Part Ten –Baptism by Barrackers

At home in Delaware, Ray, his friends and his coworkers at DuPont tried as well as possible to maintain a normal routine. The war was on everyone’s mind, and the men and women of America put on a brave front, concealing their growing concern. Ray knew a few DuPonters who had joined the National Guard in an effort to avoid conscription and deployment, in other words, to take control of their military destinies. “I don’t know what they were thinking,” Recalled Ray. “Because they were the first ones to be called up. Some of those guys fought at Guadalcanal and never returned.” Most of the technicians at Jackson Labs ate in the company cafeteria, where they talked about the same things: Trying to live a normal life, whether or not they should be the one to enlist as opposed to their siblings or other members of the family.

There were plenty of opportunities to divert their attention away from the war. Young adults of that time went to the movies, dance clubs or indulged in other hobbies or interests. Ironically, war movies had become extremely popular, but the screenplays were purposefully written to glamorize the conflict in order to entice enlistment and rally the general public. Also, in the pre-television days of the 1940’s, people received news through newsreel trailer films that were shown in advance of the main feature. Again, these were slickly produced, and most conveyed an optimistic tone that supported the war and encouraged enlistment.

As days turned to weeks and weeks to months, Ray waited to be called in for basic training, or “boot camp” as it was popularly known. In June, 1943, six months after enlisting at Philadelphia’s Custom House, he received a letter from the Army ordering him to begin basic training in Miami Beach, Florida, a place known more for its beaches, sunny sub-tropical weather and luxury hotels than as a location for military training bases.

Ray showed his mother the letter from the Army with his service orders. She tried her best to fight back tears. “Raymond, you are my oldest son, and I am so proud of you but so afraid for you.” They sat and talked for a while, Alisa expressing her fear for Ray’s safety and his life. “Even in my native Italy the *camicie nere* have taken over. The world has gone mad. And I worry so for you, Raymond.” She began to weep, then hugged him so hard he could hardly breathe.

Dominic, who was upstairs, overheard his Mother crying. He rushed down the stairs to see why she was so upset. A few seconds later Chip, Albert, Sandra, and Joe appeared to see what was going on. One by one, they began to hug Ray and their Mother. Without a word, they seemed to understand that what they were expecting for months had finally come to pass – Ray’s orders had come through. “Don’t everybody get all soppy,” Ray petitioned. “I’ll be fine and so will all of you. As soon as we beat the hell out of Hitler, which we will, I’ll be back. But I need all of you to promise me you’ll take care of Mom and the household until I do.”

“Not that you do anything around here,” Dominic teased. “So that’ll be easy.”

“Stop it, Dominic,” Alisa admonished. “This is no time for jokes. Your brother is going to war!”

“Sorry, Mom. Sorry, Ray.” Dom looked dejected. “I’ll make sure Mom and all of us are OK while you’re away. Ray, I promise.”

“They want me in Miami Beach to report for basic training,” Ray announced. I gotta take a train from Philadelphia in two days. I’m going to start packing tonight.”

The Firmanis needed to be together that night, so they stayed in the living room for the rest of the evening talking, laughing and remembering good times. Alisa, the quintessential Italian mother, did what she knew would comfort them and put them into higher spirits. She went into the kitchen to prepare a delicious homemade supper.

The next morning on his way to work, Ray ran into his friend Mario Masilli at the Fourth Street ferry dock. “Mario, I got a letter from the Army yesterday. They want me in Miami in four days for basic training. I’m going to war, my friend.” He told Mario that he planned to notify his superiors at DuPont that day that he’d been called for active duty.

“That’s big news, Ray. I’m going to miss you. We’re *all* going to miss you.” Mario was designated 4F because he flunked the physical, being partially deaf in one ear as a result of a swimming accident that happened during a camping trip when he was younger. To the two men, the ferry seemed less crowded. DuPont had lost about ten percent of its workforce since the start of the war. The company had a very generous personnel policy for the enlistees. Their time serving the country would be counted toward their pensions, and they were guaranteed a job upon return.

A couple of days later, Ray was giving his mother and family a tearful goodbye when he heard the city bus rumbling up the street that would take him to the Wilmington Station. He grabbed his suitcase, bumped his way out the front door and yelled “I love you…I’ll write” as he lumbered toward the bus stop a block away. Alisa watched tearfully as he boarded the bus. She stood at the front door until the bus was out of sight, wondering if she would ever see him alive again.

Ray purchased a one-way ticket to Philadelphia. The train platforms were above the station up a terribly long flight of stairs, which Ray negotiated with some difficulty, fumbling with his suitcase on the way up. The platform was full of people waiting for trains to various destinations along the northeast corridor. Ray found a spot where he could lay down his suitcase not too far from the edge of the platform. Looking around for any familiar faces, he saw no one. There were a few guys in uniform, but Ray didn’t know them. Neither did he know anyone on the train to Philadelphia.

When the commuter train pulled into Thirtieth Street Station, Ray grappled with his suitcase as he made his way off the train and into the main terminal, where he checked the large mechanical rotating display for the track number of the train to Miami. He had about a half hour to kill so he bought a paper. Finding an empty bench, Ray stacked up his suitcases then sat down, using his suitcase as a footrest.

The train to Florida was a consist designed for long haul travel. There was a dining car with a full kitchen and table service, and many cars had sleeping compartments. Ray and the other recruits on board traveled in a coach. The seats were wide and comfortable, reclined sufficiently so one could sleep and had a footrest with a built in cushion that folded out from under the seat. Garnering what little strength he had left in his arms, Ray lifted his suitcases up to the overhead suitcase rack, found a nearby seat and settled in for the lengthy trip.

For the most part the train ride to Miami was uneventful. During their station stop in Washington, DC, the locomotive was changed from an electric GG-1 to a powerful K-1 Pacific steam type used exclusively by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Cars which rolled in on trains traveling from other parts of the country were added, which was customary in the days when one could purchase a ticket to travel to anywhere in the U.S. or Canada, regardless whether a railroad served that part of the country, often without having to change trains. Further south, when the train traveled out of the Pennsy Railroad’s circuit, the locomotive and the crew were replaced with equipment and a crew from Southern Railway, then finally from the Florida East Coast Railway when they pulled into Jacksonville

As the train moved its way south, the July weather began to overwhelm the passengers. Summer in the southern United States was stiflingly humid and miserable. There were fans on board, but the train had no air conditioning. Ray was wearing a sleeveless sweater pulled over a shirt. He stripped off the sweater, but it didn’t do much to help him cool down. Some of the recruits were standing in the vestibule between cars, shirts unbuttoned, where they could open a door and enjoy the hot breeze as the train sped south through the north Florida scrublands at sixty miles per hour. The state was as flat as a sheet of plywood which made pulling the heavyweight coaches easy work for the massive Florida East Coast Railway locomotive.

Later that afternoon, after stops in Jacksonville and West Palm Beach, the train pulled into the City of Miami railway terminal, the last passenger stop on the line since the Labor Day hurricane destroyed the Key West extension eight years earlier. The engineer tolled the bell as the breaks squealed and brought the train to a full stop. The conductor announced that the train had arrived at its last station stop in Miami, and everyone had to disembark. Ray climbed up on a seat to reach his suitcase that had been stowed in the overhead rack since boarding in Philadelphia. He shuffled off the train with the other recruits, dragging his heavy suitcase behind him.

The train platform in Miami was abuzz with activity. Drenched in sweat, Pullman porters were unloading the baggage car and pushing wooden carts loaded with freight and suitcase to and from the station building and the Railway Express Agency. Weary passengers were looking for the people they had planned to meet at the station upon arrival. Throngs of new Army recruits were mulling about trying to figure out where they needed to go. Ray noticed a coterie of military men holding signs and calling out to the recruits to report for basic training, that busses were lined up waiting to take them to Miami Beach. “Please have your orders ready before boarding your assigned bus,” they shouted in a staccato monotone. “Step lively, keep the line moving.”

Ray fished through his pockets and found the letter from the Army with his assignment. He joined the sinuous line and made small talk with the recruits who waited alongside him to board the bus. Just then, an Army C-47 transport plane flew low and slow right over the station on its approach to Miami airport. It was the biggest airplane Ray had ever seen up close, and it sent a shot of adrenaline through his body. “I just need to suffer through two weeks of boot camp, then train to get my wings and I’ll be up there,” he said to the man standing next to him. “I’m gonna be a pilot.” He eagerly looked forward to the next phase, which would take him to basic flight training.

As each bus filled up with recruits, another idled behind it rushed forward to take its place. It seemed like an endless conga line of men and busses. The line was inching forward and, after about twenty minutes, Ray was near the front. A sergeant was shouting, “Have your orders ready. No one gets on a bus without their orders.” A few men stood aside, digging through their pockets and suitcases looking for theirs. Ray handed the sergeant his letter. “Wilmington Delaware,” he commented. “You’re the first one I’ve seen from Wilmington.” He handed the letter back to Ray. “OK get on board bus number three. We’re gonna make a soldier out of you, Wilmington.”

Ray climbed aboard with his suitcase and squeezed into a seat. The bus was hot, the seat was sticky and the tiny fan above the driver was totally inadequate. The windows were open, but it made no difference - there was no escaping the relentless Florida summer heat and humidity. When the bus was packed, the driver swung the door shut, shifted into gear and off they went. At least the air was moving as the bus plodded through the streets of Miami toward the County Causeway, which traversed Biscayne Bay, connecting the mainland to the barrier islands and Miami Beach.

A large part of South Florida had been turned into training ground for all branches of the military. There were Navy blimp and ship bases, Army bases, and ones for the Marines and Coast Guard. In addition, many military schools, supply stations, and communications facilities were established. But at Miami Beach, rather than build large army bases to train the men needed to fight the war, the Army and Navy converted hotels to barracks, movie theaters to classrooms, and local beaches and golf courses to training grounds.

After driving over the causeway, the bus turned right on Collins Avenue toward an area that later became known by tourists as “South Beach.” That part of Collins Ave. was lined with pastel beige and pink art-deco style hotels, restaurants and clubs that all sat directly across from one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. The traffic on Collins that day was heavy. Swarms of soldiers and trainees were either marching are performing some type of military drill. Ray noticed there were an inordinate number of young, single women on the streets. He commented out loud, “Wow, this is going to be a little more fun than I expected. Look at all the girls!” The other recruits gawked and strained to get a look. A few whistled and cat called through the open bus windows.

“That’s because Clark Gable is here for Officer Candidate School,” someone shouted from the rear of the bus. “The girls are here because of him.” Gable, was arguably the most famous actor of his day. Good looking and suave, Gable melted the hearts of American women, and many had traveled to Miami Beach just to get a glimpse of him.

Soon after turning onto Collins Avenue, the line of busses pulled over to the curb. The drivers set their emergency breaks and swung their doors open. When the men poured out, the Army noncoms separated the men into groups according to their hotel assignments. Lining up behind the soldiers, they began a long march down Collins Avenue to their assigned quarters.

“Fancy joint,” commented Ray, as they arrived in front of a squat, three story building with a taller building set behind it. The sign said, “Leroy Hotel and Suites.”

“Wait ‘til you see your accommodations,” answered one of the soldiers in a thick New York accent. There were several – sergeants and corporals - who were standing on the sidewalk to greet them. “Nuttin’ but da best for *our new* GI’s,” he mocked. Ray soon found out these men would be his drill instructors.

“Alright, everybody line up here on the sidewalk, single file and follow corporal bellhop. He’ll show you to your rooms.” The other non-coms chuckled derisively. The corporal they called ‘bellhop’ said, “OK, you plebes, follow me.” The recruits grabbed their suitcase and shuffled up the sidewalk toward the front door. As they approached the entrance, a number of cadets were sitting in the open windows of the high rise hotel, legs dangling precariously off the ledges, taking in the chaotic scene. They had a fine time mocking the recruits as they entered the building. “Hey boys, hope you like pain ‘cuz that’s what you’re gonna get.” Another shouted, “Yeah, you’ll be sorry. Enjoy your stay on beeeyoooteeeful Miami Beach, boys!” They had a good belly laugh after that one. Some of them had arrived only a few days earlier, but they made a sport out of insulting the newer recruits.

Inside, the hotel was barren. The lobby had been turned into a classroom, the rooms had been stripped bare of all furniture and fixtures, which were replaced by government-issued bunk beds, generally four men per room. With the cynical mocks of the cadets ringing in his head, Ray and three others he recognized from the bus piled into the room the corporal designated. “Say, corporal,” one of the men asked. “When do we get some time off to chase some of those Miami Beach girls?”

“Time off?” the corporal snapped. “You guys ain’t goin’ nowhere. You’re restricted to base for a week. You’re gonna learn to be soldiers if it kills you. So get used to it!”

Moans and grumbles and a few hushed expletives could be heard from the other rooms. “We’re definitely in the Army now,” Ray said cynically.

“By da way,” added the corporal, “chow line is open for another half hour. Grab some grub then be back here 15:00 hours for your day of beauty, boys. And don’t be late!”

A half hour later the cadets, bellies full of Army food, they lined up in front of the Leroy. The corporal marched them to an ad hoc barber shop that was set up in the lobby of an adjacent hotel. the first thing they did in boot camp was to change our appearance from civilian to G.I. soldier.

So, for the first week of boot camp, no one ventured far from the stripped down Leroy Hotel and the ad hoc training base that was cordoned off from the rest of Miami Beach.

It was early evening on Miami Beach. The sun waned slowly behind the tall pastel-colored hotels draping Collins Avenue with elongated shadows in a cheerless gray dusk. Ray unpacked his suitcase, transferring the contents into the empty foot locker that was adjacent to his bunk. A corporal then walked down the hallway shouting, “All new recruits are ordered to muster in the main lobby in five minutes,” banging on doors, repeating the order as he proceeded. Men started pouring out of their rooms toward the stairwells, then navigated their way to the main lobby where they found the sergeant and Corporal Bellhop waiting.

“Atten-SHUN!” the sergeant ordered. The men did their civilian best to stand at military attention. “I will be your drill instructor for the duration of your basic training.” He walked up and down the line, looking each of them over, from head to toe. “Boy, oh boy, you are the sorriest bunch of misfits I’ve seen yet. OK, plebes, line up behind the corporal. He will take you for a haircut, physical exam and vaccinations. You will immediately return here to the Leroy Hotel. At that time, the corporal will guide you to the PX [Post Exchange] where you will be issued a uniform, cap and shoes, gear, a rifle dog tags and ID card. Do you understand me?”

A few lazy “yehs,” and “sure, sarges” came from the group.

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU!” he shouted, so loud that his voice reverberated off the lobby walls.

The men seemed to get the idea. “Yes, Sir,” they shouted disjointedly.

Ray’s unit marched pathetically behind the corporal to the infirmary a few blocks away, then added themselves to long line of recruits waiting for one of the nurses to call them.

At the PX, there was another long line of men waiting to pick up their uniforms. Behind an expansive counter, where recruits were filling out paperwork, a couple of soldiers were asking recruits for their name, height, weight and shoe size while others went into the back, picked out the appropriate sized gear, and dropped it on the counter in a neatly folded pile with the shoes on top in front of each recruit. After about ten minutes, Ray was next in line.

“Name,” the soldier behind the counter demanded.

“Ray Firmani.”

“Height?”

“Five feet, six inches.”

“Weight?”

“One hundred forty ponds.”

“Shoe size?”

“Eight and a half.”

“OK, next!”

Ray moved to the far end of the counter where a soldier handed him his pile of neatly folded government issued khakis with a belt and black shoes on top. He carried the pile of clothes outside where the rest of his unit was waiting. Once they all had their uniforms, they marched back to the hotel on the Sargent’s orders. It was almost dark outside when they arrived. Next, they changed into their new uniforms then packed their civilian clothes into cardboard boxes that were shipped home, wondering when they’d get to wear them again.

One of the corporals led them to the lobby of an adjacent hotel where an ad hoc barber shop had been set up like an assembly line. Bare incandescent bulbs were affixed to one wall, each with a round mirror beneath. There were three chairs and three recruits were called up. The first man had thick blonde hair combed into a “DA” style where the back resembled a duck’s tail, popular with the “Zoot Suit” crowd who followed the Jitterbug dance craze of the era. He took a chair and the barber wrapped a smock around his neck. Before a word was uttered, the barber dug into his thick mane with electric shears. Zip, zip, zip and the poor recruit was looking at himself in the mirror with a perfect Mohawk haircut. “Next!” called the barber as he jerked off the smock and waited for the recruit to leave the chair. The whole room erupted in laughter as the unfortunate recruit turned beet red with embarrassment. Ray and the other waiting cadets were momentarily terrified as they never expected to wear a Mohawk haircut through basic training. One recruit looking to quietly escape the ordeal moved toward the door, but it was blocked by the corporal who was standing at attention with his arms folded in an intimidating manner.

Realizing that it was a hilarious act, the laughter subsided and the barber called the blonde cadet back to the chair. “Hold still, mister,” said the barber as he shaved off the rest of the man’s hair. He was left with a perfect buzz cut, high and tight. “OK, next!” he cried again, and Ray sat down for his turn. “Just a little off the top,” he mocked the barber. In short order, the men sported identical, G.I. haircuts, shaved on the sides and no more than ½ inch long on top. The barber's prank was performed regularly with every new group of recruits and became legendary.

Back at the Leroy, the Sargent was standing in the center if the lobby, flanked by two corporals. “OK, men, time for some shut eye. Curfew is at twenty-one hundred hours. Reveille is at oh five hundred, and you have a big day ahead. Dismissed!” The men headed up the stairs to their bunks.

For the next two weeks, every day began with the trumpet sounding reveille at five a.m., followed by a five mile run. They ran up Collins Avenue and up and down the beach, the sand making it that much more strenuous. The Drill Instructor served as role model, task master, and gatekeeper for the men. He was directly responsible for the success of his recruits and spent almost every waking hour with them. He marched and drilled the cadets incessantly, taught them how to wear their uniforms and how to give a snappy salute, how to shoulder a rifle, don a gas mask, in other words, how to be an American G.I.

One day, they ran an obstacle course that had been set up both on and adjacent to the beach. Ray was athletic and wiry, and came in first on their initial attempt. He stood proudly at the finish line, half expecting to be congratulated by his DI, while cajoling the other cadets as they struggled through the course. The Sargent noticed Ray standing with his chest puffed out and shouted, “Firmani, you thought that was easy didja?”

Before Ray could answer, the Sargent shouted at the top of his lungs, “DO IT AGAIN, FIRMANI!”

Dejected, Ray jogged over to the beginning of the obstacle course and repeated the exercise. The next day, he came in eighth. Ray was learning how to buck the system like an experienced soldier.

After running the obstacle course the second time that day, Ray’s feet started to blister and hurt. The next morning, he looked at his shoes before sliding them on and saw they were a half size too small. He’d been assigned Kitchen Patron (KP) that afternoon, something he reviled. Standing in a hot kitchen on a stiflingly hot Florida summer day, sweating profusely while peeling carrots, shrimp and potatoes, cleaning fifty gallon stockpots and kitchen grease traps was more than he could bear. “I remember that we were always peeling shrimp. They were slimy, smelly and repulsive,” Ray remembered. “So that day, while I was on KP duty, I decided to go back to the PX to requisition a new pair of shoes.”

Ray started his KP shift, then snuck out of the kitchen through a screen door that was always left open to alleviate the kitchen heat. When he arrived at the PX there was the usual long line of recruits along with a few cadets. So Ray went to the end of the line and waited. The line inched forward, more slowly than he remembered it did during his first visit to the PX. After about forty five minutes, as he drew closer to the front, a slightly devious thought entered his head. “I hated KP like the devil. So I got this idea that I’d just walk to the back of the line to kill time.” He pulled the stunt two more times, killing about two hours. Ray then received his new shoes and went back to the mess hall, sneaking into the kitchen through the back door. As if nothing had happened, he picked up a potato and resumed peeling. Minutes later, one of the corporals walked into the kitchen. “Where’ve you been, Firmani?” he demanded.

“I’ve been right here peeling these potatoes and shrimp the whole time,” Ray retorted.

“Very well, carry on,” ordered the corporal. He spun on his heels and left the kitchen, none the wiser. Only about a half hour remained until the end of Ray’s KP shift.

“You know, before I joined the Army I was a do-gooder – you know, a rule follower. After a week at boot camp, I realized how naïve that was. Like most soldiers, I figured out how to work the system,” Ray reminisced years later.

At night, Miami Beach is one of the most beautiful cities in America. During peacetime, gently swaying palm trees silhouetted against a backdrop of pastel-colored hotels, which were illuminated by spotlights and tiki torches. But the mandatory black-out rules that applied in Delaware applied here and in many other coastal cities so that if one were traveling by boat just offshore, they wouldn’t know that the city even existed just a mile or so to the west. Collins Avenue, the hotels and the beach were nearly invisible, especially in the pitch black of an overcast night, as was the case during Ray’s first sentry watch.

Cadets rotated nightly sentry duty, which consisted of walking up and down the beach to the upper and lower limits of the training base with a standard issue Springfield M1903 bolt action rifle loaded with a single bullet. Their job was to watch out for enemy vessels patrolling offshore intending to drop saboteurs onto the beach. “I don’t know what they expected us to do if we saw the enemy. They only gave us one lousy bullet,” recollected Ray. More often, they would encounter a cadet trying to sneak off base in a foolhardy attempt to sample the Miami Beach nightlife. Or, if another sentry was simultaneously on duty, they might encounter each other. Ka-chink, ka-chink would be heard as both sentries chambered their single round with the back and forth slide of the rifle’s bolt. “Who goes there?” they’d demand of each other. “That happened to me a couple of times and let me tell you, it was pretty scary. We were cadets - very inexperienced and trigger happy,” said Ray.

At the end of Ray’s stint at boot camp in Miami Beach, the men in his unit were ordered to muster in the lobby of the Leroy Hotel. There, the Drill Sergeant and his two corporals stood at attention. The cadets had earned their “stripes” and were ready for their next assignments.

“Atten-SHUN,” ordered the sergeant. The men snapped to attention with military exactitude. “So, you made it through basic training and now the fun begins. Corporal, hand me the list of orders.”

One by one, the sergeant called up the cadets and handed each man a set of papers that described their next assignments. After receiving his orders, each of the men presented a snappy salute, then stepped back in line saying, “Thank you, Sergeant.”

He finished distributing the assignments then, with a booming voice said, “Dis-MISSED! And good luck, men.” The men returned the salute then started back to their quarters.

Ray walked up to his quarters in the Leroy Hotel with his bunkmates. He walked in, sat on his foot locker, then opened the envelope the sergeant had given him. His hands trembled with anticipation. Ray extracted the letter from the envelope and read it silently. His orders were to report immediately to Kent State University in Ohio for his College Training Detachment (CTD), the first stage of his flight training.

Ray felt the sensation of butterflies in his stomach as reality set in. He was on his way to becoming a pilot. But he also felt a sense of foreboding as he knew that many of the men he befriended might not come home alive.