HISTORY OF 303D AIR SERVICE GROUP

Three years ago today, 9 February 1942, our 303d was a War Department baby, impotent and powerless, but full of possibilities. On 27 January 1942, General Orders No. 12 rolled off the whirling mimeograph machines at Headquarters, Air Force Combat Command, Ellington Field, Washington, D. C. It said in substance that the 303d Air Base Group, consisting of Headquarters & Headquarters Squadron and the 321st Materiel Squadron was activated at Harding Field, Baton Rouge, La. effective 9 February 1942.

Today, three years later, our 303d Air Service Group is an effective fighting team of 661 En and 48 Officers, performing with three other Air Service Groups the vital, "behind-the-scenes" job of third-echelon supply and maintenance, plus base services, for Isley Field B-29 base on Saipan, M. I. From here, four Very Long Range (VLR) Bomb Groups fly their 3500 mile roundtrip missions in the deadly B-29 Superforts to "bomb Jap industry on their home islands with maximum efficiency and maximum frequency", to quote Brigadier General Emmett O'Donnell, Commanding General of the 73d Bombardment Wing.

It's the humble attempt of this story to tell what happened to our 303d in those three years. It's been plenty.

It took our 303d:

1. Two years, four months, and 25 days;
2. Two major reorganizations, numerous redesignations and T/O changes, and eight different CO's;
3. Four times when we were truly "hot" and ready to ship overseas; and
4. Ten changes of station as a Group;

before we finally left Los Angeles Port of Embarkation (Wilmington, Calif) at 2300, on 4 July 1944 — of all days! A month later, 5 August 1944, our destination was announced as Saipan, Marianas Islands. We debarked on 11 August 1944, 38 days after leaving the States, with only a one-day shore leave at Hawaii to break the monotony of the sardine (or was it soldier?) packed SS Fairland. We were lucky to get that leave.

"It was a hard fight (to get overseas), but we made it."

The 303d was activated 9 February 1942, and finally left the States 4 July 1944, two years, four months, and 25 days later.

The 303d was originally organized as an Air Base Group with Headquarters & Headquarters Squadron and the 321st Materiel Squadron. Twice we weathered major "shake-ups" (the Army calls them reorganizations): once when 10 units were assigned on 15 August 1942 and joined together as a united Group at Will Rogers Field 25 September - 10 October 1942; and secondly, when this 10 unit Service Group was split equally to form two Service Groups (Special) at Tinker Field, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on 13 January 1944.
Previous orders show that there have been exactly 22 redesignations of units from activation to date. Since reorganization the second time, there have been five major T/C changes, all occurring within five months of training between February 1944 and June 1944.

The following Officers have been 303d Commanding Officers:

25 Sep 42 - 11 Oct 42 — 1st Lt Charles A. Holland
12 Oct 42 - 2 Nov 42 — Major F. H. Goodrich
3 Nov 42 - 14 Dec 42 — Major William H. Chambers
15 Dec 42 - 3 Jun 43 — Major James R. Allen
4 Jun 43 - 5 Sep 43 — Col Barnard Cummings
6 Sep 43 - 15 Nov 43 — Major Rogers A. Gardner
16 Nov 43 - 9 Jan 44 — Lt Col Edward W. Thomson
10 Jan 44 - Today — Col Horace W. Shelmire

As for being seriously "hot," old-timers remember Will Rogers Field in January 1943, Casper, Wyo., in May 1943, Tallahassee, Fla., in December 1943, and Walker, Kans., in May 1944 as four distinct times. The latter was "it," the "real McCoy".

As an organized, individual Group, the 303d has changed station 10 times in the following order before final embarkation: Harding Field, Baton Rouge, La.; Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma City, Okla.; Dispersed Service Group Training Station, Woodward, Okla.; Will Rogers Field again; Casper, Wyoming Army Air Base; Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Fla.; Tinker Field, Oklahoma City, Okla.; Walker Army Air Base, Victoria, Kans.; Tinker Field, again; and Camp Anza, Arlington, Calif.

This is the second tour of overseas duty for 29 EM and 4 Officers, roughly 5% of the Group. They've already served all over the world --- from the Alenquins to Australia and from Trinidad to Arabia, including such in-between points as Porto Rico, Panama, Bahamas Islands, England, Nigeria, British West Africa, Egypt, Hawaii, Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and New Caledonia. In fact, Major Louis C. Geisendorf, Group Executive Officer and well-liked CQ of Headquarters & Base Services Squadron, had already served 15 months in Nigeria, British West Africa, and Arabia with the Air Transport Command when he returned overseas for the second time --- at the age of 50. Lt Blair W. Peppel was at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 and later returned to the States to graduate from Infantry OCS. Most of the EM served in the Caribbean area, some for as long as 32 months.

While no exact figure is available, the most reliable, conservative "guess-estimates" say that at least 500 men were furnished to "hot" outfits during 20 months from October 1942 to June 1944 inclusive. This caused much unavoidable confusion to our own overseas training program. But on the other hand, it is also quite a creditable achievement in indirectly speeding other organizations overseas.

The life story of our present Commanding Officer, Col Horace W. Shelmire, is unique, colorful, and quite remarkable. He's been boyhood chum and lifelong friend of Gen. H. H. Arnold. Born within 20 miles of each other in Pennsylvania, they attended the same grade school. Pals throughout high school, they graduated only a year apart from Lower Merion High School, Ardmore, Penna., where they played football together. In 1903, Henry had the opportunity to go to West Point, while his pal, Horace, enlisted in the Pennsylvania National Guard. Today, after 42 years of Army experience (almost twice as long as many of us are years of age), Col Shelmire has done far more than his share to wage an aerial war against the enemy that is unequalled in history.
For 26 months (Sept 1941 – Nov 1943), he served in Headquarters, Army Air Forces as right-hand man for General H. H. Arnold. He travelled all over the world by air — Alcuitans, China, India, Africa, Middle East, Australia, Pacific, England — on inspection trips, acted as “trouble-shooter” coordinating conflicting interests, reporting directly to Gen. Arnold, attended the Casablanca Conference, designed the Air Corps shoulder patch and our own 303d “Eager Beaver” insignia, and finally was awarded his long cherished hope of a field command. In the rated non-pilot specialty of Aerial Gunner, he has commanded our 303d for the past 13 months, longer than any other Officer, and has led the Group thru the difficult readjustment of reorganization, a speeded up period of training as a guinea pig B-29 Service Group, and finally the trying 14 weeks of building our own living and working quarters from rocky sugar cane fields.

At present, the Colonel is Assistant Chief of Staff for Supply for 73d Bomb Wing. It’s up to him to see that no B-29 is grounded for lack of parts. This responsibility involves handling, segregating, and distributing several boatloads and innumerable planeloads of incoming water and air freight each month, besides a considerable tonnage of outgoing repairable parts. AC, CM, SC, CS, EC, and GE supplies are all included. Before this duty assignment, Col. Sholmire was Director of Supply and Maintenance for Service Centers A and B, handling about 125 planes. In this job, he guided those repair stations into operation doing 3d echelon work.

Without looking for it, the Colonel has found plenty of excitement and unique experiences during his 26 months with Gen. Arnold. He’s been lost at least twice: once over the Alcuitans when his plane did a 16,000 foot power dive in a DC-3 (same as C-47) — “Try that some time for a thrill,” the Colonel comments; he was lost again over Japan held territory in China with Gen. Arnold abroad. On this narrow “squeak,” the Colonel helped navigate the lost B-17 safely back to their destination, which they’d overshot by 350 miles.

Flying the treacherous “Hump” in India, the navigator of a B-17 “passed out” at 18,000 feet when he carelessly neglected to put on his oxygen mask soon enough. The Colonel, dozing in the plexi-glass nose, saw the Lieutenant in a groggy state, shook him “awake,” and put on his oxygen mask for him. “Where are we?” the Colonel asked. Finally, the answer came, “I don’t know.”

“Quickly, that navigator shot the stars with his sextant while I recorded his readings,” the Colonel recalls, “and together we figured out our position. We were 350 miles beyond our destination, Kunming, China, at a point halfway between Canton and Hong Kong — over Japan held territory to boot. And Gen. Arnold was on that plane too!”

He was instrumental in providing reliable maps for previously un-mapped strategic Alcuitan island outposts, later taken by American doughboys. He has worked with Gen. Claire Chennault to improve Chinese air bases, hosted with an Arabian sultan where the ‘piece de resistance’ was a dinky piece of canned corned beef, decorated with a dried apricot to make it look appetizing; has been the guest of the Governor General of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and has bargained for souvenirs with the wide-lipped Ubangi natives in dark Africa .... to mention only a few experiences.

The Alcuitans probably hold a pretty warm spot in the Colonel’s heart, in spite of their wicked, sub-zero weather. During the planning of the Alcuitans island conquest, war-planners in Washington proposed to take several islands and build airfields there. However, they were woefully lacking in maps of any kind. Realizing this, Col Sholmire searched everywhere for reliable data by which to draw maps. Government agencies such as the U.S. Coast Guard, Coast
and Geodetic Survey, U.S. Bureau of Fisheries and others chipped in valuable scraps of information. The Colonel managed to contact several scientists who had lived there, gaining a gold mine of accurate facts from them. Other sources also proved helpful.

By piecing together these bits of information like a jig-saw puzzle, Col. Shelmire was able to produce accurate maps. From these, he recommended capture of Adak and Amchitka islands to provide far more suitable airfields instead of two others tentatively agreed upon for occupation which his maps showed were only rock piles.

"It was the proudest moment of my life," Col Shelmire beamed, "when I set foot on Adak only 12 days after it was taken and saw an airfield well underway. It was located in a natural amphitheatre of easily worked Arctic tundra —— just like my maps showed." Truly, it's an achievement of which the Colonel can be justly proud.

Another time while supervising construction of airfields for Gen. Chenault's Flying Tigers, Col Shelmire found it "quite a job to get the Chinese to defile the graves of their ancestors scattered all over the landscape" (where the proposed fields were to be built).

Besides a chest full of other decorations and campaign ribbons, Col Shelmire wears the Bronze Star awarded "for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 11 August 1944 to 20 October 1944." This was part of those short 14 weeks between our arrival and the first big raid on Tokyo.

The Group as a whole was informally commended for its superior work during this same period by Brig Gen H. S. Hansell, Jr., then CG of the 21st Bomber Command. "You carried on your official work with efficiency above the usual under rugged conditions," Gen Hansell said. "In addition, with hard work, ingenuity, and a kind of stubborn will that typifies the spirit of American pioneering, you made with your own hands a place to live and a place to work, overcoming obstacles that were not foreseen."

It is not commonly known that Col Shelmire came up the hard way thru the ranks. He served two "bitches" with the Pennsylvania National Guard before enlisting in World War I, was an E2 for three months, then graduated from Field Artillery OCS, Ft Oglethorpe, Ga. in November 1917, commanded a combat Field Artillery Battalion in France for a year, and then served with the Army of Occupation. After 20 months as an Officer, he resigned his commission in July 1919 due to the pressure of business, but was re-commissioned a Field Artillery Captain in ORC only 7 months later in January 1920. He's "been in" ever since.

During the 1920's and 30's, Col Shelmire found time from his flourishing insurance broker's business to put in 32 weeks of active duty tours in ORC, and complete two difficult Army correspondence courses, Field Artillery Battery Officer's course and the coveted Command and General Staff School.

Vigorous for his 59 years, Col Shelmire has an aggressive personality. Most impressive and striking in his appearance is his waxed, noodle-point moustache. It seems to symbolize his determined character. Back in the States, you never saw him without his swagger stick, but here in the islands the Colonel says it came apart and besides he was always losing it, so he's saving it for home use.
Very few men realize it was Col Sholmire (and his aggressive personality) whom we can thank for going ashore at Pearl Harbor. It was an unheard of thing to let any travelling troops go ashore. Col Sholmire had to persuade the Commanding Admiral to break the rigid Naval SOP in our case and allow us ashore. "It was also necessary to get some friends in the Air Corps at Hickham Field and some Navy friends to provide us transportation to and from Waikiki Beach," the Colonel explains. "I took full responsibility," he added, "that all would be well, and felt pretty badly when two men let us down by staying ashore." No travelling troops have had the same shore leave privilege at Oahu before or since during this war, according to the Colonel. He found this out on a trip back to Hawaii. That privilege of seeing the sights of Honolulu was certainly appreciated, since that is probably the only chance we'd ever have.

Besides commanding the 303d, the Colonel is busy now consolidating handling of all kinds of supplies for 73d Bomb Wing under one head. "This single, central supply center for requisition and record keeping is an amazingly huge thing," the Colonel noted. "At first we consolidated only AC supplies, but later added OBS, Oam, SC, CE, and CW supplies. The two Service Centers no longer perform a supply function, except to keep a 10 day supply of needed parts on hand. Their job now is almost 100% maintenance."

The history of the 303d can be conveniently divided into three periods,
(1) Prior to 10 October 1942, the 303d was largely dormant. It existed as a two-unit Air Base Group at Harding Field, Baton Rouge, La. On 15 August 1942, nine new units were assigned to the 303d and one was relieved. These 10 units all joined together as a united Group at Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma City, Okla., 25 September - 10 October 1942. (2) From 10 October 1942 to 12 January 1943, the 303d operated as a 10-unit (nine unit after 1 May 1943) Service Group. (3) From reorganization on 13 January 1943 to date, the 303d has operated as a 3-unit "streamlined" Service Group providing 3d echelon maintenance and supply for a B-29 Superfort Bomb Group.

General Orders No. 87, dated 15 August 1942, from Headquarters, Air Service Command, Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio, assigned the following organizations to the 303d from the locations shown:

| Hq & Hq Sq | Harding Field, Baton Rouge, La. |
| 73d Service Sq |raig Field, Selma, Ala. |
| 327th Service Sq | Drew Field, Tampa, Fla. |
| 22d Signal Co (Serv Cp) | Jacksonville AAB, Fla. |
| 824th WM Co Trk (Avn) | Craig Field, Selma, Ala. |
| 754th WM Co Trk (Avn) | Wilmington Municipal Airport, N. Car. |
| 178th WM Co (Serv Cp) | Mac Dill Field, Tampa, Fla. |
| 1746th WM Co MM (Avn) | Harding Field, Baton Rouge, La. |
| 835th Ord Co (Avn) AB | To be activated. |

Briefly, here is a short history of each unit from its activation until it joined the 303d in October 1942 at Will Rogers Field. It carries the 835th all the way through to deactivation on 1 May 1943 at Casper, Wyo.

Period up to 10 October 1942

73d Service Squadron

Oldest outfit in the 303d is the present 73d Air Material Squadron. Activated in October 1940 at Maxwell Field, Ala., the 73d has at times numbered 600 EM. 5
73d mechanics have handled AT-6, A-20, B-17, C-47, P-39, P-40, P-47, P-51, and the mighty B-29 planes.

At least 45 of the original 73d boys at Craig Field, Ala., are still with the 303d. That's 2½ years in the same outfit. On the other hand, perhaps 250 EM have been furnished by the 73d since activation to organize new units or for "hot" outfits. In August 1942, 100 EM were yanked out of the 73d and sent to Harding Field, Baton Rouge, La., to form a new Service Squadron. About 25 EM went to "hot" outfits at Will Rogers Field, 25 more at Casper, Wyo., 50 from Tallahassee, Fla., and 50 from Walker, Kans. Turnover of personnel was constant and heavy.

For 23 glorious months (November 1940 - October 1942), the 73d was stationed at Craig Field, Selma, Ala., which was then an advanced Cadet flying school where oftentimes the graduating class was 50% British cadets. Their mission was to keep as many as 500 AT-6 trainer planes in flying condition. The 73d handled all 3d and 4th echelon repair, engine overhaul, and airplane modification, plus handling their own supply problems from Sub-Depot warehouses. In addition, the boys did a minor amount of shop work on F-40s which pilots used for "checking out". Six School Squadrons did most of the 1st and 2d echelon maintenance "on the line" although at times our 73d performed such work also.

From activation until joining the 303d in October 1942, the 73d was an independent unit. It belonged to no tactical Group and its mission was confined to handling planes at Craig Field. From activation until reorganization in January 1944, the Squadron had always been composed of skilled airplane technicians and supply personnel. For the past 13 months, it has functioned purely as a supply organization.

The 73d will always remember Craig Field as a GI paradise. There were concrete sidewalks, green lawns, one story, yellow stucco, red roofed permanent barracks which were divided into 6 man rooms, each room with its own latrine. The boys even had their own footlockers and two clean sheets and a pillowcase every week.

Chow was tops too. 3 Sgt Guy S. Sellers, present Mess Sgt of the 73d, was a cook at Craig Field. "We had the best equipment there of any place we've ever been", he recalls. "We had a stack oven, gas heated, for baking pies, a 2½ x 6 foot grill right on the serving line, dish washing machines, and colored KPs; we fed hot rolls every noon, had ice cream, cake and pie --- all three for one meal --- at least three times a week, and I've fried steaks big enough to cover a whole serving tray." It was a "good deal", but definitely.

This GI heaven ended abruptly and roughly in October 1942 when the 73d boys joined the 303d. When they arrived at Will Rogers Field one cold night at 2200 at the end of a tiring, 4 day (6 - 10 October), 1,000 mile truck convoy, the 73d was greeted (?) by nasty smelling, dimly lit, unheated, dusty tar paper and rough board shacks. With cots only a foot apart, 32 men were squeezed into each barracks. It was a rough change, but now the boys were in an overseas tactical outfit destined for foreign service --- eventually (they hoped!).

Headquarters Squadron

plus one EM Officer, both from the 22d Air Base Group, Baer Field, Ind. The Squadron remained at Harding Field for seven months until 24 September 1942 when one Officer and 87 EM moved by train to Will Rogers Field. 1st Lt Charles A. Holland was Squadron Commander at the time and assumed command of the Group upon arrival at Will Rogers Field on 25 September 1942. He was the only company grade officer ever to act as Group Commander.

When activated by General Orders No. 12, the 321st Materiel Squadron was assigned to the 303d at Harding Field, La. After being redesignated a Service Squadron in June 1942, the 321st was reassigned to the 320th Service Group by General Orders No. 87, Headquarters, ASC, 15 August 1942, mentioned above.

327th Service Squadron

The same General Order No. 12 mentioned for Headquarters Squadron also activated the 327th Materiel Squadron, effective 9 February 1942 at Drew Field, Tampa, Fla., and assigned it to the 309th Air Base Group. The original activating cadre of 47 EM was drawn from the 37th Materiel Squadron, 27th Air Base Group, and from Headquarters Squadron, 309th Air Base Group, both then stationed at Drew Field, Fla.

After redesignation to a Service Squadron in June 1942 and realignment to the 321st Air Base Group in July 1942, the 327th finally was assigned to the 303d Service Group in August 1942 and has been with the Group ever since. The 327th remained stationed at Drew Field for eight months between activation and joining the 303d. Between February and October 1942, two large shipments of EM were assigned the 327th — 110 in February and 135 in May. During the same period 115 EM were shipped out in March and 25 in July. Upon arrival at Will Rogers Field on 5 October 1942, the 327th had one Officer and 178 EM.

22d Signal Co. (Serv Gp)

Second oldest unit of the 303d is the 22d Signal Co (Serv Gp). Originally activated as the 22d Signal Platoon (Air Base) with one Officer and 11 EM on 5 February 1941 at Langley Field, Va., the unit was renamed the 22d Signal Co (Serv Gp) in July 1942 and assigned to the 303d in August. In the 19 months between activation and joining the 303d, the 22d Signal Co changed station three times; from Langley Field, Va., to Charlotte AAB, N. Car. in April 1942, from there to Jacksonville Municipal Airport, Fla., by motor convoy in March 1942 and from Fla., to Will Rogers Field by rail, arriving 3 October 1942 with one Officer and 57 EM. Several present veterans of the 303d were with the 22d "way back when".

824th QM Co. (Trk) (Colored)

The 824th QM Co (Trk) and the 73d Service Squadron knew each other long before joining the 303d. They were both stationed at Craig Field, Ala., for about 12 months, but made separate trips to Will Rogers Field. Activated on 6 March 1941 at Barksdale Field, La., the 824th was originally known as Company K, 31st QM Regiment, with personnel furnished by Companies D and E, 31st QM Regiment. In mid-July 1941, a Detachment of Co K moved to Eglin Field, Fla., for permanent change of station. They remained there until re-joining the rest of the unit at Will Rogers Field on 5 October 1942.

Meanwhile, the remainder of Co K stayed at Barksdale Field, La., until late October 1941 when they moved to Craig Field, Ala., where the 73d Service Squadron had already been stationed for a year. In January 1942, the organization was
redesignated the 824th QM Co (Avn) and in September was again redesignated the 1996th QM Trk Co (Avn). When the 1996th joined the 303d at Will Rogers Field on 10 October 1942, their strength was two Officers and 88 EM.

754th QM Co (Trk) (Colored)

Activated 6 April 1942 at Wilmington Army Airport, N. Car., the 754th was somewhat larger, with an original assigned cadre of one Officer and 43 EM from the 750th QM Co (Trk). The 754th was assigned to the 303d on 15 August 1942, and redesignated the 1924th QM Trk Co (Avn) on 19 September 1942. The 754th travelled from Wilmington, N. Car. to Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Fla. on 11–12 September 1942. Three weeks later, they moved to Will Rogers Field, arriving after a three day trip on 5 October with two Officers and 65 EM.

178th QM Co (Serv Gp)

On 5 May 1942, the 178th Platoon (Service Center) (Avn) was activated at Daniel Field, Augusta, Ga. with one Officer and eight EM. Six weeks later, the nine men moved to Mac Dill Field, Tampa, Fla. where the unit remained until it moved by train to join the 303d on 27 September 1942 with four Officers and 124 EM. The unit was redesignated to the 178th QM Co (Serv Gp) in July 1942. During three months at Mac Dill Field, Fla., three large shipments of men were assigned: 24 EM on 25 June 1942, 52 more only a week later on 4 July, and 70 EM were shipped in on 13 September 1942, only two weeks before the unit moved to Will Rogers Field. However, 20 of these were immediately shipped out before moving.

1745th QM Bn (Avn) Co

For the 1745th QM Bn (Avn) Co, only two months passed between the date of activation and joining the 303d. The unit was activated on 14 August 1942 at Mac Dill Field, Tampa, Fla. and assigned to the 303d the next day. The 1745th motored to Orlando AAB, Fla. on 20 August, was redesignated the 1745th Ord Bn (Avn) (Q) on 1 September 1942, and left Orlando, Fla. on 25 September 1942 for Will Rogers Field, arriving on 1 October with the impressive strength of two Officers and four EM.

1766th QM Bn (Avn) Co

This unit's story is much the same as her sister, the 1745th. The unit was activated on 10 August 1942 at Harding Field, La. from a cadre of seven EM transferred from the 334th Service Group, Bollar Field, La. and assigned to the 303d on 15 August 1942. The 1766th left Harding Field by train with Headquarters Squadron on 24 September and arrived at Will Rogers Field the next day. Strength of the organization on 1 October 1942 was one Officer and seven EM.

835th Ord Co (Avn) AB

Oddly enough, the 835th Ord Co (Avn) AB was disbanded only eight months after activation. The 835th was organized on 20 August 1942 at Will Rogers Field with one Officer and seven EM. (Order unknown). Evidently the unit was assigned to the 53d Service Group, because on 5 September 1942 while stationed at Will Rogers Field, the 835th was relieved from the 53d Service Group and assigned to the 303d. It was redesignated the 1104th Ord Co (Avn) AB on 19 November 1942. On 1 May 1943, only eight months after activation, the 835th was disbanded at Casper, Wyo. and the imposing strength of one Officer and 15 EM then assigned was absorbed by the 1745th Ord S & H Co.

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The 303d Service Group had begun to "take shape". It was no longer a pint-sized, inactive, aimless weakling. With 16 Officers and 710 EM, the 303d was ready to go places and do things. We had finally begun to have a definite, active part in the war. But little did anyone realize how long it would be before the outfit finally climbed the gangplank. Four times in 20 months, the 303d "got hot" and finally sailed on 4 July 1944, destination unknown at the time. It took four changes of station and one major reorganization to do the trick.

Summary of Period 10 October 1942 - 12 January 1944

For 15 months, our 303d trained for overseas, "got hot" three times, but each time moved to a new station within the United States, not overseas. We stayed at Will Rogers Field and Woodward, Okla, for four months until February 1943, where we packed all our equipment for overseas shipment --- unnecessarily. We repeated the same "get hot---cool off" process during four months at Casper, Wyo, AAB. Then we became a Parent Group training two other Groups for overseas, besides furnishing replacements from our own 303d to "hot" outfits. Finally we were alerted ourselves late in December 1943 and completed all tag ends of overseas training in a whirlwind, 10 day "freeze" --- all this in 6% months at Tallahassee, Fla, before moving to Tinker Field for reorganization on 13 January 1944. We were split equally to form two "streamlined" Service Groups (Special) to team up with two B-29 Bomb Groups as their 3d echelon supply and maintenance units.

Will Rogers Field & Woodward, Okla.
10 Oct 42 - 29 Feb 43

For five weeks at Will Rogers Field, the 303d was primarily engaged in on-the-job training. Both Service Squadrons went to work in the hangars doing 2d and 3d echelon maintenance on A-20's and P-40's. Supply men worked in the Sub-Depot warehouses. All in all, it was a "shake-down" process, knitting the growing Group together into a smooth-working, efficient team.

Numerous batches of GI school graduates, up to 50 at a time, were assigned to the 303d almost faster than they could be properly absorbed. In fact, in this four month period, the size of the Group almost doubled --- 16 Officers and 710 EM to start with, and 67 Officers and 1179 EM at the end. Fifty-one Officers and 469 EM had been added in a short four months. The 303d really had a bad case of "growing pains" that time.

Construction was started on a 20x40 foot Group Chapel, made from an old corn crib and battered chicken coop. This unique, remodelled Chapel was visited and photographed during construction by Robert Ripley. It is not known definitely whether or not Ripley ever mentioned the Chapel in his daily "Believe It Or Not" cartoon.

It was a common "hunch" that the 303d was "hot". "We fully expected to be overseas in February 1943," Capt Barth L. Ottoboni declares. This seemed logical when all units except the two Service Squadrons moved 175 miles by motor convoy on 18 November 1942 to Dispersed Service Group Training Station, Boiling Springs State Park, Woodward, Okla, for five weeks of intensive, 3d phase overseas training specializing in camouflage.

It was "rough" at Woodward, but not too disagreeable, everyone agrees. The 303d was the first Army unit to use the abandoned CCC camp, located in hilly, heavily wooded terrain, and consequently spent considerable time building the camp. "It was always a job trying to keep warm --- we walked in mud most of the time --- the showers were a mile and a half from the camp area --- there were
daily reconnaissance flights to inspect our camouflage." Such are some typical comments of veterans who were there (and survived! ——) Incidentally, this was the first time colored troops had been stationed near Woodward, Okla. It was quite some "Christmas present" to return to Will Rogers Field on 23 December, after enduring five weeks of intensive camouflage discipline and wretched living conditions likely to be encountered overseas. The return trip was again made by truck convoy, starting at 0200 in bitter, freezing cold. And brother, it was cold!

While at Woodward, a party of 2d Area Air Service Command Officers informally inspected the Group. However, no formal POW inspection was ever made, the Group never received any Warning Orders, nor was it ever formally alerted for overseas movement. Nevertheless, for some unknown reason, all equipment was treated with cosmoline waterproofing grease and packed in overseas shipping crates.

Even at this late stage of movement, the 303d didn't seem to have any clear-cut mission, according to most reliable accounts. Supposedly, the 303d would operate as a Dispersed Service Group. That much was fairly definite. Beyond that, it was speculation. Would we handle fighters or bombers? Evidently that decision still had to be made by higher authorities. It was expected that the Service Center where repairs would be made would be located about 200 miles behind the forward airfields, from which the planes operated. And judging from a series of lectures about the operation of a Dispersed Service Group overseas, the 303d might be heading for N. Africa or possibly the Pacific. At any rate, all possible preparations had been completed and the 303d was ready.

But instead of heading for the Port, the Group took a train ride to Amy Air Base, Casper, Wyo. We were to learn all about B-17 Fortress bombers. It took five trains, totalling some 250 cars, using five different routes, to move all personnel and equipment. The last train finally arrived on 28 February. The 303d had been "hot" once, but didn't "make it" that time.

Casper, Wyo. AAB, 28 Feb - 12 Jun 1943.

When the 303d hit Casper, it cooled off in a hurry. There was no immediate prospect of going overseas, and besides it was down to 30 degrees below zero. As one colored boy put it, "When you get cold, you can't do nothin' about it, but when you get hot, you can always fall out in the shade." It was still like an ice-box when the Group left in June. Those regular Saturday formal retreats weren't very cozy either. You stood out on a wide-open parade ground in freezing weather, facing a bone-chilling wind that whipped stinging snow in your face.

Like at Woodward, our 303d colored truck drivers were the first negro troops to be stationed at Casper. Some 200 colored civilians had previously prepared a Service Club in town ready for their boys to use upon arrival.

Almost before the two Service Squadrons could touch a B-17, they were sent out on DS. The 327th went to Scotts Bluff, Nebr., but came right back. They were gone only 12 days, 16-28 March. Back at Casper, the 327th learned B-17s inside out, servicing the Fortress bombers used in 4-engine transition school.

The 73d had better luck. They went on DS to Army Air Base, Alliance, Nebr., where everyone got all the free airplane rides they wanted. Then they went to Hill Field, Ogden, Utah to inventory the Depot, where there were ten gals for every fellow. (No kiddin'!!!)
Alliance was a Paratrooper training base, with C-47's and gliders galore. For some reason, our 73d boys scarcely touched the C-47's. Only the Air Corps supply men, dope and fabric workers, and parachute men had any job to keep them busy. The supply men put a new warehouse into operation, the dope and fabric men had plenty of work on gliders, and those overworked parachute men should have been paid on a piecework basis. There was almost no B-17 maintenance, and "we only changed the engine on 1 C-47" one GI recalls. Consequently the four weeks at Alliance failed miserably to give the training and experience which had been hoped for.

But it succeeded admirably in giving the boys plenty of free airplane rides, since there were plenty of C-47's flying cargo in and out constantly (also local flights), and the CO was liberal in granting permission to take a hop. Never, before or since, has it been so easy to get a free airplane ride.

But it wasn't the end of the 73d's Good Luck. Never, before or since Hill Field, Ogden, Utah was the feminine situation so favorable. The girls outnumbered the fellows ten to one! (What a life that was!!) The four week stay there was entirely too short. Seriously though, the boys tackled the tough assignment of taking the initial inventory on several million dollars worth of supplies at the Depot and they turned out an excellent job in record time.

Then too, they tell about that 15 man detail from the 178th QM Co that was sent out to tear down 20 old CCC barracks. They accomplished the job in only 21 days in spite of bitter winter weather and a "FP" -- "Pretty Punk" ---- place to shave and bathe. That's not so memorable.....it's the guy who got thirsty, calf-fashion, one day and drank at least a case of milk at one sitting.

Back at Casper, the 303d had practically wiped out the Base in a mock battle one sub-zero morning in March. The Base Commander wanted to test his plan of defense, and our 303d gladly agreed to be the attackers, attempting to capture the Base and make it useless for flying. For that short but intensive forenoon, Airplane technicians and supply specialists played Infantry soldier.

Long before dawn (at 0300 in fact), the battle-eager 303d set out with blood in their eye. In a howling blizzard, the 1022d Signal Company strung communication lines all around the outside edge of the Base defenses. The Chemical section took up advanced positions and prepared to lay their smoke screen at the right time before taking the Base Chemical warehouse. Assault troops were ready in trucks, protected by .50 caliber machine guns mounted on top of the cab. The Medics accompanied them during the attack as an unnamed First Aid men, ready to treat any casualties. (By coincidence, they had just finished blood-tying the whole Group without a microscope by use of the new serum group method.) Even a public address system and loud speaker had been rigged up on a sound truck for propaganda purposes. There was plenty of action that raw winter day from dawn until noon, especially when our 303d Air Corps "Infantry" stormed the Base defenses. After a lively "battle", we 303d boys felt sure we'd won a decisive victory. However, the umpires thought otherwise, and the umpire is always right, especially when he's a GI ump.

Even in April, the weather didn't seem to be warming up any, but the 303d was. A Pre-FOX inspection, complete with pitched pup tents and "show-down", was conducted by IOD officers from Washington, D.C. in April 1943. Dome Rumor immediately went "hog wild", sending us to Alaska, England, North Africa, or some Pacific Island.

As it was later revealed, that Pre-FOX inspection was severely critical...
it really "reamed us out". Result: another Service Group went overseas, in- stead of our 303d. Twice now, we'd "been hot", but didn't "make it".

Whether or not the turnover of personnel was the reason can be argued. In four months at Casper, we suffered a net loss of nine Officers and 310 EIs. There were 67 Officers and 1179 EIs on arrival in February, and 58 Officers and 869 EIs upon leaving in June. This is only the net result of turnover. Figures are not available of how many new men came into the 303d while at Casper. Several EIs ventured the opinion that "turnover of personnel was heavier at Casper than any other time."

At any rate, by 7 June 1943, everyone was on the train, headed for Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Fla. -- from bitter, biting cold to stifling, sultry heat -- "so hot you could hardly breathe."

Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Fla. &
Tinker Field, Oklahoma City, Okla.
13 June 1943 - 13 January 1944

The 303d "stayed put" at Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Fla. for 6½ months, the longest time it has been stationed at any one base. (Except overseas, Heaven only knows how long we'll be here!)

Until November 1943, our mission at Dale Mabry was very different from anything we'd done before. Instead of training ourselves for overseas duty, we acted as a "Parent Group", supervising the overseas training of the 30th and 32d Service Groups, which were attached to the 303d for training purposes in July 1943. From an authorized overstrength of 3 cadres, the 303d supplied shortages and absorbed overages of the two trainee Groups, besides acting as their overseas instructor. At Tallahassee, Capt. Sloan, Group Chemical Officer made a 500 foot Chemical Training film with his own camera and film.

In addition, we were supposed to act as a miniature overseas replacement pool. Personnel was constantly shipped in, trained if necessary, often at a factory training school course, and then placed "on call" as available for individual replacements to fill shortages in "hot" outfits. All 303d personnel was subject to overseas shipment this way, not just newcomers.

It wasn't uncommon for EIs to be notified that they were on an overseas shipping roster early in the morning, and be on their way to the Port by late afternoon, in less than 12 hours. On one occasion, the 1131st QM Co furnished 26 QM Officers at one crack for a rush FOC call. At least 60 Officers and over 325 EIs were furnished to "hot" overseas outfits. Some idea of the turnover of personnel can be gained from the following figures: Arrived at Dale Mabry Field in June with 58 Officers and 869 EIs. Strength on 15 September 1943 - 121 Officers and 1179 EIs. Strength transferred to Tinker Field for reorganisation in January 1944, 61 Officers and 855 EIs.

Shortly after the two trainee Groups shipped overseas early in November 1943 the 303d was alerted itself. This meant a concentrated program of bivouacs, firing on the range, training films, gas chamber drills, immunization "shots" -- in short, every detail of overseas training. The 303d had begun to "warm up", without any help from that hot Florida climate. To climax it all, the Group went through a FOC inspection. Evidently the IGD Officers weren't satisfied, because a 10 day restriction to the field was slapped on all personnel. Twenty-one specific discrepancies had been found during FOC inspection and had to be corrected. Unfinished training had to be completed before the deadline 10 December. With
that ultimatum, the whirlwind "21 Point Program" got underway like a rocket V-
bomb taking off from its launching site.

"Those 10 days were a rougher nightmare than the first rugged days of basic
training," one E! commented. Two night marches were required. On one of them,
a surprise midnight gas attack was staged, just after stopping for chow. On the
other, the boys barely got back in time for breakfast and a full day of bayonet
drill, grenades, land mines, field sanitation, First Aid, and camouflage. For
self-protection, everyone wrestled through a 12 hour course in Judo. Needless
to say, there was plenty of good-natured G1 griping and kidding. But when 10
December rolled around every requirement had been met and the 10 day "freeze"
was over. "This is it" seemed to be everyone's feeling, and the Latrine Armor
Factory was working overtime spreading fantastic stories.

Might be Europe for the coming D-day invasion. Maybe Italy. How about some
Pacific Island? Hope we don't go to Alaska. But the juiciest one of all was
about being reorganized into a B-25 Service Group. Did the boys ever chew that
one over!

But that's exactly what happened. Instead of heading overseas, four trains
moved 61 officers and 955 E! and all organizational equipment to Tinker Field,
Oklahoma City, Okla. 1-7 January 1944 for reorganization. It was almost like
coming home to return to Oklahoma City, which we'd left only 11 months earlier.
But for the third time in a year, the 303d had been "hot" and was still in the
States. This was a helluva war on this side. Or was it?

All units except Headquarters Squadron, 73d and 327th Service Squadrons were
de-activated on 13 January 1944 and the personnel was divided equally between the
303d and the newly activated 359th Service Group (Special). All personnel of the
old 327th Service Squadron and the 174th Ordnance Supply and Maintenance Co was
transferred together in a body to the 359th. Personnel of the old 73d Service
Squadron remained with the 303d, where the Squadron was divided. Those who were
skilled airplane technicians were assigned to the 327th (renamed) Engineering
Squadron, while qualified supply men remained in the 73d (renamed) Material Squad-
ron. The same separation took place with the 327th boys, now in the 359th. Per-
sonnel of the two colored QM Truck Companies, the 1942d and 1996th, was transferr
to Daniel Field, Augusta, Ga. Replacement Depot shortly before leaving Tallahassee.

The time at Dale Mabry Field had its benefits though. The 73d Service Squad-
ron sent 75 E! to a satellite P-47 check out field at Perry, Fla., where mechanics
and other technicians gained much valuable experience. At other similar fields
at Jacksonville, Fla., Waycross, Ga., and Thomasville, Ga., E! from both Service
Squadrons worked on P-39's and P-51's. Other E! went to factory training courses
to catch up on latest technical developments in propellers; instruments, radar,
fuel cells, and other equipment.

Sidelights: 11 November found 40 E! from Headquarters Squadron marching in
an Armistice Day parade in Tallahassee, and the boys really had a rousing time at
supper entertaining Miss Laraine Day, movie actress.
Summary of Period 13 January 1944 - Present.

After being "streamlined" into a B-29 Service Group, we built our own area from a Kansas mudhole at Walker Army Air Base, Victoria, Kansas where we trained for four months. Due to four widely different T/Os in that same short time, our personnel situation was constantly and completely "snafued". However, we managed to pass POM inspection in May and started our return trip to Tinker Field on D-day in Europe for a two week layover to complete final preparations for shipping over. We moved to the Fort staging area late in June, and for a week or so we stared goggle-eyed at the sights of Hollywood and Los Angeles when we were out on frequent 14 hour overnight passes.

On 4 July, we started what turned out to be a 36 day boat trip to Saipan. Highlights were a one day shore leave at Honolulu, a genuine Hawaiian hula gel USO show aboard ship in Pearl Harbor, and a 12 day layover at Eniwetok without shore leave. The SS Fairland was as home-like as a sardine can, with 1400 troops, 150 crew, and 200 Navy gun crew personnel jammed aboard. (It was mostly us troops who were jammed -- everybody else was pretty comfortable.)

We were only too glad to disembark here on Saipan on 11 August, D-day plus 53, after a 38 day mail drought, with mountains of letters waiting. The island was "secure" from organized resistance with all Japs cornered on the North end, while we were bivouaced somewhere on the South end. We slept in pup tents in a rocky, sugar cane field for the first three nights, (with mosquitoes, lizards, crabs, and spiders for bed partners), ate G and K rations for two weeks, continually got soaked in frequent downpours, slipped through greasy mud, battled clouds of insects and bugs, and unloaded mountains of boxes and cargo from the boats. Several hundred tons of supplies and equipment had to be trucked over some six miles of cow-path, rutted "roads" out to our area where it was finally segregated, after much handling, into some kind of order. Over half the boys had at least a mild touch of dengue fever in the first six weeks before low-flying C-47's sprayed the area with DDT insecticide in a knockout blow to those pesky mosquitos. Incidentally, after the B-29's started arriving (first one landed on 12 October), each tent built its own sand bag bomb shelter, and improved it vigorously after a "stimulating shot" of Jap air raids.

Gradually we got cooked chow, wooden floors in our pyramidal living tents, electric lights, a mess hall where we could sit down to eat, closed latrines, a shower for bathing, Quonset huts and wooden frame warehouses instead of squad tents, a chapel, and a baseball diamond and theater. Civilization inevitably followed. We've even got a barber shop (no manicures yet, however). We've had numerous inspections of tents, living area, latrines, and mess halls, and at one time, you were liable to be "giggled" if you wore a T-shirt to the movies. That's lifted now though. Strictly CI --- nothing but class A (without tie and cap, thank fortune) after 1700 --- getting more "garrison" all the time. Ugh!

We've been through about 15 Jap air raids during November and December 1944, with none since 2 January 1945. About 10 Jap planes have been shot down and crashed in flames within less than a mile of our tents. Most air raids were pretty tame and amounted only to hitting the foxhole and then lousing up to three hours of sleep. However, several times the ack-ack threw up a thunderous, literally earth-shaking barrage. It looked like a brilliant red-orange-yellow 4th of July celebration, but far more terrifying. We've been attacked only once in daylight, at noon when Jap fighters sneaked in without warning and strafed our tent area and the bull diamond where some fellows were playing. Then they headed for the B-29's. That was our worst scare. Another time during a high altitude bombing attack, we could plainly hear whizzing shrapnel, and we
picked up jagged souvenir pieces the next morning.

Five men of the Group have been decorated and three non-battle casualties are buried here on the island. Pfc James A. Fleetwood got the Purple Heart when a bomb landed only five feet away and caved his air raid shelter in on top of him and burst his ear drum. He was on duty guarding a B-29 during the above "anniversary" attack in the "wee, small hours" of 7 December 1944.

Sgt Tom Martin and Cpl Harry Sogajian of the Fire Fighters have received the Soldier's Medal. They rushed to a B-29 which had been set on fire by enemy strafing, climbed on top of the plane, and put out fires raging in the forward gun turret. The plane was loaded with bombs and gasoline. Besides the danger of being blown to bits, the boys kept working in the face of continued enemy strafing. "The whole crew deserves a decoration", declared Sgt Martin. "He couldn't have done a thing without the pumper crew and the rest of the boys."

Lt. John W. Gebring also was awarded the Soldier's Medal for saving two B-29's. On one, he drove a burning gasoline trailer away from under the wing of a parked plane during an early morning raid. At noon about 10 hours later, despite continued enemy strafing, he helped extinguish a burning B-29 engine, although in immediate danger from explosion of the plane's gas and bombs.

Our Commanding Officer, Colonel H. W. Shelmire, was awarded the Bronze Star "for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 11 August to 20 October 1944."

Three men were non-battle casualties. T Sgt John J. Chalenko was accidentally shot in his tent one noon by his buddy who had just finished cleaning his carbine. Pvt Daniel Trevino was drowned while swimming the day after we landed. Pfc Paul Battle died from severe burns. He happened to be unlucky enough to be unloading bombs when a P-38 crashed in flames in that bomb dump and all hell broke loose. A buddy of Pfc Battle's was severely burned, but survived. Three main streets of our Group area are named in their memory. Two of Pvt Trevino's buddies were miraculously saved from drowning. They managed to hang onto a God-sent piece of wreckage all night long and were picked up five miles at sea the next morning by a Navy patrol boat that didn't know the men were missing. Pfc Charles L. Nichols and Pvt Claude H. Stevens, both of the 327th Air Engineering Squadron, were also involved in the Trevino drowning in an unsuccessful rescue attempt. They saw the boys floundering beyond the breakers in open sea between Saipan and Tinian. Pfc Nichols and Pvt Stevens swam out until their buddies on land could no longer see them. Unable to reach the floundering swimmers, they started back for shore. It was just about sundown. To get back, they had to fight a strong ocean going current and then swim along about a mile and a half of jagged coral cliff coastline before they found calm enough water to wade ashore. Elsewhere, angry waves crashed into the rough rocks, throwing spray high in the air. They had spent over two hours in the water, most of it after dark. Now that they were finally safely ashore, they had to make their way, barefoot, and without a stitch of clothes for protection, through dense undergrowth and over jagged coral through about two miles of completely unknown country in the black night to our own tent area. They finally made it after an exhausting two hour trip, after they were already worn out from their rescue attempt in the ocean. Both men received a fine letter of commendation from Colonel Shelmire for their bravery and courageous attempt.

After three months of operating this B-29 base with three other Service Groups, we've achieved a good share of success. But we still have plenty of room for improvement. The Jap homeland war industries will feel the effect as
we become more efficient. It won't be a pleasant experience.

Walker Army Air Base, Victoria, Kansas
13 January 1944 - 7 June 1944

With reorganization accomplished and a new Commanding Officer added, Colonel H. W. Schmaier, the Group totalling 45 Officers and 533 Enlisted Men moved to Walker Army Air Base, Victoria, Kansas by truck convoy 30-31 January 1944. We were to train together with the 500th Bombardment Group, a Second Air Force B-29 tactical outfit.

We faced a stupendous task. First, the Group had to get used to operating under a completely different division of responsibility. No longer were there nine separate organizations to handle supply, maintenance, communications, transportation, medical care, security, and administration. There would be three separate organizations: the 73d Material Squadron to handle all supplies and nothing but; the 327th Engineering Squadron to handle all airplanes maintenance and nothing but; and Headquarters and Base Service Squadron to handle all administration and such Group-wide service functions as communications, transportation, medical care, security, and utilities. Second, we were a B-29 outfit and had to learn all the intricacies of the AAP's newest and most complicated bomber from scratch. We hadn't even seen one before arriving at Tinker. Third, our area at Walker was completely undeveloped. We had to build our own huts, warehouses, orderly rooms, and shops from a bare, muddy plain — all in the face of a raw, wet, Kansas winter.

Readjustment of personnel proved to be the most difficult problem. We had four separate T/O's in four short months at Walker, and each of them was considerably different from the previous one, both in number and qualification of personnel. (Also ratings.) Results: the personnel situation was completely "snafued" all the time. "The Group seemed like a replacement pool", one distressed personnel non-com observed, "Yeah," another agreed, "Just like Grand Central Station." "There were so many men in and out all the time", a First Sergeant commented, "that I couldn't possibly keep track of everybody".

The Group set up its own Reclassification Board for shifting EM into the T/O job for which they were best qualified. MOS numbers were tossed around like confetti. Shortage and overage lists were telephoned long distance to Oklahoma City almost daily. But nothing seemed to calm the jumbled personnel situation. In fact, during two weeks at Tinker just before leaving for the Port, the Group lost 75 EM who were overages, besides transferring in about 50 EM to fill shortages. Here outstanding yet, we picked up 12 airplane technicians at the staging area less than 10 days before leaving the country.

The Group was authorized three cadres overstrength which supposedly, when trained by the 303d, would be used to activate new Service Groups. So far as is known, this idea never became a reality.

During five months at Walker and Tinker, at least 300 personnel transferred in and out. The following figures show total assigned strength of the 303d (Officers included) up to Camp Anza:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Strength</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 February 1944</td>
<td>578 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 February 1944</td>
<td>711 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 March 1944</td>
<td>818 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 March 1944</td>
<td>860 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 April 1944</td>
<td>840 men</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 April 1944</td>
<td>760 men</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 May 1944</td>
<td>790 men</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 May 1944</td>
<td>765 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 June 1944</td>
<td>762 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 June 1944</td>
<td>777 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 June 1944</td>
<td>700 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 June 1944</td>
<td>712 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virtually unchanged since arrival</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During this same five months, four separate T/O's gave the following authorized strength:

Tentative T/O No. 1 in AG letter, 46 Officers and 739 Enlisted Men
Teletype from ASC Headquarters, 9 March 1944, 45 Officers and 716 EM
Information copy present T/O, 29 April 1944, 41 Officers and 609 EM
Changes to above T/O authorizing additional personnel, 47 Officers and 663 EM

With each succeeding change, allotments of grade for Sergeant and higher really took a wicked beating. The same applied for Officers.

During this constantly muddled personnel situation, the Group tried to weld itself into an efficient working team. Busiest of all was the newly formed Utilities Section which did much of the work in converting that Kansas mudhole into our camp area. More of that later though.

In the Material Squadron, the QM, AG, Communications, Ordnance, and Ammunition sections built necessary warehouses from pre-fabricated modules. Only the QM section ever handled any supplies, while the Air Corps supply men took a couple of inventories and tried to straighten out a tangled mess of property transferred to the 303d. Actually, there wasn't too much of a chance at Walker for supply men to get acquainted with new B-29 parts and equipment they'd be handling overseas.

In the Engineering Squadron, it was a different story, though. The boys really learned a lot in a short time about the new, complicated B-29. They helped install about 50 separate modifications on planes soon to be flown to overseas combat bases from Walker, they fixed up a crashed B-29 for rebuilding at Eglin Field, Florida, and they salvaged a plane at Walker. All this besides shop work and factory training courses.

First of all, one of the Mobile Repair Units was sent to Eglin Field, Florida late in January on DS for 30 days to patch up a B-29. This was the first actual work any man had done on the new Superforts. This particular plane, a year old at the time, happened to be the third B-29 built, cost $1,300,000, and had only 96 hours flying time on it. It had landed safely, but then the landing gear folded, dropping the plane to its belly with a jolt where it skidded along and ripped the belly to pieces.

The boys had to tear out the damaged parts and would have rebuilt the plane to flying condition if their 30 days of DS had been extended. As it was, they tore out the wing panels and both bomb bay doors, removed the rear pressure cabin, changed all engines and stripped off numerous other parts. This was the "initiation". The boys were beginning to get the feel of those amazing B-29's.

A much "tougher nut" to solve turned up at Walker. A B-29 parked outside on the ramp just plain broke in two-one day. How to move it out of the way was the big question. You just don't pick up a B-29 and walk off with it.

Here, the MNU's got in another good lick of practical experience. The boys rigged up their own jacks to raise the plane. Then they moved it, slowly and inches at a time, some distance to a spot where it was out of the way and could be salvaged unhurriedly. The task was a major accomplishment and the boys received a generous commendation from Colonel Scilmire for their ingenuity and hard work. The 462d Bombardment Group took both still and moving pictures of the whole operation. After salvaging all useable parts, the plane was shipped to Amarillo, Texas for training purposes.
The most valuable experience was putting on those 50 separate modifications on planes just before they were flown to overseas bases. That meant plenty of shop work for sheet metal, electrical, instrument, propeller, radio, radar, and other technicians who worked in the hangars or Sub-Depot, besides actual installation of these latest improvements. "The B-29's we're handling now over here have hundreds of modifications that we never saw in the States, too," CWO William G. Goots, veteran aircraft maintenance officer, comments. Shortly before the 303d left Walker, this job of putting on last minute modifications was taken over by Tinker Field, major Air Service Command base at Oklahoma City.

During that four months at Walker, all kinds of airplane technicians were continually going to factory training courses to catch up on newest technical developments. All in all, it was a pretty well trained bunch of B-29 specialists that left Walker in June.

As for converting that Kansas mudhole into our living area, that's a story in itself. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, for the 303d to use when we reached Walker, Kansas. We were shown a flat, muddy area at the edge of camp and told, "Here, it's yours, go to it." It was cold as Hades (or is Hades cold?), the mud was sticky and slippery, and that Kansas wind whipping across those wide open plains almost blew you away.

The area had to be drained; huts were fitted together for living quarters, mess halls, warehouses, dispensary, and orderly rooms; latrines were built by the Base after our arrival; wooden sidewalks were laid out; and all else that goes with setting up housekeeping from scratch for an 800 man Group had to be done. The Utilities Section did a major share of this big job, and rates a good big pat on the back.

Those pot-bellied, coal-burning, muddy stoves used to heat the huts were the cause of lots of funny incidents. Boiling clothes...getting red hot early in the evening and then too cold by morning...chimneys clogged from soot...clouds of smoke belching back into the hut...oh, it was a great life if you laughed with and at it.

In late May, we had a tornado warning; too. Everything was lashed down, but the storm didn't hit Walker. Then too, there was that five day bivouac in mid-May to complete overseas training. We had fine Spring weather and everyone had a swell time. The biggest laugh case when we found out that the only casualties requiring medical attention during a low-level airplane gas attack at 1800 one evening were a Chemical Warfare training officer and an umpire, both from Tinker Field. Sort of embarrassing, isn't it, to get caught "with your pants down" (or was it without your gas mask on?) when you're supposed to set a shining example. Were those two officers' faces ever red!

During April and May, the Group went through Pre-FOM and FOM inspections and passed both with flying colors. It was said that our 303d was the best trained B-29 Service Group in the AAF, on paper and according to inspection reports. Dave Harm was sending us to bases in India or China. The last two weeks were feverishly spent in packing everything for overseas shipment. From past experience, we were past masters at that art by now! Waterproof paper, stencils for shipment code numbers, paint, crosomine, overseas packing boxes, and all sorts of such equipment was scattered all over. Just before leaving Walker, everyone was issued new clothing and equipment. (Did we ever hit the jack-pot that day!)
On D-day in Europe, 6 June, we headed back to Tinker for a short lay-over before heading for some West Coast POE. Seldom was there such a solemn, sober bunch of boys as they listened to hot D-day news flashes at 0600 before boarding a truck to begin the first leg of our own overseas journey.

Tinker Field, 8 - 23 June 1944

Nobody knew how long we'd stay at Tinker. We all hoped it wouldn't be long, and it did look like we were really on our way. Was there a chance that it would be the same old story of "get hot" but not ship overseas? We hoped not. Colonel Shelmire rejoined the Group at Tinker after spending part of a 22 day leave with former associates in Headquarters, AAF, Washington, D.C.

Then out of a clear sky came a Group formation one afternoon about 1600. "This is it", Colonel Shelmire announced. "We board the train for a West Coast POE within a couple of days. Get your stuff packed, and you can go into town on pass until the last possible moment. But for gosh sakes, remember AR 360-5 and conduct yourselves as gentlemen and soldiers." You could feel the underlying tension relax, and then a surge of exhilaration. Mixed with it all was a deep seated seriousness which everyone felt, but didn't talk about very much.

Packing was a nightmare for most fellows. After shipping everything possible home, it's still a deep, unsolved mystery how most of us jammed that mountain of stuff into one small duffle bag. But we did it somehow.

Our last night at Tinker was wild for some and heart-breaking for others. We were restricted to the field, of course, so the PX was jammed and the amber brew really flowed in floods, both in and out. As for heart-breaking, every fellow whose wife was in Oklahoma City was with him on the field until 2300. Every couple knew this was the last time they'd see each other for a long, long time. The next afternoon after early chow, we marched with full field equipment to the two trains which were to take us to Camp Anza, Arlington, California, our staging area.

Camp Anza, Arlington, California, 24 June - 3 July 1944

Our three day train trip to Camp Anza took us through Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, to California. There were periodic stops for exercise and we managed to get ice cream and candy several times. The cooks did a fine job in their first experience with a kitchen car. It was a serious trip, with everyone's thoughts home or wondering a little about what we were getting into.

Nobody knew how long we'd stay at Camp Anza, but in contrast to Tinker, we knew it wouldn't be for long. Chow was excellent — we were shipping overseas, so why shouldn't he be the best? We picked up 12 skilled airplane technicians, among them several Central Fire Control specialists flown in from Lowry Field, Denver, Colorado, where they'd just finished CFC school. We also learned what censorship was and what it meant to write a letter that someone else would read first before mailing. You couldn't say everything you wanted — in more ways than one. It was hard as the devil to think of what to write. We ran the obstacle course, climbed cargo nets up and down the 40 foot side of a dummy ship with full field equipment until we felt like monkeys, had our weapons inspected, were issued new gas masks and tested them in a gas chamber, got innumerable "shots" and physical inspections, and had our wills and powers of attorney fixed up. After several "show down" inspections in an open field with all clothing and equipment spread out on a shelter half, the supply men were busier
than ever issuing shoe dubbing, protective ointment, one pair of wool OD's and winter underwear (for what use?), towels, and other last minute miscellany.

But nobody remembers Camp Anza for all that. It was those 14 hour (5 P.M. - 7 A.M.) overnight passes. A three hour, $2.25 bus ride got you into Los Angeles or Hollywood in plenty of time for a full evening. The last bus returning to camp started back at 3 A.M. (Sleep was very, very "expensive"). For most of us, it was the first time we'd been any nearer the glitter of the world's film capital than our favorite theater.

We stood on the corner of Hollywood and Vine Street, went to studio broadcasts at CBS and NBC studios, visited Hollywood Canteen and Palladium Ballroom, saw all the signatures, nose, foot, leg, and finger prints, at Grauman's famous Chinese restaurant, ate a fancy dinner (mostly fancy priced) at Earl Carroll's theater restaurant, and tried not to gawk too wide-eyed at the luscious Carroll beauties. Seeing orange trees for the first time was quite secondary to all this.

Then at 0600, 3 July, we were alerted, restricted to our own area of the camp, and all communication with the outside world cut off. Some fellows had returned from a pass less than two hours before. It was quite remarkable and exceedingly generous, to say the least, that they'd be so lenient with passes. By 0900, we were all aboard our floating home for the next 38 days, less than 12 hours after we'd been alerted, and less than 14 hours after some of the fellows had returned from a pass.

It was the same nightmare repeated to squeeze everything you already had, plus some newly issued stuff, into your already jam-packed (and non-elastic) duffel bag. And then it was another terrific job to lug that clumpy, 100-pound pound bag to the train. It wasn't half bad on a "dry run" with an empty bag, but what an ordeal for the "real thing"! What started out to be a military, marching formation with rest periods, quickly turned into a straggling, helter-skelter mass. It was "every man for himself". Just get yourself and your duffel bag to the train as best you can, that's all that counted. It was almost like trying to lug a bag of potatoes while loaded down with full field equipment. Those three long blocks to the train seemed like three miles. Finally, everyone struggled in, completely worn out and scarcely able to stand. (Why couldn't those bags, heavy as lead, have been hauled over in a truck?) That was really a "rough" start, but definitely.

At 1400, after a dinner fit for a king, we boarded those funny, old-fashioned coaches owned by the U.S. Maritime Commission and used only for transporting troops those 50 short miles to the docks at Wilmington, California. We sat four abreast, same way on each side of the aisle, with scarcely enough room for your knees. Carbines, gas masks, helmets, field packs, and musette bags were scattered all over. It was stifling hot in those jam-packed cars too.

We were delivered right to the docks, with the SS Fairland berthed a short block away. We waited around for about an hour in long queues, sweating like a butcher in those barn-like warehouses. At 1800, after chow of coffee, sandwiches, and doughnuts served by Red Cross ladies (not girls — unfortunately), we answered roll call and climbed the gangplank. (Boy, what a struggle it was to push ourselves and our duffel bags at the same time up that steep gangplank!)

We were finally aboard and there was no turning back now. Before we knew it, we had been hurried down a hatchway to two decks below where everyone scrambled for the first bunk he came to. It was a strip of canvas roped to a
rectangular pipe frame and hinged on two metal posts. Duffel bags were stacked along the sloping sides out of the way, and every man prepared to live out of a musette bag and steel helmet until we landed.

A band was there during loading to "whoop it up" with "Deep in the Heart of Texas", "Beautiful Ohio", "On Wisconsin", "Beyond the Hills of Idaho", "Kentucky", "New Jersey Was Never Like This", and other lively songs about States. It helped a fellow to feel hilarious, but deep down inside, you felt grim, serious, determined.

We remained at the dock for another day, and at 2300 on 4 July 1944, we finally got under way for a safe but monotonous 30 day trip. The 303d had finally "made it". On the fourth time of "getting hot", we went "all the way". No one knew for sure after we left Tinker on 21 June 1944 when we'd leave the States. It was quite incredible to find out that a memo dated 23 June (before we ever arrived at Camp Anza) had been written from Los Angeles Port of Embarkation authorities "To All Concerned" — meaning our 303d — saying that we would embark on 3 July, which we did as scheduled. However, nobody in our 303d ever saw these directions until after we were several days at sea. That's how carefully Camp Anza authorities guarded our movements with secrecy. After all, it wasn't necessary for us to know such details at the time.

**Aboard SS Fairland, 4 July - 11 August 1944**

Perhaps the greatest lesson of that deadly monotonous 30 day boat trip was "It can be done!" In spite of living like sardines, enduring endless monotony, getting along with absolutely no mail, being violently seasick the first couple of days, literally "sweating out" that uncomfortable, sticky heat (and encountering no enemy action whatsoever!), we survived very well, thank you. "It can be done!"

Our 303d was one half of 1400 troops packed like sardines on a single deck of a ship only 475 feet long and 75 feet wide. The 330th Service Group was the other half. Except for a lucky one day shore leave in Honolulu, that was our prison-like "home". We lived out of a helmet and musette bag, used fresh water for drinking only (for shaving too, if the 1st Sergeant didn't see you), took salt water showers, and since salt water and soap only make grease instead of lather, we always had to spend the next hour or so trying to scrub or rub off as much of that dirty, leath-like mess as possible. We were probably worse off after washing than before, because the dirt would only rub off on your towel, like pencil erasings on paper. It was loony! We washed our clothes from a helmet with rationed hot salt water turned on only for short periods at meal time.

Those who could find room and who wanted to fix up a "bed" of discarded wooden crates and cardboard boxes could sleep out in the open on a steel deck (where it usually managed to rain at least once during the night) instead of down below where it was always close and stuffy, in spite of forced ventilation. We wore our life-jacket, web belt, and canteen at all times, or had it within arm's reach. We pulled three day stretches of KP in a steaming hot kitchen and dining room, pulled four hour stretches of guard, submarine and airplane watch, took turns on daily deck cleaning and garbage dumping details, got plenty of drill on practice air raid and submarine alarms, and had to observe the strictest blackout rules (except that some dopes got careless and lit cigarettes anyway — endangering everybody)

Monotony — we surely learned all about that. Sit (if you could find a seat) until your "fanny" seemed worn to the bone, walk around aimlessly for a while, then stand, stand, stand at the rail with nothing to see but the
boundless blue Pacific, read a book, get some "sack time", maybe write a letter, lose a wad of dough in a dice game (one fellow won $1,200.00 though), and then start the same dull routine all over again. It was always the same endless treadmill.

But, however tiring all this was, there were still many enjoyable and interesting times. None of us had ever seen flying fish before, nor porpoises jumping out of the water, nor phosphorous particles in the water sparkling at night as if the water was full of fire-flies. It seemed quite unusual to have gulls still following the ship three days from the mainland. (They hitch-hiked a ride part way up on the rigging.) Late world news taken over the ship's radio by one enlisted man was edited into a daily mimeographed paper by two others and was announced by a third over a daily public address system broadcast.

We listened to about five hours daily of popular musical records played by request over the ship's PA system. We "sweated out" those endless PA lines for our ration of cold Coca-Cola, candy bars, cookies, and other goodies. We enjoyed several amateur talent and boxing shows, and got a good suntan (or a scorching sunburn if you weren't careful) while "batting the breeze" or chewing over the usual flood of wild rumors. We had moving pictures on deck furing all 16 days of stop-over at Honolulu and Eniwetok where there was no blackout, and for a limited number in the Officers' Mess while enroute. It was quite a sight to view Kwajalein and Eniwetok Atolls from a distance and see palm trees stripped like telephone poles. Both atolls seemed low enough for any big wave to wash right over the whole tiny spot.

One "character" we'll probably all remember is Mr. Kenopke. Hundreds (?) of times daily, the ship's PA system would blare out: "Mr. Kenopke, you are wanted at the bridge immediately...Mr. Kenopke, report to the engine room". Mr. Kenopke this, that, the next thing, everything. He was 1st Mate, second in command, and really ran the ship. He was likable, a little frail, and wore gold rimmed glasses. When his sailors weren't busy, he worked them on paint chipping and repainting details. It sounded like an insane "Anvil Chorus" in Hades to have 15 fellows start banging a steel deck with hammer and chisel to knock off the paint.

These are only sidelights, minor ones at that, of our voyage. We'll always remember the experiences of being terrifically seasick, seeing a genuine, swivel-hipped Hawaiian Hula gal USO show, and crossing the International Date Line, with King Neptune presiding at appropriate initiation ceremonies.

A three day spell of seasickness for virtually everyone made our ship one slippery mess for that time. Fellows "heaved" all over the place -- into the wind (with disastrous results), into their helmet (if their aim was good), into a "stool" (if there was enough time to get there and one was vacant), or just plain on the floor (if you couldn't do anything else). You felt as if your innards were coming up after the first dozen or so "eruptions". Consequently, it was a pretty good idea to try to eat at least a little something, just so you wouldn't be heaving a "dry run" all the time. Officers weren't immune either and some of the healthiest, strongest, most athletic looking fellows were the sickest. We surely were a sorry looking bunch of "Sad Sacks" going into overseas combat duty. We were about as soldically appearing as a limp dishrag. A few of the stouter souls staggered around on deck where the breeze seemed to pep them up, but most of the boys were just too sick even to roll off their bunks, except for frequent "emergencies"! After a short three day siege, it was all over -- we'd acquired our "sea legs" -- but, oh, what an ordeal! (PS -- Why in the devil didn't the Medics give us an anti-seasickness "shot"
as long as they were stabbing us for everything else?*

About that Hawaiian hula girl show: it was the real thing and was it ever a dilly? It seemed like those attractive, chunky, well-proportioned gals could wiggle their hips in every direction at once. It was almost unbelievable, but there it was right before your eyes. Yet you didn't get dizzy watching those luscious lovelies do the hula (oh, yeah!), and the more they danced, the more we cheered and whistled.

Not only that, but they brought along the leaves, and we fellows (at least the ring-siders) actually made a grass skirt right on the spot, according to their instructions. Then to top it off, the hula gals dolled up Colonel Selmire (who was quite willing, incidentally) in this home-made, genuine grass skirt and taught him the hula dance, hip-wiggle and all! He was quite spry that evening, very much so in fact, and young enough to steal a kiss on the platform from one of those Hawaiian beauties afterwards.

Nor was all this boisterous excitement the end. Although they didn't put the grass skirt on him, the hula gals did give a quick lesson in the hula to another "victim", Chaplain Davis (tsk, tsk, of all people!) He wasn't exactly unwilling either.

Crossing the International Date Line was nothing at all, except it had some hilarious after-effects. As we sailed westward, we'd been told whenever necessary, "All watches will be turned back 30 minutes at 1800 tonight!", or some similar announcement. It seemed cockeyed to be continually living over the same half hour that your watch said had just passed out of existence. Then one day came the word "Today will be July 19 until 1400, and then it will be July 21!". Hey, wait a minute, what gives on here! Nothing, except we crossed the 180th Meridian, the International Date Line and had lost July 20 in the shuffle. We'd skipped from the 19th to the 21st — just as simple as nothing.

That meant King Neptune had to get busy and initiate all neophytes to "The Ancient and Sacred Order of the Golden Dragon". Many of the crew, besides all us troops, had invaded King Neptune's secret domain for the first time, and now we'd have to pay for being so impudent. With traditional ceremonies, King Neptune and his voluptuous, squeaky-voiced (male) queen presided in a court of judgement. For an entire afternoon, he passed sentences at the pleasure of his queen. The trial was simple, and the same for everyone. The victim was haled into court as though he were a bum, flatly accused of violating King Neptune's private domain, and summarily sentenced without a trial or even a chance to say "Baa!"

The sentence usually consisted of crawling on your hands and knees (in an excellent position to be paddled) some distance around the deck to the "Executioner". You sat on the edge of a big canvas water tank, your back to the water, and facing your tormentor. First, he gave you a haircut, a very artistic job, too. Sometimes he'd clip a path from ear to ear and from forehead to neck, a very neat cross, and bare to the skull. Sometimes he only left an Indian scalp-lock of hair. Sometimes he just chopped it up hodge-podge. Sometimes he'd cut the back half of your head clean to the skull and leave the front half untouched, or vice versa. Sometimes he went all the way and clipped off every single hair, slick as a picked chicken, "cue-ball" fashion. No matter what the style of "haircut", it was a "King Neptune Special".

Then whether or not you had any hair left, you got a free hair wash, another "King Neptune Exclusive Super-Duper Job". The "Executioner" mashed
eggs in your hair, oiled it up with catsup, mustard, molasses, vinegar, lard, or bacon grease, and then tried to rinse it out with old engine oil. It was slimy and tasted terrible, if you happened to be careless. Sometimes, for good measure, they'd slobber green paint all over you —- back, chest, legs, stomach —- literally paint you green. Oh yes, if you were unlucky enough to have a carefully groomed mustache, you probably came through the initiation with only half of it left, at the most.

Then, without warning, you were pushed over backwards into that tank of salt water. If you shouted "Shellback" right away when you came up, they wouldn't duck you again. Otherwise, you got shoved under again and again until you did shout the password. After about 10 men had been "dunked", that tank had a scum on top an inch thick. (Very tasty and dainty indeed, especially when flavored with salt water.) After floundering around, several victims had to be fished out by attendant sailors. Now that you had endured the indignities of initiation, you were released and became a full fledged member of King Neptune's domain. On your next trip across the Date Line, you could help do the initiating.

This initiation wasn't a closed affair for selected victims only. It was for everybody's benefit. Anytime, the "Executioner" and his assistants might take a notion to spray any area packed with spectators with a barrage of eggs. Plenty of by-standers were such "casualties". Once in a while, choice bits of garbage might go sailing out into the crowds. Boy, it was one helluva rip-roaring, messy time and everyone got an explosive "bang" out of King Neptune's antics.

One spunky dental officer (not from our 303d) was walking away from the tank after completing his humiliating initiation, and suddenly turned on his tormentors and shouted defiantly for everyone to hear, "Just wait until I get you in the chair" (for drilling or pulling a tooth). "So he wants more, eh?" jeered the "Executioner" in fiendish glee. "Bring him back and give him the works!"

Did that poor officer ever pay for being so "fresh"! They ducked him up and down like he was inside a washing machine, and he gargled more salt water scum than he ever dreamed he could handle. When they finally let him go, he pulled himself out of the tank like a drowned dog and walked away very weakly ---- and very silently. He'd been completely subdued.

Three days later, we passed Kwajalein and the next day dropped anchor at Eniwetok for a 12 day layover without shore leave. Those nightly movies on deck, sent out from the island, surely helped relieve the monotony.

Up to now, nobody knew where we were going, but everyone figured it would be Saipan. No other guess seemed quite so logical. Half an hour after we weighed anchor, in the late afternoon of 5 August to leave Eniwetok, Colonel Shelmire's voice came over the ship's PA system. Everyone hushed immediately, alert for every word. For once, we were "all ears", listening intently. Now we'd know for sure where we were going.

"Our destination is Saipan," Colonel Shelmire announced, and then told us a little about the island. Our guess had been correct. We knew by the ship's radio news broadcast that organized resistance had ceased on Saipan about 12 July while we were enroute, and we'd just finished a 12 day lay-over at Eniwetok for action to quiet down even more. At this time, Saipan was the deepest penetration into Japan's Pacific island network. We were right "up front" as
far as we could go. War moves fast, though. Only a short two months later, we
were definitely in the back seat, almost as far back as the last row in a bur-
lesque show. Leyte Island in the Philippines, some 1600 miles farther West, had
been invaded. The heart and stronghold of Japan’s island empire had begun to
fall.

As we learned later, Saipan is about 60 square miles of concentrated coral,
sugar cane, and tropical life. It is about 13½ miles long, North and South, and
about five miles wide at its greatest width. Between the chain of hills run-
ning the length of the island, there are large, flat areas ideally suited for
the several airfields that were already built. The southern end of the island
especially is low and flat.

Saipan has about 40 miles of coastline. Along the whole western shore is
a smooth, shallow lagoon. Wide, sloping sand beaches cover almost the entire
length of the island. Offshore is a protecting coral reef which slows up the
heavy sea waves and breaks them into long, foamy, white breakers. The eastern
shores and north end of the island are steep, rocky cliffs, with deep water
close inshore.

There is a wet and a dry season —- soaking wet and bone dry. About 65
inches of rainfall drenches the island during the five month’s rainy season from
July to November. During the other seven months, only 25 inches of rain sprin-
kles down. It doesn’t even settle the clouds of dust, not even for a short time.
Occasionally during the dry season, however, the weathermen will forget himself
and it will rain cats and dogs all at once, or else rain a dozen short squirts
during the day.

Under Jap control, Saipan’s water supply was derived almost entirely from
rain water. Each house has its own collecting tank to catch rain water from
the roof. Minor amounts were obtained from condensed steam at the island’s
huge sugar mill and from a small sea water distilling plant nearby. A moderate
sized lake near the sugar mill is unsuitable for drinking water.

On the whole, the climate is healthy and quite pleasant if you can manage
to stay out of the sun, or at least protect yourself from it. For some strange
reason, Saipan is hotter than islands nearer the equator. The temperature
varies but little —- around 95 degrees when it’s hottest in June and around
70 degrees when it’s coolest in February. Year-round average is 80 degrees.
There’s plenty of sunshine, and while humidity is high (around 78% in winter
and 82% in summer), the air isn’t too “sticky”. Besides, there’s usually a
light breeze to cool you off. During the winter months, weather is downright
pleasant, just about as perfect and ideal as could be hoped for. It’s a lot
like a Florida or California vacation spot.

Incidentally, earthquakes are fairly common, but rarely dangerous. Storms
on the other hand are rare, but violent. Since the island is on the far western
edge of the typhoon belt, storms don’t occur very often. But once every several
years, a typhoon hits with all the pizazz of a Kansas tornado. The worst typhoon
in 40 years hit Guam on 3 November 1940 with a 110 mile an hour wind. The
greatest danger during a typhoon is from flying wreckage. A foxhole, cave, or
dugout provide the best protection.

Plant and animal life on Saipan is plentiful. However, there was little
food produced in excess of the needs of the Jap and native population. Rice
was imported from Japan. Fresh vegetables are available only during the rainy
season from July to November. Sweet potatoes and taro are always available.
There are limited supplies of coconuts, breadfruit, limes, peanuts, bananas, pineapple, mangoes, melons, papayas, custard apples, and guavas. All grow wild, and can also be grown in gardens.

Large quantities of fish are always available. In fact, the Japs had organized the fish industry quite scientifically. In 1936, about 4,500,000 pounds of bonito and tuna were caught around Saipan. Most of it was dried and shipped to Japan. Some fresh meat is obtained from hogs, goats, poultry, and wild deer.

Other agricultural products include tapioca and cotton. Tapioca has been intensively cultivated and has yielded a rich return. In 1930, about 10% of the copra (coconut) collected in the Mandated Islands came from Saipan. A coffee plantation was established in 1928.

As for flowers, Saipan is a lovely isle of coconut palms, flame trees, and tree ferns. The oleander and scarlet hibiscus spread riots of color. Also flowering gorgeously is the crape myrtle called by the Japanese "sarasubaru" (monkey slide) because the trunk is so slippery that a monkey cannot climb it. There are also odd "sleeping plants" which close their leaves at sunset and open them at sunrise. They are indeed so sensitive to light that they will fold when a dark cloud obscures the sun and open when it passes. The mango tree is one of nature's most magnificent, with a glossy broad head casting so dense a shade that "sleeping plants" beneath it would never wake. Then there's the queer, small tree known to science as the "Earringtonia asiatica", the poisonous fruit of which is crushed and dropped into pools. It has a narcotic effect upon the fish which, stupefied, float belly-up to the surface and are readily scooped in with a hand net. The poison does not affect the edibility of the fish.

As for animal life, there are plenty of flies and mosquitoes. However, birds would be scarce, especially after the battle. The rose-crowned fruit dove used to be seen frequently. It is a tropical bird, brightly colored with rose, green, yellow, orange, and purple.

The megapode is a comic bird that flies as sluggish as a Navy patrol bomber, as gracefully as a crew, and waddles instead of walks. It is half domesticated and will come running if you knock two stones together.

The flying fox, wingspread three feet, is an odd number. He's small, smelly, and hangs by his tail from trees like a tiny Tarzan. Don't blame Jap "saki" liquor if that's what you see, because it's true. It's face is foxlike with a pinched nose, small, pointed ears, and large eyes. Natives consider than a tasty dish. You can catch them with a net in the moonlight or shoot them in daylight, that is if you like to eat small, smelly bats (instead of the usual Spam!)

You've really had too much to drink when you see snakes, though. The only snake in the Marianas has a name bigger than it's size, Tiphlops braminus. It looks like a somewhat scaly earthworm, hardly longer than your finger. Harmless, too.

You can carry a gecko around in your pocket if you want to. It's a small lizard which lives peacefully around the barracks or tent. It chirps like crazy and loves to chase insects upside down on the ceiling. You can scare the tail off a gecko by chasing one yourself. His cousin, the monitor lizard, wouldn't fit into your pocket. He's four feet long. He's got sharp teeth and claws. Give him a chance to run away from you. He likes you less than you like him.
Wasps and ants are pretty mean on Saipan. They sting, but hard. So do scorpions. Centipedes don’t sting. They bite instead. Doesn’t make any difference, though. It feels the same either way: hurts like hell. Dengue fever is carried by Marianas mosquitoes, but not malaria.

Before American occupation, sanitation on Saipan was generally fair. Wagons removed garbage and refuse, but not quite often enough. There was no sewage system. Human excreta was used as fertilizer. Fleas, cockroaches, and bedbugs virtually ruled the island. Pigs were kept in all the native houses.

As a result of all this, dysentery, typhoid, dengue fever, and eye trouble were quite prevalent. Child death rate from intestinal disorders were quite high. An instance in May 1943 is reported when some Jap troops were not allowed ashore from a ship stopping at Saipan “because of infectious diseases.” Up to 1936 at least, vaccination of Japs and natives was conducted annually throughout the island. Skin diseases and hookworm are easily caught, especially if you go barefoot.

We were going to an island almost unknown until it jumped into the headlines during the battle. Saipan had been ruled by the Spanish for over 300 years until 1898, then by the Germans for about 15 years, until World War I, by the Japs for 30 years (1914-45), and finally now by the United States. The first white men to visit the Marianas came in 1521. They had three sailing ships, each about the size of an LCT. Their admiral was Ferdinand Magellan, the first round-the-world explorer, who flew the Spanish flag. They had discovered the Straits of Magellan near the southern end of South America, and now they were crossing the unknown Pacific.

For more than three months they had sailed through open sea, somehow managing to miss every important Pacific polka-dot until they came to Guam.

Many of the crew had died of scurvy and starvation. The rest were eating the ship’s rats or leathery of the rigging. The islanders came out to greet them in sleek, fast “flying proas”, outrigger canoes fitted with three-cornered sails. They brought fruit and food, and the grateful Spaniards gave them bushels of trinkets in return.

These Chamorro natives swarmed over the ships like twentieth-century souvenir hunters, and began grabbing everything not nailed down. Finally, they cut loose a ship’s boat and took it ashore. The Spaniards went after them with firearms, and bows and arrows. In a fierce fight, Magellan’s men killed half a dozen islanders, burned fifty houses, took back the ship’s boat, stole all the provisions they could find, named the place “Las Islas de las Ladronas” (Islands of Thieves), and took off.

Spain ruled these islands for many years. She renamed them the Marianas after Queen Maria Ana, patroness of the Jesuit missionaries who arrived to convert the islanders. But there was much trouble. The Chamorros were a proud people who liked their ancient customs and beliefs and disliked the heavy hand of Spain. They saw the white men bring religion, and over the years they were to become devout Catholics. But the white men had also brought rats, mice, fleas, mosquitoes, disease, bloodshed, terror, and famine. When Magellan arrived, there were perhaps 100,000 Chamorros living on the islands. By 1764, about 240 years later, there were little more than 1,500, most of them women and children. But the islanders have not died out. Spaniards, Filipinos and Mexicans intermarried with them, and today there are some 25,000 Chamorros. Practically none is pure-blooded.
During the early years of Spanish rule, there was romance as well as death in the Marianas. Here, rich galleons from Mexico would put in on the way to Manila, to return home laden with treasure. Here, English buccaneers would stop off and enjoy "making Holes in the Hides of the Infidels". Here, in the last century, American whaling ships would stop to rest their crews, refit their vessels and take on food. In 1810, an American named Capt. Brown tried to settle an American colony on Saipan. He brought some American and Hawaiian families, planning to sell supplies to the whalers. But the Spaniards wiped out the settlement and carried the Hawaiians off into slavery.

The world heard little about the Marianas during all this time. Then, one morning in June 1898, the American cruiser "Charleston" steamed into Apra Harbor, Guam and opened fire. The Spanish Governor asked about the noise, and was told that the Americans were probably paying their respects to him by firing a salute. So the captain of the port rowed out to apologize for not answering the salute because there was no ammunition. That was when Guam learned that the United States and Spain were at war. Next day, the Governor, with 110 soldiers, quietly surrendered to the Americans. The island was turned over to the U. S. Navy for administration.

Spain sold the rest of her many Pacific island possessions, including Saipan, to Germany for 4,500,000. They were a German colony for about 15 years until Japan joined the Allies in the last war and pounded on all German possessions in the Pacific. In October 1914, a Japanese squadron took over the German Marianas (everything except Guam which remained in American hands). After the war, the League of Nations let Japan keep them as a "Class C" mandate. This means, among other things, that Japan had to promise not to build fortifications or military bases. For a few years Tokyo apparently kept the promise in good faith. Then in the early 1920's, the Japanese Marianas were closed completely to outsiders. By the time Japan was ready for Pearl Harbor, she had built Saipan and the other Marianas islands into powerful bases.

Meantime, under the Washington Disarmament treaty of 1922, the United States agreed not to fortify Guam. Fulfilling the spirit as well as the letter of this agreement, we removed heavy guns that had been laboriously and expensively installed for Guam's defense during World War I. When this treaty expired in 1936, Congress refused to spend any money on Guam's weakened defenses until it was too late. For these two reasons, Guam fell to the Japs on the third day of war like a ripened plum.

In June 1944, America went back to the Marianas. Marine and Army divisions landed on Saipan and took the island after 25 days of bloody fighting. It was the most costly campaign yet won in the Pacific war --- over 3,500 dead and 13,500 wounded. The Jap garrison of 21,000 was almost completely wiped out. In July, after pounding the Japs from sea and air, our forces wedged ashore on Guam and Tinian. Resistance there was equally strong.

Commenting on Saipan's strategic importance, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz said on 13 July 1944, at the end of organized resistance there: "It is now clear that Saipan Island was built by the Japanese as the principal fortress guarding the southern approaches to Japan, and as a major supply base for Japan's temporary holding in the south seas area. The hills and jungles and caves of the island lent themselves well to defense and elaborate fortifications manned by picked Japanese troops testify to the importance which the enemy attached to the island. The seizure of Saipan constitutes a major breach in the Japanese line of inner defenses, and it is our intention to capitalize on this breach with all
available means."

That was why our 303d B-29 Service Group was headed for Saipan.

Saipan, Marianas Islands - 11 August 1944

Before arriving at Saipan, Capt. Harry F. Ryan of the SS Fairland put up
§25 to whoever could guess closest to the exact time, to the minute and second,
when we'd drop anchor. Everybody must have tried for that free prize. Nobody
guessed the time exactly (it was about 1200), but three or four fellows came
equally close — only 30 seconds or so off — and they split the money among
them.

We were darned glad to debark. We'd been cooped up like sardines for 38
days with no mail, no scenery but the same endless ocean, and plenty of monotony.
We didn't know what we were getting into, but still we were itching to get off.
Anything would be better than this. (Maybe!)

Debarking —— what a lesson in acrobatics that was! Every man carried his
own duffel bag and all equipment down that narrow, swinging stairway along the
ship's side to the dock far below. It was easy enough to wear your helmet, but
when you threw on your gas mask, carbine, and field pack, things became a little
hard to handle. Add your clumsy duffel bag and you've got an almost unmanageable
load. It was great fun trying to handle a 100-pound plus duffel bag with only
one hand and hang onto the rail with the other, all the time trying to pick your
way gingerly down those swinging stairs where sometimes the next step was there
and by the time you put your foot down, it had moved. By some lucky accident
and with much tugging and grunting and caution, everyone managed to get off without
incident.

Probably no one will ever forget that truck ride from the docks out to our
area. We drove over the remains of a 3600 foot Jap fighter strip only a stone's
throw from the beach. It was the smoothest part of our ride. For the most part,
we jolted along through a soaking downpour over muddy, rutted, rocky "cow paths".
We probably saw more war on that six mile, two and one half hour "endurance con-
test" ride than we had ever seen before or wanted to see again. Bombed-out
Garapan, wreckage-strewn D-day landing beaches, wrecked Jap Zeros, and Jap
Prisoners of War at work were the main things. It wasn't pretty, and it all
smelled with a rotting, sickening odor.

Before the Battle for Saipan, Garapan was a thriving city of 10,000 persons.
Only Agana, town in American-held Guam, was larger (12,000 population). Garapan
was capital of all Jap government in the Marianas, and was the military headquar-
ters of the Jap Commander in Chief of the Central Pacific Area. Vice Admiral
Chuichi Nagumo, leader of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, committed hari-
kari in Garapan on 7 July.

Before invasion, Garapan was a boom town of contrasts. Brisk little Japa-
nese scurried everywhere, while easy-going natives tried to enjoy life. The
streets were choked with charcoal-burning automobiles and primitive ox-carts.
The buildings included thatched huts of the Kanaka natives, substantial stone
houses left from the German regime — looking as if they had been built for a
land of storm and snow —- and modern Japanese stores. An old Spanish mission
contrasts sharply with nearby radio towers, dried bonito fish factories, and a
half-mile of geisha houses. In 1937, there were 13,000 vehicles and 171 miles
of roads on Saipan.
During the battle, Garapan was practically wiped out. A withering naval, air, and artillery bombardment had virtually leveled the town. It was the heaviest ever thrown at any one target in the Pacific up to that time. It seemed impossible, combat veterans declared, that any living thing could have survived that deadly rain of hot steel. Yet the Japs still threw up a vicious resistance. It cost 3,500 American dead and 13,500 wounded to take Saipan, the bloodiest island conquest in the Pacific up to that time.

Our first genuine view of Saipan was while driving through bombed-out Garapan and along some distance of wreckage-streamlined, D-day landing beaches. It was pretty grim. Later, when filling sand bags there for our bomb shelters, we found bones — human bones — a ghastly reminder of the price paid to make this a B-29 base.

Stretching like a ribbon along a flat, sandy beach for almost two miles, Garapan was a mass of rubble. There were a surprising number of two or three story, reinforced concrete buildings. Most of them were blown to bits. In places, huge, gaping holes yawning through reinforced concrete walls two to three feet thick. Strong pill boxes, buried almost to ground level, were thickly scattered all over the town. Many had been blasted open and others were blackened by flame throwers. Flimsy wooden houses and make-shift sheet metal shacks had been smashed to smithereens. Everything smelled with a nauseating stink. We saw a handful of Jap POW's, our first (and probably only) sight of enemy captives. They were at work, under strong guard, clearing away the wreckage. But, although they had been laboring for a month already, they still literally had a mountain of work facing them. Even when we first saw Garapan about six weeks after the battle for the town was finished, it was still a smelly, revolting scene of death and destruction.

During that truck ride, several sudden tropical downpours soaked us in no time at all. It was the rainy season and this was only the beginning. Showers struck without warning. It was almost like turning a faucet on and off, these rain squalls were so sudden. Nothing tene about them either. Frequently a strong wind blew the rain in sheets, and brother, when it rained, it rained! — by the bucketful.

After bouncing around like a ping-pong ball and getting splattered freely with sticky mud, we arrived at the Jap's main captured airfield. It was somewhat surprising to us rookies and quite reassuring to find a substantial force of B-24 Liberators of the 7th Air Force using the field. We waited here for about an hour while the "powers that be" decided where to bivouac us. (Will run war, eh?)

Eventually, we landed in a wide-open, sloping field full of knee-high underbrush and jagged coral rocks. Along one side was a leafy sugar cane field looking for all the world like thickly planted corn stalks without tassels. On another side stretched a thick growth of young, leafy trees about 10-12 feet high and with a trunk about as thick as your wrist. (They made handy corner poles for our tents.) A little ways down the hill was a rather steep cliff, some 40-50 feet high. The level plain below was packed with wavy green sugar cane fields for about a quarter of a mile to the ocean. Our trucks pushed their own road over rocks and through underbrush and cane as we entered the area. Jagged chunks of shrapnel, up to 15 pounds, were scattered everywhere, harmless now, but grim reminders of what a terrific battle must have raged on that slope.

The view was splendid. Only three miles across the channel was embattled Tinian Island, where we could see tracer bullets and flares every night for a
mouth or so until Jap resistance was wiped out. Occasionally we'd see a destroyer shelling enemy positions. Otherwise it was the boundless blue Pacific of Saipan, Behind us rose rugged, 1554 foot Mt. Topotchau, highest point in the Marianas. On windy days, the breakers came crashing into cliff-like shores and threw up a great white spray high in the air.

Three key words describe Saipan: cane, coral, and change. Before invasion, about two thirds of the island's 60 square miles was sugar cane fields. This included nearly all of the relatively level areas except around Charen-Kanoa, sugar mill settlement town of 3,000 persons, where vegetable gardens predominated. Sugar cane exports amounted to more than $6,000,000 annually. In 1937, there were 93 miles of tiny, narrow gauge railroad scattered all over the island, converging on the giant, six story, modern sugar factory at Charen-Kanoa. Trainloads of cane came in at one end and sugar came out the other. The pressed and crushed cane was used as fuel for the boilers. Some fresh water was obtained by condensing the steam obtained from boiling the cane juice, and another small quantity was furnished by a small sea-water condensing unit near the factory. The manager, incidentally, was trained in an American sugar mill in Cuba.

A sweet smell not only hung over the roaring factory at Charen-Kanoa, but pervaded the whole island. In fact, it seemed to have attracted all the flies in the whole Pacific, judging from the clouds of insects we battled continuously, especially mosquitoes. Insect repellent, mosquito bars, and head nets surely came in handy.

But the fly is not without honor on Saipan. A fly saved the island. A certain insect was ruining the sugar cane. The sugar experts imported a parasitic tachnid fly from New Guinea, *Microceramia sphenophori Vill*, by name. It laid its eggs in the pupa of the harmful insect, and when its larvac hatched they fed upon the pupa, thus destroying it.

Therefore flies, at least those of this particular family, are enshrined in the affections of Saipan sugar folk. They must never be killed. And since it is difficult at a glance to distinguish them from other varieties, all flies gain immunity.

This story, occurring before invasion, is told of the Jap policemen who ordered bean soup. Six flies were floating around in it (for flavor?) when it was set before him. He raised the bowl to his mouth, locked his long upper teeth over the edge to form a sieve, and drank the soup. The six flies remained in the bowl.

He smiled. "We get used to them" was his comment.

One enterprising firm used to distill whiskey from the sugar molasses and sell it in Tokyo as "Genuine Old Scotch Whiskey Made In Saipan". It cost about eight cents a bottle.

About three-quarters of the 40,000 Jap civilians on Saipan before invasion were Okinawas; that is, they were brought from in Okinawa Island in the Ryukyu Island Group. (The Ryukyus were formerly called the Loochoo Island Group.) The same was true on nearby Tinian; half the Japs there were imported from the Ryukyus. Most of these Jap civilians were brought into the Marianas since 1920.

They are of mixed Japanese-Chinese blood. Their home, the Ryukyu Islands, is located southwest of the big islands of Japan, near Formosa, and once belonged to China. Like so much other territory now in Jap hands, the Ryukyu Islands were
just plain taken from China by outright annexation in 1879. Interbreeding of these Chinese with Japanese immigrants made a race that looks somewhat better than "pure" Japanese, but speaks a language that can be understood neither in Japan nor in China. Cut off from the advantages of the mainland, the Okinawas were used to a rough life. They were considered hard, honest workers and were readily impressed for hard labor at low pay.

It took crowds of unskilled laborers to develop Saipan's sugar industry --- to cultivate the cane fields and run the sugar factory. This job was handled by a powerful, government subsidized company called the South Seas Development Company. They "hired" thousands of Okinawa sugar slaves to work in cane fields and the sugar factory. They were literally transplanted from their Ryukyu Islands home to the Mariannes, whether they wanted to go or not. These workers used mostly primitive, hand methods. They lived miserably under a complicated system of tenant farming and were completely dominated, economically, by the company. Kept "under the thumb", the workers were paid only whatever wages the company wished to pay, and it did no good to protest. Their bosses were spectacled, staccato-voiced young men from Japan proper.

Their original Okinawa blood is now predominantly Japanese and many of them speak mainland Japanese as well as their own peculiar dialect. Nevertheless, there is no love lost between the Okinawas and people from Japan proper. These Okinawas were interned as Jap civilians in their own camp after invasion.

We had little experience with sugar cane except to pull the stuff up by the roots. If you don't think that's a job, try it. You could hardly pull a stalk up. It was almost like trying to uproot a young tree that didn't want to let go. That pancake-like root system took an extremely firm hold in the crumbly, rock-storm, chocolate-brown soil. We had to clear off several fields to make room for our living quarters.

In addition to the 40,000 Jap civilians, predominantly of Okinawa ancestry, there were 4,000 Chamorros and 1,000 Kanaka natives on Saipan. Before the war, American-held Guam, 100 miles to the Southwest, provided a marked contrast. There, about 21,000 Chamorros comprised 90% of the normal civilian population. Very few other Chamorros are found elsewhere than on Guam, Tinian, and Saipan; on the latter two islands, they received pretty cruel treatment from the Japs; while on Guam they were handled fairly and with justice by Americans.

The Chamorros are one of the most interesting races in the Pacific. They were the earliest known inhabitants of the Mariannes, found there by Magellan in 1521 when he discovered the Mariannes during the first round-the-world ocean voyage. No one is quite sure how or when the Chamorros first came to the Mariannes. That secret will probably remain buried in history. At any rate, through inter-marriage with Europeans and Spanish Filipinos, the Chamorros became a blend of three lively races. They are generally light brown in color and short in stature. They average about 5' 4" tall, have round heads, broad faces, high cheekbones, and short, flat noses. Their hair is generally straight and black.

Their native language is unusual, musical, and hard to learn. It's a quasi mixture, with considerable Spanish. Most Chamorros, however, especially the younger ones, speak English, because for nearly three centuries they have had much contact with western Europeans. Most of them have attended school and some have studied in the United States or Australia. In fact, one outstanding native could speak English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Japanese, besides his own Chamorro language. He was a respected leader among his people and was chief of native Chamorro police at their own internment camp. He was educated at an
American university and his brother was an internationally famous doctor, a specialist in tropical diseases.

Two of our boys had an amusing experience concerning language difficulties. They happened to meet up with some natives, and couldn't figure out how to understand each other with different languages. Suddenly, like a bolt out of the blue, one of the natives spoke up. It startled our GI's and was so surprising they nearly fell over. "That's all right", said one native in perfect English, "we understand and speak your language".

As for dress, Chamorros know western ways and generally wear western clothes in Filipino or Spanish style. Their women wear long skirts and balloon sleeves of the Philippines. The Chamorros always wear something to protect their head from the tropical sun --- the women usually a scarf and the men an old, battered hat or cap.

The Chamorros' religion is important to them. As devout Catholics, they consider it irreverent to work on Sunday and would be outraged at any sign of disrespect in a church or cemetery. Their customs are traditionally Spanish. Fiestas are popular with them. They are usually held at weddings, baptisms, and religious holidays. They take their religion seriously, but have to be gay and care-free at the right time.

However, the Japs had only disrespect for the Chamorro and his Catholic faith. When a Chamorro lad had the courage to say to a taunting Jap, "Please respect our God as we respect your Emperor", he was thrown into jail and never seen again. It was an unpardonable offense to speak in the same breath of the Japanese Emperor and the Christian God.

The Chamorros had little to do with Jap sugar cane. They let well enough alone, kept to themselves, and tended their small vegetable gardens and pastured their cattle --- that is, if they could. The Japs had been systematically squeezing them out. Chamorros were forced to lease their land to the Japs at the Jap's own price. And if the Jap "forgot" to pay, nothing could be done about the injustice. By this smooth process, most of the land had passed into the hands of the Japs.

We GI's had very little to do with Chamorros or Jap civilians. They were enemy or neutral civilians and were out of the way. We had a big job to do and their main job was to keep out of the way. Both Chamorros and Jap civilians were placed under protective custody in separate internment camps. Some months later, the Chamorros were gradually released and could be seen working their vegetable gardens or watching their cattle grazing. You couldn't miss seeing the big signs protecting them, "Off Limits ---- Keep Moving".

So much for sugar cane and sugar cane workers. As for coral, that was equally plentiful but far more useful. Cane caused lots of trouble and nuisance from flies and mosquitoes, but coral could be used for building roads and airstrips. Coral is hard, bony stuff. It is sharp and jagged and can cut like a razor. It is brutally painful stuff to fall on or run across barefoot. You have to wear shoes in swimming to protect your feet. Coral is made by tiny, plant-like creatures that live in the sea. Whole islands can be made by them through the centuries. The Marianas are made of coral, while the smaller island dots of the Bonin, Kozan, and Volcano island groups halfway north to Tokyo are of volcanic origin.

Coral is readily available nearly everywhere on Saipan. All you need to
do is dig. You couldn’t even pound a tent peg without hitting coral rocks, and 200 pounds of dynamite was used in blasting one 16 foot deep pit latrine hole. It was solid rock all the way from the surface. Engineer Aviation Battalions building the big B-29 landing strips actually shaved off the side of a huge hill with blasting, air hammers, huge scoop shovels, and trucks. They hauled unbelievable tonnages of coral in record time for the base for asphalt landing strips. In the sun, the glare reflected from the blazing white coral almost blinded you.

We fellows remember coral most vividly though, as that wrretched stuff we "slept" on the first two nights, trying to drive tent stakes into the stuff, and those constant police details around the area and ball diamond to pick up rocks. Oh yes, heaving about 8 feet of coral fill to level up one side of the mess hall, and running across the stuff barefoot at night during an air raid. That meant some painfully "cheved up" feet and a little visit to the dispensary afterwards to get patched up.

Change is no doubt the most remarkable fact about Saipan.

Garapan, town of 10,000, ceased to exist. Warehouses, gas dumps, repair shops, and a huge motor pool replaced the mass of rubble and wreckage. When we landed in mid-August, only three ships could unload at once. Now, the docks can handle a dozen or 15 ships at a time. Sugar cane fields disappeared. In their place grow vegetable gardens. More than 10,000 acres in the Marines have been planted to cucumbers, watermelons, corn, cantaloupes, radishes, lettuce, cabbage, and tomatoes. They expect to harvest around 5,000 tons of vegetables a month in season. Deep wells were drilled and water holes dug instead of relying mainly on rain water as the Japs did. Camp areas sprang up everywhere, breaking the natural scenery like big polka dots.

Aslito Field, main Jap air base, was puny compared to our Isely Field B-29 base which replaced it. The best the Japs could do was a 3600 foot air strip, 900 foot wide. Three hangars, nine fighter revetments, and major aircraft repair facilities had been developed there. A smaller fighter strip along the beach was under construction. The Japs' Tampag harbor naval seaplane base was a major installation, however.

Aviation Engineers lengthened the Japs' runway to an 8500 foot asphalt airstrip for B-29's in only 13 weeks, far ahead of a seemingly impossible deadline. A second parallel strip, only 100 yards separating them, was completed in record time also. A complete base for fighter planes only was finished "in jig time", and a third separate field was carved out for B-24's and cargo planes. Ack-ack batteries and radar and searchlight units sprouted everywhere, even between the two B-29 strips. In fact, they even set up a Personnel Replacement Pool.

Saipan became a booming military installation, far more powerful than anything the Japs ever had, or ever dreamed of. The same thing was happening just as fast on nearby Tinian and Guam. B-29 population in the Marianas was increasing by leaps and bounds, almost as fast as rabbits.

All these changes transformed Saipan from an impotent defensive Jap base into a hard hitting, aggressive, offensive American base. It had become a stationary aircraft carrier, and together with Tinian and Guam was fast growing.

Up to now, Tokyo was untouched by war except for (then) Lt. Colonel Doolittle's carrier raid with B-25's in April 1942. But because things had changed on Saipan and in the Marianas, things would change for Tokyo, too. On 24 November
1944, the day after Thanksgiving, 26 Superforts, all from Saipan, hit Tokyo in the first major raid against Japan. It was Pearl Harbor in reverse, except that Tokyo knew what was coming. It was a drastic change, an unpleasant one for Tojo and his people. Things would keep on changing — for the worse. They knew that inescapable fact. They knew that it was only the beginning of bigger and more devastating raids to come.

The Japs must have realized in that Thanksgiving rain of bombs returning to them the true meaning of that Bible verse: "Whatsoever ye sow, that also shall ye reap".

Our truck ride and first close-up look at Saipan weren't the only big events in our first memorable day ashore though. Before we scattered all over our bivouac area to pitch our pup tents, the 12 man Armament section of the 327th Engineering Squadron took on a ticklish job. To make our new living area safe, they "de-joused" the area of booby traps, land mines, grenades and other explosives which would endanger our lives. Harmless chunks of jagged shrapnel were scattered everywhere. Later, following Jap air raids, these same boys formed a demolition squad and went out to "de-activate" any unexpected bombs, a dangerous job under any circumstances.

After a 35 day mail drought, mail call was really something. It was for our folks back home, too. All mail, both incoming and outgoing, had been held up while we were enroute. We received that accumulation all at once. It was waiting for us when we landed. The mailman literally had mountains of mail to sort. Some fellows got as many as 75 letters, and almost everyone had 30-35 letters. It was an all afternoon's job, with half a dozen others helping sort. The mailman was really "swamped" that day and a very popular guy indeed.

Our first two nights, "sleep" wasn't any "beauty rest", either. We "slept" on bare ground, among coral rocks, sugar cane stalks, and underbrush. That meant clearing off a little spot to make it as comfortable and soft as possible. (It was neither.) We fixed up "beds" as best as possible from underbrush, a raincoat, and blankets. Some fellows didn't bother to dig out their mosquito nets, and they were "chewed up" the next morning like a piece of raw beefsteak. Others woke up in the middle of the night to find they had bed partners -- lizards, bugs, spiders, or mosquitoes. "New Jisey Was Never Like Biz." To make matters even more uncomfortable (?), it rained a cloudburst (it seemed) several times while we were still under pup tents and on the ground. The only reason we didn't float away is because the water ran down the hill. (Pity the poor fellow on the low side.) Two nights of this was enough. The third day, six-man pyramidal tents and cots were unloaded and we were only too glad to set them up. It was real luxury to sleep in a cot instead of hard, wet ground. It didn't make much difference that we had to move our tents three times before getting located permanently. Soon we acquired wooden tent floors and electric lights. That was even more luxurious yet.

Another memorable experience that first day was swimming in the Pacific. For many, it was their first salt water swim. About 350 men went down to a nearby beach at some time during the day. Everyone had to be armed and stay with his particular group. In spite of safety precautions, one man was drowned. Two of his buddies were miraculously saved by Lady Luck when a Navy patrol boat, unaware they were missing, picked them up five miles at sea after they'd hung onto a God-sent piece of wreckage all night long.

At night, our guards had no "sleep" job patrolling the area. Besides those drenching downpours, there was the ever-present threat of Japs. You just
couldn’t be sure they were all cleaned out of our vicinity and cornered on the North end of the island several miles away. Guards admitted they were “trigger happy.” Who wouldn’t be at strange noises in the night? Especially if there was no answer when challenged? It was quite common to wake up several times a night when a string of carbine or Thompson sub-machine gun shots would break the silence like the crack of a whip. One morning, a guard from a neighboring outfit had to cart away a dead cow. Better that, than to let in a live Jap, by far. Two guards were court-martialed for being asleep on guard post. One got four months, the other six months confinement at hard labor and forfeiture of pay for both. Even part of this light sentence was remitted. On nearby Guam, a fellow got a dishonorable discharge, a long term of hard labor and forfeiture of all pay for the same offense.

For the first two weeks, we ate cold C and K rations. They were darned monotonous, but sufficient. Some fellows warmed their own over open fires. One morning we were surprised with hot coffee, and a couple of days later, along came a slice of bread per meal. No more “dog biscuits”… that was good. Until then, we never realized how delicious bread and coffee could be. In two weeks, we were eating hot, cooked chow. We didn’t mind standing up at long tables in a crowded tent too much. It took two months to finish building mess halls, and by then it was a real treat to sit down to eat. In time we actually got an ice cream freezer. All the cooks deserve lots of credit for hot chow in those early days, even though we were always cursing them for serving so much Span and C ration stew. They did a good job under trying conditions.

Drinking water was supplied by the Island Command from deep wells or water holes. The latter was chemically treated for purification. There was enough drinking water, but every man was supposed to catch his own rain water for shaving, bathing, and washing clothes. It panned everyone no end and tightened the drinking water supply considerably to see some few individuals who considered themselves “privileged” using valuable drinking water wastefully for shaving and bathing. There was plenty of rain water if they’d only taken the trouble to catch some. Fortunately, the situation never became serious.

Later, during the dry season, water rationing went into effect all over the island at the rate of five gallons per man per day. Soon this was raised to 10 gallons. For all practical purposes, though, you didn’t realize that water was rationed. There was no noticeable shortage. By this time, adequate sources of water supply had been put into use.

Fortunately, a QM laundry opened inside of six weeks. That eased our individual laundry problem considerably. It surely saved lots of elbow grease and cussing. We certainly appreciated how easy it was to send in 15 pieces every week or 10 days and get clean clothes back in two days, with no effort on our part.

Immediately on landing, we ran into the tremendous job of unloading our boatload of trucks, equipment and supplies of all kinds. We worked a 24 hour day (three shifts) at the height of the rush. Mountains of boxes and crates piled up and after much handling were gradually sorted into some semblance of order. Truck tires really took a beating hauling supplies over razor-sharp coral boulders. In our area, there were no roads worthy of the name — just muddy tracks through the cane field and coral rocks. But in spite of rain, mud, mosquitos, coral and boxes galore, we handled the job very creditably.

Dengue fever is one vivid memory for lots of fellows during our first six weeks on Saipan. In spite of mosquito nets and insect repellent, those pesky,
disease-carrying mosquitoes would "drill" you, especially after dark. Dengue hits suddenly with a fever, headache, and complete weakness. You have no appetite. Sometimes, the "GI's" keep you sitting on the shool endlessly. Frequently, your bones and joints ache severely. You don't feel any more soldierly than a limp dish rag. There's no known cure. All you can do is take the fever-reducing pills the medics give you, and "sweat it out". Recovery usually comes within 3 or 4 days. Unlike malaria, dengue leaves no disabling after-effects and is not recurrent.

At the height of the dengue wave, some 75-100 cases were sick in quarters or hospital on any given day. Very few were hospitalized. As many as 20-25 new cases came in daily. Probably at least half the Group (around 350) had a touch of the fever at some time. Around 1100 man-days were lost before it finally died out.

By 1 October, dengue fever was under control. Not a single case has been reported since then. Low-flying C-47's, only 50 feet above the ground (the backwash from the props shock the tents like a hurricane), sprayed all camp areas and mosquito breeding places thoroughly with DDT insecticide daily for about a week. That was the knockout blow.

Dona Aramor started working overtime the day we landed — from everywhere, not just the latrines. First there was a flood of wild stories about Japs in the hills, their battles with Marines and their attempted infiltration into our area. Then came an even bigger crop about going home. First the whole outfit was returning to train other B-29 Service Groups. Then only cadres were going back home. One fellow even took over $100 in bets that we'd be in the States or on our way by 1 August 1945. These stories made us look like "rookies", especially when compared to numerous men we met who had already been out here for 36 months or more. When the Superforts started flying missions, there was the usual quota of stories after every mission. After every Jap air raid, plenty of juicy stories made the rounds, too. Ninety-five percent of all rumors had little or no basis in fact. Very, very little of what you heard was reliable.

Early in the game, the Island Command started calling on us for personnel to help them do their job. That evidently was their prerogative. We'd just have to get along as best as possible with less men. About 25 drivers and their trucks, plus two mechanics, went to the Island Motor Pool. Three men were sent to the PX warehouse. One cryptographer and four teletype operators went up to Joint Communications Center. Ten MP's helped patrol the two civilian internment camps and dock areas.

When the 73d Bombardment Wing Headquarters moved in and started pulling the same stunt promiscuously, nobody was quite sure whether they were coming or going. It began to look like the "snafued" personnel situation at Walker again.

As we expected, we had to build our own living and working quarters. Quite soon in fact, we'd cleared the area, built wooden floors for our tents, and installed electric lights. A little more slowly, we built a dispensary, mess halls, permanent latrines, showers, offices, chapel, and PX. At the same time, we opened up temporary engineering shops and tent warehouses. Some of them had to be moved to make way for new roads. Aviation Engineers, meanwhile, surveyed the location and put in cement floors for some 20 wooden permanent warehouses and 45 quonset hut engineering shops. We fellows helped build these working quarters for our own use. Only 14 short weeks after our arrival, they were built and in use. On 24 November, Superforts struck Tokyo in force for the first time with 96 planes.
Our 303d, with other units, was informally commended by Brigadier General Heywood S. Hansell, Jr.; then Commanding General of the XXI Bomber Command. "You carried on your official work with efficiency above the usual under rugged conditions," General Hansell said. "In addition, with hard work, ingenuity, and a kind of stubborn will that typifies the spirit of American pioneering, you made your own hens a place to live and a place to work, overcoming obstacles that were not foreseen." The Public Relations staff made quite a big splurge of this in the articles they sent back to our home town newspapers. To our folks, it sounded like big time stuff, but to us it was merely part of the job.

Throughout all this work, there were many examples of ingenious improvising, too numerous to mention them all. The Armament and Central Fire Control men of the Engineering Squadron made their own gun charger testing apparatus. They found a madly .50 caliber aircraft machine gun in a cane field, cleaned it up, and put in new springs to make it workable. Then they used the wing gun mount from a crashed P-47 to set up the gun on a bench in the shop. When they finished, they had a .50 caliber aircraft machine gun in working condition, on which could be mounted any number of B-29 gun chargers, one after the other, for testing purposes. These gun chargers clear faulty ammunition out of jammed B-29 machine guns. It means a whole lot to those B-29 gunners to know their gun chargers have been tested beforehand and are in working condition. In Headquarters Squadron, one "bouquet" strictly to the Fire Fighters' own credit is "Leaping Lena". That's a reconditioned Jap crash truck, made completely and solely by the Fire Fighters themselves from parts of eight different broken Jap vehicles and a Jap Zero fighter plane. Now they have an extra truck of 300 gallon capacity for fighting fires, something they made themselves, unaided by others, and can rightfully call their own. It closely resembles a GI "135 crash truck".

"Leaping Lena" was literally resurrected from the junk heap. She's strictly of Jap ancestry. Only the battery, condenser and distributor cap are GI. The body and 300-gallon tank were taken from an old Jap fire truck found on the North end of the island. Lifting the front wheels in the air, the boys hauled the wreck some 8 miles over rough, rocky roads behind a weapons carrier to our own area. Suitable tires were found on two Jap airfields. Gas line tubing came from a junked Jap Zero. The gas tank and power take-off came from a bettered, heavy duty Jap gas truck. It took three weeks of hard work to install a completely new front end, including a motor, springs, axle, fenders, steering assembly, and transmission. "Leaping Lena" is now a battle tried veteran. She was christened on Christmas night when she opened up her hoses and spit water on a burning Superfort. Thus, she is assumed at least partial credit for keeping the fire from spreading to nearby planes. That was the night she was used for a bomb shelter too (Dual purpose vehicle, eh?) She was "on duty" during four other bombing raids besides numerous "stand-by" missions for fires and B-29 take-offs and landings.

The Dental Clinic provided another example of improvising. The boys motorized their drills with the aid of salvaged Jap plane parts. None of this foot pedal power for them! These are only three examples, among many.

The first B-29 to land on the newly built airstrip dropped onto the runway about 1:30 on 12 October 1944. General Hansell himself was at the controls. He had come to set up his Headquarters here (later moved to Guam), but more important, to test the runway, both landing and taking off. Since mid-morning, the news of the plane's arrival had spread like wildfire all over the island. Traffic was jammed for miles around the airfield. GI's were perched everywhere, craning for a better view, anxious to see the plane close up. Very few of us, least of all the boys who had been over here for months on end, had ever seen
a B-29. But nobody got more than a distant look at that amazing plane. An armed guard was thrown around that B-29 strong enough to stop the most curious GI or any attack from suicide Japs. In time, this strict secrecy was lifted and it wasn't too tough to have a buddy show you inside the plane. Marines jokingly nicknamed the B-29's "sitting silver birds" --- that is until they flew their first big raid on Tokyo. After that, they were no longer "sitting".

Our 303d had nothing to do with building the airstrip. That tremendous job was done by a hard-working Aviation Engineer Battalion. Those Sea-Bees of the Air Forces had completed their job ahead of a seemingly impossible deadline and against all sorts of obstacles. Ever since landing, they had been working around-the-clock to meet that 15 October deadline. You can imagine their excitement now that the big day had arrived.

Those record-breaking Aviation Engineers who had been building airstrips all over the Pacific since Pearl Harbor landed on Saipan on D-plus-five with 30 officers, 735 enlisted men, and 2,000 tons of equipment. Their outfit was only about 50 men larger than our 303d. They had more bulldozers, graders, cranes, steam shovels, caterpillar tractors, dump trucks, and steam rollers than you could count --- almost. Within 24 hours, they bulldozed enough coral gravel to fill in 600 shell craters on captured Aslito airfield and the first P-47 landed. By D-plus-12, Aslito, now renamed Ie Shy Field, was lengthened 1,000 feet and was big enough for bombers. On D-plus-15, another airfield was started, less than half a mile from where tanks were banging away at the Japs.

More than once, the Aviation Engineers were forced to quit work on airfields and fight. Often they were working within earshot of Japs. Immediately after landing, survey parties laid out the B-29 strip, each party protected by six riflemen. One day an officer killed a sniper by running him down with a jeep.

But the work of building the airstrips went forward relentlessly. When a young mountain stood in the path of one runway, they moved it --- literally blasted it flat. To build a strong, level runway, they hauled over 4,000,000 cubic yards of coral. Working around the clock in eight hour shifts, they dumped a truckload of coral on the growing runway on the average of every 40 seconds for over two months.

It wasn't easy to transport coral to the airstrip though, even though coral was everywhere. "Roads", if that's what they could be called, were PP, Pretty Funk. But two huge quarries were opened. On one, they literally shoveled off the side of a hill. To move the coral, they built an asphalt-top, three lane super-highway that cut the five hour haul to 15 minutes. It was nicknamed the "Haul Road" and only trucks hauling coral were allowed on this smooth, speedy super-highway. Not even the General could drive the "Haul Road". At one point where traffic crossed the "Haul Road", there was actually a Stop and Go sign, just like back in the States. "Haul Road" traffic always had the right of way. It was almost like taking your life in your hands to try to cross that busy "Haul Road" with a steady stream of dump trucks full of coral "barreling along" at 40 miles per hour or better. "We never stopped for nuttin'" one driver described it.

But getting the crushed coral to the runway was only part of the full job. They had to surface this coral base with asphalt. They set up their own plant (not part of their organizational equipment) built mainly from salvaged odds and ends from the shell-shattered sugar mill at Charan-Kanoa. Seeds and dust poured from this plant 24 hours a day like a "Little Pittsburgh". It was not a job for "EM's" with dainty hands and delicate skin. It was real "he-man" who melted the solid tar in fiery, red boilers, crushed the rock to the right uniform small
size, mixed the two in the right proportions and laid down the asphalt mixture before it cooled too much.

Before invasion, Washington war planners had said "impossible" or at best, "unlikely". But those astounding Aviation Engineers completed their stupendous job ahead of schedule. Only 13 short weeks earlier, they had made the Japs' captured airstrip serviceable for our B-24's. Then they faced the seemingly impossible deadline of making the same strip serviceable for B-29's by 15 October. They had done their "behind the scenes" work well.

They did more than build airstrips, though. Soon after landing, they re-store a bomb-clogged, deep-water well, installed a purification system, and built many huge gasoline storage tanks.

With the runway completed, now came the crucial test. How would their coral base, asphalt top runway "take it"? How would 22 tons of B-29 affect "their baby"? Like a veteran, the 8500 x 500 foot airstrip handled her first plane for several test take-offs and landings. General Hansell heartily OK'd the job and the Aviation Engineers went right to work building a second strip parallel with the first only 200 yards away. Vast areas of asphalt taxi-ways, service aprons, and hardstands were already carved from the billowy green sugar cane fields.

Today, planes use both strips at once, starting their take-offs at 30 second intervals. At times, planes have landed equally fast.

Jap methods of building an airstrip were quite primitive, according to several enlisted Aviation Engineers who had a chance to see abandoned Jap equipment and their runway before we started improving it. "They didn't have much mechanized equipment", one fellow said. "It looked like they'd just level off an area as best they could with picks, sledges, and hand tools. Then they'd haul in coral and pack it down by marching their men across it over and over again.

Tramp it down solid --- by foot. Their methods were pretty crude. Of course, all they got was a crude airstrip. I don't see how they ever built the 3600 foot runway they had. It must have taken a tremendous amount of labor. They couldn't have done any big jobs of filling or excavating or cutting away a hill like we did."

For the next month, three or four planes arrived daily at noon until some 120 planes dotted the several square miles of hard-stands and taxiways surrounding the two airstrips. On 21 November, only five weeks after the first plane landed, most of them took off like big silver birds to initiate Tojo in Tokyo to the "new era".

With the arrival of the B-29's, we started building bomb shelters, in anticipation of Jap raids. It was a precaution well taken. If they had raided us any time sooner, we'd have really been caught unprepared. Our only plan for protection was to run down to the semi-wooded, underbrush area on the side of the cliff, disperse in designated areas, and lie flat on the ground. We'd have been a sorry looking bunch of "Sad Sacks" if the Japs had the sense to bomb or strafe our tent area while we were in that disorganized state of confusion.

Before the first raid, we built sand-bag bomb shelters beside each tent. The Plans and Training Officer suggested an above-ground affair with a completely open top. It was to be three sand bags high (two feet at the most), with bags laid lengthwise the flat way to use as few as possible --- about 125 bags per six man shelter. Size was approximately 6 x 12 feet. It seemed like a fairly strong, adequate shelter.
The first raid changed all that —— fast. Nobody needed to be told to improve his shelter. Everyone realized how woefully unprepared we had been, even with make-shift shelters, and was darned thankful we weren't caught in an even greater state of unpreparedness. Luckily there were never any casualties in our tent area. After every raid, you could see a fresh, new, vigorous wave of bomb shelter improvement going on. Some of them almost become pill boxes, able to withstand everything but a direct hit. Soon they were all at least hip high or more (three or four feet), banked at the sides, and provided with a strong roof with room for escape, if necessary. Some of them were dug into the ground. On others, the sides were made from 55 gallon oil drums filled with coral. All were really substantial and strong. Most fellows could reach them in a split second after the siren went off, too.

Naturally, air raids made us "jittery", more or less. We carried our gas masks and helmets everywhere. "Suicide squads" were organized and sent up to protect the airstrip from possible paratroopers or suicide Japs from the hills during every raid or alert. One morning, two fellows were seen running across an open field between the warehouses and our tent area. Nobody knew why they ran. In only 15 seconds, everyone was scattering for their bomb shelters like scared rabbits. There was no siren, no plane, no guns firing, no nothing. It was just a case of "jumpy nerves". Panic, or anything like it, spreads like wildfire. Several "false alarms" didn't help calm things down either. When someone would accidentally drop a wrench or slam a door, the sudden sound would make a fellow jump, and just to hear our own fighter planes roaring around "upstairs" in practice flying made some fellows expect gunfire to follow automatically.

A more extreme example is about the fellow from another outfit found sitting in the mouth of a cave at 1400 one bright sunny day. He was waiting, all ready to dive into his well-built perfect bomb shelter, "just in case". By far, however, almost everyone kept on working quite normally, but very alert for the slightest warning hint of any raid.

These shelters came in darned handy during air raids. It seemed good to have that protection, although even that seemed flimsy enough when thundering ack-ack, bursting shells, and the chatter of machine guns all "at fly" at once. Now that raids seem a thing of the past, those sand bags seem to be a breeding place for mice. Our last raid was 2 January 1945. The capture of the Japs' two Jima island base from which they raided us makes raids even more unlikely.

However, war came close to our 303d during November and December, as close as it will probably ever come. Jap planes RAIDed us about 15 times in those two months, including Pearl Harbor anniversary, Christmas, and New Year's. Pfc James Fleetwood received the Purple Heart and Lt. John W. Gephart, Sgt Thomas Martin, and Cpl Harry Sogegian were decorated with the Soldier's Medal for heroism for fighting blazing B-29's.

Pfc Fleetwood was guarding a B-29 near the airstrip about 0400 on 7 December when the Japs struck without warning. Just as he hit his nearby bomb shelter, as instructed, a near-miss (five feet away) piled the shelter in on top of him. The concussion burst his left ear-drum and the sand bags and gravel-filled oil drums banged him up considerably. He was hospitalized for several days with cuts and bruises. He is the only 303d casualty from air raids.

This is not the first "close call" for Pfc Fleetwood. He and a buddy were rescued from drowning at sea on our second day on Sipan. They were swept out to sea by an undercurrent, luckily hung onto a God-sent piece of wreckage all
night long, and were rescued the next morning five miles at sea when a Navy patrol boat, unaware they were missing, accidentally sighted them.

Sgt Thomas Martin and Cpl Harry Sagegian were awarded the Soldier's Medal. They climbed on top of a burning B-29 and extinguished fires raging in the forward gun turret. They are credited with saving the plane and possibly the lives of nearby personnel. The plane was loaded with bombs and gasoline. Besides the danger of being blown to bits, the boys kept working in the face of continued enemy strafing. "The whole crew deserves a medal," Sgt Martin declared, "because we couldn't have done a thing without the boys on the pumper." In another raid, one of the Fire Fighters "passed out" from smoke fumes and exhaustion, but was uninjured.

Lt. John W. Cophart was also awarded the Soldier's Medal. He is credited with saving two B-29's, one at midnight and the other at noon on the same day. On one, he drove away a burning gas truck from under the wing of a parked plane, and on the second he helped extinguish a burning B-29 engine with a fire extinguisher during continued Jap strafing attacks. Both planes were loaded with gas and bombs.

Jap raiders sneaked in several times and caught us unawares, once at noon in their biggest raid. That was the noon they strafed our tents and ball diamond where some fellows were playing before they headed for the B-29's. That was our worst scare. Low-flying Jap Zeros, followed by gunfire, was the first warning we had; our sirens were way late. Fortunately, that was the exception rather than the rule.

We saw about 10 planes shot down. All of them crashed within a mile of our tent area in a vivid orange burst of flame, while noseing around the wreckage of a crashed Zero, one fellow kicked a round thing that looked like a helmet. It turned out to be the Jap pilot's head. The plane dispersal area, only a quarter of a mile away, has been strafed a little and bombed much more, high altitude typ and dive bombing as well, with everything from small fragmentation bombs to 1600 pounders and even a rocket bomb. Except for his early, daring noon time raid, "Red Check Charlie" as we nicknamed him, always came at night, and only on bright moonlight nights at that. Sidelight: on 24 December 1944, the movie was finally finished at 0100 the next morning after being interrupted twice by Jap air raids.

Once the searchlights picked up a Jap bomber around 20,000 feet and held him for 10 long minutes. Heavy ack-ack blazed away almost as fast as machine gun fire. It was literally an earth-shaking, thunderous, colorful sight. He had a hot time up there, but managed to get away by putting on a very fancy exhibition of evasive action. Whether or not fighters got him later is not known. We never did see a dog-fight or our fighters attack a Jap bomber. All we saw was red tracers, yellow flame bolting from ack-ack pieces, their brilliant bursts high in the sky, and a big orange glow in the black night when a Jap plane crashed. It reminded you of colorful red-orange-yellow 4th of July fireworks, only far more deadly.

Another time, one of our own 0-47 planes came in without his special radio identification equipment turned on. He ran into a sky-full of flak from our own guns and came within an ace of being shot down before he was identified by gun crews as our friendly plane and the "Cease Firing!" order saved him.

That rocket bomb was quite a fiery sight, too. It plunged diagonally downward in a straight line at terrific speed with a long, blazing white tail. It landed near the control tower with a terrific explosion but caused no damage.
One night the airstrip was bombed from high altitude and we could plainly hear the whine of flying shrapnel. The next morning, there were plenty of small jagged chunks lying around for souvenirs. Another night, one Fire Fighter on duty at the airstrip had his helmet knocked off by a flying piece of shrapnel. He has a wicked looking dent in his helmet, the shrapnel, and his life as proof. One morning, hundreds of small, unexploded fragmentation bombs peppered the airstrip and plane dispersal areas (but not our tent area). There were “duds” that had to be rendered harmless by bomb disposal personnel.

Once, the whole island was alerted against a possible gas and paratrooper attack. “Tokyo rose”, Jap woman radio propagandist, had threatened gas and returning B-29 crews had sighted an aircraft carrier which later was identified as our own. Nothing more happened.

On the whole, there air raids were quite tame and harmless. The Japs’ principal target was B-29’s, not personnel in tent areas. Nine times out of ten, raids amounted only to hitting the bomb shelter and losing up to three house sleep. On several raids, no Jap plans appeared. Our fighter planes did a bang-up job of interception. Very few japs ever reached the island, and practically none of them ever returned. True, we were in potential danger, but never really face any considerable actual danger. The guards, Fire fighters, bomb disposal crews, and personnel at the shops during a raid came closest to real danger.

S Sgt Henry Eskes can rightfully claim to be the only man in the 303dsure of getting a Jap. He is on DS with about 10 other MP’s from this Group in an 80 man MP Company down at Camp Susupe some five miles distant, helping to prevent GIs from loitering about the internment camp where about 15,000 Jap civilians are under protective custody.

Each day, about 1,000 of them, all ages, trudge from their seashore camp about two miles back into the hills where they work their cultivated gardens. In a rich, well watered, green valley about a mile wide and two miles deep, they grow watermelon, muskmelons, bananas, pineapple, and crops similar to squash and potatoes for their own consumption. They return to Camp Susupe before nightfall. Two shifts of Jap cooks prepare a warm meal of GI rations at noon in the field. Civilians from Japan proper and those imported to Saipan from Okinawa Island are fed in separate mess halls due to ill feeling between them.

It’s these canned GI rations stored in the mess hall that starving Jap soldiers, the few survivors who are still hiding out in the hills, are after. “They come out of their caves every night to try to steal whatever they can,” Lt. William T. Porter, 303d Provost Marshal, who was Commanding Officer of the lst Provisional MP Company for three months, tells you. “This particular night, S Sgt Eskes in a 12 man patrol got one for sure and the next morning, we found four more. We aren’t sure who killed them.”

“We were hidden along paths leading into the mess hall,” S Sgt Eskes recalls, “and had the place completely covered. We counted a mess of them as they sneaked into the storeroom. It was a bright moonlight night. When they left, we let the first couple get through OK, and then opened up. It was far from real battle or hand to hand combat, but don’t kid yourself about it being scary business.”

As for movies, we were lucky to have movies the third night on the island and every night since. In addition, we’ve enjoyed several musical variety shows staged by traveling Seabee, Marine, and Air Force troupes. Twice, talent from Saipan has performed.
Perhaps the most unusual were the native dances put on by Kanakas and Chamorros and the youngsters' exhibition of wrestling. One evening in October 1944, about 125 men, women, and children showed us their genuine native dances for an hour and a half. It was intensely interesting. About 30 women put on one dance that consisted of much chanting, hand-clapping, and shuffling. Encouraged by her mother, one little four year old girl did some steps during that dance that looked a little like our jitterbug. She was having a whale of a time, completely unconscious of the crowd.

Then some men "brought the house down" with their offering. It was a group affair. About 30 men lined up in three lines and proceeded to obey the direction of their leader. It was similar to a square dance, except much more quiet. The 30 men changed their own musical accompaniment softly in the background.

Evidently the natives had been taught some GI commands in English, because every once in a while the leader would interrupt the slow and easy dance with some booming commands. In the gruffest 1st Sergeant manner, he'd bawl out "Ten hut!" (Everybody would line up in haphazard fashion.) "Hut, tuh, 'ree, fo'----hut, tuh, 'ree, fo'." (Everybody would turn every which way.) "Company, halt One, tuh. Fall in!" (Everybody would face him, looking very serious and almost half scared.)

We GIs nearly split, it looked so much like poor "Sad Sack" in the cartoon strip. Their leader who acted as 1st Sergeant played the part well. He was really a rough customet. They realized though, that our laughs were amusement, not ridicule. You could see they understood and thoroughly enjoyed putting on the act.

Then they'd go on with their own native dance again, a very calm affair, only to interrupt it with the same performance again, just when we were getting anxious for another laugh at the whole curious performance. The natives really got a "big kick" out of "burlesquing" all of us and our rookie days of basic training.

The "Stick Dance" was downright spectacular. Sixteen husky native warriors, larger than the average, formed four diamonds, four men in each. Their unique head-dresses, strings of beads, and painted faces made quite a sight. Each man carried a stout stick about the size of a baseball bat.

Then with no music or chanting, they began their dance, first slowly, but gradually speeding up to a furious climax. The men would tap their sticks on the stage, do gymnastics with them, and hit the next fellow's stick, slowly and gently. They would exchange places with each other in their own diamond and then would trade places with dancers in other diamonds. The dancers moved around constantly, sometimes crouching, sometimes standing upright, faster and faster all the time, always tapping, swinging, juggling their sticks. Before the dance ended, every man had occupied every point of every diamond---16 men each occupying 16 separate spots in rotation. As the tempo of the dance speeded up, the dancers banged and pounded their sticks more viciously than ever. It was the most perfect example of split second timing, coordination, and team work we'd ever seen. If any one single man had made one wrong move in that organized melee of stick pounding, he'd have gummed up the works for everybody and many men probably would have been hit pretty badly by accident.
The climax came when the dance was moving at breakneck pace and everyone suddenly stood up and partners swung their sticks together hard enough to break several of them like matchwood. If anyone’s head had been in the way his skull would have been cracked wide open.

Each dance lasted about two minutes and they gave several variations of the “Stick Dance”, with time out in between to catch their breath. This was their first performance for a GI audience and their first appearance outside their own internment camp. At least 7,500 GIs attended.

Earlier on that October evening, two matched teams of 10 youngsters each showed us their style of wrestling. Both before and after each bout, these 8-10 year olds would bow very low and very politely to their audience and to each other. But that was as far as their friendliness went. Wrestling was strictly business.

They would squat facing each other inside a three foot circle, arms held upright with hands at shoulder height. At the referee’s signal, they would try to bump or shove each other outside of a larger 10 foot circle, or upset their opponent to make him touch any part of his body to the floor except his feet. They weren’t allowed to stand up or use their hands. Several contestants cleverly tricked their opponents into going off balance. Those youngsters were a lively bunch of scrappers --- reminded you of a couple of bantam roosters. Two out of three wins decided the bout, and all 10 matches took scarcely 10 minutes.

As for self-entertainment, movies, baseball, swimming, volleyball, and horseshoes are the main sports (excluding “sack time”). We have movies, preceded by the latest war news, every night. An eight team softball league within the Group plays regularly and three teams are entered in the stiffer competition of the Wing League. Lights are being put up for night baseball and a new larger area is being fixed up for a hardball diamond, plus additional softball fields, volleyball and horseshoe courts.

Two fads have struck the boys so far. First came shiny, stainless steel wrist bands followed by Saipan shell jewelry. Necklaces and bracelets made from cream colored, light green, or white sea shells sold for fabulous prices (no OPA out here). Diamond shaped shells, some with stripes crossways, ran from the size of a quarter to scarcely larger than a pencil eraser. They were really unique souvenirs and made a big hit with wives, sweethearts, and mothers back home. They were very striking and very distinctive.

Our 600 volume library was thoroughly collected back in the States by Chaplain Davis. He got lots of help from his home church and community. Mrs. H.H. Arnold, wife of the Commanding General, Army Air Forces, contributed substantially. The idea of an overseas library also had the vigorous approval of our Commanding Officer, Colonel Shelmire. It has proved very helpful in relieving monotony. Judging from how they’re used, these books are very popular. Average circulation is around 25 withdrawals a day. Chaplain Davis’ services have always been “tops”, too.

One amusing incident is worth mentioning. It concern “Duke”, our veteran canine mascot of over two years who since has strayed elsewhere for a three months’ vacation and now has come back to us. He sauntered down the gravel aisle one Sunday, right smack in the middle of Chaplain Davis’ sermon, just like he owned the place, and quietly proceeded to bury a bone! Chaplain Davis continued his sermon with interruption. Then “Duke” lay down and slept through the rest of the service. After the benediction he left, carefully picking his way through a forest of legs. Independent, “do-not-give-a-hoot” little mutt, isn’t he?
That about brings the story of our 303d up to date. We’ll live the rest of the story as it unfolds day by day. Our morale is as good as can be expected in an overseas outfit. We handle our work in warehouses, shops, and base services as efficiently as any outfit and are all living for the day when we can go home to live where we belong. In the meantime (however long that lasts), we are still in this Army and our 303d “sweating it out”.

Note: much of the information describing Saipan Island and the natives is either rewritten or quoted word for word from three other sources: a GI orientation pamphlet, “Meet the Marianas”, Willard Prices’ absorbing description in his book, “Japan’s Islands of Mystery”, and an Intelligence Bulletin on Saipan. It is borrowed, not original like the rest of the story. The same applies for the short unit histories of the 10 outfits of the old-type Service Group found at the beginning of this story. This information is consolidated from longer unit histories written by them covering their history from activation up to 15 September 1943. Without all this help and with the willing cooperation of many “old-timers”, both Officer and EM303d veterans, in interviews, this account of three years 303d history would not have been possible. PS: you can thank Sgt. John J. McGowan for many long, monotonous hours of typing stencils and Cpl. Glen O. Burklund for practically cranking his arm off on the mimeograph machine to bring you this 303d narrative.

Best of luck, men,

Lyman J. Noordhoff.