

Itinerary of the 98th Ground Echelon

From the Diary of a Yard Bird

The 98th Bombardment Group (H) was actually activated at MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida, on February 3, 1942, from the 44th Group. It went from MacDill Field to Barksdale Field in Shreveport, Louisiana, where they were assigned the personnel as an official organization.

On March 28, they left by air and train to Fort Myers, Florida, where they began their overseas training in earnest. After their unusual experiences of close calls, crack-ups and combat training in searching for enemy subs in the Gulf of Mexico, the Group moved to Drane Field in Lakeland, Florida, on May 15 for more simulated combat training.

On July 3 we packed our gear as we had finished out preliminaries and were considered ready for combat, so we said “good-bye” to the flying personnel who were to fly our, not yet famous, Liberators overseas to combat. The ground crews left by train for Fort Dix, New Jersey, where we were confronted with the usual procedures of inspections, drills, false alarms, and even AWOLS as some of the boys can confess.

On July 15, after hanging around the barracks indulging in the G.I.s favorite pastimes “sack time or playing poker” orders came through at 1:15 pm to embark. To the military airs of the post band, we marched with full pack to the train. About 5:00 pm we left the station and arrived downtown in Brooklyn, N.Y. at 7:00 pm. The boys took the ferry and after sailing by the “Normandie”, lying on her side, boarded the S.S. “Louis Pasteur” about 9:00 pm. This ship was taken by the English from the French after France capitulated. We slept below like rats.

On Thursday morning, July 16, the “Louis Pasteur” at exactly 8:30 am slipped out of New York Harbor with everyone out of sight and curtains drawn. Everyone on board, with good old American curiosity too a peek at the scenes. Excursion boats loaded with people were waving and we soon passed by that famous lady in New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty. This reminded me of the night six boys of the 98th took a taxi to Trenton and indulged a little at that famous bar which was probably the longest in America. The taxi driver looked at me and asked “How long have you been in the Army?” I answered, “Two weeks.” He then asked, “What have you learned so far?” Again I answered, “right face, left face, and

about face.” He looked at the six of us and began singing “Sailing, sailing over the bounding waves.”

About noon we had our first glimpse of combat. A destroyer cut across our bow and dropped depth charges while a B-25 and several Navy bombers were patrolling overhead. At 6:00 pm more depth charges by the destroyer and a Navy bomber. The destroyer stopped and fired her deck guns nine times. Two submarines, and possibly a third, were sent to Davy Jones’ locker. Our immediate thoughts were “God bless the United States Navy.”

For several days nothing exciting happened, except daily inspections, life drills, guard duty (really guarding the “Norden” bombsights in the middle of the ocean) and “sack time”.

On Thursday, July 23, about 6:00 pm we went to a sports deck and Nunchuck asked “Can you tell a submarine”? Off the starboard side, we could see a periscope sticking out of the water. About that time the “Louis Pasteur” started jitterbugging around the Atlantic and the sub was soon out of sight. We assumed it was a friendly one, but we didn’t stop to ask the “million-dollar question.” However, it was a wonder that the “Louis Pasteur” didn’t go over on its side with literally thousands of curious G.I.s on the starboard side to get a glimpse of the submarine.

Friday, July 24 we sighted Africa at 2:30 pm. At 4:00 pm the “Louis Pasteur” dropped anchor in Freetown, Sierra Leone. It was a beautiful looking town, with mountains all around, but again we saw the results of combat. There were two ships sunk in the harbor with the masts sticking out of the water. The natives came out in a fuel boat and entertained by singing, dancing and even fighting for our cigarettes. But they refused our money. This was the beginning for the “firsts” of the 98th.

Saturday, July 25 we were on our way again at 5:00 pm with a large convoy pulling out at the same time. The mutton meals were terrible and there was no love for the “Limie” crew. The Americans started to make noises like sheep because of the famous “Limie” dish.

On Wednesday, July 29, the German radio broadcasted that the “Louis Pasteur” had been sunk off Freetown by one of their submarines. It was really great to be alive and to hear your own obituary.

Saturday, August 1, we were getting a little seasick as the seas were very rough rounding the Cape of Good Hope. We were briefed on Durban, South Africa, as we were to land there the next day and would be allowed shore leave. After two days of sightseeing, eating, drinking and other recreations that red-blooded American boys love so well, we were ocean bound again to the tune of “The Star Spangled Banner”, rendered by an English band on a British Battleship.

Latrine rumors began flying thick and fast and the Indian Ocean was very rough. On Saturday, August 8, the latest was Egypt which proved to be the right destination of the group.

On August 10 the boys were really sick of mutton stew, and they found where the ship’s crew stored crates of onions, and we began eating onion sandwiches. By August 15 even the officers were eating the same. Word got around that the British canteen was raided that night and the officers were also involved.

After sailing into the Red Sea, we arrived in Port Tewfik, near Suez on Sunday, August 16. At 11:00 am the 98th were shore bound in small boats and I can still hear the sounds echoing over the Gulf of Suez, the men “Bleating” like sheep “Baa-Baa.” Can ewe?

We were stationed temporarily in a transit camp and had a good dish of American stew. After visiting Suez and sitting around waiting for our next move, we began our departure by troop train to Palestine, our official destination. After a day’s trip, we arrived at our base of operations with the group being divided into two sections. The 343rd and 344th squadrons went to St. Jean Accra, sixteen miles north of Haifa and the 345th and 415th with headquarters at Ramat David.

Now we were finally reunited with the combat units who had flown our B-24s across the Atlantic vis Brazil to Africa. They had been on nine successful missions to Mersa Matruh, Tobruk, Italian Navy and convoys. One squadron, the 344th, had lost one plane enroute, Lt. McCormack’s, due to an electrical storm with all crewmen killed.

On September 5, several of the boys of the 98th were transferred to form the 376th Bomb Group, which had been in operation in the Middle East as the Halpro. This unit had been in action against the Axis on similar targets as the 98th with outstanding success.

The missions were nearly daily when the weather permitted, but only a few of the planes made missions because of rainy weather and the big Libs would get stuck in the mud. The milk runs were Benghazi, Tobruk, Mersa Matruh, Nabarino Bay, Crete and convoys. Lt. Cain, a bombardier of the 344th, said our planes were sinking seven or eight ships in the convoys.

On Sunday, November 8, the first echelon left for our new base. On December 15, the rest of the group left by DC-3s for our new base L.G. 139. Again, the group was together. Now the 98th and the 376th were joined by the 93rd Bomb Group from England. The 344th Squadron was assigned to maintain this group.

Missions continued to be made almost daily depending on weather conditions. The boys were sweating out the sandstorms, sand fly fever, jaundice, routine air raids and alerts, and other problems of desert warfare. It was ironic to be assembled to police up the cigarette butts for half a mile around L.G. 139 only to have a sandstorm appear an hour later and practically blow your tents away.

On February 24, 1943, the 93rd went back to England and the 98th was again on the move. This time to Benghazi, Libya, via truck convoy, stopping at Tripoli. Here again it was routine with the targets being Palermo, Bari, Catania, Reggio Calabria and Naples and Messina being the favorite "hot spots." During this period, we had visits from members of Congress who didn't stay too long as we were having a famous sandstorm at the time. Winston Churchill, Alexander Brereton and other generals visited us.

There had been rumors for some time about us impending low-level raid on a target which would shorten the war by several months. On April 1, "Killer" Kane's boys began working on a low-level bombsight nicknamed the new 15¢ bombsight for low altitude bombing at 80 feet or less. We then knew definitely that something big was in the works.

Captain Eddie Rickenbacker came on May 16 and gave us a very interesting and humorous talk about his experiences in the last war and his twenty days adrift in the Pacific. Another highlight was when we had our first bath in months, when a British "traveling bath" visited our unit. We were like the goat that had his nose shot off. He still smelled.

Monday, June 14, got us out at 1:00 am as 100 German paratroopers had landed south of here and burned the ammo dump, nearly destroyed an Ack-Ack outfit and three planes. An officer in charge of paratroopers and even the "won" joined in by

killing three of the enemy. Most of the enemy was captured, but on Friday, June 18 those who had not been captured got into camp and put time bombs on two wimpies and the Arkansas Traveler II, with the planes completely destroyed.

On June 26, the 93rd arrived at Berks to join the ranks of “The Desert Rats”. Three days later they were joined by the 44th and a few days later the 389th arrived from England starting the rumor that something big was in the making. These groups said we were in the minor leagues, but after visiting Naples and Messini, decided this was in the combat zone also. It is amazing how being shot at makes some people “Believers.”

Again, on Monday, July 19, history was in the making with Rome being bombed for the first time. About 300 heavy bombers and 200 medium bombers took part in this raid with the blitz lasting 3½ hours. All ships returned safely, and Rome was really burning. Not a bomb went astray, and all military installations had been hit.

During the Sicilian Campaign, the 98th dropped more bombs than any other group participating. On July 22, word got around the camp of the impending mission coming soon. That may lessen the war by six months and possibly save millions of lives, if successful.

On Friday, July 23, the boys began practicing for the big mission as low altitude sights were installed to replace the famous “Norden” bombsight. Now the rumor was that the target was the Rumanian oil fields which turned out to be correct. An exact replica of the target was erected in the desert and the combat crews made their daily practices. Gen. Ent was in camp, and he was to fly as gunner with “Killer” Kane on the “Hail Columbia” as the 98th was supposed to lead this historic raid.

On August 1, 175 Liberators on the 98th, 376th, 93rd, 44th and 389th took off for the Ploesti, Rumania, oil refineries and the biggest raid of the war. The story of this raid is in another section of this book. Sixty-six planes were listed as missing and the 98th lost twenty-six.

Missions were few for several weeks as the 98th was practically planeless. They made a few with the other groups in the area to Foggia, Naples, Wiener Neustadt, etc.

On September 1, we became associated with the 12th Air Force.

On September 8, Italy surrendered unconditionally – one down, two to go. During the period from August 1 to September 9, the 98th shot down 123 enemy fighters, 17 probables, and 10 damaged.

On Sunday, September 19, we left for Sousse, Tunisia and arrived at Sousse on the 24th. Only a few missions were made from this base as the runways were mostly a sea of mud and about the only excitement being a few boys bitten by barracudas while swimming in the Gulf