

THE BATTLE FOR THE P-51 – HOW THE US MILITARY ALMOST REJECTED ONE OF THE BEST FIGHTERS OF WW2

FOR ALL ITS WORLD-BEATING QUALITIES, THIS SILVER BULLET OF A PLANE WOULD INITIALLY BE “PUT ASIDE” BY THE US ARMY AIR FORCES

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A North American P-51D painted in ‘invasion stripes’ for Operation Overlord. By the summer of 1944, the Mustang had demonstrated its importance to the Allies. Two years earlier, not everyone in the USAAF was convinced of the plane’s potential.



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The North American P-51 Mustang wasn’t just another high-performance fighter - *it was arguably the best Allied fighter aircraft of the Second World War and the weapon that defeated Hitler*

A deadly javelin of unprecedented speed and agility, its powerful Rolls-Royce Merlin engine gave it a top speed of well over 400 mph and a prodigious endurance with a range of more than 2,000 miles. The Mustang was a falcon in Duralumin alloy.

Yet for all its world-beating qualities, *this silver bullet of a plane would initially be shunted aside by the U.S. Army Air Forces*, which stymied its adoption as thousands of young airmen went to their deaths in the battle over Europe.

Air force historians, looking back, would conclude the delays on the P-51 “*came close to representing the costliest mistake made by the AAF in World War II.*

All through the summer and autumn of 1943, massive B-17 Flying Fortresses carrying nine tons of bombs flew into slaughter over Nazi Germany, sustaining crippling losses as they were shot down like flocks of geese by the German air force.

In August 1943, raiding a Messerschmitt aircraft factory at Regensburg, a force of 146 U.S. Eighth Air Force bombers lost 14 planes in 30 minutes of battle while still 100 miles from the target. Total crew losses in the action mounted to 240, a savage count. Over Schweinfurt on Oct. 14, a force of 230 American bombers lost 60 heavies, more than one-fourth of its total strength. Many more bombers would come in damaged beyond repair. *The casualties were staggering; they could not go on.*



As U.S. daylight bombing losses mounted in 1943, the need for a high-performance long-range escort fighter became clear.
(Image source: Wikimedia Commons)

A war of attrition would result in which the Eighth Air Force would be ground down to powder by the far superior German *Luftwaffe*. The Third Reich's air force, which for four years had held total air supremacy, would remain master of the skies. It was the darkest depth of a dark season for the "Mighty Eighth," the low point of the air war. The bombers could not win because there was no fighter plane to shield them.

Fighters were the key to turning the air war around. But neither of the two U.S. fighter plane models then in use could get the job done. The P-47 Thunderbolt could not reach Germany to escort and protect the B-17 sky arks, and the P-38 Lightning had crippling engine problems. The result: the existing escorts had to turn back to England far short of the target, leaving the big "Forts" exposed and vulnerable. The result was all too often a frenzied *Luftwaffe* ambush.



Mustang painted in U.S. Markings in flight, circa 1941.

Now at the midnight of this warfare would arrive the P-51 Mustang - but the U.S. Army Air Forces refused to put it into mass production. The story was long, checkered, and dated back to the Mustang's inception.

Since the P-51's genesis in 1941, the USAAF had cast the prototype aside, delaying its testing and manufacture.

The center of the opposition was the vast, sprawling Wright Field near Dayton, Ohio, where, under the Materiel Command, planes were developed and procured for the USAAF. Air force officers viewed the Mustang as a British project; it had been first commissioned by the British and now had a British engine. At Wright Field, "Made in America" was more than a phrase, it was an article of faith.

There were other, darker obstacles to the adoption of the Mustang. Army Air Forces contracts often went to political favorites and cronies who had strong support at the Pentagon. A sign of the clout established manufacturers could wield: In the fall of 1942, during the Mustang's exile, the Army Air Forces had on order 2,500 Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawks, no fewer than 8,800 Bell P-39 Airacobras and a boggling 11,000 P-63 King Cobras. None of these planes was a match for the latest German fighter, the Fock-Wulf FW 190.

Issues of doctrine also affected air force judgment. An embedded “Bomber Mafia” — General of the Air Force Henry H “Hap” Arnold and his key generals — resolutely continued to assert those bombers were invincible on their own. Flying high and fast in an interlocking grid to form a stronghold in the sky, the generals thought, the bombers with their dozen .50 caliber machine guns could defend themselves unsupported. The Bomber Mafia had little use for the fighter plane.



A RAF Mustang Mk. III.

Finally, something more sinister may have been at work. The second in command at Materiel, Major General Bennett E. Meyers, was favoring manufacturers who gave the business to a small aircraft parts company he owned on the side. North American Aviation, the Mustang’s manufacturer, did not buy Meyers’s parts; its plane was not fast-tracked until October of 1943. Could rank corruption (and politics) within the Army Air Forces have delayed the Mustang?

At last, like General Ulysses S. Grant charging onto the field, a world-famous polo star, former fighter pilot, and pillar of New York society, Lt. Col Tommy Hitchcock, would lead a lobby to loosen the P-51 Mustang from the muck and mud of Wright Field. Hitchcock, the assistant air attaché at the U.S. Embassy in London, learned of the Mustang’s outstanding performance. He campaigned for the plane from Washington to California. Slowly the tables began to tilt.



The P-51 would eventually be adopted by the U.S. Army Air Forces. More than 15,000 would roll off production lines before the end of the Second World War

Meanwhile, bomber losses continued to mount. There was talk of mutiny among aircrews in Britain. The press started to protest and there was an outcry in Congress. At last Hap Arnold was forced to change his mind and seize up the only fighter that could both outfight the Luftwaffe and fly far enough to take bombers into and out of Nazi Germany - the Mustang.

Production grew from a current to a wave to a tsunami, and the Mustang was thrust into action across the European skies. Within months it proved its worth. In the six months before D-Day, the P-51 Mustang decimated the Luftwaffe and opened the road to the Normandy invasion. A new breed of raptor had mowed down Germany’s best forces.

Throughout the war, Mustangs shot down 5,000 German planes in the air and 4,000 on the ground. This was almost half the enemy aircraft destroyed in Europe by all American fighter types.