340th BG Mission to Eleusis

By Dan Setzer, son of Hymie Setzer 340th BG HQ

On November 16, 1943 several elements of the 57th Bombardment Group were sent on a mission to bomb the German airfield at Eleusis near Athens. All four squadrons of the 340th Bomb Group and all four squadrons of the 321st Bomb Group were represented.

The attack was part of a major battle for control of the island of Leros. The fortress at Leros was being defended by 3,200 British and 5,300 Italian troops. The Germans had landed ground troops on the island and the Luftwaffe was pounding the Allied defenses in support of their ground troops.

The 57th Bomb Wing was contributing to the effort by bombing the German airfields at Eleusis and Kalamaki, both near Athens, in order to disrupt Luftwaffe support of their ground attack.

The war diaries for November of 1943 are missing for the 486th Squadron, but here is how the mission was described by the other squadrons:

> 487th BS:
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> Another successful raid today, although "not as good as yesterdays." Target was Athens/Eleusis A/D, with the 487th having frags for the dispersal area in the Northeast corner of the field. They took off at 1015 and dropped their frags – guess where – in the dispersal area in the Northeast corner of the field. Four squadrons of the 340th participated with as many from the 321st. Each squadron flew nine planes, in a new type of formation designed to give a wider front. No fighters were observed. Flak was intense coming off the target, but all planes returned safely. It was black, red, and white, all heavy. Some crew members observed fires still burning on the Athens/Kalamaki field bombed yesterday. (Note: A 487th bomb got one of the hangers on that field, unreported yesterday.)....
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> 488th BS:
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> Target today Eleusis A/D, Athens. Clear and not too cool. Michalowski got a four inch hole in his ship. 321st Group failed to make the target although they were seen North of our formations. [This is clearly not correct since the 321st gives a detailed report of the raid and photographs. See below.]
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> 489th BS:
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> Nine planes bombed Eleusis A/D. At the briefing Col. Tokaz complimented the men on yesterday's raid. Our results were not as sensational as yesterday's, partly because the 486th Squadron cut in front and forced our bomb run further west than intended. However, fires were observed and the mission was considered successful.

Combat photographer M. M. (Johnny) Johnson of the 489th BS caught these dramatic photos of the 340th BG bombs striking the airfield:

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0191345489 16 3 1 43 1 4 0 7

The original high-resolution photos can be found at his web site here:

http://www.angelfire.com/wv2/johnson/missions.html

Contrary to what was recorded in the war diary for the 488th, the 321 BG did make it to Eleusis and did drop their bomb load with excellent effect. Here is the report from the war diary:

> 321st BG:
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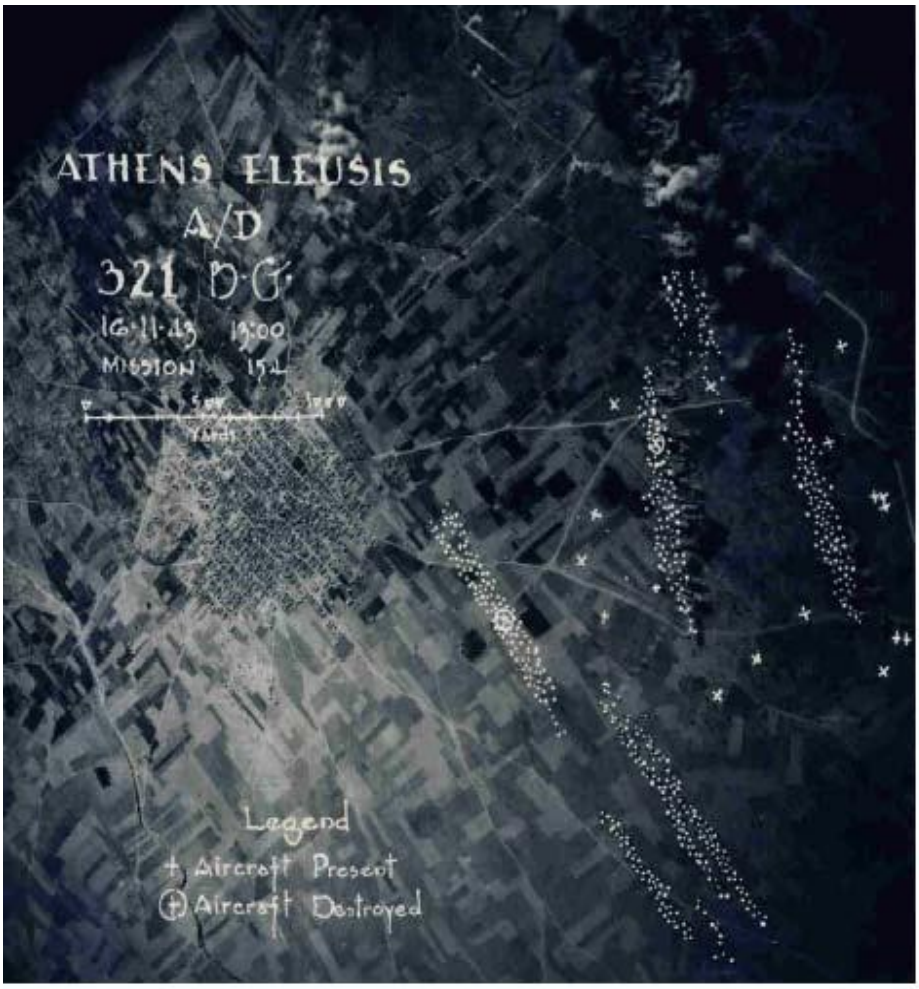
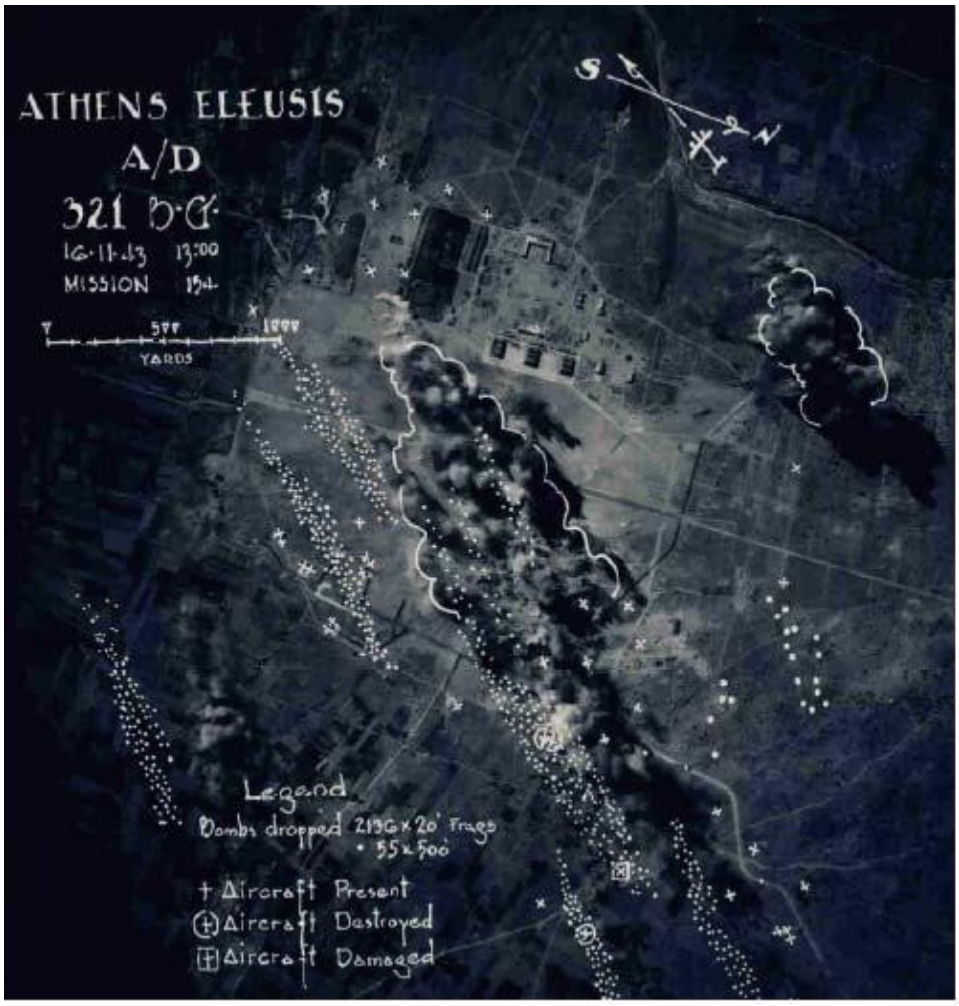
> RESULTS: Very good coverage of field and dispersal areas is reported. Demolition bombs ran from NE corner of field to SW, cratering runway causing large explosion in its center, and hitting S hangar. Frags fell across field and in dispersal areas with especially good coverage of NE dispersal area. Direct hits were observed on small building N of hangars, on T/E in front of hangars, on 2 E/A in middle of field, among 15 E/A in revetments in NE dispersal area. 2 strings fell through hangars. Large explosion seen on NW side of field and fires observed at S end of runway, in NW, SW and NE corners of field, and N of hangars. Total of 10 fires counted.

OBSERVATIONS:
Air---------2 S/E on deck at target did not attack. 35/40 E/A on A/D, and in revetments. 8/10 E/A noted in SW area, 15 in NE dispersal area under trees, 4 JU-88's in front of hangars. One report of 4 E/A taking off from field. E/A about half T/E and half S/E. 25 JU-52's and 88's observed on Tatoi A/D.

The war diary also included these intelligence photos:





For more details see the war diaries of the 321st BG at:
http://57thbombwing.com/321stHistory/321_BG_1943-11.pdf

The photos provided by the 321st note several enemy aircraft on the ground. There weren't as many as there might have been because the German bomber squadron stationed there was in the air on a mission to Leros. As the German formations returned to Eleusis they found their home airbase under attack and were forced to divert to Kalamaki airfield.

One of the German airmen who diverted to Kalamaki was Gert Winterfeld. Here is what he had to say about the events of that day:

> "With my crew we traveled in a PKW as quickly as we could back to Eleusis, because as a General Staff Officer I had to be back there as soon as possible. After this new attack on Eleusis that caused us so much damage to aircraft, we did not get any new orders from the staff at 10th Air Corps in Kiphissia for the day; we concentrated on making ready for tomorrow's mission. During the night the other crews came back to us from Kalamaki. The few remaining machines were tanked up and armed.

> Around 9 PM I received a phone call from headquarters in Kiphissia. Their General Staff Officer, Major Vonier, shared with me the news that the island of Leros had capitulated and we could stand down on our preparations for tomorrow's mission. We were all very happy about this victory."

The irony is that at this time Eleusis Field was home to Lehrgeschwaders 1, the Helbig Flyers. After suffering so much damage at the hands of the 57th Wing and the 340th Bomb Group, they would be the group that would visit Alesani, Corsica on May 14th of 1944 and destroy sixty five of our aircraft and Gert Winterfeld would be there to report on the attack.
[See: http://www.dansetzer.us/taghon/Korsika_index.htm]

Source for the German view of the raid:
Geschichte des Lehrgeschwaders 1, by Peter Taghon, Page 269
VDM Heintz Nickel, Zweibrucken 2004