I Guess That’s Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Army Me: Going In

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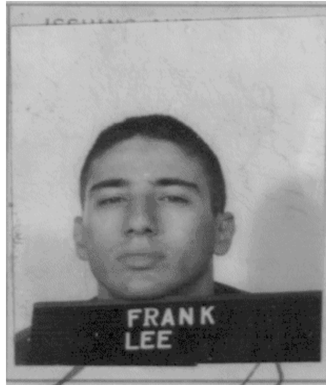
Army Me: Going In

In July of 1960, I paid a visit to the recruiting center in Newark. Not voluntarily. This was a personal request from my draft board. I had not visited downtown Newark since they closed the Burlesque houses five years before. The last thing I expected was to renew relations with the town of my birth. Six months later I would be back in Newark, destined to quietly coast through the rest of my time in service. Implausible. Unpredictable. But then everything was unthinkable, as the United States Army began to examine me.

All hope, however, was not lost. I had a slip from my doctor claiming my psoriasis was too severe to allow me to serve. As many of you know, the symptoms of psoriasis are seasonal; its season of remission was summer, more so when one is active in the sun. This was July and the Army doctor opined as to its lack of severity. I tried to explain it was much worse in winter. Which it was. So much so that I was hospitalized in the last winter of my two years of service. The doctor there, at the Navy hospital at St. Albans on Long Island, asked, “How did you get into the Army?” I responded with, “Where were you when they were taking me in?”

This hospitalization in 1962 turned out to be a good thing. After leaving the service, I went to the VA hoping for

any help for my psoriasis. Because my record showed that hospitalization, they gave me the minimum service-connected disability. In effect, they were paying me for their mistake. And they paid more. In 1967, the VA diagnosed a broken toe as arthritis. They even knew my special category, Psoriatic Arthritis. More money. Actually, you're *paying for their mistake—with your taxes. Thanks, but if I had my choice, I'd forego the disease.*



Take me in, they did. They did, however, provide me with some minor amusement in the form of a test. This was the same test Mohammed Ali had suspiciously failed. People thought someone apparently as intelligent as he couldn't possibly fail such a test. And while I didn't fail, I understood how *he* could. The clue is that this test was not your standard intelligence test. Think for a minute. It was a test designed by the Army—to meet the Army's needs. Without the right experiences, those right for the Army, you could fail this test. I can believe Ali did. Their approach was aimed at testing different abilities (not too far from those enumerated in Gardner's *Frames of Mind*). There were five parts as I recall, and, no, I don't recall all five but I do remember one: mechanical ability.

I remember because I had never tested well in mechanical ability. My test-taking skills gave me the

second highest score in our group. Second to Karl, who built hotrods in his spare time. This test emphasized practical experience and mine was only average in mechanical things. High School tests had said I was mechanically retarded. Owning a car had improved my mechanical skills. Later, with increased experience, they improved still more. Eventually, I understood the inner workings of computers, largely a mechanical aptitude (albeit abstract).

This was not the Army's last test for me. Their endless (or so it seemed at Fort Dix) testing in Basic Training saved my military career and maybe my life. My test-taking skills stood me in good stead. With one perverse exception—the Morse Code test. Unexpectedly, my Boy Scout training surfaced and produced my highest score, a score significantly higher than everyone around me. I had visions of sitting on a telegraph key, languishing in remote military outposts like the Aleutians. Fortunately, they overlooked (or had no need) for this skill (at that time) and instead pulled me out of formation a few weeks into Basic for a different assignment.

Up to this point, Basic Training had been all hell and a mile wide. Now, eight of us were excused one Wednesday afternoon and sent to a building across the base. As they gave us directions, we were made to understand this would lead to a cushy assignment once Basic was over. While the Army has varied needs, their primary need, as always, is more foot soldiers. Basic was bad enough, but knowing the odds were in favor of more of the same—Advanced Infantry Training—only made it worse. Here we were scarcely beginning our descent into Hades, and then suddenly we were saved.

Saved, that is, if we went along with the new program. And what was this program? They couldn't tell us. We made the trip across the base every Wednesday

for five weeks—and they never told us. All we knew was this indescribable job was classified. Thanks to the Draft, my future had been getting progressively dimmer for almost three full years. Then, drafted and in Basic Training, it was positively black. Now, I was promised salvation, yet this too was murky. The tests we had taken revealed the abilities they sought. Now what they wanted to know was, could we be trusted? Until they trusted us, they would keep is in the dark.

At these weekly meetings they hinted at what we might be doing. When asked a direct question beyond what we needed to know, they said the answer was classified. And there was more testing. These were decidedly different tests. These were one on one, more like interrogations than tests. They wanted to know whether we were Marxists (or worse) in khaki clothing. These tests were something new for me. They were designed to find the limits of our knowledge. They did this by going far beyond those limits. I never felt so stupid.

That feeling quickly wore off as I continued in the program. Most didn't. One, I recall, dropped out precisely because they wouldn't give us any details. We tried to talk him out of his decision, saying this enigmatic assignment was far better than being an infantryman. The others were weeded out for reasons not spelled out to those of us not permitted to be in the know. At the end, when the assignments (Military Occupational Skill or MOS) were handed out, there were only two of us, John and myself. At New Jersey's Fort Dix, most of our fellow trainees were from the New York metropolitan area. John was from Kearny, a few miles east and on the other side of Newark from Union, my hometown. You can read about our shared time in *My Life*.

This book is partly about how the world sees me and I have one more story from Basic Training. I call it "Invisible in the Service." The pictures of me in uniform

don't show the uniform we wore everyday, fatigues. Most people think of fatigues as rumpled, often dirty. Not so in Basic. Ordinary cleaning and pressing weren't good enough for our Drill Instructors. They used some form of industrial-strength starch that turned creases into weapons. Their unnaturally sharp look was supposed to impress us, something to emulate. I took a different approach.

Fatigues were made to withstand the rough and tumble of Basic Training. As the day progressed, they regressed into a significantly less crisp state of dress. By day's end they were rumpled and dirty. I took advantage of this natural degradation. Whenever we were not at attention, I would grip the area above my left breast pocket . . . and mangle the name tag sewn there. My goal was quite simple. If they couldn't read my name, they wouldn't call my name

I was counting on two things. One was our Army-induced anonymity. The other was their need to appear superior. An unreadable name tag slowed them down. There was no easy way to single you out, if you were in a group, simply to ask your name. Pointing diminished their power. I thought I could reduce their power over me by becoming invisible. Every chance I got, I manipulated my short last name into even fewer letters. This meant beginning anew each morning with a straight and legible name tag. It worked. My name was almost never called. It paid off in another way, too.

The ultimate proof of my method for achieving invisibility came at the end of Basic. To insure our worthiness as cannon fodder, the Army had more tests. These were not simply physical tests, such as running and falling to the ground when told to "hit it." This testing included more cerebral skills such as memorizing our general orders and reading maps. People actually studied for this because they were afraid to fail. This fear came

from intimidation: Fail, and you repeat Basic Training. (For any offense, this was their strongest threat throughout Basic Training.) I never gave this test a second thought.

Thoroughly unintentionally, and assisted by the Army's inherent need to grade on a curve, I made the highest score. Far from perfect, it was still enough to exceed my fellow soldiers-to-be. It was enough to be singled out in front of the whole company and awarded a trophy. (In the picture above right, it says, "H Co. 4TH TNG REGT / HIGH SCORER PROFICIENCY TEST / Lee Frank.") When my name was called out, I trotted to the front of our platoon and then to the center of the company formation. There were whispers from the ranks. Our glorious leaders handed me the trophy and shook my hand. Carrying the plastic trophy, I trotted back to my place in formation. More whispers. What I heard them repeating was, "Who's that?" "Who's that?"

Although Basic Training controlled my life, it was not the most important thing *in* my life. That was still Patty. She visited twice while I was at Fort Dix and I

rode the bus north on two free weekends to visit her. She also provided my greatest trauma during Basic. I could ignore the dirt, the sweat, the constant abuse, the danger from the live ammunition (and hand grenades, and even the K.P.), but one letter from Patty almost put me into the stockade.

It said her father was back. He'd been gone for three years and she was much happier without him. She had told me about his abuse and it nauseated me. Now he was back and I was sixty miles away, imprisoned by the Army. I remember my panic as I tired to figure out how to get to a phone while following the Army's excessively detailed schedule for my whereabouts. Endless horrible hours passed until I was able to call her. All I knew was I had to be there to protect her and there was no way I could—without going A.W.O.L. All she had to say was "I need you" and I would have gone over the wall. When we finally spoke she was in far less distress than I. She wasn't happy but in the years he'd been gone she had matured. He wanted back, but her strength and resolve turned him away. My relief was the size of the two lives saved.

Basic over, I was headed now to Baltimore, three times as far from Patty as Fort Dix, for another eight weeks of training. And after that, for eighty-eight more weeks, I could be stationed anywhere in the world. When

would we see each other? Another unanswerable question served up by the Army. Our love slipped into the limbo of disembodied letter-writing. Basic Training was at Fort Dix, and at least I was still in New Jersey. Next I would be sequestered in Baltimore. We knew no more than I'd be permitted to come home before they shipped me who knows where for the remainder of my two years. Neither of us had ever dealt with a long-term long-distance relationship. My life was now being torn in two: physical indenture to the Army and my emotional attachment—being stretched daily—to Patty. The one immediate, the other dream-like. We'd had one separation that left permanent scars. Now we were facing a division of more than six hundred days. And one we would be powerless to cut short thanks to the added distance tacked on by Uncle Sam.

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