

A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF THE TRIP TO INDIA

Written by Ed Vickery

I remember embarking from Newport News, Va. On February 11, 1944, it was a cold, dismal day. The Salvation Army was set up on the dock passing out coffee and doughnuts (Free) before we went on board the liberty ship, Abraham Lincoln. I believe there were about three hundred of us down in the hold. We were assigned to canvas bunks, four bunks high, lying on your back there was about four inches to spare up to the bottom of the next bunk. We weren't out many days when it got real rough. I remember standing watch on deck – one minute the waves would be twenty feet above you and next it would be like looking down into a canyon when the ship was on top of the wave. Quite a few of the men would stay up all night playing cards instead of sleeping. I asked one of them why they did this and he said they wanted to be awake in case the ship was hit and they would have a better chance to abandon ship. Hell, the seas were so rough and the weather so cold you couldn't have lasted long out there on the North Atlantic, so you might just as well forget it and go to sleep. The crew on the Lincoln wasn't much help; they were always telling stories of how many ships were torpedoed on the last crossing or how lousy the ships were being built and how many just fell apart in the rough seas. We were not allowed up on deck for a period of three days at one time because it was so rough. The crew said this was good because the German subs would have problems operating in this kind of weather so we counted our blessings.

The convoy we were in was made up of over one hundred ships and we split up West of Gibraltar. I think about half of the convoy proceeded North to England and the rest of us proceeded thru the Straights of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean. We landed in Oran and were trucked to a tent area outside of the town. The days here were warm but as soon as the sun went down it got cold. I used to put on my longies, O.D's, overcoat and blankets to keep warm during the night. One night we tore an old outhouse apart and started a bonfire to keep warm. We were given passes to go into Oran, nothing there but more G.I.'s and a few beer joints. I still have a chit for a beer at "Al's Place". The toilet facilities there were something new to me. They had a hole in the floor with two raised pads on each side. When you dropped your pants to take a shit, you had to be careful or all your change would fall out of your pockets and roll down into the hole. You weren't sitting on anything so at least you didn't have to worry about catching anything.

The natives at Oran were something. They were the worst bunch of thieves I have ever run across. They could steal a wristwatch off your wrist without you even knowing it. You would see them dressed in long john and mattress covers and they were as proud of the outfits as if they had on tuxedos. After a short stay at Oran we were loaded on trucks and brought back to the dock at Oran and loaded on to the S.S. Champolleau for a leisurely cruise of the Mediterranean. We slept in canvas hammocks slung in the mess hall; there was dammed little room between each hammock. Not being used to sleeping in a hammock I used to wake up each morning with a sore back and aching kidneys. The latrine was up on deck and the pathway from the hold to this facility was a mess most mornings. Quite a few of the men had diarrhea and being seasick at the same time- they let go on the stairway to the latrine. With the rolling of the ship and the slippery conditions underfoot it was an adventure to go to the john. The Champolleau was a French ship with an English crew. The food was pitiful, more than once I saw worms in my food. I practically lived on bread, butter and marmalade for the whole trip I haven't

used marmalade since I got out of the service – I had enough for one lifetime on that trip. Our final destination was to be Bombay, India but I think some budding travel agent must have planned our trip. First we ran up to Naples they wanted us to see Mt. Vesuvios and the Isle of Capri - how lucky can you get? After we docked at Naples we were told that there would be no shore leave. You could hear the field artillery firing at Mt. Cassino, which was too far away. I was wondering if any of my old buddies from the 36th Infantry Division were up there. Thank God they had unloaded me from that outfit when I couldn't pass the eye test when they were getting ready to go overseas. They took an awful shellacking when they landed at Salerno.

One night while docked at Naples the Germans made a bombing run on the harbor, we were told to stay below but someone was up on deck shooting a machine gun at the Germans giving our location away. I was told that it was M/Sgt. Silvestro – I guess he wanted to win a medal for shooting down a plane. We left Naples and cruised down the West coast of Italy thru the Straights of Messina between Italy and Sicily and on to Port Said. When we were docked, a lot of little boats pulled up along side and started selling souvenirs (junk) to the troops. They would throw up a rope with a basket tied in the middle, in the basket were brass items and also things made of leather. You hassled them over the price and sent the money down in the basket. Some of the guys dropped large objects down on them trying to sink their boats – it was hilarious. The screaming and yelling was really something. We left Port Said and proceeded thru the canal. Every once in a while you would come across a hulk of ship that had been sunk in the canal. The remains had been dragged to one side or the other of the canal so not to block the channel. We next stopped off at Aden – hottest place I have been in my life – worse than India. From there we went to Bombay, disembarked and I think we took a train to Deolali – this was an old British army outpost. You almost expected to see Victor McGlaughlin or Dunga Dinn to appear. This place was my downfall, up to now I had felt great but within two days I came down with dysentery. Between the run down bashes, rope beds, rotten latrines, lousy food and pitiful sanitation conditions it was small wonder. At this camp there were a lot of Italian prisoners of war and almost every afternoon they would be playing soccer against the English soldiers. We had a lot of Italian G.I.'s playing soccer against the English soldiers. We had a lot of Italian G.I.'s in the outfit and they used to cheer for the Italians to beat the English. This would piss the English off to no end, as we were supposed to be on their side. The Italians were a happy lot as the war was over as far as they were concerned.

We next got on a train and crossed the country to Chakulia, what a trip. The sleeping facilities were anything but comfortable. During the day you sat on a slatted bench, three men on one side and three facing you. At night two more slatted bunks dropped down from above and this was your bed. It was like sleeping on a park bench. You almost had to sleep flat on your back, even then the slats dug into your flesh. At every train stop the tea wallah's would be out setting "Limey tea and cookies". I believe this trip lasted four or five days.

On arrival at Chakulia, April 15, 1944, we were assigned to tents. Thank God they were British tents as the G.I. canvas tents would have been unbearable in the heat. The U.S. Army didn't impress me with the way they outfitted us for the tropics. The tents were lined up in rows with a ditch about four feet deep between each row. This ditch was to carry off the rainwater from the monsoon season, which was soon upon us.

Mealtime at the old area was quite an adventure. You lined up for chow both officers and enlisted men in the same line. You had to keep your eyes out looking for the damned vultures that were flying overhead and would swoop down and steal your meal out of your messkit if you weren't looking. Many a guy lost his meal this way and had to get back in line to get a refill.

Our shower facilities were also quite original. About four-thirty to five P.M. every day a water truck appeared on the main road where all the native workers were parading by to go home for the day. We would be all out there stark naked and the truck driver would be spraying us with a hose. First you would soap yourself then rise off – there was no problem drying off due to the heat. The natives must have thought we were a bunch of nuts. Some of the guys would be shaking their privates at the woman as they went by.

Well, Oppie, that takes me up to the time we settled in the old area at Chakulia. I will try to find time to write about my memories after that, next time I write. Most of this crap will be familiar to you as you went through the same routine I am sure.