



Date of event: August 7, 1942
Date written: 1985
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INTRODUCTION

Recent issues of MEMORIES have told the stories of members of the outfit that are little known because they were solo efforts or the efforts of a small group (Louis Jones and the Dixie Mission--MEMORIES #14 and the salvage effort at Hsichang--MEMORIES #16). Because one or just a few people were involved, not many members know of these history-making events. This is another story that is little known because it happened to one man--Bob Copley.

THE DAY THE EARTH EXPLODED

The engine didn't hit an open switch because there wasn't any. And if the smash-up had followed the earthquake there might have been some logical explanation; but that's not the way it happened at all.

First the train leaped the track strewn high explosive bombs, fuses, grenades and ammunition along the roadbed; then the earthquake hit with shattering fury; then came the fire. That's the way it happened. In that order. All within a single hour.

The Mestizo Indians living near the village of Naranjo, Guatemala, C.A., probably still talk about the awesome events of that day in August, 1942, because their homes were vaporized by a force so savage that not even the rubble remained.

The events started to unfold in the dead of night near an obscure railroad siding on the outskirts of Guatemala City. Although the mission was shrouded in war-time secrecy, nothing could stifle the laboring whine of the bomb trucks as they shunted back and forth from the ammunition dump to the railroad siding.

Ordnance crews of the 25th Bombardment Squadron had been alerted only a few hours before dusk to prepare the shipment of general purpose bombs and other ammunition. At the same time, I was pulled aside by my commanding officer, Captain Richard Culpepper, and was told I had been selected to ride guard on the shipment all the way to its destination - an auxiliary landing field near San Jose on Guatemala's Pacific Coast.

All night long the bomb trucks rolled between the siding and the ammo dump, and the sweating ordnance crews chained down the last bomb just before noon the next day. In addition to the bombs, they loaded nose and tail fuses for the bombs, several cases of hand grenades and about two hundred thousand rounds of fifty calibre machine-gun ammunition.

PAGE TWO

In all, the crews loaded fourteen box cars for the seventy-five mile trip down the towering Sierras to the coast. The railroad tracks were narrow-gauge and were laid by the British before the turn of the century.

I walked up the long string of cars with the loading master to check each car. Satisfied that the lethal load was snugged and secure, he slid each door closed, shot the bolt into place and attached his metal seal to each one. We were ready to roll.

The engine jarred into the coupling on the lead box car as I climbed to the top of the caboose, sat down and leaned back against the cupola. Then with a violent jerk we moved out of the siding to the main line and the long, tortuous descent down the mountains to the coast.

It was a beautiful day for the trip. Visibility was excellent, the sky cloudless and the sun hot. It was hard to believe a war was raging throughout the world. The soft sway of the caboose together with the hot rays of the sun beating down on my face erased everything but contentment...and a feeling of peace. A feeling that was soon to change violently.

Near the town of Esquintla the steep descent started to level into the broad flat regions of the coast and the heavy forests slipped behind us. We were about three and one half hours out of Guatemala City when the train ground to a halt along a remote area lined with leafy banana palms.

Two crewman climbed down from inside the caboose and walked toward a smoking grease box near the front of the train. They flipped the box open, pulled out an oily puff of waste and stomped it out on the ground. Then they soaked a clean wad with oil and stuffed it back in the box and snapped the lid. When the two men returned to the caboose, I asked them where we were and they told me we were about six miles from Naranjo. Naranjo - a strange name to me then; but very familiar now. And even now, when I look back on the experience that lay a scant five miles down the track, my flesh crawls.

We had been underway about twenty minutes - no longer- and were traveling slow, twenty-five miles an hour at the most, when I felt something going wrong. One of the crewman had scrambled out of the caboose and started up the small ladder that led to the top where I sat.

His face was yellow-white beneath his dark skin and his lips were drawn tight with fear. I snapped my head around to follow his terror stricken eyes and at the same time, heard the deafening screech of steel biting against steel. The train, still moving forward, began to shudder along its entire length when a box-car way up the line started to mush sideways.

The car, caught by the rolling weight behind it was whipped broadside, exposing its middle to the ponderous battering ram. The next car in line snaked in the opposite direction and they collided with a sickening roar, accompanied by the sharp crack of tearing wood. I saw a thousand pound bomb smash through the side of one of the cars, then I jumped.

My feet whipped out from under me when I hit the ground, but I was up in an instant to watch the rest of the destruction. One by one the box-cars snapped their couplings and plunged into a small ravine bordering the track.

As they plowed and rent the earth, railroad ties popped like seasoned wood under an ax and whole sections of steel track were twisted into gigantic hoops. The cars gutted themselves on

splintered trees and the flimsy walls yielded to the ponderous weight of the bombs. Boxes, laden with fuses, hand grenades and ammo, spilled through openings smashed in the sides of the cars.

In the awful quiet following the wreck I stood silently and surveyed the chaos that lay around me. Not a twig moved, not a single bird, not even a breeze. Just utter and complete silence.

The engine with three cars trailing it was up ahead and still on the track. My gaze followed the twin ribbons of steel back to where they suddenly converged and lay twisted. The first car to leave the track listed at a queer, broken angle nearby. It was impaled by the shattered trunk of a tree. One of its wheels, rotating slowly, shone brightly in the afternoon sun. Another car, its back broken, lay near the first. It had gouged a deep, broad furrow in the ground and now hung humped and broken. The rear trucks swung three feet above the road bed.

The last three cars to leave the track were squashed on their sides when they overturned and then were smashed open by the bombs as they crunched through the roof, the flooring and the sides. In all, five cars and the caboose were derailed.

The engineer and the crew, none of whom were hurt, were inspecting the twisted rails so I walked over and joined them. It was impossible to tell if anyone had tampered with the rails because the evidence had been ground to powder under the wheels of the cars.

We were all down on our hands and knees looking for some sign of sabotage or at least some reason for the wreck when the first of the Mestizo Indians poured out of their village to crawl and poke over the wreckage. They jabbered with excitement and gestured wildly at the smashed box-cars, the shiny rounds of ammunition and the gleaming bomb fuses. At first they just poked them with their feet, then finally one of them, gathering courage, scooped up a handful of fifty calibre bullets and two nose fuses and started to make a run for the village.

I let out a loud whistle and he stopped dead in his tracks. The rest of the indians were suddenly quiet. I seized this opportunity to bellow in my best Spanish: "Bombas! Bombas! Bombas! Muy pelegroso!"

They reacted immediately by scrambling away from the wreckage only to line up at the fence near their village a scant fifty yards away. Their jabbering and gesturing continued but they didn't cross their imaginary line again until they panicked when the earthquake hit with ear-splitting fury.

With the indians at a safe distance, my next thought was to find a way to report the accident to my commanding officer back at the airbase. I queried the engineer and he told me there was a telegraph shack about a quarter of a mile down the track. He added that he had already sent his fireman to the shack to wire the railroad officials at Guatemala City of the accident. I asked the engineer to keep his eye on the indians then took off to report the wreck.

The fireman had dispatched his message by the time I reached the telegraph shack; but he waited until I finished sending mine and we returned to the scene of the accident together. I noticed more Mestizos had joined the first group and some of them obviously planned to stay because they had started several small fires to brew something in pots which were hung over the

embers on tripods fashioned out of sticks. The fires were a safe distance from the explosives so I didn't give them another thought. Instead, I climbed up the side of one of the listing box-cars to command an overall view of the wreckage and to wait for somebody to show up.

No more than fifteen minutes had passed when I heard the first faint rumble. I thought it was another train coming down the mountain from Guatemala City but when I looked up the track I saw nothing.

The rumble continued and there was something ominous about it as it changed to a steady, reverberating sound. The car I was sitting on began to sway slightly and thinking it was just settling in the soft ground, I jumped off. The swaying motion continued, growing sharper, and the ground under my feet began to tremble.

Then the rumble suddenly changed to a deep, booming roar and with it I heard the terrifying screams of the indians who were instantly transformed into a wild, frenzied mob. They bolted in all directions fighting and clawing at one another and screaming **TEMBLOR! TEMBLOR!**

In their wild dash, they burst right through the fires scattering blazing embers into the dry brush along the roadbed and a hundred tiny fires crackled to life. Then the earthquake hit with all its fury.

I looked out over the land and saw the solid earth heaving and rolling like a wild, angry sea. The sound was hideous and everything was subordinated to its booming, thunderous roll. To my left giant trees shuddered and swayed then gathering momentum, were whipped and lashed until their uppermost branches touched the ground.

A tall wooden fence surrounding the village fluttered like a flag before it cracked with the snap of a bull ship and splintered into a thousand pieces. Inside the deserted village the mud huts quivered in unison before exploding and then disintegrating in billowing clouds of dust. The village had been vaporized and only a shapeless heap of rubble remained.

For a split second the intensity of the temblor subsided and then came roaring back with increased violence and a great section of land beyond the rubble of the village heaved upward then crashed down to leave a hundred trees jutting at crazy angles. Then the earth stopped heaving and grew still.-

The ferocity of an earthquake cannot be confined to definition and to describe the transformation of the solid earth into a rolling, violent sea is beyond comprehension. You just have feelings you never felt before, thoughts you never had before, fears you had never known before.

I tried to run but there was no place to escape to. There was no solid footing, no high ground. And when the cracking and heaving intensified I was too stunned to move. It wasn't until the quake subsided that I became aware of anything and the first thing I noticed was a warm sensation on my legs. The fires, started by hot embers kicked into the brush by the indians, had spread fast and now moved in a solid wall toward the high explosive bombs and ammunition which lay scattered up and down the track.

My first impulse was to run to safety but I didn't. Instead, I peeled off my field jacket and began beating at the crackling flames. Blinded by the smoke, I flailed blindly. The field jacket became a ragged torch in my hands but I stopped swinging only to roll a bomb out of the flames or to scoop

ammunition, grenades or fuses into my jacket and dump them safely out of reach. After a few trips such as this, interspersed with stomping and swinging at the flames, the jacket was in shreds and useless; however I felt the battle was turning in my favor.

After the short breather, I discarded my field jacket and ran to the caboose, remembering I had seen a shovel inside. The inside of the caboose was a shamble and reeked of kerosene oil from several broken signal lanterns that lay in one corner of the listing caboose.

My feet crunched over jagged bits of red glass as I walked around throwing raincoats, blankets, boots and other debris aside searching for the shovel. I couldn't find it so I turned to get back to the fire and there, imbedded like a stiletto, in the rear wall of the caboose was the shovel.

After a few tugs on the handle, it wrenched free and I raced back into the battle with the fire. There was enough loose earth around to make the job easy and as I began flinging damp earth on the flames, I heard the putt-putt of an engine.

In a few seconds, an old Ford tractor hove into view from behind a cluster of banana palms a hundred yards down the track. Crowded around the driver was a score of indians and each one carried a long, green banana leaf. Even before the tractor stopped, the indians had leaped off and placed their leaves right over the flames. The fire was snuffed out in an instant.

Then a voice, in perfect English, told me that hot food was on the way. The voice belonged to the driver and I learned he was the owner of a large coffee finca nearby. When the crews arrived from Guatemala City to re-rail the train I was completely settled.

Except for chow, the crews worked for two days without a break and although I didn't think it possible, the track was repaired and all the cars were re-railed and ready to continue to San Jose at mid-morning, August 8, 1942.

A member of the train crew told me to mount up and when I turned to do so I saw a jeep bouncing up the road toward us.

As it drew nearer, I recognized my commanding officer, Captain Culpepper, and my top sergeant, Tom Silvestro. Tom leaped out of the jeep and wrapped me in his bear-like arms; then he pushed me away and said: "Why in the Hell didn't you get in touch with us, we've been looking for you for damned near two days!"

Since he found me I thought he had received my message and told him so. Captain Culpepper explained that when the train didn't show up at San Jose, he contacted the railroad office and found out about the wreck.

To this day, I wonder what that telegraph operator was clacking out over his keys when I walked out of his shack near Naranjo, Guatemala, on the Day The Earth Exploded.

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Editors' Postscript: The editors of MEMORIES are William A. Rooney and Robert L. Hall, 517½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091. Please write us about your experiences in the 40th Bomb Group--any story you think is worth telling. Right now we are especially seeking your memories of flying patrols from "The Rock," your travel from Kansas to India in 1944, and the POW supply missions right after hostilities ended in 1945.

M.E. Carmichael is Treasurer and would welcome contributions to defray the cost of printing and mailing MEMORIES. If you want to help, make a check to 40th Bomb Group Association, and mail it to M.E. Carmichael, 2514 Oregon Ave., Alamogordo, NM 88310.

Harry Changnon is 40th Group Historian. He would welcome any military records, information or memorabilia about the 40th Group to be added to his extensive archives. The Hoover Institution of War, Revolution and Peace on the campus of Stanford University has begun accepting all 40th Group archives and memorabilia to be permanently housed there. Hare is transferring his collection to the Hoover. If you have any material you would like to have included in this collection, send it to Harry Changnon, 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014.



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