3rd Pursuit Squadron

28th Bombardment Squadron

We are pleased to publish the following article by Richard Slater on the air activities in the Philippine Islands prior to the outbreak of the war. Rick has published several previous articles on the USAAC/USAAF in the Philippine Islands and has spent several years researching and contacting veterans from that era. Any additional information or photos of USAAC/USAAF activities in the Philippines up to the fall of Bataan in 1942 would be greatly appreciated by the author. Please contact: Richard Slater, 257 S. Sunset Drive, Camano Island, Washington 98292.

2nd Observation Squadron

Up and At 'Em

THE 4th COMPOSITE GROUP IN THE PHILIPPINES, 1920-1941

BY

RICHARD SLATER

4th Composite Group

The first military airplane in the Philippines was a Wright Flyer which made its appearance in 1911. It saw a number of duties as befitted the only airplane operated in the Philippines. It was typical of what was to be a continuing problem for the Air Corps in the Philippines (and for the Army Air Corps in general) -- either the aircraft were too few or woefully obsolete, or in many cases both.

For most of the interwar period, the main army air unit present in the Philippines was the 4th Composite Group. A composite group was standard for the Air Corps in all the overseas territories. In addition to the 4th, the 5th was stationed in Hawaii and the 6th in the Panama Canal Zone.

A composite group was designed to be a jack-of-all trades and expected to handle a number of duties. It would usually consist of one squadron each of fighters, bombers and observation planes. In those days of airplanes with short ranges, the extremely long distances separating these U.S. possessions from reinforcements in the States meant that all three types were necessary in the same place. The lack of resources made larger units impossible during the interwar period.

The 4th Composite Group dated its service in the Islands to the 1920s, being formed originally as the 1st Observation Group. Among its squadrons were included some of the oldest Air Corps units. Through the '20s and '30s, the squadrons comprising the 4th included the 2nd Observation Squadron, 3rd

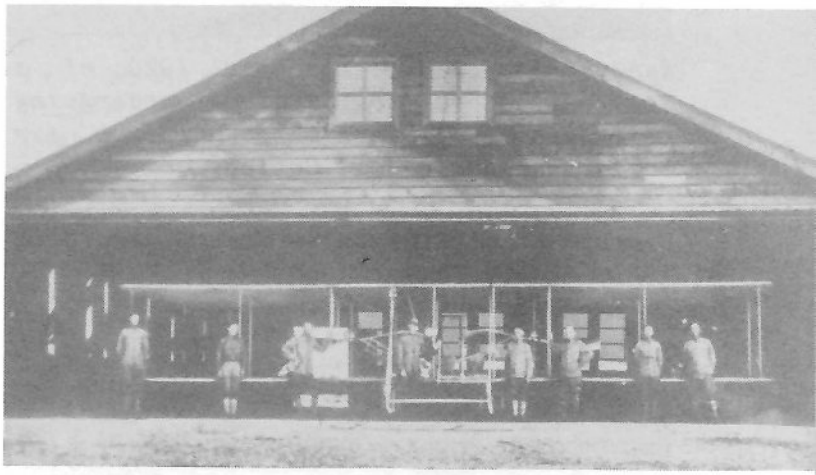
Martin NBS-1 bombers of the 28th Bomb Squadron over the Crater of Taal Volcano, Luzon, P.I., October 25, 1926. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

Pursuit Squadron,and the 28th Bombardment Squadron, as well as small attached support units.

The 2nd Observation Squadron started out in December 1915 as the 2nd Aero Squadron and dated its service in the Philippines from 1919. The 3rd Pursuit also started its service in the Philippines in 1919 as the 3rd Aero Squadron, while the 28th Bomb Squadron was the "baby" of the 4th, being transferred to the Philippines in 1923. The 28th saw service as the 28th Aero Squadron with the RFC/RAF (ground echelon only) and the U.S. 3rd Pursuit Group in World War I before being reconstituted, redesignated as a bombardment squadron, reactivated, and sent to the Philippines.

In addition to the usual military training activities, pilots and aircrew of the 4th could look forward to rather unusual duty. Pilots flew serum to disease-ridden provinces, inspected flood damage, carried mail, buzzed incoming military shipping, and in at least one instance flew snakes from the outer provinces to a local zoo!

Flying activities were also at a somewhat leisurely pace even when war threatened. One pilot arriving in May 1941 remembers being assigned to the 2nd Observation Squadron according to the letter his last name started with and with no regard to flight school specialty ("career planning" being saved for a future generation). Aerial maps? Those who had any at all got road maps from local service stations. Radios? Those used in many planes were not compatible with army radios used on the



Wright type "B" Fl at Fort McKinley (near what later became Nichols Field), 1912. (Fairchild Heritage Museum)

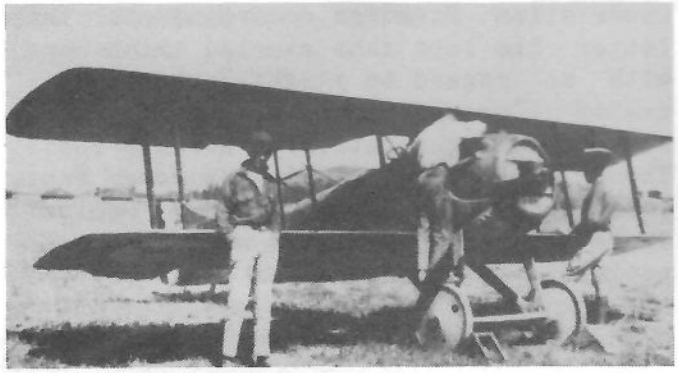
ground so dropping messages was the preferred method of communication. Some pilots didn't mind this as it gave them a good excuse to buzz horses and men and generally (legally) stir things up! Ammunition expenditure was severely limited, also.

Airfields in the Philippines, even when judged by the rather primitive standards of the day, were crude. Nichols Field, located near Manila, was almost unusable during the rainy season and was prone to extensive flooding. It was also served by a single rickety bridge which could easily be knocked out by a single bomb. Even Clark Field, located some 60 miles northeast of Manila and the headquarters of the 4th, looked far different from the vast facility that exists today. The runway consisted of sod which, again, was prone to flooding. Due to limited budgets, little improvement was made to these facilities before the war. A number of satellite fields were also constructed. Among these were Iba, Nielson, Zablan, Batangas and others, mostly located on Luzon. In a pinch, any field cleared of

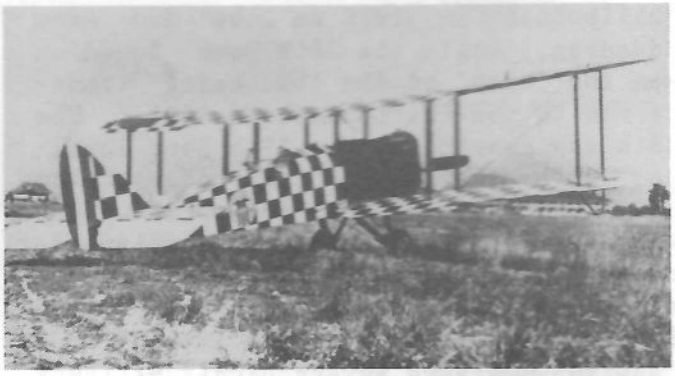
Early 4th Composite Group Emblem.

the MAJOR obstacles would do. Some fuel and supply dumps were set up in the other islands, but these were only for emergency or wartime use. As for anti-aircraft protection, a handful of Browning .30 cal. machine guns on anti-aircraft mounts sufficed until arrival of the 200th Coast Artillery Regiment (AA) in 1941.

There was a local joke that aircraft followed a definite pattern before arriving in the Philippines: after being declared obsolete for use by Air Corps units in the States an aircraft



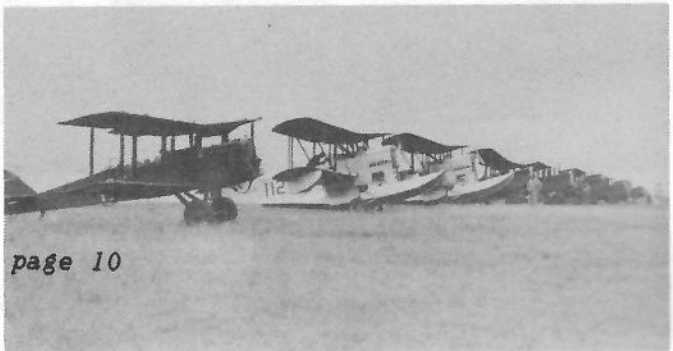
Early photograph, taken about 1920, of a Spad of the 3rd Aero Squadron undergoing maintenance at Clark Field. (Clark Air Force Base Historical Center)

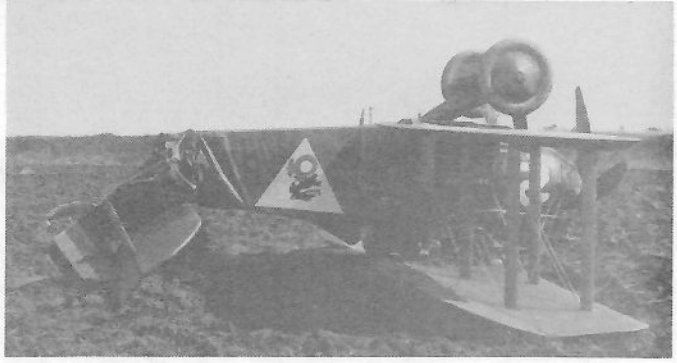


One of the first planes based at Clark Field, a DH-4. (Clark Air Force Base Historical Center)

Lineup of 4th Composite Group aircraft, 1927. (Matt Collection)

"Company Street," 3rd Aero Squadron, 1919, before erection of permanent buildings. (Clark Air Force Base Historical Center)





Boeing MB-3A, A.S. No 68406, airplane #2 of 3rd Pursuit Squadron. Accident at Clark Field, P.I., on 6 November 1923. The engine quit on take off due to a faulty fuel gage which indicated that the tank was one-quarter full when it was practically empty. The pilot was Major J.C. McDonnell, A.C. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

Boeing PW-9, A.S. No 25-313, of the 3rd Pursuit Squadron. Accident at Clark Field, P.I., on 1 August 1927. The Pilot was 1st Lt A.S. Heffley, A.C. Due to another crash on the field airplanes were landing as quickly as possible. Two airplanes landed 180 degrees apart and collided. It is not known which airplane was #10. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

Boeing PW-9A, A.C. No 26-364, airplane #8 of 3rd Pursuit Squadron. Accident off-shore of Manila Bay near the Polo Club, Passay, P.I. on 26 January 1929. The airplanes's engine seized due to tight bearings, the beach was crowded, and the pilot, 2nd Lt Clarence Irvine, A.C., ditched in shallow water. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

Boeing P-12B, A.C. No 29-450, of 4th Composite Group. Accident in Manila Bay on 3 February 1932. The airplane was assigned to, and maintained by, the 28th Bombardment Squadron. This is an extremely rare photograph. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

would then be sent to the Panama Canal Zone; following service there, to Hawaii; and finally, when it was ready for the scrap heap, it would be sent to the Philippines. Although there is evidence that the Philippines wasn't much worse off than the other outlying territories, the jest had a large grain of truth. One pursuit squadron commander flew the same aircraft in the Philippines that he had used several years before as an "advanced fighter trainer" in the States! He discovered this by finding the initials he had marked in the cockpit.

Unfortunately, many high-ranking officers had risen to the top by seniority and not be imagination. A number of these were sent to the Philippines to serve out their last few years until retirement. One pilot remembers being summoned to the base theatre for a special briefing. Thinking they might be let in on some hard intelligence, the pilots were disappointed to find out that they were being chewed out concerning:

1. not standing "retreat;"
2. having collars unbuttoned and ties undone upon completion of flying (ties being considered part of the "flying uniform" at this time);
3. being outside quarters in the wrong uniform after duty hours.

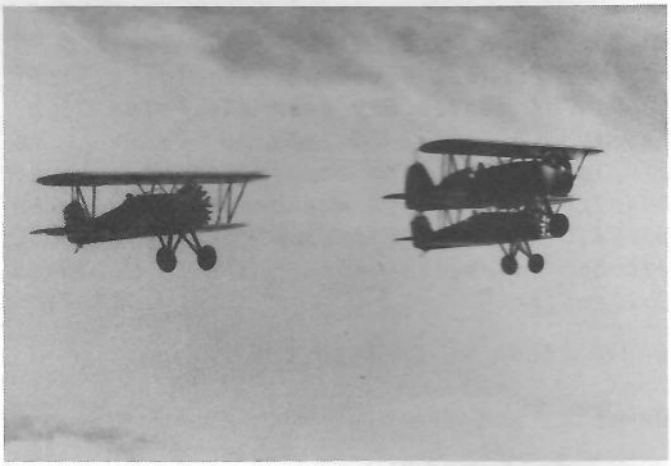
After early service with a variety of different aircraft, including JN-4s,

Clark Field, Luzon, P.I., August 1939

DH-4s, MB-3As and PW-9s, the 3rd Pursuit Squadron received Boeing P-12Bs and Es in the early '30s. The 2nd Observation Squadron and 28th Bomb Squadron made do with DH-4s and Martin NBS-1s until receiving Thomas-Morse O-19s and Keystone B-3s, respectively. With the exception of the P-12s, none of these types offered much more than marginal improvement in bombing and observation over similar aircraft of World War I. At least some of these aircraft would soldier on right up until the war, a P-12 and a couple of B-3s being on the inventory of the Philippine Army Air Corps in 1941!

The 4th continued its tradition of being at the end of the line right through the '30s. In late 1937 and early 1938 Boeing P-26s started to arrive, some three years after the Air Corps first received the type. After experience with the dubious quality of Philippine airfields, it was found necessary to remove the main wheel covers and modify the tail wheel to avoid numerous accidents (as was also done in the

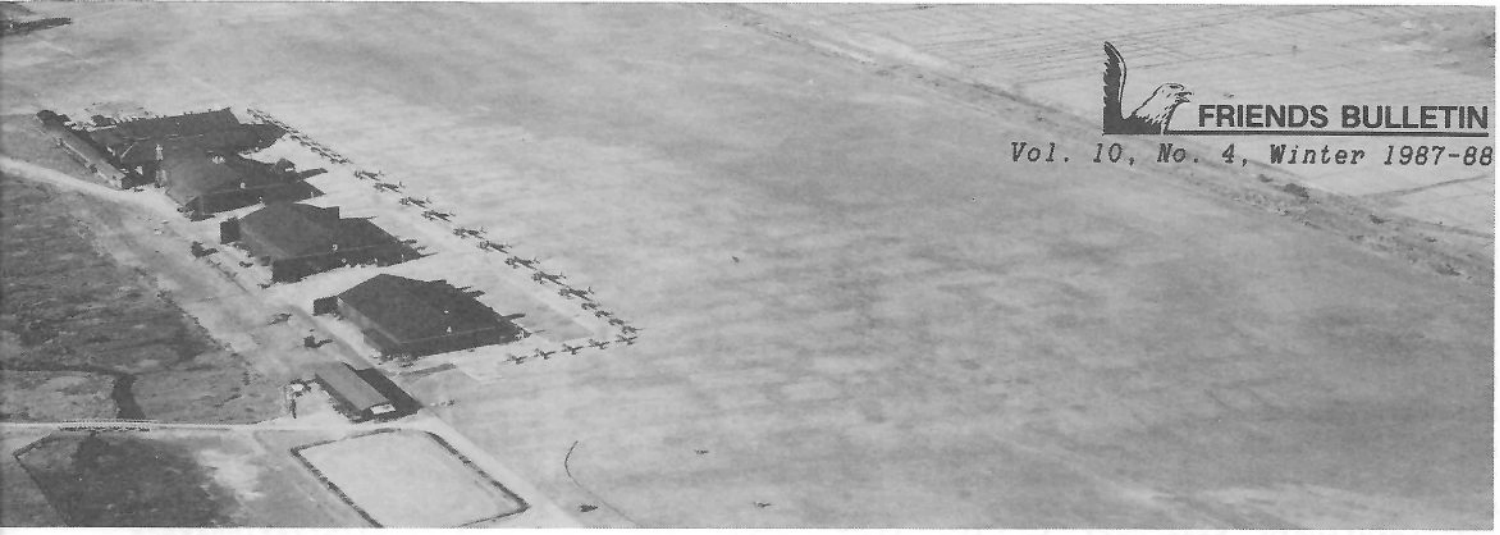
Headquarter of 2nd Observation Squadron at Nichols in 1938. (George Tweedy)



A P-12E and two P-12Bs of the 3rd Pursuit Squadron, late-1937. (George Tweedy)

Keystone B-4 of 28th Bomb Squadron. (R.H. Dean Collection)

Keystone B-4 of the 28th Bomb Squadron. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)



Nichols Field, Luzon, P.I., February 1938

States).

Even when they first arrived the P-26s were on the verge of obsolescence. As late as November 1940, 28 of them continued to form the main fighter strength in the Philippines. The P-26 was passed along to other squadrons as they arrived and finally most of those remaining were given to the young Philippine Army Air Corps in August 1941, which had the dubious honor of flying them in combat against the Japanese in the early days of the Pacific War. Those not lost in combat were destroyed when the U.S. forces retreated to Bataan.

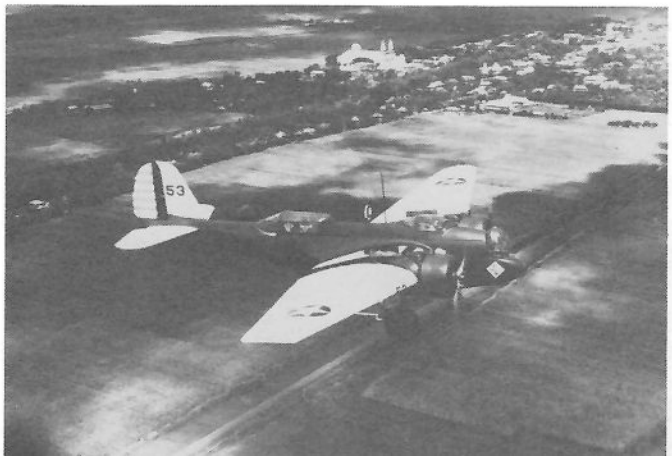
Due to the rise in tensions with Japan, it was finally decided in late-1940 to reinforce the Philippines and the 17th and 20th Pursuit Squadrons were duly sent. The 17th was the famous "Snow Owl" squadron and was best know for flying highly decorated P-6Es in the early '30s. The 20th was transferred from the 35th Pursuit Group at Hamilton Field, California. When they arrived in

Keystone B-4 of 28th Bomb Squadron taking off from field near San Jose, Mindora, P.I., 1937. (R.H. Dean Collection)

B-10 of 28th Bomb Squadron flying over central Luzon, 1939. (Bob Jones)

Thomas Morse O-19C in flight. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

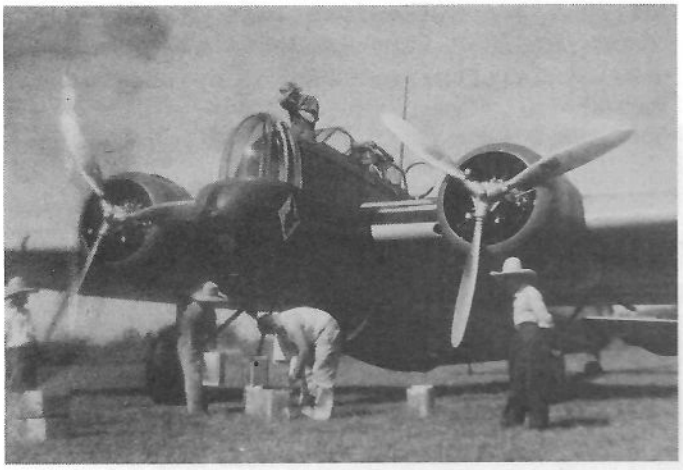
Thomas Morse O-19 in flight in the vicinity of Lake Taal, Luzon, P.I. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)



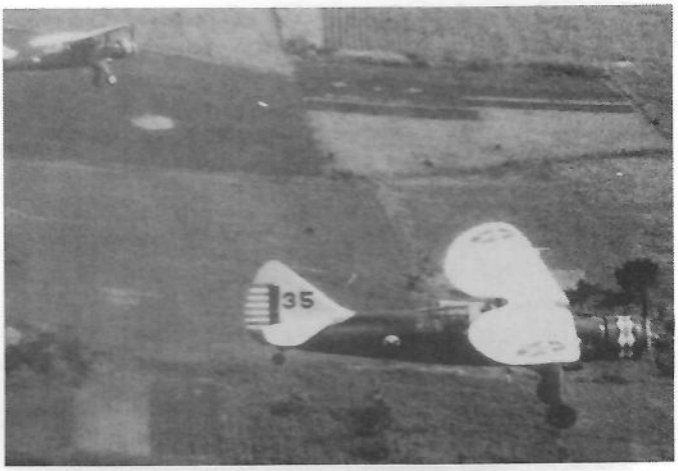
October and December of 1940, both squadrons initially received the same P-26s flown by the 3rd.

Shortly after, approximately 50 P-35As arrived. As with many of the aircraft in the Philippines, they had a somewhat checkered past. Originally part of an order by Sweden impounded by the War Department, these ships were somewhat improved models over those that had previously been used by the Air Corps. They were somewhat faster, had an extra .50 caliber machine gun in each wing, had provision for bombs, and even had a baggage compartment in the fuselage, which could carry a passenger. This feature was to prove quite handy when evacuations were started of key personnel from Bataan. (One veteran remembers a P-35 landing at Del Monte Field on Mindanao during the Bataan Campaign. Going out to greet the pilot, he found not just the pilot, but two others stashed on board, one behind the pilot and one in the baggage compartment!) The little Seversky lacked self-sealing fuel tanks and armor plate for the pilot.

These aircraft were far from unmixed blessings, however. After they were unloaded from ships, ground crew found upon opening the crates that they still wore the three-crowns insignia of Sweden. Of course, there was the small problem of translating from Swedish the instruction manuals that had been included. One can only speculate that soldiers whose last names were Olson and Lindbloom were very popular for awhile! Instrumentation was in metric and also labeled in Swedish. It was a real adventure for the pilots to transition to



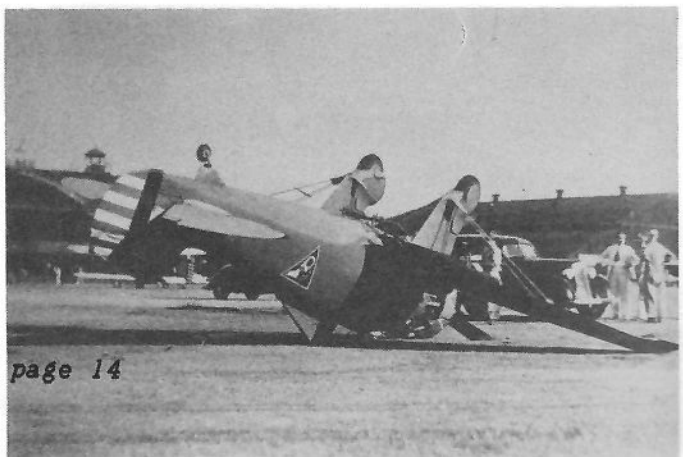
Martin B-10 of 28th Bomb Squadron at unidentified emergency field, 1938. Quantities of gas and other supplies were kept at these fields. Tins were loaded by hand into airplane. (George Tweedy)

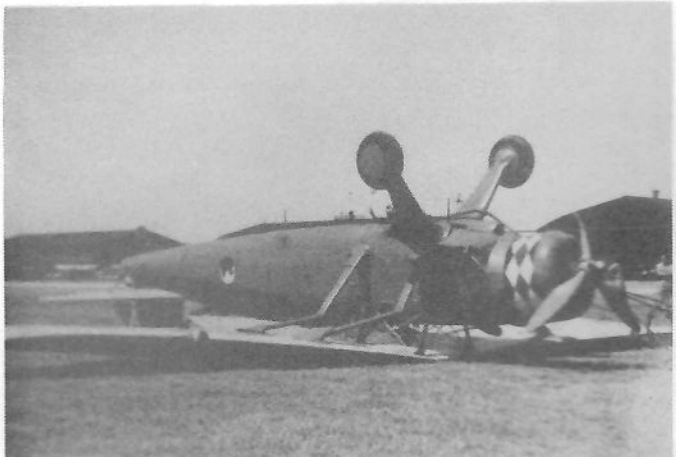


O-46s approaching landing field at Camp Keithley, Mindanao. O-46s lacked range to fly from Luzon to Mindianao and had to make intermediary stops. (George Tweedy)

P-26A, A.C. No 33-109, Col Ralph Royce 7-15-38. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

Pranged O-46A of 2nd Observation Squadron. Large upper wing of O-46 could be a problem landing in a crosswind. (George Tweedy)

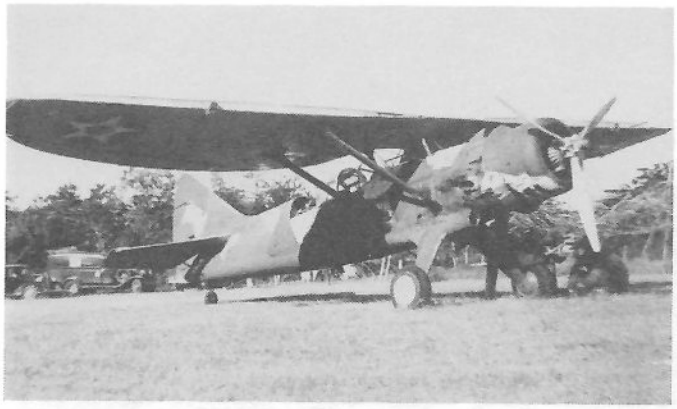




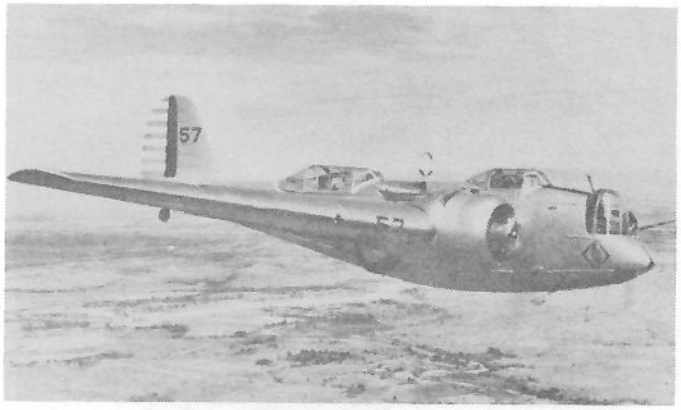
these ships. All planes were finished in a glossy aluminum, which could be seen for miles. It wasn't until August 1941, that an appreciable number were repainted in olive drab. This was probably the result of having one paint sprayer in the whole Philippine Department.

Unfortunately, the 28th Bomb Squadron had done no better. Martin B-10s started arriving at about the same time as the P-26s. These bombers were the first truly modern bomber type the Air Corps had but, like the P-26, they were allowed to slip into obsolescence in the Philippines without replacement until 1941. It should be emphasized that they did not necessarily replace the ancient bi-winged B-3s, but merely supplemented them. The old Keystones served as transports for a few years thereafter. At least one B-3 continued to serve with the Filipinos right up through 1941. As late as May 1941, B-10s were the only bombers the Philippine Department had. Allison Ind, an Air Corps officer arriving on the U.S. Army transport "Washington," was horrified to discover that these antiquated relics were still in first-line service.

About the same time as the arrival of the "Washington," a shipment of Douglas B-18s did arrive, passed on from the 5th and 11th Bomb Groups in Hawaii. These bombers, "in very poor material condition," were of the same design that by default won over the Boeing 299 (later B-17). Basically a redesigned version of the DC-2, it was soon decided after their arrival in the Philippines that they were fit for little else but use as transports, target tugs and other miscellaneous duties. The 28th was reorganized as a part of the newly-arrived 19th Bomb Group equipped with B-17Cs and Ds. There is some doubt that it ever flew a combat mission with its new unit, however, and it may have been



O-46 in temporary camouflage using water-based paint during 1938 manuvers. (George Tweedy)



Silver-painted B-10B of the 28th Bomb Squadron, 1939-1940. (R.L. Cavanagh Collection)

An O-19, probably returning from gunnery training, 1938, taken over Luzon. (George Tweedy)

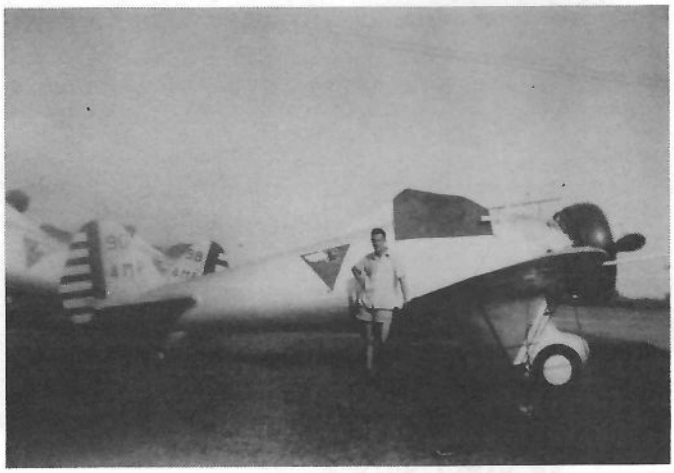
P-26 taxiing out for take-off, Nichols Field. Note colorful cowling insignia. Wheel covers were still fitted at this time. (George Tweedy)

a 'paper' transfer. With the fall of the Philippines, the 28th wasn't finished. The 28th would see service as a B-29 outfit, flying out of the Marianas with a resurrected 19th Bomb Group in 1944-45.

The 2nd Observation Squadron continued on with its O-19Cs until 1938, when a number of high-winged Douglas O-46s arrived. Both types were slow, lightly armed and incapable of existing in a modern combat environment, especially where the enemy controlled the skies. The O-46 was favored over the older plane because its single high wing made photography (one of the 2nd's duties) easier. A few O-46s were passed along to the pursuit squadrons, along with some B-10s, where they served as squadron hacks and target tugs. Although dropping light bombs was part of the 2nd's army cooperation duties, Robert Jones recalls: 'We had no bomb racks, so we never dropped any bombs, Come to think of it, I don't believe we had any bombs . . .'

It wasn't until May, 1941, that P-40Bs arrived--the first marginally combat-worthy planes seen in the Philippines. Even this type was rejected for front line service shortly after by the British as 'obsolete tactical equipment.' The snafus that seemed to plague the Philippine department continued. The new P-40s sat on the runway for over a month because there was no glycol for their liquid-cooled engines. Rumor had it that some supply officer in that States couldn't understand why aircraft flying in the Philippines needed anti-freeze (actually the shipment was sent to Panama by mistake). When they were operational, these aircraft were assigned to the 20th Pursuit

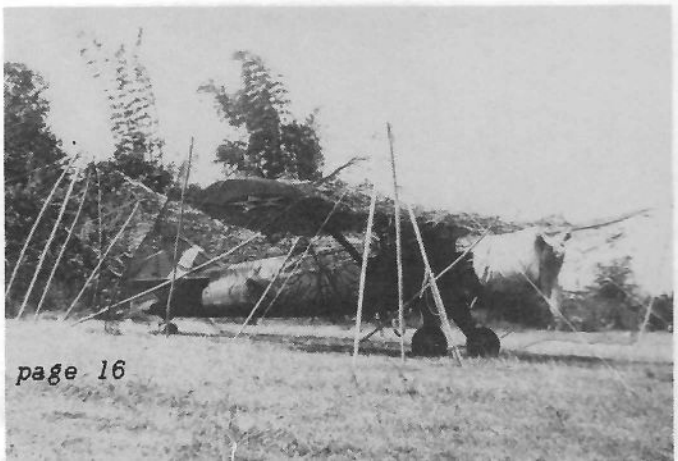
George Tweedy of 2nd Observation Squadron holding aerial camera, which weighed over 30 pounds. (George Tweedy)



P-26s still in service with 3rd Pursuit Squadron, Nichols Field, 1941. Older aircraft in Philippines and elsewhere were painted aluminum to denote obsolescense. (Via Art Reynolds)

Another photograph taken during 1938 maneuvers showing a camouflaged netted O-46. (George Tweedy)

O-46 taken at Nichols Field in 1941. (George Idelett)



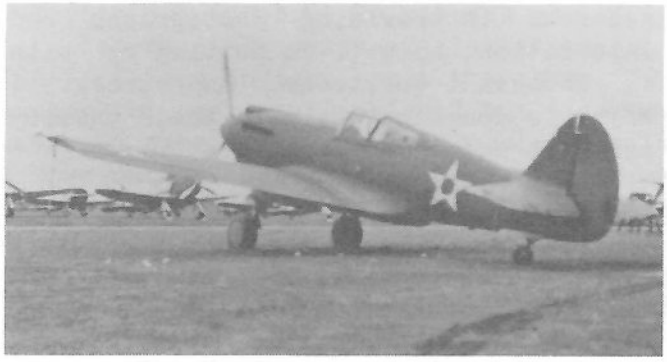
Squadron, stationed first at Nichols and later at Clark Field.

In the fall of 1941, P-40Es arrived in large numbers. Depending on the source, anywhere from 50-100 came in. By the start of the war the 3rd, now stationed at Iba Field, the 17th and the new 21st, both stationed at Nichols, were equipped with the new type. Training with the P-40E was hampered by critical shortage of .50 caliber ammunition and a lack of bottled oxygen. The latter would require P-40 pilots to fly at a much lower altitude than their Japanese adversaries.

More reinforcements continued to arrive. The 21st and 34th Pursuit Squadrons arrived in November 1941. Both would inherit the worn-out P-35s. However, the 21st, at Nichols, was fortunate enough to get P-40Es on the eve of the war, albeit, most were still in crates. The 34th, based at Del Carmen, would take its Seversky into brief and one-sided combat. Both squadrons were to comprise the 35th Pursuit Group and were only temporarily attached until the rest of their group arrived, which it never did.

Some arrivals were of questionable worth. Several North American A-27s, beefed-up version of the famous AT-6, were impounded on their way to Siam (now Thailand) and came with (you guessed it!) instructions in Siamese! They were turned over to the pursuit squadrons for use as navigational and transitional trainers. Most were grounded due to lack of spare parts by the start of the war. They were remembered rather affectionately by some pilots (one pilot said " it . . . was the best buzzing airplane he ever flew"); however, the metric instruments gave trouble. As one man put it, "It's a great airplane but I'd feel better about it if I could ever figure out how high I was, how fast I was going, and how much fuel I had left."

About a dozen Curtis O-52s arrived for the 2nd Observation Squadron. Only slightly more modern than the O-46s they



P-40B assigned to 20th Pursuit Squadron, 1941, Nichols. Other fighter aircraft of 4th Composite Group (P-26s and P-35s) can be seen in background. (Art Reynolds)

Headquarters building at Iba Field, 1941. Iba had no support facilities and was used as gunnery training site. Note tail of 2nd Observation Squadron O-46. (Slater Collection)

B-18 shortly after being set up at Philippine Air Depot. Note old unit designators. (14th Bomb Squadron, 11th Bomb Group). (Art Reynolds)

Lt George Armstrong of 17th Pursuit Squadron preparing to take-off in P-35A. (George Armstrong)

replaced, they were sincerely disliked. "A horrible airplane--the worst I ever flew," was one pilot's recollection, who went on to list a large number of deficiencies. "Undoubtedly someone in the Air Corps felt good about sending us some brand-new equipment. I just wish he would have flown one of them first." "Maybe he did," he continued. The O-52s were soon shot out of the sky or destroyed on the ground.

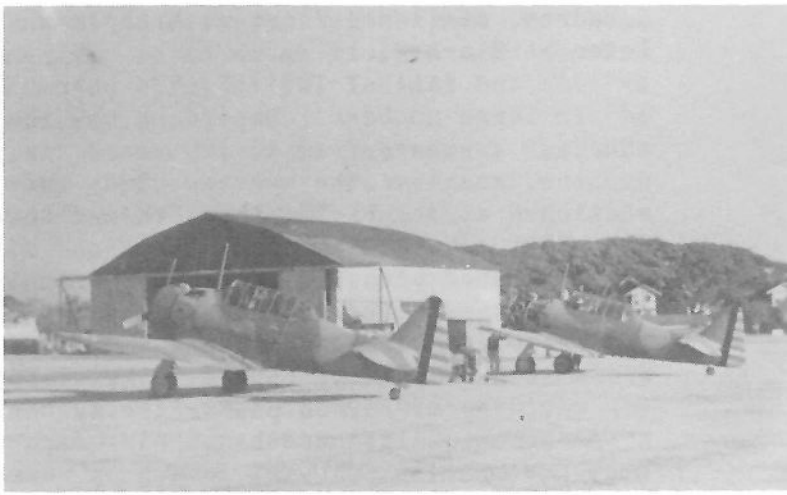
With the large number of new units, the 4th Composite Group grew too unwieldly and soon passed out of existence. In the fall of 1941 the pursuit elements, made up of the 3rd, 17th and 20th Pursuit Squadrons, were reorganized as the 24th Pursuit Group. The 21st and 34th were supposed to comprise the 35th Pursuit Group, as was mentioned earlier. The 28th became part (on paper at least) of the 19th Bomb Group. Another echelon of authority was laid on with the establishment of the 5th Interceptor Command and 5th Bomber Command.

The 4th Composite Group, which had seen nearly twenty years of service, passed into history. The new organizations that succeeded it survived by mere months. Although fighting until the last, they were swept aside by the Japanese onslaught.☆

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

I would like to thank my good friend Jack Denehy. I was relieved to find one other person who had this same obsession! He deserves much of the credit for running many sources down.

This article is dedicated to the veterans of service in the Philippines. They include Art Reynolds, George Armstrong, John Brownewell, Bob Jones, "Cy" Blanton, Bob McClellan, Ray Patenaude, Tom Gage, Samuel Grashio, George Tweedy, and Edward Jacquet, to name but a few. They were extremely generous in providing photographs and information, as well as putting up with my incessant questions. Any success I enjoy is due completely to their unselfish help and encouragement.



Two North American A-27s, probably assigned to 17th Pursuit Squadron, Nichols, 1941. (George Armstrong)

THE AUTHOR:

Richard Slater is an elementary librarian and resides with his wife and three children at Camano Island, Washington. His interest in this subject goes back to early childhood. His ambition is to one day sit in the cockpit of a P-40!

Construction Completed (cont.)

an expected capacity of over fifty aircraft, plus special exhibits. One major difference as compared to the older Museum building, is the white ceiling which is expected to represent a major savings in electrical lighting requirements and make photography much easier. Named "The Modern Flight Gallery," the addition is totally environmentally controlled to provide protection for the collection of aircraft and artifacts. A connector link between the older building and the new addition will allow visitors easy access to the displays.☆