

# YANKEE SPITFIRES

Colonial pilots astride  
English mounts

BY BARRETT TILLMAN



Joseph M. Kelly stands on the wing of his Mk II Spitfire *Little Joe* with artwork inspired by the Eagle Squadron's unit patch. After volunteering for the RAF at age 19, Kelly was posted to No. 71 (Eagle) Squadron. The artwork on the Spitfire is inspired by the Eagle's unit patch. Kelly later requested a transfer to the China-Burma-India Theatre but ended up flying Kittyhawks in Egypt. (Photo courtesy of John Dibbs Collection)

**D**uring World War II, the United States provided prodigious amounts of war materiel to Allied nations, most notably Britain and Russia. Franklin Roosevelt's "Arsenal of Democracy" was based on the Lend-Lease Act of March 1941, eventually sending \$50 billion (in 1941 dollars) to the Allies, more than half to Britain. Aircraft featured prominently: P-39s, P-40s, B-25s, PB4Ys, and many more. The flip side of the Lend-Lease Act was (appropriately enough) Reverse Lend-Lease, with Britain providing hundreds of planes to "Uncle Sugar." They included some 600 Spitfires, mostly Mark Vs that equipped fighter and reconnaissance units in Britain and the Mediterranean Theater.



**Capt. Don Willis of Crawford Co. Indiana poses in his Spitfire VB of the 335th FS, 4th FG still marked with his prior Eagle Squadron codes AV-R. Willis, certainly one of the most experienced American pilots in the 4th, was quickly assigned as operations officer of the 335th serving a full combat tour with the group. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)**

### The first Yanks in Spits

Before the United States received Spitfires, American pilots were flying the elegant Supermarine fighter in combat. Though of dubious legality, considering America's official neutral status, U.S. citizens were allowed to join His Majesty's armed forces to fight Germany before Pearl Harbor.

Three fighter squadrons were composed largely of Americans, gaining fame as the RAF Eagle Squadrons. The first, No. 71, began operations in February 1941. Two more followed.

The Eagles' first ace was William R. Dunn who scored his first four victories in Hurricanes. Of the Spitfire he said, "It's the only aircraft I've ever flown that had absolutely no bad habits. You can't even scare yourself in it. You can do a high-speed stall and it will do about a half flick and you can kick it out of a spin. You can do a low-speed stall, and about the same thing will happen. It's got a very high rate of climb, it's very maneuverable, very fast ... If you were coming in on a precautionary landing, you could dump the gear and flaps and

**Although many U.S. units first tasted combat in Spitfires, most transitioned into American fighters as soon as they became available. Still, American pilots who flew the British fighter always speak warmly of it. (Photo courtesy of Joe Gertler)**

make your final approach at about 75mph. Over the fence was about 70, drop in at 65mph, and you'd stop rolling in a few hundred feet. Yet you could pour the coal to it in takeoff ... and by the time you crossed over the perimeter you'd be doing well over 200mph. Then you could stick the nose up and climb so steeply that the leading edge of your wing blanked out the horizon."

The three Eagle Squadrons were activated as the 4th Fighter Group on September 12, 1942, but continued operating under RAF control—an administrative twilight zone. On the 26th a variety of conditions inflicted the most disastrous mission in U.S. Spitfire history. Though still No. 133 RAF Squadron, the pilots were officially members of the 336th Squadron dispatched in a dozen Spits on a bomber escort to Morlaix, France. The Eagles departed Bolthead, Devonshire as part of a wing operation.

One returned.



Poor coordination, faulty navigation in worsening weather, and enemy action conspired to destroy the plan. The British squadron leader descended out of the clouds over Brest Harbor, and the experienced German AA gunners immediately opened fire, with predictable results.

Eagle Squadron historian Vern Haughland quoted Pilot Officer George Middleton: "It seemed that every anti-aircraft battery in the German army was stationed there that day, and they were all shooting at us. It was obviously an every man for himself situation." Middleton was one of six pilots captured, later making a temporary escape.

Bottom line: 11 Spitfires lost with four pilots killed in exchange for one Fw 190 claim. One pilot evaded capture while Pilot Officer R.N. Beatty crash landed in Britain, out of fuel. An embarrassed Allied press office stated, "some aircraft and pilots had been lost because of wing icing."

It was the last Eagle Squadron mission. There-

after, the Debden Eagles were all-American.

At year end, the 4th Group claimed 8 1/2 victories against 14 pilots lost, only one operationally. In March 1943, the group exchanged Spits for Thunderbolts after six months on operations.

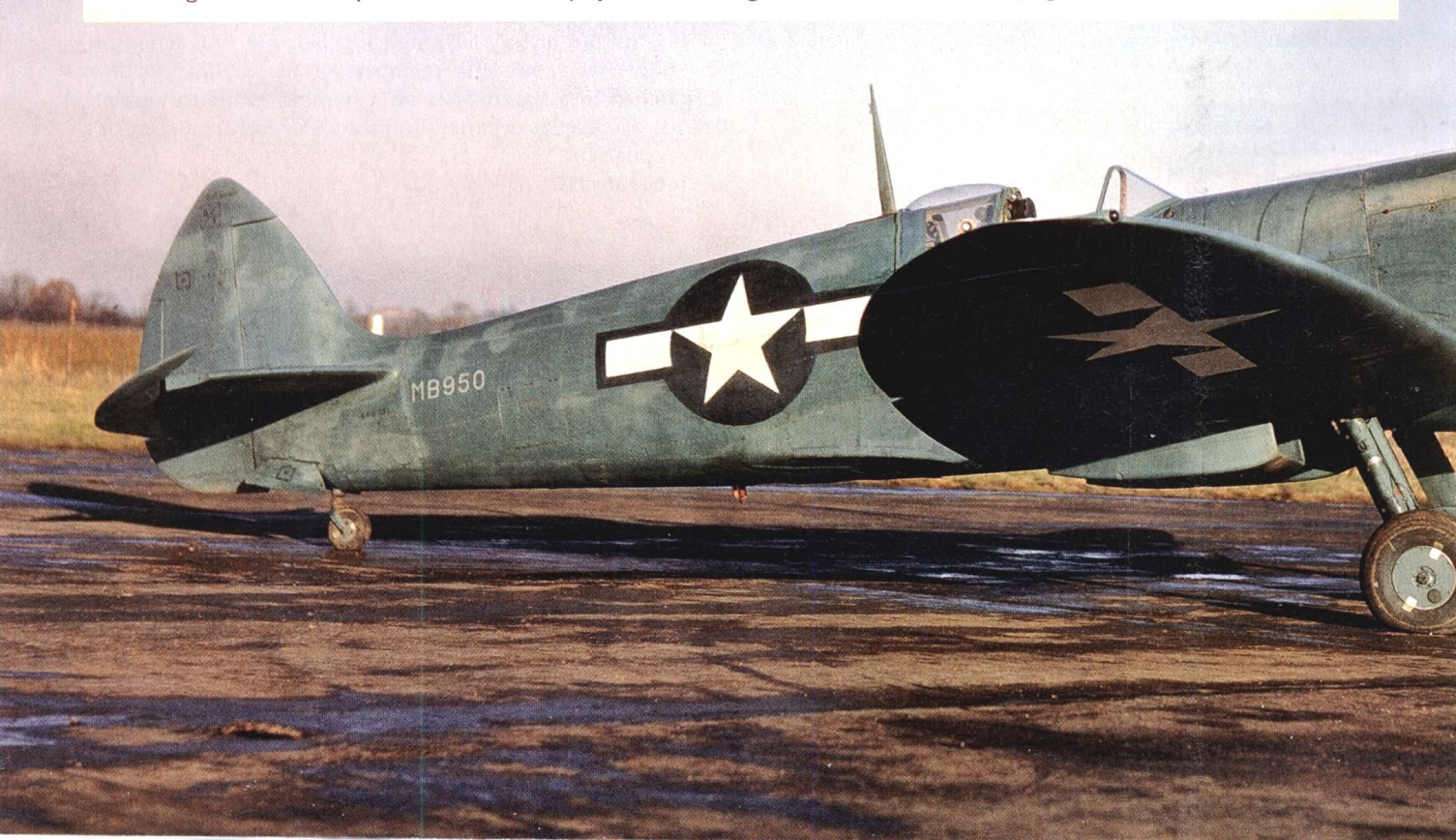
### More Yankee Spitfires

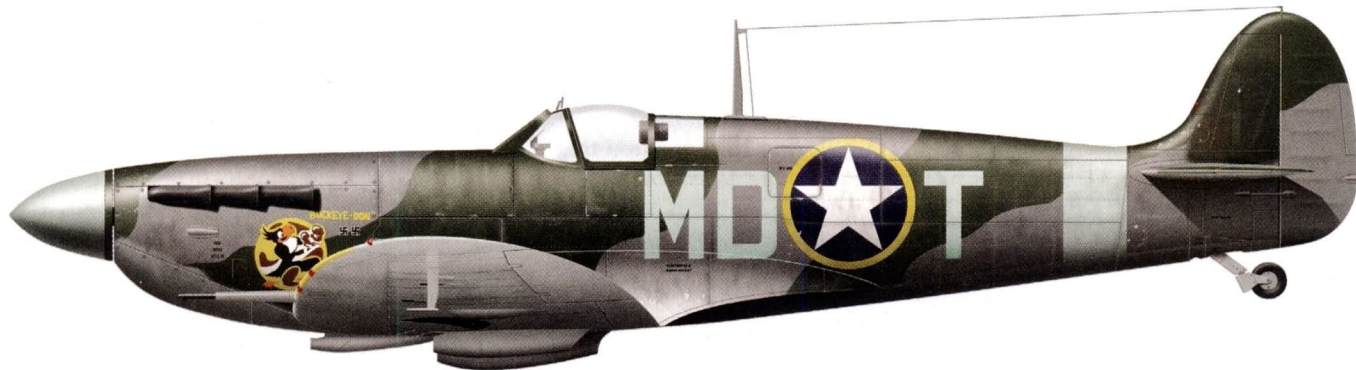
Meanwhile, two other AAF Spitfire groups had arrived in England. The 31st and 52nd had flown P-39s and 40s during Stateside training but were delighted to learn they would fly the most glamorous mount in the Allied stable. Certainly the arrangement was preferable to the original plan: ferrying the 31st Group's P-39s across the North Atlantic. Recalled one pilot, "We were told that we'd fly our P-39s to Scotland via Greenland and Iceland. The fighter commander, General Frank O'Driscoll Hunter, said that a 25% loss rate would be acceptable."

Fortunately, both groups went to Britain by sea. The Americans adored the British fighter's per-

## Uncle Sam's Spits

As a rush of American AAF fighter personnel began arriving in England in the summer of 1942, they left their training aircraft behind, but had a few P-38s and P-47s arriving to equip them. Itching to get into the fight, the British came to the rescue and began providing initial units with "Reverse Lend-Lease" Spitfire Vs. The 31st and 52nd FGs trained in the UK and saw initial action at the Dieppe raid in August then headed to North Africa for the Torch campaign. Those units, as well as the 67th Recon Group, would operate Mk 5B & Cs, Mk VIIIIs, and IXs for recon duties. Over 600 Spitfires were operated by American fighter units in the MTO through 1944 including a later handful of Mk XIs that were transferred to the 7th Photo Group, as pictured here, at Mount Farm, Cambridgeshire. They were brought in to beef up their mission success after the group's early P-5As & B Lightnings began experiencing severe engine issues in the high-altitude winter weather over Europe. Although well-liked by their crews, the advent of the Mustang and the NIH (not invented here) syndrome relegated them to the back pages of USAAF history books.





MD-T Spitfire Vb flown by ace Don Gentile, 336th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group, Debden, England, October 1942. (Illustration by Tom Tullis)

formance and handling, but there were glitches. Unlike AAF aircraft with brakes integral to the rudder pedals, the Spitfire's brakes were activated by a grip on the control stick. Additionally, the RAF's circular "spade grip" seemed cumbersome to some Yanks who'd grown up with a conventional stick.

The 52nd alit in Northern Ireland in July 1942, briefly moved to Goxhill, and proceeded to North Africa in early November. While in the UK, Lt.

Col. James Coward's fliers took some adjusting to local procedures. In their 52nd Group history, Tom Ivie and Paul Ludwig quote then-Lt. Bert Sanborn who described the colorful operating environment at Biggin Hill: "The field did have one problem. It was high enough in the middle to screen the other end. One result was a Polish squadron asking for clearance just as a Canadian squadron started to roll from the opposite end. The tower confirmed, 'You are clear to take off,' and before he could complete the sentence with 'after the other squadron is clear,' all the Poles started to roll. Two squadrons coming over the rise head-on made things a bit wild."

The 31st Group was the first AAF Spitfire unit in combat, supporting the Dieppe raid on August 19, 1942. In a day-long series of combats, Colonel John Hawkins' pilots claimed two Fw 190s destroyed for two Spits splashed, pilots safe.

### North African Airmen

America's first offensive against the Western Axis was *Operation Torch*, the invasion of French Morocco in November 1942. The British provided the eastern end of the strategic anvil, with AAF support. On November 8 the 31st flew to Algeria with the 309th Squadron finding immediate combat upon trying to land at Tafaraoui. Jumped while landing, the squadron lost a pilot to French Dewoitine 520s though two Vichyites were claimed in retaliation.

Similarly, the 52nd deployed to Algeria via Gibraltar in early November. So began the North African slogging match: from Algeria to Tunisia, then on to Sicily.

The groups led a nomadic existence in North Africa. The 52nd moved six times in six months before reaching Sicily in July 1943. From there the Spits proceeded to Corsica at year's end, remaining until ordered to the Italian mainland in May 1944. The Thirty-firsters were even more unsettled, using nine African airfields up to June 1943.

Both Spitfire groups engaged in some strategic deception as their squadron code letters duplicated two 8th Air Force units. The 31st Group's squadron codes (HL, MX, and WZ) duplicated the 78th Group's while the 52nd codes (QP, VF, and WD) matched the 4th's. However, it's uncertain how effective the measure was in misleading German intelligence.

Spitfire XI, MB-950 in its factory fresh high-altitude PRU blue scheme assigned directly from Supermarine to the 14th PS of the 7th PG at Mount Farm in November, 1943. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



In early 1943, the 52nd Group got most of the opportunities. On April 3, the 2nd Squadron tied into a group of Ju 87s attacking Allied forces near El Guettar, Tunisia. The U.S. Spitfires emulated the RAF "Stuka party" format, claiming 13. Capt. Norman McDonald, who specialized in Luftwaffe bombers, ran his record to 5.5 with a triple. Captain Arnold E. Vinson also scored—the first two AAF Spitfire aces.

But Luftwaffe fighters intervened, killing Vinson while he covered McDonald's tail. A well-regarded leader, Vinson was 24.

The 52nd's last Spitfire ace was 1st Lt. Sylvan Feld who logged his fifth victory on April 18. He added four more, becoming the AAF's top-scoring Spitfire pilot. His death in 1944 was among the most tragic of all: killed by Allied bombing while a POW.

had a provision for no middle initial (NMI) but no first name? Consternation! In order to comply with officialdom, Collinsworth explained, "I told that old boy that my first name was Jerry, and that satisfied him, but actually I was just JD, without the periods."

In North Africa, Collinsworth proved exceedingly consistent: he downed a Fw 190 every month between February and July. Thus, army regulations nearly deprived the AAF of a budding ace. He returned stateside as a captain, though his Merlin engine experience went begging since he was made a P-47 instructor. Twenty-seven years later he retired as Colonel J.D. Collinsworth, USAF.

Early June was a prime season for the 31st, which crowned four aces in two days: Major Carl Payne on the 10th with Collinsworth, Charles Fischette, and John White the next day.



A Spitfire Mk Vb assigned to the 309th FS sits on the apron at Membury Air Field in Berkshire, England, during March 1943. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

Major Frank Hill of the 31st, a former plumber and glider pilot, hit the aerial jackpot on May 6. On two missions he engaged five Axis fighters, claiming three 109s destroyed plus a Messerschmitt and a Macchi damaged. That same day, Lt. Col. Harrison R. Thyng joined him as the group's first aces. It was the start of a rare career for Thyng, who added five MiGs in Korea.

Spitfire Mk VIII and IXs began arriving in April, providing a morale boost with improved performance over the familiar Mk V. Whereas the Mk V's 1,470-hp Merlin 45 produced 370mph, the Mk IX with a 1,650-hp Merlin 61 delivered an honest 400mph above 25,000 feet.

### An Elliptical Texan

Among Colonel Fred Dean's 31st pilots was a young Texan, Lt. JD Collinsworth. Like some southerners of his generation, Collinsworth had no given names, a cultural peculiarity that clashed with military bureaucracy. The Army

### 59 missions and down

The 31st Group flew from four Sicilian bases in the summer of 1943. Meanwhile, the 52nd also was frequently on the move before fetching up in Sicily end of July. The group then shifted to Corsica in early December.

Operating from Corsica, the 52nd ranged as far afield as the Spit's range permitted. On February 9, 1944, flying his 59th mission, Flight Officer R.A. Hoover and three other 4th Fighter Squadron pilots were bounced by Fw 190s over Nice Harbor, France. The Focke Wulfs were potent: long-nose D models with the powerful Jumo engine. Unable to jettison his drop tank, Hoover's Mk V was vulnerable but he had no choice except to engage. He thought he hit two Germans, then noted another pulling wide deflection at a seemingly impossible angle. Hoover recalled, "I saw this airplane, 90 degrees out there, and I just ignored it. How could you ever get an angle shot like that?"

The German—likely *Oberleutnant* Siegfried Lemke of JG 2—hit Hoover's engine, then another Fw gunned him from below. Wounded in one foot, his Spit afire, Hoover went over the side. Another flight officer, J.H. Montgomery, also was captured.

The day wasn't done. Floating offshore, Hoover noted a flight of Spits apparently searching for the missing pilots. Another gaggle of 190s appeared, shot down another Spitfire, and departed. Thus the legendary future test pilot and airshow legend entered 16 months of captivity.

Siegfried Lemke was already a triple ace with six Spits to his credit. He finished the war with at least 70 victories.

### Spits Italiano

With secure Allied bases on the mainland, many 12th Air Force groups moved to Italy. The 31st made the shift in October though the 52nd re-

# American Spitfire Units

## ROYAL AIR FORCE EAGLE SQUADRONS

**No. 71 Sqn.** Spitfires August 1941 – September 1942

**No. 121 Sqn.** Spitfires October 1941 – September 1942

**No. 133 Sqn.** Spitfires October 1941 – September 1942



PO Harold "Flash" Pederson RCAF smiles at his good fortune as he examines his Spitfire's bulletproof glass that saved his life. Pederson of 165 Squadron was hit by return fire from a DO-217 he downed on August 19, 1942, during the Dieppe commando raid. Pederson later transferred to the AAF and was KIA in Tunisia flying a Spitfire Vc with the 52nd FG on February 4, 1943.



Major Jim "The Big Stick" Thorsen CO of the 308th FS stands by his Spitfire Mk VIII at Castel Volturno, Italy, after shooting down a Fw 190 on February 22, 1944.

## ARMY AIR FORCE UNITS

### 4th Fighter Group; 8th AF

Spitfires September 1942 – March 1943

334th FS, 335th FS, 336th FS

12.5 victories

### 31st Fighter Group; 12th AF

Spitfires June 1942 – April 1944

307th FS, 308th FS, 309th FS

198 victories

### 52nd Fighter Group; 12th AF

Spitfires August 1942 – May 1944

2nd FS, 4th FS, 5th FS

166 victories

### 7th Recon Group; 8th AF

Spitfires May 1943 – November 1945

13 PRS (1943), 14 PRS (1943–1945)

### 67th Recon Group; 9th AF

Spitfires September 1942 – November 1943

12th PRS, 107 PRS, 109 PRS

### 68th Recon Group; Med. AFs

November 1942 – June 1944

16 PRS (1943), 111 PRS (1943)

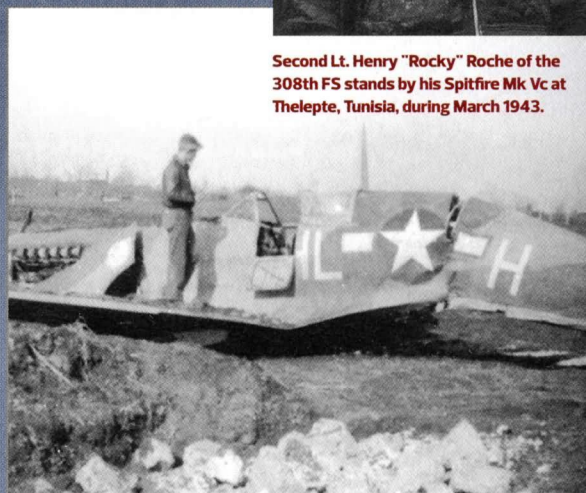


Second Lt. Henry "Rocky" Roche of the 308th FS stands by his Spitfire Mk Vc at Thelepte, Tunisia, during March 1943.

## Army Air Force Spitfire Aces

Pilot	Group	Score	
1Lt. Sylvan Feld	52nd	9	KIA as POW 8/44
Capt. Norman L. McDonald	52nd	7.5	+4 in P-47s
Maj. Frank A. Hill	31st	7	
1Lt. JD Collinworth	31st	6	
1Lt. Richard F. Hurd	31st	6	
Capt. Virgil C. Fields	31st	6	
Capt. Arnold E. Vinson	52nd	5.33	KIA 3/43
1Lt. Charles R. Fischette	31st	5	
Maj. Carl W. Payne	31st	5	+1 Pacific
LCol. Harrison R. Thyng	31st	5	+5 in Korea
Col. Charles M. McCorkle	31st	5	+6 in P-51s
1Lt. John H. White	31st	5	

At least a dozen other Americans became Spitfire aces in the RAF, including Eagle Squadron pilots.



First Lt. Dick Hurd, six-kill ace of the 308th FS, stands on the wing of his wrecked Spitfire Mk VIII at Castel Volturno, Italy, during March 1944. (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)

# American Naval Aviators: British Spitfires

One of the least-known stories of the monumental D-Day operation of June 6, 1944, is that of a short-lived U.S. Navy squadron of 17 aviators and their ground troops. Trained by USAAF pilots to fly British Mk. Vb Spitfires for barely a month, the American sailors came from battleships and cruisers where they flew Curtiss SOC Seagulls and Vought OS2U Kingfishers on gun-spotting duties.

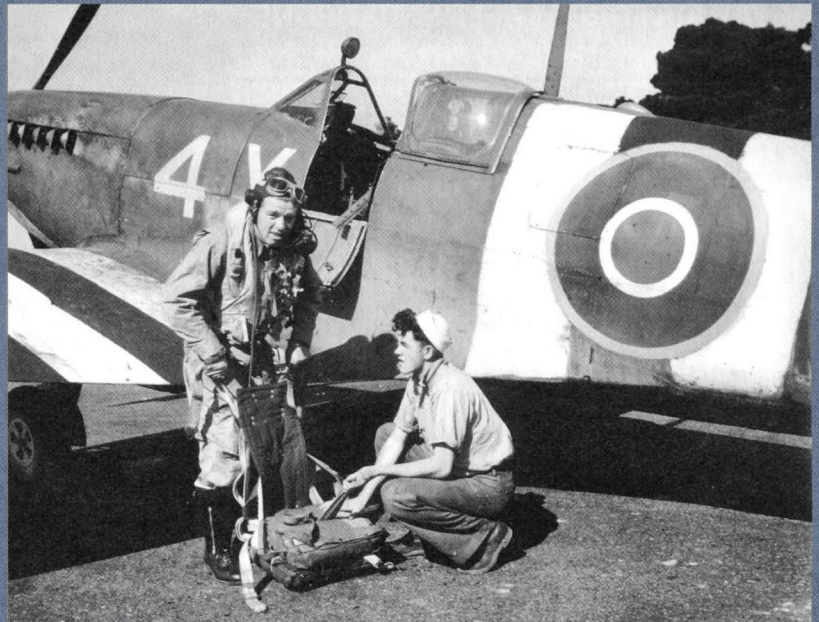
Before D-Day, the Allies decided to stand up a squadron of experienced gun-spotters to help support the massive effort to soften up what was expected to be a vicious German defense. The Mk Vb was basically a Mk I airframe—the fighter that served in the Battle of Britain four years earlier—but with a more powerful Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. Introduced in late 1940, by mid-1944, it had been overtaken by more advanced types on both sides of the Channel, and had been replaced by the Mk. IX. Although no longer in major frontline service, the Vbs at least carried cannon and machine guns, and had the Spitfire's speed and legendary maneuverability.

USAAF pilots formerly of the 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (TRS) who had flown Spitfires in North Africa trained their Navy compatriots to fly their new mounts. The syllabus included defensive fighter tactics, aerobatics, navigation, formation flying, and spotting procedures.

On May 8, 1944, Lt. Robert W. Calland, from the battleship *USS Nevada* (BB-36) took temporary command of the new squadron, designated Cruiser Scouting Squadron 7, or VCS-7. He was relieved on May 28 by Lt. Cdr. William Denton, Jr., from the cruiser *USS Quincy* (CA-71).

On D-Day, all available aircraft from the U.S. Navy, the RAF and Royal Navy spotting squadrons were pooled. The Americans found themselves flying not only their own Spitfires, but those from the Royal Navy, which were known as Seafires, similar to their own land-based fighters but equipped with tailhooks. North American P-51 Mustangs were part of the pool from the USAAF, but the VCS-7 pilots had not been checked out on the speedy new P-51s and flew only Spitfires. The three days at the opening of the D-Day operation were the most intense, with 94 sorties flown. Squadron pilots received nine Distinguished Flying Crosses and several Air Medals.

By the time VCS-7 was disbanded, its pilots had flown 191 sorties



Lt. Francis A. Cayhill, a pilot from the cruiser *USS Augusta* (CA-31), gets into his parachute harness, helped by U.S. Navy sailor John F. Mulreany. (Photos courtesy of the Peter B. Mersky Collection)

from June 6 to June 25. During that time, they had lost eight Spitfires in combat, mainly to flak. Enemy fighters were rarely encountered, but one mission saw four VCS-7 aircraft attacked by Bf 109s and Fw 190s. Fortunately, the American aviators were able to use their Spitfires' maneuverability to avoid being shot down. Besides their reconnaissance and spotting duties, the squadron also strafed German targets like panzer columns advancing toward the front lines.

Another VCS did fly Mustangs. VCS-8 pilots had been trained by pilots of the USAAF's 111th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, flying the F-6A, a camera-equipped version of the early P-51. The VCS-8 aviators started, in P-40 Warhawks and then moved on to the more advanced Mustang.

Unlike VCS-7, VCS-8 continued to operate after D-Day, but when the invasion of Southern France approached in August, its pilots and sailors were ordered back to their ships. They had flown 242 missions.

—Peter B. Mersky



American and British mechanics work on a VCS-7 Mk Vb.



Lt. Cdr. William Denton, Jr., CO of VCS-7, by his Mk Vb.

mained on Corsica until May 1944. Ultimately, the 31st settled at San Severo and the 52nd at Madna, both near the Adriatic coast.

In the first three months of 1944, the Yankee Spitfires continued finding combat. The 31st Group's last three Spit aces completed their records in that period: Captain Virgil Fields in January; group commander Colonel Charles McCorkle in February, and finally 1st Lt. Richard Hurd in March. "Sandy" McCorkle was the only AAF Spitfire ace who also gained the title in P-51s.

The AAF's last victory for the Spitfire went to 2nd Lt. Joe Blackburn of the 5th Fighter Squadron. He was credited with two 109s on April 6 while Capt. Terrell Yon claimed a probable. It brought the 52nd Group's total to 166. Barely a week previously the 31st Group's 196th kill, a FW 190, was notched by 1st Lt. L.H. Emery.

Knowing it was the last Spitfire mission, the 308th Squadron ended 20 months of flying the British classic with a spectacular "farewell party." Said the unit history, "The wheat would definitely grow lower to the ground that season as a result of that flight back home. Mowing preceded the growing this year!"

Emery narrowly missed acedom when he added three more victories in Mustangs.

Mechanics of the 31st and 52nd enjoyed one advantage in the switchover, as they were intimately familiar with the Merlin engine that powered both fighters. However, before leaving Corsica, the 52nd men ruefully watched French pilots taking their pick of the now cast-off Spitfires, especially Mk IXs.

The P-51 required some adjustment. Whereas two-hour missions had stretched endurance in Spits, the Mustang's long legs easily doubled that figure—and often tripled it. Former Spitfire pilots may have groused at being confined to a P-51 cockpit for such unaccustomed periods, but most considered it a worthy tradeoff with greater opportunities for combat.

## Photo Joes and spotters

Despite its notoriously short range as an interceptor, the Spitfire performed the long-range photo reconnaissance mission. The most numerous PR version, the Mk XI, became a well-regarded "recco" platform. It was inevitable that AAF units also would receive recon Spits.

The Mk XI was tested in 1941 and entered production in late 1942. More than 460 were manu-

factured through December 1944, replaced by the Mk XIX.

The Mark XI's lovingly sleek airframe was built for speed, rated at nearly 420 mph at altitude. Moreover, it boasted a 395mph cruise at 32,000 feet, and in a 1944 calibrated dive test an XI recorded Mach .89.

"Armament" comprised two vertical cameras behind the cockpit. Options included two verticals and an oblique.

In Britain the 67th Photo Group's four squadrons received war-weary Spitfire Mk Vs in the fall of 1942. The group was essentially an operational training unit for several months with numerous accidents—nearly a dozen in December alone, often due to engine failure.

One of the notable recon missions was flown



by Major Walter Weitner, CO of the 14th Photo Squadron, who photographed the results of the Mighty Eighth's first Berlin mission on March 6, 1944.

"Unarmed and unafraid" was the recon pilot's mantra, and another 14th pilot proved it conclusively. On Valentine's Day 1945, Captain Robert J. Dixon flew to Merseburg, Germany, his 65th mission. The target was obscured by clouds so Dixon descended to about 12,000 feet for his photo runs. On the fourth pass, Merseburg's notorious flak connected with his Spitfire. With the aircraft streaming flames, he coolly gave his escorting Mustangs a wind-corrected course for home, then radioed a description of the refinery: "There are ten chimneys down there. Only one is smoking. This plant is almost inoperative. I'm going to bail out now."

The dedicated photo pilot went over the side, spending the next three months as a POW. Awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, he retired as a four-star general in 1978. †

PA-944 in its post-D-Day invasion stripes was involved in a gear up landing on September 12, 1944 when pilot Lt. John S. Blyth accidentally tripped a CO2 canister with his headset cable locking up the landing gear that forced a belly landing. "944" was quickly repaired and returned to service till war's end being scrapped in 1949. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)





# Over the Blue

Elliptical Wings in the Mediterranean

AS TOLD TO JAMES P. BUSH

Supermarine Spitfire LF Mk XVIe TE184 painted as Mk VIII HL-K Fargo Express, a 308th Fighter Squadron aircraft. The 308th were equipped with Mk V Spitfires upon arrival in the ETO in 1942. Deployed "Over the Blue" in support of *Operation Torch*, and later the Allied invasion of Italy, they used Spits until March 1944 when they re-equipped with Mustangs. (Photo by John Dibbs/ planepicture.com)

Although the United States supplied many different types of airplanes to its Allies during World War II, there was one particular "reverse lend lease" aircraft the British enjoyed sharing with their friends the most—the Supermarine Spitfire. Whether utilized as a ground strafers, a bomber escort, or a photo reconnaissance platform, the British-built Spit was considered a dream to fly by most Yank fighter pilots. Although it had been deployed all over the world and proved its worth tenfold, it held the line with the fledgling Army Air Force over the deserts of North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. The British simply referred to the empty spot on the map as "the blue"—the vast barren deserts of North Africa that spanned Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Since the beginning of the war, the British, along with their Commonwealth allies, fought the Italian Army, the biting sand flies, the blistering heat, and cold damp nights along with choking sand storms as their front lines sea-sawed back and forth in the unnamed nothingness of the blue. Follow along as three American pilots share their insights of what it was like to fly the legendary Spitfire over the blue.



**Ivy League Flyer**  
**P/O John Keller**

*680 Squadron RCAF, PRU Spitfire Mk. XI*

I had great sympathy for the poor British during the dark days of the Battle of Britain. Reading about their plight, I wished that I could do something to help instead of attending those lavish parties that were held at Harvard while I was there as a senior. I had taken a short course in something called the Civilian Pilot Training Program in 1940 and became immediately interested in flying while at the controls of a J-3 Cub. Desperate to join the fight, I knew I didn't have enough money to get to England, but I did have enough to get to Canada, which was only a hop, skip, and a jump for me. I dropped out of Harvard in late 1941, ran to Canada, joined the RCAF, and trained there for 10 months. One of the airplanes I trained in was ironically called the Harvard, the Canadian version of the AT-6. In November of 1941, I got married and then two weeks later I was on a troop ship bound for England.

When I arrived in England, I was told there were no aircraft for us—they were all in the air currently defending the British Isle. We were “volunteered” to

go to the Middle East where allegedly the aircraft would be readily available. I embarked on a long two-month trip that took us around the Cape of Good Hope and up to Egypt. From there, I was sent out to Libya to an advanced landing ground. My further flight training became all fouled up due to one General Erwin Rommel (“Desert Fox”) and his Afrika Korps as they pushed us backwards for two months, losing one airfield after another.

Although I had earned my wings and was deemed a fighter pilot, I was stuck shepherding a petrol bowser to the Nile Delta. From there I was shipped up to Syria and met a delightful chap named Geoffrey Morley-Mower who became my instructor as I acquainted myself with the Hawker Hurricane.

I really thought the Hurricane was a dog. It was very clumsy and very difficult to fly, but it won the Battle of Britain. The Spitfire had a much better public relations team and received all the credit for saving “old blighty” but in fact the Hurricane saved the day. I never flew the Hurricane all that well even though I was offered a choice when I completed my training—fly a Hurricane on the deck with 40mm cannon under the wings or fly as high as I could up at altitude with nothing in the wings for protection and only a couple of cameras stuffed inside the fuselage as part of the photo reconnaissance unit (PRU). I chose to be on the deck but my instructors must have seen how I handled the Hurricane, so they sent me up high, unarmed and very afraid.

A Yank in the RCAF—John Keller strikes a pose in his Spitfire before his next mission. (Photo courtesy of author)



A Spitfire Mk Vb assigned to the 309th FS 31st FG sits on the apron at Membury Air Field, England during March 1943. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)





### Spitfire love affair

I joined No. 680 Squadron and stayed with it for the rest of the war. I was introduced to the Spitfire Mk. I and II, which I thought were beautiful airplanes—one in which I thought I could cope and manage quite well. Sitting in the cockpit, your shoulders were only about an inch away from either side and it felt like you were part of the airplane, an integral part if you will. It was a delight to fly and had a lot of power.

The “poor” bloody British had no extra money for joy rides or extra engine hours, so I really didn’t get much time flying for the fun of it. Our

at between 25 and 30,000 feet or above, unpresurized, unarmed, and scared!

We started out with the Mk. I Spits and ended up with the Mk. XI. The Mk. XI was my favorite of course. It was a pure delight to fly, as it was supercharged and even had retractable tailwheel. You would be happily cruising along at 12 or 13,000 feet and the supercharger would kick in and give you a great big boost in the tail as you literally slammed back in your seat while your airspeed jumped another 20-25mph.

Our No. 680 Squadron was a wonderful outfit full of nice guys, made up of all kinds of nation-

Christmas 1943, Torca Libya. John Keller is standing in the back row, third from the left (Photo courtesy of author)

**BELOW ALL THE DUST AND DIRT WAS A DARK BLUE FUSELAGE THAT WAS CHIPPED AND DENTED. OUR SPITFIRES WEREN'T FANCY LOOKING BUT THEY SURE COULD GO HIGH!**

training field in Beirut was interesting to say the least. We had two runways that formed a big X. One was concave and the other convex, which made for some very interesting landings on my part, but I survived.

I only had 15-20 hours of Spit time before I was sent out on missions over Europe doing photographic reconnaissance. Most of my flights departed from Libya, flying over the north coast of Africa out over the Mediterranean and then photographing airfields, marshalling yards, and harbors of Greece and the surrounding islands. On almost all of my PRU flights, I was operating

alities including Tasmanians, Australians, Canadians, and one lone American—me! Our Spitfires matched our pilots in the unit—we were not a very pretty bunch, both men and airplanes were downright filthy looking. Below all the dust and dirt was a dark blue fuselage that was chipped and dented. Our Spitfires weren’t fancy looking but they sure could go high!

### PRU missions

Thankfully, we had nice long runways both in Cyprus and Libya, as our Spits operated from Lancaster bomber bases and it felt like extra



**PR (Photo Recon) Spitfires** were fitted with one, but usually two, long focal length, very large format cameras. From as high as 30,000 feet, they shot overlapping, fine-grain film strips that when viewed through a pair of special magnifying "glasses" gave a slight three-dimensional effect. (Photo courtesy of Joe Gertler)

security to land and take off from those. We carried two Fairchild F-24 cameras weighing 21 pounds apiece that were behind the cockpit and embedded in the fuselage. To operate them, we had one little control on the dashboard that you could turn the camera on and vary the interval between each picture so almost every spot on the ground was taken twice from a different angle. That way, the analyzers could do stereoscopic views of the ground. The interpreters used to work far into the night interpreting our images

and gleaning wonderful amounts of information about the ships being loaded, how many fighters and bombers the Germans had on a particular airfield, or what kind of supplies were in the marshalling yards. That intelligence proved invaluable to mission planners as our bombers returned to where our lone Spits had once been.

In all of my 81 missions I was only shot at twice over Crete when the German flak guns targeted me. The scary part is, when you are all alone, you

know exactly who they are firing at! On another trip when I was returning from a recon over Europe, the engine suddenly began to run rough. It felt as if it was literally shaking the Spitfire apart, and I could barely maintain my altitude. I was concerned this situation was going to end with a swim in the Mediterranean. Thankfully the northern coast of Libya was now underneath me, so I switched off the engine and was shocked to see what was staring at me from out in front of my nose. Low and behold, there was one foot missing off one of my wooden prop blades and two feet off another. I didn't recall being shot at and the only things I can think of to account for the damaged blades are icing or Gremlins!

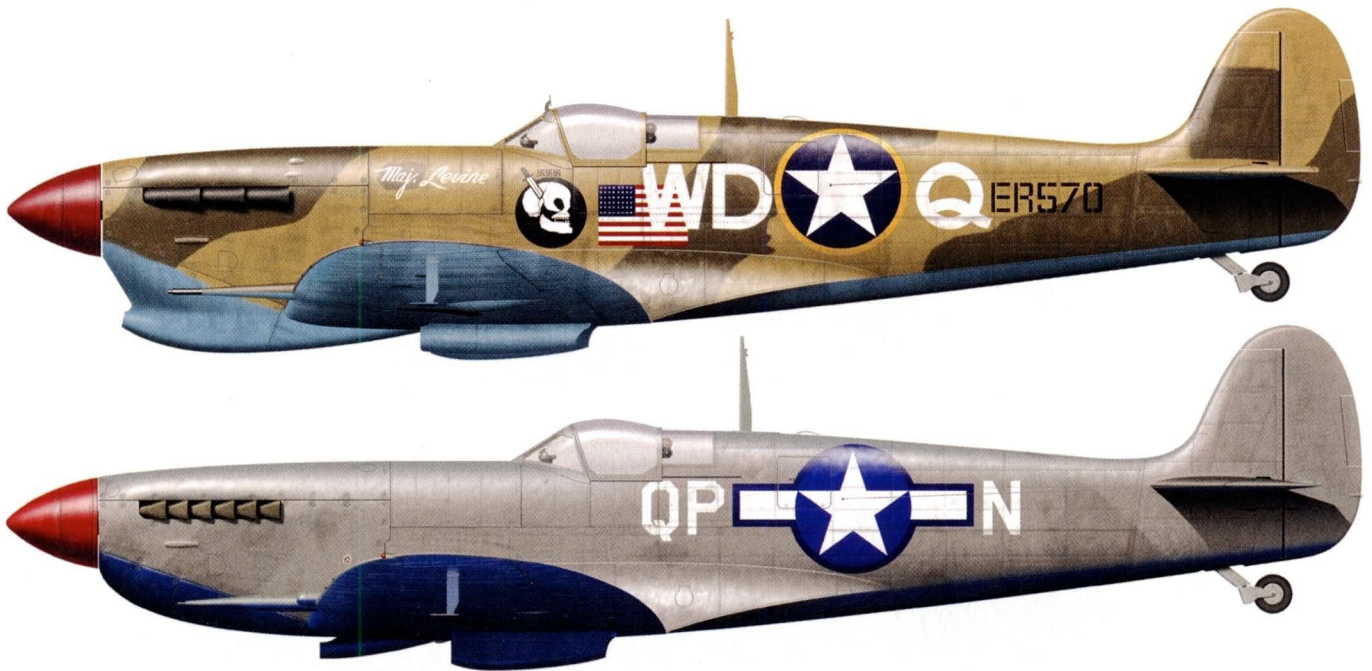
Cold temperatures were always an issue, and one of the problems with carrying those bloody cameras up so high was that half of our heat had to be pumped in the back to keep the camera toasty warm while we the pilots were freezing!

Most of my flights were 3.75 hours and that was about the duration. With only 270 imperial gallons (325 U.S.) of fuel in the wings, we couldn't fly much longer than that. On one trip, I clocked 400mph coming out and 400mph coming back—a tailwind each way, so who could ask for anything better!

The only defensive weapon I carried was a Very pistol to shoot flares up if we had to bail out over the Med and paddle around in a dingy. When I



**April 16, 1944** — at 28,000 feet, this is what the port of Piraeus near Athens, Greece, looked like from John Keller's PRU Spitfire. (Photo courtesy of author)



**Top:** WD-Q Spitfire Mk Vc, 4th FS, 52nd FG, Tunisia, Summer 1943. Flown by Major Robert Levine who scored three kills in this aircraft.

**Lower:** QP-N Spitfire Mk IX, Lt. Fred Ohr, 2nd FS, 52nd FG, Summer 1943. This Spitfire is painted in medium Sea Gray over PRU Blue. (Illustrations by Tom Tullis)

flew my mission, I usually wore a bright red shirt for a couple of reasons: one was as a good luck charm and the other, more important, reason was the fact that if I ever went down in the sea, I was hopeful the Air Sea Rescue chaps would spot me a mile away—and I hoped the Germans were colorblind!

The only German aircraft I had encountered were below me as I took photos of them at their bases. Thankfully they didn't have good radar, otherwise they would have been up there waiting for us and we would have been as helpless as a church mouse surrounded by a bunch of ravenous alley cats. The Me 109 was a fearsome opponent and quite deadly for any PRU pilot.

I had the opportunity to transfer into the USAAF and wind up who knows where and flying who knows what. I had been flying high over Europe every two or three days, in an airplane that I thoroughly enjoyed, and was with a group of men who were a delight to be with on a daily

basis. Needless to say, I never made any application and let the deadline lapse. After the war, as a reward for serving with the RCAF, they sent me a check once a month so I could apply it to my schooling back at Harvard. But my personal reward had been even greater—being allowed to fly a Spitfire.

### Comparing the Spitfire Mk. V to early American fighters

**Robert J. Goebel**

*Lieutenant Colonel USAF (Ret.)  
308th FS, 31st FG, 12th Air Force*

By the time I arrived in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO), I had over 240 hours of fighter time in Curtiss P-40 Warhawks and Bell P-39 Airacobras. I had dueled fellow squadron mates over the well protected and Axis absent skies above Panama. I thought the P-40 was



Spitfire Mk Vb Trop s/n ER120 VF+D assigned to the 5th FS 52nd FG is salvaged for parts at Telergma Airfield, Algeria, after being hit by flak on February 13, 1943. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



A PR Spit receives outdoor maintenance by its ground crew—blowing sand and biting flies! (Photo courtesy of author)



Spitfire LF Mk Vc JG891's cockpit. The majority of Mk Vcs were sent overseas, with many serving in North Africa or the Mediterranean. Usually fitted with two wing-mounted cannons, four cannons are visible here. The extras were fitted to Malta-bound Spitfires: an ingenious way of importing spares to the besieged island. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

a great block of concrete with wings on it, but given a little time and opportunity, I thought I could do alright with it. The Airacobra was another story.

I was young and naïve and christened with the title "fighter pilot." I thought the P-39 was a good plane but at the time I just didn't know any better. It had some very tricky flight characteristics, and you had to honor those if you wanted to stay alive. In retrospect, I was glad I didn't have to go up against the highly maneuverable Bf 109 with it. Actually, it was a greater danger to American pilots than it was to the Germans. In fact, years

in Oran, Algeria, in early 1944. From there, I was sent to the 12th Air Force fighter training center at Telergma, which was formerly home of a French Foreign Legion outpost. Unfortunately, we were not living the comfortable high life, as our brother pilots were in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). About the only thing we did have in common was our great affection of flying the Spitfire.

I had just been assigned to the 31st fighter group, 308th Fighter Squadron of the 12th Air Force. Our group, along with the 52nd Fighter Group, was to receive training in the Spitfire Mk. V in preparation for our role as a close air support unit flying Spitfire Mark VIIIs and IXs. The Spitfire was a recognized frontline fighter and a proven combat veteran. For me, the Spit was a true joy to fly. It was light on the controls,

**FOR ME, THE SPIT WAS A TRUE JOY TO FLY. IT WAS LIGHT ON THE CONTROLS, VERY NIMBLE, AND HIGHLY MANEUVERABLE—VERY DIFFERENT FROM ANYTHING ELSE I HAD FLOWN PREVIOUSLY.**

very nimble, and highly maneuverable—very different from anything else I had flown previously. It turned on a dime and it was easy to see why the Brits loved it. The only issue I had with it was the pretty short legs—we couldn't carry enough fuel to carry the attack a long distance. Although the cockpit was snug, I felt as though I was an extension of the airplane. Inside the cockpit the layout was a little different than the American fighters I had flown. Instead of a straight stick, the Spit

after the war, I had mentioned to Luftwaffe Ace Gunther Rall about my flying the P-39 in training. Gunther smiled at me and said, "We (the Luftwaffe) were very familiar with the P-39—we loved them!"

When I was deemed combat ready, with no actual combat, I was shipped overseas. Shoehorned aboard a Liberty ship full of other combat-bound servicemen for 21 days, we bobbed on the Atlantic Ocean dodging U-boats until I finally arrived

had a lovely loop control, which took no time getting use to. I was elated at flying the Spitfire and looked forward to the day I would fly it in combat. Unfortunately, that day never came.

After receiving 20-25 hours of familiarization time, our batch of recently trained Spitfire pilots was moved to the 31st Fighter Group home at Castel, Volturno. It was a very short stay. Without warning, we were removed from operational flying, told to turn in our Spitfires, and transferred to the 306th Fighter Wing of the 15th Air Force. We were also told that our new combat assignment would now be "bomber escort" and we would be flying an airplane that was a cousin to the Spitfire called the P-51 Mustang. Although the Mustang was faster than the Spitfire, it was not quite as nimble. The Spit was fun to fly while it lasted, and I will always have fond memories of the Supermarine Spitfire.

### **Tunisian Spitfire: Mastering the Mk. IX** **Lieutenant J. D. "Jerry" Collinworth** **USAAC**

*307th Fighter Squadron, 31st Fighter Group  
12th Air Force, Tunis, Algeria*

When the group switched to the Spitfire Mk. IX from the war-weary Mk. V, it changed our squadron's whole outlook on life. The new and improved Spitfire made me turn from a defensive mindset into an offensive one. The Spitfire Mark IX could still out turn the FW-190 and in some cases we could still out climb and outrun it as well. Most of the time though, it was the Germans who were on the run! I went from horrifying and scary looks in the cockpit to beating and thumping my chest in triumph as we tangled with the Luftwaffe over the deserts of North Africa.

On May 6, 1943, I was in a flight of four Spitfire Mk. IXs cruising over Tunis, Algeria, at 10,000 feet. Leading our finger four formation was our squadron commander, Major George LaBresche. I had flown a Spitfire Mk. V with Major LaBresche on one of the missions over Dieppe, France, in August of 1942, where we both barely survived by the skin of our teeth. Times had changed and we were now itching to fight. It didn't take long to find a scrap to get into as my wingman, Johnny White, spotted a pair of FW-190s above us. After receiving the OK from LaBresche to attack them, Johnny and I pointed the noses of our Spitfires skyward and went tearing after them. Johnny and I were a great team and we always knew what the other was thinking as we closed in to attack. I got behind the number two FW-190 and gave him a short squirt of machine gun and cannon fire, until I saw his canopy come off, and then I stopped firing and watched him bail out. I broke to the right to clear my tail and continued through a full 360-degree turn. I looked for Johnny but I couldn't find him anywhere, as the sky was empty



except for the billowing white parachute a quarter mile away. Seeing no other German airplanes in the area, I decided to go back and give this guy in the parachute the once over. As I closed in on him, hanging in his straps, I pulled some power back on the Spitfire and stared at him through my open canopy. This guy had just made me one step closer to becoming an Ace, so I wanted to thank him. I placed my thumb on my nose and moved my fingers back and forth, waving at him. It was a major insult to him but I'm sure he was glad I wasn't shooting at him as he hung helpless in that parachute. After I had my fun, I split out of there and headed for home.

Although the majority of USAAF pilots flew "made in America" products, today there are those few who fondly remember their days of glory at the controls of the elliptical icon. Nobody ever regrets having been a Spitfire pilot. †

*Fargo Express was the mount of Lt. Leland "Tommy" Molland. Fighting alongside his close personal friend Robert J Goebel, Tommy earned command of the 308th FS and ended the war a double ace with a tally of 11 kills. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)*