

PART I. ANCIENT HISTORY

CHAPTER I -- THE MYTHICAL GOLDEN AGE

It wasn't like this in the Old Armee,
In the days beyond recall.
In the rare old, fair old Army days,
No one ever worked at all.

By Joseph F. Ware

As Top Kicker Milton Anthony Warden so trenchently put it,
"This is G Company, of which I am First Sergeant. I run this company. Holmes is the C.O., but he is like the rest of the officer class: a dumb bastard that signs papers an rides horses an wears spurs an gets stinking drunk up at the stinking Officers' Club. I'm the guy that runs this company.... Holmes would strangle on his own spit if I wasn't here to swab out his throat for him."¹

James Jones' crusty First Sergeant in From Here to Eternity may not have scored a bulls-eye, but he wasn't far off the mark. Nearly three decades later, grizzled war dogs with hash marks half way to their chins still reminisce nostalgically about the "Old Army" between World Wars, when the NCO Corps reigned supreme.

What was it like, a quarter of a century ago?

First and foremost, the Army of 1939 was professional. Every man was a Regular, every man a volunteer. Rear rank Privates made up half the enlisted strength in those days (Figure 1). Privates First Class accounted for another quarter, and believe me, sky rockets who

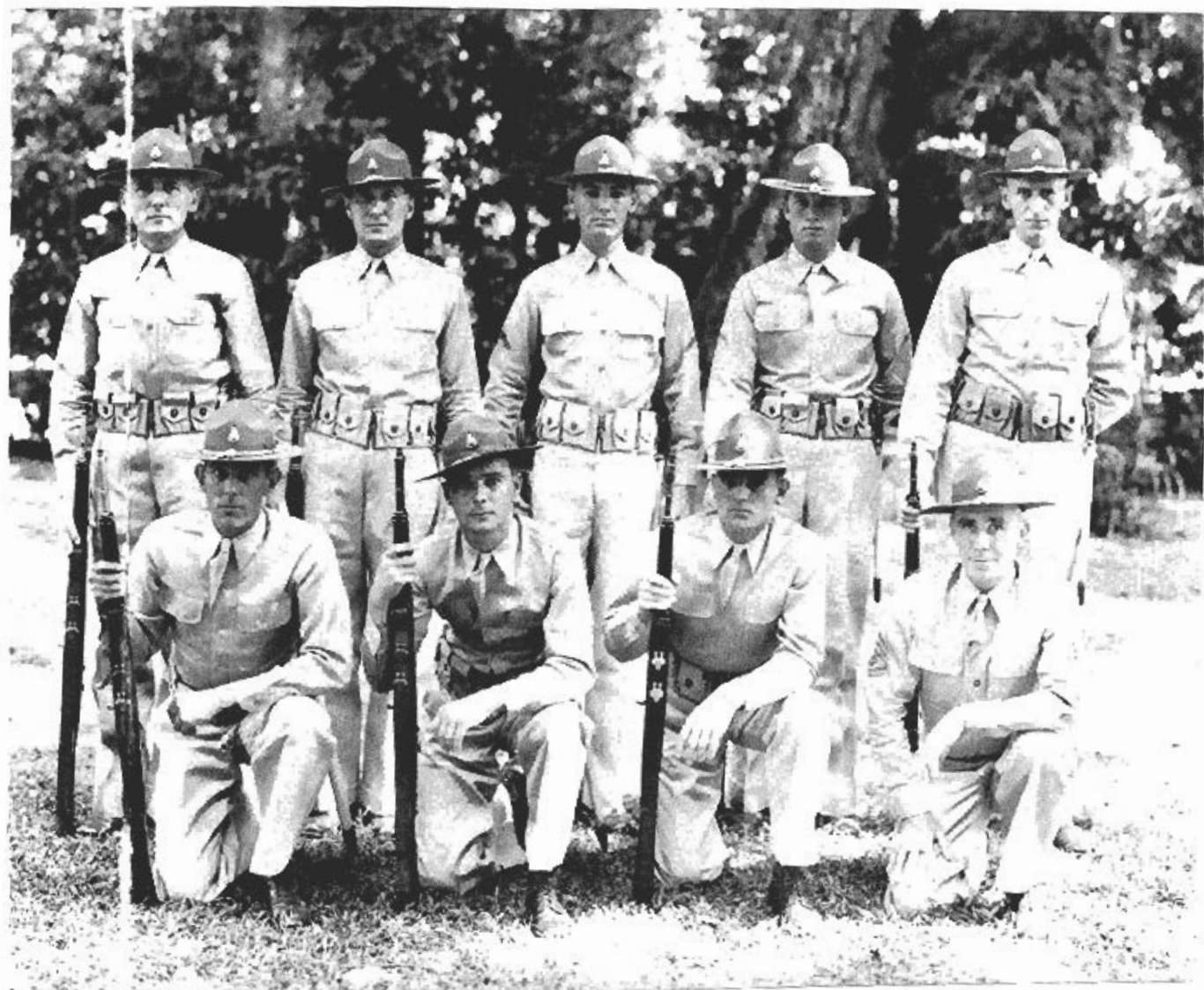
made PFC on their first three-year hitch were viewed with suspicion by protagonists and peers alike.²

Noncoms were exclusively troop leaders, whether line or staff, a hard core elite, set apart from their fellow man. In every rifle company, artillery battery or cavalry troop, the basic fighting units, the stud duck was an E-6,* with three chevrons up and two rockers down framing his coveted diamond. Washboard-knuckled Buck Sergeants, the scourge of barracks and field, ruled platoons in despotic grandeur, and Corporals held sway over squads (Figure 2).³

Tinkers, tinkerers and assorted wizards passing by drew extra pay for bizarre specialties, but their sleeves were innocent of stripes.⁴ Those were reserved for NCO's, the poor man's feudal barons.

Promotions were permanent, and hard to come by. Rigorous examinations commonly sifted out social climbers, particularly among the top three grades. Dullards who failed to pass the test were afforded a full year to contemplate the error of their ways before they could try again. The now defunct Coast Artillery Corps threw a 'specially slippery slider: candidates for promotion to Master or Technical Sergeant were reduced to the grade of Private if they flunked twice, no questions asked. Only fireballs need apply. First Sergeants, by the way, normally were exempt from exams. Because of their hand-in-

* In 1939, there were seven enlisted grades, from Master Sergeant, Grade One to Private, Grade Seven. Since then, the system has been wrenched upside down and inside out on numerous separate occasions. To avoid confusion, current E-1 through E-9 designations are used throughout this text. (Appendix II).



1. "Old Army" rifle squad poses for posterity.
Company G, 31st Infantry, Philippine Department.
Note Corporal squad leader and two-rocker Top Kick.

glove relationship with Company Commanders, they universally were elevated on the Great Man's say.⁵

Military service was more than a profession in 1939 -- it was a way of life, and togetherness was the theme.

It was largely monastic, within the narrow confines of the Post. Intercourse with civilian communities frequently was limited to just that: the cyclical Pay Day binge on the wrong side of the tracks, followed by a boisterous, company-sized raid on the nearest house of ill fame.

Except for a handful of hoary-headed NCO's, men in the ranks were single. First-term enlistment was categorically denied those unfortunates with wives, suckling children (up to age 21) or other dependents of any kind. Wedded bliss was no bar to re-enlistment for First Three Graders, and benevolent commanders infrequently might bestow that perquisite on favored Sergeants in Grade Four, but all others were destined to be bachelors 'til Kingdom Come.⁶

There were real teeth in this restriction. Nearly 200 soldiers were given the boot during FY 39 for attempting to conceal dependents.⁷ Such restraints eased imperceptibly during the period of limited emergency before Pearl Harbor, but it took a global war to kill 'em.

Once in, enlisted men were rooted in concrete. Transfers required a dispensation from the Pope, and for noncoms, the cost was dear. Regulations were very clear: "The transfer of a non-commissioned officer from one organization to another," even across the company street, "carries with it reduction to the grade of Private." Rare

exceptions were made in the interests of the Service.⁸ Since prospects of rebounding to greater glory were treacherous and fraught with unknown peril, fortune hunters, misfits and malcontents thought twice before leaving the frying pan for the fire.

Continuity and tradition thrived in this atmosphere, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto.

Like it or not, most noncoms were married to their men, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. They knew those men like the backs of their hands, fortes and foibles, family and friends. They were on tap 'round-the-clock, ministering to basic needs, maintaining good order and discipline, tutoring the awkward squad, cracking heads as required and generally keeping a sensitive thumb on the unit pulse -- a full seven days a week. Any good Corporal could spot a potential AWOL from 150 paces with the naked eye, and field strip a gold brick without breaking stride.

With all this regimentation, there still was room for a surprising amount of flair and individuality not enjoyed today.

Mess Sergeants did their own marketing in that halcyon era before the advent of Army-wide master menus. The variation was astounding, delightful or dreary, depending on the tastebuds of the chefs, who ran the gamut from steak and potato lovers to eccentrics who doted on chocolate-covered grasshoppers and monkey navels flambé. Unavoidably, there were unimaginative clods who ladled out slum and beans six days a week, with cold cuts Sunday night, and cannivers

who served short rations and blew the savings on bathtub gin -- but across the board, it was a fairly stimulating arrangement.

Enlisted men hardly ever saw an officer, unless the fat was in the fire. Those exalted personages excelled as teachers and scholars, observers, advisors, plotters, planners and paymasters. Their bent was tactics and global strategy, not the mundane unit scene.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was fairly representative: 16 years as a major in little worlds of his own, but rarely near the troops.⁹ George Patton's chief claim to fame was his string of personal polo ponies and seven-point rating as captain of the Army team.¹⁰ And Matthew B. Ridgway buffeted from pillar-to-post in search of the Holy Grail.¹¹

From the enlisted point of view, wearers of stars and bars were around for just three things: to set policy and standards, to make command decisions, and in the broadest sense of the word, to supervise. Noncoms ran the troop-level show.

This, then, was the Army NCO in his natural habitat, circa 1939.

This was the Golden Age.

Or was it?

The Army had been walkin' around on its uppers for 20 years, since the close of World War I. "Drifting aimlessly and subsisting on a shoestring, the Army of the Roaring Twenties had little to roar about or roar with," wrote Patton's biographer.¹² "Probably the most quiescent element in the country, all it had in common with Scott

Fitzgerald's fervid world was that it, too, was the haven of a Lost Generation. While the United States cavorted in prosperity and caroused in Prohibition, the Army just dawdled, its officers whiling away their time in what Thackery called a life of dignified otiosity. The word 'soldiering' became a synonym for loafing. In this torpid interregnum, virtually the only motion seemed to be the constant moving of officers from one Post to another, none being allowed to let down their roots or do anything lasting. Deprived of a useful purpose, even the best men succumbed to apathy and relaxed with the sad fatigue of idleness."

Most of the Army's ills could be traced to money -- or rather, the lack thereof. A U.S. public, ignorant of peacetime requirements for national defense, remained apathetic, almost inert, in the face of mounting crises abroad. Minuscule appropriations for military purposes were made grudgingly, even during the prosperous Twenties; after the Stock Market crashed, chronic Government deficits discouraged anything beyond bare bones maintenance of the modest military establishment so reluctantly tolerated. There simply wasn't enough cash around to entice high caliber personnel consistently, or to mold the manpower on hand.¹³

As a result, the Army had been chronically under strength for years. In 1934, General Douglas MacArthur, then Chief of Staff, admitted that the situation was desperate: "in many cases, there is but one officer on duty with an entire battalion; this....(has) brought Regular Army training in the Continental United States to a

virtual standstill."¹⁴ And Chief of Staff George C. Marshall later looked back on sorry days when a battalion-sized garrison "could muster barely 200 men....including cooks, clerks and kitchen police....for the little field training that could be accomplished with available funds."¹⁵ The peacetime authorization for a rifle company in 1939 was a mere 114 hardy enlisted souls, 48 fewer than the posture for war (Figure 2), but even this half-naked version suffered many blank files.

What men were on tap weren't always the best. A sizeable residue of muddle-headed non-commissioned veterans had been treadin' water in the military manpower pool since the Great War,¹⁶ and the Army had policed up at least its fair share of street sweepings and military vegetables during the black days of the Depression, when millions were unemployed, and one out of every six men, women and children in the United States was riding relief rolls.¹⁷ Fugitives from breadlines and Salvation Army soup kitchens won their spurs along with all the rest in those dog-eat-dog days, when a loud mouth and a sneak left hook might rate just as high as a degree from M.I.T.; more hoodlums were wearin' chevrons in '39 than mama would care to admit. There weren't many plaster saints.

How imprecisely Congress, the appropriating authority, understood the Army's needs after two decades of wilfull neglect is suggested by a contemporary, unofficial analysis of War Department military expenditures for FY 39, published in the Baltimore Sun:¹⁸

| | <u>Millions</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Pay, clothing and subsistence. | \$267 | 58.8 |
| 2. Training (direct expense). | 12 | 2.7 |
| 3. New equipment. | 84 | 18.5 |
| 4. Research and development. | 5 | 1.1 |
| 5. Arms maintenance. | 25 | 5.5 |
| 6. New construction. | 10 | 2.2 |
| 7. Plant maintenance. | 25 | 5.5 |
| 8. Seacoast defense. | 5 | 1.1 |
| 9. Procurement planning. | 0.3 | 0.07 |
| 10. Miscellaneous. | <u>21</u> | <u>4.6</u> |
| Total | \$454 | 100.0 |

The total appropriation for that year, incidentally, was \$646,000,000, but of this, \$192,000,000 -- roughly 30 percent -- was siphoned off for un-martial pursuits, such as the Panama Canal and civil engineering projects.¹⁹

The remaining greenbacks spread mighty thin. Nearly three fifths of the Army budget may have been devoted to loaves and fishes, but it proffered little more (Figures 3-4). By contrast, civilian pay looked mighty sweet (Figure 5).

Take a Rifle Company First Sergeant, that eternal tower of strength, with over 100 men in tow, come rain or shine, sleet or dark of night. After 20 years of troop leading, his reward was \$105.00 at Pay Call²⁰ -- hardly a regal emolument; a leg breaker in the local slaughter house raked in seven dollars more each month, working a feckless 40-hour week.²¹

The lowly Dog Face Soldier hypothetically revelled in 70 cents a day and found,²² but deductions for GI laundry, broken crockery,

lost leggin' laces and donations to assorted funds routinely reduced this treasure to a pittance over the table. The finer things in life -- like a hooker of Old Tennis Shoes or a hearty roll in the hay -- hinged on hot dice in a latrine crap game. Off Post, any splay-footed imbecile crackin' rocks on a WPA road gang could pocket as much in an hour as Private Buck did in an endless, sweat-stained day.²³

Under these discouraging conditions, a man had to be a dead beat or love the Army above all else to stay.

Not everybody did.

Hundreds of faint hearts bought their way out of the Service each year, until mounting pre-war tensions slammed the door on this escape route in the autumn of 1940.²⁴⁻²⁵ It didn't cost much. Just about a hundred bucks, give or take a fin or two, for a Private on his first ride.²⁶ But the toll swallowed up five or six months' pay complete, hat, shorts and spats, without a farthing left for a beer. A guy had to want out bad to pinch his pennies so long.

Some couldn't wait.

The equivalent of one man in every squad flew the coop in the mid-1920's, seven percent of the entire enlisted force. Desertions were pretty well under control by '39, but even so, nearly 4,000 artful dodgers took off on plow furloughs that year, and never came back.²⁷

Personnel problems, mingled with equipment shortages, reduced team training to farce. Requisites were modest -- there were just five line items on the Rifle Company TOE -- but funds for refurbishing

tools of the trade eked out barely one twentieth of the Army budget during the 16-year interval from 1925 to 1940.²⁸⁻²⁹ Supply just didn't meet demand.

Hardware was largely World War I surplus, increasingly obsolescent and ineffective from fair wear and tear.³⁰ Transport was insufficient to permit assembly of the three half-starved Regular Army infantry divisions, whose component parts were broadcast over the land like buckshot. Combined arms training thus was impractical. Almost total absence of corps or army-level command/control and support forces prohibited maneuvers as we know them today.³¹

It doesn't take a syndicated columnist to conclude that this was a gloomy refuge for aspiring NCO's.

Training almost inevitably took on a form as stylized as Kabuki, with inordinate emphasis on manual of arms, alignment of tent pegs and parrot-like regurgitation of General Orders for Interior Guard. Bayonet butts burst, and bolts clicked ceaselessly in sultry quadrangles, where machine gun loading drill droned on and on -- "Fall out One!" The individual marksmanship fetish still was in vogue (we could benefit today), consuming countless hours of sighting and aiming exercises, followed by day after day on the known distant range, repleat with sand bags and leather slings. Care and cleaning of equipment soaked up much of each working day, and when the rains came, inclement weather schedules dwelt interminably with the wondrous mysteries of field sanitation, map reading and venereal disease, the three most persistent problems of the Western World.

Early in 1939, the Chief of Infantry could still expound on the multiple merits of close order drill -- "the rhythmic crash of a hundred boots on the pavement is....a powerful integrating factor. Even the Egyptians knew this." -- but he reluctantly acknowledged that the complicated evolutions of "squads right," recently abandoned, had taken "so large a part of training time that (they)...assumed importance far beyond that of drill actually used in battle."³²

Formal inspections rivaled county fairs, and were somewhat more numerous. Spit'n polish, burnished brass and whitewashed rocks were emblems, white glove walk-throughs the fad.

Within reason, meticulous attention to detail promoted a certain sense of responsibility and self-discipline, cohesion and unit pride. Carried to extremes, which it often was for lack of something better to do, it reached the realm of ridiculous. In one benighted outfit, a single vehicle was placed on display, resplendent with baked enamel. The aluminum crankcase was filed and buffed until it shown like silver, iron cylinder castings sanded with emery until they shown; the push rods and exhaust pipes were chromium-plated. Unhappily, the truck wouldn't run.³³ Here and there, inmates skied across squad rooms on squares of burlap to avoid scarring floors lovingly coated with shoe polish and hand-buffed to a mirror finish.

This, in balance, was the "Old Army" of 1939, wherein everyday reality only faintly resembled latter day legend. Small wonder that officers by the drove retreated into hallowed halls of learning or the bowels of Stateside staffs.³⁴

But the fact remains, that noncoms were on top of the heap, cocks o' the walk, proud, prestigious and professional in their jaunty campaign hats. Theirs was the power and the glory, authority supreme.

Soon thereafter, the "Old Army" died almost unnoticed at 2:15 on a Tuesday afternoon, and was laid to rest by a host of khaki-clad amateurs. On 27 August 1940, President Roosevelt, by Executive Decree, federalized the National Guard; its lead increments were inducted on 16 September, the same day he signed the nation's first peacetime Selective Service Act. The army was inundated with civilians in uniform. An era had come to an end.³⁵⁻³⁶

85,218

FIGURE 1
ENLISTED GRADE STRUCTURE

30 June 1939

Total Strength: 167,712 (Philippine Scouts Not Included)

Army Air Forces: 20,838

Specialist Ratings: 36,906

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| 1st Class | 190 |
| 2d Class | 1,538 |
| 3d Class | 2,391 |
| 4th Class | 6,728 |
| 5th Class | 7,032 |
| 6th Class | 19,027 |

43,799

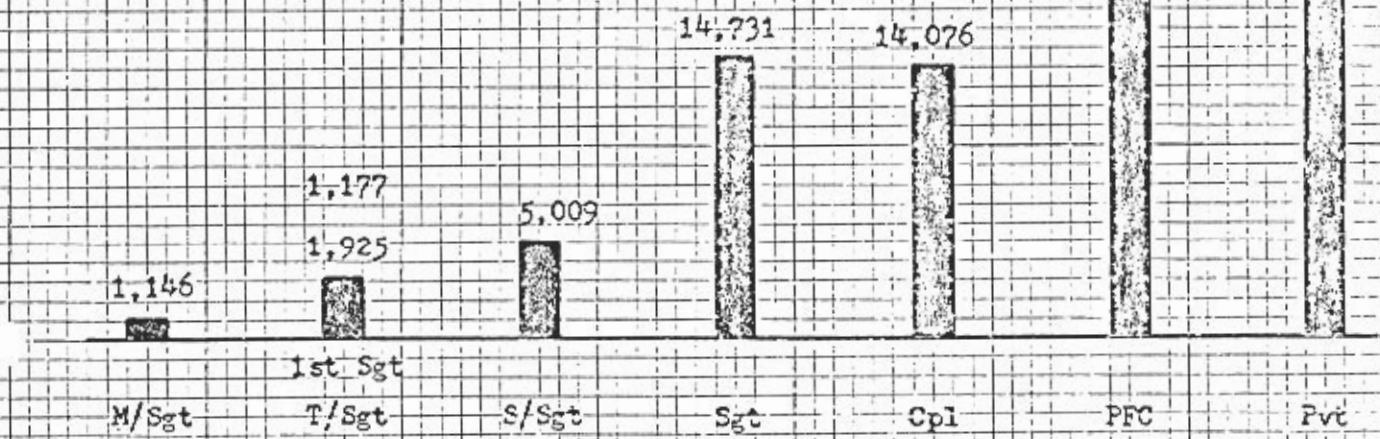


FIGURE 2
 ORGANIZATION, INFANTRY RIFLE COMPANY
 1939

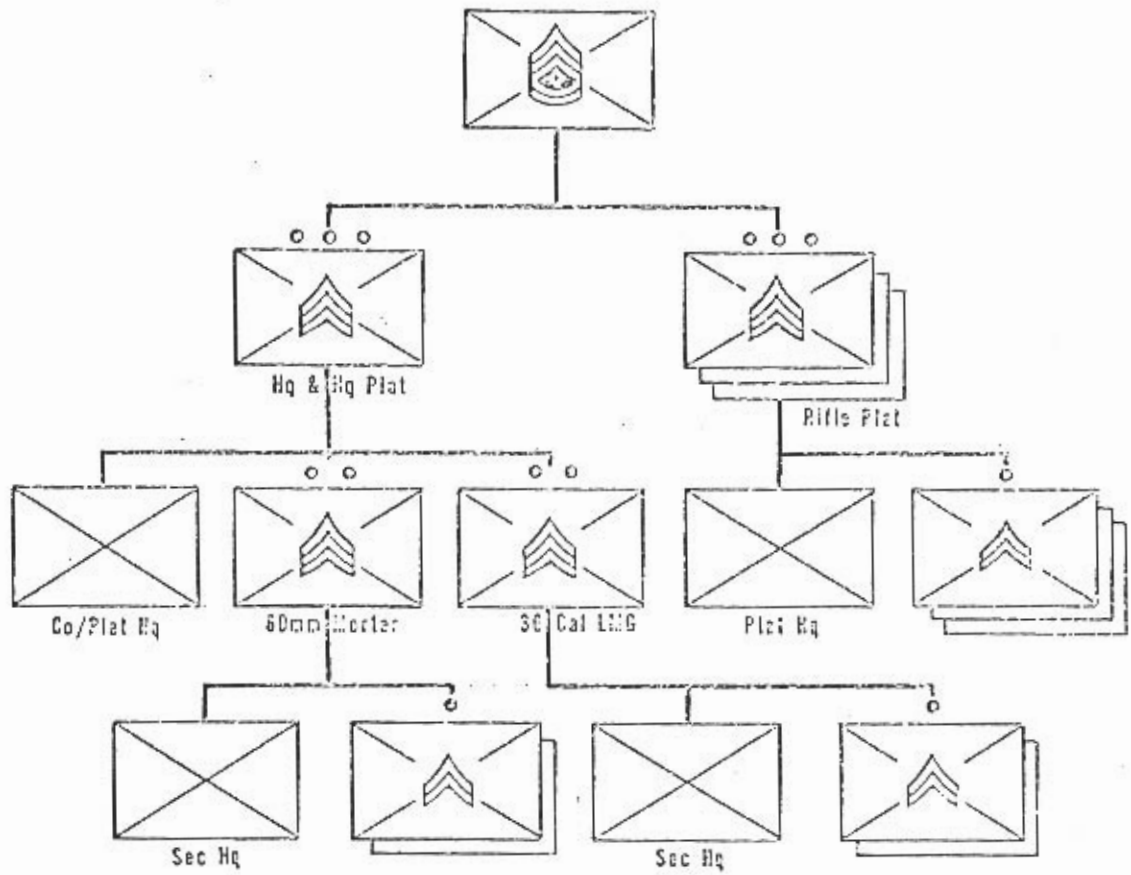


FIGURE 2 (CONTINUED)

ENLISTED STRENGTH

| | <u>Peace</u> | <u>War</u> |
|---------------|--------------|------------|
| 1st Sgt (E-6) | 1 | 1 |
| Sgt (E-4) | 10 | 20 |
| Cpl (E-3) | 14 | 14 |
| Pvt/FFC | <u>89</u> | <u>127</u> |
| Total | 114 | 162 |

SPECIALISTS

| | |
|-----------|----------|
| 4th Class | 3 |
| 5th Class | 1 |
| 6th Class | <u>5</u> |
| Total | 9 |

TCE LINE ITEMS

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| 1 1/2-ton Trk | 1 |
| LMG, 30 Cal | 4 |
| Mortar, 60mm | 3 |
| Rifle, 30 Cal | 132 |
| Pistol, 45 Cal | 32 |

FIGURE 3
MONTHLY ENLISTED PAY RATES, 1939

| | <u>Under 4 Yrs</u> | <u>Over 4 Yrs</u> | <u>Over 8 Yrs</u> | <u>Over 12 Yrs</u> | <u>Over 16 Yrs</u> | <u>Over 20 Yrs</u> |
|-------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| M/Sgt..... | \$126.00 | \$132.30 | \$138.60 | \$144.90 | \$151.20 | \$157.50 |
| 1st Sgt.... | 84.00 | 88.20 | 92.40 | 96.60 | 100.80 | 105.00 |
| T/Sgt | | | | | | |
| S/Sgt..... | 72.00 | 75.60 | 79.20 | 82.80 | 86.40 | 90.00 |
| Sgt..... | 54.00 | 56.70 | 59.40 | 62.10 | 64.80 | 67.50 |
| Cpl..... | 42.00 | 44.10 | 46.20 | 48.30 | 50.40 | 52.50 |
| PFC..... | 30.00 | 31.50 | 33.00 | 34.50 | 36.00 | 37.50 |
| Pvt..... | 21.00 | 22.05 | 23.10 | 24.15 | 25.20 | 26.25 |

SPECIALIST PAY FOR PRIVATES AND PRIVATES FIRST CLASS

| | |
|-----------|---------|
| 1st Class | \$30.00 |
| 2d Class | 25.00 |
| 3d Class | 20.00 |
| 4th Class | 15.00 |
| 5th Class | 6.00 |
| 6th Class | 3.00 |

MONETARY ALLOWANCES IN LIEU OF RATIONS AND QUARTERS*
IN CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES
(PER DAY)

| | <u>No Gov't Mess</u> | <u>Gov't Mess</u> |
|-------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Subsistence | \$1.20 | \$1.00 |
| Quarters | <u>.75</u> | <u>.75</u> |
| Total | \$1.95 | \$1.75 |

* Allowances were slightly higher overseas, but nowhere did they equal the \$4.00 a day authorized by law. Married Non-Commissioned Officers, Staff Sergeants and above, were the principal recipients. 37

FIGURE 4
 COST OF LIVING, 1939
 SELECTED ITEMS
 (NATIONAL AVERAGES)

| <u>Commodity</u> | <u>Price</u> | <u>Quantity</u> |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <u>Food</u> ³⁸ | | |
| Milk | \$.12 | Quart |
| Butter | .31 | Pound |
| Eggs | .28 | Dozen |
| Bacon | .32 | Pound |
| Leg of Lamb | .28 | Pound |
| Sugar | .05 | Pound |
| <u>Drink</u> | | |
| Charing Cross Gin ³⁹ | \$ 1.00 | Fifth |
| <u>Transportation</u> ⁴⁰ | | |
| 1937 Ford Coupe | \$395.00 | |
| <u>Rent</u> ⁴¹ | | |
| House (Median) | \$ 21.40 | Month |
| Hotel Room | 2.00 up | Day |

FIGURE 5
 SELECTED CIVILIAN UNION WAGES, 1939
 (MONTHLY WAGE ARBITRARILY BASED ON 35-HOUR WEEK, 30-DAY MONTH)⁴²

| | <u>Hourly Earnings</u> | <u>Monthly Wage</u> |
|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Street Car Motorman | \$.76 | \$105.00 |
| Truck Driver | .79 | 110.00 |
| Hod Carrier | .89 | 124.00 |
| House Painter | 1.36 | 190.00 |
| Carpenter | 1.40 | 196.00 |
| Machinist | 1.46 | 204.00 |
| Plumber | 1.53 | 214.00 |
| Boiler Maker | 1.60 | 232.00 |
| Brick Layer | 1.66 | 235.00 |
| Plasterer | 1.68 | 235.00 |