SOMEWHERE OVER THE MOUNTAIN

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"All right, fellows, your first move is to step into the straps of your parachute so that the main pack will be at your back."

The strong voice and these words came from the throat of a young U.S. Army Air Corps Staff Sergeant who had been providing guidance to our group of 26 Air Corps personnel since early that morning as we prepared for a somewhat different and perhaps risky long-distance flight later that morning.

"Now, reach down with both hands to the shoulder straps lying on the ground beside your main pack. Grasp the shoulder straps firmly and pull both straps up while lifting the whole chute until the pack is hitting your fanny. Slide both straps up and onto your shoulders, and pull the crotch straps into place as they tighten on your body." The sergeant paused while we struggled with the chute straps in what was to most of us a very unfamiliar activity.

"Next, you'll adjust all those straps so they are quite tight, starting with the crotch straps, but doing all of them together. Just be sure everything is comfortable and tight, but be aware that if you don't get them right, and you do have to use the chute, you could be seriously injured in a very unusual way." The Sergeant was almost shouting at us and his face clearly told us that his instructions were very very serious, although a couple of men did sort of laugh at the thought in a very nervous way.

The instructions and admonishments continued until all 26 of us were fitted and almost comfortably ready. Probably more important, they continued until the Sergeant had checked each one and was satisfied with the fit and that all parts of the chutes were in correct positions.

All this unusual activity was taking place on a bright, sunny, and warm day in April 1944. We were grouped on the flight ramp of an Air Base near the town of Missamarra in the upper Brahmaputra River Valley in the north-eastern state of Assam, at that time a part of India, and bordered by China and Burma to the northeast.

Less than two weeks earlier, we had been part of our whole 40th Bombardment Group and the included Squadrons that had arrived at out still-being built home Air Base at Chakulia, India, about 80 miles west of Calcutta. Now, as a newly assembled group of volunteers extracted from those squadrons, we were suddenly and perhaps urgently preparing to fly northeast up and over that remote and rugged expanse of the Himalayas Mountains known as the "Hump" heading, we hoped, to another new air base, but not yet completed for operational activity. We were designated as an Advance Detachment and we were to set up our ground facilities and prepare this new western China air base so that our new B-29 Superfortress very heavy bombers and their flight crews could fly up from our India base over that infamous "Hump" and conduct missions from our remote and advanced location.

The day before, at our Chakulia main base, we had boarded a twin engine cargo plane, a Douglas-built C47 Dakota, with all our personal belongings, and all the tools and supplies we could plan for and get our hands on in the short preparation time of just four days that we were allowed, and then we flew here to Missamarra about two and a half hours flight time from Chakulia. Last evening we had moved all our gear from the C-47 to a larger two-engine cargo plane, a Curtis-built C-46 Commando, for the flight today over the "Hump" into China. This morning, we were grouped on the ramp beside that C-46 getting our final briefing, most from the Staff Sergeant.

That briefing included the latest on the normally expected story weather over the "Hump", directions on our loading and movements during flight, and some unique directions regarding our use of breathing oxygen during the flight. We would be flying above 15,000 feet in altitude for several hours and oxygen would be needed. Cargo planes were not equipped with an oxygen system for passengers. Also it seemed that the base was not prepared for our number of people all at one time. They were short on "walk-around" bottles and had no extra "bail-out" bottles. Three or four of us would have to share each "walk-around" bottle and these did not include oxygen regulators. They had a knob to manually open and close the control valve which was connected directly to a short length of flexible 3/8th inch hose which we would place between our lips and then breath raw oxygen through the mouth. Not the most exciting prospect, but necessary at the time.

Our flight route would follow that normally flown by the many cargo planes in their delivery of supplies to both American and Chinese bases in China. This route was far north of the main ground forces and air activity in Burma in order to avoid potential interception by enemy fighter planes but in so doing, that route was over the highest mountains in the range adding to the dangers of flying over that terrain and usually adverse weather conditions. Thus, oxygen was an absolute necessity.

Our flight was being done shortly after the unfortunate ground battles in Burma that had resulted in American and British troops being driven north and west in an almost full retreat for what General "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell described as: "We got the hell beat out of us!" One specific result of that rout of the Allied Forces was that the enemy ground forces were able to capture the Mytikyina fighter airfield in northern Burma. The loss of that fighter airbase permitted enemy planes to fly from there and seek out targets much farther north and west even into India as far as Calcutta.

We were flying this route to be beyond the range of those fighter planes from Mytikyina. This was also one of the reasons we had transferred from a C-47 to a more powerful C-46 which could fly the higher route over the mountains. Some months later when Stillwell's forces were able to drive the enemy south and down the length of Burma, all flights into and out of China were able to use a much lower altitude route further south and this eased things somewhat for our supply flights as well as our B-29s to and from our A-1 base for their missions and their trips over the mountains (over the Hump).

Soon, our C-46 was roaring down the runway as we took off and we were on our way. We circled the field several times while climbing to altitude in preparation for the high mountains ahead. Then we headed northeast up that large valley while continuing to climb into the expected cloud banks. From this point on, visibility out the cabin windows varied from nothing to very little. In a little while, the pilot directed that we get out the oxygen bottles and we knew we were over those mountains. From time to time, rain pelted the windows as the plane bounced and jostled us around from the storm conditions outside. Once in a while, there would be a break in the clouds

And we could see we were flying in what appeared to be a high valley with craggy peaks and ridges all around and just off the tips of our wings as it seemed. The mountains themselves extended upwards with their tops hidden above us in the cloud mass.

Sharing the oxygen became a ritual and a pattern. One fellow would take a bottle and breath that gas for a little or until he began to feel a rawness in his throat or a disturbance in his stomach. Then we would pass the bottle to another; that choice would be first to any fellow who was starting to feel dizzy or woozy from lack of air. There the process would be repeated. In between uses of the bottles, we tried to breath deeply and perhaps gain more air that way.

We were over half way in our expected flight time of five hours and heading into China when the cockpit sent back word that the runway at our intended destination, Base A-1 near Chengtu, was blocked by the construction, landing was not possible that day, and we would have to detour to Kunming for that day or until the runway construction permitted us to go to A-1. The weather cleared as we came down from the higher altitude and the flight became more comfortable and routine.

Kunming, the ancient capital of Yunnan Province, is in a very large and high agricultural basin of semi-tropical climate, and is located in the far southwest of China. During that war time it was the eastern terminus of the Burma Road and later the Ledo Road, those tortuously built engineering marvels which when open could permit truck convoys to bring supplies overland into China. A large air base on the east side of the city was home to fighter planes of the Fourteenth air Force and also served to move supplies in the area. That is where we landed later that afternoon. Most of our group were quartered for the night in a military hostel in the city which was under full blackout conditions so we didn’t get to do any site-seeing. Four of our group were selected to stand guard at our gear in the C-46 for the night, sleeping in turns. Native laborers worked at the base almost 24 hours per day, and at that time, everyday supplies were very short in all areas and things like blankets could be sold for a good amount of American dollars which the Chinese liked.

The next day, we were ordered to stay near the C-46 on the possibility that the runway work at A-1 would permit us to fly there. Also this would relieve our four guards and provide daytime protection at the plane. By mid-afternoon, we were told the flight would be approved for the next morning but we all should stay either near the plane or at the hostel in town for the remainder of our brief stay in Kunming. I went back to the hostel for that night partly on the chance that I might get to see a little of the city even in the blackout.

The next morning, we got transportation out to the air base and gathered at the C-46. About 10:30, the pilot informed us we were taking off in a half hour. In order to arrive at A-1 during a brief time when construction workers would have a part of the runway clear for us to use. The day was nearly clear and calm and the flight to A-1 was at an altitude of just under 10,000 feet so this time use of oxygen was not a problem, but we did wear the bulky parachutes.

In mid-afternoon, we circled A-1 as we dropped down for the landing. We could see the large river that bordered two sides of the field and we even spotted the little village of Hsinching on the southwest side of the field. A perpetual haze seemed to hang over the whole area from the many many rice paddies and we could not see or even guess where the city of Chengtu was located. We could use only about one-third of the runway length and only a part of the width, and as we taxied back to the operations area, we could see the difficulty. Mounds of broken rocks and other

material were piled all around waiting for Chinese laborers to use for completing the runway and other taxi-ways and our pilot had to maneuver around them as we moved along.

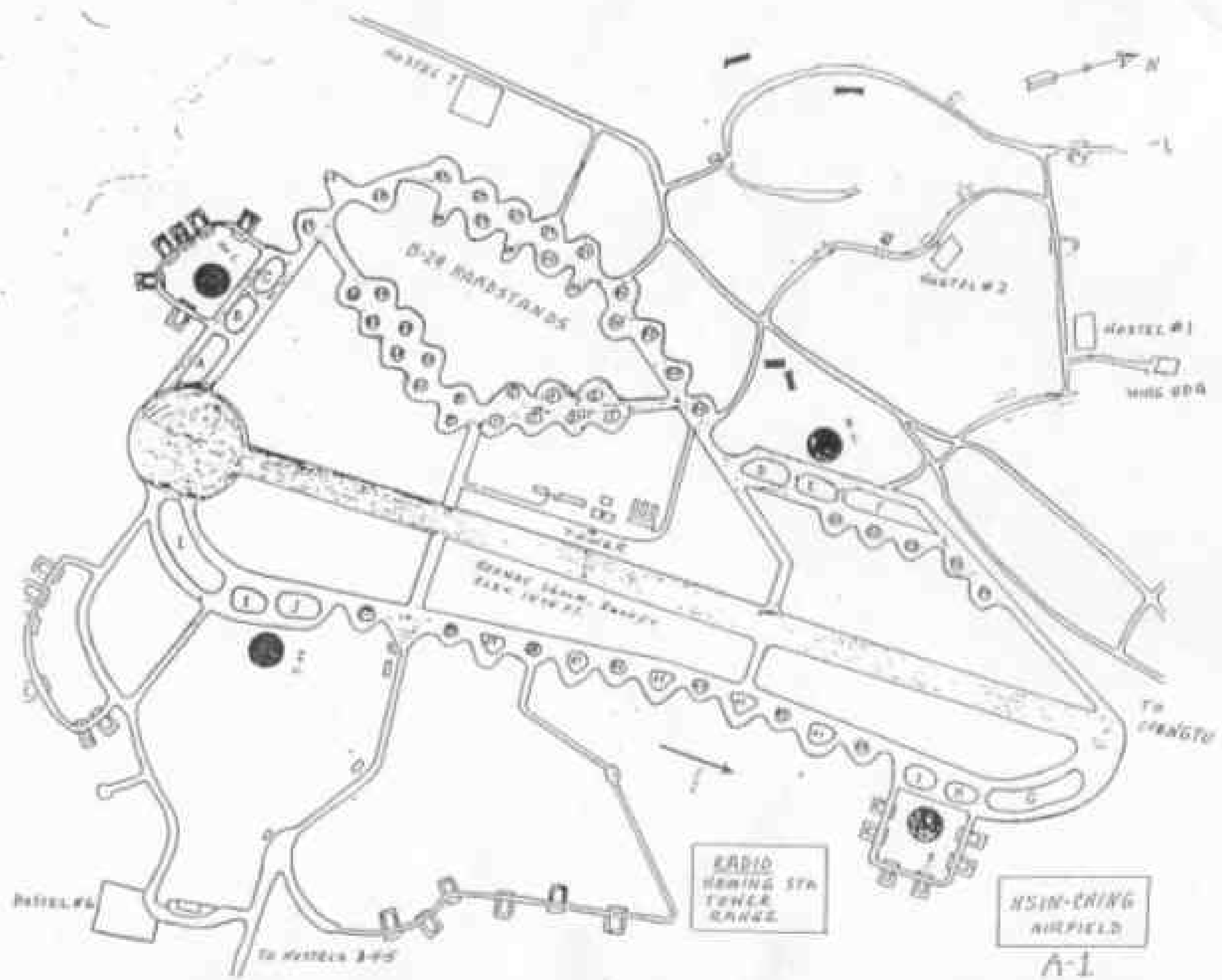
We unloaded our gear and supplies and stored that in the completed Operations building as we tried to survey the field and start to plan our tasks. I looked to the west side of the field where I could see a small building of some sort. My Engineering clerk, Corporal Bob Liset, and I walked over and it was a two-room bamboo walled and tile roofed building with a hard dirt floor that was empty and seemed to be unused. I decided that I would commandeer that building and make it into my maintenance/engineering office. We could set up tents on one side of the office for our shop work. The smaller of the two rooms could be our instrument and electrical shops which would put that work inside and protected from weather. Liset and I decided we would start there at that building the next morning.

As we got back to Operations, we told our new Line Chief, Master Sergeant Luigi Coppola, and the Flight Chief, Master Sergeant Frederick Wing, of our location and decision and they were quite relieved by knowing we had a place to start. Immediately, they began telling all of our maintenance fellows about this start.

The Army Engineering Corps Lieutenant who was directing the field and base construction arrived at our plane with his sergeant, one truck, and one jeep. We then used these vehicles to transport everybody to a new compound about a mile off the field. This turned out to be our newly constructed living quarters. Fortunately they were ready for us to move into and were already staffed with local Chinese to help us get settled. A nearby mess hall was ready for operation with a resident Chinese cook and helpers. That evenings meal was thoroughly enjoyed by all of us even though it was mainly heated C-Rations.

Slowly, and in a sort of subtle way, we all were able to shed the anxiety of our flight, the uncertainty of our mission and duty, the newness of our circumstances. Our Commanding Officer, Major John Seeley, even held a little planning meeting that evening before we retired. Several comments were made about "what a relief not to have to suck on those oxygen tubes or wear those parachutes any more." Perhaps life at A-1, although not exactly somewhere over the rainbow, would be acceptable after all.

C. Nelson


B-29 HARDSTANDS
HOSTEL #2
HOSTEL #1
TOWER
TO CHENGTU
RADIO
HOMING STA
TOWER
RANGE
HSIN-CHING
AIRFIELD
A-1

Post Arrival Notes:

Over the length of our "year-plus" operation at A-1, our Advanced Detachment experienced many new and unusual situations and each one is a separate story and recitation in itself. Some of these activities to be briefly mentioned here.

As our B-29 missions developed and our needs for personnel with specific skills developed, others were transferred from our main base in India and we grew to around 40 fellows. Our Commanding Officer, Major Seeley, became Lieutenant Colonel Seeley; we added Armament skills, Photo skills, Intelligence skills, and more. But also as our activities increased, we became a regular target for enemy air bombardment usually the night after our planes returned.

One night, a twin-engine bomber dropped a bunch of anti-personnel fragmentation bombs around the field. Four of my maintenance crew were in a protective revetment at one side of the field. My Engineering Clerk, Corporal Bob Liset, took part of a blast from one of those bombs and was severely injured. The next day, when our planes returned to India, he was transferred with them and then to the general hospital in Calcutta; he was never able to return to duty with us.

Another night, and in a similar situation, bombs hit a cluster of just emptied 55-gallon fuel barrels and started a fire, making a target of our planes at that end of the field. Our Commanding Officer uttered a terse "Let's go; we've got to do something." Three of us grabbed a jeep and headed for the fire. Colonel Seeley was in the front with Lt. Jamison driving and I sat in back. Apparently blinded by the fire, Jamison drove directly into a new bomb crater and the jeep crashed there. I got some scratches and bruises from being thrown up and forward over the windshield to the ground beyond the crater; I lost my glasses and wristwatch and perhaps was a bit unconscious for a short time. Jamison and Seeley hit the dash and front and suffered major injuries; from our A-1 infirmary, they were transferred to the general hospital in Calcutta and then moved back to the States for necessary surgery and care. I went back to duty that night.

This was just part of our life, over the mountains in Western China.

Cletus Nelson