How I took a proficiency exam . . . . and joined the "Greatest Generation"

Bernard S. Miller, Jr.
(PFC, Army of the United States)

Second Edition

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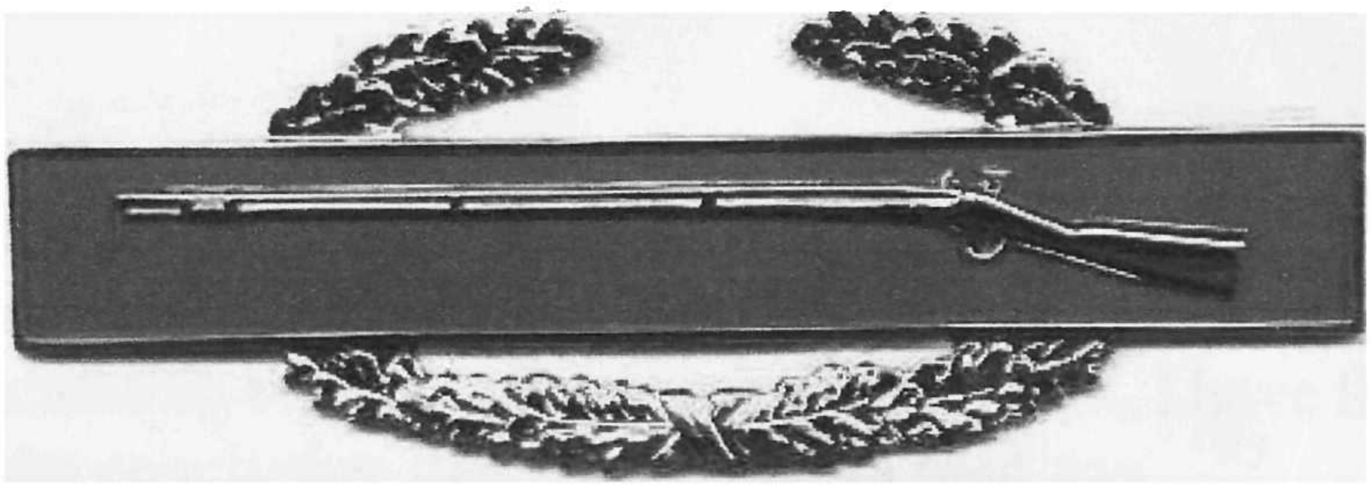

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2nd edition – with revisions, corrections and additions
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No child of mine has ever asked me, "Daddy, what did you do in the war?" – which is very fortunate, for mine was a humble service, though ever surrounded by heroes, in which my main goal was always survival with the least damage to others.

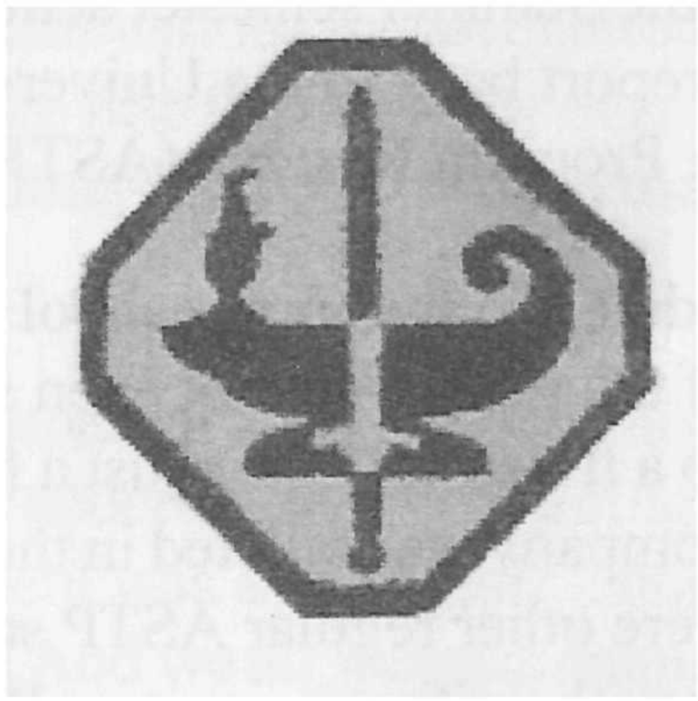
However . . .

> Having on several occasions been around others who have collected their old photographs and dug up old memories to make albums and booklets for their posterity, expanding and elucidating on *their* experiences in the WAR, I have finally come to the conclusion that *Hey, I can do that, too.*
>
> So here, in a somewhat muddled and inconsistent fashion, is the story of what I saw and did and heard during some twenty-six plus months in the Army of the United States during World War II – and for which I received as many important decorations as most and more than many.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I

The ARMY SPECIALIZED TRAINING PROGRAM



The Army Specialized Training Program ("ASTP") was established by the United States Army in December 1942 to identify, train and educate academically-talented enlisted men as a specialized corp of Army officers during World War II. Utilizing major colleges and universities across the country, the Army provided a four-year college education combined with specialized Army technical training over a period of one and one-half years to those enlisted men who were accepted into the program. The men of the ASTP were distinguished by the octagon shoulder patch insignia of the program which was worn on their uniforms. It depicts the lamp of knowledge crossed with the sword of valor -- an allusion to both the mental and physical capabilities of these specialized officers-in-training.

ASTP soldiers were to serve as Army officers in both the successful prosecution of the war and the restoration of civilian governments in Nazi-occupied Europe after the war's end.[1] After July 1943, ASTP trainees came in increasing numbers from eligible men newly inducted into the Army. These were of three kinds: (1) inductees with an AGCT score of 115 or over; (2) enlisted reservists, or certain college students inducted into the Army but kept temporarily in a civilian status; and (3) A-I2's (or certain high-school students who by pre-induction tests had established their eligibility for the ASTP.[2]

And so it was that in the Spring of 1943, I took the A-12/V-12 test while a senior at Granite City Community High School. Several of us who took the test there that day passed. Don Hehner chose the V-12 program and later joined the Navy. I chose the A-12 program because I liked the Army uniform better.

After graduation in June of '43, I enrolled at the University of Illinois for the summer semester in Champaign, IL, as a freshman in the Chemical Engineering program. However, in order to take advantage of the A-12 program I had to enlist before my eighteenth birthday and before the start of the fall quarter of the ASTP program; therefore, on August 6, 1943, I enlisted as a private in the Enlisted Reserve Corp (ERC). I then completed the Summer semester at the University, returned home for break, and was ordered to report back to the University to become a member of the Army Specialized Training Program Reserve (ASTPR).

Not many of us were ordered to the same school we had attended. Fact is, I have since learned that a lot of the guys were not even sent to schools in their own states. But as for me, it was into a fraternity house just a few blocks from where I had been living. An entire ASTP company was billeted in the house. We reservists were platooned together but there were other regular ASTP soldiers in the company with us. The University provided us with uniforms – excess ROTC jackets with their blue lapels and overcoats designed in WWI. But we all wore the regular ASTP patch (which we called the "Flaming Piss-pot") and marched together from class to class.

Other than keeping regular hours for "lights out" and Reveille while trying to keep up with the class work – no "late nighters" – the task was not too difficult. There were courses in history, physics, mathematics and English, but none were too difficult. Our main complaint was having to wear uniforms with those blue lapels. No one knew exactly who we were. Sometimes we didn't either. We were subject to regular army discipline, but were not paid, were shunned by the people at the USO and not accepted as part of any civilian program. Nor did we get passes to go home, though we were allowed out of the house on to the campus. We were fed, "clothed" and housed and sent home at the end of the fall quarter. (A bit of a break for me was Mother and Dad coming up to visit one week-end, though that was not very satisfying for any of us.)

In December 1943 I reached my 18th birthday and so went home at the end of that quarter to wait for further orders. The concept was that an ASTPR would be placed on active duty after the end of the quarter in which he became 18. At that time, he would be sent to an ASTP Basic Training program at Ft. Benning or Ft. Hood. Upon completion of basic, he would return to school as a full fledged ASTP soldier, complete his education, and be assigned to an Army unit needing his knowledge and skills. (I heard that the Navy V-12 recruits actually got a few quarters under them while on active duty – and some were even commissioned.)

Sure enough, I was ordered to report to Fort Sheridan, IL, for induction on Feb. 14, 1944. There we gathered, at least a company of us. We were to be there for a week to receive uniforms, vaccinations, classification tests and generally get ready to go on. I was even able to go into Chicago one evening and Mother and Dad came up to visit me! Ate at the Palmer House, went to a movie with them and later got to a USO.

After two weeks of preparing kits for other incoming inductees, cleaning the latrines to a fine polish and wondering what was going on, we were put on a train and sent to Ft. Benning, GA. There was a real Basic Training Program all set up for us there. We had found a home! And we all went through two whole weeks of the basic.

But... *both the replacement crisis and the alarm regarding the condition to which the ground arms, particularly the Infantry, had declined* [and]. . . *efficiency of divisions in training. . . being gravely impaired by the wholesale transfer of their infantry privates to the replacement stream* [so] *The ASTP was immediately cut. A large number of its trainees, almost overnight, became infantry privates.*[3]

We had been caught in the last days of the winding down of the ASTP program! Only we didn't know it. We were all set for 12 weeks of heat in Georgia, but by the end of the second week there were all sorts of rumors going around, tales of different units, and the sudden shock that we were finished here. We wound up on a rickety southern train, bound for who knew where. . . .

1.Quoted from the ASTP web site, www.astpww2.org

2. Palmer, Wiley, Keast, "The Army Specialized Training Program and the Army Ground Forces" from *United States Army in World War II, The Army Ground Forces, The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops.*

3. Palmer *et al*

II

The 100th INFANTRY DIVISION

The 100th Infantry Division was born at Ft. Jackson on November 15, 1942. The cadre was assembled from the 76th Division and from replacement training centers. The ranks were filled with men drafted from New York, New Jersey, the New England States, the Carolinas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Delaware. Together the men of the Division went through "Basic Training," and then on together through Tennessee maneuvers. And while going through all the steps of becoming a trained Infantry Division, by August 1944 the 100th had managed to send 14,636 enlisted men and 1,460 officers to replacement depots.[1]

We ASTPR's had embarked from Ft. Benning on the Southern RR, transferred to the Atlantic Coast Line (supposedly the better line) and arrived at Fort Bragg to join with those others of our ilk who, during the Winter and Spring of 1944, provided some 3000 to 4000 replacements to help fill out the 100th Division.

The story goes that they did not quite know what to do with us. We were a bunch of youngsters, scarcely out of high school but quite confident of our

intellectual abilities. However, our Army training was quite deficient, even compared to the average infantry replacement. And the old hands were not really excited about going through all their training again. Luckily for all, the Division leadership was more than competent and immediately arranged for a four week review of our two week Basic Training.

The training not only brought up our skills. It was also immensely helpful in integrating we "college kids" into the culture of the Division: an amalgam of Runyonesque and Faulkner like characters, beat-up veterans of Tennessee maneuvers, old hands trying to break into song like they did in the "Singing Century," left-overs destined to remain state-side forever, cadre willing to provide father figures for us, and younger guys who had had more "real" college[2] than we and looked down their noses at us. This whole world of more worldly people absorbed us into its mix and helped us to grow.

Like me, most of we ASTPR kids were naive enough to sit spell-bound at the rollicking tales spun out by the old experience men from the "Big Town" and its New Jersey suburbs. It was as if they had the whole world behind them and we were new-born. They laid out a whole world of attitudes beyond our pale. Yet, somehow, I think most of us felt we were above their adventures – that we were living by much higher standards. We were still youngsters, of course. Why, I was so pimply that Dad was still sending me the "white lotion" to apply. And I went about recruiting friends to apply it to my back. (I think that must have been how I first became acquainted with Dick Laurens and McFadden.)

The Basic review took us through much of our marksmanship training. (Hey, I got a "Marksmanship" medal even though I could hardly reach the trigger.) And we did close-order drill. (I have a vague memory of each of us getting to give the commands for the drill. What a sense of power!) Then there was map reading and learning the phonetic alphabet (*able, baker, charley, dog* . . . .), cleaning and reassembling our M-1 rifles. (I think the goal was to be able to do it in the dark but we never got that far.) And rolling up our full-field packs and laying out our foot lockers in the very correct manner. Of course, by that time we knew how to make up our cots with the blankets tight enough to bounce a coin. Why we were even ordered to scrub down our barracks so that they glistened. I think they were trying to break our spirits or else mold them into a unit. I remember our batting through the process and then sitting outside while the officers inspected our work with their white gloves,

trying to figure out how we had gotten done so fast and so thoroughly, completely upsetting their training plans for a whole afternoon, not knowing the attitudes that had gotten us into the ASTP to begin with – do it best and always be first.

As replacements we were extremely fortunate in that we were inserted into the unit at a time when we could be taken through the entire program of unit development. I am sure the Division had been through this before the Tennessee maneuvers but the leadership, so typical of the 100th, made sure we were properly supported to do our jobs in the most competent manner. We started with squad training – learning the arm and hand signals, the squad formations, the purpose of the BAR team, and the leadership techniques. We went on overnight hikes and camped with our shelter-halves buttoned together into two-man tents (shades of the Boy Scouts). I learned that the North Carolina ticks were as bad as the chigger of the Ozarks and were much bigger. We trained as platoons, repeating the squad training on a grander scale. Company training knitted us together even more as we worked with the other platoons and found out about the weapons platoon and how we could utilize their 60mm mortars and 30 caliber machine guns. Wow!

And we hiked. Five mile hikes. Ten mile hikes. Hikes at night. I learned to carry a tube of Carbolated Vaseline to ameliorate the chaffing. I learned how to wrap a mosquito net around an empty pineapple can to make it look like a blanket roll in a full field pack (but lighter!). We all became conditioned to 50 minutes hiking and 10 minutes off to drop our packs and "light up if you have them." But how happy we were that we were not in the neighboring company whose Captain was forever getting them up before daybreak to run their five miles. Just for rest from all the field work we would be marched to the movie theater to become indoctrinated with that wonderful series of movies *"Why We Fight."* We got through the first four films. We thought that there were five in the series and that, of course, we wouldn't be sent over seas until we had viewed all five.

About this time I was made a platoon messenger and was introduced to the wonders of the Signal Corps radios, the SCR 300 and 500. One was the "little" one carried slung over the shoulder – a long box with an ear piece on one end and the mike to talk into on the other and an elongated push-button in the center to turn it on. For its day it was an miniature marvel. You could check the batteries by spitting on your fingers and touching them to get a shock when they were OK. And if you were careful it did not get tangled up with the rifle you were also required to carry. The

other radio was the big one carried on your back with a separate hand set, but that was for the company messengers – lucky me! The real neat item we were in charge of was the "sound-powered" telephone. This was a hand set connected by wire to another set a distance away. No batteries, just the two hand sets connected by this one wire that came on a drum from which you rolled it out as you ran from one fox-hole to another. The phones could connect outposts with the platoon CP (Command Post) and the platoon CP with company. The real dream was the wire – it was a single strand from which you could strip insulation and then "tie" together with another piece before covering with insulating tape so making mending and connecting as easy as pie. And the magic was that you just talked in one end the sound came out the other! Then there was more map reading and learning how to write messages with the proper dashes through Z's and 0's.

By the time D-Day arrived we felt we were accomplished soldiers in a unit that was as good as it could be. We were all assembled to hear the messages transmitted to the troops for the attack – as if we were a part of the landing. In a way, I guess we were. But the whole summer stretched out before us.

That summer was filled with more training. We went through battalion and regimental operations, learning to work together as a unit. We ran through machine gun courses and practiced attacks under live artillery. The Division also became a "show" unit and so we ran the machine gun courses at night, demonstrating to visiting dignitaries just how it was done. (Some of us were pretty disgusted with that – wallowing in the mud and having to clean up our uniforms and our equipment just so some big shots could get their jollies. After all, we were as good as they were!) Then there were reviews – Regimental and Divisional – for brass from Washington and other VIP's. I guess the reviews pretty impressive. It was thrilling to have the band strike up and step out on parade. But it was summer and the parade ground was hot and dusty. Fortunately for me, in order to make things really neat, the last row in each unit had to be even, with just as many men as the preceding rows, and each unit started with the tallest men first. Naturally, there were often a few of us "shorties" at the end of the line to mess up all the pretty so we would be ordered to get back to the barracks and hide out until the parade was all over.

Since Fort Bragg was, in addition to being our home base, the center for glider training we were used to watching the gliders from a distance and seeing the air-born troops up close with their shiny boots. But we weren't prepared for the day the gliders fell all over our division area. Seems as though while they were gliding into

their landing area at Pope Field some really large gusts of wind blew across, lifted them up and scattered them on top of us and our artillery range. We discovered how fragile those gliders really were!

Several other things, of a more personal nature, happened during this period, though I no longer remember exactly when. (1) Mother came out and visited with me for a couple of days. She even brought my special girl at that time. I really must have been a real imposition! There were visitors barracks especially set aside for such guests, so it was easy for us to visit together with little loss of time. (2) I had entered service loaded with all sorts of allergic food reactions, but by this time I had discovered that something had reduced my allergies, at least to peanuts. Whether because of the exercise or the inoculations or the environment, there came a magic day when I ate a Clark Bar (a crispy peanut butter bar) without any reaction. This had never happened before in all my life. So I ate four more – all at once and with no reaction! This was truly a defining day in my life. Never again was I cautious about peanuts, at least in moderation, and from then on I have credited the service and its inoculations with the reduction of my allergies. (3) I had made a friendship in ASTPR with a guy named Dean, who at that time was at the University of North Carolina still in the ASTP. I got my only 3-day pass and visited him in Raleigh. I had requested it from the First Sergeant, but instead of granting the request, I was selected as the outstanding soldier in the week inspection and granted the pass on that basis. I remember that Dean played a soprano sax and for the life of me, that's about all I remember. (4) Along with just a few others, I was promoted to PFC! I supposed it was because I was a messenger since there was no other distinction I could think of. Certainly, McFadden, Laurens and I, along with the rest of our bunch, were all pretty sharp cookies!

Near the end of our training we went on "platoon problems" where our officer was given an "objective" to take and he was to lead us (and we to follow in an appropriate manner) in obtaining the goal. The goal was a machine gun nest and Lt. Angier had two squads form a front and the third to swing around in a flank to overtake the gun from the rear. For some reason the officer referee did not like the manoeuver at all and critiqued our Lieutenant thoroughly.

By that time there were rumors all over the place about what would happen to our Division. At least once we had been told we were "in reserve" for one Army or the other that was already in Europe. At the same time, about all the enlisted men and many of the non-coms left from the original Division had been sent out as

replacements. All during the late Spring and Summer we were receiving replacements from programs that were being discontinued, Air Corps, Officer Candidate Schools (OCS), all sorts of highly qualified disillusioned young men who had never dreamt they would end up in the Infantry. (Boy, did that give us ASTPR's a chuckle!) Then there was a large influx of troops that had been stationed in Alaska, most of whom carried a lot of stripes. This depressed promotions for many of the qualified non-coms that were left and thus promotions for any of the ASTP people who by now were "old-timers." Amid all this activity, the remaining troops were getting their last, and sometimes only, furloughs, and we were all sweating out whether we would get furloughed or whether we would be sent out without one, since it was also rumored that we were to be put on the alert for shipment overseas.

Then I got mine! Away I went on a 10 day furlough, from Fayetteville, to Washington, to St. Louis. Coach all the way. Crowded with troops and civilians, women and children, men and boys, standing and sitting, asleep and awake. And the greatest excitement in the world!

When I got back to Fort Bragg the Division was on orders. I was told I was lucky I hadn't been recalled. And all my buddies had seen some movie I had missed in which the key phrase was "Which way did he go?" and I felt like I had missed more by being on furlough because everyone was shouting back and forth "Which way did he go, George, which way did he go?". But by then the tension was building through final inspections and preparations for the big movement. One big blur and then we were off.

1. Bass, Michael A., ed., The Story of the Century (The Century Association 1946)

2. One "Easterner" was totally disgusted that I had never heard of the great St. John's University basketball team!