

War Era Story Project 2012

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Age: 86

I was enlisted in the Navy at the Cambridge, Ohio Post Office building by a Navy recruiter. Three of we enlisted and were sent by Red Star Bus line to Columbus, Ohio: Me, Tom Tribbie and Charles Hickman. The two friends I went to Columbus with were turned down by the Navy for some reason or another; they were sent back home and I was kept. I was sworn into the Navy at the old Post Office building down by the State Capitol building after a basic preliminary medical exam. We were issued a chit for a room, meal and breakfast at the Southern Hotel (my first stay at a Hotel), and a railroad ticket on the B&O railroad to Great Lakes, Ill via Chicago.

We were to be at the railroad station at the prescribed time under threat to all in the contingent of GREAT PENALTIES. It was my first train ride; I was all eyes. All I had were the clothes on my back, two dollars and some change my sister Marie had given me. I had no suitcase. I arrived in Chicago; you have to visualize, a young boy that had never been further from home than 50 miles east of Cambridge, (Wheeling, W.VA.) 59 miles south of Cambridge (Marietta, Ohio), twice in Columbus, Ohio (80 miles west) and once in 1936 as far north as Akron, (72 miles), in my young life of 17 years.

With by now a crowd, I caught the elevated electric train to the Skokie line station (Chicago to Milwaukee), got off at Great Lakes Naval training station with the rest of the bewildered crowd, and joined the ranks of recruits being formed up into company size (130) and marched into the training station.

Our clothes were put in card-board boxes, we addressed them for home and the Navy shipped them. We were now in shorts, or a towel, almost nude, scared and even afraid to ask questions. We were measured, averaged for clothes size and each was more closely measured for shoes; sizes were marked in red numbers on your stomach.

First came the most intense medical examination (or maybe it wasn't intense, because I had nothing to compare to). I remember a large round fountain device; about 20 guys could get around it at a time. In the center was a column with a metal head that squirted water out in small streams like a round sprinkling can. We were given throw-away toothbrushes and told to brush our teeth. One guy was standing there peeing in the basin. Did he ever catch hell! He, like the rest of us, had never seen anything like this.

Our teeth were examined and marked for fillings, extractions and whatever else was needed, and appointments were made by the Navy for later dates that we didn't know about. If one had too many bad teeth, he was put in a dental company and his teeth were extracted and dentures were made for him. My brother Harry had that experience. Teeth were not too good in those days. Fluoride was not known as it is now. Fillings were done without Novocain and it hurt.

On this first day at Great Lakes Training station we received our clothing. About all sizes were too large, the Navy had planned on shrinkage and weight gain from living a disciplined life prescribed by them. Long lines again, through a building in your under shorts. We were issued one sea bag, one ditty bag, one hammock, one mattress, two blankets, two pair dungarees, one pair canvas leggings, two dungaree shirts, two pair black shoes (one dress, one work; both at the time the same, but one pair was quickly turned in to the cobbler shop and extra rubber heels built up), three pair black socks, two changes white navy underwear, two white hats, two pair summer white uniforms, one navy blue undress winter uniform, one set navy dress blues, one navy blue flat cap, one navy watch cap (toboggan) one winter sweater, one pea coat, one neckerchief, six handkerchiefs, one package clothes stops. All was taken from each person except for the immediate clothes he had to wear. The sea bags, which by now were stenciled with your service number and name, etc., were gathered up to be taken by truck to our training camp.

We marched (if you could call it) that from the Camp Perry side (the old side) across the road and about three miles to a new area called Green Bay. The rest of the day was taken up by using the cut stencil boards that were a part of our new gear furnished and beginning the stenciling of all of our clothing with our name – even the underclothes. We dressed and again assembled for marching to chow.

The next day, we marched back over to Perry to the commissary to receive our ordered living necessities. And getting our haircuts didn't take long; all hair was on the floor when we left. Not quite bald, but not quite with hair.

We again formed a line entered another area and were issued \$5.00 in advance from our pay (\$27.00 per month) and given a list of items to buy. They gave you a readymade parcel (and took your \$5.00) containing: toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, letter writing materials, black shoe polish, and shaving material, even if you didn't shave yet. I can't remember about cigarettes. Maybe we were allowed to buy them, most people smoked in those days. Can't remember what cigarettes cost. Maybe 15¢ a pack, I think. I just didn't smoke. Didn't have the money nor any way to get them. We all bought the same thing. Orders were to be obeyed. Then, we marched back to our barracks.

Shots happened the first week also. The shots for disease were an experience. Companies of men, about 130 per company, were marched to the dispensary where the shots were given. Double lines entered the building. Tables were set up with a several corpsman at each table. The shots were given on each arm at the same time, plus small pox vaccination scratches. We must have received about two shots in each arm plus the small pox. The corpsman would pick up a loaded syringe, insert, plunge, withdraw, and lay the syringe down on the table. There was a little blood on the cover of the table from so many needles. Another corpsman would take the empty syringe, remove the needle, drop same into a bath of alcohol, pick up one that had been soaking from another alcohol tray, attach it to an empty syringe, load it with serum, and lay the loaded syringe back down on the cloth cover. Several corpsmen were doing this loading, cleaning, inserting in arms. The recipient line had to keep moving, one fellow in our line got two shots the same because he didn't move forward. He couldn't lift his arms the next day. They gave him light duty for one day because of his fever I think. The next day, he was right out there with the rest of us. Now and then some recruit would keel over. Some people just don't like a needle stuck in them.

Those guys had a lousy job doing that all day long. The next few days about everyone had stiff sore arms.

Drilling and instructions in same started immediately. We were lined up by size in rank, tallest to the front and so on; we were to remember where our place was and when we fell in, we were to line up in this manner. We were taught to “dress right” by placing the right hand on the left shoulder of the man to your immediate right, and with body facing forward, turn your head smartly to the right. We were told to observe the line and see that it was kept straight. At first you were moved over top of a line in the pavement, told to dress right, with toes on that line, to closely observe the straightness of same line. Then you moved off the line and were told to dress right and keep the same straight line. After a little yelling and shoving, it started to work.

Our introduction to drilling by our company commander was started the same day. He would demonstrate a move and tell you the commands he would give to initiate this movement. And we would attempt to imitate it. It was sad to start.

Day after day went in this manner: 05:30 Reveille, 06:15 calisthenics, 07:15 breakfast, 08:00 barrack inspection by company commander, fall out 08:30 for daily close-order drilling, late AM classroom lectures on seamanship and such things, personal health, 12:00 chow, Fall out at 13:00 drilling, and lectures until 16:00, supper chow was at 17:00. After supper, we were free to go to the barracks, write letters, wash clothes and normally just laze around. There were no radios. We could go to the ships’ store, but that was such a long walk; normally it was done only on Sunday after church.

On Sundays, all fell out for church; all must go, each to his religion. This was the first time in my life that I knew people other than Syrians could be Catholic. Until that time, the only ones I knew or paid attention to that went to Catholic Church were Syrians, while I knew kids that went to St. Benedict’s and played on the basketball team. It’s strange how small my world was. I got an enlightenment when a kid with an Irish name fell out in the Catholic line. I told him, he was in the wrong line. He said “I am Catholic,” then it dawned on me that Pat O’Brien, who played Father Flanagan, was Irish and, like a flood in my brain, I recalled all the Irish names. Talk about living in a closed society. I’m glad I kept my mouth shut. I was called a hillbilly any way by the guys from the big cities for the way I talked. Words like BOOsh, FEEsh, DEEsh, crick, warshrag, etc. It was no wonder, looking back on it.

All had to wash clothing continually, a daily chore; all clothing bled horribly and we didn’t know how to scrub clothes to start with. There were large wooden wash tables with smooth scrub areas that slanted towards the center towards the water drainage trough in the center, with spaced water spigots (no hot water) close by the clothes lines in rear courtyards in back of each barracks. We used a scrub brush for all clothing.

Those famous issued clothes stops were used to tie the clothes on the lines for drying also. We had to write letters home at least once a week. These were little woven cotton (two strand) ties, like a round cotton shoe string only thicker strands in them, they were used to secure your clothing in an individual roll like a small bedding roll. The pants were folded over, leg on leg, then starting at the top tightly rolled to the bottom, no creases anywhere or they wouldn’t roll tight. When the little roll was made. A clothes

stop was tied two inches down from the end of the roll, 1 on each end. It absolutely had to be tied with a square knot or the inspecting officers would go nuts.

These were by Navy boot camp rules. In addition, they were supposed to be rolled tight enough to bounce if thrown to the deck. All clothes were secured in the same manner. The clothes would be laid out on your folded hammock at the bottom of your bunk on the deck for inspection on each Saturday morning. Any layout that didn't pass – clothes not rolled tight enough – gave the Company Chief the opportunity to hook his foot under your hammock and give it a kick and throw, scattering your items all across the barracks. Then you could expect some extra duty, like polishing and re-doing the "Head" (Navy for toilet and showers). One could always find three or four men in the Head polishing bright work (the pipes) or scrubbing basins and toilet bowls.

The bunks would have to be drawn tightly and blankets folded just so. Your ditty bag was a little, soft, cream-colored, cotton bag about 24 inches long with a draw string top. In it was kept your personal gear: shaving gear, toothbrush, soap box, letter writing material and memories of home, letters etc. Generally the ditty bag was left hanging on the rail and wasn't inspected. The sea bag rail was built down through the center of the barracks, kind of like a clean hitching rack, on it were hung all the sea-bags stenciled with each owners name. And all issued clothing was rolled and stored in it.

All mail was given to the company commander and he kept a list of who was writing and who wasn't. Lights out was 21:00. Our day was kept filled. We had no trouble falling asleep.

On Saturday morning, we all turned to quite early, about daylight. We would steel wool the decks by placing steel wool under your shoe and rubbing back and forth to remove any marks on the wood. We never wore our work shoes in the barracks, to keep from marking the decks. We showered, marched to chow at 07:30, Barracks inspection at 09:00, and Captain's Saturday morning company inspection at 10:00. All companies stood at parade rest, feet apart the width of your shoulders, hands clasped behind your back, until such time the inspecting officer was finished inspecting and grading the individual barracks. Each building had a lower floor and an upper floor, company 1444 was on top and we (1443) were on the bottom. There were six buildings in a grouping. The inspecting parties would then appear at the top of the grinder (drill area) to inspect personnel All companies had been previously ordered to open ranks, dress right by looking over your right shoulder, and get lined up with the man on your right.

All across the parade area were the sounds of companies being brought to attention. We stood at attention for as long as it took the officer to inspect the ranks of all assembled men. Normally, he just walked steadily down the ranks, all men's eyes ever looking forward, for to look at the inspecting officer would be a cardinal sin.

All companies competed against each other in the compound you were in. If your inspection ratings were the best, your company was awarded a special award pennant on a parade staff to march with for a week. The pennants were displayed by the flag staff pole outside the company entrance any time the company was in barracks The company ratings were posted by Saturday PM We learned quickly to find out how we ranked. We won the pennant in our 5th week. We had been marching with rifles for several

weeks now, and had become pretty good at rifle drill. How proud the company was that won the pennant.

The pennant company from each area made up the assembled companies on the main drill field of area Green Bay for graduation of the finished companies. There would be up to 50 or more companies marching at the same time and every shoe was hitting the asphalt in cadence. And to march in review with the camp band playing a quick Sousa march past the reviewing stand was a feeling I'll never forget. Pride in accomplishment is vital thing in your training company. When the company commander gave an eyes right to the reviewing stand and marched past carrying his hand in salute to the inspecting officers and dignitaries, you could almost hear the neck bones snap, as those heads went around so sharply in unison.

My mother became seriously ill in August, 1944. She was operated on and diagnosed with peritonitis in her stomach. Apparently, the doctors thought she would not live. They got in touch with the Navy. I was called into the Red Cross office and interviewed (like what was my mother's maiden name, my aunts name, my sisters', etc.) to see if the wire from home was true or false. They loaned me \$50.00 to buy tickets (to be taken from future pay) and gave me a seven-day emergency leave. Company 1443 graduated without me. So I didn't get to make the sought-after recognition march in front of the reviewing stands as one of the graduating companies ready for future fleet or school assignments.

My time in Boot Camp training was over, next stop-- Fleet assignment.