

War Diary of the 488th Bomb Squadron

March 1944

Prepared by: Capt. Everett B. Thomas

March 1, 1944

Rain, hail, sleet, thunder storm and RAIN!!! Stand-down all day.

2nd

Rain and overcast, but mission to beach-head. Took off at 0945. Intermittent rain and sunshine all day. Ostrem and Bachtell got captaincies.

3rd

Rain all day. Had class in escape code.

4th

Rain all night. More rain. Class in escape code.

5th

Stand-down all day. Rain for a change.

6th

Rain until middle of the afternoon. Stand-down except one nickeling mission.

7th

Stand-down. Nickeling mission in the afternoon.

8th

Mission to Orte. Moving pictures taken of the crews at Group Operations. Correspondents flew with the mission.

9th

Mission to Porto San Stephano. No buono, cloud coverage. Dropped bombs, but missed.

10th

Mission to Littorio Marshaling Yards. A mess. Ran into flak. Two ships of the 486th collided, but got back to the field. One of ours in the box following to duck the collision dove and when it pulled up, two of the thousand pound bombs pulled loose and went through the bomb-bay doors. Col. Jones, riding co-pilot with another of the 486th, went down North of Rome. Five 'chutes were seen – there were seven in the ship of which Capt. Swope was pilot. Col. Jones will be a tremendous loss to the Group which he was just whipping into its old time condition of morale and efficiency.

11th

Mission to Orvieto Bridge called off. Did not meet the escort.

12th

Stand-down all day. Rain. Axis Sal last night reported the Colonel and four others as prisoners of war.

13th

Mission to Perugia Marshaling Yards. No excitement.

14th

Mission to Terni Marshaling Yards. No excitement.

15th

Mission to Cassino at 0755. 340th led in the reduction of the town to rubble. There were to be eleven heavy groups and five groups of mediums and at 1200 hours the Infantry to move in behind a creeping barrage. Undershot target a bit. Second mission to gun and stores emplacement at 1145 hours West of Cassino. No excitement on either job. There were about 35 visitors over Naples last night and quite an A/A show. Report is they sank a hospital ship and damaged a naval vessel in the harbor, but that the smoke screen was so quickly laid that with the help of an off-shore wind the harbor was thickly blanketed in a few minutes. Most of the bombs landed in the town. Hits were made on the transient Officers' mess, the apartments near-by, in an Italian bomb shelter and several hundred casualties resulted. Planes could be heard droning over our field and seemingly not much more than four or five thousand feet high, perhaps using Vesuvius as a check point. Our doors rattled from the concussions in Naples. They also dropped frags on Capidochino. We have a new Col. – Col. Chapman as Group C.O.

16th

Mission to same concentration as yesterday afternoon. No excitement.

17th

Mission to Roccasecca. Major Cover, Capt. Thomas and Sgts. Goranson and Hawkins drove up to the front and watched the attack at Cassino.

18th

Mission to Foligno Marshaling Yards. No excitement. Tonight Vesuvius is really acting up. Beginning about supper time, the crater began to spout a bit higher than usual and by dark was going the strongest we've seen. The West side – towards Naples – was lighted by a red glow from the flowing lava that colored the heavy smoke and set the whole crest of the mountain in silhouette. From our side we could see only the usual bubbling red cone and silhouette, no lava flowing on our side. By 2100 hours the white and red-hot lava was visible as it flowed to the edge of the South slope. Spouting at times was very high with occasional bursts like a Fourth of July “fountain.” Bubbling had also spread to the North rim of crater and the whole sky was aglow.

19th

Mission to Orte. No excitement.

20th

Mission to Terni, but weather bad. Vesuvius going very strong last night and explosions getting heavier. Grunts like a giant pig and our doors rattle.

21st

Stand-down all day. Rain. Vesuvius going stronger than ever. At supper time blasts were getting to be one continual rumble and just after supper it began to seem that the whole top of the mountain was going to come off and one heavy explosion seems to indicate that it may have. Heavy thunder storm added to the show. The lava started coming down our side, dropping in big white-hot flows like metal in a foundry. By 2000 the whole top of the mountain was red-hot and the billowing smoke illuminated by the yellow glow. The towns of San Sebastiano and Massa di Somma were being over-run by the lava today, a stream 50 feet high, slowly engulfing everything in its path. Trees, a hundred feet away, suddenly swell and burst from the expanding sap and immediately are consumed by fire. Army trucks are evacuating its people and G.I.'s form a counter-procession in an effort to see everything and get photos of a memorable occasion. Red air raid warning for a few minutes tonight.

22nd

A red letter day. Vesuvius after putting on a show with lava coming down our side quieted down last night about 2130 and except for an occasional grunt made no commotion. About 0200 there was considerable upheaval and vibrant blast. Kept up steadily, but diminished for about an hour. At 0400 we were awakened by a new demonstration and again at 0545. This time we were being pelted by pea-size pellets and by 0600 we were having a black snow storm and the missiles had grown to walnut size with occasional baseballs. The mountain was reverberating with a pulsating rumble similar to sound and feel of the churning of a propeller on a big steamship.

Began to look like an exciting day and Major Cover and Capt. Thomas started checking up, Cover taking the line and Thomas the area. Group Headquarters, three miles away, was not getting this stuff and while the telephones were still active we got word to them and were told to keep the wings shoveled off and the planes protected as far as possible.

Everybody was routed out to do the job which wasn't particularly pleasant with chunks of lava as big as your fist rapping on your helmet and setting your ears ringing. Other than keeping the weight of the ash from piling up on the wings there wasn't much we could do to protect the planes otherwise. Plexi glass and wing surfaces couldn't stand up under the barrage and no planes could take off nor could they have safely even two hours earlier with the first light of day. Just to make everything more interesting we had a heavy and continuous thunder storm with some of the brightest lightning ever seen by any of us, many of the flashes seeming to strike for the crater. At the times of the worst peaks of the storm it seemed that the largest chunks of lava were spewed out with the greatest force, but which was the cause of the effect (if there was any connection) we couldn't decide. By this time the falling hunks were generously interspersed with nuggets the size of footballs. These when they hit something solid would break open and disclose white-hot interiors. Some fell with a crust of frost on the outside while still white-hot on the inside.

By midmorning the fall had attained a depth of six inches and it was still coming, and long before noon roofs began to go under a foot or more, and we began to think the phenomenon had passed a bit beyond the purely interesting stage.

Somewhat earlier the combat crews had been told to be ready to evacuate in the belief that they were going to be sent to Capri and for several hours conflicting orders were issued, but in the early afternoon final order came and they lost no time in shaking – literally – the dust of Pompeii L/G off their shoes. In fact they went so fast that most of them left all personal belongings where they lay beyond what they could pack in a musette bag and made much extra work for ground personnel later on. During the afternoon the ground personnel with few exceptions were alternately told they would and would not evacuate, but about four o'clock five trucks pulled up and quickly loaded with approximately 100 men, their goods and chattels. About four-thirty the convoy, with Major Cover and Capt. Thomas leading in a jeep and five trucks following and two other jeeps, started for Gaudio-Paestum L/G where the 321st Group were to play host.

The convoy traveled a route through Poggiomarino and by devious back alleys into the gathering darkness. No vehicles had made a track in the foot or more of dust and progress was exceedingly slow. The lead jeep, loaded to the gunwales and dragging equally loaded trailer, made little progress until the following truck nosed up behind and in low-low added its GM power. At the first stop when it was realized we were lost the exhaust of the big GM truck was white-hot.

At each village there was welcoming committee on every roof and they showered us with shovels full of volcanic ash as we crept through the narrow streets bucking the four-foot drifts they had made in cleaning off their roofs. We came to one makeshift bridge on a route which we found was posted "no thoroughfare," but we were not in a mood to turn back.

While Capt. Thomas crawled down the bank to watch the action of the bridge supports, Major Cover made a test flight across with the jeep and trailer. There was a sharp S-turn of just about the limit of the truck's ability to negotiate and one side of the bank was already caved. While we held our breaths the first truck gingerly made its approach and almost capsized, but the driver gave it the gun and, with a dozen men hanging their weight onto the top side, made it.

All men except the drivers were ordered out of the following trucks and jeeps and by careful approach the trucks were guided across one by one without accident.

By the time we made Salerno we had lost most of the fall of larger pieces and were getting mostly dust which at that time began to be mixed with rain and fell in a form of mud which added nothing to visibility and comfort. Around midnight a tired, bedraggled, cold bunch of men with faces like coal heavers finally saw the welcome lights of the 448th Sqdn of the 321st Group where Major Knievel, Executive Officer, was on the job in the mess hall with hot kidney beans, Spam and abundance of bread and coffee.

The E.M. bedded down in a tobacco warehouse which was the 321st briefing room while Major Cover and Capt. Thomas were taken in by Major Knievel.

23rd

Back at Pompeii Tech. Supply, Sqdn. Supply and personal baggage of the crews were loaded by the few remaining men from the line and the area.

Rained mud.

At Paestum Major Cover began looking around for a permanent set-up while Capt. Thomas scrounged living quarters for the ground Officers who would be coming in.

24th

Back at Pompeii, San Guiseppi received its heavy fall of ashes this evening. Everything cleaned out except Communications. More personal equipment found and sent on to Paestum. The 488th personnel that remained behind were asked to load 486th equipment. Everybody in a good mood after that.

At Paestum the few Officers moved their stuff into vacant quarters next to the 321st Headquarters building being assigned three rooms with four men to a room. Majors Cassada and Cover, Capt. Thomas and Lt. Pitkin got nicely settled in one room with their stove, lights wired and all housekeeping facilities in place. Finished at 1800 just in time to be informed as they started for supper that they would have to move out the next morning as the 321st wanted the rooms for themselves. Capt. Adams and Lts. Mintz and Tarzy, the only other arrivals, were in a similar fix upstairs. During the day the available men worked hard in a gale of wind and occasional rain squalls setting up tents for the mess, orderly room and combat crew quarters.

Axis Sal announced to the world by short wave that the eruption was an act of God for the Germans and that the 340th was wiped out to the last man and ship. She was nearer right than she knew on ships at least since they are a total loss except for salvage. Fortunately, however, our casualties were limited to two of a serious nature. One in the 488th was struck in the face by a single lump, his nose broken and face lacerated. In another Squadron it was reported that a large lump conked one man on the helmet, bounced off and broke his arm. Why scores were not killed or seriously injured while struggling to protect the equipment is beyond understanding.

25th

Back at Pompeii loading and scrounging the area for stoves, stove pipe, tent poles and any other stuff of any value was still going on. Clear except for heavy smoke overcast from Vesuvius.

At Paestum the day opened with a cloud burst and wind which seemed to be all of 80 M.P.H. – ideal weather for setting up tents and moving the men (under pressure from the 321st) out of the warehouse into those tents. The area was a slough of mud and jeeps and trucks were mired wheel deep all over. It was a sad looking group of G.I.'s when darkness finally shut us from each other's vision. Cold, wet with no lights everybody was perfectly satisfied to crawl into whatever makeshift bed he had provided as soon as he had finished supper.

26th

Where as it looked as though the 340th was out of operation for weeks or months we sent a mission to Perugia R.R. today. Only three ships, but tomorrow we'll have six. Somebody in wing or above was certainly on the job.

The last of the pilgrims arrived from Pompeii – Capt. Tayloe, Sgts. Becker, Bahm, Laseter, Sather and Bianco and Chips, two small dogs. The Squadron is pretty well shaken down and like all good G.I.'s the men are already pretty much at home and working on personal conveniences.

Capt. Tayloe, Squadron Adjutant, who remained at Pompeii to the last deserves special mention for an exceedingly good organizing job and keeping evacuation moving without loss of either time or equipment.

27th

Beautiful Spring day. What! No Rain? Sgt. Hoffman, our exponent of light, has as usual traced out the supply of “Eyetic” current and laid a lead to the tent area and spent most of the day and evening cursing up the amateur electricians who gravitate toward the line like ants to sugar. We have lights and we don't have lights as various members make connections with granny knots, cross wires and otherwise gum up the works. Heavy mail tonight. First for days.

Mission to Perugia R.R. Bridge which according to reports won't be carrying any trains tonight.

28th

Mission to Perugia. No excitement.

29th

Mission to Viterbo A/D. We missed it, but the other squadrons got it.

30th

Mission to Orvieto R.R. Bridge. Did not drop bombs. Overcast. General Knapp here today to give out medals and clusters.

31st

Stand-down all day. Cold, windy, rain, overcast. March goes out like a lion. During month we have been getting new crews, some of them set up for B-25H operations – no co-pilot.

Men mentioned in the History for March 1944 on the page indicated:

P 6

Cornelius T. O'Brien, Jr.
William (NMI) Duda
Harry F. Luederman
Alexander E. Rosin

P 7

Howard C. McElroy
Andrew N. Ryck
William A. Davidson
Samuel G. Bradley
Louis H. Schmidt, Jr
James D. Reynolds
Gerald L. Crane
John B. Rome
Egbert S. Turner
Robert F. Lamparyk

P 8

Karl O. Schaffer
Walter M. Hutson
Alden H. Kapp
Frank J. Kremenak, Jr

P 9

Harvey L. Rackmyer

P 10

Robert J. Mollard

P 11

Charles K. Johnston
Peter R. Ferryman
Roy H. Pinkard
James B. Smith
Arthur M. Vandermuellen

P 12

Max A. Mitchum

[Many of these same events are also recounted in the War Diary of the 340th Bombardment Group HQ Squadron, though from a different perspective. The HQ diary can be found here:

http://57thbombwing.com/340th_History/340thGroupHistory.php

Transcription by Dan Setzer, son of Sgt. Hymie Setzer, 340th BG HQ Squadron. June 7, 2015]