758th Railway Shop Battalion

By Dave Kaufman, Copyright 1996

With the advent of the activation of railway operating battalions (ROBs) in World War II, the War Department recognized the need for heavy duty maintenance and repair of rolling stock. Maintenance of equipment to keep it in running condition was the responsibility of the ROBs; major repair was the designated responsibility of the railway shop battalions (RSB). Each RSB provided minor/major overhauls, electrical repair, blacksmithing, and a foundry. Under the direction of each railway grand division (RGD), the RSBs worked in support of the ROBs and their duties of transporting supplies, equipment, and personnel.

On April 6, 1943, the 758th RSB was activated at Camp Harrahan in New Orleans, LA. The battalion soon consisted of four companies: H & S, A, B, and C. T-4 Vernon D. Lowry, a pre-war school teacher from Los Angeles, recalled Camp Harrahan. I was a DI at Camp Harrahan, where the drill field was a mile long, a half mile wide, and made of oyster shells a foot deep. You could go blind looking at the drill field for too long. It was hot and humid there. We used to have pools wagering how many drops of sweat would fall off an individuals hand. In addition to my DI duties, myself and five other GIs were detailed to handing out clothing to 200 new inductees every night. (1)

Following basic training at Camp Harrahan, the unit was transferred to Camp Millard in Bucyrus, OH, for further training in RSB operations. Camp Millard was the mechanical training camp of all RSBs. The technical training was obtained in the nearby shop of the New York Central Railroad. The living conditions were not among the best; the GIs lived in tents for nearly three full months in summer.

T-5 Karl Winchester recalled I was sent to Camp Harrahan where I joined the 758th, and then to Bucyrus. Several of the men and I were sent to Mansfield for diesel fuel injection training. We were taught how to keep the injection systems clean, starting with the injectors, and mostly through maintenance of filters. The diesel system was not that much different than gas systems, but keeping impurities out of the diesel fuel was most important. We were also expecting a number of diesel locomotives when we got overseas, and there were only about three of us who even knew anything about them anyway. (2)

As their training neared an end, there was wonder among the men as to which theater the battalion would be sent following training. The resolution to the overseas assignment of the 758th was being reached at this time. There had been a high level of concern among the highest military and civilian levels in the United States and in England regarding supply problems in the CBI. There was much acrimonious debate regarding this concern.

As Japan had an effective blockade around China, vital supplies, in any amounts, were not getting through to the Chinese. The Chinese Nationalist Army (CNA) was expected to at least create a diversion against Japanese ground forces threatening to control India, but in addition to inadequate training, the CNA had insufficient supplies—and not necessarily due to Japanese intervention. Locked in a struggle with Communist Chinese forces, and facing civilian and military corruption at all levels, caused great and unnecessary problems for the CNA.

In India, the Japanese were threatening to invade from Imphal, the gateway to India from Japanese-controlled Burma. British ground forces were also having supply problems, particularly food, but these were mostly geographical and weather-related. After much discussion and pressure, an agreement was reached by Allied military and civilian commanders. They included General Joseph Stilwell, Sir William Slim, Field Marshal of British Forces in India, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and English Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill.

The 758th was subsequently assigned to the 705th RGD, along with five ROBs. In mid-December 1943, the entire division of 4,500 GIs left Los Angeles, CA, on a single troopship, the S.S. Mariposa, en route to the China-Burma-India theater. There were no escort ships, and the ship had to zig-zag every few minutes. After a stopover in Hobart, Tasmania, the men arrived safely in Bombay on January 11, 1944, having spent a total of 32 days at sea.

Lowry remembered the trip. En route, on December 27, we stopped in Hobart, Tasmania, which was closed in celebration of Boxing Day. The mayor opened the town for us, and we were treated real well, especially in the bars. The ship-board food was so bad, the men revolted, and we dumped the food rather than eat it. The ships Captain said he was unable to do anything, because the command of ship was under an Army officer. We heard later that Army officer was later court-martialed and sent to Leavenworth because of the food incident. (3)

Andy Brydon, assigned to H & S Company, recalled the trip. There was a near mutiny on the shop going over. Water was rationed and the food was terrible. We could see that the officers were getting beef, lamb, and pork. After the troops refused to eat the crud which led to the near mutiny, the officers came with their sidearms and read us the Acts of War. The S.S. Mariposa was a civilian liner before the war, and its passenger cubicles were designed for two people. We had six men in each cubicle, and were locked in them prior to the officers arrival. (4)

Their arrival in Bombay was both a curiosity and a shock. The city was crowded, filthy, and hordes of disfigured beggars swarmed them. T-5 Leuty Chambliss of Company B said When we first landed in Bombay, we finally received shore leave. My buddy and I were wandering around, and we noticed that everyone had had their teeth pulled. Later, we learned that they lost their teeth due to long-term use of betel nut. (5)

Among many things, perhaps the most unusual fact the GIs encountered was relative to their assignment. The railroadmen learned of one of the unique aspects of the Indian rail system it was three different gauges. The battalion was split into two sections and sent to different locations, Saidpur and Dibrugarh.

Lowry said, We landed in Bombay and travelled by rail for 1800 miles, and then by paddle wheel boat on the Brahmaputra River for over a day and half. The river was 20 miles wide at that point. There were 125 GIs and 125 Indian soldiers under command of an Indian Army corporal. We took trains the rest of way up to Dibrugarh. There was a Spike camp (camp housing work crews) set at the foot of the Himalayas in the jungle. It rained 310 the first year, and only 280 the second year; the natives complained that they were in a drought. (6)

Winchester recalled The trip up the Brahmaputra River was really something. I cant believe the U.S. government would send us on a river if they knew it was as filthy as it was. That river flows down all the way from Nepal and Tibet and the villagers dump their garbage into it. There was trash and fvses everywhere. When we got to Dibrugarh, we watched the natives wash their clothes in it. (7)

Dibrugarh is located 250 miles north of Calcutta, which in turn is 1,800 miles north of Bombay. The Dibrugarh-Sadiya RR went from Pandu where the broad gauge delivered freight from Calcutta to the western shore of the Brahmaputra River, where it was brought across by flat boats. Freight was reloaded on the meter gauge for shipment to the front, to the east and north to Tinsukia, far to the north of Burma. The city of Sadiya was the eastern terminus and Dibrugarh was halfway between Sadiya and Pandu.

The Brahmaputra River heads on the north side of the Himalayas, continues east before swinging south and finally west to join four other major streams. Together, they drain the south and west parts of the

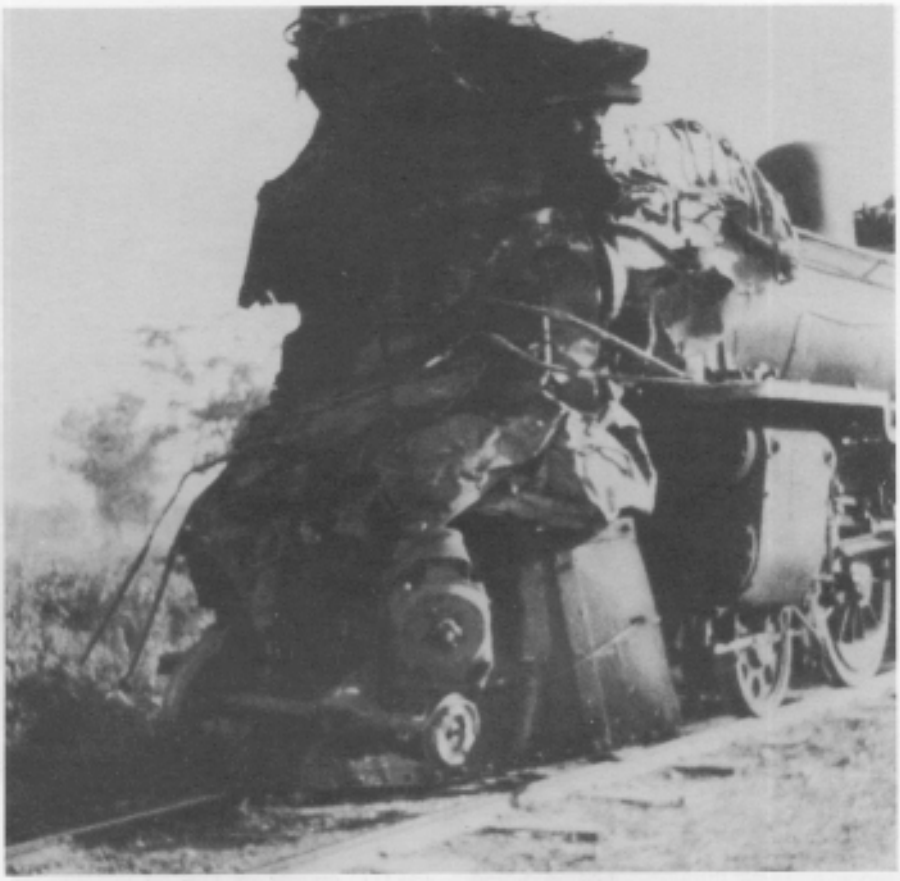
Himalayas to eventually form the Ganges River, then redivide into four rivers for the remaining 500 miles to the sea, a hundred miles below Calcutta.

The GIs appreciated that they were living in tents again. Railroad equipment repair work began immediately. However, the battalion was not far from the war, either. Intelligence reports provided the information that the Japanese closed to within five miles of the railroad near the Manipur Road before being driven off. Five foot deep trenches, covered over with bamboo for camouflage, offered minimal protection against expected Japanese air attacks. The GIs were issued extra clips and ammo for their M-1 carbines, which they took to the shops, along with gas masks and helmets. Work was interrupted by combat maneuvers and infantry training. Tensions were high as the battalion was placed on eight hour alert in preparation for moving out to a combat front.

Winchester said When we first arrived, the Japanese were threatening to cut our lines up north. I saw dogfights and planes shot down, especially near Tinsukia Airfield, which was about 32 miles from our camp. The Japanese even bombed there. saw a P-40, a Japanese bomber, and two Japanese fighters shot down there. For protection, we had British and Welsh gunnery outfits stationed at Dibrugarh with us. All they had were guns and motorcycles. Now, we took anti-aircraft gunnery with these units. We had a large crane, set up next to the Brahmaputra River, that catapulted drone aircraft with 15 foot wingspans about 1,000 feet. They fired at these drones with their towed AAA guns, and we used all of our small arms. We practiced every month for the first several months that we were there. (8)

T/Sgt Paul Cochet, assigned to H & S Company, recalled that When we first got to Dibrugarh, the Japanese had cut or were threatening to cut our lines only 5 miles from where we were. We had some accelerated infantry training courses, but that was tough. We didnt have any regular army officers in our battalion, just railroad men commissioned as officers. They couldnt teach us what they didnt know. (9)

Sgt. Bud Roberts also was assigned to H & S-Co. He was a welder supervisor for Western Pipe and Steel Company before the war. Roberts recalled of Dibrugarh, There was a problem with food thefts along the rail lines. The first three months in Dibrugarh, we only had British food to eat. That consisted of a can of bully beef, tea, and biscuits. We had to soak the beef in tea in order to eat it, because it was so tough. We supplemented our diets with bread purchased from a bakery in a nearby village, Saidpur. One day, someone was eating bread and someone else said Hey, hold that bread up to the light—it looks like a B-29 in there. We clearly saw whole insects, wings, and insect parts baked into that slice of bread. We went down to the bakery, and the baker was rolling his flour on the dirt floor. Meanwhile, goats and cows were just wandering through the bakery shop. We then knew why we had rampant dysentery in camp. Pfc. Harold Ginn, a Company B member said, We called it Hollywood Bread. You had to give it a screen test—push it through wire screen—before you could eat it! (10) Lowry added that Eventually, we got some kangaroo meat from Australia, which wasnt too bad after that bully beef. (11)



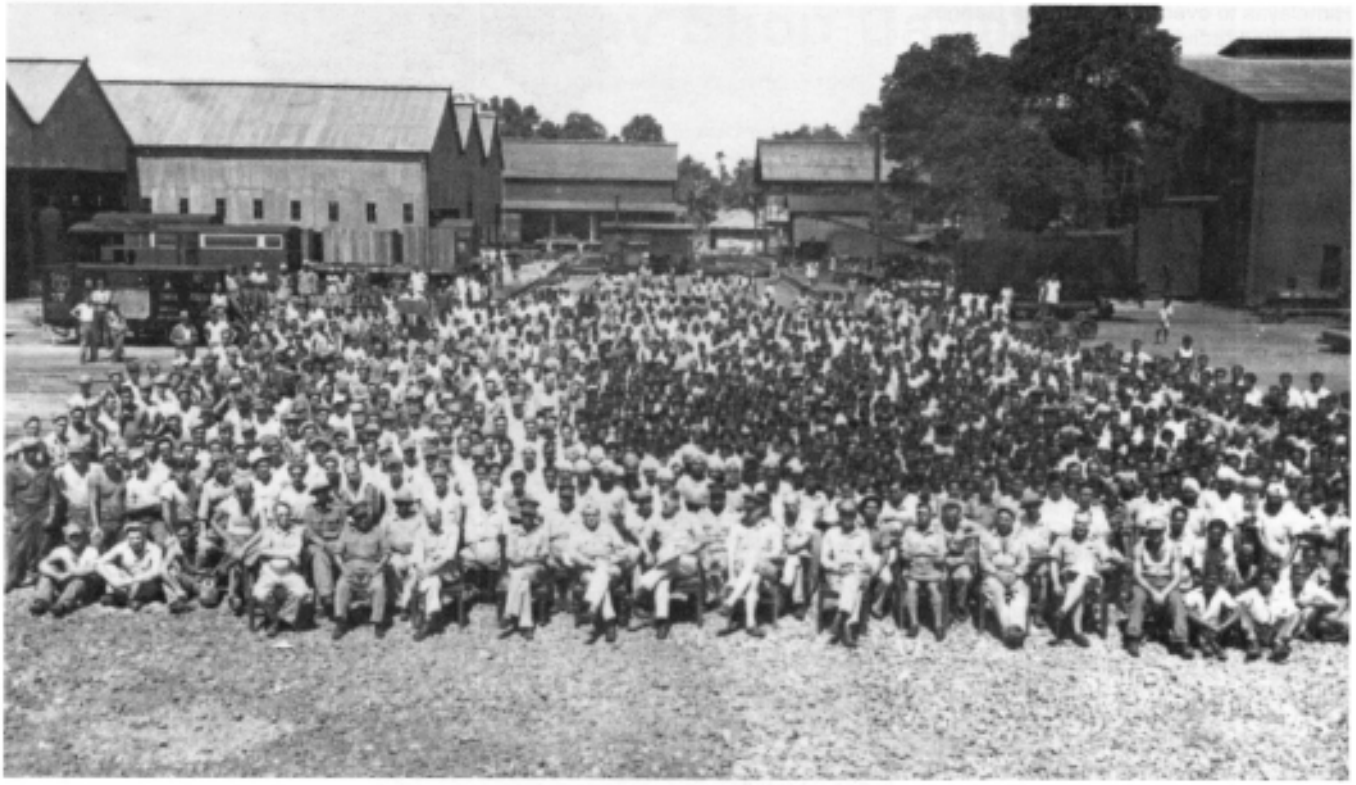
1. Collision between locomotive and rail-converted jeep. Both GIs in the jeep escaped injury— courtesy Ted Gumm.

The first three months, the section at Dibrugarh not only had British food to eat, but were privileged to sleep in British tents. The tents featured handsome native sleeping beds. These were wooden framed devices with a woven coconut rope center, which made sleeping next to impossible.

Eventually, living conditions improved. Bashas were built they had concrete floors and thatched bamboo. They slept 10-14 GIs on both sides. There was electricity in them, but no fans they just didnt work due to humidity. The work shops were 1/4 mile away. Major Almes directed that a stationary boiler be constructed, so we had steam and hot showers. After that, we always had clean utensils in kitchen, so there were no mass bouts of diarrhea. Clean rainwater from wells up the mountain in the tea patches was piped in.

Mohonbari Airbase was 4-5 miles east of our camp. P-51s and P 47s were based there, and always took off westbound until they were directly over our camp, and then they climbed. The planes often blew thatch off our buildings, so that it looked like it was snowing. Japanese bombers flew over our camp twice. The first time, we were digging zig-zag trenches and drinking our first beers, so we didnt care too much. We put our beer on our concrete floors. They werent ice cold, but they werent warm, either. Our fighters must have taken care of the Japanese bombers, because those two occurrences were the only times we saw them, recalled Lowry. (12)

Winchester said Our camp at Dibrugarh was the site of the old Frank Buck headquarters. As a matter of fact, his old fireplace and hearth from his main building were still there. Now, there were always wild animals around, and we learned a lot about them. Animals who migrate follow a trail known to them for generations. It doesnt matter if something is in the way or not. Theyll just keep going. Our camp was in the path of an old monkey trail. They would walk out of the jungle, climb the



2. 758th Railway Shop Battalion in Dibrugarh—courtesy Vernon D. Lowry

fence, and walk through our camp. Sometimes they walked on the ground, and sometimes they walked on the roofs of the our bashas—nothing really stood in their way. These migrations lasted the entire time we were there.

One time, we were returning to our barracks late at night following a movie. It was pitch dark and as we came in, we saw a large shape, about the size of a living room chair, sitting on my buddy s bunk. The shape had pulled my buddys mosquito netting down from the ceiling. We finally got close enough to figure out it was a large female monkey, who was apparently waiting to die. She had been left behind by her group. That got our hearts pumping, and we all raced out of the barracks as fast as we could. (13)

T-5 Chambliss recalled I was a blacksmith in the battalion. After we got to Dibrugarh, one of the laborers was struggling to break a betel nut open. I told him to just lay it on the anvil and I hit it with a sledgehammer. The nut just went everywhere. He was upset because it had cost him 2 annas. I gave him a rupee note, and he said, crack another sahib, crack another!. (14)

After several months, the section that was at Saidpur was transferred up to Dibrugarh and the battalion was together once again. H & S handled administrative duties, which included the responsibility for supply and maintenance of shop power and equipment. The existing power supply was D.C. current and U.S. equipment operated on A.C. One of the initial jobs was bringing in additional air compressors which were used not only for equipment operation, but to cool the GIs at work in the machine shops. Eventually, a new electric power house was installed.

T-4 Cliff Olsten was assigned to H & S Company. He remembered I was an architectural draftsman before I was drafted into the Army and was fortunate to be assigned as a draftsman for the 758th RSB. I did a lot of sign painting, painted inspirational slogans for the men, and marked barracks bags. I also drew the Christmas cards. Another one of my duties was maintaining control of the blueprints of the War Department locomotives that we had in theater. We didnt have blueprints for the Indian locomotives. So, if someone came in with a request for the blueprint of a part, I sketched it out for him and gave him the sketch. I was first assigned to Saidpur, and had a lot of Indian draftsmen working with me. After 4-5 months, I moved up to Dibrugarh. One of the differences between the two locations was that we slept in tents at Saidpur, and then in barracks that we called bashas in Dibrugarh. The bashas had cement floors, with woven sides and roofs. We had electricity in the bashas, but no fans. At Dibrugarh, we had a large number of Indians involved in camp sanitation. They continually cleared out ditches as part of mosquito control, and generally swept the camp to keep it clean. To further combat mosquito-borne diseases, such as malaria, we took atabrine on a daily basis. Those pills kept you healthy, but turned your skin yellow. (15)

3. Christmas card, drawn by Cliff Olsten—courtesy Vernon D. Lowry

T/Sgt Cochet added I was in charge of repairing all the motor cars, or section cars, used by the ROBs in theater. These were the little section cars used to go out on the tracks and make repairs. One of the responsibilities of the ROBs was track

maintenance in their respective divisions. The section cars the Army used had a variety of engines, which were better than the hand-operated cars more known in the States. There were International 6 cylinder flatheads, Buda 4 cylinders, and some even had Briggs and Stratton engines. We also had a few large section cars with V-8s, and they could really fly. I believe they were all chain driven, and had the same size chain. Also, they all had the same size axle front and rear, about 2 in diameter with two pillow block bearings for each axle with a sprocket on the rear axle. Typical repairs to these section cars were general engine maintenance, axles, chains, sprockets, and water pumps. The problem was that we didnt always have the necessary parts on hand. Of course, we had about 100 pounds of main bearing caps and you wouldnt use but one in 10,000 years. The Army didnt know what to purchase, or how much to purchase. The repair crews went out about 10-12 miles to make repairs. Once they reached their repair destination, they would take the cars off the tracks by lifting them up or pushing them off the tracks. This was to allow the trains to keep rolling. Some were light enough that two men could pick them up, and other required four men lifting up one end at a time. We initially had a hard time finding what we needed. We were fortunate in locating a 100-acre wrecking yard near Ledo. I found out the yard had a lot of parts that we needed. An example of this was the section cars had small International truck engines in them, because those little engines ran well in hot climates, especially those flatheads back then. Our parts section didnt have distributors and water pumps. This lot had a lot of International parts. When the Japanese ran the British out of Burma, everything that could be evacuated was brought out, and if it didnt run, it was dumped in this lot. There was a smaller section, about 40 by 150 where a lot of odds and ends were dumped, especially bicycles. The Air Corps used lots of bikes. It seemed that if you broke a wheel, you got a new bike. You could take two bikes, make a good one, and have spare parts. We ended up with a lot of bikes in camp. The T/Sgt who ran this lot told me that I needed a purchase order signed by my commanding officer. Once that was done, that T/ Sgt said I could take anything and everything I needed. It didnt even have to be on the order. You see, he understood the problem. I think we were the only unit obtaining parts from this lot.

Of course, it helped that we often had liquor to trade. We obtained it through T/Sgt Olson who also worked in the office with an Indian sergeant. The Indian sergeant picked up rations about 40 miles from Ledo. If he went by train, the trip would take most of two days. If he went with my crew, we dropped him off and picked him up on our return trip in one day. Some of the officers he picked up rations for didnt want the liquor. So Olson and I gave him money to get the unwanted liquor. We ended up with 12-15 quarts for less than $2.00 a bottle. (116)

4. Locomotive repair—courtesy Norm Sieb.

Company A was responsible for the lathes, milling machines, and repairing minor or major overhauls of locomotives. One of the lathes was large enough to turn a six foot locomotive wheel. A major overhaul could mean taking a locomotive completely apart and then rebuilding it. Prior to assignment of the battalion, the shops were turning out two of these majoroverhauls a month; Company A increased this total to 10 major overhauls a month.

Pvt Don Clevenger said I was an apprentice machinist before the war. I had my basic training at Camp Harrahan, LA, and was originally assigned to the 763rd RSB. I transferred as a machinist to Company A, 758th RSB at Bucyrus just prior to the latter battalion being sent overseas. I was overseas in less than three months after joining the Army. It was a half mile walk from the camp to the shops. I worked the night shift, from 1700 to 0100 hours, six days a week. When we first got there, out behind the shops were three tracks of sidings. Each set had approximately a mile of locomotives needing various types of repair work. The Indian government had projected a three year completion date on all of the repairs, which reflected completion of all repairs necessary for each locomotive. Doing the minimum amount of work to get those vitally needed locomotives in service, we completed the repair work on all of the locomotives in approximately six months. Now, some of the locomotives

5. Overview of shop—courtesy Norm Sieb.

were in real bad shape, and needed a lot of repairs, and others required only a little repair. There was a wheel machine already set up when we arrived. The wheel machine is a lathe to turn the driver wheels on the locomotives. It turned the tires—the part of the wheel that touched the track (also known as the tread)—and also ground the journals and the crankpin simultaneously. The wheels were flat and the tires were heated, which caused them to expand. Then the tires were pressed on the wheel, and when they cooled, they were on tight. When the tread was worn out, the men would cut it off in sections, and put a new one on, instead of replacing the whole wheel.

I worked on a turret lathe turning out bolts, shafts, etc., and also worked on a boring mill. Now, the brake pistons on the locomotives had leather cups which were used to catch the air and set the brakes. We had a problem because we couldnt get the leather cups, so we cut grooves in the pistons and made rings, like car piston rings. I cut the rings to size—there were two on each piston, and two pistons on each engine. I cut the outside and the inside of each ring, and then cut them off to width. Id take a hacksaw, cut the solid rings in two, take a piece out of them, and fit the rings up inside the engine cylinder. Id file them down until they had about 1/16 clearance around the cylinder. Each ring was about 10 in diameter, and about 3/16 thick. I could get about 15-20 rings out of one casting. Once they were cut and matched, the floor mechanic did the actual installation on the locomotive.

Our shop had a unique way of moving the locomotives through. We didnt have a turntable like most shops do. We had what was called a transfer table. We drove the locomotive onto the track outside of the shop, moved the track sideways, and then the locomotive drove back off on the other side. (17)

Brydon, initially assigned as a truck driver said, The drivers major job was hauling supplies for both the shop and the camp. I drove up to Mohonbari Airbase and picked up 40-50 barrels of gasoline and diesel to fuel them. We also transported people on sick call who were in need of treatment greater than that available from the medical unit attached to our camp. It was a good blacktop road, and still is. I was also a temporary camp guard—but not assigned as an MP. Then, I was assigned to the maintenance section, responsible for the maintenance of several diesel engines that provided both electrical power and power for the air compressors. Taking care of the generators was easy. I turned one on at 0800 hours, and let it run until 2200 hours, and turned another one on 1800 hours to run the lights, and turned it off in the morning. I made sure they had enough fuel, changed the oil, and worked in synch in putting out the correct voltage. They were 30kw generators, and the smaller one was a 10kw machine. All were AC generators. There was a boiler that ran the power to the shops, but that was a DC generator, since it was British. There were six 30kw generators and three or four air compressors for the shops.

Two special projects accomplished by our battalion were the fabrication of 46 refrigerator rail cars. This work was done at our Saidpur facility, and was accomplished ahead of schedule. With this job accomplished, food that needed refrigeration could be transported to the areas forward of Assam. The second project was the conversion of two passenger rail cars for use by the Red Cross. These mobile Red Cross canteens would be able to service remote camps that didnt have access to any other facility. The cars were set up to provide coffee, donuts, a writing area, and Red Cross volunteers to operate the canteen. (18)

Pfc. Benjamin Lowenstein recalled that I was assigned as a car repairman in the 758th, but like the others, did a lot of different jobs. One of our biggest jobs was building refrigerator cars. We built huge ice bunkers on the ends of each car, and insulated them as well. The boxcars were wood; we added kapok to the sides, ceilings, and floors, and covered that up with reclaimed wood. I guess the sides were about 6-8 thick. The kapok looked like the roll insulation of today, but we didnt have the protective equipment like insulation installers wear nowadays. We also built huge heavy doors for the refrigerator cars. Each of the outward opening doors was 12-14 thick, about four feet wide, and eight feet high. The hinges were made from 3 x 3 steel about 3/8 n thick.

I also burned a lot of rivets, and did some rivet bucking. Burning a rivet meant using an acetylene torch to heat the rivet head; then you would turn the torch off, and use oxygen to blow the head off. Another GI hammered the rivet out the other side, which could be used again. Bucking a rivet was a three-man job. The first GI—the heater—heated a new rivet and inserting it in the hole. The heat caused the rivet to expand. The next GI—the catcher used an air hammer which featured a special die that fit over the rivet head and pounded it in. The third GI was on the inside, and pounded the rivet body flat. It all had to be done very quickly. We also built a special luxury railcar for some Indian prince. Also, I remember seeing a passenger car over there that was so long, it had a wheel truck, on a shaft, in the center. When the car came to turns, the body slid over outside the rail, but the center wheel truck remained on the track, supporting the car. Indian cars didnt have couplers, they just had hooks, and were hitched up with a turnbuckle. The cars also had springloaded bumpers on them. When Indian-built trains started up or stopped, there wasnt a lot of jerking, like on American-built trains. (119)

Winchester, also assigned to Company A, said My first job at Dibrugarh was starting and maintaining the engines in the shops power plant. We had six power units to start with. Each one was approximately eight feet long by five feet high, and was an inline 8-cylinder engine. Their power was measured in kilowatts, but I dont remember their output. It took two units for each building, like the roundhouse and the wheel lathe. The wheel lathe was used to turn and true the six feet tall drive wheels for the locomotives. We turned wheels on Baldwins, Porters, Mallys, and British locomotives. The British locomotives featured double boilers, one on each side of

the cab. These British locomotives didnt work out too well, because they were so heavy they tore up the spur roadbeds. We had a crew working full time on the rails and roadbed from the shops to Mohonbari Airfield, and on the other spur.

After I left the power unit, we received a lot of the rail motor cars. They were like hand cars, but had small Ford and Chevy inline six cylinder engines. Each one could pull one flatcar, and we used them a lot to move 500- and 1,000- pound bombs to Mohonbari and Tinsukia Airfield, which was a bomber base. Mohonbari was only about 5 miles away. They could pull 1,000 pounds at one time. Sometimes the bombs were shuttled in through the yard, and sometimes on the river on a barge. We built engine covers, seats, cabs with windshields, and a cover for those cars. They had a clutch and a throttle instead of a gas pedal. You could start them in any gear, but second was the best. You could spin them in high gear. They had chains, sprocket gears, and standard transmissions with a single clutch. They featured 14 inch flanged wheels. The wheels were always coming up with a flat spot from the guys spinning them or locking them up. Id take those heavy wheels off and they would get trued up. Sometimes they could be turned on a lathe, but others were repaired by filling in the flat spot and then welding it. My job was repairing the drive trains and maintaining the cars. They were fast and cheaper to operate than some of the larger locomotives. They could go approximately 100 MPH on a straightaway, but that was real dangerous on those tracks. Doing 60 MPH, I dropped one off the tracks on a curve 3 miles from the airfield. Someone had pulled only half a switch. You see, Indian railroads dont have switches like we do; theirs were off set, maybe 3-4 feet, and you had to sometimes move a switch for each rail, especially on the spurs. Our rails move in tandem by one switch. It may have had something to do with the angle at which spurs meet main lines. (20)

Company B was responsible for boiler repair, firebox rebuilds, and blacksmithing. Boilers could be completely rebuilt in this part of the shop. Blacksmiths straightened out bent sections of rail cars, usually damaged as the result of accidents.

T-2 Nicholas Gizzi was a boilermaker before the war. He said, I was working for the Delaware and Hudson RR before the war. I was a boilermaker for the 758th doing welding and riveting. Iron boilers were both welded and riveted into locomotives. We worked right inside the body of the locomotives. The biggest problem boilers had over there was the impurity and hardness of the water. The water was so dirty, there was always a lot of mud in the bottom of the boilers—like what you might find in an old water heater in your home. The boilers would be so full of mud, they wouldnt heat properly. We tried to inspect the locomotives once a month. Boilers had other problems too, such as clogged flues, broken stay bolts, and about a hundred others. Flues, which connect the throw sheets inside the boiler, front to back and carry the smoke out, sometimes leaked water. Flues came in different sizes depending upon the size of the boilers. In India, dirt tended not to stick to the brass-constructed flues, but accumulated in the bottom of the boilers. The fireboxes have copper liners and staples. (21)

6. Jim DeWolf and his wrecker halftrack—courtesy Jim DeWolf.

T-5 A1 Contreras said I was a shipyard yard welder for Cal ship on Terminal Island, CA, before the war. I was assigned to H & S Company, but worked in a Company B Specialty Shop. The shop usually made a lot of miscellaneous products for the USAAF, but also built a prototype jeep with steel wheels for operation on railroad tracks. We also made a sand box that was mounted on the outside of that same jeep, next to the driver. By pulling a lever, the bottom panel slid open, and sand poured out, for traction on the rails. The box was approximately 12 x 8. The jeep was sent up to Myitkyna, so that the unit up there could make others. My shop unit also mounted brand new Mercury engines on hand carts that were used up in Myitkyna to haul supplies. The Japanese had destroyed most of the engines, freight cars, and tracks (22)

T-5 Read Putnam, assigned to Company B, recalled I was a blacksmith working at a forge situated out back of the Dibrugarh shops, and did a lot of freight and coal car rib repair. The fully-enclosed cars themselves were used to transport horses and mules. The ribs we straightened out were about seven feet high, made of 2 x 2 angle iron, with about 3 x 3 on the corner and two irons placed flange end to flange end the full length of the car. The ribs were contoured from the angle iron frame up in the shape of a number seven (with a straight side) and riveted at intervals to the sheet metal of the sides and ends, as well as through the flanges of the back to back angle iron along the top. Most of the construction was hot riveted using different dimensions. The ribs ended up looking like pretzels after some of the wrecks. We heated the ribs foot by foot, straightening them out and restoring the curve where the ribs were contoured to fit up the side and then join at the center of the car with the ribs on the other side. We punched out the holes again so the rivets went through. While forging the ribs, there was general distortion on one dimension or another during the process because we never had furnaces big enough to heat a complete rib all at once. It took anywhere from 3-4 hours to 2 days to straighten each rib, depending upon how wrinkled they were. We never manufactured any new ribs.

Even though I was assigned to Company B, our shop did repairs in the Company C forges. Our work was done on and for rolling stock running on the meter gauge close to the rip track used by Company C who reassembled the cars with rebuilt parts. I worked on this outside forge, with only a corrugated metal roof for cover, for about 18 months. The freight cars were of metal construction, and some were badly twisted in the wrecks on the rails. We never had any cranes around the forges, so the frames and wheel trucks were sent to the

heavy blacksmiths inside the building. I also made leaf springs needed to repair cars. The main springs of the cars were a set of five or six leaves. Each leaf was 1/2 x 4 spring steel and the main leaf broke when any kind of wreck took place. The spring steel had to be cut to the proper size and then bent around a 1 shackle bolt to hold the spring in place, and then arched to make a movable spring.

The operating crews were working under some trying circumstances early in the time we were there. Japanese patrols would fire on the crew and the crew returned the fire. Sometimes there was a race between Japanese troops on the ground and the crews in their cabs. Needless to say, wrecks were frequent and some railroad equipment severely damaged. Other causes of wrecks were hot fire boxes or sacred cows on the tracks. Or, train A would be traveling faster than train B and climb up the caboose. More repairs! (23)

T-5 Chambliss, who also repaired leaf springs, recalled The repair of leaf springs was one job that kept us busy. Usually, they had to be welded in a forge—you know, heated up, struck on the anvil, and welded together. We just repaired them and didnt have to make new ones. It usually took about an hour and half to complete the job. Hot, just coming out of the forge, and having to lay it just right on the anvil was tough. Repair of the leaf springs was my toughest job. There were usually five or six bars to each spring. You laid one on top of another one, and bound them together with clamps. Boy, were they heavy, especially after you bound them all together. It always took a couple of men, sometimes more, to handle one completed spring. We also repaired damaged rolling stock, like freightcars. Sometimes, you could pound out or pull out the dent, just like working in a civilian autobody repair shop. Other times, you had to cut the damaged part out, and replace it by welding it in. (24)Company C ran the foundry, which manufactured different items necessary to operate a railroad. Wheels were trued, bearings were repaired or replaced, and brakes were repaired, built, and added to existing rolling stock. S/Sgt Jim De Wolf was assigned to Company C. I was in charge of wheels and ran the wrecker. The wrecker was a half track with a 10 foot beam on the front end and with a one inch cable which we used as a hook. We also had a winch on the front. We used the wrecker to lift freight cars and wheels, by lifting the ends of the cars off of their trucks and placing that end on a steel horse or another truck. We worked about 12 hours a day, which was okay, because we got double chow. The chow was okay, but the natives just went wild over it. They ate everything except for the meat. We were called out two or three times to clear wrecks on the tracks. We just followed along right next to the tracks because there were tea swamps surrounding us. (25)

S/Sgt Robert Foran, also assigned to Company C, had an interesting civilian career. I worked in a mental institution before the war, and tried to keep that quiet so I didnt have to work in Army hospitals. I was also a graduated apprentice for Sante Fe Railroad, working as a steel car repairman before the war. I did a lot of riveting for them rather than welding. I was the foreman for the Company C Shop. I ensured that the projects were completed, and completed on time. We refitted the refrigerator cars, and sent them up the line. Our shop straightened a lot of cars that had damage from accidents; we picked the cars up from the wrecking yard at Dibrugarh. We always had ample equipment, but occasionally ran out of acetylene for cutting steel. We mixed a little carbide with water, which formed a useable gas, as a substitute for the acetylene for the few occasions when that happened. We didnt do too much welding in our shop that I remember. (26)

Lowry said There were three shifts working. The Indians already there used to sit on the floor, holding work projects with their feet. For example, they could turn out a coupling pin in three weeks, patiently filing the stems into perfectly round forms. We built work benches 3-4 feet high, but the Indians sat on them, still holding projects with their feet. The Indians were paid in rice—one cupful for each member of his family. We saw that amount was tripled by the time we left. (27)

The GIs also had the fortune of working in a training program ordered by the commander of the Military Railway Service—close order drill. Brydon said As far as my work shift, we worked just liked we did in the United States. Those who worked in the shops had to do calisthenics, then went to the shops and worked, returned to camp for lunch, and then went back to the shops. They cleaned up, had evening retreat, dinner, and then had the rest of the night off. Calisthenics lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. (28)

Contreras recalled When we first arrived in Dibrugarh, we worked three shifts. I worked an eight hour day, and was off Sundays. Someone had the bright idea that before each work day, we would do calisthenics. So our officers marched us in formation, from our camp about a mile to a soccer field, where we did the calisthenics. The weather was hot and humid, so we were all tired, dirty, and sweaty as we got to work. We performed calisthenics before every work day the entire time we were there. (29)

When one considers that the GI shop workers were using huge heavy tools just to do their military job—some of the wrenches alone were three feet long and weighed 30-40 pounds—this calisthenics program appears ill-thought out. Taking into consideration the more than 2,500 miles distance between New Delhi, the headquarters of the 705th RGD—and Dibrugarh, it is apparent even the tough climate considerations did not offer a respite nor an understanding at the RGD offices.

On April 4, 1944, Lord Louis Montbatten, Commanding Officer of all ground forces in the CBI Theater, spoke to the battalion in their shops. He encouraged the unit by describing to the men how important their job was in support of the ROBs and the combat effort of Allied ground forces.

In May 1944, several of the GIs made an interesting discovery. Winchester said We had some V-8 engines already, but in about May 1944, up near Ledo, we found a cave used by the Japaneve that had 25, brand new, still-in-the-crate V-8s from a major American automobile manufacturer. The crates had 1944 dates, about the time we got there, and had no water or other damage. We didnt see any paperwork. The engines could have been stolen or captured, but it also appeared as if this manufacturer was still selling engines to the Japanese in the middle of the war. These engines were complete—they had starters, generators, and carburetors. We loaded them all up and took them back to Dibrugarh with us. They had about an inch and a half of cosmoline on them, so we cleaned them off with a solvent and washed them off with a water hose. (30)

In August, 1944, several of the men from the battalion were sent via air to Myitkyna and assigned to the 61st Transportation Company (Provisional). Their task was to repair and return to service available locomotives and freight cars of the railroad running from Myitkyna to Mandalay. Defeated Japanese forces were only 20 miles away from Myitkyna. Tracks were repaired and the prototype jeep made by Contreras specialty unit was utilized on the rails. Other teeps were also customized in a similar manner. A single jeep could pull up to two box or flat cars. One jeep train even transported several mules assigned to Merrills Marauders. These hybrid jeeps were used for over a week until the destroyed rails and bridges were ready for the heavy locomotives. The running shed and water tower at the main railroad yard in Myitkyna were also welded and repaired. Multiple Japanese air attacks on the nearby airfield did not deter the GIs from their tasks. It took nearly a year before all of the men were returned to the battalion.

Back at Dibrugarh, the remainder of the battalion continued their much-needed repairs. At this point in the war, equipment and supplies were moving by rail in far greater numbers than in the air over the The Hump. The five ROBs operating in the theater were ensuring steady work for the 758th RSB.

With the Japanese threat subsiding as they withdrew their forces from India and Burma, the workload did not prevent the battalion from some entertainment. A battalion baseball team was assembled, and it went up against teams organized by the ROBs and other support units. On Christmas Day, 1944, several major league baseball players made an appearance at the championship game for the theater. There were organized and sanctioned boxing matches that were also well-attended.

Some of the GIs recalled trips to Kunming, China. Brydon said In April 1945, I volunteered to drive the Ledo Road to Kunming with a group of 20 others from the battalion. Upon our arrival in Ledo, we learned that our trucks were older than expected and required some repairs and maintenance prior to leaving. It was during this time when Chuck Dagen and I were taking a shower and we got into a conversation with two guys were brand new to the CBI, and they asked us about malaria. Chuck, who was skin and bones anyway, answered that he had the disease three times already and had gone from 180 pounds upon arrival to his present 135 pounds. He surely got their attention. It was all a big lie since he never had the disease. There were 40 GIs and 40 Chinese Nationalist Army soldiers in our convoy. We left on April 21st at 0830 hours on our 1,076 mile trip. The Pangsau Pass was in our first mountain range, and was shrouded in fog and light rain during much of the climb. It was slow going and I had to use first gear most of the day. There were 27 switchbacks in a vertical mile—it was mountainous driving all day. There is a great deal of tropical growth, many tree ferns and numerous streams coming off the mountains. The green vegetation is almost overpowering. We drove only 75 miles in 12 hours. The road wasnt nearly as bad as we had been told. There was a great deal of rock being quarried and broken into smaller stones that would be used on the road. There were rock crushers all along the road. The road crossed the Shinglo Pass and then there was a six mile descent to Shingbwyang at the base of the hills, 103 miles from our starting point.

On the fourth day we drove through the Hukawng Valley, and the road was quite straight and level. The jungle trees were immense on each side. At the 187 mile marker, we reached Warazup and crossed the Namyin River. The road opened up through the valley into two lanes, and we made pretty good time. We arrived in Myitkyina, on the banks of the Irrawaddy River, 257 miles from our origination. A Bailey Bridge was being built by the engineers over the river. The road on the other side was deteriorated. There was lot of wrecked and abandoned Japanese equipment alongside the road. The next day, we passed four mule trains coming in from the front in Burma. They had been with the Mars Task Force. The road was only blacktopped, and was poorly maintained at that. It was full of pot holes, and was very slow going as we tried to find the smallest holes. This was just outside of Bhamo.

7. Memorial service for President Franklin D. Roosevelt courtesy Norm Sieb.

We made it into Wanting, China a week later. The scenery changed from jungle to scenery similar to some Southern California hills. There was cactus, succulents, and lantana on the gently rolling hills. The road was very crooked and reminded me of the original ridge route (State Highway 99) in California. We started climbing in elevation again, and the scenery reminded me of the way to Yosemite, California. There were numerous coniferous trees, and then we drove into the Salween River gorge. We had to cross the river on the Hwei Tung suspension bridge. This was a real thrill as the portion of the bridge that the truck was on waa lower than the area in front and it kept moving and swaying as the truck progressed. We safely crossed then followed the Swegoo River, covering our best distance in one day—141 miles. Our convoy finally arrived in Kunming on May 5, and eventually all of us returned to our camp on different Air Corps flights. (31)

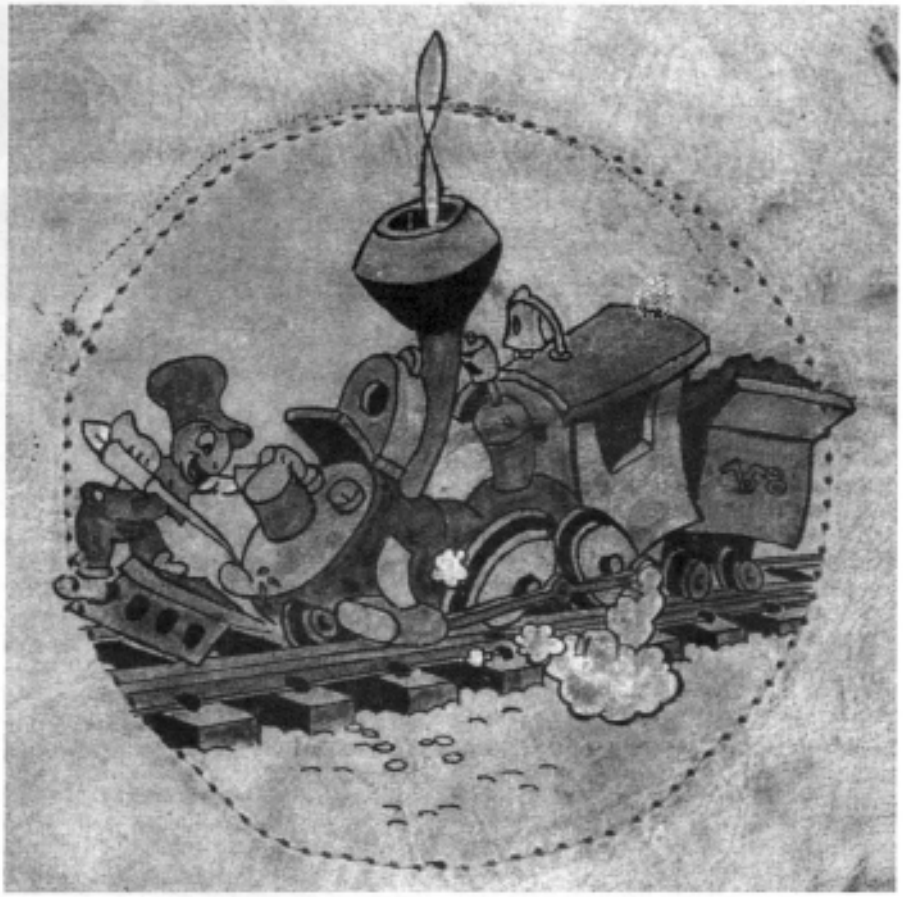
Winchester recalled a personal trip. I took a trip up the Ledo-Burma Road to see a mule outfit up there. They took care of those mules like you would take care of a girlfriend. They got exercised regularly, they got rub downs, and their hooves were closely watched. There were no odors, there were no flies, and no excrement laying around. I was surprised to learn my cousin was an officer in the outfit.

The trip up there got a buddy and I thinking about a trip to Kunming on motorcycles. My buddy canceled out after about 200 miles, so I made the trip by myself a week later on an old BSA. My buddy and I each took .45s with us, but when I went alone, I brought a .45 Thompson in addition to the .45 pistol. There were lots of bandits operating on the road, but I never saw any. Gas, oil, and water were not a problem, because there were pipelines running the whole length of the Burma Road. You could pull the plug, take what you needed, replug, and be on your way. By the time I arrived in Kunming, about two days and two nights later, I had blisters on my legs and hands, was dirty and stinking, and was tired. Went to sleep right next to the road on the outskirts of Kunming with my motorcycle. The next morning, got a bath and something to eat for a pack of cigarettes. Sold a carton of cigarettes for $200.00. There were lots of common Chinese walking around with U.S. currency. The Chinese would offer to buy your clothes right off of you. I left that old motorcycle on the street and caught a ride at the airfield. I told the guy I borrowed it from that it broke down and where it was. (32)

The veterans all had varying opinions regarding their Indian co-workers. Most agreed that the Indians did not cause problems in the shops, but some differed. Putnam said, The lines and shops were run by GIs, with native assistance. The natives werent a lot of help. They paced themselves to fit their own needs of schedule and war or no war had just two speeds. This one, and one slower. The native population seemed to me to be a very high strung people, deeply emotional in things religious or political. They argued before, during, and after work, and often fought as soon as the whistle blew at night. The British put up with none of their differences during working hours, and often were called after hours to prevent bloodshed and serious injury. (33) Gizzi and Lowenstein did not recall any problems with the Indian workmen, and Gizzi stated They taught us a few tricks. (34) Chambliss stated We didnt have any personal problems with the Indian laborers, but they sure fought against each other. (36)

With the war winding down, the battalion started losing men who were not being replaced, which was good news for the 758th. Rumors as to where the remainder of the unit was going, if it was going, and who was going, were rampant. The surrender of Japan only increased these rumors. The first to go were the older GIs, and some of them left with the 725th ROB, whom they shipped over to India withus in 1943, on the U.S.S. General Hugh L. Scott. Finally, on October 13, 1945, the locomotives and rolling stock repairmen were on their way home. From Pandu to Amingaon and on to Bengal, the men were transferred from one railroad gauge to another, and even at odd hours, they didnt mind. Camp Hialeah had been established in Calcutta as a staging base, and was now a port of embarkation. Coincidentally, also on board were GIs from two more of the five ROBS that had shipped over with the 758th on the S.S. Mariposa. Sailing through the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean, and finally a stormy Atlantic Ocean, the battalion made

8. 758th going home—courtesy Norm Sieb.



9. Patch designed by Disney for unit

it home on November 24, 1945. The battalion was inactivated on November 26, 1945.

The GIs of the 758th Railway Shop Battalion played no small part in their supporting role. By keeping both locomotives and rolling stock in good repair and running, building new stock and refurbishing old stock, they were the foundation for equipment, supplies, and personnel to get where they were needed. The 758th ensured the success of the ROBs operation in carrying out their duties. Between March 1944 and August 1945, the 758th repaired more than 4,700 cars, converted 132 boxcars into low-sided gondolas and 46 boxcars into refrigerator cars and changed others into snack cars for troop trains. (37) Additionally, they equipped several thousand cars with brakes and more than 2400 cars with vacuum brake systems. By July 1945, 96 % of 10,113 War Department freightcars had been equipped with vacuum braking systems. (38) This application of brake systems reduced the numbers of collisions and other accidents significantly, thus keeping more cars and locomotives on the rails and keeping them there longer. The superhuman hard work, under difficult and trying climatic and working conditions, sheer numbers of work output, all of which led to the success of the 758th RSB was a little-known factor of great military significance to the successful Allied combat effort in the CBI.

THE INSIGNIA

The 758th Railway Shop Battalion was authorized the CBI and Services of Supply SSIs, but never had a DI. What is most interesting is that the book, Disney Dons Dogtags, indicates that Company B had a Disney design for an insignia. (39) Unfortunately, the book incorrectly identifies the unit aa a Railway School Battalion—and no one in Company B ever saw the design, let alone the patch. A review of Walt Disney Company Archives in Burbank, California, turned up the note that the drawing was approved in May 1944, which is when the battalion was already in theater. However, a very few members of H & S Company not only were aware of the design—they also wore the patch. I was fortunate in locating a surviving member who still had his. He had drawn it in colored ink on leather c. 1945, and wore it on his khaki shirt. His example is in surprisingly good condition. The skill and artistry is amazing, with laser-sharp lines, distinct and realistic shading, with the colors still retaining their vibrancy.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Interview with author

(2-7) ibid.

(8) Interview with author.

NOTE: In Dr. Eric R. Cranes book, The Burma Roadsters—464th CA AA Battalion in China-Burma-India, Western Research Company, Tucson, 1992, he describes the battalions AA training at Dibrugarh.

(9) Interview with author

(10-30) ibid.

(31) correspondence with author

(32) Interview with author

(33-36) ibid.(37) Bykofsky, Joseph and Larson, Harold. *The U.S. Army in World War II—The Technical Services: Operations Overseas.* Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C. 1957, page 576. The text actually mentions 47,000 boxcars. Several former members of the 758th have taken the time to compute this with various factors, and agree it was physically impossible for them to have repaired this many boxcars during the time they were in the CBI.

(38) ibid. page 577

(39) Rawls, Walton. Disney Dons Doatags. The AbbevillePublishing Group, New York, London, Paris, 1992 page 61

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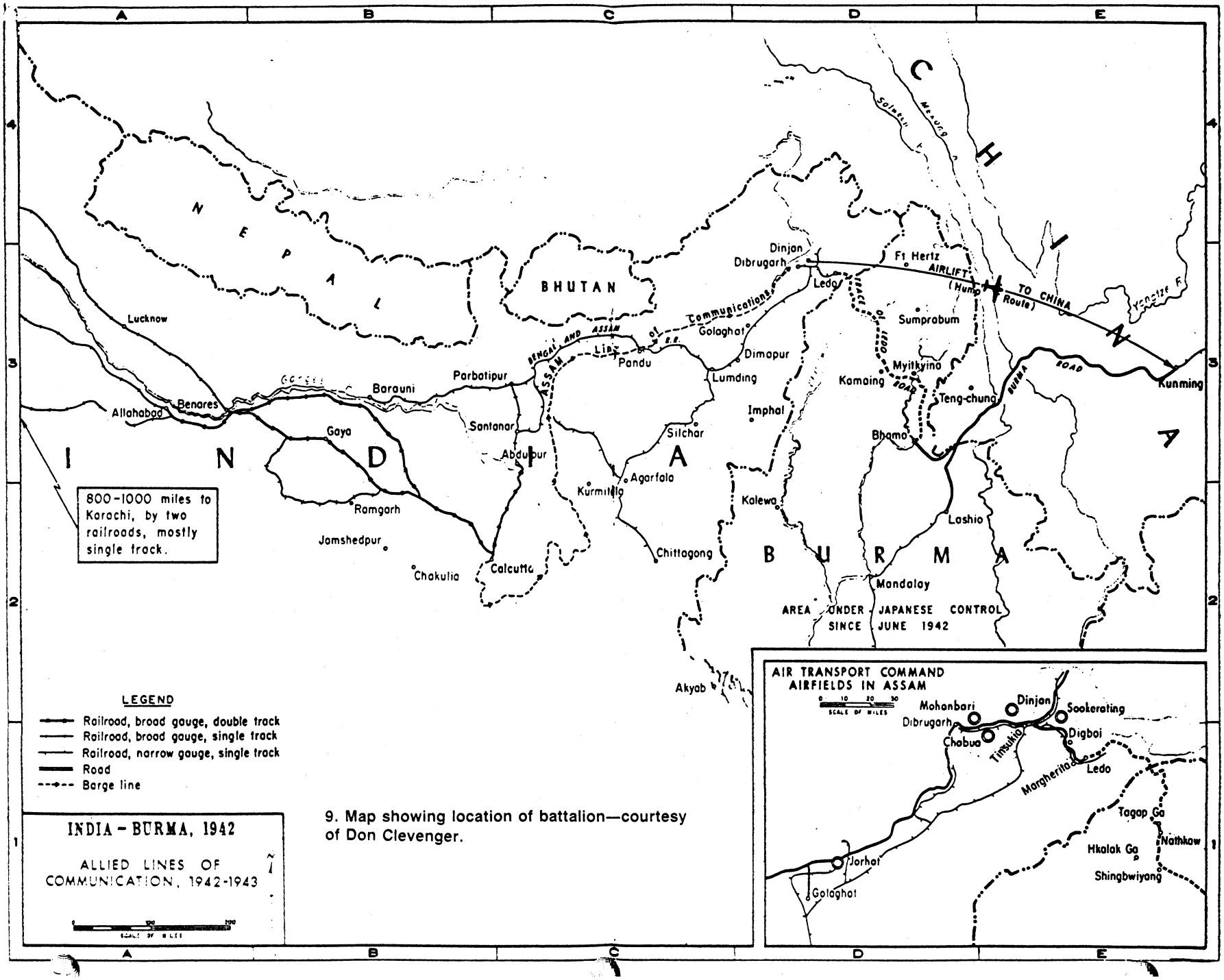

9. Map showing location of battalion—courtesy of Don Clevenger.