My Three Years in the Infantry

1943 – 1946

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Bernard Huntley

Cover image: Bernard Huntley as a new enlistee at 18 years old *ca.* 1943

Preface

With the family making tentative plans a for special 2004 Luxembourg trip to visit the places where I saw combat in the WW II Battle of the Bulge. I've been reviewing some of the material I have accumulated in preparation for serving as the guide on this undertaking. My thought was to work up a brief history of that battle and my small part in it, this to serve as background reading prior to next spring's journey but, as I got into it, I started to recall other aspects of my whole experience as a soldier and, finding myself with a lot of free time here in St. Thomas, I decided to expand this into a more complete overview of those times, stretching from autumn 1943 through the spring of 1946... my three years. The initial intent can be served, however, by skipping ahead to page 13.

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Stateside Infantry Training

My first real awareness that I may wind up in the service came on a cold December afternoon in Lowell, where I, with some of my family, enjoyed a great concert of folk music by the Trapp family, newly arrived from Austria, with their "Sound of Music" musical and movie fame still years ahead of them. Upon leaving the auditorium we were bombarded by Lowell Sun newsboys shouting "Extra, extra, Japanese bomb us at Pearl Harbor ... read all about it," etc. We were both electrified and astonished upon learning the details of that sneak attack. On Monday morning the principal of Lowell High School, where I was a senior, piped President Roosevelt's declaration of war into each classroom, a momentous action that soon brought millions of men, and a few women, into the armed services, and which would significantly change the daily lives of every American for years to come.

The first change affecting me directly was my selection of several hastily added choices in our high school curriculum... power plants (all about airplane engines), Morse radio code, and meteorology reflected my anticipation of coming military service. Our June, 1943 graduation ceremony placed a heavy focus on patriotism in the speeches and music ("This Is My Country" etc.), and, no doubt, we all did a bit of wondering about what the future would bring to each of us.

I don't recall much about that summer. I went to work full time in the family hardware business, my father having lost his single non-family employee and my older brother, Jimmy, to the services. Shortly after my 18th birthday in August, I received my selectIve service notIce to report to Ft. Devens for my physical. By October, I was on my way to basic infantry training in Camp Croft, just outside of Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Infantry Basic in South Carolina

For the next five months, I willingly participated in the Army's well-designed conditioning program whose goal was to convert me from a free and independent civilian to becoming a soldier in every way ... physically (endless inoculations, dental work, lots of daily drills, weekly hikes, etc), socially (becoming a functioning member of an infantry platoon, adjusting to barracks life with all its different human nuances, gang showers, and toilet facilities, accommodating the rigid dichotomy between officers, non-coms, and plain old GIs like ourselves, learning to go along in order to get along), psychologically (subverting one's natural inclinations and preferences to whatever the Army directs), emotionally (getting over homesickness, accepting some of the Army's brutal approaches, following directions without any questions) and occupationally (acquiring soldierly skills such as close order drill, firing and maintaining my weapon and gas chamber drills, obstacle and bayonet courses, night marches, behavior under fire, etc.) ... this and much more all combining to enable me and my cohorts to function as properly trained and disciplined soldiers, ones who could and would perform in a predictable way as small, but essential, cogs in a gigantic military machine.

Other recollections of those five months include my learning that southern soil can have a distinctive red color, that one can become extremely fatigued from a 25-mile forced hike with 60-plus pounds of equipment and, on the personal front, acquiring a close friend in Paul Love, a really great guy from a rather privileged (by my standards) background in Pennsylvania. I also earned a few small distinctions along the way. Being extremely thin and wiry, I had the company record for speed in running the obstacle course, I learned that I could be pretty good at firing a rifle, acquiring a badge for excellence, and I also discovered that my innate musical talent served me well in sending Morse code (we were headed toward becoming infantry communications personnel), achieving sending 25 words per minute, which was also the best of our company. This latter accomplishment, which l owe more to genetics than anything else, made me a prime candidate for advanced communications training at the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, which became my next assignment.

Communications School in Georgia

Paul Love, who has also made the cut for radio school, and I both found school life much to our liking, standing out in stark contrast to our phys-

ically demanding basic training. Fort Benning, Georgia, is the site of the Infantry School and is the best permanent post in that branch of the service. Post buildings and barracks were of red brick, surrounded by well-manicured lawns and many shade trees, and there was a large residential area that was as nice or better than most superior suburbs in civilian life. Recreational facilities were excellent, with a handsome theater, post library, and several swimming pools. The officers had their own clubs and pools, of course, while the pools for the enlisted men were segregated by color, as desegregation of the Army was still waiting for the courageous actions of Harry Truman in the late forties.

We were privileged in other ways, being relieved of having to care for a rifle and full field pack, and having only one brief period of daily calisthenics. Our training focused on more advanced radio procedures, continued Morse code training, and the use of more sophisticated equipment. We operated on two shifts, 6 am to 2 pm, and 2 to 10 pm, spending two weeks on each shift. Having free time in the afternoon was great, and we often spent it in the swimming pool or the library. Some evenings Paul and I would walk around the residential area which, with kids playing around, was as far away as we could get from the regimented Army atmosphere.

As always, I did a lot of reading, remembering many afternoon hours of bunking out when I was on the 6 to 2 pm shift, or, another favorite pastime, watching the airborne troops floating slowly to the ground from their parachute towers, which were close by. Another strong recollection is of the very hot and humid weather. Flat roof areas were spaced out on the third floor of our barracks, and these became our alternate sleeping areas when the barracks were suffocating. About a half dozen of us would lug our mattresses up to the roof: spending many hours chatting under the stars and enjoying the cooler night air.

Upon graduating I was given an MOS (military occupational specialty) number designating me as a communications specialist, valued in particular in that it superseded the common infantryman designation I had upon finishing basic training, thus I might anticipate any future combat action to be somewhat to the rear of the front lines. As will be seen, this expectation was short-lived.

Following this training I was given a furlough back to Massachusetts, which was greatly anticipated and enjoyed. I think my parents were distressed that I hadn't put on but a few pounds beyond my regular 125 as I look at old pictures now, I sure didn't resemble any ferocious combat-ready soldier, despite my training. It was good to be home again, however. To my puzzlement, I became one of several Communications School graduates who were re-assigned to commence another infantry basic training

program in Camp Van Dom, Mississippi. *Another* BASIC? In *Mississippi*? In *July*? Geez!!!

More Basic Training

The word we heard was that the Army was getting a lot of bad publicity about the number of youths being killed in combat, with much of the criticism coming from Walter Winchell, a well-known journalist and radio personality, and had instituted a temporary policy of delaying combat assignments until a soldier passed his nineteenth birthday. There must have been some truth to this as all of us who were delayed from our overseas assignment were still approaching that date. And how else could the Army have us marking time other than to just start us on another basic training schedule?

Aside from my later combat experience, Camp Van Dorn was the worst assignment I had in the Army, being the pits in many ways. The barracks were one-story buildings clad in black roofing tar paper, which made a lot of sense in the searing Mississippi sun. The moisture-laden heat was tremendous, and we slept under musty mosquito bars to keep us from getting eaten alive by the mosquitoes. The training was heavy, and soon we were doing full 25-mile hikes with the regular 60 pounds plus of rifle and equipment. Thankfully, these hikes were started in the middle of the night so that we were finished well before noon, but that's the only concession that I can recall. One sight that remains vivid in my mind was that, while on a night bike, we saw a large burning cross on a distant hill, not uncommon where the Ku Klux Klan was still a local force.

The camp seemed to have an air of vague discomfort and corruption about it, which was confirmed when we discovered that our company orderly room was involved in some kind of bootleg liquor operation. It was off-limits to us, but there was a steady stream of and officers from other units making purchases. Our non-coms were mainly "good old boy" rednecks from the South, with an obvious antipathy to those who didn't fit that picture, often going out of their way to add more "chicken" to barracks life, tales not worth repeating.

Two things helped a lot during that period. We were allowed a weekend pass after completing our first six weeks, and Paul and I spent it in Natchez. We went from touring a couple of magnificent southern mansions along the Mississippi to, that evening, getting more than a little tipsy on beer, releasing the pent-up steam incurred in our unnecessary second basic training. Not an experienced drinker, I can still remember the hotel room swirling around after I went to bed.

The second, and more important savior of my sanity, was being allowed to play hymns on the Hammond organ in the chapel in our company area. This was my first experience on the organ, going over there almost every evening whenever the chapel wasn't being used, even getting good enough to use the bass pedals on the slow hymns.

Sometimes some soldiers would enter the chapel below for a few quiet minutes listening to my playing of the various catholic and protestant hymns. One evening a soldier climbed the stairs to the choir loft, sitting quietly behind me. Soon I heard him crying softly and, upon asking if he was all right, I learned his sad tale. It seems that, though married, he "shacked" up with a girl at a previous post and, since then, had been writing steadily to both this girl and his wife. When his locker began to overflow with their responses he gathered up all of their letters and mailed them back for their safe-keeping. Unfortunately, however, he mailed the package intended for the girlfriend back to his wife and sent her letters back to the girlfriend, and he had just learned that day that his wife was suing for a divorce. He was beyond any hope of assistance from me.

I am reminded of another domestic situation that occurred back in our basic training days at Camp Croft. Crawford, one of our platoon members who was quite a heavy drinker was excited because his wife was arriving by train on Saturday night, enabling them to have one night together before she returned to work. Paul Love and I wished him well as we left for a movie at the post theater on Saturday night. Upon returning after the movie we found, to our surprise, Crawford sitting on his footlocker, shedding heavy tears of regret. It seems that he had several beers while waiting for his wife's arrival and, upon her seeing him more than a little plastered, she immediately stepped back aboard the train without so much as a kiss. So much for his weekend of bliss.

This Mississippi assignment finally concluded and I was shipped up to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, an assembly area for overseas shipment. While there we (Paul and I were still having parallel assignments) got a pass to spend a Sunday in New York City. A highlight was a free tour of Radio City, including witnessing a live broadcast of Phil Spitalmy and his all-girl orchestra, after which I was able to call home. I carefully followed instructions by not telling my parents that I was about to go overseas, though it was self-evident when I told them about the radio show I had just seen. A few days later we were brought over under cover of darkness to board ship someplace on Staten Island, soon sailing out to join a large convoy being assembled on the high seas.

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of Liberty and the skyline, but more distraught in that Paul was not on board, having been delayed for a further eye test. I was never to see him again as, after serving in combat in Italy, he returned to civilian life as a student, from which he disappeared under mysterious circumstances unknown to his family or classmates, never to be seen again. In my follow-up in later years, including visiting his mother in Illinois, it appeared plain that he was somehow a victim of foul play.

Adding further insult to injury, my achieved MOS rating as a communications specialist was now superseded by that, once again, of an infantry rifleman, as that was my latest training designation. Oh, well, I was learning that the Army way was the only way and a hard one at that.

War in Europe

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The Battle of the Bulge

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