

Lee Reese's Final Words— How It Seemed To Me

by Lee Reese, 398-A

An account of my experiences from high school graduation to the arrival of our troop ship in Marseilles, October 20, 1944.

Preface: Last year, I heard from a fellow named Claud Slover, of Midland, Texas, who was trying to locate all of the surviving members of the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program in 1943 and/or who had received their basic training in an ASTP Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia. He was interested in forming an organization of such men. In the last year, Claud has managed to contact nearly 300 of them, and fifteen of us had a reunion in Dallas last summer. Many of us who were trained at Benning wound up in the 100th Division so some more *déjà vous* has happened all over again.

When the war got going, my ambition as a high school senior in Gainesville, Texas, was to become an aeronautical engineer and design airplanes for the war effort. I had only a dim idea of what it took to be one of those, but I knew it took a lot of education, and that the main barrier to a college degree for me was the first semester of Freshmen English wherein you have got to diagram sentences and know the difference between a verb and a past participle. In spite of the influence of my mother, who was an English major, such things made no sense to me at all. But understand it or not, I thought I would have the best chance passing the subject at Gainesville Junior College, because the Freshman English teacher was one of my mother's classmates in college. So I enrolled there in the Fall of 1942.

Shortly afterward, they announced that there would be a test for applicants for one of the Specialized Training Programs offered by the various branches of the armed services. Five of us took the test, passed it, and were then given the choice of signing up for V-12, the designation of the Navy program, or A-12, the Army program. Knowing that my poor eyesight could disqualify me for the Navy, I chose A-12. I think I was the only one.

[Of those who did not choose A-12, one went to West Point and retired a few years ago as Chief of Staff of the Air Force. At least two others attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas, sixty miles from home, where they spent four years, came out with engineering degrees, and are wealthy developers in this area today.]

As for me, I was assigned to Texas A & M College, where we stayed in an ancient dormitory for two weeks before the Army decided it had really meant to send us to OKLAHOMA A & M, at Stillwater. So I went back home where I found that my mother had rented out my room to a service man and his wife from local Camp Lowze. All of this should have told me something.

Classes at OAMC began around September First for the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program (ASTRAPS, for short). OAMC used the quarter schedule then, and we were in an accelerated program, with no allowance made for careless delays such as reaching down to pick up a dropped pencil. I was exposed to physics for the first time in my life (the grading curve saved me) and soon learned the subject of Geography at OAMC was NOT the same subject we had in grade school.

Every day we would run two miles, then do calisthenics, then march to breakfast, loudly singing songs that were commentaries on our lot in life.

Meals: "...I've had beans and beans and beans, enough to run the Navy; Wilberforce, Get Off That Horse and Bring Him in for Lunch,"

ASTP: "... Take down that Service Star Mother, your Son's in the ASTP. He'll never get hurt on a slide rule, so that Service Star never should be," and

Soldiering: "Some day I'll go over the ocean, and a dirty old Jap I will see. I'll whip out my slide rule and kill him with the cosine of a minus b . . . "

Because of our schedule, we were seldom allowed off campus. Some of us defied that order once and skipped classes to go to a movie, but we were caught and punished by being made to clip the grass in the football stadium with ordinary scissors.

The lack of significant sin in bone-dry Stillwater made most excursions there futile, so we were forced to manufacture our own. One of the guys brought a roulette wheel, which offered a lot of diversion, and the field house showers offered an excellent place to roll dice. This didn't last long for me—we were unpaid reservists, remember—so gambling soon tapered off. Once, an enterprising soul who lived in Laredo and was allowed to visit home at Thanksgiving returned with a bottle of tequila! I still remember him sitting on the side of his bunk pouring the precious liquid in the cap and offering it to a long line of takers at 25 cents a cap. I doubt if he paid much more than fifty cents for the whole bottle, and is probably a very wealthy man today.

Most of us finished the quarter successfully, and were then told that it would be a dandy idea if we got our Army basic training out of the way so we could be free to return to college for our promised four years, followed by commissioning as officers and gentlemen. This was the last thing any of us heard of college or commissions.

I reported to the Reception Center at Camp Wolters near Mineral Wells, Texas, on December 18, 1943, and was sent to Fort Benning, Ga., shortly after the first of the year. The ASTP boys were collected in training regiments, and I was assigned to the First Company, 5th Regiment. We still regarded ourselves as college men who were simply going through some dreary formalities because of some monstrous clerical error, and that we would be summarily returned to the relative comforts of college just as soon as the tragic error was discovered by the proper authorities.

[Only last year, I learned that when General George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, found out that a number of boys were being sent to college rather than being given guns, he was quoted as shouting "Why in the hell are we still sending boys to college when we're losing the war?" This frank exchange of opinions had two effects. The ASTP was no more and the infantry had some more cannon fodder.]

Basic training ended on March 21, 1944, and many of us were sent on the Central of Georgia Railroad to Fort Bragg near Fayetteville, North Carolina. This trip of maybe 500 miles took several days, because we stopped for all other trains, stray cows, and sometimes, apparently, for the crew to admire the scenery. On one stop, Chattanooga, I think, we were allowed to get off the train to stretch, or something. We were still pale from winter, dressed in OD's with long wool overcoats and we must have looked like an entire company of Sad Sacks. As we detrained, we saw a group of German prisoners, presumably veterans of the Africa Korps, standing at rigid attention on the train platform. They were deeply suntanned, appeared to be eight feet tall, and were still dressed in the shorts and summer uniforms they wore when they were captured in North Africa. I think we all had the same reaction: We have to fight guys like THIS?

Side note: I was reminded of that train ride several months later when I read Max Shulman's "The Feather Merchants." The book described a train ride across Oklahoma. The train had no diner, but the conductor came through the cars before the next stop and took the passenger's lunch orders. He then got off and walked ahead to the next stop to place the orders at a cafe. By the time the train got there, the orders were ready, so no time was lost by stopping to eat.

At Fort Bragg, some of us were assigned to Company A, 398th Infantry Regiment, 100th Division, where I became a MOS 604, Light Machine Gunner. I learned all about the M 1919 A-6 light machine gun (the smallest part has the longest name: "belt feed lever pivot pin retaining screw"), and how to clean grease off of rifles when you forgot to salute an officer. I also learned that the best way to clear a space on a bus back to the base was to drink boilermakers before boarding.

Our training consisted of forced marches, twenty mile hikes, so-called "wilderness camping," where we had to read a compass to find our rations for the next meal, and some battle conditions maneuvers, where we would set up the gun and maybe even fire off a few bursts. There were Corps Tests, where we were required to meet certain standards of strength and stamina by such things as long marches and a full range of difficult calisthenics. We thought it was pretty snazzy, and it did help us get ready for the real thing. We dug foxholes, of course, but this wasn't effective because North Carolina's sandy soil made it kind of fun. I believe it was here that I first heard of the ten minute break. All of us enjoyed the rest and

the chance to smoke yet another cigarette, but it was only enjoyable, we found out, if the break is not in proximity to an artillery battery that has chosen that moment to fire for effect.

My mother came to visit that summer, rented an apartment in Fayetteville so she could invite me and my friends (Ed Rawlings was one) to some old-fashioned Southern dinners. This was a welcome thing for me because our cooks in Company A were all Yankees, who clearly had no idea how real food was supposed to taste. Her Southern cooking made the army food that much worse. I was on KP a lot, which gave me ample opportunity to gripe about this to the cooks. I pointed out that Fort Bragg was located in the South, for God's sake, and we never even had any corn bread. Finally, the cooks got enough of this and agreed to serve corn bread. They then proceeded to prepare and serve us some corn pone—water, salt, and cornmeal baked into flat, almost tasteless hockey puck-like cakes. They served nothing else that went with corn pone, which only displayed their gross ignorance.

[For those who have reached this age still ignorant of the subject, let me elaborate: Corn pone alone is inedible, but becomes food for the gods when dipped in what we called "pot likker" the liquid remaining after cooking greens seasoned with plenty of hog back. It was only this year that I learned that Huey Long prescribed corn pone with pot likker as the base of the food pyramid of Louisiana school children, black and white, in the 1930's. If he hadn't been shot, Huey Long could very well have been our President that year, and we would not today be having the debate over school lunches.]

In any event, the cooks served the corn pone, remarking that this ought to prove the Southerners knew nothing about food and chuckling mightily when everyone who ate it almost retched.

Around the first of October, 1944, we were told we were going to some unspecified location overseas. In the frenzy of activity, we were issued first some so-called gas-proof uniforms. (ETO?), then suntans (Africa? Pacific?). We got gas masks and atabrine tablets (for some reason, Captain Kierniesky called them "Aberdeen tablets") and all sorts of ruses designed to fool the Germans about where we were going, as if they didn't know.

When we moved out of the barracks with all our worldly possessions, we sat in groups on the parade ground waiting for the trucks to carry us to the troop train. While waiting, someone broke out the cards and we began to play poker to pass the time and to mask our collective nervousness at the idea that this was IT. My luck was phenomenal. At the second hand, I was dealt four aces! Riches were at hand, finally.

[To fully appreciate what happened that day, the reader should know about my unvarying routine on pay day: At the PX, I would purchase enough cigarettes to last a month, a pint of vanilla ice cream and a package of peanuts. Then I would proceed to pour the nuts over the ice cream, eat it, put the cigarettes in my foot locker and proceed to lose the rest of my money in the ensuing poker game.]

Back at Bragg, I had lost too many hands by becoming impatient, and was afraid the others would fold if I were to raise the opening bet too much. So I only saw the first bet, hoping to suck everyone in for a later coup de gras. The player on my right doubled the bet, and the next one doubled that. There was enough in the pot to provide a comfortable retirement to the winner when everyone finally passed. My four aces were high, but another player had an ace-high straight, and still another full house, aces high! Gambling lesson No. 873 still sticks with me: Don't try to play poker with a Pinochle deck.

Our next stop was Camp Kilmer, N.J., and some of us had a chance to visit SIN CITY-New York. There, we saw the Andrews Sisters at Radio City, ate at an automat, bought mixed drinks and I suppose told dirty jokes.

Our Division left Fort Dix, N.J. on October 7, 1944, and departed from New York Harbor on October 8 aboard the USS General Gordon.

I suppose the trip over, through the Straits of Gibraltar and up to Marseilles was uneventful except for the hurricane, a real experience if your bunk is three decks below the keel. It was mostly fine weather, though, and I did learn something that has probably saved me many dollars: Don't play blackjack on a Troopship! There were about 4,000 people on that ship, and at least that many different sets of Blackjack rules. Had we been issued live ammunition aboard ship, very few would have gotten across.