

ARKANSAS TRAVELER RIDES AGAIN

By GENE YOUNG
S&S Thailand Bureau

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Twenty five years ago this same Arkansas Traveler was wracking up an impressive record over the war-torn skies of Europe.

For the record, the Arkansas Traveler is both a man and an airplane. The man is Col. Paul P. Douglas Jr., of Paragould, Arkansas, wing commander of the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing at Royal Thai Air Force Base, Korat.

The aircraft is currently a sleek F-105 Thunderchief adorned with a bright, shiny painting of a cartoon character riding on a 500-pound bomb, complete with the lettering "Arkansas Traveler".

In another day, another part of the world and another war, this same cartoon character adorned the side of an ugly, mean looking deadly P-47 Thunderbolt. Riding that bomb, it saw a young 23-year-old captain log 136 missions in 337 combat hours.

If that little hillbilly character could talk, it would probably tell you how that young captain scored eight kills to become an ace. It would also proudly proclaim how on two separate occasions this young pilot shot down three enemy aircraft in one flight. Or how that fighter jockey emerged on "V" Day as one of the most highly decorated combat aces of the European Theater.

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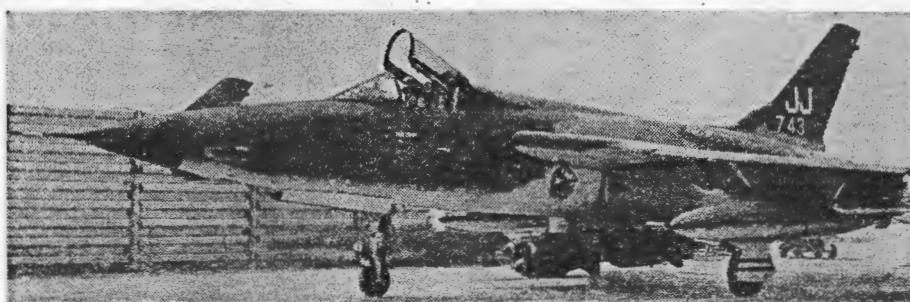
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There are two ways to nail down this "Bull of the Woods" for a conversation and that's either at the side of his plane or in his car. When he is in his office, he can usually be found wearing his flight suit. That's because he just got back from a mission or is going on one.

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The "Arkansas Traveler" has flown 14 missions so far, but that is just a warm-up for the wing commander. He has this idea in mind that he would like to celebrate his 49th birthday at the controls of his Thunderchief and if the high brass are really favorable to him and the war is still on, he wants to close out his career by flying a combat mission on his 50th birthday.

Reminiscing about his career, Douglas recalled how he got the idea in 1943 of getting a name for his fighter. "I guess it has always been a fad among fighter pilots to decorate our aircraft and back in those days we wanted something different. Well, I remembered this little cartoon character in Esquire magazine, so I adopted him and had a mechanic paint him on the side of my plane. We added the bomb, and someone came along and said 'Hey, Arky, traveling somewhere?' That was the final touch and we painted on the name 'Arkansas Traveler'."

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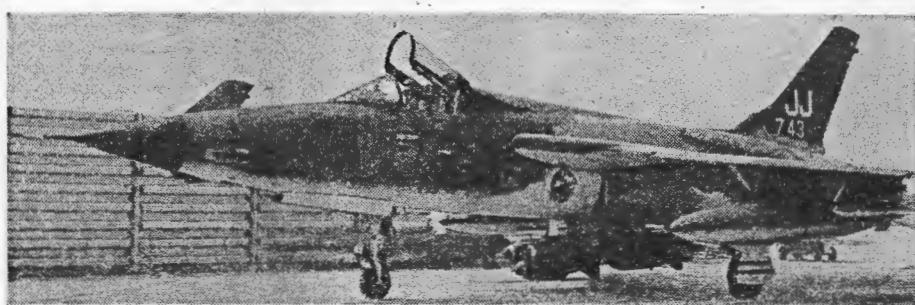
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