

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

33. THE EXPERT

A step at a time, we fill each requirement, and qualify for the Expert Infantryman's badge. On the firing ranges, we practice with rifles, BARs, carbines, pistols, submachine guns, mortars and machine guns.

We are seated on a hillside overlooking a long meadow as the sun sets behind us. Ten noncoms stand, one at every 100 yard interval, all the way out in the meadow to a range of 1000 yards where the lone sentry is not much more than a speck. Almost invisible in his green fatigues, he waves a signal flag to be sure that we can see him. One can estimate the distance (or range) to each man by his apparent size.

Some of the noncoms move until they are hidden by a small hill. Distances are harder to estimate when part of the intervening ground is hidden by a rise or depression in the terrain; things then seem closer than they really are.

Classes continue at this location until after dark, when the noncoms are posted again. Now they are invisible until each one in turn lights a match. Even at 1,000 yards the match light is clearly visible. The lesson is not lost on us.

I earn the coveted top marksman badge, "Expert;" a Maltese cross with a wreath and a bulls eye target on it; below hangs a bar each for the rifle and carbine. This is an improvement over my Basic Training rating of "Sharpshooter" for rifle only. I also qualify as "first class machine gunner," a rating equal to "Expert," but without benefit of a medal or bar. I am confident that I can hit anything I can see with the machine gun or rifle and, within a shorter range, the carbine. Ironically, my side arm is the pistol with which I make the lowest rating; "Marksman."

One day we line up ten water-cooled 30 caliber machine guns; each on an elevated post which in turn is mounted on a regular tripod. Every machine-gunner in the regiment is lined up behind these guns. Each gunner brings a belt of ammo with 100 rounds in it (a belt normally holds 250 rounds).

Each man in turn steps up to a gun, loads his 100 rounds, and fires one long burst at a radio controlled model airplane. The plane has a wingspan and fuselage of about eight feet; it is clearly visible, flying in small circles and figure eights; I can see the tracers chasing it, and momentarily expect it to crash.

The firing continues for about an hour. The guns perform well; they get very hot, water boils in some of the jackets and steam bubbles into the overflow cans,

but the guns do not burn out. Finally, the firing ceases, the plane lands, and we look incredulously at two bullet holes in the wings. I hope our Air Corps and antiaircraft artillery are more effective.

The EIB qualification continues; some of it similar to basic training; more obstacle and bayonet courses, endless physical training; and on to another night infiltration course under live machine gun fire. After the antiaircraft drill, I feel a little more confident that the gun barrels will not burn out, but it is a relief to finish the infiltration course safely - again.

The final EIB qualification is a long forced march. We start at midnight. After a hot July day, this night is cool as we slosh through a steady rain. The pace is fast; we wear raincoats, steel helmets, full field packs, and side arms. We sing - "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now?" Someone asks, "Where or what is her NOW?"

The songs die down to Langley's last chorus of "The Yellow Rose of Texas." Then he too joins our silence. Each man is exerting himself to a maximum to maintain the pace. It is a very good time to be carrying a pistol, for I am hard pressed to keep up.

About four in the morning after twelve and one-half miles, we go through a hasty "chow line." Rainwater chills the scrambled eggs and soaks the toast. The lot is washed down with a canteen cup full of coffee while I sit on my raincoat tails and rest against my pack. The "breakfast" break is only a few minutes longer than the 5 minute breaks we take after each hour.

Dripping with sweat and the rain, fingers wrinkle and shoes are soggy. Feet lose their toughness, become sore, and then numb as the thick calluses soak and soften.

I play music through my brain; whatever can be recalled; "Piano Concerto" moves quickly to match our pace; Gilbert and Sullivan airs, college songs, Sousa Marches. The sheer boredom of setting one foot in front of the other numbs the brain. "Hay-foot straw-foot, five miles more, where in the heck is this mechanized war?" "When was it that the Infantry seemed to be the place to be; the Queen of battle?"

In my mind, I am back in high school; I see the towers over the doorways; the white concrete and red bricks. Listen to the bass drum rattling the gym windows at the pep rally! Remember how the Drum and Bugle Corps swings into the stadium at the football games; and a girl friend waits in the stands.

Again, in my head; "I wonder who's kissing her now?" Wish I could sit down on one of those hard stadium seats. Or even on this muddy road.

I climb out of a cab; the nightmare is over, Dad shakes my hand; Mom gives me a hug. A hot bath and my warm dry bed are waiting. The vision fades as the rain quickens; drops of water flow from my helmet onto my nose, down my neck; water is everywhere, I am soaked.

The rain is cold, but we are working much too hard to be chilled. Thank God for a cool night, rain or no, even as the rainwater adds to our loads; wet sand drags at our boots; wet feet grow ever more tender.

At 8 A.M. we are back in our barracks. With our 40 pound loads, we have force marched twenty five miles in eight hours, including time for breaks and a meal. Someone says "That was NO SMALL FEAT!" My sore feet feel bigger than life.

Our new platoon commander, Lt. Scott Witt, joins Sgt. Hogan and a medic as they check the bare feet of every man in the platoon. I admire their stamina; we are lying on our bunks, barefooted; they are still in their wet boots.

My feet have calluses which are almost square; they conform to the inside of the ankle length "GI" shoes. But now the calluses are soft and spongy. There are tender spots, and a small blister. I am in good shape compared to some of the others, but it is plain that wet feet are very vulnerable. Trench foot is a real danger for us, even here, in barracks.

Soon afterwards, we receive our Expert Infantryman's Badges, and the next month, the extra pay. Some of the men qualify later; it appears to me that almost everyone qualified. (Not every company did as well.)

Rivalry between the older cadre and the "Quiz Kids" reaches a peak when two young gunners challenge two sergeants to a "gun drill" race. Both teams start with two men and a dismantled machine gun. At a signal, they race to place the tripod, mount the gun, load a belt of ammo and fire a simulated round.

ASTP gunners, Pfc.'s Aisenbrey and Curley, pull the trigger on their empty chamber a full two seconds before Sergeants Fitzgerald and Tuttle are ready. Rivalry is honed into a new sense of teamwork and competence. The 399th Regiment motto applies to each of us: "I am ready." Seems appropriate, after six

years of “Be prepared” - in the Boy Scouts.

34. FROM TACTICS TO STRATEGY

Strategy, we are told, is the positioning of large units. Someone "up there" (maybe God alone?) knows what is happening to units as small as a Battalion. We are concerned with tactics; and this involves moving little units, the platoon, squad, - and me, from here to there, quickly, - and with the heavy machine guns.

Every morning we run a mile or two; yet we feel pampered because Item Company is up and running five miles before we roll out in the cool dawn for Reveille. Item Company Commander, Captain Travis Hopkins, is determined that Item will be the fittest company in the regiment. They earn their nickname, "The Greyhounds!"

Before dawn, three rows of barracks are quiet as King, Love, and Mike Companies try to sleep until first call. But we all wake every morning to the Greyhounds' barbaric running cadences, echoing through the whispering pines.

More replacements filter in; some fresh from basic training, others from units which are being disbanded. A few are old soldiers; it seems incongruous that I am a gunner, while these older men start as ammo bearers. No one complains.

Brunson MacLeroy shares Langley's Texas background, but not his gung-ho spirit. Brunson is justifiably skeptical of the Army's motives since he had been transferred from the Air Corps to our infantry squad. (Both MacLeroy and Langley will become lawyers, after the war.)

No longer threatened by Japanese aircraft carriers, a Panama Canal anti-aircraft battery sends Al Bowman to us. Quiet, easy going, and funny, he is probably the oldest man in the squad. Already an old soldier, PFC Bowman makes himself comfortable with little fuss, and shares his peace of mind with us.

In the third (mortar) platoon, a new man wants no part of it; he will not fall out for formations and remains in the barracks. After a series of unproductive interviews with noncoms, officers, and the CO, he is taken away by two armed guards. The next day, the guards bring him to the woods across the street from our barracks. While the guards take turns watching, he digs a hole six feet square

and six feet deep and then he fills the hole in. It takes all day and half the night. We are sleeping when he tamps down the final fill, packs his bag and is taken away. We can only wonder at his motives and fate.

Our squad goes through the gun drill, over and over. My original 145 scrawny pounds have grown to 160; I can swing either the gun or tripod easily to my shoulder and carry the burden with a full field pack for miles. We carry the weapons deep into the woods on "field problems." Then we repeat the exercises with live ammunition, firing on targets which pop up from the ground.

As first and second gunners, Langley and I become a team that functions well in a series of "live fire" exercises. We look forward to the indirect firing range where only the squad leader, Sgt. Revere, will see the target, and we will fire over a hill, as he directs. We do it dry, no ammo, over and over until the drill is second nature. Finally we are scheduled for the range - day after tomorrow!

At Retreat, my name is called to go on furlough the next day. I report to the Orderly room and sign my furlough orders; "Two weeks at home!" The orders still need the CO's signature; "They'll be ready in the morning!" says the Company Clerk. Next morning I draw funds from the bank and pack a bag. At the appointed midday hour, I return to pick up the approved furlough. But - all furloughs are canceled. We are "alerted" for overseas movement. I missed a furlough by only a few minutes!

Devastated, I drag myself back to the barracks, stow my gear and join the afternoon training sessions. Lots of sympathy; especially from those who would have had their turn after me. At sunset, I want to be alone. Soldiers are not supposed to cry! God, it has been a long time away from home! I trot a few miles to the Officers' Beach on a small lake; swim in the moonlight; trot back to bed; stifle a sob, and sleep uneasily, exhausted.

The next morning we ride in weapons carriers out to the firing range. The jouncing ride is killing me; each bump is a knife in my stomach. When we finally arrive, I fall from the truck onto the ground. A fetal position calms the pain a little. A Major prods my stomach gently; "Can you gut it out?" "No Sir, I can't even stand up!" He sends me back to the barracks in a jeep. An ambulance crew picks me up, and that night my badly inflamed appendix is removed.

After the appendectomy there is a few days' bed confinement, followed by a week of "recuperation." We take short walks each day and do a few light calisthenics. Then I am listed as "limited duty" for six weeks. The Division is

preparing to go overseas. My bunk stays in the second platoon, but I am assigned to "light duty" as a "runner" in the HQ Platoon. Near the end of September, I am alerted for transfer from the Division.

I appeal the transfer, and the CO sends me to the Regimental Aid Station. A doctor - a captain, says: "You could be permanently classed as 'limited duty' because of your eyes, and now you will need a few more weeks before you can be taken off limited duty, because of this appendectomy. We have been told to ship all of our limited duty men out."

I point out to him that my glasses provide 20-20 correction, I have a spare pair and lenses in my gas mask. I suggest that the Division will be in the States at least a few more weeks; that my strength has already returned; and shipping out would leave me in a Replacement Depot; where I would become a new replacement in a strange unit.

Perhaps he sees the "Expert Rifle and Carbine, First Class Machine Gunner, and EIB" ratings in my personnel record, for he agrees to let me stay, provided that I remain a runner "on light duty" for a few more weeks. The CO is glad to hear it. I stay with Company M, assigned to the HQ platoon on temporary limited duty.

My pistol is exchanged for a carbine, as required for "runners," and I spend a few days on guard duty before we leave Ft. Bragg. One night I guard a small dam on a stream. The post is on a swinging footbridge above the dam. The sergeant of the guard gives me a single round for my carbine and instructs me to watch for anything floating down the stream that might endanger the dam. I wonder what does one do with a single shot? Would a warning shot scare off a saboteur? Stop a bomb?

We turn in the machine guns and mortars and leave Ft. Bragg; once more by truck to Fayetteville, and by train to the Northeast. I carry a full field pack with a blanket roll. All of my other possessions are in a single duffel bag. We stop for a few days at Camp Kilmer near New Brunswick, New Jersey.

We are issued "shoe packs," peculiar black boots, rubberized from sole to ankle, then leather to mid calf. Inside, the bottoms are lined with removable felt pads. They are comfortable and warm, but do not support the feet and ankles as our ankle length GI shoes do. With the shoe packs, one does not need leggings. They are obviously good for cold weather, - if they can be kept dry.

One more short train ride brings us to Hoboken, where we ride a ferry across the Hudson. While we wait on the dock, Red Cross volunteers distribute

coffee and doughnuts.

Finally we file onto a giant troopship; the George Washington. A one-time German luxury liner, it was captured in the First World War.

35. CONVOY

We settle into our "bunks" - white canvas stretched between steel pipe frames and stacked four high; but there is little sleep. We are about to become part of a grand strategy.

My bunk is at the top of the stack, pressed close to the overhead deck. Pipes share my crowded space and limit the positions in which I can sleep. We are not allowed on deck while the ship slips quietly down the Hudson. (Are "they" afraid that we might jump overboard?) From a starboard porthole I glimpse the Statue of Liberty as the ship rocks gently to the first ocean swells.

On deck, we see a thin line of land far behind us. Ships spread in convoy formation from horizon to horizon. In every direction the ocean is full of ships, each a half mile or more apart. On the horizon is a "baby flattop;" a small aircraft carrier, but I see no aircraft. Little destroyer escorts bustle about, taking station at various points; hurrying ahead and behind us, scouting the waters.

I count only 13 ships; perhaps there are more beyond the horizon. We move at the speed of the slowest, about 13 knots.

In the summer of 1940, brother Ray and I watched in horror from the beach at Norfolk, as a tanker burned on the horizon after a U-boat attack. Now, plowing sedately across the ocean, I feel like a sitting duck, waiting for the hunter. I'm grateful that Ray is not with me now.

Our ship, the George Washington, is the largest in the convoy; so big that it carries some 7,000 men; nearly half of the Division. Antiaircraft guns are located

at the bow, stern and on each side, amidships. The gun crews run regular alerts and one day they do a little target practice. Our ship rides smoothly while the little destroyer escorts pitch and roll as they scurry around and through the convoy.

We settle into a comfortable routine for old salts like me. Poor mail clerk is paralyzed with seasickness. For those of us with "sea legs," there is a good supply of pocket books, limited amount of "PX" rations (candy and tobacco) and just two meals a day. Every meal includes a dollop of pickles, reported to be good for seasickness. Warm sea water showers are cleansing, but leave us feeling sticky..

Fresh water is reserved for drinking.

After six days at sea we enter a hurricane. Our ship, big as it is, rolls and pitches; the bow digs into a big wave, the stern rises until cavitation allows the propellers to spin free, the engines race, and the ship shudders almost to a stop. Then the bow rides up on the next wave, the propellers dig deep, the engines slow under the load, and the ship surges forward.

To some of us the motion is invigorating; I stand on a forward upper deck and watch the waves crash over the bow and wash the low forward deck. I am humbled and exhilarated by the sheer power of sea and ship.

Many have an opposite reaction. On the bottom level below my bunk, the 42-year-old mail clerk is deathly sick. Probably the oldest soldier in the Company, his helmet becomes his refuge, the retching nausea leaves him too weak to make it to the head.

Hatches, ports and doorways are kept shut. Below decks, foul air adds to the misery of the sick men and oppresses everyone. Reading for several hours in the stifling air gives me a headache and a queasy stomach. An effective remedy is to go out on deck, watch the horizon, and breathe the cool air.

Destroyer escorts are amazing; they climb vertical walls of water and slide down to crash into the depths; they disappear from sight in the spray behind the towering waves, and bob up again like corks to ride another crest. Yet they persist in their constant patrol, around and through the convoy. Their crews must be black and blue from such tossing about. I wonder if my resistance to seasickness could stand that.

The storm passes after several days; the skies clear, the water quiets, and the air is warmer. Gambling is officially prohibited, but games of cards or craps can be found all over the ship. One of the "new kids" in my HQ platoon prevails upon me to "loan" him ten dollars. It is never returned.

At night the ships are blacked out; there are no lights, not even a smoker's cigarette glows on deck. The ship's wake boils with phosphorescence. I sleep on a hatch cover and watch the stars; suddenly one streaks silently across the sky; a line of light appearing directly overhead; it falls in a second, all the way to the horizon; a disappearing pen stroke arched by an unseen giant hand.

Moments later there is smaller one, a mere speck of light glimpsed from the

corner of one's eye. There are more as the ship plows on through the dark, into the peak meteor hours, from midnight to two or three o'clock.

Little strokes of light paint a quick flash and die abruptly. Others pass half way across the sky. Sleep is banished as we wait for the next and the next. A shower of shooting stars must be a sign of good luck.

For the rest of my life this night will never be matched. There are no artificial lights, none from horizon to horizon; and none reflected in the distant skies.

After a few hours on deck, one becomes accustomed to the dark and the stars actually provide enough light for one to see the outlines of the ship. Perhaps, never again will there be a place on earth where such an experience can be duplicated. It takes a war to put all of the lights out.

The next day we pass little green gems of islands spotted with white houses. The weather is warm and clear, the sky and sea, a cobalt blue. The Azores look like picture post cards!

Another day; I watch the radar antenna sweeping around and around. It stops, looking ahead, sweeps a few more times and then locks onto a target dead ahead.

Soon, in the late afternoon, we see the top of the Rock of Gibraltar. The sun sets behind us, coating the Rock with a rosy glow. The color fades, the Rock emerges from the horizon, turns purple, black, and then, dark as the night, it vanishes except for a little red light that blinks from its summit. We move on into the night as the little red light passes our port beam and fades away to the West.

A German submarine base is said to be still active and not far up the Mediterranean Coast in Spain. Our convoy hugs the African coast. We see the lights of Oran, and later, while we sleep, the convoy turns North to cross the Mediterranean Sea, well clear of the Spanish coast.

Wendall Johnson writes:

"The Rock: Shortly after my Liberty Ship passed this, with Tangiers on the right, the ship ahead of us blew up and went down almost instantly. Some experience!"

And - about Marseilles: "I buried one of my men in a military cemetery here" .

