

U.S. ARMY EXPERIENCES, Harry L. O'Neal, T/Sgt. , ASN 19028070

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Part 2

The cheapest and fastest way we had of traveling any distance was hitch hiking. It was easy to get rides if you were in uniform. One time a friend, K. C. Powell, and I went to L. A. together and agreed we'd meet at my parent's home to start the trip back. When he showed up there he had a hangover and so did I. His relative, that had driven him up from Long Beach, took us up Highway 99 to Castaic Junction. We got out of the car and promptly sat down on the railing along side the overpass we were on. We felt so lousy that we decided we wouldn't take what appeared to be short rides, we'd wait until we saw a big comfortable car coming that looked as though it was going quite a ways. We hadn't hardly expressed this thought when we saw a big Century Buick Sedan coming so we put our thumbs out. As we got in the car the driver asked where we were going and we told him Mather Air Base, Sacramento. It turned out that he was going right past there and would drop us off at the main gate. After a couple of hours he asked if we knew any place nearby that we could get something to eat so we directed him to a Tiny's Resturant in a nearby town off the highway. We went in and all had a waffle, ham and eggs and coffee. When the waitress came by to see if we wanted anything else I told her I'd have the same thing again. Kelley decided he would too and our driver reluctantly said yes he would also. When it came time to pay the bill, the driver, who it turned out was a Lockheed Engineer, picked up the tab for six waffles, six half slices of ham, a dozen eggs and a pot of coffee. In addition to getting to eat when we were hungry, we got rid of our angovers, and it cost us nothing. We couldn't have made the trip in the time he did for he drove 80 miles an hour all the way.

In April of that year I got a ten day furlough and while I was home I asked my mother to read the cards and see if I was going to get a promotion soon. She read the cards and said yes so I went out and bought six sets of Staff Sergeants chevrons. When I got back to the base I made a beeline for our bulletin board and sure enough I'd been promoted, not to Staff Sergeant but to Aircraft and Engine Mechanic, Second Class. This paid the same as Staff Sergeant so the raise was welcome.

In May I got another ten day furlough and went through the same routine again with mother and the cards with the same answer from her. I went out and got six more sets of Staff Sergeant chevrons. When I got back to the base I went immediately to the bulletin board and sure enough I had been promoted again, to Aircraft and Engine Mechanic, First Class. This paid the same as Tech Sergeant. Not long after this they split the squadron apart and we lost the First Sergeant in the move. One of my friends was promoted into that spot. The move also opened up a four man room in the barracks I was in so the First Sergeant, myself and two of our friends moved into it. The rooms were issued to those with the highest rank and by date of warrant. The reason they were so in demand was that you could keep whiskey in them legally. Soon after the move I was appointed barracks chief. The First Sergeant came in one day and told me I

could start sewing one set of the Staff Sergeant's chevrons on one of my shirts, because they were working on a bunch of promotions and when the promotions were finally ready to be published he'd tell me. Several days later he told me that I could wear the shirt. This was my fourth stripe. When they added the fourth stripe all the A&E ratings were discontinued. With the discontinuance of the A&E ratings the squadrons were given the opportunity to promote all first class ratings to Technical Sergeant and all second class ratings to Staff Sergeant, or any other way they wished to adjust the ratings. Our organization had a bunch of fellows they wanted to keep in the outfit so most of the upgrades turned out to be Staff Sergeants, otherwise they could have promoted by the directive, looked at the numbers of the different ranks they'd ended up with, and then had to offload a some of the people. I've kept mentioning the stripes because while I was at Hamilton I met a buck Sergeant named Cassidy who took a liking to me. One day when we were talking I asked how he stood for promotion to Staff Sergeant. He replied that he was sixth on the list. When I asked how long he'd been there and how many were ahead of him when he got there he told me he'd been there eight years and was eight on the list when he arrived. One fellow had been transferred and one had died. The promotions came much faster the minute the expansion started.

One thing that I just remembered seeing at Hamilton were Staff and Tech Sergeants doing practice bomb runs with Norden bomb sights. The sights were on tall rolling platforms and the floor was covered with maps. They had guards posted to keep people out of the area but you could figure out what they were doing. The minute the war broke out these guys who had been officers before, were returned to their previous ranks, and were probably the most experienced bombardiers in the army.

Sometime during the summer of 1942 perhaps August or September we started our overseas movement.. We had a little party to celebrate the occasion and in a 24 hour period 23 fifths of whiskey were consumed in our room. We'd stop every couple of hours and carry the empty bottles out after we'd counted them. The outfit was transferred to Silver Lake, Washington, about twenty miles north of Everett and close to Payne Field. A friend went with me and I told the C.O. that my father was going to drive us up there so we got seperate travel orders, three days to make the trip, avoided riding the troop train, and had a lot of fun hitchhiking. We set up a tent encampment and then laid out and constructed an obstacle course. We had just barely finished it when the rain started. Something else happened here that really affected us. We went off garrison rations and onto field rations. On field rations you only went thru the chow line once until every one had been fed. Then if there was any food left over you could get seconds. There were hardly ever any left overs. Since we weren't on an established base there wasn't any place to buy anything. One afternoon when we entered the tent there sat one of our tentmates eating cheese and crackers. He'd been over at Payne Field and got them at the Commisary. We dug out some money and ordered a pound of the crackers and two packages of the cheese. The cheese turned out to be Limburger and since we had no place to store it we placed it on the hearth beside our stove. The heat from the stove ripened the cheese and after a couple of days you could hardly stand the smell in the tent.

One thing happened that was to influence the balance of my life. My sister Rosemary had shown my picture to the next door neighbor's sister, Wanda Dillon, and this was where I was stationed when I got her first letter. In one of her many letters later on she sent me her picture and that was when I decided I'd ask her to marry me when the time came along. We corresponded to the end of the war and I came home.

There wasn't much else remembering about Silver Lake, other than the rain and the mud it caused. The campsite we set-up was on raw land and the minute it rained you were almost immediately in six inches of mud. We were told that we were sent there for artic training and I often wondered,

where in the artic, did they always have six inches of mud? One thing that was accomplished while we were there was that we built boxes to hold all our tools and equipment for shipment. In addition all the boxes were painted and stenciled with our task force number, 1540-Y. The boxes were all numbered and lists made of the contents before the lids were put in place. Finally they all had to be weighed and the weight stenciled on the box in several places.

When all the chores were finally finished we received orders sending us to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. We loaded all our belongings into box cars and then boarded the five cars assigned to our outfit. From Seattle we traveled thru Idaho, across a corner of Montana, past Cheyenne, Wyoming, then on thru Nebraska, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and finally into New Jersey. Camp Kilmer was located just outside New Brunswick.

On the train rather than let everyone jump off at every stop, the C.O. appointed five or six fellows to take orders for the things the others wanted. When ever we stopped we trooped off to fill the orders, and yes I was one of the ones selected. I figured that when I returned to civilian life I'd know where every liquor store was between Seattle, Washington and New Brunswick, New Jersey.

We soon discovered that Camp Kilmer was a vast staging area for shipping troops overseas. There were eight seperate staging areas, each of which were complete within theirself. Each had a church, post exchange, barbershop, cleaners, theatre, etc.. Other than the usual annoying army things, lectures, hikes, close order drill, there was nothing else to keep us occupied. I think we were assigned to area three, but we travelled to all the other areas to see the movies in their theatres. There was a different movie showing someplace on the post every night.

Somehow I was always in charge of a platoon and had to take them on a daily hike around the base. There was always snow on the ground and it turned my feet into two lumps of ice. One day I got the brilliant idea of turning the platoon over to the next in command, Staff Sergeant A. Robert Rollins, and going back to a warm barracks somewhere to play blackjack. When he got back to the quarters I was sitting on my bunk counting the hirty or forty dollars I'd won. After that he took the platoon on it's hikes and I played blackjack.

Things out of the ordinary always brightened up our days. One day after we started on a hike I gave the platoon to Rollins. He decided he'd go with me so he turned it over to the next guy in the chain of command. On the way, it being so cold and all, we decided to stop at the PX for coffee and donuts. Of course we were carrying our Thompson sub-machine guns and ammunition pouches. We were standing at the counter enjoying the food when I noticed that it had suddenly gotten very quiet. I glanced around and there were two Military Police behind us and they had their hands on their guns. When I asked what the problem was they replied that they seldom got two soldiers there armed with weapons. I explained that we were passing by and decided on the spur of the moment to come in for coffee and donuts. They replied that they understood and would stay with us until we finished and left, for us to take our time. These were the two nicest M.P.s we ever had any dealings with.

All troops going overseas have to pass a seperate physical exam. The only one in our outfit that was incapable of passing one was a Master Sergeant that had been a parachute umper and tester. One of his legs was about two and a half inches shorter than the other one as a result of several not too successful jumps. Anyway to get him over there with us one of the officers that was about his size got dressed in one of his uniforms and took the exam for him.

At Camp Kilmer they had a rule that only ten percent of any organization could be off the post at any one time. In our outfit this more or less meant that only the married men could go off the post. Most had brought their wives with them and naturally wanted to spend all the time

they could with them. This caused so much grousing among the single men that they finally put a stack of blank passes on the orderly room counter and whoever wanted to go to town manufactured his own pass. I'm sure they knew what was happening, but the rule sounded good, so they just looked the other way.

One of our Lieutenants was out with a lady in New York and on the way from town to put him back on the train she asked him what our task force number was. When he told her 1540-Y she told him we'd be going to invade Casablanca, Morocco. When he got back to the base he stopped by the Military Intelligence folks and relayed the information he'd been given. As a result they pulled our unit out of the invasion force and switched another one in. While we were waiting to see what they were going to do with us I got into New York quite a few times. They had a place on Park Avenue that gave out free tickets to various plays, etc. I got to see Lavender and Old Lace, Up in Arms, the Ice Follies and other things. At the Ice Follies in Madison Square Garden we sat in the first row on the ice. If we'd had to pay for the seats they cost twelve dollars and tax. In those days that was a lot of money. We got good seats at every performance we ever went to. Being from out of town we naturally had to see Greenwich Village. We went to a place called Cafe Society, Downtown and ended up trying to drink up their liquor supply.

Sometime while we were there one of the girls that worked in one of the P.X.s got tired of working for just plain wages so one morning she brought two blankets to the post with her. She grabbed the first G.I. that she came to and took him into the wooded area. Once there she hung one blanket over a low limb as a shield, put the other one on the ground behind it, gave him a freebie, and sent him out to spread the word. Three or four hours later a couple of M.P.s driving by noticed the long line of men going into the woods and stopped to find out why. They gathered her and her blankets up and escorted her off the post. It's a good thing they did, at the rate she was going she'd have had all the ready cash on the post.

Every time we went into New York we'd stop in New Brunswick for a pint of Anti-freeze. When we got onto the train we'd open a pair of the seats up so we could see either direction and keep an eye out for the M.P.s. If they caught you with a bottle they confiscated it. When we spotted one coming into the car we handed the bottle to one of the civilians around us who held it for us until the M.P.s were out of sight.

The invasion of Casablanca took place without us and two or three weeks later we got our movement orders. I don't know how our equipment got there but they loaded us on trucks and took us to the train station in New Brunswick. There we caught a train to the Port of New York. As we marched up the gang plank our names were checked against a roster of our outfit and we were assigned stateroom numbers. The Air Force got staterooms and the Infantry got a bunch of tier bunks stacked five high in the Salon. The ship we drew was the S.S. Monterey, a Lurliner that was taken off the run to Hawaii and converted into a troop-ship for the duration of the war. We were aboard and settled down by nightfall. One of our guys named Scotty told me he'd rather be beaten with a baseball bat than take a boat trip because he got so horribly seasick. About 10:00 P.M. someone hollered out that we'd just pulled away from the dock. Scottie turned green and started upchucking, he laid in the gangway deathly sick all the way to Casablanca. Incidentally our boat never pulled away from the dock until 8:00 A.M. the next morning.

Aboard the troopship we only got two meals a day, a late breakfast and an early supper. The second day out we noticed the merchant seamen rolling big rolls of canvas to the tops of the gangways. Once there they fastened the loose end of the roll to the top step and unrolled the canvas down the steps and fastened it as they went along. We wondered what it was for and the following day we found out. Up to that point the ship had been more or less sheltered by the land. Between the second and

third day we were finally out on the Atlantic Ocean proper. The ship was big enough that it was carrying five thousand soldiers and while it didn't pitch around like a smaller boat there was some movement. At each meal five thousand men went down the gangways to the galley, got their food in a stainless steel tray, walked to a stand-up table area and ate, and then walked back up the gangways to their area. Due to the movement of the ship a lot of food was spilled on the floor, was walked in, and then tracked thru all the gangways of the ship. After a couple of days of this the ship smelled like a garbage scow headed down the Hudson river. About six days out we decided the mess line was too much for us. We pooled our cash and bought a case of vanilla wafers from the ships stores. When ever we got hungry we'd eat some of the Vanilla Wafers. Four days of that and it cured me of ever wanting them again... To this day I can't stand them.

The convoy our ship was in had one thousand ships in it. When you stood on deck and looked in a 360 degree circle there were ships as far as you could see. You began to wonder how an enemy submarine could miss if it fired a torpedo into the area. It looked like a sure thing if they just randomly fired one in the general direction of the convoy. I started wondering where a torpedo would hit the ship if one hit it so I dug up a merchant seaman and asked him . He told me he thought about D deck. That's where our stateroom was so after that conversation I spent a lot more time up on the top deck.

Late afternoon of the tenth day we were offshore from Casablanca. They ordered a single ship at a time up to the dock, where passengers were off-loaded. They piled all the gear and things in the holds into cargo nets and piled it onto the docks. Each man had in his possession all his belongings in two barracks bags. In addition he had a gas mask, a steel helmet and liner, and the weapon he'd been issued plus 400 rounds of ammunition for it. Master, Tech, and Staff Sergeants were issued Thompson sub-machine guns and everyone else had .30 calibre Springfield rifles.

We had to carry all this stuff and march to Cazes airport, five and a half or six kilometers. I spent most of the time the trip took us watching 'Margie', the toy Pomeranian dog that one of the guys came home from Sacramento with one evening. She couldn't have a bowel movement on the ship. About every eight or ten steps that we took she'd have to stop and go a bit. It seemed like this went on all the way to the airport. We were billeted inside a soccer stadium, which luckily had a good chain link fence around it. When we got there we were told to pitch pup tents. Each man carried one half of one, one pole, and half the pegs used to erect them. We stopped wherever we happened to be, dug the tent parts out of our bags and pitched the tents. Each man was equiped with two wool blankets so my tent mate and I put one under us and the other three on top. It only took about an hour to discover that we'd made a mistake. As much cold comes from underneath as it does from the top.

When I got up the next morning and looked around one of the guys was eating an orange and I asked where he'd gotten it. He led me out to one of the gates of the soccer field where one of the Arab kids was selling them. There were several Arab women present with their children. One of the guys was asked if he wanted to see one of the Arab woman's breasts. He shook his head yes and she hauled it out and motioned for him to come closer. When he got close to the fence she squeezed it and shot milk all over his face. The Arab kids were just like the kids I saw in Mexico. They ran in gangs and were always asking for cigarettes for papa, for chewing gum, chocolate, or for bon bons. They had been cussed so much by the G.I.s that if you spoke harshly to them they poured out the foulest language you ever heard. We asked a couple of Arabs that we'd befriended, about our own age, if the kids understood what they were saying. They replied that the kids had no idea, they were just parroting what had been said to them.

After lunch we took down all the tents and rearranged them in a much more orderly manner. We gathered up all sorts of things to put on the ground as ground cover and to stuff between our blankets. We also learned that even a pea sized pebble feels like a boulder and were careful to remove them from our sleeping area. The second night we also learned to scoop a small depression for our hip bones to fit into.

The first work assignment we got outside the soccer field was to go to the Dock area to locate and retrieve all our equipment. Our orders were to get all our stuff and whatever else from whatever happened to be there that it looked like we would be able to use when we finally moved into a combat zone. My friends and I found a box containing a hundred mattress covers. We promptly sold them to the Arabs for the equivalent of twenty dollars a piece. We found a lot of canvas cots and we took enough for everyman in the outfit, we numbered two hundred and forty five.

Several days later all the mechanic types were sent to the hangar at the airport. Airplanes were being unloaded from the decks of freighters. Some of them were partially dismantled and packed in boxes and these had to be trucked to the airport. Others were just lashed down on deck and these had to be towed behind a truck or a tug. These had had the wings and portions of the tail sections removed and crated. The planes that were lashed down were coated with several heavy coats of cosmoline. The best way we found to remove the cosmoline was to use hundred octane aviation gasoline very carefully. The smallest spark and every thing would have been blazing. When the fuselage had been cleaned and inspected thoroughly we opened the box that went with it and replaced all the equipment that had been removed for shipment. Once we'd assembled them we checked out the control surfaces to make sure we'd assembled them correctly, checked the safety wiring on every place we'd put it, and checked that the control cable tensions were correct. When every thing was completed and checked out we serviced it with gas, checked out all the various fluids and fired up the engine, or engines. If they checked out O.K. they were turned over to the Fighter Command. We assembled P-38s, P-39s, P-40s, and P-47s.

The war effort was so new that there were no dock hands to work the docks, and no regular assembly squadrons to reassemble airplanes. As the need for these organizations was noted, they were formed. When we'd finally assembled all the planes our Fighter Group needed we were relieved of our duties and moved into a war zone with them. We were assigned to them to perform third echelon repairs. Their mechanics took care of servicing them, loading ammunition into the wings, etc., we took care of the repairs.

When we were ready to move up into a war zone they sent a warrant officer around to see if anybody was a truck driver. They had one hundred four ton Diamond-T trucks loaded with rifles and misc. things that needed to get to an Ordnance depot. Our C.O. volunteered our services to get them there. The alternate to being a truck driver was riding in a French box-car labeled forty men or eight horses. Most of the mechanics, including me decided they were truck drivers. We loaded all of our belongings into whatever spare space there was in the back of the trucks and all the C-rations we'd been issued, plus all the ones we'd liberated, in the storage space under the seats. It didn't take long to discover that if you went hungry it was your own fault. The C (Or canned) rations came in three varieties, meat and beans, meat and vegetable stew, and meat hash. We were eating it cold until someone discovered that you could poke a hole in the lid, set it on the exhaust manifold for ten or fifteen minutes as you drove along and it would be boiling hot. One fellow forgot to put the hole in the top of his can and when the pressure finally got great enough the can exploded. Everything in the engine compartment was covered with a fine layer of meat and beans. It was hard to believe they'd got all that food into one little can.

Just before we left Casablanca the Warrant Officer they'd put in charge gathered us together for a few words. The speech covered how many hospital beds we had available, and that they were all needed for American troops. If perchance we hit an Arab we were to back the truck over him before we got out of the cab to check out his condition. No one ever hit one though so this was a wasted effort.

Our destination turned out to be Montesqieu, Algeria, and was over fifteen hundred miles of the crookedest road I was ever on. It was either up or down hill or around curves. There wasn't a five mile stretch of flat level road in the whole trip. When we started the Warrant Officer rode in front of the convoy in a Weapons Carrier. This caused the convoy to be strung out along the highway too far, so he put the Diamond-Ts out in front. All of the truck drivers agreed to poke along until the guy in front of him was out of sight and to then speed up to the red-lined limit of his speedometer. We soon had the guys at the rear going all out to catch up with us.

In a case of C-rations there were twenty four cans of actual rations and twenty four cans containing hard tack biscuits, three pieces of hard candy, and a package with four cigarettes in it. The Warrant Officer got bored just sitting and riding so one day he opened all the biscuit cans from a case of rations. He put the candy in his steel helmet. Every time we came to a town and slowed down passing through it gangs of children would run along side the vehicles begging for nthe usual cigarettes for papa, chocolate, or bonbons. When he thought he had a crowd of them of sufficient size he'd throw a handful of candy out. This would start the most awful fight you ever saw and he'd just sit there and grin through it all. He finally ran out of candy so he had his driver stop at a pile of gravel along side the road and he got a helmet full of gravel. Then he spent a couple of hours wrapping individual pieces of the gravel in squares of toilet paper. At the next town, after the children had congregated, he threw out a handful of the gravel he'd wrapped. It got the same fight going that the candy had. He thought this was hilarious but he soon tired of wrapping the gravel and had to find something else to pass the time away.

When we finally reached our destination we turned the trucks and other vehicles over to the Ordnance Depot that we'd driven them for and were trucked to where the outfit had been set-up. We'd been on the road for ten days and we hadn't had any way to bathe, wash or hardly anything else. As a result I was sweat galled between my legs. I wanted to clean up and turn in to the medics so I asked Master Sergeant Ancil, who was in charge of setting up the flight line, if we could go shower. He immediately flew into a rage and said "Hell no you can't, everyone wants to go shower". We never did get a chance to explain why. He assigned us the task of ining up a bunch of empty boxes that our equipment had been shipped in.

Apparently he took exception to the manner in which we were doing it. The next thing we knew the Engineering Officer pulled up in a jeep and told us to get our weapons and get in. The next thing we knew the First Sergeant was telling us the Commanding Officer would see us shortly. He called us in and then said that he understood that we didn't want to respond to the Master ergeant's orders. We told him that we had responded to the Master Sergeant's orders but perhaps not in the way he thought we should. We went on to tell him that if they had anything else to be done we'd be glad to do it, so the five of us, four Staff Sergeants and a buck Sergeant were put on the general duty roster.