



War Diary of the 340th Bombardment Group October 1943

Transcribed from US Army microfilm and illustrations added by
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*The 340th Bombardment Group on Corsica
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Group Diary

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October 1, 1943

Naples has fallen to the Allied armies. Fabulous, once beautiful Naples, of which the proverb runs, "See Naples and die," is ruined by the ravages of war and humble in her defeat. The British 7th Armored Division entered the city this morning and met little enemy opposition. How long will it take to restore her glories if indeed they can be restored?....The rains are coming! Weather has hampered our operations considerably and the entire drive is likely to be severely hampered in the weeks to come....We ran a mission today against a road junction at Benevento, 24 aircraft achieving only a partial success owing to poor visibility...A B-24 (Liberator) made an emergency landing here and piled up here on the end of the runway. It was part of a large heavy bomber formation that hit the Messerschmitt factory at Wiener Neustadt near Vienna. The pilot reported the target area was heavily plastered, but that ack-ack was terrific and opposition from enemy fighters very formidable. Said he, "The Luftwaffe is far from being washed up. I wish some of the complacent people who said it is could have been on the raid with us to see for themselves."...Some promotions (officers) came through today; evidently only half the orders have been published....A second raid run by 340th today was aimed at a bridge at Benevento, but the planes missed and hit a couple of towns and the road.



Messerschmitt Factory at Wiener Neustadt as it appeared on March 3, 1943

October 2, 1943

Rain. Late this afternoon a sudden wind came up, accompanied by flashes of lightning and a sombre symphony of thunder. The corrugated patchwork roofs of the hangars gave way here and there and went clanging down to the ground, and loose objects were sent willy-nilly over the field. The rainbow came out beautifully after the show, but beautiful sky-scapes can't get missions off to bomb the enemy....Our crews at the rest camp, instructed to send us a signal when they were ready to be picked up, haven't communicated with us yet. Captain Garske, assistant operations officer, flew over to investigate.

October 3, 1943

Movement orders for our change to an Italian station arrived today and we shall be leaving Catania in a few days. According to plan (the first in probably a long and un-honorable line of plans) the A party moves out on October 8, the B party in a few days after that. An advance party headed by Major Charles Murray, deputy commander, will pull out in a couple of days to arrange affairs at San Pancrazio, the new base. The place has little in the way of facilities, but it is hoped we shan't have to endure it long. We all hope to be in northern Italy soon. With the drive pushing northward day by day

and our group giving close support to the ground troops it may be possible for us to follow them right up the line...We go into winter clothing October 15.

October 4, 1943

It will be a good day for us when we get away from Catania airfield and its congested air traffic and tuck ourselves into the little field at San Pancrazio where we know we shall not have other planes based with us. The drome here at Catania is a sort of Grand Central Station as far as activity and air traffic is concerned, but a sort of narrow gage junction as far as adequate facilities are concerned. If we were the only ones on it, with perhaps a squadron of transports and a squadron of fighters it would still not be too crowded. Instead, everybody and his brother is based here or at least flies in here half a dozen times a day. We have an American troop carrier wing occupying one of the main hangars, and a British troop and freight carrying wing occupying another. Also based on the field are a hospital evacuation unit and a repair pool for British fighter planes. A welter of small detachments, signals, engineers, etc., take up still more valuable space. This congestion makes it a difficult and hazardous task for us to run missions and to execute them with the split-second timing necessary for efficient operation.

October 5, 1943

Another wrench in the movement machinery. We have been informed that gasoline and bombs will not be available to us at the new field until October 20. Here we are just two days away from the move and we still don't know the final plan. TBF (Tactical Bomber Force) was supposed to send down a representative today but no one showed up. As a result we are in between the devil and the deep blue sea, a traditional army predicament apparently....September was our busiest and most effective month in combat, statistics reveal. We flew 900 sorties, 5768 operational hours, and dropped a bomb weight tonnage of 1494. All of these totals are very considerably higher than those of last month, our previous "record" period....We have received unofficial word that 2nd Lt. William I. Rankin of the 488th squadron, a bombardier, is a prisoner of war. Apparently, he spoke over a radio to listeners in the United States. He and his pilot, 1st Lt. Bernard L. Corbin, and their crew [T/Sgt. Grant C. Thorsted (KIA), 2nd Lt. J. W. Grawbowski] were shot down at night over Randazzo, Sicily, July 18, 1943. Sgt. Rohr [A. P. Rohr], their radio man, was the only man to get back to Allied lines.

October 6, 1943

We plow a new furrow tomorrow. This group is to send 36 planes against a target in Greece, a strictly strategical mission and an entirely new country to hit. Now being planned this evening, the raid will be made against an airfield 600 miles from our home base. We shall pick up fighter aircraft at Lecce in southern Italy. Coming home from the target our planes are to refuel at a drome in that vicinity. Everyone is talking about the possibility of meeting enemy fighters, since unlike our tactical targets, tomorrow's target has several fighter fields within range and we know the fighters there are operational. We have never lost a bomber to a fighter in the day time; as a matter of fact, one could count on one hand the number of times enemy fighters have attacked our formations. This is largely because our targets are on the front line or immediately behind it, and the enemy always withdraws his fighters considerably behind the front; indeed if he does not, the bombing of the strategical Air Force or

our own Tactical Air Force would blast them to bits in a matter of minutes. Another cogent reason why we've had no fighter opposition is that Warhawks, Spitfires, or P-38's (Lightnings) go out with us to the target....We ran a small mission today against a road junction: only six aircraft bombed, with fair results. We also ran two other twelve-ship missions with good results.



P-40 Warhawk

October 7, 1943

The big raid on Yannina [Ioannina?] airdrome in Greece fell flat today, the planes being recalled because of bad weather. Our move to San Pancrazio today was also canceled. Evidently there was a mix-up in the routing of the tank landing ships. No definite date was given for the move, but it will probably come as soon as adequate shipping facilities are available. Good thing that women don't fight these wars. Can you imagine the exasperation they would suffer with all these plans and counter-plans going awry? It rained again today, as gloomy, black clouds scudded across the sky....We seemed to be stopped in Italy, while in Russia the great Red Army goes smashing through, with supplies and fresh troops rushing up to consolidate the advances and to freshen the attack on Gomel [?]. The war drags on...

October 8, 1943

Poor visibility again on the Italian front; as a result one of our twelve-ship missions returned with bombs, while another bombed a railroad and bridge near Sessa-Aurunca landing ground....Civilian photographers representing the Associated Press and other American picture services took photos of 340th personnel from ten or eleven of the major U.S. Cities today. The men were photographed in groups of cities. A number of Flying Fortresses flew over this field this afternoon and some of them landed here. Their missions are planned differently from ours, for instance, we get a target in the morning and by noon we have a formation over it. They sometimes know their target for weeks in advance. They very probably do not fly as many missions as we do in a given period, but they do spend more time in the air per mission, almost twice as much, perhaps...Another change in plans on our imminent move came through today, with our discovery that there are no ships to move our personnel. Our freight still goes by water, but we shall probably have to fly the personnel, or most of them in our own planes.

October 9, 1943

We ran a couple of missions this morning against one of our bugaboos, Jerry flak guns. Northeast of Canua twelve of our planes found too much cloud cover to bomb, but a second mission of twelve dropped their load through almost nine-tenths cloud cover to pick off some guns northwest of Canua, and incidentally bomb the town to create a road block.

October 10, 1943

The target today was enemy guns again, this time at Fiana di Colazzo as well as northwest of Canua. The flak was inaccurate but our bombing wasn't.

October 11, 1943

Gloomy Monday. All morning cold rain poured down in torrents. This is a cheerful looking country only when the sun is shining, when it rains it is quite miserable. No doubt the same can be said for all countries, our own United States included....We have had two unfortunate accidents the last couple of days. Saturday, S/Sgt. John J. Mackovich, a crew chief in the 487th squadron, was accidentally shot and killed by a squadron mate who was examining a Beretta pistol. Today 2nd Lt. Arthur J. Hover, 487th pilot, was killed at Comiso airdrome, Sicily, where he was attempting to land a Messerschmitt 109, a captured German plane put in shape by Lt. Hover and Lt. James O'Neill of the same squadron. Witnesses said Lt. Hover was coming in for a normal landing and actually got both wheels on the runway when the tricky plane flipped on its back. The 12th Bombardment Group lost Colonel Hall, operations officer, about a week ago in the same manner...The 12th Air Support Command, under which we function, is reported to be in Naples. Either their headquarters has not been set up yet, or they have not arranged a communications system; certainly we, at least, have not heard from them. Ordinarily we wouldn't give the situation a second thought, for communications with higher headquarters more often than not is a one-way affair and spells double trouble to us. But we have quite a few men who have finished their tour of combat duty and are sitting around waiting for the 12th Air Support Command to make some disposition of their cases....Lt. Colonel Tokaz, our group commander, will go to La Marsa in North Africa to list our woes tomorrow.

October 12, 1943

Lt. Hover, killed yesterday in a flying accident at Comiso, was buried with simple, impressive honors at Ponte Olivio, Sicily, where the 12th Bombardment Group was operating while we were operating at Comiso. It is indeed unfortunate for a man to survive several dangerous combat missions only to fall victim to an accident that might easily have happened to a civilian back in the States. It is understandable that men in combat want to fill in their off hours with an engrossing hobby, but flying enemy planes seems to be too dangerous to be classed a worthy pastime...For entertainment these days most of us are enjoying bottled delight on the base and in town, running up the mountainside to Via Grande, the popular restaurant, and taking in the fairly regular American movies shown by Lt. Gjertson, our special service officer.

October 13, 1943

The move to San Pancrazio looms up larger every day with all of us in the annoying position of knowing we must move but knowing little else. Many factors affecting our comfort, morale, and operating efficiency are involved in our moves from one base to another. For instance, we have to send key personnel to the new base without impairing our operations at the old one. We must see that those men have food and sufficient equipment to maintain themselves when they arrive. High priority equipment for operational activity – gasoline and oil trucks, bomb trailers, generators, signal equipment, jeeps and trucks, messing equipment and rations – has to be split up with Solomon-like wisdom, leaving enough behind to enable us to fly missions from the old base and enough sent forward to guarantee a quick renewal of operations after the planes and crews leave the old base. What really has us biting our fingernails is that we don't know for certain when we are to move, and we haven't close enough connection with the Navy to be certain their tank landing ships can pick up all our equipment when we actually begin moving. Add to all this confusion, more complications. We shall probably have to send a number of planes and crews to the 12th Bombardment Group at Gerbini to continue operations while the rest of the personnel and equipment of the group is transported to San Pancrazio and set up.

October 14, 1943

A few of our planes and the mess equipment of the 488th squadron were packed off to Italy with sighs of relief today. We are on our way. God alone knows when we shall be reunited over there and get back to normal functioning.

October 15, 1943

A good example of the progressive deterioration of the airdrome at Catania presented itself this morning when one plane of a 12-ship mission aimed at Sparanise on the Italian front dug a whole chunk out of the macadamized runway and sunk two feet into the cavity it made. The incident occurred as the plane jockeyed into takeoff position. Evidently, the engineers who patched up the place after we and other Allied units finished bombing it didn't do a good job on the runway or the rains would not have washed out the fill so soon. The mission against Sparanise “blew.” A complete cloud coverage of the target sent our planes back to base...Lt John Marsh, bombardier, was recently sent over to the 12th Air Support Command headquarters to inquire about the orders on our men who have completed fifty missions. Evidently when the headquarters moved all pertinent papers were lost. Now we have to repeat the whole procedure of initiating these papers...Another change in administration came up for us when we learned we have been transferred, for administration, from the 12th Air Support Command to 57th Bombardment Wing. No effective date was given and they haven't even informed us of the location of that organization or to whom we should report. None of us here have heard of the 57th Wing, so we conclude it must be some new creation.

October 16, 1943

We have approximately 20 planes and crews at Gerbini to operate with the 12th Bombardment Group while the rest of us are moving. The 12th, it will be remembered, served as sponsors at our baptism of fire in Tunisia last April and May. Since then we've both probably learned a lot about combat

operations...Today was the eight month anniversary of our first full day at sea aboard the U.S.S. West Point out of San Francisco bound for Egypt. This morning S/Sgts. Smith [Thomas H. Smith?] and Carracalo of the S-2 section and S/Sgts. Slutsky [Joseph Slutsky] and Ptasienski [John A. Ptasienski] of the S-3 section left by jeep for the base at San Pancrazio. Other key men from headquarters and the various squadrons also left. They will have to be ferried across the straits of Messina to Reggio di Calabria before they can really get going on the trip...Lt. King of Group S-2 and other squadron S-2 officers have gone to Gerbini to interrogate our crews after their missions...Yesterday the squadrons began a shuttle system with their planes, plying to and from the new base with baggage, small equipment and personnel. (AT GERBINI) Twelve ships and crews went out with the 12th Group after the town of Sparanise again and achieved a fair success. Our crews admire the spirit of the 12th Group and some of the luxuries and traditions they have built up. The boys have words of praise for the enlisted men's club there, and no doubt the officers have a pleasant set-up in this respect also. American whiskey is sold over the bar there. They must be getting it in quantity there for the enlisted men to have it too. In addition they have a good movie set-up and apparently have shows regularly. It is difficult to overestimate the morale value of American movies shown at overseas stations, particularly in combat areas. They help us forget the war, make us remember the world that's waiting for our return.

October 17, 1943



Savoia-Marchetti SM-82 Transport

Hello, San Pancrazio! Many of us arrived here today at this little field in the “heel” of Italy via B-25s and DC-3s, with a few coming in a couple of SM-82s (Italian transport planes) [Savoia-Marchetti]. We have our work cut out for us. The landscape of the field reminds one of the long open stretches around Hergla, but San Pancrazio is cultivated rather than barren. We took off this morning in rainy weather and landed at the new base under cloudy skies. Some wooden barracks remain undemolished by the retreating Germans, but they seem to have made a thorough mess of most of them. Incidentally they did not damage the two story stone building and out buildings near the southeastern end of the runway. We shall be able to set up operations, intelligence, the briefing room, and the A.L.O.'S office there. The administration building for the base was also left undemolished. After we get our “co-belligerent” Italian friends out of it and also out of some of these barracks we can set up headquarters and establish the squadrons. There is plenty of clear, cold water here, some shower rooms with hot water boilers, and adequate electric power from the city power line. All in all, the place is not the purgatory we were led to believe. There are about fifty men of the 310th Medium Bombardment Group here and two of its airplanes. They too are under the impression that the San Pancrazio field belongs to them. What screw-ups this army is famous for. No doubt Colonel Tokaz and the ranking officer of the rival detachment will fight a duel tomorrow for the field. (AT GERBINI) no mission was flown this date.

October 18, 1943

This afternoon at San Pancrazio many of the men and vehicles that left Catania October 15th arrived, with entertaining stories of the trip across the Apennines. Evidently the roads are very torturous for our big G.I. Vehicles to traverse. Some of the boys are still stuck on the road in Calabria. Here at San Pancrazio we are all eating at one mess, the 488th. In a few days 489th will get one up and have the

487th squadron as guests. That will leave the 488th only one other squadron and headquarters to feed. Ask the 488th cooks what they think of that and they will probably say, "That's enough!" (AT GERBINI) Twelve planes of the 340th went out with the 12th to hit a road junction at Venafro. It was the same story: complete cloud coverage so the mission returned.

[No entries for October 19th through 21st]

October 22, 1943

Picking up this diary after a few days of neglecting it in favor of the more important job of setting things up at this new base, we can report things are quickly being whipped into shape. The Italians have evacuated a good many of the buildings we need and the operations building and the headquarters buildings are going concerns even though all the equipment has not been set up. There are still many trucks, jeeps, bomb trailers, and other vehicles scattered on the road between here and Reggio di Calabria; moreover, they are likely to remain there for some little time. Stragglers are reporting in every few days, full of tales of the difficult going on the mountain roads, and informing us that cars and trucks are broken down. Many are out of fuel or need parts and are passed by two or three times daily by other 340th vehicles and men who have a big enough job to fight through to San Pancrazio themselves, to say nothing of stopping to help the wayside casualties. If all these stories are true, some kind Santa Claus had better give the 340th a fleet of new vehicles before the next movement begins. And there will be a next movement. There always is...(AT GERBINI) On October 19th, we sent 12 planes to bomb a road junction at Teracina, an alternate target. Returning crews said the nine-tenths cloud cover prevented accurate sighting and observation but they thought they achieved good results. Today we had a successful 12-ship mission against Venatro, where we created a road block and allowed the Jerries to pepper ten of the ships with flak.

October 23, 1943

The boys here are still talking about an incident that happened on the night of October 21st. Major Louis Keller, assistant operations officer, was with our crews at Gerbini and decided to fly over to this base and return the same day. He started out on the return trip with too little gasoline in his tanks, ran into a storm between here and Sicily and had to turn back. The weather wasn't any too good here either, but M/Sgt. Lennon [Thomas E. Lennon] was instructed, in the interests of airdrome defense, not to turn on the night runway lights unless planes identified themselves. This was a wise precaution, since San Pancrazio is about 76 miles from German-occupied Albania. Major Keller came in over the field, very low on gas, and either didn't signal immediately or wasn't seen when he did signal. He must have had about a thimbleful of gas left when he and Lt. Dick Teford bailed out. The plane crashed about two miles off the field. No other persons were in the plane...Today at Gerbini twelve of our aircraft bombed guns at Gaeta Point on the western coast of Italy. One box bombed well, the other poorly.

October 24, 1943

A total of 19 new crews joined the organization in the past couple of days, just in time, too, for we were getting worse by the day, with more and more men finishing their combat tours. There are many new faces in our midst these days. We received word today that we should submit the names of 15 men for

possible commission as officers and a return to the States. Engineering personnel only, read the directive. (AT GERBINI) A final mission was run here today, with 12 of our planes hitting away at a road-blocking task at Fornia. The flak was bad. Captain Rodgers [Bobby M. Rodgers] of the 487th got hit in the left engine just as he passed over the coast line. Radiomen reported he said he would try to make a crash landing around Naples.

October 25, 1943

Today we began operations at San Pancrazio with a 12-plane mission against Trosionone. It was successful, but three planes were hit by flak. We hear that Captain Rodgers landed safely with his crew at a field near Naples, although his plane was completely washed out...We are all reassembled here at San Pancrazio with the exception of a few men coming over on the tank landing ships...Our group newspaper "Avenger Argus" had reached its one hundredth issue. Captains Rothwell and Simpson, the British A.L.O.'s attached to us, do a splendid job on it. The little mimeographed four-page sheet daily sums up the entire global war, tells us the principal news stories of the U.S. and England, and offers interesting intelligence information about the enemy. The food problem is a group one here. It is virtually impossible to purchase anything to supplement the squadron messes, even through the black market. Some of the squadrons if indeed not all of them have made arrangements for town bakers to bake bread with flour supplied them by the squadrons themselves...Lt. Hamill [Robert S. Hamill] of the 489th was promoted to Captain, we are informed today.

October 26, 1943

We achieved very good results today with a 21-plane mission against Terracina. Our planes hit the three main roads communicating with that city including a stretch of the famous Appian Way, over which the Roman legions marched to defend or extend the empire...We are still trying to find out a way to buy some food around here. Captain Hughes, 487th executive officer, is to go to Naples to inquire about the possibility of getting fresh vegetables. No bread component has been issued at this situation yet: consequently the messes are stoically serving the infamous slate-like British hardtack we came to detest so thoroughly at Hergla.

October 27, 1943

Colonel Tokaz and Major Malcolm Bailey attended a meeting at TBF this morning. Such conferences invariably mean new or more important operations. We wonder what is in their sleeve now...An Italian civilian who didn't have enough sense to stop when challenged by one of our guards was shot in the neck today, but it is believed he will live...Lt. Templeton [James R. Templeton], the first man ordered back to the United States, arrived there recently. He called up Major Bailey's wife and gave her news of the group and a good word from her husband.

October 28, 1943

Today was another bleak, rainy day with no possibility for operations. On such days there is little for most of us to do but sit around and feel sorry for ourselves. We hope the entire winter won't be cut from the same bolt; if it is our reputation for excellent performance will be just a memory...There seems

to be a mistaken notion in this organization that combat crew members are automatically promoted at the end of a tour of duty and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. This is not true, although headquarters has at all times endeavored to do its best for all personnel in the organization. This misunderstanding occasioned the publication of a directive on the subject today....About 18 more combat crew members have completed their tours and are awaiting orders...Fighting in Italy is slow. Weather, demolitions and rear guard actions by the Germans are holding up our advance. Still the battle for Rome looms up more close each day.

October 29, 1943

The group had another day of operational inactivity today, with weather again the bete noir...We held our first staff meeting on this field today. The problems that had arisen since the last meeting were discussed and found to be solved for the most part. We can look forward to staff meetings at a new place soon, for it seems that we shall soon be picking up stakes. According to the C.O. We should be ready to move with three days notice, but it is thought that this time we are ready. If we can whip our flagging motor transport into life again we shall take the move in stride. We shall go straight to the Rome area or the Foggia area. With progress so slow on the Fifth Army front, it will probably be Foggia first. The 12th Bombardment Group is reported up there already and undoubtedly the better satellite fields in the area are also occupied. What is left is probably crumbs...Everybody who doesn't have a cold these days has yellow jaundice. Some thorough people have both.

October 30, 1943

Once again it rained. Naturally, we're developing a jolly little mud-hole here at San Pancrazio. If it gets much worse an order will probably be published compelling all personnel riding around in jeeps and trucks to wear Mae Wests in case they should fall out of their vehicles...A Christmas card has been designed for the personnel of the group to send to their friends. 15,000 copies have been ordered, and we shall sell them at two cents a piece, including envelopes...No further word has been received concerning our movement...Our ordnance sections may be forced to leave us. There is some talk about establishing a separate ordnance company for each tactical outfit.

October 31, 1943

Well, for a few minutes today it seemed we would finish the month in a blaze of operational activity, however inglorious were our doings throughout the period. We put 24 planes up before noon, briefed to attack Ancona harbor, high up on the eastern coast of Italy. Radioed orders brought the formation back when TBF told us to cancel the mission. We presume the weather was poor in the target area...Pay day today brought on its usual epidemic of games of chance with everyone in the outfit practically involved. As might be expected large sums of money change hands in a short time, with some of the "big time" winners smart enough to send their winnings home, and others too far gone on the click of rolling dice or the fascinations of poker to keep their fellow players from a chance at getting the money back...Jaundice, our new occupational disease, was very prevalent with the German troops during the Tunisian campaign, we learn. According to a British Medic in the Brindisi hospital, the Germans fought while they had the disease and were not hospitalized. It must not be a serious ailment judging from that and also from the fact that our own victims are not making much of the thing either.