

The Last Wild End

The last 8 month academic year for me was the wild and wooley one. All we graduating cadets were faced with our final - career determining - decisions. Which Service to enter - The Army, or Army Air Corps - which would soon become the separate US Air Force. And then which BRANCH of Army service to enter - Infantry, Artillery, Armor, Combat Engineers, or Combat Signal Corps?

I negotiated with LIFE MAGAZINE for one of my great photographs, cut a class, got 'slugged' with a stiff punishment for that, got a lecture from my 'Tac Officer' about piano lessons, the Canadian cruise ship Noronic exploded and burned, pushing my great photos off the pages of Life, I crashed my car, graduated clean-sleeve, got pushed into an arranged marriage that would never last, the Korean War broke out, my graduation leave became a mess, my would-be-wife got drunk and crashed my car in the mountains of Colorado my orders got changed to send me to combat without benefit of Infantry officer training. All in the space of 8 months. Whew!

My Choices

When the time came - April 1950 - when all we Class of 1950 West Point Cadets had an opportunity to choose

our branch of service, and initial assignments before our coming June 6th graduation, I was somewhat tired of what I sensed was the herd instinct of many of my classmates. Many wanted to go immediately into Airborne and Ranger training, before they joined their ultimate infantry, artillery, or armor units. I felt that was a kind of fad. I always have marched to my own drum, and never have been a lemming-like follower of military fads.

So I not only selected Infantry branch, but also chose the only separate, straightleg, Rifle Company in the US Army - the 77th Separate Rifle Company at Fort Riley, Kansas. Where there would be few classmates. There was another reason I selected that set of choices. I wanted to first command a regular Army combat Infantry unit made up of the 'salt of the earth' American draft soldiers, not airborne, ranger, or special forces elites. I had concluded from watching, while I was a teenager too young to serve in it, our 8 million men winning WWII, that our success was more decided on the average performance of the average American soldier in a draft Army than from the performance of military elites. The rise to the challenge of the 'citizen soldiers.'

I also could have opted for the Army Air Corps and flown combat planes. 25% of the class went Air Corps, for this was before the Air Force Academy was founded. But if I was in combat I wanted to see the whites of my enemy's eyes, which I doubted I would ever see if I became a

fighter pilot.

But I did not notice that either Airborne assaults, or just strategic bombing had won the war in Europe. Just the selfless actions of millions of ordinary American men with a rifle taking on the German and Japanese Armies.

I had no problem with the special elites - they admirably perform specialized tasks - but they did not, by themselves, decide the war. Bill Maudlin's (WWII premier cartoonist) Willy and Joe did. I wanted to command American Willy and Joes from heartland America.

All this went through my mind as I made my selection before I graduated with 670 other classmates on June 6th, 1950. And they made theirs. Three weeks later the North Koreans invaded South Korea and the US Government became desperate for enough troops and officers to lead them, in an Army which had been let - by Congress and the Truman Administration - to wither on the WWII post-war vine - in numbers, trained quality - including of their leadership - and weapons. The first troops thrown into the war were occupation units from Japan, often poorly led.

I remember clearly all of we First Classmen inside a large room, being called out, in order of Class Standing, and making their final decision, whether to select Army Air Corps (which 25% of each class had to choose, 10 years

before there WAS a separate Air Force which then drew graduates from a new Air Force Academy) or Army. I had made my choice.

Life Magazine

During early September, 1949, while I was supposed to be enjoying my way through easier First Class Academics toward graduation, I was contacted by Life Magazine - THE Life Magazine - reputedly the most prestigious photographic-news magazine in America.

Someone had sent them a copy of the Pointer Magazine in which my classic picture of the entire plebe class of 1953 spread across two pages.

They wanted to print it! My photography of West Point in Life Magazine! Big stuff. I would be paid up to \$1,000. But they had to negotiate how to get the original film to them, and lots of details about the photo, the background of it, who is in it and why, etc, etc. They were in a hurry for it was a unique 'freshmen' class photo just as Colleges and Schools were starting up for the 1949 school year. They would like it for their September 19th issue.

The trouble was they insisted on talking to me at 9:30 AM the next day, by phone, in a conference call with me at one end, several Life staffers at the other. But that was

right in the middle of my Military History class! I couldn't just simply 'be excused' for that kind of excuse!

So I took a really calculated risk. I might not be missed by a less than attentive Instructor. So I cut the class, got into the Pointer's offices, waited for and took the call. The arrangements were going smoothly.

But the Military History instructor DID miss me. And so wrote up an 'unexcused absence' quill. Which would then crank through the system to my Company F-2 Tactical Officer, who would demand to know why I was absent. Possible some medical excuse? I had no excuse except what I did and why.

MEANWHILE, that very night - September 18th - the big Canadian luxury Liner the 'Noronic' caught fire when docked with over 500 on board, and totally burned up, killing up to 140 passengers. A big calamity. Big news. Big PHOTOGENIC News.

Life rushed to cover it. THAT story pushed my West Point story right out of the magazine.

So I didn't get my 15 Minutes of Fame, OR the \$1,000.

Slugged

But I did get 'slugged' - cadet name for heavier than 'normal' punishment. I had deliberately cut a class I was required by USMA Regulations to attend. I had no

legitimate - in the eyes of the Academy - excuse. No matter what a great piece of publicity for West Point in the great Life Magazine, if it had run. But it didn't run.

It took over 2 weeks before that 'quill' got to the F-2 tac, a check up made to the Academic department that the class absense was in fact inexcusable. (I was given Zero tenths out of a potential 3.0 on the spot quiz done the day I was absent. Which sure didn't help my class standing in that subject for that semester) Then the quill worked its way through the Tactical Department to my Tactical Officer's desk while he was on a short TDY assignment - thus absent.

So Lt Col Keller, on return, reviewed the facts with me, lectured me on the fact that he had a hobby playing the piano. That he had no time, consistent with his Army duties and responsibilities to pursue practicing his hobby. My photography was a hobby. I had put my hobby before my duty.

And it was, to him, more serious because I was a Firstclassman! A Senior. An example to all the other classes!

It would not be seemly for a First Classman to Walk the Area with a rifle and be seen as a bad example. So he sentenced me to (1) be busted from my cadet Sergeant's rank to private (2) be confined to my quarters during the

Spring semester. Meaning I could not take advantage of 1st Class privileges, like driving my car. I could only go to class, to formations, to meals, scheduled physical training and intramural competitions I was in, and attend other specific duties - otherwise stay in my room, study, and contemplate my Sin. I was only let out of confinement for June Week - my graduation week. And he was not the one who released me for it. He was rotated to another assignment and a Lt Col Tuck became my Tac. He let up on me for those very last days.

Storm King Mountain

So academics came to an end. I had managed to pass everything, so would graduate and be commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the US Army on the 6th of June, 1950.

But there was another matter I had to deal with.

From time to time in this West Point Years story I have mentioned that I had a girlfriend back in Colorado. All four years while I was at West Point. I had met her while I was still a Cadet at Colorado Military School. Her brother was also a Cadet. Her name was Pat Tompkins. I was mildly attracted to her - as a teen boy of 17 might well be, while he is playing the field.

The big problem was that her mother, a shrewd woman

with some Denver socialite contacts and ambitions pushed her on me. Because she thought I would be heir to Arleen Hughes estate - which would set up both of us for life. And the cost to her own estate by supporting Pat, would be lifted from her. And she never considered the possibility I might make the Army a career or that I would not be a beneficiary of the E.W. Hughes fortune. Or that I might not love Pat Tompkins, who seemed increasingly to be looking more for a father-figure than a husband.

I did not make plans to have a typical West Point June wedding. But she managed to arrange it with my Aunt Arleen who was going to come to my graduation - she was not - with Pat and make it easy for us to get married right after I graduated - in New York, in a hotel suite Service. And she put her up at a Cornwall set of rooms like many an independent cadet date might have.

The day I was released from confinement, two days before graduation, I drove over Storm King Mountain in my new Chevy to see her. She was distraught, we argued, but she wanted to 'consummate' the marriage right there on the spot even before any ceremony was held. She was trying to entangle me no matter what. And she desperately wanted to do what 'other' of her girl friends at Stephens College did - copulate routinely with their boy friends. She wanted to be so 'normal' that she was not normal. So she insisted and I obliged to engage in sex in the car in the dark

It got late - so late I was going to be late for bed check back at West Point and I might be sanctioned again by the Tac. There were ways I could be 'held over' or not be permitted to attend my own graduation - but get my diploma and commission later. ??? I wanted to cross that graduation stage like all my classmates. I worked too hard for too long to miss out on it.

So I jumped in my Chevy and raced through Cornwall and up over the Storm King Mountain shelf road. It was raining lightly. I got part way up when I saw I was being followed. The Cornwall Cop was chasing me for speeding through sleepy Cornwall! I tried to outrun him, but when I got to the very top of the mountain road, which was only guarded from the cliff overlooking the Hudson River, by a low stone fence I spun out on the slick road, banged against the low outside wall, distorting the bumper and grill.

The engine, the fan belt jammed and died. I started rolling freely down the other side with a dead engine. The Cornwall Cop followed me down, not trying anything on that dangerous road - he knew what was at the bottom better than I did. I had just missed going over the side to a sure death.

I was able to roll to a stop in an off road parking area. He then came up - and having dealt over the years with many a West Point cadet trying not to be late, suggested

I just lock the car, get in his. And so he, at breakneck speed - knowing how important it was for me not to be late - had me write out my own ticket in the other seat! And he delivered me with 5 minutes to spare!

So that was my encounter with Storm King Mountain and scheming women.

Suffice it to say I called the Chevy Dealer in Highland Falls to retrieve my car, and I got ready to graduate a day later, and pack my lean belongings, for I would have to depart the Post and my place in the barracks within one day.

Some how Pat got to the Graduation Ceremony, over Storm King Mountain by taxi. It was held inside.

And here is proof I graduated in the picture below. The then Superintendent General Moore handed me my diploma,



Notice I have three gold stripes meaning I am a FIRSTCLASSMAN, but I show NO rank (lik'e Sergeant's Stripes)

So I graduated with one of the rarest distinctions. I was one of the only FIVE CADET PRIVATES OF THE CLASS OF '50!

If I couldn't be the top military cadet, maybe I could be the bottom! They all became the same after graduation.

Only four other of my classmates were also busted to Private at some time the last semester.

But I made it. I graduated from West Point, fair an square

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along with my other 670 Classmates, while 292 others did not make it. ALL of us graduating would be, just like me, in rank a 2d Lieutenant, after graduation. Starting all over again in the Army at large. Where ones actions in combat and war, and record in peacetime, would determine who rose in rank over the years.

We were then Sworn In, as Commissioned Officers right after the Graduation ceremony.

I was free to leave for 60 days Graduation Leave then report to my 1st Duty station - which as of the date you see me above, 6 June, 1950 - would be Fort Riley, Kansas.

That concluded my 4 year Adventure through West Point.

Go to West Point (15) for the end of the saga.