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A Soldier Looks at History¹

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KNOWLEDGE OF history is perhaps more practically essential to the everyday life of a military man than to that of any other person. This is due to two sets of circumstances. In the first place, the military man must base his strategy both of the present and the future on lessons learned from history. One can think of many illustrations, one of the most recent, perhaps, being the mounting of the guns of Singapore. In the second place, the military man is ever surrounded by reminders of the past—his uniform and all it stands for down through the years in point of both utility and service; the drill, salutes, even the language he uses every day; his regiment and the fort at which he lives.

By way of more detailed illustration, I am going to tell you something of my own reactions to Fort Snelling after I went there in 1940. I found the Third United States Infantry Regiment stationed there. I had not been long at the fort before I became aware of the intense pride felt by all the enlisted men and officers of the Third Infantry for their regiment. They learned almost from the beginning that it is older than the Constitution, that it is called the "Old Guard," that it has served on every frontier and in every war that the nation has waged; that it has furnished one president and many statesmen and military leaders. It began to be known as the Third Infantry in 1815, when several organizations, all of which

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had taken a prominent part in the War of 1812, were consolidated. It was stationed thereafter for a number of years at various posts on the Great Lakes. In 1826 it was removed to St. Louis, where it erected Jefferson Barracks; in 1827 it moved on up the frontier and constructed Fort Leavenworth, named in honor of its own commanding officer. In 1840 it saw service in the Seminole War in Florida. Soon afterward it went to Texas under General Zachary Taylor, who commanded it brilliantly during the Mexican War. It was at the triumphal entry of the American Army into Mexico City that General Winfield Scott turned to his staff and said: "Take off your hats, gentlemen, to the Old Guard of the Army." Thus the Third Infantry won its name. After more years of service on several frontiers, it entered the Civil War, where it took part in every battle of the Army of the Potomac and was present at the surrender of General Lee at Appomattox.

Most of the succeeding years until 1888 were spent on the western frontier. Then it was ordered to Fort Snelling as its home station and there, except for occasional sorties, it remained until the summer of 1942. It went to the Philippines in the Spanish-American war; later it served in Alaska building roads and telegraph lines; and still later it performed necessary duties on the Mexican border in the First World War.

All this history lived for me when I watched the regiment on parade and had a chance to see the blue and buff uniform of Washington's army, which only the Third can wear. At such times, too, I watched the regiment's battle streamers waving proudly. On them I read the names of scores of battles that every child learns in American history — Buena Vista, Mexico City, Bull Run, and all the rest. How could I fail to appreciate the value of a knowledge of history under such circumstances?

When I stood at the commandant's house overlooking the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers and gazed about me, I could hardly fail to realize that I was stationed at a post that was physically older than most of the other forts and posts in the Middle West. How far back in the nation's history this Fort Snelling reached!

I could turn and see two buildings that actually dated from the 1820's—the Round Tower, the oldest man-made structure in Minnesota, and the Hexagonal Tower still guarding the actual junction of the two rivers, though its gun ports are laughable now when one considers the size of modern artillery. I was not long at Fort Snelling before I learned how, and when, and why Fort Snelling came into being. I became fascinated by piecing together the story, and admired the keen judgment of Thomas Jefferson in planning for the preservation of the American West against the machinations of hostile neighbors, who were scheming to reach into American territory and appropriate some of it, especially the region north and west of the Falls of St. Anthony. I became acquainted with that strange but compelling personality, John C. Calhoun, who actually planned the cordon of forts guarding the frontier line from Green Bay to the Missouri and south to Texas—Fort Howard, Fort Crawford, Fort Snelling, Fort Leavenworth, and the others. Here was genuine strategy mingled with fine statesmanship. Fort Snelling took its place in the vision of a coast-to-coast United States—a picture, incidentally, that few men were capable of envisioning in the year of our Lord 1820! So the men who were responsible for erecting Fort Snelling were not ordinary bureaucrats, but patriots who dared to love their country well enough to think and plan for its future.

I often heard the name “Taliaferro” mentioned by residents of the Twin Cities when speaking of early days at Fort Snelling. Of course I had to learn how to spell it; who would ever dream that a word pronounced “Toliver,” was spelled T-a-l-i-a-f-e-r-r-o? That personality, Major Lawrence Taliaferro, came to life for me one day when I stopped at the Minnesota Historical Society and saw the actual diaries kept by this first Indian agent at Fort Snelling. Then I began to appreciate the place that Fort Snelling held in the development of Minnesota as well as in the military and diplomatic history of the nation. I saw that for many years the life of practically all present-day Minnesota and much of Manitoba centered at Fort Snelling! To it went the Indians of both Minnesota's great tribes, the Sioux and the Chippewa; out from it went missionaries and ex-

plorers; in its hospitable homes titled foreigners and other venturesome travelers were entertained. I sometimes have had the urge to write an account of all the famous and semifamous men who visited the post before 1850—Major Long, Governor Cass, Count Beltrami, Henry R. Schoolcraft, George Catlin, the Earl of Selkirk, Sir George Simpson, Joseph N. Nicollet, and scores of others. I was particularly impressed by the number of scientists and artists who found their way into the region. Then there were all the missionaries to the Indians who looked to Fort Snelling as the source of their protection and the place where they usually received mail and supplies—the Pond brothers, Dr. Thomas S. Williamson, Stephen R. Riggs, Jedediah D. Stevens, William T. Boutwell, Ezekial G. Gear, Father Ravoux, and Father Galtier, to mention but a few. How well one can enter into the spirit of a century ago by knowing what Fort Snelling meant to those unselfish men and women whose letters and reports are full of accounts of trips to it and references to soldiers and officers sent out from time to time on particular missions! It is impossible to remain many days at Fort Snelling without absorbing much local and Minnesota history.

It is only human that the men now stationed at Fort Snelling should want to see the more recent history of the Third Infantry and the fort preserved and given its proper place in the annals of the region and nation. They know that some day other officers and enlisted men will stand before the commandant's house and realize how colorful, important, and interesting Fort Snelling was in the year 1942. So, for their benefit, I am going to record for you and for future generations some of the changes that have taken place at Fort Snelling in my own day, from 1940 to the present, as they have appeared to me.

Hitler's legions moved into Poland in the early days of September, 1939. His troops moved from conquest to conquest, and in the spring of 1940 came the fall of France. It was then that America began to realize the crucial world situation with which it was faced. Congress adopted the Selective Service Act of 1940 and other measures designed to augment the army and navy and to place them

upon a wartime basis. These steps, of course, had their influence upon the organizations and personnel at Fort Snelling.

Located at the post at that time were the usual overhead detachments, including the station complement, medical personnel, quartermaster detachment, finance office and detachment, and others. Fort Snelling was still the home of the Old Guard, and in the later months of 1940 the post became the headquarters for the newly organized Sixth Infantry Division, which included the Third Infantry, with Brigadier General Clement A. Trott in command. The elements of the division, with the exception of certain units of the Third Infantry, departed for Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in May, 1941. The remaining units of the Third Infantry were administered and trained by Colonel Paul H. Brown until they left for an unnamed destination in the summer of 1942.

In early November of 1940 Colonel Ben F. Ristine assumed command of the post and remained in that capacity until late in January, 1941. He was succeeded by Brigadier General Clarence S. Ridley who, a few weeks later, was promoted to the rank of major general. About the middle of May he was relieved for a few days by Colonel Ristine, and on May 18 the present post commandant, Colonel Harry J. Keeley, assumed command.

After the fall of France units of many varieties were activated, organized, and trained at Fort Snelling. In the ever-moving picture of war, they have long since moved to other scenes and activities. Coincident with these transient activities came the organization, development, and operation of the Recruiting and Induction Station and the Reception Center at Fort Snelling, both of which it has been my privilege to command since October, 1941. These units go to make up one large installation, which for the sake of brevity can be designated as the Fort Snelling Reception Center. It was organized on August 9, 1940, as an outgrowth of the old Post Recruit and Casual Detachment. The first officer to assume command of the Reception Center was Lieutenant Colonel Francis M. Brannon. Before the end of 1940 he was succeeded in turn by no less than three officers—First Lieutenant John W. Keating, Colonel Ristine, and

Major James C. White. The latter was relieved on January 4, 1941, by Lieutenant Colonel John W. Campbell, who retired in the following October. I then was designated as commanding officer of the center, assuming command on October 10.

Originally the Reception Center was housed in buildings of the concurrent training camp area, situated in the southern part of the old training camp. Late in 1940 it was removed to new mobilization-type buildings. The severe weather of the last months of 1940, with storms like that of November 11, made it difficult for men to live in buildings intended for summer use only. Both the commissioned and enlisted men welcomed the removal to well-insulated buildings that are heated with gas. In the months that followed other buildings were constructed and occupied, among them the present Reception Center Headquarters Building, a processing building, a medical center, barracks, and a mess hall. By September, 1941, a total of thirty-eight buildings had been occupied by the center. With its growth additional receiving companies were organized, and there were four by the spring of 1941. A number of reserve officers, newly called to extended, active duty, were assigned to the Reception Center.

In the first months the center, with an authorized strength of 39 officers and 123 enlisted men, had a capacity of 250 enlisted men per day. An abbreviated form of processing was then in use, consisting merely of the issuing of clothing, the reading and explaining of the Articles of War, and the prompt shipping of recruits to regular army units. The first opportunity to gain experience with the new and greatly augmented processing procedure came in November, 1940, when the Fort Snelling Reception Center processed the first selectees through the operation of the Selective Service Law. Practically all these men, numbering about 250, were, strictly speaking, volunteers. For four months the center received men from recruiting and induction stations at Fort Snelling, Des Moines, Fort Meade, Sioux Falls, Fargo, and Cheyenne, but after April 1, 1941, only men from the Fort Snelling station were processed. The experience gained by processing more than thirty thousand recruits in 1941 was of great

value to those connected with the Reception Center, who felt that they were prepared for almost any kind of load in case of war.

Then came the sudden and tragic events of December 7, 1941. We will always remember Pearl Harbor. How could we ever forget it? The terrible events of that day unified our people, drove away uncertainty and reluctance. We then and there made up our minds to fight it through to the finish and to glorious victory.

Precipitation into the war brought sudden and large increases in the numbers of men to be physically examined and processed at Fort Snelling. We were suddenly handed a job far larger than anything we had ever dreamed about. Military necessity required that the job be done well and promptly. New and untrained officers began to arrive, and the trained and experienced officers, whom we most desired to keep, left, for they were of troop age, and their services and experience were badly needed in the field. In April the war department increased the size of the Fort Snelling Reception Center from a thousand to fifteen hundred men, and three additional receiving companies were organized.

With the increase in personnel, housing space was at a premium. As the situation became acute, the Reception Center spread into the training camp area, where it was originally located. The buildings in the camp area had to be winterized, gas heaters were needed immediately, carpenters and plumbers were hurried to the spot. In a very few weeks twenty-seven buildings were completely winterized and occupied, bringing the number used by the center to sixty-five. Almost at once, two receiving companies were removed to the camp area buildings. As soon as the weather permitted, tents were put into use for housing purposes. It was possible to abandon them in the following October, when twenty-two new buildings had been completed. They formed the first unit in a group that included barracks, mess halls, dayroom buildings, company headquarters buildings, and other types of structures. The entire building program resulted in the construction before the end of November of thirty-one large buildings and two hundred hutments measuring sixteen feet square and capable of housing from five to eight men

each. By January, 1943, the reception center had occupied more than three hundred buildings and had a capacity of about forty-five hundred beds. As the work of the Reception Center grew in 1942 we managed—I do not know how—to keep about one building ahead of absolute requirements. But never once did we let a man down; somehow we managed to find beds for all. Coal stoves are used in the buildings erected in the fall of 1942 in place of the more convenient gas heaters in buildings constructed earlier, for the lack of critical materials has affected the military forces as well as the civilian population. The Reception Center is the only outfit at Fort Snelling that is burning coal.

The year 1942 was one of hard labor, with long hours, usually seven days a week. We are intensely proud of our record, for during the year we physically examined between 150,000 and 160,000 men; and we processed through the Reception Center and shipped on, as soldiers of the Army of the United States, nearly 102,000 men during the same period. Our rated capacity is 450 completely processed men per day, but we have processed as high as 800 in a single day. Our authorized strength of officers of all categories totaled 80, and of enlisted men, approximately 600.

During mobilization a heterogenous assortment of man power is received by the army. This personnel must be sorted, processed, assigned, and forwarded to replacement training centers or units where their training will be completed. In the First World War, before the problem of the sorting of man power was solved, a division was sometimes disrupted as many as four times by transfers of men of certain qualifications to other organizations. As a result its departure to the theater of operations was often delayed weeks. One division, on its departure overseas, left a seventh of its men behind as ineffectives. Many others suffered hardly less. The loss of time and effort, the confusion and discouragement, caused by these failures to sort out personnel before assignment can hardly be exaggerated. Gradually, before the end of the earlier war, measures were put into effect to remedy the situation.

A sorting process must be accomplished before men are assigned

to organizations. To the activities connected with the sorting and care of the men have been added, for convenience, other processes such as providing clothing and equipment, and making records. The whole group of activities is known as reception. Reception centers exist primarily for the purpose of classification, so that the best possible disposition of available skills can be made. Following classification comes proper assignment. Every effort must be made to provide each army organization with men that it can use, train, and keep. The army must not be forced to undertake useless tasks, such as training clerks to be truck drivers in one place, and truck drivers to be clerks in another; rare experts must not be wasted; organizations must not be given ineffectives who are useless to them; and organization commanders must not be forced to sacrifice training because of initial paper work and administration incident to the reception of new enlisted men.

It is interesting to note that the reception centers also show to the new soldier expertly designed sound training films on sex and personal hygiene, first aid, military courtesy, and customs of the service. He also sees a film on classification, designed to orient him so as to obtain his understanding and co-operation throughout the classification and assignment procedure. The Articles of War are read and explained to each soldier, as well as the provisions of the Federal Soldiers' and Sailors' Relief Act. Each soldier is encouraged to purchase National Service Life Insurance. This is term insurance which may be converted at a later date. Over ninety-nine and nine-tenths per cent of all men passing through the Fort Snelling Reception Center have voluntarily purchased government life insurance. The average policy is for between eighty-two and eighty-three hundred dollars. And every civilian will be gratified to know that the soldiers from this great Northwest are making pay reservations for the purchase of war bonds in an astounding fashion. Again over ninety-nine and nine-tenths per cent of the men passing through the Reception Center voluntarily make pay reservations for bonds. The average reservation is now ten dollars, which, on the basis of a buck private's pay of fifty dollars per month, is a good twenty per cent.

The soldiers are doing this because they know that they are assisting their federal government to purchase and place in their hands the fighting tools of war; they hope to do something toward retarding the vicious inflation spiral; and they wish to lay up savings which, if necessary, they may release as purchasing power after the conflict.

The people of Minnesota and the Dakotas may well be proud of the men they have sent and are now sending into the military and naval forces. There is much more that I could say regarding my experiences with them at Fort Snelling these past two years, but time and space will not permit. Judging from many reports received from military personnel located across the length and breadth of these United States, organization commanders are always gratified to receive men from this section of the country, because they know they are intelligent, capable, physically fit, and in general well trained. They constitute the finest potential soldiers in the land.



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