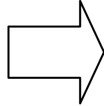

Army Life:

An intimate look at being a soldier in WWII.

As living historians, we make a diligent effort to master our subject. This leads us to a thousand fascinating details that enrich our understanding of World War II and enhance our ability to interpret that time for the public.

The problem with this way of understanding the past is that the details tend to distract us from the pulse and pattern of soldier life as excessive attention to trees distorts our perception of the forest. Sometimes we need to focus on bigger things; once we do that, puzzling elements of the details we have learned suddenly become easier to understand.

The GI

Our God and the soldier we alike adore.
Even at the brink of danger; not before;
After deliverance, both alike requited.
Our God's forgotten, and our soldiers slighted.

— Francis Quarles, 1632

The Army between 1918 and 1941 was generally considered a fate worse than death, a place for losers. That the Army was manned at all was possible only because the Great Depression provided an endless supply of losers. The Old Army was led by a force comprised of discouraged[1] professional officers – predominantly West Pointers – noncoms who had entered the service after the Armistice, and a few thirty-year men who had seen the green fields of France, plus the mass of the enlisted who could find no other trade. Many younger soldiers enlisted because, however degrading peacetime service might be, it was at least better than soup kitchens, riding boxcars and dodging railroad bulls, or shoveling dirt in the CCC.

It was a professional Army, largely cut off from the country it served[2], worshipping its own secular saints, honoring its own traditions, and as contemptuous of civilians as the civilians were of the soldiers. The enlisted man's lot was a mix of harsh discipline, degrading fatigue duty, and dull rote training. Operational budgets were below subsistence level because of the Depression and years of isolationist politics. There was just enough ammunition to fire qualification in the spring and summer, not enough gasoline available to train with anything heavier than light vehicles (such tanks as there were sat in the motor pool), and no political will to change things

[1] As was the case after WWII, the rapid promotions required by mobilization were reversed, and most officers reverted to their Regular Army (permanent) grades, often several steps below their wartime rank. There was also a massive reduction in force (RIF) and, during the Depression, a fifty percent pay cut. Soldiers (and most officers) lived in squalid conditions far from the amenities of civilization.

[2] Just like today!

until the late 1930's. Much of Army life was endless listless routine for low pay and little respect.

The peacetime draft instituted in 1940 started a change that would affect the Army for decades to come. From a ground strength of 620,774 at the end of 1940[3], the Army grew by the eve of Pearl Harbor to 1,460,998; by 1945 there were around eight million under arms[4]. The influx of draftees strained the Army's capacity to house and train the mobilized numbers. Camps – predominantly pyramidal tents or shacks on wooden pallets, with mud streets, plank sidewalks, and desperate supply problems – sprang up across the nation. The Regular Army had to supply the cadres to train the new recruits, and that cadre was spread thin and inventing new methods every day. The need for experienced officers was so far beyond the Regulars and the output of ROTC and West Point that the Command and General Staff School was actually closed down for a time to release senior and middle-grade officers for active assignments, while the faculty turned to writing new field manuals by the dozens.

The new draftees were quite unlike the old hands who had been manning the Army. Strict medical standards screened out hundreds of thousands whose health had been stunted by poverty and poor nutrition in the 1930's[5], and their educational levels varied from the ridiculous to the sublime – from college graduates to the barely literate. At the same time, the sudden arrival of war resulted in the relentless involuntary retirement of large numbers of overage but experienced noncoms – an error that would cost the Army dearly during the hectic expansion.

Attitudes were different among draftees. Although it is generally forgotten, the Depression had triggered a leftward turn in attitudes, and many new soldiers were wary of discipline and the traditional Army caste system (the Communist Party was active in America in the 1930's and 40's[6]), and brought into the mainstream of soldier values a much wider range of beliefs and tolerances. The post stockades did a land office business.

Until Pearl Harbor, public support for war was abysmally low, despite the obvious urgency of events in Europe. Renewal of the peacetime draft passed Congress by *one vote* in 1941, not long before the Japanese attack. Interestingly, isolationist policy was a conservative position; the American Left was much more warlike, particularly as the threat to the Soviet Union increased.

As months passed, more qualified draftees began to move into NCO positions as the Army expanded beyond the available prewar leader pool; sheer Darwinian merit prevailed to fill leader positions. But despite the turnover, the general traditions of Army life survived. It is those that we must understand and honor if we are to interpret that critical time.

It is useful to understand how the expansion was done. Divisions were formed and trained together, then deployed together – a great tool for building cohesion and morale. However, just before deployment, each division was "taxed" large numbers of good officers and NCO's to

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[3] Larger than today!

[4] If we had conscripted at a per capita rate equivalent to the other belligerent powers, the numbers would have been at least twice as high. But America was truly the arsenal of democracy, and had we shifted all available and physically qualified manpower to active service we would never have been able to perform such feats as launching a liberty ship or victory ship every 48 hours.

[5] One side effect of the Depression was to give new life to diseases conquered or banished so long ago they didn't even have Latin names.

[6] When we read about the Red Scare and the McCarthy abuses of the late 40's and early 50's, it is hard to understand why these attitudes were prevalent. Those alive and sentient at the time remember that the Depression and the war left us with a legacy of political leftism that had been driven underground. There were quite a few Reds around—though some threats were hallucinated or manufactured for political reasons, and the degree of actual threat exaggerated, there was a residue of radicalism.

form the leadership base ("cadre" used as a verb) of new divisions. Leadership was somewhat anemic because of this necessary practice. It's also important to understand that most of the earlier divisions trained together; only later did draftees and enlistees go into a general replacement pool to be centrally trained (Basic Individual rather than Basic Unit Training). The program was also speeded up to feed the mobilization, and there were never enough combat veterans available to staff the training divisions in the States. The result (of the "individual replacement system") was questionably trained replacements trying to fit in with veterans who had been together from the start —a problem dramatized in "Band of Brothers".

Life in the Army

These middle-of-nowhere camps – a "camp" being a temporary installation, the permanent ones designated "fort", and a collection of small satellite functions like recruiting offices called "stations" – were often bleak places to live and learn. They were usually thrown together in record time. Barracks, if there were any, were cold or hot according to the season; food was basic, but generally plentiful (wartime enforces attention to priorities). Amusements for the limited free time were bare-bones – a drafty post theater, small post exchanges[7] where soldiers waited in long lines to buy a candy bar, maybe a pass into the nearest town – if one happened to be handy. (The expression "gonorrhea gulch" often described small communities overwhelmed by lonely and bored trainees.[8])

The Army in garrison is dull routine punctuated by frustration and despair, gallows humor, and glimmers of hope.

One thing we miss in reenacting – even at the Gap – is the Army day. There is a sameness to the daily activities, and it is a somewhat troubling reality that soldiers and others in such jobs tend to be comfortable with routine and annoyed when it is broken. This also happens in prison populations. A day ran something like this:

0615: Reveille ("Drop your cocks and grab your socks!"). Soldiers quickly dress and shave.

0645: First call (the tune they play as the horses walk to the starting gate at the Derby) alerts the troops that formation is nigh.

0650: Assembly (another bugle call. Some of these calls were so familiar the soldiers had words for them.) At the last note, every soldier not excused from formation had to be in place or risk company punishment.

0715: Breakfast. Rubbery eggs, greasy fried potatoes, limp toast; maybe SOS[9] (always popular) or some fried spam. A lot of grab-ass in line.

0800: Fatigue. Soldiers policed the barracks area, cleaned the latrines, hauled trash, or prepared for inspection. A police inspection followed. Cleaning latrines was always popular. Most troublesome was the urinal: not the slick ceramic fixture in public facilities today, but a sheet metal trough that sloped slightly to let the piss drain away. Fatigue was despised by soldiers. It came as a result of the duty roster kept by the First Sergeant; assignments were

[7] A modern PX, by contrast, resembles a medium-size Wal-Mart where one finds anything a department store would carry.

[8] Excellent descriptions from first-person experience are found in Neil Simon's play "Biloxi Blues" and a wonderful story by Jean Shepherd (A Christmas Story (screenplay); "Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories") published in *Playboy* called "Zinsmeister and the Treacherous Eighter from Decatur."

[9] "Shit on a shingle" (officially, creamed chipped beef on toast).

supposed to be fair and evenly distributed, but the Top could use it to influence problem soldiers by assigning them to less desirable fatigue duties.

James Jones, in his novel *From Here to Eternity* (the greatest novel ever written about the Unites States Army), described fatigue in this way:

> There is, in the Army, a little known but very important activity appropriately called Fatigue. Fatigue, in the Army, is the very necessary cleaning and repairing of the aftermath of living. Any man who has ever owned a gun has known Fatigue, when, after fifteen minutes in the woods and perhaps three shots at an elusive squirrel, has gone home to spend three quarters of an hour cleaning up his piece so it will be ready the next time he goes into the woods. Any woman who has ever cooked a luscious meal and ladled it out in plates upon the table has known Fatigue, when after the glorious meal has been eaten, she repairs to the kitchen to wash the congealed gravy from the plates and the slick grease from the cooking pots so they will be ready to be used this evening, dirtied, and so washed again. It is the knowledge of the unendingness and of the repetitious uselessness, the do it up so it can be done again, that makes Fatigue.
>
> And any man who shoots his gun at squirrels and then gives it to his young son with orders to clean, any woman who cooks the succulent meal and gives the dishes to the non-cooking daughter to be washed – those grownups know the way an officer feels about Fatigue. The son and daughter can understand the way an enlisted man feels about Fatigue.

[NOTE: In the novel, drill was in the morning and fatigue in the afternoon. This was the result of weather cycles in the Hawaiian Islands where the novel was set. Drill was put aside in the rainy season – when rain was a daily annoyance – and intense in the dry season. It was the "Pineapple Army," and unique.]

A special kind of fatigue was "motor stables." This evolved from the horse cavalry and persisted after that branch shifted from oats to gasoline, though the bugle call remained the same (*"Come to the stable as fast as you're able/ To curry your horses and give them some corn/ For if you don't do it the captain will know it/And then you will rue it as sure as you're boooorn!"*). At motor stables, vehicle crews maintain their equipment.

0900: Drill. This had its popular bugle call: *"Fall out for drill/Like hell I will/I ain't had no chow – fall out for drill/You bet I will/Comp'ny commander's here noooow."* Drill was of two types: close order and extended order. Close order was marching – drill and ceremonies. Extended order was tactics training. Drill could be switched to physical training – generally "setting up" exercises, vaguely related to modern stretching exercises, as a warm-up followed by a "daily dozen" that included by 1943 side straddle hop ("jumping jacks"), bend and reach, deep knee bends, four-count or eight-count pushups, situps, squat thrusts (then called "burpees"), and other favorites (see FM 21-20 and the entertaining War Department Pamphlet 21-9). This was often replaced by hikes. Running in formation, except in the parachute units, was not as common as it is today.[10] Aerobic fitness was reinforced by calisthenics and other activities. Overweight

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[10] In my day (1966-1992) the runs were the core activity, as the airborne culture had spread to the whole Army. These runs were typically 2-5 miles, depending on the unit's mission and the preferences of the commander; they usually took place before breakfast. Recently the Army revised its physical conditioning regime, mixing distance runs with sprints for more aerobic range, and mixing Crossfit exercises that stress both fast-twitch and slow-twitch neuromuscular pathways.

The version of FM 21-20 at the start of the war was antiquated. Almost immediately the Army recognized that getting soldiers into physical shape was essential and there wasn't a lot of time available to make it happen. The manual was revised with changes that became training bulletins explaining the new methods. These didn't result in a complete new FM 21-20 until 1946, though the methods were pretty much in place by the beginning of 1943.

The central feature of the WWII PT program was hikes, since most regiments were "leg" infantry and combat outcomes often depend on movement rates. Other exercises were added by 1944 for variety and to offer different conditioning paths – most notably grass drills, guerrilla exercises, and the ever-popular log drills.

draftees were comparatively rare. Being underweight was a more serious problem. There was also training in unarmed combat, now called "hand to hand" or "combatives." In those days it was based on popular principles of judo as taught in big-city dojos, combined with boxing and street fighting. Nowadays it combines classic principles with elements of Korean taekwondo.

In many cases, close-order drill was in the morning, extended order in the afternoon.

1200: Midday meal. This has "mess call" to entertain the troops, called "soupy" (from French bugle call, *Soupe*): *"Soupy, soupy, soupy/Without a single bean/Porky, porky, porky/Without a streak of lean/Coffee, coffee, coffee/Without any cream."* This was unchanged since the 1860's. There were favorite meals, such as beans and franks. According to James Jones, favorites lost popularity if served too often; beans and franks, sometimes called "stars and stripes" became "rat turds and dog turds" if overused. Salty-sweet Spam, pork shoulder and ham pulverized and crammed appetizingly into a large tin, was also popular unless overused (it is still the official state food of Hawaii!). There was great dissatisfaction among occupation forces in Europe after 1945 as commissaries tried to use up huge wartime surpluses of the stuff. After a few weeks of nothing but Spam, you're ready to scarf cat food (which spam closely resembles). SOS was a popular breakfast meal when I was young—we never got tired of it.

In garrison, meals were either A rations (fresh meat and vegetables) or B rations (canned meat, dried or canned veggies), but usually a mix. Powdered eggs were common because of storage problems; real eggs kept too long would, as Herman Wouk put it, "dissolve your fillings." Powdered eggs could be stored without refrigeration and resuscitated in boiling water, and efficient process producing a substance looked vaguely egglike but tasted, unfortunately, like shit.

To keep control of personnel, there was a formation and troops marched to the mess hall.

Generally there was a period of personal time after lunch. This was inserted in the schedule because of the mental and physiological decline in the early afternoon (called the "postprandial dip"—*prandium* is Latin for lunch). They would doze off or fumble anyway, so not much is lost with a short break.

1300: Drill again.

1600: Recall from drill; personal maintenance time.

1700: Retreat formation. The entire regiment falls in to honor the flag as it is lowered.

1730: Supper meal

To break up this routine, there were troop information classes ("Why We Fight"; "VD Prevention"[11]), organized athletics, and other adventures in soldiering. Drill was frequently replaced by classroom or outdoor sit-around training (class call: *"It's CLASS—CALL. Oh, it's CLASS—CALL. I don't want to go to class, but I gotta go to class, I don't want to go to class, but I gotta goooo."*)

After supper, there might be free time, or extra training (see "crime and punishment", below), or extra duty – soldiers are paid for 24 hours a day, and quitting time is up to the commander's discretion!

[11] This film was so graphic it defies description. Venereal disease was endemic because of the large, horny transient military population with no source of release but assorted floozies (it was a great time to be an ugly girl). The film used the same approach as those grisly pictures of highway wrecks used to make high schoolers slow down a bit. It came close to stopping the baby boom.

Basic training was somewhat different from that at a settled camp with a veteran unit. For the peacetime Army, there was a mood of busywork and listlessness that often defied the motivating efforts of the leadership. In the training camps of Army Ground Forces, there was too much to do in too little time; the pace was naturally more intense.

Duty

In addition to scheduled training, there would be a lot of extra duties available to build soldiers' character. Here we need to look briefly at the concepts of "straight duty" and "special duty."

Straight duty for a lower enlisted man in the infantry was in a rifle squad or some other combat slot. With straight duty came drill, drill, and more drill, plus the joys of guard, KP, and other work assigned by roster. Special duty men performed work that made them exempt from drill and other infelicities of soldier life. Special duty included the clerks and jerks (company and supply), cooks, and, particularly in the prewar Army, the bugler. The SD men rode the gravy train, at least from the point of view of the dog soldiers[12] doing straight duty.

KP – kitchen police – requires a special note. This was a detail that most soldiers dreaded, even though it excused you from training. I did it twice as a cadet at Fort Bragg, Summer of 1964). The mess hall was run by a mess sergeant – an important figure who generally was not pestered by the First Sergeant, who and answered to a regimental mess officer (usually a warrant officer[13]). There were assigned cooks, most notably the first cook, who might be a T/5, and a staff of permanent cooks (who, as the observant James Jones put it, "got KP every day, but too dumb to know it"). Preparing, serving, and cleaning up after meals required more—and unskilled— manpower, and this came from the duty roster.

If you had KP on a given day, you tried to show up early – jobs were usually handed out first come, first served. Most desirable was DRO, or "dining room orderly", who served the officers and senior NCOs (officers had a special section in the mess hall – and they paid for their meals in cash[14]). The DROs were waiters and general gofers; they didn't have the dirtier jobs.

Worst of the jobs was pots and pans ("pearl diving") – the P&P soldier scrubbed large cooking equipment in deep sinks until spotless. This was hard on the skin, and left the KP greasy and worn out with fingers and palms that would soon start to peel. You could also end up with joyful jobs like peeling spuds (no cook would deign to peel anything) and scrubbing garbage cans. When you finished KP, you knew you had done a day's work. In a company, you generally

[12] "Dog soldier", which morphed in the early 40's into "dogface" is of uncertain origin but some antiquity. It is said to derive from the late 19th Century, a reference to the Dog Soldiers of the Cheyenne Nation (who were actually the tribal police, not elite warriors), but this may be too much to hope for. The version "dogface" appeared in the 40's, and was immortalized in "Dogface Soldier," the official song of the 3rd Infantry Division. It means a line infantry soldier – doughfoot, grunt, cricket-cruncher, etc. Parachute infantry referred to straight heavy infantry as "straightlegs" or just "legs." Marines called them "doggies."

[13] Being a mess officer was a technical specialty because it required quite a lot of knowledge. It had its own supply system (Class I, symbolized by a crescent that resembles the peep hole of a classic outhouse), end endless sanitary requirements that an officer on temporary or additional duty could not hope to master in a short time; hence warrant officers (specialists who did one thing and did it very well) were assigned this duty. Note that we still have a Veterinary Corps because somebody has to inspect meat issued to the post.

[14] Most are not aware of this, but officers are for historical reasons administered in a way distinct from enlisted men. An officer pays for any meal received in the mess hall or the field (we had to pay cash for C rations in Ranger School!). Officers are issued field gear (TA-50/501) and turn it in when they transfer; but they buy their own uniforms (and receive a small "uniform allowance" that does not cover much of the cost).

didn’t pull it more than once a month – and that was enough. It was also a good reason to buck for rank, since only privates and pfc’s drew KP.

Guard: This was another unpopular duty, as it was for 24 hours and – in WWII – without “compensatory time” to catch up on sleep. Sergeants and below drew this, with duties appropriate to rank (though the guard detail also needed a sergeant of the guard and a couple of corporals of the guard). It was an important job, and all soldiers memorized the eleven general guard orders in Basic Training. At guard mount there was an inspection (you had to be clean and polished), and the Officer of the Guard[15] might well require you to sound off with, say, the fifth guard order (“I will quit my post only when properly relieved”). You generally walked a two-hour post, with some time set aside for sleep.

CQ: Junior NCO’s often pulled a duty called CQ, or “Charge of Quarters.” This was the poor soul who sat in the Orderly Room after duty hours and answered the telephone; there was a runner on standby.

Fire guard: Every barracks had a fire guard awake at all times.

ED: The most desirable category was ED, or “excused duty.” This didn’t happen very often, and usually resulted from an injury that was not serious enough for hospitalization but too serious for normal duty and training. ED’s were commonly called the “sick lame and lazy squad”, or, in the Civil War, the “puny squad.”[16] "Limited duty" was a lesser form of ED, usually based on limitations imposed by an injury or other medical condition.

Crime and Punishment

In WWII, soldiers were subject to the Articles of War; this draconian document was replaced after the war by the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), which is still the standard. The Articles of War were a bit looser on what is now called “nonjudicial punishment” under Article 15 of the UCMJ. This was minor correction applied without the formality of a court martial, and was then called “company punishment.”

Old fashioned company punishment had one overwhelming advantage – it was not part of the soldier’s official record. It was, in fact, “nonjudicial.” It also entirely under the authority and discretion of the company commander, which could sometimes lead to abuse. Company punishment generally consisted of “extra training”, which could mean denial of pass privilege, unscheduled hikes in full field pack, special work details, or such generally frowned-upon activities as digging a large hole and filling it in. It was particularly effective (and hated) because it was conducted during the soldier’s free time. There was little free time under good circumstances, and using it up with unpleasant activities was infuriating.

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[15] Officer guard duties were specialized. The Officer of the Guard (OG) ran the guard details for a specified organization; there was also an Officer of the Day (OD) for the whole installation. Finally there was the Staff Duty Officer (SDO), who stayed up all night to answer important calls, check safes, etc.

[16] Around this time the Medical Corps came up with what is called the “profile.” Six medical categories were established (P=physical capacity (stamina); U=upper extremities; L=lower extremities; H=hearing and ears; E=eyes; S=psychiatric). Together these spelled “PULHES.” If you were squared away in all areas, each had a value of “1”, for a physical profile of 111111, or “picket fence”. If you were slightly nearsighted, you might have a profile of 111121. If you were a nut case you might be 111115 (this was determined by psychiatric exam, something like “Do you hate your mother? Do you hate your father? Do you jerk off? Are you queer? Next man . . .”). If you broke an arm, you might have a temporary profile (131111, for example) and be exempt from certain activities.

There were two important limitations to company punishment. First, it was not assigned in the form of extra helpings of regular duty, such as interior guard. These were "duties" that a soldier performed because he was a soldier, and were not to be confused with punishment. The duty roster was in the hands of the First Sergeant, and most played it straight – messing with the duty roster to punish soldiers was considered classic "chicken shit" (see below). Second, a soldier was not required to accept company punishment; if he felt he was being unfairly treated, he had the right to demand a court-martial to sort the matter out, which is what happened in the famous latrine inspection flap between Dick Winters and Captain Sobel. Of course, the soldier took a big chance doing this, since the officers empanelled to hear his case might disagree as to the injustice and hand down a verdict significantly in excess of the company punishment.

[After the war and with the introduction of the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice, which replaced the Articles of War), a soldier charged with a court-martial offense could demand to have an enlisted member on the board. This seldom happens; the enlisted member assigned is usually a senior NCO who is likely to be far less sympathetic to a miscreant enlisted man than any officer who might sit in his place. The UCMJ also replaced "company punishment" with nonjudicial punishment under Article 15. This last was meant to curb abuses, but it also insured that any infraction cited against a soldier went on his permanent record]

Most courts martial did not deal with major crimes. The common charges were absent without leave or pass, drunk on duty, insubordination, and other peccadilloes pretty much reflecting violations of Army discipline rather than things a civilian would recognize as big, fat, hairy deals. Sentences, depending on the seriousness of the offense, could range from an official reprimand to reduction in grade to stockade time. I suspect something equivalent to the manpower of a corps was in the stockade at any given time during the peak of the war.

Repetitive minor insubordination was, in those days, often handled by "NCO justice," in which the squad leader would simply take the ne'er-do-well to a secluded spot behind the barracks and beat the crap out of him. This generally worked well, for two reasons: there was no spot on the soldier's record (and his behavior was generally corrected by NCO justice) and there was a sort of personal touch involved instead of the arid, authoritarian formal company punishment because no officer got involved. (Mort Walker, creator of "Beetle Bailey," clearly recalls NCO justice from his Army days; his comic strip is frozen in the early 1950's, when the practice was still common.[17])

Particularly in theater, there was also an option called "disciplinary company." This was a last alternative to a bad conduct discharge (BCD), which was undesirable because lack of an honorable discharge could complicate finding employment in the postwar years, as many "tough guys" learned. Hard cases went to disciplinary company, usually at Division. The experience was to be avoided – the training provided the Dirty Dozen of movie fame was mild compared to life in the hell of disciplinary company.

A hard case could also be transferred to another company for one last chance before imposition of a BCD, on the quaint notion that new leadership might straighten out the soldier

[17] I've read Beetle Bailey for something like fifty years, and it has changed. There was a time when it reflected the American man's recollections of the Army, and included quite a few "in-jokes" understood best by soldiers and vets. When the draft ended in the 70's, a new comic strip was born; the artist had to go "generic" as his former audience dried up. (However, Beetle first appeared in the Missouri State student paper, before he (and Mort Walker, who matriculated at Mizzou) faced the draft.) He still appeared in *Army Times* – maybe he still does. During the cynical Army years of Viet Nam, there was a privately circulated cartoon strip (not by Walker) in which Beetle finally took off that fatigue cap. Tattooed on his forehead was the sentiment "fuck the Army."

before it was too late. This happened in my company in 1970 in Viet Nam, resulting in a rather long episode involving a First Sergeant who threw people though doors without opening them first and a monkey named Maurice who drank Budweiser from a can and suffered from intense body odor – a story like that of the Giant Rat of Sumatra for which “the world is not yet ready.”

Life in garrison: The company area

Home living was of three kinds: bivouac, in which soldiers encamped in the field under two-man tents; cantonment, which was for a longer period and generally mean under squad (pyramidal) tents with hot meals, latrines, maybe a theater under the big top. Garrison was a settled post, camp, or station, with wooden barracks or even fancier permanent structures. A “fort” was a permanent Army facility; a “camp” was a mustering point used in mobilization training. A “station” was a temporary sluice gate for soldiers in transit. Forts are forever; camps are supposed to vanish when the war is over – and many were built in a temporary fashion with standard wooden barracks that could be put up in a short time; since they were supposed to be temporary, they were not supposed to be durable. As we know, a few installations are still using them. Major forts generally have buildings of brick or concrete; old camps (now all designated forts, like Fort Indiantown Gap) might have temp buildings still going after 60 years.

[As early as the mid 1950’s, a peculiar hazard complicated the razing of these buildings. In the latrines, there were slots below the sink mirrors into which used razor blades were discarded. Since stainless steel razors had not been invented, a blade was good for one shave and one shave only, unless you were my old buddy “Nick” Von Schnepel who went cheap on blades and as a consequence regularly appeared at reveille formation with bloody bits of toilet paper stuck on his face. The result over the years was a huge buildup of used razor blades, out of sight and of mind until the buildings came down, when special handling was required to dispose of them. I believe most of them were collected and melted down and subsequently converted into my family’s 1954 Studebaker, which would explain several intriguing mysteries.]

Let’s look at a typical company area in garrison, using Indiantown Gap as an example.

The buildings were arranged in row, long way: Mess Hall, Orderly room, barracks (3-4), supply room.

The company headquarters was the Orderly Room, usually a separate building. The company officers had their offices there, as did the First Sergeant and the company clerk. This was an important place to Private Snuffy. For one thing, if he were called to the Orderly Room, it was usually bad news: “Yer mother died;”[18] or you were in some kind of trouble. You generally had to report to the Orderly Room to sign out before you went on pass, and usually be inspected, and to sign in again when you returned.

Usually sharing the same building as the orderly room was the Day Room. The day room was a place to relax during those rare moments when you had nothing else to do. There were some ragged old magazines and newspapers, maybe a pool table, some chairs and an ugly vinyl sofa. Real luxury. (This was supported by the “unit fund”, which received contributions from the operations of the PX system; a unit fund council, chaired by the CO, found ways to spend it,

[18] An old Army story. The grizzled top sergeant had no tact or empathy for soldiers’ personal misfortunes. At formation one day he yelled out “Hey, Kabibble, yer mother died! Report to the CO!” The Captain was horrified and told him to handle bad news with more sensitivity. Later that month Private Slipschitz’s father passed away suddenly. At formation: “All men with two living parents take one step forward. Where the %@$&# are you going, Slipschitz?”

which is where those ugly vinyl sofas came from. This was separate from the other fund – either unmentioned or called in hushed voices "the slush fund" – that let the First Sergeant help soldiers out of ready cash pay for haircuts, etc. It was not legal, but every company had one.)

Each platoon generally had a separate barracks, two floors each with two squads per floor. There were rooms set aside for platoon sergeants and above, plus showers and latrine and bunk space for supernumerary enlisted like the company clerk and supply sergeant. (Officers did not live in barracks. They had their own housing – usually no fancier than the men's, but with more privacy – in a bachelor officer quarters, or BOQ. These quarters had less supervision, and sometimes combined the worst features of the *garçonniere* and the Bates Motel.)

The supply room held various classes of Quartermaster and Ordnance supply – clothing and equipment for issue; ammunition and weapons were stored in the arms room, usually attached and heavily locked for security. The supply sergeant and supply clerk ran this operation.

The mess hall was at the head of the company row (for reasons that go back to the pre-Civil War encampment regulations, which actually form the basis for the fixed camp of the 1940's). The Mess Sergeant ruled here, assisted by the First Cook and the permanent cook staff. A company in garrison for an extended period would probably spend money from the company fund to spruce up the mess hall a bit.

Also available – though you might have to slog through mud to get there – were a small Post Exchange (PX) and an EM Club where you could get a beer. (There was also an NCO Club and an Officers' Club.)

Going on pass

If you were lucky, you might get a pass. A pass is formal permission to be absent from post for a short time – generally no more than 72 hours, usually shorter. For longer absences, a formal leave was necessary, and this was rare unless you were going from one post to another or had a special leave for emergency or travel. A whole regiment could be granted a furlough for a set period, usually a break before port call to head overseas, a few days to kiss your mother goodbye and get laid one last time. ("Hey, come on – a month from now I may be lying dead in a ditch . . .")

A pass, as the NCO's would tell you, is a privilege – not a right. You had to earn it by good behavior and satisfactory progress in training and proficiency – duty always came first. You could not go on any pass if you had a duty – guard, KP, etc. – to perform, and you had to report to the Orderly Room to sign out. The duty NCO or First Sergeant would usually inspect you; depending how chicken shit (see *infra*) he was, you might have to go back to the barracks to make corrections to your uniform.

But a pass made life worth while. Stories of life on an old-fashioned pass are rapidly fading. A good account is in Neil Simon's play "Biloxi Blues" and in the late Jean Shepherd's short story "Zinsmeister and the Treacherous Eighter from Decatur." (Jean Shepherd's tales were used to create such films as "A Christmas Story.") Another humorist and veteran, Art Buchwald, wrote a useful guide on how to get laid on pass, and I will say without further elaboration that Mel Brooks (a WWII veteran) had an even better plan.

Grades of shit: bull, chicken, and nit

A common, if rhetorical, question asked by soldiers is: "How do I get out of this chicken shit outfit?" The expression "chicken shit", which can be used in the sense of a noun or predicate nominative ("Sobel is chicken shit") or of an adjective ("that chicken shit bastard"), referred to a perceived overemphasis on details that would not matter in combat. Most identifiable splots of chicken shit had to do with the niceties of garrison life – mopped and buffed linoleum, shined service shoes, details of haircut and display, too-frequent inspections, and other things a Freudian military analyst would call "anal-retentive" as opposed to the other pole of soldier behavior – "phallic-aggressive"; I'm not making this up. Garrison soldiers and field soldiers even have their own subcategories of obscenity. (I wrote a paper on that topic when I was just out of grad school. It was rejected by a social psychology journal run by hippies who did not appreciate the humor.)

Chicken shit, like most things pejorative, tends to be in the eye of the beholder, though I already wish I had not put it quite that way. One man's attention to detail is another man's petty harassment; what seems a natural article of discipline to a Regular NCO or a West Point or ROTC lieutenant can look like pointless busywork to a stressed private. Everyone understands and generally accepts a "nit shit" detail (which technically refers to the excreta of the nymph stage (nit) of the common body louse, *Pediculus vestimenti* – far smaller than the droppings of a chicken!) like close attention to grit or crud in the workings of the rifle – this is understandable attention to detail run a bit amok. Chicken shit begins where the combat edge of nit shit dulls.

"Bullshit," of course, refers to obvious larger-scale injustices – mass punishment, general cancellation of passes, drilling in the rain, bad food in the mess hall, frequent changes of schedule and other bugaboos of soldiering. Bullshit is expected and likened to the Homeric understanding of the workings of Fate – even the gods are subject to bullshit, and there is no point losing sleep about it. A soldier can use the term "bullshit" with a smile or a laugh – not so "chicken shit," which earns no better than a sneer.

A good example of bullshit is "hurry up and wait." If regiment says Able Company is to be on the range by 0830, battalion decides to get them there by 0800 to avoid any chance of being late; company anticipates battalion by specifying 0730. When the order came all the way from SHAEF to have the 29th ready to embark the landing force in June 1944, I am surprised the soldiers did not arrive at the docks by July 1937. This is bullshit at its most understandable: human frailty squared and cubed and painted OD.

It is also understood that bullshit is subject to the law of gravity: that is, it rolls downhill. It starts at the top – like SHAEF – and keeps sliding like a wet avalanche to lower levels. Guess who is at the bottom. It is bearable because everyone in the chain of command is wearing some of it before it lands on Private Snuffy.

What ain't we got? Wartime is a time of shortages, when the citizens do without this or that luxury so the soldiers lack nothing but the sporting probability of a long life.[19] But there are things that soldiers miss, and we need to remind ourselves of these empty places.

[19] Or so it was in olden days. We have been fighting two wars for more than a decade as I write this, and most Americans have not been obliged to make any particular sacrifice.

First, money is not generally in short supply; what is hard to find is something to spend it on (unless you were on leave or furlough). Life on an Army post was the ultimate expression of inflation – "too many dollars chasing too few goods." If there happened to be a town nearby, money evaporated quickly (minus the allotments you sent home and other deductions), but you were usually too busy to care. Money was like beer – it came in one end and it went out the other in the most natural way, physically unchanged but faster. Gambling was against regulations, which meant you didn't do it when anybody who cared was watching (why else did God make latrines?). Such wealth as there was tended to be redistributed with easy, almost Socialist fluidity. Nobody was going to get rich on Army pay, so why worry? Hedge fund managers lose sleep; privates don't even dream.

So where were the shortfalls?

Free time. Time for yourself is more valuable than your monthly pay. The Army does for free time what de Beers, Ltd. does for uncut diamonds: it raises value by austerely limiting supply. You dream of an hour without having to worry about details or police calls or the smell of Private Slipschitz in the next bunk or the way Pfc. Schmuckatello continuously picks his nose. You fantasize about lying on the sofa reading an Earl Stanley Gardner novel or *Life* magazine. You miss having a life distinct from that of the slob next to you. You're ready to strangle Hitler with your bare hands for the violence he has done to your personal life.

Snacking. You can't store food in the barracks, as it attracts vermin (nit shit) and doesn't look "military" (chicken shit). Nobody eats except at meal times on most days. Americans, even in the Great Depression, were great snackers – hey, would the Germans have invented Coca-Cola and the Milky Way? – and that's a yearning the Army does not satisfy.

Sitting down like decent men. Some obvious things make life unpleasant, one example being the lack of a comfortable place to sit. If you sit on your bunk (usually not permitted during duty hours), you will have to make it again (don't even *think* about lying down). There are no chairs. In the field the ground is cold and generally wet, and if there are bleachers they are hard and cold and generally wet. The Army issues tons of foot powder, but – tragically – no Preparation H. (Aviators and tankers have it particularly hard – trust me.)

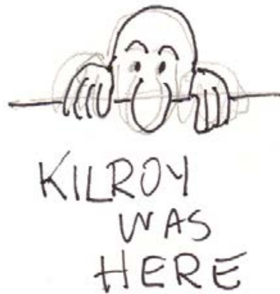
Privacy. One thing soldiers immediately miss is the luxury of taking a dump out of view of the passing crowd. (This skips the related problem of the inevitable draftee from Dogpatch who has never seen a toilet and kicks off his Army service by using the urinal for unintended purposes.) No matter how touchy a recruit may be on induction, he eventually ceases to care about this problem, anyway – or, like the legendary cattywhampus, gets "real mean."

The urinal in those days was a sheet metal trough with a common flush. Soldiers tended to flick their cigarette butts in the urinal, which would have to be cleaned by hand by the soldiers detailed on fatigue to clean the latrines. This unpleasantness produced an official sign with a frequent unofficial endorsement:

DO NOT THROW BUTTS IN URINAL

It makes them damp and
hard to light.

A frequent witness to this drollery was a mysterious character named Kilroy, who was everywhere:



Sex. An unavoidable side effect of the training camps and deployments was the unavailability of safe and sane sexual release. Deprivation when no sex is reasonably available seems worse than deprivation when there is still some hope, however faint; that is, even those who were not getting it back home miss it even more at Camp Runamuck, Alabama. Unlike famously civilized France, America has never countenanced the idea of the "field brothel" (or, in the Foreign Legion, the institution of the company camel – on the back of which, I hasten to explain, the men ride into town to seek release at a bordello). The United States Army is opposed to casual sex as an official policy, but generally accepts pinups and other institutions that make that policy more cruel and less practical than it need be (at the same time that it limits other forms of release: see "privacy", above). Sex, as Bill Mauldin's avatars put it, is a "revrint subject." The Army also makes condoms available and wishes it could find a way to make them mandatory without actually stapling them in place. As noted earlier, one who has seen the infamously graphic 1942 training film on venereal disease will ever see love in quite the same way again; no audiovisual device has ever done so much to suppress *eros* and encourage *agape*. Not that any soldier is known to have actually desisted for purely hygienic reasons. They just worried more during the intermissions (that is, "between intromissions").[20]

Mind food. Much of what soldiers do is so routine and so repetitive that any source of mental stimulation is a relief. If the *Stars and Stripes* was too tame or official-sounding, *Yank* was a little less "revrint" (it was the difference between Willie and Joe and the Sad Sack as models). A letter from home was golden – the troops would eat dirt and drink hydraulic fluid rather than miss mail call. The sorry friends and family back on the home front should do time in Purgatory watching the faces of soldiers who didn't get mail when they needed it.

Time perspectives

Why did men serve?

(1) Serving in the Army is like hitting yourself on the head with a hammer because it feels *so good* when you stop.
They hunted you down and put you in jail if you didn't.

[20] In Viet Nam in 1970, the first sergeant of my company invented an ingenious way of easing venereal infelicities. Convenient outdoor urinals – "piss tubes" were installed by inserting the sheet metal prop charge casings of 155mm rounds in the ground with some gravel to ease absorption. The Top added a sort of handle bar for any soldier recovering from gonorrhea to hold as he urinated – an exquisitely painful experience when you have the clap.

(2) It was arguably better than being identified as 4F during a war everybody knew had to be fought to the finish.

(3) Women wanted to help the war effort, too. There was an easy way to do this while having a good time and getting at least dinner and a drink or two, so there was some value in wearing the uniform for that reason alone.

(4) Great friends, travel opportunities, good food.

Most veterans have good and bad memories of the Army; they tend to tell us about the good times and keep the bad ones to themselves because (1) they'd just as soon not relive the bad times, and (2) they soon learn that non-veterans won't understand anyway.

It is this last thing that sets veterans apart – literally a sense of *apartness*, the sharing of experiences that others who have not been through it, even in peace time – will not understand. "We have shared," as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it long after his service in the 1860's, "the uncommunicable experience of war." There is an indescribable sense of the terrible, the inspiring, and the totally, bugfuckingly absurd about the Army and the practice of war, the inevitable and unavoidable imposition of order and logic on sheer madness that would amaze Sartre or render Homer mute as well as blind.

Maybe this is why the veterans just . . . smile and nod.