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The Memoirs of an M. P.

By One Who Was One

IT'S a fact, and you know it, that when you get four or five young men with the same background together they're going to get around to talking about it sometime in the course of the conversation. Many are the spirited discussions to which I've hearkened in Pullman smokers when the genial company therein assembled discovered they were all traveling men. How frequently also have I heard the praises of the Donkey or the Elephant sung when we found we were all Democrats or Republicans, or whatever it was. But louder, longer and heartier by many a vigorous phrase and roof-rocking shout are the get-togethers I continually find myself in of young men who unearth the fact that all on hand were present and accounted for in the war.

"When I was in the Umpth Infantry," someone invariably remarks and holds the floor until "that time we were working a seventy-five up below Soissons" or "the morning we tanks got going" cuts in for a while. It is during these gatherings that I retain a firm hold on my tongue. I have no desire to be hurled bodily out of the window of a train traveling at sixty miles an hour. Nor, if it happens to be a restaurant, do I want a handful of plates skimmed in my direction. When asked diplomatically what I did in the great war it is my practice to remark with a fine air of casualness, "Oh, I was just attached to the Army for rations." It's going on four years that

I've been demobilized, but I'm not taking any chances. I don't feel like starting any reminiscences in reach of doughboy hands with "Now when I was an M. P.—"

Yes, I was an M. P. in the great war. Just a minute, buddy—put down that gun and hear me out. The law is quite firm on the point that you have to give a man a hearing before you shoot him. And, after all, maybe I wasn't the one who picked you up without a pass that time in Tours. You see I was with the division all the time and I never saw Tours or Nancy or Paris. Nor did I ever teach a man how to salute with a blackjack the way they did it in "Three Soldiers." In private life I am neither a boilermaker, a dance hall bouncer nor a third-rate prize-fighter, much as I hate to buck up against the Army's cherished notions of the pursuits of its police in civilian life.

We did have, in our outfit, one late-comer who had really been a patrolman, but he spent most of his time making himself sandwiches and eating them. The lieutenant met him plodding his beat between two villages in our billeting area one muddy winter day.

"Where are you from—Vigny or Moisseulles?" he inquired.

"From Omaha, sir," said our gallant policeman, and wondered why his name didn't appear on the next list of first-class privates.

"Candidly, I don't believe I'm giving away any military secrets when I say that the life of an M. P. had its advantages"

So that was our welcome to France. It followed nine months of valiant service to the cause of democracy in a Southern training camp. We arrived in camp as yellow hat-corded, spur-jangling cavalry, turning up our noses at all other outfits, as is the habit of the cavalry. We left made into M. P.'s, wearing infantry blue hat cords and with everyone's nose turned up at us. As a last remnant of our former glory, over whose loss we forever gnashed our teeth, we were still carrying spurs which we wore all over France while hopefully looking for the horses that were promised us. If recollection serves, I threw mine away at the end of the first twenty kilometer hike under full pack, along with my currycomb and picket rope.

But the days of eight-hour gate guard and traffic duty in the U. S. A. had their livening touches. I recall the crusade we made against the soldiery's attempt to bring moonshine from the hills into camp for purposes of Christmas jollity. Low subterfuges were resorted to by our opponents in their efforts to bilk the guardians at the gates. One snowy night of that holiday week an artillery sergeant came straggling in well after Taps.

"Bad night, M. P.," he observed genially, showing his pass. "Pretty tough on you fellows out in this storm."

The M. P. agreed and smiled upon the friendly sergeant, who strolled off, innocent of bearing forbidden liquids on his person. But what was this thing jerking and crawling over the snow-crust fifty feet behind him? The M. P. looked. The friendly sergeant had a full quart tied on the end of a long string, and it was following him into camp like a faithful dog. He had been a cheerful, likable sort of sergeant; it would be a shame to arrest him, yet the orders were strict against bringing firewater into camp. The M. P. broke the string and attached a scraggly chunk of wood in place of the quart. He still wonders what an artillery sergeant thinks about when he finds his Christmas corn has turned to part of a stump.

Yes, we M. P.'s were sharp, shrewd fellows. I remember the time one of our sergeants, a lynx-eyed sleuth, drove our combination Ford truck and patrol wagon to a neighboring hamlet to pick up a badly-wanted O. D. malefactor whom our outpost had cunningly entrapped. With a gun to his ribs our Sherlock Holmes clapped his prisoner in the back of the truck and, mounting gloweringly to the driver's seat, whirled homewards, eyes to the front in a military manner.

"Come out of there," he growled twenty minutes later at the truck's back curtain, which he covered with his trusty Colt. "You're at the brig."

No—I am frank to say—the prisoner

wasn't. Somewhere in the six-mile homeward spin he had hopped blithely out of the flying Ford, and to the best of my knowledge the Army is still looking for him. The sergeant? Oh, it's easy to get to be a corporal. One stripe from three leaves two.

However, memory dwells more fondly on the side of camp life other than the official. On the time, for instance, when a hundred extra horses were wished on the outfit and those of us who were not on M. P. duty became excellent grooms and stable boys. On the particular afternoon when, led by our major on his dashing roan, thirty of us took ninety of those horses out for exercise. Merrily, I recall, we passed along a back road, our charges bucking and snorting and kicking with the carefree joy of quadrupeds who have been two weeks idle in their stalls.

And then there descended on us, marching at attention with their band in front, the Umptieth Infantry Regiment, returning from their parade ground with their colonel proudly at their head. The band inspired our vigorous steeds when the column came alongside of us. A hoof went through a drum and the bandsmen began to blow sour, disjointed notes.

"Take your condemned horses off the road, sir," glared the colonel at our major.

But an M. P. major is a high-ranking personage. A colonel of infantry is nothing in his eyes.

"Keep your blasted troops in order," came back our major. "I never saw such a rotten column."

It wasn't a very military column any more. I shall never forget the way horses were milling about in it with us hanging onto their halters for dear life. Three active steeds on one rope is a handful; try it sometime if you want a busy afternoon. And our friends the doughboys helped greatly in preserving order. They were giving our plunging nags the rifle butt and the boot in the ribs with cheerful and workmanlike precision. I do not know how the colonel vs. major argument came out. The surrounding country was too rapidly becoming covered with flying horses madly pursued by the military police. The only touch needed to attain the perfection of chaos was for the doughboys to open fire on us. Why they refrained is one of the unsolved mysteries of the war.

Eventually there came the time when we boarded the transport. There the luck held and we found ourselves doing guard duty, which gave us the run of the decks. Not for us sleeping in the stuffy fastnesses of the hold along with two thousand other troops. We found ourselves cosy nooks and crannies on

the upper decks where the breezes blew cool. All night long, I remember, you could hear the patter of feet along the decks as honest sailormen routed the military police out of lifeboats and other favorite gobs' sleeping places and chased them around with knives.

Candidly, I don't believe I'm giving away any military secrets when I say that the life of an M. P. had its advantages other than permission to stay out all night in the rain and bark at moving troops. As a guardian of law and order you learned so much on duty that helped you to enjoy yourself when off. You found out how far you could go and get away with it. Which brings to mind at this moment the case in our outfit of the ambitious private first-class who hied himself to Aix-les-Bains as one of the chaperons of a leave detail.

"What kind of people did you meet?" we inquired of him as he sat shirt-sleeved, hob-nailed and comfortable in the billet the night of his return.

"The duchess was great," he remarked casually, opening a tin of willie with a hatchet. The merry raspberry bloomed at once.

"I always thought I'd like to be an officer," he explained in an injured tone when the mirth had subsided. "So I borrowed a Q. M. first looey's rig from a friend of mine I found down there and went into society. A real duchess gave a luncheon in a palace and I went and sat between the A. P. M. and the R. T. O. Good scouts they were, so I told them they were handling things very neatly at Aix and they seemed pleased. After luncheon I met the inspecting colonel from G. H. Q. who was at the doings as the guest of honor and signed my name in the duchess's visitor's book. I guess the folks at home'll be pleased about my promotion. Easy? The next time I go on leave I'm going to be a captain. I'm tired of this business of being ranked."

We found out later from the rest of the leave crowd that he spoke the truth. He had, they said, been careful to return their salutes in a military manner while a lieutenant in Aix. I rather imagine that in the next war that young man will drift down to the recruiting station wearing acorns and enlist as a major.

But in winter billets was where we M. P.'s shone in our glory, armbands and gats on or off. We were split up two and two, and sent around to various villages to do the town constable act, far, far from our headquarters and attached to infantry, artillery and sanitary train alike. To be candid, I cannot recall our coming ever being received with cheers. But at all events

we were comfortable. I know I spent the winter in a large, cheerful room with white bearskins on its waxed floor, a full-length mirror and electric lights over the bed that worked—occasionally. Again I say don't shoot. I am afraid you were probably in a barn. But when the gravy is handed to you on a platter, take it, is my advice.

Of course, we popped out at all hours of the night on wild alarms. Every time a cow kicked against the wall in one of those combined stable-and-home cottages the good madame would think it was a burglar and send for the military police. But the best alarm I can recall was the village fire where, as local M. P., I spent the wee, small hours keeping the crowd back while an artillery battery wrestled with the flames.

The French pompier blew his fearful blast in the square, the redlegs rushed out the French fire engine and a sterling, half-clad Yank bucket brigade passed the pails from the well to the troughs of the dizzy old engine. Remember the kind where you poured water into its side-scoops and a whole mob got on the pump handles and sawed like mad to make its hose spout?

I'll say our hardy artillery pumped. The cottage seemed in danger of being saved when the well went dry, and the soldiery sat down to smoke and wonder if the loyal villagers would break out the cognac after the excitement was over. Then came a wild hurrah. Another well had been found and the bucket brigade once more was splashing water furiously into the pump troughs.

"Where in blinking blazes are the pump handles?" howled the topkick to his crew of pumpers. A bulky form in blue uniform and helmet answered him. It was the local fire department, bugle and all.

"I have hid ze poomp handles," he announced craftily. "You poomp so hard you will break zem."

The fire department spoke the truth; he had concealed them well. The only thing that saved the entire street from the flames was the fact that French houses have two-foot-thick stone walls and tiled roofs, so the fire stayed in the house of its origin and burned that down. They don't give Croix de Guerres to M. P.'s, but just the same, that night I saved a Frenchman's life. I told the pompier to go home in a hurry.

Now that it is all over I wonder did I gain from my experiences as an M. P. in the great army of Baker's Best anything of direct benefit to me in my present civilian career? Truthfully, I shall say that I did. Watching the dawn coming rosily up over snow-clad barracks roofs and rows of tents; in-

forming careless privates, sergeants, lieutenants and even majors to "button that there button"; listening to the dull bang-slamming of barrages on crossroads; jotting down the names of high-spirited young men found in cafés at the wrong hours—such things aren't of much lasting use.

But today I think that I can weather the severest frown. My boss in the office doesn't give me nearly so nasty a glance as did many a doughboy buck that I remember. Little in my life are the missiles hurled at my derby-hatted head by urchins after a snowfall—once I expected bricks. The gruff "move on" of the policeman keeping the lines at a parade or a fire means nothing to me—I used to say it myself. Having been an M. P. rather enables one to put up with the little stings of the world and glower sternly back.

All right—I'm through. And now, boys, you can let it go, all together:

"Who won the war?"