

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

23. THE CITADEL

The barracks look like a row of white concrete forts, three stories high, punctuated with arched entryways, barred windows and gates. Each has a single main entrance; the "sally port" which is the only way in or out and that way is under constant guard. West Point, I remember from the books, is gray granite sprouting on a plain by the hills over the Hudson. These stark white buildings sit on a plain by the Ashley River. They contrast sharply with the bright blue sky, the green parade ground and the palm trees along the street.

My room is on the third floor of the "Murray Barracks;" the farthest from the gate. My new roommate's exuberant accent rolls over me as he pumps my hand: "I'm Bob Katzenson, yer noo roomie. Where ya from, kid?" ... "Wherinell is Balmor? ... Oh you mean Baltimooah! Down blow Philly, rye? Ah'm fum Brooklyn. I wuz goin ta en-why-yoo win' the draft gomee. Ya shudda seen da place! It wuz crawlin' wit' broads!" I ask: "What's a en-why-yoo?" He says: "Ya nevah hoid a' NooYawk Unavoisity?" It is different from the Baltimore slang, but I learn to translate. Lucky for me, he is a good student and congenial companion.

After supper, as required, we are in our rooms studying; every night except Saturday; and some of us are playing "catch up" then. The pace is furious, the courses are accelerated and we carry a heavy schedule.

We rejoice in the snug rooms, three hot meals a day; and a chance to get an education. The routine is rigorous and restrictive. But we do not forget the foxholes and slit trenches of the Talladega bivouac. We understand something of the holes which are being dug and lived-in, in places like Italy and Tarawa.

We wear khakis, then change to OD's in the few months of cool weather. Otherwise we live as the cadets do, except that we get no rifles (we had our rifle training at IRTC); and we are spared the plebe hazing which the Army (and I) view as counterproductive. Of course, there are no ASTP upperclassmen.

There are four barracks, each occupied by a battalion of four companies. The men in the first barracks (closest to the gate) recently graduated from the Army Air Corps' basic training. They wear Air Corps piping on their caps and, when marching, they demonstrate that they were not trained in the infantry. The rest of us continue to wear Infantry blue piping.

The biggest barracks, next to ours, is occupied by some 700 ROTC cadets; all that is left of The Citadel's proud Corps which ordinarily numbered three or four times as many. The rest have gone to the draft, to OCS; some to accept commissions - or to work in a defense industry. Maybe some are in the ASTP battalions. There are very few seniors.

Cadet uniforms are gray cotton in summer and blue wool in winter. Year round, they wear a blue cap with black visor. They carry 1903 Springfield rifles on review and at retreat ceremonies. On special review days the cadets wear formal uniforms; dress gray jackets, starched white trousers, and plumed shakos with shiny black chin straps that are too short to reach the chin. They make a beautiful picture, carrying their rifles at a stiff "right shoulder arms."

The barracks are shaped like hollow squares; in the middle is the checkerboard quadrangle where we fall in to formations; reveille, mess, class, retreat. We march to every meal (except Sundays) and to every class. In short order we have "cadet" sergeants, lieutenants, captains and a battalion commander. The faculty consists of Army officers and civilians. Even the civilian teachers wear uniforms and have an ROTC status equivalent to officers.

The Citadel Commander is the aging 4 star General Charles P. Summerall; the gentleman that we nearly bowled over a short lifetime ago in Washington DC.

Nearly every Saturday morning we "pass in review." The entire student body marches around the parade ground. We wear comfortable khakis or OD's with the orange and blue student lamp ASTP patch on our left shoulders and marksmanship badges above the left shirt pocket. The enrollment drain has affected The Citadel's excellent band; one of the trombone players is a faculty member. His khaki uniform stands out in the line of blue and gray cadets. We march past the band while they play "The Washington Post Light Infantry March," I think: "This is marvelous; we are so 'light' that we are not even carrying rifles!"

From Saturday noon to Sunday supper we are free to explore the Charleston area. One afternoon, I take a bus to Sullivan's Island. At the bridge, a pair of MP's check papers of all men in uniforms. I tell them that I'm from The Citadel on a weekend pass by VOCO ("Verbal order of the Commanding Officer"). I expect to get hauled off the bus, but they recognize my ASTP shoulder patch and move away. On the island, batteries of big guns cover the approaches to Charleston Harbor.

The window of our room overlooks the Ashley River; we can see the railroad bridge. Every night after lights out a passenger train leaves Charleston, the lights in the car windows reflect from the black water as the train crosses the river to the West. The engine's lonesome whistle calls back to us from the far side of the river. We'd like to be going North; back to our homes. We wonder where and when we go from here?

There seems to be only one girl on the campus; we linger in the commissary to admire her striking good looks. Ralph Reeves thinks of her as "the Regimental Doll."

Seven of us find that we can check out a racing shell in the free time between last class and supper formation. We row across and up and down the river. One day we have a little extra time; we race downstream against a Coast Guard crew in a lifeboat and leave them far behind. We head out into the harbor. The coxswain says: "Do you think we could go to Ft. Sumter?" The Fort is a thin line on the horizon, as we continue down the river. Half an hour of rowing brings us into rougher water; we are moving very fast as we approach a point of land projecting from the South shore. We turn into a little harbor; the quarantine station for the Port of Charleston. Ft. Sumter is still a long way off, and the water is getting choppy in the freshening offshore breeze.

We rest and then head back to Charleston. Now we know why we arrived so quickly. The tide, the river current and the wind are all heading down the river and out to sea. We pull hard and steady; the shell's bow breaks every wave and little splashes of water slosh over the sides. The coxswain bails and steers; the rest of us pull as hard as we can, for we are moving very slowly against the combined forces and the incoming water is gaining on the coxswain.

We approach the nearest pier in the Charleston Harbor just in time; only a few inches of the shell remain above water and we are exhausted. We tie-up to the dock, bail the water out, and rest. A guard shouts: "Get off this dock! This is private property!" We shout: "As soon as we can get this boat bailed out!" It only takes a few more minutes and we have an easier row back upstream, sheltered by the river bank.

Katzenson and I go to the YMCA or Catholic Church dance on Saturday night. One night, getting ready to go, Bob says: "I hope da goil I met las' week comes; she really toins me on; I need a cast iyon jock strap when I dance wid 'er. One slow dance 'n der'd be shrapnel all ovah da place!" I'm laughing, as he goes

on: "I kin see da hedloins now! Fitty goils and foity soivicemin kilt by mistree bomb!" It is funny, but I know how he feels.

My radio-phonograph and records are sent from home. We listen to Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw and others. We have little free time, but in the few minutes waiting for a formation, sometimes five or six fellow students gather in our room, listening to a Big Band. The big new 33 rpm records have six songs on each side. We listen to classic swing: "Boogie Woogie," "Moonlight Serenade," "Begin the Beguine," "String of Pearls," "You Made Me Love You," "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now." I wonder who Betty is dating now.

A fellow student sings a new verse to "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" - "Take down your service flag Mother. Your son's in the ASTP!"

Christmas day I ride a bus to North Charleston. The big shipyards look like the ones in Baltimore near the Fire Department Repair Shop on Key Highway. At the North Charleston Methodist Church, two girls invite me to Christmas Dinner. We eat in a giant mess hall at the shipyard where they work. It is rather festive; but not like being home.

In the three months from early September to the end of December, we complete a semester of basic engineering plus military science, and inspections and a review every Saturday morning.

The three month semester ends on December 31; we get a 7 day furlough.

The Germans are retreating from Russia, and the Japanese have lost several islands. We do not know that Josef Mengele has already been at Aushwitz for six months. This month, December, 1943, Mengele had a new mother's breasts bound up, and then he spends a few days watching and taking notes, as the newborn baby dies of starvation and dehydration.

Maybe next year we'll all be home. But I doubt it.

I pay \$20 for a round trip to Baltimore in a 1934 Ford convertible sedan. We head north, feeling like - (what else?) like kids just out of school. About midnight, the engine runs out of oil. We break into a closed gas station, take four quarts of oil and leave enough cash to pay for the oil.

In the wee hours of Sunday morning the car's lights go out. We follow a bus, through the dark, up old US Route 1, towards Alexandria, Virginia.

Waking, I can only see a little out of my left eye. I have a faint recollection of bright lights and a cry; "Look OUT!"

A nurse's face floats in a white background; "Do you know who you are?" "Sure, I'm Frank Hancock!" "Do you know where you are?" That's a stopper. I should be in the car. "You are in the hospital at Fort Belvoir."

I think: "Ft. Belvoir? Where are the Engineers?" She goes on: "You were in an accident, and the Alexandria Hospital sent you here. You have been unconscious for nine hours. It is two o'clock in the afternoon." "Did anyone call my folks?" "Of course, we always do that."

Tuesday morning Mother and Grandfather appear in my little window of visibility. Mom had been making phone calls all afternoon and late into the night before. She found several Katzensons in Brooklyn before locating Bob. He gave her a list of names of the others in the car. (Smart Bob went home by train.) A few more phone calls and she found one of our riders who had taken a bus from Alexandria to his home in Philadelphia.

I was the only one seriously hurt, although one student was knocked for a loop by the battery which fell out of the car after it stopped rolling. "They" said we rolled three times (in a convertible!) after a car broadsided us when the driver assumed that there was no other vehicle in the dark behind the bus.

Army medics do a great job of salvaging my right eye and sewing my face together. They cannot find why my left shoulder hurts, and they turn me loose to resume my leave after only two weeks. The hospital administrator tells me: "Go, take your week's leave; just let your HQ know what happened and where you are."

It's good to be home, but my scars are not healed, my face is a mess, and I wonder about the classes which are already underway.

25. CADET'S FAREWELL

The loss of the first three weeks of the new semester is tough to catch up, especially in Analytical Geometry which builds on fundamentals established in the first two weeks. But the pressure makes the time fly.

We march in a parade to downtown Charleston and back. Bands play, cadets carry their rifles, and we march back to barracks whistling "When Johnny comes Marching Home Again." The citizens are enthusiastic; The Citadel is, and always was - the pride of Charleston, even before the Cadets manned the batteries that fired on Fort Sumter. The student lamp emblem on my left shoulder labels me as "One of those soldiers from The Citadel."

A shiny new brass bugle is issued, and Murray Barracks' recorded bugle calls are replaced by my real ones. One morning the first notes of "Reveille" are muffled; and there is laughter a few rooms away. I pull a wad of paper from the bugle's bell. For me, the bugle calls have a special magic. Tattoo, just before taps, is the longest and prettiest. It is one of the two calls that reach down to the fifth note. Almost all other calls are played on just four notes.

In late January there is about an inch of snow that actually stays on the ground all day. All the local schools close except ours. We march to class and the mess hall through the slush and water.

The second semester closes in March with bad news; there will be no between - term leave, there will be no next term; we are shipping out. The night before we leave we get our orders; "Proceed by train to the 100th Infantry Division at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina."

That night we pack our bags and sing: "Thanks for the memory, of higher education, with seven days vacation, The Citadel, a living Hell! A physics prof who is slightly off! We thank you, so much."

Before dawn on the 25th of March, 1944, we stack our duffel bags by the sally port and march off to an early breakfast. We clean out our rooms, and we each carry a few things in an overnight bag.

We joke and laugh; The Citadel has no more control over us.

A strange sound intrudes upon the familiar formation. A distant drum beat welcomes us as we march out from the shadow of the sally port into the street. We blink in the glare; the sky is ablaze with color from the rising sun; a beautiful

March day; birds are flying about in the palm trees as we turn, "Colummm - RAT!" towards the main gate.

Across the parade ground we see the band, facing the gate and playing "The Washington Post Light Infantry March." Then, an astonishing sight! On each side of the street, there is a single line of Cadets, spaced evenly, around the corner; all the way to the gate! And each cadet stands at "PRESENT ARMS" - his rifle held in both hands, trigger forward and barrel up, inches in front of his nose and the black visor of his cap.

We fall silent as we pass the stony faced, solemn cadets, watching from behind their rifle barrels. They know where we are going. We perceive, at each cadet, an individual silent tribute; our rite of passage. Approaching the band, we pick up the step, straighten our lines and march through the gate like real soldiers. The rising sun warms our march down the streets of Charleston. I wonder if I am the only one to brush away a tear.

The sound of the band fades while the pulse of the bass drum follows us out of sight; and then we are in the silence of our own thoughts. Our boots scuff on the asphalt, birds twitter in the trees, and the sun continues its remorseless climb. We grieve for the end of a dream and wonder what happens next. I know that I will never be quite the same again.

Perhaps some of those cadets of March 1944 remember that magnificent tribute; their farewell salute to the departing warriors to be.

Forty two years later I visit the Citadel's new museum. It begins and nearly ends with the memorabilia of General Mark Clark who commanded the American Armies in Italy and came home to be President of The Citadel. My opinion of Mark Clark is diminished by the exhibitions of his ego. (Later, in 1990, the Museum was changed to represent the history of The Citadel, arranged chronologically, and now includes a mention of the ASTP, with the emblem, under "The Citadel in world War II.")

Fifty two years later, I write to the Citadel's Commander, and suggest that it is time to accept women, stop wasting time and money in courts, and stop the hazing. His deputy responds that hazing is now limited, and concludes: "If you wish to contribute to the Citadel's legal fund send your check to...!"

Some folks learn very slowly - the Supreme Court finally convinced them.

26. COMPANY M

Open trucks sweep us away from the Fayetteville's hot train station and into the whiteness of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The sky is freshly washed to a clean azure blue and punctuated by small white clouds.

At the post HQ we jump down from the tailgates to face a blazing sun. The glare and heat is reflected and amplified by white sand and white two-story

barracks parading away to the horizon. Regimented lines are softened only slightly by the greens of tall pines and watered lawns. The air of permanence is a sharp contrast to the temporary hutments and barren grounds of Ft. McClellan.

We are divided into groups and marched away. Ahead and behind us, men turn off into their assigned company areas, until only our small unit continues. We are hot, thirsty, hungry and tired. Ahead, we see open fields when suddenly the column veers and stops in front of the last row of barracks.

A sergeant orders: "Detay-yull - HALT! LEFT - HACE! - At Ee-yuz!" And a few moments later, "ATTENnn- HUT!"

A tall bespectacled captain mounts a stairway in front of us and announces: "Welcome to Company M! I know you are tired and hot, but bear with us while we assign you to your platoons!" The concern for us is a distinct novelty. Officers and noncoms are solicitous as they sort us out; a sharp contrast to the harassing hostility of basic training. The third-platoon sergeant is taking the biggest men first. The rest of us wait. Someone whispers, "Big guys go to the mortar platoon."

A dozen of us are herded into a barracks by a technical sergeant; 3 chevrons up and two rockers down. We gather around our new shepherd:

"This is the Second Platoon. My name is Alvie Hogan, and I'm your Platoon Sergeant." His face is dark from months of training and maneuvers with the Division; his lean build and Tennessee background remind me of the WW I hero, Sergeant York. While he divides us again, into little groups, I wonder, "Is Sgt. Hogan as good a shot as Sgt. York was?" Turns out he probably is.

Buck Sgt. Revere, our squad leader, leads three of us up the stairs and assigns me to a cot near the middle of the row, in the back of the second floor of the barracks. Sgt. Revere has startlingly blue eyes, ruddy complexion, dark hair and a stocky muscular build. In time, I conclude that he has a special guardian angel, no doubt assigned to him before he left Brooklyn, New York.