



A buck sergeant leads members of I Co, 3rd Bn, 176th Inf on a road march at Ft. Meade, MD, in 1941. Soldiers wear "soup plate" World War I type helmets, but carry new M-1 rifles. (Photo courtesy Command historian, Virginia National Guard)

Memories of *A Brown Shoe Army*

By SFC (Ret.) Richard Raymond, III

P'toon, TEN-HUT! AT EASE, LISSEN UP. In order to improve your military knowledge this bright morning, the Old Sarge is going to perform Inspirational Reading No. 9, Subject: The U.S. Army, 1920-1940, otherwise known as the "Brown Shoe Army."

You young soldiers of today may find it amusing that there should have been such a name, let alone such an Army. But I give you my solemn word that one existed and that we owe the men who formed it a debt of gratitude that can be repaid only by becoming soldiers as good as they once were.

Why should you learn this? Fair question. Any knowledge or experience that increases your individual morale and unit pride, otherwise known as "esprit de corps," cannot help but make you a better soldier. So, when I tell you about this Brown Shoe Army, you may come to realize what a great outfit it was and why we should in every way follow that example.

I tell you this as a matter of personal experience; not that I was in that Army, but I was a boy during part of that era and those men and times were a powerful influence on me.

The Brown Shoes actually began in the enormous force drawdown that followed World War I. After all, the Kaiser had been whipped, the world had returned to normalcy, prosperity and the Roaring Twenties had emerged and who needed a huge Army anyway? The "War to End All Wars" had just been fought and won and Peace Forever was at hand. Yeah.

Well, with the Army being reduced from over two million to somewhat fewer than 250,000 in less than two years, times were hard. Budgets were cut beyond the fat and muscle and into the bone. With peacetime prosperity, recruiting became tough and weapons, equipment, clothing, pay and most of the things that you now take for granted were in short supply, if available at all. This lasted through the Great Depression up to 1940.

When the Depression hit, the entire nation took a body blow. Thousands of citizens—honest, hard-working, skilled employees, many of them ex-soldiers—were on the street, selling apples, eating at soup kitchens, asking for handouts. Somehow, in all of this, the Army had to continue to function.

The Army's missions didn't end with the end of the war,



Soldiers train on the Browning .30 caliber machine gun at the State Military Reservation, Virginia Beach, VA, in 1931.

any more than they do today. They became what we now call "Operations Other Than War," or OOTW. There was still training for combat, of course—remember the old Roman proverb, "In peace, prepare for war." But a great deal of work was done in providing support to civil authorities, things which, by the nature of their organization, training, equipment and experience could be done better, quicker and more economically by the Army than by any other existing group.

Programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), for instance. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was responsible for helping to create the CCC as a national work force to restore people's confidence and provide jobs for millions of unemployed. But who could manage and direct such a vast operation? The Army, of course.

The CCC was, as the name says, made up of civilians, but a large number of them were ex-servicemen, out of work and glad to get back to regular meals, a place to live and some productive work to rebuild their self-respect. Remember, although there have always been lazy loafers throughout history, most of these were good men down on their luck. They wanted to work and provide for their families.

Hundreds of Army Reserve officers were called to active duty (my father among them) along with thousands of old-time sergeants and corporals—to organize, train and oversee the daily work of these laborers. And what work they did!

They planted forests. They built dams for flood control, battled forest fires, laid out and constructed roads and bridges. Every kind of natural conservation project you can think of and a lot you can't, was performed under the direction of the Brown Shoe Army.

What kind of men were they? Mostly, they were strong, proud men having a rough run. They came from city slums, from country farms, from north and south, east and west.

They were black and white and yellow and brown and all

shades and shapes and sizes in between. Some had never seen a live cow. For their direction and management they needed, and had, good leaders.

My father's company in upstate New York was, I suppose, a typical group. They couldn't use military rank, so there were equivalent titles such as "foreman," for first sergeant, "section leader," for corporal, and so forth. Since so many of them had served in the Army, they understood and readily adapted to the platoon and company-type organization. And since they were not subject to Army regulations or military law, they could be disciplined in the common way.

Officers and NCOs had to use effective leadership techniques—psychology, setting the example, demonstrating their fitness to be leaders—for these men to accept them as such. Dad's old first sergeant, Danny Zecca, a man born and raised in the toughest ward in Brooklyn, would walk into the nearest bar, after working hours, pick out the biggest fellow in the place, order him to put up his hands and then knock him out with one punch. The word instantly got back to the CCC camp and he had no trouble with his new draft of recruits. Illegal? I guess. Effective? *You bet!*

We couldn't possibly do such things today, of course. It's a court-martial offense to raise a hand against a soldier. But the men who lived in those times understood and respected the courage, determination and professional competence of the Danny Zeccas who helped run this civilian army.

Meanwhile, the Army kept on doing the things it had always done in peacetime: the Army Air Corps, forerunner of the U.S. Air Force, participated in some famous flights, including a four-plane, round-the-world record; there was relief in natural disasters and control of civil disturbances.

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In all of this, the world kept changing and not for the better. The 1930s saw the rise of the fascist dictatorships of Hitler and Mussolini, both of whom began to build fearsome fighting machines. Hitler in particular announced his intention of overturning the treaty ending WWI and reclaiming Germany's former glory. In the Far East, Japanese armies marched into China, bent on conquest.

And how stood the Brown Shoe Army? In 1937, very close to the outbreak of hostilities, they were about 140,000-strong, a trifle below the military might of Rumania. Soldiers trained with wooden rifles; trucks with big signs reading "TANK," were used

to represent nonexistent modern armor; mortar crews dropped make-believe shells down stovepipes; National Guard aviators dropped five-pound sacks of flour from observation planes (Guardsmen were deemed unfit to fly real fighters like the Curtiss P-40) to simulate bombing runs.

The Brown Shoe Army passed its most severe test with flying colors, growing in four years to eight million, fighting in every corner of the globe and whipping utterly and decisively the country's worst enemies. The Old Army NCOs had done their work well. Many hundreds were commissioned, led companies, battalions, even armies (GEN Walter Krueger of the Sixth Army had been a first sergeant) in combat.

So, young soldiers, you may well thank your stars that there were such men to fight your country's wars. The Brown Shoes left us a splendid legacy and you enjoy many of the benefits of their sacrifice—the sweat and tears in the long, dry years, the blood in the fires of battle. Such things as the GI Bill, veteran's mortgages and any number of marvelous gifts of a thankful Republic are yours to use. Remember who bought them for you and never forget them.

And though you do not stand in the same brown shoes, you march in time—to the same traditions—in boots of a different color. ■

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Congress Passes Draft Law, Activates National Guard

In September 1940, Congress accomplished two things when it passed the first peacetime draft law in American history. It provided for a draft and authorized nationalization of the National Guard. The act stipulated that the draftees would serve on active duty for 12 months. Similarly, it activated the Guard for 12 months—this at a time when many people opposed preparations for war. The short active-duty time in the bill for both the draftees and the Guard reflects this hesitancy to begin mobilization.

In the following months the international situation continued to deteriorate. Within half a year it was obvious that the American preparedness movement would be seriously crippled if both the draftees and the Guardsmen went home when their year of service was up.

The fight to extend the service obligation of these soldiers during the summer of 1941 was both intense and close. The extension of the draft passed the House of Representatives by a single vote, 203-202. The National Guard got extended for the duration, but the draftees got extended for only another 18 months. Later they would receive more final word that they were in for "the duration."

To the military who lived through this period, the vote to extend the service of the draftees during the summer of 1941 was crucial. ■

The Lean, Lean Years of the **Depression Army**

By COL (Ret.) John M. Collins

As topkick Anthony Warden so trenchantly 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 and 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."

James Jones' crusty first sergeant in *From Here to Eternity* may not have scored a bull's-eye, but he wasn't far off the mark. More than three decades later, grizzled war dogs with hashmarks halfway to their chins still reminisce nostalgically about the "Old Army" between the world wars, when NCO Corps reigned supreme.

What was it like in the "Old Army?"

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 ranks in those days. Privates first class accounted for another quarter and, believe me, any rocket who made PFC on his first three-year hitch was viewed with suspicion by protagonists and peers alike.

Noncoms were exclusively troop leaders, whether line or staff, a hard-core elite, set apart from their fellow men. In every rifle company, artillery battery or cavalry troop, the basic fighting units, the first sergeant had three chevrons up and two rockers down framing his coveted diamond. In 1939, there were seven enlisted grades, from master sergeant to private. Since then, the system has been wrenched upside down and inside out on numerous separate occasions. Washboard-knuckled buck sergeants, the scourge of barracks and field, ruled platoons in despotic grandeur and corporals held sway over squads.

Tinkers, linkerers and assorted wizards passing by drew pay for bizarre specialties but their sleeves were bare of stripes. Those were reserved for NCOs, 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 (although skullduggery was fairly common). Dullards who failed to pass the test were afforded a full year to contemplate the error of their ways before they could try again. First sergeants normally were exempt from exams. Because of their hand-in-glove relationship with company commanders, they universally were elevated on the Great Man's say.