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SCANNED BY
2006

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THE FIGHTING 319th

During the three months of active combat the 319th Bombardment Group (Medium) has come into its own as the outstanding bombardment group of the 12th Air Force.

The 319th was the first medium bombardment group to start operations in the North African Campaign, and proved the Martin B-26 to be the tough hot aircraft of this theater. The 319th started operations with a skeleton force of aircraft and combat crews due to the extreme weather difficulties of getting the bombers to the theater by way of the northern route. During this migration to North Africa, the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Alverá Rutherford, and one of the squadron commanders, Captain Frank M. Tuttle, were lost over France. Other B-26's with their crews were lost in the North Atlantic due to weather, and many others were stranded in Greenland and Iceland. Finally about fifteen planes arrived in North Africa which were to represent the 319th Bombardment Group and to distinguish themselves in these early raids over Tunisia.

Major David M. Jones, the senior pilot, took command and the group was made ready for the tasks which the 12th Air Force might put upon it. Communication and Transportation was practically non-existent for the important job of advising the group from higher headquarters as to its missions and for getting the results back to them. Weather reports were seldom to be had and aerial maps and target charts were scarce if available at all. These and many other difficulties such as having to gas the aircraft by hand from five gallon cans and to load the bombs with no equipment were overcome by a strong will to fight and to get the job done. The vitality, friendliness, and good pilotage of Major Jones were the paramount factors in keeping the moral of the group high so that all obstacles were but small hurdles in the fighting path of the 319th. On November 30, 1942 Major Jones led nine B-26's to bomb Gabes, Tunisia with aerial maps to cover only part of the

route. At the briefing that morning he was not bothered when he found that no maps were available, but merely said "We will find the place". He did.

Lieutenant Colonel Sam W. Ages, Jr. arrived to take over the job of commanding officer and Major Jones became operations officer, but hard luck seemed to be destined for the 319th. On the fourth raid Colonel Ages flew as co-pilot with Major Jones on a mission over the most defended area in North Africa, Bizerte, Tunisia. Their B-26 was hit by flak as it left the target and was seen to crash land in enemy territory. These two officers are now prisoners in Germany. The group coped with this bitter loss when Major Joseph A. Cunningham assumed command and the good work carried on.

On one of the early raids to Gabes one B-26 was hit by flak and was seen to crash in enemy territory. One of the P-38 escorts summoned help from one of the A-20 group support groups stationed just behind our lines. A daring rescue was made when an A-20 landed near the crashed B-26 and took its entire crew aboard, took off on the rough terrain, and brought our crew to safety behind our lines. Lieutenant David L. Fleeter, his co-pilot, Lieutenant Basil B. Burnstad, and his navigator-bombardier, Lieutenant Vernen G. Scogin had an interesting account to give of this experience when they returned to their home base.

Fleeter told his story. "As we left the target my plane was limping badly having been hit many times by heavy flak. My right engine was damaged, and I could not keep up with the formation. I had a desperate feeling when I realized that my plane could not carry me and my crew to friendly territory. I turned to Burnstad, who passed my message on to Scogin, to be on the look out for a place to land. I could not hold my altitude so I began to maneuver my ship into a position for a crash landing on a level place which we spotted. The plane slid to a halt and remained intact. All of crawled out. We were safe, but still had to cope with the situation of being in enemy territory. We saw one of our P-38

escort circling over us so we decided to wait at that spot in case help should come. Scogin decided to remove the nose glass from our crashed B-26 since one was needed to repair another ship back at the base. At about dusk we sighted an A-20 which came in for a landing some distance from us. We poured gasoline on our plane and set her afire. I hated to see her burn. Soon we were crowded into the rescue ship and on our way home." This experience of Lieutenant Fleeter and his crew made front page news in the States at that time.

On January 9, 1943 the 319th led the way again when their planes made the first bombing raid on Tripoli from the North African theater. At ten o'clock in the morning six B-26's took off led by Lieutenant Howard M. Crew accompanied by twelve P-38's to act as fighter escort. The escort lost contact with the bombers prior to reaching the target and the B-26's successfully bombed the Tripoli airbase without escort, but just after the bombing run they were attacked by five enemy aircraft, Fock-Wulf 190's and Messerschmitt 109's. Three of these enemy aircraft were destroyed. On the approach to the target Lieutenant Robert S. Dorsey's plane was caught in Lieutenant Crew's prop wash on a steep turn and stalled causing a parachute to slide in such a manner as to click off the right generator switch. This fouled the hydraulic system so that the bomb bay doors could not be closed. Lieutenant Dorsey was forced to fly at high throttle setting all the way back to keep up with the formation. A very convenient dust storm in the Tripoli area enabled the B-26 formation to dive down into the dust clouds for cover and escape on the deck.

Lieutenant Colonel Wilber W. Aring assumed command of the group and proved himself to be a swell fellow and able leader. Major J. R. Helzapple became operations officer and has ably planned many missions. At this time a new type of job was given to the 319th, sea sweeps on enemy shipping where skip bombing was involved. On twelve missions of this type the 319th scored a severe blow on the enemy in the destruction of four large freighters, four large cargo

liners, one destroyer, and the probable destruction of another large freighter. Captain Donald L. Bilbert and his crew distinguished themselves by sinking two enemy vessels in one day. On this same mission the B-26 formation encountered thirty enemy aircraft, five of which were destroyed. The Commanding General of the 12th Bomber Command sent the 319th a congratulatory telegram on - - - "A job well done".

On February 3, 1943 Major Joseph R. Holzapple led twelve B-26's on a sea sweep of the area north of the Gulf of Tunis. The lead plane flown by Major Holzapple had twenty-three missions to its credit. This B-26 held the record in the group. On returning from this mission due to mechanical difficulties in the hydraulic system caused by enemy aircraft fire, only the nose wheel of the B-26 would function. Major Holzapple made a perfect crash landing using the nose wheel and tail of his B-26. On landing, the plane glided to a stop and tipped over on its left wing. This B-26 had served its time by completing twenty-four operational missions.

After many hazardous low level raids over enemy territory in the African theater, pilots flying the B-26 medium bomber have plenty of reasons to have confidence in their airplane. On several occasions members of the 319th have come back from missions to tell outstanding stories about their experiences in the B-26.

On one mission as the bomber formation left the target, the B-26 piloted by Lieutenant William F. Erwin, Jr. was attacked by Messerschmitts 109's and 110's. Since contact had been lost with the fighter escort, it was up to the B-26 to defend itself. The tail gunner, S/Sgt. Vernon W. Ohland, sustained severe leg wounds from a 20mm burst on the first attack but gave the enemy fighters plenty of trouble from his tail guns. One enemy fighter after another continued to attack, and S/Sgt. Ohland and the turret gunner, S/Sgt. Roy C. Grinnel, Jr., fired hundred of rounds to drive them off. The bomber was hit

fifteen to twenty times by 20mm bursts which caused severe damage to the fuselage, tail assembly, and wings. The right wing tank was hit causing a gas leakage approaching ten gallons per minute. A fire was seen started at the right wing root which spread to the bombay. As the turrets began to get too hot, Ohland and Grinnel rushed to the navigator's compartment. Ohland, though wounded, grabbed the fire extinguisher and put out the fire in the bombay. His wounds were soon discovered by the navigator-bombardier, Lieutenant James W. Barr, who had also been wounded when a burst shattered the nose glass, and he and Grinnel treated Ohland's wounds while Lt. Erwin and his co-pilot, Lieutenant Webster E. Brown, tried to keep the plane going by transferring gasoline to the right engine. The gasoline shortage soon became acute so Erwin headed toward land to hunt a place to set her down. He called for a crash landing when a marsh was sighted. A perfect belly landing was made even with the bombay doors open, and Barr and Grinnell carried Ohland away from the plane while Erwin and Brown dug themselves out of the mud-filled pilots compartment.

Every day and every night while ordinary mortals go about their work, sleep and go about their work again; other ordinary people, different only in the airman's uniform they wear, go out on their wings of metal to fight and die. These are the men whose skill and courage converts America's productive capacity into that greatest of all modern weapons - air power. Without them the work and creative genius of the nation for which they fight would go to naught.

Much has been written during this war about flyers and flying; playing up the unusual, the freak incidents, the amazing achievements. But this is the story of just one mission - one of many that could be written about each day of - - a counter-shipping mission in the Mediterranean area by American B-26 Marauder Bombers.

Each successful bomber or fighter mission makes heroes out of the men who participated. For the enemy fights hard and skillfully and only the utmost

in effort can bring victory. This is as true of each bombing mission as it is of an entire war. Most of the air heroes of this war will never be heard of, but the five heroes of this story have all been recommended for decorations and are expected to receive them shortly. The pilot, 1st Lt. Charles R. Meyers, Jr., of Wayne, Pa., and the co-pilot, 1st Lt. Bennet H. Grimm, of Lumberport, W. Va., have been recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross. Capt. Thomas C. Griffin, of Chicago, the navigator-bombardier, has been put in for an Oak Leaf Cluster in addition to his Distinguished Flying Cross won in the raid on Tokyo in May, 1942. The Soldier's Medal had been recommended for the turret-gunner, Technical Sergeant, Richard K. Ferrill of Framingham, Mass., and the Oak Leaf Cluster to a previously awarded Airman's Medal has been asked for the tail-gunner, Sgt. Everett C. Hunt, of New Orleans.

The story that follows is largely as Lt. Meyers wrote it in his diary days later as he lay in a British military hospital on the Northern Tunisian front:

The Mission for this day was another sea-sweep over the Tunisian port of Sousse, past Tunis and Bizerte nearly to Sicily and then west, back to friendly territory again. We ate an early breakfast and then got a thorough briefing. Take-off time was moved back to 12:20, however, so we ate lunch, tea, before starting out. There were four bombers, led by Major Donald L. Gilbert. Our escort consisted of 10 P-38 fighters.

The trip out to the coast was quick and uneventful, but, as we hit the sea, we sighted two small vessels lying close to shore, and made a run on them. Holly, my co-pilot, for this mission, had never used a skip-bombing sight before, and our stick of three fell 100 yards short.

Major Gilbert's bombs covered near misses on both ships, though, so we headed out to sea again, still on the deck (200 feet) looking for more targets. We'd found that it doesn't pay to stick around over a ship too

long. Jerry pilots like to get the Iron Cross by catching a few bombers with 20 or 30 ME 109's.

Everything went smoothly for a while. Engines were running true and no enemy fighters sighted. But just as we turned on the final leg of the sweep, heading away from Sicily and towards Bizerte, we sighted two large vessels moving south.

Major Gilbert gave the signal for attack. Beard (Lt. John B. Beard of Ft. Smith, Ark.) and I took the ship on the left, and Major Gilbert and Nix (Lt. Jack W. Nix of Clayton, Ala.) took the one on the right. I didn't have much altitude for the peel-off, so we had to feed it a lot of gas.

We came in fast, weaving and changing altitude to evade the barrage of flak they were throwing at us. We were heading almost directly into the afternoon sun, but I noticed Holly had taken off his flying glasses to see into the bomb sight better. I got in a few quick glances at the boat and saw a Hell of a lot of fire directed at us and being shot straight up, barrier-like. It was a big cargo liner.

A few heavy flak shells nicked us early, but they really got to work on us with the light 20mm stuff as we reached the release line. When Holly released these three 500-pounders, all Hell broke loose.

We got a direct burst of flak just to the right of the metal strip running down the center of the windshield. The plane gave a violent lurch. My right eyeglass (sun glasses) was shattered and blood was pouring into my right eye from flak wounds on my forehead. Blood was spattered on the left eyeglass, and the right side of my face and neck burned like the Devil.

Out of my left eye I suddenly saw that the plane was heading for the water and slipping badly as if something was wrong. For a second I thought this was the end. I then pulled off the broken glasses and quickly wiped the blood from my eye; at the same time pulling back on the wheel and attempting to straighten the ship up.

We leveled off about 10 feet above water, and I found that the rudder was gone and the only means of steering was with the ailerons.

I got the ship under control and then noticed that the right engine was laboring badly, so I cut back the power on it and prayed. About this time I managed a quick glance at Helly. The left side of his face was covered with blood and the back of his left hand was laid open to the bones and bleeding badly. He almost lost consciousness right then, but somehow he hung on.

The left engine was losing oil fast and I didn't know how long we could stay in the air, so I called Tommy (Capt. Griffin) back from the nose and the two gunners up from the rear. Tommy immediately got out the first-aid kit and began to doctor Helly.

All this had taken place in two or three minutes, and I hadn't had time to think of myself. Now, however, I noticed that my right forearm was badly swollen; that blood was running from my sleeve, and that it was becoming so still I could hardly move it.

Tommy gave Helly and me sulfamidazole tablets and poured sulfa powder on the wounds. Glancing down, I found that I was sitting in a pool of blood. Feeling gingerly, I found I'd caught flak in both thighs - the left one the worst. Funny how you don't feel these things right away.

Sgt. Hunt, my flight engineer and tail-gunner, came forward and told us our bombs had scored a direct hit and sent the boat to the bottom. Our other two planes had sunk the other ship, too. That gave us all a lift. We had done our job, anyway.

Hunt also said the rear of the plane was full of holes: rudder shot half way, elevators in bad shape, bomb bay doors still open and hydraulic fluid all over the place.

Sgt. Ferrill said there was a hole as big as his head directly behind his turret.

All this time I'd been trying to keep the formation in sight.

We were getting only half power from the right engine, with the prop governor shot away and another shell up through the middle of it. The left engine was carrying the load but losing oil fast. I contacted the Major on the radio and told him we couldn't stay up long and would try to stay on the Coast and land at Bone instead of going inland over the mountains with the formation.

He called back, "okay and good luck", and there we were, a crippled bomber alone in enemy territory. But then we noticed that three P-38's were sticking with us. That would help a lot. It was swell of them.

Just then, when I'd calculated we were past enemy lines and was beginning to breathe a little easier, the left engine - the only good one - cut dead. The ship yawed violently to the left and seemed to stagger. I cut back the throttles and yelled back: "Here we go, gang!" And we started down toward the water.

We had just passed around the end of a rocky promontory and so were farther from the shore than I'd wanted to be.

When the engine cut, we were at 250 feet, so it didn't take long to get down. As we neared the water, I brought the nose up in a slight stall position, in order to cut down the speed at the instant of impact. I yelled at Helly and Sgt. Hunt to jettison the escape hatches above the pilot's and co-pilot's seat just before we hit the water.

For a long second I was afraid they were going to stick, but Helly threw all his remaining strength into it and both hatches flew open. There was a terrific jar as the ship hit the water, and the nose went under almost immediately. Before I could take my hands off the wheel, the water was over my head in the pilot's compartment. Holding my breath and fighting against panic, I unbuckled my safety belt and started out the top. Groping in the black water, I found the hatch and slammed it shut again. Using all the strength I could muster in both arms, I managed to shove it open against the pressure of the water above.

The hatch opened; I surged to the surface to find the plane still partially afloat but going down by the nose. The tail had broken off in two pieces.

I pulled the two cords of my Mae West and breathed a sigh of relief when it filled immediately. I looked around and found four bobbing heads and knew everyone had gotten out. From the time we hit the water until we were all out had taken no more than twenty-five seconds, but I had lived a lifetime in that short a period. In another thirty or forty seconds the plane had disappeared under the water except for a shattered piece of tail structure.

Of the half-mile swim to shore I can say little, except that it was interminable and painful. I could use my left arm and my right leg and Sergeant Hunt helped me. Helly's Mae West was only half inflated, the other half having been pierced by flak. Tommy and Sergeant Ferrill were helping him.

The P-38's continued to zoom overhead for a while, but finally banked around and headed for home.

It took us fully an hour to make our painful way to shore, where two Arabs helped pull us up on the rocky promontory. The sky was cloudy, and there was a cold breeze blowing from the north. The combination of shock, wounds, and cold reduced Helly and me to a state of helplessness. I was shivering so hard I couldn't stand up, and Helly had passed out. The other three men were also suffering from cold and shock, so when the Arabs built a large fire in the lee of a hill, we welcomed it. We were too miserable to worry about strafing enemy planes.

I spoke with the Arabs (thank goodness for my French) and learned that we were only twelve miles from enemy territory. There was an Arab village a mile or so away, and a detachment of French Marines four miles further up

the coast. The nearest doctor was twenty miles distant through the mountains.

Warmed and fried by the fire, Helly and I then managed, with the help of five of five Arabs, to walk the mile into the Arab village. They gave us one of their rock-wall, thatched-roof huts for shelter and fed us Arabian food and cold water.

As soon as Tommy had eaten, he took on of the Arabs as a guide and set off down the coast to find the French Marines. He was back in three hours, bringing antiseptic wash, iodine, and gauze. Even more welcome were the biscuits, chocolate, and cigarettes he had gotten from the French.

Although it was even then after dark, Tommy and the two gunners decided to set out over the mountains immediately to bring medical aid. Notwithstanding the solicitous attention of the Arabs, we spent a most painful and uncomfortable night.

The next morning a stretcher team from a British field ambulance unit arrived and there followed more antiseptics, bandaging, and restoratives. Then, after a very palatable lunch of Arabian cous-cous (ground corn), chicken, and some sort of pancakes, we were taken down the coast to the Marines' station-- a cave in the side of a hill which gave them protection from enemy strafing.

A boat was supposed to come over from Bone for us that afternoon, but it never arrived, so we spent another bad night--in a cave. The next morning a fresh British stretcher team arrived, and they decided to carry us back over the mountains. They took Helly on the Stretcher, and I rode a mule. It was a good ten miles over rough trails, and I was nearly dead when we reached a road where an ambulance could pick us up.

We finally reached the British field hospital at seven-thirty P. M.-- more than two days after the crash. They operated on us that night, and from the effects of the anaesthesia, I got quite a lot of sleep. They cut a lot of flak out of my right arm and some out of the left thigh. The rest of it in my right thigh, face, neck, and eyebrow I'm still carrying around with me. They

say it will probably do no harm. It was necessary to have a drain in my arm for two days as they feared gas gangrene poisoning, and I lost a great deal of blood.

Holly's hand will take months to heal, and his right eye will need a lot of special treatment. His eye will probably be okay, though. Thank God for that. He won't fly for a long time, but I'll be back on the job soon.

A short time later another story was told to me.

Captain Guernsey I. Carlisle of San Antonio, Texas and his co-pilot, Lieutenant Myron C. Mauk of Taber, Iowa, stepped into the Intelligence office after having been reported shot down the day before by German aircraft. Capt. Carlisle was in high spirits despite his experience and said "It would have been an interesting experience if I had not lost my tail gunner". After hearing his story we felt that it was more than "an interesting experience."

Over the target the B-26 formation met intense flak and Capt. Carlisle's plane was hit in the left wing and engine which caused it to fall behind the formation. This B-26 was "dead meat" to the five Messerschmitts which started to attack. The tail gunner, Sgt. Thomas Chism of Lambert, Mississippi, fired upon one Messerschmitt and probably destroyed it before he was killed. The waist gunner, Sgt. Robert C. Layhe of Chicago, Illinois, was seriously wounded during one of the first attacks. The turret guns were the only defense left and after S/Sgt. Ernest H. Condon of Boone, Iowa, fired a few bursts his guns jammed and ceased to function. Sgt. Condon said, "All there was left to do was pray, and I prayed hard".

With his guns out of commission and his plane out of formation, Capt. Carlisle constantly maneuvered the B-26 into evasive position. The Messerschmitts continued to attack time after time further crippling the B-26 until its left aileron was destroyed and its tail controls were badly damaged. Attacks were made at very close range--from the front, rear, and sides until the enemy aircraft

ran out of ammunition. The bombardier-navigator, S/Sgt. Robert R. Cause of Winslow, Arkansas, was slightly wounded and could not defend the B-26 from the front. For twenty minutes the merciless attack continued until the bomber was a honeycomb of bullet holes. The German pilots were so close that Sgt. Condon could see their looks of surprise when the B-26 would not fall.

Capt. Carlisle and Lieutenant Mauk, who had received a head wound when his steel helmet was grazed by a shell, searched for a place to bring down the bomber to a landing. A rough piece of ground was sighted between two hills and the pilot brought his plane to a crash landing just within our lines. As the B-26 hit the ground the tail was knocked off and the bomber fell apart. S/Sgt. Cause was able to walk straight out the nose since nothing was left. The pilot and co-pilot were left sitting in their seats with practically nothing left of their compartment.

The B-26 is a tough aircraft which with the unusual skill of Captain Carlisle brought five of its crew away from enemy territory against insuperable odds.

The 319th has always operated with only a fraction of its strength in planes and combat crews, but has made as good a show as could be expected of a full group. The most planes that this group has ever had at one time is twenty-three and of these only twelve have been sent on a mission at one time. Losses of its own aircraft have been rather high, but the 319th had made the enemy pay through their own losses. On twenty-seven missions the combat crews of the 319th have credited with the destruction of one Junkers 88, seven Messerschmitt 109's, four Messerschmitt 110's, two Messerschmitt 210's, and the probable destruction or severe damage of twelve Messerschmitt 109's, two Messerschmitt 110's, and two Messerschmitt 210's.

Recently Colonel Rideneur conducted a citation ceremony and presented the Airmen's Medal with clusters to the various combat crew members of the 319th for their outstanding work done in the African Campaign. The ceremony was held on a rainsoaked field, and the members participating dressed in their best uniform and presented a fine military appearance lined up in front of their favorite aircraft, the B-26, which has carried them on many dangerous and exciting missions and has proven itself to be a deadly weapon of war.

Colonel Rideneur's words are quoted here, and the fighting 319th has reason to be proud of its achievements.

"You have all heard the orders citing the members of this, the 319th Bombardment Group for the performance of their duty.

This is without question the proudest moment I have had in twenty-five years of service with the Air Forces. To feel that I have in any way been a part of your achievements is the ultimate gratification that could come to any commander.

I take special pleasure in this occasion because I have followed your activities almost from the time you were organized. In spite of lack of time for proper training as an organization, in spite of lack of adequate personnel, in spite of losses which might well have broken the spirits of a less courageous unit, you have continued to be the type of quiet, efficient, courageous organization which only asks that it be given a fighting job to do.

Your fighting record, your splendid loyalty and your ability to do the work assigned has more than justified the faith I've had in you and your equipment.

My only regret is that each and every man can not be given recognition at this time for a job superbly done. Let me hope that your continued success as the fighting 319th will justify citation of the entire group."