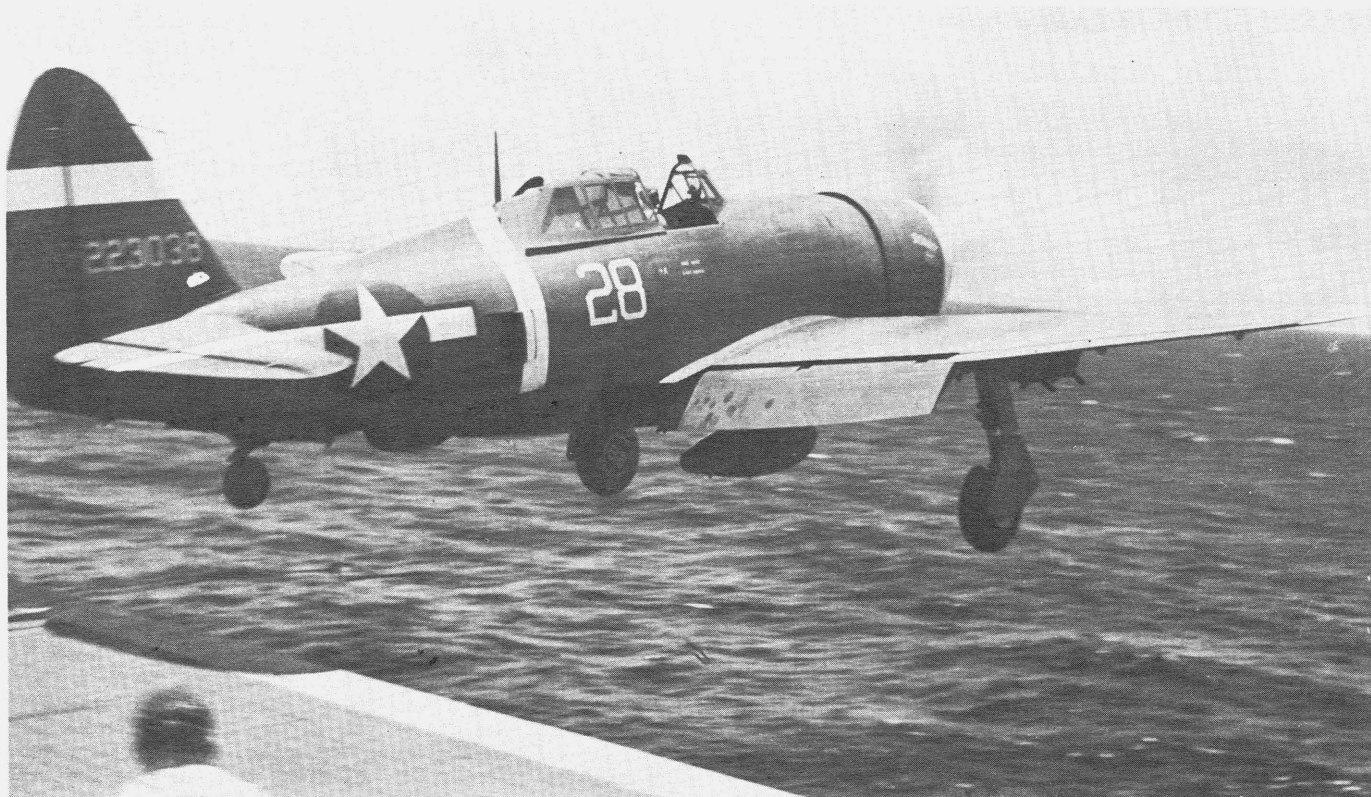




A Republic P-47D of the 73rd Squadron, 318th Fighter Group, takes off from the flight deck of the USS Manila Bay bound for Saipan on 23 June 1944. Note Aircraft Number applied to inside of wheel on SONNY BOY. (USAF A-63748AC)

FIGHTER MARKINGS - P.O.A.

By KENN C. RUST

The Pacific Ocean Area (P.O.A.) was delineated in 1942, included the greater limits of the Pacific Ocean westward from Hawaii and joined the South West Pacific Area east of the Solomons. Throughout most of World War II, U. S. Army Air Force action in the P.O.A. was carried out by the 7th Air Force, headquartered at Hickam Field, Hawaii. Offensive bomber operations were flown in and from the Gilbert and Marshall Islands into 1944 when the bomber units moved further west.

At the end of 1942, VII Fighter Command consisted of the 15th, 18th, 21st and newly formed 318th Fighter Groups. In March 1943 the 18th was assigned to the 13th Air Force, and during this year the 15th and 318th sent the 45th, 46th and 72nd Fighter Squadrons into the Gilbert Islands for operations against the enemy. The other groups remained on duty as fighter defense to the Hawaiian Islands, and so it was that fighter aircraft were scarcely engaged in combat operations in the P.O.A. prior to 1944.

During March 1944, a decision was reached to extend the U. S. offensive in the Pacific all the way to the Marianas Islands by invading Saipan in June. It was also decided to augment Navy and Marine fighter support with one group of AAF fighters. The 318th Group, equipped with Republic P-47D Thunderbolts since October 1943, was chosen for this duty and thus became the first truly active AAF fighter unit in the P.O.A.

For initial operations in the Marianas, the 318th employed two of its squadrons, the 19th and 73rd, with 73 Thunderbolts. The former was placed onboard the escort carrier Natoma Bay and the latter on the Manila

Bay, and both ships sailed into the Marianas area in June 1944. First P-47s into action were from the 19th. Twenty-four of them were catapulted off their carrier on 22 June. The following day the remaining aircraft of the 19th were flown in to Aslito Field (which had just been made ready on Saipan and was later known as Isley Field), and the first four P-47s of the 73rd flew off the Manila Bay. On the 24th the 33 remaining planes of the latter squadron flew into Saipan.

While the P-47s were beginning operations in support of the ground forces on Saipan, a Japanese sabotage party attacked the 318th base in the pre-dawn hours of 26 June. One P-47 was destroyed in this action, and the men of the 73rd got in some time in ground warfare. On 27 June, six P-47s from the 19th Squadron flew a rocket mission against Gurguan Point. Coming in low over the target, Lt. Wayne F. Kobler's aircraft was caught in the detonation of a 500-lb bomb planted as an anti-aircraft land mine by the Japanese and destroyed. This was the Group's first loss, and subsequently, the second Saipan airfield was named Kobler Field in the pilot's honor.

Taking off through Jap sniper fire, flying constant support missions on Saipan and then against Tinian and Guam, nearby in the Marianas, the two squadrons of the 318th did yeoman service--from 22 June to 17 July they flew 2500 sorties totalling 4000 hours, dropped 260 tons of bombs, and fired 500 rockets and 530,000 rounds of 50 caliber ammunition. On 18 July the remaining squadron of the Group, the 333rd, arrived on Saipan, and henceforth the 318th was at full strength to carry

on its duties of providing air defense to the Marianas and giving close support to the ground forces.

The Thunderbolts of the 318th were finished in normal OD paint and tended to use color to show their squadron affiliation. In the 19th Squadron, the entire cowl except for the upper, anti-glare portion, and the vertical and horizontal tails were cleaned down to their natural metal finish, and light Blue stripes were painted lengthwise on the tails. Just aft of the cockpit, on the fuselage side, an Aircraft Letter was painted in white, about 21 inches high. In later months, an Aircraft Number, ranging from the 40s to the 80s, was painted on the lower center of the cowls.

A more standardized marking was used by the 73rd Squadron. The forward 12 inches of the cowl, a 12 inch band around the fuselage just aft of the cockpit, the outer 12 inches of the wing tips, and 10 inch bands about the vertical and horizontal tails were all painted White. On the side of the plane, beneath the aft part of the cockpit, was the Aircraft Number, ranging from 1 to 37 (although some three-digit numbers were used). It is understood that the markings of the 333rd Squadron were the same as those of the 73rd, except that the color Red (or possibly Yellow) was used.

When Saipan, Guam and Tinian were made secure, the P-47Ds of the 318th turned to neutralizing the lesser Marianas Islands while at the same time continuing their duties in defense of the islands. All the while feverish building activity was underway on bases for operating B-29 bombers of the 20th Air Force.

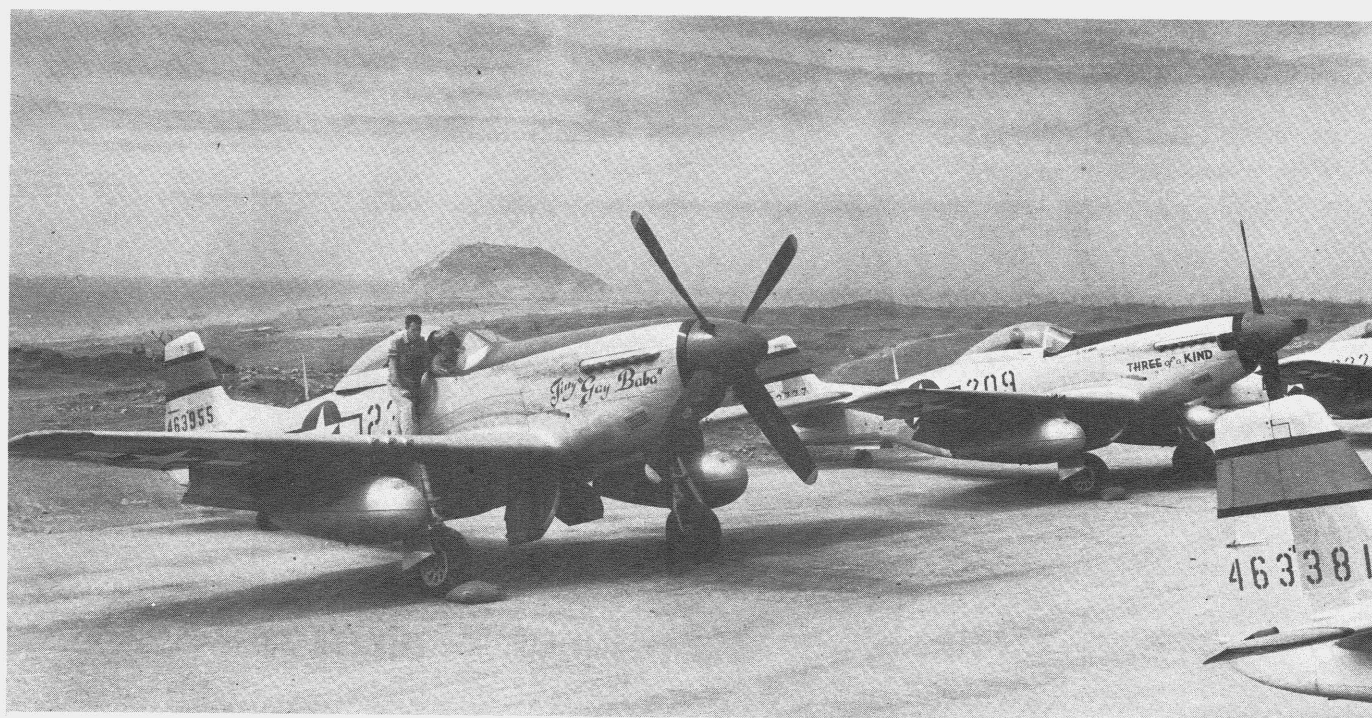
With B-29s arriving on Saipan in October, and with B-24s of the 7th Air Force operating out of Guam and Saipan, there developed a need for the 318th Group to give fighter escort over a far greater range than could be normally accomplished by their P-47s. Even though 20 P-47s escorted Liberators to Iwo Jima on 21 October over a range of some 1500 miles (destroying a Nick in the process), a longer range fighter was needed. Accordingly, thirty-six Lockheed P-38s of the 531st Fighter Squadron in Hawaii were flown across the Pacific by their pilots to join the 318th. At first, it was planned to form a fourth squadron within the group, but in the event about a dozen P-38s were assigned with their pilots to each of the 318th's squadrons. Beginning on

22 November the P-38s escorted B-24s and B-29s on strikes against such targets as Truk and Iwo Jima--on the 22nd twenty-five P-38s destroyed four Zeroes and probably destroyed another while escorting B-24s over Truk. The P-38s carried no special markings other than having their spinners painted in the squadron color.

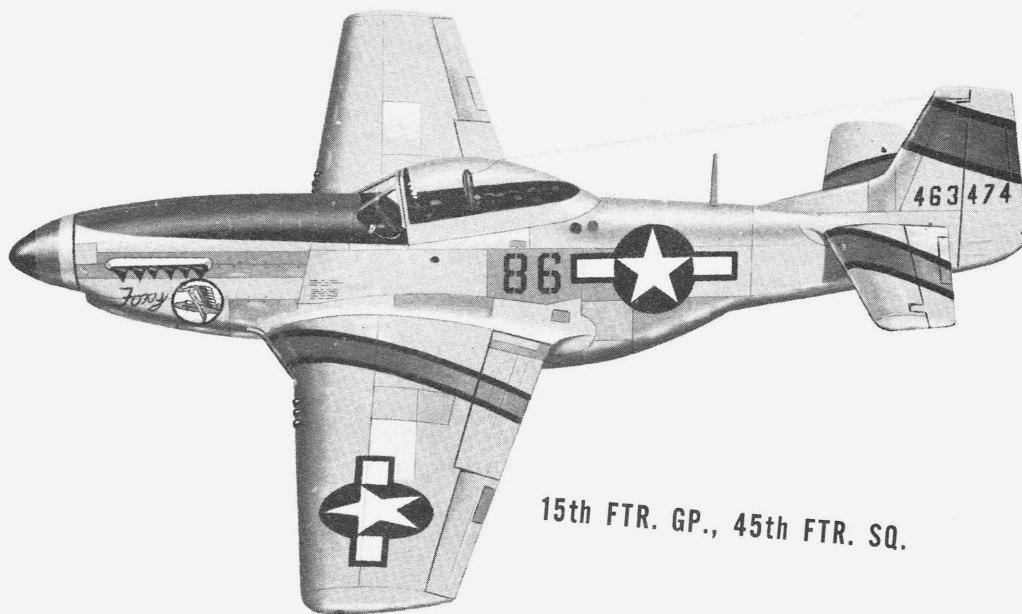
With the coming of the B-29s to the Marianas and their meeting rising fighter resistance in their attacks on Japan during late 1944 and early 1945, the need for long-range escort fighters was further established. It had been foreseen, and the 15th and 21st Fighter Groups of the 7th Air Force had trained for this role in North American P-51D Mustangs. Their use, however, required airfields nearer Japan than any in existence until U. S. Marines attacked Iwo Jima on 19 February 1945. When that bloody island was taken, and its airfield enlarged, a base from which the Mustangs could escort the B-29s to Japan was available.

In preparation for such operations, VII Fighter Command with the 15th and 21st Groups, shipped from their bases in Hawaii to Saipan in February 1945 and then moved in to Iwo Jima during March. Members of the VII Fighter Command, and its attached units, received a bloody reception in the early morning darkness of 28 March. A force of Japanese troops came out of hiding and attacked the VII FC area, striving to kill as many fighter pilots as possible rather than to destroy their machines. In a few hours over 300 Japanese were dead, but dead also were 44 officers and men of VII FC.

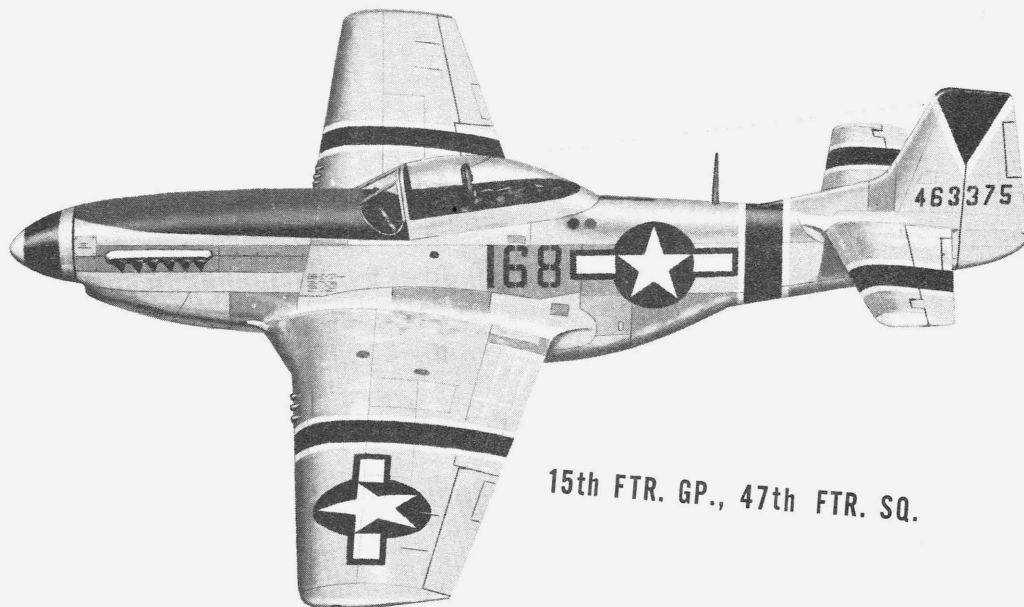
During the last half of March 1945, the P-51s of the 15th and 21st Fighter Group flew operations against airfields, shipping and military installations in the Bonin Islands. Then, on 7 April 1945, the two groups (with VII FC, now under control of the 20th Air Force) dispatched 96 planes to escort B-29s against Japan. The P-51s flew with three navigational B-29s to the target which was the infamous, Tokyo 357. The round trip distance of nearly 1500 miles was so close to the maximum range of the Mustangs that they could stay over Japan for only ten to twenty minutes. In that short time, however, they met large groups of Japanese interceptors with the 15th destroying 17, probably destroying 1, and damaging 6, while the 21st claimed 4-5-4. Two Mustangs were lost with one pilot rescued, and six



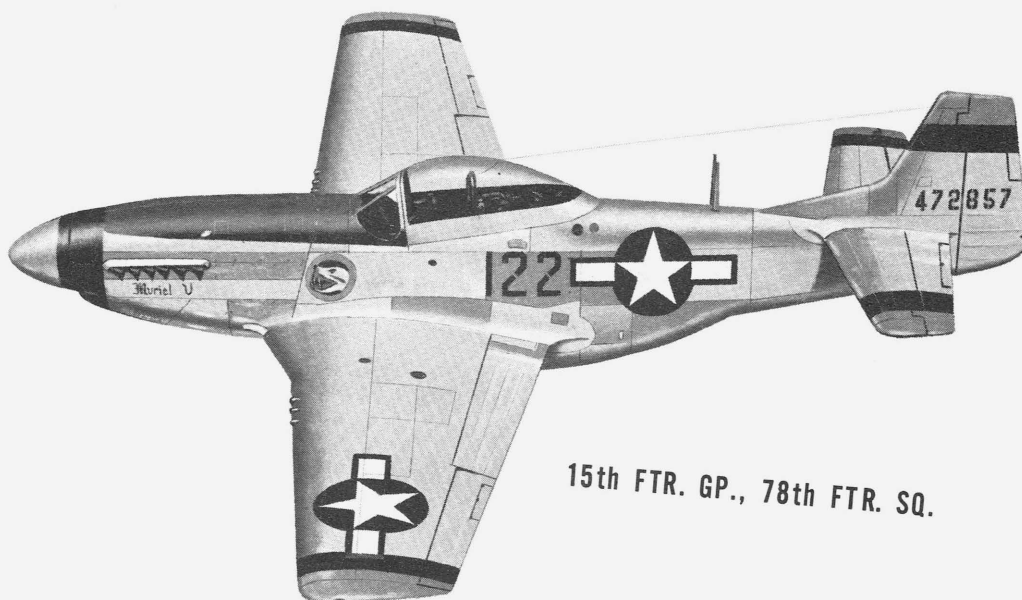
Two Mustangs of the 72nd Squadron, 21st Fighter Group on Iwo Jima with Yellow appearing very dark. (USAF 64849AC)



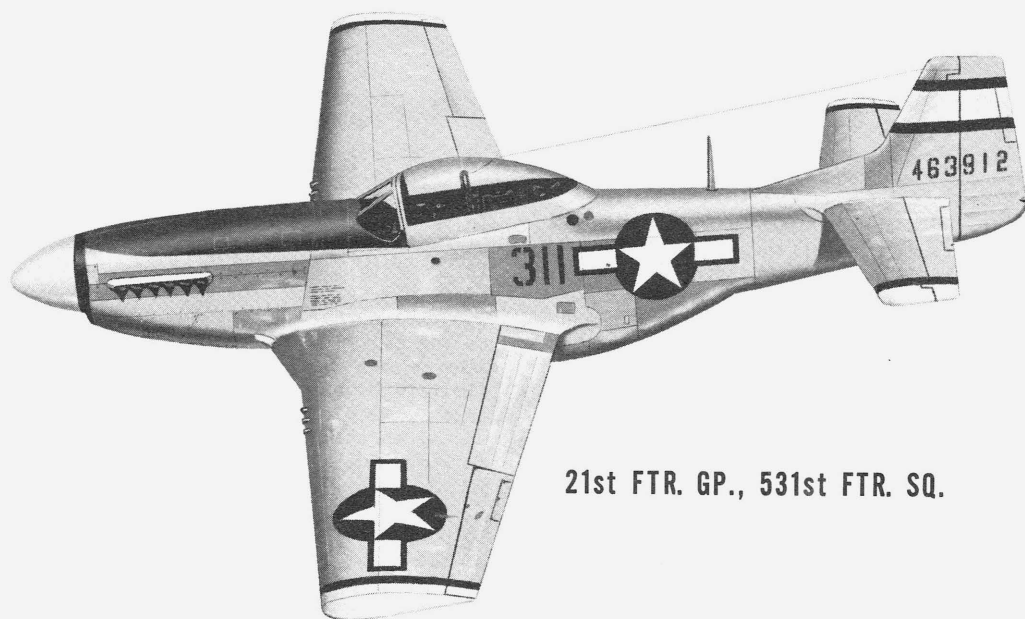
15th FTR. GP., 45th FTR. SQ.



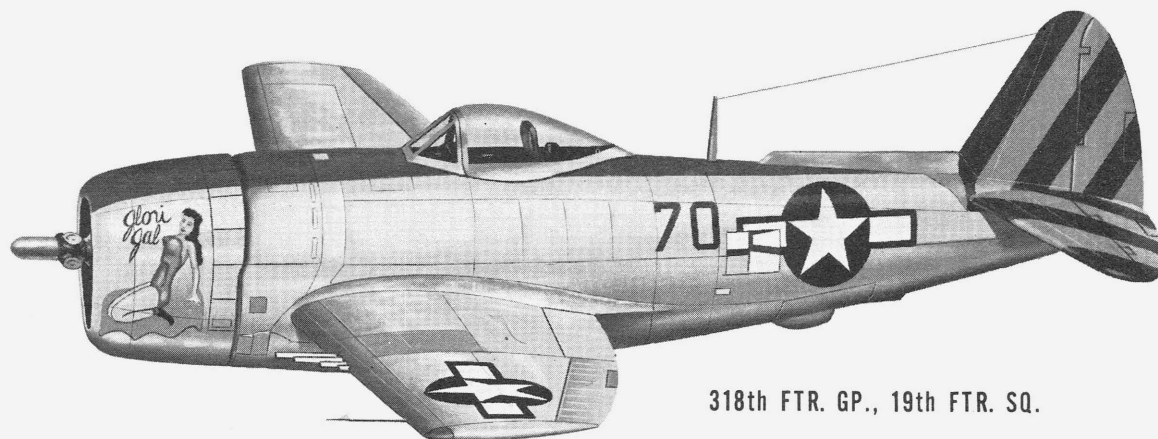
15th FTR. GP., 47th FTR. SQ.



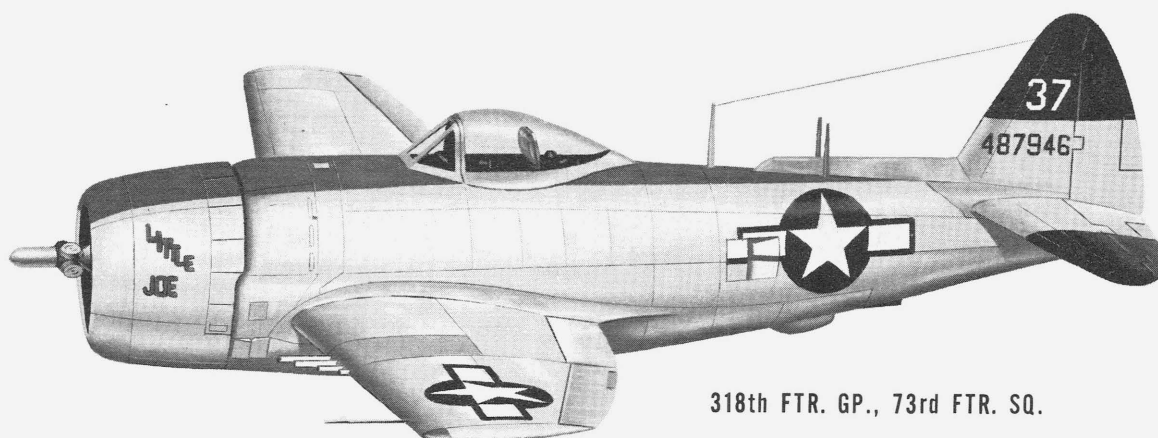
15th FTR. GP., 78th FTR. SQ.



21st FTR. GP., 531st FTR. SQ.



318th FTR. GP., 19th FTR. SQ.



318th FTR. GP., 73rd FTR. SQ.

B-29s were lost out of 101 attacking (but only one went down to enemy aircraft).

For the next four months the Mustangs of these two groups (each received a Distinguished Unit Citation for its part in the 7 April operations) continued to fly escort missions to Japan and carried out attacks on ground targets in the Japanese Home Islands until the end of the war. In May 1945, they were joined by a third Mustang group, the 506th, which henceforth operated with them although assigned to the 301st Fighter Wing and the 20th Air Force.

The 506th suffered a severe blow on 1 June when it lost 15 Mustangs and 12 pilots (after presumably running into severe weather when returning from a mission). Despite the heavy loss, the 506th determinedly carried on with B-29 escorts to Osaka and Tokyo on the 7th and 10th of June in which only one B-29 was lost while the Group accounted for 11-4-2 enemy aircraft. For these operations, the 506th Fighter Group received a Distinguished Unit Citation.

Although some Mustangs of the 15th and 21st carried their markings when shipped by aircraft carrier to the Marianas, all aircraft were not given distinctive markings until they were on Saipan and Iwo Jima. Each squadron of the 15th Fighter Group, which operated from South Field, Iwo Jima, had its own distinctive markings (see page 258).

The 45th Fighter Squadron used deep Green, diagonal bands with narrow, black borders. On the wings, and horizontal tail, these ran from the inboard leading edge diagonally back and out to the trailing edge. On the vertical tail, the Green band ran diagonally back and down. Aircraft Numbers, ranging from 51 to 99, were carried in black on the side of the fuselage forward of the national insignia and, in some cases, on the landing gear cover. The propeller spinner had the forward third painted black, the middle third was green, and the aft third remained silver. The Squadron insignia was usually carried on the side of the nose.

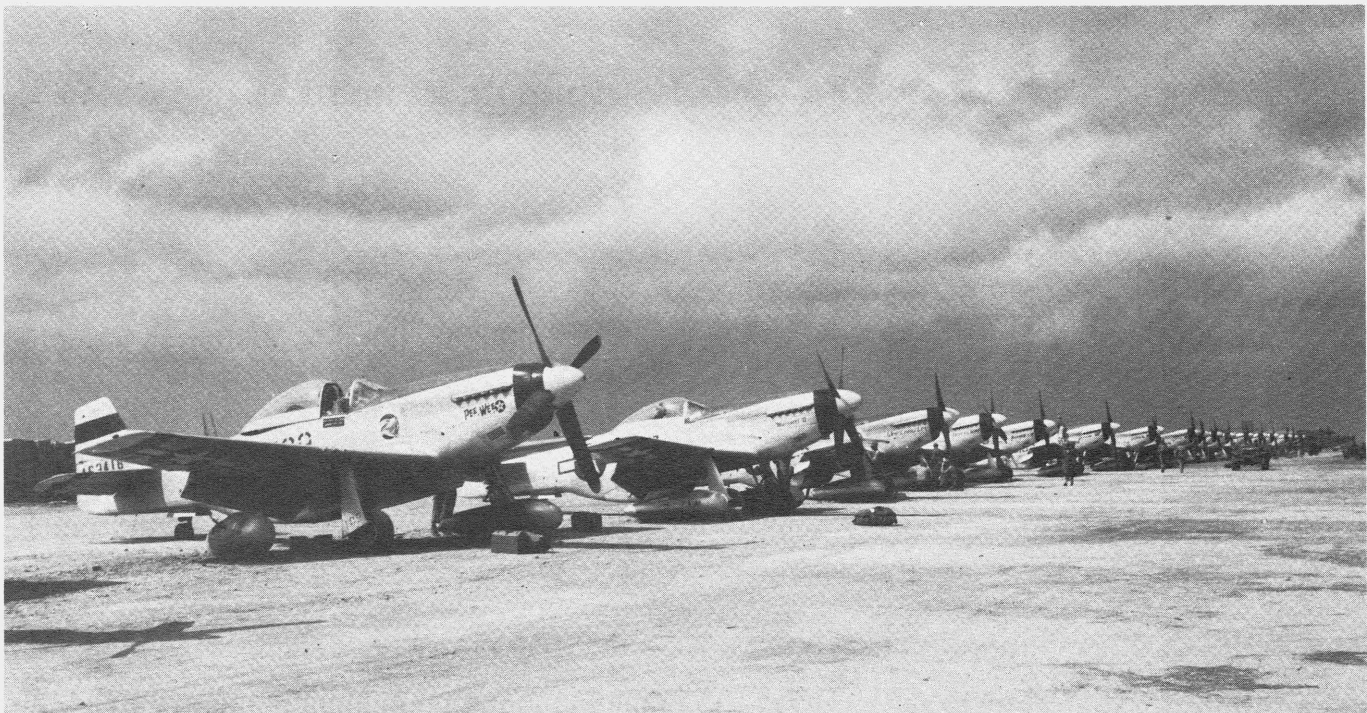
The 47th FS used Black stripes with narrow, yellow bands on the wings, just outboard of the machine guns, on the horizontal tail, and about the aft fuselage. On the vertical tail was an inverted Black triangle, with narrow yellow bands. The forward quarter of the spinner

was yellow, the middle half black and the aft quarter yellow. In some cases the Squadron insignia was carried on the nose, similar in placement to the 45th. Aircraft Numbers were carried on the side of the fuselage forward of the national insignia and also on the lower part of the landing gear cover. The range of numbers was from 150 to 199, although when the Squadron first arrived on Iwo Jima its aircraft had numbers in the 50s and below. One very famous plane was "15", serial no. 44-63423, SQUIRT, which was flown by Brig. Gen. Ernest "Mickey" Moore, commander of VII Fighter Command.

The 78th Fighter Squadron had the tips of its Mustangs' wings and horizontal and vertical tails painted Yellow with a Black band, of equal width, inboard or below the Yellow. The spinner was painted all Yellow and the forward part of the nose was all Black. Most of the aircraft carried the Squadron insignia on the side of the fuselage just forward of the canopy. The Aircraft Numbers ran from 100 to 149 and were carried just forward of the national insignia, and, in some cases, on the landing gear cover. (Aircraft 122, shown on Page 258, flew one of the last Mustang sorties of World War II.)

Markings of the 21st Fighter Group which was based on Central Field, Iwo Jima, (depicted by Aircraft 311 of the 531st Fighter Squadron on page 259) were uniform throughout the Group with only the colors and run of Aircraft Numbers varying. The markings consisted of a horizontal band on the vertical tail, the wing tips and horizontal tail tips, and the spinner being of a squadron color--Blue for the 46th Fighter Squadron, Yellow for the 72nd, and White for the 531st. A narrow black band bordered the color markings while another was placed just behind the spinner. Aircraft Numbers were--100s for the 46th, 200s for the 72nd, and 300s for the 531st Fighter Squadron.

Group markings for the 506th Fighter Group, based on North Field, Iwo Jima, are shown on page 264 and consisted of having the stationary members of the tail (forward to a point just behind the national insignia) painted in a distinctive color for each squadron. The 457th Fighter Squadron had its tails painted Red, the 458th had Black, diagonal zebra stripes, and the 462nd had its tails painted Yellow. No other portion of the



P-51Ds of the 78th Squadron, 15th Fighter Group on Iwo, 10 March 1945. PEE WEE, 109, foreground. (USAF 70561AC)



A dense cloud of smoke backgrounds P-51Ds of the 458th Squadron, 506th Fighter Group on Iwo. (USAF 67969AC)

aircraft, including rudder and elevators, was painted. Aircraft Numbers were--457th from 500 to 549, 458th from 550 to 599, and 462nd from 600 to 649.

Such were the Mustangs in the P.O.A., but even as the P-51s were flying their first missions plans were underway to bring into the area an escort fighter developed expressly for the long, over-water flights required in the Pacific. This was the Republic P-47N Thunderbolt which, when equipped with two under-wing drop tanks of 310 gallon capacity, had a range of 2500 miles with full combat equipment. (Most P-47Ns were to operate from Ie Shima where it was 1000 miles to Tokyo while the distance was 750 miles to Tokyo from Iwo Jima.) Even with the greater distance involved, the P-47Ns had sufficient range to escort bombers to Tokyo, remain in the target area for two hours and return with a good margin of fuel still in the tanks. The penalty paid for this outstanding performance was in the take off--the P-47N needed 5,000 feet of runway minimum to get airborne, and take off required setting the brakes, revving up to half throttle (water injection at Manual), releasing brakes and increasing power to 72" Hg.

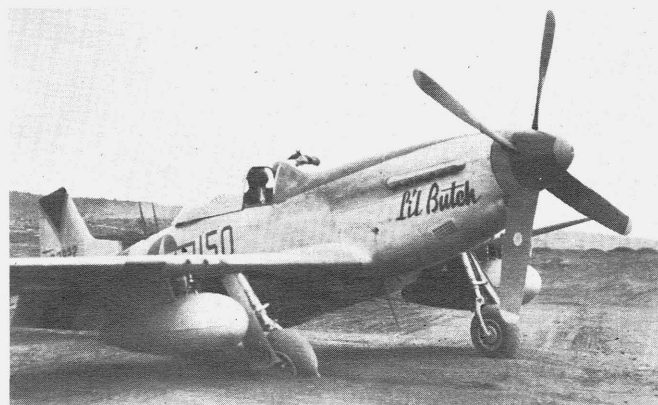
Movement of the P-47Ns into the combat theater was one of the more intriguing operations of WW II. Over 400 Thunderbolts were loaded on aircraft carriers in San Francisco and ferried west, from April to June of 1945, the majority being debarked in Hawaii with others being put ashore at Majuro, Eniwetok and Guam. Even while the first planes were arriving in Hawaii, the pilots of the 318th Group were giving up their P-47Ds and P-38s on Saipan and being flown east to pick up new mounts at Hawaii. As soon as they were familiarized with the new fighter, the pilots of the 318th began flying them across the Pacific to Saipan. Using B-25s as navigation planes, the 318th pilots flew the 4,132 mile trip by stages--to Johnston Island, to Majuro, to Eniwetok and then to Saipan--without losing a single aircraft. From Saipan they flew to Ie Shima (a small island, five miles long by one mile wide, off the northwest tip of Okinawa) where they were to be based from May 1945 until the end of the war.

Pilots of three new P-47N groups, the 413th, 414th and 507th Fighter Groups, began moving westward in May. Some flew from Hawaii, others were shipped to Majuro,

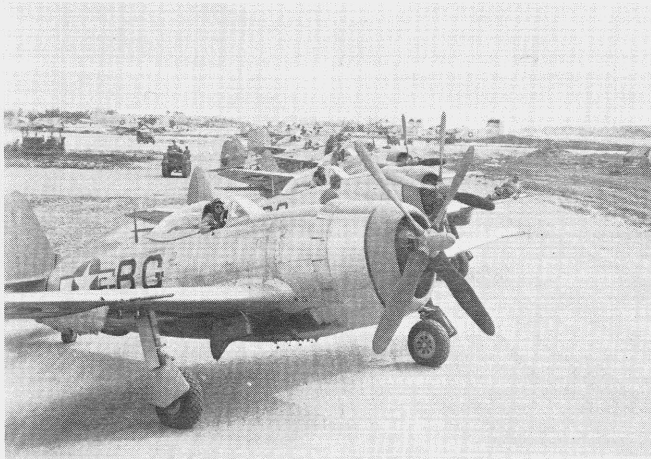
Eniwetok or Guam to pick up their planes and then fly them for whatever distance remained between the pick-up point and Guam. An idea of this operation can be gained from the following words of Robert T. Forrest of the 507th Fighter Group.

"The bulk of the 507th pilots, ground crews and supporting units went over to Majuro (from San Francisco) on a transport, but a few of us went on an escort carrier on whose deck were about one squadron of P-47Ns. These were originally supposed to be ours, and we were to be catapulted off the deck of the carrier at some unnamed destination. We were thoroughly briefed on catapulting procedures by the Navy and were looking forward to the historic event, but it never came off. About 7 days out of Alameda (1 April) we cruised past Diamond Head and into Ford Island. We debarked and did not see these P-47Ns again.

"We spent several weeks at Hickam Field, swimming, tennis and all that and flew some in preparation for ferrying some other Jugs westward. About 12 to 16 of us, with 13 B-25s navigating, flew to Majuro via Johnston Island. There we met with the rest of the Group, but we did not keep these aircraft either and in a few



LIL BUTCH pulls up lame but still shows the colorful markings of the 47th Fighter Sqdn. (George J. Letzter)



Above, a lineup of Republic P-47N Thunderbolts of the 28th Fighter Squadron, 413th Group with the fourth aircraft in line showing the black Heart on the rudder. Right, some 28th Squadron P-47Ns had a blue Heart on the vertical fin. (Photos - Jack Ehlers)



days were flown by C-47s (some went by ship) to Eniwetok arriving during the first week of May. On Eniwetok we finally received our own Jugs, craned off a carrier top, and we stayed there several weeks until we were real hot in the N model.

"I was fortunate in being able to check out in an F6F (Eniwetok being Navy) and spent many happy hours whipping the tail off frustrated Jugs in dog fights (at lower altitudes). The Hellcat was very easy to fly, while the Jug turned like a 60-foot trailer below 15,000 feet.

"Finally, one bright morning, we took off and with B-25s again navigating, flew to Tinian with the key ground crews coming in transport aircraft. The remainder of the Group shipped direct to Ie Shima. We stayed a few days on Tinian and because the Tinian runways were not long enough for us to take off fully loaded we jumped across to Saipan and took off the next morning for Ie Shima, again with B-25s navigating. We made the long flights with all guns loaded, of course, but held out enough rounds of 50 cal. so we could put a few cans of beer in with the ammo. I hate to think what would have come out if we had had to pull the trigger--but if you got to the beer real quick after landing, it was fairly cool."

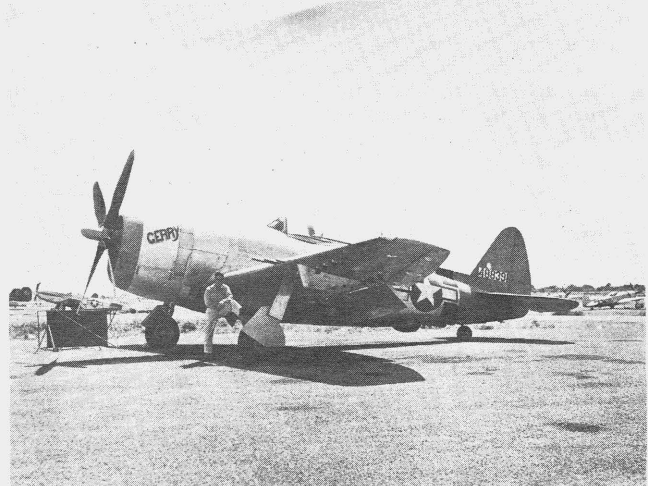
The 318th arrived on Ie Shima in May and by the end of the month had begun combat operations, first flying tactical missions in the Okinawa area and then extending these to the main, southern island of Japan, Kyushu. The Group scored its first aerial victory in the Okinawa area on 24 May (it had scored 31 victories from Saipan); on the 25th its planes ran into gaggles of Japanese fighters and Kamikazes and destroyed 34; on the 28th the Group destroyed 17 more enemy planes over Kyushu; and by 10 June the 318th had run its count from Ie Shima to 102 enemy aircraft destroyed.

During June, the 301st Fighter Wing arrived on Ie Shima from the Zone of the Interior and took direct control over the 318th, and the 413th and the 507th Groups when they arrived some weeks later. The 301st Wing also took control of the 414th Fighter Group (its P-47Ns were shipped to Guam from where it flew against Truk from 11 to 22 July before taking up station on North Field, Iwo Jima late in July) and the 506th Mustang Group also stationed on North Field, Iwo Jima.

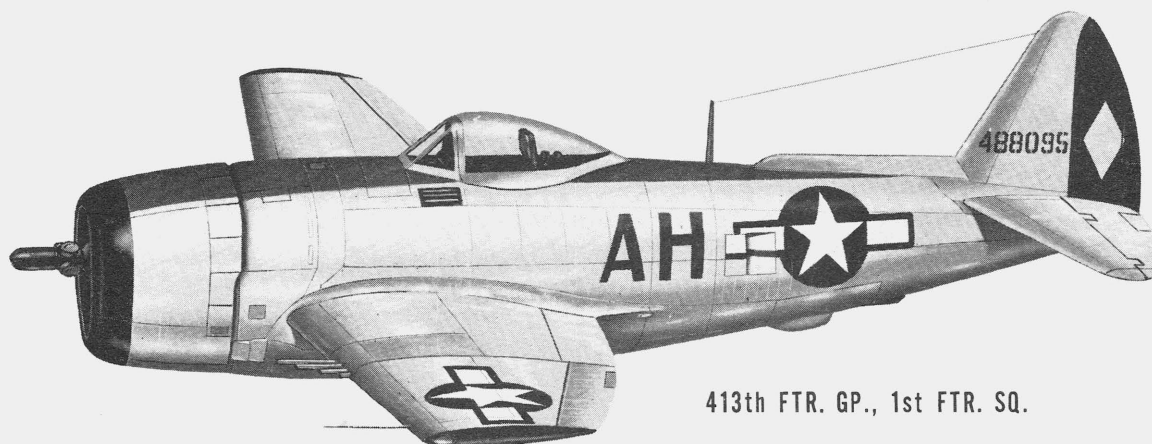
The 301st Wing was technically responsible to the 20th Air Force, but it functioned under command of the 10th Army defensively and under command of the Navy strategically. Defensive and tactical missions were flown in May, June and into July and then B-29 escorts



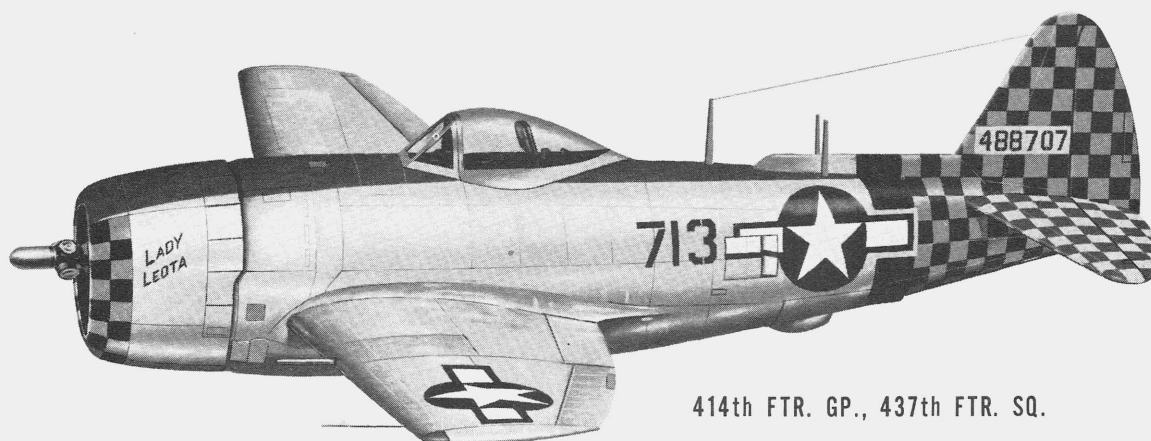
P-47Ns of the 414th Fighter Group on board USS Casablanca, 6-22 July 1945. (Photo - E. H. McEachron)



GERRY, No. 774, serial 44-88391, belonged to Lt. E. H. McEachron of 456th FS, 414th Group. (McEachron)



413th FTR. GP., 1st FTR. SQ.



414th FTR. GP., 437th FTR. SQ.

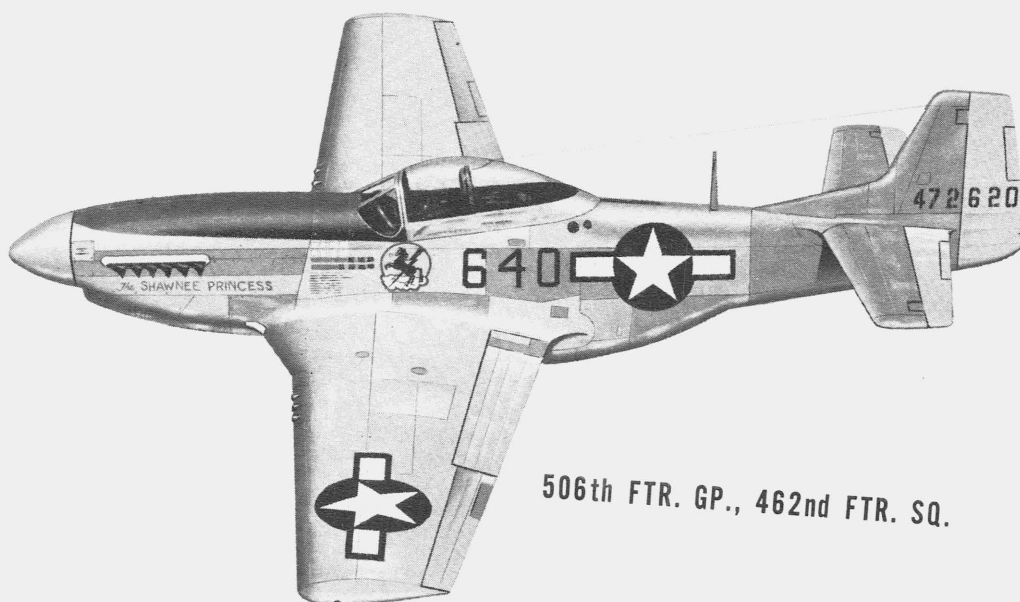
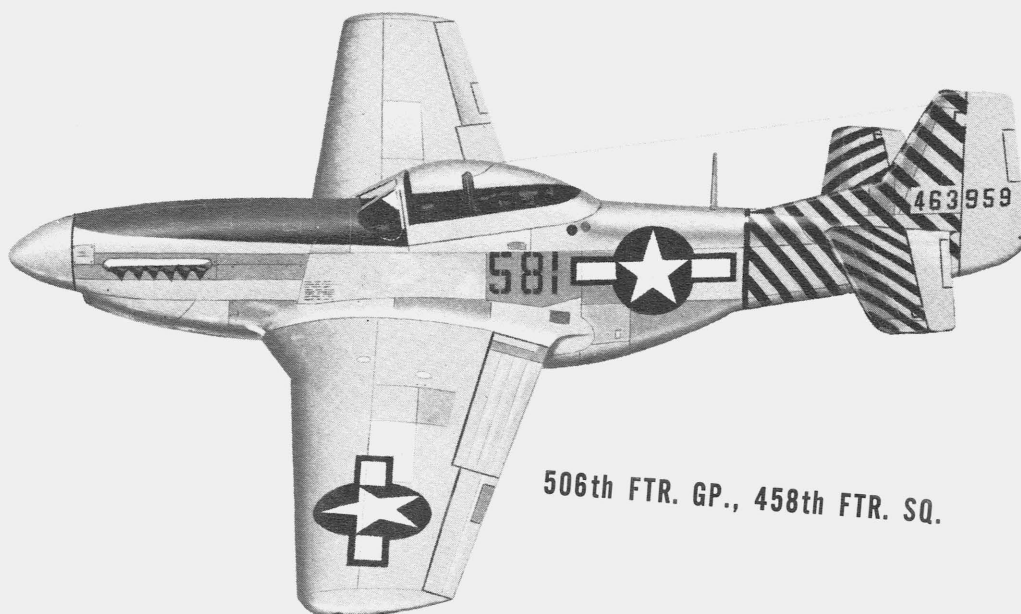
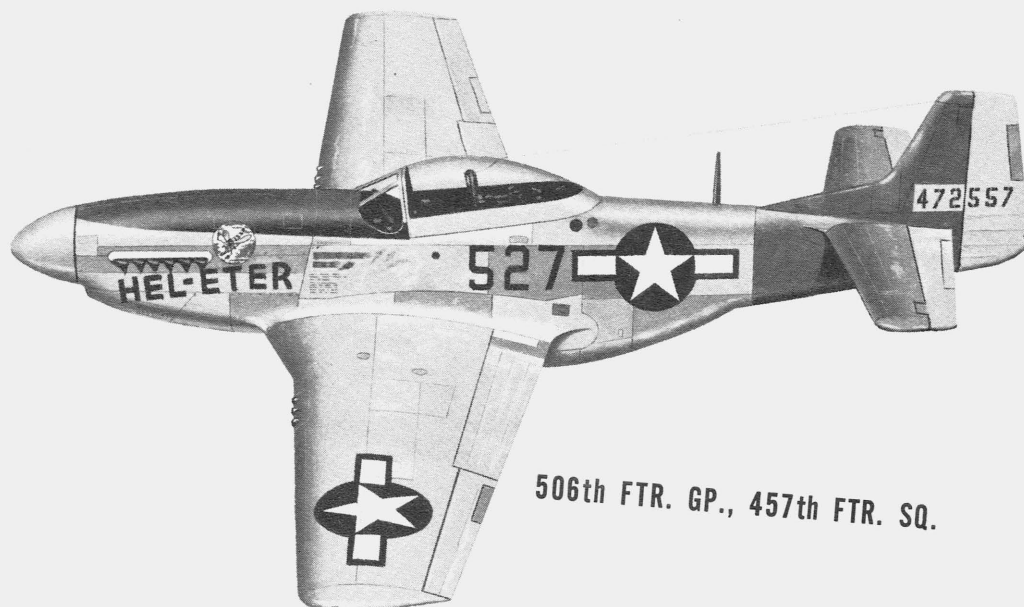
were flown. In August, the 301st Wing and its groups were transferred to control of the 8th Air Force which was then setting up heavy bomber bases on Okinawa from which to strike Japan. However, before the 8th's bombers could go into action, the war ended on 15 August.

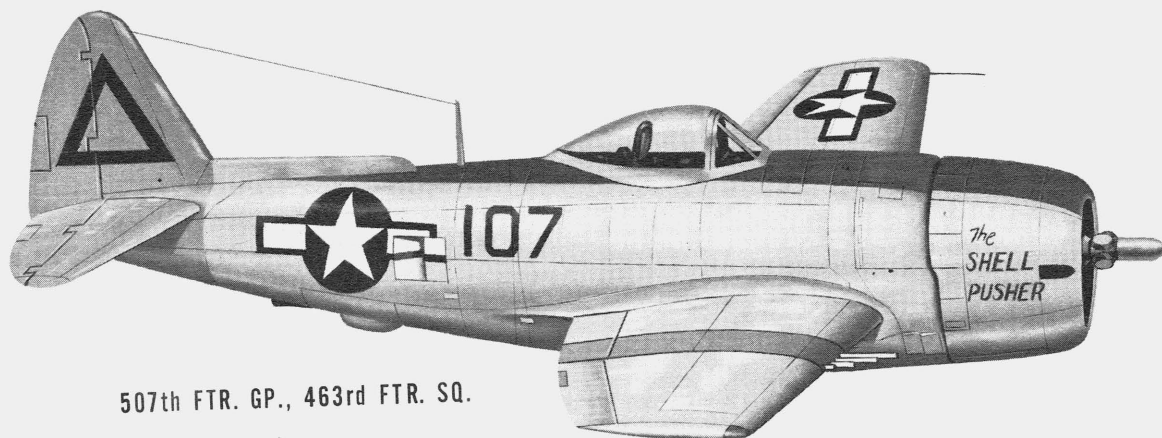
With the 318th flying from Ie Shima since May, the 413th Fighter Group became operational on Ie Shima in June 1945 and the 507th entered combat there on 1 July 1945. Operations of these P-47Ns soon stretched across the whole breadth of the western Pacific from Japan to China to Korea. On 13 August, 48 P-47Ns of the 507th flew a long-range fighter sweep from Ie Shima to Keijo, Korea, despite incomplete intelligence on the target area. After a four hour flight in, the Group was intercepted by 50 Japanese fighters. In a 30 minute air battle the 507th destroyed 20 e/a in the air, and added two destroyed on the ground, for the loss of only one Thunderbolt. For this action the 507th received a Distinguished Unit Citation.

Aircraft markings of the 318th Group were changed when the squadrons reequipped with the N model (see page 259). The 19th Fighter Squadron painted the tails of its planes with broad, Black and Yellow, zebra

stripes but the remainder of the machines retained their metal finish. Aircraft numbers ran from 38 to 74 (possibly further) and were placed on the lower landing gear cover and (probably in most cases) on the side of the fuselage forward of the national insignia. The 73rd Squadron painted the upper portion of the vertical tail and the outer portions of the horizontal tail Black, and it placed the Aircraft Number, range from 1 to 34, in the Black on the vertical tail, with the number being unpainted metal. In a few cases, 73rd aircraft had a Black band around the forward cowl. The 333rd FS painted its tails in the same manner as the 73rd, except Yellow was used. The forward part of the cowl was also painted Yellow. A narrow black band bordered all Yellow markings. Aircraft Numbers are reported as 75 to 110, but it is not known where these numbers were carried in the 333rd.

The 413th Fighter Group marked its aircraft with a playing card symbol, using a different one to indicate each squadron--the 1st Fighter Squadron used a Diamond, the 28th a Heart, and the 34th a Spade. The 1st FS (see page 263) painted the rudder Black with a metallic Diamond in the center, and the forward part of the cowl was

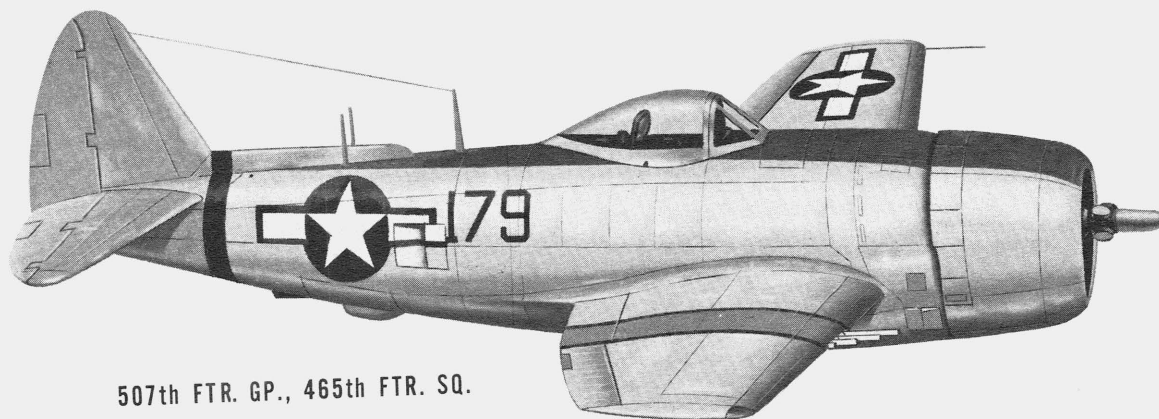




507th FTR. GP., 463rd FTR. SQ.



507TH FTR. GP., 464th FTR. SQ.



507th FTR. GP., 465th FTR. SQ.