7 PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNICAL SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE
7 Photographic Technical Squadron activated, 16 Sep 1943

STATIONS
Will Rogers Field, Oklahoma City, OK
Calcutta, India

ASSIGNMENTS
8 Photo Reconnaissance Group

COMMANDERS
Lt John S. Teague
Capt Lawrence E. Dawson
Capt Dawson
Capt Francis J. Kosciuk,

HONORS
Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

The 7th was probably one of the lesser known, 'behind the lines' outfits among the magnitude of resources that helped the Allied Forces make their advancements through Burma. You might say we were the forerunners to the "One Hour Photo Shops" of today. It was mass production at its utmost.

Virtually every battlefield is exposed to the lens of a camera, from the air and ground, keeping an accurate eye on the enemy and recording his whereabouts and progress. This requires millions of prints and mosaics to be made available to the eyes of the plan-makers. During WWII, Photographic Technical Squadrons were created that would produce these photographic prints in greater numbers, faster and better than ever before. It was an organization complete with a mess section, orderly room, medics, motor pool, communications and a huge lab section, everything, loads of lab equipment, lab technicians and photo interpreters, a mass production unit to work in conjunction with photo recon units.

The 7th Photo Tech Squadron was assigned to the 8th Photo Recon Group and therein became the Theater's major supplier of photographic prints, filling orders for photo interpretation, map production, bombing missions, etc. The Squadron maintained a central library where all of the aerial and ground negatives for the CBI Theater were cataloged and stored. The Photo Laboratories would draw from this library to fill the orders that came in from throughout the Theater.

The 7th Photographic Technical Squadron was activated on 16 Sept 1943 at Will Rodgers Field, Oklahoma. The three months at Will Rogers were months of growing pains, waiting and the dither of preparation to depart. From its nucleus of a handful of officers and men, the squadron grew rapidly to full strength. The passing days were filled with training programs, inspections, mountains of paper work, packing, medical examinations and a good deal of activity which you will find nothing about in Army Regulations or Official Training Programs.

Not all recollections of Okie City are military memories by any means unless you want to classify some under Manual of Arms. Many a 7th man who watches the moon of India from his barracks porch is seeing oil well towers instead of palm trees against the sky. For the moment the PX is Katz's drug store and the EM Club is Daisy Mac's or a USO club depending upon what kind of memories he has. Maybe he is misty-eyed over that party at Blossom Health Inn. Or, it could be that stagg beer party in the mess hall.

Then one day the last crate was nailed shut, steel-bound and stenciled, the last man had stood starch-stiff by his bunk for inspection. Tender adieus were said to wives, an assortment of Oklahoma maidens and the Huckins Hotel and we filed through a drizzly morning into a waiting troop train.

The train was rolling south. Where were we bound? Which way would we turn? Some guessed the east coast, some guessed the west and they argued their points. Pocket maps were dog-eared and liberally scrawled on. Even when we headed west the East Coast faction said we'd probably turn and go to New York. Only after we had crossed Arizona and New Mexico was the guessing game conceded to the West Coast.

On and on went the train, the interminable poker games, chess, checkers, fitful reading, the writing of letters for future mailing and the bull sessions. The men grew tired and bored. There was a short stopover in Navajo, New Mexico for stretching cramped legs and light exercise, then back to the railroad cars to stare out the windows at the United States slipping by - too fast. It would be a long time, we reckoned, before it slipped back again. On a Wednesday afternoon we arrived at Camp Anza, California, Los Angeles Port of Embarkation.

Anza was a beautiful spot. It was a green bowl of earth with snow-crested rims, but the week there was a fitful one and the California climate for the first half of the week was appropriately petulant. The native Californians in the squadron spent a lot of time apologizing for the rain and chill. There were more inspections and examinations, check-ups, supply adjustments, more training films, talks, warnings. Leisure time was consumed in mad dashes to Los Angeles, Hollywood, in shorter trips to Riverside.

On 8 March, we lined up according to numbered helmets and were sardine-packed into the little train which chugged down to San Pedro and the waiting ship. Red Cross workers hustled doughnuts and coffee to us as we stood on the pier. In another hour or so we passed up the gangplank harnessed and loaded like pack mules ascending a mountain path, and entered into a floating city which was to be our home for the next month.

Approximately 70 officers and 225 enlisted men boarded the SS Mariposa in San Pedro, CA, on 9 March 1944 and we put out to sea and watched the white rims of the California Mountains fade away. For the next 30 days we saw more blue sea and sky than any of us ever thought existed. We also saw more hard-boiled eggs and chili than we ever thought existed - and we wished it didn't. Twice a day we wound through companionways, down steps to what had once been the sumptuous dining room of the liner. Row on row of long chow tables filled the big salon now and rows of men on each side of them stood to eat. There were other items on the menu at times, of course, but the staples were chili and hardboiled eggs, hardboiled eggs and chili.

The first few days the men used in getting themselves and their stomachs settled. The sea was calm and blue but a few gills were green from the gentle rocking which was new to landlubbers. There were several thousand troops on board and practically all available space on the ship was rigged with the steel framed stretched canvas shelves which served as bunks. We were not so much quartered on board as racked like parkerhouse rolls in an oven. The decks offered the only relief from the hot, stuffy and stale quarters and virtually every square inch of deck space was covered with a Coney Island conglomeration of legs and sprawling bodies in costumes which ranged from twill fatigues to bathing trunks.

Day and night, anyone who moved about must make his way by stepping gingerly through this maze of human anatomy, composed of individuals reading or writing letters in positions of unique physical contortion, staring into strange space equally and horizontally divided into air and liquid, and clots of humanity engaged in card games, crap games and conversation. The stairways and foyers were crowded too, especially at night when there could be no smoking and no light on deck. Men littered the ship from stem to stern as though they had been spilled over it.

In spite of congestion, in spite of what we may as well bluntly describe as "lousy chow" and that nemesis and nuisance known as PT it was a good voyage, a calm, unthreatened journey. There was some smell of adventure about it and even a genuine touch of gaiety now and again. For all its inconveniences, its lack of luxury accommodations, it was still a big ride and there was nothing to do but loaf and relax for a solid month. The shelves of the ship's library were plucked clean by the locust-swarm of readers which descended upon it. We had brought along our own squadron library, a book or two per man, and these were passed from hand to hand keeping the flow of literature steady. Those with a leaning toward romanticism gazed out at the South Seas they had dreamed of in front porch hammocks and neighborhood movie houses and tried to forget for a while that this cruise was sponsored by the War Department.

At any rate, they found the sapphire-to-turquoise sea colors, the morning and evening skies and the spell casting nights more than equal to their fancy reputation. The flying fish were like guilt birds in the tropical sunlight and after dark the ghostly phosphorous tossed in the gray and black foam of the ship's wake. At least the of the ship's wake. At least the story books were not all lies. Of course, sea water for ablutions is not exactly like a bubble bath and for dental purposes its equivalent to brushing your teeth with Epson salts . . . but c'est la guerre.

After three weeks of this, when we had come to the conclusion that there wasn't any land in that part of the world, we sighted it. At sundown on 28 March 1944 we put in at an Australian port, jammed the decks to stare at the little old port town which studded a hill with curious sheetiron buildings and structures with dingy iron filigree and to hear an Aussie band play the Star Spangled Banner in a tempo which might have startled Francis Scott Key. We stayed out on deck a long time that evening, just looking at land.

Next day we had shore leave and a free train ride to a pretty little neighboring city where Time, if it hadn't stood still, had, at least, strolled casually for the past few decades. It had a pleasantly unreal look, like something painted on a backdrop. We roamed its streets and crowded its restaurants in a special eagerness born of the eggs-and-chili diet, swarmed into its milk bars and other bars which dispensed more potent potables. We saw the sights, talked to the friendly people and pondered the miracle of putting down an American dollar and picking up four scotch-and-sodas and change. At 10 o'clock that night we returned to the railway station carrying a general feeling of good will toward Australia, paper sacks full of good Australian fruit, shillings and "tupny bits" for souvenirs and freshly-purchased maps of India. The guessing game was over and everybody knew the right answer.

There was one more week at sea. The maps were worn to tatters and then replaced by the "real thing." On Saturday, 8 April, the Eve of Easter, we pulled into the harbor at Bombay and took a long look at the strange land which would probably be our home until victory or rotation did us part.

We stayed on board Sunday. Mail from home was brought on and eagerly devoured. We attended the ship's Easter services - and we waited. On Monday morning, 10 April, we lugged our duffle bags down the gangplank to a waiting train. The American Red Cross was on this end of the line, too, serving iced tea through the train windows.

We shall never forget that train and the ride we took on it. The gents' room was a 'phone booth with a hole in the floor. Hard board seats and luggage shelves were our beds. K rations, C rations, corned-willie and Indian bread constituted the daily menu, washed down with occasional bottles of warm beer. The fruit wallahs along the line did a land-office business in tangerines, bananas and green coconut juice. Other wallahs sold "guaranteed" Swiss watches which ran and kept time by some special magic until the wallah was out of sight, fancy daggers, scimitars, and big switch-blade knives. The rupees and annas for which we had exchanged U.S. money on board ship flowed freely out of the train windows.

Mile after mile across India the train rolled. Heat, grime, mosquito lotion and weariness settled in layers upon its human cargo. The guessing game was revived. Where to go in India? New Delhi? Calcutta? The ragged maps were spread out again. For hours of blazing daylight we gazed out the windows at the changing scenes - cluttered towns, fantastic villages, baked plains, green-terraced gardens, jungle thickets, towering palms, long-tailed monkeys at play and swarms of beggars lining the tracks, very young and very old, all chanting "Baksheesh," the Indian cry for alms . . . new noises, new faces, strange places. All this was a long way from home.

On the evening of 14 April we arrived at Howrah station, Calcutta, changed trains and chugged off again into the Bengal plains. Morning found us on a siding at a little town near which was an American Army Air Base. After a while, trucks rolled in for us.

Our first home abroad was a pleasant place on the plains with sparse groves of palms and mangoes, good barracks thatched with rice straw and, above all, shower baths and food which, by comparison with our travelling diet for the five weeks, would have thrown Oscar of the Waldorf into a fit of envy. For the first week we were fed by another USAAF unit on the base. Then we had our own mess hall ready - and almost burned it down the night before we opened it. A gasoline stove got out of control, singed off part of the thatched roof and caused more excitement than a cage of mice in a female seminary before the flames were out.

The next two months we spent at this temporary base. It was the waiting routine again but under very pleasant conditions. Some sections, such as Mess, Supply, Transportation,

Headquarters and Medics, had work to do but almost everyone had plenty of time to loaf in the sack and rest from the wear of travel.

Then came the infamous train ride across India to Calcutta and into the plains of Bengal to a place called Gushkara. On 9 June 1944, the Squadron set up final housekeeping at Bally Seaplane Base just north of Calcutta.

Bally was a British base, formally used for seaplanes, consisting of a taxiway from the Hooghly to revetments inland, with an assortment of buildings and all surrounded by a village, some temples, a Swedish Match Factory and the Hooghly River. The downside for the location of this real estate - it was directly across the river from Hastings Mill, the Headquarters of Eastern Air Command.

We set up housekeeping in fairly elaborate style, fixed up a club and bar for Enlisted Men, another for the Officers. It was here that we became acquainted with the happy luxury of the Indian bearer, that Man Friday of the soldier's dreams, who swept the barracks, made the beds, washed the clothes and cleaned the shoes. The weeks sped swiftly by and suddenly we came to town. Calcutta. We had seen the big city on three-day passes and now we were to live on its outskirts. Cafes, air conditioned movie theatres and ice cream. Dances, too, and girls for the gayer blades. Not bad. We moved to our permanent base on 7 June. Our equipment and several men had preceded the main body of the squadron and now we were ready to set up shop, to do whatever was in the books for us in behalf of the war we'd been hearing about. There was plenty. The monsoon season held work requirements down to some extent until we got settled in, but as the weather began to wane the work orders waxed. The lab expanded. More men, more room, more production.

First thing we knew we were the biggest, busiest photo tech outfit in the world. Within three months we had received official commendation from Headquarters, India-China Division, Air Transport Command, signed by Brigadier General T. O. Hardin and endorsed by Major General George E. Stratemeyer, commanding general of the EAC, and Colonel Charles E. Hollstein, commander of the 8th Photo Group under which our squadron functioned. Within our first year we won official praise on two other occasions.

As this record is being set down we have rounded out our first year in India. We have acquired the mark of veteran CBI men - an eye permanently focused on Rotation Day. It hasn't been a bad life altogether, though it hasn't been all beer and skittles in spite of the fact that, by the grace of the PX system, there was usually enough beer. There was the sun for one thing, which makes a furnace of southern Bengal and melts your ambition down to pools of perspiration. There was prickly heat of a colossal species and that occupational disease of the tropics which causes frantic and frequent visits to the gents' room. There were other things, too, in the sights and smells of India and of the army which came in for curses and rounds of bitching. The green mold of the monsoon season, for instance, which grows on everything from your instep to your immortal soul.

There were some good things, too. Southern Bengal has a fine winter season. We lived on a well-equipped base, with good barracks and operational buildings, a well-furnished Enlisted Men's Club and bar, movies, the bounty of the PX, sports and the advantages of having a big city handy. It was a life of new experiences. We learned some things about this creaking old globe which you couldn't get out of an atlas or an encyclopedia. We learned to accept saris, dhotis and Punjabis as conventional dress, not something worn by a guest at the Beaux Arts Ball. We were equally at ease rolling along Chowringhee in a rickshaw or a Calcutta cab, one of those 1935 Plymouth open jobs with a horn like the moo of a disconsolate cow and a driver who looks like Abdul the Fierce. We picked up a smattering of Bazaar Hindustani, (but the Indians picked up more Stateside English). We saw the extremes of India, poverty and ugliness, richness and beauty (some in the saris aforementioned).

Good and bad, it will stick in the Mental Memory Book. At times, in years to come, its pages will flutter open to the mind's eye and we shall read them again, perhaps aloud and to a generation not yet born . . . the battle of Chowringhee, the siege of Ferrazini's and Firpo's, the occupation of the Winter Garden ... the Lighthouse, the Metro, The Burra Club . . . not to mention occasional spearheads into the dark areas on the strategic maps of the MPs . . . the brown boys who were our housekeepers and general hired help . . . Sambo, the definite if unofficial mascot and one-man morale squad of the outfit . . . the thousand and one scenes of life on the base . . . furlough visits to other scenes of India . . . until a sleepy kid says "Grandpa show us your medals," and we shall answer, "It is late now. Get to bed."

There was always wonderment as to where the seaplanes might have gone and what kind of Lend-Lease arrangement our Government might have made with the British for the use of Bally. Their soldiers didn't take very kindly to letting the 'Yanks' have their barracks (two story brick) while they had to move into tents. Another rub was the British played soldier every day, standing reveille and retreat while the 7th put its efforts into production, a "bloody civilian attitude." One redeeming factor that finally brought the 'Yanks & Limeys' together was liquor and cigarettes. They loved American cigarettes and their scotch was a big improvement over "Karuse Booze," so it was an even trade of one carton of American cigarettes for a bottle of Johnny Walker - and the 'Yanks/Limeys' lived together happily thereafter.

Social status was also augmented by the considerable amount of improvements that the 'Yanks' made to the Base. Revetments were converted into large office complexes, water supply for the Base was tripled, an assortment of E2 buildings were erected along with a beautiful brick shower and outhouse facility. This real estate, with all of the enhancements, was handed over to the natives without any monetary compensation when Briton de-colonized in 1948.

With some exceptions, most of the Squadron wasn't put in harm’s way -unless battling the endless fungi that entered every orifice of the body or slapping the malaria-laden mosquito that made air strikes on your torso, or possibly dodging the careening taxis of Calcutta would have warranted a battle star. Perhaps maintaining photographic equipment was the biggest battle for the 7th - especially with the automatic processing units. These were semi-trailers that housed equipment into which you could place a roll of negatives, push a button and in a very

short period of time finished prints would come rolling out the other end - already dried, trimmed, and stacked. Like I said, a "one hour photo service." These units worked perfectly at Wright Patterson - but in the land of flying carpets they mildewed very fast in the monsoons and became a maintenance nightmare. So, it ended up that 90% of the work was done the 'old fashion way', by hand.

The men of the 7th not being in a fighting unit, were never in a position to receive medals for heroism so their only claim to fame was a letter of commendation from Major General Stratemeyer for the enormous production accomplished in 14 months. Breaking it down into numbers it amounted to development of 413,417 aerial negatives and making 1,485,990 prints of the same; and developing 32,048 ground negatives from which 794,095 prints were made. Putting today's dollar value to those numbers that 'one hour photo service' would have grossed about $525,000 in one month of operation.

By August of 1945, the Squadron was packed and awaiting orders to hop the Hump to China and become part of the photographic backup to the proposed land invasion of Japan. Just in time, the big boom in Japan ended the War. After that, it was just a matter of adding up points and waiting for rotation back stateside. The majority of the Squadron left Calcutta 12 December 1945 aboard the Gen. Muir, arriving in New York on 10 January 1946 and then on to Camp Kilmer, NJ. There the Unit was disbanded the cadre and its personnel were scattered to all the points of the civilian compass.

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE UNIT HISTORIES
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Sources

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