

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Richard Thome

Current home town: Columbus, Ohio

Age: Not given

I was inducted at the Wall Street Armory in Toledo on February 20, 1943. I traveled to Camp Perry, Ohio on February 27. On March 7, I got a one day pass to visit home, then on March 8, I boarded a train to Atlantic City for basic training, where I stayed at the Ambassador Hotel on the boardwalk. On April 17, I went by train to Ft. Monmouth, NJ, where I spent six months going to radio school, three months on ground radio and three months on aircraft radio. Classes were from 6:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. for one month, and from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m. the next month. Mornings and afternoons were physical training. I went to New York one weekend, going to Radio City and a New York Yankee game at Yankee Stadium. We went the surrounding towns such as Red Bank, Long Branch and Asbury Park on occasion. After a couple months, I was named a squad leader, which meant I didn't have to help in the Friday night GI party which was scrubbing the barracks floor.

On October 7, I went by train to Jefferson Barrack outside of St. Louis for overseas training. I remember doing PT early in the morning under a moonlit sky and temperatures close to zero. The squadron I was assigned to was mostly from Ft. Monmouth and a very close bunch of GI s. We used to sing whenever we were in formation, and we didn't take much guff from the permanent party training sergeants. On one occasion, we were apparently doing something that a Sgt. King didn't like, and he gave us a hard time, and we started to sing "Sgt. King is a son of a bitch, parlei vous." He yelled "gas" which was the signal to put on our gas masks. When they were on, he double-timed us for a considerable length of time. After we repacked the masks, we started to sing the same thing and went through the same routine. I believe this happened three times. We finally won the encounter.

I got a one-week pass home while at JB, the only time I was home in better than three years. On December 30, I boarded a train heading for POE Camp Patrick Henry, VA. This was a newly constructed camp with wooden sidewalks and mud all over the place. On January 10, we were taken by train to Hampton Roads and boarded the *Empress of Scotland* troopship for parts unknown. This was a fast ship, so we traveled alone. It was a British-run ship, and dirty and greasy all over. The food was barely edible, the best part being the orange marmalade. I was seasick most of the time, but as long as I was laying down, I was able to make it. I could eat something and keep it down if I would go lay down after eating. I was supposed to pull guard duty and watch a watertight door, but as soon as I got to my post, I was usually sick and had the guy next to me watch my watertight door. Fortunately we didn't have any trouble with subs or mines. Before the war, the *Empress of Scotland* was a Canadian Pacific Line vessel named the *Empress of Japan*. The Japan had been removed on the bow, but plates inside identified it as the Empress of Japan.

We stopped for two days at Capetown, South Africa, and got to go into town for the days. I remember Table Top Mountain and taking a cable ride to the top. The trip took 30 days.

On February 9, we docked in Bombay, India. A good many of us were too weak from seasickness and lack of good food, that we couldn't carry our duffel bags down the gangplank. We just dragged them off. (I don't know how many pounds I lost). We were taken to a RAF (Royal Air Force) rest camp somewhere outside of Bombay. Again the food was bad, and our mess kits were washed only in cold dirty water. It was only a matter of time before we would have dysentery or worse. One of our officers quickly got some hot water for washing and rinsing our mess kits. I don't remember how we spent our time while in this camp. I know some of the time was spent doing close order drill.

On February 27, we boarded an Indian train, and spent five days going to the Karachi area. We went north to Delhi and then west to Karachi. I remember the little kids singing "Deep in the Heart of Texas" and saying "no mama, no papa" as they begged for food and money. After five days we arrived at Malir Cantonment outside of Karachi in the Sind dessert. I don't know what we did there, probably nothing.

On March 17, I was on a motor convoy with maybe 100 trucks and Jeeps. I was assigned to a weapons carrier, a 3/4 ton truck, with another fellow. The road through the desert was just two ribbons of concrete or brick, and always there was dust so that many times you couldn't see the truck in front of you. I had never driven before and the first day out I just rode. At our first stop, we were in line for gas and my driver wasn't around so I drove the truck to the gas pump and got gassed up. No problem. After that I did my share of the driving.

As I recall, the cities that we stopped for the night, usually at a British camp outside of town, were Hyderabad, Sukker, Multan, Lahore and finally New Delhi. There was one occasion, I think in Multan, that a couple of us took a rickshaw into town. I don't believe these people had ever seen a white man before, and it was rather uncomfortable riding around with them staring at us. We didn't stay long before going back to camp.

In New Delhi, approximately 20 of us were taken off the convoy to a tent camp. After a few days, an officer asked us what we doing there as we were waiting for some travel orders. He said he would take care of that. That night we were on a train (maybe the Calcutta Mail). We had a car to ourselves, but what a night. The car was full of cockroaches and we spent a good length of time killing all of them before we could sleep. I slept on the baggage rack. The next day we arrived at Camp Howrah and spent a few days there. This camp was outside of Calcutta.

My next travel was by wide gauge train to some town along the Brahmaputra River. There we boarded an Indian river boat for a day or two trip up the river. There were natives and British soldiers aboard. At the end of this trip we boarded a meter gauge train, the Bengal & Assam RR at Pandu. This was an American-run railroad. After a day trip, we arrived at Tinsukia. There we were picked up for transportation to a transient camp (Polo Grounds) and then on our first permanent assignment. We arrived at the 1056th Signal Co. 329th Service Group on April 18. This group had seen service in North Africa, Sicily and Italy before being shipped to the CBI.

We lived in a tent city. The monsoons were going in full force and everything was a big mud hole. Leaches were always something to watch out for, and if you found one on you, someone who smoked always put a lighted cigarette to the creature to get them to withdraw. If you knocked them off, their heads would remain embedded in your skin and would cause an infection.

After I had been there for a while, the first sergeant called me to the orderly room and told me the commanding officer wanted to see me. I wondered what I had done to see him about. He informed me that he was putting me in charge of the radio shop. We had a thatched hut that we called a radio shop, but we had virtually no equipment, as it had not arrived from Italy. There wasn't much to do, but I had to make written report every week.

After about three months, about ten of us were notified we were being transferred to a different outfit. This was the 1043rd Signal Co., 51st Air Service Group at Dikom, with a Chabua APO. This was one the oldest Service Groups in the CBI theater. As this signal company had been in CBI for quite a while, there was a complete radio shop equipped to do most aircraft radio repairs. I was assigned to repair the SCR-274 transmitters and receivers, which was used for short range aircraft communications. After a short time, I was assigned to the SCR-269, a radio direction finder. This receiver could be used to home in on station for navigating, or could plot a location by tuning in two stations. All of the testing was done in a screened room to avoid outside interference.

We could repair almost any piece of equipment including long range transmitters, instrument landing system receivers and IFF (identification friend or foe). We received a commendation from ATC (India China division - Air Transport Command) and from the 14th Air Force. All of the radio equipment was used on C-47's and C-46's, which were flying the "Hump" to China, and on fighter planes at a field near us (Nagaguli). The cargo aircraft were flying from Mohanbari and Chabua. At one time, Chabua was supposed to be the busiest airfield in the world. Our company area was under the flight pattern of planes returning from China and we could hear them around the clock.

Although our company area was cleared from the jungle, we had a softball field, a basketball court and a half sized football field. Our radio officer believed in recreational activities, and we could leave work an hour early if we played some kind of sport. During the dry season, there was usually a touch football game going which I played in. I played my first golf in the town of Dibrugar at a nine hole golf course. One of my tent buddies had met an English tea plantation owner who played this course, who invited us to play. The course was in bad shape with long grass and cow dung everywhere. (No balls got stuck.)

With the war over, there wasn't a whole lot to do to keep busy. I don't know what I did, probably a few radio repairs as there were still considerable flight operations. A point system was in operation to determine the order of returning to the states. One point was given per month for stateside duty, and two points for overseas service. Battle stars were worth five points. I had one which gave me 55 points. (10 stateside, 20 overseas, 1 star with time counted till the end of the war). Originally high point personnel were to be transferred to an outfit of men with 55 points or higher, and shipped home as a unit. This is the reason I was transferred to the 1009th Signal Co. at Myitkyina. At this time I had a good

chance of going home soon. It didn't work that way. Soon after arriving in Burma, the rules changed. Now personnel would be rotated strictly by points. Since I had 55, I was now at the bottom of the list.

There was a little work to do in the radio shop, but not enough to keep busy. I imagine we goofed off most of the time. As we were getting fewer and fewer men all the time, everyone except higher ranking noncoms had to do guard duty every other night. The Chinese would steal anything. Needless to say this was not one of my best memories.

One day the mess sergeant come to my quarters to ask one of my buddies if he would like to be a cook. I asked if he needed any more cooks and he said he did. So I volunteered for something once in the army. No more guard duty. Working in the mess hall was probably 1-2 hours a day at the most. I spent Thanksgiving in Burma and we had a feast. Fresh turkey with all the trimmings. Shortly after, the entire company was flown back to India I spent 2-3 weeks at a former 7th Bomb Group base, again with very little to do. I remember repairing a few personal radios, if we could find some spare parts.

There were a few sayings that I remember, like: "home alive in '45", and "out of the sticks in '46". Also, along the road were the old Burma Shave signs: "save your swing and sway for Sammy Kaye, Burma Shave".

Next was POE Camp Kanchapara, a post for waiting for transportation home. I spent Christmas and New Year's here with nothing to do but eat and sleep. There were movies and other forms of entertainment, but not a whole lot. Calcutta was off limits to all GI's as there were serious riots going on in the area. I found out about the riots much later.

On January 4th, I boarded the Marine Wolf for my trip home. The seas in the Bay of Bengal were as smooth as a billiard table and I had no problems with sea sickness. When we passed through the Straits of Malacca, the ocean became choppy and I started to get sick. After we passed through the straits, we were in the South China Sea and in the middle of a typhoon. We rode this to Manila, where we dropped anchor for two days. As soon as the rolling motion stopped, I felt OK. I remember passing Corregidor as we pulled into port.

After we pulled out into the ocean I got sick again, and didn't feel reasonably good until we neared Hawaii. We passed near Midway Island as we headed East. We stopped about four hours for food in Honolulu. The rest of the trip we had all the fruits and vegetable we could eat as there were big tubs of them available all the time.

We pulled into San Pedro early in the morning of February 6th after a 34 day voyage. The most memorable part of part of the voyage was when we were docking. I think you could have heard a pin drop on the ship as no one said a word -just looked over the side. Later in the day we went by train to Camp Anza near Riverside, California. We had our lunch, which was a big meal (the works) served by Italian POW's. Two days later, I was on my way to Camp Atterbury, Indiana for discharge.

Service - 2 years, 11 months, 21 days