

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG!

THE COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY OF THE MUSTANGS OF THE 354th FIGHTER GROUP
AND THE FINAL DAYS OF THE LUFTWAFFE AND THE GERMAN REICH - PART ONE

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George Bickell, one of the 354th's original pilots, was the 355th FS' first Commanding Officer and then, from April 1944 until the end of the war, the Group CO.



WWII insignia for the 354th Fighter Group.

A nice shot of the 356th Squadron's flight line at A-98, behind Maj. Lamb's UNO WHO?. Lamb claimed to have shot down three Fw 190s with 44-63792 on 23 March, one of which was not confirmed. The plane was slightly damaged by debris from one of their victims. In the foreground is the tail of a Piper L-4 Grasshopper, and in the left background are some C-47 transports ready to take off on a mission in support of the Allied Rhine River crossings.

The infamous Battle of the Bulge, which was fought on the Western Front in Europe, officially concluded on 1 February 1945, with a decisive American victory. The German army had launched a surprise counteroffensive six weeks earlier, from the fortified Siegfried Line along its country's border into Allied-controlled Belgium and Luxembourg, and the very surprised, unprepared, and insufficient US ground forces opposing it were immediately overrun and pushed back, creating a huge protuberance ("Bulge") into the Allied lines. The American armies in that area quickly reorganized, however, and their now reinforced units halted the German advance and then gradually pushed it back to where it had begun.

Greatly aiding those Allied ground forces were the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bomber groups of the US 9th Air Force (AF), which provided the majority of the air-to-ground support that helped make their victory possible. One of those P-47 units was the 354th Fighter Group (FG), whose nickname was, ironically, "The Pioneer Mustang Group." The 354th had, in fact, previously flown North American P-51s for more than a year. Although part of the tactical 9th AF in England, during its first few months in combat it exclusively flew long-range escort missions in support of the 8th AF's four-engine bombers. It was the first unit to fly the Merlin-engine P-51B operationally, in December 1943, and subsequently helped prove it to be World War II's premier long-range bomber escort fighter — running up a large score of *Luftwaffe* fighters in the process.

In April 1944, the 354th FG began flying some low-level tactical missions to France in preparation for the Allied invasion of that German-occupied country that was scheduled for early June. Following its move to an advanced landing ground in France a week after the D-Day landings in Normandy, the group's missions were mostly tactical in nature. In August, it supported Gen. George Patton's Third US Army (TUSA) during its famous end run around Nazi ground forces to liberate Paris, the French capital. As of the late fall of 1944, the Allied armies were lined up in eastern