

THE P-51 OVER BERLIN



MARK E. BRADLEY

(U.S. Air Force Photos)

THE story goes that when he heard the news, Hermann Goering exploded, "Impossible! If there are P-51s over Berlin, my name is Meyer!" Whereupon he climbed aboard his plane for a personal look see and promptly got himself chased into Poland—by a P-51.

Well, I'm sure we didn't chase Hermann into Poland that day. And there is no record of his ever changing his name to Meyer. But the P-51s were over Berlin, that's for sure, and not just once by any means. It took a bit of doing to get them there, enough so that I believe the story merits telling for the record, or perhaps just to let today's generation know that the Boy Scouts could have been right all along.

It was the Spring of 1943. As Chief of Aircraft Projects at Wright Field, I was sent to England on a special assignment to assist in getting the P-47 into effective combat. I could have been more helpful

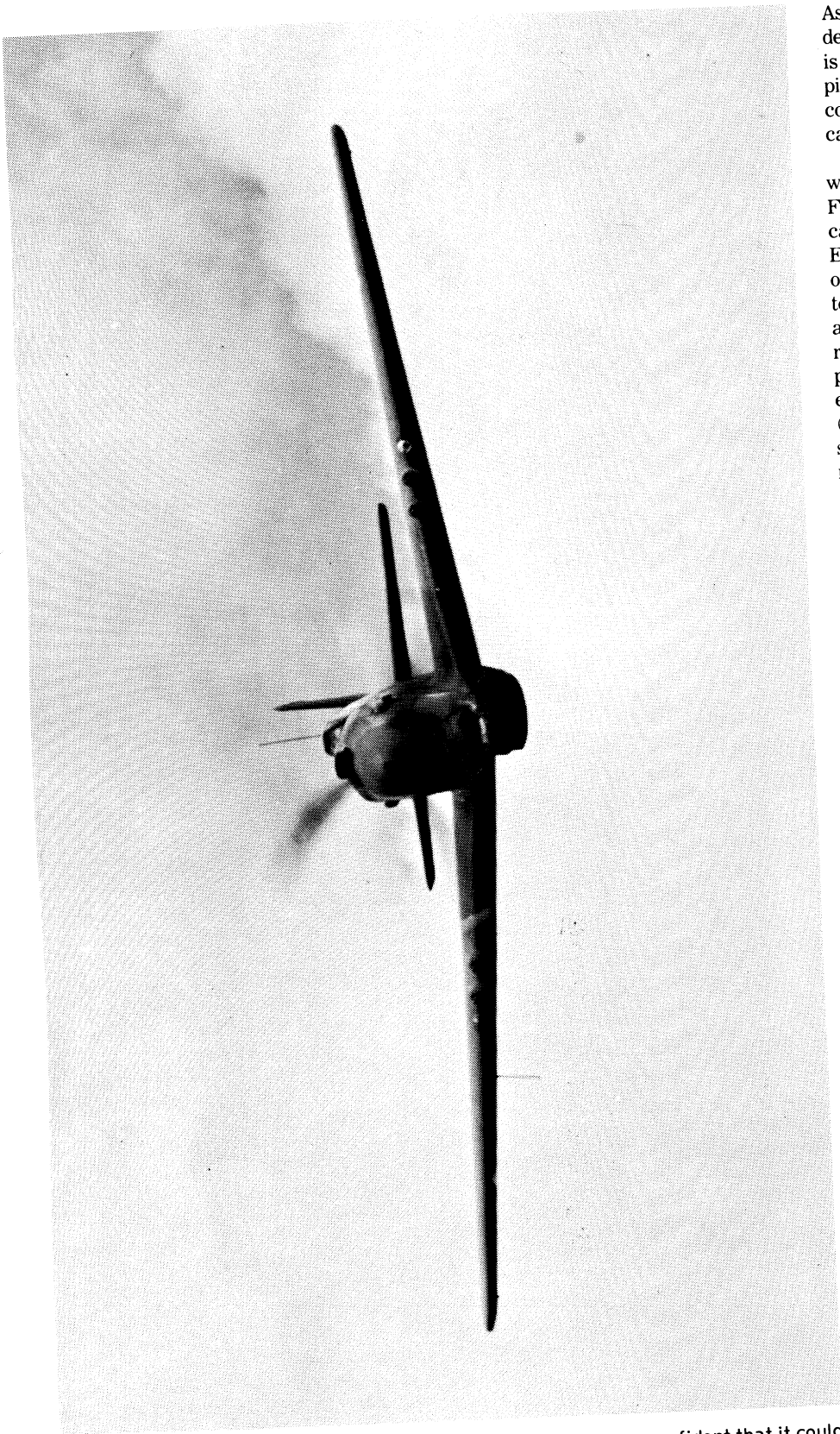
had I been an electronics expert, as the only major problem encountered was the VHF radio which was fairly new to the Air Force, a complete unknown to me, and certainly not compatible with the electrical system of the P-47's R-2800 engine. The magnetos, spark plugs and their parts in the distribution system were putting out such strong electrical signals that incoming radio signals were completely drowned out. With radar control from the ground, and with the need for constant communication between fighter and fighter, not to mention fighter and bomber, a properly functioning radio was mandatory. Simple to diagnose, the problem was not so easy to solve, but we did after several months of work. It was during this time that I became aware of a steadily worsening situation of a different nature.

Each day our bombers were out across the Channel and over the continent. Each

week saw our men increasing the depth of their penetration until they were operating far beyond the range of the P-51s and the P-47s which we were still debugging. They had long since left the Spitfires behind. As our bomber losses to the German fighters mounted, so did anxiety and frustration among our commanders. All—General Arnold, General Eaker, and General Hunter among them—were calling desperately for "more fighter range."

It was obvious that the range extension programs in progress in the United States were not going to give us anything soon enough. I say it was obvious, but you had to be close to the need to see how desperate it really was. Clearly, the time was past for normal development, testing and production procedures, and only bold, unorthodox measures could save us.

It was at this time, too, that I saw the new bubble canopy on the English Spitfire.



The North American P-51 Mustang fighter—General Bradley was confident that it could carry enough fuel to accompany bombers all the way to Berlin and back.

As any fighter pilot knows, the most deadly place to find the enemy, belatedly, is on his tail. The bubble gave the Spitfire pilot the rear vision so vital to his safety. I couldn't wait to get home to install the canopy on the P-51 and P-47.

I was doing some P-47 combat training with Armand "Pete" Peterson's 78th Fighter Group when my orders finally came to return to Wright Field. I left England with two goals: to get the bubbles on our fighters without delay, and to extend the range of the P-51, our best air-to-air fighter. Within a few days after my return, I found that one of the first production models of a new long-range escort fighter was available for flight. (Known as the P-75, it turned out to be a short-lived, long-range escort fighter, but I mustn't get ahead of my story.)

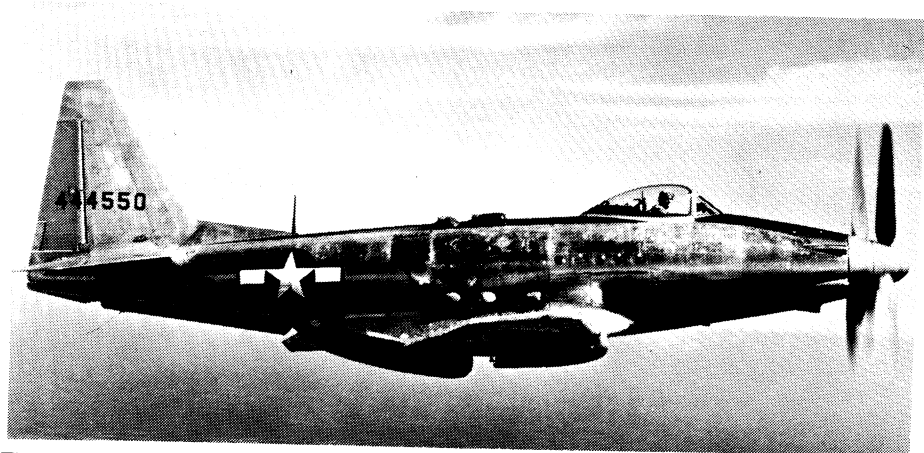
Through General Motors, the P-75 project had been launched in late 1942. To get into production quickly, the plan was to use, as far as possible, parts already in production for existing aircraft. The double Allison V-3420 24-cylinder engine and a double rotating propeller were to be the only new features. The wings were to come from the P-40, the center section from the Navy's Vought Corsair FU-9, the tail from Douglas' A-24 bomber. With an initial order of 1,000 planes, General Motors had started production on an emergency basis at its Fisher Body Plant in Cleveland. Anxious to fly the P-75, I lost no time in getting to Cleveland to take it up.

The airplane, with its contra-rotating propeller, was a big one—too big. It was heavy, and worst of all, clumsy and unstable. If it had been able to go the required distance, it never could have defended itself. No fighter pilot would endorse it, I was certain. To me, it was hopeless.

I returned to Wright Field more determined than ever to resume my project of extending the range of the P-51. Given enough time, certain defects of the P-75 could be corrected, I knew, but there was not enough time. As I look back today, I am certain that its weight, excessive size and basic instability would have prevented the P-75 from ever being a successful fighter.

Before going to Cleveland to fly the P-75, I had gone out to the hangar to do a little simple barnyard research on the P-51 configuration. At that time the P-51 had about 200 gallons of fuel in its wings and we were adding two 75-gallon drop tanks, one under each wing. But to go to Berlin, fight and get back to England safely, it needed more internal fuel. I looked behind the pilot's seat and found only the plane's two radios, the IFF ("identification friend or foe") and the VHF. It was obvious that a

AEROSPACE HISTORIAN



The General Motors P-75 turned out to be a short-lived, long-range escort fighter; the contract for 2,000 of them was cancelled.



The P-75 (shown here and above is a P-75A), with its contra-rotating propeller, was a big airplane—too big, in General Bradley's opinion.

tank of considerable gallage could be put there if the radios were moved to another location but, as you may have guessed, it wouldn't be that simple.

I knew that North American engineers had considered putting a gas tank back of the pilot's seat and had discarded the idea because of fear that a full tank would cause a dangerous shift aft of the center of gravity. The danger was there, I knew only too well, but I had come back from Europe swearing to right a desperate situation and was convinced that it was going to take audacious, if not downright extreme measures. I figured that a full tank of eighty to ninety gallons might well require two hands on the stick for takeoff and climb, and perhaps for a considerable time thereafter. But it seemed logical that after the climb-out and cruise over the North

Sea, the weight of the fuel would be sufficiently reduced to assure a return to normal stability. I was just this far along in my thinking when I went to Cleveland to fly the P-75. Upon returning to Wright Field, I went immediately to see General Orval Cook, then head of the Production Division and my immediate boss.

"Orval", I said, "I am just back from flying the P-75 and I cannot believe what I've heard! We've ordered 2,000 of them?"

"That's right. We have to escort those bombers."

"But, Orval, the P-75 won't hack it! It's too slow. It won't be maneuverable enough. And it's so unstable I'd be afraid to fly the damn thing again. It couldn't even protect *itself*, let alone a bomber!"

Orval looked at me. He didn't like what I was saying. "O.K., Bradley. What's your

solution?"

"We can make the P-51 do it."

"The P-51? How?"

"We can put a tank behind the pilot and, while the airplane will be unstable at first, as the rear tank empties, stability will return to normal. At least, I think so."

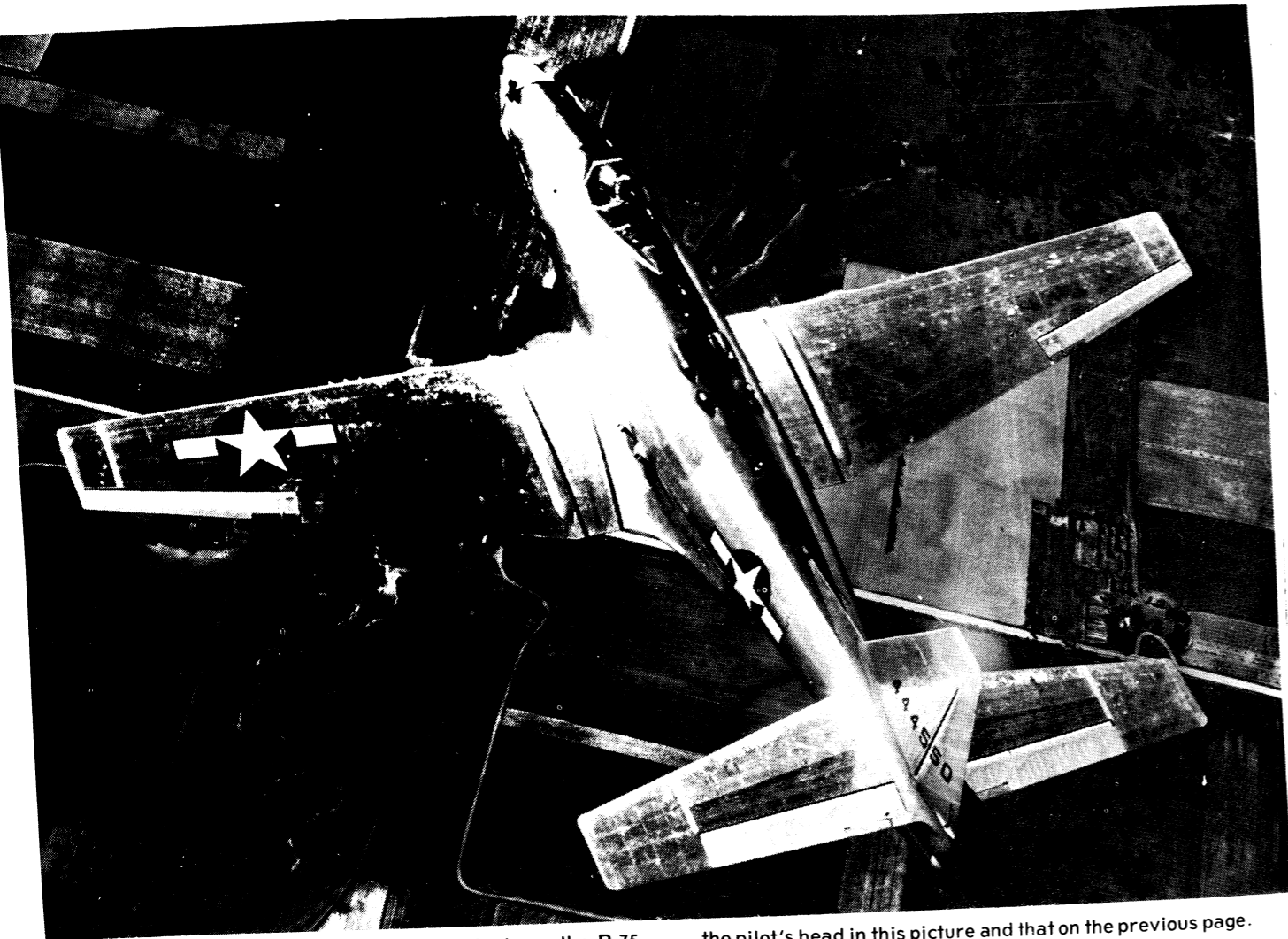
Orval picked up the 'phone on his desk. "Give me General Echols." Then he handed me the telephone and said, "Tell him!"

GENERAL Echols was in Washington on General Arnold's staff as Head of Materiel, and a very important man. I stumbled a bit at first, but soon got going and pleaded the case of Bradley vs. the P-75. Although I was certain mine was not



General Mark E. Bradley, USAF (Ret.) is now senior executive vice president of the Garrett Corporation of Los Angeles. He retired from active duty with the Air Force in 1965, after more than thirty-five years service. He became Commander, Air Force Logistics Command on 1 July 1962, the same day his appointment as a four-star general became effective.

An Official History GREEK COMBAT AVIATION



Having a superficial resemblance to the P-51 Mustang, the P-75 was by comparison a large aircraft as can be seen by the size of the pilot's head in this picture and that on the previous page.

the first bad report, General Echols was highly displeased and gave me considerable argument when I said the plane was too heavy and lacked fighting maneuverability.

"We don't want it to maneuver all around! We want it to stay right with those bombers to protect them!"

I was dumbfounded. I recall thinking that General Echols' early training must have been in bombers because I could not imagine a fighter pilot making such a statement. Then General Echols said, "That's my information from the Navy." (My only possible explanation for this remark is that the General must have recently had conversations with some Naval persons on the subject of bomber protection.) Not wanting to press my argument too far, for obvious reasons, I was preparing myself for a possible strategic withdrawal when the voice on the phone said, "O.K., Bradley. Go do it!"

Then the fun began. Within minutes I had North American's Dutch Kindeburger on the telephone in California. "Dutch, I have a special job to be done—now! Take all the stuff from behind the

seat on a new P-51B and put a tank back there that will fill up the space. We need at least eighty gallons. The first tank can be made of welded aluminum or anything. We'll get it bullet-proofed later. Then put two seventy-five-gallon tanks on the wings, fill up the main tanks and fully load the guns. I'll be out in five days from now to take it on a simulated combat mission from England to Berlin."

I knew what he'd say, and he said it. "O.K., Mark, but you know that much weight added in the tail will have some dangerous consequences as to stability. Our boys say the plane will be unsafe to fly."

"I know that, Dutch," I said. "That's why we have to put it in there and test it. There's no other choice."

The plane was ready on schedule. I took it from the factory to Edwards AFB where we loaded it up. The next day I took off and flew to Albuquerque at 25,000 feet, simulated full power combat over that city for fifteen minutes, then flew back to Edwards with plenty of gas left. The mission to Berlin had been accomplished.

Yes, the P-51 was unstable with a full

tank. It flew more like a wheelbarrow than an airplane. You needed, or felt that you needed, both hands on the stick for what seemed like too long a time. But it could be handled, with care, and it *would* do the job. We well knew the dangers inherent in any carelessness or any error in judgment as to speed or angle of dive during the early stages of flight. But there was no alternative.

A kit program was set up at once. Tanks had to be redesigned and ordered, and production plumbing designed and procured. North American did a great job. If my memory is correct, in less than three, or possibly four, months P-51s were over Berlin—in large numbers. Accidents, thank God, were mercifully few. Unfortunately, there was never any way of counting the bombers and crews saved by those plucky little P-51 escorts, but they must have numbered in the thousands.

Perhaps one of them did chase Meyer Goering into Poland that day. Who am I to spoil a good story? And if any taxpayers are interested, the contract for 2,000 P-75s was cancelled.



A Lockheed F-104G Starfighter taxis in from a mission at an unnamed base in Greece.



Newly-commissioned Greek Air Force officers take their oath while their brother naval officers watch.