



HAS THE ARMY CHANGED ELVIS?



His top sergeant gives frank answers about rock-'n'-roll's idol who was supposed to give the Service headaches but instead became a "good soldier"

by M/SGT. IRA JONES as told to GEORGE RIEMER

WHEN I WAS TOLD that Elvis Presley was assigned to my reconnaissance platoon in Germany, I wasn't the happiest guy in the world. I had vivid mental images of rock-'n'-roll riots, tons of fan letters dumped in my quarters, repeated upbraiding from my superior officers and thousands of autograph hunters under foot.

And when he landed in Bremerhaven, it looked as if all my gloomy forebodings had come true—in spades! Four thousand fans had somehow managed to jam themselves onto the docks. When Elvis sauntered down the gangplank, duffel bag over his shoulder, there was a spontaneous roar as they burst through the police line that had been set up. I was knocked over and nearly trampled to death by a gang of wild teen-agers screaming, "Willkommen! Elvis! Elvis!"

On the train to Friedberg, the 32nd Armored's camp, I nursed my bruises and brooded over my bad luck in getting Presley. His performance record from basic training was good, but I was bleakly pessimistic.

There are 36 men in my platoon. How could a millionaire, a celebrity, with girls squealing for tatters of his clothing, fit in with us?

I decided to bury him washing cars somewhere, but an order from my company commander settled

that. "Treat Presley like everyone else," he said, and I knew he wasn't kidding, at all.

As soon as the new men are able to find their way around camp, they start group classes. I gave them my usual talk about what was expected of them as scouts, but this time I shot a meaningful glance at Presley and added, ominously: "I don't have time or room in my platoon for goof-offs."

It takes most men five or six weeks to adjust to their platoon; Presley fit in after only a week. The others were watching him closely and when they decided he wasn't a phony or goldbricker, he was in. He scrubbed, washed, greased, painted, marched, ran, carried his laundry and worried through inspections just as everyone else did.

He worked in so smoothly that one day the executive officer asked me: "What have you done with Presley? Camouflaged him?"

When we started operational routines, I assigned him to drive the lead scout jeep, my own. I made the choice on the basis of his qualifications, but I admit that I also felt that in my jeep he might keep out of trouble with autograph hunters and the like, when we went on off-camp maneuvers.

Unfortunately, my appointment was interpreted in the wrong way by the press which reported that "Elvis had a snap job chauffeuring an officer."

"Presley and his captain race around picking up German girls," etc. And soon as the news was out that he was driving for his platoon sergeant, the division's press officer was bombarded with mail accusing the Army of giving Elvis preferential treatment. I was called to answer the charges. "I gave him the job because he qualified for it," was my explanation. "I would have picked him if he were named Gerald McBoing Boing."

At first the protests hurt Elvis, but gradually his common sense helped him put on a hard protective shell. He realized that what mattered was the Army's genuine approval, and this he surely got. My company commander told me: "If Private Presley weren't so distracted by demands from his public, he'd be an outstanding soldier, the kind the Army would like to keep." (Presley, I must admit, shuddered at the notion.)

One day, I was sorting out some old magazines at home, when I came across one with an Elvis Presley article. It called him a "bump-and-grind piper leading hysterical, glassy-eyed teen-age girls to ruin in a jungle of crude taste and sensuousness." The description of citizen Elvis clashed so violently with the Private Presley I knew that it gave me a start. Could they be writing about the same trim soldier who drove for me?