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Communications

Russell Rulau

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COMMUNICATIONS

October 18, 1999

East Texas Historical Journal
Archie P. McDonald
P.O. Box 6223
Nacogdoches, TX 75962

Dear Mr. McDonald,

An attorney friend of mine, Jay S. Jackson of Garrison, Texas, sent me a copy of your Volume XXXVII, Number 2 (1999) containing the article on Camp Fannin by the late Lawrence C. Walker. It was extremely interesting to read, as in my own days there during World War II we were told almost nothing about the camp's history.

The Fannin I recall was quite different in late 1944 and early 1945, as it had become an Infantry Replacement Training Center (IRTC). My group who took the oath at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, was made up primarily of eighteen-year-old draftees from the Chicago area, with a sprinkling of twenty-four to twenty-seven-year-olds who had been reclassified from farmer or essential work status, plus about six "I-C's" (limited duty men reclassified from "4-F"). As best I can recall, I was the only Wisconsinite in the group, and I was a volunteer.

October 21, 1999

Russell Rulau
N7747 County J
Iola, WI 54945

Dear Sergeant Rulau:

It is refreshing to receive a response from someone who reads our articles and unusual for that response to come from so far from our service area.

Sadly, I report the death of Laurence Walker, my friend of nearly thirty-six years and a colleague at Stephen F. Austin State University. Larry battled cancer and heart trouble and won for about ten years longer than his initial prognosis. He passed away on the day I sent the MS containing his last article to the press. Larry was quite a distinguished forester, a far field for one who grew up in Washington, D.C. He credited the Boy Scouts and fields trips into parks and woods with finding his life's work for him. If that incurred a debt he repaid it many times over with his professional contribution and with unpaid work for Boy Scouts and the Presbyterian Church.

Another military experience we published, Max Lale's "My War: 1944-1945," has been republished in anthologies and quoted widely, especially in Stephen Ambrose's *Citizen Soldier*. So I encourage you to think about doing the same, if you have not done so already. Now is definitely the time to harvest the memoirs of WWII vets – home front and battle front – so I hope you will do that for some appropriate journal, including ours, if you would care to elaborate on your experiences in Texas.

Sincerely,
Archie P. McDonald
Executive Director and Editor

November 17, 1999

East Texas Historical Journal
Archie P. McDonald
P. O. Box 6223
Nacogdoches, TX 75962

Dear Mr. McDonald,

I have taken your advice, in your letter of October 21, and set forth my recollections of Camp Fannin near Tyler in World War II.

The Fannin I recall was quite different in late 1944 and early 1945, as it had by then become an Infantry Replacement Training Center (IRTC). On arrival in Fannin, we were segregated out by AGCT scores (something like an IQ test), and those of us who scored high were assigned to Company B, 81st Battalion in the 15th Regiment. We were to undergo six weeks of infantry basic, similar to what Mr. Walker described, then eleven more weeks of Intelligence & Reconnaissance (I&R) training. When we graduated, we were given MOS 761 (Scout).

Our days at Fannin were happy ones, considering that most of us were learning toughness following the relatively soft life of high school. I recall with fondness visits on pass to Tyler and Kilgore, and once to Corsicana, and also a wonderful dance for our soon-to-be-graduates arranged at the camp with the Rangerettes from a nearby college. It was also my first introduction to what is now called "country music" (a tune called "Smoke on the Water" was played over and over by the Tyler radio station, along with hits by Acuff, Carter, etc.). I had heard the National Barn Dance on Chicago radio WLS in school, but the music didn't "stick" until I got to East Texas.

The quality of the officers who trained us must have been rather suspect, because I cannot recall the name, appearance, or demeanor of a single one of them, with one exception – a second lieutenant named Ault who was a prissy Officer Candidate School (OCS) graduate, commonly called in those days a "Ninety Day Wonder." Our company commander was pretty invisible during training; I cannot recall his name or anything about him.

On the other hand, our noncommissioned officers (NCO's) were outstanding enough that I can recall them vividly. Our First Sergeant, Hugh Raymond, had never seen combat but was a father-figure to us trainees, frequently intervening in our behalf when he felt our training officers overstepped the bounds and needs of discipline. My platoon (1st Platoon of Company B, which averaged thirty-six to forty men over the seventeen weeks) was fortunate to have an actual combat veteran from Europe.

After our first ten days of training, led by a private first class who was a nonentity, a Corporal Northup arrived to take over. A tough Southerner, he brooked no nonsense, having recently been released from a hospital after his war wounds had healed. Rank was handed out freely in those days, so after a short time as our platoon sergeant he received a big-jump promotion to technical sergeant. He was worth it.

I had never thought of myself as a "leader." In my senior year in high school I was one of only four boys (all age seventeen) who took and passed the rigorous examination for the Navy's V-12 program. We were to have been sworn into the Naval Reserve and sent to a college in Michigan for two years,

to be graduated as ensigns. My mother refused to sign for me, and my father (they were separated) would not do so as it would anger my mother. It was as close as I'd ever come to joining the sea service, in late 1943.

But apparently I must have exhibited some leadership qualities because I found myself chosen as squad leader after several weeks. Our first trainee squad leader, Marinus M. Swets, was chosen for OCS and departed our company, and I replaced him. Whether I was effective or not is difficult to judge. My fellow soldiers respected me (my AGCT score then was 136, enough to qualify for West Point), but on one night reconnaissance mission I misread my compass and led my patrol to the wrong destination. In actual combat the 200 yards I was off when we emerged from the forest could have been disastrous, as Sgt. Northup pointed out in a painful, private verbal reaming I received. Still, I was not demoted.

After fifty-five years the memory fades, but I can still recall many of my fellow soldiers from the days at Fannin. The only volunteer in our company besides myself was Mike Radakovich, who had been a prisoner serving in Joliet State Prison in Illinois for armed robbery, but he had a good IQ and was told he would receive a full pardon if he joined the Army and received an honorable discharge. He was in his early twenties.

Then there was Arthur Plunkett from Chicago, with whom I was to spend the war side by side. He made staff sergeant in Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 187th Paraglider Infantry, about seven months after we landed in Japan. I saw him only little after the war, but he attended my wedding in June 1948 in Milwaukee.

Ernest Ross from Watseka, Illinois, a reclassified exempt-occupation man, was called "Pops" because he was twenty-four years old. He served as judge in the one "kangaroo court" session we had in Company B, when a recruit named Blackie Lawrence who did not bathe often enough was sentenced to a "GI Shower" (scrubbing under the showers with clothes on, using steel wool instead of soap). I heard Ross was killed in 1945 with the 32nd Division near Baguio, but I was unable to confirm this.

The young man who had the bunk above mine – we all slept in double bunks in the Fannin barracks – was a farm boy from Oklahoma named Ernest Rottler. He was memorable because he had never used a telephone until he came into the Army. One day at the rifle range, Sgt. Raymond assigned him to use the field telephone to communicate targeting scores between the firing range and the pits where targets were examined and re-pasted for another round. Rottler said, "I don't rightly know how to use this thing, Sarge." Sgt. Raymond patiently showed him how to use earphone, mouthpiece, and toggle switch. That night he told me the telephone was a wonderful thing and he would get one on his dad's farm after the war.

We had nicknames for some of our classmates. Pvt. Kotler was "the Kotex Kid." The aforementioned Lawrence was always "Blackie" Lawrence; I'm sure he had a first name but it was never used. Radakovich was "Black Mike;" we were all afraid of him at first but he became a model soldier.

Camp Fannin had a huge round water tower visible from our barracks. The only way up was to climb tall steel ladders attached to the framing, and a circular walkway protected by a steel bannister went around the "belly" of the

tower. Whenever any of us did something dumb ("screwed up" was the indelicate phrase preferred), we were told the next time we did it we would be punished by having to climb the water tower and scrub it with a toothbrush! No one in Company B ever received that punishment in my time there, but the threat certainly was intimidating.

Basic infantry training during the first six weeks was much as Mr. Laurence Walker described: long twenty-five-mile marches with full field pack; crawling on our backs under barbed wire with live tracer fire just a few inches above our noses; running the overhead artillery course with explosions behind and in front of our skirmish line to assure we stayed in line; firing range practice; night reconnaissance exercises; and many "G.I. parties" (scrubbing those wooden barrack floors that were already scrubbed white by previous trainees); etc.

We were fortunate that the 1,000-yard bayonet course had been abandoned at Fannin before our arrival, as it was becoming apparent we might face Japanese, not Germans. We learned how to use the bayonet, but our instructors told us it was an open-field weapon, less suited to jungle warfare.

In December 1944, the I&R class just ahead of us was "graduated" two weeks early as the Battle of the Bulge was raging and our peerless leaders thought the Germans might break through to the sea. I never learned what happened to them, but I'm sure they reached England far too late to be involved in the Bulge but in plenty of time for the final push into Germany.

Company B graduated every man left after the seventeen weeks. We were proud of that. Those who had fallen behind due to illness or other causes were assigned to less advanced companies. We marched in parade for graduation and gave the "Eyes Right" salute to the battalion commander.

Our few "I-C's" were assigned as cadre at Fannin since they were not to go into combat, but the rest of us were given ten days leave and shipped by train to Fort Ord, California, and thence by troop ship to the Philippines. At Ord we had to prove we could swim when we were told we might be going on a sea voyage. I never learned what happened to the few who nearly drowned in the huge outdoor pool because they had never learned to swim.

An ironic thing happened on our Pacific voyage: several days out from San Francisco the radio on deck announced that President Franklin Roosevelt had just decreed that no more eighteen-year-olds were to be sent overseas. We did not know whether to laugh or cry! During the voyage I recall a lot of sea sickness but no fear of what lay ahead. I suppose at eighteen we felt immortal and adventurous.

Our troopship, the USS General Mann, had a Navy and Marine crew and 5,000 of us replacements crammed into its holds. How we endured the seventeen-day zigzagging Pacific crossing seems miraculous in memory. Eventually we learned where we were headed as the ship entered Manila Bay, at that time filled with sunken ships of all types with their upper works above the water line.

We were broken into two groups at the replacement depot near Manila. Most of us who were eighteen volunteered for jump-and-glider school and were assigned to the 11th Airborne Division; the rest were sent straight into combat with the 32nd Division near Baguio. The 11th was then in reserve for retraining, with combat patrols against Jap holdouts on Mount Macolod, near Santo Tomas.

The U.S. Army in World War II seemed seldom to assign its soldiers to slots for which they were trained. In the case of Privates Plunkett and Rulau, the Army had a hiccup – we were both assigned to the I&R Platoon of Headquarters Company, 2nd Bn, 187th PGI. We were actually to function as infantry scouts, mapmakers, and forward observers. The 2nd Battalion had lost a good many of its men in the battles at Nichols Field, near Lake Taal, and Lago de Bay, before we joined the 11th Airborne, and Headquarters Company was being restructured with us fresh replacements. Plunkett and I and one unwounded veteran, Corporal Duthie from South Carolina, were the whole I&R Platoon!

After airborne training was completed at Lipa in southern Luzon, we were set to train for an invasion (later we learned it was to be Japan), but on August 6 the first A-bomb was dropped and everything changed. On August 12 my regiment flew to Okinawa and on August 29-30 we were the first combat troops to land in Japan, at Atsugi Field, to protect General Douglas MacArthur when he landed on August 30, if Emperor Hirohito's orders to lay down arms should not be obeyed.

The rest of my story has little to do with Fannin. I liked the Army, reenlisted, and served also in the Korean War and several crises (Lebanon-Jordan in the 1950s and the Cuban Missile in 1962). Three of my "peacetime" (Cold War) assignments are worthy of separate stories: I was a recruiting sergeant in Milwaukee from late 1947 to early 1950; I worked in Air Force Intelligence in Germany, 1958-1959; and was sergeant major of a nuclear unit in New Mexico when we were placed on alert during the Cuban crisis in October 1962. But it all began at Camp Fannin.

Readers may wonder about the rest of my life. I served eighteen years on active duty, the first six with the Army and then twelve with the U.S. Air Force (1944-1962). I also served as a master sergeant in the Air Force Reserve ten years (1963-1973), of which the first four were in active units and the rest inactive status.

On leaving the Air Force in December 1962, I joined the editorial staff of a newspaper called *Coin World* in Sidney, Ohio, as a staff writer. I had taken several courses in journalism in the service and received two years college credit in 1948 by passing with honors a GED equivalency that was filed with USAFI in Madison, Wisconsin. I was thirty-six years old when I became a full-time journalist (I had been a coin collector since 1939), and in just nine months I was promoted to full editor of a new magazine called *World Coins*.

I spent eleven years in Ohio but was then hired away by a publishing house in Iola, Wisconsin, at a considerable salary increase, to become editor-in-chief of a new newspaper called *World Coin News*. In 1980 I also began writing books on coins and this led me to a wonderful decision.

In August 1984, I took early retirement at age fifty-eight to become a numismatic author, consultant, and broker. It was chancy, but my children were then grown. In less than a year I found myself appointed as the sole agent in the United States for a private mint in England and for thirteen years my sales commissions earned me more than the Armed Forces or journalism ever could. I also wrote fifteen books in as many years and found myself in *Who's Who in America* (in 1995), and recognized by my peers as "one of the top medal and token authorities in the world."

I have developed as a leader, thanks to my start at Camp Fannin. I have been post commander of VFW Post 9748 in Iola, Wisconsin, almost continuously since 1985 and regularly give lectures on patriotism at high school auditoriums in the area. I joined the Republican Party and the Reagan campaign in 1975 (as an active duty serviceman I could not participate in politics under the Hatch Act) and soon found myself GOP county vice chairman for Waupaca County, 1977-79, then chairman, 1979-82, and vice chairman of the Wisconsin State Republican Party, 1981-83, and, since then, chairman of countless campaigns for individual candidates. Lacking formal training, I developed over the years into an accomplished off-the-cuff lecturer on numismatics, politics, and economic history.

One thing more. I cannot recall ever seeing a black soldier at Camp Fannin. The 15th Regiment was all white. As it happens, the 11th Airborne was also all white men, except that we had some Navajo and other Indians, a few Chinese, and some Nissei interpreters. Much later, in 1950, I was stationed at Fort Custer, Michigan, when the Army was integrated and, for the first time in my six years' service, served with black soldiers. As a recruiter earlier, I had induced many African Americans to enlist, but all my fellow recruiters were also white.

It never occurred to us trainees at Fannin, or to us soldiers in the Pacific, that our Army was segregated. That word may have existed, but it was not part of the lingua franca of the average GI. Soldiers accept the conditions that exist; in World War II we did.

My uniformed service took place under Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Harry S Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy. They were all American leaders I learned to admire, though I voted for only one of them, Dwight Eisenhower.

Sincerely,
Russell Rulau
ex-Master Sergeant