

Cadence Calls

These cadence calls come from my basic training days at Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, in the fall of 1951 and the winter of 1952. I was in one of the last outfits to have 16 weeks of infantry basic training during the Korean War; shortly afterward the Army dropped it to 8 weeks. I expected to go to Korea as an infantry rifleman, and I carried feelings of dread and as well anticipation of the challenge of this terrible unknown. The feelings of dread came not so much from hearing almost continually of cadre from our company, and others, who were regularly dying in Korea, or from hearing about the spookiness of Chinese soldiers continuing to pour themselves at the American lines, flowing over the stacks of bodies of their own fellows, until the Americans ran out of ammunition or time or whatever. Rather it was my realization that in battle an individual soldier would never know what was really happening, therefore would have no way of contributing significantly or intelligently to his own fate. To a certain extent, of course, that outcome was exactly what military training was all about – not the confusion, as such, but the message that as individuals we did not really count. Only the entire functional units mattered. The confusion was incidental, driving home to us all the underlying horrors of the necessary and inevitable methods of fighting wars.

Almost every night I had nightmares over the anticipation of that kind of battlefield chaos. Included were scenarios in which my rifle would not work, I was out of ammunition, or I had neglected or forgotten something crucial. I took all the admonitions of my company cadre seriously, and believed completely in the additional possibilities of dying from frostbite or foot rot or failure to be properly conditioned physically or properly prepared mentally. I knew our training in hand-to-hand combat was woefully inadequate, and I doubted that I could take apart, repair, and re-assemble my M-1 in total darkness, as I knew I might have to. I wondered how long I could stay awake if sleep was life-threatening, and how long I could run or fight at top intensity without becoming exhausted and vulnerable.

For me the last parts of basic training were marked by a recurring dire despair. My orders to go to Korea as an infantry rifleman were indeed cut, and I was carrying them. It looked as though the die had been cast. Then, almost unbelievably, we heard that the fighting had stopped. Suddenly and miraculously we were on hold. I ended up shipping to Fort Knox as an entomologist to deal with an apparently large population of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, feared capable of carrying the Korean malaria returning soldiers were introducing into the U.S. For me the threat was over.

What follows here are the cadence calls we used over and over as we marched and double-timed over a good deal of the training grounds of

Camp Breckinridge. Almost two years after I had marched to them I sat among hundreds of soldiers, many of them battle-hardened, sitting on a grassy bank, waiting to be discharged, angry, apprehensive, relieved, worried, weary.

As we sat there, jaded and testy from two years of what to some of us had eventually seemed mostly hurry-up-and-wait, the men near me began out-talking each other about what they would do before they would “re-up.” A man next to me swore that he would pimp for his sister before signing up again.

Along the highway as we left the camp were strewn dozens of the heavy drab brown woolen overcoats we received for supposed duty in the Reserve. We called them horse blankets. Next to the horrible woolen underwear we were forced to wear in winter, those great, prickly, old weighty overcoats precisely symbolized the bad aspects of the Army to more than one soldier. We were convinced they were being parceled out to us, not because of likely service in the Reserve, but just to get rid of them.

We were all lucky, as we passed down that highway, but we were still apprehensive. I am sure I speak for many men when I say that the apprehension didn't go away for a long time.

Later, at Fort Knox, I acquired a close friend from the Ozark Mountains named John T. Moore. He went from corporal to sergeant while I knew him. He had served in World War II, and he told me had been trained for the Medical Service Corps, in which both he and I were serving at the time. He said the only weapon he had fired in his basic training was the carbine. When his ship was arriving somewhere near an island in the Pacific war zone at midnight, he and his fellow Medical Service technicians were suddenly handed M-1 rifles and hurried to small boats that took them into the darkness of the beach of a remote island. He said they encountered a wall of enemy fire as they were continually admonished to race forward to get off the beach. The night was pitch-black, and men were dying all around him. He started blindly firing into the darkness, and after eight rounds the emptied clip flew off his rifle. Not knowing what had happened, he began to scream for someone to come and fix his broken weapon. Some time during the night the top of his ear was shot off. His description of what happened that night was a perfect example of the kind of horror and pandemonium I had expected to encounter during combat in Korea. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why I sometimes come close to weeping when I sing these simple verses.

Raise your head and raise it high
Charlie Company's passin' by.
Charlie Company, haven't you heard?
Company C of the Fifty-Third.

Shiny boots and shiny brass
Charlie Company's got the class.
Charlie Company's on the ball
They don't need no Hadacol.

Ain't no use in goin' home
Jodie's* got your gal and gone.
Ain't no use in feelin' blue
Jodie's got your sister too.

I don't know but I've been tole
Jodie's wearin' my one-button roll.
I don't know but it's been said
Jodie's sleepin' in my bed.

G. I. brush and G. I comb
Gee, I wish I'd stayed at home.
G. I. beans and G. I gravy
Gee, I wish I'd joined the Navy.

Ain't no use in goin' back
Jodie's got your Cadillac.
You used to work for Ma and Pa
Now you drill for Cavanaugh.

Ain't no use in lookin' down
Ain't no discharge on the ground.
Ain't no use goin' over the hill
If the M. P.'s don't get you, Jodie will.

Left my gal away out West
Thought this Army life was best.

Now she's someone else's wife
I'll be drillin' the rest o' my life.

Left my wife in Tennessee
Said she would be true to me.
Now I wonder who the heck's
Helpin' her spend my allotment checks.

I got a gal up on the hill
She won't do it but her sister will.
I met a WAC and she was willin'
Now I'm takin' penicillin.

We know now it won't be long
Three more weeks and we'll be gone.
We don't know but the Lieutenant said
We'll be fightin' Chinese Reds.

I don't know but I believe
I'll be home for Christmas Eve.
When I get my three-day pass
I'm gonna kick old Jodie's ass.

If old Jodie's five foot three
Jodie's ass belongs to me.
If old Jodie's six feet tall
Ain't a-gonna bother him at all.
(or: I'm gonna yell for [Sergeant] Cavanaugh)

If I die in a combat zone
Box me up and ship me home.
Tell my Mother that I cried
Take me home before I die.

Dig my grave both wide and deep
Tombstones at my head and feet.
On my breast just let it say
I died fightin' for the U.S.A.

If I die on a Russian front
Bury me with a Russian cunt
Eeny meeny miney mo
Let's go back and count some more.

-2-

Choruses and answers:

Sound off! *Sound off!*
Sound off! *Sound off!*
One, two, three, four!
One-two ---- three-four!
Cadence count! *Once more!*
Sound off! *Take it on down!*
One, two, three, four
One-two ---- three-four!

Y'left, y'right, y'left
Y'left, y'right, y'left
Y'right!
Y'right!
Y'right!
Sound off!
One, two, three, four
One-two ---- three-four!
Y'hadda good home and y'left!
Yer right!
Jodie was there when y'left!
Yer right!
Yer sister was there when y'left!
Yer right!
Yer brother was there when y'left!
Yer right!
Yer father was there when y'left!
Yer right!
Yer mother was there when y'left!
Yer right!

Yer baby was there when y'left!
Yer right!
 Ya wouldn't go back if ya could!
Yer wrong!

-3-

Onesy, twosy, threesy, foursy
 Let's go back and count some moresy.
 Sound off, etc.

* * *

*Jodie = Civilian

Cadence Calls

G A7 C G C G C
 Raise your head and raise it high Char-lie Company's pass-in' by. Char-lie Com-pany,
 C G G G C A7
 have-n't you heard Company C of the fif - ty third. Sound off! One, two!
 C A7 C C G
 Once more three, four Break it on down! One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four!
 G C G C G C
 Ya had-da good home and ya left! Yer right! Ya wouldn't go back if ya could! Yer wrong! Sound off!
 G G
 One, two, three, four. One, two, three - four!