

# A.W.O.L.—Absent Without Leave

by Albert E. Holm, 399-D

I really was a good soldier. I never really deserted. There were times though that I had s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d the allowable. I might have been “out of the area,” so to speak, but I really wouldn’t call it “A.W.O.L.” At least I didn’t call it that, but in retrospect I was! Sort of.

I was inducted into the ARMY on January 29, 1943. I was 18 years, four months and twenty-one days old. I was in love. My high school sweetheart and I made our vows to be together for all eternity. We married as soon as I got home. Actually 10 days after my discharge. I mention this now so that you can understand the demands that fate placed upon me that were in conflict with military regulations! Just so you know, those vows were sincere and given in good faith.

Betty Lee (my darling), and my folks saw me off at the railroad station in Louisville, Kentucky. I was on my way to Fort Thomas, Kentucky, which you will remember from your history lessons, was, at one time, the last out-post of the federal troops in what then was known as Virginia, back when Daniel Boone was opening up the new frontier. Anyway, Fort Thomas is only about fifteen miles up the Ohio River from Cincinnati, Ohio. That makes it about 125 miles from Louisville, Kentucky. On my first weekend in the Army, I received a class “A” pass, a “R&L” kit, (that got me in trouble with my mom). The pass was restricted to 25 miles, to go to Cincinnati, and enjoy myself. The first sergeant talked to the new GIs about our first pass and impressed us on some Army know-how! Like, he told us, “If you leave here with an Army cap, come home with an Army cap! It doesn’t have to be the one you left here with, just bring one back with you. We can always have the quartermaster trade one that fits. Also, he told us that we should avoid the MPs. If the MPs bring you back, that’s big trouble! You could wind up on K.P. for a week if you got caught doing something wrong. We also had to watch some dirty movies, with naked girls that had VD. The movies were effective. Scared the dickens out of me! Looking back, I missed out on a lot of “fun” as a result of those films. “She may look clean, BUT,” sticks in my mind to this day!

**No. 1 AWOL** I got my pass to go to Cincinnati, so I took the trolley to Cincinnati. Knowing something about the area, I got off in Covington, Kentucky, before crossing the river. I then caught a local bus to Florence, Kentucky, about 15 miles west of Covington where I could hitch a ride on Highway 42 to Louisville. I was back in my Betty’s arms in less than three hours! What a weekend that was!

**No. 2 . . .** See above.

**No. 3 . . .** See above.

**No. 4 . . .** See above. I never did get to see Cincinnati until twenty years later.

On to Fort Benning where I was part of the A.S.T.P. program. I was expecting to go through basic training, then continue some more college studies before actually becoming a soldier. Well Congress changed all the rules, and we changed from MENSOR candidates to cannon fodder with the zap of a pen. To say the least, we felt betrayed. At least I felt betrayed. One of the effects of that betrayal was to become more aware of survival techniques and looking after your own interests. A soldier was not about to receive any breaks from this army, so you had to make your own breaks and take advantage of whatever opportunities came along.

A short stay in Fort Benning for some attempted “basic training” turned out to be almost nothing in the way of fighting skills. I did learn how to field strip an M-1 rifle. I also learned how to strip a rifle under a blanket, but I became better at stripping under a blanket after I got home and went back to college. There weren’t any furloughs from Benning, only a couple of passes for the local towns, none of which I can remember. We just weren’t there long enough to accomplish anything.

My second train ride in the Army was to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to become an infantry soldier in the 100th Division. No college classes there. It seems that the outfit was alerted to prepare for eminent shipment to the front lines in the ETO. Not without training, which we had not had time to do, as yet. Not to worry, a few days out on the range, some speeded-up familiarization with the Carbine and the Colt 45 and we were pronounced “Ready.”

Let me tell you about “Ready.” I was assigned to the 3rd Platoon. Also known as the “Heavy Weapons Platoon.” Machine guns and 81mm mortars. I was trained as a mortar man. My first assignment on the front lines, when we relieved the 45th Division, just north of Marseilles, was gunner on a .50-caliber machine gun. I had never seen one before, let alone know how to shoot it or load ammo! The damn thing didn’t even have a “trigger,” like on a rifle or a pistol. I had to ask the soldier I replaced, “How do you shoot this thing?” I must have given him night-mares!

Total training time was about eight weeks. We also had a few passes for the weekends. Fayetteville had little to offer to the GIs, but that is where I met an Air Force soldier from Pope Field who was from my hometown, St. Matthew’s, Kentucky. It was sometime in April 1944. What a great break that was. He told me that his captain, the pilot of a C-47, had to make extra flying trips to wherever, to get as much practice as possible before they went to active combat hauling paratroopers behind enemy lines. His normal destination was Bowman Field, within walking distance of Betty Lee’s

home. If I wanted to, I could fly with them the next weekend. They would leave Friday evening and be back to Pope Field about sundown Sunday night. If I wanted to go along, be at the operations shack by 18:30.

**No. 5** My first visit home in about four months. I suppose I was beyond the 25-mile limit, but, wait a minute. The limits of travel distance goes way back to what was possible to travel in one day. Anyway, I was within three hours of getting back, if by airplane. I'm sure that interpretation was not part of the original restriction of distance. As long as the intent was to get back before reveille, and there was no intent of desertion, then why would anyone be concerned? I was "Over the Hill," but I got back in time for lights-out. A happy soldier. Well rested. Ready for another week of training. Also ready to get back to Pope Field at the next opportunity.

**Nos. 6, 7, and 8** followed over the next four or five weeks. Trouble hit on the last trip. The first and only time that I got caught.

I got a telephone call from the pilot to inform me that a storm front was on its way and that we were "grounded" for at least one day. "Sorry about that." PANIC set in. I could almost imagine the firing squad. I decided to send a telegram to the CO and explain that I hadn't deserted and that I would get back as soon as possible!

After I sent the telegram, the captain called again and asked if I could get to Stout Field in Indianapolis before 18:00. Yes, I could! OK, go to operations and meet Captain what's-his-name, who will stop to refuel on his way back from Denver, and will look for you and bring you back to Pope Field. It worked! I was in the sack before midnight. At morning fall-out, First Sgt. Steinmen told me to meet him at the CP. Boy oh boy did I catch hell from him! "It was stupid to send the telegram before you were actually late! Use your head. Don't panic when you get in a tight situation. Keep your mouth shut!" No one else saw the telegram.

My next visit was the first and only "legal" furlough I had to go home. I was on the train when the news hit that "D-DAY" was happening. The realization that time was short, that I would be on my way the ETO pretty soon, made me thankful that I had been able to get home a few times and see my ever-loving.

**No. 9** occurred while on pass to Nancy, France, about the end of May 1945. This AWOL was more or less sanctioned. What happened was . . . the rest center commander was my old company commander in Fort Bragg. He remembered "Whitey" and we renewed old times and swapped stories of what we had each experienced. I asked him if it would be possible to get to Denmark and visit my grandmother and aunt in Copenhagen. Because orders had already been received that day to return all 100th men for redeployment to Japan, he back-dated some travel "authorizations" for any and all military facilities so I could hitch rides to Denmark. I stayed away from all MPs and went to the British Operations Center on the east side of Orley Field, Paris.

I made it to see my grandmother and aunt and spent a week with them. I made it back to Frankfurt, Germany by plane, a British flight, then hitched a ride on a truck to Coppingen, Germany, in time to rejoin my outfit. Nobody missed me while I was away. Everyone was caught up in the excitement of moving out.

**No. 10** The next and last AWOL occurred on the second day back in the USA. We steamed up the Hudson River on May 5, 1946. The Kentucky Derby was on the PA System as we passed the Statue of Liberty. The first Saturday in May. We had our steak dinner, showers, and a night's sleep on solid ground. We got that old reliable class A pass, good for 25 miles, to take in the sights of New York City. Hey, I was born in Fort Hamilton NY, and lived in Queens until I was 16. I chose to "Go Over the Hill" and visit my parents, who had moved back to Queens when the war job my dad had at the shipyards in Kentucky ended.

I was discharged on May 9, 1946, never to go AWOL again. Is 10 a record?