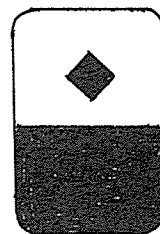
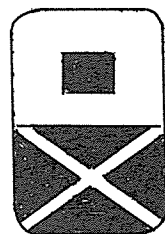
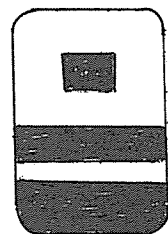
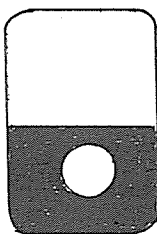
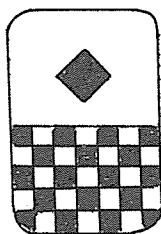
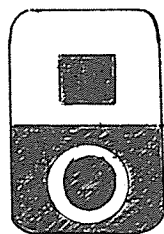
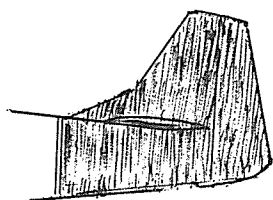


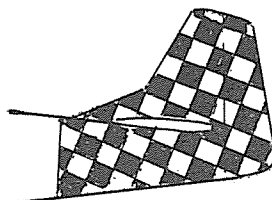
5th BOMB WING SYMBOLS



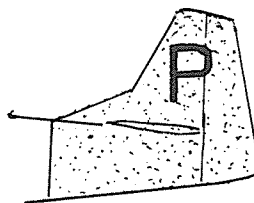
EXAMPLES OF B-24 TAIL MARKINGS



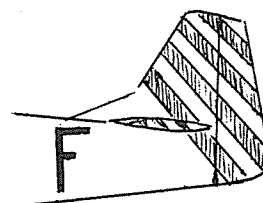
332nd
FIGHTER GROUP



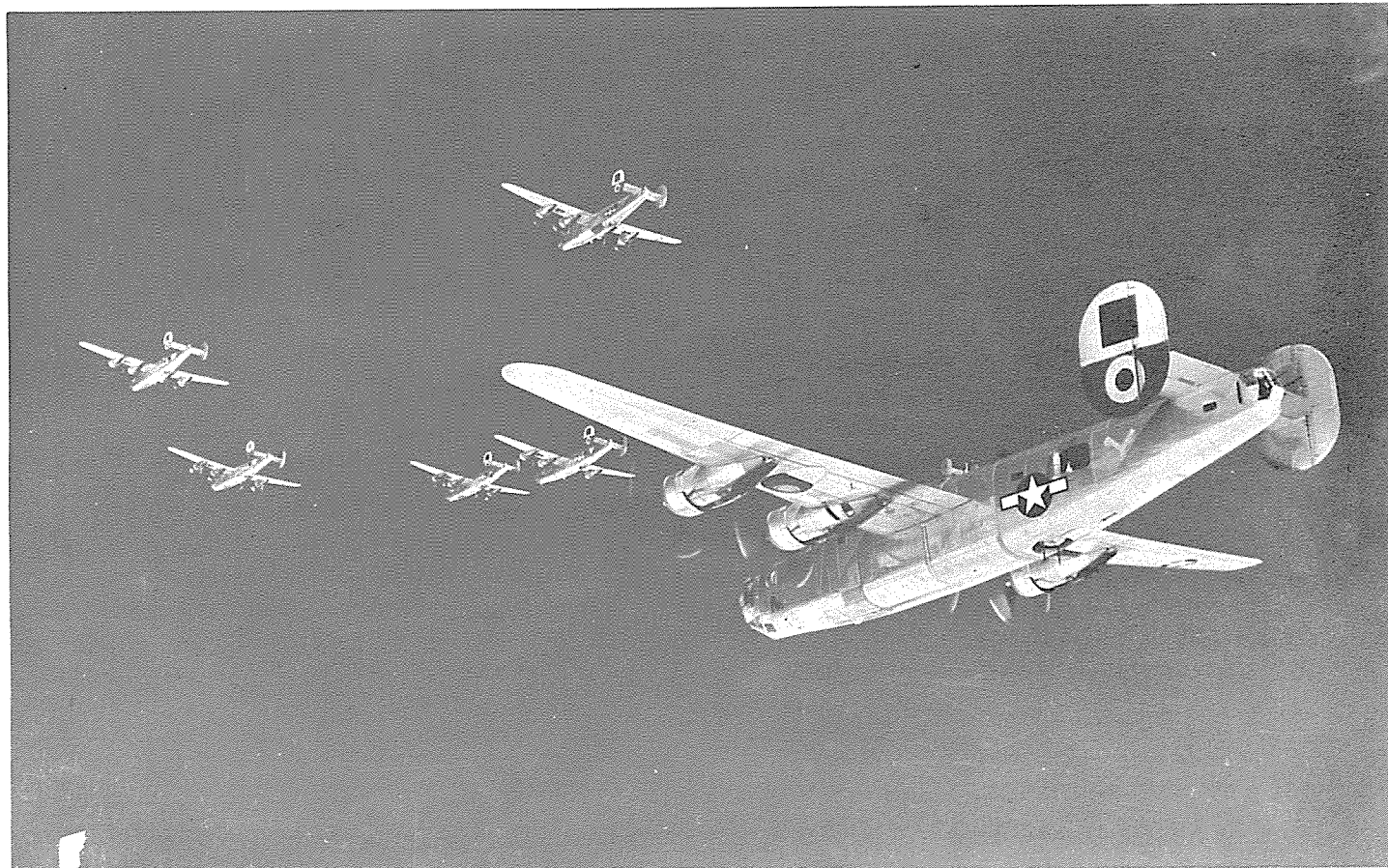
325th
FIGHTER GROUP



52nd
FIGHTER GROUP



31st
FIGHTER GROUP



W.W. II AIRCRAFT MARKINGS OF THE 15th AIR FORCE

by Roger A. Freeman

The U.S. 15th A. A. F. was officially born on November 1st, 1943 as the Mediterranean contribution to the strategic bombing offensive against Hitler's Third Reich and satellites. The new air force took over two B-24 groups from the old 9th A. F. and four B-17 groups from the 12th, the latter being original diversions from the 8th A. F. By diverting a further 13 B-24 and 2 B-17 groups from the 8th's quota the 15th was brought to its planned strength of 21 groups by April 1944. Three P-38 units which had come from England with the 12th A. F., and were scheduled to return there prior to the Normandy invasion, were finally claimed by the 15th for escort duties. During April-June 1944, four single-engined fighter groups (previously 12th A. F.) converted to the P-51C to complete the fighter complement.

These groups had a varied assortment of unit identification markings and the following account covers those known to the author. Comprehensive coverage of 8th A. F. markings has appeared in many journals but little, if any, information has been published concerning aircraft decor of the junior partner of the USSTAF. It is hoped that this survey will promote correspondence to the journal filling in the many unrecorded details of 15th A. F. unit markings.

Fighters: The 31st and 52nd F. G's commenced combat flying in England in 1942 and were allotted the 2-letter code combinations for the identification of their squadrons. Upon conversion from Spitfire IX's to Mustangs in the 15th their code letter system was retained. Squadrons of the 31st F. G. were coded MX, HL, WZ, and those of the 52nd F. G., OP, WD, and VF. The same combinations were also used by two 8th A. F. groups in 1943 in an attempt to confuse the enemy as to unit movement. The 31st F. G. carried squadron letters in the conventional style, forward of the fuselage national insignia, with the individual a/c letter on the rear fuselage side. The 52nd, however, differed in that the a/c letter was painted on the fin and rudder. The 325th F. G. and the Negro 332nd had no lettering but used numerals for individual a/c identification. On the 325th machines there were always two digits; but the 332nd also made use of single digits. By the autumn of 1944 a pattern of colour markings had been fully developed. The 325th had been one of the first units in the Mediterranean (if not the first) to adopt such identification when in 1943 it painted its P-40's with checkered tails. In contrast to the 8th A. F.'s group identification by coloured nose markings and the 9th's adornment of fins and rudders, the 15th fighters colored the whole tail unit and adjoining area of fuselage with group identification. The 31st featured four diagonal red stripes across each surface, the 52nd all-yellow surfaces, the 332nd all red, and the 325th its checkerboard of black and white (one source gives this as black and yellow). These group markings were often repeated on the wing tips of the P-51's. In addition to the group colours, the spinner and an adjoining band around the cowl were painted in a squadron colour.

Not so much is known of the P-38 decor. The 1st and 14th F. G's had come down from the United Kingdom, one with code letters and the other with numeral identification. Photographic evidence seems to point to both groups using two digit numbers while part of the 15th. One group (believed to be the 14th) carried its numbers on both booms and noses of its Lightnings. The 82nd came down from England with a different system of letter identification which was perpetuated throughout its service with the 15th. Each squadron had a different letter - A, B, & C. The appropriate letter being

painted on the boom followed by an individual a/c letter. Group colour markings were also applied to the tails of the Lightnings and appear to have taken the form of different coloured stripes.

Bombers: From available evidence, no group or squadron identification was carried by the 97th and 301st B.G.'s when they departed the 8th A.F. The 12th and 97th apparently used a small white triangle symbol, and the 301st a disc symbol. Both markings were carried on the B-17 fins. When the 5th Bomb Wing reached its final composition of 6 B-17 groups the letter 'Y' was adopted as identification with each group having a different symbol as a background. The reason for the selection of 'Y' was that this letter was not featured in any of the 8th A.F.'s group markings. The 97th B.G. used Y in a triangle, 301st Y in a circle, 2nd B.G. is believed to have used Y in a square, 99th believed Y in a diamond. The other two groups, 463 and 483, carried Y in a five sided figure and in a circle segment, but which is which is not clear. These markings were in black and white on the a/c fins. In the 2nd, 97th, 99th, & 301st B.G.'s squadrons were identified by means of a single digit on the fin, each of the squadrons in a group being numbered 1 to 4. Sometimes this squadron number was superimposed on a white disc. In the 463rd and 483rd B.G.'s, one unit used individual a/c letters surrounded with a square, circle, or other symbol as squadron identification (this was attributed to the 483rd but no positive proof has been forthcoming). Additional to the above markings, the B-17 units appeared with coloured rudders and elevators in the last six months of the war. One source gives the colour as green but here again the information has yet to be substantiated.

B-24's sported a combination of symbols and colours on fins and rudders as identification for Wings, Groups, and Squadrons. Little reliable information on this system is available to the author but the following details throw some light on these markings. The outer surface of fins and rudders were painted in two colours, each covering half the area and usually with a horizontal division. Red and white are known to have been used and photo evidence suggests that use was also made of black or blue. It appears that the colouring and positioning identified the Combat Wing. Superimposed on these colours were various symbols. In the upper half they took the form of a square, circle, or diamond, but sometimes there were no symbols. In the bottom half, vertical, horizontal, and diagonally crossed bars, circles, and checkerboard appeared as various identification marks. It seems likely that the upper symbols indicated the squadrons and the lower ones the groups but the reverse may be the case. Individual a/c were usually distinguished by two digit numerals on the rear fuselage through at least two groups used letters for this purpose. The 98th B.G. is reported to have been one of these.

It is appreciated that this survey is somewhat sketchy and in parts almost resorts to surmise. This is due, in some measure to the conflicting reports given by ex-15th personnel who, understandably, have confused memories of those far off days. Photographic evidence, however, constitutes the chief source for this article.