

Chapter 1 Army Training

As the silver passenger train moved through the green pine forest of East Texas, I listened to the conversations around me. None of us knew what to expect when we got to our destination and thereafter. My companions and I—18- to 25-year-old young men with a few gray-heads scattered among us—were draftees into the United States Army, new bodies to replace casualties of wars half-way around the world.

On June 6, 1944, the United States and its allies had fought their way onto the shores of Normandy in France with almost 150,000 soldiers. Having constructed a line of fortified concrete batteries and strong points reinforced with miles of barbed wire tangles strung between anti-tank obstacles called Czech hedgehogs, the Germans waited. The hedgehogs, constructed of metal with welded or riveted connections, were like giant “jacks” scattered by mythical titans in preparation for the childhood game. Millions of anti-personnel mines, some hidden and some in the open for maximum terror, lay in the sand from the shore to a line of semi-buried pillboxes, each located to provide complementary lines of fire from the waiting .50 caliber machine guns. Despite taking heavy casualties with more 10,000 dead and wounded, the Allies were able to establish and hold a beachhead. Within a month, a million Allied soldiers and almost 200,000 tanks, trucks, and other vehicles had poured through the Normandy beaches to take the fight to the Germans.

While a start on the road to victory, everyone recognized the battle was just beginning. The Germans were a lethal fighting force that had honed their military skills conquering

countries in Europe for five years. Their major ally, Japan, controlled much of the South Pacific including the Philippines and had drawn America into the conflict with their dastardly attack on Pearl Harbor. The Japs seemed determined to win at any cost in lives of their own people or their enemies. Looking around the train compartment, I realized some of us would not be coming back from the war and others would return with arms and legs missing. It was a sobering thought that evening of July 14, 1944.

Like other young men, I received a notice to report to the San Antonio Induction Center at Fort Sam Houston where I boarded a train to Camp Robinson near Little Rock, Arkansas. It was my first trip beyond the borders of Texas. I do not count Oklahoma, since it is just a little brother of the Lone Star state. Before the draft, I worked for almost a year on the railroad, riding freight trains throughout the hot, dusty plains of the Panhandle of Texas. At age 20, I had never traveled east of Dallas.

As we click-clacked over the rails through the pine forests of east Texas and southern Arkansas, I wondered why my ancestors had left the wooded mountains and hollows of Tennessee to move west during the previous century. In my part of Texas, temperatures regularly soared over 100 degrees in the summer and early fall. West Texas is a region populated with patches of mesquite trees, sagebrush, and burned-out indiagrass. Whirring grasshoppers as long as your finger rise suddenly to the sky, horny toads—descendants of the dinosaurs—feed on colonies of inch-long red ants, and rattle snakes grow thicker than a grown man's arm. Some say a tall man can see buildings in the town of Amarillo from the town of Lubbock 125 miles distant, with only a few trees to obstruct his view. The landscape of tall conifers, green grasses, hills, and

valleys that flashed by the windows of our east-bound train seemed to be an Eden. I promised myself that, if I did return, I would explore America and see the “amber waves of grain” and “purple mountains majesties” described in the songs of my childhood.

When we arrived at Little Rock depot, uniformed soldiers bellowing a mix of curse words and instructions hustled us off the train, into waiting buses for the short trip to Camp Robinson. At the Camp, everything happened in a blur. Despite the chaos and confusion, we quickly learned to group in raggedy lines by the first letter of our last names. In short order, we were assigned barracks and issued dog tags, clothing, and boots. To my surprise, everything was a good fit for me. I do not know if everyone had the same luck, but no one complained.

After outfitted and settled in, we marched in rows to see an officer dentist and his assistant. When the stubby, middle-aged dentist stopped in front of me, I opened my mouth wide for him to inspect my teeth. He pulled my lower jaw down, looked up into my mouth and poked around with the little steel probe that had most recently explored the oral cavity of the previous recruit. Ignoring my winces, he told his assistant of the needed treatment. The taller assistant leaned over, looked at my dog tags, and wrote on his clipboard before the two moved to the next man in line. Neither the dentist nor his assistant spoke a word to me, not even a “thank you” when they were done.

About a week later, my drill instructor directed me to the dental clinic, an almost perfect replica of the barbershop where military barbers had buzz-cut our heads the first day. Instead of barber chairs, dental chairs lined the hall opposite wooden benches against the wall for those waiting. I had never visited a dentist while growing up, relying upon

Mother's instructions to brush my teeth morning and evening for dental hygiene, so the experience was new to me and a little frightening. Soldiers up and down the line of dental chairs were moaning in pain and spitting blood as the dentists did their work. As quickly as one patient was done, another soldier rose from the bench and filled the recently vacated chair, the other soldiers sliding over to another spot on the bench.

Dentistry as practiced by the Army was straight-forward, every person treated on the assembly line and the dentist doing whatever work was needed at one time. If the recruit needed a tooth pulled, five fillings—or a dozen, the dentist treated him in one sitting with minimal use of Novocain to dull any pain. I think the Army believed that pain and haste made good partners, the latter reducing the former.

My seat on the bench gave me the perfect view of a mighty struggle between a short, wiry dentist trying to pull a lower tooth from the mouth of a large, barrel-chested recruit. The dentist, standing beside the chair, clamped both hands around a small set of pliers—the tooth puller—buried in the reluctant soldier's mouth. He strained and strained, the muscles in his forearms popping with his effort, but got nowhere with the tooth. He began to cuss. His patient squirmed in the chair, trying to move away from the tool that violated his person, but there was no retreat. Disgusted, the dentist climbed onto the chair, into the patient's lap, and straddled the patient's legs to get better leverage on the recalcitrant molar. All of a sudden, a loud crack pierced the din of moans and cuss words. The recruit screamed and jumped to his feet, knocking the dentist to the ground. Before anything else could happen, two soldiers grabbed the moaning patient and hustled him out of the room.

Wow, I thought. *I am not ready for this.* Before I could form an escape plan, to my horror, I [M2] heard the assistant call out, "Lewis!" Let me tell you, I was not anxious to be next, but I did not have a choice. I shuffled over, sat down, and curled my hands around the arms of the chair and squeezed tightly, determined not to show my fear and consternation. The dentist silently motioned for me to open my mouth. Suddenly, he stopped and said, "I just broke a guy's jaw. I'm in no shape to work on you. You can leave and we will call you." I left.

On my second visit a few days later, the dentist said that while I didn't need any fillings, he wanted to pull a crooked tooth on one side of my jaw to avoid problems later on. My entreaties to keep the tooth were ignored, which left me with a sore mouth and one tooth short of the ones God had given me.

The 270 trainees in my group came from across the United States. I met people whose names I could not pronounce, even some who I couldn't understand because they talked fast or had thick accents. I had better luck understanding my Mexican friends speaking Spanish than those from New York. Our training unit included college graduates and high school dropouts, but people generally got along once the pecking order sorted out.

In almost every crowd, there is a bully who thinks he can run over everybody. Our unit was no different. [End of Sample]