



View of Vesuvius volcano with the ruins of Pompeii in the foreground, August, 1943. Photo from the National Digital Archives

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How the eruption of Mount Vesuvius destroyed American bombers

Author: **JANUSZ WRÓBEL** 10.03.2023

Vesuvius exploded in the middle of March 1944. It was most active between March 18th and March 29th. On the 23rd, the volcanic fallout destroyed 88 (or 75) bombers standing at the bottom of the mountain at the military airbase near Terzigno. They were B-25 bombers from the 340th Bomb Group of the 12th US Air Force.

After the great explosion of Vesuvius in 1906 the volcano's activity dropped. In the years 1927-1929, hot lava poured out of the mountain to the east. In the times of relative peace smoke was coming out of the small

cone inside the crater almost every day. There were also small lava bursts which did not come from the crater.

The last blast

The last blast of Vesuvius took place in 1944. In January and February, lava poured out of the crater and partially outside of it. Strong tremors and underground shakes could be felt in the middle of March near the volcano. On March 18th, lava began pouring out of the bottom of the crater and went down the sides of the mountain after filling up to the top. Since March 19th, in the intervals of several seconds, loud bangs could be heard from Vesuvius. On March 20th, its activity grew. Blocks and crumbs of lava were thrown in the air in huge explosions, while thick ash clouds rose to the sky. Red and gold lava poured down the valley, reaching the first houses of San Stefano. The last residents who remained in their homes were evacuated then.



**Eruption of Vesuvius in 1944,
seen from Naples (public domain)**



**American bomber B-25 Mitchell
flying near Vesuvius during the
eruption in March, 1944 (public
domain)**

Vesuvius stood exactly on the path of the Allied forces, pushing back the Germans towards Naples.

On March 21st, military authorities launched the evacuation of nearby population. The people were taken by cars to Naples, Santa Anastasia and Aversa.

Worse than bombing

A military airbase stood at the bottom of Vesuvius, near Terzigno. It required constant repairs due to the eruption. It was not evacuated as the lava was not a threat. However, on the night from March 21st to March 22nd, unexpected masses of hot volcanic ashes fell on the airport, along with huge chunks of solidified lava. It were these chunks and ashes which destroyed American planes before they managed to leave the endangered airbase.

The eruption caused more damage than an enemy bombing - 88 (according to other sources 75) B-25 Mitchell bombers were covered in ashes and destroyed by the volcanic bombs.



Crew member brushing off the ash from the wings of an American bomber B-25 Mitchell from the 340th Bomb Group, March 23rd, 1944 (public domain)

“I will forever remember the moment...”

Sergeant Robert F. McRae from the 489th Squadron who had guard duty that night, wrote this in the war journal of the 340th Bomb Group:

“At 2 a.m. the volcano seemed to explode, mighty roaring occurred and pieces of lava as large as golf balls began to fall around me (...). This continued for about ten or fifteen minutes. Then the mountain became quiet and remained still (...). At 4 a.m. the stones (lava) began to fall again (...). At 8 a.m., all hell broke loose. Black stones of all sizes, some as large as a football, fell in great quantity completely covering the ground, breaking branches from the trees, smashing through the tents to break up on their floors, tearing through metal, fabric and Plexiglas of the airplanes. (...) Soldiers who ventured from shelter wore steel helmets. Civilians covered their heads with pans, boxes or heavy baskets. At about noon - March 22nd, it was decided to evacuate the entire camp.”

Dana Craig, a nurse from the 486th Squadron, wrote in her diary:

“We understood what was happening in the morning (...). Until the day before Vesuvius was only on fire. I will forever remember the moment Vesuvius exploded. I have never seen a bomb do as much damage. We had to work under falling stones and ash. We all wore protective vests and helmets. Then the order came to evacuate to Naples.”



View of Vesuvius in 1944.
Photography from the album of

Zenon Angerman. Photo from the collections of the Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance



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Total devastation

Several days after the evacuation, Sergeant McRae was assigned to the group which was to save what it could from the damaged planes. He wrote in his diary:

“Upon reaching the airport on the 26th we found almost complete devastation. Tents were torn to ribbons and 88 airplanes were a total loss. 88 B-25 Mitchells — \$25,000,000 worth of aircraft.”

The planes destroyed in the explosion of Vesuvius belonged to the 340th Bomb Group of the 12th US Air Force, which most likely lost most planes than any other American unit in the Second World War. To the 88 (or 75) bombers destroyed in the eruption of Vesuvius we need to add 60 planes which were destroyed as a result of an unexpected German air raid on the Alesani base on Corsica, on May 13th, 1944.



View of the Naples port and the volcanic Mount Vesuvius - picture taken in 1946 by Corporal Michał Bar (Baar), a soldier of the 2nd Warsaw Armoured Division, while he was stationed there. Photo from the collections of the Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance

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On March 27th, the volcano's activity began dropping, and it stopped completely on March 29th.

The towns of Massa di Somma and San Sebastiano suffered the most from the Vesuvius explosion in 1944, as they were completely covered in lava. 26 people died from the roofs falling down on them, crumbled by the weight of the falling ash. Thanks to the war correspondents present on site, the 1944 eruption remains to this day the only explosion of Vesuvius documented on film.

It was also the last eruption of Vesuvius, which is now considered to be a sleeping volcano. Another explosion would have terrible consequences - 3 million people currently live in the 20-kilometre radius of the crater. According to volcanologists, there is a 400 square-kilometre chamber filled with molten lava 10 kilometres below the crater. It is estimated that in case of an explosion at least several hundred thousand people would have to be evacuated, while some volcanologists provide even higher estimations. Vesuvius' activity is constantly monitored by the volcanology observatory on site.

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