

Tracing Private Jack Lovelace – The American at Shamshernager in 1945

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The Trigger: Writing on the Tarmac

The engraved writing on the concrete wasn't anything like the 'DaVinci Code', shrouded with the mysteries of Fibonacci code that would need some cryptographer to decipher! Nor was the rugged surface where it was engraved anything like the parquet floor of Louvre museum in Paris. It was a plain and simple engraved handwriting on the concrete tarmac on Bangladesh Air Force Shamshernager airfield that read: 'JACK LOVELACE' in one line followed by the year '1945' in the second line (see picture 1). At first glance, one is tempted to interpret it as an attempt by some 'Jack' to immortalize his love for someone called 'Lace' in 1945. Indeed, that is how it has been interpreted for so long by the locals who occasionally tour that place. But who was this Jack? What was he doing in Shamshernager in 1945? What was life like at Shamshernager at that time? Was the writing really about Jack's eternal love for Lace?

Picture 1: The writing of JACK LOVELACE on the tarmac of Shamshernagar Air Field.

Shamshernager in 1945: A Bustling Allied Air Base

At first, the quest to know more about the writing was a mere curiosity. It is common knowledge that in 1945, in the height of World War II (WWII), Shamshernager airfield was used by the Allied Air Forces. A number of United States Army Air Force (USAAF) units were based in Shamshernager and elsewhere in the country. Indeed, according to one source obtained from the US National Archives, as many as eight



different types of units, squadrons, and detachments were stationed in Shamshernager in 1945 (see table 1 below). A combination of Air Service Squadron, USAAF base units, engineering, ordnance and quartermaster units, signal company and weather squadron detachments were operating in Shamshernager at that time.¹ The diverse nature of these establishments gives us an idea about the magnitude of operations being carried out from this place.

¹ The information was generated by US Army Air Force and obtained from the US National Archives. It may not be completely accurate as the units were often in transition while the list was compiled. For details, see http://www.cbi-history.com/part_vii.html.

US Army Air Force Units in SHAMSHERNAGER in 1945

- 506th Air Service Squadron (219 NY) of 61st Air Service Group (Old Type)
- 1347th Army Air Force Base Unit (219 NY) of India China Division Air Transport Command

Engineer Units

- Detachment Station Number 260 and 267 (219 NY) of 128th Army Airways Communication System (AACCS) Squadron.
- Detachment HQ and Service Company of 930th Aviation Engineer Regiment (219 NY)
- **Detachment of 879th Aviation Engineer Battalion (219 NY)**

Ordnance Units

- 1582nd Ordnance Company, Aviation Supply and Maintenance (219 NY)

Quartermaster Units

- 1084th Quartermaster Company, Aviation Service Group (219 NY)
- 2259th Quartermaster Company, Aviation Truck (219 NY)

Signal Battalion/ Company

- 1104th Signal Company, Aviation Service Group, (219 NY)

Weather Squadrons

- Detachment Number 138 and 151 (219 NY) of 10th Weather Squadron

Source: <http://www.cbi-history.com/part-vii.html>

By all accounts Shamsbernager was a busy place during WWII. Bustling with the nonstop noise of C-109s, C-47s and WACO CG-4A gliders, the base was used to service a continuous stream of aircraft which were flying from India “over the Hump” to supply Chinese Nationalist forces fighting in central China. The “Hump” - the air supply route to China, was the only way to get supplies into China as the Japanese had already cut off all the land access. Allied air lift activities from Shamsbernager (and other airfields nearby) were fulfilling the greater Allied objective in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre of recapturing northern Burma (now Myanmar), improving the air route and restoring overland access to China. The sheer magnitude of flying activities is reflected by the fact that the 1347th Base Unit (1347 BU) of the India China Division that was stationed at Shamsbernager in 1945, logged over 453 trips over the ‘Hump’ without any accident or mishaps, within the first 48 days of its existence.² However, not all their missions were without danger. Indeed, one veteran said. “I didn’t envy the guys who had to fly those planes ‘over the Hump’; a lot of them never came back.”³ The difficulties and challenging environment of these operations were well recognized by the then theatre commander Lieutenant General Dan I Sultan who remarked: “...because of the distance from home bases of supply, the difficulty of terrain, plus the savage fighting, these remote campaigns will make a place of their own in our military history.”⁴

² 1347 BU Complete 48 Days of Hump operation without Mishap as It Contributes to Records, The Hump Express, Vol. 1, No. 7, March 1, 1945, available at <http://cbi-theatre-9.home.comcast.net/hump-express/hump-030145.html>.

³ J Irving Grove, *Memories of the World War II at Shamsbernager Airport: an US Veteran*, available at <http://www.moulvibazar.com/history/general/grove.html>

⁴ ‘India Burma Theatre Birthday ‘Historical’ Says Sultan,’ *India–Burma Theatre Roundup, Vol. III, No. 26, March 8, 1945*, available at <http://home.comcast.net/~cbi-theatre-15/roundup/roundup-030845.html>.



Photo Courtesy: Moulvibazar.com

But the piece of history that I was interested in was about Jack Lovelace and it wasn't getting any easier! The sheer number of units stationed at Shamshernager made the search for Jack a more daunting one. Amongst all these units, where was Jack serving? The initial search started with a post requesting some general information about Jack in a WW-II CBI veterans' website. Convinced by the traditional interpretation of the tarmac inscription, I was looking for 'Jack' and 'Lace' and wanted to see if they were still alive. By all account, it was a very long shoot as most of the veterans must have expired by now, yet my curiosity drove me to make the search anyway and I was lucky!

Jack's Unit: 879th Air Borne Aviation Engineer

It was through Marion Clarkson Grove and Dana, a British-American couple from whom I got the initial response. Dana's father was also in Moulvibazar (near Shamshernager) in 1945. With Dana's help I traced back several CBI newsletters published by the US military in 1945 where Jack's name was mentioned. As opposed to the popular belief and my initial findings, it turned out that 'Lovelace' was the family name and 'Jack Lovelace' was a private who was drafted in the US military during WWII and probably served in the detachment of 879th Airborne Engineer Units stationed at Shamshernager in 1945. The 879th Airborne Engineer Aviation Battalion was raised on March 1, 1943 at Westover Field, MA, USA. The battalion arrived at Pairadoba (near Calcutta), India on 23 February 1944. A detachment of this battalion was positioned at Shamshernager in 1945. The main job of these Airborne Engineers was rapid repair or construction of airfields. They converted the paddy fields and scrub-lands into air strips for air transportation operations in otherwise inaccessible terrains. They also constructed bigger landing fields for combat cargo C-47's of the 10th Air Force. Their equipment was limited in size by the load capacities and door dimensions of the C-47-plane or WACO CG-4A gliders. Typically the engineers used to accomplish their work with the help of power graders and air-transportable tractors. It is likely that Jack used to operate one of these. One source claimed that the advance detachment of these Airborne Engineers companies normally used to build an airstrip in three days and put up a control tower in four hours.⁵ With such encouraging findings, the search to find out more about Jack continued.

⁵ See for details, 'Yank Engineers Aid 36th British in Burma Drive', *India -Burma Theatre Roundup-* , 8 March 1945 -*CBI Theatre of WWII*, p-20, available at http://home.comcast.net/~cbitheater-15/roundup/roundup_030845.html



Picture2: Partial view of Shamshernager Air Field, 1945 (Photo Courtesy: Moulvibazar.com)
Jack Lovelace: The Air Strip Soldier

As luck would have it, one of Jack's brothers, Gerald Lovelace, gave me further details about his early life. Jack Lovelace was born in Port Jervis, New York, a son of Clarence Lovelace and Minnie Bice Lovelace. In his early life, he also lived in Congress, New York. Gerald confirmed that Jack was a heavy duty construction equipment operator before being drafted into the US military. At the age of 18, he was serving in the US military as a CAT-07 bulldozers operator in Camp Orange Berg, New York. This US military base was being used as a staging post for US servicemen being shipped overseas. Presumably, Jack Lovelace's skill in operating heavy duty construction equipment earned him an overseas tour of duty when the Allied forces were expanding their presence in the CBI Theater by establishing several airstrips, runways and forward bases. Jack was transferred to the Air borne Engineers where he operated small earth-moving equipment.

Jack's tour of duty in WWII in the subcontinent was quite eventful. Apart from his routine truck driving duties, he also experienced some 'front line' adventures, made 17 glider missions and survived several air crashes. One such air crash survived by Jack featured in the *India- Burma-theatre Roundup* magazine of March 8, 1945:

*'..A similar quick transformation from prosaic truck driving to front line combat happened to Pfc. Jack Lovelace of Congress, N.Y. The call came for the ASC men to accompany glider borne engineering equipment into Burma and the next thing Jack knew he was sitting in the grass of Bengal plain listening to incomparable Cochran brief the mission that was to put a new pattern for war into the military textbooks. Lovelace rode into Burma one dawn with his friend Charlie Fischer of Coschocton, O., as "passengers" with a glider pilot and his flight officer co-pilot. The glider almost arrived intact, but took a hail of Jap (Japanese) bullets which cut controls. The heavy craft nosed down and Jack and Charlie came to consciousness on the ground, outside the crash. Pilot and co-pilot had been killed under impact.'*⁶

Gerald says that Jack received 2 Purple Hearts for being wounded in action. However, Jack wasn't alone in his family in joining the war effort. All Lovelace brothers took up arms when the call of duty came during WW-II. One of Jack's brothers was serving in the USS light cruiser Biloxi; another reportedly landed in Iwo Jima on the first day of the invasion and lived in a foxhole for three weeks! Serving in the USAAF, one of Jack's brothers also served in North Africa and England during the War. The legacy remains as Jack's nephew and grandson continues to serve in the US military today; one is a retired Army colonel and the other is lieutenant colonel on active duty.

Jack died on April 15, 2005 in the U.S. His funeral services were held at Augusta Memorial Park, NY. In his later life, he became pastor of several churches in Virginia, Maryland and New York. He is

⁶ S/Sgt, Karl Peterson, 'Life in Wartime U.S. Told by I-B Scribe', *Ibid*, p-9.

survived by his wife, Elsie Lovelace; one son, Jack W. Lovelace Jr. of Staunton; four daughter, Nancy Zimmer of Crimora, Sharon Weyer of Waynesboro, Brenda Bixby of Longview, Texas and Debbie Engel of Roanoke, V.A.; four brothers, Douglas of Port Jervis, N.Y, Gerald of Pond Eddy, N.Y, Paul of Elkhart, Ind. and James Lovelace of Matamoras, Pa.; and two sisters, Gail McKinley of Pond Eddy, N.Y. and Rose Ann Arris of Florida.

Final Thoughts

Jack's story captures both operational and human dimensions of war. The making of the airfields in various parts of the CBI theatre to carry out combat support missions to supply the Chinese Nationalist forces against a Japanese land blockade reflects the importance of mobility of airpower and its crucial role. Use of these dispersed airfields was often critical to sustain the Allied war efforts and advancement in CBI theatre. It also reflects the base dependency of airpower and the need of having well trained support forces like Aviation Engineering Battalion capable of building and repairing airfields to offset that limitation. But perhaps the human dimension of the story is more appealing. Indeed, if anything, Jack's story reflects the life of a citizen soldier and a nation that mobilized its people for the freedom of others. Living thousands of miles away from his home and family, Jack shared the sun and the serenity of Shamshernager for a greater cause of freedom. Like many of his time, he also sacrificed the best time of his life making airstrips in the inaccessible terrains of the India-Burma theatre braving death and danger. His tale may not be as touchy as many who gave their lives in the WW II, but his accomplishments, courage and commitment as a private in the US military would surely touch everyone in arms; for we in the military are preordain to live or give our life like Jack Lovelace for the sake of freedom, honour and country when the call of duty comes. No wonder, the writing in the tarmac of Shamshernager, thousands miles away from home, would continue to remind us of Jack Lovelace, the American soldier because...

*Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that write it; for I love you so,
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
If thinking on me then should make you owe.
- William Shakespeare, (The Triumph of Death)*

Bibliography

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3. J Irving Grove, *Memories of the World War II at Shamshernager Airport: an US Veteran*, available at <http://www.moulvibazar.com/history/general/grove.html>
4. *India-Burma Theatre Roundup*, Vol. III, No. 26, March 8, 1945, available at <http://home.comcast.net/~cbi-theatre-15/roundup/roundup030845.html>
5. The Hump Express, Vol. 1, No. 11, March 29, 1945, available at http://cbi-theatre-9.home.comcast.net/hump_express/hump032945.html
6. The Hump Express, Vol. 1, No. 7, March 1, 1945, available at http://cbi-theatre-9.home.comcast.net/hump_express/hump030145.html
7. Personal letter by Gerald Lovelace Sr, brother of Jack Lovelace on April 15, 2007.
8. Personal e mails of Marion Clarkson Grove, March-April 2007.
9. Personal e mails of Nancy Zimmer, Daughter of Jack Lovelace on November 2007.

Biography

Wing Commander Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan, an Air Defence Weapon Controller, joined BAF in 1986. He held various command, staff and instructional appointment in the BAF. He is a Mirpurian and also a

graduate of Air Command and Staff College, USA. He was awarded Master of Military Operational Art and Science from Air University, USA in 2002 and Master of Defence Studies from National University, Bangladesh in 2000. Presently he is commanding a training unit in BAF.