

## **Checkertails and Aircraft Markings of the 51st Fighter Wing**

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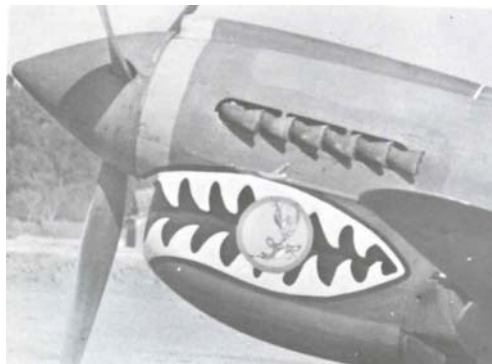
In March 2007, the 51st Fighter Wing revived one of its historic legacies so that the “Ready to Fight Tonight” Mustangs of today can proudly carry on a tradition in its distinguished heritage begun nearly 67 years ago.

Ever since World War I, military aircraft carried distinctive markings as a means of personal or unit identification in telling friend from foe. This tradition continued during World War II and the Korean War in the form of nose art and tail designs. Aircraft markings thus provided Airmen with a sense of pride, uplifting their morale and creating a lasting heritage.

For the 51st Fighter Wing, this tradition began in 1942 when the 51st Fighter Group flew combat missions from the Assam Valley in northeast India. Initially, the group’s 16th Fighter Squadron, flying the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, was sent to China in June 1942, and attached to the 23d Fighter Group, the successor of the famed All-Volunteer Group, the Flying Tigers. The squadron adopted similar nose art of the Flying Tigers by painting shark mouths on the nose of its aircraft. Within several months, the group’s 25th and 26th Fighter Squadrons, based at Dinjan and Sookerating airfields in the Assam Valley in October 1942, sported similar nose designs. The 25th added a short, saber tooth to its shark mouth while the 26th included its squadron insignia—a winged deer caricature on a yellow disk—in the center of the shark mouth.



**25 FS P-40s on the line at Sookerating Field, India, in 1942-43.**



**Nose art typical of 26 FS P-40s in 1942-43.**

In October 1943, the 51st Fighter Group was reassigned from Tenth Air Force, and moved to China to join Brig Gen Claire Chennault’s Fourteenth Air Force. The 16th squadron also rejoined the 51st at this time. In March 1944, the group converted to the North American P-51B/C Mustangs, and each squadron’s aircraft carried their distinctive shark mouths. By the fall of 1944, the 25th squadron added a checkerboard design to the vertical tail fin. Black

squares were painted in a checkerboard against the natural metal skin, and thus, became known as the “Checkertails.”



**P-51s of B Flight, 25 FS, at Yunnanyi, China, in November 1944.**



**Capt Duane Biteman, 25 FS, in China during May 1945.**  
(Photos courtesy of Robert Dorr)

Following the war, the 51st Fighter Group was inactivated for a brief time, but returned to active duty on 15 October 1946 with its three WW II squadrons at Naha Airfield, Okinawa, for assignment to the 301st Fighter Wing. Pilots initially flew the Republic P-47 Thunderbolts of the inactivated 413th Fighter Group. Aircraft still carried 413th markings from WW II. In early 1947, the group received its first jet aircraft, the Lockheed F-80A/B Shooting Star. At the time, ground crews began painting the nose cowling and a stripe on the vertical stabilizer of the F-80s with each squadron’s color.

On 18 August 1948, the 51st Fighter Wing replaced the 301st, and the 51st Fighter Group was assigned to the 51st wing. By July 1950, the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing (FIW) had been alerted for possible combat duty in the Korean War. Each squadron was upgraded to the F-80C. In early September 1950, the wing received orders to deploy, and on 22 September 1950, arrived at Itazuke AB, Japan, with the 16th and 25th squadrons. Both squadrons immediately flew close air support, aerial reconnaissance, and interdiction missions with this aircraft.

About this same time, aircraft of the two squadrons were painted with two horizontal stripes on the vertical stabilizer—blue for the 16th and red for the 25th. The top tip of the nose also was painted black and surrounded by the color of each squadron. Over the following year, these markings remained unchanged.

On 20 November 1951, the 51 FIW converted to the North American F-86E Sabre as its mission changed to air-to-air superiority. During the first few months of flying this aircraft, ground crew members did not have time to add unit markings. However, as the wing’s pilots engaged MiG-15s in aerial combat, it became clear that some type of marking was needed to distinguish the F-86 from the MiG-15.



**F-80C, 16 FIS, on display at the National Museum of the USAF. (Okonski)**



**F-80C, 25 FIS, at K-13 (Suwon AB), South Korea. Note squadron emblem below cockpit and the command stripes on the fuselage. (Dorr)**

While the 4 FIW, equipped with the F-86A since December 1950, had been flying with forward-slanting black and white stripes on the center fuselage, reminiscent of the World War II “D-Day” markings, the 51 FIG commander, Lt Col George L. Jones, felt his squadrons needed distinctive markings on their aircraft.

He did not want to copy the 4th’s stripes, and had the group’s materiel officer, Capt Ed Matczak, develop something different for the 51st’s aircraft. Captain Matczak, also an amateur artist, drew a picture of an F-86 with a forward-slanting yellow band on the fuselage, and yellow bands on each wing. This arrangement made it easier for F-86 pilots to identify with each other.



**F-86E “Elenore E” flown by Maj William Whisner, 25 FIS commander. He became the first Ace of the 51 FIW on 23 February 1952. (Photos by Dorr, Lake and Thompson)**



**Color plate of F-86E #51-2740, “GABBY,” piloted by 51 FIW commander, Col Francis S. Grabeski, during the first 6 months of 1952. The “Checkertails” design had not yet been applied to wing aircraft**

Several months later, the 39th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, which had been flying North American F-51 Mustangs with the 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing, was reattached to the 51 FIW on 1 June 1952, and converted to the F-86F. The addition of the 39 FIS finally brought the wing up to its full fighter complement. As more F-86Fs arrived, the 16th and 25th squadrons also began conversion to this model. Soon thereafter, ground crews added black squares to the natural metal, reviving the “Checkertail” markings of the 51st Fighter Group’s WW II days.



**Lineup of 25 FIS F-86s at K-13 base (Suwon) in May-June 1953. The 25 FIS color was red. The F-86 in the foreground was assigned to the 25 FIS commander. Note the two command stripes before the cockpit. (Buttelmann)**



**Lt Gen Glenn O. Barcus, Fifth AF commander, flew 10 missions in a 39 FIS F-86E with Capt Joseph C. McConnell Jr, 39 FIS, and Top Ace of the Korean War, in April 1953. The 39 FIS color was yellow. (Clyde Wade)**

The “Checkertails” remained the wing’s distinctive aircraft marking after the Armistice was signed on 27 July 1953. On 1 August 1954, the 51 FIW returned to Naha AB from Suwon AB, South Korea. Shortly after its return to Okinawa, the 51st began a conversion to the F-86D on 8 August 1954, and by the end of 1954, both squadrons were equipped with the interceptor. The squadrons also continued the tradition of the “Checkertails” on all F-86Ds.



**F-86F #52-4580, in the foreground, was piloted by 51 FIW commander Col Benjamin O. Davis Jr, from late 1953 until July 1954. Colonel Davis later became the first black officer in the U.S. Air Force to achieve general officer status. (Dorr)**



**F-86D Checkertails of the 25 FIS lined up on the Naha AB flight line in 1958. (Keith Fannon)**

On 9 March 1959, the 16th squadron became the first squadron in Pacific Air Forces to convert to the Convair F-102A Delta Dagger. As the squadron received the world’s first supersonic, all-weather interceptor over the following several months, ground crews painted the “Checkertails” design on the vertical stabilizer.

At the same time, the 25th squadron still flew the F-86D; however, by June 1960, the squadron was inactivated which left the 51st wing with only the 16th squadron carrying on the “Checkertails” tradition. The 16th squadron

finally was inactivated in December 1964 as the F-102 was removed from active service, and as a result, the “Checkertails” design ended for the 51 FIW.



**F-86Ds of the 25 FIS begin a scramble takeoff from Naha AB, Okinawa, in 1958. The aircraft on the right was flown by the squadron commander while the trailing F-86D was piloted by the squadron operations officer. The command stripes on fuselage denoted who flew the aircraft** (Keith Fannon)



**F-102As of the 16 FIS at Naha AB in late 1959. (USAF Photo)**

The 51 FIW was inactivated at Naha AB on 31 May 1971; however, this status lasted only 5 months. On 1 November 1971, the 51st Air Base Wing replaced the 6314th Air Base Wing as the host wing at Osan AB, South Korea. Less than 3 years later, the wing was redesignated as the 51st Composite Wing (Tactical) with assignment of the 36th Tactical Fighter Squadron, equipped with the McDonnell F-4E Phantom II, and the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron, equipped with the North American Rockwell OV-10 Bronco.

By the early 1980s, F-4Es of the 36 TFS aircraft displayed the shark mouth on its nose. However, this nose art was not continued when squadron converted to the General Dynamics F-16 Viper in August 1988.



**Left Photo: 25 TFS' A-10s, based at Suwon AB, displayed the “SU” tail designation after arrival in 1982. Right Photo: 36 TFS F-4Es carried the shark mouth and eye on its nose with the “OS” tail designation from 1982 until 1988. (USAF Photos)**

Earlier in March 1982, the 51st added the Fairchild-Republic A-10 Thunderbolt II to its aircraft inventory with assignment to the 25th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Suwon AB. These aircraft, in camouflage, carried only the aircraft serial number and the two-letter base designation “SU” on its vertical stabilizers.

By the mid 1990s, aircraft of the wing's two squadrons, the 25th and 36th, were painted grey with the vertical stabilizer(s) bearing the aircraft serial number, two-letter "OS" designation for Osan AB and "Mustang" logo. Additionally, the vertical stabilizers of the 25 FS A/OA-10s carried a small green and yellow checkered design at the across the top of the stabilizer. These were colors on the squadron's emblem. The 36 FS F-16s had a red and black checkered design.



**Flagship aircraft of the 51 FW. From lower left, clockwise: OA-10 #80-0253, 25 FS commander, A-10 #79-0183, 51 OG commander, F-16C/D #89-2020, 51 FW commander, and F-16C/D #89-2136, 36 FS commander. Aircraft of the 51 FW and 51 OG commanders displayed colors of both squadrons. (Photo by Jim Haseltine)**

Early in 2007, with the USAF celebrating its 60th Anniversary as a separate service, Brig Gen Joseph Reynes Jr, 51 FW commander, discussed the idea of reviving the "Checkertails" design with Seventh Air Force commander, Lt Gen Stephen G. Wood, as a way to carry on this historic legacy of the 51 FW.

After developing a "Checkertails" design, General Reynes submitted the proposal to Gen Paul V. Hester, PACAF commander, in February 2007 to change the paint schemes on two A-10s and three F-16s—the flagship aircraft—of the wing. The request included painting a black and grey "Checkertails" design on the vertical stabilizer and command stripes on the fuselage of each aircraft. On 23 March 2007, General Hester approved the "Checkertails" design with some modification for the five aircraft flown by the Seventh Air Force commander, 51 FW commander, 51st Operations Group

commander, 25 FS commander, and 36 FS commander. The request for command stripes, though, was not approved at this time.

In April 2007, the 51st Maintenance Squadron paint shop completed the new paint scheme on the 51 FW commander's aircraft, F-16C/D, #89-2020. During May 2007, they finished the Seventh Air Force commander's aircraft, F-16C/D #90-0710 with the other three aircraft scheduled for completion by mid June 2007.



**Tail flash of F-16C/D 89-2020, 51 FW commander's aircraft in April 2007.**



**Tail flash of F-16C/D 90-0710, 7 AF commander's aircraft in May 2007.**

**(USAF Photos)**

Although the 51st Fighter Group was not the first unit during WW II to display the "Checkertail" design, it became the trademark of the wing during the Korean War, and that tradition proudly has been carried forth by the Mustangs of today.