

EVACUATION SQUADRON

by Clifford Emling

The 803rd MAES was activated at Bowman Field, Kentucky in early 1943. It sailed to India on the troopship George Washington in the fall of 1943 and set up headquarters at Chabua in Assam under the command of Major Morris Kaplan. The squadron was given the responsibility of all air evacuation within the entire China-Burma-India Theater (CBI). One of the busiest periods for the 803rd was the spring of 1944 when the Japanese were being driven out of Burma, climaxed by the capture of Myitkyina by allied forces. Air evacuation planes, usually C-47s, were making a number of round trips daily to remote airstrips near the front lines to evacuate wounded.

The air evacuation planes ranged widely from Calcutta and Karachi to the Assam Valley and over the Hump to China. A detachment of the 803rd operated out of Kunming Headquarters of the 14th Air Force.

The 803rd suffered very few casualties but they had their share of dangerous assignments and exposure to danger. Three of its members were wounded when strafed by Japanese planes while they were loading wounded at the Myitkyina airstrip during its recapture. A little patient being loaded onto the plane was killed by the strafing. Chief Nurse Audrey Rogers was the first flight nurse to receive the Purple Heart in the CB Theater from wounds received in the Myitkyina mission. Missions were hazardous, with numerous close calls but resulted in only two crash landings that required "walk-outs."

"Tex" Gleason Boy, a flight nurse, was the only woman to bail out in China. Not an experience she would like to repeat. She landed in a heavily wooded area in freezing rain. Fortunately she was rescued by Chinese peasants who escorted her to the 14th Air Force Base at Kweilin.

In China, the air evacuation was guided by the Transport Section of the 14th Air Force. Air evacuation flight crews usually consisted of a medical officer, six nurses and eight technicians. Two such flight crews were attached to the 14th Air Force.

In late 1944, the 821st MAES arrived in the CBI to assist the 803rd. It established headquarters in Ledo. The 821st took over the Burma Operation and the 803rd remained responsible for the China, Hump and Intra-India air evacuation requirements. By early 1945, air evacuation requirements dropped considerably with a less hectic schedule.

The 803rd utilized the C-46, C-47 and the C-87, the transport version of the B-24 for most missions. The C-64 "Nordun-Norseman," and the L-5 were used for small field emergency operations.

Except for the casualty at Myitkyina, the 803rd never lost a patient during evacuation. Working with primitive equipment under the most hazardous conditions, the 803rd performed a heroic mission and had a most memorable record.