

WHERE HAS THIS W.O. BEEN?

By John Lilley

Joining up in 1942, and finding myself in the Royal Engineers a few weeks later, I spent my first two years as a Sapper in the UK, working on railway installations (with 609 Railway Construction Company RE) and on sea defences and other installations in the South of England (with CRE Sussex West) in the preparations for D-Day.

Then, one fateful day, RE Postings Branch decided that enough was enough and that it was time that I got my knees brown. So off I went to the RE Depot at Halifax (located at Hebden Bridge, in some ancient school buildings which had been scheduled for demolition long before war broke out.) then, by overnight train to Gourock, on the Clyde, to embark on the Union Castle Line vessel 'Warwick Castle', which had been recently fitted out as a troopship.

We were six weeks at sea, eventually reaching Bombay at the beginning of April, as part of a convoy so big that we had to stand off in Bombay Roads for three days before we could get alongside to quay to disembark. I still see the huge banner strung along side the dockside buildings –

“WELCOME TO INDIA – BUT MUMS THE WORD”

Having been surrounded by mystery and confusion ever since we arrived at Halifax, at least we now know where we were.

It is almost impossible for me to convey to anyone who has never been to India, the first impressions that our arrival on shore made upon us. When we marched off the troopship, it was only a few steps to the busses waiting to take us to the nearby reception camp at Kalyan, but the journey took us through unbelievable scenes of squalor and deprivation – dirt and filth seemed to be piled up along the streets, people were trying to eke out a living scrabbling through the refuse to find anything which might be sellable or eatable, deliberately deformed beggars were pleading with upturned hands for baksheesh, and over everything hung the most appalling stench that any of us had ever encountered, causing many of the newcomers to retch long before the journey was over. However, as long as I live, I will never, ever forget my first few hours in India. It was very much later before I discovered what a beautiful, enchanting, wondrous places there are in India.

After a day or two in Kalyan, and a few more in a Depot at Deolali (or 'Doolally' as it is universally known), I received my first posting in India – to a Military Engineer Services (or MES) Depot of the Royal Indian Engineers at Jullundur, which I soon learned was in the Punjab, hundreds of miles away up towards the North West Frontier. It took several days on the train to reach it when I set out, and I then found that Jullundur is in a sandy, desert-like area of the Punjab, not far from Amritsar where the famous Sikh 'Golden Temple' is situated. It was the hottest, dustiest, dirtiest place that I have ever encountered. Heat exhaustion seemed to be the greatest hazard, and there were a

number of deaths in the camp from this while I was there. This complaint strikes with almost lightning speed, and I was fortunate that, when I was not feeling as fit as I ought and went sick, the MO spotted the trouble at once and got me into hospital, where several days of drinking nothing but salted water, and with a fan blowing across a block of ice straight at my face pulled me round.

The Jullundur Depot's responsibility was to allocate reinforcements to MES units anywhere in India, and after a week or two I was posted to CRE 122 Indian Works RIE 'where are they?' was the obvious next question – answered by the information that this unit was with the 14th Army, just beginning to fight its way back into Burma under the inspired leadership of General 'Bill Slim'. 'We aren't sure of its exact location', they told me, 'as the situation is a bit fluid up there at the moment.' As I found out in due course, that proved to be just about the biggest understatement of the year.

So another railway warrant, and another long train journey – this time, seven days and nights right across India from Jullundur to Calcutta. Seven days and nights in a carriage with only wooden slatted seats to sit on by day and to sleep on by night, with 'air-conditioning' provided by the occasional lump of ice thrown in through the ever-open carriage door when the train happened to stop at one of the infrequent stations through which the line passed, to lie and melt on the carriage floor.

Although the journey was so long, there were no catering facilities on board, instead there were pre-arranged stops so that the passengers could get off and eat whatever was available at that station. When the engine driver gave the signal, everyone re-boarded, and on we went. Indian railway engines, at that time, were wood-fired, and so they had no great head of steam and consequently acceleration (and top speed) was very poor, and there was plenty of time to get on board after the train had started to move and before it got clear of the platform. Perhaps these were some of the reasons for the length of our journey.

In Calcutta, the Queen Elizabeth reinforcement camp became my next home for many days while another search was made for the location of CRE122, but eventually I left that city's Howrah Railway Station (another almost unbelievable sight, with whole families living permanently on the platforms, as they had no other homes of any sort), travel north to Gauhati, on the Brahmaputra River, on my way to Assam and Burma. It is now well into the monsoon season, and the river was in full spate when the train reached Gauhati. The paddle-steamer by which we were to cross was secured to an anchor set in mid-stream, and made the crossing by swinging like a pendulum from one bank to the other. The Brahmaputra is a very wide river, and as the current was so strong the crossing took a long time and we were mortified to find by the time that the boat reached the far bank, that a sudden and unexpected surge had raised the water level so much that we could not disembark. A return to our starting point and another attempt later in the day finally got us across and it was then but a short journey to Dimapur, the eastern terminus of the Indian railway system.

The Movement Control Officer at Dimapur repeated that (by now well-worn) phrase "I've no idea where they are" when I asked the location of CRE 122, but quickly got me off his doorstep by producing a warrant and directions to a train heading south to Comilla, near Chittagong, in what is now Bangladesh. This piece of the Indian railway system was another marvel of engineering – a single track, narrow gauge line, winding its way through Assam and the mountains of Nagaland, through some of the wettest and lushest jungle country in the world, with curves in the line so sharp that at times it seemed that the two ends of the train might meet.

Comilla was alive with Allied troops at that time, as there was a group of Reinforcement Camps in the area, either busy assembling drafts to go onwards into Burma or providing brief rest periods for those returning from the battlefields. Most men stayed only a few days, but as CRE 122 was still proving to be very elusive, I was there for much longer, and this was no doubt the reason that, a few days after my arrival I found myself appointed Camp Orderly Sergeant. This was difficult for when I had left the UK I had had to drop my L/Sgt. rank and revert to my substantive rank of Cpl. The camp was full of seasoned, battle-hardened troops, including many Chindits returning from raids behind the Jap lines – and not everyone took easily to a young, relatively inexperienced Cpl. as their Orderly Sgt.

It was, I must admit a relief to be on the move again when CRE 122's location was found to be near Mandalay, still hundreds of miles away from where I was. The single track railway took me back to Dimapur again, and then it was a case of thumbing a lift on any vehicle that was going my way down the Manipur road and on through Imphal, Kohima and Tamu to Kalewa on the Chindwin River. This road was another engineering marvel. Bulldozed through the jungle, over mountain ranges and across the valleys which separated them, over streams and rivers and through swamps, it provided the sole route through which supplies and reinforcements could be got up to the forward areas where the battle against the Japs was raging as they were thwarted in their attempt to invade India and were then slowly pushed back. The term "bit-hess road" was coined to describe the construction of this road, it was a simple earth formation, bulldozed into shape, compacted and rolled and covered with roofing felt (bituminised Hessian – hence the name). In spite of its apparently fragile construction, it carried thousands of vehicles, large and small, and an uncountable quantity of supplies and equipment up to the front line, when the surface split or was torn or was washed away, when the monsoon rains lashed down, more roofing felt were rolled out and sealed around the edges with bitumen. It was an ingenious form of road construction, but it worked well, and was also used on a number of temporary air-strips in Burma.

At Kalewa, the road petered out and I was fortunate to find room on a barge going downstream with a Gurkha unit onboard. There were several night stops before we reached their destination when the skipper decided that it was time to stop, he pulled into the bank and tied up for the night, each man then found his own place to sleep somewhere ashore. I will remember one night when I thought that my luck was in after I came across an old bit of concrete from the base of some long collapsed hut near a small village, and spent the night on that. A concrete mattress and a big pack

for a pillow is not the most comfortable of beds, but it was better than the wet ground – and anyway, sleep was hardly possible as I lay listening to the jungle sounds all round.

When the barge reached Monywa, just above Mandalay, I disembarked and then found that CRE122 had moved on again and was now located in Meiktila some eighty miles further south, but I was soon able to hitch another lift and finally arrived at the CRE's campsite on the bank of the north lake in Meiktila with a feeling of great relief.

It was mid-October when I reached journey's end – six months after I had left Bombay, six months of interrupted frustration and unpredictable travelling while searching for an elusive target. The CRE's adjutant (a huge, husky-voiced Pathan lieutenant, who chewed raw green chillies after his meals as you or I might chew 'After Eight' mints – perhaps that was the cause of his husky voice?) promptly signalled RE records in the UK with news of my arrival and of my being taken on the unit strength. His signal quickly produced two replies –

1. A signal to inform me that in the eight months since I had left the UK, I had worked my way up the Engineer Services seniority list, and was now promoted to WOII.
2. A second, very tersely worded signal a few hours after the first stated the RE Records had had no information about my whereabouts since I had left Bombay. It concluded "Where has this WO been for the last six months".

When I told the Adjutant exactly where I had been travelling most of the time entirely by myself across the length and breadth of India and a good bit of Burma in my search to find CRE 122, even his husky voice could hardly conceal his laughter as he composed his reply to RE Records (no doubt sitting all this time in their comfortable offices in Ditchling Road, Brighton). His reply was extremely short and to the point –

"WOII Lilley was travelling to join unit."

No further questions were ever asked about how I spent from April to October that year, but it was a journey that I am never likely to forget.