



SERGEANT SAPPHO

Sidney K. Lebhart



Sergeant Sappho

by Sidney K. Lebhart



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Houston, TX 77065

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ISBN 978-1-62212-095-6

DEDICATION

THIS BOOK TOOK far too long to be written, but now that it's done I want to dedicate it to my comrades who only wanted to serve their country but had to lie to do so. I know I loved being in the army and I loved the life it gave me. I just hated not being able to be honest about myself.

So to all the women and men who experienced the same fear, pain, and frustrations that I did, this one is for you—and I'm sending a salute along with it as a signal of the respect and admiration I have for all of you. Since our country never said it, allow me to thank you for your service, for I know all too well it's cost. God bless you and good luck.

Staff Sergeant Sidney K. Lebhart

THE LATE AUGUST Alabama sunrise tried to force itself in through the blinds as Sid considered ignoring the alarm. She got up anyway to shower and get dressed. Her starched fatigues hung on the closet door just above the spit-shined combat boots, and every detail of the uniform seemed to demand that she hurry. After all, it wouldn't do for the drill sergeant to miss reveille formation.

The shower really didn't do much to ease her longing to return to bed, but years of self discipline kept her from giving in. Sometimes it seemed like the only thing that made any sense at all was just doing what had to be done, rather than what she wanted to do. Because anything else would lead to the certain collapse of all she had accomplished, and she had worked too hard to give it all up.

Checking the mirror one last time to be sure everything about her uniform was perfect, she glanced beyond her own reflection toward the reason so little sleep had claimed her the previous night. Lying there under the sheet was the latest tousled blonde goddess, who had the luxury of sleeping in while the sergeant marched off to work. It just didn't seem fair, but the smile creeping across Sid's face was a sure sign that she really didn't mind.

With visions of perfect breasts and exquisite curves, she shut the front door quietly behind her and faced one more day of living the lie. Sergeant Sappho was on her way to work.

CHAPTER

1

1969. GOD, WHAT a year! What an era, really, as our world had started changing so swiftly. To those of us of a certain age, if we close our eyes and try, we can still smell the incense and hear the sitar music.

That August, Washington was its usual perfect summer self. Long hours of riding horses, swimming in the Green River, and cleaning the barn had made it a sweet season so far, but change was waiting to snag me in its web with the next ring of the telephone.

I don't believe I was particularly noticeable in any way back then, as I had perfected the art of blending in instead of standing out for most of my life. I was eighteen, average height, with light brown hair that tended to sun-bleach in the summers, and green eyes. I had graduated in June the year before then worked at the stables where I boarded my horse and helped my mother around the apartment building she managed, and where we lived. I had my own little apartment there; had, actually, since I turned fourteen. There were differences between my life and the lives of my friends. But just because there were differences doesn't mean mine was a bad life, and almost everyone I knew seemed to

think I had it pretty good. Looking back, I can see how they might have thought that. But they didn't know everything.

For instance, most of them had no idea how desperate I was to leave home. I couldn't find the words to explain why I had to go; I just did. I wasn't looking for adventure; I was looking for freedom. I was ready to find out who I was becoming and I was trying to make sense of the shape my life was going to take. All I was sure of was that I had to leave home behind to do that. I knew I had to face everything alone.

I was never afraid of being alone. I had shielded so much of myself from everybody for so long, so finally being able to let my guard down and just "be" held all the promise of some kind of heaven, and if that meant being alone, that was okay. I was so ready for it, whatever "it" turned out to be.

I was just heading out the door of my parents' apartment in Seattle when Mom hollered that I had a phone call, so I went back in to grab it.

It was Army Recruiting Sergeant Olson, checking to see how I was managing with my weight loss program and asking if I would come down to the Armed Forces Examination and Enlistment Station and weigh in so she could update her records. It really was not what I had planned on doing that morning, but it didn't seem right to refuse her request just because I wanted to go riding. Besides, I was proud of my progress on the diet. I felt I was looking pretty good, and wanted to show off just a little bit. So I said sure, I'd be right down, and hung up.

The AFEES Station was crowded, as usual, with eager recruits and disgusted draftees waiting to be processed. I walked past them all as I looked for Sergeant Olson so I could get this over with and get on my way to the stables down in Kent.

Sergeant Olson looked as sharp in her uniform this morning

as she had when she had come to our apartment last December to talk to me and my parents about my enlisting. I couldn't help but admire this woman. She looked so official and competent, and she had been so nice about my need to stay at home until Dad returned from Oklahoma City after attending an advanced course at the FAA headquarters there.

Sergeant Olson led me into the medical area and had me get on the scales. I think I held my breath, but she seemed almost as pleased as I was when she saw that I was well within the weight standard. She asked me to wait for her in her office and we'd talk some more. We really didn't talk, though. Instead, she arranged for the Army doctor on duty to complete my physical so I would be all set to leave for Basic Training.

Leave? Now? Today? Whoa, wait a minute; I thought I was just weighing in. I didn't think it would mean leaving right away! Very patiently, Sergeant Olson explained that my slot in the Air Traffic Control School, the Advanced Individual training that I had selected and qualified for, dictated that I leave for Basic Training as soon as possible. And that meant heading for Alabama tomorrow night.

Well, this was it. This was what I had been working toward since last December, so I had to accept that the wheels really were in motion. After she explained this to me, she led me into a huge room where I was sworn in with about two hundred guys who were starting their journey to a war somewhere in southeast Asia. I don't know what was in their minds, but I was stunned. Wow! I had just joined the Army!

CHAPTER

2

ONCE I HAD all my travel documents, vouchers, and schedules in hand, I made my way through the crowd to a payphone and called Mom. She and Dad had signed the papers months ago to let me enlist, but I could hear the surprise in her voice as it sunk in that it was happening so suddenly. And I couldn't blame her; I was in a state of shock, too.

I don't really remember what we did in the next twenty-six hours, but somehow I found myself at SeaTac airport waiting to get on a plane that would take me to Ft. McClellan, Alabama. Mom was trying hard not to cry, Dad was grinning with pride, and my little brother was being the typical thirteen-year-old, cracking jokes to cover up the way he really felt. It was pretty hard to say goodbye to my family; they had been so supportive of me and my plans. It was going to be so different to be on my own now. I guess I was scared, but I can't recall much of what I was thinking. Before I knew it, I was in my seat on the plane wondering just what I had gotten myself into and what it was going to be like.

I wasn't traveling alone, thankfully, as two other female recruits were going to Alabama, too. Becky was from Tacoma, and Melissa from Mount Vernon. We exchanged histories on the

plane and were relieved that we would have the comfort of having someone from our home state to talk to as we started our new lives. I sometimes wonder what the other passengers on that flight thought of us, or if they even gave us a second thought.

It wasn't a direct flight and we had to deplane twice before we got to Alabama. To a daughter of the northwest, it seemed weird to have to fly into Atlanta to get to Alabama, but I didn't file the flight plan and I figured the airline must know what it was doing. I was just anxious for the trip to be over.

A sharply memorable event was sharing the flight into Atlanta with a GI just returning from Vietnam. He looked like a typical Southern boy, with his red hair and freckles. He was so excited to be going home that he was totally unashamed of the tears coursing down his face as he looked out the window and got his first glimpse of the Georgia red clay beneath us. To me, it seemed somehow sad that he was so happy to be ending his military experience while we were just starting ours. Kind of an alpha and omega sort of thing, I guess.

Finally we landed in Anniston, Alabama. After waiting our turn to get out of our seats, I was totally unprepared for the furnace blast of hot, wet air that slapped us in the face as we walked off the plane. Oh, my god, it was so hot; I quickly learned what humidity meant! I had worn a wool suit that was perfectly comfortable in the Seattle evening temperature, but was absolutely *not* appropriate for Alabama in August. I hoped I could change into cooler clothes and out of my heels soon.

We boarded an olive drab bus that wound its way through Anniston as I watched for signs of Ft. McClellan. I was musing on the similarities of the landscape to Washington when we arrived at the main gate and the MP waved us through. In a matter of minutes we had stopped in front of a three-story cinder block

building whose sign indicated it was the Reception Station. A stern looking black woman in uniform was standing with a clipboard in her hand and she waved us to stand in a line as she read our names off. She announced that we were assigned to bay number two and we could take our luggage in and pick a bunk. Not really sure what bay number two might be, we entered through the screen door and followed signs down the darkened hallway.

We found that bay number two was a huge dormitory-style room that contained enough single beds, wall lockers, and foot lockers for forty women. It was going to be our home until enough recruits arrived to form a platoon, and then we would move into our training companies. After looking around, we figured we might as well get comfortable.

The three of us from Washington naturally decided to stay together on the same side of the bay, and we began unpacking. Before we got much done, however, the sergeant who had greeted us at the bus came in and told us to line up outside to march to dinner.

Gamely, we hustled back out into the heat and got our first taste of marching. The sergeant had us line up in four columns, with the tallest woman in the front and the rest of us behind her according to our height. She explained that when she gave the order to march, we would step off with our left foot, and we would keep walking until she commanded us to halt. Seemed simple enough to me, but it was amazing how hard it was to keep in step with everyone.

The Reception Station faced a central quadrangle that was formed by three other identical three-story cinder block buildings, all painted a blinding white with dark forest green trim. It was hard to believe there were over six hundred trainees

housed there, because there was not a soul to be seen. Just heat waves radiating up from the walkways.

We marched to a single-story building at the back of the quadrangle, then we halted, and were instructed on the procedures for eating in the mess hall. We were to file in singly, no talking was allowed in the line, and we could choose what we wanted to eat from whatever was being offered on the chow line.

After filling our trays, we were supposed to get glasses of milk or cups of coffee and sit down at the closest available empty seat. Every table of four had to be filled before you could sit at an empty table, and talking was to be kept to a minimum. One by one, we entered, signed in, and started through the chow line.

Now, just like you, I had heard rumors that Army food was less than close to what Mom cooked, but imagine my surprise when I discovered that steak was on the menu! Granted, it wasn't a T-bone, and it was pretty tough, but it was a far cry from the hash or meat loaf I had expected. I really did not have time to get much of an impression of the mess hall or the food, though, because we had to finish our meals so the next platoon could eat.

I remember I was rather confused as to who the women in the blue uniforms were who served us on the chow line. It didn't quite make sense that the Army would hire people to work in a mess hall, after all; not when there were trainees running all over the place. In fact, I started to realize that the only green uniforms I had seen since we got off the bus were on the sergeants at the Reception Station. What was that about?

After my Washington companions and I wolfed down our steaks, we were hustled out the doors and told to go back to Reception. The walk was a little longer than a city block back home, so we strolled along and took in what we could of the scenery. Alabama seemed kind of pretty, but even though it was

close to six o'clock in the evening, the heat had not abated in the least. Boy, this was going to take some getting used to and I was sure grateful that I had changed into slacks and a blouse before we marched to dinner!

Again, I kept seeing women in those funny blue uniforms. They were all wearing a short sleeved, cornflower blue blouse, paired with an A-line skirt of a similar blue that buttoned up the front from hem to waist, and black ankle socks under black, blocky, lace-up shoes. If these were trainees, they sure didn't look like the recruiting posters and brochures I had been shown.

About ten more women had arrived at the bay while we had been at the chow hall. We all introduced ourselves, and then everyone got busy trying to make our bunks. One of the new arrivals said her sister had been a WAC and had clued her in on what to expect in Basic Training, so I asked about the blue uniforms.

Spencer said those were called PT uniforms; they would be what we wore to do physical training and everything else in Basic. She explained that men were issued the green fatigue uniforms for their Basic, but the only time we would be wearing fatigues would be in our sixth or seventh week when we went out in the field and slept in tents for a couple of days.

Apparently, we would be wearing blue shorts under those A-line skirts to accommodate doing exercises and physical work like KP, scrubbing the floors, and keeping the bay clean. Practical, sure, but they certainly weren't attractive! Oh well, it was only for eight weeks, I thought.

The next thing I knew, the sergeant came in and announced that it was eight-thirty p.m. and we had thirty minutes until lights out so we needed to get ready to go to bed. *Go to bed?* I joined the Army to become an adult and somebody was telling me I had to

go to bed at nine p.m.? Oh, good god, this was crazy! My sentiments seemed to be pretty universal as I listened to the complaints around me, but we didn't seem to have any alternative. So, in a flurry of activity, beds got made and personal items got stashed in those wooden footlockers and all twenty or so of us crawled into our cots.

The lights went out at exactly nine p.m., and the quiet lasted for all of about eleven minutes before someone got up and lit a cigarette. I heard hushed conversations around me as little groups of three or four women got together and tried to pass the time. Apparently I was not the only reluctant participant in "early to bed, early to rise."

Someone came by my bunk and asked if I wanted to play cards. Since sleep was nowhere on my horizon, I said sure and followed her out to the bathroom, which we had just learned to call the latrine. Cards were being shuffled and dealt as we walked in. I asked what we were playing and was told that nobody seemed to be sure how to play poker but we were going to try to figure it out. Well, I have no idea what we were truly playing, but since no money was involved, winning didn't seem to be the point anyway. The six of us sat on the cool tiled floor in our pajamas and bathrobes and talked and laughed and just generally got to know each other. We were having a pretty good time, too, until a sergeant walked in and said we were in trouble and would have to see the captain first thing in the morning.

Great, in the Army less than forty-eight hours and already I'm in trouble! I was sure this was not a good thing, but looking back, it's a shame I couldn't have seen a pattern in the making.

CHAPTER

3

It seemed like I had just drifted off to sleep after our “poker party” when I was jolted awake. The lights turned on without warning and some sergeant was walking up and down the central aisle blowing a whistle and telling us to get up and get ready for chow. Everyone quickly dressed and ran outside to form up on the sidewalk for our march to the dining hall. Breakfast was uneventful but filling, and I was back in the barracks before it was even really daylight.

Shortly, the sergeant returned and called out a list of names of people to go with her to the captain’s office. As we walked down the staircase, she instructed us on how to report and salute the captain but didn’t give us any hints about what to expect from this meeting.

She ushered the six of us into the office and, after reporting to the commanding officer, she left us on our own. Captain Young was a very professional looking woman who regarded us with less than amusement over our antics of the previous evening.

She started the exchange by lecturing on the absolute necessity of following orders in the Army, even those orders that do not appear to make any sense. And in her mind, since we were

told to go to bed at lights out, our latrine poker party amounted to outright disobedience which could not be tolerated.

Once we had assured her that we understood what was expected of us and promised no further after hour's activities, she imposed our punishment. In teams of two, we were assigned extra cleaning duties throughout the building, and we would perform these duties for the next three nights.

A girl from Wisconsin and I were assigned the task of stripping and re-waxing the floor of the captain's office and were told to pay particular attention to the corners and the baseboards. Actually, it was recommended that we pick up some extra toothbrushes at the PX, as they would come in handy to make certain that all the old wax was removed.

Welcome to the Army, girls, and that old standard: the GI party! Instead of pizza, soda, and beer, these parties featured lye soap, scrub brushes, and floor wax, and a hell of a lot of elbow grease. Well, somehow we survived our extra duty and even emerged with a renewed respect for cleanliness, which I could see would come in handy as we endured the preparations for endless future inspections. But I have to admit that I can't remember ever playing cards again in Basic Training!

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