

Interview with John Henry about his experiences with the Thirteenth Air Force during WWII.



John Henry Private First Class 1943

The following is an excerpt from “From Fiji Through the Philippines With the Thirteenth Air Force” by Lt. Col. Benjamin Lippincott

Although the Thirteenth Air Force was relatively small, and could not compare in size with the Eighth or Ninth as they were organized in Europe, it yielded to none in mobility, Performance and color.

It did not fight from centralized bases closely tied together. It fought from island bases, spread hundreds of miles apart. It never enjoyed the usual overland communications – telegraph, long distance telephone, and good roads or roadbeds. It could communicate only by radio, ship or airplane. From its origins to VJ Day, its units were spread over at least forty-five islands in the South and Southwest Pacific.

Units of the Thirteenth moved from the Fijis and Australia through New Caledonia and New Hebrides, up the ladder of the Solomon's to the Admiralties and the Netherlands Indies. And finally through the Philippines. From the easterly point, Bora Bora, in the Society Islands, to the most northerly, Lingayen, in the Philippines, they traveled approximately 7,000 statute miles. Taking into account the establishment of the 868th Bombardment Squadron on Okinawa during the last month of the war, they traveled even farther, approximately 7,900 statute miles.

They operated over an area of as least 4,000,000 square miles, which is an area approximately one and one-third times the size of the United States. Most units made many moves, and, of course, they often moved without much warning. As General Matheny, former commander of the Bomber Command, said, in speaking of his own units, "those outfits got so much practice they could move in an hour's notice, just like a circus troupe."

Units of the Jungle Air Force Participated in thirteen campaigns: Guadalcanal, Northern Solomon's, Bismarck Archipelago, Eastern Mandates, Central Pacific, Western Pacific, New Guinea, Southern Philippines, Luzon, China, Air Combat Borneo, Ryukyus, and Air Offensive Japan. They also helped Marine aircraft and Navy surface vessels destroy the "Tokyo Express", which time and again sailed down the "Slot" to bring supplies and reinforcements to Guadalcanal.

John: We left San Francisco in June of 1943. It took us about a month to get to the Society Islands, which was our first stop. We were on a Dutch freighter. We stopped at Bora Bora to re supply for a couple of days.



Bora Bora

After dickering with the natives, who would pull up along side and try to sell us coconuts for a dollar apiece, we got bored with it finally and everyone was hot, so a group of us decided to go swimming. We dove

over the side and we were trying to climb back up a rope ladder, which had become fouled with oil to the point that we couldn't get back up. We swam around the front of the ship and climbed up on the dock and our transportation officer spotted us and claimed we were jumping ship. They threw us in the brig! They soon found that their impressions were wrong and pulled us out and assigned us to haul the kitchen garbage to shore and I remember slopping grease down our shorts while trying to get the damn stuff down the gangplank.

They had issued us wool clothing in San Francisco but within a very short time we were in khakis.

I boxed. Allot of the guys would box for cigarettes. Winner would get Lucky Strikes and the losers would get Players.

Don: *Was the ship really crowded?*

John: Oh yea. We were stacked 4 high in canvas bunks down in the hold.

You couldn't throw any garbage overboard because of submarines. Just after dark the captain would come out and say the garbage could be dumped.



Initiation into the Order of the Shell-Backs... SS Extavia.

Mike: *Did you have an escort?*

John: No escort. We stayed south of Japanese controlled areas.

We headed to New Caledonia from Bora Bora and we were there for about six months. That was more of a training center for the pilots and their crews.



Jim: *Was it any decision of yours to be heading into this part of the world?*

John: No, after basic training I let it be known that I would like to be in the Air Force. What it ended up being was the Army Air Corp.

In the fall we headed up to the Solomon Islands, near Bougainville. The islands we ended up on were called the Treasure Islands. There were only two and only a couple hundred yards between them.

Don: *Did you ever get bombed?*

John: Yea, while we on New Guinea. They would come at us one at a time. Harassment runs mostly. They would come in at night and shoot off a 90mm gun, which would wake up everybody. You'd roll out of your sack

and dive head first into a fox hole out back. Only one of our guys got wounded the whole time we were out there. He caught shrapnel in the butt as he was trying to dive into his foxhole.

That was a place where I almost went section 8... that's out of your head. The stress was high here. Along with the nuisance raids I had to worry about Typhus. They dipped all of our clothing and gear to stop the spread of the germ.

The supply ships would anchor offshore and they would put us in these damn things called "ducks" (D.U.K.W amphibious vehicle). Which is how we would shuttle all the stuff in. We had gotten sideways in the surf and it went from upright to right over on its side. I was right up on the tail end of it and there was a bunch of cables back there. When I went off I had cables wrapped around my ankles and I was under water worrying about that damn propeller going around. I was also worried about getting pinned between the wheels and the shore bottom. Later I learned that the reason we went sideways was because the engine failed. I finally got out of the water and I just shook for hours after that. Then to top it all off we had two Jewish boys in our tent that were constantly bickering, which I got fed up with real fast.



DUKW or "duck" amphibious vehicle.

Gene: *Was it unusual to spend 3 years without a leave?*

John: Well I had a 3-day pass in New Caledonia, but I couldn't leave the Island.



John with his buddy Fitzpatrick and Randolph Scott.

We finally left there and went up to Palawan, which was in the Philippines. We joined a convoy that had ships as far as the eye could see.

Mike: *You were really heading into Japanese territory weren't you?*

Scott: *You were coming up as the front was being pushed north, right?*

John: Yea, the area had really been cleared out. From New Guinea we bombed Borneo as well as The Celebes and Halmahera. There was an awful lot of oil that was being moved out of Borneo, which accounted for their presence in the area.

While we were down at Palawan, the end of the war came but we had no word. Someone just started shooting their machine gun down on the beach. We were wondering what that was all about and finally someone told us that the war was over...

Mike: *In Europe?*

John: No, in Japan. They had dropped the bomb.

Scott: *The bombers you were servicing, were they B25's?*

John: Mostly B25's but we had some B24's also. B24's replaced the 17's because they didn't have quite the range as the 24's.



B25

Rick: *So you were the first one to leave the States in '43.*

John: Yea, well I guess Fred was in Chico California when I shipped out from San Francisco. I had a 24 Hr pass there and I Hitched up to see him but I never caught up with him.

Don: *Your basic training was in Florida wasn't it?*

John: Yea, we went from Miami Beach to Denver for armor training, then to Hunter field in Savannah, Georgia. From Savannah they shipped us out to San Francisco for deportation.

Scott: *Did you service any P38's?*

John: Yea, 38's and 39's.



P38



P39

Mike: *So did you do any building of the airstrips?*

John: No we would follow the Seabees in who did all of the construction and we did ordinance supply and regular maintenance. I maintained 50mm and 30mm machine guns and plane-mounted cannons.

Scott: *Did you ever get sick from the water or food?*

John: No, Not really, not even sea sick. It was so hot down there though, that you're under arms and crotch are constantly wet. We always had a rash as a result and they would paint us up with a purple antiseptic...



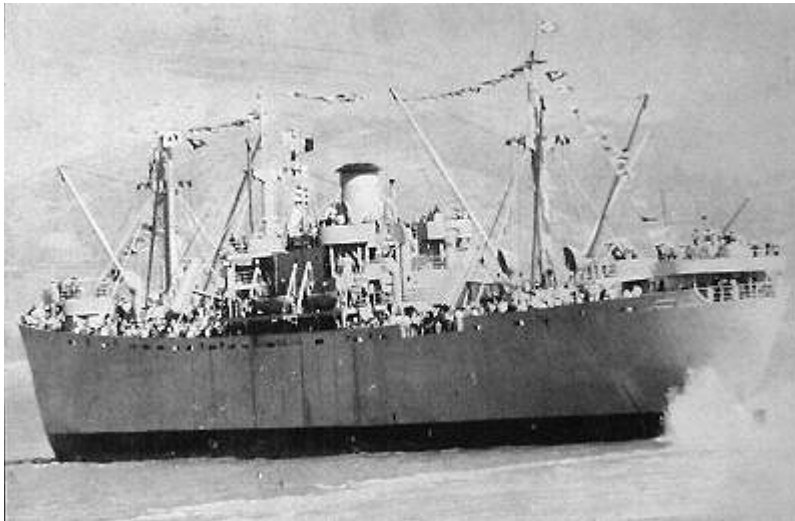
There may have been no women but he had a pet monkey!

Scott: *What about women?*

John: I never saw a woman for three years... I saw one from a distance, a native woman. It was really something to come back and smell perfume and see women when I first got back. It would make me light headed.

Mike: *How did you get back?*

John: It was on a liberty ship. Which was a cargo ship... they made about one a day down in Georgia.



A Liberty Ship... his ticket home.

While we were bivouacked in a coconut grove on Palawan we could walk a half a mile out in the ocean, it was so gradual. We would swim naked; they're being no women around. We'd get sunburned and pants would be pretty uncomfortable for a few days.

When we moved from Bougainville to Palawan, we went in an LST and someone had it in for me. We had jungle hammocks that we strung up anyplace that we could find to do it... between two trucks or a truck and a railing, two and three high. Someone cut through my ropes and it all came down in the middle of the night on top of a guy below me. I had to spend the rest of the night down in the hold and the next morning a siren went off to wake everyone up... I had fallen asleep just below the damn thing and didn't realize it until it went off.



LST being loaded from shore.