

Recollections of Army Life— Before Pearl Harbor and Beyond

by Bruno Viani, 399-I

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Joining and Fort McClellan

Every Centuryman has, I am certain, his own unique story regarding Army life, particularly in regard to his service with the 100th Infantry Division. My time in the Army began prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, so my own story has a few extra “twists and turns,” which I thought might be worth recounting.

It begins in the spring of 1940 when I joined the 27th Infantry Division, which was, and remains today, a component of the New York State National Guard. During World War I, it had been part of the American Expeditionary Force and had fought with distinction on the western front, including the Meuse-Argonne campaign. Following the Armistice, the 27th Division reverted to its National Guard status.

At the time of my joining, I was the youngest of three sons of a widowed mother. My mother had emigrated from Italy as a young woman and became a widow at a relatively young age when my father died as a result of injuries sustained in a construction accident.

Fortunately, my two older brothers were of working age and were able to provide my mother with financial support.

By the spring of 1940, I had graduated from high school, and several of my close friends had already enlisted in the Guard. At their urging, I decided to join them. In addition to a paycheck, the National Guard provided a welcome diversion from life on the crowded streets of New York City’s Lower West Side. At that time, the 27th Division was configured as a World War I era “square” division, consisting of four, rather than three, regiments, including an entire medical regiment.

This was the 102d Medical Regiment of which I was a member. As part of our service, we drilled once a week at an armory on West 66th Street. In addition, we were sent in the summer of 1940 to Pine Camp (now Fort Drum), which is near Watertown in upstate New York.

During this two-week period, we conducted field exercises, which were designed to resemble combat conditions. These exercises, which were held over wide-open areas, enabled us to enhance the skills we had been developing at the armory. As a medic, my training was primarily concerned with the treatment and transportation of wounded soldiers. Following our return to New York City, we were, once again, part-time soldiers. This status would, however, prove to be short-lived.

By the autumn of 1940, the Second World War had already begun. It was against this background that the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940 was enacted. As a result of this legislation, the 27th Infantry Division was “federalized” on October 15 for a scheduled duration of twelve months. At this time, other National Guard units were also being “federalized.” Among these was the 45th Infantry Division, which was from Oklahoma and other southwestern states. It was nicknamed the “Thunderbird Division.” Centuryman may recall that we relieved the 45th Division at the outset of our participation in the Vosges Mountains campaign.

Shortly after being “federalized,” the 27th Division was sent to Fort McClellan, located near Anniston, Alabama. Fort McClellan was a sprawling army base, covering over 42,000 acres. Rather than living in barracks, we were housed in large pyramidal tents. Each tent, which could accommodate five men, was heated by a coal-fired stove.

In addition to my everyday duties as a medic, I also had responsibilities in regard to sanitation, including our regimental mess halls. To improve conditions, we devised, by rather simple means, a cleaner and more efficient method for utilizing the large water drums used to clean mess kits. By elevating these drums a few feet, the men were now able to wash their mess kits while standing up, rather

than having to perform the same chore with the added discomfort of bending down. This relatively simple step, along with several others, improved both morale and our overall well being.

While at Fort McClellan, the 27th Division also participated in field maneuvers in Tennessee. These particular maneuvers, which involved large numbers of men and equipment, were conducted in June 1941 and were on a larger scale than our field exercises in upstate New York. These maneuvers provided further opportunities to develop our skills and to enhance our readiness.

Louisiana Maneuvers and “OHIO”

Shortly after returning from Tennessee to Fort McClellan, the 27th Infantry Division was designated to participate in the Louisiana Maneuvers. These maneuvers, which dwarfed, in size, our maneuvers in Tennessee, were conducted pursuant to orders from the Army's chief of staff, General George C. Marshall. Simply stated, Marshall's aim was to prepare the army for war. Equally important, it provided General Marshall and his staff with an opportunity to identify and promote those senior officers who displayed superior levels of ability and to remove those who were ineffective.

These maneuvers were conducted over a wide geographical area and involved several hundred thousand troops and thousands of pieces of equipment. There were two sides—a “Red” army and a “Blue” army—with one side “invading” Louisiana and the other side “defending.”

Although this was a peacetime exercise, there were casualties, particularly at night. These were, for example, the result of vehicular and weapons accidents.

As one might imagine, our living conditions were far from idyllic. For the most part, we lived in pup tents, as we were frequently on the move. In addition to having to confront the “enemy,” we also had to contend with, among other hazards, the numerous swamps, snakes, and mosquitoes found in southern Louisiana. It rained frequently, so the terrain was often muddy, which further impaired our mobility. As these maneuvers unfolded, the men, including myself, were beginning to miss the comforts of our rather spartan quarters back at Fort McClellan. With its difficulties and discomforts, the Louisiana maneuvers did, however, provide a realistic foretaste of the conditions that the American Army would experience during the European campaign.

Despite the passage of time, I can, to this day, recall an occasion during these maneuvers when someone mentioned that a certain “Colonel Eisenhower” was nearby. Within a few short years, the name of Dwight D. Eisenhower would be known worldwide. Moreover, it was in recognition of his outstanding performance during these maneuvers that Ike was promoted to brigadier general and thereby received the first of his five stars. As a result of the Louisiana Maneuvers, General Marshall and his staff had gained a much better understanding of the Army's readiness, as well as its deficiencies.

These maneuvers were conducted during the months of August and September of 1941. While underway, the end of our twelve scheduled months of federal service was approaching, with the men eagerly anticipating their return to civilian life. Disappointment soon followed.

As a result of the enactment (by a margin of one vote in the House of Representatives) of the Service Extension Act of 1941, we were notified that our federal enlistment was being extended for an additional six months. This sparked response from many National Guard soldiers who had received similar notification and came to be known as the “OHIO” movement, which was an acronym for “Over the Hill In October.” Throughout the country, the enlisted men, in particular, were justifiably angry and felt betrayed by this rescinding of a promise of a return to civilian life following the twelve obligatory months of federal service. With its implied threat of mass desertions, the word, “OHIO” began appearing everywhere, including on artillery pieces, barrack walls, and latrines.

The feeling among the men of the 27th Division was no different. By this time, I had been promoted to staff sergeant, with the duty of maintaining discipline among the men for whom I was responsible.

One method that I used was to keep the men occupied with maintaining both the grounds and our quarters in good order, which was commonly referred to as “policing the area.” Although there were a few desertions and hardship discharges, most of the men grudgingly accepted the extension of our federal service.

With the country still mired in the Depression, our prospects at home were, to be realistic, somewhat limited. In due time, "OHIO" fervor subsided, and the men and their NCOs, including myself, returned to their everyday duties at Fort McClellan.

Pearl Harbor Day and California

With the worldwide spread of hostilities and with the ongoing expansion of our ranks, we all began to realize that America's entry into the war was becoming unavoidable. With the passing of the late autumn of 1941, it would prove to be only a matter of time. On December 7, the sun rose on the last peacetime morning at Fort McClellan. On that fateful Sunday, I was in nearby Birmingham as a result of having secured a weekend pass.

Mindful of my mother's wishes, I tried, as best I could, to attend mass on Sunday. On this particular morning, I was joined by our company's mess sergeant, Joe David. As we were entering church in Birmingham, we were greeted, quite unexpectedly, by an affable older woman, a Mrs. Horton, who promptly extended an invitation that we join her and her family for dinner that afternoon. After church, we traveled by trolley to the address that she had provided.

When we arrived, we were greeted by Mrs. Horton and her three adult daughters. They were all most gracious to us, and with its warm setting, her home offered a welcome respite from army life. In addition to serving a home-cooked meal to two soldiers, Mrs. Horton had deftly provided her grown daughters with an opportunity to meet two "eligible" young servicemen.

As we were enjoying each other's company, someone turned on the family radio. We listened in stunned silence to the announcement that the Japanese had attacked the Hawaiian Islands, including Pearl Harbor. In addition, it was announced that all furloughs and leaves had been canceled and that all military personnel had been ordered to return to their respective bases immediately.

As the initial shock subsided, we were able to regain our composure. At that point, Joe David and I looked at each other and decided we would stay and finish our dinner, including coffee and dessert. After all, it was certain to be a long war, and we had, of course, no idea as to when we would be enjoying another home-cooked meal in such pleasant surroundings.

Upon leaving, we thanked our hostess, Mrs. Horton, and her daughters for their fine Southern hospitality, and I promised to keep in touch with them. It was a promise that I was able to keep for most of the war.

As evening approached, we were back at Fort McClellan. By the following morning, the 27th Division was ordered to proceed immediately to the West Coast.

As part of this effort, I helped direct the loading of equipment, such as our ambulances and trucks, aboard the flatcars that were attached to our transport train. During this cross country trip, most of the men had to endure the discomforts of confinement in the coach cars. As a staff sergeant, I qualified for an unoccupied sleeping compartment located in the officers' section on the train. Needless to say, it made the six-day journey a bit more comfortable.

After passing through Chicago, we proceeded to California and disembarked at Camp Haan in Riverside, where we remained for six weeks. Following our stay at Camp Haan, the division proceeded north to Fort Ord, which was located on the Monterey Peninsula.

Upon arriving, I glimpsed the Pacific Ocean for the first time. While at Fort Ord, we did have some free time to tour the northern California countryside, including San Jose and the picturesque town of Carmel.

In addition, it was during this time that our ranks expanded. At one point, this expansion included a contingent of unruly Texans who had been temporarily quarantined and who had been placed under my supervision. This quarantine was necessitated by an outbreak of fever among their ranks. Although unpleasant, it was one of a number of assignments that I willingly accepted, rather than shirk.

Hawaii

In April 1942, we received orders to proceed to Hawaii, with San Francisco as our port of embarkation. Although I am unable to recall many details regarding the voyage, I do remember that it was on or about

April 21, my twenty-first birthday, that we arrived aboard our transport ship in the Hawaiian Islands. At this point, the 27th Infantry Division became one of the first combat divisions to leave the American mainland following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

After arriving on the island of Oahu, we were transported by smaller vessels to the island of Maui. As we had only a brief stopover on Oahu, I had no opportunity to view the remnants of the devastation at Pearl Harbor. Upon our arrival on Maui, we immediately began constructing defensive positions in anticipation of a possible follow-up attack by the Japanese. These positions were dug out on property that had been pineapple and sugar cane plantations and that had been recently appropriated by the Army.

Despite being a medic, I was issued an '03 Springfield rifle as the Japanese had obviously shown no regard for the Geneva Conventions. With practice, I acquired a degree of proficiency, as the Army dispensed with its rule that had prevented medics from bearing arms. Nonetheless, the '03 Springfield was nearly obsolete and would have been of limited utility had the Japanese decided to return. Fortunately, better equipment, including weapons, began arriving, which enabled us to strengthen our positions.

In June 1942, our navy won a stunning victory at Midway. As a result, we gained some assurance that the Japanese had been rendered incapable of threatening the Hawaiian Islands. I should add that in those days, the island of Maui was largely rural, with a small indigenous population with whom the Army maintained an amicable relationship.

Following Midway, life on Maui became somewhat routine, with time for additional training and for some relaxation.

In August 1942, my Army career took a new turn, as I was given the opportunity to apply to Officer Candidate School (OCS). The choices offered to me were the Medical Administration Corps (MAC) or the Infantry. As a medic, my first choice was to seek a commission in the MAC. The Army had, however, the final word, and I was selected for the Infantry. It was a matter of numbers; the Army needed infantry officers. Shortly after my acceptance into OCS, I was on my way to the Army's Infantry School at Fort Benning, near Columbus, Georgia.

As a historical note, it should be mentioned that the 27th Infantry Division subsequently distinguished itself in the Pacific Theatre. Among the hard-fought campaigns in which the 27th Division participated were the battles of Saipan and Okinawa. Due to the fierce nature of these particular engagements, the 27th Infantry Division sustained heavy casualties.

As one might expect, OCS was a rigorous program, which included both classroom work and field exercises. There were approximately 240 men in my entering class, which included several African-American candidates and which thereby made OCS (Infantry) one of the Army's earliest efforts at integration. Among the wide range of subjects covered were logistics, map reading, and tactics.

Over a period of twelve weeks, my classmates and I underwent instruction and training seven days a week, with minimal free time for ourselves.

As the OCS program proceeded, our course work, as well as grading by our instructors, continued unabated. Those candidates who, for various reasons, withdrew from OCS retained their enlisted rank.

Ninety-Day Wonder

In January 1943, our twelve-week course of instruction concluded. In a ceremony on the parade grounds at Fort Benning, I joined with my remaining classmates as we received our commissions as second lieutenants. Due to the tightly compressed nature of our training, we newly minted officers were sometimes referred to as "ninety-day wonders." Following a brief leave to visit my mother and brothers in New York, I reported to Camp Wheeler, Georgia, which was near Macon and was designated as an Infantry Replacement Training Center (IRTC). My assignment was to train the recruits who, by now, were flooding into the Army. In addition to these instructional duties, I was, on occasion, assigned to one of the trains transporting recruits and soldiers along the eastern seaboard. My responsibility, along with a detachment of NCOs, was to ensure that each train arrived at its destination without incident.

Following almost ten months at Camp Wheeler, I was given similar responsibilities at Camp Blanding, Florida, which was close to Jacksonville and was also an IRTC.

At these IRTCs, my fellow officers and I were charged with the duty of turning civilians into soldiers. As one might imagine, it was, at times, a challenge. For different reasons, a small number of inductees were in poor physical condition, including some who were clearly disabled. By unknown means, they had somehow managed to slip past their draft boards. As a general practice, these men were placed in separate units, while we focused on training the large majority of recruits, who were in good physical condition.

We instructed these men in the fundamentals of service in the infantry, including close order drill, field exercises, and weapons. Eventually, those recruits who were clearly unfit for military service were sent home. Over time, I gained some measure of satisfaction in being able to turn recruits into infantrymen.

Nevertheless, I had, by the early days of 1944, become increasingly eager to serve along side the men I had been training. Accordingly, I requested assignment to a combat division, and in time, my request was granted. In April 1944, I arrived at Fort Bragg with orders to report for duty with the 100th Infantry Division.

The next chapter of my life in the Army was about to begin.

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