

1916

Experience of a Recruit in the United States Army

Cal C. Lyon

Follow this and additional works at: https://digicom.bpl.lib.me.us/books_pubs

Recommended Citation

Lyon, Cal C., "Experience of a Recruit in the United States Army" (1916). *Books and Publications*. 130.
https://digicom.bpl.lib.me.us/books_pubs/130

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections at Bangor Community: Digital Commons@bpl. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books and Publications by an authorized administrator of Bangor Community: Digital Commons@bpl. For more information, please contact ccoombs@bpl.lib.me.us.



*Experience of
A Recruit
in the
United States
Army*

C. Lyon

WAR DEPARTMENT,
THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,
Washington, D. C., May 5, 1916.

With the view of presenting to all concerned the actual experiences of a young man who enlists in the United States Army, the following extracts from the Columbus Citizen, of Columbus, Ohio, are republished. This tale of human interest was published in the newspaper mentioned from March 31 to April 4, 1916, and, as stated in the editor's note, depicts the actual experiences of a newspaper reporter detailed to find out and tell the Citizen readers how the United States prepares its soldiers for duty. These articles are republished without comment, as it is obvious that comment is unnecessary.

H. P. MCCAIN,
The Adjutant General.

EXPERIENCE OF A RECRUIT IN THE UNITED STATES ARMY.

By C. C. LYON.

[Issue of March 30, 1916.]

I'm a private in the United States Regular Army now.
Half the civilized world is at war.

The United States has rushed practically every available regular to the Mexican border and has sent several thousand into Mexico to capture the bandit Villa "dead or alive."

President Wilson is vigorously urging preparedness for national defense.

Congress has just authorized a considerable increase in the Regular Army.

More young men are now joining the colors than in many years.

The Ohio Militia and that of other States, are on their toes, ready for a possible call to border duty.

What about the thousands of men who are doing the drilling and who will do the fighting and the dying if trouble comes?

What class of fellows are they?

Why do they join the Army?

What does the Army do for them and to them during their enlistment?

What chance for promotion has an enlisted man?

LYON DID EVERYTHING RECRUIT DOES EXCEPT ENLIST AND TAKE
THE OATH.

It was to find answers to these questions that I went into the Army. I wanted to see the machinery of the Army working from the inside.

I didn't tie myself up for a three-year enlistment. By special arrangement with high Army officials, I was permitted to "join," but the door was left open so I could get out when I had gathered all the information I was after. The only detail I omitted was the signing of the enlistment papers and the taking of the oath.

I am now at the Columbus Barracks, where Regular Army recruits from 14 States are collected and whipped into shape for real service.

EDITOR'S NOTE.—C. C. Lyon, Citizen reporter, is now in the United States Regular Army, stationed at the Columbus Barracks, to find out and tell Citizen readers how Uncle Sam prepares his soldiers for duty. This is the first of a series of articles which will be published from time to time as Lyon's experiences develop.

I'm sleeping, eating, and drilling, with the Tenth Recruit Company, United States Army, Capt. Mason commanding, and First Lieut. Thompson next in command.

Seventy-two of us recruits presented ourselves at the barracks receiving station the same morning.

One of the first questions the sergeant in charge asked was:

"When did you have a bath last?"

Those of us who could show visible proof of acquaintance with a tub within three days were waived aside. For the rest it was a hot shower with plenty of soap and scrubbing.

"The first thing you learn in the Army is to keep clean," the sergeant told us.

We were a nondescript crowd that went to the hospital for physical examination.

Most of the fellows were between 19 and 24. A majority of us slouched along as we walked, making no effort at erect carriage. Only a few were well dressed. Several looked like down-and-outers. A good many were smoking cigarettes.

DESIRE FOR ADVENTURE ATTRACTS MANY YOUNG MEN INTO THE ARMY.

Why do young men join the Army?

While we loafed at the hospital I talked with a lot of my fellow recruits.

"I'm after a crack at that fellow Villa," said one.

"If you'd see the town I came from you'd know," said another. "Deadest place in Georgia. I worked in a grocery store. I want to see something."

"I and my girl had a falling out and I threatened to join the Army. She said I didn't have the nerve," said a third.

Most of the boys said they craved adventure and excitement and thought they could get it soldiering. Stories of the Villa hunt, almost without exception, had aroused their fighting spirit.

Six of the 72 backed out before the physical examinations began. That is a privilege with recruits, I learned; they may change their mind and stay out provided they haven't signed enlistment papers and taken the oath.

"What's the matter, brother?" I asked one of the quitters.

"Cold feet, I guess," he said. "I think I'll go into the Navy."

He was from South Carolina and the Government had paid his way to the Columbus Barracks. He was dead broke. It was walk back home or ride freights for those who "declined," if they happened to be broke.

The physical examinations of the rest of us required all morning and was machine-like in precision.

4 Experience of a Recruit in the United States Army.

The examining officers divided us into two groups, photographed and finger-printed us and then had us change to our Garden of Eden costume.

"I'll now test your lungs," the chief examiner called out and then he went rapidly down the line thumping and testing with medical instruments each man in his turn.

"Now your hearts." He made us hop on one foot two or three times around the big room and then applied another instrument.

As he found a defect in a recruit he called it out and a clerk put it down.

LYON HAS FLAT FEET.

He was testing our feet and he reached me.

"Call out your name," he commanded.

"Lyon," I said.

"Flat feet in the first degree for Lyon," he told the clerk.

"Would that disqualify me?" I asked.

"Not first degree flat feet. But third degree would. We'll fix you up with proper shoes."

Later he declared I needed some dental work. Nearly two-thirds of all the recruits examined had something the matter with their teeth.

The medical examiner tested us for every disease and ailment I ever heard of and many I'd never heard of.

Then he turned us over to an eye, ear, and nose specialist—an Army officer, who put us through his tests.

Only six were rejected for physical disabilities.

We recessed for dinner.

INSURED AGAINST DISEASE.

"Now we're going to vaccinate you," the sergeant in charge said, when we returned to the hospital. They marched us into a sort of operating room.

"Let me say first that if any of you men get sick while we're working on you, just lie right down on the floor. It'll be all right," said the chief in charge.

We stripped to the waist and as we marched past a table one attendant dabbed our left arms with alcohol, another attendant painted a part of the arm with iodine, and a third one scratched us each with a vaccinating needle.

"This is for smallpox," the chief said. "Now to inoculate you against typhoid," he added.

This was more painful. He jabbed us with a big syringe just around the corner from the smallpox wound, on the left arm, and shot what seemed to be about a spoonful of medicine into each of us.

TOOK SOME OF HIS BLOOD.

The blood test was the most painful of all.

"We want about a thimbleful of your blood to make the Wassermann blood test," we were told.

We bared our right arms. Only a few were allowed in the room at a time.

"It's not a bad idea to look out of the window at the scenery while we're doing this," I was told.

One attendant tightly bound my arm below the elbow and I was told to clench my fist tightly. As I did so another operator stuck a rather large pump affair into the most prominent artery. The outside scenery had ceased to interest me and I turned just in time to see a small test tube filling with my life's blood.

BIG OUTFIT OF CLOTHING.

Being fitted out with clothing, shoes, and toilet kit was the pleasantest stunt of the day.

There was a noncommissioned officer at the supply station who would take just one look at the recruit and call out to clerks the size of a suit that would fit him.

That man's judgment was well-nigh perfect. Out of the 60 men he outfitted that afternoon, he made only four bad guesses.

"He's been fitting out recruits for 25 years and is the best in the Army," Sergt. Simpson, our guide, told us proudly.

Each of us received an olive-drab uniform cap and overcoat, two pairs of tan shoes, leggings, four suits of underwear, six pairs of socks, a suit of overalls, and a soldier's toilet kit, which contained a razor, shaving brush, soap, shoe brush and polish, clothes brush, tooth brush, hair brush and comb, and mending outfit.

SELL CIVILIAN CLOTHES.

"Now, get into your uniforms," commanded Sergt. Simpson.

A second-hand clothing man was at the receiving station to buy our civilian clothes if we cared to sell. Some of the boys got as much as \$2 for their entire wardrobe. I had mine sent home.

They divided us into platoons of 16 men each for assignment to barracks and drill sergeants.

I went to Company 10, Sergt. Watt, along with 15 other new men.

"You'll like Watt," said Sergt. Simpson, as he marched us over to the Tenth's barracks. "He's seen 27 years in the Army. There's none better when it comes to drilling."

[Issue of March 31, 1916.]

Drill! Drill! Drill!

Drill is the big word in an Army post dictionary.

Left, right; left, right; one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four!

The sergeants bark it at you every minute you are on the drill grounds.

And right here let me say the drill sergeants are the backbone of an Army recruiting post.

Whether the recruit will make a good soldier depends largely on the drill sergeant.

Take Sergt. Watt, for instance, the drill sergeant who puts me through my paces for nearly three hours every day.

Watt met our platoon of 16 men at the barracks door that first evening when Sergt. Simpson led us from the receiving station, all dressed up in our Army uniforms.

"Gee, but that fellow looks stern," I thought to myself after my first glance at Watt.

A middle-aged man, with a grave, serious face, but every inch a soldier. That's the man I saw.

We certainly did not look much like soldiers. All seemed strangely awkward in their new "rookie" clothes.

WATCHED OVER 'EM LIKE A FATHER THE FIRST NIGHT.

"Now, men," he said, or rather commanded, by way of introduction, "get a move on; lay your things on those bunks and come to my desk; I want to talk to you."

We instantly felt he was not a man to be trifled with, and we promptly got a move on.

"I don't want one of you men to leave this room to-night," he said

Jaws dropped all around me. My own dropped a little. Nearly everyone of us had personal plans outside the post.

"I have a good reason," he continued. "You've all been vaccinated and inoculated to-day, and you are liable to be sick to-night. I want you here where I can look after you."

I decided right then I was going to like Sergt. Watt.

And Sergt. Watt's attitude, I have found, is typical of the service.

The United States Government looks after its fighters—their health, morals, and physical development to minute details, and their mental development to a certain extent.

Every day Sergt. Watt devoted one hour to lecturing us.

EDITOR'S NOTE.—C. C. Lyon, reporter for the Citizen, is now in the United States Regular Army, drilling at the Columbus Barracks, to get stories of Army life for Citizen readers. This is the second of several articles he will write.

"The first thing a soldier must learn," he said that same evening, "is cleanliness of body, how to appear neat and soldierly in his clothes, and how to behave himself inside and outside the post."

We found out mighty soon what Sergt. Watt meant by "cleanliness"—two baths a week, at least; teeth cleaned three times a day; face and hands scrubbed with hot water and soap before every meal; shoes shined at least twice a day; clothes always spotless and pressed; shaves at least twice a week, and every man is supplied with four suits of underwear and six pairs of socks to change as often as he wants to.

One fellow in our platoon "complained," as he was cleaning his teeth:

"I don't suppose I ever brushed my teeth three times in all my life before I joined the Army," he said.

SENT ROOKIE BACK TO WASH HIS FACE RIGHT.

At the first drill under Sergt. Watt he singled out one of the boys.

"Did you wash your face this morning, young man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, go back and try it over again and this time put a little more enthusiasm and soap into it."

At first drilling is tiresome but it's a lot of fun.

Some of the fun is in watching the awkward recruit and in pitying the patient drill sergeant as he tries hour after hour to teach him how to keep step and to distinguish his right foot from his left.

I watched Sergt. Donald Williamson one day. Out of eight commands "right face," one recruit turned to the left seven times. He knew, of course, his right hand from his left, but he would become confused every time he heard the command.

"You and I'll learn left from right next Sunday," said the sergeant in despair. Sunday is a day off at the post.

SOME NEVER CAN LEARN.

"About one recruit in every thousand is absolutely incapable of distinguishing left from right or of learning how to keep step with his company," said First Sergt. Stone. "We finally switch him from one company to another, and if nobody can drill it into him he's dismissed from the Army."

However, I was told that some of the most awkward recruits in a few months make the best drillers.

One big fellow in our platoon was made to stand aside nearly all of one morning because he couldn't keep step with the rest.

But he wasn't half as discouraged as Sergt. Watt. After drill he said to the sergeant:

"I am as clumsy as a cow now, but I'll learn or die."



TOP ROW SHOWS 10 RECRUITS THE DAY THEY ENLISTED.
BOTTOM ROW SHOWS SAME 10 MEN, IN THE SAME RELATIVE POSITIONS, AFTER 12 DAYS UNDER THE DRILL
SERGEANTS.

MADE OF THE RIGHT STUFF.

That afternoon, when the rest of us were enjoying an hour off he was outside the barracks with a couple of pals practicing with dogged perseverance.

"He'll make it," said Sergt. Watt. "He's got good stuff in him." What's the use of all this drilling?

My answer would be that there never was a machine that would do perfect work unless every part worked smoothly and with absolute precision. And that goes for the war machine.

There's no doubt, too, that drilling gives one a wonderful "set up" feeling.

It made me realize for the first time in my life that I had a backbone.

BRACES A MAN UP.

After drills I would find myself walking around with my shoulders thrown back, head up, stomach drawn in, and hitting the ground on the balls of my feet.

There's no room in the United States Army for the slouch.

There's another thing that distinguishes the Army man, and drill and discipline does it; he snaps off his physical movements and his mind soon comes to work just as briskly.

Army life makes real men out of some mighty poor specimens.

Sergt. Mike Garvey pointed out to me one day a young fellow of 20 who looked as if he might have had previous training in a military academy.

AWAKENED HIS AMBITION.

"He came to me just 12 days ago," said the sergeant. "He was all bent over, carried his head on one side, had no ambition, and couldn't concentrate his mind on the simplest commands. I wondered how he ever got past the receiving station."

"How did you transform him?" I asked.

"Drill and exercises. He woke up when he found he was holding the entire platoon back. Now, he's a comer."

It now takes Uncle Sam about 25 drill days to whip the recruit into shape so he can be assigned to a regiment and sent away from the Columbus Barracks.

About 30 men are now being sent out every day, and the recruiting rush hasn't really begun.

Two of my new-made acquaintances left this week—one for a fort in Arizona and the other for Coast Artillery duty in Rhode Island.

"And just think," said one, "just five weeks ago I was feeding the cows on the farm."

"And I was tending a soda water fountain," said the other.

Both looked the part of real fighting men.

[Issue of April 3, 1916.]

UNCLE SAM'S SOLDIERS LIVE ON "FAT OF LAND" AND HAVE PLENTY OF TIME FOR PLAY, SAYS LYON—CITIZEN REPORTER WHO JOINED THE ARMY DESCRIBES LIFE AT COLUMBUS BARRACKS.

At my breakfast in the Columbus Barracks mess hall a 20-year-old recruit from West Virginia, sitting next to me, ate six fried eggs, as many slices of bacon, a grapefruit, three cups of coffee, a plateful of potatoes, and I don't know how many slices of bread and butter.

A sergeant who presided at the head of our table, which seated 11 besides myself, called a waiter and ordered all the platters replenished from the kitchen.

"Don't be backward, boys," he encouraged. "Wade right into the grub. It's a rich country you're fighting for."

I'd often heard Uncle Sam's fighters are the best fed in all the world. I know from personal experience now that everything served is of the very best quality, and there is plenty of it.

RECRUITS PUT ON WEIGHT.

I gained 3 pounds the first week I was at the barracks, in spite of the fact they almost drilled the legs off me and my left arm was sore from vaccination and inoculation and my right arm lame from having a blood pump jammed into it.

"I'm afraid you're not doing well," said First Sergt. Stone of the Tenth Company. "The average recruit gains 5 pounds the first week and 7 pounds the second week, or 12 pounds the first 14 days he's at the barracks."

I know the answer: For the first time in the lives of nine-tenths of the boys their existence becomes ordered and regulated. Every act is according to official schedule: Out of bed exactly at 6 a. m.; 15 minutes to make up bunks, dress, and be outside for roll call; breakfast at 6.45; drills at 7.15, 8.15, and 9.15; dinner at 12 noon; recreation, 1 to 3; retreat at 4.30; supper at 5; lights out at 9.

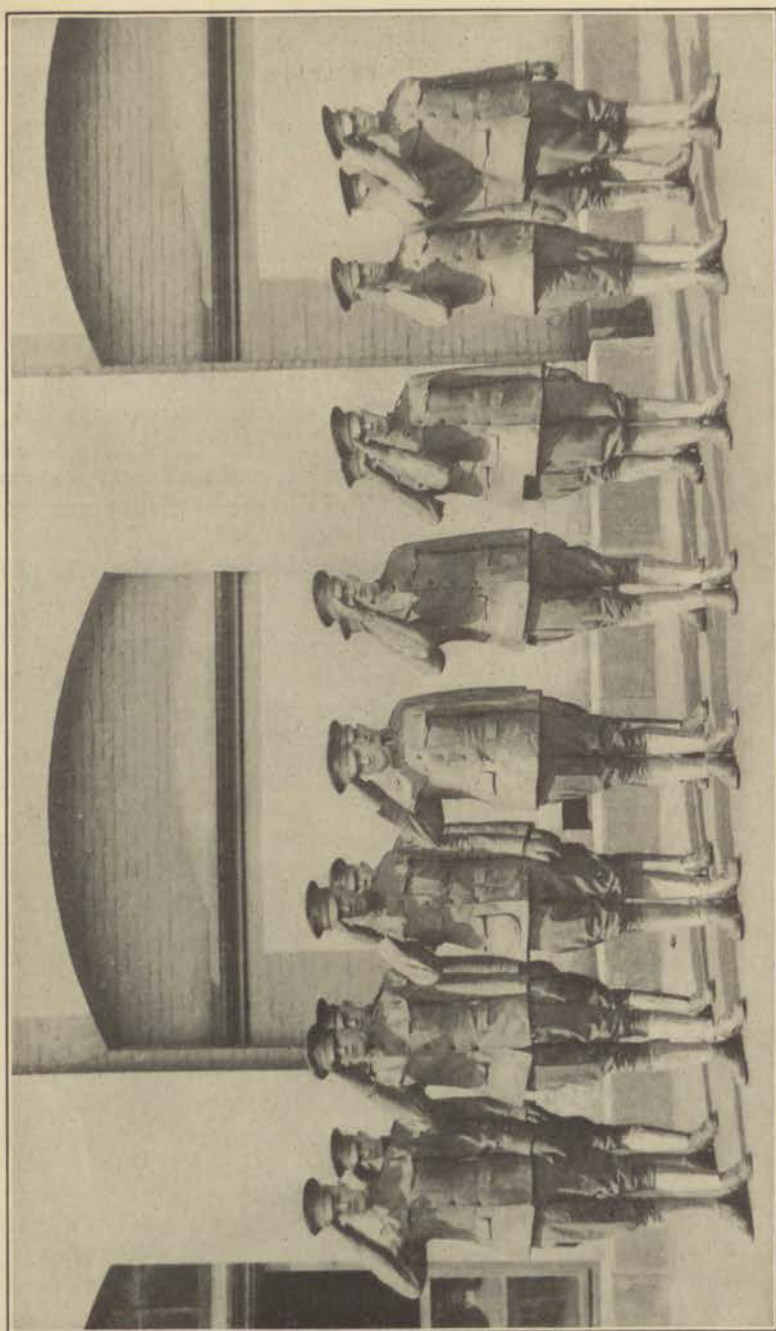
The Government is feeding its barracks soldiers for a little more than 26 cents a day per man.

Sergt. John F. Wells is the man who turns the trick at the Columbus post.

"I'm held responsible for results just as the drill sergeants are," said Sergt. Wells. "I have to feed the hundreds of recruits so they'll have strength and muscle for the rigorous physical training they get."

All the cooking and serving of food is done by the soldiers themselves. The cooks qualify as "Army cooks" and get a sergeant's pay, plus \$15 a month. All the other work—such as waiting table, drying the dishes and silverware—falls to the lot of the recruits. Each recruit puts in about 1 day in every 10 doing "kitchen police."

EDITOR'S NOTE.—C. C. Lyon, Citizen reporter, is in the United States Regular Army, stationed at the Columbus Barracks, to write Army stories for Citizen readers. This is the third of a series of articles.



PLATOON OF RECRUITS AT COLUMBUS BARRACKS.

12 Experience of a Recruit in the United States Army.

I wiped something like 1,100 dishes the day I was on duty and thought it fun. And I used to kick when my wife asked me to wipe 15 or 20.

POINTS OF A SOLDIER.

In developing a recruit into a real soldier, Army officials lay stress on three things—drilling, eating, and recreation. I've told about the first two. Now, something about Army recreation.

Right after dinner every day, except Sunday, we would change from our soldier uniforms into our "recreation clothes," which consisted of pants and blouse made of overall material.

They marched hundreds of us to the big drill hall. There we found boxing gloves, medicine balls, and a lot of other gymnasium paraphernalia.

They divided us into four groups. A big, fat, jolly sergeant led the bunch I was in.

"I've seen 28 years in the service, am fat, and no longer a spring chicken," he told us the first day. "If I can stand these stunts you young fellows ought to."

HAVE STRENUOUS EXERCISES.

He ran us around for 15 minutes, passed the medicine ball for another quarter hour, and then showed us all sorts of indoor games and leg and arm exercises, all fun, but carefully designed to strengthen our bodies.

"Now for the boxing gloves," he said, and a shout of approval went up from all of us.

In the Army they teach you to fight with your hands as well as with a gun.

I was fairly itching to put the gloves on, but the scramble was so great I didn't get a chance until a big 6-footer took the center of the ring.

He looked like a white hope, every inch of him.

"He's the post champion," a recruit whispered to me. "He's got a punch like a mule kick."

"Now's your chance, Lyon," the sergeant called out.

But just at that moment my vaccinated arm began hurting me something terrible.

THEY ALL HAVE ALIBIS.

"My arm's too sore to-day, sergeant," I said. "I can hardly lift it."

I looked around and nearly everybody else in the big circle was likewise nursing a sore arm.

Later, I took on a fellow as inexperienced as myself. The post doctors are confident he will recover.

While a mass of us were thus enjoying ourselves, noncommissioned officers had scores of other young fellows in another part of the reservation training them for the coming baseball season.

Some of the best amateur teams in the country are to be found in the Army.

Whenever a good baseball, football, or basket ball player enlists, there's always a good deal of wirepulling among companies to land him. I'm told that often high Army officers take part in this good-natured wirepulling.

HAVE ATHLETIC TROPHIES.

The Tenth Company, my own organization, has a number of beautiful silver cups won in post athletic contests.

A good baseball or football player is seldom sent away from the post to join a regiment during the baseball or football season.

The Columbus Barracks has free bowling alleys and all recruits are urged to use them. A big pool and billiard room is also provided, where they can play at half the cost outside the post.

A well-stocked library and reading room is also maintained for the men.

[Issue of April 4, 1916.]

ARMY PRIVATE HAS CHANCE TO BE AN OFFICER—AFTER TWO YEARS' SERVICE HE MAY TAKE AN EXAM FOR SECOND LIEUTENANCY.

What chance has an enlisted man for promotion and bigger pay in the Regular Army?

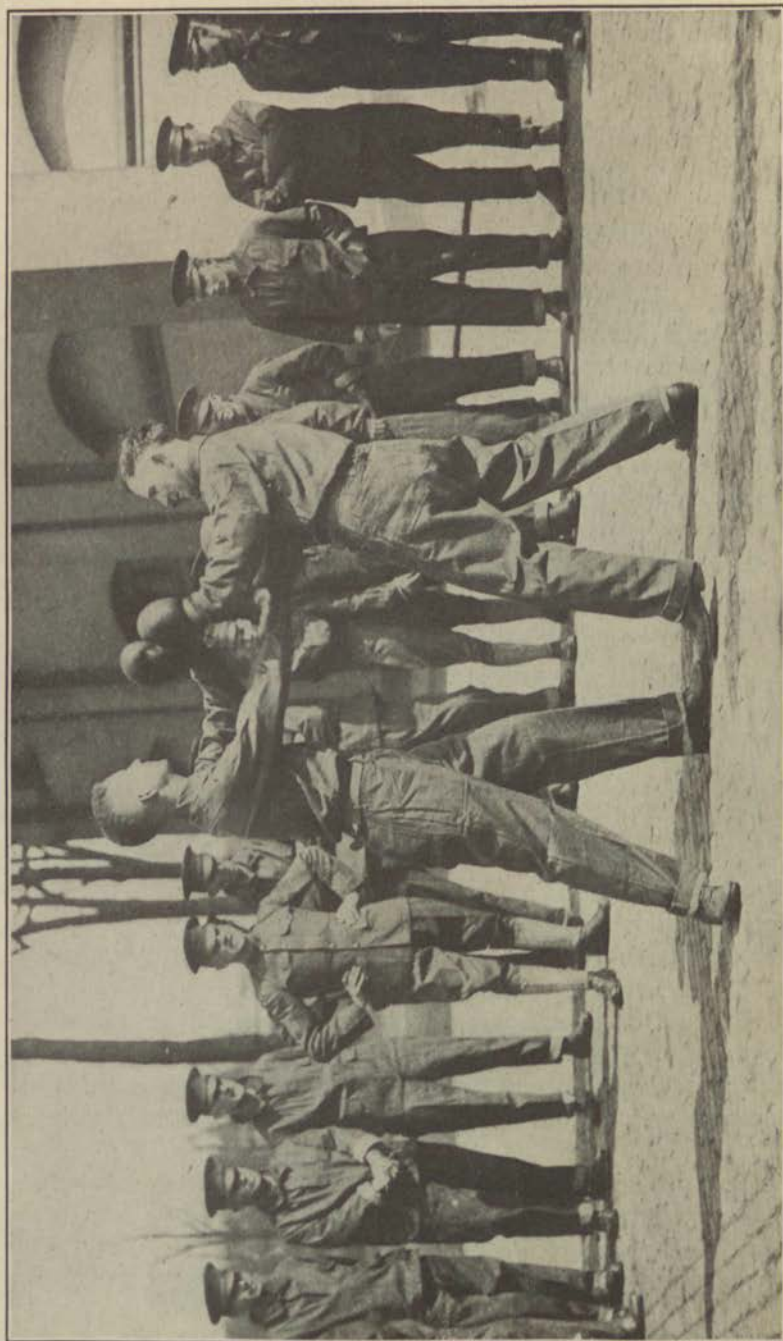
I'm going to draw no conclusions of my own that would influence any young man to join the Army. I'm only going to repeat what several men already in the service told me.

"Everything depends on the enlisted man himself," said a sergeant with 28 years of Army experience behind him.

He draws \$48 a month pay, and when he goes on the retired list in two more years Uncle Sam will pay him \$67.50 a month for the rest of his life, provided he is made a first sergeant by that time. And it is customary for that promotion to be made where a man's record has been good.

This particular sergeant is now 45 years old. "How many men at 47 can show as much as I'll be able to show?" he asked. "I'm more than satisfied with Army life."

EDITOR'S NOTE.—This is the fourth and last of a series of articles on the Regular Army by C. C. Lyon, reporter for the Citizen. Lyon spent some time at the Columbus Barracks, eating, sleeping, and drilling with hundreds of recruits.



RECRUITS BOXING AT COLUMBUS BARRACKS.

IT'S NOT ALL SUNSHINE.

I got the other side from a private who has had more than 20 years' service.

"I made the mistake of my life when I first went into the Army," he said. "I've been a sergeant several times and a first sergeant once, but I didn't behave myself and here I am back with the privates."

This fellow apparently had lost his "punch" and was sticking in the Army because he thought himself too old to tackle civilian life anew.

"There's nothing in Army life as a career," he said, "unless the boy is determined right from the start to make a success of it. Otherwise, it becomes merely a place to put in time."

WHAT A SOLDIER EARNS.

The minimum pay for an enlisted private is \$15 a month, for a corporal \$21, and for a sergeant \$30. There is an increase of \$3 a month for each three-year reenlistment up to the seventh by corporals and sergeants, giving them maximums of \$39 and \$48, respectively. The maximum for a private is \$24. First sergeants get from \$45 to \$69 a month, according to length of service.

A number of the noncommissioned officers are married. The Government pays these men "ration money" amounting now to an additional 25 cents a day, and, furthermore, permits them to buy food supplies for their families from the Army store rooms at actual Government cost. Noncommissioned officers also are furnished all their military wearing apparel free.

NO PLACE FOR A LOAFER.

"If a young fellow hasn't the stuff in him to justify us in promoting him to the noncommissioned ranks, he'd better quit the Army after his first enlistment," a commissioned officer of high rank declared.

He was speaking of the fellows who go into the Army with the idea of sticking, one enlistment after another.

An enlisted private becomes a noncommissioned officer on the recommendation of his company commander.

It doesn't take the commanders long to spot the "comers." Out of the 60 who enlisted the day I myself went into the Army, I thought I could pick at least 10 who would at least be corporals before their enlistment expired.

They were the chaps who showed the most aptitude in drill, appeared neatest and trimmest in their uniforms, and put "punch" into everything they did, whether in the barracks, on the drill grounds, or at play.

MAY BE AN OFFICER.

Nowadays an enlisted man has a chance to win a commission in the Army. After two years' service he may come up for examination along with other enlisted men, and the topnotchers get the shoulder straps. They go in on the same footing as graduates from West Point—second lieutenants.

I talked with several young men who were spending their evenings in the post library getting ready for the examinations.

In time of actual war chances for the advancement of enlisted men and noncommissioned officers would be much better.

"I'm almost certain to be made a captain if war is ever declared," a sergeant told me. "In actual war the Army would need many additional commissioned officers."

NEVER TALK OF DEATH.

In all my time at the Columbus Barracks I never heard any soldier—private, noncommissioned, or commissioned—speak of the possibility of getting killed.

Sergt. Watt, my drillmaster, in a lecture one day had this to say:

"Disease, you'll find, kills many more soldiers than bullets. That's why the Government is so determined that every soldier shall have a sound body and know how to take care of it."

Just now there are thousands of young fellows throughout the country trying to decide whether they'll join the Army.

WHAT ARMY OFFERS.

Each one must decide for himself. I can only furnish him with these facts, gained from my own personal experience:

Army drill and exercise is bound to improve the physical being of every man who enters.

In the barracks the food is first class.

The recreation periods furnish more fun and amusement than the average young fellow ever finds on the outside.

The pay is small for privates, but practically everything is furnished him and he has his pay for spending money.

The bright, alert chaps get the promotions.

