

WHEN THE MUSTANG WENT TO WAR

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE WRAPS UP ITS ORDERS FOR THE ALLISON-POWERED MUSTANG AS THE TYPE EXPANDS ITS COMBAT ENVELOPE - CONCLUSION

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Even though the North American Mustang Mk. I was heavily armed with its four .50-caliber and four .30-caliber Browning machine guns, the Royal Air Force was entering a new phase where it wanted heavier armament in the form of aerial cannon for its fighter aircraft. *Luftwaffe* pilots, particularly those flying the Fw 190 with the steel cowl, called the British .303-/.30-caliber guns "paint scratchers." Of course, they were not and a well-aimed burst from these weapons could bring down any Axis aircraft but the Germans were realizing the benefits of heavy cannons, especially since they could effectively destroy the

increasing numbers of Allied bombers venturing into the airspace over Fortress Europe. Also, the cannon could be very effective in the co-operation role with the British Army.

The design work in fitting the four Hispano 20mm Mk. 2 automatic cannon to the Mustang's wing was not overly complex and, although opinions went back and forth, the nose armament was eliminated along with the wing machine guns. At the factory, this aircraft was given the NAA type designation of NA-91 and some early correspondence with the British refers to the cannon-armed Mustang as the Mk. II but Mk. IA was settled upon. It is of note that by this time, Lend-Lease had kicked in

and the USAAF was showing interest in the variant. The initial order was for 150 Mk. IAs and this was placed by the USAAF on behalf of the British on 7 July 1941 (as per what would become standard Lend-Lease practice). The new act meant that America could "lend" the planes to the British if the action was deemed to be "vital to the security of the United States of America."

Lend-Lease meant that the NA-91s would also carry a USAAF serial as well as an RAF serial. By the time the first Mk. IA flew (USAAF 41-37320) on 29 May 1942, the attack on Pearl Harbor had taken place and the USAAF had a great need for tactical reconnaissance aircraft. Accordingly, the decision was made to withhold 58 aircraft from the British Mk. IA order and 57 were retained by the USAAF for tactical

recon conversion. This involved the fitting of two cameras along with the associated controls needed for that equipment. The 58th aircraft that was withheld was transferred to the US Navy on 17 September 1942 for evaluation by that service. This meant that the Royal Air Force would receive 92 Mustang Mk. IAs. The order broke down as follows:

41-37320/-37339 (20) to USAAF

41-37340/-37351 (12) to RAF

41-37352/-37321 (20) to USAA; 41-37352 for XP-78/XP-51B project

41-37372/-37411 (40) to RAF

41-37412/-37429 (17) to USAAF, 1 to USN; 41-27421 XP-78/XP-51B project; -37426 to USN

41-37430/-37469 (40) to RAF

As typical, testing went on at Inglewood and Mustang Mk. I AG347 was fitted with a cannon mock-up installation during October 1941 while the first production NA-91 wing set was installed on AM190 (NA-83).



A not particularly happy looking RCAF pilot waits while the ground crew prepares the Fairchild aerial camera for installation behind the armor plate.

The weapon was to be built under license in the USA but getting this set up along with making the associated belt feeds was taking longer than anticipated. With the RAF, the Hispano Mk. I was fitted to the new Bristol Beaufighter and Westland Whirlwind but problems soon cropped up. The Beaufighter showed the need

for a belt-feed mechanism since it was very difficult to replace the 60-round drums in flight. Early tests with



Splendid view of a Mustang Mk. IA between missions.