

# Lucky Infantryman

By

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## Chapter I

### First Day in Combat

**T**omorrow will be a tough day," my foxhole buddy Johnny said. He had survived the vicious hedgerow fighting in Normandy for more than two weeks and this made him a combat veteran. "Listen carefully, it may save your life. Stick with the squad. When we run, you run, and when we hit the ground, you hit it, too."

It was late July 1944. The fighting among the Normandy hedgerows had been unrelenting. My company had lost many men during the past few weeks. The day before, as an infantry replacement, I was assigned to the second squad of the second platoon of "F" Company of the 358<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

I was a frightened 26 year-old rookie infantryman, five feet, eight inches, with brown hair and blue eyes, solidly built and weighing about 145 pounds. This was my first day in combat. I didn't have the shakes or anything like that, but I could feel the fear deep down in my guts.

Prior to coming overseas, I had received 16 weeks of basic infantry training at Camp Blanding, Florida. During the last week of training, I had crept through an infiltration course as the

camp cadre fired live machine gun bullets over my head. Now I would be in combat, not a simulated training exercise. I felt my breakfast churning in my stomach. Nausea filled my throat. My mouth was dry. German soldiers were out there trying to kill me. Would I survive my first engagement with the enemy?

I had been born and raised in New York City and never prior to my training in Blanding had I fired a real weapon. No member of my family had ever owned a gun or fired one. I had never hunted or killed any of God's creatures. Now I was a soldier in the big war. Would the infantry training I received back in Florida carry me through?

"F" company had been ordered to clear the hedgerows of Germans, and tomorrow we would resume that task. I planned to stay close to Johnny and the other squad members.

We were awakened before daylight and ate a cold K-ration breakfast. No fires were permitted. Before we finished eating, the stars had disappeared. The sky was clear of clouds. The sun would soon appear in the sky, and another hot summer day would begin.

My squad with the rest of the platoon had been entrenched behind the shrubbery from which they had chased the Germans in yesterday's engagement. The hedgerows consisted of thick and fibrous bushes, five or six feet high. They surrounded each field in all directions. No two fields were alike, but all were protected by the fierce, bristly, prickly bushes. Hedgerows had cordoned off these Normandy fields for generations. Against them, tanks were useless; they became entangled in the impenetrable growth and soon became easy targets for anti-tank weapons.

"The Germans," Johnny explained, as we went to the ground under very thick bushes, "have good defensive positions at the end of each field. We never know exactly where they're hiding. They let us get close, and then open up with rifles and machine guns. In order to pin them down, we fire at the section of the hedgerow most likely to be their hiding place."

"How long do we shoot at their position?"

"Each of us fires at least two clips and then we run across the field while they're pinned down in their holes. Once we get to their positions, we've got them. Usually they surrender or run away. They don't stay and fight, because they know we've got them outnumbered. Their job is to delay us as long as possible."

We were on our stomachs in the still-moist grass looking toward the farthest edge of the field. The ground was still damp with the morning dew. We heard birds singing. Our rifles and the one Browning automatic rifle that was the heavy weapon of our squad were sighted at the thickest shrubbery where the enemy generally dug its foxholes. Mortar shells could not penetrate the thick, natural protection, and artillery fire was ineffective.

Despite the cool air of the morning, my forehead was wet with perspiration and my mouth dry. I could feel my heart pounding. Johnny, a thin, blond, 19 year-old from New Jersey, about my height and perhaps ten pounds lighter, had his right hand lightly on my shoulder as he whispered, "Don't forget, stick with the squad."

I couldn't respond. I could only nod my head as I sighted my rifle at the bushes about 100 yards away. The distance had been estimated by the squad sergeant. To me, it seemed about a half mile. Could I run that far? I had my rifle, steel helmet, and carried a backpack, folded shovel, gas mask, and a cartridge belt containing ten eight-round clips of ammunition. Attached to the belt was a canteen full of water, a bayonet and scabbard, and a first aid kit. Around one shoulder hung a bulky gas mask in a canvas pouch. I wore heavy, chemically-treated fatigues designed to protect me if the enemy used gas. My feet were encased in regular Army brogans. Strapped to the brogans and wrapped around my trousers were old-fashioned canvas leggings. (Combat boots were not issued until late October, 1944.)

"Ready. Fire," was the sharp whispered command. I sighted at what they said was the enemy position in a large clump of shrubbery and squeezed the trigger of my Garand M1. To my amazement, the rifle did not fire. I pulled the trigger again with the same result. Clearly my rifle had jammed.

What was wrong? Quickly, I removed the trigger housing. It looked okay. Weapons were going off all around me, as I tore the rest of my rifle apart but could not find the cause of the malfunction.

"Up and at 'em!" the sergeant shouted.

My rifle parts were spread out on the ground. I did not obey the command. The rest of the squad ran toward the enemy but I remained where I was. I just couldn't move with a defective rifle. I had checked the rifle briefly when it was issued to me several days ago. The bore had been clean and it had an easy trigger

pull. I had not fired the weapon or disassembled it since it was placed in my hands.

In the distance I could hear the sound of weapons being discharged. I was alone and badly frightened. I fought to control my sphincter. Sweat poured down my forehead as I groped with the rifle parts. I fought the desire to put my face on the ground and cry. I was a rookie alone on the field of combat. My only weapons were a bayonet and two hand grenades.

After minutes of desperate searching, I discovered a heavy wad of cosmoline; thick grease had jammed the spring of the main rod. With my handkerchief, I carefully cleaned the spring and made certain the interior of the rod was also free of the cosmoline. I rapidly put the rifle together and placed a new clip of eight rounds in the M1.

I would not run to join the other men until I was certain the rifle would operate. I fired a round into the air. The used casing was expelled and the next round slid easily into the chamber.

My single trial shot elicited bullets that went whistling through the bushes above my head. I heard them crash into the heavy brush and the branches around me. They were shooting at me. My body flattened out. My face went instinctively to the ground. At the same time, my stomach churned painfully.

"Hold your fire," I yelled. The small arms fire had come from the direction of my platoon at the far end of the field.

They must have heard me; the firing ceased. I started to run across the field to join them, but stopped after several strides. A foul odor reached my nostrils. It came from a wide area of moisture in the seat of my pants. My sphincter had let me down. I was dirty and smelled bad. I could not rejoin my squad in this condition. If I did, I'd never be able to live it down. What could I do?

Fortunately, I had a change of trousers and undershorts in my backpack. I ducked within a hedgerow and removed my helmet, pack, cartridge belt and accessories. The leggings with the long laces and many hooks, as always, were difficult to unfasten. Then I took off my shoes, pants, and underwear shorts. I cleaned my butt with a small towel and water from my canteen. I put on fresh shorts, pants, and the rest of my clothes and equipment; grabbed my rifle and ran across the field and soon caught up with my squad.

“Where were you?” Johnny asked with concern in his voice.  
“I thought you’d been hit.”

“I’ll tell you later,” I said, happy to be in the midst of the men surrounding the three Germans who had surrendered.

We cleared up two other sets of hedgerows that day and my rifle worked well. That evening I told Johnny about the malfunction but never mentioned my change of clothes. It was my first but not my last frightening experience as an infantryman.



## CHAPTER II

### First Days as a Draftee

**M**y draft notice read, "Report to the Induction Center at 8:00 a.m. on December 23, 1943." I was inducted into the Army two days before Christmas, a cruel blow. My life had been on hold ever since the war began. Most of my friends and many of my relatives were already in the service. One friend had been killed and two were wounded. I was grateful a high draft number had kept me out until now.

The physical aspect of the armed services didn't worry me. I had been a jock most of my life and was in good shape. I was mentally prepared; I had been reading for years about the military in newspapers, books and magazines. Additional information had come from conversations and correspondence with friends and relatives who were already in the service. They had warned me never to be suckered by the call, "Volunteers wanted to drive trucks." The volunteers would wind up pushing a hand truck of garbage or other dirty and heavy material. I would not be foolish and volunteer for anything.

After the war, I learned I had made a big mistake by not volunteering when they called for typists. I was a fairly good typist at that time. A fellow from my neighborhood standing

next to me volunteered. His typing detail turned out to be a pleasant and long lasting assignment. He eventually made master sergeant and never left the United States.

My sources had said, "Be prepared to stand in line and wait for anything and everything." They were correct about that. I arrived at the induction center at eight in the morning, and did not begin processing until an hour later. I wore old clothes. I tossed them into a Salvation Army box after collecting my uniforms and equipment.

Throughout the day, we stood in line for everything, including the use of the bathroom. The medical examinations were perfunctory. Somebody said, "If you got here by yourself, you passed." We completed numerous forms, signed many papers, and that afternoon we were sworn into the United States Army.

The noncommissioned men and officers at the induction center were serious about their work and brooked no levity from inductees. Our lunch was a paper bag containing a sandwich, several cookies and an apple.

Late that afternoon, we rode in a bus to the railroad station and from there traveled by train to Camp Upton. Dinner was another paper-bag meal: two salami sandwiches, a banana, orange, and a candy bar. At Camp Upton, we were herded into a one-story barracks building. That night, we slept without sheets on Army cots, under two heavy blankets. There were pillows but no pillow cases. The lights went out at ten. We were awakened at 3:30 in the morning by the "Rise and shine!" shout of a tall and husky sergeant.

"What the hell's going on?" someone said, as lights brightened the large barracks. Those who did not immediately get out of bed were rudely dumped to the floor by the burly sergeant who turned their cots upside down. We were informed, "Thirty minutes till chow. Get cleaned up." Breakfast was another poor meal: lumpy, lukewarm oatmeal; greasy scrambled powdered eggs; two slices of white bread, a spoonful of jelly and a cup of lukewarm weak coffee. The food was ladled into compartmentalized trays while we slowly walked through a cafeteria line. We consumed our meal sitting on benches connected to tables that accommodated about a dozen men.

That day we received our government-issue clothing. That's

where the term "GI" came from. Everything was Government Issue: shoes, socks, khaki-colored shorts and undershirts, pants, shirts, leggings, ties, a long brass-buttoned jacket, fatigue uniforms, a brass-buttoned overcoat and a narrow overseas cap. All our gear went into two barracks bags that were closed with clothesline drawstrings.

To receive clothing, each inductee passed by a counter where the soldier supplying the item asked, "What size?"

If the correct size was available, it was given to the recruit. Otherwise, each man had to accept whatever was tendered and move on. If a man complained about the size, the clerk would say, "Take it or leave it. Look around, another guy may have your size and you can swap. You're gonna be charged for this clothing whether you take it or not. When there's an inspection and you're missing something, you're gonna have to buy it with your own dough."

That afternoon, most of us looked grotesque in oversized or undersized uniforms. Several men, because their clothing was absurdly oversized, were immediately sent back to the warehouse for better-fitting apparel.

The men in charge of issuing the heavy Army shoes were conscientious and competent. They asked for your size and then gave you a pair of above-the-ankle brogans. They carefully watched as you donned a pair of thick woolen socks and put the shoes on. A supply man then placed his hand on the front of the shoe and probed for the big toe to see if the brogan fitted properly.

The brogans given to me were long enough but tight on the sides. I told the supply clerk where they were tight. He felt the brogan and said, "It's long enough. Nine seems to be the right size. What width do you generally wear?"

In those days I was not aware that shoes came in varied widths. "I don't know," I said as I took off the brogan. He looked at it, and then at my foot, and quickly and firmly said, "You need a 9EE." He pulled a pair of shoes from a shelf, thrust them at me and stated, "These should be right. Try them on."

They fitted perfectly. I had never worn more comfortable shoes. He advised, "For the first few days, don't lace them all the way up."

The army gave me two pair of 9EE brogans. I followed the clerk's advice and never had trouble with them or any other Army shoes. From then on, I knew my proper shoe size.

Except for the underwear, most of my Army clothes had to be altered. Throughout my stay at Camp Upton I looked like a rookie, with rolled-up sleeves and trousers. Lines formed at the tailor shop from dawn to curfew. Each man paid for his alterations.

The second day at Camp Upton was busier than the first. The Army barbers gave us one-minute scalplings. Rookies were also recognizable by their short crewcuts.

Immunization shots were next on the schedule. On our way to the medical center, passing soldiers shouted, "Watch out for the hook!" We heard that more than a dozen times during our ten-minute march to that facility.

A number of men seemed overly concerned about getting the immunization shots. "I hear they used big horse needles for the shots," the man next to me said, "and they really hurt."

A big fellow marching beside us turned almost white. He said, "You don't know what you're talking about. They don't use horse needles."

In the morgue-like atmosphere of the medical center, we received the dreaded injections. To me, they appeared to be normal syringe needles. But to the men whose vivid imaginations had been fueled by the propaganda hurled at them, they apparently seemed large. Two men fainted after being injected.

We were ordered to stay close to our barracks. Failure to do so would mean extra work details. For two consecutive days, we were assigned to kitchen police (KP). It meant getting out of bed at 4:00 in the morning and working in the large messhall from 5:00 until 8:00 at night. We sliced bread, peeled potatoes and onions and followed the orders shouted at us by the kitchen personnel. Every order was accompanied by profanity:

"Move your ass, you frigging asshole. That's not the way to do it, you dumb jerk. Where the hell were you, when they handed out brains? Keep your filthy hands off the food."

After we helped prepare the meal, we set the tables in the dining room. At the meal's conclusion, we cleared and cleaned the tables, swept and mopped the floors and then washed the dishes, pots and other utensils. The most unsatisfactory workers were assigned to empty the garbage cans at the dump and finished their long day's work by washing and polishing the empty cans to a mirror-like finish. These rookies were the last to

leave at about 9:00 p.m. I never made that select group but heard second-hand about the dirty work.

We had very little sleep and very busy days while at Camp Upton. It seemed they were always selecting men from our barracks for filthy, backbreaking details. In between such labor, we took vision, hearing, intelligence, and mechanical aptitude tests that were usually given when we were totally exhausted.

One cold morning in early January, we were ordered outside. We were told, "Short-arm inspection. Wear shoes and socks and only your overcoats and caps."

"Guess we'll be moving out shortly," Henderson said. He was a tall, lanky man from Albany, New York, who had been appointed temporary barracks leader because of his high school military training.

"What's a short-arm inspection and what makes you think we'll be moving out soon?" someone asked.

"They always line us up and look at our cocks before they ship us to the training camp. They don't want to send damaged goods."

Henderson wore a band with sergeant's stripes on his right sleeve. He was proud of his temporary rank. He assigned the cleanup work for our barracks and frequently designated men for outside details. "Sergeant Henderson," a brown-nosing rookie asked, "where will they ship us?"

"How the hell do I know?" Henderson retorted angrily. "If I did know, I wouldn't tell you. The enemy might hear and sabotage the shipment."

Cramer, a rookie wiseguy from Brooklyn, whispered to me, "What kind of bull is that? They wouldn't waste a saboteur on a bunch of untrained rookies like us."

We had already been shown two films on the importance of security. We could make telephone calls, but to do so meant sneaking out of the barracks after curfew and waiting on line in frigid winter weather for an hour or more. Several married men tried it. They said it wasn't worth the effort.

A number of men wrote letters or read while waiting in line. I was a letter writer. I always carried a pen and a small paper pad and wrote whenever I had spare time. In the Army it was always hurry up and wait. We usually marched at a rapid pace to our destination and then had to wait. During any delay I

would pull out my pen and pad and write letters. The other guys read or talked.

We had the short-arm inspection and Henderson was correct. Our processing was completed and we were ready to go to our training camps. Some men were assigned to the artillery, others to radio school, medical corps training and other specialty camps. I was headed for the infantry. At one of the examining tables, I was asked, "What kind of special skills do you have?"

I should have said I was a good typist. Instead, I said, "I've got lots of experience in athletics and physical training."

The interviewing sergeant, with a smile on his face, said, "That's great. You physical education guys make good infantrymen. Next man."

The following day, about 500 of us were put on a long coach train. It took three days of uncomfortable travel to arrive at our destination in the central part of Florida. The coaches were packed to capacity. Often, our train was shunted to a side track, while more important railroad equipment went rattling by. No one was permitted to get off at any of the dozen stops that were made. Boredom and restlessness filled the train. The men spent the time reading, talking, playing cards and dice and trying to sleep. There was no room to walk, the aisles were crowded with barracks bags. The small amount of reading material was soon absorbed, even though the lighting was poor. It was difficult to shave and keep clean because the bathrooms were always crowded. For two days we conjectured about our destination. At the low ebb of our morale, we learned we were headed for Florida. This lifted our spirits somewhat. Most of us had never been to the Sunshine State. We were happy to be leaving the frigid North.

## CHAPTER III

### Training Begins

**W**e were a dirty, tired, depressed and sullen group of men when we unloaded from the train in Florida. The cadre who met us at the station wore clean, well-tailored uniforms and looked like competent military men. They shouted and cursed us into formation. "Don't worry about your barracks bags," they said, "the trucks will bring them to the company area. Line up, you goofballs. Get into formation, you friggin' morons."

They pushed and yelled until we began moving toward our training company area in a poorly-aligned formation. It was good to get off the stinking train. The fresh air was delightful and invigorating, but the shouting and cursing of the training cadre as we moved along detracted from the pleasure we derived from the first opportunity in three days to stretch our legs. They snarled and constantly berated us about our posture and our failure to keep in step. "Don't you assholes know your left foot from your right? Stand up straight, goofball. You're not the hunchback of Notre Dame. You're not dancing, you're marching, you friggin' fairies."

These yelling madmen were worse than the noncoms in the

messhalls at Camp Upton. The men could not turn to stare them down. "Look straight ahead," they shouted. "Keep your eyeballs fastened on the head of the man in front of you. Get in step, lame brain."

Despite the corrections or because of the bewildering commands, the men floundered along toward the company area. Each recruit tried to adjust even though there had been no training in formal marching during the brief stay at Camp Upton. The harried men cursed by the cadre tried their best, but the marching barely improved.

Then, the sound of drums and military music was heard, followed in a short time by the appearance of a smartly equipped military band. With eye-stopping precision the band moved to the front of the nondescript formation. Gradually, the men began mimicking the band members in front of them. The lines straightened. Caps and tunics were adjusted. Within minutes a proper formation of soldiers emerged. Chests puffed up, arms swung properly, and the rookie unit began to move with the beat of the music. A warm feeling pervaded the formation as the rookies marched into their company area at the Camp Blanding, Florida, Infantry Training Center on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

"Company halt!" came the shouted command. The men were now standing in a wide sandy space bounded by rows of small gray shacks. "Left face," was the next order. Most of the men turned in the proper direction.

On a small platform stood a well-built, six-foot captain dressed in pressed starched Army fatigues. Two silver bars shone on the front of his helmet liner. "I'm Captain Hinson," the officer stated. "I'll be your company commander for the next seventeen weeks. The officers standing behind me are in charge of your platoons. We're going to make good infantrymen out of you. Pay close attention during this period of training. What you learn may some day save your life. It may even save your life while you're training at Camp Blanding. Within six months, most of you will be in combat. That's a guarantee."

"Bullshit," the men in the formation muttered to each other.

"I can see," he said in a slightly louder voice, "that some of you don't believe me. I don't make it a practice to deceive my men."

He was right. Most men in our training company were in combat in Europe within six months, and those of us who

addressed ourselves properly to the skills taught at Camp Blanding benefited greatly from the excellent training provided by Captain Hinson and his officers.

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"Camp Blanding stinks," my shackmate Reuben Hillman, a tall, thin man with a longish nose from Newburgh, New York, said. "There's nothing good nearby. We're isolated. Where will my wife live, when she gets down here?"

"She can stay at the guest cabins at the Post," said Tom Coleman of Albany, New York.

"I already called there. They're full-up," Reuben answered. "My wife has no family. We've never been separated in the three years we've been married. She's pregnant. She needs to be near me."

"Perhaps, she can stay in Starke. It's about 40 miles away." Tom answered.

"That means I'll only see her on weekends. That is, if I get a pass."

Bill Greer, a stocky fellow from Hoboken, New Jersey, wore a uniform that fitted him perfectly. He was the only one in the shack who did not look like a rookie. He seemed to be informed about Army procedures. We later learned he had been in the National Guard. He joined the conversation. "Whatever you do," Bill cautioned, "don't let her come here for a while. You won't get any passes for the first two weekends."

But Hillman persisted, "Don't they make exceptions for a married man whose wife is nearby and needs help?"

"You're in the Army now, buddy. They don't give a shit about your love life."

There were five trainees in our small shack, all of us from northeastern states. Mel Campbell was from New Haven, Connecticut, I was from New York City. Ours became known as the Yankee Shack. At first, it was a derisive term, but later it became a name of distinction because we excelled as a group and as individuals in many of the soldiering skills.

From the beginning, ours was a cooperative shack. We worked as a team to pass the various inspections that came throughout the week and the important one on Saturday morning. At that time each man had to pass a tough rifle, shelf,

bed, and locker examination. Everything in the cabin had to be spotless; that included the trainees, who had to be clean-shaven, with suitable short haircuts and clean fingernails.

Demerits or gigs were given if anything was out of position on the shelves or in the footlockers. Beds were examined thoroughly. The blankets and sheets had to be clean and taut and the beds made with hospital corners. The inspectors wore white gloves and probed every corner with their fingers. If a glove became dirty, all shack members were gigged. Too many gigs and a trainee would be punished with extra KP duty, other onerous details, or confinement to the company area with no trips to the PX or movies, and the loss of the all-important weekend pass. Thanks to the expertise of Bill Greer and group teamwork, we never failed to acquire our weekend passes. Reuben never had to go AWOL to see his wife, who had rented a room in Starke.

Mel Campbell was a former machinist, hunter and expert rifleman. After we cleaned our rifles, Mel carefully went over each one. Initially, we had received the Springfield rifle. After three weeks, they gave us the new M1 Garand rifle. No one in our shack was ever gigged for a dirty bore or rifle.

We began work for the Saturday morning inspection on Friday night immediately after the evening meal. We scrubbed the floors, washed windows, arranged lockers and shelves, cleaned rifles and equipment and left the minor details for Saturday morning.

On that day, we arose twenty minutes in advance of the regular wake up call, and shaved before the rest of the company crowded the latrines. After breakfast, we hurried back to our shack. The two men who were the best at making beds made all of them. The rest of us put the finishing touches on the shack and all the equipment. Bill Greer, our military expert, thoroughly inspected each man and his gear. We worked feverishly until the inspectors arrived. When the inspection team left our shack, each man got on his knees in front of his bed, faced the center of the small room, and bent his body so his head almost touched the floor and salaamed gratefully to the gods who had helped him survive the inspection. It was a ritual started by Reuben Hillman, when we were certain we passed our first inspection and knew we would get our passes. He was happy he would get to see his wife for the first time in more than a month.

Our training went at a hectic pace. Every morning we were awakened at 5:30 by a bugler who played Reveille. Breakfast was followed by the cleanup of person, weapons, equipment and shacks. On our first day we had three important chores: first, we put our initials and serial numbers on all our possessions. This required hours of painstaking work with indelible ink.

Every piece of clothing and equipment had to be marked. This was done to prevent the thievery that was rampant in the Army.

The second chore was to get our clothing altered and cleaned. Most of the work was performed by tailors located near the PX. Some alterations were made by men in our company who were proficient with scissors, needles and thread and were willing to work late into the night to earn extra money.

And finally, we were required to get everything we owned into top notch condition. Every belt, strap, pack, legging, cartridge belt, canteen holder and other pieces of equipment had to be thoroughly cleaned. Each belt buckle and brass button was brightly polished. Each pair of shoes had to be shined to a mirror-like finish.

Every morning each man's appearance and equipment received close scrutiny. If the GI or his equipment was subpar, he was giggered and ordered to appear at the company office that evening with the items in first class condition. Failure meant extra details or additional sentry duty and the man's name went on the cadre's shit list. That list decreed who would perform the arduous and dirty work assigned by the cadre. Latrine orderlies and men for the latrine cleanup were always selected from the list.

The most important piece of equipment for an infantryman was his rifle. "It's a rifle, not a gun," the cadre would bark. "And don't you ever forget it. Your rifle is the most important thing in your life. More important than your mother, wife, or girl friend. It will determine whether you live or die when you're in combat. Take care of your rifle and it will take care of you. Take it with you wherever you go. Never let it out of your sight. If you lose your rifle, you're in big trouble. Memorize your rifle number as you did your army serial number. We'll teach you to take it apart and to clean it. Then, we'll teach you to fire it."

We were delighted when they gave us our new M1 Garand semi-automatic rifles. The M1 was not as heavy as the Springfield. We were taught how to take it apart and clean it. To the cadre our

rifles were never clean enough. Initially, we could not spot the specks of dirt or rust the cadre saw in our rifles, but hours of repetitive cleaning, aided by instruction from our in-shack experts, Bill Greer and Mel Campbell, taught us to keep our rifles spotless.

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January, February and March of 1944 turned out to be the coldest winter in years. Even though most of us were Northerners, we were not accustomed to being out in the damp cold all day and most of the night. Trainees caught colds and many cases developed into pneumonia. The base hospital filled up. Throughout the lectures and instruction classes, men were constantly coughing.

At night, the cold winds whistled through our poorly-insulated shack. We shivered under two blankets, even though we had our winter coats over them. We slept with most of our clothes on. When the sun was out, the days were bearable. When we awoke at 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning, it was miserably cold. After two weeks we were issued army comforters. We placed our two blankets on the mattress, covered them with our bottom sheet and then crept into bed with our clothes on. Our other sheet and the comforter went on top.

When it rained, which it did frequently, the sandy ground became a quagmire. We were always scraping mud from our shoes and leggings. When the sun came out, it eventually dried the grounds and warmed us until the evening cold and moisture again pervaded the training camp.

"There are worse places than this in the United States Army," the cadre said, when we griped about the conditions at Camp Blanding. "Besides, this will get you used to combat conditions. You goof-ups have it easy. Each night you get to sleep inside your shacks and in an Army cot."

Time proved the cadre told the truth. It was much tougher in the combat zones, though we didn't believe it then.

One night we were talking after the lights went out. Campbell said, "Have you noticed not one of us is a volunteer. We're all draftees."

"Do you know anyone in our platoon who was not drafted?" Hillman asked.

No one came up with a name. There was only silence for about a minute. "Are you willing to die for your country?" Bill Greer asked in a voice that was barely audible.

Again there was silence. "No. But I'm gonna be the best soldier that I can be," I said. "I want to live, that's why I'm gonna learn everything they can teach me."

"I'm no hot-shot patriot," Campbell said, "but I like to think I'm a good citizen. When I received my draft notice, I came in to do my share. I'll do what I can to help my country."

"I'm no fighter or athlete," Hillman said. "But I never looked for a way out of the draft. I'll do my best."

We hated the Germans for starting the war and the horror they inflicted all over Europe. At that time, none of us knew about the concentration camps and the Holocaust. We had the same anger against the Japanese for their attack on Pearl Harbor and their treatment of American prisoners of war.

We had no lust to kill. No one had lost a relative in the war, but two of us had friends who died in combat.



## CHAPTER IV

### At Last, a Weekend Pass

**W**e were kept busy at Camp Blanding. Wake-up call was usually at 5:30 and frequently came thirty minutes earlier. We generally went to bed around 11:30. Breakfast was an hour after wake-up because many things had to be done before we went to breakfast. We always ran to use the latrine and to shave and wash; otherwise, there would be long lines waiting to use the toilets and urinals and even longer lines for the sinks. Each man brought his toiletry essentials and a small mirror purchased at the PX. There were no mirrors in the latrine. Learning to shave with a small mirror was an experience. This, too, was training for overseas duty. The toilet stalls had no doors. There was no privacy.

After we received our steel helmets, many of us used them to shave or wash. We filled them with hot water and went outside the latrine for our daily shave. Men with light beards avoided the crowds by shaving the night before. But a trainee had to be clean-shaven. If not, an officer could stop the trainee in the late afternoon and say, "When did you shave, soldier? Make sure you shave tomorrow morning and report to me so I can check you out."

Each morning the training cadre examined the recruits closely for cleanliness of person and equipment. They said, "A dirty soldier is a sloppy and careless soldier."

The cadre's obsession for cleanliness also applied to the areas around our shacks. If one piece of paper or cigarette butt was seen on the company grounds, we were called out to police the entire area. "All we want to see," the cadre would shout, "are asses and elbows. Pick up everything that doesn't move."

We were always at the beck and call of the cadre. When "Company fall in!" was heard, we had to stop whatever we were doing and hurry into formation. Tardy trainees received "gigs" and company punishment of extra work details. If the cadre were displeased with the speed of the turnout, it had to be performed again and again, until they were satisfied with the response.

Our orders were that one complete issue of clothing must always be clean. The mud that abounded made it difficult for us to keep our clothing and gear clean. It seemed as if we were always washing and cleaning leggings, shoes, belts and packs. Most trainees gave their underwear and socks to the Post laundry. Dress uniforms were cleaned at the Post dry cleaners. The wire clothes lines behind each shack were crowded with items each man personally cleaned. Trainees paid for all alterations, laundering and cleaning at the Post shops.

Every day we went through thirty minutes of physical training. To all classes and training sessions, we marched in formation. Our marching skills improved through long and boring close-order drills. We left-faced, right-faced, about-faced, and learned to perform all the right moves on command. We stood straighter and began to march competently and proudly. Our uniforms now fitted well. We looked like soldiers but we were not yet infantrymen.

After our first month of training, we were told, "This Saturday morning, there will be a battalion review. All training companies will parade before the Post commander. You must have a haircut and a fresh shave. Every man must wear his best uniform. Rifles will be spotless. Fuck-up and nobody gets a weekend pass."

All week long the trainee worked to secure his weekend pass. After the third week at Camp Blanding, those who passed inspection and were not loaded with gigs were given weekend passes. Dress uniform was compulsory. Pass in hand, happy

men went through the camp gates. By thumb and other means of transportation, they traveled to Starke, St. Augustine and Jacksonville. Reuben Hillman was finally able to see his wife.

Our shack was a beehive of activity the Friday night before the Parade. We had to look good, pass inspection and do well on the Parade to get out of camp for the weekend. By this time, we were a good team. On Saturday morning Bill Greer told us, "You guys look great. Our shack and equipment should pass inspection. The rifles are spotless. Not a speck of dirt or rust on any of them. If no one goofs up in the marching, we'll be out of camp before one o'clock."

The shack inspection was quick; they wasted little time there. But each man's appearance and rifle received close scrutiny. We didn't perform our salaam of elation ritual after the inspection team left. We didn't want to mess up the crease in our pants, and because Reuben said, "Let's not jinx ourselves by salaaming too early. The biggest and hardest part is yet to come."

Reuben was right. The platoon waited in formation for twenty minutes before the entire company was ready to move out. From his platform, Captain Hinson surveyed us, "I've been told this was your best Saturday inspection. I'm proud of you. In the upcoming Review and Parade, show them you're the best company in the battalion. Afterwards, we can all get away for the weekend."

We were the first to reach the parade ground. It was thirty minutes before the last company arrived. Then it began to rain. We stood at attention as the heavens poured down. Captain Hinson and our officers attired in their dress pinks stood in the front of the company. The rain soaked everyone to the skin. Our laced-up brogans protruding from the leggings were waterproofed and kept our feet dry, but everything else including our rifles was drenched. We were miserable. "How the hell are we going to get past the gate guards, when we look like this?" Reuben whispered to me. We were soaked and bedraggled. Our spirits sagged. We looked like a bunch of sad sacks.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the rain stopped. The Post commander and his officers strode to the reviewing stand. The Camp Blanding military band marched to the front of the battalion playing the rhythmic "Liberty Bell March." To the beat, we marched in review. The sun came out and our flagging spirits

rose. Captain Hinson smiled as he dismissed us in our company area with a short commendatory speech.

We quickly changed into dry uniforms, polished our shoes and happily went through our salaam ritual before we ran for our weekend passes.

I had no desire to go to Starke. It had a few bars and several dingy restaurants that always had waiting lines. Because we always waited on lines for everything in the Army, I hated waiting on lines and wanted to avoid them if I could. It seemed to me, the further I traveled from Camp Blanding, the less I would see Army personnel. I also wanted to get as far away as I could from the Navy, and thus would not venture to Jacksonville, which had a large naval base. This left St. Augustine, the oldest city in Florida, reputed to have wonderful beaches, where I could relax and enjoy the warmth of the sun.

Outside the camp gates, there were long lines waiting for buses that would go to Starke, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine. I didn't want to queue up and began hiking down the road. A few minutes later a car responded to my hitchhiker's thumb signal. "Where are you headed?" the driver asked.

"St. Augustine."

"I'll take you there for a dollar," he said. "I have room for one more."

It was a good deal. The bus fare was almost \$2.00. I climbed in alongside the other four passengers, all GI's. During the drive, I picked up valuable information about St. Augustine: where to sleep, eat, drink, and about the hospitality provided by the USO and the people of the community.

Most men took a carryall of some kind with them for the weekend. In a small zippered bag, I had a toilet kit, two paperback novels, writing paper and envelopes, and several candy bars. Candy was much more expensive in town and the better brands were generally unavailable at the local stores. (Milky Ways, Hershey chocolate bars, Baby Ruths and Love Nests were my favorites.) I loved candy; it supplied the energy needed for the rigorous activities of the training program.

My first stop was at the USO. For one dollar, I reserved a dormitory bed for the night. For free, I had a late lunch of several doughnuts, two cookies and an apple. I supplemented that with one of my candy bars and headed for the beach. It would have

been a long hike from the center of the city but I got a lift from a GI and his girl headed that way. It was a warm day, just what I expected from sunny Florida. I stripped to the waist and walked the broad, sandy beach. Unlike the beaches I had known in New York, this was almost deserted, not more than two or three people per 100 yards. The ocean looked green and clean.

I found a sand dune about twenty yards from the water and placed my carefully folded clothes in front of it. I opened my bag. A small towel became my headrest and also protected my hair from the sand. I was delighted with the quietness of the beach. I had never experienced anything like this. I stared at the ocean, nothing marred its surface. No boats were in sight and no one was in the water. It seemed as if I were on a deserted island. The nearest people were about 100 yards away.

My solitude was short-lived. I awakened from a short nap by the voices of a man, woman, and a boy who appeared to be about four or five years old. They walked to a spot about thirty yards away and about five yards from the water. The boy ran to the water's edge with a small shovel and pail, while his parents put down a blanket and set an umbrella into the sand. They didn't notice me because I hadn't moved and they never looked in my direction.

The boy dug with his shovel for a few minutes and then filled his pail with water that he poured into the hole he had dug. Each time he went back to fill his pail, he went further into the ocean. His parents were engrossed in their conversation and threw an occasional glance in his direction.

As he went back for another refill, a slightly larger wave came in. He tried to duck away from it, and would have done so but stubbornly refused to let go of his laden pail. The wave knocked him down. In a moment he was covered with water. He struggled to right himself, but another large wave turned him over. Clearly he was in distress. I looked at his parents, who were still talking and unaware of his situation. I jumped to my feet, sprinted to the water and scooped him into my arms.

They reached me just as I carried the boy out of the water. "Willie," the father cried as I carefully placed him into his outstretched arms, "Are you all right?"

The boy coughed and spit out some water. "I went way under the water, didn't I, Daddy?"

"You certainly did. Are you hurting anywhere? Did you swallow a lot of water?"

"Just a little bit. I spit most of it out. Did I drown?"

"No. You're all right, thanks to this soldier." He had noticed the dogtags hanging from a chain around my neck and my wet army pants.

"Thank you," the woman said, as she dried her son's face with a large beach towel. "You were very quick. Willie might have been hurt, if you hadn't picked him out of the water. I'm Ellen Williams and this is my husband, Bill. We were careless. We should have paid more attention to Willie. We're extremely grateful. You're all wet. Please take this towel to dry yourself."

"Thanks," I said. "I only have one small towel. I'm happy your son is okay."

I wiped myself with the towel and pressed it against my wet pants for a few minutes and then turned to go back to my sand dune and possessions. "Would you like to join us?" Bill Williams asked.

"I don't want to get in the way of a family outing."

"Please bring your things over and join us," Ellen Williams added. "We come out here often. Besides, we can use another set of eyes to look after Willie." She pointed to her son who was back at the water's edge and now throwing water at his excavating project.

I soon learned Bill and Ellen Williams were natives of St. Augustine. He was in the real estate business and Willie was their only child. Bill was 4F because of perforated ear drums. He was a former fullback at the University of Florida, tall, well built and handsome. Ellen, a slim, tall and attractive blonde, also graduated from that university.

We spent several hours talking and watching Willie as he played. We became friends.

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