

UNCLE SAM'S PAYBACK

by Fred Hobbs

Noah Webster and the Merriam boys, Charlie and George, list in the dictionary named in their honor the word "duty" as number three in their definitions of "obligation." Their book doesn't list "payback", but Google gives the reader a choice, "return gained from investment" or "punishment for what was done in the past."

In trying to write on the topic "Obligations and Payback", the notion of military service, especially drafted military service comes to mind. As a citizen of the USA in pretty darn good standing, I knew that if Uncle Sam said he wanted me, it was my duty, my obligation to serve. At the time, (the 1950s right after the Korean War), I wasn't sure what payback I'd receive for such fealty to my country, "return gained for investment" or "punishment for what was done in the past." I was certain, however, that dodging the draft, to me, was neither good judgment nor cause-related high purpose."

In my first days, in Army basic training, it seemed pretty clear that punishment was being inflicted, although I wasn't sure what I had done "in the past to deserve it." Being roused out of bed at 4 a.m., carrying an M-1 rifle on marches out in the muddy field, eating C-rations out of a mess kit, crawling the infiltration course, sharing a "shelter-half" with a buddy on the cold, rainy central California nights while on bivouac... plus, a list of other indignities too numerous and embarrassing to dwell upon.

Of course, that training was required should duty call for some combat assignment. The Army apparently was smarter than I thought. In its (or is it "their") wisdom, the deciders decided I wasn't meant for further combat training.

I was sent to clerk-typist school. As it turned out, that assignment had many privileges attached to it. The clerk worked in headquarters, knew all the GI gossip, what the best jobs were and who to recommend for them, etc.

Once overseas in Germany, the Army got even smarter. A transfer into Armed Forces Radio allowed me essentially to extend my early experience in my chosen life-long field of broadcasting. That's the point at which the payback for being in the service began to take shape for me. Not only did I have a job that I enjoyed, but I was stationed in Berlin, one of the most interesting and impressive, even beautiful cities in the world. This was at a time before the Wall. The city was surrounded by communist-controlled territory of East Germany, which, of course, could be dangerous, creating an aura of excitement and intrigue like no other.

On leaves I visited In Paris, London and Rome and enjoyed the West German countryside and river trips. All of this as a lowly PFC on \$87 a month, plus room and board.

So, it can be truthfully reported that, in my case, being drafted into military service resulted in a payback that more than compensated for the obligation I fulfilled.