

From Pesky Blisters to Total Bliss

By A. Edward Pierce, A/56

As a result of our weekly twenty-five mile marches in the later stages of our rigorous training, we all seemed to end up with a series of bothersome water blisters, not a serious condition by any stretch of one's imagination. All of this changed in mid or late August of 1944 just prior to the Division leaving Camp Barkeley for the train ride to Camp Shanks in the state of New York. It was then that my life was transformed from a regimen of blisters on the feet to one of extreme and total Bliss.



To make a somewhat hazy statement more clear, it was then that I was placed on detached duty and transported to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas for two weeks of anti-aircraft gunnery training. Those receiving the training did not remain on the base, but rather spent all the time in the field on the Fort's reservation, part of which is in New Mexico and in, if I remember correctly, the Franklin Mountains. The temperatures through the daylight hours exceeded one hundred degrees by far each and every day of my tenure. We slept on cots and were housed in pyramidal tents.

We were involved from early morning until very late in the afternoon from Monday through Friday firing fifty (50) caliber machine gun shells at airplanes pulling sleeves connected to the tail of the airplane by very thin wire. The sleeves were situated significantly far from tail of the airplane in order to avoid any chance that the plane might be struck by errant aiming and firing. The planes were flown by members of the Women's Air Force. The pilots were eminently qualified and did an outstanding job of providing the targets necessary for us to practice our aircraft gunnery skills. The spent shell

casings that we had to police the area of were often times as hot as the weather. One could easily burn his hands picking them up too quickly after they were fired.

The first weekend all of the anti-aircraft gunner trainees were free and on their own. El Paso was all right, but it had little at the time to offer a stranger to the area. Juarez, Mexico was just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, but a trip there to one unfamiliar with the surroundings was analogous to playing Russian Roulette.

Just prior to the second weekend, the two weeks of training ended and I was on a train heading back to Camp Barkeley to rejoin my comrades in the first rifle squad, second platoon, Company A, 56th Armored Infantry Battalion. It was good to see the small group of men that fate had put together and that God was watching over.

It wasn't very long thereafter that we made our train trip to Camp Shanks for a brief stay, and then headed off to the European Theater of Operations aboard the Empress of Australia. The bliss was gone for the duration, and it was a rapid return to those pesky blisters!