

This Day in History... October 26, 1940

First Flight of the P-51 Mustang

On October 26, 1940, the P-51 Mustang completed its first flight.

In April 1940, the British government sought to purchase planes from American manufacturers. At the time, the Curtiss P-40 Tomahawk was the best American fighter aircraft in production, however, the Curtiss-Wright plant was working at capacity.

Then North American Aviation (NAA), which was already producing other planes for the Royal Air Force (RAF), offered to produce their B-25 Mitchell medium bombers. The RAF asked if they could produce the P-40s under a license from Curtiss instead. The NAA then responded that they could build better planes with the same engine faster than producing P-40s. That March, the RAF ordered 320 planes and requested they be completed by January 1941.

The prototype plane was completed in September 1940, just 102 days after the order was placed. Then on October 26, 1940, test pilot, Vance Breese took a P-51 on its first flight. A year later, the first Mustangs arrived in the United Kingdom and in January 1942, they entered service.



Stamp pictures P-51s escorting B-17s on a bombing raid in 1944.

Although the basic design of the P-51 was sound, tests soon proved that the Mustang's greatest disadvantage was its engine. In the RAF's opinion, it was "a bloody good airplane" needing only "a bit more poke." Engineers on both sides of the Atlantic contemplated the problem, and eventually, it was suggested that a Rolls Royce Merlin engine be installed – a modification that dramatically

improved the P-51's performance and revolutionized its potential. The first of these new models entered service in December 1943 in the skies over Europe.

Able to fly long range, the Mustang could now reach beyond Berlin, as far as Austria and Czechoslovakia. Known for accompanying the B-17s on their longest raids, the P-51 was also employed as a fighter, fighter-bomber, dive-bomber, and reconnaissance aircraft. The P-51 was seen as the finest all-around piston-engine fighter in service. Affectionately referred to as the Mustang, its nickname was a suitable choice – referring not only to the plane's American beginnings but also its untamed power.

By the end of World War II, P-51 Mustangs had taken down 4,950 enemy aircraft, more than any other fighter in Europe. Mustangs remained in use into the Korean War as the main fighter of the United Nations. They were soon replaced with jet fighters though, such as the F-86 Sabre. However, other countries continued to use it for several more years before it was retired in 1983. In all, about 15,000 were built.



P-51 Mustang stamp from the Classic American Aircraft Sheet.

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