CAMP McCAIN

It is not within my power to accurately portray the change in my life that occurred in traveling the few miles from Oxford to the vicinity of Grenada, Miss., where Camp McCain was located. I had experienced the military life during basic training at Camp Claiborne, so I knew something of what was in store. Those nine months at Ole Miss had, however, made my army life seem, if not comfortable, at least something like the civilian life I had left when I enlisted. Gone now were the coeds, the professors, the dormitory rooms, the weekends at Etheridge's home, the basket of booze in the tree, the long phone sessions with Nell or Pat. Nothing of that life remained. Once more all effort was directed by leaders, from squad to division, to convert us "college kids" into the killers the army intended for us to become.

I should explain at this point the unusual situation in which the 94th division had found itself, and why it needed men to fill its ranks. The division had been organized first at Camp Phillips, Kansas, more than a year before. It had completed basic training and advanced training in Kansas, and then gone to Tennessee for field maneuvers. This sequence of activity was the normal route during WWII. After maneuvers, the 94th was sent to Camp McCain for final preparation before going to a combat theater. Shortly after it arrived at McCain, the army in Italy suffered a great many casualties at the Anzio beachhead, to the point where units could no longer function effectively. There was an absolute need for trained infantry replacements, immediately. Faced with this dire situation, the army decided to cannibalize the 94th, taking men from all infantry units for shipment to Italy as replacements.

This left the 94th with units fully trained, but lacking enough men to permit commitment to combat. At this point, the army decided to discontinue the ASTP program, and we students were available for assignment to fill the ranks of the division. It was realized that we needed more training in the necessary skills of war, so the division was put into the advanced training cycle once again, for our benefit. Men in the units we were assigned to were of two minds about the situation. Practically, they were grateful for the delay in deployment overseas, into combat. However, they resented having to endure another cycle of training in matters they had already supposedly mastered months before.

This brings to mind an observation about the training system in the army, at least the army I was in during WWII. The skills required to make one a competent infantry soldier are relatively simple, and not exceedingly numerous. It is necessary, however, that they become so deeply imbedded that they are automatic, and are performed in combat with little necessity for decision. Training, therefore, is repetitive, and becomes very boring after months of doing the same things over and over again. So boring, in fact, that the prospect of any sort of relief, even deployment and battle, begins to seem attractive. When I say this I am expressing only my own opinion based on my experience and my observations of other men.

In addition to preparing the individual soldier for battle, the army in WWII aimed at developing unit confidence, between men and between leaders and between units at all levels. This confidence allowed operations to take place with little concern about the men or the units on all sides. The general feeling was that everyone could be relied on to perform adequately, and could be depended on to carry out the mission.

I do not know when the army decided to abandon the unit concept, but the terrible period of the Vietnam war demonstrated its value. In that conflict, men were trained as individuals in units permanently stationed at posts in this country, and then shipped to combat among strangers, with not any connection to each other or to units. This was a horrible way to fight a war, and to treat people, and will always be a shameful blot on our nation's military history. I am pleased to note that our people in Iraq and Afghanistan are committed to those operations as units, trained and prepared together to face the enemy. War is never pleasant, but is made more tolerable if conducted by units with some knowledge of each other and of the men in them.

Understandably, when we arrived at the 94th we were greeted with doubt and some derision, as soft college kids who would not be able to cope with the rigors of combat training. These doubters did not know about the strenuous physical training we had endured during our stay on campuses. We soon had an opportunity to demonstrate. Orders came down from on high that all men would participate in a series of races, exercises, and combat training course runs. After a few days of being outshone by us "softies" the old hands were forced to admit that we were probably in better shape than they were, and could handle ourselves in competition. The games were the icebreaker, and we were accepted as men and comrades in arms.

I was now a member of Company I, Third Battalion, 301st Infantry Regiment, 94th Infantry Division. I now had to become familiar with a new set of leaders. Sergeant Grubner was squad leader in the third squad. Sergeant Menetski was platoon sergeant in the third platoon. Sergeant Wood was, I firmly believe, the best First Sergeant in the

entire army. Lieutenant Tuckman was my platoon leader. Lieutenant Cancilla was the executive officer. Captain Donovan was company commander. Lieutenant Colonel O'Neill was battalion commander. Colonel Hagerty was regimental commander. General Malony was division commander. Those names - Malony, Hagerty, O"Neill, and Donovan - led us in Company I to sometimes call ourselves the Irish Regulars. Of course, Tuckman was a Jewish fellow from the Bronx, but we could tolerate his lack of "Irishness" and him very easily because he proved to be a really good officer and an all around nice guy.

Advanced training now began in earnest. We essentially took up where we had left off nearly a year before. There were numerous hikes, planned for both distance and time involved. We spent many hours on the rifle and machine gun ranges, becoming familiar with our weapons, and also with those guns normally assigned to specialists, because of the fact that combat often leaves crucial weapons unattended due to casualties, and someone has to put the guns into operation for the benefit of survivors.

Each squad was assigned a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) which was a sort of cross between a rifle and a light machine gun. It could be fired either automatically, emptying its magazine, or single shot. This gun was a holdover from the first world war, for which no improved substitute had been found. Our Garand M-1 rifle was a vast improvement over the bolt action Springfield which had been the infantry weapon in the first world war, because the M-1 was gas operated and could fire rapidly without the necessity of working a bolt by hand between each shot. Each platoon, however, had two snipers - expert riflemen - who were used for long range firing at selected single targets. These

men were equipped with the vintage Springfield Bolt action rifles, fitted with telescopic sights, for extreme accuracy at considerable distances.

Two other weapons not changed for at least fifty years were the bayonet and the fragmentation hand grenade. We spent long training sessions practicing their use. For grenade practice, we threw dummies, loaded with only the ignition cap and no other explosive. These made a satisfactory bang, without demolishing the grenade and scattering deadly fragments about. Possibly because nearly all soldiers had played baseball in their youth, grenade skill was quickly achieved. Bayonets, as I have said before in the Basic Training segment, were another matter. We generally flinch at the idea of stabbing a long sharp object into the body of another human being, and most American young men require a definite change in thinking to prepare for that action. The army did its best to accomplish that change, with varying degrees of success. Even after much practice, I was never sure how I would react in close order combat with an enemy soldier.

At Camp McCain, as at most army installations in the United States, there was a prisoner of war camp. The POW camp at McCain was filled with elite German Afrika Korps troops who were captured during the defeat of Field Marshall Rommel's forces in North Africa. For these men the active war was finished, and they were now utilized in operating the post laundry and in other menial jobs. It happened that the route used by our units to begin hikes, to march to the rifle range, or to go to the outdoor training areas in the woods, passed by the POW stockade, and the fence around that area was nearly always lined with prisoners, jeering and laughing at us as we passed. They were, I guess,

getting continuing revenge on America for their capture and defeat, but they certainly didn't endear themselves to us as we passed by, sweating with full packs and covered with either dust or mud. They also had another avenue of revenge, Service from the laundry was terrible. Items sent for washing were often lost or returned in damaged condition, and always late. It was so bad that most of us just washed our own clothes in the latrine showers, and hung them to dry in the barracks on Saturdays or Sundays.

This situation, while a great annoyance for most men, was a sort of bonanza for me. I was always poor while in the army, because I had an allotment taken from my pay for Mom. Base pay for a private was $50.00 a month, and I think I drew only half that. Later, after marrying Pat and assigning an allotment for her, I was paid only $10.00 a month. When in combat, that was increased by $5.00, until I became a sergeant and was paid more. Thanks to Mom's early training, I was skilled at doing laundry, and many men were not. Also, I had brought from home an electric iron, and it was the only one in my barracks. I was able to earn a fairly decent amount of money (and a lot of gratitude) doing laundry and ironing uniforms for less skilled comrades. The money I spent, and the gratitude was occasionally quite useful during the remainder of my stay in Company I. I was often able to "gratitude" my way out of distasteful assignments because a non-com was wearing a field jacket I had washed and neatly pressed. As with Mom's laundry training for me, one never knows when some bit of knowledge or training may pay off significantly in totally unexpected ways.

It should be noted that although the 94th Division had been stripped of a large number of riflemen for assignment to replacement duty in Italy, the other parts of the division had been left nearly intact. None of the artillery units had lost personnel. All of the command structure was untouched. A fitting parallel would be to have a truck in good operating order, with four flat tires. As a result of this situation, the support segments passed through a repetition of their advanced training and field problems. I can imagine that they were not joyous at the necessity to wait while we newly assigned ASTP men completed training.

The infantry troops, however were beneficiaries. I know particularly about the resulting efficiency of the artillery forces, both regimental and division. When we finally were in combat, and had to depend on the support of our artillery, we could and did rely absolutely on their accurate and deadly fire. Never did they fail us, and I am quite sure the additional months of training contributed to their excellence. Throughout history, beginning with primitive catapults and continuing through development of many sorts of methods of throwing large projectiles at the enemy, battles have been decided often on the quality of support afforded the foot soldier by heavy weapons.

Near the end of our training, a visit to the division by the Secretary of War was scheduled. In preparation, we rehearsed an assault on an supposed enemy. We were to put on a magnificent show, with live artillery fire over our heads, and a great number of blank cartridges fired from our rifles, as we dashed forward to overwhelm our goal. The entire division was involved in the spectacle, and we were told beforehand that it was going to be nothing like real combat, because of the placement of our troops and the

formations to be used, and many other factors not a part of fighting a real live enemy force in a real war.

The Secretary came, and we performed as instructed, and our leaders, from division on down to platoon, were very happy with the result. Apparently the Secretary was also impressed, as he was profuse with his congratulations on the super condition of the troops and our obvious capability. The irony of the whole charade was not apparent until many months later, when we were actually fighting an honest-to-God enemy. Only then did we realize that the show produced for the Secretary was the single event in our training that really was, inadvertently, an accurate portrayal of the conditions and events that really do take place at the point where enemy forces meet, on the ground, to determine who lives and who dies. "The best laid plans of mice and men" seem often to succumb to actual conditions. All our training served to prepare us, but when the shooting for real began it soon became apparent that confusion is immediate, and nearly everything becomes ad lib, with the most resourceful emerging as the winners, usually.

One day not long after we arrived at Company I, we were surprised to see the commanding general's Packard stop at the company area, and even more surprised when private Dunstan emerged from the orderly room and got into the car. When he was summoned to the orderly room in the middle of the day, we had all expected that he was going to be punished for some infraction. Several hours later the car reappeared and Dunstan emerged and went to the barracks and changed from dress uniform into fatigues. He joined into whatever was going on until the afternoon was over, and only after evening mess did we have a chance to interrogate him, which we did with alacrity. It

seems that Dunstan came from a very wealthy family in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. His family lived near and were close friends to one of the top officials in the War Department. That official had visited the 94th division on some mission or other, and when he did he asked that Dunstan be brought to headquarters to dine with him and General Maloney. This scenario was repeated several times before we left for Europe. Dunstan was a bright, likable fellow, and a good soldier.

Now I have a comment to add that is pertinent as I write this, in 2006. I have described events involving two different individuals, Lieutenant Drexel at Camp Claiborne and private Dunstan at Camp McCain. Both were very wealthy, and had great social and financial resources. Both were serving in infantry units, despite the fact that they might have avoided peril by using influence to escape such duty. I do not know what happened to Lieutenant Drexel, but I do know too much about the eventual demise of Dunstan, and will describe that tragedy later. My point is that these men served in common with their fellow American young men, and did not ask to buy preferential treatment. I compare this daily in my thoughts to the sordid and despicable actions of our present so-called leaders - Bush and Cheney - who certainly did use every scrap of advantage they could muster to avoid serving their country in time of war. Heroes fight, and cowards cower. I will say no more on this subject, but feel that I would be betraying my friends and comrades, who paid the final bloody price for the freedom those two cowards enjoy, if I did not point out the difference between truly dedicated citizens and those who claim all the benefits but never pay the necessary price. Eternal shame on them!

One of the objectives of all our training at McCain was to qualify the units and the

division as a whole for a new award devised by the army to recognize qualified infantry units: the Expert Infantry Badge, which was an elongated metal bar, with a classic silver rifle on it, in a blue enamel field with a silver border. It was quite striking, and was intended to make well trained units recognizable as such. There were a number of specific goals which had to be reached for qualification, and Company I was a leader in completing the requirements. On May 26, we were among the first units in the army to receive the award, and we pinned them on our jackets with pride. Shortly after, the 94th Division became the first division in the army to earn the award as a whole.

Beyond the Expert Infantry Badge was another, for which we could not qualify until we earned it in actual contact with the enemy. This was the Combat Infantry Badge, which was the same as the other, except that there was now a silver wreath around the center. This award also carried an increase in pay for all enlisted men who earned it. The increase was not great, but neither was base pay so any additional was welcome when we entered the shooting war.

One amusing result of this combat award was the large number of rear echelon officers who suddenly found it necessary to pay brief visits to units at the front, in order to get the medal. I suppose we who earned it, even if against our wishes, should have resented this ploy by those in the rear. However, we knew who had earned it and who merely wore it, so we really didn't care.

It was in advanced training that I was moved from Private Don Parks to Private First Class (PFC) Don Parks. This move which gave me my first stripe was based on my being designated as squad scout. Now I should describe the makeup of a twelve man squad. First was the squad leader, a staff sergeant. Then was the assistant squad leader, a sergeant, (or buck sergeant.) Next came the scout, a PFC. Then the BAR man and his assistant. The remaining seven men were riflemen. It has been said that no battle, or war, is won until the infantry occupies and holds contested ground. It is only when that occupation has been accomplished that the enemy has been routed and victory may be declared.

Warfare is largely a matter of maneuver, by squads and platoons and companies and battalions and regiments and divisions and corps and armies. Basically, by one or more squads attempting to outflank or assault or feint or otherwise gain advantage over the enemy. It is at this point that the scout becomes important, if not vital, in the process. When a squad moves, it is normal that it be preceded by the scout. He may be in front of his fellows by a few feet or by many yards, but in front he is as the squad moves forward, or to the side. It is the responsibility of the scout to detect signs of the presence of the enemy. These may be sounds, or footprints, or disturbed surroundings, or any other of a number of signals. When such detection is made, the scout must use hand signals to control the advance or the halting or the disbursement of the squad, Depending on the speed of the advance, he may have only seconds to make his determination, He may, on the other hand have adequate time to analyze a situation and determine appropriate action.

While advancing, the scout naturally makes a prime target for the forward units of any enemy force encountered. He is out in front, and would make an easy shot. This certain vulnerability makes the assignment quite dangerous, and many man are not suited for it. In addition, scouts were selected for powers of observation, decision making ability, and a willingness to take on the responsibility. Obviously, to force any soldier to serve as a scout would be futile and dangerous. In this regard, nobody forced me to be a scout. I was not always, when we were in combat, delighted to be in the lead, but someone had to do it and I had more confidence in my abilities than in those of the rest of the riflemen in the squad. Besides, there was always the probably false story that the enemy, rather than opening fire on one lonely scout, would wait for the remainder to move into range and then capture the scout and shoot the rest of the squad. As a scout, one could hope so.

When I write about later portions of my service, I will deal again with my career as an infantry scout. I was, in training, usually able to perform my duties properly when we were engaged in field problems and maneuvers, and felt that I could do the job when finally the chips were down.

At every level of organization, there were scouts. Regiments had reconnaissance troops, which moved into enemy territory to attempt to determine the nature of the enemy, its identity, its organization, its positions, and its capability. Quite often this effort resulted in what might be called pre-battles, with both sides engaging in intensive fire fights. On occasions, these situations developed into major campaigns, although begun only in an attempt to learn the nature of the opposition. Many of the more spectacular engagements in the Civil War, for instance, involved cavalry forces under such legendary warriors as,

on the Union side General Phillip Sheridan or on the Rebel side J. E. B. Stuart. The feats of Stuart, who circled entirely around the Union army of McClelland at Manassas, or Sheridan who conducted the Shenandoah campaign with his cavalry in the lead, remain among the great military legends of all time. Truthfully, I never felt like a military legend while scouting, out ahead of an attack, but the function is the same, only on a much smaller scale.

Among the most valuable training segments we practiced at McCain was warfare in urban settings. For this purpose there was an "enemy" village, with streets and various buildings. We went through drills involving both attack and defense. At the time this seemed like just more of the same, but in Germany we discovered just how valuable this training was.

As a culmination of our time at McCain we were sent to Holly Springs National Forest, in eastern Mississippi, on a sort of mini-maneuver, which lasted a week and involved a supposed approach to an opposition force through enemy territory, with each day's food depending on our being at certain locations at specified times to meet supply forces. As usual, Company I exceeded all requirements and ended the week very successfully. Regrettably, however, that week meant the downfall of my squad leader, Sgt. Grubner.

One evening in the middle of the week Captain Donovan decided that we were doing so well that we deserved a small reward, so he procured a supply of sodas and candy bars. He apparently thought it would be a good surprise if he sneaked up on our bivouac position and delivered the treats himself. It just happened that Sgt. Grubner was on guard

duty at the time, about midnight, and detected the captain crawling through the woods. The sergeant did not like the captain, and had said so on several occasions. He took advantage of this situation to demand that the captain identify himself and deliver the password. When he made this demand, Grubner was sitting on Donovan's back, hissing "Gimme the password, dammit! Gimme the password." The captain finally said the password, and Grubner let him up, reluctantly. Nothing more was said. We enjoyed the sodas and candy, and the captain left. The only change was that Grubner was now a private, and John "Pappy" Blalock took over as Sgt. Blalock.

During our time at McCain we paraded nearly every week. Mostly these were at either Battalion or Regimental level, but we did have three full Division parades. Most soldiers complained endlessly about such events, because they required everyone to turn out in best possible uniform, shaved and combed and shoes shining and rifles gleaming. Also, there was a lot of marching to get to the parade ground, and then standing in position for long periods while the various troops and equipment moved into location. Invariably, a few men would collapse in the ranks, and fall to the ground while neighbors grabbed the rifles to prevent them from dropping into the dirt. Finally, the band would begin to play, and the reviewing officers on the stand would stand at attention while the troops passed by in near-perfect formation, and artillery pieces rumbled past and trucks in long files droned along. After passing in review, everyone returned to quarters and relaxed, ready to enjoy the weekend.

As I said, most soldiers complained. I, however, was different. I was always happy when we paraded. I could easily overlook the various discomforts because I enjoyed the thrill

of being a part of such a grand spectacle. There is really no pageant like the sight of a division of fifteen thousand men with full equipment moving and standing and moving with great precision, with the band playing stirring music and flags and banners waving in the wind. To me, this was what it was all about if it made any sense at all. Parades demonstrated strength and unity and skill and determination, and comradeship and the hope for eventual victory. I was different. I love a parade.

By now, we knew that our time in training was nearly at an end, and that we would soon be moving into combat somewhere. We all hoped for the European Theater, because of the lurid stories about the savagery of the Pacific war with implacable and suicidal Japanese troops. Training ground to a halt, and time was spent filling old foxholes and ditches left in practice areas, or in numerous other make-work details designed to keep us away from boredom. The foxhole filling was somewhat interesting, because a number of them had been adopted as homes by water moccasins, which came crawling out and had to be dispatched with blows from shovels.

A cycle of ten day furloughs began, in preparation for our transfer. Pat and I decided, by phone and letter, that we should be married while I was at home. She did all the arranging and planning, even though she was working full time as a telephone operator, because her mother refused to have anything to do with what she considered was a bad idea. Helen, the mother, thought Pat was marrying beneath her class, and that I left a great deal to be desired as a son-in-law. Lloyd Church, Pat's dad, was glad for us and helped Pat as much as he dared, but my bride created our wedding almost all by herself, a

and we were wed on May 15, 1944, in her parents' home at 614 8th Street, in Sheldon. Reverend Thomas Lutman, pastor of the Congregational Church, officiated. Pat was lovely, and I tried to be as handsome as my khaki uniform would allow. We left the next day for Chicago, where we spent our honeymoon at the Stevens Hotel, at no cost because I was in my country's uniform. I then went back to McCain and Pat returned to Sheldon, to await whatever fortune intended for Private and Mrs. Donald Parks.

I found the division in full preparation for shipping out. All our weapons were replaced with new items, which had to be cleaned and zeroed in for effective firing. Other equipment was similarly replaced, including vehicles and kitchen gear and typewriters and everything else. Some of us joked that they might as well replace us too, but that didn't happen. The furlough cycle continued, with men going home and then returning to duty. Most men, that is.

In our platoon was a mountaineer from Tennessee, Ace Adams, who looked and acted exactly like what he was. He went on furlough when his turn came, but did not return. We knew he lived in a remote mountain location, and suspected that he had possibly decided to become a deserter, because he never was very fond of army regimentation. No one heard a word from him, and several weeks passed during which we were preparing to move out. We had decided that we would never see Ace again, when he reappeared, escorted by an MP (Military Policeman.)

By now the changeover had been completed, even to the full day when we were entirely naked in our areas, having turned in our old clothing and not yet having the new. (The

sight of thousands of naked men going through the motions of military life for a day must have been interesting. We just found it embarrassing.) (Em-bare-ass-ing?) Ace calmly turned in his old gear, and drew new, accompanied at every move by his MP. He said almost nothing about his absence until later, when we were on the Queen Elizabeth headed for England, and the MP was not with him any longer. Then he explained that he had been at home all the time. It happened that his cousin was county sheriff, and Ace told him that he would let him know when to come and get him and turn him over to the military. Someone in the company, whom Ace never did identify, had been in touch with Ace, and told him when he had better get back. While Ace was at home, MP's came looking for him several times but the sheriff assured them that Ace was nowhere around, but if he did show the sheriff would certainly turn him over immediately. Finally, when movement was imminent, the sheriff notified the MP's, and he received a small reward for his assistance, and Ace was under arrest for only about a week and then everything was forgotten when we boarded the ship. Even hillbillys sometimes beat the system. Ace certainly did.

From McCain, we moved to Camp Shanks, New Jersey, which was the staging point for overseas movement of troops. We spent about a week there, getting final physical exams and inoculations, and being checked for proper glasses and other details. Among other items was the issue of new gas masks, and going into a gas chamber to test their fit. At this point, strangely, one of the men in the platoon was taken out of the division because his face could not be fitted adequately with a gas mask. He had very prominent and sharp cheekbones, and sunken temples;, and no matter how the experts tried they could not

keep gas from leaking into his mask. After many attempts, they just transferred him and replaced him with a man from the forces at Camp Shanks. As far as I know, he was the only person on record who was too ugly to go fight the German army.

While we were at Camp Shanks, we could get evening passes to New York if we wanted to. Again, because I was always broke I decided not to apply for a pass, but my good friend Hyman P. Kroll, a native of Brooklyn, asked me to go with him to his home to see his folks one evening. That was the only visit I ever made to New York. We rode the subway, and his family was delighted to see us (him, really,) and fed us a great deal of food and we drank a lot of wine, and returned in the wee hours to camp.

Kroll had been a good friend since I joined the company, because although he was a Jewish kid from Brooklyn and I was a small town guy from Iowa, we both liked good music and art and literature and we felt a sort of kinship for that reason. He was physically inept, and I was able on many occasions to assist him on hikes or other trials. He had the only radio in the barracks, and we listened to classical music often. This made some of the other men unhappy because they appreciated Roy Acuff more than Toscanini. One Saturday night I returned from town to find Kroll in the latrine, with a bloody nose and a black eye. He had been struck in the face when he entered the latrine, but didn't know who had hit him. Sgt. Walsh, weapons Platoon Sergeant, was raging furiously through the company area, threatening to strangle the coward who hit poor Kroll. We didn't identify the culprit until he did so himself, long after, during a somewhat desperate situation in combat in Germany. More about that in due time.