

# MARINELL and the Hen Puddle Mustangs

WE EXAMINE A CURRENTLY FLYING P-51D AND THE COMBAT EXPLOITS OF THE 339<sup>TH</sup> FIGHTER GROUP DURING WORLD WAR II

BY RICHARD PAVER

While there are numerous restored fully airworthy P-51D Mustangs regularly flying in the USA, the type is also very popular in Europe; albeit with fewer numbers being regularly flown and even less of these active airframes have a traceable connection to actual authentic combat veteran airframes.

This feature tells the story of the history, restoration, and current operation of one such example — namely P-51D 44-13521 *Marinell*, which, a few years ago, was fully restored to airworthy condition by former owner Maurice Hammond and until the autumn of 2016 was regularly flown by him from his home strip adjoining the former USAAF 8th Air Force base at Hardwick in Norfolk, United Kingdom.

Within this feature I will also describe a special commemorative flight that was carried out on 13 August 2014 when *Marinell* returned and landed at its wartime 339th FG base at Fowlmere near Cambridge in order to commemorate the 70th anniversary to the day of its loss during WWII.

The 339th Fighter Group was one of the final fighter groups formed during WWII as part of the USAAF 8th Air Force and the unit became operational at Fowlmere on 30 April 1944. At that time, Fowlmere was a small grass airfield that had been used by the RAF as a satellite to Duxford, which is only four-miles away. Fowlmere had a long history with the Royal Air Force, having first been used for active operational flying in 1918 but after the First World War over the hangars were demolished and flying ceased with the field returning to agriculture.

For a time, Maurice Hammond was fortunate to own and operate two flying Mustangs and he regularly shared these aircraft with English airshow spectators.

With the build-up of the RAF at the beginning of the Second World War, Fowlmere was re-activated and became famous as the home for the RAF's No. 19 Squadron during the Battle of Britain in summer 1940. This unit was the RAF's first operational Spitfire squadron and it is also noteworthy that — before being handed over to the 8th Air Force — Fowlmere had also been regularly used by No. 133 (Eagle) Squadron RAF as a satellite field while they were based at Duxford. During operations with the RAF in 1940/44, Fowlmere had not been equipped with the facilities to handle a complete fighter group as it was essentially a secondary satellite and the runways were all grass, there were very few permanent airfield buildings, and many that were being used were converted agricultural buildings such as Manor Farm barn that was utilised by the RAF as the main mess (dining) hall.

In early 1944 when Fowlmere was handed over to the USAAF, the airfield was expanded to meet the requirements of a complete fighter group and it was assigned the USAAF designation of Station 378 and allocated to the 8th AF Fighter Command. The work carried out in 1943/44 included the construction of a new concrete peri track, taxiways, hard stands for 64 fighters, and a single T2 hangar. There were also seven smaller blister type hangars constructed and Nissen huts were built on a numerous of sites around the field to accommodate

the 1700 USAAF personnel who were based there at its peak. The runways remained all grass but extensive areas of Sommerfeld tracking (lightweight mesh airfield surface — what Americans call Pierced Steel Planking) were laid to enable year-round flying operations and the Americans soon nicknamed the airfield "The Hen Puddle," reflecting their views on what it was like in winter.

The 339th Fighter Group arrived at Fowlmere from Rice AAF, California, on 4 April 1944, and equipped with P-51B and P-51D Mustangs. The 339th FG consisted of three fighter squadrons — the 503rd (D7 codes), 504th (5Q codes), and 505th (6N codes). The first operation carried out by the 339th was a fighter sweep over northern Europe on 30 April 1944. The 339th Mustangs were distinguished by their red and white checkerboard nose markings and the unit was awarded the Distinguished Unit citation for the destruction of 58 enemy aircraft on escort missions on 10/11 September 1944. The 339th flew its last operational combat sortie on 21 April 1945 — concluding the war with just a single year of combat operations. The Commanding Officer was Col. John B. Henry until 14 April 1945 when Col. William C. Clark took over at the end of the war in Europe.

During 1944, P-51D-5-NA 44-13521 was built at North

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