

# THE

# GREATEST DAY

HOW THE 345th FIGHTER GROUP DEFEATED THE LUFTWAFFE IN SEVERAL OF WORLD WAR TWO'S MOST DEFINING COMBAT MISSIONS  
BY STEVE BLAKE



Insignia of the 9th Air Force.

**T**he 25th of August 1944 was a notable day for France — and especially for its capital, Paris. On that date, American and Free French soldiers who had penetrated the City of Light secured the surrender of this German garrison after some brief fighting, thus liberating it from its brutal and humiliating four-year Nazi occupation. (The *Wermacht* had marched into Paris on 14 June 1940.)

Also very active that day in northeastern France, were both the *Luftwaffe* and the USAAF's 9th Air Force, whose task it was to support

and protect those liberating American ground forces. Numerous sources refer to 25 August 1944 as the 9th Air Force's "Greatest Day," because it produced the largest one-day victory tally for its fighter pilots (75 enemy aircraft confirmed destroyed in the air, plus many more on the ground — and lots more probably destroyed and damaged) and because of its contribution to the liberation of Paris. All but two of those aerial victories were scored by two of the 9th's Lockheed P-38 Lightning groups (the 367th and 474th) and one of its North American P-51 Mustang groups

— the 354th. This is the story of the latter's "greatest day" in aerial combat.

The 354th Fighter Group, comprised of the 353rd, 355th, and 356th Fighter Squadrons, arrived in England from the US in early November 1943 and was chosen to be the first USAAF unit to operate the new P-51B (powered by the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine built under license by the Packard Motor Car Company) in combat, flying that soon-to-be-famous fighter's first mission on 1 December — hence its adopted nickname, "The Pioneer Mustang Group." Although assigned to the tactical 9th Air Force, before the Allied invasion of German-occupied France in June 1944, it mostly escorted the strategic 8th Air Force's four-

engine bombers to their distant targets throughout the German *Reich*, racking up a huge score of enemy aircraft in the process and helping to prove the Mustang to be the war's premier long-range bomber escort fighter.

The 354th began mixing in some low-level tactical missions with its bomber escort assignments in April, in preparation for the invasion — especially the bombing and strafing of enemy airfields and transportation systems. It moved to a temporary advanced landing ground near the Normandy beachhead two weeks after D-Day (6 June) and then truly became part of the tactical air force. In mid-August, the Group transferred to Gael in eastern Brittany, about 30 miles west



Gold bullion 354th Fighter Group insignia.

Boxted, England, March 1944: New P-51B-10-NA 42-106434, had recently been delivered to the 354th FG and received the 355th FS code letters GQ'B. It was assigned to Lt. Bill King, who named it *Atlanta Peach* after his hometown. This is the plane Lt. Coleman flew on both of his 25 August missions.