

Journey To “Old Buck”

By Frank Kyle 453 BG / 732Sq.

December 2, 1943: We left March Field today at 11a.m. for an unknown Port of Embarkation. The Group pulled out in three long troop trains loaded with ground echelon. The air crews are getting new planes and will fly to our destination. Wild rumors are flowing; everything from San Francisco to Boston to New York to England to India. The train I am on is headed east. We hate to leave March Field. It was a good station with a lot to see and do.... The guys liked Riverside, L.A. and Hollywood. The civilians were good to G.I.s.

December 3 – 4, 1943: We are still headed east. Rumors are flying but the “word” is out via the orderly room noncom that our P.O.E. will be Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. From there we are to join the Eighth Air Force in England! The medical detachment guys seem to know where we are heading, too, and they confirm it. It’s England!

December 4 – 6, 1943: We have passed through California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado via Union Pacific Railroad. We have puffed up some high mountains along the way. The scenery has been spectacular in spots. Inside, the train is alive with fun. The men are in high spirits. I served in the mess car where the cooks are turning out hundreds of meals. I managed to “liberate” some apples, oranges, and bottles of milk and thus acquired the status of “hero” when I passed them out to my pals. I was awarded the upper berth for sleeping. The usual card games are going on, and some of the boys have won or lost quite a bit of cash.

December 7, 1943: It is Pearl Harbor Day and we are still aboard a troop train. We are in the Mid West, having passed through Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and are now in Michigan. Man, we are flying....this train is really moving! Either we are behind schedule or this engineer is crazy. I got stuck with KP for two days. The first three-grader noncoms don’t have to do any details aboard this train. I ladle out deserts, so I have a good job for myself. Nebraska is flat as a pancake, no hills at all. In Iowa we threw some money out to some kids who were waving at us. I’m sure they thought we were nuts. One thirteen year old was asked, “how do you stand in the draft?” Maybe they will get to him at that; some of these guys on this train don’t look much older.

December 8: We arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey after barreling through the tip of Canada, then down through New York, Pennsylvania, and on into New Jersey. We arrived shortly before midnight and slept aboard the train. First impression of Kilmer....Brrr! It is cold!!!

December 9 – 12: At Camp Kilmer, a Port of Embarkation. It is England for us, so the orderly guys were right. Physicals, psychological testing and calisthenics are the order of the day. We are permitted to call or write home so long as we say we are “somewhere on the east coast” and do not mention where we are. What a laugh that is. I called home collect and when Ma answered the phone, the operator asked her, “ will you accept a call from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey?” So much for military secrecy.

Despite the fact we were told to stay in the barracks area, a bunch of scaled the fence and sneaked into New York. Johnny Majek and I hitched a ride from a couple of civilians who drove us right into Times Square. What a time we had! We didn’t have to pay for a thing....even the girls paid for our food and drinks. We had a hell of a time getting back to Kilmer, though. We did not get into the barracks until 0430. The First Sergeant knows what is going on. I heard him talking to the squadron exec, Major Trigg, but neither one has said anything to any of the men. Trigg asked if anyone was missing and when Hickman said, “No,” Trigg just said, “Have a good day, Sergeant.”

December 13: We embarked late in the evening aboard the Queen Elizabeth, 83,000 tons, the world’s largest ship. She was partly loaded when we came aboard and it looks as though the 453rd Bomb Group will be the last aboard. We stood in full packs, rifles and gas masks for an hour or so before embarkation. An Army Band played some lively airs for us, including “Over There.” Red Cross women dished out coffee, doughnuts and candy to us. I stepped up the gangplank at 2340 when they called my name and I answered with my serial number. We filed into our quarters in alphabetical order. I was assigned to room 108A, along with five other G.I.s. There are two tiers of bunks, each containing three bunks. The sign over the door says, “Certified to accommodate two seamen.” We were told by a Transportation Corps Officer that we will have to sleep in shifts....six men will relieve us at noon each day.

December 14: We pulled out of the pier in New York at 0800, passed slowly out of the harbor past Staten Island, then past the Statue of Liberty. A lot of civilians on the ferryboats waved to us as we pulled out. There was a Navy blimp-circling overhead exchanging signals with the Queen as we moved downstream. It looks like we will make the run alone. The silence from the troops as we passed the Statue of Liberty was very noticeable.

December 15: It is a Wednesday and we are moving along at a fast pace. The ship is alone; there are no escorts. One of the British sailors says that airplanes are up ahead, but I didn’t see or hear any. We had an emergency muster at noon to get all troops on the boat deck as quickly as possible. We had two messes—one in the morning at 0745 and the other in the afternoon at 1730. The chow is good, except for the coffee...God, that was awful. Scuttlebutt has it that there are 20,000 men aboard, including tankers, artillerymen, infantry, medics, engineers, anti-aircrafters, paratroops, and a large detachment of M.P.s. However, the bulk of the troops seem to be Air Force personnel.

December 16: They tested the ship guns today. One of the 20mms shot out a parachute flare that was the target. Army gunners manned the guns. All aboard enjoyed watching the flak catch the parachutes in crossfire. The 40mm Bofors looks like a wicked anti-aircraft weapon. The noise was terrific. The ship is still hitting a fast clip, and is changing course frequently--all you have to do is look at the wake to see that. The water looks cold and rough. Even a big ship like this looks insignificant compared to the North Atlantic.

December 17: It is Friday and cold as ice on the deck. The Queen is speeding along at 36 knots, according to the Royal Navy sailors aboard. The ship is really vibrating. The Red Cross gave out cigarettes and gift packages including candy. I swapped my butts for some candy. There was no emergency muster or gunnery practice due to the rain and spray. I took a wash and shave in ice cold salt water ...what an experience that was ! I needed a blood transfusion after that shave.

December 18: We seem to be heading southeast today. It is getting much warmer and the sun is over our left shoulder as it rises. So unless I'm a punk navigator, we are heading southeast ..Later in the day, it got quite uncomfortable on board the ship. The air is foul in spite of the air conditioning.

December 19: It is still very uncomfortable aboard the Queen. We are still heading southeast too....and us with heavy woolen underwear on and water being rationed ! It is rather smelly in our small stateroom.

December 20 : It is Monday and we are still at sea as I "celebrate" my 22nd birthday. It is a bit cooler than yesterday and it is raining. An announcement was made to wear helmets on open deck, so now we must be getting closer to our destination. British sailors said the reason we swung southeast was to avoid a submarine wolfpack, which was picked up by radar. We apparently came within 180 miles of the Azores. Now we are going due north and changing course all the time. It is a fact that we are going to England. The Transportation Corps distributed pamphlets all about England.

December 21 : We arrived in Scotland early this morning, and after the blackout was over, I went topside to have a look. The boys say we are at the mouth of the Clyde and will unload here. Seven jeep carriers and H.M.S. Illustrious, a fleet carrier, were anchored around us. A couple of destroyers and three corvettes were also in the bay—quite an array of naval power. It is quite foggy so nothing much can be seen of the land around us.

December 22: We spent the day aboard ship, while other guys are going ashore in lighters or smaller ships. It is a nice, clear day and the town of Gourock can be seen off in the distance with a seaplane and a destroyer base nearby. In the background can be seen sloping hills, an old castle, and a village. Very pretty. The harbor is the Firth of Clyde and it is alive with shipping. The weather is brisk and wet. One of the naval ratings remarked that the war must be taking a turn for the better, because there would never have been such a concentration of shipping in previous times as there is here now.

December 23 : The 453rd went ashore this morning in a fairly large boat, but it was dwarfed by the huge Queen Elizabeth. Further downstream, H.M.S. Aquitania, another huge liner, lay at anchor....quite a setup for an air raid! We docked and quickly boarded troop trains. The Red Cross met us at the station with good coffee and doughnuts. We had quite a fast ride through Glasgow and Scotland, until we had to button up for the blackout. The scenery was beautiful and the G.I.s were really impressed with it. A flock of Scotty kids followed us all through Scotland asking for gum, coins, souvenirs or cigarettes. Our officers warned us not to throw things off the trains to them because trains coming from the other direction had killed a couple of the kids. The R.A.F. fed us at Manchester and from there we went on to Attleborough. The townspeople turned out to look us over, mostly kids, women and older men. They greeted us with nods, waves, and a few "hellos." Curiosity was all over their faces, that are for sure. We arrived at Old Buckenham and went to bed early....it had been a long trip.

