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Subject: War Stories

Moron Corps

In the last week of August, The State put out a call for Ft. Jackson stories, personal accounts of time training there. Come November, Ft. Jackson's first hundred years will be observed in The State, to include illustrations by those who served there.

I served there. Actually, I trained there. It was for only eight or nine weeks of basic training and some down time coming and going. We, 206 of us beginning in May 1968, were Company E, Fifth Battalion, 1st Brigade.

Our barracks were WWI jobs at the bottom of Tank Hill. The "tank" was a water tower on top of the hill, the highest point at Ft. Jackson. We marched with our weapons shouldered up that hill most every morning for our training. We didn't know it at the time, but we marched with a commemorative corps later called the Moron Corps now finally being recognized almost 50 years later.

In mid-1966, President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara got a little personnel push from General Hershey, head of the Selective Service, aka the Draft. Hershey explained that the expansion of the Vietnam War under way, having begun in early 1965, was likely going to need hundreds of thousands of recruits, and the best opportunity to draw that many men was the American system of higher education, the nation's colleges and universities replete with more than enough eligible men should they lose their student deferments.

Johnson said no, not the college men. Johnson already knew by early 1966 the war was unwinnable, according to McNamara's analysis shared with only a few in the Johnson Administration, and he could only guess at the unpopularity and the protests sure to follow the loss of student draft deferments.

The backup plan, reserves and guardsmen, could rise for the occasion in a call-up, but more political problems came with that idea, particularly in context with elections every two years in Congress and every four years in the White House.

Johnson and McNamara discovered a different backup plan, one absent college material. If the U. S. Army could tap its huge pool of men who had flunked the military's mental test, the grossly under-qualified could help the under-populated. McNamara figured he could tap more than 100,000 men each year for a few years, putting most of the mentally challenged in the Army infantry and the rest could take on the soft tasks that didn't need much intelligence to function: folding blankets and other areas of supply, peeling potatoes and general kitchen concerns, maintaining the great grass lawns on the parade fields, all kinds of menial tasks that any "idiot" could do. And, of course, standing as cannon fodder was perfectly suitable for the men of low value, as McNamara might put it. After all, on average McNamara's 100,000 each year showed up with reading and math skills no higher than the sixth grade level. Talk about expendable.

In McNamara's two major books on his time as Secretary of Defense, there's not one mention of his installation of idiocy among the combat arms.

General Westmoreland called the program a disaster. He, a combat veteran well removed from McNamara's corporate class of thinking, was worried McNamara's under-qualified would get killed too easily and probably endanger everyone around them. As it turned out, McNamara's 100,000 were 2.5 times more likely to die than the men with a minimum of average mental aptitudes.

From the fall of 1966 until the program's abandonment in 1971, out of the 350,000 under-qualified total drafted, almost 5,500 were killed in action. And no one knows how many deaths were due to the pathetic condition of borderline or mildly retarded. Drafting such sad souls for combat was probably a violation of the law, but at the time that was not a concern.

President Johnson wouldn't hear of it. If he could oversee the deaths of the under-qualified, like the bulls in the rings that always lose, at least the poor bastards had a fighting chance while they stood in for college men who had been led to believe they had four years to finish. To keep the war going, Johnson had to keep the replacements coming but not from the colleges.

While he pushed for the overpriced combination of guns and butter - that would be the Vietnam War tied with the Great Society - Johnson hoped somehow to get out of Vietnam soon enough. But how? Johnson didn't know what he was doing. No one did.

Meanwhile, McNamara's annual draft of 100,000 would teach a little discipline, provide training and uniforms, and upon an honorable discharge after two years, allow for a productive life. Death on the battlefield had a way of interrupting Johnson's social side of combat participation. Even those who lived through it, in many cases, never got the honorable discharge because they were so difficult and under-equipped in the head. They didn't fit in, never did.

So that's who marched with me up and down Ft. Jackson's Tank Hill and graduated basic training in the summer of '68.

Wonder what happened to them? Johnson, McNamara and Hershey never said. All they knew was that out of the 58,220 on the wall in Washington, many – too many – were illegally conscripted while woefully unfit for military duty.