

## THE U.S. SIXTH ARMY

During the period from April 1942 to September 1942 a gradual buildup of service, supply and troop deployment activities occurred. Many small units from company to battalion size were arriving daily and were being assigned not only to the Brisbane area but also to Rockhampton, Townsville, and Darwin. The Australian government through civilian contractors built depots, warehouses, and other required logistic complexes. Private schools were taken over by government decree sometimes rather forcefully and converted into base and general hospitals. As a signal officer assigned to Base 3, I was involved in not only planning the installation of their communications but I also had to make frequent visits to inspect and confirm that everything was working satisfactorily. Many times I had to fly to the site if it were out in the bush while the rest of the time I was able to drive to the unit via military vehicle. Sergeant Chuck Vining generally accompanied me and was the driver. During those trips. I can truthfully say that I got to know practically all of Australia at that time and loved staying overnight in the small towns that had only one small hotel with a pub. The Australians were friendly, hospitable and knew that we were far from home. They felt that the least they could do in spite of rationing and severe shortages and restrictions imposed during wartime, was to invite a Yank to their home for dinner. I had so many

invitations that I became embarrassed to accept anymore. I reciprocated by giving them candy or tobacco.

General MacArthur at that time was planning for the future and was bombarding the War Department for more planes, more men and more supplies. Unfortunately he was told rather bluntly that the first priority was the buildup in Europe and that he would have to bide his time. He did request General Walter Krueger and Headquarters 6th Army be sent as soon as possible. General George Marshall concurred. In mid February I was given the mission of installing a temporary communications center to include telephone, teletype and messenger service to the unit which arrived via air from the U.S.A. on February 18, 1943. They were to be located some ten miles west of Brisbane at a site known as Camp Columbia. I contacted the 832 Signal Battalion and requested the Commander to furnish an installation team and equipment to complete the task. The next day I drove to Camp Columbia to check on the progress of the work. The linemen were putting up poles and stringing field wire all over the area. I checked in and reported to Colonel J. Rockafella the Adjutant General who seemed satisfied with the progress of the work. As I walked over to the tent that was marked Comcenter. I happened to look up. A tall, slender, erect, gray haired officer with three stars stood before me. He stuck out his hand and said rather casually, "My name is Walter Krueger Lieutenant". I saluted and gave my name and

told the General what I was doing there. He thanked me and without another word, turned and walked off. While there I had learned that one of my former instructors in R.O.T.C. at Cornell University was now the G-1 on the Generals' staff. He was Colonel John R. Pittman. I wanted to meet him when he arrived and to kiddingly welcome him to the land down under. I was deeply saddened to learn from the General that day that Colonel Pittman was killed when the plane he was a passenger in crashed while landing at Canton Island en-route to Australia. I was most impressed with the warmth and friendliness of General Krueger, and later learned that he made it a point to invite a different officer and enlisted man to dine at his mess every evening. He continued this practice throughout the entire war. I met the General several more times especially during the landing in Hollandia New Guinea later on during the war. While there I met and had dealings with his Signal Officer Colonel Harry Reichelderfer. I thought General Kreugers staff the most professional of any that I had ever dealt with. He was an outstanding leader and a real gentlemen. All of his troops respected and loved him.

While at Camp Columbia I noticed that about a quarter of a mile away from Headquarters Sixth Army there was another unit which was the 152 field Hospital consisting of some twenty nurses, ten doctors and many enlisted medics. All were quartered in tents which included many wards, a mess

hall, a bivouac area, and one operating room. I spoke to the head nurse who was a Major from Maine and who described the units primitive way of life as similar to being back to the western frontier in the 1890's. Their drinking water was hung outdoors on a tripod stand which supported the heavy Lister bags which were heavily chlorinated. Laundry was done by hand in a wash basin. All the Nurses wore the fatigue clothes that the Doctors wore. Worst of all they were some half mile away from the railroad station that could take them to Brisbane. I really felt sorry for them and after thinking it over a few minutes I finally asked if I could talk to the commander of the unit, a Lieutenant Colonel. I don't recall his name but I did ask if his signal communications were satisfactory. They had one telephone line into a nearby Australian unit and could hardly get through to higher headquarters. They did have some fifty or more patients, many wounded in New Guinea and even a few that managed to escape from the Phillipines and Java. I suggest that the Colonel pay a visit to the 6th Army Headquarters and talk to the Signal Officer about temporarily connecting one of their lines to the Army switchboard in order to function more efficiently. "Why don't you send your Chief Nurse over to see General Kreuger and ask for some help?" I added.

I learned later that my suggestion worked out fine because the symbiotic relationship that developed between the hospital nurses and the officers, plus the closeness of

Brisbane all came together nicely to make life a little more enjoyable for all concerned. While I didn't know it at the time one of the nurses in that unit, a Lieutenant Helen Kathryn Hoffman from Pittsburg, Texas was to play a major part in my life. Had someone told me then that a tall, slender beautiful, brown eyed and black haired Texan was the one I was to fall in love with and marry, I would have scoffed at the idea because we were as different in mannerisms, speech and ways of dealing with situations as day is night. Yet they say opposites attract. In the years that followed I never had cause to regret my decision but that is another chapter of my life that will be narrated later on. It is strange but in an indirect way I contributed to her making the trip into Brisbane many times (where I was stationed) a lot easier since the Officers at Sixth Army had "wheels" and any Army nurse was always welcome to ride along. Her unit remained at Camp Columbia for only six months when the entire outfit was shipped to the seven mile airstrip outside of Port Moresby, New Guinea.

#### THE LOST BATTALION

The U.S.A.T. Holbrook was one of the seven ships in our convoy that was loaded with troops that landed in Brisbane on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1941. Included in the troops was a Texas National Guard Unit called the 2nd Battalion 131st Field Artillery that had been called to active duty in late 1940. This unit consisted of men from Wise, Jack and Parker

counties in Northeast Texas. When they debarked from the ship they were quartered at both Doomben and Ascot racetracks. On Christmas day the enlisted men and officers spent the day unloading their equipment from the hold of the Holbrook. On December 28th they reboarded the ~~Holbrook~~ <sup>BLOEMFONTEIN</sup> along with their artillery pieces and ammunition under orders to sail to Surabaja, Java and to stop en-route at Darwin, Australia. The ship arrived at the Darwin port on January 3, 1942 and left immediately after unloading for its Java destination. The unit arrived in Surabaja on the tenth of January where they set up their artillery pieces at Bundung which was in the mountains. At the same base the Dutch Military command operated an airfield where many of the U.S. B-17 bombers landed that had been flown out of the

Phillipines from the Del Monte airbase in Mindanao. <sup>19th Bomb Gp</sup>  
COL. ~~JAMES LEE BANKS, later MAT. GEN. USAF~~

The B-17's were flying daily bombing missions over the Java Sea against Japanese ships. There was also in Bandung at the same time a group of fighter pilots and P-40 fighter aircraft who were the remnants of the original 17th Pursuit Squadron from Nichols Field in the Phillipines. They were led by Captain Boyd J. "Buzz" Wagner". His unit flew fighter cover missions for the bombers as well as reconnaissance missions. "Buzz" became the first air ace of the Pacific war with five confirmed kills. Because of the extreme shortage of side and tail gunners in the B-17 bomber unit many of the men from the 131st Battalion units volunteered to

be side and tail gunners or turret gunners. In fact those men that did and survived the bomber missions were the fortunate ones to leave Java as bomber crew members when Java fell to the Japanese on March 3, 1942. The rest of the men from the 131st Field Artillery Battalion were taken prisoner by the Japanese on March 8th and remained POW's in Thailand, Burma and Indo-China until liberated in 1945. It is this same group that the Japanese used for slave labor to build the 263 mile long "Death Railway" which represented one death for each tie laid. The movie "The Bridge Over the River Kwai" contained some incidents about this group but for the record the film was strictly Hollywood as the bridge was never blown up, nor was the terrain like that depicted. Hollis G. Allen from Jacksboro, Texas who was a Lieutenant in battery "F" and P.O.W. describes how the Japanese brutalized, tortured and humiliated the men under the worst possible conditions in Malaya while building the railroad. His story is contained in a book published in 1963. ( )

Forty four years later a monument and bronze plaque with the names of all the men in Battery "F" was set up in Fort Richardson Park in Jacksboro, Texas. It was dedicated as a tribute to their sacrifices and bravery. Many of those who are still alive and survived imprisonment attended the ceremony which was held on June 2, 1986.

I thought to myself that I too was in the same convoy but fate had been kind to me as I was pulled out of the group

of officers on the ship solely because there was a shortage of Signal Officers at the time we landed. Had I remained in the Field Artillery at Fort Bragg I am certain I would have wound up in the Phillipines with a similar unit at that time. Who can say for sure what the outcome of ones life might have been just on speculation? During that time I hardly gave it a passing thought because the rapid turn of events left little time for deep thought or reflection.