

STORM OVER THE PACIFIC

CONCLUDING OUR BOOK-LENGTH SAGA OF THE 318th FIGHTER GROUP AT WAR - PART THREE

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As of mid-May 1945, the Group was ready to enter its new combat arena, far to the west and very close to the Japanese Home Islands, over and near which the Pacific War was now being fought. Okinawa, the largest and most southerly of the Ryuku Islands, just south of the Home Islands, had been invaded by US Marine and Army forces on 1 April, commencing the most vicious land battle in that theater. Okinawa is just 300 miles south of Kyushu, the southernmost of the Home Islands, and as a gateway to the latter the Japanese were determined to hold it. The island wasn't totally

secured until 2 July, after many thousands of casualties on both sides. The primary importance of Okinawa was the numerous Allied airfields that were established there.

IE SHIMA

The 318th FG's actual destination was the much smaller island of Ie Shima off Okinawa's northwest coast. Ie Shima had been invaded by Army troops on 16 April, and after some intense fighting it still hadn't been totally secured when

the Group's advance ground echelon went ashore there on 30 April. Work had immediately begun to repair the island's airfield, which had been demolished by the Japanese to prevent the Americans from utilizing it. Army engineer battalions also constructed two new airstrips, interlinking taxiways, and revetments.

The Group's pilots flew their P-47Ns the 1400

miles from Saipan to Ie Shima non-stop over a three-day period, one squadron at a time, accompanied by some B-29s for navigational assistance. The 333rd made the trip on 13 May, the 73rd the following day, and the 19th Fighter Squadron on the 15th. During the 73rd's flight some severe weather

conditions were encountered, and 1st Lt. Alford J. Babcock, flying P-47N-1-RE 44-87821, went missing and neither he nor his plane were seen again. On Ie Shima, the 318th was attached to the 301st Fighter Wing as part of the local Air Defense Command.

The pilots were very unhappy about their new airfield, as it was too short for them to operate from safely. According to 73rd Squadron CO Maj. Hussey, they "found a rough surface coral that would pond when it rained, and it rained constantly. It was extremely short for the big P-47N. I cut the tops off some trees on my first takeoff." The 333rd's

Men of the 333rd Fighter Squadron with a P-47N prior to departing Saipan for Ie Shima.



73rd FS armorers work on the .50-cal. guns of P-47N #29 USAAF 44-87815. The otherwise unidentified P-47N next to it is named *Darling*.