

The AAPERS Report

A true story by Dan Mabbutt, Specialist 4th Class, US Army, retired

I was among the last of the draftees. With the Vietnam war still raging, and a lottery number of 122 (some things you just don't forget), "Mother" McKinnon, the clerk of my local draft board, sent me a letter which said in effect, "We're on to you. No more education deferments. Report for duty or the next letter goes to the sheriff."

And so, I reported to Fort Ord for Basic Training just a few days after graduating as an Electrical Engineer from the University of Utah.

For the first six weeks, my attitude was, "Work with the Army. You've spent years becoming an engineer. Surely they'll take advantage of that expensive training. It will be OK." Then the MOS – Military Occupation Specialty – orders came down and I found out what the Army had planned for me.

I got 11 Bravo – infantry. I felt like a tree just fell on me. In a daze, I walked around listening to what the other guys got. Because my Basic Training company was formed during the first week of June, there were maybe a dozen college graduates in it. The other guys were mainly experienced in the LA Watts riot. I felt a little better to learn that most of the other college graduates also got infantry. But there were a couple of guys who didn't have the brain of one chipmunk between them who got something like "nuclear weapons maintenance" and were on their way to White Sands, New Mexico. I haven't felt really safe since.

The drill sergeants were moving through the knots of trainees telling us that the Army knew best. They said that if *anybody* had any ideas about trying to get our MOS changed ... well ... just forget about it. The Army would "red flag" the files of troublemakers and there were worse places where they sent troublemakers.

But I had tried working with the Army. I was over that.

They didn't ship you out directly to Vietnam. My next assignment was eight weeks of AIT – Advanced Infantry Training. By the end of it, by writing letters that my wife would mail from our home back in Utah, I had made it out of the infantry and into PERSINSCOM – the Personnel Information Systems Command in Washington DC – as a 01Echo20 – "Mathematics/Statistics Assistant". There's nothing like a college education to prepare you for real life.

As it turned out, PERSINSCOM was where MOS assignments were made. True to form, the drill sergeants were just robots repeating something they were told to say. Working in PERSINSCOM, I learned that the Army wasn't organized enough to be able to "red flag" a file even if they wanted to.

My job at PERSINSCOM was to help calculate the AAPERS Report. (And to give private tutoring to a Colonel who was going for his MBA.) Years later, just by chance, I met one of the thousands of former Army company clerks who was on the receiving end of the AAPERS Report. I told him the story I'm going to tell you. I thought he might have a seizure right on the spot.

The "big idea" behind the AAPERS Report was to rank the major Army commands in timeliness and accuracy of personnel reporting. We ranked the big commands like Europe, Pacific, Sixth Army ... I forget them all now. The AAPERS Report was a single, attention grabbing page that ranked the commands from best to worst in five categories. It was sent directly to the commanding general of each command. These are the guys who have clawed and scratched their way up through a competitive system that makes a pack of wolves look like kindergarten. Put yourself in the frame of mind of a commanding general when *his* command is in *last place*. Yes, that's right. I think you've got it!

It took us about a week to calculate the report each month based on numbers we copied from computer printouts. (The rest of the time we worked hard at looking busy.)

One number was critical because it was used in four of the five numbers in the Report. We received a copy of an inch thick computer printout every day but we only used one number from one day's printout. We didn't know in advance which day it would be, however. The Major would get a phone call and tell us which day to use. We would dig through the stack, find it, and throw the other twenty pounds of paper away.

As luck would have it, I was within a week of ETS – Expiration of Term of Service – when it happened. The Major walked out of his office and said, "Use Tuesday's printout." But it wasn't there. For reasons unknown, we just didn't have it.

But we did have a distribution sheet that listed a couple of dozen other offices that also received the report. So the Major told me to get on the Pentagon bus and get a copy from one of the other offices.

After visiting eight or ten offices, I decided that nobody had it. I had to check with that many offices because most of them threw it away as soon as they received it. Only a few even had a stack of old reports. Being a hard charging chairborne trooper, I decided to go the extra mile and get the number from the source at the data processing center that sent it out.

The DP center told me that there had been some sort of computer error that prevented the report from being generated. The civilian I talked to said something about bad computer memory they had to get through a low bid contract. I also learned that there were no plans to re-run it. But I did find out where the responsible system analyst was.

After another ride on the Pentagon bus system, I finally found myself in front of the green metal desk of an Army Spec-5 who admitted that, yes, that system was her

responsibility. She had been willing to do what I was not – give up six years of her life for an assignment that I had spent six years being trained for.

“How is this number calculated?” I asked, pointing to the sample report I brought with me.

“It’s a parameter,” she said. She seemed a bit nervous.

That kind of non-answer might work for people who didn’t know how computers work, but not for me. “OK, what’s the source of the parameter?”

“It’s based on previous reports.”

“Look, we have an office full of people with serious math training and not that much to do. Just tell me how this number is calculated and we’ll do whatever it takes to calculate it.”

“Ummmm ... I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t calculate it.”

“Who does?”

“Nobody.”

“Then where does it come from?”

“Look! I make it up. OK!? I’ve been doing this job for two years and I know about what that number should be. I pick a number. I input it into the system. I make it up. *All right!?*”

“Are you telling me that you just invent the key number that ranks the commanding generals of the major Army commands every month?”

“Well ... I said I know about how big it should be!”

I walked on clouds getting back to the Major’s office to tell him what I found out. In another week, I would be a civilian again. As the Major listened to my report, the color drained from his face. After a few minutes, he told me to start processing out of the Army and not to report to work again. I never did find out what, if anything, actually happened to the AAPERS Report.