As the first unit to fly the Merlin-engined P-51B in combat, the 354th Fighter Group adopted the nickname Pioneer Mustang Group. Until D-Day, it escorted 8th AF heavy bombers to targets on the European Continent. The group then moved to France and supported Patton's Third Army from Normandy to Bavaria, and also participated in the Battle of the Bulge. Its pilots scored over 600 confirmed air victories, and forty-three of them became aces. This book is an almost day-to-day account of their aerial combat experiences and the gypsy lifestyle they and their support personnel led as they moved from one airfield to another across Western Europe.

My Personal Review:
After 60 years, here is the unit history the 354th Fighter Group deserved! When discussing Steve Blake's 446-page magnum opus, superlatives come easily. A well-written narrative bursting with 600+ photos, color artwork and dozens of first-person reminiscences, THE PIONEER MUSTANG GROUP will stand as THE definitive history of this illustrious 9th AF unit.

Given its unique status and enviable combat record, it's surprising that only one mass-market history of the 354th has been published, that being Bill Hess' 2002 book for Osprey. That's a moot point now since Blake has "dun it right!" He interviewed dozens of 354th vets, scanned countless combat reports and other military records, mixed it all together and produced a comprehensive, entertaining and informative record of the 354th in action. Along with describing the missions flown by the Group, Blake includes behind-the-scenes, life-on-the-ground material that gives the reader a taste of the Group's character, memorable personalities, etc.
As mentioned, there's a ton of photographs including color pix (P-51s, P-47s, pilots, ground crew, gun camera shots, award ceremonies, etc.) along with ten pages of color profiles.

Appendices, which total 68 pages(!), include group/squadron commanders, aces, kills scored by the 354th, aircraft assigned, markings, casualties and so on. Quite a thorough presentation!

THE PIONEER MUSTANG GROUP sells for $69.95 and it's worth every penny. Blake is an accomplished author; his narrative is lively and interesting. The number and quality of the photos speak for itself. This is aviation research/history at its finest. I'd give it six stars if that was possible. Highly recommended.

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