Peace, Love, & Fort Ord

People say a lot of things about soon-to-be-shuttered Fort Ord, once the embarkation point for thousands of Vietnam-bound grunts. A great place to build an antiwar movement is not usually one of them.

BY MICHAEL BALTER

Ever since I read that Fort Ord, the U.S. Army base up the coast on the Monterey Peninsula, is going to be phased out over the next few years, I have had the mixed emotions of glee and nostalgia that a former boarding-school pupil might feel upon learning that his alma mater has been nailed shut and the headmaster dispatched into early retirement. At the height of the war in Vietnam, when I was in my early twenties, I was stationed at Fort Ord for seventeen months. The experience made a man out of me, although not the kind of man the army intended.

Fort Ord was one of the principal infantry training bases in the United States. When I was a guest there, most of the young men who grunted over its green hills and drilled with their M16s on its fine beaches were later sent to fight in Vietnam. I was one of the few exceptions. I spent my military career cooking in a mess hall and fattening up the soldiers. If it is true, as Napoleon is supposed to have said, that an army marches on its stomach, I must have made a considerable contribution to the war effort. Yet my purpose for being there was to do just the opposite.

At this point I must confess something the FBI has known for years. During the 1960s I was a member of a far-left group—so far left, in fact, that we thought Mao Zedong was a revisionist capitalist roader. We believed that revolutionaries should join the military to subvert and destroy it from within. I was an undergraduate at UCLA when my turn came to carry out this mission. I mailed my student deferment card back to my draft board along with a letter condemn-
ing the war and was promptly obliged with an induction notice.

At that time, few antiwar activists approved of this tactic. Inspired by the slogan “What if they gave a war and nobody came,” most campus radicals advocated draft resistance. They doubted that soldiers could be organized and questioned the sanity of anyone who would try. As I kissed my girlfriend good-bye and mounted the steps of the Los Angeles induction center that rainy fall morning, I encountered two friends who were active in a local draft-resistance group. They were handing out leaflets urging people to refuse conscription. I took one with a smile.

For several minutes we stood talking and embracing, acknowledging our common goal to end the war that had driven so many members of my generation half mad with outrage. This poignant moment was interrupted only by the unexpected appearance of my father, a retired navy lifer, who had shown up proudly to shake my hand as I embarked on my patriotic duty. Naturally, I had not told him what I was up to.

But the army certainly knew. As I learned later when I applied for my records under the Freedom of Information Act, the FBI had passed my file on to military intelligence. When I finished basic training, I was put under a security hold that kept me at Fort Ord pending the outcome of an “investigation.” But the investigation never seemed to end. With plenty of time on my hands, I went about the task of organizing my fellow soldiers.

In the minds of many antiwar activists, the typical G.I. was an ignorant rube from South Carolina who just couldn’t wait to get over to Vietnam and kill the “gooks.” True, most of my fellow soldiers were ignorant, and many were from the South. But I met very few who wanted to kill anybody. Most of them were terrific and understood nothing about the war. They were in the army because they had no choice.

I smuggled large amounts of antiwar literature onto the fort. Everyone seemed happy to take a leaflet or brochure when it was offered. Whether they agreed or not, my fellow soldiers liked the idea of having a resident revolutionary among them. Besides, I had begun to develop a reputation as an excellent cook. As mealtime is about all a soldier has to look forward to, this talent endeared me even to those who, in civilian life, might have tarred and feathered me for my political views. One day Sergeant Woodruff, the portly black mess sergeant for whom I worked, said to me, “Bater, I don’t care if you’re a Communist or an American. All I know is, you do a good job for me.”

The months passed. Several other comrades from my revolutionary group came to Fort Ord. We recruited dozens of ordinary G.I.s to work with us. No one seemed to mind associating with hard-core leftists, even though our more extreme views were shared by few of the people who came to the meetings. I was amazed at the courage of these young men in the face of the army’s close surveillance of our activities. We began to publish a newsletter, which attacked the war and exposed the army’s harassment of black and Latino soldiers. When Cesar Chavez called a strike of lettuce pickers in the Salinas Valley, we organized a lettuce boycott at the base—no small thing, as Fort Ord was the single biggest lettuce customer in Monterey County.

I was court-martialed twice, once for passing out leaflets and then again for disrupting a riot-control class and “compromising military discipline.” On the latter occasion, antiwar groups from the Bay Area were planning to demonstrate outside the gates of Fort Ord. The military brass put out the word that “secret documents” had fallen into their hands, indicating that the protesters intended to march onto the base and physically take on the troops. All leaves were canceled, and the entire base was on alert. When, in front of a squad of soldiers training to repel the invaders, I questioned the likelihood that a mob of unarmed hippies was a threat to the security of the fort—and suggested that the passes had been revoked because the army was afraid that some G.I.s would join the protest—I ended up before a tribunal of officers who busted me down to the lowest sort of private and confiscated most of my already laughable pay for several months.

But for the most part, our group was treated with kid gloves, carefully watched rather than suppressed. It seemed the brass didn’t want anyone to think that you could get a discharge just by passing out leaflets against the war. The army’s patience had its limits, though, as we found out shortly after the Saturday afternoon we held a demonstration on Fisherman’s Wharf in Monterey. The sight of one hundred uniformed soldiers carrying picket signs emblazoned with antiwar slogans must have been a curious sight to passersby. For the army, such a public display of dissidence in the ranks was beyond toleration. Within two weeks, the hard-core instigators had been scattered to the winds. Two of us, including myself, were given early discharges, one activist was sent to Alaska, one to Vietnam, another to Texas, and so on.

All this happened more than twenty years ago. My political views have undergone some moderation since, but I am still proud of what I did at Fort Ord. Never since have I had the opportunity to act out so completely the principles in which I believed. That might sound like a bit of 1960s nostalgia, but it is a sorry statement for a 46-year-old man to have to make. Yet at least I can make it. Unlike so many people I knew in the army, my name isn’t inscribed on any memorials in Washington, D.C.

The people who live in the area surrounding Fort Ord are now squabbling over what should be done with these twenty-eight thousand acres by the sea. Some want to develop the beaches and adjoining land for tourism, while others wish to turn the area into a park. And then there is a long lineup of federal and state agencies that want to make use of it. As a former resident, I say go for the tourists. I may want to open a restaurant there when I retire. ☺