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Special Account

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319th Bomb Group Medium
AFG 650

22 August 1944

SUBJECT: Special Historical Account

TO : Historian, 12th AAF

{ Note: This account of the chronology of the }
{ change from low to medium altitude operations }
{ by B-26's in the Mediterranean was requested }
{ by the 12th AAF Historical Section. }

The first B-26 operation in North Africa was carried out by the 319th Bomb Group (M) from Maison Blanche against the port of Sfax on 28 November, 1942. Trained for low level bombing and equipped with D-8 (low level) bomb sights, the group attacked Sfax at a height of 1,000 feet and continued to operate at comparable altitudes for a period of about four weeks, during the last half of which the group was stationed at Telergas.

Casualties for the two missions carried out in November amounted to .926 per cent, but for the nine missions executed in December the rate was 8.20 per cent.

On about 26 December, 1942, Brig. Gen. James H. Doolittle ordered B-26 units to operate henceforth at medium levels (about 10,000 feet) against land targets.

This order, however, did not apply to sea sweeps and a detachment of 319th combat men and airplanes went to Bizkra about 28 December to train and experiment with skip-bombing procedures and to carry out attacks on enemy shipping. Because of the special nature of the targets and bombing procedure these raids were to be at deck level. In the event a mission found no shipping targets it was to attack specified land targets as alternates (ports, rail installations, bridges), remaining at a low level. Several such missions were carried out at low levels against land targets subsequently when missions could not find shipping targets. The 319th mission of 31 December against bridges and railroad near Takrouna was one of this nature. As alternates to shipping targets, however, which required low flying, such land targets constituted exceptions to General Doolittle's order.

The 319th's operations for January and February, 1942, consisted principally of actual attacks on shipping. The January casualty rate was 2.41 per cent, but for February it went to 11.11 per cent.

Because the 319th had started operations considerably under strength, with many airplanes stranded along the Northern ferry route, the subsequent losses of men and airplanes and the effect of the losses on morale necessitated retirement of the group from combat at the end of February for training and reorganization. The group's last mission before its temporary retirement was flown 13 February.

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In its initial combat period the 319th carried out only two missions with land targets as primary targets after the issue of General Doolittle's order. These were against the Maharek rail junction 15 January and El Aouina airbase 13 February. The first was made at 7,000 feet using D-8 sights and the second at 10,000 feet using Nordens which had been acquired from heavy units.

The second P-26 group to see action in the Mediterranean was the 17th Bomb Group (H), which carried out its first mission from Tolargua on 30 December, 1942, against Gabes airfield. General Doolittle's order having been issued several days before, the 17th flew its first mission at medium level. Like the 319th, the 17th had been trained for low level bombing, but it was more fortunate in that it had left the States equipped with one Norden sight for every four airplanes. It began operations immediately at medium heights and continued to operate at medium heights, except on sea sweeps and for one special mission against the vital La Honda bridge, which was flown low.

The third and final American Parader group to enter combat in the Mediterranean was the 320th Bomb Group (H), which, with the 17th and 319th, formed the 2686 Provisional Wing, the first Parader wing in the theater which later became the 42nd Wing (US). The 320th flew its first mission from Montescieu on 22 April. It had come overseas equipped with the same number of Nordens as the 17th and, like the 17th, started operations from the beginning at medium altitudes. The 320th flew one special mission at low level involving the dropping of para frags on Cape Bon. However, it also had been trained at low levels in the States and, unlike the other two groups, was re-trained in Africa for about a month at medium levels before going into combat.

General Doolittle's medium-altitude order, at the time it was issued, met with considerable disfavor among the combat men of both the 17th and 319th groups. However, at the time the 320th went into combat the 17th Group's success at medium levels resulted in the 320th welcoming the re-training for medium level operations.

After reorganization the 319th returned to combat on 5 June against Fentelleria. It has operated uniformly at altitudes near 10,000 feet since that date. The casualty rate covering 5 June, 1943, through 31 July, 1944, was .598 per cent.

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(Authority for this account is Colonel Joseph R. Bolsapple, present commander of the 319th Bomb Group (H), who at the time of General Doolittle's medium-level order was 319th Operations Officer and who aided in preparing both the 17th and 320th groups for their initial combat operations.)

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