

★ OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES • 24 ★

P-47 Thunderbolt Aces of the Eighth Air Force

Jerry Scutts



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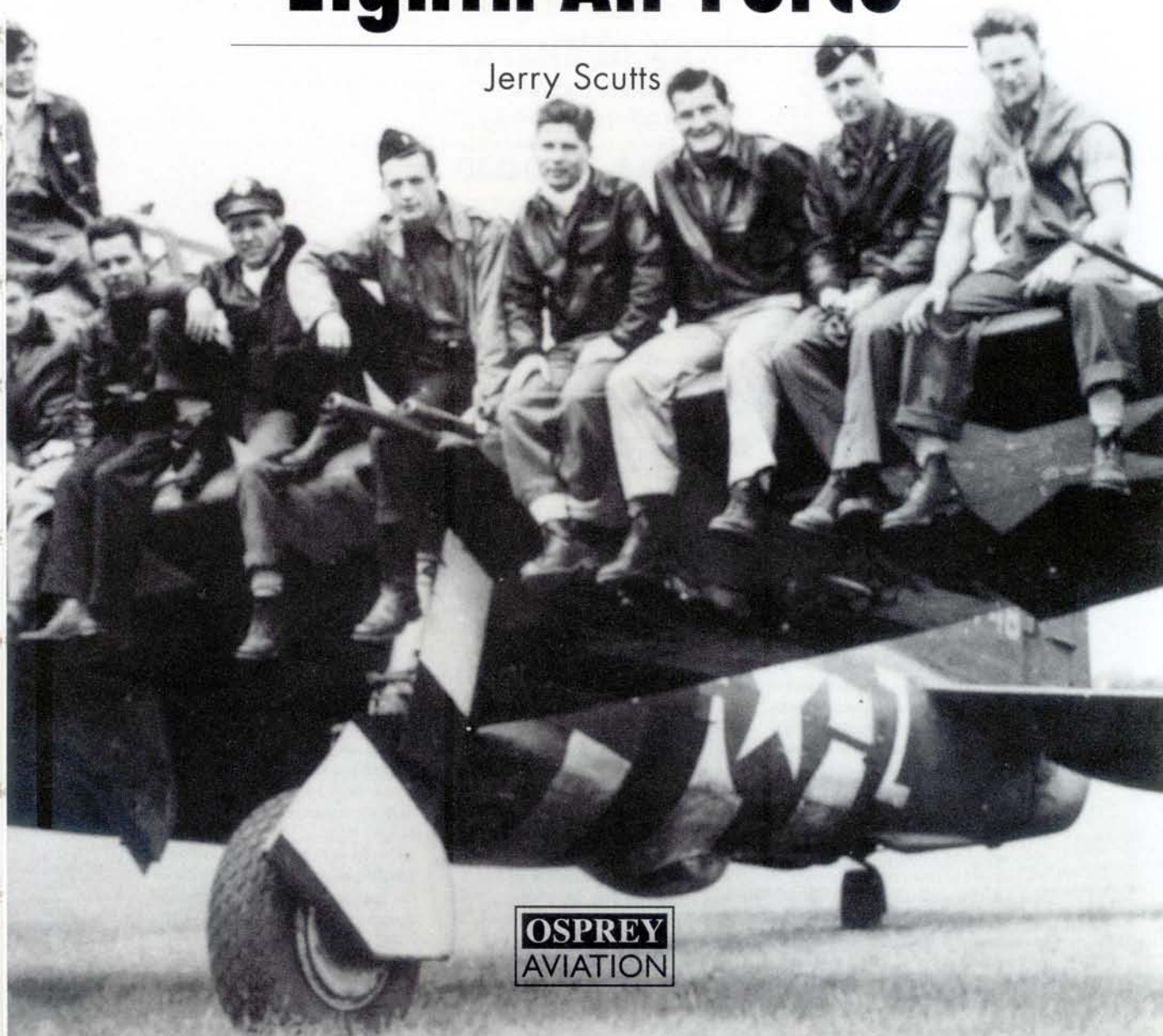


SERIES EDITOR: TONY HOLMES

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P-47 Thunderbolt Aces of the Eighth Air Force

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OSPREY
AVIATION

Front cover

On the morning of 23 December 1944 Col Dave Schilling, boss of the 56th FG, led 56 P-47s of 'Zemke's Wolfpack' in support of a maximum effort raid by VIII Bomber Command which had been hastily organised in response to Hitler's Ardennes offensive. The mission took the fighters across Holland and into Germany where, at 1145, the Thunderbolts clashed with at least 90 Fw 190s and Bf 109s of JGs 4, 11, 27 and 54. Schilling (flying his personal P-47D-25 42-26641, decorated with the cartoon character 'Hairless Joe' on its engine cowling) describes what happened next in this extract taken from his combat report;

'I flew straight ahead, pulled up, applied full power, and made a slow diving turn to the left to position my flight on the outside and allow the other three to cross over inside so that we might bring as many planes into position to fire as possible. In so doing I managed to hit the rear right Me 109 with about a 20-degree deflection shot at a range of about 700 yards. There was a large concentration of strikes all over the left side of the fuselage, and he fell off to the left. I then picked out another more or less ahead of the first and fired from about the same range as the first, causing him to smoke and catch fire immediately. By this time the first Me 109 was slightly ahead, below and to the left, at which point he started to smoke and caught fire. I then picked another and fired at about 1000 yards and missed as he broke right and started to dive for the deck. At about 17,000 ft I had closed to about 500 yards and fired, resulting in a heavy concentration of strikes, and the pilot bailed out.

'At this point I had become separated from the other three flights and had only my own with me. I heard Maj Comstock of the 63rd FS in a hell of a fight and called to get his position. As I was attempting to locate him, I sighted another gaggle of 35-40 Fw 190s 1000 ft below circling to the left. I repeated the same tactics as before and attacked one from 500 yards' range and slightly above and to the left. The plane immediately began to burn, spinning off to the left. I then fired at a second and got two or three strikes. He immediately took violent evasive action, and it took me several minutes of manoeuvring until I managed to get into a position to fire. I fired from about 300 yards above and to the left, and he

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EDITOR'S NOTE

To make this best-selling series as authoritative as possible, the editor would be extremely interested in hearing 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. Please write to Tony Holmes at 10 Prospect Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 3UA United Kingdom.

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forced me to pull through him and fire as he went out of sight over the cowling. I gave him a five-second burst and began getting strikes all over him. The pilot immediately bailed out and the ship spun down to the left, smoking and burning, until it blew up at about 15,000 ft. By this time I was alone and saw a 63rd FS plane. I called, and he joined up just as a 35-40 plane formation of Fw 190s flew by heading west about 1000 ft above. I had hoped to sneak by and turn upon their tails, but they saw me just as I started my climbing turn. I knew I would have to hit the deck sooner or later, but I thought I could get their tail-end man before I had to.

My wingman lagged back, and just as I was getting set, he called and said two were on his tail. I thought I saw him get hit and told him to do vertical aileron rolls and hit the deck. At that time two got behind me and were getting set, so I did several rolls as I started down, hit the switch and outran them by a mile as I got to the deck. I lost them and zoomed back up to 8000 ft.'

This artwork by Iain Wyllie shows Schilling destroying his fourth kill of the five he claimed on 23 December - these were his only successes in 42-26641. In total, pilots of the 56th FG claimed 34 victories during the group's last big dogfight of the war

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY DAYS 6

CHAPTER TWO

EXTENDED RANGE 30

CHAPTER THREE

BLOODY BATTLES 40

CHAPTER FOUR

MAXIMUM EFFORT 56

CHAPTER FIVE

**BUILD UP TO D-DAY
AND BEYOND 66**

CHAPTER SIX

ARNHEM AND INTO GERMANY 77

CHAPTER SEVEN

FINAL CLASHES 84

APPENDICES 92

COLOUR PLATES COMMENTARY 92

EARLY DAYS

By the early spring of 1943, three USAAF fighter groups – the 4th, 56th and 78th – were flying the P-47 Thunderbolt from bases in England. Having American rather than British fighters (the 4th had flown Spitfires from September 1942) in the hands of Army Air Force units undoubtedly gave the planners of the Eighth Air Force's bomber offensive a little more confidence. The P-47 was capable of escorting heavy bombers further than was previously possible with Spitfires, although the operational doctrine of using fighters in this role had hardly been addressed. How best fighters could protect the B-17 and B-24 formations on their daylight heavy bombing missions would remain a matter for discussion throughout much of 1943.

But at least with the re-equipment of the in-theatre 4th Fighter Group (FG) at Debden and the arrival in the UK of the 56th and 78th FGs, bomber escort would be handled by fighters with similar capability and slightly more range than Spitfire Mk IXs. The latter aircraft still escorted the Eighth's 'heavies' to targets in the vicinity of Paris, however, and the RAF would continue to offer short-range penetration and withdrawal support to American heavy and medium bomber crews, who were more than welcome comrades in the Allied struggle to defeat Germany.

Of these three US fighter groups, only the 4th had combat experience, its component units tracing their lineage back to the volunteer 'Eagle' squadrons of the RAF. Inevitably comparing the newcomer with the Spitfire, the 'Debden Eagles' looked askance at the huge and portly Thunderbolt, with some pilots seriously doubting its ability to fight on equal terms with the Luftwaffe's small, highly agile and deadly Bf 109s and Fw 190s. RAF pilots were equally sceptical of its potential.

As early as December 1942 the 4th FG got the word that it would receive the P-47 for heavy bomber escort missions. There were some

Title pages

Practically the entire pilot complement of the 62nd FS/56th FG pose on and around a camouflaged P-47D in a photo taken almost certainly in late 1944 (via Tony Garner)

When the first P-47Cs came to Britain, not only had there been little attention paid to the role they might play over Europe (apart from the vague phrase 'bomber escort'), nobody had devised a system of identity markings for them. In the event the excellent RAF system of two letters to identify the squadron and one to denote the individual aircraft was chosen. In the meantime, the traditional USAAF method of identifying aircraft by numbers rather than letters had to suffice. This P-47C-5 (41-6209) was photographed whilst being shown to the press in the spring of 1943, the white recognition bands on the nose, fin and tailplanes that became synonymous with ETO operations having already been applied. It also has the then-current USAAF star insignia with a yellow surround, and a temporary three number fuselage code. Early Thunderbolts were assigned to the 4th FG, which was the only operational group in England at that time



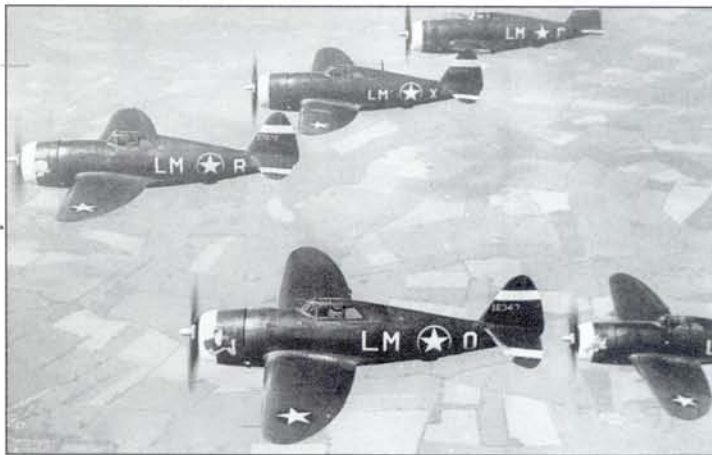
pilots who felt great relief at being released from the endless convoy patrols they had been flying in Spitfires, although the 'Rhubarbs' and medium bomber escort sorties had occasionally brought excitement. In the event, there was little contact with the P-47 until enough aircraft had been delivered and conversion training had been completed in April 1943.

Before any of the Thunderbolt groups got into combat, the question of minimising risks to pilots as result of faulty recognition had to be addressed. The RAF liaison personnel attached to the Eighth Air Force thought that the P-47's superficial resemblance to the Focke-Wulf Fw 190 should be offset by painting white nose and tail bands on all operational Thunderbolts. This work, initiated at depots as early as 6 February 1943, was to serve P-47 groups well, particularly on bomber escort missions where gunners usually adopted the rule of shoot first and ask questions later. The highly visible recognition markings saved numerous pilots from being shot down by accident.

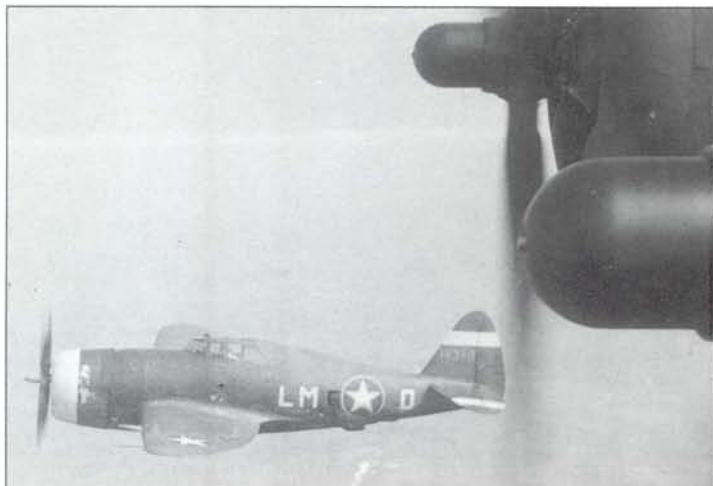
As the original group to equip with the type in the USA, the 56th was much more sold on the capabilities of the P-47 than the units comprising the 4th FG. Having extensively flown the Republic fighter, the group had materially assisted the manufacturer in developing the early production models into something that (unlike previous US fighters) was estimated to have an even chance when the time came to take on the Luftwaffe.

The last of the original Thunderbolt groups to form up was the 78th FG. Having trained on P-38s in America, its component units came to England without aircraft, and they soon found themselves flight testing its first P-47s. Initial impressions of the aircraft were mixed, with a number of pilots drawing unfavourable comparisons between the Thunderbolt and the Lockheed twin – such reaction was not uncommon at the time, and it soon passed. In any case, there were simply not enough P-38s available at the time to equip the 78th, this situation causing much consternation amongst certain individuals in higher echelons, who viewed the Lightning as a better aircraft for escort missions in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO) – see *Aircraft of the Aces 19 - P-38 Lightning Aces of the ETO/MTO* for further details.

Training flights occupied the groups during the early part of the year, 50 hours being specified before a man could be considered proficient on the P-47. Pilots had to come to terms both with numerous technical malfunctions suffered by the early 'combat worthy' P-47Cs and the huge challenge to navigation and formation flying posed by England's weather. Few Americans had ever seen anything like the solid cloud cover, freezing rain and fog that prevailed over this part of the world, and that the weather could be just as lethal to single-seat fighters as the Luftwaffe was grimly proven on numerous occasions. Training flight accidents, often to weather-related causes, inflicted a steady toll right through to VE-Day.



Once the groups had finished painting their early P-47Cs with full three-letter codes, each aircraft was allocated to a pilot – who, judging by the nose art visible on these Thunderbolts, clearly lost no time in personalising their aircraft. This formation shot was one of a number taken for publicity purposes depicting Thunderbolts of the 62nd FS/56th FG. Flying P-47C-5 LM-O (41-6347) is Capt Eugene 'Gene' O'Neill, who had joined the then 62nd Pursuit Squadron within the 56th Pursuit Group in December 1941. During his tour of duty in the ETO – which lasted until 20 February 1944, and saw him tally 200 combat hours – O'Neill claimed 4.5 kills (he has often been erroneously credited with five). All but one of these victories was claimed in the aircraft featured in this photograph



Affiliation flights with the bombers they were primarily in England to escort was an important part of each fighter group's non-operational flying. It was vital that the bomber gunners recognised the P-47 to prevent accidental 'victories' over 'enemy' fighters. The white bands helped, as they were visible over a considerable distance. Formating on a B-24 in this view is P-47C-5 (41-6342) of the 62nd FS, this shot being yet another of those taken in the sequence which featured the photograph seen on the previous page (via *M Bowman*)

unnerved by the crackling and buzzing that emitted from their R/T headsets, the odd behaviour of Pratt & Whitney engines under certain flight conditions or the less than sparkling performance of their aircraft at lower altitudes. They also applied themselves to heeding warnings about the reputedly dangerous flight condition known as 'compressibility' that the P-47 could get into in a high speed dive.

Behind the scenes, the Eighth Air Force and Republic technical troubleshooters made an intensive effort to better tailor the P-47 to European conditions. To their credit, they largely overcame the not inconsiderable problems this posed, and duly provided the fighter groups with an aircraft that would soon prove its potential.

Potential to destroy other aircraft in combat the P-47C had in abundance, for its eight .50-cal Browning machine guns firing up to 425 rounds per gun were equal in terms of firepower to most fighters armed with cannon. Some American pilots even thought that eight guns was excessive, with comments voiced to this effect by doubters probably bearing the weight factor in mind, for the P-47 was, at 14,925 lbs fully loaded, certainly no lightweight. On the other hand, they might have been slightly chagrined at the implication that Republic thought they needed all those guns because they couldn't shoot straight!

Whether or not a pilot had a favourable attitude towards the P-47 often depended on what he had flown before. The 4th FG's combat experience on Spitfires had bred a widespread attitude that the British fighter was an almost impossible act to follow. Nobody could deny that the two aircraft were very different indeed, but comparisons did not really mean much.

On the face of it, one could cite the fact that it took a P-47C twenty minutes to reach 30,000 ft and a Spitfire Mk IX less than seven-and-a-half as being a strong indicator that the Thunderbolt would be useless if it had to climb fast in the battle area, but this turned out not to be too much of a drawback. The P-47 did indeed have a poor rate of climb which had to be allowed for, but virtually all combat aircraft have their weak points.

The situation vis-a-vis the P-47 was not helped by a vague operational plan outlined by VIII Fighter Command that failed to appreciate the important role to be played by the escort fighter in the American daylight bomber offensive. At this stage in the war some bomber commanders still



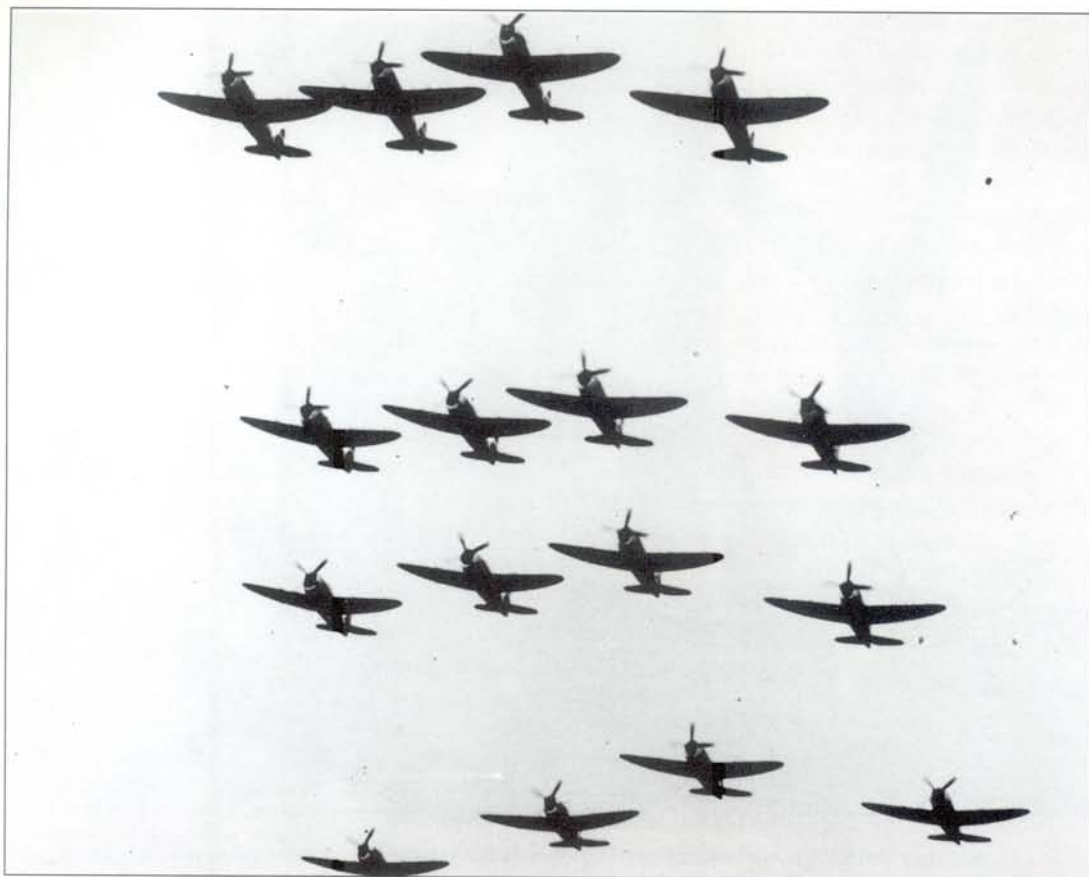
reckoned that they could cope without fighter help by adopting tight, self-defensive, formations. VIII Fighter Command leader Gen Frank O'Dell Hunter (who had little fighter experience himself) could hardly counter this school of thought at the time for his early-model P-47Cs could not fly much further than Paris on escort duty. It was consequently left to the group commanders, and their flight leaders, to more or less develop their own tactics and deploy their forces to the best advantage.

Fortunately all the groups in England had commanders who would shoulder this responsibility as if they had been pre-ordained for it. Individuals such as Hubert Zemke, Don Blakeslee and Chesley Peterson helped write the book on early escort operations from the UK, creating a solid foundation for future American fighter force missions.

For the ordinary USAAF fighter pilot in the UK in the early months of 1943, the prospect of combat with the Germans was both exciting and daunting. Many had heard stories of how good the *Jagdflieger* were, but when they came to England and learned more about how the RAF had managed to keep them at bay during the Battle of Britain, these details were well noted. Clearly, the Germans were not invincible, and although the Americans had last fought them in European skies in 1918 (notwithstanding the handful who had fought for the Republicans in the Spanish civil war), these combats had become somewhat obscure by 1943.

That first world conflict nevertheless brought to mind the possibility that someone in VIII Fighter Command could equal or better the score of the famous World War 1 ace Eddie Rickenbacker. He had knocked down 26 enemy aircraft, which sounded a lot to novice USAAF fighter pilots in

Artistic imagination ran riot on USAAF aircraft during the war, and in some cases the 'nose art' tended to dominate the standard markings. Lt W J O'Connor of the 63rd FS/56th FG at Horsham St Faith shows off the artwork on his P-47C, along with his canine mascot 'Slipstream'



the spring of 1943. As with the 1914-18 conflict, five aerial victories was the minimum required to take the title of ace, but as to how they would fare, these modern counterparts of the Spad and Nieuport pilots of the last war, only time would tell.

— LUFTWAFFE STRENGTH —

Ranged against Allied bomber incursions over the European continent in the early spring of 1943 was a substantial part of the Luftwaffe day fighter force at almost its peak wartime strength. With JGs 1, 2 and 26 as the cornerstone *Jagdgeschwader* able to oppose the USAAF fighter force, VIII Fighter Command was initially outnumbered – on 31 March the enemy could call on 513 single-engined fighters based in the West and 185 based within the borders of the Reich. A substantial number of twin-engined *Zerstörers* and nightfighters (some 460 at this stage of the war) could also be called upon, the Bf 110 equipping most of the component units, although the *Nachtjagd* also included Ju 88s, Do 17s and Do 217s.

The twin-engined force was supported from May 1943 by the Me 410, although American fighter pilots consistently reported encounters with the Me 210 during this period, although this is extremely doubtful as most of these were stationed in the Middle East. The type's misidentification was almost certainly down to Allied Intelligence failing to appreciate that the Me 410 was a virtually new aircraft, although it bore a very close resemblance to its unsuccessful forerunner. But the fact that the later

It took time for the USAAF to appreciate that the 'finger four' was the most practical fighter formation ever devised, the RAF being strongly in favour of more outmoded formations. The Americans initially followed their advice, but soon found that they had to work out their own formations if they were to meet the Luftwaffe on equal terms. A basic leader-wingman grouping was found to be vital in combat

Messerschmitt twin-engined fighters had a single tail unit rather than the twin fins and rudders of the Bf 110 leads one to wonder if on some occasions at least the aircraft being shot down were not in fact Ju 88s – enemy aircraft recognition was never a strong point of USAAF fighter pilots.

The Ju 88 was certainly used for bomber interceptions, although the significant difference in size between this and the Messerschmitt ‘twins’ would surely have been appreciated, if not through visual observation then by film from the gun cameras of the P-47s. Although combat footage often cleared up doubts, the film exposed was not always of the best quality as ‘fogging’ often obliterated any image(s) captured on celluloid. Despite all the checks into victory claims, anomalies regarding the aircraft type involved in some combats were perpetuated.

April 1943

Debden airfield in Essex witnessed a buzz of excitement on 8 April as the 4th FG took off for ‘Circus 280’, as this was the first time that all three squadrons had been able to fly the P-47 operationally. Little of note occurred during the sortie, however, the ‘Eagles’ instead ‘taking in the sights’ of Dunkirk before heading home. Four Thunderbolts from the 56th and 78th FGs also went along for the experience, sweeping inland for about 15 miles to the St Omer area.

On the afternoon of 13 April the war finally began for the 56th FG, based at Horsham St Faith in Norfolk. Each component squadron – the 61st, 62nd and 63rd FSs – contributed four P-47s apiece for a twelve-ship probe across the Channel. More familiar with the Thunderbolt’s flying characteristics than any other unit within the Army Air Forces, the 56th could concentrate on the fundamental details of deploying the aircraft in combat, rather than the physical flying of it. At first the group adopted the standard RAF ‘javelin’ formation, as had been recommended. Although the American pilots duly complied with this advice given by seasoned combat veterans, few of them felt that the stepped-down formations actually gave them enough flexibility should the enemy be encountered.

The 56th’s pilots instead worked out their own formations, and on subsequent missions the German ‘finger four’ spread was adopted,



The early ‘short’ cowling flaps that identified the widely used P-47C are shown above ‘Mac’ McCollom’s personal aircraft in the 4th FG (via M Bowman)



although familiarity with this formation did not come immediately. Various positions were flown in order to find the best ones for combat manoeuvrability, mutual leader/wingman cover and ease of changeover.

The Duxford-based 78th FG also marked 13 April as its true combat debut date, for the 2nd and 83rd FSs laid on morning and afternoon sweeps along the French coast, accompanied by 4th FG aircraft. Pilots from the former group noted in their diaries that the Germans ignored them completely! Not much would happen for the rest of the month, despite the 78th flying more sweeps along the coast of France.

These early sorties were more a source of annoyance than anything else for some pilots, as the radio reception problems with the P-47 persisted. Also giving some trouble at this early stage were the turbo superchargers and the R-2800-59 Double Wasp engines in general. 'Across the pond' work on improving the P-47C model Thunderbolts continued.

On 15 April Maj Don Blakeslee's victory over an Fw 190 near Knocke marked the start of the P-47's combat career proper in the ETO. Part of 'Rodeo 204', the 4th FG was led by Operations Officer Lt Col Chesley 'Pete' Peterson on a sweep which took in an area stretching from Furnes, in Belgium, to Cassel, in France. Just after 1700, Blakeslee (leading the 335th FS, with two squadrons of the 56th following) spotted three Fw 190s at 23,000 ft – some 5000 ft below the Thunderbolts. Blakeslee led the bounce, and brief combats ensued while he dived after a single Focke-Wulf. Firing short bursts, the American pilot pulled out at 500 ft as the German pilot unsuccessfully attempted to bail out over Ostend. For Don, who had been given command of the 335th in November 1942 and received promotion to major rank on 1 January 1943, this Fw 190 was only his fourth confirmed kill in almost two years of frontline flying, the

Although the risk of the Luftwaffe attacking US fighter stations in England was much reduced by early 1943, units usually dispersed aircraft, and some airfields already had revetments designed to minimise damage if the enemy did appear. At Duxford the 78th FG utilised dispersals complete with air raid shelters (the entrance to which is visible immediately forward of the aircraft's fin), as this fine view of a P-47C-5 of the 82nd FS shows (via W Bodie)



Some 56th FG pilots brought 'a little bit of Americana' to England in the form of the 'Lil Abner' characters from Al Capp's 'Dogpatch' cartoons. As shown in this June 1943 view, 'Abner' himself adorns the nose of Capt 'Gene' O'Neill's LM-O. Indeed, the cartoons became so popular with the pilots of the 62nd that the unit even had a 'Dogpatch Flight' for a time

gun camera having otherwise denied him better than two probables and seven damaged claims on the Spitfire Mk Vb whilst serving with the RCAF's No 401 Sqn and the RAF's No 133 'Eagle' Sqn

Withdrawing, the rest of the 4th encountered five Fw 190s five miles off Ostend and Peterson attacked. Two aircraft were downed (one by Peterson for his seventh, and last, kill) for the loss of two P-47s, with Peterson himself bailing out into the Channel after his aircraft suffered engine problems. This was not an encouraging start, and some pilots blamed the P-47, which they compared unfavourably with the Spitfire.

Surprisingly, given his success during the sortie, one of those still not totally convinced by the new fighter was Don Blakeslee, as the following quote from future 4th FG P-47 ace James 'Goody' Goodson reveals;

'I checked Capt Don Blakeslee out on the P-47. Of course he didn't like it. It was daunting to haul seven tons of plane around the sky after the finger-tip touch needed for the Spit. I tried to sell Blakeslee on the opportunities this plane could open for us. "For one thing", I said, "they'll never be able to dive away from us again". He must have been listening. On 15 April 1943, Blakeslee was leading us over Belgium when we spotted a couple of Fw 190s. We attacked – as usual they dived away, and we followed. Admittedly it took a while. We jumped them at a little over 20,000 ft and Blakeslee was at 500 ft before he finally blew his victim out of the sky and into a suburb of Ostend. It was the first victory for the P-47. Back at Debden, I caught up with Blakeslee at debriefing. "I told you the "Jug" could out-dive them!" Grudgingly he conceded, "Well it damn well ought to be able to dive – it sure as hell can't climb!"'

By 29 April the 78th was able to send out 36 P-47s, with the aim being to eventually have 48 available for operations. New aircraft arrived regu-

larly and were issued to the squadrons as soon as they had been checked and passed fit for combat. This usually meant a complete overhaul and change of radio set to comply with British emergency procedures.

MAY 1943

On 3 May the 56th flew a 'Rodeo' led by CO, Lt Col 'Hub' Zemke, but bad weather resulted in a recall. This aborted sweep *was* significant in another way, however, for it was numbered Field Order 8 rather than 'Rodeo 212', denoting that the USAAF mission numbering system had been instigated by VIII Fighter Command. Such a change made more sense for the Americans as the former system was only really understood by the 4th FG, and was in any case getting unwieldy – under the RAF system, new USAAF pilots might have wondered why they appeared to be flying their 200th mission instead of their first! British mission descriptions such as 'Ramrod', 'Rodeo' and 'Circus' remained in place, however.

Putting up 48 P-47s for a 'Ramrod' for the first time on 4 May, the 78th FG had to wait a further ten days before meeting the Luftwaffe in strength. Making contact with B-17s over Belgium (which would quickly become a familiar rendezvous area), the pilots waded into Fw 190s attacking the bombers. They claimed three shot down, 83rd FS CO (and future boss of the 78th FG) Maj James J Stone gaining the distinction of 'bagging' the 78th's first kill. Future five-kill ace Capt Charles London of the 83rd FS was also credited with a probable on this sweep, having fired at an Fw 190 (in P-47C-5 41-6335/HL-B) he had caught up with northwest of Antwerp. The price for these successes was high – three P-47s were lost.

Of the 117 Thunderbolts that crossed into enemy airspace on 14 May, the 56th contributed 37. Led by recently promoted Col Zemke, the 62nd FS was away first to offer withdrawal support for 1st Bomb Wing B-17s,

Leading that same 62nd flight in June 1943 was P-47D-1 42-7870 LM-R. The cameraman used the open waist gun position of a B-24 to capture the 56th's fighters on film (via P Jarrett)





Pilots of the 4th FG at Debden viewed their mighty new steeds with awe. Comparing a P-47 to a Spitfire was bound to be an exercise in futility, as the two fighters were so different. This line up shows that some pilots were able to make the transition smoothly enough, as it includes 1Lt Don Gentile's *Donny Boy* (coded VF-T) parked second from the right. A veteran No 133 'Eagle' Sqn pilot, Gentile had his groundcrew adorn his new P-47 with two kill markings to denote his double score with the Spitfire Mk Vb during the Dieppe invasion on 19 August 1942. He later went on to claim four and one shared kills with the Thunderbolt, before enjoying even greater success with the P-51B (IWM CH 21338)

but the day was marred by problems with radios, engines and, in one instance, guns that refused to fire. Zemke himself was obliged to return before he had crossed the Dutch coast, although not before he thought he had claimed his first kill (an Fw 190). However, his gun camera film could not support the claim back at base, and it became a probable, then a damaged. Pilots from the 61st and 63rd FS fared no better, although shots were exchanged with enemy fighters.

All groups experienced unproductive sweeps and bomber escort sorties during this period – perhaps fortunately, considering the limited experience of many of the pilots – when very little of note occurred, and the 78th did not see action with the Luftwaffe again until 16 May.

On the 16th it all came at once – over 100 Fw 190s were found. Units divided up to take on separate swarms of fighters, and the 84th scored kills two and three for the group for the loss of Flg Off Charles R Brown.

A Bf 109 kill credited to the 334th FS's Lt Duane 'Bee' Beeson (flying P-47C 41-6212/QP-1) near Ostend on 18 May was the start of a string of victories this pilot would score while the 4th FG still flew the P-47. 'Bee' became an ace (12 kills) during the 'Eagles' Thunderbolt period, a feat few of his fellow pilots emulated. Some pilots found it hard to come to terms with Republic's mighty fighter after flying the totally different Spitfire, but not Beeson. He had joined the 'Eagles' after the Spitfire period and had not flown it in combat, so was unaware of any comparison.

By the end of May the Duxford group had flown another 11 missions with little action to report, this situation being much the same for the 56th FG 'Wolfpack'. Many enemy fighters were seen on missions and pilots opened fire on a few occasions, but had to break off to evade hostile

action or withdraw because of technical malfunction or low fuel state.

Although pilots may have personally felt some frustration at this point, the P-47s were nevertheless seen by the bomber crews to be 'in their part of the sky' just in case. The mere presence of American fighters often broke up the large-sized German gaggles, which could be lethal for the bombers if multiple fighters were free to make their attack runs. En masse, the US 'heavies' were not generally easy to shoot down, and it took a great deal of concentration for the *Jagdflieger* to do so. Having to worry about being jumped by escort fighters made a difficult task that much worse, so for the men in the Fortresses and Liberators, a successful escort did not always mean that dozens of enemy fighters had to be shot down. The mere presence of 'little friends' was enough.

JUNE 1943

Early June was also quiet for the 56th. Capt Francis 'Gabby' Gabreski took over leadership of the 61st FS on the 9th, and three days later future six-kill ace Capt Walter Cook (flying P-47C-5 41-6343/LM-W) opened the 'Wolfpack's' score when his 'Red Flight' jumped Fw 190s near Ypres, in Belgium. There was little doubt as to the fate of Cook's target, as his fire exploded ammunition in its left wing and sheared part of it off.

On the morning of 22 June 1st Lt Jim Goodson (flying P-47D-2 42-7959/VF-W) of the 4th FG's 336th FS found himself behind an Fw 190 ten miles northwest of Hulst, and he quickly sent it earthwards. He was on the road to becoming another of the 4th's early aces.

As a pilot and commanding officer eager 'lead from the front', 'Hub' Zemke had the dual responsibility of placing the best qualified men in leadership slots at the head of the 56th FG's squadrons and to generally ensure that the unit functioned as efficiently on the ground as in the air. It took a vast organisation, from clerks and latrine orderlies to armourers and cooks, to keep a fighter group at a high level of efficiency, and in mid 1943, Zemke had little time away from the office when he was not flying.

Not a man to stifle initiative, he listened patiently to any sound ideas as to how his P-47s could improve their performance, offer better protection to the bombers and challenge the Luftwaffe fighter force. It was hard going at times, as there were very few operational guidelines to follow.

Some pilots needed to appreciate that they were part of a team. Lone heroes were not likely to survive for long, but some men would completely forget the sound principles of the well-disciplined unit and go charging into the German fighters the minute they were spotted. Zemke, and other fighter commanders, had to admonish such individualists, although they did not wish to stifle an aggressive spirit. And 'hot rock' fighter pilots were not alone in failing to grasp the significance of teamwork, for Zemke also faced considerable apathy from various quarters including Eighth Air Force bomb group commanders, some of whom had little idea of how vital fighter protection was to the success of daylight precision bombing. In the air, Zemke's first two confirmed kills came on 13 June when he destroyed a pair of Fw 190s in rapid succession in the vicinity of Cassel. A third Focke-Wulf was claimed as damaged.

It was 22 June before Charles London was able to confirm his first kill – an Fw 190 that went into the sea off Walcheren Island. On the 29th London made it three, destroying two Bf 109s near Gournay.

COLOUR PLATES



1

P-47C-5 41-6584/*HOLY JOE* of Lt Joe Egan, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, August 1943



2

P-47C-2 41-6211/*JACKIE* of Capt Robert Lamb, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, August 1943



3

P-47C-5 41-6343/*LITTLE COOKIE* of Capt Walter Cook, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943



4

P-47C-5 41-6335/*EL JEEPO* of Capt Charles London, 83rd FS/78th FG, Duxford, June 1943



5
P-47C-5 41-6330/ "MOY TAVARISH" of Col Hubert Zemke, CO of the 56th FG, Horsham St Faith, June 1943



6
P-47C-5 41-6630/ *Spokane Chief* of Maj Eugene Roberts, CO of the 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, August 1943



7
P-47D-6 42-74641/ *Feather Merchant II* of Maj Jack Price, CO of the 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, November 1943



8
P-47D-15 42-76179/ *Little Chief* of Lt Frank Klibbe, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944



9

P-47D-1 42-7938/ "HEWLETT-WOODMERE LONG ISLAND" of Maj David Schilling, Deputy CO of the 56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943



10

P-47C-5 41-6347/ *Torchy*/ "LIL" "AbNER" of Capt Eugene O'Neill, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, November 1943



11

P-47C-2 41-6258 of Lt Glen Schiltz, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943



12

P-47D-1 42-7877/ "JACKSON COUNTY. MICHIGAN. FIGHTER"/ *IN THE MOOD* of Capt Gerald Johnson, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943



13

P-47D-11 42-75242 of Capt Michael Quirk, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, February 1944



14

P-47D-1 42-7890 *BOISE BEE* of Lt Duane Beeson, 334th FS/4th FG, Debden, January 1944



15

P-47D-5 42-8473 *Sweet LOUISE/Mrs Josephine/Hedy* of Capt Virgil Meroney, 487th FS/352nd FG, Bodney, March 1944



16

P-47D-10 42-75068 of Lt Raymond Wetmore, 370th FS/359th FG, East Wretham, April 1944



17

P-47C-5 41-6325/'Lucky Little Devil' of Lt John Vogt, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943



18

P-47D-5 42-8487/'SPIRIT OF ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.' of Capt Walker Mahurin, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944



19

P-47D-5 42-8413/'MA' FRAN 3RD of Capt Norman Olson, 357th FS/355th FG, Steeple Morden



20

P-47D-5 42-8634/'Dove of Peace IV' of Lt Col Glenn Duncan, CO of the 353rd FG, Metfield, December 1943



21
 P-47D-1 42-7883/*IRON ASS* of Maj Jack Oberhansly, CO of the 82nd FS/78th FG, Duxford, December 1943



22
 P-47D-6 42-74753/*OKIE* of Lt Quince Brown, 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, March 1944



23
 P-47D-6 42-74750/*Lady Jane* of Lt John Truluck, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944



22
 P-47D-11 42-75435/*Hollywood High Hatter* of Lt Paul Conger, 61st FS/56th, Halesworth, December 1943



25

P-47D-10 42-75163 of Lt Joe Powers, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, December 1943



26

P-47D-5 42-8461/ "Lucky" of Lt Robert Johnson, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, February 1944



27

P-47C-2 41-6271/ Rat Racer of Lt Frank McCauley, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943



28

P-47D-10 42-75207/ Rozzie Geth/ "BOCHE BUSTER" of Lt Fred Christensen, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944



29

P-47D-5 42-8476/*LITTLE DEMON* of Capt Walter Beckham, 351st FS/353rd FG, Metfield, December 1943



30

P-47D-11 42-75510 of Lt Col Francis Gabreski, CO of the 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, January 1944



31

P-47D-10 42-75214/*POLLY* of Lt David Thwaites, 361st FS/356th FG, Martlesham Heath, March 1944



32

P-47M-1 44-21112 of Maj George Bostwick, CO of the 63rd FS/56th FG, Boxted, April 1945



33

P-47D-22 42-26299 of Capt Cameron Hart, 63rd FS/56th FG, Boxted, December 1944



34

P-47D-25 42-26641 of Col David Schilling, CO of the 56th FG, Boxted, December 1944



35

P-47D-21 42-25698/Okie of Maj Quince Brown, 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, September 1944



36

P-47M-1 44-21108 of Capt Witold Lanowski, 61st FS/56th FG, Boxted, November 1944



37

P-47D-22 42-26044/*Silver Lady* of Maj Leslie Smith, 61st FS/56th FG, Boxted, May 1944



38

P-47D-21 42-25512/*Penrod and Sam* of Capt Robert Johnson, 62nd FS/56th FG, Boxted, April 1944



39

P-47D-25 42-26628/*Rozzie Geth III*/*Miss Fire* of Capt Frederick Christensen, 62nd FS/56th FG, Boxted, July 1944



40

P-47D-25 42-26413/*"OREGONS BRITANNIA"*/*HAPPY WARRIOR* of Col Hubert Zemke, CO of the 56th FG, Boxted, June 1944



41

P-47M-1 44-21117/*Teddy* of Maj Michael Jackson, 62nd FS/56th FG, Boxted, January 1945



42

P-47D-26 42-28382/*"OLE COCK III"* of Capt Donavon Smith, 61st FS/56th FG, June 1944



1
Lt Col Dave Schilling, Deputy CO of
the 56th FG at Halesworth in March
1944



2
Col 'Hub' Zemke, CO of the 56th FG at
Halesworth in December 1943



3
Lt Robert Johnson of the 61st FS/56th
FG at Halesworth in October 1943



4
Maj Gerry Johnson of the 360th
FS/356th FG at Martlesham Heath in
January 1944



5
Capt 'Gabby' Gabreski, CO of the 61st
FS/56th FG at Horsham St Faith in
June 1943



6
Lt Col Eugene Roberts, Deputy CO of
the 78th FG at Duxford in October
1943

EXTENDED RANGE

Some early 'pre-drop tank' escort missions saw Eighth Air Force P-47 groups positioning at Manston, in Kent, to top off their fuel. That way they could stretch out their range, with every few miles gained probably saving a crippled bomber or two from the unwelcome attentions of the *Jagdwaaffe*. One of these missions took place on 26 June, and Lt Robert S Johnson was to remember the details for a long time afterwards. Having been previously 'chewed out' by 'Hub' Zemke and Gerry Johnson (his 'Blue Flight' leader) for breaking formation, Bob Johnson swore to stay in position on this mission, come what may.

As 'Keyworth Blue Four', Johnson experienced extreme frustration soon after heading inland over France, for he spotted enemy aircraft, called them in, and nobody else seemed to hear him. Johnson soon became frantic. The Fw 190s were boring in, and still no reaction from the rest of the Thunderbolts. While he was in the process of calling again, an Fw 190 found the range and opened fire – on Johnson's aircraft (P-47C-2 41-6235/HV-P)! Thus began a long running fight with the American almost powerless to react for his aircraft had been badly hit in that initial burst, resulting in wounds for the pilot and a jammed canopy, cutting off any chance for him to bail out. Somehow, with the Fw 190 shooting him up, the future American ace managed to set course for home.

'I am the luckiest guy on this station', Johnson later recalled. Describing the attack by the Focke-Wulfs, he said, 'They were all around me before I could make a run for it and one of them hit me from above. I heard a thud and there was a sound like the pecking of a typewriter. His machine gun bullets were making holes all over my airplane.

'I tried to dive away when something started burning the back of my head. My oxygen had become ignited. I tried to open the canopy but it

Taken at the 78th FG's Duxford, home, this photograph shows 'Wolfpack' P-47C-2 41-6267 (which was almost certainly coded HV-V) of the 56th FG's 61st FS. It had probably been flown to the Cambridgeshire base by an experienced pilot allocated to the 78th FG for a short detachment in order to help smooth the new group's entry into combat (IWM HU 73852)





Home away from home for the fighters were the Eighth's bomber bases. This 78th FG P-47C-2 (41-6246) is seen at Ridgewell, in Essex, which was home to the B-17s of the 381st BG. As the bomber commanders came to realise that they needed all the help they could get from their 'Little Friends', fighter pilots received a warm welcome whenever they had to land at bomber bases

First USAAF fighter ace in the ETO was Capt Charles London, who scored all five of his victories in this P-47C-5 (41-6335), seen here at Ridgewell sometime between 29 June and 30 July 1943, parked amongst 381st BG B-17s. These two aircraft exemplified the early months of the Eighth's bomber offensive, for the other two key 'early players', namely the B-24 and P-38, were then still in the minority. Within a year of this photo being taken, a well known North American product had already started to overshadow the bomber protection achievements of the P-47

stuck fast. The German just kept firing and pieces of my plane would tear off as his bullets hit. Then something exploded in the cockpit and I was blinded with a shower of fluid from the hydraulic system.

'I tried another dive and the oxygen stopped burning, but I still couldn't see anything for a few minutes. When I came out of the dive, the engine was grinding badly and I throttled back to keep it from blowing. I wiped the hydraulic fluid out

of my eyes, and when I looked around I found I was still at 19,000 ft. The Germans had disappeared. They had done a good job because I couldn't manoeuvre the plane, and it seemed the wings were hanging on by a couple of threads. I beat on the canopy, but it still wouldn't open. I figured I might as well relax because it didn't seem as though I had a chance in hell of getting back. I didn't feel bad. My face was bleeding and the burns on the back of my head hurt, but the lack of oxygen was making me drunk.'

Johnson was suffering from the effects of hypoxia brought on by lack of oxygen above 10,000 ft. Convinced that he was doomed, he was also certain that he could not control the aircraft. When the P-47 slipped below oxygen height the drunken effect cleared, and with the realisation that his aircraft would respond to the controls, Johnson set course for England.

'By the time I was near Dieppe I was down to 8000 ft. Off to the right I saw a blue-painted Fw 190 coming toward me. He manoeuvred for a pass and I couldn't do a thing about it except to sit there and watch him swing around on my tail for the kill. He started firing and some pieces came off my plane. Since we were both travelling at a good clip I kicked the rudder to slow down. He shot past, and when he was directly in front I let him have a few bursts. They didn't have much effect. He immediately turned around and came back. I think the Jerry knew by this time that he was fighting a cripple because he held his fire and started flying alongside.

'He stayed with me all the way over Dieppe, and it must have mystified the anti-aircraft gunners. They didn't send up any flak, which was a good break for me, because I couldn't have taken any evasive action. When we neared the Channel, the German circled my plane once or twice and then



the pilot waved. I waved back and thought he was going to let me go. But he just pulled up and took another shot at me. Then he came down and examined my plane some more. We were now below 3000 ft and evidently he didn't think I had any chance of getting home. He must have been a good-hearted Joe. Instead of finishing me off, he wag-gled his wings and went away.

'My engine was still grinding so I tried the stick. To my surprise the P-47 started to climb a little. I kept nursing her and she managed to struggle all the way across the Channel to England. When I came down, I didn't have any flaps or brakes, but it was the best landing I ever made.'

This bizarre 'cat and mouse' game was not entirely unique, for such actions on the part of the Germans were occasionally reported by bomber crews, but it was rarer for fighter pilots to find themselves in such a position. After the emergency landing at Manston, Bob Johnson was advised to take a few days' rest. He did, but was back in the cockpit on 1 July.

The 26 June mission was the second most costly in terms of pilots killed that the 56th was to experience throughout the war. Of the five P-47 pilots shot down (by JG 2), four were killed, whilst a further six aircraft needed repair and Johnson's machine – well and truly shot up by the determined Fw 190 pilot from JG 26 – was deemed beyond repair.

JULY 1943

The first day of July saw the 78th FG up for a 'Rodeo' mission which enabled future nine-kill ace (and 84th FS CO) Maj Eugene Roberts to 'get his eye in' by attacking an Fw 190. Only credited with a probable, he had to wait nearly a month before being presented with another opportunity to score his first kill on the 30th. Roberts usually flew P-47C-5 41-6330/WZ-Z *Spokane Chief*, but on the latter occasion he used C-2 41-6240/WZ-E to claim his trio of kills – his regular mount was, however, always on hand for the balance of his first tour, and he would use it



Charles London's *EL JEEPO* is seen in close up during its Ridgewell visit in June/July 1943, the fighter showing four kills beneath the cockpit rail. His striking personal badge also appeared on the starboard side in the same location. The display of four crosses means that London's Fw 190 probable on 14 May must have been claimed as a victory, for his fourth and fifth confirmed kills were not achieved until 30 July. This was not unusual, for claims were made in all good faith under wartime conditions when the exact toll taken of the Luftwaffe on any given day was next to impossible to check. After the war German loss records could be scrutinised and adjustments made to scores

The fourth fighter group to see combat in the ETO in the P-47 was the 353rd. It began operations in time to have its aircraft adorned with the red-bordered 'star and bar' national insignia introduced on 29 June 1943, although this marking only lasted until 17 September when a change was made to a dark blue outline. This alteration was due to operational considerations in the Pacific, where any red marking may have caused confusion with Japanese insignia. And although this clash could not possibly occur in the ETO/MTO, the USAAF wanted international standardisation. P-47D-2 (42-8001) of the 350th FS shows typical late summer 1943 markings, and also carries one of the vital drop tanks (a 108-gal model in this case)





This P-47D-2 was assigned to the 352nd FS/353rd FG. Photographically the 'poor relation' of VIII Fighter Command, the 353rd nevertheless produced five full P-47 aces. Note the whip, rather than mast, aerial fitted to this particular batch of Thunderbolts

to score the rest of his victories. Roberts and his aircraft often became the focus for members of the press corps visiting Duxford during the summer of 1943, reporters invariably being accompanied by a photographer. Always willing to publicise the achievements of American pilots in the ETO, the 'home press' took far a less restrictive view of censorship than their British counterparts, and freely headlined details such as the number of victories individual pilots had scored.

VIII Fighter Command headquarters tended to cast a benevolent eye on such things, for if publicity fostered a competitive spirit among the fighter pilots and created an 'ace race', so to speak, then this would hardly stifle initiative. Not everyone sought the limelight, but in others there was a desire to get their name in the papers for doing better than the next man. And nobody at HQ minded if the encouraged belief that a pilot belonged to the best group in the theatre (whichever one it happened to be) was enhanced and broadened out by words and pictures.

Newspaper stories and broadcast interviews may not generally have done much harm, but there was a downside. There is little doubt that such coverage helped the Luftwaffe build up comprehensive dossiers on all the top pilots in the Eighth, and German interrogators often scored a psychological advantage by regaling newly-captured pilots with 'classified' details of their squadron, base and colleagues. Not that such a fate awaited Eugene Roberts, for he pressed on piling up his personal score until 20 October when he downed a Bf 109F/G to complete his scoring at nine kills and one probable. By then a lieutenant-colonel, and deputy CO of the 78th FG, Roberts went on to complete 89 missions with the group before taking a well-earned break in late December 1943. He would later serve a second tour in Europe flying P-51s with the 364th FG, although without adding further kills to his score.

Emulating Maj Roberts' success on the 30 July mission was fellow 84th FS pilot Capt Jack Price (flying P-47C-5 41-6333/WZ-V), who added two Fw 190s confirmed to his premier kill (again a Focke-Wulf) scored on 14 July. A member of the 78th FG since May 1942, Price had accrued considerable flying experience before actually engaging the enemy for the first time. His victim on the 14th had gone down some 20 miles north of

Abbeville, which was well known to the American pilots as the home of JG 26 – it may well have been aircraft from this *Geschwader* that met the 78th on that day. Price was flying his personal aircraft (P-47C-2 41-6270/WZ-A) at the time, although his remaining four kills were achieved in other P-47s. Crowned an ace on 26 November following a double haul in P-47D-6



42-74641/WZ-Z, Price was by then a major and had assumed command of the 84th FS from the newly-promoted Lt Col Roberts. He too survived his tour, returning to the ETO as CO of the P-51D-equipped 55th FS/20th FG in March 1945, although he failed to achieve further kills.

Throughout the war, pilots joined Eighth Air Force fighter groups either from other units or directly from the USA. On 6 July Capt Leroy Schreiber joined the 61st FS/56th FG after serving as an instructor with the training-optimised, US-based, 338th FG. He quickly found his feet in the frontline, and on the same days that Roberts and Price attained multiple kills (30 July), Schreiber 'bagged' two Bf 109s flying P-47D-1 42-7871/HV-F. Transferring to the 62nd FS in August, he had risen to the position of unit CO (and scored 12 victories, 1 probable and 6 damaged) by then time he was shot down and killed by flak whilst attacking Flensburg airfield in P-47D-21 43-25577/LM-T on 15 April 1944.

The P-47's lack of range had caused headaches for VIII Fighter Command since the aircraft's arrival in the ETO, although a solution to this problem began to reach the frontline in the mid-summer of 1943. Initially, there had not been sufficient spare production capacity available, either in the USA or England, to ensure the construction of external tanks in the numbers required in early 1943. However, this unfortunate situation had begun to improve by July 1943 – so much so that on the 28th of the month the 4th FG was able to fly 'the first belly tank show' in the the-



Whilst the P-47-trained groups like the 56th and 78th FGs (granted, the latter had been initially formed on P-38s back in the USA) made the most of their mount in combat, the formerly Spitfire-equipped 4th FG 'sweated out' a Thunderbolt replacement with more nimble handling in the shape of the P-51B. In the meantime, pilots like Maj Lee Gover, who served both as the 336th FS's Ops Officer and then briefly as its CO in late 1943, continued to make do with the Thunderbolt – in his case P-47D-6 42-74688/VF-G, christened *MISS SAN CARLOS*. Gover was just one of the many pilots who scored only ground victories (four, in his case). In some groups (the 336th FS included), pilots used the initial letter of their second name as an individual aircraft code, hence 'G' for Gover. Having finished his tour with the 336th after completing 257 combat sorties, Maj Gover was posted to the 4th FG's HQ Squadron in January 1944, where he remained until rotated home in March

One of the perks of being in the Eighth Air Force for those men stationed on RAF aerodromes blessed with good living quarters and reasonable road transport access were the regular visits made by Hollywood stars. Among those who put on popular shows were comedian Bob Hope and actress Frances Langford, who went to Duxford on 3 July 1943. Both stars were given a look over the 78th FG's aircraft, including P-47D *Vee Gail* flown by Capt Robert E Eby. The latter individual served as a combat pilot attached to Group HQ, completing one of the longest tours in the 78th FG which lasted from May 1942 to September 1944, when he became Director of Fighter Operations, Third Air Division



Off-duty, the boyish features of leading P-47 ace Gerry Johnson might have disguised the fact that he was a highly experienced combat pilot with the famed 56th FG 'Wolfpack'. One of two aces with the surname of Johnson serving concurrently with the group in 1943/44, Gerald had scored a total of 16.5 victories (all in P-47s) prior to being shot down and captured on 27 March 1944. He had 'made ace' on 10 October 1943 in P-47C-5 41-6352/HV-T which, ironically, was not his usual mount – Johnson's assigned aircraft was P-47D-1 42-7877/HV-D

could fly a short distance into Germany by following a pre-planned route over Holland and, with any luck, surprise the *Jagdwaaffe* as it attacked the bombers. For the 78th, the day culminated in its first real taste of action in ten missions. Well aware that the 4th had penetrated German airspace for the first time 48 hours earlier, every pilot at Duxford was eager to see how the Luftwaffe would react to a second incursion. On the board was withdrawal support for 186 B-17s sent to bomb Kassel.

Crossing the German border near Kleve, the P-47s headed for the rendezvous point over Haltern. At 1100 hours the bombers were sighted and the 78th took up station at 28,000 ft – 4000 ft above the 'big friends'.

Just before the Luftwaffe attacked, Lt Col Melvin McNickle's aircraft suddenly fell out of formation, collided with his wingman and plunged to earth. CO of the group, McNickle was extremely fortunate to survive the near headlong dive into the ground, for he had passed out when his oxygen system had failed, and was still out cold when the Dutch resistance extricated him from the wreckage of his P-47. Sadly, his wingman, James Byers, bailed out but was killed. Ex-83rd FS boss Lt Col James J Stone subsequently became the 78th's third CO in just four weeks.

The 84th FS was the first to make contact with part of a 100-strong enemy fighter force making gun and rocket attacks on the bombers. Lt Col Stone exploded a Bf 109 as did Jack Price, while Capt John Irvin (four destroyed and one damaged) shot down a further two. The day's combat casualties also included a Bf 109 that went down near Didam, in Holland, its destruction marking the first kill of future 84th FS ace Peter

atre. Taking off from Debden with bulbous 200-gal tanks, the group's mission saw them providing withdrawal support for 1st Wing B-17s, rendezvousing with their charges over Emmerich. Despite the unpressurised, and not too reliable, tanks holding juts half their fuel capacity, another 100 gallons nevertheless took the P-47s to the German border – and the Luftwaffe was surprised. With their allocated bombers nowhere to be seen, the 'Eagles' took on fighters attacking other bombers and ended the day with a tally of three Bf 109s and six Fw 190s destroyed.

At Duxford on the 30th there was an unusual air of expectancy at the 78th FG's briefing, for the P-47s flying the day's mission would carry 75-gal drop tanks for the first time. Extra fuel carried in these more reliable pressurised, but smaller, tanks meant that the group could now stay in the air for up to two hours and fifty minutes. They

Pompetti – flying P-47C-5 41-6393 on this occasion, Pompetti had scored 5 kills and 3½ damaged by the time he was shot down and captured on 17 March 1944.

Maj Eugene Roberts made his way to the leading boxes of ‘Forts’ and caught an Fw 190, which he promptly shot down in flames. A second fared no better as the American opened fire on him. Finally, Roberts overhauled a Bf 109 caught just as it peeled off to attack its chosen bomber target. It never made it. With three down, Roberts became



the first Eighth Air Force pilot to score a triple victory on one mission.

His success was, however, overshadowed by the actions of Charles Pershing London, who became the first VIII Fighter Command ace during the course of the sortie. Sliding in behind two Focke-Wulfs, with the rest of the 83rd FS at 26,000 ft, London got a single Fw 190 before diving on a Bf 109 which exploded under the impact of his bullets. Other pilots scored victories too before being forced to break off the engagement due to rapidly dwindling fuel reserves. En route home, Quince Brown took the opportunity to strafe a train in what was believed to be the first such attack by an VIII Fighter Command pilot. He came back with gun camera film of the train’s locomotive surrounded by steam to prove the point.

The exuberant Brown was nearly ‘nailed’ by coastal flak batteries, however, dropping so low that his propeller made contact with the North Sea and bent two tips, although the P-47 got him home. Back at Duxford, Capt London was quickly confirmed as the first ace in the ETO, his personal P-47C, 41-6335/HL-B *EL JEEPO*, having been used for all five kills.

AUGUST 1943

As was to become standard practice, new groups to the ETO were assisted by experienced pilots on their first few missions, and on 9 August the recently-arrived 353rd FG, based at Metfield in Suffolk, was ‘shown the ropes’ by the 56th. No action took place on this or most other ‘shake-down’ missions, much to the relief of the rookie pilots. At least they had seen enemy territory, charged their guns and taken note of the weather, wondering if it was always different to that forecast by the met officer!

The 353rd flew its first official group mission on 12 August – the day future 20-kill ace Capt ‘Bud’ Mahurin nearly wrote himself off indulging in a little off-duty horseplay with a lone B-24. The P-47 pilot had flown some fancy aerobatics which, if nothing else, was good target practice for the Liberator gunners, and he moved up and under the bomber. Mahurin got too close, however, and propwash hit his P-47 and sucked it in under the wing. The B-24’s propellers ripped at the fighter’s fuselage, and Mahurin suddenly found himself diving earthwards in a tailless and totally uncontrollable P-47. He managed to bail out at 400 ft and the B-24 went on to crash-land. Mahurin was fully expecting a court martial as

Bomber affiliation or good shepherd? Lt Charles Reed of the 63rd FS/56th FG eases *Princess Pat* in for a closer look at a Liberator while the bomber crew in turn take her picture. Fellow squadron pilot Capt Walker ‘Bud’ Mahurin had cause to rue too close an association with a Liberator, his fighter losing its tail in a collision which saw both aircraft crash, and the future ace almost lose his life before he had scored a single kill

Col 'Hub' Zemke is seen standing on the wing of P-47C-5 41-6330/LM-Z, which was the first Thunderbolt assigned to him as commanding officer of the 56th FG. Initially bearing a wheel insignia as a play on his nickname and the Russian phrase "MOY TAVARISH" ('My comrade'), Zemke had the markings removed shortly after this photograph was taken. The original print shows two iron cross markings beneath the canopy, which would date it after 13 June 1943 (the date of Zemke's first two confirmed victories) and before 17 August when he claimed his third kill. It is widely believed that all of his early successes achieved between May and August 1943 were scored in this fighter



a result of the incident, with 'improper use of government property' being the indictment. But Zemke merely fined him \$100 and chewed him out. Some would say the Liberator incident, and his first two victories on 17 August (in P-47C-2 41-6259/UN-V), proved that Mahurin had luck on his side, but he believed that all pilots needed a degree of good fortune riding with them in the cockpit. As he said to a reporter at the time;

'You've got to be lucky in this business, otherwise I wouldn't be here now. I've made too many mistakes to let myself believe that I'm good. Whenever you go up you try to do everything right; you try to think fast and remember everything you've learned. You know you're flying a good airplane and you've already proved to yourself that you're as good as, if not better than, most of the Germans you're likely to meet. But all the time you keep praying like hell that your luck doesn't run out.'

Another future P-47 ace also opened his account with a double score on 16 August, 334th FS/4th FG pilot Lt Henry 'Hank' Mills claiming two Fw 190s (out of a final score of six) in the vicinity of Paris. Like numerous other pilots, he had previously been credited with probable and damaged claims, although there was nothing quite so satisfying to a fighter pilot as a confirmed kill in line with the VIII Fighter Command rules. Aerial victories in the ETO at that time meant a great deal, as the Americans were up against pilots who were universally recognised as the Luftwaffe's best.

Lt Jim Goodson (in P-47C-5 41-6574) also claimed two Fw 190s destroyed and a third damaged over Paris on the 16th.

August 1943 marked the first anniversary of the Eighth Air Force's bold experiment in daylight bombing. And while the results so far had been fairly encouraging, there was an urgency in Washington for the bombers to hit more targets deep inside Germany. The historic long range double mission to Schweinfurt and Regensburg planned for the 17th was therefore a bold move, but the 'heavies' would be forced to fly way beyond escort fighter cover. As it transpired, the missions flown on this date showed just how costly the campaign would be if Luftwaffe fighters were left to repeatedly hit the bombers unmolested.

Despite their extra range, the P-47s could not fly as far as either of these targets, and on this occasion the enemy took maximum advantage of that fact. But the AAF fighters could 'take the heat off the "heavies"' by shooting down Fw 190s and Bf 109s well away from the bomber stream, and in this role the 56th FG did very well. Briefed to cover B-17s of the Schweinfurt force in the afternoon, the P-47s were well-positioned to take advantage of what were noted as the latest German tactics – enemy fighters were opting to fly a parallel course and overtake the bombers before wheeling round for a head-on pass from about five miles out, leaving time for the Thunderbolt pilots to position themselves. Diving in front of the bombers, they could block and break up the enemy's line-abreast run-in. Once forced to break, it was difficult for the German pilots to quickly reform in strength, resulting in large formations being chopped into smaller elements which posed less of a threat to the bombers.

This period was marked by a general assault on the bombers by twin-engined German aircraft as well as single-seaters, American fighter strength being such that the Luftwaffe could still risk sending up Bf 110 and Me 410 *Zerstörers* and Ju 88s, the crews of which had an even chance of destroying the B-17s that dominated VIII Bomber Command's efforts



at that time. But if they were caught by the USAAF escort, their position could become dire, for the German 'twins' were very vulnerable in a straight fight with a more manoeuvrable single-seater like a P-47.

Battling their way back to Antwerp where they would be relieved by RAF Spitfires, the P-47s scored decisively. When 61st FS pair Capt Gerald Johnson (again in 42-7877) and future 5.5-kill ace Lt Frank McCauley (flying P-47C-2 41-6271/HV-Z) fired simultaneously on a Bf 110, the result was spectacular – the fighter exploded in a huge fireball that seemed to freeze any action for a very long time. Bomber crews and fighter pilots alike (among them Bob Johnson, who had yet to score a victory) swore it was the brightest light they had ever witnessed.

Johnson had instinctively climbed as he fired, and now found himself way above the melee. He spotted a Bf 109, dived and fired, observing hits before the pilot bailed out just prior to his aircraft exploding. Johnson soon accounted for a second Bf 109, which dived into the ground and exploded after a two-second burst from his P-47's eight '.50s'.

Frank McCauley also got an Fw 190, whilst a Bf 109F fell to the guns of Lt Harold Comstock in P-47C-5 41-6320/UN-Y (his first of eventually 5.5 victories). Totally unseen by his quarry, the 63rd FS pilot was able to close to within 100 yards of his target before shearing off one of the Messerschmitt's wings with a burst of fire.

The double mission of 17 August resulted in no less than 60 B-17s being lost. Questions were asked about what went wrong by both ranking Eighth Air Force commanders and senior USAAF officers and political figures in Washington, where the seeds of the Luftwaffe's destruction began to be sown for 'harvesting' early the following year. What the USAAF generals did not readily appreciate was the cost incurred by the Luftwaffe in bringing down such a high number of bombers on one raid. Indeed, the *Jagdwaaffe* had suffered increasing losses with nearly every daylight mission it tried to counter, aircraft falling to both the fierce defensive fire of the bombers as well as the growing ranks of escort fighters.

Two days after 'first Schweinfurt', Lt Jim Carter of the 61st FS/56th FG claimed a damaged Bf 109 west of Gilze-Rijen (in P-47D-2 42-7960/HV-J). His record showed that it could take an individual pilot some time to become an ace, with the almost inevitable damaged and probable claims to push back the day when five confirmed might (or might not) be the gratifying result of many hours of hard combat flying. Carter finally made ace on 4 July 1944, his ultimate total of six – all in P-47s – being confirmed on 18 November.

Pioneers in extending the P-47's range with the early 200-gal 'figure-hugging' belly tanks, the 4th FG performed the first penetration of German airspace on 28 July 1943. This photo may have been taken at the start of that very mission, as it shows the short-lived tanks on 334th FS ships, including P-47D-1 42-7924/QP-F flown by Capt Waclaw 'Mike' Sobanski. A native of Warsaw, Sobanski had fled to America in late 1939 after being wounded whilst fighting the Germans as a Polish Army infantryman. He had obtained a US passport through family connections, and after arriving in New York in the summer of 1940, he went north to Canada to join the RAF. Following the completion of his training, Sobanski was posted to the UK, where he briefly served with Nos 132 and 164 Sqns. He used his American citizenship once again in May 1943 to join the recently-formed 4th FG at Debden, and remained with the group until killed in action on D-Day. CO of the 334th FS at the time of his death, Sobanski's final tally was officially given as 2,833 aerial kills and three ground victories (see *Aircraft of the Aces 21 - Polish Aces of World War 2* for further details) (via W Bodie)

On 9 September the 352nd FG went operational, flying P-47Ds out of Bodney, in Norfolk. There had been the usual 'hurry up and wait' period for the first personnel to arrive, but little was possible without a full complement of aircraft. These arrived during the summer, and with future five-kill ace Col Joe Mason in command, the unit worked up to operational status, helped by ex-82nd FS (78th FG) CO Lt Col Harry Dayhuff.

Early missions for the 352nd were uneventful, and although they had not done any fighting, the pilots looked good enough to Dayhuff, who returned to Duxford after leading two 'Rodeos' on 22 September. The same quiet introduction to combat was experienced by the 355th FG at Steeple Morden, in Hertfordshire, the group flying its first full mission on 14 September – weather had delayed its combat debut by two weeks.

An Fw 190 became the first victim of ranking 353rd FG ace – and then Group Ops Officer – Maj Glenn Duncan on 23 September. Finding enemy aircraft over the French town of Nantes, Duncan's section engaged, although his kill was offset by the death of Lt George Dietz, who was shot down by enemy fighters. Duncan's great rival Capt Walter Beckham also got an Fw 190 over Nantes during the mission, this being his first confirmed kill. A member of the 351st FS, Beckham scored steadily through the remaining months of 1943 and into 1944.

Spreading the day's aerial victory honours throughout the group was always pleasing for the participating pilots, and particularly those who got nothing. They felt that maybe next time they too could do it. In this respect, future seven-kill ace Lt James Poindexter's first confirmed success (a Bf 109) was as much a victory for the 352nd FS as it was for for him.

Five 353rd FG pilots (Beckham, Duncan, Poindexter, W F Tanner and Magure) would become aces before the P-47 gave way to the P-51 in October 1944, and on 27 September one of these men, Lt William 'Mickey' Maguire of the 351st FS, shot down a Bf 109 south of Roode-schoot and damaged a second west of Emden. These were the first of five aerial victories Maguire would be credited with while the group flew the P-47, his eventual tally of seven including two on the P-51D.

'Train-busting' Quince Brown of the 78th FG also got his first victory on 27 September. Part of the 84th FS, Brown was flying his assigned P-47D-6 (42-74753/WZ-J) north-west of Emden when he 'bagged' a Bf 109. This particular Thunderbolt would be used to good effect by Brown for his next nine victories, which would take him through to late May 1944. Quince Brown would hardly have been surprised to learn that he shared his surname with other USAAF fighter pilots – but he probably would not have put the figure as high as 53, all of whom had scored one or more victories during the war!

This formation shot shows a section of P-47D-6s from the 84th FS/78th FG on a long range patrol, led by Capt Jack Price in 42-7461/WZ-Z *Feather Merchant II* – the pilot used this aircraft to gain ace status on 26 November 1943. Red outlined national insignia is in evidence on all aircraft in the picture, as are teardrop-shaped 75-gal belly tanks. These were pressurised and tended to deliver the specified amount of fuel, unlike the original bulbous tanks which were unpressurised and good for about 100 gallons only. These tanks finally made the P-47 an escort fighter to be reckoned with (IWM HU 73849)



BLOODY BATTLES

Early October ushered in a particularly productive period for the 56th FG, with its Deputy CO, Maj Dave Schilling, scoring five kills in the first ten days of the month. He claimed a Bf 109 and an Fw 190 destroyed on the 2nd (in P-47C-5 41-6343/LM-W) as his first and second kills, a Bf 110 (flying P-47C-5 41-6347/LM-O) 48 hours later as his third, an Fw 190 (in P-47D-1 42-7838/LM-S) on the 8th for his fourth and another Fw 190 (using P-47D-1 42-7870/LM-R) on the 10th to 'make ace'. Future 63rd FS/56th FG ace Lt 'Bunny' Comstock also enjoyed success on the 4th, gaining his second kill when he downed a Bf 110 over Bruhl. He was flying his familiar P-47C-5 41-6326/UN-Y at the time, this particular aircraft remaining with him until year's end, by which time it was one of the last C-models still in the frontline.

The first ten days of October had also seen the 4th FG fly four 'Ramrods' into Germany, and on the mission undertaken on the 8th, Lt Duane 'Bee' Beeson of the 334th FS (in P-47D-1 42-7890/QP-B) claimed two Bf 109s (and a third example damaged) to raise his tally to six – this double haul made Beeson the group's first all-P-47 ace. That same 'Ramrod' also saw 'Eagle' Squadron veteran, and now 335th FS CO, Maj Roy Evans, 'make ace' (in P-47D-1 42-7879) with a solitary Bf 109 kill. The first of his five victories (an Fi 156) to date had been scored in a Spitfire VB on 21 November 1942, whilst his sixth, and last, was claimed in November 1944 in a 359th FG P-51D during his second combat tour.

On 14 October the Eighth Air Force returned to Schweinfurt and Regensburg and again lost 60 B-17s to defending fighters and flak. It was a difficult operation for the fighters to support, as apart from not being able to fly all the way with the 'heavies', the weather intervened. The most successful groups in terms of contact with the Luftwaffe was the 353rd, which destroyed ten aircraft, whilst the 56th claimed three – both these groups had given penetration support. Weather ruined the missions laid on by the 78th and 355th, and forced the 4th to return to Debden early.

There was relatively little fighter action during the rest of the month, the poor weather persisting with the result that a scheduled heavy bomber mission planned for 30 October was abandoned. Despite the poor conditions, 56th FG boss 'Hub' Zemke managed to further advance his score after 'making ace' on 2 October, adding a damaged and a confirmed (an Me 210 and an Fw 190 respectively) on the 18th and 20th – both near the Dutch border with Germany. After claiming his seventh victory on 5 November (again an Fw 190), Zemke temporarily bade farewell to the 56th

A wrapped up P-47C-5 (41-6345) of the 82nd FS/78th FG is seen in its Duxford revetment having its code letters MX-R painted on the cockpit cover. The aircraft was flown by Richard A Hewitt, who destroyed one Bf 109 and damaged another on 16 March 1944 (via T Bivens)



FG, handing it over to Col R B Landry. 'Hub' would, however, return to his 'Wolfpack' in January 1944, adding a further eight kills to his tally during his second spell as CO, which lasted until August.

October also saw VIII Fighter Command add a sixth P-47-equipped fighter group to its ranks when the 356th, based initially at Goxhill in Lincolnshire, joined the Eighth Air Force on the 15th.

— NOVEMBER 1943 —

On 5 November future 56th FG ace Lt George Hall shot down an Me 210/410 near Enschede in P-47D-6 42-74750/UN-L. This was cause for a small celebration on Hall's part, for it was his first confirmed kill. A member of the 63rd FS, he had joined the 56th late in February 1943 and then had to wait a long while for his first victory. Hall had tasted limited success on 17 August when he claimed a Bf 109 probable in P-47D-1 42-7896/UN-H (the aircraft actually assigned to him). George Hall scored his five subsequent kills in his second allocated aircraft, P-47D-11 42-75266 UN-E.

Two of the most significant kills claimed in November fell to Capt Norman Olson of the 357th FS/355th FG, for he later went on to become the group's sole all-P-47 ace in February 1944. Having joined the 355th from the training replacement-optimised 50th FG in March 1943, Canadian-born Olson's run of successes began on 7 November when an Me 210/410 strayed into his gunsight over Amiens. Six days later he 'bagged' a Bf 109F near Zwolle. One of those pilots who was not assigned his own P-47 almost certainly because of his late transfer into the group, Olson used examples of the P-47D-2, D-5 and D-6 to score a total of six victories by 21 February – his last claims took the form of an Fw 190 shot down and a second damaged in the Lake Dummer area. These proved to be his last successes, for although Olson saw in the 355th's P-51 period, and was finally assigned his own aircraft, he was shot down and killed by flak near Celle Hofer on 8 April 1944.

56th FG pilot Walt Cook doubled his score when he downed two Fw 190s (in P-47C-2 41-6193/LM-B) near Bocholt whilst on the first sortie led by 61st FS CO 'Gabby' Gabreski on 11 November.

Ample evidence of the waxing power of VIII Bomber Command could be seen in the skies over Bre-



When Capt Gerry Johnson scored his fifth and sixth confirmed victories on 10 October 1943, the symbols that marked him out as an ace were naturally stenciled under the cockpit rim of his fighter. Having flown P-47D-1 42-7877/HV-D to get 4.5, he then switched to older P-47C-5 41-6352/HV-T, and he is presumably pictured here sat in the latter aircraft (*IWM AP 968*)

"Lucky" was the name aptly chosen by the 56th FG's second 'Johnson ace', Bob, for his P-47D-5, 42-8461/HV-P. Seen here at an early stage in Johnson's successful tour with the 61st and 62nd FSS, this aircraft later had two black swastikas painted the the cowling titling



men on 26 November when 405 B-17s and 103 B-24s bombed the port city's shipyards and submarine pens. The day was also the most successful to date for the fighters, all of which were up on 'Ramrods'. Take off for the 56th FG was at 1030 hours, with Dave Schilling leading. Each P-47 carried 108-gal belly tanks which were released over the Zuider Zee at 1145. The Thunderbolt pilots were greeted at the rendezvous point by the sight of bombers being attacked by wave after wave of rocket-equipped Bf 110s and Me 410s, which were charging in to fire off their projectiles under the protection of Bf 109s and Fw 190s cruising several thousand feet above the bomber stream. Having arrived first, the 62nd FS 'waded in', and in the ensuing combats the 56th claimed 15 fighters for 11 P-47s reported damaged to varying degrees.

'Bud' Mahurin as 'Red Flight' leader wasted no time in shooting down three Bf 110s and adding a fourth as a probable (the *Zerstörer* was proving to be a favourite target for Mahurin, as he had downed three on 4 October to 'make ace', and then claimed another destroyed on 3 November).

The first kill was made after Mahurin latched onto a Bf 110 which he approached from dead astern before firing at close range. The P-47's fire probably touched off one of the unfired rockets, for the enemy fighter



By 5 January 1944 Lt Bob Johnson's score stood at 11, with these kills being marked up below the cockpit of P-47D-15 42-76234/HV-P, which had been christened "Double Lucky" by its pilot

Walker 'Bud' Mahurin was one of the many characters who enlivened the 'Wolfpack's' war both in the air and on the ground. He achieved acedom in just three missions, flown on 17 August, 9 September and 4 October 1943. Apart from the first successful sortie, during which he flew P-47C-2 41-6259/UN-V, Mahurin scored the majority of his 19.75 kills in War Bond subscription P-47D 42-8487/UN-M "SPIRIT OF ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.", shown here as the ace is congratulated on the completion of another successful mission by a 63rd FS squadronmate (IWM NYF 11561)



The press really took to the 78th FG's Maj Eugene Roberts, as this shot of photographers taking his portrait clearly indicates. He had eight victories marked on his assigned P-47C-5 41-6630/WZ-Z, christened *Spokane Chief*, when this particular photo call took place at Duxford in late October 1943. Roberts had handed over leadership of the 84th FG to future five-kill ace Maj J C Price in late September and then assumed the position of Deputy Group CO. He would score his final kill (Bf 109F/G), again in this aircraft, on 20 October, before transferring to a desk job within VIII Fighter Command HQ – Roberts had completed 89 combat missions with the 78th FG (IWM HU 73848)

shed large pieces of wing as it fell away. Repositioning himself to the rear of the bombers, Mahurin then came within a whisker of being shot down by 'friendly fire', as the gunners were blazing away at anything that looked remotely like an enemy fighter - and that included American P-47s. But this was a known hazard, and the USAAF pilots always tried to keep well out of range of the massed guns of the 'heavies'. Mahurin, watching B-17 tracer bullets passing above his canopy, instead concentrated on his second victim. The Bf 110 crew, intent on their own target, failed to take evasive action, and their fighter was soon spinning down in flames.

Breaking off, Mahurin spotted a third Bf 110 several thousand ft below and immediately dived after it. By the time they passed through 14,000 ft the American had the advantage, and his third kill of the sortie duly went down. Diving away from a P-47 was about the worst manoeuvre a German *Zerstörer* crew could attempt, for the Thunderbolt could outdive most other aircraft due to its immense bulk, and it invariably caught up with either single- or twin-engined fighters. Yet air battles in the ETO continued to see this manoeuvre used by the Germans, the attack/dive away tactic tracing its origins to early engagements with the RAF, where a power dive away often eluded pursuit. And old habits die hard . . .

The day's tally brought 'Bud' Mahurin's score to ten confirmed, making him the first Eighth Air Force double ace. Most of his kills had been achieved while flying his War Bond subscription P-47D-5 42-8487/UN-M "SPIRIT

The 'Hub' and part of his armoury. Col Hubert Zemke led the 56th FG through its early combat months with great success, although he had a couple of narrow escapes through both enemy action and the technical problems that dogged the early-model Thunderbolts for months in 1942-43. Zemke became an ace on 2 October 1943, and like many of the top VIII Fighter Command pilots, was subsequently captured (on 30 October 1944) by the Germans after bailing out over enemy territory (IWM EA 39048)





The board says it all. A member of the Duxford groundcrew updates the 84th FS 'Victory Board' in October 1943, a close inspection of the entries showing Lt Peter Pompetti's 'Me 109' kill on 27 September and four of Maj Eugene Roberts' victories. The first entry is for the Fw 190 victory scored by Capt John Irvin on 16 May. Of the three squadrons that made up the 78th FG, the 84th was the least successful with 96-4-26.5 – by comparison the 82nd scored 103.5-10-39.5 and the 83rd FS 119.5-11-54 (*Bivens*)

With a haul of 12 kills, Duane 'Bee' Beeson of the 334th FS was easily the top ace of the 4th FG during its P-47 period. His success may have had something to do with the fact that he did not have to overcome the stigma attached to the Thunderbolt by veteran 'Eagle' Squadron pilots who had previously flown the Spitfire in combat. Although an RCAF recruit who briefly served with No 71 Sqn within the RAF, Beeson had failed to see any action in Spitfires prior to joining the P-47-equipped 4th FG when the 'Eagle' Squadrons were absorbed within the newly-arrived Eighth Air Force in late September 1942. Squadron, then group, gunnery officer during his time with the 4th FG, Beeson had scored 17.333 kills by the time he was shot down by flak and made a PoW on 5 April 1944. Note the 'hands off' message 'It's Beeson's' on his 'Mae West', and the battle damage to the tail of his P-47

OF ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.":

Two more victories (again both Bf 110s) made Walt Cook an ace on this mission, these kills raising his score to six. Four had been achieved while flying his assigned P-47C-5, appropriately christened *Little Cookie*. Tour expired in February 1944, Walt returned home without having added any further kills to his tally. He had flown 66 missions.

'Gabby' Gabreski also 'made ace' on this sortie, downing the almost obligatory pair of Bf 110s for the first of no less than six 'doubles' and one 'triple' he would score in the ensuing months. When 'Gabby' got back to Halesworth, his groundcrew

found an unexploded 20 mm shell lodged in the P-47D-5's (42-8458/HV-F) engine compartment.

Aerial action of the kind that developed on 26 November could not have come soon enough for the 352nd FG, for they had seen no combat worthy of the name since the group's ETO debut on 9 September. Indeed, some pilots who were already flying their 27th mission started to think that it would be over before they had had a crack at the enemy!

Led by Col Joe Mason, the 352nd FG rendezvoused with the bombers as they were flying at 27,000 ft over Strucklingen at 1225 hrs. The bomber force was a mixture of B-17s and B-24s, and the fighter pilots noted that while the 'Forts' maintained a good formation, the Liberators were well strung out, making them a better target for the *Jagdflieger*.

As the 'big friends' neared Groningen the enemy struck, six Bf 109s focusing their attention on two B-24s. The German pilots soon had 'Yellow' and 'Blue Flights' of the 352nd on their tails, however, 487th FS CO





Maj John C Meyer and Lt John Bennett leading the interception. The former (flying P-47D-5 42-8529/HO-M) got the first of three Bf 109s shot down by the Bodney group that day. All in all it was a highly successful day, with VIII Fighter Command claiming a record 36-3-9.

Pilots rarely moved between groups once in the frontline, although on 29 November one of the few exceptions to the rule scored his first combat success with Bf 109 probable near Meppel. Capt Joe Bennett had arrived in the ETO with the 360th FS/356th FG in September 1943, but had duly moved to the 61st FS/56th FG on 27 November. He quickly opened his account with his new unit by claiming the probable kill as previously detailed, and went on to score five kills with the 56th FG before moving to the P-51B-equipped 336th FS/4th FG on 4 April 1944. His scoring run was abruptly stopped on 25 May, however, for he was forced to bail out over enemy territory following a collision (his second in five weeks) – he had just downed two Fw 190s, claimed a further pair as probables and damaged a fifth during this sortie, taking his tally to 8.5-4-3.

Joe Bennett's place within the 360th FS/356th FG was temporarily taken on 29 November 1943 by seasoned 56th FG ace Gerry Johnson, who was posted to Martlesham Heath to assist with the new group's introduction to combat. He subsequently showed the way in fine style by shooting down an Fw 190 and damaging a second as a temporary member of the 360th FS on 24 January 1944. He returned to the 56th shortly afterwards, becoming CO of the 63rd FS on 19 February.

On the last day of November Lt Max Juchheim joined the 83rd FS/78th FG, where he was assigned P-47D-6 42-74690/HL-J. Still flying the aircraft in 1944, he was able to score four victories in it starting on 22 February 1944 with a Bf 109 destroyed east of Eindhoven, and

Among the lengthy list of Eighth Air Force pilots who just missed out on becoming air aces by scoring the baseline five was Lt Warren Wesson of the 83rd FS/78th FG. However, his claim of four in the air and two on the ground qualified him for ace status according the VIII Fighter Command rules then in place, which gave ground kills equal billing with aerial victories. This ruling, which was unique to the Eighth Air Force, was later revoked by the postwar USAF, robbing men like Wesson of acedom (AFM)

P-47D-2 (42-8369) named *Frances Ann II* was part of the 'Wolfpack's' 61st FS in early 1944, although the pilot(s) who flew it has yet to be identified





continuing up to 13 April when an Fw 190 fell to his guns over Beuchenbeuren. P-47D-22 42-26020/HL-J then became Juchheim's personal mount, and he remained with the 78th FG until forced to bail out of his Thunderbolt (42-26016/HL-A) over occupied Europe following yet another collision on 28 May 1944. His tally then stood at 9-2-2.

DECEMBER 1943

Although later to become one of the highest scoring fighter groups in the Eighth when equipped with P-51s, the 352nd produced just one P-47 ace – Lt Virgil K Meroney. Flying with the 487th FS, Meroney claimed his first kill on 1 December 1943 when he downed a Bf 109 and shared in the destruction of an Me 210/410 south of Rheyde, flying P-47D-5 42-8473/HO-V – he would use this Thunderbolt to score all nine of his kills.

Poor quality but nevertheless interesting photo (the only one extant, it seems) showing the 'Jolly Roger' pirate flag incorporating the aircraft name *HOLY JOE* on the side of Lt Joe Egan's P-47C-5 41-6584/UN-E of the 63rd FS/56th FG. He scored one victory in this aircraft (an Fw 190 on 19 August 1943) and four more while flying two different Thunderbolts (D-10 42-75069/UN-E and D-15 42-75855/UN-E), attaining ace status on 15 March 1944. He was later shot down and killed by flak in P-47D-25 42-26524 north-east of Nancy on 19 July 1944 – just two days after having been made CO of the 63rd FS

A P-47D-6 of the 351st FS/353rd FG. Relatively few photos appear to have been taken of the unit's P-47s, although the 'Slybird Group' was a hard flying and fighting outfit, pioneering ground strafing and dive-bombing techniques among its other achievements (via Campbell)



The 1 December air battles also drew in the 78th FG's 82nd FS, and in particular ex-4th FG pilot Lt James Wilkinson. Meeting Bf 109Gs over Eupen (in P-47D-1 42-7954/MX-L), he made no mistake about his target. It was the first of six victories Wilkinson scored with the 78th FG prior to being killed in a flying accident on 4 June 1944 in South Wales.

Ten days later it was the turn of Lt Paul Conger (in P-47D-11 42-75345/HV-T) of the 61st FS/56th FG to commence his scoring run with two Bf 110s (and a third damaged) and a Ju 88 destroyed over Langeoog Island. Although well on the way to becoming an ace, Conger would have to wait until the spring of 1944 before scoring kills' four and five.

The 11 December mission was an important one for the fighters, which had more than 600 bombers to protect. The 56th drew escort for the first two boxes of the 3rd Bomb Division 'to the limit of endurance', and the *Jagdwaaffe* struck before the American armada had even made landfall over Europe. Bob Johnson and his squadronmates were at 30,000 ft above the Frisian Islands when the first bandits were called in. No attack materialised from the dozen or so fighters spotted at 35,000 ft, however, this group being sent up merely to shadow the force until they found the best down-sun position from which to attack. They soon showed their hand, as they dived into the ranks of the 62nd FS.

The *Jagdflieger* hoped that such tactics would effectively rob the bombers of their escort if they could tempt all three American squadrons to challenge this early probe. Nobody in the 56th fell for the ruse, however, with the 62nd being ordered to counter the thrust while the other squadrons stayed out of the fight and continued on course to rendezvous with the bombers as planned. Then a call came in for the 62nd to draw off four fighters, leaving twelve to 'mix it' with the Luftwaaffe. It was an order that had tragic results, for Bob Johnson watched in horror as two P-47s making a turn collided. Nobody could prevent the accident which took pilots Larry Strand and Ed Kruer out of the mission.

Both men jumped and parachutes were seen. Johnson pressed on. At the rendezvous point the bombers were taking a beating, with 40+ *Zerstörers* and 60 single-seaters running in and making firing passes, or launching rockets, into the massed B-17 combat boxes. Gabreski called an attack and waded into the enemy. He said later that the appearance of the P-47s 'let all hell loose'. Johnson selected a Bf 110 and chased it as the



The legendary Francis 'Gabby' Gabreski emerged as the top US fighter ace in the ETO with 27 aerial victories. Having flown at least nine different P-47s during the course of his long combat career with VIII Fighter Command, 'Gabby's' score would have undoubtedly been higher had he not been shot down by flak on 20 July 1944 during a strafing run on Bassenheim airfield (in P-47D-25 42-26418) (via J Lambert)



Lt Quince Brown is seen in the cockpit of *OKIE*, which has four enemy aircraft kills and 40 fighter sweep symbols painted on its side. This particular machine was P-47D-6 42-74753/WZ-J, which Brown used to score his first ten victories, plus a 0.333 share in a Do 217. He was flying different aircraft on both occasions for his last two victories (D-5 42-8574/WZ-D and D-25 42-26567/WZ-V). After the final kill (a Bf 109) on 1 September, now Maj Brown was shot down by flak over Schleiden (in P-47D-28 44-19568/WZ-Z) five days later and murdered by an SS *Schutzstaffel* officer who was later prosecuted after the war. Sadly, Brown was one of a handful of fighter pilots in the ETO to meet such a grim fate (IWM EA 16830)



enemy pilot, alerted to what was going on behind him by his gunner, dived. Close behind, he was amazed that the 'twin' stayed in one piece after it recovered very low down. Flattening out into a tail chase, the German pilot kept rolling as he tried to shake the P-47, before finally Johnson pulled up, waited for the enemy aircraft to straighten up, and fired. One short burst and the Bf 110 'came apart at the seams'.

More fighter strength was added to the Eighth on 13 December when the 359th FG at East Wretham, in Norfolk, flew its first combat mission with P-47Ds. In the event, no pilots achieved acedom during the group's P-47 period, although Lt Ray S Wetmore came nearest with 4.25 kills, followed by Lt Robert J Booth with 4 – both later 'made ace' on the P-51.

Fresh from training at Luke Field, in Arizona, future ace Lt Dave Thwaites joined the 356th FG on 19 December. He was assigned to the 361st FS and allocated a P-47D, but had no chance to score any victories until early in 1944. CO of the group's 359th FS at that time was Maj Don Baccus who also later became an ace, although his score of five was only partially achieved on the Thunderbolt – he had already opened his score (in P-47D-5 42-8568/OC-T) with a Bf 109F/G kill on 29 November.

After being credited with a number of probable and damaged claims, now CO of the 353rd FG, Lt Col Glenn Duncan, reached ace status with his fifth victory (an Fw 190 over Rastede) on 20 December. On that day Capt Joe Bennett of the 61st FS opened his score (in P-47D-2 42-

Bellied-in and probably a source only of spares, Lt Col Dave Schilling's P-47D-1 42-7938/LM-S was another War Bond subscription aircraft named "HEWLETT-WOODMERE LONG ISLAND". Schilling used this Thunderbolt to down 3.5 aircraft (all Fw 190s) and damage an Me 210/410 during October/November 1943 (via *Bodie*)

This interestingly marked P-47D-10 42-75126/QP-F of the 334th FS/4th FG has its code letters in a non-standard grouping forward of the 'star and bar' due to the odd placement of the factory-applied national insignia. With serviceable aircraft always at a premium, this machine could not be spared from the flying schedule just to have its squadron codes applied correctly. Therefore, it remained so marked until the aircraft went into the maintenance 'shops' at Debden for routine servicing in the shops for a lengthy period. This aircraft was flown by Capt Mike Sobanski for much of its time with the 4th FG, the pilot having the name *Mike IV* painted in white just forward of the fighter's windscreen





Maj Jack Oberhansley's second P-47 was D-1 42-7883/MX-X, which he named *IRON ASS* as he had done with his first Thunderbolt, P-47C-5 41-6542/MX-W in which he scored a probable on 14 May 1943. CO of the 78th FG's 82nd FS between August 1943 and May 1944, Oberhansley had his combat record kept fully up to date on the fuselage of this aircraft, these markings becoming more elaborate as his tour progressed. For example, the mission 'brooms' painted forward of the cockpit eventually received a much more visible black background panel over the OD scheme. This aircraft was used by Oberhansley to score two victories and a probable in September and November 1943, although by the time he 'bagged' his third, fourth and fifth victories, he had received a much newer Thunderbolt (P-47D-11 42-75406/MX-Z). Promoted to lieutenant-colonel, Oberhansley scored his final kill (a Ju 88) in P-47D-28 44-19566/MX-X on the day that he was made Deputy Group CO - 28 August 1944 (via *Bodie*)

7960/HV-J) with a confirmed Bf 110 kill over Falkenburg, thus starting a run of victories that would soon make him another 'Wolfpack' ace.

JANUARY 1944

When Lt Peter Pompetti came home (in P-47C-5 41-6393/WZ-R) from a 4 January mission, the 78th FG Intelligence section soon confirmed that he had 'made ace'. A Bf 109 downed near Coesfield, plus an Fw 190 damaged, meant that the 84th FS pilot had reached this coveted status.

The early weeks of the new year proved fruitful for other future P-47 aces too, including the new CO of the 61st FS/56th FG, Capt Jim Carter. He downed his first confirmed kill - a Bf 109 - on 11 January (the day after he was given command of the unit), returning home with evidence of a further Bf 109 damaged and a third that could only be credited as a probable. More positive success would, however, result from Carter's shooting on subsequent missions. Carter would remain at the helm of the 61st until VE-Day, by which time he had flown 137 combat missions.

On the 14th 1st Lt Vermont Garrison (in P-47C-5 41-6573/VF-S) of the 336th FS/4th FG got his first confirmed kills when he attacked Fw 190s over Compiègne Woods. He came home to receive credits for two, to add to an Fw 190 damaged on 7 January and a percentage share in a Ju 88 hit on 16 December. On a winning streak, Garrison was an ace by 10 February, and he ultimately became the second highest-scoring 4th FG pilot (6.333 kills) on P-47s after 'Bee' Beeson (12 kills) - Hank Mills and Jim Goodson tied for third with five kills apiece.

By the beginning of 1944 some of the original pilots of the 56th FG were approaching the end of their first or second tours, and to offset any shortfall in trained pilots when these men rotated home, 'Gabby'



'Babies' (belly tanks) attached, the 84th FS prepares to roll out from Duxford at the start of yet another 'Ramrod' in late November or early December 1943. Nearest to the camera is P-47D-6 42-74641/WZ-Z *Feather Merchant II* of Maj Jack Price, who had used this machine to 'make ace' on 26 November when he downed an Fw 190 and a Bf 109 near Paris. Close examination of the kill markings beneath the cockpit appear to reveal 'five up' for Price (via *Bodie*)

Gabreski put forward the idea of 'recruiting' Poles serving in RAF fighter squadrons. Fluent in Polish thanks to his parentage, Gabreski had applied for an exchange posting to a 'Free Polish' unit soon after arriving in the UK, and had duly flown 13 combat missions with the RAF's No 315 Sqn between December 1942 and February 1943. Having gained valuable experience, he returned to the 56th FG, but kept in touch with the Polish friends he had made within No 315 Sqn.

By 1944, RAF fighter squadrons were encountering the Luftwaffe in ever decreasing numbers, as their Spitfire IXs had been effectively out-ranged by the German fighter units, which had generally pulled back inland. This move allowed the *Jagdwaffe* force to make more effective attacks on bombers, and put off clashing with the American escort fighters until the latter were at the limits of their fuel. As the bases in France and Belgium had also received plenty of attention from Allied medium bombers, the German withdrawal was also a tactically sound one.

This left many Fighter Command pilots frustrated, with the Poles in particular finding the lack of aerial activity difficult almost impossible to cope with. Knowing this, Gabreski gained authorisation from 'Hub' Zemke to encourage Polish pilots on ground tours to seek exchange postings with the USAAF, or to simply leave their desk jobs and come fly with

While the attrition rate among the Thunderbolt groups was never cripplingly high, it was nevertheless constant. 'Down in the weeds' after a combat mission is P-47C-5 41-6367, which represents a typical example of call on replacement aircraft stocks by its group while it was being repaired – always assuming that it was not so badly damaged that it was categorised a write-off



the USAAF! Amongst those to do so were 'Mike' Gladych, Tadeusz Sawicz, Witold Lanowski, Zbigniew Janicki and Tadeusz Andersz, who all joined the 56th under a unique, and rather odd, arrangement that meant that these pilots could not be paid! This was primarily because they were told by their Polish Air Force (PAF) superiors that they would have to resign their commissions in the PAF if they chose to remain with the 56th FG. And while the US authorities were more than willing to use their services, the rule book could not be rewritten to accommodate men who had not been through their induction system.

Yet the Poles still wanted to get into action with the group, and the issue of money was eventually solved by the 56th FG pilots 'taking the hat round' every month to collect for their new comrades in arms. As strange as this arrangement was, it was made even more confusing by the fact that the Polish contingent continued to wear RAF rather than USAAF uniforms because that was all they had. The 56th didn't mind how they were dressed, for it was their combat experience that they were after (see *Aircraft of the Aces 21 - Polish Aces of World War 2* for further details).

The reliance placed by Gabreski's group on a handful of veteran Polish pilots reflected the fact that men arriving fresh in the UK from the USAAF's training programme not only had zero combat experience, but insufficient flying time on fighters and less than comprehensive instru-



Another Thunderbolt portrait taken by a bomber crew, 42-7906 was a P-47D-1 flown by the 351st FS/353rd FG. Nicknamed *Chief Wahoo*, it was flown in combat by Capt Fred LeFebre, who eventually became the squadron CO in August 1944 (via *Bodie*)



Waiting on the line for another sortie, P-47D-2 42-8369 of the 61st FS/56th FG has not untypical stencil breaks in its three-letter codes and a repainted red outline to the national insignia. Like the majority of P-47s in the ETO, it appears to have had a relatively undistinguished career as regards victories



Demonstrating its least favoured aerial manoeuvre (climbing), a P-47D of the 62nd FS pulls away from its bomber stream



ment training. This situation continued well into 1944, and it effected instructors as well as trainee pilots. For example, Marvin Bledsoe flew a tour of operations during 1944 with the 353rd FG after completing a spell as an instructor. Upon returning home he discovered that he was one of only two pilots who had survived out of an instructor group of seven sent into action in the ETO between June and October.

On 21 January the Bottisham-based 361st FG put up its first ETO mission in the P-47D. Later famous as the 'Yellow Jackets' because of the assigned recognition colour of its P-51s, the group, like most others in the Eighth, started combat flying olive drab P-47s. Equipped with Thunderbolts for less than five months, it too failed to produce an ace before the arrival of P-51s – Maj George L Merritt, CO of the group's 375th FS, came closest with three kills.

Returning to German targets again after weeks of inclement weather, the bombers hit Hannover and Brunswick on 30 January. Strength ratios



Capt Mike Quirk banks his P-47D-11 42-75242/LM-K away from the camera, again invariably located in the waist gunner's position in an anonymous bomber. Underwing racks had yet to appear when this shot was taken in the early months of 1944, thus making visible the dissimilar sizes of the national insignia – the port wing marking had been added by groundcrews in the UK. Quirk scored 6.5 of his eventual 11 kills in this aircraft, including the all important fifth victory (a Bf 109 near Almelo) on 30 January 1944 (*via Bodie*)

An ace's mount that came to grief, P-47D-5 42-8458 led a chequered career with the 56th FG. Numbering aces like Frances Gabreski among its pilots ('Gabby' scored three victories in it, the final two on 26 November 1943 giving him ace status), this P-47 had originally been assigned to RAF-trained Flg Off Evan 'Mac' McMinn soon after he joined the 61st FS in late 1943. However, it seems that he did not use it to score any of his five kills, although an identical number of victory symbols are barely visible beneath the windscreen. McMinn was posted Missing In Action on D-Day

were 742 heavy bombers, with an escort of 635 fighters, attacked by 200 German fighters. With that superiority in numbers, the odds were firmly in favour of the USAAF, and indeed the final figures for the day reflected this. Following a number of combats, the groups came home with a tally of 45-15-31 – a rate better than ten-to-one. One of the day's final kills was a Bf 109 downed by Lt Virgil Meroney for his fifth success, making him the



352nd FG's first (and only) P-47 ace. His combat report read as follows;

'Leading "Crown Prince Blue Flight", I turned into twelve plus Me 109s approaching from seven o'clock at 30,000 ft and made a head on pass at the lowest one, firing a short burst from 400 yards and 10-15° deflection. I observed a few hits but did not see what became of him.

'I then made a fast 180° turn and chased a flight of four enemy aircraft. I closed on the nearest one, firing short bursts as I closed from 400 yards to 150 yards. My last burst was as he was going straight down at 10,000 ft. The right wing came off and the E/A disintegrated. I had no trouble staying with the Me 109 and could overtake him at will. I pulled up and joined some other P-47s since my flight had become separated.'

Meroney's wingman, Lt Robert I Ross, also got a Bf 109 to make it two for the 487th FS, plus a damaged. Meroney's P-47D-5 was duly decorated with a fifth iron cross beneath the cockpit, and his groundcrew enthusiastically waxed the aircraft to gain that little extra turn of speed for the next time their pilot mixed it with the Luftwaffe. This Meroney did up to 16 March, when his score stood at nine confirmed. His luck changed following the group's transition to the P-51B, however, for he was shot down by flak and made a PoW on 8 April 1944.

On 30 January a Bf 109G became Quince Brown's fifth victim, the pilot getting so close to his victim that he could clearly make out the fighter's underwing 20 mm cannon gondolas and external tank.

FEBRUARY 1944

Ten days into February, Lt Grant Turley downed two Bf 109s in the Osnabruck area. He had joined the 82nd FS/78th FG in September 1943 and been assigned P-47D-1 42-7998/MX-N, which he promptly named 'Kitty' on one side and 'Sundown Ranch' on the other. It was subsequently used by Turley to down all his six of victories, including a double (an Fw 190 and a Bf 109) on 11 February. A pilot who was obviously a good shot, Turley made no claims for probables or aircraft damaged, all his kills being single-seat fighters. Turley's was a remarkably short career, for just over a month after scoring his first kill he was dead, shot down in combat near Barenberg, Germany, on 6 March in his personal P-47.

The 'Wolfpack' enjoyed something of a field day on 20 February when they ran across a sizeable group of Bf 110s west of Hannover. Flying in a neat 'finger four' formation, the enemy *Zerstörer* crews appeared to be quite unaware of the danger they were in. Gabreski shot down two (and

Almost certainly pictured at a later date than in the previous photo, 42-8458 was surely judged a Category E write off after flipping over on landing. The date of this accident is unknown

Guns and diamonds on a 353rd FG P-47D-15. This example, with three 108-gal 'paper' fuel tanks attached, was flown by Lt George Perpente of the 351st FS, who named the ship *FRAN* and *DOADY*. He was wingman to ranking squadron ace (and then leading ETO ace) Maj Walt Beckham when the latter was lost to flak on 22 February 1944. Perpente made a few damaged and ground claims during his tour, among the latter being a shared Fw 190 with Beckham just moments before disaster struck (via *Bodie*)

damaged a third) while 61st FS pilot Lt Donavon Smith carried out what, for want of a better phrase, was a 'regulation shoot-down' – shallow climbing approach, careful aiming followed by restrained bursts of fire. Gun camera film revealed that Smith was even able to select the area to fire at will. As all the Bf 110s encountered that day carried external tanks, a burst aimed at the left engine would usually pepper the tank as well. That is what happened in this instance, the aircraft falling away to starboard with the engine and tank afire to become one of two confirmed victories for Smith, who was also awarded a third Bf 110 as damaged.

Having claimed two Bf 110s on 11 December (and a half share in an Fw 190 on the same sortie), Donavon Smith 'made ace' two days later when he destroyed yet another Fw 190 to bring his final tally to 5.5-1-2.

Also scoring prolifically on the 20th was fellow 56th FG pilot Leroy Schreiber, who at last made ace with triple Bf 109 kills over Steinhuder Lake. For good measure, he damaged a Do 217 and a further Bf 109.

Twenty-four hours later it was the turn of 56th FG 'Polish flight' founder member 'Mike' Gladych to taste success. The veteran Pole had brought with him eight kills from his time with the RAF that stretched back to June 1941, and it was just this kind of experience that the 'Wolf-pack' needed in its flight leader. Gladych quickly proved his worth with two Bf 109 kills on the 21st, and he followed this up with scores in the following months that took his final tally to 18-2-0.5.

Gladych, who was once summed up by Dave Schilling as 'a wild man in the air, if I ever saw one – I don't see how he lasted this long', was a worry to his fellow pilots, all of whom expected him to 'fail to return'





As mentioned in the previous caption, Maj Walter Beckham of the 351st FS/353rd FG became the highest scoring Eighth Air Force ace on 8 February 1944 when he downed a Bf 109 and an Fw 190 near St Hubert for his 17th and 18th confirmed victories. The only P-47 known to have been assigned to him was D-5 42-8476/YJ-X, which he christened *LITTLE DEMON*. Beckham was not flying that aircraft when he was shot down by flak on 22 February, instead being at the controls of a newer P-47D-11 (42-75226). How often he had flown that particular Thunderbolt remains something of a mystery

from virtually every mission he flew. But Gladych beat the odds, despite his overly aggressive tactics. Indeed, on one famous occasion he let the Germans do the shooting for him;

'We were over Germany escorting bombers when a fight developed fairly close to the ground. I suddenly found three Focke-Wulfs off at right angles to me and above. I tried to jump them but they kept away. I then went down on the deck among the trees. They followed me and that is exactly what I wanted. A rat race developed and they started shooting. Finally I got on the tail of one of them. He was a dead pigeon. To shoot him I had to straighten up, and one of the planes above me then put some holes in my wing. I started going home because my gas was running low, but the two remaining Focke-Wulfs started to fly in formation with me. They must have thought I was out of gas because they beckoned me to land. I motioned "OK" and kept on flying just ahead of them until we reached a German airfield.

'I knew what I'd do. I gave the field a short burst and all the ground guns opened up with everything they had. The two Germans were flying less than ten yards behind me and the anti-aircraft fire landed right among them. I didn't stay to see what happened but headed for England.'

As he crossed the coast Gladych ran out of fuel and was obliged to bail out. On the ground he was questioned by two British Army officers who were finally convinced he was Polish rather than German. Gladych's one regret was the loss of a \$75,000 dollar P-47, 'the best airplane I have ever flown in combat' he said.

MAXIMUM EFFORT

By mid-February the P-47 had reached the zenith of its frontline strength in the ETO with VIII Fighter Command (FC), eight groups (it had for a brief period in January been nine until the 358th FG joined the Ninth Air Force in place of the P-51B-equipped 357th FG, which in turn became an Eighth Air Force group) operating around 550 Thunderbolts. By comparison, the remaining fighter strength of VIII FC comprised roughly 150 P-38s and less than 50 P-51Bs. On the 22nd all the P-47 fighter groups were up, the Eighth being supported by two groups of Thunderbolts from the Ninth Air Force (358th and 365th FGs). Amongst the successful pilots on this 'maximum effort' mission was 61st FS/56th FG flight leader Capt Les Smith, who scored his first two confirmed victories after having been credited with damaged claims on two previous occasions – both Fw 190s claimed were downed over the Lippstadt area of Germany. Other pilots also scored kills including 'Gabby' Gabreski, who got a single Fw 190 in roughly the same area as Les Smith's victim had fallen. Big news of the day, however, was that the 61st FS had claimed its 100th kill, which made it the first AAF unit in the ETO to achieve three figures. Not such good news was the fact that leading VIII FC ace Walt Beckham had been downed by flak.

The loss of Beckham crowned a forgettable day for the 353rd FG, which had not started well when the B-24s they were briefed to support did not show (they had aborted due to weather), leaving the group orbiting in the designated pick up area until they latched on to three groups of B-17s. Once over Germany, the 353rd could find little sign of the Luftwaffe, so a search for enemy aircraft was initiated. CO Lt Col Glenn Duncan finally spotted aircraft on an airfield northeast of Bonn, and while he went down to attack Beckham's 351st FS maintained top cover.

Duncan's strafing run alerted local flak batteries, and as he and his



Sitting in the cockpit of his P-47D, Col James J Stone, then CO of the 78th FG, talks to newspaper correspondent Bill Hearst in early 1944. Stone had earlier gained the distinction of shooting down the first enemy aircraft claimed by the 78th FG on 14 May 1943 whilst serving as CO of the 83rd FS. Stone commanded the squadron at that time. Although not technically an ace with five aerial kills, Stone nevertheless played an important part in ensuring the success of the P-47 as a long-range interceptor

flight pulled up, he warned the other pilots to keep low when they made their attacks. As the 351st roared across the airfield at tree top height, Beckham selected as his target a row of six Fw 190s. He 'poured on the coals' to bring his speed up to 425 mph and opened fire. As he pulled up from the pass, his aircraft (P-47D-11 42-75226) took hits and trailed flames and smoke. With his engine on fire, Beckham knew he had little chance to get away, so he opened his canopy and bailed out. He was duly welcomed by the Germans, who thus had the leading USAAF ace in the ETO in captivity – his tally at the time stood at 18-2-4. To make matters worse, the 353rd additionally lost a further two P-47s over the airfield and a third machine earlier in the mission over Antwerp.

On a more positive note, combat over the Cologne area saw the 352nd FS/353rd FG pilot Lt James Poindexter 'make ace' by destroying two Bf 109s which he had seen arrowing in on the bombers. His fire brought spectacular results, with the first fighter exploding in front of him and the second Messerschmitt having its entire left wing blown off. Yet another 353rd P-47 went down at this stage in the sortie, however, its pilot being a member of the Ninth Air Force's P-47-equipped 366th FG on attachment to the 352nd FS to gain combat experience. Glenn Duncan got an Fw 190 for his tenth victory, while future 5.5-kill ace Lt Gordon Compton of the 351st secured his first – a Ju 88 that had just taken off from Diest Shaffen airfield. Thus, the 353rd FG experienced a not untypical victory-loss ratio of six aircraft lost for four of the enemy.

But mere figures did not reflect the experience and leadership qualities denied a group when an ace failed to return, and in that respect the result-



The sixth (more or less concurrent with the 352nd FG) fighter group to go operational with VIII FC was the 355th FG at Steeple Morden. One of the group's P-47D-2s (42-8400) from the 354th FS, coded WR-E, is shown forming with a 'heavy' on an untypically fine late winter's day in 1944



Inspecting German cannon fire damage to his P-47D in a Duxford hanger, Lt James Wilkinson of the 78th FG's 82nd FS has at least three kills marked up on his battle weary fighter, thus dating this photo at around late February/early March 1944 – he scored his fourth on 6 March 1944. Wilkinson not only went on to become a six-kill ace (on 12 May) but also CO of his squadron. On 4 June he was killed in a flying accident near Llandoverly, in South Wales, whilst still at the head of the 82nd FS



ing gap(s) that needed to be filled was considerably broader than the straightforward need for a replacement pilot(s) and aircraft. This situation was similar, but far more acute, in the *Jagdwaaffe*, which was regularly losing men of vast experience in the air battles over Europe.

Although February had not been such a good month for the 353rd FG, for members of the 'Wolfpack' it had brought near-daily success. For example, on the 24th an escort mission that saw bombers flying to various German targets due to bad weather resulted in the 63rd FS's Lt John Truluck nailing a Bf 109G (in P-47D-6 42-74750/UN-L) over the Zuider Zee. This success raised his tally to five, and would later claim a further two kills by mid-March, which took his final score to 7-0-3.

On 25 February, while the 4th FG put up its first all-Mustang show in the ETO, personnel changes were being made at Halesworth. Leaving the 56th was Capt John W Vogt, who had achieved 'acedom' with the 63rd FS just three days before (in P-47D-10 42-75109/ UN-W). Transferring to the 356th FG, he was later able to score a further three kills (the last on 4 August) whilst serving as CO of the 360th FS at Martlesham Heath.

One pilot very much staying put with the 56th FG was Capt 'Mike' Gladych, who borrowed Bob Johnson's P-47 for the escort mission to the Ruhr flown by the group on 26 February. Flying number three in a four-ship flight, Gladych was suddenly nowhere to be seen. He was soon spotted by flight mates Lts Richard Mudge and Eugene Barnum some 18,000 ft below them, tailchasing a Bf 109. Diving down after him, they wondered why the Pole had not destroyed the fighter – which they swiftly did. Once back home it was discovered that Gladych had found the gun switch in his fighter inoperable, but such was his hatred of the Germans that he was determined to run the Bf 109 out of fuel (350 miles from home!), or find some other way of causing the pilot to crash.

MARCH 1944

The first week of March saw Col Hub Zemke score his first victories in four months (he had been on leave in the USA for some of this time), downing two fighters over the Minden-Osnabruck-Dummer Lake areas on the 6th. An Fw 190 fell first, followed by a Bf 109, the 56th CO also being credited with an 0.25 per cent share of another Messerschmitt and an Focke-Wulf probable. Zemke continued to fly P-47s marked with the individual code letter 'Z', which was a 'privilege of rank' that endured for most of 1944. Zemke had flown early P-47s with his initials, but vagaries of aircraft availability meant that he also used other machines too.

Down in the rough at Boxted, this P-47D-10 (42-75069) was assigned to Capt Joe Egan of the 56th FG's 63rd FS. This was his second assigned aircraft, and he used it to score just one kill (on 30 January 1944) en route to becoming an ace, on 15 March. No personal markings or kills are visible.

The number of crosses on Lt Bob Johnson's P-47 had reached 14 by 30 January 1944, leaving the groundcrew painter with some catching up to do on the individual German aircraft type designations for each kill. These were eventually added, however, as the photo opposite clearly shows





Probably the best known Bob Johnson shot of the war, this publicity photo was taken with the ace's score at 25 (this figure being achieved on 13 April 1944) – just one short of Eddie Rickenbacker's World War 1 total, which had been a goal that all fighter pilots assigned to the ETO had aspired to beat

On 8 March the 56th FG's 62nd FS lost Lt Joe Icard in circumstances that were never fully established. Having become an ace two days previously by shooting down an Fw 190 in P-47D-10 42-75040/LM-I over Dummer Lake, Icard was back in that locality in the same Thunderbolt on the day he was posted Missing In Action (MIA). The loss of one ace was partly offset by the creation of another on the same mission, Capt Joe Bennett downing two Bf 109s east of Steinhuder Lake and an Fw 190 over Munstorf airfield (in P-47D-11 42-75269/HV-O). These were Joe's last victories with the 56th, as he transferred to the 4th FG a week later – where he scored three more kills flying Mustangs with the 336th FS.

Amongst those 'Wolfpack' pilots who had tasted success in late February and early March was 63rd FS ace Maj Gerry Johnson, who had claimed six kills in little more than a fortnight. He added a further two victories on the 15th, both aircraft falling near Nienburg – these kills took Johnson's tally to 16.5-1-4.5. Since returning from a short spell of combat tuition with the 356th FG, Johnson had been assigned a P-47D-11, which he apparently did not name. It was only briefly flown by him, however, as he was at the controls of P-47D-15 42-76249 (which also carried no name) when he was downed by flak on the 27th.

The various actions of the 15th had been fiercely fought, with fellow 56th FG ace Lt Fred Christensen of the 62nd FS duelling with at least six Fw 190s near Dummer Lake. In the familiar confusion of combat, the P-47 pilots opened fire on a number of enemy aircraft as they came into their gunsights, but there was little doubt about one of kills credited to Christensen (in P-47D-10 42-75207/LM-C), for the Fw 190 exploded violently under the weight of his close range fire. When the combat

'Cripes A Mighty' (partially visible in front of the cockpit) was an Australian slang expression picked up by George Preddy whilst serving with the 49th FG in northern Australia prior to his posting to the 487th FS/352nd FG in the ETO on 28 December 1942. Later one of the USAAF's top aces with 26.833 kills, Preddy flew P-47D-2s and D-5s before finding his greatest fame in the P-51B/D. Three kills are marked on this Thunderbolt, signifying his total score whilst flying the Republic fighter – each kill was achieved with a different aircraft. eventually promoted major and given command of the 328th FS in October 1944, George Preddy lost his life on Christmas Day 1944 when shot down in error by a US Army mobile flak battery near the Belgian city of Liège (*J Crow*)



This 'Wolfpack' ace quartet are made up of (from left to right) 'Hub' Zemke, Dave Schilling, 'Gabby' Gabreski and Fred Christensen, all of whom are setting an example to their fellow officers by wearing standard issue 'uniforms'!
(*via Bowman*)

Although a seasoned ace with a proven track record prior to joining the 56th FG, Capt 'Mike' Gladych was not issued with his own P-47 until many months after he joined the group. One of the aircraft he used with some success was natural metal P-47D-22 42-26044 *Silver Lady*, the Pole downing a Bf 109 over Evreux on 5 July, followed by a Ju 88 near Cambrai on 12 August. Something of a favourite amongst 61st FS pilots, *Silver Lady* was also used by no less an ace than 'Gabby' Gabreski, who scored five victories with it during May-June 1944. The aircraft was actually assigned to 61st FS ace, and Operations Officer, Maj Les Smith, who shot down three aircraft with it. He became tour expired at the end of May 1944, and following his return to the USA (with six kills to his credit) the aircraft was used by numerous pilots, Gladych and Gabreski included (*via R L Ward*)

reports and gun camera film were analysed, Fred was credited with two Fw 190s destroyed and two damaged. Just 24 hours later he claimed a further pair of Fw 190s near St Dizier, raising his score to 11 and 1 shared destroyed and two damaged.

Promoted to captain at the end of March, Fred Christensen also took delivery of new D-21 42-25512/LM-Q, which was one of the final 'razorback' D-models produced.

While all P-47Ds – either 'razorbacks' or 'bubbletops' – were externally similar, individual aircraft exhibited considerable differences under the skin, and experienced pilots would refute that any two handled exactly the same. Despite this, the leading aces generally flew a number of different P-47s in the course of a combat tour. Fred Christensen was one of just a handful of pilots fortunate enough to have his own aircraft on the line for the majority of his sorties, as many aces were obliged to fly whatever was available, and they never seemed to score kills in aircraft assigned to them. Thus, it was consequently rare for a successful pilot to score all his victories in one aircraft.

Another 56th FG ace tasting success on 16 March was Lt Stan Morrill



of the 62nd FS. Flying P-47D-11 42-75388/LM-H at low altitude, he chased an Fw 190 (again near St Dizier) until it exploded under the weight of fire from his guns. This was to be Morrill's ninth, and last, kill, for he was to die trying to save crewmen from two B-24s that had collided and crashed near Boxted on the 29th of the month – while AAF personnel and civilians were still attempting a rescue, part of the bomb load from one of the stricken Liberators exploded, causing much loss of life.

Flak claimed another ace on 17 March when Lt Peter Pompetti (in P-47D-6 42-74641/WZ-Z) fell victim to flak batteries located near Paris. He survived to become a PoW. Thunderbolt pilots were fond of calling the heavily defended areas of occupied Europe, and Germany in particular, the 'flak highway to Berlin'. They were not far off the mark, for German anti-aircraft fire was deadly at all stages of the war, and it only got worse for Allied fliers as the fight focused on the 'Fatherland' itself. But on 22 March another adversary came into the equation – weather. Diving through cloud, three Thunderbolts succumbed to turbulence and plunged into the North Sea, among them Dale Stream who was flying Bob Johnson's P-47D-5 42-8461/HV-P "Lucky".

On 23 March 84th FS/78th FG pilot Quince Brown 'bagged' his tenth victory – an Fw 190 – in the vicinity of Goch. Again there was a spectacular series of explosions along the fighter's fuselage, as fire from the heavy battery of .50-in guns tore it apart. This kill was Brown's fifth in eight days.

With an outstanding record, and considerable combat experience that stretched back to the spring of 1943, Maj Gerry Johnson probably gave the mission of 27 March no more thought than any other he had flown up to that point in his tour. For him, it was uneventful in terms of enemy aircraft encountered – but Johnson would have taken on half the Luftwaffe had he known how it was to end. The truck convoy his squadron had spotted didn't look too risky – a ripe target really – and down went 'White Flight' and up came the flak. Almost simultaneously, the P-47s flown by Johnson (P-47D-15 42-76249/UN-Z) and Archie Robey were hit, the former belly landing his aircraft. Lt Robey had lowered his gear in an attempt to land and pick up Johnson, but he had to abandon his rescue when he

A firm handshake greets Francis Gabreski, back from a mission in the spring of 1944. 'Gabby's' ground-crew always kept the ace's score up to date, the elaborate flags and the identity of the German aircraft destroyed on each occasion being faithfully recorded – and carried over from aircraft to aircraft (IWM EA 28124)





Capt Walker 'Bud' Mahurin was invariably filmed with a smile on his face, the 63rd FS pilot enjoying great success over Europe up until he was shot down attacking a Do 217 on 27 March 1944. His philosophy was that pilots had to have luck on their side to survive, and this belief served Mahurin well. One example of this was his ability to evade capture by the Germans for nearly six weeks, living to fly and fight again in the Pacific

Taxying accidents made a mess of aircraft and no group was exempt. The 56th's repair shops had a job on their hands when the propeller of this P-47D-15 (42-76303), with ten victories marked under the cockpit, chewed up the Mustang barely visible in the background. It was well known that the 'Wolfpack's' ground personnel didn't like the P-51 but this was taking strong feelings too far! Despite its impressive victory tally, no records exist of this machine having ever been flown by any of the 17 officially recognised aerial aces of the 56th FG's 62nd FS

found that he had no hydraulics to 'drop' the flaps due to earlier damage.

Lt Everett then tried to land, but his wingtip brushed trees as he approached and the rescue was called off. Both pilots then vacated the area together, but only Robey made England. Everett was posted MIA after he was forced to ditch in the Channel. Gerry Johnson thus became a PoW, his score having by then reached 16.5-1-4.5.

Maj Johnson was not the only 63rd FS ace to be downed on 27 March, for ranking squadron ace Capt 'Bud' Mahurin also ended the day in German-held territory after bailing out near the French town of Tours – a further two pilots were also lost to flak on the same mission, all of which combined to make this one of the blackest days of the 56th FG's war. Mahurin, having 'squirted' a Do 217 for which he received a quarter-share, was flying 'his' P-47D-5, 42-8487/UN-M (it had served him well, for most of his 19.75 kills up to late March had been scored in it).

To his credit, the rear gunner of the Dornier bomber was not cowed by the sight of a P-47 coming at him, guns blazing. He pumped rounds in Mahurin's direction and hit him, but in turn the American ace only broke off when the German bomber exploded. He then bailed out of his crippled aircraft and came down literally running as he hit the ground.

Unlike some of his colleagues, Mahurin managed to evade capture, working his way back to England by 7 May 1944. Under the prevailing regulations governing evaders, he was unable to return to combat in the ETO lest he be captured and forced to reveal the names of people who had helped him. Pilots *could* fly combat missions again, but only in other theatres, so Mahurin, who had recently been promoted to major, went out to the Pacific as CO of the P-51D-equipped 3rd Air Commando Squadron/3rd Air Commando Group.

APRIL 1944

The new month commenced with a mission to Strasbourg on 1 April, which provoked little positive reaction from the *Jagdwaaffe*. Therefore, upon their return flight home the 56th FG indulged in a little aerodrome strafing at Lille – or rather they didn't. The flight led by 61st FS CO (and 11.5-kill ace) Jim Stewart realised too late that it was a trap, having initiated the attack. The flak batteries were waiting, and the P-47 flown by Thomas Owens took hits in the fuel tanks. Stewart, screaming over the radio for Owens to bail out, flew straight into a telegraph pole which, to the amazement of watching pilots, came out of the collision in far worse shape than the Thunderbolt.



Owens failed to bail out and was killed when his P-47 rolled over and went into the ground. Stewart nursed his aircraft back to base, however, where his groundcrew discovered rather more wood in its airframe than the designers had ever intended – a piece of the pole was embedded in the wing, but Stewart had nevertheless made it back to Halesworth.



Although not a technically brilliant photo, this snap shot nevertheless shows the cockpit area of Lt Quince Brown's OKIE (42-74573/WZ-J) with twelve victories marked under the cockpit panel. The rows of brooms indicate the huge effort VIII FC put in to support the bomber force and decimate the Luftwaffe during the first year of P-47 operations – April 1943 to April 1944 (*Bivens*)

After a hectic two months of action, the 'Wolfpack' found aerial opposition hard to come by in early April. However, a bomber escort to the Husam area on 9 April gave Bob Johnson the first chance to add to his score since his trio of kills on 15 March. Left with fellow 61st FS pilot Lt Sam Hamilton to guard multiple combat boxes of Liberators against a substantial number of Fw 190s, the two P-47 pilots proceeded to charge in and disrupt the enemy formations. Watching the German pilots execute their inevitable break and dive away, Hamilton chased after them while Johnson stayed high to turn into the German top cover.

Evading multiple bounces by pairs of Fw 190s, Johnson had his work cut out when Hamilton called for help low down over the Baltic. Adding to Johnson's troubles was a frozen belly tank that refused to release. Watching a dogfight in which Hamilton gradually gained the upper hand on a determined German pilot equally bent on shooting down the P-47, Johnson lost no time in joining the party. But it was all but over before he arrived as Hamilton had succeeded in getting on the Fw 190's tail and severing a wing with a burst from his eight 'fifties'.

Just as the American opened fire a second Fw 190 had latched onto his tail, but its pilot was dissuaded from any further action as Johnson cut in. Diving and twisting, the *Jagdflieger* tried to disengage, but the P-47 ace followed each manoeuvre. Taking note of the crispness of his flying, Johnson quickly realised that his German quarry was no novice. The American finally prevailed, however, and a burst of fire finished the enemy pilot off as he tried to extricate himself from a riddled cockpit. This was Johnson's 23rd victory.

In the first successful day for what seemed a very long time, the 'Wolfpack' had other claims to total up too. One of its more successful pilots Deputy Group CO Dave Schilling (in P-47D-11 42-75388) had two Fw 190s confirmed, plus two damaged – an Fw 190 and, unusually, a Junkers



'Bud' Mahurin's P-47D-5 is about to be flown again by its regular pilot, judging by the ace's well-garbed figure on the left wing, chatting to his crewchief. Few Thunderbolt groundcrew men worked as hard as those attached to the 56th, for not only did they help sort out the technical troubles with the early P-47C and Ds, they had to do it all over again when the P-47M came along in 1945. Unlike the pilots, groundcrews did not serve tours – they remained in-theatre for the duration (*B Robertson*)

The scene hasn't changed much from the photos featuring Bob Johnson earlier in this chapter, but the aircraft flown by him has. Natural aluminium finished P-47D-21 42-5512/LM-Q *Penrod & Sam* was the ace's final mount in the ETO, and he used on his history making sortie on 8 May 1944 when he downed two German fighters to take his tally to 27 (*IWM*)



over Flensburg airfield in P-47D-21 43-25577/LM-T. A 12-kill ace, he had led the squadron since 9 February.

MAY 1944

Re-equipment of the VIII FC groups with the P-51 gathered momentum in the spring of 1944, and the 359th FG was ready to log its first Mustang mission by the 6th. This signalled the end for pilots attempting to reach ace status on the P-47, Lt Robert Booth coming closest with four kills – he went on to 'make ace' by doubling his score with the P-51B.

Although four groups had now transitioned to the Mustang, the 56th FG remained very much a P-47 group, with pilots of the calibre of Bob Johnson continuing to take a heavy toll of the Luftwaffe in the Republic fighter. On 8 May he scored his final two kills on yet another mission to Berlin and Brunswick. His report on the engagements read as follows;

'About 30 Huns were over the bombers, their contrails snaking out in the sky. Smoke was coming from the bomber box and one was going down. I started after the Jerries and then saw an Me 109 diving at me. I rolled and fired at him, but missed. Then he squirted at me and missed. I made another turn, and he tried to outrun me, the damned fool. He went down, rolling and tuning to evade, and I hit every him half roll. When his wing came off I figured he'd had it.

'We started back up for those contrails above the bombers. I was down to about 3000 ft now, in the spotty clouds. Lt Harold Hartney, my number three man, yelled that a couple of Fw 190s were diving. He took off after them under a cloud, and I told him I'd jump him when they came out. Then he began yelling for help.

'I saw the Focke-Wulfs come out, then Hartney's Thunderbolt, and

Another view of 42-5512, this time showing off the aircraft's unusual name. This combination was chosen by Johnson so as to publicise the efforts of the men on the ground (in this case crewchief Sgt J C Penrod), without whom the man in the air (Sam Johnson) would have struggled to score all of his kills. Brig Gen Jesse Auton, 65th FW CO, and Brig Gen Francis Griswold, Chief of Staff, VIII FC are seen hear being given an explanation behind the names by Johnson himself





Sgt Penfold (left), Johnson and his armorer (unknown), suitably decked out with a 'scarf' of .50-in shells, pose for an official USAAF photo

then four more Jerries chasing the Thunderbolt. I came head-on at these four. One of them was blinking at me with those .30s, and I let him have it. It got his engine and he went down smoking and blew up. The other three broke away'.

Bob Johnson's last victories (in P-47D-21 42-25512/LM-Q) first equalled, and then bettered, the score of America's ranking World War I ace Eddie Rickenbacker, who had downed 26 German aircraft. The breaking of the long standing record by an ETO pilot (leading American ace of all time, Richard Bong, was the first to better 26 in April 1944) all but ended Johnson's career as a fighter pilot, for the USAAF 'brass' ordered him home, effective immediately. War bond fund raising tours, talks to factory workers and interviews loomed, and Bob Johnson, who was promoted to major upon his return to America, actually took to the publicity circuit like a duck to water, and stayed with it.



With the panels removed, the right hand Browning machine guns on Johnson's P-47 are given a routine check by Sgt Penfold

BUILD UP TO D-DAY AND BEYOND

To get five victories to mark an individual as an ace was a feat that eluded many Eighth Air Force pilots – even those who flew combat over a considerable period of time. Therefore, to make ace in a day was rightly regarded as something special, and among those who joined this select band was Lt Bob ‘Shorty’ Rankin of the 61st FS/56th FG. On 12 May he was one of the pilots who gave the ‘Zemke Fan’ the acid test, this manoeuvre being designed to cover a 180° arc of sky whilst simultaneously offering mutual protection for three formations of P-47s.

Leading ‘Whippet White Flight’, Rankin was keeping his eyes peeled when a formation of about 25 bandits was called in. The enemy fighters were below the Americans, some 20 miles away. Firewalling his throttle, Rankin headed in their direction, only to encounter another 25 Bf 109s at 19,000 ft, climbing to initiate an attack on the bombers.

He turned his flight into the enemy fighters, which dropped their external tanks as soon as they saw the danger boring in towards them. Manoeuvring behind one Messerschmitt, Rankin first a short burst and the Bf 109 split-essed and dived. The American followed, holding his fire as the German fighter gathered momentum and steepened its dive angle. Rankin watched its wings vibrating and began to pull his own aircraft up. The pilot had underestimated the velocity of his descent and failed to pull out, the Bf 109 crashing in a small German town north-west of Marburg.

Climbing back to altitude, Rankin spotted another Bf 109 in a shallow dive to the east. He closed rapidly on it and watched his fire pepper the fuselage and engine cowling. Throwing his canopy open, the German pilot ‘hit the silk’ – or tried to, as his parachute was not seen to open. Rankin then heard Zemke, as ‘Fairbank Leader’, call for help. Rankin headed for Zemke’s position, which was over Coblenz, in southern Germany. The boss was alone and circling 30 Bf 109s, and as Rankin joined up, he went into the attack.

Covering his leader, Rankin watched Zemke shoot down a Bf 109. Pulling up, he saw more enemy fighters, so he promptly dived to latch onto the tail of a pair of Bf 109s. Spraying the left hand

P-47D-25 *Little Princess* gained some fame in 1982 when its one time pilot, Marvin Bledsoe, published *Thunderbolt*, which was a detailed account of his single tour in the ETO with the 350th FS/353rd FG. Bledsoe flew this Thunderbolt for most of his missions, which comprised primarily ground attack sorties. He duly became a ground ace in the process with 5.5 kills





machine with a short burst of fire, the American saw smoke belch out and the landing gear flop down – a sure sign of ruptured hydraulics. He switched his aim to the other Bf 109, fired and observed much the same result. Heavily smoking, the also fighter fell away with its gear extended.

Although Rankin had now downed four aircraft, he was not yet ready to quit. Making a left turn at 15,000 ft, he saw Bf 109s circling below him so he quickly latched onto a trio of fighters flying in loose formation. However, before he could open fire Rankin watched in amazement as all three pilots bailed out! He had not fired, nor had any other P-47 as far as he could see – these Bf 109s were not claimed as victories.

Two more Bf 109s ran across Rankin's sights as he climbed back to height, but the short bursts he was able to get off resulted only in damaged claims. His speed carried him past the enemy aircraft and Rankin did not pursue them for he had seen another potential target – a Bf 109 had broken out of a main gaggle and was arrowing in on Zemke's Thunderbolt. Rankin called the break as he closed on the German fighter, his fire persuading the German that chasing Zemke was futile, and as the Bf 109

D-Day was as hectic a day for the Eighth's P-47 groups, as it was for any of the tactical groups flying ground attack sorties. Fully marked and bombed up for the historic invasion is P-47D-15 *Arkansas Traveller* (the mount of Capt Dewey Newhart), which carried the name *Mud N' Mules* on the port side, with a truncated mule on the nose checkers. Newhart was serving as CO of the 350th FS when he was one of eight 353rd FG pilots shot down on 12 June during an early morning fighter-bomber attack on Dreux/Evreux which was bounced by Bf 109s. Six pilots, including Newhart, were killed during the fierce dogfight (USAF)



The mount of nine-victory ace Alwin Juchheim, this P-47D-6 was almost certainly 42-74690, coded HL-J (bar), which indentified it as being part of the 83rd FS/78th FG at Duxford. Juchheim obtained his first five victories in this Thunderbolt, and went on to score four more in another aircraft before being made a PoW on 28 May 1944 after a collision over enemy territory. He appears not to have decorated this particular fighter in any way – not even to the extent of applying victory symbols (USAF)

broke away, Rankin turned into two more Bf 109s showing hostile interest in his wingman, Lt Cleon Thomson. In his peripheral vision, Rankin saw that the Bf 109 pilot who had tried to attack Zemke had bailed out. He had downed five.

Not to be outdone, Thomson, who was on his first combat mission, shot down one of a *Rotte* of Bf 109s they had caught up with, Rankin taking the other one on. He might have had six had his ammunition not ran out just as he was positioned for a good shot.

Combat with Fw 190s not too many miles away during this mission resulted in two more confirmed kills for Capt Paul Conger, who thus joined the ace 'fraternity' within the 56th FG. In addition to the two Fw 190s definitely brought down, Conger was credited with a third Focke-Wulf damaged in the action that took place north of Marburg.

That same day also saw the 361st FG – the last P-47 unit to join the Eighth – fly its first mission equipped with Mustangs.

Twenty-four hours later the 56th FG was charged with protecting 2nd Division B-24s sent to bomb Tutow and Politz, the 'Wolfpack' dividing into 'A Group', which covered the bombers' penetration, and 'B Group', overseeing the withdrawal. Rendezvous with the Liberators took place over Heide, where the 62nd FS made contact with 40 Fw 190s which were chased. One fighter was shot down, as was a P-47 by ground fire.

Flying within 'B Group' was Lt Robert Keen of the 61st FS who, along with the rest of his unit, countered an attack on the rear of the B-24s by Fw 190s. West of Hagenow, Keen latched onto a group of fighters and downed three (plus claimed a fourth as a probable). The pilots of the first two fighters bailed out, while the third died when his Fw 190 exploded. These were Keen's first victories, and to prove that the exception can sometimes become the rule, he repeated his triple haul on 5 July. On the latter occasion the victims were Bf 109s, and the combination of the two sorties made Keen an ace while still a first lieutenant. Promoted to captain the following month, he did not enjoy any further successes.

On 22 May a double fighter escort missions resulted in victories and losses for the 'Wolfpack', the group operating alongside elements of the 356th FG. Despite the 56th becoming embroiled in a series of running battles, the latter group had little to report when it returned home, providing yet another example of the ever-changing 'fortunes of war'. The 56th adopted the 'Zemke Fan' formation over Dummer Lake, with the 61st FS heading for Bremen, the 62nd to Paderborn-Einbeck and Brunswick and the 63rd to Hanover.



The red nose band introduced in February 1944 by the 56th FG significantly brightened up the natural-metal finished 'razorback' and 'bubbletop' Thunderbolts then on strength with the group. One of those aircraft so decorated was this P-47D-28 flown by Paul Chinn of the 63rd FS. Other aircraft in the group had individualistic camouflage schemes applied from around March onwards

'Razorback' Thunderbolts survived well into the 'bubbletop era', including P-47D-21 "HUCKLE DE BUCK" of the 63rd FS/56th FG. The pilot(s) of this aircraft have yet to be identified. The full invasion stripes shown in this photo were worn for on a short period of time, thus dating this photo as having been taken in late June/early July 1944





Congratulations all round for Lt Col 'Gabby' Gabreski after scoring his latest kill on 5 July 1944 (a Bf 109 over Evreux) to confirm him as the leading ace in the ETO. In the background is his last Thunderbolt, P-47D-25 42-26418/HV-A, which was eventually adorned with 31 victory flags (three ground kills, which then shared equally billing with aerial claims in VIII FC) before it was lost in combat on 20 July 1944 (IWM EA 28891)

This day was particularly memorable for Gabreski, as he achieved his only triple haul of the war when his 12-strong 'White Flight' tangled with 15 Fw 190s spotted taking off in line abreast formation from Hoperhofen airfield. The Thunderbolt pilots – who were flying at 15,000 ft – soon sighted more fighters taking off in pairs in a mass scramble, which led Gabreski to call in the four remaining P-47s of his squadron that had been flying top cover, before diving to 3000 ft to commence the aerial battle.

'White Flight' charged in after the first eight Fw 190s, Gabreski selecting one on his first pass and setting it on fire, before turning into a second whose pilot withstood the hail of gun fire for only a short time before bailing out. As 'Red' and 'Blue' Flights attacked the remaining Focke-Wulfs, 'Gabby' observed a P-47 falling in flames, with a second smoking.

Breaking off and reforming at around 10,000 ft, the 'White Flight' pilots saw a further 25 Fw 190s a further 5000 ft below. As the P-47s dived to engage, the airfield flak opened up on them. This was obviously hazardous to German as well as American aircraft, and one of the Focke-Wulf pilots duly fired a green flare to make the gunners cease firing. The 61st FS, meanwhile, continued to attack, Gabreski shooting down his third Fw 190, while 61st FS pilots Capt James Carter and Polish volunteer Plt Off Witold Lanowski each recorded a kill apiece.

Flg Off Evan 'Mac' McMinn (also of the 61st FS) went one better by downing two Fw 190s to make him an ace. One of just a handful of flying officers to 'make ace', McMinn was yet another pilot who scored his kills in a variety of P-47Ds, his original assigned aircraft (P-47D-5 42-8458) having been written off on 1 January when it hit a 20 mm gun mounting. It had previously been damaged by flak and hit by pieces of a disintegrat-

Thunderbolts 'bought' by War Bond subscribers continued to arrive in the UK, although fewer 'bubbletop' models appear to have had names applied in this fashion. This example, P-47D-25 42-26413/UN-Z "Oregons Britannia", was flown by 56th FG aces Harold Comstock and 'Hub' Zemke



ing Bf 110 whilst being flown by 'Gabby' Gabreski, who scored three kills in it. McMinn was obliged to fly other P-47s to get his kills.

On 28 May Capt Max Juchheim flew his 76th mission with the 83rd FS/78th FG. Assistant Operations Officer for his unit, as well as ranking ace with nine kills, two probables and two damaged to his credit, Juchheim had been in the ETO since 30 November 1943.

The mission on this date saw bombers ranging across Germany briefed to attack a long list of oil targets and marshalling yards. Their fighter support included 208 P-47s drawn from four groups and 307 P-51s from seven. An air battle soon developed, and Juchheim began manoeuvring with his unit at 28,000 ft in preparation for an attack on an enemy formation, when his P-47D-22 (42-26016/HL-A) collided with a 353rd FG P-51. The Mustang exploded and Juchheim's Thunderbolt spun down with one wing severed, its pilot swiftly bailing out. Squadronmates dived down and circled the single parachute, trying to identify their comrade, but they had to break off at 12,000 ft when a Bf 109 appeared. The parachute was indeed carrying Juchheim, who became a PoW upon landing.

The 353rd FG's Maj Kenneth Gallup opened his score during the mission of the 28th, despatching a Bf 109 that he had caught over an airfield near Gutersloh. Formerly CO the P-47-equipped 53rd FS/36th FG, which had served in the Panama Canal Zone before eventually moving to the ETO to serve with the Ninth Air Force in March/April 1944, Ken had only been with the 353rd four days when he claimed his first kill. Promoted to CO of the 350th FS on 12 June after Capt Dewey Newhart was posted Missing in Action, Gallup had 'made ace' by 6 July and completed his scoring on 28 August (as a lieutenant-colonel) when he shot down a

Fieseler Storch, shared in the destruction of a second German observation aircraft encountered in the area between the towns of Verdun and Conflan, and finished the sortie off with a half kill in a He 111. This took his final tally to nine aerial victories and one damaged.

By late May the 'Wolfpack' had received its first 'bubbletop' P-47D-25s, although these did not replace the 'razorbacks' overnight, instead being issued on a gradual, as

Wearing the 78th FG's distinctive black and white checkerboard nose marking, this P-27D-25 (42-26551/WZ-P) was the personal mount of 84th FS CO Maj Ben Mayo, who used it to down two Fw 190s on 9 September near Giessen. Often credited with five aerial kills, Mayo's tally was downgraded to four according to both the USAF Historical Study 85 and the VIII FC's Final Assessment. Despite losing 'acedom' postwar, Mayo did at least enjoy such status during the last weeks of his combat tour (which ended with his return to the USA on 25 September), for he had also destroyed 2.5 aircraft on the ground





Many of the natural finish P-47s delivered to Duxford had a coat of green top surface paint hastily applied to make them less visible from above when the Eighth's fighter groups went over to large scale tactical operations as well as bomber escorts. In either case, camouflage was deemed to be prudent, although the group's black and white checkerboard marking was probably even more visible than 'silver' paint. This example of 'compromised camouflage' is the well photographed P-47D-25 of the 82nd FS/78th FG (via R L Ward)

required, basis. 'Hub' Zemke took his assigned 'bubbletop' Thunderbolt (42-26413/UN-Z – the first example delivered to the 61st FS) into action on 31 May, and came home with two Fw 190s destroyed, a third as a probable and a fourth damaged. He had despatched his two victims over the Gutersloh-Detmold area, and both of these and his other claims were all confirmed by his gun camera film. These successes took his tally to 12.

JUNE 1944

One of the most pivotal months of the war got off to a bad start for the Thunderbolt community when on 4 June – two days before Operation *Overlord* – 78th FG ace Capt James Wilkinson of the 82nd FS was killed in a flying accident over South Wales. Casualties from such incidents ran into many hundreds during the war, this wasteful carnage being an unfortunate, and somewhat unavoidable, by-product of so much flying. On any given day countless numbers of aircraft were aloft performing training, courier, liaison and transport flights, not to mention routine air tests and operations. Weather often played its part in such sad losses of personnel too, and such accidents would not stop, even in peace time.

The momentous events of the 6th saw Allied fighters ranging at will over the Normandy beachheads. Ninth Air Force P-47 units were heavily committed, striking ground targets along the coast and in the immediate vicinity of the landings. Enemy fighters were not much in evidence in the face of the Allied juggernaut over the invasion beaches, although neither tactical or escort sorties by the Eighth were performed without cost. Five-victory ace Lt Evan McMinn of the 61st FS fell victim to fighters or flak (the details are uncertain) and was killed near Bernay, his aircraft (P-47D-22 42-25963) being one of five P-47s lost by VIII FC on D-Day.

Air superiority over the beaches for the vital first days of *Overlord* was maintained by hundreds of Allied fighter units, the Luftwaffe being in no position to mount anything more than a handful of token sorties, which had little effect.



Pilots of the 361st FG at Bottisham never had much chance to run up a string of victories in the P-47, although they made up for that when Mustangs arrived in May 1944. Representing the group's early period is Col Roy A Webb, CO of the 374th FS, pictured at Little Walden. He went on to score a total of eight ground victories

Capt Fred Christensen's second assigned Thunderbolt was P-47D-25 42-26628/LM-C, which he named *Rozzie Geth II* after his girlfriend. With an accumulated scoreboard showing 21 kills, this aircraft also wore the dual name *Miss Fire* and an arresting portrait of a lady on the nose. Ranking ace of the 62nd FS by some margin, Christensen scored just two of his victories 21.5 kills in this aircraft. The individual in the cockpit is probably Christensen's crewchief, SSgt Connor



Twenty-four hours after D-Day, relative latecomer to the 56th FG Lt George Bostwick destroyed his first aircraft (a Bf 109) over Grandvilliers airfield in P-47D-22 42-26042/LM-G. Assigned to the 62nd FS, Bostwick had changed to P-47D-25 42-26636/LM-X by the time he scored a trio of Bf 109 kills (and a solitary damaged claim) on 4 July near Conches.

On 12 June ex-RCAF pilot Flg Off Steve Gerick of the 61st FS 'made ace', having previously achieved three confirmed kills and four damaged since the New Year. Patrolling near Evreux, his flight ran into a large group of Bf 109s and he proceeded to shoot down two Bf 109s to join the 'Wolfpack's' growing band of pilots with five or more kills – for good measure, he was also credited with having damaged a further four Messerschmitt fighters on this mission. Gerick rounded out his tour on 27 June with yet another damaged claim on a Bf 109, and a month later he transferred out of the 56th with his tally standing at 5-0-9.

Such a high number of damaged claims accruing to one pilot on a single mission is entirely understandable, for in the confusion of a sizeable air battle, both sides would tend to open fire on enemy aircraft as soon as they came across their sights. Even if hits registered, there was not always time to pursue an individual aircraft and destroy it, or to see it crash. It took a good few seconds to become fully orientated to the developing battle and to select a specific target, as other factors (particularly the amount of remaining fuel) could dictate whether or not this was possible. The sum result was that many American fighter pilots had to break off and be satisfied with only damaged claims when of course the enemy aircraft that fell out of sight sometimes failed to recover from a dive.

JULY 1944

George Bostwick made ace on 6 July when he accounted for a Bf 109 over the Beaumont region of France in P-47D-22 42-25713/LM-M, this being his last kill for seven months. July was to be a month of intense activity for the 353rd FG, which lost just four P-47s in 29 missions. Unfortunately, amongst this small number was group CO, respected pilot and ranking ace, Col Glenn Duncan. He had scored 5.5 kills since D-Day to raise his tally to 19.5 victories, thus passing Walt Beckham's long-standing group record of 18. On 7 July Col Duncan was flying his P-47D-22 42-25971, named *Dove of Peace VII*, as part of a 45-ship penetration support mission for B-17s. Breakaway point for the fighters was Dummer Lake, and it was there that the action began.

To divert the Germans' attention away from the 'heavies', Duncan elected to strafe nearby Wesendorf airfield. He went in and peppered a He 111, but light flak quickly had his range, and as Duncan pulled up hits severed an oil line. With his engine rapidly overheating, Duncan flew west, aiming to get as far away from Germany as possible before his

aircraft had to be put down. He didn't make it, for *Dove VII* only managed to stay airborne for another 14 minutes, by which time it had carried Duncan as far as Nienburg. He bellied in north-west of the town, and other 353rd FG pilots who were eyewitnesses to the crash landing saw Duncan throw an incendiary grenade into the cockpit and walk away from the blazing Thunderbolt. Glad though they were to see their leader alive and apparently unharmed, the pilots were nevertheless appalled at his loss to the group.

The gap left by Glenn Duncan was felt as high up as General William Kepner, commanding the Eighth's fighters. He sent the 353rd a wire in which he expressed a deep regret over the day's events and despite Duncan's last call to his fellow pilots that he would be seeing them in three weeks, he would not return until April 1945. He evaded capture, walked out of Germany and spent the rest of the war with the Dutch underground organisation.

Although the 7 July had been a bad day for Glenn Duncan, for 62nd FS/56th FG ace Capt Fred Christensen it could hardly have been better, for he became the third Eighth Air Force fighter pilot to reach ace-in-a-day status. Leading his squadron on an escort mission (in P-47D-21 42-25522/LM-H), Christensen noted activity as his formation passed over an airfield at Gardelegen. Dropping down for a closer look, he saw about 35 aircraft dispersed, so he led his flight off to the east, intending to reverse and attack these ground targets. As the P-47s made their turn, the pilots saw that a dozen Ju 52s had just entered the landing pattern.

The lumbering German transports, flying in pairs, represented targets too good to pass up, and Christensen led his flight in for the kill. In his excitement he forgot to drop his external tanks, but this oversight proved useful as the Thunderbolt lost more airspeed than it would otherwise have done. The slowness of the Ju 52 sometimes made it a harder target than many fighter pilots could have imagined due to the misjudgment of the relative closure speeds. Fred Christensen made no such mistake;

'I saw them peeling off to the left and making a huge orbit down the field. I entered the traffic pattern from above, went by the last Ju 52 and shot at the next one in front of me. I saw strikes on the wing and left engine but passed over him before I could see any further results. My wingman said it burned and exploded in mid-air after I passed over him.

'I lined up on the second and shot from quite close range, registering hits on both wings and fuselage. Huge flames were billowing back from the aircraft. The third Ju 52 was in a turn to the left. I fired a 15° deflection shot, noticing many strikes. Its right gas tanks were on fire when I ceased shooting. The Ju 52's pilot tried to land the aircraft on a field short



Bob Johnson (centre) played the publicity angle for many photo sessions, although this one was hardly posed as the group was probably snapped after returning from a 'Wolfpack' combat mission. Fellow 56th FG ace Lt Joe Powers is seen on the extreme left of the line-up

of the airdrome, but the flames increased and it burned in the pasture.

'During my next attack on another Ju 52, my engine quit and I spent precious moments switching gas tanks. I went by him and dropped my tanks at the same time. I then found myself another Ju 52, took a short squirt at this aircraft and noticed a few hits. He then tried some evasive action by putting his tail in the air at a 60° angle. Given that he was only 100 ft off the ground, he couldn't pull out and crashed into the ground.

'I then lined up dead astern on the fifth (Ju 52) and waited until I was very close before firing. The hits were concentrated around the fuselage and inboard of (each) engine, where the non-seal proof tanks are located. Both wings were burning as I went by, and the aircraft peeled off to the right and dove into the ground.

'That left one aircraft right in front of the fifth machine I had just shot down, which had crashed just off the edge of the field. I pressed my attack through the flak and gave him a good burst in both wings. Flames were coming back from the outer tanks but he tried to land anyway. He did and burned in the middle of the field. In the meantime, I had to do a 180° turn to evade the fierce flak. I counted nine fires, including the one on the field. The tenth Ju 52 crashed in the town where I couldn't see him'.

In addition to Christensen's six confirmed Ju 52s (his final kills of the war, taking his tally to 21.5-0-2), Lt Billy Edens shot down three in P-47D-15 42-76363/LM-F to make him an ace and Capt Michael Jackson got one in P-47D-11 42-75237/LM-S.

A new commanding officer took over the 63rd FS on 17 July, now Maj Joe Egan (with five victories to his credit) having been with the unit since February 1943. Sadly, the new CO's tenure in this post was to last barely 48 hours, for on the 19th he was shot down and killed by the ever-deadly flak, his aircraft (P-47D-25 42-26524) falling north-east of Nancy.

Flak was easily VIII FC's deadliest foe in the last 18 months of the war, both experienced veterans and novices falling victim to the 'One more pass' syndrome – a phrase fighter pilots often called in as they dived down to work over a target that had invariably been 'woken up' by earlier strafing and/or bombing runs. It was not always an advisable course of action.

In a surprising number of cases, considering the fatal attrition suffered by the *Jagdflieger* in equally well-built aircraft, American pilots lived to rue their actions when flak shot them down, or they crashed due to some other cause. It could happen to the best, and late on 20 July the boys at Boxted had finally to give up hoping that by some miracle 61st FS CO Lt Col 'Gabby' Gabreski would return to board the transport scheduled to take him home for 30 days' leave. It was not to be for his camouflaged P-47D-25 (42-26418/HV-A), complete with scoreboard, lay broken in a cornfield a half-mile from Bassenheim airfield.



Duxford Thunderbolts were known for numerous examples of well-rendered aircraft artwork, among them the flying horse and name *Geronimo* sported by P-47C-5 41-6367/WZ-B of the 84th FS/78th FG and flown by Maj John D Irwin (*Bivens*)

The base had been spotted by Gabreski after a non-eventful escort of 4th Bomber Force 'heavies' raiding central Germany. His squadron duly strafed the airfield and then 'Yellow' and 'Blue' flights pulled off. However, there were still tempting targets to be had – a number of Bf 110s and He 111s appeared to have survived unscathed. Gabreski took his 'White Flight' down once again, and as he dropped low, he selected an He 111 and opened fire. The Heinkel immediately went up in flames and 'Gabby' decided on that one last pass. Nothing hit him, but he hit the ground, bending his prop tips and leaving his Thunderbolt staggering along, losing speed. This seemingly basic pilot error was almost certainly caused by Gabreski being caught unawares by the aircraft's excessive sink rate due to the extra fuel carried by the 'bubbletop' P-47. It was later found that pilots could easily underestimate the difference the extra fuel made to the fighter's handling, and as Gabreski's aircraft had been the first of its type delivered to the 61st FS, there had probably not been sufficient time to test its flying characteristics, especially at very low altitude.

There was nothing for it but to find a place to land – and fast. 'Gabby' found a cornfield and brought HV-A down. It tipped up but settled back, and he forced the hood off and got out. He was now on his own. Although Gabreski evaded for five days, the 28-victory ace was eventually captured.

German flak would also claim two Thunderbolt pilots from the 356th FG that day, while the 56th FG also mourned the loss of Lt Earnest, who was killed when his aircraft crashed into the Channel.

AUGUST 1944

On 12 August 'Hub' Zemke finally bade farewell to the 56th FG and handed over the 'hot seat' to Lt Col Dave Schilling. Being given command of the 'Wolfpack' was just reward for an outstanding pilot and Zemke, who was about to take up a new assignment as CO of the Mustang-equipped 479th FG, left knowing 'his' Thunderbolts were in safe hands. Schilling's first kill as group commander came on the 28th of the month, and took his score to 14 confirmed victories and six damaged, and by 0930 he had added a 14th – a He 111 downed over the 'Siegfried Line' south of Trier. He was flying 'bubbletop' P-47D-25 42-26417 at the time, this being the first of four kills he would score in the aircraft.

Relatively few VIII FC pilots were able to score victories – or indeed have any chance to fly – the later P-47Ds fitted with the clear view canopy. This was because most had reached the end of their tours and received transfers back to the USA before their respective units received the aircraft, or the group had traded in its Thunderbolts for Mustangs. 'Razorback' models also soldiered on to the end of 1944, and it was more usual for groups to go from early P-47 models to the P-51 without ever receiving 'bubbletops'. One exception to this rule was the 78th FG at Duxford, which did not make the change over until Decem-

Looking good at Duxford, this P-47D-25 was the mount of Lt Ross Orr on 1 July 1944 when he was bounced with his bombs still attached at 16,000 ft by 30+ plus Bf 109s. The aircraft was last seen heading down in flames, but Orr bailed out to become a PoW





Quince Brown of the 84th FS/78th FG scored his last kill in this P-47D-27 (42-26567) on 1 September 1944. Five days later he attacked Vogelsand airfield in P-47D-28 44-19569/WZ-Z. What happened next was related to the 78th FG's Intelligence officer by Lt Richard L Baron, one of Brown's flight members;

'Brown called and said he was going to go over it (Vogelsand airfield) and investigate. He made a steep turn and we ended up in string formation. He went over first and I saw tracers going at him, so I hit low for the deck. I looked up and saw several strikes on his plane. He pulled up sharply as we got across and I pulled up alongside. I saw his plane shake and his canopy come off. He then bailed out at about 1200 ft. His parachute opened and I saw him land in a field. He then ran and lay down in some tall grass.'

The fact that Brown was seen to be alive and well and seemingly evading on the ground gave his colleagues back at Duxford great hope for his survival. However, they eventually learned that the P-47 ace had been captured and subsequently executed by a Schutzstaffel SS officer, who was duly tracked down and prosecuted for murder after the war (*Bivens*)

onwards) in action, these being the 78th, 353rd and 356th FGs. The remaining five groups had all received P-51s as new equipment by the time the 'bubbletop' Thunderbolt made an appearance in the ETO.

SEPTEMBER 1944

Flak caused the removal of another VIII FC ace from the order of battle on 6 September when the 84th FS's Ops Officer, Maj Quince Brown, went down west of Schleiden after attacking Vogelsand airfield in P-47D-28 44-19569/WZ-Z. Originator of the P-47 strafing attack, and the 78th FG's ranking ace with 12.333 kills, Brown was fated never to reach a PoW camp, for he was murdered by an SS officer soon after being captured.

An efficient organisation for handling prisoners, backed by a well publicised order that downed Allied fliers were to be handed over to the Luftwaffe as soon as possible, made such incidents of summary execution and murder by civilians mercifully rare, but the risks remained. And they got worse towards the end of the war when the German infrastructure began to break down in the face of the Allied advance.

German PoW cages were, by the autumn of 1944, looking increasingly like fighter pilot reunion gatherings. Another man who joined the expanding 'club' at this time was Lt Billy Edens of the 56th FG who, having scored seven aerial victories and five on the ground with the 62nd FS, was nailed by flak near Trier (in P-47D-21 42-25522) on 10 September.

Arriving back for his second tour with the 56th FG on the very day Edens went down was Maj Les Smith who, having scored six victories during his first tour with the 'Wolfpack', took over as CO of the 62nd FS. He would hold this position until 26 January 1945 when he became Deputy Group CO.

Whilst Les Smith was acclimatising himself with frontline flying once again, one of his old squadronmates, the redoubtable Capt 'Mike' Gladych, was coming to the end of an eventful tour. To mark his departure, the Pole got himself into a running fight on 21 September that carried the protagonists from east of Arnhem to north of Gorinchen, in Holland, and eventually saw a single P-47 down two Fw 190s. This double victory brought Capt Gladych's final wartime tally to 18-2-0.5, ten of the kills having been scored with the 56th FG and eight with the RAF.

ARNHEM AND INTO GERMANY

Field Order 578 flown on 18 September 1944 would be a day the 56th FG, and other Eighth fighter groups, would long remember. The memories would not be pleasant, for all groups were ordered to fly support missions for Operation *Market Garden* – the attempt by British and Canadian forces to capture bridges over the Rhine at Arnhem, in Holland. An operation that went wrong from the start due mainly to the scattering of parachute troops up against alerted

and far stronger defences that Intelligence knew about but ignored, it began to need strong air support. This included an anti-flak effort by USAAF fighter groups, which were not the choicest of sorties to fly because to do the job effectively, pilots had to wait to be fired at in order to spot the guns to be destroyed.

Newly promoted Maj 'Bunny' Comstock, CO of the 63rd FS/56th FG, drew mission lead, although he wasn't scheduled to, and he duly led 39 P-47Ds away from Boxted at 1437, destination Turnhout, in Holland. Low cloud forced an 'on the deck' approach to be flown, and the Thunderbolts being met by intense flak. The briefing warning about not firing until fired upon was misguided, to say the least, as Allied AA units had not apparently been issued with any such restriction. They let fly and shot down one 'Wolfpack' P-47, while their German counterparts did far better. The problem for the American pilots was the fact that the flak was able to track them from the side – an easy enough task for experienced gun crews. Comstock's wingman was amongst those pilots shot down, although he was able to walk out and rejoin the group the following day.

When the loss figures for 18 September were released they made shocking reading. The 'Wolfpack' had lost 16 of the P-47s sortied, whilst a further 12 had suffered major battle damage. Eight pilots had bailed out or landed in Allied territory, three were wounded badly enough to be sent home, one was killed in a belly landing, another a PoW and three were MIAs.

Despite such costly failures such as Arnhem, with its unrepresentative pilot and aircraft losses, the air war was clearly going well for the Allies,



'Wolfpack' P-47D-28 44-19786 was flown by Lt Edward Albright of the 63rd FS. He was killed in this aircraft on the notorious 18 September 1944 'flak busting' mission performed by the 56th FG in support of the Arnhem operation. This was easily the worst day in the 'Wolfpack's' history, as 16 P-47s were shot down and a further 12 badly damaged out of 39 that had sortied



Not all Thunderbolts decorated with kill markings were necessarily flown by aces, nor did these always denote aerial victories. This P-47D-22 (42-26024/HV-O) does have kill markings barely visible on the original print, and may have been the mount of six-victory ace Capt James Carter of the 61st FS/56th FG, although his records fail to mention this aircraft specifically

This Duxford flightline shot shows the aircraft of the 82nd FS, with a kill-marked 'bubbletop' in the foreground. The 'razorback' P-47D-22 second in line is *Miss Behave* (42-26387), with the 'W' (bar) ID code denoting a duplicated letter within the squadron – note the code of the third in line 'bubbletop' (J Crow)



although the progress of the ground forces towards a crossing into German territory was frustratingly slow.

On 21 September Eighth Air Force headquarters reduced the 300 hours figure required for an individual pilot to complete a tour to 270 hours. The statisticians had reckoned up that the odds of a man surviving a tour at the old rate had dropped to one in one hundred, with the primary reason being the attrition exacted by ground strafing.

And that push into Germany was about to experience a major setback.

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1944

Having flown P-47s from Metfield until April 1944, when it moved to Raydon, in Suffolk, the 353rd FG put up its first all-Mustang mission on 2 October. One of the most dedicated of P-47 groups, the 353rd had, among its other achievements, pioneered ETO dive-bombing, with single-seat fighters.

Although the fact that the Germans had managed to bring jet and rocket fighters to operational status caused extreme anxiety amongst Eighth Air Force bomber commanders, there was little they could do until the enemy showed his hand. Meanwhile, publicity about the 'jet menace', with provisional data on the salient points of the Me 163 and Me 262, was circulated to all units. The fighter pilots could not do much more than await developments and find out the hard way if the sparkling performance figures for their new adversaries were as good as Intelligence sources claimed.

On 1 November Lt Walter R Groce of the 63rd FS/56th FG found himself in a position to answer some of the questions. Eager – as were all the pilots – to put an encounter with enemy jets into his log book, Groce and a group of Mustangs attacked an Me 262 about to hit the bombers. It had been damaged (probably by fire from the P-51D flown by Lt William Gerbe of the 352nd FG), but a full deflection shot from Groce's guns did the trick. The Me 262 ran into the burst and its right side Jumo turbojet burst into flames. Groce followed the aircraft down and saw the German pilot bail out. His gun camera film so reflected the high quality of shooting, with strikes on the jet clearly visible, that Groce was awarded a half credit, as was Mustang pilot Gerbe.

That the speed and confusion of air combat as seen through a gun camera had dramatically increased with the advent of the jets was confirmed by the fact that 20th FG P-

51s (and a total of six pilots from the three groups) had also been involved in this action. After some deliberation on the part of the assessors, it was the visible evidence on film that confirmed the names of the two pilots who finally got the credit. That film was probably run more than once for other 'Wolfpack' pilots to note the salient points of the aircraft they would be up against in the coming months. Although the jet's performance had now been seen at first hand, nobody could yet answer the vital question of 'how many do they have?' with any certainty.

By 20 November the 356th FG had all but completed its conversion to Mustangs, that day recording its first P-51 mission. A further loss to the rolls of the 78th FG on 26 November was 82nd FS 'A Flight' CO, Capt Joe Hockery. Flying his assigned P-47D-28 44-19950/MX-L, he had downed two Bf 109s and hit an Fw 190 that was subsequently credited to him as a probable over the Rheine, when he tangled with more fighters and this time lost out. One of the few P-47 aces shot down by Luftwaffe fighters, seven-kill ace Hockery saw out the rest of the war as a PoW.

DECEMBER 1944

The bleak winter of 1944-45 enabled the final German army counter offensive in the West to go ahead masked by a blanket of weather that kept the Allied tactical air forces all but anchored to the ground. When news broke of the German push, it was a case of trying desperately to put all and everything in the air in an effort to prevent further enemy gains in what came to be known as the 'Battle of the Bulge'. By this late stage the 78th FG had already received its new P-51B Mustangs at Duxford, but on 19 December a 'maximum effort' Thunderbolt mission was laid on to escort 'heavies' to Trier. Forty P-47s completed the mission without sighting the Luftwaffe, with solid overcast from 10,000 ft down to a 300-ft thick ground fog prevented a concurrent attack by the fighters on Baben Heusen aerodrome, so the group strafed the section of railway running from Siegen to Giessen instead.

Briefed to support von Runstedt's offensive, the Luftwaffe appeared (although that was not always literally true!) in considerable force, and the 78th's aircraft did later clash with enemy fighters – some 20 Fw 190s and Bf 109s. Noting that the Germans did not seem overly aggressive and ran for cloud cover, which was never very far away, the American pilots neverthe-



P-47D-28 42-28615/WZ-X was flown by Lt Robert Laho. It had a striking piece of artwork next to its name and a Spitfire-type rear view mirror – a much sought-after 'add-on' fitted to many Thunderbolts (*Bivens*)

The word 'Flak' appears to be part of the name of this 'Wolfpack' P-47D-28, which was photographed at a time when the 56th FG was about to fall back on the earlier 'bubbletop' models (and some 'razorbacks') following delivery of the new, potent but unfortunately flawed P-47M to the last Thunderbolt group in the Eighth Air Force





61st FS CO Maj Donavon Smith probably picked up on English Cockney slang to come up with the name 'Ole Cock' for his two aircraft, this one being the second P-47D-26 (42-28382) to be so named. Coded HV-S, it is seen at its Boxted dispersal with a pair of triple tube rocket launchers fitted under each wing, and a more passive streamer on the wingtip to alert people that the pitot head stuck out some distance from the wing leading edge – human heads did not want unexpected contact!

Cologne-Bonn areas, where about 20 German fighters were encountered. Maj Leslie Smith was leading the 'Wolfpack' (in P-47D-28 44-19925/LM-L) that day, and his 'Daily White Flight' dived on four Fw 190s that the P-47 pilots observed had a high cover of Bf 109s.

Having previously flown a tour with the 61st FS, during which time he had 'made ace', Les Smith had come back for a second and been given command of the 62nd. In the resulting action, he quickly despatched a Focke-Wulf, while his wingman, Lt Alfred Perry, shot down two. None of the Bf 109s came to the aid of the Focke-Wulfs, almost certainly because the 61st and 63rd FSs had positioned themselves as top cover to Smith's flight. As the 56th set course for England, any chance of a celebration in the familiar surroundings of Boxted was scorched by the weather, for the base was completely 'socked in' by fog. Consequently, some of the P-47s landed at alternative fields in England, while others turned back and put down at the first convenient base on the continent.

On 29 December the 78th operated Mustangs for the first time as 'A' and 'B' groups, with the 84th FS putting up 32 P-47s as the 'C' group. The P-51s escorted bombers while the 84th stooled around with some Ninth Air Force aircraft over Coblenz and Luxembourg, forlornly looking for the Luftwaffe. It was a similarly frustrating story the following day, with the ground controllers vectoring the P-47s around only to find friendly aircraft rather than the enemy.

The last 78th mission of 1944 saw 14 P-47s offering freelance bomber support under microwave early warning (MEW) control in return for relatively little action. However, Pat Maxwell shot down an Fw 190 for the group's 400th air combat victory of the war following a little light train strafing. He received a silver beer mug to mark the occasion.

As an interesting additional statistic of the P-47 period at Duxford, the 79th Air Service Group, which was responsible for the 78th FG's aircraft, announced that during its tour as part of the group, 227 P-47s had passed through its hands for major and minor repair and disassembly for return to depots.

JANUARY 1945

On the day that the Luftwaffe fighter force made its last big show of

strength in the West by attacking Allied airfields in Belgium and Holland, the 78th flew its last P-47 sorties from Duxford. By this time the 84th FS had just four serviceable aircraft, the remainder having been stood down or returned to depots for reissue to groups within the Ninth Air Force or the French *Armée de l'Air*.

The New Year's Day mission was to be an unusual one for the veteran P-47 unit, for the quartet of aircraft, led by Capt Wilbur Grimes, escorted the last of the Project *Aphrodite* B-17 'flying bomb' to its target. Packed with 22,000 lb of Torpex explosive, the old Fortress was well on its way to Oldenburg by the time the Thunderbolts turned for home.

The passing of the black and white checker-nosed Thunderbolts from Duxford meant that the 56th FG was now the sole operator of the Republic fighter in VIII FC. Waved under its collective nose from time to time was the spectre of the P-51, but the 'Wolfpack' personnel – particularly the groundcrews, who did not want to service liquid-cooled engines – managed to hold out, even when the future reliability of the P-47M (the first of which had arrived at Boxted on 3 January) looked doubtful.

The M-model was the fastest Thunderbolt of the entire series, and it also gave the fighter the kind of range the 'Wolfpack' had always needed. It could now fly 250 miles from England, stretching this figure (on internal fuel) for a range of 530 miles, which meant that with the insurance factor of bases on the continent available for emergency landings, the 56th could now cover any part of Germany. The trouble was that it took weeks to determine that the P-47M engines had not received the necessary protection from the elements before being shipped over, and reliability was consequently low.

In the meantime the group continued to fly a mix of 'razorback' and 'bubbletop' P-47Ds, during which time six-kill ace Maj Jim Carter took over leadership of the 61st FS – he would achieve no further victories, but would remain in command of the squadron until VE day.

Attrition among the Eighth Air Force Thunderbolt aces remained relatively high to the end, for although the *Jagdwaaffe* failed to shoot less than a handful down, flak accounted for most of the pilots languishing in PoW camps. A few were also lost in operational accidents, including seven-kill ace Capt James Poindexter of the 352nd FS/353rd FG, who was killed in a P-51 flying accident five miles from Raydon on 3 January 1945.

Flying his assigned P-47D-28 (44-19780/LM-J) over the Rheine area on 14 January – the day the P-



This P-47M-1 was assigned to Lt Col John F Keeler, and is seen parked at Boxted. This aircraft would have been flown only sporadically during the early months of 1945 due to the lengthy engine problems which kept the penultimate Thunderbolt from reaching its full potential. These problems were finally rectified just prior to VE-Day, resulting in the M-model becoming a more familiar sight over Germany

Once the 78th FG became a Mustang outfit in late 1944, only the 56th FG remained P-47-equipped within VIII FC. That was the cue to extend the individualistic camouflage to denote all three squadrons, with the P-47Ms in particular being given the treatment. The 61st FS, for example, adopted a striking dark blue-black overall finish, often with red codes (via R L Ward)





Maj George Bostwick's P-47M-1 44-21112 sported the blue rudder of the 63rd FS and typical striking camouflage finish which tended to vary from aircraft to aircraft. CO of the squadron, Bostwick was the only 'Wolfpack' ace to tangle successfully with the Me 262, using this very aircraft

ational status. A reflection of how demanding this was is the fact that Conger had flown his personal P-47M-1 44-21134/UN-P, named *Bernyce*, on an operation earlier in the month (the 14th) during which he had shot down a Bf 109 and damaged. Thereafter, he had reverted to a P-47D-30 (44-2045/UN-Y), as did other pilots of the group, pending the outcome of more engine trouble shooting on the P-47M.

Prior to taking over as CO of the 62nd FS on 26 January, Capt Felix 'Willy' Williamson also appears to have had little chance to fly the P-47M assigned to him. He scored no victories in it, and reverted instead to a P-47D-28 (44-19925/LM-L) in which he made 'ace in a day' on 14 January by downing four Bf 109s and an Fw 190D north of Burg. He was then issued with P-47D-30 44-20555/LM-I, which he also put to good effect by destroying a Bf 109 and an Fw 190 (plus a second Focke-Wulf damaged) on 3 February over Berlin. This haul of seven kills in the first two months of 1945 made Williamson the leading P-47 ace of 1945, and took his final score to 13-0-1. he remained in command of the 62nd FS until the end of the war.

FEBRUARY/MARCH 1945

Capt Cameron Hart, who had joined the 56th FG's 62nd FS at the end of June 1944, also shared in his CO's success on 3 February, accompanying Capt Williamson on a free-ranging hunt for the Luftwaffe south of Berlin. Encountering over Friedersdorf airfield south-east of the embattled capital, Hart succeeded in downing two fighters for his fifth and sixth (and last) victories. Both were scored while flying P-47D-28 44-19937/UN-B. Cameron Hart was killed less than a year later when his P-47N (44-87929) crashed at Craig Field, Alabama, on 16 January 1946.

Having lost faith with his P-47M (on 26 February all 67 M-models at Boxted were grounded for more engine checks and tests), 63rd FS CO Paul Conger used P-47D-30 44-20455 for the remainder of his time with the 56th. Following on from his single kill in January, Conger also claimed a Bf 109 (plus a second Messerschmitt damaged) and an Fw 190 in the sprawling combat enjoyed by the group south east of Berlin on 3 February. These victories raised his final score to 11.5-0-4, for Conger relinquished command of the 63rd after completing his 168th combat mission on 19 March. His successor was 62nd FS ace Capt George Bostwick.

Throughout the early months of the 1945 increasing numbers of Me 262s continued to appear to harry the bombers, and although the P-51

escort groups enjoyed the lion's share of actions with the German jets, P-47s also overcame these ostensibly superior enemy aircraft on several occasions.

If Me 262s managed to climb to altitude it would usually be Mustangs that attempted to turn the German jet pilots away from their primary target, but elsewhere over the front the 'turbos' – particularly the Arado Ar 234 – could come face to face with a half dozen or so different types of Allied tactical fighter.

The second direct encounter with the jets by VIII FC P-47s came on 14 March, and although conventional fighters continued to appear on an irregular basis during the final weeks of the war, the time when Allied flyers would encounter them in force had passed. By March it was all but certain that the jets that had posed such a potential threat six months previously had not, and would not, materialise in significant numbers.

That the engine troubles associated with the P-47M had not been cured was reflected in an yet another Eighth Air Force grounding order on 16 March. Exasperated, high command had said that enough was enough – the 'Wolfpack's' potentially excellent Thunderbolts would remain on the ground until the engines troubles were cured. Fortunately, it was a short time after this that the true cause of powerplant unreliability was traced, but the 56th had still had to endure a nine-day stand down until 24 March. On that day, the 'Wolfpack' flew two missions in a day, which was the first time that such a feat had been achieved in some months. Neither was productive in terms of aerial victories, however, and little was seen on the ground either.

On 25 March, things improved. Waiting about 30 minutes for the B-24s it was scheduled to escort, the 56th FG duly took up station. However, the P-47 pilots could not prevent six or seven Me 262s diving on the bombers from 18,000 ft and downing two of the high element. As the jets left the area, George Bostwick, flying P-47M-1 44-21112/UN-Z, led the 63rd FS in what appeared to be a vain pursuit. He quickly lost sight of the quarry, so instead elected to orbit Parchim airfield – the likely destination of the jets. Sure enough an Me 262 soon appeared, and Bostwick ordered Lt Edwin H Crosthwait to go after it, and the jet was duly shot down.

Maj Bostwick, having noted that Parchin was packed with 20 to 30 jets, now spotted four more in the circuit. He picked out one that looked as though it was about to land and bored in. As he did so, he saw that a second Me 262 had just broken ground, and so he duly pulled the nose of his P-47 through to get a shot at this one. Making a tight turn to avoid the Thunderbolt's fire, the jet dug in a wingtip and cartwheeled. Bostwick then picked up his original target, but could only damage it with several strikes. The downed Me 262 was credited as Bostwick's sixth aerial victory – the only occasion when a 56th FG ace added a jet to his score while flying a P-47. Crosthwait was also credited with an Me 262 confirmed.



Close up of Bostwick's P-47M. In this case the code letters were masked off to reveal the natural metal finish beneath, the codes then being re thinly trimmed in red. Thirteen kills marked on Maj Bostwick's aircraft (denoting air and ground kills combined) have been applied with the distinctive 'frame' made by the squadron painter. These 1945 'Wolfpack' Thunderbolts had some of the most garish markings seen on USAAF fighters during the entire war

FINAL CLASHES

Maj George Bostwick again led the 56th on an escort to Germany on 5 April, the fighters being under strict orders to stay with the bombers which, on this occasion, were 2nd Division B-24s. But when Me 262 attacked the Liberators north of Regensburg, the P-47 pilots had no choice but to react, and one Me 262 was shot down by Capt John C Fahinger, Operations Officer of the 63rd FS, for his fourth, and last, kill of the war.

Two days later, a chase which took its American and German participants from south of Bremen to north of Hamburg ended in the last victories for George Bostwick. Again flying P-47M-1 44-21112, he led 'B group' as part of the escort 'Ramrod' sent to cover no fewer than 1200 B-17s and B-24s. For a change, the Luftwaffe rose in considerable force, and the day's various combats resulted in 64 claims by the American fighters and no less than 40 by the bomber gunners. Bostwick shot down two Bf 109s and damaged an Me 262 he found north of Hamburg, thus taking his final tally to 8-0-2 and six ground victories. Aside from his solitary success against an Me 262 on 25 March (detailed in the previous chapter), all

With the war over, the 56th FG honoured 'Hub' Zemke's contribution by painting up P-47M-1 44-21175 (a Thunderbolt sub-type he never actually had the chance to fly in combat) and displaying it along with other Allied war winning aircraft in an exhibition staged in Paris near the Eiffel Tower (Crow)





A close up view of the markings which adorned 'Zemke's' P-47M in Paris. After it had performed its flag-waving job, the aircraft was unceremoniously scrapped (Crow)

his claims had been against Bf 109s.

Against a backdrop of overwhelming American airpower, with some 1300 four-engined bombers flying into enemy airspace in clear skies, the 10 April mission was a 'maximum effort' by the 'Wolfpack'. The group sent out 62 P-47s, most if not all of them being M-models, which had been given a new lease of life thanks to engine modifications. It was to be a memorable day in terms of successful strafing attacks, for numerous pilots had a field day. A variety of aircraft were shot up by the Thunderbolt squadrons, including a Ju 88/Bf

109 *Mistel* combination which fell victim to Lt Dennis Carroll, who legitimately claimed a double ground victory.

It was whilst en route home that a solitary Me 262 was credited to Lt Walter J Sharbo who, with a good height advantage, dived on the unsuspecting Me 262 and opened fire from 600 yards. The German pilot jettisoned his canopy and the aircraft fell into Muritz Lake from an altitude of about 1500 ft. This combat, which turned out to be the last time a German jet fell to an Eighth Air Force P-47, brought the total aerial kill tally for the mission (rounding up the three half shares) to 6.5.

Another strafing spree three days later netted the 'Wolfpack' no less than 95-0-81 on the ground at Eggebeck, in Denmark. It was the group's second anniversary in-theatre, and with figures like those, it was not surprising that a number of pilots made ground 'ace' in one strike. Lt Randall Murphy of the 63rd FS actually became a double ace with ten kills, whilst squadronmate Lt Vernon Smith was credited with six.



'Bud' Mahurin and Bob Johnson during a light-hearted interview for the press. The latter pilot took these duties quite seriously, and toured America making numerous speeches to help further the war effort

Plenty of USAAF 'top brass' were interested in knowing what air combat over Europe was like, and Bob Johnson was more than happy to describe his numerous engagements. Here, he demonstrates a typical manoeuvre in even more typical fighter pilot hand language to Brig-Gen Jesse Auton, 65th Fighter Wing CO, and Brig-Gen Francis Griswold, Chief of Staff, VIII FC (IWM)



The pilots reported that it was like shooting 'fish in a barre' upon returning to base, their quarry being mainly Bf 110s, Ju 88s and He 111s, although most first-line single-seater fighter were also present, and they too were duly shot up as the P-47s 'buzzed' over. By the time the carnage had finally ceased, the 'Wolfpack' had surpassed the 1000 enemy aircraft destroyed mark.

The familiar menace of flak claimed a P-47 near Huhldorf on 16 April, its pilot, Capt Edward Appel of the 62nd FS being killed – he was the last Eighth Air Force P-47 pilot to be shot down during World War 2.

For what turned out to be its last mission of the war, the 56th FG put up 39 aircraft from the 62nd and 63rd FSs as 'A group', led by Maj Williamson, with the 61st contributing 18 as 'B group', led by Maj Joseph Perry. Basically performing a 'Ramrod' for B-24s, the 'Wolfpack' actually flew a freelance fighter sweep when the Liberators were recalled due to weather. Below the overcast that would have frustrated the bombardiers, the P-47s swept enemy territory from Linz to Ingelstadt without finding any German aircraft. The order prohibiting ground strafing to

prevent any casualties among friendly troops, just about wrapped things up for the prowling Thunderbolts. There was nothing for it but to fly back to Boxted and have the magazines unloaded. For the longest serving P-47 group in the ETO, the war was over.

MAY 1945

Although the enemy had inflicted its final casualty on the 56th, the group nevertheless suffered yet another tragic loss on 1 May when Polish pilot Lt Albin Zychowski was killed on a routine training flight. Having joined the 'Wolfpack' later than the other Polish pilots who had transferred in during early 1944, the young Pole had nevertheless completed 32 combat missions with the 61st FS before his death, which was almost certainly the result of low-level 'buzzing'. He had apparently been one of four pilots practicing a formation peel off break when his Thunderbolt 'mushed' into the ground near Tiverton, in Devon.

As the end of the war approached, the mass wind-down of Eighth Air Force personnel and combat units included a number of aces who were sent home. One such pilot was Maj Jim Carter, who relinquished command of the 61st FS on 8 May after flying an impressive total of 137 combat missions with the 56th. His final score was 6-3-3, with all Carter's victims having been fighters, including two Bf 110s. The day Jim Carter left the 'Wolfpack' the war in Europe ended.

However, the Thunderbolt still had a handful of duties to perform, although these were more of a ceremonial than combat nature. When the Allies prepared a victory celebration in Paris, examples of all the leading US combat aircraft types were part of the display staged around the Eiffel Tower. To represent the 'Wolfpack', the P-47M-1 assigned to Lt Paul Dawson was painted up as 'Zemke's Wolfpack' with 'the Hub's' kills applied below the cockpit. The aircraft, which in common with some other P-47Ms had the deeper dorsal fin as fitted to the P-47N, also noted that the 56th had claimed over 1000 enemy aircraft during its time in the ETO.

The question of which group got the most victories – air and ground – remains a matter of conjecture to this day, with the ground kill scores in particular being impossible to accurately tally. The 'Wolfpack' was officially credited with 1006.5 victories, of which 677 were aerial kills. The group also produced 42 aces with five or more victories in aerial combat. To these were added three pilots who, under Eighth Air Force guidelines, were considered aces by adding ground successes to aerial victories, whilst a further trio of pilots claimed all their kills during strafing, without getting any in the air.

As far as the ranking aces of the Eighth were concerned, the P-47 had served the leading pilots well. It was the aircraft that many of them had cut their teeth on, and as the necessary re-equipment with Mustangs had been spread over some ten months, numerous pilots were able to score victories on both types of fighter.

For the record, the top 11 aces of the 56th were:

Francis Gabreski -	28*
Robert S Johnson -	27
David Schilling -	22.5



Lt Col Francis 'Gabby' Gabreski, top scoring ace of VIII FC, is seen in his full dress uniform after returning from his spell in a German PoW camp

Fred Christensen -	21.5
Walker Mahurin -	19**
Hubert Zemke -	18
Gerald Johnson -	16.5
Joe Powers -	14.5
Leroy Schreiber -	14
Felix Williamson -	13
Michael Quirk -	12

* Gabreski scored a further 6.5 kills flying F-86s in Korea

** Mahurin scored a further kill flying P-51Ds in the Pacific in January 1945, followed by 3.5 victories in F-86s in Korea

FACTS AND FIGURES

A word about numbers. Of the nine – 4th, 56th, 78th, 352nd 353rd, 355th, 356th, 359th and 361st – Eighth Air Force groups equipped with the P-47 (a tenth in the shape of the 358th FG was transferred to the Ninth Air Force after just two months of service with VIII FC), only seven produced aces who scored the baseline five or more air-to-air kills with the P-47. In total, some 64 pilots qualified for ‘ace status’ with the Thunderbolt during their time with VIII FC, these men being distributed thus: 4th FG - 4; 56th FG - 42; 78th FG - 10; 352nd FG - 1; 353rd FG - 5; 355th - 1; and 356th - 1.

No pilots with the 359th or 361st FGs had the chance to become aces in their relatively short period flying the P-47 prior to switching to the P-51. This rather arbitrary breakdown is purely at the author’s whim, but it

With the 28th kill added to P-47D-25 42-26418, Gabreski receives another handshake from his armourer, Cpl Joe DiFranza. This posed picture almost exactly duplicated another taken at the same time showing a member of the Eighth Air Force public relations office again pointing to the last victory flag. Understandably, records made news, and ‘Gabby’ received plenty of ‘press’ in the *Oil City Blizzard*, his local newspaper in his home town in Pennsylvania



does serve to separate the full Thunderbolt aces from the full Mustang aces, and the numerous pilots who scored with both the P-47 and P-51, as well as a handful who were also adding to their previous totals scored on the P-38 in the ETO. Further individuals who had already seen action in the Pacific before being posted to the ETO were also able to add Japanese 'meatballs' or rising sun flags to the iron crosses or swastikas they earned with the P-47 in Europe. Still other pilots had enjoyed success with the RAF. None of these have been counted for the purpose of this statistical breakdown.

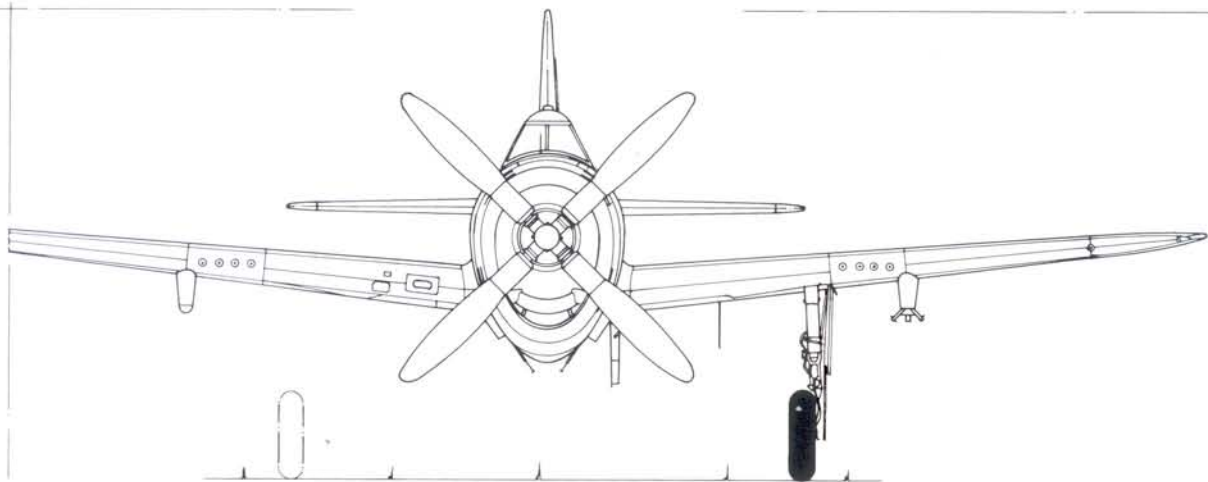
It should be stressed that the scores quoted here are taken from Dr Frank Olynyk's magnificent (and hugely time saving) publications, which originate from the final written decisions of the Air Force fighter claims credits boards. After the war some downgrading of individual scores was necessary, which is why photos of P-47s showing lines of iron crosses or swastikas do not necessarily reflect the true picture if the implication is that a given pilot had more than enough kills to make him an ace. At the time claims were awarded in good faith, and an unconfirmed extra one or two was good for morale and publicity. Nobody should find fault with that.

There were of course many Eighth Air Force pilots who were quite at liberty to count themselves as aces, even if they had never seen an enemy aircraft in the air. Under an VIII FC ruling, ground kills carried legitimate credits. But it was only human nature to regard the aerial victory as more decisive and more prestigious, despite the undeniable hazard of shooting up enemy aircraft on the ground.

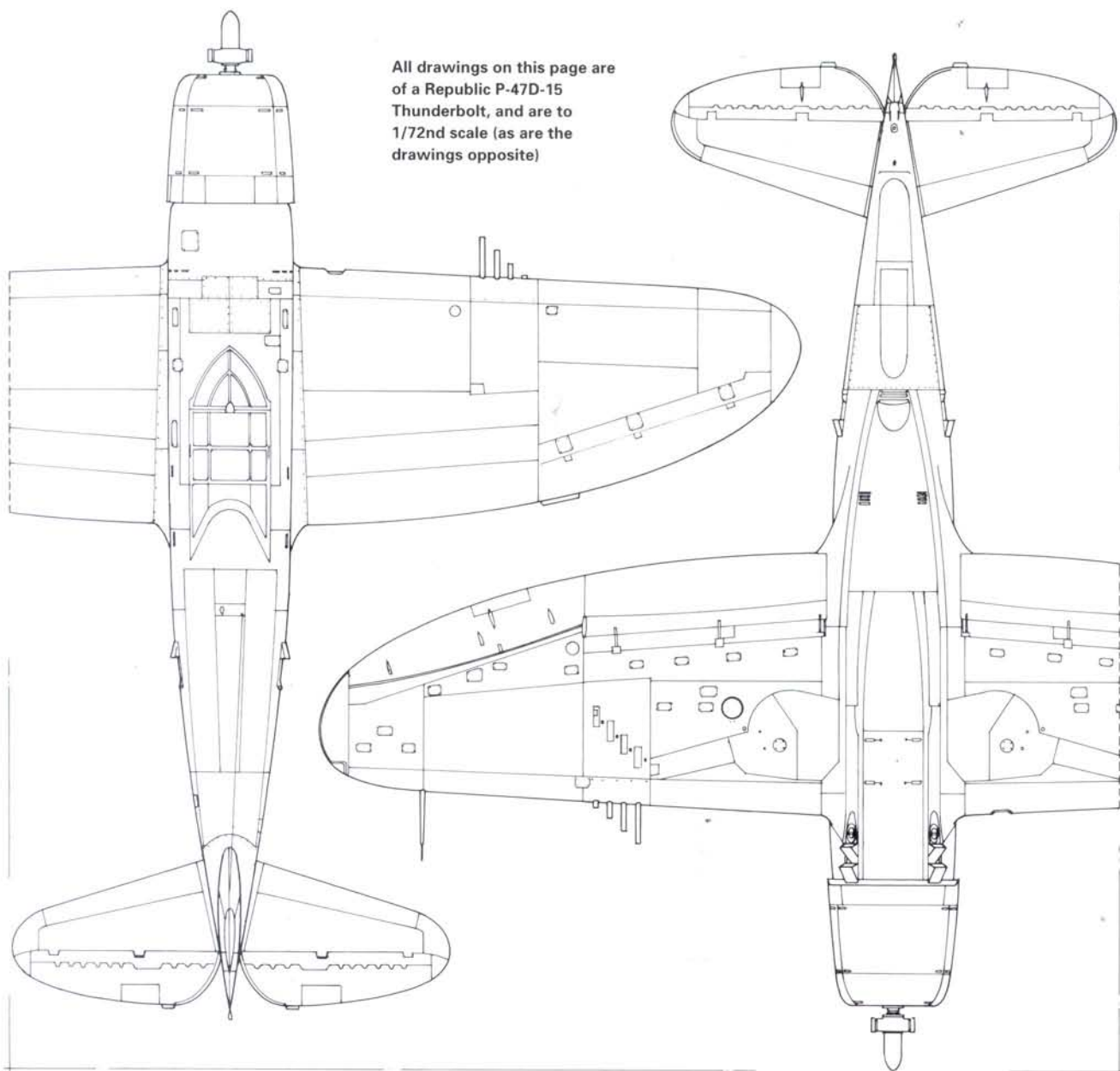
There is no really accurate breakdown of the type of aircraft destroyed on the ground by AAF fighter attacks, but it can be said with some certainty that during the last year of the war, the Luftwaffe left hundreds of unwanted bombers and transports littered around airfields. Eliminating these from the inventory was going to do little to effect the war effort, but five Me 262s shot up before they could take-off to intercept Allied bombers, or nightfighters destroyed during daylight strafing attacks so they could not harass RAF night bombers, was very valuable indeed.

Back cover

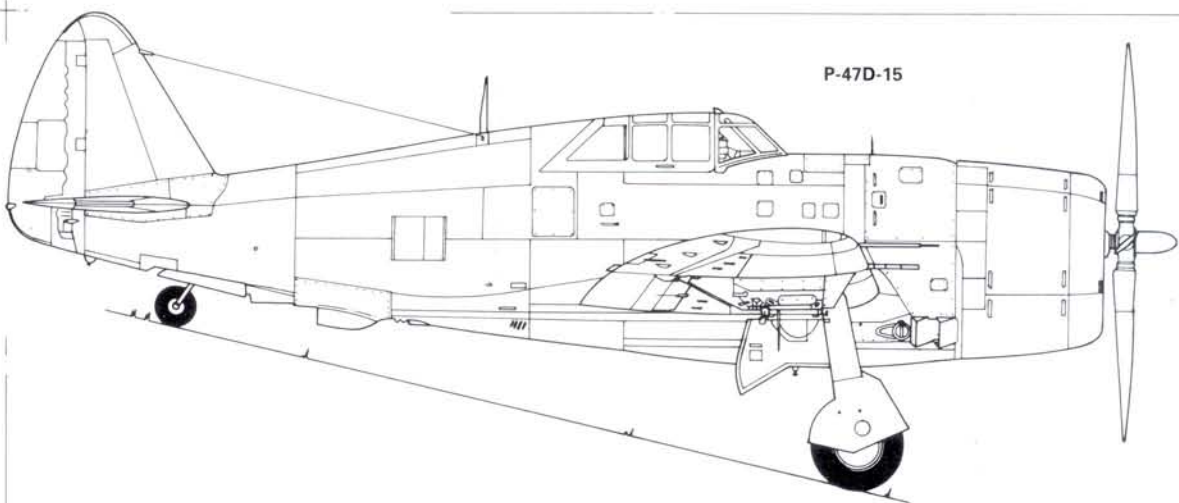
This rare colour view shows 'Gabby' Gabreski's armourers, Cpls Joe DiFranza (foreground) and John Koval, filling the left wing magazine bays of his last assigned P-47D-25 (42-26418) in which he was lost on the fateful 20 July 1944 mission. All pilots had preferences when it came to the 'mix' of ammunition to be loaded in their aircraft, and Gabreski liked a greater percentage of API (armour-piercing incendiary) rounds. (USAF)



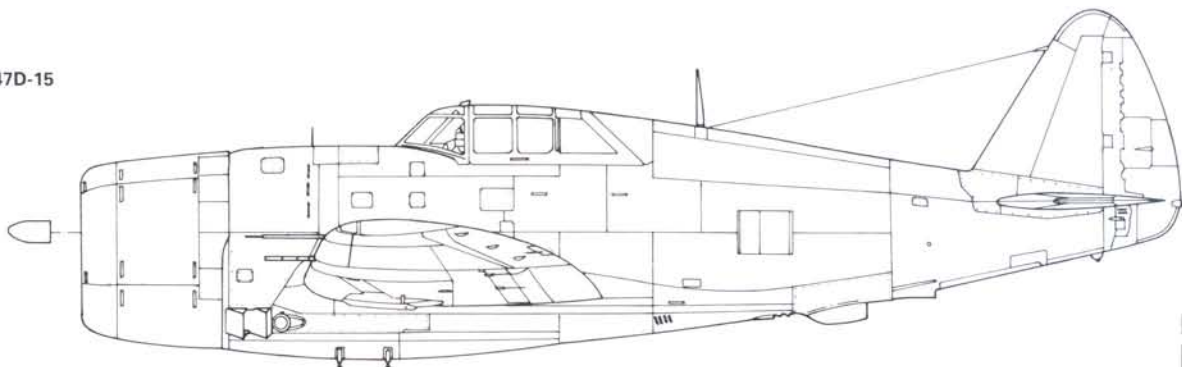
All drawings on this page are
of a Republic P-47D-15
Thunderbolt, and are to
1/72nd scale (as are the
drawings opposite)



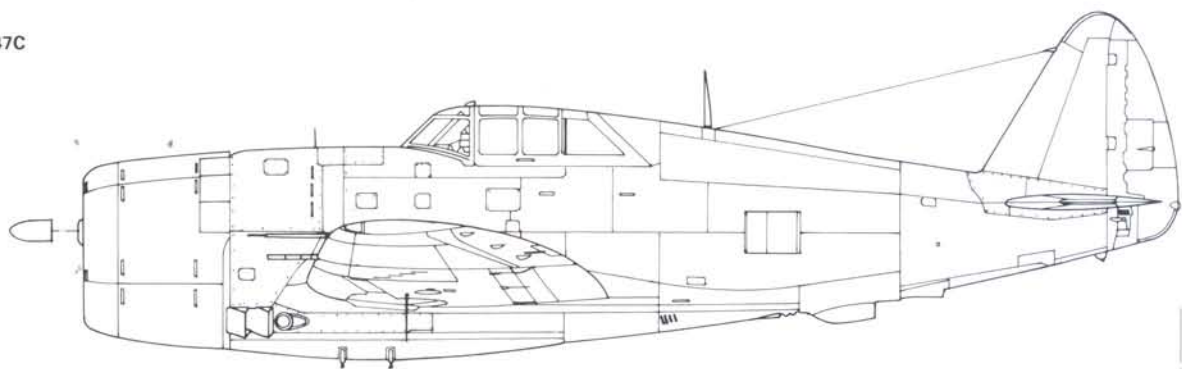
P-47D-15



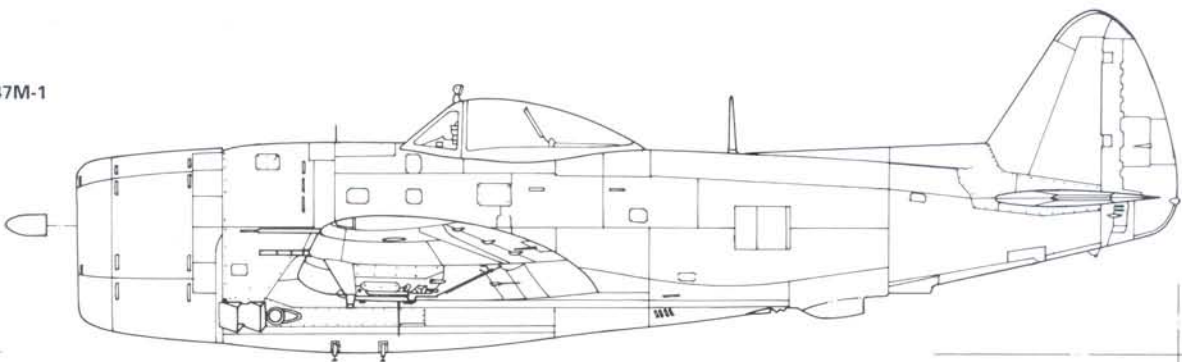
P-47D-15



P-47C



P-47M-1



COLOUR PLATES

1

P-47C-41-6584/HOLY JOE of Lt Joe Egan, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, August 1943

Seen in standard P-47 camouflage and early ETO markings, this aircraft was used by five-victory ace Lt Joe Egan to down his first kill (an Fw 190) on 19 August 1943; his remaining kills were scored in P-47D-10 42-75069/UN-E and P-47D-15 42-75855/UN-E. Some sources indicate that this aircraft survived long enough to have the red bordered national insignia applied.

2

P-47C-2 41-6211/JACKIE of Capt Robert Lamb, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, August 1943

Like Joe Egan, future seven-kill ace Capt Robert Lamb used this aircraft to claim his first victory on 19 August (again an Fw 190). He was still flying it in mid-October when he claimed an 'Me 210' damaged on the 18th. The scrap view shows the starboard side of the fighter's nose cowling, which had been adorned with a rendition of a queen of hearts playing card.

3

P-47C-5 41-6343/LITTLE COOKIE of Capt Walter Cook, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943

Capt Walter Cook scored four of his six victories in this P-47C-5, which was his assigned aircraft – it bore the name *LITTLE COOKIE* on both sides of the cowling. His remaining two kills (a pair of Fw 190s) were achieved on 11 November 1943 in P-47C-2 41-6193/LM-B, which he had been forced to use after *LITTLE COOKIE* suffered a flat tyre and subsequent propeller damage when landing on 20 October 1943. Cook completed 66 missions before returning to the USA in February 1944.

4

P-47C-5 41-6335/EL JEEPO of Capt Charles London, 83rd FS/78th FG, Duxford, June 1943

This famous aircraft is depicted in artwork based on the photograph seen on page 32, the P-47 having been used by VIII FC's premier ace, Capt Charles London, to score all five of his kills, one probable and two damaged between 14 May and 30 July 1943 – a fifth swastika was added to the tally seen here following his 'ace making' double haul on the 30th. *EL JEEPO* experienced no paint changes in the few months that London flew it.

5

P-47C-5 41-6330/"MOY TAVARISH" of Col Hubert Zemke, CO of the 56th FG, Horsham St Faith, June 1943

Flown by Col 'Hub' Zemke on many of his early missions at the head of the 56th FG, this Thunderbolt bore the legend *"MOY TAVARISH"* (*"MY COMRADE"*) from May 1943 – there is some evidence to suggest that the name was also repeated on the starboard side too, with the letters painted in a half circle. The big fighter also carried the ID letter code 'Z', which reflected the surname of the pilot, and was a privilege of rank afforded to flight, squadron and group commanders only. Zemke, who felt uneasy about commanders displaying such individualism, had the name and the 'spoked wheel' (both a play on his nickname, 'Hub', and a symbol of him being the commander of the 56th) insignia removed at an unknown date

– the personal embellishment had certainly been removed by September 1943 when, as UN-S, it was noted with red-bordered national insignia. Zemke used this aircraft to register his first trio of kills between 14 May and 19 August. It was finally written off in a crash landing with Lt Adam Wisniewski at the controls on Christmas Eve, 1944.

6

P-47C-5 41-6630/Spokane Chief of Maj Eugene Roberts, CO of the 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, August 1943

Maj Roberts was able to use this aircraft to achieve six of his nine confirmed kills, plus the solitary probable that he kicked off his tally with on 1 July 1943. The ace's opening trio of kills were then scored in P-47C-2 41-6240/WZ-E, before returning to his *Spokane Chief* for – as far as is known – the aircraft's first confirmed victory on 17 August. CO of the 84th FS for much of his frontline tour, Eugene Roberts was promoted to lieutenant-colonel in October 1943 and given the position of Deputy Group CO. By the time he was posted to a desk job in VIII FC HQ, he had flown 89 missions.

7

P-47D-6 42-74641/Feather Merchant II of Maj Jack Price, CO of the 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, November 1943

Capt Jack Price was assigned this P-47 in the spring of 1943, and he was able to gain the last two of his five victories whilst flying it. He had earlier used three different Thunderbolts to gain his first three kills – C-2s 41-6270/WZ-A and 41-6228/WZ-N, and C-5 41-6333/WZ-V. At some stage in the fall of 1943 reports suggest that the individual code letter of this aircraft changed from 'Z' to 'A', although this remains unconfirmed.

8

P-47D-15 42-76179/Little Chief of Lt Frank Klibbe, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944

Lt Frank Klibbe decorated at least two of his P-47s with a Red Indian head motif, complete with war bonnet and the wording *Little Chief*. This was the third Thunderbolt assigned to him, and he is believed to have scored four of his seven kills in it. Klibbe's missions with the 56th FG's 61st FS totalled 63.

9

P-47D-1 42-7938/"HEWLETT-WOODMERE LONG ISLAND" of Maj David Schilling, Deputy CO of the 56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943

This early-build D-model was the first of its type assigned to then Maj Dave Schilling, who was one of just four 56th FG aces to break the 20-kill mark. Not just a great fighter pilot, Schilling was also one of the best group leaders produced by VIII FC, having been a member of the 56th FG from 2 June 1941. CO of the 62nd FS until August 1943, he failed to score any kills until becoming Deputy Group CO of the 56th. Schilling was assigned this P-47 War Bond subscription aircraft after his switch the group HQ flight, although he scored his first three victories using two other Thunderbolts (C-5s 41-6343/LM-WV and 41-6347/LM-O). He enjoyed his first success with this aircraft on 8 October 1943 (an Fw 190), shortly after which Schilling was forced to crash-land in it. The P-47 was duly repaired and used by Schilling to add a further 2.5 kills to his tally up to 29 November when, for reasons unknown, he switched to another Thunderbolt.

10

P-47C-5 41-6347/ TORCHY/ "LIL" AbNER" of Capt Eugene O'Neill, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, November 1943

Capt Gene O'Neill used this P-47C-5 to score his first 3.5 victories in November/December 1943 – the fraction was a Bf 110 he jointly shot down on 26 November 1943. The aircraft also carried a third name – *Jessie O* – on the starboard side adjacent to the cockpit. Having joined the 62nd FS in 23 December 1941 (it was still designated a pursuit squadron then), O'Neill used P-47 D-10 42-75125/LM-E- to score his final kill on 6 February 1944. Although listed as an ace in numerous publications, both USAF Historical Study 85 and VIII FC Final Assessment credit him with 4.5 kills, having failed to find any record of that elusive fifth victory that would have made him an ace.

11

P-47C-2 41-6258 of Lt Glen Schiltz, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943

One of a number of Thunderbolts used by Lt Glenn Schiltz to record his final tally of 8-0-3, this was the P-47 in which its pilot 'made ace' on 11 December 1943 by downing an 'Me 210' (his only kill in the aircraft) near Emden.

12

P-47D-1 42-7877/ "JACKSON COUNTY. MICHIGAN. FIGHTER" / IN THE MOOD of Capt Gerald Johnson, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943

A captain by the time he used this particular Thunderbolt to score 5.5 aerial victories, Gerald W Johnson was one of the 'Wolfpack's' most outstanding pilots. The machine shown in profile was photographed in colour (in three-quarter front view), although just one poor snapshot exists to show the War Bond inscription. It was assigned to and flown by Gerry Johnson for his first confirmed victory on 26 June 1943 (an Fw 190), and he continued to use it until the end of 1943, although his final kill with the aircraft was scored on 14 October (another Fw 190). All Johnson's P-47s were 'razorbacks', and he achieved kills in at least five different aircraft.

13

P-47D-11 42-75242 of Capt Michael Quirk, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, February 1944

Mike Quirk had used two P-47C-2s (41-6215/LM-K and 41-6295/LM-K) and a D-2 (42-22481/LM-S) to score his first three kills before being assigned this P-47D-11. He went on to score 6.5-1-1 in this aircraft, the last of which was claimed on 25 February 1944 (an Fw 190). The Thunderbolt's overpainted tail band indicates a transition to coloured tactical markings, which this aircraft duly received while Quirk was still its regular pilot. He rose in rank to major on 17 September 1944, but by that time he had already been a PoW for a week after being downed by flak over Seligenstadt airfield on the 10th of the month. Quirk's final tally was 11-1-1.

14

P-47D-1 42-7890 BOISE BEE of Lt Duane Beeson, 334th FS/4th FG, Debden, January 1944

This aircraft was responsible for the destruction of no fewer than 11 enemy fighters whilst flown by Lt (later Capt) Duane 'Bee' Beeson, who finished the war as one of the highest scoring VIII pilots, with 17.333 kills by April 1944. The 334th FS

pilot transitioned onto the P-51 in late February 1944, taking a tally of 12 kills scored on P-47s with him – Beeson was easily the ranking Thunderbolt ace within the 4th FG, and also the leading ETO ace when lost to flak on 5 April 1944.

15

P-47D-5 42-8473 Sweet LOUISE/ Mrs Josephine/ Hedy of Capt Virgil Meroney, 487th FS/352nd FG, Bodney, March 1944

Virgil Meroney was the first, and only, pilot to 'make ace' while the Bodney group flew the P-47, his score being an impressive nine kills and one damaged over a period of some three-and-a-half months between 1 December 1943 and 16 March 1944 – all of these victories were scored in this P-47. The above quoted names were, in order, Meroney's wife, Crewchief Giesting's wife and Sgt Gillenwater's wife. The last name appeared on the starboard cowling, while *Mrs Josephine* was painted on a slant in approximately the same place as *Sweet LOUISE*. Yet another ace downed by flak, Meroney was lost whilst flying one of his first sorties in a P-51B on 8 April 1944.

16

P-47D-10 42-75068 of Lt Raymond Wetmore, 370th FS/359th FG, East Wretham, April 1944

Although Lt Ray Wetmore of the 359th FG fell just short of being a full P-47 ace with a total score of 4.25, his aircraft is included here to represent the group. The highest scoring Thunderbolt pilot in the group, his closest rival was Lt Robert Booth of the 369th FS, who got four kills. Two of Wetmore's haul (Fw 190s) were scored on 16 March 1944 in this aircraft, and he used two other P-47s (D-5 42-8663/CR-G and C-2 41-6282/CS-O) to claim his remaining successes. The eight-kill tally marked on the fighter is something of a mystery, as even by counting all Wetmore's reported contacts with enemy aircraft (six in all P-47s flown) as confirmed kills, this still does not match up with the symbols shown. The explanation must surely be that another pilot enjoyed success while flying this P-47.

17

P-47C-5 41-6325/ 'Lucky Little Devil' of Lt John Vogt, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943

John Vogt was one of a number of VIII FC pilots who downed enemy aircraft while flying the same type of aircraft with more than one group – in his case the 56th and 356th FGs. The P-47C-5 depicted was his first assigned aircraft in the 56th, and he used it to score his first three victories, before moving on to P-47D-10 42-75109/UN-W. He also flew a P-47D-20 and finally a D-25 'bubbletop' after transferring to the 360th FS/356th FG, with whom he scored his last three kills for a final tally of 8-0-1.

18

P-47D-5 42-8487/ "SPIRIT OF ATLANTIC CITY, N.J." of Capt Walker Mahurin, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944

Capt 'Bud' Mahurin shot down a total of 19.75 aircraft, ranging from Fw 190s to a Ju 88, during his lengthy career with the 56th. This War Bond presentation aircraft (the second assigned to Mahurin) was used for all but three of these victories – the first two (Fw 190s) were achieved in C-2 41-6259/UN-V on 17 August, and he claimed a Bf 109 (and a second damaged) in D-11 42-75278/UN-B on 29 November. Unusual in that it retained

its full squadron code letters (the inscription tended to replace the two letters on other subscriber-purchased P-47s), this machine is not known to have had any other form of personal marking on the starboard side. Mahurin was eventually shot down in this machine on 27 March 1944 by the rear gunner of Do 217 that he helped destroy south of Chartres.

19

P-47D-5 42-8413/“MA” FRAN 3RD of Capt Norman Olson, 357th FS/355th FG, Steeple Morden

Once again a sole group representative as an ‘all-P-47’ ace, Capt Norman Olson scored 6-0-2 during the 355th FG’s brief seven-month association with the Republic fighter in the ETO. Although not definitely confirmed, it is presumed that this particular D-5 was the only P-47 assigned to the ace, although he also used a D-2 and a D-6 to achieve his full score. Having transitioned to the P-51B in late March, Olson was killed on 8 April 1944 when his Mustang was shot down by flak near Cella Hofer.

20

P-47D-5 42-8634/Dove of Peace IV of Lt Col Glenn Duncan, CO of the 353rd FG, Metfield, December 1943

Maj (later Lt Col/Col) Glenn Duncan had an outstanding career with the 353rd FG, and he flew at least four P-47s to score a total of 19.5 victories. The D-5 depicted here was apparently named *Dove of Peace IV*, although the exact location of the name (on the starboard side) has been impossible to trace. The fact that this aircraft was number four assumes that there were three others, although they were not necessarily P-47s. Duncan had served briefly with the 361st FG before transferring to the 353rd on 14 March 1943, which suggests that the other ‘Doves’ may have been aircraft flown in the USA prior to his move overseas.

21

P-47D-1 42-7883/IRON ASS of Maj Jack Oberhansly, CO of the 82nd FS/78th FG, Duxford, December 1943

The second P-47 assigned to Jack Oberhansly, this aircraft bears the modified form of his personal insignia. Previously, Oberhansly had flown C-5 41-6542/MX-W, which carried the same name on the port side, but in a square. The aircraft depicted was used by Oberhansly to score two kills and a probable on 27 September and 30 November 1943, the pilot then using P-47D-11 42-75406/MX-Z to achieve his next four successes. Oberhansly’s sixth, and last, kill came in ‘bubbletop’ D-28 44-19566/MX-X on 28 August 1944.

22

P-47D-6 42-74753/OKIE of Lt Quince Brown, 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, March 1944

Quince Brown’s final tally of 12.333 kills were obtained in just under a year of combat operations between 27 September 1943 and 1 September 1944. This aircraft is his originally-assigned Thunderbolt, which he used to score 7.333 of his kills, including his first six successes – Brown also destroyed enemy aircraft in three other Thunderbolts; D-6 42-74723/WZ-X, D-5 42-8574/WZ-D and D-25 42-26567/WZ-V. *OKIE* (the nickname perpetuated Brown’s Oklahoma background) reverted to another pilot with the ID code ‘V’ following Brown’s assignment of natural-metal ‘razorback’ D-5 42-8574/WZ-D.

23

P-47D-6 42-74750/Lady Jane of Lt John Truluck, 63rd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944

John ‘Lucky’ Truluck scored his first kill in his assigned P-47D-1 42-7853/UN-R before using the aircraft depicted here to score his second and third victories. He then enjoyed success with D-5 42-8488/UN-A on 26 November (an Fw 190 destroyed and a Bf 110 damaged) before reverting back to *Lady Jane* to ‘make ace’ on 24 February 1944 with an Fw 190 kill. Truluck claimed his sixth kill in D-10 42-75206/UN-G, although he went back to *Lady Jane* again to score his seventh, and final, victory (an Fw 190), plus a damaged (a Bf 109), on 15 March 1944.

24

P-47D-11 42-75435/Hollywood High Hatter of Lt Paul Conger, 61st FS/56th, Halesworth, December 1943

This grandly-named Thunderbolt was the first aircraft assigned to Paul Conger, who was almost certainly responsible for the three kills marked under the cockpit. He was subsequently assigned War Bond subscription P-47D-1 42-7880/HV-N “*REDONDO BEACH, CALIFORNIA*” and finally P-47M-1 44-21134/UN-P. Like many other aces, Conger used at least three P-47s not assigned to him to reach his final tally of 11.5 kills.

25

P-47D-10 42-75163 of Lt Joe Powers, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, December 1943

Although Lt Joe Powers was assigned this particular aircraft in the autumn of 1943, he failed to score any kills in it until 11 December – by which time he had already claimed two victories (both Bf 109s) in C-2 41-6267/HV-V and C-5 41-6337/HV-S. His first victories in the D-10, which he named *Powers Girl*, came on 11 December when he destroyed a Bf 109 and a Bf 110, and damaged a second *Zerstörer*. Powers subsequently flew a number of missions mostly in other P-47s (including 41-6267 again), although he scored kills in *Powers Girl* in January, February and March 1944. A captain by the time his tour ended in May 1944, Joe Powers’ final tally was 14.5-0-5.

26

P-47D-5 42-8461/“Lucky” of Lt Robert Johnson, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, February 1944

Robert S Johnson’s third assigned aircraft, “*Lucky*” was used to score his third, fourth, fifth and sixth victories before being lost in the North Sea on 22 March 1944 with Dale Stream at the controls. Johnson had previously flown two C-model Thunderbolts christened *Half Pint* and *All Hell*, and had shot down his first two kills in the latter aircraft, C-5 41-6235/HV-P. Some weeks prior to “*Lucky*’s” watery demise, Johnson had discarded the aircraft in favour of P-47D-15 42-76234/HV-P, which he logically christened “*Double Lucky*”. This aircraft duly lived up to its nickname, as the ace is assumed to have scored all his remaining kills (bar his last two) in it, although the serial number(s) of the aircraft used for this string of victories (coded HV-P) has not been 100 per cent confirmed. Finally, now Capt Johnson flew P-47D-21 42-25512/LM-Q *Penrod & Sam* to achieve his final two kills – numbers 26 and 27.

27

P-47C-2 41-6271/Rat Racer of Lt Frank McCauley, 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, October 1943

One of the 56th FG's early aces, 'Mac' McCauley was assigned this P-47C-2, which he named 'Rat Racer' – the words appear under the portrait of Mighty Mouse, just above the wing root. An ace who managed to score all his kills in one P-47, McCauley's aircraft shows six victory symbols, although one was later disallowed. After completing 46 missions, he left the 'Wolfpack' on 20 November 1943 and served out the war as an instructor with the 495th Fighter Training Group.

28

P-47D-10 42-75207/Rozzie Geth/ "BOCHE BUSTER" of Lt Fred Christensen, 62nd FS/56th FG, Halesworth, March 1944

Although this aircraft was the first P-47 assigned to Fred Christensen, the 62nd FS's future ranking ace actually scored his first of 21.5 kills in C-2 41-6193/LM-B. However, his next 10.5 victories were all downed in this D-10, which he continued to use until the late spring of 1944. Christensen flew a further two 'razorbacks' during his 107-mission tour.

29

P-47D-5 42-8476/LITTLE DEMON of Capt Walter Beckham, 351st FS/353rd FG, Metfield, December 1943

Walt Beckham had *LITTLE DEMON* assigned to him at the beginning of his ETO tour, and it is assumed that he scored the majority of his total of 18 victories in it. He is not known to have been assigned any other Thunderbolt while serving with the 353rd FG, although when he was shot down by flak on 22 February 1944, he was flying D-11 42-75226.

30

P-47D-11 42-75510 of Lt Col Francis Gabreski, CO of the 61st FS/56th FG, Halesworth, January 1944

'Gabby' Gabreski used this remarkably plain D-11 to steadily build up his score during the first half of 1944, the aircraft being his third assigned Republic fighter since his arrival in the ETO in early 1943. Bearing 18 kill markings beneath its cockpit following its pilots successful double Bf 109 haul on 27 March, this P-47 was just one of several successfully flown by Gabreski during the spring of 1944.

31

P-47D-10 42-75214/POLLY of Lt David Thwaites, 361st FS/356th FG, Martlesham Heath, March 1944

David Thwaites was the only pilot in the 356th FG to score all his kills on the P-47 while serving with that one group. Naming both his assigned Thunderbolts (the second being P-47D-20 42-76457/QI-L) *POLLY*, Thwaites is known to have used at least three P-47s to achieve his haul of 6-0-3. Following the completion of his tour in September 1944, he returned to the USA and became an instructor.

32

P-47M-1 44-21112 of Maj George Bostwick, CO of the 63rd FS/56th FG, Boxted, April 1945

George Bostwick spread his scoring from 7 June 1944 to 7 April 1945, ending the war with eight kills. Both his P-47M-1 and an earlier P-47D-22 (42-26289/LM-Z) assigned to him whilst still with the 62nd FS were referred to as 'Ugly Duckling', although the name was not painted on either aircraft. Bostwick was the only Thunderbolt ace to shoot down an

Me 262 – he got his jet on 25 March 1945 in M-1 44-21160/UN-F. He also damaged a second Me 262 in UN-Z on 7 April.

33

P-47D-22 42-26299 of Capt Cameron Hart, 63rd FS/56th FG, Boxted, December 1944

Typical of the rather beaten-up 'razorback' Thunderbolts that some elements of the 'Wolfpack' were still flying in late 1944, Cameron Hart's aircraft shows signs of wear and tear. Although four kills adorn this fighter, its assigned pilot only scored his first victory, a probable and a damaged (all Bf 109s on 5 September 1944) in this aircraft. The personal insignia has been attributed to a similar device carried by a Panzer unit – whatever its origins, Hart liked it, and carried it over to his P-47D-28 44-19937/UN-B in which he scored four of his six kills.

34

P-47D-25 42-26641 of Col David Schilling, CO of the 56th FG, Boxted, December 1944

One of Dave Schilling's seven assigned P-47s, this fighter revealed an early 'Wolfpack' penchant for painting *Dogpatch* cartoon characters on its Thunderbolts by featuring a neat rendering of 'Hairless Joe' on its cowling – although the name of the Al Capp character was not applied. Schilling's penultimate aircraft (he was actually issued with P-47M-1 44-21125/HV-S first, but engine problems saw it ground), this D-25 was in fact used by the colonel for his 'five in a day' haul (see cover caption) on 23 December 1944, raising his final tally to 22.5-0-6.

35

P-47D-21 42-25698/Okie of Maj Quince Brown, 84th FS/78th FG, Duxford, September 1944

As mentioned in profile 22, Maj Brown flew another *Okie* after his original P-47D-6 had been passed on in April 1944. Pilots did not always opt to fly newer aircraft, but given the choice most did. Brown failed to score any victories in this P-47.

36

P-47M-1 44-21108 of Capt Witold Lanowski, 61st FS/56th FG, Boxted, November 1944

Witold Lanowski was one of the Polish team that joined the 'Wolfpack' in 1944, and his tally of four kills made him the second most successful pilot of this small group behind 'Mike' Gladych. The nose emblem sums up the Poles' feeling towards the enemy – a factor that while living up to the aggressive spirit of the fighter pilot, tended to colour judgement in combat. The 61st FS had most of its P-47Ms camouflaged in variations of this unconventional scheme by May 1945.

37

P-47D-22 42-26044/Silver Lady of Maj Leslie Smith, 61st FS/56th FG, Boxted, May 1944

Les Smith was assigned to fly a P-47 named *Silver Lady*, although it is possible this name may have also applied to earlier P-47D 42-14671. In the event, this particular aircraft was also used by a number of aces, including 'Mike' Gladych and 'Gabby' Gabreski. Smith, himself, scored seven kills, but those painted under the cockpit were not all attributable to him.

38

P-47D-21 42-25512/Penrod and Sam of Capt Robert

Johnson, 62nd FS/56th FG, Boxted, April 1944

Robert S Johnson's last P-47 was named for his groundcrew as a tribute to their outstanding work. Bob Johnson used up to four P-47s, one of which was lost whilst being flown by another pilot. This aircraft wore the ace's final score, which bettered that of World War 1 ace Eddie Rickenbacker by a single kill – at which point VIII FC chiefs said enough was enough, and Johnson returned home in triumph.

39**P-47D-25 42-26628/Rozzie Geth III/Miss Fire of Capt Frederick Christensen, 62nd FS/56th FG, Boxted, July 1944**

Fred Christensen accounted for kills 14 and 15 on 27 June (Bf 109) and 5 July 1944 (Fw 190) respectively in this aircraft, although his momentous haul of six Ju 52s in a single sortie was achieved on 7 July in D-21 42-25522/LM-H

40**P-47D-25 42-26413/"OREGONS BRITANNIA"/HAPPY WARRIOR of Col Hubert Zemke, CO of the 56th FG, Boxted, June 1944**

The last Thunderbolt assigned to 'Hub' Zemke before he left the 56th to take command of the 479th FG, "OREGONS BRITANNIA" is one of the last known War Bond subscription aircraft to have reached the ETO. It was used by Zemke to score six kills prior to his departure, after which it was flown by Harold Comstock and other pilots to help make up the shortfall of serviceable airframes following the grounding of all P-47Ms.

41**P-47M-1 44-21117/Teddy of Maj Michael Jackson, 62nd FS/56th FG, Boxted, January 1945**

Mike Jackson's P-47M probably shared much the same fate as other examples of the penultimate P-47 – parked on the grass at Boxted with engine cowling off and groundcrews setting about its troublesome engine. Jackson rounded out his total of eight confirmed aerial victories with a Bf 109 and an Fw 190D on 14 January 1945 flying P-47D-28 44-19780/LM-J. The extra kills marked on *Teddy's* scoreboard denote Jackson 5.5 ground victories, hence their application in white.

42**P-47D-26 42-28382/"OLE COCK III" of Capt Donavon Smith, 61st FS/56th FG, June 1944**

Donavon Smith's last assigned Thunderbolt was his third of the tour. He made his final combat claim on 22 February 1944 against an Fw 190, bringing his final total to 5.5. Smith ended his duty as CO of the 61st FS on 10 January 1945, which probably meant that his aircraft was taken over by one or more other pilots to fly the remaining 'Wolfpack' sorties of the war.

FIGURE PLATES**1**

Lt Col Dave Schilling, Deputy CO of the 56th FG at Halesworth in March 1944, is seen wearing olive drab (OD) shirt and pants, topped off with an officer's overseas cap – note the black and gold officer braid on the cap. He has a silk scarf around his neck (synonymous with fighter pilots the world over, who wore them to reduce neck chafing whilst constant-

ly craning their heads to look out of the cockpit for in search of the enemy). Schilling wears Russet brown low-quarter shoes on his feet, whilst his Mae West is RAF 1941 pattern, with distinctive securing tie-tapes. Finally, the zip-closed pouch attached the right harness strap of his B-8 parachute (with AN-6510 seat pack) contains first-aid dressings.

2

Col 'Hub' Zemke, CO of the 56th FG at Halesworth in December 1943, wears a M-1926 officer's issue short wool overcoat over his dark OD shirt and pants. His shoes are again Russet brown low-quarter style, whilst his gloves are B-10 Russet leather. On his head, Zemke wears his prized service hat with all important soft crown ('50 mission crush' style), created by the removal of the interior stiffeners – typical AAF practice, done so as to enable a headset to worn over the hat

3

Lt Robert Johnson of the 61st FS/56th FG at Halesworth in October 1943 has an RAF 'C' type flying helmet on his head, fitted with standard US R-14 receivers. The latter were not a perfect fit in the rubber mounts of the British helmets, which meant that they were invariably taped into place, as can be seen here. B-7 goggles complete his headwear. Johnson's Mae West is a B-3 type, worn over a favourite A-2 leather jacket. His trousers are OD 'mustard' shade, whilst his shoes are GI service issue. Finally, Johnson's gloves are the officer-issue chamois-leather type.

4

Maj Gerry Johnson of the 360th FS/356th FG at Martlesham Heath in January 1944. Like his namesake in the previous artwork, he is wearing an RAF 'C' type helmet with B-7 goggles. Note the British style 'bell-shaped' jack plug in his hand, which the Americans had adapted to allow the helmet's receivers to work with their own system. The attached oxygen mask is a Type A-14. His remaining attire is identical to Bob Johnson's with the exception of his Russet brown low-quarter shoes

5

Capt 'Gabby' Gabreski, CO of the 61st FS/56th FG at Horsham St Faith in June 1943, is wearing light olive drab (shade 54) shirt, pants and 'overseas' cap, which was a combination widely chosen by ETO pilots as their woollen material made them warmer in a cold cockpit than cotton khakis. Over his A-2 jacket he has on an RAF 1941 pattern Mae West, whilst his flying boots are 1936 pattern from the same source.

6

Lt Col Eugene Roberts, Deputy CO of the 78th FG at Duxford in October 1943, has on officer's dark olive drab (shade 51) shirt and overseas cap, whilst his trousers are shade 54 'pinks'. Note the khaki tie tucked into his shirt as per regulations, and the silver pilot's wings pinned to his shirt above the left breast pocket. These are three inches in size, although there was a smaller two-inch size made specifically for wearing on shirts. On Roberts' left collar point is the gold/silver winged-prop device of the AAF, whilst his insignia of rank – a silver oak leaf – is pinned to the front left side of his garrison ('overseas') cap. Finally, his shoes are commercial pattern, rather than regulation Oxford-style lace-ups.



Amongst the first American-built fighters to be operated by the USAAF in Europe, the 56th FG joined the Eighth Air Force in Britain to undertake the escort role for the latter's growing B-17 bomber force in late 1942. Initial encounters with German fighters were not encouraging, as the P-47 was easily outmanoeuvred at low to medium altitudes, and its engine performance was rather lacklustre – the 'Jug's' short range was also criticised. However, the arrival of the first P-47Cs in mid-1943, with external tanks, addressed the problem of the aircraft's



short combat radius. As combat tactics evolved, pilots learnt how best to fly the Thunderbolt in order to counter the more nimble Luftwaffe fighters, and aces of the calibre of 'Hub' Zemke and 'Gabby' Gabreski began accruing scores. Built to absorb damage, and rock steady as a gun platform, the Thunderbolt was

soon able to more than hold its own. The arrival of the definitive P-47D in late 1943 was followed shortly after by the 'bubble top' Thunderbolt, which then became the favoured mount thanks to its superior rearward visibility.



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