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CAMP FANNIN: A REMINISCENCE

by Laurence C. Walker

Severe drought parched the land in 1943. Only a few sprinkles moistened the deep sands in the northeastern corner of Smith County, Texas. Torturously high temperatures accompanied the drought, and the sun's rays reflected from the white sands, raising ambient temperatures to the 150°F range. And, as the towns people of Tyler, the nearest city, noted, "the soldiers were out at *camp fannin!*"

Camp Fannin consisted of about 18,000 shaggy acres carved from a collection of rundown cotton fields covered with intermittent shrubby brush and a few remnant pines. The pines reminded one of the conifer stands harvested from these lands early in the twentieth century. Those virgin stems had grown where the organic matter had been worked into the soil over a millennia to give it substance for storing nutrients and water. The tree cover, once removed, and the oxidizing rays of the sun, soon left the land parched. Neither roses nor cotton fared well when the U.S. Army purchased these tracts midway through World War II. The government's initial appropriation provided for the purchase of 3,000 acres in 1942. Cadre from other camps began arriving in December of that year. Later, another 15,000 acres were added to the camp.

Camp (James Walker) Fannin, was a "Branch Immaterial" training center. While designated Branch Immaterial, it was obvious what that first summer's soldiers were training for, and would graduate to, the infantry. In my case it was to be the 84th Division encamped at Camp Claiborne, located in Alexandria in the longleaf pine country of Louisiana. The 84th, by name and insignia, was called the Railsplitters in honor of Abraham Lincoln. The unit, until mustered into active service, was a division of the Illinois National Guard. After my transfer to the Signal Corps, the unit gained fame in the Battle of the Bulge.

With nary more than a sprinkle of rain all summer, the GIs at Camp Fannin had prickly heat. Webster's Unabridged describes the malady as "a malaria that is a noncontagious cutaneous eruption of red pimples attended with intense itching and tingling ... and caused by inflammation of the sweat ducts." Webster errs when the dictionary says it occurs in hot *humid* weather! The summer of 1943 was hot and dry, the sweat that covered our bodies from morning calisthenics to the end of the day provided the moisture for the itchy discomfort. Scrub-brush showers and powders seemed to provide little comfort. Elsewhere the wordsmith makes a correction: a malaria is "associated with excessive sweating and retention of sweat in sweat glands with occluded ducts." Even that appears too mild a description of the malady.

Company A's 4th platoon of the 67th Battalion would be my home from June to September, my arrival occurring shortly after the gates swung open and long before the official dedication of the camp. The press reported some 50,000 people showed for a ribbon-cutting in May 1943, when trainees began arriving.

As the 4th Platoon was comprised of soldiers whose last names began with latter letters of the alphabet, and because squads are arranged by the men's heights (tallest in front), I always seemed to end up in the tail of the forced marches.

From our parade ground we regularly made twenty-five-mile fast hikes to Big Sandy on a rutted road with sand well above one's ankles most of the journey. Fine sand grains found their way into a soldier's trousers, causing a rash worse than the prickly heat that scorched our backs under the heavy full-field packs. We carried M-1 Gerand rifles, overcoats, and bedrolls, and wore gas masks in the heat that hovered around 100°F. The treks took eight hours.

As the littlest guy and a name beginning with "W," I, of course, brought up the rear on these hikes. A pistol-toting lieutenant (*sans* pack, etc.) joined us at the rear to assure no M-1s were left behind. When a man passed out, he was left by the side of the road for the medic's ambulance, but not his rifle. At the officer's direction, I, along with other rear-rankers, would drag back into camp carrying a half-dozen of the twelve-pound weapons. How I wished my name was Able!

And the rear ranks never got the hourly ten-minute break. It took that long for commands from the head of the long regimental column to reach us. "Take a ten-minute-break's over" became one command.

Gas masks quickly filled with perspiration on these marches. To avoid drowning in one's sweat, the thumb was gently placed under a corner of the chin to release the salty effluent. Water flowed out, gas could not enter.

We all went into gas chambers to be familiar with mustard and other gases. For years I bore the burn scar on an arm due to that noxious, toxic chemical.

En route to Big Sandy, we hiked the main (only?) street of Winona, cheered by townsmen at their store-front, awning-covered checkerboards as we plowed deeper furrows in existing ruts. On our return to camp, a band hid either in or behind a barn as we approached – perhaps a mile away – the camp compound. The 128-beat per minute cadence provided the needed stimulus for completing the trek.

A lot of barrack mates were financed from home, as \$18.75 of the \$30 dollars per month private's pay went for the coerced \$25.00 government savings bond that would mature in ten years. I think not until later did the Army withhold some \$6.00 per month for our own \$10,000 life insurance policy. I earned my spending money cleaning rifles, at \$1.00 each, for those buddies who would rather catch the bus for Gladewater for beer. Smith County was "dry."

Of course everyone, except the cook, hated KP. The worst task, always for the runt, was to clean the grease trap. A gas mask was required for the chore. And for cook and bakery sergeants the challenge was to have the kitchen with the least number of flies in the corps' area. They vied among themselves for the honor and the medal that acknowledged the award, presented at full-dress ceremonies.

To remind us college kids that good soldiers gripe, the commandant hung signs in the barracks that shouted, "Quitchebéliakin', We're at War." Fannin did not yet have a stockade for malcontents.

Indeed, we were almost all college kids from all over the U.S. Many, such as I, a freshman at the old Penn State Forest School in the South Mountains of that state, surrendered to the recruiter. He promised that if we signed up for the Enlisted Reserve Corps we would be able to finish college, go into service as second lieutenants (we were all in ROTC), and exchange the cowardly three initial number of a draftee for the bravado of a one as the first number of our eight-digit serial number. The army didn't yet use Social Security numbers for identification. Oh, the recruiter did mention we would be called up if the war heated up; it did, and we were. At year's end the school closed; the recruiter served well!

The Army understood us well: we needed some mature men as confidants. In every platoon there would be one or two older men, caught at the end of their eligibility for the draft. They, in their mid-thirties, all garnered the title, "Pop."

We scrubbed barrack floors daily, the pine wood bleached white by the lye in the scrub water. A grain of sand dragged in from the company street and left unnoted until the second lieutenant's inspection could have serious consequences for applicants for a pass to leave camp. These inspections covered every figurative "jot and tittle." Each item in a foot-locker must be in its assigned place. No millionaire's kitchen was cleaner than Fannin's latrines; that detail was to be avoided. Bunks drawn so tight with hospital corners that dimes dropped from two feet must be able to bounce at least six inches. Shoes so polished they could be used for shaving mirrors. And failure to salute an officer became a serious offense, especially if the shavetail had been commissioned only recently.

We were tough at the end of the training. Climbing high wooden walls, digging foxholes, throwing grenades, bayoneting straw dummies, and crawling under barbed wire while bursts of 30-caliber machine-gun fire whizzed over heads and backs made us so.

In Tyler, various churches entertained GIs and fed us Sunday dinners in members' homes. Tyler women entertained trainees well – when the soldiers could get passes, the quota for these essentially issued only for Saturday nights and Sundays. Other than at church, there was little socializing in Tyler. The partygoers soon located Gladewater and Kilgore. A few had cars to get them there. Emphatically, the town of Tyler, some 30,000 citizens, appreciated the military folks. Never did the men hear negative civilian attitudes that were so prevalent at, for instance, Camp Maxie, near Paris, Texas.

Entrepreneurs bought Camp Fannin from the government at war's end. Fannin's barracks, warehouses, and chapels soon made up a village called Owentown, named for C.E. Owen, leader of a developers' group. Although the buildings were mostly constructed from green lumber – some say harvested

seventy-five miles to the south—they provided roofs over the heads of dramatically expanding postwar families when housing was in short supply. The camp infirmary site passed to the state for, at first, a tuberculosis hospital and now is a unit of the University of Texas' medical school.

Today, a paved road, state highway 155, scenically winds its way from the state hospital over I-20 that now cuts through the old army base, to Big Sandy. Pine and broadleaf forests in time seeded in on much of the camp's land upon abandonment of the infertile, coarse-textured beach-like soils.

An annual reunion, initiated in the 1980s and sponsored by the Tyler Chamber of Commerce and The Smith County Historical Association, brings men and their families back to the old camp site to reminisce and recall the trying training times. Many from Fannin would never return to the sandy lands where once non-belligerent young college kids and their contemporaries learned to fight for their lives and for freedom. Unknown is the number and the names of those for whom taps sounded on foreign fields and distant seas.

Includes excerpts from *Excelsior: Memoir of a Forester*, published by the SFASU College of Forestry, 1995.