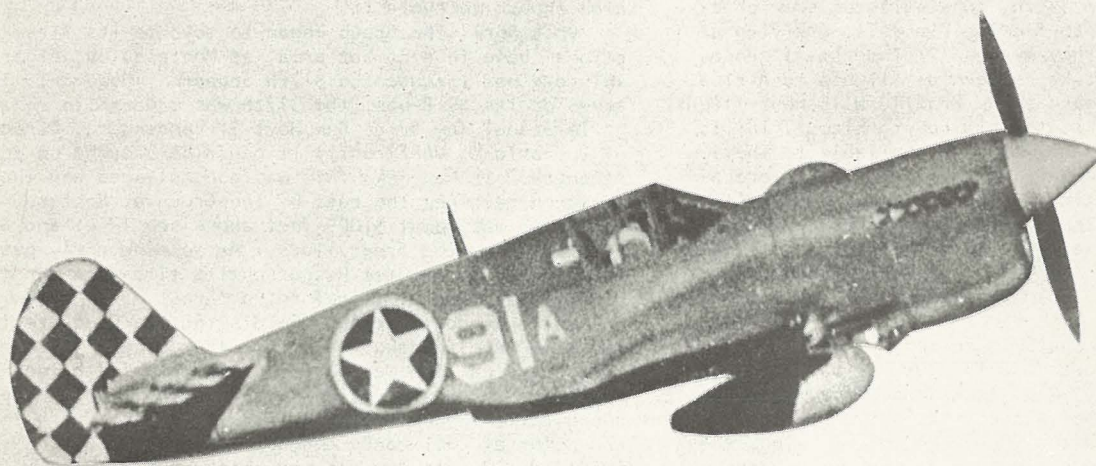


Checkertails

*History of the 325th
Fighter Group Part 1
August 1942 - May 1944*

By ERNEST R. McDOWELL



The 325th Fighter Group came into being on 20 July 1942 when Headquarters of the First Air Force, Eastern Defense Command issued General Orders Number 50. These orders called for the activation of the Group and authorized the detaching of officers and enlisted men from the 79th Fighter Group to form the new group. A cadre of officers and enlisted men from the 85th, 86th and 87th Squadrons led by Major Leonard C. Lydon made up the nucleus around which the 325th was to be built.

Hillsgrove, Rhode Island housed the Headquarters and the 317th Squadron at Theodore Green Field. The 318th was sent to Grenier Field, Manchester, New Hampshire and the 319th reported to Rensschler Field at Hartford, Connecticut. Chain of Command was through the Boston Air Defense Wing and the First Fighter Command to the First Air Force. The Group immediately began to draw additional personnel from the regular channels--AAF Training Schools, replacement centers, officer candidate schools, and other established fighter organizations. Training of both flying and ground personnel commenced at once. Pilots began an intensified schedule of formation flying, aerobatics, celestial and intercept missions, instrument flying and navigation, as well as gunnery practice and "scrambles". Ground officers were sent to various specialist schools in intelligence, camouflage, chemical warfare, etc. The enlisted men attended lectures, drills, watched innumerable training films, received specialized departmental training, as well as practical "on-the-job"

training.

Activities of the 319th Squadron during this period may be cited as typical of the entire group. The 319th was activated on 3 August 1942. Initially it consisted of 178 men under the command of Captain Lawrence E. Oldham, the only officer in the entire cadre. Major Robert L. Baseler took command on 26 August and the Squadron had reached a strength of 29 officers and 312 enlisted men when it was transferred to Hillsgrove on 5 October. As a part of training, regular patrols were flown over the New England Coast under control of the Boston Defense Wing.

Having seen the new group through its teething period, Major Lydon was replaced as Group CO by Lt Col. (now Major General) Gordon H. Austin. Col. Austin, a fine pilot and able leader, took over 10 December 1942. The Group had reached its allotted quota of men under the T/O and Col. Austin quickly brought it up to combat readiness.

The alert for overseas movement was issued 2 January 1943 and all pilots were ordered to Langley Field, Virginia with their aircraft. A short, intensive period of training followed because the orders were to take their planes aboard the aircraft carrier USS Ranger and fly them off when they reached their destination. There were 72 pilots in the flight section at the time. With the cooperation of the Navy, a landing strip at Langley was marked off with a series of lines which indicated

the maximum permissible takeoff run of a P-40 from a carrier and took into account: 1) carrier speed of 25 knots, 2) varying velocities of the wind over the deck, 3) loss of drag of the plane as it left the deck, and 4) drop off speed increase for a deck being 50 feet above the water. Each pilot had to make two simulated carrier take-offs and be airborne by the line prescribed for wind and other conditions that day. Take-offs were made with just internal fuel, belly tanks were empty and the flaps were set at 15 degrees. Major Baseler, commenting on his trials, stated he managed to get off clearly on both of his tries and that no problems were encountered.

Seventy-two P-40Fs of the Group were placed aboard the USS Ranger after all pilots had completed take-off training. The pilots boarded the carrier at Norfolk, Virginia on 7 January, sailed across the Atlantic and flew their P-40s off the deck of the Ranger on 19 January, pointing their noses toward Cazes Airdrome near Casablanca, French Morocco. Major Baseler, leading the second section of 36 aircraft, got his P-40 off with 50 feet to spare after only two planes in the first section dropped below deck level. All 72 planes took off cleanly without difficulty. The Navy had very generously allowed them 425 feet of deck whereas their pilots normally used only 390 feet.

Air echelon of the 325th, consisting of crew chiefs and armorers, was sent to Florida via rail, arriving at Morrison Field where they were split into small groups and sent to Miami to take commercial flights to Africa. Some flew direct to Georgetown, Brazil, a 16-hour flight. Others took different routes via Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Belem as flight space was made available to them. All then were flown to Natal, Brazil and from there across the South Atlantic to Liberia, Accra, the British Gold Coast, finally winding up at Tafaraoui Air Base. Some of these men had a lay-over at Belem and were able to do a bit of sight-seeing while others managed to get in an unguided tour of Fisherman's Lake at the other end of the trip.

The balance of the ground echelon, under command of Capt. Oldham, had departed Hills Grove for Camp Kilmer, New Jersey 23 January 1943. Two weeks later, they were moved to a POE and went aboard the USS Lyon 8 February. Thirteen days later, after an uneventful crossing, they disembarked at Mers-el-Kabir, Algeria on 2 February. They proceeded to Oran and boarded a train for Ste. Barbe de Tlelat. Arriving at their final destination, they were marched to Bivouac Area Number 1 and remained there at "Mud Hill" a week, before joining the others at Tafaraoui.

Meanwhile, after landing at Cazes Airdrome, the pilots and planes had moved to Mediouna, a few miles distant, on 23 January. In mid-February, German forces under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel launched a major counter-

attack against U. S. forces in and around Kasserine Pass, Tunisia. Among the hard pressed units involved in this battle was the 33rd Fighter Group, and to keep it at full operational strength, the 325th flew 20 of its P-40s (under Col. Austin) to Youks les Bains for the 33rd and then 24 more P-40s (under Major Baseler) to the same place. Rommel's last offensive was halted, and within a week the 325th's planes, having seen their first combat, were returned to the Group. Shortly thereafter, the entire Group was reunited at Tafaraoui, where the newcomers became accustomed to African weather, the salesmanship of the Arab, and African insects and other pests.

Also at Tafaraoui, the pilots were indoctrinated in combat operations. They flew a number of practice missions and attended lectures by seasoned pilots. One of these was the famous Col. Phil Cochran of the 33rd Fighter Group. In his briefings, Col. Cochran stressed line abreast formations with adequate spacings so that all aircraft could turn in position into any attacking aircraft. He also told the pilots to always fly at 8000 feet above the ground, not sea level, as that took them out of the range of the small automatic weapons and if Me 109s bounced them they would have to pull up. At that altitude the 109s could not split-S as it took about 10,000 feet to recover on the part of the Me 109 pilots. So far as heavy flak was concerned the P-40 could not fly high enough to avoid it.

On 5 April the Group began to move to its first operational base in a combat area, at Montesquieu, Algeria. This did not include the 317th Squadron, however. Short seven of its 25 P-40s, the 317th was ordered to remain at Tafaraoui (by Brig. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Director of Operations, NAAF) until it could be brought up to full strength. In May 1943 this was accomplished and the Squadron rejoined the rest of the Group at Montesquieu. This base was about 3,000 feet above sea level and about 75 miles from the front lines. As someone aptly put it, about 15 to 20 minutes Messerschmitt time from the front, and air raids were, therefore, a threat.

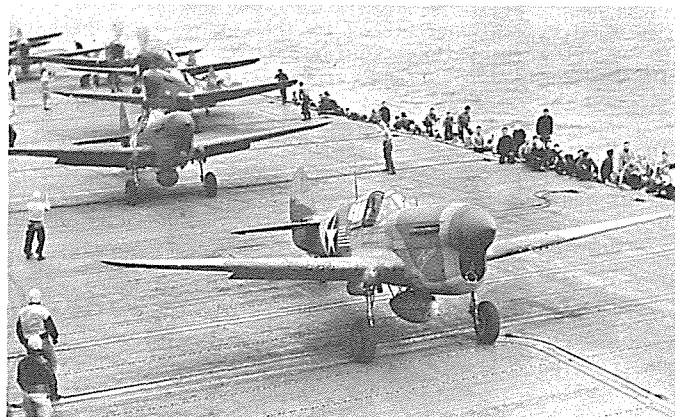
While at Montesquieu, the distinctive Checkertail markings were adopted. Several schemes were tried before the final one was approved. Originally 6-inch black and white squares were used to form the checkerboard tail. However, in the air it appeared as a solid red color at a distance and was therefore useless. Next, it was decided to try red and white, but results were the same. Finally, it was decided to try a larger square and the size was increased to 14 inches. This time yellow and black were tried and proved to be ideal as it was distinctive and stood out in the air from great distances. At this time Capt. John Watkins, a life-long personal friend of General Carl Spaatz, took the markings to him for approval and they were immediately approved for use. The checkerboard tail remained the trademark of the 325th throughout the war. They did not try 14-inch squares in any other color combinations.

Most of the personnel had been flown to the base in C-47s. The pilots made a few familiarization flights to learn the terrain and on 17 April flew their first combat mission which went into the combat intelligence reports as follows:

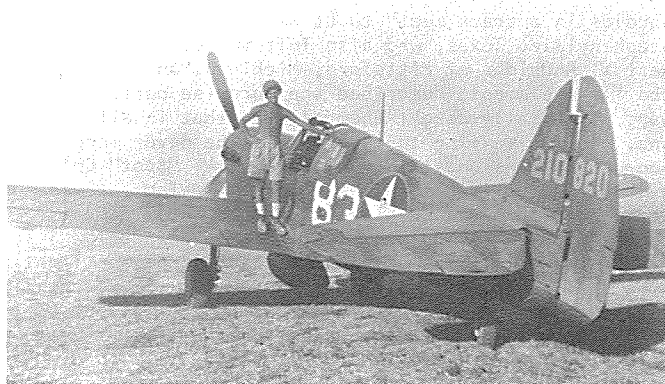
"22 P-40s of the 318th FS and 14 P-40s of the 319th FS took off at 1645 hrs. to escort B-25s of the 321st BG over Mateur. 2 Me 109s made a diving attack on the formation with no results, over the target area. Lt Bloomer fired on 1 Me-109 with no results. Bombs hit Mateur and near the A/D. 1 P-40 was shot down by E/A (F/O Cook). Cook was later picked up by the British. 35 P-40s down at 1900 hrs. All bombers returned safely."

On the surface this was hardly an auspicious start for the Group, however, it marked the start of a string of 59 missions of bomber escort duty during which not a single bomber, of over a thousand escorted, was shot down by enemy aircraft.

Following Mission Number 1, the 318th and 319th continued to fly escort missions and the next six missions were all escort jobs. On Mission Number 8 orders were



Curtiss P-40Fs of the 325th Fighter Group, many with a U. S. Flag painted on either side, were flown off the USS Ranger on 19 January 1943 to Casablanca. (U.S. Navy)



Lt James H. Jones' P-40L, "Available Jones", before it received its checkertail design. (Photo - S. Wilson)

a bit different, as a dive bombing attack was laid on. This mission was flown 29 April 1943. Twelve P-40s of the 318th, each carrying one 500-lb bomb, were escorted by 24 P-40s of the 319th. Target area was the docks at Cape el Melah and Cape ed Drek. Bomb hits were scored on vessels at both and the areas were left in flames as a result of the bombings.

The enemy was reluctant to engage as the war in North Africa was nearing an end. More escort missions were flown, and on one F/O Leninger managed to get in a couple of quick bursts at an FW 190 which managed to escape with only minor damage. Col. Austin and his flight strafed a lighthouse, then hit and sank five small vessels with machine gun fire. Targets were difficult to find and as a matter of record the mission reports mentioned that on the first 13 missions, never more than five enemy aircraft had been spotted on a single mission and that only 17 had been encountered on the 13 missions, most enemy aircraft having elected to turn tail rather than fight.

The Group finally drew its first blood on Mission Number 14, 6 May 1943, a sea sweep between Cap Bon and Cap Serrat. Twelve P-40s of the 318th carrying 500 pounders were escorted by 12 P-40s of the 319th. Bomb hits were scored on several medium-sized vessels which were left burning in the water.

Lt Harmon Burns, Lt "Spot" Collins and Flight Officers Catlin and Parent became separated from the Group during the attack and after dropping their bombs, headed for home. (Most of the Flight Officers in the Group had originally been sergeant pilots but were made Flight Officers so they would receive better treatment should they be taken prisoner, hence the great number of F/O's mentioned in early reports.) On the way back they spotted about 20 Ju 52s parked in a neat little row on a landing strip. All four pilots went down and strafed these aircraft leaving several in flames. Lt Collins, who had been an All-Conference guard at Texas Wesleyan College, became separated from his flight and alone set course for home. Then he spotted a 109 making a landing approach with its wheels down. He quietly slipped into the pattern, got behind the 109 and shot it down with a well-placed burst. It hit the ground and burst into flames. Lt Harmon Burns, finding himself in a similar position, was lucky enough to spot a Ju 52 flying at about 1,000 feet. He quickly dove to the attack and shot it down in flames. It fell into the sea near the Cap. F/O Parent and F/O Catlin had also encountered Ju 52s which they damaged rather severely but did not shoot down, fuel shortage forcing them to break-off their attack and head for base before they could finish off the Junkers.

More strafing, dive bombing and escort missions were laid on during the next few days. F/O Hesler exploded an Me 323 and set a Ju 90 on fire during one of the strafing missions. On this same mission, 7 May 1943,



"Available Jones" with 325th's checkertail design. The name was on lower cowl in white script. (S. Wilson)

Lt Walton's P-40 was hit by flak, crashed into the sea, and the pilot was lost.

Targets were becoming even more difficult to find. In fact, one eager pilot strafed and sank a sail boat. Troops, road, trucks and bridges received their share of attention during these missions. F/O Poole was the next pilot to be hit by flak. He was wounded but managed to land in Allied territory and was able to eventually return to duty. At the end of the Group's first 20 missions the scoreboard read: Victories 2, Losses 3, Sorties 470.

On 13 May 1943 General Von Arnim surrendered the last Nazi Forces in North Africa to bring that phase of the war to an end. The Group had flown 23 missions including the one flown on that day. The day before Lt Bloomer had bellied in a P-40 at Kairouan but managed to escape injury.

The war now turned toward Italy with the campaign against Pantelleria and Sardinia being stepped up. On 14 May the Group mounted a combination escort and dive bombing mission against Sardinia with all 40 fighters carrying a 500-lb bomb. Lt Collins made a direct hit on a hotel and Lt Ritter scored a bullseye on a power house. Thirty-two bombs were dropped on or near the South Catterina power station. Col. Austin's flight strafed a destroyer and a motor vessel, leaving the M/V dead in the water.

Two missions later the 317th joined the group in action and the tempo was stepped up at once. Enemy aircraft now began to appear and they were more inclined to engage than they had been on previous missions. An escort mission to Decimomannu was on the flight room board for 19 May. This air depot was a vital one and the Germans elected to defend it. Eleven Me 109s were waiting when the Group appeared in the vicinity and they were willing to scrap, even though outnumbered. Five of them were blasted out of the sky, but not before they managed to shoot down two P-40s. The victories went to Major Baseler, now Operations and Executive Officer for the Group, Lt Bloomer, Lt Green, Lt Ritter and F/O Smallsreed. F/O E. W. Smith closed out the day's scoring by picking off a lone 109 on the return trip, 15 miles east of Cap Frasca. Lt C. D. Housel was shot down but was seen to bail out. However, Lt D. R. Brown, who also was hit, went down with his plane and was lost.

The next day Decimomannu was revisited as the 325th escorted B-26s of the 320th and 17th Bomb Groups to the A/D. The bombing results were good, the landing strip was hit and six or seven enemy aircraft were destroyed on the west side of the field. The fighters strafed the radio and radar buildings and left them smoking. Enemy fighters numbering about 16 put in an appearance at this stage and the 325th turned to the attack. Five 109s were shot down, one was listed as a probable, and a lone Macchi was sent down, too. Lt Burns scored his second victory. Lt T. B. Johnson's P-40 was hit and he made a

forced landing in the water about 2 miles NE of Toro Island. Other victories were credited to Capt. Howe, Lts Lott, Crossley and McDaniel. Lt Collins joined Lt Burns as he also downed his second kill, picking off the lone Macchi. Meanwhile, Col. Austin's section spotted seven Me 323s headed in the direction of Villacidro and they boxed them in and shot them all down. Victories were credited to Col. Austin, F/Os Campbell, McKeithen and Smallsreed, (the last named getting his second in two days) Lts Tuchson, Grove and Hamilton.

Decimomannu continued to rank highly as it was visited again the next day and four more Me 109s were shot down. Lts Grove and Hamilton, who had each scored their first victories the day before, were able to make it number two, but in turn, both were shot down. Hamilton bailed out over the sea, but Grove went in with the plane and was believed to have been killed. A search was flown the next day for Lt Hamilton, without any luck, and he was listed as MIA. At about this time the Group began carrying 20-lb fragmentation bombs. At the end of 40 missions the scoreboard read: Victories to date 26, Losses to date 7, Sorties flown 913.

Capt. Robert W. Myers succeeded in taking off with a 1,000-lb bomb at this time and carrying such bombs soon became routine. However, the 325th was the only P-40 group in the theater to carry them. All squadrons hit Decimomannu on 27 May and destroyed six more enemy aircraft that tried to intercept the bombers they were escorting. Majors Baseler and Howe each bagged an Me 202 while Lt Collins and F/Os Smallsreed, Boone and Catlin each got an Me 109. Lt Hemphill was hit and made a crash landing in the sea. F/O Catlin spotted him and dropped a life raft. Lt Hemphill managed to get in it while F/O Catlin radioed Air-Sea Rescue. Shortly thereafter a sea-plane arrived, landed and took Lt Hamphill aboard. On attempting to take off, however, it crashed and sank with all aboard.

The next day Capt. Green, Lt Lancaster and F/O Palmer scored single victories over Me 109s, but F/O Smallsreed was lost on this mission as he failed to return, reason unknown, and was listed as MIA.

On 1 June 1943 at 06:05 hours, 12 P-40s from each squadron took off to strafe Stagnone Seaplane Base, Marsala, Sicily. Eight P-40s returned early, but the rest hit the base as scheduled. Attacking on the deck, flight after flight of Warhawks came in over the seawall that protected Stagnone against the open sea. These seaplanes were being used to ferry supplies in from the mainland and their loss would be a severe blow. The enemy was caught completely unawares. Major Baseler, who got two of the seaplanes, was quoted in a news release as saying, "We just snuck in on them before anyone was up moving around and got out before they knew what hit them." As they strafed the flying boats, it was like "running the

hurdles in a track meet" to Lt Rayburn D. Lancaster of Stephenville, Texas, who also left two burning. Lt Herbert W. Andridge of Pittsford, Michigan, another one in the first element, described the surprise party in this way: "We really caught them asleep--that is all except one, who was taxiing to take off but he never made it because Collins and I let him have it." "Spot" Collins added, "And besides that one that was moving, there were three more and we hit everyone of them." Capt. "Herky" Green, flying top cover, said, "Down below I saw fire after fire spring up, just as if someone was lighting up a string of bonfires. There were also some large fires caused by the boats the boys hit on the way out."

After passing over the anchorage they took time to strafe four boats in the harbor, leaving them burning and sinking. Other pilots taking part in the mission were F/Os Slattery, Boone, Moon and Lts Steffler, Rusher and James H. Jones. F/O Leninger summed up the mission perfectly when he remarked: "We sounded reveille for that place today, but it also was taps for a lot of them." Lt Johnson's P-40 was hit by flak and exploded for the only loss suffered by the Group on the mission.

On 6 June, during a dive bombing attack on Pantelleria, the 23 participating P-40s were bounced by 25 Messerschmitts. F/O Charles R. Engle of Lowell, Ohio, a member of the top cover squadron, spotted the enemy and in his own words, "I had a bird's eye view of the whole business. Down below our boys had just finished dropping their bombs and were starting out to sea when from the northwest I saw 25 Me's coming. They didn't seem to see our high cover and I started down after the P-40s on the deck. My flight turned and dove after them. I lined one up, gave him a little lead, and he flew right through my burst. His plane seemed to stand still, shudder, roll over and then plunge down into the sea."

Capt. Joseph A. Bloomer called the engagement duck soup as he bagged his second Me 109. The other victories went to Lt A. T. McDaniel, F/O Lewis E. Brown, F/O David D. Campbell and F/O Otis E. Prevatt. This was the 50th mission flown by the Group. Tactical missions against Pantelleria continued and the scoreboard after the 60th mission read: Victories to date 41, Losses to date 10, Sorties flown 1,341.

Two missions were flown on 10 June against the island, and on the first, Lt Rusher, Lt Andridge and Lt Ritter each sent a 109 down. F/O Dunlap failed to return from this mission, reason unknown, as he had last been seen over the island in good shape. The second mission of the day produced two more victories as Capt. Taylor bagged both of the 109s that were encountered. Another 109 was shot down by flak and Lt R. D. Clark was shot down by an enemy aircraft but subsequently turned up in a hospital at Sousse. The next day the last mission over Pantelleria was flown just before it surrendered. During this period, pilots had been bothered by both the intense heat and a siege of diarrhea, but had still continued to fly whenever possible. The stage was now set to hit Sicily a knockout blow.

On 19 June the Group moved to Mateur Airfield, a dusty fighter strip in the vineyards near Bizerte, Tunisia. The ground was the same rock hard, cracked earth they had to contend with at El Khenis, but the flies were not quite as bad, at first anyway. The grasshoppers in their thousands made a meal of everything from rifle slings to mosquito netting. Small trenches had to be dug around the wheels of parked aircraft and filled with oil to keep other crawling insects out of the airplanes as much as possible.

Just prior to the move, 15 June, Lts Burns and D. R. Clark had downed a 109 apiece and F/O Beck had been shot up and forced to bail out on the same mission. Lt Penney added a 109 on 18 June, and on this same mission Lt Rogers got a Fi 156 and damaged another. Lt Rogers took a lot of kidding from fellow pilots about not picking on someone his own size. The first mission flown from Mateur, 24 June, was a counter Air Force diversionary sweep over Southern Sardinia, which was receiving an equal share of



Pilots of the 325th (Major Baseler tallest in center of back row) pause before P-40F after returning from seaplane shoot at Stagnone, Marsala, Sicily in which the Group destroyed 12 and damaged six. (Robert Baseler)

the Group's time with Sicily. Capt. Hearn spotted a 109 on the deck about 35 miles southeast of C. Spartivento and shot it down. Then the Group ran into 15 enemy aircraft about six miles north of San Pietro and a battle ensued that continued across the island and 60 miles out to sea. Lts Lancaster and Hogg and F/Os Slattery and Boone each racked up a 109. Lt Blifford was shot up badly and had to make a belly landing in the target area. Lt Rappman was hit by flak and crashed into the sea just off shore. Lts Bollich and Cutter failed to return and were listed as MIA.

The favorite target, Decimomannu, was scheduled again on 28 June and Lt Mierzijewski failed to return from this mission. However, four German pilots never returned to their base either, as they went down before the guns of Col. Austin, Capt. Green and F/Os Huntington and McKeithen. All flew Me 109s. On 3 July, during a strafing mission at Pula, Sardinia, Lt Bryant was lost when his tail assembly was shorn off by another P-40, and he crashed.

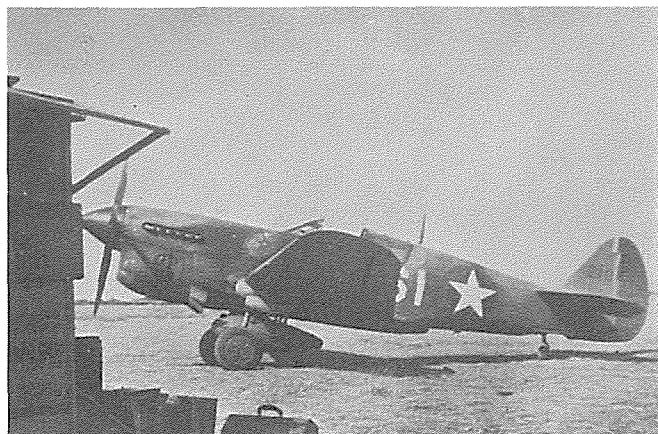
At the end of 80 missions the score stood: Victories to date 59, Losses to date 19, Sorties flown 1,947.

On 7 July the 317th took off to escort 25 Baltimores of 323 Squadron, RAF to the Milo/Trapani A/D, Sicily. The 23 P-40s ran into 13 enemy aircraft over the target and shot down six. Lts Brundyge, Walker and F/Os Huntington, Brookbank and Cunningham were credited with 109s and Lt Penney got a Macchi 202. Lt Casselberry was sent down in flames by a 109. Two days later Lt Miller failed to return when his engine quit and he had to bail out over the sea. He was later picked up by an invasion barge and returned to base uninjured. The invasion barges supporting the invasion of Sicily, which began 10 July 1943, were doing a good business as they picked up Lt Ruschell who bailed out on the next mission. Lt Rogers also was shot down on this mission but was not so fortunate, as he crashed in the target area. Lts Bloomer and Clark and F/O Prevatt each bagged a 109 on the mission to avenge the two pilots who were shot down. A second mission flown on the same day, 10 July, produced identical scores as Capt. Taylor and Lts Collins and Walker added 109s to their list of kills; Capt. Reed and then Lt Clark were shot down. Both men later returned to the Group. Reed was uninjured, but Clark was hurt and wound up in a hospital.

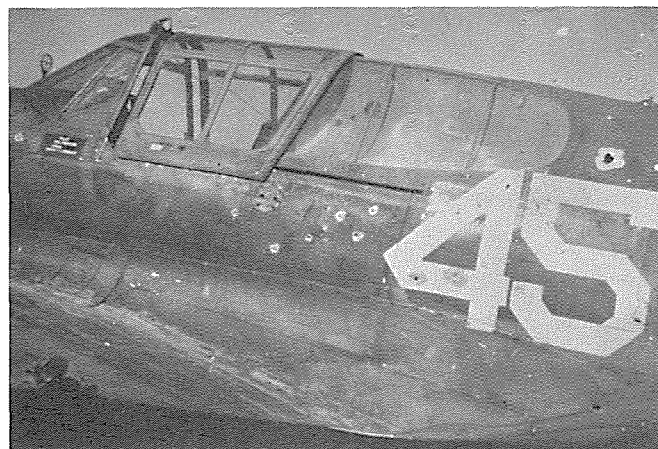
F/O Boone got a 109 on 12 July and Lt Dove and F/O Hesler got one apiece the next day. F/O Cowley bailed out on 14 July when his engine quit and he wound up in a hospital on Malta. More tactical missions followed with no encounters with enemy aircraft until Decimomannu came up on the mission board again for 20 July. The Group strafed five Me 109s and three Ju 52s on the A/D, picked off 10 trucks and shot up a group of about 300 soldiers they had surprised in the open. Twelve enemy aircraft then appeared and attacked the 48 P-40s. Capt. Tylor got the first triple victory scored on a single mission in the Group when he shot down two Macchi 202s and a 109. Capt. Warden and F/O Jones added 109s and Lt Novotny and Lt Brundyge sent down Macchi 202s. F/O Dickas failed to return.

The pasting that the enemy was now taking continued to mount as the Group shot down 17 on the following day against a loss of only two. F/O Boone and Lt Miller were shot down by enemy aircraft. Major Baseler got two Ma 202s, Major Howe got a 109 and a 202, Lt Gerkin got two Macchis, as did F/O McKeithen. F/O Moon and F/O Smith also scored a double, each clobbering a 202 and, oddly enough, each bagged an Fi 156. Other scoring was done by Lt Copsey, one 202, F/O Gonda, one 202, F/O Prevatt, one 202. F/O Slattery managed to find a Ju 52 and blast it out of the sky, to bring the day's slaughter to an end.

Two days later, 23 July, F/O Rauth was shot down by small arms fire and crashed into the sea. The Group's 100th mission came on 26 July and it produced five more notches, as four Ma 202s were shot out of the sky by Major Baseler, Capt. Watkins, Lt Whiteside and F/O



A Curtiss P-40L of the 318th Fighter Squadron waiting to take off for another mission. (Stan Wilson)



This P-40 of the 318th has been neatly peppered by enemy fire while on a mission over the Mediterranean. (Wilson)

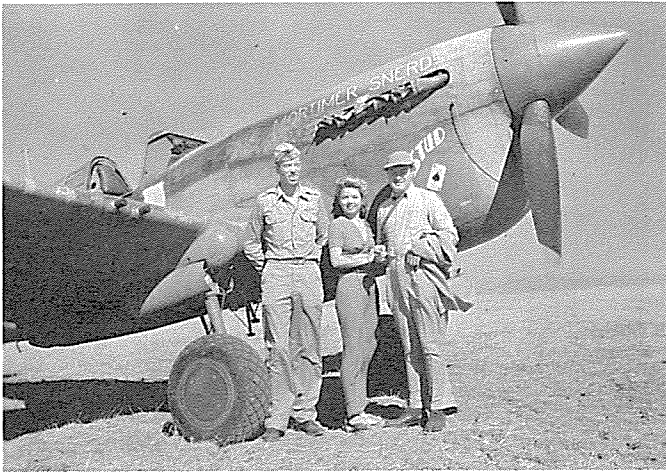
Maret. F/O Brown got an Me 109 for the fifth of the day credited to the Clan. At the end of 100 missions the score stood at: Victories 103, Losses 28, Sorties 2,747. The Group was thus averaging a victory a mission. They had also racked up 6,649:45 combat hours to date.

Mission Number 101, while producing two more victories, was a bit on the tragic side as Capt. Howe, the C/O of the 319th, was shot down after being hit by flak. He bailed out and was seen on the ground waving to signal he was O.K. F/O Slattery and Lt Hogg each bagged a Macchi 202. Mission Number 102 was described as uneventful. However, the next mission flown on 30 July was most eventful. Thirty-six P-40s ran into approximately 30 Me 109s over southern Sardinia and when the battle ended, 21 Messerschmitts had fought their last battle. Lt Sederburg failed to return. He ended up as a POW.

Lt Walker bagged three 109s, Capt. Warden, Lt Eyerly and F/O Huntington each bagged a pair. Captains Reed and Hearn, Lts Carroll, Mock, Staley, Sederburg, Dunkin, Hamilton and Novotny, and F/Os Tudor, Dean and Donovan all accounted for a single 109 in the scrap.

On 2 August F/O McKeithen was lost when his P-40 was involved in a mid-air collision with a seaplane marked with Red Crosses, when he got a bit too close investigating the intruder. Later on that day, 13 P-40s took off to search for a pilot reported seen in a dinghy, but the search was unsuccessful.

August 5th brought the most unusual victory scored by the Clan during the war. While returning from an escort mission over Sardinia, a trio of 319th pilots spotted a Nazi submarine surfaced on the Mediterranean. The sub was first spotted by Lt William R. Elliot and he



Posing before Major Baseler's "Stud" (also "Mortimer Snerd", a P-40F, 41-20006) are the Major, Frances Langford and the "one and only" Bob Hope. (R. Baseler)

dove on it, strafed the conning tower and caused an explosion. The other two P-40s flown by Lts Hartley and Ritter, following his lead, also strafed the sub. The stern of the submarine was seen to lift in the air and the craft disappeared under the water leaving a large oil slick. The trio was later given credit for sinking the sub rather than merely damaging it. Capt. Bloomer and F/O Maret shown down Me 109s on 7 August.

The Checkerboard Clan received a welcome respite from combat when Bob Hope and his troupe appeared on 10 August and put on a show for the 325th personnel. Bob's group included singer Frances Langford, Hildegard, Jack Pepper and Tony Romano. A lucky delegation from the Clan met the actors at El Alouina Airport in Tunis and flew them back to Mateur in the Group's B-25, Passion Flower II.

After lunch in the Group Headquarters' mess hall, the Hope company presented a performance on a temporary stage behind the big Nissen hut Chapel. The visit of these entertainers was one of the biggest morale builders the Group had had since leaving the States. After the show Frances Langford presented Purple Hearts to Lt Ronald C. Dove, F/O James I. Poole and F/O Cecil Dean. Miss Langford was decked out in orchid slacks, orchid sweater and a green snood. She topped off the award with a kiss to each of the recipients. Capt. Walter B. Walker got his medal, but no kiss and was heard mumbling to himself something about a Nazi plot. Walker, incidentally, had already won the D.F.C. and Air Medal with 12 OLC's and had 50 combat missions to his credit.

Sicily fell on 17 August, ending that phase of the war. Command of the Group had changed hands on 5 July as Col. Austin was transferred to become CO of the 319th Bomb Group and was replaced by Major Robert L. Baseler, his operations officer. By the end of the Sicilian Campaign the Clan had in four months of combat, established an outstanding record for so young a unit. Operating first under the 2nd Air Defense Wing of the 12th Air Force and then under the Northwest Africa Strategic Air Force it had flown 110 missions, 3,233 sorties, shot down 128 enemy planes against a loss of 26 P-40s. This was a ratio of 5:1 and they were averaging slightly over an enemy aircraft a mission. They had also escorted 1100 bombers without losing a single one to enemy aircraft.

The final month of its operation of the P-40 aircraft found the 325th still engaged in softening up operations against Sardinia that earned them the nickname of "The Sardinian Air Force." The 325th was the only single engine fighter group in the Northwest African Strategic Air Force and the only target still within range of their aircraft after the fall of Sicily, was Sardinia. Sar-

dinia was a thorn in the Allied side and the 325th was given the task of removing it.

Both the Germans and Italians had fighter fields all over the island and its many aerodromes were staging bases for Ju 88s and various other Italian and German bombers that were used for occasional hit and run raids on North African seaports at night. Additionally, all of these aircraft, fighters included, were a constant threat to the Allied beachhead at Salerno, invaded 9 September 1943, and to Allied shipping on the west coast of southern Italy and the northern coast of Sicily. Sardinian zinc mines, electrolytic zinc plants and other installations were vital to the enemy economy. General Doolittle told the 325th, in effect, to go to it, Sardinia was all theirs and no other group would be operating in that area. Doolittle's orders were to fly a mission a day, or every other day, pick your own targets, shoot down their aircraft, harass and destroy their establishments and disrupt their communications.

As Major John C. A. Watkins put it "Ours was strictly a gentlemen's war. We set our own time and place to fight. We ranged up and down the island, staging dog-fights in the best Hollywood fashion, when we--by dropping fragmentation bombs on their aerodromes--made their fighters made enough to come up and jump us. We dive bombed power switching stations, bridges and factories, strafed air raid warning stations along the coast and sank enemy ships whenever one of them attempted a rare dash down the coast in daylight." Operations continued against Sardinia without letup but now very little opposition was being encountered.

On 26 August Lt Eyerly was killed when his airplane hit some unusually high, high tension wires and burst into flames. Capt. Reed also hit some of these wires but was more fortunate as he made it back to base and crash-landed, escaping injury but writing off the P-40.

Two days later the Group, while dive bombing a factory, was bounced by 26 Me 109s forcing those who had bombs remaining to jettison them. Seven of the attackers were shot down, three more were listed as probables and two were damaged. Lt "Spot" Collins scored his fifth victory, Capt. Watkins shot down a pair and Lts Brundyge, Hamilton and Owen, along with F/O Palmer, got single kills. Lt Owen and F/O Plumer made belly landings due to combat damage but both escaped injury. On 3 September Major Myers, the 319th CO completed his 150th hour of combat flying--high at that time for the Group. After Mission Number 120, the Big Scoreboard read as follows: Victories 135, Losses 32, Sorties 3,728.

There were several other incidents between the 120th mission and the final one that bear telling. On 7 September 1943 the Group flew a fighter sweep and on the return Captain Harold H. Crossley and his flight sighted a big seagoing tug towing four barges on a course parallel to the shore. "Red" was on his last mission before going home but didn't want to miss getting a few licks in at something so he led his flight in a line astern attack on this juicy target. Down the length of the string of barges and up to the tug they roared with all guns clattering.

"All of a sudden, I heard a noise, like things banging on a tin roof," he recalled afterward, "and I smelled gunpowder. Then I realized in a flash what it was. Those barges had targets on 'em and the tug was towing them along to give the enemy coastal batteries practice. Boy, were we in a spot! They were shooting everything from 20mm to big guns, and we had to go and fly right into their sights. I thought to myself, 'All right, you sap, this is your last mission.'" However, apparently the enemy gunners were as surprised as the four pilots were, and after sinking the barges the pilots managed to escape and get back to base. When the maintenance squad got hold of Red's P-40, they took one look and put it on the salvage pile as junk. Explosive cannon shells had torn great chunks out of the duralumin skin, machine gun bullets had riddled the wings and the cockpit was full of holes. It seemed a miracle that the pilot had

not been touched.

On 11 September F/O Parent made a belly-landing at El Koran due to engine trouble and managed to escape injury. On the 22nd, five P-40s from each squadron escorted a C-47 with one Italian minister, two Englishmen and two or three American officers as passengers to Decimomannu A/D which was now in Allied hands. Italian A/A batteries opened fire on the P-40s and Lt Frank Collins' P-40 was hit by flak, but he was not injured. After landing, an Italian colonel and representatives, apologetic, explaining that the gun crews had mistaken them for Me 109s that had been strafing the field daily since it surrendered. The last P-40 mission was flown later on that day and it too was an escort mission, covering a C-47 bound for Decimomannu. Thereafter, the Group was withdrawn from combat and scheduled to reequip with Republic P-47D Thunderbolts.

Before Sardinia had fallen, the 325th had attempted to get the island to surrender to the Group. An elaborate message calling on the senior Italian Commander to surrender to the "Checkerboard Warhawk Group" (as the Clan was called on enemy radio) was prepared and dropped on an air field in a bag with a long yellow streamer attached. The ultimatum told them if they were ready to surrender to place big white crosses on all of their airfields on the southern end of the island, as the Italian admiral had done on the landing strip at Pantelleria, and that the commanding general of the Mediterranean would be promptly notified that they were ready to quit. These white crosses were never placed but very shortly thereafter the Germans rendered all these fields temporarily unusable by demolitions and withdrew all their fighters to the northern part of the island. The formal surrender came within two weeks.

Before summing up the P-40 phase of the 325th history, a few personal comments from various Clan members which, due to uncertainties of dates involved, would have been difficult to fit into the chronological order of the foregoing part, but which relate interesting events that are a part of the story, will be added at this point.

On a fighter sweep over Sardinia, Captain Walter B. Walker of Stamford, Connecticut, who had been a non-flying employee of American Airlines in New York City before entering the Army in December of 1941, ran into a dogfight and got several machine gun bullets in a propeller blade, and thus unbalanced, he lost speed and had to drop out of the dogfight. Walker, trying to make his crippled Warhawk as inconspicuous as possible to the swarm of Messerschmitts in the area, dove for the ground and leveled off a few feet above the green and brown landscape to take full advantage of his camouflaged P-40 and limit attacks from below.

"I kept looking over my shoulder apprehensively," he

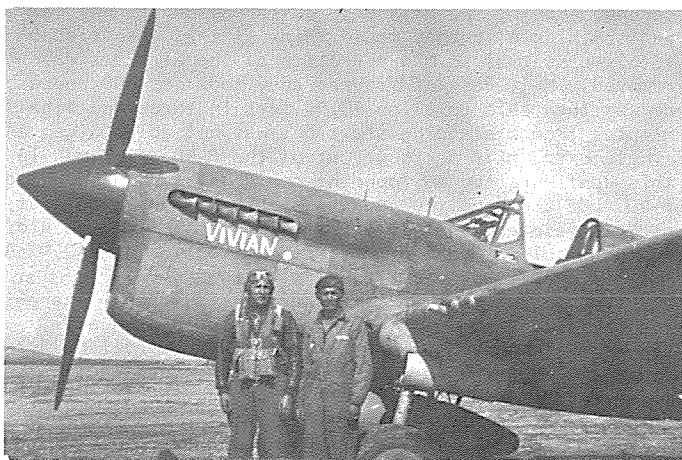
said, "because I was a shining mark. The Jerries like nothing better than to gang up on a cripple. Suddenly I saw seven of them coming at me. I began screaming into my radio and asking somebody, for God's sake, to come back and give me a hand.

"Their cannon were blinking like signal lights. I really thought my number was up," Walker said, "I kept thinking in the best movie style, 'This is it,' and the only thing that saved me that day was the tremendous odds against me. The seven Joes behind me knew they would get me sooner or later through sheer weight of numbers, so none of them were taking any chances. The minute I would turn and look as though I might engage, they would break off. All the time they kept squirting me with their guns. I couldn't have kept it up much longer as that mouse and puss game was wearing me down."

Walker's call for help had been heard and two P-40s found him just as the unequal battle had reached a crisis and dove to his aid. Five of the 109s broke off to engage the newcomers, leaving Walker with two enemy planes still to contend with. Walker did not choose to run a race with two Me 109s at 50 feet above the Mediterranean. "My radio suddenly went dead and I knew a cannon shell had hit it. It's a damned good thing it wasn't hit until after I shouted for help." Walker, his left arm and hand damaged by fragments from a 20mm shell which had torn a hole in the canopy above his head, found one of the 109s on his tail.

"I turned the old P-40 to the left and the Jerry behind me kept turning with me, trying to get his nose inside mine so he could squirt me. The turns got tighter and tighter until he overshot." Suddenly Walker found himself approaching the other 109 head-on. "There was this Joe firing his three cannon at me and there I was squirting him with my face behind the bullet-proof glass and my shoulders carefully hunched together so as little of me as possible lapped over the glass. Why doesn't he hit me, I kept thinking. Doubtless, the German was thinking the same thing." Walker didn't get him on that pass, but a few moments later, he damaged the 109 so badly that the pilot had to bail out. The pilot had waited too long and his chute failed to open in time. He splashed into the water from about 2,000 feet, not far from where his plane had hit. One of the other pilots who came to Walker's aid had to bail out, but he was rescued by the Germans and made a prisoner of war.

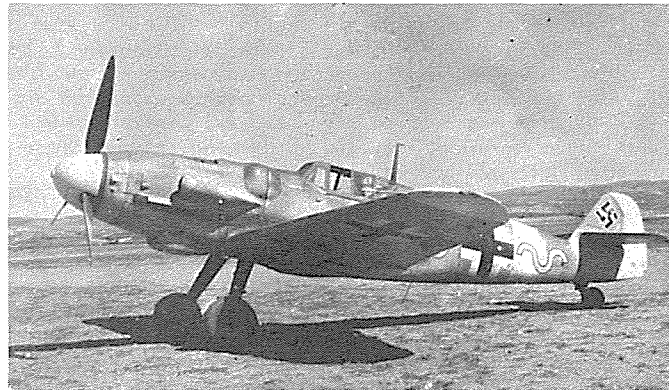
There was a feeling among single-engine pilots that to a P-38 pilot anything with a single engine was hostile and the Checkertails had experienced this a number of times when their P-40s took on all of the outlines of a Me 109 to some inexperienced Lightning pilot. The last straw came on a mission when the top cover that was to have been provided by the 14th Fighter Group, failed to materialize when needed most. Major Robert Baseler



Two checkertailed Curtiss P-40s which would appear to belong to the red-nosed 319th Fighter Squadron. (L. Lorbiecki)



"Otto", an Me 109F, former Gruppen-Kommandeur's plane, prior to its first and last flight with the 325th.



"Hoimann", an Me 109G, number 16, on the day it became a part of the 325th Fighter Group. (Photos - Baseler)

felt that these lads had spotted a Jerry and then the whole Group had gone tearing off after him. Fortunately, no one was lost, but the Clan's P-40s had a few more bullet holes than would have been their normal quota had they been given the proper cover. Getting back to base, Major Baseler had the ground crew roll out "Hoimann", the liberated Me 109G that had been obtained when North Africa fell. "Hoimann" was painted a matte black all over with red spinner, rudder and ailerons with standard American markings. Taking off he made a bee line for the P-38 field, three miles distant, where he understood the 14th Fighter Group was stationed at the bottom of the hill. Down over the hill he roared and went barreling across the field with its P-38s at 100 feet, pulled up and roared back in another pass. As it so happened, he had selected their dinner hour and the entire personnel was in a long G.I. chow line. When the plane pulled up to roar back and the G.I.'s recognized it as a Messerschmitt, the sky filled with flying Spam, mess kits, eating utensils, etc., as men scattered in all directions heading for the nearest cover. Major Baseler, recalling the scene, said it was "like a bunch of chickens after they had seen the shadow of a chicken hawk on the ground." Major Baseler calmly flew back to base and landed.

The ground crews put "Hoimann" away and Bob went to his quarters. A little later, Capt. Larry Oldham told Major Baseler that there was a colonel outside who wanted to see him. Naturally, Major Baseler couldn't imagine why anyone wanted to see him at that hour. He went outside and there stood an angry "Bird Colonel" who just happened to be an old friend from the days they were with the 94th Pursuit Squadron, Colonel Ralph S. Garmin, Commander of the 1st Fighter Group. Col. Garmin came to the point quickly when asked what had brought him over.

"Some S. O. B. just buzzed my chow line in a Messerschmitt" he explained. "It ruined our dinner hour and my men still won't come out. Do you know anything about it?"

"Sure, I know all about it" replied Baseler, who'd mistaken the 1st Fighter Group field for the 14th's.

"Why you ~~*****~~" was all Garmin could say, but he managed to cast some doubt about the status of Major Baseler's birth in the sentence.

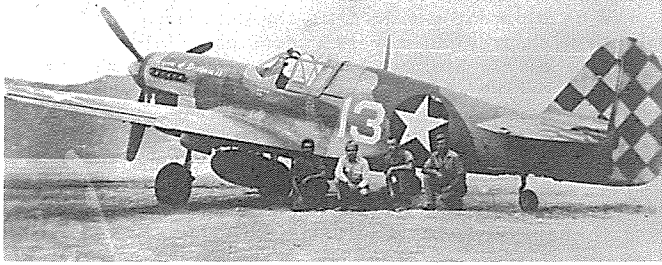
After Bob explained that they were a bit tired of getting bounced by P-38s and missing top cover, Col. Garmin agreed that he had a point and that he'd get together with the other two Groups that were flying P-38s and stress aircraft identification a bit. Apparently the scare sharpened the memories of the P-38 lads, as all went well after that time.

Commenting on the Me 109, Maj. Baseler stated that it was a fine airplane except that visibility was extremely poor in the ones he flew. The Me 109G they had named "Hoimann" in honor of Hermann Goering had been found in a wheat field two days after the surrender. As there was a British airbase nearby, Maj. Baseler checked with them,

since he felt they might have a prior claim to it, but they told him that they had taken what they wanted, namely, the radio and battery, and the Clan had a 109 to test fly. It had been landed by the mortally wounded pilot, relatively intact. A single 20mm shell had gone through the upper longeron on the left side of the fuselage and exploded in the cockpit. Another had penetrated the left side of the fuselage and exploded against the laminated aluminum armor-plating behind the pilot, while a third one had pierced the fabric on the rudder. One tire had gone flat, apparently due to a hard landing. This was the extent of the damage. A new battery was put in along with a new radio and the damage was patched up. Later on the Group obtained a 109F, "Otto", in which Maj. Baseler experienced a narrow squeak while giving the plane its first flight. A number 6 rod on the right bank of cylinders broke and went through the crankcase and sheered off an oil line and the coolant line as well. It then caught fire and he had to belly it in but escaped injury, although "Otto" was written off so far as further flying was concerned.

"Hoimann" served an important purpose as a confidence-builder. By flying with it, young pilots would be shown how easy it was to get on the tail of a 109 in a turn, if the turn was tightened up. The 109 would spin out in a tight turn. It would just go over the top of a turn on the outside. The confidence this built was an important item. Strict flying discipline regarding sticking together also played a key part in holding 325th losses to a minimum.

Another incident involved the German photo recon pilots who used to fly over the base from time to time. They were dubbed "Photo Freddies", and Maj. Baseler in an effort to get up high enough to greet them, had his P-40 stripped to the minimum so far as weight was concerned. Radio, two of the 50 calibre machine guns, ammo and anything else they could think of that wasn't absolutely essential to the operation of the aircraft was removed. Maj. Baseler figured they took out 800 pounds. He was then able to climb 10,00 feet in three and a half minutes from a standing start but was not able to get a single extra mile per hour out of the P-40, although in this configuration he found he could out-turn a standard P-40. He did keep four guns and carried more ammo, but, as Maj. Baseler so aptly put it, "No matter what we did, we just couldn't make a Messerschmitt out of a P-40." A lot of trouble was experienced with the machine guns so far as charging them in flight went. The manual charging operation was done by means of a cable with a T-handle attached and it was like unwinding a reel of wire. Hydraulic charging was not much better, as hydraulic leaks developed and, in either case, you found yourself facing an enemy with guns that did not work. So, it became a policy to load the guns "hot" and make sure the pilot kept off the switch on the ground. This policy was also used later on, on both the P-47s and P-51s.



"Duchess of Durham IV" was mount of Capt. Ralph G. Taylor and bears six victory swastikas. (Jack Evans)

Aircraft in the 325th were regarded as the property of the crew chief rather than as the pilot's airplane. While the pilot usually had first choice in naming his airplane, if he elected not to do so the crew chief usually did it. For the most part, pilots and crews kept the same aircraft numbers throughout the war. Crew chiefs seldom changed numbers. Speaking of naming an airplane, Major Baseler had named his old 88, "Stud", and used an ace of spades as an insignia. Clem Eckert was Bob's crew chief, and Bob always felt he sounded like Mortimer Snerd when he laughed and kidded him about it. One day Clem told Baseler, "Major, if you keep calling me that, I'm going to paint that name on your airplane." Major Baseler said, "You wouldn't Dare!" However, he found that Eckert did dare, because next morning there stood "Stud" with "Mortimer Snerd" painted above the exhaust stacks in red, outlined in yellow. Other crew chiefs who named planes for wives or girl friends included Jack Evans with "My Gal Sal" and Jerry Strauss with "Ski Snoot." Luke Meisenheimer named his "Patient Virgin"; one of the pilots who flew it stated this was because he still was waiting for someone to score a victory with it. Col. Austin named his P-40 "Lighthouse Louie", probably because of his activities in the early missions against these targets. Lt Jimmy Jones, Maj. Baseler's wingman, made a point of naming his P-40 "Available Jones" because he claimed he would always be "available" if Baseler needed him. The Duchess of Durham IV" was flown by Capt. Ralph Taylor. Lt W. K. Carswell flew one named "Beagus" and others named "Vivian", "Trixie" and "Texas Cyclone" were flown at the time, pilots unknown.

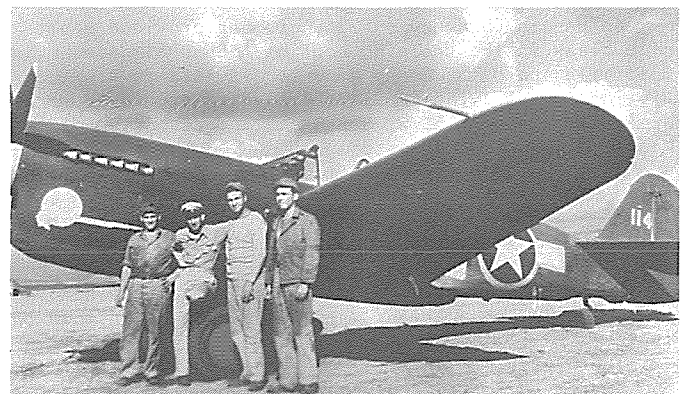
Lt Herschel H. Green flew his first mission in number 13, which was Crew Chief Jack Evans' plane. He scored his first victory in it and got pretty badly shot up in the process. The armor plate behind him had stopped a lot of shrapnel from a shell that had burst in the fuselage. In an interview later, Lt Green was quoted as saying, "I got the Purple Heart on my first mission and to this day I'll never forget it." Asked about his other achievements he insisted, "No! The first one was the most memorable one. It was my toughest fight and the only time since I took up flying that I remember being really scared. We had a mission over Sardinia and somehow I became separated from my flight and before I knew it, I had gotten into a tussel with five enemy fighters. I got scared, seared and shot at. Those jokers really worked me over. I got one of them, though, before I finally wobbled back to my corner." Herky smiled when he recalled, "When I got back and landed, Major Reed (his squadron CO, Major William R. Reed of Marion, Iowa) rushed up and asked 'Did you see that dogfight? A million of those guys raising hell with one of our fellows and he got away. Boy, what a fight.' I almost didn't have the heart to tell him I was that guy." The date of this mission was May 19, 1943.

That was the last time Herky flew number 13. He switched to number 11 and Taylor took 13. During the entire war, number 13 was a lucky number. Only Wayne Lowery, who had to bail out and was taken prisoner, failed to keep the number with a perfect record of not a pilot lost against 26 confirmed victories. Lowery was using the number on a P-51. Crew chiefs did all the mechanical work such as engine, props, brakes, hydraulics, etc. Each crew chief had an assistant, and in addition, he had a radio man and an armorer in his crew. Each of these men considered the aircraft as his own, and they had an immense pride in getting it in top shape and keeping it that way. A spirit of comradeship with the pilot was built up and to this day many pilots keep in close touch with their old crew, and they have become very close personal friends.

During this period, despite heat prostration, attacks of dysentery, malaria, insects, sand, every type of weather and other difficulties, the ground crews maintained an excellent record far above that expected of them. Normally, about 80% of the assigned aircraft were expected to be combat ready at all times. This level was always more than maintained and most squadrons never fell below 85% of their aircraft strength. Most of the time the level was between 85-90%, a truly outstanding record. Many times it was practically impossible to get spare parts and it was a common sight to see the crew chiefs grab their tool box and head for a plane that had just bellied in to grab needed parts almost before the dust had cleared. At Souk-el-Khenis, the mechanics had to keep their tools in a bucket of 100 octane gas so that they wouldn't get too hot to pick up when they were used. This was the base where they had to cut parking spaces out of a wheat field by taxiing the plane through four foot high wheat--getting the wheat out of the aircraft after that accomplishment was a major task in itself.

There were other events taking place during this period which were not a part of the Group's history, but provided some added excitement or change from the daily routine. A B-26 crashed on the field during an attempted emergency landing, killing all aboard on May 25th. A Ju 88 was shot down over the field on July 8th, and a P-40 pilot flew his plane out into the Sahara Desert (only he knows where) and disappeared for two weeks. The poor lad had been compromised in front of his buddies by the ladies of the notorious Sphinx in Algiers and was so humiliated that he took off on a flight to nowhere. While he was not a member of the 325th, the story was a sensation at the time. Then there was the P-39 pilot who sold his airplane to an Arab but kept borrowing it back to fly his missions. Again, he was not a member of the Clan, but he was the talk of the town so to speak.

On 18 September 1943, the P-40s of the 325th were turned over to the 324th Fighter Group, with the exception of a few that were kept to enable the pilots to remain proficient while awaiting new replacement airplanes.



P-40F, number 11, with initials H.H.G. on cowl design belonging to Lt Herschel H. Green. (Photo - S. Wilson)

While flying P-40s, four pilots became aces--Major Robert L. Baseler, Lt Frank "Spot" Collins, Capt. Walter B. Walker, Jr. and Capt. Ralph G. Taylor, Jr. All scored six victories. Sixty-three different pilots scored one or more victories while flying P-40s. Lt Bloomer, Capt. Howe, F/O Huntington and F/O McKeithen all had four victories apiece.

One crew chief who kept an accurate record on a daily basis, Ed Doss, found that the following pilots flew his particular P-40 at one time or another; Lts. Anthony, Bollich, Carswell, Chesney, Crowley, Elliott, Grove, Hamilton and Jones, as well as Capt. Myers and F/Os Rauth and Smith. He felt that this was pretty well representative of the group as a whole, pilots were lost or scheduled for a mission on which their own plane was not available, were ill, or unable to fly for various reasons, and this all contributed to the situation.

Final record of the 325th Fighter Group with P-40 aircraft was 128 missions, 3,990 sorties, 10,121:45 combat hours, 328,820 pounds of bombs dropped, 135 victories and 32 losses. Of the 135 victories, 96 were Messerschmitt 109s, 26 were Macchi 202s, seven were Messerschmitt 323s, three were Junkers Ju 52s, and three were Fiesler Fi 156s. Of these, 42-1/6 were destroyed on escort missions, 27-2/3 were destroyed on bombing missions, 31-1/6 were destroyed on strafing missions and 34 were destroyed on fighter sweeps.

Of the 32 losses by the Checkertails, 13 occurred on escort missions, three on bombing missions, eight on fighter sweeps and eight on strafing missions. Further, three were the result of engine trouble, 11 the result of enemy aircraft, six the result of flak, one the result of small arms fire, one the result of crashing into high tension wires, two resulted from an accident with another plane and eight resulted from unknown causes.

THE P-47 ERA

The period from 22 September through 31 October 1943 was a time of transition for the pilots and their ground crews. During this period a series of forums for all personnel were initiated covering current events and the progress of the war.

Lectures were given to flying and maintenance people by the civilian technicians who were now assigned to the Group to aid in the change-over to Republic P-47D Thunderbolts. Manuals were passed out to appropriate personnel along with other technical literature, new methods and allied techniques were discussed, and training proceeded as rapidly as possible.

On 11 October Col. Baseler buzzed the field in a brand new P-47, the first to join the Clan. He'd flown it up from the Bizerte assembly area. The planes were being shipped to Casablanca, Algiers and Bizerte and, after assembly, preflight checks and a short test hop, were ferried to the squadrons lucky enough to be getting them. Training now went into high gear.

An Honors Ceremony on 27 September provided a bit of a break in the training routine. General James H. Doolittle paid the Group a personal visit to pin the Distinguished Flying Cross on Col. Baseler, Capt. Herbert W. Andridge and Lt E. W. Smith and to present a Soldier's Medal to Sgt James Johnstone.

The advent of the rainy season made the field at Mateur unfit for further use and the Group was moved to Soliman, Tunisia on 4 November 1943. This air base had some paved runways and was by far the best permanent base the Clan was assigned while in Africa. It was also their last one in North Africa. and transitional training continued while preparations were being made for a move to Italy.

The P-47s with their longer range, higher ceilings and better performance brought a change of assignments for the 325th. The Group was transferred from the 42nd Medium Bombardment Wing to the 5th Heavy Bombardment Wing, soon to become a part of the 15th Air Force.

During this period the Clan was rewarded for their outstanding bomber escort work by being given the assignment to provide fighter cover for the Presidential party and other high officials on their way to the Teheran Conference. The operation was carried out without incident.

Wing apparently felt that the assignment of a few pilots with previous combat experience flying the Jugs would be a valuable asset to the pilots over the actual break-in period when they started combat flying. It was obvious that Thunderbolt tactics would be somewhat different than those evolved on the P-40.

The Eighth Air Force supplied the Clan with three pilots who had extensive P-47 experience in combat. The key man in this group was Major Lewis W. Chick, Jr. who had joined the famed 4th Fighter Group in England in January of 1943 and flown Mark V Spitfires with it until the 4th re-equipped with the P-47 in April of that year. He then flew the Thunderbolt until May when he was re-assigned to Headquarters VIII Fighter Command in the Combat Operations Section. He did not especially relish his assignment but made the most of it and was eventually sent back to another P-47 Group, the 355th Fighter Group, where he continued combat flying until selected to fill the 325th's needs. With him came Bill Madole and Archie Hill.

In November the trio left England for North Africa and arrived at Soliman on 3 December 1943 just as the move to Italy was beginning. The move had actually started on 3 November when an advanced echelon left Soliman to prepare a bivouac area at the staging grounds near Bizerte. The ground echelon was to move to this camp to await transportation across the Mediterranean to Southern Italy.

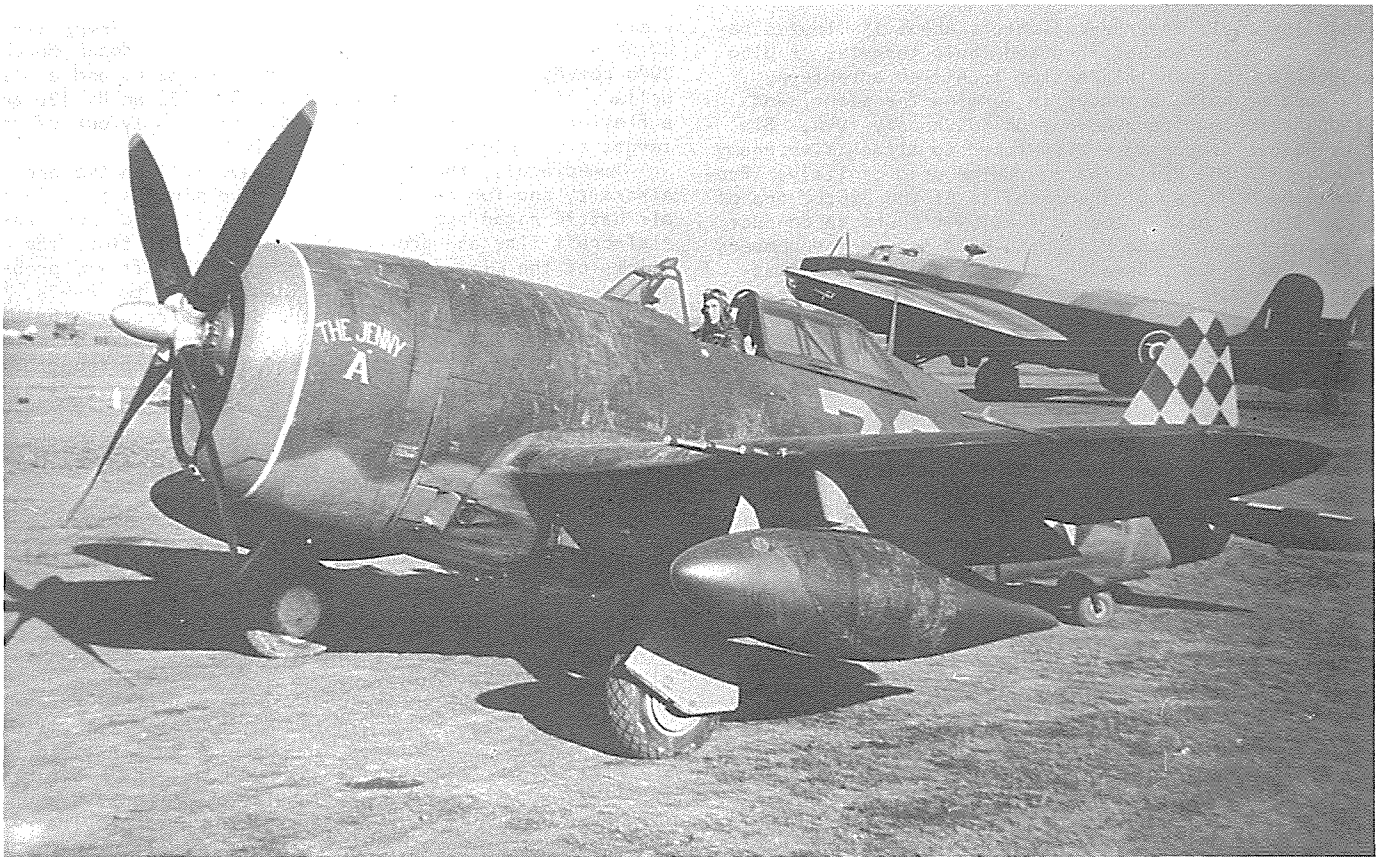
Between 1 and 3 December the ground echelon made the move in good condition. They were then re-equipped for action in Italy and necessary repairs and re-fittings were made on all vehicles assigned the Group.

December 9 found Col. Baseler leading the pilots and air echelon to the new base at Foggia Main. Baseler flew the Group's B-25, pilots flew their P-47s, ground crews went in C-47s and the Group's B-26 rounded out the movement which was interrupted by weather and not completed until the afternoon of December 11th.

The ground echelon, meanwhile, was separated into two groups, one to leave Bizerte on the 12th and land at Taranto, Italy on the 17th, the other to depart Bizerte on December 24th and dock at Naples on the 27th. The trips were made via LST's. The crossings were without serious incident and after landing at their respective debarkation points these two groups were sent to Foggia via trains and trucks. The base was located about 10 miles north of the city of Foggia.

The Group had not waited for the movement to be completed before resuming flying operations against the enemy. On 14 December 1943 a bomber escort mission was laid on to Greece; this one was followed by five more milk runs. While these missions were not especially tough ones, they were not entirely without incident. On Mission Number 4 Capt. Spot Collins became separated from his squadron on the way back from a raid on Innsbruck, and for a change of pace, went down and strafed the air depot at Ancona, damaging a Ju 52 on the ground. Major Chick who had been with the Clan less than two weeks also got "lost", and on the way back he picked out a 200 foot boat moored at Rozzeto di Abrizi and went down to work it over. Apparently it had a prize cargo because it was surprisingly well defended and by his own admission, "This was damned near my last mission." Other pilots strafed two motor convoys at Porto Civitanova and another lucky pilot found a train at Sonogalli and went to work on the railroad. The pilots liked their new Jugs and wanted a chance to really use them.

Another milk run was scheduled for Christmas Day, but it resulted in a tragic loss as three pilots were killed when bad weather set in and they failed to return from the mission. Their crashed aircraft were discovered later, and there were no indications that they had



Lt William K. Carswell in his P-47D "The Jenny A", Number 79, named for a Republic war worker. (Stan Wilson)

been downed by enemy action of any type. The three were Lt Muller, Lt Slattery and F/O Watkins.

Another accident occurred on 29 December when Lt Reynolds collided with an S.M.79 during a landing. His P-47 was a total loss but fortunately Lt Reynolds was not hurt. Foggia at that time was pretty well crowded with all sorts of aircraft, Italian, British and American. On 30 December, to relieve this congestion, the 325th was sent to Celone Number One, more commonly referred to as Foggia Number 1. It was located about seven miles from Foggia. There were a number of air fields in the Foggia area and often there was reference to the area as the Foggia Complex.

No time was wasted as a mission was flown the very first day even though it was a wet, cold and uncomfortable day and the field itself was a semi-quagmire. On this mission a dozen 109s were spotted but only three were encountered, and these were promptly dispatched with Herky Green getting one while F/O Richard L. Catlin of the 319th bagged the other two.

Foggia Number 1 in time proved to be the best base assigned to the Clan as it offered a grassy plain which, after the rain stopped, made an excellent bivouac area. At the time of the move, however, no one would have believed this as it continued to rain the rest of the day and all that night. On New Year's Eve morning the worst storm that part of Italy had ever experienced greeted them. Many tents were blown down during the night, but the kitchen survived and an excellent turkey dinner made life a little better on New Year's Day. In a few days the weather lifted and things began to brighten up.

As a part of the 15th Air Force, which was given the strategic air role in Italy, the 325th now began to concentrate on heavy bomber escorts. The overall air plan called for the isolation of the battle in Italy from Germany to the north, and the railroad marshalling yards in Northern Italy became the prime targets. Tactics also called for counter-air offensives and many fighter

sweep missions were laid on to keep enemy interceptions of bomber missions to a bare minimum.

During January 1944 the action started slowly, but rapidly built up to a peak by the end of the month. Early January missions were escorts of the penetration, target and withdrawal type. Targets getting their share of attention were Sofia, Bulgaria, the Weiner-Neustadt area and marshalling yards at Reggio Emile, Fiume and those in the Rome area.

Lt Miller was listed as missing in action, cause unknown, when he failed to return from a mission to Sofia on 10 January. Lt Fallon made a forced landing at Naples on 13 January after his Jug was damaged by enemy aircraft in an engagement over Rome. Of the 35 enemy planes encountered by the Group, Major Toner, Capt. Collins and Lt Forrest each destroyed an Me 109.

Several more fighter sweeps were flown before Major Chick and F/O Paulk cornered and downed a 109 apiece over Frascati on 19 January. Two days later the Clan charged into six FW 190s over Florence and shot down four of them, kills being credited to Lts Elliott, Hartley, Smith and Carroll.

During another mission on the 21st, Lt Hussey bailed out of his aircraft, reason unknown, and was listed as missing in action. Lt Logg and Lt Brumfield swelled that list the next day, 22 January, when they failed to come home from a sweep over Rome. Capt. Collins bagged a pair of Messerschmitts and single kills were added to the records of Lts Elliott and Barkey and Major Chick, each accounting for a 109. Lt Rogers knocked down a lone 109 on the first of three missions scheduled on the 23rd. Multiple missions in a day were now commonplace and the only excitement in the next few days came during a landing, when a Jug nosed over during the third mission flown on 29 January. There was a great deal more action the next day.

Intelligence had been monitoring enemy radio for some time and had noted the Germans were in the habit of

scrambling their intercept fighters about 15 minutes before U. S. heavy bombers reached their targets. A plan was devised to turn this system to Allied advantage, Col. Baseler being a leader in forming the plans, and the operation was carried out on 30 January 1944. Six heavy bomber groups were dispatched to attack five enemy airdromes in the Villaorba and Udine area of Italy. Preceding the bombers, 61 Thunderbolts of the 325th, one of which returned early, took off at 0945 hours to conduct a special sweep of the Villaorba area before the bombers arrived. With Col. Baseler leading the Group, it was hoped they would catch the enemy fighters as they were being scrambled to attack the bombers.

Route to the target was over the Adriatic and it was flown at an altitude not exceeding 50 feet. The first 75 miles was flown on a heading of 350°, then a heading of 333° was flown for 225 miles. This brought the formation virtually to the Gulf of Venice where it began climbing toward the target on a heading of 33°. Flying north, the Group experienced a slight haze over the sea which made it difficult to hold a close formation and, at times, there was no horizon visible, making it even more difficult to hold altitude and not go into the sea. Capt. Frank Collins, who led the 319th Squadron, commented later, "We flew so low prop wash sprayed up behind each airplane like it does on an outboard motor boat. Altimeters were set at zero and we never got over 50 feet."

As the formation began climbing out of the mist and reached the coast, Col. Baseler experienced one of his greatest thrills. Despite the fact all navigation had been by dead reckoning, he found he was exactly where he was supposed to be at precisely the second he was to be there with all 60 aircraft.

The Group reached the Villaorba area, time 1145 hours, at 15,000 to 19,000 feet. Below them some 60

enemy aircraft were scrambling into the sky. There were 20 or so Messerschmitt 109s, an FW 190 and a dozen Macchi 202s coming up to attack the incoming bombers, and a miscellany of 12 Ju 52s, two Ju 88s, a Do 217, an Hs 126 and a Fiesler Fi 156 Storch, all taking off to fly out of the target area before the bombers arrived.

Immediately, the Checkertail P-47s fell on the enemy aircraft, and for the next thirty-five minutes a violent air battle raged over the area through intense enemy anti-aircraft fire and ground defense. In that time, the pilots of the Clan destroyed 37 enemy aircraft and probably destroyed six more, for a loss of only two P-47s. So completely did they master the enemy aircraft, the heavy bombers were able to deliver an unmolested attack which destroyed a further 70 enemy aircraft on the ground.

A flight led by Capt. H. H. Green, flying his first mission after a siege of malaria had laid him up for several weeks, and including F/O Cecil O. Dean, Lt George Novotny and F/O Edsel Paulk, had a field day in the ensuing action. The four pilots destroyed 15 enemy aircraft between them.

"When we spotted those Ju 52s beneath us," Captain Green later told reporters, "I was so anxious to get down to them that I dove too fast and passed them over. I turned and came back to the first four. It was like climbing steps shooting all the time. All four blew up in my face. I then chased a Macchi 202 at tree top level for about five minutes before catching him."

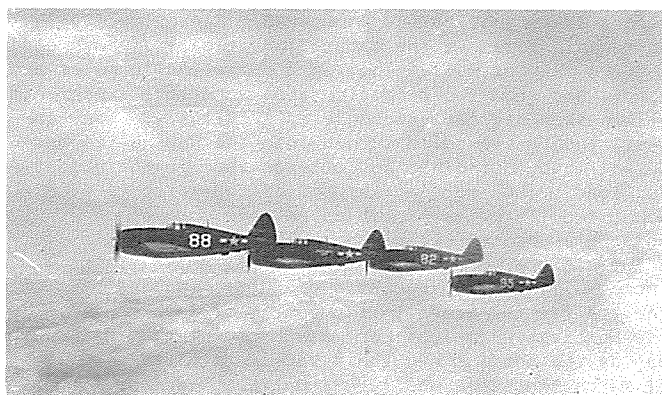
On the way back to the coast "Herky" Green sighted a Do 217 and sent it down in flames for his sixth victory of the day and the ninth of his career. This put him in a tie with Capt. Collins, who bagged a 109 for his ninth the same day, as the Group's leading ace. Herky Green had left Vanderbilt University to join the Cadet Training Program in September 1941 and had graduated at the top of his class, an indication of things to come.



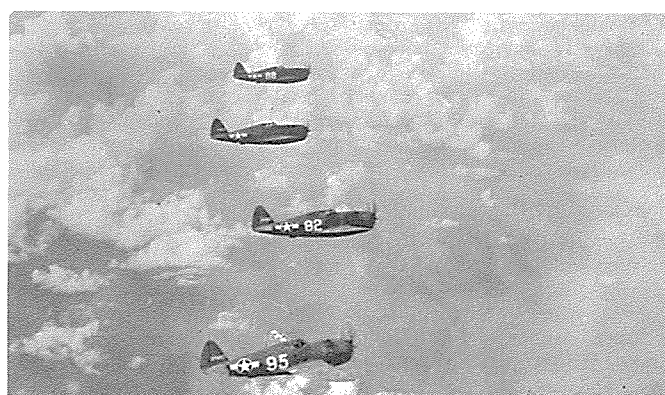
Lt Col. Robert Baseler, commander of the 325th Fighter Group, in his P-47 "Big Stud". (Photo - Robert Baseler)



Major Herschel H. Green, leading ace of the 325th Group, polishes nose art on his Thunderbolt. (S. Wilson)



Four new Jugs in flight. Second is named "Spirit of _____ County", pilot unknown, no number. (Baseler)



Now in background, is Number 88, 42-75008, Colonel Baseler's "Big Stud" soon after being received. (Baseler)

Another member of the flight, Lt George P. Novotny of Toledo, Ohio, became an ace on this mission as he also found that Ju 52s make good targets. After returning in his plane, "Lady Janie VI", he said, "We dove on those Junkers on the deck and I picked out a couple that turned to the left and destroyed them both. After turning to rejoin my flight I saw a little Hs 126 right in front of me. He came along wagging his wings at me so I gave him the works. One burst and he disappeared. Only a few pieces were left of the plane and they fell to the ground."

Third man of the flight, F/O Cecil O. Dean, of Panama City, Florida, also took delight in reducing the number of Ju 52s in the Luftwaffe by scoring three. He said, "I came down on the tail of one Junkers in a flight of three, one burst and he went down, another burst sent the next one down almost on top of the burning wreckage of the first, the third was almost on the ground when I hit him."

The last member of the flight, F/O Edsel Paulk, not to be outdone by his buddies, finished off two Junkers and added an Me 109 for good measure.

While the Fearsome Four were at work, other pilots of the 325th had entered the whirling air battle. In the words of Major Lewis Chick, "At Venice we started our climb to 20,000 feet and then Herky Green shouted he saw a bunch of Jerries and went after them with his flight. Just as he dove I spotted a gaggle of 109s climbing towards the bombers and went after them with my eight Jugs. The flights in the other two squadrons started calling Jerries at about this time, too. It was a real hassle, and Hollywood would have given a million to have gotten the overall picture of the action. It still scares me to think of all the near misses and mid-air collisions I almost had." In the ensuing engagement Major Chick caught up with and destroyed two Messerschmitt 109s.

(After the war, a believe-it-or-not incident occurred when Chick was assigned as Chief of the USAF Mission to Bolivia in 1949-50. On a side trip to Lima, Peru, he met an employee of the Carillon Hotel. Noting the man's German accent, he asked him about the war, and it turned out he had been in Italy, had been a pilot and had been shot down. After more details, Chick was amazed to discover that this man was one of his 30 January victims. They had fought from 20,000 feet down to the deck and back up again until the German had been forced to bail out. It was, indeed, a small world!)

In the great air battle, Lt John L. Brower picked off a 109 but tended to give more of the credit to the aircraft than to himself. "These Thunderbolts," he said, "are known as high altitude fighters but they are most versatile. I came in and picked off an Me 109 at about 100 feet off the ground. He was flying straight and level, but I was flying straighter and leveler."

Lt Gerald B. Edwards of Yonkers, New York and pilot

of "Turbo Terror", told how he downed a 109. "It did a split S but I followed it down and got him on both sides." Another scoring P-47 was "The Merry Bee" piloted by Lt J. C. Dorety, of Trenton, New Jersey. "This Ju 88 jumped me straight down out of the sun. I dodged him and followed him down and shot him out of the sky." F/O Walter L. Dahle, of Staples, Minnesota, had some trouble before getting his score. "One Me got away from me. Then another one did the same thing. A third one came along and I was dead set on getting him. It took a lot of rounds from my machine guns but I got him." Lt Roy B. Hogg, of Atlanta, Georgia, had an easier time destroying a 109 and a Macchi 202. He used only 40 rounds of ammunition to down both victims.

With the sun in his eyes, Lt Ferdinand E. Suehle, of Chestnut Hills, Pennsylvania, calmly started to join a formation of Macchi 202s he had mistaken for his own flight. Three of them promptly latched onto his tail, but he swung around, shot one down and eluded the other two. Major Anthony Tirk, from Grapevine, Texas, commented about Lt Phillip C. Whiteside. "Six Ma 202s attacked me, and if it had not been for the cool-headed daring of Lt Whiteside, who sneaked up on them and saved my life, I would not be here to tell this tale." Whiteside shot one of the 202s off Tirk's tail and later flamed a Messerschmitt 109.

Lt Neil C. Kitchen, from Indianapolis, Indiana, was chasing a 109 when a Storch, full of fight, confronted him. Neil blasted it out of his path and still managed to catch and clobber the 109, sending it down in flames to join the Fi 156.

Col. Robert Baseler encountered the only multi-engine German aircraft he was to see during the war. "I saw the Ju 88 and gave him a damned good chase. I finally caught up with him, gave him a burst and saw him crash and burn." It was his sixth aerial victory. When he landed back at base, he found General Nathan Twining waiting for him. The General reached in his pocket and took out a Silver Star and pinned it on Baseler right there, for his leadership of the mission.

During the engagement, two organized efforts against the 325th by the enemy were reported. About 11 Macchi 202s, flying in line-abreast formation, attacked from 12 o'clock at 10,000 to 11,000 feet, just after the Checkertail formation split into sections to engage the many other enemy aircraft. The Ma 202s were forced to break when the P-47s turned into them.

One section of eight P-47s had dropped their wing tanks and had just leveled out at 14,000 feet, five miles northwest of Villaorba Airdrome, preparing to make a diving attack on four Ju 52s when they met a coordinated enemy attack. One 109 came out of the sun, two 109s came from 5 o'clock high, and two others came from 6 to 7 o'clock high. The section of Checkertails broke up and engaged the 109s, destroying several of them. However, two P-47s were damaged and two were lost, probably from

this engagement. They were the only losses the Group sustained, and although one pilot was seen in a dinghy, there was no further word of him.

Other victorious 325th pilots were: Lt Eugene M. Emmons who got two 109s, shooting the second down while right on the deck; Lt. Neil C. Carroll who scored a 109 and a 202 in his plane, "Civilian Defense Lady of Rockville Center", which was reputed to be five pounds heavier than other Jugs due to the paint used to put the name on the cowl; Lt James H. Jones with an Ma 202 and a 109; and Lt Don P. Kerson with a 109.

The next day, five more enemy aircraft were shot down over Venice. Lts Dunkin, Hoffman and Capt. Rynne got a S.M.82 each, and Rynne added an Me 109, while Lt Suehle closed the books by getting another 109. The S.M.82s had been spotted on the deck and the trio had slipped up on them from dead astern and flamed them before they knew they were not alone in the sky.

The first ten days of February produced six more missions and the loss of Lt Whiteside who failed to return from the mission flown 8 February. He was given up as MIA after a search failed to produce results--cause unknown.

On St. Valentine's Day, the Group held a small mass-acre clobbering seven enemy aircraft in a 30 minute battle during which rocket firing 109s were encountered for the first time. Lt Davis made a forced landing and was badly injured, his P-47 being a total loss. Victories went to Col. Chick, Capt. Rynne, Lts Mock, Malloy and Clark with one 109 each. Lt Emmons had a double, a 109 and a 202. Probables were credited to Lt Clark with one and Lt Butler with a pair. All three were 109s.

On Washington's Birthday the Clan lost Lt Soper who failed to return from a mission, reason unknown, and was listed as missing. Two days later, eight Me 109s caught Lt Forrest alone as he was attempting to return to base after having to turn back because of engine trouble. Forrest turned into them figuring his best defense was a good offense. In an attempt to adjust their formation to meet the threat, two 109s collided and exploded. The rest were so unnerved by this accident, they broke off and headed for home, leaving Forrest a greatly relieved pilot who then nursed his plane to base without further incident.

Lt Clifford White lost power and crashed on takeoff into Lake Lesina on 25 February. He was killed in the crash.

If the Clan had any doubts regarding the accuracy of the gunners in the heavy bombers, it was dispelled on 2 March when a flight of P-47s passed over a flight of bombers in getting to their escort station. One Thunderbolt was holed a few times but fortunately not seriously. No one took short cuts to get on station after this event occurred.

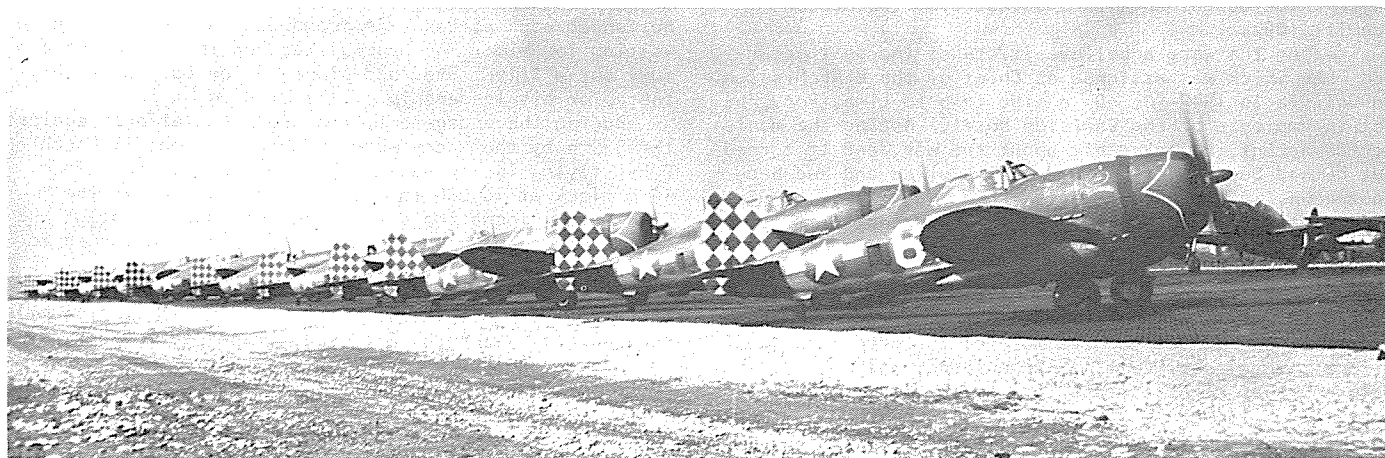
Next day another big battle developed during an

escort assignment to the Rome area. Approximately 30 German fighters hit the bomber formation from both sides and the rear as well. They were operating in pairs and fours, and from their tactics they were more experienced pilots than had been encountered previously. None-the-less, the Checkertails turned into the Nazi elite and out-climbed, out-dived and out-ran them in the resulting dogfight. The score at the end of the scrap found six down, two listed as probables and six more damaged. Lt Col. Chick bagged his sixth, a 109, and Lt Deakins got a 109 along with an FW 190. Lt S. E. Brown flamed a Focke Wulf, and Lts Vaught and Storts, who had been with the 4th Fighter Group in England, too, each bagged a 109.

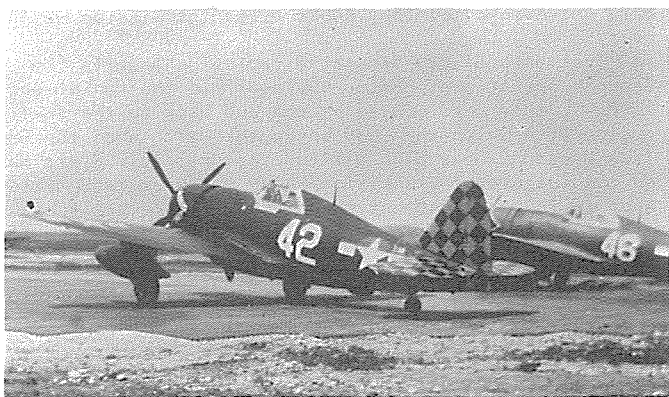
Huge aerial melees were now becoming the rule of the day as the Germans had their backs against the wall. On 11 March the score was 10-4-1 but the Clan lost three. One of the Clan losses was doubly hard to take as Lt Jimmy Jones was shot down by a member of the 325th in a case of double mistaken identity. After destroying a 109, Lt Jones spotted a new pilot, Lt Hudson on the deck and mistaking him for an FW 190, dove on him. Hudson had been pretty well worked over by the Germans and in his excitement turned into Jones and shot him down with a quick burst. A few weeks later Lt Hudson went down in battle himself, never having forgiven himself for downing Jones. Even Col. Baseler felt that Hudson had reacted instinctively and did not really blame him. Lt Jones had been Baseler's wingman and had earned the title "Available" Jones as he always hung onto the Colonel in every fight and was always available when needed. Besides Jones, Lt. Col. Tirk (CO of the 319th Squadron) and F/O Knox were also lost on 11 March. Capt. Rynne got two 109s, Maj. Green, Lts Butler, R. D. Clark, Barkey, Chesney, Jones and Kern all had 109s and Lt William Carswell, flying "The Jenny A", splashed a 202. Carswell's aircraft had been named after a grandmother who had a perfect work record at Republic Aviation and the Company wanted to honor her. So when the Group received the request, Lt Carswell gallantly agreed to so name his plane. Lt Bob Barkey of Wyandotte, Michigan, was flying "Thunderbolt Lad" named in honor of his infant son.

More sweeps followed, until 18 March, when another gang fight developed. Lt Daniel Davis, who had recovered from an earlier crash injury and insisted on going back on flying status, and Lt Walter J. Hackett were lost on this mission. However, the Clan took revenge on nine enemy pilots. Lts Kitchen and Walker downed Macchi 205s, a type now being encountered. Messerschmitt 109s had to suffice for Lt Barkey, Lt Chesney, Lt Klinge, Maj. Green, Lt Novotny, Lt Kern and Lt House as each added a kill to his total.

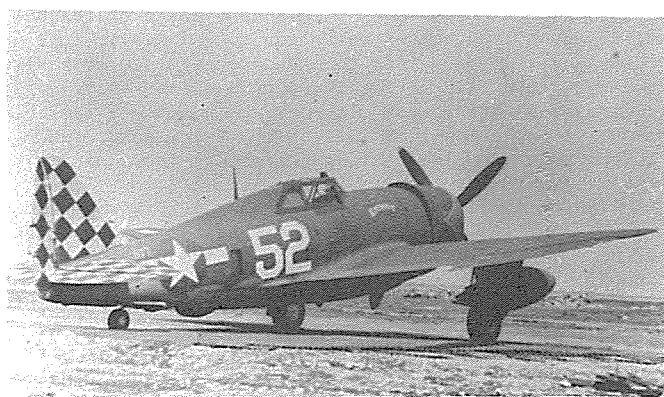
On 28 March the Checkertails lost Capt. Rynne, Lt Hudson and Lt A. O. Jones. Lt Col. Sluder, flying "Shimmy", got a 109 as did Lt Folkes. In an oddity, Lt Hudson, who had accidentally shot down Lt Jimmy Jones, was



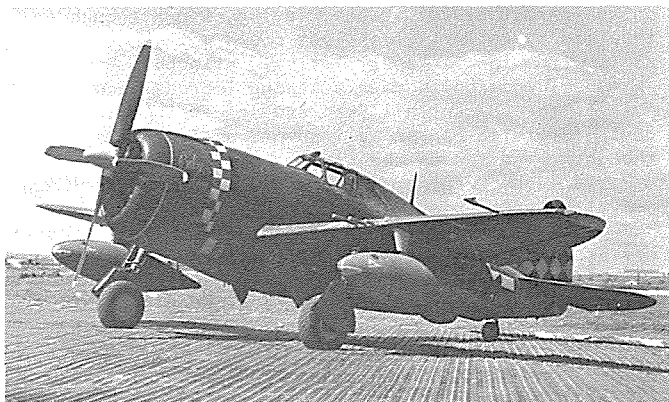
Lineup of Checkertail P-47s of the 318th Squadron with their distinctive, sweptback red cowl design. (R. Baseler)



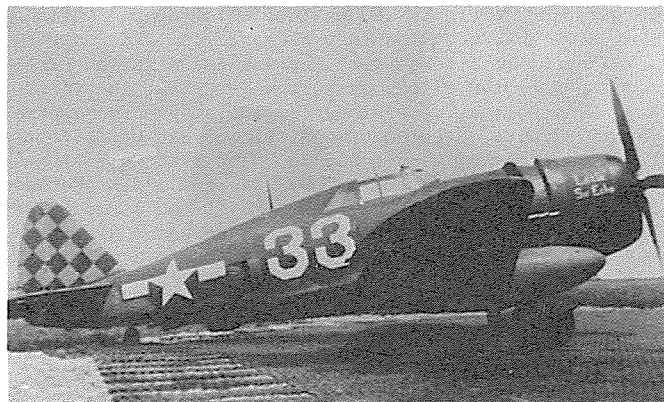
Lt Donald J. MacDonald's "Barbara May" with the name above and below the swept cowl design. (S. Wilson)



Another 318th Jug is "Shimmy", the aircraft flown by Lt Col. Chester L. Sluder, third Group CO. (D. Weatherill)



Waiting for a mission is the Thunderbolt "Baby Eileen" sporting drop tanks with tiger designs. (S. Wilson)



It is possible the reverberations of the big R-2800 engine suggested name for "Little Sir Echo." (S. Wilson)

lost along with another Jones, Lt A. O. Jones, and in both cases, each Jones had scored a kill before being shot down. Another victor on this mission was Lt John R. Booth. He ran into a gaggle of Messerschmitts and quickly shot two of them down. A third 109 made a head-on pass and collided with Booth's aircraft. The sturdy Jug, despite losing four and a half feet of its right wing, remained in the air. The German lost control of his plane, veered into his wingman and both exploded. Booth had bagged four 109s in about ten seconds and managed to nurse his Jug home despite the damaged wing.

The toll of enemy aircraft continued to mount on 29 March as Major Green got a 190 and Lts Forrest and Butler downed long-nosed Focke-Wulf FW 190Ds. The following day Lt Hamilton closed the books on the month of March as he downed a Macchi 205 over Sofia.

April got off to a good start on the 2nd as Lts Dun-kin, Mock and Hoffman blasted 109s. April 10th was the next big day for the Clan; flying their 70th Jug mission they scored 10 victories. Lts Hamilton, Hoffman, Mock, Storts, Penney and Emmons decreased the Me 109 stockpile by one each and Lts Dorety and Novotny did likewise with Ma 205s. Lt Oxner added a pair of Macchi 202s. Maj. Green picked off a Messerschmitt 110 the next day, to become ranking ace still on flying status in the theater.

On 12 April a P-38 damaged a P-47 in error due to faulty identification. Lt Parker was shot down later on but managed to bail out. Six Me 109s were taken off the Nazi duty roster as Capt. Hartley, Lts Gerken, Strain, Malloy, Dunkin and Paulk did the honors. Lt Emmert added a probable. April 13th was an unlucky day for Lts Malloy and Mock, as they failed to return from the mission, but it was a lucky one for Lts Aho and Brewer who downed relatively rare Me 410s and Lt Emmons picked off another rare bird, an Re 2001. Lt Novotny damaged another Re 2001 and Lt Garcia was grateful for

a more common Me 109 which he belted down for the count. Lt Deakins had another 109 and was now beginning to reach his peak.

Three days later, Lt J. R. Booth had to ditch at sea but managed to get out and was spotted floating in his Mae West. F/O J. W. Barrett was also forced down, both pilots were listed as MIA. On 17 April Lt Emmons scored a double kill getting two 109s while Lt Edwards and F/O Kastner got one apiece. April 19th produced victories for Lt Dowd, a 109, and 190s for Lts S. Brown and Rogers. Lt Gonda was lost on the mission.

More Thunderbolt missions were flown but the Group now began to train with P-51s while still flying their quota of combat missions. May 23rd produced a lone kill credited to Lt Cullen Hoffman who knocked down a 109. The last Jug mission was a good one as six more enemy aircraft were destroyed. On this the 97th P-47 mission, 24 May 1944, no losses were sustained by the Clan. Lt Kerns got a pair and single victories went to Lts Barkey, Mohawk, Rausch and Bass. All were Me 109s.

While the Group was flying escort missions and fighter sweeps in their P-47s from December 1943, other events were taking place that were as much a part of the Group's life. Shortly after settling on their new base at Foggia Number 1, mines became a problem. The land around the base had been heavily mined by the Germans at the time of their retreat from the area, and on 7 January an Italian laborer was severely injured by an exploding land mine. Ordnance and Demolition experts moved in and cleared the area of mines, bombs and bomb fuses.

Heavy bomb groups arriving to take up station at the base resulted in over-crowded conditions, and orders were issued on 13 February for the Clan to move to a new base at Lesina. The next day T/Sgt E. B. Bowman took a detail to the new site to prepare the layout and erect Nissen huts. On the 15th, Col. Baseler recalled the party

and cancelled the move on a temporary basis as the new field was all but under water due to the heavy, continuous rains. Reports from the advanced echelon emphasized the fact that they were experiencing all sorts of difficulties due to the mud. The new runways were vanishing into the ooze almost as fast as they were completed, and tent stakes were ineffective against any sort of a wind when anchored in mud.

The move was put off until March 26-29th when the conditions finally improved enough to permit operations. Advance parties left on the 26th and the rest of the Group followed during the next three days. The move was made entirely by motor vehicle as the new base was only 45 miles away. At the time it was the most advanced airfield in the 15th Air Force.

On 1 April 1944, Lt Col. Chester L. Sluder replaced Baseler as CO of the Group. Col. Baseler was called up to the 306th Fighter Wing to become Assistant Chief of Staff, A-3, to Brigadier General Strother. That evening an unidentified recon plane flew over the base and orders were issued to dig fox holes the following day. However, they never had occasion to use these.

The outstanding event in May was the citation ceremony held on the afternoon of the 19th. At the ceremony, Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, Commanding General of the 15th Air Force, attached two Distinguished Unit Citations to the guidons of each squadron. The first citation was for the mission of 30 July 1943 when the 325th shot down 21 enemy aircraft and had four more listed as probables. The Citation read in part... "This mission so weakened the enemy's number of operational aircraft and combat morale that it contributed directly and materially to the subsequent surrender of the Island."

The Second Citation was for the mission of 30 January 1944 when the Group downed 37 enemy aircraft. This Citation read in part... "So completely neutralized was the enemy's aerial defense of the region that in an unmolested attack our bombers were able to destroy over 70 enemy aircraft on the ground... The skill with which these pilots flew for such a distance over the water... has been an example of unsurpassed combat efficiency."

After the presentation ceremony, a formal review was held for Gen. Twining. Leading the parade was a platoon of pilots, followed by the Headquarters platoon, and then a platoon from each squadron.

Recalling this stirring event, Lt Barrie Davis of the 317th had the following comments: "My memories are filled with things like the day General Twining came to Lesina to pin a few medals on some of us. We managed a parade for the brass... but only after some of the guys spent long hours searching through rats' nests hunting for green pants that they had not worn since the day we arrived in Italy."

"We had opened a new officers' club in a renovated Italian stable and Gen. Twining kept urging everyone to have a good time. Needless to say, since we figured the General knew we were not slated to fly the next day, we really laid one on. Lots of fellows hit the sack only when too looped to stay on their feet, and others had to be poured into bed."

"Imagine the reaction when those scheduled to fly the next day were hauled out of their tents the next morning at 4 a.m. for a long, long escort mission somewhere up near Munich."

"It was the damndest bit of formation flying I have ever seen. When course was set, fighters were all over the sky, and how the devil the Group stayed together, I will never know. Those of us who stayed home sweated blood until the first of the Group began coming back. They'd gotten into a rough and tumble with all types of German aircraft. Wayne Lowery, who I think, knocked down two during the scrap, said the whole mission was flown in a haze so far as he was concerned. There were so many bandits in the sky he just flew in circles, and whenever a Jerry would appear through the haze in his sight he'd let go with his fifties. Of that type of thing, you might say Aces are made. Some of our guys

were not even completely sober after the mission was over."

The month of May brought a radical change in the Group's operations. After having flown the radial-engine P-47, they were now to be changed back to the in-line engine with which they had begun the war. When the Group flew Mustangs on a high altitude escort mission, it marked the successful transition which had been made without a pause in normal combat operations. While still handling full combat duties, the pilots and ground crews flew daily training missions and learned the mechanical structure and maintenance of the P-51. The Group thus became the only group to fly three different fighter types in combat.

When Lt Wayne Lowery and Lt Brewer were ordered to the Group as replacements, they flew their Jugs to the base. Making a dramatic entrance, they buzzed the field a few times to let the Clan know they were getting some good new blood. As a grand finale they performed a few faultless barrel rolls. The two new pilots were called on the carpet by Col. "Zack" Taylor, who although enthralled by their flying, just could not sanction barrel rolls with wing tanks still firmly attached.

The Thunderbolts made a strong impression on the pilots of the Checkertail Clan and served them well. Their days of service can be well summed up in the words and thoughts of a few of the Clan.

"Our Jugs," said Major Lewis Chick, "were all equipped with water injection and the factory word was 2,800 RPM maximum with 52 inches of mercury manifold pressure dry and 56 inches wet. The 317th set their engines up to allow 70 inches wet which really gave the old Jug a kick in the pants for a few minutes and drove the factory reps nuts. Anyway, it worked and we left them that way."

"With the doctrine I was teaching, that of turn the airplane gently and maintain an indicated air speed of at least 250, we could out-run anything in the air that could give us trouble in combat. Our evasive action was to dive 'til you saw 500 mph indicated and you could be sure by then that no one was behind you any longer, as they would have shed their wings by then. Also, the Thunderbolt was faster than anything we would run up against."

"The Thunderbolt," said Lt Wayne L. Lowery, "turned out to be a lovable beast; forgiving of my many errors of omission, as well as commission. Even though some of my manipulations in effect pushed the 'Spin, Crash and Burn Button,' she simply refused to die and seemed to be telling me 'I don't care about you, you damned fool, but I am going to live.' Performance-wise the Jug was nothing to shout about in a turn, but at high altitudes it had the most amazing maneuverability of any airplane I've ever flown. She seemed to thrive on thin air. I can also say that I have never before nor since seen a plane that could get rid of such appalling hunks of altitude in such a short time. She also had an inclination to reverse controls in a high speed dive, particularly in thin air. I flew the Jugs for 20 missions, mainly dodging bullets, a game at which I must have been pretty good. I also seem to have buck fever as I was forever firing while still way out of range."

Lt Col. Bob Baseler said, "The first time I tried my (P-47) D-10 I climbed from a standing start to 30,000 feet in 10 minutes, I guess I used about 250 gallons of gas doing it--this was without water, just standard military power, 52 inches of mercury and 2,700 RPM's."

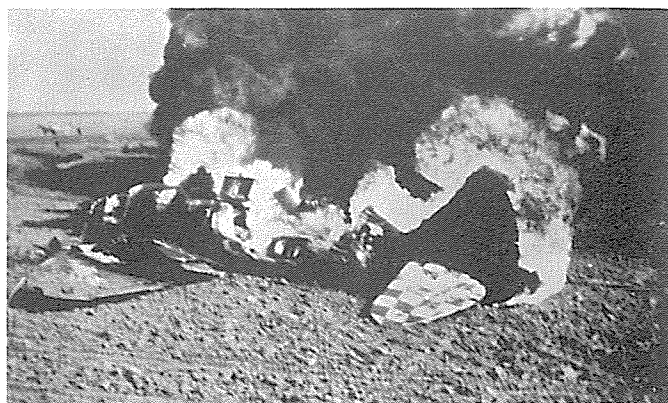
"I and my crew double-ought sandpapered my airplane and it increased my top speed 15 mph at 1,000 feet. Joe Parker, Republic's chief test pilot, told me that that was about what to expect as they had tried it at Farmingdale with the same results."

"My D-16 was exactly 50 mph slower with the same throttle setting, 52 inches of mercury and 2,700 RPM's, due to those monstrosities (wing tank pylons) they used on it."

"Col. Claire Baunche, who was the director of operational engineering in the XII Bomber Command under Gen.



P-47D, serial 42-75007, named "Topper" in its earlier days before application of checkertail. (S. Wilson)



This Thunderbolt crashed on takeoff and then burned beyond the runway. The pilot survived. (Leo Lorbiecki)

Doolittle, had Joe Parker get him the stress analysis for that part of the wing and he redesigned the pylon--put a buffer plate on it and used two P-38 pylons--it now slowed the airplane down less than one mile per hour.

"I used to have to use 2,300 RPM and 32-33 inches of manifold pressure when I was leading a group of 48 P-47s in order to allow the last man in formation to maneuver at all. My fuel consumption was roughly 120 gallons per hour; we carried 370 gallons internally and 330 gallons externally, which gave us a range of 420-450 miles, 20 minutes to fight and then get home and still have a little time left to go around a couple of times if need be.

"Joe Parker told me if you tangle with an FW 190 or Me 109 at 25,000 feet and want to beat him to 30,000, then dive to 20,000 and zoom and you'll be waiting for him up there. It was really true, the Jug's zoom qualities were tremendous.

"I feel that I'm speaking for the entire Group when I say we liked the P-47. It was a fine weapon, could take lots of punishment and dish it out, too. It was dependable, no worrying about coolant leaks, easy to maintain, just an all around good airplane."

Capt. Robert M. Barkey, who had been a police officer in Wyandotte, Michigan before the war, recalled how the Thunderbolt served him when he spotted a lone German and raced after it for a "sure" kill. "I was never so sorry in my life. It was one of Hermann Goering's elite aces. We tangled for half an hour. First he would get me in a tight spot, then the tables would be turned. It was like a football game where you used every trick in the book and that German knew how to fight. Right then and there I gave up any hope of seeing Wyandotte again. As his bullets whizzed past my head I felt sure his next burst would get me and if I lived to tell the tale, I'd spend the rest of the war eating weenies and sauerkraut.

"In desperation I gave up all the latest tricks they had taught us and tried an old one. It worked. He went into a dive to escape and I followed him down. At 700 miles an hour my controls froze, but he was straight under me, right in my gun sight. He was on fire and I was getting too close for comfort when he hit the ground. It was like a puff of smoke, and my plane was three seconds behind him when I pulled out of the dive. The terrific speed blacked me out and when my head cleared, I was up to 15,000 feet and still climbing. It was just about the happiest moment of my life."

The P-47 produced five new aces in the Group. Major H. H. Green was high with 10 kills, next was Lt E. H. Emmons with 8; Major Chick and Capt. Rynne were tied for third with 6 each, and Lt G. P. Novotny had the minimum five needed to qualify as an ace. These victories do not include those scored with P-40s. Sixty-five pilots scored one or more victories while flying the Jug.

Final record of the 325th Fighter Group with P-47 aircraft was 97 missions, 3,626 sorties, 15,280 combat

hours, 153 victories and 38 losses. Of the 153 victories, 100 were Messerschmitt 109s, 12 were FW 190s, 11 were Macchi 202s, 5 were Macchi 205s, 11 were Ju 52s, 3 were S.M.82s, 2 were Fiat G.55s, 2 were Me 410s, 2 were Ju 88s and 5 were miscellaneous types. Of these, 30 were destroyed in missions against lines of communication, 101 were destroyed in counter-air force operations and 22 were destroyed in missions against towns and industry.

Of the 38 losses sustained by the Group, 18 occurred while giving route cover, 8 while giving withdrawal support, 6 on fighter sweeps and 6 while giving penetration support. Further, 9 were the result of enemy aircraft, 8 the result of weather, 5 the result of flak, 1 the result of mechanical failure, 11 the result of unknown causes, and 4 the result of other causes.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This history of the 325th Fighter Group through its P-47 days is the result of a great many letters from former personnel of the Group, personal interviews, telephone conversations, mission reports, newspaper clippings, personal scrapbooks, a mimeographed history of the Group and a brief mimeo history of the 319th Squadron. Without the help of many, fine men this history would not have been possible, and I would like to express my deepest thanks to: Stan Wilson, Wayne Lowery, Barrie Davis, Donald J. MacDonald, Robert M. Barkey, Ed Doss, Jerry Strauss, Jack Evans, General Felix Vidal, Paul Hudson, Col. Paul Dowd, William K. Carswell, Lewis Chick, Ray Brooks, R. L. Fort, Maj. Gen. Gordon H. Austin, Cecil O. Dean and Robert Baseler--all of the Checkertail Clan--and David Weatherill, Phil Yant, Dick Hill and Bill Gebhard.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ernie McDowell, of 1922 W. Berenice Ave, Chicago, Illinois 60613, has spent a goodly part of the last two years researching and developing this history of the famous Checkertails. He has delved into more corners than can be counted and brought forth many important and almost forgotten parts of the 325th's history. But this is nothing new for Ernie. He has been delving deeply into aviation matters for many years now and is a guiding force in aviation and A.A.H.S. matters in the Chicago area. Ernie is also a plastic aircraft modeler turning out the kind of models that make most of us highly envious, a photographer who, two years ago, was the A.A.H.S. Representative to the Paris Air Show, and a writer with international credits. His success is the result of a real love for aviation, tenacity in tracking down new information and hardiness in bringing together all the pieces of a story.

The second part of the Checkertail history will appear in the Winter JOURNAL. Covering the P-51 era, it's now being completed by Ernie McDowell's working partner on this phase of the 325th story, Mr. William N. Hess.