

After The Guns Fell Silent

By Sidney Hecker

Ten years after the guns fell silent and the camps liberated, our own guns continued firing, spewing brass and reek of cordite in the rain and mud. Then the sergeant screamed “cease fire” and the Fort Jackson firing range went mercifully quiet. And then something extraordinary – and frightening – happened.

There were fourteen of us Jewish boys and four Italians and we New Yorkers had banded together like metal filings under a magnet. If Stan Rothenstein and Billy Gambini of the movie “My Cousin” Vinnie had been there, they would have felt exactly as we did. They had been accused of murder in rural Alabama and exonerated only after the real culprits were caught. South Carolina was not much different, full of southerners who had never seen a Jew, much less an Italian.

We soon realized that our time would be spent trying to beat the army at its own game and of course getting in to trouble. But there were also serious

discussions about why we were there, and we ultimately settled on two reasons. First, we knew that Europe was a horror and the Middle East was a challenge. Some of us remembered standing on street corners selling slips of paper for 10 cents, each one representing a tree to be planted in what would become the state of Israel. And we knew that money and trees were not all that would be needed. We were the only people on earth who might have to

fight for two countries, though this was, as we say, not a job for a Jewish boy. The second reason was simply selfish. The Reserve Forces Act of 1955 allowed volunteers to serve for only six months on active duty and then spend some specified weekends training for the next seven and a half years. This seemed like a good idea at the time – as long as you didn't get recalled. But that's another story. Almost all of us needed to get back to NYU, City College or other places which we favored above military life.

Our huge sergeant, Rufus Washington – we called him Captain Midnight – but of course we wouldn't do that today – refused to believe that Moskowitz was Jewish. On our first day he kept looking down at Mosky's head, then

feeling gently under the curls. Marty Rosen had inadvertently pulled out a Klezmer brass band recording his Mom had sent, called "Jews With Horns" and that freaked Sgt. Washington out completely. We assigned ourselves the task of unconfusing him, gradually.

Our sergeant had an eighth grade education and was all army. What he knew was orders. He lived by them and expected us to live by them. If the orders from on high proclaimed white tee shirts showing at the neck, we'd better show white or it would be our necks. When a typo in the day's orders mistakenly stated revile at two AM instead of five, Sarge had us wandering around in the dark for no discernible reason. Reason, in terms of questioning orders, was unthinkable.

By our second week, each day commenced with the usual boot camp mishigoss, calisthenics, schlepping, screaming and learning assorted methods of doing away with bad foreigners. The lieutenant in charge of the infiltration course seemed to take great pleasure in lowering the machine gun barrels so that the tracer bullets whizzed a couple of inches above our heads

as we crawled through the red Carolina clay. Segal's comment for the day was "this isn't Holidayworld; this isn't Waterworld; this is Schmootzworld." This officer had an unusual sense of humor, complete with a miniature hangman's noose on his desk.

The next day brought our first formal inspection, conducted by a bird colonel. This was supposed to impress us. It didn't. Colonel Bureaugard stomped up and down the barracks floor kvetching about all the regulations we were flouting. Pointing to something apparently out of place in Shinuk's locker, he stormed "just what do you call that, soldier?" Without missing a beat and just a hint of a smirk, Shinuk replied "it's called a book, sir," with a slight hesitation before the "sir." A week on KP was the upshot and Gene claimed it was worth every minute.

Day two into our third week – more drivel with some actual free time in the afternoon. Three of us searched out the base library which was rumored to contain several books. But the real surprise was the attached music room, complete with phonograph, earphones and some real music hiding among the "somebody done somebody wrong" songs. Our Italian friends

located a small restaurant about a mile from the base – where incidentally they shouldn't have been - and indicated that the pasta was edible. Feldman wandered back to the barracks with a story he insisted was true. He had been accosted by a fairly inebriated soldier who – and he says this is a direct quote – said “man I sure wish I wuz Jewish.” “Uh uh” said Feldman, which was the about only reply he could muster at the moment, and then just listened, unable to fathom what could possibly be coming next. “You know, all da Jews are millionaires and if a Jew goes broke all the other Jews give him a quarter and he gets to be a millionaire again.” “Oh I knew that”, yelled a laughing Vinnie Ragano and four of us chased him around the barracks. There were times when we did have some fun.

For a few minutes each day we were back in Brooklyn or the Bronx or some other civilized place, but for most of the time we were in a place like something like Chelm, but without the sophistication. After a while we began to believe we were in a Tom & Jerry cartoon with Sgt. Washington as Tom and us as Jerry. He was always chasing us to do things the army way and we almost always had a better way which contravened those beloved

orders. One day Moski got up very early and slid quietly in to the operations room, substituting a Mickey Mouse Club record for the standard reveille recording and turned up the volume just before he zoomed back to his bunk. It was the best morning yet – or as good as it could be at five AM, but ole Sarge was devastated. It was simply out of order. The next night two of the Italian boys, not to be outdone, jogged over to the officers' parking lot and replaced Col. Bureaugard's “Reserved for Battalion Commander” sign with

“Reserved for Village Idiot”. Bureaugard stomped over to the company area at six, vowing to take fingerprints, court martial the whole company and cancel leaves forever. Each threat seemed to make his neck one shade redder. He referred to us as a menace and said we would never make good career soldiers. It was the one time we agreed wholeheartedly with him.

We were usually at odds with our sergeant but we never regarded him as evil or even mischievous. We were the mischievous ones. So when the guns fell silent on the firing range and a grim Sgt. Washington emerged from the cab of a five ton truck with a sheet of orders, we were a bit apprehensive. He took his usual stance, this time on a mound of mud and barked “listen up; we

got orders. All you Goldbergs and Schwartzes and Horowitzes, you mens git in to the truck”. He called our names, checking each of us off on a list. We hesitated, but after all we were standing there with loaded rifles and there were 14 of us and one of him. What could this possibly mean? He was clearly following orders from a higher source. Rangone and Collabelli volunteered to come with us – you get to know who your friends are - but Sarge said there was room for only 14. That truck could easily hold 20.

He drove us to the barracks where we were ordered to get cleaned up and in to class A uniforms. We started speculating; “maybe they’re taking us to be court-martialed for disobeying orders”, gulped Rosen. “But we never really disobeyed orders”, chimed Steinberg, “we just sort of ignored them”. “Hey maybe this is the revenge of that nitwit Burugard” was Meltzer’s view.

Fourteen Jews, 22 opinions.

We drove for quite awhile. By the time we emerged from the truck, night had fallen and we were admittedly nervous. Sarge stood us attention, gave us a cursory inspection, straightened 12 ties and marched us in to the side door of a large building. I will never forget the next voice we heard: She said

“ya’ll want the maztoh ball soup or the gefilte fish or both?” It was Pesach, 1955.