

TUMULT OVER TUNISIA

THE FIRST NORTH AFRICAN COMBAT TOUR OF THE 14TH
FIGHTER GROUP'S LOCKHEED LIGHTNINGS - CONCLUSION

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The following morning, 6 December 1942, 49th FS pilots encountered some twin-engine enemy aircraft near Faïd. Captain Ralph L. Knapp subsequently claimed to have shot down a Ju 88 and to have damaged a Bf 110, but his own plane was damaged by another Messerschmitt and he had to force-land the Lightning. He was uninjured, however, and was rescued and returned to duty. Knapp recalled later that, "An Army company saw me go down and dispatched a motorcycle to pick me up. But before the Army arrived, a large group of Arabs that seemed to come from out of nowhere assembled around my plane. Encountering the Arabs was very interesting because they filled my canteen with water and gave me food." First Lieutenant

William P. Moore claimed two more of the Messerschmitts destroyed and one damaged. A single Me 210 of 8./ZG 1 was, in fact, lost to a P-38. That afternoon, during a sweep by the 48th Squadron to Sousse, on the Tunisian coast north of Sfax, Capt. Wallis shot down a Ju 52.

The 7th of December would mark the tenth day in a row the 14th FG's pilots had encountered enemy aircraft in the air. That afternoon, the 48th FS flew another fighter sweep to Sfax, during which its pilots spotted some Ju 52s and Ralph Watson and Virgil Smith each shot one down. Four days later, the 49th's 1st Lt. Jim Tollen, flying P-38F-1-LO 41-7645, was shot down and killed by anti-aircraft

fire near Kairouan.

In the mid-afternoon of 12 December, some 48th Squadron pilots were strafing Axis vehicles near Kebili, about 50 miles west of Gabes, when an enemy aircraft identified as an Fw 190 was spotted. Virgil Smith out-climbed it and claimed to have shot it down at 18,000 feet. On another mission that day the 49th FS's Virgil Lusk damaged a Bf 109. Smith's victim was almost certainly actually a Bf 109, of 5./JG 53, that was shot down northwest of Gabes by a P-38. Its pilot, Uffz. (Unteroffizier — Corporal) Egbert Willenbrink, bailed out of it, wounded. Lusk's was most likely the Bf 109 of 2./JG 53 that was, in fact, shot down by a Lightning over La Galite

Island east of Tunis. Its pilot, Fw. Horst Rössler,

Three 14th FG officers pose next to their large dugout tent, which replaced their original one-man pup tents at Youks les Bains. Left to right: Capt. John Murray, the Group Adjutant and Provost Marshall (wearing the holstered six-shooter), and 49th FS pilots Ralph Knapp and Albert Wolfmueller. Captain Knapp shot down a Ju 88 near Faïd, Tunisia, on 6 December.

was missing in action.

Smith's victory was his fifth confirmed kill, making him the second P-38 ace.

Lusk was, of course, the first.

There was a lull in the Group's combat activities for the next nine days as regards encounters with enemy aircraft. During that time, they mostly escorted the Havocs to their targets in Tunisia. Then, on the early afternoon of the 21st, Ju 88s of Sicily-based 4./KG 6 (Kampgeschwader — Bomber Wing) dive-bombed Youks les Bains, doing considerable damage. Several 49th Squadron pilots on alert were scrambled, caught up to them as they departed the area, and claimed to have shot down three of them. Second Lieutenant Robert J. Moffatt (flying P-38F-1-LO 41-7670) downed one five miles north of the airfield, 2nd Lt. Robert H. Woodward got another 25 miles east of the field, and 2nd Lt. Lewis H. Gregory claimed his victim near Tebessa. Two of KG 6's aircraft were reported to have been lost that day.

By this time the 1st and 14th FGs were both getting very short of P-38s, given their losses and the lack of any replacement aircraft since their arrival in North Africa six weeks earlier. The 14th's missions were by then being flown by no more than two flights (eight aircraft)



The cockpit of one of the Group's P-38Fs in Algeria.



P-38 G-3-LO 42-1279, was one of the Lightnings received by the Group from the 82nd FG on 28 December 1942. The 49th FS's Lt. Bob Kirschke became its regular pilot and he shot down a Ju 88 with it on 2 January. Captain Bill Fulmer was killed in action while flying 42-12793 a week later.