

China, Burma and India:
The Forgotten Theatre of Combat During World War II

By Eddie Olvera

It was Sunday December 7, 1941. A fairly mild day for late Autumn in the Bronx. I wore my light jacket to the picture show. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were up on the big screen dancing as beautifully as ever, I was lost in a daydream wishing I was a dancer like Mr. Astaire. Anything would be better than being a poor kid from the South Bronx.

Without warning, the picture stopped and the lights went up. What could be the problem? The theater manager walked on stage and in a sad and serious tone, often broken by emotion, announced that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. The audience listened in stunned silence. We were told that all military personnel must report back to their bases immediately. The movie began again, and I was once again lost in my own "Never Never Land."

When the film ended I walked outside onto Westchester Ave. People were gathered near a yellow taxicab listening to the radio for more news. Men and women turning to one another and asking, "Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?"

The next day, Monday December 8, 1941 was a school day. I was in my Senior year at James Monroe High School, five months from graduation. There was an assembly first thing that morning, we did not go to our regularly scheduled classes. A loudspeaker was connected to the only radio in the school and we listened to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ask congress to declare War against Japan. We heard the members of Congress and the House of Representatives cheering and applauding this Declaration of War.

We were then instructed to go back to our regular classes, still confused about where Pearl Harbor was. I was in English class. Our teacher was from England, British accent and all. He was crying as we entered the room. After we had settled down at our desks, Mr. Sutton looked around the room, pointed his forefinger at us and said, "Our Country is at War! Everyone of you young men are going to a part of it. Times will be difficult, almost impossible. I want each and everyone of you to take solace in the fact the this too shall pass away. Everything comes to an end. God be with you all. Class dismissed." Just after he let us go, the Air Raid siren sounded throughout the city. School let out that day, December 8, 1941, at noon. I was disappointed to learn that I would not be able to practice with my swimming team, I suppose I not quite aware of the enormity of our Nation's predicament.

I enlisted in the United States Army on December 27, 1941. The first boy in my high school to do so. My parents were not happy about my decision to join the war effort, they were looking forward to my being the first in our family to get a high school diploma. They reluctantly signed my enlistment papers and off I went to Whitchall St. I was accepted despite my poor vision, which, incidently, prevented me from joining the Navy. Thus began my journey into World War II, a journey that would last four years and thousands of miles.

The very next day I was on a train to Camp Upton in Suffolk County, New York with about 500 other men who volunteered for Service. Our train was met in the late afternoon by an NCO (non-commissioned officer) by the name of Young. Sgt. Young lined us up and we experienced our first dose of military discipline. He ordered us to turn around and face the camp flagpole. "Retreat" was sounding and we were ordered to salute the American flag as it descended. Next we were lead, marching, to a supply shed where we picked up coarse white sheets and tan woolen blankets. We then trudged on for two miles to where we would bunk. Our home for the next few days was a large wooden barracks left over from WWI, as were the sheets and

blankets we were issued earlier. At each end of the small building stood a pot-bellied stove that burned wood and coal, though not nearly enough to make the place warm. Since my parents very poor, and could not take care of me, I spent seven years as a young boy in an orphanage in Brooklyn. One of my chores in The Brooklyn Home for Children, was to make the beds in my dorm every morning before school. I was taught then how to make a bed in the "military style."

Therefore, I was the only soldier in my barracks who knew how to make a bed the way the Army Demanded. I was ordered to teach my fellow recruits this "skill" on that very first night at Upton. It was so cold that January night in 1942 that we all slept with our clothes on. Three days after our arrival at Camp Upton, New York, the company boarded a train again headed for Ft. Eustace, Virginia.

The barracks in Virginia were very different from our camp in New York. They were permanent brick structures quite a cut above the wooden WWI leftovers. The War was a month old and it seemed like there was confusion every where. New barracks had to be constructed, troops who were not any older than twenty years of age were being trained to go into combat, and raw recruits were pouring into Fort Eustace by the hundreds. For about a week we were placed on guard duty with very old Springfield Rifles. They were bolt action rifles, again left over from World War I. Our assignment was to guard the huge 8 inch Railroad artillery pieces that would be stationed at the mouth of the Potomac River protecting the Nations's Capitol. The giant guns were not loaded at this point, nor were the rifles we were using to protect them. What a laugh. Untrained troops, with unloaded guns guarding artillery pieces which I suspect could not be moved or used anyway. A week later we began serious Basic Training which continued for a month of more. Around the middle of February 1942, we were again on a train to Camp Stewart, Georgia.

Confusion all over again. We were housed in raw wooden barracks that were two stories high. The buildings were recently constructed and smelled of fresh pine. At Camp Stewart we were organized into anti-aircraft Units. I was assigned to the 902nd AA Battalion. We were equipped with 90mm AA artillery, 40mm guns, 50 cal. AA machine guns and 60 in. search lights. I was assigned to the Search Light Unit, which as you can imagine was not very exciting. Months of intense training followed. What I remember most was the oppressive Georgia heat in the daytime followed by very cold and wet nights. The camp reeked of soft coal which was used to heat all the buildings in the camp at night. Sentry Duty was a cold and damp experience on a nightly basis. In August of 1942 there was a drive for volunteers to join a special unit. I enthusiastically volunteered for this mission, because for the past six months I had been bored out of my mind.

My new unit was made up of troops from 10 smaller units. We Were about 900 troops in all? Each one was composed fo 85 enlisted men, five officers and 12 50 cal. Anti-aircraft machine guns.

I was assigned to the 683rd AA/AB Company where I would remain for the duration of the War. This was a hush-hush outfit. We issued Thompson submarine guns, and boy did we think we were the cat's meow. We trained night and day, rain or shine come Hell or high water. I was never in better physical condition. The men were given the option of leaving or remaining with this division. Dropouts were numerous. When all was said and done, six of the units, that is 560 men, were shipped out to North Africa where we heard they were wiped out by the Germans. The rest of us, the 681st to the 684th were loaded onto trains at Camp Stewart headed for West Coast. We had no idea where we would end up.

The 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th companies were placed on a troop train and we were shipped across the United States to the west coast. We arrived at Fort Strongmen which is just north of San Francisco. We stayed here for a few days. Finally about the third or fourth morning, our company was awakened at 4:00am, fed breakfast and lined up. We were then marched about two miles out of camp where we halted and stayed until 4:00 in the afternoon. We were then marched to a nearby river and boarded a large ferry boat which in turn brought us to the San Francisco Harbor.

I remember how scared I was. Playtime was over, this was for real. The Army Band was playing patriotic tunes. People were cheering and waving flags. I was a frightened kid of nineteen on my way to war.

We arrived at a long ship dock about 9:00 pm and disembarked from the ferry. All I saw was a huge black wall that was illuminated from within. I soon learned that it was a door to a very large ship. Up and into the ship we climbed, staircase after staircase. It seemed endless to me. Remember, we were carrying heavy duffle bags and our individual weapons which didn't make the climb any easier. After what seemed like miles of stairs, we were ushered into a very large room lined with wooden bunks three tiers high. I climbed into a top bunk, stowed my gear, and promptly fell asleep. It wasn't until the following morning that I learned I was aboard the Luxury Liner formally known as the "Il de France." Our quarters were on the Promenade Deck which had previously been a dining room. At 11:00 am on November 3rd, 1942 our ship sailed.

As we sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge, people were lined up along the bridge's guardrail waving and cheering at us. So much for the war propaganda saying, "loose lips sink ships." At this point, we still had no idea where we were going. Our naval escort outbound was a small coast guard cutter that stayed with us for about an hour. We were now on our own and headed due west at a very fast speed. Three or four days later, our ship sailed into the inlet of Pearl Harbor. So this was Pearl Harbor! A very large Naval harbor in Hawaii. On December 7th 1941, two Japanese mini subs attempted to enter the inlet on a mission to torpedo anchored naval battle ships. They were thwarted in their efforts by alert naval seamen on a patrolling Destroyer. This of course was before the Japanese air attack on Pearl, which was quite unexpected.

After we docked, two tug boats placed an anti submarine net around the ship. This was war and it's brutal reality. From the main deck of our ship, I could see the overturned hull of the battleship "Arizona," and the heavily damaged ship the "Oklahoma." Also visible were other damaged ships and buildings. The success of the Japanese attack on the U.S. was very apparent. How can anyone forget this sneak attack?! Yet, unfortunately, very many of today's American citizens have forgotten and, I feel, too many could care less. The following day our ship left Pearl Harbor and we headed out into the Pacific. Our escort this time was one destroyer, which soon after also left us alone. We still did not know where we were going.

While docked at Pearl, Anti Aircraft machine guns were bolted to the deck of the former Luxury Liner. Each gun was manned by our units on a twenty four hour basis seven days a week. The Japanese fleet was very powerful and controlled much of the Pacific Ocean. In addition to the machine guns, our ship had a six inch naval gun mounted on a platform at the rear of the ship. This gun was manned by a British Naval crew. We Americans laughed at this puny gun, what could this thing do against a Jap cruiser, destroyer or submarine? My gun position was located on the fantail located at the very rear of the ship, just above the three huge propellers. I spent most of the trip there, even sleeping on the open deck. This was especially true when we sailed into the South Pacific. The heat turned the interior of the ship into a great big furnace, no air

conditioners in those days and few fans for the troops. This was no Luxury Liner for us. Oh yes, when we sailed from Pearl, my outfit was transferred to a cargo hold above the engine room and one deck below the ship's kitchen. We had to sleep in swinging canvas hammocks which swung back and forth with the roll of the ocean. We soon got used to this sleeping arrangement. Our former sleeping quarters were taken over by a company of Military Police, who boarded at Pearl Harbor. The situation on the ship was this; A former French luxury ship was now carrying about 10,000 American troops. The ship was manned by a British crew with Hindu cooks preparing two meals a day of vile British rations. The Hindu cooks were promptly relieved of their duties by American cooks chosen from among the many troops aboard. After we left Pearl Harbor, our gun crews were finally told that we were going to India, not to a exotic Polynesian island in the South Pacific like we thought. We were, however, relieved because the other 9000 troops was headed for Iran. They were to construct a railroad from the southern part of Iran to the southern part of Russia. This railroad would be used to carry American war supplies to Russia.

We continued to sail on a south southwest course for a number of days. On or about the 21st of December 1942, our ship ran in to a violent storm. The Pacific Ocean is home to long rolling waves that are stories high during a storm. Our ship was soon climbing one side of a wave. We could only see the top of a wave if we looked up, as if we were looking at a New York City skyscraper. When the ship reached the crest of a wave there would be no more water for the propellers to grab, they would spin wildly out of control, and shake the ship from stem to stern. Then we would crash down on the other side of the wave and again we would feel the reverberations, this was very rough sailing. This ship was at least the size of the Queen Mary, and it was being tossed about like a rubber ducky in a child's bath. On Christmas Eve, we were still in the middle of the storm. I was now sleeping in the cargo hold with the rest of my company, as it was unsafe to sleep on the open deck. I had become used to sleeping on the deck near my gun position, but during a storm that was out of the question. One particular time, after crashing down off a wave, the ship listed to one side. One the men, very agitated, shouted, "Jesus Christ! They got us!!!" The over head lights flickered a bit, but stayed on. Then there was silence.

The listing stopped. I think we were all waiting for the order to abandon ship. I was trying to prepare myself mentally for a dive into the water. I loosened the laces on my boots so I could kick them off if need be. I unbuttoned my pants so I could use them as a float in the water, and I checked my canteen for fresh water. Most of all, I just kept telling myself not to panic and keep calm.

There was no panic necessary. Soon our Company Commander, Capt. John Dykes, arrived to assure us that the ship had not been torpedoed, as we thought. He told us that the cargo had shifted to the port side as we rolled over the waves in the storm, causing the list. We were then ordered top-side to either the starboard or port side in order to right the ship on its course.

On Christmas Day, 1942, we entered a narrow inlet that was the harbor of Wellington, New Zealand. On each side of the inlet were public beaches. At 7:00 in the morning the beaches were packed, as it was Summer in New Zealand. The people were mad with joy! I had never seen such a display of happiness. Our ship, loaded with American troops, must have looked like a Knight in Shining Armor as we sailed into the harbor. The Japanese were bombing Darwin daily. The city of Darwin is in the north Australia and it was believed that the Japanese were going to invade soon. From Darwin, it a short distance to New Zealand. That is why all the

people on the beaches were so happy to see us. We stayed in Wellington for about four days while the cargo on our ship was re-shifted.

While we were docked in Wellington, we had an opportunity to walk around the city and stretch our legs. We were all in our dress uniforms and marched down the main street. It was like we were in a parade; people were lined up on each side of the street cheering for us. We marched to the local cinema where we previewed the movie, "Mrs. Miniver." The following day, we were permitted to explore the city, but only in company groups so that we could keep an eye on each other. In our wanderings we came upon a small shop similar to a delicatessen. Our top Sargent spoke to the shopkeeper and made a deal with him. The agreement was that we would put corporals behind the counter and charge American prices for any goods that the soldiers purchased, of course to be paid in U.S. Dollars. It had been so long since we had seen any real food, the rations aboard ship were downright disgusting and we were tired of canned meat and powdered eggs. We stuffed ourselves silly with very creamy milk and fresh jelly rolls the size of hero bread. We also bought all the candy, rolls and pastry the store held. The one delicacy we were ecstatic about was real live cheese! We cleaned him out of that as well. When we left the shop damn near empty, but the shopkeeper's pockets were full. I believe he made more money in that one day than he did in a week. The next day we sailed from Wellington with a weeks worth of goodies in tow.

We were now sailing due South around the Island of Tasmania which is off to the south of Australia in the Tasmanian Sea. We docked one day at Perth, in Western Australia, but never left the ship. We were only there to restock food and water on the ship. As we sailed from Perth, we were immediately spotted by a long range Japanese flying boat. Our guns were loaded and we were ready for battle, but nothing happened. The Japs did not provoke any hostile action. I have to say that they did not have a sub, ship or planes in the area, thank God. What a field day they would have had. The weapons that our former luxury liner was equipped with would have been no match for what the enemy could throw at us. We continued to sail in to the Indian Ocean, and finally arrived just off-shore of Bombay, India.

It took five weeks for us to get from San Francisco to India, but this was surely not the end of our travels. Huge flat barges approached the ship. They would carry all our dismantled weapons, our gear, and ourselves off the ship to shore. The guns and equipment were loaded on to a wooden troop train, that looked as if it came out of the 1800s. There were no sleeping quarters on the train, just hard wooden benches. Each car was supplied with a its own army of gigantic cockroaches, each about 3 inches long.

It was now January 1943. The trip across India was a cultural nightmare. A real eye-opener for we American soldiers. I had always thought my family living in the South Bronx was poor, but India showed me what poor really meant. The heat was unbearable, and the stench of death, disease and filth were only magnified by it. The noise of music, people and animals could be heard as loud and clear as if they were all on the train with us. The first Indian word we learned was "bakshee", which was the call of the beggars. They would come right up to the train as we were passing through, "bakshee, bakshee, bakshee!" The soldiers threw coins out the train windows and the masses scurried to pick them up. It was a heart breaking scene. The sights we saw all across India were gut wrenching and shocking to us. We finally reached Calcutta after about five days. We were again welcomed by hundreds of beggars and prostitutes. The likes of which would quell even the greatest of desires.

The next day we were headed northeast until we reached a very wide river. I think it was

called the Brahmaputra. We pulled alongside another train and all our equipment was loaded onto it. Everything; men, guns, and support equipment was transferred onto the second train. We learned the transfer was necessary because the rail line further north was of a more narrow gauge than the one we had been traveling on. We proceeded northbound over a narrow bridge for about another day. Finally we came to a flat plain which was covered with hedge; high, high bushes which actually tea plants.

We began to see to spot American transport planes flying overhead. We had arrived at our destination. We were in the Indian province of Assam which is located at the extreme northeast corner of India. The Himalayan mountains were northwest; China to the north, and the Naga mountain range on the east, which is the border between India and Burma. A series of airfields, about four or five had been constructed on this open plane. Army trucks had met our unit. The 863rd was taken to an airfield called Donjon. The other units were transported to other fields. Donjon was one of the support fields from which military supplies and equipment were loaded onto planes and flown to airfields at Kunming, China. The idea was to help the "brave Chinese" to remain in the war. This entire operation was later known as "Flying the Hump".

Our unit was very busy during the next few days, setting up our guns, constructing gun sites, tents, etc. Our mission was to protect the field and cargo planes from low flying Japanese Zeros.

It was now February, 1943. We had traveled about 35,000 miles from the time we had left San Francisco, halfway around the world. The air force personnel had urged us to hurry as it was the dry season and they expected the air raids to return at any time.

February 14th, Valentine's Day dawned bright, hot and clear. About ten in the morning, we heard the steady roar of aircraft engines followed by the howl of the air raid siren. We sighted the high flying Japanese bombers. I jumped into the harness of our gun. There were about 29 bombers in all. They were much too high for our machine guns. What we did not see, were the Jap Zero's at tree top height streaking in over our field. I opened fire at once. The enemy planes were firing at anything they could see. Planes on the ground were hit, as were many buildings. There was a lot of noise and total pandemonium. The sound of exploding bombs was intermingled with the rattle of our machine guns. The anti aircraft machine guns put up a curtain of fire. My gun was soon red-hot. I could hear Cpl. Sal behind me screaming, "Lead, lead, lead!" My buddy Kenny was feeding the gun belt of ammunition into the gun in a very calm manner. I remember he had a smile on his face as if he were enjoying the whole event. I was firing my gun at any Zero that came into my line of fire. My glasses fell off, but that did not matter to me. I spotted the Zero flying about twenty feet above the main runway. His propeller was scattering gravel in all directions. I noticed that when he was halfway down the runway he pulled up and flew off with a trail of smoke coming from the rear of his plane. The bombers in the meantime, dropped their bombs. Most of the bombs landed in a near-by tea plantation. All this action took place within ten minutes, and then it was suddenly over. All that was left was smoke from the burning planes and buildings. I realized I had pissed all over myself and I began to cry. Our crew checked each other over, then we either laughed hysterically or we cried. We had been "blooded". I hadn't known if we shot any planes down, but air force personnel told us we shot down about six Zeros. The air force no longer made snide remarks about our "pop guns". The next day, Chabow Airfield, which was about ten miles away got hit. On the 16th of February, our field was hit again. The Zero's kept a respectful height this time. Some tried to break through, but were quickly driven off by a wall of fire from our guns. On the following day, the Japanese sent a force of forty bombers over our air field. Our fighters, made up of p-40's,

were ready and waiting for them. We had been alerted to the approaching bombers from the east. so they were at a very high altitude above the approaching bombers. They pounced on the Jap formation; shooting down many of them. There were bombers falling everywhere. Rumor had it the all forty bombers had been either shot down or damaged. I can only say that the "fly boys" were the real heroes of the CBI Theater.

There were no more heavy raids after that massacre. Maybe a few sneak raids with only four planes at the most. Boredom soon set in. It rained constantly, day after day. Sometimes heavy, sometimes light, but the rain lasted for three or four months. It was very hot; the humidity was murder. Tempers flared and fights were frequent. The cargo planes continued to fly when the rains let up a bit.

The most exciting thing to happen during this quiet period, was the massive earthquake which shook our air base. I happened to be on duty that night. It was about 9 PM and the moon was so bright, you could almost read a paper by its light. I remember that I was writing a letter home inside our hut, which was large enough to accommodate our whole gun crew. Everyone was asleep except me. I suddenly became aware of a low rumble and thought that it sounded like a subway going through a tunnel. Next, I heard the metal corrugated sheets of our out door shower rattling loudly. The ground underneath our hut was moving back and forth violently. I yelled, "Earthquake!" You should have seen six naked bodies all trying to exit out of one entrance at the same time. Cargo planes were bouncing around all over the place. The quake was over in about three or four minutes at best. Now this was something to write home about!

About the end of November or the beginning of December 1943, we received orders to dismantle our guns and prepare for new movement. Immediately the rumor mill opened up. We were shipping out to the Philippines, Europe, and even back home to America. All wrong. On Christmas Day 1943 we were loaded into cargo planes and flown over the Naga Hills, landing at a very primitive airstrip in Burma. It was a dirt and gravel air strip about 4000 feet long. The strip was constructed on a small hill. Planes had to land up hill and take off down hill, much like on an aircraft carrier. It was completely surrounded by heavy jungle. The place was called Shing Boyang.

As we got out of the planes, we could hear the sounds of small sized field artillery. The front lines were not too far from us. We set up our guns very quickly and prepared for action. That evening, some of us were sitting around a small brewing pot of coffee. Morale was low, very low indeed for we were stuck here in the thickest jungle any of us had ever seen. Nobody spoke. Suddenly we heard a voice say, "That coffee smells good, can I have a cup?" We looked up and quickly jumped to our feet. It was General Joe Stillwell. He motioned us to sit back down as he did not want to get shot by a Jap sniper. Of course he got his coffee, and he spoke to each of us. "Where are you from?" "Do you know why you are here in Burma?" Things like that.

When General Stillwell asked if any of us knew why we were in Burma, no one answered him, and he didn't tell us. I guess we were there to protect the airstrip to help make the way to the Lido and Burma roads safe for passage. He stayed with us for about half an hour and then he left as quietly as he came. We learned later that the General had been replaced as Commander of the CBI for daring to speak out against the Chinese leader who Stillwell considered nothing more than a glorified bandit. "The Peanut" is what he called him; how right he was.

At first Shingbuayang was pure Hell. Not because of the enemy, but from the effects of nature. Constant rain sometimes for days and weeks at a time. Swarms of bugs, mosquitos, blood sucking leaches, and the occasional wild animals such as tigers and wild elephants wandered

through our campsite. The tigers especially love rubbing against our canvas tents. They rubbed in order to get the lice and ticks out of their fur. They were more frightened of us than we were of them. Oh, I forgot to mention the snakes, especially the Krit snake. It was small and very poisonous. These critters loved to crawl into shoes and boots at night where it was warm. The nights in this region were very cold and wet. There were always fog banks in the morning until the sun broke through. During the day it was very hot and muggy. It was like living in a constant steam bath.

There was no R and R, no towns, just jungle all around us. Our neighbors, if you could call them that, were Naga Headhunters. They were dressed in loin cloths and hats that were like Derbies and they carried wicked machetes. They were short, a little less than five feet tall with mahogany skin. Their legs were very muscular, probably from climbing all the hills that surrounded us. They traveled in pairs, and never tried to communicate with us. They squatted just outside the camp and stared at us and we would stare back at them. There were also some Japanese deserters that we let live among us in the jungle. We put them to work in exchange for food and clothing. In this diverse community were also some members of the Hindu caste system. They were known as the "Untouchables". They worked for us and were paid for their labor.

There were no USO shows. However, Pat O'Brien the movie actor did entertain us once. He was so drunk that he almost fell off the improvised stage. Our main entertainment was the good 'ole movies. They were shown at a nearby amphitheatre carved out of a hill by our engineer troops. Our seats were raw wooden planks, the only thing protected from the rain were the projector and movie screen. We often sat in the pouring rain watching Betty Grable, Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rogers sing and dance. The audience was made up of American black engineer troops, white troops, Indians, English, and Chinese troops. There were also a few curious Nagas that were fascinated with the pictures on the screen.

In March of 1944 there was a large contingent of American Infantry troops that came marching down the Ledo Road. These troops were the first American troops were the only other Americans that I was aware of in Burma. They had new equipment, field guns, supplies of all kinds neatly packed on the backs of Missouri mules. This was the outfit that was later known as "Merrill's Marauders". However, the thing that interested us most was the mules, fresh meat on the hoof! These troops encamped not far from us. After they resumed their march further south into Burma, we found ourselves feasting on mule steaks for several days. The "Marauders" suffered terribly in their campaign to capture a major airfield at a place called Michenar, which was about 70 miles south of us. Much has been written about that campaign and the poor brave troops who lost their lives in the effort.

Months passed rain fell constantly as the rainy monsoon season lasted for four months. The heat was oppressive, and nothing was ever dry. Sickness was rampant and morale was at low low. Christmas of 1944 came and went without any celebration or special meal. About the second week of January 1945, we heard a cargo plane circling overhead. It was trying to land at our air strip, but the fog was heavy. Finally the fog lifted somewhat and the plane broke through at the south of the runway. It had been some time since any plane had landed here because of the rain and heavy fog cover. The plane taxied over to the parking area near my gun position. Its cargo doors opened. An airman poked his head out and shouted, "Is there a 683rd AA outfit here?" "I have a plane load of letters, Christmas cards, packages, beer rations and other supplies for you guys!" Christmas of 1944 came in January of 1945, but it did come and we were

overjoyed. Needless to say, the plane was unloaded in record time by many eager volunteers. The goodies and letters were distributed to each gun squad and the party was on. My unit got great "booty". Kenny, my buddy opened and among the gifts was a quart bottle of ovaltine. Ken was a "health-nut". He looked at the jar in disgust. What was he going to do with ovaltine all the way out here in the jungles of Burma. He gave me the jar and I opened it. To our surprise, the ovaltine jar was filled with brandy! I told Ken that his folks were smarter than he thought. We all got a swig of the brandy, and topped off by the beer ration, it wasn't long before we were very very happy. What a night! Our squad leader, Sal, whose home town was Philadelphia, got a prize package. It was a box full of Italian goodies. Spaghetti with all the trimmings. Spaghetti, canned meatballs, canned sauce, and Italian cookies. The spaghetti was cooked in a galvanized pail. The meatballs were cooked in a half gallon metal can that usually served as our wash basin. There were also three loaves of Italian bread which were hard as rocks. WE soaked them in water and then dried them out over an open fire. It was the best Italian dinner I ever ate! God bless the wonderful people of Philadelphia for their kind thoughtfulness.

Finally. At the end of April 1945 we were ordered to pack up our gear and prepare for a new move. We were to proceed further south into Burma to an airfield located at Bhamo. This village is where the Ledo Road from India connected to the old Burma Road and led to China. I don't remember the exact date, but it was the beginning of May when our three officers were ordered to headquarters. Shingbuyang had become the hub of operations in Burma. I will never forget that night as long as I live. Our officers' Jeep came racing back from headquarters directly on to the runway. The horn was blowing loudly and the officers were waving and shouting. I thought they were drunk. It was only when they got up to our tent that I heard the joyous shout that we were going home, at long last. Pandemonium broke out. There were shouts of pure joy and thanksgiving! Some men, myself included, broke down and cried. No one slept that night. All we could think about was that we were going home. We had survived the horror of this awful place.

A day or two later we were flown to Calcutta, and taken to an encampment in the middle of the city. It was the same day that Germany surrendered and the war in Europe was over. In spite of all the celebration going on in the city, I was much too tired to join in. I guess I passed out from sheer exhaustion. I slept through the entire night of celebration. Finally, we were transported to a ship dock and assembled as a unit for the last time. We marched along the dock to the side of a troop transport. The ship's rails were lined up with a crew of Coast Guardsmen, all looking damn and healthy and tan in their white uniforms. They were looking down on us in horror. We must have been some sight! Each of us had dark brown skin with a hint of yellow. The yellow was from the drug, Atabrine, we were ordered to take to help fight against malaria. Our wrinkled uniforms hung on our too skinny bodies. I was told later that someone said we looked like the walking dead. WE thought we were looking good! Once aboard ship, we stowed our gear. Then we were directed to the Mess deck. There we were treated to a feast of food that had been laid out for us. We had not seen food like that since we left the United States three and a half years earlier. We just sat and stared at the food. Then like jungle beasts, we all grabbed handfuls of fresh butter and stuffed it into our mouths. I heard one of the crewmen say, "Jesus christ, what did they do to you?"

The trip from India back to the United States was mostly uneventful. No heavy storms no surprises. Our ship was about half the size of the Ill de France, which we took overseas. On this trip home we had about three thousand passengers. Many of the passengers were "Section 8".

Men who had suffered mental breakdowns while serving in the field. Some were extreme, some were treatable. There were also medical personnel on board to administer to the poor souls. Also aboard were soldiers that had been arrested and were going home to face criminal charges. They were kept under lock and key in a special area. We also had about 200 Chinese students being sent to the States to learn about American business. They were all well educated and were also the most troublesome aboard ship. They felt that since their government was sending them to America they should receive special treatment. They were expected to do the same chores as the soldiers, such as GI duty and KP. This they were not happy about and they did not hesitate to let us know. This was their first lesson in American business. One starts at the bottom and works his way up.

We sailed down the Hoogley River which was an open sewer serving the city of Calcutta. It was a horror. We entered the Bay of Bengal and then sailed to the Island of Ceylon. We docked there for one day. It was beautiful country, green and fresh. Not like Calcutta which was brown and dank and littered with dead bodies. Then we sailed north to the entrance of the Red Sea. As the ship entered the Red Sea, an incident occurred that fortunately ended well. I was leaning on the deck railing on the port side of the ship, when I suddenly became aware of a commotion on the deck below me. Someone was yelling, "No! No! Get off that railing!" I looked down and saw one of the more extreme mental patients standing on the railing below me. The man was stark naked. He stood on the top of the outside railing, and then executed the most beautiful dive into the sea. When he came out of the dive, he began to swim toward a ship going in the opposite direction. Our ship's master horn then sounded a call of man overboard. We slowed down and a motor launch was lowered, fully manned. They went after the swimming soldier. When they caught up with him, the crew began to pull him in. He was very strong and struggled violently against the rescue. Apparently, someone in the launch knocked him out because he suddenly went limp. By the time the launch returned to the ship, the entire port side was lined with passengers. We all cheered loudly because the man had been rescued and was not hurt. Later, we learned he jumped ship because he was not happy with our accommodations, and wanted to try the other ship.

We continued our trip through the Suez Canal which wasn't much, just a big ditch in the middle of the desert. We entered the Mediterranean Sea and sailed toward the Atlantic Ocean. We arrived at Newport News, Virginia, which is not too far from Ft. Eustace where we received basic training three and a half years before.

We disembarked from the ship and, for the last time, what was left of the 683rd AA A/B Company marched as a unit to the camp Theatre. After we entered the doors were locked and guards posted. An officer who identified himself as a member of the United States Department of State addressed us. We were told not to disclose anything we heard or witnessed while serving in the CBI Theatre of World War II. If we did so, we were told, we would be court-martialed, imprisoned and dishonorably discharged from the Armed Forces. What a warm greeting to give to soldiers just returning from almost four years of duty overseas in less than favorable conditions.

After this ringing speech we were ordered to the Mess Hall where we were told we could order anything we wanted to eat. To our surprise and wonder, the men serving us were German POW's. They appeared to be well fed and in good health, unlike the men they were serving.

After about two days in camp, we were given thirty day leaves. My trip back to NYC and then to the Bronx was a wonderful experience. People were very kind and helpful. When I

reached Penn Station, I was in a state of utter excitement as well as confusion. The driver of a Yellow Cab helped me out. He agreed to charge only half price for the trip to the Bronx to my parents new address in the Fordham area. He told me he had a son overseas in the Pacific somewhere. It was a hot summer evening . People were sitting outdoors to stay cool. When we arrived at the new address, the driver refused to accept a tip. As I got out of the cab, I heard my cousin Raymond shout, "It's Eddie! It's Eddie!" Then I heard my mother scream, "Mi hijo Mi hijo! Gracias as Dios!" Spanish for "My son, My son! Thank God!"

I truly don't remember much about the thirty day leave, only that it was a really wild time. While on leave, I received orders to report to a camp in North Carolina when my leave was over. I suspect it was a gathering camp for fresh troops to be shipped out to the Pacific for use in the invasion of Japan. In August of 1945, while I was in Greensboro, North Carolina, the Japanese surrendered. Thank God!

World War II was over for PFC Edward Olvera, now 22 years old. I was spared and protected by the Grace of God and the help of all my fellow soldiers.