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DESERT CAMPAIGN

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

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OF THE BRITISH IN AFRICA

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

Marshal Foch, 1922

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Activation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RESUMÉ

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

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

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

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