



# FLIGHT TO NAPLES

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U. S. ARMY AIR FORCES

FOR a long time we had been anxious to get a kick at the shin of the Italian boot. From our secret airfield in French North Africa our B-17 Group had bombed targets in Tunis, Sardinia and Sicily, but we had been looking forward to our first visit to Italy as a memorable landmark in the Mediterranean campaign.

Awakened at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning, we were told to eat breakfast quickly as there was an early briefing. For breakfast we had pancakes, fresh eggs, cereal and coffee. We then piled into trucks for the ride to the old granary which had been taken over as the Group's headquarters.

We knew that the planes had been loaded with fragmentation bombs so speculation ran high as to whether the target was an airdrome or a troop concentration.

The intelligence officer in charge of the briefing stepped on the platform and picked up the pointer. Somewhere in the room a news cameraman's photo bulb flashed.

"The target for today is the Capodichino Airdrome several miles Northeast of Naples . . ."

This was it—the target we had been waiting for. The briefing officer went on:

... flying over Capri . . . Mount Vesuvius . . ."

THERE was little sound in the room while the target information, the amount and position of anti-aircraft batteries, and the number of enemy fighters we would probably encounter were revealed. The navigators checked on routes. The weather man gave his report on the weather out, the weather to be expected over the target and on our return trip. We synchronized our watches. The briefing was over.

After we had drawn our maps, trucks drove us out to the dispersal area where our planes were warmed up and ready to take off. Since it was to be a long mission the mess hall had sent out a box of food for each crew and a candy bar for each man.

At 8:45 we took off, circling the field several times while other groups joined us, making a total of about a hundred planes. The sky seemed full of grey B-17s. Then the swarm of planes assembled in formation and headed toward the coast.



A flight of B-17s (above) returns after inflicting this damage on the Naples harbor.

Captain L. V. Casey was the pilot of "The Gremlin." I was co-pilot and we were to fly on the squadron commander's left wing.

The sky was clear although there was a slight ground haze. We passed over the north coast of Africa at about 4,500 feet. Directly below was a small fishing village clustered at the foot of a mountain. The Mediterranean was calm, clear, and the most remarkable blue I have ever seen. Near the coast, it was easy to distinguish the shallow water covering the reefs and bars.

Once clear of the land we tested our guns. The sharp rat-a-tat-tat of the practice shells sang out above the noise of the motors. Soon the steady drone of the engines became a part of the silence and we were unconscious of it. The bright sun was reflected on the metal of the planes.

The monotony of our crossing was broken by chatter on the interphone, Spam sandwiches, and Casey and I spelling each other at the wheel. Our course was directly

between Sicily and Sardinia. Although we were flying at only 1,000 feet the haze almost hid Sardinia and we couldn't see Sicily at all. Clouds far off in the distance marked the coast of Italy. At a signal from our group leader we started to climb.

We went on oxygen at 10,000 feet. At 20,000 we were well in sight of the coast. Below us was the Isle of Capri, a barren, rocky island with several small white villages perched on the shore. A thin spiral of smoke drifted up through the clouds. This was Vesuvius.

As we passed over the coast of Italy, we were at about 25,000 feet. In clear view below were small, neat Italian farms, then the city of Naples, the airdrome, and even the insane asylum we had been warned not to hit. Approaching the target, we stayed about 25,000 feet for a minute or two and then dived down a few hundred feet, turning towards the target and opening the bomb bay doors at the same time. We were on our bombing run.

The engines were purring smoothly. Casey was flying and I had nothing to do but look around and watch the excitement. Off to the left, I could see the other groups dropping their 500-pounders on the docks and railroad yards. Clouds of smoke rose from the explosions. The other groups were attracting quite a bit of inaccurate flak, hundreds of large black bursts.

Then I could see bomb clusters from the other two planes of our element start to drop. That meant that our bombs would be dropping too.

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Clusters drop out horizontally and, a few feet below the plane, the six little bombs split away from each other and point their noses down toward the target in a long parabolic arc.

"Bombs Away! Bomb bay doors closed."

Suddenly two bursts of flak went off directly between us and the other wing ship. I could hear them both faintly. Then about five seconds later there was a tremendous explosion which seemed to come from behind my seat. I could hear pieces of metal tearing through the plane in several places. The cockpit was filled with dust and smoke, and for the first time I could smell the acrid garlic-like odor of the charge.

The flak had gone off just below our plane, causing it to lurch violently. The number two engine began to wind up like a siren. I looked at the tachometer and saw it passing 2500. I glanced at the pilot. He nodded. I shut off the engine and feathered the prop. Another explosion came from the starboard side. I glanced at engines three and four. Oil was gushing from the top of number three. I cut it off, too, and feathered. Casey and I were both thinking the same thing: "Did one of those explosions get number one or four?"

**W**E had lost so much speed that our element was far ahead of us. I saw the second element of three planes, led by Lieutenant David W. Bishop, snuggling in on our wing to give us protection from the fighters which were now swarming about.

We kept the throttles on our two engines wide open. We dived and turned until we were out of the anti-aircraft zone. But the Messerschmitts, Reggianis and Macchis were still on us. We could hear the pounding of every gun on our plane. The gunners knew that they were fighting for dear life and the sound of their guns proved it. After the first attempt, the enemy fighters decided not to press the attack. We all breathed easier when we discovered that no one on the plane had been injured and that we could hold our altitude without forcing the two remaining engines too much.

On the long journey home I suppose the Mediterranean was just as beautiful as it had been on the trip out, but somehow it didn't have the same appeal. During the entire day there wasn't anything that looked as beautiful as our home base as we circled it prior to landing.

Casey made a beautiful landing. When the wheels touched the ground "The Grem-lin" swerved sharply to the left, the first indication we had that the left tire had been punctured by flak. But Casey kept the plane on the runway with the number one engine.

When the engines finally came to rest and all was quiet, Casey turned to me with a smile and said, "Those Italians really take that 'See Naples and Die' stuff seriously, don't they?"

"I think the Italians will remember today, too," the intelligence officer said as he wrote the report of our bombardier. ☆