

Excerpt from the wartime diary of Flight Lieutenant Edward Greer Fleming, 550 Squadron North Killingholme Lincolnshire England.

Monday 13th August 1945.

“Dead asleep this morning and nearly missed briefing at 0600 hours. Had to have breakfast afterwards in a helluva rush.

Today I broadened my mind further yet on my first trip to Italy. The route – out of England over Bilsey Hill, Caen, Poitiers, Toulouse, down to the Mediterranean and a straight line across the Gulf of Lion touching Toulon and the tip of Corsica, over the Island of Elba and down the west coast of Italy passing over Anzio down to Naples, landing at Pomigliano Airfield just north of Vesuvius. Weather not bad but a few thunderstorms over the Med. and rough air. From opposite Rome on to Naples blazing hot and hazy, the temperature at 5000 feet 18 degrees C.

We left here (*England*) about 7.30am and got there about 1.45pm. Items of interest on the way – Caen; the countryside pock-marked with bomb craters – Mulberry harbours; still in position on the coast – France; gradually getting brown and dried up looking as we proceeded south and not much sign of life in the villages – the Med.; it is very blue, - Toulon; after a long stooge across the Gulf and looking down we could see the scuttled French fleet in close to the wharves with whit glistening towns behind. Next Corsica; very rugged everywhere, the mountainsides sloping straight into the sea and dotted here and there with small villages stuck precariously up on the cliffs and ridges. Then Elba; no fun for Napoleon there for it’s very like Corsica, quite a big island but only half a dozen or so villages or groups of buildings. Across towards the Italian coast then and down until we pass over the Anzio beachhead, a good beach with arid, bare countryside between it and the Autostrada to Rome. – Vittoria; standing quite alone like an oasis and planned in regular fashion like a geometric figure. – Too hazy to see Rome off the port and the next place of interest was the headland near Naples where we turned sharp left and headed across the city with the bay and Vesuvius off the starboard. Interesting but not any more than flying over Wellington (*Capital City of New Zealand and EGF’s hometown*), except perhaps the whiteness of the buildings and a few Monasteries of unusual appearance.

Then an airfield, bags of chat on the R/T from American and British voices, I picked the wrong field first and had to overshoot, pouring with perspiration and proceed to the right one a few miles on. Finally got down with water streaming into my eyes and taxied into a long line of “Lancs” where we stopped. Chocolate ration running over the throttle quadrant so dropped it out the window!

Feet on Italian soil, or dust I should say, and all the “Erks” burnt dark brown. Standing around gasping in the heat although clad in Khaki. Trucks arrived shortly to drive us through Naples and out to our transit camp on the Autostrada to Sorrento.

Our first impression of Italy – dusty roads, disreputable stone buildings, maize growing in the fields, usually below road level and Italians, dusty ill-clad men, fat and thin women in doorways with bags of children about, the babies all with bare seats. Two wheeled carts with no sides, drawn by odd-looking horses. What they carry and why doesn’t seem to matter.

It may have been an attractive looking place once but Naples is no glamour city now. The buildings are all very shabby stone or concrete with drab iron balconies and large shutters to the portals – windows don't appear necessary. The shops are all pretty scruffy, selling principally fruit or trashy jewellery, as do hawkers of all ages in the street.

Quite a lot of bomb damage meets the eye on the way out of the city. Vesuvius stands off to the left, scrub covered and dotted with buildings well up the slopes until the lava stream from the last eruption is reached. A railway and a zigzag road took tourists to the crater but these were damaged by the last eruption 18 months ago.

And then our camp – just part of the residential area between the Autostrada and the bay with our sleeping quarters in one large stone and concrete apartment house of about 5 stories and the mess another large palace-like structure with high ceilings and hard marble floors.

We booked in, changed a one pound note for 400 lira and had a pretty hopeless meal about 6.30. We collected a mosquito net and two blankets and climbed to our 3rd floor room to locate our beds. There were 3 canvas-stretched-on-frame beds out on a balcony, which looked the “gen” so we pitched our nets over these and went out for the evening to Naples.

All transport in this country is done by army trucks. There are dilapidated trams for the Italians onto which they crowd until they are hanging from the steps and sitting on the buffers. Life appears rather cheap in fact. And these army drivers – they only have two speeds, stop or flat out!

We got into Naples about 7.30pm and commenced our tour of the centre of town, around the Opera House area. Every few yards some kid pops up waving thousands of Lira and saying “you change English pound – 800 Lira” These people know that when the Allies leave the Lira will be pretty well worthless. Jewellery shops abound and street pedlars sit on all the corners or slide up and whip out a tray of trinkets under your nose.

Dick and I bought nothing that night but went in search of food and a drink at a very excellent NAAFI officers club where we had a bottle of “Frascati” wine (135 Lira) and quite a decent meal with dancing and orchestra playing in night club style. We returned to camp hanging out of a truck at about 10.45pm.

And on this page I shall have to end the 3rd volume of my Wartime Diary.”

(EG Fleming's diary continues with sightseeing around Pompeii and Sorrento with flying scrubbed on the 15th.)

Thursday 16th August – V.J. Day

“Pulled out early again this morning and this time we were off. Breakfast – half a tomato on a piece of fried bread. That was to last me until 6 o'clock that evening so I was somewhat starving!

Trucks took us out to Pomigliano by 7.30, briefing at 8am and I went in search of my kite among 80 – odd others there and found it with my 20 army passengers standing all around and loading their kit into the bomb bay. I had a chat to them and just before 9am we loaded them all in and “cracked off” for England.

The trip back was uneventful. We flew over Toulon on the way back. The weather was good but the temperature dropped most noticeably as we travelled up France and I soon put my shirt back on again.

We landed a Glatton near Peterborough at about 4pm and unloaded the passengers into waiting trucks. They must have been glad to get out of their cramped positions, but they thanked me for the trip before they left.

After refuelling and having a customs man round with a form which I signed off without further investigation by him we snatched a very welcome cup of tea and 6 biscuits (!) and headed off hard for home (*Base – North Killingholme*) where we landed in pouring rain just to complete the contrast.”

(Flight Lieutenant and his crew made a second trip to Italy on 23rd August and returned to England 25th August)