

NARRATIVE HISTORY

CHAPTER V

Period covered:

Dec. 1, 1943 to Jan 20, 1943

During the greater part of the month of December, the 451st was, literally, spread all over the map. The ground echelon, having met the various requirements of staging, embarked squadron by squadron on four separate vessels on December 3rd, and began a pleasant but uneventful boat trip which consumed most of the month. Two squadrons passed Christmas day in camp areas set up on the hills of Oran, Algeria; while the other squadrons (724th and 727th) remained on their respective boats in the harbor of Naples, Italy, from the 24th to the 27th, on which date they disembarked to be quartered at Ciano College.

Meanwhile the air echelon was neither here nor there, but all over. Several of the crews and passengers remained at Lincoln until December 7th, whereas by that date many of the eleven ships of the "first flight" had progressed as far as Marrakech or Casablanca. The first crew to leave the states was the number 1 crew of the Group, that of 1st Lt. Claude U. Vail. They departed from Morrison Field, Florida on November 27th, and landed at Dakar, French West Africa on December 3rd. On the whole, the trip by air for all of the planes followed the same general pattern, Morrison to Borinquen, Porto Rico, or Waller Field, Trinidad, to Atkinson Field, British Guinea, to Belem, Brazil, to Natal or Fortaleza for the jumping off point, to Rufisque Field, near Dakar; from there to either Tindouf, Algeria or Marakech, Morocco, from which point all took off for northern Africa, some hitting Casablanca, others Oran, and still others Algiers from which point all were briefed to their final destination at Telergma Field, Algeria.

But while the routes were uniform and stereotyped, individual experiences varied greatly. By far the most important phase of the entire movement, which was not actually completed until January 4, 1944, when the last of the Group planes reached Telergma, was that all of the sixty-two planes reached their final destination without mishap or accident, and without loss. Of course, there were narrow escapes: the most astounding of these involved the plane piloted by Captain Sidney Winski, and carrying the squadron commander, Capt. Halton and the Flight Surgeon, Capt. Kremers. Captain Winski was flying from Morrison Field to Waller Field, Trinidad. While outside of the sight of land, three engines of the plane failed, and the fourth alone carried the ship and its fourteen passengers. The mechanical failures had developed without notice, and nothing could be done since the closest land was some seventy miles away. Capt. Winski gave the order to prepare to ditch while maintaining altitude as well as possible on one engine; everything loose was thrown overboard, including all baggage carried, guns, chutes, etc., and the men prepared to take their positions, for which they had rehearsed well at Morrison. But as the plane came down through the clouds towards the water below, one of the men saw land in the distance and gave the cry. It was the lovely island of San Lucia, and lovelier to the men because of Beans Field which was situated immediately on the coast. The pilot succeeded in reaching the field, and was able to unfeather one of the three bad engines to land the plane safely. It was an act of extreme courage and confidence which had pulled the plane and its fourteen passengers through to safety; Capt. Winski proved his ability.

By the end of the month, all ground echelons had arrived in Italy, and on 2 January they received orders to proceed to the new permanent base at Gioia Del Colle. The movement was made by truck and train. Upon arrival it was seen that there were no accommodation, and that it was up to ourselves to make the most out of nothing. Areas were immediately assigned to the various squadrons, and the business of construction started. Tent cities arose in all corners of the area, while immediate preparations were made for mess halls and the like. Meanwhile the muddy conditions made all work difficult, to say the least. What pushed the work on was the possibility of the arrival of the air echelon and the beginning of operations at any time.

Actually the air echelon was not to arrive at the new base until January 20. For upon our arrival at Telergma, a new policy was instituted by higher headquarters which required our group to fly a number of practice missions before taking part in actual operations. Hence the group flew seven such missions, with targets assigned for dry bomb runs, and practice bombs being dropped on an assigned area in the desert. The group commander emphasized the standardization of operational procedures and good tight formation flying. Briefings were held in shifts in a small tent in the muddy group area, and critiques were held each evening in which the group commander reviewed the mistakes and discrepancies of the mission. The benefit was clearly demonstrated later on. Horribly muddy conditions existed which afforded to all a nastier prospect of overseas duty than actually deserved. On January 16th, after consultation with staff in Italy, the colonel decided that the engineers had progressed sufficiently well with the runway at Gioia to warrant our moving up to our permanent base. We flew up to Italy on that day to meet the commanding general of the 47th Wing to which we were assigned, and after reviewing the situation at Gioia, called upon the air echelon to leave Africa.