

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

Army Me: Going South

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Fort Holabird was about as different from Fort Dix as the cosmopolitan seaport of Baltimore was from the rural pine barrens of New Jersey. Our secret pass out of the horror of Advanced Infantry Training was Army Intelligence. (I did the oxymoron joke in *My Life*.) Delivered from the land of the grunt, my future was more secure if still unknown. After this first miracle, I had no reason to expect it to get any better. But it did.

Fort Holabird was, for an Army post, civilized. Baltimore had what we from Jersey called “cultcha.” It was full of amusements from hip coffee shops to the more anatomically explicit strip joints. Baltimore, specifically East Baltimore Street, was the veritable bellybutton of stripperdom. Reminded me of the specialized streets in New York, kind of a garmentless district.

Being trained for intelligence was nothing like Basic. It was much more like college—with uniforms. We were still military, but the difference from Basic was day from night. Days filled with classes, nights with homework, weekends on the town. My mind’s picture of Holabird is much like Rensselaer, lots of red brick. Sure there were some wooden buildings, but I remember the brick, and other things. The best part was sharing the “campus” with fledgling officers. We privates were only segregated from our fellow second lieutenant students in the barracks and

the classroom. As brand-new privates, we were treated with more respect than the freshman at RPI.

One important difference was that they, the second louies, knew that we, the lowly privates, had declined the offer of officership. The Army knew we had the ability and they wanted to maximize their investment. And everyone knew we had chosen stripes over bars. Yes, officers were paid more. Yes, officers got the better jobs. All they had to give up was a year of their lives. A year? No way. We enlisted were in for two and then out. As officers, we'd spend an extra year and still owe the Army more whenever they needed more officers. No (insert your favorite expletive here) way.

This mutual respect caused enlisted men and officers to treat each other as equals. In town, especially, we really were equal. Both out of uniform, privates and lieutenants went to the same bars, competed for the same women. Although out of uniform, it was easy for us to tell who was whom. The women never had a clue, and we couldn't tell them because the Army told us our rank was now officially classified.

On the base, we wore standard uniforms with standard insignia of rank and unit. Even so there was respect from our fellow officer trainees. For example, everyone knows enlisted men must salute officers and the officers must return the salute. At Fort Holabird, in keeping with the campus atmosphere, we walked to class. No needless marching in formation here. But we still had to comply with military regulations and discipline. Like saluting. Walking back and forth to class, we walked in small groups or singly. If we were in a group and saw an approaching officer trainee, we privates would spread out, form a single file, and force the lieutenant to return each of our salutes separately. By the time he reached the end of our line he had a broad grin.

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There was another very noticeable difference between Holabird and Dix. A good number of our fellow soldiers in Basic were drafted, an equitable representation of male American youth. (Not just American. There were a handful of foreigners of every description choosing service over deportation.) While our career officers were mostly white, our career enlisted—the dreaded Army drill instructors—were mostly Black with a smattering of Hispanic. Every trace of color disappeared when we went to Baltimore. The only person in Basic with whom I could share my aversion to the military, with whom I shared both sense and sensibility, was Black. I don't know if Bill made it out in one piece. The Black sergeants wanted obedience not sensitivity. I know he didn't have my luck. Basic was a different Army. Every trace of color in uniform disappeared when we went south to Baltimore.

Was Intelligence Training all fun and games? No, only compared to Basic Training. If Fort Dix was an eternity, Baltimore was a blur. I suppose there was K.P., but I don't recall any. I do recall having to clean an area—Army calls it policing—of litter and cigarette butts. I remember because I was badly hungover and the scraping of the metal lawn rakes on asphalt was agonizing.

We played hard because, to abuse a cliché, we worked hard. There was a lot to learn and none of us wanted to flunk out and lose what we hoped was the promised easy assignment. The hardest subject for me was one I thought was my best—typing. The Army mandated thirty-five words a minute. Without any mistakes. I had been typing since my second year of high school. But my typing was never for the Army's exacting reports. High school teachers were less demanding than the military. And most of my typing was for myself, to make my handwritten notes more permanent—and more legible. That typing was for speed. As I tried to meet the Army's goal, I learned I had been

typing eighty words a minute. With lots of mistakes. Getting to thirty-five without a single error was a struggle. It was my only concern in the classroom, but I passed. With no small effort.

The work in other classes came easier. I could tell you the reason I can't tell you about those classes is they were classified. They were, but the real reason is I don't remember them. I do remember my surprise at the results of our final exams. This was a group of young men (the *good* old days?) chosen for their general intelligence. Most were in their early twenties, a few in the mid-twenties. Most were college graduates, including a few PhDs. The highest score belonged to our only married classmate who lived (lucky dog) off base with this wife (lucky dog) and studied, as he so often told us, with her help (same dog) and none of our single-guy-on-the-loose-in-the-land-of-the-stripper distractions. I came in third.

One other memory of Fort Holabird: Sitting in the lounge and watching the Kennedy-Nixon debates on television. Kennedy for us, for most of the country, was an unknown personality, unlike Nixon, whom we knew. Not knowing Kennedy, no one expected much. He did better than America expected. The perception, ours included, was that he won the debates. He did, but not by the margin magnified by our low expectations. Radio listeners thought Nixon won, proving it's easier to sell a used car if people can't see it.

The debates were not the Great Event today's historians and commentators (we were there) would like you to believe. If you don't believe me, read John Steinbeck's Travels With Charley. Its subtitle is In Search of America. Steinbeck, a reporter, observer, and historian better than most, found little national discussion of the Presidential contest. I recall some, but not the Great Debate the revisionists write about. Most of America was more

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concerned with the personal problems we had to deal with everyday. My concern was not the military, but when the next letter from Patty would arrive. I doubt we wrote much about the debate.

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