

## Pacific Escort

The 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, part of the “Pineapple Air Force” stationed in Hawaii, was one of the first units of the United States military to experience combat in World War II. On December 7, 1941, Japanese aircraft attacked the squadron at Wheeler Field. The 78<sup>th</sup> suffered extensive damage but would eventually carry the fight back to Japan’s home islands. First Lieutenant Daniel Tucker Mathis, Jr. of Augusta, Georgia would become one of the 78<sup>th</sup>’s pilots.

Mathis was an agriculture major and a member of Clemson’s Class of 1944. He was assigned to Company I, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Cadet Brigade. When the 1943 academic year came to a close, Mathis was called to active duty. Mathis enlisted in the Army Air Force and was accepted for flight training. Designated as a fighter pilot, Mathis’s advanced training centered on learning to fly the heavy P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bomber. In early 1945, Mathis was ordered to Saipan in the Marianna Islands where he joined the 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron of the 15<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group.

The 78<sup>th</sup> was transitioning from the P-47 to the newer P-51 Mustang. The Mustang, with sixty percent longer operating range, was better suited for the vast expanses of the Pacific Theater. Mathis’s first missions with the squadron were in support of the Marines battling to capture Iwo Jima. Even before that island was completely secured, the 78<sup>th</sup> moved its base of operations there in order to be in a better position to provide very long-range escorts for B-29 bombers attacking Japan. The bombers, based in the Mariannas, would now rendezvous with their escorting Mustangs over Iwo Jima. The Mustangs were not equipped with their own long range navigational equipment but would accompany the big bombers to their targets and back as far as Iwo Jima.

On June 1, 1945, the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force launched a 400-bomber raid on Osaka, Japan. The B-29s met up with their “Little Friends” over Iwo Jima as planned and continued toward their targets. The formation flew into a heavy weather front and when the bombers plowed into it, the fighters had no choice but to follow. The high winds, rain, low visibility, and turbulence caused by the front



*Ground crewmen prepare Dorrie R, Mathis’s Mustang for a mission.*

spread havoc throughout the formation, causing collisions between aircraft and structurally damaging some of the fighters. By the time the formation passed through the storm, multiple aircraft had been lost, including the one piloted by First Lieutenant Mathis.

Daniel Tucker Mathis, Jr. was initially listed as missing in action. Two months later, at the end of the war, Mathis was reclassified as dead. He was awarded the Air Medal, Purple Heart, Air Force Presidential Unit Citation, Asiatic/Pacific Campaign Medal, and World War II Victory Medal. He is memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing at the Honolulu Memorial in Hawaii and in the Sweetwater Baptist Church Cemetery in Edgefield County.

