

Abroad (Part 2) by Eric Cooper

In the Catch-up Stanton News I described how I started my great adventure to that hitherto unknown place called “Abroad” and how I found myself in Egypt in 1943. It was interesting; we swatted flies on our tent flaps every morning (dozens at a single swat), we watched the sun come up each day, we watched it go down each day, we ate and dozed and visited Cairo and saw the Pyramids and Sphinx. We listened to the news on the wireless, we wrote letters home; then suddenly the Army’s Movement Control ordered 19 of us to board *SS Maharada*, a ship on its maiden voyage, and to proceed even further abroad. We sailed down the Red Sea in hot, calm, sheltered weather, dozed and watched the sand hills as we passed by. We called at Aden and watched trade going on in the port (but we were not allowed to disembark), we spotted flying fish on occasions in the Indian Ocean, ate lavishly (the boat was well provisioned) and we dozed our way to Colombo in Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was known in those days). There we did disembark and went to a Transit Camp a few miles from Colombo where we spent a couple of weeks, living in the jungle (where I saw fireflies for the first time) and visiting Colombo most days. In Colombo city we were given the use of the facilities at the Grand Hotel including permission to use the open air swimming pool. The pool steamed in the heat of the day and I was reminded of washing day at home and my grandma’s wrinkled hands when she took them from the water.

But such luck could not last. Transit Control ordered us to go by train to the north of the island, then by ferry boat across the Palk Strait, by train again to travel the length of India and to get to Deolali, a garrison town not far from Bombay. Here we stayed for a few days during which time I met a Gunner who had been a friend when I was at Devizes in 1940. We continued to eat and doze until we were allocated to different Commands. I was told I would join 1st Indian LAA Regiment, part of 14th Army in Assam (North East India). I travelled by train across India to Calcutta, a very interesting journey. Whilst I was in Calcutta, although I did not know it at the time, my wife back at home gave birth to our elder son John. Meanwhile I was still dozing, eating and looking for the elusive war.

So on to my next journey. My train went north from Calcutta to Parpattipur (a rail junction now known as Lumding) where I changed on to the narrow-gauge line and went by narrow-gauge train via Dimapur and Golaghat to Tinsukia where 1st Indian LAA Regiment and their guns were protecting a gigantic supply Depot from which supplies of war material, food, clothing etc. were being ferried by American and Chinese pilots using American Air Force planes flying over the Himalayas to help Chiang Kai-Shek and the Chinese forces.

It was at Tinsukia that I had my first success with 1st Indian LAA Regiment the very first day after joining them. I was left in charge of the Troop (six Detachments of 10 men each manning a Bofors gun emplacement spread round the airfield). I could only speak English, my troops could only speak Urdu – and one of my Detachments caught two Chinese pilots who could not speak either English or Urdu and who were having a walk round the airfield. My men thought they had captured some Japanese (we were constantly reminded that the enemy were close). I leapt into my Jeep and dashed to the scene of the capture. Then I took the two Chinese into my Jeep thus relieving my troops. With a winning smile I took the Chinese to the other end of the airfield where I pitched them out of the Jeep and returned to my headquarters to savour my tactful handling of a potentially damaging international incident! Having no wish to incur the wrath of my Colonel I did not mention the incident to anyone and thus received no plaudits for my brilliant diplomacy!