

World War II and The Army

By Gus Dick Andros

I was almost 15 years old on December 7th 1941. My father died that year and left me living with my mother, brothers, and Uncle Nick at home. December 7th was a Sunday and I was in front of the fireplace reading the Sunday funnies, when I heard "Extra-Extra! Japan bombs Pearl Harbor." I ran outside and bought the paper for 5 cents. I brought it in, Mother and I turned the radio on and listened to the news. Plato and Dee were still asleep, and Uncle Nick wouldn't be up for some time. I know all of us were in disbelief when President Roosevelt addressed the country with his famous "That this day will live in Infamy" speech.

In a matter of months, many of the boys had enlisted or had been drafted. At that time I wasn't sure if I understood what all of this meant. Plato had volunteered for the Coast Guard. Dee was still in High School and I was still in Junior High, and I was beginning to work at our restaurant. Dee had been trying for some time to teach me to drive. So every Sunday we borrowed our cousin's car, an old Peerless, for me to drive. Dee usually brought many of his football buddies with him and they made my learning very difficult. If I put the brakes on too fast and threw everyone forward they would announce that I have just dislocated every vertebrae. Our family car was a Packard and I wasn't allowed behind the wheel. When Daddy died and Plato went into the service, Dee had the car as his own. The only restriction he had was the rationing of gasoline.

Oklahoma City at that time wasn't very large and because of the depression there were not very many rich people anywhere. The Governor's nephew lived across the street and he was made head of the draft board. His son was my age and my close friend. We went to High School together and everyone wanted to know him because his uncle was the Governor. His contacts rubbed off on me, also that I was the baby brother of Plato and Dee didn't hurt. Upon graduation you automatically went into the service. Dee had made arrangements during his senior year to enlist in the Marines. The school agreed to give him his diploma for his enlistment.

The day that Dee left for the Marines, he said good-bye to mother and I went with him to the train station. We were driving in the Packard. When the train came and everyone was boarding Dee handed me the keys to the car and said, "Get it home." I didn't have a license, nor had I ever driven this big car. Also, the center of town was between the train station and our house. Pure panic set in. I was alone and there was no one to turn to. Being the chicken I am, I drove around the city to get home. When I arrived, almost shaking in my shoes, mother was unimpressed. I guess mother and Dee had worked this out. Mother got on the phone and had a family friend take me for the drivers' test and I passed and got my license the same day. The new rules about the car were that it was mine as long as I ran all of mother's errands, and drove her where she wanted to go. If nothing else, mother had faith in my judgment. That is a terrible thing to put on a kid my age, but because of this faith I had to and did live up to it.

So for all of my high school days I had a car, and the most expensive one on the market. I had just started dating; I met Mildred in Junior High. She was a great dancer and so was I. At that time there was only one word to describe me, and that was "FAT." She loved to dance and because I was the best dancer in school, she dated me.

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years, while working as a cook at our restaurant, I began my first diet. I lost a pound a day for a month and a pound every other day the second month. I went from 225 pounds to 147. My clothes fell off of me. I lost so much weight that nothing could be altered. I needed all new clothes. Mother was furious. I think she wanted me fat. She needled me to death saying "You were much nicer fat than you are thin."

"You have to be nice when you are fat or no one would like you at all." I would tell her.

After I lost the weight I was really quite handsome and Mildred was proud to be my girlfriend. When I went back to school in the fall my schoolmates didn't recognize me, nor did my brother, Plato, while home on leave. After the weight loss every one who used to shun me became my friend. Even some of the guys that would pal around with me saw me as competition, but that didn't last long. Pretty soon I became a very popular guy in school. While I was still fat, the very intellectual debating society wanted my friend Clyde, the Governor' nephew, as a member, but he wouldn't join unless they also pledged me. The members made sure I knew that I was not really welcomed. After I lost my weight things changed. In fact by my senior year I was president of the Debating Society, president of the Art Club, I was vice president of the sophomore, junior and senior class, I was the vice president of the student council, and best of all, I was the cheerleader.

I always remained my own man, sometimes to the anger of the school officials. We had pep clubs that ran the school. Not everyone belonged; they were called independents. Because my brothers were "Red Shirts" I was pledged. I really didn't care one way or the other. Our school colors were Black and Red, so there were the Red Shirts, Red Skirts, Black Shirts, and Black Skirts. The top kids in class belonged to the Red Shirts and Skirts. The only trouble was I liked the Black Skirts girls better than those belonging to the other club. After my break-up with Mildred, I started dating the president of the Black Skirts. In fact I dated two of their presidents in my senior year. When I went to a school dance with one of them, the club always bought the corsage that I gave her because they wanted their president to wear an orchid and I didn't have the money to buy one. I was nominated to be "Mr. Central." The politics that occurred was right out of Washington. All the clubs had secret meetings and what happened would boggle your mind. The Red Shirts and Skirts decided not to back me because I dated the Black Skirt president. The Black Skirts almost had fist fights because many didn't want to back me because I was a Red Shirt. I understand that many of the members had to go along with their club's decision not to back me. Even with the top clubs not backing me I got in the run-off with the presidents of the Red and Black Shirts. I came in second, getting more votes than the Black Shirt

President. When it came time to be crowned, all of the guys that were originally nominated were to be presented on stage with an escort. I asked an independent to be my escort. Believe it or not, I was called into the principal's office and a number of the teachers were in the room and they wanted me to have a Red Skirt as a partner. I said that if I got that many votes, they had to come from the independents, it was only fair for me to have an independent as an escort. I threaten not to appear if they did not let me have my way. I think some of the teachers respected me for sticking to my beliefs, but others were very verbal about how I was always against the establishment. I think those who know me today know I have not changed. I even took an independent to the Senior Prom. Again I was ridiculed for not playing the game. When I went back to the 40th reunion, I could still feel some of the tension. There were other times in the future that I stuck by my guns and it cost me a lot, but I have never felt that I was wrong.

During my senior year I received the notice to take the physical for the army. I was a 4-F and Clyde was also . His father used to kid me that with feet like mine, the army wouldn't want me. I knew the real reason I was a 4-F was not that I had something wrong with me, but because I was the best friend of the head of the draft board's son. I was not eager to go and have my head blown off. I already knew of too many boys being killed or crippled for life. There was a down side to this. It was not always easy walking the street looking tall and healthy. I used to get a lot of negative comments about not being in the service, mostly from servicemen. I decided that the least I could do was work for the aircraft plant that was in Oklahoma. I helped make C-47s. I worked on the wing assembly. It was fascinating to see how we could turn out a dozen planes a day. The assembly line ran 24 hours a day. I worked with people who were as far from the way I thought as you could get. I was pleased with the fact that I could fit in with these people. Two "Rosie the Riveters" called me "Blondi." I was thrilled to death to be making \$35.00 a week. Up until that time I was making a dollar a day. It's hard for people today to understand the Depression, and what it was like to grow up through it.

I hope that they will never have the experience of a real Depression. As my cousin Evelyn says, "One Depression a lifetime is enough." As I was working for the Douglas Aircraft Company I got a call from the main office offering me a job in the drafting department. I had been recommended by a teacher from High School. I told the person on the phone that I was already working there as a rivitor on the wing assembly, but thought that I could get a transfer. I learned their policy was once you were placed, nothing could get you a transfer. When the transfer was rejected, I quit and made plans to go to college.

My very good friend Bill and I agreed to be roommates. I had two interests, one was to be an actor and the other was to be a graphic artist. Standing in line to register when I was about third from the front, I still hadn't made up my mind. As I have done many times in my life, I flipped a coin to see if I would major in Drama or Art. The coin came up art. I am very glad that it worked out that way, because later I found out that actors and I do not get along very well. Bill and I lived in the freshman dorm. The first thing that a freshman finds out is that they are not as smart as they thought. I also learned

that I really didn't know how to study. My first year, I planned to get all of the required subjects out of the way so I could spend my last years devoted to art.

Because of the war, civilian boys were outnumbered by the girls, but there were army and navy units assigned to the University; that evened the number out. I became a close friend with the boy across the hall. He was very handsome and not too bright. Many girls used me and my open personality to get to know my friend. I helped him with his work. We were in the same English class. He could never get his work done without me. But no matter what we did, he always got a better grade than I did. Finally I went to the teacher and complained. She said she could tell it was my work, but he was smarter, because he could get me to do his work. That was a very special lesson I learned. From that day on, he did his own work and I did mine and my grades began to improve. Our friendship did not suffer this action. While we were in our second term, he enlisted in the Navy. Bill and I left the freshman dorm and moved into a rooming house. One by one, many of the boys were called to war.

Bill developed a nosebleed that wouldn't stop, and he finally went to the infirmary. They couldn't diagnose his problem and sent him home, where he was placed in the hospital. I wasn't too concerned, but I did visit him on the weekend. The second weekend, I got home Friday night and went directly to bed. The next morning my mother woke me up because I was wanted on the phone. It was my friend Martha and she asked if Bill had died. I almost flipped, "What do you mean?" She said that he was not expected to live through the night. I called the hospital and he was still alive. I dressed quickly and went to the hospital, where I met Bill's mother. I had a chance to go into his room, and after that I sat with his parents outside his door for over 24 hours. His parents and I were sitting outside his door when his nurse called us inside saying, "He is going." Standing at the foot of the bed with my heart in my throat, I watched Bill take his last breath saying my name. I had no time to feel my grief; I had to comfort his mother and father.

In the days that passed I was at their beck and call. I took their car and chauffeured them everywhere. I left school for a time to help with his funeral. I was a pallbearer and, I as usual, kept my grief to my self. It wasn't until I got back to college that I had a chance to let go and cry my eyes out.

After Bill's death, I had a series of roommates -- some nicer than others, but no one ever replaced Bill as my friend. I kept in touch with Bill's mother until she died in an automobile crash.

The United States had invaded Europe and we thought that the war would soon be over. Being drafted didn't even enter my thoughts until Mother called me to say I had a letter from the government. I asked her to read it to me. I was told that I had to take another physical. This time I passed. I was given a couple of weeks to tie up loose ends. My professors told me if I would finish the work, they would give me credit for the semester. I worked myself into numbness to get the work done. I passed all my subjects

and my transcript says I completed the year. Years later, I had trouble explaining how I could be in the Army and University at the same time.

The Sunday before I was to leave, mother had my college girlfriend, Betty Ward, to dinner. Mother never said anything when we disappeared into my bedroom for over two hours. The next morning I went alone to the induction center to be shipped out. I didn't know any of the other guys. We all looked a little scared. I had never been farther away from home than the University. We were packed on a bus and we drove all night to Fort Smith, Arkansas. We got there late and we stood in the rain until we could be assigned to a bed. In the morning we were up bright and early to be processed. I was luckily to have a top bunk. The boy in the lower bunk next to mine was pissed on by the guy above him, who couldn't control his bladder. Moral to the story: always head for the top bunk, which I did from that day on.

After being processed we were given an opportunity to join the regular army. Why I did, I will never know, but the only thing that changed was I could put RA in front of my serial number and I knew I would be out in two years. At this time we were still in our civilian clothes. We were taken to the supply center and stripped naked and our clothes were packed to be sent home. We were then issued our G.I. equipment. Dressed in our khakis and boots, we packed all our winter clothes into a duffel bag. I remember well that the duffel bag was so heavy that I couldn't carry it, but within a week I could throw it over my shoulder and carry a rifle and mortar tube.

I made some good friends while at Ft. Smith. We were the same, away from home for the first time not knowing what was going to happen to us. I didn't know it at the time, but because of my height I was sent to Camp Robinson in Little Rock, Arkansas, and assigned to a heavy weapons corps. I never saw my friends again.

Being in a heavy weapons company meant that we had to carry everything that the other soldiers had to carry plus one part of a mortar. The mortar comes in three sections: the tube, the tripod, and the ammunition. The army was determined to make men out of us. Camp Robinson was a training camp, but instead of living in a large bunk house we lived in five-men huts. The first day there I was made a squad leader of the first platoon, because I knew my right foot from my left. Being squad leader of the first platoon put me in front of the company.

Being a squad leader had its benefits, such as, I never had to pull latrine orderly, KP, or clean-up. The downside was I was responsible for the actions of my men. I wondered how some of them passed the mental test. I found it easier to clean their rifles and escort them to reveille rather than be chewed out for their mistakes. I knew this was the wrong way to handle this, but it was faster.

I was soon running a mile with a full pack, rifle and mortar tube. I got along very well in the army because I figured out early what they were trying to do. The army wanted

to destroy our dignity to rebuild it. Some of the men hated calling the officers Sir, but I thought, "What is the difference between Sir or Jim?"

"All I want to see are asses and elbows" the Sgt. would call out. That meant we were to get on our hands and knees and police the area. I laughed thinking what it looked like seeing hundreds of men with their asses in the air. I also thought it would make the officers sick having to perform short arm inspection. "Short arm" is when all the soldiers stand by their bunks with their pants unbuttoned and their genitals hanging out of their pants. As the officer walked by, you were to milk your penis to see if a milky fluid came out. If you had a discharge that meant you had a venereal disease. Some officers took more time in front of some soldiers. I thought, "Are they checking them out or does that guy have the clap?" How can you get the clap when we weren't allowed off base.

I heard some older soldiers tell how to GI your floor. You make a mixture of water and lye and spread it evenly over the floor and, presto, a beautiful clean floor. But how was I going to get the lye? I charmed the girl at the PX and she brought it in from the outside. Friday night was the time to GI the floor, and I sent my hut mates to the PX with the promise to do the floor. They were happy to let me do it. It didn't take 15 minutes to have the floor ready. When I arrived at the PX, my friends panicked. I assured them that everything was taken care of. Three or four beers later we went back to the hut and, low and behold, a spotless floor. I know that in time the floor would be eaten through, but I didn't plan to stay there for long.

About the fourth week I ruptured a vein in my leg and had to report to the hospital and spent three days in bed. I didn't know what would happen when I got back with the company--they made me work my way back to squad leader. One day I did KP and one day I was the latrine orderly of the officers' latrine, which was easy because it was very clean compared to the enlisted men's latrine. After I finished the three sections of the latrine I went to the back of the building to hang up the mops. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the inspecting officer approaching. When I came back I was ready to report that all was done and ready for inspection. The officer was not in the front room and he wasn't in the shower room and I knew he had to be in the crapper and he was sitting on the toilet. I snapped to attention and said, "Pvt. Andros reporting for inspection."

"Would you get the fuck out of here." he shouted

I didn't know what to do, so I waited outside. When he came out he said, "Can't a guy take a shit without you reporting for inspection?" He walked away without completing the inspection. After that, he always made some remark that I worked too hard to get brownie points.

When I went into the army I had never touched a gun or even heard one shoot. After weeks of dry fire we were finally taken to the firing range. It was raining, we were late and we didn't get a break. Being in the first platoon we were the first to the firing line

to shoot the target. We had gone over and over the commands to fire. As I stood there I knew what to do and I was sure I would be a sharp shooter. "The flag is up--the flag is down--drop and fire." I dropped flat on my belly. Just then the guns on each side went off and the noise hit me hard and I just peed in my pants. Because of the rain we were all in puddles of water so no one ever knew that I had had an accident there on the firing line. You are the first to hear this. On the second trip to the firing line I did become a sharp shooter, but I wasn't very good with the forty-five. I hit the target that was in the shape of a man once, and that was in the groin. The officer said he would hate to be my enemy.

Although there were many incidents that could be written about while I was in the army, the most embarrassing was when I was asked to train my platoon. I must say I started with great confidence, but I was soon put to shame. I gave the command "right flank" but I was distracted for a moment. When I looked up I saw my men headed toward a building, and I couldn't come up with the command "to the rear march." My men marched into the building piling on top of each other and making me look like a fool. I was never asked to take the platoon again.

Before I finished basic training Japan had surrendered and I thought that I would be discharged, but I was wrong. I was a member of the regular army and I had two years to serve. When we finished basic training I was sent to the Pacific Theater. Again because of my height, I was assigned to General Mac Arthur's Headquarters Company. While waiting for placement I was billeted at the Finance building in Tokyo. Because of my art background they thought I might be a good replacement for the cartoonist of the Star and Stripes who was up for a discharge, but the cartoonist decided to re-enlist. In the process of the transaction my papers were misplaced. I sat for days watching others come and go. I figured that I would never be called, so I went out on my own and by accident found the special service office. I inquired how could be a member of special service. They put in a request for me when they found out I was an artist. Eventually my papers were found, and I ended in a room with two other artists painting signs. Such as: "Bus leaving from Hibiya Park at 1400," or "The movie tonight will be seen in the game room." It was after a month when Major Diott decided to send me to Club Ichiban to help decorate the largest enlisted men's club in the Pacific Theater.

The Japanese artist made my art-work look amateurish. I had sense enough to know I was outclassed. I got pictures of the United States and had them paint them on the wall. After the club was opened I was made program manager and, eventually, director. As director of the club I was in a position to get perks that made my life beautiful. I was allowed to swim with the officers; we all look alike in a bathing suit. I could get a car over a General, because a case of beer to the right person was a passport to heaven. I even got invited to a party for General Mac Arthur. I was the only enlisted man there. Major Diott, my superior, threatened me with bodily harm if I got out of place. "I don't know how you got here, but your life is on the line if you goof up." He warned. I never told him that I got the invitation from a Chinese General whom I had arranged the orchestra for this occasion.

One thing I became aware of was that the officers were young men like myself. They were away from home for the first time and just as scared as the rest of us.