

The Day I Became a Brave Rifle

by Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk, USA (Ret.)

Gen. Winfield Scott, at the Battle of Chapultepec, was reputed to have exclaimed about the 3d U.S. Cavalry Regiment, "Brave Rifles, Veterans, you have been baptized in fire and blood and have come out steel." Thenceforth, the troopers of the 3d Cav would be known as the "Brave Rifles."

My baptism of fire came not on the fields of strife, but at peaceful, picturesque Fort Myer, Virginia, where the 3d U.S. Cavalry Regiment was stationed. It occurred during my first tour as Officer of the Day. My "bleeding" was not in combat, but for a brand-new, pre-war second lieutenant, it proved to be a pressure-packed, challenging, inspiring, exhilarating, exhausting, tempestuous 24 hours.

It all began at a gallop at Guard Mount, and never let up. As I descended the steps of the Guard House resplendent in polished boots, spurs, breeches, Sam Browne belt, saber, and campaign hat, I was weak-kneed with a pounding heart. My quivering legs somehow got me to my post. As I stood before the perfectly aligned, crisply and immaculately uniformed troopers, my mouth was dry, and my mind suddenly went blank like a quarterback about to call his first play and not remembering one thing out of his play book. My last vestige of confidence vanished when I saw my Sergeant of the Guard. He was a tiny, wizened, but very tough old soldier with over 20 years of service who allegedly ate second lieutenants with his scrambled eggs for breakfast. I knew his reputation, and had heard him on the parade ground during close order drill shout, "When aye say aysa rite, aye wanna heer dose aysa cleeeek."

But somehow the tough old sergeant and the new lieutenant were carrying it off. Now the ranks were open, and I was passing slowly, carefully, from man to man, checking each weapon, shoes, crispness of the summer-starched khakis, hair-cuts, shaves, position of the caps, knowledge of General and Special Orders, confirming that each was, indeed, qualified to stand guard.

At the same time, I was searching for the most perfectly turned-out trooper, who would be designated the Colonel's Orderly. The chosen soldier would not have to pull guard duty, and his selection was a greatly sought after honor for him and his troop. It was so competitive among troops that troopers were known to have been carried from their Orderly Rooms to Guard Mount by their fellows, so that they would not crack or wrinkle the heavily starched trousers at the knee.

I was now down to three. After checking handkerchiefs, undershirts, polish of their brass, and asking ever increasingly difficult military questions, I finally had my man, and Guard Mount was soon over.

I was now the Officer of the Day, and for the next hours, I would be in charge of the Post, as the colonel's designated representative. I did not have time to reflect upon my newly exalted status or my great responsibilities, for my corporals were now running the prisoners out of the Guard House, and lining them up for a rapid roll call. I watched with more than a vested interest, for like a supply sergeant, I was about to sign for them.

As soon as the count was correct and my signature on the dotted line, they were hustled out at a rapid clip for the Mess Hall, some distance away. They marched in a tight body, and members of my guard circled them like outriders during a cattle round-up, or fighters escorting heavily-laden bombers, and every bit as alert.

The moment I saw their plates being filled, I sallied forth directly toward the flagpole, for it was now almost time for Retreat. As I arrived, to my great relief I found the detail to be complete and in place — two men to fire the Retreat Gun, two to lower the colors, and the bugler. I glanced at my watch. I had been warned to start EXACTLY on time — after all, the colonel's quarters were only a stone's throw away, and HE might be watching. My watch said, "Now!"

I nodded to the bugler. With his first notes, I became swept up and deeply moved by the small, simple, yet poignant ritual which unfolded before me. I was standing on a high bluff looking down upon the whole city of Washington, D.C., which seemed to sprawl tightly around my feet. Behind me the setting sun, like a giant spotlight, bathed the city in the brightest of light. Every detail was so clear and so close that I was tempted to reach out and touch the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, the Capitol. The bugler's notes were so strong, so clear, so penetrating that I was sure that the entire city before me was hearing him.

The spectacular setting and simple ceremony were so stirring and absorbing that I had difficulty holding back the shivers. Then came the BOOM of the gun, and the bugler, again, with his beautiful, plaintive, haunting notes — as I saluted and watched the colors being slowly and carefully lowered. That simple, dignified, and beautiful ceremony signified the end — the high point — of the soldier's day, and left me with a vivid and absolutely unforgettable picture. From that day on, Retreat would always have a special meaning for me.

As soon as the flag was folded and the detail began marching away, I shook myself back to reality, and hastily returned to the Guard House. The prisoners were back from their meal. I gave them time to get settled in for the night, then went in to check them.

As I wandered among these basically good-looking troopers, despite their prison garb, caged and lying on hard, uncomfortable bunks because of some transgression, I could not help but be struck by how this depressing sight contrasted so vividly with the truly beautiful one which I had so recently witnessed.

Darkness quickly settled in, and now it was time to carry out yet another one of my gamut of responsibilities. One by one, I visited each of the 14 widely scattered guard posts, and was challenged 14 times by 14 different sentries. I was encouraged and reassured that my guards were alert and familiar with their General and Special Orders, and that the post was secure.

This had been a long, demanding procedure, and midnight was approaching. Yet, before the task was completed, there was one more post to be inspected — the 15th. This one was the most distant, most unusual, and most special. It was the



sentry at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, deep in Arlington National Cemetery.

As it had been with the other 14 posts, this one would be on foot — *a la pied*. The day of the jeep had not yet arrived. From the Guard House my steps took me past the old, venerable, brick chapel, and through the nearby gate into the cemetery. I took a deep breath, for staring straight ahead of me was total blackness. The bright lights of the Post which I was leaving accentuated the darkness which I was facing.

I moved out briskly, for I had a long, long walk ahead of me. The lights of the Post had gradually dimmed, and soon disappeared behind me. It was now pitch, inky black, and absolutely still. The only sounds to be heard were the sharp crack of my leather heels as they hit the pavement. Since there were no competing sounds, the noise of my boots was greatly magnified. Each time the heel came down, it was like a spaced, single, pistol shot echoing in the heavy stillness of the night — crack, crack, crack.

As I walked deeper into the cemetery, I began to be flooded with emotions. It was eerie, unreal, spooky, scary. Here I was in a vast cemetery — all alone. What had I gotten myself into? Misgivings began to emerge. Who would know it if I turned back right now and forgot the whole thing? I, the only living person among acres and acres of dead. My chest got tighter, my breath shorter — crack, crack, crack. I gritted my teeth, and just knew that I had to ride it out. I resolutely continued on, and began to think positively.

My eyes were now more accustomed to the deep gloom. I could make out, dimly, row upon row of identical white headstones. Visible, too, from time to time were more elaborate markers and monuments. I began to reflect upon who it was that was buried around me and why they were there. Suddenly, abruptly, I realized how very privileged I was. Here, enveloping me were military heroes from every war in which the United States had ever been engaged, even including some from the Revolutionary War. There were military leaders and military men whose exploits fill endless pages of history books, recipients of the Medal of Honor, individuals known only to family and friends, and, as I would soon note, some known but to God. I was suddenly sobered and awed to realize that I was moving about the greatest collection of heroes in all the world.

I knew that, earlier this day, hundreds of people, busloads of them, had been scattered throughout the cemetery to pay homage to these heroes. Now I had them, all of them, the whole cemetery to myself. I was privileged, indeed.

My heart had stopped pounding, I was swallowing easier, my footsteps quickened — were more purposeful. I was now eating up the yards. Suddenly, it was no longer totally black, for up ahead I noted a faint spot of light.

As I walked, it gradually became larger and brighter, and I knew that I was about to reach my destination. I moved closer and then abruptly stopped. There before me in an island of

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bright light was pure, powerful drama. A lone sentinel — stiff, almost rigid — in crisp, sharp, splendid uniform, was executing an intense, moving ritual. He paced back and forth before the Tomb — 21 precise steps, an "about face," a shift from "right shoulder to left shoulder arms," a 21-second halt, and 21 more precise steps back. It was truly an awe-inspiring, breath-taking spectacle.

As I emerged out of the darkness into the bright light, I heard a loud, firm, "Halt, who goes there?" Standing at rigid "Attention" with his rifle at "Port Arms" was the guard who had abruptly stopped his pacing and now waited for me to identify myself. After a brief exchange of words, I instructed him to "carry on," and he resumed his brisk, clipped pacing.

My next duty was to inspect the Guard Room in the base of the Amphitheater. Before entering the room, I turned and drank in once again the poignant, symbolic, floodlit scene. Once again how privileged I was not only to "see" this tribute to that fallen hero and all those he represented, but to be, this night, the sole witness, the only spectator.

Soon I was back in the darkness retracing my steps. Those steps now were buoyant, for I felt exhilarated. What a rich, never-to-be-forgotten experience.

Before I knew it, I was out of the cemetery, and back in the Guard House. After a brief "breather," it was back to work — hitting, again, before dawn, the 14 guard posts.

The long, eventful night had, finally, ended. The Post was once more busy, bustling. I watched as my NCOs married up combinations of a guard and two prisoners, and sent each detail to their work locations.

For the Officer of the Day, the job was only partially finished. More challenges lay ahead.

Promptly at eight o'clock, I stood at Post Headquarters in front of the desk of Mr. Whitehouse, the senior warrant officer. I stared at the tall, lean, completely white-headed individual who looked old enough to have served with Teddy Roosevelt. My fate was now in his hands, and I wondered tremulously what that would be. He acknowledged my presence by reaching immediately into a side drawer of his desk. He removed some thin, typewritten, "onion-skin" sheets of paper, and wordlessly handed them to me. I walked out of his office and into the corridor. My heart sank, for I counted six sheets of paper. Each one represented a funeral in Arlington National Cemetery that day. I had "maxed the course," for in those days six was the most that could be handled. It had been impressed upon us that the Officer of the Day was solely responsible for the funerals on his tour, and that he would ensure that each funeral was completed exactly as prescribed — that there was no second chance, no second time around.

From my fellow lieutenants, I had heard all the "horror stories," undoubtedly highly exaggerated, about the OD who had a funeral without a bugler, another without a firing squad, still another without a chaplain who, himself, was forced to say, "ashes to ashes." The most colorful, of course, was about the OD who was bustling around, and in his great haste had stepped back and into the freshly dug grave.

Now it was my time. I was responsible for six.

When I came out of Post Headquarters, I spotted a pick-up truck, and knew that for this detail I would have "wheels." I

hastened to the Office of the Superintendent, and was immediately handed a map of the cemetery with circled locations of each grave, numbered in sequence. I jumped back into the truck, and hastily reconnoitered each widely scattered site to determine where it was, and how to get there. I rushed back to the Post, and found the first funeral detail already forming. After checking and inspecting it, it was time to go, and the first funeral in Arlington National Cemetery that day was underway.

As soon as the graveside services had been completed, I quickly returned, and there, already forming, was the detail for the next funeral. And so it went all day — back and forth.

It turned out that my six spanned the spectrum from the very simple — chaplain, pallbearers, bugler with few mourners, to the elaborate with full military honors — including caisson, rider-less horse, sizeable honor guard, firing squad, and many mourners. Each was so sad, sober, moving that I became not a spectator but a mourner.

Now, finally, it was time for Guard Mount once again. There stood not an apprehensive, trembling young lieutenant, but an exhausted, shell-shocked one. I was still in a daze, and wondered if anyone could pack more varied activity into a 24-hour period than I just did.

From somewhere came the words, "Old Officer of the Day." I shook myself and realized that they were directed at me. I was finished, my tour was over, I had survived.

Once again the boots went click, click, click. This time they headed in the direction of my bachelor's quarters and bed. It had been a tumultuous day, an emotional roller-coaster. I felt a great sense of achievement, of fulfillment. I now knew that I had won my spurs and earned the appellation — "Brave Rifle."

BG Albin F. Irzyk served in the Army for 31 years, fighting five campaigns in Europe as a 27/28-year-old tank battalion commander in the 4th Armored Division, which spearheaded Gen. Patton's Third Army across much of Europe. He was wounded twice and received the nation's second highest decoration, The Distinguished Service Cross, for extraordinary heroism. Additional decorations include the Silver Star with OLC, the Bronze Star with three OLCs, and the Purple Heart with OLC. Additionally, he served two years in Vietnam, with 600 combat hours in a helicopter with the 4th Infantry Division for which he received 11 Air medals and the third highest decoration, The Distinguished Service Medal. He commanded the famed 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment along the Iron Curtain during the Berlin Crisis of 1961. For two years, he headed the U.S. Army Armor School at Fort Knox. At the University of Massachusetts, he received his Bachelor's Degree and a commission in the Horse Cavalry from ROTC. He holds a Master's Degree in International Relations from American University in Washington, and is a graduate of the National War College. He retired in 1971 at Fort Devens, Mass., where he was the Commanding General. He is the author of a recently published book entitled, *He Rode Up Front For Patton*.