

FOREWARD

The surprise landings in the Philippines on October 20, 1944 by the Sixth Army culminated the first great phase of the war in the Pacific. Behind this successful campaign under General Douglas Mac Arthur lies the story of the men who landed on an obscure and unknown outpost on the Southeastern tip of New Guinea in the spring of the year 1943. Elaborate military plans called for the construction of a great base (Milne Bay), the most powerful in the Southwest Pacific. It would be built immediately to launch the coming offensive against checked Japanese forces dominating the above islands.

This great task was assigned to the Army Engineers. It was up to these men to battle the mud, swamps and loneliness of the thick overgrown jungles and to crush the Anopheline mosquito which carries the dreaded malaria.

The men and officers ordered to this area accomplished their mission in the highest manner befitting the Corps of Engineers.

This is the story of the men and officers who built that great base and who later lent their experience in the reconstruction of the Philippines.

This is the story of the 339TH ENGINEER CONSTRUCTION BATTALION.

CHAPTER I

"THE BEGINNINGS"

It all began in the late summer of 1942 when a letter direct from the Adjutant General's Office in Washington, DC ordered the activation for a 339th Engineer General Service Regiment to be organized at Camp Butner, North Carolina on the 18th day of the month of August. The core of this newly established unit was a cadre of 7 officers and 95 men from the 105th Engineer Combat Battalion. The following day Lt. Colonel Joseph W. Cox Jr. who had been on duty in the Office of Chief of Engineers, Washington, DC assumed command of the new born regiment.

As the cadre continued its technical training men from nearly everyone of the eastern states filled the fast growing ranks. The first inductees (49 in number) joined the regiment exactly one month after its activation. From then on men by the hundreds were assigned as future Engineers. Heavy equipment such as tractors, roadgraders, power shovels and all types of vehicles were flowing into the regiment's motor pools. A SMALL CADRE HAD BECOME A POWERFUL ACTIVE REGIMENT.

By the middle of October the men were ready to begin to learn the duties and technical traits required of an Army Engineer. Basic Training had begun for 1211 enlisted men and 16 officers.

Perhaps the success that this hard driving regiment achieved overseas was due to the intensive training period which dominated the next two and one half months. The place-- The wooded hills of North Carolina. The time-- Cold of winter. Hikes and bivouacs across gripping mud, through hard driving rains and over snow covered terrain created the 339th Engineers; for frost bitten men of many different traits and abilities were being molded into a striking force which could, when called upon

--regardless of place or condition, destroy gun fortifications, smash tank obstacles, clear dreaded mine fields and make use of demolition. However, these men at the same time became constructive artists. They were taught pontoneering, the ability to build great liberty docks, building, and bridges. The knowledge that goes into the construction of roads and airstrips sank into their minds. As heavy equipment rolled into become the property of the regiment, they were turned over to men who became a debt in handling the mechanical monsters. Only time would decide how valuable these men would become. IT WAS A BIG JOB BUT THE 339TH ENGINEERS WERE BIGGER

CHAPTER II

"THE BIG MOVE"

On New Years Day the men entered 1943 with their basic training at an end. Though they remembered rugged days of fatigue, there were a few dates that stood out and they held these with respect. There was Nov. 7th when they had held the regiment's first dress review and Lt. Colonel Cox had silver eagle pinned on his shoulder. Majors Bradley and James had taken over command of the two battalions.

Then something was in the air. The outfit was marked with the permanent unit Number 9812K and the temporary APO of 5382. Orders came rushing through to be ready to leave Camp Butner February the 1st. The 339th Engineer Regiment (GS) was going overseas. The day arrived, but only train laden with equipment left the Camp. The days that followed were probably the best remembered to the anxiously waiting Engineers. Three and Four Night Bivouacs and Dress Review followed. Bivouacs and reviews - reviews and bivouacs. Then came manuevers and more reviews. Other outfits knew the 339th as the "reviewest damn outfit there is". But during this time many men were given leaves and furloughs; in one of the reviews the regiment was highly lauded by Lt. General Ben Lear.

Then the word came. The date - March 26th. The 339th was to arrive on April 3rd at the staging area of Camp Stoneman California. The whirlwind began. March 29th three troop trains of husky Engineers shot out of North Carolina and raced across the country to their west coast rendezvous. Arriving in California full of excitement, the men spent the following week rechecking personal equipment, listening to preparatory lectures, taking pleasant hikes through the soft green hills of the Bay Region, and seeing the sights of gracious San Francisco.

On the afternoon of April 13th two lazy river wessels left Camp Stoneman and slowly steamed down the river into busy, noisy Oakland Bay. The boats scraped the docks and men loaded with field packs, helmets and rifles descended slowly into the great warehouse before them. There were many civilians in the midst, but there were no cheers nor applauding. Men were racing supplies into huge cargo nets and women were cheerfully checking items of transportation. The soldiers shuffled out through another door and on up to a large gangplank. No one had much to say. The men didn't know what the ship even looked like. First, they were tired; secondly the ship was so close to the door of the huge warehouse that they were unable to see the complete structure.

A ship called the HILLARD S. HOLBROOK formerly known as the PRESIDENT TAFT, slipped its moorings from pier #6 on Wednesday, April 14th and headed out to sea without escort or convoy. The 339th Engineer Regiment (GS) 1300 strong had left America.

CHAPTER III

"THE VOYAGE"

The Pacific, known to men of the sea for its unusual calmness and serenity, was a blessing to the men aboard the crowded ship. The members of the 339th were not the only voyagers. Besides the contingent of the Nurses and Red Cross Workers there were men from Ordnance Companies, Signal Battalions, Engineer Dump Truck Units and special Air Corps crews.

Meals were served in the large dining rooms of the one time spacious liner, PX supplies were available daily and books of many reading tastes were plentiful. There were afternoon shows performed by talented GI's and USO'ers on the huge stern of the ship. Men found favour in the limbering up exercises and short rifle drills held every morning. This tended to break the monotony of lying upon deck all during the long warm days that followed. Then there were the extravagant "dunking" ceremonies the day the equator was crossed. Enlisted men and "Bars" alike were thrown into the huge tub of salt water.

One day out at sea the gentle atmosphere of a quiet afternoon was blasted suddenly by the shrieks of "General Quarters". Two slim ugly periscopes were spotted gliding through blue waters only 200 yards off the stern. The ships gun crew swung into action. Tense and alert they rushed to battle stations and swung their 3" and 5" guns into point blank positions. The soldiers tightened their lifebelts another notch. The ship's giant motors burst into a supreme impelling force of speed that the men, who were now below deck, could feel the terrific motivations by the trembling in their bodies. The subs were left behind.

That evening as the iron bars of night unfolded the boat within its great lonely limits, a young American Engineer dressed in the safety of a life jacket looked out over a gold rail and stared thoughtfully into the darkness. There were no stars out and a cool breeze played with his helmet strap dangling along side his right cheek. He was wondering how it would be like, for that very afternoon the men of the 339th Engineer Regiment (GS) had been told that they were heading straight for Brisbane, Australia.

CHAPTER IV

"AUSTRALIA"

On May second, a bright Sunday morning, the S. S. Holbrook escorted by an Australian destroyer sailed slowly up the picturesque Brisbane River towards the metropolis. Men excitedly leaned over the low rails and gazed upon the soft, green rolling hills, the small quaint villages, and the rich fertile pastures covered with cattle and sheep. The sight of the lovely Australian countryside after eighteen trying days at sea was happily acclaimed by the men of the 339th Engineers.

The troops were unloaded and marched into Camp Doomben (a former racetrack) just outside the city of Brisbane. There they spent nine days in this far off land that held such different customs. People spoke English, but with a humerous cockney accent; all transportation followed the left side of the road and their currency was different; and then the civilians themselves held a certain aloorness in contrast to the easy going Americans. Yes they drove Buicks, liked modern jazz were the same clothes as the people in the States and "put out" some beautiful girls. But to the wide awake Yanks they were still ten years behind times.

The men of the 339th were not able to confine all their time to social activities. Already large crews were toiling on the docks unloading ships while others laboured in the great warehouse along the busy waterfront. Though passes weren't given out every evening, the boys, now fascinated by the tempting "come hither" look of Australian lovelies, would slip out through a large hole in the west gate of the former race track. So many went through this opening that it was affectionately known as "The Furma Road" and was held in great esteem by all. At times it was so crowded that a MP would stand there and direct traffic. The nine days flew by quickly. During these days intense lectures were given on how to combat the dreaded malarial fever.

On the cold grey morning of May 11th, the 339th Engineer Regiment (GS) boarded the S. S. Cremer of the Dutch Merchant Marine and sailed out of a quiet peace loving land---destination unknown. Making up the five ship convoy were Taroon, a US Corvette, and Australian destroyer and a liberty ship. Five days later the convoy cut the grave water of the Coral Sea where a few months ago a great Japanese Task Force had been handed such a decisive setback. With no combat troops aboard the 339th knew then "where in the hell they were going". It could be only one place. The damn Japs had all the other islands. They were going into thick overgrown jungles where torrential rains made daily calls and where there were no roads, but sloshing muddy trails. A desolate land ruled by primitive pygmies and the dreaded Anopheline mosquito. To arise out of this---the greatest striking base in the South West Pacific. On May 11th the ships sailed into Milne Bay on the South-eastern tip of New Guinea. This for the next despised eleven months was the home of the 339th Engrs. Here they accomplished their outstanding record. Probably the best picture of this unholy island is the vivid description given by a young engineer one week after arrival

"Last night as I was returning from across the Bay in a landing barge, I beheld a spectacle that held me in incantation long after I had reached shore. It was a beautiful night, warm and quiet except for the singing hum of the boats powerful hydro-matic engines. Before me lay the island. Had I not been present, I would have sworn that it had been engraved on canvas."

Rising from the sparkling sandy shores were the long curvacious trunks of the stately cocoon trees. Through its umbrella shaped boughs high above in the heavens was perched imperiously a brilliant moon full of exuberant brightness. This was not an imagination, but it was a reality -- as I gazed upon this tropical paradise. Blue waters, brown shores, dark green rising palms, crowned to perfection by a golden moon. -- And yet to think this seemingly beautiful island held torture with its dreaded malarial fever and the haunting graves of hundreds of brave soldiers who were murdered upon its bloody shores. Its long peacefulness and serenity had been disrupted by its cruel conqueror --- WAR. A great battle had blown holes into its velvet shores, filled many of the tall stately palms, scorched its many beautiful plants and foliage and played havoc with Mother Nature.

Only at night when shadows strive valiantly to conceal its horrible secret, does its one time enchantment burst forth and its famed beauty bloom again".....

CHAPTER V

On May 18, 1943, three vessels laden with Engineers and supplies entered Milne Bay on the southern tip of New Guinea and dropped anchor in a small cove known as Jock McMillan Bay. The 339th had reached its destination. In the lonely selfish months that followed there arose the most powerful striking base in the Southwest Pacific. During these days of hardships these engineers braved dangerous swamps, sliced their way through thick, ugly

jungles, stumbled awkwardly along muddy trails, fought off the germs of the malarial mosquito and endured the great loneliness of a primitive island. They stuck to their jobs--chopping, lugging, building, sweating. The results were not just outstanding but amazing. The achievements of the 339th Engineer Regiment (GS) at this US Advanced Sub Base USOS AHG has yet to be surpassed and has since been the goal of all engineering units. Perhaps the following figures will indicate the magnitude of their work:

12 HUGE LIBERTY DOCKS	equal to	500,000 ft.
37 MAJOR BRIDGES	equal to	1,798 feet
130 CULVERTS		
50 MILES OF ROAD AND MAINTENANCE		
10 JETTIES		
PIPELINE	equal to	20,000 ft.
2 GENERAL HOSPITALS		
1 STATION HOSPITAL		
Fuel Base		
MEDICAL AREA CWS		
SIGNAL CORPS AREA		
ORDNANCE BUILDINGS		
GHQ HEADQUARTERS BUILDING		
QM TRANSPORTATION SERVICE		
A - A DEPOT		
AND MAINTENANCE OF ALL PROJECTS ON THE BASE.		

The regiment laboriously unloaded supplies and heavy equipment that evening of May 18th though thirteen miles up the bay at Gilli Gilli Japanese bombers were playing havoc with Australian troops. The men of the 339th and their ships remained untouched. All night and the next day the work continued.

It became apparent that the regiment would be assigned the huge tasks of constructing the base. The men found the thick underbrush so dense that several days were spent clearing land for a suitable bivouac area. Already work had begun on the main road running east to west along the beach. Two miles west of Jock McMillan Bay (bivouac area) was Ahima (No troops beyond) while six miles east was KB Mission future headquarters of the Sixth Army. Seven miles beyond was Gilli Gilli. This was the outline of locations. As yet there were no communications and air raid warnings were given by the flickering light of a ship.

One month later a huge 330' liberty dock was under a rigid 24 hr. construction schedule. Already the hard driving men of the 339th through the use of bulldozers and manual labour which involved picks and shovels had completed large areas for storing supplies and equipment. The absence of much needed cranes and the ever present deep mud where heavy equipment could not penetrate necessitated the weary men to grapple the heavy Australian lumber with huge "bull hooks" and carry them on to the dock. It was here where the majority of clean-cut men formed a highly irregular vocabulary. Future docks followed with amazing results "100 footers" were turned out in three weeks. And now ships of all sizes were pouring into the busy bay. There were LCV's, LCM's, LST's, PT's, SPM's, destroyers, cruisers, tugboats, barges and cargo ships. At night they formed a beautiful array of figures with the spectacular New Guinea sunset as a background. On June 20th General MacArthur had visited the island personally and lauded the manner in which the task was being accomplished.

During these trying days the health of the men was remarkably well. Malaria and Dengue fever were being dealt a decisive blow. However, the great rains had to be reckoned with. The uncomfortableness and misery

caused to these engineers driving huge equipment or "lugging" materials on slippery, dangerous docks was unbearable. The 339th referred to them as the "bastard rains". A realistic picture of the situation is sharply described by one of the men in a letter to his wife "because we soldiers are used to the good hard feel of a sidewalk under our feet, the jungle rains to us are an ordeal. There is no such misery existable as to arrive in the damn jungle during the rainy season. Everything becomes wet. Clothes become soggy shoes squidge. A steady drip falls from the back of our helmet and rolls down your itchy skin. Articles made of leather mildow before our eyes. Food spoils guns rust. Damp skins invite fungus dhobie itch, athlete's foot and pinta. We get prickly heat rashes. It takes our bodies about six weeks to adjust themselves to the humidity, that is if we are in good physical condition -- otherwise longer, perhaps never. Broken bones and cuts and bruises heal slowly and leave telling marks. And then, honey, little streams emerge wildly into great onrushing rivers. Savagely they tear up recently constructed bridges, eat away precious roads and play havoc with mother nature. We engineers battle ahead knee deep in the heavy mud. And then, Betty, the ordeal comes. The rains stop suddenly and the sun comes out. The sky focuses the sunrays squarely upon us. The effect is sickening. We then wish for rain. It does very soon. Then we wish for the intolerable sun to come out again. It does. And so you see, darling"

Late summer was approaching and already four docks, several warehouses and a network of roads had been completed. Despite adverse weather conditions the men's spirits were bolstered by the exceptionally good mail service and living conditions. Fresh meat and eggs came from Australia; apples, oranges and pears were arriving from Tasmania-famed for its fruits. There were wooden floors in all tent quarters, and a huge pipe line brought fresh water showers to all. Special Service arranged movies three times per week and a huge stage was constructed for future USO shows. A regular baseball schedule was under way in which both enlisted men and officers participated. The 339th Regimental Team became the best ball club on the island-- a small honor compared to its already high reputation for its engineering achievements. On June 22nd the regiment began its fine newspaper known as the "Guinea Hen Cackle" which became the basis for news to all troops stationed at Milne Bay. The percentage of 98.76% showed that nearly every man in the 339th had taken out National Service Life Insurance to make the grand total \$10,992,500.-

One sunny afternoon a white speck was spotted in the air--a Jap reconnaissance plane. On September 25th (one week later) Tokyo radio screamed out over the air lengths that 150 planes had raided and destroyed the Base At Milne Bay. The men of the 339th have yet to see those planes. Soldiers and supplies were arriving every day. At this time the 5th Marines who were later to invade New Britain were undergoing vigorous training. Elaborate communications had already been set up by the Signal Corps. General Krueger's 6th Army Headquarters was established at KB Mission. Ships by the hundreds continued to stream into the magnanamous base.

Outfits arrived and others left, but the men of the 339th continued their grueling tasks of being assigned all construction projects though there were other engineers stationed on the island. When work became so abundant these other units were assigned minor roles, but due to their lack of experience, and ineffective ability, the 339th invariably had to supervise the jobs and many times they actually had to take them over. On October 1st a huge new dock 480' long had been built in three weeks. Allowed time had been 4½ weeks. It was on this assignment that the men with native labor traveled on a huge bargo to Sidea Island (China Straits) to obtain the necessary "piling"-- giant supports for the dock.

Six months passed quickly. The 47 officers and 1220 men of the 339th

Engineer General Service Regiment had earned themselves a high reputation by the amount of work accomplished under adverse conditions. The Regiment was regarded by high ranking officers of the General Staff as a well commanded, well disciplined organization capable of excellent results.

The men and officers were constantly surrounded by "that psychological feeling". As one of the officers described it "...The jungle is a horrible place for even mere existence. We have that curious psychological quirk about fighting here. It is a shut-in trapped feeling of a strange world that is entirely cut off from the one we once loved. The stifling vegetation holds time back. Other theaters of war are different. Looking down across the African Desert, standing on an open hill in Sicily or Italy you can see white people strolling along avenues and quaint little villages. In France huge buildings, Paris and even--imagine--a good hard sidewalk. But in the dark unlimited depths of the jungle there seems no end, no way out. Ahead lies Jungle and Japs--behind lies Jungle and dead Japs. It is the same nerve-wracking ordeal day after day. We feel that if the war should suddenly come to an end we wouldn't know it until sometimes later. But the men and officers of the 339th have a job to do.

CHAPTER VI

"THE COMING OPERATION"

Six months had passed and seven huge docks were already in operation. The men thistime were busy constructing two elaborate hospitals on a picturesque red clay plateau overlooking the bay. Casualties from all parts of New Guinea filed through the portals of the 125th Station Hospital and the 47th General Hospital. On November 15th the men read excitedly of the bloody invasion of the Gilberts and on December 2nd were treated to the personal appearances of Gary Cooper, Phyllis Brooks and Una Merkle. All operations were suspended on Christmas day and gifts from loved ones at home rolled in at unprecedented numbers.

However the New Year was no holiday for the 339th. The construction of roads, buildings, bridges and docks continued smoothly and efficiently. Heartbreaking experiences occurred when careless handling of a large ship resulted in damage to several docks, and had to be disgustingly repaired.

March 18th will be remembered by these men not because of the dramatic landings on the Admiralty Island by the famed 1st Cavalry Division, but through the memory of a storm---a great rainstorm. Waters of vicious intensity swept down from the mountains at a tremendous speed and literally carried everything in their path out to the sea. The many sturdy pile bridges the regiment had built on the Ahime-KB road held up remarkably well, but four other bridges were damaged enough to hold up hundreds of vehicles on this main road. The 339th had gained a reputation for never holding up any vehicles on any road construction. So that cold, damp night when orders came through men weary from a full day's work slipped out of warm cots, dressed quickly and joined other engineers soaked by the driving rain in the waiting trucks. All that night they worked--"slaved" is a better word. Carbon and truck lights (even flashlights underneath the bridges) were used by the men as they waded recklessly the swift flooded rivers, shoved heavy planks into place and swung great steel sledges. The next morning the bridges were completed but even during the night jeeps and trucks already were crossing the bridges--their wheels only inches away from the skilled fingers of engineers at work. Colonel Hunt Base "A" Engineer wrote a letter of commendation the next day for the dispatch and efficiency the 339th Engineer Regiment (GS) had shown the night of the great flood.

And now as the eleventh month in New Guinea approached there was something big in the air and the men knew it. Already combat training including hikes, rifle ranges and care of equipment was being indulged in lavishly. On March 23rd the regiment was assigned to I Corps and to be combined with the 24th infantry division for the forthcoming operation. This was known as the "Rockless Task Force" which was aimed at Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea in a bold strategic move that would bypass the Japs at Wowak and Hansa Bay and if successful, capture the three airdromes, Cyclops, Senteni and Hollandia on Lake Sentani approximately 15 miles inland from Hollandia town. The "Force" would be composed of 2 sections. "Letterpress", which covered Hollandia-Humboldt area and "Noiseless", which covered Tanahmerah Bay area 25 miles northwest of Hollandia. The second battalion was assigned the task of landing on D-Day; the first, on D plus 8. The regiment was going to experience its first D-Day operation. It was only natural that wild and wierd rumors began floating around. Some had the men landing on the China coast. One explanation had the 339th going to sunny Hawaii. How silly they all were.

The US Naval vessel Gannymeade, which was assigned to transport the 1st echelon to the operational area pulled out of Milno Bay April 16th carrying some 640 men and officers. The next day the ship joined the greatest convoy ever assembled in the South west Pacific area. Covering the sea were six hundred ships-troop transports, all sizes landing craft, destroyers, cruisers and aircraft carriers of the Fifth Fleet. Aboard ship frequent lectures were given on the coming operation with maps and charts used to impress explanations. The ship sped swiftly and silently eagerly cutting the calm blue waters its stern pointing towards the great Japanese base. The night before D-Day the men of the 339th and the thousands of other troops on the many ships didn't catch a great deal of sleep. First they wanted to be sure they would be awake to see the great naval bombardment of the shores prior to the landing, secondly, the men of the 339th were taking part in an invasion for the first time in their lives. In fact, though strategic, this was to be the boldest strike the Allies had ever attempted in the Pacific. There lives no man who has not a touch of fear in his heart before he goes into battle. Our engineers were the same, normal human beings. They thought and sensed alike. But they would also work and fight alike.

CHAPTER VII

"HOLLANDIA - TANAHMERAH BAY"

On the early morning of April 22, '44, the terrific naval bombardment began. Sleek destroyers slinked along the still blackened shores and pounded installations mercilessly. Then destroyers and LCI's cut sharply through and let their rocket guns turn lightening charges of red salvos over into the cliffs that characterize the NW New Guinea coastline. The impact of explosions was deafening. At 0700 elements of the 19th & 21st Infantry of the 24th Division captured Red Beaches 1&2 without opposition. 339th Beach was situated between these 2 points and due to the dense jungles the infantry had not yet reached the area when the 339th was ordered to land. The first wave of men landed successfully at our beach that had not been softened up by fire from sips. Because of the shallow waters men waded 100 yds. into shore and heavy equipment rolling off LCM's often became bogged down in the sands extending out from the beaches.-- Due to harbor anchorage and terrain difficulties it was decided that the Hollandia-Humboldt Bay area would be developed into the main base. The 339th's initial work of jetties and a mapped road was dropped and full attention was given to unloading precious cargoes from waiting ships.

The 339th spent the first few nights at Tanahmerah Bay with elements of the 24th Division at the foot of the narrow and steep Depapre trail. These

nights of waiting will long be remembered. True initial resistance had been light, for only scattered remnants of Jap service troops were encountered; however, enemy troops were in the vicinity and often survey parties & work details would be harassed by Nips. The jungle nights were an ordeal. One engineer after a night in a foxhole soaked by terrential rains and sick with pain and fatigue remarked: "The mystery of the jungle night is one of the greatest horrors of this war. Night falls and you are probably still wet from daily, driving rains. White man is sensitive to slight changes in temperature, and a night breeze, which is not cold but merely warm hits your dampness. If you are not careful you catch cold, induce sinus trouble perhaps accumulate pneumonia."

When it's dark you don't have to imagine things, they are really there. Each sound becomes a magnimous reproduction. The call of a singing cockatoo resembles a screeching siron; a falling limb resounds with a crash; and rifle volley becomes an artillery barrage.

You hear a sound. You listen. You hear our cautiously. Nothing. You look around. Nothing, above there is a brilliant moon perched majestically up on its throne of waiving palm trees. It seems to single you out with the power of a searchlight. The sudden stillness of the night makes you shudder. You lie down and close your eyes. Again that sound! Nothing?

The first echelon then began work on minor roads, many storage tanks of 56,000 gallon capacity, an oil jetty 1,000 ft. long a great pipeline stretching from the Bay to the vital Hollandia ardrome 15 miles away.

Last, but not least, an astonishing feat. The construction of the nearly impenetrable road winding through the rugged Cyclops mountains to Hollandia--the greatest road project yet tacked by S.W.P.A. engineers! Dutch engineers for years prior to the war had attempted to build a passable road out of this muddy, precarious trail. Finally, they gave it up. On April 28th the 339th Engr. Rgt. took it on as just another job! Even jeeps were unable to grind their sturdy motors over the thick muds and slippery curves. Men carried rations on their backs fifteen miles to reach frontline troops.

The huge task began. Armed with picks and shovels (it was impossible to drive heavy equipment up from the foot of the mountain) the men labored strenuously on corduroy roads in order to allow traffic to pass. Soon hull dozers began climbing up the hardened trail. They cut savagely thru banks of precious gravel and "smeared" it on the new surfaced road. Dangerous was the job assigned to the men who scaled the huge cliff life banks and with giant crosscut saws and heavy axes felled the gigantic trees "standing guard" over the darkened road. Soon the powerful rays of the sun could stream freely through and keep the roads hard and dry. It was here that operators of bulldozers, road graders, power shovels, and heavy dump trucks became skilled in their duties as they squeezed around sharp curves, maneuvered on the top of high cliffs, and carefully avoided landslides.

In side of 2 months this seemingly impassable road became a miraculous achievement. It now resembled a super highway, for vehicles of all sizes were racing thru the Cyclop mountain range and on the road those 339'ers put through was common talk. The vital link between Tanahmerah Ban and the precious Hollandia air field had been established.

In the meantime, second battalion headquarters had been established at Maraboe village 3 miles up from Tanahmerah Bay on the road to

Hollandia. Eventually the whole regiment would congregate there. The Regiments' newspaper, The Guinea Hen Cackle, again became the source of news for all troops in the area.

The second echelon (composed mainly of 1st battalion men) had arrived at Hollandia aboard the "John Burroughs" one week after the original landings on Tanahmerah Bay. Attached at the time to the 41st Infantry Division they were assigned immediately the task of repairing and widening the main supply road in the Hollandia district. Japanese roads were never built to withstand the pounding traffic of U. S. heavy vehicles and equipment. Troops by the hundreds poured into the ever increasing base at Hollandia. Men of the 339th at home with their D-8's, carryalls, pullgraders and powershovels had quickly opened a smooth fast means of communication.

At huge, but colorless Lake Sentani regimental colors were hoisted. The need for the 339th--its men, its officers was apparent. Though other engineer outfits arrived daily, the regiment was chosen to construct the many buildings at base "G" headquarters overlooking the extensive base at the mouth of the bay. Also pipelines, division staging areas, many hospital buildings and warehouses were already under expert construction.

Movies were frequent as various outfits were now stationed in the area. Sports were encouraged and mail was good. But it was big happenings like June 5th, D-day, when Hitler's fortress of Europe was smashed by the greatest invasion force the world has ever known that filled our men with courage and faith. On July 2nd Guam was blasted wide open by landings that carried Marines into the vital Marianas.

But these landings also carried a message to the hearts of the officers and men of the 339th. It was one that boasted proudly of our evergrowing land forces, of our great, powerful navy, of our dynamic air forces, and our endless flow of supplies. Yes, it was good to know that the end was in sight. The road to Tokyo had never looked straighter. It was our superior firepower that was killing the "yellow bastards". But it was damn good engineers that kept the road open.

On August 1st, 1944, there arose officially from the well planted seeds of the General Service Engineers a new outfit destined to live up to its high reputation. It was not just changed by an official order. True the same men remained; however, increased vehicles, added heavy equipment, and various engineering devices now became the property of the 339th Engr. Cons. Bn. The men liked to look upon this change as a "streamlined version" of their beloved outfit. The new TO soared enlisted men's ratings to new heights. Master sergeants now "ruled" the platoons. Everyone called their buddies "Sarge" and nearly always he was really a sergeant. The rebirth of the 339th Engineers took place at Mariboe village two miles from Tanahmerah Bay. Lt. Colonel W. T. Bradley assumed command. Though drastic changes were apparent and fully felt, the engineering projects engaged in were continued with great zeal. One platoon was still absent from the new Battalion area. Left at Hollandia, it was completing staging areas, roads, bridges, warehouses and waterlines.

"Down Tanahmerah Way" the battalion was confronted with three great tasks. First the upkeep of the great Cyclops Mountain road where more than 20 culverts and 10 pile bridges had been built; secondly, the completion of a liberty dock on the West cove of the Bay, the only sized dock in that area. It was on this unusual project that more than 35,000 cubic yards of earth had to be removed from the side hill, cut and hauled out into the bay to provide a causeway to the dock which had to be built several hundred feet from shore because of shallow water.

The officers and men were highly lauded for their performance in a letter of commendation by Brigadier General L. J. Sverdup, acting Chief Engineer SWAP. Third, the laborious task of constructing ten thousand gallon fuel tanks. Under the fiery, blazing sun huge hot sheets of steel were placed in gigantic rings and there arose quickly the magnanimous structures. Rains were everpresent and added to the occasional destruction of roads and bridges.

Something was in the air and everyone knew it. The Fifth Air Force was striking and striking hard and the Philippines. On the 1st of September of 1944, the 339th Engineer Construction Battalion was relieved of USASOS and attached to the 6th Army for the following King 2 operation. Training schedule had begun and explicit talks were being given by "Doc" Lacy on diseases especially venereal. The sound of small bars, fast women and certain houses held an intriguing picture for men who for 18 months had not seen a building, a town, or a woman that looks like a human being. But the dangers were recognized and impressed upon the minds of the men, thanks to "Doc" Lacy.

General MacArthur's long cherished ambition of "I shall return" was soon to be realized. The greatest invasion of the Pacific campaign was to be launched. Preceded by two weeks of gigantic areal onslaught and naval bombardment the doors to the dynamic Philippines were to be smashed open.

The 339th was about to take part in one of the greatest campaigns in American History; the campaign to free the Philippines. Everything that had gone before in this theater had been in preparation for the invasion. All the island campaigns, the maneuvering for bases, building up of great reserves of supplies, the training of a hard hitting team of ground forces and personnel -- all had been designed to get us into position for this operation.

Now more than ever before in the wartime career of these men it was necessary for a highly rated engineer outfit to be at top efficiency on D-Day. But that went for everyone in the command--from the first assault troops to the men engaged in unloading supplies. It was this kind of preparation that paid off in the great landings in Europe. Now the eyes of the world would be on another invasion, our expedition to the Philippines. The same preparations would pay the same dividends. The Philippine campaign would take us into the home stretch. It was fine engineering units like the 339th Engineer Construction Battalion that were chosen for the coming operation.

CHAPTER VIII

"WE LAND IN THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS"

On October 15th a great armada of proud ships was already sailing swiftly toward the Philippines.

The 339th had been carefully divided into four echelons. First echelon, attached to the 24th Division which would land on A-Day; second to accompany I Corps on A plus 2 for purpose to rebuild any demolish bridges, clear mine fields and operate water facilities; the third (largest) to land on A plus 4, and fourth, a thirty day rear echelon.

On October 20th the first echelon made up mostly of volunteers landed on the blasted beaches of Leyte Island in the Philippines. Amid

the whistle of angry bullets, the thunderous rear of heavy guns and the shrieks and groans of dying men, unloading operations continued all during the day. Filipino civilians joyful at the arrival of the Americans streamed toward the busy beaches and gave what help they could.

D plus 2 offered an unusual and blood-curdling experience for the men of the 339th which they will always remember. A corduroy road had to be built quickly over a rice paddy which lay in front of the 24th Division (34th Infantry) who were blasting away at desperate Japanese at the far end. That night crossing the sloppy field, water to their knees, the 1st echelon began the task which placed them between American front line troops and the Japanese. Bodies of dead men lay in the field and the nerve wrecking sensation of tripping over them or brushing against a cold arm or head rilled cold shivers down the back of the weary engineers. Finally, firing became so intense that they were ordered to retreat back into the front lines of the infantry.

Probably the greatest thrill and ignored dangers were experienced by the boys who came in on A plus 4 day with the greater part of the convoy. That was the unforgettable day the Japanese Air Force chose to strike against the Philippin invaders. It was a warm, beautiful cloudless day as the great transports entered Leyte Gulf. Suddenly the sky was filled with flashes of intense ack ack as Japanese air men diving from nowhere struck crazily at the incoming convoy. From then on it was just a big show, but a dangerous one. What a wonderful sight to see the Japs falling down as fast as the well trained gunners could shoot. With the light blue sky as a background, the sight of a zero bursting suddenly into a great red-orange flame brought cheers and roars from the excited men of the 339th. And to top it all, on one corner of the island of the starboard side of the ship angry US Navy fighter planes were dive-bombing mercilessly a Japanese held town. The men instead of rushing below deck would not have missed this astonishing spectacle for anything as they ran excitedly around the decks ducking behind trucks and diving behind equipment for protection. But they had to see it all. However, their enjoyment was ended abruptly when a well aimed bomb by the enemy blasted an LST only 75 yards away.

As endless amounts of supplies streamed forth onto torn beaches of Leyte, the men of the 339th were already busily engaged in stevedore labor, manning their huge bulldozers and setting up camp for the evening, an evening they shall never forget. Hundreds of dead Japanese soldiers were lying everywhere. The sight and smell of dead men were horrible and nauseating. Some were missing limbs, others be on their backs, eyes bulging roundly; and others resembled weird figures as they were swollen stiff by flame throwers that had burnt them alive. But every now and then our tired eyes would strike a fallen figure. A large body dressed in green fatigues lay cold and still, arms stretched out, head down, an American Boy. A couple of hours ago he had been laughing, joking with his buddies. And we looked down upon this figure and others too, and we said to ourselves; "For every boy lying there, someone at home is waiting, expecting him, they don't know."

Oh yes, that first evening, October 24th, that was the night when the Japanese Imperial Navy was heading swiftly for the Leyte Gulf, with the bold intentions of blasting all the American troops dug in on the beaches and destroying the great supply ships anchored off shore. Well, until way past 1:00 A. M. the night was terrifying. Machine guns roared down into infiltrating Japs only a few hundred yards from our bivouac area, falling limbs and small animals would set off the flares surrounding the

perimeter and cries from human beings that spelled one word--death, were like a cold dagger carving into our rapid beating hearts. A couple of hours passed and most of us then slept, but around 4 A. M. the word came. A Japanese task force was heading straight at us. Every man was quickly roused underground into an elaborate system of trenches prepared by the Japs for their own use. Hundreds of drowsy, frightened men were thrown into a limited space to await their fate. Frightened? Hell yes, the men were helpless. There was no chance of rushing inland as the Nips still held strong lines and were joyfully awaiting the doom the Imperial Fleet held for their enemies. We sweated in "those holes" and were soaked miserably by a heavy rain that nearly drowned us.

But those "sea-going bastards" never reached us. In fact, they never again would reach anyone. God bless our Navy. Admirals Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet had caught them as they were sneaking through between the two Philippine islands of Negres and Mindanao and had delt them a complete destructive blow. The terrific hot sun the next day was never better received.

CHAPTER IX

"WHAT THE PHILIPPINES MEANT TO US"

The engineering projects and the outstanding construction ability of the men of the 339th Engineer Construction Battalion displayed on Leyte is history. Because the men disfavor repetition, they want their mission and their resulting achievements mentioned only briefly. But first a word about the Filipino people and a description of the towns and villages in order to clarify to the reader the feelings and the situations that surrounded the men of the 339th. (NOTE: The author begs permission to drop the usage of the impersonal third person and refer to further activities in the first person plural using the personal pronoun "we").

Well, here was the situation. We hadn't seen a woman in a dress for nearly eighteen months, and, after all, most men are males and the opposite sex known as females causes a strange reaction between the two. For the sake of morals further explanations are hereby denied. Well, we eyed the small, dainty Filipino girls with their long black hair and their pretty bright colored dresses with a curious, but promising look. Most of them could speak English and we enjoyed our language spoken. Their complexion was darker than ours but their skin was smooth and soft. The Japanese had left them and their families very poor and on the brink of starvation. And so a close relationship arose between the Filipino and the American whose kindness won him friends wherever he has been.

Most of the civilians lived in grass shacks, but around the larger towns their homes were built of wood with tin roofs. Most of the buildings in the towns were destroyed by artillery fire, but it gave us a warm feeling, just to walk on a concrete sidewalk and enter into a store that had a glass show case outside. And when we walked into a theatre in Tacloan, capital city of the island, we were thankful New Guinea was far behind. This standard of living was very low but from our past experiences of jungle life this was a diversion that we quickly accepted.

A few facts must now be recorded in order to keep our story intact:

The 339th Engr. Const. Bn. spent a little over 3 months on Leyte and emerged with--by command of Gen. Walter Krueger, Sixth Army CG--"The

Meritorious Service Unit Plaque, in support of military operations on Leyte from 20 Oct. '44 to 25 Jan. '45 this Const. Bn. landed on D-day and worked continuously under adverse weather, terrain, and traffic conditions and completed all projects in a highly efficient and expeditious manner. Throughout the entire period superior standards of morale and discipline were vigorously maintained. The assigned work included 24 hour maintenance of from 10 to 35 miles of road, three and one-half miles of new road construction, over 200 linear feet of bridges plus many culverts, operation of five gravel pits with a total output of 170,000 cubic yards, repair of five miles of water pipeline including the Palo municipal system, and the construction of two hospitals and a Signal Corps station totaling over fifty buildings. Each of these major projects was accomplished with dispatch and in accordance with the highest engineering standards."

During these three months there were a few notable dates that meant a great deal to us. On Oct. 26th the neighboring island of Samar was invaded and one month later there was the first daylight smash at Tokyo by B-29's. And on this day, Nov. 25th the bastion of Limon on Leyte was finally crushed and a huge Japanese convoy off the island of Masbate was smashed. On Dec. 2nd, Ormac, the last stronghold of the Japanese on Leyte fell and twelve days later our troops had invaded Mindoro. We were getting very close to our great military objective--Manila, capital of the Philippines!

Christmas was greeted by a day off, Turkey for dinner, and a case of beer for each man.

CHAPTER XI

"ONWARD TO LUZON"

On January 1, 1945, we were relieved of attachment to the Sixth Army and reverted to USASOS. Five days later we knew we would soon make another move for construction duties were being taken over by various Engineering units. On the 11th we were assigned to 8th Army for the coming M-3 operation, which was later known as the Mike 7 operation. Two days before, the island of Luzon had been invaded via Lingayan Gulf and we were to follow to assume responsibility of the construction of an Air-drome at San Marcelino, Luzon. On January 25th we, the men of the 339th Engr. Cons. Bn., totaling some 875 men and 30 officers, left the island of Leyte and steamed swiftly northward into the China Sea.

At midnight of the 28th we had reached our destination. The next morning would be landings by elements of the 30th Division preceded by usual Naval bombardment. We awoke early in order to crowd the decks of the LST's and see the rockets and 3 inch shells hurled scorchingly into the beach defenses at San Narcisco. Two hours later there was still no activity and now the sun was shining brightly. We couldn't understand why not a single shell had been fired. Then when Infantry troops loaded into assault boats and were racing toward the beaches we were astonished. What sort of an invasion was this?

Well, all day we layed off shore awaiting orders to unload, but no word came. On the distant beaches we could see civilians and soldiers alike all going casually about their business. Evidently, everything was under perfect control. That afternoon we learned the enemy troops had retreated from the area some weeks ago and that Filipino guerillas were in complete charge. We had missed the expected excitement that surrounds a landing but we didn't feel sorry. Unlike Leyte there was not a single Japanese plane to be seen.

That evening at 10:00 P. M. we began unloading our equipment on the beaches and racing ten miles inland to the outskirts of San Marcelino where we bivouaced for the night. There was quite a tension traveling at midnight through the lonely countryside--the first Americans there in three years. But no Japs were to be seen.

Many of the boys worked all night bringing heavy equipment and supplies into the camp.

CHAPTER XII

"SAN MARCELINO AIRDROME"

At dawn on the 30th of January our S-3 section was already surveying the great stretch of land that layed at the foot of the Zambales mountains. The construction that followed on the first airfield undertaken by the 339th Engineer Construction Battalion was one of outstanding skill and amazing swiftness.

By B- 6 day five thousand feet of fighter strip was to be completed. But in four days we had completed six thousand feet of smooth runway, a huge control tower, and had nearly completed the fighter sector building. February 4th was really a big day for us. At 9:40 A. M. a flight of P-47's landed on the San Marcelino strip and were amazed at the fine runway. It was also on this memorable day that the 1st Cavalry entered Manila.

All during the month of Feb. the spotlight was on the San Marcelino Airdrome and facilities for the 5th Air Force. Since the Air Corps was anxious to put the strip into operation immediately, buildings were rushed and completed as rapidly as possible. On the 4th of Feb. one hundred by six thousand feet of dry weather runway with forty hard stands, four service aprons, two five hundred feet overruns, one transport apron and connecting taxiways were completed. An astonishing sidelight that took place Feb. 14th was the completion of a cub strip in exactly four hours! Two days later the 5th Marines began the bloody battle for Iwo Jima.

During the month planes of all sizes were operating from our great airdrome against shipping off the China Coast, targets on the Cina Mainland, and in support of ground troops in the Philippines. The San Marcelino Airdrome was the first operational field on Luzon and besides commendations by the 309th Bombardment Wing we were highly lauded by Major General Hall.

CHAPTER XIII

"TWIN SPREAD"

The next 4 months saw the 339th spread all over central and Northern Luzon. First, Feb. 15th B Co. moved down into the Subic Bay Area where the complete rehabilitation of a permanent building for Signal Corps, and 84 foot trestle bridge at Balsic and a spare parts building at Olongape. At the same time a platoon from A Co. was constructing huge fuel tanks at Subic. Improvements of several roads were completed. Secondly, on Mar. 11th, A Co., H & S Co., and C Co. moved to Pio to work on the San Jose to Porac Road for the purpose of facilitating the handling of supplies from the various supply dumps to the Bataan peninsula to the Florida Blanca Airstrip about to be constructed, then to join a network of roads to Clark Field.

It was at this time that a home in the swank Pasay district in the city of Manila was rented for the men in the Battalion. Four day passes were allotted generously and we excitedly rushed to see what Manila looked like. As school boys long ago we had heard of the beautiful Capital of the Philippines, but when we finally did see it for ourselves it was a different story when we returned to camp "You know, they once called Manila a beautiful City. Its graceful buildings, its stately landscaped boulevards, and its colorful world famed bay were known to all." We saw many buildings and boulevards. The sign read "Manila City Limits." We did not see a beautiful city. Instead, we saw the cruelest, most devastating destruction that had been planned systematically.

Hundreds of blocks of once important buildings were only a great debris of rock and twisted steel. Beautiful hotels, apartments, and penthouses on famed Ewey Boulevard were smouldering in ruins from fires set off fiendishly by Jap demolition squads. The lovely homes in the Pasay district had their roofs blown in, their windows smashed, their spacious lawns and gardens set afire -- Why?

True, a fierce battle was fought in Manila. But American bombs did not find their targets on the great downtown buildings nor the city's proud residential districts, Americans did not destroy the theaters, the old universities, or the stadiums.

Manila suffered the most deadly systematic destruction that the warped mind of the Jap could conceive. Captured enemy documents showed that the horrible results were carefully planned on paper long before the Americans set foot on Luzon.

The city of Manila now smolders in ruins, its beauty stripped to ashes, its gracefulness reduced to naked images. But there is a spirit in that city that has never died. A proudness that shows its good blood has not all been wasted. It will rebuild again its beautiful body. Historical facts can never be erased. The Japanese destruction of Manila has left its mark. But the death mark they intended has already become the Filipino's birthmark.

On March 25th the battalion moved to San Fernando. To our great enjoyment our convoy traveled over a network of fine paved highways which we believed non-existent in the Philippines. Also in that area it was watermelon season and our messhalls bought up hundreds of the delicious melons and served them ice cold at "chow time." Also, tomatoes and cucumbers were plentiful. It was here that we constructed our first all weather Cub Strip (50' x 1200') with a spare parts building and a cub hanger. Across from our area we constructed the 6th Army Ordnance Service Center which included a 2 way all weather road and nine service buildings.

Movies, PX supplies and beer were now more plentiful than ever before.

CHAPTER XIV

"CUB STRIP MONTH"

May can be truthfully called the Cub Strip Month as job orders came through simultaneously for strips to be constructed at Rosales, (where the Battalion again had moved a few days ago), Rosario and Naguilian.

While "A" Company was being assigned all three jobs, "B" Company moved to San Fernando to begin work on the 23rd Field Hospital.

Special mention at this time concerns the most outstanding job of the month performed by "C" Company. On May 7th they began installing 3 spans of Bailey Bridge over the Annburayan River in La Union Province -- for beyond any other U. S. Troops. Four hundred feet of new bridge had to be constructed and a temporary bridge put into operation. Bents were built by placing a cluster of nine piling in old steel castings. The casing then being filled with rocks and 5 ft. of concrete. By the second week the Daily bridge was being assembled on the remaining spans of original bridge. Launching was done by two Diamond T. Trucks hooked in tandem were used to push and two GMC Trucks, one on each side of the launching nose guided it by means of cables. Two 160' spans of triple double bridge and one 80' span of double single was in place by the latter part of the third week.

Though May 8th was VE Day and people rejoiced the world over as peace reigned supreme on the European continent, it was just another day of work and toil to men of the 339th. We still faced an enemy- a desperate one. Shortly afterwards we became acquainted with redeployment plans and were shown the movie "Two Down, One to Go." The point system had come into effect and the critical score for discharge was 85 or more points. Nearly 100 men were eligible while two thirds of the battalion had scores in the 60's and 70's. We waited patiently for further slashes in the point score.

CHAPTER XV

"BELETE PASS" (Now called Dalton Pass)

GATEWAY TO CAGAYAN VALLEY

We entered Luzon and made immediately ourselves known for the outstanding performance on the San Marcelino Airdrome. When the Luzon Campaign was officially ended on July 5th by the swift break through into the Cagayan Valley by elements of the 25th Division our engineering projects had for already several weeks placed us directly at the great gateway guarding the approaches into the Valley-Rugged, unsurpassable Belete Pass! ! The torturous battle endured by American dough boys was the most gruelling and hated assignment in the Philippines. Giant cliffs, hundreds of feet high, loomed gloomily over the road through the pass and the Japs were dug in at every cave and hole they chose as a favorable defense position. Frequent landslides washed out bridges and narrow curves slowed down operations.

As usual, we "Got" the job. We worked that road 24 hrs. a day for nearly two months and we worked under constant armed guard provided by ourselves, of course. When bridges were swept away, we built them over again. When the usual torrential rains caused heavy landslides blocking the road, our bulldozers knifed and plowed through the great debris of rock and mud, and when sections of the road itself would wash out we built huge cribs into the deep banks. Our work took us close to combat terrain that several Japanese soldiers gladly surrendered. Operations took a platoon of our men to the Northern most part of the island to the last Japanese strong hold on Luzon - Aparri. Our men were attached to Colonel Volmans Forces and actually had ring side seats when the 11th Airborne jumped down on the city.

While our companies were spread over central and northern Luzon, our headquarters was firmly established at Rosales. We were pleased at having presented on our stage the production of "Oklahoma" and several U. S. O. shows. However, our greatest thrill was the Kay Kyser show. At this time, we were greatly excited and overjoyed at the dropping of the two Atomic bombs on Japan on August 6th and 8th and the Russian Declaration of War the next morning. Then, a few nights later, Kay Kyser, in the midst of his show started us with the breathless announcement -- "Japan Offers to Surrender ! ! !"

CHAPTER XVI

Today is the first of October and this story is being brought to an end. No, we are not leaving for America today. We believe that if the reader has been interested in our activities over here in the Pacific that how much more pleasant the story will be if he listens to the final chapter from the lips of a man who was a member of the 339th.

We have been told by Major C. B. Calaway our new Bn. Commander that we are leaving in a few days for Japan. We have been told frankly that it means we are actually on our way home. With the new critical score at 80 points and further reductions expected very soon, nearly all are eligible for immediate discharge. Yes, for thirty months in the Pacific we have toiled and fought to uphold the high standards of the Corps of Engineers. We are going to be civilians again, to leave the Army and the loneliness we have experienced far behind us. As long as we had to be engineers in this war, we will always be proud that we were under the colors of the 339th Engineer Construction Battalion.

Prepared by Battalion I & E Section
(Louis Michner and other members of "A" Company)