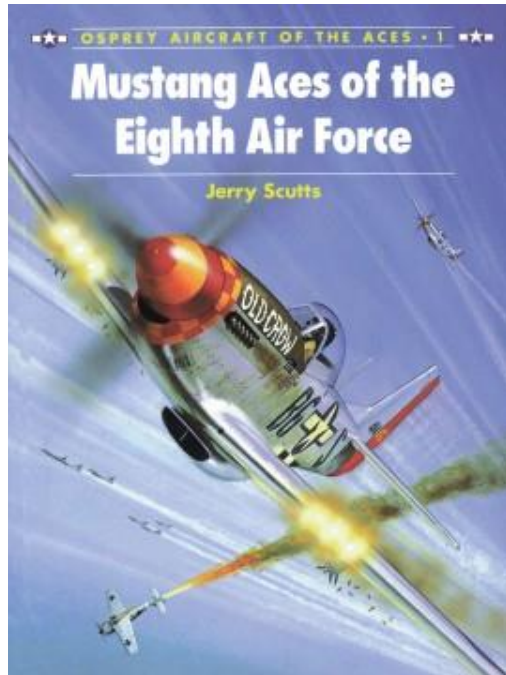


Mustang Aces of the Eighth Air Force

Aircraft of the Aces series No. 1

By Jerry Scutts

Review by Jonathan Aird



Contents:

Merlin's Reach

New Blood

A Wilder Pony

Outclassed

Mission Completed

The Bluenosers

Plates – 18-page colour section. 16 pages of aircraft profiles by Chris Davey, John Weal and Iain Wylie. 2 pages of personalities by Mike Chappell.

Perhaps an odd choice to launch a new series with -- Battle of Britain Spitfire Aces had to wait for ACE12 and BoB Hurricane Aces was ACE40! ACE1 also showed a series that, whilst it was still finding its legs to some extent, offered a more personal military history simply because more of the pilots in question had been interviewed along the line and, of course, in 1995 when the volume appeared, a good number were still alive, being in their 70s.

The book opens with a brief history of the birth of the P51 as a long-range escort fighter -- how a good ground attack and low-level fighter became a high-altitude, long-range fighter, thanks to the incorporation of the superb Rolls Royce Merlin engine. It was a necessary transformation because the P-38 had proved unsuitable in the European theatre whilst the P-47 didn't have the required range and the Eight Air Force was hitting high losses as its bombers pushed on to Germany whilst its fighter escort pulled away around Paris. Interestingly, although it was quick to prove its usefulness -- Jim Howard of the 345th claimed eight Bf110s in a single mission -- there was some reluctance to give up previously flown aircraft, but that soon changed. At the same time the unofficial competitions to become Aces could be frustrating as missions could be flown without encountering the enemy. To offset this, the idea of a strafing ace was conceived.

It's a topic that divides opinion -- was the pilot who shot up aircraft on the ground a true ace? Was, later on, the pilot who specialised in shooting down Me262s as they took off or landed a true dogfighting Ace? In reality, and in a sense undermining the whole ACE series, it doesn't matter! The dogfighting ace may make a good heroic story for the papers -- the jousting knight of the air angle -- but really destroying the enemy's equipment quicker than they destroy one's own equipment is a key part of winning an attrition war. And experienced Luftwaffe pilots who had no aeroplanes were much less of a threat to the bomber stream.

The discussion of such tactics also leads into an area of doctrine for mission lengths -- fighter pilots were required to fly 200 hours, later 300 hours, before being rotated out of a combat unit. This meant there was a constant influx of inexperienced pilots and a limited time in which an experienced pilot could rack up the necessary five kills to be counted as an Ace.

The section titled Mission Complete has several excellent real-life stories -- including Pierce McKennon, who was told he had no aptitude for flying and yet achieved 20.68 kills (11 of them aerial), and Leonard Carson's quick "training school" speech for new pilots in the 357th Fighter Group -- valuable to the wargamer because it describes how pilots were expected to engage the enemy. Surprisingly, actual combat descriptions are quite sparse -- which makes it difficult to recreate on the table some of the air combats briefly referred to, but there is a detailed description of a daring rescue of a downed pilot which could with a little "tweaking" make for a good game.

On the other hand, the colour plates are superb, with mainly side views of different versions of the P-51 and illustrating well how the various fighter groups customised their paint jobs. A very varied unit can be put together - completely historically - with slightly different marks of aircraft with marked differences in canopies in particular. With the notes on tactics, these illustrations are the most "wargame useful" part of the book. The illustrations of particular pilots are nice, but not hugely useful.

Overall - -a handy painting reference and an entertaining and informative read.