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DESERT CAMPAIGN

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The Story of the NINTH U.S.
ARMY AIR FORCE in support
of the British in AFRICA

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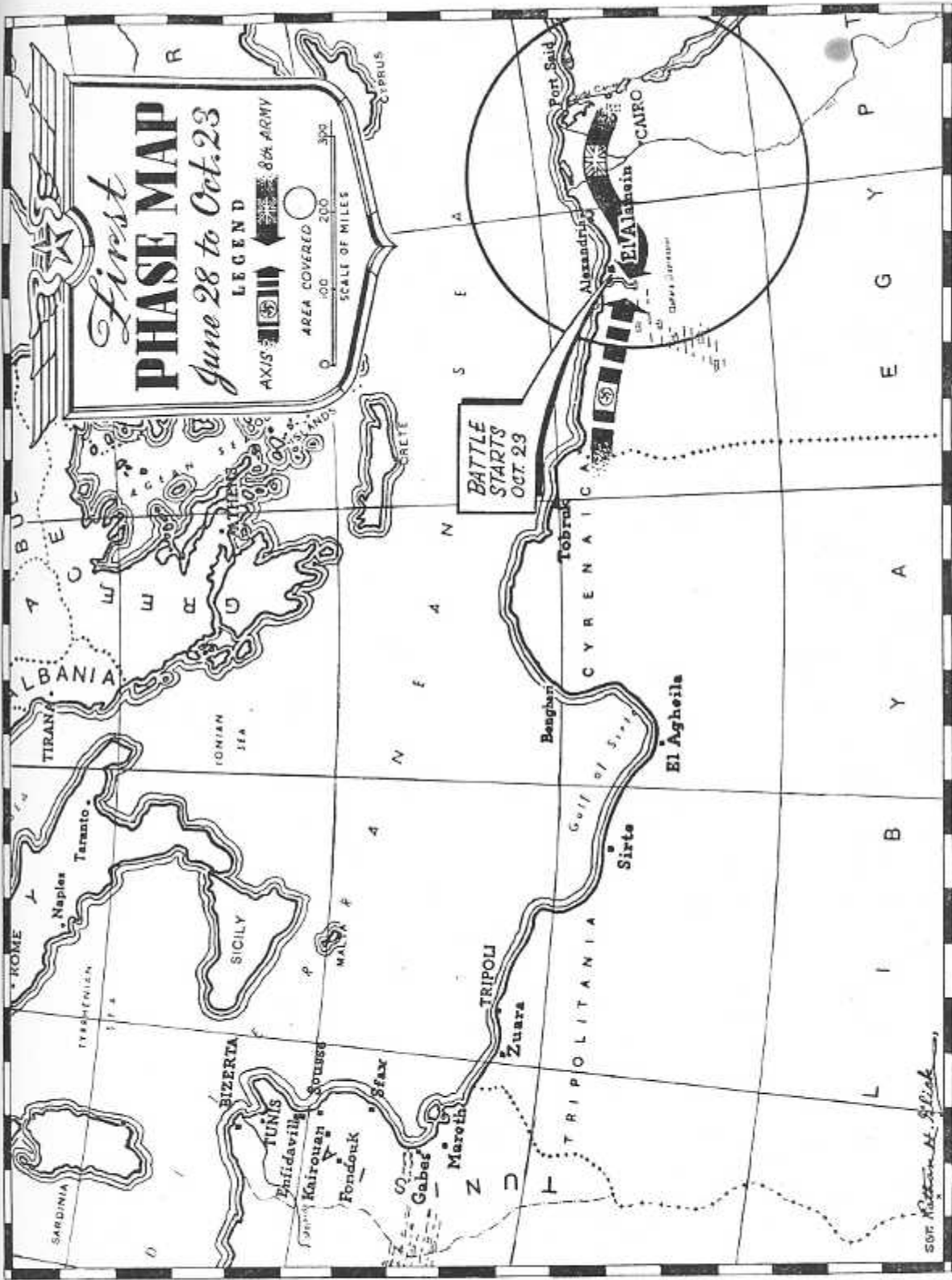
THE STORY OF THE NINTH U.S.
ARMY AIR FORCE IN SUPPORT
OF THE BRITISH IN AFRICA

The military mind always imagines that the next war will be upon the same lines as the last. That has never been the case, and never will be. The greatest factor in the next war will obviously be aircraft. The potentialities of aircraft attack upon a large scale are almost incalculable.

Marshal Foch, 1922

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Activation

THIS is the narrative story of the Ninth U.S. Air Force over the Western Desert, filtered from records and figures and, in small degree, personal recollections.

It is a story of heavies over the Mediterranean and mediums and fighters in support of the British Eighth Army's push across North Africa.

It is in just part the story of the Service Command and Troop Carriers and Air Transport and all other elements contributing to what the British have acknowledged as "immeasurable help."

It is the story of the development and test of desert tactics—the medium bomber shuttle service ; fighter bombing ; positioning of the enemy fighter ; fighter bombing of shipping and motor transport.

It is a story equally of the Generals and the "Joes."
It is finally, a story of achievement.

Never large in size, the Ninth has been necessarily developed as a keen, swift striking force rather than a ponderous crushing power. Its consequent fluidity and high degree of mobility have been employed to the full degree of their utility with devastating effect along the north coast of Africa and across the Mediterranean.

The record of the Ninth is inseparable from that of the British Eighth Army and all air units which supported its East to West drive against the Axis Afrika Korps. The operational bond, closer at the outset, widened as experience was accumulated and the medium bombers and fighters of the Ninth were able to operate more on their own initiative. It is this element which is here chronicled for the sake of an American record.

The story has a prologue in India. Major General Lewis H. Brereton, Commanding the Tenth U.S. Air Force at New Delhi, interrupted a staff meeting to read a cable ordering activation of the United States Army Middle East Air Force. This was early in June. General Brereton brought with him to Cairo key headquarters personnel and a single squadron of Flying Fortresses.

Organization of the Air Force became official June 28, 1942 in Cairo. The authority was paragraph 1 of General Order number 4 of the United States Army Forces in the Middle East.

Tactically this organization included the Brereton Detachment from India and the Halverson Detachment which had been destined for China, but which was diverted to Egypt en route. Later this was augmented by personnel transferred from other organizations in India, the Middle East and the United States and the assignment of organizations intact from the United States.

General Order number 2 on the same date activated the Air Service Command of the Middle East. General Order number 3 on July 17, redesignated the Halverson Detachment as the Hal Bombardment Squadron.

The First Provisional Group was organized on July 20. This unit consisted of Group Headquarters, the Ninth Bombardment Squadron and the Hal Bombardment Squadron. Colonel Harry A. Halverson became Commanding Officer of the group and thus began the Ninth Air Force with one group of heavies.

The Hal Squadron was hand-picked in the States for one of the most daring raids of the war, veiled in an air-tight secrecy at the time—the bombing of Tokyo. But with the Axis accelerating its drive toward the Nile, the Hal Squadron had its destiny changed in mid-journey and it vectored its course over to the new Middle East Air Force, arriving air-borne June 2 at Fayid, Egypt.

Another early arrival was the 57th Fighter Group. This Group which was later to become known among the correspondents as the 'flying circus' because of its spectacular assaults, officially joined the Air Force, August 4.

Pilots and planes made the crossing on the aircraft carrier Ranger. The Ranger anchored off Lagos on the west coast of Africa and the planes of the 57th skimmed off her deck to cross the continent as an air-borne safari under the leadership of Lt. Colonel Frank Mears. This strange land-brood left the mother ship July 19 and after a series of hops reached Muqebila, Palestine, July 31.

The 12th Medium Bombardment Group, the 79th Fighter and the 316th Troop Carrier Group followed in close order as the Air Force took form.

RESUMÉ

In the early stages more emphasis was laid on heavy bombers and there was a natural tendency to consider America's part in the campaign as a "heavy bomber show." In a measure that was true for no other theatre provided such a thorough test of the effectiveness of long range heavy bombardment.

However, over the battlefield, in the close-in contact with the enemy and in the bombing and strafing of the retreating Axis columns, American fighters and medium bombers had their roles and played them well.

Air Transport performed a Herculean task in moving men and material to supply the rapidly advancing allied forces and moving air units bodily to new forward landing grounds every few days.

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The Ninth Bomber Command of the air force originally commanded by Brigadier General Patrick W. Timberlake, controlled all heavy bombardment in the Middle East. A few aircraft in the command were Royal Air Force. The primary objective of this command in the opening phases was to prevent supplies reaching Rommel's armies in Africa through the bombing of shipping and harbor installations.

While Axis forces were at Alamein and threatening to drive on Alexandria and the Nile Delta the enemy maintained a corridor between Greece and Crete and the African ports of Benghazi and Tobruk which was virtually inaccessible to Allied short range aircraft based on Malta and in the delta area and to the British navy. The assignment of the bombers was to close that corridor.

Reaching out great distances from their Levantine bases, they struck effectively at ships at sea and in harbors and at port facilities used in the loading and unloading of Axis vessels. A conservative estimate is that they stopped at least twenty per cent. of the supplies bound through the corridor for Axis ports in Africa early in the campaign, either by sinking the ships, disabling them or forcing them back by the ferocity of the assault. This figure eventually rose to fifty per cent.

The effectiveness of these operations has been demonstrated by the finding of more than 700 Axis aircraft on hastily abandoned landing grounds. Many of the ships were in operational condition but could not be flown away and could not even be destroyed by burning because there was no fuel in their tanks. The lack of supplies for the Axis forces, particularly fuel, was admittedly a very great factor in original Allied break-through at El Alamein.

Long range attacks by heavy bombers were made entirely without the protection of fighter escort against such far flung targets as the Roumanian oil fields, the Corinth Canal, Navarino Bay and other targets in Greece; against Naples, Tunis, and Tripoli. For weeks before the Alamein offensive virtually no shipping reached Benghazi and Tobruk, and that which did stood little chance of unloading. For weeks preceding the fall of Tripoli that great Axis port was practically closed to shipping through heavy bomber attacks, supported by attacks on shipping lanes from Malta.

Before and during the Alamein offensive, U.S. medium bombers, B-25 Mitchells, shouldered approximately one-fifth of the offensive load given to medium and light bombardment. While the role was not spectacular, attacks on enemy positions, his ground lines of communication, on tanks and motor transport were highly effective. After the break-through, the rapid advance of the Eighth Army soon carried the battlefield out of range of B-25 bases, and they did not become active again until the fighting proceeded beyond the El Agheila positions. Then they moved forward and took up an estimated one-third of the medium and light bomber task. They carried that portion of the load on through to the fall of Tripoli.

The record established by U.S. fighter pilots flying advanced models of the Curtiss P-40 Warhawks and late model Kittyhawks, has been an outstanding contribution to the Allied offensive. Before and during Alamein these fighters flew from one-sixth to one-tenth of the sorties flown and scored approximately forty per cent of the total victories over enemy aircraft. Their losses were very small and their record of victories was to increase.

After the break-through they moved forward in repeated jumps to occupy new landing grounds almost as soon as the retreating forces abandoned them. They took part in every phase of the offensive, with the percentage of the load carried continually growing to one-fourth and then one-third of the total daily sorties. On many days they flew as many as one-half of the total fighting sorties flown. That proportion is impressive when it is considered that as many as half the sorties flown were on low altitude bombing and ground strafing of enemy troops, which many pilots consider to be a more dangerous assignment than aerial combat. A large proportion of our fighter aircraft lost were lost as a result of ground action.

The long supply lines stretching across the desert ; the necessary quick movement of entire air units and supplies to forward landing grounds, and the long range movement of personnel and casualties front and rear have provided an unusual testing ground for air transport. U.S. air transport with something more than one-half of the load carrying capacity of all desert units have done a remarkable job. In the short space of three weeks in December they transported nearly two and one-half million pounds of vitally needed supplies, chiefly petrol, from rear to forward areas, carried upwards of seven hundred casualties of all types plus many hundreds of passengers on official business from forward to rear.

FIRST MISSIONS

The Hal Squadron's first mission was an ambitious one—too ambitious as later proven. It was partly successful as to objective, but wholly costly in loss of men and ships.

The targets were in Roumania, a round-trip distance of more than 2,500 miles from the Fayid base, even as the bomber flies.

Four of the thirteen ships which participated had to land in Turkey and were interned and another was downed by enemy fighters. This mission was flown June 12.

Targets were the Astra-Romana Refineries at Ploesti ; the Black Sea port of Constanza and a tank farm and warehouse in open country. The refinery was left in flames and fires were also started at the tank farm between Bucharest and Ploesti. Hits were scored on two factories and a bridge in the target area.

Of the four ships which were forced to land in Turkey three were set down near Ankara and one at Izmir. One of them had two port engines out of commission due to oil leaks and another was shot up by enemy fighters.

Only four of the ships landed at Habbaniya, according to plan. Of the remainder, one ship landed at Mosul, due to fuel shortage ; one at Ramadi, due to navigational error. Two ships landed at Aleppo and one at Dier Ez Zor also due to faulty navigation.

It remained for the second mission to redeem the squadron. This mission was flown June 15, aimed at an Italian fleet off Taranto. Seven planes participated and five claimed hits on the super-structure of a Littorio class battleship. Another claimed a near miss on the same craft. A Trento class cruiser was known to be sunk.

Benghazi, important to the Axis as air base and port of entry for vitally needed supplies, was the target of a series of devastating attacks from June 21 through 27.

The harbor of Tobruk was also pounded during this period, constituting a double-pronged assault on the movement of supplies when and where the enemy needed them most. There had been no casualties since the Roumanian venture. Luck and skill shared in this record.

Then came June 28, 1942, notable here as birthdate of the Air Force, and the Hal Squadron flew its first mission under the newly constituted Command on that date. The mission was routine in the operational records. There were hits on shipping and harbor installations. Nine Liberators participated and there was no opposition from enemy aircraft. The anti-aircraft fire was light and inaccurate and all aircraft returned safely and without casualties.

On the following day the story was different. The air force recorded its first casualties. Tobruk was again the target of four Libs and this time the enemy ack-ack was ready, and one ship and its crew was lost to ground fire which came in deadly accurate at the 20,000 feet level.

Grim solace to the airmen, the distinction of being first casualties, but it is to their eternal credit that they went in over the same target the second day facing the inevitable deadlier aim because there was a job to be done. "Hits on harbor," says the operational report. The job was done.

The crew was composed of Captain F. E. Nestor, pilot ; Lt. C. W. Shaw, co-pilot ; Lt. M. L. Phillips, navigator ; Sergeant C. L. Hunter, engineer ; Staff Sergeant A. M. Umstead, radio operator and Sergeant H. W. Kramer, gunner.

There followed successively five more attacks on Tobruk Harbor, two of which were flown on one day, July 20. Also on this date a mission was flown over the same target by four fortresses of the newly arrived Ninth Bombardment Squadron. Hits were reported on targets, but definite results were unknown and there were no casualties.

On the Hal Squadron's fourteenth mission in which six planes participated in an attack on a convoy two direct hits were scored and near misses claimed. One tanker was set ablaze. One enemy plane was sighted, but it did not give battle. No casualties resulted and only light anti-aircraft fire was encountered.

FIGHTERS ARRIVE

The vanguard of fighter plane crews began to arrive in Egypt early in August and were absorbed by RAF and South African Air Force for training. They had learned to fly ; now they had to learn to fight. The crews had been on the ground only a few hours when they obtained permission to take up some of the Kittyhawk fighter-bombers with which the RAF squadron was equipped. First reports of the observing British were good. "These boys can really fly," reported an RAF officer, "If all the Yanks are as good as these we'll have some fun."

The American pilots in those early days of the campaign flew RAF planes on RAF operations and were assigned to various British and South African Air Force squadrons, and widely distributed. Like the bomber crews they were entirely dependent on the British for intelligence, briefing, air field facilities and ground servicing. But unlike the bomber crews they did not undertake independent missions but became integral parts of squadrons, flights and even sections.

Thus they were schooled in desert warfare by the 'Ole Swimmin' hole' method of throw 'em in and the result of that instruction forms the brighter side of this document. Behind this close association in combat lies much good in the binding of closer Anglo-American relationship.

American fighter crews then were under the command of a flying Colonel from Alabama with more than 5,000 hours to his credit, the present Brigadier General Auby C. Strickland, later to command the Ninth Fighter Command.

General Strickland, revered by the British as well as by his own boys never missed an opportunity to fly with his airmen and live with them on the desert until the pull of administrative duties kept him more constantly at his desk.

American heavies in mid-August began to range further afield in their systematic bombing of Axis ports and supply routes. Previously they had been catching convoys at their points of debarkation in North Africa, at Mersa Matruh, at Benghazi or at Tobruk whose port by then was cluttered with the up-ended hulks of capsized vessels.

At dusk on the eleventh of August, they thundered in over Navarino, Axis port on the western shore of the Palloppnese peninsular of Greece. Their targets were four cruisers which had been convoying supplies to Rommel on the trans-Mediterranean route.

One of the cruisers was directly hit with two heavy bombs. A second ship belched black smoke from a probable hit or near miss. Three more near misses rocked a third cruiser and caused a violent explosion on deck constituting a sizeable bag for a long haul.

From the beginning of operations through the middle of September, Tobruk was the target of 27 attacks all costly to the enemy. Docks, ammunition dumps and gasoline storage were fired in addition to hits on ships. There had been seven attacks on Benghazi which was to take its heaviest blow later.

Ten attacks had been made on convoys with three vessels sunk and others damaged.

Four merchant vessels were hit and fires started in as many attacks on Suda Bay.

There were four attacks on el Daba ; Mersa Matruh was thrice bombed ; there were two attacks on Candia with extensive damage. The Corinth canal was bombed.

Fighters of the fledgling Fifty-Seventh within the period up to September 13 had made 158 sorties. The missions were mostly bomber escort with only two offensive sweeps. Operations were still in conjunction with British fighters.

Medium bombardment planes of the 12th Group, operating from advanced airdromes close behind the bomb line, began to test their wings during the first week of September. They flew 55 sorties in four days. Operating with the British they bombed enemy transport with success.

The Benghazi blitz made rich history for the Ninth.

Heavy bombers struck their most telling blow on the harbor on the nights of September 16 and 22. First reports were routine and then reconnaissance showed the attacks had been devastating. They were to have far-reaching effect on enemy defensive strategy and they allowed many enemy guns to cool for want of ammunition.

The check list of results includes :

The destruction of more than half the main unloading pier known in operational and intelligence language as "Harry", rendering it useless for a long time to come.

Demolition of a 7,000 ton transport berthed at "Harry" and loaded with ammunition and explosives which echoed the first bomb hit for many hours after.

The breaking up and sinking of four half sunken vessels in the immediate vicinity of "Harry," thus eliminating all the deep water anchorage along the central mole. This, combined with direct destruction to the outer half of the mole itself, has put the central unloading mole completely out of use.

Another 7,000 ton vessel which lay alongside the only other unloading pier known as "George" was hit by bombs on the 16 and completely burned out.

The new oiling jetty on Guiliiana Mole was demolished and submerged.

The 7,000 ton vessel and the destruction of the oiling jetty could have been the combined work of British and American bombers.

"Old Harry" is, appropriately, a British name for the devil.

ARRIVAL OF TROOPS

Teeming Cairo, cradle and grave of an ancient culture, had become crucible of modern war plans. It was the center of Middle East operations and barometer of conditions in the Western Desert.

Its streets and cafes had faithfully announced the arrival of English, Scotch, New Zealanders, Australians, Free French and South Africans and now the Yanks.

American soldiers began to appear in increasing number toward the end of September and the hawkers and peddlers of useless devices sprang to renewed activity—and learned some new American scam words. And the Yanks had to wrestle with piasters and pounds and spent too much until they learned the hard way that piaster was not penny and pound was not dollar.

Part of the ever growing family of the new Air Force, they were mostly service troops under the air service command, the men to whom the catch phrase, 'Keep 'Em Flying' has real meaning in terms of wrench, shovel or typewriter.

The Yanks' bouts with Arabic and Eastern customs yielded more than one interesting story. There was the sergeant from Texas, who delved into Middle East legend and produced this story with an ironic twist :

The Bedouins in North Africa, according to the Italians, have a high regard for General Rommel and look upon him as a god. They say, moreover, that the Bedouins have composed a song to his power and glory. Roughly translated this song, 'The Glory of Rommel' follows :

' O Rommel, all powerful,
 The mighty sheikhs, overawed,
 Veil their faces before thee ;
 Even the camel, stately and dignified,
 Kneels at thy approach.
 Before thy glory the burning sun
 Becomes dim and hides his face.
 The wind is thy slave,
 Serving only to help thee in thy journey.
 Seeking shelter from thy stinging blows,
 Man trembles and flees before thy fury.
 All powerful Rommel,
 We kneel before thee.'

But there is a certain fact which completely unraveled the fabric of this little fairy tale woven by the Italians. R-O-M-M-E-L is phonetic spelling for an old Arabic word meaning : sand.

The vast, sprawling desert, so aptly called tacticians paradise and quartermasters' hell, was strange terrain to American trained flyers, but American flyers are adaptable. So are American mechanics, but for them the problem was much more real and practical. It involved more than a different technique in map reading and learning to breathe and eat sand. They had some of that to do and more. The digestive tracts of motors are not adaptable to sand in the diet and the delicate mechanism of guns can be temperamental, too.

Sand's end-product, dust, was the common enemy of all combatants, revealing and hiding movement ; filling slit-trenches, coarsening food and thickening water. Borne on the wind, it blinded, choked and added to the general destruction of camp and equipment. The defeat of this enemy was the specific mission of the men in the shops and mechanics on the forward landing grounds.

These mechanics don't get medals or newspaper headlines. Their reward must come from the certain knowledge that without them many a ship would not fly. A spirit as gritty as the sand about them sustained these soldiers through long night vigils and daily grinds. Battered planes limping home have taken to the air again the following day after their over-night miracles of rejuvenation.

