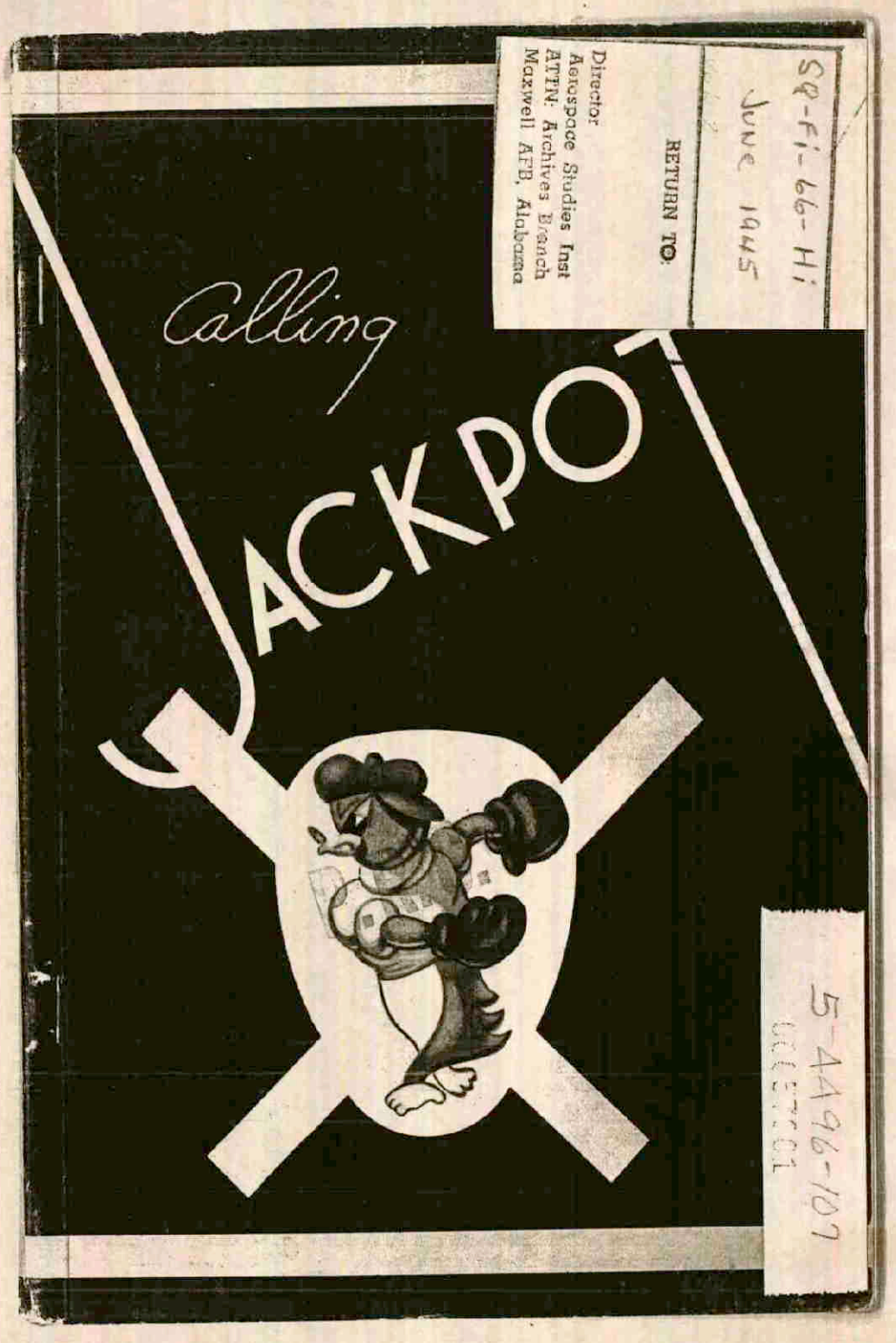

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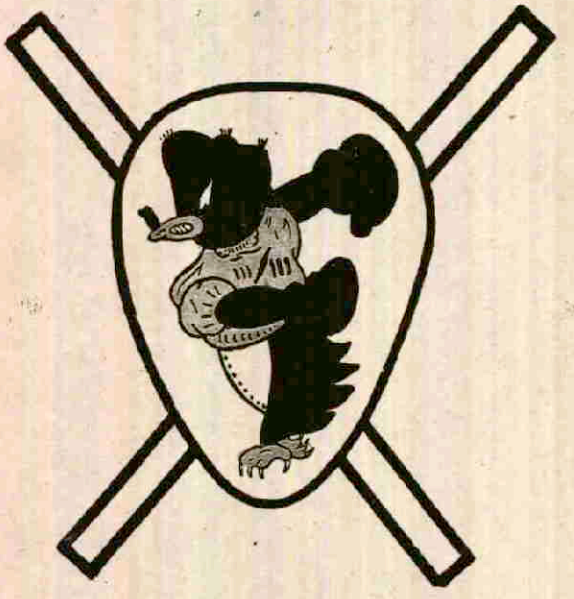

SIXTY - SIXTH FIGHTER
" SQUADRON X "

66 SQUADRON INSIGNIA

PRINTED
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June, 1945

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CALLING JACKPOT

Story Of The

Sixty-Sixth Fighter Squadron

PALESTINE - EGYPT - LYBIA - TUNISIA
MALTA - SICILY - SOUTHERN ITALY
CORSICA - NORTHERN ITALY

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LT. COL. CHARLES C. LEAF

Present Commanding Officer Of 66th Squadron

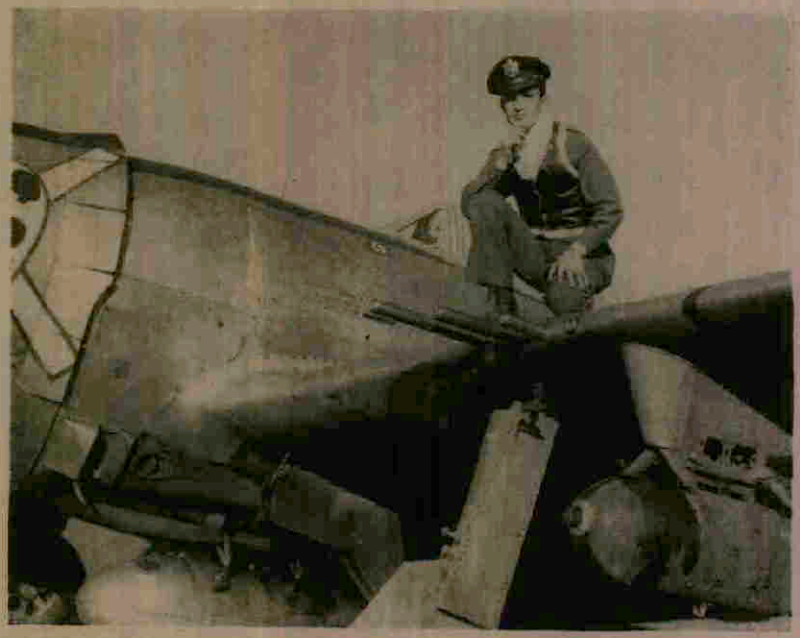
Former Squadron Commanders

Charles R. Fairlamb
William J. Yates
James G. Curl
Glenn A. Reich
William P. Benedict
Cortland McCoy Jr.

Dedication

We wanted this book to be dedicated to those who have died so gallantly. But death is a final word; it means a cessation of being, and the boys who have failed to return certainly are not in that category. They are still around. Their stories and achievements are told and retold daily. Their laughs still echo. They have but gone on a rest leave and will return the middle of next week, broke and yelling for their mail. It was always so — it will always be that way. Old soldiers never die.

So we will dedicate this book to those men but not in a solemn or tragic manner. They are fighter pilots and probably wouldn't stand for it.



MAJOR RICHARD L. JOHNSON

Operations Officer

Foreword

To record and print all the adventures and incidents befalling a fighter squadron would be an impossible task. During the months of combat our adventures have been so varied that an attempt to recollect our battles and moves, our different and outstanding personalities, the many wonderful stories born within the ranks, would require endless pages of description.

It was my original intention that this publication would be written for the wives and families of men of this Squadron who have so gallantly given their lives in the fight. I hoped to give their families something more tangible than just impersonal letters to repay, even in a small way, the sacrifice they have made. But to the men—both pilots and ground crews—who worked so tirelessly for the success of the Squadron, we also owe many thanks.

We have come a long way. Instead of the old P-40 Warhawk we are now flying the P-47 Thunderbolt, the best any Army can offer for dive bombing and strafing. Instead of clashes with hordes of German and Italian aircraft, we now see an occasional surprised Messerschmidt or spot a lone German Jet Fighter flying high above our formation. From tents and muddy foxholes, we are now living in buildings and hotels. From eating C rations from mess lines, we now eat good food served by Italian signorinas. Some things remain forever the same. The old men of the outfit still sit and reminisce about when "it was tough" in Egypt and the Desert. It was always "rough" before. Yes, we have come a long way.

Many will be called upon to continue the high traditions of the Squadron in the Pacific. As long as the name "Exterminators" remains in active status, you may be certain that it will always be known as the most colorful squadron in the Air Corps.

CHARLES C. LEAF,
LT. COL. A. C.

Calling Jackpot . . .

Early in January 1941 the Army Air Corps wheels began to turn and a few days later when the smoke had cleared a new Pursuit Group had been formed. This unit, then called the Fifty-Seventh Pursuit Group, was destined to play a leading and a unique role in the history of the United States Army Air Forces.

The activation took place at Mitchell Field, New York on January 15, and the personnel were taken from several sources. A number of key men from the Eighth Fighter Group formed the Sixty-Sixth Squadron cadre. Many of the men were New Yorkers just back from aircraft mechanics technical schools, raring to go to work; many others came from the Lone Star State where they had been crewing Army training aircraft. Despite their initial clashes, many of which cropped up when someone said that the Empire State was better than Texas, the Squadron began to assume the semblance of a well-balanced unit.

At Windsor Locks, Connecticut—halfway between Hartford and Springfield, Massachusetts—a new airfield was being constructed to base the Fifty-Seventh Group. It was to be built in the tobacco section of Connecticut—a revolutionary idea in several respects. The landing strips, hangars, and installations were cleverly camouflaged, and from the air the entire area resembled one of the many surrounding tobacco farms. In August the Group moved into its new home, and after receiving additional basic personnel was ready to go to work.

The Sixty-Sixth Squadron had the grand total of four aircraft, three P-40s and one two-place trainer. In those peaceful days aircraft gasoline and ammunition were scarce and flights were made for training and gunnery—far from an intense schedule. The big question in everyone's mind was, "When are we going to get some aircraft?"; and the general opinion was that all P-40s being built were being shipped to China for General Chennault's "Flying Tigers."

Life on the base was dull and monotonous but the two cities of Hartford and Springfield became a lure to everyone during off-duty hours. The numerous insurance firms in Hartford employed thousands of girls, and most of the men in the Squadron were wined and dined nightly by the up-to-then lonely queens. On several occasions, dances sponsored by the various insurance companies were held in the exclusive Hartford Club and the Fifty-Seventh Group virtually held the key to the city.

Summer faded into autumn and the maneuvers began. The Group aircraft left the base (now called Bradley Field) and headed toward Riverside, California. Enroute, inclement weather brought disaster to the formation and only two out of twenty-five aircraft reached their destination. A group of A-20 medium bombers flew into Bradley Field from Savannah, Georgia Air Base and many of the Sixty-Sixth's flight mechanics assisted in their maintenance to escape the enforced idleness.

The rising tension in the Pacific commanded everyone's attention and

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the dark clouds of an impending war gathered. Then the day of infamy arrived and the next day the Nation declared war upon the Rome-Tokyo-Berlin aggressors. The Fifty-Seventh Group was alerted for any possible invasion of the eastern coast and was split up, each squadron moving to a different base along the coast.

The Sixty-Sixth went to Farmingdale, Long Island to do anti-submarine patrol and to protect the aircraft factories in the area. A few weeks later the Squadron was based at Langley Field, Virginia and was again doing coastal work; and soon another move took place and the Sixty-Sixth moved to the newly built Naval Air Station at Quonset Point, Rhode Island.

Here for the first time an Army Air Corps unit worked faultlessly with the Naval Air Service. The station was far superior to an army post, the quarters were modern brick structures, and the food was very good. Here, along with coastal patrol duties, the Squadron trained a number of newly acquired pilots who would shortly be engaging the German Luftwaffe in combat. On June 1, 1942, the organization moved to Hillsgrove Airport, about ten miles closer to Providence. Again daily training missions were on the program and experiments were carried out using five hundred pound belly bombs on P-40 aircraft.

About the middle of the month rumors began to circulate to the effect that the Group was going overseas. Then on June 29, forty-two of the Squadron's key men were alerted for immediate overseas shipment. A few hours later, after a beer party, the men left, and the next morning a list of additional personnel was posted, restricting those men to the Post for shipment.

When the shipping list for "destination unknown" was posted on the Squadron bulletin board, it was surprising to see most of the remaining personnel in the Orderly Room, asking to have their names added to the list. After the key men in the air echelon left, the atmosphere was charged with tension while preparations were made for shipment. The bulk of the Squadron soon found themselves in a staging area at Fort Dix, New Jersey until the fateful afternoon when they entrained for the Port of Embarkation.

Early morning on July 16, 1942, the floating home of the Fifty-Seventh left New York and headed eastward. Life on the transport was crowded and monotonous and for the first time in years the men learned that a dime couldn't buy a hamburger to fill that "empty stomach." After "HMS Pasteur" refueled at Freetown, West Africa, the voyage was made to Durban, South Africa, where everyone had two days of shore leave to see the sights. The city was a surprise to everyone—no one expected to see skyscrapers and American automobiles in the Dark Continent. For the first time in almost a month the men ate eggs and steaks and drank milk as well as beer and liquor. Then the last lap of the trip began, and after the gales which blew the lone ship all over the seas, the placid calm of the Red Sea was a welcome change.

The heat was intense when the voyage ended at Port Tewfik, Egypt. The landing was made by native lighters, after which the men assembled on the dock with their equipment. The docks presented a strange scene to

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the men: everywhere native labor crews were stacking immense piles of American corned beef, working under foremen who carried long, black whips which they used freely on the goldbrickers. The stores of tinned meat were tremendous, but no one in the Squadron realized that in the year to come, the men themselves would consume a large percentage of those thousands of cases.

A day later the men were on their way to Palestine, traveling via Egyptian Railways—an experience unparalleled anywhere. The seats in the misnamed coaches were similar to American park benches, which were certainly not built for comfort. After three days of jouncing through country ranging from endless Egyptian Desert to citrus grove covered Holy Land plains, the Squadron reached its camp area at Beit Daras, Palestine on August 19, 1942. Waiting there for the past three weeks were the "Lucky 42" who comprised the air echelon. Their trip via Pan American Airways was a tourist's dream, flying by Clipper over Brazil and the heart of Africa in a ten day trek ending in Palestine. The reunion of the two parties that evening lasted far into the night.

Orientation followed during the next few weeks: drill, rifle practice, and routine duties, while the Squadron's P-40 aircraft flew training missions from the strip near camp. Everyone was proud of the epic-making trip the planes had made when they were carried across the Atlantic and launched from the flight deck of the Navy's "Ranger." Rumors concerning the disposition of the unit were plentiful, but the general opinion was that the Squadron, when properly acclimated, would fly with the Royal Air Force in Egypt.

Meanwhile the men learned everything about living in the field. No provision had been made for American rations or supplies and the British rations were hardly comparable to garrison rations back in the States. The Squadron cooks did their best to camouflage the few staple items into tasty dishes, and everyone regained the weight lost coming overseas as well as acquiring a healthful sun tan. During their off-duty days many of the men made trips to some of the famous towns in the Holy Land: Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel-Aviv; and practically every afternoon a truck left camp to drive ten miles to the Mediterranean for surf-bathing enthusiasts.

Finally on August 27, most of the technicians and mechanics left Palestine in B-24 Liberators and set up at Mariut, a suburb of Alexandria, Egypt. Under the guidance of the RAF, the Squadron pilots learned formation and combat tactics in the sky, while preparing for actual engagement with the powerful Luftwaffe. On September 16, the rest of the Squadron moved from Palestine and the unit set up at the base about twenty miles south of Alexandria.

The procedure of building an airfield in this country was unique. One of the numerous level areas near a highway was simply marked off by gasoline drums at each of the four corners, a wind sock was erected, and the field was ready for business. The Squadron tent area covered a considerable amount of space due to the dispersal of the tents. To concentrate anything here—aircraft, gasoline, ammunition or personnel—was to invite disaster.

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Each tent had five occupants, two of whom maintained the aircraft parked close by it. At first a sentry mount of two score roving guards was tried, but German reconnaissance aircraft overhead tended to make light sleepers of all the men so the plan was abandoned in favor of a guard post in the ration tent throughout the hours of darkness.

An RAF Wing on an adjacent field gave the Squadron countless valuable pointers on setting up camp and making the best of the primitive environment. In addition, immeasurable credit was due to a man who was the "backbone of Sixty-Six," Captain (then Master Sergeant) Casey Riley, the Flight Line Chief at that time. His wide scope of practical knowledge of everything, on this, his second stay in Egypt, solved many of the problems of the men from sanitation to aircraft maintenance. His men in the Engineering Section built a shower from a number of discarded gasoline drums and again cleanliness was next to Godliness instead of next to impossible.

Although several of the original motor trucks were shipped overseas, only one actually was included in the fleet acquired from a depot in Cairo. The Transportation Department, which had included only twelve men back in America, now boasted a staff of twenty-two men driving and maintaining a fleet of thirty-five motor trucks. Now the importance of motor transport was seen. Every gallon of gasoline, every round of ammunition, every case of food, and every drop of water used by the Squadron had to be transported into camp from dumps miles away, entirely by truck.

Life about camp was interesting. Every day fifteen men left camp at noon to spend twenty-four hours in Alexandria, where diverse entertainment was readily found. The movie houses showed fairly recent films and there were countless restaurants and cafes everywhere in town. The Squadron Special Service man, S-Sgt. Martin J. Howard, set up a tent as a bar and daily hauled a supply of canned beer and soft drinks from Alexandria. This was sold every evening to the men who gathered for a few hours of singing and joking. The disadvantage of spending too much time at the canteen tent was the probability of losing track of one's tent and spending most of the night wandering around in the dark. Some of the Squadron trucks went to Cairo several times weekly and a few of the men rode along to combine the job of picking up an aircraft engine with the thrill of visiting the Sphinx and the Pyramids.

In Egypt, the men learned something about money and its value. Heretofore the American dollar could purchase anything, from clothes to entertainment and those who had money in their wallets could perform miracles. Now money was of no practical value whatsoever. The little things which were readily taken for granted and obtainable for the sum of five cents, such as a Coca-Cola drink or a cigar, were not purchasable at any price. The men were paid in Egyptian pounds, each worth about four dollars, and was spent wildly on night-life in a twenty-four hour leave. It wasn't unusual to spend fifty pounds in a "big" night. Back in America the equivalent two hundred dollars would really have purchased something, but here the only tangible evidence was usually a red Egyptian fez and a throbbing headache. The ever-present card and dice rolling sessions also took their toll

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The Blue

Move Over!

When the bettor said "Bet one Pound" no one realized that it wasn't a dollar but rather four times that amount.

The Squadron was under the administrative control of the 9th U. S. Air Force but under the operational command of the famed Desert Air Force. This was the first American fighter group to go into combat in the desert and the Group motto "First in the Blue" refers to that fact in British slang by which "blue" meant the Western Desert, rather than the American connotation of the word. The D.A.F., at that time dwarfed by the powerful Luftwaffe, had a two-fold mission: to eliminate the enemy Air Force and simultaneously support the British Eighth Army on the ground. A better proving ground for a Tactical Air Force than Africa could not have been found. Here, were all the elements of the greater battles to be fought later, and the mistakes made here would not be too costly.

Major Charles R. "Fuzzy" Fairlamb was the Squadron Commander during this period and his untiring efforts set a criterion for all to follow. His was the task of teaching his pilots the necessity for close formations and fighter escort and to learn the peculiarities of German planes and their weaknesses. Flying mission number one on August 31, 1942, the Squadron soon fell into the swing of a well co-ordinated unit and by the time the offensive at El Alamein began, the Sixty-Sixth Squadron was ready.

One great problem was the necessity of keeping up with a fast moving front. The RAF had perfected a unique plan and taught the Yanks its elements. The procedure was simple and effective. The Squadron would be split into halves with an equal number of mechanics, armorers, radio technicians, cooks, truck drivers and so forth in each party. The party which would move forward first would be called "A" party, the rear echelon "B" party. As soon as the ground forces secured a site for a forward airfield, "A" party was to move forward, carrying half of the Squadron's equipment and rations, to establish servicing facilities on the new airfield. Meanwhile the efficiency of the Squadron was not heavily impaired, as "B" party continued flight operations from the rear. As soon as "A" party signalled that they were ready to begin flying from the forward drome, the aircraft would land and take off into combat from there. Then "B" party would move up to join "A" party for operations, at times "leap-frogging" "A" party if the battle line continued to move ahead.

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By the middle of October, the Squadron was busy escorting medium bombers which were hitting enemy airdromes behind the lines to eliminate the German Air Force threat to British ground troops. Then on October 23, General Montgomery's Eighth Army set off what was the fiercest clash of armored forces of all time. The veteran 211 Royal Air Force Group needed one additional Squadron for the intensive operations proposed, and the Sixty-Sixth Squadron was chosen to operate with the already battle experienced 239 Wing. The Eighth Army broke through Rommel's defenses in 12 days and the longest chase in history—1300 miles in 13 weeks—began. The battle line moved westward across Egypt and the Sixty-Sixth's new base at Fuka was selected. So thorough was the 211 Group's planning that airdromes far behind the enemy lines were allocated to the various air units long before their actual capture. Pinpoint locations were still to be found on British maps used two years previously by Generals Wavell and Cunningham.

The long anticipated jump-off for the Squadron came on November 5, and the camp area looked practically deserted with half of the men gone, their tents and trucks no longer around. "B" party continued to operate from their base, and every man had to work twice as hard to keep the aircraft flying. "A" party drove through ninety-four miles of bloody battle-and the remnants of enemy divisions lay in confusion everywhere, and every field, and for the first time saw death in all its grotesque forms. Shattered hulks of what were once German armored vehicles, huge artillery pieces, revolution of the convoy's wheels brought new scenes of havoc and destruction into view.

On November 6, "A" party reached its new field and set up camp. The British Army used a fleet of American built motor trucks to carry supplies onto each airdrome, and established dumps of gasoline and ammunition in the area. The Squadron aircraft took off for a mission and as soon as they left, "B" party struck its tents, loaded trucks, and moved forward to join "A" party. The aircraft landed at "A" party's airfield and, after servicing, were ready to fly the short distance into enemy territory to engage the "Wily Hun." This method of keeping up with a fast moving front was perfect and as no period of inactivity was necessitated by a move, it proved to be the model upon which all future operations were based.

Montgomery was still hitting Rommel hard and more names on the map became British occupied. Now the Squadron's "leap-frogging" game began in earnest and there were several changes of station made during November, some necessitated by the extensive mining of the fields assigned. The Sixty-Sixth was taking its toll of enemy motor trucks, installations, and enemy aircraft, but suffered its own losses as well.

A move to a forward airfield began to assume the perspective of a hunt. The first ones to arrive usually found stores of enemy equipment which were very useful. Jerry left articles of every description behind, from delicious food items to portable generators, and souvenir-hunting, although dangerous, was profitable. Practically everyone strutted about with a shiny Luger automatic pistol on his hip, and the mens' 180 pound British tents boasted cheery light from German kerosene lanterns during the long chilly evenings.

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A Gen Talk

Marble Arch

Achtung Minen!

Moving forward was a dangerous procedure for several reasons. The trucks kept intervals of one hundred yards between them so that an enemy strafing aircraft would not account for the destruction of too many vehicles. All the personnel riding atop the trucks kept their rifles at hand for such an occurrence and every fifth vehicle mounted some kind of machine gun against attacking aircraft. It was extremely dangerous to stray from the road or track, as German Teller Mines were planted everywhere. Although an occasional truck would pull off the road in an attempt to pass a slow-moving convoy, it would suddenly blow up in a geyser of smoke after hitting a mine—and discourage any further short-cuts around the convoy.

At night the convoys stopped along the road and the men tried to get a few hours of rest. Aside from the cold breeze that whipped around one's cot out in the open, Jerry aircraft often dropped flares along the road and strafed any concentration of vehicles observed. One night in Halfaya Pass, on the Egypt-Libya border, German aircraft strafed several tanks near the Sixty-Sixth's convoy and everyone admitted that the multi-colored tracer bullets and anti-aircraft bursts made an awe-inspiring, though deadly, spectacle.

A more motley appearing gang of men than the Squadron personnel on the move could not be found. The men wore a wide assortment of uniforms and no two of them were alike. British battle jackets and trousers were

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worn by many, while others had swapped items with their Australian friends back in Egypt and wore huge-brimmed hats in real Aussie style. German shoes were a popular item of footgear in lieu of worn-out American shoes, and the Squadron was jokingly called the "66 Gypsies."

As the offensive on the ground moved westward, the original task of the 239 Wing was completed and the Sixty-Sixth was ordered to rejoin the Fifty-Seventh Group at Martuba, Libya. Many handclasps and greetings were exchanged as the Squadron personnel looked up old acquaintances in the other squadrons of the "First in the Blue" Group.

As Thanksgiving Day approached, the men wondered whether Uncle Sam had completely forgotten them, but a miracle was witnessed when B-25 aircraft landed with their bomb bays full of frozen American turkeys and vegetables. The kitchen personnel worked long hours and prepared a meal reminiscent of a banquet back in America. After months of existing on bully beef and tea, this day of feasting was long remembered.

The famous war correspondent and author, Leland Stowe, was on the field gathering material at this time. He expressed surprise that although the Sixty-Fourth Squadron had been named the "Black Scorpions" and the Sixty-Fifth Squadron the "Fighting Cocks," the Sixty-Sixth was nameless. The Sixty-Sixth's explanation was that the job of leading the Group in exterminating Jerries left no time for naming the unknown "Squadron X." Aptly enough, Mr. Stowe called the Sixty-Sixth the "Exterminators" in his articles, and the name stuck.

A few weeks later, Christmas found the organization eating American rations in part, and although rumors mentioned something about a chicken dinner, rainy weather prevented the transports from flying in the promised treat. A few days later, however, the men ate a delicious, although somewhat belated, Christmas dinner. New Year's Day saw "A" party on the move and although one truck in the convoy hit a land mine, injuring two of the men, the trip through the dangerous Marble Arch sector was completed safely. Memories of the dive bombing and strafing attack on "B" party near Agedabia were still fresh in everyone's mind. Reaching its new base at Hamraiet in a blinding sandstorm, "A" party was unable to set up camp for several days. Engineers were still carrying rocks off the proposed field and German aircraft took their toll in several strafing attacks which killed over fifty of the hardy soldiers. The men in the 57th were battle-wise and dug in everywhere against aerial attacks. In addition, several of the men had made machine gun nests from captured German weapons and threw up their own anti-aircraft fire. Soon after the Squadron drove into the selected camp area, Messerschmidts strafed the trucks and personnel. Luck was with the Sixty-Sixth which suffered no casualties. In addition, one of the crew chiefs, S-Sgt. Louis Lederman, using a captured Spandau machine gun on a home-made tripod, shot down one of the Messerschmidts. A few days later "B" party, moving toward Hamraiet, lost a truck in an enemy mine field, but no one was hurt by the blast. Darragh was the next base and operations there were curtailed frequently by the driving sandstorms which blew for days on end.

Tripoli was captured by the British Eighth Army on January 23, 1943

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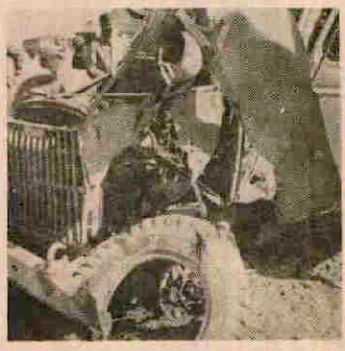

Another Mine

Mud

and the occasion was wildly celebrated. General Strickland said that the Fifty-Seventh would be employed in the Tunisian Campaign, and the men gritted their teeth and moved westward. From Zuara, Libya, an advance party crossed into Tunisia on March 2, and although they set up camp deep inside the border, a German counter-attack from the Mareth Line forced them to retreat over 40 miles to Ben Gerdane.

A few weeks later the Squadron was flying from El Djem L. G. and on April 18 made the famous "Palm Sunday Massacre." The Fifty-Seventh Group in ten minutes shot down the astounding total of seventy-five German aircraft for the loss of six Warhawks. This example of Yankee plane-trading broke the arch of the aerial bridge over which the Germans were supplying the Afrika Korps—which was like pumping blood into a corpse. The "Exterminators" accounted for the destruction of 25 aircraft and damaged 11 others. That night the Intelligence Section worked until midnight to sort out the claims, and a party was laid on that will never be forgotten. Twenty-five days after the Palm Sunday Massacre the Axis in Africa surrendered.

The Fifty-Seventh was ordered to prepare for the impending invaision of Europe, with Sicily as the first stepping-stone, and "A" party moved to Bou Grara, L. G., Tunisia, to water-proof vehicles and equipment for an amphibious landing operation. Meanwhile "B" party operated from Cape Bon, bombing Pantelleria and Lampedusa, and assisting greatly in the surrender of their garrisons. Cape Bon was a "scrounger's paradise" as the evacuating enemy forces left equipment everywhere. Every fifty feet along the road lay a German truck, jeep or trailer, and the men in the Squadron soon were riding around in eight-cylinder reconnaissance cars and Renault convertible coupes. German generators hummed in the camp nightly, supplying power for lights and music furnished by Herr Rommel's radios. It was amusing to tune a German radio to the German propaganda station in Berlin and hear Sally—that ugly battleaxe—talk about the "Butchers of the Fifty-Seventh." Later in the month the two parties of the Squadron met at Causeway, Tunisia, and after a few short days "A" party moved to a rocky

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Palm Sunday Pilots

camp on Malta, "the Gem of the Mediterranean." There the men saw the sights, watched the tremendous quantities of invasion material pile up, slept on the ground under pup tents, and awaited D Day.

The Eighth Army invaded Sicily on July 10 and nine days later "A" party landed at Pachino, Sicily, driving through the surf onto the beach in typical newsreel style. Soon the entire unit was flying from one of the Gerbini airstrips south of Catania, hitting enemy movement in the northern end of the island. The airfield was close to the fierce battle taking place on the plains of Catania and the Squadron sweat out several night attacks of the Luftwaffe, luckily escaping one which destroyed many men and airplanes on an adjacent British field. The unit lived in an orange grove and for the first time had fresh vegetables with meals. Wine was plentiful there at Scordia and a huge barrel was on tap outside of the mens' day room every evening.

On the third day of September the British Eighth Army, still under "Monty," crossed to the toe of the Italian boot and the battle on European soil had begun. The news of the Italian Government's capitulation made everyone's spirits rise, but the reports from the bloody beaches at Salerno proved that the Rome-Berlin Axis was still a strong war machine.

Soon afterward half the Squadron was on the move again, crossing the Straits of Messina and driving through Calabria Province on the heels of the fast-moving Eighth Army to Rocco Bernardo L. G. The huge Italian Naval Base at Taranto was soon taken and the Squadron was flying from a

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The Warhawk

Saturday Night

Home

Friends

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THE STARS AND STRIPES
MIDDLE EAST

NAZI AIR CONVOY SMASHED

Artist's Conception Of Giant Air Battle

57th Bags 74 Axis Planes In Greatest Sky Battle; RAF Aids

Easter Tours For Troops

A Good Show

really modern airfield at Gioia del Colle. On the same field were a number of Italian aircraft, flown and maintained by Italian personnel, and the bombers were reputed to be the same aircraft that bombed the Fifty-Seventh's field at El Djem in the Spring, so disastrously.

Not far from the field was the comparatively unscathed city of Bari and it soon became a Mecca for the men off duty. Wine shops were plentiful in town and five shillings (about one dollar) would buy a quart of sparkling champagne reminiscent of prewar days. Beautiful women were lonesome only until the wolves of the Sixty-Sixth Squadron reached Bari. After that romances flourished under starlit skies in typical Italian fashion. That charming city with its well-stocked shops and "well-stacked" signorinas cast its spell on the men for only a short time however, and the Squadron was on the road once more.

Its destination had been anticipated for a long time and the move to the Foggia airfields surprised no one. From here the radius of aerial cover spread deep into enemy territory embracing western and eastern Italy and also Yugoslavia. The Squadron entered the city of Foggia three days after its capture and found that the heavy bombers of the Twelfth Air Force had done a thorough job of paralyzing the railroad network in the area. During the next two months the Squadron was based on three different fields on

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Camp At Scordia

the Foggia plains, flying in close support of the Eighth Army. This period was an uncomfortable one in many respects. No American service units were in the area yet; British rations comprised the menu again; in addition, the weather was bleak, and chilly nights and rainy days found the men shivering with cold for the first time in years. After two hot summers, first in Egypt and second in Sicily, this autumn really affected the men. Everyone dug deep into his barracks bag and came out with an assortment of clothing which, although hardly regulation, kept him warm.

On one mission over Yugoslavia the "Exterminators" upped their total of victories by destroying six Stuka dive bombers in a fast five minutes of action, these being the first enemy aircraft destroyed over Yugoslavia by an American fighter unit. Lieutenant William P. Benedict, one of the most colorful figures in the unit, led the mission and destroyed one of the JU-87s himself. The next day General Doolittle decorated several of the Group's pilots. One of the Squadron's outstanding pilots, Lieutenant Charles C. Leaf, received the highly coveted Distinguished Flying Cross during the ceremony.

After a successful summer of operations without a single airman lost, the Squadron began to feel the brunt of German anti-aircraft fire and several pilots were lost in action over the heavily defended enemy territory. Operations were divided between dive bombing of Jerry positions on the Sangro River and reconnaissance over Yugoslavia with exceptional results. The pilots became deadly marksmen with their bombs and messages of commendation from Army Headquarters were frequently received after the Squadron had knocked out enemy strongpoints only a few yards from friendly troop positions.

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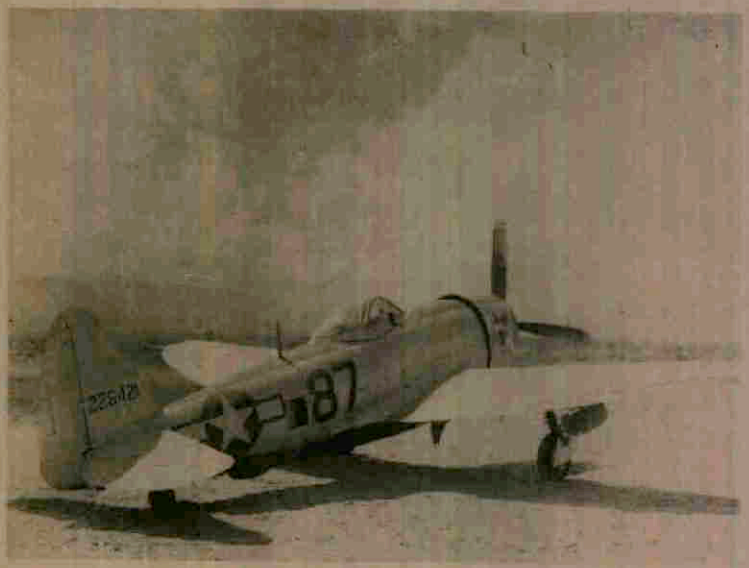

Mush Bucket

Thanksgiving Day found the Squadron cooks taking advantage of the American food (which was at last available) to make a turkey dinner fit for the proverbial king. A few days later the Group received 12 new Thunderbolt aircraft. The Sixty-Sixth was given four planes and several of the best mechanics checked them over. This new airplane was huge compared to the Warhawk, weighing almost seven tons. The plane was powered by a Pratt-Whitney radial engine and mounted eight fifty caliber machine guns. Although originally designed for high altitude escort flying, the ship was to be initiated as a low altitude fighter and dive bomber. The Fifty-Seventh was given the task of pioneering this new technique, and many modifications were required.

On adjoining fields in the area groups of heavy bombers began to move in and it was odd to see Fortresses based within sight of the Squadron's strip for the first time.

December found everyone building plywood walls around his tent and making homemade stoves from old gasoline tins to keep warm during the rainy, cold nights. Movies were shown several nights weekly at an Italian theater in nearby Manfredonia and the Group movie projector worked overtime on those occasions. Early in December Christmas packages began to arrive in numbers, and after having received last year's packages four months after Christmas, every mail call brought whoops of joy and midnight feasting. German aircraft visited the area nightly but no attacks were made. However, all were prepared for the worst and foxholes were dug near every tent. Once every week American Red Cross girls from nearby Foggia

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served coffee and doughnuts on the flight line and everyone spent a merry hour there chatting and refreshing themselves. With the unit under American Air Force command, the Squadron clerks found their work doubled as many forms, which were non-existent under Desert Air Force regulations, now had to be kept, including flight reports and aircraft maintenance form booklets.

In the middle of December, First Lieutenant Benedict assumed the duties of Squadron Commander. He was well liked and the men were glad to see him attain the position. The first thing he did was to discard the three year old policy which had stipulated that the enlisted personnel could have no liquor on the post. He gave the men permission to have a bar in the Club tent and they built a bar which was a work of art.

The new Thunderbolts flew several shakedown missions with the now obsolescent P-40s and on one of them the Squadron Operations Officer, First Lieutenant Leaf, shot down a Messerschmidt 109, the sixty-second aircraft destroyed by the "Exterminators." Christmas Day the Squadron was released at 1400 hours after the third mission landed. A big dinner followed and the Enlisted Men's Bar was opened. All had a good time and the second Christmas found the men in good spirits, confident that this would be their last Yuletide overseas.

New Year's Day brought rain and a gale that tore most of the tents to shreds and thoroughly drenched everyone's bedding and equipment. Cans of cold C-rations were passed out and comprised the holiday meals instead of the turkey and pie dinner which had been planned. The aircraft fared the weather well, except for the Squadron's German Fiesler Storch which was badly damaged. The field was a huge mud puddle which cancelled flying, but the time was not lost as it was spent in drying blankets and clothing and setting up more tents. The snow on the mountains east of camp was an impressive sight for the men who were seeing it for the first time in their overseas tour.

Many changes were taking place now, and with the passage of time the camp became more elaborate. The officers built a brick building which they used as a combination mess hall and club, and the enlisted men acquired two Niesen huts for their mess and recreation room. A war weary B-25 was given to the Squadron and it was a helpful addition in bringing in canteen supplies and liquor for the entire Group, for all Squadron motor transportation was curtailed to comply with regulations. Too, no longer were the men forced to perform the odious and unpleasant detail of kitchen police as a number of Italian laborers were hired in exchange for their meals and a few lira per day which the men cheerfully contributed.

Operations, though light, continued despite adverse weather conditions which grounded other units. The Squadron flew anti-shipping missions along the Yugoslavian coast with great success. It was here that Captains Benedict and Leaf pioneered skip bombing in the Mediterranean Theatre.

On January 22, the faithful Warhawks, twenty of them, took off for the last time under Sixty-Six colors. As they formed up and passed low over the field in a final salute, everyone felt a choking sensation for their old

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Charlie And Benny

departing friend. That same evening new P-47s flew in and the next week was spent in making the required receiving inspections and necessary modifications.

February was notable for its consistently poor flying weather which kept the aircraft grounded for days in succession. The forced inactivity made everyone restless and proved that the men's lives revolved about the aircraft. The food improved considerably, and eating real pork chops or steaks in the comfort of the Niesen hut was a distinct pleasure. On the night of the 26th, the enlisted men held a dance in Foggia and several girls of the WAC Detachment attended. This was the first social event attempted, and turned out to be a perfect flop.

After six months in the Foggia area, the Squadron moved westward across the Italian Peninsula to Cercola Landing Ground, four miles from Naples. The purpose of moving across the country was to support the American 5th Army in its drive toward Cassino and Rome. Several days of rain dampened everyone's spirits, but early in March the outfit set up camp in the muddy flats, and the officers moved to a villa on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, the first time that any Squadron personnel had lived in a building

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GI Palace

Lava At Night

overseas. Here at Cercola the men drank their first Coca Cola in two years and many of them posed for snapshots holding the familiar shaped bottles close to their chests.

The Thunderbolts flew several missions, carrying a 500-pound bomb under each wing and wreaked havoc on enemy gun emplacements and military installations in the Cassino area. The P-47s were proving their worth as dive bombers and low altitude fighters. Soon several American staff officers from England came down to fly with the organization. Their job was to learn about tactical support of ground forces, dive bombing techniques, and mobility of an air unit during an offensive. The lessons learned by the Fifty-Seventh Fighter Group were to point the way for successful tactical air operations in the proposed invasion of Europe from the west. Now the situation was somewhat reversed: the boys in the Squadron were in a position to impart their knowledge to other Air Force units less than two years after they had been "green" themselves.

The admiration and high esteem the Exterminators held for the soldiers of the United Kingdom could never be aptly expressed. In those dark days of 1942 the British anti-aircraft crews shared their last cigarettes with the "orphans of 66," and other service units split their meager stores of tea and bully with the Squadron when there were no prospects of ever replenishing their stocks. Regardless of opinions expressed by other American organizations concerning the British Imperial Troops as men and soldiers, the men in the Sixty-Sixth will be eternally grateful for the privilege of living and fighting with the 8th Army.

With the Squadron based so close to Naples, the men took advantage of their free time to visit this famous city and many trips were also taken to nearby Pompei for some interesting sight-seeing. History was in the progress of repeating itself as Mount Vesuvius began erupting in the middle of the month. Molten lava flowing down the slopes of the volcano engulfed several villages in its path and the Squadron Officers' villa in San Sebastiano had

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to be evacuated. Several of the organization's trucks assisted in the evacuating of civilians from the threatened hamlets in the area. Camera bugs went wild over the splendid shots of Vesuvius in action and the men trudged up to the active crater to take pictures. German bombers took advantage of the illuminated landmark made by Vesuvius and the massed shipping in Naples harbor to make nightly raids, and the fireworks made beautiful night displays for those who admired that type of spectacle. The ashes from the volcano threatened the Squadron aircraft and they were flown to another field north of Cercola for safety.

Late in the month the entire Squadron left Cercola and sailed to Corsica

Vesuvius Erupts

—the island which in many respects was a huge aircraft carrier anchored off Italy and the French Riviera. Surrounded by picturesque mountains on one side and the Ligurian Sea on the other, the Sixty-Sixth operated from the dusty, sun-baked field at Alto, near the town of Folleli. The scenery, however, was beautiful and plentiful and from the field the islands of Elba, Pianosa, and Monte Cristo could be seen plainly in the distance.

Near the end of March, 1944, the Twelfth Air Force devised a tactical plan which, if successfully carried out, would slowly and inexorably strangle German activities behind the front lines. What was needed was a fighter outfit which could strafe and bomb at low altitudes. To accomplish the mission of disrupting the enemy's vital communications and supply system,

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smashing railroads, locomotives, rolling stock, motor vehicles, tunnels and bridges, the Twelfth Air Force selected the Fifty-Seventh Fighter Group as the first separate task force in the United States Army Air Forces.

While the Germans were still solidly entrenched at Cassino, the plan which later became popularly known as "Operation Strangle" entered its active phase. The Exterminators' move to Corsica placed them deep into the enemy's right flank. And soon after arriving at Alto they were joined by the famous French Lafayette Squadron, veterans of four or five years of combat flying.

After elements of the British 8th Army moved into Cassino, May 18, and the U. S. 5th cracked the Adolf Hitler line, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring called desperately for reinforcements. How important the Germans deemed the Italian front was seen in the dispatchment of the crack Hermann Goering division to bolster their faltering defense lines. But before the Goering division could reach the front, Sixty-Sixth pilots strafed and bombed them unmercifully. Harassed continually during daylight, the Nazis attempted to move forward at night. Nevertheless, the Thunderbombers slashed and cut the division to ribbons. By the time they hit the front their troops were bomb and machine gun happy, their motor vehicles were crippled and smashed, their supplies depleted, and their morale shot. During the month of May, Exterminator pilots flew more sorties, expended more ammunition, and dropped more bombs than in any other similar period in Squadron history.

Stationed far above Rome, the Exterminators were vulnerable to air at-

Aboard An LST

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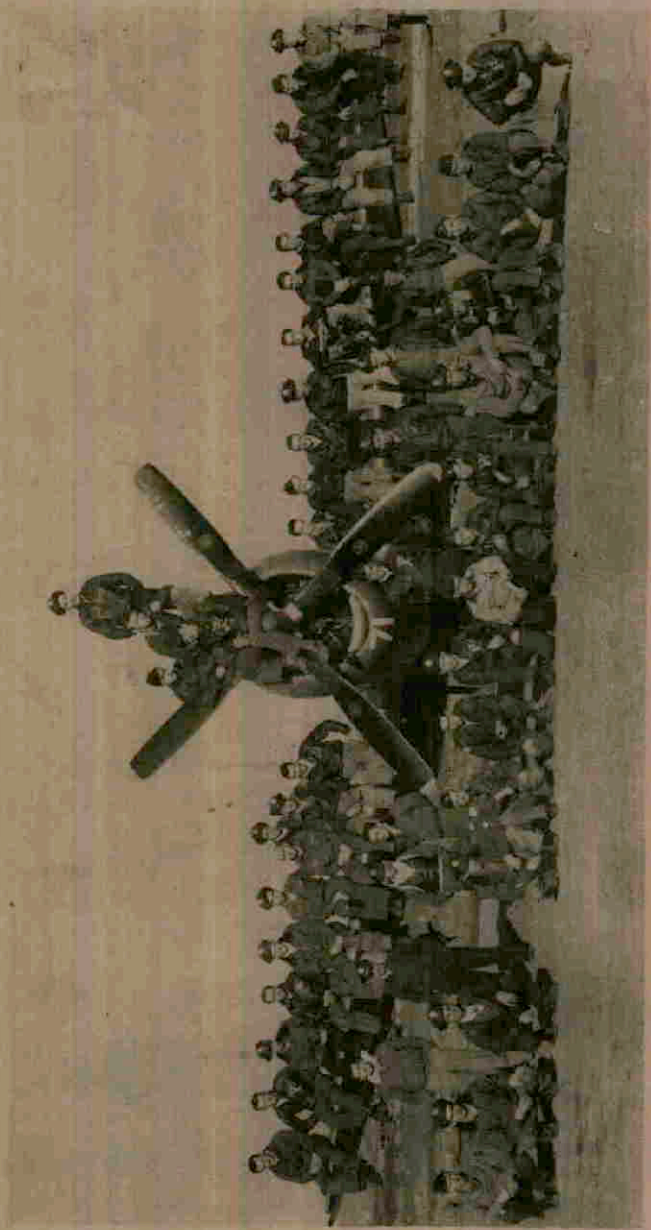

OFFICERS--MARCH, 1945

ENLISTED MEN--MAY, 1945

Night Raid

tack from the Italian mainland. In an effort to counteract the Allied aerial strangle hold over northern Italy, the Luftwaffe, in the middle of May, mustered together the remnants of their once proud Italian based air fleet, and for the last time in the European war, the Squadron trembled upon hearing the wavering drone of Jerry planes and seeing enemy flares. Starting late at night and continuing until early morning, the attack skipped the Squadron area and concentrated its blows several miles to the south.

Soon after the raid the men, weary and wary of enemy planes, elected to move the camp site away from the field. The new area was located in the sanctuary of the Corsican mountains, two road miles from the air strip. Situated near a fresh water stream which cut through the beautiful lush green mountain sides, the Squadron enjoyed the best camp site in two years of foreign service. The enlisted men and officers built club houses near the edge of the stream. Most of the men lived in pyramidal tents but some, using GI ingenuity, built comfortable dens out of belly tank and ammunition boxes.

After a tediously long hot day on the line, ground crews and pilots relaxed in the cool invigorating mountain stream. Improvised diving boards were constructed. Life in the mountains afforded a great many men a chance to rest in quiet and take things easy for a while but for others who craved excitement, the complaint was that life was growing monotonous and dull. For those who wanted to get away from camp, passes were issued to the towns of Bastia, seaport on the northeast part of the island, Ajaccio, birthplace of Napoleon, and Corte. The Group B-25 flew personnel to Naples and from there they sailed by ferry to the exotic Isle of Capri for rest leaves. After Rome was taken, passes were issued to the Eternal City where soldiers could view for themselves the ancient and fabulous sights of St. Peter's Cathedral, Vatican City, the Colosseum, the Forum, and the Pantheon.

Anywhere a GI traveled on the island he encountered prohibitive prices

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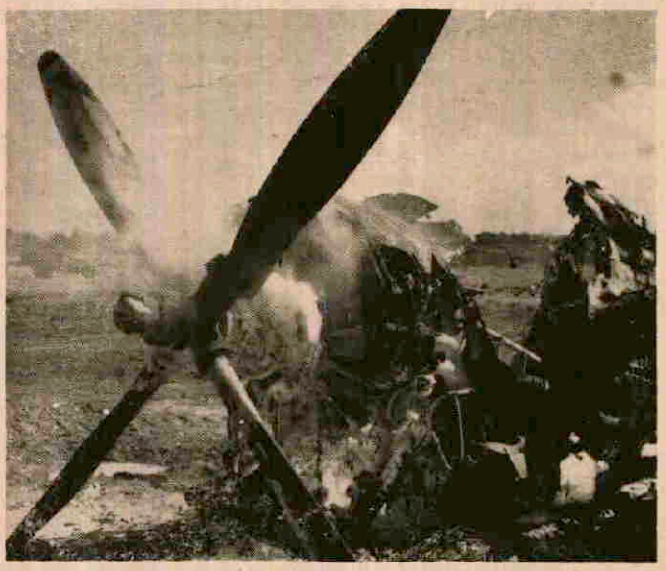
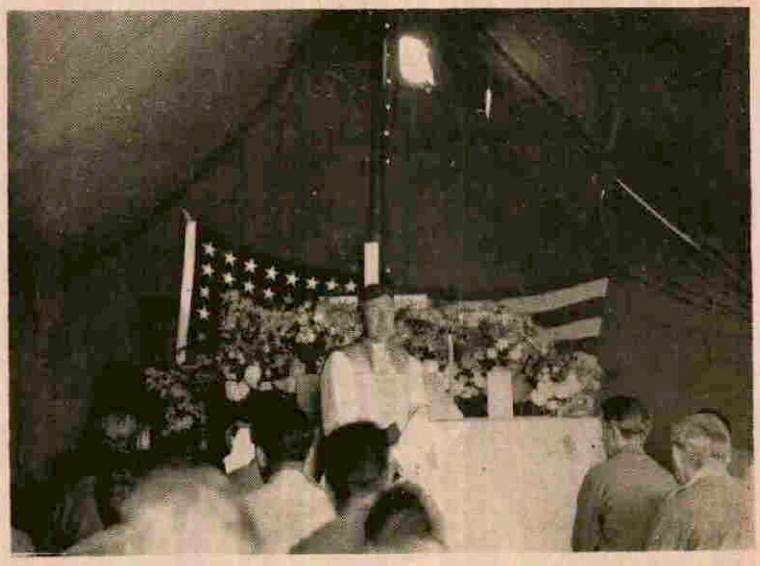


Pranged



The Chapel

on food and drink. Those large unwieldy franc notes eased away rather rapidly after he left camp. In camp the enlisted mens' bar did a thriving business. Cognac, rum, wines, and gin were brought in regularly from Catania, Sicily and Alexandria, Egypt. The officers received a regular ration of good old American liquor. The men sopped up the almost lethal Eau de Vie which is described as containing 180 octane gas. The juices of the anise plant furnished the fiery base of the drink.

In the evening, Special Services supervised a softball league and presented films three times a week. Squadron personnel, sitting on bomb fin crates and tops of trucks, sweated out darkness by playing cards and reading three or four months old newspapers and magazines. Once in a while a good entertaining film came around the circuit but usually a great many

USO Show

men left the premises before the first reel was over. It was not unusual for the projection machine to cut out a dozen times a night. Sprockets were often torn on the film or the generator would run out of gas. In addition, a few USO and British shows made their way to the island and the entertainment offered was a welcome change and was well received.

Less than a month after smashing the Hitler Line, 5th Army troops entered Rome on June 4, 1944. Events were moving swiftly. Hardly had the world celebrated Rome's liberation when General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, announced the long anticipated invasion of France on June 6. When Elba was invaded on June 17 by French Colonials, the Exterminators provided close aerial support almost within sight of their base. As supply stockpiles began to mount on the island fortress, wagers were made on D-Day for southern France.

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Roll Out The Barrel

On July 1, the Exterminators began their third year overseas. In commemoration of the anniversary, they joined the remainder of the Group in a festive party. Operations scheduled for that afternoon were cancelled but not before Sixty-Six pilots had scored a triumph to shove all subsequent anniversary events into the background. On a morning mission Exterminator airmen encountered what was now considered a rarity—enemy planes in the air. They shot down six ME-109s without a loss—a most appropriate accomplishment to punctuate the opening of the 25th month in foreign service.

During a Group formation, Maj. Gen. John K. Cannon, commanding the Twelfth Air Force, formally presented the Group's two War Department Distinguished Unit Citations. Following the ceremony, food and drink were served in the Sixty-Fourth Squadron area. Barrel after barrel of cool, thirst-quenching beer was consumed by all the "desert rats." It was reported that an English theatrical unit presented a variety show but the report was never confirmed.

Tension mounted in the Squadron as the Western Front became more fluid. The men were becoming restless; everyone was talking about moving. Life on the island was now dull and boring. When were the Allies going

to crash into southern France? Would the outfit move to France and get an opportunity to judge the merits of the mademoiselles, perfumes, and wines? As rumors multiplied and an air of expectancy pervaded the Squadron, 20 enlisted men who qualified for B-29 crews left the outfit for the United States. New bubble canopy long range P-47 Thunderbolts began coming into the organization.

Then on August 15, 1944, the long awaited jump-off into southern France took place. On the preceding night, the Army Liaison Officer briefed the Group on the plans and operations for the new invasion of Fortress Europe. Before dawn, pilots, crew chiefs, armorers, radiomen, truck drivers, and clerks were starting a grueling day on the line. Taking off in the dark, Major Charles C. Leaf led the Squadron's first mission into the air to dive bomb gun positions and then patrol the beachhead. By 0730 hours, five flights of the Sixty-Sixth were in the sky; and this was only the beginning. Planes of every type and description filled the sky as they flew over the field toward targets in southern France. On the ground one could hear the continuous drone of aircraft until nightfall.

As the U. S. Seventh Army raced forward against token resistance, the Squadron began priming for a move. Informed that the Sixty-Sixth Squadron would go into southern France, the spirit in the camp area rose. But as days passed into weeks and September came, the Squadron still watched the war from Corsica. Enemy resistance collapsed and adequate fighter support was forthcoming from fields in western France. The bombline was out of range of the Squadron's aircraft—it was easy to see that the war had moved surprisingly fast in southern France and the Group was no longer essential

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Leaving Corsica

to operations there. By September 1, the campaign was going into its last phase.

Rumors swept through the camp area like brushfire — the Squadron would return to the States, ship to England, go to the Far East, move back to Italy, or remain in Corsica. A short time later the Squadron knew it was escaping the confines of Corsica to return to Italy, and at noon on September 9, A Party had left the area, bound for a loading berth near Calvi. A surprise awaited them there when, for the first time, they boarded a ship manned by the United States Navy. Loading the organization's equipment took all evening and at 0230 hours in the morning the craft left Corsica, feeling its way carefully through the heavily mined waters off the Cape. After an hour or two of rough sailing, the ship set a smooth pace through the "millpond" Mediterranean, and daybreak was a peaceful and inspiring event. An unusual treat was afforded the men. The three meals served aboard were delicious and nourishing, a far cry from the usual cans of cold C rations eaten during every move.

Late in the afternoon the landing craft reached Piombino, Italy, and after unloading their trucks and equipment, the Squadron was soon driving south over exceptionally good highways to Grosseto. It was dark when the city was reached and rather than ride around in circles hunting the proposed new campsite, the convoy stopped in a field and everyone had a refreshing sleep under the beautiful star-studded sky. In the morning the convoy drove a short distance and set up camp in a grove of jack pines, about nine miles southwest of Grosseto. The airfield, called Ombrone Landing Ground, was nothing more than a rutted stretch of farmland one mile from the camp area. The nearby beach at Grosseto Marina boasted a number of unoccupied summer villas, and the officers moved into several of them, setting up adequate living quarters.

Operations from Corsica (where the planes were still based) consisted of several daily armed recces of the Po Valley, but targets were scarce and the flights were soon called "milk runs." Personnel and light equipment from B Party were flown across to Ombrone by the shuttling B-25's in the

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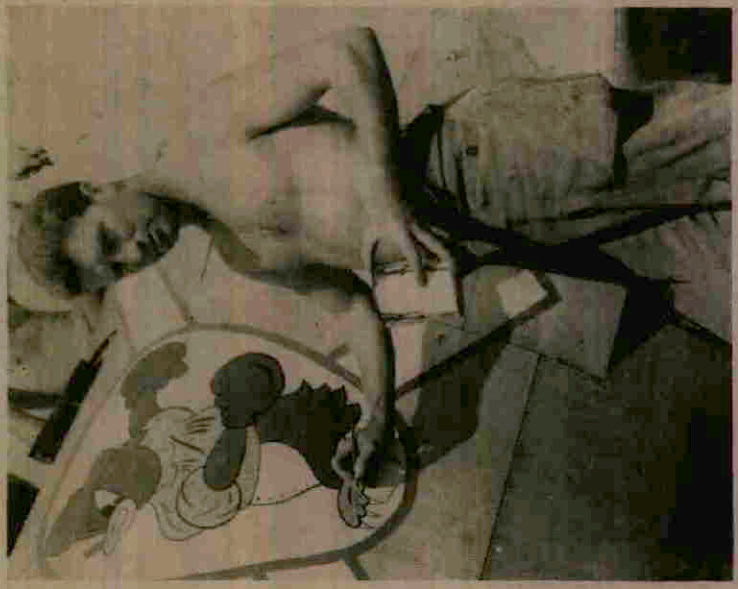
Jeeter



Oscar And Friend

Group and a few days later the rest of B Party boarded an LST in Bastia harbor and sailed to Italy to join the Squadron.

The landing field at Ombrone, flooded after every rain, soon became a sea of mud, definitely grounding the aircraft. Army engineers attempted to construct a drainage system around the field but it was evident that the strip would never be satisfactory for operational flying. Finally on September 25, the aircraft were flown to the main landing field at Grosseto. This field, still showing signs of being pummeled by the Allied aerial assault in Northern Italy, boasted a concrete runway which facilitated flying despite the nightly rains.

Although to reach the airfield a ride of several miles was necessary, the Squadron retained its camp area at Grosseto Marina, and the usual improvising and elaborating of recreational rooms followed. The officers set up a pretentious barroom in a large villa and spent many enjoyable hours there between scheduled flights. Not to be outdone, the enlisted men cleaned up and painted a three-room house near their camp area, and installed a bar and card tables. The huge fireplace in the central room sent out waves of heat to break the chill of the Autumn evenings.

Instead of armed reconnaissance of the Po Valley, the Squadron began flying close support missions. These operations were first used by the Desert Air Force in November 1943, and the Squadron became adept at them quickly. The plan consisted of a controller on the ground, located in an armored car at an advantageous spot overlooking the front lines. Upon the approach of the aircraft, the controller, identifying himself as "Rover Joe," directed them by radio to a target, either one of his own choice, or one given to him by the Army.

The results of these "Rover Joe" missions were excellent. The controllers were often experienced Flight Leaders from the Sixty-Sixth who could readily select suitable a target and determine the best method of destroying it. It soon became customary to hear the ground controller say over the radio transmitter, "Good show, Jackpot, you have hit your target." Another innovation was tried with the Thunderbolts. An external gasoline tank was carried under each wing filled with gasoline thickened to the consistency of jelly.

Two igniters insured the burning of the deadly mixture upon impact with the ground and the flames roared 50 feet in the air completely consuming anything in the large burning area. This effective weapon, called a Fuel Tank Incendiary Bomb, became widely accepted and proved of immeasurable value in driving the Germans from their Gothic Line positions. Aside from its destructive power, the bomb had a demoralizing effect on enemy personnel, who feared that each flight of P-47s thereafter was carrying the dreaded Fuel Tank Bomb. In addition the aircraft were proving more effective against pinpoint targets than even medium bombers.

At this time the Squadron pilots were taking advantage of the "Temporary Duty" furlough to America and after a month of relaxation they returned to the Squadron fresh and eager to "fight the wily Hun." Several of the enlisted men went home on permanent rotation and everyone envied

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Day Room

Mess Hall

Captured Equipment

their good fortune. The organization always strived to arrange leaves for its personnel and with Rome only a hundred miles south of the field many of the men were able to enjoy the splendors of the Eternal City. The atmosphere here helped everyone to forget the "horrors of war" and many men expressed a desire to return to Rome after the war. Rainy weather hampered operations considerably and the camp area was a foot deep in mud. Sometimes the aircraft braved cloudy weather over the base only to find their target area closed in, but they often managed to do considerable damage and teletype messages of commendation from 5th Army Headquarters arrived frequently.

Heavy rains once more gave the Squadron a chance to battle Nature as a dam north of Grosseto broke and flooded the entire valley. The Sixty-Sixth camp area was isolated and by midnight of November 2, the ground was inundated. One of the men, Staff Sergeant George Coyle, procured a fishing boat, and by rigging up a cable crossing powered by a truck winch, assisted in evacuating everyone from the flooded area. The camp area was abandoned and the officers gave up their villas on the beach, allowing the enlisted men to live there while they themselves moved into a large farmhouse nearby.

The Squadron's Thunderbolts became a more formidable weapon than ever with the installation of rocket tubes. Each aircraft carried six rockets, three under each wing, and the tubes could be jettisoned in an emergency.

Bridge Builders

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The Flood

Wet, Isn't It?

In subsequent operations the rockets took a heavy toll of enemy installations and supplies.

Now the work of the organization was clearly defined: unable to drive the German armies from their heavily fortified Gothic Line positions, the Allies called upon the Tactical Air Force to isolate the enemy battlefield by systematically cutting every rail line and motor truck artery north of his front lines. The Thunderbolts were perfectly suited for this work, with their heavy armament and long range of flight. To begin the task, the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force launched an operation called "Bingo" on November 6 to knock out the electrified Brenner rail line transformer stations at several key points, putting the enemy to the inconvenience of converting to steam power. The Squadron participated in the attack, sending sixteen aircraft to Trento where the flak was the most intense ever encountered. The Squadron's dive bombers were subsequently used to attack pin-point targets unidentifiable from high altitudes. The deadly strafing and rocket attacks, carried out in conjunction with practically every bombing raid, added to the total of destroyed locomotives and rolling stock. In addition it achieved a major degree of traffic interdiction by wrecking moving trains at numerous points on the main lines. Thus the plan unfolded, the over-all objective being to prevent Axis men, weapons and supplies from reaching the front. Winter weather was a big problem but the Exterminators flew through weather which grounded medium and heavy bombers, and kept the assigned rail arteries cut.

Thanksgiving Day was bleak and rainy but everyone enjoyed his traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings, on this the third Thanksgiving Day overseas. December was a busy month, with the Exterminators flying through rain and hail to keep the enemy rail lines cut, and the Squadron Operations Officer, Captain Richard L. Johnson, earned the nickname "Train-buster" after destroying scores of railroad locomotives and cars.

In the middle of December the entire Squadron moved into the city of Grosseto itself. The officers took over a hotel and restaurant while the enlisted men moved into a huge school building. After improvements were made, heat, running water, and lighting, the Squadron's morale rose considerably. No longer did the winter winds and torrential rains bother the

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Saturday Night At Grosseto

personnel during the long evenings, and it was a comfort to have a roof overhead instead of a tent. Just before Christmas the Squadron flew its one thousandth mission, the first fighter-bomber squadron in the Mediterranean Theater to reach that impressive total.

The Christmas spirit really permeated the Squadron. Wreaths adorned most of the windows and several Christmas trees, decorated with tinsel and knick-knacks, were erected in the corridors of the building. Christmas packages were stacked high under everyone's bed and nightly strolls were taken to some of the poorer homes in town to distribute sweets and toys to the destitute "bambini." On Christmas Eve open house was held at the Officers' Club and free drinks were served at the enlisted men's bar, which had just been completed. But in spite of the celebration, everyone enjoyed a big turkey dinner after two missions had landed the next day.

On the last day of the year the Squadron had the honor of flying the Group's three thousandth mission. January found the Squadron still hammering at railroad targets in the Po Valley, and with the addition of K-25 aerial cameras on several of the aircraft, claims of destruction were substantiated by developing the films a few hours after the aircraft landed. These pictures helped the Intelligence Section considerably in determining and assessing the flight's damage results.

The social life around town began to enter the limelight and several dances held by the organization brought a number of pretty local signorinas out of hiding and soon many of the personnel were spending the winter evenings at civilian homes, being wined and dined in rare style.

Enemy anti-aircraft became more concentrated in the target areas and the Squadron suffered many air crew losses. Every mission attacking the assigned heavily defended bridges and yards would return with aircraft badly holed, and the men in the Engineering Section were patching the aircraft continually.

In February, Lt. Col. Leaf flew his two hundredth mission, the greatest number flown by any pilot in the Group and one of the highest records in the theater, destroying a railroad bridge near Cittadella with his expert dive bombing.

The Squadron Intelligence Section set up a War Room and Briefing Room comparable to any in the theater. Covering the walls were huge situation maps showing the disposition of all armies in Europe and the Allied situation in the Pacific. These maps were changed daily and many of the Squadron and Group personnel dropped in every day for a look at the "big picture" and a few minutes of explanation on the phases of current strategy. Aircraft recognition contests were held to uncover the champion among the pilots and the ceiling of the room was covered with miniature aircraft in flight. Here was the meeting place where each day's efforts were recorded and tabulated for higher headquarters and for posterity.

The Army began to stress "Information and Education" programs, to insure that every man knew what he was fighting for and what his post-war problems would be. Weekly talks on current events and War Department films became compulsory and the men soon admitted there was a lot more to the war than just maintaining an aircraft. The Squadron organized a basketball team which thrashed every competitor in Grosseto and went on to finish high among the winners in the North Italy League, as proof that the Sixty-Sixth was on top in sports as well as in combat.

During the last few weeks of winter, the routine four and five daily missions to the German "Life-line" targets became monotonous and everyone hoped that the long-awaited Allied spring offensive would open soon. Sometimes locomotive hunting was fruitful, and on one mission, Captain R. L. Johnson accounted for the destruction of sixteen of the enemy's depleted reserve of locomotives. On several occasions the Squadron was called upon to escort medium bombers deep into Austria, and despite the distance to the target and back, the Exterminators never lost one of the charges under their protection.

The Fifth Army offensive began early in April, and the Sixty-Sixth flew ten missions daily, striking enemy command posts and heavy artillery positions preparatory to the ground troops push. The flight line became a bee-hive of activity from dawn to dusk every day, and the ground crews, as well as the pilots, worked with renewed vigor, stimulated by the fact that their work was showing tangible results. All other Squadron activities were shelved while the men proved that they could keep the aircraft operational despite the enemy's tenacious flak defenses.

On April 21, proof was shown that the terrific costs in airmen and aircraft during the continuous winter rail interdiction had not been in vain. The Germans in Italy began their withdrawal toward the Austrian border, and

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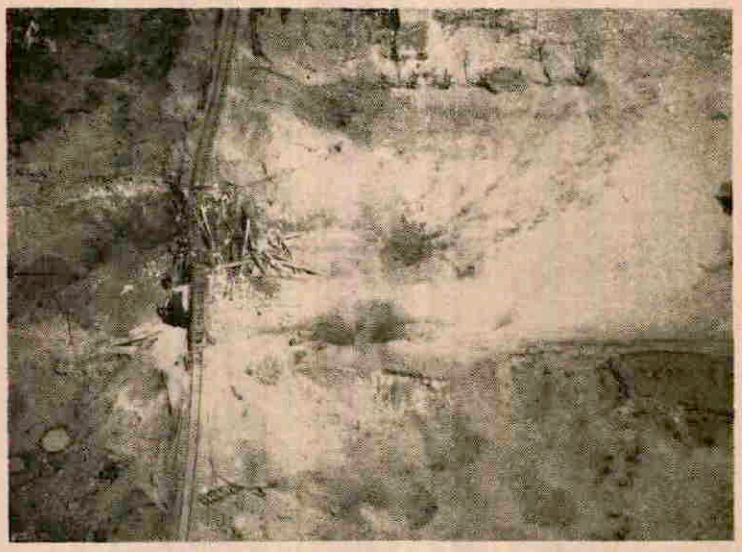
Rail Bridge Definitely Unserviceable



Keeping The Diversion Impassable

Third Anniversary Party

during the next week the Squadron participated in the slaughter of enemy motor columns that hastened the catastrophe which was to befall him shortly. As the enemy retreated towards the Alps, the Squadron's base in Grosseto soon was left far behind the bomb line, and on April 27 the Exterminators moved northward to Villafranca di Verona Airdrome. Enroute to the new location the ground crews drove through the battlefields of the Apennines and saw evidence of the Squadron's effective dive bombing. The Po Valley was a revelation to the men who enjoyed the picturesque fertile country, comparatively untouched by war. Everyone had heard so much about the beautiful country and now had an opportunity to see the industrial and agricultural center of Italy for himself. A good camp site was found in a number of wooden barracks in a grove of trees about three miles from the airfield, and a nearby villa was used to house the officers.

The civilian population was very friendly around Villafranca, and the men in the nearby villages, mostly Partisans, took many of the men of the men out on nightly trips, hunting down German troops pocketed in the area. The Sixty-Sixth men were the first Americans most of the populace had ever seen and wine drinking festivals were held nightly. Some of the more courageous men in the Squadron participated in the Hun-hunting parties and came into camp at dawn every morning loaded down with German souvenirs and trinkets. Handfuls of Partisans marched hundreds of Jerry prisoners past the camp area at all hours of the day, and one evening Major Johnson, while riding alone in a jeep, was approached by a German officer who wanted to surrender his twelve hundred men. The major accepted the offer and led the huge convoy of Jerry trucks and men to a P. O. W. camp near Villafranca.

With the main forces of the German Fourteenth Army slaughtered in the Po Valley, very little enemy activity was seen by the Squadron during long hours of reconnaissance, and operations slackened considerably.

The Squadron boasted that despite continuous operations during the

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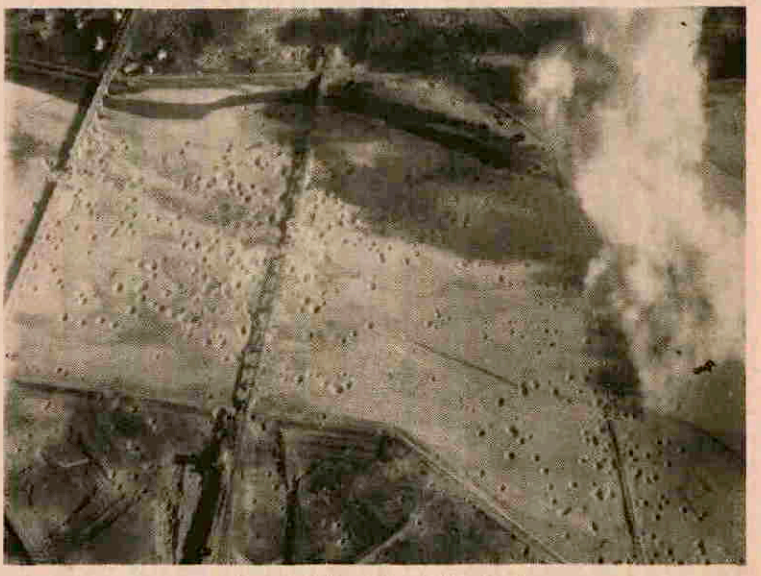
Egg Market

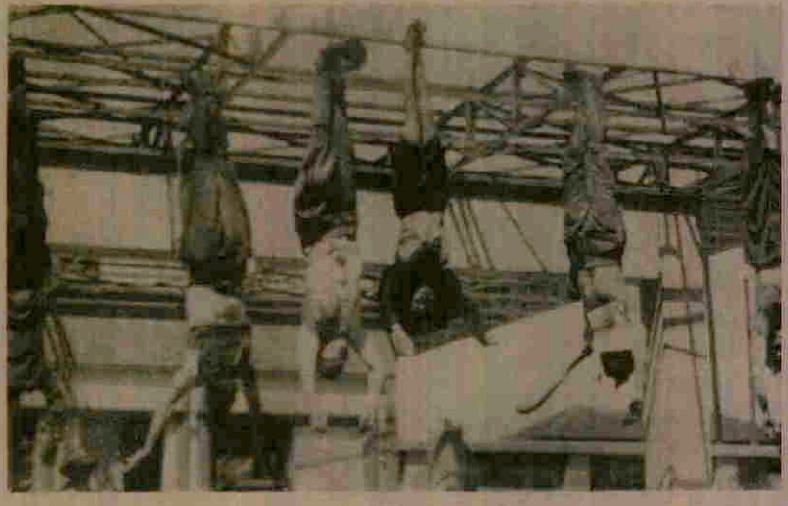


Achtung! Bridge Closed For Repairs

The Wehrmacht In Defeat

past 34 months an effort was made to send someone on leave whenever the opportunity presented itself. Now with the war in Italy winding up, the advantages of being in the center of the Po Valley were utilized, and men who could be spared from the flight line went on sight-seeing trips. The snow-capped Alps, visible from the camp, and nearby world-famed Lake Garda attracted many of the men but most of the Sixty-Sixth tourists headed for the modern cities of Milan and Turin, to see the cultural wonders there. Several other trucks full of happy men, each carrying his camera, headed eastward toward the famous city of canals, Venice. This proved to be an unforgettable experience, riding a gondola in an atmosphere far removed from anything military.

Finally on May 2 came the astounding news that the German High Command in Italy had surrendered unconditionally and all hostilities would cease immediately. By a coincidence, the Squadron had two aircraft out on a reconnaissance mission when the news came from Army Headquarters and it was a thrill to say over the radio transmitter, "Calling Jackpot, calling Jackpot aircraft. Return to base, the war is over."



Finito Benito

Unit Citations

and

Personnel Roster

War Department

Distinguished Unit Citations

I

The *57th Fighter Group* (S) and the 314th Fighter Squadron are cited for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy on 18 April, 1943. On this date, at a time when the operations in northern Tunisia were reaching their culminating intensity, 47 Warhawks of the 64th, 65th, and 66th Squadrons of the 57th Fighter Group (S) and the 314th Squadron of the 324th Fighter Group (S), escorted by a top cover of Spitfires of the Royal Air Force, were dispatched on a fighter sweep over the Gulf of Tunis for the purpose of attacking enemy aircraft in the Cape Bon area. In the course of the patrol, a large force of approximately 100 three-engined enemy transports of the JU-52 type, escorted by about 50 ME-110s, was sighted 6 miles off the coast flying in close formation low over the water. The Warhawk pilots immediately engaged the enemy formation, swooping down from an altitude of 8,000 feet into the midst of the troop-laden transports and wreaking a devastating toll of their numbers. During the ensuing air battle, in which the ME-110s were powerless to stem the ruthless onslaught, the scene became a melee of diving airplanes and gunfire. The transports blew up in midair, dived into the sea, or crashed in flames on the shore, while the beaches and surf below were littered with wreckage and troops from the enemy aircraft. In all, the four fighter squadrons destroyed 72 airplanes, of which 58 were troop transports and 14 were ME-109s and 110s. The outstanding heroism, aerial skill, and fearless initiative demonstrated by these gallant pilots, both individually and as a close knit combat team, contributed in large measure to the destruction of enemy air power during a critical period of the Tunisian campaign, and materially accelerated the collapse of the enemy forces in the Tunis and Cape Bon area. The victorious exploits of these squadrons are exemplary of the highest traditions of the Army Air Forces.

II

The *57th Fighter Group* (S). For outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy in direct support of the British Eighth Army in the Middle East campaign, from the battle of El Alamein to the capitulation of the enemy forces in Tunisia and in Sicily. This group, operating from advanced landing fields directly behind the front lines under the most difficult of desert weather and terrain conditions, carried out continuous and devastating dive bombing and strafing raids against enemy airdromes, ground installations, troops, and supply lines, as well as many fighter patrols and fighter escorts for our own and Allied bombardment airplanes, and engaged in repeated aerial engagements with enemy aircraft in which vast numbers of enemy aircraft were destroyed. The pilots of this organization exhibited the greatest bravery, skill, and resourcefulness, while its ground personnel, in the face of repeated enemy attacks, performed all duties with utter disregard for their personal safety. By the superior courage, initiative, skill, untiring efforts, and devotion to duty of all personnel of this organization, despite personal hardships and the most difficult of conditions, the *57th Fighter Group* (S) contributed greatly to the defeat of the enemy in the Middle East in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Army.

III

The *57th Fighter Group* is cited for outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy. Pioneering in the adaption of the high-altitude P-47 as a low-level strafing and dive-bombing aircraft, the *57th Fighter Group* perfected these techniques to such a high degree of effectiveness that on 30 March 1944, the organization was moved from the Italian mainland to Corsica to operate as a separate task force. Selected to accomplish the interdiction of railroads and communications and the destruction of locomotives, rolling stock, and motor vehicles behind the enemy lines, the group was directed to provide a minimum of 48 fighter-bomber sorties per day and customarily furnish its own top cover. Displaying outstanding efficiency and zeal in surpassing these requirements, the unit, during its nine days of combat operations from 1 to 14 April, 1944, exceeded an average of 80 sorties per day. On 14 April, 1944, the *57th Fighter Group* distinguished itself through extraordinary heroism, determination and esprit de corps in a flawlessly coordinated group effort which struck a series of devastating blows to the enemy in the Florence-Arezzo area. Flying 91 sorties between 0810 and 1610 hours, the pilots of this group, in six consecutive missions, destroyed two tunnels, one railroad bridge, six locomotives, and a large oil dump. More than 13 trains were attacked, 108 railroad cars were destroyed, damaged or set on fire, and tracks were cut at 9 different points. Five motor vehicles were strafed and left burning and 10 others were destroyed or damaged. With all missions briefed to engage any hostile aircraft sighted, one formation of 16 P-47s attacked more than 32 ME 109s and FW 190s, destroyed 3, probably destroyed a fourth, and dispersed the remainder. Near Ponarance, 16 other P-47s strafed 40 barracks-like buildings, and through flames and explosions which hurled debris to a height of 4,000 feet, repeatedly attacked these installations until 25 buildings had been hit and 19 fires started which threw flames 500 feet into the air. From the day's operations, one aircraft is missing and three were damaged. Through the untiring devotion to duty and superior professional skill of its ground personnel, and the proficiency and gallantry of its pilots, the *57th Fighter Group* has upheld and added to the luster of the highest tradition of the military service of the United States.

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Personnel

Officers

A

Aldis, John, 1014 Merchants St., Emporia, Kansas.
Apostolou, Alexander N., 649 Day Avenue, Roanoke, Virginia.
Averbach, Sidney, 2911 Newark St. NW., Washington, D. C.
Anderson, Miller A., Route 1, Harshaw, Wis.
Angelone, Joseph, 215 E. 12th St., Alliance, Ohio.
Adams, Robert M., 517 Longwood Drive, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

B

Bell, Robert M., 48 E. Walton Place, Chicago, Ill.
Bergen Clinton W., 900 N. 8th St., Kansas City, Kansas.
Bigelow, Louis R., 7818 83rd St., Glendale, L. I., N. Y.
Burgess, Bruce E., 804 N. Audubon Rd., Indianapolis, Ind.
Ballew, William C., 8 Hagood St., Easley, South Carolina.
Barlow, Hugh G., 294 Washburn St., Lockport, N. Y.
Bailey, Wilbur P., R. F. D. County Line Rd., Lakewood, N. J.
Bangiola, Paul, Littleton Rd., Morris Plains, N. J.
Bettinger, Stephen L., 36 Carnegie Ave., East Orange, N. J.
Brown, Robert C., (No Address).
Bracha, Vincent J., Ohmulgu, Oklahoma.
Burt, William C., Simsboro, Kans.
Bell, Donald W., Lakelawn, Taylorville, Ill.
Bittner, Robert F., 7135 Thomar Blvd., Pittsburgh, Pa.
Brewer, Calvin W., 3803 E. 14th St., Des Moines, Iowa.
Benedict, William P., San Quentin, Calif.
Bernal, John K., Jr., 3008 Dudley Ave., Nashville, Tenn.
Berquist, William G., 425 17th St., Rockford, Ill.
Blackburn, George M., Jr., Battery Lane, Nashville, Tenn.
Bowman, John A., Box 154, Wauneta, Neb.
Brandon, Gerald A., (No Address)
Boulware, Thomas M., Ellestyne, S. C.
Bowen, Lewis L., Box 401, Eagle Pass, Texas.
Bell, Joe D., Gleason, Tenn.
Baker, Ralph M., 270 Shendoga Location, Chesholm, Michigan.

C

Chapman, Richard K., 1000 N. Kenasaw St., Arlington, Va.
Coughlin, David A., 32 Taft Ave., Winthrop, Mass.
Carrick, James, Jr., 154 Radford St., Yonkers, N. Y.
Carlson, Carl B., 76 Newton Ave., Stratford, Conn.
Casida, Darrel F., 222 2nd St., Hobart, Oklahoma.
Cleveland, Howard W., 37 Delana Ave., Yonkers, N. Y.
Chaitin, Irwin I., 251 West 98th St., New York, N. Y.
Chandler, Porter R., 108 E. 82nd Street, New York, N. Y.
Cook, Carroll M., 720 E. Nebraska Ave., St. Paul, Minnesota.
Conan, Mark E., Brighton Arms Apt., Syracuse, N. Y.
Carlton, George S., 306 N. Station, El Paso, Texas.
Clay, Robert G., Box 867, Burns, Oregon.
Cunningham, William F., 3612 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.
Coburn, Julius H., Jr., Route 1, Mankato, Minn.
Callan, Thomas H., Custer, S. D.
Cohn, Herbert M., (No Address).
Cleveland, Arthur B., 235 E. McCreight Ave., Springfield, Ohio.
Claxton, Anlia Wade, 805 N. Jefferson St., Dublin, Ga.
Campbell, William B., 512 Jibson St., Blessfield, Mich.
Curl, James G., 2450 Main St., Columbus, Ohio.

D

Danks, Howard W., P. O. Box 1002, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
Davenport, Grady F., Jr., 1219 Hanover St., Chattanooga, Tenn.
Davis, Thomas D., Rt. 2 Forrest Road, Columbus, Ga.
Deckert, George F., Jr., 2001 North Blvd., Baton Rouge, La.
Deniston, Dale R., 1295 Triplett Blvd., Akron, Ohio.

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Dose, Frederick P., 2012 Lunt Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Denton, Guy O., Route No. 2, Trop, Texas.
Dickinson, Wm. H., 926 E. Madison St., Russelville, Alabama.
Dodds, Wayne S., 1811 Grande Ave., Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
Duncan, Harry D. (No Address)
Dehmer, Charles S., 266 South Washington St., Tiffin, Ohio.

E

Ehney, William H., Brinkley, Ark.
Emerson, Roy C., Nelight, Nebraska.

F

Fairlamb, Charles R., Box 273, Saddle River, N. J.
Farley, Stanley B., Jr., 120 S. Madison St., Madison, Ky.
Farrel, Raymond A., 401 Locust Ave., Central a, Pa.
Fleming, James J., Jr., 1301 Carswell Ave., Way Cross, Georgia.
Flood, Edwin O., 3823 Avenue P., Galveston, Texas.
Fox, William R., Centerville, Md.
Fandel, Ray O., Box 133, Wymore, Nebraska.
Feichtinger, Louis M., Jr., 351 Rademacher Ave., Detroit, Michigan.

G

Gregg, Roye E., Creighton, Missouri.
Grubaugh, Robert E., 1405 Homeview Drive, Louisville, Ky.
Gains, Robert H., 646 Odell Ave., Yonkers, N. Y.
Gardner, James T. Jr., Milburn, Oklahoma.
Garland, Christopher, Head of the Bay Road, Buzzard's Bay, Mass.
Gibson, Robert E., 22 Pine St., Rockville Center L. I., N. Y.
Gilbertson, John T., 222 Stonewall St., Memphis, Tenn.
Goldcamp, Robert J., (No Address).
Gogan, Harry L., Buffalo, N. Y.
Goodman, Herman, 145 S. Road, Jamaica, N. Y.
Goss, Quentin J., Box 78, Carrington, N. D.
Groendycke, Guilliford D., Lake City, Kansas.

H

Hain, Calvin S., 2499 N. 50th St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Hartwig, James P., Box 33, Sherman, Texas.
Hayden, Harry J., 909 Grant St., Wooster, Ohio.
Hays, Louis O. III, 936 Forrest Ave., West Homestead, Pa.
Head, Billy M., 520 Gorskin Ave., Douglas, Georgia.
Henson, Walter H., Jr., Ridgeland, Miss.
Hedrick, Donald A., 9753 S. Drexel Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Herring, William J., 4108 Chowen Ave., S., Minneapolis, Minn.
Hertzberg, Frank E., 507 E. Walnut St., Santa Anna, Calif.
Heying, Arno H., 611 Main St., Corona, Calif.
Hill, William R., 815 S. W. Avenue, Jackson, Michigan.
Hitchcock, Mervin J., Windsor, Mass.
Hoke, Robert A., Buzzards Bay, Mass.
Hunter, Robert J., 1602 S. Olympia, Tulsa, Oklahoma.
Hutton, David T., 1885 Noble Road, E. Cleveland, Ohio.
Hanrahan, Raymond J., 672 W. 40th St., Des Moines, Iowa.
Heiman, Matthew F., 114 Illinois St., Baytown, Texas.
Heron, Truman R., Box 175, Grant, Oklahoma.
Hunnicutt, Samuel Z., 1927 S. 13th St., Chickasha, Oklahoma.

I

Irby, George S. Jr., Woodruff, S. C.

J

Jansen, Leon E., Tieton, Washington.
Johnson, Elvaughn E., McLean, Nebraska.
Johnson, Richard L., 5830 N. Maplewood Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Jones, Gordon H., Randall Road, Ransomville, N. Y.
Jones, James A., Belle Center, Ohio.

K

Kaiser, Robert E., 465 84th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Kimball, Richard W., 4907 Browndale, Ave., Minneapolis, Minn.
Knauf, Anthony R., Bark River, Michigan.
Koelling, Glenn H., New Franklin, Mo.

Kranzush, Darwin E., 234 E. Emmett St., Portage, Wisconsin.
Kropidlowsky, Chester L., (No Address).
Kriss, George, 325 Westfield Ave., Elizabeth, N. J.
Ketchum, David S., 530 Glen Arden Drive, Pittsburgh, Pa.
Kelley, John W., 5117 California St., Omaha, Nebraska.
Kizziar, James H., 2817 Hulbirt St., Corpus Christi, Texas.
Kruse, Richard W., 1302 S. 44th St., Omaha, Nebraska.

L

Leaf, Charles C., 411 Thornden St., South Orange, N. J.
Lee, Randolph W., Rapid City, S. D.
Leek, Henry T. Jr., Pontotoc, Miss.
Lehman, Philip T., 2405 E. Gordon St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Lewis, Kenneth R., Humphrey, Nebraska.
Livesey, William I., 132 Arlington Blvd., N. Arlington, N. J.
Llewellyn, Raymond A., 316 Lincoln St., Johnstown, Pa.
Long, George W., 1805 Franklin St., Lexington, Mo.
Longnecker, Joe L., 1824 Connor Ave., Joplin, Mo.
Lord, James R., 239 Sandusky St., Conneaut, Ohio.
Looney, Robert, 15 Gladstone St., Rochester, N. Y.
Lown, Robert C., Walkill, N. Y.
Lyth, Alfred R., 2832 Orville Ave., Kansas City, Kansas.
Lee, Roland E., 105 W. Brooks Ave., San Diego, Calif.

M

Marx, Frederick A., 819 No. 3rd St., Monroe, Louisiana.
Mallet, Alfred P., 594 Sawyer St., South Portland, Maine.
Martin, Fred K., 1025 Tennessee Ave., Fort Wayne, Indiana.
Mammarelli, Alfred D., 791 Belmont Avenue, Springfield, Mass.
Matula, Theodore, 162 Lyon St., Peterson, N. J.
May, Thomas R., 307 E. Scott St., Knoxville, Tenn.
Mayberry, Charles W. Jr., 144 Water St., Circleville, Ohio.
McCoy, Cortlandt, Jr., Monroe, Louisiana.
McCullum, Walter C., Kullawa, Ky.
McMullin, Robert L., 2231 S. 19th E., Salt Lake City, Utah.
McCreary, Charles E., 707 Witson St., Berkeley, California.
McDonnell, Harold E., 500 E. Chelton Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.
McMahan, Charles R., 1800 Skeen St., Madison, Illinois.
McMillan, Cecil M., Jr., Gladstonburg, Alabama.
Meacham, Gerard S., 22 Sutton Manor, New Rochelle, N. Y.
Mitchell, Delbert Y., 401 W. 7th St., Tulsa, Oklahoma.
Moody, James L., 2406 Lyndon Ave., Chattanooga, Tenn.
Mancuso, Philip A., 156 Washington St., Worcester, Mass.
Markowski, Ignatius R., 20-32 E. Orman, Pueblo, Colorado.
Miller, John P. III, 39 Walnut St., Carlisle, Pa.
Monsell, Harry B., Tallulah, Louisiana.
Morrison, Robert E., Box 434, Coquille, Oregon.
Moore, Aldon L., 1126 Palm St., Abilene, Texas.
Mosites, George A., 877 Valleyview Road, Mt. Lebanon, Pa.

N

Norris, Gene, 2709 W. 3rd St., Dayton, Ohio.
Neely, Leonard P., 137 Cedar Ave., Long Beach, Calif.
Noyd, Eugene L., 2608 Hamilton Ave., Apt. No. 3, Houston, Texas.

O

Olsen, Eigil E., 927 East 20th St., Oakland, Calif.
O'Donoghue, John B., 216 W. Central St., Arkansas City, Kan.
Orcutt, Robert B., 1654 W. Grace St., Los Angeles, Calif.
Ottaway, William M., 401 W. Pine St., Rome, N. Y.
Overcash, Robert J., 225 E. Center Ave., Mooresville, N. C.

P

Paine, Charles T., 524 Mommouth St., Independence, Ore.
Palovich, Edward J., 1009 1/2 Ketcham Ave., Toledo, Ohio.
Paulsen, Richard B., 809 Prospect Ave., Lewiston, Idaho.
Pernicka, Louis J., 240 S. Clarence St., Berwyn, Ill.
Parish, William W., 400 E. 57th St., New York City, N. Y.
Peterson, Vernon R., 3642 Logan Ave., Minneapolis, Minn.
Pinkowski, Robert J., 1930 Beverly Place, South Bend, Ind.
Place, Richard L., 16524 Glastonbury St., Detroit Mich.
Pridgeon, Bobby J., San Saba, Texas.
Polk, Gaston L. Jr., Whappo Heights, S. C.

R

Rahn, Claude A., 313 Martingale Ave., Baltimore, Md.
Read, Robert P., 18 Ostego Road, Worcester, Mass.
Reich, Glenn A., Tripp, S. D.
Robinson, Arthur S., Box 377, Onancock, Va.
Rowles, Patrick E., 603 W. 26 St., Spokane, Wash.
Riley, Casey A., 443 Holt St., Hampton, Va.
Richards, James B. Jr., 130 W. Glenn, Auburn, Ala.
Ridley, John J., 4415 S. 73rd St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Reynolds, Joseph F., 32-15 41st St., Long Island City, N. Y.

S

Santry, John W., Kosse, Texas.
Schuren, Robert C., 12 Madison St., Lake Geneva, Wis.
Sharratt, William J., 1525 Rose Terrace, Union, N. J.
Sherwood, Lincoln R., St. Johns, Ariz.
Schryer, Paul F., 2224 66th St., Kenosha, Wis.
Shaw, Warren L., Box 65, Hodgenville, Ky.
Smith, Aiken V., Joseph City, Ariz.
Smith, Allen H., 237 E. 20th St., New York City, N. Y.
Smith, Eugene F., 3640 Columbus Sq., Minneapolis, Minn.
Smith, Jack A., 45 Fairfield Terrace, Long Meadow, Mass.
Smith, James L., (No address).
Smith, Donald A., 1127 Jefferson St., Delowo, Calif.
Spalinger, Donald C., Box 6, Route 7, Bakersfield, Calif.
Stahl, Adrian K., 611 "U" St., N. E., Minneapolis, Minn.
Stefanik, John J., 275 Fairview Ave., Chicopee, Mass.
Stern, George T., 342 Warwick Ave., South Orange, N. J.
Swanson, Harold A., 187 South I St., San Bernadino, Calif.
Sweeney, Richard F., 2217 A Floyd Avenue, Richmond, Va
Sexauer, Paul S., 7530 Milan Avenue, St. Louis, Mo.
Skoropowski, Kenneth B., 49 Elizabeth Road, Belmont, Mass.
Sorn, William W., 37 Winne Road, Delmar, N. Y.
Simpson, Robert E., 1884 Wymore Ave., E. Cleveland, Ohio.

T

Tattersall, Harold O., 3252 N. 13th St., Phila, Pa.
Taylor, William E., 811 Broadway, Galveston, Texas.
Teichrow, John E., 1625 Hewitt Ave., St. Paul, Minn.
Tench, William C., 1610 Wickham Place, Stuart Gardens, Newport News, Va.
Tilley, Thomas M., 2612 Van Dyke Ave., Raleigh, N. C.
Turner, Charles W., Route 1, Mariette, Ga.

W

Weber, Sheldon A., 3001 Derby St., Berkeley, Calif.
Wdggdmdn, John F., 170 Eye St., N. W., Washington, D. C.
Weisenberger, Carl J., 351 W. Market St., Tiffin, Ohio.
Wiener, Richard S., (No address).
Wise, James B. Jr., Pondcreek, Okla.
Williams, Herman R., Shirley, Ind.
Williams, James A., Dixon Mills, Ala.
Williams, Thomas T., 726 E. 16th Ave., Denver, Col.
Williams, William B., 2949 Morley Road, Shaker Heights, Ohio.
Wackerman, Arnold G., Tonawanda, N. Y.
Waters, Dallas C., 3 E. Denton St., New Bern, N. C.
Weaver, Gerald B., 512 Portage St., Buchanan, Mich.
Wicker, Walter L., 133 South Eden St., Shawnee, Okla.
Woodley, Edwin L., Jr., 343 Pitman Ave., Pitman, N. J.
Wray, James W., 58 Smith St., Mt. Clemens, Mich.

V

Yates, William J., Route 1, Box 199, Calexico, Calif.
Yoder, Carrol J., Wellman, Iowa.

Z

Zipser, Albert, 1840 N. 14th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

Enlisted Men

A

Adesso, Lewis J., 106 Worth St., Ithaca, N. Y.
Alkire, Charles R., 922 East 12th St., Parkersburg, W. Va.
Allein, Fred H., 151 Indian Church Rd., Buffalo, N. Y.
Allen, Donald E., 357 Hanford St., Columbus, Ohio.
Amacher, Jacob A., Osceola, Nebr.
Anderson, Roy F., 2741 W. Denver Pl., Denver, Colo.
Anderson, Warren K., Dunlar, Kan.
Arigo, Dominick A., 1260 71st St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Armstrong, Charles E., 1961 Aberdeen Ave., Columbus, Ohio.
Askenase, Arthur, 2060 74th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Asche, Joest H., RR No. 2, Clara City, Minn.
Atkinson, Kenneth S., 509 Market St., Freeport, Pa.

B

Baker, George F., 751 Hazel St., Elmira, N. Y.
Barstis, Edward J., 608 Lake Michigan Rd., Grand Rapids, Mich.
Behrik, Joseph M., 3357 Mahoning Rd., Canton, Ohio.
Berg, Charles B., 94 North Main St., Spring Valley, N. Y.
Blodgett, Clifford P., Jericho, Vt.
Brown, Richard S., 201 W. Adams St., Brownwood, Texas.
Bodlak, Louis Jr., 13401 Chapelside Ave., Cleveland, Ohio.
Blake, Robert L., 401 Julia NE., Grand Rapids, Mich.
Boyda, Mitchell C., 3910 Talbot, Detroit, Mich.
Benson, Daryl M., Gen. Del., Humeston, Iowa.
Bobb, Raymond E., 105 McKinney St., Malvern, Ark.
Bachelor, Waldon L., 124 Michigan St., Petoskey, Mich.
Baker, Henry, 1701 E. 5th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Bartosz, Robert, 116 Center St., Stevens Point, Wis.
Boyman, Kenneth, RR on U. S. Highway No. 12, Benton Harbor, Mich.
Beck, Howard D., 92-13 214th St., Queens Village, N. Y.
Bedell, Charles F., 95 Central Ave., Owego, N. Y.
Bengel, Harold E., 707½ St. Clair Ave., Jeanette, Pa.
Benton, Richard J., 11 Greenridge Place, Saratoga Springs, N. Y.
Bentsen, Stanley B., 3301 Longfellow Ave., So., Minneapolis, Minn.
Boyd, Earl, 1120 N. Cotton Ave., El Paso, Texas.
Boyda, Mitchell C., 3910 Talbot Ave., Detroit, Mich.
Brady, Francis S., 933 24th St., Altoona, Pa.
Brannan, Robert A., 3446 Clay St., Denver, Col.
Brearley, Ronald, 2168 South 28th St., Milwaukee, Wis.
Brooks, Robert W., 413 Strafer St., Cincinnati, Ohio.
Browne, Clifford, 38 Clarke St., Binghamton, N. Y.
Brubaker Jr., Herbert L., R.F.D. No. 1, Holtwood, Pa.
Burns, Russel El, 2 Hocheborne Ave., Auburn, N. Y.
Byron, Antonio J., 101 Bradford St., Lawrence, Mass.
Booher, Johnny A., Branson, Colo.
Borkowski, Sigimund, 409 Pleasant St., Gardner, Mass.
Brandman, Norman N., 18 Isaac Place, Norwalk, Conn.
Buckner, John, 305 Biebe St., Johnstown, N. Y.
Bunzey, Carlton, R., R.F.D. No. 1, Conklin, N. Y.
Burke, Herman F., Route No. 1, Millen, Ga.
Busher, Charles W., Lake Purdy, West Chester, N. Y.
Beacham, Frank P., 89 Thag W. St., New York, N. Y.
Berman, Max, 740 Howard St., San Francisco, Calif.
Berkey, Robert D., (No Address) Elton, Pa.
Bertolino, Bengoznini, 41 Surprise St., Elmont, N. Y.
Berty, William M., 2121 A. W. Main St., Richmond, Va.
Bigley, Jack, 1414 4th Ave., Council Bluffs, Iowa.
Billi, Angelo, 689 Hawthorne St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Bonner, Walter A., (No Address), Glendive, Mont.
Booth, William A., R.F.D. No. 2, Homer, Mich.
Bostater, Robert, 173 So. Avenue, Battle Creek, Mich.

C

Cacciaglia, Ferdinand., 69 Villa St., Rochester, N. Y.
Campbell, Henry M., 2621 Marion Ave., Mattoon, Ill.
Carby, Walter G., 76 Park Ave., Binghamton, N. Y.
Carroll, William F., 7 Schultz St., Port Jerves, N. Y.
Carswell, Robert L., Drexel, N. C.
Cassady, Frances A., 3629 Livingston St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Cates, Clarence S., Hillsboro, N. C.

Cellar, William M., 675 Brewster St., Bridgeport, Conn.
Clark, Elmer A., Potter Place, N. H.
Clark, Matthew G., Mallory Hotel, Portland, Ore.
Clark, Raymond C., Route No. 1, Platteville, Colo.
Cline, David H., Route No. 2, Scheston, Mo.
Colmaria, James, 60 Ash St., Saratoga, N. Y.
Cook, George W. Jr., 504 Corlier Ave., West Allenhurst, N. J.
Cook, Walter A., 32 Fairview Ave., Newark, N. J.
Cooper, Benjamin, 5040 Alderson Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa.
Cooper, Lewis J., Main St., Succasunna, N. J.
Corcoran, John H., 19 Thomas St., Holley, N. Y.
Corio, Rosario, 37 O'Neil St., Providence, R. I.
Coyle, George W., 248 N. Main St., Southington, Conn.
Crosby, William C., 5 Mohawk Ave., Scotia, New York.
Crowley, Daniel V., 49 Winslow Rd., Belmont, Mass.
Czuszicky, Stanley J., 534 Wilson St., West Exeter, Pa.
Chimenti, Joseph, 2964 Dickens Ave., Far Rockaway, L. I., N. Y.
Clark, Clarence M., 18 Silver St., Norwich, N. Y.
Cabot, Hohn W., 358 Grove St., Bridgeport, Pa.
Chenette, James J., 728 N. Russett St., Portland, Oregon.
Coen, Paul C., 11 Pleasant St., Franklin, New Hampshire.
Cook, Tesse L., 11 Prospect Ave., Northport, L. I.
Churchill, John P., Main St., Great Bend, Pa.
Chinnock, Wilson, 80 Heller Pky., Newark, N. Y.
Caputo, Daniel, 819 2nd Ave., Altoona, Pa.
Calomeris, James T., 2403 57th Place Tuxedo, Hyattsville, Md.
Carman, Foster J., 8 Waverly Place, Baldwin, L. I., N. Y.

D

Daly, James A. Jr., 219 Bracnett St., Portland, Maine.
De Bow, Duane L., North Main St., Suffield, Conn.
Di Bernardo, Julius T., 7023 19th Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Dill, Jacob, Route No. 1, Platteville, Colo.
Dobi, Stephen, First St. Ellport, Ellwood City, Pa.
Dolan, Francis P., Hyde Park, Mass.
Donnelly, Thomas B., 47 Mechanic St., Lancaster, N. H.
Doyle, Lawrence R., East 944 32 St., Spokane, Wash.
Doyle, Edward J., Arlington, Vt.
De Barros, Richard J. Siasconset, Mass.
Della Volpe, Vincent D., 55 Woodbridge Ave., Ansonia, Conn.
Duchon, Homer V., 1227 S. Seneca Ave., Alliance, Ohio.
Doren, James M., 1749 Gregory Way, Bremerton, Wash.
Duvall, Howard, 51 Victory Blvd., Portsmouth, Virginia.
Deloreto, Mark J., 239 Liberty St., Schenectady, N. Y.
Denny, George, Lonepine, Montana.

E

Ebarb, Elmo, P. O. Box No. 114, Zivolle, La.
Evans, Bernard B., 236 N. Church St., Decatur, Ill.
Ellentuck, Elmer I., 896 Tox St., New York, N. Y.
Eipper, Glenn E., 25338 Pennsylvania Ave., Lomita, Calif.
Englund, Carl A., 903 Eustis St., St. Paul, Minn.
Epstein, Rubin, 1534 Stevens St., Philadelphia, Pa.

F

Feinberg, Abraham, 208 S. 1st St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Fewkes, Elmer L., Box No. 55, Cascade, Idaho.
Foley, John A., 52 Oak St., Sommerville, Mass.
Flaherty, Frances X., 322 Bunker Hill St., Charleston, Mass.
Fletcher, Russell P., Route No. 1, Baltimore, Ohio.
Fortunato, Anthony T., 105 Franklin Ave., Hartford, Conn.
Fox, Stanley C., 5819 S. Junett St., Tacoma, Wash.
Frail, Donald A., 29 College St., Montpellier, Vt.
Franklin, Walter E., Box No. 44, Randolph, Ill.
Frankowski, Michael, 5338 33rd. St., Detroit, Mich.
Fortier, Clarence M., 470 Court St., Auburn, Maine.
Friedman, Norman, 2015 Creston Ave., Bronx, N. Y.
Freeman, Bruce, 1129 1-2 W. 15th St., Los Angeles, Calif.
Franks, Joe H., Box No. 1001, Elkhart, Texas.
Flanders, Henry C., Rt. No. 2, Swainsboro, Ga.
Fidler, Russell H., R. F. D. No. 1, Summit Station, Pa.
Fitzkee, Norman E., 34 E. Main St., Mt. Joy, Pa.
Fisher, Frank, 806 Juno St., St. Paul, Minn.
Freeman, Charles W., Route No. 4, Ashville, N. C.
Fricke, Allen H., Box No. 91, Oakville, Wash.
Frost, Lester, 709 W. Kentucky, Anadarko, Okla.

G

Gardner, Fred O., Box No. 196, Lancaster, Mo.
Geene, Henry S., (No Address), Hanlontown, Iowa.
Geuin, Percy W., 52 Lowell Blvd., Denver, Colo.
Gist, Robert N., Cedar Lawn Cabins, Tawas City, Mich.
Glenn, Walter D., (No Address), Sarepta, Miss.
Gluckman, Herbert W., 31 Ellsworth Ave., Brockton, Mass.
Gluckman, Melvin H., 368 W. Hudson St., Long Beach, L. I., N. Y.
Goldberg, Abe, 901 Uclid Ave., Shreveport, La.
Goldberg, Joseph, 748 Saratoga Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Gregory, Arthur G., Rural Route No. 1, Box 330, Puyallup, Wash.
Gudbaur, Jack A., Star Route No. 2, Bonners Ferry, Idaho.
Gillon, John J., 28 Mill Place, Tonawanda, N. Y.
Graham, William H., 2956 Gale Ave., Long Beach, Calif.
Gress, Paul B., Box 708, Houston, Pa.
Gelband, Joseph S., 2055 Grand Concourse, New York, N. Y.
Gashowski, Albert S., 88 Newport St., Nanticoke, Pa.
Gately, Anthony J., 38 Parkman St., Dorchester, Mass.
Gabrys, Stanley J., 1918 Mohawk St., Chicago, Ill.
Georgens, Thomas G., 458 Seneca Ave., Ridgewood, N. Y.
Godstone, Henry H., 18 Foxton St., Utica, N. Y.
Generke, William A., 5951 N. Kent Ave., Milwaukee, Wis.
Goode, Robert, 52 Romaine Ave., Jersey City, N. J.
Glickman, Victor, 2206 Valentine Ave., New York, N. Y.

H

Haberlan, Thomas E., 689 S. Ardmore St., Los Angeles, Calif.
Howard, Martin J., 159 E. Chester St., Long Beach, L. I., N. Y.
Hardy, Louis E., 38 Rolee St., Penacook, N. H.
Hardman, Olywyn N., Glencoe, Ala.
Hasson, Schander C., 313 Beech St., E. Pittsburgh, Pa.
Hibbard, Merton T., R. F. D. No. 3, Smethport, Pa.
Hoatson, Fred R., Hershey, Neb.
Holland, Robert C., 11 Cross St., Longmeadow, Mass.
Hosey, Thomas C., 886 E. Green St., Nanticoke, Pa.
Howard, Jack B., 10 West Ave. A., San Angelo, Texas.
Hugus, Dan M., 35 E. Fayette St., Uniontown, Pa.
Huska, Andrew, 25 Colt Ave., Torrington, Conn.
Hutchens, William F., 6102 King Hill Ave., St. Joseph, Mo.
Hawkes, Myri W., 528 E. 4th St., Salt Lake City, Utah.
Henderson, Thomas A., El Patio Hotel, Tulsa, Okla.
Holmes, Robert S., Benson, N. C.

J

Jester, Joseph, 29 Hurd Rd., Belmont, Mass.
Johnson, Paul C., 315 Webster St., Needham Heights, Mass.
Judd, Roy F., 1150 Farmers Ave., Tempe, Ariz.

K

Karampatsos, John, 1 Central St., Haverhill, Mass.
Kennedy, Harry, G., 39 1-2 Doubleday St., Binghamton, N. Y.
Kerr, Donald B., 709 E. 43rd St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Kindrick, Maynard J., Crab Orchard, Tenn.
Kinz, Richard M., 338 Clay St., Clarksburg, W. Va.
Koslowski, Joseph, 307 Charles St., Providence, R. I.
Kostek, Stanley, Box No. 231, Hartfield, Mass.
Kramer, Theodore B., 179 Beach 66th St., Arverne, N. Y.
Kreppel, Jack F., 60 Hopper St., Patterson, N. J.
Kabala, Stanley W., 209 Unity St., Latrobe, Pa.
Katz, Herbert A., R. D. No. 1, Nassau, N. Y.

L

Lamkin, James W., Route No. 1, Clay, La.
Lancaster, Joe C. (No Address), Steppville, Ala.
La Voice, Dale E., South Grand St., West Suffield, Conn.
Laurey, Salvatore A., 613 West Cooper St., Utica, N. Y.
Land, William T., (No Address), Liberty, Texas.
Leight, Edward J., 2212 Aiken St., Baltimore, Md.
Lewis, Bradford L., 10 Florence Place, Troy, N. Y.
Love, Milton, 902 Avenue C, Brooklyn, N. Y.
Lowther, James P., 268 Ash St., New Bedford, Mass.
Long, Thomas J., Langdon, Md.
Lane, Donald V., 865 E. 183rd St., Bronx, N. Y.

Lee, Hugh A., Clinchfiel Station, Marion, N. C.
Lazouras, Andrew, 220 Pawtucket Ave., R. I.
Long, Lawrence R., Gen. Del., Mabton, Wash.
Lederman, Louis, Maine St., South Fallsburg, N. Y.
Lee, Robert J., 4 Freeman Lane, Portland, Me.
Lytle, Robert C., 540 Forest St., Spartanburg, S. C.

M

Manor, John F., 80 Erie St., Oswego, N. Y.
McCormick, Michael W., 93 Division Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
McKay, Robert S., 20 W. 34th St., Indianapolis, Ind.
Mearns, Robert D., 142 Center St., Ellenville, N. Y.
Miller, Carlisle A., 4517 N. 16th St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Miller, Morris, 16 Shaw St., Attleboro, Mass.
Milliken, Wilson J., Box 170, Naval Air Station, San Francisco, Calif.
Mills, Orin H., 432 Abbott Rd., East Lansing, Mich.
Moulton, Leslie W., 4 Prospect St., Norwood, N. Y.
Myerson, Hyman, 1422 58th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Murphy, Michael, R. F. D., No. 1, Liverpool, N. Y.
Mamula, Nick, Box No. 88, Tridelphia, W. Va.
Marshall, Franklin H., Box 343, Bridger, Montana.
McAlphin, Robert C., Berrien Spring, Mich.
McClelland, Robert F., 86 Lawrence Ave., Ocean Grove, N. J.
Martin, Frank C., Star Rt., Eldon, Mo.
Mangiardo, Dominic J., 42 Pond St., Beverly, Mass.
Maurais, Joseph P. R., 27A St., Lowell, Mass.
Maxwell, George M., 29 Sylvan St., Springfield, Mass.
Melloan, Charles R., Whiteland, Ind.
Milliken, Wilson J., 2528 W. Market St., Louisville, Ky.
Moen, Theron H., Hitterdal, Minn.
Munson, Clarence L., 106 Burleson St., San Antonio, Texas.
Madaj, Edmund J., 3740 W. Cornelia Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Michalek, Buster S., Mineville, N. Y.
Miller, Harold H., 134 Swan St., Scotia, N. Y.
Miller, Max L., 3906 Stuart St., Greenville, Texas.
Mahony, Paul T., 159 Oakly Rd., Belmont, Mass.
Monroe, Herman R., 90 South St., Westboro, Mass.
Morrison, Charles S., 430 Berwick St., Easton, Pennsylvania.
Murphy, Bernard P., 34 South Union St., Burlington, Vermont.

N

Narkiewicz, Gerald L., 79 Montage St., Valley Stream, N. Y.
Nash, William A., 322 E. 163rd St., Bronx, N. Y.
Nicholas, Arvin D., Route 1, Stamps, Arkansas.
Neff, Fred F., 969 W. Town St., Columbus, Ohio.
Nareski, Stanley J., 3345 Mercer St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Nicholas, Peter A., 1111 Magnolia Ave., Elizabeth, N. J.
Nichols, Horace, Owasa, Iowa.

O

O'Dell, William L., 125-15 107th Ave., Richmond Hill, L. I.
Olson, Howard R., 1204 Horton St., LaCrosse, Wisconsin.
O'Neill, William J., 10 East 35th St., Bayonne, N. J.
Ovitt, Richard H., R. F. D. 1, Passumpsic, Vermont.
Ordyna, Joseph W., E. Hoosac St., Adams, Mass.
Osaer, Jerry R., 23115 Firwood St., East Detroit, Mich.

P

Paglio, Carmen F., 62 Nichols St., Newark, N. J.
Palayma, Edward, 40 Adam St., Stoughton, Mass.
Petrucelli, Julio B., 2315 E. 13th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Pettis, Leland W., Appleton, N. Y.
Pinkham, Warren C., 63 Tremont St., Braintree, Mass.
Piantz, Douglas I., Holland St., Alexandria Bay, N. Y.
Presley, Lee H., 2612 E. 28th St., Kansas City, Mo.
Przybylek, Theodore J., 1239 Crysler Ave., Schenectady, N. Y.
Parella, Carmine, 806 5th Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Pranov, Raymond N., 14 Elmer St., Bridgeton, N. J.
Podraza, Pete, Rt. 1, Anderson, Texas.
Penland, John R., 814 Cypress St., Kansas City, Mo.
Plattner, Henry G., Jersey City, N. J.

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Peters, William C., Woodbrook Farms, Metuchen, N. J.
Powell, Michael J., 648 Hudson St., New York, N. Y.
Price, Henry, 1801 Heights Blvd., Houston, Texas.

R

Rivera, Carl, 2404 1st Ave., South Billings, Mont.
Root, Norvell L., Webster Springs, W. Va.
Rotter, Samuel, 777 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Routh, Martin, 217 42 St., Sandusky, Ohio.
Ryan, John W., 2714 Amboy Road, Staten Island, N. Y.
Ryan, Eddie A., Wynoiva, Okla.
Ryan, Joseph B. Jr., 63 Bowen St., Providence, R. I.
Raica, John P., 31-14 23rd Road, Astoria, L. I.
Radcliffe, George J., 1919 E. Sedgley Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.
Reinstein, Max, 439 Clinton Ave., Newark, N. J.
Reno, Herman G., R. D. 1, Browning, Ill.
Ritchie, John, 265 Admiral St., Providence, R. I.
Rollyson, Homer H., Dingy, W. Va.

S

Scardigno, Angelo M., 2527 San Jose Ave., Alameda, Calif.
Schnabel, Eugene, Murry Hill Hotel, Fallsburg, N. Y.
Sedell, Charles, 179 Amboy St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Sparks, Clyde J., Rt. 2, Rogers, Texas.
Stripling, Howard C., Box 484, Iowa Park, Texas.
Schmidt, Clayton J., 1145 Livingston NE., Grand Rapids, Mich.
Sullivan, Daniel J., 127 Belmont St., Belmont, Mass.
Surles, Roy B., Summit, Virginia.
Stanford, Lawrenee O., Box 881, Clovis, New Mexico.
Spradlin, Fredrick C., 3518 Miles St., Dallas, Texas.
Sonnen, Adolph T., 2303 Perez Street, San Antonio, Texas.
Smith, Winston H., 109 Fairview Road, Farmingdale, L. I., N. Y.
Schwartz, Gerald, 1523 E. 17th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Sidorowicz, Stanley J., Arena, N. Y.
Sabrno, John, 17 Dewolf St., Dorchester, Mass.
Small, Harmon L., 816 Ave. "G", Brownwood, Texas.
Smith, Clifford J., 335 N. Maple Grove, Hudson, Mich.
Smith, James E., Route 1, Tenaha, Texas.
Strait, Daymond E., 500 Park Ave., Charlotte, North Carolina.
Skrobarczyk, Leon A., Route 1, Stockdale, Texas.
Smith, Gerald E., 15th S. E. of Central, Oklahoma City, Okla.
Soliene, William R., 55 Shulet St., Lyons, N. Y.
Sorell, Clifton W., 2030 E. Walnut St., Newcastle, Ind.
Stamets, Leonard G., 506 1-2 W. High St., Elkhart, Ind.
Stancil, Finis E., 1501 Caroline St., Palestine, Texas.
Stephens, Nathel L., Red Rock, Texas.
Stewart, Robert P., 824 Tenn. St., Graham, Texas.
St. Jean, Armond L., 9 Page Court, Chicopee Falls, Mass.
Schwartz, Egon L., 989 W. 178th St., New York, N. Y.
Schoenfield, Albert, 1148 E. 7th St., Tucson, Ariz.
Sherlock, John, 17 Dewolf St., Dorchester, Mass.

T

Thomas, Richard T., Rockport, Maine.
Tillery, Harvey T., Pendleton, N. C.
Tilson, William R., Matartoe, Texas.
Tomilson, Albert M., Route 1, Box 237, Henryetta, Okla.
Tunnell, Felix M., Gen. Delivery, San Marcus, Texas.
Thomson, Raymond E., Route 1, Narcy, N. Y.
Titgeneyer, James A., 4742 Douglas Rd., Toledo, Ohio.
Turner, James A., 236 Marguerite Ave., Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.
Toloczko, Mecilaus P., 223 West St., Hyde Park, Mass.
Teague, Royal D., R. R. 2, Calhoun, Ga.
Trifton, Terry N., 816 18th St., Columbus, Ohio.
Tolp, Charles W., R 3 Lisbon Rd., Salem, Ohio.

U

Utley, Gordon D., 319 Peoria Ave., Dixon, Ill.
Urban, Joseph F., 340 W. 142nd St., New York, N. Y.

V

Vigil, Ceferino, P. O. Box 78, Aguilar, Colo.
Vincent, Albert H., R. R. 1, New West Minster, British Columbia.
Valliere, Maurice F. W., Skowhegan, Maine.
Vane, Robert O., 90 Golden Hill Ave., Goshen Orange, N. J.
Volter, Carl Jr., 346 Van Wagner Place, Williston Park, L. I., New York.
Vosburgh, Stephen E., Augusta House, Augusta, Maine.

W

Walsh, David H., Long Hill Road, Groton, Conn.
Ward, Edward R., Kennebunk, Maine.
Werhut, Fred A., Box 138, Bordenville, Penna.
Wasserman, Charles, 650 Manhattan Ave., Brooklyn, New York.
Westbrook, John L., Box 448, Wichita Falls, Texas.
Werner, Winston H., Leesville, Louisiana.
Wert, Warren W., R. F. D. 1, Shamokin, Penna.
White, Joseph F., 31-15 24th Ave., Astoria, New York.
Wilcox, Robert F., Sr., Route 3, Winston-Salem, N. C.
Williams, Ellsworth E. Jr., 63 Lafayette Street, Norwich (New London) Conn.
Watson, Paul H., R. F. D. 1, Limestone, Maine.
White, Forrest W., 3247 Jefferson St., Kansas City, Mo.
Wistner, Floyd A., Warren, New Hampshire.
Williams, Melvin H., 806 Myrtle St., Parkersburg, W. Va.
Werdo, William, 177 Derby Avenue, Seymour, Conn.
Williams, Howard W., 418 W. Pelason Ave., Youngstown, Ohio.
Williams, Marvin L., 1321 Spaulding St., San Angelo, Texas.
Wilkins, Kendall R., Box 34, Willsboro, N. Y.
White, Bernard W., 1548 SW. Columbia St., Portland, Oregon.
Walsh, Joseph J., 30-27 246th St., Bellerose, Long Island, N. Y.
Williams, George J., 231 Reese Street, Scranton, Penna.
Wilson, John T., 1405 Agnes Place, Memphis, Tenn.

Z

Zdanowiez, Edward C., 696 Metcalf St., Georgetown, Penna.
Zuzze, Stephen A., 1813 Ave. "T", Brooklyn, N. Y.
Zellem, Michael, Box 136, Listie, Pa.
Zimmer, Joseph P., 628 N. Rural St., Indianapolis, Ind.

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