

MYSTERY OF THE MISSING WASP

DURING 1944, A WASP PILOT IN A P-51D TOOK OFF FROM MINES FIELD, NEVER TO BE SEEN AGAIN. GERTRUDE "TOMMY" TOMPKINS WOULD BECOME THE LAST WASP MISSING IN ACTION
BY HOWARD CARTER



Although outside the scope of this article, we thought it would be interesting to illustrate the progression in the life of 44-13366. Once in England, it was reassembled, test-flown, and assigned to the 358th Fighter Squadron where it was flown by Lt. Ward H. Douglass. The Mustang was coded YF*K and named *Baby Buggy*. It was just one of the thousands of Mustangs delivered by ferry pilots, many of whom were WASPs.



Walt Disney Productions gladly let the WASP organization utilize the "Fifinella" image for the WASP insignia.



It was a typical late October afternoon at Mines Field in southern California. The year was 1944, and an increasing stream of bubble canopy P-51D Mustangs was pouring off the North American production line. The field was literally packed with Mustangs — aircraft just completed were being pulled out of the production hangar; in the engine test area, Merlins were being run up night and day; the .50-caliber Browning M2 machine guns were being test fired around the clock; factory pilots were taking P-51Ds aloft for their first flights; USAAF pilots were making acceptance flights; and ferry pilots were preparing

to take the new fighters to their assigned destinations.

On 26 October 1944, P-51D-15-NA USAAF 44-15699 had gone through the required checks, accumulating just three hours of flight time in the process. A USAAF pilot had signed the Mustang off as ready for delivery and the fighter was scheduled to depart on a cross-country flight to Newark, New Jersey. At that location, a massive facility had been set up to get military aircraft ready for delivery to the ETO and MTO battlefronts. For the most part, the fighters would be expertly disassembled and cocooned for shipment by sea

while the multi-engine aircraft would be readied for the transatlantic "hop."

Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) member Gertrude Vreeland "Tommy" Tompkins-Silver had gone through the paperwork for 44-15699 and then did a thorough walk-around to make sure that the new fighter was ready for the long delivery flight. Gertrude had been born on 16 October 1911 to Vreeland and Laura Tompkins in Jersey City, New Jersey. As a child, her parents soon found that she had a terrible stuttering problem. Try as they might to rid her of

this malady, nothing worked. A decision was made to send Tommy, as she had been quickly nicknamed, to friends that had a farm in rural West Virginia. The Tompkins thought perhaps a change in environment would help their daughter beat the stuttering. Because of

this, she had become socially withdrawn and did poorly in school since she was often hazed by other children.

Nothing really worked but she did improve both socially and scholastically. She was enrolled in a horticultural school and for a period of time she raised goats, apparently finding an affinity with animals that she could not find with humans. By the mid-1930s, a decision was made where she would return to

New Jersey. Her father had given Tommy a job at the profitable iron cement company he created — Smooth-On Inc. — and she moved to New York City.

She dutifully took to her new, but dull, employment until sometime in 1940 and an event that would change her life. Stanley Michel "Mike" Kolendorsky was born on 24 February 1915 — also in Jersey City, so perhaps Gertrude had some prior acquaintance with him but this does not seem so. His grandfather

Beautiful image of an NAA P-51D-5-NA during a factory test flight — perhaps the first flight for the new fighter before it was handed over to a USAAF pilot for an acceptance test. At that point, the Mustang would go to a ferry pilot like Gertrude "Tommy" Tompkins for delivery. USAAF 44-13366 displays the different textures of aluminum skin, which is quite different from the overall "shiny" finish favored by some current owners with new Mustang restorations. USAAF 44-13366 was flown from Mines Field to Newark, New Jersey, where it was disassembled, crated, and shipped to England.