

## Evalina – the Japanese Mustang

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Starting in late 1943, Japanese pilots encountered a new enemy: the P-51 Mustang. Despite some early successes, it quickly became evident that the new fighter was a deadly opponent. The threat only became worse with the introduction of the Merlin-engined P-51B/C and P-51D.

As Japanese losses due to the Mustang increased, evaluating it became a priority for the Japanese, in the hope that a tactically significant weakness could be discovered to even the odds. It is fairly safe to assume that the Japanese were able to study some wrecks and other Mustang-related material but this was not enough for a thorough evaluation of the type's performance.

The importance of fully evaluating the opponent's aircraft can hardly be overestimated. American forces were able to capture an intact Japanese Zero shortly after the battle of Midway. Bringing it back to the US, they thoroughly tested it. The evaluation confirmed what was already known: the Zero was almost impossible to defeat in a slow turning fight. However, it was also discovered that it was a fairly poor opponent at high speeds. As a result, the Americans shifted to high-speed "hit and run" tactics which allowed them to defeat Japanese air superiority.



*1Lt. Oliver Strwabridge on Evalina's wing. (Photo: USAF)*

On January 16, 1945, an event occurred that gave the Japanese military a chance to become much more familiar with the Mustang. On that day, 1.Lt. Oliver E. Strawbridge of the 26th Fighter Squadron, 51st Fighter Group, was hit by enemy gunfire and landed at the Japanese-held Suchin airfield in China. Some sources indicate he made a wheels-up landing, while others contend he landed his airplane normally. Pictures of the aircraft in Japanese hands show no obvious sign of damage or repairs. Had Strawbridge made a belly landing, the damage to the propeller and belly intake would have been very complicated for the Japanese to repair. One can therefore assume that the P-51 was captured intact.



In any case his aircraft, a P-51C-11-NT nicknamed "Evalina", was rapidly seized by Japanese troops. Whatever damage the aircraft had taken was repaired rapidly. Hinomarus were painted over the American stars but the rest of the aircraft was left in its original scheme. "Evalina" was flown back to the Japanese Army Air Inspection Center in Fussa (now Yokota Air Base) by Yasuhiko Kuroe, a 30-victory ace.



*Evalina, prior to her capture by Japanese troops, carrying typical 51st FG markings. (© Gaëtan Marie).*

In Fussa, the Mustang's performance was evaluated by Kuroe, who recalls: (1)

*"I was astonished with its performance. Turn characteristics were splendid, almost the same as the Ki-84 in a horizontal turn. The radio transmitter was excellent, the armament and other miscellaneous equipment was very good, particularly when compared with their Japanese equivalents, and moreover it had a radio direction-finder. (2)*

*Its dash speed was inferior to that of our imported Fw 190A, but diving speed and stability during the dive were excellent. After fuel consumption tests we estimated it would be able to fly over the Japanese homeland from Iwo Jima. Some time later this came true."*

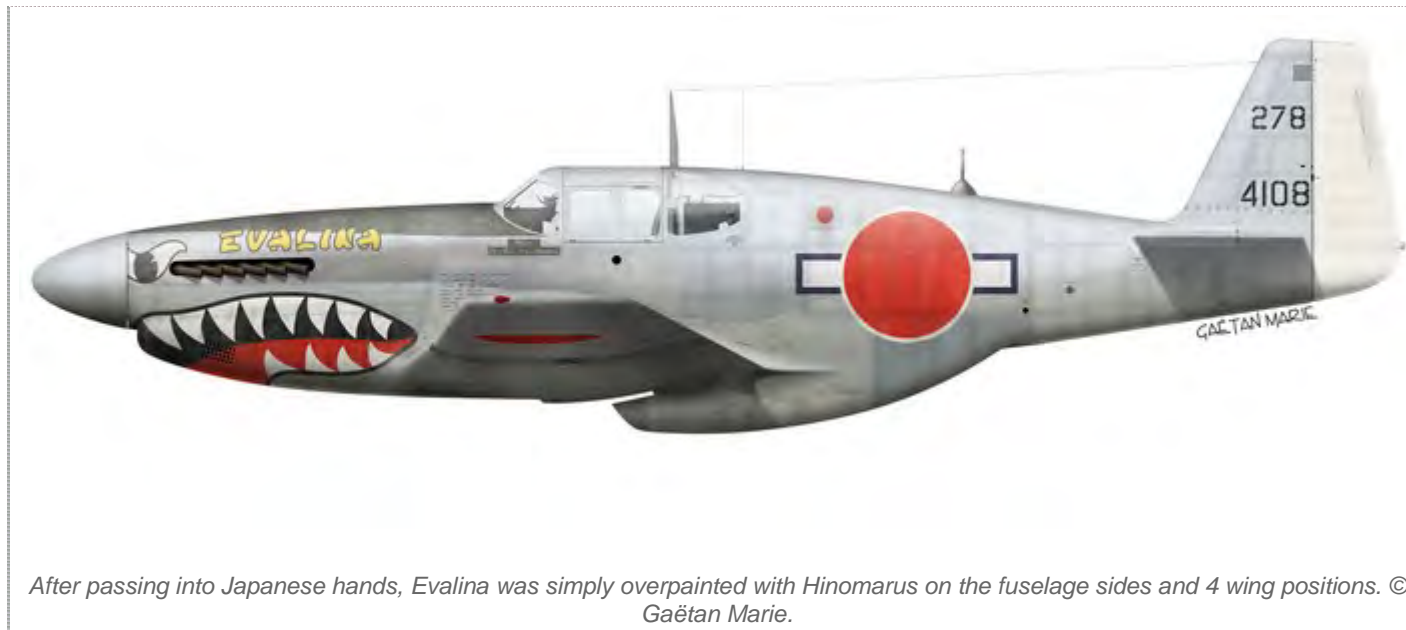
Evalina was later transferred to the Akeno Flying Training Division for further evaluation and mock combat against fighters such as the Ki-43, Ki-61 and Ki-84. In mid-April 1945, Kuroe was placed in charge of a "flying circus" composed of captured Allied aircraft. The group toured Japanese fighter units to train pilots how to fight the opponent's aircraft. One of the pilots who benefited from this was a First Lieutenant from the 18th Sentai, Masatsugu Sumita, who recalled that he learned "how to take his aircraft out of the P-51's axis when being chased...". At the time, the 18th Sentai was flying the Ki-100, one of the few Japanese types that matched the Mustang's general performances, albeit with inferior equipment. Kuroe claimed:





*"I had such confidence with this P-51 that I feared no Japanese fighters."*

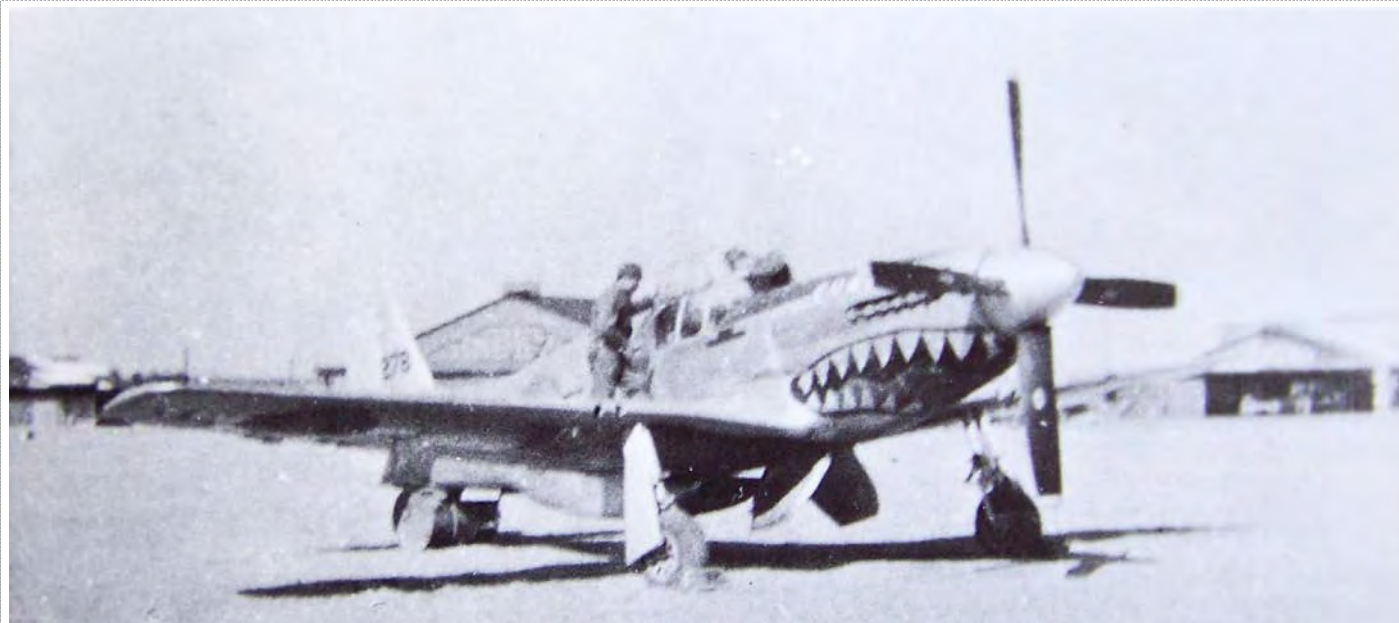
The Japanese's impression of the Mustang was that it was an excellent all-round aircraft with no major fault and excellent equipment. The absence of oil leaks was surprising to most, as all Japanese engines leaked to some extent. Several pilots were invited to fly the fighter. Among them was Yohei Hinoki, one of the first to shoot down a Mustang in November 1943. (A few days later, he himself was shot down by a Mustang and lost a leg. Eventually returning to combat with an artificial leg, he ended the war with a dozen victories): (3)



*After passing into Japanese hands, Evalina was simply overpainted with Hinomarus on the fuselage sides and 4 wing positions. © Gaëtan Marie.*

*"Major General Imagawa asked me to master the P-51 and then demonstrate it to other fellow pilots. I did not have a great deal of confidence in my ability to fly such an advanced aircraft with my disabled leg, but I made up my mind to do my best.*

*I flew to Omasa airfield and finally got a look at the P-51. I could see the superiority of its equipment, and its shiny fuselage with the open red mouth of a dragon. I saw several red dots on the side of the cockpit, probably recording Japanese aircraft the pilot had shot down. With the radiator under the fuselage, it looked very sleek and deadly.*



*Another view of Evalina being inspected in Japan. The inner wheel well covers are descending, probably indicating that the engine was shut off only moments before. Note that the tail is sitting on a barrel. (Click to enlarge.)*

*It reminded me of the day I had first seen the P-51 in the sky above Burma on 25 November 1943. Major Kuroe, who brought the P-51 back from China, told me how easy the P-51 was to fly. Getting in, I was very impressed by the roomy seat and I did not have any trouble with my artificial leg on the rudder pedal. For me there were several new things about the aircraft. First of all there was the bulletproof glass, with a better degree of transparency than the thin Japanese glass; secondly, the seat was surrounded by a thick steel plate which I had never seen in a fighter before; there was an automatic shutter for the radiator, and an oxygen system which was new to me. Overall, it was better equipped than any Japanese airplane I had ever seen."*

Evalina was finally grounded by a burned-out generator. Two P-51Ds were reportedly captured in mainland Japan in 1945, but their fate is unknown.