

JOSEPHINE TO THE RESCUE

THE CREATIVITY OF TWO MUSTANG PILOTS RESULTED IN
A UNIQUE SYSTEM TO SAVE AVIATORS DOWNED IN THE PACIFIC
BY ADAM STANTON

The long reach of the United States Army Air Force was coming to fruition during 1944 as one Pacific island after another was conquered by the US Navy, US Marine Corps, and US Army. The cost was tremendous in men and material but there was a common goal — capture islands so that the ever-talented SeaBees could rapidly build airbases to accommodate the new Boeing B-29 Superfortress — the tip of the spear that was aimed directly at the heart of the Japanese Home Islands. The goal of the B-29 was to bomb Japanese bases, cities, and industry centers into rubble prior to a massive invasion by American and Allied forces.

The long-range trips by the B-29s were physically exhausting for the crews and for the pilots of the single-engine fighters assigned to the VLR (Very Long Range) mission. Fuel-heavy P-51D Mustangs and the new generation of long-range Republic P-47N Thunderbolts would escort the bombers to and from the targets. The Americans knew they would meet opposition from Japanese fighter forces and from the enemy's anti-aircraft gunners. Losses were expected and they would not only come from enemy action but also from weather, depleted fuel supplies, and mechanical problems.

The Superforts came with their own set of problems — the Wright R-3350 and its propeller were less than reliable. A lost engine could result in a ditching at sea and the B-29 airframe was not particularly good for landing on an ocean surface and staying intact, even with the most modest of wave action.

The fighter pilots faced their own problems. Ensnared in their cramped cockpits, the young pilots probably constantly thought of their chances if they were forced down at sea. For the Mustang pilots, the manual even forthrightly stated *not* to ditch since the P-51D, with its underslung radiator scoop, would blast a torrent of water into the fuselage and guarantee that the plane would sink in seconds. The manual stated for the pilots to take their chances by parachute. Bobbing on a single-man life raft, a miniscule speck in the mainly uncharted Pacific, must have weighed heavily on each pilot as they prepared for their VLR flights.

The Japanese gave little, if any, thought to rescuing their pilots down



Trapp dropping the prototype Josephine off the coast of Oahu.

in the Pacific. Americans were just the opposite. The USAAF knew they were going to have aircraft go down in the ocean, and with the help of the US Navy, an elaborate network of amphibian aircraft, submarines, and pre-positioned surface ships was set up for each raid to the Home Islands.

Studies with the B-29 proved that it was not "ditching friendly." The sheer size of the new bomber was one thing but early ditching attempts identified a number of problems. First, the bomb bay doors often collapsed on impact with the water. Their large size and placement made them a weak point and their failure could result in rest of the airframe coming apart. Then, it was found that the rear pressurized compartment's front access door would often be compromised by the force of water entering the fuselage. Also, the tail section of the bomber would fill rapidly with water and this would cause the entire unit to break off and sink.

Modifications were added on the production line to help with these problems. The pressure bulkhead door was reinforced. The bomb bay doors were strengthened. An escape hatch was added to the top of the rear pressurized compartment to help crewmen exit after ditching. It was learned there was a better chance of survival if all crewmembers were moved into the front pressurized compartment. This section was more watertight and usually did not collapse on impact with the sea. Sometimes, it would remain afloat for extended periods of time.

On each mission, the crews were briefed on where the surface ships, subs, and amphibious aircraft would be



Major Tapp with his P-51D Margaret-IV. Located. If in trouble, a B-29 would try to make it to one of these locations where, hopefully, a successful ditching could be accomplished and the crew rescued in a short time.

What if a bomber crew or fighter pilot could not make it to one of these rescue points? Major James Buckley Tapp and Capt. Vic Mollan were both Mustang pilots with the 15th Fighter Group. Tapp had enlisted in the Air Corps during October 1941 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant during June 1942. After a transition course in the Bell P-39, he was assigned to the 78th Fighter Squadron based in Hawaii. He would remain at that location for the next three years until the unit transitioned to the P-51D and in January 1945 it became part of the 15th FG.

Tapp and Mollan started training for VLRs and, during this time, the pair began thinking on how the Mustang could



Insignia for Maj. Tapp's 78th Fighter Squadron.



Mustang carrying a prototype Josephine tank.

ABOVE: Although the Josephine kits were mainly deployed for Mustang pilots, they could also be used on downed B-29s. Superfortress 42-63447 Umbriago, Dat's My Boy made a successful ditching without breaking in two.