AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

17. THE SHARPSHOOTER

The big day finally arrives, hot and clear; about halfway through the training cycle. We carry rifles, full canteens and "light packs" (raincoats and mess kits). In high spirits, we hike the five miles to the rifle range. We are divided into two groups; mine goes first "to the pits." Standing in the target pit, I look up at the big target; maybe 6-foot square, white paper on plywood, an 8-inch diameter black bull's eye sits in the middle of several larger circles on the face of the target.

The first shot comes as a surprise; the bullet slaps the target just before the sound of the rifle blast arrives. It is almost a single sound. Now we know what a shot sounds like when a rifle is fired in our direction.

After each shot we pull the target down into the pit and place a marker on the bullet hole to show where it hit and to indicate the score. When a target is missed, the "pit crew" waves a red flag known as "Maggies drawers."

There are many erratic shots; we hear the thud of bullets hitting the dirt in front of the pits, some ricochet and whistle over our heads. One spent ricochet bounces off the target and falls on my shoulder. It does no harm, but when I pick it up, it is too hot to hold. The bullet is nearly flat, opened at the nose and peeled back; its copper jacket is laid back from the lead. It becomes a souvenir; the only bullet to hit me during the war. Shrapnel is something else.

Our turn on the firing line brings the purpose of this game into a sharper focus. We watch Sgt. Muir demonstrating the use of the sling. His position is rock solid and he fires consecutive bulls from all five positions; stand, kneel, squat, sit, and prone.

The range is operated as safely as possible. We hear and respond to commands from a megaphone in the control tower near the middle and behind the firing line: "Lock and Load!" I check that the safety is on; push the clip with its 8 rounds of "ball" ammunition down into the open breach; the bolt rides home carrying the first round into the chamber.

"READY ON THE RIGHT?" A non-comm to my right raises his hand.

"READY ON THE LEFT?" A hand appears in that direction.

"READY ON THE FIRING LINE!" A non-com checks each trainee.

"FIRE AT WILL!" Later, of course, the Company clowns wonder which one is "Will," but everyone is deadly serious on the firing line.

At last, we fire at targets from 100 to 500 yards away. The first task is to find the "zero" position, by moving the rear sight either horizontally or vertically,

depending on which knob is rotated. One knob sits on each side of the rear sight. We start in the most stable position, prone, with the sling rigged to lock the rifle into our shoulders. We fire a practice round to get used to the "kick."

When the rifle is fired with the bull in the sights, and the marker shows a hit outside of the bull, then the sights are adjusted to bring the next shot into the bull. With luck, further adjustment can bring a shot close to the exact center of the target. One must also consider the wind, when there is any.

The kick of my first shot brings appreciation for the shoulder pad in my fatigue shirt. I am astonished when the target reappears with a mark not far from the bull. After each shot I adjust the sights until I hit consecutive bulls..

One must remember where the "zero" is. The only way to locate it is to count the number of "clicks" that can be heard and felt when moving the sight from the zero position to the left stop, as far as it will go, and again, to one of the vertical stops. Then, to reset the "zero" one goes back to those stops and counts the "clicks" back to the zero position. The Springfield sights are marked with range distances and seem easier to "zero."

Once the rifle is "zeroed" we get a few practice shots, and then fire "for record" in each of the five positions, first without using the sling; then using the sling. In the "squatting" position; my heels will not touch the ground, so I dig little holes for my toes.

A few men hit the wrong targets. This takes a little shuffling of firing orders by the cadre to sort it out.

As we move to longer ranges the bull's eye gets much smaller. At 500 yards it is a tiny speck sitting on the middle of my front sight. I picture a helmet, about the same size.

Qualification scores fall into three grades; Expert, Sharpshooter, and Marksman. I qualify as a Sharpshooter, and enjoy the medal; a Maltese cross with bull's eye and concentric target rings. The Marksman medal is a plain Maltese cross, while the Expert's is decorated with a wreath around its bull's eye and target rings.

A few men fail to qualify on their first try; they go back again until they do qualify. We wear our medals on our khaki shirts on a Sunday pass to nearby Anniston. It supplements the new infantry blue piping on our caps.

18. ROUTE MARCH

An officer talks about walking. "If you march at 120 steps per minute, with a 30-inch stride, you will go about one mile every fifteen minutes. To do this, and carry a full field pack, rifle, steel helmet and ammunition, you cannot waste any effort."

A noncom demonstrates an effortless glide. The officer points out that the gentle roll of the noncom's hips serves to extend the length of his legs. They do not explain that the arms, swinging in opposite directions, accumulate kinetic energy, until at the end of each swing, the energy is uncoiled, thus helping to bring the arms back, counter-balancing the movement of the legs. As each foot pushes back, toes straight ahead, the body weight rolls smoothly over the ball of the foot, thrusting the soldier forward. The lead foot comes down gently, rolling the body's weight from the back of the heel, smoothly forward again, over the ball and pushing off from the toes.

Then the noncom walks the same route with his toes pointed out - and again with toes pointing in. It is obvious that "duck waddle" and "pigeon toe" gaits waste a lot of energy moving from side to side, and the body weight will do damage as it rolls over the side of the foot. The object is to carry the center of gravity straight ahead with no bobbing or weaving, while rotating the extremities, balanced around the center of gravity.

We march away in "route step" which permits us to try different styles of walking. I try the exaggerated arm swing used by the British. Sure enough, it helps to build momentum and to balance the motion of the legs, as contrasted to the stiffness of our prescribed six inch arm swing. The lessons have instant application.

Every morning and afternoon we leave the Company Area marching four abreast. The first platoon follows the CO or one of his officers and trainee Arbuckle, the Company guidon bearer. Arbuckle was so honored because his name starts with "A" and he is tall enough to already be at the head of his squad in the first platoon. He is well built, and his task is to carry the small dark blue company flag, or guidon, which marks the head of our column; the officer on the left, the guidon on the right, followed by the four first platoon squad leaders in one line.

Arbuckle gets a little ribbing because he carries the guidon in place of a rifle. Even the Springfield rifle is heavier than the guidon. I picture the color bearer as THE prime target in "The Red Badge of Courage" but we are far from any combat.

On the back roads, we proceed in two files, one on each side of the road. When any distance is involved we may be allowed to march at "route step." This allows each man to take short or long steps, rather than "stay in step." We may talk and sing and make ourselves more comfortable by carrying rifles at "sling arms" on either shoulder. Slung upside down on my left shoulder, the rifle's offending bolt handle points away from my hip.

Passing a headquarters building, a flag, or an officer, the column is told to: "Sling Arms to the RIGHT!" And then a call to: "AH-TEN-HUT!" We sling the rifles, barrels up on our right shoulders, straighten our lines and pick up the step. Then: "Dresss-right, - DRESS! - HUP - HUP - HUP - TWO - LEFT - RIGHT - LEFT - RIGHT - ..." We pick up the step and close ranks.

Finally, "EYES - RIGHT!" All heads turn right except those of the men in the right column. The officer in charge of the platoon salutes, Then "FRONT!" - and if we are lucky, once more, "ROUTE STEP!"

At first we march leisurely to one training site and then another, further away. (I am in a minority that can describe the pace as "leisurely" thanks to conditioning from the paper route.) Later we retrace the five miles to the hutments in one hour.

A few days later we "double-time" most of the five miles back, covering the distance in about 45 minutes.

A song comes to mind; "Hayfoot, straw foot, five miles more! Where in the heck, is this mechanized war? Come on doggies, don't get sore, Get HEP HEP HEP to the step!"

As the cycle progresses we venture farther from the hutments. Finally we face the longest forced march; over "Baines' Gap" near the reservation boundary. The day is hot, we carry full field packs, rifles, and full canteens. We march eight miles at a fast pace and climb a long steep slope for about a mile, up a small mountain, pounding the dirt in a desperate effort to keep up. The distance between men grows a little; then as the lead platoon goes over the top they bunch up and resume their assigned distances apart. Far ahead, I see the men speeding up as they move over the crest and start down hill.

Our platoon tries to maintain the spacing, moving faster as we climb. I can't quite keep up; the man in front of me pulls away a few feet while I go as fast as I can. It seems hopeless when suddenly we are at the crest and take our turn rushing down the hill to close the gaps. Near the bottom, the column is halted after marching exactly 10 miles. We get a strange order: "ABOUT -FACE! -FORR -WAARRD - HARCH!" And we start back up the hill.

I congratulate myself for being in the third platoon; the fourth is leading us up the hill; and now the second and first platoons, behind us, have trouble keeping the spacing as we coast over the top.

We force ourselves to resume the pace back up the hill, Arbuckle suddenly appears between our files. He must "double-time" to carry the guidon back to the end of the column which is now leading our way to water and rest. I no longer envy his light burden. We return to our Company Area in the same quick time to a rare congratulation from the CO because no one fell out, and even the few stragglers made the entire march.

My feet are building calluses that fill the square corners of my boots. They appear to have square edges!

19. NIGHT MARCH

The problem is simple enough. The Company will cross a wooded area at night. The CO leads the way, following his luminous compass course. There is no moon. Even the distant lights of the Fort and the dim light of the stars are masked by the trees. It is so dark that each man must hold onto the entrenching tool on the back of the pack of the man ahead of him. In single file, we plow through the brush, through the woods, through a small stream. We stumble over a barbed wire fence.

This night is too dark for the best night vision. Perhaps the old Boy Scout night adventures helped; I am sure that we are drifting off to the left of our original course. Nothing I can do but hang onto the handle of the little shovel of the man ahead, out of sight, leading me blindly on. The march is scheduled to take one

hour; the minutes drag on forever.

After two hours we break free onto a road; our objective. We gather around our platoon leader. He became aware of a break in the line ahead of his position and he lead us out of the woods. But the first and second platoons are nowhere in sight.

The Lieutenant sends scouts in each direction on the road. To the right, about half a mile away, they find the first and second platoons which had followed the CO's compass headings directly as planned. The left scouts are recalled, we join the others and wait, sleeping on our packs. Part of our platoon and the fourth platoon are lost.

Several hours later they burst out of the bushes into our midst. Their story is simple. A man near the end of the third platoon lost his grip and fell when he hit the barbed wire. He stumbled on in the dark until he found what he thought was the man ahead of him, grasped the welcome tool handle and followed as before. After several hours, the fourth platoon leader fell out of line, feeling that he had been through the same obstacles before. He wanted to see if he had any stragglers; but the end of the line never came. He became aware that the same men were passing him again.

They had been following blindly in a circle for hours.

20. WEAPONS

We are introduced to more of the infantryman's arsenal. Every rifle squad is equipped with grenades, grenade launchers, bazookas and a BAR; the famous Browning Automatic Rifle.

Light machine guns and 60 mm mortars are assigned to each rifle company's weapons platoon. Carbines are carried by officers, ammo bearers and messengers. The water cooled 30 caliber machine gun and 81 mm mortar are left for the heavy weapons companies.

I throw dummy grenades until I can throw one almost as far as I can throw a football, maybe 40 yards. It may not be far enough to be out of range from the grenade's shrapnel.

Next, we are to throw a live grenade from a trench. I hold the grenade in my right hand with the handle secure against my sweating palm, gingerly pull the pin

with my left hand, heave the grenade at the target and in one motion, duck down in the trench.

Relief pours through me when the throw is a good one; panicky trainees have been known to drop a live grenade. When it leaves my hand, the handle springs free setting off the fuse. Three seconds later, while I am crouching in the bottom of the trench, the explosion shakes the ground and leaves my ears ringing.

The instructor tells us: "Grenades are useful at night because they do not reveal your position like a rifle's muzzle blast will!" Sounds like a good thing to know, but I learn later (in combat) that it is not true. The burning fuse streaks a trail of fire through the dark!

We are shown how to "field strip and reassemble the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR)." It looks complicated. The BAR holds a clip of twenty rounds which can be fired fully automatic. It is the rifle squad's machine gun. We each fire a few shots with and without the bipod on the ground. The biggest men in the rifle squad are often assigned to carry the BAR which weighs 20 pounds. They also carry as many 20-round clips of ammunition as they can for this gun has a high rate of fire..

The 30 caliber M-1 carbine is a welcome change since it weighs less than 6 pounds. Compared to the rifle, the carbine is small; the ammunition is also smaller, and the clip holds 15 rounds. I fire a few rounds and learn that the carbine has less range and is less accurate than my M-1 rifle. But the rifle clip holds only eight rounds. The carbine offers fifteen shots as fast as one can pull the trigger! It weighs about half as much as a Garand Rifle, and carbine ammunition is about half the weight of rifle ammunition. We are impressed.

The 45 caliber Colt semi-automatic pistol is clumsy and heavy. I can't imagine firing it at anything more than 50 yards away.

We fire the 60 mm mortar with practice loads; first, mounted on the base plate with sights and charge set for a target a few hundred yards away. We fire a few rounds holding the mortar tube against the ground, without the base plate. The target needs to be not too close; a breeze can bring the shell back to the mortar crew if the tube is close to vertical.

We see the 30 caliber air-cooled machine gun field stripped, reassembled, loaded and fired. We each get to place a belt in the gun, load it, and fire a few rounds. Short bursts work best because the first shot will move the gun and it then needs to be re-sighted on the target.

Finally we sit on a hill behind a battery of 105 mm howitzers. Their explosions are deafening; we can see the rounds whispering through the air, then

four rounds explode almost simultaneously some 10 yards apart and 20 feet above the target; a neat trick of the new proximity fuses recently developed by the Harry Diamond Laboratory in Washington DC

The variety of our arsenal is impressive. There is still no hint that I will be a machine gunner in a heavy weapons company.

21. INFILTRATION

The infiltration course is next: "You will crawl under live machine gun fire. Explosions will simulate artillery shells hitting near you! Do not let them panic you. There is danger if you panic; DO NOT STAND UP!"

Perhaps the course is scheduled towards the end of the cycle so that men who might panic could be sorted out. It even follows the exercise in which we don gas masks in a building full of tear gas; a sure inducement to claustrophobic panic.

Machine guns, we learn in weapons training, must have barrels replaced after prolonged firing because the rifling wears away and eventually the enlarged bore will allow the rounds to fire in ever widening circles. This, we are told, is not allowed to happen on the infiltration course. Machine gun mounts, if not tight, can collapse, dropping the barrel. On the infiltration course, the guns are blocked into place to be sure they will not drop.

Naturally it rains earlier that evening. We slosh through ankle deep water in the trench approaching the course; there is not much talk. Non-coms urge us "Over the top" as we climb out of the trench and slither along through and under barbed wire. The black sky is ablaze, streaked with tracers overhead. No need to look up; just watch for the path worn by all the men who had gone before, through the obstacles and wire. An explosion throws dirt over me from one side and behind; then another ahead on the other side reminds me to keep moving.

There are two techniques permitted: "creeping," with arms and legs splayed and torso hugging the ground; and "crawling" on hands and knees. Crawling moves one more than a foot higher; it is not a desirable option as the tracers light the ground around me. Creeping is slow, hot, muddy work. Maybe we are better off in this "cool" 85 degree night, rather than the 100 plus degree days of August. The fatigue uniforms turn from green to red-brown; almost black, darkened by water and mud below and by sweat pouring from above.

We are spaced so that the man ahead is well through the course; it is ever

more lonely as I get closer to the firing guns. An eternity passes in the space of little more than an hour; every muscle aches and I can't see the end of the course.

The pathway swerves to the left, now I crawl faster as the thunder of the guns falls away to my right and then behind. A non-com helps me to my feet after I fall into the trench that marks the end of the course. We did it!

The relief is palpable as we hike back to the hutments. I feel much older. There will be no forgetting the sound of a machine gun, firing in my direction.

22. BIVOUAC

"Final exam" for the training cycle is a two week camping trip. What fun! We hike South, away from Ft. McClellan, sweating under rifles, full canteens and full field packs, including a single "K-Ration." A few trucks pick up men from the rear of the column and advance them a few miles. Thus the column is shuttled and marched deep into the Talladega Forest.

We eat the "K-Ration" lunch beside the road somewhere "en route." Supper is supplied from a field kitchen a few miles yet from our bivouac area. We arrive exhausted as the last light of dusk fades away. My buddy and I feel fortunate to find a small clearing for our tent.

About 2 in the morning we are awakened, not by the rain, but by a small stream flowing through our tent. We create a little island in the dark and barely get back to sleep when we are roused out for the start of maneuvers. We wash down cold eggs with warm coffee and then track an invisible enemy through the soggy woods. Our first night is our best; from then on we simulate combat. We are constantly on the move; day and night are all one.

Sleep must be grabbed between moves, after we "dig in" and then only in shifts, one hour on, one hour off; wrapped in a wet blanket and shelter half, wedged into a slit trench or foxhole. The days and nights become a blur of movement and fatigue.

A tank rumbles over my foxhole, Goliath, rumbling and clanking, passes over David who smugly rises from the hole and throws a simulated grenade (rock) at the back of the tank. "Maybe you'll be lucky and the grenade will knock a track off!" But I think: "Maybe he will stop, and turn his turret back on me?"

We learn a new way to look at things. "The enemy to fear the most is the one close enough to hurt you!" This good advice serves a lifetime for hazardous duties such as driving - anywhere, or walking a dark street:

"Look FIRST at the ground, at the brush and trees nearby; look for mines and trip wires, watch for spider nests (camouflaged fox holes); look for snipers in trees. Look beyond to the middle ground, all around; then the distant ground. Watch that distant tree line; it can hide a main line of resistance. Or maybe just a sniper. Check your left and right and watch the rear."

We move out on patrol, spaced 10 yards apart to avoid presenting a group target. The point man moves slowly, quietly. At any sign of life he signals and the rest of us freeze. The man at the rear walks backwards and scouts are out to left and right. At every stop we set up a picket line; outposts watching in every direction.

The patrol finds all of the expected dangers. A simulated mine explodes like a firecracker! Booby traps are found - or set off. Targets pop out of the ground and from behind trees. Machine guns fire blanks from hidden bunkers, catching us in the open.

The friendly beauty of the woods is distorted into a nightmare. Still, the Talladega Forest scenery is not lost on me; it swims in the water flowing off of my helmet liner. We are standing in formation, waiting for a briefing on our live fire attack on a mock village. Most of the "problems" have been solved; this will be our last "exercise." The rain persists and has long since penetrated through my raincoat; even my spare socks are wet, hidden inside my shirt. There is no hope for an end to the wait and the wet.

In a clear tenor voice, McSpadden, the bridge playing "Hahvahd" man, sings from the rear rank; every verse of a very catchy new "hit" song. I have never heard it before; it plays in my mind as I race through the village, firing at targets a and bayoneting dummies as they appear. The picture of that rain washed hillside will flash before my eyes for the rest of my life - every time I hear - - "Singing in the Rain!" (The movie came out a year later.)

Back from bivouac, we clean up our gear and uniforms, and wind up the training cycle. The mess hall supplies watermelons; one to every two men, and we march out into the woods to eat them. No mess in the mess hall. A few days later we pack up, load our bags on a truck and march one last time to the main base. Buses carry us to the coal burning train that hauls us off to Charleston, South Carolina. "I've never heard of this Citadel!" "Hell, y'all nevah hud uf da West Point of da Souf? Wot a dum' damyankee!"