

STOMPING A COBRA

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Date and place of event: Chakulia, India, summer of 1944.

FOR GEOGRAPHICAL IDENTIFICATION, our base was located a couple miles south of the town of Chakulia in Bihar Province. Its RR station is 114 miles west of Calcutta. Our unit was part of the 58th Bombardment Wing of the 20th Bomber Command in the new 20th Air Force. There were four Bomb Groups in the 58th Wing. The 40th Bomb Group was the nucleus for formation of a new military command. The other three Groups were the 444th, 462nd and 468th. When we first arrived in India on March 31, 1944, there were four squadrons in each Group. A few months later, one squadron in each Group was assimilated into the other three squadrons. I imagine this was to reduce the number of people needed in the command structure, but that is just my guess. Our first fleet of B-29s was comprised of the first 150 aircraft assembled at the new Boeing plant in Wichita, KS. The plant was built specifically for assembling B-29s. There were nine airplanes assigned to each 58th Bomb Wing squadron, or 36 to each group. (By the end of the war in August 1945 the number of aircraft had increased to 51 per Group.)

I arrived in India aboard a troopship on March 31, 1944 and arrived at our Chakulia base about ten days later after a four-day train ride from Bombay. I was glad to learn that our base was near a town with a name I could pronounce! Our housing area was about a mile from the airfield. Sometimes I walked to the flight line around 6:30 a.m. One morning as I walked along the path I noticed a serpent coming toward me. The soil was moist and the grass was wet from the rainfall of the preceding night. The snake was showing its hood, so I knew it was a cobra.

When I saw the snake I stopped in my tracks. When the cobra noticed me it also stopped, then turned away to enter the grassy area off the path. My US Army G I shoes were thick leather with leather soles and heels. When I had them re-heeled a "horseshoe" was nailed to each heel. I guess that was to extend the life of the heel. As the snake slithered away toward the grass, I stepped forward and stomped on the snake's body just behind the head, decapitating it. So much for the adventure with a cobra.

Among the little varmints around our housing area were some very large scorpions. They were 8 to 12 inches long and as large as a Maine lobster. We were told that the scorpions stinger could penetrate a leather boot. Once upon entering the latrine (outhouse to you farmers) I saw a large scorpion on the cement floor. After sizing up the situation, I stomped the scorpion just as I had the cobra. It was the afternoon of the same day the cobra was dispatched.

Life in India was interesting.