

CHINA BLITZERS!

THE 26th FIGHTER SQUADRON AT
WAR IN THE CHINA/BURMA/INDIA THEATER - PART TWO

BY STEVE BLAKE

During May of 1944, Capt. John Yantis relinquished command of the 26th Fighter Squadron to Capt. John K. Davis. The squadron had received the 51st FG's first North American P-51s at the end of April, and it flew its first Mustang mission on 10 May — an attempted interception of enemy aircraft by two pilots from Kunming. Over the coming weeks it would complete its conversion to the P-51, which had a lot more speed and range than its old P-40s (but two less guns), while the Group's 16th and 25th Squadrons would continue to operate their obsolescent Warhawks (except when their pilots were TDY with the 26th or

another Mustang squadron) until the end of that year.

On 27 May, a special unit, officially designated the "26th Fighter Detachment," arrived at a "secret" landing strip near Liangshan in north central China's Szechwan Province, from which it would operate for the next month — and also on occasion from another airstrip farther north at Sian. The detachment was comprised of eight P-51s and their pilots: Three from the 26th FS (Lts. Joe "Rosie" Baglio, Bob "Monk" De Veer, and Von Weller) and four from the 16th FS plus the detachment commander, Capt. Solon C.

Kelley II, from 14th AF headquarters. Its primary task would be to interdict the rail system between Peking and Hankow, which was now totally controlled by the Japanese.

This detachment was one of the Allies' responses to the Imperial Japanese Army's (IJA) launching, in April, of its biggest land offensive of the war. Designated Operation *Ich-Go* (Number One), its main objectives were to secure all of the above-mentioned rail link between the Japanese-held cities of Hankow and Peking and then to push forward to the west and south all the way to Indochina, capturing Chinese cities and 14th AF airfields along the way. Air power would be a major factor in countering this massive campaign, resulting in increased Allied casualties (especially from anti-aircraft fire) and encounters with enemy aircraft. Although the 14th's fighter units, including the 26th FS, would continue to fly some interception and bomber escort missions, their primary function would now increasingly be as fighter-bombers, attacking Japanese soldiers and equipment, supply centers, and transportation systems on the ground and on China's huge network of rivers — its aquatic highways.



Pilots of the 26th FS relaxing outside their operations building at Kunming, China. In the background are the airfield's control towers and some of the squadron's P-40s.

Coincidentally, the 51st FG's first aerial victory by and loss of a P-51 took place on the same mission. Captain Kelley and the 16th FS' 1st Lt. Leland W. Dawson took off from Liangshan on the early morning of 30 May for a fighter sweep to Peiping. They first strafed rail targets, each of them claiming five locomotives destroyed. Then, according to the squadron history, "At a small

grass field west of town they found nine I-97s [obsolete Nakajima Ki-27 fixed-landing-gear fighters] on the ground. Our planes attacked in a string with Capt. Kelley leading. The first plane caught fire. Many strikes were seen to hit under [another] from the engine back to the tail, with pieces flying off, and it [was] claimed destroyed. [There were also] hits on the number seven plane, and it is claimed probably destroyed. When Capt. Kelley reached the end of the field, he saw two I-97s



Rare multi-piece leather flight jacket patch for the 14th Air Force.



China Blitzers at their best — 26th Fighter Squadron North American P-51Cs are refueled and prepared for their next mission.