SECTION - 2 The OVERSEA TRIP

1. Port of Embarkation
2. Shipboard - Santa Elena
3. DEBARKATION AT BIZERTE, North Africa
At 11:30 a.m., Wednesday August 11, 1943, the 18th Depot Supply Squadron fell out in class A uniforms for its last formation on Patterson Field, Ohio. Though the winter season was yet to come, the woolen dress uniform had replaced yesterday's khaki wear. The O.D.'s made it unbearable for the recent August heat wave. The high humidity and hot sun felt like a woolen blanket had covered us and suffocating all the G.I.'s.

Rumors had indicated the likelihood of an eastern movement. It would favor the handful of New Yorkers in the squadron.

On hand to see the squadron leave were the mothers, sweethearts, relatives, close friends and spectators, all strangers to the G.I.'s, The Ohio members were leaving their home state for the first time, since serving two or more years. Ozzie and I were shipping out for the fourth time to a Port of Embarkation in or near New York.

As we marched through the main gate out of Patterson Field, the M.P. gave us a farewell salute. The streets of Osborn were crowded with all spectators extending the customary farewell greetings.

The full packs on our shoulders appeared to gain extra weight with each forward step. Dancing helmets became jitterbugs on some heads. Our carbines on one shoulder, the other a gas mask, the woolen OD uniforms kept in step, marching to the tune of a band while we were being admired and cheered by the crowd.

Approaching the railroad tracks, more crowds had gathered to wave a last goodbye, give another kiss, before husbands, sons or brothers went off to war for the duration.
The atmosphere was covered with sadness and everywhere handkerchiefs were being waved, they were now being used to wipe away the tears of all the loved ones.

The marching soldiers did not stop and moved directly to the waiting trains, to climb aboard and remove the packs in relief. Troop trains do not have the comforts and conveniences of pleasure trips. Our accommodations was crowded conditions beyond the capacity of each separate car. Twenty four hours of traveling while sleeping on wooden seats, unable to stretch our feet in a comfortable position was more than we could expect. We welcomed break of dawn upon arriving at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

To miss formation is a GI's delight. Today I was among ten others who did not fall-in with full pack to move to another location. A soldier knows best not to volunteer for any detail while on a movement requiring transporting personal equipment. While the squadron moved out with full pack, I became a hand-picked specialist for the unloading the A and B barracks bags from the train cars. I would be riding on the truck taking us to the assigned section of the squadron. Unloading the bags, organizational equipment and supplies wasn't an easy task. The GI's resentful attitude towards extra working details was summed up with expressing a famous remark, "My aching back".

Group assignments to each barracks was a simple task. My concern was teaming up with Ozzie to share a double bunk. Our squadron occupied the upper floors in two different barracks. We succeeded to find our separate bunk.
The distance from our camp to home was about 30 miles to N.Y. Thoughts of going home never left my mind while at Kilmer. It was a daily occurrence to think of the few days left before going overseas. Ozzie and I visualized a weekend pass with Mary, Yela and our loved ones.

The duplicating time wasting routine of inspecting clothing, equipment and rechecking everything we knew we had became an aggravating experience. Sarcastically and in complete disgust, all GI's would answer, "I've got everything", or "nothing for salvage" and "we don't need anything". After supper time we managed to call home.

In the middle of the night, we were called out to pick up special clothing from the supply room. Why did we have to get up from a deep sleep to receive the special chemical treated, impregnated clothing? This could have been done before going to bed or early the next morning. If we got involved in a gas attack, it would take place while overseas, not in the states.

Our stay at Kilmer would be too short for those close to home. The squadron was confined to quarters the first two days. Saturday, 50% of the squadron would receive their first pass. Before leaving for the bus stop, our B bags had to be ready for shipment if the orders were received to ship out.

Ozzie and I were among the first ones to receive a 12 hour pass. The other half of the squadron would go on leave Sunday morning. The second time around, Ozzie drew KP. In our failure to convince the 1st Sgt and C.O. to skip Ozzie's KP turn, we found someone who would take the detail for $8.00. Ozzie was willing to pay $10.00.
We spent the weekend with our loved ones. Ozzie had created a problem between Dolly and Yola. His choice was Yola but Dolly was not aware of the situation. Arriving in New York to go our separate ways home we had made plans to meet by the Hotel Aster on Broadway.

The homecoming celebration included all the favorite foods I had left behind upon entering the service. The joyous reunion ended when Mary and I left to spend the evening with Ozzie and Yola.

We wasted two hours waiting for the absentee couple. In the meantime we met our C.O. Captain, several officers and enlisted men from the squadron along the crowded Broadway. For the Ohians, the opportunity of visiting the big city was not as eventful or exciting to appreciate the visit. The night life did not meet their expectation.

Saying good night to Mary revealed a goodbye for the duration. We both sensed the feeling and departed knowing the war will separate us for an indefinite period. A cancellation of passes greeted all returning GI's upon reading the special notice posted on the barracks bulletin board.

Monday, August 16th the Squadron had scheduled several formations throughout the day. After supper, we were ordered to dress in class A uniforms and assemble in the recreation hall. The captured audience received the first lecture from the censoring officer. Our company doctor gave a presentation on sex hygiene. This was a typical army camouflage for a surprise party for the squadron's farewell meeting. Whatever the festivities, Ozzie and I would have rather been home on pass. Our morale hit the lowest point yet while the celebration was accepted by the other members of the squadron.
Tuesday August 17th was a restless day, from the time the bulletin heard instructed us another special examination would take place. The uniform to march to the dispensary was the raincoat to cover our birthday suit. As soon as we entered the doorway we were told to follow the signs, keep the lines moving and ask no questions.

Our starting point was a large red arrow, thereafter various color arrows would direct us to the next examining room and another doctor. The speedy walkers would finish first and wait for the late stragglers. And if along the way two GI's had carried a mannequin would have passed the examination to determine overseas duty.

It was a joke. Arrow to arrow. Right. Left, Straight ahead. Reverse the directions. Go here. There. For every turn there was a non-sem ordering you to move forward, stop talking. Go here. Bar there. Had someone turned left instead of right or visa versa, the lucky GI would have been rejected and discharged on the spot. Though there was a doctor for each part of the examination, all that was really required to pass was, five fingers, a nose, two eyes, two ears and a body with two feet to move ahead. No surprises. We all passed in true army fashion and qualified for overseas duty.

Several unnecessary formations took place before giving us an extended recreational break to play softball or other athletic games. All activities stopped when orders to ship out were received. Before retiring for the night, the A bag was to be completely packed, ready to be loaded on the trucks first thing in the morning.

Falling asleep the night before shipping out wasn't an easy task. Had I been in conversation my dry throat would not permit words to leave my mouth.
In my attempt to fall asleep, my thoughts took over my troubled mind in a not too peaceful body. My immediate family, Mary, and the home life I would be leaving behind all flashed in my instant replay action. This mental picture would stay with me for the duration. The physical separation would keep us oceans apart and the distance would be covered by correspondence in letter writing. I did not know my destiny but thinking of the war's end and a future reunion, gave me the courage to put to rest the loneliness feelings of what I was leaving behind.

These gut feelings prevented my falling asleep. I kept hearing myself saying to Mary, "So long, pretend I am going on a short trip. I'll be back". Then I was only going to the induction center, new overseas duty would be a lengthier separation. Once I accepted the inevitable, my mind was put at ease, unknowingly I fell asleep.
The anxiety of shipping out curbed everyone's breakfast appetite.

We should have known better than to expect an 8:30 departure. In typical army tradition, three hours later we were loading our A bags on the 6 x 6 trucks.

The censoring officer found a way to get even with my long letters by ordering me to ride the trucks to unload and then lead the A bags onto the train cars. This detail would save me from marching to the railroad station in full pack. I considered this to be a good deal since it gave me much free time to relax while waiting for the squadron to arrive.

As each soldier climbed aboard I extended a helping hand in relieving them from their packs. Once seated, the tired men removed their ties and shirts. It was obvious that army brass intended to make us uncomfortable by overcrowding the cars as though they were packing sardines. I escaped from the sealed can when again I was called to serve as a guard at the front end of the train car. This was my reward because it gave me the privilege of staying on the outside platform between cars. Compared to the other soldiers, I was riding in a private air conditioned car. From this position on the train, I could review the last group of civilians wave to us as the train passed by. As the sound of the band weakened, to complete silence the trained delivered us to Union City Station.

Debarking from the train, our next adventure was walking to the Ferry that would take us to Staten Island. We could never understand and accept why such movements required a double-time pace. If the packs did not tire us out, the unnecessary speed race did.
Some soldiers could not handle the fast pace and soon were dragging some of their equipment, overcoat and became disorganized getting to the ferry. Too many were forced to drop out and required help. Ozzie and I were among the proud ones to complete this ordeal in complete control. Since we were among the first to enter the ferry we had no problem in selecting a choice seat.

From our sitting position we could see what was visible in the focused distance from the harbor. At some point all eyes skyward, seeing a torch in a raised hand as though attempting to touch the open sky. Ozzie and I immediately recognized the "Grand Old Lady" who appeared to have turned greener since the last time I saw her. For many of the Ohioans, it was the first time they were starring at the STATUE OF LIBERTY in New York Harbor.

I wondered when I would see her again and Ozzie's facial expression told me the same thing. As we moved towards Staten Island, we could see other ships that would be in the same convoy. Most of them were liberty ships of the Merchant Marine fleet. The Navy ships were also ready to escort us across the Atlantic Ocean. The feeling of leaving New York Harbor overtook us completely and we hoped this short ride on the ferry was the really taking us overseas. When the ferry ride ended and was docked, we adjusted our packs and immediately found ourselves counting off on the deck. When our name was called, we responded by giving our last name, first and middle initials, and moved forward to the awaiting gangplank of our troop ship. Marching aboard, we each received an index card with the deck and room number and the assigned bed bunk to occupy.
OUR TROOP SHIP

The SANTA ELENA, was our troop ship for sailing across the Atlantic.

My inquiry among the crew members reveal she was 18,000 tons, 600 feet long and it had made three previous troop crossings. Two trips were made to Casablanca and one to England. During peace time, it was a pleasure ship with the distinction that Dick Fowl and Jean Blendle had spent their honeymoon aboard the Santa Elena. With this past history we placed our confidence in a ship that would be our seafaring home while heading for an unknown destination across the Atlantic Ocean.

Just before receiving our index cards to the staterooms, a GI hurried ahead of me which turned out to be the advantage of Ozzie and the four of us in the same quarters. I was given the first card for room 144 instead of the last numbered 146. Ten GI's share the same quarters two from the original 18th while the other eight came together from Fort Logan Supply School. The stateroom was adequate for a couple enjoying their wedding anniversary but for ten GI's it was much too crowded, even if two bunks were used for equipment storage space.

The salter arrangements had four sections of three hammocks. No sooner than spending a few minutes to relax and remove our packs, when we were called out for a special squadron meeting in the mess hall. The converted dance hall/dining room would be our serving area for eating all our meals. Prewar ocean trips found many couples dancing with the open skylight overhead. The moon was always on hand for the moonlight nights of pleasure on the Santa Elena.

There was a reason why the 18th D.S.S. was the only troops aboard. The meeting clarified our curiosity when the C.O. informed us the squadron was detailed as the permanent K.P.'s on the troop ship.
All hell broke loose as everyone blew their stack. This meant working in the kitchen to become helpers to the cooks, butchers, bakers and doing all the cleaning up after every meal, for the duration of the trip. When the meeting broke up it gave us some "cooling off" time that brought us to our senses. It didn't take us long to realize the many advantages we would realize by working in the kitchen. We quickly agreed it would be a good deal and thanked our Captain for volunteering the 18th D.S.S. for this detail on a troop ship.

The little blue button identified our status to the regular crew. The members of the squadron were completely separated from all the troops on board because we enjoyed the extra privileges extended to us. While the servicemen received only two meals a day we received three with in-between meal snacks available throughout the day.

There was only one mess hall to feed the enlisted men the two daily meals. The endless chow lines circled around two decks. Many appetites were lost from the hours it took for the lines to reach the service area. In some cases the end of one meal also signaled the start of the second meal.

The sleeping arrangements was better. As crowded as we were in the staterooms, it was paradise compared to the sleeping facilities of all other servicemen. Some outfits shared staterooms in a 12 hour swing shift and removing their packs, equipment each time they moved in and out. Other GI's slept wherever they found a free space to crawl up for the night.

The luck of the draw when I received the index card had me located in the center of three hammocks directly facing the porthole. I could not have asked for a better sleeping accommodation.
Our ship wasn't ready since the longshoremen were busy leading supplies, equipment and other cargo. We had no idea how long a waiting period would keep us in port, until all troops were aboard. We spent the idle time examining the many activities that developed with the added service units coming aboard. Card games and the throwing of dice flourished on all parts of the ship. I never saw so much money turn over in such a short time of my visitation at various locations. The winners and losers were separated from the many GI's reading books, magazines and writing letters home to their loved ones. The limited space did not afford any athletic participation, leaving most of the time walking about the decks, doing nothing worthwhile to occupy their spare free time.

The members of our squadron looked forward to working their KP shift. My first night our mess sergeant gave us the detail assignments for the trip. I was part of a group sitting around a potato-peeling machine. While two operated the machine, the others plugged the eyes out. Conversations included every topic, activity, and happenings in our prewar life style. We soon realized the advantages of our KP facilities available while working. The kitchen was at our disposal for eating between meals. The best sandwiches served at deli's were ours for the making, deserts, ice-cream, sodas, fresh fruit, pies, cakes all within an arms reach, without asking but simply taking whatever we desired.

Ray's assignment for KP was on the day shift because of his rank of sergeant. Somehow in a very unconventional way we had touched each other during the entire voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.
Ray and his KP group always managed to keep a supply of coca-colas in the refrigerator where all the meat products and other perishables were stored. Ozzie and I found them while working the night shift. We enjoyed the cold drinks before the day KP's could quench their thirst.

From time to time we would help ourselves to extra canned fruits which we planned to take off ship when reaching our destination. By the end of the trip we would have a supply to last us a month of the many goodies that would certainly not be available on foreign soil.

Among the last soldiers to come aboard were a group of nurses. Though WAC's appeared on the dock, none of them traveled on our ship. It was a sign that our ship was loaded to capacity and ready for sailing. Sure enough, the next morning we all noticed that the longshoremen had disappeared and all loading operations had stopped. We knew it was time. Three days of waiting had overcrowded the ship full to its capacity.

The last afternoon in the states found me standing on the port side of A deck looking towards Manhattan. I was becoming homesick and searching for some sense of security before taking off for overseas service. I found my peace in the Statue of Liberty. The "lady" seemed to be telling me, "I'll watch over your loved ones while you're gone". I noticed she did not have her familiar water background and I did not wonder long because in the distance I also witnessed the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building, together in a straight line. I could not ask for a better security sign to have America's symbols of freedom, the sky scrappers of New York City to send me off with their blessing of a safe trip.
THE OVERSEA TRIP

Saturday 21, August 1943 was sailing day for the 16th D.S.S. At 11:15 a.m. the Santa Elena started to move away from the dock and into the harbor. This time only the longshoremen were on hand to give us the last cheer, though not as noisy and the departing farewells received from the loved ones we left behind in Dayton. The silent, lonely decks brought to mind the seriousness of the ocean crossing taking us to Europe or Africa. Missing were the Hollywood cameras for the false movie picture productions of the real thing. The GI's leaving for foreign service were in no mood to emulate the tinseltown's presentation in movies on similar occasions.

Many other ships moved into the convoy. From a distance, we could see their cargo on deck and identified tanks, trucks, jeeps with other army vehicles. Somewhere below deck the equipment and supplies were not visible. Of the two aircraft carriers in the harbor only one joined our convoy, with a deck load of P-47's.

As faith would have it a hospital ship was moving into the harbor. This unexpected scene sort of deflated our security with the Navy ships guarding our outer perimeter of the convoy. We could not overlook the many soldiers waving to us, some with their visible bandages around their heads, some holding on to crutches. God knows how many were in hospital beds not capable of witness our departure. The passengers on this hospital ship meant the end of the war. To us we hoped and prayed that we would not met the same fate of these returning GI's.
New could I tell them I was holding a two way ticket on this crossing. That I would guard it from this moment until returning after war's end.

The Santa Elena had moved out, keeping its distance and staying in formation while leaving the harbor. At the same time other ships joined the convoy while those remaining gave us a final farewell wave, mostly with their sailor hats.

Leaving the open net in the harbor, my watery eyes could barely see the skyline of Manhattan. To the left stood Staten Island and Long Island was on my right. The harbor net extended from Sandy Hook to Rockaway Point. This was the entrance to New York Harbor but today, for our ship it became an exit away from our home City.

By the time the last ship left the harbor the convoy formation had been completed, by maneuvering into their assigned positions. Heading forward to its unknown destination, the land behind us was slowly disappearing. The skyscrapers were getting smaller and smaller and the water around us was increasing around us.

The guessing game started when all we could see was the surrounding water. How long will this trip last? Where are we going? On a convoy we could not map our distance as when we traveled by train. The impossibility to track our course gave Uncle Sam a vast victory. We would not know our destination until we would safely arrive at our debarkation dock.

My early hours on board ship were spent examining the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. My ignorance of sea life surfaced immediately when I mistook a porpoise for a shark. The porpoises tumbles over the waves near the bow of the ship. It comes out of the water and then dives back into the waves and trail the ship for many hours.
Our first night at sea, the rocking movements of the ship started to seriously affect many soldiers. After plucking the eyes out of the spudd for about two hours, we all felt the floor was not holding our feet steady enough. This frequency motion caused too many to become seasick. In no time I was working alone since the KP's had disappeared to their staterooms.

The mess sergeant had left to play black-jack. When he disregarded my plea for help, an argument resulted. My aggravation was the cure for settling my stomach and to lose the seasickness feeling, to complete my night.

Late afternoon the next day found me walking the deck, resting by the rail deck and staring at the horizon where the sky and oceans water formed a duet in a dancing contest. This observation made me realize a natural beauty that had been overlooked. In my concentration on the waves I discovered an entirely new picture than when playing on the summer beach as they rustled into shore in the full power of their roughness. Waves are caused by the winds and not by the ship's bow, cutting the water. When the top of a wave breaks, the crest of the water tumbles forward expressing a natural beauty. The salt becomes visible to the naked eye and can be seen descending to the ocean's depth. The white foam blended with the clear blue water was very picturesque.

Land lovers never get to see a flying fish. It was an experience to see the shiny blue sea life come out of the water, accompanied by three or more and gliding a few yards before diving into the crest of a wave. These fishes employ the principles of a glider and do not actually fly through the air. Most of our daily routine was spent in such a pastime. What else could we do during the past seven days at sea?
Each morning, before retiring to an extended "day sleeping" schedule we would enjoy a first rate breakfast served at the most exclusive restaurants. All our meals were top-rate because of the KP assignment. Our normal sleeping habits had been changed but nevertheless I only required at least six hours of sound sleep. Ozzie could sleep his life away, getting better than ten hours a day. Many a day he would also enjoy an afternoon nap.

The KPs took turns in their assignment of washing pots and pans. It was necessary to rotate on what had been considered the worse job of the KP detail. Though we always cooperated, at times someone would take off and leave without advising another to cover for him. It most cases it was to play poker or black-jack in what became known as the Monte Carlo of the Santa Elena. We all evened the score since every night a disappearing act revealed one or two missing KPs.

The mess sergeant was a much taller two-ten-Tony Galente physical specimen. The night Ozzie and me took off to see a USO show on ship we argued over the extra punishment the sergeant gave us. Our strong complaint fell on deaf ears especially when we reminded him he did not punish any of his friends when they disappeared to play cards with him. We knew but never accepted that rules only applied to a few while others could break the rules and not pay the penalty.

In a poker game involving the Sergeant, Ozzie and me, get our revenge. While we were winning, the sergeant losing, he would not permit us to return to the KP detail. Inspite of his warning, I left the game, but later he gave me double punishment because at the time I was the big winner.
Many nights were spent on the open deck while everyone else was sleeping. The silent ship was guarded by the bright moon overhead. The heavens filled with stars, accompanied by the milky way and big dipper, kept watching our ship's progress.

Loneliness took over under such a setting. My spirits were high with thoughts of Mary. She became my companion. For the restful time on deck I was not alone. The darkness of the night brought on a special attraction of white phosphor. A flashing light appeared to go in and out every few seconds. It appeared as though a mermaid was underwater with a flashlight, giving us signals in directing our course.

Ozzie and I spent many idle moments talking about my brother Neil. In reminiscing the short time we spent together before our separation, we could not help but reflect on his punctual time schedule in planning his days off and after school hours to entertain himself. Our conversation revealed how much we missed him but never thinking of his presence with us on this overseas trip.

A first experience on a Navy ship would not be complete without the loudspeaker instructions, "If we hear this" for the benefit of the KP workers. "Garbage detail commence dumping" was the signal for the special KP's to dump overboard the accumulated garbage of the day. The night offered added protection in scattering all disposal rubbish. This would make it impossible for enemy submarines to trace our course. It was a very necessary precaution and necessary in a convoy.
AFRICA here we come! When our destination became known every GI on the troop ship received the Army information booklet concerning the language, customs of the people and their culture. No survey was ever taken of the percentage of GI's who mastered the full contents to study this strange, foreign land.

After four days of examining the Arabic expressions most of us could only master "KISHA" or "ALLAH" which meant scram or get lost. No cuss words were included in the booklet to keep us concentrating on the everyday usage of words and familiar expressions.

The post exchange, better known as the "FX" would provide the opportunity to purchase our daily rations. The formation lines became second in length to the chow lines. By the time GI's arrived at the purchase windows practically everything had been sold out. The same disappointing problem was experienced every day thereafter. In a very unconventional way, I managed to buy the ration needs of the members in my stateroom, without sweating out the long lines.

During one of my scouting trips aboard ship, I accidentally located the back door to the FX. It was my luck to hold a conversation in the vicinity of this location and realized he was the FX Officer. It was my good fortune when he asked me to bring him all the small coin change I could get my hands on. In exchange for this service I would get top priority to buy my FX rations before before opening the front door to the GI daily business. I never revealed this arrangement but when the scheme was discovered by others we all lost out. The FX Officer was interested in getting the small change and it didn't matter who would serve his needs. When the entire ship attempted to bring their coins to the FX Officer, he realized it was time to close the rear door.
On the tenth day at sea the restless troop ship picked up the rumor that we would see land today. Since everyone wanted to be the first one to shout, "LAND" too many GI's woke up before dawn while the night KP group did not retire for their sleeping session. After wasting too many hours, hoping for the unexpected sight, we accepted the false alarm rumor.

At noon of the eleventh day, land was sighted in the far distance of the horizon. The surrounding fog enveloped the ship and all that was visible was a silhouetted cone shape of land separating the skyline from the ocean water.

Looking at the dark islands sticking out of the sea our eyes were gazing on two continents, Europe and North Africa. Spain was on our left and Africa, the dark continent on the right. We entered the Straight of Gibraltar and all eyes immediately searched for the famous Rock of Gibraltar while we were greeted by the Mediterranean Sea. A British convoy was leaving to return to England. The empty ships had accomplished their mission and were returning home to become part of another future convoy. Our distance only permitted hand waving greetings to each other.

At 4 p.m. we witnessed the Rock and an hour later, our ship was visibly lined up with this outstanding sight-seeing experience. My disappointment disillusioned the popularity of the Rock of Gibraltar. When the ship passed by Spanish Morocco, we had seened larger rocks along the African coastline. Knowing its military significance our curiosity and dissatisfaction brought us to reality of the true purpose of the rock.
Some of us did not realize that at the time of entering the Straight of Gibraltar, two British aircraft carriers joined our convoy. The battleship Texas, having been our protective Navy ship headed towards the Rock. At the same time British destroyers had replaced the battleship, to give us the protection in anticipation of any confrontation in these troubled waters.

The additional naval protection power convinced us that war had finally greeted us in these troubled waters.

The reorganized convoy began to constantly change its formation and the zig-zagging movements of the ships indicated course changes on an irregular basis. This too was a safety precaution against any submarine centration. We had been lucky thus far hoping our prayers would keep enemy attacks away from the convoy. Word leaked out it would take about three more sailing days to reach our destination.

The Mediterranean Sea was much calmer and a darker green than the Atlantic Ocean. Evening relaxing hours on deck only brought me to reminisce on my present status aboard the troop ship. The well kept secret has us guessing whether it would be Oran, Algiers, Tunis or Bizerte. All the troops hoped and prayed that the enemy was also not aware of our port of embarkation.

The British spitfires protecting our convoy gave us courage for our safety. They gave us some excitement while taking off the carrier, flying low and gaining altitude towards the open sky. We did not appreciate breaking up our silent sleep at such an early morning hour. It became apparent that they were searching the skyways for enemy intruders since our convoy was starting to break-up.
Part of the convoy separated for Gran. Later on a few more ships left the convoy and headed towards Algiers. We soon discovered that of the twenty-five ships leaving together only six remained on course pointing to either Tunis or Bizerte. The carrier and destroyers protecting our sides, told us we were not out of danger. The protection would take us safely to our destination. The troops on board ship realize they too would have a role to play for the remainder of the traveling distance. When 90 rounds of ammunition was issued for our carbines we wonder how soon would it become necessary to fire our rifles.

Action introduced us to the war on Thursday, September 2, 1943 at about 7:30 p.m. when the convoy was attacked for the first time.

The gun firing interrupted my sleeping and the sudden rising to run on deck with lifejackets and witness the action. Too many had come on deck, hopelessly and unable to help, except to pray that our ship would be spared a "bull's eye hit". We nervously waited for the excitement to end. We were surrounded with gun firing explosive sounds while watching the tracer bullets of the anti-aircraft guns from the navy ships, going skyward towards enemy targets.

The battle was short, nevertheless we realize the war had greeted us sooner than expected. Rumors hit the deck that one destroyer was damaged and one enemy aircraft was shot down. Working that night wasn't an easy task because we wondered if the Germans would attack again. The mess sergeant could not cope with the battle action. He disappointed us for revealing a weakness that many others had handled better than he did.

The war I had read about back home had finally become part of my army life. I was in the war without firing a single shot from my carbine.
The next morning we were glad to see the carrier, their planes on deck, all prepared and ready for action within a moment's notice. They made us feel secured. In the afternoon enemy planes circled the convey. This time the alert signal included instructions for all troops to stay below deck. The gun crews remained silent and since no planes took off the carrier it signaled a false alarm. Nevertheless we were frightened and nervous with a worried tension of whether they would be a later follow-up by the enemy.

At break of dawn the evening KP's left their detail while the day shift took over. The gun crew had been alerted during the night and the sailors did not put us at ease when revealing the convey had been attacked by submarines. We accepted this but worried when told a torpedo had missed the Santa Elena. That news made our day, that the Germans were still on our trail.

Saturday, September 4, 1943 our trip was over. Destination was the city of Bizerta, we welcomed the 18th D.S.S.
DEBARKATION AT BIZERTE

From the time we spotted the city at 9 a.m., the troop ship did not dock until four hours later. Moving slowly to our debarkation pier gave us the opportunity to examine the total destruction caused by the bombings, artillery fire and the Navy support. The city of Bizerte paid a high price, few buildings remained standing while all the property was leveled to the ground. It was a site not easily forgotten and the sad impression will remain in the new arrivals for a long time. We also knew this would not be our first on-site-inspection of yesterday's battlegrounds.

Our view from positions along the rail decks were taken away with the orders for all troops to go below deck. From the porthole in our stateroom, five heads attempted to look our at the same time. Merchant ships, freighters occupied the docks, being unloaded at rapid speed, to make room for the other waiting ships. The slow movement of the Santa Elena appeared to have a helping hand, searching through a dark alley while being guided to its assigned position to unload its cargo and troops. The many sunken ships resting in the sea, reminded me of the Normandie tragedy in New York Harbor. All around us were smoke stacks above water while the remainder of the ship had sunk to the ocean depths. We could see large holes of direct torpedo hits. Naval destruction was witnessed and it became a toss up where more damage took place, on the land or sea.

The civilian population had evacuated the city with only a scattered handful of Arabs roaming the streets. The GI's out-numbered the remaining population of civilian workers. When the squadron debarked from the ship I was again selected to guard our equipment and supplies as it was unloaded from the ship.
It had been standard procedure for rotating enlistedmen on special detail assignments. Why I had been targeted for every detail since leaving Patterson Field was expressed to the officer in charge. My objection fell on deaf ears and I simply obeyed army orders to the letter.

Barracks bags, organizational fixtures, C ration cases, enough for one week's supply and every other need of the squadron were placed in a designated area. From ship to shore, a human chain of GI's and civilians worked hand in hand to unload the cargo. That night, I was on guard with three other squadron non-coms. Together with a Capt., 1st Sgt., Staff and Corporal we had the responsibility of protecting the squadron property, through the night. In shifts we slept a few hours on the barracks bags with our loaded carbines becoming the security blanket.

We did not worry about the enemy but rather the troublesome Arabs who circulated the busy area, hoping to find an opportunity to steal the shirt off our backs. The Germans had their backs towards Sicily and our concern were the Arabs facing us to catch a guard away from his post. In this "cat-and-mouse-game" our guard shift was no match for the Arabs - they could not take a cigarette butt from the ground near our equipment or supplies. The squadron scored its first military victory, without making firing a shot.

The sky filled with stars directed its ray of light towards my attempted sleeping eyes. I constantly reached up to catch a falling star, resembling glittering diamonds, to take for the asking. The conditions were perfect for an enemy raid causing us to stay awake rather than sleep through the night.
The thought of the recent arrived convey in Bizerte did not sit
right with us. Bizerte had many such opportunities for the enemy to
attack at night and have a field day with their attacking planes.
The cargo ships were vulnerable to bombing raids. When and how I
joined the land of make believe ended my wandering feelings for
the night, knowing they would constantly return to keep me alert.

The rewards of previous assigned details did not compare with
this one. I was fortunate to have breakfast on board ship, to select
and satisfy my morning desires. The men were eating C rations while
I feasted with ham and eggs, buttered toast, home fries, coffee and
danish. I took advantage of the feed, not knowing when I would enjoy
such a breakfast again.

Before leaving the ship for what I had considered would be my
last time, I visited with the cooks for a final farewell. This was
not to be. The 6 X 6 trucks did not arrive at the docks until after
eating a steak dinner with the cooks. The squadron was located in a
bivouac area eating the C ration feed cans.

The trucks arrived after enjoying our last supper on board ship.
Upon leaving the dock area it became necessary to cross a small stream.
Yesterday the entire squadron was able to cross on the invasion barges.
The trucks loaded with the heavy squadron equipment could not use the
barges to cross the stream. The secondary alternative lead to impossible
road conditions before arriving on normal highways.

The trip back to our location gave me the opportunity to witness
more destructive areas on the outskirts of Bizerte. This would be the
first sight-seeing tour, the beginning of many more to follow. Hill 609
was the last place the Germans retreated before fleeing out of Bizerte.
wasn't it a pleasant picture to see abandon munitions dump, secret airfields, and outdoor storage areas filled with captured supplies, army equipment of all types of vehicles. All around us were the battlefields of yesterday covered with military corpses of the Allied and enemy forces. Still visible were the enemy equipment, destroyed trucks, tanks and other burnt enemy vehicles, deserted in battle and left behind along the roadside. Captured supplies and machinery were stored at special depot locations. There were many other evidence of a battlefield destruction. A deformed, decomposed dead horse was awaiting a future burial.

To the new arrivals from the States this was an interesting attraction because it was an "after-the-fact" war experience for our rear echelon squadron. Going through the small town of Ferryville, the civilians called out in French or Italian to the waving GI's in the truck convoy. We made no stops along the way to socialize.

Upon arriving at our bivouac destination we took a rest period while the drivers received specific instructions to our squadron's location. In no time Arabs of all ages came out to greet us, begging for food, candy and whatever we had on hand to give them. The booklet on how to communicate was a waste of time when I discovered most of them spoke Italian. Our conversations were cut short with the signal to lean up started the trucks off to our final destination.

The long trip tired all of us and we could not wait to rest and relax. I searched for Ozzie and discovered he had teamed up the night before with someone else to pitch their tents. The Corporal I shared guard duty with became my buddy in the pup tent.
September 6, 1943 was Labor Day. It was a restless, wasted day because we now waited to move out of our temporary location. No details for a change and we were left to enjoy the day as we seemed fit to do. The hot weather gave us no choice but take advantage of the Mediterranean Sea. After a short hike we reach the shoreline and spent most of the morning swimming to our hearts content.

The Sea was rough that morning and after struggling more than we had intended, the waves forced us to quit and go back to camp. In our search for finding the direction in the heavy forest terrain. The density of the wooded area and anxiety of finding our way, was soon forgotten when we heard the anti-aircraft guns firing towards the sky. The skyward movement gave us the daylight to see if any enemy aircraft were in sight. The rearing guns kept firing while we continued to walk blindly to find our way. Several times we walked back to a former starting point. In the excitement everyone had forgotten their sense of direction, walking around in circles wasn't a favorite pastime.

In spotting a disabled enemy gun position, we managed our way back to camp. The rumors greeted us before we could ask questions. An enemy reconnaissance plane flew over our camp site and got away. We knew the harbor had not yet been cleared, with cargo ships still waiting to be unloaded. The Germans would return and give us their calling card of an air raid.

When the news arrived that we would leave this place and head for Algiers. The most cooperative efforts proceeded to load the trucks with our A bags and squadron equipment. Had we been clocked for speed, the packing trucks set a new record. For some unknown reason, no one had given the truck drivers the signal to move out. As daylight disappeared into darkness we realized another night would keep us here.
disappeared into darkness we realized we would be spending another night in a dangerous location. In anticipation of a night raid, we all started to dig foxholes.

This overnight stay was not welcomed. When news circulated our camp that our Santa Elena should have never gone to Bizerte in the first place, all hell broke loose. Luckily we were occupied in digging foxholes in solid ground that caused too many to find better soft areas for their security. How could we accept the screwed-up-orders that should have sent us to Algiers when the convoy ships separated for their respective destinations.

We could not worry about "what should have been" but concentrate on what could happen if and when the German planes greet us with their routine raids whenever a convoy arrives in port. Cold sweat never disappeared from our foreheads. By nightfall we prayed that the night would peacefully pass. The true meaning of peace will only be wars accepted and understood at the end.

We were not disappointed. At 9:30 pm the German planes flew over our campsite and the fireworks kept us on our toes, until we hit the prepared foxholes. The enemy planes were met by anti-aircraft firings. Spotlights searched the sky for the gun crews to find their target. There was no need to sound the air raid sirens or for a jeep to move through the camp to signal a raid.

My first experience in a foxhole gave me the necessary protection from flack and shrapnel if any bombs were dropped in our area. I could only think what a foxhole meant to GI's in a raid. A similar comparison could be made for the parachute to a pilot in a burning
plane before crashing; the life preserver to a sailor on a sinking ship; the bayonet to the infantry combat soldier facing the enemy without ammunition. In occupying my mind the common denominator for each special item was the only hope of survival. Experiencing the fear of death my sole companionship in the foxhole/ the silent prayers invisible I kept reciting to myself. Close second were the loved ones standing by by my side.

A skyward movement permitted me to view the fireworks. Tracer bullets searching and guiding ground firings towards their targets. Criss crossing locations sent their ammunition to form a cone shape design in the sky. The spotlights had more than one plane in their paths but were out of range of the anti-aircraft guns. The thunderous fireworks overshadowed the colorful excitement directly over our camp site. The continuous concentration of gun firings caused a plane to coming down at a low altitude. We didn't know if it would crash or whether coming in to strafe the area. As it neared the ground, the engine sounds signaled it was coming down to crash. This excitement experience was too much for the fresh troops that had recently arrived on foreign soil.

When shouting warnings of a GAS ATTACK reached our area, an immediate desertion of the foxhole became necessary since no one had taken this protective equipment into the foxhole. A mad scramble took place, running to the pup tents while disregarding the heavy anti-aircraft firings and the many planes overhead. A near panic situation developed while running back to take cover in the foxhole.
A heavy fog circled the camp site to convince us it was the real
ting. This was the gas attack, that caught us unprepared for
such an emergency. Just as soon as we had received the alert warning
we were informed we had been covered by the camouflage smoke
screen to protect the area from ground visibility to the enemy. The
sight of the fog caused to yell out gas. The culprit was never discovered and the experience gave us something
else to remember.

The first raid lasted about one-half hour, though it seemed we
had spent many hours in the foxhole. Later that night the Germans
returned for another raid and bombing mission on the harbor. This
time we were prepared with gas masks and loaded carbines. We were
told during the first raid, enemy paratroopers were dropped in our
guns immediate area. When all guns were finally silenced, assembled GI's
circulated to pick-up whatever rumors that would delay a peaceful
sleep.

Next morning while boarding the army truck to move us out more
rumors occupied the many conversations heard 'round the camp. There
was a discrepancy as to whether thirty to sixty enemy planes took part
in the second visit by the Germans. We shot down five airplanes while
two merchant ships were hit in the harbor. Five paratroopers were
cought while fifty others had landed to infiltrate the Allied
ranks. Our squadrown did not stay around long enough to substantiate
these rumors. Our next destination was Algiers.

The last loaded truck carried our daily meals of C ration cans.
Meat and beans; hash; beef stew; biscuits, coffee, lemon flavored
drinks to be eaten in any order for our morning, noon and evening meal.
The shortage distance from Bizerte to Algiers is a straight line of about 300 miles. The round-about-way the army maps out the traveling route was extended to over 550 miles. Spending 51 hours on GI trucks was a lifestyle no GI enjoyed. Our satisfaction was to survive the ordeal and remember the bombing experiences that greeted our arrival. The truck ride was going away from any troublesome locations and the convoy would be traveling safe and secured highways.

Our C.O. Captain decided to have the convoy go to Tunis and visit the war damages of another African city. We did not appreciate the uncomfortable fast driving ride since the drivers managed to hit every pot hole in the road. The speeding trucks denied us the opportunity to examine any highlights in Tunis. Total destruction was everywhere and we were glad to move on to Algiers.

We passed through Satif and Constantine and did not investigate these smaller Arabian cities. Along the way we cut through the Atlas Mountains with its winding roads, sharp turns and irregular mountain terrains. This turned out to be the second sight-seeing tour for the rear echelon tourist, overseas in Africa for only three days.

Somewhere along the way, during one of our rest stops since leaving Tunis we found a prickly-pear fruit bush. Ozzie and I were the only ones enjoying this exotic since had been part of our Italian family fruit eating habit. Other GI's not aware of the taste or having ever seen this fruit could not resist asking me to remove the skin and letting them share in our satisfied enjoyment. Once eating they realize its delicacy, I could not keep up with the demands from the members riding in our truck.
**Description:** An oval fruit, 2½ in (7-10cm) long. Changes colour as it ripens from green through yellow and orange to bright red and reddish-brown.

The fruits are covered with small beds of tiny, vicious, arched spines left where the large spines have been removed during harvesting. Like the watermelon, the flesh of the prickly pear contains a lot of water and also lots of edible pulp; taste is slightly acid.

**Origin:** Mexico.

**Producer Countries:** Italy, Israel, Spain, Morocco.

**Availability:** July to February.

**Use:** Rub the fruits thoroughly with a cloth and rinse under the tap. Cut in half and scoop out flesh, or slice the top off and peel. Eat raw or use in fruit salads. Throw away floury fruits.

**Keeping Qualities:** Ripe: a few days in the refrigerator.

**Nutritional Value:** 56 Kcal and 20mg vitamin C per 100g serving.

**Industrial Processing:** None.
The convoy was held up in a small town when a herd of sheep where being driven across the road by local farmers. We patiently waited waiting for the animals to get off the road. One of the slower moving sheep was hit by the truck, very slightly and finally crossed the road.

The view from the open truck did not give us a pleasant view terrible and disgusting sight of the Arab town, especially their living conditions. Their home is small huts, made from dry straw. This is also used to feed the cattle and other animal life in their possession, such as cows, sheeps, dogs, cats, goats. Together with several family members all occupy this one hut. One wonders how and why they keep a goat tied outside the hut, lazily eating the straw, until the Arab has to build a new hut.

The Arabs appear to be useless because they don't do a darn thing. Laziness represents their idleness. The lift they carry on their outer clothing must certainly get to their bodies. The unbearable sanitary conditions is the reason why a great majority of them are infected with diseases. From my experience it is shocking for such a sickening population survives in such limited existence.

As for feed the absences of farms or vegetable gardens or fruit trees makes you wonder what is their daily feed supply. They struggle for their everyday needs which must be close to starvation.

You could always spot an Arab, stranded, lonely, walking in the middle of nowhere, miles away from anything visible. Where he goes? How he spends his idle time? All unanswered questions.
The Arab's clothing is the brightest side of his life. They are all dressed in a mixture of military uniforms, from American, British, German, Italian and French. This leage of nation wardrobe tells you they have stolen most of it if it wasn't donated to them. Certainly they could not buy the articles of uniforms. The only conclusion is they that/striped the dead soldiers from their uniforms, who were left behind on the battlefields. The Arabs got to them before the graves registration detail did their job.

These Arabs along the side roads of the traveling convey would yell out *Baka "Bombon"* for candy. Our language guide book did not include such simple words to communicate and we realize the issued booklets would become useless to the GI's.

Nature's beauty would have been appreciated by art students in accepting the challenge offered by the scenic surroundings of the Atlas Mountains. Blended together were the canyons, the winding blue roads, rivers, waterfalls and the sky over the countryside. Artists and poets, blending such an atmosphere would produce the perfect picture or poem.

The excessive irregular winding roads and high altitude was too much for my weak stomach. I could not take advantage of nature's offerings. Instead I disturbed and marred the setting by strewing along the road, the C ration meal I had eaten earlier for breakfast or lunch. The speeding trucks did not consider my condition over the two day period of riding to Algiers. The nightly sleeping hours did not relieve my riding sickness. I was at the worst physical condition of my soldier life.
The bivouac areas we camped at night gave be the temporary relief needed to restore the necessary energy to survive the next day's travel. Most squadron GI's pitched their pup tents while others found their sleeping quarters on the tarpellien used to cover the army trucks to protect us from the periodic rain. Though the surrounding area was well guarded, from the roaming Arabs, the truck accommodations offered additional security messages. Every GI had his loaded carbine by his side, to defend themselves against the troublesome Arab thieves. The traveling convey to Algiers had taken us a safe distance from the worrisome German enemy.

September 8, 1943 moving out after breakfast, which I had skipped, hoping to rest my sick feeling of the day before given to me by two American Red Cross workers. Our restful lunch break was interrupted by two American Red Cross workers who gave us the good news that Italy had surrendered. Could the war's end be nearer than expected?

A happy group traveled over the damaged roads and fallen bridges that were being repaired by Italian prisoners of war. The slow down driving permitted us to give cigarettes and candy to the former enemy soldiers. However it was the welcomed news of Italy's armistice with the Allied Forces that really made their day. They sheered us off as the trucks picked up their normal traveling speed.

In order to reach a certain bivouac area where shower facilities were available, the excessive speeding caused many of the GI's to become sick. I had been suffering long before this and the dusty roads were no match for our respirators to prevent the flying dirt from our faces and eyes.
The experienced truck drivers did not disappoint us by reaching our destination. The hardship suffered was soon replaced by being able to shower for the first time since leaving the Santa Elena. We followed the same routine of the previous night's sleeping arrangement which found most of us peacefully satisfied with the day's events.

A freak accident almost took the life of a truck driver while having supper. In his attempt to make some hot coffee, he carelessly spilt gasoline fuel on his clothing. His clothing caught fire and the quick action of others by his side, only caused minor burns on his chest. He was rushed to a nearby field hospital. Luckily he was not seriously wounded. The next morning he took his position behind the wheel of the truck I was riding with Ozzie.

September 9th would be the end of our traveling to Algiers. This news had a positive effect to ease my mind and kept me in a better state of mind to complete the trip feeling much better. I could not wait to relax on solid ground and restore my physical stamina.

The final leg of the trip was cutting into a large grape field that was stripped of its grapes. The road lead us into the small French town of Maison Blanche. The first decent building in good shape was the Church of St. Joseph, surrounded by tall palm trees with a Grotto on one side of the church. We knew this would be our Sunday mass location, since a short distance away, the trucks came to a full stop for unloading the tired, hungry GI's.

While the A and B barracks bags were coming off the truck and searching the correct tags, the sgt assigned us to a pyramid tent. Once our gear was safely in the tents, we wasted no time to head for the showers. After arranging our equipment in order, the mess sergeant issue special meal tickets to present at the mess hall.
What a relief not to eat C rations again. The Consolidated Mess
Hall ever the entrance deer greeted us. The surprise reception received in the hall made the two/trip worthy of the service received in this army mess hall.

That fact we did not need our mess kit should have told us to expect something different. Trays were distributed and passing through the chow line, Italian KP's were distributing the feed servings. We got all we asked for and plus. The hot cooked meal made us feel like civilians home on leave. Included were the special family trimmings of unlimited deserts, ice-cream worthy of a celebration activity with all your loved ones present. It certainly gave us a well deserving lift after the tiresome driving from Bizerte to Algiers.

The large mess hall was divided into the officers section on one side while the enlistedmen had similar accommodations and service on the other side. This was a transit mess hall for incoming troops being relocated and assigned to new areas. The welcoming mat was visible as soon as one entered the doorway.

Three shifts of KP's were needed since this particular mess hall was opened for service 24 hours a day. After full satisfaction with the meal I held a conversation with the KP's, all prisoners of war. They invited me to return to have a special spaghetti dinner with them.

My first Italian dinner reminded me of home. Socializing with the Italian P-W's brought conversations of famous hollywood stars, mostly Clark Gable, Jeannette McDonald, Spencer Tracy, Diana Derbin and especially Shirley Temple, all favorites of the movie industry. They all agreed that had American remained neutral, the Axis would have won the war.
It was surprising to learn they respected the American soldier more so than the British. The biggest disappointment was the heavy weight championship fight between Primo Carnera and Max Baer. They all felt their idol was framed in losing the title to Baer and could not be convinced otherwise.

Among this group of P-W's I meet youthful Vincent Pelligrino from Salerno. We kept a friendship in Africa until I shipped out to Naples, Italy some four months later. Of all the Italian-American GI's they had encountered, they said I understood the language more fluently.

We stayed at the intransit camp for two days, then the squadron moved to farm #5. Loading the army trucks became a routine matter knowing we would finally move to a permanent facility. We expected regular army barracks or at least the large pyramidal tents. Neither accommodations appeared in a large open field that was a prewar farm. We wasted little time to find a perfect location to set up our pup tents. Worse still was the eating out of our mess kites from food served in a field kitchen.

It took a steady work detail of constructing platforms and frames to assembled the large pyramidal tents we would call home. The dry and very hot weather made our sleeping nights very uncomfortable. The near by Sahara desert greeted us with periodic sand storms. If our tents withstood the strong winds, we could not escape the sand that covered our camp site. It became necessary to relocate the tents until we found adequate protection from the constant sand storms.
Building what became known as our tent city required the full cooperation of every member in the squadron. The raining season was upon us and racing for time to move in our tents pushed us beyond our expectation.

The rain came with the completion of the last tent. As luck would have, the squadron carpenters completed the last tent a few minutes before the rains came. Our timing was just right.

Once the living quarters had been finished it became necessary to construct a day room for rest, relaxation and play. In this new atmosphere Ray and I found mutual interests. The numerous activities united the GI's into forming clicks, and groups among the servicemen. It was at this location and in these surroundings that Ray joined me and Ozzie. The OZRAYABBEY TRIO solidified the close buddy friendship that has survived for the past 50 years.