

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Veterinarians in Combat: The China-Burma-India Campaign

WANTED: VOLUNTEERS FOR HAZARDOUS AND DANGEROUS MISSION WITH LARGE ANIMALS

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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Those words on a sign at the Brooklyn Air Base captured the attention of two new veterinary graduates in the fall of 1943. Marshall J. Waple Jr. and Kenneth I. Gumaer Sr. met at the base where they had been assigned to meat and food inspection duties at the height of World War II. They found their work to be boring. "I hated it," Gumaer told me in a 2007 interview, "and I think Dr. Waple felt the same, so we accepted the challenge not knowing what lay ahead of us."¹



Kenneth I. Gumaer Sr., Graduation Photograph, 1943
(© Cornell University)

The two veterinarians were sent directly to remount training school in Fort Robinson, Nebraska, and assigned to the Quartermaster Pack Troops. Corporal Floyd Sager, a 1917

graduate of Cornell, was commander of the remount depot there. He was responsible for preparing 20,000 mules for shipment to the China-India-Burma theatre of the war, where the Americans were preparing to recapture strategic bases lost to the Japanese in earlier fighting.

Dr. Gumaer became part of the 31st Quartermaster Pack Troop and Dr. Waple, the 33rd Troop, in Fort Bliss, Texas. They were each assigned a shipment of mules and new Liberty ships. In late fall 1943, their ships left the port in New Orleans—Dr. Waple remembers being responsible for a cargo of about 365 mules—and headed to the North Atlantic.²

Three days out of port, Dr. Gumaer's ship was torpedoed by a German U-boat patrolling the waters off Key West, Florida.³

We were just off the coast and got hit during one of those nights when the clouds were over and every once in a while the sky would clear up and there would be a lot of moonlight. It was ideal for the German subs that were doing a lot of damage off the coast of the US at that time. The attack didn't sink the boat but the concussion from the torpedoes disabled the drive shaft and the boat lost power. We sent out an SOS and planes came over to scare away the sub, then an ocean tugboat towed us into the port of Miami.

They spent a week there getting major repairs, with the mules still on board, then traveled up to Newport News, Virginia, for final repairs before heading across the Atlantic. Most of the mules were held in stables in the hold, but because of the limited space below, they spilled onto the top deck where the soldiers made sheds for them. The soldiers would also periodically take them to the deck boards below for exercise.⁴

Since we had to pitch manure overboard every night and the subs would have been able to locate us by tracing the refuse, we couldn't travel in a convoy. We had to go cross the North Atlantic as a single ship with no escort protection.

Fortunately, there was a real bad northeaster during our crossing and the ocean was very rough so there was very little opportunity for subs to operate. We were lucky that way and didn't get any further enemy activity going across the Atlantic. Though many of the mules developed large hematomas from the rough seas—some were as big as bushel baskets—we only lost one mule the entire trip and that was from a fractured femur.

Dr. Waple's boat was also attacked by the enemy during the crossing. The ship sank and all of the mules were lost. Waple survived, however, and reached Deogarh, India, where he was assigned another group of mules for the trek into Burma.

Meanwhile, Dr. Gumaer's ship safely crossed the Atlantic and entered the Mediterranean Sea then progressed through the Suez Canal on the way to Calcutta, India. The mules were

unloaded and placed on rail cars for the trip into the interior, arriving in Deogarh just as the troops were getting ready to move down the Burma trail.

Drs. Gumaer and Waple, each with their band of mules, became part of a long range penetration Special Forces unit that traversed the 6,000 foot Kuman Mountain range behind Japanese lines.⁵

In that kind of tight jungle warfare we were confined to the trails and getting out into the jungle was almost impossible. We were a real surprise to the enemy. I don't think the Japanese expected our troops to be so experienced. Our troops killed a lot of the enemy soldiers that were not used to frontal assault—they'd just walk right into the fire. We had Japanese interpreters with us who were very loyal to our group and they got us a lot of good Information that made it easier for us to know what to expect.

Dubbed Merrill's Marauders after their commanding officer, Brigadier General Frank Merrill, they advanced through some of the harshest jungle terrain in the world. They were not only greatly outnumbered by the enemy with whom they fought several major engagements, but they also faced hunger, disease, and unspeakable hardship. They continued to their destination of the Myitkyana airfield, which they captured from the Japanese on May 17th, 1944.

Gumaer and Waple, along with the entire 5307th Composite Unit (provisional), were awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation for *"accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions as to set it apart and above other units participating in the same campaign."*

After reaching Myitkyana, Waple was hospitalized (among other things, he had been injured by a mule kick) then returned to the US for further hospitalized medical treatment. He was later reassigned to meat inspection for the duration of the war.

Gumaer continued on into China where he was assigned as a liaison officer to the Chinese animal transport under the jurisdiction of General Chiang Kai-shek.

Thus, like many veterinary graduates at that time, these two veterinarians found themselves supporting the war effort, admittedly under more challenging circumstances than more.

¹ Gumaer, Kenneth I, Sr. (retired veterinarian, Cornell 1943). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) and Dr. Richard Drumm (practicing veterinarian in Greenbush, NY), October 15, 2007. Dr. Gumaer is deceased. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14205>

² Waple, Marshall J, Jr. (retired veterinarian, U Penn 1943). Telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2013, Oct 13.

³ Gumaer, Kenneth I. *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.