

## ***57th Fighter Group 'First in the Blue',*** by Carl Molesworth

reviewed by Robert Allen

Mount Vernon resident Carl Molesworth is a keen modeler who has attended model shows in the Seattle area, and written articles for the *Seattle Chapter News*. He's best known for writing about the air war in China during WW2, and the Curtiss P-40 series. This recent release in the Osprey "Aviation Elite Units" series doesn't involve the former, but it certainly does the latter.

The 57th Fighter Group flew P-40s and then P-47s in North Africa and Italy from July 1942 until V-E Day. Somewhat overlooked by post-war historians because they featured no big-name aces, they were more noted for their work as a fighter-bomber squadron supporting the ground troops than they were as a fighter squadron engaging enemy aircraft – with one huge exception.

Molesworth's book covers the 57th FG from its formation in January 1941 as the 57th Pursuit Group. There's a bit of a local connection early on, a disastrous cross-country trip from the east coast to McChord Field in Tacoma, during which the Group lost 12 of the 25 P-40s embarked, and suffered the death of four pilots. Perhaps not co-incidentally, the Commanding Officer was replaced a few weeks after.

The bulk of the book covers the Group's service in the MTO, which commenced with a bang, 72 P-40s flying safely off *USS Ranger* to Accra, even though none of the pilots had previously attempted a carrier take-off. Using primary sources, unpublished manuscripts, and numerous interviews and correspondence with Group members, Molesworth paints a picture of the often brutal conditions under which the Group operated. He not only features the pilots, but also the ground crew and administrative staff who worked from dawn

until dusk to allow the pilots to do their job. The evolution of fighter-bomber tactics is discussed, including one pilot's horror at having to strafe German horse-drawn wagons, and seeing the effect the eight machine guns in his P-47 had on the defenseless horses. He sums it up by commenting "Thank God I never had to do it again."

The book also includes numerous lighter moments, even under such conditions,



such as when one of the men wrote a letter to Hormel complaining about the taste of SPAM, and received a letter back stating that they had never sold any SPAM to the Army. Even when the cooks piled up a multitude of SPAM cans and took a picture of one of them sitting on top of the pile, Hormel insisted that they must have received a shipment intended for the Navy. There's also the story of the P-40 pilot who took off on a sortie flying a USAAF P-40 and arrived back at base several hours later flying an RAF one...

One mission covered in detail is the "Palm Sunday Massacre" of April 18, 1943, in which the P-40s of the 57th FG and 324th FG caught a large formation of Luftwaffe Ju 52s attempting to resupply the Afrika Corps. In the ensuing one-sided battle, the 57th FG was credited with 50 victories, over a quarter of their total for the entire war.

The text is complemented by many excellent black-and-white photos, and even a few color ones. There are 32 color profiles by Jim Laurier of the 57th FG's aircraft, and drawings of group and squadron emblems. This is an excellent book, one that fills a gap in WW2 aviation history.

