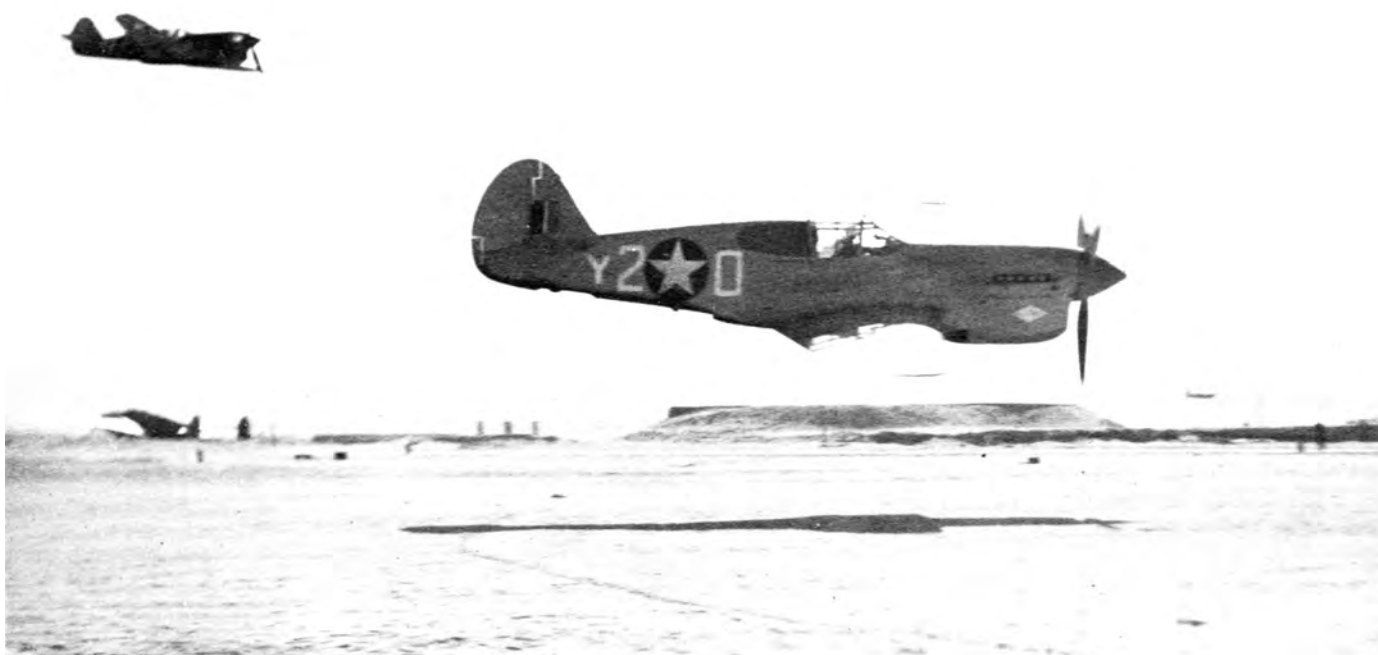




Curtiss P-40F, Y20- with yellow diamond of the 314th Fighter Squadron, buzzes Tobruk Airfield. (Photo - Howard)

9th Air Force in the Desert

By KENNC. RUST

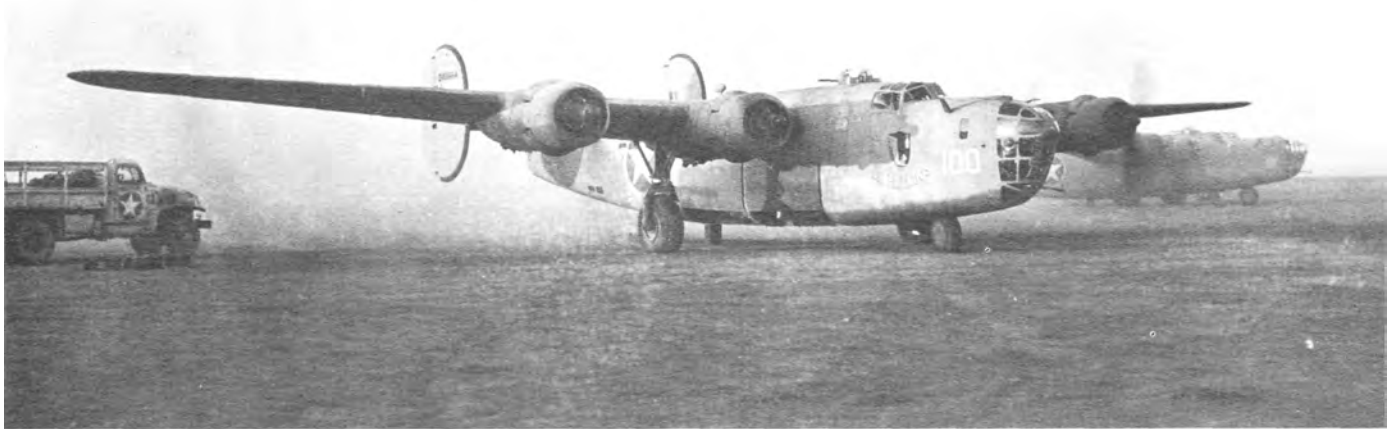
When the United States Army Middle East Air Force (USAMEAF) was activated on 28 June 1942 with Major General Lewis H. Brereton as Commanding Officer, there were only two Army Air Force units under the command which would, on 12 November 1942, become the 9th Air Force. The two original units were the Halverson Detachment (code named HALPRO) and the Brereton Detachment. HALPRO had come to the Middle East in early June 1942 on its way to China to undertake bombing of Japan with its 23 Consolidated B-24D Liberators, but had been held in the theater to help the critical situation stemming from General Erwin Rommel's drive across Libya and Egypt to El Alamein. HALPRO carried out its first mission on 11/12 June, attacking the Ploesti oil refineries. The Brereton Detachment was made up of 10 to 12 Boeing B-17E Flying Fortresses from the 9th Bombardment Squadron and the 436th Bombardment Squadron (formerly the 88th Reconnaissance Squadron). These units had been rushed to the Middle East from the 7th Bomb Group in India with General Brereton to help in halting the on-rushing Axis tide. The B-17s flew their first mission on 2 July 1942, attacking Tobruk.

The two detachments were formed into the First Provisional Group, with the Halverson and Brereton Squadrons, on 20 July 1942 in Palestine. As far as can be determined their aircraft had the normal AAF finish of olive drab with neutral grey undersurfaces and the white star in blue circle national insignia. The B-17Es carried an Aircraft Number, about 30 inches high and in white, centered on the vertical fin and painted over

the middle digits of the serial number. These numbers appear to have ranged from "1" to "12" or so.

In the late Summer of 1942, AAF aircraft in the Middle East began carrying what can be referred to as a theater marking. This was an RAF fin flash, a rectangle on the vertical fin made up of three vertical stripes of red, white and blue, from front to rear—carried on both sides of the fins, whether single (P-40s) or twin fins (B-24s and B-25s). Thereafter, all AAF fighters and bombers operating from the Middle East, with or in conjunction with the RAF's Desert Air Force, carried the fin flash. Thus, this became a standard marking for the 9th Air Force in the Desert and did not denote, as commonly stated, that the aircraft carrying the fin flash were reverse Lend-Lease RAF aircraft.

The first complete groups to come to the Middle East and join USAMEAF were the 12th Bombardment Group, Medium (with 57 North American B-25C and B-25D Mitchells), the 57th Fighter Group (with 72 Curtiss P-40F Warhawks which were flown off the aircraft carrier Ranger to Accra, Gold Coast and then ferried across Africa) and the 98th Bombardment Group, Heavy (with 35 Consolidated B-24D Liberators). All of these aircraft had an overall finish of Sand 49 paint—a finish that tended to reflect the red hues of the desert and so won for the color the name of Desert Pink. All of the aircraft also carried the white star on blue circle national insignia, and the serial number, less the first digit, on the tail—on B-25s the serial numbers were yellow on fin and rudder, on B-24s the serial numbers were black on the



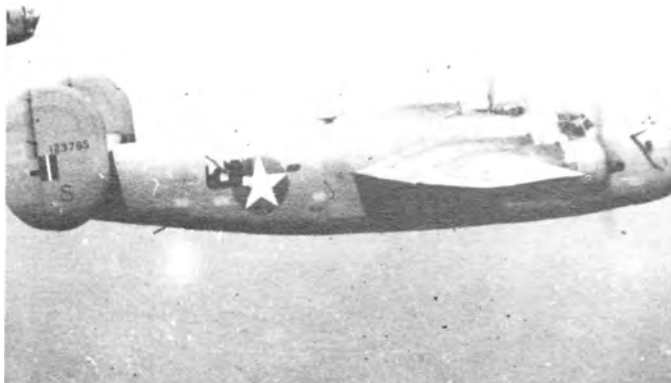
Consolidated B-24D, 42-40664, of the 376th Bomb Group, the Liberandos, returns to air base near Benghazi after famous Ploesti mission. No. 100 has Sand finish, yellow edged national insignia and fin flash. (USAF 67029AC)

fin, and on P-40s the serials were yellow on the fin and rudder.

Before all of its aircraft arrived in the theater, seven 98th Group B-24s carried out the Group's first mission on 1 August 1942. By the 7th of August, the 345th and 415th Squadrons and Group Headquarters were located at Ramat David, Palestine, and the 343rd and 344th Squadrons were at St. Jean d' Acre, Palestine. Subsequently the 98th moved to the Delta area in November 1942 and to Libya in February 1943. Shortly after arrival in the Middle East each aircraft of the Group was given an individual Aircraft Letter which appeared in various places on the vertical fin (sometimes below, sometimes in front of, and sometimes above the fin flash), usually in red. These letters were assigned by Group Headquarters to Squadrons and then to aircraft haphazardly, with no intent of squadron identification. The aircraft were identified by the names and paintings on the nose, or lack of same, and most of these paintings were quite flamboyant—there being such aircraft as THE VULGAR VIRGIN, ROSY WRECKTOM, THE SQUAW and HAIL COLUMBIA.

(HAIL COLUMBIA was the B-24D, 41-11825, flown by Major John R. Kane while CO of the 343rd Squadron and before he became group CO on 27 December 1942. This plane is depicted in the painting by William E. Warren that appears on the back cover of this issue and shows the plane while Major Kane was flying it with the 343rd Squadron. At the beginning of 1943, 825 "was renamed GRUMPY with the 343rd but saw little service in the following seven months. When the Ploesti mission of 1 August 1943 came up, Colonel Kane again took command of 825, it was renamed HAIL COLUMBIA with a new painting on the nose that differed greatly from the original, and led the 98th to Ploesti in his original aircraft.)

About the beginning of 1943, the 343rd Squadron named all of its aircraft after Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, plus other characters such as THE WITCH and PRINCE CHARMING. Until July 1943, all B-24s of the Group carried the plain star in circle national insignia and then changed it to the red outlined, star in circle with white bars national insignia that became standard on 29 June 1943. The Liberators of the Pyramids bore this insignia when they took part in the



B-24D, 41-23705, Aircraft "S", of the 98th Bomb Group as seen from a sister-Liberator during a mission about the beginning of 1943. (Photo - Edward Rothkrug)



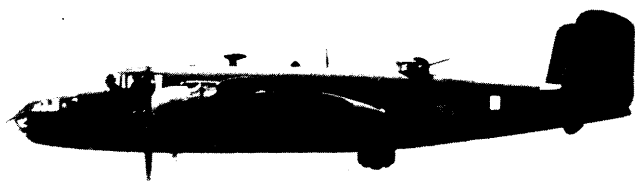
SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS B-24D, 42-40364, "Y" of the 343rd Squadron, 98th Bomb Group. She was lost to enemy fighters at Ploesti.



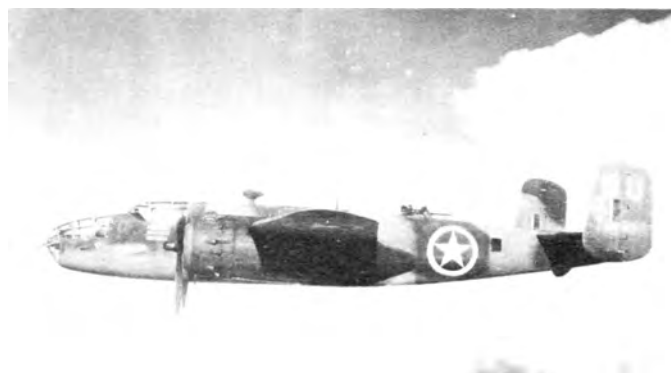
Curtiss P-40F of the 57th Fighter Group with insignia of the 64th Fighter Squadron during 1943. (USAF 59155AC)



While armourers work, a P-40 of the 86th Squadron, 79th Fighter Group shows part of a/c code. (USAF 23753AC)



Sand finished B-25D, 41-30123, No. 31, of the 82nd Bomb Squadron, 12th Bomb Group over Egypt. (USAF 23431AC)



Camouflage patterned B-25C, 42-32496, 8U is POON TANG of 488th Squadron, 340th Bomb Group. (Griff Murphey)

famous raid on Ploesti, 1 August 1943.

Effective 1 November 1943, the First Provisional Group became the 376th Bombardment Group, Heavy, with the 512th, 513th, 514th and 515th Squadrons. On 26 November 1942, the B-17s (513th Squadron) flew their last mission with the Group and thereafter the 376th was a complete B-24 group. Its Sand finished Liberators were identified by Aircraft Numbers that were painted in white, originally on the nose, about 20 inches high, and later added to the upper fins, about 15 inches high. A run of approximately twenty-five numbers was allocated to each squadron in turn. During 1943, the star in circle national insignia on 376th B-24s was adorned with a yellow outer ring, and it was with this form of marking that the Liberators of the 376th flew the Ploesti mission, 1 August 1943. The 376th Group received the name, The Liberandos.

The 12th Bombardment Group, Medium, carried out its first mission on 16 August 1942 while attaching itself to 3 Wing, South African Air Force, a unit (equivalent to an AAF group) which helped train the 12th in the ways of desert warfare. Introduced to action in small numbers, the 12th did not become a separate and integrated group until October 1942. However, from mid-August on, its Mitchells carried Aircraft Numbers on their tails. They were painted in white about 21 inches high, usually on the upper part of the fin and rudder but sometimes with their base just below the middle of the tail. These numbers, which were placed on the B-25s before the RAF fin flash which was painted over parts of the numbers on the original aircraft, were allocated as follows: 1 to 25 for the 81st Squadron, 26 to 50 for the 82nd Squadron, 51 to 75 for the 83rd Squadron, and 76 to 99 for the 434th Squadron. A few of the original B-25s with the 12th Group had Sand finishes with dark (olive drab?) underbellies while most were Sand overall. By the middle of 1943, the Group was operating a number of replacement Mitchells which had an olive drab finish with light gray undersurfaces.

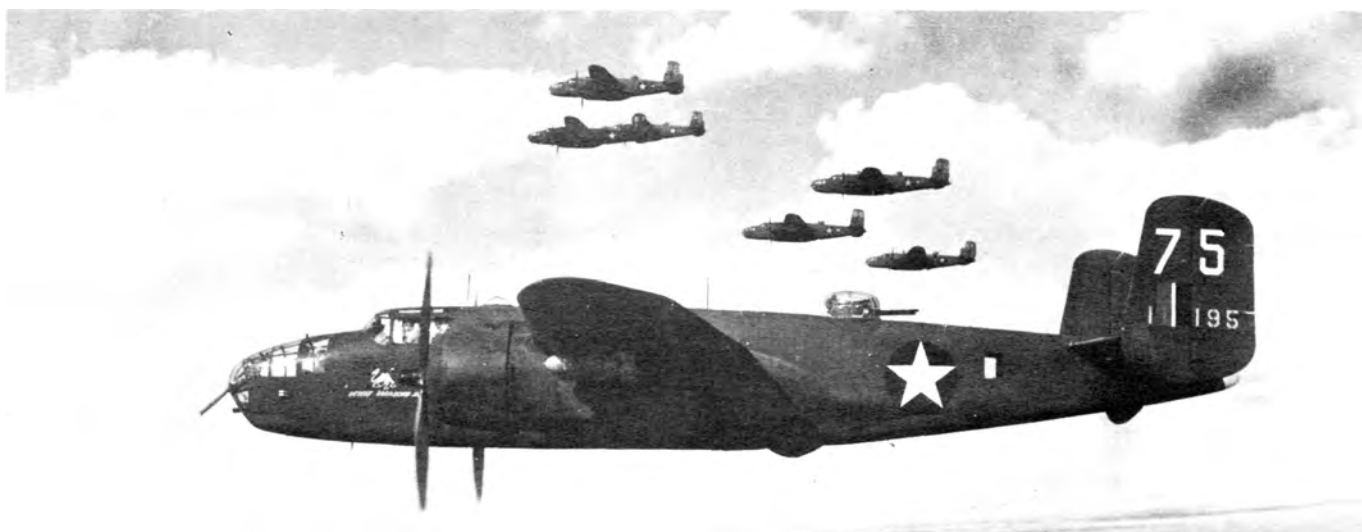
On 6 April 1943, the last unit to join the 9th Air Force, the 340th Bombardment Group, Medium, began flying missions with the 12th Group. Its Mitchells were Sand finished and carried the star in circle national insignia, ringed with yellow and the RAF fin flash. Shortly after beginning operations, the Group's B-25s began carrying Aircraft Codes on the tails. These consisted of a number and a letter, in white and about 18 inches high. The number was first and was the last digit of the squadron number--6 for the 486th, 7 for the 487th,

8 for the 488th, and 9 for the 489th--and was followed by a letter denoting the individual aircraft. At least some of the early aircraft of the 340th received a camouflage shadow finish with olive drab (?) patches being painted over the Sand finish all over the fuselage, wings and tail. It is believed that during August 1943 at least some of the 340th's Mitchells also bore the new white bars and red outline national insignia, although this may not have appeared until September.

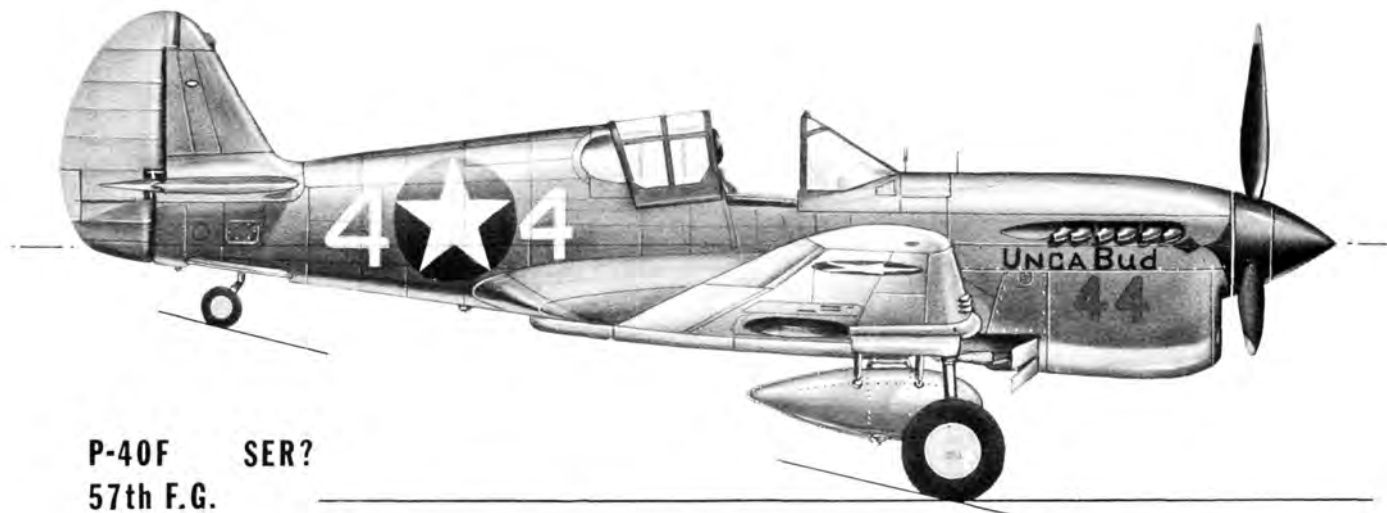
During August 1942, the 57th Fighter Group and its three squadrons began training for Desert operations and the 66th Fighter Squadron flew its first mission on 31 August. Aircraft Numbers were allocated to the Warhawks as follows: 01 to 09 for Group Headquarters, 10 to 39 for the low numbered squadron (the 64th), 40 to 69 for the middle squadron (the 65th), and 70 to 99 for the high numbered squadron (the 66th). The numbers were painted in white with one digit on either side of the star in circle national insignia and were sometimes outlined in black. At least the 65th Squadron, for a short time following its arrival in the Desert, carried its Aircraft Numbers on the forward cowlings also. After beginning operations the P-40s acquired the RAF fin flash, and red spinners were predominant. By the Battle of EL Alamein, the 64th and 65th Squadrons had acquired distinctive squadron insignia and before long these appeared on the cowlings sides of all squadron aircraft. The 64th Squadron insignia was a Black Scorpion on various shaped backgrounds, sometimes a blue background with red border at the circumference of the insignia circle. The 65th Squadron insignia was a red Fighting Cock, sometimes in a white circle with a green border at the circumference.

Until the end of November 1942, the 66th Fighter Squadron had no name or insignia. Then, war correspondent Leland Stowe referred to the unit in his dispatches as "Squadron X", and in a short time the 66th took hold of this appellation and became the Exterminators. Their insignia was a pugilistic rooster wearing boxing gloves on a white background composed of a shield and a large letter "X".

The second fighter group to join the 9th Air Force was the 79th. Its pilots picked up P-40Fs at Accra, Gold Coast and flew them to Egypt where the first pilots of the Group were initiated into battle with the 57th Fighter Group during early November 1942. The first Group mission was flown on 14 March 1943 against enemy positions in Tunisia. The Sand colored P-40s of the 79th were numbered in the same sequence and same manner as the aircraft of the 57th Group, with one digit



Olive drab, with light grey undersurfaces, B-25Cs of the 12th Bomb Group over Tunisia. No. 75, 41-13195, is named DESERT VAGABOND JR. Note that the RAF fin flash has been painted over part of serial number. (Photo-USAF 23614AC)



in front of and one behind the star in circle national insignia. However, to easily differentiate the aircraft of the two groups, the letter "X" was placed in front of the Aircraft Number on 79th P-40s. It was painted in white, as were the numbers, but measured 8 inches shorter than the approximately 30 inch high numbers. Both the letter and numbers were sometimes outlined in black.

In some cases the squadron insignia were carried on the cowling sides of the 79th's aircraft. These were the Flying Skull insignia of the 85th Squadron (which seemed to be carried on most squadron aircraft), the Comanches insignia of the 86th Squadron and the Skeeters insignia of the 87th Squadron. As a further marking, the rudders of many of the 85th Squadron's Warhawks, and some of the 86th Squadron, were adorned with paintings of shapely pin-up girls (see the JOURNAL Pall 1963, Vol 8, No 3. pages 218-220).

During December 1942, the 324th Fighter Group arrived in Egypt and two of its squadrons moved forward to Libya to gain battle experience, the 314th joining the 57th Fighter Group and the 316th joining the 79th Fighter Group. The P-40s of the Group carried the usual Sand finish and the star in circle insignia. Aircraft numbers were used as in the 57th and 79th Groups, and the two digit numbers were preceded by the letter "Y" which had a height about 8 inches less than the numbers. The Group's squadrons had names and insignias; the 314th being the Hawks, the 315th the Crusaders and the 316th the Hell's Belles, but the insignias were not carried on the aircraft. Instead, a diamond 24 inches long came to be painted on each side of the cowling and filled in with a squadron color--yellow for the 314th, red for the 315th and blue for the 316th. The 324th Group and its squadrons came together as a single unit on 22 May 1943, moved to El Haouraia, Tunisia in June, carried out escort and patrol missions until the invasion of Sicily, 10 July 1943, and then reverted to a training status.

(Representative markings for the 57th, 79th and 324th Fighter Groups appear above and at right in the detailed drawings prepared by Walter M. Jefferies, Jr. of the P-40F and later models that served with the 9th Air Force in the desert.)

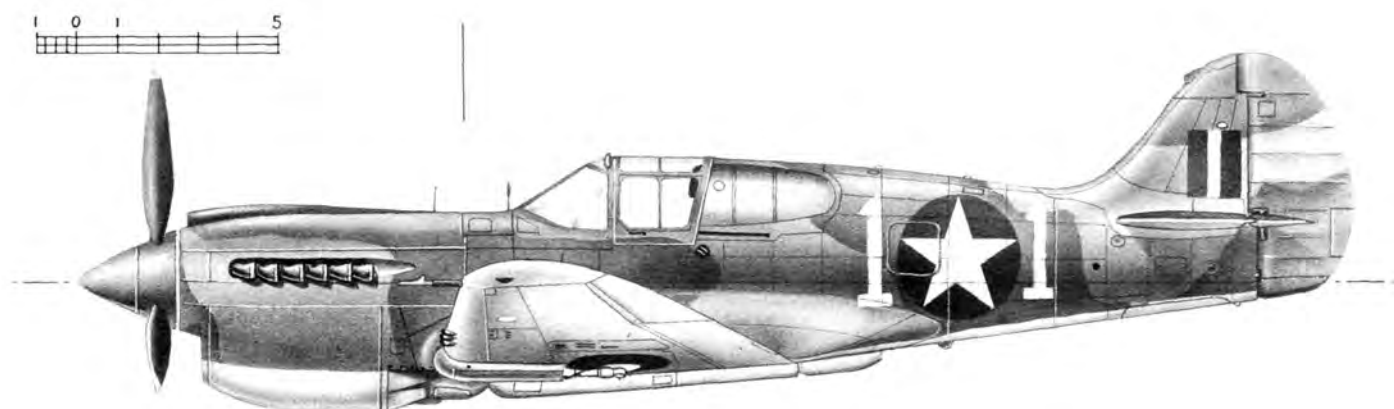
One other group was part of the 9th Air Force in the desert, and that was the 316th Troop Carrier Group which arrived in Egypt during the latter part of November 1942. So far, no information or photos have come to light regarding the C-47s of this Group.

By the end of the North African campaign on 13 May 1943, all groups of the 9th Air Force had been in ac-

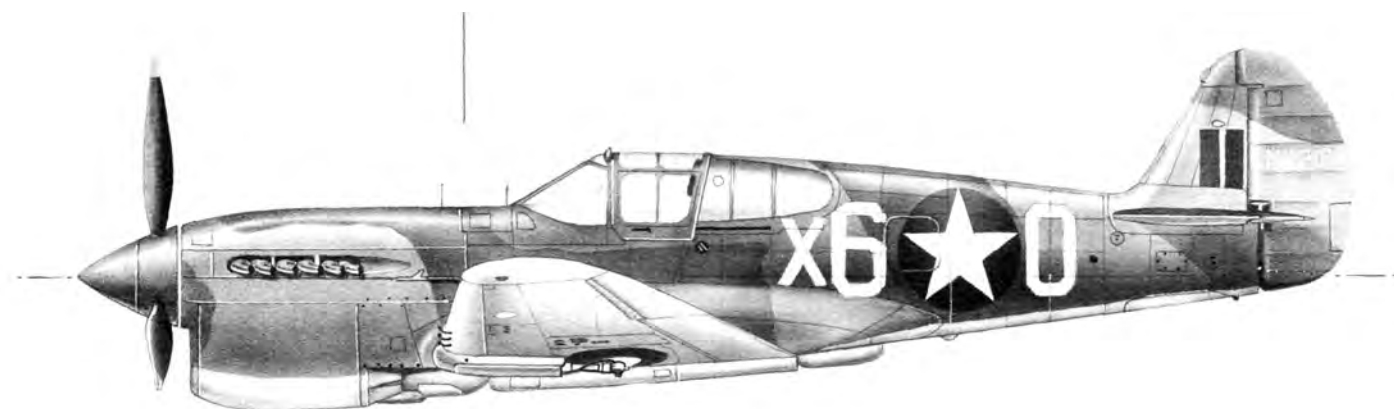
tion. These same groups then joined in the air blockade of Pantelleria, beginning 14 May 1943, then supported preparations for the invasion of Sicily. The bombers were busy in direct and long range support of the battle for Sicily, but the fighters only participated directly toward the end of that battle. The heavy bombers, joined by three groups of B-24s from the 8th Air Force in England, then carried out the 1 August 1943 attack on Ploesti, and the fighters prepared to support operations against Italy proper which would be invaded on 27 August 1943. Two days earlier, however, all groups of the 9th Air Force (with the apparent exception of the 98th and 376th which remained for several more weeks under IX Bomber Command) were transferred to the 12th Air Force, and Headquarters 9th Air Force and other key sections under General Brereton began moving to England where the 9th was reestablished on 16 October 1943.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The operational story of the 9th Air Force in the desert, plus the operational and markings stories of the 9th Air Force in England and on the Continent, are now in preparation and will appear about the end of 1965. They will appear, with the markings story of the 9th in the desert, in a single book which will be the first in a series of--American Aviation Historical Society Studies. The History of the 9th Air Force, and other books to follow in the series, will be authored by Members of the Society and supported by the research experience of the Society. It is my belief and hope that they will add greatly to the history of American aviation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: The story of the markings of the aircraft of the 9th Air Force is the result of the excellent help the author has received from many ex-members of the units involved, and from the Air Force Times, through its Editor, Don Mace, and the Air Force Museum, through Royal Frey. Among those whose help was invaluable are: Colonel John R. Kane, Robert E. Wilson, Edward Rothkrug, Colonel R. S. Hamill, G. A. Berglund, Brigadier General Richard B. Spear, D. H. Shuttleworth, J. B. O'Donoghue, Joseph R. Paragone, Theo Bennett, Lieutenant Colonel C. V. Glines, Captain S. R. Kirkpatrick, George R. Steinkamp, Paul Langworthy, Thomas R. Gibbins, Jr., Griff Murphy and, last but by no means least, Doctor Albert F. Simpson and the Aerospace Studies Institute in Alabama.



P40E,K? SER?
57th F.G.



P-40F-CU 41-14216
79th F.G.



P-40L-20-CU 42-11002
324th F.G.

EFFERIES