

BASIC TRAINING: THE FIRST 48 HOURS

By Fred Hobbs

The recent yearly observance of Veteran's Day reminds us of the service of men and women who donned military uniforms and fought to preserve our liberty. Some volunteered; others were "invited" to participate by their Uncle Sam during the years between 1940 and 1973, when the draft was in force. But, whether volunteers or draftees, everyone who entered the service was required to experience the rite of passage from civilian to GI called basic training.

In October 1954, after an examination showing I was physically fit to serve (no mental test required), I joined a group of eight young men from Denver officially sworn into service in the U.S. Army. All of us happened to be recent college graduates and draftees.

My first night in the Army spent in the barracks at Fort Ord, California, was a mixture of reactions, emotions and doubts. Why am I here? How am I going to survive this new environment? What about living for the next eight weeks with forty strangers? Having college roommates had been challenge enough! I'll never be able to sleep on this hard Army cot.

At nine o'clock the lights went out. Lying on my bunk and feeling a little sorry for myself, unexpectedly, something happened to lighten my mood; in fact, under the circumstances, I found it hilarious. Three or four of my barracks mates, all from southern California (we came to refer to them as "L.A. Cats",) were still wrestling, making loud noises and in general horsing around, apparently undaunted by this new and scary adventure.

Suddenly, the lights were on again. The first sergeant ran up to the rollilcking "Cats", (who were still in their skivvies), grabbed a couple by their necks and ordered them to run around the perimeter of the barracks four times shouting: "I'll never do it again, "I'll never do it again." As the last repetition of those words faded away on the

opposite side of the barracks, I chuckled to myself, pulled the army blanket up to my chin and within minutes, fell fast asleep.

The next day, I pulled my first, and as it turned out, only KP (Kitchen Police) duty. Up at 3 a.m., over to the Officers Mess Hall in the dark. The fat, swarthy, unshaven cook, known only as “Cookie” called each of us raw recruits “buddy”. At first, I was tray washing buddy, dipping each metal tray into nearly boiling hot water, scrubbing each with a brush and using harsh GI-style lye soap. At mid-morning with all the breakfast trays washed, I was assigned to stir a huge metal pot of macaroni. When it began to boil fiercely, I started to turn down the gas flame. “Turn that gas back up,” shouted Cookie, “you’re not a (expletive deleted) cook!” So I turned up the flame. The faster I stirred, the more the macaroni began to stick to the bottom and quite naturally began to burn. Cookie grabbed the big stirring paddle from my hand. “You burned the macaroni, you idiot,” he screamed. For the rest of a long, long day, as he conjured up other chores for me to do, he would holler: “hey, you, buddy, the one who burned the macaroni, come here!” I’ve never cared much for macaroni since.

Many more incidents would lie ahead, involving the myriad and often crazy characters encountered during my two-year stint in the military. Details of my experiences in Army basic training are fading away after so many years. For some inexplicable reason, however, those two incidents in my first 48 hours of soldiering are still in my memory bank.

They are not especially happy memories, but as the renowned writer, Jane Austen observed: “Perfect happiness, even in memory, is not common.”