

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



Wartime photo of the author

## *A Historian's Memory of the Second World War*

by Alan B. Spitzer

I want to testify to a past in which I participated but a past beyond immediate recall. I cannot reconstruct the fresh impressions of a nineteen-year-old private first class just off the line in the winter of 1944, but can only deliver the reminiscences of a retired history professor who has thought, read, and taught about that past, inevitably transforming fading memories into reflection.

For example, in 1943 when I enlisted at age eighteen it seemed natural, virtually self-evident, that “everyone,” that is, all healthy young males, would go—that there would certainly be no class distinctions to shield the sons of the wealthy and influential. As in the First World War, when the sons of the European elites had served in the trenches as second lieutenants and died in greater proportion to their numbers than did the classic cannon fodder from the farms and the slums, so too in World War II, in the United States, privileged status encouraged service. The sons of the president served, George Bush went, Jack Kennedy concealed physical disabilities and pulled strings to be accepted into an especially dangerous branch of the service. “4F,” the designation of someone with a physical disability exempting him from service, was a term of opprobrium. In one of

the lousy films featuring cameo appearances by many Hollywood stars—we reached the cinematic nadir during the war—Bette Davis sang, “They’re either too young or too old, they’re either too grey or too grassy green, what’s good is in the Army, what’s left will never harm me.”

What would not have occurred to me then, but is apparent to hindsight now, is that those attitudes were historically contingent, the product of a long process of social integration in the modern state where nationalism had become the dominant ideology. As late as the Civil War one could buy a substitute to take one’s place; the majority of Yale graduates, I believe, never served in the Union forces during those years. One hundred years later, once again, during the Vietnam War social class separated those who served from those who did not, this time thanks to educational deferments. In the late 1960s when my older son was about ten and I was telling him about *my* war, he asked, “Why didn’t you go to Canada?” He was too young to know that anachronism was the ultimate historical sin. I pointed out that in those days you went to Canada to join the Royal Canadian Air Force if you couldn’t wait until the United States entered the war.

The path that I took into the service was



In Iowa City, cadets at the University of Iowa navy pre-flight school learn nomenclature on an older navy training plane flown in from Pensacola, Florida.

not quite typical but does provide a small example of the unanticipated consequences of the wartime wedding of a more-or-less democratic society and a vast military bureaucracy. I enlisted under the impression that I would be assigned to the Army Specialized Training Program—ASTP. The standard book on ASTP is entitled *Scholars in Foxholes*, and that's what we turned out to be all right. The conception, organization, brief life, and abrupt liquidation of that program perfectly exemplified what we enlisted men thought the army was all about—SNAFU, TARFU, and FUBAR—you can fill in the acronyms.

ASTP had been invented in response to the decision to lower the draft age from twenty to eighteen. The idea was, or the official version was, that the need for technically

skilled and trained personnel no longer available in the shrinking civilian pool might be met by inducting young men with a relatively high IQ, giving them basic training, and sending them back to college in military units. Another motive was to keep colleges and universities afloat. This was certainly how it was seen by the leaders in higher education who were lobbying desperately for a life belt and clutched at this imperfect alternative.

During my basic training—thirteen weeks of infantry basic in the midsummer of 1943 at Fort McClellan, Alabama—I was sustained by the prospect of marching onto some campus with a student body almost totally populated by what we called “co-eds” in those days. As it turned out they sent me to the Citadel, the military college in Charleston, South

Carolina (recently in the news for its ferocious resistance to the insertion of even one woman into the student body) whose students, we were proudly informed, had fired the first shot in the Civil War, against Fort Sumter.

At the Citadel we took introductory courses in an engineering curriculum conducted by the college faculty, but we were under military discipline in units commanded by army officers, marching to class but still on campus instead of in camps. Most of us fell into quasi military/academic step with a sort of self-ironic ambivalence. Sporting the ASTP shoulder patch (the Lamp of Knowledge transfixed by the Sword of Valor, a.k.a. "the flaming piss-pot") we marched to the tune of "Take down your service flag, Mother, your son's in the ASTP."

The army would soon liberate us from the necessity to satirize ourselves. The irony of our selection as a sort of intellectual elite was anticipated by the fate of people who flunked out of the program. As I recall, most of them were sent to the Signal Corps or the Cooks

and Bakers School, whereas the future of the successful students would be the infantry.

The Army Ground Forces had never liked the idea of ASTP. "With 300,000 men short, we are asked to send men to college," summed up their response. It was bad enough that the Army Air Corps was already creaming off recruits of higher intellectual caliber, and that the army, and especially the infantry, got the rest. Aside from the understandable practical concern of the Ground Forces as the casualties mounted, there were hints of resentment at a sort of tacit elitism, sparing the best and brightest from the risks of the real war.

By 1943, some 150,000 young enlistees had been transferred or inducted into ASTP programs—not a large percentage of the roughly twelve million Americans eventually under arms but, by an uncanny coincidence, just about equivalent to the number of fighting men the Ground Forces absolutely had to have at the beginning of 1944. Either all but 30,000 trainees would have to be withdrawn from ASTP or it would be necessary to dis-

band ten infantry divisions and assorted other units to feed replacements into units in the field. No question as to the result. The ASTPers, initially recruited as an intellectually promising cadre of potential officers, non-coms and technical specialists, became infantry privates almost overnight—so, to die in disproportion to their numbers.

The army had vaguely assured us that we were the

At Fort Des Moines, stacks of uniforms fill shelves built as a Work Projects Administration. Photographed just after Pearl Harbor, on December 10, 1941.



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SHS1 (DES MOINES)

In Iowa, soldiers play checkers and piano at the U.S.O. on 5th and Mulberry in Des Moines, in September 1942.

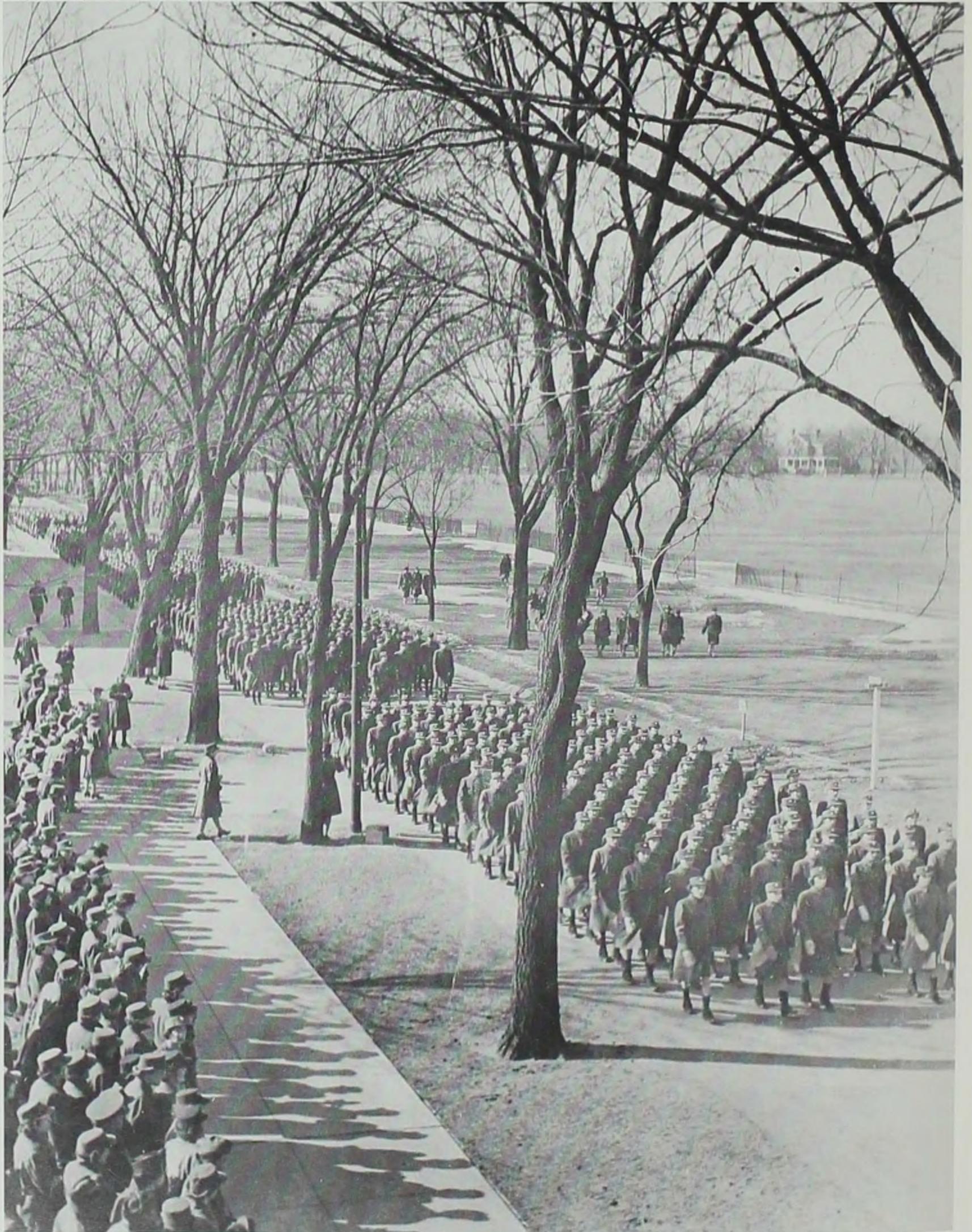
types “expected to assume the responsibilities of non-commissioned officers and skilled technicians.” This was not what the non-coms in place expected. Many of the stateside divisions had functioned as training units sending out replacements to the depleted combat divisions. The ASTPers, former Air Corps cadets, and men culled out of the Army Service Forces fleshed out companies already staffed by a cadre of non-commissioned officers. We came in as cannon fodder, and we would eventually describe those vague assurances of a rosy military future in the language we learned from the non-coms.

I was posted to the 100th Division at Fort Bragg and trained there from mid-March un-

til late September when the division was sent overseas. My company fielded that ethnic mix celebrated in the movies, then and now, as the finest example of our great American melting pot—without African Americans in those days. We fought to save the world for democracy in an army organized on racist lines. My only experience of integration was in army hospitals where it was apparently possible to mix so-called races without any problems.

In another way the composition of my company did not represent a cross section of the country or the army. This was because many of the enlisted men had been combed out of more-or-less privileged units to meet

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At Fort Des Moines, site of the first training center for the new Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, WAACs parade in review for Eleanor Roosevelt and Oveta Culp Hobby, WAAC director (circa 1943).

the insatiable demand for replacements. We were, on the average, younger, better educated, and more middle class or potentially middle class than the profile of most infantry companies. There was, I imagine, a higher quotient of youthful idealism. Not that we affected the boy-scout enthusiasm of the rush to the colors in 1917, and we were appropriately sardonic about the media tripe that characterized the home front—"Lucky Strike green has gone to war," or, "We are fighting for the right to boo the Dodgers," and so forth. Still, eighteen- and nineteen-year-old boys faced that great experience with a certain innocence. I recall one rainy night in the ASTP basic training company, when we gathered in groups in the company street between the barracks to sing our respective college songs—hardly aware, incidentally, of the effect this might have had on our non-coms who had not enjoyed our opportunities.

In the company at Fort Bragg, we were subjected to a certain number of cracks about "college boys" and "ABCDers," mostly from our first sergeant, a Depression-era professional soldier from South Carolina whom I hated with a purity undiluted by a cultural super-ego or liberal guilt. When it came to the point, he was all soldier. Although his rank indicated a place in the company command post out of direct action, he waded into enemy fire on our first day in combat and had part of his nose shot off.

By and large, in our company at least, we got along with our non-coms. The officers varied but our company commander is revered to this day by those who attend the annual reunions of Company A of the 397th Infantry. Recently, in calculating relative ages I realized that the man whose calm authority we accepted without question was then aged twenty-six.

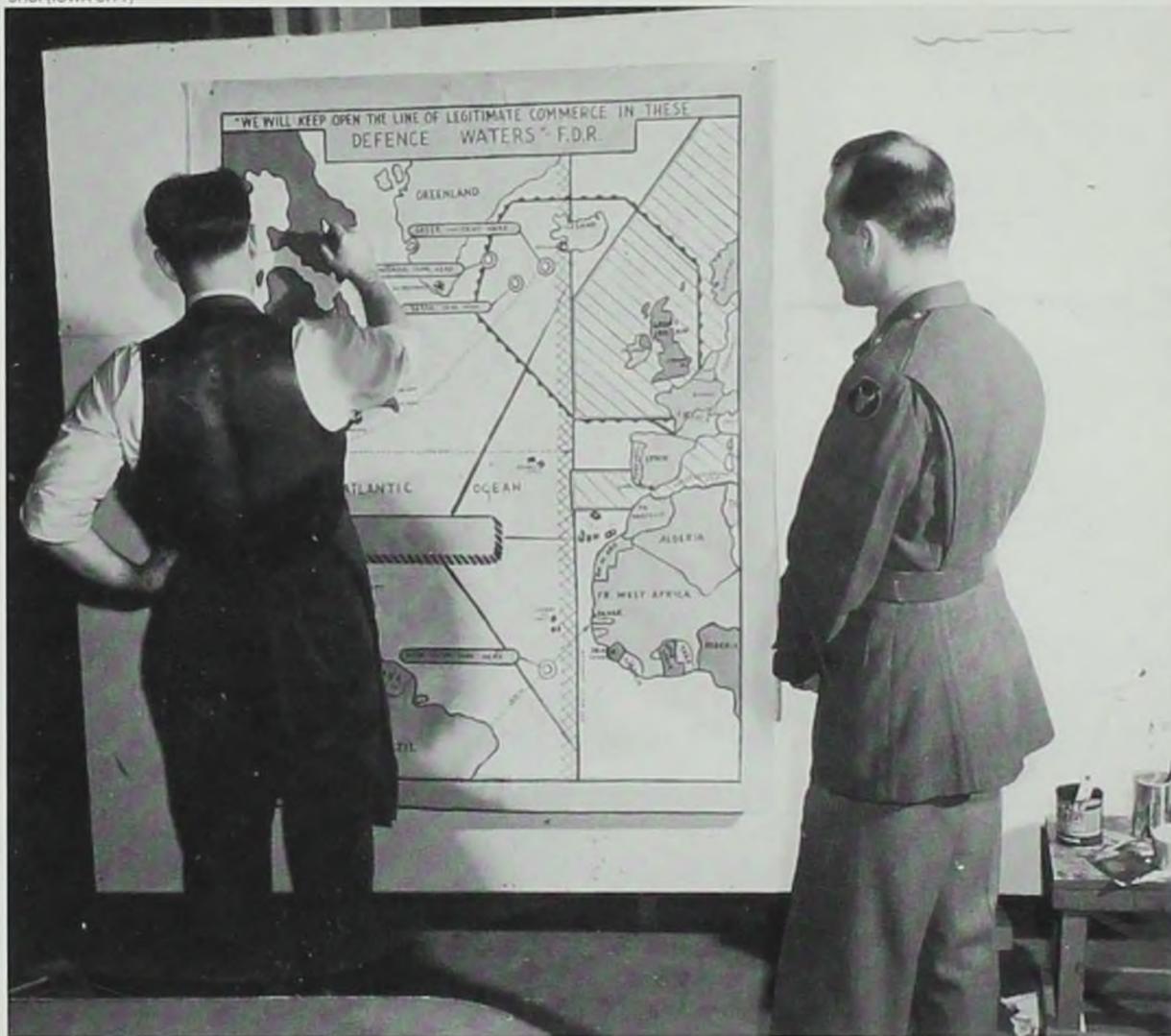
**T**he organization, training, weaponry, and tactics of an infantry company still owed a great deal to the experiences of the First World War. A veteran of 1918 would have recognized the hand grenade, a version of the British Mills bomb; the Browning Automatic Rifle, the one fully

automatic weapon assigned to each twelve-man squad; and the light machine guns and sixty-millimeter mortars carried by the weapons platoon. We were still equipped with bayonets (although as early as the Civil War only a small percentage of wounds had been inflicted with edged weapons) and were still put through bayonet drill that probably dated from the early eighteenth century, designed to inculcate a latent ferocity to be tapped on appropriate occasions. There is a cartoon by Bill Mauldin, the great cartoonist of the war, or any war, in which one grizzled "dog-face" says to his buddy, "I'll be dawgoned! Did you know this can opener fits on the end of a rifle?"

The major weapons innovation at the company level was the M1—the Garand rifle—a superb semiautomatic weapon. Recently I was surprised to read that General Patton believed that with the firepower of the M1 the best offensive tactic was a steady advance in line while pinning down the enemy with continuous fire on the move. This is to return to the tactical principles of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, which cost the English 60,000 casualties on the first day, and reflects, I think, the distrust of citizen-soldiers who would presumably be reluctant to move forward once they had gone to ground under fire. Fortunately we were not trained according to those principles but learned to hit the ground and advance by short rushes under covering fire.

There was some concern that the ex-students suddenly funneled into infantry divisions would be insufficiently trained for combat. Most commentators have concluded that thanks to physical vigor and relatively high intelligence this was not the case. Many of us had undergone thirteen weeks of infantry basic and an additional six months of training with the division before we were shipped out. A crucial element here, emphasized in studies of combat morale, is that we were together long enough to establish comradeship and unit identity.

I will permit myself one anecdote from the period at Fort Bragg, one that strikes a postmodernist note, illustrating how art creates life. The people in Public Relations, a



In Iowa, WPA artists help create defense posters and maps.

service that had become a major branch of the armed forces, regularly planted stories about specific units in the media. Ours, the 100th Division, was featured in *Look* magazine, a poor man's version of *Life* magazine, where we were described as the Singing Century Division, particularly addicted to music—which was news to us. A couple of weeks after that publication, our company received an issue of ocarinas, the small terra cotta wind instruments often called “sweet potatoes.” I spent a day in a target pit holding up silhouette targets for machine-gun practice with a clarinetist who in the course of that day taught me to play “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” on one of those ocarinas—thus transforming *Look* magazine's fiction into fact.

**W**e were shipped out in late September, east across the Atlantic, in that oddly peaceful limbo of life in a convoy, through the straits of Gibraltar to clamber down the rope

nets off the ships when they docked at Marseilles. That great port had been secured in the supplementary invasion of southern France in August 1944 over the anguished objections of the British, who deplored the withdrawal of troops from the Italian campaign, and the frustration of Churchill's fantasy of a thrust into the “soft underbelly” of Nazi Europe.

We camped outside of the city for a week or so. There, one experience illuminated for me one of the salient principles of warfare, especially in the twentieth century—the primacy of logistics. Details had been assigned to night shifts un-

loading supplies at the Marseilles docks. When some men from my company came back with “souvenirs” liberated from crates dropped from an appropriate height—canned turkey and canned peaches slated for some high echelon officers' mess—my buddies and I volunteered to help expedite the flow of supplies. Despite “the best laid plans” we were soon put to work unloading ammunition instead.

After a bit I drifted away from that assignment to visit the chow lines of other companies' details. As I wandered through that immense cavern of materiel on the Marseilles docks, it occurred to me that we were certain of victory. A friend of mine who served in the South Pacific came to the same conclusion when he saw the mountains of abandoned equipment rusting on islands all across that vast expanse.

As Paul Fussell does in his debunking book *Wartime*, one can expose examples of cosmic incompetence in American military leadership, and of the superiority of our enemies in

tactics, training, discipline, and certain weapons systems. For example, German tanks, and their all-purpose artillery piece, the "88," took a terrible toll of our forces. However, war between modern industrial societies demands the production of goods on a vast scale—and not only production but the planning, organization, and rational distribution of what was produced. At this, no one could match us. Indeed, when they attacked Pearl Harbor, the Japanese solved our problem of excess industrial capacity for almost two generations.

**W**e pulled out of Marseilles in rainy fall weather and were trucked north along the Rhone River on roads littered with the wreckage of German equipment, to positions held by the Seventh Army in the southern sector of the Allied line which, as in the First World War, stretched from Switzerland to the sea. There we faced the line the Germans had reformed just in time to avert the collapse of their West Front armies in August and September, weeks that framed an immense tragedy of lost opportunities.

The 100th Division went into action in the Vosges Mountains—old mountains like the Appalachians—wooded, cold, and wet in that November of 1944. My brief experience of less than a month in combat scarcely made me an authority on the conduct of the war, but I came away with some observations that speak to certain general phenomena.

In that first month in the mountains, we were fighting an old-fashioned sort of war. Once we had dropped off of the trucks, we moved on foot no faster than any infantrymen ever had in those hills, from the Roman legions to the American soldiers who had walked the same ground in the First World War. We traveled light. Unlike the troops who drowned under the weight of full-field packs in the waters off of Omaha Beach we carried almost nothing. At first, no more than our weapons, a spoon stuck in our boots, and a canteen and canteen cup, which also served as a bowl, hoping that the supply sergeant would jeep up something to cover us at night. After awhile, most of us improvised some

motley collection of necessities—a blanket roll across the shoulder, no different than those carried by soldiers in the Civil War, and something in which to carry a couple of boxes of K-rations, cigarettes, and candy.

While I was with the company we were involved in what might be called minor or light engagements. One or another company in the battalion would move forward into a brief fire-fight where the Germans waited, having laid out fields of fire, registered mortars with professional precision on narrow roads and intersections, and scattered mines and booby traps on the roads, in the forest, and in the towns, inflicting a quota of casualties before pulling back. There was some shelling, but no murderous barrages or mass attacks. Yet the erosion of personnel, measured by the excess proportion of rations to company strength—you could pick your favorite tinned meal from the stack of extra K-rations—rapidly opened large gaps in the company's table of organization.

In part the replacement crisis in the fall of 1944, when a country of 150 million with some 12 million men under arms could scarcely keep 89 divisions up to strength, reflected the large proportion of American soldiers in the "tail" (the non-combatant services) compared to those doing the fighting. Other armies, especially the Russian, did with a lot less behind in order to have more up front. And the overwhelming percentage of casualties were taken in infantry line companies. Even in divisions where combat infantry constituted 67 percent of division strength, they would suffer some 92 percent of the casualties. So our company suffered that inexorable accumulation of killed, wounded, and gone sick in these first few weeks. And this, as I said, in a series of light skirmishes. I became one of those casualties, wounded by mine shrapnel on the fifth of December.

**A**fter I left the company things became far more serious as the division was launched into the bitter winter campaign for the old fortified center of Bitche, an almost impregnable strongpoint on the Maginot Line. I got some sense of what that was like from a letter, in-

credibly, still in my hands, written by a nineteen-year-old platoon sergeant with whom I have renewed a friendship after forty years, since his retirement as managing editor of the *Denver Post*. This is a passage from the letter he wrote to me in January 1945:

"They really went down fast after you left, Spitz. You know about Paul; I was one of the first to reach him. I thought at first that he was still alive, but no soap. A couple of days earlier Smitty, Thomson and Atkinson went down 1-2-3 right beside me as we walked up a hill. At and Thomson are o.k., but Smitty didn't make the grade. Where Paul got it we were subjected to the worst shellfire since we started—they used everything on us, mortars, 88's, and even a damned flak-wagon. We refer to that hill as 88th Avenue now."

The "Paul" killed in that action was Paul Spurgeon, a boy from Illinois, my tentmate. Like me, he had been a company runner until he was promoted to communications sergeant shortly before his death. The citation for his posthumous Silver Star reads as follows: "Sergeant Paul K. Spurgeon, on 13 December 1944, after his company secured its objective, was faced on three sides with a counterattack. With the men low on ammunition, he exposed himself going from foxhole to foxhole distributing ammunition until mortally wounded. The company was enabled to repel the enemy counterattack by this gallant act."

I still have a heart-rending letter from Paul's mother—"Our loss is only one in a million," she writes, "but I must say the wound is *deep*." The letter goes on and on as if she couldn't bear to sever even one tenuous link with her son.

I didn't intend here a celebration of one death in war, one American hero, in the manner that so often serves the facile self-praising superpatriotism that is the very stuff of political demagoguery in this country. But I wanted to evoke the poignancy of all of those truncated lives, those lives that were never lived, lost not only in the service of this country, not only in battle—the unrecorded lives cut off, not by natural forces, epi-

demics, floods, or earthquakes, but by the malevolent ingenuity through which humans have slaughtered one another (and continue to slaughter one another) by the millions throughout the course of the wretched century that began in 1914.

One cannot know how those lives abridged by war might have been lived. Paul Spurgeon is now a remote memory for me, viewed dimly back through the decades as if through a veil of early snowfall in the Vosges; a boy from a church-going midwestern family who advanced his queen too early in our games of chess, who was educating himself by reading *The Wealth of Nations* on his bunk, who leaned out of our ranks on that first night as we moved up out of Marseilles to bark "*bon nuit*" to a startled Frenchman. I can only imagine what his life might have become. But I *can* know what was denied him by death at the age of nineteen—for example, the challenge of return to college, the joys of love and sex, the fulfillment and the pressure of a career, the comradeship and tensions of marriage, the rewards and anxieties of parenthood, all of the pleasures of a healthy body, and inevitably the decline of that body into decrepitude and death—but death at some later date.

To begin with, not to survive was not to know that grand moment, for those not crippled in combat, of coming home from the wars. In contrast to the awareness of the permanent psychic scars left by the terrible ambiguities of the war in Vietnam, there was little public assumption of long-term consequences of war-related trauma. Not that the deep emotional wounds inflicted by the horrors of our war were ignored, but they were expected to heal. You were supposed to get on with life.

There was, however, a brief indeterminate period, a happy hiatus between discharge from the service and getting on with our lives, when we were still in uniform perhaps, or in a new sports jacket, in its lapel the discharge button (embossed with an eagle—"the ruptured duck") that disappeared after the first "You still wear your merit badges, buddy?" So, for awhile, we were thought of and identified ourselves as veterans, and were



Iowa signs of the GI Bill: Hawkeye Trailer Village in 1947 (above) at the University of Iowa comprised 128 trailers and communal wash houses and showers for married veterans and their families. Below: Veteran Glen Mathisen of Royal, Iowa, was a student at Buena Vista College in Storm Lake in 1947—and “Dad” to son Larry Michael.

allowed a certain space in which to redesign our futures. The cataclysmic experience of the war had so sharply severed familiar continuities that “before the war” referred not only to an earlier stage in our lives but to a radically different self-identity, or so it seemed to those who were still too young to have been robbed of a vital segment of their mature lives by three or four years away from job and family. Though we laughed at the number in that forgotten musical comedy *Call Me Mister* that began, “When he went into the army he was a jerk,” and concluded, “and when he got out of the army he was still a jerk,” we believed that we had been given a clean slate.

We began to write on that slate, still in the shadow of the war, still identified as veterans for some purposes. Among the purposes I can speak to out of personal experience were the undertaking or resumption of higher education and the attempt to relate the role as a veteran to a citizen’s role.

For veterans, higher education meant the GI Bill, which financed the costs of college for anyone a college would admit. That was a great time to go back to school, for the thou-

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sands who wouldn’t have gone at all if it hadn’t been for the bill, and for the many others who enjoyed a certain autonomy because our parents had been freed from the financial burden of seeing us through. The cohorts of student veterans are generally remembered fondly by their professors as eager to learn, consequential in their studies, and not inclined to see college as an agreeable interlude between high school and the real world. Many of us were married and would



In post-war Iowa, scenes like this 1942 photo of WAACs striding under a war-bond banner over Sixth and Locust streets in Des Moines would be replaced by scenes of veterans returning from Europe and the Pacific.

retain a brief postwar coherence in “veteran’s housing,” often in abandoned military installations—vacant barracks or Quonset huts. There are probably people reading this who started out in the rows of Quonsets that once lined university campuses and who remember those arctic Iowa nights when the baby’s blanket might freeze to the metal wall of the Quonset.

I can’t resist reference to the GI Bill without grinding an axe. The bill was a triumphant example of single-payer education. Because those students had gone to war it was not only politically, but economically possible to subvent mass education out of the national budget. As with the subsequent National Defense Education Act, or even President Eisenhower’s National System of Defense in Interstate Highways Act, large public expendi-

tures for the common good, and even the violation of the sacred principles of the free market, were legitimated by the evocation of past and future wars.

The attempt to relate the veteran’s identity to a citizen’s role was experienced by me as a member of the American Veteran’s Committee (AVC), a veteran’s organization conceived as a liberal alternative to the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Our motto was “Citizens First, Veterans Second.” Most of us were idealistic political neophytes who found ourselves on a new battlefield whose chosen weapon was *Roberts’ Rules of Order*, where ferocious, dialectical combat was joined between the leftists of various stripes, including communists; fellow-travelers; those who believed there should be no enemies on the Left and who would join the Progressive

Party that supported the 1948 presidential candidacy of Henry A. Wallace; and their antagonists—the anti-communists liberals who rallied to the ADA (the Americans for Democratic Action). I occupied a middle splinter. The duel in the American Veteran's Committee was a marginal example of the worldwide conflicts on the political Left under the factional imperatives of the Cold War. In the United States the most significant locus of that struggle was probably in organized labor. To think of that now is to recognize how far to the right the political spectrum has shifted.

**M**emory has become a chic historical topic. Historians who deal with memory as a collective phenomenon should take care to distinguish one variety from another. My reminiscences about the war comprise a testimony drawn from immediate experience—a “living memory”—but colored now by all of the other accounts I have heard and histories I have read. I have also realized that particular memories are fixed in the telling and retelling. It is now impossible for me to summon up any event from a past that had such a deep effect on me but that has not already been fixed in my memory by earlier accounts to others or to myself.

Many of you will have a memory of the war-time years. Others of you will have a memory once removed—a memory of the testimony of survivors. Not too long from now there will be no one left to convey these living memories. And some time after that, the recipients of these memories will also pass. But what historians call “collective memories” will persist in various forms—in popular myths, generally received opinions, fictionalized accounts (as in Hollywood films), and in the claims to authority of academic histories. These are not clearly separable in the public mind but interpenetrate to shape popular conceptions of significant pasts.

I have had a professional interest in the subject of so-called historical generations—age cohorts separately identified because their historical location seemed in some way to set them apart from their predecessors

and successors. There are different ways to characterize such generations; one way is to identify them as cohorts marked by the stamp of a defining experience, identified, for example, as the Depression generation or the Vietnam War generation. The experience that left a defining imprint on me was not so much participation in World War II itself, as growing up in an era in which fascism seemed to go from strength to strength, so that the horrors of modern war seemed an acceptable price to pay in order to beat back the threat, not only to any democratic political order, but to simple decency in daily life.

Of course, not every American of my age was affected that way. The pioneering essay on historical generations by the sociologist Karl Mannheim distinguishes segments of the same age-cohort as “generation-units” that responded variously to similar experiences. To many of those in my “generation-unit”—let us say apprentice intellectuals who took politics seriously—the decisive trauma would be Stalinism and the threat of the post-war expansion of the Soviet system. Others, like myself, have probably been more concerned with the internal, rather than the external threat to democracy. I never believed that there was the remotest chance for anything like a communist takeover in this country or even the advent of the diluted milk-and-water social-democracy of Sweden, or England under a Labor government; and I was probably more fearful that we would sell our political soul to the Cold War than that world communism would win it.

Historians agree on very little except, perhaps, on the contingency of human destinies. However similar, things are never quite the same. I did not, and do not, believe that we were, or are, threatened by some sort of fascism on the Italian or German model of the 1930s, or even something that might be labeled neo-fascism. Still, for us old liberals, in times of extreme political alienation when nothing seems to work, the demagogues who spring up to peddle the politics of hatred, above all, race hatred, remind us that there are still battles to be fought—that the war for a democratic and humane political and social order is never finally won. □