

Out of Uniform

LTC (RETIRED) WILLIAM C. COLLIER

On 7 December 1914, 17-year-old William Albert Collier enlisted as a private in Company K, 5th Infantry Regiment, Massachusetts National Guard. In those days, a National Guard company commander could enlist a boy under age if he showed some leadership potential. After he enlisted, Collier enrolled as an officer cadet at the Massachusetts Officer Training School.

The school's name was eventually changed to the Massachusetts Military Academy because the term "training school" connoted what was done to convicts during their incarceration rehabilitation. Each state's National Guard operated a state-run military academy. Eventually, the state military academies became state Officer Candidate Schools.

Cadet Collier successfully completed his course of instruction at the Massachusetts Officer Training School in 1916. He was not commissioned at graduation because he was under 21 years old. Upon completion of the Officer Training School, he was reassigned as a sergeant bugler in Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1st Massachusetts Field Artillery. Collier would remain with this unit until he became 21 and eligible for a second lieutenant's commission. During his assignment to Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, the Massachusetts National Guard was federalized and sent to the Texas-Mexican border along with rest of the 1st Massachusetts Field Artillery.

One of Collier's personnel characteristics, which he maintained all of his life, was a fastidious attention to dress. He always wore a hat and a necktie. He was so conscious of dress and appearance it was unnerving to bystanders. As an example of this penchant for dress, when dress shirts were sent to the laundry for cleaning, they would be returned to the owner starched, folded, and boxed in cardboard boxes. Collier was known for going through all of his laundered shirts until he found one that the collar was prepared to his satisfaction. The rest were returned to the laundry for a re-cleaning and pressing. Collier's family found his affinity for dress to be very annoying.



Photos courtesy of author

The above photos show William A. Collier as a private bugler assigned to Company K, 5th Massachusetts Infantry, circa 1915.

Collier went with his battery and performed his duties as mounted bugler and other duties as assigned while serving on the Texas-Mexican border with the Pershing Expedition. Living in the desert, a person gets very dirty, and cleanliness becomes a chore that requires constant attention.

Prior to World War I, the U.S. Regular Army was very small with only 10 regiments of Cavalry and 24 regiments of Infantry. In 1916 and early 1917, the United States entered into war fever. After war was declared in April 1917, the size of the Army would grow rapidly. The need for commissioned officers

was great, and commissioning regulations were greatly relaxed. Since Collier had successfully completed his officers training, he was one of the candidates for immediate commissioning.

When Collier's commission came down through channels to the battery, the unit was still serving along the Texas-Mexican border. Sergeant Collier was ordered to report to the battery commander for reasons unknown to him. He cleaned himself up and straightened up his uniform, the best he could considering how long he had been in the desert, and reported to the battery commander in the orderly room tent.

Once in the orderly room tent, the battery commander began to chew out his bugler for being out of uniform. Being the Soldier he was, Collier stood at attention and replied, "Yes sir; no excuse, sir!" After Collier was dismissed, he left the orderly room tent and took a short walk to recover from his verbal dressing by the battery commander. Collier was mad and he did not appreciate comments about being out of uniform. Collier felt he had done the best he could under the existing circumstances. It was about 30 minutes after he left the orderly room tent that it dawned on him. The battery commander never once addressed him as Collier. Throughout the entire counseling session, he had been addressed as Lieutenant Collier.



Troops from the Massachusetts National Guard patrol along the Texas-Mexican border circa 1917.

Collier had been promoted to second lieutenant! Having had this revelation, the new lieutenant returned to the orderly room tent, much to the laughter of all those inside. There, Collier received additional instructions that he was to immediately leave his regiment and report for duty at a new regiment at Syracuse, NY. Hopefully, he would be in the right uniform!

Second Lieutenant Collier arrived at his new unit — the 47th Infantry Regiment, 4th Division — and was sent overseas to serve with the Allied Expeditionary Force in the First World War. During combat operations in France, Collier would receive another promotion — to first lieutenant. However, his promotion to first lieutenant was far less dramatic. He did have to wrap his gold second lieutenant insignia with silver tin foil which came from chewing gum wrappers. In the trenches, Collier had no means to obtain proper first lieutenant insignia. As any former second lieutenant can attest to, one wants to replace those gold bars with silver ones as soon as possible!

Collier would continue serving in the U.S. Army until he retired in 1954 as a brigadier general. He saw service in the Mexican Border Expedition, World Wars I and II, and the Korean Conflict. Two of his sons served in the U.S. Army, and one son served in the U.S. Air Force. Two of his grandsons currently serve in the U.S. Army.

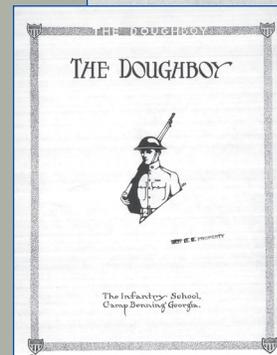
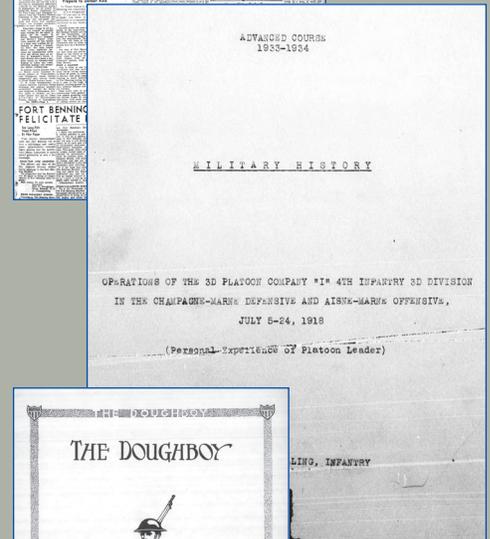
Author's Note: *This article is based on the reflections of the late BG (Retired) William A. Collier. Two of his sons have confirmed witnessing him going through laundry shirts. The pictures are from his personal photograph collections.*



SGT William A. Collier poses for a photo outside his tent while serving on the Texas-Mexican border in 1917.

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