

Henry Finkelstein
Notes From India - 1945

I am starting to write my itinerary on Wednesday, March 28, 1945 on board a cattle car which we boarded Tuesday 2200 March 27, 1945 at Bombay. I left Kelly Field Texas on Friday 16th February, 45 and arrived in Camp Anza 15 miles from Riverside, California on Monday the 19th February, 1945. We stayed there one week and on Monday 26th February, 1945, I walked up the gang plank after three hour trip from Camp Anza to Terminal Island. The ship was named the Admiral Benson and was a beauty, both in size and armament. The boat weighed approximately 25,000 tons. We left the States Tuesday, 27th February, 1945 but I didn't witness the sailing as I was in the ship's hospital with a cold and a little fever. I went into the hospital Monday night and got out Wednesday A.M.. They treated me nice in the hospital. Wednesday afternoon I got seasick but after one visit to the head (latrine), I was cured.

After seven days out we crossed the equator and it was as hot as hell for a few days but as we got closer to Australia it cooled off. After 7 days more or 14 days (sailing) we arrived in Melbourne, Australia. We stayed 2 days and then on to India. Eleven days later we arrived in India. The entire trip was uneventful as far as subs went. We had a escort of two corvettes (British) with us for two days and they picked us up 3 1/2 days out of Bombay, India. The trip wasn't too bad. I kept myself fairly busy most of the time. I read books, played cards and shot the bull with the boys. Living accommodations were good. We had a very well ventilated compartment and it was comfortable. The food on the ship wasn't too good and we only got 2 meals a day. But looking back now as we are eating c & k rations that food was pretty good. All in all we were on the ship 29 days. It looks like the ship ride is going to be the most pleasant part of the journey. I am now on a train which is like a box car. We sit on both sides of the car on benches and our bags are piled in the middle. We will be on this train for about 5 days. We will live on c & k rations. I expect to get very little sleep as when sunset comes we have to spray the car every 3 hours and also put repellent on till day light. Malaria is very prevalent in this country and we are all being cautious.

All our money was converted into rupees and annas. Indian money. Last night as we started on this journey to Calcutta the beggars were all around us. They were the filthiest people I ever seen and that includes the people in Cuba, Mexico and Texas. They sold us rings and knives and I bought a knife. We had a very good time bargaining with them. That was last night. We have stopped now and are about 300 miles from Bombay. We stop every 50 miles for water and then the beggars all come around the train and the boys really tell them off in all languages. Boy it is hotter than hell. One of the boys is bargaining for a bottle of scotch. What a battle. All the boys are kidding and joking. As the train pulled out, he bought it for 1 carton and one Rupee. He got gypped. It was marked white label scotch but it was a bottle of piss water. All the scenery looks the same open fields with rice patties. Otherwise all open land like Texas. We climbed a little and there were a lot of trees and there were baboons running around like cats.

Thursday - Everything is just about the same. We still stop very often and the beggars still crowd around and beg. I bought about 25 bananas for 1 rupee (30¢) and a 6 oranges (6¢). The med officer said they were all right. I forgot that on the 27 March as we were leaving the ship we got mail. I got 20 pieces and I was very very happy. Twenty shots in the arm couldn't have made me feel any better. I read each letter carefully and slowly. Absorbing each word. Tears came to my eyes but I was not ashamed. Oh I was so happy! I re-read my mail again yesterday. As for living conditions well they are very bad. Dirt and filth are very predominant. We get hot water from the engine and we wash in our steel helmet. The water is nice and warm. We get 3 rations of c ration a day. One ration consists of a can of stew and one can with coffee, crackers, candy and sugar. A very nice diet, three times a day. I only eat about 1 1/2 cans of stew a day. It is very hot and I haven't any appetite, but I feel fine. We have a 16 gal. tank of water. We fill it up twice a day and each time we chlorinate it. We have to be very careful with what we drink and eat. Disease is very prevalent in this country. At night we spray our car every three hours and rub our hands and faces with repellent every 3 hours. So we don't get very much sleep. We sleep on the wooden seats and every bone and joint in my body aches. But I am overseas and I expect the worst.

Friday, 30 March. I just had some coffee and a few biscuits for breakfast. I can't eat stew at least it is clean food. As for the lavatory. There is a small room at the rear of the car and in the middle of the floor there is a hole. You either stand up or do a deep knee bend. We stole toilet paper from the ship and so that part is all right. Back to the scenery again. We see plenty of cows, goats and oxen. You see these oxen pulling the wagons loaded with straw and wood. These people are very primitive. Yesterday while we were waiting for the train to take our coal and water we saw a unusual sight. A woman with a baby on her arm was begging. Then one of the boys threw her a Anna (1¢). She bared her breast and squirted milk in a stream about 6 ft. Well she repeated this 3 times each time for one Anna. What simple bastards. We were told that we should reach Calcutta morning (Saturday 31 March) and wouldn't we all be glad. We need a very good bath. All the rest of the day was the same we stopped every 25 miles sometimes in a town and sometimes on a siding. We are traveling on no priority. Everything goes before us and we just wait. We make about 200 miles a day. We had a close one about 2200. We came upon a G.I. field and a B-29 was coming in right over the train what a close one.

Saturday, 31 March - I had about 3 hrs. of sleep and when we were outside of Calcutta we changed engines and I washed up and had cocoa and biscuits for breakfast. It is now 1000 and we are on the other side of Calcutta, we sure do make time. We now have only 40 miles to go. But the way we are traveling it will take us all day.

While on the boat we had Passover services Sunday night 25 March. They gave us chopped liver, matzos and wine. It was very nice.