AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

7. KITCHEN POLICE

My name is called for kitchen police duty to start at four the next morning. At first, KP seems not too tough except for starting at 4 A.M. By late afternoon, sitting and peeling potatoes is a luxury after mopping miles of mess hall floor. A corporal watches us for a few moments, and picks me, no doubt, as the least efficient potato peeler.

The corporal instructs me and another man; "Load those garbage cans on that truck!" Working together, we heave the 20 gallon cans onto the truck. Each can weighs about 160 pounds, - some 15 pounds heavier than I am. We are surprised that we could lift them at all. Then we ride among the sloshing garbage cans, in the back of the smelly truck to a farm several miles away.

In the dark, the truck backs up to a pig sty. Dimly lit by the driver's flashlight, we pour the slop over the tailgate and over a fence, into a black void. The garbage splashes onto the backs and heads of unseen pigs, squealing and snorting in their feed trough. The heat, humidity, and stench are overpowering.

Back at the barracks, lights are already out. We wash our stinking fatigues in the latrine sinks under the night lights.

A few hours later, before dawn, we pull the wet fatigues back on and turn out for the Reveille formation. Shivering from the wet and cold, I hear my name called. Four of us are to ship out by "Ten hundred hours - That's 10 o'clock to you Rookies!" The orders are for basic training with the Corps of Engineers at Ft. Belvoir. The mystique of the Corps intrigues me; fortifications at Yorktown, Ft. McHenry and Vicksburg; the sappers of the first World War. The Corps makes the waterways navigable; now it is building our defenses and demolishing "theirs." The Engineers often lead the way; "Essayons" - "Let us try." It is a good place to learn how to make a living and sure to be more fun than the infantry.

Best of all, Ft. Belvoir is close to my Baltimore home and the District of Columbia, - a favorite soldier's playground.

I pack with every expectation of going to Ft. Belvoir and becoming a part of the elite Corps of Engineers. Both things will happen; but Ft. Belvoir waits seven months and the Corps waits 35 years.

We report as ordered, and carry our duffel bags to a waiting weapons carrier.

A sergeant checks a list as each man loads his bag and climbs into the truck. All except one; I stand in the street amazed, as the truck leaves without me. The puzzled sergeant checks the list again, and takes me to the orderly room where the first sergeant finds that my Ft. Belvoir orders were canceled.

8. SURPRISE VISIT

I take this opportunity to ask about replacing a broken hinge for my glasses. Incredibly, the "Top Kick" gives me an overnight pass to go off base to an optical shop. While "they" sort out my new orders, I go home via buses and street cars; stop at the optical shop for a quick fix; sleep in my own bed, and visit my high school before heading back to camp the next day.

The rumpled, baggy dress khakis are a poor fit, and devoid of insignia. My friends ask; "What kind of uniform is that?" Khaki shirt and trousers, matching tie, civilian brown shoes, limp, unadorned overseas cap. It is not impressive. Some are skeptical; "I'm in the Army." - "Oh yeah, sure!"

A younger brother has already moved into my room. There is no going back. No longer a civilian, I do not feel nor look like much of a soldier.

9. HELICOPTER, STARS AND SOOT

Inevitably, orders come, even before another tour of KP. Five of us are going to Fort McClellan, Alabama. We board the train to Washington DC Being first on the alphabetical list, I am "senior member" in charge of this “travel detail."

We compete in finding landmarks for first time visitor, Private Ness. At Union Station, we have a one-hour layover. Private Ness and I trot south on broad Delaware Avenue, up a gentle slope to Capitol Hill.

We are astonished to see a small helicopter hovering over the Capitol, as if on cue, waiting for us. We blend into a crowd of dignitaries and watch the strange new machine land in front of the Capitol steps. The pilot gets out and shakes hands with Army officers and gray haired men in tailored suits. Then the pilot climbs back in and the strange machine blasts us with its down draft as it pulls itself up, over the Capitol, and out of sight behind the dome.

Delayed by the distraction, we race back down the avenue to Union Station. We skid to a halt to avoid bowling over an elderly officer; a hasty salute and - "Sorry Sir, we have to catch a train!" - we address the first four-star general that either of us had ever seen. He smiles, returns our salute, and pauses to avoid blocking our hasty retreat. (We nearly knocked down the former Chief of Staff of the United States Army - from 1926 to 1930). The next time that he and I exchange salutes, I will know him as General Charles P. Summerall, Commanding Officer of The Citadel.

The train is crowded with servicemen, mostly soldiers. The day is hot, and the old steam engine pours smoke and soot through the open windows into the cars. We find seats or sit on our bags, and look over our fellow travelers.

At Lexington, Virginia, we are joined by soldiers wearing uniforms that fit. These fellows are very aware of their big new gold rings, each with the same bright stone. One of them tells me that they are ROTC Juniors, so they may wear their VMI rings. I think back to our living room Civil War battles where Stonewall Jackson left the Virginia Military Institute for glory - and death. The VMI Juniors are also going to Fort McClellan. Theirs will be an abbreviated basic training before entering Officer's Candidate School (OCS).

The Shenandoah Valley vanishes into the night as dawn finds us in Tennessee. Our late afternoon arrival in Anniston, Alabama is a liberation from the heat of the crowded sooty day coach. The VMI boys form up sharply, shoulder their duffel bags and head for the trucks. The rest of us struggle to follow their example.

Crowded into big trucks (the famous "deuce-and-a-half") we ride 10 miles up the highway and into the receiving area at Ft. McClellan. The breeze through the truck bed is a welcome change from the crowded, sooty train.

Noncoms (non-commissioned officers; - sergeants and corporals) sort us out. I am among a group of strangers, standing in the hot sun, in front of a row of "hutments." It is a big camp; rows and rows of wood-frame hutments. They have wood floors; plain wood siding up to about 5 feet from the floor; then continuous screened windows which provide much needed ventilation. This is IRTC; the Infantry Replacement Training Center.

10. IRTC

We "fall-out" in the standard trainee's uniform; helmet liner, our one set of fatigues; green shirt and trousers. Trouser legs are "bloused;" that is, tucked into the canvas leggings, and pulled down just enough to hide the top of the leggings. The fatigue shirt is more like a jacket than a shirt, with black metal buttons and large pockets. Similar three-grenade-size baggy pockets are on each side of the trousers. Each legging has a webbing strap that extends under the ankle length brown "GI." shoes.

The sun seems to be everywhere. It fills the sky. Heat and glare reflect from the gravel of the formation area, from roads and sky. Heat radiates from the hutment walls and roofs. The heat and glare pursue our every move, we squint and hide beneath our helmet liners. But the sun pales under the intense bright blue eyes glaring at us from the shadow cast by the brim of Sgt. Muir's helmet liner.

A wiry buck sergeant in immaculately pressed khakis, Sgt. Muir assigns us to squads, and sorts the twelve men of each squad in order of height. I am in the middle of the squad, and sure enough, 5 feet 10 inches is the average for this Army. (Soldiers of WW I averaged 5 feet 8 inches tall.) We are the third squad of the third platoon. The tallest man becomes the acting squad leader, and wears a black arm-band with three olive drab chevrons.

Sgt. Muir introduces himself: "You will address me as Sergeant! You will not speak unless spoken to! You misbegotten sad sacks will become soldiers in the next thirteen weeks, and I'll be there to see that you do! You will pay close attention, because your lives will depend on what we will teach you. Do not expect any free time from now until the end of this cycle!"

The Sergeant herds us through the basic training cycle; assisted by a couple of corporals, supervised loosely by a lieutenant platoon leader, and directed by the Company Headquarters; Top Sergeant, Exec Officer, and Company Commander.

Rumor has it that Sgt. Muir was an accountant in a Boston bank, where he mysteriously stayed wonderfully conditioned. No taller than I, he seems to be made of coiled steel springs. We gather that he has been through this training cycle many times, and that IRTC training is as rough as any; equal to the Marines' boot camp; on a par with OCS.

Sgt. Muir adds to our fears: "If you screw up, or if you are sick for more than three days, you will go to another battalion and start the cycle all over again." We quickly discover that this is not something that a sane man wants to do, and it could mean missing the ASTP schedule.

At "Orientation by the CO," the Company commander, First Lieutenant Reese, expounds on the Infantry Replacement Training Center. Most "graduates" go directly overseas to infantry divisions already in combat. "You think you are going to ASTP, but you'll be wise not to count on it!" Lt. Reese goes on, and on:

"There are three ways to do a thing; the right way, the wrong way, and the Army way. You will always do it the Army way! The Army has been training men for more than 150 years, and we learned how to do it from people who had been training soldiers for centuries. It may not be clear to you why we do some things, but there is usually a very good reason." (We grow increasingly skeptical about the "very good reason.") We conclude that First Lieutenant Reese is "bucking for Captain" and will sacrifice our comfort and leisure in pursuit of a second silver bar.

The officers and non-noncoms (known as "cadre") are overtly contemptuous of our anticipated assignment to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). They know that we passed the Army General Classification Test (AGCT) by a score of at least 115 points, while 110 is enough for OCS. Our motives are suspect, and they tag us, with exquisite irony, "the whiz kids," a word play on the radio show, "The Quiz Kids." The cadre sets about tearing down our egos; humbling us into pliable forms which might be molded, as much as possible, into soldiers.

There are twelve men in a squad, four squads to a platoon, four platoons in a company; and four companies in a training battalion. The first three companies are potential ASTP cadets. The fourth, mostly VMI juniors, are getting a crash basic training; eight weeks compared to our thirteen, before going on to OCS. Thanks to their ROTC training, the fourth company makes us look like the rookies we are, as we drill, march on the parade ground, and march from one training area to another.

Processing and training areas are far from our hutments and we march everywhere. A few miles, at first, then more and more miles stretch forever in front of us. Each session brings us back to the hutments wringing wet with sweat.

We each buy a second set of fatigues from the post exchange (PX). These one-piece coveralls are lighter in weight than the issue fatigues and not nearly as

durable. But we wash one set every night and sometimes have an almost dry set for the next day.

A week later we are issued additional sets of fatigues and there is time to send them to the Quartermaster laundry. The laundry fees are low, and the accumulated fees are deducted from one's pay at the end of the month.

The pay for a private before deductions, is $50 a month. After several "individual briefings" by officers and noncoms, it appears that everyone signs a deduction slip to buy bonds.

By morning, we realize that we will live every day in our one set of fatigues; a baggy uniform, with huge pockets in the shirt and trousers. So far, my "set" is clean enough to wear again. This day, we stay clean as we face batteries of tests and interviews.

An officer asks: "Would you be willing to fight for your country?" "Yes sir." "Do you have a girl friend?" "No sir!" He hesitates, "You don't have a girl?" "No sir." A nearby officer looks up, and then joins us. "Tell us about it." "I date several girls, not just one." The officers confer. My single status seems suddenly unique, one says something about "...young - still playing the field..." (I think - "Shy, and not so good looking or rich.")

More physical exams; "Fall out in your raincoats and helmet liners, shoes and socks!" "He didn't say that, - did he?" But the command is repeated: "ONLY SHOES, SOCKS, RAINCOATS AND HELMET LINERS!!" We learn new terms: "Short Arm Inspection." "Milk it down!" - and most embarrassing: "Bend over and spread your cheeks!"

Bare arms are targets for a barrage of shots; typhus, diphtheria, and small pox. Both arms are sore, and we suffer mini-attacks of the diseases being prevented. The baggy fatigues feel strange during the day. Each evening, when we "stand retreat" in our new unwashed khakis, we look like rows of "sad sacks."

Civilian clothes are shipped home. Sorting things out, I find the ASTP notice that I brought from High School, and give it to a sergeant who is amazed that I had not produced it earlier.

The barracks are never quiet. Throughout the night someone is always visiting the latrine, or returning, stumbling into the unfamiliar furnishings. When everyone is settled in, an occasional snore breaks the silence. The first few nights, I hear a few muffled sobs.

I think: "So far, so good. Not that much different from Scout Camp, but I won't be going home next week." It is a melancholy feeling, being lonely among so many others.