

BATTLE OVER HUNGARY

MESSERSCHMITTS OF THE ROYAL HUNGARIAN AIR FORCE'S ELITE PUMA SQUADRON
TACKLE THE LIGHTNINGS OF THE 82nd FIGHTER GROUP

BY STEVE BLAKE

By 7 July 1944, the USAAF's strategic 15th Air Force (AF) in Italy had been operational for just over eight months and had reached its peak strength, which included 21 groups of four-engine Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress and Consolidated B-24 Liberator heavy bombers and seven groups of long-range escort fighters, equipped with Lockheed P-38 Lightnings and North American P-51 Mustangs.

The Allies invaded southern Italy in early September 1943, and by the end of that year had captured most of its peninsula south of Rome. Many Axis airfields were captured and new ones were built for use by the Allied air forces in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO). They placed the USAAF's long-range bombers and fighters that were now based there within range of

enemy targets throughout southern and eastern Europe — from France to Greece and as far north as Poland.

The 15th AF's primary targets on 7 July were the synthetic oil refineries at Blechhammer and Odertal, in Silesia (now part of Poland). Its P-38-equipped 82nd Fighter Group (FG) was tasked with withdrawal support for the Liberators of the 55th and 304th Bombardment Wings that attacked those targets. They were to rendezvous with the bombers near Bánovce in Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia), 80 miles south of Blechhammer, as they headed for home after the bombing.

This was the 82nd FG's 723rd combat mission. Its first had been on 25 December 1942, with the 12th AF, shortly after it arrived in Algeria from Northern Ireland, where it had been training for the previous several months. Since January 1944, it had been based at Vincenzo Airfield (Foggia #11 — one of the vast number of airfields in and around Foggia), southeast of the city of Foggia and a few miles from the Adriatic Sea. The 82nd had by then been the top-scoring USAAF fighter group in the MTO for well over a year.

By 0905 hours, 38 Lightnings had taken off from Vincenzo and were forming up over the Adriatic — 15 from the lead 95th Fighter Squadron (FS), 13 from the 96th, and ten from the 97th. Leading

the Group was the 95th's 1st Lt. Joseph F. Belton.

(In the MTO,



Insignia of the 82nd Fighter Group.

First Lieutenant László Dániel, the 101/3 Puma Squadron's Technical Officer, with one of his unit's Bf 109G-6s at Veszprém in the summer of 1944. Dániel was credited with shooting down ten Allied aircraft, including two USAAF P-38s (one of which was a shared victory) and two B-24s (both also shared).