

# 15th Air Group P-51 Mustangs

by Ralph J. Ferrusi

We just came across my Dad's—Ralph J. Ferrusi Sr.—July 29, 1946 Army of the United States Honorable Discharge. I was very surprised to find out he was discharged from the Seventh Air Force 15th Fighter Group. Pop was 33 years old and married with two grade-school-age kids when he was drafted into the U. S. Army on February 22, 1945. I never knew this, but according to his discharge he was an instructor! He didn't teach fighter pilots how to fly, but he taught hydrostatics and fire fighting, and "Was also informed on airplane maintenance."

I did know he was stationed in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and maybe, Fort Benning, Georgia, then went to Hawaii, then the Philippines, but I don't recall any specific details, except he once took the carburetor off a P-51 Mustang (in Oahu, Hawaii???).

And, I was very surprised to discover there was a book about the 15th Air Group: John W. Lambert's 2006 THE LONG CAMPAIGN, The History of the 15th Fighter Group in World War II. I immediately bought a copy.

To be perfectly honest, the first thing I did was thumb through it to see if Pop's name was mentioned, or if I could identify him in any of the many photos. Nope... then I read it from cover to cover. Here's my take on it:

The 15th Pursuit Group originated at Wheeler Field, Oahu, Hawaii on December 1, 1940. They flew the Boeing P-26 and the Curtis P-36 Hawk. The P-26 was an open-cockpit fighter, with a maximum speed of 234 mph. At the time, it was thought that the 314 mph Hawk could outperform any Asiatic aircraft. 352 mph P-40B Tomahawk's began arriving April 1, 1940. Then along came Sunday, December 7, 1941, that proved that these aircraft pretty much provided target practice to the Japanese Zero.



Two pilots at Wheeler, 2nd Lieutenants Ken Taylor and George Welsh raced north to the untouched Haleiwa training airstrip on Oahu's north coast and took off in P-40B's towards Wheeler, where about 100 neatly-parked aircraft, mostly P-40's, had been destroyed or damaged.

Above the Wheeler carnage, Taylor and Welsh then became the first American fighter pilots to engage the Japanese, shooting up one or two Val dive bombers apiece before landing at Wheeler (and being shot at by U. S. Forces in the process).

Here's a thought I just had: the Val's that Taylor and Welsh shot up, and any other Japanese aircraft shot up, or down, were technically destroyed before Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the U. S. officially declared war on Japan. I don't know how this shakes out in the Grand Scheme of things, but, at least to me, it's an interesting thought.

The 15th Pursuit Group, credited with ten confirmed kills, provided the only real opposition to the Japanese by U. S. Forces on Pearl Harbor. 188 Army, Navy, and Marine aircraft were lost, and fewer than 90 Army planes of all types survived on Hawaii's four airfields.

In 1942 the 15th began receiving P-40D and E models, and Bell's unorthodox but quirky P-39D Aircobras. The good news in 1942 was the invasion of Guadalcanal (where my father-in-law, Corporal Phillip Duane Reed at 9:09 AM, August 7, 1942, landed on Red Beach with the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Platoon, First Marine Division) and the drubbing of the Japanese fleet at Midway—ahhh, the good old Douglas SBD Dauntlesses—but the bad news was the P-40's and P-39's were, honestly, inferior aircraft to the Zero, and the Oahu-based 15th, flying Combat Air Patrol and training flights, somehow managed to lose 13 pilots and 31 fighters to operational accidents.

In March 1943 the 15th's 46th Squadron ended up on Canton Atoll, and then other hot, barren, tree-less shit holes, valuable only for their airstrips, somewhere in the vast Pacific a zillion miles west of Hawaii. At times, P-40's and P-39's were

actually catapulted off of jeep carriers to get to the air strips. I had absolutely no idea that P-40's and P-39's could be catapulted from carriers. Squadrons of the 15th eventually ended up on Makin Island in the Gilberts north (?) of Tarawa, and escorted A-20's, B-24's, and B-25's that were wasting tons of bombs on tiny, crappy Mili island.

These were long over-water missions, and, during this period all too many P-40's and P-39's crashed and burned or ended up in the bottom of the Pacific. The book goes on and on and on about how depressingly miserable life was on Canton, Makin, and other crappy islands, and how basically futile their missions were, for a long long time: not fun reading.

So, let's fast-forward to the Spring of 1944 when radial-engined "razorback" P-47D's began arriving in Oahu to replace the in-line Allison-engined P-40's. The good news was the Thunderbolts were far superior to the P-40's. The bad news was the pilots had to get used to horsing around aircraft that weighed nearly twice as much as the P-39's and P-40's, and the 15th's mechanics now how to readjust to air-cooled radial engines after adjusting to in-line liquid-cooled engines, and, before that, the air-cooled radial P-36 engines!

Nothing much of any consequence happened with the Thunderbolts, and in November 1944 P-51D-20-NA Mustangs began arriving: back to liquid-cooled in-line engines for the mechanics, but the 15th's combat-deprived pilots were finally going to see some action in the superb new Mustangs.

So...let the Mustang story begin: I'm a Mustang "nut", and this was the part I was waiting for. It turns out in the final 80 pages of the book there was some good news, but, mostly, a lot of bad news concerning the long, long 8, 9, 10, and 11 hour 1,500 mile round-trip over-water flights from Iwo Jima to the Japanese mainland.

To summarize, it was asking a lot of the Merlin engines, and the Mustang pilots, to make these extremely long escort round trip missions after mission. There were coolant leaks, oil leaks, rough engines, often involving parachuting (and, all too often, parachutes that didn't open) and ditchings: "No question about it, the P-51 was a great airplane, but a lousy boat." "...the underside airscoop acted like an instant anchor."

And, I had no idea how aggressively, and relentlessly, Japanese fighters attacked the high-flying B-29's, and how extremely important the Mustang escorts were. And, how the Mustangs relied on B-29 "pathfinders"

to escort them out and back from Iwo Jima, and how often this fouled up. And, how often the shitty Pacific weather affected missions: the absolute worst being on June 1, 1945 when 27 Mustangs were lost when a mission was suckered into an impossible/impassable "overcast". This was a terrible, inexcusable, really-should-have-been-avoided foul-up. I have never read, or heard of, a worse tragedy occurring on a fighter escort mission, or, for that matter, any fighter mission.

And, near the end of the war, Mustangs were sent out on low-level strafing missions: the right (long range) plane, for the wrong job (a plane dependent on a liquid-cooling system). Mustang losses, as in Korea, were terrible.

To sum things up, overall this book, unexpectedly, and unfortunately, and, surprisingly, made me feel pretty bad: all those beautiful Mustangs—and all-too-often pilots—at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean between Iwo Jima and the Japanese mainland.

And, it made me think about the 8th Air Force Mustang's escort missions from England to Germany, where the only significant water crossing was the 20-something mile English Channel, and, if the shit hit the fan you could bail out over land, or crash land on land, not into mega-hundreds of miles of deep, deep ocean.

And, of Don Gentile's ONE-MAN AIR FORCE, and "Bud" Anderson's To Fly and Fight, describing what it was like to kick the Luftwaffe's ass over France and Germany, flying the "Shangri La",

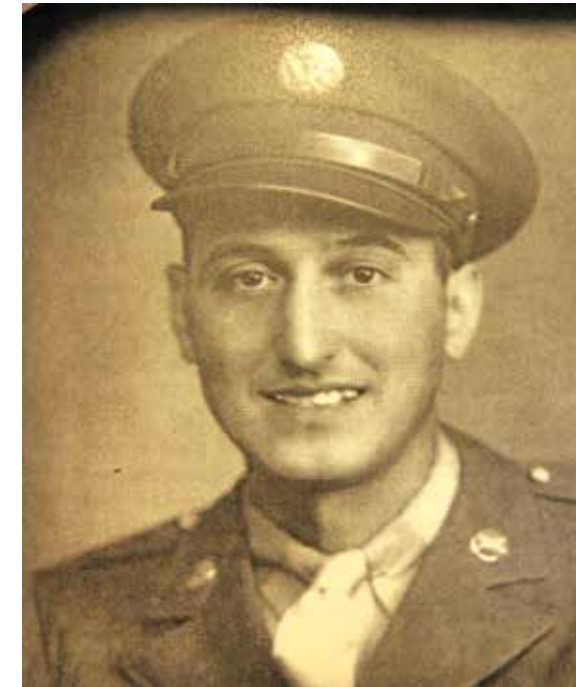
and the "OLD CROW". Or, Ratsey Preddy's "Cripes a Mighty". And, how these guy's names are household words to P-51 nuts like me.

And, how none of us Mustang nuts know a damned thing about James M. Vande Hey, or, Leon Sher, or, the "Margret IV", or "Squirt". Or, that the 15th's highest scoring ace was 23-year-old Major Robert "Todd" Moore, flying "Stinger", with 11 (or 12...) victories.

Or, for that matter, that Corporal Ralph J. Ferrusi Sr. was Honorably Discharged from the 15th Fighter Group on July 29, 1946.

But I do: SPF Ralph Joseph Ferrusi Jr., Honorably Discharged Radio Sergeant, 156th Field Artillery.

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