

## DELIVERING MUSTANGS

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of April Bill and Lieutenant Dante Ciochi departed for temporary duty to the European Division ATC (Air Transport Command), a duty that was expected to last 15 days.

They were collected by a B-17 and transported to station 366, Metfield airfield, which was situated half way between Norwich and Ipswich, about a mile and a half from the village from which it took its name. First occupied by the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in July 1943, Metfield had formerly been the home of the `Slybird Group` the 353<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group who had arrived in August 1943. They were then joined by the `Ringmasters` the 491<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group (H) who shared the field with them until the 353<sup>rd</sup> moved on to Raydon in April 1944. The `Ringmasters` eventually departed the field as well in August 1944 and it then became the home to the ATC.

Upon arrival at Metfield Bill and Lieutenant Ciochi reported to base operations, where they were assigned quarters, stripped of all identification including their `dog tags` and then with their fellow volunteers, they had outlined to them what they had volunteered for. A series of flights were to be made to Sweden ferrying P-51 Mustangs, under the code name of `Project Speedy`. There was no official explanation given for the reason behind the flights, but the general rumour and consensus of opinion amongst the ferrying pilots was that there was an unwritten agreement that the Mustangs were to enable Sweden to assist the Allies in pushing the Germans out of Norway if the war was to persist. As Sweden was a neutral country this explanation was and still is vehemently denied. Instead it is proffered that the Mustangs were acquired simply to replace their obsolete existing fighter aircraft made of metal tubing and plywood, and which would then bolster the Swedish air defences and give them the necessary punch to deter the cut-off German forces in Norway and Denmark from evading the Allies by retreating north and linking up with their troops still in Finland and making a last ditch stand on the Scandinavian Peninsula. Sweden already had over 100 modern bombers interned on her soil but only four flyable P-51's. A deal was agreed where they would purchase these four aircraft at \$25,000 each and initially purchase another 46 aircraft at \$70,000 each. Since these aircraft would have to be delivered through enemy airspace, combat experienced pilots would have to fly them. About half the volunteers would be like Bill and Lieutenant Ciochi, tour expired, the remaining volunteers gathered by taking two from each active 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force fighter unit.

All the gathered pilots were then allocated a number that they were told would be used for identification purposes during the flight, and that out on the flight line they would find a P-51 with the same identical tail number. The pilots would have to act as their own crew chief, check the plane over, test hop it if required and ensure themselves they were satisfied with its flying condition.

The first of these planned delivery flights took place on the day of Bill and Lieutenant Ciochi's arrival at Metfield, when 10 mustangs took off and headed for Sweden (44-64157, 44-72058, 44-72066, 44-72066, 44-72074, 44-72086, 44-72093, 44-72109,44-72126, 44-72156, 44-72177), though two of the aircraft subsequently returned that of Lieutenant Wagner and Captain Boychuck who had a fire break out after engine problems. Bill and Lieutenant Ciochi had to wait a further two days before their assigned ferry flight, when 18 P-51's were to be dispatched (44-63701, 44-63743, 44-63758,44-63865, 44-63874, 44-63992, 44-64072, 44-64087, 44-64109, 44-64132, 44-72050, 44-72051, 44-72105, 44-72151, 44-72184, 44-72206, 44-72220, 44-72223.) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Bailey.

On the morning of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> they were called to a briefing. After the usual locking of doors, closing of curtains and posting of guards the mission wall map was uncovered. The

assembled pilots could see the ribbon marking the mission route went due north from Metfield, far out over the North Sea to a point where a straight run could be made up the Skagerrack to the west coast of Sweden and then across the peninsula to Stockholm. The Mustangs were not going to be alone on the flight as they were all under the control of a B-17 Navigation ship, which also carried their gear, Bill flying as a flight leader of four aircraft, his assigned aircraft being P-51D-20 NA serial number 44-63701 an aircraft delivered to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1944. The P-51's carried two huge drop tanks, which to Bill appeared almost to scrape the ground when they took off, and were unarmed. Star and bar markings and codes were painted on the aircraft, but other than black anti glare finish to the upper part of the engine cowling, carried no other insignia, even though some of the aircraft had been previously assigned to 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force Fighter units.

The flight was uneventful, only broken when about halfway across the peninsula an American voice came over the pilot's head phones welcoming them to Sweden, and a little over four hours after they took off, the Mustangs found themselves over Stockholm Harbour. The city of Stockholm is made up mostly of islands connected by a series of bridges and as they circled awaiting permission to land at Bromma Airfield, Bill having already made a couple of circuits of the harbour became rather bored with the whole affair. Having flown over the harbour bridge a couple of times he decided to liven things up a little and fly under the bridge. Not content with one flight under the bridge and encouraged by the waves from the people on the bridge and harbour sides, Bill completed a further two to their delight.

Having landed and parked their aircraft Bill and his fellow pilots were taken in to a large building, where they were searched by customs personnel and relieved of their automatics and shoulder holsters. Those that smoked were handed a carton of Lucky Strike cigarettes and all were handed a large pitcher of fresh milk. After being fed, each of the delivery pilots were allocated to a Swedish Air Force officer who would act as their escort. Bill stayed at the home of his assigned liaison officer for the next three days. For their first night in Sweden all the pilots, dressed in their class A uniforms and accompanied by their chaperones and various senior officers and dignitaries, were entertained at a terrific banquet in a huge down town restaurant. The following days were spent exploring and being shown the sights of the city including the royal palace and in the evenings being taken to a couple of the city's variety shows.

After three days during which the weather had been relatively fine, the weather took a turn for the worse and all the pilots were reassembled back at the airfield, their numbers swollen by another 14 pilots who had ferried in a further batch of Mustangs on the 14<sup>th</sup>. The poor weather conditions being a cover for clandestine flights between Sweden and Britain, the clandestine airline that would return the pilots to England had been the idea of a Norwegian Air Force Colonel named Berndt Balchen. He had been chief pilot on Admiral Richard E. Byrd's Antarctic exploration and had become acquainted with General Hap Arnold. After Norway's occupation he escaped to England, and managed to convince General Arnold to set up such an airline, to enable supplies to be sent to the Norwegian underground, and evacuate diplomatic personnel and American internees from Sweden. These flights within the Arctic Circle required specialist navigational skills. The returning pilots were driven to the far side of Bromma airport, where they boarded totally Black, unmarked C-107's (the cargo version of the B-24), taking off at about 21:30 into a driving rainstorm.

Bill was soon in conversation with some of the pilots who had made the ferry trip of the 14<sup>th</sup>. Unlike his flight, theirs had been far from uneventful. They related, how when they had been briefed at Metfield, they had been told, that they, like on the two previous missions would be flying unarmed aircraft (one of the reasons given later, included that the aircraft became Swedish property as soon as they lifted off from Metfield). Many of the pilots, were not

comfortable with the thought of being virtually defenceless if intercepted by the Luftwaffe, and so while checking their aircraft for the mission, there ensued a mad scramble as they scrounged ammo belts from other aircraft such as B-17's parked about the field, with which to arm their own. This transpired to be rather fortunate, as during the flight, north of the Danish coast, bogies were sighted. Aircraft were dispatched to investigate the unidentified aircraft, and shortly over the radio came "bandits", "they're coming in". The order was immediately given to drop tanks and for one of the flights to close in on the B-17 to give it cover, meanwhile the bandits were engaged, one of the pilots sent to investigate and the youngest on the mission 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Arthur Bates (504<sup>th</sup> Sq 339<sup>th</sup> FG) managed to shoot down an ME-109 and FW-190, just off the Swedish coast at Orust, the remaining enemy aircraft deciding to retreat back to their bases.

Elated, and finding themselves over Stockholm's inviting collection of Bridges, several of the pilots began flying under them, bringing the entire city's traffic to a standstill. Typical was Lieutenant Leon J. Levitt (368<sup>th</sup> Sq 359<sup>th</sup> FG), who selected a small bridge with a sailboat passing under it, he pointed his nose down and zooming under the bridge tried to hit the boat's sail with his prop wash as he passed. His first two attempts failed, and by the third pass the boat's skipper had managed to pull into the bank and was hurriedly lowering his sail. People were streaming on to the bridge to see the entertainment, waving to him as he passed, and so he decided not to disappoint them and finished off with a slow roll. The reassembled pilots then got back into a traffic pattern, but as they approached Bromma airport, interned B-17's and B-24's were sighted and several of the pilots buzzed the parking areas. Lieutenant Levitt joined in and made a couple of passes before finally an extremely agitated American voice yelled over the radio in no uncertain terms that he would like them to have their planes on the ground at their 'earliest convenience'. Upon landing Lieutenant Bates managed to acquire some paint and two swastikas were painted on his aircraft, but these were soon removed to avoid a diplomatic furor. Unlike Bill and Lieutenant Ciochi, the pilots were temporarily housed in a small hotel overlooking the Baltic coast, about ten miles outside Stockholm in a town called Salts Jobaden. The place had a tall barbed wire fence, gates and guard towers but no guards. They too were treated to a banquet on their first night and given an escorted tour of Stockholm the following day, and apart from having to report to the American Embassy each day were left to their own devices

Though Bill's flight to Sweden had taken about four hours the return trip took eleven. The flight took them north of the Arctic circle where he was able to see the Northern Lights which made it almost as bright as day outside. They flew quite a distance out over the North Atlantic before heading south flying between the Shetland and Orkney Islands to an airfield in Scotland called Leuchars used as a staging base for the closely guarded clandestine flights. They then transferred to a C-47 for the flight back to Metfield. Bill had anticipated that he would make a series of these delivery flights, but this was not to be, and the 'Happy warriors' as they were referred to, as they were all tour expired, were told they were to return to their respective Groups for onward transfer to a replacement depot and the States. Bill and Lieutenant Ciochi arrived back at Martlesham Heath.

The delivered aircraft were subsequently flown to Uppsala, where the 1<sup>st</sup> Swiss Mustang Group was formed. As part of the agreement the USAAF provided three pilots (4<sup>th</sup> and 358<sup>th</sup> FG), a supply officer and several enlisted men who remained in a teaching capacity. In 1948 following approval by the U.S. congress, King Gustaf and the Swedish government awarded the Gold medal of Vasa to each of the 37 pilots who were involved in the project. In 1990 on his return visit to England and Europe, Bill attended a reunion in Sweden arranged for the ferry pilots, and some of the pilots and aircrew who had been interned in Sweden during the war. His and his fellow volunteer ferry pilots flights under the bridges of Stockholm, were re-enacted by the only flying P-51 in Sweden, operated by the Swedish historic flight.

As a footnote to Bill's delivery flight, the aircraft he delivered became FV 26015 and served with the Swedish Air Force F16 and F21 wings until 1952, when it was sold to the Dominican Air Force (19-9-52), becoming FAD 1904. In 1984 it was purchased by Johnson Aviation and returned to the States at the beginning of an awakening of interest in piston engined war bird aircraft. It is presently owned by Sal Rubino Jr and has been restored in the colours of a 354<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force aircraft 44-63702 `Grim Reaper`.

