

Fire in the Night

by Fred Stanton (779th)

[Ed. of the 464th BG newsletter - Fred Stanton (779th) reports on the problems which plagued the early maintenance personnel just after they arrived at Pantanella. He had his memory refreshed by Mike Moyna, sez he. Also, he stated that Jack Shipman may possibly add to this tale.]

In the first few weeks of our arrival in Pantanella, our maintenance crews threw up hastily built shelters of about anything we could find. Myself and two others put together some bomb-bay luggage racks and old tarps. 3 or 4 more shelters were built on the flight line and the rest of the men had built dwellings on the hill, several hundred yards above us in an old apple orchard.

We had only lived in the shanty a few weeks, when I was awakened by a loud crackling and snapping sound. My first thoughts were that the wheat and grass surrounding us was on fire.

Jumping up I raised the tarp window to see utter mayhem. One plane was totally in flames, spouting .50 caliber rounds and tracers in all directions. Before I could hardly react, she blew up, exploding a fireball mushrooming into the night sky. The concussion threw me to the floor without any harm.

The other two men, not knowing what had happened, one ran into the wall trying to find his way out, not as yet fully awake.

Rushing out, I ran into a complete landing gear lying about 30 feet from our shack. It was a scene of chaos and destruction. The exploding aircraft had damaged two more beyond repair. The .50 caliber firing, at first, was like being under enemy fire. Mike Moyna and several others took cover in a nearby ditch. Some were hollerin' and giving commands to hit the ditches. Lucky for us we had these to drop into.

Seems like it was 3-4 hours before anyone could get near the burned aircraft to inspect the scene. This destruction was caused when armament men were working late and were using the gasoline auxiliary engine (the putt-putt) under the flight deck to power their lights. When this evidently leaked and sparked, the fire started and was too far along, when noticed, to extinguish. Men did crank up and taxi a few airplanes from harm.

Next morning the destruction looked like a war zone. I was crewing the Black J at the time of the explosion and fires. Parts of a supercharger from an engine of a burning plane went thru the side of Black J and she was a couple of hundred yards away. [Ed. of 464th BG newsletter - This damage is quite similar to that suffered by Red J on the 2 December 1944 mission to Blechhammer, mentioned previously in this Newsletter.]

Later on, we built 4-5 block houses on the flight line, with the remaining personnel building homes on the hill side. There was a small town constructed there. I often wondered what happened to it. [Ed. of 464th BG newsletter - People who traveled with Joe Stewart's trip to the "Hill" a few years ago, reported that everything had been leveled except for one building which may have been the theatre...correct?]

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