



Curtiss P-40L Warhawk of the French Air Force used as a trainer about March 1944. (Etablissement Cinema des Armees)

CURTISS P-40 IN FRENCH SERVICE

By J. CUNY

First French interest in a version of the Curtiss Hawk powered by an inline engine giving greater power than the Pratt & Whitney R-1830 engine of the Hawk 75-A manifested itself at the beginning of World War II. Actually, the French Air Force ordered 140 Hawk H 81-A-1s before the June 1940 collapse. These aircraft were diverted from U. S. Army Air Corps' orders for P-40 aircraft, April 1940, and they were delivered, beginning in September 1940, to the RAF as Tomahawk Is. French pilots were not to fly the type until more than two years later, after the Allied landings in North Africa.

When U. S. personnel visited the French base at Casablanca, after the November 1942 North African landings, they saw a famous insignia related to their own service history. This was the Indian Head (Sioux) insignia painted on the fuselages of Hawk 75s of the French Air Force's 1st Escadrille, GC II/5. One man who saw these insignias was Col. Willis, a U. S. pilot in the famous "Escadrille Lafayette" volunteer unit of World War I, and he helped GC II/5 become the first French fighter unit to reequip with modern aircraft and so resume the fight against German and Italian forces. Thanks to his assistance this Groupe received 25 Curtiss P-40F Warhawks (with long fuselages). The commanding officer, Ctd Rozanoff, (1) and the escadrille leaders made their first P-40 flights on 26 November 1942, the day after the planes had been presented to the Groupe.

Everything appeared to be going well but, in reality, there were political and administrative difficulties. GC II/5 had fought fiercely against U. S. forces during the fratricidal combats of 8 to 11 November, and Allied Commanders were not fully convinced of the desire of the unit's pilots to resume operations against the

Axis powers. At the same time, there was a lot of political trouble in the French Command as several different, and opposed, personalities tried to create a legal government--General Charles de Gaulle, Free French; Admiral Jean Darlan, number two personality in the ex-Vichy government; and General Henri Giraud, representative of the French North African Army. Under such conditions, U. S. leaders wished to strictly control GC II/5 by attaching it to an Army Air Force fighter group.

After a month of negotiations and pilot training, plans for such an attachment were cancelled and the unit became officially known as the "Groupe Lafayette" on 24 December 1942. (Previously, only the 1st Escadrille had the name and the Indian Head insignia.) Thirteen P-40s left Morocco on 8 January. They stopped at Algiers on their way to Tunisia, and an official ceremony was organized to take place before Generals Eisenhower and Doolittle and various French and Allied V.I.P.'s.

The first planes of GC II/5 appeared over southern Tunisia on 9 January 1943. There were only 11 Warhawks, however, as a serious, ill-timed incident, involving two planes, had occurred. Two pilots, instead of flying to the Tunisian Front, flew across the Mediterranean and crash-landed their planes in recently German-occupied southern France, near the town of Sete. (2)

As expounded by some U. S. officers, this was a near perfect example of the lack of fighting spirit in the French forces, and for a time it threatened the continued existence of the Groupe. However, the main result of the incident was to delay the reequipment of other French Air Force units for several months. In the meantime, the Groupe Lafayette had to blot this desertion from U. S. memories. It became a part of the USAAF 33rd

Fighter Group, under XII Air Support Command, and its base was at Thelepte. The Groupe Lafayette gave immediate proof of its desire to fight:

9 January: Eleven P-40s landed at the Thelepte base

10 January: First victories: Two Ju 88s shot down

11 January: First losses: Adjt Chef Delannoy killed and Lt Le Stum severely injured.

Thelepte, near the small Tunisian town of Feriana, was not to prove a garden spot for any Allied unit at this time, least of all for the men of 11/5 who were reinforced with 12 more planes on 17 January. The enemy base of Kairouan was not far away and enemy pilots were well trained and flew superior machines. These were Me 109F's and FW 190A's which had important performance advantages over the P-40s. Their speed and climb superiority did not permit the Warhawks to intercept them and gave the tactical advantage to the Luftwaffe planes.

Only five German fighters were credited to the Groupe Lafayette for about the same number of aircraft losses. The remarkable strength of the P-40 airframe, however, limited the loss of life in air action to only the already-mentioned death of Adjt Chef Dellanoy. The second in command, Cdt Stehlin (3), had to bail out of his aircraft when hit, and Sergeant-Chefs Gisclon and Denaix crash landed in the mountains (Denaix twice!) but did not suffer injuries.

More dangerous to the unit was enemy ground attack. Frequently, enemy fighter-bombers appeared unexpectedly, after flying low over the mountainous front. Allied personnel, as well as aircraft and ground equipment, suffered from such raids. Coisenau and Cavalli (4) were killed by a bomb during one such attack, the second and third pilot losses of the Groupe Lafayette.

ROMMEL'S FEBRUARY OFFENSIVE

When German forces under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel launched a surprise offensive against Allied positions in Tunisia in mid-February 1943, his troops quickly

pierced Faid Pass and pushed back the 1st U. S. Armored Division at Sidi Bou Zid. Thereafter they moved quickly toward Sbeitla, Gafsa...and Feriana! On 16 February the German 17th Light Division spearhead was only 15 miles from the airfield at Thelepte.

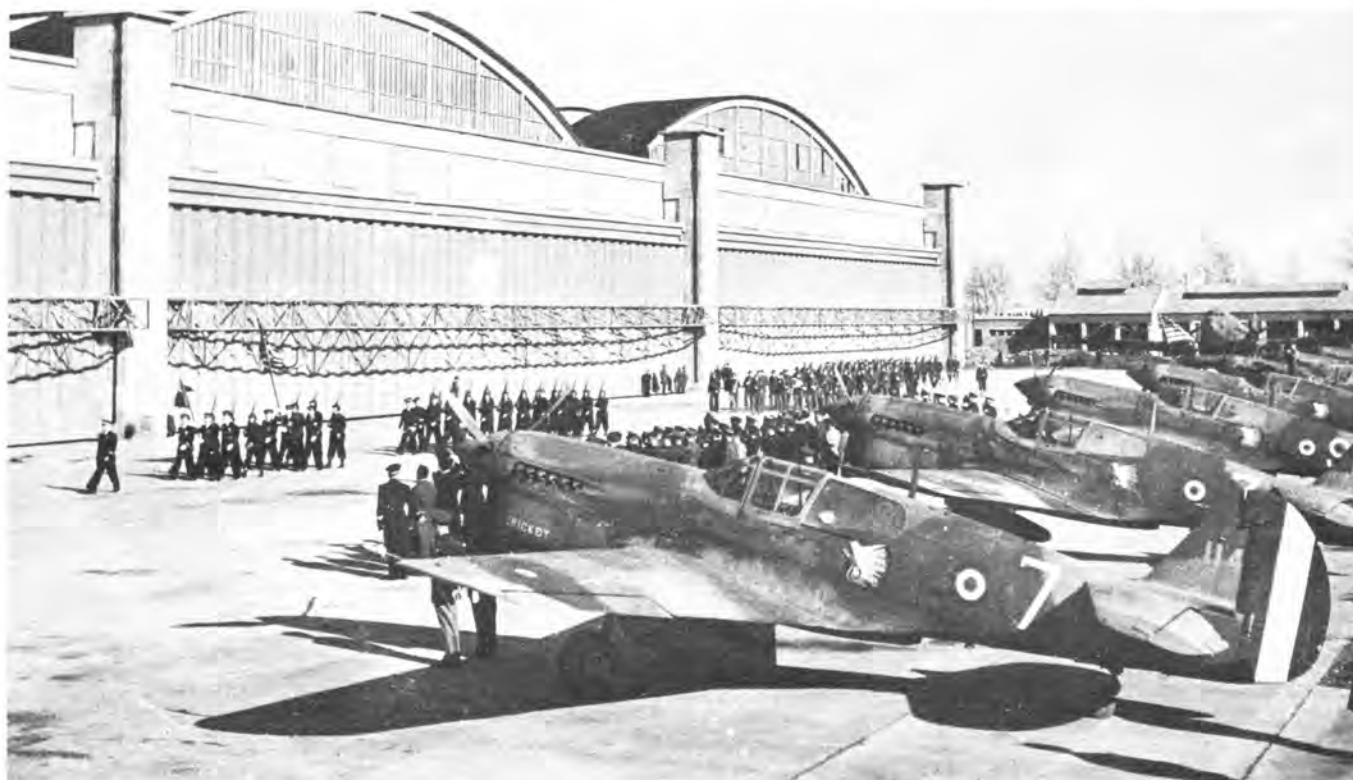
An evacuation was ordered, but only 12 French P-40s, of the 16 remaining, could take off at dawn of the 17th. Three were unflyable and one could not start its engine. The four Warhawks, and no less than 28 Spitfires, were burned before enemy forces overran the airfield. (Rommel himself wrote that his troops had found thirty wreckages on this airfield.)

The planes of 11/5 were ordered to land at Youks-les-Bains but landed instead at Le Kouif. They were unable to operate as the ground crews and some pilots had left Thelepte under enemy fire and were retreating through the mountains.

On 20 February, GC 11/5 was ready to resume operations, with 13 planes, from the Kalaa-Djerba base. The same day the German 10th Panzer, after a difficult passage through Kasserine Pass, was approaching Thala, eight miles south of the P-40s' new base. The British 6th Armored Division moved into position to halt the enemy tanks but, this time, evacuation was not delayed. The Groupe Lafayette took off toward Biskra in southern Algeria on 21 February. During the flight, bad weather in the mountains caused two planes to crash, and Lt Casenobe became 11/5's fourth fatal casualty.

Up to 12 March surviving Warhawks operated over the Biskra-Gafsa area, mainly giving aerial support to Leclerc's units. After a south to north crossing of the Sahara Desert, in which all remnants of German or Italian Saharan garrisons trying to reach southern Tunisia were destroyed, General Leclerc disposed small motorized columns on the left flank of the Eighth Army, under General Bernard Montgomery. GC 11/5 returned to Morocco on 15 March for reequipping with only five planes still in flyable condition.

During two months of operations, including intercep-



Groupe Lafayette's P-40s lined up for official ceremony at Algiers on 9 January 1943 while on their way to Tunisia. March-past with recently presented U. S. banner is led by Cdt Rozanoff. The first three planes are from the 1st Escadrille and the fourth plane appears to be from the 2nd (Stork) Escadrille. (Etablissement Cinema des Armees)



Personal plane of Commandant Rozanoff, P-40F-5, serial number 41-14369. The plane's name, MADKOT, is a contraction of his and his wife's first names. (E.C.A.)



Sgt Chef Gisclon's P-40F-1 at Casablanca, 5 January '43. In 20 January combat Gisclon shot down FW 190 and then crash-landed damaged plane and burned it. (M. Gisclon)



Warhawk of the Groupe Lafayette. Sioux Indian Head and green diagonal band are clearly visible. (E.C.A.)



P-40F-5, serial unknown, of Lieutenant Villaceque, the commanding officer of 1st Escadrille, 11/5. (E.C.A.)



Sergeant Chef Denaix's P-40F-1, '9', probably 41-14271, of 2nd Escadrille. Denaix was shot down by FW 190, making an emergency landing in the country during early 1943. (M. Gisclon)



Probably S/Lt G. Gauthier getting into P-40L of the 2nd Escadrille, GC II/5. Stork insignia and yellow outlined roundel give date as Summer 1943 at Bone. (E.C.A.)

tion missions, bomber escorts, ground attack and evacuations, the Groupe Lafayette had lost 20 of its original 25 fighters. Six P-40s had been shot down or obliged to crash, two had been accidentally crashed due to mountain weather conditions, two had been "lost over Mediterranean Sea", four had been voluntarily burned to prevent them falling into enemy hands, and six had been lost due to various operational causes. Several of the remaining

planes of this first batch were later used by the Meknes Ecole de Chasse, in spite of their considerable service use.

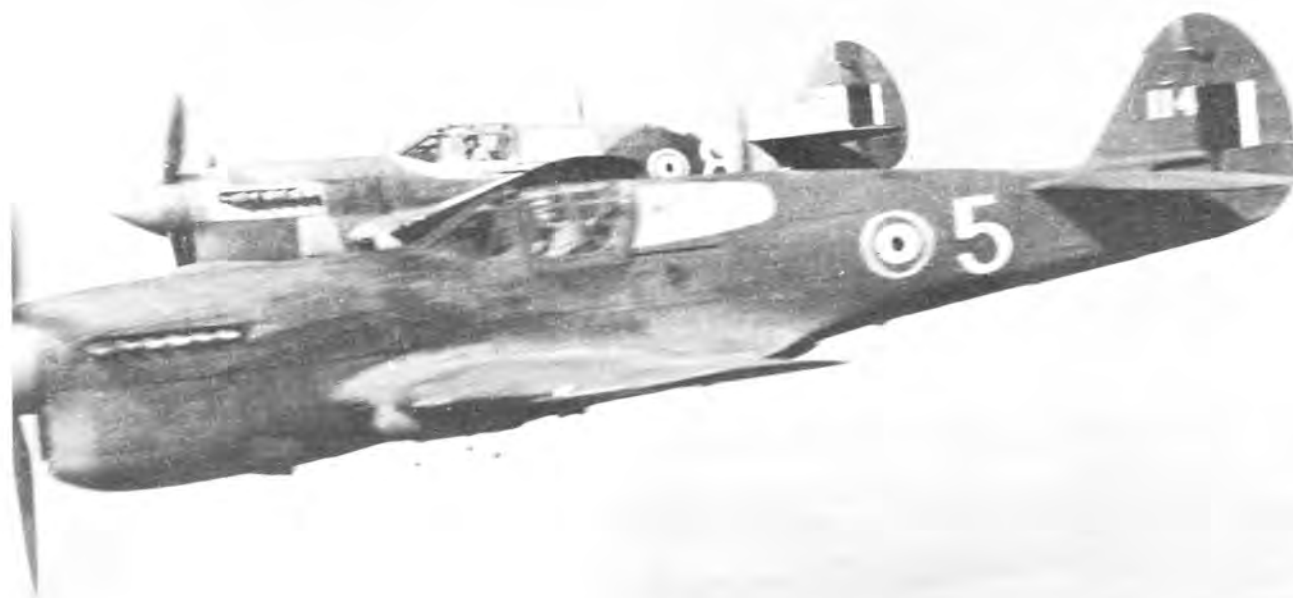
The Squadron had flown 287 sorties, totaling 576 flying hours and was officially credited with seven confirmed victories. Pilots seriously hoped to improve this score.

SECOND TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN

Beginning 25 March 1943, GC II/5 received new P-40L Warhawks that had been assembled at Oran, West Algeria. There were 36 of them which was far more planes than needed to equip a normal F.A.F. squadron, but the Groupe Lafayette was more than just a squadron. It had achieved extreme importance as a symbol of French revival, and numerous pilots tried to serve with the only modern French fighter unit of this period.

To absorb the additional aircraft there was a supplementary escadrille, actually the successor to the 1st Escadrille of GC II/4 of July 1940. Now the Groupe Lafayette was made up of the "Sioux", the "ducks" (which was the nickname of the 2nd Escadrille Storks), and the "Red Devils." All of these escadrilles had been famous units when equipped with Curtiss Hawk 75s in the 1939-40 period. (See JOURNAL, Vol II, No 1.) With 40 planes and 38 pilots the Groupe arrived in Tunisia just as Axis forces were surrendering in May 1943. They were based at Sebala, and the pilots had the satisfaction of participating in the Victory Fly-Past over Tunis on the 20th of May 1943.

At this time the Groupes' two commanders, Cdts Rozanoff and Stehlin, had just been replaced, probably be-



Curtiss P-40F and P-40L, still desert-camouflaged, probably from the Meknes Ecole de Chasse, March 1944. (E.C.A.)

cause the High Command disliked the independence they had given to their unit. The unit was relegated to coastal patrol and defense missions from Sebala during May and June, and the crews' hopes of participating in the invasion of Sicily were not met. After a move to Bone they gave aerial defense to naval convoys under command of the Allied "Bone Fighter Section."

The Groupe began to receive new planes during December 1943 and became the first French unit to operate Republic P-47s. This was a reward for seven thankless months of defense and naval escort work, during which the Groupe Lafayette had flown some 1500 missions, totaling 2300 flying hours. The reequipping marked the end of the French operational career of the P-40.

OPERATIONAL TRAINING

Curtiss P-40s were used for conversion training, from the middle of 1943, on such Moroccan bases as Meknes and Marrakech. The first planes used were the few remaining P-40F's from the Groupe Lafayette, and later all surviving P-40L's were used. Apparently the training units also received aircraft direct from other Allied sources, including some Allison-powered P-40E's. In fact, the author believes these Kittyhawks were used only on a loan basis, and this is supported by the 1943 North African system of Allied maintenance pools, using 1940 French facilities. (There were workshops, says "Ateliers Industriels de l'Air", on several important bases. They were fully used during the 1939-40 period to assemble Martin 167s or Douglas DB-7s, and these small factories did important repair work during 1942-44 on Spitfires, Hurricanes and all types of P-40s.)

In training service, both long and short fuselage P-40F and P-40L types were used. They remained in service even after the end of WW II. Several found their way to south-western France. On the Mont-de-Marsan Base, the main French evaluation center, there were still some flyable P-40s during 1946 and 1947.

CAMOUFLAGE AND MARKINGS

The first batch of 25 P-40F's retained their desert camouflage paint scheme of sand and brown colors. (The colors were disrespectfully referred to by French crews as "Caca d'Oie" or "Goose droppings.") The U. S. star in circle insignias had been covered over by U. S. ground crews with French roundels of the same dimensions, and these appeared "enormous" to the French pilots. The reaction was to overpaint them hastily with



Post war P-40 on the Marrakech Base, Morocco with gray-green standard RAF-type finish. (Author's collection)

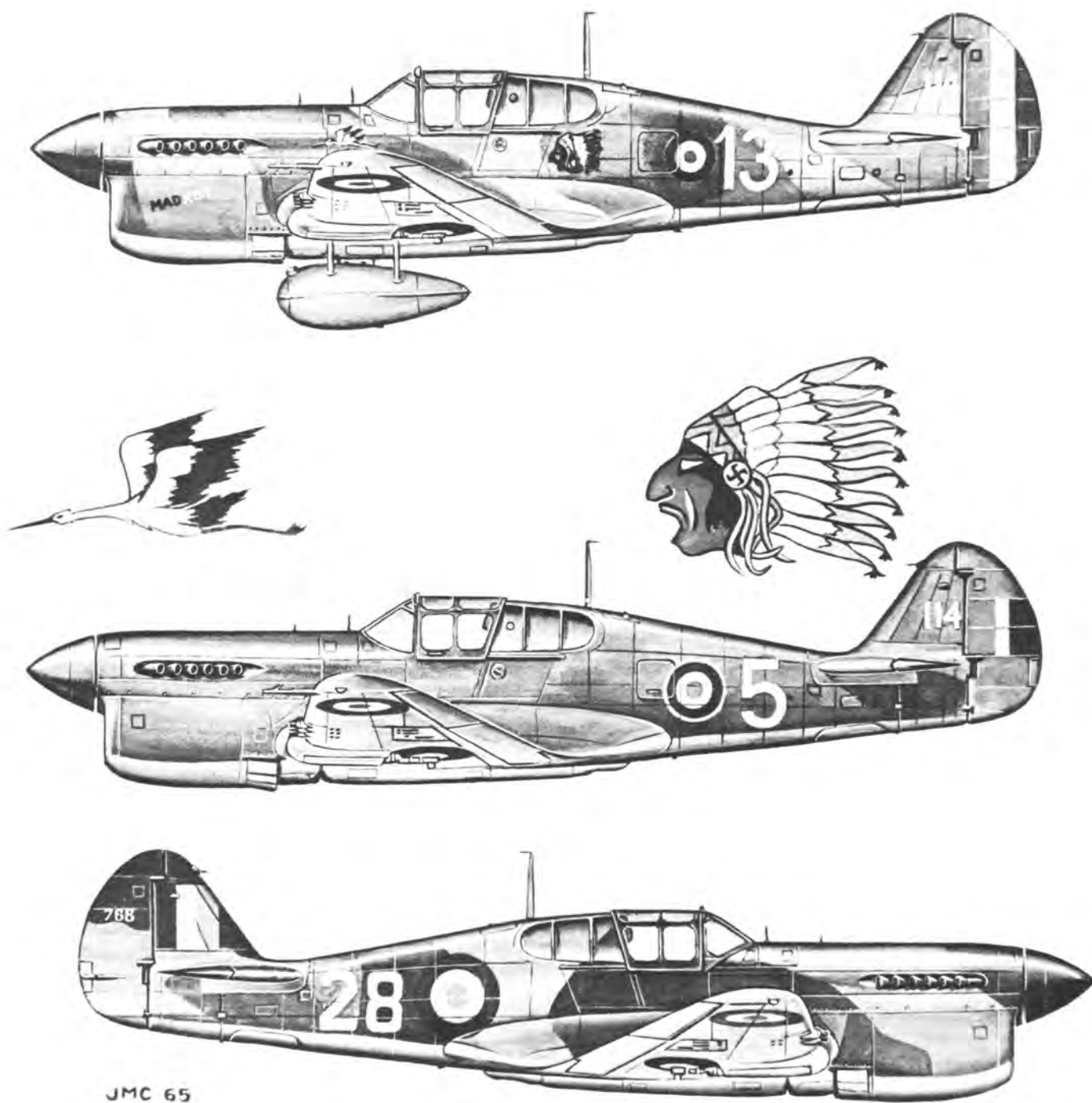
brown (a different shade of brown than that used in the camouflage finish) and then apply the abnormally small national insignias that had been used on Hawk 75s in 1939. On many photos taken at this time the brown "joint" is clearly visible. Large size roundels were kept only under the wings. Full rudder tricolor stripes were applied and covered half of the U. S. serial number. There were a few cases of planes having a U. S. flag, previously painted on the side of the fuselage, overpainted with brown. The second batch of P-40L's included some aircraft in desert camouflage but most were olive drab with gray undersurfaces.

With the official adoption of the Lafayette name for the full unit, all planes had the famous Indian Head insignia painted on the fuselage sides, just under the rear transparent panel. The "true" Lafayette Escadrille (the first one) had only this insignia, generally painted over a short diagonal green band (reminiscent of the 1939-40 campaign). Planes of the 2nd Escadrille had a small "Stork" insignia painted on the sides of the fuselage just in front of the windshield. For the second Tunisian campaign, from April 1943, the three escadrilles returned to the old French tradition and used only their own insignia (Sioux, Stork and Red Devil). These insignias were always applied to the rear sides of the fuselage.

Large size fuselage numbers were used to identify



Curtiss P-40L Warhawk of the Meknes Ecole de Chasse seen in flight during the post-war years. Number appearing on the rudder is "755." (M. Mutin Collection)

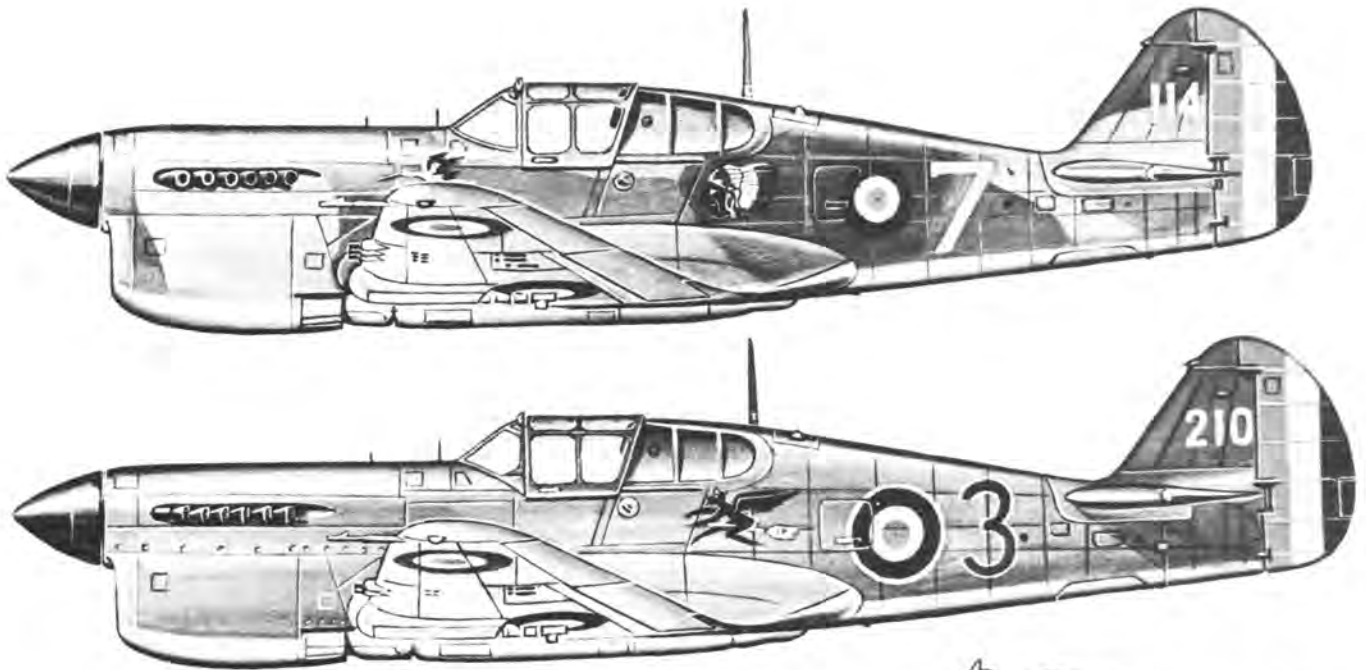


(Top) P-40F-5, 41-14369, "13" of Commandant Rozanoff. Sand and brown desert camouflage finish. Insignias of both escadrilles. Name, MADKOT, painted in black and white. Small fuselage roundel painted over "large" one. First three digits of serial on vertical fin, yellow.

Black and white "Stork" insignia, of 2nd Escadrille, with red beak and feet. "Sioux" Indian Head insignia of 1st Escadrille has red, white and blue feathers.

(Middle) P-40F-5, unknown serial, flown at the Meknes Ecole de Chasse after being completely repainted with U. S. olive drab. White fuselage identification number "5." Yellow outlined French standard roundels. Tricolor stripes on rudder are of a non-standard type.

(Bottom) P-40L-10, serial probably 42-10768, of the Meknes Ecole de Chasse with white fuselage identification number "28." Medium Gray and Forest Green camouflage scheme similar to the standard RAF-type finish. Fuselage roundel and fin stripes are non-standard type.



(Top) P-40F-1, unknown serial, "7", of the 2nd Escadrille, GC 11/5. Identification number is light blue. Aircraft probably belonged to Lt Boudier.

(Bottom) P-40L-10, unknown serial, of the 3rd Escadrille, GC 11/5. Identification number "3" is red. Red painted "Red Devil" insignia with the broom being yellow.



individual aircraft. Each escadrille used the same run of numbers, from 1 to 12 or 13, painted on the planes in the same style, but those of the 1st Escadrille were white, those of the 2nd were light blue and those of the 3rd were red. The Commanding Officer, Cdt Rozanoff, used the number "13" in memory of the earlier commander of GC 11/5, Cdt Tricaud, who had been killed by a Wildcat in his Curtiss Hawk 75 number "13."

It is presently almost impossible to identify the U. S. serial numbers for these planes. French tricolors hid half of the number on each side of the rudder, and the small serial listing, on the forward fuselage, can rarely be read in photos.

During their use as operational trainers, P-40s retained their original camouflage or were repainted when it became necessary. Many standard or non-standard schemes were used, including RAF day fighter's gray-green scheme which was certainly inspired by Spitfires of the same Meknes Ecole de Chasse. National insignias varied also, and identification numbers were applied to school planes in a "squared style" with a range of numbers from "1" to "28" or "29."

FOOTNOTES

(1) Cdt Rozanoff was to become the most famous of post-war French test pilots, being particularly well known for his work on the Ouragan-Mysteres series.

(2) This fact was rarely report. Undoubtedly the pilots had been psychologically shocked by the fierce dog-fights of November 1942, during which six of their friends lost their lives. Both men were fine fighters and one is known to have planned an escape to Gibraltar in 1940 to continue fighting against the Germans--

after twice being shot down and being credited with four Germans during the 1939-40 campaign. Cowardice was certainly not his motive for desertion. One man is still living and the author prefers to limit details.... GC 11/5 was probably again deeply indebted to Col Willis for his intervention at Allied Headquarters after this desertion.

(3) Cdt Stehlin was to become French Air Force Commander in Chief in the postwar years.

(4) Jerome Cavali was a famous pre-WW II aerobatics pilot, flying colorful planes in Air Meets.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Following this, the third article by the author on U. S. aircraft in service with the French Air Force during World War II, Mr. Cuny will cover several other types for the JOURNAL in Volumes 12 and 13, including the DB-7, the Dauntless and the Thunderbolt. Also planned for next year is a summary of additional photos on the Martin 167 and the Hawk 75A.