40th Bomb Group Association

MEMORIES

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GOING OVERSEAS, Part II

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: The 40th Group got to Chakulia by a variety of routes. None of the travel was anything but miserable. In Issue #22 of MEMORIES, Morty Roth and George Steinman recorded the trip as it was experienced by those going from the U.S. east coast to Bombay and thence to Chakulia. In this issue of MEMORIES are accounts of the trip as experienced by others going different routes using different modes of transportation. Included is Dick Steiner's account of the ditching of their aircraft off the coast of Africa.

One thought remains about Issue #22 and the extracts from George Steinman's diary. On the trip over aboard the USS CALEB STRONG, a squadron intelligence officer was given the duty of instructing all on board on security as covered by AR 380-5. Specific in those instructions was the statement that no one was to keep a diary. George's maintenance of a diary while bunking in the same stateroom as the intelligence officer is an indication of the extent to which army regulations were observed and the extent to which others were frightened by the intelligence officer's words.

Memories of Nelson Miller

We were the 28th Air Service Group serving the 40th Bomb Group. The Group had been stationed in Spokane, Wash., Epharata, Wash., Walla Walla, Wash., Riverside, Calif., Blythe, Calif., Great Falls, Mont., and finally Fort Dix, N.J. It was from Fort Dix early in April of 1943 that we boarded a troop train and headed for Newport News, Va., our point of embarkation. We boarded the USS Athos II three days after arrival and located our quarters on "G" deck, 12 feet below the water line. The ship was not large (about 675 feet long) and not new. At one time it had been a French luxury liner but was now converted to a troop ship capable of transporting 3,500 men.

We left the harbor about dusk with one other ship. By morning the other ship had left us and we sailed on alone to the Isthmus of Panama. Through the locks and across Gatun Lake to Camp Kobe on the Pacific side where we were billeted in the most comfortable quarters of my four years in the service. Barracks were three stories high with a huge mess hall and recreation area on the ground floor with large airy sleeping quarters on the floors above. Quite a contrast to the cramped life aboard the Athos II.

A propeller shaft bearing on the ship had malfunctioned on the trip across Gatun Lake. It had been repaired and our quarters aboard ship completely cleaned and painted when we boarded and we were once more on our way.

Next stop was the Galapagos Islands to which an engineer was flown from Panama to inspect the repairs to the ship. Didn't pass inspection so back to Balboa at 4 knots. More of Kobe, same quarters and more sightseeing for one week, then away once more with all systems go. Stopped again at the Galapagos and were OKd to carry on.

The Athos II carried 99 full colonels and a contingent of Chinese nurses who had been trained in the U.S. The 99 colonels were engineers who were to supervise U.S. military construction in China.

At one point between the Galapagos and Bora Bora island, our next stop, we were followed by a submarine for five days necessitating a zig-zag course. Seven minutes one direction then 10 minutes another until we finally eluded the submarine. All this time the ocean was like glass except for the ground swells that caused more seasickness than rough water.

We left Bora Bora and headed southwest again on an uneventful journey to the southeast coast of Australia, still a lone ship maintaining absolute radio silence. We had now been enroute 60 days. The Bass Straight between Australia and Tasmania provided the roughest water we were to encounter. One moment the anchor deck was awash, propellers throbbing out of water, the next moment the garbage deck was under with the bow high in the air. One of the 99 colonels insisted on riding the anchor deck, against the captain's orders. He was washed down the companionway to "C" deck and was severely injured. We were in sight of land for more than a day around the southern coast of Australia, and finally into the harbor at Fremantle. We had two days ashore, half the personnel ashore each day for four days. We ate our fill of "fish and chips," the popular lunch in this shore city. The change from two meals of boiled macaroni each day was a welcome treat. Saw most of Fremantle and a good bit of Perth which was 25 miles inland. People, customs, climate very much like the USA, very enjoyable. At a little concession stand in Queen's Park on the Swan River we asked a lady proprietor for a chocolate bar. She had one bar which she kindly gave us and when we asked what we could do for her, she wondered if we had a pack of cigarettes she could take to her husband. We scrounged up four packs between us and the second day ashore four of us loaded pockets and field jackets with 100 packs and left them with her. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she thanked us.

We left Fremantle mid-morning early in June and headed into the Indian Ocean, this time accompanied by two US Navy corvettes. About dusk the first evening out, the PA system sounded an alert. "This is not a drill, now hear this, this is not a drill, all personnel to battle stations." Everybody scrambled to assigned positions on deck. Both corvettes made sharp turns to starboard and the Athos II made a very sharp turn to port. Either you grabbed for something solid or hooked your heels in the gutter or you were in the drink. The corvettes rolled off depth charges. We could feel the concussions as the charges exploded and huge white boils of water came to the surface. The corvette nearest our ship (about 100 feet off) dropped a charge and a great black oil slick surfaced. Shortly the all-clear sounded, we regrouped and went on our way. It took a while for the light-hearted mood of shipboard life to return. That experience was a little too close for comfort.

Twelve or 14 days later we saw the glow of lights on the western horizon and were told they were from a harbor on Madagascar. Seems we were taking the long way around! Another two weeks or more of flying fish and dolphins and we came into Bombay harbor. It was the day after a large munitions ship had exploded while anchored. The destruction of life and material was unbelievable. The stench I attributed to the explosion I later discovered was INDIA. Ninety-one days enroute, the second longest troop movement of World War II, the longest being 92 days. Three days of unloading and sorting TAT equipment then reloading it on flat cars and we were ready to board a troop train (such as it was) and head east. Another three days and we arrived at Dum Dum Army Base just outside Calcutta. Two unforgettable evenings in Calcutta, then back on the rail cars for another 100 miles to Chakulia, our final destination in India.

Our advance cadre had been waiting in Chakulia nearly three months for our arrival with no word as to our whereabouts until the day we unloaded. Three months of mail to read and a lot to learn about a really foreign country.

Memories of Bob Copley

The system used to select those to fly unit aircraft and those who were to go some other way was never satisfactorily explained to any of us combat crew members who eventually wound up on a train. Personnel with less experience (I had 9 hours and 45 minutes in the airplane) and those with more experience were selected. Those with more and those with less rank were selected. After getting word about who was traveling and how we were then encouraged (read ordered) to head out for the flightline and assist the more fortunate in preparing their aircraft.

Salt was then poured into our wounds by restricting us to the base until date of departure (to be announced, when it was known). Finally we got the word on a Saturday that we didn't have to work on the flightline that night because our train would pick us up early the next morning. Sometime during that evening Lt. Col. Wilkinson found me busy packing and took time to tell me that he held me in high trust. Therefore I would be the mess officer on the troop train. With that information an exchange of words took place that made me come to a quick decision: the bottle of grog that had been saved for travel, was broken out right then and there.

On Sunday morning when the rest of the troops were finding seats and berths I was directed to get on a baggage car that was filled with provisions, reefers and stoves. It was then I met the men assigned as cooks. At the same time I signed for crates and boxes of provisions in a hurry because there was no time to take inventory.

My every thought upon departure was how good it was going to be to spend some time in California because we had stenciled and marked our hold baggage for Huntington Beach, CA. It was disconcerting to note that the train was heading east out of Pratt but I had it figured out. It had to head for Wichita before heading west. This was just the first of many assumptions that proved completely wrong.

My instructions were to collect cash from all the officers on the train for their rations. That's why I can remember the Georges (Varoff and Weschler) so well. I was told by them in very definite words what I could do with my collecting activities. "Shove it up your nose" was the cleanest phrase remembered.

As the train continued east day after day it seemed the mess men had a list of requisitions for every stop--ice and etc. I handed out IOUs along the route with complete abandon. Food consumption exceeded every calculation that had been used in planning. This was easy to understand because it seemed no matter what time of the night I awoke and stuck my head out of the bunk, someone was walking down the aisle with an open cap of peaches, a big sandwich or something from the mess car. I didn't particularly care.

When the train finally pulled into Newport News, VA, I saw everyone scampering away and into waiting trucks to convey them to the barracks area. Everyone except me. I was told to get our supplies and equipment off the baggage car post haste because the train was pulling out right away. The stuff tossed onto the loading dock didn't include large items such as the reefers and stoves--the train schedule just didn't allow enough time. I was then told to report to the quartermaster and clear my account. It took minimum time for them to tell me that so few men couldn't consume what the records indicated. I was asked about the large equipment that couldn't be located. I was queried about the number of officers aboard and the amount of cash to be turned over to the quartermaster. They got a lot of unsatisfactory answers and a decision was made that I would sign a statement of charges. My only question was, "where do I sign?" When they asked about my organization and address I told them when they found out let me know because I sure as hell didn't know. So far as I know there continues to be a statement of charges in my files somewhere because I heard no more about the matter.

The days at Newport-News were frustrating. All of us were expecting a briefing - destination, etc. We had reasons for concern because, included in that baggage we had sent ahead, was equipment for the arctic. Most vividly recalled during our time there were the viscous "Red Dog" games. We were kept completely in the dark regarding our immediate future while there. No departure date, no nothing

We finally knew for sure we were in for a cruise because we got the word to pack everything and be prepared for a physical examination, then pick up our baggage and move out. This was the opportunity to see more than 5,000 men get a physical in one duty day. About all the examination proved was that all 5,000 of us were males and that we had no rectal problems. This was proved by watching one doctor peering at spread cheeks all day long. All I could think was that that medic must have splendid thoughts to exchange with family and friends over the evening meal.

We officers were delighted to learn that our aboard ship quarters were on the top deck. That feeling was diminished when we finally got our over-stuffed B4 bags to the assigned room that was meant for two and to which 12 of us were assigned. Once you got yourself squeezed into a bunk there was absolutely no way you could turn over. It was a blessing when some one left the room because then you had room to stand. The room was immediately adjacent to the open area where the movies were shown 24 hours a day as shifts were scheduled to see the same movie. We in the room memorized every line of each movie script. I remember sitting in the room one time with others-all of us in deep silence-each for his own personal reason. All at once C.C. Myers said, "there goes that damn whistle again." (Part of the movie.)

We finally boarded our troop ship. After all night on the ship (The USS Butner), it seemed we had been on the high seas for days. What a let down to walk out on the deck the next morning and see the shoreline of Virginia about three miles in the distance. All night had been spent degauzing the ship. Eating for the officers on the ship was excellent. For the non-coms and airmen it was atrocious. They were furnished two meals a day and of course with so many aboard they ate in shifts commencing at a very early hour in the morning. Very disconcerting to the officers was the fact that we could make purchases at the ship's store during the few hours it was open but the store was not open to the enlisted men. Officers do have a heart. Many of us purchased stuff at the store and carried it to our men way down in the bowels of the ship. This proved to be one of the worst things we could have done because it resulted in near riot conditions, and in truthfulness, there were many fights as the ground pounders accused the fly boys of being coddled. I know of no man who wasn't sea sick and conditions on the ship compounded this with its inadequate number of rest room facilities for the traffic. Once aboard we were never told our destination. After about three days at sea the navigator passengers agreed that we weren't headed for the Panama Canal.

Two weeks in Casablanca furnished experiences that we could have very well done without. We moved into a tent city right across from a prisoner of war camp. We soon learned that the Italian prisoners rated better than we did. Our first experience with mess kits along with questionable food saw the majority of us with the first of many cases of diarrhea that we were to have during the rest of the year. We got the heat proof butter that wouldn't melt - neither would it digest. The Italians rated real butter. They had Red Cross supplies while tent city had nothing. The theater was outdoors and on the side of a hill. From day to day we had changes in what we could take with us when we moved on. One day it was everything-the next-it was just bare essentials-like a toilet kit. All this frustration was climaxed when we got word that we were going to get a final briefing from a major. His first words at the briefing were, "I have been up where you SOBs are going and I can tell you--'its rough'." We were called every name in the book and admonished for our lack of discipline, our attitudes and you name it. Final result: Court martial proceedings were initiated against him. Result--another briefing along with apologies. The matter was settled but the morale was minus one on a Richter scale of one to ten.

The C-54 flight to India was alright. While on landing approach in Egypt we came within a hair of being eradicated by a British Beaufighter who wasn't satisfied with the exchange of signals. Mind you - we still had no idea what our destination was. We were well aware we were in Cairo and then when we landed along the Red Sea (where we were served the hottest tomato soup ever put together) at midnight, we noted that we were skirting a large body of water that finally brought us to Karachi. It was here we took advantage of the very cheap cashew nuts in the airport terminal and with that commenced the diarrhea all over again.

When we reached Kharagapur and took a look at the sorry headquarters, it wasn't comforting to be told that this wasn't to be our home. We were to load aboard a train immediately and go up country where things weren't that good. How this all came about I'll never know but I once again got a position of high trust-train commander. I took all this as just a title with no duties involved. But, when some of the troops removed and loaded their 45s and started shooting at everything they saw along the railroad tracks, including animals and birds, the conductor let me know I had responsibilities and by Gawd, he would see that charges were preferred if I didn't get things in hand. Truthfully, I was afraid to say anything to the culprits because they might shoot me. There is no question about it---it was a fighting mad bunch of men who were greeted by Halburt Hewitt upon our arrival at Chakulia. His words of welcome were brief but to the point. We were "home" and he hoped we liked our billets. With that we took off for the sorry hooches in the old area and prepared ourselves to greet those who traveled more than half way around the world under ideal conditions.

Memories of Dick Steiner

I had completed navigation school in August, 1943. When I arrived at Salina, the unit was well crewed up and seemed to have an overage of navigators, so after the usual confusion, I was sent to Clovis, New Mexico, to become a member of the first group of replacement crews to be trained for the eventual movement to India. Crew assignments were made and, assignments to our crew were as follows:

Ap Com	Capt E.O. Clark	CFS	S/Sgt R.P. Adamson
P	2nd Lt. L.G. Jones	R	S/Sgt W.J. Salmon
N-B	2nd Lt. F.D. Steiner	LG	S/Sgt E.W. Bronson
B-N	1st Lt. I.B. Redmon	RG	S/Sgt M.P. Shebak
FE	2nd Lt. L.J. Koenig	TG	S/Sgt G.L. Voris

About 1 June we were sent, by rail, to Herington, Kansas, where crews were matched up with replacement B-29s and sent off to the combat zones. My crew, as Crew #FR322-AF-11, was assigned to B-29 Number 42-6383, told to pre-flight, load and depart for West Palm Beach and to secret overseas destination.

Our first stop on the flight overseas was at what was then Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, and, of course, we had some maintenance problems there which delayed us for a day before we took off for the great unknown. We had sealed orders which were not to be opened until we were airborne from the POE at Morrison. There was some excitement, and apprehension, as Capt. Clark opened and read the orders to the crew over the inter-phone. It was finally confirmed -- we were going to India! Our trip south to Atkinson Field, British Guiana, and our landing there were without incident. We spent one night there in a tent in the jungle, then took off for Natal early the next morning. All went well to Natal and we preflighted, cleared a few maintenance problems there and departed late in the afternoon of June 10 for Accra, West Africa. I became aware, for the first time, that we had a spare engine bolted to the bomb racks in the front bomb bay; a significant amount of weight which later became a matter of concern.

Our briefed route to Accra was plumb line, direct, to landfall at Cape Palmas (the south-westerly point on the "hump" of Africa), then south-eastward along the coast to Accra. We battled equatorial squalls along the route all night but our major concern was difficulty with the fuel-transfer system. Landfall at Cape Palmas was just after sunrise, I recall, as the steamy jungle right down to the beach and the little air strip were clearly visible as we turned to parallel the coast.

About half way between Cape Palmas and Accra there was sudden concern over the' dangerously low fuel level in the outboard tanks and no way to transfer more fuel to them. I don't recall if the fuel was in the rear bomb bay tanks or in the inboard wing tanks, but the transfer system just wouldn't move it and the outboard fuel level was dangerously low. We had just made a decision to return to the emergency strip at Cape Palmas and turned back toward it when both outboards quit from fuel starvation. Suddenly we were a twin-engine B-29, and with the extra weight on board, we were not maintaining altitude. Capt. Clark ordered us to ditching positions and began a landing pattern to ditch just outside the rock barrier parallel to the coast. The published ditching procedure at that time directed the navigator and bombardier to go to the gunners' compartment and occupy the side gunners' positions on ditching. Redmon and I went back and joined the three gunners in the center section and had a good view of the ditching through the side blisters, which were under water as soon as the airplane settled in after the initial shock and deceleration. Our prescribed route out after ditching was through the armored door at the rear of the gunners' section, which was jammed shut in our case and totally blocked. The water level was at our shoulders and rising. I tried to get out the top blister and managed to knock it out by firing my .45 through it, nearly hitting Edsel Clark, who was on top of the fuselage trying to help us out. Then, with the weapon on full cock, I used the butt to try to knock out the Plexiglas. It was useless. The ring gun sight effectively blocked passage. In desperation, with water up above the level of the tunnel entrance, all five of us (three gunners, Redmon and myself) all went through the tunnel to the front cockpit and got out through the pilot's window. The window on the left side, was on the side away from the surf and well above water level so we just dropped out. With my usual luck, I began to scramble out the window and got caught by the strap around the right leg of my flying suit and had to climb back in to release myself. Finally out in the water, I inflated my Mae West and discovered that I still had my loaded and cocked .45 automatic in my right hand. I was so startled by the impact of this that I threw it into the ocean.

Although anyone who has ever been through a ditching will agree that it's serious business, in retrospect, there is humor. As we all gathered together in the surf outside the stricken airplane, we suddenly realized that Glen Voris, the tail gunner, wasn't there. Someone paddled around to the tail, which was high and dry and twisted around to the left, as the airplane structure was broken at the rear pressure bulkhead. There he saw Voris, sitting on the horizontal stabilizer with his parachute on. He shouted for him to get away from the airplane because it could sink momentarily; Voris got up, took off his parachute, carefully put it back in his tail compartment, and dove off the stabilizer. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt in the ditching. Although we were in sight of the coast while we were still airborne, from the surface we couldn't see the shoreline. Attempts to get our life rafts out were futile, as the over-wing sections of the skin were buckled, jamming the raft compartments. We tied ourselves together and just floated there in our Mae Wests for several hours until, eventually, the surf took us into the beach. By this time, the beach was crowded with natives from the nearby village. They were more interested in scrounging from the debris washing ashore than in helping us. They did finally bring to us, a Methodist missionary, who spoke English. This allowed us to communicate with the natives, through him. They took us to the village, sent a runner to a town nearby which had wire service and dispatched a message. We never heard whether the message every got out or not. We stayed in native huts that night (June 11, 1944), which was probably a mistake.

After dark the mosquitoes were pretty bad. The next morning the first search airplane, a small twin-engine amphibian, came over several times, located us in the village and dropped a note with a streamer on it, telling us help would arrive in the afternoon to pick us up. That afternoon a PBY from Roberts Field, Monrovia, Liberia, landed in the lagoon. Three men, including a doctor, came ashore in a raft and we were ferried out to the PBY by natives in dugout canoes. This was the real adventure, as half of us were seasick before we got airborne again. I won't say which half, but I do remember it vividly.

At Roberts Field, an American installation, we were put in the hospital for observation and treatment of minor cuts and abrasions which some of us had. For the next few days we were questioned about the crash. After the inquiry was completed and the forms and reports filled out, we were scheduled for shipment, via ATC, to Kharaghpur, India, and the 20th Bomber Command. Promotion orders for the 2nd Lts, effective June 10, came through while we were there. Edsel Clark, our aircraft commander, was hospitalized with malaria and eventually sent back to the States. I saw him once again, in 1951, at Maxwell Field. He was a Brigadier General in the Ohio National Guard.

The remainder of the crew went on to Kharaghpur by C-46, via Kano, El Fasher, Aden, Masiarh Island, Karachi and Delhi. We stayed briefly at Kharagpur and were reassigned to Chakulia and the 45th Squadron. After a short time, Jim Cowden was assigned to us as aircraft commander, and we began to fly the Hump in the old camouflaged tanker, which later became "Hump-Happy Pappy."

Memories of Warren Wilkerson

We left Pratt February 13, at approximately twelve midnight. Our troop train took us through Colorado, on west and then southwest to Camp Anza, California, near Los Angeles, arriving there February 17, 1944. Food on the troop train was from a field kitchen in a box car. No seconds, please.

Camp Anza, California processed troops for embarkation at Port Wilmington, Los Angeles. We were at Camp Anza nine days, from February 17 to February 26. The climate was cold at that time, cloudy and a mist fell almost 24, hours a day. We slept in tents which were heated by fuel oil stoves. Noses, ears, throats and eyes were congested by the fuel oil fumes and smoke. We were processed for embarkation. Shots were given and medical records were checked and brought up to date. A couple of days were spent in learning how to board or land from a ship via rope ladders loaded with a full pack, carbine, canteen and musette bag. We left Camp Anza February 26, 1944 and went to Port Wilmington (L.A. Harbor) where we boarded the U.S.S. Mt. Vernon. The Mt. Vernon, originally a peacetime luxury liner, had been stripped of all luxuries and converted into a troop transport. There were seven or eight decks starting from the bilge on up. As I recall, she had 5" guns fore and aft, with several Borfors anti-aircraft guns on deck. The Mt. Vernon was considered a fast ship. Too fast to be slowed by being in an escorted convoy so we started out without escort.

Scuttlebutt had it that there were about 2,500 troops on board. Informed (?) sources had it that there were many more. The Mt. Vernon's speed was verified by the fact that she made Los Angles to Melbourne in 16 days with two short stops on the way.

About six or seven days out of Port Wilmington we made a stop and anchored at a distance from some islands we could not identify. We could see naval and air activity and just guessed we were near Hawaii. The ship up anchored and we set sail in the middle of the night. The third day out a British heavy cruiser, the H.M.S. Sussex, showed up to be our escort. To celebrate this event we had pay call in the form of a brand new $5 bill. At this time we still had no idea of our destination, but the presence of a British ship for escort got rumors circulating. The cruiser was along side pretty close and we could see what looked like training exercises being carried out. However, general quarters was sounded on the Mt. Vernon and the cruiser began dropping depth charges off the port side a good distance away. This continued for a long period of time. Some felt like this was a confirmation that there was a Jap submarine in the area and was the reason the British warship showed up. It appeared that the Jap submarine was destroyed. The word from the radio on the Mt. Vernon relayed to personnel was that the Jap radio was claiming that the U.S.S. Mt. Vernon had been sunk. This took place in an area we believed to be near either the Fiji or Samoa Islands.

We arrived at Melbourne, Australia March 15, 1944. We stayed there two days. The ship took on supplies, fuel and fresh water. No one was allowed to leave the ship. Fresh water was hooked up to the ship's water system so that the personnel could take fresh (cold) water showers. We left Melbourne March 7, with either a British frigate or destroyer as escort. We proceeded past Ceylon, the tip of the Indian sub-continent, up the Malabar coast from the Indian Ocean to the Arabian Sea to Bombay, India, March 31, 1944.

There was mail for us in Bombay, brought in by our own aircraft - the first mail in 36 days. We spent four days in Bombay living on the ship. We were indoctrinated by doctors and the local gendarmes about what to and what not to eat, local rules, regulations and customs, etc.

We left Bombay on April 4, 1944, on a British troop train with British rations and arrived at Chakulia April 4.

Memories of Jim O'Keefe

When we landed at Chakulia, we thought of all the experiences of the trip over about which we would write home. But before we ever took pen in hand we received stern warnings about 'security' and 'censorship.' Thus the first frustrating letter home:

> Dear Mom and Dad,
>
> I am overseas, but can't say where. I am fine. I hope you are fine too. Give my love to Aunt ________, Uncle ________, and Cousin ________. Say hello to Mr.________, down at the corner drugstore.
>
> Your loving son,

So it would be many months before the folks at home would hear about: Gander Lake, Newfoundland...surrounded by dark and gloomy forest... snow piled high alongside the runways ...Royal Canadian Air Force pilots in their blue uniforms...RCAF planes taking off on Atlantic patrol and flying into some of the world's most treacherous weather...Cape Race, the south-eastern tip of Newfoundland, our last glimpse of North America...night over the north Atlantic ...growing tension and finally fear as the wings iced up and the plane began a slow, sickening spiral downward ...Scooter Skousen then using all of his experience, struggling with the controls and finally bringing the plane back to level flight...tranquil skies at morning...landfall, Africa!...the airfield at Marrakech, Morocco ...uniforms of many nations...a Babel of languages--French, Arabic, Berber...fezzes, burnooses, camels...on across North Africa skirting the Mediterranean Sea, as blue as we had always heard ...the wreckage of desert warfare seen strewn from Benghazi to El Alamein...the green ribbon of the Nile floodplain...circling over pyramids...Cairo...date palms, more camels ...night take-off from Cairo, a fuel line rupturing immediately and Scooter quickly turning back to the runway, the cabin reeking of of gasoline with no one cracking the stale joke about lighting a match to see what was wrong...night take-off again from Cairo...at midnight the lights of Bethlehem below us and silence on the intercom...dawn, revealing utterly desolate wasteland on the western fringes of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley...ruins of ancient cities scattered across the valley ...the Persian Gulf fringed by barren, baked mountains ...dust rising to incredible heights, on the approach to Karachi, India (now Pakistan). Kipling country... soldiers from all corners of the Empire ...turbans, snake-charmers, still more camels ...early morning take-off for our final destination ...a dogleg to fly over the Taj Mahal ...the Ganges, Holy River of the Hindus ...over a parched plain feeling the heat at five thousand feet, a portent of things to come... then below us Chakulia AAAFB, our home for a year.

From the air we saw the entire layout--the red dirt runway, parked alongside of it the few B-29s of the earlier arrivals, a cluster of thatch-roofed buildings, and a scattering of tents. It looked dusty, sun-baked, and forlorn, as if someone had begun the building of it, and halfway through the job they had gone away and forgotten all about coming back. In all directions stretched a gentle plain, most of it covered with a sparse scrub forest. Villages surrounded by tiny, cultivated fields were scattered across the plain. Anything moving on that landscape raised a cloud of red dust.

A railroad passed north of the base. On the maps we traced it eastward to Calcutta approximately 120 miles away. Around Calcutta the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers had built a huge delta into the Bay of Bengal. We would become familiar with the delta for it was here that XX Bomber Command had decided to lay out our practice bombing range.

Several hundred miles to the north were the mighty Himalayas. We would become familiar with the eastern reaches of that great range flying over their rugged peaks many times on the famed Hump route to China.

To the east about 40 miles was Jamshedpur where the great Tata Iron and Steel Works was located. In 1942 the airstrip at Chakulia had been hurriedly constructed to accommodate the RAF fighters whose mission was the defense of this industrial complex. In 1943 Chakulia had served as a temporary base for medium bombers of the U.S. Tenth Air Force. In 1944, much work would be needed to convert it into a B-29 base.

We landed, reported in, and were assigned to quarters in what was to be known forever after as the OLD AREA. We were issued mosquito netting, mosquito repellent, and salt tablets and told to make ourselves at home. Home in the Old Area was a large barracks room with a concrete floor, mud walls, and a thatched roof. There were trees around; unfortunately many were leafless at that time of the year, an adaptation to the monsoon climate. Years later, I was to remember this biological phenomenon and use it in a biogeography lecture as an example of environmental adaptation. In April 1944, I was unimpressed with plant physiology; I missed the shade.

Memories of Hibbard A. Smith

I was bombardier on Capt. Charles M. Taylor's crew. We left Pratt at 01:00 April 1, 1944, in A/C #26308. The 45th's operations officer Maj. John Seeley was aboard. However, Charley and his regular co-pilot C.E. Crecelius made the takeoff. On takeoff we got caught in propwash and it took both pilots on the controls to keep things under control. After we were up and away Charley informed us it was his first night takeoff in a B-29.

We were cleared through air traffic as B-17s. Our ETA's to various checkpoints indicated a ground speed considerably above that of any B-17. I remember seeing Detroit. At Portland, Maine, we deviated from course to avoid U.S. Navy ships in the harbor. The stop at Presque Isle was unscheduled. Weather at Gander Lake, Newfoundland, forced the change. I believe there were ten to fifteen B29s that had dropped in on Presque Isle and we created quite a stir.

At Presque Isle there was an ATC hotel on the base. While at this time we did not know where we were headed, we suspected this might be our last chance for steaks. Bill Townes, Pete Petras and Chris Crecelius "arranged" for me to pick up the check for about four meals in a row. But we weren't going to have any use for money anyhow! There was a bingo party one night and the 40th guys "sort of" won more than their share. The only problem was the winners tried to drink their prizes before we finally took off for Gander. Very shortly after leaving Presque Isle, we crossed into Canada and left the U.S. I think everyone aboard has his own quiet thoughts on that.

Gander Lake was overflowing with new B-17s with very new crews headed for England. At Gander, we began to suspect we were not going to England when we received orders for our next destination--French Morocco.

By now all the B-29s had about ten hours on their four new engines. Since no B29 had ever gone much over ten hours without losing an engine, we started out for Africa with a certain amount of concern. The engineers, though, had done their jobs and the fly-away engines stayed with us all the way.

At Marrakech, we got some bad gasoline and all the planes had trouble getting up and over the Atlas Mountains. At dawn we were well out over the desert. I was drowsing in the nose admiring the spectacular sunrise. I don't know how long it took me to wake up to the fact that the sun was coming up over our left wingtip. My remote indicator compass showed us on course, but the co-pilot's magnetic compass said we were headed due south! Later we were to find the gyro-fluxgate compass out in the left wingtip had tumbled. But for the present the discovery certainly woke everyone up. We didn't know how long we'd been flying south. However, fortunately, the solution was simple. We flew a northeast course and when we found the Mediterranean, we turned east to Cairo.

The highlight of Cairo was a Red Cross bus tour to the Pyramids. We had time to go inside one Pyramid--or climb it. I climbed along with Bill Renfro and a few others. The trip from Cairo was again at night. We went well north of Saudi Arabia. There was a full moon and we were able to find Bethlehem. By daylight we were over the Tigris and Euphrates River Valley. At the end of the Persian Gulf, we turned left and headed east along the desolate south coast of Iran. When the shoreline turned south, we were near Karachi. At Karachi, we stopped long enough to have the plane sprayed for mosquitoes and then proceeded on to Chakulia in daylight.

EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPTS: Please send us your memories -- any story you believe worth telling. Send it to: William A. Rooney, 517½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091.

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