

Drill on the Campus: The Student's Army Training Corps, 1918

by Louis P. Koch

Introduction

The following memoir by Louis Koch provides an inside look at one of the military training experiments conducted during World War I. The Student's Army Training Corps was a short-lived attempt to develop officers for a massive army which was planned as America's great contribution to the war effort. Before 1918, most of the colleges in Iowa (including the state universities) had provided Reserve Officer Training Corps programs as a part of the regular curriculum, but the students trained through R.O.T.C. moved quickly into officers' training camps and on to troop assignments during the first months of America's involvement in the war. When the demand rose for a new pool of officers, the War Department set up the S.A.T.C.

The object was to tap the reservoir of college students enrolled at 500 colleges and universities. The students were to attend regular classes, but be subject to Army drill and discipline. Almost 2000 students took advantage of the program at The University of Iowa, some from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the Dakotas, but most from the Hawkeye state. One interesting feature of the Iowa City S.A.T.C. was the inclusion of black students in the training corps. The Army had only recently (with extreme reluctance) allowed blacks to become officer trainees, usually at segregated camps, despite the fact that there had been many black Army officers in the late nineteenth century.

The Armistice brought the experiment in student training to an end, probably none too soon. Evidence suggests that the mixture of academics and drill was not a happy one. It is likely that neither received adequate attention, and the living conditions were certainly unpleasant for the trainees.

Louis Koch returned to the University after his discharge from the S.A.T.C. and earned a B.S. in commerce in 1921. He was an employee of the W. A. Sheaffer Pen Company in his native Ft. Madison for more than 40 years.

Although he is now retired, he is active in community affairs and lists the research and writing of local history among his hobbies. His memories of the S.A.T.C. bring to life an experience of almost 60 years ago.

Editor

The weather was warm and summery in Iowa City that October day in 1918 when the Rock Island train deposited me at the neat, cream-colored brick depot. I checked my big imitation leather suit case and cased violin because I had not engaged a room and took the depot street car to the Jefferson Hotel corner.

The World War I draft law had gone into effect a few months earlier, and I had registered at the Lee County Court House, taking time out from my summer job as clerk and runner at the Fort Madison Savings Bank.

The War had been in progress since April 1917, and Pershing's men were fighting in France, but our country was poorly prepared for what looked like would be a long war. It was recommended to young men that they wait to be drafted because camps were full, and for men with some college training it was suggested that they return to their schools where they would be available for call. Soon we learned that a new organization was being set up, whereby we could continue our schooling at government expense, receive military training, and if eligible, advance to officers' training camps as vacancies occurred.

The Old Stone Capitol's second floor was administrative headquarters for the University, and a trip there disclosed that

everything was pretty well muddled. Instructions were to report for acceptance in the new Student's Army Training Corps, several days later.

The town was swarming with lads seeking temporary shelter. The S.A.T.C. idea had appealed to many, and all the small private colleges had dumped students in Iowa City, glad to take advantage of learning at government expense. Also, many just-graduated high school seniors believed this was the royal road to the college education they could not have afforded otherwise. Fortunately, I ran across a friend who, believing a normal school year was beginning, had taken a room in a private home on North Dubuque Street. He had bed space so I moved in with him and marked time until the day designated for registration.

Registration or enlistment (we thought it was registration) was quite different this year. The old squat-towered gym and armory was the location. We signed the cards and documents, left our fingerprints on cards, then stripped in the locker rooms for the doctors to look us over. They did not seem very critical so practically all of the applicants were accepted and assigned to companies by professional schools, by age groups, and by college-year status. My rank was Liberal Arts sophomore so I became a private in Co. K, later changed to Co. G, made up of fellow Liberal Arts sophomores from various colleges. The company for that reason included almost all the best football players such as Quarterback [William S.] Kelly, Center [Lawrence] Block, and Full-

back Duke [Fred W.] Slater, the giant black who later was key man in Coach [Howard H.] Jones' conference champion team.

University President Walter Jessup was a canny man with the buck. He had received a sizeable sum [\$250,000 from the state legislature] for housing the rookies so he had started building on a west side hilltop, a huge barracks around a central court and with a brick blockhouse tower at each of the four corners. President Jessup was thinking ahead of a postwar dormitory rather than a temporary barrack, and in doing that he was wise, but he was roundly cursed by us rookies because "Jessup's Folly" was never ready for occupancy of recruits, who were housed in all sort of makeshift facilities. Company K drew the third floor of the rather new Women's Gymnasium. Thin, closely-spaced, single mattresses were assigned to us, and blankets were issued. Sanitary facilities were two floors down. Meals were eaten in a huge, frame mess hall that had been run up on vacant ground near the armory. Slab tables and benches were the equipment, but we did eat from regular dishes with cafeteria style service.

The next day we were lined up and, without knowing too well what it was all about, were sworn into the United States Army. Most of the men were wearing regular civilian clothing, but I had stuffed my blue serge suit in my gym locker [in order] to don my R.O.T.C. uniform of khaki wool blouse and breeches, canvas leggings, and brown campaign hat with

infantry blue cord. I felt quite military, as did some of the others who also wore their R.O.T.C. outfits.

For several days, life for Company K was not only boring but downright unpleasant. We had mass calisthenics on the football field, meals in the mess hall, and some drill instructions, but too much time had to be spent lounging on the barrack mattresses in a poorly ventilated room with the sun pouring heat through the big room skylights.

This was a wonderful time for the Spanish Influenza epidemic to hit Iowa City. Company K, by then Company G, in its overheated, poorly-aired, and crowded quarters seemed to be particularly susceptible to the germ. Men came down in dozens and were packed off to improvised hospitals, wherever they could be isolated. Both University and Mercy Hospitals were crowded. Recoveries were very slow, and there were numerous deaths.

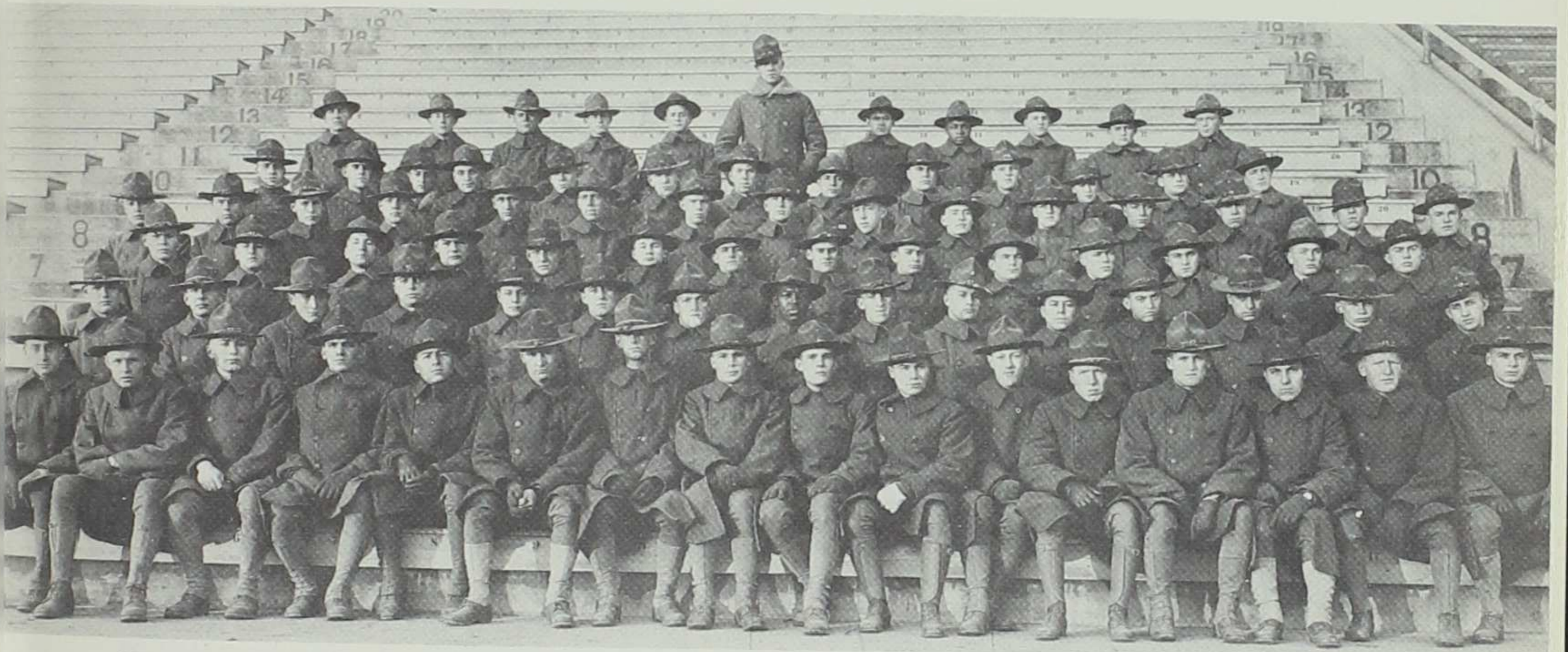
Something had to be done quickly about Company G and one other company. With the weather continuing warm, two large tents with board floors were hurriedly set up on tennis courts, just east of the armory. Company G's tent was equipped with steel barrack beds, but we had to leave our mattresses and substituted cotton ticks filled with straw. For sanitary purposes we used the gym locker room, which made quite a long trip for anyone who had to get up at night.

Shortly before the move, we had a clothing issue: two pairs of heavy cotton two-piece underwear, two pairs of heavy socks, a woolen shirt, cotton blouse and breeches, canvas leggings, campaign hat, and heavy shoes. The shoes were any-

thing but dressy: heavy soled, smooth leather inside and rough leather outside. In that we were lucky. You could not polish the shoes. A couple quick brush strokes before inspection made them as presentable as possible. The cotton khaki uniforms were pretty well made and fitted reasonably well, but they were recalled soon and woolen uniforms (likewise overcoats) were allotted. This clothing was a weird conglomeration. Both blouses and breeches fitted poorly, and colors varied from tan to very dark brown. Overcoats, though, seemed to have been dug up from numerous sources, with all wars since khaki was adopted seemingly represented. Company G, again, was lucky, and its men drew the latest approved style overcoats—knee-length, loose-fitting, double-breasted, with wide collars. In many companies these were mixed with form fitting coats, almost ankle length, and the shortest men always seemed to have drawn the longest overcoats.

With extra blankets issued, the tennis court tents were an improvement over previous quarters until the weather turned chilly. Then, some heat was supplied in the form of construction site "salamanders" burning coke. These looked like small garbage cans with short legs and bottom grates. You started the fire with wood, outside the tent, then two men carried the salamander inside, hoping it would no longer smoke. Usually it did, so we coughed and choked for a while. On real cold nights, fire guards had to tend the salamanders constantly.

Military training was rudimentary. All companies took part in mass calisthenics on the football field, shortly after reveille, roll call, and barracks policing. Breakfast followed, then infantry drill manual evo-



Company G of the University of Iowa S.A.T.C. Author Louis Koch is seated on the front row, sixth from the right. The soon-to-be All-American footballer, Duke Slater, is in the middle of the second row.

lutions, by company usually, but sometimes by platoon. Occasionally, there was a full review with bugle corps or band. Afternoons were supposedly devoted to classes and study, but we learned quite early that dreams of continuing education were just that. Those of us of draft age were supposed to pursue three subjects only; military mapping and surveying, military sanitation and hygiene, and military law and practice. A few classes in those subjects were held in a half-hearted way by civilian instructors who did not know their subjects. They lectured to instructees who barely listened. No texts were ever issued, although we had to buy field note books and pretend to survey the interurban tracks on the south side. A good part of our time was spent in the Natural Science Museum. Chairs were placed around the cases of birds, reptiles, and Professor Nutting's Laysan Islands display. We were supposed to be studying, but there was nothing to study so magazine reading, small talk, and boredom prevailed.

For quite a while, there was not much of this loafing time. In fact the general opinion was that we were overworked. The flu epidemic reduced the number of effectives so that K.P. (kitchen police), scrubbing mess hall floors, and scraping pots and pans, was an every day job for each man.

Guard duty was another chore that required a lot of manpower. In an effort to control the epidemic, guard lines were established around the main campus, and armed sentries confined all traffic to pass holders. Fortunately the guard rifles were not loaded, and no ammunition was supplied. Otherwise, some nervous lad unfamiliar with arms might have hurt himself or some occasional guard-line crasher. Once in a while, a belligerent was pricked a bit by a guard's fixed bayonet. An unoccupied store close to the campus was the guard house, and there the off-duty guards lounged or slept on steel cots without mattresses or straw ticks. The duty was three hours on and three hours off for twenty-four hours. All military

personnel were confined within guard lines, and all non-military students, mostly girls, were provided with passes. As the epidemic slowed down a bit, passes were issued for off campus time, Saturdays and Sundays. However, all churches and motion picture theaters were closed so there was little to do but loaf around Racine's Cigar Store or Whetstone's Drug Store.

Another duty not at all relished was care of flu convalescents. As soon as hospitals could do so, they unloaded patients on temporary nursing homes where, still bedfast, they were cared for by men from the different companies. This exposed some of the amateur nurses to the disease, and some succumbed, but although I served my turns, I was one of the fortunate not hit by the epidemic.

The head of the Iowa City S.A.T.C. was Captain [George W.] Robertson, a soldierly looking man with a good command voice; quite different from that of Captain [Andrew C.] Wright, the R.O.T.C. man who had been superceded. Wright was an experienced professional, but some illness had given him a thin, piping voice which made his parade commands laughable instead of imposing.

Captain Wright's professional assistant in the person of Sergeant [Jacob] Maier stayed on. He was a short, bandy-legged cavalry man with heavy black moustache and a heavy German accent. His line of profanity was said to be excellent, but as custodian of R.O.T.C. weapons his favorite expression was, "Da goddamned gimmick." Possibly Maier had been a cavalry bugler. Anyway, he was in charge of music and trained the buglers with many a German-English oath. The story

was that he had been in the Prussian Army at one time. In peacetime Iowa City he made quite a military display, when he rode his beautiful, high-stepping horse through the streets.

Company G was commanded by a second lieutenant named [L.A.] Clark. He was young and slender, perhaps the product of a recent officers' training camp. It was our opinion that he did not pay much attention to his men, and he did have kind of a playboy air about him.

Our real boss was Sergeant Connell, about 35 years old, husky and freckled, with close-cropped red hair. Evidently inferior to his men in education, Connell was firm but fair, and had no difficulty controlling his college lads. Naturally, we disliked it very much when he double timed us back and forth across the College Street Bridge, because he had seen the glow of a cigarette in the night-blurred ranks and wanted someone to inform on the culprit. Connell must have had a regular army experience because he handled drill well.

Our other non-coms, chosen from the ranks, were Sergeants [W.C.] Kelly and [Abe] Smulekoff. The former was the tough, little, red-haired quarterback and the latter a Cedar Rapids Jewish lad, who had gone to some military summer school or camp. He did most of the paper work for the company.

Most of us were just run of the mill sophomores, but I have already mentioned Duke Slater. He was huge and black with hands like hams, but his disposition was gentle and kind. There were two other blacks, and the three pretty much stayed to themselves by choice.

In every outfit there are always a few that do not fit the general pattern and

are natural targets for pseudo witicisms of their associates. One of these was Rodney Cobb, a rather fragile fellow who was aiming at the Episcopal ministry and did not think a war should interfere in any way. He was confined to the guard house a couple times for leaving camp unauthorized to study in the library. His standard response when called on the carpet for infractions ("I can't see why") was widely quoted by fellow rookies in a derisive vein.

Red Lynch was another one who was different. Lanky, grinning, and flame-haired, his loose-jointed walk was definitely non-military. He also could not see much sense in the rules and regulations, so he was frequently in trouble and was considered a butt for razzing by the conformists.

Sidney Barrows and a couple others from Graceland College arrived on the S.A.T.C. scene wearing bright yellow beanies, evidently standard head gear at their Latter-Day Saints college. This was an oddity to the other men, and those from the larger institutions always had a little contempt for those from the smaller ones. Sidney pretty well kept to himself, and as he was rather odd appearing, skinny, awkward, and with a prominent Adam's apple that bobbed, he was considered a bit of a joke.

Fall was blending into winter so the tennis court tents were becoming more and more unsuitable. Walls were up on Jessup's quadrangle, but it was far from ready for occupancy. However, on a hilltop across the river there was an almost finished brick structure intended for a children's hospital. True, it had no heating plant and no sanitary facilities, but open latrines were dug in the back yard and hot-air furnaces were installed in two

large ward rooms; also, there was a well with hand pump in the yard. These ward rooms were the new housings for the two tennis court companies.

Each morning, the men left the new barracks, where they had slept on steel cots and straw ticks. After the usual roll call and very primitive toilets, they were marched downhill and across College Street Bridge to the mess hall. Only after the day's activities were over, did they march back to the barracks. Sometimes, the road was so muddy or rutted there could be no marching, so the formation was dismissed at the west end of the bridge and we scrambled uphill on a cowpath that was more solid.

On November 10th, a Sunday, word began to circulate that an armistice had been signed in France. Before the rumor could generate enthusiasm, it was definitely disavowed so we retired that night suspecting nothing. Around four o'clock Monday morning, men bunked on the town side of the room were awakened by shouting and bells across the river. Soon the whole room was aroused, but the general opinion was that the whole ruckus was just another false alarm.

There was no telephone in our building, but shortly, an orderly arrived with word that Company G and its neighbor should report on Clinton Street, opposite the Old Capitol. This occasioned quite a bit of grumbling because we were sleepy and still dubious of the veracity of the armistice news. The whole S.A.T.C. outfit stood in formation on Clinton Street, and Captain Robertson officially informed us that the armistice was real. I don't know why, but there we stood for a couple of hours, not at attention, fortunately. Perhaps the authorities were afraid we might be in-

clined to riot at the good news, but it was taken by the men with remarkable coolness. They were unimpressed with the horrors of war and with the chances of fatalities and maimings. The future seemed along the path of adventure, and now it was suddenly changed.

Before dismissal for breakfast, we had been ordered to assemble in the same place at 2:00 P.M. for the big victory parade. It was headed by the S.A.T.C. Band and color guard with the armed companies in front. Company G was toward the rear with Engineer and Medical units because they likewise had no rifles. Following, were town units of school children and hastily drummed up society units. Seemingly, the whole population of Iowa City lined the downtown streets to celebrate the occasion. After dismissal from parade formation, the men were given town liberty but had to report at barracks before tattoo.

The guard lines around the campus had been discontinued a couple weeks earlier, but as a substitute we had military police. Detailed men with M.P. armbands and armed with night sticks patrolled the main part of town and demanded passes from all uniformed men they encountered. Armistice night was my time to draw M.P. duty from 8:00 P.M. to 8:00 A.M. This was easy duty except for the necessity of staying awake. The weather was mild, and the Jefferson Hotel lobby was a good place to sit down and warm up between rounds. The city was remarkably quiet for the occasion. Wartime prohibition was in effect so there were no saloons, and probably the bootleggers had sold out early for home parties. Anyway, I only encountered two men in uniform, and they had hospital orderly passes.

After the armistice there was a big let-down in the Iowa City personnel. The big question was, "Why don't they let us go home?" To counteract the extreme boredom there were feeble attempts at entertainment. About once a week the whole unit was assembled in the Natural Science Auditorium, and we were practically commanded to sing. Prof. Hayes of the School of Music lead the effort, but we did not like his selections too well. They included, "Long Long Trail A winding," "Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag," "Tipperary," and "Smiles," but compulsory singing was not appealing. As far as "Smiles" was concerned, we preferred the parody, "Styles":

The styles that Eve wore in the garden
Are the styles that appeal to me.

Movie theaters and churches were open now, so free week ends were not so bad. They were preceded by Saturday morning inspections. For our company they were a snap, because we had no rifles and no inspecting officer could look for dust in our open pit latrine, which was without even squatting holes. It was a very unpleasant place, open to the elements above, muddy and sloppy below. All calls of nature that could be delayed were postponed until we crossed the river.

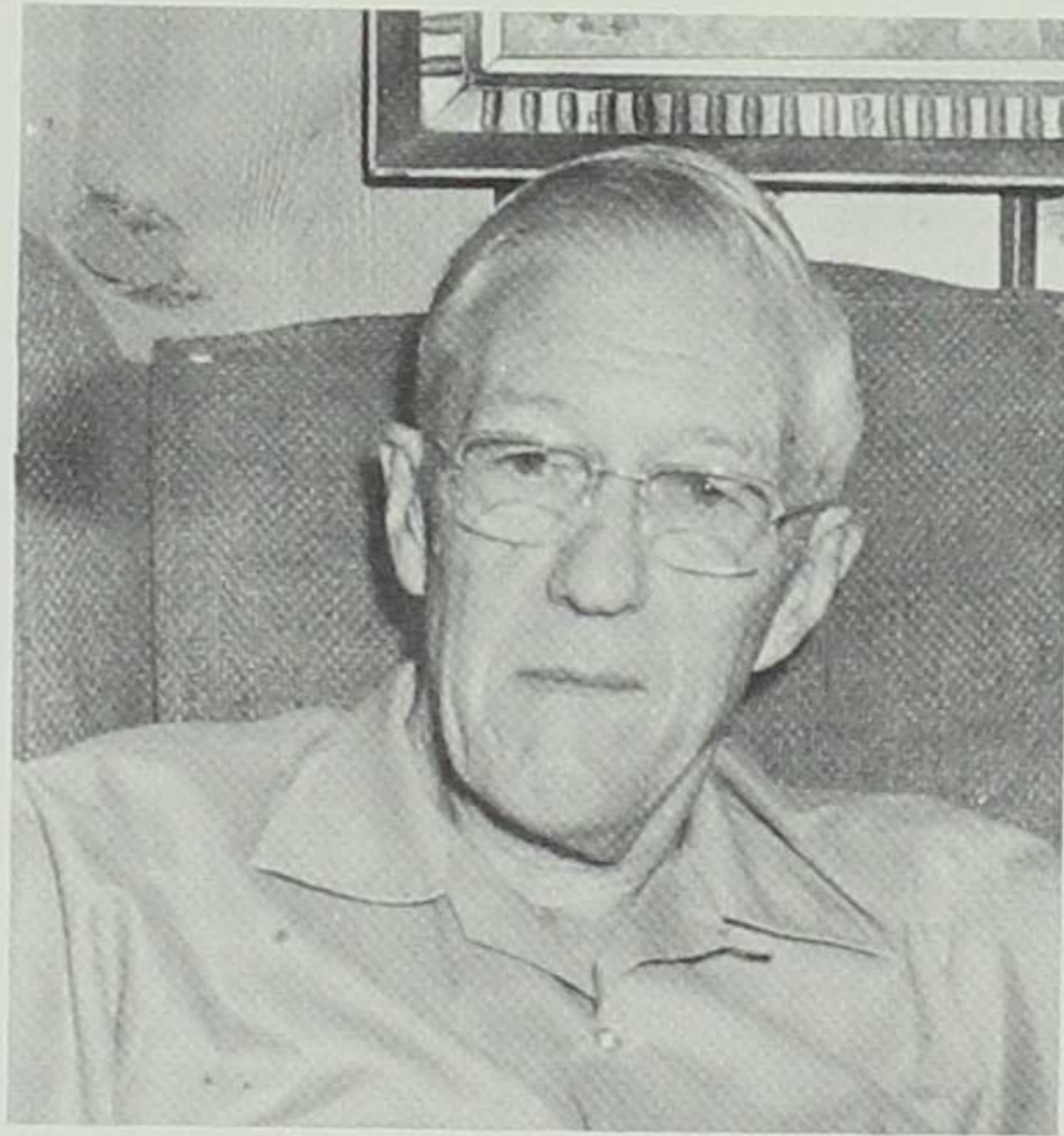
In this boring period, some kind citizen donated a piano, an old square grand, ancient but playable, which was moved into our barracks. Private Grimm of our company was a pretty good pianist so I got my violin out of storage, and evenings now spent in the barracks were less dull. The men could sing the popular tunes not in Prof. Hayes' repertoire: "How Ya Gonna Keep Em Down on the Farm After They've Seen Paree?," "Mademoiselle from Amentierres," "Goodbye Broadway,

Hello France." We liked "K-K-K-Katy" but the last line of the song was altered a little:

When the moon shines over the mess hall
I'll be mopping up the k-k-k-kitchen floor.

Still no actual date of discharge was made known. Finally, a few days before Christmas, discharges were handed out, and we were given travel pay vouchers to get us back home. This meant one last night in barracks. The sergeant must have been out celebrating, and maybe a bottle of hooch had been circulating a bit. Anyway, Grimm and I were aroused from our cots and urged to supply some entertainment. This we did with only a little reluctance. Thereby we avoided any hazing from the rowdy element now feeling its oats. Our eccentrics (Cobb, Lynch, and Barrows) came in for the most of the horseplay. Lynch in particular wound up on the low roof of a construction shed, baying at the moon as commanded. Our husky black football players then took a hand. Slater had to use one of his ham-sized hands to shove a rowdy or two, and the sergeant's return ended the celebration. The next day, I boarded the 2:35 eastbound train enroute back to my original point of departure.

The S.A.T.C., Student's Army Training Corps, derisively called "Safe At The College," had passed into history. □



Louis P. Koch today.