to come to the public's attention consisting of Don Gentile and John Godfrey.

The former was honest enough to express a feeling held by most pilots fresh to the ETO – that by being sent to tackle the *Jugdwaffe*, they were being pitted against 'supermen' who knew all the angles when it came to air combat. Although Gentile soon learnt that this was not totally true, few pilots denegated the enemy once he had been met in combat.

Godfrey, commenting on Gentile's technique, said, 'It's his aggressiveness. He's got a split-second jump on any other fighter I ever saw. Your ordinary good flier sees a flock of Huns below him – and he counts them. Gentile sees a flock and he's after them in the same instant. He'll hit the one he can get to quickest. Reflexes, I guess. When it comes to the pinch, he's got a little something extra.'

An effective fighter escort relied on a reasonably integral formation to be flown by the bombers, who in turn relied on a good assembly over



A solitary kill adorns the canopy bar of P-51D 44-13777 *Rough and Ready* of the 357th FS, 355th FG at Steeple Morden, in Cambridgeshire. This aircraft was flown by a number of different pilots within the squadron from late 1944 (H Holmes)

The 355th started flying P-51s from Steeple Morden in March 1944, having earlier cut their teeth on the P-47. Duran M Vickery Jr flew 44-14910, christened *Bama Bound*, this machine also wearing the name of his future wife Ann-Anita. As with most decorated P-51s, these terms of endearment were carried on the port nose region of his Mustang. (Vickery)





John F Tulloch Jr flew this strikingly-marked P-51D, nicknamed *JAKE THE SNAKE*, with the 358th FS, 355 FG from Steeple Morden in the spring of 1945. It bears not only his personal insignia, but also four kill markings on the canopy bar, and like many pilots of the time, Tulloch Jr has fitted two external rear-vision mirrors to the canopy rail of his Mustang

England. When this went awry, the fighters had the devil's own job to protect hundreds of B-17s or B-24s strung out across miles of sky. Such a shambolic assembly happened on the 29 April Berlin mission, which was compounded by a navigational error that saw the bombers spaced out as much as 40 miles away from their briefed position.

This total chaos resulted in 17 Fortresses being lost in-bound to the target due to the spread out bomber stream, whilst a further 38 B-17s and 25 B-24s were shot down as a result of the *Jagdwaaffe's* attention over and around the German capital itself. Powerless to intervene in this carnage, US fighters downed a mere 14 aircraft in a series of small-scale actions.

By going all out for the Luftwaffe in April the groups had netted positive results – an estimated 825 aircraft had been shot down, with a further 493 destroyed in on the ground. P-51Bs had claimed three-quarters of the victories, but this effort had cost 163 aircraft, including 67 Mustangs. Although it was expected that strafing kills would be achieved at a higher cost, April's figures showed that three P-51s had been lost per 100 sorties against airfields, and just one for every 100 escort missions flown.

Most significantly, the Luftwaffe had lost 489 pilots in April, with only 396 replacements joining the frontline *Gruppen*. The American offensive had also prompted the denuding of other fronts to boost Reich defence, a situation that would only get worse in the coming months.

As the year progressed, and the D-Day landings drew ever nearer, fighters of the Eighth participated in a wholesale laying waste of tactical targets in France. Whilst all this was taking place, more groups were converting to the P-51B, among them the 339th FG at Fowlmere, and they soon went on the offensive over Europe. Many of these missions went unchallenged, as the *Jagdwaaffe* was marshalling its force for the defence against the bombers. For example, on 8 May an enormous air battle developed over Brunswick and Berlin, that day's dual bomber targets, and over 200 German fighters were observed.

Over Dutch territory the *Jagdfliieger* made head-on passes at the 'heavies', but the 359th shot down 11 of them. Upon reaching the target areas, the 352nd made contact with about 150 fighters just as they ren-



John Tulloch Jr poses with his highly imaginative personal emblem of a Messerschmitt-strangling serpent name JAKE! He flew 44-14163 exclusively throughout his tour from Steeple Morden. This marvellous album snap shot also provides excellent detail of the standard fighter pilot rig in the last year of the war

devoured with the bomber force. There was a heavy undercast over Germany that day which tended to favour the Luftwaffe, and the P-51s chased a number of enemy fighters into cloud, only to quickly lose contact with their foe. Lt Col John Meyer, CO of the 352nd's 487th FS, and one of the Eighth's most successful pilots, experienced this frustration before sighting a plum target – a section of Fw 190s still carrying their centreline tanks. Meyer, and his wingman, Capt Hamilton, joined up and bounced them, the former quickly despatching a Fw 190.

However, as Meyer climbed away, he spotted several fighters lining up astern of Hamilton. He quickly pushed the nose of his P-51B down and closed on the tail-end fighter, whose pilot duly bailed out without Meyer firing a single shot! Gaining altitude once again, Meyer and Hamilton were joined by the 328th FS's ranking ace, John Thornell, who arrived just in time to engage a gaggle of Bf 109s.

The fighters dived away from the P-51s through a hole in the clouds, pursued by a stream of .50 calibre bullets from Thornell's guns. One of the Bf 109s blew up, whilst the other pair broke wildly, with Thornell and Meyer on their tails – both were swiftly shot down. This same mission also saw Lt Carl Lukic of the 352nd FG become the Eighth's first 'ace in a day'.

On 13 May the 355th FG got amongst the Me 410s of ZG 26, inflicting heavy casualties. Lt Col Gerald Dix, and his wingman, watched two of the enemy fighters collide before shooting down a further pair – the group ended the day with six Me 410s to its credit. The 357th also tangled with the twin-engined fighters and claimed three.

In the run up to D-Day many groups were temporarily assigned to full-time strafing duties, performing *Chattanooga* strikes against German and French locomotives. The 339th, however, continued to undertake escort work, and on one sortie in May 1944 came across a formation of 17 enemy aircraft. The Group downed 13 in several minutes, with Lt Chris 'Bull' Handleman of the 505th FS putting himself in the record books by becoming the first teenage ace in the Eighth Air Force – he was just 19.

On 24 May the 4th's Lt Ralph 'Kidd' Hofer, one of the more colourful characters in the group, shot down two more enemy aircraft for his 13th and 14th kills to date. Two days later the Eighth's last assigned fighter group flew its first mission with the P-38. VIIIth FC thereby achieving one of its primary goals of having all 15 groups in combat before D-Day.

Oil was now a priority target for the bomber force, and these missions became notorious for the hot reception Allied crews could expect both from flak and fighters. Politz, the target on 29 May, was among the worst. Flying escort on this mission was the 359th FG, who took on some 40 Fw 190s, and among the victors that day was the Group's ranking ace, Lt Ray Wetmore of the 370th FS. Also satisfied with the day's hunting were pilots of the 361st FG. Nicknamed the 'Yellow Jackets', they had repeatedly tackled dozens of single and twin-engined fighters that had attempted to charge through the Liberator formations – they ended the sortie with 12 kills.

Remarkably few aces of the Eighth were killed in combat, but there were exceptions. On 30 May a huge force was out over a variety of



An extremely youthful looking 2nd Lt Arthur C Cundy of the 352nd FS, 353rd FG uses fighter pilot 'hand talk' to tell how it was to his fellow aviators in a beautifully posed propaganda shot taken in late 1944. Cundy's final score was six kills, and they were all shot down with this aircraft, P-51D 44-15092/SX-B. The location for this squadron portrait was Eye, in Suffolk, home to the B-17s of the 490th BG. The actual reason for this seemingly high-spirited visit by the 352nd FS to the bomber base remains unknown

Col Glenn Duncan with the P-51D he flew only briefly upon his return to the helm of the 353rd FG in April 1945, following a long spell with the Dutch Resistance! All his 19.50 kills were achieved in P-47s prior to him being shot down on 1 July 1944. The Mustang he flew whilst serving as group commander in April/May 1945 was 44-73060/LH-X. The badge on the nose of his aircraft was a personal decoration, not one based on a squadron insignia – his previous P-47s had also worn it

German targets, and the 357th did particularly well, claiming 17 enemy fighters in a swirling air battle that ranged from 30,000 ft down to tree-top level as the *Jagdwaiffe* made their attacking runs and dived away.

However, among the US casualties was Capt Fletcher Adams, one of the Group's first aces whose score then stood at 9.5 kills. Heading home, Adams' flight of four combat-weary P-51s was bounced out of the sun by a *schwarme* of BF 109Gs, and he was fatally hit on their first pass. Despite losing their formation leader, the remaining Mustang pilots reacted quickly and downed all four of their antagonists.



A WILDER PONY

Gen Dwight D Eisenhower's pre-D-Day message to the troops that the 'Planes overhead will be ours' was no empty boast. By the time 6 June dawned, the Allied air forces had indeed made the coast of France so dangerous for the *Jagdwaffe* that the Supreme Commander could confidently predict that little interference would come from that quarter.

The air umbrella for *Operation Overlord* was indeed overwhelming, and the Eighth's fighter force formed an integral part of the detailed plan worked out to ensure that Allied fighters would be over the fleet in continual relays as the troops stormed the Normandy beaches. As they did so, P-38s, chosen because their silhouette was amongst the most distinctive in the Allied air arsenal and therefore the least likely to be fired on by trigger-happy naval gunners, began the fighter patrols. Over the actual invasion area there was little for them to do, and many pilots felt more than a little frustrated to say the least, particularly when news of the wholesale carnage of US troops on *Omaha* and *Utah* beaches was relayed back to VIIIth FC bases in England.

The Luftwaffe did eventually put in an appearance in small numbers during the afternoon of 6 June, with the 4th FG shooting down an Fw 190 after a hairy incident over an aerodrome flak trap, and the 355th later ran into ten very surprised Ju 87s. Led by Lt Col Gerald Dix, the group dived down onto the Stukas, whose panic-struck crews hastily sought the sanctuary of any flat ground in the vicinity and attempted to land. Eight were quickly destroyed by the P-51 pilots, who then resumed their patrol.

Stukas also stumbled across the 357th FG later that day, and another seven were shot down, elements of the 339th putting in an opportune



An impromptu ceremony around appropriately named and decorated 505th FS P-51D, 44-15315, to honour a favoured WAC. The lady in question cut the ribbon around the 339th FG Mustang's nose, before accepting a bouquet from the assembled air- and groundcrews on an overcast day in the autumn of 1944. Unfortunately we don't know who she was, who flew this P-51, or what ID letter it wore, aside from the 505th's standard '5Q' combination (USAF)

Some groups 'made up the numbers' on missions by flying mixed P-51B and D formations, particularly during the transitional phase between models during the 'D-Day summer' of 1944. Exhibiting all three major derivatives of the Merlin Mustang in one formation, these P-51s are again 339th FG machines, although this time they hail from the 503rd FS



One of the last groups in the Eighth to transition onto the P-51, the 55th FG were also amongst the most colourful of Mustang operators. The 343rd FS, in particular, came up with this slick way to combine tactical camouflage and the natural metal finish then coming into vogue. For a time, all squadron aircraft sported 'half and half' paintwork, trimmed with the group's prancing mustang insignia on either the fin or rudder. *Miss Marilyn II* was the regular mount of Robert Welch, a six-victory ace who scored four of his kills during the fall of 1944. He had yet to open his account, however, when this photograph was taken by a squadron mate as they cruised over the parched farmland of Essex during a training flight from their Wormingford base in August 1944.

appearance during the same interception and claiming two for their trouble. Part of the reason for the Luftwaffe's desultory reaction in Normandy was the widely-held belief (particularly by Hitler) that the invasion would really take place in the Pas de Calais. Only gradually was it confirmed that this was indeed the main invasion force, and not a diversion on the part of the Allies. Once this was realised, German air activity gradually began to increase, although the Luftwaffe was never in a position to prevent the troops getting off the beaches. Ground attack missions made up the lion's share of the sorties performed by the US fighter groups on D-Day, and there were inevitable losses to flak – in a total of 1873 sorties flown by VIIIth FC, 26 enemy aircraft were claimed for 26 fighters downed.

By 8 June the Luftwaffe had moved fighters into French airfields in range of the invasion forces. A number of air battles that day saw upwards of 100 enemy fighters facing many times that number of Allied aircraft of all types. The 339th scored heavily, claiming 11 out of a total of 31.

Lt Archie Tower of the 505th FS was leading an early-morning dive-bombing mission when one of the pilots in his section spotted a gaggle of Fw 190s above them. Tower immediately engaged them and picked off the first fighter with a 60-degree deflection shot. It was still pretty dark and the American pilots, having scattered the Fw 190s, went down to low-level to investigate lights on an enemy airfield. Greeted by a heavy flak barrage, Tower and his wingman hit the deck and high-tailed it for home, but not before they shared in the destruction of a Do 217 bomber.

By June 1944, four groups – the 4th, 339th, 352nd and 361st – had taken delivery of the first P-51Ds to equip the Eighth. These groups initially flew a handful of missions with mixed formations consisting of both models, although the P-51Bs were soon replaced when more D-models arrived. By July six groups – the 20th, 55th, 355th, 357th, 359th and





364th – had the P-51D. It would be another three months, however, before the 479th became the next group to make the change-over in September, with the 353rd in October, the 356th in November and the 78th in December. The last three groups did not receive the P-51B but went straight from the P-47 to the P-51D.

D-Day, and all the missions flown in its immediate wake, were handled by the P-51B, along with P-47s and P-38s, and all of them proved more than capable of clearing a path for the advancing ground troops. As the Allies attempted to secure their foothold in France, so more and more ground attack sorties were requested, thus increasing the number of strafing missions flown by each group. Luckily, more than enough Mustangs and pilots were available to cope with the demand, and units began regularly flying formations split into 'A' and 'B' flights to handle both the strafing and bomber escort tasks on the same sortie, although the latter remained the primary role of the P-51 groups.

Transition to the Mustang was not always trouble free, particularly for those pilots who had grown used to the larger and heavier P-38. The 55th FG made the switch without too many traumas, helped by the VIIIth FC policy of seconding an experienced theatre commander to smooth the process. Nevertheless, the torqueless P-38 was a complete contrast to the P-51, and unfamiliarity with the latter's external tanks, and its inherently unstable flight characteristics with them full soon after take-off, nearly spelled disaster for some pilots, as observed by Maj Ed Giller.

'Our first combat mission as a squadron flying P-51s with full internal and external tanks was a bit of a mess. On climbing out from the base in full squadron formation at 800 ft, the unit in front of us had just pulled up into the lower cloud deck at 1000 ft, when out of the bottom of the cloud came a spinning P-51. By some miracle the pilot dropped his wing tanks and success-

Although photographed at roughly the same time as squadron mate Welch's P-51D, Ed Giller's *The Millie G* (one of four he flew!) exhibits subtle differences in unit markings, like the barely discernible prancing horse on the rudder, and the thicker borderline between the OD and natural metal. This machine became quite famous years after the war when a profile artist working for a highly respected British aviation journal depicted its camouflaged area as having been painted bright red! It was, of course, OD, the dark shade serving to obliterate the P-51D's serial number, 44-14985. Visible beneath the canopy bar are two small victory crosses (Giller)

Stern view of *The Millie G* during one of the many PR flights flown by Ed Giller for official purposes in the late summer of 1944. Why this particular P-51 was chosen for these sorties is unknown, but it could perhaps have had something to do with its overall pristine condition





In common with several other groups, the 55th did not always repaint the tail serial numbers when squadron colours were applied. *Cherry*, flown by R Gibbs of the 343rd FS, was credited with downing five enemy aircraft. Its rudder is a solid shade of yellow, the unit's traditional colour, and like *Lady Val* below, it bears no trace of the once stylish OD rear fuselage common amongst 343rd FS Mustangs only a few months before. This photograph was taken in the winter of 1945

One of the four original P-38 Lightning groups within the Eighth, the 55th FG received Mustangs in July 1944. *Lady Val* was part of the much photographed 343rd FS, and it wears the familiar prancing stallion as an additional identification marking. The shade of yellow used on the rudder appears to be much darker than that worn by *Cherry* (see above), however, and the OD anti-glare panel has also been extended around the cockpit itself

fully pulled out of his dive at about 50 ft – his Mustang was left with a permanently bent fuselage, and in a weak radio voice he announced that he was aborting. I'll never know how he made the recovery.'

The 55th nevertheless carried on, although some of the pilots had been shaken by the incident. At

25,000 ft a tight 360-degree turn was called and at least half a dozen pilots spun out. All of them had the presence of mind to jettison their tanks, and each recovered some distance below. It was just as well that the ex-P-38 pilots came to realise one of the foibles of the P-51D early on.

FROM ENGLAND TO RUSSIA

On 26 June 1944 the Eighth laid on the first of the *Frankie* missions, which was for all intents and purposes a *Ramrod Shuttle*, with its final destination being Russia. An edgy Don Blakeslee took the lead of this first flight, his cockpit stuffed full of maps. He was fully aware at the start of this very important mission how big a responsibility rested on his broad shoulders. Aside from the 45 P-51s of his own group, Blakeslee also had a further 16 from the 352nd to help fly 'shotgun' for the three wings of Fortresses that the fighters would accompany non-stop to the Russia. He could not afford to waste fuel in combat over Germany, and was grateful that the *Jagdwaaffe* all but passed up this mighty armada as it ran into its target of Ruhland. The Mustangs traded shots with a mere handful of enemy fighters, but did not chase after the fleeing Germans as they would have normally done – two enemy fighters were shot down nevertheless.

Blakeslee ploughed on. 'Kidd' Hofer, ever the individualist, flagrantly disobeyed his CO's orders and chased a fighter to the deck; he failed to rejoin. With 580 miles covered, the pilots were jubilant to see Piryatn below them, and they all landed without incident. They would be the





guests of the Russians for four days before returning home, via Italy. As it transpired, they would be escorting far fewer B-17s than they'd come with as the enemy carried out a very accurate night strike on their base at Poltava, destroying 43 'heavies'. Fortunately, the fighters' temporary home at nearby Pryatin was not touched.

On 26 June Blakeslee led a Penetration Target Withdrawal Support from Russia to Drohobycz, in Poland, and the fighters then headed south for Lucera, in Italy. Hofer, who had single-handedly navigated his aircraft to Kiev only to find he had been posted as MIA, now rejoined the flock, but a problem with his P-51B kept him, and three other 4th FG pilots in his flight, on Russian soil for a time.

Bidding farewell to their charges over the coast of Yugoslavia, the main formation of fighters peeled off to fly across the Adriatic and land at Lesina, Madna and San Severo. There they were hosted by members of the 325th FG, the famed 'Checkertails' of the Fifteenth Air Force, who were also equipped with Mustangs. The four P-51s that had had to turn back into Russia now attempted to join the party, but only one made it to Sicily, where he crash-landed on the beach – the other two landed at the sprawling Italian mainland airfield at Foggia. That only left the 'Kidd' who, true to form, ignored orders, went after a gaggle of Bf 109s and then ran low on fuel near his destination. Luckily for him he was intercepted by Spitfires and guided safely to Malta. The next day he flew onto Foggia, via Catania, just in time to rejoin his group for their next sortie.

Blakeslee had organised a com-

Dolly was part of the 505th FS, 339th FG, the P-51 also wearing the name *Happy IV* in a small black rectangle below the port exhaust stubs. It was the personal mount of the Group's last wartime CO, Lt Col William C Clark, who assumed command of the 339th on 14 April 1945. This P-51D ended the war wearing 11 kills beneath its cockpit, all but one of which denoted a strafing victory. In fact Clark was credited with no less than six kills in one sortie two days after taking the helm. This tranquil scene was photographed during the Easter service at Fowlmere in 1945

Robert Buttke, a two-tour veteran of the 55th FG, scored 5.5 kills flying 44-15025, christened *Lovenia* (Ethell)



bined fighter sweep from Italy, in company with the 352nd and 325th FGs, to the Budapest area, where they found around 80 Bf 109s. The P-51s had stirred up a hornet's nest, and a series of vicious combats followed which resulted in four 4th FG aircraft being rapidly shot down. Deacon Hively, one of the Group's leading aces, was wounded early on in the dog-fight, but still destroyed three fighters, whilst his wingman, Grover Siems, was jumped and hit by a burst of fire that straddled his cockpit. He too sustained painful wounds, but was able to shoot a Bf 109 off Hively's tail. It was, however, the end of the 'Deacon's' war, as he was soon rotated home. Of the quarter from the 4th who were shot down, two became PoWs and two were killed – the seemingly indestructible Hofer was one of the latter, crashing fatally at Mostar, in Yugoslavia. The 4th would never be the same again without the antics of the 'Kidd' from Missouri.

Whilst the P-51D could do most things outstandingly well, one feature that NAA had not considered was its ability to perform as an impromptu frontline rescue aircraft. Due to its generous cockpit space, it could accommodate two men in an emergency marginally better than the P-51B, and on more than one occasion a pilot was eternally grateful for this unexpected bonus. It was still a tight squeeze, however, and not a recommended practice, despite the fact that pilots were successfully rescued.



A black and white 'piano keyboard' nose marking was chosen for the 20th FG's Mustangs. Photographed at Kingscliffe relaxing between sorties in the autumn of 1944 is third ranking ace of the Group, Harley L. Brown, who joined the 55th FS upon his arrival in the ETO in August 1944. At that time, the 20th FG was just transitioning from P-51Cs to Ds, and Brown soon came to grips with the type. Returning home in March 1945 having scored six kills, his most successful sortie was flown on 2 November 1944 when he claimed two Fw 190s and a single Bf 109.

One such rescue was performed in Germany on 18 August when 355th FG ace Lt Royce Priest heard a plaintive R/T transmission.

'My plane's been hit by flak. I'm gonna belly it in.'

It was Capt Bert Marshall Jr, a fellow ace from the 355th. Priest acted quickly.

'Land in a road, coach. I'll land and pick you up.'

Howls of protest came over the R/T. Such action could mean two P-51s lost to the group. But Priest was adamant. Marshall failed to find a road and his P-51D was now lying in a field. The earth looked too

soft to take-off in a heavily laden Mustang, so Priest picked a field of corn stubble about three quarters of a mile off. He side-slipped his big fighter in, cutting the throttle just above stalling speed. Coming to a stop with room to spare, Priest hauled his P-51 around and taxied it back along the path he had earlier made when he landed – he had now made for himself a temporary runway. Marshall, meanwhile, was setting a less than Olympic pace towards his rescuer.

'It was tough going. I wasn't in shape for that kind of stuff. I got pooped out. Every now and then I had to slow down to a fast walk. And I got kind of mad because I remembered that I only had two American cigarettes, and I didn't like the idea of sticking around in France with only two American cigarettes.'

Priest obligingly eased the Mustang across the rough and Marshall clambered aboard, accompanied by a stream of profanities which only



When viewed from the starboard side many P-51s looked very 'government issue', this being because personal markings were most commonly painted on the port side from which, in true equestrian tradition, the pilot climbed aboard. This 'dorsal finless' Mustang was amongst the first batch of P-51Ds supplied to the 4th FG soon after D-Day. Its 'QP-F' code denotes that it belonged to the 334th FS at Debden

ended when Priest stood up in his cockpit, threw his parachute out and said 'Get in!'. He then sat in Marshall's lap, 'gunned' the engine and taxied back to his home-made runway. The overweight P-51 eventually unstuck and barely cleared a haystack at the end of the field. Back at Steeple Morden, the tower was informed that there were two pilots aboard the aircraft, and clearance was given for a straight in approach and landing. A routine recovery ensued, and two very happy pilots duly climbed out of the cockpit.

SIGHTING THE GUNS

An optical sight was fitted to the P-51B and early D-models, this device incorporating lenses and reflectors that put a 'bull's eye' ring and dot on a slanted glass panel set above the sight housing, and in front of the bullet-proof glass windscreen that was a reassuring 12 inches thick. Fine manufacturing tolerances ensured that the pilot wasn't hampered by distortion whilst using the device. Behind and to the right of the sight glass was an iron ring with a centre dot. This dot was aligned with a thin metal rod, topped by a round 'bead', set forward of the windshield on the cowling. If the pilot was unable to use the new sight for any reason, the old 'ring and bead' still gave him a chance of hitting his quarry.

During the autumn of 1944 the P-51D was cleared to use the new K-14 lead-computing gunsight. This revolutionary piece of equipment automatically displayed the correct angle of deflection required to hit a moving target, and was thus the answer to many a pilot's prayer. Deflection shooting was a skill many found difficult to master, irrespective of the aircraft they were flying, or the air force in which they flew.

The only alternative to the good deflection shot was to get

Herb Rutland of the 356th FG's 360th FS is adorned with all the personal equipment a USAAF pilot needed to survive an ETO tour in fighters in the bloody winter of 1944/45. Immediately below his gloved hand can be seen the glass reflector pane of the 'Ace Making' K-14 gun sight. Also, note how weathered the painted canopy rail is following its use as a 'lean to' for pilots climbing in and out of the cockpit (H Rutland)





Winning an enviable reputation as dedicated bomber escorts, the pilots of the 356th FG consequently produced fewer aces than most groups – only six in fact. However, they did boast the most elaborate markings within VIIIth FCI. In this marvellous shot taken from a B-17 at the beginning of a sortie, a trio of 360th FS P-51Ds come in close for a good look at the bomber (H Rutland)

'Buzzing the field' was a popular pastime when pilots had something to celebrate. Officially frowned upon, it was often viewed with a 'blind eye', particularly if a popular boss came back to visit his old unit. Here, five-kill ace Col Don Baccus in the right-hand P-51D returns to visit Martlesham Heath, in Suffolk, and 'his' 356th FG in May 1945 after being posted to command the 359th FG at East Wretham (H Rutland)



in very close, and this method of attack brought with it its own problems, not the least of which was the danger of debris flying back from the target as soon as the pursuing pilot opened fire. Also, stricken fighters often suddenly exploded violently if hit in the fuel tank.

Deflection shooting didn't entirely eliminate such hazards, but it significantly reduced them, and the K-14 (widely known as 'the ace-maker' sight in the Eighth) was eventually issued to all P-51 groups. A light touch was required to use it effectively, with the pilot having to resort to the 'ring and bead' if his target rapidly reversed direction, as such violent manoeuvring could easily cause the K-14's temperamental gyros to 'tumble' as the pilot tried to follow his quarry.

Lt William Beyer of the 361st FG's 376th FS was one who reaped the rewards of the K-14 early on during a mission to Kassel on 27 September. About 40 enemy fighters broke through the escort and headed for the bombers. Flying above a group of eight Fw 190s, Beyer and his wingman quickly lined one up and closed to 1000 yards. The P-51s fired at long-range and chased the *Jagdflieger* as he shed his canopy and plunged into cloud. Making a tight 360-degree turn, Beyer, who followed the Fw 190 into the overcast intent on delivering the killer blow, was suddenly surprised when he spotted a German pilot in a parachute.

Another Fw 190 was soon picked up, and it began to split-S and perform a number of tight turns – this was the Focke-Wulf pilot's trump card as few fighters could match the Fw 190 in a turning fight. However, Beyer had not read that particular flight manual, and he stayed glued to the German's tail. In attempting a climb, the enemy lost his advan-



Parked on PSP (Pierced Steel Planking) matting, *Ain't Misbehavin* hailed from the 357th FG's 362nd FS. It wears two small kill markings just below the anti-dazzle panel, and was photographed at its Leiston base between sorties in November 1944. Parked across the dispersal from 'G4-M' is an overall OD P-51D, one of the last camouflaged Mustangs then still flying with the Group (*M Olmsted*)

Major Leonard 'Kit' Carson was the premier ace of the 357th FG, scoring 18.50 kills in a single tour with the 362nd FS. P-51K 44-11622, christened *Nooky Booky IV*, was his penultimate Mustang, and it carried his full kill tally, including 3.50 strafing victories, on the port side. An advocate of the close-in attack, Carson achieved most of his kills in the final six months of the war, including five in one sortie on 27 November 1944



tage, and as Beyer's fire hit his machine, he promptly bailed out. A third Fw 190 was soon destroyed as Beyer continued his one-man war, but number four appeared to be a little more experienced than his colleagues, and he tried desperately to shake off the P-51 snapping at his heels. His desperate manoeuvring even included dropping his flaps and wheels and waiting for the Mustang to overshoot. Beyer had seen that trick before, however, and duly followed suit before letting rip with his guns. The Fw 190 shuddered violently, and the pilot quickly abandoned his mortally

wounded fighter as more .50 calibre bullets found their target.

Diving for the deck was a fifth Fw 190, and Beyer quickly gave chase. This time he was being led into power lines by the fleeing German. The Mustang went over them while the Focke-Wulf opted to go under. Now enjoying a height advantage, Beyer made no mistake, and the fifth enemy aircraft spiralled into the ground and exploded. Beyer was an ace-in-a-day.

Meanwhile, over at Leiston the 357th FG's pilots were quietly compiling a scoring record that would see them finish top of the list for aerial victories in the P-51. However, unlike other bases, the small Suffolk strip appeared not to rate too highly with war correspondents of the time, and neither 'Bud' Anderson or Chuck Yeager can ever remember seeing a single one. As Anderson put it,

'No war correspondents ever dropped by our base, to my knowledge. Neither did Bob Hope or any of the Hollywood roadshows. F373 (Leiston) was out of the way, off by itself, not big or different enough among the 130-odd bases in England to rate special attention. I did a radio interview one time in London about becoming an ace, but I never did hear how it came out, and seldom saw clippings from the papers back home. I'd been vaguely aware that when you did or said anything special they would send word home. I'd shoot down an airplane and Mom and Dad would hear about it over the radio and read about it in the papers.

Our PRO was always taking your picture and typing up press releases, mailing what the wire services couldn't use to each man's hometown. We were vaguely aware of all that, but it wasn't until I returned home that I realised how busy people had been turning us into heroes.'

By the autumn of 1944 the American pilots were observing at first-hand the deterioration of the Luftwaffe's pilot training programme. There was no shortage of



A very young Lt Preston Easley poses in front of 'his' P-51D, *The Virginia Squire*. Assigned to the 360th FS, Easley was not alone within the 356th FG in having an elaborate personal badge painted on the nose of his Mustang (H Rutland)

Lt Henry Roe's 'Miss Pam' in the red trim of the 78th FG's 82nd FS. The yellow fin tip may have been an additional flight identification marking applied at squadron level. As with all 78th FG Mustangs, this machine has a half black/half white propeller spinner



courage shown by their adversaries, but the basic skill level of the new *Jagdflieger* was beginning to wane in the face of the ever-burgeoning daylight bomber onslaught. The quality of the fighter escorts had in nine short months improved out of all recognition, and the majority of American pilots went into battle confident that their equipment was the best that could be supplied, that in the P-51D they were flying one of the best fighters in the world, and that when they got home there was ample fuel for their next sortie. It was also unlikely that their airfield would have been in any way disturbed by the attentions of the enemy during their absence. Few of these advantages were now available to the Germans.

That the quality of the Luftwaffe's pilots had plunged was manifested in fighters stumbling about unsure of what to do in combat, blindly following their leaders. They were all too often easy victims for escort fighters.

Combat reports noted that the Germans appeared not even to remember the cardinal rule for survival in combat of jettisoning tanks before engaging the enemy. Multiple claims on one mission were further evidence of the problems facing the *Jagdflieger*, which now often made only a weak reposte to the USAAF, and on some missions wasn't seen at all. Nobody could yet afford to be complacent, however.

THE COLOUR PLATES

This 18-page colour section profiles some of the most famous aircraft of the aces flown within the Eighth AAF, plus many lesser known examples never before illustrated. The artworks have all been specially commissioned for this volume, and

profile artists Chris Davey, John Weal and Iain Wyllie, plus figure artist Mike Chappell, have gone to great pains to portray both the aircraft and the pilots as accurately as possible, following much in-depth research.



1
P-51B-5-NA 43-6819 *BEE*, flown by Captain Duane W Beeson, Officer Commanding 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1944



2
P-51B-15-NA 42-106924 *Salem Representative*, flown by Flight Officer Ralph 'Kidd' Hofer, 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, May 1944



3
P-51B-5NA 43-6636 *ILL WIND*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Nicholas 'Cowboy' Megura, 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1944



4
P-51D-25-NA 44-73108 *Red Dog XII*, flown by Major Louis 'Red Dog' Norley, Officer Commanding
334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1945



5
P-51B-10-NA 43-7172 *Thunder Bird*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Ted Lines, 335th Fighter Squadron,
4th Fighter Group, April 1944



6
P-51D-20-NA 44-72308 *RIDGE RUNNER III*, flown by Major Pierce 'Mac' McKennon, Officer Commanding
335th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, Spring 1945



7
P-51B-5-NA 43-6913 *Shangri-La*, flown by Captain Don Gentile, 336th Fighter Squadron,
4th Fighter Group, March 1944



8

P-51D-20-NA 44-64153 (unnamed), flown by Major Fred Glover, Officer Commanding 336th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1945



9

P-51B-15-NA 43-24769 *MISSOURI MAULER*, flown by Captain Willard 'Millie' Millikan, 336th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, May 1944



10

P-51D-5-NT 44-11161 *June Nite*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Ernest Fiebelkorn, 77th Fighter Squadron, 20th Fighter Group, November 1944



11

P-51D-5-NA 44-13761 *HAPPY JACK'S GO BUGGY*, flown by Captain Jack Ilfrey, 79th Fighter Squadron, 20th Fighter Group, September 1944



12

P-51D-10-NA 44-14223 *KATYDID*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel Elwyn Righetti, Officer Commanding 338th Fighter Squadron, 55th Fighter Group, early 1945



13

P-51D-5-NA 44-13837 *Miss Marilyn II*, flown by 1st Lieutenant E Robert Welch, 343rd Fighter Squadron, 55th Fighter Group, October/November 1944



14

P-51D-20-NA 44-72218 *Big Beautiful Doll*, flown by Colonel John Landers, Officer Commanding 78th Fighter Group, 1945



15

P-51D-5-NA 44-13808 *Y7-YI*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Francis Gerard, 503rd Fighter Squadron, 339th Fighter Group, October 1944



16

P-51B-15-NA 2106872 *PATTY ANN II*, flown by 1st Lieutenant John F Thornell Jr, 328th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, July 1944



17

P-51D-15-NA 44-14906 *CRIPES A' MIGHTY*, flown by Major George Freddy, Officer Commanding 328th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, Christmas Day 1944



18

P-51B-5-NA 43-6704 *HELL-ER-BUST*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Edwin Heller, 486th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, September 1944



19

P-51D-10-NA 44-14812 *Slender, Tender & TALL*, flown by Major William Halton, Officer Commanding 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, April 1945



20

P-51D-10-NA 44-14151 *PETIE 2ND*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel John Meyer, Officer Commanding 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, August 1944



21

P-51C-1-NT 42-103320 (*Little Ann*), flown by 1st Lieutenant Glennon Moran, 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, September 1944



22

P-51B-10-NA 42-106449 *Princess ELIZABETH*, flown by 1st Lieutenant William Whisner, 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, May 1944



23

P-51D-10-NA 44-14237 *Moonbeam McSWINE*, flown by Captain William Whisner, 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, February 1945



24

P-51D-20-NA 44-72374 *BETTY-E*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel Wayne Blickenstaff, 350th Fighter Squadron, 353rd Fighter Group, March 1945



25

P-51D-25-NA 44-73060 *Dove of Peace*, flown by Colonel Glenn E Duncan, Officer Commanding 353rd Fighter Group, April 1945



27

P-51D-15-NA 44-15625 *MAN O' WAR*, flown by Colonel Clairborne Kinnard Jr, Officer Commanding 355th Fighter Group, early 1945



28

P-51D-25-NA 44-73144 *Man O'War*, flown by Colonel Clairborne Kinnard Jr, Officer Commanding 355th Fighter Group, April/May 1945



26
 P-51D-15-NA 44-15092 ALABAMA RAMMER JAMMER, flown by 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C Cundy, 352nd
 Fighter Squadron, 353rd Fighter Group, October 1944



29

P-51B-10-NA 42-106448 *THE HUN HUNTER/TEXAS*, flown by 2nd Lieutenant Henry Brown, 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, April 1944



30

P-51D-5-NA 44-13305 *THE HUN HUNTER/TEXAS*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Henry Brown, 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, late summer, 1944



31

P-51D-15-NA 44-15255 *DOWN FOR DOUBLE*, flown by Lt Colonel Gordon Graham, 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, March/April 1945



32

P-51B-15-NA 42-106950 *The Iowa Beaut*, flown by Robert E Hulberman (rank unknown), 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, June/July 1944



33

P-51D-5-NA 44-13677 *MISS STEVE*, flown by 1st Lieutenant William Cullerton, 357th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, post-November 1944



34

P-51B-5-NA 43-6928 *OLE II*, flown by 1st Lieutenant William Hovde, 358th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, March/April 1944



35

P-51D-25-NA 44-73108 *OLE V*, flown by Major William Hovde, Officer Commanding 358th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, December 1944



36

P-51D-15-N 44-15152 *JERSEY JERK*, flown by Major Don Strait, Officer Commanding 361st Fighter Squadron, 356th Fighter Group, December 1944/January 1945



37

P-51B-15-NA 43-24824 *OLD CROW*, flown by Captain Clarence 'Bud' Anderson, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, May 1944



38

P-51D-10-NA 44-14450 *OLD CROW*, flown by Captain Clarence 'Bud' Anderson, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, late 1944



39

P-51K-5-NT 44-11622 *Nooky Booky IV*, flown by Captain Leonard 'Kit' Carson, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, Christmas Day 1944



40

P-51B-10-NA 42-106462 *U'VE HAD IT!*, flown by Captain John England, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, early Fall 1944



41
P-51D-10-NA 44-14709 *MISSOURI ARMADA*, flown by Major John England, Officer Commanding
362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, December 1944



42
P-51D-25-NA 44-72199 (unnamed), flown by Captain Charles Weaver, 362nd Fighter Squadron,
357th Fighter Group, April 1945



43
P-51B-5-NA 43-6933 *SPEEDBALL ALICE*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Don Bochay, 363rd Fighter Squadron,
357th Fighter Group, April 1944



44
P-51D-20-NA 44-72244 (winged Ace of Clubs badge), flown by Captain Don Bochay, 363rd Fighter Squadron,
357th Fighter Group, February/March 1945



45

P-51D-20-NA 44-63621 *LITTLE SHRIMP*, flown by Captain Robert Foy, 363rd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, January 1945



46

P-51D-15-NA 44-14888 *GLAMOROUS GLEN III*, flown by Captain Charles 'Chuck' Yeager, 363rd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, November 1944



47

P-51B-5-NA 43-6935 *Hurry Home Honey*, flown by Captain Richard Peterson, 364th Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, May/June 1944



48

P-51D-5-NA 44-13586 *Hurry Home Honey*, flown by Captain Richard Peterson, 364th Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, October 1944



49
P-51D-20-NA 44-72164 *THE SHILLELAGH*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel John Storch, Officer Commanding
364th Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, early 1945



50
P-51D-5-NA 44-13606 *LOUISIANA HEAT WAVE*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Claude Crenshaw,
369th Fighter Squadron, 359th Fighter Group, November 1944



51
P-51D-10-NA 44-14733 *Daddy's Girl*, flown by Captain Ray Wetmore, 370th Fighter Squadron,
359th Fighter Group, early 1945



52
P-51D-5-NA 44-13704 *Ferocious Frankie*, flown by Major Wallace Hopkins, 374th Fighter Squadron,
361st Fighter Group, Summer 1944



53

P-51D-10-NA 44-14164 *DETROIT Miss*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Urban Drew, 375th Fighter Squadron, 361st Fighter Group, October 1944



54

P-51D-15-NA 44-15076 *Betty Lee III*, flown by 2nd Lieutenant William T Kemp, 375th Fighter Squadron, 361st Fighter Group, September 1944



55

P-51D-25-NA 44-72719 *Constance*, flown by Major George Ceuleers, 383rd Fighter Squadron, 364th Fighter Group, late 1944



56

P-51D-5-NT 44-11243 *Betty Jo IV*, flown by Major Samuel Wicker, 383rd Fighter Squadron, 364th Fighter Group, December 1944



57

P-51D-20-NA 44-63263 *PENNY 4*, flown by Colonel John Lawell, Acting Officer Commanding, 364th Fighter Group, November/December 1944



58

P-51D-25-NA 44-73045 *Lucky Lady VII*, flown by Captain Ernest 'Ernie' Bankey, 364th Fighter Group, early 1945



59

P-51D-30-NT 44-11674 *BOOMERANG JR*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur 'Art' Jeffrey, 434th Fighter Squadron, 479th Fighter Group, March 1945



60

P-51D-25-NA 44-72922 *SCAT VI*, flown by Major Robin Olds, 434th Fighter Squadron, 479th Fighter Group, February/March 1945



1. Captain Leonard K 'Kit' Carson of the 362nd/357th FG, circa November 1944

2. An AAF Captain wearing the latest 1945-style Eighth Air Force fighter pilot combat clothing

3. Captain Don Gentile in dress uniform, circa March 1944, just prior to him returning to the USA



4. Major Pierce McKennon of the 335th FS, 4th FG, at Debden, circa March 1945



5. Colonel Don Blakeslee, Commanding Officer of the the 4th FG at Debden, circa June 1944



6. 1st Lieutenant in the standard Eighth Air Force dress uniform of late 1944

OUTCLASSSED

Air combat over Europe in mid-1944 brought American pilots into contact with what amounted to a new age of flying, and one that would very rapidly render their superb aircraft obsolete. Fortunately for the Allies, German scientists were only able to provide a taste of the vast effort that had gone into bringing this next generation of aircraft up to operational status.

German jet and rocket development had been under close Allied scrutiny for many months before the first aircraft powered by these revolutionary engines were met in combat by the Eighth Air Force. There was considerable speculation – and no little apprehension – as to how these potentially lethal new weapons would be deployed. Pilots noting the existence of jets and rockets were closely questioned at debriefing so that accurate intelligence reports could be circulated to all units, particularly the fighter groups.

The purpose of these reports was to devise new tactics for the fighter force, but in reality little could be done in this area – if the P-51 could not catch the jets then pilots could hardly shoot them down. It was very much a situation of wait and see, however unpalatable this appeared.

On 28 July 1944 the 359th FG had drawn escort duty for a bomber force heading for Merseburg. As the Mustangs approached the target area, Col Avelin P Tacon Jr heard a call from one of his pilots. Two condensation trails were heading for the bomber stream, betraying the presence of fast aircraft – very fast. He reefed his P-51 into a 180-degree turn and his flight attempted to cut off the jets. They had little chance. The Me 262s shot away, one diving for the ground, the other climbing up into the sun – there was nothing a piston-engined fighter could do to catch them.

Gen Kepner, digesting this and similar sighting reports, advised his groups that '... probably the first thing seen will be heavy, dense contrails high up at 30,000ft and above, approaching the rear of the bombers. Jet aircraft can especially be expected in the Leipzig and Munich area...'

Kepner and all his group commanders realised that the kind of challenge that now confronted his pilots was unlike any other. In maximum level speed alone the P-51 was outclassed, and if the Germans managed to form multiple *Gruppen*



The final group assigned to VIIIth FC was the 479th. This formation consists of three 434th FS P-51Ds, the lead Mustang (44-14395) being christened *The ONLY Genevieve*, whilst alongside it is *The YAKIMA Chief* (44-14523). Pilots of the P-51s were Bob Kline and Harold Stott respectively

The 479th was based at Wattisham, in Suffolk, throughout its time in the ETO. Originally a P-38 group, it was not, however, the last to receive P-51s as it converted to D-models in September 1944, ahead of both the 78th and the 353rd FGs. This Mustang, nicknamed *The Impatient Virgin*, is also a 434th FS machine



equipped with jets, the slow bombers would be decimated.

In the ensuing weeks the 'jet menace' loomed ever larger. On 5 August Messerschmitt Me 163 Komets attacked a formation of P-51s protecting bombers, and shot down three of them at close range. However, the 359th FG evened the score a little only days later.

Watching out for enemy aircraft over Leipzig on 16 August, Lt Col John B Murphy saw the bombers being attacked by an Me 163. As he turned and made after it, the tiny rocket aircraft appeared to cut its throttle and pounce on a straggling B-17. To save the hapless Fortress, Murphy firewalled his own throttles, which resulted in his airspeed indicator nudging the 400-mph mark. He steadily closed on the Me 163 which, in the meantime, had overshoot its intended victim and flattened out at medium altitude. Murphy closed right in and fired. Strikes were observed on the enemy machine's vertical tail and fuselage as the American banked away to kill speed. His wingman, Lt Cyril Jones, fired from slightly below as the enemy pilot executed a split-S and dived. Jones kept after him but hit the jetwash and momentarily blacked out. The Komet pilot quickly took advantage of this and raced away out of range.

But the sortie was not over as Murphy had spotted another jet 5000 ft below him. He dived, cut inside the Me 163's turning circle, and scored hits on the fuselage. There was an explosion and suddenly the rear of the fuselage broke away – there would be no doubt about this kill.

Further skirmishes between Mustangs and Komets took place through to October, after which time Allied aircrews were thankfully able to report that the jet threat was not materialising as fast as had been earlier feared. It soon became clear that the Me 163 had limited endurance, and



A detailed close-up of the nose art of Harold Stott's *The YAKIMA Chief*, plus of course the pilot himself. Although the 479th had the shortest of combat records in the ETO, its pilots nevertheless achieved a few notable first and lasts, like claiming the first Me 163 destroyed (this distinction fell to ranking ace Capt Art Jeffrey on 29 July 1944), and downing the last German aircraft shot down by the Eighth in World War 2 (Lt Hilton Thompson achieved this feat on 25 April 1945 when he despatched an Arado Ar 234 'Blitz' bomber near Salzburg, in Austria).

356th FG pilot Herb Rutland's immaculate late-build P-51D on the PSP in April 1945 at Martlesham Heath – the steel sheets had been laid down due to the heavy spring showers in East Anglia that year





although highly manoeuvrable, it appeared to be capable of little more than an 'all or nothing' full power climb, leaving its pilot with only seconds of attack time up his sleeve, before he was obliged to dive away.

COMBATING THE ME 262

The Me 262 was in a completely different class though. A sleek twin-engined jet capable of superb acceleration, it appeared to be the main threat. However, on 7 October, Lt Urban Drew of the 361st FG's 375th FS showed that the P-51 was still capable of 'taking the ring' with the jet and emerging victorious if cleverly flown. Drew surprised two Me 262s taking off from Achmer aerodrome, and using his speed and altitude to full advantage, quickly shot both jets down. This was indeed gratifying news, for if the Mustang pilots could use their aircrafts' excellent piston-engined performance to obtain a good tactical position before the enemy jets had a chance to build up speed, the threat might still be contained.

That Drew's double Me 262 kill was no fluke was shown by none other than top P-47 exponent, 'Hub' Zemke, that same day. Formerly of the 56th FG, the 'Hub' had only recently forsaken his favourite Thunderbolt for the cockpit of a Mustang, following his posting to command the 479th FG. In the process of helping his Group transition from the P-38 to the P-51D, he and his wingman, Lt Norman Benolt, attacked what they took to be a Bf 109. Good strikes were observed and the enemy aircraft shed a wing and crashed—it was not until the two pilots' combat film was developed back at their Wattisham base that an Me 262 was clearly revealed.

While it was realised soon enough how formidable an opponent the Me 262 could be to conventional fighters, the German pilots tried everything they knew to avoid the escorts and shoot down only the all-important bombers. However, there were usually so many American fighters present that this was all but

A trio of 356th FG P-51Ds from the 360th FS cruise in formation over East Anglia during the spring of 1945. This gritty group had a particularly hard war, being the final P-47 outfit to transition to the P-51 (the 56th FG never made the swap from Thunderbolt to Mustang). Due to its total devotion to escorting the bombers, the 356th scored the least number of kills in VIIIth FC, and suffered the worst ratio of losses to victories – 276.5 enemy aircraft destroyed for the loss of 122 P-47s and P-51s (H Rutland)

Arguably the most famous series of aircraft flown within the 359th FG were those nicknamed *Daddy's Girl*. They were all piloted by the group's leading ace, Ray Wetmore, his sobriquet adorning P-47D 42-75058, P-51B 42-106894 and finally P-51D 44-14733. The young Californian flew no less than 142 missions between 1943 and 45, scoring 21.25 aerial victories and 2.33 strafing kills (Ethell)



impossible. This situation left the *Jagdflieger* with little choice but to blast their way through to the bombers, and on 1 November the 20th FG had one of its number shot down in flames by a diving Me 262 intent on stopping a formation of B-17s. Beginning his attack from 38,000 ft, the enemy pilot appeared to have broken off his run after destroying a solitary P-51D. However, he then turned back towards the bombers, and dozens of Mustangs and Thunderbolts attempted cut him off.

Lt Dick Flowers of the 20th and Lt Gerbe of the 352nd fired at him first, then a 56th FG P-47 joined the fray. Three other pilots tried their luck before the Me 262's right engine flamed out and the pilot decided to 'hit the silk'. Gerbe and Lt Groce, the 56th FG pilot, shared the kill.

'Bud' Anderson had a couple of skirmishes with the German jets.

'I might have shot down the first one I saw, but I was so excited at seeing a jet that I butchered the chance. We hadn't joined up with the



The legendary triple ace Clarence 'Bud' Anderson's second *Old Crow* (P-51D-10-NA 44-14450), posed against a Christmas backdrop at Leiston during the festive season in 1944/45. Only a matter of weeks before, this Mustang had still worn its OD and grey scheme so favoured by the 357th FG, and Anderson in particular – at least the 110-gal 'paper' tank still wears matt grey paint! The Group were also one of the last outfits to remove the 'D-Day stripes' from their P-51s. A native of Newcastle, California, Anderson successfully completed two tours with the 362nd FS, flying 116 sorties and scoring 16.25 aerial kills whilst in the ETO (Anderson)

bombers yet – this (attack by the jets) might have been a ploy to get us to drop our tanks early – who knows? But I looked down and saw a 262 flying right-to-left across our course, straight and level, a few thousand feet under us. I knew the 262 was much faster but I had enough altitude to build up some speed and was thinking that if I peeled off and down right now, staying upside down so I could keep him in view, falling at just the right angle to come out behind him (coming out ahead of him could prove mighty embarrassing), I might just get off a burst before he could run off and vanish.

'To get rid of your drop tanks, first you routinely turn the switch to internal fuel in order to avoid interrupting the flow of gas to the engine. But I'm excited now. I'm thinking, "Drop 'em and GO!" I hit the release without switching my tanks, roll over into my dive – and the engine quits cold!

'I figure it out almost instantly, switch my tanks and restart the engine. The prop runs away, just like always, until finally it catches and settles

back down. All this wastes time, and I'm cursing my own stupidity. But in spite of it all, he's still down there and I'm still in position, falling like a brick and thinking I can still pull this off. I put the pipper dead on him and maybe, if I fire right now, I might hit him. But I'd have to be lucky. I'm at maximum range, going like hell and I think I'm overtaking him. I tell myself to be patient, and that in a couple of seconds I'll have a good shot. And then the 262 disappeared! He was really moving and in an eyeblink that jet just shrank up and vanished behind my gunsight's bull's-eye of light.'

The time-honoured maxim 'he who has height controls the battle' was never truer than when VIIIth FC met the jets. But the Germans still had a useful force of conventional fighters which might or might not be tempted into combat – at that stage of the game it was hard to anticipate just what the Americans might be faced with. To make the enemy's reaction more certain, they could always pull a ruse, as Anderson explains.

'On 27 November, we tried some new tactics. It was technically speaking a strafing raid. But we used that as a ruse, hoping to draw out their fighters. The Mustangs of the 353rd Group arranged themselves in bomber formation and our planes flew the standard zig-zag escort pattern



Joe Thury was the scourge of the Luftwaffe in April 1945. For example, as part of the 339th's 504th FS, he led two strafing attacks that month that resulted in the group claiming no less than 200 aircraft destroyed in total! Thury's score was 26.5 confirmed, all but one of these being ground kills. After the second sortie, *Pauline*, alias 44-14656 of the 504th FS, had to be junked due to it being flak damaged and over-stressed

Lt Philip Petitt and *Princess Pat* of the 505th FS, 339th FG (*Ethell*)





Damaged by flak during a strafing mission over Germany on 15 January 1945, *DANA KAY* nevertheless carried her pilot safely back to his base at Honington, in Suffolk. Assigned to the 364th FG's 383rd FS, the lightly damaged P-51D is having its unused ammunition removed from the magazines by squadron armourers prior to it being moved to the unit's hangars (USAF)

Rolling out at Honington, the furthest of these 383rd FS, 364th FG P-51Ds was the mount of George Cueleers, the Group's leading ace with 10.5 kills. He was a veteran of 103 missions, and this shot was taken only weeks after Cueleers' unit had converted from P-38s to P-51s in late July 1944, hence the fact that only three kills are marked below its cockpit – he scored two victories whilst flying P-38s (Ethell)

above them. The idea was to fool the German radar and scramble the interceptors. It worked almost too well. They threw themselves at us 100 miles southwest of Berlin, north of Leipzig. The enemy pilots must have had coronaries when they discovered what they were attacking – not B-17s, but more than 100 fighters spoiling for trouble. Our pulses jumped, too, when we saw the hornet's nest we'd stirred up, for they came, not by the dozens, or scores, but in insect-like clouds we called "gaggles". For whatever reason, they decided to hit this raid with every airplane they had.

'It was the biggest concentration of enemy airplanes I had ever seen! They came in two clusters of 80 to 100 planes each. I'd seen 100 all together before, but here were two groups that big, mostly Focke-Wulfs. They were coming at us almost head-on, at 11 o'clock; we turned into them as they passed us and all hell broke loose.

'I fell on a straggler who broke smartly and ran for the deck. Letting him go, I turned and went back where the fighting was, with wingmen Ray Wolf close beside me. I picked out a 190 ahead at about 31,000 feet, closed to within 250 yards before he knew what was happening, and hammered him with a burst that made flashes all over the fuselage. When he didn't do anything, I followed up with another, and he rolled over slowly, too slowly, and fell into a spin. The pilot must have been dead. I turned





away, looking for targets. There were airplanes darting all over the sky.'

'Bud' Anderson, and the rest of the 357th FG's pilots, had a field day. 'Kit' Carson got five, Chuck Yeager claimed four and Anderson three – these later 'went into the records as two and a probable'. The group had put up 49 P-51s and came home with a score of 31 enemy fighters destroyed, which at that time was a record, for the loss of a single P-51.

NEW SUITS

By the autumn of 1944, G-suits had been developed for pilots, and the 339th and 357th were amongst the groups which combat-tested them. They were filled with either water or air, and were designed to prevent black-outs during high speed manoeuvres, as 'Bud' Anderson recounts.

'The Mustangs, generally speaking, could take harder turns than the people who flew them. Long before the wings flew off, the pilots would simply lose consciousness. The blood drained from his head by centrifugal force, measured in Gs. Five Gs and you might "gray out" but be able to function. Six or so and you could "black out" and lose consciousness. The form-fitting suits simply inflated as the airplane pulled Gs, hugging you, and preventing your blood from running from your brain all at once.

'They were strictly experimental, which was why we had two different

P-51D *Milly* of the 360th FS, 356th Group, was flown by Don F Jones in the last months of the war. As with many Mustangs of the period, the pilot has had nose art applied to his machine in the photographic-reproduction style popular at the time (H Rutland)

Robert Garlich flew *Luscious Jr* with the 355 FG's 357th FS from Steeple Morden. He arrived in the ETO in the second half of 1944, and finished the war as an Eighth AF ace with 6.50 ground kills. Of the Group's three squadrons, the 357th was probably the least publicised as they boasted none of the outfit's major aces (Garlich)





Duran Vickery Jr poses for a quick photograph for 'the folks back home', before strapping into *Ann-Anita/Bama Bound* and heading out on a patrol over the Low Countries during the spring of 1945. Assigned to the 355th's 354th FS, Vickery Jr claimed four strafing kills whilst in the ETO, three of which have been sprayed up on the canopy bar of 44-14910 (D Vickery Jr)

Lee Mendenhall oversees routine maintenance work on his 354th FS, 355th FG P-51D, christened *Texas Terror IV* (44-13571) at Steeple Morden during the summer of 1944. The SCR-695 radio transmitter receiver (and its associated SCR-522 device) was crucial to the effectiveness of the P-51 as an escort fighter. Therefore, at the first hint of trouble the groundcrews would whip off the canopy and give the kit a thorough going over



kinds. The water suits were like overalls. The crew chief filled them up at the top with a funnel and pitcher (as I recall, it took several pitchers) and when the mission was done you would sit on the wing, open two little drains at your ankles and the water would simply empty in two silver streams. The problem with the water suits was that they were cold, and I only wore one a couple of times. We tried filling them with warm water, but at six miles up they cooled quickly. The air suits, attached to a G-sensitive valve, drew air through a line that ran from the pressure side of the engine's vacuum pump. These suits wrapped around your abdomen, thighs and calves in three sections that looked like a cowboy's chaps, and they inflated automatically. These worked much better.

'With the G suits, we could fly a little harder, turn a little bit tighter. We could pull maybe one extra G now, which gave us an edge. There was no resistance to wearing them as we understood what they meant right away; wearing one was the same as making the airplane better.'

At the edge of a new era of flight, the American fighter pilots could have done with a fully pressurised cockpit to prevent the very painful condition that divers know as the 'bends'. Flying at 40,000 ft-plus with nothing more than an oxygen mask, the nitrogen in the human bloodstream could congeal in the joints, causing intense pain. One cure used in 1944 was to

pre-breathe 100 per cent oxygen before the mission to purge the bloodstream of nitrogen. It was a condition that did not affect all pilots the same way, as some found that constant exposure to high altitudes acclimatised their bodies.

Often, more fundamental problems tended to manifest themselves at this altitude. Sometimes the P-51's demisters decided to pack up and the pilot suddenly found himself sitting there blind, looking at an opaque white wall. The guns too were adversely affected by high altitudes, particularly if their heaters malfunctioned.

MISSION COMPLETED

After its last brief fling on New Year's Day 1945 during *Operation Bodenplatte*, the *Jagdwehre* was never again to appear in such force on a single mission. VIIIth FC, the RAF and other Army Air Force formations, not to mention the Red Air Force in the east, had the enemy totally surrounded. Gradually the separate fighting fronts contracted to squeeze the remaining life out of the Third Reich. The last months of the war saw VIIIth Bomber Command continuing to pound Germany targets from the west while the Fifteenth Air Force flew from its southern Italian airfields to hit Austria and eastern Europe.

Escort duties occupied the Eighth's Mustang force throughout the period, there now being frequent sorties which were merely routine outings for the pilots, with little sign of the enemy fighter force. Yet *Bodenplatte* had shown that the Germans were quite capable of surprising the Allies, and the pilots realised they were overflying what amounted to a hotbed of technological genius, however battered airfields, factories, railyards and seaports might appear to be from an altitude of 30,000 ft.

Vast numbers of buildings, any one of which could have housed a small production line for a secret weapon, were never bombed, and even with the gift of hindsight, it is impractical to imagine that all these targets could have been destroyed in any case with the technology then available. Strategic bombers could only concentrate on the main urban centres and recognised tactical targets as briefed, and while the medium bombers and fighters did what they could to destroy many smaller targets, a significant number had to remain untouched as they appeared to be seemingly innocuous and totally unconnected with the war effort.

The Germans also went underground in order to continue the production of fighters and rockets, as well as an amazing array of advanced weapons. Camouflaging of airfields, utilisation of road sections as runways and an elaborate system of dispersing fighter strips in wood and heathland enabled Luftwaffe interceptors to keep flying, and oblige the Allied fighter force to remain alert. A vast industrial effort managed to ensure that there would be fighters for pilots to fly, and by a near-miracle, enough fuel to power them. Supplies of oil and high octane petroleum



Arguably one of the most famous pilots to serve in the USAAF during the war, Col John Landers was also amongst the most experienced. He was an ace in both the Pacific and European theatres (one of only a handful of pilots to achieve the double), where he saw action in all the major combat types. Landers' sobriquet, *Big Beautiful Doll*, and his impressive scoreboard, adorned almost a dozen airframes during his career, but reached its zenith with P-51D-20-NA 44-72218, which he flew from December 1944 until war's end whilst CO of the 78th FG.



A little bent, and some distance from its home base of Duxford, this crestfallen 83rd FS, 78th FG P-51D was photographed at an isolated Soviet strip dripping bodily fluids after one of the many Shuttle missions in early 1945. Judging by the damage to the wheel nearest the camera, *Lottie* may have experienced a ground loop on landing (USAF)

Lt Warren Blodgett of the 84th FS, 78th FG, flying 'LITTLE CHIC' (44-72099), formates with Capt James Farmer in 44-15731, nicknamed *Mischievous Nell*. The kill markings on the former's canopy bar denote ground strafing victories (Ethell)

were ever dwindling, and this was one of the major factors (compounded by a severe pilot shortage) that crippled the Luftwaffe's jet force, thus easing Allied fears of mid-1944 that these advanced fighters would gain the ascendancy over Germany.

LAST KILLS

The Luftwaffe's dire position by 1945 was also the cause for serious concern on English fighter bases – how could new pilots hope to score victories with the enemy keeping his head down? The only chance a pilot had of destroying an enemy aircraft, let alone becoming an ace, was by claiming ground kills. Even that was becoming difficult, or so the scuttlebutt said. VIIIth FC was in the exasperating situation of having more than enough eager pilots, but few targets left for them to shoot at.

This was a period when groups of fighters, ranging freely across the length and breadth of Germany, could turn up little that was worth the

ammunition expenditure. But some groups seemed to be able to find the Luftwaffe in its hides. One such outfit was Joe Thury's 339th FG who, on a number of occasions in April 1945, came back with evidence of multiple strafing passes and widespread destruction.

Pilots also noted grimly that as Germany's territory contracted so the available number of flak batteries rose; both large calibre guns and the small and deadly multi-barrel mobile type that frequently guarded airfields, and could put up withering sheets of fire in the path of low



flying fighters, proliferated. These weapons began to surround any worthwhile target in substantial numbers.

Not that air-to-air combat had entirely given way to victories on the ground. The 359th FG at East Wretham, in Norfolk, were another of those units who rarely hit the headlines, but that fact hardly deterred the pilots of the green-nosed P-51s from carving their own niche within VIIIth FC. The Group's leading ace, Ray S Wetmore, emerged as one of the foremost exponents of the P-51 in the ETO, scoring 16 of his 21.25 aerial victories in the Mustang.

Wetmore served two combat tours which enabled him to witness the last gasps of the Luftwaffe's once mighty fighter force. That the enemy could still make things more than a little uncomfortable for the Americans had been amply demonstrated on 27 November when Wetmore and his wingman, Lt Robert York, became embroiled in a seemingly one-sided dogfight – the odds were 50 to one! The former quickly called in help when two further gaggles of fighters numbering roughly 100 aircraft each were sighted north of Munster. Unfortunately, the rest of his flight had aborted due to engine trouble with one of the P-51s, and Wetmore and York found themselves stalking the massive force alone. When the enemy saw the size of the opposition, the hunters became the hunted. 'We had to attack in self-defence', Wetmore said later.

With little choice remaining, the P-51s waded into the fighters and Wetmore and York quickly reduced the odds by one a piece. A good burst with 20 degrees deflection brought Wetmore's second kill. He then turned into the attack of another Bf 109, and the pair twisted and turned as the respective pilots strove for the upper hand. It finally fell to the American, and he shot off all his remaining ammunition, whereupon his foe bailed out. Defenceless now, Wetmore spent the next ten minutes bluffing out attacks by more fighters, before extricating himself from the mêlée.

He followed up this success with another big score on Valentine's Day 1945. Vectored by ground control onto enemy fighters in the vicinity of an aerodrome west of Dummer Lake, he sighted four Fw 190s flying in trail below him. The 359th ace dived and shot down the last Focke-Wulf in line. Firing at a second, Wetmore saw the pilot attempt to



Lt Charles Oldfield was shot down while strafing a Luftwaffe airfield near the German border with Holland in this very aircraft (44-63555) on 25 February 1945. He then successfully evaded the enemy and arrived back at Duxford courtesy of the Dutch resistance on 5 April. Oldfield rejoined the 84th FS and flew several more patrols over Germany before VE-Day (Ethell)

Kitted out for a long-range Shuttle mission to Russia, pilots of the 364th FG pose in front of BATAVIA BLITZ in March 1945





The code 'N2' and a circled individual aircraft letter signified the 383rd FS of the 364th FG, based at Honington. Although the only frontline combat unit at the large Suffolk base, the Group was always surrounded by assorted B-17s from the 3rd Bomb Division as the airfield was home to the 1st Strategic Air Depot, who specialised in repairing and overhauling the big four-engined Boeing bomber. This close relationship with elements of VIIIth Bomber Command could explain why the 364th was one of only two groups (the 20th was the other outfit) to adopt bomber-style tail markings for its individual squadrons.

break and dive, but he had no altitude and snap rolled into the ground.

Shooting down a third Fw 190, Wetmore called in his wingman to take out the last enemy machine. Shots were exchanged before a fogged windscreen ruined the pilot's aim, and Wetmore finished him off. Reforming, he and his wingman climbed up to attack

another pair of Fw 190s and as they made their pass another P-51 joined the fray. The newcomer and Wetmore opened fire simultaneously, and both Germans bailed out – the 359th's leading ace was credited with four downed and one shared.

His last kill of the war occurred on 15 March, just over a month before the 359th's final mission. The Mustangs were again operating around Berlin when Wetmore, leading a flight, spotted two Me 163s orbiting around Wittenberg. Closing to 300 yards, he watched in awe as one of the fighters zoom climbed. He followed the Komet as well as he could, and at 20,000 ft its engine flamed out. The Me 163 executed a split-S and dive, with Wetmore's P-51 stuck to its tail. The ASI spun and with 600 mph indicated, Wetmore opened fire at 200 yards. Throwing his machine into a right bank, the German took several telling hits. More strikes then chopped away half the left wing and the pilot jumped out.

Ray Wetmore was the leading Eighth Air Force pilot of 1945, but others were continuing to build their scores too in the last months of the war, including Donald J Strait of the 356th FG. Having flown one tour with the group during its P-47 period, Strait was posted back to his old group in the autumn of 1944, thus giving him the chance to fly both the P-51, and possibly increase his score. He had been credited with three kills while flying the Thunderbolt.

Strait's first opportunity to re-acquaint himself with aerial combat came on 26 November whilst he was leading the 361st FS in the vicinity of Osnabruck. Over 40 Bf 109s appeared, hell bent on attacking the bombers his Group was escorting that day. The P-51 pilots punched off their drop tanks and bounced the enemy fighters. Soon after engaging the first gaggle, Strait saw the German top cover some 1500 ft above. Climbing up to deal with this threat, he closed on a lone Bf 109 and scored many hits on it from about 350 yards, sending it down trailing smoke. A new wingman joined Strait as he looked out for more enemy aircraft at 13,000 ft. The two Mustangs latched onto another Bf 109, which characteristically dived. Strait's shots hit home, but the *Jagdfliieger* sought a turning match in order to secure his escape. His wingman scored more hits, then Strait finished the damaged fighter off with a well-aimed burst from 250 yards away.

With two victories on 5 December, Don Strait found more air combat on Christmas Day. In action again with Bf 109s, he had a nasty moment when his first victim of the day deposited oil and coolant all over his windscreen. Skidding away, Strait almost rammed his foe, whose propeller had stopped. He flew past the *Jagdfliieger* just as he belly-landed in a field.



Strait watched his wingman fire on a second Bf 109, but the Mustang pilot had apparently not seen another enemy fighter pursuing him. Urgently calling for his colleague to break, Strait could not prevent the German from scoring hits on the turning P-51. Quickly onto the enemy's tail, Strait was still hampered by the film of coolant on his windscreen and could not see well enough to shoot. Sensing his chance, the Bf 109 pilot snap rolled away and the Mustangs called it a day.

Another pilot who did well on the P-51 was Robin Olds of the 479th. Destined to make more of a name for himself over 20 years later as an F-4 Phantom II pilot in the Vietnam conflict, Olds flew the P-38 well enough to become the Eighth's leading ace on the type (nine kills), before the group switched to the P-51 in September. His first Mustang victory came on 6 October 1944, and he went on to claim three more kills in the P-51D before VE-Day, an achievement helped immeasurably by his ability at deflection shooting in conjunction with the K-14 gunsight.

Having knocked down an Fw 190 with a no-deflection burst on 6 October, Olds did not score again until 9 February 1945 when, taking care to get the Bf 109 square in the K-14 and allowing a small degree of deflection, he let the sight computer do the rest. He was some distance away from the target at 450 yards when he opened fire, and was therefore very surprised when this first burst hit the enemy aircraft. Twice more Olds ranged in the Bf 109, and again hits were seen, the third burst being enough to send the German down. Similar results were obtained on another Bf 109 and an Fw 190 on 19 March. Approaching his first kill, Olds mortally hit it with a 50-degree deflection burst, whilst the second

Possibly one of the most famous publicity shots ever taken by Eighth AF war photographers, this mixed formation of 375th FS, 361st FG Mustangs was seen up from Bottisham, in Essex, just weeks after D-Day on 11 July 1944 – during the previous two months the Group had been heavily involved in *Chattanooga* sorties, and had claimed no less than 23 locomotives destroyed in France. Sadness surrounds this stunning shot, as the pilot leading the four-ship in *LOU IV*, Group CO, Col Tom Christian, was shot down and killed on 12 August 1944 in this very machine. On a more positive note, the second P-51D in the formation was being guest flown on this occasion by the Group's third-ranking ace, 1st Lt Urban Drew, who usually piloted P-51D 44-14164, nicknamed *DETROIT Miss* – he finished his ETO tour with six aerial kills, including two Me 262s on the same sortie. Alongside him is Lt Bruce Rowlett in his personal Mustang, *Sky Bouncer*, whilst occupying the number four slot in soon to be retired P-51B 42-106811 is Lt Francis Glanker.

(the Fw 190) tried barrel-rolling its way out of Olds' fire, but to no avail.

On 7 April his group was part of an escort for B-24s attacking Duneberg. Rapidly moving contrails below the bomber stream betrayed the presence of jets, and Olds' flight immediately performed a split-S and plunged down on the Me 262s. This time the Germans used their speed to maximum advantage, and Olds' solitary burst was fired more as a token gesture at the 'tail-end Charlie' out of sheer frustration. Better results were, however, obtained nearer to the bombers, where Olds found Bf 109s hacking at the Liberators. He chased one through a formation of B-24s, holding fire lest he hit one. Emerging out the other side, Olds unleashed more bursts until the enemy bailed out.

Among the 4th FG pilots at Debden who returned for a second bout with the *Jagdarmee* was Louis 'Red Dog' Norley. Back in the saddle of a P-51, this time a D-model, he set about improving on his previous score of 8.33 from the first tour. Now a flight leader with the 335th FS, Norley nailed two Fw 190s during operations in support of *Operation Market Garden* over Arnhem in September 1944, as well as an Me 163 over Merseberg on 2 November, to complete his scoring with the 335th. He was then promoted to CO of the 4th FG's 334th FS in January 1945. Flying in that capacity on 19 March, he was leading A Flight as they cleared the skies ahead of the bombers. Nothing much was seen on the outward leg, but on the return 'Red Dog' got a Bf 109 in his sights and soon sent it down.

On 17 April, Norley, who remained 334th commander until war's end, scored his last kill, an Fw 190D. Cutting off the enemy's approach to the bombers, Norley fired at his quarry from over 600 yards away in the hope of scaring him off as he knew he would never hit the Focke-Wulf from that distance. He then stopped firing as his chase was taking him and his target dangerously close to the bombers. Then, to Norley's horror, the Fw 190 carried on and crashed headlong into a B-17. Both immediately went down, the Mustang pilot convinced that the German must have been killed by his long-range burst, as the latter hadn't fired a single round as he closed on the Fortress.

While the 4th had always had healthy competition with the 56th for leadership in terms of combined air and ground kills, the 'Eagles' hated conceding the lead to the Thunderbolt outfit. By 16 April they were looking for a target that would put them ahead. Flying A and B groups, with



A close-up of 44-13926, taken during the same photo-shoot as featured on the opposite page, shows the crudely sprayed application of OD paint hastily added to 375th FS P-51s when VIIIth FC thought it was going to have to forward deploy fighters to France soon after D-Day. 44-13926 was almost brand new when this shot was taken from a 91st BG B-17. Later assigned to Lt Abe Rosenberger, the P-51 was written-off in a crash soon after on 9 August 1944 whilst being flown by a Lt Don Dellinger, who was killed



Capt Charles 'Chuck' Yeager named all his P-51s after his future wife, Glennis. This is number three (44-14888), coded 'B6-Y', and it was clinically used by the legendary 363rd FS flight commander to down a considerable chunk of his 11.5 aerial victories over Christmas 1944/45. It was photographed parked on the PSP at Leiston soon after a snow squall had blown through the Suffolk base - one of many during the last bitter winter of the war (USAF via Yeager)

Norley leading the latter, the 4th found targets on German airfields and came home with a score of 105 destroyed. Norley's contribution was four strafed to destruction on Gablingen aerodrome, making his final wartime total 11.3 aerial kills and five destroyed on the ground.

TOP ACES

Among the 4th's most successful pilots was Pierce W 'Mac' McKennon, an individual who had initially endured the not unusual experience of being told by the USAAF that he lacked inherent flying ability. Washed out, McKennon was undeterred and promptly shipped out to Canada. There, the RCAF's training syllabus was much more realistic in its appreciation of ability, and McKennon was eventually posted to the UK and assigned to a Spitfire squadron. He saw no action, however, and transferred to the USAAF in November 1942. Posted to the 4th, McKennon quickly showed how little talent he had by becoming one of the group's first P-47 aces! P-51 kills followed, and by the time he went home at the end of his first tour, he had 10.5 kills in the air to his credit.

He returned to Debden on 18 August 1944 and soon set about boosting his score. Things didn't turn out too well for him, however, and on 28 August he was shot down. Evading the Germans, McKennon spent nearly a month with the French resistance, before returning to England in September. On Christmas Day 1944 he shared a Bf 109 with another pilot but thereafter all his subsequent victories were ground kills. Then, on 18 March the Neubrandenburg airfield flak claimed McKennon. He safely bailed out and Lt George Green headed in to pick him up. With 'Mac' on his lap, Green flew back to Debden. Being twice shot down whilst strafing didn't deter McKennon from further low-level sorties, and he finished the war with a score of 20.68, 11 of them aerial kills.

Like 'Bud' Anderson, John England of the 357th owed part of his air combat success to both the K-14 gunsight and the G-suit. One particular kill, he reckoned, would not have happened had it not been for the fact that he was wearing such a suit. On 13 September, England was leading 'Dollar Squadron' (the 362nd FS) at 8000 ft when he spotted a Bf 109 in a dive – it was soon overhauled as England closed to 800 yards distance at an altitude of 3000 ft. Seeing that his quarry was heading for an airfield, England wound his P-51 up to 400 mph and turned tightly to close the range to 500 yards. With the K-14 'locked-on', England fired, observing strikes on the Bf 109's engine and cockpit before it crashed – he went on to down two more Bf 109s on that mission. England's score continued to rise until he was rotated back to the US with his total at 17.5.

Without a doubt Leonard K 'Kit' Carson found the air war in Europe, as opposed to the Pacific, much more to his taste. On the point of heading for the Far East with a P-39 outfit, he instead joined the 357th FG. His first victory was on 8 April 1944, and his chosen technique for success



Yeager thought extremely highly of his groundcrew, who had to turn his Mustang around between sorties in some of the worst weather ever recorded in East Anglia in the first months of 1945. Ever conscious of their well being, he has ventured out here to 'shoot the breeze' with his crew chief and armourer as they take a break from tending to *GLAMOROUS GLEN III* in February 1945 (USAF via Yeager)

was to bore in close to his victim, rather than rely on deflection shooting. This method brought with it serious risks, but in Carson's case, it never failed. And like other pilots in the group, he too ran 'Clobber College', the 357th's combat school, for a time, passing on his unique skills.

'There were no tactical geniuses around to spread the gospel on how to stay alive in a dogfight with the Luftwaffe when we arrived in England in December 1943. Our training in the States had never envisaged seven-hour missions at 30,000 ft in weather where unfamiliarity with instrument flying would kill you faster than the enemy could.'

When he addressed newcomers, he pulled few punches about how things were in the ETO, and how their first missions would see them flying as wingmen to the more senior pilots.

'We always start on the basis of two-ship element. It will be evident in a matter of seconds whether its going to be a one-on-one scrap or not; your leader will know it and so will you. If the enemy is that thick you'll be able to pick your own target, but clear yourself to the rear before you do. If you're threatened from the rear, call your leader by name and tell him you're leaving him. He'll help you if he can.

'Don't freeze and don't panic. If you're jumped, remember in the P-51 you've got (other than the Spitfire) the best defensive fighter in the business. Reef it in with full power and manoeuvring flaps or shove the stick right into the instrument panel – do anything you can to break his line of sight on you. Once you've done that, he can't lay a glove on you. I would recommend in your first encounter or two that you do not attempt any flat-out, gut-wrenching dogfights. You may have to, but if the choice is yours, don't do it. Get the feel of it first, size up the enemy and note the patterns they run in the attack. Stick to your leader – you'll live longer. You'll be busy enough as it is.

'Don't fret because you think you're in an isolated position as a wingman. We have a lot of wingmen in this group who are aces. This is an alien sky and a hostile environment, so get used to it a little before you take on the hard ones.'

He was equally straight about the weather. 'Two out of three days that you fly, you're going to have to fight it. There's lots of rain, snow, ice and poor visibility and its as big a problem as the enemy. Its not as hard as it sounds as the P-51 is a good weather airplane with gyro instruments. Forget the needle-and-ball routine of cadet training. The P-51's primary flight instruments are



This 4th FG P-51D, nicknamed *Rebel*, was photographed during a visit to RAF Digby, in Lincolnshire, in the summer of 1944. It was later renamed *Betty Jane II* and credited with three kills

When hostilities ceased, low flying restrictions were quickly reintroduced in England to discourage pilots, who were eagerly awaiting transfers home, from indulging in a little 'buzzing' to relieve the boredom. Individual aircraft codes were quickly applied in large black letters under the wings so that any bystanders on the ground who witnessed such high spirits could accurately report their sightings to the relevant authorities. This P-51D wears the letters 'PI-B' under each wing, thus denoting that it belonged to the 352nd's 360th FS, and was usually flown by Lt James Charlton (*H Rutland*)



boxed with yellow tape for emphasis; get familiar with using the artificial horizon and the gyro compass. With a little practice you can fly this airplane down to a frog's hair on instruments. Anyone who has a casual attitude towards flying in this climate is going to wind up wearing an 8000-lb aluminium coffin at the bottom of the North Sea. If you lose visual contact with the man ahead when climbing through clouds, go on instruments instantly. Trust your gyros – they work very well.

'Weather over here compels you to do a lot of low altitude navigation in poor visibility. Sometimes visibility is bad at high altitude, too. If you're separated, remember those two course headings. If you're at Berlin, the course home is 270 degrees. If you're over Munich its 310 degrees. So, your mission today puts you somewhere in between. OK. Steer a meridian course home on 290 degrees. Britain is 600 miles long – you can't miss it! The squall lines and thunderstorms we get over here in the spring and summer are violent – stay out of them. Either go around or over them.

'Get to know the coastline of England as this will be your biggest aid to zeroing in on home base. I refer of course to the east coast, say from Dover round to Yarmouth. While you're at it, pinpoint the RAF emergency strips at Manston and Woodbridge. They're not only landmarks but great places to land in a pinch.'

On gunnery, 'Both the RAF and we have found that the common problem of new pilots in combat is to underestimate the range of targets by a factor of two. When new pilots think they're shooting at 200 yards, its actually closer to 400. Don't try for the big deflection shot, that is 30 degrees and up. You'll miss at least four times out of five. Get dead astern and drive in to 200 yards or less, right on down to 50 yards. Deflection shooting isn't the whole story; if you close up to 200 yards and fire a couple of one-second bursts, you'll nail him. Your .50 calibre slugs have steel cores. We don't use tracer as it gives a false sense of distance and direction, but when the steel cores hit home, they strike sparks which appear as winking lights so you'll know you're scoring.'

When the guns fired in the P-51, the velocity loss was less than one mile per hour. All pilots felt was the vibration of the guns firing.

Finally, Carson imparted these words of advice, 'Think strategic



Herb Rutland's aircraft, also pictured postwar at Martlesham Heath, wore the code 'Pl-R' beneath its wings. The stylish scroll on the canopy bar that denoted the pilot's name on each machine was a feature applied to the 360th FS's P-51s towards the end of the war. Herb Rutland shipped back to America with the rest of his Group in October/November 1945 (H Rutland)

A more than familiar sight on a seven-hour mission! The instrument panel of the P-51D was functional, and few pilots complained about any lack of visibility through that great perspex dome





No photograph in this volume better sums up the sheer might of VIIIth FC in last year of the war than this remarkable shot taken on Thursday, June 7, 1945 during a victory open day held at the 78th FG's Duxford home. Each of the three rows of Mustangs was comprised of a single squadron, with the 83rd FS filling the middle rank. A close study of the latter unit's aircraft reveals that they are in fact Dallas-built P-51Ks, unlike the aircraft of the remaining two lines, which are standard D-models. Behind P-51K 44-11563 is 'F-HL', which wears five small swastikas and a large green clover leaf motif below its cockpit. Like the 356th FG, the 78th also shipped back to the USA in November 1945

escort; get in the habit of thinking about five and six and even seven-hour missions. Dress for the missions as if you were going to walk out of Germany. Make sure you have a good pair of boots. Above all, make sure you have a good foam rubber pad to sit on; that goddamn dinghy pack is like a slab of granite and it will ruin you. Regarding the fatigue problem on long missions – five hours and up is where it gets you in the legs and fanny. When you fly six and seven hour missions, the groundcrew will probably have to lift you out of the cockpit.'

That the new blood of the 357th learned the curriculum set at 'Clobber College' well is in no doubt – the group had the highest scoring victory rate for the last year of the war, and boasted no less than 46 aces. Carson ended up with 18.5 kills to place him 11th in the overall Eighth Air Force ace listing.

Fellow 357th ace Chuck Yeager reckons that approximately one in twenty-five missions had to be aborted because of the weather, and that it was flight rather than group commanders who had the most effect on the performance of a unit in the ETO. His acknowledgement of the part played by the groundcrews included this comment.

'Many of our P-51s flew 50 straight missions without an abort and my crew chief got a bronze star medal for his work. Regarding the fighters themselves, I flew the P-47, P-38, Bf 109 Fw 190, Spitfire and several other lesser known types, and the P-51D was by far the best war machine; the Mustang would do for eight hours what the 'Spit' would do for 45 minutes!

'The P-51D solved all the problems we had experienced with the B-model, and the only bad flight characteristic (of both) came about when the fuselage tank was full. This wasn't exactly dangerous, but one had to be careful when turning. We were also glad to see the back of the P-51B with its four guns and bad ammunition feed.'

Another pilot who was to win lasting fame (as arguably the most famous American test pilot of all time) after the shooting had stopped, Chuck Yeager finished the war with 11.5 aerial victories.

THE 'BLUE-NOSERS'

Of all the Eighth Air Force's illustrious fighter groups, the 352nd did better than most in the air combat stakes, coming fourth in the overall group listings with an impressive 519 confirmed kills. Among other 'claims to fame', the group turned in the second highest number of aerial kills in one day – 38 on 2 November 1944 – and its 487th FS was the only squadron in VIIIth FC to win a Distinguished Unit Citation. Subsequently, the total from 2 November was adjusted to 25, but this in no way downgraded a truly meritorious display of flying.

Formed at Mitchell Field, Long Island, in October 1942, the 352nd consisted of three units, two of which – the 486th and 487th – were originally the much older 21st and 34th Sqns respectively. The third was the 328th, a brand new outfit that stood up at the same time as the Group.

On 9 March 1943 the group moved to Farmingdale Army Air Field, adjacent to the Republic Aviation plant, and began training on the P-47. It moved to Westover in May and thence to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, on receipt of overseas movement orders – group personnel actually embarked in the liner *Queen Elizabeth* for a fast trans-Atlantic crossing.

The 352nd was assigned to VIIIth FC on 6 July 1943, and assembled at Bodney, in Norfolk, two days later under the command of Col Joseph L Mason, who had lead the group since May. Its initial combat aircraft was the Thunderbolt, examples from the P-47D-5 to D-16 (razorback) production blocks being flown for the first nine months of operations.

The 352nd flew its first escort mission on 9 September 1943, and was heavily engaged with the Luftwaffe right from the start. These sorties often took them to just inside the German border, the limit of the P-47's range. The fifth group to be assigned to VIIIth FC, the 352nd became part of the 67th Fighter Wing in October 1943, under whose control it was to remain, apart from a short break in the winter of 1944-45, until the end of the war. The group received P-51Bs in April 1944, followed by a few P-51Ds in June. Both models looked resplendent in the dark blue group colour from which it was to take its nickname.

In common with all other Eighth Air Force fighter groups, the 352nd's success in combat carried a

Capt Ralph Hamilton of the 487th FS was not at all pleased when invasion stripes were applied to his P-51B in May 1944 – he stormed around the dispersal at Bodney demanding to know who had vandalised his formerly pristine *Frances B TOO*. Ironically, on D-Day itself George Preddy actually flew this aircraft over the Normandy beaches!



George Preddy's *CRIPES A' MIGHTY 3RD*, pictured in the dispersal at Bodney with its faithful groundcrew. On 6 August 1944 this machine had been used by Preddy to despatch a record six Bf 109s over Brandenburg – this shot was taken only a matter of days latter during a large press visit to Bodney to meet the Eighth's newest 'ace in a day'





Another of the shots taken on the same press day shows armorers of the 487th busily toiling away under the afternoon sun, replenishing the six .50 calibre Brownings fitted in the wings of Preddy's P-51D – throughout his combat career, Preddy never once suffered a malfunction with his guns. The squadron artist had been kept busy adding new crosses to *CRIPES A MIGHTY 3RD*'s uniquely placed scoreboard prior to the press descending on the small Norfolk base – the fruits of their labour are clearly visible in this shot

Preddy was on his way to becoming the top overall ace of the ETO when he was shot down by US anti-aircraft fire on Christmas Day 1944. His liking for English colloquialisms stretched to him naming four out of the five P-47s and P-51s he flew with his favourite saying of them all

price – on 8 April the then leading ace with nine kills, Capt Virgil Merony, was shot down and made a PoW, but on the 24th, Edwin Heller more than evened up this loss by destroying seven enemy aircraft (both in the air and on the ground) to become an ace.

BLOODY MAY

May 1944 was hardly a memorable month for the group for among the pilots lost was Capt Frank Cutler of the 486th FS (8.5 victories), who was killed during the first Berlin mission on the 13th. Carl Luksic, who then had 15.2 victories to his credit (8.5 of which were aerial kills), was shot down on the 24th to become a PoW, and on 28 May Capt Woodrow Anderson (with 13.5 victories, most of which were strafing kills) was lost after his parachute failed to open. Better results were obtained by the group at the end of the month, however.

Lt Glennon T Moran scored three victories during the 352nd's P-47 period and went on to knock down ten more enemy aircraft with the Mustang. He had a great day on 29 May when the 487th FS's bomber escort ranged far into eastern Germany. Over Gustrow around 40 enemy fighters appeared to attack the bombers, and Moran chased an Fw 190 down from 22,000 to 3000 ft before his fire made an impression. The German half-rolled and went in from an altitude of about 1000 ft.



On the climb-back to height, Moran and his wingman, Lt Jule Conard, saw many fighters above. They nevertheless climbed up to attack, and one Bf 109, who had broken off from the dogfight, carelessly strayed across Moran's nose and was quickly shot down. Both he and Conard then destroyed a Bf 109 bent on strafing an American airman in a parachute.



A series of dogfights kept the blue-nosed Mustangs busy on 30 May, and the group came home with 14.5 victories. Moran's contribution was two downed and one damaged, again with Conard as wingman. Moran's total put him level with the unit's leading ace at that time, Virgil Merony.

The months of April and May 1944 were also highly satisfying for George Preddy, who had made a slow start to his victory tally with the P-47. The switch to the P-51 brought rapid results, and boosted his score to 11.33 during that period. Escorting bombers to Magdeburg on 20 June, Preddy shot down an Fw 190 and shared an Me 410 with Lt James Woods.

On 21 June the 352nd accompanied the 4th to Russia for the second of the shuttles, following in the footsteps of Mustang units from the Fifteenth Air Force who had escorted the bombers from Italy. On 7 July Capt Orville Goodman led the 486th FS so well that the pilots came home to report 11 enemy aircraft downed without loss.

Among the pilots who rotated home at this time after a successful tour with the 352nd was John Thornell. On an escort mission on 21 June, Thornell completed his tour by setting a small record when he became the first pilot in the group to reach 300 operational hours. He had also scored 17.25 aerial victories since his debut on 14 September 1943.

On 18 July the group claimed 21 kills, four of them falling to George Preddy, whose eye was now well and truly tuned to the tricks of the enemy, and on 6 August he set a record – six down on one mission.

Preddy was leading 'White Flight' at the time as part of the group escort to the Brandenburg area. They ran into 30-plus enemy fighters as they stalked the bombers at 27,000 ft, and concentrating on their four-engined targets, the Bf 109 pilots maintained formation, seemingly oblivious to the P-51s gradually whittling down their number. No less than five Bf 109s (undoubtedly flown by combat

A formidable partnership – Preddy and his armourer, Sgt M G Kuhaneck. In this no doubt staged picture, the ace and the 'ace maker' ham it up for the press. Preddy enjoyed being able to share his success with those who had helped him achieve it. Quite what the sergeant was pointing out to his boss over 50 years ago has been lost over the ensuing decades

Amongst the lesser known pilots of the 352nd FG was 11.5-victory ace Major William Halton. A seasoned campaigner who had earlier flown both P-47s and P-51Bs with the 487th FS, Halton took over the squadron when John Meyer was promoted to Deputy Group Commander in November 1944. His personal P-51D-10-NA was nicknamed *Slender, Tender & TALL*, and was photographed here at a misty Asche airfield in Belgium in February 1944 during the Group's brief sojourn to the less than sunny Continent





Having dispensed with his 75-gal 'teardrop' tanks to give him optimum manoeuvrability at low-level, Lt Karl Dittmer taxis out in *DOPEY OKIE* at Asche to commence yet another short-range patrol over the slowly advancing Allied frontline in mid-January 1945. Part of the much-vaunted 487th FS, Dittmer had claimed a solitary kill up to this point in his career in the ETO

about his feat became a classic of under-statement: 'I just kept shooting and they just kept falling.'

Preddy commanded the 328th when the squadron went hunting on 2 November. A gaggle of Bf 109s was ripped apart, with no less than 25 Axis fighters being lost – this meant that the Group had achieved a scoring rate of more than one every 60 seconds as the intercept had been completed in less than 20 minutes. Capt Don Bryan led the squadron's score with five, and ace Capt Henry Miklajcyk added two more to his score of 5.5 before he himself was shot down and killed in this whirlwind action.

Blue-nosed Mustangs were again at the *Jagdwaaffe's* throat on 21 November, a day that recorded another huge air battle, composed this time of 50-plus Focke-Wulfs. The unit's 'B' Group routed the enemy formation southeast of Leipzig, Capt Whisner claiming six and a probable (adjusted later to five and a probable) and Lt Col John Meyer three. The former's flight from the 487th FS had been covering bombers pounding the synthetic oil refineries at Merseburg when 50-plus Bf 109s were seen to attack the formation. Diving to 29,000 ft, the Mustangs pounced on the Messerschmitts' covering group, which was composed of Fw 190s. Whisner heard John Meyer (group lead) direct him to attack a pair of stragglers at the rear of the formation. He destroyed both in quick succession before boring in on three more.

Whisner quickly despatched one of these, and then closed in to 200 yards and destroyed his fourth enemy fighter for the day. Then he ranged in on another pair of Fw 190s and made short work of both. Whisner then dived and shot a further Focke-Wulf off a Mustang's tail. Unfortunately not all of these victories could be confirmed, although Whisner was awarded a respectable five destroyed plus two probables – and a DSC.

MOVE TO BELGIUM

In an effort to break the deadlock caused primarily by the appalling winter weather of 1944-45, and the unexpected German panzer thrust through the Ardennes 'bulge', the 352nd and 361st FGs were detached to the continent. Based at Y-29, alias Asche, in Belgium, from 23 December, the 'Blue-Nosers' faced a Christmas with little chance of a stand-down from duty. On Christmas Eve, Preddy indulged in a game of craps and scooped the pot to net \$1000. Never a spend-thrift, he intended to invest his winnings in war bonds.

Then came one of the Eighth's blackest days, made all the more sadder because it was not the enemy who downed George Preddy, but American

anti-aircraft fire. As had been routine for some time, Preddy had led his 328th FS on a low-level patrol over the battlefield and downed two ground-hugging Fw 190s. He was in the process of chasing several others over the snow-covered forests when the aircraft broke out over an open field. Unfortunately for Preddy, a battle-weary US anti-aircraft unit let fly at the second group of fighters with a deadly quad .50 calibre machine gun mounting as they shot over their position, fatally wounding the American ace, whose P-51 ploughed into the snowy field at speed.

It was just the kind of incident that many pilots had learned to be wary of – often during a strafing run it was not the leading aircraft the gunners shot down but the ones following. Gun crews had very little time to react as they had to range in their weapons in order to have a chance of hitting fast, low flying, aircraft. This they did as the first enemy aircraft flew over, ready for the next flight. In Preddy's case the US gunners had been warned of enemy aircraft in their vicinity, and when the fighters appeared they assumed them to be hostile. They missed the Fw 190s completely, but hit Preddy's machine. Only a few rounds were fired before the mistake was realised, but by then it was far too late for the Eighth's top ace.

Two days later, the 352nd waded into another mass of German fighters in the vicinity of Bonn, and again the outcome was loaded heavily in the Group's favour. To Maj Bill Halton's triple score was added another 19 shared among the other pilots. More action was still to come though.

It was a prudent move by John Meyer to get his 487th FS airborne from Asche early on New Year's Day 1945. A man who earned a fine reputation for 'thinking like a German', Meyer had a hunch that the Luftwaffe just might gamble on 1 January as a good day to catch the Allied airfields napping – he felt the enemy would believe a New Year's Eve hangover might have caused the pilots to lay in that morning. Meyer postponed the 487th's party by one day – it proved to be a wise decision. The P-51s barely had air under their wheels before all hell broke loose. Racing across the field were a mass of Fw 190s, part of a force of 800 fighters briefed to attack Allied airfields in Belgium. They were ambushed over Asche.

The 352nd's pilots found themselves pressing their firing buttons

BONNY was a P-51K flown by Lt Gordon Cartee during the last months of the war. A relatively unknown pilot, Cartee was actually John Preddy's wingman throughout his time as CO of the 328th FS. Nicknamed *Steph-N-Jane* on the port side of its nose, 44-11560, was photographed at Bodney in early May 1945, accompanied by its two dedicated groundcrewmembers





John Preddy's great rival within the 352nd FG was John Meyer, who ironically hailed from the same squadron – the 487th FS. Both pilots scored heavily throughout the second half of 1944, and unlike Preddy, Meyer chose to mark his kills up with swastikas, rather than the more conventional crosses. Unfortunately, the latter soon realised that his burgeoning scoreboard was barely visible from a distance, particularly in the air, so he ordered the 'squadron artist' to repaint the yellow kill markings with a heavy black shadow – that way his German foes might see them better!

Devoid of any kill markings whatsoever, P-51D 44-13557 was in fact the last of four Mustangs flown by William Halton during his two tours with the 352nd FG. This machine was photographed at Bodney in late May 1945



up a Fw 190 and shoot it down. The unique circumstances of the combat, and the superb reaction by the 487th, brought them a Distinguished Unit Citation for a battle that became known as the 'Legend of Y-29'. It was the only occasion when a unit based in northwest Europe received this award, and Meyer's foresight and leadership was recognised with a DSC. Whisner was also decorated, an Oak Leaf Cluster being added to the DSC awarded on 21 November. In total the group were credited with 23 aircraft shot down and one damaged on 1 January.

Having mounted an operation that was little short of a disaster of its own making, the Luftwaffe was hardly able to support von Runstedt's bold bid to break the Allied ring of steel, and by mid-January he was forced to retreat. The 352nd followed. A base move to Chievres saw the Mustangs seeking out whatever targets they could find over the next few weeks, but the enemy rarely showed, at least in large numbers.

On 14 March Don Bryan found some action in the vicinity of Remagen, where the last intact bridge across the Rhine became a focus of frantic Allied attempts to take and hold it while the Germans did their utmost to destroy it. Escorting A-26 Invaders over the area, Bryan and his comrades came upon German fighters protecting an Arado 234 jet bomber about to attack the bridge. Bryan dropped his tanks and closed on the bomber, but could not catch it – it had at least a 50-mph advantage. The Ar 234 made an abortive attack and then made a run for safety – unwittingly, as it transpired, towards a group of 56th FG P-47s. Realising that the enemy would soon see these aircraft and most likely turn eastwards to avoid them, Bryan positioned his Mustang to spring a trap. It worked. The Arado pilot turned as anticipated and Bryan fire-

walled his throttle. At 250 yards range his fire knocked out the jet's right engine, whereupon the pilot put it into a series of shallow diving turns and short pull-ups. Bryan hammered the bomber again and the left engine went out. Emitting white smoke, the Arado rolled over onto its back and plunged straight into the ground. This victory brought Bryan's score to 13.34, the second highest for the 328th FS.

BODNEY REVISITED

It was back to Bodney for the 487th on 13 April, their stint in Belgium having been more than eventful. The group had, by this stage, enjoyed a new CO for over seven months, Col James D Mayden having taken over from Col Joe Mason in November 1944.

Capt Ray Littge of the 487th FS played an important part in two of the group's final missions on which they encountered the enemy, leading section attacks on German airfields. On 16 April the group claimed 39-0-27, and the following day significantly bettered this with 66-0-24. Littge was credited with nine destroyed and five damaged on the two strafing runs. During the latter strike on Prattling aerodrome, Littge's aircraft came under fire from flak batteries. Shrapnel punctured the engine reservoir tank, causing all the aircraft's oil to be lost, as well as severing the manifold pressure lines and shooting off a foot-and-a-half of its left wing. Seven passes were made over the field, Littge destroying two highly valuable Me 262s in the process. These strafing attacks earned him a DSC, and raised his score to 23.5 (10.5 aerial kills).

Now the end was clearly in sight—Germany had been all but overrun by the time the 352nd flew its last ETO mission on 3 May. When the final figures for enemy aircraft downed in Europe were compiled, George Preddy and John Meyer topped the list of pilots who had scored the majority of their kills on the P-51. Preddy's tally stood at 23.83 out of 26.83 in Mustangs, and Meyer 21 out of 24. John England emerged as number five, with all of his 17.5 victories having been achieved whilst flying the P-51. Ten pilots had been awarded the DSC while serving with 352nd. Like most other VIIIth FC groups, the 352nd shipped out of Bodney, bound for the USA, in November 1945.

Lt Lothar Fieg flew *Katydid* with the 328th FS during the second half of 1944. Like several other units within VIIIth FC, this squadron used the small trim tab on the rudder as an appropriate place to display individual flight markings, which usually took the form of coloured bars. By coincidence, the 55th FG also had a P-51D christened *KATYDID*, which was flown by the Eighth's leading ground attack ace, Lt Col Elwyn Righetti



Little Stinker carried an appropriate skunk painting under the forward exhausts, and was flown by Lt Leonard Gremaux. The 'PZ' codes denote an aircraft of the 486th FS, perhaps the least known of the Group's trio of squadrons. Their relative anonymity no doubt stems from the fact that they failed to produce a single high-ranking ace within the 352nd FG



THE APPENDICES

OPERATIONAL DEBUT DATES FOR VIIIth FIGHTER COMMAND GROUPS

4th	(1) 10 Mar 43 – P-47; (P-51B from 25 Feb 44)	352nd	(5) 9 Sept 43 – P-47; (P-51B from 8 Apr 44)	357th	(13) 11 Feb 44 – first Eighth AF P-51 Group
20th	(11) 28 Dec 43 – P-38; (P-51B from 20 July 44)	353rd	(4) 12 Aug 43 – P-47; (P-51D from 2 Oct 44)	359th	(10) 13 Dec 43 – P-47; (P-51B from 5 May 44)
55th	(8) 15 Oct 43 – P-38; (P-51D from 19 Jul 44)	354th	(9) 1 Dec 43 – First P-51 unit in ETO (this unit was always technically part of the Ninth Air Force)	361st	(12) 21 Jan 44 – P-47; (P-51B from 12 May 44)
56th	(2) 3 Apr 43 – P-47; throughout combat ops	355th	(6) 14 Sept 43 – P-47; (P-51B from 9 Mar 44)	364th	(14) 3 Mar 44 – P-38; (P-51D from 28 Jul 44)
78th	(3) 13 Apr 43 – P-47; (P-51D from 29 Dec 44)	356th	(7) 15 Oct 43 – P-47; (P-51D from 20 Nov 44)	479th	(16) 26 May 44 – P-38; (P-51D from 13 Sept 44)
339th	(15) 30 Apr 44 – P-51D; throughout combat ops				

On 1 Jan 1944 VIIIth FC had the 4th, 56th, 78th, 352nd, 353rd, 355th, 356th and 359th FGs (eight groups) operating with P-47s, and (two), the 20th and 55th FGs, with P-38s. By 6 June 1944, VIIIth FC had the 4th, 339th,

352nd, 355th, 357th, 359th and 361st FGs (seven groups) with P-51s, and the 20th, 55th, 364th and 479th (FGs) with P-38s (four groups), plus the 56th, 78th, 353rd and 356th FGs with P-47s (four groups).

MUSTANG GROUPS, AND THEIR SQUADRONS, OF THE EIGHTH

4th Fighter Group

334th Fighter Squadron
335th Fighter Squadron
336th Fighter Squadron

20th Fighter Group

55th Fighter Squadron
77th Fighter Squadron
79th Fighter Squadron

55th Fighter Group

38th Fighter Squadron
338th Fighter Squadron
343rd Fighter Squadron

78th Fighter Group

82nd Fighter Squadron
83rd Fighter Squadron
84th Fighter Squadron

339th Fighter Group

503rd Fighter Squadron
504th Fighter Squadron
505th Fighter Squadron

352nd Fighter Group

328th Fighter Squadron
486th Fighter Squadron
487th Fighter Squadron

353rd Fighter Group

350th Fighter Squadron
351st Fighter Squadron
352nd Fighter Squadron

355th Fighter Group

354th Fighter Squadron
357th Fighter Squadron
358th Fighter Squadron

356th Fighter Group

359th Fighter Squadron
360th Fighter Squadron
361st Fighter Squadron

357th Fighter Group

362nd Fighter Squadron
363rd Fighter Squadron
364th Fighter Squadron

359th Fighter Group

365th Fighter Squadron
366th Fighter Squadron
367th Fighter Squadron

361st Fighter Group

374th Fighter Squadron
375th Fighter Squadron
376th Fighter Squadron

364th Fighter Group

383rd Fighter Squadron
384th Fighter Squadron
385th Fighter Squadron

479th Fighter Group

434th Fighter Squadron
435th Fighter Squadron
436th Fighter Squadron

TOP ACES OF THE EIGHTH—GROUP BY GROUP

Name score personal aircraft (P-51s only)

4th Fighter Group

Gentile, Don	19.83	P-51B 43-6913/VF-T <i>Shangri-La</i>
Beeson, Duane	17.33	P-51B 43-6819/QP-B <i>BEE</i>
Godfrey John	16.3	P-51B 43-6765/VF-P P-51B 42-106730/VF-P <i>Reggie's Reply</i> P-51D 44-13412/VF-F
Hofer, Ralph	15	P-51B 42-106924/QP-L <i>Salem Representative</i>
Goodson, James	15	P-51B 43-13848/VF-B P-51B 43-6895/VF-B P-51D 44-13303/VF-B
Carpenter, George	13.2	P-51B 43-6575/WD-I <i>Virginia</i> P-51B 42-106675/WD-I
Millikan, Willard	13	P-51B 43-24769/VF-U <i>Missouri Mauler</i> P-51B 43-6997/VF-U
Hively, Howard	12	P-51B 43-6898/QP-J <i>The Deacon</i> P-51D 44-15347/QP-J
McKennon, Pierce	12	P-51B 42-106911/WD-A <i>Yippi Joe</i> P-51B 43-6896/WD-A P-51D 44-14221/WD-A <i>RIDGE RUNNER II</i> P-51D 44-14570/WD-A <i>RIDGE RUNNER</i> P-51D 44-63166/WD-A P-51D 44-72308/WD-A <i>RIDGE RUNNER III</i>
Megura, Nicholas	11.84	P-51B 43-6636/QP-N <i>Ill Wind</i> P-51B 43-7158/QP-F
Blakeslee, Don	11.50	P-51B 43-6437/WD-C P-51B 42-106726/WD-C P-51D 44-13779/WD-C
Clark Jr, James	11.5	P-51B 42-106650/QP-W P-51B 43-6726/QP-W P-51B 43-6560/QP-W P-51D 44-13372/QP-W
Norley, Louis	11.3	P-51B 43-12416/VF-O P-51B 43-6666/VF-O P-51B 43-6802/VF-O P-51D 44-15028/WD-O P-51D 44-15350/VF-?

Name score personal aircraft (P-51s only)

		P-51D 44-72196/QP-O P-51D 44-73108/QP-O <i>Red Dog XII</i>
Anderson, Charles	10.5	P-51B 43-6972/VF-N <i>Paul</i> P-51B 43-7181/WD-L
Glover, Fred	10.3	P-51B 43-12214/VF-C <i>Rebel Queen</i> P-51D 44-14787/VF-B P-51D 44-64153/VF-B
Lines, Ted	10	P-51B 43-7172/WD-H <i>Thunder Bird</i> P-51D 44-13555/WD-D <i>Thunder Bird</i>
Woods, Sidney	10	P-51D 44-72251/QP-A

20th Fighter Group

Fiebelkorn, Ernest	9.5	P-51D 44-11161/LC-N <i>June Nite</i> P-51D 44-14823/LC-F <i>Miss Miami</i>
Morris, James	7.3	(P-38 only)
Brown, Harley	6	P-51D 44-13779/KI-N P-51D 44-11250/KI-A <i>Be Good/Brownies'</i> <i>Ballroom</i>
Lindol, Graham	5.5	(P-38 only)
Ilfrey, Jack	8*	P-51D 44-13761/MC-O <i>HAPPY JACK'S GO</i> <i>BUGGY</i>
McKeon Joseph	6*	P-51D 44-13992/LC-C <i>Regina Coeli III</i>
Price, Jack	5*	P-51D 44-14693/LC-G <i>Feather Merchant 5th</i>

* Victories primarily scored with other units

55th Fighter Group

Lewis, William	8	P-51D 44-13907/CY-S P-51D 44-14907/CY-S
Cramer, Darrell	7.5	P-51D 44-14121/CL-Z <i>Mick #5</i>
Righetti, Elwyn	7.5	P-51D 44-14223/CL-M <i>KATYDID</i> P-51D 44-72227/CL-M <i>KATYDID</i>

Name	score	personal aircraft (P-51s only)
Landers, John	14.5*	P-51D 44-13823/CG-O <i>Big Beautiful Doll</i> P-51D 44-72218/WZ-I <i>Big Beautiful Doll</i> P-51D 44- /B6-7 <i>Big Beautiful Doll</i> P-51D 44-72218/E2-I <i>Big Beautiful Doll</i>

* Victories scored primarily with other units

78th Fighter Group

Brown, Quince	12.34	(P-47D only)
Juchem, Aldwin	10	(P-47D only)
Roberts Jr, Eugene	9	P-51D 44-15061/5E-O <i>Jimmie the First</i>

339th Fighter Group

Bryan Jr, William	8.5	P-51D 44-13601/D7-J P-51D 44-15074/D7-J <i>Big Noise</i>
Gerard, Francis	8	P-51D 44-13808/D7-U <i>Yi Yi</i> P-51D 44-150003/D7-U
Schafer Jr, Dale	8	P-51D 44-14671/D7-C P-51D 44-72147/D7-C

352nd Fighter Group

Preddy, George	25.83	P-51B 42-106451/HO-P <i>CRIPES A' MIGHTY 2ND</i> P-51D 44-13321/HO-P <i>CRIPES A' MIGHTY 3RD</i> P-51D 44-14906/PE-P <i>CRIPES A' MIGHTY</i>
Meyer, John	24	P-51B 42-106471/HO-M <i>Lambie II</i> P-51D 44-14151/HO-M <i>PETIE 2ND</i> P-51D 44-15041/HO-M <i>PETIE 3RD</i>
Thornell, John	17.25	P-51B 42-106872/PE-T <i>PATTY ANN II</i>
Whisner, William	16	P-51B 42-106449/HO-W <i>Princess ELIZABETH</i> P-51D 44-14237/HO-W <i>Moonbeam McSWINE</i>
Bryan, Donald	13.34	P-51B 423-6894/PE-B <i>Little One II</i> P-51D 44-14061/PE-B <i>Little One III</i>

Name	score	personal aircraft (P-51s only)
Moran, Glennon	13	P-51B 42-6912/HO-M P-51C 42-103320/HO-M <i>Little Ann</i> P-51D 44-13320/HO-M
Halton, William	11.5	P-51B 42-106717/PE-T <i>Slender, Tender and TALL</i> P-51D 44-13966/PE-T <i>Slender, Tender and TALL</i> P-51D 44-14812/HO-T <i>Slender, Tender and TALL</i> P-51D 44-13557/HO-T <i>Slender, Tender and TALL</i>
Littge, Raymond	10.5	P-51C 42-103320/HO-M <i>Pluribus Unum</i> P-51D 44-13320/HO-M <i>Silver Dollar</i> P-51D 44-72216/HO-M <i>Helen</i>

353rd Fighter Group

Duncan Glenn	19	P-51D 44-73060/LH-X <i>Dove of Peace VIII</i> (P-47D only)
Beckham, Walter	18	(P-47D only)
Blickenstaff, Wayne	10	P-51D 44-72374/LH-U <i>BETTY-E</i>

355th Fighter Group

Brown, Henry	17.2	P-51B 42-106448/WR-Z <i>Hun Hunter/Texas</i> P-51D 44-13305/WR-Z <i>Hun Hunter/Texas</i>
Hovde, William	10.5	P-51B 43-6928/YF-I <i>OLE-II,</i> P-51D 44-13531/YF-I <i>OLE-III,</i> P-51D 44- /YF-I <i>OLE-IV,</i> P-51D 44-73108/YF-I <i>OLE-V</i>
Haviland Jr, Fred	9	P-51D 44-14405/OS-H <i>Barbara</i>
Elder, John	8	P-51B 42-106732/OS-R <i>Moon</i> P-51D 44-63633/OS-R <i>Moon</i>
Kinnard Jr, Clairborne	8	P-51B 43-6431/WR-A <i>Man O'War</i> P-51D 44-15625/WR-A <i>MAN O'WAR</i>

Name	score	personal aircraft (P-51s only)
		P-51D 44-73144 /WR-A <i>Man O' War</i> P-51D 44-14292 /QP-A <i>Man O' War</i>

356th Fighter Group

Strait, Don	13.5	P-51D 44-15152 /QI-T <i>JERSEY JERK</i>
Scheible, Wilbur	6	P-51D 44-76457 /QI-Z (44-10583)
Thwaites, David	6	(P-47D only)

357th Fighter Group

Carson, Leonard	18.5	P-51D 44-13316 /G4-C <i>Nooky Booky II</i> P-51K 44-11622 /G4-C <i>Nooky Booky IV</i>
England, John	17.5	P-51B 42-106462 /G4-H <i>U'VE HAD IT!</i> P-51D 44-13735 /G4-H <i>U'VE HAD IT!</i> P-51D 44-14709 /G4-H <i>MISSOURI ARMADA</i>
Foy, Robert	17	P-51D 44-13712 /B6-V <i>Reluctant Rebel</i> P-51D 44-63621 /B6-V <i>LITTLE SHRIMP</i>
Anderson, Clarence	16.5	P-51B 43-24824 /B6-S <i>OLD CROW</i> P-51D 44-14450 /B6-S <i>OLD CROW</i>
Peterson, Richard	15.5	P-51B 43-6935 /C5-T <i>Hurry Home Honey</i> P-51D 44-13586 /C5-T <i>Hurry Home Honey</i> P-51D 44-14868 /C5-T <i>Hurry Home Honey</i>
Bochkay, Don	14.84	P-51B 43-6933 /B6-F <i>SPEEDBALL ALICE</i> P-51D 44-15422 /B6-F P-51D 44-72244 /B6-F
Kirla, John	11.5	P-51D 44-14624 /G4-H <i>Spook</i> P-51D 44-72180 /G4-H <i>Spook</i>
Yeager, Charles	11.5	P-51B 43-74650 /B6-Y <i>GLAMOROUS GLEN</i> P-51D 44-13897 /B6-Y <i>GLAMOROUS GLEN II</i> P-51D 44-14888 /B6-Y <i>GLAMOROUS GLEN III</i>

Name	score	personal aircraft (P-51s only)
Storch, John	10.5	P-51D 44-13546 /C5-R <i>THE SHILLELAGH</i> P-51D 44-72164 /C5-R <i>THE SHILLELAGH</i>
Broadhead, Joseph	10	P-51B 43-12227 /G4-V <i>Baby Mike</i> P-51D 44-14798 /G4-V <i>Master Mike</i>

359th Fighter Group

Wetmore, Ray	21.25	P-51B 42-106894 /CS-P P-51D 44-14733 /CS-L <i>Daddy's Girl</i>
Doersch, George	10.5	P-51B 43-24810 /CS-J P-51D 44-72067 /CV-R
Booth, Robert	8	P-51B 43-6757 /IV-F; P-51D 43-7199 /IV-F
Crenshaw, Claude	7	P-51B 42-106689 /IV-S P-51D 44-13606 /IV-I <i>LOUISIANA HEAT WAVE</i> P-51D 44-15016 /IV-I <i>HEAT WAVE</i>

361st Fighter Group

Spencer, Dale	9.5	P-51B 43-24800 /E9-D P-51D 44-14217 /E9-D
Beyer, William	9	P-51D 44-14144 /E9-N
Drew, Urban	6	P-51D 44-14164 /E2-D <i>DETROIT Miss</i>
Hopkins, Wallace	6	P-51B 42-106855 /B7-H <i>Ferocious Frankie</i> P-51D 44-13704 /B7-H <i>Ferocious Frankie</i>
Kemp, William	6	P-51C 42-103749 /E2-X <i>Betty Lee/Marie</i> P-51D 44-14270 /E2-X <i>Betty Lee II</i> P-51D 44-15076 /E2-X <i>Betty Lee III</i>

364th Fighter Group

Cueleers, George	10.5	P-51D 44-13971 /N2-D P-51D 44-15020 /N2-D P-51D 44-72719 /N2-D <i>Constance</i>
Bankey Jr, Ernest	9.5	P-51D 44-15019 /5E-B P-51D 44-73045 /5E-B <i>Lucky Lady VII</i>

Name	score	personal aircraft (P-51s only)
Fowle, James	8	P-51D 44-13829 /5Y-J <i>Terrie Claire</i> P-51D 44-14184 /5Y-Q <i>Terrie Claire III</i>

479th Fighter Group

Jeffrey, Arthur	14	P-51D 44-14423 /L2-O <i>BOOMERANG JR.</i> P-51D 44-11674 /L2-O <i>BOOMERANG JR.</i>
Olds, Robin	13	P-51D 44- /L2-W <i>SCAT IV</i> P-51D 44-14426/L2-W <i>SCAT V</i> P-51D 44-72922/L2-W <i>SCAT VI</i> P-51D 44-72922/L2-W <i>SCAT VII</i>
Gleason, George	12	P-51D 44-14740/L2-H <i>Hot Toddy</i>
Candelaria, Richard	6	P-51K 44-1175/J2-K <i>My Pride and Joy</i>

RATIO OF KILLS TO LOSSES GROUP BY GROUP

Eighth AF Fighter Groups – aerial kill ratio to losses
(all types of fighters flown)

Ranking	Group	Kills	Losses
1	56th	674	128
2	357th	609	128
3	4th	583	241
4	352nd	519	118
5	355th	365	175
6	78th	338	167
7	353rd	330	137
8	55th	316	181
9	364th	256	134
10	359th	253	106
11	339th	239	97
12	361st	226	81
13	20th	212	132
14	356th	201	122
15	479th	155	69
Totals:		5276*	2016

*2.75 enemy aircraft destroyed for every fighter lost

SPECIFICATIONS

P-51B Mustang

Type: single-seat, long-range escort fighter

Armament: four Colt-Browning M2 .50 in machine guns with total capacity of 1260 rounds; capable of carrying a single 500-lb bomb under each wing for ground attack missions

Powerplant: one Rolls-Royce (Packard) Merlin liquid-cooled V-1650-7 engine developing 1330 hp for take-off

Dimensions: span 37 ft; length 32 ft 3 in; height 12 ft 2 in

Weights: max loaded 11,800 lbs; empty 7010 lbs

Performance: max speed 440 mph; cruising speed 362 mph; service ceiling 41,800 ft; range 880 miles (with 2 x 75-gal drop tanks)

P-51D Mustang

Type: single-seat, long-range escort fighter

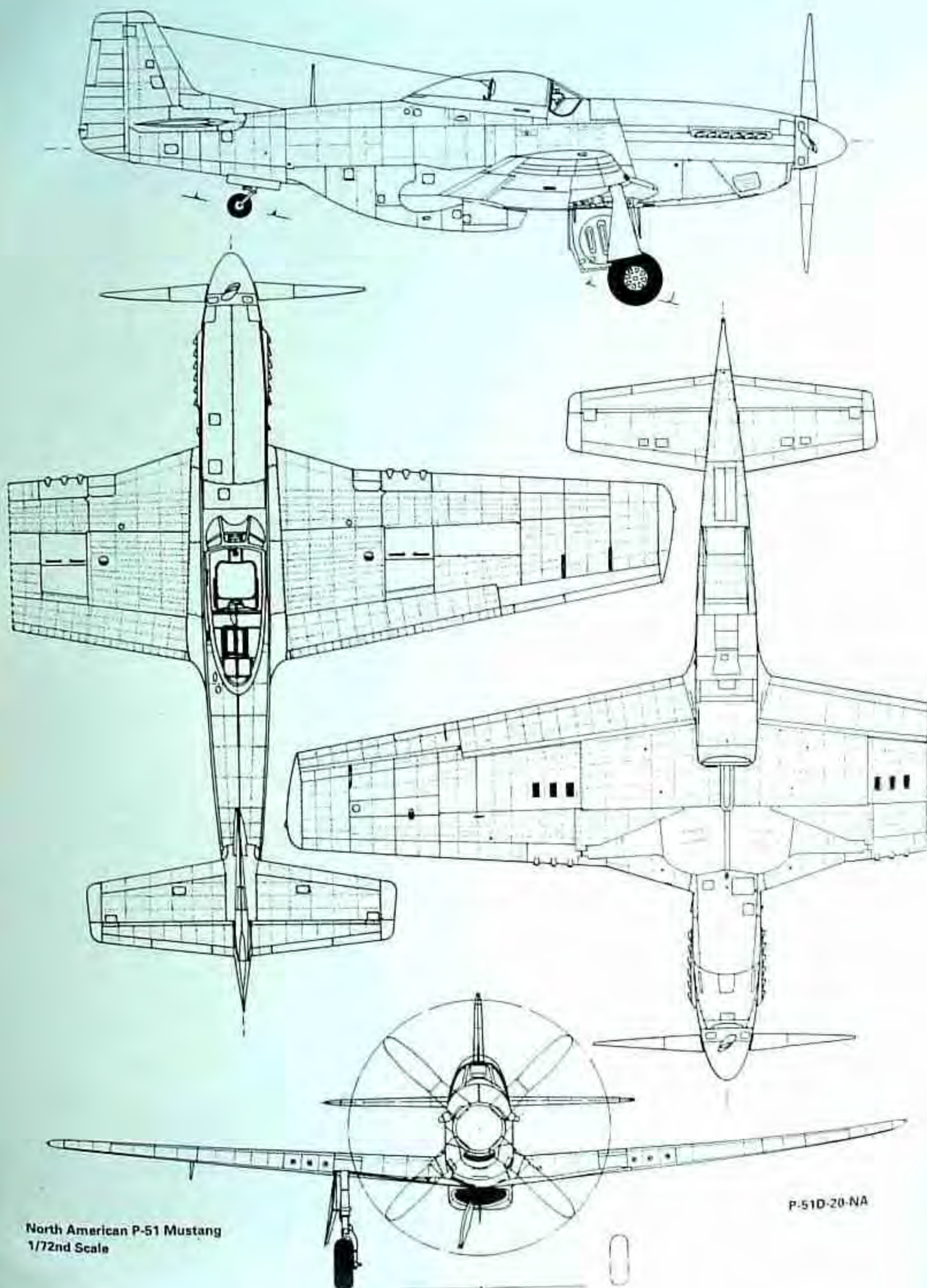
Armament: six Colt-Browning M2 .50-in machine guns with total capacity of 1000 rounds; external stores up to 1000 lbs of bombs or 6 x High Velocity Aerial Rockets (HVARs)

Powerplant: one Rolls-Royce (Packard) Merlin liquid-cooled V-1650-7 engine developing 1490 hp for take-off

Dimensions: span 37 ft; length 32 ft 3 in; height 12 ft 2 in

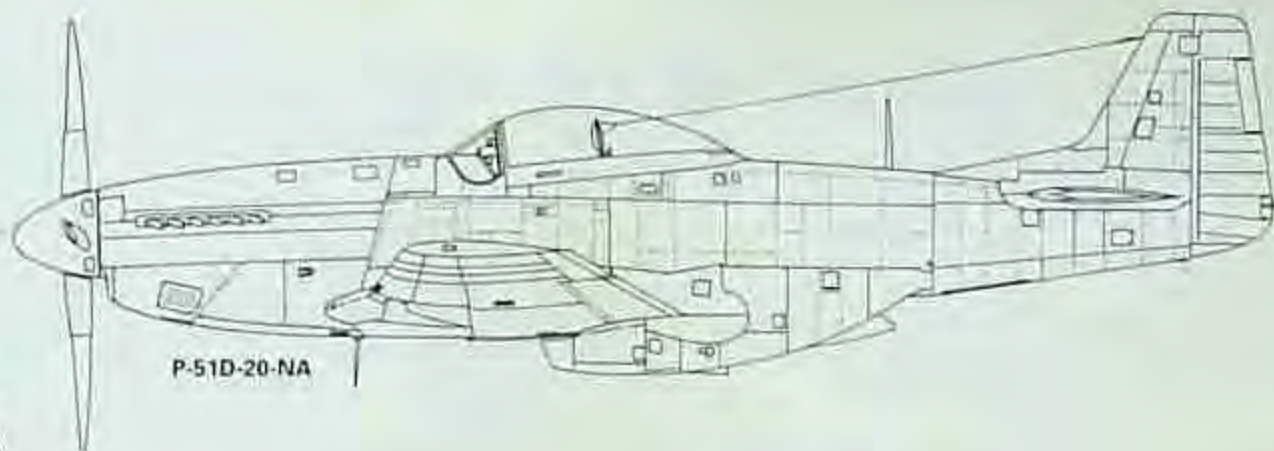
Weights: max loaded 12,100 lbs; empty 7635 lbs

Performance: max speed 437 mph; cruising speed 362 mph; service ceiling 30,000 ft; range 1000 miles with 2 x 110-gal drop tanks



North American P-51 Mustang
1/72nd Scale

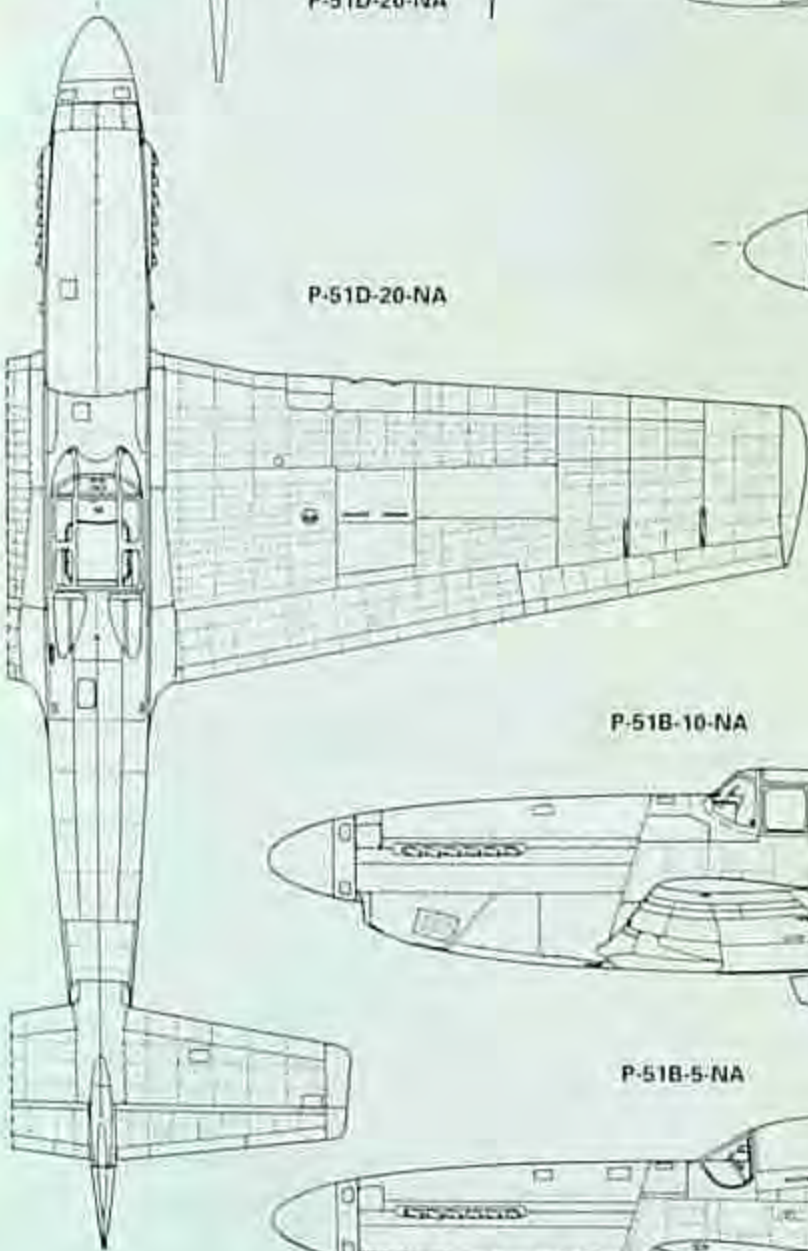
P-51D-20-NA



P-51D-20-NA



P-51B-15-NA (Malcolm hood)



P-51D-20-NA



P-51B-10-NA



P-51B-5-NA



P-51K-5-NT



COLOUR PLATES

1

P-51B-5-NA 43-6819 BEE, flown by Captain Duane W Beeson, Officer Commanding 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1944

The first Mustangs to reach the Eighth Air Force were painted in overall olive drab (OD), with neutral gray undersurfaces. The colours blended gradually into one another through the use of a slight overspray. Recognition stripes in white were initially applied across the wings, tailplane, fin and around the nose. Duane Beeson was Don Gentile's rival in the Eighth Air Force's first 'Ace Race' aiming to beat Great War ace Eddie Rickenbacker's record of 26 enemy aircraft downed, but he was shot down and captured on 5 April 1944, when his score had reached 22.08, including 17.3 air-to-air kills, 5.3 of which were scored in the Mustang.

2

P-51B-15-NA 42-106924 Salem Representative, flown by Flight Officer Ralph 'Kidd' Hofer, 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, May 1944

A rebellious maverick who habitually flew in a blue and orange college football shirt, the 'Kidd' began his flying career in the RCAF, transferring to the USAAF in June 1943. The *Salem Representative* was Hofer's third P-51B, assigned to him in April 1944 – his first two aircraft had been lost while being flown by other pilots. The aircraft had drab upper surfaces, with a very high demarcation on the fuselage, and a red band across the fin in the same position as the discontinued recognition marking. Black recognition stripes were retained underwing and under the tailplane. An ace even before promotion from Flight Officer to Lieutenant, Hofer was killed in action over Yugoslavia on 2 July 1944, shot down by a Bf 109. He was credited with 15 enemy aircraft in the air, and destroyed another 15 on the ground, prior to his death.

3

P-51B-5NA 43-6636 ILL WIND, flown by 1st Lieutenant Nicholas 'Cowboy' Megura, 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1944

The factory camouflaged P-51B *Ill Wind* flown by Nicholas 'the Cowboy' Megura, who amassed a total of 11.83 air-to-air kills, with another 3.75 by strafing. Megura (by then a Captain) crash-landed in Sweden after being hit in the glycol tank in error by a P-38 on 22 May 1944. He was prohibited from re-entering combat after his repatriation due to the rules of his previous internment. On most early camouflaged (and natural metal) Mustangs the specified white nose recognition band gave way to Group colours (red for the 'Eagles' of the 4th FG, for example) while the tailfin stripe was deleted because it broke up the distinctive outline of the Mustang's tail. White stripes were retained on the wings and tailplane, however (black on natural metal aircraft).

4

P-51D-25-NA 44-73108 Red Dog XII, flown by Major Louis 'Red Dog' Norley, Officer Commanding 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1945

During December 1944 the 12-inch red nose band used by the 4th FG was extended aft to 24 inches on the upper decking, curving down and aft towards the wingroot. Aircraft had already started to gain more colour from October 1944 onwards, when squadron coloured fin bands or trim tabs were replaced by coloured rudders, with red for the 334th FS, white for the 335th FS and blue for the 336th FS. Two-digit squadron identification codes were applied to most Eighth Air Force Mustangs ahead of the star and bar, with an individual letter aft or on the tailfin. Although a deadly serious professional in the air, Norley was known as something of a prankster on the ground, and a fanatic for red-dog poker, which provided his nickname. He amassed 10.3 aerial victories, scoring nine of them in the P-51.

5

P-51B-10-NA 43-7172 Thunder Bird, flown by 1st Lieutenant Ted Lines, 335th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1944

Ted Lines, from Mesa, Arizona, decorated his Mustangs with appropriate Indian-style artwork and bestowed the name *Thunder Bird* on them. With ten officially recorded aerial victories and another three credited by the Group, but not recognised by the Victory Credits Board, Lines was a little-publicised member of the 4th FG. This P-51B was eventually replaced by similarly named, similarly marked P-51D 44-13555 (WD-D). Reflecting the Mustang's multi-role capability, *Thunder Bird* is seen here toting bombs underwing, and wears full black recognition stripes on wings and tail.

6

P-51D-20-NA 44-72308 RIDGE RUNNER III, flown by Major Pierce 'Mac' McKennon, Officer Commanding 335th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, Spring 1945

A talented pianist and music student from the University of Arkansas, McKennon initially showed little aptitude for flying, being washed out of USAAF training. Undeterred, he joined the RCAF and eventually reached a Spitfire squadron based in Britain, before finally transferring to the USAAF in November 1942. Shot down twice, McKennon avoided capture the first time, and was smuggled out by the French Resistance. His second period in enemy territory was of much briefer duration, since one of his pilots landed and flew his squadron commander back to Debden on his lap! McKennon amassed 11 aerial victories, seven of them in the P-51, with a further 9 as strafing kills.

His final Mustang, shown here, carried an Arkansas razorback on the nose, rushing past two parachutes! The black-edged white rudder denoted the 335th FS.

7

P-51B-5-NA 43-6913 *Shangri-La*, flown by Captain Don Gentile, 336th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, March 1944

Winner of the 'Ace Race' to reach Rickenbacker's 26 kills (racking up 21.83 aerial and six ground victories by April 1944), Gentile's personal kill list, and Gen Eisenhower's remark that the youngster from Ohio was a 'one-man air force', obscure his contribution as a team-player, whose unselfish partnership with wingman John T Godfrey proved mutually beneficial. Rejected for pilot training by the USAAC, Gentile followed the example of many of his compatriots and enlisted with the RCAF, scoring his first kill (and receiving a British DFC) as a member of No 133 'Eagle' Sqn flying Spitfires in support of the Dieppe landings. Gentile transferred to the USAAF with his squadron in September 1942, achieving 2 Spitfire and 4.33 P-47 kills before converting to the P-51 and scoring a further 15.5. The beautifully decorated *Shangri-La* broke its back when Gentile hit the runway during a low-level pass after completing his last operational mission on 13 April 1944. He later flew a silver P-51D with similar markings during a fund-raising drive in the USA.

8

P-51D-20-NA 44-64153 (unnamed), flown by Major Fred Glover, Officer Commanding 336th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, April 1945

A former pro-baseball player with the *St Louis Cardinals*, Fred Glover was another ace rejected out of hand by the USAAF, trained by the RCAF, and later transferred back to the service that had spurned him. Glover did not join the 4th FG until 1944, and flew only the Mustang, gaining 10.3 aerial and 12.5 strafing victories. His airborne kills included an Me 163 Komet, which made the fatal error of slowing down for its firing pass on a USAAF bomber formation. Glover flew a succession of Mustangs, this one being the last. The anti-dazzle panel was painted in the 336th Sqn's adopted blue, as was the canopy frame (these denoting his status as CO) and of course the rudder.

9

P-51B-15-NA 43-24769 *MISSOURI MAULER*, flown by Captain Willard 'Millie' Millikan, 336th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, May 1944

After having a stipulated \$350 of dental work carried out, Willard Millikan was allowed to join the USAAC, but was washed out of training for an 'inherent lack of flying ability'. Even in the RCAF, which he subsequently joined, Millikan showed little promise and was advised to become a ferry pilot. Despite a reputation for emphasising protection of the bombers, and supporting other members of his flight (rather than chasing after enemy fighters hell-for-leather), Millikan quickly became an ace, eventually amassing 13 aerial

victories, ten of them while flying the P-51. Millikan's war ended on 30 May 1944 when his wingman collided with him after being hit by flak. Both pilots bailed out to become PoWs, Millikan subsequently escaping, but not in time to return to operations. Leading the F-84 equipped 121st Fighter Squadron of the DCANG, Millikan's post-war Air Guard service included taking his unit to Korea.

10

P-51D-5-NT 44-11161 *June Nite*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Ernest Fiebelkorn, 77th Fighter Squadron, 20th Fighter Group, November 1944

At 6ft 4in and 16 stone, Ernest Fiebelkorn must have found the Mustang's cockpit a trifle cramped. Nevertheless, flying this Dallas-built P-51D and others, including 44-14823/LC-F *Miss Miami*, he became the 20th Fighter Group's top-scorer with 9.5 kills. He was a slow starter, though, not opening his account until 2 November 1944 when he downed three aircraft. That same month also saw the addition of seven black and six white nose stripes behind the 20th FG marking.

11

P-51D-5-NA 44-13761 *HAPPY JACK'S GO BUGGY*, flown by Captain Jack Ilfrey, 79th Fighter Squadron, 20th Fighter Group, September 1944

In naming his P-51, Jack Ilfrey repeated the sobriquet he'd applied to his P-38 Lightnings, flown with the 1st and 20th Fighter Groups. All of his eight kills were scored on the Lightning. The 20th Fighter Group's constituent squadrons eschewed the use of coloured rudders, instead repeating the aircraft's individual letter in a triangle (55th FS), circle (77th FS) or square (79th FS). Like many 79th FS P-51s, Ilfrey's Mustang had its serial number overpainted.

12

P-51D-10-NA 44-14223 *KATYDID*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel Elwyn Righetti, 338th Fighter Squadron, 55th Fighter Group, early 1945

In addition to 7.5 aerial victories, Elwyn Righetti amassed a score of 27 ground victories – the highest individual score in the Eighth. He was promoted to full Colonel in command of the 55th Fighter Group from February 1945, but was lost on 17 April following a successful belly-landing, after being hit by ground fire, on an airfield he had earlier been strafing. Righetti had destroyed nine enemy aircraft during this mission alone, and soon after being captured near *KATYDID*, was killed by a furious mob of German 'civilians'. The 55th introduced coloured rudders from October (green for the 338th FS, yellow for the 343rd FS and, from December, red for the 38th FS). Righetti's kill markings were applied in the form of broken Swastikas.

13

P-51D-5-NA 44-13837 *Miss Marilyn II*, flown by 1st Lieutenant E Robert Welch, 343rd Fighter Squadron, 55th Fighter Group, October/November 1944

Bob Welch scored six air-to-air kills, most of them

during the heavy fighting of Autumn 1944, with a further 12 strafing credits. His 343rd Fighter Squadron P-51D was typical of the unit's aircraft, with the lower part of the nose in natural metal, but with the rear fuselage, fin and upper surfaces in dark green. The red prancing horse insignia began to appear in late 1944, and a narrow two-inch band (in the squadron colour) was applied behind the green and yellow chequers from about November.

14

P-51D-20-NA 44-72218 *Big Beautiful Doll*, flown by Colonel John Landers, Officer Commanding 78th Fighter Group, 1945

Scoring six victories in the Pacific with the 49th FG whilst flying P-40s, Landers was posted to a succession of Eighth Air Force fighter units, flying a series of P-38s and P-51s, all of which were named *Big Beautiful Doll*. From the 38th FS of the 55th FG (scoring four kills in P-38s and flying Mustang 44-13823/CG-O) he was promoted to command the 357th FG (flying another *Doll*) between 11 October and 2 December 1944, before moving to Duxford to take command of the 78th FG. After the war he commanded the 361st FG. Appropriately enough, the Imperial War Museum at Duxford painted its P-51D in the colours worn by Landers' Mustang, although the aircraft is presently displayed at their Lambeth headquarters, rather than at their Cambridgeshire airfield. He scored 14.5 victories, 8.5 of them while serving with the Eighth (4.5 in Mustangs), amassing a further 20 ground victories, including eight during one mission!

15

P-51D-5-NA 44-13808 *Yi-Yi*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Francis Gerard, 503rd Fighter Squadron, 339th Fighter Group, October 1944

Francis Gerard's Mustang shows the markings of the 339th FG to advantage, though two-inch coloured nose bands and coloured rudders (red for the 503rd FS, green for the 504th and yellow for the 505th) were added from early 1945. The 339th trained as a dive bomber unit before re-equipping with P-39s and converting to the fighter role. They were thrown in at the deep end, receiving Mustangs only after their arrival in England. The 339th FG began operations with P-51Bs on 30 April 1944, and in its one year of operations claimed 239.5 air-to-air and 440.5 ground victories, an Eighth Air Force record. Gerard himself scored eight aerial victories, the last as a Captain in March 1945.

16

P-51B-15-NA 42-106872 *PATTY ANN II*, flown by 1st Lieutenant John F Thornell Jr, 328th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, July 1944

Finishing the war as the Group's third ranking ace, and top-scorer of the 328th Fighter Squadron, Thornell opened his account with 4.25 P-47 victories. He in fact led the Group's scoring league table until his return to the USA in June 1944, giving Preddy and Meyer the opportunity to overtake him! When he left the squadron in July

1944 he was the first of the unit's pilots to reach 300 operational hours, and had amassed 17.25 aerial victories (13 while flying P-51s) and two ground victories. His Malcolm-hooded aircraft is seen here with the later extended blue nose markings and a coloured rudder tab.

17

P-51D-15-NA 44-14906 *CRIPES A'MIGHTY*, flown by Major George Preddy, Officer Commanding 328th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, Christmas Day 1944

George Preddy's last assigned aircraft was this P-51D, flown after his return from R&R to take command of the 328th Fighter Squadron, and it carries the squadron's standard red rudder and canopy rail name tag. A stylised barber's pole was painted on the right hand side of the cowl, reflecting the part-time 'career' of his crew chief! His previous aircraft, flown while serving with the Groups 487th FS, included P-51D *CRIPES A'MIGHTY 3RD* (44-13321/HO-P) and P-51B *CRIPES A'MIGHTY 2ND* (42-106451/HO-P), as well as the original *CRIPES A'MIGHTY*, a P-47-RE in which Preddy scored his first three victories. The style of lettering used for Preddy's personal markings varied enormously on all four aircraft. With 26.83 air-to-air kills, 23.83 of them scored while flying Mustangs (and three strafing victories), Preddy was the top-scoring P-51 pilot of the war, although if air and ground kills are counted his old rival John Meyer (who could add 13 strafing kills to his 24 aerial victories) took the title.

18

P-51B-5-NA 43-6704 *HELL-ER-BUST*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Edwin Heller, 486th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, September 1944

Factory-applied camouflage was abandoned in January 1944, primarily to save cost and time in the factories, but it also resulted in both a minor weight saving and improved performance through reduced drag. Aircraft delivered after February 1944 arrived in-theatre in natural metal, but camouflaged upper surfaces were reintroduced from May 1944 for those units expected to serve overseas after the invasion. Such camouflage used British paint, and was applied at unit or depot level. Towards the end of 1944 such camouflaging was abandoned, and many aircraft were stripped back to a metal finish. Several 352nd Group pilots were reluctant to give up their drab-painted P-51Bs, one, Lt Sheldon Hoyer, reportedly being jokingly threatened with court martial before he would accept a trade-in! Edwin Heller's P-51B, wearing 11 victory markings, is fitted with a sliding, blown, Malcolm hood, which gave much improved visibility and which would have made *HELL-ER-BUST* a particularly desirable mount. Heller scored 5.5 air-to-air victories, but 16.5 ground kills swelled his final tally to 22!

19

P-51D-10-NA 44-14812 *Slender, Tender & TALL*, flown by Major William Halton, Officer Commanding 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, April 1945

Replacing John Meyer as commander of the 487th Fighter Squadron in November 1944, William Halton had already scored one victory while flying P-47s (and P-51Bs) with the 328th FS, before replacing George Preddy as Operations Officer of the 487th. He then scored another kill in his new P-51D, which he continued to fly as squadron commander, raising his victory tally to 11.5.

20

P-51D-10-NA 44-14151 *PETIE 2ND*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel John Meyer, Officer Commanding 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, August 1944

After flying Iceland-based P-40s on fruitless convoy patrols, and scoring three victories while flying the P-47, John Meyer got into his stride once strapped into a Mustang from the 352nd Fighter Group. His first aircraft (P-51B 42-106471) was named *Lambie II* and then *PETIE*, and it was in this machine that he racked up the majority of his kills. The P-51D illustrated did not look like this for long, since Meyer thought the name in white and victory markings in yellow looked too bland, so he ordered Sgt Sam Perry to brighten them up, in order to "scare the hell out of the damned Germans". *PETIE 2ND* was overpainted with bright orange stripes, and the kill markings were changed to orange! *PETIE 2ND* was Meyer's mount for only two victories, and he scored more in another P-51D (44-15041) *PETIE 3RD*. He continued to fly and score after being reassigned as Deputy Group Commander in November 1944. Meyer claimed two MIG-15 kills while flying with the 4th FIW in Korea, before retiring as a General in 1974.

21

P-51C-1-NT 42-103320 (*Little Ann*), flown by 1st Lieutenant Glennon Moran, 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, September 1944

Glen Moran's combat record was impressive. Credited with 13 air-to-air victories, he scored these during a relatively short period of time, notching up a tally more rapidly than his more famous squadron mates Meyer and Preddy. He scored most of his victories in this machine, which replaced his original aircraft (P-51B 42-6912/HQ-M) after an April 1944 landing accident. It was a Dallas-built P-51C-1-NT, and is seen here with underwing fuel tanks and D-Day recognition stripes.

22

P-51B-10-NA 42-106449 *Princess ELIZABETH*, flown by 1st Lieutenant William Whisner, 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, May 1944

William Whisner's first Mustang was this P-51B. From late April 1944 the 352nd Fighter Group's blue nose marking was extended aft from being a 12-inch band to slope aft and upwards to cover the exhaust stubs, and squadron rudder colours (blue for the 487th FS, red for the 328th and yellow for the 486th) were introduced from November 1944. Whisner's P-51B retained the standard early Mustang canopy, which greatly restricted visibility. He ended the war a Captain, with 15.5 aerial and three ground victories.

23

P-51D-10-NA 44-14237 *Moonbeam McSWINE*, flown by Captain William Whisner, 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group, February 1945

William T Whisner scored his first victories, whilst flying as George Preddy's wingman when the 352nd still flew P-47s, four more while flying other Mustangs during the remainder of his first combat tour, and the rest in this aircraft. *Moonbeam McSWINE* was equipped with a K-14 gunsight, which reportedly made deflection shooting much easier, as Whisner's second-tour total of 10.5 victories bears testimony. Whisner went on to become the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing's first jet ace in Korea, and also served in Vietnam, albeit not as a combat pilot.

24

P-51D-20-NA 44-72374 *BETTY-E*, flown by Lieutenant Colonel Wayne Blickenstaff, 350th Fighter Squadron, 353rd Fighter Group, March 1945

Wayne Blickenstaff scored four of his ten aerial victories on 27 November 1944, and four more on 24 March 1945. His aircraft wears the extended chequers and coloured rudder adopted in November 1944, and the aircraft's code letters are outlined thinly in yellow. While the 350th FS used yellow as its squadron colour, the 352nd used black, while the 351st left their rudders silver. The 353rd FG accounted for 330.5 enemy aircraft in air combat and 414 on the ground, losing 137 fighters in return.

25

P-51D-25-NA 44-73060 *Dove of Peace*, flown by Colonel Glenn E Duncan, Officer Commanding 353rd Fighter Group, April 1945

Glenn Duncan's period at the helm of the 353rd was interrupted on 7 July 1944 when he was shot down in his P-47 over Holland. After successfully belly-landing the 'Jug', Duncan evaded capture and worked with the Dutch Resistance until the allied advance through the Low Countries allowed him to return to his unit. Returning to his command on 22 April 1945, Duncan was assigned this P-51D, which took over the same *Dove of Peace* nickname as his P-47 had carried. All of Duncan's 19 victories were scored in the Thunderbolt.

26

P-51D-15-NA 44-15092 *ALABAMA RAMMER JAMMER*, flown by 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C Cundy, 352nd Fighter Squadron, 353rd Fighter Group, October 1944

Arthur Cundy's *ALABAMA RAMMER JAMMER*, wearing typical early 350th FG markings as they appeared shortly after the P-51 entered service with the Group on 2 October 1944. Whereas most camouflaged aircraft lost the white recognition stripes painted on their tailfins, the similar black stripes painted on natural metal Mustangs tended to be retained. The nose chequers were extended aft during November 1944, to avoid confusion with the black and white chequered Mustangs of the 55th FG. Squadron rudder colours were introduced

at the same time, and coloured outlines were added to the identity code letters. One of Cundy's six kills is marked below the windscreen.

27

P-51D-15-NA 44-15625 MAN O'WAR, flown by Colonel Clairborne Kinnard, Officer Commanding 355th Fighter Group, early 1945

Clairborne Kinnard Jr returned to the 355th Fighter Group as commander in late February 1945, after a three-month spell in command of the 4th Fighter Group, where he flew a P-51D (44-14292/OP-A) also named *Man O'War*. His first mount with the 355th was initially unnamed, however, and wore the red rudder and nose band associated with the 354th FS, but soon picked up the *Man O'War* name in a red lightning flash. This aircraft was fitted with distinctive twin mirrors on the canopy arch. All eight of Kinnard's aerial victories were achieved in the Mustang.

28

P-51D-25-NA 44-73144 Man O'War, flown by Colonel Clairborne Kinnard, Officer Commanding 355th Fighter Group, April/May 1945

To distinguish his aircraft as that of the Group Commander, Kinnard had no rudder colours on his last *Man O'War*, and used an all white nose, with no red outline. This aircraft carries the distinctive cylindrical external fuel tanks which were made from laminated paper to save weight, and thus also avoid the use of strategic materials. These would only last a few hours once filled with fuel, as the volatile fluid began to attack the paper and glue after a period of time. They had to be jettisoned before landing for flight safety reasons.

29

P-51B-10-NA 42-106448 THE HUN HUNTER/TEXAS, flown by 2nd Lieutenant Henry Brown, 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, April 1944

Henry Brown's first Mustang, named *THE HUN HUNTER/TEXAS* was a P-51B delivered in the standard camouflage of olive drab and neutral grey, with white recognition bands. Brown applied his kill markings in a red stripe, which expanded to become a large panel, with several rows of crosses. When D-Day stripes were applied, they encircled the entire rear fuselage, with star-and-bar and squadron codes superimposed.

30

P-51D-5-NA 44-13305 THE HUN HUNTER/TEXAS, flown by 1st Lieutenant Henry Brown, 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, late summer, 1944

Brown's second *HUN HUNTER* was a P-51D delivered in natural metal finish, but with RAF dark green top surfaces having been added in the run-up to D-Day. Top scorer within the 355th FG having achieved 14.2 aerial and 14.5 ground victories, Henry Brown (by then a Captain) became a PoW after being shot down by flak on 3 October 1944. Coloured nose bands and rudders had not been added to the Mustangs of the 355th FG at this early stage of the war.

31

P-51D-15-NA 44-15255 DOWN FOR DOUBLE, flown by Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Graham, 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, March/April 1945

A white letter 'C' was applied to many 355th Fighter Group Mustangs flown by command pilots, including this aircraft, assigned to the newly promoted Lt Col Gordon Graham, a 7 aerial/9.5 ground victory ace who scored all of his kills while flying the Mustang. From late 1944 355th Fighter Group HQ aircraft also had white nose bands extended aft below the exhausts, with the painted area edged in red. The 355th Fighter Group was the leading Eighth Air Force air-to-ground victory scoring fighter unit, with 502 ground kills – it also achieved 365.5 aerial victories, thus making it the third most successful destroyer of enemy aircraft in the air.

32

P-51B-15-NA 42-106950 The Iowa Beaut, flown by Robert E Hulberman (rank unknown) 354th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, June/July 1944

Although not assigned to him, ace Frederick Haviland flew *The Iowa Beaut* on a number of occasions, and scored several of his nine aerial and six ground victories in the aircraft. Despite the impressive tally of victory markings, no trace of Hulberman himself, whose name appears on the nose, can be found in listings of Eighth Air Force air or ground aces. Two-tone disruptive camouflage, almost certainly using two very similar RAF paint colours, has been applied to a natural metal aircraft, necessitating the application of white recognition stripes above and below the wings and tail in place of the normal black ones.

33

P-51D-5-NA 44-13677 MISS STEVE, flown by 1st Lieutenant William Cullerton, 357th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, post-November 1944

1st Lt William J Cullerton claimed five air-to-air and 15 air-to-ground victories, ranking him 29th among Eighth Air Force aces under the system in force in Europe at the time, where no distinction was drawn between air and ground kills. The Eighth Air Force was out-of-step with other units, and official recognition of ground kills was withdrawn postwar. Cullerton's P-51D carried a blue rudder and a 12-inch blue nose band, markings adopted by the 357th FS after November 1944. Several other 357th FS Mustangs carried the same 'Licking Dragon' motif on their noses.

34

P-51B-5-NA 43-6928 OLE II, flown by 1st Lieutenant William Hovde, 358th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, March/April 1944

William Hovde's *OLE II* in regulation finish, with factory applied olive drab upper surfaces, neutral grey undersides and white recognition stripes around the wings, nose, tailplane and across the fin, seen shortly after the 355th Fighter Group began conversion from the P-47 to the Mustang. The fin stripe was soon deleted because it was felt

to be counter-productive, breaking up the distinctive shape of the Mustang's tail, and most Groups overpainted the nose stripe and spinner in individual colours.

35

P-51D-25-NA 44-73108 *OLE V*, Major William Hovde, Officer Commanding 358th Fighter Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, December 1944
Several of Hovde's later Mustangs (including *OLE V* and *OLE IV*) carried the same legend in Cyrillic script, originally applied during a 'shuttle-bombing' escort mission. This translates as Major Vazh Hovde, the name of Hovde's father, who was of Russian extraction. Hovde ended the war with 10.5 aerial and two strafing victories. The aircraft has a yellow nose band and rudder, the identifying marks used by the 358th Fighter Squadron after November 1944.

36

P-51D-15-NA 44-15152 *JERSEY JERK*, flown by Major Don Strait, Officer Commanding 361st Fighter Squadron, 356th Fighter Group, December 1944/January 1945
Squadron colours were not adopted by the 356th FG until December 1944, when coloured rudders (yellow for the 359th FS, red for the 360th FS and blue for the 361st) were introduced, followed by coloured spinners from February 1945. Not equipped with P-51s until November 1944, the 356th FG was the 'hard luck' group of the Eighth, with a higher loss-to-kill ratio than any other fighter unit, claiming 201 aerial and 75.5 ground victories for the loss of 122 aircraft. Don Strait's 13.5 air-to-air kills included 10.5 in the Mustang, the last being a trio of Fieseler Storchs! Strait was not credited with any air-to-ground victories.

37

P-51B-15-NA 43-24824 *OLD CROW*, flown by Captain Clarence 'Bud' Anderson, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, May 1944
Formed at Tonopah, Nevada, the 357th Fighter Group was the first P-51-equipped unit in the Eighth Air Force, beginning combat operations in February 1944. Its aircraft were among the most colourful, with red and yellow nose chevrons and a variety of individual names and nose art. The 357th scored a higher number of air-to-air kills than any other unit in the Eighth, accounting for about a quarter of the Mustang aces in the Eighth, and coming second only to the 354th FG in the number of aces it produced. This P-51B wears the original olive drab camouflage, with invasion stripes around the fuselage and wings and the Group's red and yellow striped spinner and chequered nose band.

38

P-51D-10-NA 44-14450 *OLD CROW*, flown by Captain Clarence 'Bud' Anderson, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, late 1944
Initially flown by Anderson in drab and neutral grey, by December 1944 *OLD CROW* had been stripped to a bare metal finish, and had picked up a red rudder (the identifying colour of the 362nd

FS), though it retained invasion stripes. Clarence Anderson ended the war with 16.25 aerial victories, plus a single strafing kill. Staying in the USAF, he served as a test pilot for many years before flying F-105s in action over Vietnam.

39

P-51K-5-NT 44-11622 *Nooky Booky IV*, flown by Captain Leonard 'Kit' Carson, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, Christmas Day 1944
Top-scorer of the 357th Fighter Group with 18.5 aerial victories (plus 3.5 more by strafing) was Leonard Carson. He chalked up the bulk of his score during the final six months of the war, many of his victims falling to the guns of this, his fourth Mustang, a Dallas-built P-51K. From November 1944 the 357th Fighter Group adopted coloured rudders for its constituent squadrons (red for the 363rd FS, yellow for the 364th and no colour for the 362nd). Until December 1944 most of the unit's aircraft were camouflaged.

40

P-51B-10-NA 42-106462 *U'VE HAD IT!*, flown by Captain John England, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, early Fall 1944
The first of four P-51s flown by the 362nd Fighter Squadron's John England, typical of natural metal P-51Bs given a hasty coat of camouflage on the top surfaces in anticipation of service from continental forward airfields. In fact, the extraordinary range and endurance of the Mustang, the continuing importance of the US daylight bombing offensive and the availability of other fighter types for close support and tactical work made such basing unnecessary. His squadron was among the first to receive Berger G-3 anti-g suits (after initial trials by the 339th Fighter Group), and replace its Mk II and Mk VIII reflector sights with the new K-14 gyro gunsight, a combination which England used to devastating effect.

41

P-51D-10-NA 44-14709 *MISSOURI ARMADA*, flown by Major John England, Officer Commanding 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, December 1944
In December 1944 England's *MISSOURI ARMADA* was still painted in the original Eighth Air Force olive drab and neutral grey camouflage, and, as an aircraft from the 362nd Fighter Squadron, lacked a coloured rudder. England scored his final victory (of 17.5 air-to-air kills) on 14 January 1945, and finished his tour soon afterwards. Staying in the USAF post-war England was killed in a flying accident on 17 November 1954 at Toul-Rosiere.

42

P-51D-25-NA: 44-72199 (unnamed), flown by Captain Charles E Weaver, 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, April 1945
Bedecked with 11 victory symbols, representing 8 aerial and 3 strafing kills, Captain Charles E Weaver's P-51D also sported a massive and beautifully executed reclining nude. The practise of the 362nd Fighter Squadron of not using coloured

rudders made their aircraft the least striking of the 357th Fighter Group, but many of the unit's pilots compensated for this by applying gaudy nose art. The 357th was the first with P-51s, and scored more air-to-air victories (609.5) than any other Mustang-equipped Group, although its relative lack of strafing success (106) put it behind the 352nd and 355th FGs overall.

43

P-51B-5-NA 43-6933 *SPEEDBALL ALICE*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Don Bochkay, 363rd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, April 1944

The Mustangs of the 357th originally flew without distinctive unit insignia, apart from their two-letter unit codes and individual aircraft letters. The white nose bands and spinners were soon replaced by red and yellow chequers, however. Don Bochkay frequently flew as part of a flight of four aircraft, that comprised Jim Browning (a seven-victory ace killed in action on 9 February 1945), Chuck Yeager (11.5 victories), Clarence Anderson (16.25 victories) and Bochkay himself.

44

P-51D-20-NA 44-72244 (winged Ace of Clubs badge), flown by Captain Don Bochkay, 363rd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, February/March 1945

Major (from March 1945) Don Bochkay planned and led a number of successful missions against German jet bases during the closing weeks of the war, downing two Me 262s himself to bring his score to 13.83 aerial victories. His last three aircraft were all unnamed P-51Ds, but all carried his large 'winged Ace' insignia on their engine cowlings. Bochkay was not credited with any air-to-ground victories.

45

P-51D-20-NA 44-63621 *LITTLE SHRIMP*, flown by Captain Robert Foy, 363rd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, January 1945

One of Robert Foy's first aircraft was a drab-painted P-51D named *Reluctant Rebel* (44-13712/B6-V), but this later illustrated aircraft is better known, and was flown by the pilot for most of his 15 aerial and 3 ground victories. Foy enjoyed something of a charmed life, being plucked out of the Channel twice, and even managing to fly home after hitting a tree during a low flypast of a downed foe. Foy ended the war as a Major.

46

P-51D-15-NA 44-14888 *GLAMOROUS GLEN III*, flown by Captain Charles 'Chuck' Yeager, 363rd Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, November 1944

Chuck Yeager's blend of cockiness and fearlessness served him as well in his career as a fighter pilot as it later did as a test pilot. Yeager ended the war with 11.5 aerial victories, including two Me 262 jets. On the other side of the ledger, Yeager was himself shot down by an Fw 190, but evaded capture and eventually returned to the UK, via Spain, with the help of the French Resistance. This P-51D was the third of Yeager's Mustangs, all

named after his sweetheart. The red rudder (applied to the unit's aircraft from November 1944) denotes the 363rd Fighter Squadron.

47

P-51B-5-NA 43-6935 *Hurry Home Honey*, flown by Captain Richard Peterson, 364th Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, May/June 1944

Hurry Home Honey was a P-51B flown by Captain Richard Peterson of the 364th Fighter Squadron. Invasion stripes encircle the entire rear fuselage, marring the effectiveness of the camouflage and necessitating the application of a black outline to those code letters applied over the white paint. One of the 357th Fighter Group's original pilots, Peterson notched up a tally of 15.5 air-to-air and 3.5 air-to-ground kills.

48

P-51D-5-NA 44-13586 *Hurry Home Honey*, flown by Captain Richard Peterson, 364th Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, October 1944

Peterson was assigned at least two P-51Ds, both of which he named *Hurry Home Honey*, inspired by the way his wife concluded her letters to him. This aircraft has green top surfaces extended to the vertical fin, while his other similarly marked D was overall natural metal, and had the yellow rudder of the 364th Fighter Squadron. Peterson was a slow starter, scoring most of his victories during the last nine months of the war.

49

P-51D-20-NA 44-72164 *THE SHILLELAGH*, flown by Lt Colonel John Storch, Officer Commanding 364th Fighter Squadron, 357th Fighter Group, early 1945

From November 1944, the 357th Fighter Group allocated rudder colours to two of its squadrons, yellow for the 364th and red for the 363rd, aircraft of the 362nd retaining natural metal. The abandonment of camouflage did not signify that the skies over Germany were safe, however, since there were still a handful of highly experienced Luftwaffe *experten* flying, and in the wrong hands aircraft like the Fw 190D and the jet-powered Me 262 could still give a P-51 pilot a very hard time. Storch claimed 10.5 aerial and 1.5 ground victories. One can only wonder if Storch knew what a 'Shillelagh' was, since a simple club was painted on the nose of his aircraft, whereas the real Irish weapon has a sloping, hammer-like head! Storch began his first tour as a Captain, being promoted to Major in May 1944.

50

P-51D-5-NA 44-13606 *LOUISIANA HEAT WAVE*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Claude Crenshaw, 369th Fighter Squadron, 359th Fighter Group, November 1944

Crenshaw's finest moment came on 21 November 1944, when he was credited with downing four Fw 190s. This achievement was even more impressive when one considers that only three of Crenshaw's guns were working, and the manoeuvring nature of the engagement had forced him to fire at deflection angles of up to 90+ degrees! No less

than 14 Mustangs were lost that day, and many bombers were also downed by a Luftwaffe that was far from beaten. The 359th Fighter Group initially used a green spinner and 12-inch green fuselage band as its marking, adding squadron rudder colours in November 1944. The 368th Fighter Squadron used red rudders, the 368th yellow and the 370th blue. Crenshaw gained seven air-to-air victories, and three strafing kills.

51

P-51D-10-NA 44-14733 *Daddy's Girl*, flown by Captain Ray Wetmore, 370th Fighter Squadron, 359th Fighter Group, early 1945

The 359th Fighter Group extended its green nose band aft in late 1944, curving down over the exhaust stubs and under the wing leading edge. Ray Wetmore's *Daddy's Girl* has this later style green nose and blue rudder of the 370th Fighter Squadron. With 21.25 victories, 16 of them scored in Mustangs (plus 2.33 strafing kills), Wetmore was the top-scorer of the 359th. For his final kill, he shot down the fourth and last Me 163 Komet to fall to the guns of Eighth Air Force Mustangs. Wetmore continued in the USAF postwar, only to die when his F-84 crashed on 14 February 1951.

52

P-51D-5-NA 44-13704 *Ferocious Frankie*, flown by Major Wallace Hopkins, 374th Fighter Squadron, 361st Fighter Group, Summer 1944

Wallace Hopkins flew a succession of aircraft named *Ferocious Frankie*. His natural metal invasion-striped B was 42-106655, and this was replaced by the aircraft illustrated. The group marking of a 12-inch yellow nose band and spinner was extended aft from about August 1944, following the style of the 352nd FG's blue nose. Rudder colours were added from November 1944, with red for the 374th FS, blue for the 375th and yellow for the 376th. Prior to this some aircraft carried coloured trim tabs. Hopkins, with his eight confirmed victories evenly split between air and ground, eventually rose to become a Lieutenant Colonel and the Deputy Commander of the Group.

53

P-51D-10-NA 44-14164 *DETROIT Miss*, flown by 1st Lieutenant Urban Drew, 375th Fighter Squadron, 361st Fighter Group, October 1944

A former instructor, Urban Drew scored six air-to-air victories and a solitary strafing kill in his one and only combat tour with the 361st, including two Me 262s downed in a single mission. This unique feat earned Drew a much belated Air Force Cross (in lieu of the discontinued Distinguished Service Cross), awarded on 12 May 1983! His second tour was in the Pacific with the 414th FG. Before rudders were painted in squadron colours some aircraft featured small patches of colour on the fin tip, wingtips and canopy rail. Drew's aircraft wore 374th FS colours.

54

P-51D-15-NA 44-15076 *Betty Lee III*, flown by 2nd Lieutenant William T Kemp, 375th Fighter Squadron, 361st Fighter Group, September 1944

Kemp scored a total of six air-to-air victories with the 361st Fighter Group, all of them while flying the P-51D. He also won a Distinguished Service Cross in July 1944 for his defence of the bombers he was escorting, closing to within 15 yards of an Fw 190 to down it after three of his guns jammed! His first aircraft, *Betty Lee II*, also carried the name *Marie*, but by the autumn of 1944 Kemp was flying this aircraft, *Betty Lee III*.

55

P-51D-25-NA 44-72719 *Constance*, flown by Major George Ceuleers, 383rd Fighter Squadron, 364th Fighter Group, Late 1944

Constance was flown by the top-scoring ace of the 364th Fighter Group, Major (later Lieutenant Colonel) George Ceuleers. He scored two of his 10.5 confirmed kills (all air-to-air) in his P-38 (*Connie & Butcher*), which carried the same squadron codes as this Mustang. The 364th eventually adopted a blue-and-white striped nose band and white spinner as its unit insignia, but squadron colours were not used. Instead the 383rd FS applied the individual aircraft code letter in a black circle on the fin, the 384th in a black square and the 385th in a black triangle.

56

P-51D-5-NT 44-11243 *Betty Jo IV*, flown by Major Samuel Wicker, 383rd Fighter Squadron, 364th Fighter Group, December 1944

This Dallas-built P-51D was the mount of Major Samuel Wicker, who scored four air-to-air victories in the Mustang during December 1944, adding these to his three victories notched up as a Captain when flying the P-38 with the same squadron. Wicker was not credited with any air-to-ground victories.

57

P-51D-20-NA 44-63263 *PENNY 4*, flown by Colonel John Lowell, Acting officer commanding, 364th Fighter Group, November/December 1944

PENNY 4 was flown by John Lowell, whose tally of 7.5 aerial victories included 4.5 in the Mustang. He racked up a further nine air-to-ground victories. As Group Commander, Lowell bagged the individual aircraft letter 'L' for himself, and flew an aircraft from the 384th Fighter Squadron.

58

P-51D-25-NA 44-73045 *Lucky Lady VII*, flown by Captain Ernest 'Ernie' Bankey, 364th Fighter Group, early 1945

Continuing to fly the same aircraft assigned to him as a member of the 385th Fighter Squadron, Bankey held an appointment within the 364th Fighter Group staff from December 1944, but nevertheless managed to increase his score from 2 to 9.5! On 27 December 1944 Bankey was able to make the astonishing radio call, 'I've got 50 Jerries cornered over Bonn!' – he then proceeded to rapidly shoot down four of them in the ensuing mêlée, and share another with his wingman. Bankey also added 8 air-to-ground credits to his 9.5 air-to-air kills.

59

P-51D-30-NT 44-11674 BOOMERANG JR., flown by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur 'Art' Jeffrey, 434th Fighter Squadron, 479th Fighter Group, March 1945

The 479th Fighter Group did not convert from P-38s to P-51s until September 1944, and as a result, the Group scored less air-to-air victories (155) than any other, although it also lost significantly fewer of its own aircraft (69) and pilots! This Dallas-built P-51D was the mount of Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Jeffrey, who scored 10 of his 14 kills (all air-to-air) in the Mustang, most as a Major. This total included the Eighth Air Force's first victory over the Messerschmitt Me 163 Komet on 29 July 1944.

60

P-51D-25-NA 44-72922 SCAT VI, flown by Major Robin Olds, 434th Fighter Squadron, 479th Fighter Group, February/March 1945

Robin Olds scored nine aerial victories in the P-38, making him the top Eighth Air Force Lightning ace, and another four in the P-51. His 11 strafing victories took his combined total to 24, placing him the 17th in the Eighth Air Force's ace listing. This P-51D was the last of a series of consecutively numbered SCATs, and is typical of 479th FG Mustangs in having no Group nose colours. Instead using only a red rudder (and a red oil cooler intake lip) to signify the 434th Fighter Squadron. Olds led the Eighth TFW's 'Wolfpack' during the Vietnam war, flying F-4C Phantoms IIs, and added four MiG kills to his wartime total. His individual tally of kills was less important than his inspirational leadership of the Wing in this later conflict.

FIGURE PLATES

1

Captain Leonard K 'Kit' Carson of the 357th Fighter Group in full 1944 flying kit. The fur-collared B-15 jacket was popular with fighter pilots, and usually worn over a regulation olive drab shirt and khaki tie. Both American and RAF-pattern goggles and flying helmets were commonly used. The standard B-5 seat parachute harness is shown over A-4 coverall trousers, along with an oxygen mask and R/T leads, plus an inflatable B-4 'Mae West' lifejacket, crucial for North Sea crossings.

2

An AAF Captain wearing the latest 1945-style Eighth Air Force fighter pilot kit. A B-4 'Mae West' lifejacket is worn over an A-2 leather jacket and silk scarf to prevent neck chafing, with the abdomen and legs swathed in a Berger-type G-3 anti-G-suit to prevent unconsciousness in high-speed combat. The optional sidearm is a Colt .45-cal automatic, and GI canvas shoes are worn here.

3

Captain Don Gentile in dress uniform, circa spring 1944. Along with AAF insignia, Gentile was entitled to wear RAF 'wings' over the right breast pocket of his A-1 uniform jacket, which bore captain's 'bars' on the shoulder tabs. An Eighth AAF patch was worn on the left shoulder only, and medal ribbons were sewn below the AAF wings. Slacks, or 'pinks', were worn with standard issue GI shoes.

4

Major Pierce McKennon of the 4th FG's 335th FS in A-4 flying coveralls which are largely devoid of insignia, apart from the Eighth AF shoulder patch (also worn at the trouser waistband). Tucked into the intermediate B-15 jacket, with fur-trimmed collar, is the universal silk scarf to prevent neck chafing. The trousers had pockets for maps, whilst the A-6A winter flying boots were of AAF pattern. An all-important ditching whistle is worn on a neck lanyard.

5

Colonel Don Blakeslee of the 4th FG shown immediately after a mission, wearing an A-2 leather flying jacket, AAF officers' OD slacks and GI shoes and socks. The AAF C-type flying helmet with integral R/T earphones is worn with tinted double-lens goggles and the much sought-after RAF-issue silk flying gloves. A rank badge is worn on the shoulder of the flying jacket.

6

This 1st Lieutenant wears the standard AAF issue OD 'M1944' 'Ike jacket', with pilot's wings on the right breast over medal ribbon bars. An Eighth AF patch was worn on the left shoulder only, and the 'overseas cap', piped around the turn-up in AAF orange, has a single silver (metal) bar of rank, while the sleeve badge is fabric. An AAF tie and OD wool shirt and trousers are also worn, as are standard GI shoes.



Unquestionably the best American fighter of World War 2, the North American P-51 Mustang served in large numbers with the USAAF's Eighth Air Force from late 1943 until VE Day, and was the mount of most aces in-theatre. Charged with the responsibility of escorting huge



formations of B-17 Flying Fortress and B-24 Liberator bombers on daylight raids deep into Germany, the P-51 pilots of the various fighter groups within the 'Mighty Eighth' went head to head with the cream of the Luftwaffe's fighter squadrons for control of the skies over the Third Reich.



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