ONLY ONE RATTLESNAKE PER TENT: Lieut. Vernon L. Springer's Photographs of Camp Hyder, Arizona, 1943

Author(s): Lloyd Clark

Source: *The Journal of Arizona History*, autumn 2010, Vol. 51, No. 3 (autumn 2010), pp. 257-276

Published by: Arizona Historical Society

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/41697302

ONLY ONE RATTLESNAKE PER TENT
Lieut. Vernon L. Springer's Photographs of Camp Hyder, Arizona, 1943

by
Lloyd Clark

MEN OF THE ADVANCE PARTY of the "Statue of Liberty" Division halted their vehicles at an isolated way station beside the Southern Pacific tracks, just west of the Maricopa County line, in southwestern Arizona. The place was Hyder, Yuma County; the date, April 1, 1943. Surely, thought these soldiers—mostly easterners and from the New York area—this was an April Fool's joke. They had heard before leaving Fort Jackson, South Carolina, that they were to undergo twelve more weeks of training at a good camp in the Southwest. But this—this wasn't a military post!

There was the yellow "cracker-box" railroad station; a few adobe-and-board structures clustered around some tamarack trees; a corral; and cactus, greasewood, and other desert growth—all set in a forlorn landscape ringed by barren mountains. Any moment now, the commander of the convoy would give the command to "mount up," and they would be on their way to the anticipated oasis. But that order was not forthcoming. As certainly as it was a Friday and the sun was shining, they were at their destination. It was their destiny, this April Fool's day, to set up camp.

Led by the 302nd Engineer Combat Battalion, the first arrivals went into action—clearing scrawny vegetation, blading roads, rais-

---

Lloyd Clark is a former member of the Arizona Historical Society's board of directors and served as the Society's delegate to the Arizona State Board on Geographic and Historic Names, 1994-2007. He founded the Council on Abandoned Military Posts (CAMP) in 1966.

ing and staking tents, hauling water, digging latrines and garbage pits—all the while being wary of those creatures that inhabited the area for centuries: snakes, lizards, scorpions, and spiders.

The initial shock of realizing that they had arrived in the middle of nowhere, in the realm of nothing, was followed by surprise encounters: "Sarge, Sarge! There's (puff) two big rattlesnakes in our tent!" someone shouted. The topkick withdrew the pipe slowly from the corner of his mouth and turned to face the excited young private. "Now, lad, there's been a [expletive] foul up. I've told those jackasses in supply to issue only one rattlesnake per tent. You go turn in that extra rattler this goddamn minute!"

Wryly . . . that was the one way to react to this strange situation. Just a week earlier they had been in civilization. Now they were in Hell (spelled CAMP HYDER). Although the days were far warmer than those they had been accustomed to, the springtime nights in the desert were mild, sometimes even a bit chilly. Summer, however, was on the way.

So was the bulk of the 77th Infantry Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Roscoe B. Woodruff. Trainload after trainload of troops arrived, day after day, until some 13,000 men set foot on the Palomas Plain, where tanks and other armored units had been training in the California-Arizona Maneuver Area (C-AMA) since April 1942. The 77th, home to World War I's legendary "Lost Battalion," bore the dubious honor of being the first infantry division to undergo the rigors of desert maneuvers during World War II. At first, the nearest water supply was at Agua Caliente, six miles from the division's command post. Agua Caliente, "hot water" in Spanish, was the site of the first Anglo settlement north of the Gila River in what later became Arizona. King S. Woolsey, born in Alabama and raised in Louisiana, came to this locale in 1860 and began growing wheat near the springs that pre-Columbian natives had long been using for their soothing and therapeutic value.[1]

The engineers soon shortened the distance to water by drilling a well near the Hyder rail siding. Its flow was rated at 120,000 gallons per day. In addition to providing an adequate water supply for vehicles and for human consumption, there was enough left over for bathing. A huge shower facility quickly went up nearby.

By the time Maj. Gen. A. D. Bruce succeeded Woodruff (who was moved up to command of the VII Corps) on May 22, 1943, a

tent city spread out two miles across the plains north of Hyder. Every company occupied a double row of pyramidal tents, each of which accommodated six men. Rocks were gathered, whitewashed, and placed as markers for company streets. The stones also were used to show unit designations and to identify specific areas. At night, the whitewashed rocks helped soldiers avoid tripping over taut tent ropes.

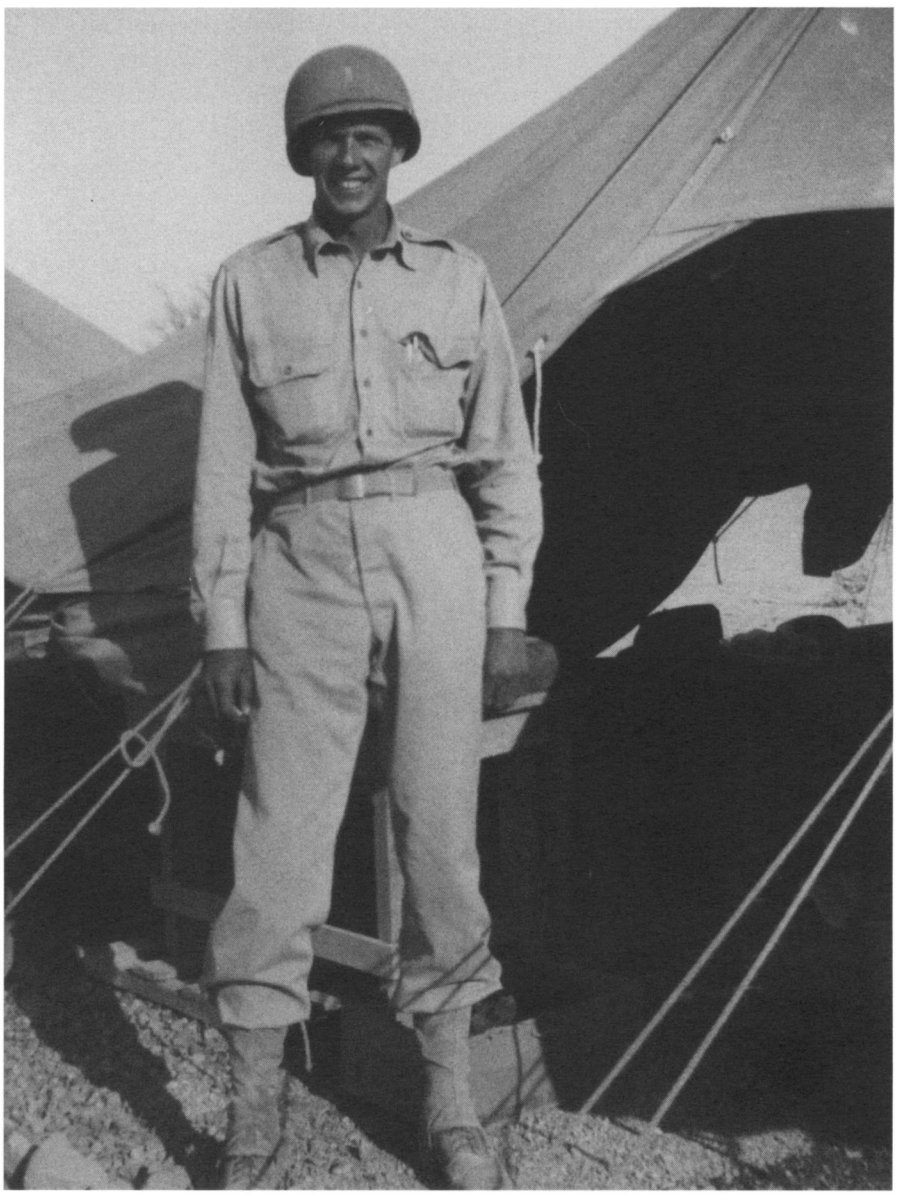
After "setting-up-house" details had been completed, firing ranges and an infiltration course were laid out. In order to develop leadership qualities in junior officers, lieutenants were dispatched with their platoons on six-day cross-country marches, using compass readings to locate caches of water and rations. A few instances of serious hardship occurred during these exercises, but no lives were lost. Small-unit tactics evolved into broader battalion and regimental maneuvers.

Soldiers' physical limits were put to the test. The standard army ration of one quart of water per man per day was found to be inadequate in the high temperatures and low desert humidity. And the men learned quickly to take advantage of whatever shade the sparse palo verde or other desert shrubs had to offer.

Second Lieut. Vernon L. Springer was one of the easterners being acclimated to desert existence. Born in Fall River, Massachusetts, he grew up in Tiverton, Rhode Island. At the time he entered the army, Springer was working in the stocks and bonds division of the West Indies Sugar Company in New York City.

There were times, when the sun seared his skin and the heat inside his tent became oppressive, that Springer couldn't quite believe that his life had changed so drastically in the past year. "Is this for real?" he would ask himself. Was he really opening a can of C-rations in this godforsaken land and drinking lukewarm lemonade out of an oversize tin cup that he had used that morning to hold water for shaving? Surely, Springer mused, he would awaken to find himself on the subway bound for lower Manhattan. He would stop by the automat for a roll and a cup of a coffee. That would help clear his mind of the bad dream. Then he would be ready to tackle the day's work at his desk in the financial district.

Adding to the unnatural juxtaposition of persons and events was Captain Rockefeller—Winthrop Rockefeller, grandson of John D. Rockefeller.[2] What was he doing in this unlikely setting? But,



Second "John" Vernon L. Springer—six-feet-one-and-a-half inches of 77th Division Infantryman.

there he was, nonetheless, serving as a supply officer. And Springer was his assistant.

Believe it or not, this was reality. Springer thought it best, therefore, to keep some record to show his big city associates that he had been a part of this drama cast on the remote and desolate stage known as Camp Hyder. He took photographs, and had photographs taken of himself. Together, they preserve a small facet of some Americans' involvement in World War II. The late Elizabeth R. ("Betty") Springer of Phoenix kept them in her scrapbook. "My husband and I came back," she explained in a 1978 interview. "We moved back to Phoenix in November 1959 because of the introduction we had had to it during the war."

Betty recalled that after Vernon had been at Camp Hyder for a week or so, she followed him to Arizona and rented a room on West Willetta, near Central, in Phoenix. Because the place lacked air conditioning, she immediately began looking for other accommodations. One day, in a local branch library, she overheard a school teacher remark that she would be giving up her room when the semester ended. Betty introduced herself, and the arrangements fell into place. By the end of May, she had a room and bath—and air conditioning—with Mrs. Stein on West Coronado. "Vernon would come into Phoenix on supply runs most every week," Betty recalled. "Captain Rockefeller kept a room at the Westward Ho, so while he was there Vernon would come to our 'home' on Coronado."

In June 1943 the division moved in convoy through Yuma, crossed the Colorado River, and commenced maneuvers from an assembly area near Palo Verde, in the northeast corner of Imperial County, California. As part of the IX Corps, the 77th—along with the 7th Armored Division, the 4th Cavalry, and several tank destroyer battalions—opposed an "enemy" in the form of the 8th Motorized Division. The exercise continued into July, conditioning the troops to move great distances on short notice. The maneuver area extended forty miles west of the Colorado River and from Ogilby, in southeastern Imperial County, 140 miles to the outskirts of Needles in northeastern San Bernardino County.

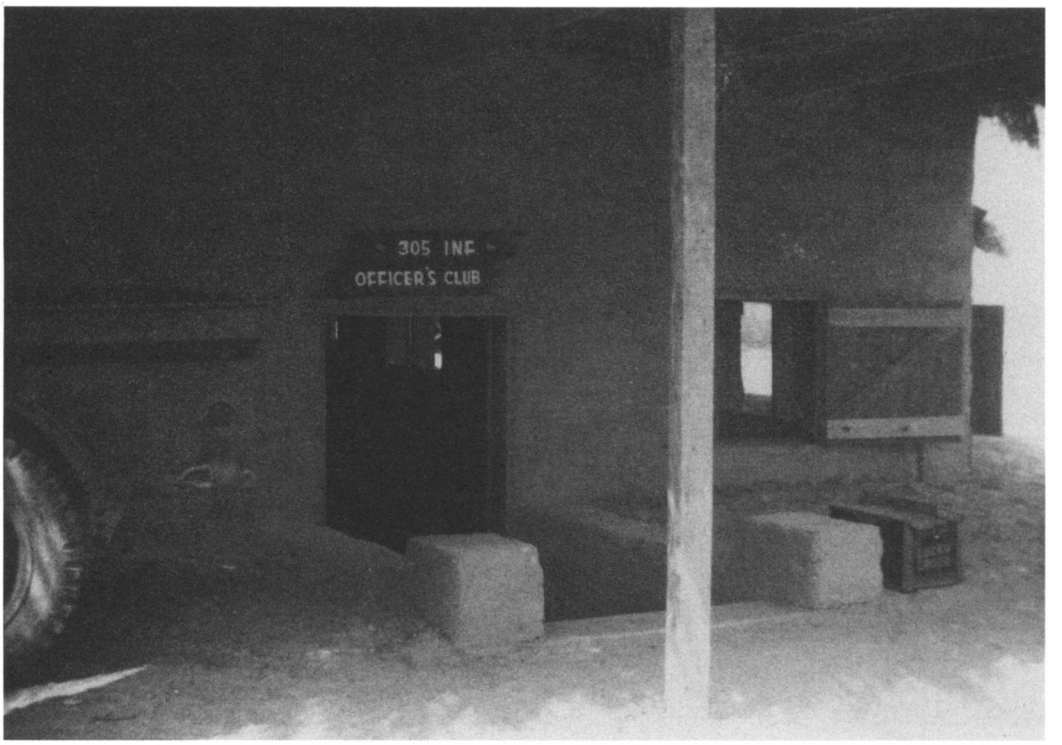
During the first week in July, the 77th made a twenty-four-hour motorized march back to Camp Hyder. The old tents seemed much more appealing to soldiers who had been continuously on the move for six weeks. Spirits were further bolstered by the expectation of

soon moving on. But bitter disappointment was in store as the division was ordered to continue desert training for another sixty days. The almost total absence of recreational facilities compounded the discomforts of tent life in the enervating heat. Although passes and furloughs were issued, returning to Hyder was discouraging to soldiers who had tasted civilization.

Some energetic individuals looked for ways to improve their lot. Officers of the 306th Infantry Regiment constructed a rude adobe hut to use as a clubhouse. The officers of the 305th Infantry followed suit, going into the mud-brick business to build a larger clubhouse. Post exchanges stocked beer and soft drinks, along with a limited amount of ice to chill the beverages. The Hyder "Opry House," a stage erected at the base of a hill west of town, featured movies almost every night. Occasionally, a USO troupe would appear, with the master of ceremonies typically requesting foreign service pay for entertaining troops in this out-of-the-way place. The *Liberty Torch*, the division newspaper that had last been issued at Fort Jackson, reappeared at Camp Hyder on August 26, 1943. The camp athletic program featured baseball and boxing competitions. And modern-day warriors soon appreciated the soothing properties of the Agua Caliente waters discovered by local Indians many years earlier. Division engineers constructed a swimming pool at the old settlement on the north bank of the Gila River.

While recreational activities somewhat relieved the soldiers' discomfort, General Bruce brought in Lieut. Col. Gordon F. Kimbrell, a graduate of the British commando course, to continue training his division. Known as the "Bull Dog School," the course subjected students to realistic combat conditions as they crawled across the hot sand under a stream of live ammunition and amid the whine of exploding demolitions. Soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand encounters, constructed and exploded booby traps and Molatov cocktails, and fired from the hip small arms and light machine guns. A week of this schooling established an individual's alertness and self-confidence or, as sometimes was the case, exposed his inability to withstand a desert combat environment. Despite precautions, several men were injured and one officer was killed in Bull Dog School.

On August 27, Lieut. Gen. Lesley J. McNair, chief of Army Ground Forces, who had visited the 77th during its California maneu-



Lucky Lager was there!

vers, arrived to inspect the division at Camp Hyder.[3] At the time, the regimental combat teams were engaged in a grueling six-day exercise in the mountainous terrain east of the camp. Extended foot marches, nighttime motorized movements under blackout conditions along narrow roads and over steep grades, and camouflage and concealment operations tested soldiers' skills and endurance. Simultaneously, reconnaissance and intelligence personnel tested their mettle during extended patrol missions over strange terrain. At the conclusion of the exercise, regiments underwent air-ground training and were tested on aircraft recognition, air-ground communication, and close air support coordination.

On Wednesday, September 15, most of the 77th Division personnel witnessed a demonstration of close air support. At its conclusion, General Bruce took the microphone and made an announcement:

"Maggie's Drawers" a-flying (background) and M-1s a-firing.

"The 77th will entrain in the next few days for Indiantown Gap Military Reservation in Pennsylvania." The ensuing cheer shook the ground squirrels in their burrows.

By the time orders were cut and accommodations for overseas deployment were determined, some of the division's personnel had been dispatched to the A. P. Hill Military Reservation and others to Camp Pickett, both in Virginia. But to veterans of the desert summer of '43 it made little difference. Any place that sported greenery and afforded easy access to urban settings would do.

The 77th Division's intensive training for desert warfare was subsequently tinged with irony. On March 31, 1944, the unit landed in Hawaii, where it commenced amphibious and jungle warfare training. Before the division was deactivated in Japan on March

15, 1946, it had fought on Guam, Leyte, Kerama Retto, Ie Shima, and Okinawa, and served in the Hokkaido Occupation on the Japanese mainland.

Two thousand eighty-seven soldiers of the 77th Infantry Division were killed in combat. Its most widely mourned casualty was not a soldier. On the third Wednesday in April of 1945, combat correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed by Japenase machine-gun fire on the tiny Pacific island of Ie Shima. The 77th's 1118th Combat Engineers Group erected a permanent monument on the site where the roving Scripps-Howard reporter fell. Its inscription read:

At This Spot
The 77th Infantry Division
Lost a Buddy
ERNIE PYLE
18 April 1945

Vernon Springer stayed with the 77th throughout its overseas' service. He was scarred on his right side from scrapes with coral encountered during landings on reefs in the Ryukyus. His helmet was knocked off by a bullet on Okinawa. After he and Betty settled permanently in Phoenix, Vernon went to work as a civilian property officer for the Phoenix Police Department. On November 17, 1968, he came home early from work, complaining that he wasn't feeling well. He died of a heart attack at 4 P.M.

A small contingent of army personnel maintained Camp Hyder as part of the Arizona-California Maneuver Area until May 1, 1944, when it was turned over to the Ninth Service Command headquartered at Fort Douglas, Utah. The Army Services Forces organization presided over the camp's closure, along with all the other installations in the C-AMA theater of operations, at the end of the war.

In January of 1959, General Bruce returned to the Camp Hyder site during a winter vacation in Phoenix from his duties as chancellor of the University of Houston. As he passed, for the last time, the two stone pillars that had served as the entry gate, the general saluted. Recollections of those hectic months in the desert and thoughts of friends and comrades remained keen in his memory.

NOTES

1. Woolsey, a noted Indian fighter, served in the First Arizona Territorial Legislature in 1864. Daniel Ellis Conner, *Joseph Reddeford Walker and the Arizona Adventure.* Edited by Donald J. Berthrong and Odessa Davenport (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 170 n.

2. Winthrop Rockefeller went on to serve as governor of Arkansas, 1966-1970. He died on February 22, 1973.

3. General McNair and eighty-eight men of the 30th Infantry Division were killed in Normandy on July 25, 1944, when U.S. Army Air Corps navigators miscalculated and bombs were dropped on American lines.

SOURCES

Army Times, April 22, 1970.

The Army Almanac (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950).

The Desert Training Center and the California-Arizona Maneuver Area (Washington, D.C.: War Department U.S. Army Ground Forces Historical Section, 1946).

Ours To Hold It High: The History of the 77th Infantry Division in World War II (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1947).

Phoenix Gazette, January 26, 1959.

Elizabeth R. Springer interviews with the author (beginning mid-1978), Phoenix, Arizona.

PHOTO CREDITS: All photos from the late Elizabeth Springer courtesy Lloyd Clark and AHS/SAD.

Camp Hyder: A Photo Album

A few more trudges, and we're back to civilization—the home of the Statue of Liberty Division.

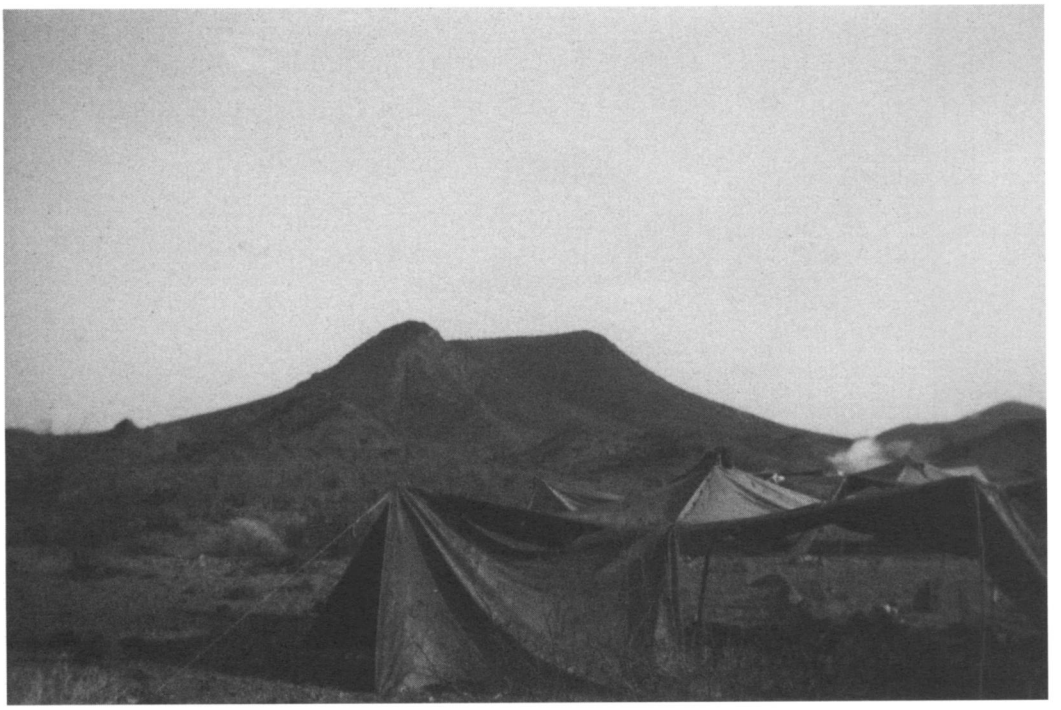
Steel helmets cover the heads of the men in this photograph.

This trailer hauled Class 6 supplies.

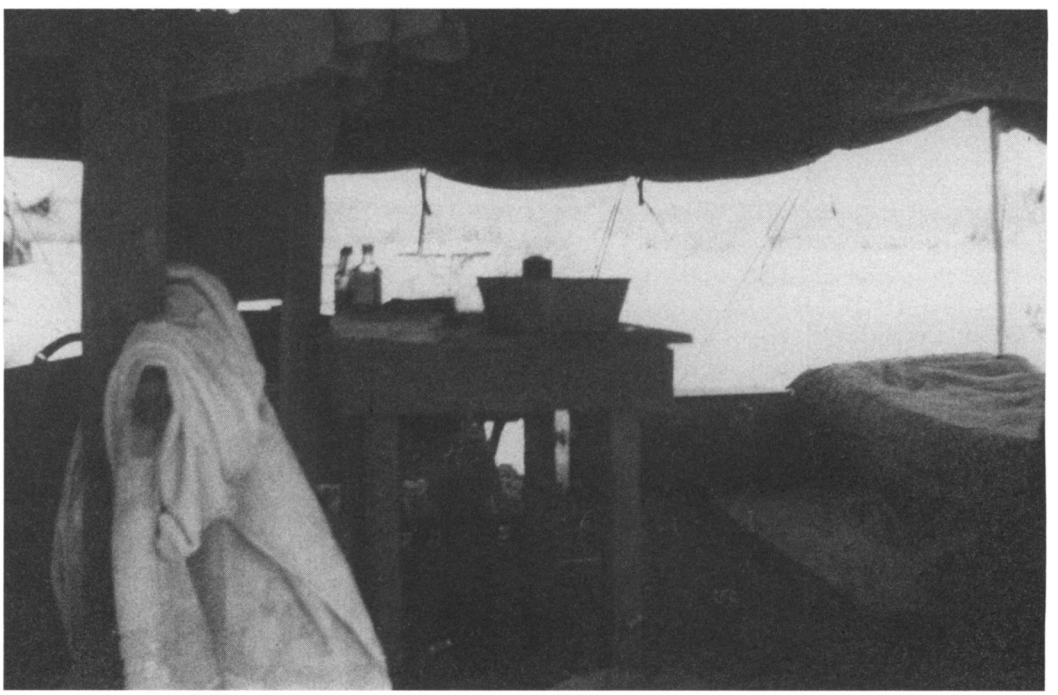
The major and his canteen cup.

A-TENT-SHUT! Dress right, dress!

A shavetail shaves.



A home away from home.



Cots and footlockers, table and wash basin—all the comforts of home.

One GI can with boiling soapy water, one for first rinse, and the third for final rinse. "Scald 'em and air 'em and you won't get the GIs!" shouted the Topkick.

Mesquite, palo verde, desert chaparral . . . any old place in the shade.