

SUKKUR SUPPLY DEPOT

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SUKKUR SUPPLY DEPOT

"YOU'VE OFTEN heard the expression - "in the middle of nowhere," usually a description of some deserted town or site. In CBI there were many places thusly described, but none more fitting than the U.S. Army Depot at Sukkur, India, now part of West Pakistan.

In mid summer of 1942, the U.S. Army, operating out of Base Depot No. 1 at Karachi, established a supply depot at a desert town called Sukkur (pronounced sucker). The community lies about 250 miles north of Karachi and some 200 miles south of Lahore, in the center of the blazing Sind Desert. Temperatures as high as 127 degrees at midday are not uncommon.

The nearest large city from Sukkur is Hyderabad, 150 miles south on the Northwest Railway. The railhead for Sukkur was Rohri, across the Indus River. A spur from Rohri bridged the Indus and wound its way into Quetta, a hill station 200 miles west.

The original mission of the depot at Sukkur, as far as could be determined, reflected the early logistical indecision of the 1942 period. It will be recalled just a few months previous Stilwell made his famous walkout of Burma. The planning thereafter ran along these lines to establish a supply depot for the "Hamid Route."

The Hamid Route was one which would carry the Chinese lend-lease supplies via rail from Sukkur into Zahidan, Iran, the end of the line. From there the materiel would have been carried via the ancient silk caravan route, eastward to China. This was the fantastic plan borne of desperation to supply the Chinese with war materials after the Japanese forced the closing of the old Burma Road.

Much of the equipment at the Sukkur depot when I arrived to assume command was still marked with "Hamid" stencils. But, of course, the Hamid Project met an early death when the Ledo Road plan was substituted.

The early depot commanders at Sukkur included a Capt. Page, who was the first. M/Sgt. Herbert Mosely of Chicago was among the earliest arrivals and stayed about 30 months. Mosely admirably adapted himself to the climate and circumstances and owed of tremendous value in the depot functions.

I arrived at Sukkur in October, 1944, replacing 1st Lt. Isadore Princethal, then commander. He had been there about a year and was overjoyed to be replaced, as likewise was I about ten months later! The depot site was an enclosed railway yard about 1,000-feet long by 300-feet wide, sizzling in the desert sun. A contingent of 18 Gurkha guards made up the protecting force. Four Chinese civilians from the China lend-lease organization in Karachi assisted at the depot since most of the supplies were destined for China. A labor force of 150 to 200 coolies did the actual loading, unloading and storage. This was handled through a local labor contractor, one Rajput Kapur, a wily Hindu. We had no trouble attracting labor as the Yank scale was considerably higher than the British.

Materiel stored at the depot included thousands of oil drums, steel rods, engineering equipment and some raw materials for China. When the Hamid mission was abandoned, the depot's function became that of a reserve supply depot, handling the overflow from Base Depot No. 1 in Karachi.

Gradually, as the Ledo Road opened up, and the Japs were pushed back in Burma, the flow of supplies tended to be diverted into Calcutta and Karachi, and Sukkur's mission dwindled. By spring of 1945 the activity had considerably diminished, and in June Base Depot No. 1's personnel entrained to Calcutta before moving up to China shortly before the war ended.

The lack of American personnel in Sukkur made life along the lines of a solitary existence. There was only Sgt. Mosely and myself! However, we joined the small circle of British Colonials to help keep ourselves occupied. In retrospect, I saw the end of British Colonial life at close hand, after so long in India.

In fairness, Sukkur was interesting - filled with small time Colonial offices and officials. There was Capt. Doc Taylor, chief of police, who was responsible for British rule over a large radius surrounding Sukkur; Mr. Richard Birkett, the railway stationmaster; Peter Cargill, the revenue officer, who came up frequently from Karachi. There was a true Scotsman named John Crosby, keeper of the Sukkur Barrage, one of the largest dams in India at that time, astride the Indus River, feeding irrigation water to a portion of the very dry Sind Desert.

It was a pleasant interlude at the end of a hot day to jump in the jeep and set out along some of the canal roads leading from the dam. Along the banks of the canal was some excellent game shooting - pig, jackals, etc.

I remember vividly how Mosely and I planned Christmas dinner in 1944. We decided weeks ahead to plan a good dinner by locally procuring a goose.

However, Christmas Eve came and with it a rail order from New Delhi, ordering us to ship immediately 27 wagons (freight cars) to Tinsukia, Assam. We worked like beavers straight through Christmas Day and the day after, and finally had our Christmas dinner on December 27th.

Few CBI-ers had ever heard of the Army depot at Sukkur, since not many had the occasion to visit the installation. If General Pick had not been assigned to build the Ledo Road, Sukkur might have grown to enormous proportions and the name might have had the same significance today as Ledo, Shingbuiyang and Myitkyina. -THE END

Air Force Order of Battle

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Sources