The P-47 Thunderbolt: THE BEAUTIFUL BRUTE LIVES ON

BY **BUDD DAVISSON** PHOTOS BY **JOHN DIBBS**

There's a lot more to the P-47 than simply being a seemingly fat, overweight pugilist surrounded by svelte, muscular-appearing peers on both sides of the fight. Its out-of-place appearance made it the butt of a lot of jokes on its own side. However, to the Axis, whether on the ground or in the air, the arrival of the Thunderbolt was anything but a joke.

One of the unusual features of the P–47, and the secret to its high–altitude performance, hides under the bump on its lower, rear fuselage: the turbocharger. Exhaust gases are routed aft to spin the turbocharger, which uses that energy to compress incoming air and ram it into the engine. Most of the Jug's bulbous belly outline is due to extensive ductwork and plumbing. Many restorations forego the complications of the turbocharger. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

In total, worldwide, the Jug accounted for something over 3,600 enemy aircraft in the air, with roughly a 4:1 kill loss ratio and an unknown, probably much larger number, destroyed on the ground.

When turned loose to go down to the deck, the Thunderbolt's ability to hit a designated target and thoroughly destroy it became both legendary and invaluable. The Thunderbolt's heavy armament and capability of carrying a huge ordnance load on hard points and pylons came to the fore and "close air support" took on a whole new meaning. It was the Skyraider of WW II. And there's a good reason the official name of the A-10 Wart Hog is Thunderbolt II.

Unfortunately, as tough as she was in combat, her survival rate to the present day was looking precarious clear into the 1970s. In fact, it was the very last WW II fighter to gain the attention of warbird restorers. This was primarily because Jugs left the U.S. Air Force for the National Guard almost as soon as the war was over and the ANG

Left: It's difficult to judge scale in a photo, but the cockpit of the P-47 was big, even compared to other American fighters. In contrast to the cockpits of its adversaries, the difference was almost laughable.

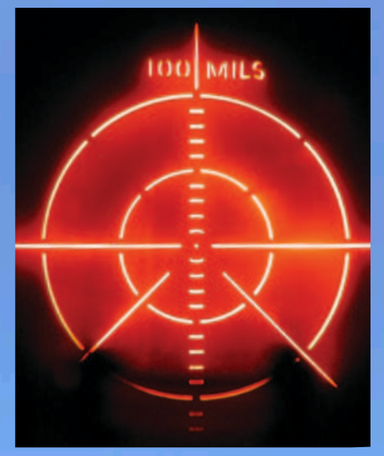
Above: With an aim towards streamlining, the flat, laminated bullet-resistant glass panel is mounted between the windshield and the gunsight. Bubble canopies put the panel right out front.

Right: The legendary R2800, 18-cylinder radial engine was a WW II mainstay but the only radial in single-engine USAAF combat fighters (P-61s used them) and it used a remote mounted turbocharger rather than a direct drive super charger as they did in Navy service.

Lots of fighter sweeps with one locomotive left steaming and dead on the track.

The unit designator (WZ) followed by an individual airplane code (D) was a scheme used mostly by the 8th and 9th Air Forces.

The serial numbers on all USAAF aircraft remained throughout their careers.



A wide variety of both U.S. and UK gun sights were tried in the Thunderbolt but the USN Mk. 8, fixed reticle unit became standard equipment beginning with the P–47D–20. It was replaced by the K–14A computing sight in 1945. Note the skid–ball at the bottom of the reflector glass: the pilot had to keep that centered and

only flew them for a few years. Most immediately moved to South American air forces. The sight of a P-47 outside of a museum was rare, even in the 1950s. The primary reason so many Mustangs have survived is that they flew in the ANG until the late 50s and lots of them were left on U.S. soil although there were others overseas.

There were practically no Thunderbolt airframes available to restore until the early 1970s. Then, Ed Jurist, who operated Vintage Car Store in Nyack, New York, decided to branch out into airplanes and rescued at least six, possibly as many as nine, complete airplanes from Peru. Since that time, the flying population of Jugs has continued a slow, but steady increase as restorers continue to bring the beautiful brutes back to life. ✠

SNAFU (Situation Normal All Fouled Up) certainly applied to WZ–D, of the 84th Fighter Squadron, 78th Fighter Group at Duxford, on December 15, 1944. How it wound up on its belly with no other apparent damage is unknown, but the pilot was Earl Steir. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Although the P–47 was the heaviest, biggest, single–engine operational fighter in the USAAF inventory, it was such an easy airplane to land that pilots joked about filling out their paperwork while still on final. This was largely due to the wide landing gear and effective flaps. Note the gear doors stay open, when the gear is down, creating lots of drag, where the Mustang's close after the gear is lowered, then are dropped after the aircraft is parked.