



BENNING SCHOOL FOR BOYS

During those first two weeks of our marriage, Marian did what she called “experimental cooking” because she never knew what the result was going to be. Usually, it was at least edible, and the two of us were happy to finally be together. We were living in a small rented apartment in Baltimore, Maryland not too far from the Pentagon, where I worked in General Marshal’s office..

But at the end of those two weeks, General Marshal wrote orders for me to report to officers’ candidate school in Fort Benning, Georgia within five days. So, after only two weeks together, we packed up all our belongings in the Chevy Marian’s brother, Bob, had loaned us to use while he was overseas in the army medical corps. It was a sad parting for both of us, especially Marian, who had to drive alone many hundreds of miles through the mountains,, back to Bowling Green, Ohio to live again with her father and step-mother.

For me, officers’ candidate school was rigorous, but manageable. Fort Benning, itself, was impressive, with solid, red brick buildings and a well-kept campus. But the area where our training took place was less of a fort than a group of slapped together barracks and officers’ quarters with the red dirt roads, typical of Georgia, leading to our many obstacle courses.

Our tactical officer was tougher than the most hart-hitting top sergeant I had ever met. Built like a bulldog, with the same scowling face, the man yelled and swore at us constantly as he whipped us into shape. He drilled us day after day, week after week on terrain designed to emulate rough war zones. Carrying heavy equipment and rifles We crawled under barbed wire in the mud, climbed rope ladders, stuck bayonets into dummies, and ran through forests in rain and snow, stumbling and falling. It was as if his job was to criticize and mock every move we made. But we were young, and although, at first his attitude was demoralizing, and our lessons were challenging and dangerous, we slowly learned what a lowly lieutenant was supposed to know.

Before long, the few Jews in the class suspected that this “slave driver” also was a real anti-Semite. He made it clear in many ways by giving us Jewish candidates the toughest assignments and by criticizing everything we did, from making our beds to keeping our rifles



clean to giving us the dirtiest time-consuming jobs.. Eventually, he wrote complaints about each of us Jewish candidates.

One day we were assigned to a class in hand to hand combat taught by a Colonel Merrill. Colonel Merrill later became a general, who led a group called Merrills Marauders that became famous during World War II , serving brilliantly in the Orient. That day, there were about 250 candidates sitting in bleachers. He gave us some basic instructions and then, to demonstrate, he called one candidate after another down to try to attack him. Each time, the candidate ended up on the ground, having been overpowered in one move by Colonel Merrill, and each time the colonel taught us how to defend ourselves in different hand-to-hand situations. After while, no one wanted to take the chance on being thrown around, so when he ask for another volunteer, some of my classmates who knew that I had a black belt in Judo, coaxed me to face the officer, so I did..

“Okay candidate, don’t worry about attacking an officer,” he said. “Just defend yourself.” and the colonel reached for my arm.

But I was quicker than he, and I threw him to the ground with a Judo move. The colonel was surprised, but unhurt. He went for me a second time, and again I threw him to the ground, but this time I had my knee on his throat. If I had put my full weight on him, he would have chocked to death..

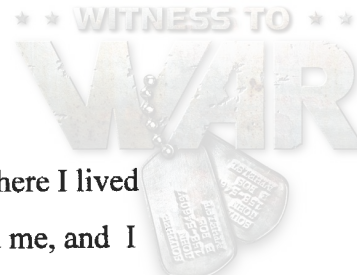
My classmates cheered, but the colonel got up, brushed himself off, glared at me and barked, “Candidate, I want to see you after class.”

I went back to my seat in the bleachers wondering if I had gone too far. Was I in trouble? Would the colonel turn in a complaint? A word from him, and I could be washed out of OCS. By then, our ever diplomatic tactical officer had told us several times that in battle, the average life span of a lowly lieutenant is three minutes. We all believed him, so I had mixed emotions about the possibility of being washed out of OCS.

After class, I reported to Colonel Merrill. “Candidate Goldner reporting, Sir.”

“At ease, candidate, now tell me where you learned those judo moves.”

He listened carefully as I explained, “Sir, I was always a pretty skinny kid and I grew up in a tough neighborhood where I was always getting beaten up. I needed to learn a way to defend



myself that didn't take a lot of strength. Some of the men at the fire station near where I lived told me about judo, so I got a book about it and studied it a lot. The firemen helped me, and I practiced and practiced. Then I met a Japanese gentleman who coached me until I earned a black belt."

After that, for several days, Colonel Merrill took me to a secluded area and the two of us did a lot of hand-to-hand fighting. When he was satisfied that I was ready, he assigned me to assist him in teaching the course. Later on, I collaborated with him to write the field manual that is still used by the U.S. Army Infantry.

But I was far from finished with my training.

Toward the end of our training, I was called before the board of review: three generals who considered and made decisions regarding complaints by tactical officers against candidates. As I stood at attention before the forbidding trio of judges, I pondered worriedly about why I was there. Finally, one of the generals spoke, holding up a sheaf of papers, "Candidate, your tactical officer says here that you are afraid to speak in front of your men!"

I felt a wave of relief and smiled as I took the thimble I always carried, out of my pocket. "Sirs, I'm not afraid to speak before people. I'm a magician," and as I manipulated the thimble from one hand to the other, making it disappear and reappear in another place, I added, "I have been doing magic since I was ten years old. If you check my last assignments you'll find out that I've been doing shows for the soldiers ever since I enlisted." Then I took a deck of cards out of my pocket and did a few card tricks. It was easy to see that, like any other audience, the generals enjoyed my brief magic demonstration. After I finished, the three generals spoke to each other quietly. Then the general who had read the charge said brusquely, "Candidate Goldner, the charge against you has been denied. Dismissed!"

After a hundred and twenty days, about two thirds of us had managed to finish the course. Men who went through Officers Candidate School in ninety days during the war, were called "Ninety Day Wonders," and so were the candidates in my class, even though, by then the course had been extended another month. Still, I figured we got the name because it was a wonder we ever made it. Actually, in peace time it took a lot more training to become an officer in the U.S. army. That name others gave us implied that we were not fully trained for the rank of lieutenant,



and no doubt we weren't..

Before the graduation ceremony, our ever belligerent tactical officer walked by a group of us, looked straight at me and said, "I never meant for you Jew boys to graduate!"

If he hated us so much, he should have made it easy for us to pass the course. According to his prediction, which, by the way was pretty much true, none of us would have survived the war. Thank God, I was one of the lucky few that did.