AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

4. PEARL HARBOR

Pat and I are strolling back from the Gwynn Oak Amusement park on a lovely Sunday afternoon; when her parents call to us; "The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor." I hurry home and the family gathers in stunned silence around the radio. Hawaii is so far away. At sixteen years and eight months, I can do little about it.

School goes on at a new pace. We are assembled in the auditorium to hear FDR ask Congress to declare war. Some of the older boys join the State Militia and the Civil Air Patrol which actually patrols in Piper Cubs over the Chesapeake Bay, looking for submarines. Soon I am a messenger for Civil Defense, riding my bike through blacked-out streets. Later I train as an Auxiliary Fireman. We are unpaid volunteers, but we ease the load on the Fire Department, as men leave for service or more lucrative defense jobs.

A special exam at school is followed by a notice that I am qualified for the Army Specialized Training Program. Thanks to an accelerated program, I graduate in February, 1943 rather than in June. Pat and I go to the Senior Prom on the streetcar, in a snow storm!

A German army of 330,000 men is also in the snow, surrounded by the Russians. Ordered by Hitler not to surrender, two-thirds of them die before their commander, General Paulas surrenders. The survivors form a column, several miles long, and trudge into captivity through the far off snows of Stalingrad, on February the second, 1943. Very few return. (Paulus spent long years in Soviet POW camps, and returned to Germany where he died on February 1, 1951.)

By the end of February, Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel's attacks have been thrown back by the combined American and British forces in North Africa. In spite of his victory at Kasserine Pass, Rommel sees disaster approaching in North Africa, as the US 1st Armored, 9th and 34th Infantry Divisions become skilled at desert warfare.

In the same month, the Japanese impose control over all Europeans exiled in Japanese occupied China. Most are Jews from Germany; their brief freedom is lost again.

I work in the laboratory of a paint factory, and plan to go to college at night. On my 18th birthday, March 27th, 1943, already a veteran of 2 months in the paint lab, I register for the draft, and volunteer for induction. New registrants are usually not called for about 6 months, and it seems better to get the physical before starting

college in the fall. Between bad teeth and poor eyesight, I expect and dread rejection, and am anxious to get it over with. Going in the service seems an impossible dream. What happened amazes me to this day.

5. INDUCTION

The draft board gives me a "preliminary physical" on April 23, 1943. They note that I am breathing, have a pulse, the requisite number of working extremities, and a normal temperature. They recommend a "final physical."

Thursday, May 27, 1943: An older friend and I report as ordered. We are both named Frank; he is a fellow church member, a ball game buddy. We ride the streetcar on a lovely spring day and wonder how far we might go together in the Army. At the Armory we are sorted alphabetically and I do not see him again for several days.

Surrounded by strangers, we follow a serpentine course, clad only in shorts, through the maze of the examinations. A man in khaki says: "Sit here." A blank wall is 3 feet in front of me. The voice goes on, now behind my left ear: "Take your glasses off, cover the right eye, and read the smallest letters that you can see."

"What letters?" "On the chart!" "What chart?" A finger in front of my nose points to the right where 25 feet away the blur of a letter chart is tacked to a wall. I can read the first letter. We check both eyes. Then with glasses on, I read something near the bottom line. I know that will be "corrected to 20/20." My examiner confers with someone standing behind me; "What do you think of this?" They leaf through my records, already several pages thick. "Lookee here, a volunteer! He'll make a better soldier than either one of us." I am directed on to the next step in the maze.

The day wears on, mostly waiting. Finally dressed, we are ushered into a separate room. Flags line one wall. An officer appears and informs us that we have passed the exam and he promptly swears us into the Army. "Raise your right hand and repeat after me..." We are told to go home, to wait orders which will arrive a few days later. The words echo in my head: "I will defend..." Exuberant, amazed, and a little terrified, I find a pay phone and call home to report the news.

I am giddy and dizzy with the prospect. It is impossible to imagine that I could be actually going into the Army. Euphoric and delighted, I float on an

adrenaline rush, and think of the rookie's fears and doubts in The Red Badge of Courage. From the streetcar window, the familiar streets show no hint of the coming adventure; - where will I go, what marvels to behold, and when - or if - I will return. All those folks, in cars and on the streets, in the houses and shops; they are all are living predictable lives as I had been, and now, something very special is going to happen to me. I continue to float in a dream state, down the steps from Streetcar Number 32 and over three blocks of sidewalk to our house.

The news stirs little fuss at the paint lab. My boss and coworkers expected it, although it is still an improbable surprise to me. An elderly mill operator wishes me luck; "Bring me a button from the first dead Jap you see!"

Saturday night I take Betty to a dance at the Dixie Ballroom in nearby Gwynn Oak Park. We had played badminton in her church's lighted court where we were a close match, splitting games as often as not, (or maybe when she was generous). She is quick, athletic, graceful and fun, but never dated me before.

The night goes smoothly. I wonder if she is just being nice to one more departing schoolmate. Never much of a dancer, I am amazed to find that we are gliding smoothly through some great big band tunes. We walk back to her house and watch the moon as it moves along with us above the telephone poles. I say: "Wherever I go, I will think of you when I see the moon above telephone poles." At her door, she kisses me quickly on the cheek and disappears into the house.

I walk and whistle: "You made me love you, I didn't want to do it," - while the moon follows me home, soaring along over a long row of telephone poles. The scene comes back often during the next three years; and during the next seventy - and more years...

Sunday, at church, we learn that our friend Frank was classified "4F" because he had a perforated ear drum. (Seven years later, Frank was drafted for the Korean War.)

Monday morning, June 10, 1943: The big old yellow streetcar lurches through the dark cool pre-dawn of a hot day. Little familiar scenes flicker in the shadowy street lights. Our church, the schools, library, friends' houses, - and the stores all melt away in the dark, just as they did in years of Sunday morning paper routes and in the eerie dark of air raid duty. On this trip, the streets are saying good-by.

The image persists; Dad, shaking my hand, a brief hug, and an admonition; "Don't stick your head up where you don't have to. It was a lot of diapers to change for it all to go to waste."

Mom kisses me good-by, and turns away, shielding her feelings. They watch from the porch as I walk up the dark street carrying an overnight bag; a change of clothing, shaving gear, comb and brush. I leave home for the first time.

6. THE RECEPTION; JUNE 1943

Our first hurry-up and wait begins predictably when twenty five nervous young men report to the draft board at 6 in the morning. We sit on a hall floor for two hours before we are herded onto a chartered streetcar that takes us to the train station. A short hot train ride, with windows open to the coal smoke, brings us to Fort Meade where the midday sun bakes the seats of the waiting trucks.

The Reception Center at Fort Meade is a different world. Profanity, unheard at the draft board and on the train, is the universal language. Privacy is a fond memory, shattered by the long lines of double bunks, toilets without stalls, and gang showers. Lunch is a thrill; a chow line in a huge mess hall; the food cooling quickly on the stainless compartmented trays. Noisy and confusing, but satisfying. After a lifetime of cereal for breakfast, and a sandwich for lunch, 3 hot meals a day is a luxury. I eat everything they serve.

We shuffle through a maze in a large, crowded warehouse where our single file stops every few feet for a different item. T-shirts and shorts, socks and two pairs of shoes; two sets of khakis and two sets of "OD's" (olive drab wool shirt and trousers) and one OD "blouse" (the dress jacket). The "OD" color does not match the "OD" that we produced in the paint lab.

I adjust the webbing suspension of the plastic helmet liner to fit my head and tighten the leather chin strap over the small protruding bill. The light-weight helmet liner provides remarkable protection from sun and rain. I wonder when we will be given steel helmets. The helmet liner turns out to be the only thing that goes everywhere with me for the next three years.

We are soon back in formation in our one set of new fatigues, GI ankle length shoes, leggings, and the ever present helmet liner. There are instructions as to how to make a bed, polish shoes, store clothing. "Hang shirts, jackets and coats

with left sleeve showing!" (The left sleeves will later sport our unit insignia.) We hang the duffel bag on the wall. There is a place for everything.

Orientation is fast and thorough. We understand that corporals and sergeants are surely prophets of God, commanding instant respect and obedience, but they do not rate a salute, and they will tell you not to use the word "sir" with each response. Officers are to be saluted and "sirred." Any officer; from the lowest second lieutenant all the way up to the President.

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.