

COST OF WAR

A VARIETY OF ALLIED AIRCRAFT
KNOCKED OUT OF ACTION DURING
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Even the best got into trouble. Top-scoring ace Capt. Dominic Salvatore "Don" Gentile was a hero not only to the American public but also to his fellow pilots in the 4th Fighter Group. Going north before Pearl Harbor to fight the Germans, Gentile enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and was posted to the United Kingdom to pilot Spitfires with No. 122 Squadron, one of three famed "Eagle" Squadrons made up of Americans. With the US entry into the war, he transferred to the USAAF's 4th Fighter Group and quickly made a name for himself. His assigned aircraft was P-51B 43-6913/VF-T Shangri-La. Along with wingman John T. Godfrey, the pair became a public relations dream and on 13 April 1944 (he had been awarded the DSO on 11 April), Gentile went aloft to make a series of passes at the 4th FG's Debden airfield for a throng of gathered reporters and photographers. Each pass got progressively lower until Gentile had the misfortune to literally "fly" into the ground at high speed. The Mustang skidded for several hundred yards before slithering to a stop in a muddy field. Gentile emerged unhurt but the damage was done as the photographers fired away.

Colonel Don Blakeslee, commander of the 4th FG, was enraged at Gentile. He had a standing order that any pilot that damaged an aircraft while "grandstanding" would be shipped home immediately and that is exactly what happened although Gentile's trip to the States was later noted as a "planned" tour to sell War Bonds. Members of the 4th FG along with the press milled around the wreck of *Shangri-La*. When the Mustang hit the ground, the Harrison radiator and associated systems were shoved up into the fuselage, breaking the fighter's back. An angry Blakeslee, in overcoat, can be seen inspecting the wreck.



It was up to the groundcrew to remove the wrecked Mustang. This view shows the famed artwork on *Shangri-La* to advantage.

When the damaged fighter was moved, it literally broke in two. Some parts were salvaged from the P-51B but what finally happened to the wreck of the famed fighter has been somewhat of a mystery. Some sources state that the wreckage was dumped in a nearby pond, others say the Mustang was buried in a farmer's field, but the most likely end was that the P-51B was stripped of parts and scrapped.

