

# Jim Howard ONE-MAN AIR FORCE

BY BARRETT TILLMAN

## Maj. James H. Howard learned the hard way:

It really was possible to be lonely in a crowd. His was the only Mustang in a crowd of Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs. Minutes previously, he had had been leading the 356th Fighter Squadron; now he was the lone defender of a box of heavy bombers deep in German airspace.

On January 11, 1944, the Eighth Air Force sent 650 “heavies” to the Brunswick area; the First Air Division was to bomb the Oschersleben FW 190 factory, 140 miles west-southwest of Berlin. Many groups aborted because of weather, but the Oschersleben region was clear under an overcast. Forty-nine P-51Bs from all three squadrons of the 354th Fighter Group provided target support for the 174 Boeing B-17s attacking Oschersleben.

It had happened so fast. Somebody—the pilot did not give his call sign—had spotted bandits climbing to intercept the Fortresses. Pragmatism ruled in the 354th Group: Whoever made the first sighting took the lead. Col. Kenneth R. Martin, the 27-year-old commander of the “Pioneer Mustangs,” insisted on tactics over protocol.

Howard’s squadron was cruising just below the overcast at 17,000 feet. The anonymous young pilot who had seen the *Staffeln* of 109s and 110s clawing for position to attack the bombers called, “Go down and get the bastards!”

Recalled Lt. Col. Richard E. Turner, then a 356th flight leader, “The voice sounded enough like Major Howard’s to satisfy us.” As the CO nosed down, he was overtaken by a squadron of youngsters eager to exploit their altitude advantage.

Air discipline vaporized. Without awaiting proper procedure, the entire 354th Group shoved over. Howard pulled up to avoid a collision. He was largely on his own.

Because all three squadrons had jumped on the vulnerable Messerschmitts, Howard realized that the “big friends” were unprotected. Therefore, he led his four-plane flight back to the bombers’ level, providing miniature escort to dozens of B-17s. In the next few minutes, he was going to have more shooting than he wanted.

Lt. Col. Jim Howard boards a 353rd Fighter Squadron P-51B prior to the Ninth Air Force Group’s mission from Boxted, England, on January 20, 1944. This Mustang was soon lost to air action over Germany on April 8. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

### China Days

James Howell Howard had already lived a fighter pilot's fantasy: prewar carrier aviator, Flying Tiger mercenary, and one of the original Merlin Mustang squadron commanders. He fought both major Axis powers, scoring against each in a combat career spanning two and a half years.

Born in China in 1913, "Jimmy" was the son of Harvey Howard of St. Louis, an eye surgeon working for the Rockefeller Foundation. The youngster spent his first 14 years in Asia before the family returned to Missouri. He attended boarding school in Pennsylvania and high school in St. Louis. He graduated from Pomona College in California in 1937.

American Volunteer Group (AVG).

While aboard USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) in June 1941, Howard learned that he had been accepted by CAMCO. Intrigued with the opportunity, he realized that his decline of a regular commission paved the way to China. With few exceptions, only reservists were eligible for the AVG. Furthermore, he had company: more than half of the Flying Tiger pilots were navy trained.

Howard wanted to see China again, partly for his regard for the people. "But my overriding reason was my yearning for adventure and action." Beyond that, he believed "my role was that of a warrior...If there was to be a war, I wanted to be in it."

In addition to 377 hours in flight training, Howard had two-and-a-half years in the fleet. His experience commended him to the AVG, which enrolled him as a flight leader in the 2nd Pursuit Squadron, the Panda Bears, then elevated to vice squadron leader.

During the AVG's formation period at Kunming, China, Howard got the essence of the head Tiger, Claire Chennault. The navy pilot said,

"I knew instinctively that here was a man who was going to make a go of our organization. With his military bearing he radiated a feeling of confidence that everything was going to be all right now that he was there and in charge. Here was a man who said what he believed and did not mince words. He offered no apologies or excuses. He touched all of us with his sincerity and singleness of purpose. He was a man we could follow."

The AVG flew Curtiss P-40B/C Tomahawks diverted from a British shipment. They were a new concept to Howard, who had grown up in Grumman biplanes and only briefly had sampled the new F4F-3 Wildcat.

Howard found soulmates in the Panda Bears. The standout personality was another naval aviator, David Lee Hill, who had been born in Korea two years after Howard. Like Dr. Howard, "Tex" Hill's father was a missionary but with a difference—he became chaplain of the Texas Rangers.

Contrary to public opinion, the Tigers did not engage in combat before Pearl Harbor. Their first battle came three weeks later, but Howard had to wait a while longer.

On January 3, 1942, Howard teamed with the



Above left: Prewar, Howard was a qualified U.S. Navy fighter pilot, seen here with an F3F. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Above right: Howard resigned his commission in 1941 and flew with the Flying Tigers. His air-to-air combat experience paid off in the skies over Europe. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Like so many World War II fliers, Howard became enamored of aviation early on. A lanky six-foot-two, he feared he might be too tall for his dream of fighters, but he became a naval aviator in January 1939 and flew the delightful Grumman F2F and F3F biplanes from USS *Lexington* (CV-2) and USS *Enterprise* (CV-6). Recalling the F2F-1, Howard wrote, "The stubby little fighter's huge thousand-horsepower Wright Cyclone spun its three-bladed propeller with a deafening roar that could shatter the quiet of a peaceful afternoon. It had all the advanced equipment—retractable landing gear that was cranked up and down manually, a complete instrument panel with the latest aids...a homing loop, oxygen, and a constant-speed propeller." A bonus of duty in Fighting Squadron Six was flying for the Robert Taylor movie *Flight Command*.

Despite his easygoing personality, Howard was fearsome in the air. Squadron mates learned to respect Ensign Howard in "IBP" (individual battle practice). He knew he had a future in the Navy when offered a regular commission, but he declined, fearing it would affect his true love—flying. Thus, he filled out papers applying for the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CAMCO) in China, a cover for the nascent



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squadron commander, Jack Newkirk, and Tex Hill for a dawn strafing mission against Tak Airfield near Rahang, Burma. "Scarsdale Jack" was another navy-trained fighter pilot, making the mission a golden-wing trio. Howard recalled, "I had my eyes glued on a row of airplanes neatly parked along the far strip. I saw they were American-built Brewsters and knew that they were ships which had fallen into Jap hands. [Note: The Royal Air Force had four squadrons of Brewster Buffalos in Southeast Asia.] I determined they'd never get to use those aircraft against us. I darted over there and let the tracers flow. Incendiaries blew up tanks and set them all on fire, but I wasn't satisfied. I ran back and forth over those ships, tossing riddling steel into them.

"I was so busy doing that I didn't see a fast Jap fighter who was so close to my tail he was practically getting into the act. But Tex Hill shot him down. As we flew home he told me about it. I didn't believe him. But when I put my hands on those bullet holes, Tex said reprovingly, 'Those didn't come from moths, you know.'"

Howard found more action that month. On the

19th, he earned a one-third share in an "Army 98 recon" at Mesoht Airdrome—probably a Ki-51 "Sonia." He followed up with a Ki-27 "Nate" fighter at Rangoon on the 24th.

Jack Newkirk was killed strafing a Thai airfield in late March, and Tex Hill became skipper. Howard succeeded him just before the AVG disbanded in July.

AVG attrition was not limited to combat. In mid-May, Howard was practicing dive-bombing in new P-40Es with his friend Tom Jones, who had flown Northrop BT-1s from USS *Yorktown*. Jones went straight in, reason unknown, although he had confided having had severe headaches to a few friends.

On July 4, flying a Kittyhawk, Howard gunned an "I-97 fighter" (another Nate) at Hengyang, one of four kills credited on the Tigers' last day.

From January to July 1942, Howard flew 56 missions, claiming 2.33 aerial victories and four planes on the ground. He received the \$500 bonus for 6.33 credits—serious money at the time. When the Tigers were absorbed into the Army Air Force (AAF), he elected to go along and received a captain's commission in January 1943.

Though it never displayed the name, "Old Exterminator" was Col. Robert L. Scott's P-40E as CO of the 23rd Fighter Group, which absorbed some Flying Tiger personnel when Jim Howard returned to the United States. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



### Against the Reich

Howard went through transition training with the 329th Fighter Group at Glendale, California, and in May 1943, he joined the 354th at Santa Rosa, California, then flying Bell P-39s. Upon sailing to England that fall, however, the 354th became the first unit flying new Rolls-Royce Merlin-powered P-51Bs—thus, the name: Pioneer Mustangs.

Col. Martin's group entered combat from Boxted, Essex, England, in November 1943. Although assigned to the 9th Air Force—the

tactical organization intended to support ground forces in Occupied Europe—the Mustang's range and performance commended it to the "Mighty Eighth." Therefore, the Pioneer Mustangs flew long-range bomber escorts for heavy bombers. The P-51s arrived none too soon. During the summer and fall of 1943, German fighters and flak took a fearsome toll of U.S. bombers, to the point that deep-penetration missions into Reich skies became problematical. At one point, it had been statistically impossible for a bomber crew to survive a 25-mission tour.

Howard's attitude toward the Merlin Mustang was typical. "This ship has no bugs," he said. "All the pilots have gone overboard for it. They wouldn't want to have to select any other plane to fight in. And we'd all like to race the Mosquito, the Typhoon, the Spitfire, P-38, P-47, or the German Focke-Wulf or Messerschmitt 109."

Thus did Jim Howard enter his second theater of war. At age 30, he was personally and tactically mature, a combat-experienced fighter pilot confident in himself, his aircraft, and his colleagues. On an escort to Bremen/

Wilhelmshaven, Howard bagged a Bf 109 on December 20, his fourth kill of the war.

### "The One-Man Air Force"

On January 11, northwest of Halberstadt in only his second European combat, Howard had a sky full of black-crossed fighters to himself.

Howard cut off a 110 tracking the bombers and shot it down, but lost his wingmen in the process. Then a squadron of 109s drove in for an attack. Howard, the consummate professional, headed them off. He feinted and dodged, taking shots when

"Berlin Express," which sports a Malcolm hood, rather than the "birdcage" canopy of Howard's *Ding Hao*, flew with the 357th Fighter Group. The 357th was the second AAF P-51 unit in the European Theater and entered combat one month after Jim Howard's Medal of Honor mission. The reincarnated "Berlin Express" is a rebuild by Pacific Fighters from a total wreck. (Photo by Scott Slocum)



A still from Jim Howard's gun camera film of January 11, 1944, shows an Me 110 erupting in flames. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

Incredulous bomber crews watched Howard ride a wild Mustang across the sky in a high-noon shootout. For 25 minutes, he jousting with as many as 30 opponents.

Below: Ding Hao was a carryover from Howard's days as a Flying Tiger. It's a Chinese term that roughly translates as "Number one" or "Very good." (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



he could, but mainly spoiling the Germans' firing runs even when down to one of his .50 calibers functioning. Incredulous bomber crews watched Howard ride a wild Mustang across the sky in a high-noon shootout. For 25 minutes, he jousting with as many as 30 opponents from three fighter wings: Bf 109s of II Gruppe JG-11, Bf 110s of

I Gruppe ZG-26, and FW 190s of II Gruppe JG-1. Undeterred by the odds, he spoiled repeated attacks on the bombers, whose crews counted six planes destroyed or driven down.

Back at base, the Pioneer Mustangs claimed 15 kills with no losses. When Howard landed and debriefed, his share of the total was two 110s and a 190 destroyed, plus a probable 109 and one damaged. Without the P-51s, the toll in bombers would have been appalling. As it was, 34 of the 174 attacking Oschersleben went down, or nearly 20 percent.

Howard won praise from Col. Harold Bowman's 401st Bomb Group, which was subjected to gun and rocket attacks. The B-17 crews insisted that the pilot of the lone P-51 be decorated with nothing less than the Medal of Honor. When Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle saw the letters at Eighth Air Force headquarters, he initiated action for "a suitable award."

One bomber pilot wrote to Howard, "It was



Left and below: Newly promoted Lt. Col. Jim Howard, CO of the 356th Fighter Squadron, sits in his new P-51B at Lashenden, England, shortly after his Medal of Honor mission. The six Japanese victory flags were painted on for publicity purposes (over Howard's objection). He scored 2.33 air victories with the American Volunteer Group but received six bonus credits. (Photo left courtesy of Jack Cook; photo below courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

**THE STARS AND STRIPES**  
Daily Newspaper of U.S. Armed Forces European Edition  
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**Found: The Horatius at the Oschersleben Bridge**  
**Bombers Hail One-Man Air Force**  
By Andrew A. Rooney  
Stars and Stripes Staff Writer

A MUSTANG BASE, Jan. 18- A lone, unidentified Mustang pilot battled 30 German fighter planes for half an hour high over central Germany last Tuesday. Fortress crewmen who cheered as they watched the U.S. fighter send plane after plane smoking to the ground have been trying ever since to find out the pilot's identity.

With his deeds buried in an over-cautious intelligence report, Fighter Command officials had to comb the records to find the man for whom bomber crews were claiming six destroyed enemy planes and countless bombers saved. With the records, they dug up possibly, the best fighter pilot story of the war.

Today the fighter pilot those men watched wage the story-book battle in their defense finally was identified.

**He is Squadron Leader....**



a case of one lone American taking on the entire Luftwaffe. I personally feel that your exploits that day evidenced the spirit of teamwork, which is the *sine qua non* of successful military operations. Let me assure you that should you ever have occasion to visit this station, your welcome will be a warm one. There is not a man in our group who hasn't sung your praises."

That sentiment appeared to be universal. B-17 crewmen who witnessed the combat insisted that the pilot of AJ-X deserved whatever medals were being handed out.

And thereby lies a controversy. As squadron commander, Howard's assigned aircraft was AJ-A, named for the Chinese phrase *Ding Hao*. According to various sources, it meant "Number one," "Very good," or "The best." Apparently his first Mustang was AAF serial number 43-6375, while *Ding Hao* was 43-6315. Because the mission reports did not specify aircraft serial number, Howard's aircraft on January 11 remains speculative.

Interviewed shortly after the action, Howard impressed reporters with his modest demeanor. He was quoted as saying, "I seen my duty and I done it," but that was not Howard's way of speaking. If he said it, he was being facetious.

In any case, Howard felt that he had done no more than "my duty" and was undeserving of special praise.

Howard continued flying combat. He added another 110 near Brunswick, Germany, on January 30 and got a piece of a 410 on March 16. When "Sleeper" Martin was shot down and captured in February, Howard succeeded him as

group commander. The former Tiger closed his victory log with a FW 190, again near Brunswick on April 8.

A reporter who interviewed Howard described him as "a double header ace, an ambidextrous big leaguer of the skies."

Comparing the two Axis powers, Howard told Christian Gilbert of *True* magazine, "The Germans are good fighters. You really have to riddle them to bring them down, whereas a few hits on a Jap plane can finish it. The Japs aren't very good shots, but they are more alert than the German pilots. The Japs flew different planes and the formations were different, so it is hard to compare the fight here with the fighting out in the Pacific. This is the biggest air offensive center in the world here, and it was on a small scale, remember, when we were fighting with Chennault.

"You have a better feeling flying over France and Germany in a single-engine plane than you have flying in Burma. You have the feeling you'll get better treatment here if you go down. Over there, once you are shot down you are either lost or you fall into the hands of the Japanese. I have a personal hatred for every Jap that I don't feel for the Germans."

Friends and subordinates said that Howard had a sweet tooth, was not superstitious, and enjoyed going to the movies. His leadership style was low-



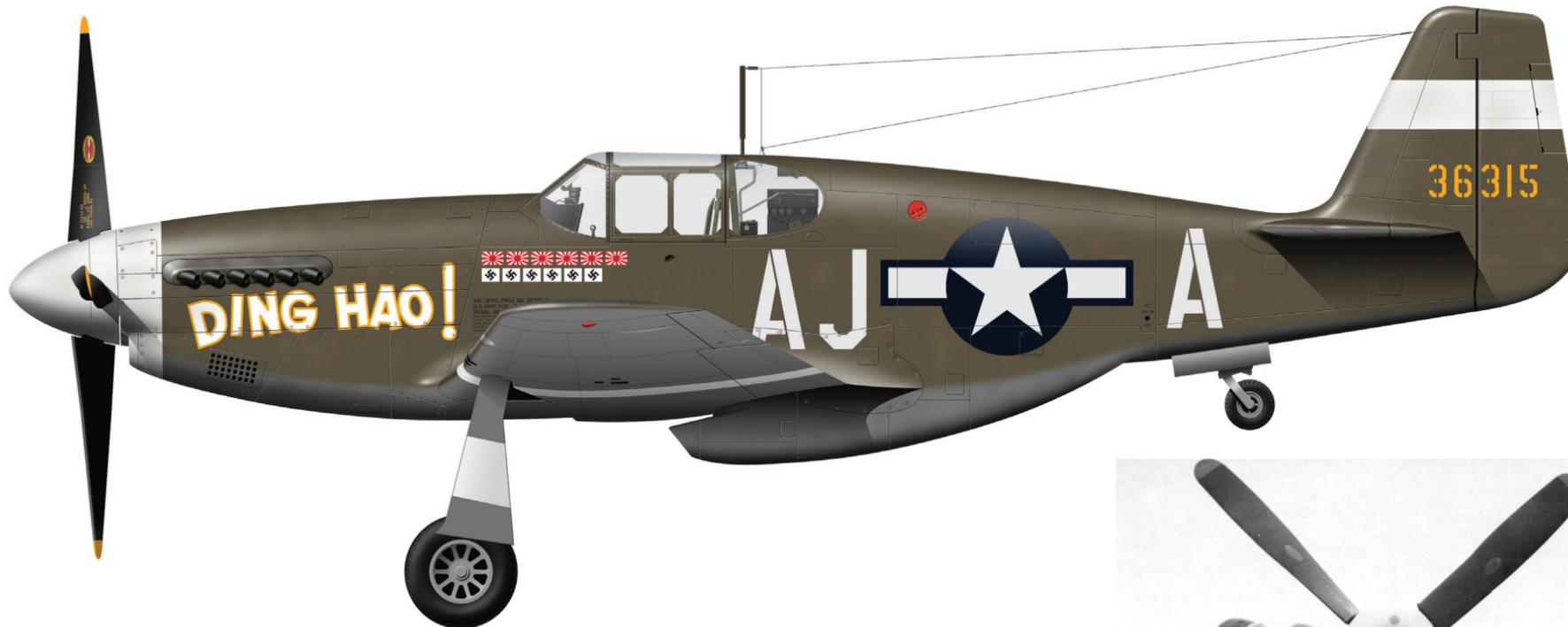
Lt. Col. Jim Howard is congratulated by Assistant Secretary of War R. M. Lovett, after receiving the Medal of Honor from Gen. Carl A. Spaatz. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

## Medal of Honor Citation

**HOWARD, JAMES H. (Air Mission)**  
**Rank and organization:** Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army Air Corps.  
**Place and date:** Over Oschersleben, Germany, 11 January 1944.  
**Entered service at:** St. Louis, Missouri.  
**Birth:** Canton, China.  
**G.O. No.:** 45, 5 June 1944.

### CITATION

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action with the enemy near Oschersleben, Germany, on 11 January 1944. On that day Col. Howard was the leader of a group of P51 aircraft providing support for a heavy bomber formation on a long-range mission deep in enemy territory. As Col. Howard's group met the bombers in the target area the bomber force was attacked by numerous enemy fighters. Col. Howard, with his group, and at once engaged the enemy and himself destroyed a German Me 110. As a result of this attack Col. Howard lost contact with his group, and at once returned to the level of the bomber formation. He then saw that the bombers were being heavily attacked by enemy airplanes and that no other friendly fighters were at hand. While Col. Howard could have waited to attempt to assemble his group before engaging the enemy, he chose instead to attack single-handed a formation of more than 30 German airplanes. With utter disregard for his own safety he immediately pressed home determined attacks for some 30 minutes, during which time he destroyed 3 enemy airplanes and probably destroyed and damaged others. Toward the end of this engagement 3 of his guns went out of action and his fuel supply was becoming dangerously low. Despite these handicaps and the almost insuperable odds against him, Col. Howard continued his aggressive action in an attempt to protect the bombers from the numerous fighters. His skill, courage, and intrepidity on this occasion set an example of heroism which will be an inspiration to the U.S. Armed Forces.



An original member of the 354th Fighter Group, the "Pioneer Mustangs," Howard was among the first to take Merlin-powered P-51B/Cs into combat. (Illustration by Tom Tullis)

key, often to the point of generosity. He would detach a section or flight to attack *Luftwaffe* aircraft that he might have taken himself. Pilots in the 356th Squadron described him as sincere and sympathetic but not very communicative. Some friends attributed that trait to his upbringing in China. Whatever the reason, it produced results in combat.

If not for the glowing reports of the bomber crews, Howard's Oschersleben action probably would have been passed over. It was service politics: the AAF lived and died by the self-defending bomber, and Medals of Honor to "little friends" might draw attention away from the "big friends." But the B-17 crews were so enthused that Eighth Air Force orthodoxy was reversed for once. Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz, commander of U.S. strategic air forces, presented now-Colonel Howard with the Medal of Honor in Britain on June 27. It remained the only "Congressional" awarded a fighter pilot in the European Theater of Operations and one of merely two for a "pursuiter" flying against Germany. (In contrast, the Fifth Air Force in the Pacific awarded the Medal of Honor to four fighter aces.)

A reporter visiting Boxted got to know Howard reasonably well. The writer observed, "When he puts on wings, he takes off his cloak of restraint." That was not unusual. Jim Howard was fairly representative of the breed. There are not many chest-thumpers among the aces. Gabby Gabreski was gregarious without being egotistical. Marion Carl and Bob Galer were quiet almost to the point of shyness—not what people expect of Marine general aces. Alexander Vraciu had a

quiet, almost subtle sense of humor. Some men's brain chemistry changes when they strap into a fighter and take off with loaded guns.

### Postwar Years

After serving with the Ninth Fighter Command, Howard's final wartime position was commanding Pinellas Army Airfield, an operational training base near St. Petersburg, Florida. By then, he had logged nearly 1,800 hours and 8.33 aerial victories.

The former Navy ensign was promoted to permanent colonel in November 1945, on inactive status. He returned to active duty, receiving his brigadier general's star in March 1948, commanding the 419th Troop Carrier Wing from June 1949 to January 1950. He retired from the Air Force Reserve in 1966.

Besides the Medal of Honor, Howard received the Bronze Star, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, and 10 Air Medals plus a Chinese White Cloud Banner.

Though quiet and soft-spoken, Howard enjoyed attending AVG and 354th reunions plus gatherings of aces. At a St. Louis event in 1970, he exchanged experiences with the *Luftwaffe* top gun, Col. Erich Hartmann. Howard said that, in fighting 109s, he preferred to turn away from the torque side, possibly catching his opponent by surprise. When Hartmann joked that maybe they should fly together, Howard quipped, "OK, I'll fly your wing!"

Howard remained active in business with his Washington, D.C., engineering company until retiring in 1977. Married twice—the first time as



Howard poses with several of his Pioneer Mustang group pilots prior to a mission on January 20, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

a brigadier—he had one stepdaughter. Howard published his memoir, *Roar of the Tiger*, in 1991. He died March 18, 1995, at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Bay Pines, Florida, not quite 82. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Jim Howard's legacy was described by his friend and fellow Mustang ace Dick Turner: "The dramatic proof of his combat wisdom and his uncanny ability to impart it to others was demonstrated...by the tempering of our squadron in the crucible of 16 months of continuous combat [with] an enviable record of 298 aerial victories with but 22 pilots lost from all causes. It was small wonder that with such an outstanding leader the squadron and the entire 354th Group...became one of the sharpest thorns in the side of the *Luftwaffe*." †