

engagements that day credited him with five Mustangs destroyed, PLUS two damaged so badly they later crash-landed many miles to the south. One of these two was from his first engagement of the day, the other is related above and believed to be Ralph Hofer. To the south of the battle area is Mostar, and an AAF report states that during the period from November 1943 to November 1944, only one P-51 (3 P-40s and 5 B-24s) aircraft crashed in the area around Mostar.

From this evidence, it appears entirely likely that "Kid" Hofer was Hartmann's next to last Mustang victim. If so, he had mixed with the greatest of all German fighter pilots, almost beaten him, only to be hit and gravely wounded. Still he'd tried to get home as he always had, only to crash 300 miles southward in the attempt.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The story of Ralph K. Hofer is based on his personal flight log; information contained in Grover C. Hall, Jr.'s "1000 Destroyed"; interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Arthur J. Hofer; and a copy of the official AAF list of victories for Lt. Hofer. It is important to note several discrepancies between my account here and the official victory list. The latter gives Hofer only

half a victory each for 12 and 21 May, but two victories for 8 October. Since it is patently impossible that Ralph scored two victories on 8 October 1943, I have credited him here with full victories on 12 and 21 May so that we arrive at his officially recognized final victory total of 30½ enemy aircraft. There is some evidence to support my conclusion, but it is equally likely that there is one of Ralph's victories not recorded here. His personal flight log is complete only to 1 May 1944 and thereafter was kept up by a person unknown.

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Mustangs of the Eighth

During 1940, while the Battle of Britain came and reached its climax, North American Aviation developed and built in under three months a sleek, new fighter plane for the British Air Purchasing Committee. Soon named by the company as the North American Apache, the NA-73 was ordered for the Royal Air Force, and the U.S. Army Air Corps showed a smattering of interest by ordering two production aircraft for evaluation.

Production machines for the RAF received another name, however, and became the Mustang I. While they were being delivered the Army Air Force showed a little more interest by ordering 150 P-51 aircraft, and still more with another 1941 order for 310 P-51As. When the U. S. had been drawn into World War II, some of these first AAF Mustangs were sent to duty overseas--P-51As seeing service in the China-Burma-India theater and a few P-51s (including 41-37328) seeing action in North Africa. Later, they were joined by a dive bomber version, the A-36, known as the Invader, which served with two groups in the Mediterranean Theater from mid-1943 into 1944.

By the time the later Allison powered Mustangs were going overseas, production was under way on another version of the airplane powered by Packard built Rolls Royce Merlin engines. They didn't change the name again and the marriage of the Mustang airframe and the Merlin engine produced the most exciting fighter plane that ever took to the air--the P-51B and P-51C with cockpit faired into the fuselage and P-51D with bubble canopy.

The entry of these new Mustangs into combat took place in England which was to be the arena where, under the 8th Air Force, the P-51B and its predecessors would fully prove themselves. The first unit to be equipped with these planes was the 354th Fighter Group of the 9th Air Force. They received their mounts after arriving in England and flew their first operational mission on 1 December 1943. Although missions were flown in support of the 8th Air Force, the 8th did not receive its first Mustangs until two months later when the 357th Fighter Group, 9th Air Force, was transferred to it on 10 February 1944. On 26 February, the 4th Fighter Group received its first Mustangs and was converted to them by the 29th of the month. Then on March 3rd, the 355th Fighter Group (operating in England since

9 September 1943) converted to the Mustang.

Success of the 354th, 357th, 4th and 355th with the Mustang was so great that by September 1944 all but 3 8th fighter groups had been converted to P-51s, and two of those converted in November and December. By the end of the war in Europe, the four original Mustang groups had accounted for an impressive number of enemy aircraft. The 354th destroyed 701 in the air and 255 on the ground; the 357th destroyed a total of 688½; the 4th had accounted for about 855 enemy aircraft with P-51s; and the 355th had destroyed over 750 enemy aircraft with its Mustangs--a total of some 3250 enemy aircraft destroyed by just four fighter groups in less than 17 months.

During April 1944 two other P-51 groups were added to the 8th. The 352nd Fighter Group converted to P-51s on 7 April and the 339th Group arrived with Mustangs to go operational with the 8th on the 30th. In May the 359th Fighter Group converted from P-47s to P-51s on 4 May and the 361st converted on the 12th. During July 1944, three of the 8th's four Lockheed P-38 groups converted to Mustangs--the 55th doing so on 14 July, the 20th converting on 17 July, and the 364th on 28 July. During September 1944, the fourth P-38 group, the 479th, converted to Mustangs on the 27th of the month, while on 30 September the 353rd Fighter Group switched over to P-51s.

Final conversion of the 8th Air Force fighter groups to Mustangs took place on 6 November 1944, when the 356th Fighter Group made the change, and on 21 December 1944 when the 78th Fighter Group became the last to take on P-51s. Thereafter the 8th had fourteen P-51 groups and one P-47 group.

History that is now legend was written by the Mustangs based in England. In all certainty the wonderful little North American fighter reached its peak of success and glory with the 8th, and so it is with a real sense of pleasure that we revisit some of the earlier P-51s on the next three pages through the photos made available to the JOURNAL by Member, Ray E. Bowers, and taken almost exclusively in the first half of 1944.

Those looking for more and different Mustangs will be pleased to know the almost forgotten, photo recon Mustangs will be treated in detail in the history of the 9th Air Force, to appear in the JOURNAL during 1965.



With 368th Squadron code letters trimmed in black, CV-E of the 359th Fighter Group sustained a 20 mm cannon hole in the propeller. Aircraft is a P-51B, 43-6491.



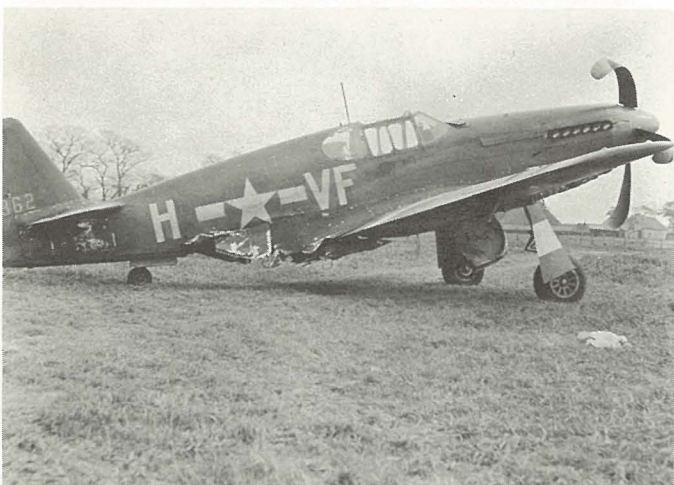
A P-51B, 42-106662 carries invasion stripes only under wings and under national insignia on fuselage. 5Q-Y is from 505th Fighter Squadron, 339th Fighter Group.



Hangared for repairs is PZ-S, 43-6500, with "displaced" lower rudder. Equipped with a Malcomb hood, it served with 486th Fighter Squadron of 352nd Group.



A bit oil streaked but still sleekly beautiful is the silver FT-V, P-51B, 42-106897, from the 9th Air Force's 354th Fighter Group, 353rd Fighter Squadron.



After a wheels-up landing which virtually tore away her radiator intake, VF-H of 336th Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, had her gear dropped and stood awaiting repairs.



With distinctive blue nose of 352nd Fighter Group, HO-Z crash landed when engine cut-out on take off. The P-51B was with the Group's 487th Fighter Squadron.



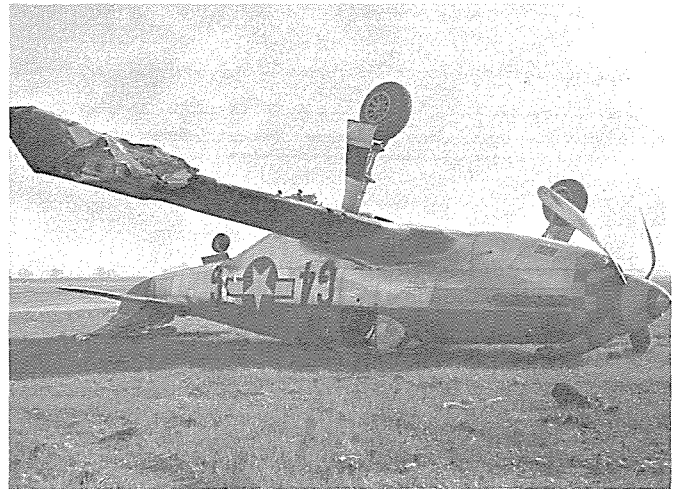
With five bombing missions to her credit, B6-B, 43-6999, ran into a balloon cable and clipped off the outer portion of her right wing. 363rd Squadron, 357th Group.



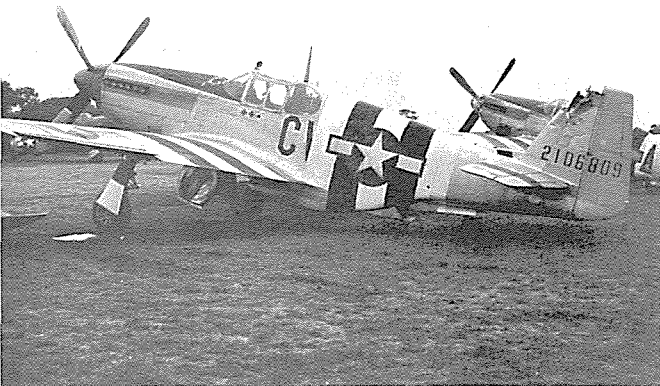
Rough landing for P-51B, 43-6840, of the 336th Fighter Squadron, found the aircraft sliding along right into a revetment area, as if to hide herself and her shame.



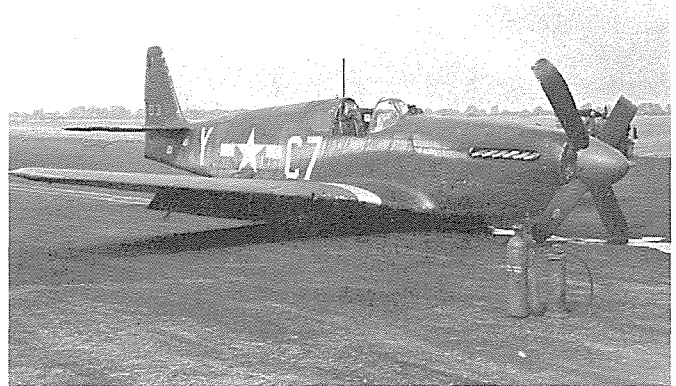
A Dorset potato farm is not the best place for a forced landing as this P-51C, 42-103781, discovered. QP-Y was from 334th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group.



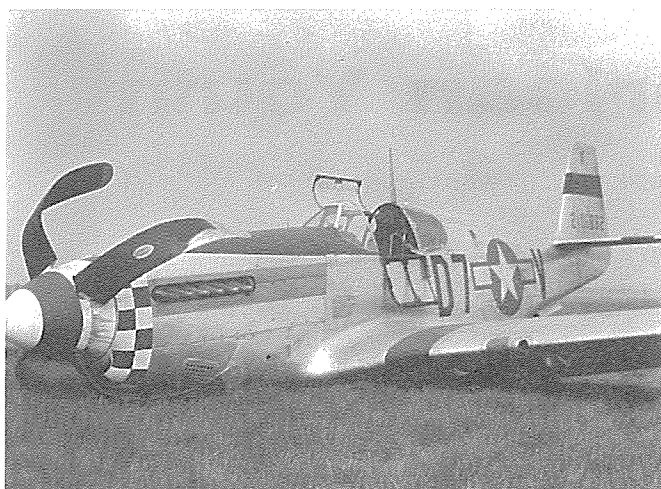
Another landing that didn't quite come off as planned. G4-G, with OD upper surfaces, is a P-51B, 42-106814, of the 362nd Fighter Squadron, 357th Group.



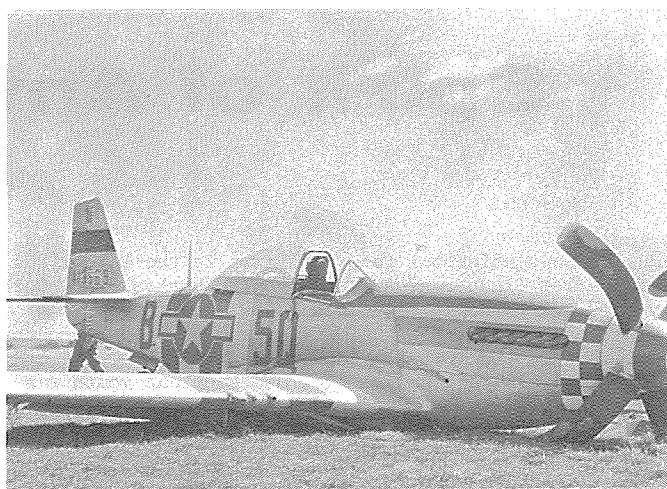
In the rush to paint invasion stripes on this P-51B of the 368th Squadron, 359th Group, part of the squadron code and the entire aircraft letter were overpainted.



This pilot landed on runway fine, except that his wheels were in the "up" position. A P-51B, 43-6503, C7-Y was probably with 496th Fighter Training Group.



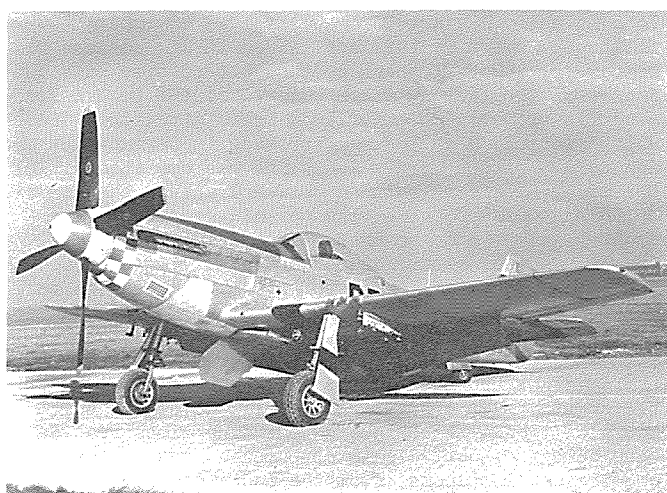
At rest after sliding in for a belly landing, this Mustang, P-51B, 42-106882, is D7-V from the 503rd Fighter Squadron of the 339th Fighter Group.



A P-51D, 44-13569 is from the 505th Fighter Squadron and carried the distinctive red and white checkerboard cowl, and red and white spinner, of the 339th Group.



"Sally", also 505th Fighter Squadron, bears damage to her nose and left wing from snuggling up too close to a balloon cable. Serial number 42-106579.



A P-51D-5-NA, 44-13627, this 503rd Fighter Squadron Mustang stands waiting for a mission with underwing pylons ready for tanks and her gun muzzles covered.



Photographed on D-Day, with considerable flak damage to her right wing, was "Sniffles III", 42-106812. Underlined "A" shows her as second "A" aircraft in squadron.



With yet another belly landing, to the aptly named "The Roller", a P-51D of the 504th Squadron, we bid adieu to the Mustangs of the 339th Group and the 8th Air Force.