

#4 82nd Airborne – Dates not recalled – Ft. Bragg, North Carolina

Writer's Notes - 82nd Airborne Headquarters Company (for XVIII Division)

The buses reached the transit barracks of the 82nd Airborne just after noon on Saturday, carrying a total of eighty men whom had been placed on a roster for assignment to the All American Airborne Unit. The men had been provided with transportation courtesy of the Army. Why they were not just flown over the base and allowed to jump into their new home, Lou did not know. It would have made more sense to him, since all the men had graduated from the jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, the previous morning. The coaches were very similar to Greyhound buses and were reasonably comfortable.

They were late leaving Fort Benning the previous evening, so the men had spent the night on the road. They stopped for fuel and breakfast around 0700 hours, and the trip was finally ending. All the men were a little sore from the trip, but none of them complained. There were worse ways of traveling, and normally the Army went out of its way to find them. They would not have been surprised to be forced to make the trip in the back of open deuce-and-a-halves. Infantrymen were used to being relegated the lower end of the transportation system. The fact that all the men were Private First Class made the means of conveyance they had been provided all the more remarkable.

Louis was the only one in the group that had not made even that minimal rank. The normal procedure was to be awarded the rank of Private First Class upon completion of Advanced Training, but Lou had managed to eschew the privilege, and he was not too worried about it. Other than a few extra bucks a month in pay, it meant nothing to him. Rank would come, and there was no reason to worry.

The new arrivals were assigned bunks in the transit barracks, which held the men quite easily, only filling the two first-floor bays of the three story building. The structure was fairly new and in excellent condition. Lou had been impressed as the bus passed the tall, new barracks that the 82nd Airborne occupied. The whole division's area was clearly superior to any Lou had seen in his brief military career, everything clean and new in appearance. The men were told to make themselves at home but not to get too comfortable, since they would only

be there until Monday morning. Then they would be reassigned to their individual units. By the time bedding was issued and things were stored in lockers, dinner was called. Each barracks had a mess hall attached to the end. This is where the men gathered for evening meals. It was good to have so many classmates still together as a group. Normally the men would have been scattered by now to the proverbial four winds.

Lou and Jim shared a table with some of the other men. They were all glad to be assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division, since it was the designated primary reaction unit for the whole United States military. This meant if any trouble broke out anywhere in the world, they would be the first unit alerted and the first unit transported to that area, a fact which gave the division preference for the best weapons and training. They were also guaranteed plenty of jumps and training in some truly exotic places. Lou and the other men were looking forward to that.

None of the men expressed disappointment at not being posted to Vietnam right out of jump school. The subject was never broached, each man holding back his opinion about that particular assignment. Every man in the room knew they were slated for service in Vietnam prior to discharge from the military. It went with the territory. Lou was glad he had more opportunity to train prior to taking on that assignment. He wanted to be as mentally and physically prepared as possible before getting into the fight.

The first night was uneventful since the men were tired from the trip. They were not restricted to barracks, although they were asked not to leave the division area until they had been assigned to their permanent units.

Having already served in a non-training unit, Louis was familiar with the routine the men would find themselves working under. If this was anything like the MP Company at Fort Ord, it meant that, except when away on special exercises, the day's training would end around 1700 hours, and then the men were free to come and go as they pleased until it was time to report for their jobs the next morning. The senior NCO staff and Officers did not stay in the Company area after training hours. It was an entirely different atmosphere than those men who had been in training since their first day were used to, and they were all looking forward to it.

The men woke up to four inches of new snowfall. It was the middle of winter after all, but in Georgia the weather had been cold and damp but without snow so far. After breakfast most of the men got dressed and went outside.

In back of the transit building was another barracks. It was occupied by the men of one of the division's regular infantry companies. Louis and his crew had seen men periodically entering and exiting the building the previous evening, but neither group spoke to the other.

Some of the men in Lou's group began building a snowman. A few guys had never experienced snow before and were getting a big kick out of playing in it. They could not seem to believe how cold and white it was, even though they had all seen pictures describing winters in the North. After a short period of time several men exited the other building and took up position on the concrete steps of the building opposite them.

"What you cherries doing? Playing with yourselves?" one of the men from the other barracks yelled over.

"What's it to you, asshole?" someone from Lou's group yelled back.

"That's one ugly snowman. Looks like a Leg," said a short man...

"Hell yeah, it's ugly; we building it while looking at you," replied Lou's fellow.

One of the men from the regular company descended the steps, reached down, gathered up a handful of snow, and quickly fashioned the mess into a perfect snowball. That man's from the North, Lou thought. A Southern boy would never be that quick. The white missile was launched in the general direction of the snowman. It missed the snowman by a good foot and struck instead one of its sculptors near the armpit.

The reply was a couple of missiles volleyed back at the instigator. One of the missiles was dead on target, hitting the man in the chest, but somehow the guidance system on the second missile malfunctioned, causing the projectile to miss its mark. It landed amongst the innocent bystanders situated on the stairs of the opposite barracks. Luckily it came to an abrupt stop on the forehead of one of the men. The erstwhile innocent bystanders quickly dispersed, spreading away from the dangers of being clustered on the steps. Being outnumbered at least two to one, they did the only thing an Airborne squad could do: They initiated a frontal attack.

Missiles took flight, and Lou's group quickly gained an advantage with superior firepower. He was sure the enemy would soon retreat, as they were slowly backing up toward their barracks, but then the doors suddenly burst open, signaling the arrival of reinforcements for the enemy. Jumping to the ground, the new forces quickly armed themselves. Now it was Lou's group that was faced with a white extinction, as enemy missiles began to land upon his body with more and more frequency. Shouts of "Airborne!" came from both sides, mixed with other more traditional slogans of the American male locked in battle.

Lou's group of ten men was now outnumbered three to one, and they were getting clobbered. About to give it up and find a nice foxhole to fight from, Lou spotted men turning the corner of his barracks. These men were fully armed and had begun a flanking attack. A rebel yell informed Lou that there was a similar attack taking place on the other end of the barracks. Again there was a shift of power as the small but gallant group of soldiers from the other side was pelted unmercifully from three sides. A whistle blew. All the men turned to find the source of this sound, the fighting stopping instantly.

"You guys knock this shit off. Someone is going to lose an eye, and then all you guys will be in big trouble." It was the staff sergeant in charge of the transit barracks who delivered these words of wisdom. He turned his back as the men on both sides considered his advice, which he had delivered in the same tone of voice the men had heard throughout their lives. The sergeant had managed to imitate every man's mother with those words, issued in that particular tone. He began to reach for the door handle as the men responded to his orders in the form of about fifty snowballs. The man almost disappeared under the blizzard of snow. It was really quite a testament to the accuracy of the men, and for an instant there was a cheer of shared victory from both sides. At the darkest period of combat they had united to slay a common threat.

It was time to get back to work though, as a snowball caught Lou from behind on his right ear. He bent over in pain as the ear began to sting, reached his hand up and ran it across the area expecting to find blood. There was none. It continued to sting as he reentered the fight.

A Jeep passed by on the street that ran perpendicular to the barracks, the driver slowing down so its two occupants could get a better look. Bad idea, thought Lou, as he launched a missile in their general direction. His hit the driver while the others pelted everything else. The jeep disappeared down the road and was never seen again. The fighting was at close quarters and very vicious with the "Cherries" beginning to get the upper hand. The regular unit was about to go down in defeat.

Men from other barracks had heard the uproar and started standing around and watching the battle, laughing and shouting. Slowly their numbers swelled as word spread. These men were from the same battalion as the occupants of the enemy barracks, and, as their seeming defeat became inevitable, unit pride took over, and they quickly formed a skirmish line, arming themselves and then advancing across a wide front. They were well within firing distance before the first volley was launched.

As this wave of enemies approached, Lou saw his life flash in front of his eyes. A picture of an officer knocking on the family's front door formed in his mind. His mom opening the door to be informed that her son had given his life for his country while engaged in a military operation against the enemy. His still-frozen body being lowered into a grave. The color guard performing a twenty-one snowball salute.

The barrage was devastating, nearly knocking the men to their knees, with over a hundred missiles arriving simultaneously. Every man was hit. Those from Lou's barracks received a majority of the hits, but the men they were fighting also got caught in the barrage. All the men who were engaged turned towards the new threat. Without a formal declaration of peace, a new alliance was formed, and suddenly the men who had been enjoying their own private conflict turned to face their new enemy. The gist of this new alliance did not strike everyone as a good idea, so several men from each barracks continued their private battles within the older war. This led to snowballs flying in all directions. The forces then lost direction as enemy and friendly troops intermixed. It was difficult to recognize friend from foe, since each side chose to wear identical uniforms and camouflage. A hell of a way to fight a war.

After another thirty minutes the fighting died down as the men got tired and their energy waned. Lou was amazed at the whole incident. Not once was a punch thrown. He

could see tempers flair all over the battlefield from time to time as each man received their share of vicious hits, yet the two sides fought each other by the same rules that included everything but touching an opponent. If two guys threatened to square off with each other, they were quickly subdued by members of their own side. Lou saw this done several times during the hour long battle. No one dictated the rules; they were just there to be obeyed by all. Even during the worst of the hostilities, there was laughing coming from all around the area. When the two sides got too close to each other, the strength with which a projectile was launched seemed to lessen. Lou took pains to aim for the other guy's body instead of going for the head. Like Lou, everyone took head shots, but most occurred while troops were bending down to pick up snow.

If it had been real combat everyone would have died, since it was impossible to get missed for more than a couple minutes during the course of the battle. Not a pleasant thought. The fight ended with the men shaking hands and slapping each other on the backs as everyone drifted back to their own barracks. It had been a great fight and was the main topic of conversation during the rest of the day. Many a man from Lou's group expressed a wish to be reassigned to the barracks where their opponents were stationed.

Monday morning they were awakened at 0530 hours and informed that the morning run would take place in fifteen minutes. No one had mentioned that the night before, maybe because the sergeant in charge of the barracks was still miffed at the way he had been abused during the fight. The men were quickly formed up into two platoons out in front of the barracks. In the early morning light, Lou could see whole companies forming outside of every barracks in sight.

The men were moved to the wide road in front of the barracks. There were no vehicles on the road. Looking up and down the road, Lou could see all the companies formed up, like a parade was about to begin.

The necessary orders were issued and the men took off at a double time down the road. In front of them were companies of men, all double timing it up the road. Behind them were more companies. The noise level rose as each company began belting out its best Jody chants at the highest decibel level possible. Looking to his right as the group moved down the road,

Lou could see between the barracks to another road that was filled with more formations of men moving along. The entire 82nd Airborne Division was starting its work week with a morning run. At least all the men currently on post.

The run moved outside the division's area, passing through areas occupied by non-Airborne units. Here the chants grew louder, and some of the words took on a tone of defiance as the Airborne let the other men know they were moving through their turf. It was over an hour before the men were formed up again outside their barracks. They were told to turn in their bedding, pack their equipment, get cleaned up, and have breakfast. The next formation would be at 0900 hours, at which time they would report with all their gear. They would then be furnished with transportation to their new units.

Lou lingered outside the barracks after the group was dismissed and watched some of the activity taking place around the area. Each barracks had large open spaces to its front and sides. All the companies in the area were spread out there, and the men were in the process of doing their morning daily dozen physical training, each group performing their exercises in perfect synchronicity with the men sounding off cadence loud and clear. Lou could hardly wait to join them.

At the 0900 formation, the men were placed at ease and the staff sergeant began reading off the men's names from a clipboard: "Adams, Benjamin. First of the five-oh-four." First Battalion, 504th Infantry Regiment. There was a line of men in back of the sergeant, drivers from the various outfits, sent to pick up the new arrivals. As he called out each unit's name, one of the drivers would raise their hand so the man knew whom to report to. It soon became apparent that the list was alphabetical, so that Lou was ready when his name was called. "Merrins, Louis. Eighty Second Admin." Lou had stepped out of the formation as his name was called. One of the men raised his hand as the unit was designated and Lou moved over towards him. Lou wondered what the hell Eighty Second Admin was.

"Follow me," the man said and started walking off towards the street to where the jeeps and trucks assigned to pick up the men were waiting. By now all the other drivers had several men waiting behind them as the new men were being divided out. His driver did not wait,

meaning that he knew there would be only one man to be picked up. The man walked around the front of the jeep and climbed in behind the wheel.

"Dump your stuff in the back and climb in," the driver said. As Lou's butt hit the seat, the man pulled away from the curb. Three minutes later he pulled up in front of a barracks that had a sign that read, "Headquarters Company, 82nd Airborne Division." Lou did not like that sign. Not at all. "Follow me," the man said and began up the sidewalk towards the entrance to the building. Lou grabbed his duffle bag and followed. There were a zillion questions flowing through his mind as he entered the building.

He was directed to a chair in an office on the first floor of the building. There was a Spec Four clerk sitting at a desk filling out paperwork. The driver stuck his head through another door and informed the occupant that the new man was here and he would be heading over to Division Headquarters in about twenty minutes on a mail run if his services were needed then. Upon receiving a reply he turned and left the office, leaving the door open.

The man who appeared in the doorway must have been at least fifty years old. From the stripes on his starched and ironed fatigues, Lou could tell that he was the first sergeant for the company. "Come on in," he said to Lou and disappeared back inside. Lou entered the office, prepared to report as he had been taught in training, but before he had an opportunity to do so, the sergeant told him to sit in a chair located in front of his desk. The sergeant picked up a cigar that was burning in an ashtray on the desk and took a few deep breaths. He soon had the stogie billowing clouds of noxious smoke out into the air. "Light up if you want," he said.

"I don't smoke," Lou replied.

"Good," the sergeant said, "A nasty habit and one you should stay away from if possible. I'm First Sergeant Burke and I'm in charge around here. I know you have a dozen questions, but I was told to round you up and ship your ass over to Division ASAP. I'll talk to you later when you get back. If I'm not in my office when you return, my room is located on this floor. Just ask anyone and they'll point you in the right direction. You can leave your gear in the office, and I'll have one of the guys put it on your bunk for you. Smith will be back to pick you up in a couple of minutes. He knows where to take you."

"What is the 82nd Admin Company, Tops?" Lou asked, addressing Sergeant Burke by the traditional designation for a company's first sergeant.

"You'll find out soon enough, Private. Now get out. We'll talk later."

Lou was taken in tow by Spec Four Smith and driven to Division headquarters. Lou had no idea what to expect once they reached there. There certainly must have been a mistake, he thought, since he was an infantryman. Maybe he was being placed into a security force for the division headquarters, although surely the MPs would be handling that function within the division. He was led into a building where it seemed like there were a thousand clerks busy at a thousand desks. On the third floor he was deposited in another chair, in another office, where another Spec Four clerk worked at another desk. Once Smith had informed the man who Lou was, he turned and left on his appointed rounds.

"Private Merrins is here," the clerk said into the phone on his desk after dialing a single digit. "Major Bend will see you now." He indicated a door. Lou walked over and knocked.

"Enter!" a voice rang out.

"Private Merrins reporting for duty, Sir, Airborne!" Lou said, saluting.

"All the Way, Private Merrins," the major said returning his salute. "At ease and have a seat. I am sure you are wondering what you are doing here."

"Yes sir," Lou replied.

"Well I have a question for you before we get started. How come you are still just a Private E-2?" the major asked.

Lou was so used to having to explain it that his answer was very concise, a fact which shortened the story to a mere five minutes. The major sat there listening intently as if he were truly interested. Once or twice he made a note on the pad in front of him.

"Evidently there are a number of men in the outfits you have served in since leaving basic training who do not know what the hell they are doing," the major said once Lou was done. "Your promotion to Private First Class is effective immediately." This brought a smile to Lou's face.

"Now I have some news for you that might not make you so happy. I want you to listen closely to what I have to say and I don't want to be interrupted until I am finished. You understand?"

"Yes sir," Lou replied. He was sitting up, leaning forward, hanging on every word.

"Your records came here to the 82nd Headquarters last Thursday once your class had completed its last practice jump and they were sure you would graduate. All the records of the men were screened prior to assigning them to the various brigades throughout the division. Yours was flagged immediately by one of my men and brought directly to my attention.

"I want you to understand what is happening and why. As a Major there is really no need to offer you any explanation, but the circumstances here are extraordinary, and I want your cooperation.

"The 82nd Airborne gets first consideration for replacements because of its position within the Army. The men we get are all of the finest caliber. The primary function of the 82nd is combat, and almost all of the men sent here have a military MOS in combat arms. Most of them are Eleven Bravoes just like you. In reviewing your records, I see where you enlisted in the military specifically for that MOS and Airborne Training. I admire that in a man and hate to be the one who must upset your plans.

"The division has always had a problem of getting men who were qualified to do clerical work. Even before hostilities worsened in Vietnam, we had a problem keeping certain jobs filled with qualified men. Of course there is a simple explanation for that. Men who choose to become clerks do not normally have the psychological make-up to become Airborne. In the best of times Division receives only a fraction of the trained clerical personnel necessary to operate. Since things have heated up in Vietnam, even that small trickle of qualified men has slowed. Therefore we screen all new recruits for certain skills and aptitudes.

"Many of the men who come to the Division do not have particularly high test scores. A lot of them don't even have a high school diploma. This has never stopped them from becoming first rate soldiers. What they lack in education they more than make up for in native intelligence and determination. I have the utmost respect for them, but at the same time it does not make my job of finding qualified personnel any easier."

As the major talked, Louis' spirit sank more and more. He knew what was coming.

"Of course the moment your personnel packet hit the desk here at Division Headquarters, your fate was sealed," the major said. "Not only do you meet the requirements for working in Administration, but you exceed every one of them by quite a margin. Staff Sergeant Orison, who screens all the personnel records, was so excited he immediately requested you be assigned to his area. Most of the men we get have no typing skills and are only minimally qualified to begin training as clerks. Men with your test scores are usually given preferential training in some more intellectually challenging area than either the Airborne or the Infantry. If you had gone to Officers Training School there is no way you would have been allowed to stay in the Infantry after graduation. You test scores would have put you automatically on a list of the top five percent of each class, regardless of how you did in the school. Men who make that list can count on further training in logistics, intelligence, or planning.

"After reviewing your records with Colonel Anderson, it was decided that you just might be the answer to a particular problem we have at the moment. If we had decided to make you a clerk somewhere, I would not be taking this time to talk with you. If you had somehow snuck through our screening here at Division, you would have exactly the same problem when your records reached any one of the Brigade Headquarters. They are always bitching because we get first crack at recruiting clerks and as a rule get the best men available. If a man has a problem training into a job here at Division Headquarters, they are shipped off to one of the brigades, where they invariably wind up as a clerk. Sometimes a man will be passed down through brigade to battalion level, then down to company level. And whether they become company clerks or work in supply or the motor pool, they always remain in jobs that require their heads, if not their hearts. I am telling you this because I hope you will not take my decision personally. It's just the system, and now you are part of that system.

"You may think that an injustice is being perpetrated upon you and that having enlisted for Airborne Infantry somehow protects you from being recruited into Headquarters Company. Every year we have several men who wish to talk with the Judge Advocate's office to protest their change in MOS. I will tell you up front that I will not stop you from trying to get

transferred out, but I will also tell you that the Judge Advocate's office will say there is nothing they can do about this decision. You want to see the Judge Advocate's office?"

"No Sir," Lou answered. He knew the man was telling him the truth.

"Good. Now let me explain our problem and where you fit into the solution. About ten days ago Sergeant Hayes made his required quarterly qualifying jump and managed to twist his knee so badly as to require surgery. Sergeant Hayes is a senior NCO who has been with the 82nd Airborne for most of his career. He has more jumps than anyone in the division. It was a freak accident, but that does not alter the fact that the doctors at the hospital have removed him from jump status due to physical injury. They claim that the injury will prevent Sergeant Hayes from ever being capable of jumping again. Sergeant Hayes told the doctors to kiss the part of his anatomy he wipes daily, but until the leg heals and he is capable of getting recertified both medically and physically, we are required to transfer him out of the Airborne. Not even the commanding general of the division is able to prevent that from happening, and he would not anyway. The first law of the Airborne is that if you can't jump, you're out.

"Sergeant Hayes works alone putting together all the manifests for overseas deployment of men from the 82nd. That position is normally held by a senior NCO, E7 or above. It is a sensitive position since the person occupying that position must routinely make decisions about which men are placed on the monthly manifest for shipment to Vietnam. There are other manifests to other areas, but normally these are small lists to be filled by men who have requested transfer into the positions as they become available.

"I do not have any senior NCOs available who I can afford to transfer into a position occupied by only one man. Neither does anyone else in the division. If a senior NCO transferred into the division with any kind of personnel background, I have half a dozen jobs that require more training and expertise than Sergeant Hayes' position. We have been talking about trying to utilize a man of lower rank for the job, but none of the men have the type of background we are looking for. When Colonel Anderson saw your files, he asked me if I would be willing to take responsibility for training you into Sergeant Hayes' job.

"I will let you make the decision. If you do not want the job, I will reassign you to another position within the Headquarters Company. There are a number of factors you might

want to consider before you choose. First, if you take the job you will be working directly with me. Second, if you take the job you will be required to get a Top Secret clearance. This means that the FBI will do an extensive background check. The security clearance is necessary because you will be seeing and handling documents that are restricted to only a few men in Division. Any breach of security carries harsh punishment, including possible federal prosecution. It is not a situation to be viewed lightly. Your job would require you to make certain decisions using your own judgement with only minimal guidance from me. There are Army regulations to help guide you in making decisions, but the fact is that there are times when, because of your position, it will be your call. Every time you put a man on a manifest for duty to Vietnam, it is altering their life forever. Not everyone would be comfortable in that position. And lastly, once in that position, you will be there for the duration of your enlistment. Of course, if you do not take the job you will wind up being a clerk anyway, but if you take this job you can count on remaining at Division Headquarters."

Lou's fate was signed, sealed, and delivered. There were really no options available. Refusing the position would not have altered his position dramatically. At least they were offering him a job that might challenge him. He refused to give up his goal of Airborne Infantry and would keep an eye open for the opportunity to transfer. The major might be willing to seal his fate, but Louis was not.

Lou's afternoon consisted of sitting in a room with two FBI agents who asked him every conceivable question, and he gave some answers which he could only hope were correct. In addition he was fingerprinted and had half a dozen photographs taken of him from different directions, including one of the back of his head. Probably so they could recognize him as he disappeared over the hill. During the course of the day he had a chance to think about his dilemma from a dozen angles.

The most obvious way to get transferred out was to simply refuse to jump the first time his name was placed on a manifest. This guaranteed a transfer out of the Airborne regardless of how the major might feel about such a maneuver. This solution would only guarantee that he would never be Airborne Infantry though, and in no way would it guarantee his transfer back to the infantry. Patience would be needed, and Lou was willing to at least give it a try.

Lou was released from his interview and reported back to Major Bend. Because of his age, his lack of criminal record, and his performance in the interview, the FBI men had already given Louis temporary clearance. The actual background check might take several months because of the backlog of such requests the Bureau was trying to fulfill. Major Bend told Lou to meet him back at Headquarters the following morning at 0800 hours, when Lou would be introduced to Sgt. Hayes and begin learning his new job.

That evening he was laying on his bunk try to figure out why his life was so complicated. If he had wanted to become a glorified secretary he would have gone to secretarial school. One did not join the Army, and certainly not the Airborne, to push a pencil. He had expressed these sentiments to the first sergeant, who had lent him a sympathetic ear. Tops had heard renditions of the same story many times before.

The Headquarters Company was set up unlike any other in the division. There were no squads, or platoons. The first sergeant ran the administrative end of things and was responsible for running the barracks. The men were required to keep their living spaces clean, but inspections rarely occurred. Each had a separate bed and living space, although the area they were assigned to could vary quite significantly. Lou was initially placed on the first floor, until Tops received a call from Major Bend's office indicating that better quarters might be more appropriate for him. His gear was then moved up to the second floor where the rooms were much larger than anywhere else in the building.

The men were required to participate in the morning run each day. On Mondays it was four miles for the whole division. On other days it was merely two miles with a ten minute PT period afterwards. The Saturday morning run was optional. A lot different from the line units, but enough to keep the men from getting out of shape. There was no KP, no cleaning the barracks. All that was handled by men sent to Headquarters' barracks on disciplinary detail. Tops made sure they were closely supervised and searched coming in and out of the building, but he still advised Lou to keep his personal belongings under lock and key.

The men were required to make a jump at least every three months in order to keep their jump status. There was a manifest where the men could sign up for a list of jumping dates

and times available. They could jump more often if they desired to do so, unless a particular time slot was filled up.

Other than that, Tops had little to do with the men. He did not know what most of them did or where they reported to once they left the barracks. Since they were all attached to Headquarters, they worked directly under NCO supervisors and officers while at work. Most of the men had weekends free, and many of them had either part-time jobs off base or simply went off carousing. As long as they reported for the morning run on Monday and work on time daily, what they did in their off time was their own business. The first sergeant was willing to listen to any problems that arose and assist the men when needed. He made it quite clear to Lou that he did not consider himself anyone's mother and that the chaplain was available to advise the men about personal problems.

Lou enjoyed conversations with the first sergeant. He seemed like a decent guy who had his shit together. An Airborne soldier who was nearing the end of his career in charge of a bunch of clerks. Lou got the impression that Tops held the men he herded in high esteem. They did a job most of them did not want to do. It was necessary for the functioning of the division and they earned their pay. That was good enough for him.

Lou did not sit in judgement of the other men. What they did and why they did it was their own business. He would stay in his new job only for however long it took to figure a way back into the infantry.

The next morning he participated in the morning run which lasted just about twenty five minutes according to Lou's watch, about two miles, the time and his body's reaction to told him. Not half the distance required on an easy day during jump school. This was followed by ten minutes of PT. When it was over all the men headed back to the barracks for breakfast. Lou sat out on the steps and watched the men from the various infantry companies pass by, double timing it down the road. It wasn't until thirty minutes later that the company occupying the next barracks down completed their run. It had to be at least six miles, Lou thought.

The men of the infantry company spread out in the area surrounding their barracks and began performing their morning PT. Again Lou was struck by how closely it resembled a carefully choreographed dance. The men changed from one routine to the next with barely a

pause. They evidently had been doing the same routine together as a unit for so long that the switch from one set of exercises to the next required no verbal command. The NCOs leading the exercises did not walk amongst the men to ensure compliance like in training, but instead participated fully in their own little group off to the side, keeping pace.

Louis knew that if he wanted to be in the infantry, this was the type of exercise regimen he would have to maintain in order to stay in even close to good enough physical condition for when the time came. New men coming into the infantry company he was watching would have difficulty keeping up, and these men were just beginning their day. With the exercise routine he had done that morning, Lou would be out of shape in a month by these men's standards. It was 0730 hours when Lou entered the barracks to get ready for work. The men in the company next door had just finished up.

It was the beginning of the tenth week on the job at 0900 hours when Lou unlocked the door to his office and got to work. Over the past weeks Lou had settled into the job and a reasonably comfortable routine. The job had turned out to be much more interesting and challenging than he had anticipated. Getting up to speed had taken many extra hours. This didn't bother Louis in the least. It beat moping around the barracks. Major Bend had proven to be a great boss who allowed Louis to take on as much responsibility as he could handle as quickly as possible. The man had promised to provide whatever assistance Louis needed and had kept his word. He did not hesitate in praising Lou for the job he was doing and admitted he had been nervous about putting a totally untrained man into that position. The fact that Lou was doing such a great job had not escaped Colonel Anderson's attention, and Major Bends had passed that information to Lou.

This was all fine and dandy. Lou was glad the major felt that way. His life was not as miserable as he was expecting it to be. The major had proven to be flexible enough about Lou's routine that at least life was bearable.

Lou's mornings now started with the morning run, but instead of running with the rest of Headquarters Company, he ran with the Infantry Company next door. This practice had started with Lou staying outside after the morning PT. He sat and waited one day for the infantry company to return for its morning PT and in doing so learned that they didn't always

run as far as they had that first morning. Once they had spread out, Lou took up position in his own company's area and followed them through their exercise routine.

Louis felt kind of lonely and stupid the first couple of days. He was the only man from his company in front of his barracks performing these exercises. He stuck out like a sore thumb for anyone to notice. Men from the infantry company would periodically look over in his direction, quite obviously wondering about the madman from Headquarters Company. Lou rarely got to finish the complete routine because he was expected to report to his job by 0800 hours. Sometimes the infantry company was done by then, sometimes it was not.

On Monday of the third week, after the division run, the men of Headquarters Company were dismissed to get ready for work. There was still plenty of time to prepare when the men of the infantry company spread out and Lou took up his regular position for the workout. One of the officers from the company broke away from the group and walked over towards Lou. When he got close, Lou assumed the position of attention. "Airborne, Sir!" he said, saluting.

"All the Way, Private!" the officer replied. "The captain has noticed you taking part in our morning exercise. As a matter of fact so has everyone else in the company. The captain was wondering if you might feel better joining the group in formation instead of exercising over here alone."

"Thank you, Sir!" Lou replied.

Lou followed the lieutenant over to a place at the back of the formation. As they moved over, Louis suddenly became aware of the fact that the infantry company had not started its routine like normal. In fact, all eyes were on him, as he took up his position. As soon as he did, the lieutenant moved off at a double time to take up his position. As soon as he was in position the PT began.

Lou's watch said 0730 hours and it was time for him to leave, but now he was really into the exercise. For the first time since jump school he really felt like part of a group, even though he knew he wasn't. Instead of just leaving he kept going until the company finished. As they began closing ranks and forming up, Lou turned and sprinted back to his barracks. Some of the men were just exiting the building in a big hurry. They would have to hustle or be late for work. In the Headquarters Company that was a no-no. The colonel was a stickler for punctuality.

Lou was tempted to jump in the bus provided for transportation just the way he was but decided he needed a shower and clean fatigues. Hurrying as fast as possible, he made it to his office by 0830 hours. He unlocked his door and sat down. The phone rang three seconds later.

"I admire a man who does things with enthusiasm," the colonel said. "If you're going to be late, why mess around and be two minutes late? Thirty minutes is damn near a record. Do you have a reason for choosing to come into work a half hour late?"

"No excuse, Sir," Lou said.

"Very good, Private Merrins. At least you do not try to hide your indiscretion behind some lame excuse I would not accept anyway. If you can not get to work on time like everybody else, some kind of action must be taken to insure it does not happen again. Am I right, Private Merrins?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Are you sure you don't want to say anything on your behalf?"

"Yes, Sir."

"At ease, Private Merrins. Take a seat. I do not approve of men showing up to work late without prior approval. You would normally receive a warning, and the next time it happened you would receive an Article 15. When you were late this morning, Major Bend placed a call to Company to inquire as to your whereabouts. First Sergeant Hayes told him of your proclivity for physical exercise and that this morning you seemed to have been adopted by Alpha Company next door. Major Bends, worrying that you might have deserted your post, put a call through to the Company Commander. Between them, they have decided that the best way to keep track of you will be to assign you to Alpha Company for their morning runs and PT. Because this Company is particularly hardcore, it will require changing your hours to allow for this extra training. From now on you will be allowed to report at 0900 hours. Since you work alone and do not seem to mind working late anyway, I do not feel it will affect the functioning of this unit."

"Thank you, Sir," Louis said.

The next morning, Louis was a little nervous about joining Alpha Company. The CO must have recognized Lou's position, and so when he exited his barracks, there was a man from

Alpha Company waiting there to escort him into formation. Whether the company did it to welcome Lou into their midst or because it was just part of their normal training schedule, they ran for almost two hours that morning, far longer than normal. Lou noticed more than a few sideward glances during the run as the men around him watched for signs of fatigue or quitting. Lou could not hide the fatigue, but he was a hell of a long way from quitting before the run was done. Afterwards, the PT was only half of what it normally was, but everyone was getting fatigued by then.

He returned late to his barracks that night. There was a note on his bed from Tops. One of the men from Alpha Company had dropped by and invited Lou over to the enlisted men's club for a drink with some of the men. Lou seldom drank alcohol and felt sort of awkward in joining the men, but it might be considered an insult not to accept their invitation.

He walked into the club and looked around. Lou did not think he would be able to identify any of the men. Walking over to the bar to order a drink, he was intercepted by the same man who had met him that morning. "Looking for us?" he asked.

"Yeah. I got your message. I thought I'd better stop by and say hi."

"Damn right. Name's Dan," the man said, extending his hand.

"Lou."

"The guys over there are really interested in meeting you. Get a drink and join us."

Everyone in the group introduced themselves. There were six of them sitting around the table. Lou could never remember all their names, but they seemed friendly and curious about him.

"Infantry, right?" one of them asked.

"All the way!" Lou replied with a smile.

"The old man tried running you into the ground this morning. Does it every time we get a new man into the outfit. Gets his rocks off doing it. You quit, you wouldn't have been invited back. Just so you know how it is." The speaker was one of the Negroes in the group.

"Wouldn't want it any other way. Got to separate out the Legs," Lou replied, smiling.

"Right on, Brother. Fuck the Legs!" he shouted. Men all around the room raised a glass in salute. It was a call heard frequently that evening. After an hour Lou left the group. They

protested his leaving but he came up with an excuse of having work to do back at Headquarters. Since none of the men could discern exactly what his job was, it was hard for them to argue. Other than issuing the normal challenges to his manhood, they allowed him to leave graciously.

Lou had nursed two beers during the hour he spent in the club and was feeling their effects. He knew that one of the ways these guys greeted a new man into the group was to get them falling down drunk. The next morning would then be a blast as the new man tried to keep up during the run. Airborne humor, you gotta love it.

After that first night, Lou would drink with the men from Alpha Company from time to time. He enjoyed sitting around, listening to them bullshit, telling stories of adventures shared and things to come. Although never really feeling at home with them, they were more his compadres than the men in the Headquarters Company.

Lou just never really got involved with the HQ men. There were several reasons for this besides Lou's "proclivity for exercise," as the colonel was apt to put it. All the men had separate living areas that tended to isolate them from each other. Lou was sure that both Tops and Major Bends had thought they were doing Lou a favor by putting him on second floor and giving him a nice room, but all the other men on the floor held the rank of at least E-5. Being a Private E-3, Lou could not have tagged along even if had wanted to when the men on the second floor would go to the NCO clubs on base.

Most of the men worked together in sections, such as the finance crew, whereas Lou had a job that he worked alone. Not only did he report to Major Bends directly, but the men also could observe Colonel Anderson enter Lou's office from time to time. Most of the men had little or no contact with the senior officers, and Lou imagined that might be a source of irritation amongst them.

In his job Lou routinely handled top secret documents, which meant he had to work behind closed doors most of the time. He could not leave his office without locking the documents in a safe and then locking his door. The other men could not just stop by for coffee and bullshit. Being a PFC and having an office was also highly unusual. Amongst the staff, having an office was a prestige thing, normally reserved for only more senior NCOs. For a

Private to have an office was highly unusual. Yet another requirement of handling top secret information was that Lou could not discuss his work with the other men in the company.

Putting all those considerations together with the observable fact that Lou preferred the company of infantrymen guaranteed that he would be left alone by the other HQ men. It did not bother him greatly since there were movie theaters on base and a library. Lou preferred reading by himself more than going out drinking with the guys. Being a loner by nature meant that he valued his time alone, especially Sundays when the barracks were deserted.

His job kept his interest and took up much of his time. Lou was sure once he got caught up on all the reading that went along with the job, he would have considerable free time on his hands. The thing that saved his butt was that he was a fairly good typist. Although he had to spend much of his time wading through Army manuals to learn procedures, his typing skills were clearly superior to Sgt. Hayes', whom he had replaced, and he was capable of making up for lost time there.

His job was in some ways quite simple. He was responsible for putting together lists of men for reassignment to other units. Lou's view of the 82nd Airborne changed dramatically as he got involved in the job. He had imagined the Airborne Division as a stable organization in which men served together for long periods of time. Maybe in peace time this was true to a greater degree than now. Lou had access to old manifests that were only slightly shorter than the ones he had been working on since the beginning of April.

Each month a couple of hundred men left the 82nd Airborne to take up other positions in the Army all over the world. Manifests would arrive from the Department of Defense with requests for "X" number of soldiers in "Y" number of MOS. This month the 82nd was to provide over three hundred men for reassignment to units in Vietnam. There were smaller manifests for Germany, Korea, and the Philippines. Both the Special Forces and Rangers were continuously draining men away from the 82nd. There were always volunteers waiting for these assignments, and they represented the top men the 82nd had to offer.

Even filling the manifest for Vietnam would not be difficult if it only meant picking from the men who had requested transfer there, as the 82nd was made up of all volunteers. If given a choice, the whole division would just up and move to Southeast Asia. These men expected to

fight. They were more frustrated at being kept out of the fighting than mad at being sent. Part of Lou's job was picking the right men to send. It was not in the best interest of the 82nd Airborne to lose too many of its key men at any one time. Their brigades, battalions, companies, platoons, and squads were in constant training because of the need to assimilate new men as more experienced ones were transferred out. The Department of Defense had issued many guidelines covering the transfer of men within the military, especially to Vietnam. It was Lou's job to interpret the guidelines and put together the lists.

The military was getting into data processing as quickly as possible. Lou would send out requests to the data processing center for a list of all men with a certain MOS and who had spent at least a certain period of time in the 82nd. Part of his job was to ensure that any member of the division who was approaching a year left of service was sent to Vietnam. It seemed like a cruel thing to do, and if these soldiers were draftees it might be. Lou did not feel sorry though. It was the fate they had chosen, the fate they had worked hard to achieve.

Lou had been hard at work for over an hour when there was a knock on the door. He opened it, and Major Bends and Colonel Anderson both walked in and sat down.

"Present for you," Colonel Anderson said, handing a folder to Louis. It had a red border around the outside of the envelope, meaning that it was top secret. Lou was not the least bit impressed. Most of the information in such envelopes was more boring than exciting. It was unusual for both officers to deliver such an envelope together. The seal had already been broken and Lou pulled the contents, which consisted of two typed sheets, from the envelope.

"Something to keep you busy for the next couple of weeks. From the looks of it you might just want to move a cot in here. No rest for the wicked," Major Bends said smiling.

The Department of Defense was calling for the formation of two completely new airborne infantry battalions. One would be formed up and trained at Fort Bragg for reassignment with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam. The other would be formed up and trained at Fort Campbell, Kentucky for duty in Vietnam, with one brigade of the 101st Airborne Division that was already stationed there.

"Lots of luck," Colonel Anderson said getting to his feet. "I expect you to come up with your requirements and ask for volunteers by tomorrow morning. As you will see from the

directive, we don't have much time to get this manifest together. Training is scheduled for two weeks. Do what you need to and get the job done on schedule. I'll make it up to you later."

"Yes, Sir," Lou said.

Lou read through the directive slowly, and halfway through he felt his pulse begin to rise. Once done he read through it again just to make sure his brain was not playing tricks on him. This directive was written differently than any others he had seen so far. Most manifests were filled using the standard army regulations covering transfer, but this one included special wording.

Once a manifest was put together, it could be changed by the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division if the transfer of certain individuals could affect the overall operation of the division. Sgt. Hailey had pointed this out when training Lou, telling him always to have a supplemental list of men available should Division remove some names from a manifest. While it rarely happened, since it was part of Lou's job to see that such transfers were not needed, once in a while Division chose to use this option. It was necessary to protect the integrity of the unit.

For this manifest, those rules had been changed. Any man requesting transfer, who had the prerequisite primary MOS, would be allowed to transfer. Evidently someone in the Pentagon did not want any transfers being blocked and so had removed the restriction from the process of forming these battalions.

When Louis had come to Headquarters Company, his military occupational status had been changed from Eleven Bravo to a Seventy-One Hotel: Light Weapons Infantryman to Assistant Personnel Manager. Under Army regulations he still held his Light Infantryman MOS as his primary MOS. Lou had the option to switch if he wanted to, and this had been suggested by Major Bends. But Louis had refused. The only way it could be done without Lou's permission was if he was sent to the proper military school for training in the new MOS, or if he spent one year in his new occupation.

Lou calmed himself and began to consider what needed to be done in order to ensure his transfer. If there were too many requests for transfer they would be granted to individuals under Department of Defense guidelines, which gave consideration to time in rank. Lou had

almost none. Hell, every new recruit had more time in rank than he did, since the men sent to jump school were all PFC out of advanced training. It would come down to a case of numbers, and Lou could affect those numbers.

The April manifest included two hundred and thirty names, many who had volunteered for transfer. The list would not take effect until the end of the month when orders would be cut. Many of these same men, not knowing their names were on the manifest for April, would see the request for volunteers and put in for immediate transfer. Since the new directive gave priority to the new battalions being formed, these men would be eligible for transfer, a point which could affect enough men's statuses to block Lou's transfer. That would not be in the best interest of the United States Military.

There was a touch of reality to Lou's decision also, in that it would be damn near impossible to disassemble the current manifest for April, complete a new one, and then try to reassemble yet another new April manifest. Lou decided that the proper thing to do was to complete the April manifest first and then begin on the adjusted version. That decision cost Lou almost a complete night's sleep. It was 0300 hours before he left the Headquarters Administration Building, but he saw it as an investment in his future.

The next morning, having missed the run for the first time since joining the 82nd, Lou dragged his butt into work. He grabbed the fruits of the previous night's labor and presented it to Major Bends. The major was pleased with the wording of the notification that was being sent to the various brigades in the division asking for volunteers. It struck just the right tone as far as he was concerned. He was amazed that Lou had completed the April manifest so early. Lou explained that since it was actually the third one he had put together, he was getting much quicker at being able to assemble the necessary information. Lou pointed out the fact that he was lucky since putting the new manifest together would take all his time. If the major wanted, he could approve the April manifest now and get orders cut, or he could wait until the end of the month. Lou was careful to point out that many of the men on the April roster were likely to apply for the new battalion, which would mean redoing it. It was left up to the major.

Lou went back to his office to begin working on the new manifest. Even without having names available, there was work to be done. How many infantrymen were needed, and of

what rank, to fill a new airborne battalion? How many cooks? How many clerks and drivers? How many personnel for supply?

The answers to all these questions were available. The Army provided a Table of Organization and Equipment for every unit. The TOE listed the number of men and MOS of every man in an organization and the equipment necessary for them to complete their mission. It was quite a piece of work and planning. Within Division Headquarters, men worked with information contained in the manual every day. Louis found the name of the person responsible for assigning new men within the division: the same Staff Sergeant Orison who had flagged his records for Major Bend when he was assigned to the 82nd.

Staff Sergeant Orison turned out to be very helpful and gave Lou all the information he needed. He dug through different manuals quickly when there was a piece of information he wasn't already carrying around in his head. Lou sat in a chair while the sergeant worked. After about ten minutes the sergeant looked up and smiled at Lou. "You still here? This is going to take a while. I have never put a whole battalion together from scratch before, and although I know all the parts, it's different when you have to do the whole thing at once. It'll take me a couple hours. I'll bring you what you need sometime this afternoon. No sense you watching me work." Lou thanked the man and headed back to his office.

Lou was working on another problem when there was a knock on the door. It was Colonel Anderson. He handed Lou the April manifest. Lou took it without bothering to study it and awaited the colonel's comments. He did not want to tip his hand to this man. "Major Bends and I thought it was a good idea to go ahead and get the April manifest out of the way. You must have worked like the Dickens to get it done this early."

"Yes, Sir," Lou replied.

"A photocopy of the list is already downstairs and orders are being cut as we speak. The general okayed the list this morning. He is not very happy with the new manifest. The division is bound to lose a lot of good men because of it. I just hope none of our senior NCOs get it in their heads to volunteer, although I doubt there are many jobs at battalion level that need men with rank. Have you put any of that information together yet?"

"No sir," Lou replied. "Staff Sergeant Orison is helping me with that as we speak. Just watching him work, I don't think I could do it without him. He seems to know what he's doing."

"Hell. Staff Sergeant Orison is one of our top men. The place would fall apart without him watching over his section. I am glad to hear he is helping you. With his help you cannot go wrong. Good job, Private Merrins. Carry on."

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of his transfer out of Headquarters Administration and back into Airborne Infantry was the approval of the April manifest for Vietnam. Once orders are cut they are damn near impossible to cancel, especially when they affect such a large body of men. Lou looked at the document the colonel had dropped off. At the bottom were the signatures of Major Bends, Colonel Anderson and the commanding general of the 82nd Airborne.

Since the new manifest would have to be completed quickly, Lou was reviewing the criteria for making decisions about who would be allowed to transfer if too many men volunteered. If there were not enough volunteers, on the other hand, then Louis would use standard operating procedure in deciding who to add to the list.

A man with more than six months duty in his primary MOS had a higher priority than a man who had less than six months. A new man with less than a month of experience had a higher priority than one with between one month and six months of experience. Lou could see the logic in that. Division was reluctant to part with a man who they had invested time in training. It hurt them less if the man who was leaving had little or no training time invested in him. This little rule would vault Lou past many of the men who would also be requesting transfer. All those with less than six months training had received much more training than Lou had in their primary MOS, since Lou had received no training in his primary MOS as a light weapons infantryman. The nine weeks at Division Headquarters could not be held against him, since he was working in a secondary MOS.

The requests for transfer poured into the Division. Every man and his brother volunteered, threatening to overwhelm the administrative system. It was part of Lou's function to see that this did not occur. Of course his motivation was not selfless. It was necessary to ensure that everything was done fairly and within Army guidelines if his own transfer was going

to go through. It wound up that the colonel's little joke about needing a cot in his office was not so funny. Even though Lou did not handle the officers or the senior NCOs for the new battalion, his job was almost overwhelming. Without the data processing division it would have been impossible.

Lou had a meeting with Major Bends and Colonel Anderson before things shifted into high gear. They approved Louis' guidelines to be used by data processing in handling the transfer requests. He had written them out neatly and the colonel and major both signed the necessary paperwork to get the data processing people started.

Lou knocked on the door to Tops' room. A moment later the door opened. He was dressed in a white tee shirt, boxer shorts and sandals, the standard barracks dress for afterhours wear. Since it was already nine-thirty in the evening, this was appropriate.

"I need your signature, Tops" Lou said, handing him the papers he was carrying.

"You requesting transfer, huh? You know they will never approve this? A dozen guys a year try, and none of them make it. You know I'll have to report this to your section chief, Lou?"

"Yeah, Sarge. I know. You can't knock a man for trying," Lou replied.

"Who is your section chief, anyway?"

"To tell you the truth, First Sergeant, I am. I work for Major Bends but he is assigned to Division staff, so that technically he is my boss, but not my CO. The best I can figure, you are at the top of my chain of command."

"Well then I'll have to tell Major Bends about this request," Tops said, putting his signature on the paperwork. "We could have done this in my office during normal working hours you know?" Tops was looking at the transfer request more closely now. "Eleven Bravo? Didn't they get you changed to another MOS?"

"Yeah Sarge, but I refused to let them make it my primary MOS. I'm still an Eleven-Bravo."

"I hear this new battalion is getting top priority," Tops replied with a big smile. "You think you can beat the system on this one, Lou? Huh?"

"Hell Tops, I am the system on this call," Lou replied with his own big grin.

"Well good luck, Lou" Tops said extending his hand. Lou shook it. "You'll make a hell of an infantryman. Don't find many like you around here. You're a good man, but you never have quite fit in with the rest of the men. I hope you get what you want. Now let me get back to my show, huh?"

"Sure Tops, got to get back to work anyway," Lou said. Top's signature was all that was necessary in order to make his request for transfer valid. Lou returned to the administration building and stopped by an office on the building's second floor. Luckily there was a technician on duty. Lou filled out a request form and got what he needed ten minutes later. On his way back to the office, he dropped the request for transfer by data processing, where all the original requests were coded for processing. The clerk on duty did not even bother looking at the name on the request. It was really of no interest to him. He just knew it was late at night and he was having to put in a lot of time processing all the requests he was receiving. Lou handed him a receipt form to indicate he had received the document. The clerk signed it. Lou gave him a copy and kept one for himself.

The next morning, Lou's phone rang nice and early. Without picking it up, he knew who it was and what they wanted. Two minutes later he was standing in front of Major Bends' desk.

The major had returned Lou's salute but did not put him at ease. Lou stood there at attention. There was a knock on the door and Colonel Anderson entered. Once he was near the desk he came into Lou's peripheral field of vision, but Lou was careful to keep his eyes focused on a spot on the wall.

"Colonel Anderson, I want you to know about a phone call I just received from First Sergeant Burke over at Headquarters Company. It seems that late last night Private Merrins asked him to sign a request for transfer form. He signed it, and Private Merrins took it with him when he left."

"At ease, Private Merrins. Grab a chair." the colonel said. Lou sat but was far from being at ease. "This true, Lou?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Why late at night?"

"I just went back to the barracks for a new set of cloths and a shower. I have been tied up here for the past two days. Top's office wasn't open and he said to just stop by his room if I ever needed him after hours, Sir."

"Sounds reasonable. Where is your request for transfer right now, Private?"

"Down in data processing, Sir."

The colonel seemed to be taking the news quite calmly. The same could not be said of Major Bends. He looked pissed.

"What job are you applying for?"

"Light weapons Infantry, Sir."

"And do you have the necessary qualifications and training to meet the criteria set forth in the guidelines?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Have you reason to believe your name will appear on the list once it has been screened by data processing?"

"Yes, Sir." Lou replied.

"Do you think there is any way in hell you will receive approval to transfer if either I or Major Bends don't wish for it to occur?"

Lou knew when to keep his mouth shut.

"I pick up that phone and your paperwork gets lost for two weeks. What do you think about that, Private Merrins?"

"I think I want to talk to the Judge Advocate's Office, Sir."

"I have no problem with that Private. I know they will gladly listen to your story and get back together with you in a couple of weeks about it. Now I suggest you just forget about transferring out and get back to work."

"Yes, Sir." Lou replied, bringing a smile to the major's face. "I will get back to work, but I will not withdraw my request for transfer. I am within my rights, the same as any other man in the division. I will not voluntarily withdraw my paperwork." So much for the major's smile.

"What if your paperwork just disappears?" Major Bends asked.

"Yes, Sir. It could happen, even though I have a copy of the receipt the clerk down in data processing signed last night when I dropped off the signed request. I also thought it might be a good idea to get a photocopy of the request made. Those, along with First Sergeant Burke's memory, will go a long way in providing proof that such a transfer was requested."

Colonel Anderson smiled. "I know you have authorization to receive photocopies of documents. Hell I authorized that myself. What made you think of it?"

"You did sir," Lou replied. "Yesterday you mentioned that a photocopy of the April list was made so that orders could be cut. Until then I hadn't even thought about photocopying anything."

The colonel laughed. "Don't get the wrong idea, Private. I do not fault you for trying to transfer out. You have always been honest about not wanting to be here in the first place, but it is not my job to keep you happy. I am responsible for running this division's administration and I will do anything necessary to carry out that task. From the looks of it you have done your homework and there appears to be nothing I can do about it. Given some time though maybe I can come up with a solution that is beneficial to all parties. You get back to work, and Major Bends and I will talk to you later."

"Yes, Sir. Airborne!" Lou saluted the officers, did an about face, and left the office.

Lou was shaken by the encounter. Morally, he felt that what he was doing was right. Trying to regain his position amongst the fighting men of the outfit. If the 82nd didn't need his talents as a fighter, maybe someone else would.

After lunch there was a knock on the door. Louis went over and unlocked it. Staff Sergeant Orison handed him two sheets of paper. "This should cover it, Lou," he said.

"Thanks a lot, Sarge. You got a minute? I'd like to look this over before you leave. I will probably have a dozen or so questions for you."

"Sure. Major Bends is on the warpath today anyway. Someone put a bee in his bonnet. I wouldn't mind staying in here all afternoon to tell you the truth. You have any idea what's bugging him?"

"Nah." Lou turned his back from the door. His office was quite large. It contained his desk with a swivel chair, a filing cabinet, a floor safe, and three chairs for guests. Lou moved

over to a chair with its back to the window and sat down. He had gotten used to sitting in this chair during the day when he needed to concentrate.

"Mind if I look over some of this stuff on your desk?" said Orison. Lou kept his eyes on the paper and nodded yes. Sgt. Orison was cleared for top secret. Lou continued studying the new information. It would be quite a challenge, filling all the spots on the manifest. He had never realized a battalion had quite that many people or that there were so many different MOSs involved. Once the volunteers had been processed there were bound to be spots left over. Even without having his bosses mad at him, this work was going to be miserable.

When he was done he looked up. SSgt. Orison had his feet up on the desk and was reading some of the material Lou had prepared for Major Bends. "I'll say this for you Private Merrins. You do good work. I was mad when they decided to give you this job. I was hoping to get it, but I knew that Major Bends felt he needed me in my current position. I did not think you had a chance in hell of doing even a decent job.

"Well, I was wrong. Major Bends considers you better than Sgt. Hayes was, and I tend to agree."

"He said that?"

"Yeah. He has had me looking over your work on a regular basis from the beginning. Wanted to see if I had any recommendations that might help you. I told him the other day that the best way to help you was to listen to any recommendations you make."

Lou smiled. Major Bends had always praised his work, but Lou had been skeptical, thinking it was probably the major's way of making up for transferring Lou. To hear he was saying the same things about him to others felt good.

The phone rang. "Division Headquarters, Staff Sergeant Orison speaking." Lou smiled as a look of consternation crossed the Sergeant's face. He had picked up the phone and answered it in the same way he did a hundred times a day before he realized it was not his phone and the call was probably for Lou. He talked into it for a moment before handing it over sheepishly.

"Private Merrins speaking."

"This is Specialist Tucker. Colonel Anderson wants to meet with you immediately in his office." Click.

"You are welcome to stay if you want," Lou said.

"Okay."

Louis hurried down the hall to the colonel's office. He entered the atrium, and there was Colonel Anderson. Even before he could salute, the colonel said, "Follow me." They took the stairs down to the first floor, the colonel moving at a brisk military pace. He said nothing to Lou as they headed out the door and followed the sidewalk, turning East. Probably taking me to the stockade, Lou thought.

After another minute the colonel turned another corner and where they were headed became obvious. The only building on this street sat back from the road and was different in appearance from every other building in the area. It served as both the residence and headquarters of the commanding general of the 82nd Airborne. They entered the front of the building, the guards at the door saluting Colonel Anderson as he entered. The colonel never broke stride as they entered the building and came to a set of double doors to their right. A lieutenant, who was sitting, jumped to his feet and saluted. "The general is expecting you, Sir, and said you can go right in."

The colonel walked over to the closed double wide doors and entered the office without knocking. Lou followed at his heels.

By now Lou was beyond just nervous. A PFC was not bought before a general except for the death penalty. The colonel was done messing around with Louis, and maybe a stretch of time at Fort Leavenworth was in order. The commanding general was sitting down behind his desk as they entered. He got to his feet as Anderson reported in. Louis stood behind him at attention.

Louis was in position to get a good look at the general. He had seen him at a distance a number of times, but never this close. The man was dressed in standard army fatigues that were starched and ironed. On the lapel of his fatigue jacket were two stars. He had a name tag with his last name on it like every other man in the Division. Above the left pocket he wore his jump wings and above that a combat infantryman's badge with two stars.

"Have a seat, gentlemen." The colonel chose a chair to the side of and facing the general's desk, which positioned the occupant facing mostly in the same direction as the general. Lou took up the other chair that was directly facing the general.

"Private Merrins. Colonel Anderson has brought me up-to-date on your situation here in the 82nd Airborne. You might be surprised that it is not the first time I have heard your name. I had to approve you being placed in the position in the first place. I have from time to time been curious about how you were doing and have been pleased with what I have heard, until now. Colonel Anderson tells me of your request for transfer and about how you have seemingly used the system to get your way. He has asked me to intercede in this matter, but before I do, I have some questions for you."

Lou sat there nervously, realizing he had won a battle but would probably lose the war. He could feel the sweat dripping down his sides from his armpits. He did not have to look down to know his fatigue jacket was wet.

"The colonel's strongest argument for me interceding in this matter is that there is not enough time to train anyone into your position before you would have to leave. You got any thoughts on that matter?"

Lou looked nervously over at Colonel Anderson. "Private Merrins, if you have anything to say, do so now. I don't have the time to waste," the general said.

"Okay, Sir. Colonel Anderson is telling the truth from his perspective. The truth of the matter is that Staff Sergeant Orison knows the job and really likes the position. The only reason that he did not get it when Sergeant Hayes left was that Major Bends felt he could not afford to lose Orison out of his current position."

"Major Bends still feels that way sir," Colonel Anderson interjected.

"I agree with Major Bends, Sir," Louis replied. "I don't know Staff Sergeant Orison all that well. I only met him this morning for the first time. I needed help putting together the list of personnel needed for the new battalion for the 173rd. He dropped what he was doing and in a couple of hours he had finished a paper with all the information I needed. It would have taken me two days to gather the same information. The sergeant did not act like he was doing a favor."

"I do know that if I had his knowledge, my job would be a snap. My job is twenty percent knowledge and eighty percent secretarial work. The aspect of my job that took the longest to learn was interpreting the Army's regulation manuals. Just watching Sergeant Orison flip through them this morning, I could tell he already knows his way around them. Major Bends has had him monitoring my work from the beginning, so he knows the job. If you need someone to fill my job, give it to Sergeant Orison.

"Give him my office to work out of and replace my position with a good typist. I am sure Staff Sergeant Orison could handle both my current job and his. Just do not put a typewriter in there because he is too valuable to waste his time typing. It's why you don't get to type, Sir.

"Sergeant Hayes was an E-7, and the position calls for an E-7. Give Sergeant Orison a promotion," Lou added impulsively. He was winging it now, letting his mind speak without much forethought. "Hell, they take kids, teach them to fly a helicopter, and then make them warrant officers. If Sergeant Orison is so important to the division, make him a warrant officer."

Lou was relaxing now. Warming up to the discussion. "Another thing is that until now the information being provided by the data processing section has been great, and I could not do my job without them, but with a little work on how they process my requests, I think we could cut the work on the manifests in half, Sir. They are doing everything they have been asked, but I think we just have to rework our thinking about how we want the information we need processed."

Lou stopped speaking. "Well, Colonel Anderson?" the general asked.

"Yes, Sir. What Private Merrins says is all true as far as I know. I would have to talk with Major Bends and Sergeant Orison about it, but some of the private's ideas have merit. Which brings us to my other point regarding his future."

"Colonel Anderson feels you have a real flair for the administrative process. It would be a waste of your talents to let you be an infantryman, the general said."

"Colonel Anderson has a right to his opinion, Sir," Lou replied. "On the other hand I have a right to mine. Did you know I was sent to advanced leadership school out of basic training and finished first in my class, or that I was given a squad in advanced infantry training and finished the cycle as a platoon sergeant? Colonel Anderson does not seem to give the

same weight to the fact that I qualified as an expert on both the automatic rifle and machinegun. I don't know if he knows that I train each morning with Alpha Company just to keep in shape so that when I receive my transfer I can survive physically. Did the colonel tell you I have made five jumps since joining the 82nd? I may be just as talented as an infantryman and I would certainly be more highly motivated."

As he spoke, Louis let the frustration of the past two months loose. He began to get mad. "I'll tell you another thing, Sir. The colonel feels this is his army and he knows what is best for it. Well, it's my army too. I joined up because there are Americans getting killed fighting a war. If there wasn't a war, I would not be here. If I wanted to be a secretary I would have bought me a mini skirt and gotten a job working in an office as a civilian, making decent wages, Sir."

"Those are pretty harsh words from a private," the general said. "Is there anything else you want to say before I give my decision?"

"Yes, Sir. You have a combat infantryman's badge with two stars. What would you do if you were in my place? Go back to your typewriter like a good boy? I don't think so, Sir. You might get one CIB because someone made you, but you don't get the stars unless that is what you truly want to do. You can block my transfer if you must, General, but if you do, then I will do what I need to do."

"And what is that?"

"Sir, I will never jump again with the 82nd Airborne," Lou replied. "Since I jumped last weekend, that means I would be here for three more months before I would need to jump or lose my status. Since I will never jump again with the 82nd Airborne, I will be transferred to a leg outfit. Since I am jump qualified, in six months I will be eligible for transfer to a Ranger outfit, Sir."

"Okay, Private Merrins. Wait outside while I talk with the colonel."

Lou took a seat in the outer office under the watchful eye of the general's secretary. Probably thinks I'm a criminal of some kind to be dragged by a bird colonel in front of the commanding officer, Lou thought, smiling. Five minutes later, Major Bends walked into the

office. He glanced over at Lou, but continued to the doors of the general's office and entered. Lou sat. Ten minutes later there was a knock on the door and Staff Sergeant Orison entered.

He looked over at Lou with a worried look on his face. Lou gave him his best Alfred E. Newman, "What, Me Worry?" shrug of the shoulders. A minute later the lieutenant escorted him to the door of the general's office, and then he too disappeared behind closed doors. Lou sat.

An hour later, Colonel Anderson, followed by Major Bends and Staff Sergeant Orison, exited the office. The colonel looked in Lou's direction. He immediately sprang to his feet and saluted. "Airborne, Sir!"

"All the way, Private. The general wants to see you now." The colonel turned and walked out. All three men had smiles on their faces. Lou wondered what the hell that meant.

Lou knocked on the general's door and then entered and reported in.

"At ease, Private," the general said without asking him to be seated this time. "Working with Airborne soldiers is both the greatest honor I will ever have and the biggest pain in the ass. Remember that, Private Merrins.

I agree with Colonel Anderson that you certainly have a talent for administrative duties. If you want to stay, I will guarantee you that you will spend the rest of your tour here at Fort Bragg, and you can expect rapid promotion. It's an offer that is good now and will remain good as long as I am Commanding General of the 82nd. If you should ever change your mind, just contact my office and give them your name.

I have decided to grant your transfer to the Third Battalion of the 173rd. You asked me what I would do in your situation. I can only hope that I would do what you have done. I am proud of my career and of being Airborne, but I am most proud of having served my country in combat. I think you know that, whereas Colonel Anderson and Major Bends never will. They are good men, and the military could not survive without them and other men like them, but they are not infantrymen. You finish your job here at the 82nd and then go join your new outfit. Colonel Anderson and Major Bends won't give you any trouble. They are good men and will accept my decision on this matter. You are dismissed."

"Airborne, Sir!" Lou said saluting.

"All the way, Private Merrins," the general said. He was smiling as he returned Lou's salute.

Lou felt a flood of relief as he left the general's office. Hot damn, he thought. He hurried back to his office. There was a lot of work to get done, and now Lou's time was limited. Walking down the hall to his office he saw that the door was open. He hoped there were no top secret documents out. Sergeant Orison should have locked the material away and locked the door when he left. Lou could be in big trouble.

He entered his office. Major Bends was sitting behind the desk while looking over some papers with Sergeant Orison standing behind him, looking over his shoulder. They looked up as Lou entered.

Sergeant Orison almost jumped over the desk with a big smile on his face and his hand extended. Lou took his hand and almost had his arm shaken from his shoulder. "Colonel Anderson and Major Bends will not tell me what you said to the General, but it seems I got a new job."

"Yeah, and my office." Lou said smiling. "Probably put a desk for me in the latrine."

"You don't need a desk. Just sit on the hopper and write on your lap," the major said. He too was smiling. "I was sure we had you, Private. Colonel says that public speaking is just another of your hidden talents."

Well, I'll leave you two gentlemen alone to figure out how you want to handle things. Keep me informed of any changes you make, Sergeant Orison."

"Yes, Sir."

"Private Merrins, let me know if you need anything. I hate losing you, but you have done an excellent job for me, so I have nothing to complain about."

"Thank you, Sir."

"So what's up, Doc?" Lou asked after the major was gone.

"What's up is that my old lady will shit when she hears what happened today. They are giving me your office and putting me over both my section and this one. I know that you had something to do with this. I can't thank you enough for that. But can I ask why? You hardly know me."

"Wrong," Lou said. "I know that the major believes you do great work. I know you helped me when I asked. That is enough. You aren't getting anything you haven't earned. I suspect you will do a good job, but that isn't my problem one way or the other. Without you I might be stuck here at headquarters for another two years, so I'm the one who should be grateful. Now what?"

"You can keep the office until you leave. Between us we should be able to get that manifest done in no time."

"Sounds good, but I have an idea. Why don't we move your desk from downstairs up here and put it in the corner over there. You and I can share the office making it easier on both of us. I need the big desk like I need another hole in my head. You're the boss now, so you need a big desk."

"You know, for a private you are a very wise little sucker. I should keep you as my secretary."

"Yeah, that's a good idea, Sarge. As long as your old lady doesn't require that her man have balls."

Sergeant Orison and Lou worked together and got the manifest for the new battalion done as quickly as the data processing department provided the names. Lou was wrong about needing to assign men from the 82nd who did not volunteer. Every MOS had an abundance of volunteers, and they wound up selecting the best men available for several positions. Sergeant Orison allowed Lou to do this since he would be most affected by the men he selected.

Lou wondered aloud how the battalion would go about assigning men to different slots within its organization. Sergeant Orison said that since they were filling the manifest, that they might as well fill in the various slots themselves. No one ever questioned what they did. This is how Louis managed to wind up as the first rifleman assigned to the first squad of the first platoon of Alpha Company. He wondered if anyone besides Sergeant Orison ever realized what had happened and why. It had just the right touch of irony to tickle Lou's funny bone. Sergeant Orison thought it was a nice touch.

Two weeks later, Lou packed his duffel bag and moved down the road to the barracks occupied by Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade.
END