

HOW WE ALMOST SET THE HARBOR AT TUNIS ON FIRE

March 12, 1943 was moving day for Ben Dodds and myself. We were vacating our half below, half above-ground two-man hut that had shelter halves for a cover.

Six-man pyramidal tents were being issued to the 37th combat crews. This was a much better situation for us. A whole crew would be under one roof, above ground and dry, with more room for each man and the convenience of a home-made stove to cook our eggs on.

The 17th Bomb Group had been at muddy Telergma for some time. The field site was located on a smooth plain between a range of low mountains near the small town of Telergma ^{ALGERIA} about 30 miles from the ancient city of Constantine. Our targets had been Axis bridges, airfields and shipping. And while the enemy had been hurt, it was not done without losses to us.

On Feb. 24 the 37th lost 3 of the 6 planes it sent out with group in a raid on Alouina airfield outside of Tunis.

The end of February saw Rommel pushed back from the Kasserine area where his armor was only a few hours away from our field. Our crews were becoming more professional under such pressure. And for relaxation we had found the city of Constantine and the hot mineral baths at Sidi Athmenia.

Late in the afternoon of the 12th the call came out that the next day's mission schedules were being posted, something eagerly watched since that would tell which crews would be flying as the sun came up.

My name was posted, which wasn't unusual. But this time one crew, the one I was scheduled to go with, had been set aside, separate from the other crews, on the bottom of the page. The

order stated this crew will fly aircraft #970, 10:30 takeoff time, X mission.

The crew was listed as follows:

Pilot	Lt. Boone
Co-Pilot	Lt. Cheeves
Navigator/ Bombardier	Lt. Leigh
Engineer	S/Sgt. Southland
Radio Operator	Sgt. Donato
Ordnance	S/Sgt DeBeau
Aircraft Crew Chief	Sgt. Larsen

"X mission," what the hell was that? And bringing a crew chief along too!

After chow and most of that evening we tried to figure out what a "X" mission would be. No one seemed to know. So after much speculation between ourselves we ate our snack of fried eggs and went to sleep.

March 13, morning was snappy and clear. We ate early breakfast, and went out to ship #970, which showed a pygmy African warrior blowing a dart gun painted on its nose with the lettering "A Shade Raunchy" - just a shade.

We pulled the usual pre-flight checks with the ground crew, but our cargo caused even more speculation. We carried no bomb load. Instead several large wooden boxes and half a dozen 20' lengths of 1-inch galvanized water pipe were loaded on board and fitted into the bomb bays.

Only Lt. Boone had been briefed. When he came out to the ship about 10 a.m., he only smiled when we inquired what was up?

He kept tapping an envelope with his fingers and said we have sealed orders. We would all know as soon as we were airborne, he said. So we shrugged off the uncertainty, ran the props through, taxied out, and took off. In the air, we circled the field once while Lt. Boone opened the orders ceremoniously. He announced we were to go to the French airfield at Biskra, about 150 miles south of Telergma. There we were to "proceed as instructed".

The flight to Biskra took about an hour. We flew over the rough back of the Atlas mountains with peaks 5,000' high and rugged, rocky valleys below. We passed over them at 9,000'. As we started to descend for our approach, I could see a camel caravan plodding along a trail in the foothills. Then the desert came into view. We made an easy approach to Biskra. The airfield, about 2 miles from town was just flat hard ground without benefit of a tower. We landed on a well marked-up strip, taxied over to a small metal hangar that could have been a relic of World War I. It had "Aerodrome di Biskra" in weathered letters over the front entry.

As we exited the ship a squad of French soldiers stood at attention for us - a gesture of recognition we hadn't expected. And we were greeted by an ordinance detachment of about 12 men commanded by a Capt. Race. Also on hand were 2 full Colonels to add importance to our mission. They were observers- The first, Col. Campbell was an Air Force officer, a personal representative of President Roosevelt, we later learned. The second Col. Stuart was an infantry officer and a West Point man. After introductions we secured the ship and French soldiers were posted to guard it. And it was only then I realized that routine and "raunchy" old #970 now had a glamorous Norden sight on board.

We were taken into town - but not for easy living. We were set up in a rusty place, the ancient hotel Transatlantique in the center of town, a flea-bag with a fancy name. Each of us were issued a mattress cover, straw to fill it, and 2 blankets. The full crew was set up in one over-size room on the round floor. This was to be home for our stay here, however long that would be. There was also a 6-man R.A.F. maintenance crew from a Beaufighter squadrom stranded here. They had a couple of equally rusty smaller rooms. The Englishmen and ourselves filled the hotel.

Our first job came that afternoon when we went back to the field to help Crew Chief Larsen put some plugs in the airscoops so that blowing sand would not get into the air intakes.

Biskra airfield had been used earlier by the Germans and by U.S. P-38's. But now all that remained were a few old French twin engine bombers that had escaped from the German occupation of France. There also was a large twin engine bi-plane that at one time had been at a Paris airfield. It must have been at least 20 years old and had some Rube Goldberg contraptions to keep it airborne. The whole flying picture seemed more linked to the past than the future.

The next morning we were picked up at the Transatlantique by a weapons carrier and brought to the airfield to start work on our mysterious mission.

And it was surprising. Our job, we learned, was to air drop homemade "gas and rubber bombs", something none of us had ever seen before.

Capt. Race and his men were working on a highly flammable device. This consisted of a ~~50~~⁵⁵ gallon gas drum that was half filled with chips of rubber hacked off of a large block of crude

rubber with machetes. The balance of the drum was then ~~dropped~~^{topped} off with gasoline. This mixture would set overnight and become a jelly-like mass in the drum.

Some drums had fins welded on the ends for stability. Some had no fins but a long contact fuse into the drum to aid ignition. Others had an incendiary bomb screwed into a flange that had been tack-welded to the drum end.

The drums had two, one-half inch wire rope cables spaced to receive our bomb shackles. These were secured by locking clamp bolts. We were told that a B-25 had been tested to drop the drums but its bomb bay doors were too narrow to accept the drum. So a B-26-- ours - was requested to replace the B-25.

Hence we came to Biskra on an "X mission".

The bombs were completely experimental. Col Campbell felt that they would be very effective against shipping, specifically in the Axis supply port of Tunis. The small Sieble ferries the Germans used would be especially ~~vulnerable~~ to fire.

The experimenters were anxious for us to drop the first two drums that were now ready. While they were being loaded into the bomb bay we could see that the homemade contraptions barely cleared the bomb bay doors. This caused much anxiety to the air crew, to say the least. A wedged drum could ignite the plane.

It was a very concerned crew that took off with the first bombs from Biskra.

Lt. Leigh had no bombing tables for this configuration. They were to be dropped from 300 feet into a small lake a few miles away. Leigh was interested in the trajectory. Race wanted to know how they would react on contact with a water surface.

The next few days we dropped at least a dozen. Some were duds, some were infernos.

On one flight, for some reason, we had a delayed drop and the bomb hit the desert floor instead of the lake. When it hit, the bomb went off and left a spectacular trail of fire as it skidded along the ground.

On one occasion I went to the drop site with Capt. Race as an observer and to photograph the hit. We had a K-20 camera with us. But we had a dual abort. The bombs came down with a swooshing rushing noise and just plunked into the water. The camera jammed. So we got neither photos nor fire. Later, when we cleared it, all I got was a picture of Capt. Race in the jeep we had come to the lake in.

On about the fifth day of trials, we blew a booster coil in our right engine as we were taxiing for takeoff. We had no replacement parts with us, so it was decided to see if one of the French bombers would ferry Lt. Boone and Sgt. Larsen back to Telergma to pick up a replacement part. The French C.O. was agreeable. A French medium bomber took off with Boone and Larsen for Telergma. I tried to get on, too, but the French pilot, a veteran of 2,000 hours waved me off, he said the plane was now full.

I went back in some disappointment to our ship. Because Mel Southland said he wanted to change the plugs in the right engine; maybe he would need some help. I could speak some Italian so he sent me over to the French Hangar to see if they had some spark plug grease. Somehow the French mechanics understood my Italian - and we got the grease.

By now 3 hours had passed and the French bomber was overdue on

the return flight from Telergma. When six hours had passed we all became concerned, including the French C.O.

There was a small operations building on the field so I was sent over to see if I could raise Telergma somehow to find out what was happening.

There was only a telephone and a reluctant French noncom in the office. He finally agreed to call Constantine. The code name for Constantine was "nutmeg". The call was transferred to Telergma post office and then somehow to 37th operations from where a 37th voice said that no French bomber had arrived as yet from Biskra. We were then cut off.

The French bomber from Biskra never reached Telergma. It had crashed into the mountains near Batna with no survivors. A close call for me, a sad accident for our crew mates.

The next day a 37th squadron B-26 landed at Biskra piloted by a disturbed Major Bowen, our C.O. He brought in a pilot replacement, Lt. Manley, and a Crew Chief replacement, Sgt. Jack Gordon. With a full crew we continued to make drops into the lake, some duds, some real live ones.

One day as we were taking off for a drop, we saw a B-26 preparing to land. When we got back we found eminent visitors. Gen. Jimmie Doolittle had arrived to see what progress was being made on the trials. A special run was made for him. He watched from near the drop area. Both bombs just plunked into the lake. Duds.

However, Doolittle expressed confidence in the bomb and said, encouragingly, that it would only be a question of time before a reliable fire bomb would be perfected. He then departed, and left us to go back to the tests.

We must have dropped about 30 of these bombs with about a 50 percent detonation rate over the course of about 13 days.

And then the way we came, we departed, an order went up on the board. We packed our flight bags. But two comrades had been lost in that trial time.

Before we left we were instructed not to discuss our doings at Biskra with anyone.

When we arrived at Telergma I was told my close friend Fred Clive was K.I.A. on March 22, it happened on a sea sweep. An Italian fighter made one fatal pass and the B-26 fell into the sea near Sicily.

Ben Dodds had fared better, his shot up ship bellied in near Bone. The crew walked away from it but Ben was badly shaken up by it, to say the least.

In May of 1943 - only weeks after our Biskra tests - the African campaign came to an end with the defeat of the Axis African armies. I had kept a meager diary during the Biskra affair and soon after the war ended I started to put together some order of the events as they occurred using the diary and pictures that were taken at Biskra.

Then the notes took a long slumber. In 1972 I tried to locate Capt. Race and others with no success. Then I decided to write to retired General James Doolittle to ask if he could enlighten me as to the final outcome of the Biskra trials. The attached letter was his reply.

At the Dayton and Colorado Springs reunions of the 17th Group I met Mel Southland and Jack Gordon where we further discussed the events at Biskra.

We never did find out the outcome of our gas and oil bombs. But, recently, while looking through a copy of "The Log of the Liberators", lo and behold, there was a picture of a formation of B-24's of the 819th Squadrom 30th Bomb Group dropping 55-gallon drums-of what was by then called NAPALM - on two Jima on February 1, 1945. So it would appear that our fickle contraptions in the African campaign were finally perfected and used in combat two years later in the far Pacific war.

Joe Donato, 37th, March 1980

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