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GOOD MEN REMEMBERED

by Max S. Lale

John M. Taylor, in his An American Soldier: The Wars of General Maxwell Taylor, quotes his father on his being assigned to command the 12th Field artillery Battalion at Fort Sam Houston in 1941:

"Command of the 12th ... was an enormous pleasure... The old noncoms who had all the know-how were still there and I had a battalion rich in talent in all the noncommissioned grades. The experience of these men, particularly my sergeant major, was an enormous help to me ... His knowledge of soldiering and the practical side of administration of a unit – looking after families, all the things that went with peacetime service – made him of enormous value to me."

It seems proper that these good men, professional soldiers all, should be rescued from obscurity, particularly sergeant Major Harry W. (Uncle Bob) Roberson, whom I also knew when General Taylor knew him.

A San Antonio newspaper story of the time described Roberson as "51 years old, 21 years an artillery-man, and always a rabid, big-hearted friend of the ex-war horses retired to pasture at Fort Sam Houston." More about that later.

A native of Indiana, Roberson enlisted in 1916 – the year I was born – and went to the Mexican border with the 11th Infantry. He became a member of the 12th when the Second Division was activated in France.

Sergeant Roberson was one of a cadre of non-commissioned officers in the 12th for whom Taylor's encomiums were justified fully. Others included First Sergeant Gabe Janas of Battery C and Sergeant Major Jimmie Brought, and who was retired just before I joined it in August of 1940. Gabe was born in Vilna, in Lithuania, but he valued his place in America and his role in the Army. Another of these was Anthony J. Opalnsky, mess sergeant at the time, and later first sergeant of Battery C.

All of these men were by definition "old soldiers." They had their issue uniforms seamed and adjusted by the post tailor for best impression at inspections. They used Blanco on their belts and other web equipment to convey use and experience. Their blood ran artillery red.

Jonas and Opalnsky were members of Battery C when former Sergeant Major Brought, who had connections to Lone Star Brewery downtown, became sold on a baseball pitcher in the 12th named Jerome Dean. This was before I joined, but the story was legend.

Brought believed that Dean had a chance at professional stardom, so arrangements were made with the brewery to "buy out" Dean's enlistment. This permitted a soldier to terminate his enlistment by paying either $100 or $200, depending on whether the unexpired term was one year or two years.

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That the buyout was a good investment is attested to by “Dizzy” Dean’s four-batter strike out of the New York Yankees “Murderer’s Row.”

These were some of the men Major Maxwell Taylor came to Texas to command. I have been assisted in remembering them by retired Lieutenant General Herron N. Maples, a second lieutenant in Battery C when I was, and by Merrill W. “Pappy” Younger, another second lieutenant in the 12th who was S-3 of the 12th during its combat days in Europe and later a close friend of Harry Roberson.

Two others who assisted me in developing this commentary were Major General Michael Maples, son of a longtime friend Herron Maples and later commanding general of Fort Sill and the artillery school there, and Lieutenant Colonel Bruce A. Cordelli, commander of the 1-12th Field Artillery.

Maxwell Taylor is best remembered for many things - his later career as commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Europe, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, and ambassador to South Vietnam far outweigh his service as a junior field grade commander in 1941. But I remember him well, nevertheless.

On reporting for active duty on August 17, 1940, I became automatically the junior officer in the Second Division. I had been commissioned in the reserve upon graduating from the University of Oklahoma in May 1938. The commander of Battery C, to which I was assigned, was First Lieutenant Melvin Stilwell, another OU graduate and a reservist, unrelated to the General Joe Stilwell who had departed the post recently.

A month after I joined the 12th in August, the battalion observed the anniversary of its organization by winning a championship baseball game against the 15th Field Artillery on September 18, 1940. All members of the 12th were given the day off in celebration; the only requirement for the day was a reading of the unit’s history in each of the batteries. Two photographs provided to me by General Mike Maples show sergeants Brought and Roberson, each in “civies” and each wearing a baseball cap, and each has a cup in hand, which apparently contains a celebratory libation. I do not remember the score.

In those days, perhaps even now, reserve second lieutenants were promoted to first lieutenant automatically after three years, whether on active duty or not. Accordingly, I was promoted in May 1941, making me senior to other second lieutenants with whom I was serving and who had more active duty than I did.

The solution to this difficulty seemingly was to transfer me to the battalion staff as S-2 shortly after my promotion. There, I assume, I could do little harm and would be expected to stay out of the way of more experienced officers. It was there that I was placed in close association with Maxwell Taylor and Harry Roberson, an association that accelerated my professional development as I learned my new trade and for which I was and remain grateful.

Major Taylor was a bear for training, as Sergeant Major Roberson and his
knowledge of soldiering.” As a consequence the 12th had a heavy schedule of service practice, motor marches, alerts, formal guard mount practice, inspections, Morse Code laboratory work, minor court-martials, driver training with our four-ton White motive power trucks, and night training at nearby Camp Bullis, often in heavy rains.

I remember one exercise when a winch-equipped truck was stuck in mud deliberately. This was a training opportunity for a “dead man” hitch using the winch, to the displeasure of the enlisted people who would have to clean, dry, and grease the winch cable the next day on post.

I remember, too, a practice motor march from Fort Sam Houston into the hill country in which I rode in a command car at the head of the column with Major Taylor and the sergeant major. My task was to lead the column, on time, to various checkpoints along the route. The close quarters with these two personages was intimidating to a lieutenant with a year or less of active duty.

I should note that Sergeant Major Roberson held a reserve commission, not unusual among dedicated and ambitious enlisted men at the time. Others, among them some of the enlisted men in Battery C and elsewhere in the 12th, became officers during World War II via officer candidate school. Roberson had earned his reserve commission by correspondence courses available to the army’s more dedicated enlisted men.

Sergeant Major Roberson’s reserve commission was activated during World War II. He served as a lieutenant colonel after the war, something I did not know until I learned it from Pappy Younger. After the war, my longtime friend Herron Maples told me about visiting Roberson at his retirement home at 735 Division Street in San Antonio. Herron was a Regular Army colonel at the time. As he told the story, Roberson bragged about the number of “his” lieutenants who had achieved field grade during World War II, unaware, of course, that he was remembering them with a future three-star general.

This was still in the future, naturally, when my own service overlapped that of the old soldier then at the top of his profession as an enlisted man. As did Major Taylor, Sergeant Major Roberson believed in ceremony and tradition as bulwarks of morale and esprit.

Well remembered are Saturday morning parades of the 12th on Arthur MacArthur Field, located just around the corner from battalion headquarters. Taylor and Roberson were in the reviewing stand, along with another which displayed a proper respect for history. This was Old Pat, a horse foaled in 1908 and assigned to the 12th in 1922, then in retirement and at pasture.

Splendid in a blanket exhibiting his hash marks and service stripes, Old Pat “took” the review along with the senior officer and non-commissioned officer of the 12th. This was when the animal was nearing his fortieth year, an usual age for the species. Sergeant Major Roberson was quoted as saying that the horse had put in eighteen years in the 12th and “By George, the generals and what have you ought to let him enjoy a good spine-tingling review.” Old Pat was the whole show.
The sergeant major knew about recognition. During bloody days with the 12th in Europe during World War I, he had won the Victory Medal with five bars and the Silver Star for two personal citations. The *Croix de Guerre* was pinned on his chest by General John A Lejeune, commander of the Second Division.

"I had three horses during the war," he once said. "One broke his heart pulling a gun until he was exhausted. Another was killed by shell fire and an officer took the other one." It is no surprise that there still was a place in his heart for horses when the 12th was motorized on October 1, 1938.

Many years later I attended a dinner meeting of the Dallas Council on World Affairs at which General Taylor, then chief of staff, greeted me warmly and asked "Do you know that Old Pat has died?" Still later, I visited Old Pat's elaborate gravesite at Fort Sam Houston, another fitting memorial to another old soldier.

On January 1, 1942, soon after the country was attacked at Pearl Harbor, the 12th held a traditional open house when family members could visit the venue of husbands' and fathers' labors. As S-2 of the battalion, I took Georgiana along with me to visit the 12th's headquarters.

Sergeant Major Roberson was there, along with his wife Inez, resplendent in mink. In the newspaper story about him, Roberson had called her "the best Longhorn cook Texas ever produced." I explained to Georgiana that he was paid $124 a month, only a dollar less that I had earned as a second lieutenant and not much less that the $166.67 I then earned as a first lieutenant. And he did not have to buy his own uniforms, as I did!

In the file of material supplied to me by General Maples and Lieutenant Colonel Cordelli is the reproduction of a newspaper photograph showing the sergeant major looking on as Major Taylor holds old Pat's halter and Brigadier General John Lucas, Second Division Artillery commander, paternally holds the halter rope on the other side of the animal.

In yet another newspaper photograph Roberson is shown smiling broadly as Major R.C. Carpenter, who succeeded Maxwell Taylor as commander of the 12th, bids farewell to First Sergeant Opalnsky when he was transferred to the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. Opalnsky had joined the army in 1912 – four years before I was born – and five years later helped to form the 12th. Major Carpenter subsequently commanded the 12th in Europe until he was wounded.

Herron Maples, mess officer of Battery C when Opalnsky was mess sergeant, has fond memories of their service together. "Sergeant Opalnsky always had a piece of pie for me when I inspected the mess, and he once saved me from embarrassment in front of the division commander making own inspection. There was a form I was supposed to initial after an inspection, and the general asked Sergeant Opalnsky if I had done so, and he asked to see the form. I didn't know anything about the form, but Sergeant Opalnsky proudly displayed it to the general, properly initialed by him, not me."

Shortly after the open house at the 12th, the Second Division was alerted
for overseas shipment to take part in the new war. In preparation, everybody in
the division was inoculated against yellow fever. The following morning,
because of contaminated or faulty vaccine, the only three able to make it to
headquarters were Major Taylor, Sergeant Major Roberson, and this lowly
lieutenant.

In addition to being a bear about training, Major Taylor also was one who
respected the social obligations and courtesies of command. I remember a
dinner party at the Taylor quarters with perhaps six officers and wives
attending. It would have been easier to entertain all the officers of the battalion
at once at the mess, but this would not have served the same purpose as a more
intimate setting at home.

Georgiana and I were met at the door by one of the two Taylor sons in
cnee pants. At the head of the stairs to assist the ladies with their wraps was
posted the other son. I don’t remember which of the sons was which, whether
it was author John or his brother Tom. Tom, I learned many years later, served
as a captain in the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam, the division once
commanded by his father in Europe during World War II.

I was impressed when at this party Major Taylor served drinks from a
silver pitcher suitably engraved to commemorate the tennis championship of
the Tokyo Country Club, which he had won while he was military attaché in
Japan. Later while in his forties, he also won the tennis championship of the
European Theater of Operations after World War II ended.

Sergeant Major Roberson was not at this party, of course. He was present,
however, on another occasion when Major Taylor demonstrated his respect for
his subordinates.

On a battalion motor march, the Battery C “agent,” riding a motorcycle
and speeding toward the head of the column, sideswiped an eighteen-wheeler
and lost a leg in the accident. Major Taylor was directing traffic when my
portion of the column approached the scene. The unfortunate soldiers’ stump
was infected by gas gangrene from the roadway, and he died several days later
in the general hospital at Fort Sam Houston.

The soldier’s widow, who somehow had been subsisting on the soldier’s
pay of $30 a month, wanted her husband buried at his home rather than at the
post cemetery. Major Taylor, accompanied by Sergeant Major Roberson,
escorted the young widow to the rail station in San Antonio for the beginning
of the soldier’s last trip home. This was performed with all the courtesy and
dignity that he might have exhibited had the soldier been the commanding
general of the division.

I was and remain “enormously” privileged to have known these men.
Retirement ceremonies. 12th Field Artillery farewell to Batteries A and D, leaving the Regiment to join the 15th Field Artillery. Sgt. Major Roberson leading pat at the head of the convoy. October 10, 1939. Courtesy of Fort Sam Houston Archives.

MSG Harry Roberson 12th Field Artillery Sergeant Major at his desk on May 7, 1941. Courtesy of Fort Sam Houston Archives.

Pat with Major Maxwell Taylor, c. 1939. Courtesy of Fort Sam Houston Archives.
Pat with Maxwell Taylor, an unidentified brigadier general of the Second Infantry Division, and MSG Harry Roberson, 1940. Courtesy of Fort Sam Houston Archives.

SMG Harry Roberson at work in field. Courtesy Fort Sam Houston Archives.