

## 34<sup>th</sup> AIR DEPOT GROUP



### MISSION

### LINEAGE

34<sup>th</sup> Air Depot Group  
Activated, 21 Jan 1942

### STATIONS

Ogden, UT  
*Augusto, Italy*  
*Palermo, Italy*  
*Dittiano, Italy*  
*Pomigliano d'Arco, Italy*  
*Pisa, Italy*

### ASSIGNMENTS

### COMMANDERS

### HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

## **Decorations**

## **EMBLEM**

## **MOTTO**

## **NICKNAME**

## **OPERATIONS**

It was a cold, clear, crisp, full-moonlight night in February at Casablanca. The ship had anchored far out in the harbor during the day and had slipped into the dock after nightfall. The men had been deeply impressed by their first foreign landing that day the beautiful brightness of the North African climate, the brilliant blue of the sea and the thin beige coastline with its fragile silhouette of white block-piles outlining the city which carried an even more spectacular meaning as the principal debarkation point of the theater of war. In silent anticipation, reluctance, hope, fear, impatience and eagerness they awaited the time of landing. Now they were standing in line or slouching in huddles after being marched away from the pier to the roadside where the big flats came 'to haul them out to camp. It had been an arduous day of doing nothing; the men were tired, but it was good to feel the solid earth, even the war-torn earth, under one's feet, after so many cramped days at sea.

Being heavily overloaded with complete field equipment the men piled onto the great flat-trailers in grotesque heaps and haphazard jumbles. There was no time to be lost in getting away from the dangerous, congested dock area where the ships of the, Convoy were still being unloaded. The wild ride on the long, low, open flats through the white ghost city began in the bright light of the close African moon. With no sign of life anywhere, the blacked-out city of odd, pale blocks was eerie and weird. Only the grinding of the truck motors broke the stillness of the night, and even they seemed bent on haste and domination, adamant and insensitive. They roared through the haunted city like furious monsters on some errand of Satan.

Out of the city's cement slabs into the level, open country side flew the caravan with its sprawling, human cargo. Abruptly it came to a groaning halt on a wide, double-drive with turf, parking between tall hedgerows. The soldiers piled off the flats and made a hasty but reluctant formation. They were marched quickly through a gate in the hedgerow which led into a sports field or stadium area.

The men were dispersed by squadrons inside the oval of a small race track where they set up their pup-tents during the wee hours of the morning for their first night on; foreign soil. It was a sorry business at best, discouraging, and yet it smacked of adventure considering the fame of the place only a, few weeks after the first American landings in North Africa and upon the heels of the historic Casablanca conference. The imagination inevitably abetted this importance in the soldier-mind somewhat relieving the feeling of disgruntledness. The freedom from the vacuum-packed ship was, something. The old refrain, 'Anything is Better Than This " was hushed for a

while. One could stretch his legs and breathe the fine, fresh air. Even the hard-sod was relaxing after endless hours on the waffle-branding rope bunks of the boat. A fresh-water sponge-bath was a luxury.

Morning brought a real treat, a never-to-be-forgotten novelty, " C " Rations. There were the bright, little cans of biscuits (though disappointingly canine) and hard candy balls in cellophane twists, supplemented by the shiny tins of vegetable stew, hash, or meat and beans. Some ate them down cold, and greedily. Others built little fires to heat the cans. Many novel preparations were originated. Comments of enthusiasm were rampant. It was certain that the inner man was satisfied beyond his fondest dreams.

The camp area was perfect. The lay-out took form in company streets, kitchens, mess halls, recreation and utilities areas. Diverse and ingenious means were used by the squadrons and the men in setting up their quarters with "extras" for the sake of individuality. The entire camp was enclosed by a high, strong, wire fence and tall hedges or cypress and thorn trees so that much privacy was insured.

Improvements were made daily. A prominent company street intersection was marked with signs "Wilshire BLVD." and " Western Ave." A pup-tent became a dog house when some original fellow raised the roof with side-walls of boards, custom-built, with the tent on top of the form. These tailor-made homes sprouted with such glamorous names as " Bellevue- Stratford," "Book-Cadillac," or "Beverly-Wilshire". A miniature U. S. had mushroomed itself out of the African dust.

Soon the pyramidals came and the shift from two to six tent mates brought a shake-up in the domestic tranquility that had been established. Day rooms, orderly rooms, offices were added. Nothing was spared for sanitation and safety. A huge airplane crate was fashioned into a dressing-room adjoining an outdoor, "home-made", canvas-walled shower.

A large screen replaced the temporary portable one in front of the small stadium where movies became the one fascinating entertainment for the men at night. The stadium was filled at every show. Men sat on the hard, cold, cement risers an hour before night fall in order to be assured of a seat. Many brought their stools or benches. Some climbed to the roof of the grandstand. Others stood or sat on the ground.

Underneath the modernistic concrete stadium were two large, rectangular rooms. These rooms were identical, being at each end of the grandstand. Their high ceilings and circular ends at the sides of the stadium made them ideal for special uses. One of them was made into a very attractive Group day room and library by the Special Service Officer and his crew. The other room was converted into a small chapel, intimate and quaint. The " Chapel of the Old Rugged Cross " was designed and executed by the men who created the beautiful wall murals for which it became famous, as well as the rustic appointments and colorful decorations. An impressive dedication was given. The Chapel was a place of much pride and climaxed the need for complete living " For God and Country" inscribed on the " Air Corps " mural.

So grew the living area of the Group in its first overseas camp. Everything was the best that could be had, a standard that has never been relaxed, in sanitation, conveniences, recreation and food. Ours was the finest camp in the Casablanca region. The interest and enthusiasm of the men increased. The soldiers were justly proud of their camp and they responded in health and vigor with a measure of contentment and enjoyment.

There was much work to be done. The great airport buzzed from dawn till dark with swarms of lusty soldiers going about their tasks of nursing the aircraft coming and going in endless rhythm. The huge German hangars teemed with crawling mechanics clinging to the patient planes that were coming into life or being revived after having spent their energy in daring exploits. The job of bringing into condition and operating such an important air terminal was tremendous. The matter of supplies alone required constant vigilance and indefatigable effort on the part of the men. The men on the line assembling new planes, worked long and faithfully. Their friendliness and enthusiasm were an inspiration. They were supported by the men who set up and ran their own shops for the mechanics.

Their integrity and skill was so keen that often it became necessary to design and make their own special tools, parts or instruments when they were not to be had otherwise. The maintenance crews were sending out a steady flow of repaired and reconditioned ships as well as doing a prodigious amount of emergency work in changing engines and fuselage repair. The alert crew won prestige for its unequalled servicing of planes at any hour of the day or night. The parachute department, besides doing its own work with magnificent efficiency, became the Mecca for anyone who wanted a bit of tailoring, upholstering, or interior decorating done! The paint shop turned into an artist's studio as well! And, of course, those who were interested in watches or jewelry patronized the instrument shop, where its precision craftsmen could produce anything from a mechanical mouse to a robot peace-feeler! Anybody who wanted anything else done went to the eventually famous typewriter shop which was just aborning.

There were rewards too. Half-days off, and then whole days off came weekly as organization removed the pressure of necessity. These were spent in the city, the new, strange, fascinating foreign city of the French. It was dominantly European, yet modern and surprising. There were the sidewalk cafes, the shops, the markets. Papa Gouin's Restaurant intrigued the palate as best it could be intrigued outside of camp. The Red Cross operated beautifully with snack bar and sightseeing trips. The ancient Medina, though Off Limits, caught a few devil-darers., There was the Sultan's Palace Garden to visit and the great new twin-towered, unfinished cathedral. The Vox theater attracted many under American management. But topping all was the street life with its varied activity in traffic and odd personages. Every manner of things on wheels (usually pneumatic-tired) was pulled or pushed by every manner of thing on legs, from swank dames in the park with their streamlined baby carriages, to the horse carriages, donkey carts and Arab-propelled contraptions! The native, charcoal-burning, motor buses festooned with Arabs like so many bundles of washing atop a laundry wagon, smoked their way anywhere they wished to go.

Perhaps the happiest and most novel memories of Casablanca are the dances that were held by the various squadrons as the pleasant spring and summer arrived. The French girls responded

very cordially to the invitations that were forthcoming. These occasions were unusual. Whether the dances were held at the Robinson Hotel resort or the beautiful Lido at the beach with its outside swimming pool and magnificent view, the dances were always enjoyable. No expense was spared for music, food or decorations and the music was usually furnished by the Depot band which had the novel name of the 'Hungry Nine", as they were always ready to eat. Both inside and outside ballrooms were used. Sometimes they were transformed into a carnival setting, or a Golden Palm Room. The dances were always a credit to the Group. As a social factor they were the greatest morale builder we had known.

The rumors began to fly again. As usual with rumors, one of them came true. Preparations were completed for movement.

Finally a day arrived when the lovely camp was torn down. A convoy left with half the Group and the rest were taken by train. The week enroute was rugged. The motor convoy fared better than the train units, it, was thought. Both contingents arrived at their new destination about the same time.

The train ride was the most famous in the history of transportation. The wheezy little train of Iowa corn-cribs drawn by an emasculated locomotive with a coloratura voice was a caution. It was a Forty & Eight French Special (8 horses or 40 men per crib), The men were solid-packed without juice on the straw covered floors of the freight cars. It was worse than the boat we had known. The monotony, heat and boredom were in a class heretofore undreamed of. Eating twice a day beside the tracks near the kitchen car was the only diversion. The usual folderol went on when men are so closely associated by necessity, big talk, horsing around, and crap games. It was a great experience. Cooperation was the order of the day in all human needs. A group of aquatic gangsters developed, who went for every water tower at each stop in order to swipe a fine shower from the railroad company. It was a most pleasant past-time, though unorthodox and illegal. While the men were being reprimanded at the front of the train for their sportive ingenuity, another outfit was bathing at the other end of the long train at another tower spout. But everyone was clean.

The dreary week aboard the horse limited finally ended with a panting halt at a railhead beside the quiet harbor filled with the stark specters of war. The little train almost upset because all the men rushed to the port side, hanging out precariously, looking at the sunken wreckage and the damaged shoreline. Bizerte was the first war-torn city the men had experienced and it held them spellbound in the twilight.

No time was lost in transporting the men and the baggage in trucks from the tracks to the distant staging area in the hills far behind the town, away from the skittish target of the bomb-threatened harbor. The convoy of headlights made a serpentine of glittering jewels winding among the hills, while the dense, white dust clouds rolled aloft like the furious breathing of some giant fire dragon.

In a sloping valley between the barren knolls the squadrons were dispersed to sleep upon the

ground that first night under the low canopy of brightly polished stars. The following day temporary camp was set up with pup-tents and the minimum essentials for good living in the rough.

Then began a train of events during the coming weeks which the men will never forget because it was their first contact with war. Almost nightly the enemy planes came over to bomb the busy harbor. It was wonderful, beautiful, as a rising, circular curtain of fire around the visible horizon might be beautiful. It was scintillating like a Hollywood opening as the great pyramidal searchlight beams pierced the heavens with their dazzling white shafts, converging now-upon a tiny moth-like creature darting hopelessly above and following it around the sky.

The inexorable flares with their ghastly green glare caused the fox-hole brigade to hug the good earth harder and pray for deliverance. The rain of bombs flashing and thundering in the distance punctuated the hideous revelry with staccato syncopation. Graceful fountains of tracers etching the draperies of the ack-ack fire made a riot of color while a mist of red steam seemed to rise from the valley floors. The close noise of the ack-ack itself resembled nothing so much as mighty pop-corn excitedly blowing: its top. The very cauldron of war was boiling over.

But all this went unheeded when the first German plane was shot down just over the crest of the next hill from our camp. The soldiers came out of their foxholes with one accord like a flashcard rooting section's animated routine at some Rose Bowl Football game. They arose unanimously out of the solid earth, as a theater orchestra might rise out of the pit on, its elevator, to cheer and yell and see the colossal explosion and tremendous copper fire as the aircraft crashed.

Throughout the following day pilgrimages went to the scene of the wreckage where the scorched ground was strewn-with shattered bits of plane and men. The visitors were shocked and speechless. From all the area around came hundreds of soldiers and a score of nurses to witness the macabre destruction. Some came away cynical, bracing themselves with: forced indifference; others were deeply moved and damp-eyed. Silently they covered the charred acreage searching for some; war souvenir, or more often striking an attitude of prayer. It, was a somber occasion witnessed by a reverent gathering of fellow humans. This was a taste of war.

The following days were, heartening even in the stifling; heat. The nights were delightfully cool and beautiful out in the open wilderness of the thirsty African hills. The night brought relief from the millions of flies who attacked us in formation and necessitated the using of the foxhole during the day. Living was the main chore. The desert bloomed with recreation. A magnificent beach on the gorgeously blue Mediterranean was an irresistible inspiration where daily swimming and cavorting a la Adam were available for the mere task of getting there. Sometimes the three mile hike was organized in squadron groups to make it more bore some and less enjoyable.

Individuals often hiked both ways exploring the hills and barren canyons. More often than not, trucks plowed the dusty road to the beach carrying the men to the very edge of the azure sea and parking on the white sand until the return.

In the evenings just after dark the photo section was on the beam with its outdoor, portable movie set-up, offering a splendid library of films. The chief objection to the night air-raids was the frequent interruption of the movie. Many fine stories lurked unfinished in the soldier's haunting memory. He was truly disappointed, angry, and heartsick at this inconsideration of the enemy. "You ruined our picture", he would scream at, shaking his fist at the wildly flitting specks high in the air, "Jerry spoiled our story again". The really pissed lads would SAUNTER to their foxholes in spite!

One complete squadron flew over to Sicily to aid the American armies drive the enemy out!

Bizerte ushered in the greatest event of the war of all soldier experience. It was the Bob Hope show. Bob and Frances Langford gave several performances just outside of town. They came for a sultry matinee to the dusty hills of our camp area. Hundreds of soldiers sat for two hours upon the parched, hard soil in the heat of a blistering sun waiting for the actors' caravan. After snappy program of an hour and a half on the trailer "flat" stage, the men were still loath to leave their idols. It was the most impressive mutual tribute between audience and artists and by Americans to Americans that could ever be conceived. The thrilled Bob and Frances traced their white-dust clouds over the hills back to town. The happy, grateful soldiers trudged home. The heart of America had pulsed its world-wide rhythm.

One Sunday morning the soldiers had just returned from their first mass in a bombed cathedral. It had been an inspiring service. They found the camp torn down. A movement order had come through. The men were transported to the port staging area in an old olive grove near the waiting LSTs. The following day the men entered the huge out swinging doors of the ship's prow. Across the sea? No one knew where. Rumors and wagers contended for Italy and India. Since Sicily had just been taken, Italy seemed the eventual destination.

On the third evening the LST convoy arrived at a Sicilian port after an alluring and uneventful voyage, not without its risks and jittery possibilities. The soldiers disembarked the next morning to find refuge in an olive orchard above the town. Advance detachments had already been operating on the island during the spectacular Sicilian campaign. The bulk of the Group now enroute received orders to proceed to Palermo, which proved to be the beginning of one of the most unforgettable novelties of the Group's history.

Palermo was reached with flying colors. One felt that he had just survived some Herculean Roller-Coaster ride at an international fair. But it was all a mistake. At the staging area outside the city it was learned that the order was misgiven. This fiasco put everyone into the doldrums. It was rumored that one squadron was already well set up in the great city, in luxury and ease where civilization was genteel. The next morning a glamorous cloud-burst welcome drenched everybody and drowned all hope. The entire outfit had descended into the depths of despondency. It would return to the other end of the island from whence it came, the next day. Even the lovely straw stack boudoir seemed indifferent that night. Another bubble had burst. The outfit was surely poultry guano.

Returning to the Great Plain at the other end of the island the squadrons set up their working camp near the clear, shallow river. After a few weeks the ruggedness of the outdoor life became routine and stimulating. Here another great task was completed. It was of an emergency nature and the men responded with hard, continuous, faithful effort. The servicing and maintenance of the bombers and the fighters for the Invasion missions to Italy, the loading of bombs, the continual pressure for supplies of gasoline and ammunition drove the men mercilessly day and night. They did not flinch. Willingly, eagerly, they performed their arduous slavery for the aerial beasts and gave every ounce of their exhausted strength to serve for Victory. For weeks it continued. Soiled and worn they dropped into their cots in the evening, often too tired for even a refreshing splash in the river, to say nothing of sitting through a movie, The food was poor at first. The men did not complain. The drinking water was warm, chlorinated and repulsive. The units were scattered and separated for miles around. It was not a happy circumstance. Yet, these things were all ignored in the line of duty.

The grimy toil of the Great Plain dwindled with the success of the invasion of Italy. The numerous temporary airstrips were abandoned one by one. Eventually Headquarters set up in Palermo The offices were in a new, modern streamlined building in the heart of the city. All squadrons were called to the metropolis and the Depot was established to take charge of the whole island as far as things pertaining to the Air Corps were concerned. The squadrons occupied apartment houses and large public buildings in the most elaborate set-up they had known.

After the months of travel and rugged labor, this civilized habitat was a real treat in the midst of a great ancient center of old world culture. The century-worn city was fascinating. Our men arrived soon enough after the war hibernation ended to watch the town revive slowly and regain some of its own natural characteristics. They remained long enough to witness the integrity of a bomb-and-shell shattered city re-establishing itself for the steep climb toward reconstruction and independence. During the months that followed, the G. I.s identified themselves with the people and the city became "home." The soldiers loved the place and a few found recruits for the founding of future American homes across the sea. Many wish that they were still there.

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Air Force Order of Battle

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.

Unit history. *34 Air Depot Group, Invito al ricordo!* Fred C. Graham. Italy. 1945.