

Chapter Three

Fort Benning

I boarded the Rock Island Rocket to Chicago the morning of January 20, 1949, headed for the Fort Sheridan Reception Center in Lake Forest, Illinois, a northern suburb of Chicago. I transferred to the North Shore Line in Chicago to end my journey at Fort Sheridan. When the train stopped at Fort Sheridan, I got off on a huge platform inside the Fort and was ushered down the steps of the station into the parameters of the Fort. I

presented my orders and was taken to the Reception Center where after a physical, shots and interview, received my issue of uniforms, other clothing and given a box to put in my civilian clothes to ship home. We were issued dog tags, put on the uniforms and marched to the barracks at the south side of the installation compound. By the time we were settled it was time for supper and we headed for the mess-hall on our own.

I had joined the ASTP Contingent which was growing all day. There were fellows who came from other schools around the Sixth Army area in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan and Indiana. Those of us from MSC had banded together because we knew each other but That evening I got to know some others who became lifelong friends. One who really became a good friend was Bob Dunn of LaCrosse, Wisconsin and was so until his death in 2000.

After supper we wandered around the Old Fort grounds and became acquainted with the area. That night I ran into Dick Kipping my good friend since grade school. We really were surprised to see each other as when we were out together after I was home on leave, I said goodbye to him before he reported a few days earlier.

The next morning we fell out for reveille and after breakfast were divided into groups to go on detail. The group I was assigned to was to report to the supply room in the Reception Area; we reported to the supply Sergeant to get our work assignment. To my surprise the Sergeant turned out to be an acquaintance from the store. He had been the jukebox technician who worked for the company that had my father's store as a client. His name was Bob Jones. He recognized me immediately and asked how everyone at home was. We talked a while and then he said he had better get us out of sight and not to stand around. Since all he had was make-do work to give us, he told us to go into the loft of the supply room and to stay until he called us. He told us we could do whatever we wanted, talk (not too loud), sleep, play cards or whatever, but to keep out of sight. He called us at noon, sent us to the mess-hall and joined us so he and I could talk.

After lunch we reported to our barracks to await further orders. That afternoon we received some lectures on military discipline and returned to our barracks to get ready for retreat. After retreat we were dismissed with the orders to be back in the barracks by 9:00 PM with lights out after bed check and 10:00 PM. We headed for the PX to drink beer (4.2%) and socialize. Beer was 10 cents a bottle and as we looked around the PX we saw many items which were cheaper than at home and others that weren't available at home. We went to a movie on post and then returned to our barracks to get ready for bed. At 10 o'clock taps were played and it was lights out.

Six o'clock the next morning seemed early but we arose, washed, shaved and fell out for reveille. We then began our day with breakfast and then we made our beds, cleaned up the area. We fell out for further indoctrination, learned how to pack our barracks bags and prepare to move to a permanent station. We never were told where or when we would leave for our destination for basic training, but knew it would be soon.

On the fifth day at Sheridan orders came that we would mover out and we gathered our gear to be ready to move south to wherever. The next day we boarded a troop train and were told we were heading for Fort Benning, Georgia. On the train we

were given seat assignments until the car was filled and with all the troops aboard we pulled out of Fort Sheridan.

Troop trains in those days consisted of old passenger cars and special units built for the army, half box car, half passenger with bunks built in for cross country movement. These were used on that train to provide mess facilities for the train. It was a long tedious ride to Georgia. We traveled through Illinois to the south, crossed into Kentucky, Tennessee and into Alabama then turning east toward Georgia. Chow lines were formed by car into the army units that had kitchen facilities. There we used our mess kits and canteen cups to get our meals; we would return to our cars to eat and when everyone in the car was finished we would return to the mess car to wash our mess equipment, dipping them into boiling, sudsy water to rinse them. We would return to our assigned rail car.

For recreation on the trip we read, some played cards, had gab fests or simply dozed off. On the second night we were side tracked in Birmingham, Alabama. Then later we started to move out of that rail yard. The next mid-day we pulled into a siding at Fort Benning and marched off to a group of barracks in the Harmony Church area of the Fort.

In 1979 I was traveling on business to Fort Benning and visited the area where the barracks were located, but many of the buildings are gone, especially the orderly rooms, supply rooms and recreations rooms. The area had second growth pine trees, the PX was gone, the theater and service club had also disappeared. The church for which the received its name was still located across from our company area, as was Victory Pond a landmark across the highway where we held training problems,

When our troops were settling in at Fort Benning we were assigned to the ASTP basic training unit alphabetically. I was assigned to the A through D platform. The platoon Sergeant was a man by the name of Andros, a dour looking fellow with a sallow demeanor. He made it clear he was going to be our "Boss" for the next 16 weeks and we his minions. He and Corporal Kelley began by showing us how to make a bed GI style—correct GI style-- and how we were expected to follow it. He wasted no time impressing upon us who was "Boss" and relished his life-or-death rule over us.

That evening we hit the sack after taps; behind us was a busy day with more to look forward to, especially under Sergeant Andros. The next morning was damp and cold as we fell out for reveille. Dressed in our fatigues we lined up in alphabetical order for inspection after having showered and shaved. The Sergeant scrutinized all of us to make sure we were clean and fit to a "T". When he came to me, he scowled and told me I hadn't shaved. With my face already raw from having shaved as close as I could earlier, he ordered me to get back to the latrine and shave again. I was at a loss, since at 8:00 I already had a five o'clock shadow. I didn't argue with him. He ordered me to shave and report to the orderly room when finished; punishment was to be meted out by the staff Sergeant. I went back to the latrine, took the blade out of the razor, lathered up my face and went over it with an empty razor. I then reported as instructed and was told that the Sergeant had gone by the latrine to check that I was following his orders. The next time

if I appeared at reveille without shaving I would get company punishment. I hurried to the mess-hall to sit down for breakfast. After that incident, he never accused me of not shaving again.

After having returned to the barrack to make beds and clean up our area, we fell out for duty in fatigues and field jackets to be told that a five mile road march awaited us. We assembled by squads and platoons which were formed alphabetically. Our platoon ran from A to D. We were led by Sergeant Andros who gave the order not to talk or sing during the march. We thought nothing of this until the hike began and the other platoons started to sing songs to cadence. We obeyed orders for that two hour hike but all thought about retaliation on later hikes. (You have to remember that this group was made up of fairly brilliant young men who all qualified for officer material under normal circumstances—if you can call the army normal.) We returned to the barracks and began various training activities, calisthenics, lectures and hands-on training in weaponry, map-reading and hygiene (sex lectures). We were taught how to roll a full field pack, read a compass, tactics, and had a full compliment of movies to indoctrinate us mentally.

Close order drill was a daily must as well as calisthenics, bayonet drill and lectures. This was rigid discipline especially close order drill which demanded that every man do the movement in unison as one. We were helped in this area with training we had received at the various ASTP affiliated schools we attended in the fall of 1943.

In the first days at Fort Benning we met some in our group who had attended other schools as ASTP reservists. Among these were some from the Quad City area. Kent Drummond of Davenport, Tom Block of Davenport and John Bishop of Davenport, Bob Dunn of LaCrosse, Wisconsin were among those fellow-ASTPers.

I became acquainted with John bishop when I lost my High School class ring. I was looking for it with a couple of other fellows and this GI comes up to me and asks what I was looking for. When I told him it was my class ring he asked me to describe the ring so he could help. I told him it was 18 karat gold with a rose gold inset and that it had St. Ambrose Academy 1943 around the inset. All at once it was as if I had dropped a bomb. He said "St. Ambrose Academy", you from Davenport? No, I said, I was from Moline. He introduced himself as a grad in 1941; his name was John Bishop. I asked him if he was related to Jim Bishop was in my class. He answered that Jim was his cousin. The next day while in a class on map reading he sat next to me. It was hot and stuffy and we were ready to break for the day. Then he asked if I'd like to go to the PX for a couple of beers after we showered and ate supper. I was taken aback as his cousin was not in the crowd at the Academy that drank at the places we all hung out.

After supper we went to the PX and drank beer and exchanged conversation on how we got to Benning and what we did before. John had been at Norte Dame as a pre-med student, but he enlisted in the ASTP program to continue his studies. He was sent to Fort Benning after his enlistment before entering the program. This was a requirement (basic training) before entering the program for those over 18 years. Kent Drummond and I got to be friends until we separated after Fort Benning. Tom Block and I were in contact off and on through the rest of our service as he was assigned to the same battalion

after we left Benning.

We had settled down to routine training. One of the odd things was the rifles we were issued for the training. This was a 1917 Enfield which the army had used when they didn't have enough Springfields in WWI. We cleaned them and used them during training. It wasn't an M1 but it would serve the purpose of the training we were receiving. The Army needed all the standard issue to be sent overseas in preparation for the big show in the Pacific and Europe to fulfill the needs there first. Training received the non-standard items until those combat needs were filled. Today the Army does the same things until production catches up to requirements. This was one of the things learned from the start.

Many things occurred during the seven weeks we were at Benning. The first was on our second hike. Sergeant Andros again led the column with the admonition that we were not to sing during the march. We began the march in silence but after a half hour into the hike with Sergeant Andros at the head of the platoon, the rear of the column began to chant "Andros beats us". As this went on the Sergeant headed for the rear of the column saying, "Who is singing?" and told them to be quiet. As he continued toward the rear, they became silent and the front of the column began to chant. He kept running back and forth to keep the platoon quiet. We kept this up for about five miles until we finally quit. He threatened the platoon with a GI party (scrubbing the floor after duty hours), if we didn't shut up. He must have covered an extra five miles running back and forth trying to keep us quiet. That night he made us scrub the barrack's floor until midnight as punishment.

Another time he was supposed to teach us Judo and asked for a volunteer to show the various holds. Chris Argiris, a kid from Chicago, raised his hand to volunteer. Andros did not know he had been a wrestling champ in high school. After he had shown a few Judo holds, he wanted someone to try and break holds and to try to pin him. Chris again volunteered and flipped Andros real hard. This put Andros on the sick list for about three or four days. This gave us a sense of sweet revenge!

Afterward Andros and the platoon had called a sort of truce with certain surges of revenge on both sides. As the training progressed we were finally allowed a pass into Columbus. This meant a long ride by bus into town or find one of the cadre with a car. I tried the latter, getting a ride from Sergeant Andros at the cost of five dollars. He took four of us into town where he lived off post. This amount would drain our resources if we went to town every weekend as our pay after our life insurance, laundry and War Bond payments were taken out was \$24 per month. The bus became our means of transportation. After that though most of our time was spent on the base sponsored entertainment facilities. We had the PX with beer and soft drinks on tap, a snack bar, soda fountain, writing area, pay phone to call home, the movie theater (which cost fifteen cents per visit) and the service club which held dances two or three times a week with a Saturday Night Dance for which the base band provided the music.

Sundays started with Mass or other religious services, a late breakfast, newspaper at the PX and a trip to the club to read the paper and make a phone call home. I would

call my parents Collect each week and I would call my girl who was later to become my wife. As often as I could afford it, I would go to an afternoon movie which was invariably a first-run title that had yet to hit the civilian theaters. Many times we would find what was being served for dinner at the mess-hall and chose between the offerings at the service club.

On Monday mornings we would begin our training again. We had rifle training, bayonet drill (twice a day), compass and map reading, night problems, obstacle course and many basic exercises to build up the knowledge an infantryman would need on the battlefield. There were lectures on discipline, VD, security and Army regulation. Most of these were informational films shown in the theater. Assignments included guard duty, latrine duty, barracks maintenance duty and inspections. The inspections were held daily but there was a formal inspection on Saturday in which all the men would dress in Class A uniforms and an officer would inspect each man's rifle, footlockers, clothes, bed and cleanliness of the entire barracks, the latrine floors and check for dust. This is referred to as a white glove inspection. If we passed individually or as a platoon or both, we were free for the weekend. If one man was gigged or if the barracks did not pass in its entirety and was gigged, either he or the whole platoon was denied a pass for the weekend. If it were a complete washout we would be confined to quarters and made to scrub the entire area on our hands and knees (the GI party again!)—until it was felt our punishment was sufficient. Even at that when we finished we were confined to the post. This really wasn't too bad because we didn't have enough money to go to town every weekend. There were plenty enough things on post to keep us busy and help us save money.

At the PX we bought our various toiletries, cigarettes, pop, beer, ice cream candy. If a person lived off base he could buy food and groceries. The PX was a general store selling everything a GI would need that was not supplied by the Army. The service club provided recreation facilities, reading material, entertainment, meals, help if one needed emergency leave, pay phones, special events such as visits from celebrities and actors. There were rooms available for visitors giving them an opportunity to stay on post at reasonable rates. A group of us mostly the ASTPers from Michigan State would run around together—Art Byrnes, Eddie Bazelon, John Bishop, Bob Binder, Roy Brunehart, Jason Colbath, Lou Loesmondy and myself. We were often seen together on Pass or at the PX with the trips to Columbus being few.

I would get packages from home every week which my mother would send religiously. The goodies she sent—olives, canned shrimp, cheese crackers, candy, cookies, plus cigarettes, gum, Kool Aid—were all awaited eagerly by the whole gang. This continued all through my Army career and when I see Art Byrnes we always bring these goodies into the conversation. We would have a real feast when packages from home would arrive. Especially when mom sent her weekly donation. The things she sent could be had at the PX and many of the fellows' folks couldn't afford. Mom really took care of me in as many ways as she could. Every week she would send a two-dollar bill to augment my pay and she would send me the cash if I needed something extra.

At Fort Benning I had a chance to pick up a used field jacket which I bought from

Sergeant Andros for \$5.00. He sold a few in the platoon and we were sucked into paying for them. We didn't realize that these were class X items which were repaired serviceable items of issue which were distributed to the troops as free issue, first come, first serve. But again we were stung by Andros. This man was a thorn in the side of us all and he was taking advantage of his position to skin the recruits as much as he could.

One Sunday I was assigned to barracks orderly which meant you took care of the heating and cleanliness of the barracks. I wanted to go to Mass that day and asked the Sergeant if I could get a stand in for that hour. He refused. I found out later that he was exerting his authority against regulations and should have provided some way so that I could have attended Mass. I was told to shut up or suffer the consequences; and being scared I did the job.

We later made life as miserable as possible for the beloved Sergeant during the remaining time at Fort Benning. Since he was never in the area after retreat and on weekends after inspection on a Saturday. He would go into town overnight where he had an apartment with his wife. We used this time to get even. At times someone would short sheet his bed or mess it up so it would not pass inspection. One time we put the bed in the shower before his return on Monday morning. These tactics drove him insane and he would make life miserable for us as best he could. The NCO's under him who stayed on base knew what we had done but would not rat on us as they knew our reasons and sympathized with us.

After five weeks at Fort Benning, we were appraised of our standing in the program and would look forward to the future. A week later came the word that the program would close and we would be reassigned to permanent units to finish our training. Another week later word came that we would be transferring to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and that we should prepare our packing, get our changes of address to our folks and other correspondents and turn in our company equipment—rifle belts, packs, bayonets, entrenching tools, rifles and helmets.

We packed our personal and permanent items in our two barracks bags in preparation for our transfer to Fort Bragg and spent the last week at Fort Benning which had become our home away from home. One evening we went into the town pump in Columbus, Georgia, to drink beer at a gathering place for GIs avoiding a trip across the Chattahoochee River in Phenix City, Alabama. We had gone there once out of curiosity and our experience had imprinted in our minds that this place was a definite no-no—especially for the naïve youngsters that we were.

We had been told how rough it was and advised not to go alone. Nevertheless a group of six or eight of us ventured out. We went into a bar and drank some beers when two buxom WACS came in, started an argument with the bartender and tore the place apart. We got out of there and almost ran back to Columbus. But there were also things to avoid in Columbus—namely drunken paratroopers and young trainees who wanted to prove their virility. Incidents like these help keep us on the base at Fort Benning. We returned by bus early that night and were in a way glad we were leaving the next a week.

We spent the next few days in routine calisthenics, close order drills and getting

the barracks in shape. We cleaned windows, floors, the latrine for shut down until the arrival of the next group of trainees. Sergeant Andros threatened us while we cleaned that he would see that we would not leave area until he had inspected and okayed our work. We were naïve enough to almost believe him, but our unscrupulous teenage minds sought revenge for real and imagined injuries to our egos. The final day came and as we finished our assigned tasks we slung our gear over our shoulders and fell in formation to march off to the rail spur and embark. Andros was inspecting the barracks as we filed out and the last troops finished the latrine and began boarding up the windows. As he entered the latrine and they left, they slammed the door on him and nailed it shut leaving him to shout and pound on the door.

When we formed up to march to the marshalling area, the Lieutenant asked where the Sergeant was. There was not a word from us—nor from the two corporals who reported to him. When he didn't come and the company began to march off we left the area without him. Our last thoughts were of the Sergeant locked in the latrine shouting his lungs out.

We boarded the train and began our adventure in the Army of World War II. As we passed through the Georgian countryside looking out the windows of the troop train for two days rolling along, some of the southerners pointed out their homes. Our meals were served in a baggage car in the center of the train and we would line up in our car, holding our mess kits and canteen cups and moved by car unit into the mess car. We passed the kettle which held the chow, a kitchen attendant would ladle our food on our mess kit and the next attendant would pour coffee into our canteen cups. We rounded the serving line and proceeded back to our car to sit and eat our chow. When finished, we repeated the routine of returning to wash our mess kits and canteens completing the trek back to our seats.

That afternoon of the third day we found ourselves in North Carolina arriving at Fort Bragg. We got off the train and fell into formation. After roll call, we boarded trucks to move to the area where our new quarters were located. Thus ended our sojourn at Fort Benning and thus began our introduction to Fort Bragg.