



BASIC TRAINING

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Only a few days after my 18th birthday, I flew out from the Bangor International Airport. It was then a small wooden building (now it's a LARGE wooden building)—just kidding! It is a beautiful airport! Stephen King filmed his movie, *The Langoliers* there. This was my first plane flight, and it was a propeller-type. The aircraft was at a slant, and so when walking up and down an aisle, you REALLY WERE walking up and down! I didn't have to use the airsickness bag, and was busy frantically trying to memorize my service number (WA-8-117-148). It's part of my life now, like my social security number. I left in the morning with another girl (from another part of Maine). We were traveling to Fort McClellan, Alabama. I will never figure out (right way, wrong way and the army way!) . . . how leaving in the morning, got us into Fort McClellan (Anniston), so late at night! Our first layover was in Washington, D.C. That was where I saw my first sesame seed hamburger bun. Had never seen sesame seeds on a bun before! There were many more shocks to follow though! When we arrived at it was dark. We waited in an office, to be assigned to our barracks. One of the girls who had recently arrived, sat her suitcase down. A sergeant told her to line it up on a line on the floor. She whispered, "she must be kidding"—and then heard in a loud voice, "and I am NOT kidding!" We were sent to our barracks and told to go to bed. There were no lights on, and I tried to pull the blanket down, but couldn't figure out

why it was so difficult. I then tried the other end of the bed (army cot), and was unsuccessful—now this was a puzzle! I finally got under the covers, and realized in the light of day, that the way the cots are made-up—a blanket over the top and tucked in, and the other end with hospital corners, that was the reason I found it difficult! Imagine, you are in another world—30 of us girls, all around 18, and away from home, probably for the first time in our lives—I had barely been out of my hometown—I had never even been to a sleep-over! We all had to go to processing for our new clothes. Goodbye to civilian clothes for 8 weeks! As we went to get our duffel bags and clothes, other girls good-naturedly called out to us, “hey, rainbows!” because we still had on our civilian clothes. One of the supply sergeants made a statement that “we’ve got a bunch of little ones, this time.” I guess, meaning, that we were smaller than she was used to. We had to drag our duffel bags back to the barracks, and put our last name and service number on every item. We were issued Class A (dress uniforms), hats, gloves, granny shoes (black with lace-up ties), World War II overcoats (I thought these were cool), raincoats (these had to be put on a certain way, with folds in the front, etc., scarves, underwear, but they gave us nylons—NOT pantyhose—nylons with seams! Since my legs tended to be slightly bowlegged, it was difficult to keep the seams straight! When we would have inspections, I would always have the girl behind me check. We had to roll our underwear—nylons included. Imagine trying to roll up nylons and tuck them in to keep them together—a little like handling a squid! Upon inspections, if this was not done properly, when you returned to the barracks after chow, they would be completely unrolled and spread out in glorious disarray on your cot. You’d have to try again to get it right! We were also issued the uniform we were to wear the whole time while in basic training (except when we were allowed to go to the service club—rarely), or off the post where anyone else could see us! This uniform was a symphony of style! It must have been made of the cheapest cotton material available—made to wrinkle just by breathing—blue skirt and blouse with

white buttons—also white buttons all the way down the front of the skirt, with white stitching that went down to your ankle (definitely mine, because I am 5'2 and a half). The granny shoes were wondrous to behold . . . our grandmothers' shoes—thick heels, black shoelaces. The piece-de-resistance were the army-green cotton roll down socks. I am sure we were visions of loveliness. We also wore a wool garrison cap—a narrow cap fitting from front to back. We were also issued dress hats, but only wore them with the dress uniform. We wore our dog tags at all times, making your skin green.

Every afternoon after lunch (chow), we would have to race back to the barracks to iron our skirts and blouses, which really was pointless. Whenever we sat down, we had to hold the skirt out to the side to prevent wrinkles—just more discipline and rules. When we washed our uniforms, we would hang them out to dry outside. Imagine the panic in trying to find which blue skirt and blouse was yours, in a sea of blue, when only way to identify yours, was the service number written on the inside. We had to iron them, and use spray starch, which to this day, when I smell starch, I think of our feet sticking to the floor, because there were a lot of us ironing at the same time. We had to polish our brass, and shine our shoes in addition to ironing. We had to make a trip to the PX (post-exchange) for other supplies, such as, shoe trees, Brasso (to polish our brass), and cotton balls for spit-polishing those granny shoes. The “spit” was water, by the way. I guess you could have used the real thing, but who's got that much to do a pair of shoes?! We were not allowed to purchase candy. We had footlockers where all the items had to be in precise order. Some girls put candy in them, but were given demerits, when there was an inspection. We also had wall lockers, set up according to the rules. We were not allowed to sit on the cots once they were made up. We spent a lot of time making sure the sheets and blankets were tight enough, under the beds, pulling and tugging—most of the time I was in a state of panic, thinking any day would be my last. I had never learned how to do any housekeeping type of jobs, the army's way was exacting. Our

areas (cots, wall lockers, foot lockers) were inspected every day. Every evening with fear and trepidation, I would look at the list of gigs (demerits), afraid it would be my last. If you received too many, you were recycled—a horrifying thought—meaning you would have to start basic training all over again in another platoon. One girl made the mistake of forgetting her bobby-pins on her cot—she got a demerit for each one!

We had to line up our shoes on a line under the cot—if they were out of place, we would get a demerit.

Five o'clock in the morning was a cold experience in Alabama. We would run outside, line up, and dress right-dress, that is, turning one's head to the right and extending your arm to the person's shoulder next to you. We would then march to breakfast (chow). I was frequently told I was eating too slow, so I tried to work on that. Our meals were served on metal compartmentalized trays. I was thrilled by this, because I didn't like my food to touch—still don't!

One of the WAC's from Minnesota was on K.P. (Kitchen duty), and was told she had to make the water hotter, while doing the dishes. She kept changing the water, and the next day, we were shocked to see both of her hands totally bandaged!

After morning chow, we would attend classes in military history, The Uniform Code of Military Justice, learning to recognize what insignia meant, protocol, whom to salute, when to salute. If a vehicle had an insignia of an officer, you had to salute it. Sometimes, if we saw a military vehicle approaching, we would lower our heads, so we didn't have to figure out if we should salute or not. We were worn out from marching, polishing, saluting, and doing everything for the first time. It was October, and hot in the classrooms, and we had to keep an eye on one another, because it was so easy to doze off. We would nudge each other, if we saw them nodding. One day, I was so exhausted, I put my hand over my eyes, and leaned my elbow on the desk, pretending to write; later when I looked at the paper, there were a few lines, and then the pen had made a mark down to the bottom of the page.

One of the classes was in Chemical, Biological and Radio-

logical agents (CBR). We were shown a film of sheep in a meadow. A nerve agent was introduced, and in minutes the sheep were twitching, and all died within minutes. We were told that the next day, we would be trained in using our gas masks, and it was imperative to know how, because, of course, if the mask wasn't used properly, you would die. To offset this, you would need to use an atropine syrette (needle), and jab it into your leg quickly, to stop the effect of the chemical. I was horrified! I believed that they were going to use the real thing, and wondering what would happen to me, if I couldn't get my mask on properly. They used tear gas the next day. I found out, years later, that there were others who thought the same as I did, but I guess, they were too afraid to ask any questions!

We all had to get shots. We would line up and get the shot in each arm at the same time. We were instructed to swing our arms for awhile, to prevent any soreness.

After classes, we would drill and march. Just as the male soldiers had their chants, so did we! One of them was: "Turn your head, and bat your eyes, we are passin' by the guys" We had a different spin: "Turn your eyes, and bat your head, we are passin' by the dead." Another was "I gotta guy in old Milwaukee—we make love by walkee-talkee."

After evening chow, we would race back to the barracks, to polish, iron, wash, etc. We were frantic to get everything accomplished before lights out. Even after lights out, we would need to complete our tasks in the dark! While taps was playing, sniffing could be heard (and I was one of the "sniffees"). That is when homesickness would set in. During the day, there wasn't time to think about it, because you were so busy. When anyone received a package from home, it was always shared; broken cookies, and all!

Since preparation of food was done on such a large scale, it was quite fattening, so in addition to our flattering uniforms, one could gain weight easily, and at the same time, the other indignity, was to have your face break out!

We were allowed to go to the service club, to dance and listen to music, and see the opposite sex. This only happened

2 or 3 times during the basic training. We were able to exchange our blue uniforms for the nice ones, take off the granny shoes and roll-down socks, and put on nylons and high-heels! One almost felt human again! I was dancing one evening, and was told to sit down. I guess I was too enthusiastic. It came as quite a shock, to one who had always been so proper! I was quite indignant! One night I left my purse at the club, and requested permission to go back and get it. My sergeant said I would have to change into my dress uniform. I thought, “wow”—how bad must we look in these outfits!

Graduation day! We raced to the roster to see where we would be going to school. I was going to Signal School at Fort Gordon, Georgia.