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# THE FIRST-TERM SOLDIER: A SELF-PORTRAIT

by

JAMES H. POWERS

By people, I do not mean 'personnel.' I do not mean 'end strength.' I do not mean 'percent of fill' or any of those other labels which refer to people as a commodity. I mean living, breathing, serving human beings. They have needs and interests and desires. They have spirit, and will, and strengths, and abilities. They have weaknesses and faults. And they have *names*.

—General Creighton Abrams

*The article which follows is based upon an individual study project undertaken by the author when he was a member of the US Army War College Class of 1980. During this project, the author interviewed 65 soldiers reflecting a broad diversity of branch, military job, sex, ethnic background, career orientation, and geographical area of assignment. However, no effort was made to select a statistically valid sampling or to employ modern polling techniques. The author's impressions are simply that—impressions—and should not be construed as statements of fact or scientifically arrived-at conclusions.*

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**I**n our society and in our profession we are bombarded continually by snapshot statistics. Statistical tools, while valuable, are not unlike medical laboratory tests. The empirical facts ascertainable from laboratory tests are important for proper diagnosis and treatment of disease, but the physician's talks directly with the patient provide an essential human perspective on the practice of medicine. I yearned to do precisely that in approaching the problems of first-term soldiers—to provide a human perspective to complement existing scientific data. Last

year, the US Army War College allowed me to venture forth, armed with a tape recorder, to develop this complementary perspective. I traveled to Berlin, to V and VII Corps troop kasernes in West Germany, and to Forts Eustis, Myer, Belvoir, Meade, Knox, and Campbell. At each location, I asked soldiers to tell me about three aspects of their lives: the circumstances surrounding their joining, their experience as soldiers, and the factors surrounding their decision whether to reenlist. Leading questions were deliberately avoided, e.g. "What do you think of the NCO Corps in today's Army?" I am convinced that in scientific questionnaires we are, in fact, frequently asking respondents, "What would be your opinion on the subject, if you had one?" Soldiers talked to me about what was important to *them*, in *their* words. What follows are impressions from my fascinating trek to "ground zero."

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE FIRST-TERM SOLDIER

Something that hit me right between the eyes is the great diversity of our first-term soldiers. The demeaning stereotypes of "Snuffy" and "Joe Sixpack" are not only ill-deserved—they are misleading. They imply a sameness that just is not there. The diversity

of our soldiers has several dimensions. Origins—geographic, economic, ethnic, and cultural—display as much variety as the citizenry of the country itself. More, in fact. Enrique, from Mexico, joined the Army “to learn the English with the people . . . because the people is the one that has the language.” Rich, a former Detroit hippie, joined when the only job he could get was as bagger at Farmer Jacks. He didn’t want that job because: “The only requirement was that I had to cut my hair; I had fairly long hair, probably about a foot and a half long [smiles], and I decided that I didn’t want to do that” (but one week after induction Rich had had two haircuts). Laveta, an extremely attractive, 32-year-old Specialist Four, spent nine years in civilian employment. Eight were with the State Department, as a secretary in Washington, Paris, Brussels, and Jamaica. Incredibly, she joined the Army because she wanted “some excitement” in her life. Dean, the son of a General Mills vice president, “just didn’t care for my parents paying for my college. They were always giving instructions on classes, and his way of life, and things. I kind of wanted to get away from that for a little while.”

The number of older volunteers surprised me. They seem to have a stabilizing, maturing influence on their peers. Jim is an example. A 38-year-old Portuguese American, he had been a handpresser, shipper, bartender, clerk, lamp assembler, hot dog stand manager, dairy manager, and gas station attendant. He joined the Army to travel and meet people. Because of his age, the nickname “Pops” follows him from one assignment to another.

Outlooks appear to be as diverse as the individuals in which they are contained. Consider the following two cases with regard to the compatibility of marriage and an Army career:

- Rebecca is a 25-year-old operating room technician. Married, with a small child, she is clearing post at Fort Eustis: “I don’t knock the Army at all. For a single person, it’s fine.”

- Ronnie, 22, is a married stevedore at Fort Eustis. He has just reenlisted: “I always

told myself that I wasn’t going to reenlist, but then once I got married, you know.”

A final aspect of diversity that struck me was in the soldiers’ jobs. Animal Technician. Cavalry Scout. Diesel Mechanic. Electronic Warfare Cryptographic Analyst. Fixed Station Telecommunications Specialist. Removable Prosthetics Specialist. Rough Terrain Forklift Operator. Anti-tank Weapon Gunner. These were some of the labels worn by the soldiers I interviewed. Sameness? “Snuffy” and “Joe Sixpack” are myths!

## JOINING THE ARMY

The reasons that first-term soldiers gave me for joining the Army were as varied as their individuality. Education, however, seemed to be the biggest drawing card. Two facets of that drawing card are the GI Bill and in-service training for a marketable skill. But these also seemed frequently to be a source of disillusionment for the soldier, either in not being able to fully participate in the on-duty education program or in the feeling that training in their job skill is superficial. For example:

- Ronnie, a stevedore:

We was supposed to a been a Stevedore Company, and we was supposed to a spent a lot of time at the ships. . . . But we didn’t do that. We did a lot of other things—details, cutting grass, or shoveling snow, or painting. . . . I didn’t get enough [stevedoring].

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- Dale, a senior electrician, working as a battalion career counselor at Fort Meade:

When I got to the actual [specialty] school, that, to me, was a waste of time. They had changed it to a self-pace, seven-week course. I was there for seven days.

Some of the reasons cited by soldiers for enlisting are adventure, excitement, travel, meeting people, and escape—from parents, sweethearts, spouses, school, or the humdrum of a civilian job.

- Mary, a former secretary in the office of the Mayor of Miami, joined to get away from her husband: “My husband wasn’t really up to par, and it was more or less my escape out.”

- Don, a stock control clerk in VII Corps, joined to escape a romantic entanglement:

It was more or less, at the time, an escape from my private life. I was livin’ in a nice house. I didn’t have to work . . . [laughs] . . . you know, I was eatin’ good, sleepin’ good. Well, I was livin’ with a lady friend of mine. In a sense, she was takin’ care of me; I lived with her for a year and three months.

The escape from parents is an ambivalent theme, for it is often accompanied by a contradictory impulse—wanting to be stationed close to home. The volunteer seems to want to escape, but not always too far.

Opinions of the service—from parents, relatives, and friends—came to the surface in most of the interviews as factors bearing on enlisting. The volunteer soldier is a future public relations representative for the Army, whether we like it or not. The number of soldiers who said they had already encouraged friends or relatives to join was surprising. Parental response to the enlistment decision is an interesting notion to monitor. At the outset of the decision, it is often negative, though sometimes positive, provided the volunteer doesn’t plan to stay in too long. After the son or daughter has been in for a while, parental reaction often swings

to the positive side, if it was not there at the outset.

Two aspects of soldiers’ perceptions of their recruiters emerged from the interviews. One is the matter of integrity. Perceptions of recruiter conduct covered the complete spectrum, from outright lying with respect to the picture of the Army portrayed by the recruiter to total accuracy:

- Dick, a sergeant, is a wheeled vehicle mechanic at Fort Meade. When he signed up, he thought he would learn to be an automobile mechanic:

My recruiter, I asked him, would I be workin’ on cars. And he says ‘Does a car have wheels?’ You know, kinda makin’ me feel pretty stupid for askin’ the question. Then I went right to the school—[non-automotive] vehicle mechanic. If I went to automotive school, I could be workin’ on cars.

- Bill, an armor crewman, had wanted to be in either the Military Police or Special Forces:

To get in Special Forces you have to be airborne-qualified, so he typed into the computer for airborne. Nothing came up. Then he asked if I wanted to try airborne-armor, which, at the time, sounded a little . . . it didn’t sound right. So I said, ‘Well, OK.’ Still nothing came up. Then he finally said, ‘Well, why don’t you just try armor?’ I said, ‘OK.’ That’s how I got into my [present job].

Besides integrity, respondents mentioned how much their recruiter cared. Caring appeared frequently to be the tie-breaker for service selection:

I didn’t like the Navy—the way they came across to you. [The recruiter] didn’t care.

Administrative Specialist, Fort Knox

The recruiters have a lot to do with who comes in. Like, with the Marines, the recruiter himself just turned me off completely. I didn’t even bother asking him

for the brochures. . . . He didn't really see any use for me.

Fixed Station Telecommunications  
Center Specialist, V Corps

Interesting are the soldiers' perceptions of their early encounters with "The Green Machine," a blanket term they use to decry instances of illogical bureaucratic behavior:

• Enrique, the citizen of Mexico, enlisted as a Chapparral crewman:

Three weeks after I start [Advanced Individual Training], they told me I cannot keep up with that [specialty] because I wasn't resident, and only citizens could have that job. . . . They send me to Fort Jackson to be a clerk. In Jackson, I asked them so many time, I say, 'I'm trying to learn English, you know. I cannot be a clerk-typist if I don't even know how to speak it yet.' 'You'll do all right,' they say. So . . . was fine with me.

After six days, Enrique was scrubbed as a clerk and sent to stevedore school.

• Laura, trained as a cook, was not considered qualified to enlist as a clerk:

I wasn't clerical qualified, as far as my tests go. I don't know why—I took typing in school. I knew how to type off a dictaphone. I took business machines and shorthand, and all this stuff, and I wasn't qualified [laughs].

During her entire three-year term at Fort Campbell, Laura worked not as a cook but as an administrative specialist.

### THE ARMY EXPERIENCE

For a force so frequently maligned for its lack of soldierly qualities, I was surprised to find such a recurring demand by soldiers for more discipline, higher standards, and less laxity. Even when they admitted "shaming," they did it with a tone of surprise and disappointment that they could get by:

I expected to find a lot of discipline. That's something I wanted in my life at that time.

That's something I didn't find.

Battalion Maintenance Clerk, V Corps

I do my job and do it well. I'm expected to keep on. Whereas, I've seen people that they'll do a minimal job or don't do it at all. And they've got all the benefits.

Wheeled Vehicle Mechanic, Fort Meade

I admit that I've taken advantage of it. . . . When you comb your hair, and it comes down below your collar, then you're *wrong*. But most men don't say anything to you. Probably because they don't know.

Management Specialist, Berlin

People tell me, 'What happened to you? When you first came here, you were spit-and-polish. Now you aren't anymore.' Well, the only thing I can say is, 'Hey, look at everybody else. What's the use!'

Military Policeman, Fort Meade

The theme of impersonality and lack of caring by the Army found frequent expression in the interviews.

You come up to them and say, 'I'm gettin' out of the Army,' and *then* they say, 'Well, you don't really want to do that.' They only look at you at the beginning and the very end of your enlistment—in between, you're on your own.

Armor Crewman, Fort Knox

No matter what a man wears on his collar, he's still a human being. At some time, you're going to have to look at that man as a human being. . . . Help the man with his human-type problems, and then you can help him with his military problems.

Scout Driver, Fort Myer

I keep saying to myself, 'If they don't give a damn about me, I don't give a damn about them. I don't give a damn about the job.'

Personnel Records Specialist, Fort Belvoir

Another recurring theme was job satisfaction. As might be expected, some were highly satisfied, some were highly dissatisfied. From their comments, one can

form a mosaic of the constituents of a good job as the volunteer soldier sees it: being kept busy with meaningful work, recognition, unit and individual pride, and courteous and respectful treatment. Examples:

At this post here, it's only two days a week. Those are the only two days I work. I mean, I go into the office, but I don't work.

Animal Technician, Carlisle Barracks

I was sitting in the motor pool, in the chair, just doing nothing. I mean, my days was looking like months, and I begun to hate it. I was just sitting there, serving no purpose at all.

Parts Clerk, Fort Eustis

The letter of appreciation. People laugh and say, 'Oh yea, I've got hundreds of them in my records.' But it's kind of nice to be recognized.

Administrative Specialist, Fort Knox

I wanted something where in a few years they can say, 'This is Mike; this is what *he* does.' And they'd say, 'Wow! I wish *I* could do that!'

Armor Crewman, Fort Knox

I guess *my* biggest gripe is, when I do something good, never gettin' any recognition for it. I feel that I'm taken for granted a lot of times.

Parts Clerk, V Corps

Perceptions of both officers and NCOs came up, but most frequently it was the NCO. Officers were generally perceived as aloof:

We've got a Detachment Commander. . . . I really don't know what he does [laughs]. . . . I've seen him back there reading old war novels, paperback war novels [laughs]. So he can't be that crutched for work.

Military Policeman, V Corps

It's not surprising that the NCO image comes up more frequently than that of the

officer. First-termers are closer to the NCOs in their daily routines. Furthermore, if they are career-oriented, it is normally the NCO's shoes they are going to fill.

I was talkin' to two NCOs. One was an E-5 and one was an E-7, right? OK, my take-home pay is seven hundred dollars. . . . This next NCO, his pay was only one hundred dollars more than me—he was an E-5. And this E-7, his pay was only a little over a hundred dollars from the E-5! And this man has what . . . twenty years? Eighteen years? And the man's only making two hundred dollars more than me?! . . . So I can't see it, you know?

Field Radio Repairman, V Corps

Older NCOs—seeing what, I feel, has happened to them. . . . I don't see very much self-esteem. . . . They seem to have lost it—self respect.

Battalion Maintenance Clerk, V Corps

My roommate . . . he has an E-6 supervisor—one who is drunk most of the time. . . . I've seen him come in and steady himself on the wall lockers. He *reeks* of alcohol. There's no way that I'm going to reenlist and put myself in a position where I can be, you know, [under that type].

Military Policeman, V Corps

Many volunteers thought there was not enough meaningful training to produce sufficient proficiency in basic soldiering skills. This will surprise those observers who would malign the volunteer's motivation:

The training here is not enough. There's more time spent on cleaning your rooms. . . . There's small things that you could be doing that really wouldn't cost that much. You and your platoon could just grab packs and weapons and just flock out, do some raids and ambush training. That wouldn't cost that much.

Cavalry Scout, Fort Campbell

I went to Fort Riley; it was a Retraining Brigade. . . . I learned a lot. If I could go

back to that training, I would, but not in the situation that I was in at that time. . . . If they had training like that, and it was up to you, like, 'Hey, you want to go to that training for two months?' I'd say, 'Yeah, I go back.' See, there, they treated us like men. They treated us like soldiers.

Personnel Records Specialist, Fort Meade

It's the same stuff I learned in basic trainin'—wounds, and stuff like this. It's all very basic. They're not learnin' anything but what they learned for the past six months. Learnin' nothing at all. They ain't advancin' them at all.

Diesel Mechanic, Fort Belvoir

We got a mailroom clerk—she's a Spec Four—that had to have an E-2 that's fresh out of basic show her how to break down and clean her M-16. That's ridiculous! Every soldier in the Army should know that M-16, from muzzle to butt! They oughta know everything about it!

Military Policeman, V Corps

On the other hand, challenging unit training got high marks:

I think the best training I've had so far, here in Berlin, was CIC Training—Combat in the City. . . . You're in the city, fightin! . . . It's just been real interesting, seeing what you can do, and what you can't do, and how hard it is to clear a room.

Platoon Radio Telephone Operator, Berlin

The most satisfying [experience in my Army career] would probably have to be Graf, when we were downrange-42 for qualification on the tank. We came back 'green,' which is almost the same as being an expert. . . .

Armor Crewman, Carlisle Barracks

Finally, our female soldiers. They occupy jobs which might surprise old soldiers:

• Barbara, a truck driver, is stationed in Berlin:

My job here is driving in East Berlin. . . . I can be out, have a 'crossover,' which is crossing over from West Berlin at checkpoint Charlie into East, at four o'clock in the morning.

• Susie is the first black woman to graduate from the Explosive Ordnance Demolition School. As we talk, the two-way radio on her belt crackles with EOD traffic. Hers is an important unit:

It helps support the Secret Service. When you have any dignitaries, any movement that the President, Vice President, and their families does . . . like, for instance, when the Pope came. . . . Any mistake you make could be the last mistake you make.

### THE REENLISTMENT DECISION

Escape was a factor for those deciding to reenlist, but to a lesser degree than for those enlisting, and for different reasons. Many of those reenlisting wanted to escape either their present post or Military Occupational Specialty. Education (GI Bill and marketable skill) continued to be a prime decision factor. A number of soldiers were getting out of the Army in order to go to college with their GI Bill entitlements, thus making it apparent that some in-service educational opportunity must co-exist with a GI Bill. Otherwise, we drive out of the service those like Ernie—a Senior Pathfinder—with the very enticement originally used to draw them in: "The way things turned out, it's better that I get out—go to school and use my GI Bill while I got it."

In making the reenlistment decision, the factor which now assumes paramount importance is the state of the economy. Those who entered the Army for such reasons as excitement, adventure, travel, meeting people, or change of pace had usually realized these by the time of their reenlistment decision. What's more, in the process of realizing these aims, they had matured and become more independent of parental influence (and support). Many had married.

Some had bought cars and were now making car payments. The maintenance of a steady income was more important to them than it was when they first entered the Army.

• Ricky is typical. He is a 20-year-old rough-terrain forklift operator, stationed at Fort Eustis:

The 11th of November I'm going to school. . . . The Reenlistment NCO done told me I won't see this place again. That's why I reenlisted. I talked to my Mom back home and everybody's getting laid off. So I didn't want to take my chances on gettin' out, going there, not gettin' a job.

The overwhelming majority of the volunteers looked back on their original decision to enlist as a good one. Despite gripes or specific dissatisfactions, faced with the same decision they would again enlist; further, they would not discourage their children or friends from enlisting.

A central theme present in discussions concerning all three phases (joining, serving, reenlisting) was caring. Caring by recruiters and supervisors came up frequently. What about caring with regard to the reenlistment decision? A recent Department of the Army survey indicates that about 40 percent of our first-term soldiers are not interviewed by their commanders at the completion of their enlistment period as required by regulation. Why? That statistic does not appear to indicate a high prevalence of caring.<sup>1</sup> I think the best statement of how caring affects the reenlistment decision was made by Dale, a battalion career counselor. He handed me a card titled "What's wrong with the Army Reenlistment Program," and reading as follows:

I'm the person who goes into the orderly room and patiently waits while the First Sergeant does everything but pay attention to me. I'm the person who goes into the supply room and stands quietly by while the Supply Sergeant and his assistant finish their little chit-chat. I'm the person who does not grumble while I clean rifles in addition to my own while other people wander aimlessly

around the unit. Yes, you might say I'm a pretty good person. But do you know who else I am? **I am the person who never extends my enlistment** and it amuses me to see you spending many hours and dollars every year to get me back into your unit, when I was there in the first place; and all you had to do to keep me was . . .

- *Consider my needs as a human being;*
- *Show me a little common courtesy;*
- *Use me well;*
- *Give me meaningful training and a meaningful job to do . . .*

*And I might surprise you!*

## THE QUALITY ISSUE

Finally--the matter of quality. It keeps coming up. I have been approached by those who knew of this project with questions concerning the quality of the volunteer force. My feeling is that the public autopsy of the volunteer soldier's quality is counter-productive. Quality with regard to what? The quality of this year's accessions in comparison to what? Quality as measured by what? Quality as a measure of ability to do what? For an issue of such complexity, it is surprising to me that some leaders so readily render a cocksure vote of thumbs up or down.

I was pleased with the soldiers I encountered during this sojourn and would gladly take every one of them as team members in my command. They as individuals are undeserving of the stigma which results from rash estimates of gross "quality." But equally important, they do not deserve statistical anonymity. Means, modes, and standard deviations are powerful and valuable tools; but they do not, by themselves, describe our soldiers, who, in the words of General Abrams, "have names."

## NOTE

1. Occupational Survey on MOS 00E and 79D, January 1979, Data Analysis Branch, Occupational Development Division, Personnel Management Systems Directorate, US Army MILPERCEN. Of course, it is possible that to some extent the high rate of non-interviews reflects command sentiments that the soldiers not interviewed did not merit reenlistment.