



VIEWPOINT



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Army Memories

by

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My home in New Hampshire was in an area hard hit by the Great Depression. Life was hard, and jobs were practically nonexistent. So in 1934 I left home and went to New York, hoping to find work there; but things there were not much better than at home.

So, unemployed, and being of a somewhat adventurous nature, in November of 1934 I joined the Army. The old Army, that is: breeches and wrap leggings; campaign hats; "ours not to question why; ours but to do, OR ELSE!!"

Even the Army had felt the effects of the depression, the privates' pay had been cut from twenty-one dollars a month to seventeen and a quarter. Other ranks of course were also cut, temporarily; the pay was restored in 1935.

The recruiting station was in Manhattan; I took the exam and physical and was sworn in there. I was given subway and street car tokens and sent out to Fort Slocum, a holding station on a small island in the East River.

At Slocum I joined a group of recruits like myself; we were given more complete physical exams, and aptitude tests, and all kinds of shots for all kinds of diseases.

We were issued woolen OD shirts, breeches, choke-collar jackets — the uniform of the time. And we were given lectures, and a basic introduction into the Army.

From Slocum, we were taken downriver to the Brooklyn Army Base, where we boarded the Army Transport *Chateau Thierry*. Some of us were for Panama, some for Hawaii, and some for the Philippines. I had already been assigned to the 11th Combat Engineers, stationed at Corozal, in the Canal Zone.

Although I had lived on the waterfront and was familiar with small boats, this was my first experience on a ship. It was rather a weird feeling to see the Statue of Liberty and the New York skyline fade in the distance, and see nothing but open ocean ahead of us. (Hope those guys up on the bridge know how to read a compass and charts!)

We made one stop, at Puerto Rico, where we went ashore to stretch our legs and marched up to see the old fort on the headland.

Our first sight of Panama, from the sea, was rather frightening; it looked to be all sharp-pointed conical hills.

It was thrilling going through the Canal, seeing our ship being raised and lowered again in the locks. (And to think that that is all done, basically, by the simple matter of water running down hill.)

Through Gatun Locks; across Gatun Lake; through miles of canal; finally through Culebra, also called Gaillard Cut; where the Canal was cut right through the mountain. Mountains on both sides of us; not a breath of air stirring except from our own passage; the sun directly overhead! (My God; what have we gotten ourselves into?) The sun so hot we couldn't hold our hands on any exposed metal on the ship; and we were still in our winter uniforms issued to us back in New York.

Then through Pedro Miguel Locks, across Miraflores Lake, and finally docking in Balboa.

Landing in Balboa, we were loaded on old army "Wobblies" (old WWI four-wheel-drive trucks: high wooden sides, canvas tops, no windshields, no starters). These were replaced in 1935 with Ford dump trucks.

We were then delivered to our respective destinations: some to Fort Clayton (Infantry and Field Artillery); some to Albrook Field (Air Corps); some to Fort Amador (Coast Artillery); and some to the Post of Corozal (Engineers and Quartermaster Corps).

This was on December 24. After supper at Corozal, we were placed in the recruit barracks, which were to be our home for the next few weeks, and met our recruit master, Lieutenant "Hawkeye" Hawkins, and drill Master Sergeant Waters, who gave us a brief outline of what we were in for.

Christmas Day we had Christmas dinner in the mess hall, which was decorated and included a trimmed Christmas tree. A Christmas palm tree??

Our first four weeks were confined to recruit barracks, now called basic training. Drill, drill, drill, and more drill. We soon learned, to our surprise, that in that heat, our woolen OD shirts were more comfortable than the light cotton. The wool would get saturated with perspiration, then evaporation would make them cooler, whereas the cotton would get wet and stick to our bodies.

On our last day at recruit barracks, we were loaded on trucks and given a tour of Panama City. Some sections, and the second floors everywhere, were off limits. We were warned about the "overhead sewer system" in use in some places, wherein some second-floor residents would throw their wastes out the window (preferably when a soldier was walking by below).

We rode down one street that had somehow been named the Coconut Grove. There were little one-room booths down both sides of the street. Each booth had a booth and a rocking chair. We were told that the women in those booths were available any time we were free — two dollars or more around payday, as little as fifty cents at other times. Prostitution was legal, and supervised by the Panamanian authorities. We were also told that at the end of the street and across Fourth of July Avenue (the international bound-

ary), was an Army medical prophylactic station; GO THERE!!! After treatment at the pro station, the medics would give a soldier a green card. Without that green card, any soldier showing any venereal problems was automatically subject to thirty days in the stockade.

After recruit training we were “turned to duty” — assigned to our respective companies. I was assigned to D Company, Captain George Work Marvin, commanding. Captain Marvin was a great officer, and a great guy, and very aptly named — especially his middle name. He was about the smallest man on the post, and he drove the biggest car. Sometimes on maneuvers he rode a horse, and looked like a little kid on a big horse. Great guy, though; he treated his men very well.

At that time the sultan (chino) uniform had not yet been officially adopted by the U.S. Army, but it had been adopted by the Panama Canal Department. So we were told, “We cannot order you to buy these uniforms; but we can make you wish you had bought them!” A fine distinction.

So we bought tailor-made uniforms out of our seventeen and a quarter a month. The prices were very low: something like two dollars for a shirt, and four dollars for a pair of breeches. We each needed three dress uniforms, but we could pay for them a few dollars a month. Campaign hats, field and fatigue uniforms and other things were issued.

One minor problem we had was learning exactly where fifteen inches from the ground came on our legs, so that as we were lined up, the tops of our leggings (OD wrap leggings contrasted with the sultan breeches) would form a straight line.

At that time close order drill was based on the eight-man squad; each squad moved as a unit, and every man in the squad had his own numbered movement to make. Some people may remember hearing of the command, “Count off 1,2,3,4.” Now you know what that was for; it gave every man his position in the squad, so he knew what he had to do in all squad movements, even though he had never been in that squad before; like at guard mount, where a few men from each company, every day, formed a platoon (two or three squads) for guard duty.

Company D won several awards for excellence in precision drilling, and we really earned them. Squads left; column right; left flank; right flank; hour after hour; military precision.

As engineers we did a lot of field work: cutting trails (in the jungle this was a never-ending job, the vegetation grows so fast); building roads and bridges; and surveying, as well as our constant military training.

Part of our field training included building temporary bridges; one was a series of canvas-covered, wood-framed boxes, about thirty inches square, with planks laid across to form a foot bridge across a stream; another, about three feet wide, twelve feet long, and twelve inches deep. Filled with kapok, these were hooked together, end to end, and slid across a stream to form another type of foot bridge. Then there were the so-called pontoon bridges: wooden boats, about six feet wide and twenty feet long, placed about eight feet apart across a stream; wooden beams, to form a bridge for trucks. That was work!!

During the dry season we spent a lot of time surveying, making topographical maps all over Panama. On these missions we camped out for weeks at a time. We would have breakfast, be in the field by daylight, and work until about one PM; after that it usually got so hot that heat waves dancing between transit and rod made it impossible to take a reading.

Once we were camped about a mile outside a little town called "Pese," up near the Costa Rican border. My crew was sent out to a subcamp, a few miles out. No roads, just oxcart trails, so we had a four-line mule team and a station wagon to go out in. Going out was OK. After a couple of weeks the rainy season started, and going back, in one place we had to go down a long straight downhill stretch — all red clay, with high banks on both sides. That wet clay was like grease, and our wagon, with all four wheels locked, started sliding!! Those poor mules probably never ran so fast in their lives, trying to keep ahead of that wagon that was trying to run over them. That was a wild ride!!

I remember the natives coming and admiring, but staying well clear of our mules, exclaiming, "Mula grande!" They had some oxen, and some small horses they called "caballos," but they had never seen anything like our big draft mules.

One saloon keeper in Pese gave our guys credit; just write your name on a paper. He was in Corozal on our first payday after returning there, looking for Ben Turpin, Andrew Jackson, and Clark Gable. One woman was there also, looking for someone who owed her six dollars: two dollars for laundry, and four dollars more!!

Albrook Field, adjoining Corozal, had some of the most modern fighting planes in the world: single-engine, open-cockpit biplanes. Machine guns were mounted on the nose, synchronized to fire between the propeller blades. For training purposes, the guns were sometimes replaced with movie cameras.

One morning on maneuvers, we were strung out on both sides of a road, hiking along a road that followed a long, straight ridge, then dipped down into a valley. Suddenly one of those planes came roaring up out of that valley and came streaking down that road, with its wheels about six feet off the ground!! Talk about diving for the ditch!! I would surely have loved to have seen that pilot's film of that action! I have wondered whether that pilot was commended for wiping out a regiment of engineers, or whether he was reprimanded for reckless flying!

Once, on maneuvers, I was with the signal section of my company. We were in bivouac, sleeping on the ground without tents. At dusk I went off duty and found myself a spot under some brush to sleep. Something was rustling around in the leaves, which I ignored for a while, thinking it was probably one of the little lizards which were plentiful in the area and completely harmless. But the noise persisted, keeping me awake, so after awhile I looked around and saw two little eyes looking at me. It was dark now; I couldn't see beyond the eyes. I made a swipe at them with a stick; the eyes jerked back a little and stayed there, but I didn't! I wasn't about to argue with something that wasn't afraid of me!! Later that night a couple of sentries about fifty feet from that spot captured a seventeen-foot python.

I remember once on survey we were camped about a mile outside a small town. I got drunk in town one night and woke up in the morning lying on the ground beside my cot back in camp. No knowledge of how I got there, through a mile of jungle. That day we got up on a hill, and our party chief, Sergeant Hudson, sent me over to the next hill to give him a reading. I gave him his shot; then, going back I found a shady spot, and thinking they wouldn't need me for an hour, I rested. When I awoke, the sun was well past its zenith; my party was gone, and our truck. I had to hike about twelve miles back to camp, getting in well after dark, and long after supper. (Top kick didn't forget those damn quinine pills, though.)

Later, Sergeant Hudson told me he knew I would find my way back to camp all right, so he left me there to teach me a lesson: "Hereafter do your drinking on weekends!!"

Military radio at that time was in its infancy; we had telephone and telegraph, but our air-to-ground communication was not too good. One means we had was strips of white cloth, about a foot wide and six feet long, which we could lay on the ground to form a code which a pilot could read from the air, and read the message from his code book, i.e., "Enemy artillery two miles," and an arrow pointing the direction.

Another thing we did was tie a message in a pouch to a cord strung across two poles about twenty feet apart and about six feet off the ground. The plane, with a grappling hook dangling below it, would fly over and pick up the message. If the pilot had a message for us, he would put it in a pouch with a long red or white streamer attached, so we could find it in the grass or brush. Of course, today, as everyone knows, air-ground radio is like talking to your neighbor on the phone.

There were several kinds of ants in Panama: some big black ants over an inch long; some little tiny red ants that would raise a blister every time they bit you. Some worked in trees during the day; others worked at night carrying bits of leaves back to their nests. We had to be careful not to set up a pup tent over one of their trails; if anything got in their way, they would climb over, under, or through it!!

In the field we had to be careful to check our clothes each morning before getting dressed, to see that there were no scorpions in them. When it rained, they looked for dry places, and our clothes and shoes were very attractive places for them. I learned that the hard way, pulled on my shoes one morning with a scorpion in one. I really pulled that shoe off in a hurry, then couldn't get it on again for several hours, until the swelling went down. Very few scorpions in Panama could be fatal, but their stings could make one very unhappy for awhile.

Our food was very good; our mess sergeant gave us a variety of good food, yet was able to save enough on the mess fund to throw us a party once in awhile. Our mess allowance while in garrison was adequate, and it was increased in the field to allow for buying fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers. There was no refrigeration in the field. And we never did any KP; every man chipped in a dollar a month, and San Blas Indians were hired to do our kitchen police.

Our barracks at Corozal were the old wooden barracks that were built to house workers building the canal. Two-story wooden buildings, set up about three feet off the ground, boarded up waist-high on both floors, then screening above that, covered with corrugated metal roofs, with a four-foot overhang to stop rain from driving in through the screens. Noisy as hell when it rained!! Our cots were raised up so we might get the benefit of whatever breeze there might be. We were quite comfortable in them.

We went on the rifle range once a year. Prizes were awarded for various achievements. The first year I just qualified, but the second year I had made private first class, and I made expert rifleman! That pay-day I collected some fifty odd dollars; after twenty-one a month, that seemed like a fortune!

Once, on maneuvers, we made a twenty mile hike one day. Some big brass wasn't satisfied with the way it was done, so on the second day we went back, and on the third day did it all over again! Sixty miles in three days, with full field equipment, and temperatures above one hundred degrees! There were quite a few blistered feet, and a lot of blistering language directed toward that brass!! Fortunately, things like that didn't happen very often.

Occasionally we had what were called "musketry problems." We were lined up, shoulder to shoulder, in the prone position, facing a brush-covered hill across a small valley. Sheets of paper had been

placed, out of sight, along the hill. We were each issued fifty rounds of ammo and given orders, like; "From the large rock forty degrees left; traverse right one hundred yards and back; rapid fire; fire at will; NOW!!" Shoulder to shoulder, rapid fire; it was a miracle that we weren't deafened permanently! We did have some sore shoulders and jaws for a few days. Those old '03 Springfield rifles had quite a kick to them. After it was over, if some of those papers had holes in them, the problem was considered a success. The idea was, the papers represented an enemy dug in on the hillside. Our rifle fire was pinning him down, preventing any action on his part, while we brought up artillery to blast him out.

President Roosevelt came through the canal once on a cruiser. I never did know what the occasion was, or where he was going, but my company was selected to act as honor guard for him. He came ashore in his wheelchair, on the Miraflores Lock, and inspected the guard. So I had the honor of seeing him close up. The cruiser was lowered in the lock so he could be wheeled ashore on a level walkway.

Malaria was still very bad in Panama at that time, except in the Canal Zone, where mosquito control had eliminated the disease. But whenever we left the Canal Zone, on field trips, surveying, or whatever, we took quinine every day. At evening chow, when we lined up, the company clerk was there, checking off names, and the first sergeant was there, handing out pills and watching you swallow them.

During daylight hours, whether on post or off, on duty or off duty, we had to keep our heads covered. Off duty we might walk down to the swimming pool in just swim trunks, but wear a hat! Take it off while in the pool, but put it on when you leave! I guess the theory was that uncovered, the sun could bake your brains; but some of us thought that was illogical because if we had had any brains we would never have been there in the first place.

We had a shoe-shine boy (boy? a man about thirty years old) who was really amazing. There were forty men in our building; each man had a shoe rack under his footlocker at the foot of his bunk. Every man had three or four pairs of shoes on his rack. Yet after a man had been with the company a week or so, that shoe shine man knew every shoe in the building, and who it belonged to. We could come in after a day's work or drill, our shoes all muddy, and leave our shoes on a rack in his shop. Next day we would find our shoes all cleaned and shined and back in our own racks. That service cost us another dollar a month, but it was well worth it.

Cigarettes were fifty cents a carton at the post exchange, and other things were in the same price range. Movies were a dime at the post theater. Shirley Temple was at her peak; Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire were big hits; and I remember seeing "Mutiny on the Bounty" there for the first time.

We could hike into Balboa, or ride one of the little native buses, called "chivas," into Panama City for a nickel.

We were free to leave anytime we were not on duty; except that, in the engineers, sometimes the charge of quarters would ask a man to name the parts of a truss, or describe a gin pole, or hand him a piece of cord, and tell him to tie a bowline. If you didn't have the right answer, or tie the knot right, you didn't get your pass until you did.

We could go to town, or visit another post, but we had to be back for bedcheck at midnight, NO EXCEPTIONS!! The MPs started picking up men about 11 pm. If picked up by the MPs, the absentee was covered; but the CQ taking bed check had no way of knowing the absentee had been picked up, so if he did not report him absent, he himself would be in trouble.

Finally, HAPPY DAYS!! Short timer!! But those last few days each seemed a week long. Then, to Balboa, and aboard the same old *Chateau Thierry*; through the canal again, and out to sea, bound for New York, and home.

At that time an enlistment in the Army was for three years, but a tour of foreign service was two years. So men returning with less than a year to serve were given a “short discharge,” an honorable discharge, “for the convenience of the Government.”

On being discharged in Brooklyn, I immediately went over to the recruiting station in Manhattan and reenlisted, to go to China. At that time we had troops stationed in China, and from all the reports we heard, it was the best place in the world to serve. A U.S. dollar over there was like fifty at home. But previous service in the Army was required before a man could sign up to go there.

My two years in Panama gave me all I needed, so I took the physical, signed the papers, and was all set, except for taking the oath.

The recruiting sergeant told me the recruiting officer had gone out to lunch. I should come back at two o'clock and be sworn in, and that would be it.

Not knowing the train schedules, and not wanting to lose any time getting home (I had thirty days leave) I told the sergeant I would be back next week. I have often wondered what my life would have been if that officer had waited a few minutes before going to lunch.

So I went home and met again a girl I had been writing to for some time, a friend from childhood, but definitely no longer a child!! I very suddenly decided I didn't want the Army, or China, after all, so I never went back to take the oath.

We were married soon after, and had fifty-five wonderful years together, and three kids and nine grandchildren, before she passed away.

Mr. Morris joined the United States Army in November 1934 and served two years. He currently resides in New Hampshire.
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