

Chapter XXIX

Back in Old Algiers

July 20, 1943 – September 3, 1943

After an early breakfast on Tuesday morning July 20th, Sheffield went up to the bridge to find the preparations for getting underway were going smoothly. Commander Terry was receiving reports from all over the ship, and finally he informed the captain that the ship was ready to sail. With steam in her boilers built up, he gave the order to weigh anchor and get under way. Steaming at five knots, the Reprisal made her way into the open sea where she formed up with the rest of the ships of Admiral Weston's task force.

Once at sea, the ships headed into the wind and the Reprisal began launching aircraft. While in port, the squadrons were brought back up to strength by drawing from the spares that had been held in reserve. After the attrition from the previous operations, only a few spares remained. Each plane in the air group now sported a twelve inch yellow band around each wing, consistent with the Army Air Force and other allied aircraft taking part in the operation. In addition, the national insignia had a white bar on either side of the blue circle with a red band outlining the entire design in accordance the the Bureau of Aeronautics issued on June 28th.

The first into the air were four F4F-4s from the Fighting Eleven Wildcats on combat air patrol. They were followed by six TBF-1 Avengers from the Torpedo Eleven Seahawks on anti-submarine patrol. Last into the air were a dozen SBD-3 Dauntlesses from the Bombing Eleven Crusaders who fanned out to the east and north on search patrols. Complimenting the anti-submarine patrol were four OS2U Kingfishers, two each from the Bismark and Alameda.

Captain Brason loved to watch the air operations from the wing bridge. He missed his flying days and the thrill and challenge of taking off and landing on a carrier. Now that was left up to younger men with quicker reflexes. Even though his flight status was active, it had been a long time since he was qualified for carrier operations. As he observed, he couldn't help but long to be in the air.

His opportunities to fly were limited, and when he did, it was in trainers. Flying the open cockpit Stearman reminded him of the good old days. He enjoyed being able to take someone up with him, most recently Paula and then Ramona.

His thoughts turned to Ramona and he wondered how she was doing. For the first time he allowed himself to think, "You know, I can see myself marrying her some day; perhaps when this war is over." The thought was a pleasant one.

The task force, with the Reprisal surrounded by her escorts, steamed east. The patrols were rotated throughout the day, with planes on deck ready to be launched at the first sign of trouble. German and Italian submarines were a constant threat as were land based bombers from Sardinia and Italy.

The next day they were back in the Tyrrhenian Sea, north of Sicily, providing air cover and ground

support for General Patton's advance toward Palermo. During the morning there was a German air attack to fend off. Thanks to the combat air patrol and the ships' gunners, nothing got through. In the afternoon, an Italian submarine was sunk by Avengers on anti-submarine patrol.

On the 22nd the Seventh Army began entering Palermo. The same day some destroyers, minesweepers, and PT boats arrived in the harbor. That day, another Dauntless was lost over Sicily while attacking a column of Panzers. The routine kept up for the next two days without any further losses to the air group.

On the 25th word was received that Mussolini had been deposed by the Grand Council of Fascism and was forced from power after twenty one years. The news wasn't as good as it sounded. He was replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who pledged continued allegiance to the Axis.

On the 26th German air raids stepped up with an attack on the destroyers and minesweepers just off shore; the AAF failed to provide protection. Communications were still not the best. Wildcats from the Reprisal arrived too late to make a difference. The destroyer Mayrant had been so severely damaged by near misses that it had to be towed into Palermo.

After seven days on station, the task force retired to safer waters to the west on the 28th for refueling. The next day, they were right back at it.

On the 30th Admiral Lyle Davidson arrived in Palermo with the cruisers Philadelphia and Savannah and six destroyers and took up fire support duties the next day as the Army advanced along the northern shore of Sicily. A German air attack with eleven Stukas concentrated on the fire support force on the 31st. CAP from the Reprisal helped break up the attack which resulted only in a miraculous near miss by a dud bomb only fifteen yards from the Philadelphia

Late that afternoon while recovering aircraft, radar identified an incoming German air attack headed for the task force. Captain Brason sent his crew to their battle stations. The Wildcats in the air waiting to land were ordered to bolster the combat air patrol. Together they broke up the attack, at the cost of two Wildcats. Those that escaped the melee next encountered concentrated anti aircraft fire from the task force, with only one Fw 190 breaking through.

Captain Brason and those on the bridge saw it streak up the flight deck on a strafing pass. Twenty millimeter bullets ripped into the deck sending wooden splinters in all directions. Several men were injured at their guns.

In the blink of an eye, Captain Brason watched as the bullets tore into three Wildcats, two Avengers and four Dauntlesses parked at the forward end of the flight deck, setting them on fire. As the German fighter sped away, it took a direct hit from anti-aircraft fire and exploded into a fireball which crashed into the sea.

Firefighters quickly sprang into action battling the blaze. One of the Dauntlesses still had a five hundred pound bomb attached. All nine still had some fuel aboard.

As thick black smoke billowed into the air and drifted back toward the superstructure, obscuring the view from the bridge. Captain Brason ordered the ship to come about so the wind would carry the smoke away from the ship. The immediate concern was for the fuel and ammunition in the planes. Before the firefighters could bring the flames under control, one of the five hundred pound bombs detonated. The explosion blew a hole in the flight deck, blasting through the officers cabins directly below. Burning fuel poured down onto the bow and flames began to engulf the open fo'c'sle.

The plane was tossed into the air, cartwheeling over in the air and crashing back to the deck onto one of the other burning planes. The fire, intensified by the explosion, spread. More firefighters rushed to the fight. The second bomb detonated, blasting the planes and firefighters to pieces. Burning fuel began running down the deck.

A rain squall was passing by about five miles away and captain Brason ordered the helmsman to take the ship into the squall. For the next fifteen minutes, the fire raged as attempts were made to bring it under control. As the ship entered the squall, the cool heavy rain began dousing the flames. Sheffield kept the ship in the squall until the fire was extinguished and the hot spots had cooled. His quick thinking and reaction had kept the fire from spreading to hangar where several fueled and armed planes were waiting to be brought up to the flight deck to be launched.

Coming back into the clear, the damage was assessed. It was confined to the area forward of the elevator, which was undamaged. There was a fifteen foot hole in the deck and wreckage strewn all about. It would take several hours to clean up the mess and patch up the deck. The catapult equipment had been damaged beyond repair, but they weren't used that often. The blast also took out the arrestor cables across the forward end of the flight deck and wrecked the forward wind break palisades. Worst of all, twelve men were dead and thirty seven others were injured.

In the meantime, the planes in the air were running low on fuel and needed to be brought aboard. Captain Brason had the ship head into the wind to begin recovering them. Due to the damaged flight deck, the Bat Team would not be going up that night. Admiral Weston lead the task force back to the west into relative safer waters.

Into the evening, the focus was on the gruesome task of recovering the bodies of those who had perished from among the debris. In some cases, only parts were found. At first light, the wreckage of the demolished planes pushed over the side and work began on patching the hole in the flight deck. By eight o'clock, the flight deck was reopened and ready for flight operations.

Just before resuming operations, there was a brief pause to bury those who had been killed. Captain

Brason had their personal effects gathered and over the next few days he had twelve more letters to write.

The timing couldn't have been worse. During the pre-dawn hours the Germans carried out an early morning air raid on Palermo. Consequently the Alleycats were unable to do anything about it.

All that day and for the days that followed, the air group continued to fly combat missions over and around Sicily. By August 3rd the Italians and Germans were only holding on to the northeast tip of Sicily. There was another early morning attack on Palermo on the 4th. This time the Alleycats helped to break it up.

On the evening of August 5th, three Italian cruisers left La Madalena to bombard Palermo. They were discovered by the Bat Team and attacked. One was sunk and the other two turned back. On the 6th the task force withdrew to refuel the destroyers.

On the night of August 11th and 12th the Bat Team covered an amphibious landing behind enemy lines at Brolo at the cost of one of the precious Alleycats and two radar equipped Avengers. The air group provided ground support during the day on the 12th and the helped break up a counter attack later in the afternoon. With the enemy evacuation of Sicily underway, on the 13th the Reprisal was ordered to return to Algiers.

As the task force neared Algiers on Saturday the 14th the air group, which had been reduced by attrition to under full strength, was sent on to the Maison Blanche Airport. Rather than dropping anchor in the bay, that afternoon the Reprisal was brought into the harbor and tied up at a dock.

It wasn't until the next morning that Yeoman Gover brought the Captain his mail. As usual, he sorted through the stack of mail until he found a letter from Ramona.

July 29, 1943

Dear Sheffield

Why Sheffield, don't you know by now that a woman's size is classified information? But since I am your girlfriend and you want to buy me something, I suppose that I can declassify that information, but it is for your eyes only.

I doubt that the sizes are the same as they are in the United States, I'll give you my proportions instead. Keep in mind that you will most likely have to convert them over the metric system. For starters, I am 5 feet 2 inches tall and weigh 120 pounds.

Now for the more sensitive information. I measure 33½ inches around my bust and 33 inches around my ribs just under my bust. I have a 26 inch waist and I am 32 inches around my hips.

I'm basically the size that Sandy was when she was fifteen, when they came to Hawaii. In fact I have some of Sandy's clothes that she grew out of.

In addition, my inseam is 28 inches and I have 8½ by 3 inch feet. My hat size is 21¾ and in case you want to do something really special, the diameter of my finger is 5/8s of an inch.

I would love something French. In high school I took French but I was in and out of school so much that I didn't have a chance to learn much. Paris is one place I've always wanted to see.

I guess I didn't realize that Algeria was so French either. Now that you mention it, it's not too surprising. I'm glad that you had a translator. It would be pretty hard to get around someplace where you didn't understand the language.

I know Morris. I am tremendously impressed with him. It sounds like his friend Simon is every bit as impressive. Young men like them will go a long ways in life. How is it that they came to have such a good command on their respective languages. They must have lived somewhere that spoke those languages for a considerable length of time. Isn't that kind of unusual for a farm boy from Utah like Morris?

You asked about adventure. I would love to travel. When I was growing up and my mother worked for the banker, we got to go along on their family trips so she could take care of the children. Since then I haven't had a chance to travel much. When I lived in San Diego I did a quite a bit of exploring and when I was in Hawaii, I got to know Oahu very well. I even got over to Maui a couple of times. I would love to see some of the places that you have been. You're fishing trip in Rio sounded like something I'd like to do. I remember when you took Deannie and the kids on that sailboat trip through the Islands. Now I could really go for something like that.

When I was little girl, I used to love to ride my father's horse. And then my mother's employer had horses that I got to ride all the time. I haven't done much of that since we moved on. I have always loved horses. Riding a camel sounds real exciting. I bet that was a lot of fun. Lets see what else. I'm not much into sports but I do love to swim. I never liked running or baseball like Deannie.

Oh I bet this is something that you don't know about me, I like to sing. I don't consider myself to be a very good singer and I mostly sing to myself. I do my best singing in the shower. The few times that we went to church together I didn't sing out for two reasons. For one, I'm still learning the hymns and

second I was embarrassed to let you hear me. Pretty silly, huh?

That must have been harrowing to have been bombed by our own people. I just thank God that nothing real serious happened. Losing two men is bad enough. It's too bad that nobody talks to each other.

That is really interesting that you ran into a couple of old friends so far away like that. I guess it shouldn't be all that unusual the way people get around with the war. Your friend Harvey is a smart man, you should listen to him. I realize that Geannie is the love of your life and always will be. I'm just grateful that you have found room for me in your heart as well.

You don't expect me to be her. I never could be Geannie, although I have tried to adopt many of her traits just because I could see that it would make me a better person. The kind of person that you would want.

I can't tell you how happy it made me for you to tell me that you are falling in love with me, I'll settle for a long distance love affair for now. That's just the reality of things in these times. But its like you said, the war won't last forever and I too look forward to growing old with you. I love you more than I can ever express. Come back to me so we can see where things take us next.

*With all of my love,
Ramona.*

Sheffield didn't have time to write back as he had a full day ahead of him. After meeting with the senior officers, Captain Richard Tuggel, the commanding officer of the repair ship Vulcan, and several of his men came aboard to inspect the damage. Sheffield, Commander Terry, and Lieutenant Commander Marc Heiner the damage control officer gave them a tour of the of the damaged area. The inspection took all morning.

At noon Captain Brason hosted lunch for his guests in his wardroom. The rest of the day taken up in working out the details and the paper work. Captain Tuggin's estimate was that it would take a week to ten days. They would be able to get started on Wednesday morning.

On Tuesday, Captain Brason called Seaman Ballard to his office and asked him to accompany him ashore as his driver and interpreter. He didn't see any reason to bring Yeoman Gover along too this time. The staff car was waiting at the dock and Seaman Ballard standing by when he left the ship.

He had Simon drive him to the downtown town business district to look for a dress shop. He figured that since he had done it twice before for Geannie, he could do it for Ramona. Armed with all of the vital information and a translator, he felt confident.

“Here’s one sir.” Seaman Ballard announced as he pulled up the curb in front of shop. The sign in the window read, “Les Boutiques de Robes de Paris.” In the display window were several mannequins adorned in elegant apparel.

“Bonjour, messieurs.” greeted a very stylish French woman who appeared to be in her mid thirties. Sheffield remembered enough French from his Academy days to reply, “Bonjor, madame.”

The woman introduced herself as Juliette and asked how she could help them. From there Simon had to take over.

Sheffield explained that he was looking for something for his girlfriend back in America.

Simon dutifully translated the dialog that ensued.

Juliette told him that everything that he saw on display was the latest fashions from Paris. But since the liberation, Algiers was cut off from their source of mechandise in Paris. What she had were samples for display but anything she had could be repoued to any given specifications locally by professional seamstresses.

She asked for his girlfriend’s size. Through Simon, he gave her Ramona’s mesurements. Simon blushed when he relayed the fact that she was 86.4 centimeters across the bust.

After recieving the information, she wanted to know how old of a woman she was dealing with. She was little surprised that it was for a forty year old woman.

Juliette then invited Sheffiled to brouse through the selection. He examined each article of clothing closely. As he did, he listened to Juliette’s advise on the features of each dress and how it would compliment or detract from the figure of the woman that he described.

He selected two that he particlarly liked. Juliette was quick to suggest that one of his choices would be an excellent choice. This particular dress featured curved pleates sweeping down from the shoulders beginning at the outer collar bone and swooping across the bust and back up to the same point on the opposite shoulder. Again Simon blushed as he translated that it was fitted under the bust. The pleats continued down off shoulders, forming a rounded sleeve. She pointed out that it would enhance a smaller bust. On a woman who was more filled out, it would over emphasize the bust.



Next, she called attention to the gathers that began at the narrowest point of the waiste that angled up toward the bust. The gathers came together at a seam in the center. She explained that the anngle would draw attention away from the narrow hips and compliment the bust. A zipper ran up the back from the waiste.

Finally, from the high angled waist, vertical pleats came over the hips down to just below the knees. Juliette pointed out that this feature emphasized the hips, making them appear to be wider. Again she said that on a woman with a more mature figure, it would draw extra attention to the hips.

Sheffield tried to picture the dress on Geannie and he saw what she meant. It would not have looked good on her. But as he imagined it on Ramona, it looked very flattering. "Tell her that this is the one I want," he said to Simon.

After Simon had relayed his decision, he told the Captain "She says that it is an excellent choice, sir."

Next she called his attention to a wide selection of fabric that it could be made from. She recommended a white satin weave with silk filament. Silk was not available in the United States as the supply from the far east had been cut off by the war, but it had been plentiful in France under Nazi control. Juliette explained that she still had some but that she was quickly running out since the liberation.

Sheffield thought about it for a moment and decided to take her advice.

Next Juliette explained the process. A model of the same size would be selected that a pattern would be fitted to. Once the pattern had been cut out, a seamstress could assemble the garment. The entire process would take about ten days. When it came to price, he found that demand for US currency in Algiers at the time, made it very good deal.

Wednesday morning was quite busy as the repair ship, USS Vulcan moored alongside. Most of the day, machinery and equipment was put in place and the actual work got started on Thursday. One of the more tedious jobs was removing the path of twenty millimeter bullets from the wooden flight deck and patching up the holes. After further inspection, the starboard catapult and the forward palisades would be removed altogether and track would be planked over. Since the forward arresting gear had been destroyed, it was determined to remove all of the forward arresting gear. Other work would focus on rebuilding the officers' cabins on the galley deck and repairing fire and smoke damage to the fore'sle.

While the ship was tied up at the dock, Captain Brason ordered that the radar be operational and manned since it was the most powerful set on any of the ships in port. That proved to be a wise move, for one afternoon, a flight of fast moving planes were picked up at high altitude seventy miles out.

The alert was sent out and the ships in the harbor and the bay went to general quarters. Many in the bay got underway. The Reprisal tied to the dock on one side and the Vulcan moored to the other was unable to.

An urgent call was made to Commander Lovejoy at the Maison Blanche Airport. A dozen Wildcats were scrambled immediately along with the same number of Army Air Force P-47 Thunderbolts. The fighters flew out to meet the oncoming air raid composed of eighteen JU-88 twin engined bombers that had flown

down from an airfield in the south of France.

Thanks to the availability of the Navy fighters, the bombers were out numbered and out gunned. Ten of the bombers were shot down, six by the Wildcats. The AAF pilots came away with a better appreciation of the capabilities of the navy fighter planes. The surviving bombers broke off the attack and retreated before any even came within range of the shipboard anti-aircraft guns.

Work progressed on the repairs to the point of completion. All that remained was the clean up. At the same time Ramona's dress was also finished. At the appointed time, Captain Brason had Seaman Ballard take him downtown to pick it up. Waiting for him, was a model wearing the dress. The model happened to be Juliette's seventeen year old niece, Céline. Of all of the model's at her disposal, Céline had the exact proportions. She wasn't a professional model but after a little coaching from Juliette, she was able to do a good job of showing off the dress. That is until she got distracted by the cute, French speaking American Sailor.

Sheffield studied, the young girl, picturing Ramona in his mind. He was quite pleased with the results. He had Simon tell Juliette that he was very satisfied. She sent Céline to the dressing room to take it off. While waiting for her to bring the dress back, Juliette told Sheffield that she still had several pairs of silk stockings left, mostly in smaller sizes. Sheffield wasn't exactly up to date on what American women were wearing, but he was aware that silk stockings were virtually impossible to come by and were highly sought after.

As far as that went, it was the same story with nylon. Soon after the beginning of the war, Du Pont ceased production of nylon stockings and switched to a making parachutes, airplane cords and ropes for the war effort. Because nylon was so widely sought-after, nylon stockings had become the target of crime, selling on the black market for as much as twenty dollars a pair.

Sheffield ended up buying five pair of genuine silk stockings for three dollars in addition to the dress. Juliette wrapped up the dress and stockings in flat box perfect for shipping. While finishing up his business with Juliette, Céline had Simon cornered and was really pouring on the charm. He was more than relieved when the Captain was ready to leave so he could escape the very flirtatious young woman.

After driving off, Captain Brason commented, "You know Simon, most sailors would give their right arm to get hooked up with a girl like that."

"Not me sir. I've got a girl back home waiting for me and I have sworn to be true to her. When the war is over, I want to still be worthy of her when I ask her to marry me."

Again Sheffield wondered, "What it was that made these boys tick. Boys? They they're better men than most."

When Sheffield got back to the ship, he finally answered Ramona's letter.

August 26 1943

Aboard the USS Reprisal

Algiers, Algeria

Dear Ramona,

Well here I am back in old Algiers. That sounds like a good title for a song, or something. I received your letter when we got back several days ago. I have waited until now to write back so that I can enclose it with this gift of my love and affection. I certainly hope you like it. I had it custom made just for you. It's based on the latest fashions out of Paris. When it was modeled for me, I knew that it would look spectacular on you.

I thought about hanging on to it until I see you again. But then I thought better of it. The last time I bought a dress for someone, I hauled it around with me for a year and a half and ended up giving it to someone other than who it was intended for.

We ran into trouble since I last wrote to you. We were strafed which set several planes on fire which in turn resulted in a couple of explosions and a fire. We lost 12 men in the process. Since we have been back, we have been undergoing repairs for the damage received. Oh, it could have been much worse, We got off pretty lucky actually. The repairs are just about complete.

Since the ship had been docked, I have had many occasions to let my mind wander in your direction, especially when selecting your gift. I thought of you and how pretty you would look in it. I don't know how all of the time that I have known you that I overlooked just how beautiful you are. Maybe I had to see the

beauty within first. You have such a youthful, innocent look about you.

There are obviously things that I still need to learn about you. For example, I didn't know that you liked to sing. The next time I see you, I'd like to hear you sing to me. I don't consider myself to be too bad of a singer, but that's only my opinion.

Another thing I didn't know was that you took French in high school. Did you know that I took four years of French at the Academy? I didn't get a thing out of it. I could sure use it here. I'm just glad that I have Seaman Ballard.

I'm sure there are other things that I don't know yet. The discovery part is what makes falling in love so exciting. I'd love to take you to some of the places that I have been, but to tell you the truth, I don't know that I'll ever get back to some of them. We'll have to find someplace new and go discover it together.

Simon was a big help to me in selecting your gift. He is every bit as impressive as Yeoman Gover. Would you believe they were both Mormon missionaries before the war? Morris spent two and a half years in Brazil and Simon served for two years in Eastern Canada.

I'm glad that you referred to yourself as my girlfriend. I guess I hadn't thought about in those terms. It does bring a sense of intimacy to our relationship. I suppose that makes me your boyfriend.

I know that you could never be Geannie and I don't expect you to be. Do you know what? Geannie could never have been you either. It's your uniqueness that I love. You are quite a woman, or should I say lady.

I really do love you. I want you to know that. Since I last wrote, I have grown to love you even more. How is that possible? I haven't seen you in two months. I suppose it is true that absence does make the heart grow fonder. I don't know when I will see you again, but it won't be soon enough.

One of the things that I love about you is how you make me feel. You have brought love and joy back into my life. Any more, I rarely find myself looking back at what I have lost. Rather, I am constantly looking at the present and what I have in you. I find myself looking to the future and what I hope to gain. Yes, I find myself thinking that someday, perhaps when the war is over, that I just might ask you to marry me. What would you say to that?

Love, Sheffield

After finishing writing to Ramona, he put the letter inside the box with the dress and silk stockings and had Yeoman Gover take it down to the ship's post office.

The repairs on the ship were virtually complete. The next next day the final inspections were conducted. Everything was found acceptable. Captain Brason and Captain Tuggel signed the paperwork and the job was done. All there was left to do was to clean up and remove the machinery. On Saturday, the Vulcan pulled way from the carrier so they could move on to the next job. The Reprisal remained dockside over the weekend.

Captain Brason had always sought ways to improve the relationship with the Army Air Force. Earlier he had paid a visit to the air group at the Maison Blanche Airport and had meet with Lieutenant Colonel Humphrey McGuire of the 186th Fighter Group. At that time he invited the Colonel and his men to come aboard the Reprisal. Since then, the invitation grew into a day cruise once the repairs were complete.

On Monday morning, a couple of flatbed railroad cars loaded with six P-47s, with their wings detached, pulled onto the dock alongside the ship. A crew of Army mechanics reattached the wings and they were hoisted aboard.

The Reprisal slipped her moorings and was pulled away from the dock. Soon they were making way through the bay and out into Mediterranean, escorted by two destroyers. Once at sea, the air group, less the Bat Team, began coming aboard with the AFF pilots riding along in the back seats of the Crusades and Avengers. The men of the air group and the fighter group had already had a chance to mingle and get acquainted. This gave the men of the Reprisal Air Group an opportunity to show their new friends around their world.

A special luncheon was hosted in the officers wardroom followed by a tour of the ship. During lunch, the planes were respotted for take off. As a special treat, the six P-47s were spotted for launch along with the air group. The preselected pilots, including Colonel McGuire were given the opportunity to take off from the carrier. With the rest of their guests riding along, the air group took off and returned to the base. Later in the afternoon, the Reprisal dropped anchor in Algiers Bay. The outing had been successful. At least the men of the 186th had a better appreciation for their Navy brothers.

During the remainder of the week, the Reprisal lay at anchor. One day a store ship came along side to transfer dry and refrigerated stores aboard. Another day a tanker filled the fuel bunkers to capacity. Yet a third ship, an ammunition ship, came along side to restock the magazines. Repaired and resupplied, the Reprisal was once again ready for action. The only exception was the air group, which was a few planes under strength with no spares. By Friday, the ship was ready to sail on the following Monday with orders were to conduct operations in support of an amphibious assault on the mainland of Italy.

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The repair ship USS Vulcan was based in Algiers during the summer of 1943. At the time it was commanded by Captain Richard Tuggel.

The German air attack on Algiers mentioned in this chapter is fictional, although the Germans had carried out air attacks on Algiers

Lieutenant Colonel Humphrey McGuire and the 186th Fighter Group are fictional.

