

Boot: The Making of a Soldier, 1968

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Of the Emerald

The private E-1, his girl following, stepped out from behind the fetid latrine's combination windbreaker-door and faced the young second lieutenant squarely.

The officer had noticed their semi-hidden, kissing embrace and stopped to investigate—doing his regulatory duty.

"What company you from, soldier?" he asked, notarizing the private's name.

"A-5-2, sir," answered the 17-year-old volunteer.

"You graduate today?"

"You're damn right, sir."

The gold bar smiled understandingly and drove off, leaving the slick-sleeve and the girl to complete the long walk from his company area to the frame building for relatives and friends visiting the 200 just-graduated green suits of Company A, 5th Battalion, 2nd Training Brigade (Basic) at North Fort Lewis, Wash.

He and his buddies had finished their eight-week fundamental course in applied warfare—the notorious introduction to the military way known as Basic or Boot to millions of Americans who know of it from highly-active participation.

The troops (as soldiers are collectively known), receive identical training whether they are regular enlistees, draftees or Reservists and usually have identical low opinions of the Army's methods of mental preparation for combat.

These methods include instruction and practice in marksmanship, tactics, bayonet, hand-to-hand, first aid, escape and survival (if captured by the "enemy," not from the Army), land navigation and a variety of other soldier skills.

"Just like the Boy Scouts but with M-14s instead of B-B guns," is a sample comment. The young trooper who offered it forgot—perhaps because of the approach of his platoon sergeant—to add that the Boy Scouts were never quite as demanding as a sergeant in the U.S. Army.

"What is the spirit of the bayonet? KILL!"

Basic training is an experience that must be lived to be fully appreciated as a program of rigid discipline and intimidating harassment leading (the Army hopes) to the individual's submission to the system. Ideally, the soldier would function mechanically within his squad, platoon and company, performing routinely as a cog, but with pride—esprit de corps—in the wheel.

"Women—no good! Whiskey—no good! PT—so good!"

Physical training serves to build morale in two ways: it boosts strength and confidence for the soldier and is used as punishment, most commonly when one man errs, all go down for pushups to emphasize the bad example and his mistake, which could be real or imagined but certainly petty.

The social pressure to conform to the Army way is tremendous, and each man is determined not to blunder, bringing on the disapproval of his comrades.

"I want to be an airborne Ranger,
I want to go to Vietnam,
I want to live a life of danger,
Kill me a few scroungy Cong"

—gung-ho Army marching song. The product of this intensive eight weeks of 4 a.m. to midnight, seven-day-a-week training is a soldier, proud of himself, strongly identified with the Army's operations and goals as America's defenders against all comers, and thinking and behaving in military fashion.

"I volunteered for airborne infantry when I enlisted," said an 18-year-old Seattle trooper, "and I can't wait to get over the pond."

Others, mainly draftees and Reservists, were more conservative, but still strongly per-

suaed that the U.S. position and presence in Vietnam is correct.

"I used to think the service was just a lot of marching crap and boot-polishing, but I can see its purpose as an agent of democracy and defense much clearer now," said a 23-year-old draftee who flunked out of Washington State his sophomore year. "All I knew was what I had observed about the ROTC," he continued.

But these reactions to the military are a culmination of daily life in a coal-heated wooden barracks first used in World War II.

With 50 other trainees in common predicament, the trainee is committed to from four months of active duty for a Reservist (ultimately six years) to four years for an enlistee. The short-time National Guardsman or Army Reservist quietly gloats over going home at the end of the eight-to-11 weeks of advanced training that follows Basic.

The enlistee, and to a lesser extent the draftee, need to justify their participation in the service as a desirable thing to do. Wouldn't you defend your occupation as a student or teacher as necessary and good? The soldier may hate it for its harassment and manipulation, but he'll generally defend it as well.

"Hell No, We Won't Go" vs.
"Airborne—all the way"

Dissension over Vietnam and high draft quotas mean the induction of many young men without friendliness or optimism towards the military or its offerings. Men previously conditioned to anti-war, once in uniform, weight thoughtfully the price of following their consciences by refusing service in the Army; those who have refused are now either undesirably discharged and/or reducing rocks at Leavenworth. This forced prostitution of ideal amounts to the price one must pay for the privilege of being American, the draftee may rationalize, reflecting on calls to war heard by young men of the world's countries throughout history. The draftees in A-5-2 were conscripted not only into a uniform, but into a "dog tag mentality."

Conversion to the Army way is aided by the instruction and example of the training cadre sergeants, the backbone of the Army. Responsible for 50 men and at least a ten year veteran, the NCO (non-commissioned officer) is a professional in skill as well as service. Most are fair and knowledgeable, many have several overseas tours behind them, including combat duty in Vietnam. Despite the indictments against them in soldier's letters home, few poor personalities are allowed to train the troops in Basic.

Private Jerry T. of Portland put it this way: "Our sergeant is real straight. He's ready to

go to bat for any of us if we're right and the lieutenant or the major is wrong; but he sure can chew tail when we're not." Another trainee, Private Roger S. of Spokane felt that "the cadre are trying to teach us things to save our lives in Nam. We all listen up when Sarge talks because what we don't know will kill us in Asia."

Training Intense

The training is intense, using Vietnam as a research lab for gathering the meat of the curriculum. Jungle camouflage, booby traps, search and interrogation techniques and emphasis on night operations are added courses. The result is a soldier who is more likely to return home from combat than his WW II or Korean war counterpart, a new type of warrior for a new type of war. At least this is what the field commanders in Vietnam hope they have in their units—since anyone can die at any time, their personal lives often depend on the efficiency of the men in neutralizing any Vietnamese big enough to carry a small grenade into headquarters.

It is to the draftee's advantage (once he has decided that deserting is not worth three years in prison) to fully obligate himself to the system, to assimilate combat lore, to get gung-ho. All the games against the Army and induction end when the trainees realize how far out of his own hands his life is. With no control, he must prepare for the worst if he cares to live through 12 months of combat in a land with no king's X, no sidelines and no rules. Anyone, the trainee knows, who thinks he can fake it in Vietnam will come back in a cargo, not a troop, plane. It's true, so many people have already gone and the realist in uniform doesn't care to be next in line. Would you?

Fruit Can Ashtrays

The private kissed his girl again as they neared the visitor's building, an unheated ex-garage filled with square tables adorned by No. 10 fruit cans serving as extra-adequate ashtrays. It was a dismal place and then only for visiting, although warmth and food was available a half-mile away at the snack bar, the military's idea of a combination restaurant/reprieve. Seeing the coke machine in the garage was empty, the GI and the girl, lacking anything better to do (facilities being in short supply), started for the Army's Halfway House, a reminder of civilian life for those in captivity.

After enjoying an oatmeal hamburger and coffee trucked

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in from an Army mess hall in Alaska, the couple watched soldiers without visitors sit and exchange rumors, stare vacantly, practice totaling up the time remaining in stir (oops, service), or dreamily caress the GI's plastic-fantastic lovers, the jukebox and the pinball.

The selections were telling: the military is full of masochistic troops who played records extolling, mainly, the virtues of life off-post. Married men favored "Have You Got Cheatin' on Your Mind," while reminiscent acid-rock tunes were preferred by single men. Eating your own heart out (or your buddie's, if you could get to him) seemed to be a favorite pastime, and just about everything was carnivorous on occasion.

Time So Short

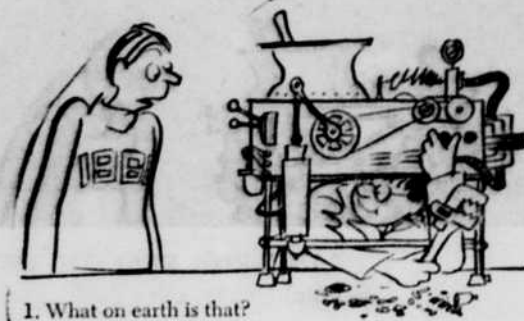
The soldier and his sweetheart, however, were being devoured by the clock. Their time together started at noon and would end, by order of the major, precisely at 3 p.m. Tomorrow would find her at home again, spilling perfume on pink letters for him, he would be 1,000 miles down the coast at Fort Ord for eight more weeks

of schooling before, most likely, Vietnam port call.

Walking towards the bus that would take her to Sea-Tac, to the plane of separation, the two spoke quiet reassurances and gentle thoughts to each other, their speech interrupted by sporadic firing from third-week basic at the nearby range. She looked at the painted sign in front of the A-5-2 headquarters: blue background, with "Alpha-Gators" in black across the top, white borders, and a depiction of an alligator armed with a bayoneted M-16 herding an Oriental-type in black pajamas, who was presumably a P.O.W. The gunfire and the war and the uniform next to her brought the war 7,000 miles closer.

Eyes moistening blurred his face, and she began to understand exactly what and how much could be lost in war; 20 years ago, nearly every mother might have told her and she wouldn't have believed.

Now the kiss goodbye, now the lieutenant smiled understandingly, and now the gay blue eyes matched the windy gray of an afternoon in January at Fort Lewis, Wash.



1. What on earth is that?

The world's first almost perfect pickle slicer.



2. What'd you mean 'almost'?

It keeps rejecting dills.



3. How'd you make out with your self-sharpening toothpick?

I gave it up to work on my pre-stretched rubber band.



4. Ever considered going into a field more likely to give you a living income?

But I want to be of service to humanity. And I like the challenge it provides.



5. Maybe you ought to look into the openings at Equitable. They've got a wide range of fascinating jobs that give you the chance to be of service. And they also give you a salary you can live on.

Say, think they'd be interested in my fail-safe lint picker?

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