

HQ. Det. 1390th Service Unit
(Special Training Unit)
Holabird Signal Depo
Baltimore, Maryland

15 December 1943

Dear President Johnson:

This cold night finds me alone in the Day Room for the 1390th S.U. That is surprising. The place is usually bustling with life, and I prefer noise in the neighborhood for letter writing. It gives me a sense of being in the center of the intensity of things—a sense that all good letters possess.

With a makeshift of a magic carpet, I'll take you over some of the main ground I've covered since I left the University. I was transported to Camp Lee (near Petersburg), Va. in a bus. The bus was easy-riding, and the trip was quiet. Only one thing worried me: the expressions on the faces of the men, as I watched them with side glances, full stares, and querying looks in the mirror, were deeply puzzling. I could have understood anger or loneliness or simple despair. But most of these men showed hollowness—absolute hollowness, as though they were the secret panels in a thick wall. I reasoned: "It's because they do not like to leave the people they have just so tearfully told goodbye." Or, "because they are Negroes and are wondering if this is in any sense their war." Or: "most of them really deep down realize the great futility of killing before one does what must be done with one's world. "But there was more to their hollowness than that. These men had the hollowness of wondering if anyone really cared for their personal, particular discomfiture and sacrifice. They were each a nation going to war. They would not have gone by themselves, and they could not feel that the gigantic forces that set them as individuals in motion had any cause for whirling at that time.

In Camp Lee, I was the commonest of common soldiers. I did grounds police, kitchen police, fire guard, "the works." I "fell out "in front of the Company Orderly room on the double. I learned the true meaning of the adage: "It never rains (snows, develops high winds, etc. etc.) in the Army; It only rains on the Army." Though I didn't smoke I had to pick up other people's cigarette butts and match stems. I learned the meaning of community by helping to pay for the mistakes or arrogance of people in my unit when only one or two of 200 men were at fault.

It all reminded me of the opening of Walt Whitman's Drum Taps. Bad as war was to him (a Quaker by ancestry), he could see that it taught men comradeship and devotion for common causes more dramatically than anything previously used. It made men see each other's faults. It made men rise and fall together. It concentrated their personal strength to a community purpose.

If only someone could devise a highly dramatic peacetime enterprise to do those things as well—

I took the Army Tests and did fairly well. I was classified as a Teacher and sent here to help prepare illiterate and semi-literate men for Army Service. As I work, the main thing I think of is that thousands of

men here will not be in the absolute dark any more—ever. I close my eyes to the fact that success here means more cannon fodder sooner.

The steps in the system here are about as follows:

- 1- Receive the men from the Induction Reception Center.
- 2- Test them to find if any are 4th grade caliber in reading or writing; if any, order them sent immediately out for training.
- 3- Send the others to whatever level the multiple test scores show them fit for.
- 4- Follow them as they go from level to level; if they fail once, examine their backgrounds carefully and make recommendations; if twice, call them in for highly personal, thorough, systematic individual examinations.”
- 5- Recommend for discharge from the Army all hopeless cases.
- 6- Keep close records on everything.

Although I came here to teach, my first stop was in the office of the Personnel Consultant (who is in charge of the system described), and there I have remained. I have done (at least once) everything the variegated job calls for. I am now the chief record-keeper and statistician, but at times-tomorrow for example—I devote myself mainly to giving the Individual Examinations. I work hard, but about half as hard as I did “on the Hilltop high.”

And I am worried about those kids, Mr. President. From what I hear, they aren’t getting nearly enough attention. I wish it were possible for me to do this job and one there, too. I’m trying to keep in touch with key students, but I’m not happy about their opportunities.

I can’t tell you everything in one letter, and so this rush of words must stop. Oh yes, will you please see if there’s any way for you to arrange for me to get my check for Rem4dial English I did in A.S.T.P. last summer. I hadn’t expected it before now, but I was counting on it for Christmas. It seems to have struck a severe snag. And that’s bad news, considering that the Army’s taking out for two months’ dependency allowance and three months insurance has caused me to be “redlined” (get no pay) so far.

Please accept from me to you and Mrs. Johnson my heartiest Christmas wishes. I hope to see you early next year at the latest.

I’m not alone anymore!!

Prvt. John Lovell, Jr.