

ROT-SEE

By John S. Halbert

On the Campus at Florence State College, September, 1963:

While the girls in our Freshman Indoctrination group were off doing something else, we guys were herded into old Wesleyan Hall that dated from the 1850's. There, we made our first encounter with a part of student life that would dominate at least the first half of our college careers. In those days, all male students had to take ROTC (which we pronounced as "Rot-See") for the first two years.

We took our seats in Wesleyan Auditorium, on the second floor of the venerable building that had been the headquarters for Union forces during the Civil War, exactly a century ago. Sitting there waiting for the program to begin, I reflected that Ulysses S. Grant, the Union general who had commanded for a short time the garrison that occupied Florence, had probably addressed his staff who had sat in these same seats in this same auditorium. He was the identical General Grant who, at the end of the war, had engineered the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, and later became President of the United States.

As soon as the crowd was gathered in the outdated-looking, musty space, a fit-looking U.S. Army officer in uniform appeared onstage. Without preliminaries, in a loud voice he addressed the assembled all-male multitude. "When I say, 'Gentlemen, the P.M.S.!' you will rise to your feet. The 'Professor of Military Science' will step onto the stage, and he will tell you to be seated. The Colonel will then address you. When he is finished, I will say, 'All rise!' and you will again stand until he has left the stage."

We boys exchanged glances with each other. Wow! "Reserve Officers Training Corps", shortened to "ROTC" promised to be a big deal if this preview was any indication! These thoughts were hardly imprinted into our collective minds when the officer suddenly re-appeared on the platform. "Gentlemen, the P.M.S.!" he called out.

The gathering of guys rose to our feet as a slightly-stocky, middle-aged U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, his chest festooned with ribbons and medals, strode with measured tread to the podium. "Be seated, gentlemen!" With a noisy scuffling of feet and scraping of chairs, we dropped back into our well-used seats.

The decorated officer pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket and laid it on the speaker's stand. In a resonant Midwestern accent he gave a short, spirited talk about how wonderful an opportunity the ROTC program was for those who wanted to become an Army officer, and a few other points. As he spoke, I scrutinized this man who would likely have a considerable influence on my college career. From his apparent age, I decided he was a veteran of World War II and Korea; infantry, probably. Listening to his speech, I had absolutely no idea of much of what he was talking about, except it seemed from his remarks I would be spending a lot of my time on campus in a uniform---something with which I had not previously reckoned. After speaking for a few minutes, he picked up his notes from the podium and turned to leave the stage.

At that moment, the first officer burst from behind the side curtain. "All rise!"

We cadets-to-be again came to our feet.

It was a forceful introduction to ROTC.

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At the beginning of the school year, right after registration, we were directed to report to the clothing issue room, which was located in the basement of Wesleyan Annex. Upon entering, the first thing a new cadet detected was the strong, masculine smell of heavy canvas and leather. There was a long line of young men at a cafeteria-like counter where the cadets shuffled from one station to the next until we assembled our entire kit. The Supply Sergeant at the first issuing station cast a gimlet eye at a cadet and hauled out a pair of shirts that he judged to be the student's correct size. With a bored scowl, he tossed the garments onto the counter, whereupon the cadet in a hurry stuffed the items into a duffel bag. At the next station, another brusque noncom repeated the process with trousers, followed by stops at the coat and the military Oxfords sections. (Our shoes were expected to last the whole two years of Basic ROTC, as mine did with plenty to spare.) Then, came the socks, cap, tie, and belt. Finally, the cadet ended his shopping spree with a little package of insignia and a name-tag, all of which he added to his now-bulging duffel. The last sergeant in the line handed the cadet a sheet of detailed instructions that specified as to where everything went on the uniform. At the top of the page was an unmistakable directive that a correct uniform at all times was *MANDATORY*.

As it turned out, the initial classroom session was a riot of mis-matched outfits, as hardly anyone got it completely right the first time. As we had been instructed by the Supply Sergeants that our uniforms had to be absolutely correct beginning with the very first classroom meeting, those with even a minor uniform violation had their first encounter with "demerits."

"Merits" and "demerits" were very important to the success (or failure) of a cadet. Merits were handed out for specific good deeds, such as directing traffic for the Homecoming football game, and for attending certain functions relating to promoting ROTC to the public, among others. Demerits, on the other hand, were likewise meted out for infractions such as being late to class, missing a drill, or for just about any other reason the Powers That Were could conjure up. If a cadet accumulated a substantial number of demerits, conceivably he could end up flunking the whole program, although I never heard tell of anyone actually doing that. A complicating factor was that it took *two* merits to overcome *one* demerit. Therefore, every cadet tried to garner as many merits as possible, against the day he would inevitably have demerits issued against him.

Cadets were required to wear the uniform to each ROTC activity, whether to class or on the drill field. Therefore, it was necessary to wear the uniform all day. In my case, the only day of the week I was not required to be in uniform was on Friday. Wherever we went, we had to observe uniform etiquette. This meant doffing our hat each time we entered a building, and putting it back on when we went back outside. Also, we were required to salute the Army officers whenever and wherever we happened to encounter them, whether on or off campus. We received a lot of instruction on saluting, as it was considered a very important (and privileged) part of military life.

The uniform was the standard U.S. Army outfit and came in two versions: the summer uniform and the winter uniform. All medallions, insignia, and name tags were affixed on the uniform in a very specific manner. It was essential that the brass be shined to sunshine sufficiency at all times. ROTC shoes were plain military Oxfords of very high quality, in keeping with the other parts of the uniform.

The summer uniform featured khaki trousers and a matching short-sleeved shirt, open at the

collar, with a T-shirt underneath that was just visible above the second button. I never had a properly-fitting summer shirt---all those issued to me had an exaggerated, flared waist which never fit properly. For the life of me, I couldn't imagine such shirts anywhere, military or otherwise. I had to use safety-pins below the belt line to slim them down to fit my waist. Some cadets, unfamiliar with the safety-pin technique, looked like walking miniature circus tents.

The winter outfit featured a long-sleeved khaki shirt, with a plain black tie that was tucked inside the shirt between the second and third buttons. I never figured out why they did this, and none of my queries about this practice, which I considered very strange, ever brought a satisfactory answer. Like many other military customs, it was just one of those things that was done because that was the way it was *always* done. One was considered a troublemaker if he persisted in second-guessing Army procedures or questioned the reasons for a particular activity. Right-off, we cadets learned to keep quiet about such things as there was always the ever-present threat of demerits hanging over our heads, and questioning *anything* was looked upon by the Army brass and the sergeants as insolence---next to wartime treason the worst offense to which a cadet could be accused

Trousers for both the winter and summer uniforms, aside from being baggy and ill-fitting, used *buttons* instead of a zipper to secure the fly. For this and other reasons, I suspected that our uniforms were hold-overs from days long past (*World War II, perhaps?*), as zippers were almost certainly in use in the regular Army by 1963.

The change-over from one uniform to the other was done seasonally on direct orders from the Pentagon and affected all U.S. military personnel worldwide, including us in the backwaters of ROTC. Invariably, the switch from one uniform to the other took place at a time when the weather was either too hot or too cold for the uniform we were directed to wear.

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Two days a week we had an hour of classroom instruction in a wing of century-old Wesleyan Hall, a three-story yellow brick structure with massive turrets on the corners that made it resemble a medieval castle. A row of World War II-era U.S. Army howitzers in line abreast in front of the building, pointed their big barrels menacingly toward Morrison Avenue. (*One day, while standing on the corner waiting to cross the street, I made the intriguing observation that all the guns were aimed squarely at a restaurant across the street, as if the eatery was a ready-made target. Was it a subliminal message about the quality of the restaurant's food?*)

Wesleyan Hall still bore the scars of its role as General Grant's Civil War occupation headquarters. In the basement, charred wooden beams were mute evidence of a reputed failed attempt one time by Confederates to burn the General's offices while he was in there.

The ROTC offices and classrooms occupied the first floor, the basement, and a three-story Annex that was connected to the main structure by a Middle-Ages-style masonry bridge, complete with battlements. The basement of the Annex, in addition to the clothing issue room, housed the magazine, where the ROTC rifles and ammunition were stored; and a dark, narrow rifle range, where we cadets learned to shoot with live ammunition.

In the classroom, we studied Military History, Military Tactics, Principles of War and Map-Reading---just about everything an student officer would learn at a regular military academy---such as the main one at *'West Point'*---except that we didn't go on actual maneuvers in Basic ROTC. (Advanced ROTC students did, however, have summer training at a military base, that included realistic field training.) We did a lot of marching in parades and directed traffic

(always in uniform) for school events such as Homecoming, for which we garnered precious merits. On the drill field we learned the Manual of Arms and marching---miles and miles of marching. Included were the cadence drills and all the other marching maneuvers. Over a period of time, we gradually developed an '*esprit de corps*', an intangible bonding of men essential among soldiers---even student soldiers.

ROTC was organized at two levels: Basic and Advanced. All male students had to take Basic ROTC for the first two years. After that, the cadets could apply for Advanced ROTC. For those who completed the program, Advanced ROTC offered a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. The commission (signed by the President of the United States) came with the diploma at graduation ceremonies. Florence State reputedly sent more officers into the regular Army than any other ROTC program in the state.

The first year I was at Florence State, I was in "D" Company, that drilled on Thursdays at four o'clock. Each company was composed of several platoons that were further sub-divided into squads, in the standard Army arrangement. The company was headed by the Company Commander, who in our case was a highly-regarded Senior Cadet named "Felix King". He, in turn, was assisted by his student staff. I was assigned to the Third Platoon, that was led by a student officer named Frankie Wallace. His Platoon Sergeant was another Advanced Cadet, Larry Evans.

At the top was the Brigade Commander, a Senior student who usually had the highest grades and performance rating in his class. He was assisted by a sizable headquarters staff of student officers and noncoms. The whole thing was quite realistic insofar as training future officers for the U.S. Army.

A number of women students, who served as Brigade and Company Sponsors, drilled with the units. All were extremely attractive and popular coeds who were usually the girlfriends of upper-classmen student officers.

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It didn't take a new cadet very long to realize that "Military Science" involved far more than just handling a rifle and marching in formation. Overseeing these activities were the regular Army officers and noncoms, assisted by the upper-level cadets. The ROTC instructors unceasingly confronted us with exhausting (and oftentimes confounding) military courses, with tests to match.

There were probably a thousand people---men and women---on the drill field each Tuesday morning for the Brigade Drills in which all companies drilled *en masse*. In addition, each company drilled one hour a week in the late afternoon--"A" Company through "E" Company--Monday through Friday, on the respective days of the week.

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Each spring, the Inspector General came down from the Third U.S. Army Headquarters in Virginia and inspected the troops. I can say that I was actually inspected by the Inspector General. To get ready for these inspections and other duties, we underwent endless hours of drills, classroom work and spit-and-polish. On Inspection Day, all the companies marched around the parade ground (where '*Flowers Hall*' is now) in a big formation review. After the troops tramped past the reviewing stand, where we saluted the Professor of Military Science and

his Very Important Guests, the Inspector General climbed into an olive-drab Jeep. Standing in the rear seat (General Patton-like), the bemedaled general rode around the grounds as the unit band played, *'Hey, Look Me Over'*, for what seemed like hundreds of times. Meanwhile, the troops wilted in the heat.

Finally, he dismounted from the vehicle and inspected the ranks. The procedure was to "Present Arms" when the general approached with his entourage. He moved down each of the rows of troops, inspecting each cadet in turn. As the general stopped and faced the cadet, the student-cadet stuck his right thumb into the chamber of his *'M-1 Garand'* rifle, onto the horizontal spring that operated the ammunition clip; at the same time glancing into the chamber. Simultaneously, the heel of his right hand pushed back a projection on the operating rod, that immediately sprang forward with tremendous force. If the cadet managed to statch his thumb out of the chamber in time, the rod struck the firing pin with a loud and satisfying *SNAP!* On those horrific occasions when the cadet's thumb failed to exit the firing chamber in time, the thumbnail would get caught between the top edge of the chamber and the firing pin, which resulted in the nail flying through the air and a mashed and bloody thumb stuck in the chamber. As an "M-1 thumb" took a long time to heal (up to a year), most cadets would have rather endured almost anything else than to get such a sudden and excruciating injury. Adding insult to (literally) injury, it also resulted in demerits and a public humiliation. Assuming that the inspection went according to the book, as the thumb shot out of the firing chamber a micro-second ahead of the onrushing operating rod and the loud noise announced a successful clearing of the chamber, the dour Inspector General grimly looked the cadet up and down for what were probably the longest several seconds of the young man's life.

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Even though it was officially just another department of the college, ROTC, aside from stuffing nearly half of the civilian student body into military uniforms, in many other ways extended its influence over all the campus.

One day, I was in a Psychology class in the "Kilby Education Building", in a classroom with a view of the stone walkway that connected Wesleyan Hall to the Annex. As it was springtime, the big windows and the shades were open. A few minutes before the end of the lecture, everyone in the room became aware of a droning sound, that became a loud rumble, then the roar of airplane engines! "Get down!" the teacher shouted over the strident roar as everyone tumbled to the floor. Looking upward through the window, I watched, stunned, as the underside of an enormous *airliner* passed directly overhead, just a few feet above the space between Wesleyan Hall and the Annex, barely missing the corner turret of the building! As the earthshaking thunder of the airplane engines went on, we braced for the inevitable explosion. But after a few seconds, the noise faded away and there was no crash. Picking ourselves up from the floor, wide-eyed and trembling, everyone gasped in a babble of voices the same questions at the same time.

"What was *THAT?*"

"Was that an airplane?"

"Are we being attacked?"

"I thought we were going to be killed!"

I found some possible answers a few minutes later at the Student Union, where everyone was still talking about the near-collision of a big airliner into Wesleyan Hall.

The night before, the ROTC Department had held its annual Open House, (remember those

merits), and a plane-load of military dignitaries had been on hand for the occasion. One student had his own theory: The Very Important People had probably decided to give their friends at ROTC an unforgettable good-bye---and what better way than to buzz the building!

An out-of-breath friend told how he was standing among a group of people in front of the Student Union Building, when they heard the roar and saw the aircraft approaching. He said the plane was flying so low it actually had to climb in order to clear the three-story-tall turrets of Wesleyan Hall!

According to another who was there, a choral practice was in session on the third floor of the building. As the choir sang along, the music director happened to glance out the window---and did a double-take. An enormous multi-engine airliner, skimming the treetops about two blocks away, was flying directly toward his top-floor Wesleyan window! "Look out!" he yelled at the confused choristers. Others then saw the airplane, by now almost directly upon them, and screamed. At the last possible moment, the aircraft zoomed upward, the propellers just missing the top of the building a few feet above them!

It could have been only a coincidence, but not long afterwards, the government announced some new rules concerning minimum altitudes for airplanes in populated areas.

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Near the end of the second year of Basic ROTC, everyone had to take a major examination, called the "R-Q Test". The hefty exam was administered around the country on the same day to thousands of cadets, and was supposed to spotlight those the Army considered mentally, physically, and emotionally suited for becoming an Army officer. (It also served the purpose of identifying those who had *no* potential for an Army career.) The test was a grinding, hours-long affair, every bit as difficult as the '*ACT Test*' I had taken for the entrance board when I applied for admission to the college. The exam was so difficult that---although I had tried very hard to pass it---I figured I had probably failed it.

Several weeks after the test, and as my second year of Basic ROTC was drawing to a close, I had my appointment with Colonel Reese, the esteemed Professor of Military Science.

The instructors had coached us in class on the proper protocol to approach the important officer: Two knocks on his door. He would reply (rather loudly) "Come in!"

The cadet took off his hat, entered the door, closed it, and saluted the colonel. "Cadet So-and-So, Sir!"

On the day of the visit, the preliminaries were just what they had told me to expect---the door knocks and the entrance went off without a hitch. The colonel returned my nervous salute and motioned for me to sit down. There was a long uncomfortable pause; The beribboned officer shuffled some papers on his desk and pulled out a sheet. He scanned it, frowning, and looked up at me. I had already prepared myself to be embarrassed by the test results.

Then he stuck out his hand to shake mine. I leaned across his desk. (A gutsy move on my part as a cadet was forbidden to touch an officer without permission, and I had to guess that his gesture was that permission.) I returned the handshake, at the same time wondering if I had forgotten something they had told us about the colonel's protocols. But I was not prepared for what Colonel Reese said next:

"Mr. Halbert, I want to congratulate you! Out of thousands of men who took the test this time, you rank nationally number twenty-four from the top! It is my pleasure to offer you the opportunity to join our Advanced ROTC program next year!"

I gaped at the decorated officer and stammered something.

The colonel cleared his throat. "I know you're probably surprised, so it's up to you as to what you want to do." He again glanced at my file on his desk. "It looks like you've had a fine record here in your two-years of Basic ROTC, and I want you to think positively about it."

It was certainly a surprise, all right, as, all along, I had considered myself just a regular cadet with no particular pedigree. Now, I was being offered a high-level opportunity as a prospective officer in the U.S. Army! With my mind swirling, I stumbled through the rest of the interview, because there *WAS* a problem---my grades. Unfortunately, my undergraduate marks were undistinguished, except in English and History, and my grade-point-average could use a little help. (It later improved dramatically, but not in time for Advanced ROTC.) In the end, I had to respectfully decline the colonel's offer.

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POSTSCRIPT: That interview, in the spring of 1965, came at the time of the early American buildup in Vietnam. Before long, several student officers I had known that spring were killed in Southeast Asia. These included my Company Commander, Felix King, who would die within a few months of my visit with the colonel; Frankie Wallace, my Platoon leader; and and Larry Evans, my Platoon Sergeant.