

Part I - Beginning March 30, 1942

Contributed by Charles Harper
Monday, 18 March 2002

The morning of March 30, 1942, dawned bright and clear with a slight frosty bite to the air. This was the setting for a new and much different life for Charles Harper. This was the day he was to join a group of his friends and other young men at Norton Kansas and after a short briefing by the American Legion Commander they were taken to the Bus depot and were soon on there way to Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, where they were to be given their final examinations and inducted into the Army of the United States.

Yes, we all had butterflies in our stomach as we pulled out of our hometown, leaving many close friends and relatives behind. However we all felt that we had a job to do and with that thought in mind it gave us the courage and determination we needed to carry us on. At the time no one knew where we would eventually be assigned or where in the States we would be sent for training. With each of the passing miles we were being carried farther from home and we all knew that there would be some of us that would not return, yet each was willing to give all he had and carry on to the bitter end if necessary. Not much was said on that trip as everyone was pretty well lost in his own thoughts.

At noon the Bus was stopped and lunch was eaten at the Government's expense I am afraid it wasn't very much enjoyed though, and soon we were on our way again. Supper was eaten at the Fort, anyway we decided that was what they called it. A greasy stew that tasted very much of goat, boiled potatoes, and a few other things to go with it.

After that was over we were all taken back to the barracks and assigned bunks. They weren't called beds any more and we had to make them up ourselves. Well some did and some didn't. As it was only eight o'clock none of us were ready to go to bed but as we weren't allowed to leave the building there wasn't much else to do.

The charge of quarters came in at nine o'clock and turned the lights out and informed us that there would be no talking or turning the lights on the rest of the night. He was only a Private First Class but to us he might have been a General so we took him at his word and it wasn't long 'till all was sleeping as well as could be expected.

Morning came too soon for most of us and we were awakened by the orderly and instructed to fold up our bedding and be ready to go to chow in thirty minutes. We were to take all our personal belongings with us. That is why we had been instructed to travel light before we left home. After breakfast we were taken to a large room where we were to wait `till our name was called for examination, as soon as that was over we returned to the same room to wait `till we had been classified and assigned to companies.

As soon as the companies were made up we were assigned to barracks and given bunks. After that was over we drew bedding from the supply room and were shown how to make a bed the Army way and that was the way we were to make them from then on. They were inspected a short time later to see that we had done it correctly and didn't have any wrinkles etc. If some fault was found we had to make it over Ætill we did it right. After all of this was done we were taken to another building where we joined several other groups and were all sworn in and now we were officially in the Army.

Now we also dropped the Mister from our name and exchanged it for a

number which was to identify each of us through our Army career and we were also known as privates now. Our pay was \$50 per month and all our food and clothing were free. After we were sworn in we were taken to another building where we were fitted with our clothing and got all our equipment. We were also issued two large bags to carry all our equipment in and also anything else that we wished to take along. All our civilian clothing was to be sent home excepting some small personal items that didn't take up much room. We had to carry the two bags full of our issued equipment about a quarter of a mile to the barracks and by that time we had decided to get rid of everything that we didn't have to carry with us.

Upon arrival to the barracks each of us were carefully checked to see that we had been issued all the equipment we were supposed to have, then we were told to get all our things together that we were going to send home and get them sent that afternoon so it was a very busy place getting it all ready to go and finding the post office to get it mailed.

About four o'clock that evening a group of us were picked out to work in the mess hall and I was one of the group. We had to serve the tables and then clean up the tables and mess hall after chow was over. It was about ten o'clock when we got it all done so we went back to the barracks and were told that we were to have a practice air raid in about an hour and told where to go out of the building, etc. After that was over we all went to bed and slept till the charge of quarters woke us up the next morning.

We were all marched up to the mess hall for breakfast then back to the barracks and a few minutes latter we were all called out again and told to police up the grounds. That included picking up all the trash and paper that we found laying around in our area. It didn't take long but some felt that it was beyond the call of duty never the less. We didn't realize how many more times we would be doing that very same thing in time to come.

Well back to the barracks again and we were told that the same group as the night before would report to the mess hall again at ten and work till four in the afternoon. So off we went but about an hour later the charge of quarters came in and rounded us all up with information that our shipping orders were there and we were to return to barracks and prepare to leave some time in the afternoon.

It wasn't long till bags were packed blankets were folded and sheets were checked back in to the supply room and we were ready for the next step of our journey and the big mystery was we didn't know where or how far. By this time we had learned not to ask questions but to wait until we were told what to do so we sat around in small groups waiting developments. We were soon marched to the mess hall again for lunch then back to the barracks to pick up our bags then to a large building where we were all split up again and reclassified. That operation took about two hours.

We had been instructed to wear our overcoats as they wouldn't go in the bags and it was plenty hot so we were near roasted when we were loaded on busses and taken to the train which was waiting for us. At least we got rid of the overcoats when we got on the train and that was relief. After all was loaded on even though crowded we were soon on the way. First came Kansas City then we headed South and West. Some thought we were going to California and others said they heard we were going to some place in Kansas. Well it turned out that after two nights and a day on the train we ended up in Texas.

The camp we were in didn't look like much and it was hot as all get out and we had to put those overcoats on again. Nothing could be seen but

camp and low hills in the background. So with our bags over our shoulders we got off the train and into another large building where we were again split into different groups and a man in charge took us about a half a mile to our barracks. Our bags had all been left at the dock and were to be hauled to the company area. That was a big help as the field we were to cross was quite muddy and the tracks of many feet made it even worse but we made it and so after getting our bedding from the supply tent we proceeded to make up our bunks and so went to wash up and take a much needed shower.

Well at least we felt better so we began to inquire around to see just where we had landed and what company we were in. We found we were in company M of the 90th Division, that however didn't mean a great lot to us, we also learned that the camp was just being built and the nearest town was about ten miles away. That was Abilene, Texas. Well we all settled down on our bunks to have a nap but as usual it didn't last long. We were all called out and told to pack up, we had been assigned to a different company and were to move out immediately. This time we were to take our bedding with us.

This move was about a block from where we were so didn't take long. We were again assigned to huts and made up our bunks for the second time that night. The huts were made of canvas and plywood and weren't too well made at that. By that time it had started to rain again and we wasn't long in finding out that the roof leaked pretty generally all over. Well we remembered that we had a thing called a shelterhalf in our bags and it was supposed to turn water so we dug them out and spread them over the bunks. Of course there were some leaks but as a whole we got through the night in pretty good shape.

The next morning after reveille and chow we were all lined up in the Company street and given a briefing as to what the score was and what was to be expected of us. We learned that we were now attached to Headquarters Company of the 359 Infantry of the 90th Division and that was to be our permanent address. Our training was to start immediately so after that it was training going to the Medics for more shots then more training and more shots.

As the days went on our records were checked to see what we were most fitted for and we were given tests to see what we could do. I was sent to radio school to learn code and the operation of the Army radios. This course lasted six weeks and by the end of that time we were issued a diploma that said we were radio operators and by that time we had spent several nights in the field operating our sets to prove it. By then I had decided that I wanted in the motor pool so I started to get myself in it. Well it proved to be quite a job but I finally made it.

As soon as I was in there I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for more training in that line. My transfer came through the 3rd of September 1942 and I was then officially in the mechanical dept. of the Company. A few days later several other men from the regiment and myself got our orders to prepare to leave for Ft. Benning to attend the maintenance school there for a period of 12 weeks.

September 21, we were at the school and were assigned to the 20th Company 1st Student Training Regiment 4th Battalion, Motor Mechanics Class No. 57, Infantry School Service Command. Our Classes were to begin the next Monday so we were taken to the school and shown around so as we would know where we were to go.

Monday morning we all fell in on the parade ground and were marched past the Co. officers for inspection. Each week the Co. which marched the best during the week was given a pennant which was to be carried at the head of the column there after. If the next week another Co. performed better the pennant was forfeited to it. Well our Co. was

pretty good and never lost a pennant and finally got good enough that we were awarded the gold flag for efficiency.

Needless to say we all felt pretty good. Classes at school was pretty tough and we had to learn it fast to keep up. Every Saturday morning we were given tests to see how we were getting along. We were never told what score we made. The only thing we knew was that if we passed we stayed in the class and if we failed three weeks straight we were sent back to our Co.