



Date of event: 2 July, 1944
Date written: March 1985
Written by: George E. Lowry

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: The Hump was--and is--such a part of our lives that we are astounded today when we hear someone say, "What is the Hump?" Only those who have flown it know what an accomplishment that was, in 1944-45, to fly from India over Northern Burma and southwestern China above the most rugged terrain in the world. At the time, these flights were regarded as "operational hours" for which no combat time was credited. Later, combat credit was given and George Lowry's crew received credit for the equivalent of about nine combat missions for their 34 Hump flights. George was assigned to the 395th Squadron when the 40th moved to India. This is George's story of one round trip over the Hump. He says it is not so much typical as just one he remembers well.

THE HUMP--ROCKS IN THOSE CLOUDS!

There is no such thing as a "typical" Hump trip. After seventeen round trips and a one way ticket to Tinian, I still could not say what was "typical" over the Hump. Routes changed. The initial route, beginning about May 1, 1944, went from Chakulia (B-4) to near Cooch Behar and the bend in the Brahmaputra river, then followed the river to Jorhat and Chabua at the end of the valley. From there it extended to Likiang in the middle of the Hump, and on to Ipin. In about July the route was moved southward, due to the Japanese retreat from the Naga hills, so it then went from Chakulia directly to Jorhat and Chabua, crossing over Shillong on the way. Beyond Chabua, there was no change in the original route.

In September the flight path was moved southward again, from Chakulia directly to Silchar, Myitkyina, and Yunnanyi near Lake Tali, then on to Ipin, down to Loshan, and on to Hsinching (A-1). That route permitted flying at lower altitude, due both to lower terrain and to improved post-monsoon weather.

The monsoon season from late June to mid-September made most of the flights very unlike those before and after that time. Monsoon storms claimed many lives, presenting a greater psychological hazard than on either earlier or later flights.

The scenery was most spectacular along the northern route--if it could be seen. A Wonder of The World, not well known to western civilization, was a hazard on the northern route near Likiang, a turning point. Still not clearly identified on maps forty years later, the hazard is a spectacular shard of rock split down its length in nearly equal proportions. It is my impression that it is anchored near a distinctive turn in the Yangtze river. It overlooks a sort of large valley, extends a couple of miles above the level where it is anchored, and reaches to an elevation estimated at 18,000 to 20,000 feet. It is not a cliff, since it is not supported by anything except the mountain ridge in which it is anchored. I do not know its name, so I must refer to it as "The Rock". Because its extreme height caused severe turbulence for a long distance I, for one, did not venture close to it. Those who flew only the more southerly route over the Hump did not see it.

A bit of background: at a location near Shillong, 6,400 feet up in the Naga hills and on our flight path, the average rainfall from June through August is 300 inches! That's for three months only!

My most memorable flight over the Hump was my fifth crossing on July 2, 1944. To beat the heat in Chakulia, we got an early start. Everything worked well, so we were off with a roar and full load of gas, curving around to the north while climbing out over the jungle. At only several hundred feet we leveled off to delay climbing until part of the load had been burned. Mostly there was a dark grayish green jungle for miles and miles, but now and then a small village flashed by--with no apparent road in or out.

After about 45 minutes of jungle we crossed the Ganges river at flood stage, a broad torrent of dirty brown, foaming water. By the end of the first hour we were confronted by a long mountain across our path, and soon afterward we made the first change in our course, near Cooch Behar. We were headed up a wide canyon with the Brahmaputra river on our right, snaking down through its own flood plain and bringing a lot of mud with it. The mountains were closing in on both sides. The light green color along their base became bluish and then dark, indistinct blue, ending abruptly at the overhanging cloud bank above. Suddenly that bank had become solid, no longer white--just marbled with ominous gray.

It was time to start our climb. The Air Transport base near the river at Tezpur was the 1st friendly thing I could see. We were flying into a trap! Suddenly we were on instruments, there was no choice, and we saw no more check points. Jorhat and Chabua disappeared from the world.

During the next half hour our navigator, Tony Lacko, gave me a couple of changes of course to follow, but they had no more meaning than just numbers on a compass. We had reached 16,000 feet and leveled off, but the storm was getting worse. We had heard about "The Rock" up ahead (not on the map, but rumored to be up to 20,000 feet), so we agreed that the smart thing to do was to climb above it all where we could see. We didn't even know exactly where that rock was!

Up we went, headed for 21,000 and some sunlight. Minutes went by. Then our rate of climb and altimeter ceased to respond. We weren't getting anywhere! We stayed at a little less than 18,000. Then came the worst news. We were iced up on as much of the wings as could be seen, and we had to face it. This was going to be a low level, high sweat mission.

Tony re-figured our position and gave us a change of course to go further south than he thought the Rock might be. We settled down into our second hour on instruments and waited. And waited. Then the air got rough, and rougher, and I was sure I could hear some rivets popping. I must admit that I felt clammy cold. Could we be just downwind from the Rock? (I felt my toenails digging into the soles of my shoes!) Nobody on the crew said a word, so I can only guess what all of them were thinking. Was this to be the day? But then the rough air began to smooth out.

Tony clawed his way up out of his navigator's hole, like a groundhog in February, and came out to blink at the world. There it was--nearby, all around, and all white. While he crouched there and just blinked, I noticed that numerous little streams of sweat kept rolling down his face and dropping off his chin. That seemed unusual because I was cold! In a couple of minutes, though, he turned to me and said, "I think we must be past it by now, so probably we can turn north and start letting down a little. If we break out pretty soon there ought to be a little lake up there ahead a few miles and a little to the right".

Even without knowing what might be coming next, I was glad to get down out of there. We started a descent on the new northerly heading and in a few minutes and a couple of thousand feet we began to break out. Sure enough, there was the lake, almost exactly where it was supposed to be; not on the prescribed course, but on the course that got us around The Rock! We were southeast of Likiang, but from there on to Ipin 16,000 feet would get us through.

The Likiang-Sichang-Ipin dogleg was a succession of mountain ranges with scattered timber on them, but mostly thin grass up to 12,000 feet. The peaks at 14,000 and 15,000 were covered with clouds, but were not directly on our course. The short distance between ridges and rivers attested to the steepness of the slopes. It was a breath-taking stretch of the Hump, but with very little evidence of human beings, friendly or otherwise.

By the time we reached Ipin, it could not be seen. Clouds hovered in the Chengtu valley to infinity, so I thought "Here we go again"--and we did. Luckily, the radio operator got prompt approval for us to descend to A-1, so we started the dogleg to Loshan and plunged into it on instruments. It seemed no time at all to Losban and the next leg to our base, but I was increasingly concerned about how high the overcast was down there. I just did not like at all that hill sticking up right off the end of the runway, and I kept wondering who was the dumb one who put the runway there in the first place. Finally we were down to less than a thousand feet above field elevation, but still nothing in sight. Then our luck improved. I caught a glimpse through a small hole which showed a piece of river bed and the tip of a runway. Now I knew where we were, so I quickly corkscrewed down so as not to lose it. We broke through at possibly less than 500 feet, but were headed the wrong way, so we had to circle back around past the side of that damnable hill and come in over the river bar.

Getting past the hill was a short approach, but clear enough to be safe. On the final turn, though, something unexpected! The first half of the runway was covered by thousands and thousands of people - but the tower had not even mentioned them. What to do? Back around the pattern and maybe into the soup, or ahead into that herd of sheep? We kept on coming in and at near the end of the runway the crowd miraculously parted and ran to each side, barely beyond the wing tips. Then they closed right back in behind us. Certainly they had more faith in my ability to stay in the middle of the runway than I had!

There had been a lot of rain. The runway had several muddy sections in it, and about everywhere else it was almost sloppy wet. No matter. We had managed to get our early vintage borrowed green bird up, over, and back down safely, with everything and everyone all in one piece. Time: 6:20. Instrument time: 3:00. A truck is waiting for us. The ground crew can handle it from here.

What barracks? Take the first one of those long gray stuccoed buildings with a thatched roof. Go in and claim whatever bed frame is available and suits you; then roll out your sleeping bag. Dirt floor, damp but not wet. And clean. Now, the washroom? Right across, over there. Just go in and they'll help you. Help you? Sure. Just go on in. And so we did.

Two-holers were in style. There were two main rooms. One had a couple of long drain boards and hand-made metal troughs with a stack of basins at the end. Clearly for washing and shaving. The second room? Just inside the door was a 50-gallon oil drum with one end cut out, set up on bricks to form the firebox for burning leaves and twigs to heat the water. A houseboy hovered around that area. The shower? Yes, right in there. The houseboy's job is to mix the water to the temperature you want and then to pull the bucket up and tie it at the right height.

We'll try it. Out with a towel and in for the water. Fairly warm, please. A little more hot. A little more hot! Bucket's full - and cold. Stand in the shower. The houseboy pulls the rope until the bucket is just above head level, then ties it to a nail on the wall. Ingenious! American-made brass valve soldered to a short piece of pipe, then soldered to the bottom of the bucket. And a whole gallon of water! Be careful or we'll flood the place! Careful we were. We tried it, it worked, and we didn't flood anything - but if we had, there was a huge drainage ditch just outside.

A little rest and reflection, then time to eat. Mess hall's right there. Crowded, too. Chicken and pork fat soup with cabbage. Very tasty, but greasy. (Earlier the Chinese cooks had been wilting the cabbage in a wok over smoking leaves and straw back of the mess hall, with a few errant cinders flavoring the cabbage). Then there's fluffy rice with chicken and pork chunks - with cabbage. And then there's tea. Just tea. Can't drink the water without boiling it.

Back to the barracks. We talk and we listen to those Air Transport crews in and out of the pattern, hauling gasoline in drums. What a disagreeable time they must have. No heat, no oxygen. Can't even climb up safely above the mountains. And those fellows have to come down in here on instruments all the time! Wonder how many trips they have to make before they can go home?

My bunk for the night had been an upper one next to the main door. Slowly I realized that day was dawning and that some unusual noise was being made very close to me. There was a lot of animated Chinese conversation, so I rolled over and focused my bleary eyes on four Chinese houseboys squatting on the dirt floor around a small charcoal fire in the center of the four-way aisles. They had cooked their breakfast there and were eating rice with chopsticks by flipping it into their mouth from small bowls held against their lips. All the while they chattered endlessly. At about the time I got my eyes open, someone a few bunks down the line shouted "Hey, Joe! How's the chow?" A toothy one of the four shouted right back "Merican chow, ding hao! Chinese chow, poo hao!" and, not missing a beat, he flipped more rice into his mouth with those chopsticks than any of the rest of us could have moved with a shovel in twice the time.

Breakfast was on our mind, so we traced the smoke and smell of food and found what we were looking for. There was tea and more tea, eggs and more eggs, and maybe some rice cakes. We filled up on whatever we had, picked up our overnight gear at the barracks, and went out front to catch a truck ride to "the field."

A truck seemed always to be ready whenever a crew needed a ride, and so it was this morning. The ride down the dirt road was a bit bumpy, but it was a fairly short distance to the edge of Hsinching, the small compound for the Chinese GI guards, and the gate which led to the parked airplanes. We pulled up beside our original issue, slightly streaked OD color B-29 and climbed off the truck. There to meet us was one of those five feet four inch Chinese GI's with his six-foot Czechoslovakian WWI rifle with bayonet, stamping his bare feet on the ground to keep warm, yet grinning from ear to ear and not understanding a word we said. How was it that, even when they were blue in the feet and in the face, too, they still could smile, stick up their thumb, radiate enthusiasm, and say "Ding Hao!" in an exuberant voice? They were rugged little men with far more capability than their dull appearance suggested.

On to the business of flying home! Our gasoline cargo had been unloaded during the night so, with the usual pre-flight preparation of inspection, starting, run-up, and closing of doors, we were ready to go. There was heavy overcast, thin patches of mud and water were on the taxi strip - and at the end of the runway, that blue denim crowd of thousands of laborers carrying gravel from the river bed, placing it just so in the muddy spots on the runway, and apparently mixing in some tung oil to stick it together. Nobody paid attention to us. We ran up the engines and did our final check at the end of the runway, cleared with the tower, and pulled into place for takeoff. Only when we began to roll did anyone seem to acknowledge our presence, and even then only slowly. Suddenly, though, a big V right down the middle split open to our wing tips, and we soon left the ground and a wet China behind us. The smooth roar of the engines, the landing gear, the flaps, the instruments, the compass heading and the weather demanded all our attention - and immediately we were in the soup again!

Once before I had seen details of those dark green, steep, and high mountains to our right, up to ten or twelve thousand feet, and I hoped fervently that Tony had made no mistake. I remembered

them as having rows and rows of terraced land on steep mountainsides, with scattered, primitive homes here and there, even up to the very top in long-winter snow country. Tony assured me that, although we were staying well to the right of the instrument flight path from Loshan, we would clear the mountains safely. ("If we were going to hit anything, we would have hit it by now!") We were on our way toward Sichang, where 16,000 feet would be enough.

Hump weather was just not predictable. Here we had prepared for the worst, such as we had yesterday, but shortly after leaving the greater Chengtu valley and well before Sichang, the clouds broke open and we continued in bright sunshine with rugged, intense green mountains below us and dense, brilliant and marbled white, towering clouds off to our right, hiding the increasingly high mountains within them. Continuing on to Sichang, we enjoyed the rugged mountain scenery, but at the same time noted that we were getting closer to those huge cumulonimbus clouds on our right. Upon changing course at Sichang, we doctored it up a bit to go about 25 or 30 miles farther south of Likiang to avoid that ROCK. In and out of clouds, we picked up some altitude along the way before we passed Liklang, which we couldn't see, and we couldn't see the Rock, either, but we made our turn and headed westward toward Jorhat. For close to two hours we flew on instruments interspersed with short, broken stretches between the clouds--with no icing up this time. While crossing those short, clear areas we could see just enough of the terrain below to decide that it was not merely awful -- it was awful awful! Not even Genghis Khan could have found his way out of there.

In little over an hour we crossed four major rivers and the mountain ranges between them. Tremendous rocky, rough stretches with limited greenery here and there. They resembled and were about as inviting as four new mud-grip Jeep tires stacked side by side. First, there was the Yangtze river south of Likiang, the least rugged of the lot. Then, in another 60 miles or so, came the Mekong and the Salween, only 20 miles apart. Even with short glimpses, I was convinced that nothing could be worse. (When India floated north and crashed into the Asiatic continent, it certainly bounced the boulders up into long, gigantic wrinkles!) In only another 75 miles came the Irawaddy, but the terrain began to improve by then. What we had seen in barely 150 miles was the massive water distribution system for China, for Laos, for Thailand, and for Burma! Who but Hump flyers ever could see anything so vast, so great, and so unimaginable?

Soon after Irawaddy country, we began our let-down toward Jorhat. Only minimal sketches of the ground could be seen, but already my own feeling was one of relief, of security, of being glad to be back. Time went by rather fast. We came to Jorhat and then a turn on down to Cooch Behar. The clouds thinned out and occasionally gave us a brief look at the Brahmaputra. Before long it was Cooch Behar, and only a few clouds to go through. Then it was the home stretch to Chakulia. The streams, the jungles, the small villages flashed through my consciousness like an old-time high-speed movie. I felt warmth from both the sun and the prospect of soon being home. I was tired, but it didn't bother me now. Instrument work was done for the day. There was still more jungle--then there it was! B-4, the runway. Home!

Call the tower. Into the pattern. Check list: props, landing gear, flaps. Engineer's check, OK. Full flaps. Flare it a bit, then ease the throttles back. Touchdown! Well--yes, but it was only a little bounce. Roll to the end and taxi back to the hard-stand. Shut 'em off. Fill out the logs. Tell the crew chief that all was OK. No problems. Ran great! Ran great! 6:05 hours. 2:00 hours instruments.

"How was it?" "Oh, great. No trouble at all". (Now comes that ticklish and inevitable question) "How much gas did you drop off over in China?" "Barely a thousand gallons". "Only a thousand gallons? That's all?" "Yeh - that's all. Quite a headwind going up, I guess. Maybe better next time".

Date of Event: 15-17 August, 1944
Date written: August 1944
Written by: Thomas Carroll

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: Tom Carroll, Group Weather Officer, had to perform his duties both at Chakulia (B-4) and Hsinching (A-1). Consequently he had to fly the Hump as a passenger. This is his account of one effort to get from B-4 to A-1. Taking into account the heat, mechanical problems, the altitude at which the Hump had to be flown, and other considerations, this account could be thought of as unusual but not atypical.

HUMP TRIP -- HOW MANY TRIES DO YOU GET?

Yesterday morning I was scheduled to fly the hump into China in a B-29 from our base at Chakulia, India. I was strictly a passenger who for business reasons, let us say, had to go to our bases in China. Our business is bombing Japan. The pilot was Captain Ray Moore.

We assembled at operations down on the line while it was still dark and while the nocturnal taste was still stale in our mouths. The pilot, co-pilot, and navigator were briefed on the clouds, winds, and other meteorological data by the weather officer. Clearances were filed, weight and cargo data assembled. We picked up our E & E equipment in case we should have to bail out.

Out at the ship the captain held a crew inspection and assured himself that each crew member had his escape kit, parachute, gun, jungle knife, and canteen, and was wearing G.I. shoes. Those were the only shoes that would stay on your feet if you had to bail out. They would give you service if you should find it necessary to walk out of the jungle. We took our places in the aircraft. Mine was in the gunners' compartment just behind the rear bomb-bay and between the side gunners.

Now the take-off. In this outfit where senior pilots and three-thousand-hour men are as abundant as grapes in a vineyard, every man drains the resources of all his faculties to lift this monster-bird into the air. Captain Moore lined up the ship on the runway, gave her full throttle, and the plane budged slowly as it overcame the terrific inertia of its stationary position. The initial inertia overcome, the giant bird surged like some Goliath rudely awakened, picked up speed and was racing down the runway in a matter of seconds.

In my seat I could feel the power of the four mighty engines, hear their full-throttled roar, and sense the dynamic tension in the whole body of the ship. Unlike the gunners, who carefully watched the engines on their respective sides of the fuselage, I saw things backwards. I saw the operations building slip into and out of view, and I knew there was not much runway left.

Suddenly the engine roar ceased. The ship's body relaxed, but now a nervous tension replaced the dynamic. We knew at once that the pilot had cut the engines and that take off was refused. Our problem now was to come to a halt before we ran out of runway. It was an insolvable problem, and we all knew it. We were two-thirds the way down the concrete, indicating over 100 miles per hour. We had gained the same momentum a Ford automobile would develop if it could travel along the highway at ten times the speed of sound. That is no figure of speech. That is literally and mathematically true.

I was sitting on the floor of the fuselage without a safety belt, so I braced my back against the bulkhead door of the rear bomb-bay, saw the gunners brace themselves against their safety-belts, estimated the amount of loose parts in the compartment, and considered the topography at the end of the runway. I knew that where the concrete ended a muddy flat patch of ground extended perhaps a thousand feet to the ditch and the road that ran at right angles to the runway. The ground was rain

soaked and soft, for this is the monsoon season in India, and the mudpatch ended in a deep ditch on the near side of the road. From the time the engines were first cut to the time I concluded my consideration of the waterlogged dirt at which we were headed, probably a second had passed. You think quickly at these times and I knew the features of our field like I know my home town.

No fear gripped us, just tense anticipation until we hit the dirt. What kept the landing gear from collapsing I don't know unless it is the sturdy and well engineered construction. At any rate I remember faint surprise that it did not fold up. Instead a barrage of mud and pebbles, shot backward by the prop blast, bombarded the belly of the ship, and I think that if I felt fear at all it was in that instant. The soft ground rapidly reduced our speed, and Moore, a pilot with experience gained from thousands of hours behind the stick, ground-looped the plane in the mud before we reached the ditch.

Our attention turned to the threat of fire. As we piled out of the ship the brakes were smoking like a volcano. The thought of thousands of gallons of high octane gasoline aboard the plane backed us a safe distance away, but not before inventory was taken to assure ourselves that no one was left inside and that no one was hurt. The pilot explained that number three engine had lost its power, making it necessary for him to refuse take-off, and after examination of the aircraft, it was determined that only superficial damage resulted from its journey into the monsoon-softened earth.

It was too late in the day to be rescheduled for another flight, so operations assigned me to another ship which was to take off in the morning.

At the pre-dawn assemblage at operations, the same procedure of clearances and weather was repeated. This time our pilot was Captain Howard Gerber, another veteran airman. Again the pilot inspected his crew and gave necessary instructions before we climbed aboard. I took my position this time in the bombardier's seat in the very nose of the ship. The check list read, the engines started, control tower instructions received, we taxied to the end of the runway.

This time the engine check revealed malfunctioning. Engines one and four were cut while the flight engineer went through a performance with pliers and screwdriver. Pronouncing them fit, the flight engineer went back to his seat, and numbers one and four were restarted. The run-up of the engines was long. Something was not altogether to the liking of Captain Gerber. Finally we moved into takeoff position, received final tower clearance, gunned the engines and moved forward.

No other position on an aircraft was ever designed that beats the view of things that one gets from the bombardier's station. I saw the runway slip under me as we gained speed. I saw the dial on the air-speed indicator climb past 60 miles per hour, then past 70 and 80. When half way down the runway, power was suddenly cut on all four engines. I smiled inwardly to myself, thinking, "Hell, I'm getting used to this." Seeing half the runway before me I estimated that the heavily laden giant could be brought to a halt before we reached the end, or at least that it could be sufficiently slowed to permit a ground loop in the concrete or a soft ride into the mud. But I hadn't bargained with brake trouble.

The powerful brakes gripped, the kinetic energy of our forward thrust was translated into heat energy in the brake lining, and the expansion due to the heat loosened the grip of the right brake. The ship veered to the left where beyond the first few feet of the soft shoulder a six-foot deep ditch was coming my way.

We came to a grinding halt. Gerber, still in his seat, was seething with rage. Pilots have pride. To have an accident like this, however blameless, infuriates the Captain. I asked him, "Are you all right?" He said, "I'm okay." I turned from him,

reached for a fire extinguisher and headed after the navigator who was now going out the co-pilot's window. Again I asked, "Are you sure you're all right?" Gerber replied, "Sure I'm sure!" I pulled the lever of his safety-belt. Only then did he attempt to get out, which he did by opening his window and squirming through.

When we were reasonably sure there was no further danger, we went back to look at the ship from which all of us had escaped without physical harm. The bombardier's compartment was a mess of twisted and broken parts. There was mud all over everything. The bomb-sight, which now was badly knocked out of shape, was leaning against the upper forward glass in the nose section. Looking in, I remembered that I had had some trouble getting into the bombardier's seat before we started on our journey, but I couldn't remember having any trouble getting out.

Having been in two take-off failures in succession, the remarks about me being a jinx were inevitable. Before I left the line they were jocularly passed from mouth to ear in the heartiest GI manner. However, before I had gotten back to operations, Lt. Colonel James Ira Cornett, CO of the 44th Squadron, volunteered to fly me over in the morning. I accepted, and word soon got around the line that Cornett was crazy. Others said that the first man to get me over the hump was going to receive the D.F.C.

Postscript: 17 August 1944. We made it.

Editors' Postscript: The editors of Memories invite you to submit your memories about experiences in the 40th Group. Please write to us:

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Your voluntary contributions of money are also welcome to help pay costs of printing and mailing. If you want to help, make a check to 40th Bomb Group Association, and mail it to M. E. Carmichael, Treasurer, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310. The 40th Group Historian is Harry Changnon, 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014.



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