

This Takes the Cake Or Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About KP But Were Afraid to Ask

by Jack Keelan, 397-I

Editor's note: Those former members of the ASTP who underwent basic training in early 1944 in the Harmony Church area of Ft. Benning and who harbored certain suspicions about the quality of the food there may wish to avoid this story. It was written by John P. Keelan of Livingston, New Jersey, who died in January 2003 before he could finish his wild Irish view of life in the military.

Jack Keelan was a rifleman in Company I, 397th Infantry. He won a Bronze Star for heroic action at Rimling, and his many friends dubbed him "Killer" Keelan. In civilian life he loved to tool around on his motorcycle, and he wore a biker's jacket with the 397th motto "Death Before Dishonor" emblazoned on it. You read his account of "charging the blockhouse" in a recent issue of the division newsletter. He was working away on similar sketches when he died. Like Archie the Cockroach, the famous little literary critter invented by the late newspaper columnist Don Marquis, Jack always looked at life from the underside in a way only the Irish can do. He titled this one "Saint Petersburg Square."

Read on and you'll understand why.

Part of basic training is learning how the Army kitchen functions. This lesson has the misleading misnomer "kitchen police," always referred to as KP. It had nothing to do with keeping order in the chow line or preventing anyone from taking more than one helping of dessert. KP involved performing myriad tasks associated with preparing food for cooking, cooking, dispensing individual servings of each item on the menu, and most important, cleaning all the utensils used by the cooks and scrubbing all exposed floor, counter, and wall surfaces of the mess hall to a spotless condition.

The Army was most strict in its requirements for cleanliness in the mess hall and kitchen, because one tiny departure from the standards could very well result in an entire unit becoming stricken with diarrhea.

When this happened, the full brunt of the Army's terrible vengeance fell upon the head of the mess sergeant.

Now the average mess sergeant was no fool. He knew he had a good deal. He drew rations for the entire unit, and it was up to him to feed all the men adequately. The daily menu and the quantity of each food item issued to each unit came down from on high as calculated by the number of men in the Table of Organization.

The mess sergeant's task was to feed the troops within Army guidelines. If he could save a little here and a little there, who would know if he managed to sneak it out the gate and become a supplier of food to a local restaurant? Or used first quality meat for barter in a rationed wartime society?

Who could blame a lady for dispensing her favors to a soldier who came courting with half a dozen steaks under his arm as opposed to her pick of handsome fellows whose extracurricular charms were limited to a trip to the crowded movies?

These job perks plus the real threat of being sent overseas as a replacement infantry private served as strong inducements to stateside mess sergeants to keep their kitchens and everything in them spotless.

Of course I didn't know that background of information on the soft spring morning when the soldier on guard duty roused me and the rest of the day's KP crew out of our beds at 0400 for our first stint of Kitchen Police. We were easily identified in the darkened barracks because each KP candidate had a towel tied on the end of his cot.

I marched with the rest of the KP crew to the dark unlit mess hall under the direction of one of the lesser ranks of noncoms who made up the permanent kitchen staff under the mess sergeant. We entered the building and huddled around the door while the cook-in-charge walked over to the electrical panel.

All the lights came on simultaneously. The frantic activity of the next two or three seconds defies description . . . well, almost.

Do you remember seeing a historical news film about the 1917 Russian Revolution that showed a huge crowd of people in St. Petersburg Square? The ground was covered with snow so that the mob appeared to be a dense, black, pulsating mass. A burst of machine-gun fire was the signal for the appearance of Cossacks entering from the left. Instantaneously, the black mass of people dissolves into thousands of individuals, each one running for the safety of doorways in the surrounding buildings. Suddenly the vast area of the square is empty. The sweep of the camera does not reveal a single moving person. The only evidence of their having occupied the space is the litter of dropped objects left in the snow in their wild rush to safety.

That sudden burst of light in the mess hall kitchen activated thousands of cockroaches to start a mad scramble for the cover of the dark spaces of the joints between the wallboards and the crevices at the juncture of the floor and walls. Cockroaches are nocturnal animals and abhor light, I learned later. We could hear the beat of the tens of thousands of racing insect feet as they scurried for a place to hide.

Just as suddenly, all was quiet. There wasn't a cockroach in sight. The only evidence of their occupation of the kitchen could be seen on the surface of the vanilla icing of six large, flat sheet cakes left out on the counter.

The night-shift bakers had made the cakes, which were the intended dessert of the noon meal. Sheet cake was specified on the master menu. The flat surface of each cake was now crisscrossed with the tracks of countless cockroach feet left by the feeding insects. And deposited between the railroad-like lines left by each set of matching feet were hundreds of tiny black specks. These left nothing to the imagination.

We recruits from the North, not yet familiar with the scale of insect life in the South, were awe-struck by the hordes of cockroaches and their amazing disappearing act. We just stood there, looking dumbly at the now empty kitchen.

Not so the cook. Grabbing a three-foot-long spatula, he deftly maneuvered it across the top of each cake, creating a wave of vanilla icing that rolled over the cockroach tracks and droppings leaving behind a fresh, flat surface. Satisfied with his creative reconstruction, he straightened up, saw us gaping and snarled, "get to work cleaning up the mess left by the bakers."

He then cut each sheet into serving portions. Obviously this procedure was a regular performance with him. Not a word was said about the sheet cakes.

At lunch, we KPs dutifully placed a piece of cake on the proffered trays of the hungry trainees along with a dollop of mashed potatoes and a slab of meatloaf.

Twenty-five years later my neighbor, a microbiologist, told me he was working on the solution to the world's hunger problem. "Use garbage to grow cockroaches," he said, "then harvest the cockroaches, grind them up, and make cakes from the pure protein gruel. Of course it would have to be seasoned to taste."

"Sounds good to me," I agreed and suggested vanilla.

(Another editor's note: Psychologists say there really is something called "post trauma stress syndrome." If you ate sheet cake at Ft. Benning, you might like to think about that.)