

## **MEMOIRS OF MOUNT LOWE**

One day during the war, when I was thirteen, Dad came home on leave. It was not long before we bewildered siblings became the subjects of waspish debates behind the front bedroom door. At ages of twelve and nine, we were too much baggage to be dragged around from base to base as Dad went through schooling and continued shuffling from this airfield to that while commanding fleets of aviation fuel trucks. A device he wore on his left collar resembled a gold spherical bomb spouting a flame. On the right he wore a vertical two-bladed propeller. We were told he was in Aviation Ordinance. To me it meant serious business.

According to Mom, there was no telling from day to day when Dad would be transferred overseas. She missed him when he was away, and so we all did. And what about our education during those frequent transfers, anyway?

### **SOME CALL IT BOOT CAMP**

Jan and I were not invited to the meeting held between our parents, during which they decided to ship us off with toothbrush and socks in hand. Jan was driven to San Marino Hall School for Girls in South Pasadena, California. After a false start at Brown Academy in the same neighborhood, I was left at the main gate to Mount Lowe Military Academy in Altadena, which was not that far away from my sister, but far enough so that we never saw each other during those lonely days we were shelved.

Our parents rented out the corner home on Jordan and San Marcos Streets in Ventura to a small family and Mom traveled east to join Dad in North Carolina.

Looking back, I remember that I troubled myself with a heavy feeling that our folks had cast us upon a foreign shore in a land of benign prisons. No mama, no papa. We suspected rather than actually observed an institutional lack of sympathy for personal fears and vague misgivings. No walking out the gate. Boys did not cry. On that far stage, I could see but few benefits of living in an alien military society. In a few weeks, though, I began to find a little comfort in a stabilizing routine. New uniforms arrived from Desmond's in Beverly Hills, including a Navy blue pull-over sweater with the Mount Lowe initial emblem sewed dead center on the chest. A snappy military cap with shiny visor was part of the kit. For every day wear we

marched in cotton khakis. For dress parade we were clothed in West Point gray with a splash of light blue and a black leather Sam Browne belt, the same style as that worn by General Pershing.

Our wardens were mature men who proved to be qualified to teach certain school subjects, to drill us on the parade ground, and to carry out inspections. It never occurred to us that as grown men they had wives, children, in-laws, mortgages, push lawn mowers and such. As far as we knew, by the time Mount Lowe had become a purple silhouette against an orange sunset each evening, those day workers would drift off to hang from some tree branch or another with wings folded.

Our institution's maximum leader was a short, dynamic tank of a man who called himself Major Dargin. He was supported by Captain Delquist, Lieutenant O'Brien, Lieutenant St. Sernin, and perhaps one or two part-time others. All of these gentlemen presented early in the morning and some stayed past evening meal, rotating duties on some unfathomed schedule. To these leaders, I suppose, the ninety of us cadets were metaphorically thought of, no doubt, as a pathetic swarm of awkward and noisy bees, significantly not of pollen-spreading age. We required lots of institutional structure and specific guidance about what was supposed to go on inside our heads in that Mt. Lowe hive. Boys from ten to fifteen found themselves locked in a strict regimen of academic study, close order drill, team sports, and military muster before each meal. The security one got from the place came from a reliable seven-day routine and predictable results intermixed with reward and punishment. Do well and promotions acknowledged ability to exercise positions of some responsibility. Goof off and you remained a private with plenty of demerits and mandatory time out designed to help you muse over your sins. The establishment found it convenient to cause gross offenders to stand facing a corner of the mess hall or assembly room while the student body at mess in the included dining room space looked on with a fine blend of pity and glee.

For us guys who goofed up every now and then, writing from 100 to 1000 sentences seemed to satisfy justice since it summarily robbed us of play field time in the afternoon. It was impossible to find a boy who thought standing in a corner was a pleasant activity. Upon reflection, I am sure the fading, or rather obliteration, of the disciplined skill of excellent fourth-grade penmanship taught to me by Mrs. Page at Washington School in Ventura could be laid to the haste with which any cadet worked to finish odious sentence writing tasks.

Using an allowance based on what our parents had sent to the administration for our personal needs, we would hover over a little canteen in the mess area which was opened for a half hour each evening to let us buy necessities and rewards, such as soap and horehound candy sticks. I can't remember having more than fifty cents in my possession at one time. These days, it seems to run against nature that little a little pouch of coins I had squirreled away in a drawer at bedside never was stolen.

In each of four barracks single beds with springs and mattresses stood at attention. Each boy had his own bedside chest of drawers for the very small amount of clothing and kit needed. One of the first things you learned was to make up your bunk with square corners and to stretch the blanket so taut an inspector could bounce a quarter off it. We learned to shine our shoes for the many daily inspections, to brush our teeth right after breakfast each day, and to take a shower right after drill and athletics. Accommodating small groups of boys at a time were public facilities for toilet needs. Concrete "caves" housed showers that encouraged shouting to laugh at strong acoustic echoes and each other.

### **BUSTED**

Looking back on those long, days of disconsolation while being estranged from my parents, I recall a few standout situations I felt were deviations from routine. During summer, tidal waves of students escaped legally out of the academy. Old friends would disappear out the gate one day, never to be seen again. When those young old soldiers had gone, new cadet captains, lieutenants, and non-coms were needed. It stunned me that I found myself a buck private one day and the next I had become first sergeant of Company C. Although I took to my fresh responsibilities with great zeal and did a pretty good job of it, two unfortunate events revealed my immaturity and dashed my prospects as a top soldier.

I thoroughly embarrassed myself when I lied to Lieutenant O'Brien. Each morning during school formation, we were required to demonstrate that we had brushed our teeth after breakfast. As the bigger-than-life institution officer came by we were to stand at attention, show our clenched teeth, and shout "Yes, sir" if we had brushed them. If we had forgotten or neglected to brush them, we were to assume the same dentally demonstrative position and sing out "No, Sir." Whereupon the offending cadet with mossy teeth would be put on report and posted to extra instruction of some physical sort. It illuminated my mind that after breakfast I

had forgotten to brush, yet at the same time it occurred to me that as a first sergeant there was little likelihood I would be closely inspected, so I shouted “Yes, Sir” when I should have said “No, Sir!” It was not until noon meal formation that I learned Lieutenant O’Brien had gone into the barracks after morning muster and, while we were in class, felt the toothbrush of each soldier who had said “Yes, Sir” at morning parade. Guess mine was dry and powdery that day.

After Lieutenant O’Brien confronted me with the evidence, I uttered a confession and was puzzled when I was given only sentences to write and was not demoted. After all, though, they still needed a rough, tough first sergeant for Company C who could take rapid muster and drill the men with precision in the afternoon dust, a delusion of mine that was soon set straight.

The second and more serious incident arose when once again I failed to use good judgment. A young boy named James had taught me how to sign. His parents were deaf and he was my teacher at getting thoughts across with hand gestures. When I had developed some confidence in this means of communication James invited me to his nearby home for the weekend to visit his parents. I got Dad’s permission by telephone, which Major Dargin had courteously dialed for me. That was the first and last time I talked to either of my parents during the whole hitch.

When Saturday came, James and I were picked up and taken off to Los Angeles by his mysteriously ailing parents for an overnight stay. We played games and James’ dad revealed a skill at assembling meals. We made a pleasant time of it until the hour came to shuttle back to Mt. Lowe on Sunday afternoon. Unexpectedly, James’ mother complained of feeling dizzy. Our drivers decided to return us on Monday morning as being close enough to orders. I liked the idea of staying out of the institution another night, yet at bedtime I made myself feel grim about not sticking to the original plan pervaded. When we arrived at Mt. Lowe mid-morning Monday, we quickly learned that Major Dargin was interested in interviewing the two of us cadets for being AWOL. After receiving a good chewing out and being made to feel miserable about my parents having been notified I was missing in action, I was reduced in rank to buck private on the spot and assigned to time-out in one corner of the assembly hall. Private James took honors in the other corner. In addition Major Dargin assigned us 1000 sentences of our own choosing as additional proof of penitence. Being a cleverer and wiser fellow, I chose the sentence, “I will obey,” which, I guess, pretty well covered all sins and made for a quicker accomplishment than James’ choice: “I must return on time from leave.”

Removing those authoritative stripes off all my uniform shirts made my throat hurt somewhere around the Adam's apple. And I had sewed them on so carefully with my Army wife, a small, olive drab kit full of needles and thread, white, black, khaki, and, of course, drab.

After Sunday evening meal about a month later, I knew that I was partially forgiven when Major Dargin invited me and a peppy cadet shorter than I, also named Terry, to a wrestling match on the stage carpet. Major Dargin was built like a pier bollard. No matter how we teamed up, Terry and I working together were unable to knock him off his hands and knees. It brought to mind the rare matches I used to have with my Dad in happier days, giving me a heartfelt morale lift.

Next day, when we cadets had completed our dusty afternoon of marching drills on the field, Captain Delquist, who always carried a clip board during parade, marking down the good guys and the bad guys, announced the honors of the day. When the honor NCO of the day was mentioned, it was Corporal Sutherland! I puffed up like a grain of rice in a bowl of milk. Once again I had begun ascending to military fame and favor at Mt. Lowe. Hell, you can't keep a good man down.

It was not long, though, before I was tested for physical courage before the assembled battalion.

### **ADOLESCENT RITES**

About every calendar quarter the battalion would assemble for a boxing smoker. Except we didn't smoke--just Major Dargin with his cigar and Captain Delquist with his pipe. A very well-developed, swarthy-looking cadet named Woodrow asked me if I would like to box him that night. I saw that he was strong and taller than I but assented with some trepidation. When I saw him in trunks at ringside that afternoon, he had defeated me before I ever stepped over the ropes. He had chiseled pectorals and protruding biceps and couldn't have been more intimidating if he were King Kong. It didn't take long for him to connect with a blow to the head that put me on the canvas. Lieutenant O'Brien stopped the fight. His taking me out of the ring at the first tough blow was a much greater humiliation than getting knocked down, and I protested loudly, tears in my eyes. Yet no one ever tried to intimidate me the remainder of the time I was at the academy, even after most cadets had seen me get whipped. They were not

interested in going up against Woodrow, who has become my champion and friend after realizing that the humiliation was his for picking an “easy” opponent.

As winter in California eased into spring in the foothills of Altadena, some deviations from ordinary experience made for reporting. On a day when birds were heard singing through open classroom windows, my fair weather friend, the ferret-eyed Farlow, who kept himself busy in inventive ways, conceived of a means of firing spit balls at me from across the classroom. The weapon for propulsion was a giant paper clip combined with a wide rubber band. A well-masticated piece of pulp meant for my head whizzed past and landed directly on instructor Lieutenant St. Sernin’s desk, coming to rest in the middle of a drawing he had been working on during quiet moments of student math exercise. This was the first I was aware that he was sketching while we were studying. Farlow and I were called to his desk for an explanation. It took my breath away when I saw the beautiful breasts and buttocks of the woman he was creating in charcoal on a large sheet of drawing paper. After we had delivered weak explanations for the appearance of the spit ball on the fair nude, Lieutenant St. Sernin awarded Farlow some 200 sentences for his target practice and he gave me a reprimand for supposedly encouraging Farlow to allow myself to become a target. Even though I was completely innocent, I actually had the impression that I had gotten off easy.

Another day I had an urgent head call during a class with Lt. O’Brien. While sitting on the throne in the communal head doing my business, I heard sharp marching steps of adult rock-hard leather heels on concrete. I tracked them acoustically to the open cubicle next to mine. Noise of a long stretch of toilet paper being collected and torn off. Sound of steps to the urinals wall. More paper crinkling noise. I could stand it no longer. I stealthily opened the stall door and there stood Lieutenant St. Sernin in three-piece tweed suit taking a leak with a generous wrapping of toilet paper around his ample instrument. Apparently he did not want to touch the damned thing.

He heard a noise, whirled without spoiling his aim, and caught me looking at him. “What are you doing in here?” His voice resonated deeply in the tiled sanctum.

“Gosh, sir, I was using the toilet.”

“Well, get back to your class immediately.”

“Yes, sir!” I ducked out of the head, peering nowhere but straight ahead. Figured I was lucky to escape with no punishment after having violated his privacy.

In spite of occasional small school incidents, I was a good student in classroom subjects. A report signed by Lieutenant St. Sernin on 25 June 1943 documents a satisfactory character rating and assigns nine A's and two B's in scholastic subjects to this boy.

It was not long after I had sewed on those new corporal stripes, though, that I decided to devote most of one noon meal with the battalion in the mess hall amusing my three companions at table by performing an athletic exhibition of ear wiggling, an exercise I had practiced in my spare moments for developing the skill of it. Giggles and snickers from our group of four-man tables could be heard above the ritual reading of daily orders by those officers seated at the battalion table some forty feet away. Not being deaf, they were attracted to the neighborhood of unwarranted disturbance.

After writing "I shall not wiggle my ears in the mess hall" 500 times, a directed sentence imposed by the eagle-eyed Captain Delquist, I found myself a corporal for the rest of my time in the institution. Perhaps the staff thought I was not a serious contender for higher grade.

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### **FREE AGAIN**

Soon after authoring a few thousand words for approval here and there, now and then, over a year's time, I saw that a rare day in June arrive in which I learned from the constantly but comfortably uniformed Captain Delquist that my sister, who was still toughing it out at girls' school, and I were going to be liberated. Orders were for us to be ready at a time arranged with the approval of Major Dargin. A truly avuncular Uncle Ortie and sweet Aunt Lorene would pick us up and insert us into a sleeper train to Dodge City, Kansas, where our parents would meet us and, we anticipated, take us to their bosoms for the rest of the war. I did not examine this change of heart on our parents' part, but accepted it as the best of long-contemplated alternatives.

When the day came, I stood spiffed up in my dress uniform, bag packed, ready at the iron gate. Good old Uncle Ortie arrived early at Mount Lowe with my naturally blond and diminutive sister, Jan, installed in the back seat. When Aunt Lorene had given us a motherly hug and Uncle Ortie had stowed our bags in the trunk, off we went to Union Station in Los Angeles, leaving behind a dozen of curious boys who somehow looked thin and alone with their fingers wrapped around the high fence bars that had held us in so long. Most of those *miserables* had witnessed some version of this scene before. Dressed in khaki cotton trousers and jackets

emblazoned with the Mt. Lowe insignia on the left breast, they seemed to appear as repetitious and wooden as tootsie rolls in a candy case.

Just before we mounted the Pullman car, Uncle Ortie handed me a dollar's worth of nickels in a bank wrapper and told me in a whispered voice to tip the porter each time that gentleman did something for us. With a large grocery sack of sandwiches Aunt Lorene had lovingly made for our trip, we began a three-day rail trip to Dodge City, Kansas, the first of many strange, to us, locations in which we would all too briefly and temporarily settle during the remainder of the war.

As the locomotive chuffed a string of cars slowly out of Union Station in Los Angeles, I swelled with a great spirit of adventure. It was my job to take good care of my little sister, a great and welcome responsibility for a communicator with the deaf and the most capable wiggler of ears in the battalion. I thought I looked very serious in my Mt. Lowe dress uniform with white shirt and black tie.

Our black-skinned and well-worn porter was a kindly gentleman with a ring of white hair around his shiny bald top. Without seeming to, he kept a close eye on us and made sure our beds were prepared for the night and that we were in them. Each time he performed some kindness, such as bringing my sister a paper cup of cold water, I would dig into the roll of nickels Uncle Ortie had left with me and hand him one of them. He would graciously accept the tip and giggle cheerfully as he departed on his many professional ministrations to bored adult passengers.

Being scattered by the exigencies of war no more, our family traveled from that Santa Fe train stop in Dodge City, Kansas as often as Bedouin move in the desert. We were on a track to live in and out of tract houses, basement apartments, two-stories, motels. Without a whimper we followed Dad wherever the Army Air Corps sent him. Making friends here, leaving friends there, I remember attending three high schools to cover the ninth and tenth grades, eventually attending five of those institutions through war days and peace days for an accumulation of four years of credit. Our wartime orders swung us through Southern states: San Antonio, Texas; Oklahoma City; Macon, Georgia; Clearwater, Florida and then west to California and Washington. Dad's gasoline trucks came and went, ran dry, rolled into ditches, got him midnight phone calls he didn't want.

One day, May 8, 1945, while Jan and I were playing outside in Midwest City near Oklahoma's Tinker Air Force Base, loyal American and Allied draftees and their professional

leaders made the Germans surrender on their own soil on what is called VE Day (Victory in Europe). On VJ Day (Victory in Japan), September 2, 1945, the Japanese government gave up the idea of fighting, our little family found itself living in somewhat disorganized small quarters in a tumble weed and jackrabbit desert habitat named Ephrata in eastern Washington State. At last the war was over and life was going to settle down to what we thought would be normal.

In spite of all the shifting of schools during these travels I had become a very good student, earning A's and B's, actually doing homework, learning to notice how girls looked and smelled and how fickle they could be, discovering how fist fights can ruin your day.

Of course, I had no clue that one day my experience at Mt. Lowe Military Academy would so well prepare me for a career in the U. S. Navy and on into merchant marine and other maritime adventures at sea and ashore.