

# 748th Railway Operating Battalion

Dave Kaufman

As part of the U.S. Army Transportation Corps during World War II, the railway operating battalions (ROBs) were a necessary means of moving large numbers of personnel, equipment, and supplies during the war. Rails are the most efficient means of such transport and the only form that maintains its own rights-of-way, communications, construction, and complete repair facilities.

ROBs were the smallest-sized active units of the U.S. Army Military Railway Service (MRS) in World War II. The 800-man battalions had four companies in the TO & E, and each battalion was considered a self-sustaining "division" along the rail lines upon which they operated. (1)

Each company had its own specific duties. Company A, consisting of two track platoons and one bridge platoon, handled construction. Two of the three platoons in Company B were responsible for keeping the equipment in running shape, utilizing their own roundhouse; the third platoon shopped the rolling stock. Company C was the largest company, because it supplied the train crews. H & S Company supplied dispatchers (train controllers), telegraphers, and other support personnel. Four to five separate ROBs, and usually one Railway Shop Battalion (RSB), were directed by a Railway Grand Division (RGD), which was an administrative group consisting of approximately 100 personnel.

The 748th Railway Operating Battalion was activated at Camp Harrahan, (near New Orleans) LA, on 19 May 1943, with a cadre from the 725th ROB. (2) A portion of Camp Harrahan was located under the east end of the Huey P. Long Bridge in New Orleans. The sponsoring railroad for the 748th was the Texas and Pacific RR. The only commanding officer was Lt. Col. Alva C. Ogg, who was a former Assistant Superintendent of the Texas and Pacific RR.

Training commenced immediately, including more than a week at the Slidell Rifle Range. The men familiarized themselves with the M-1 Garand, M-1 carbine, and .45 pistol. Subsequent to the battalion's move to Camp Jesse Turner, near Van Buren, AR,

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**SSI for 748th ROB - US made, red embroidery on orange wool. A larger version, possibly intended for pocket wear, also exists.**

different sections trained on different railroads and in yards, within Arkansas, to improve their section's specific technical skills. This included dispatching, signals (telegraph and wireless), engineering (railway maintenance operations), road and yard operation, crew dispatching (using first-in and first-out basis), and repairs. There was limited cross-training in the repair shops to insure that training cadres had technically trained specialists. The battalion subsequently provided training cadres for two other ROBs.

T-4 Joseph Allison, who became an engineer, recalled, "I was working as a fireman for the Chicago and Illinois-Midland when I got drafted. I established my seniority with them - you couldn't be a fireman until you were 21 years old. I don't know if that was law or policy. I also worked in the roundhouse and hostling.

"I almost didn't get in to the service. I had some bad burns on my body, and my family doctor told me I couldn't get in to the USO, let alone the U.S. Army. I was still firing engines, and was coming upon a promotion with the CIM. I was hoping that I could get into the signal corps, because I had been fooling around with ham radios. Anyway, about three or four Army doctors

passed me." (3)

Capt. James Weatherby HQ Co, recalled, "I joined the 748th ROB when it was activated at Camp Harrahan. I worked for the T & P as a signals supervisor before the war - I started with them in 1935. I was in charge of the department which installs and maintains the signals that trains use to operate. I was a circuit designer when I went in.

"The officers for the 748th ROB, most of whom had just completed basic training at Ft. Slocum, NY, were assigned to the enlisted personnel for basic training at Camp Harrahan. I was commissioned as a 1st Lt., with principal duties as a Signal Supervisor, the added responsibility of Battalion Mess Officer, and later was designated Class A Finance Officer with the responsibility of paying the battalion personnel." (4)

1st Sgt George Crow recalled his service with the 748th ROB, which began at Camp Jesse Turner. "I had several years experience as a machinist and apprentice for the Cincinnati Union Terminal, an all-passenger railroad terminal, before the war. We had seven railroads operating into the terminal. I thought I'd eventually be called for service, and tried volunteering for the Navy, Navy CB's, and the Army Air Corps. I was turned down by all of them because of I'd lost sight in my left eye during surgery. It had been injured in an industrial accident.

"When I joined the 748th at Camp Jesse Turner, I was on guard duty because of my damaged eye. The rest of the battalion was sent down to the Missouri-Pacific RR for technical training. I wasn't happy being on guard duty, and with my pre-war experience, I told the captain that I was really needed in the shop where I belong. After I showed him what I could do, I got a shop assignment.

"Lt. Sheehan told me to assign the GI's to work locations. As new recruits came to camp, the lieutenant told me to hold classes after chow to teach them about steam locomotives. I picked up a couple of promotions along the way." (5)

By necessity, the ranks of ROBs were usually filled by railroad personnel. One former member of the battalion did not have railroad experience. T-4 Robert Schultz said, "I was a fireman on an iron ore boat on the Great Lakes when I was drafted. I ended up in the 748th. I thought it was unusual because I had no railroad experience. Once we got overseas, because of the shortage of engineers, I was promoted to engineer from fireman, and I was only 19 years old.

"The ROBs manpower needs were met in various ways. There were both enlistees and draftees who had railroad experience. Railroad men who were drafted into ROBs were known on the railroads as 'boomers'. Boomers were transient types who moved around a lot because they were heavy drinkers or had other problems. Those who were about 25, 26 years old weren't protected from the draft. They kept drinking in the service, too." (6)

In late October 1943, the battalion moved to Camp Barkley, Texas, for additional railway operations training, which subsequently gave way to extensive military training during the month of November. The unit left Texas at the end of November enroute to the Los Angeles Port of Embarkation. On 10 December 1943, the 748th ROB departed, along with four other ROBs and an RSB, on the S.S. Mariposa, destined for the China-Burma-India Theater. All the battalions on board were assigned to the 705th RGD. Traveling alone without escort ships, the S.S. Mariposa had to zig-zag every few minutes. After a stop-over in Hobart, Tasmania, the men arrived in Bombay, India, on 11 January 1944, having spent a total of 31 days at sea. (7)

T-4 Allison said, "We shipped over on the S.S. Mariposa, and the food was terrible. We were fed only twice a day, Australian mutton and frankfurters stamped 'Made in Australia 1938'. We went through the food lines and dumped the food into barrels. We almost had a mutiny over the food. An armed Marine guard had to be posted for meals." (8)

T-4 Homer Cantrell, a former boiler-maker apprentice prior to the war, recalled the ocean journey. "We got a chance at shore leave for a day in Hobart. At that time none of us GIs knew where we were going, but all the people there knew we were going to Bombay, India. They had looked for us on Christmas day and when we arrived, they treated us royally. They had been bombed twice by the Japanese." (9)

The battalion moved by both broad

and meter gauge railroad, and by ferry up the Brahmaputra River to their station of assignment at Tinsukia, in Assam Province. Tinsukia was a major railhead that serviced not only ground troops in China, but also several airbases. They were Chabua, Mohanberri, Ledo, and Dinjan. Chabua was the largest and busiest base, because most of the supplies to China went out from there. The railroad division covered a total of 190 miles, and included a 96-mile section of the Bengal and Assam (B & A) from Mariani, Assam, to Tinsukia, Assam, and also included the Dibru-Sadiya (D-S) Railway from Dibrugarh to Lekhapani (Ledo) and Makum Junction to Sokoah Ghat.

T-4 Cantrell recalled, "We started north from Calcutta and that was a nightmare. We traveled perhaps 1,000 miles by rail and then the track made a big circle, and we were unloaded. The train unloaded the GIs and headed back south. We were then transported up the Brahmaputra River on a former stock boat that had been previously used to haul cattle.

"We then transferred to a steamer that had plenty of room for walking around in the daytime. The decks were pretty crowded at night. When you spread your blanket, you were almost touching the fellow next to you. We were on the steamer for about five days and nights. About the second night, every one of had dysentery and it was hell. There were only four johns on each side of the boat for 750 GIs." (10)

Upon the battalion's arrival at Tinsukia, the battalion was greeted with an air raid alert, and the GIs had to take cover in slit trenches. A short time later, the Japanese were threatening to cut Allied lines at Imphal, only a few miles distant.

Some tents were already prepared as living quarters, and others had to be erected. Eventually, the men based at Tinsukia lived in 4-6 man tents, built on concrete slabs or wood floors. The men joked that the tents even came with air conditioning-they just rolled up the sides.

Pfc. Arthur Kambury, HQ Co, said "The first time we got hold of some beer, some of the boys got a little rowdy and fired off their weapons into the air, while inside their tents. Command staff got annoyed at that and disarmed us, locking our carbines and sidearms in supply. Here we were in a war zone and didn't have weapons. Of course, when the Japanese were threatening to cut our lines at Imphal, we were armed again. After the threat subsided, our weapons were locked up again." (11)

Another problem facing the men was poor water potability. This was corrected by setting up a hot water system, treating the water by live steam in a tank, which was then drained and allowed to settle in a chlorination tank before distribution.

1st Sgt. Crow recalled that "The Indian water also affected steam engines very, very much. For a while after we arrived, water for the locomotives was obtained from a pond across the way and when the dry season came along, there was as much mud as water. The mud formed in the mud ring of the firebox, and caused the engines to foam real bad. When you open the throttle, two water glasses discharge water through flues from the crown sheet - at the top of the firebox. The water circulates through the flues. The mud kept the water from circulating properly, and water would disappear completely from the water glasses. If you don't know where your water level is - it could be below that crown sheet, and if you put cold water through the injectors into the boiler, and the water gets on the crown sheet, it could cause the boiler to explode.

"That nearly happened one day. I saw one of our engines sitting on a side spur, and the GI engineer said it was foaming so bad, he was afraid to take it out. I asked him if he had blown it down - there's a blow off cock on the side of the firebox, and you can open it up and blow the steam and water out to clean the engine. He said he blew it down three or four times already but it was still foaming. The Indian fireman were still on board, so they built it back up again for me, and I blew it down a couple of more times, which didn't help. When I opened up the throttle, the water level went down out of sight. I called Capt. Alberts and got a clear rail line to bring the locomotive back to Tinsukia. I told the firemen 'see the water coming down there? I want water coming out of there continuously.' I also opened the bottom gauge cock, which shows the level of the water in the boiler. We got the locomotive back to the Tinsukia yard, knocked the fire down, and washed it out. About this time, a civil engineer came in, drilled a 305 feet deep artesian well, and we had good water. Didn't have much more trouble with foaming then. Of course, here in the states, we use water purification capsules or powder in the tenders to keep the water from foaming and corroding." (12)

Also upon their arrival in Tinsukia, the men were witnesses to a strange development. T-4 Allison recalled, "When we got

to Tinsukia, there was an English-speaking Japanese pilot who was flying a Zero coming over every day. He told us his name was 'Photo Joe' and what he taking photos of each day. None of our planes could get up there to him, because he had such a high ceiling. Well, the air corps stripped a P-38 Lightning of its armor, and sent it up, and that took care of Photo Joe. He crashed about 2-3 miles from Ledo. Several of us went and looked at the wreckage of his plane." (13)

Another strange development, was the arrangement of the battalion in the British span of control. T-4 Allison said, "We were actually attached to the British Army, and had the 1st Ghurka Rifle Battalion guarding our camp and our bridges. That's probably why we didn't have any sabotage. If they weren't the best soldiers in the world, they were close to it. They became very friendly with us, because we'd bring them M-1 clips for their Garands. I heard that Patton gave them the Garands in North Africa." (14)

The British Army was not the sole protector of the 748th ROB. Sgt. Fred Beene, assigned to the Signal Section, recalled, "For the first two months we were in Tinsukia, we had machine-gun emplacements around all of our bridges. A Chinese Army company of approximately 100 men guarded them. Some of the Chinese officers were English-speaking. The EM were all young. The Chinese Army didn't draft like we did - they just rounded up all the available men from a village like cowboys did cattle, and brought them in. I got to be friends with some of the men who spoke a little English, and they taught me few words of Chinese." (15)

Immediately following improvement in the living conditions, inspections of the various companies' responsibilities began. Inspections of the entire length of the meter gauge rail lines in the 748th's division were

conducted.

On 1 March 1944, the 748th began actual operation of the division. Capt. Weatherby said, "We engaged in no railroad activity for about a month waiting for a contract with the government of India, under which the U.S. took responsibility to operate the B & A and the D-S RR. We used the existing India railroad personnel in these duties." (16)

Classes were set up to familiarize Company C personnel with the rules of the Indian railways. It was necessary to retain and retrain B & A RR civilians in their assignments to augment U.S. military personnel. The most serious difficulty that developed was the language differences, but creative signs and symbols overcame this. It was also necessary to assign train controllers to the various block stations, including on the D-S RR. Other noted problems were the shortage of locomotive parts and lack of storage facilities for them. The solution was obtaining them from the shops of the neighboring 758th RSB, located at Dibrugarh.

The Signal Section also conducted inspections to insure efficiency of operations, and noted numerous shortcomings. These included a lack of tools, unsatisfactory inspection cars, incompatibilities between U.S. and Indian telephone lines resulting in splicing problems, poor western union joints, the wire itself was of poor quality, and spans (wire hung between poles) were too long and in need of resagging.

Capt. Weatherby recalled, "The signal section consisted of 21 enlisted personnel, most of whom had experience in installing or maintaining signal systems on U.S. railroads. On the portion of the railroad for which the battalion was responsible, there was practically no modern signal system, so other than the repair of wire lines, the previous experience was of little value.

Those signal facilities that existed were very rudimentary and had been outmoded and discontinued in the U.S. years earlier. We didn't do any telephone pole repair or resagging. We left that to the signal units that worked in our division. We did repairs to the conductors in the western union joints on our train telephone lines. Copper starts out as a bar, and they draw it through dies in the right diameter they're looking for. A western union joint was a twist joint made with a double barrel copper sleeve. One length of wire is on one side, and the other length of wire is on the other side, and they lie side by side inside the sleeve, with a conductor in between. The joint was then twisted and formed a connection. Actually, I think the Indians did a lot of the telephone line repairs. We just supplemented them. We completed some emergency telephone line repairs between stations.

"There really was no typical day. We didn't have set hours; we just worked whatever was necessary. Most of our jobs were simple maintenance. They didn't have many train signals, for one thing.

"The signal system in India was so elementary compared to what we had in the U.S. that we just left the Indians to do what they could do with them, and we operated around them. The authority for train movements was under control of the individual Stationmasters, and extended only from station to station. Each station had signals at each end of the station siding where trains could meet and pass. These were controlled by mechanical levers at the station, connected to the signals by galvanized iron wires through a system of pulleys. The wire lines were double, allowing the signals to be cleared or put to stop position by a pulling action of the wire. The switches at the ends of the station sidings were also operated from the station by double wire lines. The levers were operated by 'pointsmen' under the direction of the Stationmaster. Sometimes the signal switches worked and sometimes they didn't, so the pointsmen would go out and work the switches manually. Signalmen were assigned to selected stations, and assisted or directed repairs on the mechanical systems.

"The authority to move between stations was granted by Stationmasters using either token machines, or if token machines were not provided or were inoperative, by paper 'line clear' authority. The token machines were electro-mechanical devices in-



Tinsukia Yard 1944-45 - courtesy 1st Sgt G. Crow

terconnected between adjoining stations. To clear a train, the Stationmaster would contact the Stationmaster at the adjoining station and request a 'line clear' authority. If the authority was granted, that Stationmaster would move his token machine lever in the direction of the requesting station, allowing the requesting Stationmaster to in turn move the lever on his token machine in the direction of the authorizing station. That action locked the lever at the authorizing station and released the lever and restored the system so that it could be used for other movements. If the token system was not provided or was inoperative, a 'paper line clear' authorized the movements issued by the Stationmaster by arrangement with the Stationmaster at the adjoining station. The issuing Stationmaster communicated a 'secret number' to the adjoining Stationmaster to identify the 'paper line clear' when it was handed over to the engine crew.

"These systems depended on communication by wire lines. The pole line structure was owned and maintained by the Indian Post and Telegraph organization. Because of termite infestation and unreasonably short life of wood, poles made of tubular galvanized iron set on cast iron bases were used. The cross arms were also made of galvanized iron. Porcelain insulators on metal pins supported the wire lines.

"The major causes of communications problems was low resistance to ground or the actual grounding of the conductor through the poles. Other problems were high resistance wire line splices and crosses or grounding due to improper conductor sagging. Not usually having the proper size repair sleeve to replace defective splices caused further problems. Indian repair crews used a loop rope arrangement to climb the metal poles. Our personnel cleared grounds and crosses, but relied on ladders or more often, Indian personnel, to climb the poles. As U.S. dispatchers supervised and expedited train movements, long distance communications (between the dispatchers and all stations) became more important." (17)

The inspection by the engineering section noted low bridges and resulting high water, earth slippage on several post locations, a need to reballast almost half of the main line, and shortages in ballast materials, native laborers during spring and monsoon season, and in track material for repairs and renewals.

1st Sgt. Crow recalled, "I was in charge



Indians, carrying coal-laden baskets on their heads, loading coal tenders - courtesy First Sgt. G. Crow

of maintenance and repair of all the locomotives. We performed daily inspections of all locomotives when they came into the shop. We would typically look for cracks in the side rod, play in the rod, play in the cross head, too much play in the front end or back end of the main rod, sharp flanges on the wheels, and steam leaks, including in the brakes. There were no air compressors on brakes there, so braking was done by steam. Sharp flanges on the wheels had a tendency to split the switch, where the switch put you onto another track. We could handle almost any repair or maintenance in our shop- the only thing we couldn't handle would be a wreck. We would have to send that to Dibrugarh. We had one bad wreck where a locomotive ran into a flatcar full of rails, and the rails punctured the left cylinder of the locomotive.

"The old locomotives we had back then were the 80 tons Mikado-class locomotive. After the war started, the locomotive class was redesignated MacArthur class, after the general. A lot of Mikados, named after a ruler, had been sold to Japan before the war. The engines were a 2-8-2 configuration, meaning there was a pair of pony trucks in the front, four pair of drivers, and a pair of trailer wheels. These locomotives were War Department built, and built only to last until the end of the war. The boilers weren't as thick as those we had in the U.S. pre-war, and featured super-heated engines.

"All the other repairs - like putting new bushings in the main rods or the side rods. The configuration was the steel rod, and a brass bushing pressed in, fitting on a pin that in turn fits on the wheel - when there is too much play in them, you had to take the rods off, take the bushings out, and have

new ones made.

"As far as general repairs on the cars, there were usually repairs to brake cylinders, the wheels, and wheel bearings. Typical car problems were brake cylinders leaked, wheels got sharp flanges, journals got hot and burning the bearings. They had friction bearings over there. There was a one-inch flange on the end of each axle, and when you raised up the box, there was a curved plate that was not brass, it was babbit. Waste oil went into the box - if it didn't, the axle would be running in the waste. If the box ran dry, it could get hot and scorch the axle. Sometimes, you'd get flat spots on the drivers- flats spots happen when the throttle gets opened too fast on a heavy train, and the wheels slipped. Sand would be dropped for traction, but a flat spot would appear on the wheel. Sometimes the flat spots could be ground out, but other times, the whole wheel had to be replaced." (18)

1st Sgt. Crow recalled a difficult problem. "We had an engine and tender that came down and split a switch on the third shift. The engine went down one track and the tender went down the other track. There were two or three guys underneath jacking up the draw bar, which had been drawn too tight by the split. The drawbar connects the engine and tender, and is held together by a four inch pin and safety chains. There are also hoses that carry water from the tender to the engine next to the drawbar. Another lieutenant, who didn't know anything about trains, was telling me 'Why don't you try this? Why don't you try that?' I told the captain to get the lieutenant away from me.

"This was a tough job. The only

wheels on the track were the pony wheels in the front. All four pair of the driver wheels and the trailer wheels were off. I had Everett Boyle, my hostler (one who moves engines at the shop) bring another engine down and hook up to the front of the split engine. I told him 'Don't listen to no one else but me', gave him the back-up signal, and the split engine lined all of its wheels up on the right track. The captain just walked away, shaking his head." (19)

As a railway outfit, the battalion saw no action. The Japanese never attacked their trains, and train crews were seldom armed with more than .45s. The battalion lost one man; one of two men coincidentally named David Crockett. He was fatally wounded, possibly by Chinese troops or American GI's, who shot him out of the caboose in which he was riding. There was a major investigation, but due to the difficulty of establishing who fired the fatal shots, the investigation was closed with no action. Another man was lost to a fatal infection.

Sgt. Beene said, "I thought I was in more danger from the company of Chinese than from the Japanese. We'd be riding along the railroad in our inspection motor car - it had a V-8 engine in it, and it'd run faster than a train -pulling a flat car behind it, full of rice. There'd be a change of guard duty, and the Chinese soldiers going off would take food out to others, and they would fire off their machineguns into the jungle without looking. I'd just about get cut in two on the rails! Fortunately, they were only with us for two or three months." (20)

Col. Ogg did what he could to improve conditions. Pfc. Kambury had an interesting assignment. He said, "I was drafted and sent to Camp Jesse Turner, joining the 748th, along with several other men. That was strange because we didn't work for a railroad before joining the service.

"The other non-railroad men eventually went to other units, but not me. It turned out that Col. Ogg liked music and wanted to have some type of marching band. I played the trumpet, and was assigned to the battalion because of my musical skills. During basic, because we had 'band practice', we were excused from training for a few hours. Well, Col. Ogg didn't get a marching band, but he did have a type of dance band. We toured with the USO, including with Andre Kostelanitz, while we were overseas.

"Those of us in the band didn't just

practice - we had regular jobs that we did. I was assigned to the ration detail. Sometimes I drove a truck up to Chabua to pick up fresh bread, and other times, I drove a truck up to the switching and maintenance stations along the division." (21)

Unlike some of the other divisions, the main line of the B & A from Mariani, Assam, to Tinsukia, Assam, was geographically favorable to railway operations. The main line was actually in a valley. There were mountains all around, and the line crossed over the Brahmaputra River in a few locations, but the lines were fairly flat without a lot of grades. There were a lot of curves in some parts of the division.

T-4 Allison agreed. He said, "Our division was fairly flat, and we had two or three hills, and some grades. We had metal bridges along our division. In fact, the one at Simliguri was pretty solid.

"Simliguri Junction was about the only trouble spot on our division. Going north, there was a water tank on the north end of the passing track there. There was a downgrade there, and with only 5-6 cars with brakes, we could never get stopped for the water tank. We sometimes shot by it a half-mile or a full mile, and then had to back up. I don't think that we had any sabotage to our lines. There were few derailments, but no major collisions.

"The length of trains on our division was usually determined by the length of the sidings - we could comfortably get about 60 cars on a typical siding. When a convoy was in, it was nothing for us to take a train with 100 cars. It took me about 2 to 2 1/4 hours to travel my division, if I was carrying troops and had the right of way. Otherwise, I averaged in excess of eight hours. If trains with higher priority were running, sometimes we'd be sitting

on a passing track for 8-10 hours. We couldn't move because of the Neal Token system, and we'd wait until the stationmaster came down and told us it was safe. We didn't worry about our safety because the stations at the sidings were manned.

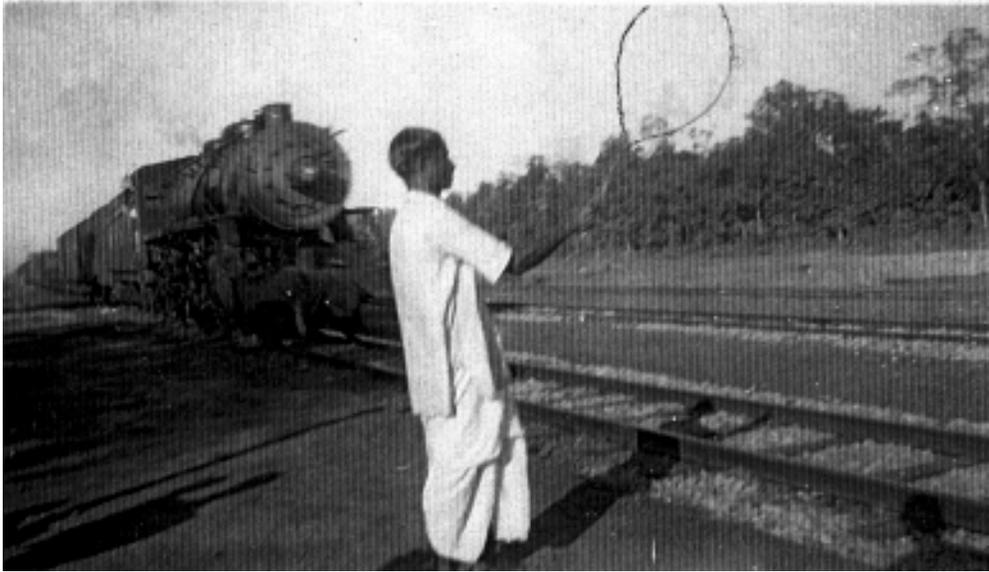
"When we first got there, we had British locomotives, but after we received and drove the WD locomotives, well, the longer we drove them, the faster we went. The WD locomotives were the Mikado class, with a 2-8-2 wheel configuration. One of the differences between British locomotives and ours was that theirs were named, the "Lord Baltimore", the "Lord Sydney" something, etc. We just had WD and a number.

"As far as horsepower differences, you have to use an anagram, using the word PLAN over a line over 33,000. (Author's note: The 33,000 refers to pounds of torque). The horsepower of a steam engine while standing still is zero. The faster it runs, the more horsepower it develops. P stands for pressure, boiler pressure. The L stands for the length of the stroke, in inches. The A stands for area of the piston, in square inches. The N is for magic number, that is, the number of revolutions per minute. You take a steam engine, and the farther it goes, the faster it goes, and the more horsepower it develops. There are theoretical limits as to what materials which go into making steam and their respective machinery will stand up under. A diesel works the opposite. A diesel can develop all its horsepower standing still, and the faster it goes, the horsepower curve drops off, which is why they need three, four, or five units on a diesel train.

"We calculated trains by the tonnage. We could comfortably handle 2,000 tons.



1st Sgt. George Crow in front of Stilwell Road sign. Note CBI and Leado Road insignia - courtesy 1st Sgt. G. Crow



**B & A personnel handing up "Line Clear" token to U.S. locomotive engineer in approaching WD locomotive - courtesy Sgt. Gary Tate**

We reached that total with our 100 car trains. Those were our rail cars, too. The Indian and British cars, or wagons, as they called them, didn't even have double trucks under them like ours. When they had them, their cars had vacuum brake systems. Not all their cars had brakes. We were supposed to get 10% of our trains equipped with brakes, and sometimes we had a lot less. Our WD engines had a steam operated brake system on them and worked pretty good." (22)

One engineer recalled several incidents. T-4 Schultz recalled, "One late night I was pulling a full load from Mariani to Tinsukia using a WD Baldwin. I was looking up ahead on our single-track line when I noticed a single headlamp heading towards me! I knew that the engineer and fireman had both probably fallen asleep and missed the block token. Well, I shut down my locomotive but when it looked like we were going to collide, I jumped out of my cab. I was right over a little creek, and landed on a culvert, breaking my right ankle. The locomotives barely touched and only damaged both pony trucks. I was sent to a hospital in Calcutta to recuperate.

"It wasn't too tough to fall asleep late at night. Anyone around steam engines will tell you each one has its own little noises. You, know, the steam hissing, water bubbling, those sorts of things. They sort of soothe you. Well, one night, I was returning to Mariani pulling a load of empties. I was on a side spur, because full loads going up to Tinsukia usually had main line

priority all the way. I was asleep in my cab on that spur, when all of a sudden, a fully loaded train went by, hauling ass, just six feet from me! I awoke with a start, scared to death, and thought I was moving. I hurriedly reduced steam and hit the brakes. My fireman, awake the whole time, was just laughing at me.

"Another time, going up to Tinsukia, I dropped a draw bar about five cars from the caboose, and just kept on going. Not every car had brakes, and we didn't have radio communications with the conductor, just arm signals. I didn't know I had lost the last five cars, and headed on in the remaining 30 miles or so." (23)

Even though the battalion was based at Tinsukia, men were stationed at various points throughout the division. Sgt. Beene was one of the personnel assigned outside of Tinsukia. He recalled, "My job consisted mostly of communications maintenance. I wasn't in the railyard like everyone else was. I was actually at a rail station at Simliguri Junction. There was another GI with me, plus a rotating crew, three stationmasters, and a medic. There were about seven of us at this station. We didn't feel too isolated - there were trains passing through all the time, plus it was a watering stop. We had one engineer who always had a 'hot box' about the time he arrived at our junction so he would have dinner with us.

"I had about 48 miles of line to maintain, from Simliguri Junction south to Mariana and then north to Nazira. Some-

times a train wreck would tear down the lines, and sometimes large condor-type birds flew into the wires at night, got wrapped up in them, and caused a short. The short shut the rail lines down, and stopped the trains from operating. We'd get out and isolate the short between two stations, sometimes driving 5-6 miles in our cars with a spotlight. We had been issued M-1 carbines, but we usually just took our .45s while performing maintenance or looking for these shorts.

"We'd take a ladder with us, go up as high as we could, and then use a long pole to reach up and unwind it. There wasn't very much electricity on these lines, just enough to allow the equipment to operate. These birds didn't see too well at night, flew into the wires, were trapped, and died. They weren't that heavy - one man could hold him up - but your arms weren't long enough to stretch out their wings.

"Indian crews completed the work on the telephone poles. The poles in our division were metal, not wood. I guess that was because of termites." (24)

Several of the men recall the services of the Indian personnel assigned to the B&A RR. T-4 Allison said, "We had GIs as firemen when we first went over there, but they couldn't take the heat of India, so we had native firemen. Most of them were out of the Hyderabad Rifles, a unit from that state in India. As time went on, native firemen who had been let go when we took over were brought back. We had two firemen on the engines. The first one was the

chunk buster, who broke up the coal, and the second one fed the fire. Sometimes the mine-run coal was too big for a shovel. The quality of Indian coal was good, because it burned real hot. Our native firemen didn't fight each other, at least from what I knew." (25)

There were also Indians working in the dispatch (train controller) office, and they maintained control over the Indian trains. The American controllers handled U.S. traffic. There were also two former Burmese GIs, refugees from Japanese occupation, working in the dispatch office.

Several of the men from the 748th ROB, as well as GIs from the other ROB, were temporarily transferred to the 61st Transportation Corps Composite Company at Myitkyina. Fighting in the region had damaged or destroyed tracks, railyards, equipment, and rolling stock. The 160-man company set up its shops, mounted armed jeeps, and began moving supplies and personnel, principally in support of the British 36th Division. Subsequently operating on 38 miles of track, and despite Japanese raids, tens of thousands of troops and tons were carried during the company's existence. (26)

T-4 Cantrell said, "I was sent there to repair the flues on an American-made steamroller - it was a Huber and Huber.

"The job of the 61st was to get some type of railroad transportation going. We took the wheels off 6 x 6 trucks and attached them to jeeps, after removing the tires. The wheels fit the rail perfectly, so we'd chain two jeeps together and they'd pull two or three flatcars on the rails. Sometimes we'd have one jeep on the front pulling and one jeep on the rear pushing. A GI would be assigned to the brakes on the flatcars, because the jeeps' brakes were ineffective, especially on downgrades. They'd carry pipes for an oil and gas line, and other supplies, and a few troops.

"I got there the third day of the battle, and it was still going on. We took the airfield in three days, I think, but it took 52 days to take the town. I saw two B-25s dropping their bombs and P-40s strafing, machineguns blazing. I clearly saw the bombs drop, but it was long time to hear their explosions.

"Now, there were some gliders that were used to bring troops into Myitkyina. Since I had never seen a glider up close, I saw one that had crashed, so I went up closer for a look. The poor boys inside never had a chance. They were all dead inside with their packs still on. They were all



**T-4 Robert Schultz in cab of WD Engine 896 - courtesy of T-4 Robert Schultz**

swollen and black, and it was a terrible sight.

"There were a couple of locomotives there, but the Japanese had buried the flat rods. Even though the natives preferred the Japanese to the British, they went out and found the rods for us. We couldn't get coal, so we converted the locomotives to oil-burning and wood-burning. There was a good stand of fresh timber nearby, and the engineers came in and started cutting down trees for the wood-burner. The engineers also set up a sawmill right there to cut the trees into useable wood." (27)

The advent of the monsoon season had different affects on the operations of the battalion, dependent upon geography. The efforts of the MRS in early 1944 to initiate and continue improvements to the entire railway system were fairly successful. In Assam Province alone were approximately 30 waterways, from the Brahmaputra and Hoogli Rivers to their many tributaries. The engineering efforts included double-tracking and extending passing tracks, adding ballast to existing tracks, augmenting roadbeds and embankments with rock, and straightening rails.

T-4 Cantrell recalled, "The monsoons were something else. During monsoon season, you didn't know when it started raining or when it stopped. We were issued two pairs of shoes. One pair was always wet during monsoon. The other pair dried out so hard it'd hurt to put your feet inside! It seemed that they both rotted at the same time." (28)

T-4 Allison added, "I recall the monsoons didn't affect us that much. We ran anytime. We had a good roadbed. The area around Tinsukia gets about 300 inches of rain a year, and that all came between April and September. The Brahmaputra River at Dibrugarh looks like Lake Michigan during monsoon." (29)

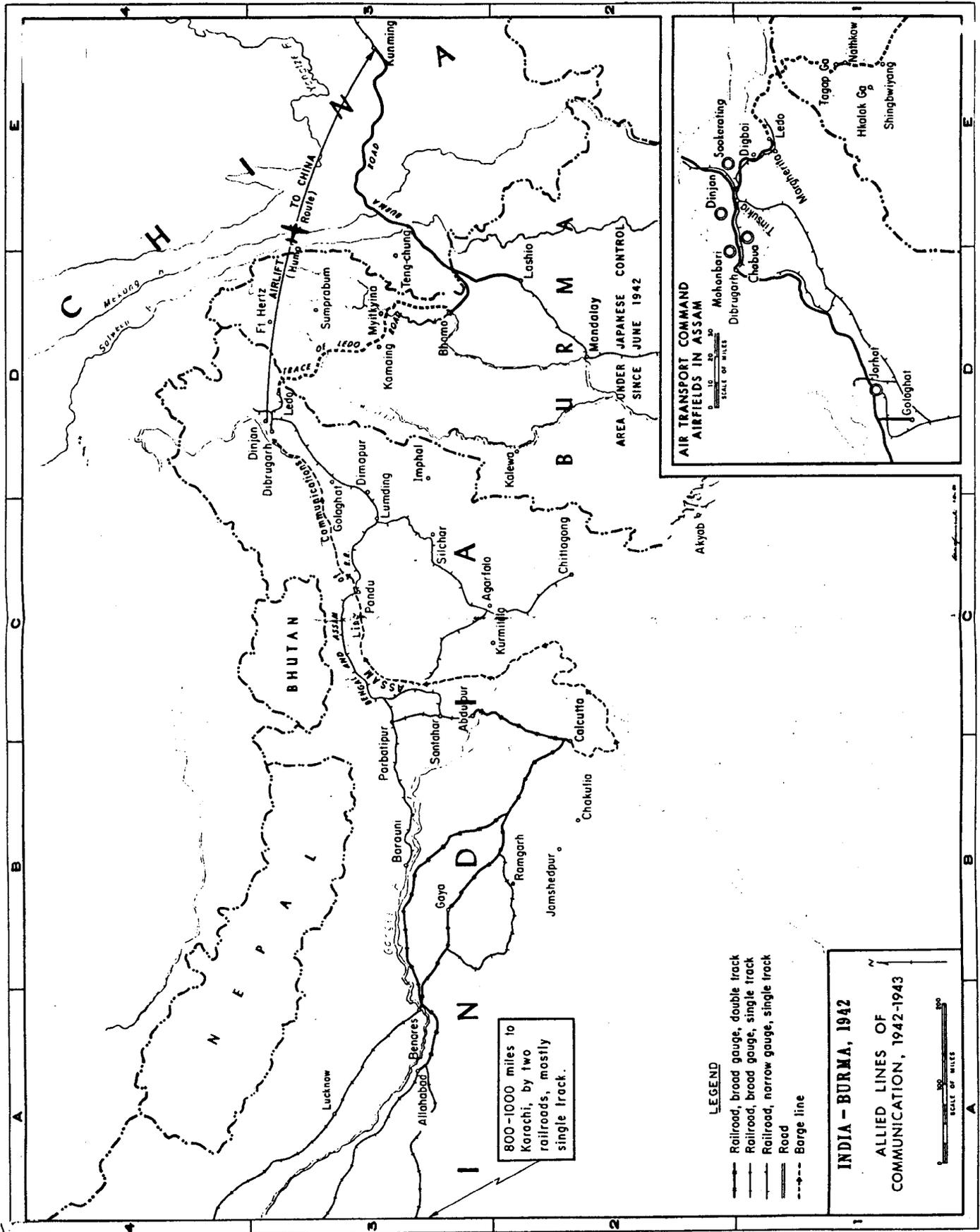
T-5 Quentin Good, a conductor and brakeman, recalled, "There were about 50-75 of us from the 748th based at Ledo. The railhead went about 15 miles up to Lakapani and further into the jungle where we had some coal mines. It was still meter gauge up at my end. The tracks were original, but new sidetracks were laid to warehouses where a lot of our cargo was stored. We also dropped off the heavy equipment used for construction up there. We worked 12-hour days every day. Lakapani was used for storage of ammunition, AvGas, vehicle gasoline, etc. There were storage tanks back up into the hills as far as you could see.

"The monsoons caused havoc with our operations. Heading out of Ledo towards Lakapani was an upgrade, and then when it leveled out, you couldn't even see the main lines. Mud and water covered the rails so deep, it looked like you were on a boat. There were lots of derailments because of the water and mud covering the rails. There weren't too many bridges out of Ledo, but they bridges were reinforced, especially to support the heavier WD locomotives.

"We lived in bamboo shacks for quite a while and then they put up these 6-man tents. We didn't have electricity for I don't know how long. We had to use candles for light. We didn't even have a mattress on the bed - just a frame with ropes.

"When it rained, we'd be dry for about 5-10 minutes, while the thatched roof swelled up. Then, the roof started shedding water, and you'd have to get out your shelter half over the top of your bed to keep dry. You'd also have to use your mosquito netting or else you'd be eaten up. We used mosquito repellent by the gallon.

"I caught malaria over there and had severe dysentery. I had to go to a field hospital, which was just a collection of bamboo shacks. When the monsoons came,



Map showing area of battalion (courtesy Don Clevenger, 758th RSB)



View of engineer's side of the cab in WD 1046 -courtesy of T-4  
Robert Schultz

there was so much mud, well, your beds sank all the way down to the crossboards. I was then transferred to the 20th General Hospital, which had large wards - 105 men." (30)

Even when it wasn't raining, the weather up at Ledo was inhospitable. T-5 Good said, "We never saw any Japanese planes, but we could hear them. The mists rising off the steaming jungle put a fog cover over us just over the tops of the trees. You could see straight ahead, but not up. Man, it was a hundred degrees and raining, and then the sun came out. It was so steamy. If you hung your clothes up, they'd mildew over night." (31)

Ledo offered unexpected dangers to enemy soldiers. According to T-5 Good, "There was no sabotage to our rail lines. We carried .45s with us. There were several Japanese infiltrators or soldiers who were caught by Indians up in our yard and just beaten severely. Then, the Japanese were carried off and no one knows what happened to them. I saw these beatings happen more than once." (32)

British Field Marshal Sir William Slim was highly appreciative of the efforts put forth by all of the U.S. ROBs in the CBI Theater. British military rail units increased daily tonnage from 600 tons pre-war to more than 2,800 by the time the British 14th Army was formed. Even that increase was inadequate to supply Allied troops at Ledo. With the advent of the U.S. ROBs, the daily tonnage increased to 7,300 tons. Slim noted the more powerful WD locomotives, as well as the energy and drive of the fully trained railroadmen. The personnel and rolling stock were assets the British simply could

not offer. The increase in shipping helped alleviate the dangerous task of moving supplies over The Hump, and eventually surpassed the air tonnage totals. (33)

After April 1945, eastbound supply traffic subsided and after the surrender of Japan in August, westbound personnel movements substantially increased. With the official end of the war against the Japanese, the ROBs in the CBI rapidly demobilized, with B & A personnel taking over operations, equipment, and supplies.

Taking only two weeks to sail home on the M.B. Stewart, docking at Seattle, the 748th ROB was inactivated 26 November 1945. (34)

### THE INSIGNIA

The 748th ROB was authorized the CBI and Services of Supply SSI in WW II. As with other railroad outfits in the CBI, the 748th ROB had an unauthorized SSI. This patch is a orange felt disc, with the unit's numbers, a telephone pole with X-shaped crossarms emitting electronic signals, "ROB" spelled out utilizing a train's wheels for the "O", and border, all in red. The examples are U.S. made, and appear in two sizes.

It would appear that the patch may have been designated for the battalion's signal section, but neither signal section man surviving today recalls it. None of the men whom I contacted from the rest of the battalion recalled the patch either. It appears that the patch may have been made in limited numbers while the battalion was training in the Zone of Interior. The design artist may himself be deceased, as unfortu-

nately are many members of the battalion.

### FOOTNOTES

- (1) In the ETO, ROBs also had a D Company, which handled Electric Power Transmissions, because there were so many electric railroads in Europe
- (2) National Archives and Record Service (NARS), Records Group 407, 748th Railway Operating Battalion
- (3) Interview with author
- (4-6) Ibid.
- (7) The GI's lost a day due to the International Date Line
- (8) Interview with author
- (9) Correspondence with author
- (10) Interview with author
- (11-25) Ibid.
- (26) National Archives and Record Service (NARS), Records Group 407, 748th Railway Operating Battalion
- (27) Interview with author
- (28-32) Ibid.
- (33) Slim, Sir William, Field Marshal: *Defeat Into Victory*, Cassell & Co. Ltd, London, England 1956 pages 170-171
- (34) National Archives and Record Service (NARS), Records Group 407, 748th Railway Operating Battalion

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