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Article Summary: Keller entered the Army at the Fort Crook induction station. Details of his first days at an induction center in Kansas would sound familiar to any World War II soldier.

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This Business of Induction

Sgt. Ken R. Keller

The process of being changed from a confident civilian to a small and timid soldier has its complications, and the greatest of these are the corporals and sergeants.

But let's discuss the situation chronologically. We'll talk about our own case because that's the only one we know anything about. We started from the Fort Crook induction station where we were "sworn in" by a lieutenant who told us to "work hard" and we would be all right in the army. This, we discovered later, was not advice; it was a prediction.

After a night ride in the comparative luxury of a Pullman, our little party was routed out shortly after 5 a. m. at a Missouri siding where a bus awaited us.

Bounced into Kansas, we piled out in the pre-dawn dark at what eventually proved to be the reception center — the place where inducted men are "processed," as the army calls it. We soon realized that out there in the gloom were hundreds of males, all shivering as we were and, no doubt, regretting that they had taken so literally all the "travel light" instructions they'd received from well-meaning persons in the home town.

Somebody came up and asked for our papers, which we produced, and the figure which took them hurried off toward the lighted windows of a building. We were told by another voice out of the dark to "Pick up your luggage and come this way."

There was difference of opinion as to which way "this way" was, but finally we stood in a crowd with the other men while a couple of shadowy uniformed objects began calling off names and handing stringed tickets to the men from the crowd who answered. The tickets were to be tied to your belts.

About that time some sergeant must have told the sun it could come up, because it began to get light.

From the building which still boasted the lights, a chubby corporal came on the run. He said, "I've a rooster and I've got

to crow it." I didn't know what the guy was talking about but I wished I had a rooster — I was hungry enough to eat it raw right there.

It developed that what the corporal had was a roster of names and that he wanted to read them. He began shouting out names and they were those of men in our group who stepped up to claim their tickets and pull aside from the remaining crowd.

While he did his shouting I stood ready to leap forward, but he finished the job without even mentioning me. Still possessing a little initiative common to civilians, I told the corporal I was with this group and how come my name wasn't read? He said to come along and he'd see what he could do about it.

Up to the building with the lights we trudged. I was told to wait "at the door" while the corporal led the rest of our contingent through the lines of waiting men to the far end of the room. I stretched a point and waited "inside the door" because by that time heat was an essential item.

Pretty soon the corporal came back and mumbled to a sergeant who sat in a boxed-off office near the door. The sergeant looked at me and said, "His papers are here, but . . ." something or other ". . . and we'll have to wait for special orders."

Wanting to be helpful, I stepped up and said, "Look, why can't I go with my bunch and then I'll be that much further along when my special orders come?"

Those non-coms couldn't have looked any more startled if I had said, "I'll have breakfast on the terrace."

The corporal came over and patted my shoulder gently as if he thought I might become violent at any moment, and said, "I'll tell you, fella" (there's a certain stage in processing where everybody is a "fella") "I'll tell you, fella, you just go over to that first barracks in Company A and we'll get you straightened out."

"When?" I asked, "And where is Company A?"

"Now," he said, "and I'll show you."

On the way to the building next door, I told the corporal I didn't mean when should I go to the barracks, but when would they get me straightened out.

"Oh," he said, confidently, "we'll have you on a roster sometime today."

At the door of the barracks he said, "This is it," and

vanished — leaving young Alice in Wonderland, so to speak.

There were four soldiers hunched over a bunk and arguing the relative residential merits of Joplin and Chicago when I arrived. They stopped talking and stared blankly for a long minute; then, without a word to me, went on as though I were a ghost that had vanished.

My heart suddenly dropped. I realized how cold I was and remembered I'd had nothing to eat since 3 p. m. of the preceding day. Dimly I could hear the argument progressing on Joplin vs. Chicago. I tossed my bag on the floor near a bunk and sat down.

One of the four soldiers turned slowly toward me. "That's right, fella," he said, "jist make yourself ta home."

The speaking soldier had a G.I. haircut so fresh it almost scared me. I took refuge in the bunk, kicked off my shoes, and pulled a blanket over me. The warmer I got the more hungry I was.

"Say," I asked myself, "are you man or mouse?"

"Neither," I answered myself, "I'm a sucker for ever wanting in this army! And a hungry sucker at that."

Then, out loud, I yelled at the four soldiers:

"Hey!" — I must have screamed it because they all looked my way quick — "don't anybody ever eat around here?"

"Ain't you had chow yet?" G.I. Haircut asked, amazed.

"No," I said, "I ain't."

He came over to my bunk and gave directions how to get to the mess hall.

I got.

Home — almost — was never sweeter than that mess hall. It was clean and it smelled good and the men on duty there were pleasant. Maybe I looked like the shooter of Dan McGrew — fresh from the creeks, and so forth — but anyway, a "fella" at the mess hall got a tray for me. The tray looked like those you get in a cafeteria, only it had six depressions of various sizes to hold food.

The first man in the "serving line" heaped scrambled eggs in one of the hollows in the tray, another added sausage; another said, "Wait, fella, and I'll find you some warm toast" — and did. There was jam, and cereal, and cookies, and the last man

planked a pint-sized mug on my tray and said, "There's hot coffee on that table and all the butter and sugar and stuff you want — if you're still hungry, come around again."

Brother!

Leaving the mess hall you get a fine view of the camp and also of the federal penitentiary. I was surprised how the surroundings had been completely renovated while I had breakfast. The white buildings of the camp fairly glistened in the sunshine, the trees had a lot of color, men in uniform looked like rational human beings, and I found myself thinking how glad I was to be in the reception center instead of over in that penitentiary.

Back at the barracks my spirits had another jolt, however, when G.I. Haircut drawled, "Jist take it easy, fella. We had a guy in here waiting special orders like you are, and it was seven weeks before they come."

This information was offset by the arrival of a couple more strays like myself. We compared our opinions of the army for a couple of hours and then went to "chow" again.

On the way back to the barracks I spotted some of "my bunch" on a horse-shoe court, and talking with them was like getting a letter from home. They were being "processed," they said, and told me where they were located.

Th afternoon dragged by, but along toward "chow" time a couple of bus-loads of South Dakota boys rolled in and were assigned to "our" barracks for the night. They were a nice bunch of guys, and the big chap who bunked over me told about working in the mines and how he'd just as soon be in the army.

Lights in the barracks went out at 9 p. m. and I was ready for sleep — which didn't last long, seeing as how they came on again at 4:45 a. m. With the South Dakota bunch I "marched" up to chow in the dark and, following instructions, hurried back to the barracks to help sweep, mop and make beds. The bed-making proved a miserable failure because somebody had forgotten to show us how, but we managed to get the blankets fairly smooth.

By this time it was beginning to dawn on me what a whale of a place this reception center is. Hundreds of men in and out in a day, and thousands around all the time.

The South Dakota group was suddenly called out, and again despair settled over me. With thousands of guys around, what

was one more? Or worse, what was one less, if he got lost? In five minutes, I had convinced myself I would spend the rest of my days in that barracks, and when the war was over people would come by and shake their heads and point to me as the "really forgotten man."

To lose the mood, I stepped out on "the front porch" and almost fell down stairs when I saw about one hundred and fifty fellows lined up on the graveled street, including four I knew from Lincoln.

One of the four — a VOC (Volunteer Officer Candidate) — was having trouble getting on a roster because something was peculiar about his papers. With one day behind me, I felt like a veteran and suggested he and I go next door to make inquiry.

"Next door" was the place where I'd had my main conversation with the vanishing corporal. Hardly had I stepped inside when a strange sergeant looked up and said casually, "You're Keller, aren't you? Wait here, I'm just making out your papers."

And I was the guy who thought the army had lost me! That was my first lesson in learning that in the army, when the army is ready, you'll find out what the army wants you to do, and not before. I know what the G.I. Haircut was trying to put across when he told me to "take it easy" and "make yourself ta home."

Without even going back to the barracks for my luggage, I was started on the route of "processing." The first step was blood typing — a matter of a pricked finger and a drop of blood for type-testing.

Normally there are twelve or more men on a roster and you move through the processing line by roster number — that is, some corporal or sergeant will call out roster number 300, for example, and all the men on that roster will line up and be taken to one of several buildings for some phase of induction.

Because of my individual mix-up, I was put on a roster by myself — an incident which caused unusual amusement from the "inductees." When a non-com would yell Number 265 and look around expectantly, I would stand up and promptly say, "Here," and he would invariably want to know, "Where's the rest of you?" That would give me a chance to say, "I am all there is," and that would make my fellow inductees happy because it proved that

corporals and sergeants don't know everything, after all, or they would have known there was only one of me.

I moved through the processing procedure with several other "small rosters" and soon discovered what a small world it is. There was a fellow from Minnesota who knew a newspaper friend of mine, and a nice chap from — of all places — Joplin. I saw more and more fellows from Nebraska I knew, and, all in all, things began looking up.

After the blood typing we were taken to the camp's "Little Theatre" where we were lectured on army courtesy, and heard some of the articles of war read and explained. Chow time again, then back to the theatre for motion pictures on army discipline, health and conduct, and then to the examination building.

The army gives two examinations at the reception center, one covering general aptitude, the other to reveal mechanical aptitude. The examinations are primarily four-way "true and false" tests, given under instructions from a public address sys- and under the watchful eyes of several monitors.

It is possible that an inductee may receive these exams on his first day in camp, and therefore dumb is the guy who arrives with a hangover because the examination record will follow him all through the army. Dumber still is the dope who arrives "plastered," because he will receive a nice cold shower at government expense and spend a day or more "sobering up" under dreary conditions.

Answers to the examination questions are recorded by the inductee on a special sheet by merely drawing a line under a number or letter and the papers are graded mechanically. The inductee's card, mechanically punched to reveal his skills, is given to the "interview section" for use in a personal talk in which the inductee tells an interviewer about his hobbies, experience and ambition.

During my first day on a roster I received the blood type, heard the lectures, saw the movies, took the examinations, and finished up with the most beautiful headache I've ever had. That evening I was moved to a new barracks in Company A along with my Minnesota and Joplin acquaintances.

The next morning was dull — consumed mainly by waiting to be sent to the interview section. Shortly before noon the call came and we were marched five blocks to the interview building,

only to wait there fifteen minutes and march eight blocks to chow and back again.

The so-called "permanent personnel" who handle the interviewing impressed me with their patience and intelligence. Most of them, I learned later, are men who have held professional positions in civilian life.

My interviewer was so pleasant I risked firing a few questions at him and learned he was a former Kansas senator, Boy Scout executive, and, I believe he said, attorney.

From the interview line, inductees pass into another division where government insurance is explained and contracted for, where men are asked to purchase war bonds through a pay-roll deduction plan, and where papers are re-checked and completed.

Just beyond the interview building is the clothing supply depot where uniforms are issued. It is a minor Mecca for inductees who, regardless of how they may have felt about the army, can't help wondering "How will I look in one of them suits?"

At the head of the clothing line, you receive your "dog tags" — metal tabs worn on a string around the neck which give your name, your army serial number, your nearest blood relative, his or her address, and stamped to show your blood type and religious faith.

Before you is a large sign which reads, "You are about to receive the best uniform ever issued to a soldier anywhere in the world. Take care of it and be proud of it!"

Somehow, that "Be proud of it" keeps buzzing in your head and you chuck your civies into a barracks bag with no regret and no thought it may be a long, long time before you put them on again.

Clad in civilian underwear, a new pair of issue sox, and with barracks bag in hand, you mount three steps to be fitted for shoes.

Stories I had heard about the army and shoes had led me to believe somebody would get a pair and throw at me. My first surprise came when I saw how carefully the "shoe man" measured my feet; my second surprise when he asked me, "How does this pair feel?" The third surprise came when, after I had said

they were a little snug across the top, he said, "Well, we'd better change 'em then — here, try these."

On a sheet of paper, the size of your shoes is entered and you move through the clothing sample room where more sizes are marked on the sheet. You pass along a stretching warehouse counter and as you move, attendants slap out equipment and clothing of the the size indicated on your sheet.

A detail man — a soldier assigned to a special job — helps you dress in your new clothes. Shoes and other clothing are again checked for size and misfits are exchanged. Clothing which must be altered is exchanged for checks and you pick the clothes up later at the tailor shop.

The feeling that "I'm in the army now" hits hard when you hoist your 85-pound barracks bag to your shoulder and stagger across the street for your first "shots."

These shots are quick things — so quick, in fact, that I didn't know for ten days that I had been vaccinated for smallpox. I did know I received the first of three typhoid and antitetanus inoculations.

For me, the evening of the shots was hectic: a rush to the barracks under the weight of the barracks bag, unpacking all the gear to get my civilian clothes from the bottom of the bag and up to the post office for mailing home, then to chow and back to the barracks to be moved again to a new barracks where processed men were housed.

The corporal at the new barracks was a jewel. He showed us how to make a bunk properly, explained that in the army "you don't have your wife, or your mother, or your sister to pick up after you — so you've got to do it for yourself," and said if we wanted to "gold brick" (duck work) to go ahead, but to expect K.P. or some other disagreeable result if caught. "And," he said, "we're pretty good at catching."

Life in the processed men's barracks begins at 5 a. m. — unless you're unlucky enough to draw K.P., then it's earlier. You put on your fatigues and are assigned to detail work — cleaning up barracks for inductees, washing windows; clearing the grounds of cigaret butts, matches, and bits of paper; rudimentary drill. Distasteful as some of this is, you finally realize that if you

weren't doing something, time would hang very heavy and the danger of homesickness would be increased.

As soon as you get your uniform you begin wondering about "shipping orders" — the orders which will send you to army training in some camp or school, or send you to some special assignment. The orders clear through the Seventh Service Command at Omaha.

Two or three times a day your company will be called from drill or detail work to "get shipping orders." Names of men will be called out by a sergeant and the "lucky guys" will be lined up and told they are on "shipping list," to dress in their Class A (O.D.) uniforms, pack their barracks bags, and not leave the Company area. Sometimes men are given but twenty minutes to be ready to leave; others are on "shipping list" for two or three days before the actual moving orders come.

You see fellows you've met and liked — others you've met and didn't like — carrying their barracks bags toward the loading platform at most any time of day or night. Rumors fly as to where "our bunch" is headed for, but the men actually don't know where they're going until they get on the train and then they have instructions to keep their mouths shut.

Few, if any, are the inductees who don't yip to hasten the day they'll leave the reception center and "get settled." The almost universal phrase for farewell is, "So long, good luck — and I'll see you in Tokio."