

At the Fort Devens reception center, where five or six days was the usual stay, I spent some time in a spot that became very familiar during the next few months: washing pots in the mess hall kitchen. Processing, however, was rapid, thorough, and impersonal. My weight, or lack thereof, was not mentioned. I was fitted with two pairs of boots which were, with their eventual successors, the most comfortable shoes I had ever worn, and to a lot of other clothing whose fit was laughable by comparison.

What followed for me after the reception center seems in retrospect a sort of dream-like interlude, a time suspended in almost delightful unreality. It was a long, slow ride on a troop train west through Massachusetts and New York to Cleveland, Ohio, and then south through Cincinnati, Kentucky, and Tennessee to Fort McClellan near Anniston in northern Alabama, where 13 weeks of basic training awaited. While I was on KP at least some of that trip, I rode in a boxcar that had been fitted up as a kitchen. Much of the time between meals we sat in the open doors watching the rural countryside basking in the soft Spring air roll slowly by. Farmyards, villages, pastures, wood lots, and country roads unfolded endlessly. Later in the journey I sat and slept on a pile of duffel bags between cars, for legroom. After three or four days—I've forgotten just how long it took—my hair was packed solid with cinders from the engine smoke.

Much of basic training passed for me in a sort of fog. I'd never been away from home before, except to college, and that hadn't been any sort of success. Our group of trainees were mostly college-delayed enlistees like me, destined to return to college after basic training in the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). I have a clear memory of a three-mile march near the beginning of training which left me almost totally exhausted, and then another ten-miler some weeks later which was no strain at all. This was an edifying example of what physical conditioning could do. I learned how wonderful even a bad cup of coffee (and that my first ever) can be when it is really needed. All in all, though, it was a confusing, dehumanizing time for me. How strange it seems to me in retrospect that, according to my letters home, I was seriously thinking of ways to get out of the ASTP program!

Probably my lack of success with the college I'd had was something to do with it, and another aspect was that the only program open to me was something called "basic engineering," which didn't interest me at all. Then too, there was the misguided—but perhaps understandable then—urge to see "action," whatever I thought that might mean. That peculiar idea was with me for a while. Later I was successful in getting approval for a transfer to the 10th Mountain Infantry Division—the "ski troops"—which I never followed through on. Considering their later high casualty rate in the storming of Monte Cassino, and other actions, in Italy, I may have been fortunate.

At this point, establishing a format that will be followed to the end of this, appears the first related item from the *Newsletter*. One of the inescapable things about war is that the participants are young. We were very young, and for the most part unsophisticated and innocent. Most of us—certainly all from the ASTP—were 18 or 19, and even the most experienced of the officers and non-coms in the Company were seldom older than their middle 20s. This characteristic of callow youth is very humanly illustrated in many of the contributions to the *Newsletter*, one of which is excerpted here.

We printed a tale about one ASTP trainee, Hugh Gillin, much later a sergeant in our Third Platoon. He was undergoing Field Artillery basic training at Camp Roberts,

California—before he made it to “G” Company—when, in his own words, from an oral history tape:

“One day we were doin’ calisthenics and I had taken my field jacket and I had taken chalk and I’d put a couple of bars on there—as a joke, you know—and I forgot I had ‘em on there. We’re out there takin’ PT, and the lieutenant stops and says, ‘Captain Gillin, will you come here a minute?’ Oh my god, ‘Captain’ Gillin. Yeah. So my punishment for impersonating an officer, he says, ‘Tonight you will dig, with a mess kit spoon, a six by six by six foot hole outside your latrine. And don’t ever impersonate an officer again.’ And I said, ‘Yes, sir.’

“I really believed him. So that night I got a spoon, after we got done, and I’m out there beside the barracks and I started to scratch down. I thought, there’s no way I can dig it six by six by six deep with a damn spoon. I can’t ever do that. So, when nobody’s lookin’, I go in and get the fire shovel next to the sand bucket. I went out and started digging with that. That wasn’t much help. So I dug around there, and I thought, I’ll outline six feet by six feet on the surface here, and scratch that up and hope he never comes by to see it. So I did that, and put the shovel up, and went to bed. He never came by and saw it.”

IV. ASTP

The ASTP was made up of college students, and potential students, who had joined the Army with the prospect of continuing or initiating their college studies for some undefined military benefit. Some of us had had a year or more of college and had been subjected to the usual 13 weeks (for some, 17 weeks) of basic training before being assigned to colleges for academic training. Others, younger, had no college experience and were trained for only a few weeks before being slated to be sent as well to various campuses. All of this came to an end in March of 1944, when the basic need for cannon fodder began to outweigh vague academic training goals, and the ASTP was deactivated.

I recall making an effort to apply for ASTP “area studies” so that I could study Russia back at Yale. This only succeeded in delaying my transfer, however, so when all my basic training classmates were shipped off to Auburn University—and coeds!—I was left behind for a time. Nevertheless, by the end of September I found myself in lovely, but sometimes strange, Charleston, South Carolina, a participant in the ASTP program at The Citadel, the “Military College of South Carolina,” an emphatically coed-less and very odd place to me.

I’d gotten a slight taste of the rural South of those days in Alabama; now I would have some experience with the urban South at Charleston. Many things were certainly different from my life in New England. In Alabama we’d seen, on marches and exercises off the Post, rural shacks in advanced states of dilapidation, full of people. Grass and