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Move to Combat

There was no attempt for the air crews to fly overseas as a Group. The aircraft departed as soon as prepared. Lt. Gathercole, 96th Squadron, was the last to depart. His plane carried men from other units and Headquarters. The route most followed on the transatlantic flight was Waller Field, Trinidad; Belem, Brazil; Natal, Brazil; Ascension Island; Dakar, French North Africa; and finally, Marrakech, Morocco. Some flew directly from Natal to Dakar. All planes had arrived at Marrakech by April 16, 1943.

The group stayed at Marrakech for one month during which time planes flew every day the weather permitted. Flights were of high altitude formation. Lt. Col. Joseph H. Thomas, a former Eighth Air Force officer, was in charge of preparing the men for combat. Close formation flying was stressed. Before the month was over, Lt. Col. Thomas was satisfied that the Group was ready for combat.

On April 20, 1943, Colonel Lauer was replaced by Lt. Col. Joseph H. Thomas as Commanding Officer of the 2nd Bombardment Group (H).

M/Sgt. Bernard "Barney" Cohen was the Line Chief of all aircraft maintenance for the 20th Squadron and was one of the original cadre from the 34th Bombardment Group. He flew to North Africa with Lt. Gathercole. February 12, 1993: "I believe we were the only Group leaving Morrison Field at the time. I had one of my engineers, S/Sgt. Fillingame, with me and I remember M/Sgt. Orebaugh and M/Sgt. Daniel Queeney from the 96th on another. I believe another of my men, S/Sgt. Carl Hansen, was on another plane. We were to go along to do whatever maintenance was needed on the flight to North Africa.

"I remember one engine change on one ship in Marrakech, North Africa. At Marrakech we lived in four man tents and heard that we would have to sleep in 'pup' tents at our first Base. Hansen, Fillingame and myself 'moonlight requisitioned' two, four man tents before we left and we put one on the ship I was on, piloted by Lt. Gathercole, and the other piloted by Captain Triggs. Lt. Gathercole never knew it was aboard, but somehow Captain Triggs found out about the tent on his ship. He got cold feet and took the tent back to the tent area. He suggested we take ours back but we said, 'no way.' We were the only ones for a few months who did not have to hole up in a 'pup' tent. The Group Executive Officer heard about the tent and threatened to take it away from us. We talked him out of it, besides, he knew he would appear as a 'horses ass' if he did."

T/Sgt. Warren Lee Anderson, Flight Engineer on the crew of 1st Lt. Richard P. Long, A/C #42-29619, "ROAD HOG." T/Sgt. Anderson died December 24, 1989 at the age of 69. His brother, Robert, a Navy veteran of World War II, submitted this information. April 6, 1991: "Lee, as he was known in 1943, kept a record of his missions and I compiled the complete record after many interviews with him. I find that most veterans have almost total recall of what went on -- the good, the bad and the humor.

He was proud of the Group and extremely loyal. He also was a member of the current 2nd Bomb Group Association while living.”

From the War Diary, 1943: “Arrived Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, March 14, 1943. Left with our plane, ‘ROAD HOG,’ with Squadron after a delay of seven hours due to adverse weather. The take-off and trip was uneventful. We did take the plane to 17,000 feet to avoid squalls.

“Arrived Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico at 1400 hours. Splendid airfield. Beautiful concrete runways. Fueled up, took a gyro compass reading, processing and took off at 0800 hours.

“Arrived at Atkinson Field, Georgetown, British Guiana in late afternoon. We received orders to proceed to secret airstrip, description follows: In order to reach field that is hacked out of deep jungle, very dense, we were obliged to follow the -- River for 20 minutes until we sighted a small island. We altered our course 5 degrees and told to proceed on course for 15 minutes. The field was a beautiful sight to behold. There was - - - - feet of concrete runway, cleverly camouflaged. Ten feet on either side of the runway dense jungle, foreboding and sweltering. Several guys wandered 40-50 feet inside this jungle and were lost for hours. The jungle itself is awesome to see. Everything is damp and dripping and it seems to rain every 20 minutes. It looked very prehistoric. We were grounded there three days due to the frequent downpours. Another engineer - from another B-17 - and I had some live target practice. Some natives told us about a boa constrictor that had killed a native girl the day before near the airstrip. They had discovered the reptile again. They led us through the dense jungle, not far from the airstrip, to what they called a ‘baby boa.’ We emptied our automatics into the creature and it finally died. The natives immediately commenced skinning it. The snake was well over eleven feet long and didn’t seem like a ‘baby boa.’

“After a three day delay, we finally took off at 0800. Pitot tubes were not removed from a B-26 and crashed on take-off. Ship was total loss. Most of the crew survived. Pilot was killed, two others seriously injured and rest badly shaken up.

“Arrived Belem, Brazil in late afternoon. Blew tail wheel in landing. Met Campbell of the 99th Bomb Group whose plane had cracked up. We took off at 0800 hours the next morning.

“Arrived Natal, Brazil. Landed at 1500 hours. I met Sherman Seiman, Lt. in supply, that I went to school with. It was good to see an old friend. We got our 50 hour inspection. We were delayed one day due to sabotage. Iron filings were found in one of the plane’s 37 gallon oil tanks. All planes had to be examined, hence the delay. We took off at 2300.

“Arrived at Dakar, Africa after a mighty long hop over the ocean. Lt. Long decided to fly ‘as the crow flies.’ From Natal, Brazil to Dakar, Africa is 2,000 miles. Some of the Group decided to hit Ascension Island, then to Dakar. We gassed up in Dakar, and for 75 cents in American money, and an old Tee shirt, natives washed down ‘ROAD HOG.’ The natives gathered around in groups and jabbered about the 50 cal. guns and size of our planes. A French policeman finally dispersed the crowd, after shaking down the natives for most of the 75 cents, as they did not get his permission before washing the plane. The natives were tall with intelligent faces. We took off early the next morning.

“We arrived in Marrakech, French Morocco at 1400 hours, March 22, 1943. Flew altitude formation missions for three weeks, every day. This was tough on pilots. Perfect formation must be maintained at high altitude and pilot must keep the plane against the wing of the ship next to him in spite of down drafts and prop wash. This is a very vital phase of our training for combat and was stressed very strongly as this type of formation depended on the success, or failure, of the mission. Shortly we were to find out just how important.”

2nd Lt. Stanley M. Korrell was a member of the 49th Squadron and Navigator on the crew of 1st Lt. Otis Kimberling. Their aircraft was #42-29623 which they named “SCRAGGY BOYS.” 1993:

From Diary: "I had only said good-bye to my darling wife four hours ago at the Dixie Hotel, and now we were pointed at the west end of the Morrison Field runway completely and heavily loaded, ready for our last take-off in the good old United States. In the next few minutes we would be on our way overseas to combat, or whatever was to come.

"Kim, our pilot, ran up the engines, set the superchargers and checked each engine carefully for it was going to take all the power we could get to lift this load in the air. Slowly the ship swung around and headed straight for the runway, then the four engines roared as four lions. There were seconds of hesitation and down the lighted strip we flashed and finally in the air as the last few feet of the runway passed under us.

"As we passed Palm Beach and the field before going on course, the tension and excitement of the take-off eased away, and for a moment, all of the wonderful things that those United States had given me, a home, wife, education and all, passed before me. Kim called over the interphone, 'What's the course?' and quickly my eyes flashed to the map. I replied with a heading and we were on our way to Waller Field, Trinidad, which was our first stop.

"Now Waller Field is some 14 hours by air from Morrison, and we really hadn't determined just how many hours we could stay in the air, with the overloaded ship we were flying, on our test flights in the States. So we were keeping an extremely close check on our fuel consumption, with the intention of landing at Borinquin Field, Puerto Rico if we were running short of gas.

"Darkness surrounded us for the first six hours out and nothing was visible below us. We were crossing the unceasing stretch of white capped water, the Caribbean Sea. My celestial navigation had been working out well during those dark hours and it showed we were on course and maintaining a fairly good speed considering our load and very light head wind. Then as the darkness was slipping away and the gray dawn of the approaching sunrise shown on the water below us, we could see the eastern point of the island of Haiti on our right and it gave us a feeling that we were again safe in the hands of mother nature.

"As the morning unfolded below us, the sky became cloudier and the air rougher, but as we passed abeam of Borinquin Field, we decided we could make it to Trinidad if the winds did not become stronger and bad weather didn't set in.

"Everything was going along fine for the next three quarters of an hour. We were ducking between the towering cumulus clouds of this tropical region and I was getting a little rest after the long grueling hours before dawn. Then out of nowhere a huge cloud came before us that we couldn't duck, so into the side of it we went. Well, for the next four or five minutes we didn't know whether we were coming or going. One minute we were going almost straight up and the next almost straight down, and everyone was holding on and praying we would come out of it right side up, and we eventually did. The air current in these clouds have enormous force and have been known to tear an aircraft completely apart, so we considered ourselves fortunate to come out of it as well as we did.

"After the shaking up we had received and with what might lay ahead, we decided to turn back to Borinquin Field, only an hour away, to refuel and check the weather from there on into Trinidad. While Kim and Zeke, our Co-pilot, went to the operations building to check the weather, the rest of us laid under the shade of the wings to rest and enjoy the cool breezes as the serviceman refueled and checked the ship from nose to tail.

"Less than an hour later we were again winging our way to Waller Field, Trinidad. Kim had talked to an A.T.C. pilot who had just flown north from Trinidad a few hours earlier and said that the weather was okay all the way in, but advised us to stay down low over the water and under the clouds. We did just that and landed at Waller Field late that afternoon without incident.

"Trinidad, especially the part around the field, was the first real jungle country we had seen. The field itself, is situated almost in the center of the island but a little to the north. There are 4,000-foot

mountain ranges on the north and south sides of the field and because of the limited visibility and rain squalls, you have to approach it from either east or west in order to make a safe approach. The hills and valley between are covered with dense jungle growth and for the most part not penetrated by foot. One ship had crashed only a mile from the field, in the jungle, and it took six hours to reach it on foot. During the three days we spent there, waiting for repairs on the plane, it rained at least six hours a day and remained overcast the rest of the time. Our last day there we all took a vote and decided to name our ship "SCRAGGY BOYS," which probably was the name best fitted for both the crew and the ship.

"Next morning, after an early rising and briefing, we were off on the next leg of our journey, headed for Belem, Brazil. There were rain showers even then over the field, but we soon climbed above them out over the water and into blue sky. Planning our flight in order to take every advantage of weather and possibility of an emergency landing, we plotted a course to take us just off the shore of the jungle covered Guianas, across the gaping mouth of the Amazon River and into Belem, Brazil's northernmost part. Too, we were flying over Devils Island, part of French Guiana and considered hostile territory and to be avoided at all costs.

"The morning passed without incident. We had flown above an overcast, occasionally spotting the sea below us in a hole in the clouds. We were half way then, but ahead we could see towering cumulus and cobweb stratus only to be seen in a true tropical front. We would have our work cut out to penetrate this weather and hold our course into Belem. These fronts are made of the weirdest looking cloud formations that you could imagine. It reminded me of a spook movie.

"During the next hour and a half we were buffeted and tossed by heavy turbulence, on instruments because of the heavy rain squalls, and above all, our fuel consumption had increased through it all. Remembering the advantages gained on the first leg of our flight by getting down tight on the water, Kim spotted a hole and we dropped from 8,000 feet to within 500 feet of the water. Rain showers were frequent but the tension was off and we were all once again relaxed. Soon we were over the 100-mile wide mouth of the Amazon River. The water below was muddy and full of floating debris. It was far from being an appealing sight, especially after a long, hard day of flying.

"I called Zeke and told him that in two minutes we would be crossing the Equator and to have everyone christened. They had a good time throwing water from the thermos bottles over each other but completely forgot about me being alone in the nose of the ship, so remained un-christened. The nose of the ship was completely crammed with baggage and mail. I had only enough room to sit down and have access to my navigational instruments. The bombardier stayed up on the flight deck during the whole trip. Forty-five minutes later we were circling Belem, wheels down and ready to land. This particular field had always been a Pan American Airlines base but didn't have the improved run-ways that Waller Field had, but Kim made a good landing and we taxied into the spot designated for us.

"We were pretty weary and were more than glad to be shown to our quarters for the over-night stay, and best of all a shower bath next to our rooms, with cold and hot (well warm anyway) running water. A wonderful shower and some clean clothes put us in a mood for food and lots of it.

"It was our first encounter with native cooking along with some native fruits and beverages. Maybe we were just hungry or else their cooking is as good or better than our own.

"Anyway, it was really delicious. Beside the meal itself, we polished off two bowls of bananas, oranges and avocados, all fresh local fruit and very good. The outstanding lesson I learned was the native drink of Brazil is not coffee, of which they grow more than any other country, but chocolate served at almost every meal we ate while in Brazil. After dinner we made preparations for an early morning take-off, called it a day, and went to bed.

"From Belem to Natal is rather a dull and uninteresting routine trip. We flew directly out to the coastline and then onto a course directly into Natal. As on the other flights down the South American coast, the weather was rough and we passed through many rain showers, but generally it was by far the

best weather we had flown in. About 200 miles out of Natal, I turned on the radio compass and picked up the Natal radio beam. It indicated that I was directly on course and headed straight to destination, so I gave Kim an E.T.A. and for the rest of the trip, laid down and took a nap. When I awoke we had crossed the coast and were over land. My E.T.A. was about five minutes to go and there ahead I could see the glistening white Natal airport. Minutes later we landed without even having to circle the field. We let down on course directly onto the runway.

"We felt pretty good because we knew we would be able to rest here a couple of days and get the ship in perfect shape again for the Atlantic crossing to Africa. The P.X. was really swell here. It sold good Swiss watches at unbelievably low prices and Brazilian boots for four dollars a pair. Some of the fellows bought watches and we all bought boots. Later, they called the boys that wore those boots to combat, 'Natal Jockeys.'

"For the next two days, Red Harris and the boys worked the ship into perfect shape, installing new spark plugs, cleaning and inspecting every part of the ship. While they were busy on the ship, Kim and I were figuring and wondering if we could stretch the fuel long enough to make the long hop from Natal to Dakar. We checked and rechecked our fuel consumption up to then and checked the time it was taking the ships ahead of us to make the crossing. Every time we figured it, we came out just short of making Dakar. We could go by way of Ascension Island and make it in two hops. We were still undecided as to whether or not we would try to make Dakar.

"Then came the night we were to take off. We went to the Dakar briefing, were given the weather and the winds. Carefully we applied the winds and the time it would take. We were still 15 minutes short. We figured it wasn't worth the chance just to gain one day's flying so we decided to go by way of tiny Ascension Island. We had spent most of the night planning and figuring so we had only a couple of hours sleep before the scheduled 3:00 a.m. take-off for Ascension.

"We were all pretty sleepy that morning as we climbed into the ship for our flight to Africa. We finally got off, just a few minutes under the 7:00 a.m. deadline for Ascension Island take-offs, and soared out into the blue. As far as navigation goes on this flight, it was going to have to be pretty darn accurate, because the island is only four miles wide and that's pretty small at the end of a 1,400-mile trip. It was a case of it had to be on the nose or else. The whole trip is over water so all I could use was dead reckoning for my course and celestial sun lines for my ground speeds.

"The weather turned out to be really swell. We flew the entire flight, up to within 100 miles of the island at 9,000 feet over a layer of clouds which at times became solid overcast. It was really beautiful weather for this kind of trip. My celestial sun lines worked out beautifully the whole trip and I was hoping my dead reckoning had too. If it hadn't I could always check it by radio and come in on it if I had to. Thirty miles before my E.T.A. was to come up, I asked Kim to spot a hole in the undercast and get down below it. We did and ended up about 1,000 feet above the water with rain showers all around us and visibility down to about five miles. Now I knew my navigation had to be good with the visibility that low.

"Minutes flew by and I was keeping a sharp lookout, both left and right, for fear that we might pass within a mile or two and miss it. Then with my E.T.A. but five minutes from being up, the greatest and most pleasant surprise of my life took place. There straight ahead of us, not to the left and not to the right, what looked like a huge rock jutting high out of the water, lay Ascension Island. Almost before I could believe it, Kim had spotted the runway, called the tower, and we were on our final approach to land without having to make hardly a degree's turn from course.

"The runway here at Ascension is probably the oddest one in the world and yet it is no doubt one of the greatest pieces of engineering I have seen. It is literally carved through the mountains and has such a slope to it at the eastern end that we almost had to use full power to pull the plane back to the parking area. It is really a desolate island. There are only ten white civilians, English, and about 50

Negro slaves, besides the British and American troops, probably a thousand of them. The food is pretty bad and sometimes scarce if their supply ship would be torpedoed on the way. In emergencies, they can get plenty of good fish by getting a permit from the British government and hiring a boat.

“We were scheduled to take off the next morning for Dakar, but supercharger trouble forced us to stay over another day and night. The next morning we took off for Dakar, even though our Co-pilot, ‘Zeke’ Tyler, was feeling pretty sick from what turned out to be a malaria fever. We figured we could not leave him on that terrible island, and we couldn’t have stayed there with him for ten days, so we took him along, planning to put him in a hospital in Dakar.

“The trip was uneventful. The weather was pretty good but the visibility was bad because of haze and dust so we didn’t see anything until we were at Dakar and almost over the runway before we realized we were there. Dakar was the first airfield to have a steel mat runway and it almost scared us to death with the noise it made when we landed. The first thing we did was get ‘Zeke’ to the infirmary and the next day they took him in town to the hospital and found he had malaria and would be there for ten days. We felt bad because they wouldn’t let us wait for him but we did make them promise that he would have first priority on transportation to catch up to us wherever we went.

“Next day they assigned us an Air Transport Command Co-pilot so we took off on what turned out to be the last leg of our flight. Our destination was Marrakech, French Morocco, the flight being entirely across the desert. It was a boring trip over hundreds of miles of desert wasteland and rocky hills. The excitement of this flight came at the very end. We were supposed to go through a pass between two, 13,000-foot mountains at whose feet Marrakech lies. It so happened that the pass was completely weathered in when we got there so we made a circle and climbed to 17,000 feet and went through the weather. For about 15 minutes we were in hail, ice, snow and rain and when we broke out we were right over Marrakech airfield. We let down and landed as directed. As we landed we noticed a great many of the ships of our Group were parked on the field and we decided that at last we had caught up with them for the first time since we left the States. It was a good feeling to see ‘Pappy Haynes,’ our CO, again and all the boys in the Squadron. And too, it would give ‘Zeke’ a chance to catch up with us.

“We talked to ‘Pappy’ Haynes and he told us we would have some high altitude bombing training before we went up front into actual combat.

“Marrakech airfield was an old French air base we had taken over at the beginning of the North African campaign and had quite a few permanent buildings, hangars, etc. We had a good P.X. set-up, and our camp was six rows of pyramidal tents set up in an olive orchard, and it was shady and cool. It was really a nice set-up.

“The missions were short but tiring. Most of the fellows hadn’t too much formation flying back in the States and it had been a long time since they flew any at all, so it was pretty ragged the first few flights we made. The missions were primarily for the bombardier and pilots but we navigators rode along anyway. It was good training and we surely needed it before moving up front.”

1st. Lt. Edwin Speed, was the Navigator on the crew of Captain Harvey P. Hall, 96th Squadron. January 2, 1991: “Our initial crew was formed at Sebring B-17 Combat Training School in August, 1942. Our pilot was Captain Harvey P. Hall, a transfer from the Canadian AF; co-pilot unknown and bombardier, 2nd Lt. Sidney Gerstenhaber. We were eventually transferred to Geiger Field, WA, where we picked up a new co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Allen Roessig. Our enlisted crew assignment was also completed at this time. They were T/Sgt. Wesley F. Adams, Engineer; T/Sgt. Harold E. Humphrey, Radio; S/Sgt. Robert B. Hecker, Assistant Engineer; S/Sgt. Harold E. Fry, Assistant Radio; and Waist Gunners S/Sgt. Captain B. Williams and Sgt. Michael J. Kamanek.

"We flew in the winter snow in Glasgow and so expected to go to Alaska. In late February 1943 we departed for Kearney, Nebraska where we picked up our new B-17s. Our plane was #42-5777 which we named "GIN MILL."

"Our next move was to Morrison Field, Florida where we received our orders for overseas. We flew "GIN MILL" from Morrison to Trinidad, spent one night and next day departed for Belem, Brazil. The following day it was on to Natal, Brazil where we spent several days checking our plane for a long overseas hop. We next landed on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic, about 1,900 nautical miles and proceeded the following day to Dakar, French West Africa. A day later we landed at Marrakech, Morocco.

"We vigorously trained for wing take-off and assembly maneuvers, wing formation, cross country and bomb run procedures. We then moved to our first base at Chateau Dun.

"Before the Germans were defeated in North Africa, we had bombed troop concentrations, the harbors at Tunis, Bizerte, airports at Tunis, harbors and airfields in Sicily, Sardinia and Italy. "GIN MILL" led the Wing during the invasion of Sicily and the first bombing of the Marshalling yards in Rome. We were shot up every time we flew a mission but none of us were seriously wounded. "GIN MILL" was well patched up after approximately 300 combat hours.

"Months before, each officer had been promoted one grade. After completing our 50 missions, three aborted, the entire crew was relieved from combat missions and returned separately to the United States.

"In a few months I was assigned as the Base Operations Officer, Navigation, at San Marcos Navigation School, Texas and promoted to Captain."

Captain Clarence W. Godecke, Jr., was a First Pilot in the 20th Squadron. April 1, 1991: "A/C #42-29604 was the B-17 aircraft that my crew and I picked up at Kearney, Nebraska some time in March, or possibly late February, 1943, and was later named 'THUNDER MUG.' How it got its name is kind of interesting. While stationed at Great Falls AAB, Montana during the winter of 42/43, we met some girls that were employed by the War Department as code workers at the U.S. Point of Entry at Gore Field, outside of Great Falls. Now those were real sharp girls, graduates of Eastern Finishing schools, and we corresponded with some of them after we left. In fact, my navigator married one of them and another eventually became my wife. Anyway, they knew about the plane, etc. and we got a letter from one of them, all in poetic verse and I remember the last lines as being, 'What could be nicer on the side of a B-17 than a picture of an old fashioned latrine?' I don't recall where the painting, etc. was done but there didn't seem to be any lack of talent in the area around the air base.

"I took my transition training at Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington, then went to Ephrata with the 361st Squadron when the 304th Bomb Group was organized and later redesignated as the 2nd Bombardment Group.

"We flew to North Africa by way of Belem, Ascension Island, Dakar and Morocco. I flew all my missions in 'THUNDER MUG' and I had reports that it had gone at least a hundred and was then flying as a courier in some area or other.

"I flew a total of 50 missions. At that time there were no double credit missions. There were targets in North Africa, Sicily, France, and Italy with lots of fighters and terrible flak. I later went to the Eighth Air Force, in England, where I commanded a Squadron of the 96th Bombardment Group."

M/Sgt. Carl I. Hansen, Crew Chief, 20th Squadron. October 1, 1991: "There is one story I would like to relate before I joined the 34th Bomb Group at Geiger Field, WN. It has lived in my memory for almost 50 years.

“In August of 1941 I was assigned the duty of Flight Engineer for a three-man flight at Wright-Patterson Field in Dayton, Ohio, to test flight the first production B-24 built at Willow Run. I had previous experience as Flight Engineer on Liberators at Wendover Field in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. We were assigned to a 30-day evaluation of its flight characteristics. The last phase was maximum altitude in which we attained an altitude of approximately, 32,000 feet. Without warning the aircraft rolled over on its back and went into a steep dive and slow spin. After falling approximately 15,000 feet, we managed to bring it back to level flight and after a very erratic flight back to home base, made a successful landing, very gently. Needless to say, that aircraft never flew again as thousands of rivets had popped, the wings were wrinkled, twisted, and the tail was askew. This is an encounter that you don't forget very easily.

“After joining the original cadre at Geiger Field, I met Barney Cohen and we became very close friends and stayed together until the end of the war in Europe.

“Barney, Bob Fillingame and myself were the only ground personnel, from the 20th Squadron, assigned as Flight Engineers and maintenance crew to fly overseas with the Group. I was assigned to Colonel Lauer's crew and we departed Morrison Field for the first leg of our trip to Belem, Brazil. Just before the point of no return, we lost No. 1 engine due to lack of oil and a short time later, No. 3 engine quit for the same reason. At that point we headed west toward Trinidad as it was the closest field to us. As we were approaching Trinidad, over territory covered by jungle, No. 2 engine started to lose oil pressure and we jettisoned as much cargo and personal belongings as possible to lighten our load. The airport in Trinidad was a very welcome sight and as we rolled down the runway, No. 2 engine quit. Upon examination, we found that all three engines, built by Studebaker, were out of oil due to defective piston rings. No 4 engine, built by Pratt & Whitney, was in top condition.

“While we were waiting for new engines to arrive, we were told not to fraternize with the natives as they were not too friendly. One particular day, while in the barracks, we heard a lot of yelling and saw what appeared to be about 100 natives in a big circle, yelling and dancing around. We thought, this is it, they're coming to get us. Then we saw a figure, in uniform, right in the middle of the group and it turned out to be Lt. 'Snuffy' Simmons, our navigator, a former tobacco auctioneer from South Carolina, who was entertaining them with his auctioneer's chant. We found out, after, that they were very friendly and helpful. They helped us unload the three engines when they arrived on a C-54 cargo plane.

“Upon landing at Ascension, we all decided to go for a swim. On our way to the lava beach we were stopped by a member of the ground crew who told us to go to the mess hall and get a chunk of beef and throw it into the water before we went in. We did as he suggested and the meat disappeared in seconds -- Piranha!

“Then off to the Gold Coast where I purchased a ruby for 50 cents which turned out to be worth \$100 when appraised.

“From Dakar to Casablanca where we laid over for three days, then on to Marrakech where I joined up with Barney and Fillingame. Then on to Chateau Dun, Ain MiLila and eventually Tunis. While in Tunis, Barney, Phil and myself, along with others, were awarded the Bronze Star for our efforts for bringing the aircraft overseas.

“Barney and I established a very close relationship from the first time I met him and we bunked together in the same barracks, tents and whatever until I left for Italy. Barney, Fillingame, Ray Richards and Hansen were called the 'Four Musketeers.'

“One thing I want to clear up regarding the 'moonlight requisitioning' of two tents in North Africa. This was established from a speeding truck loaded with tents along a lonely highway, by crawling out on the hood of a jeep and pulling two tents from the tail gate of the truck. A foolhardy operation, but well worth the comfort we enjoyed later by living in much larger quarters.”

The movement of the ground echelon of the Group was badly split during the move to North Africa. Headquarters, the 20th, 49th and 103 men of the 96th Squadron departed Camp Kilmer, New Jersey on April 1, 1943 and boarded the troop transport, S.S. Monterey, at the port of Brooklyn, NY. The ship departed April 2nd, arriving at Casablanca, Morocco on April 12th. The Group bivouacked on the southern heights of Casablanca, at Camp Don B. Passage, gathering supplies and awaiting orders. April 18th, the men boarded a "40 & 8" train and departed for Naverin, Algeria, arriving there April 25th.

Another contingent of the 96th, one officer and three enlisted men, boarded a Liberty Ship, William S. Mosely, and left New York on April 1st, in a 40 ship convoy, arriving at Casablanca on April 19th. An old cargo ship, the Robin Adair, with one officer and three enlisted men of the 96th, left Hampton Roads, Virginia on April 1st, sailed unescorted to Bermuda, arriving on April 14th. There it took on the cargo of a damaged ship, missed one convoy due to engine trouble, and finally left Bermuda on May 1st in a large convoy, arriving at Casablanca, May 16th.

April 2nd, 11 officers and 15 enlisted men left by rail for Hampton Roads, Virginia. April 3rd they were quartered at Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia, leaving there April 7th. The officers boarded the United Fruit Company, "Metapan," at Newport News and sailed, unescorted, to New York Harbor. April 14th they left New York in a convoy of about 60 vessels and proceeded, via Bermuda, to Casablanca, arriving there on May 4th. The 15 men of the detachment were split up, three men to a ship, among five Liberty Ships, the Matthew T. Goldsborough, the Champ Clark, the Halstead, the Kelly, and the John Page. They proceeded from Hampton Roads to New York, leaving there April 14th, in the same convoy as the "Metapan." This convoy arrived in Casablanca on May 4th. The Liberty Ship William S. Telghman, with one officer and three enlisted men of the 96th, left New York for the second time in this convoy.

April 15th, one officer and 19 enlisted men of the 96th Squadron departed Camp Kilmer and arrived at Staten Island. They boarded the S.S. Mariposa which sailed at 0800 hours on April 16th, proceeded unescorted, and arrived at Casablanca, April 24th, and then proceeded to Camp Don B. Passage. I was in the contingent of 19 enlisted men.

The trip was uneventful although I had some misgivings about going unescorted, after hearing of the German sub packs and reading of the huge losses in shipping. We were told that the ship was too fast for a sub, even on the surface, and by maneuvering, we would be difficult to torpedo. Sailing into the harbor at Casablanca, I could see signs of the shelling by our Navy. The Jean Bart, a French battleship, or cruiser, had taken a real beating by our Navy. We marched to Camp Don B. Passage. Some of our outfit was still there.

The ground echelon of the 429th did not leave Camp Kilmer as a unit and no member went with the contingent that left April 1st. With the second contingent there were eight officers, who were in charge of 125 men of the 96th Squadron. This contingent left on the Tank Landing Craft (LST) # 358 on April 24th. The route took them via Bermuda and landed at Port Lyauty, French Morocco, April 30th. From there they went to Camp Don B. Passage where they remained with the third and fourth contingents.

The third contingent of 62 men, under the command of Captain William M. Hall, left April 12th on the Edward Rutledge and arrived at Camp Don B. Passage, May 5th.

The fourth contingent left New York harbor on April 16th with some men of the 96th, on the S.S. Mariposa, arriving April 24th, and also went to Camp Don B. Passage.

Several officers and men were assigned as cargo-security personnel on various ships and went across at various times. An interesting experience happened to a small group of the 429th personnel on the ship S.S. Luckenback. Lt. Henry A. Zremski, S/Sgt. Donald V. Ring, S/Sgt. James E. Mahoney, and Cpl. Albert Gerstein were sent for cargo-security on March 21st and were quartered at Camp Patrick

Henry. On March 25th they were sent to Newport News and boarded the ship. About 3:00 p.m. the ship cast off and soon thereafter was rammed by two Navy barges. The ship wandered around in the bay, correcting its compass and then proceeded for New York in a total blackout. Around 11:30 p.m. there was a collision with another ship and the men rushed to the deck. They saw another ship in flames, debris in the water and there was a series of explosions. The men rushed to their lifeboat stations. S/Sgt. Mahoney was in one life boat which, when lowering away, found the life lines fouled and several men started to cut the ropes. S/Sgt. Mahoney, and others, dropped into the water to get out of the way of those trying to cut the ropes. When the boat was free, and in the water, the men in the water got into the lifeboat. A Coast Guard vessel eventually picked up the men and they were taken to the Norfolk Naval Station. S/Sgt. Mahoney had a cut over one eye, which was treated, and the men were given dry clothing. They then were returned to Patrick Henry and were re-equipped, having lost all their equipment in the wreck. Three weeks later they were assigned to another vessel which made a successful crossing.

S/Sgt. William G. Covell, 96th Squadron Communications Section. January 19, 1993: "The convoy which left New York on April 5th consisted of about 36 LSTs, 15 other ships and a destroyer escort. Among the 'other' ships was an oil tanker, a couple of sea going tugs, a converted yacht and several decrepit, rust bucket freighters. The escort, six destroyers, waited outside the harbor entrance.

"Past the headlands, the convoy and the escort took up a southern heading and began to get into formation -- five parallel columns of nine to ten ships per column. The escorts took up their stations around the convoy -- ahead, behind and on either side. Overhead a Navy blimp patrolled, looking for any sub that might be waiting for an easy target coming out of the harbor. The blimp stayed with us for only a couple of hours.

"The LSTs headed up the formation, plowing with their blunt noses, rolling and pitching. Our LST, #358, was in the center of the column, four or five back. I heard that the convoy commander was on our ship, which may have explained its position.

"Lunch time came and I lined up for some of the good Navy chow. Surprise! Lunch consisted of cold baked beans, sliced bologna (we called it horse cock), bread, butter, coffee or milk. The sea air had given me a hearty appetite so I filled my tray anyway.

"The enlisted men's mess was down from the galley which meant that once you got your food, you had to go down some steps to a landing, make a turn and go down more steps to reach the lower deck. Now going down the stairs with both hands full can be tricky anytime but to really make it interesting, slop some baked beans and coffee on the steps to make them slippery, continually tilt the entire stairway back and forth, crowd the stairs with people all holding a tray of food in one hand and a hot cup of coffee in the other and you have some idea of the difficulty I faced getting to the mess area!

"The dining room area for the enlisted men had wood topped tables with benches along each side, all bolted to the steel deck. Two tables near the exit had large GI cans lashed to one end for garbage. There was a raised strip around the edge of each table to keep cups, trays and eating utensils from sliding off. I found it took some doing even to keep my tray and cup in front of me! I had to eat with one hand and hold onto my tray with the other.

"The dining room was warm and stuffy -- not exactly the best atmosphere for people who were feeling seasick! One of the pleasures of our first days at sea was to be at a table trying to eat and have the man next to you, or across from you, suddenly barf in his tray! And, if that didn't do it, when you went to dump your tray in the garbage can, you might have to wait while someone in the line ahead of you throws up in the garbage can. Just the smell in the place was enough to do you in! A man could go into the dining room feeling fairly well and come out sick as a dog!

"The first day at sea a duty roster was made up which assigned each Army man to some duty while the ship was underway. This was to keep us busy but some jobs actually helped out. Many of the sailors were straight out of bootcamp or a Navy technical school and had practically no sea time. As a result, the ship was short handed.

"My assignment was to stand watch at one of the 40mm gun tubs in the superstructure back of the bridge. Digulielmo also drew a gun watch, on one of the 20mm guns near the bow. I don't remember what duty Zezula got but Baxter was assigned to the galley, which was just fine with him as he wasn't bothered by sea sickness and ate with a good appetite for the entire trip.

"Supper time came and although I wasn't feeling very chipper, I went to chow. I had heard that you were less likely to get sea sick if you kept your stomach full. It didn't help a great deal to find the menu hadn't changed since lunch -- still beans and bologna. Even the men who were feeling OK didn't take kindly to this treatment, especially since we could see that the sailors (who ate separately) were getting better chow.

"That evening I started pulling gun watch. I believe we stood four on and eight off. For the rest of the time I was on board, except when we were in port in Bermuda, that was my schedule -- just like one of the crew. Somehow the schedule rotated so that I stood watch at different times each day. This wasn't bad duty -- all I had to do was be at, or near, my position during watch hours.

"A couple of times during the voyage, the Navy conducted gunnery practice and the gun crews took turns firing at a balloon released from the ship's fantail. This was exciting -- the guns made a lot of noise, especially the 5 inch gun on the fantail, and I could hear how the 20mm and 40mm guns sounded in action. As far as I remember, the balloon always drifted out of range without a scratch.

"It took the convoy four days to reach Bermuda -- just an overnight run for a fast cruise ship today. But there were reasons we were so slow. First, the LSTs were not fast ships. Top speed was about 10 knots and in a convoy all ships travel at the speed of the slowest. The average speed of the convoy was about 5 knots. Second, the convoy did not go in a straight line but was constantly zigzagging which increased the distance traveled. Third, all the LSTs were new, with new crews, and both crews and ships in a shake down phase. Problems kept cropping up. A common breakdown was the electric steering.

"One of the stations manned by the Army personnel was in a small compartment below the water line in the stern of the ship, where there was a wheel for manually steering the LST. Two Army men and one sailor were on there 24 hours a day while the ship was underway, ready to take over if the electric steering quit. Talk about seasick alley!

"We didn't know we were going to Bermuda until we got there, and we didn't know we were going to Africa until we arrived there! The trip to Bermuda was rough and stormy all the way. I got really seasick the second day out and stayed sick until we got into port. As soon as the ships passed inside the breakwater, the rolling stopped and everyone who was seasick immediately got well. It is amazing how a person can be so sick that he thinks he is dying one minute and when the ship gets into quiet water and steadies, he is as good as new!

"We were in port in Bermuda for two days, giving us time to relax and get over the affects of three and a half days at sea. My name came up for leave but I passed up the chance and Bill went in my place. There was no watch standing for Army personnel while in port and I slept with my clothes off for a change. Those first days at sea, I slept fully dressed except for my shoes with the thought in mind that if we were torpedoed, I would not have to find my clothes and get dressed. After Bermuda, I decided that it was better to sleep in comfort and damn the torpedoes. After all, there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it if we did get hit!

"The morning of April 11 all the ships in the convoy upped anchor and, one after another, headed out to sea. The destroyers went first and began shepherding the LSTs and other ships into formation

as the convoy took a southeast heading. Several hours later, a small forest of masts showed on the horizon. This turned out to be a convoy of about 50 LSIs (Landing Ship, Infantry). They fell into position behind the ships in our convoy. I think we picked up a few more escorts but, in any case, we continued on our way. Now the convoy contained approximately 100 ships, plus eight or ten destroyers. A nice fat target for any subs that happened to come along!

"The first four or five days out of Bermuda were more of the same -- rough water, stormy weather, wind and cloudy skies. The LSTs rolled and pitched worse than ever. The LSIs really took a beating. We could look back at them following along behind and watch as individual ships would rise on the crest of a wave so that the entire ship was in view and then drop into a trough that hid everything but the top of the mast.

"During this period of rough weather, I had two experiences that I remember quite well -- one was unusual, the other frightening. First, I stood watch on the ship just like one of the crew and second, I nearly fell overboard -- probably came as close to losing my life at any time during the war.

"I think it was the first or second night out of Bermuda that I stood watch for the Navy. I was on the midnight to four gun watch in the 40mm gun tub back of the bridge with a couple of GIs when a Navy officer came by and asked if one of us would volunteer to stand watch on the bridge. Of course, we were already standing our gun watch but he explained that he meant standing watch for the Navy. None of the men said anything so I thought, 'what the hell, I'm going to be out here until four a.m. anyway, I might as well try something different.' So, I said, 'OK sir, I'll give you a hand' and followed the officer to the bridge. On the way, he told me that the sailor who was supposed to be on watch was too seasick to get out of his bunk and there was no one to take his place.

"On the LST, the bridge is a rectangular affair that stretches across the front of the superstructure. On either side and extending beyond the side of the ship is a small platform called the bridge wing. When you stand on one of those platforms, you can see along side of the ship, all the way forward to the bow and all the way back to the stern. This is where the ship's officer stands when the LST is coming alongside a dock or another ship, and giving order for steering or power.

"The floor of the bridge wing was a steel grating and, standing there I could look straight down at the waves coursing along side the ship. The officer led me out onto the starboard wing (right side of the ship) and said this would be my station. He asked me if I had ever seen a torpedo track. I said 'No. Except in the movies, where they show a line of bubbles coming through the water.' He said that was good enough. Then he said, 'Stand here and keep watch for anything that looks like a torpedo track and if you see one, yell out, torpedo on the starboard side.'

"It was a miserable night! Low storm clouds were driving across the sky. There were no stars nor moon. The only light came from the phosphorescence of the breaking waves. A strong wind from the bow carried spray along the deck where I was standing and kept misting over my glasses. The LST was rolling even more than usual and the bridge wing was alternately lifted high above the sea until most of the ship's side was out of the water and then dropped until it seemed the wave tops would touch the grating under my feet. If I leaned against the rail and held on, I would be staring at the sky one moment and looking down at the ocean the next. When I stared hard at a spot directly across from the ship, I could see a dark shadow where the LST in the next column was churning along. In the dark, I could see the white crests of the waves, at the farthest, maybe 50 to 100 feet. I couldn't help but thinking that if I did happen to spot a torpedo coming and did call out a warning, it would not make a particle of difference.

"The spray coming back on the wind kept fogging my glasses but when I got out my handkerchief to clean them off, the salt water just smeared them. I was soon chilled to the bone in spite of having long johns on under my wool OD uniform and heavy GI overcoat. My hands, feet and ears were freezing and there was no place on the platform where I could get out of the wind. Every so often,

one of the officers from the bridge would come over to take a look around and see if I was still there. Finally the watch ended and a sailor showed up to relieve me. I stumbled down to the warm troop compartment, crawled into my bunk, wrapped up in blankets and finally got warm. Right then and there, I decided that the ship would have to be sinking before I would volunteer to help the Navy again! And then I would have to think about it for awhile!

"My close call came about a night or two later. I had held off being seasick for three or four days by staying in my bunk when I could, and not eating much. I was on one of my early morning watches - twelve to four or four to eight. I was huddled down in the gun tub, cold and miserable and feeling worse with every roll of the ship. Finally, I knew I couldn't put off being sick much longer so I climbed over the edge of the gun tub and headed for the rail. Now the problem was that the gun tub was on top of the superstructure and to get to the rail I had to go down to the main deck. To get to the main deck I had to climb down a steel ladder on the side of the superstructure. From the bottom of the ladder to the rail at the edge of the main deck was a distance of about eight feet.

"It was another dark and stormy night. The LST was rolling and pitching for all it was worth. I got to the edge of the superstructure, turned around and started down the ladder. I remember that on the way down, I would be laying on the ladder when the ship rolled one way and hanging from the ladder when it rolled the other way. I got to the bottom, already starting to retch, let go and headed for the rail just as the ship took a big roll the same way. The deck tilted and I went skittering towards the edge of the deck. I put out my arms to catch the rail which I couldn't see but hoped was there. It was there, of course, but instead of a solid metal pipe, which would have hit me across the chest, that section of the rail was made up of wire cable (which could be removed when the ship was in port) and the cable was slack. The top caught me at about my belt buckle and suddenly I found myself doing a balancing act, halfway over the rail. For what seemed like a year, I hung there, feet thrashing on one side, and arms waving on the other. Somehow I got my feet down on the deck and my hands on the cable and then I was OK. It was close for a few minutes. I just leaned there and looked down at the waves tossing and swirling along side of the ship. If I had gone over, no one would have known for hours. Even if I had called out loud enough to be heard (and there was no one nearby to hear), I would have been gone in the dark and the only hope would have been if one of the ships coming along behind would have heard me or seen me in the water and could have thrown me a line.

"I was wearing a kopeck life jacket over my overcoat but my clothes and shoes would have weighted me down in a short time. The convoy would not, and could not, stop for one man. But I probably would not have been missed until the next day. One thing, the close call scared me so much I was over being seasick and after a few minutes, I climbed slowly, and with great care, back to the open tub where I sat quietly for the rest of the watch.

"As the convoy worked its way south and east, the weather got warmer and better. Something else improved greatly and that was the food. While we were in port in Bermuda, some of the NCOs had gone to the officers and complained about the chow. Our officers talked to the Navy officers and worked out a deal. We had some of our cooks and bakers with us and one of them, who had been a baker in civilian life, was good at baking pies, cakes and bread. The arrangement was for our cooks and bakers to help the Navy cooks and for all of us to eat together. This worked out well for the Navy too because they were getting more (maybe better) cooks plus now we all had fresh bread, pies and cakes.

"With the improved weather, we stayed on deck more when we weren't on watch. Some of the guys took sun baths, some played cards and the rest just lounged on deck. One day, someone got the idea of shaving his head and soon there were men walking around with heads that looked like billiard balls. I should mention that as soon as we left Bermuda, fresh water was only available at the drinking fountains and for an hour, morning and evening, at wash basins. We had to shower with salt water, using a special soap, but you never seemed to get clean and the salt water left you feeling grungy.

“One morning, one of our destroyers picked up something it didn’t like and started dropping depth charges. The ocean churned again and again and I could feel the vibration and hear the rumble of the explosions. All the ships went to general quarters and all the crews watched, ready to run or fight. But whatever triggered the attack was gone. Another time I was in my bunk when I heard a lot of running on the deck, klaxons hooting and men shouting. I hurried up to the main deck and saw the LST next to us on the port side, coming straight for the side of our ship. The other ship was churning up the water as she went hard a-stern and our ship was turning as fast as she could to starboard.

“Ocean going ships, even the size of our LST, don’t stop on a dime or turn quickly and for a while it looked like the two ships were ‘agoin to bump.’ But both Captains had soon enough time and the ships only came close. This was another case of steering breakdown. There had been a change of course for zigzag but the ship along side of us had not been able to turn and put us right in front of her.

“All the way across the Atlantic, we had been under water restrictions although there were big tanks on the main deck which we were told were full of fresh water. Supposedly water was needed where we were going and we could not use it. The irony of the whole thing was that when we arrived off the coast of Africa, the channel leading to the port was so shallow that the fresh water in the big tanks had to be pumped overboard to reduce the ship’s draft. While this was being done, fresh water was being turned on all over the ship and we hurried to take showers, shave and use all the water we could.

“April 29, 1943 was a cloudy, grey morning. When I came on deck, the convoy was barely moving and off to the east I could see a low smudge that was the coast of Africa. All the LSIs and the other ships were gone, with just the LSTs and a couple of escorts left behind. In a short while, a small boat came alongside and two men came aboard -- a European and an Arab in baggy pants and a fez. I overheard one of the sailors say they were pilots.

“In any case, speed was increased and we headed for the shoreline. There must have been pilots or maybe the LSTs followed the leader but soon all the ships were strung out in a line and headed up a winding river to Port Lyauty. This was an unusual sight for we were in a flat, delta area with only low bushes along the shore, and looking ahead or behind, the line of ships appeared to be winding across dry land. About ten miles up the river, we came to Port Lyauty and tied up to some docks. The voyage ‘overseas’ was over.”

Sgt. William R. “Dick” Norman, 96th Squadron. First Cook and Mess Sergeant. September 25, 1993: “We were at Camp Kilmer about a week after moving by rail from Glasgow, Montana. About 100 non-coms of the 96th were called out to fill out a large ocean liner, leaving with a large convoy to where no one knew. We loaded April 1, 1943 (April Fool’s Day) with just our two barracks bags and WWI 30-06 rifle. We were put on A deck in a smoking room and it took most of the night to get settled. I don’t remember getting underway but by sun-up we could see nothing but ships all around us and water.

“Of the mess department there was myself, Cletus Grady, Murray Cobb, Paul Anderson, Frank Mills, and I think, William D. Davis. That is all I can remember. There were also non-coms from Group Headquarters and the other Squadrons. I remember M/Sgt. Morrill Saulnier and M/Sgt. Bennett. I will never forget how Bennett tried to get us to fall out after we were billeted in tents in North Africa. He would go up and down the tent rows yelling, ‘Fall out men, God damn it men, fall out, please fall out men, oh hell!’ He had a southern drawl that was so profound you could almost cut it with a knife.

“Back to the crossing. We were fed twice daily and it took most of our time just getting down to the galley, eating, back to the top and getting in line again. The Sgt. from transportation spent most of his time in his bunk, seasick.

“We zigged and zagged so much that we had no sense of direction for several days but ten days out we noticed a distinct change in the weather temperature. In a couple more days we were told we

were going to North Africa and given a book on how to conduct ourselves toward the civilians, especially women.

“There was a lot of crap shooting and cards but I didn’t get involved. My greatest concerns were getting something to eat and sack time. I was one of the fortunate ones who wasn’t seasick. We had one incident where one of our Master Sergeants put down a Major in our Group. We had been trying to keep clean shaven but the only water in the heads was salt water. Now if you ever shaved using salt water you had quite an experience. Well, we all decided to grow beards rather than end up with chapped and sore faces. We were quite a motley looking bunch after a few days and one time the Major came through one evening and he ordered everyone to be clean shaven by morning. Well, by the next morning, when the Major showed up in our quarters this Master Sergeant had told us to trim our beards as best we could. When the Major exploded, our Sergeant informed him of the section in the Soldiers Handbook that pertained to well trimmed beards and the major had to back down.

“We arrived at Casablanca on April 12th. The first civilian we saw was an Arab, bare except for wearing a GI barracks bag tied around his waist with a hole for each leg. We unloaded in full OD dress, including overcoat, gas mask and 30-06 rifle under command of one of our Lieutenants. He led us in close order drill and after a short time, was threatened with mayhem if we weren’t allowed to shed our overcoats. It was about two or three miles to our bivouac area and six man tents. Our barracks bags were dumped in a pile, from six by six trucks, and it took most of the first day to find our bags and blankets and get a place to sack out in a tent. Then it rained! We spent the first night digging a ditch around the tent to keep the water from running through the tent and soaking our clothing and blankets.

“Shortly after we were loaded on 40 & 8 railroad cars for a trip across Algiers that lasted five or six days and nights. After the first day we ate cold ‘C’ rations. The cooks who were supposed to heat them in GI garbage cans of water on a field stove, caught the rail car floor on fire and dumped the water, cans and stove on the floor to put out the fire, so we ended up eating the ‘C’ rations cold for the rest of the trip.

“We were so crowded for space on the train that some of us moved to a car loaded with light poles. We moved them around so that we could put our blankets in cracks between poles and slept that way. We put our gas masks on about two or three nights since we were traveling through tunnels in mountains. The coal burning steam engines filled the tunnels with so much smoke we couldn’t breathe. You can imagine what we looked like when we got to our first camp after six days of no washing, shaving and so on.

“We arrived at Chateau Dun about evening time and I don’t remember our being so tired before, or since. I recall a black trucking outfit near us and one of them said, ‘You all better get a hole dug.’ Well we didn’t take his advice and just piled down to sleep. About midnight we were rudely awakened by an air raid. I don’t remember much about the rest of the night but we spent the next day digging holes.

“Our air crews were on the field but had flown no missions as yet. Their time had been spent in practice. We one hundred were now expected to keep them going. We of the mess had no equipment but finally managed to borrow and steal enough to half-way feed everyone. We even scrounged from the British for some of our rations for some time. They had good beer which we traded Vienna sausage for. Cobb was a good scrounger. Along with a guy from Headquarters; I think his name was Burney, from Georgia, we took a six by six to a big Quartermaster dump, manned by an all black outfit. I recall Burney managed to get his hands on a fifth of booze and while feeding a guard most of the booze, we hauled away a truck load of kitchen equipment and supplies. I know we had more than double what we were supposed to have because when I left Italy to come home on R&R, in 1945, I had to sign for 13 field kitchens and we were only authorized to have six.

“Well all good things had to come to an end. Fox, and the rest of the outfit caught up with us with supplies and regulations. Up until then we fed and then took off. Now we were back in Uncle Sam’s Air Corp.”

Sgt. Keisling Lane was a member of the 20th Squadron and Mess Sergeant while in North Africa. February 28, 1991: “When I went overseas I sailed on the S.S. Mariposa which had been a cruise ship and it still had its civilian cooks. I had to take a crew down to the kitchen as helpers. My job was to make sure they all went to work and I had to stay with them all day. It wasn’t a bad deal for us as we ate good along with the crew. Most everybody got two meals a day but we ate three because that was what the ship’s crews had.

“I had been a cook in civilian life. I was working in a yacht club in Clearwater Beach that had been turned into an officers club for Air Force officers at Drew and McDill Fields, near Tampa. I was trying to get into the Navy and was having a problem so I told a draft board to send me to the Army. General Tinker, from Tampa, was a member of the yacht club and he had one of the officers ask me if I wanted to be a cook in the Air Force as he was being sent to Pearl Harbor. The officer said it might be arranged that I could go also. I wasn’t sure if this was true or not, so I declined.

“Anyway, I was sent to Camp Blanding here in Florida and was to go to Cook and Bakers School. After a few weeks and no orders, I was put in the Medics and sent to Salt Lake City. From there I was sent to Ephrata, Washington and attached to the 2nd Bomb Group, 20th Squadron. This is where I met Doc Ihle, the Squadron’s Flight Surgeon. I suppose they thought the medics needed a cook in the hospital.

“It wasn’t long before I learned that my lack of education would keep me from being a Medical Technician and asked Doc Ihle if I could arrange a transfer into the mess hall where I could help with something I knew about. The transfer was soon made and I was always grateful to him for that.

“So I met the Mess Sergeant, an older man, but he had an assistant who impressed me very much. As soon as I was transferred to the kitchen I learned that the older Mess Sergeant was to leave as soon as we were trained. The assistant Mess Sergeant would then take over. I was sure then, and after 50 years of kitchen work, he was one of the finest chefs I have ever known. I think his last job had been in a gambling resort in Nevada, or somewhere else in the west. The many things that happened in the next three years could make a book! I think we drove him nuts, along with the food and equipment we had to work with. He was a real professional chef and had no business in a situation like this.

“I got the Mess Sergeant’s job when we were in Tunis. It wasn’t that I was better than he was. We had no training as soldiers. He and I never went through Basic Training. I would certainly hope that the Armed Services do a better job than they did back in those days.”

My stay at Camp Don B. Passage proved interesting to some degree. The camp was just across a road from a large cemetery where some of our soldiers, killed during the invasion, were buried. The graves were well kept and aligned as you see them in Veteran cemeteries today. It was a large cemetery, French I believe. Things were pretty dull during this period. Outside of some limited office work, guard duty and occasional trips into Casablanca, there wasn’t much to do.

The last of our men finally arrived and on the 24th of May, four officers and 108 enlisted men loaded on 40 & 8 box cars to join the main force of the Group at Chateau Dun Du Rhumel. I was fortunate to miss that trip because T/Sgt. John J. McWeeney and I were selected to drive the Orderly Room jeep in the large motor convoy. We had just received our complement of all types of vehicles and were to take them to our first base.

We departed camp May 25th and arrived at Chateau Dun on May 30th. Our trip, about 1,050 miles, took us through Fez and Ou’dja, Morocco; Orleansville and L’azhe, Algeria where there were

bivouac areas outside these towns. There we were supplied with water and gasoline. We slept on the ground. "C" rations were our staple food although we did buy some fruit along the way. One day we bummed some bread from a GI bakery.

We were wary of the Arabs as we drove through the many towns. We were pulling a trailer loaded with supplies and personnel possessions and had it covered with a tarp. As we went through a town, Mac and I would take turns getting on the trailer, with our rifle, to keep anyone from reaching into the trailer to steal whatever they could grab.

S/Sgt. James C. Charlson was a member of the 96th Communication section. May 25, 1992: "We had left Camp Don B. Passage, and were traveling by rail, 40 & 8, to our first base camp at Chateau Dun Du Rhumel. It was a several day ride and accommodations were lacking. Aside from monotony and discomfort of the trip, one personal story stands out in my mind.

"At one stop, near a small station, most of the men rushed to either the right or left ditch and proceeded to empty both bowels and bladders. Not having a demanding urge, I waited until the rush was over, then decided to walk a few blocks to the station and perform my duties in a civilized manner. On entering the station I proceeded to the rest room and was confronted with what appeared to be urinals with raised foot prints. I resolutely planted my feet on the raised footprints and started urinating when I heard the door open and expected company. I had the company in the form of a French woman of young middle age who stepped on the raised footprints in the reverse of my stance, raised her dress, pulled down her panties and proceeded with her duties. She had a full view of my shortcomings but only smiled (that hurt). But being in the midst of voiding my bladder I could not stop, so she had a long view of a short subject. When rushing back to the train, I noticed in my confusion that I had slightly wet the front of my trousers. When my colleges pointed this out, I blamed it on a faulty drinking water spigot. I never went into a station rest room again."