
ELEVEN**A.I.T.**

Fort Jackson, South Carolina
January 1968

In one sense, training at Fort Jackson proved to be much easier than at Fort Dix. That was due to the fact that little emphasis was placed on physical exercise. The Army felt, and rightly so, that the conditioning of the new men had been accomplished in Basic. Now we would spend as much time as possible learning the particular field to which we'd been assigned. This was especially critical for the infantry where there were so many different weapons to learn about. In the blink of an eye, any one of them could snuff out your life, and a lot of others with you, if it wasn't used properly.

Whereas in Basic we'd had to walk out to and in from the ranges, in A.I.T. we were trucked both out and back. Not only were we less tired when we arrived, making it easier to concentrate on what we were learning, but we got there earlier and left later, allowing more time for actual instruction.

Another factor that made A.I.T. easier to take was the weather. It was still uncomfortably chilly early in the morning, but nothing like the sub-zero temperatures we'd experienced at Dix. Near the end of my eight weeks at Fort Jackson, it actually got warm enough to go around in short sleeves.

As far as the highlights of A.I.T. that remain with me, most involved gaining experience with the weapons. I got a great deal of satisfaction out of one in particular.

Modern technology had refined the old type bazooka, a long, cumbersome, aluminum tube with a projectile that a second man loaded into the back, into a lightweight, fiberglass version that came pre-loaded from the factory. After it was fired once, it was thrown away. Not only was it much lighter to carry, but the second man was no longer needed to load it. Training, however, was still done on the old version, because it could be reloaded with dummy rounds for practice.

About a hundred yards downrange from the firing line, an old, partially destroyed tank sat as a target. Each man was given three rounds and sent up on the line with a partner who would load for him. Due to the fact that the weapon was so cumbersome, and that, when the round left the tube, it had a tendency to spray a stinging grit back into the user's face, it was extremely difficult to fire accurately.

When my turn came, I surprised myself by putting my first round through an open hatchway that was just visible on the front of the vehicle. My second round hit squarely in the center of the tank's body, and the third went through the open hatchway again.

Few of the fifty to sixty trainees were able to hit the tank at all, let alone the open hatchway.

As I came down off the line, one of the instructors took me aside.

"You know, Hutton, that was some damned fine shooting you just did up there. Do you think you could do that again?"

I was somewhat taken aback by his obvious amazement with my performance. To me this weapon had seemed the easiest I'd had to qualify with thus far.

"I don't know for sure, Sergeant, but I think I could."

The instructor appeared to consider something for a moment, “Each man is only supposed to fire three rounds, but I want to see if you can do that again. Grab yourself three more rounds and go back up on the line. I’ll load for you.”

At that point everyone had finished qualifying. Seeing that something was going on, they all moved up to the line on both sides to watch.

The instructor stood just to my side. When he finished loading a round into the tube I had resting on my shoulder, he tapped my helmet, indicating I could fire when ready.

The idea of having an attentive audience made me nervous, but my first round just nicked the top of the tank’s body. The second went through the open hatchway again, and the third hit squarely in the center of the vehicle.

I started to brush the dust, raised by the backblast, from my clothes. While I was doing that, the instructor addressed the other men who had been looking on.

“And that, gentlemen, is how the weapon is used.”

No more needed to be said. I realized that I’d just been paid the highest compliment a trainee could receive from an experienced man like the range sergeant.

The eight weeks of A.I.T. seemed to pass far more quickly than had basic back at Fort Dix, probably because of the agreeable weather and also because I was pretty well accustomed to military life by that time.

When we were finished with our training, we were given a fourteen-day leave before we had to report to our next station, which, in my case, was Fort Lewis near Tacoma, Washington. That would be my departure point for Vietnam.