

# **237<sup>th</sup> MEDICAL DISPENSARY**

## **MISSION**

## **LINEAGE**

237<sup>th</sup> Medical Dispensary

## **STATIONS**

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

## **COMMANDERS**

## **HONORS**

**Service Streamers**

**Campaign Streamers**

**Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

**Decorations**

## **EMBLEM**

## **MOTTO**

## **NICKNAME**

## **OPERATIONS**

At this time the equipment for the 237 MDA was located in Lae, New Guinea and was promptly air lifted to Mangaldan where the first complete dispensary was set up. The 237th MDA began to function as it was trained to do.

The Unit provided first aid and treatment, first echelon surgery and dispensary for all units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Commando Group, transients and all other units located at Mangaldan Air Strip. Patients

were allowed to stay for seven days only. If further hospitalization were necessary the patient was evacuated to a general hospital. Treatment for local civilians was also provided on an emergency basis.

On 18 Apr '45 the Unit moved along with the 3rd ACG to Laoag, Luzon, some 150 miles behind enemy lines. All supplies were brought in by air until a ground corridor could be opened up to the south. The Unit was assigned the municipal building in San Nicolas for use as a hospital with a small adjacent building to serve as a dental clinic.

The local area was very short of medical facilities and as a result the 237th MDA treated a considerable number of civilian Filipinos and Guerrillas on a daily basis. There was a rash of extremity injuries from explosives and hand grenades left behind by the fast retreating Japanese. Most of these injuries were on curious children and teenagers. Adults as well were tempted to salvage explosives for their use in fishing operations.

The Unit also gave emergency treatment to members of other units which had experienced injury on missions over Formosa, China and Okinawa Islands. Laoag being the most northerly air strip in friendly hands was the logical place to land for emergency help.

In addition humanitarian aid was also provided to an occasional patient when there was some relief from the daily emergencies. Such a case is related by Capt. Kenneth A. Nockerts DC of the 237th MDA:

The 237th Medical Dispensary Aviation was stationed with the Third Air Commando Group at Laoag in northwestern Luzon in June 1945. At the time we were the only military medical facility in the area. There were limited civilian medical services available but occasionally the local Filipinos requested our help.

A school teacher brought in a pretty little four-teen year old Filipino girl, Maria, who had a birth defect, a hair lip. The girl was quiet and withdrawn and constantly held a handkerchief over her lip. Her classmates made life miserable for her with their taunts and derision.

We examined the girl and decided we could not do anything for her because none of us had any formal training in cleft lip surgery. The school teacher brought the little girl in a second and third time and we finally consented to help Maria as best we could. As the dentist in our hospital I was persuaded to be the surgeon with Captain Dolphus E. Compere MC assisting. This was a decided switch from our usual relationship.

We reviewed the surgical technique in my oral surgery textbook and completed the operation on June 25, 1945. We kept Maria in our little hospital for several days and then sent her home. She came back a week later and we removed the dressing and stitches and handed her a mirror. Maria smiled and reached out to squeeze our hands. We had her in for post operative observations until we left for Ie Shima at the end of July. There were no post operative complications.

We felt the result of the surgical repair was very satisfactory. I have always felt the good Lord helped guide our hands.

Maria's personality changed dramatically for the better which was ample compensation for our efforts. Besides she did bring us two chickens as payment for our services.

#### ALL IN THE DAY OF A MDA SURGEON

by Jerry Collins - 3rd Fighter Squadron

The kid just lay there. Stunned. His body half in half out of the cockpit, was in pain; his head wounds bleeding profusely.

Yeah, just a kid. Not yet twenty-two years of age. Only moments before he had dropped supplies and ammunition to friendly Filipino guerrilla troops hidden in the jungle well behind enemy lines. Then as he pulled his L-5 of the 159th Liaison Squadron to tree top level, a Japanese sniper put a bullet in the oil sump. The engine sputtered as the engine head temperature rose into the red. The propeller froze to a standstill, The pilot put the plane in a glide and headed for the ocean beach. May-Day, May-Day he screamed into his microphone hoping someone would hear and get his position before the crash. Someone did, just as he flared out across the sandy beach. Sinking its wheels into the soft sand, the aircraft flipped on its back. No crackling flames, only silence, except for the sea beating against the nearby rocks — only silence.

From a nearby hospital, the 237th MDA an L-5 of the 157th Liaison Squadron was quickly dispatched. It was equipped with emergency medical equipment and a stretcher strapped above its right landing gear. Behind the pilot rode a young doctor, himself still in his twenties. Finding the downed aircraft they landed in an area where the sand was more firm and taxied as close as possible to the crash. The pilot was the first to reach the downed aircraft.

He gently pulled the victim from the cockpit and laid his still body face up on the sand. As he reached to pull the aviators helmet from the bloody head, the young doctor hollered, "Leave that head gear alone - It will help control the bleeding". Then after administering preliminary first aid, the two rescuers lifted the limp body onto the stretcher and flew back to base.

The crash victim was quickly taken to the Medical tent, and since there was no available cot, he was placed on the earthen floor. Intravenous fluids were administered and the multiple bleeding scalp vessels sutured. The young doctor never left his patient's side, keeping him warm under several layers of blankets. When he failed to respond, it was evident that whole blood was needed. There wasn't any. Yet without the life giving fluid the patient would probably not survive. There was no matching whole blood available except the doctor himself. Without a second thought he proceeded to extract blood from his own arm. The blood was then administered to the near lifeless form. Gradually the patient responded with no recollection of his previous events of his ordeal.

After many days in the hospital, the wounded aviator was restored to health and returned to the States. The doctor continued his duties to war's end when he also returned to the States. The doctor was Dolphus Copmpere, MD 237th Medical Dispensary, 3rd Air Com-mando Group.

On 14 Aug '45 the 237th MDA loaded on LSM 83 for a move to Okinawa and landed on Ie Shima 10 Aug '45. Since there were other adequate medical facilities in the area, the Unit did not become operational on Ie Shima but waited to move with the occupational forces into Japan.

The bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, the War was over and on 5 Oct '45 the Unit loaded its remaining personnel aboard LST 572 and proceeded to Buckner Bay on the east side of Okinawa. Going out to sea to avoid the second typhoon, the small ship rode out the storm with 135 MPH winds and then returned to Buckner Bay to join a convoy sailing north toward Japan. The 237th disembarked at Otaru, Hokkaido, Japan 20 Oct '45 and from there moved by truck to Chitose, Hokkaido.

At Chitose Air Base the main item of business was the processing of personnel for their return to the US and by 31 Dec '45 most of the enlisted men and officers had left. For all practical purposes the 237th Medical Dispensary Aviation no longer existed.

#### THE 237th MEDICAL DISPENSARY AVIATION

The 237th Medical Dispensary Aviation was activated 15 March 44 at Robins Field, Georgia. Four officers and twenty-four enlisted personnel were authorized. The officers included two physicians, one dentist and a medical administrative officer. The twenty-four enlisted men included, five medical technicians, five surgical technicians, three clerks, three cooks, a dental technician, a sanitary technician, an x-ray technician, a flight surgeon's assistant and a pharmacist.

The Unit's mission was to operate a 36 bed hospital as a forward echelon where injured and wounded could receive emergency treatment until they could be evacuated to a more permanent installation.

All the enlisted men received training at army training schools and the Unit received an additional six weeks of training at the Medical Service Training School at Robins Field.

On 17 Aug 44 the organization moved to Alachua Army Air Field at Gainesville, Florida where it assumed responsibility for operation of the base dispensary. The next seven weeks were spent in updating the men's service, medical and dental records. It was here that the Unit joined and became a part of the Third Air Commando Group.

On 16 Oct 44 the Unit moved to Drew Field, Tampa, Florida and on 26 October 44 the organization entrained for the long trip to Camp Stoneman, California, arriving there five days later. On 6 Nov. 44 the Unit boarded the General Hersey along with other units of the 3rd Air Commando Group. The General Hersey had enough speed that it made the trip to New Guinea out of convoy.

The first few days at sea were spent recovering from seasickness. After brief stops at Finchaven and Hollandia, New Guinea the General Hersey joined a convoy to Leyte, Philippine Islands and arrived on Leyte 30 Nov 44. All personnel debarked from the Hersey by climbing down cargo nets into waiting ducks which took them to shore on Red Beach. Life immediately changed drastically since all personnel were literally dumped on the beach with no welcoming committee on hand. The first night was spent in shelter halves on the beach. Some men failed to take the tide into account and had to move during the night to higher ground under strict blackout conditions. Two days later the Unit moved by invasion barges to a point further south on the beach near Burauen and four miles north of Dulag.

During the month of December no operational equipment was available since the bulk of the equipment was aboard another ship and there was no word as to its whereabouts.

The month of December was not a complete loss since the men learned to survive in a hostile environment. The first mail to arrive reached the Unit on 19 December.

It has been said that Leyte was water divided by rice paddies. It rained incessantly during the first three weeks and when the rain stopped briefly, a burning sun dried the mud and the roads along the beach became unbelievably dusty. Where the beach ended the jungle began.

The 237th MDA left Leyte and flew to San Jose, Mindoro. Original plans was for the 3rd Air Commando Group to operate off Mindoro during the invasion of Luzon; the operation went so well that the 237th MDA was on Mindoro only three days. The Unit flew on to Goatee Strip, Mangaldan, Pangasinan Province, Luzon.

The equipment for the Unit was finally located in Lae, New Guinea and was moved by air to Mangaldan. Shortly thereafter a complete dispensary was set up for the first time. The 237th finally began to function as they were trained and equipped to do. In addition to living quarters the Unit set up four ward tents, a dental office, receiving office, pharmacy-laboratory, mess hall and a headquarters. Morale soared and the Unit was busy and productive.

The 237th provided first aid and treatment, first echelon surgery and dispensary for all units of the 3rd Air Commando Group, transients and all other units located at Mangaldan Air Strip. Patients were allowed to be kept for seven days only. If further hospitalization or convalescence was necessary the patient was evacuated to a general hospital. Some treatment of local civilians were also given on an emergency basis. The medical staff were faced with many medical problems with which they were not familiar; Dengue fever, malaria, intestinal parasites, fungus infections and diarrhea. new x-ray equipment proved to be invaluable and was used extensively for both medical and dental patients.

On 30 Jan 45 a special force of American Rangers and Filipino Guerrillas freed 511 American service men who had been held prisoner at Cabanatuan 1. They were brought 25 miles through Japanese held territory to a rest camp at Calaiso. One of the prisoners Dr. James Musclemann was

a long time friend of Captain Dolphus Compere MC of the 237th MDA. They had shared a residency in surgery at the University of Michigan. Dr. Muscleman had entered the army and was serving in the Philippines when it fell to the Japanese in 1942. Capt. Compere had often wondered what had happened to his friend and when word came that the prisoners of Cabanatuan 1 had been freed Capt. Compere drove to Calaiso and there was re-united with his friend 1st Lt. James Muscleman.

The 237th completed its first year as an organization, 15 March 45 and were still located at Mangalden Air Strip. The enlisted men performed well. First Sergeant Standlee Greening, chief clerk Sergeant Francis Miller and cook Sergeant Al Scarpelli were all outstanding and set an example for the other men. Without well trained personnel the Unit could not function.

The compilation of logistics for an anticipated move proved to be of great value when the 237th was called on to move to San-Nicolas, Laoag, Luzon by a combination of aid and ground transport. This move was made 18 April 45 and was the first time the Unit operated behind enemy lines. The 3rd Air Commando Group occupied an air strip near Laoag, Luzon after the Filipino Guerrillas had cleared the area of enemy troops. The Air Commando Units were isolated from the main body of American ground forces to the south and east. All supplies were brought in by air until a ground corridor could be opened to the south.

In addition to providing medical treatment to the 3rd Air Commando Group, emergency treatment was provided air crews and individuals downed by enemy action and accident victims. PT boats operated in the area to rescue downed and injured airmen in the South China Sea. Since the 237th was the closest medical facility, primary treatment was provided these casualties.

The 237th MDA was assigned the Municipal Building in San Nicolas for use as a hospital with a small adjacent building to serve as a dental clinic. The people of San Nicolas were delighted with the arrival of the 237th and soon celebrated with a victory parade and fiesta. All of the personnel of the 3rd Air Commando Group were invited to attend.

While the local Phillippinos were happy with the presence of the Americans, the Japanese were not. On 26 April there was a night air raid with the primary target being Cabu Air Strip at Laoag but there was no major damage.

An epidemic of Poliomyelitis broke out and soon became the primary concern. By 6 June 20 cases of polio were treated of 3642 personnel. All cases of polio were immediately evacuated by air to a General Hospital in Lingayen. There were several deaths from the disease during this period. The concern was so great that Lt. Col. James French arrived directly from Washington to investigate the epidemic. As a result several measures were taken to prevent the spread of the disease such as aerial spraying for flies and mosquitoes and checking the drinking water.

The local area was very short of medical facilities, as a result the 237th MDA treated a considerable number of Filipino civilians and Guerrillas on a daily basis. There was a rash of extremity injuries from dynamite and hand grenades left behind by the Japs. Unfortunately most of these injuries occurred in children and teenagers whose curiosity and lack of judgment often

ended in disaster. Adults as well were tempted to try to salvage explosives to use to improve their catch of fish in the sea.

Late in July the 237th received preliminary orders for operation Olympic — the invasion of Japan. The Unit was scheduled to participate in the operation against Japan on the island of Kyushu, the southernmost island. The invasion of course never took place.

On 1 Aug 45 the 237th MDA loaded on LSM 83 at Gahn Point for a move to Okinawa. After some delay because of weather, LSM 83 joined a convoy of 58 ships along with a destroyer and four destroyer escorts and proceeded to Okinawa and eventually to Ie Shima, a small island just west of Okinawa. The 237th landed on Ie Shima 10 Aug 45. While enroute there were rumors of Russian entry into the war and news was also received of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rumors of peace were everywhere but it was not until 13 Aug 45 that the Japanese finally accepted the American surrender terms. The war was over.

The 237th did not operate a medical dispensary on Ie Shima since there were adequate medical facilities in the area and the Unit was expecting a move to Japan as part of the occupation forces. While waiting to move housed in somewhat temporary quarters a typhoon with one hundred mile winds struck Ie Shima on 15 Sept. It rained continuously for two days and most of the tents were destroyed. Everything was soaked and it took several days to dry out the equipment and personal items.

Personnel were beginning to think about returning to the US and the first to go with adequate points was Maj. M.N. (Bud) Childs the commanding officer of the 237th. He left the Unit on 4 Oct 45. Meanwhile the remainder of the 237th were preparing to move to Japan.

On 5 Oct 45 the dispensary loaded its remaining personnel aboard the LST 572 and proceeded to Buckner Bay on the east side of Okinawa. Another typhoon struck, this time with 135 MPH winds. All ships with adequate fuel, were ordered out to sea to ride out the storm. Five days later the LST 572 returned to littered Buckner Bay with its sea sick passengers. A convoy was formed and set sail northward to Japan. The 237th unloaded at Otaru, Hokkaido, Japan 20 Oct 45. From there the Unit moved by truck convoy another 75 miles to Chitose. Here the Unit was stationed at a former Japanese Naval Air Station where there were excellent accommodations compared to the ten months.

With more personnel returning to the US rapid changes were taking place within the Unit. On 6 Nov Lt. Callahan left for the US which left only two of the original officers and only three of the original twenty-four enlisted men. The remaining personnel served in the Base Dispensary under the administrative control of the 309th Bomb. Wing.

On 24 Nov 45 Capt Nockerts was transferred to the surgeons' section of 5th Air Force Headquarters and Capt. Compere returned to the USA. This removed the last of the original officers from the 237th. By 31 Dec 45 most of the enlisted men had left as well and the 237th Medical Dispensary Unit for all practical purposes no longer existed.

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Air Force Lineage and Honors

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.