Sketch

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The Tramp of Heavy Boots

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The Tramp of Heavy Boots

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Abstract

LIFE on an island with 75,000 soldiers presented a good many problems. Some we laughed about; some we squared our shoulders about. This was war—the real thing—and some fate had placed us comfortably on one of the main streets of Basic Training Center Number Nine, United States Air Corps...
I turned sharply with every intent of pushing that swinging towel down her dainty neck, but dismissed the idea as requiring too much energy. My reflexes weren't alert enough to engage in physical combat, and one should be a lady even at seven in the morning.

“Here, Sunshine, dunk that bright face in this bowl,” said a more patronizing voice to my right.

“Dunk it and hold it under,” came from my left. But this was lost in the rushing stream of hot water and the melodious strains of “Oh, What a Beautiful Day” as the busy bee took over.

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**The Tramp of Heavy Boots**

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LIFE on an island with 75,000 soldiers presented a good many problems. Some we laughed about; some we squared our shoulders about. This was war—the real thing—and some fate had placed us comfortably on one of the main streets of Basic Training Center Number Nine, United States Air Corps.

At six-thirty every morning “I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy” shot through my window, startled me, and left my sleepy mind confused with the heavy tramps of boots outside and the flitting fairies fading hazily away. But soon I was wide awake and knew that it was simply half the world marching under my window. I knew that they probably didn’t want to sing “I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy” at six-thirty in the morning any more than I wanted to hear them. I knew that many of them didn’t want to wear the heavy G-I boots and mechanics’ suits. Certainly they didn’t want to march along that street to the Miami Beach golf course, which was now their drill field, knowing that when they came back along that street they would be exhausted and dusty from long hours of drilling.

But they were doing it, and still singing. So the least I could do was to close my window and try to dream through the loud, worn-out songs, the shouts and cadences of the tough sergeants, and always the pulsing rhythm of the boots. After several weeks of practice I learned to mix that rhythm with the dancing fairies.
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It worked marvelously. Then one day the fairies were dancing to the beat of a bass drum. John Phillip Sousa had filled my room with all the force of a mighty host under my bed. I jumped up and gasped from the window at the ranks of the band standing in the little park across the street. The trumpets, the horns, and the bass drum were united in blaring forth "Stars and Stripes Forever!" from the bottom of their souls and lungs. I laughed a bit hysterically. Then I thought of my father. Surely he would see that this was too much. When I darted into his room, he was beaming through the shaving cream. "Marching the boys to drill—a fine old Coast Artillery custom!" he boasted. It didn't matter that this was the Air Corps, and six-thirty in the morning. It was such a fine custom that every morning I became a little fonder of the band.

We really didn't mind the raucous songs, for we realized the slight disturbances in our life were very slight indeed in comparison with those of the boys. No one complained when the bus waited twenty minutes at a street corner or narrow bridge for a squadron to march by. We became unconscious of the continual hum of airplanes above in formation or as lone scouts headed out to sea. But sometimes we heard them. A long, whistling dive or the feeling of scraping wings on our tile roofs was hard on nerves.

Guards were everywhere. Passes were needed to go on the beach. I soon learned to carry them all to flash at the moment of a shout, "Hey, you can't go in there!"

I learned also to watch my way as I walked. Squadrons held parades in any vacant lot, at any time of day. Once hurrying home, I rounded a corner and struck off across a tiny park. Too late I saw the reviewing officer and his party, behind whom I was walking, leisurely now, in an attempt at casual indifference, to the huge enjoyment of the entire parade.

I learned much from that strange life. I learned it from watching the boys march by. All of them were in khaki. The streets were full of khaki, moving in beautiful patterns of swinging arms and marching legs. Some carried guns. Not many of the boys looked at me as I watched them. Their tanned faces looked straight ahead, not at the rustling palms, not at the ice-cream colored buildings, but straight ahead. They saw things I could not see.