

AN UNUSUAL ENCOUNTER

A BATTLE BETWEEN USAAF LIGHTNINGS AND SOVIET YAKS
OFFERED A PREVIEW OF THE COMING COLD WAR

BY STEVE BLAKE



Lieutenant William A. "Bill" Stakem led the sixth 95th Fighter Squadron flight on the 7 November mission. He destroyed (burned) one of the Soviet trucks in the convoy near Niš.



Lieutenant Tom Urton, leader of the 95th Squadron's fifth flight, was credited with probably destroying one of the Yaks and damaging another.



The 95th Fighter Squadron's Lt. John Blumer in a relaxed moment at Vincenzo. After strafing two Russian trucks and a train near Niš, which actions resulted in the immediate intervention of the Soviet Air Force Yak units based nearby, Blumer shot down one of the latter's planes.



Given the antipathy between the capitalist/democratic USA and the socialist/autocratic USSR, it must have been quite a shock for many Americans to suddenly find, as of December 1941, that their country was a combatant ally of Russia. The US officially declared war on Nazi Germany's ally the Empire of Japan on 8 December, the day after the latter's surprise attack on its Territory of Hawaii, and Germany declared war on the US three days later. Russia had then been at war with the Nazis for six months, following Germany's (and its European allies') attack on *their* country.

Until well into 1944, there was little

aerial contact between American and Russian warplanes in a combat theater. The situation began to change that spring when the USSR agreed to make three of its airfields located in Ukraine available for temporary use by units of the USAAF's strategic 8th and 15th Air Forces (AF) in England and Italy. Code-named Operation *Frantic*, this plan allowed American bombers and fighters to attack targets in eastern Europe far beyond their usual range and then recover at those Russian airfields, from which they would fly additional missions before returning to their home bases. (The Soviet Air Force had little long-range strategic capability.)

The US and the USSR were only temporary, convenient allies, joined together in their unnatural and uncomfortable alliance due to the shared enmity with their then more dangerous opponent Germany. Suspicion and distrust often influenced their relationship in the conduct of the war. At the Ukrainian bases, the Russians were very wary and controlling of the comings and goings of the USAAF planes (the paranoid Stalinist attitude nearly placed Americans in the same category as Nazis). This resulted in some uncomfortable and unfortunate incidents, the most serious of which took place on 26 June 1944. Lieutenant David K. Rowe, a Lockheed

F-5 photo recon pilot of the 8th AF's 7th Photographic Reconnaissance Group, flew a solo mission to Poland that day and was returning to his temporary Ukrainian base at Poltava, when he was shot down by a Russian fighter, whose pilot, despite the Lightning's distinctive profile, evidently assumed he was German. *Luftwaffe* aircraft having been reported in the area. Rowe was fortunately able to bail out and parachute to earth safely, while suffering from painful burns (after spending some time in a Russian hospital, he was evacuated to the US for further treatment). Ironically, the fighter that shot him down was an American Bell P-39 Airacobra, hundreds of which had been supplied to Russia under the Lend-Lease Act.

By November 1944, the German Reich

was disintegrating, assailed by the Allies from both the west and east. American, British, and Free French forces had invaded Normandy in June and southern France in August, and had mostly liberated that country from its German occupation. The Western Allies were then entrenched along the German border in the Low Countries and France, preparing for their move into Germany itself. In the east, the Soviets had pushed the Axis forces out of most of the Russian territory they had captured earlier in the war. The British had invaded German-occupied Greece in October, and the Nazi forces there were retreating north into Yugoslavia. East of the latter country, Germany's allies Bulgaria and Romania had fallen to the Russians, while to the north its other ally Hunga-

ry was in the process of being invaded by them. The Germans were also being forced out of Yugoslavia, by the Russians and by several Yugoslav partisan armies that were being supported and supplied by the Western Allies in Italy, mainly from the air. The whole German southeastern front was collapsing.

As part of its support of the Russian and Yugoslav armies' ground campaign there, which had been ongoing for the past three months, the 15th AF attacked targets throughout Yugoslavia on 7 November 1944. The 82nd Fighter Group (FG) was, according to its official mission report, assigned the task of strafing "M/T [motor transport] on roads from Sjenica to Novi Pazar, to Raška, to Mitrovica" in the southeastern part of the country. This

The 95th Fighter Squadron's P-38 coded AE ("A" for the 95th and "E" for that plane within the squadron) was assigned to Capt. Coffelt, who most likely flew it on the 7 November mission.