

The Spitfire of Squadron Leader Johnny Plagis

As often happens when one undertakes historical research, it turns out that what you thought you knew as hard fact is in reality, well... just plain wrong. Such is the case with one of the most well known Spitfire Mk.IXs, flown by one of the best known RAF aces of WWII, Squadron Leader Johnny Plagis. Over the decades, his attractively marked Spitfire, named - as were all his Spitfires - for his beloved sister Kay, and sporting the presentation name "Muscat" (the capital of the then-British protectorate of Muscat and Oman), has been illustrated time and again for books, articles, and decals. It has featured on the decal sheet of more than one Spitfire kit, and is seen in nearly every publication ever produced on the Spitfire.

Well, color us surprised - yet again! After much research that led us to our original, somewhat controversial conclusions about Plagis's aircraft, yet more new information has surfaced. And it turns out we were wrong on just about every count! It turns out that Plagis's 5J-K, ML214, was only marked as the presentation aircraft named "Muscat" for a photo shoot in December of 1944! But the story is a bit more muddled than we first thought.

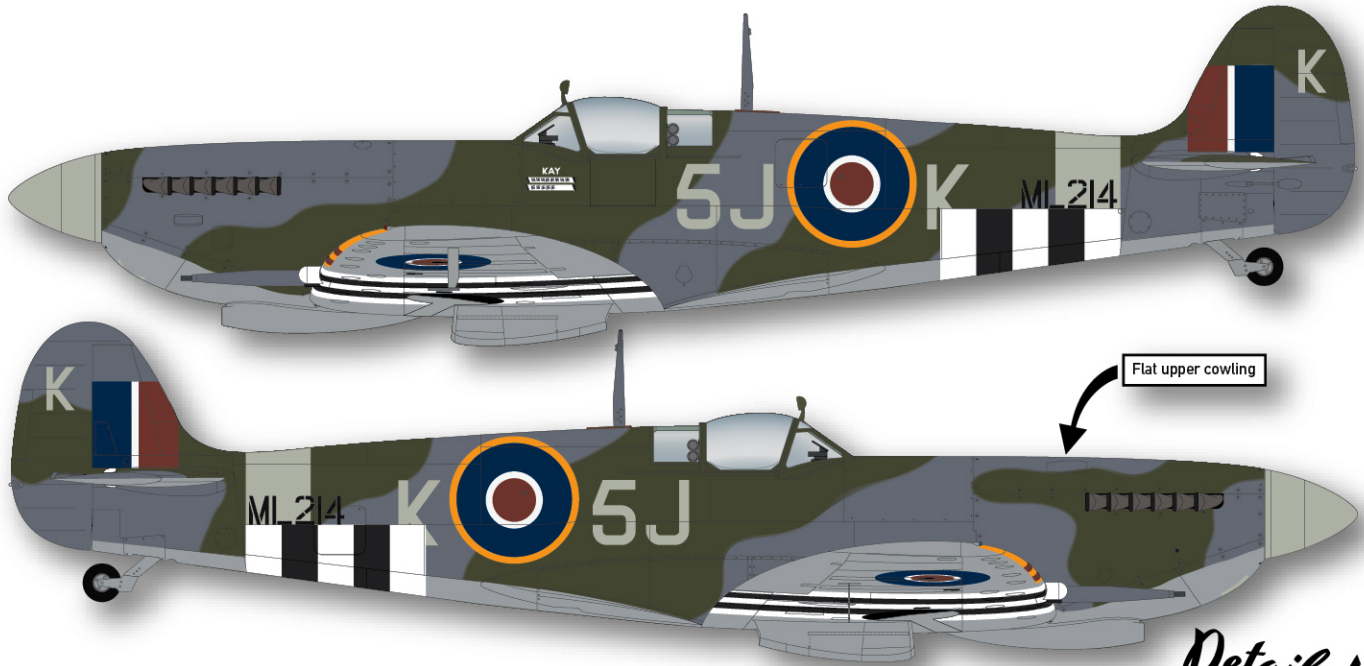
The aircraft was delivered from the M.U. to 126 Squadron in mid-May 1944. We have illustrated it as it likely appeared at that time. Plagis joined the squadron on 20 June 1944 and first flew ML214 the following day. By then the invasion stripes (about which read more herein) would have been removed from all upper surfaces. He definitely flew it for his kills throughout the summer and into the autumn. In October the aircraft sustained Category B damage (repairable on site), but she does not appear in the squadron Operational Record Book again. We are assuming that since the squadron likely had heard that they would be converting to the Mustang III soon, and since the aircraft was a presentation from the Persian Gulf subscription (126 being the "Persian Gulf" squadron), she was kept on strength, possibly as a parts source or as a backup. In any event, she didn't participate in ops after mid-October.

During the now famous photo shoot at Bradwell Bay on 12 December of 1944, it appears that ML214 was spiffed up and wheeled out for Plagis to have his photo taken in, now with his full scoreboard and possibly with a white spinner with a Sky base plate. It was only at this point that it had the "Muscat" titles applied.

In our research we discovered that all of 10 Group, Air Defense of Great Britain, of which 126 Squadron was a part, used non-regulation narrow ID stripes for Operation Overlord. Lots of people were surprised by our findings on these stripes, as they flew in the face of all previous artistic renditions and assumptions on the appearance of ML214. But we stand by our research, and we invite you to examine our reasons for settling on this perhaps somewhat radical departure from the conventional wisdom.

So... after nearly 70 years, we humbly propose that the history of S/L Plagis and the Spitfire Mk.IXs he flew be amended. Given that he didn't join 126 Squadron until well after D-Day, by which time the upper wing and fuselage stripes had been ordered removed, and since the "K" on the rudder was put there because the ID stripes had partially obliterated the fuselage code, we're now quite sure that this is NOT what any Spitfire ever flown by S/L Plagis (or anyone else) looked like. Read on and see if you agree...





Detail Note

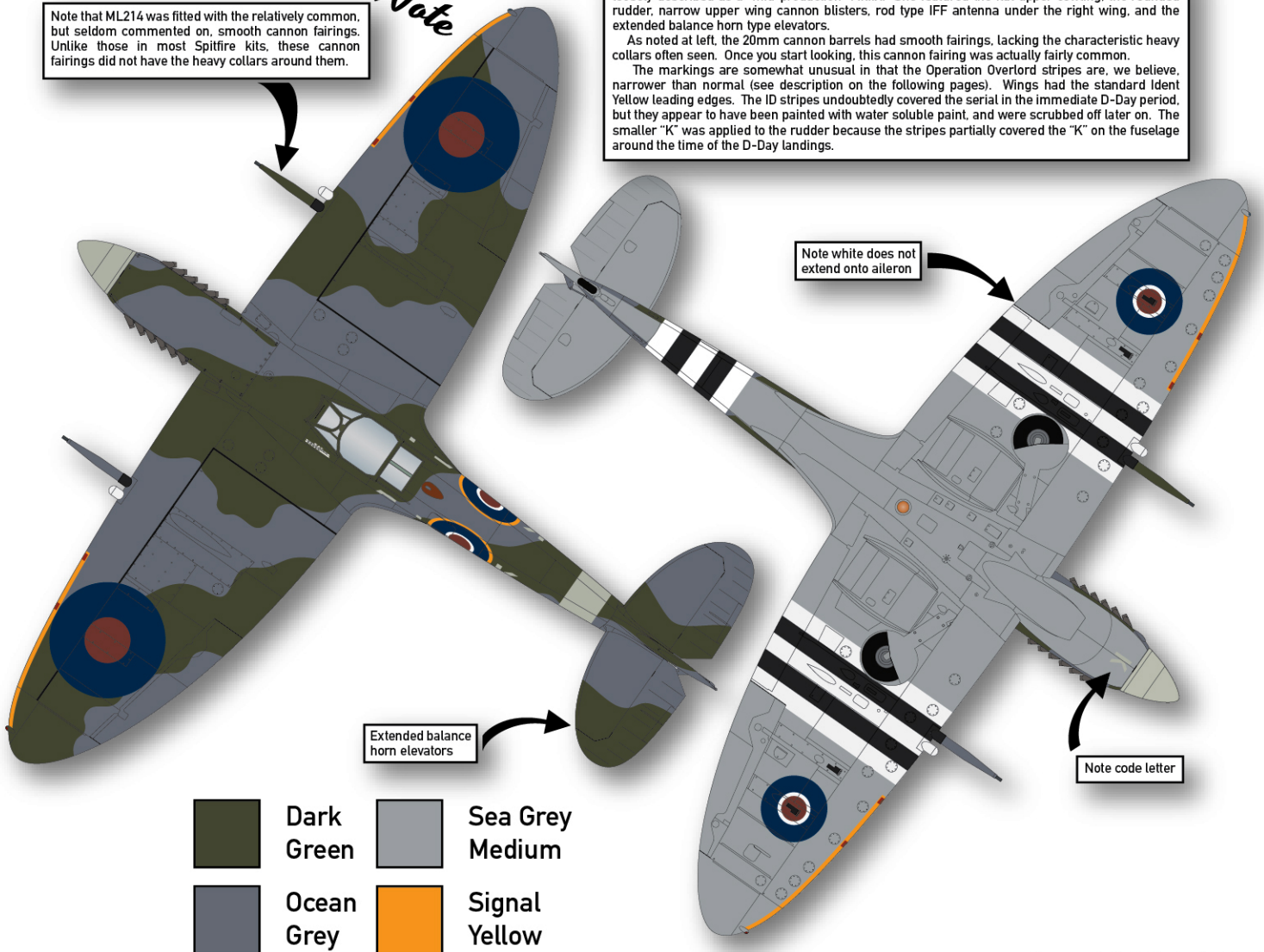
Note that ML214 was fitted with the relatively common, but seldom commented on, smooth cannon fairings. Unlike those in most Spitfire kits, these cannon fairings did not have the heavy collars around them.

Detail Note

Plagis's first Spitfire IXc, serialled ML214, was delivered new in May of 1944. It could probably be loosely described as a "mid-production" Mk.IX. She featured the flat upper cowling, the rounded rudder, narrow upper wing cannon blisters, rod type IFF antenna under the right wing, and the extended balance horn type elevators.

As noted at left, the 20mm cannon barrels had smooth fairings, lacking the characteristic heavy collars often seen. Once you start looking, this cannon fairing was actually fairly common.

The markings are somewhat unusual in that the Operation Overlord stripes are, we believe, narrower than normal (see description on the following pages). Wings had the standard Ident Yellow leading edges. The ID stripes undoubtedly covered the serial in the immediate D-Day period, but they appear to have been painted with water soluble paint, and were scrubbed off later on. The smaller "K" was applied to the rudder because the stripes partially covered the "K" on the fuselage around the time of the D-Day landings.



- | | | | |
|--|------------|--|-----------------|
| | Dark Green | | Sea Grey Medium |
| | Ocean Grey | | Signal Yellow |

Our Case For Those Oddball Narrow Stripes...

What we know to be fact is that the RAF ordered 18" black and white ID bands for Operation Overlord, and most RAF squadrons did their best to carry out that order to the letter. We know that, for reasons probably lost to history, squadrons belonging to 10 Group attached to the ADGB (Air Defense Great Britain) used narrower stripes. After careful analysis, we have determined that the stripes were consistently 9" wide; exactly half the specified width. All of that we know...

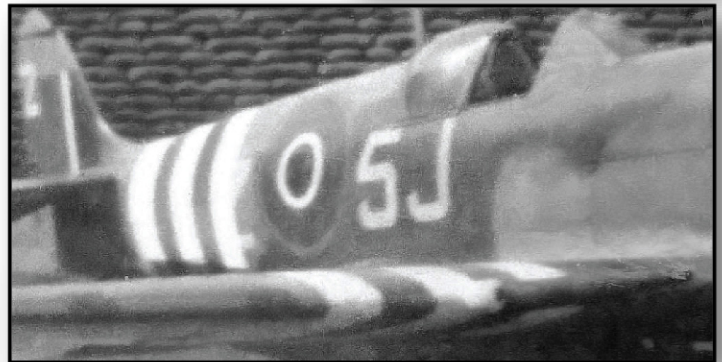
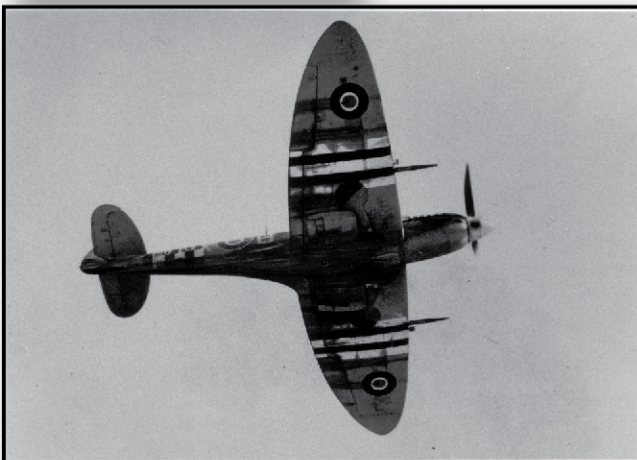
So what kind of invasion stripes did ML214 carry? Well, since no photos are known to exist showing her markings, we direct you to the Educated Guess Department on the third floor. Undoubtedly once we publish this decal such a photo (or six, in a complete walk-around in living color) will surface. Meantime, at right is a photo of a sister ship to ML214, coded "5J-L". It clearly has narrow ID stripes, that if you measure carefully, come out to 9" apiece. The Spitfire Mk.VIIs of 131 Sqdn are famous for wearing the narrow stripes, but there is other photographic evidence that the Mk IXs of 64 and 126 Squadrons wore them also. Thus, unlike all previous depictions of which we are aware, we have decided to show ML214 with the more likely narrow invasion stripes.



The most convincing evidence for the 9" stripes on ML214 is this photo of her sister ship from 126 Squadron showing the narrow stripes on all surfaces. This is likely the appearance of ML214 just before Plagis began flying her in mid-July of 1944.

Not the best quality, but this photo clearly shows the narrow stripes painted over the aircraft code and serial, along with the black and white cannon fairings. Note the aircraft code on the rudder.

Two photos of Spitfire VII MD183 NX-B of 131 Squadron displays the 10 Group narrow lower surface invasion stripes seen after upper surface stripes were ordered deleted in early July 1944.

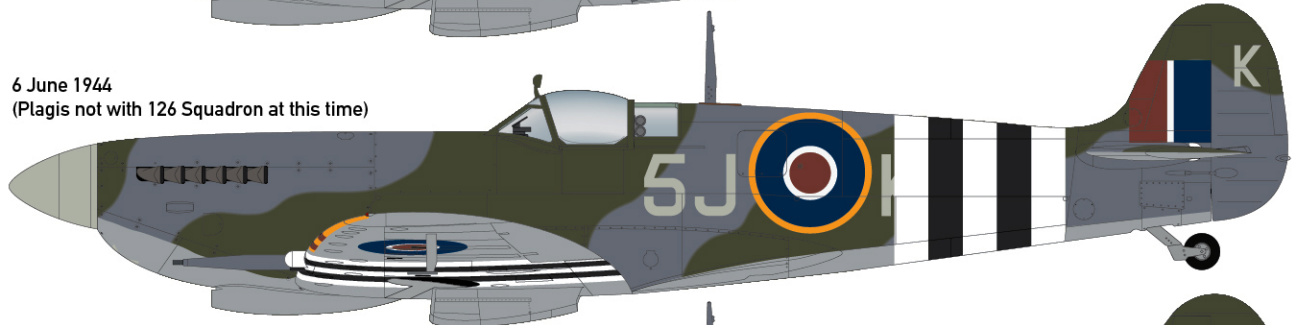


So what did she look like when...

Mid-May 1944
Newly delivered to 126 Squadron from the M.U.



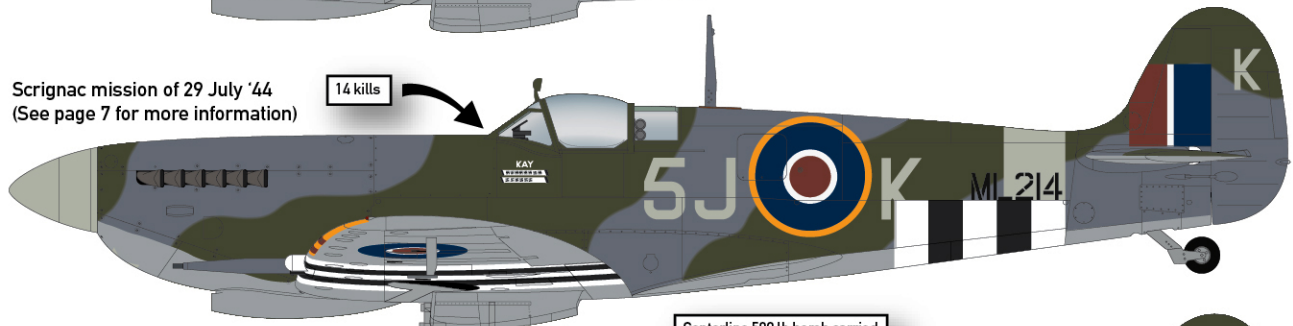
6 June 1944
(Plagis not with 126 Squadron at this time)



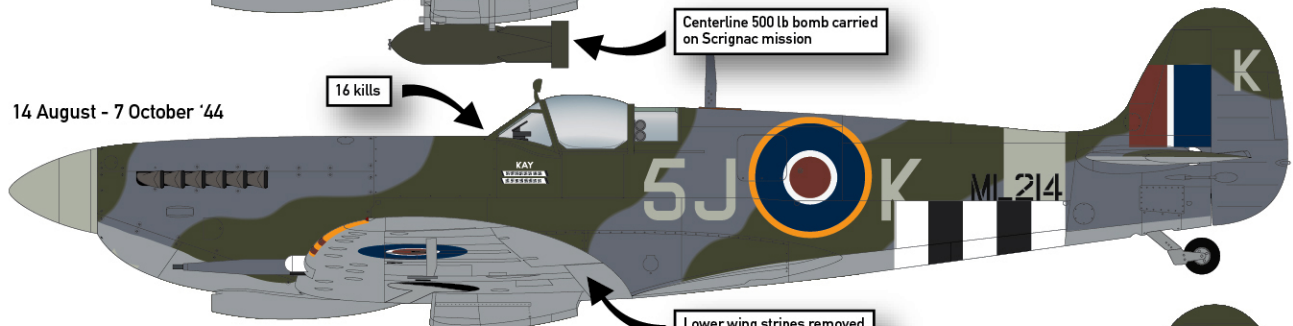
Mid-July 1944 (through 24 July)
After becoming Plagis's personal aircraft



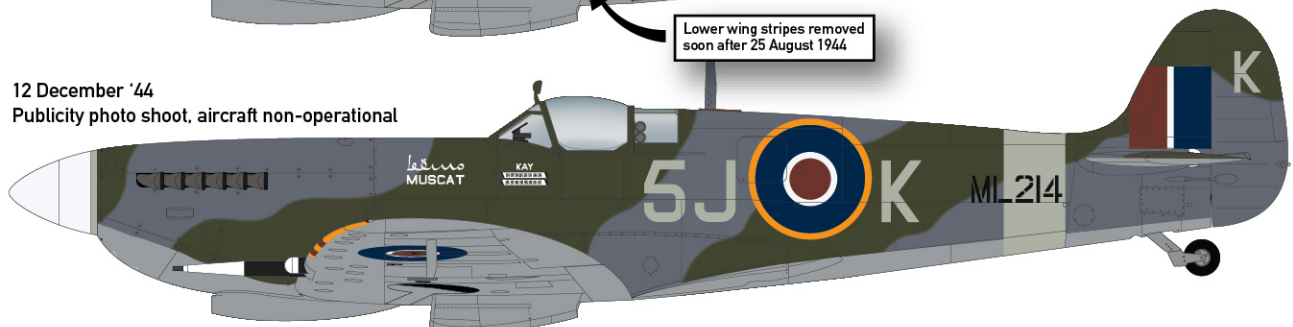
Scrignac mission of 29 July '44
(See page 7 for more information)

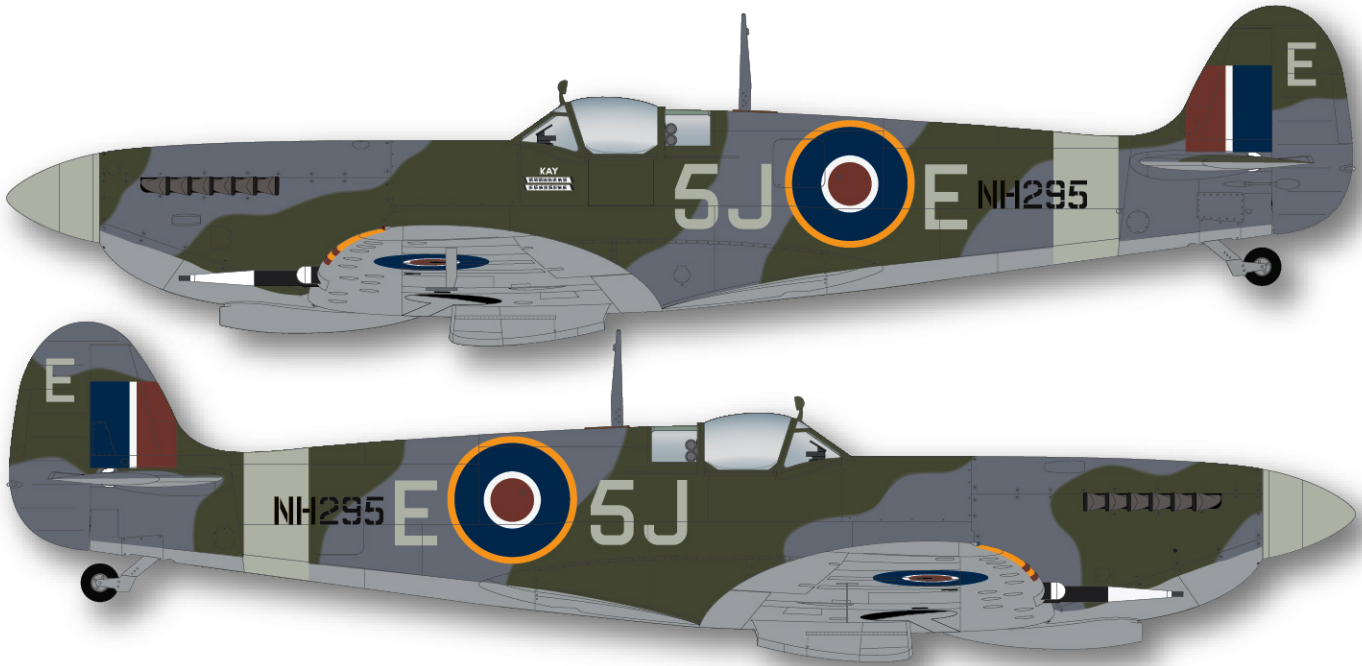


14 August - 7 October '44



12 December '44
Publicity photo shoot, aircraft non-operational

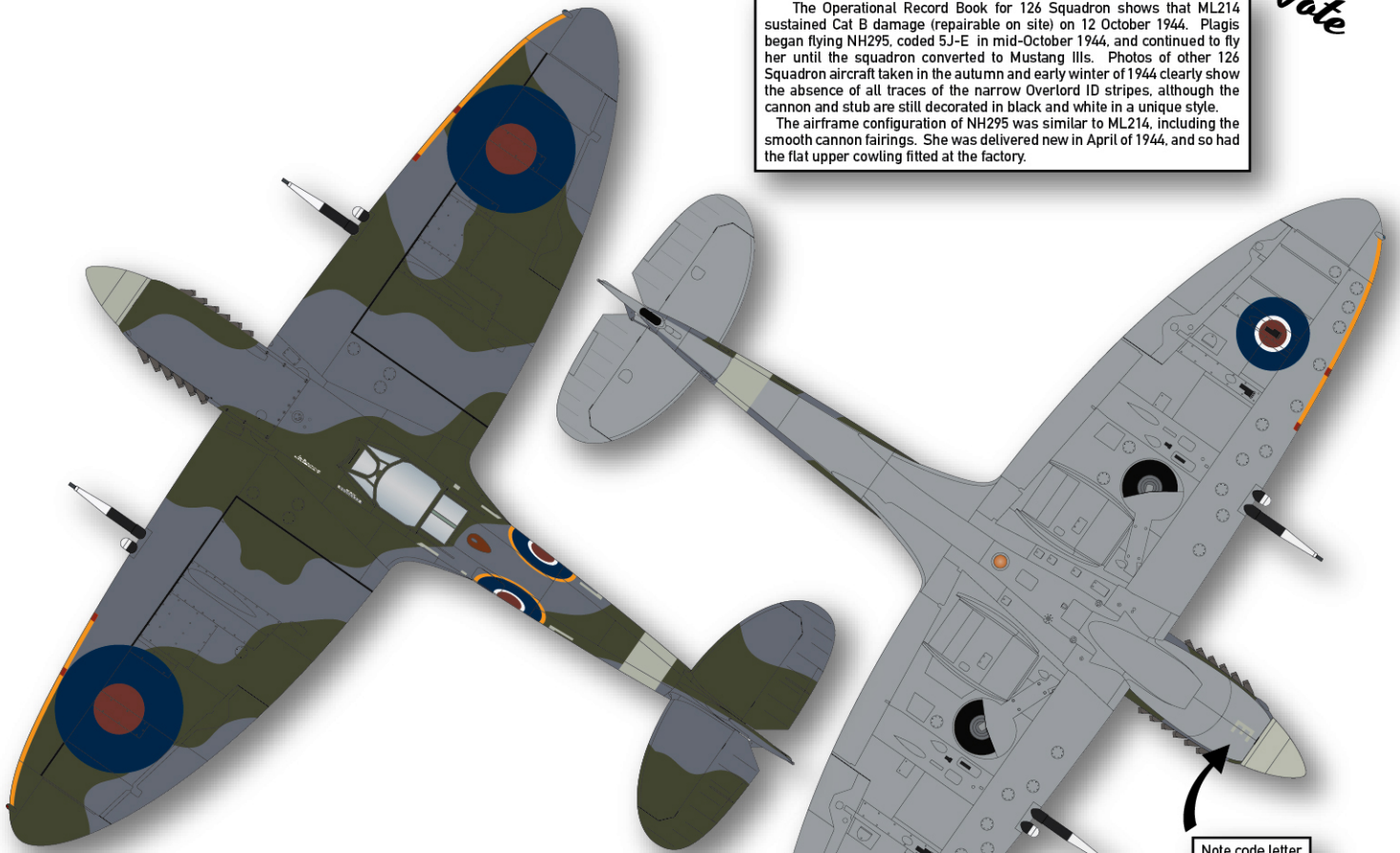




Detail Note

The Operational Record Book for 126 Squadron shows that ML214 sustained Cat B damage (repairable on site) on 12 October 1944. Plagis began flying NH295, coded 5J-E in mid-October 1944, and continued to fly her until the squadron converted to Mustang IIIs. Photos of other 126 Squadron aircraft taken in the autumn and early winter of 1944 clearly show the absence of all traces of the narrow Overlord ID stripes, although the cannon and stub are still decorated in black and white in a unique style.

The airframe configuration of NH295 was similar to ML214, including the smooth cannon fairings. She was delivered new in April of 1944, and so had the flat upper cowl fitted at the factory.



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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
|  | Dark Green |  | Sea Grey |
|  | Ocean Grey |  | Signal Yellow |

Note code letter

What color did you say those cannons were??



RAF Bradwell Bay, Essex, 11 December 1944. Squadron Leader Johnny Plagis escorts Lady H.C. Fowle, widow of former British Resident Persian Gulf Minister Sir Trenchard Fowle, as she presents Spitfires to the RAF on behalf of the Persian Gulf Spitfire Fund.

Of interest is the coloring of the cannon fairing, the stub fairing, and the spinner and back plate on "Bahrain III". Absolutely nothing can be proven from this rather interesting black and white photo, and anything we say is only our guess, and yours is as good as ours. Our guess is white with a grimy spinner back plate.

Author's Collection

Two photos of Spitfire IXc MK126, 5J-G of 126 Squadron, probably taken at Bradwell Bay in December of 1944. The oddly decorated cannon fairings and stub fairings are apparent here as well. "If it doesn't get out of the way, whitewash it!" Note the 90 imperial gallon slipper tank.



Author's Collection



Author's Collection

Ioannis Agorastos "Johnny" Plagis was born in Southern Rhodesia to Greek immigrant parents. He volunteered for the Royal Air Force in 1940, after having been turned down by the Rhodesian Air Force. By 1942 he was flying Spitfire Vs over Malta where he had considerable success. In 1943 Plagis commanded a flight with 64 Squadron flying the clipped-wing Mk.Vb. Plagis added two kills while with 64 Sqn bringing his total to 13 (12, plus 2 shared). In July 1944 Plagis assumed command of 126 Squadron, and he chose Spitfire ML214 "K" as his mount. On the 24th Plagis shot down a Bf109, and on 14 August he downed an Fw190 and a Bf109, and damaged another Bf109, all with a 90-gallon slipper tank that he could not jettison still attached to the aircraft! These exploits brought his total to 16 (15 and 2 shared). He made no further claims during the war although he did lead 126 Squadron on several bomber escort missions (later while flying Mustangs) including the ill-fated but still successful Shellhaus raid on the Gestapo HQ in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Spitfire ML214 is an interesting subject that has been depicted often. It was delivered to 126 Squadron on 7 May 1944 and given the individual letter 'K'. All of "Johnny" Plagis's personal Spitfires were named for his beloved sister "Kay" so it is believed that he chose ML214 for that reason. At the time he had 13 kills to his credit (as we portray), but he added three more by 14 August 1944. While ML214 undoubtedly had full upper and lower surface Overlord ID stripes around D-Day, by early July the upper surface stripes had almost certainly been removed in accordance with directives.

On 29 July 1944 Plagis (flying ML214) led his squadron on a low-level raid against the German headquarters in the small Brittany village of Scrignac. The

Germans had evacuated the civilian inhabitants of Scrignac and garrisoned the town. As noted in the accounts shown below, only the village church was left standing after Plagis and his comrades had had their way with the place. Ordnance was a 500lb general purpose bomb with an 11-second delay fuse, carried on the centerline bomb rack. We have seen no photographic evidence of wing bomb racks being fitted to a Mk.IXc of any 10 Group aircraft.

Plagis continued to fly ML214 after his last kills in August of 1944. On the 13 September mission he led escorting Halifaxes home from a raid on Osnabrück. Plagis lost his tailwheel on takeoff! Undaunted, he continued on and put his kite safely down back at Bradwell Bay. Plagis last flew ML214 on 7 October 1944. It appears to have sustained Category B damage (repairable on site). Why the aircraft was not then either repaired and returned to service, or sent to a Maintenance Unit for repair and issue to another squadron is not known. It may have been used as a spares source, or simply been a casualty of wartime red tape, since 126 Squadron was scheduled to convert to Mustangs in December. Whatever the reason, ML214 remained at Bradwell Bay where it was used for the now famous photo shoot with Plagis in December.

The ORB shows that beginning on 17 October 1944, Plagis began using NH295, coded 5J-E as his personal aircraft. Our depiction of NH295 is something of a reconstruction. We know that it was coded "E", and other aircraft with 126 Squadron at the time looked pretty much as we've shown this one. It appears that the narrow Overlord ID stripes common to 10 Group ADGB were completely removed by October of 1944.

126 Squadron converted from Spitfire IX's to Mustangs in December 1944 and was disbanded in 1946.

Headquarters Erased

A German occupied village in the Brest Peninsula believed to be a German headquarters was wiped out by RAF Spitfire fighter bombers in an attack at breakfast time this morning.

The village of Scrignac, consisting of between 300 and 400 houses, had been evacuated of the civilian population and a German garrison had been installed.

The only building left standing after the bombing was a church, which pilots reported remained amid a great heap of rubble.

BRITISH ATTACK REICH

R. A. F. Spitfires Destroy Nazi Field Headquarters in Brest Peninsula Town.

I was given command as Squadron Leader of 126 Fighter Squadron and whilst commanding this unit, we specialised in the interception and destruction of enemy ground transport. Trains, Searchlights, Coastal Gun positions, enemy Shipping. I led the show on the destruction of the Gestapo H.Q. in Scrignac in Brittany on July 29 1944, we completely destroyed the Gestapo H.Q. and on the following day July 30th we got prominence in the Press for this effort.

Spitfires and bombers from the Air Defence of Great Britain on Saturday morning, in a tree-top height attack, wiped out the German-occupied village of Scrignac, on the Brest Peninsula, 36 miles east of Brest. The village is believed to have been used as German H.Q. and the Germans had evacuated the civil population. Pilots reported that the only building apparently left intact was the church.



Author's Collection



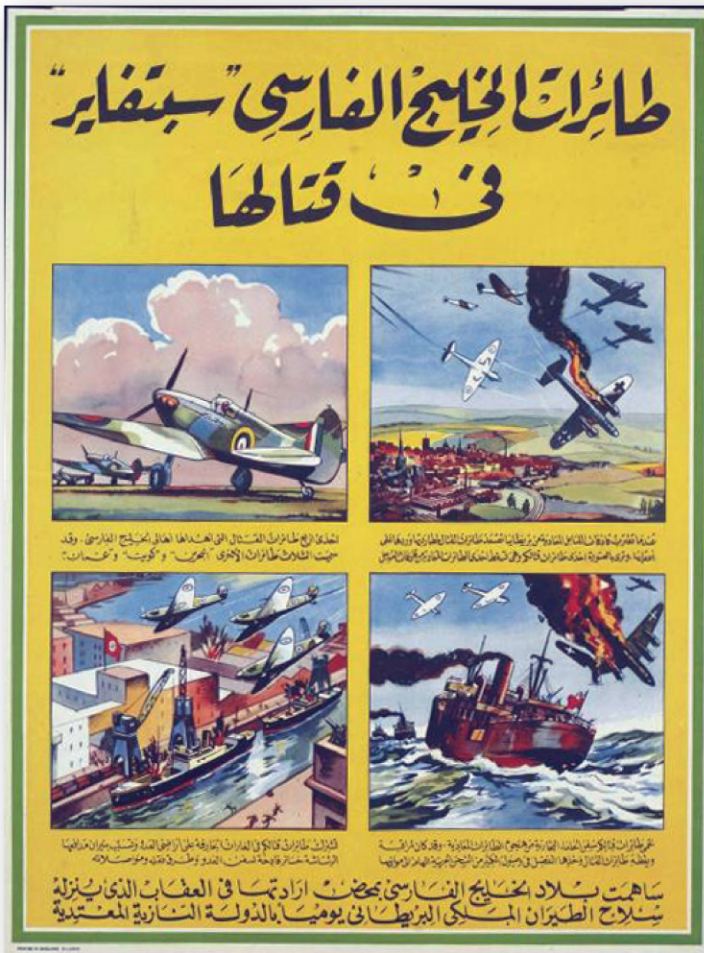
Author's Collection

This pair of photos shows two of Plagis's Mk.Vs (note the different windscreens). Note the similarity of the personal motif, and compare it to that seen on NH295 at right.



Author's Collection

Plagis seen in the cockpit of ML214 during a photo shoot on 12 December 1944.



Poster created for the Arabic-speaking British colonies and protectorates where funds were subscribed for the purchase of Spitfires such as those presented to 126 Squadron.



Squadron Leader Johnny Plagis

Our heartfelt thanks to Andy Thomas and Chris Thomas for their absolutely invaluable assistance on this project. Like many, it took on a life of its own once we started digging. Andy and Chris really manned the shovels! Thanks guys!