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## The Supply Sergeant

Jack Frazer

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## **The Supply Sergeant**

He was one of the few people who could make my mostly humorless father laugh out loud. His stories were as outrageous as his conduct. He was Ernest Minor Woolfolk, my mother's oldest brother. Born on the family farm in Orange County, Virginia in 1909 and educated at a small country school, he later attended the University of Virginia.

As a young boy, Ernest joined the neighborhood church. Following a summer revival service, he was baptized in Pamunkey Creek, a local stream. His religious response that day reflected a disregard for convention that defined his later life. The minister and assembled congregation were astonished, when raised from the water, he began a backstroke upstream for at least 25 yards before getting out. It embarrassed my family, but provided entertainment to neighbors who relished telling and retelling the story over the years.

Ernest was in constant trouble for subjecting young or inexperienced school teachers to various pranks or acts of mischief. He was one of a group of boys who misbehaved so frequently, the county school superintendent threatened to eliminate the entire facility if they did not shape up. If Ernest "shaped up," it was only temporary; he was later expelled from the University of Virginia for "conduct unbecoming a gentleman."

Like other young men during the depression, Ernest found a steady job difficult to come by. Enlistment in the army seemed a logical choice with military life a good fit. He was a career non-commissioned officer, serving in three wars or combat theaters (World War II, Korea, and Vietnam). There were also postings in Germany and France during peacetime. His top rank was sergeant first class (E-7), with a supply sergeant MOS,

Ernest remained in England after World War II, assigned to a base near the port city of Bournemouth. He became a minor celebrity, frequenting area pubs and amusing the locals with his stories. He was even the subject of a Salisbury, England newspaper article wherein he humorously and incorrectly compared the farming methods in that district to those of his home state of Virginia.

While at Bournemouth, he married Aicia Grace Bigg (1910-2010) in 1946, a lovely woman with one of those delightful English accents. My brother, sister and I called her Aunt Grace. After they returned to the states, my grandparents hosted a late wedding reception. It was there I had my first alcoholic drink, sneaked to me by my Uncle Ernest. I was four years old.

Marriage did not slow him down. Ernest smoked horrible-smelling cigars, drank to excess, and consorted with a variety of disreputable people. His friends pursued similar lifestyles; his activities were a constant source of embarrassment to Aunt Grace and my mother.

A unique uncle, he taught me how to hypnotize chickens, play mumblety-peg with a German World War II stiletto, shoot craps, and enjoy other frivolous activities. When I'd turned 10, he gave me an army gas mask and a bayonet as Christmas gifts. I still have the bayonet. My eight-year old sister got an army sewing kit, my two-year old brother a mess kit with metal utensils. Ernest claimed everything was army surplus, although my father, a decorated World War II veteran, confided to my mother the items were too new to be surplus.

For a period of time after the Korean War, he was stationed at Ft. Meade, Maryland, driving about in a U.S. Army jeep diverted to his personal use. He also acquired a second jeep for a military friend. The friend was able to hydraulically attach small farm implements, including a plow and a scraper blade, to his. They used it to plow privately owned gardens or clear snow from local driveways. According to Ernest, it was a moneymaking enterprise, but fear of discovery finally made him return the second jeep to the army's inventory.

Its return came immediately after the two of them went to Washington, DC in the jeep with the plow still attached. While there, they got drunk, and on the way out of town, the plow dropped to the pavement to send sparks up and down a major thoroughfare. They were stopped by a policeman who was not amused. Because they were in uniform, he did not arrest or give them a ticket but ordered them out of town with instructions "to get that contraption back into Maryland and never come here again."

Ernest later recounted the incident by saying: "It's a good thing he stopped us when he did or we would have plowed up two blocks of New Hampshire Avenue."

After a posting to West Germany in the mid-1960's, Ernest was stationed at Ft. Holabird, Maryland. He and Aunt Grace lived in nearby Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Their residence was in a community where each house resembled all others in the neighborhood. One night after a few drinks at the NCO Club, he returned to what he thought was his house, entered, stripped to his underwear, got a beer out of the refrigerator, and turned on the living room television. He was surprised when a woman definitely not Aunt Grace came into the room, screamed, and ran into another part of the house. Ernest, equally startled, ran out the front door in his underwear, uniform in hand.

In recounting this episode, Ernest made the observation: "I should have known that something was up when the beer in the refrigerator was not Iron City (his usual very cheap brand); but I figured that Grace wanted to please me by getting some Budweiser at the PX."

Anticipating another military reprimand, he requested an immediate transfer. His commanding officer was apparently fed up with his shenanigans. Within a matter of 30 days, Ernest, by then in his 50s, was sent to Vietnam for a year, one of the oldest sergeants assigned to that conflict.

Ernest and Grace had no children and lived apart more than together. Even when he was not overseas, he would roam around having a good time rather than staying home. Frequently he would show up at our house, providing us with amusing stories and pleading with my mother not to reveal his whereabouts to his wife or commanding officer.

Ernest died of throat cancer, likely a result of his cigar habit, on September 20, 1974 at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC. He had served our country honorably, albeit without distinction, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

He had a chest full of ribbons, mostly theater and service awards, from his many overseas postings. One of his highest honors was the good conduct medal with a multiple award device. My father laughed and shook his head every time he saw Ernest wearing it on his class A uniform.

We never understood why he was never courts martialed or permanently reduced in rank. At his funeral, several of his military friends told my parents: "He may have lost a stripe or two occasionally, but always got them back because he was an exceptional supply sergeant. There was nothing his unit needed that he couldn't beg, borrow, or steal."

He was also a noted raconteur, welcomed by virtually everyone, with the possible exception of his CO.

In 1999, twenty-five years after his death, my wife Susie and I were invited to an elderly relative's Richmond home for dinner. My cousin, Mary Walker Dillard, had also invited my aunt, Mary Elizabeth Burslem, and a friend, Sarah Bagby. Susie and I had never met Sarah, originally from Louisa County but had lived in Richmond most of her adult life.

Mary Walker, Mary Elizabeth and Sarah were Richmond west-end ladies. During dinner, conversation inevitably turned to "Who do you know that I know," noting my family's farm was only a few miles from the Louisa County line.

When I mentioned that my mother's maiden name was Woolfolk, Sarah said "I hope that you are not related to Ernest Woolfolk." When I admitted he was my uncle and asked how she knew him, she replied: "I didn't care to know him. But almost everyone else in Louisa County knew him as someone who drank bootleg whisky and ran around with bad folks." Mary Walker and Mary Elizabeth responded with weak church-lady smiles and quickly changed the subject.

Aunt Grace, died in Florida in 2010. She was almost 100 years old and had resided with relatives, who like her, were originally from England. Susie and I facilitated the transfer of her body to Virginia, and she is buried with her husband at Arlington, where the later living member of a military couple is buried directly on top of the earlier deceased.

Her interment was attended only by my brother Philip, his wife Peggy, Susie, and me. A military honor guard was present, an army chaplain performed the service. Despite the small group, the service was dignified and quite moving.

On the way home, I commented: "Aunt Grace finally caught up with Ernest and has him pinned down." My brother said: "Don't be so sure."