

U.S. ARMY EXPERIENCES, Harry L. O'Neal, T/Sgt. , ASN 19028070

Page last updated: 11/25/55422 19:18:30

Part 3

The next morning they gave us a two and a half ton truck, a driver, and six shovels and told us to go get a load of gravel. When we asked where the gravel was, the First Sergeant told us, "I don't want any crap out of you, just go get me a load of gravel". With that we jumped in the truck and started off. Our first thought was to head for the nearest town, get a few drinks, kill some time, and then report there was no gravel to be had. We were about half way to town when we spied a pile of gravel off the side of the road saying that it belonged to the Algerian road department. One of the things that we learned early in our Army training was to forage for whatever was needed. Foraging basically is just helping yourself to anything that's handy, no matter whose it is. We backed the truck up to the pile and threw several shovels of the gravel into the bed of it. Within a few minutes there were a half dozen Arabs around us mooching cigarettes. Sergeant Lox showed them a pack of cigarettes, handed one of them his shovel, and motioned him to shovel the gravel into the truck. It was just a matter of moments until all six of them were shoveling the gravel. They did a real fast job of loading the truck and after they finished Lox put a shell in his rifle and pointed at a rock about two hundred yards away. When he shot we could see dust rise. I had to try it and I also hit it. One of the older Arabs wanted to try and pointed at the rifle and himself. Since I was the ranking Sergeant, Lox asked me if it was alright. I had him wait until I put a clip of shells into my Thompson and then Lox handed him the rifle and he hit the rock also. The cigarettes we gave the Arabs cost six cents a package so we got the truck loaded for twelve cents. The loading had gone so quickly we decide to explore the country side a bit. The first thing we found was an American ammunition dump stretched alongside the road for at least twenty five miles. We checked it carefully to see if it was guarded, and to find out what was there. We threw two boxes of 45 calibre machine gun ammunition on the truck, 4000 rounds, a box of .30 calibre rifle ammunition, 1000 rounds, and a box of .30 calibre machine gun ammunition. As we drove back to the base we scooped holes in the gravel and buried the ammunition in them, except that we opened the .30 calibre machine gun ammunition and removed the tracers from the belt (Every fifth round) and then threw the rest of the ammo and the belt over the side along with the box. The reason we wanted the ammunition was that the four hundred rounds that were given us as we landed were accountable. We were always expected to keep this available to meet any emergency. No one ever told us we couldn't have several thousand. Needless to say, with all that ammunition we became quite proficient in the use of our weapons. When we got the boxes to our tent we pried up some of the ends of the belly-tank boxes we were using for flooring and scooped out holes to hold the boxes and then relaid the flooring. At one time we must have had twenty five thousand rounds buried there. Often we'd be driving along and come upon an Arab riding a burrow down the middle of the road and no amount of honking would get them to move one way or the other. When

they finally left the road we found that a tracer bullet in the grass beside them really got them activated. They respected the fire that resulted. After several weeks of the general duty the Fighter Group that we were to service became operational and we were moved back to the flight line. The thing that kept us fairly safe from too much hassle was the fact that we were graduate mechanics which were in short supply. Not too long after that about thirty-five of us were put on detached service with the 310th Bomb Group who were flying B-26 bombers. One of our crowning achievements was the repair of a B-26 that had one of it's main landing gear struts collapse while taxiing back to it's hardstand after landing. We supported the side with the damaged strut with our C-4 wrecker and towed it to our work area which was on the opposite side of the runway from the bomb group. To enable us to remove the wing we built a wooden cradle and lowered the fuselage into it. Then we removed the right engine and wing. We had to go to the nearest salvage yard for a wing and strut from one of the wrecked aircraft there. When we got it back to the base we installed it on the plane. We were a day or two from completion when the Engineering Officer from the Bomb Group came over to see what us crazy guys were doing. When we told him we were changing the wing on the B-26 he replied that it was impossible, that it had never been done in the field before. When we finally finished it and inspected it to be sure we hadn't overlooked anything it was returned to the Bomb Group. They serviced it with gas and flew it to a salvage depot for dismantling for parts. All because they'd never seen one fixed in the field before. I found myself wishing that they'd spent all that time in the fuselage, in all that heat, with me.

Just after we'd finished the B-26 I told the Captain, our Engineering Officer, that we'd been working sunrise to sunset seven days a week, and needed some time off. He said to take a jeep and a friend and go to town and have a few drinks. We promptly did that and asked where the girls were. They told us in the next town. When we got there the story was the same. On the way we picked up a couple of G.I.s who were hitch-hiking. We ended up in Constantine, where the fellows we'd picked up knew people that lived in a large apartment house. We drank and talked with them for a couple of hours and finally had to start back to camp. They came with us. On the way they asked what we'd been eating. We replied C-rations. One of them asked if we'd had any ham, which of course we hadn't. They took us into the ration dump area where they worked and loaded a wooden box full of hams onto the jeep. Then they took off to get us a sack of sugar. While they were gone Sergeant Lox got out of the jeep and loaded another box of the hams aboard. The other fellows returned with a sack of sugar and asked if we wanted a case of cigarettes. Just as we were saying yes a huge black guard stepped out of the shadows and told us we'd better leave or he'd have to shoot us. We believed him and hit the trail. When we got back to camp we just parked the jeep in front of our tent and fell into bed.

The next thing I knew we were being shaken awake. I felt like I'd barely gotten to sleep. It was the Captain wanting to know where we'd gone. I told him not to ask because he wouldn't believe us. When I finally told him Constantine he said we couldn't have, there hadn't been enough time. I asked him why he'd asked, we'd told him that he wouldn't believe us. We had monstrous hangovers from all the crap we'd had to drink so he sent someone after coffee for us and then we went out to the jeep to look into the boxes. When we got the lid off one of them we found six of the nicest twenty pound hams we'd ever seen, packed in rock salt. We gave the cook one who soaked it in water to get rid of some of the salt and then boiled it for a while. The next morning we had half a slice of it served with our french toast. It sure was good, but salty. I'll bet that I drank ten gallons of water during the day after I'd eaten that ham. We ate several of them, gave some away, and finally got rid of the last of them by trading

them to other organizations for spare parts we needed to fix our planes with.

Another time we were detached to service the 14th Fighter Group. They were issued P-38 aircraft. While it was a good airplane in the air it was pure misery to work on. It had a landing gear selector valve in the nose wheel well that occasionally went out and I got to change one of them. Their line chief came over to see how I was making out and I told him that it took me five hours to get the damned thing out. He thought that was wonderful, it took them eight. It went back easier, but it wasn't something I wanted to do all the time.

Something else the P-38 had was an oil tank that held a gallon or so of oil. It was located at the very back of the cockpit. You couldn't lay on your stomach and work on it, rather you had to lay on your back and reach back over your head and feel where to dismantle it. It seemed that if flak ever hit the airplane a piece of it always found that tank so we'd have to remove and replace it. We were never able to go out and pick one of the planes up and bring it back for repairs. Even with the wing off they were too wide to cross the bridges on the roads in the area. There were lots of frogs by the creek but we couldn't get close enough to them to catch them. We searched through all the airplane escape kits we could find looking for fish hooks. When we finally found some we straightened them out and then reshaped them so we could fasten them together and make a frog gig. We made up two of them and went off to get the frogs. We still couldn't get close enough to them. Finally I had the guys point them out to me and I set my machine gun on single fire and shot them. It turned out this was the best way to get them, when I'd hit one it would blow his body apart, and then all you had to do was dig around in the mud for the hind legs. We got about three dozen pairs and headed back to camp to cook them. As we were cooking them one of the other fellows in camp, who hadn't been with us, kept saying he'd sure like to try them, he'd never had any of them before. He sounded so pitiful I finally gave him my share. Boy was I glad that I did, everyone that ate them got sick. It never dawned on us that all frogs aren't edible.

When we didn't have any planes to work on time hung real heavy on our hands. Rollins and I read every book that we could find and finally decided to see if we could start a library. Our first order was for twenty-five or thirty books. When we got them we made a list of them so we knew what we had. We put the books in a box in the tent along with a pad of paper. When someone got a book he wrote his name and the date on the paper pad. When he brought it back he paid five cents a day for every day he'd had it. The money we collected we plowed right back into more books. It didn't take very much effort on our part and it gave a lot of us something to do to while the hours away.

One day one of the guys in the tent was looking for something under his bed. We were only allowed one sixty watt light bulb in each tent and it was so dark he really couldn't see anything. He had a candle stuck in the top of a whiskey bottle sitting on his foot locker so he lit it and was using it to see under the bed. While he was doing this a scorpion came crawling into the tent, attracted by the light. He took the candle and dripped hot wax on him stuck him to the ground. While he was doing this another one came into view so he took a couple of sticks and put it beside the first one and stuck it to it. An hour later he had over two hundred of them in a big ball.

They had a very strange assortment of bugs and insects. We were issued mosquito nets for our beds which we kept suspended over them all the time. The net was tucked under your bed clothing at the head, foot and the side towards the tent wall at all times. At night when you went to bed you got into it fully clothed and then tucked the loose side in also. You undressed or not as you wished and kept your shoes in your bed with you. They had some green insects that looked like grass hoppers but that didn't

have any wings. They'd eat anything. Every once in a while one would get on your mosquito net and you could hear them clipping their way through the netting. Two of our fellows in the outfit got Purple Hearts from wounds they got when a grasshopper mine exploded near them. The cases the medals came in were covered with the same material that the ribbon on the medal was made of. One of the guys left his out on top of his foot locker all night and when he got up in the morning they had eaten all the ribbon from the top and four sides of the case. If you mashed one of them with your foot another one would come along and eat the remains.

Once I was riding around in the jeep on a South African Airbase. As I drove along I saw something out of the corner of my eye that looked like a hand grenade. I stopped the jeep and went back to investigate. After I had looked the area over carefully I decided that it was part of their ammunition dump or storage area. The grenades were British MARK IV type and there must have been five or six hundred of them. I gathered up three dozen of them and put them into the jeep. Then I got to wondering if they were fused. When I unscrewed the base plate on one of them there was no fuse or cap inside. I went back into the area and soon discovered some tin cans. When I opened one of them I found it contained eighteen percussion cap, fuse, and dynamite cap assemblies. I took two of the cans of the fuses with me and went on to our tent on the airbase. When we got back to our base after the trip I got to wondering if toting the fuse assemblies around in the cans was such a good idea so I finally removed them from the cans and loaded them into the grenades. I stored them under a couple of layers of clothing in my foot locker. Sometime after I'd found the grenades and we were back in camp someone pinched two B-2 flight jackets that one of the Officers had ordered from the depot. The Commanding Officer called a formation and told everyone that if the jackets were turned into the orderly room within the next half hour there would be no questions asked. When the jackets weren't turned in they started the search. The Supply Officer, named Leaviss, came to our tent and asked who was in charge. When I told him I was he asked to be shown my gear so I showed him my two barracks bags, two B-2 bags and my foot locker. He threw open the foot locker lid and started digging in the clothing. It didn't take him long to get to the grenades. At that point he got kind of white and asked if the grenades were alive or dead. When I told him they weren't any good dead he suggested that I take them to an ordnance outfit and get them defused. I told him there was no need for that because I was the one that had fused them. With that he carefully closed the lid to my foot locker and left without looking at anything else in the tent. The jackets were never found. General Rommel and his Afrika Korp were finally defeated and fled to Italy. The fighter group that we were assigned to had a field day shooting down transport planes that were carrying his troops to Italy. Anyone that could get wheels headed into Tunis to see what he could find in the things they had left behind. One officer found a case of Luger pistols and loaded them in his jeep. When he got back to the town nearest the airbase he went into a local restaurant to eat. When he came out he found out that some one not only had stolen his box of Lugers, but had taken his jeep also. An enlisted man in one of the fighter outfits also came back with a Luger. When he was showing it to his friends one of them asked how the slide mechanism worked. When he pulled the slide back the gun exploded, killing him and wounding several of the bystanders.

Our next move was near the city of Tunis in Tunisia. We were nearly always away from the main organization on detached service with fighter groups, patching up their aircraft. The thing that comes to mind most about this base was the German air raids on the city of Bizerte. The German aircraft would fly overland so they could make their bomb-run over Bizerte towards the sea. In doing this they flew directly over us. We were directed not to fire on them, or to show any lights of any kind, as we

might light up our position and draw their bombs. We could hear them going over very plainly and would get a bottle of something to drink and then go set in the jeeps to watch the fireworks display as the British anti-aircraft batteries opened up on them. Each of the rounds fired went up at different rates of speed, so that we could distinguish what size shells were being fired. At the first sign of an air raid the British immediately fired off smoke bombs that completely obscured the city from view. We could see the smoke hovering over the city and the search lights trying to locate one of the German bombers. Every once in a while they'd get one in their beams and all the gun fire would converge on it and blow it out of the sky. Our camp was about five or six miles from the city, which was close enough to see the fireworks but far away enough to stay out of trouble.

One of the the fighter pilots eported seeing two U.S. planes on the sand along the beach west of Bizerte. They sent our crew in to bring them out. We took a tractor and trailer, a cletrac caterpillar, a jeep and jeep trailer, and our two and a half truck that was outfitted as a mobile repair unit. The unit normally consisted of eight men and we carried about fifty thousand dollars worth of tools and equipment. When we got started we found that we had to cross fourteen miles of sand. Since our truck and truck tractor only had two wheel drive we had to off load the Cletrac that we were carrying on the trailer and use it to tow the vehicles one at a time to the aircraft. Once we examined the aircraft we found that the Arabs had been there before us. They'd picked holes through the fuselage and wings of the planes, a P-38 and a P-40, to get at the tires. They cut slabs of the tires away, apparently to make soles for their sandals. We radioed back to the outfit for instructions and were told to burn them if we could. We'd been skinny dipping in the sea and found that an ammunition lighter must have capsized off-shore at some time or other. We gathered the powder charges that had washed ashore and found that we had eighteen hundred pounds of one hundred and five millimeter howitzer charges. We loaded a thousand pounds into the P-38 and the other eight hundred pounds into the P-40. Of course we had removed the guns, ammunition, engines and anything else we thought of value to us before we put the powder into them. One of the guys and I flipped a coin to see who got to toss the incendiary grenade into them to start them burning. His name was Willie Hathenbrook and he won the toss. He pulled the pin and tossed the grenade into the wheelwell and all that happened was the grenade burnt a hole through the skin and dropped to the ground without igniting the powder. At that I lit a match and touched it to the powder and that started the fire. At that point we went to the other plane and lit it also.

We had quite a few fifty calibre machine guns and lots of ammunition, so we decided we'd try to fire one of them. We shook the sand out of one of them as best we could and tied it onto one side of the Cletrac. Then we pulled the tracers out of one of the belts of ammunition and made up a short belt of them. We threw a battery on the Cletrac and drove it to the water's edge. Fixed guns in the wings of fighter planes do not have triggers but are fired by solenoids and have to be connected to the planes electrical system. We got the gun charged manually and sat Willie behind the gun with the battery and the wire he had to touch the battery with. and told him to fire. The gun fired only one round, simply because the Cletrac shook so much that he couldn't hold the wire on the battery. We got off two or three more rounds like this and finally Willie figured out how to hold the wire better and we got off three rounds. We were standing there watching them drift out over the Mediterranean Sea. Dusk had just fallen, when a flare went off over Bizerte and a plane flew overhead. We quit firing and went back to our vehicles.

When the Germans pulled out of North Africa they had to abandon most of their military supplies. On our airbase there were two 88mm anti-aircraft guns sitting side by side. One had had the breech mechanism blown apart and the other the recoil mechanism. At every corner

intersection of the road there piles of 88 mm shells. We thought that rather than let the Ordnance types gather all the shells up and dispose of them we'd put the recoil mechanism from one gun on the other and expend the ammunition. We never got it past the talking stage however and the shells were gathered up by the Ordnance people and dumped them into a dry cistern. When we asked how much they'd dumped there they said at least a hundred tons. When we asked how they intended to dispose of it they told us that when they were ready to pull out they were going to lower a charge down to it, hook on all the fuse they had and could find, string it out and when they came to the end of it they were going to light it and drive away as fast as they could. I never found out if they did it or not.

The war had wound down in Africa, so the time had arrived for us to move over into Italy. The fighter group that we had been servicing was given the choice of staying in the 12th Tactical Air Force or moving into the newly formed 15th Strategic Air Force. At the time they'd been flying P-38 and P-47 aircraft. They voted for the 15th and were issued brand new P-51s. Their planes were distinguishable by the black and yellow checkered tail surfaces. The individual squadrons within the group by the color of the propellor spinner. We were transferred into it also. It turned out we were charter members of both the 12th and 15th Air Forces. The Italians had divorced themselves from the Germans, and our troops had made a beach-head at Anzio. We once again boxed, labeled and weighed our equipment. This time we put all our personal gear into our mobile unit and drove it directly into the LST (Landing ship tank). The truck held all of the units belongings along with all the tools and gear we normally carried. The first thing we noticed was a crew unloading the customary three days emergency rations at the rear end of the hold. The first meal we had aboard was breakfast. It turned out the ship had been turned over to the British on Lend Lease. They served kippered herring and pork and beans for the breakfast meal. We went down into the hold to get our coffee pot and some coffee and while we were there we moonlighted 2 cases of K-rations from the emergency supplies. While we didn't want to make a career out of eating K-rations they were better than the food the Limeys served and three days wasn't all that long. The first two nights we brought our cots and blankets up on deck for sleeping. For the last night I only brought the cot and a suit of high altitude flying gear that I'd accumulated. I had everything but fur lined gloves and helmet. It was a very miserable night. My hands felt like two lumps of ice and there was a ring around each ankle that the suit and boots didn't cover. With the suit completely zipped up it was too hot inside and with the zipper opened a little I felt like I was freezing. In addition as I laid there I got to watching the cargo booms rotating back and forth against the clouds in the sky and got about two thirds seasick. We passed Sicily, got a wonderful view of Mt. Etna with the snow at it's top, passed thru the Straits of Messina, and finally came to our debarking spot at the city of Taranto up inside the heel of Italy.

The LST pulled up to the debarking site, opened the bow doors and let down the ramp. The first thing off the boat were two of our guys who hit the beach and promptly headed for the nearest wine shop. While they were ordering their wine the owner came in and told his wife to charge them five extra lire a glass because they were just off the boat. One of the fellows was an Italian whose folks had come from northern Italy and he was fair complected. After they'd had several glasses of wine and were getting ready to leave he walked over to the owner and started speaking to him in Italian. The owner's face got red and he told his wife to refund the overcharges to them.

Our first home in Italy was at Foggia, the birth place of Fiorello La Guardia who at one time had been the Mayor of New York City. We didn't stay there very long before we were moved adjacent to a lake near a small farming town called San Severo, just about due north of Foggia. San Severo was a small farm town and when you walked down the street you

could see they were drying things on racks on the sidewalks outside their homes. You couldn't see what it was they were drying until you got up close, because everything in the racks was covered with flies. You didn't dare eat anything that had been dried in this manner or you had instant dysentery. They must have built up an immunity to it but we never did. The only thing that stopped dysentery was paregoric. I finally got my self a twelve ounce bottle of it, and where I went, it went. The medics ran out of it once and tried treating everyone with one of the sulfa drugs, and it never even slowed it down. If you even thought about dysentery you got your bottle out and took a swig. Speaking of dysentery, the camp at San Severo was built on farming soil that sloped about a degree or degree and a half. Our toilet consisted of a pit about two feet wide, eight feet long, and six feet deep. A platform was built over this and four walls and a roof were added.. The seat inside would accommodate four persons at a time. The back wall was solid, and the other three walls were solid about halfway up and screened in the rest of the way. One end of the building had a screen door in it. When the rains came the water ran down the sloped ground and into the pit until it was about half full. As the days wore on the floor had a decided spring to it when you stepped inside. The main topic of conversation seemed to be who was going to fall into it. One Saturday morning one of the guys, Herschel Walker, who had a monstrous hangover, more or less staggered up to the door, entered, and dropped his drawers and sat down rather hard. The floor gave way and dropped him into the pit. When he came to rest the waste matter was halfway up his chest. He stood there yelling for help until the C-4 wrecker was driven up close to the toilet and the hook lowered from the boom so that he could hold on to it and get lifted out. The truck carried him to the center of the company street where he was told to disrobe. Someone got a bucket of hundred octane gas to pour over his clothing so it could be burnt. All of a sudden the Supply Sergeant came running out of the supply tent yelling "Save his shoes, I don't have his size". He had to scrub and wash them and go on wearing them.

One evening while I was on Charge of Quarters an old Italian wandered into the orderly room and started telling me, in Italian, about some dead bodies on a hillside. I had to send for one of our fellows that spoke Italian and finally found out that a plane had flown into a hilltop and burned and the crew were all dead and scattered among the wreckage. The day before we had been over by the control tower running up the engines on a B-24 bomber that was parked there when the tower sent a man down to ask us to shut them down. They had heard two planes pass overhead in the fog and figured they were too low. They were unable to raise them on their radio and came down and tried the radio in the B-24, but never did raise them. The next day I took a crew out there and we searched for several hours and were about to give up when we finally found the crash site. The plane belonged to the British Air Force. They had a cargo of hand grenades and ammunition that was being delivered to Yugoslavia. They were flying in dense fog and missed clearing the top of the hill by about fifty feet. The Italians had stolen all their shoes and had cut the canopies out of their parachute packs. We marked a trail from the site and returned to camp. The next day they sent another crew to remove the bodies. Along in here sometime I became aware that for the first time that I had at least a dozen new pairs of mechanic's overalls. All across Africa, when I asked for a new pair, I was told they didn't have my size. I suddenly remembered the grenades. After the Supply Officer saw them in my tent all my needs seemed to get attended to. All our runways and taxi strips were made of interlocking steel matting. The runway was always one hundred feet wide and between five and six thousand feet long. The taxi strips were about forty feet wide and ran along the entire length of the runway on either side. The revetments where the planes were parked were all on one side of the runway and housed the hundred and twenty planes assigned to the

Fighter Group. On the side opposite they had the control tower and revetments to hold a few visiting aircraft. Our area was at the top of the runway on the same side as the Fighter Groups. I say top of the runway because the top of the runway was a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet higher than the lower end. At the bottom of the runway there was about one hundred feet of marshland and then a lake, Lake Lesina. It was pretty good size but only four or five feet deep. At the top of the runway there was about fifty feet of open ground and then a roadway with a drainage ditch on either side.