

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 17, 2006

Troop Trains in World War II: Most servicemen hated troop trains during World War II. They are not to be blamed, especially enlisted men who had to sleep in bunks three or four high in cars little better than box cars (some of them were actually converted box cars). There was no place to sit except on your bunk, so a train trip of two days or more was no fun, and it took about five days to cross the country. I had a better experience with troop trains, partly because I loved steam engines and partly because I traveled on only two, one from Oklahoma City to Savannah, Georgia, and one from Oakland Pier (California) to Fort Meade near Baltimore. As an officer, I was in an old Pullman car, with uppers and lowers and clean sheets.

I had miraculously avoided troop trains from my enlistment in December 1942 until May 1945, when orders sent three weather reconnaissance crews of 10 men each from Will Rogers Field near Oklahoma City to Hunter Field outside Savannah for the purpose of picking up three new B-24 bombers outfitted as weather observation planes. There must have been several other troop movements coming and going on "our" train, as the train usually had 12 to 15 cars. We left Oklahoma City one morning in late May on the Frisco Line with two streamlined Pacifics on the head end and headed up the main route toward St. Louis. About noon, we stopped at Tulsa and got off for a half hour, long enough to look outside the station, and apparently the Pacifics came off and in their place an ancient Mountain-type (4-8-2) pulled us to Springfield, Missouri, a junction point where we had a few hours before re-boarding after dark for the Frisco route toward Memphis.

The next day was a hot one, and as we crossed the Mississippi River into Memphis, two of those streamlined Pacifics were again on the head end. For some reason, we didn't stop in Memphis, but in Jasper, Alabama, in early afternoon, where we got off the train again for a short time; the temperature was approaching 100 degrees. Our crew had adopted a black puppy for a mascot, and he almost succumbed in the heat. Changing railroads at Birmingham in late afternoon, our train seemed to have about 20 cars full of servicemen with one diner. We traveled overnight on the Central Railroad of Georgia and got off at Savannah's passenger station in early morning of the third day. A heat wave covered the south for the four or five days we were at Hunter Field, but then we got our airplane and headed west again, ending up about 10 days later on Guam.

The second troop train adventure was more pleasant, as the time was August 1946, and at the end of it, discharge from the service was promised at Fort Meade. Having arrived in San Francisco on a *slow* Army transport (26 days from Saipan) on August 6, our troop train bound for the East left Oakland Pier about noon on August 8. We were on the Western Pacific, and after crossing northern California, the train stopped at Oroville, where the local girls served us ice cream before dark. Two fresh Western Pacific locomotives were hooked on, and as darkness fell, we headed up the Feather River Canyon in the moonlight. It was again 100 degrees at noon the next day as we took the siding at Wendover, Utah, to let the westbound Exposition Flyer pass. About supper time, we skirted the south shore of Great Salt Lake, and came to a stop in Salt Lake City, where our railroad changed to the Denver & Rio Grande Western.

Reboarding the train and heading east, I was talking to the conductor as we approached the Moffat Tunnel. I remember the switch-backs as we descended from the East Portal to Denver, with the huge Rio Grande locomotive being visible around each curve. Early evening found us racing across the plains on the Rock Island, passing through Limon and toward Kansas before it got dark. The next day we changed railroads again in Kansas City. This time it was the Alton, a lengthy route across Missouri. About 10 P.M., the train stopped outside the maze of Y's near St. Louis' Union Station, then served by 17 passenger railroads, most of them still using steam locomotives. As we walked across the tracks for showers in the station, the array of passenger engines coming and going, even at this late hour, was a sight I'll never forget.

The Pennsylvania Railroad brought us home. On our last full day, we passed through Pittsburgh in the afternoon and arrived at the station in Harrisburg in the evening. Some of our friends were going to Fort Dix to be discharged, and they followed the main Pennsylvania Railroad line, probably to Trenton. We said goodbye, and our cars were taken over the Northern Central to York and Baltimore, where we arrived before daybreak. About 7 A.M., an electric GG-1 (the first non-steam locomotive on the trip) pulled about four cars to Odenton in record time, and we got off for Fort Meade. I slept at Auburn Heights that night, the first time in over 17 months.