

ONE WAR, THREE AIR FORCES

FROM 1939 TO 1943, WHEN HE WAS SHOT DOWN AND TAKEN PRISONER, AUBREY STANHOPE SERVED AS A PILOT FOR FRANCE, GREAT BRITAIN, AND THE UNITED STATES

BY STEVE BLAKE



Muriel Stanhope watches as Stan and his wingman takeoff from Debden on a bomber escort mission.

During the early days of the Second World War, before the US was forced into that global conflict in December 1941, hundreds of young American men joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) to become military pilots and aircrew, despite their country's supposed neutrality and, in most cases, without forfeiting their US citizenship. By the summer of 1940, there were enough American fighter pilots in the RAF to create a their own squadron. This was No. 71 Squadron, which was formed on 8 August 1940 and became operational in March 1941. Two more American RAF fighter squadrons were formed later in 1941 — No. 121 (May) and No. 133 (August). Initially, most of their leadership positions (flight and squadron leaders) were held by experienced British pilots, until more of the Americans gained the requisite experience. For publicity and propaganda purposes, they were called "Eagle Squadrons" after America's well-known avian patriotic symbol.

All three squadrons served with distinction for the next year, scoring a total of 74.5 confirmed aerial victories and probably destroying and damaging many more *Luftwaffe* aircraft, but suffered heavy casualties (77 American pilots died as Eagles). They all flew Hawker Hurricanes at first, but scored most of their victories after re-equipping with the Supermarine Spitfire. It should be noted that just 244 of the many hundreds of volunteer "Yank" pilots in the RAF and RCAF served with an Eagle Squadron.

After America entered the war, most of the volunteers wanted to transfer to one of its military air services, mainly the US

Army Air Force (USAAF). By the summer of 1942, a process had been agreed upon by which those men could make the transfer relatively easily — although many of them chose *not* to transfer. The three Eagle Squadrons were a different story, however, as it was decided that they, their aircraft, and their pilots would be transferred directly to the USAAF's new 8th Air Force in England, providing it with an experienced fighter group.

The new 4th Fighter Group (FG) and its three squadrons — the 334th, 335th, and 336th — were constituted on 22 August 1942 at Bushey Hall in Hertfordshire, a few miles northwest of London, which was the home of VIII Fighter Command (FC), and activated there on 12 September. They were formerly Nos. 71, 121, and 133 Squadrons RAF, respectively. They had all occupied their actual new home airfield, Debden (USAAF Station 356), in southeastern England's Essex County, to begin combat operations by 29 September, on which date a formal ceremony was held at Debden during which the Eagle Squadrons were officially transferred to the USAAF. The new group flew its first combat mission — a fighter sweep from Calais to Dunkirk, France — and scored its first three air victories on 2 October.

Although the former Eagle Squadron pilots were now wearing their new USAAF uniforms and their Spitfires displayed the US aircraft insignia, a white star over a circular blue field, instead of British roundels, their missions mostly remained the same, including low-level fighter sweeps/strafing ("Rhubarbs"), attacks on enemy shipping and ports ("Roadsteads"), and bomber escorts ("Circuses" and "Rode-



Patch for No. 121 Squadron Royal Air Force.



Sleeve patch for the Eagle Squadron.



Flight jacket patch for the 335th Fighter Squadron.