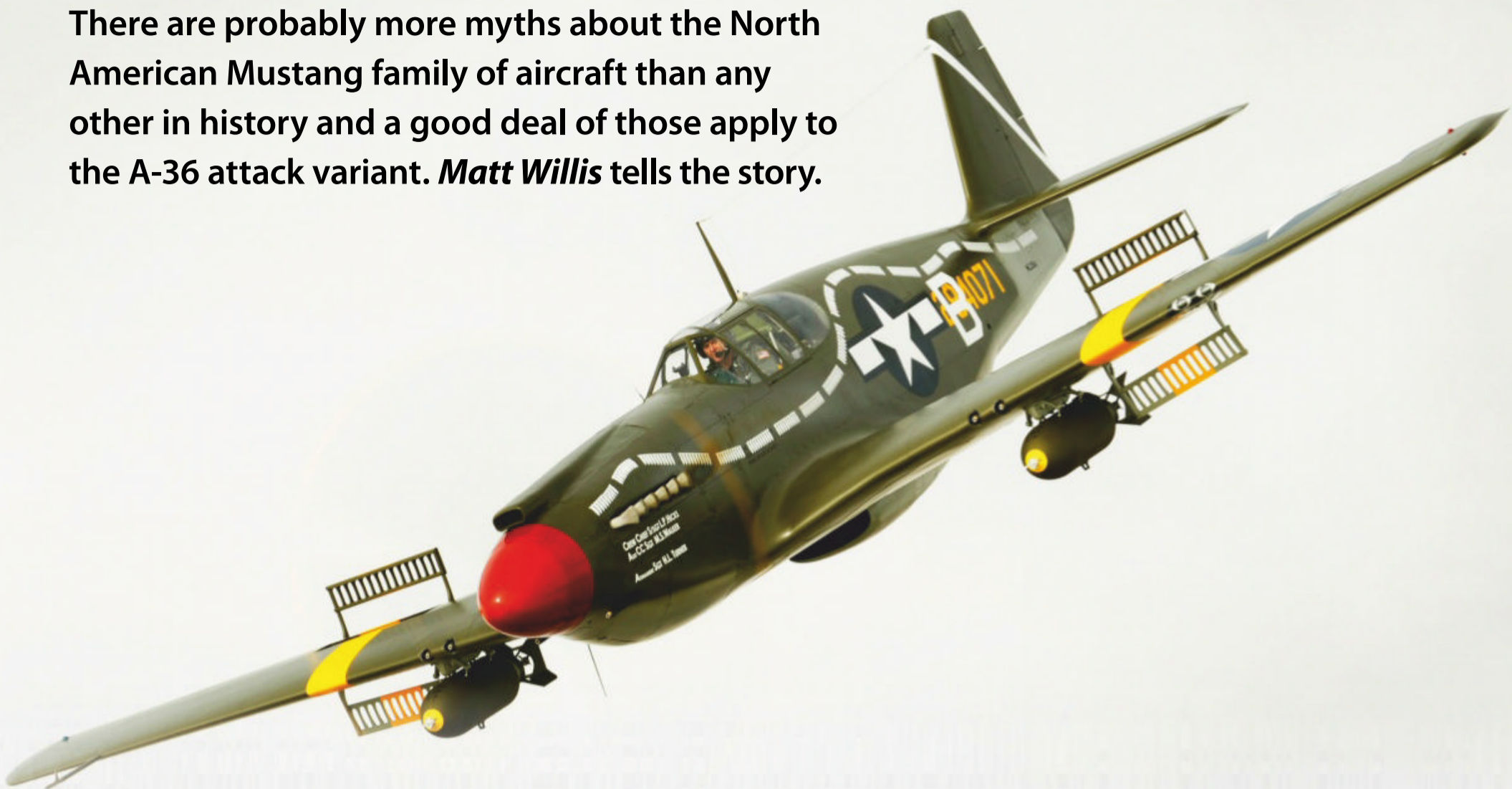


There are probably more myths about the North American Mustang family of aircraft than any other in history and a good deal of those apply to the A-36 attack variant. *Matt Willis* tells the story.



North American A-36



ABOVE: An A-36A refuelling while aircrew pose for the photographer. The aircraft wears the Type Three national marking with red borders introduced in June 1943. The spinner is red, indicating an aircraft bound for the Mediterranean, while the number on the nose (the last two digits of the serial) tended to be applied as an identification feature in the US. [All images via Matt Willis]

By the beginning of 1942, even though the aircraft had yet to go into action, the excellent performance of the RAF's Mustang Mk.I at low-level was apparent. The Mustang in British service was heading towards a tactical reconnaissance and close-support role rather than being a pure fighter.

At the same time in the US, attempts to acquire a tactical close-support aircraft had run into trouble after belated recognition of the value of this class of aeroplane. The US Army had initially attempted to procure purpose-designed dive-bombers, but these were facing troubled development. Perhaps anticipating the need, and drawing on the Mustang's low-level credentials, North American Aviation (NAA) began work on a dedicated ground-attack version. In the last week of February, NAA's 'Dutch' Kindelberger offered the USAAF such an aircraft. Design work appears to have already begun and initially included provision for both bombs and pods for 37mm cannon.

A myth has grown up that the A-36 was a ruse to sneak a purchase of fighters through the budget when there were no funds left for 'pursuit' types. In fact, the USAAF bought the A-36 because it represented the only way of bringing a close-support aircraft of the requisite performance into service in time for planned large-scale operations in late 1942 or early 1943. The aircraft were as-



signed to attack groups, and overwhelmingly used in the attack role, although the opportunity was taken to exploit their performance as escort fighters on occasion. The Army even delayed the introduction of the aircraft by insisting on dive brakes. An order for 500 specialist attack aircraft was placed in August 1942.

Before going too far into the history of this fascinating and underrated aircraft, it is worth noting and dismissing the three main myths. It was never called 'Apache' in service – although it did have a different, widely accepted unofficial name; it was not purchased as a ruse to buy fighters from the Attack budget as already mentioned; and it never went into battle with its dive brakes wired shut.

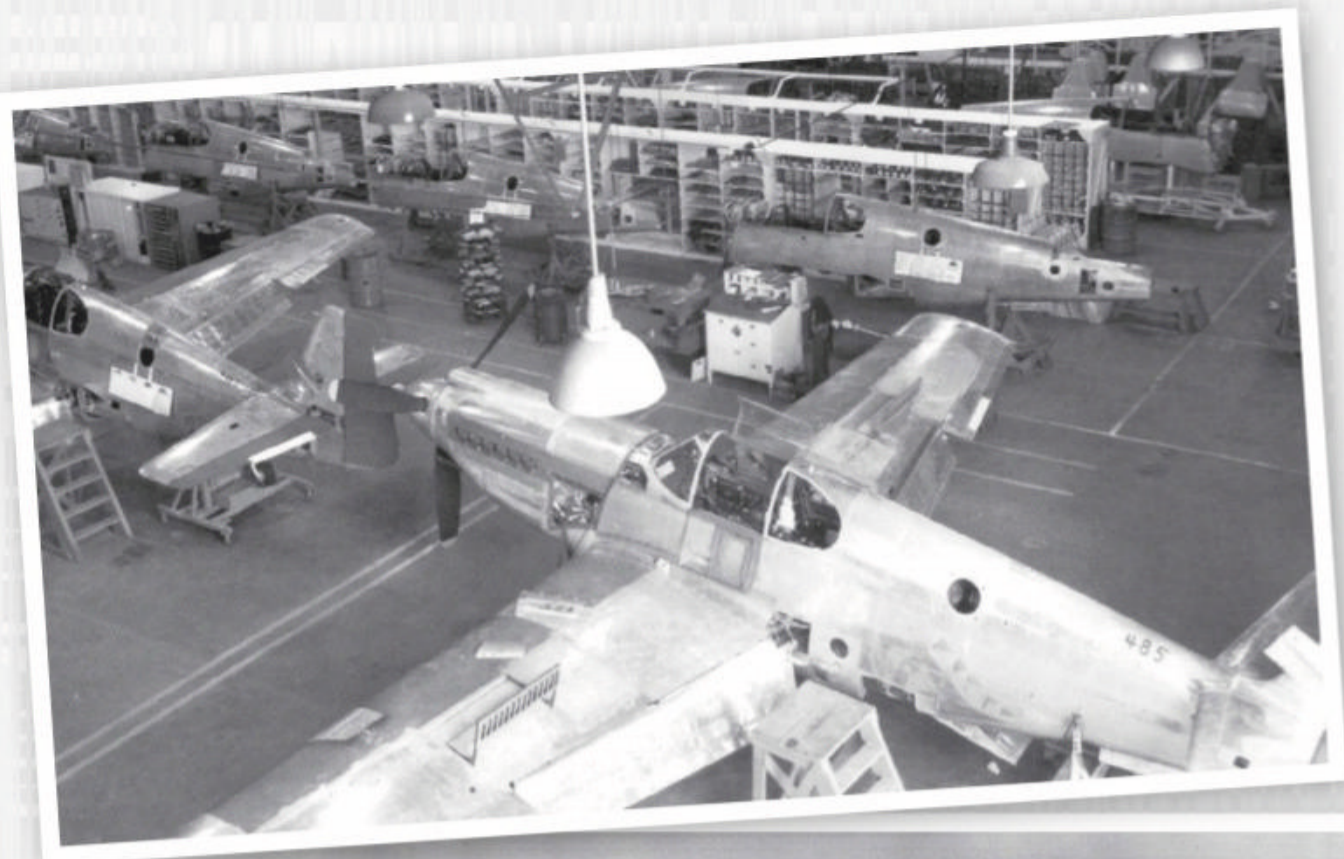
While the aircraft had a new designation, with the first and only service version to be termed A-36A, it did not receive a new name. The association of the name 'Apache' to the ground-attack Mustang is remarkably pervasive, but has been thoroughly debunked by the careful work of Mustang historians including Tom Griffiths and Michael Vorasi. In fact, 'Apache' was initially NAA's preferred name for the Mustang fighter, and used in some promotional materials in 1941, but there is no contemporary evidence the USAAF adopted it even for the early P-51. By the time the A-36 arrived, the name 'Mustang' was long established on both sides of the Atlantic for all variants.



MAIN: Taken soon after restoration, this shot of the A-36A 42-83731 (N251A) shows several of the type's features, including the shallow under nose area and 'cheek' guns as well as the dive brakes and bomb mounts. [Richard VanderMeulen]

TOP: An A-36A in basic factory markings, 42-83861 flies in formation in the US with two other products of North American Aviation, the AT-6 trainer. From this angle, if it weren't for the bomb racks visible beneath the wing, there would be little to distinguish the A-36 from the early fighter versions.

ABOVE: Seen here in North Africa during the build-up to the invasion of Sicily in 1943, A-36A 42-84036 'A-V' of the 525th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, 27th Light Bombardment Group (later changed to Fighter Bomber Group).



The A-36 was fitted with detachable bomb shackles beneath each wing, enabling it to carry two bombs of up to 500lb (225 kg) each, 75-gallon (284 litre) drop-tanks, or larger ferry tanks. The engine specified was the Allison V-1710-87, which developed its rated power at 3200ft compared with 12,650ft for the Mustang I. Gun armament consisted of four belt-fed 0.50in calibre machine guns in the wings and two more synchronised '50 cal's in the chin. The first flight took place on 27 September 1942 with Bob Chilton at the controls. There were no full prototypes as such as the first production aircraft was used for contractor's trials.

As with much of the testing of Mustang variants previously, the test pilots had many positive conclusions about the A-36A. In the Army Air Forces Proving Ground Command report, it was remarked that the A-36A was 'an excellent minimum altitude bombing and attack aircraft' and 'an excellent fighter', though the testing centre felt the aircraft was faster in the dive than was ideal for a dive bomber, even with air brakes extended.

A wing failure in the dive during testing may have led to the assumption that the aircraft was unsafe in steep dives, and the 23rd Provisional Training Wing prohibited aerobatics and use of dive flaps. It is sometimes reported, as mentioned earlier, that A-36As had their dive brakes wired shut. Not only untrue, but the dive brakes could not have been fixed in



the closed position without impeding access to the ammunition trays.

In November 1942, Operation Torch landed 735,000 personnel in French North Africa to open the much-anticipated second front of the European war. At this time a number of USAAF units were working up to operational status on A-36As. Six units of A-36A dive-bombers under the 27th Fighter Bomber Group (FBG - the 522nd, 523rd and 524th Fighter Bomber Squadrons) and 86th Fighter Bomber Group (525th, 526th and 527th Fighter Bomber Squadrons) arrived in North Africa in May 1943, having worked up from November the previous year.

It was as the invasion of Sicily was beginning that the A-36A gained an unofficial nickname – ‘Invader’. Lieutenant Walsh of the 527th suggested the name and it was immediately taken up by the 86th FBG. Although unofficial, the name gained wide acceptance and appeared in publications as diverse as a USAAF aircraft recognition guide and UK Cabinet Office reports on the progress of the war. Walsh told Associated Press, ‘when the invasion comes we all expect these ships to be right in there’. However ‘Invader’, like ‘Apache’, was never officially adopted by the military.

The first A-36A sortie was carried out on 6 June when aircraft of the 27th Group flew a reconnaissance over Pantelleria. The tiny island was the focus of considerable Allied attention as its radar stations and airfield could threaten the invasion of Sicily. After the landings, the 86th and

27th FBGs conducted a variety of missions in support of the advancing army as it moved on the strategically important port of Messina. The port, surrounding area and associated facilities were pounded mercilessly, as were bridges, gun emplacements, troop concentrations and road traffic, with an accurate and devastating mix of dive-bombing and strafing.

Attention soon turned to mainland Italy. On 22 August, A-36As of the 86th escorted a formation of B-26 Marauders to Salerno and back. When the bombers started their bomb run, the force was attacked by a dozen enemy fighters identified as Messerschmitt Bf 109s and Macchi MC.202s. Pilots from all three squadrons made claims for enemy aircraft shot down or damaged, the best score being three confirmed victories and two probables for the 526th. No Marauders from the formation were lost. Two days later, Captain Striegel of the 525th made a remarkable attack on an Italian destroyer. The squadron’s War Diary records that ‘on a mission to bomb railroad yards at Sapri, Italy, Capt. Striegel performed a feat worthy of the DFC. When approaching the target, he observed a naval vessel, either a cruiser or destroyer, in a cove South of Sapri. Realising its value as a target, and yet not wishing to divert the whole formation from the assigned target, he led the flight into the dive, but saved his bombs, and coming off the target, he proceeded to the vessel and bombed it and strafed it at low level, scoring direct hits on the stern, setting it on fire and causing it to sink.’

ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE:

A rare photograph of A-36s under construction on the NAA production line. [NAA]

A ‘wirephoto’ from the US Signals Corps showing a dramatic scene of A-36As taking off from a North African airfield in July 1943. The first missions flown by the type were strikes on the island of Pantelleria that month.

An 86th FBG A-36 undergoing some extra surfacing in the often challenging conditions they found on the Italian airfields.

[US National Archives]

An A-36 at the end of its life. This aircraft, having been stripped of its camouflage paint, was later scrapped at Buckley Field and struck off the Army’s records on 18 February 1945. The emblem on the nose, depicting a winged ‘50 cal’ bullet, suggests the aircraft was last operated at an aerial gunnery training unit.



RIGHT: Re-arming an A-36A at a North African airfield during the initial assault on Sicily in August 1943. The air brakes are seen to good effect here in the extended position to allow access to the ammunition boxes in the wing.

BELOW: An unidentified A-36 being bombed up in Italy. [US National Archives]



On 26 and 27 August, the two A-36A groups moved to Barcellona, near Milazzo, to enable them to cover the landings on the Italian mainland at Salerno. The two groups were able to provide their own escorts, without requiring fighters from other groups, during attacks on enemy communications and softening up defences ahead of the invasion. On 'D-Day', 9 September, the A-36s provided 'top cover' for the invasion forces – something their range enabled them to do from Sicily with drop-tanks.

Once the beachhead had been secured, the A-36s began operating from improvised airstrips. There they reverted to their primary role, dive-bombing and strafing enemy communications and emplacements, as well as attacking airfields to hamper the German defence. This continued with a mix of targets throughout the autumn and winter, ramping up in the early months of 1944 after German forces had retreated to a defensive line in the mountains. The dive-bombers' ability to make pinpoint strikes against targets very close to Allied positions became prized. On 2 January, the 525th bombed enemy gun emplacements on Monte Chiaia, silencing the artillery there. Four days later, the 526th struck at dug-in German positions at Monte Trocchio and Aquino, after which the pilots

were told 'Army delighted – enemy casualties [in] two days 150'.

The Allies were, however, bogged down at Monte Cassino. The precision targeting abilities of the A-36 units were put to unusual use with the delivery of supplies to men on the mountain, using parachute bundles adapted to be dropped from bomb racks, or drop tanks filled with provisions.

The dwindling supply of A-36As meant the 'Invaders' would not take part in the push towards France. The 27th had replaced some of its squadrons' A-36s with P-40 Warhawks and, in June, the 86th began to re-equip with P-47 Thunderbolts. The 526th undertook its last mission on the type on 7 July, dive-bombing a moving train and scoring six direct hits. As a coup de grâce, the 'Invaders' strafed another troop train and shot down a Bf 109. The squadron passed its A-36As to the 525th, which was soon to give up the A-36 itself. This unit flew what was probably the last A-36A mission in Europe on 15 July. An eight aircraft formation bombed railways, but results were not observed. One final motor truck was strafed and destroyed on the way home.

The A-36A's success in the Mediterranean speaks for itself. From April to June, the 86th Group claimed approximately a third of the

vehicles destroyed by the 12th Tactical Air Command during the drive from Cassino.

Meanwhile, the 311th Fighter Bomber Group was deployed to the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre with two squadrons of A-36As. Initially, they did not make a strong impression. On 16 October 1943, three aircraft from the 311th failed to return from a mission over Sumprabum. However, in the following months, they would prove more effective. On New Year's Day 1944, eleven A-36As, with fifteen P-51As, bombed and strafed the airfield at Myitkyina in Burma, and the following day scored several hits on Loilaw bridge. The day after that, they hit warehouses and an ammunition/fuel dump at Sahmaw airfield.

The A-36As continued to carry out ground support missions and hit army bivouac areas and supply dumps as the Japanese launched a new offensive in Burma. An encampment estimated to contain around 5000 soldiers and large quantities of supplies was bombed and strafed on 11 January, causing a great deal of damage.

As the year went on the A-36As attacked communications, supply dumps and troop concentrations, and provided close support to units on the ground. There were few targets the aircraft did not strike over this pe-

These two Chino warbirds clearly show the few visible differences between the first of the Merlin powered P-51s and the earlier Allison powered A-36.
[Richard VanderMeulen]



riod. The bridge at Tantabin was rendered completely unusable while the approaches to the Ye-u and Bawgyo bridges were damaged. Many coastal and river vessels were destroyed or damaged, as were locomotives and motor transports.

In support of the 77th Brigade's move to the Mogaung area, nearly 150 aircraft, including A-36As, attacked troops, fuel dumps, gun positions, and rail yards at locations across the Mogaung Valley. In May and June, more large-scale attacks took place, with 80-90 fighter-bombers and tactical bombers carrying out support of ground forces throughout the valley each day until Mogaung was finally captured.

The A-36A units in the CBI began to give up their aircraft from May 1944, as supplies of Allison-powered Mustangs grew thin. The 311th FBG swapped its A-36s for P-51Cs in August with the group's move into China.

Overall, the A-36 can be said to have had a far greater effect on the war in both Europe and the CBI than the mere 500 aircraft built would seem to warrant. They were replaced not through becoming obsolete, but because the aircraft simply wore out. Now seen as rather an obscure, and misunderstood, chapter in the Mustang story, their achievements deserve greater recognition.

Three factory-fresh A-36s fly over California near the North American factory on 29 March 1943, towards the end of A-36 production. They are 42-83707 (later wrecked in a landing accident at Hunter Field), 42-83716 (to Cincinnati for scrapping 6 January 1945) and 42-83715 (damaged in an accident in June 1943 and subsequently issued to Harding Field as a non-flying instructional airframe).

