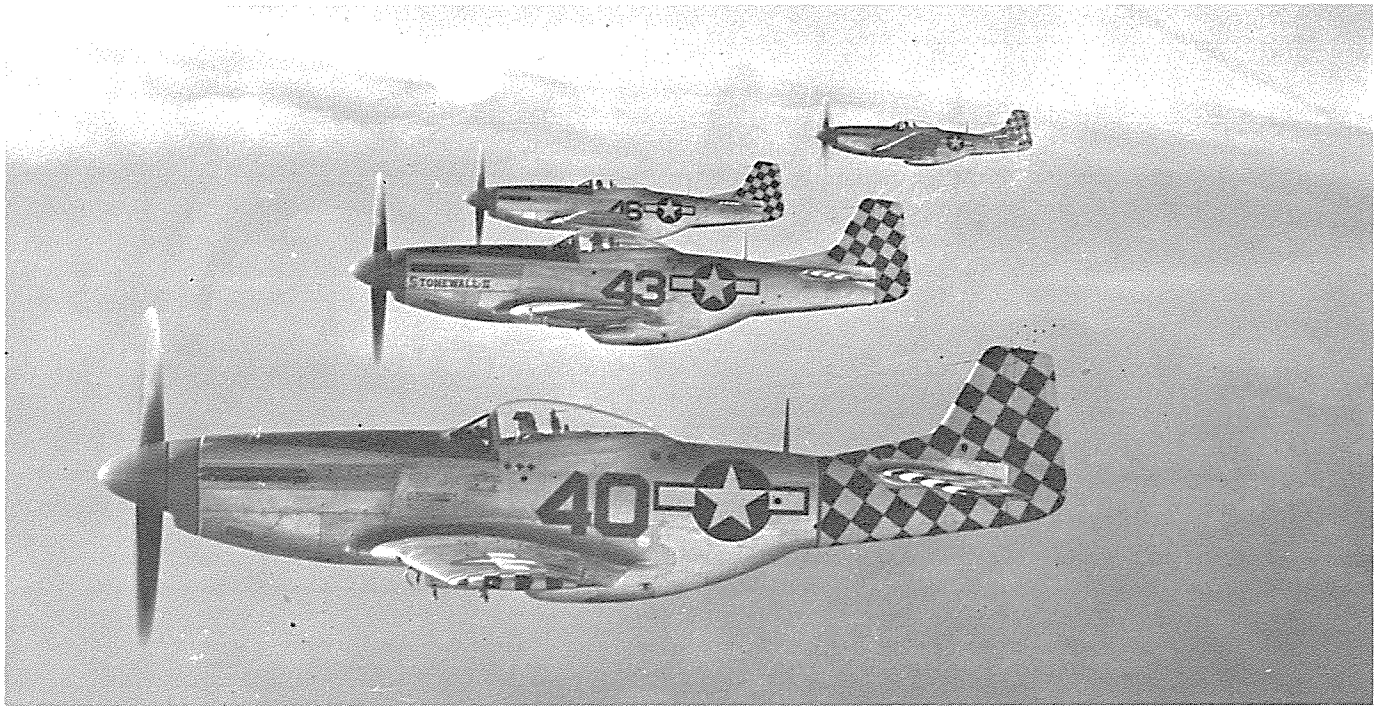




Checkertails

History of the 325th Fighter Group Part 2 May 1944 - May 1945

By WILLIAM N. HESS

On the morning of 27 May 1944, the air over Lesina Air Field, Italy, took on a new sound. The deep-throated roar of the Republic P-47 Thunderbolts gave way to the high soprano voices of the Packard Merlin-powered North American P-51B and C Mustangs. This was the third and final type of aircraft that would carry the checkertail colors of the 325th Fighter Group on to victory in World War II. In spite of bad weather the majority of the aircraft of the Group picked up the bomber stream of B-24s and escorted them to the St. Charles and La Blanchard Marshalling Yards in France. Although the mission was uneventful, it marked the beginning of another bright chapter in the annals of the Checkertails.

Two more uneventful missions escorting the Big Friends to Turin, Italy and Wollersdorf Airdrome in Austria followed before the big event of the first shuttle mission to Russia took place. It had been known that something most secret and spectacular was about to take place and speculation had been running high. The mystery was solved on the morning of 2 June when the Group was briefed to escort four veteran groups of B-17s attacking the marshalling yards at Debrecen, Hungary. When the target had been bombed, shortly after 0900, all aircraft concerned continued on to Russian bases with the Mustangs of the 325th landing at Piryatin. The first phase of operation FRANTIC JOE had been successfully completed, and the rail lines at Debrecen had been cut with a large amount of rolling stock being destroyed or damaged.

Bad Russian weather prevented further air activity

until 6 June, and the pilots and ground crews took advantage of the lull to meet and socialize to an extent with the Russians on the base. Vodka flowed and many toasts were drunk as the men of the Allied Nations sang their favorite songs for each other and exchanged souvenirs and mementos of goodwill.

Then, on the day Allied armies invaded Normandy from England, 104 B-17s and 42 P-51s invaded Rumania from Russia. The target, an airfield at Galatz, was bombed with moderately good results and no bomber losses. Sixteen enemy aircraft were encountered and six of them were shot down by 325th Mustangs, Captain Roy B. Hogg, C.O. of the 318th Fighter Squadron became an ace that day as he downed numbers 5 and 6, both being FW 190s. Lt Col. Chester L. Sluder, Group C.O., scored an FW 190, while Lt Cullen J. Hoffman shot down a Ju 88, and Lts Robert Barkey and Wayne Lowry chalked up victories over Messerschmitt 109s. This marked victory number five for Barkey and was the initial victory for Lowry who was to become one of the leading aces of the 325th. However, the taste of victory was bittered by the loss of two pilots; Lts Mumford and McDonald failed to return from the mission.

The weather turned bad again after the 6th, and Lt General Ira C. Eaker, who had led the task force, gave up the idea of bombing the Heinkel aircraft works at Riga, Latvia and at Mielec, Poland and ordered his five groups back to Italy. On the morning of 11 June, the aircraft departed their Russian bases and the B-17s attacked the Focsani Airdrome in Rumania on their return

trip to Italy. Heavy flak was encountered and enemy aircraft flew very aggressive attacks on the bombers who would have undoubtedly suffered heavy losses but for the excellent work of the escorting Mustangs of the 325th. One bomber was lost, but the Checkertails extracted a toll of three of the interceptors. Lts Ferdinand E. Seule, Richard S. Deakins and Benjamin H. Emmert were credited with the destruction of a 109 each.

Two days after their return from Russia the Group took to the skies from Lesina to provide route cover for B-24s attacking the Bayerische Motor Works at Munich, Germany. An unfortunate mid-air collision just after takeoff, that took the life of Lt Kitter, marred an otherwise excellent mission. The escorting Mustangs encountered some 23 enemy fighters in the target area, and over Udine the veteran ace and C.O. of the 317th Fighter Squadron, Major Herschel Green, downed a Macchi 202 fighter while Lts Paul P. Tatman and Wayne Lowry each destroyed Messerschmitt 109s.

The morning of 15 June saw the Group dispatched to strafe airfields in southern France. On arrival, it was found that the targets had been previously attacked, so they went to work on targets of opportunity. A Junkers Ju 87 was destroyed on the ground while a number of other aircraft were damaged. Locomotives, rolling stock and even a coal mine felt the fury of the guns of the Mustangs and when four 109s were encountered, one fell victim to "Blond Squaw" flown by Lt Hiawatha Mohawk. The Checkertails paid dearly for their successes, however, as seven P-51s failed to return from the mission. Major Woods and Lts Reed, Rosar, Rausch, Ring, Stark and Lott were all posted as missing in action.

Undaunted, the men of the 325th took to the air the following morning to escort B-24s attacking the Nova Oil Refinery at Schwechat, Austria. Just north of Lake Balaton, 11 enemy fighters were met, and four fell before the guns of Lts Richard S. Deakins, Paul K. Jensen, Wayne Lowry and John W. Reynolds. All P-51s returned safely to base.

The campaign against Axis oil continued on 23 June when the Group flew cover for bombers attacking the refineries at Ploesti, Rumania. In addition to intense, accurate flak, the enemy put up a sizeable force of fighters in a vain attempt to thwart the bombing of his primary source of petroleum. The 325th tangled with over 35 of these fighters and in a spirited fight downed four of them, only to lose three of their own. Lts Edward L. Mueller, Peter C. Osterhus and David C. Hanson were all seen to bail out in the target area. Major Herschel Green scored over a 109 to claim his 15th victory and Lts J. H. Simmons, P. J. Kastner and C.O. Dean were each credited with the destruction of Focke Wulf FW 190s.

The next day it was back to Ploesti, this time rid-

ing herd on B-24s bombing the Romano-Americano Oil Refinery. Once more the defenders rose to give battle and again they paid as five of their number were shot down. Two of the aircraft destroyed were IAR-80s, a Rumanian-built fighter flown by native pilots defending their homeland. The IAR-80s were credited to Lts C. O. Dean and H. C. Wolfe, while Lt R. C. Deakins got an FW 190 and Lt Wayne Lowry achieved acedom when he downed numbers 5 and 6, an Me 109 and an FW 190. Lt J. W. Harper, who was last seen in vicious combat with six 109s, failed to return from the mission.

Also on 24 June, 10 Mustangs were sent to provide top cover for an Air Sea Rescue PBY Catalina searching for a pilot down at sea in the vicinity of Pescara, Italy. The P-51s stayed with the PBY for over three hours and lost one of their number to light flak in a vain attempt to find the missing airman. Lt H. F. Welch was shot down on the mission.

An uneventful mission on the 26th of June marked an historic event. Mustangs of the Group flew to Hungary to escort B-17s of the England-based 8th Air Force down to Italy on the second leg of their shuttle mission to Russia. This time no fighters rose from the Debrecen area to oppose the visiting Big Friends.

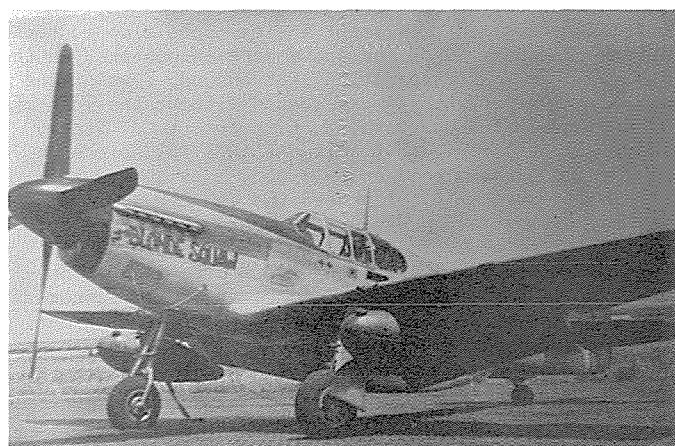
The 325th was involved in a big air battle in the Bucharest, Rumania area on 28 June when they took part in an early morning fighter sweep. Nearly 50 of the enemy were encountered and a tremendous victory was scored in that 17 enemy planes were destroyed without the loss of a single P-51. High individual scorer for the day was F/O Robert H. Brown with three 109s to his credit. Lts L. J. Stacey and A. C. Fiedler scored doubles over 109s and Lts William Pomerantz, W. A. Murphy, P. J. Kastner and John Simmons were credited with single 109s. Rumanian IAR-80s fell to Lts Paul K. Jensen, George L. Sweeney and F/O Philip Sangermano, while Lts Wayne Lowry and Barrie Davis each destroyed an FW 190.

Lt. Barrie Davis, who scored his first victory flying his P-51 named "Honey Bee", was a native of North Carolina and loved flying so much he elected to train some of the new replacements coming into the Group during the Summer of 1944. One of the more interesting facets of this instruction involved the use of an old P-40.

To quote Davis, "We also had a P-40 which we had picked up after we'd been riding P-51s a while. We'd rat race a spell, pick fights with the P-38s and then decide on a personal dogfight as a climax to the course. The new tiger would be given a P-51 and I or someone else would head into the blue with the old P-40. Anyone who knew the talents and shortcomings of the two planes could take the Mustang and make mincemeat of the P-40, but the lieutenants fresh from the States almost always found themselves trimmed and totally embarrassed when the war-weary P-40 proved their master. I'm certain



Capt. Robert Barkey in the cockpit of his P-51B Mustang, "Dorothy II" of the 318th Fighter Squadron. (R. Barkey)



"The Blonde Squaw" was the name chosen for his Mustang by Lt Hiawatha Mohawk, 319th Squadron. (Stan Wilson)

some of them lived to complete their tour of duty as a direct result of having some of their cockiness knocked out of them as a result of this training."

His proficiency in combat was also enhanced by this extra curricular activity as can be witnessed by Davis' description of his personal encounters on the 2nd of July during a mission to provide penetration, target and withdrawal support for B-24s. Target for the bombers was the Reskos Locomotive Depot at Budapest, but the Luftwaffe had other ideas about this and rose to give combat.

As Davis recalls the event, "I'll never forget the day as I remained behind to escort some cripples home ... We were jumped, but somehow only a single 190 remained to press the attack. I latched in behind him finally, and unable to shake me, he rolled over and headed straight for the deck. We started the dive at about 25,000 feet and with everything bent past the firewall we were indicating well past 550 mph passing through 20,000 feet. My guns were spraying the sky but not a damned thing was happening to the 109. Finally, at about 15,000 feet, bits of his plane began to come off. First a bit of wing tip, then what looked like cowl, then other parts. They streaked past my fuselage scaring the devil out of me in the process. I couldn't lay a gun on the guy though I was shooting from sheer fright now. Finally, it must have been below 10,000 feet, the German jettisoned his canopy, struggled upwards, pushed outward twice and finally bailed out. His chute ripped to pieces as he sailed past me. I felt right sick about it--so I guess nobody gets hardened to death.

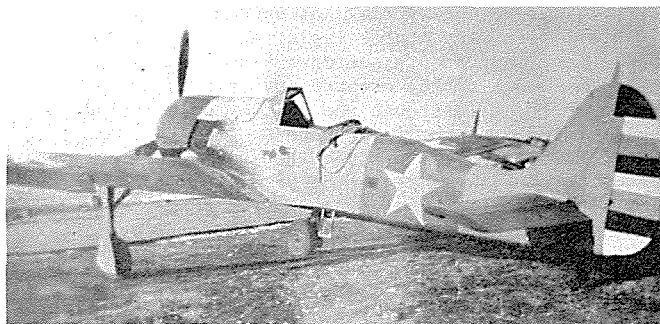
"I blacked out when I hauled back on the stick to pull out of the dive. When I came to my plane was flying upward through 18,000 feet and still climbing. Up ahead I saw a burst of flak and then I began to wonder what 20 mm flak was doing at 20,000 feet. I broke, right or left I don't remember, but sitting behind me popping out cannon shells was another 109! I finally tacked onto his tail, and this time my shooting was a bit improved. I knocked out his oil coolers and set him afire. The oil dumped all over my plane and wrapped up the windshield and wings and I flew blind all the way back to Lesina. The crew chief was most upset at all the oil on the P-51 because he thought old 'Mayfair 24' was throwing oil out the prop like so many others had come to do. He was doubly relieved to learn it was German oil that had uglier the craft. The most memorable part of the mission? Landing on that perforated steel mat without being able to see any way except out the sides of the canopy."

Davis' two 109s were the only victories credited to the Checkertails on 2 July. Two pilots were lost due to a mid-air collision, Lts C. O. Dean and James A. Murphy, but Lt Dean was seen to bail out.

On 3 July it was back to Rumania as the Group escorted B-24s attacking oil storage tanks at Giurgiu. The Luftwaffe remained consistent in its opposition to such attacks and some 50 of the enemy were encountered on the mission. In the sharp action that ensued, five of the attacking Axis fighters were downed without the loss of a Mustang. Lts Bruce Cobb, S. E. Myers, L. J. Stacey and R. S. Bass all were credited with a 109 apiece, while Lt Jack Houghton downed an FW 190.

The Checkertails celebrated the 4th of July with an uneventful mission to Pitesti, Rumania, but continued their winning ways two days later when they provided escort protection for B-17s bombing the Verona Marshaling Yards in Italy. A mixed force of eight fighters tried to intercept and Lt Jack Houghton destroyed one 109. Lt Kenneth K. Ostrum was last seen in a diving attack on the enemy aircraft and was reported as missing.

The Group traveled north after oil targets on 7 July when they covered B-17s of the Fifth Wing attacking the Blechhammer Oil Refinery in Germany. Thirteen 109s put in an appearance and two of them fell to Lts Bruce Cobb and Jack H. Bond. For some unexplained reason, the Mustang flown by Lt Frank C. Soltesz was observed to blow



The Focke Wulf FW 190 operated by the Checkertails and flown by such pilots as Capt. Wayne Lowry. Tail stripes were red, white and blue, and the cowl and rear fuselage band were red.
(Photo - Stan Wilson)

up in mid-air.

On 8 July the 325th was assigned the task of escorting B-17s to Zwolfasing Airdrome in Austria where the Luftwaffe was found to be waiting. Eleven 109s came up to do battle, and one of them was destroyed and another probably destroyed by Lt Wayne Lowry.

During this period Lowry was not only shooting down the enemy's aircraft, but he was also getting in a bit of flying time in one of the Focke Wulf 190s that had been captured and put back into flying condition. His final episode in the craft is described by Barrie Davis.

"As I recall the event, Wayne was selected from numerous volunteers to fly the 190 in from another field. The Focke Wulf had electrically operated landing gear with no indicator as to whether the wheels were up or down. When Wayne buzzed the field, he hit the switch, pitched up and around, and came on in with a perfectly lovely approach, especially considering he was flying a strange airplane. The only thing wrong--his wheels were still up. The guys in the tower made like the 4th of July with all sorts of flares, but Wayne thought it was just a special type of welcome for him and his novel flying machine, so he came in for a smoothly performed belly landing. The FW 190 sat sadly until another engine could be located before it could be flown again. He was one of the finest pilots I have ever known and this was the sole mishap that I can recall Wayne encountering."

A fighter sweep to the Bucharest-Ploesti area on 9 July brought a dozen 109s up to intercept the bomber formation and in a brief scrap, Major Herschel Green racked up No. 16 on his personal scoreboard by downing one of the Messerschmitts. Missions to Nimes, France and the Casarsa Bridge in Italy on the following days were uneventful, but Major Green scored his seventeenth victory over a Messerschmitt 109 on the 14th while flying cover for B-24s bombing the Porto Marghera oil storage installations in Italy. Some 32 enemy aircraft were sighted but only two encountered, and Green shot down one while the other was damaged.

Another sweep was undertaken by the Checkertails on the 18th, this time to the Vienna, Austria area. The opposition made itself felt in the form of some 30-plus Messerschmitt 110s. The P-51s tangled with 15 or 20 of them resulting in the destruction of four of the twin-engined fighters. Lt Robert M. M. Black accounted for two, while Lt Col. Ernest H. Beverly and Lt Bruce C. Cobb scored singles. In a weird encounter three 110s went down without a shot being fired at them. The incident occurred when three Mustang pilots, Lts Stanley L. de Gear, Horace H. Self Jr. and Edwin R. Williams, streaked down on a formation of three 110s approaching the bomber stream.

"Each of us had a Jerry lined up in our sights," Williams related. "The Messerschmitt in the center spotted us coming in on his tail and in a sudden bit of evasive action, he flipped over and went straight down

between the other two. His wingtips struck those planes and all three crashed together. The air was filled with a mass of engines, wings and tails."

The next meeting with the Luftwaffe came during a withdrawal cover mission from Munich, Germany on 19 July. Five 109s were sighted 20 miles southeast of the city and in the ensuing battle three of their number were shot down by Lts J. R. Oxner, S. E. Myers and D. J. Schmerbeck. All Mustangs returned to base safely.

The German Air Force failed to put in an appearance for the next few days so the Checkertails went on a strafing mission to Yugoslavia on the 23rd. They scored many hits on buildings and motor transport at Prizren and Dakovica, and a concentrated attack was flown on the telephone exchange at the former city. Lt Austin F. Watkins failed to return from the mission.

Only two Messerschmitt 109s came up to oppose the Group on an escort mission to Chanoines Airdrome in France, but Lt Wayne Lowry further increased his score by downing one of them as the other fled. The star of another future ace started to rise on the follow day, 25 July, when Lt Harry A. Parker of Milford, New Hampshire, downed two 109s out of an attacking force of seven during the bombing of the Hermann Goering Tank Works at Linz, Austria. Two others fell before the guns of Lts Harold C. Wolfe and Henry C. Greve as they drove the interceptors away from the Fortresses.

The 26th of July brought a memorable encounter with the Luftwaffe in which the 317th Fighter Squadron played a key role. This mission is best described by Wayne Lowry as it happened to him.

"Twelve pilots of the 317th took off that morning on what was supposed to be another routine mission. For the past week or two we had encountered scattered opposition. There was some strain on the Squadron at the time due to a temporary pilot shortage. I can recall that as Operations Officer I was required to put at least 12 P-51s up daily. As I had only 13 pilots that meant that every 12th mission one of us could be relieved. Fortunately, I had some real hunters and had little trouble with people aborting a mission. The other two flights were led by Lt Fiedler and Lt Barrie Davis.

"While enroute to the target area of Zwolfasing, Austria, and just prior to rendezvous with the B-24s, I received a distress call from a group of B-17s who were right in our flight path. I took eight planes with me, including Lt Fiedler's four, and went down to investigate the situation. I could see they were in plenty of trouble as one after another was bursting into flames. I was searching desperately to catch a glimpse of the enemy fighters when I heard Lt Fiedler's 'I see them', loud and clear, and depressed the mike button to instruct him to break and I'd follow, but he was already gone and I followed with my flight of four. It was our custom to allow the first pilot, provided he had combat experience, to make the break when he spotted enemy planes. When I did catch sight of them a second later I was appalled by their number. Captain Dunkin and I later estimated we had faced at least 80 enemy aircraft; both FW 190s and Messerschmitt 109s. I immediately went on the air to inform the rest of the Group of the serious nature of the situation and then, following Lt Fiedler's flight, stormed right through the middle of the attacking horde. Our attack momentarily broke up their formations and diverted their attention. My other flight of four was rushing to join the fight, as well as elements of the other two squadrons of our group.

"Ahead of me I could see that Lt Fiedler's flight had achieved tremendous popularity with the Luftwaffe and I was doing equally as well. I had my hands full protecting Lt Fiedler's flight and as I knew there were plenty more behind us I could only wonder what was going to happen to our Tailend Charlie, Lt Henry Greve.

"In the initial assault, I observed hits on at least three FW 190s from my own guns. The original tightly-packed enemy formation was now scattered and with the arrival of our reinforcements, individual dogfights were

breaking out all over.

"I was involved in one of them; following an FW 190 to the deck, I found myself locked in a tight-turning circle at the bottom of a steep canyon. Our wing tips were just barely clearing the ground and it was certainly a fight to the finish for one of us. There was no way out, for the one attempting to leave would be slaughtered by the other. I was handicapped by the fact that I had expended most of my ammo. In addition, my gun barrels were burned out from continuous firing to the extent that all lands and grooves were missing. They would lob bullets out the ends of the barrels for only a short distance with any degree of accuracy. By turning inside him from the rear from no more than 50 feet, I fired again aiming at a point over the canopy, a tracer fell into the vicinity of the cockpit and the 190 flipped over, crashing into the ground in a sheet of flame at a point not more than 30 feet below me.

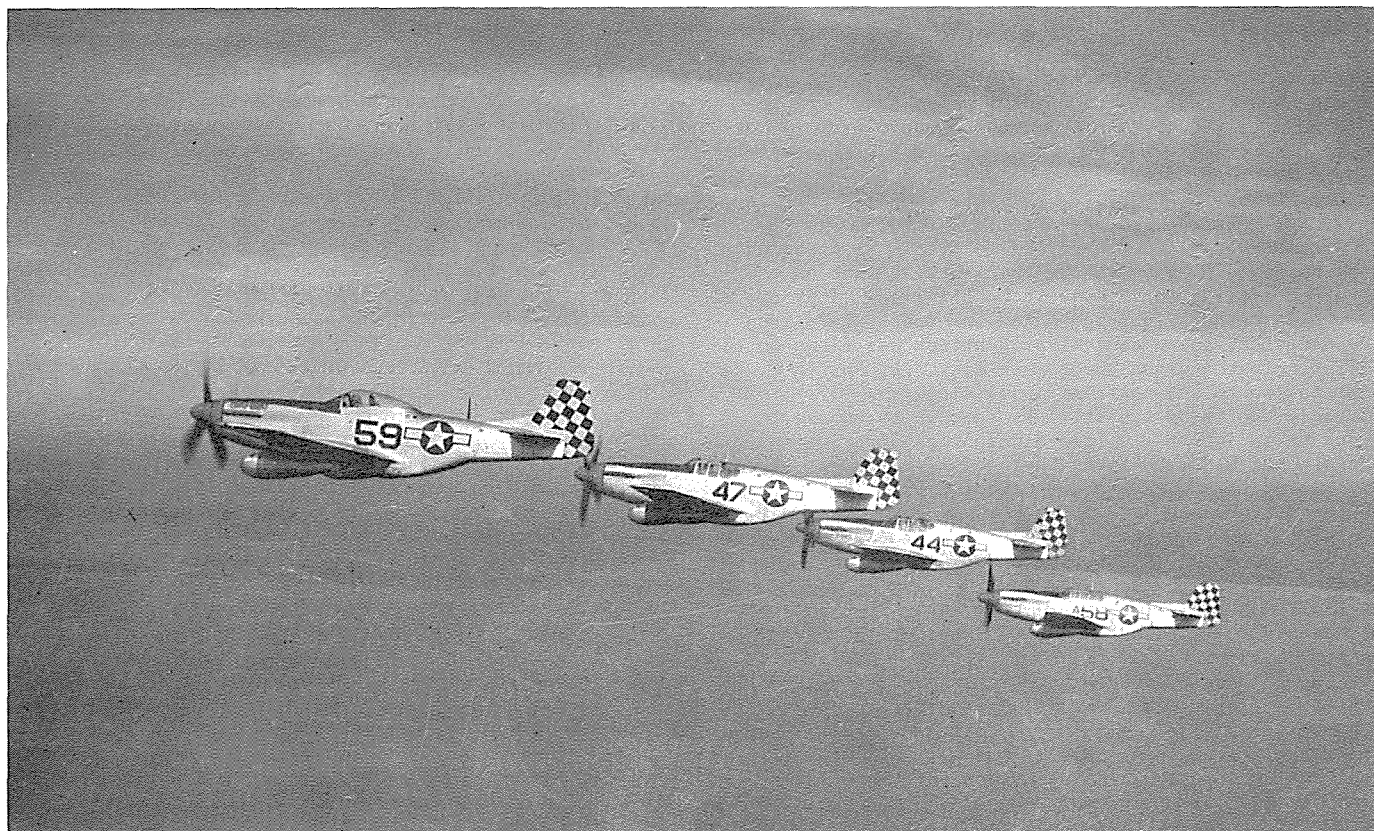
"Joining up with two of my original flight and Lt Fiedler who fell into Lt Greve's spot, we headed for home. I then spotted a 109 trying to escape up a canyon and immediately gave chase. After overhauling him, I remembered that I had no guns, so I took a station well above him and waited for the rest of my flight to catch up and make the kill. This they did with dispatch. Lt Fiedler was credited with the victory."

Meanwhile, Lt Greve, whom Lowry had mentally written off on the first pass, had managed to survive and had in fact scored hits on four or five enemy aircraft and so effectively handled his assignment that not a single plane of his flight had been damaged. Eleven of the B-17 formation of 36 had been lost in the few minutes before the fighters arrived and Greve's great rear guard action for the Mustangs undoubtedly saved more of them. Unfortunately, before he could break off the combat, Greve was hit by 20 mm cannon fire which shattered his leg and rendered him unconscious. He regained consciousness to find his plane in a spin, but somehow he managed to bail out over open country in southern Bavaria. On the ground, he tried to make his way on one leg but was persuaded to rest at the side of the road by a farmer and his wife who fed him and looked after his wounds. Unable to travel, he was captured and hospitalized. Some six months later he and Wayne Lowry were to meet again in a prisoner of war camp in northern Germany.

Lt Arthur C. Fiedler destroyed an FW 190 in addition to the 109 mentioned in the description by Lowry, and Capt. Richard W. Dunkin, who also rushed to the rescue, scored a double with a 109 and a 190 to his credit. Others who chalked up victories on 26 July were Major J. E. Perry, C.O. of the 319th Squadron with an FW 190; Lts John F. Kinney, Jack H. Bond, W. R. Minton and E. T. Strauss with FW 190s; and Lts Paul P. Tatman, V. A. Woodman and Capt. Sheldon W. Farnham with 109s.

Action for the Group during the balance of July continued to be fast and furious. While furnishing target cover in the Budapest area on the 27th, five enemy aircraft fell to their Mustangs. Lts Jack Houghton and Sam E. Brown destroyed FW 190s while Lts John P. Conant, Harry A. Parker and Robert H. Brown downed 109s. The next day some 20 Messerschmitt 109s and 10 Focke Wulf FW 190s were observed circling at 10,000 feet in the Ploesti area waiting for the bombers to come off the target. The P-51s dove to the attack and Lts Harry A. Parker, Benjamin Emmert and Paul K. Jessen destroyed 109s while Lt Gerald B. Edwards got an FW 190. There was one loss when Lt John Roper radioed that his engine was rough, his oil pressure zero and he was bailing out. On 30 July a light gray 109 was destroyed by Lt Wayne Lowry in the vicinity of Gyor, Hungary.

The last day of the month bore witness to a very strange but most successful day of combat for the pilots of the 325th. On an escort mission to protect B-24s bombing Bucharest Mogosaia oil stores, forty 109s and five FW 190s were observed in formation at 26,000 feet. When attacked they went into a huge Lufberry circle which they maintained as they gradually lost altitude, all the



It was not long after the 325th Fighter Group reequipped with Mustangs that they began receiving P-51D models. Here one is seen in flight along with three P-51B or C models, all carrying short checkertail markings. (Stan Wilson)

way to the deck. The Mustang pilots dove to the attack, pulled back up and repeated the tactic until the enemy formation finally broke up in utter confusion. Eighteen enemy aircraft were destroyed, one probably destroyed and 12 damaged in this manner. High man for the day was Lt Harry A. Parker with four 109s to his credit. Close behind were Lts Philip Sangermano and Benjamin Emmert with three 109s apiece. Lts John W. Reynolds and William Pomerantz got doubles on the Messerschmitts and Lts Henry E. Southern, Verner A. Woodman and F/O Wesley B. Terry each destroyed single 109s.

Spirited aerial activity continued into the month of August, when, on the 3rd, the Checkertails escorted B-24s attacking the Manzell Aircraft Factory at Friedrichshafen, Germany. The first encounter of the day came when three 109s were caught circling and waiting for an opportunity to get at the bombers. One of them was destroyed. The second encounter took place when 14 Me 109s and 20 FW 190s came up from the clouds to make an attack on a B-24 group whose formation was extremely poor. This unit paid dearly for its malfeasance as five of the Liberators were shot down before the P-51s could come to the rescue. In pursuing one of the Focke Wulfs, Capt. Jack H. Bond of Durant, Oklahoma showed his dogged determination by staying on his opponent's tail even after his canopy had blown off and struck him on the head. Though momentarily stunned, he continued to press his attack and shot the 190 down. Others scoring on the mission were Lt Col. J. V. Toner, Jr., with two FW 190s; Lt Col. Ernest H. Beverly and Lts E. T. Strauss and H.R. Loftus with 190s and Lts J. M. Simmons Jr. and Harry A. Parker with 109s.

Bombers attacking the oil refineries at Blechhammer, Germany, were hit by thirteen 109s and a Heinkel He 111 just as they were leaving the target on 7 August, and as they started making their attacks the P-51s of the 325th Fighter Group intercepted them. The enemy aircraft split-S'd and dove for the deck but lost four of their number before they could get away. Lts Wayne Lowry,

Barrie Davis, Harold C. Wolfe, Paul P. Tatman and Capt. Richard W. Dunkin accounted for the Messerschmitt 109s. Lt John M. Simmons took care of the He 111.

After having played such a large part in the destruction of German war industry in Central Europe, the 325th now turned its attention toward the west for the impending invasion of southern France. For several days missions were flown against heavy gun positions on the French coast. Checkertail P-51s flew to Tarquinia Airdrome in Italy on 14 August to be closer to the invasion area, and the Group's missions of D-Day, 15 August, are related by Barrie Davis.

"Our Group flew more than seven and a half hours that day. Two missions but not a whole lot of action. When we returned from the second trip so much dust had been raised at one end of the runway that it was almost fatally dangerous to land. A couple of our guys were enveloped in dust, when a third pilot plowed into the dust cloud before we could bring him to a stop. He stopped all right, but not before his four bladed prop had chewed the tail of the P-51 ahead of him right up to the pilot's seat. I was still in the cockpit of my plane and couldn't see what was taking place because of the dust, but the clatter was terrific and chewed chunks of Mustang rained down for a hundred yards or so. The only things hurt were the airplanes, although the two pilots almost came to blows--one because the guy in front was supposed to clear the runway and the other because the pilot behind had ruined his pretty airplane! The maintenance people took the front end of one and the rear end of the other and later came up with a perfectly flyable and combat-worthy machine. I don't know yet what serial number they used on the hybrid."

After another uneventful mission to Southern France on 16 August, the Checkertails returned to their base at Lesina to resume their escort activities. By this time Lesina had truly become home to the Checkertails. Over the months they had made numerous improvements on the camp and could boast of its comfortable officers' and

enlisted men's clubs and a cheerful mess hall. Men were permitted to build individual houses and shacks that would quarter as many as two to eight men and even the tents boasted of wooden floors and sides. Rest camps at Rome and Naples were arranged and three to five day passes for the enlisted men all did a lot to make life more bearable.

Escort activities were resumed and for three straight days, the 17th, 18th and 19th, the Group took bombers to the Ploesti, Rumania area. On none of these occasions were they able to encounter the enemy in the air. There was a tragic event on 18 August when Lt L. J. Leppard was forced to ditch his Mustang on the return trip. He was seen to stall and hit the water with the plane sinking immediately. Air Sea Rescue arrived within 15 minutes after receiving the "Mayday" call, but the pilot was found dead in his dinghy.

In view of the fact that the Luftwaffe had become so reluctant to come up to do battle, it was decided that the Group would go down on the deck after them. The morning of 21 August found the P-51s of the 325th escorting bombers to the Hajdu Boszormeny Airdrome in Hungary where there were many aircraft on the ground. While the bombers rained down their loads of destruction, the Mustangs orbited hungrily just waiting to go down and clean up what they missed. After the Big Friends departed, the P-51s dove to the attack and made seven strafing runs in rapid succession, covering the entire airdrome. When they were through, 37 aircraft had been destroyed, 13 probably destroyed and 17 damaged. Only one plane could be caught airborne, a 109 which was immediately destroyed by Lt Robert H. Brown.

Withdrawal support for straggling bombers coming home from the Odertal Oil Refinery in Germany, on 22 August 1944, added four more enemy aircraft to the score-board of the Checkertails. Two 109s were observed attacking a B-17 at 1320 hours from astern and below and just as the P-51s approached, one of the 109s was downed by the bomber and the other split-S'd for the deck. At about the same time six FW 190s were sighted dealing much misery to another straggling Big Friend, but this time the Mustangs were able to close in and Lt Barrie Davis destroyed one of them. Half an hour later another Fortress was sighted with six 109s working it over. One flight of P-51s ended all of this and three of the 109s fell to the guns of Lts W. R. Hinton, E. E. Ritter and Barrie Davis. Lt James P. Lintz failed to return from the mission when he lost oil pressure and had to bail out over enemy territory.

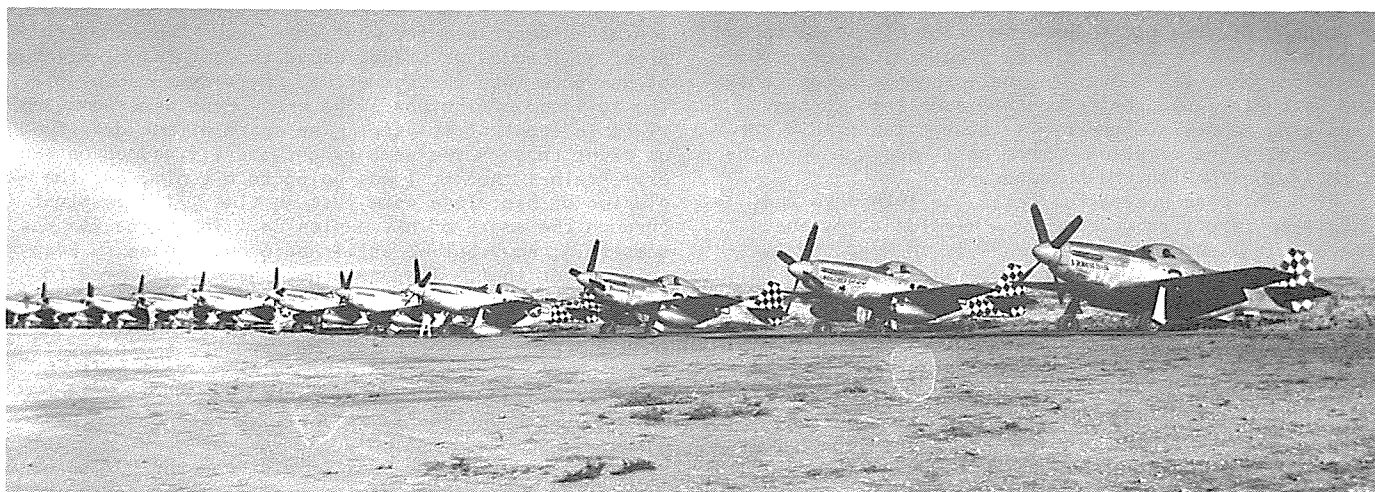
The Mustangs of the 325th Fighter Group had one of their best day on 23 August when they destroyed 15 German fighters for the loss of one P-51 and its pilot, Lt Donald D. Hawkins. They were providing close escort

for B-24s attacking Markersdorf Airdrome in Austria when some 45 fighters of a mixed force of Messerschmitt 109s and FW 190s were encountered. The air battle saw Lts J. M. Simmons and Philip Sangermano both destroy two 190s, while singles of this type were shot down by Majors H. H. Green and J. E. Perry, Capt. S. W. Farnham, Lts Jack Bond, Harry A. Parker, W. Pomerantz and L. Schachner and F/Os F. G. Johnson and W. D. Terry. Lts W. A. Woodman and R. Bass were credited with 109s.

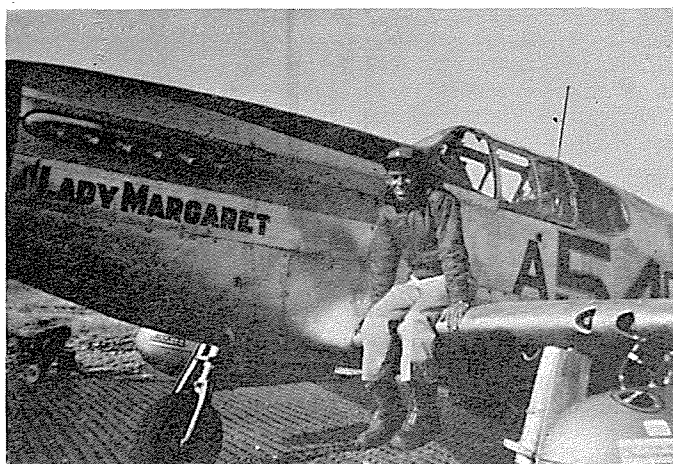
Oil continued to be the high priority target as the 325th escorted bombers to the Pardubice Oil Refinery in Czechoslovakia on 24 August. Initially a lone 109 flew an attack on the bombers and was destroyed. The next encounter came when the P-51s had to rush headlong to the rescue of a bomber group under attack by a mixed force of forty 109s and 190s. Seven of the bombers had already gone down before the Mustangs could break up the attack and send three of the enemy spinning earthward. A most unusual sight was seen in the form of an all black P-51 with yellow stripes around the wings flying with the enemy formation. Victories were credited to Capt. Richard W. Dunkin with a 109, Lt Harry A. Parker with a 109, Lt P. M. Whipperfurth with a 109 and Lt R. H. Brown with an FW 190.

Five uneventful missions followed and then the Group was detailed to fly another most unusual type of mission. They took off on the morning of 31 August to escort B-17s to Ploesti, which was not unusual at all, but this time the Fortresses were not carrying bombs. In the bomb bays were cargo racks to accommodate liberated American airmen from prisoner of war camps in Rumania. The on-charging Russian Army had taken Ploesti and many of the men who had felt the full fury of the defenses of this oil complex were flown back to Italy for further evacuation to the United States.

The month of September started off with a bang as the P-51s of the 325th departed Lesina at 0600 in the morning of the 1st to strafe Debrecen Airdrome in Hungary. While 11 Mustangs provided top cover at 5,000 feet, 40 of their mates went down to the deck to thoroughly work over the installation and its aircraft. In order to completely cover the situation, one section strafed from west to east, the second from north to south, and the third section came across the field from east to west. One pilot who seemingly couldn't find enough to shoot up was Lt Arne V. Arnesen of Springfield, Vermont. After making five consecutive passes across the airdrome, he was unable to find further targets so he proceeded to a landing field 15 miles south of the target where he had previously observed nine German bombers. In spite of the extreme danger in strafing active installations, Arnesen nevertheless completed eight successive attacks on the enemy field, breaking his attack only after four



Lineup of North American P-51D Mustangs of the 317th Fighter Squadron. First three are named, from right, "Vicious Virgin", "Threebees" and "Rosemary F". Second and fourth aircraft have the long Checkertail markings. (Stan Wilson)



Lt H. L. Long's "My Lady Margaret" was number A 54 of the 318th Squadron. The "A" signified that it was the second "54" Mustang in the Group. (Photo - H. L. Long)

of his guns ceased firing and three of the bombers had been destroyed. Lt David J. Schmerbeck caught two Ju 52 transports in the air and destroyed both of them and Lt Bruce Cobb got another. Lt Col. Beverly destroyed a Messerschmitt Me 410 in the air. On the ground, the Group ran up a total of 59 enemy aircraft destroyed or badly damaged for the loss of Lts Benjamin Emmert and Lowell B. Steere.

The following day the Checkertails went to work on the railroads between Nis and Belgrade, Yugoslavia where they destroyed 13 locomotives and a large amount of rolling stock. One Junkers Ju 52 was encountered and destroyed in the air by Lt Don B. Terry. Another mission to Yugoslavia of note took place on 8 September when 35 P-51s made a strafing attack on the airdrome at Ecka. Between five and eight passes were made resulting in the destruction of 22 Ju 52s, seven FW 190s, five Fi 156s, 19 Ju 88s, one Me 109, 1 Hs 126, one Me 110, one Hs 129 and two Me 410s. F/O Thomas E. Rogers was hit on his first pass across the field and was last seen as he pulled up smoking. Further attacks were flown against the airdrome at Petrograd on the return trip and another three Ju 52s and two Fi 156s were destroyed. For their great success on this mission the 325th Fighter Group was cited by Brig. Gen. Strother, Commanding General of the 15th Fighter Command: "This is the most thoroughly effective strafing attack I have ever known in terms of the completeness of the destruction accomplished."

On 11 September the Group reluctantly said goodbye to Lt Col. Chester L. Sluder as he took his leave to be replaced by the veteran, Lt Col. Ernest H. Beverly. Colonel Sluder had taken over the unit shortly before they gave up their Thunderbolts and had seen them through transition to P-51s. Under his capable leadership the Checkertails had compiled a memorable record and reached their zenith with the Mustangs.

Missions were uneventful until the 15th when the 325th flew target area cover on a mission to Athens, Greece. It was the task of the P-51s to keep the Luftwaffe on the ground while the bombers attacked and this is exactly what the Mustang pilots did. The only two enemy aircraft sighted in the air were two Ju 52s and these were destroyed by Lts A. C. Fiedler and John M. Simmons. Once the bombers had departed, two flights went down to strafe Megara and Eleusis airdromes where they finished off eight enemy aircraft. Lt John F. Lynch was hit by flak on the run, however, and crashed on Eleusis airdrome.

The Luftwaffe continued to be prominent through its absence, so missions tended to be flown without incident and a spell of bad weather added to the lack of activity.



Lt Sheldon K. Anderson's smile and five fingers indicate his happiness and claims for the mission to Brux of 16 October 1944. (Photo - Stan Wilson)

A very successful strafing mission was flown on 12 October in the area between Budapest and Gyor, Hungary and Vienna, Austria. Thirty-five locomotives were destroyed as well as rolling stock and vehicles. Four P-51s strafed Cskvar Airdrome and left nine enemy aircraft in ruins. Lt H. L. Long, Jr. caught an Fi 156 in the air and shot it down, and shortly afterwards, two Heinkel He 111 bombers were shot down by Lts A. C. Fiedler and J. V. Heinbach. Lt R. H. Videto failed to return.

Missions of intrigue entered the history of the Checkertails in late October when the Mustangs started escorting C-47s to places like Ist Island and to Kalamaki Airdrome in Greece. American and British agents were being landed during this period to try to organize resistance movements against the Germans who were having a difficult time keeping down sabotage and unrest in satellite and occupied nations.

The Luftwaffe finally put in a belated appearance on 16 October when B-17s of the 15th Air Force attacked the synthetic oil refinery at Brux, Czechoslovakia. No incidents occurred until the bombers had dropped their loads and turned for home. Then, there they were, a mixed gaggle of 48 FW 190s and Messerschmitt 109s. Lt Sheldon K. Anderson of Kenosha, Wisconsin, had never been close to a German fighter in his 31 missions and could hardly believe his eyes. He and his wingman, Lt Vernon B. Kahl swooped down for positive identification. At about the same time the enemy pilots sighted them, dropped their wing tanks and started to climb.

Anderson's flight attacked immediately and the action as he described it, went this way: "We were all right as long as we stayed above them, then we--all four of us--dove into the formation. My wingman and I hit the tail end of the box. The one I went after blew up right in front of my prop. The speed of our dive took us right through the next flight and I lined up on another. Again I thought I was going to hit him, but the explosion of his plane came just in time. I flew right through the smoke of his explosion. The formation was scattering now, but we still had enough speed to keep going after them. The one I got this time seemed to fall apart, but there was no explosion. I went in and got on another's tail and chased him around a couple of turns, firing all the time. He began to smoke and started going down. I now had a Jerry on my tail so I cut the throttle and slowed down. I racked around hard to the left and came out on his tail. I started firing as soon as he was in range but only one gun was working. It sounded like a BB gun. All of a sudden the German plane went limp, like a rag, as if it didn't have any pilot. It went into a stall and headed down." Final evaluation gave Anderson credit for three confirmed victories and

two probables from this combat even though he felt sure he had destroyed all five enemy planes.

All of the Checkertails returned to base safely and Lts L. D. Voss and Vernon Kahl were also credited with victories, the former with two 109s and the latter with one FW 190.

October brought another new type of mission to the 325th. For many months Allied photo reconnaissance aircraft had been flying high altitude missions with almost complete impunity from intercepting fighters. With the advent of the new German jet fighter, the Messerschmitt Me 262, this was no longer possible. One to two flights of P-51s were ordered to escort the P-38s and Mosquitos on their long and lonely flights. These missions proved to be most uncomfortable, cold and boring, but imperative.

The Checkertails enjoyed another excellent strafing mission on 21 October when they worked over Szombathely and Seregelyes Airdromes and marshalling yards between Vienna and Budapest. Lt Buddy M. Hartman turned in a real first class strafing job at Seregelyes Airdrome even though he was hit in both wings and a fuel tank while making his first two passes. In spite of the damage to his plane, he continued his attacks and made four more passes, destroying two German planes and damaging four others. Still not satisfied, he destroyed a locomotive on a siding near the airdrome.

All told, the 325th destroyed 37 enemy aircraft on the two fields plus six locomotives and four tank cars. Lt John Gaia caught a Junkers Ju 88 circling at 1,000 feet and sent it crashing to the ground. The Group lost one P-51 when Lt F. Johnson was hit by small arms fire and was forced to bail out.

On 5 November the German Air Force put in an appearance as the Mustangs provided escort to B-17s of the 5th Wing attacking the Vienna Florisdorf Oil Refineries in Austria. Eight Messerschmitt 109s were sighted flying northeast at the south edge of Lake Balaton at 3,000 feet. The P-51s flew to the attack and Capt. Oscar Rau, Jr. of Poughkeepsie, New York commenced a great day. He brought down one 109 and then noticed his flight leader was being attacked by three 109s. Immediately Rau went to the rescue and in the ensuing engagement shot down number two. Number three was destroyed a few minutes later, and then it was back to the rescue again! This time he had to shoot one of the persistent Messerschmitts off the tail of his wingman.

While Rau was destroying four enemy aircraft, a fifth was shot down by Major Norman L. McDonald. This was the first victory for Major McDonald with the 325th, although he was no novice to combat as he had achieved acedom during his first combat tour with the 52nd Fighter Group. In a few weeks he would take over command of the 318th Fighter Squadron of the Checkertails. A sixth 109 was destroyed just east of Lake Balaton by Lt Robert Newell.

The Group broke even on an escort mission to Vienna the following day when Lt J. E. Fehsenfeld shot down an FW 190 but lost Lt A. K. Rebb. This would be the last victory chalked up for some time as winter weather had set in and escort missions grew fewer. To add to this, targets for the 15th Air Force were lessening all the time as the Russian Army drove on westward. These factors no doubt tended to be frustrating to the young pilots just joining the Group, for many of them would fly their 50 mission tours without ever having a chance to combat the Luftwaffe in the air. Military discipline and courtesy that had grown lax during the stress and strain of near continuous combat became the order of the day, and many of the personnel felt they had been relegated to the Training Command once more. Nonetheless, their combat duties continued to be just as important and effective in bringing World War II into its final phases.

Twenty-two Mustangs managed to get to the deck in very spotty weather on 21 November and shot up various and sundry targets on the road between Prijepolje and

Rogatica, Yugoslavia. Fifty-one motor transport, a locomotive, three staff cars, ammunition trucks and many enemy soldiers were destroyed. Lt D. C. Haertel and Lt C. C. Whitmire were lost to ground fire, but both were seen to bail out safely.

The 325th encountered its first German jet on 2 December when two P-51s were escorting a reconnaissance P-38 north of Augsburg, Germany. The Me 262 came up from the undercast and one of the Mustangs got a few hits on it as it flashed by. The Messerschmitt attached the P-38, scoring hits. The jet then turned and made a head-on pass at the lead Mustang flown by Lt W. R. Hinton, who once more scored hits on it. The Me 262 then broke off the combat and headed east with a flash of speed. The P-38 and the two P-51s went into the overcast and returned home.

Most of the escort missions flown during November and December were plagued by bad weather which made rendezvous with the bombers most difficult and flying in general very hazardous. However, successful missions were completed, primarily against oil targets at Blechhammer and Brux. One of the rare days when enemy aircraft were sighted at all was on 26 December when Lt F. J. Wulf downed a Junkers Ju 88 which he encountered on the return trip from Blechhammer.

The highlight of December was the locomotive busting fete the Group enjoyed on the 28th. After escorting B-24s to Kolin and Pardubice in Czechoslovakia, 32 of the Mustangs headed for the deck looking for trains and airdromes. They enjoyed exceptional success in that 26 locomotives and seven enemy aircraft on the ground were destroyed by their strafing. Lt W. C. Margetts failed to return from the mission.

The New Year brought a continuation of poor flying weather and hectic days of trying to stay with the bombers through masses of billowing clouds. The Checkertails found themselves escorting the R.A.F. on 8 January 1945 and again on the 18th. Vickers Wellingtons and Consolidated Liberators were escorted to Circhina, Italy, where they made supply drops. The first mission gave the Mustang pilots some anxious moments as it was accomplished despite weather in which it was all the pilots could do to keep track of the bombers.

A fighter sweep was flown over the Zagreb and Sym-batheley areas of Yugoslavia on 10 January, and the German Air Force was encountered much to the liking of a young pilot named Lt F. F. Reid. At 1000 hours that morning he caught a Junkers Ju 52 in the air and promptly destroyed it. Half an hour later he was again successful with a Messerschmitt 109. On the way back two of the latest model 109s were met and one of them was destroyed by Lt Reid. Other victors in the brief actions of the day were Lt G. H. McDaniel with an FW 190 and Lt D. E. Ambrose with a Ju 52. Lt Aiken was the only casualty of the mission.

On the next day the 325th took B-17s to the oil storage facilities at Regensburg, Germany. Just as the Mustangs turned to head for home they sighted a gaggle of 40 FW 190s heading for the last box of Fortresses. The P-51s attacked immediately and two of the pilots were able to shoot down four of the enemy. Lt E. L. Miller accounted for three of them and Capt. A. C. Fiedler destroyed the fourth.

The month of February saw the men of the Group continue to fly escort for the bombers striking again and again at the oil targets in the Vienna area and Regensburg. These efforts as well as the lonely recce escorts for the P-38s proved to be routine with little enemy opposition. Lt W. K. Selenger managed to catch a stray FW 190 on a mission to Neuburg Airdrome on 16 February and shot it down. Weather even plagued strafing operations, and there was only one mission of that order during the month when the clouds permitted good shooting. On the 19th the Mustangs headed for the Vienna-Linz area of Austria and split up into squadrons. One squadron strafed from St. Polten to Amstettin destroying four locomotives, one tank car and thirteen motor

vehicles. The second squadron took the area between Ybbs and Enns where it accounted for 18 locomotives, five tank cars and some vehicles. The third squadron covered the stretch from Vienna to St. Polten and destroyed 19 locomotives, two freight cars, 10 tank cars and numerous motor trucks. To put the final touch on things, two of the P-51s caught a Dornier Do 217 and two FW 190s on Markersdorf airdrome and left them burning. Two Mustangs were lost over the target area on what was undoubtedly the most successful February mission.

March started off with better days for the hunters of the 325th when the Luftwaffe was encountered during an escort for B-24s to Moosbierbaum Oil Refinery in Germany. Enemy aircraft were sighted just after the P-51s left the bombers in the vicinity of Lake Balaton and during the sharp engagement, five German aircraft were destroyed.

The next day marked a change of command and a change of station for the Checkertails. Colonel Ernest H. Beverly, who had commanded the Group since September 1944, completed his tour and gave way to Colonel Felix L. Vidal. Between the second and the seventh of the month, the 325th completed its move from Lesina to Rimini. This move received a most enthusiastic welcome from the men, as living quarters were assigned to them in unoccupied buildings in the town. After many months of living in tents, such a change seemed miraculous and provided a big morale boost to all concerned.

Photo reconnaissance missions, supply drops in Yugoslavia and a few routine escort trips against marshalling yards were the order of battle for the men and their Mustang mounts until the mission of the 13th, which was to prove most effective in disrupting the German rail system. Splitting up into squadrons again the P-51s methodically searched out and went after trains in the Munich-Regensburg and Linz areas. Up to 33 locomotives, 19 freight cars and 26 tank cars were to pay the price. One Messerschmitt 109 was destroyed on a flat car which probably marks one of the few destructions of an aircraft traveling by rail. One Mustang was shot down, but the pilot was seen to bail out safely.

Another great day for the Group came on 14 March. Forty-two Mustangs had provided escort for B-24s attacking Novo Zamky Marshalling Yards in Hungary and were heading for home when one of their number had to let down due to oxygen system failure. On dropping through the overcast this pilot spotted four FW 190s. He called the balance of his flight down just in time to see a whole gaggle of Focke Wulfs pulling onto the scene. One of the pilots, Lt Gordon H. McDaniel, could hardly believe his eyes. There below him were eight or nine FW 190s, strung out one behind the other, in perfect formation for his attack. Starting at the rear, he picked off five, one at a time. He was even able to fly within 100 feet of one of the German planes before the enemy pilot caught on.

While McDaniel was becoming an ace, one of the old veteran pilots, just starting his second tour, added to his score. Capt. Harry A. Parker wasted no time in destroying two FW 190s to supplement his list of victories. The 14 additional scalps that were added to the belt of the Checkertails that day were credited as follows: Capt. D. L. Voss--one Me 109; Lt J. S. Chamberlain--one Me 109; Lt T. M. Bevan--three FW 190s; Lt J. B. Henry--one FW 190; Lt J. G. Pace--one FW 190; Lt W. K. Selenger--one FW 190; Lt P. J. Murphy--one FW 190; and Lt E. E. Bradley--one FW 190.

Following this mission Captain Parker was asked his opinion on the quality of the present Luftwaffe pilots as compared to those of earlier days. "The leaders are still good," commented Parker. "We can usually pick him out by the way he maneuvers. But the rest--well, they are not so hot. They don't seem to know what to do when we attack. They seem to be new pilots, and they act as if they lack training."

One of the lonely recce missions paid off on 16

March when Lt J. R. Dytrych caught a Messerschmitt Me 410 on the return trip and shot it down. A most welcome reward it was for a five hour mission escorting a P-38 all the way to Ruhland, Germany.

The Group mission on the same day provided a bit of action when two Messerschmitt 109s were encountered on the return trip from Moosbierbaum Oil Refinery. Both were shot down, one by Capt. G. Smith and the other by Lt T. M. Bevan.

It was back to work on the railroads on 18 March as the Mustangs returned to their hunting grounds in the Graz, Brux and Wiener Neustadt areas. In the field of rail transport the Group claimed 45 locomotives, 13 freight cars, 15 tank cars and numerous personnel. Strafing of airdromes in the area cost the Germans an additional five aircraft. Three pilots were downed in the raids, but one safely bailed out in Russian-held territory.

Eight members of the dwindling Luftwaffe took to the air on 20 March to oppose B-24s of the 304th Wing of the 15th Air Force. In a chase that was like playing cat and mouse due to patches of haze, Lts J. C. Wilkens and C. W. Morby succeeded in destroying two of them in the area of Wols, Czechoslovakia.

One of the most memorable missions flown by the 15th Air Force took place on the 24th when B-17s of the 5th Wing flew all the way to Berlin from Italy to bomb the Daimler Benz Tank Works. While many of the escorting groups had the good fortune of tangling with the enemy's Me 262s that day the Checkertails were only to sight four of the jets and then could never get within range of any of them. All 50 Mustangs of the 325th returned home from the long six-hour mission without even a claim to file.

As long as there was so little air opposition, there was only one way for fighter pilots to get at the enemy--strafe! And this is just what the 325th Fighter Group did again on 26 March. All the way from Budejovice, Czechoslovakia to Vienna, Austria the Mustangs ranged over the rail lines. Traffic was good that morning and once more the enemy paid dearly. Thirty-one locomotives, 12 freight cars and 12 tank cars were left on the tracks in ruins. Three FW 190s sought vainly to disrupt the shoot but were driven off after losing one of their number to F/O Barnes. The cost was high for the 325th this time, however, as Lts R. R. Caudill, Vernon Kahl, J. W. Willhite and L. E. Inks all failed to return to base.

A minimum altitude strafing mission in the Ljubljana to Brux areas was the order of the day on 2 April. At this stage of the war even rail targets were getting hard to find for the only thing the Checkertails were able to show for their efforts was one lone locomotive and damage to some rolling stock. However, the Luftwaffe put in an appearance in the form of fifteen 109s. Major Norman L. McDonald increased his score with two of them while Lt G. E. Amedro shot down a single.

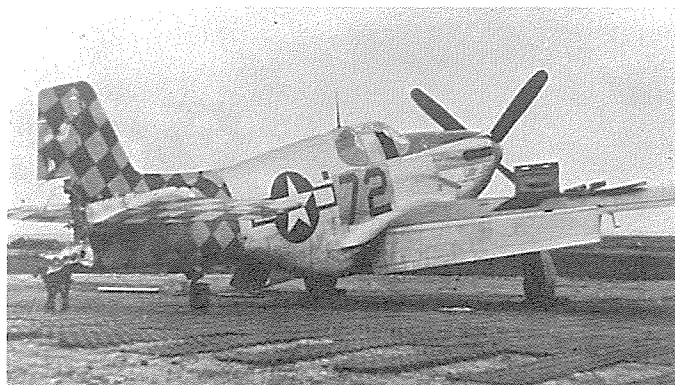
Pickings were a bit better in the Munich, Regensburg and Linz areas on the 4th as five locomotives and five tank cars were caught on the tracks and destroyed. Again the German Air Force was present in the form of six FW 190s, and this time they paid a big price. Only one of them survived the ensuing combat. Lt W. K. Selenger scored a double and the balance were shot down by Lts W. E. Aron, J. G. Howell and L. F. Seevers. Two Me 262 jets were encountered, but again no confirmed victory could be gained and Lt W. N. Clark had to settle for a probable.

The Group moved once more on 2 April, this time to Mondolfo, which was to be its last base of World War II. The base consisted of two parallel runways which were shared with the 31st Fighter Group. After so many moves it was only a short time before the area had acquired all the facilities of comfort that had been enjoyed at Lesina.

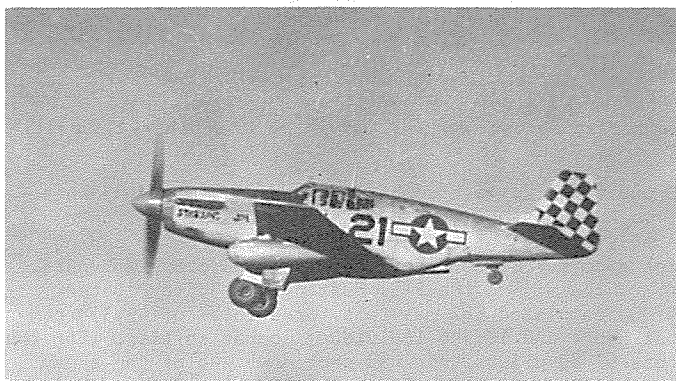
Forty effective strafing sorties were flown on 6 April in the area bounded by Munich, Regensburg, Pilsen, Budejovice and Linz. Results were quite good, 15 aircraft being destroyed on the ground and the rail system



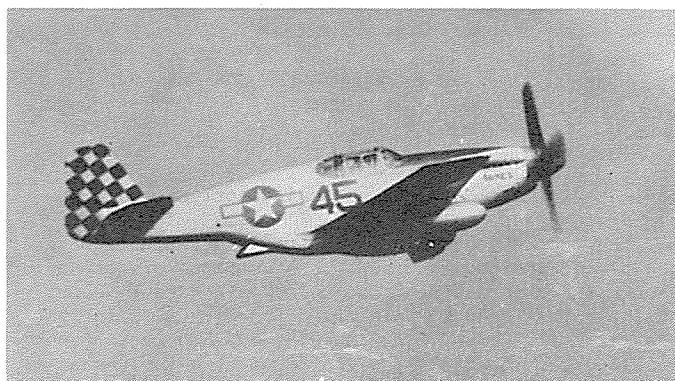
"Boss Baby" after a hard landing. CT ground crews were famous for getting them back in the air again. (Wilson)



This Checkertail Mustang, "Lady Jean", lost half of its rudder but still returned to Lesina. (Stan Wilson)



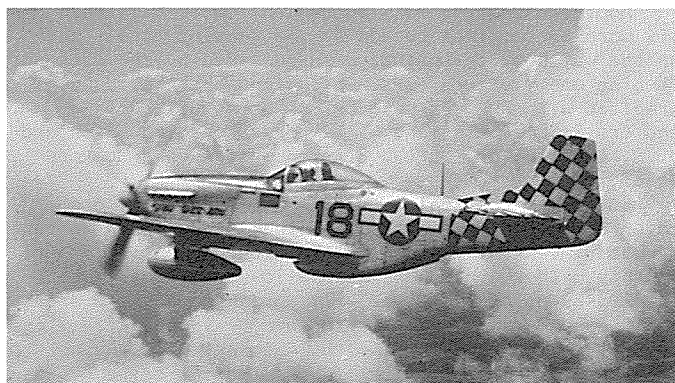
North American P-51B or C from the 317th Fighter Squadron climbs into the air for a mission. (Stan Wilson)



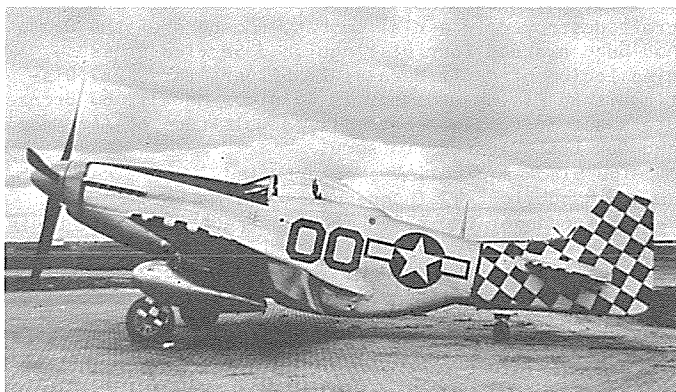
The gear comes up on "Agnes", 318th Fighter Squadron, as it climbs out from the airfield at Lesina. (Stan Wilson)



"Squeezie", 319th Fighter Squadron, flies high carrying yellow bands near her wingtips. (Photo - Stan Wilson)



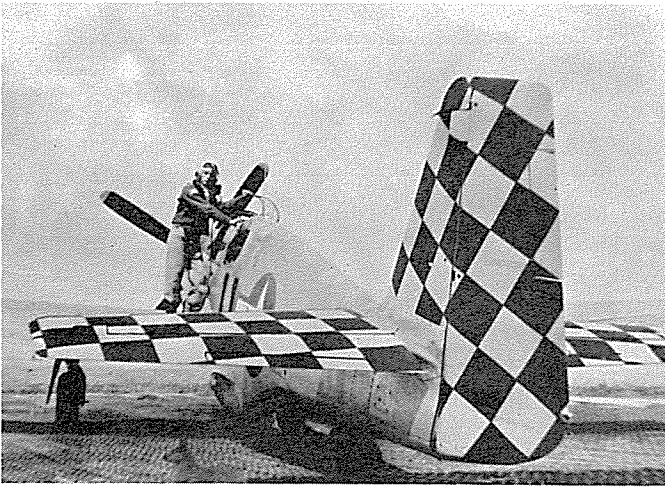
Beautiful clouds form a backdrop for this P-51D Checkertail Mustang roaming the skies over Italy. (Wilson)



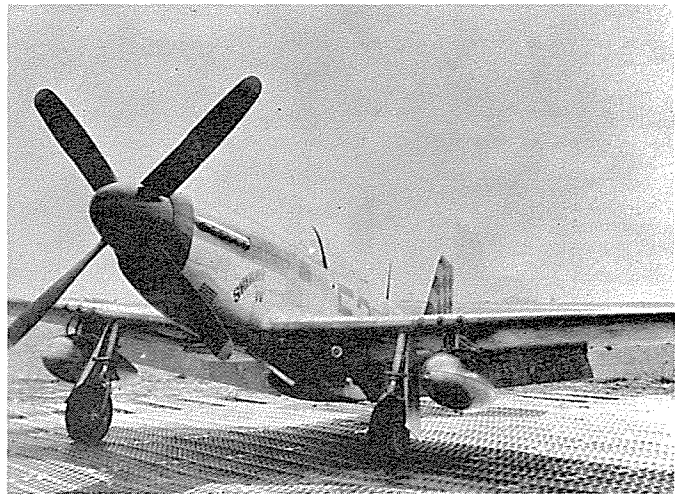
Double Zero belonged to 325th Fighter Group Headquarters and was flown by Lt Col. E. H. Beverly. (Wilson)



"Helen" was the P-51D flown by Capt. Arthur C. Fiedler, Jr with eight crosses to denote his victories. (Wilson)



Major Herschel H. Green standing beside the cockpit of his North American P-51B Mustang which carried the number 11 of the 317th Fighter Squadron. (Stan Wilson)



"Shimmy IV" was the name of the P-51D flown by Lt Col. Chester L. Sluder, Commander of the 325th Group. The aircraft number was 52. (Photo - D. Weatherill Coll.)

paying a price of nine precious locomotives and a number of tank and freight cars.

The loss of the majority of their strategic targets had placed the heavy bombers in a position of not having enough targets to attack, so on occasion the fighters of the 15th Air Force were freed for work with the tactical 12th Air Force. On 9 April the 325th Group found itself escorting B-25s for the first time in over a year. Fifty-five P-51s provided top cover and target area support for the Mitchells of the 310th, 321st and 340th Bomb Groups attacking gun positions at Imola, Italy.

Another strafing mission the following day produced six more locomotives to add to the growing total, and on the way home the pilots were rewarded by the presence of nine enemy aircraft, six of which were shot down. Credited with FW 190s were Major Norman L. McDonald and Lts R. D. Christman, W. W. Forsyth, J. E. Mason and J. A. Leonard, Jr. Lt W. E. Aron destroyed a Junkers Ju 88.

Strafing, tactical bomber escort and supply drop cover comprised most of the missions that were competently but uneventfully flown by the Group up until 17 April. On this date the Mustangs were allowed to free-lance in the Augsburg, Munich, Linz, Pilsen and Regensburg areas. At 1050 hours two Me 262s were seen taking off from Lechfeld Airdrome and this time the Checkertails were not to be denied. One of them fell under the .50 caliber guns of Major Ralph E. Johnson, C.O. of the 319th Fighter Squadron.

The last air battle fought by the Group came on 19 April when they escorted B25s of the 340th Bomb Group against the Ora Diversion Bridge in Italy. A gaggle of 109s was encountered and the Mustang pilots chalked up six victories in this meeting with the Luftwaffe. Victors were Lt W. P. Baldwin with two 109s and Lts F. W. Schaefer, W. B. Bagley, J. Barrett and F. M. Bolek with singles.

Another and most unusual victory was scored on this final day of aerial combat with the Luftwaffe. Lt Leo A. Gertin of Rochester, New York had never met a German plane in the air until he passed an FW 190 near Florence while "slow-timing" a newly installed engine. After the two planes had made a head-on pass, the FW 190 broke off the engagement and headed for enemy territory. Lt Gertin followed on the deck and caught the plane as it was about to land on an airfield in northern Italy. Bursts from Lt Gertin's guns hit the fuselage and sent the Focke Wulf crashing into the ground.

Uneventful escorts and armed reconnaissance missions continued until the very end. The 325th Fighter

Group flew its last combat mission on 7 May 1945 when five Mustangs escorted British Halifax bombers on a supply drop. This routine flight was a quiet ending for a combat career that had stretched over two years.

While flying the P-51 Mustang the 325th Fighter Group completed 362 missions for a total of 45,370 combat hours and 10,596 individual combat sorties. For the loss of 80 pilots they had shot down 248 of the enemy in the air. Of these victories 128 were Messerschmitt 109s, 86 were FW 190s, eight were Messerschmitt 110s, seven were Ju 52s, six were Ju 88s, five were IAR-80s, three were Me 410s, two were He 111s, and there were single Mc 205, Me 262 and Fi 156 aircraft.

Mechanical failure topped the list of loss causes with 24, while 21 Mustangs were lost to flak. Twenty P-51s went down to unknown causes, while only eight were definitely known to have been shot down by enemy aircraft. Mid-air collisions cost the 325th three Mustangs, while two were lost to weather and two to other causes.

During the entire war the Checkertails had flown 587 combat missions and had achieved the following records: Pilots of the Group had destroyed in aerial combat 537 enemy aircraft, had probably destroyed 60 and had damaged 89. On the ground they had destroyed 250 enemy planes and had probably destroyed or damaged many more. They also claimed 264 locomotives destroyed and probably destroyed 137 more; 159 motor vehicles were destroyed and 101 were probables; and 148 railroad cars were destroyed.

As of VE-Day, Group personnel had included 27 fighter aces, whose combined victories totaled 201 enemy aircraft destroyed in aerial combat. Members of the Group had been awarded four Distinguished Service Crosses, nine Legion of Merit Medals, 28 Silver Stars, 227 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 19 Soldiers Medals, 67 Bronze Stars and 38 Purple Hearts plus a multitude of Air Medals and Oak Leaf Clusters to same.

The black and yellow checkertailed Curtiss P-40 Warhawks, Republic P-47 Thunderbolts and North American P-51 Mustangs of the 325th Fighter Group had flown their colors victoriously over endless miles from and to both sides of the Mediterranean. They had winged into action over Tunisia, Pantelleria, Sicily, Sardinia and Italy, and had flown missions to Russia, Germany, Austria, France and all corners of the Balkan countries. Whatever type of plane they flew, they met and mastered the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica. With the close of World War II, the Checkertails, ground men and airmen alike, left behind records which will forever stand high in the annals of the U. S. Army Air Force.

325th FIGHTER GROUP COMMANDERS

Major Leonard C. Lydon	3 Aug 42 - 10 Dec 42
Lt Col. Gordon H. Austin	10 Dec 42 - 5 Jul 43
Lt Col. Robert L. Baseler	5 Jul 43 - 1 Apr 44
Lt Col. Chester L. Sluder	1 Apr 44 - 11 Sep 44
Lt Col. Ernest H. Beverly	11 Sep 44 - 2 Mar 45
Lt Col. Felix L. Vidal	2 Mar 45 - May 45

317th FIGHTER SQUADRON COMMANDERS

Lt James E. Tucker	1 Sep 42 - 7 Oct 42
Capt. Jack C. West	7 Oct 42 - Jan 43
Major Wm R. Reed	Jan 43 - Jan 44
Major Lewis W. Chick	Jan 44 - 25 Mar 44
Major Herschel H. Green	25 Mar 44 - 23 Sep 44
Major Max McNeil	23 Sep 44 - 3 Apr 45
Major John R. Burman	3 Apr 45 - May 45

318th FIGHTER SQUADRON COMMANDERS

Lt George B. Gingras	3 Aug 42 - 11 Feb 43
Capt. Joseph A. Bloomer	11 Feb 43 - 20 Aug 43
Major James F. Garrett	20 Aug 43 - 5 Jan 44
Major James V. Toner	5 Jan 44 - 8 May 44
Capt. Roy B. Hogg	8 May 44 - 23 Jul 44
Major Sheldon W. Farnham	23 Jul 44 - 26 Nov 44
Major Normal L. McDonald	26 Nov 44 - May 45

319th FIGHTER SQUADRON COMMANDERS

Major Robert L. Baseler	26 Aug 42 - 14 Nov 42
Capt. Walter V. Radovich	14 Nov 42 - 25 Nov 42
Capt. James E. Tucker	25 Nov 42 - 26 Dec 42
Capt. Everett B. Howe	26 Dec 42 - 28 Jul 43
Capt. Robert W. Myers	28 Jul 43 - 8 Sep 43
Capt. Harmon E. Burns	8 Sep 43 - Jan 44
Major Anthony Tirk Jr.	Jan 44 - 11 Mar 44
Major Frank J. Collins	11 Mar 44 - 20 Mar 44
Capt. Wm J. Rynne	20 Mar 44 - 28 Mar 44
Capt. Raymond E. Hartley	28 Mar 44 - Jun 44
Major John E. Perry	Jun 44 - 7 Dec 44
Major Ralph F. Johnson	7 Dec 44 - May 45

FIGHTER ACES - 325th FIGHTER GROUP

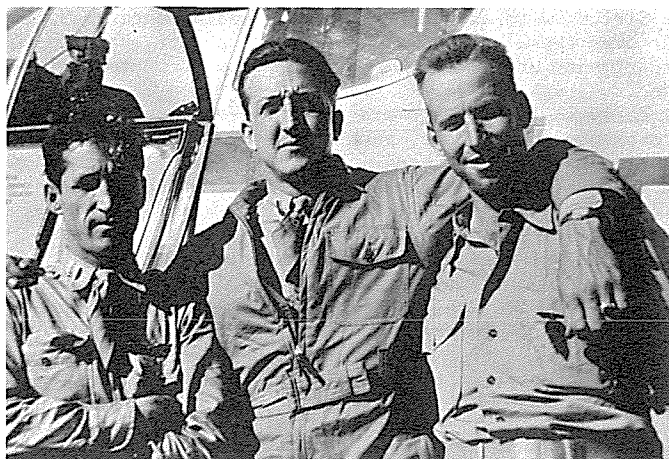
	P-40	P-47	P-51	Total
Maj. Herschel H. Green	3	10	5	18
Capt. Harry A. Parker	-	-	13	13
Capt. Wayne L. Lowry	-	-	11	11
Maj. Norman L. McDonald (7 with 52nd FG)			4	11
Capt. Frank J. Collins	5	4	-	9

Capt. Richard W. Dunkin	1	3	5	9
Lt Eugene H. Emmons	-	8	1	9
Capt. Arthur C. Fiedler, Jr.	-	-	8	8
Lt George P. Novotny	3	5	-	8
Lt Philip Sangermano	-	-	8	8
Lt Robert H. Brown	-	-	7	7
Capt. John M. Simmons	-	-	7	7
Lt Col. Robert L. Baseler	5	1	-	6
Maj. Lewis W. Chick, Jr.	-	6	-	6
Lt Barrie S. Davis	-	-	6	6
Lt Cecil O. Dean	1	3	2	6
Lt Benjamin H. Emmert, Jr.	-	1	5	6
Maj. Roy B. Hogg	2	2	2	6
Lt Gordon H. McDaniel	-	-	6	6
Col. Ralph G. Taylor, Jr.	6	-	-	6
Lt William E. Aron	-	-	5	5
Capt. Robert M. Barkey	-	4	1	5
Lt Richard S. Deakins	-	2	3	5
Lt Cullen J. Hoffman	-	4	1	5
Lt Edsel Paulk	-	5	-	5
Capt. William A. Rynne	-	5	-	5
Capt. Walter B. Walker, Jr.	5	-	-	5

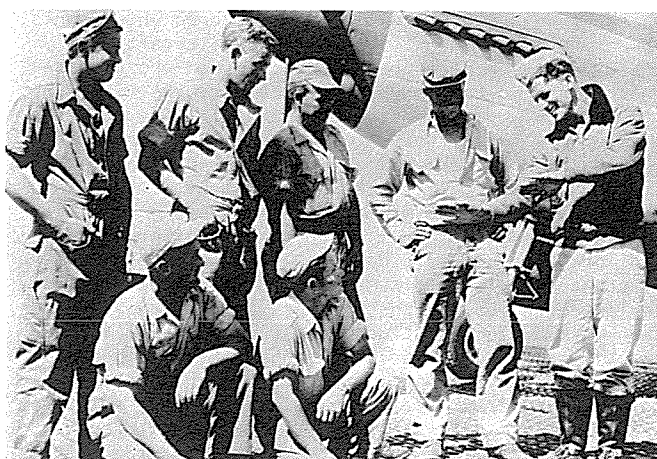
AUTHOR'S NOTE: The History of the 325th Fighter Group through the P-51 era would never have been possible without the very kind assistance of Mr. Stan Wilson, the Permanent Chairman of the Checkertail Clan and custodian of their records. From a simple letter of inquiry on the part of the author things began to snowball until all the information and photographs making this project possible were put at my disposal by Stan and the wonderful former members of the 325th Fighter Group. To them my eternal gratitude.

I would also like to thank Mr. David Weatherill, my fine friend from Australia, for all his kind assistance in helping things along.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In telling the second half of the Checkertails' story, carrying on from Ernie McDowell's Part I, Bill Hess, 9641 Kingston Drive, Shreveport, La. 71108, demonstrates another facet of his fine ability as an historian of air power in World War II. He is best known as a top authority on air aces of WW II and will, in the near future, have his first book on this subject published. In writing of the 325th Fighter Group, Bill had several opportunities to record its escort activities to a Czechoslovakian town called Blechhammer--a place he will personally remember always. During WW II, Bill was an aerial gunner with the 97th Bomb Group, and on 13 September 1944, over that oil complex, his B-17G was disabled by flak and Bill had to bail out, becoming a member of the Caterpillar Club and a POW.



Capt. Roy Hogg, Capt. Bob Barkey and Lt. C. J. Hoffman (left to right) were all Checkertail aces. (Barkey)



Captain Wayne Lowry shows his ground crew just how he went about getting that German fighter. (W. Lowry)