

## **AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER**

### **11. RIFLES**

"THE RIFLE" is issued in a special ceremony. The Army is entrusting me with a very expensive and lethal weapon. The serial number is duly listed with my name and my Army Serial Number (etched in memory: ASN 33 725 901).

THE RIFLE is to be handled reverently, carried everywhere and guarded with my life. THE RIFLE is cleaned and oiled every night; the wood stock is oiled and rubbed at every break. Mine is a much used Garand M-1, accompanied by a bayonet, scabbard, and cartridge belt. There are not enough M-1's for all of us; a few men drew 1903 Springfield rifles.

The Garand Rifle is one of the world's heaviest. Empty, and without the bayonet attached, it weighs nearly 9 pounds; a full pound heavier than a gallon of milk. It seems a lot heavier after only a few minutes on my shoulder. Balanced in my hand, it feels like a cannon compared to the 22 caliber rifles at the shooting gallery in Carlin's Amusement Park.

The wooden stock shows a history of abuse and subsequent care; scratches and dents, oiled and polished. The worn brown leather sling is punctured by two rows of holes whose scars and stretch marks betray the favored positions of the brass claws.

At "shoulder arms," the taut sling cushions the stock of the rifle against my shoulder. When loose, the sling allows the rifle to be carried on either shoulder. The command "Sling Arms!" means to hang the rifle barrel up, behind your right shoulder; where the right elbow holds it in place. Otherwise, the command is "Sling Arms to the LEFT!" Slung barrel up on the left shoulder, the bolt handle digs into my ribs. Barrel down on the left, the bolt handle points out into my left elbow. Fully extended, the sling allows the rifle to be carried across one's back (unless a pack is in the way). This frees both hands. We are told that the sling will be used as a marksmanship aid.

One man in our squad is issued a 1903 Springfield rifle; easily distinguished by its "single" barrel, long thin bayonet, and long chrome bolt handle. The Springfield is a "single action" rifle; it holds a 5-round clip, but each cartridge is fed into the chamber by working the bolt. We learn that the "03 Springfield" with a telescopic sight is an effective sniper's rifle.

A corporal pulls a recruit from the ranks and guides him into the position of

"Port Arms!" With suitable gestures, the corporal specifies: "This is your RIFLE, and that is your gun, the RIFLE is for shooting, and the gun is for fun!

Do not call your RIFLE a gun!" He grabs the rifle away from the hapless trainee, and threatens a court martial for any man who so easily yields his weapon.

Using the borrowed rifle, the corporal demonstrates the manual of arms. "At the command 'FALL IN!' You will come to the position of 'PARADE REST!' Place the butt of your RIFLE next to your right toe; hold the stock in your right hand, below the barrel. Push the RIFLE to the front, spread your feet about 12 inches apart, and place your left hand in the small of your back. At the command, 'AH - TENN - HUT!' - you will snap the RIFLE back to the trouser seam, and simultaneously pull the left foot to the right foot. Make those heels click! At the same time, slap your left hand down so that the thumb touches the trouser seam. With your heels together, spread the toes at a 45 degree angle and place the front of the RAHFUL butt next to and in line with your rat toe!"

Corporal continues: "At ah-ten-shun, yer hay-yed will be up and back, chest out and gut in! Now let's try it! - FALL IN!" (We snap to parade rest.) "Detail, Ah-tenn-HUT." Amazingly, each of us snaps to the required position.

He shows us how to allow an inspecting officer to take the weapon from the recruit standing at inspection arms. "Be sure to let it go when he slaps the stock. If you hold on too long, the rifle will pivot in your hand and the butt will kick you in the balls."

Demonstrating each action he explains: "Release the bolt after pulling it part way back and it can take your thumb off! Pull the bolt all the way back until it locks in place. Then close the bolt by pushing the bolt handle back with the side of your hand while pushing the cartridge follower down with the right thumb. Then let the bolt handle push your hand - and thumb clear!"

The bolt handle, on the right side of the rifle, has to be released quickly by the right hand while the thumb is still in the receiver; a hazard for anyone, but worse for a southpaw. We try it. The bolt closes with a tremendous whack against the chamber housing.

Corporal inspects the "bore" or inside of the barrel by cocking the bolt back, and placing his thumb, in harm's way in the chamber, so that light reflects from his thumbnail through the chamber, while he peeks down the muzzle with one eye. We follow suit, as instructed. It seems a suicidal position, but inside the bore, one can see the spiraled grooves, clean and bright.

An officer explains how the rifle works. The Garand rifle has what looks like a second barrel, sealed at the front end and tucked beneath and a little to the rear of the actual barrel. A pull on the trigger releases the firing pin, a spring drives it forward to strike a small primer in the middle of the bottom of the cartridge; the primer explodes and sets off the powder; and the expanding gas forces the bullet up the barrel. Some of the gas enters a tiny port into the second barrel where the gas pressure moves a piston to push the bolt back. As the bolt moves back, it pulls the spent cartridge out of the chamber and ejects it through the now open receiver. A spring moves the bolt forward, loading a new round into the chamber and locking the bolt shut. It sounds simple enough.

The clip holds eight rounds; eight shots as fast as one can pull the trigger; once for each shot. It is possible to load a ninth round in the chamber, closing the bolt without removing the first round from the clip. Not a good idea as an impact might fire the rifle.

We learn the rest of the manual of arms, and later, how to field strip the rifle. Eventually we start marksmanship lessons with no ammunition. We will wait longer than we expected before we fire the rifles.

At the lunch break, back at my cot, I find that the little door in the rifle butt conceals twin cavities; one holds a combination tool used to disassemble the rifle.

The other cavity contains a clever cleaning kit; a length of cord with fittings and a wire brush which allows the brush or cleaning patches to be pulled through the barrel. I use the tool to remove the lower barrel retainer, slip out the barrel assembly, and remove the trigger assembly.

The three pieces of precision machinery lay in my hands like sacred objects; the stock, barrel and trigger assemblies. The trigger assembly looks like clockwork; it is so complex that only an optimist would take it apart. I am relieved when my three parts fit together again easily. The mysterious mechanisms belie the simplicity of the operating theory. But there is no doubt about how to load and operate the rifle.

## **12. MISFITS AND TRAINEES**

The training cycle is violent and exhausting. Early morning calisthenics may be followed by a run through the obstacle course, forced marches and double-time to classes; hand-to-hand combat, bayonet drill, marksmanship, and training films. We doze through films on the evils of venereal diseases and the worldwide menace of the Axis nations. The numbers of pushups, chin ups and sit-ups increases and the marches grow longer and faster. I appreciate the muscles

developed during four years of carrying newspapers.

A few men can not keep up. Several can not leap or climb an obstacle, nor run for more than a few steps. Some are simply overweight and out of shape from years of easy living. They are grouped into a special squad that works when we work and works when we rest; it is a special hell for them.

One man is totally uncoordinated. He can not step over a small obstacle, he can not run or climb. In spite of his best efforts and one-on-one coaxing by the cadre, it is painfully obvious to us that he can not do what we have to do. He disappears after the first week, destined for limited duty or a discharge. The rest of the special squad continues their long hours.

We strain to avoid losing face from not being able to keep up, and the special squad works hard to catch up. During the first few weeks we sweat and strain, but the special squad puts in extra hours, and diets. They lose 20 to 30 pounds in fat and gain about half as much in muscle. After a few weeks, they rejoin our ranks and we face the toughest challenges together.

The trainees are a diverse group. At 18 years and 3 months, I am a year or more younger than most of them. Many have finished a year or two of college. We exchange stories.

Lamont, a muscular handsome 22 year old, was a professional ballroom dancer. He joins a small group "from Hahvahd," playing bridge at the other end of our hutment. "Blackie" is from the same Virginia home town of my young friend Pat. "Oh yeah, I know her - She's easy laid!" I resist an urge to slug Blackie, and then realize he is putting me on. Pat is only fifteen and has been away from her home town for five years! No need to challenge him.

Floyd Hancock from Hagerstown is only 18, and already a newlywed. He yearns to be back in bed with his bride, on Sunday mornings when he does not have to go to work. We share the same initials and last name, so when a registered- or insured-mail notice comes at mail call, we have to decide which one is to walk the mile to the post office to sign for it, for the post office never bothers with first names and will not allow us to sign for each other.

Kashansky is a philosopher, certified by a degree. No matter, the Army expects him to become a rifleman, along with the rest of us. At "sling arms" his Springfield rifle dangles, sloping back from his shoulder while his shoulders slope forward in perpetual weariness. I ask him why he does not hold the rifle upright as we are required to do, and he tells me this story:

"Once at a social event, a lady asked Ben Johnson how he could be so calm after he had spilled his tea. Johnson said that he simply asked himself how the event would appear when considered a year later. So, how I hold this rifle today will not be important, a year from now."

His response is unsettling. I wonder where we will be, "a year from now."

### **13. FIX BAYONETS**

My bayonet is about a foot long, and sharp on both sides of the thick stubby blade. I sharpen the point and edges to ease entry into the straw dummies. The Garand rifle bayonet looks like a short broadsword compared to the longer rapier-like bayonet of the Springfield rifle.

Saturday morning review; the band plays Sousa marches and we parade onto the field in our starched khakis, leggings, helmet liners, cartridge belts with canteen and first aid packet - and rifles with fixed bayonets. At the cue for the Star Spangled Banner, the Battalion Commander bawls out: "Preee - sent ARMS!" The command is relayed to us by the Company Commander.

I snap the rifle up and in front of me, the bayonet scratches my right cheek, as my left and right hands smack the stock smartly. Listening to the National Anthem, I look past the offending bayonet, now held rigidly a few inches in front of my nose while a trickle of blood seeps down towards my clean shirt. I see the distant hills simmering in the summer heat, and wonder if that will be the last injury to be caused by my bayonet.

Bayonet drill looks like fun, but turns out to be tough. We learn the techniques: "On Guard!" "Long Thrust - Withdrawal - HO!" "Short Thrust - Withdrawal - HO!"

The formal motions are derived from classic fencing positions; with the stock in your right hand, extend the bayoneted rifle, the left hand under the barrel. The left hand and left foot both move forward as the bayonet is thrust at the dummy. It is the reverse of a throwing motion where the left foot and right arm move forward. The movement imparts a strong force on the bayonet, and one must move quickly to regain balance, especially after missing the target.

I think the bayonet is useless as long as I have any ammunition, and with an empty rifle it would be foolish to press an attack. The idea of a bayonet attack remains far-fetched, but then, if it is "he or me" - the survivor may be the one best trained, and most determined.

The bayonet course is a series of straw filled khaki dummies and obstacles similar to the obstacle course. Some dummies have a stick on a swivel which must be parried before one can approach the dummy. We run from one dummy to

another, yelling like Banshees, stabbing each dummy in turn; - long or short thrust, withdraw, and then an uppercut with the rifle butt. It is fierce, naked violence. Each stroke must be done just so, and the penalty for a poor performance is to run the course again.

We run the bayonet course several times a week. The last run is on a hot afternoon after three molars were pulled only an hour earlier. The dummies seem to be dodging, and the entire course sways before my bleary-eyed charge. But the performance is acceptable.

My bayonet draws blood once more a few weeks later. Carrying the rifle in my right hand, I jump across a small stream just as the man ahead of me slips back down the stream bank; his calf is scratched by my fixed bayonet. He accepts my apology.

In a war dominated by firepower, the bayonet seems ineffective, and I wonder if we are wasting our time. Yet, to this day I might be able to fend off an attack if I am only armed with a broom stick, a cane, or an umbrella.

Machine gunners and ammo bearers are armed with pistols and carbines respectively. Officers and runners carry carbines. They all carry trench knives, not bayonets. However, 16 months later at St. Remy, I see that a line of riflemen advancing with fixed bayonets is a most intimidating sight.

## **14. MARKSMANSHIP**

Under the trees, we practice the standard shooting positions; stand, squat, sit, kneel, and prone. Standing is the least steady, even when the rifle is supported by the sling wrapped around the left arm, across the body, and around right shoulder. The instructors are quite specific:

"What Ah'm telling yew will hep yo' a lot! Hol' yo' rat elbow high! Et'l hep yo' keep tha rahful stidy!"

Away from the non-noncoms, we get a lot of mileage out of "hep yo a lot!" as the mimics repeat the instructions with satirical asides.

The instructors have a lot more to say:

"You may not place an object under your arm to prop the rifle when firing for qualification. Some WACS have been known to use their natural parts for this purpose, but you men are not so equipped!"

"When you assume the prone position, you should be comfortable and stable; the book says that the legs should be spread according to the conformation of the man. This instruction must be revised when the students are WACS!" It takes a while, but we laugh.

I peer through the hole in the rear sight; the front sight is a vertical blade which must appear centered in the hole with the target resting on top of the blade. I sight on the "bull's eye" (known as a "bull"). It is a black one inch circle on white paper, mounted on a wooden box about two feet high. "Take a deep breath, sight below the target and let your breath out slowly while you take up the slack in the trigger. When the bull appears on top of the blade in the center of your sight, stop exhaling and gently squeeze - do not jerk - the trigger."

Half the class sits on the little boxes with a marker on a stick; the other half sights on the targets on the boxes and does the trigger squeeze exercise. The rifleman calls out where he thinks the sights were actually aimed when the trigger clicks and the man on the box moves the marker to that spot. It seems a little silly, but I become aware of where the rifle is aimed when the trigger clicks. It is a welcome respite from bayonet drill and forced marches.

## 15. WATER

"But when it comes to slaughter  
You will do your work on water..."  
(as Kipling wrote, in "Gunga Din").

The fighting in North Africa is winding down, and the "lessons learned" are still in the training program. Every morning, and after lunch, before we "move out" to our first exercise or class, we must hold up our canteens, upside down with their tops dangling on their little chains. Non-noncoms check to see that each canteen is empty. We get no water for 4 hours in the sweltering Alabama sun. "They" call it "water discipline," and tell us it will prepare us for desert fighting. Since the fighting is winding down in Africa, we call it damn foolishness, and suspect that the Army just wants to demonstrate complete control of our lives - or maybe the training schedule lags behind the current events?

A typical four hour sequence might include an hour each of calisthenics, close order drill, a training film and a five mile forced march. When we return to the "Company Area" we stand at attention in one more formation for a 10-minute eternity while announcements are made by the C.O. Finally, we hear: "DISMISSED" and we race to the oasis; the wash racks and sinks in the latrine. We ignore the warnings about drinking too much too quickly, and seem none the

worse.

After supper we quench our thirst in the PX; sodas outsell beer. I eat a quart of ice cream, and still want more, but the full containers feel light in weight as if air is whipped into the ice cream. One Sunday, three of us actually get a pass and visit a café in Anniston. We each order - and consume - a whole apple pie and a quart of milk.

In later years, the "experts" find that drinking plenty of water improves resistance to heat and sun. Ball players are allowed to swallow water instead of just rinsing the mouth. However, we will see more than enough water before our training cycle is over.

The focus of the fighting turns to Sicily, and "water discipline" is dropped from the training programs. The whole idea never made sense to us. (One veteran tells me later "The Army did that because they can; to show us who is in control.") We find our endurance improves when we are again allowed to carry water. The timing is appropriate, for thirst and dehydration would not be helpful during rifle marksmanship qualification.

## 16. INSPECTIONS

Every day in every way there are inspections. Even in the one hundred degree heat, shirt sleeves must always be rolled down and the cuffs buttoned. Rifles, (or "side arms") are checked at nearly every formation. At Retreat, and when leaving the Company Area, one must wear khakis with a matching "overseas cap," - now with blue piping, indicating infantry. The necktie is required, properly tied; ends tucked into the shirt between the second and third buttons. Off duty, one is allowed to wear low-cut plain brown civilian shoes.

I yearn to discard the necktie, unbutton my collar, and roll up my sleeves - or even discard the shirt in the Alabama heat. Sweat-drenched uniforms are a way of life.

Most infamous is the so-called "short arm inspection" mentioned earlier. About once a month, after a full day's work we shower, and fall out dressed only in raincoats, helmet liners, socks and shoes. We march to the clinic and file through the building pausing only long enough to respond to a medic's command; "Milk it down!"

The full field inspection is a lot more trouble. All of the gear which is officially prescribed to be in the "full field pack" must be displayed, spread on the ground on the shelter half (half of a pup tent). Each item has to be positioned in its exact specified location. The comb must face just so, teeth down, and small



teeth on the left. The shaving and tooth brushes must be dry. Shaving soap must be new, never used. A spare pair of socks is rolled into a tiny compressed ball and placed exactly. A set of new underwear is folded and laid just so. The mess gear is polished and in its assigned place, open, with handle pointed in the exact required direction. Every item must be perfectly clean and located with absolute precision.

For all of its idiocy, the full field inspection has a point. When the pack is assembled, we have everything we need to survive "in the field." We lay out the shelter half, fold it around the folded blanket, and roll it up while kneeling on it; then tuck the roll into the shelter half's flaps. The roll is amazingly tight. Sgt. Muir throws mine high in the air; it bounces on the ground and is still tight. The pack is strapped around this "bedroll." On top of the pack, the mess gear fits in a pouch and the entrenching tool is strapped on below that. It makes a sturdy package, and it weighs more than twenty pounds - dry. The entrenching tool is a little combination pick and shovel; light and compact, but it makes for slow digging.

We get a Sunday treat: a "clean and dry rifle inspection." The rifle must be absolutely clean and dry; not a trace of oil; another bit of idiocy, for we must drench the parts in oil right after the inspection or the rifle will rust, especially the bore which has no protective bluing. The theory is that the oil may hide some speck of dust. "The Word" is not to worry about uniform, shoes or personal appearance, only the rifle is to be inspected. I scrub and wipe; the bore is bright and clean, not a trace of oil or lint can be seen in any part of the rifle; even the trigger assembly is clean and dry, although it is unlikely that the inspector will "field strip" my rifle.

Since it is Sunday, we fall out for this special inspection in fatigues without leggings, but helmet liners as usual. I anticipate no problem, even though Sgt. Muir berates several men before coming to me. He sidesteps to face me and I snap the rifle to "inspection arms." Mercifully, the bolt locks open on the first attempt. He slaps the rifle from my hands in the approved manner, peers into the open receiver, turns it end for end and examines every inch of surface.

I sweat an eternity while he leisurely checks the receiver, stock, butt plate, and finally holds the barrel to his eye and reflects the sun from his thumbnail in the receiver. I KNOW that rifling is SHINY BRIGHT and dry. In one smooth movement, he drops the rifle back into my waiting hands. His blue eyes twinkle as they acknowledge a good job well done. Then they drop, surveying me from head to toes and back. He speaks to the attending corporal: "Dirty finger nails!"

Most of us find ourselves on the corporal's list. We return to our hutments, oil the rifles, and put them back in the rack. We feel betrayed; "they" did not follow their own conditions for the inspection. Many men are needed for the "sod detail;" and one excuse is as good as another. We grow more skeptical of the Army's sense of fair play. I find some consolation in the fact that "my" rifle passed this tough inspection. Always near, it becomes a trusted friend as the weeks go by.

After Sunday lunch, we chosen-many spend the afternoon digging sod from a nearby meadow. We haul it in wheel barrows and plant it as directed. Through

the sweat, I am haunted by the words; "Only the rifle will be inspected." First Lieutenant Reese wishes to be a Captain; he will have grass next to the Company Headquarters walkway.

Friday night we are promised another big treat: a "GI PARTY!" We haul every cot and footlocker out into the Company Street; we move everything off the floor. I play a tune on the harmonica while big GI shoes pound out a Virginia Reel. Then we soak the bare board floor in GI soap and water, form a line and scrub it down; flush the soap away, mop it dry, and let it air a bit. Everything goes back in place; we do not walk on the floor in shoes; and the next morning's inspection finds an immaculate floor, worn a little thinner, again.