CHAPTER 4.:

THE ARMY YEARS FROM INDUCTION TO EUROPE

I reported to the draft board at 8:00 am on the morning of March 31, 1943. A group of us, escorted by army personnel, took the subway to Pennsylvania Station, then the Long Island Railroad to Camp Upton on Long Island. We took the oath of allegiance and thereby were inducted into the army. We were then rapidly introduced to the showers, the barbers, were given physical examinations, received our first uniforms, and were assigned to our barracks. We were a disorganized group, barked at frequently by noncoms and drill instructors, who had the notion of converting these civilians to soldiers. The days in camp began at daybreak, ended at dark, when we were exhausted and ready for sleep. I seemed to be always ravenously hungry. The food was plentiful, though not for the gourmet palate. During the next few weeks, we took various qualifications and evaluation tests, had extensive physical training, and the beginning of close order drill. I was now Private Heimberg.

After about three weeks at Camp Upton, I left by troop train with other men, all headed for the Army Air Corps, although we did not know the final destination. The train returned to New York City, then headed south to parts of the country I had never before seen or known about, except by name. The train left Penn Station, headed for Philadelphia, Washington DC, through Virginia and the Carolinas to Atlanta, and finally arrived in St. Petersburg, Florida. The trip to Florida took almost three days, with frequent starts and stops, and we did not have first class accommodations! Two men each shared upper and lower bunks, bathroom facilities were limited, but we were all young and most of us were glad to be in the service. Army trucks picked us up at the

railroad depot and we were transported to “Tent City”, a camp thrown together at the outskirts of St. Pete for basic training for the air corps personnel. The facilities were primitive, all tents without indoor plumbing, compared to an established camp like Upton, but here we were. At least it was warmer!

For the next few weeks, our activities were more of the same physical training, obstacle courses, close order drill, jogging. Shortly thereafter, we were moved from the tents to the Princess Martha Hotel in downtown St. Pete! The Air Corps had taken over hotels in various parts of the country, for housing during basic training. We did our close order drill and calisthenics in Miller Huggins Field, which the New York Yankees had used for spring training before the war. The hotel was stripped of anything resembling comfort or luxury, or regular hotel furniture, and was replaced with standard GI (“Government Issue”) spartan fare. I shared a ninth floor room with three other airmen, on two double decker bunk beds. We did a lot of running up and down stairs, since we were forbidden to use any of the elevators. They were reserved for the officers. The military is not a democratic organization!

Our first weapons were issued to us, the standard carbine, but more about weapons later. The Air Corps needed technically trained people of all kinds, for flight crews, maintenance, ordnance experts, medics, etc., so more time was spent in taking tests. The real training in the Air Corps would start after your assignment to one of these special areas. I wanted to be a pilot, and was given some additional testing, but this was not to be. A short time thereafter, our squadron commander called out a list of names at a formation, mine among them, and we were told to report to take a special examination. It turned out to be similar to a college entrance examination. Those of us who did well

would be informed later, but at the time, we were ignorant of its purpose. About a week later, I, and a few others, who did well on the exam, were told that the army was setting up an Army Specialized Training Program ("the ASTP") to prepare officers in various technical fields. They would be sending us back, in uniform, to various college campuses to study. I selected engineering, jointly with premed. This sounded too good an opportunity to turn down, so of course I accepted. The navy set up a similar program called the V12 program. In early June 1943, I was transferred from St. Pete to Blacksburg, Virginia, where I became part of the ASTP at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. St. Pete had been adequate for air corps basic training, but not for what was to come later. At any rate, I liked the town and did have passes occasionally to enjoy any off time in the bars, and with local girls.

VPI, at that time, was a typical southern academic military institution, all male, with a proud and traditional cadet corps. We army boys were thrown in with the cadets, and as you can imagine, the excess spit and polish did not go down very well with most of us. After a while, however, we thought we could outshine the cadets. At VPI, we were housed in dormitories, which were military barracks. I shared a small room with a fellow who turned out to be an anti-Semite from Wisconsin. We had more than one fracas. Ed Hanson was from Racine, my age, but from a more affluent background. I guess he was unprepared for a Brooklyn, New York, Jew. We eventually came to a truce, but certainly not to friendship. The main campus buildings at that time surrounded the parade grounds. Close order drill was a regular part of our daily activities, in addition to physical exercise, including a daily cross-country run.

School was set in session the day our contingent arrived! I soon was involved in calculus, engineering drawing, chemistry, English, and physics. The entire day was regimented. This was not the way college was supposed to be, but was a lot easier than what I had experienced previously at Cornell.. Reveille was at 6:30 AM. After washing, dressing, and preparing our rooms for inspection, we fell in at 7:00, marched to the cadet dining room, then marched to classes that began at 8:00, which continued until noon. After another march and lunch, we had classes and laboratories for another two hours, followed by three hours of regimented exercise. After dinner, we were expected to remain in our rooms for study until taps at 10:00 PM.

The most relaxing part of the day was mealtime. We would be seated at the dining room tables like real cadets, and were served our meals by young women who had been hired as waitresses. Everything was done by the numbers, and we had no choice in the matter. I'm sure most of us felt this as an obligation to the country at war, that we were lucky to be in the ASTP, and we tried to do our best.

On Saturday afternoons and Sundays, when not on duty, we occasionally got passes and could go to Roanoke, Salem, Radford, and, of course, Blacksburg. I rapidly learned to enjoy beer and square dancing. I was a great dancer after a few beers. We were able to meet local women, and I enjoyed the friendship of one young woman for the months I spent in Blacksburg. Unfortunately, I frequently greeted Sunday morning with a hell of a hangover.

The routine of study, exercise, close order drill, beer, and sex continued for months until it all came to a screeching halt on February 21, 1944. I managed to get good grades under circumstances far different than they had been at Cornell, and in the end, I

received substantial transfer credits from VPI to Cornell after the war. The War Department informed us that, due to military necessity, the ASTP, except for a few advanced medical and engineering students, would be closed down, and that we would be reassigned to the army ground forces. I had no option to return to the air corps as I would have preferred, and to apply for flight training. No doubt, there was military need for more infantrymen, but political pressure, I'm sure, had an effect on the army's decision to close down the ASTP. The navy resisted these pressures and the V12 program remained intact. Within a few days, the ASTP unit was closed down; we packed our duffel bags, boarded troop trains, and embarked for various destinations. By early March 1944, a good number of us from VPI arrived at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, and became members of the 84th Infantry Division. I was nineteen years old.

I was assigned to "I" Company, 2nd Platoon, 3rd Battalion, 335th Infantry Regiment, and my conversion to an infantryman began. The 84th Division had been reactivated earlier in the fall of 1942 at Camp Howze, Texas, where it started training in January 1943. It was at half strength when it moved to Camp Claiborne, after maneuvers in Texas and Louisiana, in November 1943. It remained at reduced strength until it was filled out by the ASTP boys. Half the Division, including all the noncoms, were men whose education at best terminated at high school, and the remainder were from the ASTP group. The original members of the Division referred to us as the "Quiz Kids". This at first produced enmity, then competition, but finally, collaboration and acceptance between the two groups when we proved ourselves to be good soldiers. We knew we were going to see combat, and we had to depend on each other.

We, the ASTP boys, immediately started an intensive basic infantry training. We received our weapons, the M1 Garrand rifle. I was assigned to a rifle platoon, and had to learn to love my weapon. I cleaned it, learned to take it apart and put it together blindfolded, and eventually qualified as an Expert with the M1 (the highest level based on marksmanship). I qualified similarly with the carbine, and with the bayonet. Because I was the tallest guy in the squad I often carried the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle). I also had to familiarize myself with the 30-caliber light machine gun. Even though we were not a heavy weapons platoon, the time could come when any one of us might need to use one. The same was true for mortars. Learning to use hand grenades was an obvious necessity, and we all were a little shaky before we threw our first live grenade. One of the more difficult training exercises was the obstacle course. You maneuvered on your stomach with rifle and field pack, through barbed wire, while at three feet above ground level, live ammunition was flying. You learned rapidly to keep your head and butt down. Somehow, I survived. Finally, we had extensive training with the bayonet and knife. We had to learn to use the bayonet and the rifle butt as parts of the same weapon. This to me was the most difficult, not the learning, but the thought of cold steel entering a body was frightening. We learned hand to hand combat with knives and bayonets, and how to disarm an enemy when you were not armed. This is easy to digest in training, but it was not the real thing. That was yet to come. We were being taught how to be killers, since, after all, that was what war was all about.

By this time, we were all in excellent physical condition, but there remained intensive field training, extended marches (about 25 miles) with full field pack, forced marches (double time), all of which drove us to the limits of our stamina. The swamps of

Louisiana became familiar territories for a bivouac after a hard day. Out in the field, we all became bait for chiggers and ticks. We spent many an hour, like monkeys, grooming each other using lighted cigarette butts to make the ticks back out with their claws relaxed! It was not pleasant, but very necessary. Needless to say, our personal hygiene could have been improved, but in a large way, my experience as a farm hand prepared me for some of this. We lived in dirt, breathed dirt, and prepared for combat. When we returned to camp, however, the barracks and ourselves had to be scrubbed clean, everything was spit and polish, and we had to stand for inspection and parade, before we could possibly be given a weekend pass. But there also were some small pleasures out in the field. Often, in the midst of a march or war game, we found ourselves in a watermelon patch. Nothing had ever tasted as sweet or salved your thirst as much as a watermelon, warm as it was, split open with a bayonet, and divided among members of the squad!

When we were fortunate, we would get a weekend pass, and go to Alexandria, the nearest town. There was little to do in town except walk the streets, try to meet women, or end up drinking beer for hours. I think the residents of Alexandria were not too happy to see all these soldiers descending on them. If we had enough time, a rare three-day pass, the place to go was New Orleans. I got there once. Most of the time we did not go beyond the camp gates, where a string of bars and prostitutes had set up shop. When we had time off, but were restricted to camp, we could get beer at the PX (Post Exchange), and the poker games would start. We had little energy for intellectual pursuits.

Part of our required education as soldiers was to view various films on venereal disease, how to avoid it and what to do if exposed. These films were very graphic and

surely frightening, but certainly did not restrain us from seeking out women! We were required to carry GI condoms when we were given passes. We also viewed a series of films on "Why We Fight", giving us a history of Nazi Germany and Japan, as interpreted by the War Department. We had lectures on what our duties as soldiers were, if we were captured. I don't think many of us considered that as a real possibility at the time. We knew from these talks that it would not be long before we would see combat. With the emphasis we had on jungle warfare, we thought we would be going to the Pacific.

In addition to regular infantry training, we began training as airborne troops. We were not paratroopers, but would be used as glider troops, if necessary. We had some parachute training, but no actual jumps, and learned how to lash down equipment to be carried in gliders. I guess we were fortunate never to have been used as glider troops in combat. They earned their nickname as "flying coffins".

As our training continued, D-day came and went. The infantry war expanded on all fronts. We finally received our orders, and in mid August 1944, the entire Division packed up for combat and moved to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. We assumed that we were heading for the European Theater of Operations (ETO), and this proved to be correct. At Camp Kilmer, we received some new weapons, and continued with physical training. All men in the Division at intervals received three-day passes. Those who could left for home, while others headed for a blowout in New York City. I, of course, went home to see my mother and brother Arnie. He was just twelve years old at the time, and looked up to his older brother in uniform. I also was able to see my sister Dorothy, then married to Milton Friedman, who was in the army quartermaster corps. I also managed one day for letting off steam with army buddies, and spent almost all of my

money. On September 18, we left Camp Kilmer for embarkation from New York City. The 335th Infantry boarded the "Sterling Castle", a British ship, and with the early tide, set sail. It was a beautiful sunny day as the ship headed out of New York harbor. We then began to realize that some of us might never see this scene again. As we passed the Statue of Liberty, the air filled with "balloons", as many unused condoms were blown up, tied off, and tossed into the air. A jolly scene! As the city receded in the distance, blankets were unfolded on deck, out came the cards, and the poker games began in earnest. I had about one dollar left to my name, which was of little value, so what else was there to do but to play? Stakes were only 5 and10 cents. I won the first hand, and, strangely, I had nothing but good luck that day, and won about $100 by time we finished playing. This turned out to be fortuitous, because as the daytime passed, the weather turned foul, and we were engulfed in a thick fog. Vision was very poor, and in the fog, we had a collision with another vessel. The prow of the Sterling Castle was so severely damaged, that the ship had to return to port. This quite unexpected turn of events brought us back to Camp Kilmer. It was another week, another three-day pass, and another Manhattan blowout, before we would embark again for Europe.