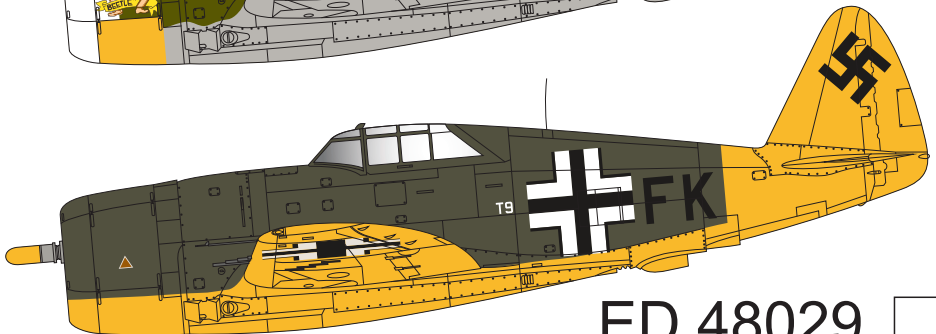
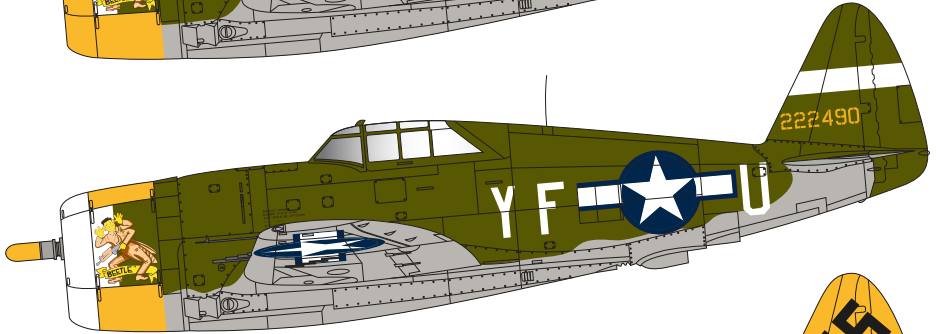
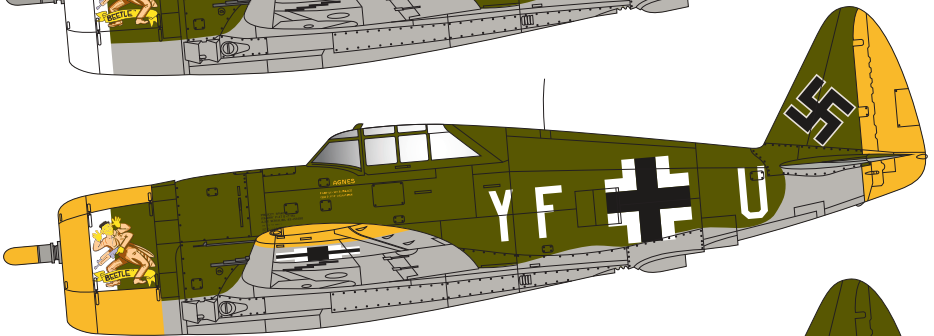
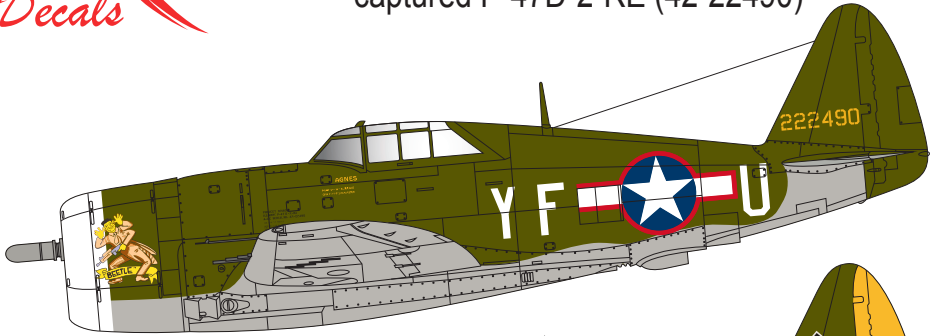




BEETLE in captivity

Republic P-47 Thunderbolt in German hands
captured P-47D-2-RE (42-22490)



ED 48029

ED 72029

BEETLE in captivity

captured P-47D-2-RE (42-22490)

On 7 November 1943 the Eighth Air Force bombed aviation industrial targets at Wesel and Düren. 110 B-17s of the 1st and 3rd Air Divisions dropped a total of 257 tons of bomb on the targets and returned without loss - a typical example of what the crews called „Milk Run“.

Fighter escort for the mission consisted of 283 Republic P-47 Thunderbolts of the 56th, 78th, 352nd, 353rd, 355th and 356th Fighter Groups. Working in relay the fighters provided their „Big Friends“ with protection throughout the mission, however, six Thunderbolts failed to return. Five belonged to the 355th Fighter Group based at Steeple Morden, Cambridgeshire. The Group, under the command of Col. William J. Cummings Jr., had flown its first mission only three weeks earlier, on 14 September 1943.

The „Ramrod“ (a bomber escort mission) on 7 November was the 358th Squadron's sixteenth operational mission. The 0815 premission briefing laid out the plan for the day. Thirteen P-47s would take off at 0927. Capt. Walter H. Kossack was to lead Yellow Flight and Capt. Carl F. Ekstrom Blue Flight. The thirteenth Thunderbolt, the squadron spare, was flown by 2nd Lt. William E. Roach and would be airborne to relieve any aircraft forced to turn back. The Group would rendezvous with the bombers in the vicinity of Mons, France and would be relieved by the 353rd Fighter Group near Marche.

From the beginning, things began to go wrong. Lt. John Lanphier of Yellow Flight, dropped out formation with engine trouble and returned to base. 2nd Lt. Roach eased his Thunderbolt, „BEETLE“, into vacant slot in Yellow Flight. This would be Lt. Roach's third combat mission to Germany and he still lacked experience with the demands of long range escort flights. The mission was uneven until the Group reached their relief point. When Marche was reached their relief, the 353rd Fighter Group - was nowhere to be found. Weather had delayed the 353rd from the rendezvous, and Col. Cummings elected to stay with the bombers rather than leave them unprotected. The delay and unexpected head winds quickly led to serious problems for the 355th Group on their return flight.

Capt. Kossack, the leader of Yellow Flight, had become disoriented in the poor weather and was no longer sure of his position, and his pilots were reporting that they were dangerously low on fuel. Capt. Kossack was hopelessly lost and he soon ran out of fuel, crash landing his P-47D-5-RE (42-8477) YF*X on the beach near Caen on the French coast. Flight Officer Chester W. Watson's tank ran dry approximately six miles off the French coast and he was forced to bail out over the sea. Lt. Jack Woertz was the only member of the Flight to reach England. Low on fuel he attempted to land at Hastings, but his engine failed on final approach and his P-47 (YF*Y) crashed short of the runway.

2nd Lt. William E. Roach crowned the flight's hard luck, seeing his leader's Thunderbolt go down, he began looking for a suitable airfield to make an emergency landing. Believing he was over southern England, 2nd Lt. Roach spotted a field, set up a short pattern and landed. A „Follow Me“ vehicle came out to meet Roach and led him to a parking place. Relieved to be down, he shut down „BEETLE's“ engine before he noticed the unusualness of the uniforms on the men approaching him with drawn guns. He had mistakenly landed at the *Luftwaffe* air base at Caen, France presenting the *Luftwaffe* with its first intact and flyable example of the Thunderbolt.

P-47D-2 RA (42-22490) was quickly repainted with the American stars being replaced by German *Balken-kreuze* on the wings and fuselage. To avoid destruction by strafing Allied aircraft, the *Luftwaffe* decided to move the P-47 to a safer airfield. Hans Werner Lerche was assigned the task of preparing the Thunderbolt for delivery to Rechlin. On the afternoon of 10 November, Lerche undertook a short test flight with the Thunderbolt. Bad weather delayed journey to Rechlin, when Lerche arriving at 14 November.

Assigned to Test and Research Center in Rechlin, „BEETLE“ was subjected to an extensive series of trials, which provided the Germans with important information on the fighter's performance, armament and handling qualities. German test pilots considered the Thunderbolt slow and cumbersome at altitudes below 15,000 ft. The P-47's high altitude performance, however, was rated as superior, and all German test pilots were impressed with the Thunderbolt's speed in a dive, roll rate, and the fire power of its eight .50 machine guns. During late 1943 „BEETLE“ was damaged while on a test flight, but she was repaired and returned to service on 20 December 1943.

During early 1944, „BEETLE“ became the star of a German propaganda film being repainted in full American markings. The German propaganda ministry had used other Allied aircraft for such film. At least three other Allied fighters, a Bell P-39, a Yak 7B and a LaGG-3 were repainted with false Russian markings for use in another film. Sometime earlier a captured Spitfire had been flown with full RAF markings for a Nazi propaganda film on the Battle of Britain.

After „BEETLE“ was thoroughly investigated and its performance and handling characteristics documented, it was released by test center and became part of *Beute-Zirkus Rosarius*. The Rosarius Travelling Circus was a special *Luftwaffe* unit under the command of *Flugkapitän* Ted Rosarius. The „circus“ visited front line fighter units, instructing *Luftwaffe* fighter pilots on characteristics of various enemy aircraft. Official name of this unit was 2. *Staffel* of *Versuchverband Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe* and operated captured Allied fighters in a training role. „BEETLE“ was one of at least three Republic P-47 Thunderbolts which were operated by the *Luftwaffe*.

As a recognition aid, all captured aircraft operated by *Versuchverband* had the tail and undersurfaces painted Yellow. The unit's average strength throughout the war was twenty aircraft. 2. *Staffel* was initially formed at Oranienburg near Berlin, but was later transferred to Göttingen during 1944. Göttingen airfield was well equipped with repair and overhaul facilities. Damaged Allied fighters could be repaired at the base without outside assistance. When US troops liberated Göttingen in May 1945, they found a number of derelict Allied fighters, including several Mustangs and Mosquito located in the repair facility. The flyable P-47 Thunderbolts were re-captured by Americans after it had been abandoned when the squadron moved to Bad Wörishofen or Schwangau in Bavaria. Spare parts for captured fighter were obtained from salvaging downed aircraft all across Germany and occupied countries. The salvage operation was such that the squadron never suffered from a lack of spare parts, ammunition, American fuel and lubricants. When the squadron was assigned to conduct training with a front line fighter unit, five or six aircraft were normally deployed. These aircraft were fully armed and operated on American fuel and lubricants.

info from Hans-Heiri Stapfer book "Strangers in a Stranger Land"



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