David W Fletcher, Spring 2001

FROM HERE TO NEW GUINEA AND BACK: THE WORLD WAR II STINT OF BASIL R. FLETCHER, SR.

OUTLINE OF PAPER

I. Introduction

II. Before Enlistment

- A. Reflections about World War I
- B. Reflections after 7 December 1941
- C. Graduation from High School
- D. Civil Service Employment

III. Enlistment and Training

- A. Military Induction, 30 January 1943
- B. Military Enlistment, 6 February 1943
- C. Military Service School
- D. Military Classification Training

IV. Service in the Pacific (New Guinea)

- A. Departure for A.P.T., 13 January 1944
- B. Service with the 333d Signal Company (Troop Carrier Wing)
- C. Return to the U.S.A., 28 October 1944
- D. Discharge and Convalescence

V. Conclusion

David W Fletcher, Spring 2001

FROM HERE TO NEW GUINEA AND BACK: THE WORLD WAR II STINT OF BASIL R. FLETCHER, SR.

For the past two decades, the number of American World War II (WWII) veterans has diminished steadily. Now removed over a half century from the time of the conflict, the soldiers that remain have reached their twilight years. Roughly sixteen million United States (U.S.) troops served in both European and Pacific Theaters during the war, and thousands of personal stories have been told and documented. But many stories that have not been divulged should be shared and recorded, not only as a matter of public record but also for the sake of historical study and reflection.

Not surprisingly, the Volunteer State played a significant role in the overall effort during WWII. Approximately one quarter million Tennessee citizens worked in various war manufacturing enterprises across the state, and over three hundred thousand young men soldiered in branches of the armed forces worldwide. This sizeable involvement directly impacted the national contribution to the Allied cause, and it harbored serious implications for economic and social transformations within the state. Participation at the personal level by Tennesseans changed the course of people's lives and reordered family structures. Following WWII, every family that dedicated their part towards world peace experienced the aftershocks of a radical upheaval that could not be reversed.[1]

---

[1]Patricia Brake Howard, "World War II," *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. Carroll Van West (Nashville: Rutledge Hill, 1998), 1080-1084.

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, such a metamorphosis occurred at grass roots levels and lingered unto the present day through positive memories of a justifiable sacrifice for a worthy and victorious cause. This benign outlook characterized the reflections of many WWII veterans about the war, and the reflections of Basil R. Fletcher, Sr. of Manchester, Tennessee, certainly represented no exception. Sergeant Fletcher spent a mere ten months at an Allied airstrip at Nadzab, which was located near Lae on the northeast coast of New Guinea. Although he never saw combat, as he performed duties with a communications support unit–the 333d Signal Company (Troop Carrier Wing)–he nevertheless felt a sense of dignity and pride in serving his country during a time of global crisis.

When compared with the big picture and the more prominent deeds of others, perhaps Fletcher's role paled in consequence, but his contribution should not be summarily ignored. In any WWII military operation, the work of each soldier, while in some measure fixed and redundant, nonetheless varied considerably and bore a distinct function in relation to the whole endeavor. In this respect, Sergeant Fletcher's mission added an essential piece to the already complex and jumbled puzzle that inevitably resulted from the conduct of a huge war. But his particular portion, no matter how seemingly small, yielded an important aspect to the historic role played by the nation, the state of Tennessee, Coffee County, and the Fletcher family during WWII.

Born into a rural agrarian family, Basil Rex Fletcher worked the ancestral farm with his father Vernon (nicknamed "Jack"), his mother Ruth Adella, and three siblings, Martha Ida, John Thomas, and Nelda Ruth. He knew that he belonged to a poor family, even though he hoped for

better things: "Times were very poor, I helped my dad on the farm to work out a meager living."[2] While growing up, young Basil had no firm plans beyond the farm, just as he held no lingering thoughts of global events recent or past. "I knew that Daddy went to the WWI training camp, and he stayed two weeks and then got a discharge. He was inducted into the military, but then they discharged him from the draft, which didn't make sense to me."[3] However, Basil did recollect WWI participation by a couple of relatives. "I heard Uncle Thurston (nicknamed "Sut") tell about nearly freezing to death in France, and I knew that Lawrence Freeze, my mother's brother, died in combat near Bony, France, in September 1918. But I didn't know much else about WWI. I didn't have much of an impression about anything, except hard work."[4] Yet in a short time, world events altered these feelings of noninvolvement for Fletcher, as well as for many others in the U.S. On 1 September 1939, the Wehrmacht, the army of the German Third Reich, stormed into Poland and ignited WWII. The next day, Fletcher celebrated his sixteenth birthday and pondered his role as a tenth grader in the new school year at Coffee County Central High. Little did he realize that, in a couple of years, the events in Eastern Europe so close in time to his birthday would change his life dramatically.

---

[2]Basil R. Fletcher, Sr., interview by author, tape recording, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001. Interview conversations are quoted verbatim, except for ellipses, errors in grammar, wrong information, and certain responses to questions, that are corrected accordingly, in consultation with the interviewee.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

During the early years of WWII, the U.S. assumed a moderately isolationist role, although President Franklin D. Roosevelt urged Congress to reverse the Neutrality Acts with "measures short of war," namely, a "cash and carry" policy that permitted the selling of weapons to the Allies and additional funds for rearmament of the military and recruitment of soldiers through the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, the country's first peacetime draft. This isolationist stance, which was debated vigorously by leaders across the nation, changed dramatically when the Japanese First Air Fleet, commanded by Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, attacked and destroyed nearly the entire U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on 7 December 1941. Fletcher, a high school senior, well recalled the day which President Roosevelt labeled "a date which will live in infamy." But he failed at that time to understand its greater significance, even for his own life. "It all began December 7, 1941. Several of us teenagers were playing touch football on the school grounds in Summitville. A nearby neighbor yelled, 'The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor.' At the time, that meant very little to me, because I didn't know what they were talking about. We just kept playing football. But in the next three years, it changed my life considerably."[5]

The local newspaper, the *Manchester Times*, dated 12 December 1941, headlined, "Japan Starts War Against The United States," and the top right caption box on the front page changed from "Coffee County's Newspaper" to "Remember Pearl Harbor." Two weeks later, the front page on 26 December read, "The Times Wishes You A Merry Christmas," and the same page

[5]Ibid.

reported a "New Draft Law Creates Possible 7,000,000 Man Army." This draft bill, signed into law on 22 December by President Roosevelt, authorized the registration of all males between ages 18 and 64, inclusive, with only ages 20 through 44 eligible for combat duty.[6] The article also noted, "The task of registering the 40,000,000 Americans in the new draft age will extend over several days. There are now about 900,000 selectees in the regular army, but future draft quotas will not be published. First call under the new draft will be made on men between 21 and 28, and approximately 400,000 men exempted under the peace time draft because of physical defects. Draft boards are examining cases of occupational deferment and about 200,000 men are to be selected from these. An additional 50,000 will be called from the group deferred because of previous military service."[7] This massive call up for military service apparently had little effect on Fletcher.[8] "It didn't capture my attention until I got a little greeting by letter to come [to enlist]. That was after I graduated from high school. It really didn't seem to affect me personally. That attitude was probably typical from most of the seniors in high school."[9]

---

[6]Draft officials verified age limits carefully, but see "Manchester Boy First 17-Year-Old to Enlist in Air Corps," *Manchester (Tenn.) Times*, 5 February 1943. Fletcher correctly observed, "I think you could enlist earlier than eighteen years old, but they didn't draft you until you were eighteen." Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

[7]*Times*, 26 December 1941.

[8]The military of the United States peaked at 12,350,000 personnel during WWII, with roughly 7,300,000 enlisted men and about 1,000,000 officers in the Army. Robert R. Palmer, Bell I. Wiley, and William R. Keast, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, United States Army in World War II, The Army Ground Forces, ed. Kent R. Greenfield (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1948), 1.

[9]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

One social spinoff, highlighted by the *Times* as "School Children Aid in Saving for Defense Industry," did catch Fletcher's attention. "I do remember," he recalled, "saving waste paper and scrap metal, since the government rationed about everything. But we didn't have anything to start with, so it didn't make any difference to us. We were poor people."[10] Luckily for Fletcher, poverty and the need to work the family farm did not force him to abandon his basic education, as it did for others. "During my freshman and sophomore years, I attended school at Summitville, but I went to school in Manchester for my junior and senior years. Registration for the Army draft really did not catch my attention."[11]

Fletcher failed to take note of the county's "3rd Registration for Army Draft on February 16" reported by the *Times* on 6 February, the "Nine Simple Questions Prepared For Men Registering," and the fact that over one thousand local men registered under the new draft law, with about fifty-five of these coming from the Summitville Civil District.[12] An article in the *Times* reported over seventeen hundred local men in the fourth national registration and remarked, "The local draft board has begun the task of arranging the names, with their serial numbers to be ready for the mailing of questionnaires when the draft lottery is held. Total

---

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]"Coffee County Registers for Military Service," *Times*, 20 February 1942. The nine simple questions included the name of registrant, place of residence, mailing address, telephone, age in years, date of birth, name and address of person who will always know the address of the registrant, employer's name and address, and place of employment or business. Ibid., 13 February 1942.

registration in the United States Monday was about 13,000,000. This brings the total number of men registered to about 40,000,000."[13] Fletcher, for his part, stayed busy on the farm and concentrated on his studies at school. Shortly, however, an important event would send him from the world of school to an environment engulfed with the dynamics of preparation for war.

At the age of eighteen, Fletcher graduated from Coffee County High School with seventy other seniors on 15 May 1942. Dr. Joseph Roemer of George Peabody College in Nashville gave the commencement address, and Superintendent Fred Gilliam presented the diplomas.[14] A class ring on his right hand, inscribed '42, reminded Fletcher of this achievement:

> I graduated with Clayton Freeze, who is my uncle, Louise Freeze, Floyd W. Fetzer, and Doris Haley. I don't remember if I had any strong feelings about graduating or not. I guess I was happy, since I was in the top ten of the class, not too far from the top. At that time, I really didn't have any plans, so I went to work. The war had very little impact on me–none. Times were very poor, so I just helped my dad on the farm to eke out a meager living.
>
> I do remember Camp Forrest soldiers camped all around us, while they were on maneuvers in the Summitville area. Those soldiers were scattered everywhere. They would go in, tear fences down, and everything else. Anything they destroyed, I guess the government paid for it.[15]

After his graduation from high school, however, Fletcher experienced the impact of the war, as he sought employment as a civil service employee of the federal government at Camp Forrest.

---

[13] "1729 Register in Coffee Co.," ibid., 1 May 1942.

[14]"71 Graduates At County High School," ibid., 8 May 1942.

[15]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001. Clayton Freeze was the son of Thomas J. Freeze and his second wife, Mattie Elizabeth Rogers, and a half-sibling to Ruth Adella Freeze, Fletcher's mother and a daughter of Thomas by his first wife, Sallie Ida Robinson. Christine Smith, *The John Rufus Freeze Family: A Genealogy of the Freeze Family from Coffee County, Tennessee* (Manchester, Tenn.: Christine Smith, 1992), 5, 6, 16.

Several artillery, engineer, infantry, and signal organizations trained at Camp Forrest, one of the U.S. Army's largest training centers during WWII. Located near Tullahoma, the original Camp Peay, so named for Tennessee Governor Austin Peay, covered only 1,040 acres. But Camp Forrest, which bore the name of the famous Civil War General Nathan Bedford Forrest, operated from 1941 until 1946 on an expanse of over 85,000 acres. The camp housed a hospital center, a prisoner of war internment area, an Army Air Force (AAF) base at William Northern Field that provided instruction for B-24 bomber crews, and temporary encampments for large scale Army maneuvers. At any given time, the post hosted thousands of troops and provided for their needs with service clubs, guest houses, a library, post exchanges, a hospital, religious centers, theaters, emergency Red Cross stations, and a variety of recreation facilities.[16] Army maneuvers began in Coffee County in Spring 1941, when Gen. Benjamin Lear and his Second Army set up their headquarters in the high school. About eighty thousand men strong, the hoard of soldiers included Gen. George Patton's Second Armored "Hell on Wheels" Division from Fort Benning, Georgia, and followed the appearance of the 33d Division (Illinois) at Camp Forrest to initiate a lengthy training program. The *Times* remarked that the town of "Manchester was simply covered up with soldiers."[17]

---

[16]"Camp Forrest," available from http://candice.arnold.af.mil/aedc/factsheets/ campforest. htm; Internet; accessed 25 March 2001. See also "3rd Army Corps at Camp Forrest For Maneuvers," *Times*, 26 June 1942, and compare "Army to Close Maneuvers in Mid-Tennessee," which detailed a brief history of training stints in the region, ibid., 11 February 1944.

[17]Ibid.

Fletcher hired on at Camp Forrest as a "Posting Clerk" and performed such duties as entering the quantity of specific items and appropriate charges for soldiers at one of the camp laundries.[18] "I figured up the cost of laundry tickets for soldiers, so that we could charge them for doing their laundry. It was a big building that I worked in, something like a warehouse. The job was pretty monotonous, and it didn't pay very much, but it was a job. I still lived in Summitville and rode to the camp each day with friends or a neighbor."[19] But like most young men, Fletcher's attention gravitated to other things, such as the fairer sex and trying to gain a favorable impression. "There was a girl that I worked with named Anita Jackson, and sometimes I rode to work with her. Dad owned an old T-Model Ford, but I don't think he had it then. I remember something about Christmas, though. We had an old whiskey bottle, and Anita knew that I didn't drink. I filled it full of water, and at our Christmas party, I told somebody to give me a drink of it. I turned it up and drank it all, and she thought I was drinking whiskey."[20] But except for an occasional seasonal party, Fletcher apparently kept to his work and paid little attention to what happened in the county and the nation, where preparations for active involvement in the war continued in earnest.

By the summer of 1942, the county draft board accelerated the acquisition and processing of men for active duty. The *Times* noted "548 Register in County for Youngest Group" along

---

[18]Army of the United States: Honorable Discharge, WD AGO Form 53-55, given to Basil R. Fletcher, by Capt. R. A. Devine, Sante Fe, N. Mex., 28 January 1945.

[19]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

[20]Ibid.

with a "Rousing Send Off Given for 140 Men Called to Service."[21] Accounts like this appeared almost weekly in the *Times*, and during the latter half of that year, a number of acquaintances and a few relatives of Fletcher answered their call to military duty:

> There were Harold Gilmore, Heard Lowry, Jr., and Lt. J. O. McMahan. No, I never witnessed any of these going off to war–Thomas Johnson, Paul Smith, Thomas Brown, James E. Wardell from Summitville, or John Fletcher Carroll. I do remember Taylor Fletcher, but I don't think he was any kin to me. There was Garvis Womack, that's old "Cookie" Womack, Floyd Nunley, and J. D. Roberts. There were Joshua B. Fletcher, Jr., who I used to play ball with, Kenneth W. Uselton, who was my first cousin, and Horace Edd Fletcher, who I didn't really know. The military also called Lyndon Duke, Charles Tarwater, and William C. Fletcher–that's my first cousin "Bulger." He got wounded in the war and eventually lost a leg. I think he served in the European Theater. Also, there were Lloyd McMahan, Jr., who was from Summitville, and Harold McAfee, who was from Shady Grove. But I really didn't have any strong feelings about being called up myself, I was just ready if they called.[22]

Seemingly unaffected by the possibility of draft and recall, Fletcher seemed oblivious to the potentiality for personal involvement. "I don't even remember registering for the draft. I guess that I registered someway, probably at the school. As far as I recall, the biggest event in my life during 1942 had to be my graduation from high school, not the war."[23]

One event, however, touched young Fletcher and his entire family shortly before Christmas that year–the death of John W. Fletcher, his grandfather. The front page of the Christmas Day *Times* briefed, "John William Fletcher, 78, died suddenly at Summitville Sunday. Funeral services were conducted Wednesday morning by Eld. W. P. Willis of Manchester, and he

---

[21] *Times*, 3 July 1942.

[22] Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

[23] Ibid.

was buried in the Fletcher cemetery. Mr. Fletcher is survived by his widow and seven children."[24] This notice struck a chord in Fletcher's memory bank:

> That's him, my dad's father, but he had more than seven children. There were Frank, Birdie, Nellie, Jay W., Grady, Hazel, Bill, Edith, Thurston, Georgia, and Tad, so that's eleven. I don't know where they [the newspaper] got just seven children there. But I still remember it. He died suddenly while sitting in his rocking chair, probably from a heart attack. It wasn't expected, since he wasn't sick or anything. He was always happy, that's how I knew him, since he didn't worry about anything. He didn't have anything to worry about, but kids. He worked as a blacksmith, although he really didn't work too hard. But his death didn't affect me any more than something like that would any other kid.[25]

Then just nineteen years old, Fletcher encountered a far greater challenge shortly after the start of the new year. This challenge, as for so many others, called him away from his family to new places in the U.S. and the world. Eventually, in a remote part of the Southwest Pacific, Fletcher experienced personally the affections of a soldier who served his country on foreign soil. But first, he required basic and specialized training that promised to effectively transform the raw recruit into a professional warrior.

Fletcher received his call to duty during the latter part of January 1943. The *Times* listed 146 names under the caption "More Men Called for Army Duty, Leave Manchester Soon," which included Basil Rex Fletcher.[26] "I was still living at home then," Fletcher thought, "and either my parents or I received a letter from the local draft board about when I should report. Both Edmon

---

[24] *Times*, 25 December 1942.

[25] Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

[26] *Times*, 22 January 1943.

Charlie Fletcher and Edwin J. Fletcher were on this call up, as well as Emit Farrar, Jr. Emit and I were born on the same night."[27] Fletcher and about eighty others represented "More Bad News For Hitler," as they departed Manchester by bus on 5 February for training at various camps. The *Times* pointed out that not all the bad new for Hitler was coming out of Russia. "In America the recruiting for an army of unprecedented proportions still goes on. Another Coffee county delegation left for army training on Friday."[28] Unlike the emotional send off experienced by some, Fletcher evidently felt unimpressed by his leaving home. "I don't remember anything in particular about that departure or the trip. I really didn't consider myself as more bad news for Hitler, either. When they drafted us, we didn't know where we would be sent, because they didn't tell us anything. We just got on the bus and left."[29]

Fletcher's induction into military service took place at Manchester on 30 January, but the actual enlistment occurred a week later on Saturday, 6 February, at Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia. What surprised Fletcher most, however, came from "extracurricular" activities at the processing center, rather than any military formalities.

---

[27]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

[28]*Times*, 12 February 1943.

[29]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001. Often, "the common carriers by bus were not as fully or effectively organized as the railroads since they constituted a much newer branch of the transportation industry and many small operators were concerned only with local business." Chester Wardlow, *The Transportation Corps: Movements, Training, and Supply*. United States Army in World War II, The Technical Services, ed., Kent R. Greenfield (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1956), 15.

> I do remember something that happened during the short time I was at Ft. Oglethorpe. It was the first time I ever got inducted into a poker game. Some of us were standing around watching these older sergeants, and they were the people in charge there. They were playing poker, and they were winning, you know. One of them got us young recruits in the rap, and I think I lost all the money I had, which was very little. I had never played poker before. I didn't even know what it was, so they taught me. Gambling wasn't permitted on the post, but it was done. Possibly, they could have got in trouble for that.[30]

Following Army in-processing procedures, Fletcher remained at Ft. Oglethorpe a few days, received a complete physical examination, and took both occupational and psychological batteries to determine his MOS or Military Occupational Specialty.[31] He recalled, "They gave us tests to determine what we would do in the service. They matched our abilities and skills with job classification. I don't think they rejected anyone and sent them back to Manchester, but they could have done that."[32] Fletcher became a "Classification Specialist," which meant that he would work in a unit administrative section and manage personnel issues such as the duty, rank, and performance of troops in his charge. His next stop, however, would be Camp Crowder, Missouri, for basic military training. Meanwhile, back at home, the pipeline for drafting and enlisting troops continued wholeheartedly, as well as rationing significant foodstuffs. News about the Russian counterattack at Stalingrad, the Allied advance on Guadalcanal, and the British

---

[30]Fletcher, Old Hickory, 24 March 2001.

[31]See Palmer, Wiley, and Keast, *Procurement and Training*, 4-13.

[32]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

successes in North Africa encouraged the new recruits, as they left home to become soldiers for a global cause.[33]

As with most startup installations during the WWII era, the utilization of Camp Crowder or "Shantytown" roughly paralleled the duration of U.S. involvement in the war, from the winter of 1941 until the summer of 1946. As the location of the Army Signal Corps Training Center, the camp inundated the area surrounding Neosho, Missouri, with about forty thousand uniformed men and women.[34] In addition to the Signal Corps operation, which formed units like the 116th Signal Radio Intelligence Company, the 501st Signal Battalion, the 299th Signal Installation Company, and the 60th Signal Radio Intelligence Company, Camp Crowder also interned German POWs (prisoners of war) who had manned U-boats, housed a school for military musicians in the 98th Army Band, consolidated a Medical Replacement Training Center from Camp Barkeley, and hosted a Station Complement WAC (Women's Army Corps) Detachment.[35] This busy camp likewise served as a detainment center for Japanese Americans who had been expelled from the

---

[33] *Times*, 12 February 1943 and 5 March 1943.

[34] See Rebecca Robbins Raines, *Getting the Message Through: A Branch History of the U.S. Army Signal Corps*, Army Historical Series, ed. Jeffrey J. Clarke (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1996), 256-257.

[35] "P.O.W.: German U-boat Men in Captivity," available from http://uboat.net/men pow/pow_in_america_stats.htm; Internet; accessed 25 March 2001; "Silver Wings Band History," available from http://www.snowhill.com/~kamarag/98AB/History/history.htm; Internet; accessed 25 March 2001; "Medical Training in World War II: Medical Replacement Training Centers," available from http://www.armymedicine.army.mil/ history/booksdocs/wwii/medtrain/ch6.htm; Internet; accessed 25 March 2001; "History Pics (WAC)," available from http://www.bpwusa.org/content/Home/About_BPW_USA/ History/history_of_BPW.htm; Internet; accessed 25 March 2001.

Pacific West by the U.S. government.[36] "I don't remember too much about Camp Crowder," remarked Fletcher. "I should have kept a diary. I just went to [military] personnel school. But I do remember going to church, a Church of Christ, in Neosho. A family invited me to their home to eat dinner with them one time."[37]

Fletcher did have opportunity, however, during his course of training to write home. The first issue of the *Times* in April 1943 highlighted a letter sent home by Private Fletcher with his photo in uniform and the caption, "Likes Signal Corps." The text of the article read:

> Pvt. Basil R. Fletcher who entered the service Feb. 6, is in the Signal Corps and is attending clerk school at Camp Crowder, Missouri. He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Fletcher of Summitville. He writes: "Army life is allright so far, but this state of Missouri is nothing compared to dear old Tennessee. Hills and rocks are all you can see. Sometimes for exercise they send us out to pick up rocks. We run a race out of it by seeing which company can get the largest pile. This is a new camp, something like Camp Forrest, but larger. I like the branch of service I am in for it is much different from the other branches. They teach us more in one day than we would have [learned] in a week at school. Keep the news rolling!"[38]

Fletcher mused, "I don't remember writing that, but I remember that sorry picture. 'Keep the news rolling' was to daddy and mother, since they wrote me, but I'm not sure how often. I think I sent them letters fairly often, maybe once each week or so. I also sent letters to my girlfriend

---

[36]"Japanese Americans and World War II," available from http://sd.znet.com/~schester/fallbrook/history/ey_essays/japanese_americans_ww2.html; Internet; accessed 25 March 2001.

[37]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

[38]*Times*, 2 April 1943.

Lucille."[39] Frequent correspondence with home became a lifeline for many soldiers, especially since they received little word about where they would be sent after their training. Superiors kept these matters a guarded secret in order to protect the men in their charge, and to disallow the enemy information about unit deployments, readiness capabilities, and troop strengths.[40] In a special way, this concern for secrecy pertained to Signal Corps units, since they moved frequently to establish vital lines of communication, so that they could avoid detection and intercept enemy transmissions.[41] So, in accordance with strict military measures, Fletcher did not know exactly where he and his company would be deployed, and this remained so during his training at Camp Crowder, his encampments in northern California, and even his transport overseas from San Francisco across the Pacific Ocean.[42] Moreover, this ambiguity often kept the men on edge concerning their whereabouts, and it left gaps of uncertainty in the minds of people back home about the welfare of their loved ones.

In the meanwhile, Fletcher kept about the business of learning how to soldier, as this remained his primary task. "I had some rifle training, but I don't reckon that I was all that good with a rifle. But I did earn my Marksman Badge on the Carbine and M-1907 rifles. Much more

---

[39]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

[40]On the problems and solutions to secrecy, see Wardlow, *Transportation Corps*, 55-56, 104, 123-124, 131-132.

[41]For a brief overview of the role of the Signal Corps in electronic warfare during WWII, see Raines, *Getting the Message Through*, 263-267.

[42]Fletcher, Old Hickory, Tenn., 24 March 2001.

than that, I just don't remember."[43] However, another recipient of Camp Crowder's charms–Ted Roberge–did recollect more about the camp and expressed his opinion this way:

> The week ending 9 Oct 1943 was the first in the series of arduous weeks to follow, during which we were to receive extensive training both technical and tactical. That week was devoted to specialist training, designed to enable the individual properly to perform his own particular job in the outfit. Throughout the training program a minimum of six hours each week was devoted to strictly basic subjects, designed to bridge the gap between civilian and soldier. Schooling comprised our technical training, but we were also to have the more strenuous tactical training. Physical training and the unforgettable hikes came under this heading, and here too we had our trials and tribulations. . . . Our fond memories of these excursions include stubbed toes begotten in our meandering through the rock-strewn wilderness of southern Missouri. . . . Strangely enough, however, all of us survived these "ordeals" and were in excellent shape when we finally left Camp Crowder to begin our trip overseas.[44]

Both soldiers–Fletcher and Roberge–agreed on the nature of the craggy and rocky terrain at Camp Crowder, and the difficulty they had in traversing it. But after three short months in Missouri and a brief trip back to Tennessee, Fletcher moved westward to Camp Pinedale near Fresno, California, in order to finalize his readiness for the longest sea voyage of his life.[45] A fast-paced, eventful year had passed since Fletcher graduated from high school. The circumstances of world conflict and the nation's rapid response to it caused him, as well as many other young men, to mature rather quickly.

---

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ted Roberge, "History of the 299th Signal Service Company (Installation), available from http://rescomp.hsg.uce.edu/~ted/299th_history.htm; Internet; accessed 25 March 2001.

[45]Trains constituted the major form of transportation to move troops to training sites and to points of embarkation from the U.S. See Wardlow, *Transportation Corps*, 11-83.

Camp Pinedale proved to be a very different experience for Fletcher. By now, he had achieved the rank of corporal with the principal duty of "Clerk Typist," and he came to Pinedale to train as a "Classification Specialist." Like Crowder, Pinedale served as a hub for Army Signal Corps operations, but with a focus on the movement of qualified personnel to the Pacific Theater rather than to the European Theater. The installation activated a number of communication organizations to include the 333rd Signal Company (333rd SC), to which Fletcher was assigned, and the 334th Signal Company.

Notably, the Pinedale site became quite active after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and operated as a staging area or an "Assembly Center" for Japanese Americans on their way to notorious locations like Tule Lake, appropriately dubbed "one of America's largest concentration camps during WWII."[46] These assembly centers functioned as temporary camps for about eight months from March through October in 1942, as the government moved detainees to ten more permanent sites called "Relocation Centers." Although officials situated the Pinedale "center" where an old mill once stood, most assembly centers used large fairgrounds or race tracks to accommodate the sizeable numbers of Japanese Americans. The first detainees arrived at Camp Pinedale in May 1942 and the last departed in July that same year, as the population of the "center" peaked at nearly 4,800.[47] Chaotic and squalid living conditions generally reached what

---

[46]Jim King, "The Past Remembered: A Look into the Tule Lake Internment Camp of WWII," available from http://www.tulelake.k12.ca.us/ths/SUBJECTS/history/camp; Internet: accessed 26 March 2001.

[47]"The Camps," available from http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8420/camps. html; Internet; accessed 26 March 2001.

can be properly described as deplorable, as each overpopulated and understaffed location lacked essential food supplies and adequate sanitation facilities.[48]

By the time Fletcher arrived, Pinedale no longer housed the potential subversives. The corporal's first recollection of the area, however, came from the weather. "We traveled by train across the country, and when we got to Pinedale, it was hot. I know that it was about 108 degrees. Camp Pinedale itself was just a dust bowl. But while at Pinedale, we went up into Yosemite and trained in the mountains for three months."[49] Obviously, young men drafted during WWII enjoyed the opportunity to travel to new places, and Fletcher appreciated this new experience in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of northern California:

> The majority of the time we stayed at a place called Bass Lake. Anne Baxter made a movie there, but I can't remember the name of the film. We lived in pup tents, which were small, and only a couple of soldiers slept in each one. But I slept on a picnic table a lot of the time, because I was afraid of the tree rattlesnakes. I saw a lot of rattlers, but I never killed one. We had rifles–the Model 1903–which was a Remington gun, I think. But we didn't carry them around with us all the time.
>
> For training, the unit set up equipment for radio stations to become familiar with cryptography that was used to send and decipher messages. That's what the unit did later along the coast of New Guinea. The training itself, as I recall, was pretty easy. But I worked in the office and kept a roster of all the men. I maintained a card on all the men so that I could administer the payroll. There were reports to fill out, at least for each pay period, which was once a month. Payment of the troops came in cash, as best as I can

---

[48]See J. Burton, et al., "Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of WWII Japanese American Relocation Sites," available from http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/anthropology/74/ce3e.htm; Internet; accessed 26 March 2001.

[49]Basil R. Fletcher, Sr., interview by author, tape recording, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001.

> remember. But they provided no security such as MPs (Military Police) for the transfer of funds. This was probably because the typical pay for, say, a sergeant was very little.[50]

But the small pay received by soldiers in Fletcher's unit did provide some measure of entertainment and relaxation. Fletcher recalled:

> There were places in the mountains where the troops could spend their money. We went over to a bar near a dam or power plant one night. The guys got to drinking, and they drunk the place dry. We went back the next night, and the place was closed. We asked somebody why they were closed, and they said that the 333rd had drunk them dry. It wasn't a town, but it was just a place where people who operated the power plant lived. That's all there was in it, just one bar. I remember that we had a big dance there before we left. I met a girl on top of Yosemite, and I invited her to the dance. I couldn't dance, and I stepped all over her feet. I don't even remember her name, but we had a good time.[51]

Soon after the company's time in the California mountains, Fletcher sent a letter to his friends back in Manchester. He sounded upbeat and had every reason to be, since he had received a promotion to the rank of staff sergeant or Technician Third Grade. For Fletcher, the short year in the military had been a success. He wrote, "Hello Friends: In Tennessee you always hear of California as being sunny, but don't believe a word of it, because it isn't. Although it is warm when it is not raining, the nights sure do get cool. We have just been on the mountains for the past three months, and we found some snow there. Thanks a million for all the pretty

---

[50]Ibid. The average annual base pay for a Signal Corps NCO in 1943 was $780, according to Palmer, Wiley, and Keast, *Procurement and Training*, 49.

[51]Ibid.

Christmas cards. It sure does make us soldiers happy to hear from all our friends. Keep the home fires burning, because we will soon be back."[52]

Overall, Fletcher certainly valued the time he spent training with the 333rd SC in the California mountains. He enjoyed the camaraderie of fellow soldiers, the vigorous hikes amidst beautiful scenery, and the discipline of military life. These novel experiences, at such a young age, expanded his heretofore sheltered world with new ideas, and this happened quickly, with rarely time to reflect and ponder. Generally speaking, military duty has occasioned such a rapid, even overwhelming, assimilation of ideology with its attendant bellicose practices. Apparently, Staff Sergeant Fletcher took it all in stride with little or no apprehension, and this gave him a solid footing for the next phase of his short career–the deployment overseas. Because he involved himself wholeheartedly with his unit, and perhaps due to the unit's isolation in the mountains, Fletcher hardly found time to take in what was happening on the world scene. In early December, when the Allied leaders–Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin (the Big Three)–met at Teheran, Iran, to discuss plans to push the Germans out of France and to pressure Japan with Russian involvement, Sergeant Fletcher hardly took notice. Rather, he and Lt. Alan L. Cameron, an administrative officer, set off for San Francisco to prepare the 333rd SC to deploy to the Pacific Theater.

---

[52]"News of Military Men in Service," *Times*, 31 December 1943.

As an administrative non-commissioned officer (NCO), Fletcher worked hand in hand with his commanding officer to perform tasks necessary for the conduct of unit personnel to their overseas duty destination:

> About three or four weeks before we departed, Lieutenant Cameron and I went to San Francisco as liaison personnel in order to prepare for overseas duty. But where we were going, we did not know. I stayed in a barracks on the bay across from Alcatraz. During that time, I was shuffling around different places in San Francisco, to the Presidio, across the bay to Stockton, shuffling paperwork and doing what they told me to do. But I really didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't even drive then, so somebody took me from place to place in a jeep. On New Year's Eve, San Francisco was covered up with soldiers. Policemen on horses tried to keep order, but there were so many soldiers in town they couldn't find enough places to sleep. Many soldiers just slept in the theaters on the floor. I slept on the floor, I think, one night. It was wild.[53]

As massive numbers of soldiers remained bottlenecked at ports like San Francisco and anxiously awaited transport across the ocean, the circuitous queuing of troops through the city annoyed and befuddled the logic and reason of the not yet fully militarized personnel such as Fletcher. Accordingly, he mused:

> The day before we got on the boat to leave, the people in charge told me to pack all my gear. After I did that, they carried me across the bay to Stockton. Our company had come down from Fresno, and they crammed us in an old ferry. That was the most jammed up, most crowded mass of people I ever saw, and we almost suffocated. They had me go over to Stockton to get with my outfit, and after we crossed the bay to board the ship, I saw that the ship was docked within a block of where I had been staying. That was the most stupid thing I ever heard of–to go all that way just to get where I had been. I had seen the ship earlier, but I didn't know that–the *U.S.S. Mount Vernon*–was what we were going on.[54]

---

[53]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001. To compare San Francisco with other staging areas and ports of embarkation, and a treatment of some of the procedures implemented by military officials, see Wardlow, *Transportation Corps*, 100, 109-136.

[54]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001.

On 13 January 1944, 127 enlisted men and seven officers of the 333rd SC (Troop Carrier Wing) boarded the *U.S.S. Mount Vernon* and departed for an unknown location in the Pacific, at least a destination undisclosed to them. The *U.S.S. Mount Vernon* belonged to a fleet of converted transport vessels and weighed approximately 18,000 thousand tons with a speed of about twenty knots and a carrying capacity of roughly 7,000 troops plus crew complement. The *Mount Vernon* saw action during WWI as the *U.S.S. George Washington* but with extensive reconditioning carried on its WWII responsibilities under its new name.[55] Retrofitted and capable of evasive speed, the troop carrier sailed alone without escort, but many of the young soldiers, however, did not stomach well the speedy travel on the ocean:

> We sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge and out into the bay, which was very rough that day, because the waves were very high. In no time, the sickness or seasickness began to spread. I didn't get sick at first, since it took about two days to hit me. Then I got so sick that I couldn't stand up. I remember when I came up the steps from the galley, I vomited my helmet full before I got up. When they called us out on the deck for drill, I went over behind the company and sat down on the deck. Lieutenant Duffy yelled out, "Fletcher, get up from there, you're not supposed to sit down." I told him, "I'm so sick I can't stand up." It took me two or three days to get over it.[56]

Most of the new recruits succumbed to seasickness, since they were not acclimated to travel by ship on the ocean. Even the more seasoned suffered difficulty with the situation. "We had one lieutenant, David A. Campeau from Elizabeth, New Jersey, who bragged that he had sailed a lot and it didn't bother him. A couple of days after we left, he was missing and somebody asked,

---

[55]Wardlow, *Transportation Corps*, 90.

[56]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001.

'Where's Campeau?' Somebody else said, 'He's up in his bunk as sick as a dog.' I guess the troops razzed him later about that."[57]

Nevertheless, the company sailed for about sixteen days, until they landed in New Guinea on 29 January.[58] En route, Fletcher savored the leisure of camaraderie at sea and received a Navy honor bestowed on him that came to few others:

> When we crossed the equator on January 19, several of us on deck got into a big blackjack game for a dollar a trick. Soon after, my most memorable experience came when I was initiated into the Ancient Order of the Deep. They do this to all sailors, but for the Army units, they took only two or three out of each outfit. I was one of the lucky ones picked by Capt. George W. Wilson from my company.
>
> It's kind of like a fraternity initiation, which they did right after we passed the equator. They had a tent-like canvas on the deck, and we had to crawl through that. A sailor at each end sprayed us with high-pressured water from a six inch hose. You'd get about middle ways–you couldn't go forward and you couldn't go back. They almost drowned us. I also had to kiss the navel of King Neptune, who looked like a big old fat sailor. But I did get a card to prove that I'm a member of the Ancient Order of the Deep.[59]

Activities such as this helped the soldiers pass the time, as they pondered the role of fate in their lives and anticipated what lay ahead for them in days to come.[60]

---

[57]Ibid.

[58]Shipping troops and supplies to destinations in the Southwest Pacific remained a tactical challenge throughout the entire war. San Francisco lay 6,193 nautical miles from Brisbane, 5,800 nautical miles from Milne Bay, and 6,299 nautical miles from Manila. See Joseph Bykofsky and Harold Larson, *The Transportation Corps: Operations Overseas*, United States Army in World War II, The Technical Services, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1957), 459.

[59]Ibid.

[60]For problems with troop control during transport, see Wardlow, *Transportation Corps*, 136-145.

On 29 January, Fletcher's company landed in Milne Bay at the far eastern end of New Guinea. A narrow channel forced approaching ships into waters that often proved difficult to navigate. Harsh conditions around the bay, with primitive facilities that had to be literally "hewn from the jungle" by the Army Corps of Engineers, made landings slow and dangerous. Further, the muddy and swampy interior terrain limited construction of decent roads, and thus kept soldiers to native trails. Yet, in spite of a decline in use after the opening of Finschhafen late in 1943, Milne Bay received on the average 202,000 short tons of U.S. Army cargo per month for the first nine months of 1944.[61]

Appropriately, the arrival of the 333rd SC coincided exactly with this massive Allied effort to drive the Japanese out of the Marshall Islands in the Central Pacific and off the northern coast of New Guinea.[62] Such coordination reflected normal contingency planning by the Allied command, since the 333rd SC bore specific responsibility to furnish communication links to the 54th Troop Carrier Wing (54th TCW), an Army Air Corps (AAC) unit charged with the transport of infantry paratroopers. But upon their first encounter, Sergeant Fletcher and others in the 333rd SC found the big island anything but hospitable. In this, they were not alone, since about one

---

[61]Bykofsky and Larson, *Transportation Corps*, 461.

[62]Charles Messenger, *World War Two: Chronological Atlas–When, Where, How and Why*. London: Bloomsbury, 1989), 161, 176. Compare Mary H. Williams, *Chronology, 1941 - 1945,* United States Army in the World War II, Special Studies, ed. Kent R. Greenfield (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1960), 166-167. Actually, the Allies completed capture of Saidor and Huon Peninsula by the third week of January 1944.

million troops embarked to destinations in the Southwest Pacific during the forty-four months of WWII.[63]

Predictably, New Guinea's rugged tropical terrain gave inexperienced soldiers first impressions that were anything but welcoming. As early as the summer of 1943, Cpl. Roy Wooten sent to readers of his hometown *Times* his opinion about New Guinea:

North of Heaven, South of Hell,
Lies a land where Natives dwell,
Covered with foliage dense,
Created by God, for man's defense.
Torn by War, ruled by hate,
Where all men's lives are left to fate,
Where rancid stench of dead Japs near,
Fill brave men's hearts with pangs of fear.
Where rain clouds oft are lowly hung,
Blotting out the tropic sun.
Where drenching down pours are common lot,
At other times its too darn hot.
Where Jungle Voices at nite are heard,
Whispered and shrilled by native bird.
Where stormy nites close swiftly in,
Wrapping her folds around this isle of sin.
North of Heaven, South of Hell,
The 198th moved in at will.
Cleared this Jungle of foliage dense,
Denying its need of protection hence,
Carved thru its heart a road of stone,
Defying all obstacles, with spirit shown.
Made chevy trucks go thru the test,
And darn few vehicles came to rest.

[63]The inclusive dates were January 1942 through August 1945, and the specific number of passengers was 1,073,673. Bykofsky and Larson, *Transportation Corps*, 485.

But our hearts still yearn for the U.S.A.
And when we get back, we're there to stay.
They can lower the land, and raise the Sea,
And this darn hole'll be right with me.
Now you people at home can easily see,
How a place like this appeals to me.
So you can pack up your troubles,
And put them away,
And be thankful you're still in the U.S.A.
Now there is no moral to this rhyme,
To me it's just a waste of time.
Inspired by naught, but true facts still,
Of men who live by Gods own will.[64]

Contrarily, others like Cpl. Robert Taylor, did not find New Guinea so dismal. "I've been in New Guinea quite a while," he wrote, "and I've already found out that it really isn't as bad as I had been led to believe before I came. Of course there are many tropical bugs, insects, etc., but they don't bother us so very much as the army provides us with sleeping accommodations off the ground. I understand there are several boys from Manchester that I know in New Guinea, however, this is an awfully big island, so I may never get to see them. I read in the *Times* that Woodrow Steiner was here, also Aubrey Lee Ogles, and I sure would like to see them, as to see someone from home would be the next thing to a trip back to the States."[65]

Fletcher himself formed his own impressions when his unit arrived in New Guinea. "The ship docked in Milne Bay about a half mile from the shore, because the water was too shallow to get the ship in closer. Then they transported us the short distance to shore on barges, and the

---

[64] *Times*, 9 July 1943. For a like assessment of New Guinea by a Manchester soldier, Cpl. Alfred Jackson, see "In New Guinea," ibid., 4 August 1944.

[65] Ibid., 28 April 1944.

water was very rough, just like when we left San Francisco. I got sick again. So the first thing I did in New Guinea, and I remember this very well, I found the nearest coconut tree and vomited all over it."[66] Like the other soldiers, the young sergeant carried his combat gear, his rifle with magazine clips, and some medical supplies which included atabrine or yellow antimalarial tablets, but the Army issued no medical supplies for nausea or vomiting. Similarly, each troop kept up his own personal gear–a duffle bag full of uniforms, linens, and a few personal items, such as letters from home, newspaper clippings, and paper and pen to write letters. Interestingly, Corporal Taylor noted frequent correspondence from folks back home, "I get the *Times* nearly every week." Yet for others, like Pfc. Thomas J. Wagner, Jr., word of his safe arrival "somewhere in New Guinea" took about two months to reach his parents in Manchester.[67]

Sergeant Fletcher did not fail to keep in touch and sent a letter to his parents dated 14 February, or Valentine's Day, that described his first two weeks in New Guinea:

> Dear Mother and Dad and all: This has been one more hot day here, and I am almost roasted. It is hot at night until about midnight, and then it gets cooler. I saw in the paper that there was a big snow in the states. I sure wouldn't mind seeing a little snow now. We sure don't have any use for our winter clothes here. Some of the boys have cut their trouser legs off and made shorts. I haven't because I sure don't want to be blistered. The people in the states working in the war plants think they are doing a lot. They are I will agree, but they are doing nothing compared to the men overseas. They can buy bonds with half their pay and still do nothing compared to what we are sacrificing. They can be with their families and loved ones, and that means everything. I think I will go to bed early tonight, as I am kind of tired. I sure would like to have something cold to drink. We only get ice once a day, and does it taste good! I guess we will all be yellow before long. We take a yellow pill called atabrine every day. When you take enough of them, it

---

[66]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001.

[67]*Times*, 17 March 1944.

> makes you immune to malaria. But it hasn't bothered us. I'll close for this time. Love to all, Basil.[68]

Not only did the climate affect Fletcher, but he retained vivid memories of New Guinea's night creatures. "I remember very well the first night in New Guinea. We had to pull out our little pup tent, and I think that just one person, maybe two, slept in it. But the tent had a canvas bottom, and the next morning, I remember rolling up that canvas and finding all kinds of critters under there. There were big green lizards about a foot long and huge spiders half as big as your hand. We too slept off the ground in the bigger tents that slept eight on top of a wooden platform."[69] For Sergeant Fletcher, these creatures marked the extent of his encounters with hideous life forms, unlike two others from Manchester who disparaged the Japanese in animalistic terms–Corporal Wooten decried "the rancid stench of dead Japs near" and Corporal Taylor perceived the enemy as "these little yellow rats, with fantastic beliefs and traditions."[70] Fortunately, Fletcher witnessed little actual combat, as he carried out administrative duties at Nadzab, an AAF base about ten miles northwest of Lae.

Perhaps the closest thing to combat-like action for young Fletcher, however, came during his transit to Nadzab:

> We stayed at Milne Bay for a short time, then flew over to Port Moresby and stayed a couple of weeks there. I was one of the last ones to leave Port Moresby, since I

---

[68]Basil R. Fletcher, New Guinea, to Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Fletcher, Summitville, Tenn., 14 February 1944, original in possession of Mrs. Basil R. Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn.

[69]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001.

[70]*Times*, 9 July 1943 and 28 April 1944.

> helped load all our office supplies on the plane. I got on the plane with the pilot and one sergeant. We flew on C-47 aircraft, which carried about thirty passengers, but that was overload. There weren't any troops on our plane–just me, the pilot, and the sergeant. The cargo area was full of our office equipment. The pilot told me to come up in the cockpit, so I went up and flew up front with them. From Port Moresby to Nadzab, we flew across some of the highest mountains in the world. When we got on top of the peaks, the pilot told me to pull the stick. I pulled that stick, and the plane started to dive. I nearly peed in my pants.[71]

But Fletcher arrived safely at Nadzab, and he began to conduct the tasks of his MOS, "Classification Specialist."

Nadzab, an AAF jungle airstrip, provided the Allies with a staging area just northwest of Lae to launch air assaults against the Japanese in Hollandia. This became significant in the early months of 1944 when Gen. Douglas MacArthur and his generals began their push from New Guinea through the Central Pacific back to the Philippines. In May, "Australian aircraft flew over 1,600 sorties and dropped almost fifty-seven tons of bombs of all types on ground targets from Aitape to Wewak. During June the pace of air operations was stepped up and . . . when more bombing than the Tadji-based Beauforts could provide was needed, A-20's and B-25's of the Fifth Air Force, flying first from Nadzab in eastern New Guinea and later from Hollandia, swung into action."[72] Later on, Nadzab outgrew its importance as an effective heavy bomber

---

[71]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001. For excellent photos of C-47's used at various locations in New Guinea, see Rene J. Francillon, *Aero Pictorials 2*, rev. ed., U.S. Army Air Forces in the Pacific (Fallbrook, Calif.: Aero Publishers, 1969), 72-74.

[72]Robert Ross Smith, *The Approach to the Philippines*, The United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, ed. Douglas Kinnard (paperback reprint, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1996), 130.

base, since it was located too far south "to support either the Central Pacific's advances or the Southwest Pacific's drive toward the Philippines."[73]

Earlier, during the fall of 1943, the 54th TCW played an important role in the capture and development of forward operating bases at Nadzab, Lae, and Finschhafen in Huon Gulf. This evolution of the Allied advance, with Nadzab as the main site for future New Guinea operations, at least during the early months of 1944, set the stage for a concerted effort to wrest the Japanese from Saidor, Madang, Wewak, Aitape, and Hollandia on the New Guinea coast, and from Rabaul on New Britain.[74] Fletcher's unit, the 333rd SC, furnished communications to the 54h TCW, which had moved from Port Moresby to Nadzab.

To accomplish this task, the 333rd SC placed several detachments of radio and telegraph personnel along the coast of New Guinea, on Biak Island, and at locations where the fighting continued. For his part, though, Fletcher remained at Nadzab and carried out his duties as "Classification Specialist." In his role, Sergeant Fletcher kept a roster of personnel that came to the unit, which changed constantly due to various factors such as casualties, changes of assignment, illnesses, and normal rotations. Since soldiers came to theater with their MOS

---

[73]Ibid., 208.

[74]See Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944*, Volume Four, The Army Air Forces in World War II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1977), 184-193, 316-317.

already in place, he did not perform the usual role of assessment via interviews and evaluations.[75] But his meticulous work at maintaining personnel data did serve a substantial purpose. Higher commands utilized rosters like Fletcher's to assess Allied capability to send quality personnel with necessary communications skills into specific combat areas. "The 5th Air Force wanted an up-to-date roster on all the men and their MOS. Later on, Capt. George W. Wilson received a letter from the command that said our company had the best roster of all. He wrote me a real nice letter, but I don't know what happened to it."[76] Thus, Fletcher's work functioned as a vital link between the common soldier at the grass roots level and the operational strategy used by senior leaders at higher levels in prosecuting the war. In this way, Fletcher contributed worthily to the effort against the Japanese in the Pacific.

Fletcher, for his part, denied any active role in combat fighting. "We weren't in any war, period, except against the mosquitoes. I was in the office, working at a desk, while the detachments were out in the field, working in the jungle. I mean, we were a part of the war, but we weren't in actual combat."[77] True, Fletcher had no grandiose experience to relate, no watch

---

[75]The Classification Specialist interviewed enlisted men about their civilian or military job history and used this information for personnel classification and assignments. He also conducted evaluations and prepared reports. See Army of the United States: Separation Qualification Record, WD AGO Form No. 100, of Basil R. Fletcher, by 2d Lt. Don S. Dixon, at Sante Fe, N. Mex., no date.

[76]Basil R. Fletcher, Sr., interview by author, tape recording, Manchester, Tenn., 8 April 2001.

[77]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 26 March 2001.

that he cut off a Japanese officer's wrist and sent home as did Pfc. Moran L. Graves,[78] no excitement at meeting a close relative on New Guinea like Pvt. John W. Farrar,[79] and not even a big fish story to tell–eight feet and thirty pounds shy of two hundred–like Alfred Jackson and Kenneth Meadows.[80] But Sergeant Fletcher's stay in New Guinea proved to be quite normal for an administrative sergeant attached to an AAF base, with its mix of routine events, some excitement, and periods of boredom. Yet the jungle environment of New Guinea, with its peculiarities, made things different for Fletcher, especially when compared to his home in Tennessee.

Typical of AAF jungle airfields in New Guinea, Nadzab offered only rudimentary facilities for its military inhabitants. Because of the extreme tropical conditions, Sergeant Fletcher appreciated the traditional Army accommodations. "At Nadzab we camped in a beautiful coconut grove. We were in tents with a platform bottom that slept eight men apiece. During those cool nights in New Guinea, we slept very well on wooden cots with mosquito netting over us."[81] But the nights involved certain perils as well. "I remember all kinds of noise in the jungle, but especially the noise of the birds. The bats, in particular, had wing spans up to

---

[78]"In New Guinea," *Times*, 1 September 1944.

[79]"Brothers Meet in New Guinea," ibid.

[80]"Army Pin-Ups from New Guinea," ibid., 17 November 1944.

[81]Basil R. Fletcher, Sr., "Stay at Nadzab," typed notes, 8 April 2001, Manchester, Tenn.; original in possession of author; Murfreesboro, Tenn.

five or six feet, and when they came out at night, they would dive down toward a person."[82] This primitive night assault with its attendant clamor unnerved not a few of the troops, but Fletcher seemed unaffected by the bats. What really captured his attention sprang from a different type of aerial attack along with the poor quality of the facility where he worked. "There was a large coconut tree beside the corner of the crude building where I worked, which was the 333rd Signal Corps Headquarters. Some coconuts fell from the tree one day while I was away from my desk. One broke through the slate-like roof and dented the corner of my typewriter. Shortly after that, we asked some of the natives to climb the trees near the office and shake off all the coconuts, which they did. They could climb a tree as fast as a monkey, and this to me was amazing."[83] But Fletcher, rattled by the episode and the thought that he could have been harmed, kept an eye out for loose coconuts.

In addition to basic tent billets and crude buildings for hangars and offices, Nadzab also included a hospital, a mess hall with a canteen, recreation areas, and an outdoor theater or lyceum. More than likely, the latter gave Fletcher his most memorable digressions from the performance of his duty. "Our recreation consisted of outdoor movies and volleyball. Possibly, we had the best volleyball team in the South Pacific. Our greatest thrill was winning over the 54th [TCW] team, which consisted of officers who were pilots. They did not like the idea of

[82]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 8 April 2001.

[83]Fletcher, "Stay at Nadzab."

enlisted men beating them, but there was nothing they could do about it."[84] Recreation like volleyball encouraged the men to stay fit and also provided an opportunity to build teamwork.

For personal hygiene, outdoor latrines functioned as the norm, and as a luxury item, the men constructed a makeshift shower with hot running water. "Sometimes one man might use thirty or forty gallons of fuel to take one shower," Fletcher noted, "and they rationed fuel back home."[85] For meals, the mess hall served the staple dehydrated foodstuffs, with a lot of eggs, potatoes, and slices of dried meats.[86] Once a month, though, pilots from the 54th TCW brought back fresh fruits, milk, and vegetables from Brisbane, but this treat came at a cost to the recipients, since each soldier had to chip in an Australian pound. Most of the men participated, since they had little else to buy with their pay, which they typically sent home, and they liked the fresh foods, particularly the "real cold milk."[87]

Generally, the Army cared for each soldier's needs, but due to the nature of life in a predominantly male environment, some fundamental needs went unmet. The canteen employed a limited number of females, and the Army stationed several female nurses at Nadzab's hospital to care for the infirm and treat the wounded among the soldiers. Evidently, some nurses fostered care of their "patients" in unauthorized ways. Fletcher quipped, "I know that some of the nurses

---

[84]Ibid.

[85]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 8 April 2001.

[86]Compare Pvt. Ira Ellsworth's summary of a soldier's diet in New Guinea, "In New Guinea," *Times*, 20 October 1944.

[87]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 8 April 2001.

were pregnant and were sent home."[88] He also remembered the unusual ways of the New Guinea women (who were strictly off limits to the troops), customs perceived as strange by American standards.[89] "It was common to see one of the [native] women walking down the road with a heavy load piled on her back, but behind you'd see a man walking and carrying nothing, except maybe a walking stick. Also, the women didn't wear any top; they only wore clothes from the waist down."[90] Nevertheless, these practices did not comprise the notable thing for Sergeant Fletcher during his time in the Pacific.

Even though he heard about the big events like the D-day landings, the Allied capture of the Marianas, or MacArthur's return to the Philippines, Fletcher didn't worry about such. Nor did he ever become tangled in the web of activities that surrounded the transport operations of the 54th TCW at Nadzab. "People in the know felt like they were a part of the bigger campaign, but I really didn't concern myself with those things."[91] Rather, the most notable experience for Fletcher was the trip to Biak Island, just a month prior to his actual departure from New Guinea. En route to Biak, the NCO caught an aerial view of MacArthur's headquarters at Hollandia, but when on Biak, his attention turned to the beautiful coral there. "On the airstrip, there was solid

---

[88]Ibid.

[89]Sgt. Aubrey L. Ogles observed "children playing a game of cards," "native girls clad in grass skirts chewing the betelnut," and "a very large snake known as the Carpet Python," which he reported in "Children of New Guinea," *Times*, 30 June 1944.

[90]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 8 April 2001.

[91]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 8 April 2001.

white coral. The island was only a few miles from the equator, and it was so hot there, you could have fried an egg on the runway."[92] Fletcher went to Biak as part of an advance party from the 333rd SC to scout out the area to which the unit planned to move next. But on the trip back from Biak, a torrential storm pelted the aircraft and the turbulence scared the young Fletcher. "About thirty soldiers flew on the aircraft, and the rain was the hardest that I can ever remember. The ride was bumpy and very, very scary, but we made it back okay."[93] Safely back, Fletcher resumed his administrative tasks, and he thought that in just a couple of weeks, he would accompany his unit up the coast to old Dutch New Guinea. But in two weeks, Fletcher returned to the United States, and his short military career with the Army ended abruptly.

Somehow, somewhere in New Guinea, Sergeant Fletcher contracted tuberculosis and experienced a classic symptom of the disease after loading some cargo.

> We were loading our office equipment, packed in large boxes, onto the plane to fly to Biak Island. After we loaded up the plane, Quentin C. Calkins, a buddy of mine, and I went to our tent to play checkers. It was then that I started spitting up bright red blood. I thought I had just strained myself by lifting the equipment. Later on that night, we passed by the infirmary on our way to an outdoor movie, so I went in to see a doctor. The doctor weighed me, he looked at me, and he asked me questions. Then he told me to gather my mess gear and go to the hospital, which I did. I eventually learned that there was a spot about the size of a dime on one of my lungs, and that's what caused the bleeding.[94]

---

[92]Ibid.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn., 8 April 2001.

Fletcher stayed in the hospital at Nadzab for two weeks and waited for a flight back to the states. "To show how ignorant I was about medical procedures," he quipped, "while I was in the hospital on New Guinea, the nurse brought me a little cup and told me that she needed a specimen. I peed that little cup full, but when she came back, she told me, 'I meant for you to spit in it.' She probably told me that she wanted a sputum test, but I didn't know what sputum was."[95] With time, however, the now infirm sergeant would learn all about the ways of military convalescence and recovery.

In the meantime, Sgt. Dominic Del Torto, a coworker in the 333rd SC headquarters section, took over Fletcher's duties as classification specialist. After nine months, almost to the day, Fletcher returned to San Francisco on a C-54 aircraft via Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean and then Oahu Island in Hawaii. Fletcher considered himself fortunate, even though he regretted the fact that he did not stay with his unit for the remainder of WWII. He returned in much better condition than some. "On the flight back, I remember three or four soldiers 'off their rocker' and strapped down in straitjackets. They had battle shock, and they didn't know what they were saying or doing, so the medical personnel had to tie them down."[96] With his mission accomplished, Sergeant Fletcher arrived back in the United States on 29 October 1944.

---

[95]Ibid.

[96]Ibid.

The Army transferred Fletcher from the west coast to Bruns General Hospital in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he convalesced for three months.[97] A notice in the *Times* on 17 November 1944 simply read: "Returns To States: SSgt. Basil R. Fletcher has been transferred from New Guinea to the Bruns General Hospital at Santa Fe, New Mexico. He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Fletcher of near Summitville."[98] He received an honorable discharge from the military on 25 January 1945 with a mustering out pay of three hundred dollars. Fletcher's time in service totaled one year, eleven months, and thirty days, and for his efforts he earned the Good Conduct Medal, the American Campaign Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with one Bronze Service Star, the WWII Victory Medal, an Honorable Service Lapel Button WWII, and the Marksman Badge with Rifle/Carbine Bar. After his discharge, Fletcher fell under the administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and he relocated to the regional VA hospital in Oteen, North Carolina, where he received visitors from Tennessee regularly.[99] Here he rested and recuperated for about four years before he returned to Summitville in Middle Tennessee.

---

[97]The 267,755 troops and other passengers debarked from the Southwest Pacific Area in the United States by the Army over a twenty-eight month period, June 1943 through September 1945, included 59,730 Army patients. Bykofsky and Larson, *Transportation Corps*, 486. On the movement of patients, see Wardlow, *Transportation Corps*, 70-77.

[98]*Times*, 17 November 1944.

[99]The news from Summitville in the 16 February 1945 *Times* mentioned a visit paid to Fletcher by "Mrs. Jack Fletcher and daughter, Martha Ida, and Miss Lucille O'Neal."

In his own way, Staff Sergeant Basil Rex Fletcher participated in the vital effort that thwarted Japanese aims toward empire in the Southwest Pacific during WWII. In many respects, his short military stint in New Guinea paralleled that experienced by the common lot of soldiers. He enlisted shortly after graduation from high school, he trained for about a year prior to deployment to the Pacific Theater, and he served approximately the same amount of time in New Guinea in an administrative, behind-the-front-lines role. When viewed from this common perspective–a vista that blends people who wear the same clothes (for example, military uniforms) into a colossal mosaic of "un-hero-ed" instruments of government design–Sergeant Fletcher was indeed a very regular soldier.

But in a very real sense, Fletcher charted a unique path traveled by none other. He served in an organization with a peculiar role–one of only two Signal Companies attached to Troop Carrier Wings during WWII. He worked as a Classification Specialist, a job that supplied essential data to the crucial hinge that existed between the Army's training of soldiers in their MOS, their placement by deployment to the field, and the actual application of any given MOS in combat. That he accomplished this for a rare Signal Corps organization made his contribution all the more meaningful.[100] In addition to this, numerous personal episodes added an unparalleled aspect to Fletcher's military stint, in particular, his succumbing to tuberculosis, his experience as a medical casualty, and his role as a soldier from a small town in rural Tennessee. By itself, this personalization of the face of a soldier created a new and different person, a changed man, who

[100]See Raines, *Getting the Message Through*, 280, for a candid evaluation of the importance of the Army Signal Corps to Allied victory in WWII.

added his own mark to what is now dubbed by historians–WWII. Accordingly, the story of Fletcher's military stint to New Guinea and back during WWII needs to be told.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Army of the United States: Honorable Discharge. WD AGO Form 53-55, given to Basil R. Fletcher by Capt. R. A. Divine. Santa Fe, N. Mex., 28 January 1945.

Army of the United States: Separation Qualification Record. WD AGO Form No. 100, of Basil R. Fletcher by 2d Lt. Don S. Dixon. Santa Fe, N. Mex., no date.

Fletcher, Basil R., New Guinea, to Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Fletcher, Summitville, Tenn., 14 February 1944. Original in possession of Mrs. Basil R. Fletcher, Manchester, Tenn.

Fletcher, Basil R., Sr. Interview by author, 24 March 2001, Old Hickory, Tenn. Tape recording. Murfreesboro, Tenn.

_____. Interview by author, 26 March 2001, Manchester, Tenn. Tape recording. Murfreesboro, Tenn.

_____. Interview by author, 8 April 2001, Manchester, Tenn. Tape recording. Murfreesboro, Tenn.

_____. "Stay at Nadzab." Typed notes, 8 April 2001, Manchester, Tenn. Original in possession of author, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Manchester (Tenn.) Times. 26 December 1941–16 February 1945.

Secondary Sources

Bykofsky, Joseph, and Harold Larson. *The Transportation Corps: Operations Overseas*. United States Army in World War II, The Technical Services, ed. Kent R. Greenfield. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1957.

Craven, Wesley Frank, and James Lea Cate, eds. *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944*. Volume Four, The Army Air Forces in World War II. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1977.

Francillon, Rene J. *Aero Pictorials 2*, rev. ed. U.S. Army Air Forces in the Pacific. Fallbrook, Calif.: Aero Publishers, 1969.

Messenger, Charles. *World War Two: Chronological Atlas–When, Where, How and Why*. London: Bloomsbury, 1989.

Palmer, Robert R., Bill I. Wiley, and William R. Keast. *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*. United States Army in World War II, The Army Ground Forces, ed. Kent R. Greenfield. Washington, D.C.: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1948.

Raines, Rebecca Robbins. *Getting the Message Through: A Branch History of the U.S. Army Signal Corp*. Army Historical Series, ed. Jeffrey J. Clarke. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1996.

Smith, Christine. *The John Rufus Freeze Family: A Genealogy of the Freeze Family from Coffee County, Tennessee*. Manchester, Tenn.: Christine Smith, 1992.

Smith, Robert Ross. *The Approach to the Philippines*. The United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, ed. Douglas Kinnard. Paperback reprint, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1996.

Van West, Carroll, ed. *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill, 1998.

Wardlow, Chester. *The Transportation Corps: Movements, Training, and Supply*. United States Army in World War II, The Technical Services, ed. Kent R. Greenfield. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1956.

Williams, Mary H. *Chronology, 1941 - 1945*. United States Army in World War II, Special Studies, ed. Kent R. Greenfield. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1960.

<u>World Wide Web Sources</u>

Burton, J., et al. "Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of WWII Japanese American Relocation Sites." Internet resource @ http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/anthropology74/ce3e.htm. Accessed 26 March 2001.

"Camp Forrest." Internet resource @ http://candice.arnold.af.mil/aedc/factsheets/ campforest.htm. Accessed 25 March 2001.

"The Camps." Internet resource @ http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8420/camps.html. Accessed 26 March 2001.

"History Pics (WAC)." Internet resource @ http://www.bpwusa.org/content/Home/ About_BPW_USA/History/history_of_BPW.htm. Accessed 25 March 2001.

"Japanese Americans and World War II." Internet resource @ http://sd/znet.com/ ~schester/fallbrook/history/ey_essays/japanese_americans_ww2.html. Accessed 25 March 2001.

King, Jim. "The Past Remembered: A Look into the Tule Lake Internment Camp of WWII." Internet resource @ http://www.tulelake.k12.ca.us/ths/SUBJECTS/ history/camp. Accessed 26 March 2001.

"Medical Training in World War II: Medical Replacement Training Centers." Internet resource @ http://www.armymedicine.army.mil/history/booksdocs/wwii/ medtrain/ch6.htm. Accessed 25 March 2001.

"P.O.W.: German U-boat Men in Captivity." Internet resource @ http://uboat.net/men/ pow/pow_in_america_stats.htm. Accessed 25 March 2001.

Roberge, Ted. "History of the 299th Signal Service Company (Installation)." Internet resource @ http://rescomp.hsg.uce.edu/~ted/299th_history.htm. Accessed 25 March 2001.

"Silver Wings Band History." Internet resource @ http://www.snowhill.com/~kamarag/ 98AB/History/history.htm. Accessed 25 March 2001.