

Training

by Frank Branco, 399-G

Shortly before my 18th Birthday I received notice to report to New Cumberland, Pa. on March 10, 1944—just two weeks after my 18th birthday on February 25, 1944. A round of going away parties were held—my friends at the Philadelphia Navel Yard and of course my family. Elaine and I spent as much time as we could together. It was suddenly Friday, March 10, 1944, the day I had so eagerly awaited. My parents decided that I should take as late a train as possible in order that we might spend as much time as we could together on my last day at home. We said our teary good-byes and my Dad and Uncle Pat took me to the train station. My train arrived; I kissed my Father and Uncle good-by and boarded the train. As the train pulled out of the station I looked back to wave and as I looked at my Father I wondered what he was thinking for I had never seen him look so sad and forlorn.

As we traveled to New Cumberland, the day's events had taken their toll and I fell asleep. Fortunately for me, when we reached my stop an elderly woman woke me. If not for her I would have been AWOL my first day in the Army. I reached the camp about 10 o'clock that night, checked in with the soldier in charge, was taken to a barracks, assigned a bunk and attempted to sleep. As I lay in that bunk, away from family and friends for the first time in my life, listening to the muffled sounds of strangers sleeping and not knowing what lie ahead, a feeling of apprehension and absolute loneliness overtook me. Gone was the eagerness with which I had anticipated this day and for the first time I questioned my decision to enlist. What had I gotten myself into?

The following day after a fitful night's sleep, we were awakened and taken to breakfast followed by periods of waiting. It seemed to me as though they did not know quite what to do with us but I learned rather quickly that this was the Army way, "Hurry up and wait." We received our uniforms, barracks bag and other equipment on March 15, 1944 and the next few days were spent doing K.P., or barracks duty while we waited for our shipping orders. Fortunately I was able to get home for the weekend and then back to New Cumberland.

I became friendly with another Philadelphian at camp and learned that this young man had attended Valley Forge Military Academy. He had received Infantry training and expected to be assigned to an Infantry unit. I told him of my enlistment and that I expected to be assigned to an Air Corps unit. On March 21, 1944 our shipping orders were posted and I went down the list of names of the fellows who were transferring out with me. I saw the name of my friend from Valley Forge. I was shocked—all my dreams of going into the Air Corps as an aerial photographer were dashed. I was being sent to Camp Wheeler, Ga., an Infantry Replacement Training Camp.

The following day we boarded a train for our trip to Camp Wheeler. We arrived in a torrential rain on the night of the 23rd of March. We were ordered off the train and forced to stand in formation in the pouring rain for the better part of an hour before marching off, with loaded barracks bags, on our shoulders to our respective barracks. At the time it seemed as though we had walked for miles, when in reality it was somewhat less than a mile. We entered the barracks, stood at attention beside our bunks, rain dripping off our raincoats and waited. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, a Sergeant entered the room, stood in the center of the barracks and said, "One of you sons of bitches is a thief." He continued this tirade relative to theft, discipline and what we might expect if we did not adhere to the rules. If he had intended to make an impression and put the fear of God into us, be assured he succeeded.

At Camp Wheeler we were to undergo training for 17 weeks and upon completion of the training period we would be sent to combat infantry units as replacements. The non-commissioned officers and officers in command of our unit were charged with the responsibility of taking a group of raw recruits and in this 17 week period training them to be combat soldiers. A monumental task by any stretch of the imagination. We were not long in learning how serious they took their work for the training was intense. As physically and mentally demanding as anything I had ever experienced in my life.

Initially I resented the regimentation and the superior attitude of the non-coms. In their eyes we were less than human and they drove us incessantly, never letting up for a moment and never letting us forget

who was in charge. We were told what to do and when to do it and God forbid should you question a command. Any breach of these orders was met with disciplinary action of some sort. I had trouble accepting this type of training and as a result found myself doing more than my share of extra duty and being restricted to base. After a number of weeks of restrictions and extra duty, I approached my Sgt. and asked why I was not getting my share of weekend passes. His answer was short and to the point and went something like this, "Kid, when you learn to keep your mouth shut, you'll get your share of passes." This was a turning point for me at Camp Wheeler.

The training had become a monotonous regimen of classes, viewing training films designed to make us hate the enemy, firing range practice and difficult marches. Marches so physically demanding over unbelievable terrain and in oppressive heat that we were followed by ambulances. They were there to pick up any soldier who fell out from sheer exhaustion, dehydration or worse yet, heat stroke. We were not allowed to assist in any way so we either walked around or over those who dropped. We trained in the heat, we trained in the rain, we trained during the day and we trained during the night. It never stopped except for the occasional weekend pass. As difficult and demanding as the training was there were some lighter moments.