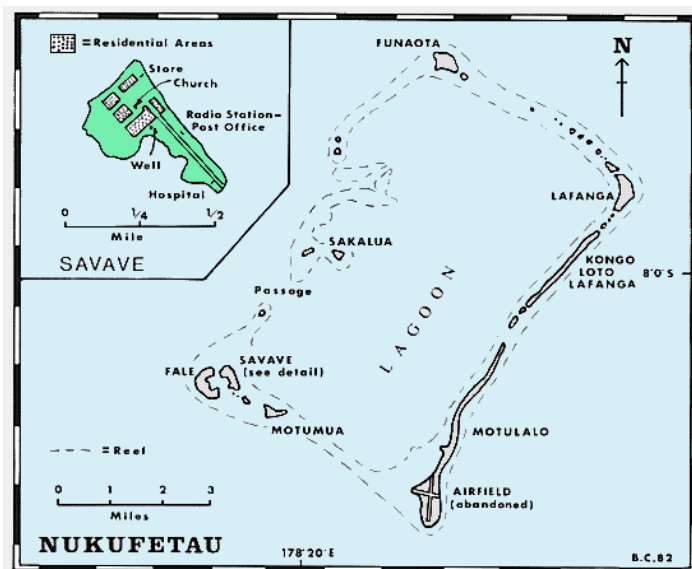


## THE WASHBURN STORY

By Herbert Kurz

I feel compelled to write this story because it is true and also that it is an amazing account of a lost B-24 plane and crew of nine in the Central Pacific during the early part of 1944. Someone, somewhere reading this might recall the event and be able to fill in the last part of an intriguing story.



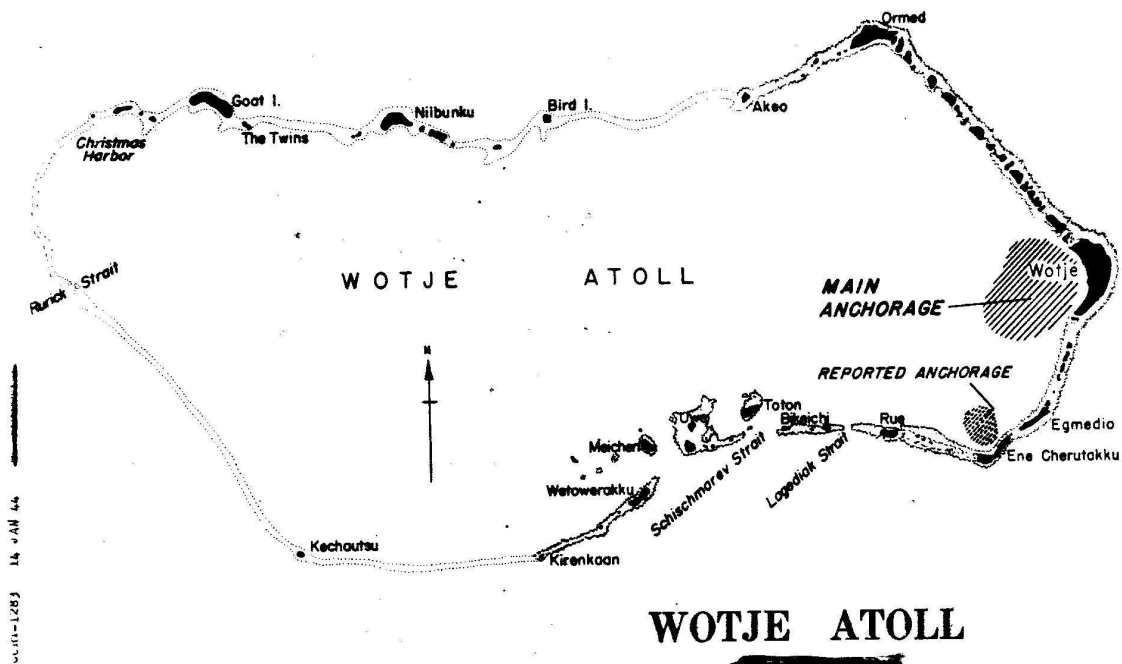
It all starting during our short stay on the island of Nukufetau, in the Ellice group just south of the equator. Frank Washburn was our bombardier. He was a stocky fellow, early thirties, from Dover-Foxcroft, Maine and spoke with a decided Maine accent. He had been on a number of missions with us since going overseas in March 1943. Operations from our base at

Mokuleia on the Island of Oahu up until November of 1943 had been mainly search with an occasional combat mission thrown in. We (98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron Heavy) moved down to Nukufetau on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1943 after the island runway was made operational to handle 4-engined aircraft. It was primitive living at best but at least we

were a bit closer to our targets.



On January 19, 1944, a night mission was to be carried out by eight B-24's from the 98<sup>th</sup> against the island of Wotje in the Marshall Islands. One of the planes, Serial #41-23938 known as "Sexy Sue IV, Mother of Ten" piloted by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Charles Hopkins



## WOTJE ATOLL

("Hoppy") would be carrying a nine man crew.

1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Charles E. Hopkins – Pilot

1<sup>st</sup> Lt. John K. Muncy – Co-Pilot

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William P. Rowe, Jr. –

Navigator

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Frank J. Washburn –

Bombardier

T/S Lorian A. Llewellyn –

Engineer/Gunner

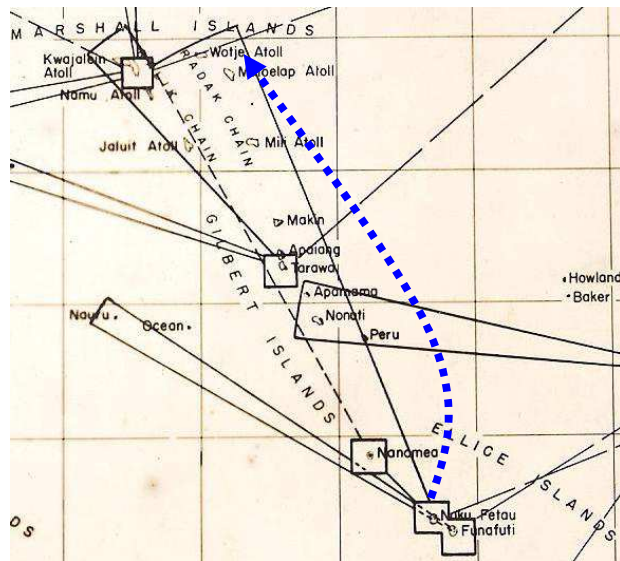
S/S Alan Hibbert – Assistant

Engineer/Gunner

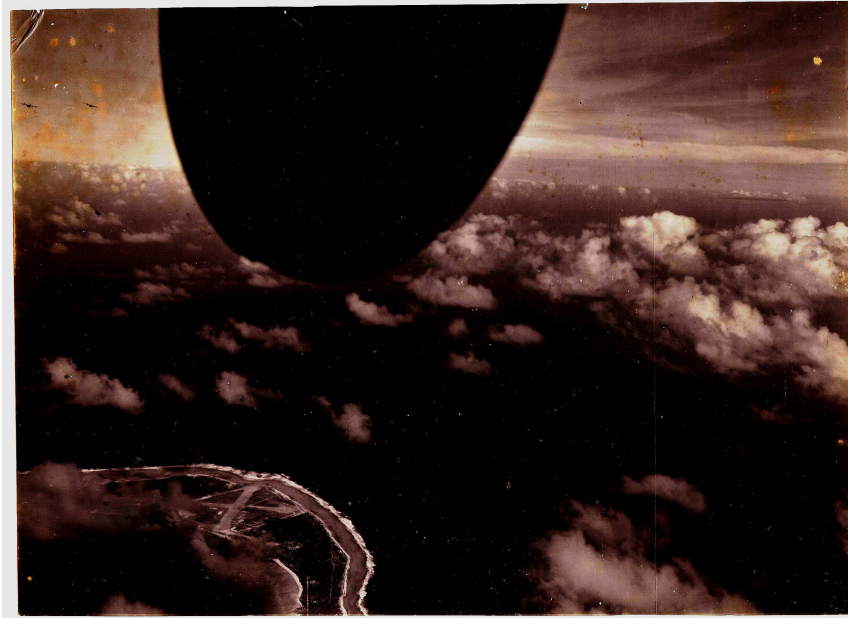
T/S Eugene J. Gurzonda – Radio

S/S Orval E. Estes Radio Op/Gunner

S/S Sam A. Belfrose – Arm/Gun



Hoppy's regular bombardier, Lt. Webb would be replaced by our bombardier, Frank Washburn due to Webb being ill. Eight B-24's proceeded from Nukufetau to staging

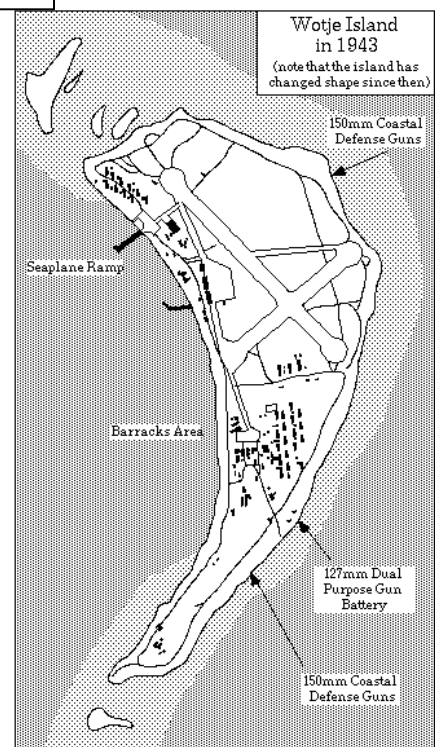


*A view of the Japanese airbase at Wotje taken from a B-24 during a bombing mission. This was not the 20 January mission. The image was darkened to partly simulate what that mission was like.*

base, Tarawa on the morning of January 17, 1944. From there the planes took off at intervals of 20 minutes starting at 1034 Zulu to 1241 Z, 20 January. Two planes were aborted and returned to Tarawa.

The remaining planes did make it to the target approaching the target area from 6000 to 12000 feet. Plane #935 was last seen by Lt. Dwyer, pilot of #009 at 1423 Z turning toward the target. At that time #938 was in a formation as close as darkness would allow. At 1500 Z, the 98<sup>th</sup> ground radio station at Nukufetau picked up a message from Lt. Hopkins that "one engine out, one bad". Shortly thereafter SOS signals were picked up until 1515 Z when they were no longer audible.

A search was conducted by Navy "Dumbo" Air/Sea rescue service from Navy Task Group 57.3 which was operating in the area. Planes of the 98<sup>th</sup> also searched



with negative results.

It must be pointed out here that the 98<sup>th</sup> was in the process of moving from Nukufetau to Tarawa between 6 January and 17 January 1944. Ground echelon was aboard an LST with only a skeleton force remaining at Nukufetau for clean up.

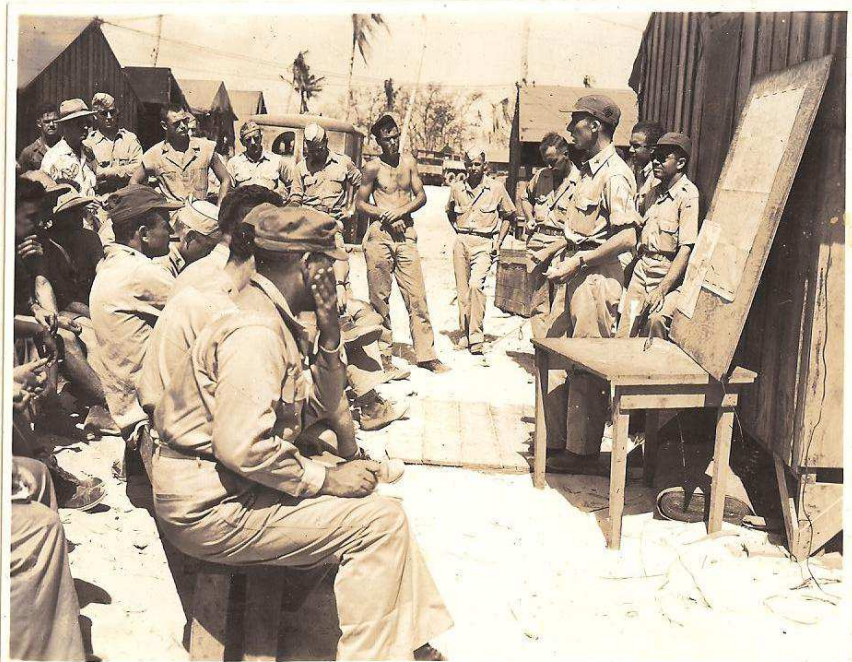
This would appear to end the story, but wait...things really get involved.

In late January 1944, our forces moved into Kwajalein and by 1 February some of the islands were secure. After Kwajalein Island was taken, the marines found Hopkins' POF file among captured documents along with another POF file from another plane lost in the same area. Jap POW's reported that members of crews of the 11<sup>th</sup> group had been taken to Kwajalein and there transshipped to "some Jap POW camp".

The 98<sup>th</sup> moved to Kwajalein between 22 March and 3 April 1944, known as APO 241.

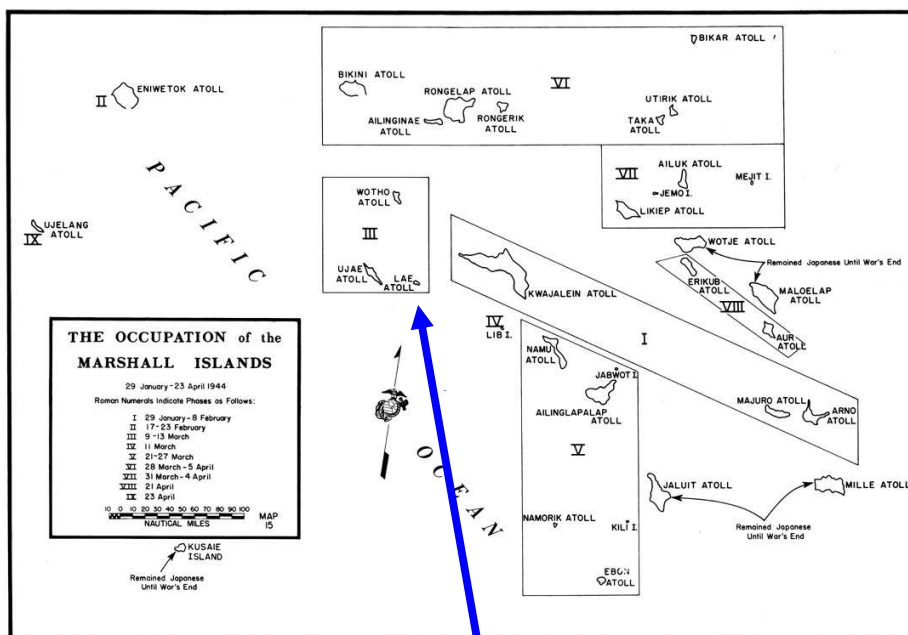
In late May or early June our C.O. Major Allen H. Wood, "Woody" as we knew him, received a letter from the mother of one of the enlisted crew

members aboard Plane #938. Woody called several of us together, myself included, being Frank's pilot, and read the letter to us asking us for advice and what to do about it. This mother wrote she had had a dream about her son and he had crashed but that

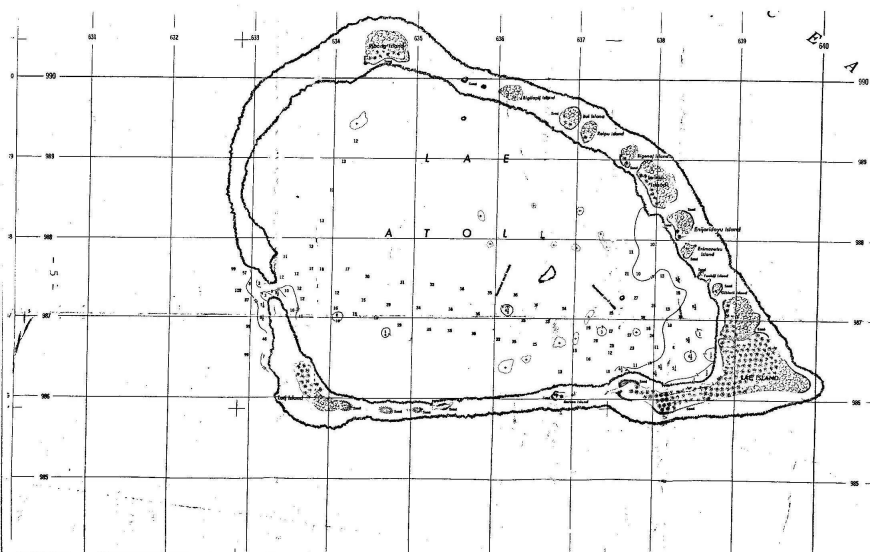


*Major Wood (standing) giving a briefing to the 98<sup>th</sup> BS on Kwajalein for the attack on Truk.*

he was safe and alive on an island called "Lae" somewhere in our area. None of us knew of any such island and it certainly was not listed as a target. Some of the navigators checked their charts but all results were negative. Finally our intelligence officer, John Gartland, checked with a Navy or Marine unit on an island across the lagoon and came back with word that there indeed was such an island. It appears that many of these islands have changed names many times depending under whose ownership the area was before and since WWI.



LAE Atoll, Marshall Islands, 1946 8,57° N, 166.12° E



The island was located at 8.57° N, 166.12° E which was about 260 miles west of the course from Tarawa to Wotje at the closest point, or about 90 miles SW of Kwajalein. When asked about the island, the Navy said that there was nothing on the island but the usual vegetation and bird life. On returning with this information and having the location of the island, it was decided to send two planes out on a

recon mission and photograph the island. I do not know who authorized this mission but on 10 June 44, two crews on TDY from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, LT. Leland A. Bates and Lt. Arthur H. Peterson in Planes #876 and #850 made a "routine" photo mission over Lae. On returning they said that they had spotted what appeared to be a clearing of vegetation with a lean-to in the middle. The photos clearly showed their findings. These photos were shown to the Navy to refute their claim about nothing being there. As a result, the Navy sent out a ship to investigate. On returning they brought back the following information as passed on to me by John Gartland.

"They had found the clearing and the lean-to and in addition had found a rather fresh grave with a marker with the name "F. Washburn" scratched on it".

Some years later, perhaps 1948 while on a vacation thru New York state our car broke down and I was able to look up Gartland who was a practicing lawyer in the city where we had trouble. We had a cordial meeting in his office and I asked John to tell the story of "Hoppy" to my wife. She had heard it so many times from me that I wanted her to hear it from someone else without any prompting. John told the story and when he finished I asked him if he knew if they had ever dug into the grave. He said that he did not know and that was all that he knew about the incident.

My son, who was researching this story thru the archives in Washington, found a letter dated 25 January 1948 to C.O. 604<sup>th</sup> QM Graves Registration Co. by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Wolenberg, to the effect that an AGRS Case 314 was investigated at Wotje Atoll. The case stated that "there is one known burial on Wotje Island whose last name is Estes and who might be S/Sgt. Estes #18011510". Estes was one of the enlisted crew members aboard #938.

The story now takes on new meaning since it was always our belief that the plane went down in the water and that perhaps there were some survivors who took to rafts. When the finding of the grave cropped up it was then believed that some of the crew floated to this small island and perhaps Frank died and was buried by a surviving crew member

who took off to look for a more habitable island that could sustain him. At least this was our belief. On the basis of what we now know it appears that the plane crashed at Wotje and there were survivors.

From interrogation of natives at Lae, the Japs used Lae as an R&R stopover, usually overnight, on their way back to Japan. It is possible that Frank and others were taken from Wotje to Kwajalein and then on their way to Japan as POW's stopped off at Lae. Frank either was seriously injured or killed by the Japs and they allowed his buddies to bury him before leaving the island. Of course this part of the story is only conjecture, but how did a crude marker appear at this grave site? Could it be coincidence some one else of that name was buried here?

It seems incredible that on the basis of a dream that a mother some 8000 miles away and during a war time situation, that the wheels would have been put into motion to the extent of sending out a ship and 2 planes and crews to investigate a matter such as this.

I might add that we are in close contact with the Washburn family in Dover-Foxcroft, Maine for the past four years. They are an incredible family. Mrs. Washburn (Hattie) is 95 years old and all eight of Frank's brothers and sisters are alive. We have visited all but one across the U.S. Mr. Washburn died sometime after the war and was a master carpenter. He was also a very talented poet with a book of his poems being published.

The missing link to the whole story is, was the grave ever dug up and positively identified? Who knows??

By Herbert T. Kurz  
98<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron  
11<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (H)  
May 19, 1986

#### References:

1. 20 January 1944 Mission Report, 98<sup>th</sup> B.S. by John Gartland
2. "Grey Geese Calling" by William Cleveland
3. Missing Air Crew Report (MACR) #1904, National Archives Record Group #92
4. AMS Map of Lae Atoll 1946
5. Kwajalein Atoll Commander, War Diary, May 1944.
6. 1 May 1944 Letter American Red Cross to Field Director ARC 98<sup>th</sup> B.S.
7. Casualty Br., Status Review and Determination No. 1965
8. 98<sup>th</sup> Sq. with History 1944, USAF Archives
9. 25 January 1948 Letter to CO 604<sup>th</sup> QM Graves Registration Company
10. National Geographic Map, Pacific Ocean, Page 329 September 1945 and Islands of the Pacific December 1974 (showing Lae Atoll)

#### Footnote:

1. Most maps do not show the Island because of its size.
2. I contacted Leland Bates in 1983 and have a letter from him stating that he does not remember the photo mission and his log does not show it. Time does funny things to our memory (Please see "Gray Geese Calling" page 338 just above paragraph title "Daylight Mission on Truk".)
3. I have all of the documentation in my possession.
4. Mrs. Washburn died on February 9, 1987 and was buried in Dover-Foxcroft in late April of 1987.
5. We have since met all of the family.



## HERBERT T. KURZ AAF SERVICE CHRONOLOGY

Arrive	Depart	Assignment - Duty
20 Dec 1941	6 Jan 1942	Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama – Enter Service
7 Jan 1942	29 Mar 1942	Bennettsville, South Carolina, Primary
30 Mar 1942	30 May 1942	Shaw Field, Sumter, South Carolina, Basic
30 May 1942	5 Aug 1942	Spence Field, Moultrie, Georgia, Advanced Commissioned as 2Lt
6 Aug 1942	15 Oct 1942	Hendricks Field, Sebring, Florida, SEAAFTC, 4-Engine Flying School, B-17's,
15 Oct 1942		Train to Salt Lake City, Headquarters 18 <sup>th</sup> Replacement Wing
19 Oct 1942		Train to Tucson, Arizona and Los Angeles
24 Oct 1942	3 Dec 1942	Davis Monthan, Tucson, Arizona, 39 <sup>th</sup> B.G.(H), 402 B.S.(H),
4 Dec 1942	2 Jan 1943	Alamogordo, New Mexico, 330 <sup>th</sup> B.G.(H), 457 <sup>th</sup> B.S.(H)
2 Jan 1943		B-24 crash (as passenger) near Collinsville, IL
1 Feb 1943		Six (6) days Leave to Home
7 Feb 1943	19 Feb 1943	Topeka – Assigned: B-24 <b><i>The Green Hornet</i></b>
	1 Mar 1943	Hamilton Field, California
		Flew The Green Hornet to Oahu
2 Mar 1943		Wheeler Field APO 959, 307 <sup>th</sup> B.G.(H), 371 <sup>st</sup> B.S.(H),
		Search missions – Hawaiian Isl. defense
		Mission to Funafuti to attack Nauru & Tarawa, bombed by Japs night of 21-22 Apr 1943
10 May 1943		Assigned, Mokuleia, 11 <sup>th</sup> B.G.(H), 98 <sup>th</sup> B.S.(H) Assigned B-24J “no name” <b>#42-73022</b>
	30 May 1943	D.S. with 1124 <sup>th</sup> Sch. Squad, Hickam Field (10 Days)
	13 Nov 1943	Oahu APO 959
14 Nov 1943	6 Jan 1944	Nukufetau, Ellice Islands, APO 240-X
		Lost “no name” <b>#42-73022</b> Jaluit mission 11/23/43
		1/20/44 - Frank Washburn lost – <b><i>Sexy Sue IV</i></b>
20 Jan 1944	27 Mar 1944	Tarawa, Gilbert Islands, APO 240
3 Apr 1944	18 Oct 1944	Kwajalein, Marshall Islands, APO 241
28 Oct 1944	1 Mar 1945	Guam, APO 246
18 Mar 1945	11 May 1945	Kipapa Gulch, Oahu Headquarters 30 <sup>th</sup> B.G.(H), 392 <sup>nd</sup> B.S.(H), APO 244
	12 Jul 1945	Attend Combat Intel. School, Orlando, Florida
	14 Jul 1945	Ft. Dix, New Jersey

		Leave
3 Sep 1945	5 Sep 1945	Ft. Dix, New Jersey
	10 Dec 1945	Accrued 96 days leave – revert to Inactive status