

Memories of the 86th Fighter Group

By MSgt. MERLE C. OLMSTED, USAF (Ret.)
(All Photos From Author's Collection)

Last year, 1968, the USAF 86th Fighter Wing was 26 years old. It left its homeland in 1943 when less than a year old, and has never returned. Originally activated as a Light Bombardment Group, it was briefly designated as a Bomb Group (Dive), and then found its niche as a fighter bomber outfit. It swung into combat in July of 1943 in North Africa, then fought its way through Sicily, Italy, Corsica, and into Southern France with the Allied invasion forces. Following the battle lines, it moved into Germany, where it was when Hitler's 1000-year Reich ended some 990 years short of its goal.

The 86th Group's distinctions were many. It won two Distinguished Unit Citations for action in Italy and Germany, and it was one of the two groups which briefly operated the North American A-36 dive bomber in Europe. It was also the last operational unit of the Regular Air Force to fly the mighty Thunderbolt.

My contact with the 86th did not come until the summer of 1948, and my memories of this fine outfit cover only a brief span of its history.

In the Spring of 1948, I was a crew chief with the 27th Fighter Group, a SAC long-range escort group equipped with P-51Ds and based at Kearney, Nebraska. There was, however, trouble again in a Europe not yet recovered from the destruction of WWII. So it was that late in the Spring I was one of many on the move, and proceeded to Frankfurt, Germany, on an Air Transport Command C-54, via Newfoundland, Azores, and Paris, and thence to the 86th Fighter Group.

The 86th, whose operational units were the 525th, 526th, and 527th Squadrons, was based at Neubiberg Air Base, a few miles from Munich. It was familiar ground, I had first arrived there in the Summer of 1945 with the 357th Fighter Group, part of the occupation air force. The 86th was, in a way, a paper descendant of the old 357th after an incredible series of redesignations and number shuffling.

Somewhere along the line, the 357th Group's Mustangs had passed from the scene, and the 86th was flying the P-47D Thunderbolts. It was temporarily flying out of Munich Rheim Airport, as concrete runways were being put down at Neubiberg. Part of the ground crews were billeted at Rheim, in the Administration building, but everyone else commuted from Neubiberg, a distance of some ten miles.

Munich Rheim was Munich's civil airport, but at the time there was so little civil traffic in Europe that the 86th had the field almost to itself. Only an occasional civil aircraft appeared. I especially remember a Swissair D.H. Rapide (HB-APU) which was present several times in the 4 or 5 weeks the unit operated from here after my arrival.

Munich Rheim had been rather heavily bombed in the last days of the war, being hit on the night of 25 April 1945, by six or eight Mosquitos of 23 Squadron, Royal Air Force, and was repeatedly bombed and strafed by U.S. Thunderbolts in the last days of the war. Probably one reason the field received so much attention those last days was the presence of the Luftwaffe's "Fighter Formation 44-Gal-



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The flight line at Munich Rheim Airport. Bomb damage is still visible on the hangar line.

land," equipped with Me 262s. By the Summer of 1948, the damaged administration building had been rebuilt and some of the hangars made useable again.

On a hardstand at the far end of the field was a Czech-built version of the Me 109. This was the model powered by the Junkers Jumo engine. It was painted olive drab and its fuselage markings (Czech Air Force) had been covered with masking tape. It appeared to be in excellent shape, and had been flown in by a Czech pilot defecting from the Communists. This seems to have been a popular sport in those days, as I later discovered an Avia C-2 (Arado 96) at Furstenfeldbruck which had arrived under similar circumstances. I do not know the eventual fate of these two machines.

In August or September, 1948, the Group returned to Neubiberg, and immediately after this move I was assigned as crew chief on P-47D-30-RA, serial number 44-33747, Squadron number ND-19 of the 527th Squadron, a position I retained throughout my service with this unit.

During this period, the Group was equipped with approximately 75 P-47s, one P-51D, one C-45, two C-47s, two Douglas B-26s, three BT-13s, and 3 AT-6s, a much larger variety of aircraft than are operated by a fighter wing of today.

Group markings were as follows; all aircraft had red engine cowls except the P-51, which had a red spinner. Aircraft assigned to Group Headquarters were coded NA, as follows:

P-47D	44-90046	NA-1(Commander's aircraft)
B-26C	44-34415	NA-2
B-26B	44-34411	NA-6
C-45	?	NA-3
C-47A	42-93087	NA-5

The P-51 was assigned to the 527th Squadron and was coded ND-26, but this airplane was withdrawn in the Fall of 1948. The three squadron codes were; NB (525th, blue rudders), NC (526th, red rudders), and ND (527th, white rudders). No personal insignia was carried except on the two B-26s. On the left side of the nose of the "C" model was a painting of the famous cartoon lady, "Miss Lace," and the entire nose of the "B" model was painted as a face.

Throughout the tense Spring and early Summer of 1948, the 86th was the only U.S. fighter unit in Europe (the Russian Berlin Blockade was in affect at that time), and as such, its mission was twofold: air support of ground troops, plus the air defense of any installation in the European Command. Quite a task for three squadrons equipped with obsolete aircraft! The situation was relieved somewhat in August, with the arrival of the 36th Fighter Group from Hawaii with 76 F-80s. This unit was based at Furstenfeldbruck. The increase in strength was undoubtedly brought about by the tense Berlin situation.

During this period, the 86th maintained a heavy flying schedule, and normally kept two "Jugs" on an alert status, which were scrambled whenever necessary to intercept unidentified aircraft, not always an easy task as shown by one



The control tower at Rheim, with rebuilt sections and fragment damage still evident. Col. Edwinson's NA-1 at the right.

The Czech-built Avia S-199 flown into Munich by a defector from the Czech Air Force



The 527th Squadron's P-51D, probably the last Mustang flown by an operational USAF unit in Europe.



pilot's complaint to the author that he even had trouble catching C-47s.

Air-to-air and air-to-ground gunnery training were not feasible over densely populated Germany. This was normally carried out either from Wheelus Field, Tripoli, or from the RAF base on Malta. It was during one of these sojourns to Tripoli that the Group acquired its donkey and its famous camel, "Clarence." These two examples of African livestock were purchased from an Arab during a night of celebration and flown back to Germany in the B-26 bomb bay. They served as mascots for the Group football team and were eventually disposed of, the camel going to the Munich zoo. Clarence also adorned the sides of the C-47, NA-5, when the base Fire Department conceived the idea of collecting and delivering a planeload of candy and toys to the children of Berlin.

Because of the heavy and varied flying schedule, the 86th had its share of belly landings and more serious accidents. One pilot had the interesting experience of finding himself over Munich Rheim Airport in a seven-ton propellerless Thunderbolt, when the engine froze and the prop parted company with the aircraft. This one had a happy ending, a successful landing.

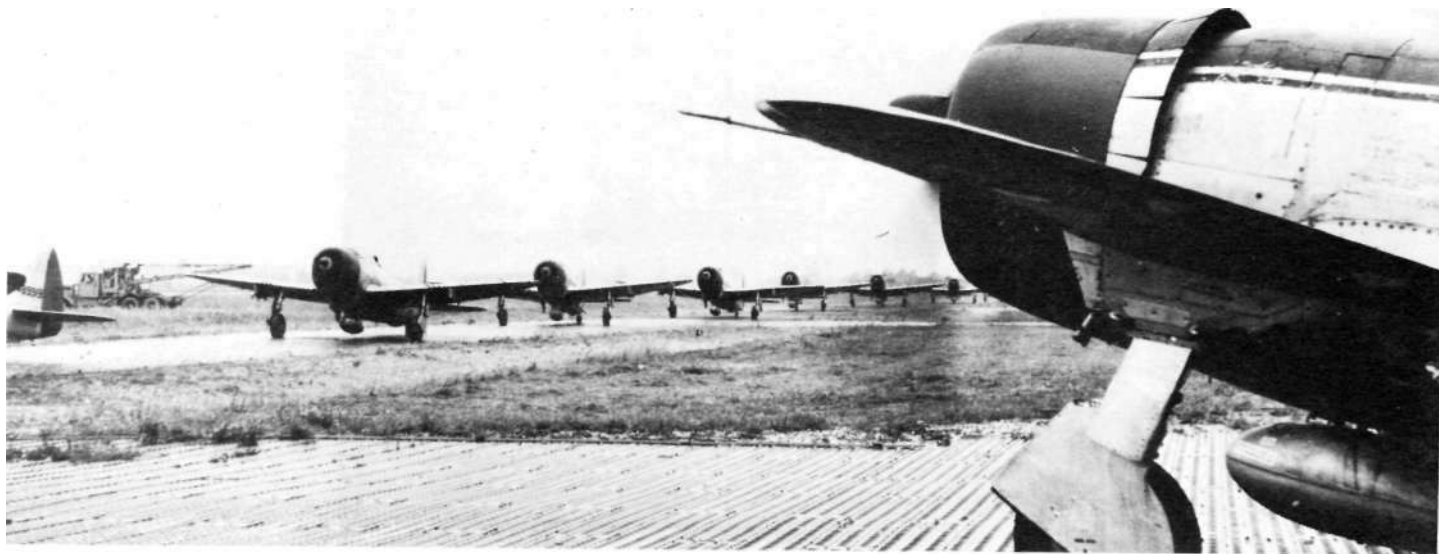
Not so happy was the spectacular accident which occurred one day as the Group was forming up at low altitude in the vicinity of the field. For some (now) unknown reason, a collision took place which destroyed three aircraft, damaged several more, and killed two pilots. The other pilot bailed out successfully.

A duty performed in relation to the Berlin Airlift was what we called "Pacer duty." This involved one P-47 flying formation with the transports enroute to Berlin and the calibration of their airspeed indicators, so that their timing in and out of Berlin could be more accurately planned. For this duty, three or four P-47s were kept on temporary duty at Wiesbaden, and at Celle RAF Base, Hamburg.

The most interesting project the author participated in was the delivery of fighters to the Iranian Air Force. The I.A.F. already had about 100 P-47Ds and in the Spring of 1949 requested delivery of 60 more which they had purchased several years previously, and which had been in storage in Germany. These machines were all combat veterans of WWII, and were to be used as spare parts for the I.A.F. "Jugs." From the fact they were combat veterans and had been in outside storage for about four years, it can be seen that they were not exactly in tip-top condition. They were delivered to Iran in elements of 12, and all markings except serial numbers were removed. I recall that at least one aircraft had a blue engine cowl, but most were devoid of any color. On the delivery flight that I participated in, we were accompanied by two B-17s (one of which was 44-83373) for navigation, and a C-47 to carry spare parts and some of the mechanics. During the five delivery flights there was only one serious mishap, when one aircraft bellied in at Ciampino (Rome). There were plenty of minor repairs to be taken care of at each stop, however:

at Rome (RON), Cyprus, Baghdad (RON), thence to Teheran, Iran. Miss Pat Peterson, the Red Cross director at Neubiberg made the trip with us, riding most of the way in the nose of a B-17. It is difficult to imagine a similar happening today.

The I.A.F. at this time was a very weak force. Besides the P-47s, only part of which were serviceable, it possessed some 30 Hawker Hurricanes, about a dozen C-47s (none serviceable), a few Avro Ansons, and some D.H. Tiger Moths, the only type I saw flying during our stay. The Shah of Iran had a plush B-17 and a D.H. Rapide (EP-AAA), and was a qualified pilot. Both aircraft were maintained at the civil airport. The military field had no refueling equipment, except that old standby ... the 5 gallon can! There was a refueling truck available at the civil field, however, belonging to a British airline.



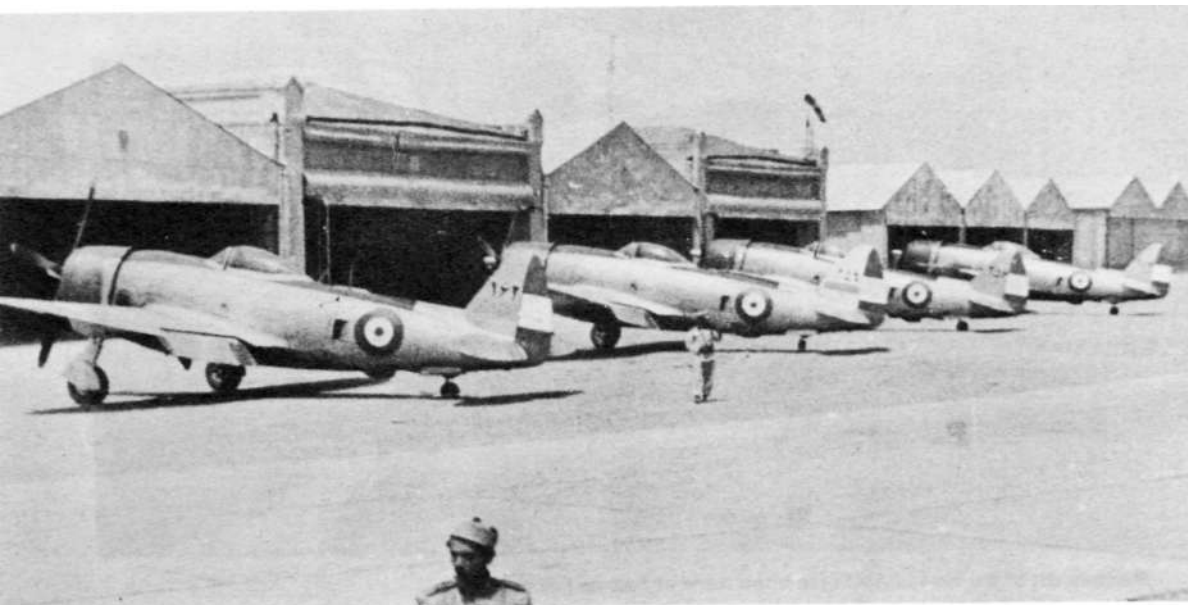
Reminiscent of the old 9th Air Force is this scene of Jugs taxiing in the rain at Neuberg.



86th Fighter Group P-47s painted in Russian markings played a part in the movie, "Berlin Airlift."



ND-8 of the 527th, dropped a wheel off the runway on landing and flipped over. Pilot injured.



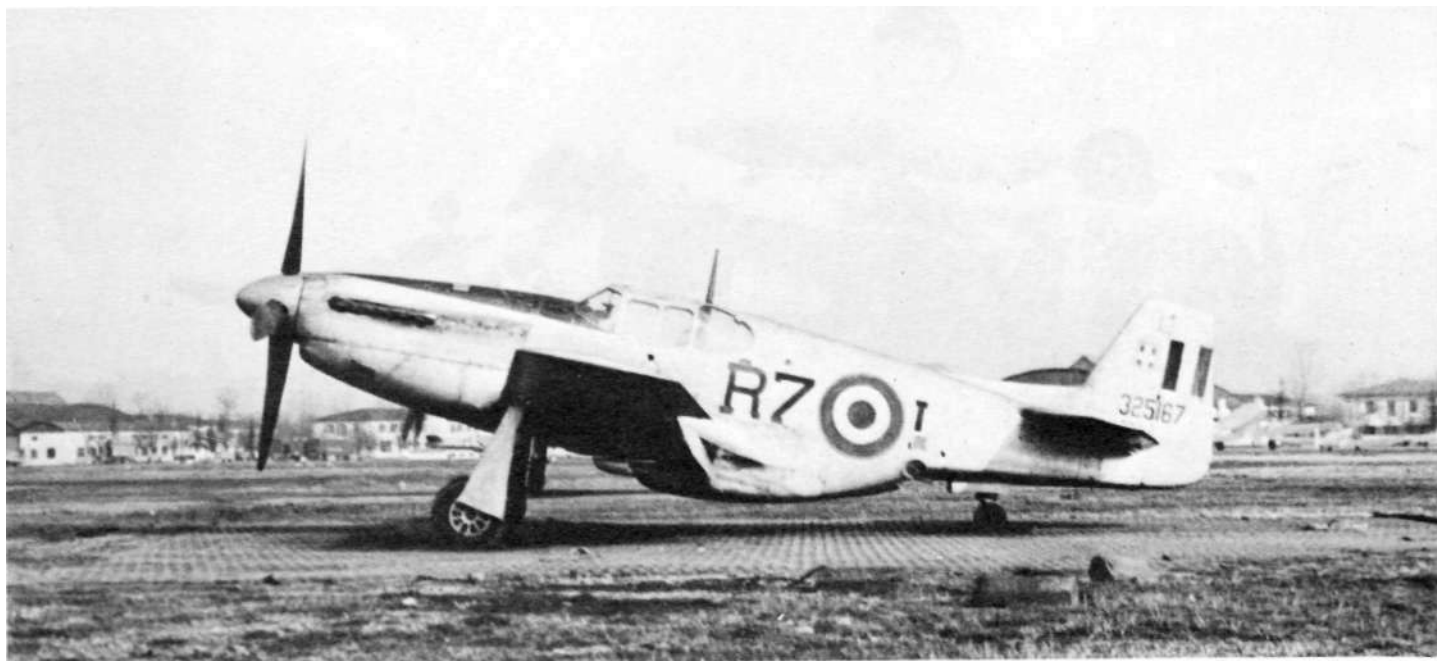
Iranian Air Force P-47s on the line at Teheran. Roundels were green (outer), white, red.



All 86th Group Jugs had red noses; this is a 527th Squadron aircraft.



An element of the 526th Squadron lift off Neubibergs runway.

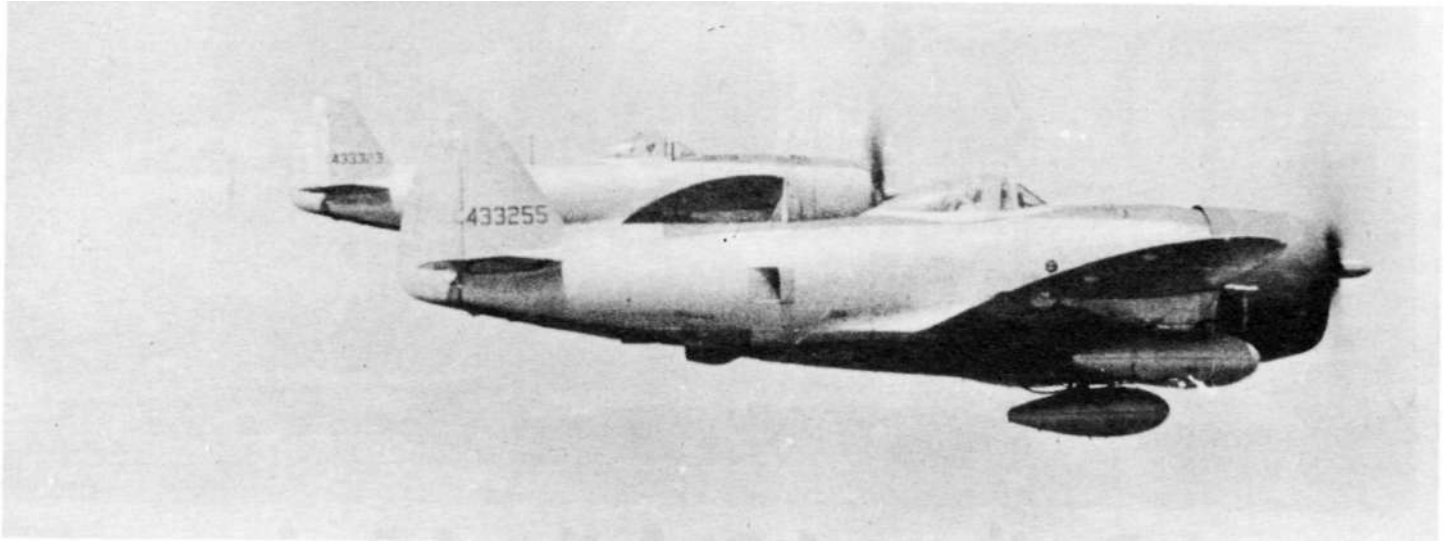


A visitor to Neubiberg in the spring of 1949 was this F-6 of the French Air Force, in company with several Lockheed F-5s.

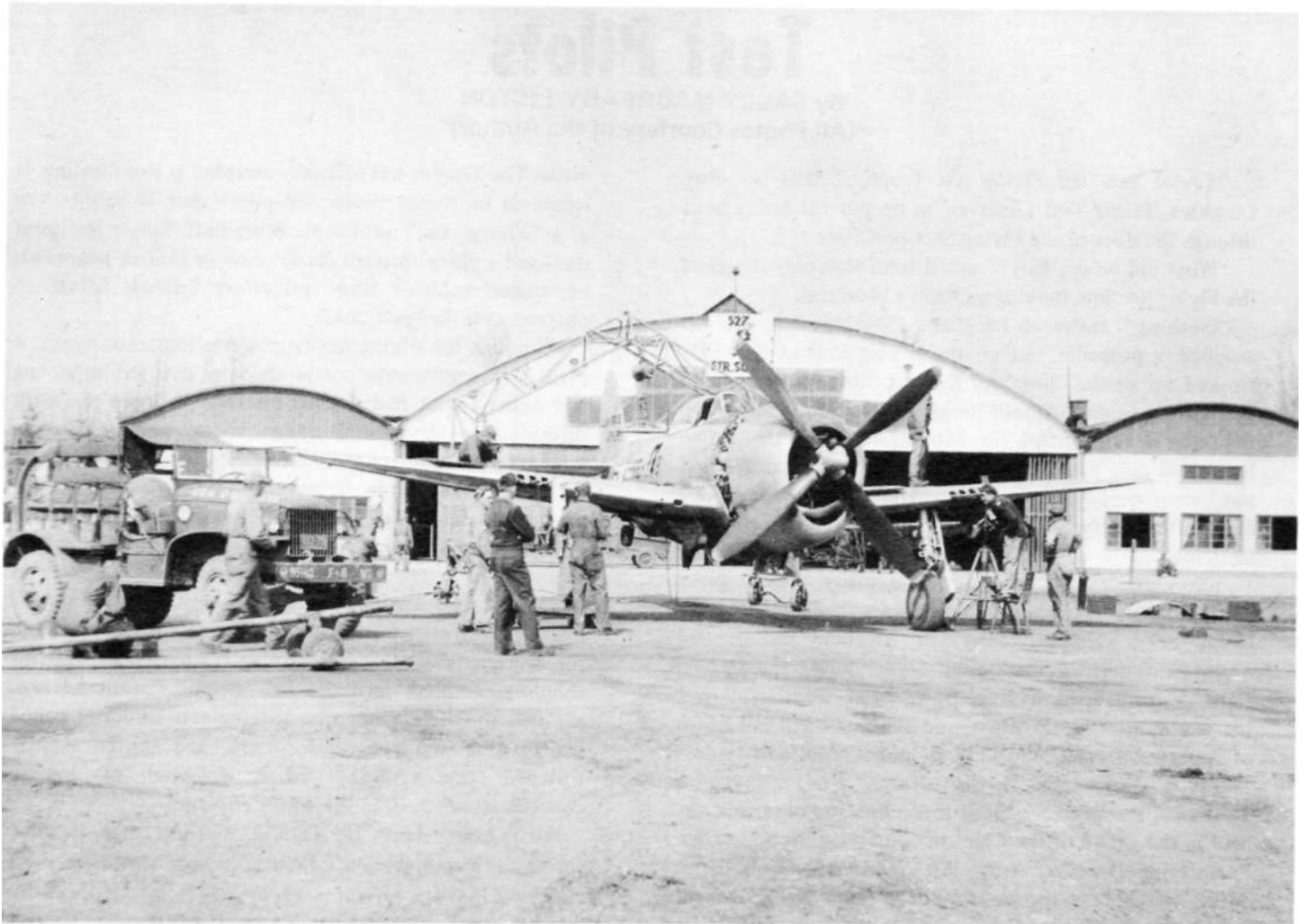
During my entire service with the 86th, it was the continual hope of all personnel that the badly aged Jugs would be replaced by the new jet propelled fighters, either the F-80, or the F-84, the only two in general use at that time. The Jug was to serve on, however, until after the end of my tour, F-84Es being received during 1950. The 527th

Fighter Squadron was the last squadron in the Regular Air Force to fly the P-47 as its main equipment.

The 86th Fighter Wing is continuing its long service in Germany, but no longer at Neubiberg, and it has long since disposed of its F-84s.



Unmarked Thunderbolts enroute to Iran. Summer 1949.



A "new" P-47, having its guns boresighted in front of the 527th Hangar.