

The Day My M-1 Went Missing

by Dennis Payton Knight

This is the saga of the day my U.S. Army M-1 rifle went missing. It was the fall of 1961. I was in boot camp at Fort Carson, Colorado. The company commander, a captain, brought an unusual idea to his new command that he reckoned would make his company, and himself, stand out from all others on the base.

On the first day in camp he lined up his 128 raw recruits in single file, rearranged us from tall to short, and then us into four successively shorter platoons of four successively shorter squads of eight successively shorter men. His was a vision of his company in a striking parade for the generals with the tallest, most powerful leading the march in front formidable and intimidating to the potential enemy troops.

My place in this phalanx was in the very last row of vertically challenged young men, having to stretch our gaits painfully, with sergeants barking, to march in time without the ranks lagging behind and making a mockery of the captain's notion.

And that was how, in our fifth week of training, we assembled as platoons and squads, not in parade formation but in twos, laden with full, heavy backpacks and ten pound M-1 rifles slung on our shoulders for a forced march eight miles up what the noncoms called Agony Hill.

The first platoon led off at the brisk pace their long legs could take them, but those of us in the fourth platoon, at the back had to cover the same distance with our pins being thirty percent shorter. The butts of the M-1s on the shoulders of those up front met their belt lines. My rifle's butt lined up inches below my own.

Despite our vertical handicaps, my squad, by virtue of the stretching we had to do in parade, kept pace with the tall guys. But they got to the top first, claimed the softest and shadiest spots to rest, and were already stretched out and tapping their canteens. Some were smoking.

It was when my squatty squad finally made it to the summit, looking for what rocks were left to sit on, that I discovered my M-1 rifle was missing. I was still erect and needing desperately to find a place to rest, but I couldn't. I was panicked, looking left, right and behind with thoughts tromping in combat boots through my exhausted brain and soul of a certain court martial. My rifle had vanished, and I was going to the stockade.

Finally, I just had to stop, sit down and get my wits about me. And it was in that motion and a rude, resultant jolt that I realized my rifle was still slung on my shoulder. I must have gotten so used to the weight that it seemed not to be there at all. And that was the day I learned carrying a gun is not all it's cracked up to be.