HARRISON'S FLATS – A LEGACY FOR ITALY

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15th AAF in Italy. The Germans came and lived among them quietly and usually as gentlemen, but when they left, they took with them or destroyed the paintings, the sculptures, the ageless works of art and finally the laughter of these people. All that went to make up the soul of their nation.

Then as the Americans came and lived among them, often noisily, but they brought back to the people laughter, happiness and somehow a feeling that the good years were upon them again.

The Italian was at first suspicious, a natural state of mind that usually lasted for as long as five or ten minutes – then they recognized their friends – the Americans. Fabulous bearers of cigarettes, chocolate candy and chewing gum and other gifts to make the bambinos and signorinas and peasanos bleary-eyed with happiness. And a race of men that threw around hundred lire notes like the chaff that blows from the grain at threshing time.

And when the American leaves he'll take no work of art that he hasn't paid twice over for and there'll not be time bombs left in beautiful churches or buildings. Further than that he'll leave with a record of construction unequalled by any conquering army.

Let's take an example – an outstanding example to be sure, but, one that personifies the American idea of how to move into a strange country, conquer it and then leave it in a better shape than when they found it.

Early this year, a conglomeration of farmers, stock clerks, machinist, roustabouts, office boys, lawyers, oil workers, factory hands, radio announcers, elevator operators, musicians and a thousand other types of professors, workers, dreamers and doers came to Italy.

They came not as a conglomeration, but, as a fighting team. Some 2,500 individual Americans all trained up to the second, in the jobs that these men will sustain the sixty odd B-24 Liberator bombers that comprised their Group.

Soon after leaving the States, they knew where they were bound and pleasant speculation as to the merits of Italian wine, women, food and even the lovely Italian climate abound.

When they reached Italy, most of them piled into cramped lousy little box cars and set out to find their base.

One lieutenant who was given the dubious privilege of traveling by truck at the head of a convoy said, "We left Naples in the beautiful light of an Italian sunset – and then the rains came. For nine hours we stumbled through the black night, frozen to the marrow. I've never imagined such rain. It came down in torrents, then bucketsful, then torrents again. I remember once we were climbing a steep grade and as we suddenly topped the rise, the boy driving, made a wild grab for the emergency – and was I glad he found it – for leering up at us through the rain was the end of the road where a bridge had been blown out. Finally, after hours of driving, we came to the site of our now base but nothing could be seen except the rain slapping into the mud that lay to the front of the trucks. So we settled down a little farther into our neats and dozed fitfully till dawn. I was awaked at the first glow of light and looked around me at our new home. Nothing could be seen but some bedraggled tents and a sea of mud that seemed to stretch to the horizon – when you could see the horizon through the curtain of sleet and rain."

This was what this group of men faced. The rains were to keep up for endless weeks till every man walked with a peculiar steeping, like a man hitched to a heavy load who grunted and cursed as he lifted one foot painfully after the other from the freezing viscous mud.

There were four buildings on this vast plateau – a farm house and two disreputable stone houses called "Casa Cantoniere" or the "house of the signalman" slouched beside an abandoned one-track railroad. These buildings were taken for the Group and Squadron headquarters and the one other lonely building – a one story granary – became the mess kitchen for the two thousand odd men in the outfit.

Every five or six men were given a tent and the liberty of pitching it anywhere they thought the mud was a little less wet or a little less cold. For the first agonizing couple of weeks, while grounds men and airmen alike struggled to organize themselves and their equipment into flying and fighting

shape, the only surcease they found from the bitter rain and clammy cold was the time they could sit in their tents and huddle around a roaring stove which was usually made from a fifty gallon gasoline drum chiseled in two and fueled with an open can of gasoline. Warm but dangerous, as almost every day there would be a muffled "Boom" and the camp would run to the rescue of the unlucky devils who had spilled their can of gas and set their whole tent and all their possessions into a blazing pyre to their hopes of comfort.

Each day was broken too, by show call, when officers and enlisted men alike stood in the rain while the painfully slow line moved forward – then to run madly for their tents with food and drink so they could eat in comparative comfort by the fire.

Progress was being made though, and daily, more and more planes lumbered down the muddy treacherous taxiways to the gleaming metal strip that served as a runway. There each silver bird would dash madly through the mud and water until safely in its element it could tuck its feet up under its wings.

As the dreary days went on, the men began to rebel within themselves and began to dream of nice warm houses with lovely cement floors and the wind and rain and mud bolted safely outside.

Pretty soon one of the GI trucks took off for an undisclosed destination and returned in a couple of hours carrying a load of "tufa" rock. This soft, porous rock is indigenous to the hills of southern Italy. Its characteristics make it an easy building material to use as it can be sawed into blocks and then shaped to meet any need. Used extensively by the Italians for inexpensive homes, barns, and other farm buildings because it is extremely easy to handle as well as for its low cost, these buildings are weather proof and have the common characteristic of being warm in winter and cool in summer.

And so the first building began. Who set the first one up is still in the realm of conjecture, but a debt of gratitude is owed him.

Soon the whole Group was busy building homes, but it was not as easy as it sounds. Finding the tufa rock was one thing and then finding transportation was another. Often the trucks were used into the wee hours of the morning as the very few in the Group were needed in the daytime to carry out their normal functions. Then, too, there was the problem of finding other building materials. Lumber was the scarcest item with hardware fixtures a close second.

In spite of the difficulties involved – because a good soldier always manages somehow- the individual ground and air crewmen began building

homes and an air base that today compares favorably with many in the States and surpasses more than a few.

In all, approximately 70% of the Group's personnel live in homes designed and constructed by themselves while 100% of them have improved living conditions to an unbelievable extent.

Besides the many fine homes they have built, the members of the individual squadrons have cooperatively built – financed by the men themselves- dispensaries and day rooms and mess halls for the enlisted men, while the entire Group has constructed a comfortable enlisted men's Service Center and an Officer Club and mess which in appointments , equipment and solid comfort, put many similar buildings back home in the shade.

Visiting generals and privates alike are enviously amazed at the complete set-up. Even "Berlin Sally" paid the Group a dubious compliment when she warned them to expect to see all their "pretty little white homes just piles of dust after the Luftwaffe is through with you."

While the shaping of this base was going on, however, the war, too, was going on and as their commanding officer, a young (26) bomb-wise, (Director of Training at the Army Air Force, San Angelo, Texas., School for Bombardiers), West Point Colonel Bertram C. Harrison of Leesburg, Va., said, "We're damn proud of our base and more than proud of the work the men in this outfit did to make it what it is, but don't forget we're still waging a war in the air and whether they live in tents or beautiful stone houses, a lot of those men are still dying over the strategic targets we're smashing daily."

No idle boast was this, as Col. Harrison's Group is one of the crack Liberator outfits in (Major General) Twining's deservedly vaunted 15th Army Air Force.

So the Americans have come and when they leave, they'll leave behind the city called Harrison's Flats in honor of their Commanding Officer, all ready for occupancy. One with a complete electrical system, water system, community showers and buildings which can easily be converted into public building for better than those in the nearby Italian towns. One nearby group of Italians are already planning to leave their centuries-old city and move into the base as soon as the Group moves.

So here is the story, not only of Yankee ingenuity, but also of the spirit of the free men of America – put 'em down anywhere and they'll make a new and better place of it and ask nothing but the chance to finish the job and get back home. End.

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(The following additional information was provided by Mr. Duane Bohnstedt, Historian of the 460th Bomb Group. 15th Army Air Corps, who was stationed at the base in the above "Harrison Flats" Article. He sent me the information below in early 2008, and with his permission now, is added to the above document as a personal account of his experience in 1944-1945 period.)

Mr. Bohnstedt Writes…

Now to something more pleasant. You asked about showers we had in Italy. For several months after we arrived in Italy water was brought in and stored in small tanks mounted on trailers. Drinking water was from LISTER bags suspended on tri pods around the camp area. We did not use much for bathing for a month or probably more. I didn't have my clothes off for over a month. I am sure that we were a really smelly bunch by then. By summer we had water and by then had managed a means to heat it. Most of the time I just heated a small amount in my steel helmet, that was enough to shave and wash up a bit One of the guys, a Captain Tuck rigged up an outside shower with a five gallon can. I think the water was probably cold. The story behind our water supply has an interesting history. I did not know this while we were there, but several years ago I was doing an article for our 460th newsletter and learned about the water supply. I will paste the article. Most of it has nothing to do with the water supply, but you might find it interesting anyhow. (E-Mail 1/26/08)

I found it interesting to learn that our "water supply" and the narrow little road that ran along the north side of our base had such interesting histories. By the summer of 1944, a small building was erected at the well site for use as a shower. The water was not heated.

When we arrived at the wheat field that was to become our base we had little resources, but soon "Yankee" ingenuity came into place. Prior to going overseas, a friend and I anticipated that we might need some basic tools when we got there, even though we had no idea of where we might be going. We made a trip to a hardware store in Savannah and purchased a carpenter saw, and a claw hammer along with pocket knives and sharpening stones. These were not much help when it came to stoves, but they all came in handy otherwise.

The first stove I built was made from about a third of a 55 gallon barrel with a small opening in the front to light it. I cut a hole in the top for a stove pipe which was made from tomato juice cans I salvaged from the mess hall. The barrel was buried about six inches in the ground, and fueled by fuel oil brought in tanks very similar to the ones which held water. The stoves were hard to get started and they put out a tremendous amount of black smoke. I had an interesting experience with ours. One time when I went to light it I was unaware that someone had turned on the oil earlier, but had not lighted the stove. When I tried to light it, it exploded and blew me out of the tent. I later replaced the smoke pipe with German 88 mm shell casings with the top of the shell cut off, these worked better and they lasted the entire time we were in Italy.

There was a problem with burning fuel oil in that the combustion was so poor, that the smoke pipes would fill with soot. I solved this by putting a pulley at the top of the pipe and with a piece of aircraft cable and a lead trailing weight from a B-24 antenna that I was able to run up and down the pipe to clean it. Later, after we built our house I made a smaller stove out of a heavy 5 gallon can. This we fired with 100 octane gas that we drained from our plane. I set up a 40 gallon alcohol tank outside the house and ran a line in under the floor. By using a short length of stainless steel tubing and a valve I was able to control the fuel burn rate. It put out a lot of heat. I mounted a bomb fin crate on the top of the 5 gallon can to provide a flat base to set things on.

Poggiorsini

Poggiorsini. Is that name tucked away somewhere in the back of your mind? It probably is if you served with the 460th Bomb Group in Italy during World War II.

On the high ground, about three quarters of a mile southeast of the Spinazzola Army Air base there was a small, rural village -- its name was Poggiorsini. It could boast of no outstanding place in history, but it was to become a tiny part of the 460th Bomb Group's memories of Italy. In 1944/45, the most recognizable features of this tiny village were the water tower on the northern edge of town, and Santa Maria Addolorata, the village church, both towering above the small homes and shops. This small community, with its friendly people was quite harmless, but it was declared "off limits" to American troops. It, like many other towns and villages, embraced communism. Even though it was "off limits," this did not prevent those with an adventurous spirit from going there for a number of reasons.

When the 460th became operational, there were several British anti-aircraft sites guarding the base, one was located near the Poggiorsini cemetery. It was a short walk from the camp area to share tea, biscuits and conversation with the "Brits." American GIs have always been known for their generous and friendly nature, and the desire to help those less fortunate. During the war years, citizens of Poggiorsini struggled to survive, and, recognizing this, some members of the 460th made an effort to improve their quality of life. Unknown quantities of clothing, food, soap and other items, including parachutes, made their way to this village in 1944/45. Many friendships were made, and it is probable that, for years after the war, a number of young Italian brides were wed wearing "Pioneer Parachute" wedding gowns!

This small and ancient village has an interesting history, its existence being documented as far back as the twelfth century. Located near the road Via Appia which carried pilgrims and crusaders on their way to the Holy Land, it may have been the first "toll road." Travelers who wished to use it were charged a fee. Some refused to pay the toll, preferring to use a road called

“Trotter dei pezzenti,” or “Beggars’ sheep track,” a name that goes back to the first crusades. On this “track,” near Poggiorsini there was a farm named La Capoposta, it served as a place where weary travelers and their horses could rest and obtain food. This farm still exists, known today as Il Cardinale”.

The countryside around Poggiorsini is ideal for the growth of grain, pasture for sheep, grape vineyards and olive groves. Over fifty species of orchids are to be found, along with many other varieties of wild flowers. Those of the 460th who were there in the early months of 1944, will remember the sea of mud that had to be dealt with daily as the snow melted and the rains came. One thing, probably not remembered nor known, is that the water supply for the 460th came from an ancient well, the D'ogna Fontana, which is located about a quarter mile east of the Group headquarters building. Its existence was recorded as far back as the early fourteenth century

The earliest recorded name for the little village of Poggiorsini was Mount Folicato," later it became Macchiavetrana, and finally Poggiorsini, which in Italian means “orsini hill.” This name came into being around 1609, when the village and the area around it were purchased by the Orsini family from the Giaquinto family. Soon after the purchase, the Duca Michele Orsini constructed a country house there. This served to stimulate the building of other dwellings for laborers and sheep herders in the nearby area. The period between 1723 and 1726 saw the construction of another Orsini country home and Ducal Palace. At the same time, foundations were put down for a parochial church, Santa Maria Addolorata. It served the community for hundreds of years, but on 23 July 1930 an earthquake of 6.7 magnitude, named Vulture, severely damaged the village and the church, although the church survived. Since that time there have been various efforts to restore it, but today it is in a state of abandonment.

Poggiorsini remained the private property of the Orsini’s until 1910, at which time it came under the administration of Gravina. The palace was then used to house an elementary school and the local police barracks, and it served as the residence of the municipal doctor. The 1930 Vulture earthquake so damaged the building, that it was demolished in 1934. In 1957 Poggiorsini gained its autonomy. This delightful small commune of 1500 inhabitants is located on a 460 meter high hill. It is no longer the little rural village of 1944/45; today, its tree lined main street is bordered by shops, and surrounded by multistoried apartments and individual homes. A small park, situated on the southern edge of the town, provides a panorama of the deep valley to the south.

While Poggiorsini may not be remembered by many of the 460th Bomb Group--it remembers the 460th. On each of the past 460th visits to the Lorusso farm where the Group was based, the mayor of this small village

shared lunch and memories of the war years with those present. The 460th has not been forgotten.

Photograph

B-24 OVER 460TH BOMB GROUP CAMP AREA 1944.