

The Boy Next Door Goes to War

On-the-Job P-40 Training in North Africa

BY SPARKY BARNES SARGENT




Like every other new pilot in 1942, Cary Benjamin “Ben” Jones experienced an abrupt introduction to combat. At that point in the war, the enemy had been flying combat for several years, but almost every American pilot, Jones included, was new to that particular lethal game. Still, he flew P-40s in the Mediterranean, Africa, Sicily, and Italy campaigns as a member of the 316th Fighter Squadron (of the 324th Fighter Group) known as “Hell’s Belles” and survived. And he eventually got good at what he did. Describing his squadron’s capabilities, Jones says, “We didn’t think anybody could fly formation like we did; we could do everything. We really had a lot of confidence in each other, and you needed that when you were flying combat.”

When Lt. C. Ben Jones first arrived in North Africa, he was assigned to a British fighter unit where he received the training so necessary to keep him alive. (Photo courtesy of Kenneth R. Samuelson)

Transition to the P-40

After flight training, 2nd Lt. Jones was first assigned to Philadelphia. “They were forming the 324th Fighter Group, and there were three squadrons. I was assigned to the 316th squadron to get ready for going overseas. One of the fellows I reported to there was Lt. Col. Pete Quesada. He was head of the first fighter group and later became a four-star general. He’d been on the first refueling flight that was ever done, and had also flown the longest nonstop refueling flight. I went to Norfolk in September 1942 and transitioned to the P-40, my first single-seat airplane.

“The P-40 was just awesome; it was unbelievable. The engine stuck way out in front, and you couldn’t see over it when you got in it. When you started to take off, you were looking at the sky because you couldn’t see the runway,” recalls Jones. “You just picked a point out there and flew. Those models we checked out in had about 1,200hp and had a tremendous amount of torque. Someone later told me, when they learned I was a P-40 pilot, ‘Well, I know your right leg’s a lot longer than your left one!’ You can’t imagine how much torque and P-factor there was. It was different from anything we’d flown in training.”



Jones's unit, the 324th FG flew P-40L and F models, which were Merlin- (rather than Allison-) powered, as indicated by the lack of an air scoop on top of the cowl. (Photo by John Dibbs/courtesy of the Fighter Collection)

Overseas

When Jones went overseas, he'd had only one aerial gunnery practice mission in the P-40. "We went out on our first aerial gunnery mission, shooting at a target sleeve being towed by an airplane over the Atlantic. The lead fellow missed the target and shot the cable in two. It just floated down, and we shot it as it went down. We didn't know what 'tactics' were. We were lucky when we were assigned to the British overseas; they had been fighting the war for several years, and we learned from them. We'd go out across Saudi Arabia, always flying low where the airplane would throw a silhouette on the sand. So we started doing gunnery on the silhouette of our own airplanes. That's the way we practiced how to lead a target and take deflection shots. We could actually see where we hit.

"I remember all 102 of my combat missions. I did 80 with the Americans, doing

the rest with the British. It was lucky that we were assigned to the British because the Americans were flying old World War I tactics in Casablanca. We wore English helmets and goggles, and a lot of the time, we wore British wool uniforms. All we had otherwise was what we took over in a duffle bag. Flying with the British, we chased German General Rommel across Africa."

Africa—79th Fighter Group

The 316th Fighter Squadron was assigned to the 79th Fighter Group from mid-March to May 1943, and Jones recalls that his group went on to combat in Tripoli. "We weren't operating as a full group yet, and the four of us who were sent to fly with the British were some of the first to fight the Germans. We flew with the British for quite a while, then came back to teach their tactics to the rest of the P-40 pilots. At that time, the Germans were retreating on the one main road out of Egypt back to Tunis. Our first mission was a strafing mission, hitting the troops and military equipment as they moved along the road. We really took a beating there. There were a lot of losses. 'Shep,' a fella who wouldn't fly with anybody except me, just said, 'Well, that was pretty rough.' And he wasn't kidding!

"In the intelligence debriefing after the mission, our commanding officer said, 'Tomorrow morning, at 10 o'clock, we're going to go out and do the same thing.' We had lost about half the people that were on the raid that day—we lost six planes out of 12. The next day, we lost half of our people again; they had guys shooting at us with machine guns, rifles, and 40mm cannons. When we got back and were sitting around the tent, I said, 'Damn, Shep. This is getting pretty serious.' He said, 'Oh, relax, Ben. We've already beaten the odds.' That was my introduction to combat.

"On my first mission, as soon as we went across the lines, they started shooting at us. All of a sudden—boy, it was funny how it hit me—I thought, 'They are trying to kill Mrs. Jones's boy!' And that's *me!*' So that gave me a whole different perspective. Plus, when we got to Africa, there was no timetable for going home. We knew we were there until we got killed or the war was over.

"I had been flying right next to pilots and had seen them blown up, but not me. So I knew you had to have a lot of luck along with skill. We very seldom ever went out without being hit by at least one German fighter pilot,

Hell's Belle's fighter pilots C. Ben Jones and Bucky Buchanan. Buchanan would nearly get shot down. (Photo courtesy of C. Ben Jones)





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The North African campaign saw almost every model of P-40 in action as seen in these Allison-powered models. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

usually more. The first fighter pilots we were up against were Hermann Göring’s *Luftwaffe* ‘Yellow Noses.’ They were flying Messerschmitt 109s, and they were crack pilots and highly experienced.”

Comparing the P-40’s performance with the Me 109’s, Jones says, “We could out-turn them. But you needed to turn to the left because their propeller turned to the right. If we could get them turning to the left, our prop helped us turn and we could out-turn them. But they could leave us and climb a lot higher than we could. You don’t hear much about the Italians, but they were still active, and boy, they had a good airplane: a Reggiane 2000. They’d come down, make a pass, and do a beautiful roll. I never got to fly a Reggiane, but they could just move the aileron (with no rudder input) and roll that airplane right on a point.

“We engaged in one-on-one combat with the Yellow Noses, and it was just happening so fast that you’d fly by pure reaction. I didn’t have confirmed kills; we didn’t have cameras at that time. I had some hits, but then I’d say 85 percent of all my missions were dive-

bombing, strafing, and ground support. I later read an article that stated if you were doing that type of mission, your odds were five times greater of getting shot down than if you were just escorting bombers and fending off 109s.

“To begin with, nobody told us anything about strafing. For instance, how would you attack a train? Well, we were attacking length-wise because you could get more shots that way, but we started losing people because the trains were carrying ammunition cans that would explode and blow the guys behind you out of the sky. So we learned that you had to

A relatively fresh 324th FG P-40L/F shows off its camouflage. The rough operating conditions quickly gave the aircraft a “desert patina.” (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



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strafe a train crosswise, then come back. That way you were gone by the time it blew up.

"At that time, you just about always got shot up on a mission, and the P-40's ailerons and tail surfaces were fabric. So you went back, they patched up the holes, and then you'd go fly another mission. I think the most I ever went out in one day was three times. Our missions lasted an hour and a half to three hours, and we never were very far from where the action was."

One particularly eventful day for Jones's squadron was April 18, 1943. "That was the Palm Sunday Massacre," recounts Jones, adding, "The Germans were retreating and trying to evacuate as many troops by air as they could from Africa. We had been tipped off for two weeks, and we flew back and forth across where we thought they were going to be. We went up just at daylight and flew until we had to go back for fuel. The pilots who relieved us spotted the Germans and shot them down over Cape Bon. That was the most enemy planes shot down in one mission, I believe—about 72 German Junkers Ju 52 transports and Me 109s were shot

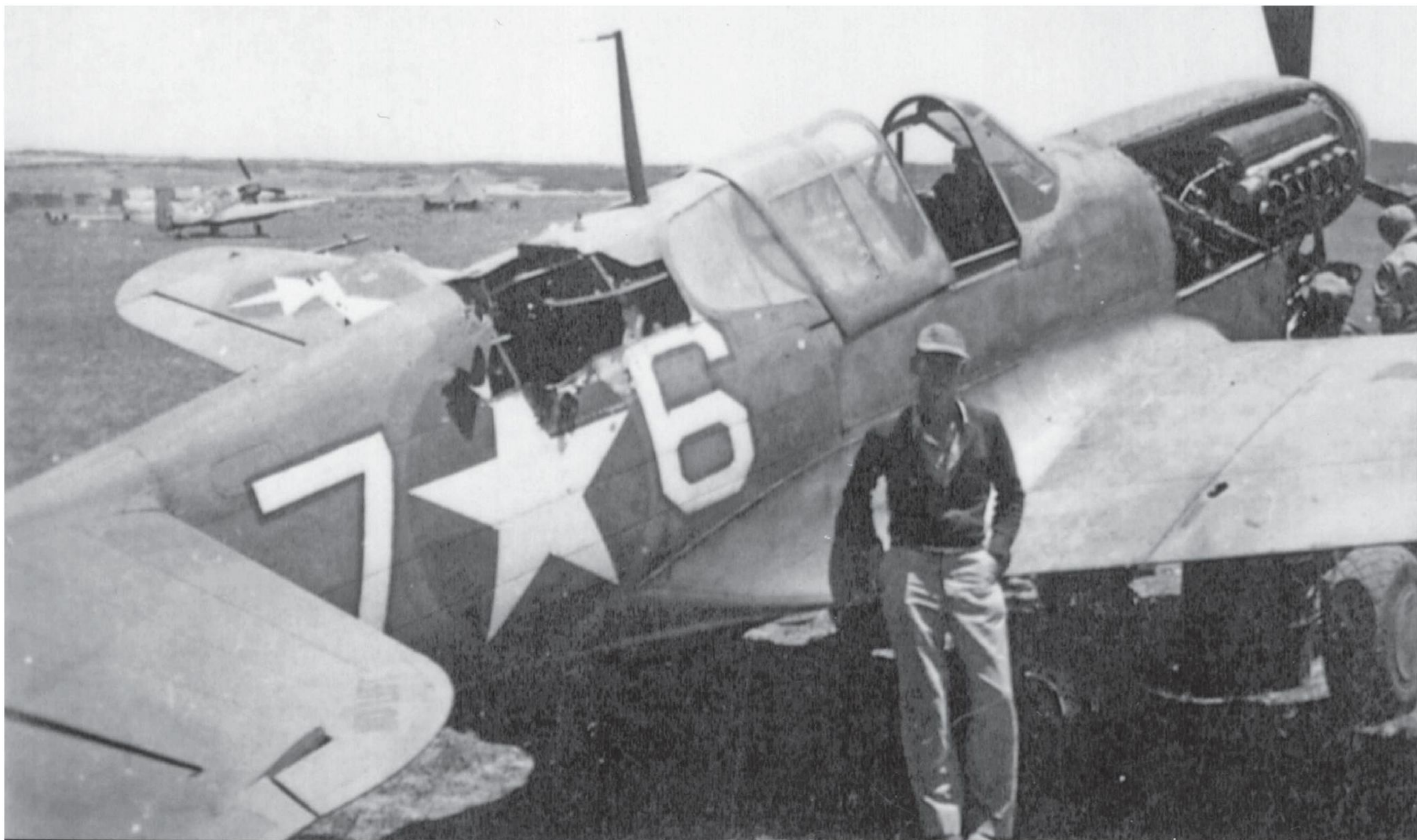
down, and we only lost about six airplanes. I hated that I missed it!"

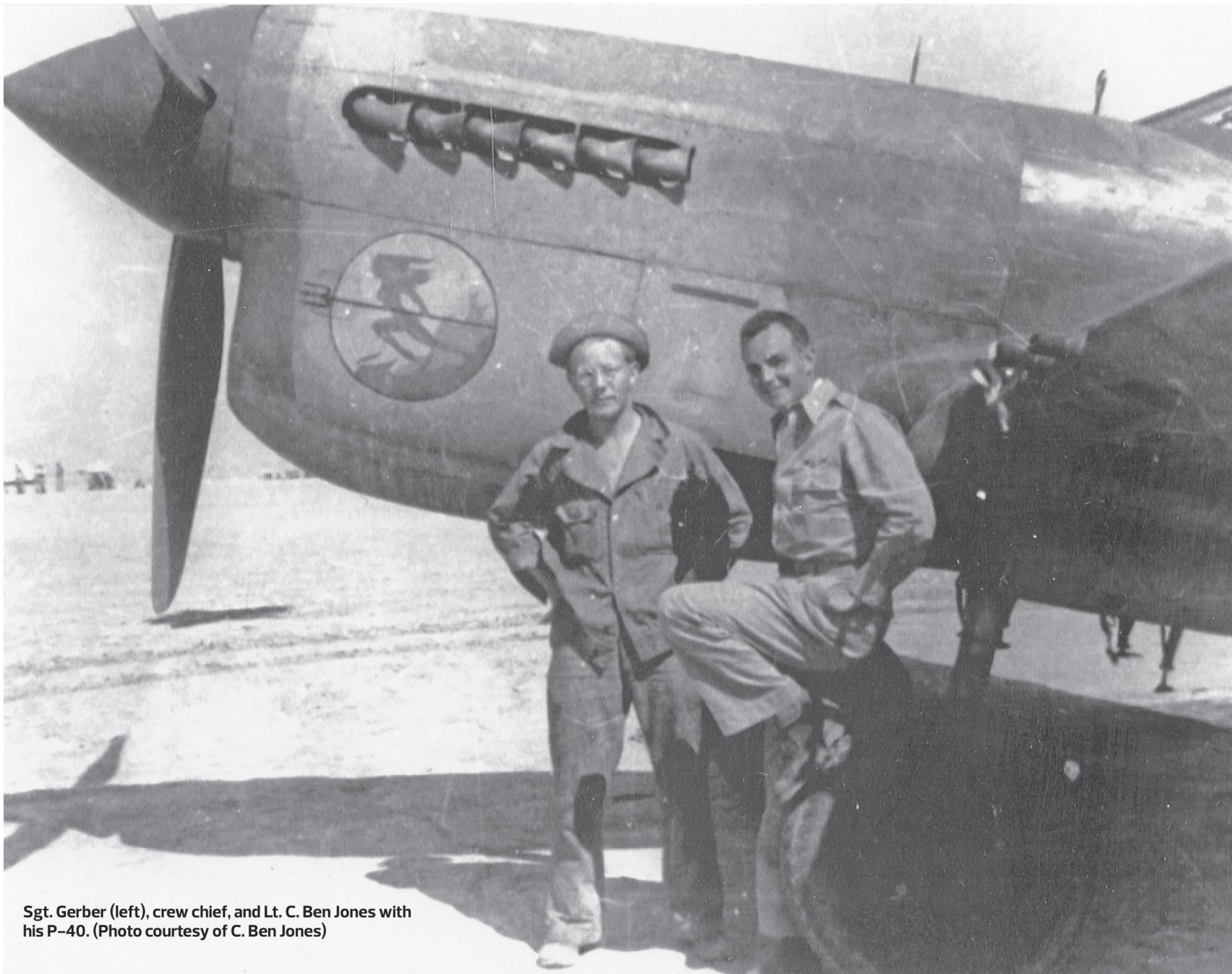
Jones and a number of his fellow officers were later awarded Air Medals (General Order 23, dated March 24, 1944) for their service in April 1943. The citation read in part, "In recognition of meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flights, [these men have] participated in 10 sorties of less than 2 1/2 hours' duration against the enemy in the Middle East Theater."

Bail Out!

Jones had to bail out of a P-40 in North Africa in May 1943. "I was flying back across from Constantine, and there were three other fellows flying formation with me. We were going over some mountains, and they called, 'Ben, you're on fire!' Yes, *I know!* There's smoke coming in the cockpit! I said, 'I'm going to try to make it back to the valley over there and belly it in.' I'd bellied in a couple before and had good luck. None of us wanted to bail out. When I first started flying, the instructor gave me a parachute and told me, 'If you have to use this, you pull the ripcord.' That was all the

A Bf 109's 20mm cannon let Bucky Buchanan know it was there. (Photo courtesy of C. Ben Jones)





Sgt. Gerber (left), crew chief, and Lt. C. Ben Jones with his P-40. (Photo courtesy of C. Ben Jones)

instruction we ever had on bailing out.

“So I cracked the canopy a little bit to let the smoke out. *That* was not smart because, when I did that, the flames started coming back at me. I knew I had to bail out—now. I called the other guys and said, ‘I’m going to bail out!’ I took off my microphone and shoulder harness, and started pulling up to slow the airplane down some. I half jumped and half threw myself out. I’ve never been calmer in my life; I knew that, in a little bit, I was going to be either alive or dead. When I bailed out, I hit the antenna for the radio, but I didn’t know it at the time. I saw the tail of the airplane go by just above me, and it looked as big as a house. As soon as I saw it go by, I pulled the ripcord. And nothing happened. *Nothing*.

“I’m falling on my back, I’m thinking clearly, and I thought, ‘Good Lord, don’t



The P-40’s primary role in North Africa was as a ground pounder, continually hounding Rommel until he left Africa. They then began to do the same thing in Italy. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



Above left: One of the earliest airframes to see combat in WW II, some of the P-40's systems were greatly improved in next-generation aircraft, like the Mustang. (Photo by John Dibbs/courtesy of the Fighter Collection)

Above right: Pictured here at 98 years old in 2017, Ben still fits nicely into his Hell's Belles A-2 jacket. (Photo courtesy of C. Ben Jones)



let me be conscious when I hit the ground.' But pretty soon, the pilot chute popped and whistled as it opened. In fact, it jerked me so hard that I blacked out momentarily. When I came back to the States, I read a pamphlet from the Air Force on the procedure for bailing out. You were supposed to wait until you lost your forward speed and you just had gravity pulling you down, but I didn't. I had my forward speed, and it ripped my harness some.

"I think I was at about 6,000 feet when I bailed out, and it was a good ride down. The fellows I had been flying formation with saw my parachute open, and they started pulling closer in on me. I thought, 'Don't get too close! You're going to collapse my chute!' My P-40 exploded and then it hit the ground and caught fire in a wheat field. I had a chipped bone in my leg before that flight and it was all bandaged up, but we didn't have pilots, so I was flying with that injury. I thought, 'Boy, what am I going to do with that when I hit the ground?' So I got completely out of my harness and held on to the straps, and I looked down. Just before I hit the ground, I let the parachute go so that it wouldn't drag me, and I rolled on the ground when I

landed. Everything was OK.

"I had bailed out several hours away from my airfield, and a Frenchman picked me up in a horse-drawn cart and took me to his house. I knew the guys would be back the next morning, and sure enough, I heard a plane. So we got a sheet, went out, and waved it at the pilot. He was leading a jeep cross-country to pick me up. The Frenchman gave us a lamb, a bucket full of lard, and some bread. We hadn't had meat in months, and we did slaughter and cook the lamb."

Invasion of Sicily

After flying and fighting in Africa, Jones and the squadron started flying into Sicily. "We started out flying strafing missions," recounts Jones. "But I guess one of the worst beatings we ever took was escorting some bombers out of Africa going into Sicily. The Germans had a lot of air force over there, with crack pilots; our losses were really bad. We were stationed at Cape Bon, which is on a peninsula at the northern tip of Africa surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea. We were briefed on the Sicily invasion on September 10, 1943. So we took off and flew about 90 miles over to

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Sicily. Flying over the American fleet was quite a sight. Most of those people had never been shot at in their life; they had just come from the States. At about daylight, somebody fired a shot. Every fifth shot was a tracer, and boy, when one guy shot, the whole sky lit up with tracers. The ships were shooting at us! We called them and gave them the password, but they just *kept* shooting at us. We got some shrapnel hits, but nobody was shot down.

“Something you don’t hear much about were the Allied forces flying cargo gliders during the invasion of Sicily. The C-47s were pulling gliders with infantry and equipment aboard, and as they got close to the coast of Sicily, the American ships started shooting at them; they shot a lot of them down. Then the C-47 pilots got excited and released the gliders while still well out at sea. Those poor guys went down with full packs and everything, and most of them drowned. But you never heard much about that. There were so many mistakes made.

“Until you’ve been shot at, you don’t know what it’s like. You don’t know how you’ll act. After Sicily, they pulled us out of combat because we’d lost so many people, and we were still flying beat-up P-40s. We took time off to fix the planes and revamp.”

Invasion of Italy

After the Italians surrendered, the squadron flew strafing and dive-bombing missions in support of the invasion of Italy. Jones recounts, “When we went over to Africa, the plane was set to carry one 500-pound bomb and six fragmentation bombs on the wings. Then things changed, and we needed to carry a 1,000-pound bomb. So one day, they asked us to try flying with one. A couple of us tried doing that, and we could get off the ground and fly with it. So we started flying with 1,000-pound bombs. We had a 75-gallon belly tank that we could drop, and that’s where the bomb would go. We hit Monte Cassino and bombed the heck out of it.

“I stayed over there until after the initial invasion of Anzio in January 1944. I kept strafing and dive-bombing until I had served enough time so that I could go home. We had 28 pilots when we first went over, and each of us was assigned our own plane. Later on,

there were 50 pilots, and they didn’t have their own planes.

“The P-40 got me through many rough situations; it was a tough airplane. Many times, I’ve been over 500mph in a P-40, and people didn’t think it would do that. But I’d go down on a dive-bombing run from 10,000 feet and open up the throttle completely—and you could pull the airplane out of the bottom of the dive without it coming apart. Incidentally, when you’d start down, you’d have to come in with *left* rudder—the controls would just really change when you were going so fast, and then when you pulled out, you still had to hold left rudder until you slowed down to where you needed to come in with the right rudder.

“One day, I was on a dive-bombing run, and I was following this fellow down, and we were carrying 1,000-pound bombs. He pulled up, and I was right under him. I could see that he hadn’t yet released his bomb. The bomb had a little propeller on it that started turning when you armed it, and I could see that propeller turning. I was losing speed, and I just knew the bomb was going to hit me! Some way or another, I was able to ‘walk’ my plane away from him, and I never saw the bomb go by. That incident reminded me that every maneuver that you learned was very important, like ‘walking’ an airplane over sideways. I just did it, instinctively, because I couldn’t raise my wing.”

Back to the States

Jones returned to the States in February 1944 and became a test pilot. “I was in charge of all the fighters at Luke Field in Arizona. We had P-51s, P-47s, P-38s, a B-25, and P-40s, and I flew all of them after repairs were made. Then I was assigned to test-flight work at Pratt & Whitney in Connecticut. I liked it; I flew everything—even a B-17.” Jones was promoted from 1st lieutenant to captain per Special Orders No. 198, dated August 18, 1945. Born May 4, 1919, Jones recently celebrated his 100th birthday in fine spirits. ✚

Editor’s note: This article is an edited version of a chapter in the author’s book, *My Father, My Friends: Memories of World War II*.