

FLYING THE SHRIKE

By COLONEL JOHN R. KANE

The following comes from a letter written by Col, Kane, the former commander of the 98th Bomb Group in World War II and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions at Ploesti. The letter was in reply to a question by the Editor asking him what it had been like to fly the Curtiss Shrikes (see the JOURNAL, Vol 10, Mo 2) in the mid-1950s. His reminiscences are printed here for their invaluable insight into that period of aviation history.

As to the Curtiss A-8...in 1933 I was flying a B-2 (Curtiss Condor bomber) at the Fort Knox anti-aircraft exercises, and the 3rd Attack Group was participating in A-8s. They had so many crashes they were relieved from participation. A squadron of Boeing B-9 twin engine "Flying Cigars" did not finish a single mission. My Squadron CO, Charley Harvard, invited me to ride with him while he flew the new Martin B-10. After he landed we climbed out and he said, "Take her around for a landing," and walked away. That flight proved to be very sweet, but it was much too short.

To return to the 3rd Attack Group, the first attack plane I saw was a Curtiss A-3 which operated with various modifications until the A-8 came along. When I joined the Group in 1935 we flew Curtiss A-12s. It flew like no other plane. In a steep bank the leading edge slots popped in and out, and in landings the plane popped the eyes of new pilots for when the throttle was cut the plane dropped like a brick. It was good in formation, however, and had good visibility. In attack flying the formation made flat turns, that is--a line through the propeller hubs remained parallel to the horizon. This required long practice and strict flying discipline. The wingmen flew on the element leader and stayed with him even if he cracked up--if there was a crash, there should be three wrecks. Might flying in formation was really a nerve jerker.

The Group or parts of it were always doing demonstrations around the country trying to convince the Army and the public of the value of air power. At Fort Benning, Georgia Major George Kenney, as Air Corps Liaison Officer, always called for us to help him convince the Army Staff and whooped and hollered when we did a good job. One year we went as a group to the Miami Air Races and daily put on a show of formation flying without getting out of the area of the airport. On the way to Fort Pierce, where we camped, my element leader went to sleep. We two wingmen flew with him and by changing the airflow over his wings kept him in fairly good formation. Finally the Squadron CO made a turn, and we had to jazz our engines to wake him up.

Most of the two weeks we were there is still hazy to me and the others. Our camp food was so terrible we headed for town after our morning flying stint and checked the bars down one side of the street then back on the other side. Midnight usually came before we completed the tour, but along the route one managed to keep a buzz going for two weeks. Except, I sobered up one morning on final approach for a landing while alone in the air. My one desire was to get on the ground in a hurry. As soon as I passed over the end of the runway I cut the throttle and fell to a three point landing, bounced over a creek, several large logs, plowed through marsh and muck and finally felt the wheels hit hard ground which threw the plane upward, tail high. It hit and bounced about three more times and finally ceased all activity

on three points--two wheels and the prop hub. When I got my eyeballs to focus again I noticed about a hundred men busily engaged in moving runway markers and setting them up about ten yards ahead of my up-standing position. No accident record was filed for this event as they hammered out the dents in the wheel pants and straightened the prop blades in time for the next day's flying.

I was in the 90th Attack Squadron, first under Capt. Tim McCoy, then Major Pinkey Amos, and finally Major Paul L. Williams. The 90th's colors were Red and white, the 13th Squadron's were White and black, and the 8th's were Yellow.

One Saturday a month we had inspection on the line with all planes lined up so the Group CO and officials could drive by. Then the CO got into flying togs and on his signal all engines were started at the same instant, and the Group taxied out and took off in Group formation.

Once a month pilots could volunteer to make parachute jumps to test the chute packing department. One Saturday a special show was set up. A large number of jumpers were to land on the field in front of our Group line, and right after their landing we were to take off in formation. As it worked out the Group CO gave the "start signal" too soon, while the jumpers were still in the air. A cross wind arose about this time and blew the descending men directly toward the line of whirling propellers. All down the line pilots killed their engines, and I sat there and watched a pilot called Preacher Karnes descending right in front of my plane. About ten feet from the ground he started to climb up the shroud lines like a monkey while holding his legs parallel to the ground. He hit in that position and bounced. Karnes got by with only two weeks in the hospital, but it was much less than some pilots suffered from playing soft ball games.

From another time, I can still see Clyde Harris standing up in the cockpit and pumping a fire extinguisher into the air scoop in front of the windshield to put out a carburetor fire. The old A-12 could build up some nice fires when over-primed with the throttle (but nothing as spectacular as a P-63).

Major Williams was to us an old man, but from the way he flew he made our flying seem conservative. Every time we went to the Texas coastal area he really cut loose so that all the women ran for their clotheslines when they heard our planes. I still don't know whether or not he knew what a telephone line looked like or whether he ever saw one, but he headed his plane at a point midway between the posts and those of us with clear space ahead followed him. Most element leaders went over with hardly a perceptible change in formation but took a chance of a sharp lecture on formation flying from the Major. I suppose I flew under many lines, but I never saw them--just the element leader. With your eyes grooved into a fixed angle with his head, and a responsive left hand on the throttle, there was no time for sight-seeing.

One winter I was flying cross country to Lambert Field, St. Louis for an overnight visit. Next morning, on arrival at the airport, I found that the mechanic had been overly strong in turning the screw on the oil filter and had broken the clamp. While we managed a bailing wire fix the weather began to close in. Little Rock was the one and only reporting station along the route I was to fly and was giving the overcast at 2500

feet. Leaving St. Louis, I headed south and was soon skirting around the peaks of the hills whose tops disappeared into the overcast. When I finally broke through to level ground, south of the hills of southern Missouri, the overcast descended and a fine drizzle froze on the windshield. I had to use full carburetor heat and try to see ahead by peeking around the windshield. Fortunately I hit the iron compass course straight into the airport at Little Rock. By the time I saw the airport, however, the A-12 was so loaded with ice it was slowly losing altitude at full throttle and I had no more than one hundred feet. I hit the ground at full throttle and ice flew all over the airport--that wing on the A-12 just wasn't designed for a heavy load. The only time I ever had more ice was right over the equator in mid-Africa, July 1942, when enroute to Palestine.

After the A-12s we had the Northrop A-17 and then the A-17A. It must have been sometime in 1938 when Gen. Arnold reached a decision on Attack Aviation. He had a demonstration at Barksdale Field with the whole Group doing its best. Then six Douglas B-18As flew over at 1,000 feet and dropped 100-lb bombs. The size of the latter's craters and the damage done convinced all the

Staff that our little 25-lb frag bombs were useless. That was the end of a fabulous era of flying.

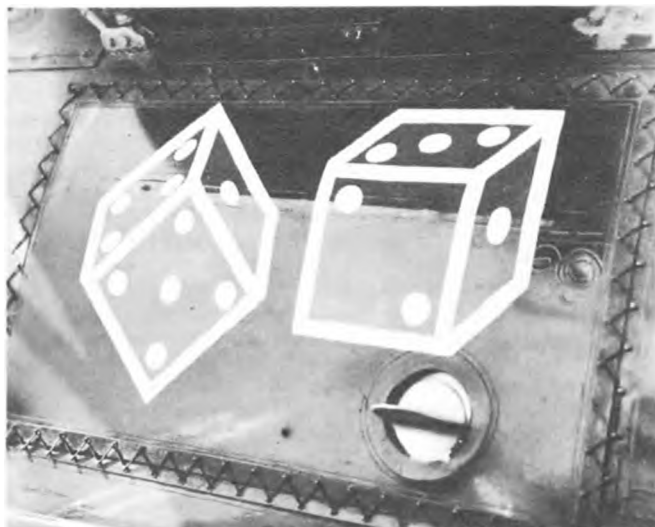
Incidentally, in 1943 we (the 98th Bomb Group) hit the airfield at Catania, Sicily with 28 Liberators each carrying forty 100-lb bombs. The airfield was not serviceable until way after the war, and I was in there in 1953 and the scars were still visible. I always thought we could have done more damage with such loads of 100 pounders than all the heavier bombs.

UNIT INSIGNIA ON AIRCRAFT

Below and on the page opposite are ten photos from Colonel Kane's collection showing Army Air Corps' squadron, group and special insignias as painted on the sides of various aircraft as unit identification. All of the photos were taken in the period from the middle of 1933 to the early months of 1934. A number of the insignias are fairly well-known through their long squadron usage but several insignias in use at the time were unofficial and were shortly supplanted by another form that did become official at a later date.



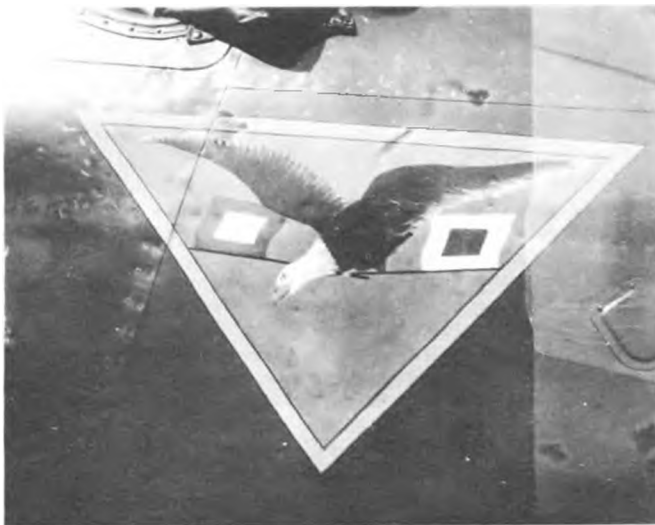
Insignia of the 13th Attack Squadron of the 3rd Attack Group on Curtiss A-3B, 30-241.



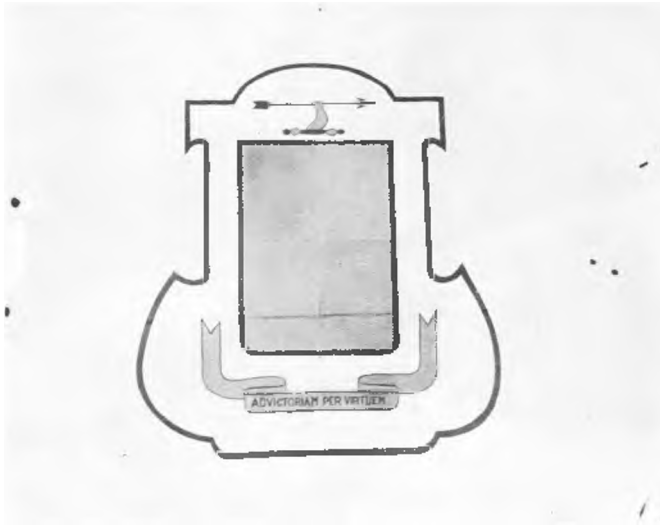
Insignia of the 90th Attack Squadron of the 3rd Attack Group on Curtiss A-3B, 30-17.



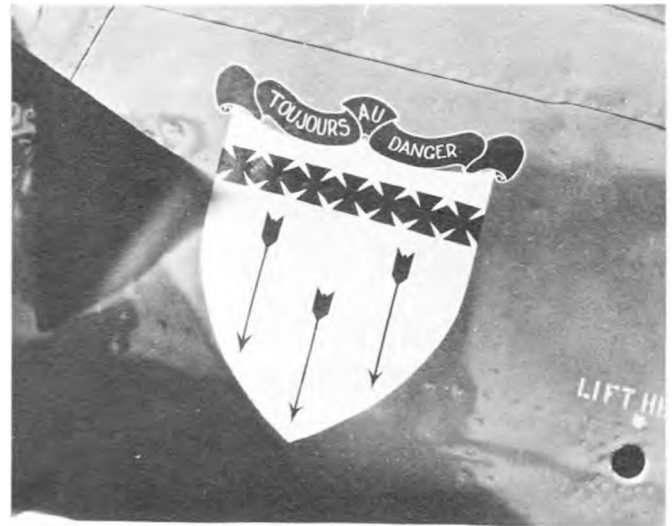
Insignia of the 1st Pursuit Group. Selfridge Field, Michigan, on tail of Fokker C-14.



Insignia of Lt Col. H. H. Arnold of the 1st Bomb Wing, March Field, California.



Early and unofficial insignia of 20th Pursuit Group on Boeing P-26A of the Group Commander.



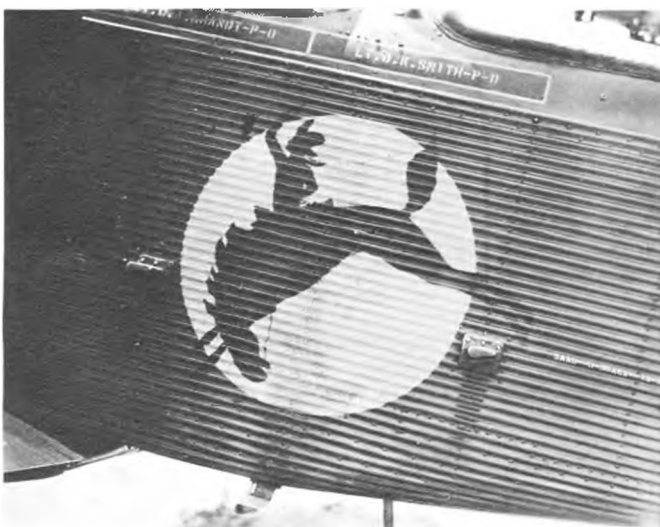
Early and unofficial insignia of 17th Pursuit Group on Boeing P-12. Motto still in use.



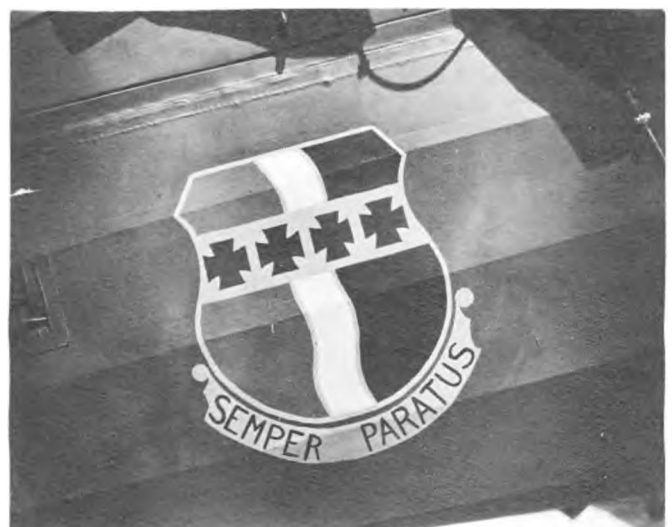
Early and unofficial insignia of 55th Pursuit Squadron, 20th Pursuit Group, on Boeing P-12.



Insignia of the 43rd Pursuit Squadron on the baggage compartment door of a Boeing P-12.



Insignia of the 88th Observation Squadron, at Brooks Field, Texas, on Thomas Morse O-19.



Insignia of the 9th Observation Group, Mitchel Field, on rear fuselage of Curtiss O-1G.