

# CAPTAIN MANTELL VS. THE SAUCER

OVER SEVEN DECADES AGO, A YOUNG MUSTANG PILOT WENT IN PURSUIT OF ONE OF THE FIRST UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS - BY JAMES THOMPSON

For Capt. Thomas Francis Mantell Jr. life was basically as good as it gets. He was strapped into the cockpit of an F-51D Mustang, the highest-performance aircraft he had flown during his military career and roaring through the Kentucky sky on the way to his home base. The 25-year-old pilot could not remember a time when he was not in love with the idea of flying. Born in

Franklin, Kentucky, on 30 June 1922, Mantell became fascinated with aviation while reading about the many record flights of the 1920s and 1930s and would always look up when he heard an aircraft rumbling overhead. He was the first of three children and his father, a traveling salesman, encouraged his son to pursue his dreams. Working hard, he graduated from Louisville Male High School in 1942 and on 16 June of that year, at age 19, he joined the Army Air Corps and was itching to fight the enemy that had attacked the United States. Just over a year later, on 30 June 1943, he graduated



At the time of his death, Captain Mantell had logged 2167 flight hours with 1608 hours as pilot in command. He had recorded over 65 hours in the Mustang while with the Kentucky ANG.

flight training and became a lieutenant in the USAAF. However, he would not be flying the fighters that he dreamed about. Instead, he was assigned to the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron, 440th Troop Carrier Group, of the 9th Air Force where he would be piloting lumbering Douglas C-47 Skytrains.

The 96th TCS had been



Numerous sources have stated Capt. Mantell was flying P-51D 44-63869, which served with the 358th FS, 355th FG, during WWII. Flown by Lt. Halbert G. Marsh, the plane destroyed five Luftwaffe aircraft on the ground on 16 April 1945. However, it is thought this aircraft was not returned to the USA and, in fact, it would be very unusual for a combat Mustang to be returned. Also, the recorded number of flight hours for the crashed plane would not seem to correlate to those of a combat Mustang.

activated the month after Mantell won his wings. After training at several bases, the 96th went to Baer Field, Indiana, where new C-47s arrived along with personnel and all the other equipment needed to make a squadron operational. Deployed to IX Troop Carrier Command in February 1944, the squadron's Gooney Birds made the long hop to Britain where work got underway to prepare the men and aircraft for the coming invasion of Europe.

The 96th was in the thick of action as its paratroop-carrying C-47s crossed the French beaches on 6 June 1944 to be greeted by accurate German flak as they dropped the men of the

101st Airborne Division near Carentan on the Contentin Peninsula while also tugging Waco CG-4A combat gliders. Turning right around and heading back to England, the C-47s began flying a steady stream of missions with more paratroopers and the vital supplies needed to reinforce the beachhead. The next day, the C-47s carried out the same missions by transporting prodigious amounts of fuel, ammunition, food, and other supplies to the forward landing areas that had been established by Army engineers. The 440th would be awarded a Distinguished Unit Citation for completing those missions against intense enemy fire.



Could P-51D-30-NA USAAF 44-74398 be the Mustang flown by Capt. Thomas Mantell when the "Mantell Incident" took place? The plane was photographed in USAF markings just after it had been transferred to the 165th Fighter Squadron of the Kentucky ANG. At the time of the accident, records indicate the crashed Mustang had a total flight time of just 174 hours 25 minutes, the same amount of time that was on its Packard V-1650-7 engine. As we note elsewhere, Len Morgan logged that this was the Mustang he was flying in 1948 when he left it in Georgia and that it was picked up by Capt. Mantell to return to Kentucky. Len Morgan was a Mustang enthusiast and would go on to write one of the first books on the P-51, which sold over 50,000 copies so he knew what he was writing about. Other records indicate that 44-74398 was shot down in Korea during 1950. So, it would seem the Mantell Incident has mysteries within mysteries!