

## The Making of a Soldier

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot  
Rome, New York

11 Nov 1942

Dear Family,

Arrived here yesterday evening after an eight-hour ride direct on a troop train from Devens. It is colder than the devil as well as snowy and muddy. This is an entirely new camp and is not yet completed. This is a replacement center, and I may not stay here long. I can't tell. I will probably start my basic training tomorrow as well as having another interview to determine whether I will get to a mechanic school or not.

The hours are some better here than they were at Devens. We get up at 5:30 as compared with 4:00 at Devens and lights are out at 10 p.m. as compared with 9 p.m. at Devens. The food has been terrible so far at this camp, but you have to eat it or go hungry. The food was wonderful at Devens.

Have just spent three hours sewing on my Air Corps insignia on the shoulder of my overcoat, jacket and flight jacket. I did a very good job, and they look nifty. I wish you could see my uniform, but I'm afraid my next move will be further west rather than east. I couldn't make Boston from here on a weekend pass.

Had a beautiful train ride from Devens and noticed that western Massachusetts has as many mountains as Maine.

There isn't too hot a bunch of soldiers in my present barracks, but I get along all right. Was on detail with a pick and shovel gang again this afternoon.

Would appreciate it very much if you would send me the following: 10 clothes hangers as we have to hang our clothes up, and it's rather hard without hangers; my pipe and tobacco that are in my room; a small, black notebook with the word 'Think' printed on it, which is also in my room; a map of New York covering upper New York and Vermont, if we have one around the house.

Tell Prescott I'm going to try to get an Air Corps insignia for him like the ones I have, if he would like one for his sweater.

Haven't seen Ralph Jury since I left Fort Devens, but I imagine he is around the camp somewhere.

The airport is about a half-mile from here and is not yet complete. I don't imagine I will see any tools for months.

I lent my new \$2.95 pen to a soldier at Devens and realized today I never got it back.

We are all called soldiers now and call each other soldier, when we don't know one's name, rather than fella or guy.

Haven't seen a paper for days, but a soldier in my barracks has a radio, and I've been listening all evening to more encouraging news reports than I have been accustomed to.

Tell Harry I will write when I have the time. I have been going to bed as early as possible each night because of the hours.

I feel like a veteran in the Army already on my first week anniversary. So much has happened, and I have been awake so many hours the last week that it seems I have been in for months.

My address is (as you can see from the envelope)  
Private Samuel Keyes – 11115949  
14th Station Complement, Barracks 29  
Rome Air Depot, New York

Love,  
Sam

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

15 Nov 1942

Dear Prep,

Just got up and, as it is Sunday and I have a free day, I think I will write a few letters. Have been marching and drilling the past few days, but haven't been working too hard. Went into Utica last evening and bought a garrison hat like the one I have drawn.

Didn't get up until 9:00 this morning and missed chow which is at 6:15. So, I am plenty hungry.

Haven't received your letter as yet. If you sent it to me at Camp Devens, I probably never will get it, but you can write another one, that is if you have any spare time.

Enclosed you will find a shoulder insignia of the Air Corps. They aren't making them with the red in the middle of the star as it resembles the rising sun of Japan. They don't paint a red circle on airplane wings anymore, either.

I'm going to write a letter to Mom now. So, until I hear from you again, be good and mind your mother.

Sincerely,  
Sam

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

15 Nov 1942

Dear Mom,

Received your letter yesterday. It was the first letter I have received since I have been in the Army.

Have just finished writing to Prescott and also enclosed a terrible picture I had taken last night in Utica.

Bought a garrison hat for \$4.50 in Utica last night, but was unable to get the small round brass insignia that goes in the middle over the visor. I think Dad can get one in an Army and Navy store in Boston for something around 50 cents. I would like it as soon as possible, so I can wear my hat.

Had another interview yesterday, but it didn't amount to anything. It is so cold and snowy here, it limits our drilling. This is another classification center, and I think we may leave here this coming week.

Did my first washing today and find that I could use some of your homemade soap. So, you can send another package with my light brown shoes and some soap. Don't send too many, just a couple of cakes, because I haven't got much room and can't carry too much until I get stationed permanently.

I saw a fella in the mess hall this noon who was in my barracks at Devens, and he said Ralph Jury is still there. The last time I saw him we were about to board a train at Devens. I thought he was here, and I just hadn't bumped into him.

Haven't received your package yet. It'll probably come tomorrow.

Is Harry L. in the Army yet? I'll write to him today.

Had my first day of KP, kitchen police, from 4:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Friday, and can't say I enjoyed it. I washed dishes, windows, scrubbed the floor three times and peeled potatoes, to mention a few of the things.

There is some kind of entertainment every night such as a movie or variety show right in the camp. Went on an eight-mile hike Thursday. The food is getting better, or I'm getting used to it.

The people are very nice about giving soldiers rides around here. Last night a couple of us walked about a half-mile to the main road and stood for a couple of minutes and got a ride right into Utica, which is about 15 miles. Around 10 p.m., we got another ride right back to the gate. It's just like having your own car. They tell us not to thumb, but just stand by the side of the road.

That's all I can think of now, so until I hear from you again.

Love,  
Sam

P.S. I have to write on my bunk on a small letter box, and it makes my writing kind of messy. I am enclosing three more pictures. They're the worst ones I ever had taken, but I'll send them anyway.

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

17 Nov 1942

Dear Grandpa,

Received your letter at mail call this afternoon and was surprised to hear from you so soon.

Sorry to hear Mr. Rivinius isn't progressing more rapidly.

Yes, troop movements certainly do give the railroads more business. I came direct from Fort Devens, on a five-car train filled with soldiers, to this air station. This is an entirely new camp located a half-mile off the main road between Rome and Utica.

The roads in the camp are not as yet paved and as a result, we are up to our ankles in mud, which means the floors of the barracks have to be washed and swept out several times daily. The actual airport is about a half-mile from here, and as yet I haven't been near it and don't expect to be. The only airplanes I have seen are those circling high above the ground in preparation for landing.

Some of the fellas here who have the proper qualifications will be sent to an aircraft mechanics school in Detroit, Michigan. I was interviewed yesterday by a master sergeant for a job in the supply branch of the Air Corps. He told me they were only sending soldiers with actual mechanical experience with automobile engines to school, and with my background I wouldn't be sent. So, I think now I might be better off if I did get into the supply branch. My IQ is sufficiently high enough to allow me to apply for officers' training, but there also is a catch to this. They informed me that there are 10,000 applications in for officers' training, which, coincidentally, have been in for over six months. So, my chances for advancement at this stage aren't very encouraging, but I'm going to plug away and do my best and hope everything will turn out all right.

Drilled for five hours today and participated in sports and did exercises for three.

We have to get up at 5:30 each morning and must be dressed and have our bunks made by 5:45. The rest of the day we spend either drilling or working around the camp. The government is still building barracks, mess halls, etc., and I can't help but wonder what's going to happen when the war is over. There's certainly going to be a lot of waste.

The days seem to pass very quickly, and on the other hand, I have done so much since I've been in the Army, I feel like a veteran.

I don't know that any experiences I ever have will equal any of yours, that is if I can believe some of your thrillers.

Lights don't go out until 10 o'clock, but I am usually ready to turn in at 8 p.m.

Until I write again, maybe from a different base in some other part of the country, I remain,

Yours truly,  
Sam

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

19 Nov 1942

Dear Family,

Received your letter today, which was very soon since you wrote it only yesterday.

Thank Mrs. Leathers very much for the candy. It comes in very handy as our desserts usually consist of some sort of fruit such as an apple, orange, grapes, etc.

Received a letter from Grandpa yesterday and also answered it. It will save me a lot of writing if you read it.

Yes, the boy Virgie Staghan refers to is Norman Ostby. He's the fella I met one night when I was out with Ted Manger.

I wrote a letter to Ralph Jury at Devens last Sunday and received an answer today. He has been scratched from the shipping list twice, but expects to arrive here soon.

This Air Corps ground crew isn't what it's cracked up to be. They are only sending men with actual mechanical experience to school, and there are thousands of applications in for officers' training. The way it looks now, I doubt if I'll ever get there. I was interviewed for a position in the Supply Corps Tuesday, so I may be transferred.

We are now settling down to a definite training routine. I drill every morning from 8 until 12 then have an hour off for chow, then drill from 1 until 2. From there we have an hour of calisthenics and then have an hour to participate in football, soccer, baseball, boxing, etc. Today they asked for volunteers to go over the commanders' course instead of participating in sports for the last hour. About 50 out of the 500 of us volunteered.

It is a regulation course on which they train MPs, military police. There were all kinds of obstacles we had to go over or under, the worst of which was the underground tunnel. We had to burrow into a very small hole in the ground which was no wider than your shoulder and about two feet high. Well anyway, I was the second man in line and once I put my head in I couldn't see a darned thing. I tried to keep in touch with the fella in front of me by yelling at him. Finally, he reached a dead end, so I felt along the wall and finally found another passage. Anyways, after 10 minutes of crawling blindly through mud, we saw daylight and believe me it looked good. The rest of the course was made up of climbing ropes hand over hand, climbing high obstructions and hurdling various obstructions. It was the best exercise I ever had, and I hope I can do it every day. With the drilling, calisthenics and commando course, it gave me quite an active day, but I like it. It's some different from working in the bank and some better.

The food is OK now. I must have arrived here at a low ebb.

Some of the soldiers have money belts, but I don't think there's any need of them as long as you know where your wallet is when you go to bed.

Herb probably has left the country as they are shipping them across as fast as they can now, and he was ripe. Two fellas in my barracks received shipping orders yesterday and received an overseas knapsack and cartridge belt, Bible and whatnot today. They'll be going across very shortly, and they have only been in the Army four months.

Louis is certainly doing very well. I certainly wish I could have gotten into the Navy Air Corps. I would have been much better off even if I didn't get a commission. On the whole, I like Army life very much. I think the fellas who don't are softies and can't take it.

Glad you gave me the Keyes address. I meant to ask for it in my last letter.

Bill West certainly is another Jack Armstrong. It's too bad he won't be able to go to college, although I suppose it's possible the war will be over in another year. It seems to me the team is counting on Bill to win every game for them, and that they are not cooperating as well as at the start of the season.

It is now 7:30, and I think I'll clear the mud off my shoes and polish them, then hit the hay. Lights don't go out until 10, but I find I have no trouble going to sleep even with a radio going and friendly fights which break out very often. A soldier has a radio about two bunks away from me, and it is going most of the time. Haven't read a newspaper for weeks, but keep up on the news by listening to the radio.

It's a riot to hear some of the fellas talking in their sleep. Someone does every night. Anyone who snores gets a shoe from someone. I'm glad I don't.

You don't need to put my serial number (11115949) beside my name when you address my letters.

Must hit the hay now, so I'll be set to go at 5:30 tomorrow.

Love,  
Sam

P.S. I enclose another insignia for Prep. This is the official one, but it is permissible to wear the red ones, which I think are prettier. Thank you very much, Dad, for the brass button. I have a pretty smooth hat now.

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

23 Nov 1942

Dear Mom,

Received your letter of the 21st today along with the swell box of cookies, shoes and soap.

Ralph Jury pulled in Sunday a.m. while I was washing my clothes. I imagine Harry will come here, too, so it will be like old home week soon.

Yes, I received the papers last week and the postage was OK. This is the first letter I have written in several days, and I owe several and should write to the Keyes, Mrs. Leathers, Aunt Helen, etc. I planned to do it Sunday, but didn't get around to it due to Ralph J.

Thanks a lot, Frances and Mary, for your letters. I will endeavor to answer them in due time.

Do you know if the USS Henley has been sunk yet? I heard over the radio today that seven U.S. destroyers had been sunk in the last engagement.

Am still drilling every day and find it very boring as there are some ignorant fools who go left instead of right, etc.

Am not surprised at Harry's entering the service, and I think he will find it a little different from what he expects.

I also received a good letter from W.R.K. Jr. today. He mentioned Uncle Sam falling over when he came to the door. Did anything serious happen to him, or was it just a fainting spell?

Some of the fellas are going to try to make Boston on a weekend pass this weekend. A weekend pass is good only from 5 p.m. Saturday to 11 p.m. Sunday eve. Therefore, you would only have a couple of hours home, and if a train were late or you missed the connection, you couldn't make it. Due to the short time home, lack of money and poor connections, I don't think I will attempt it.

There are no Christmas or New Year's passes, so as I have said before, I doubt if I'll get home for some time.

Jimmy Doty wrote me today, and I wondered where he got my address. Oh yes, come to think of it, I did write him last Sunday.

Well, I have time to write another letter before turning in, so until I write again keep buying war bonds and stamps! Ha! Ha!

Love,  
Sam

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

30 Nov 1942

Dear Family,

Have just finished standing in line for three hours waiting to get paid. Anyways, I did get paid and received \$40.08. If you already sent \$5, I will try to return it as I, of course, don't need any.

Received Frances' airmail letter today. It took five days to reach me, so you can see there's no sense sending anything airmail. I also received the Boston Globe dated November 27 from Dad. Again, there is no sense spending 36 cents for airmail postage.

Just after I called you Saturday night, I noticed a KP list on the barracks bulletin board and also noticed my name. Well, I tried to get out of it and even went through the barracks offering three bucks to anyone who wanted to take my place. No one accepted my offer, of course, which shows you how much it is dreaded.

The sergeant announced tonight that most of us are going to start school tomorrow, Tuesday. It is a 13-week course. I am pretty sure I'm going, but won't be positive until tomorrow morning.

Oh! To get back to last Sunday and KP. As I told you over the phone, I was going to Fayetteville Sunday with Ralph. Well, I had to cancel it and also my Sunday pass.

Sorry to hear that R.L. Clark is missing. Also noticed several names in the casualty list of the Coconut Grove fire Saturday night.

Haven't heard from Harry yet, but still expect to see him around here before long.

Well, that's all I have time for now and will write tomorrow or the next day explaining more fully about school.

Love,  
Sam

P.S. The clerical school is here at Rome, so I wouldn't be shipped.

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

3 Dec 1942

Dear Family,

Received Mom's letter today dated Tuesday, November 30, and Dad's dated the 2nd, so will answer both of them now.

Am very appreciative of your respective \$5 and \$2 loans. But as I said in my last letter, I got paid \$40.08 Monday, so I don't need any. As I can't make out a money order at the camp, I am going to take the chance and send it back in cash.

Ralph Jury just dropped up, so I am talking with him and writing this letter in between times.

How is Harry making out? He hasn't written to me at all. If you give me his address, I will drop him a line. I received those post cards you addressed from Mrs. Leathers yesterday as well as a big box of miscellaneous articles from the bank. They are enumerated as follows: 1 pkg. of Camel cigarettes; 1 pkg. Allen's Confections; 1 pkg. (very fancy) walnuts and pecans; 1 pkg. maple fruits (100% pure Vermont maple sugar); Epicure lemon drops (S.S. Pierce 6); 1 pkg. playing cards, 1 large can of Dr. Lyons tooth powder, 1 diary, 1 Dr. West's toothbrush in a container, 2 pairs of long shoe strings for my boots, 1 pkg. of gum, 1 Tootsie Roll, shaving cream, foot powder, Lypsyl, Lux and Lifebuoy soaps, Gillette razor blades (blue blades), pen and pencil, styptic pencil. There's probably a lot more stuff I left out.

I've been going to clerical school since Tuesday, studying company administration (i.e., the records that are necessary to keep the personnel straight). It is very complicated, and isn't as easy as it sounds. It is supposed to be a three-month course, but may be shortened at any time. This depot seems to be very unorganized, and one can't tell what's going to happen from one day to the next.

As I am unable to secure a U.S. button, which goes on the right hand side of my jacket, I would appreciate it if Dad would try and purchase one for me in Boston.

I must do a little studying before resting, so good night.

Love,  
Sam

P.S. Ask Prescott what he would like in the Air Corps line for Christmas. It has been snowing for the past week, and the last two days it has been blowing the hardest since the hurricane. It's been the worst weather I have ever been in. It must be at least zero. Alaska will be tame after we get through this hell hole.

Private Samuel Keyes  
Barracks Five  
Rome Air Depot, New York

Friday, 6:15 p.m., 4 Dec 1942

Dear Mom,

There's some form of entertainment going on in one of the big hangers tonight, and we are all compelled to go. Have to fall out at 7:00, so I haven't much time.

Mentioned enclosing of dollars in cash in my last letter and forgot. Will try and remember to enclose it herein.

Very much surprised and maybe a little envious to hear of Harry's arrival in Miami. He's certainly much better off in the warm weather than he would have been if shipped to this hell hole. Everybody in the camp seems to have a cold, and I guess the hospital is crowded with



serious cases. I have been lucky to get away with only the sniffles, so I'm afraid Harry would be in a bad way. It will be interesting to see how we make out.

The best fella I have met around here is my bunk mate. He is 29 years old and was district manager of the Coca-Cola Company in Boston and had his office in their new plant on the Charles across from Memorial Drive. He was offered a first lieutenant commission several months ago, but he would have had to go to Egypt. Anyway, he knows all the big shots and expects to go to Officer Candidate School very shortly. He had an interview yesterday.

There are about 53 of us in this barrack, and about 30 of us are going to school. For the most part these fellas are of a higher caliber.

Go to school six hours a day, five days a week and supposedly for three months, but as I have said before one doesn't know what's going to happen from one minute to the next.

You people are using your imagination too much about KP having anything to do with my pass and officer training. In the first place, I haven't applied for OCS, and in the second those KP lists are made out entirely independent of any passes. Also, no one of any authority knew I tried to get out of it. You people don't seem to have much idea of the setup of the Army.

To get back to the school, I really think I am better off going to clerical school than I would be going to aircraft mechanics school, and I am glad I am. It's funny how things seem to turn out for the best.

Ralph told me today everyone who's drilling has been issued a rifle. I haven't seen a gun since I've been here and don't care if I ever do.

Received a letter from Jimmy Doty today. He certainly has a personality and writes the best letters of any I receive.

Received a large package of miscellaneous stuff from the church today. Got so much junk around now, I don't know what I would do with it if I ever got shipped out.

The mess halls are straightened out now, and I eat at one directly across the street. The tables are all set, and I just walk in and sit down, helping myself to food, which is on the table. They have excellent cooks in this hall, and the meals are really the best since I left home.

Ralph thinks he might go to instrument school because of his experience with watches. Again, I say you can't tell what's going to happen next. The way it looks to me right now, I think he'll be in the infantry.

I have scratched this letter off so hurriedly there are undoubtedly many errors, and I haven't time to read it over.

Love,  
Sam

P.S. I have enclosed \$10. Some of it will take care of my doctor's bills I didn't pay before I left.

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

10 Dec 1942

Dear Family,

Received your letter written Monday this morning. Your letters arrive here several days earlier than mine reach home, judging by the postmarks.

The barracks is getting to be a madhouse now. There is a radio downstairs and one upstairs, both going constantly. Also, there is some jerk trying to blow a bugle downstairs.

Find school very interesting and am doing quite well. Received a grade of 92 in the first test and think I did better than that in one taken yesterday. At the present I am leading quite a soft life. Start school at 8:00 and get through at 3:30 with one and a half hours off for lunch. It's a mile to the building where we attend school (walk down and back twice a day), and we have a little hike every afternoon after school.

Am way behind in my letters and as a result haven't been receiving many letters.

Does Frances still hear from Louis as often as she did before I left?

Yes, Connie Blaisdell was in my class.

If the weather continues to be as cold and snowy as it has been the last month, a pair of gloves and a pair of woolen socks would come in very handy.

Had a couple of pictures taken in Utica Sunday, which came out some better than the ones I sent home previous. If the two of them weigh too much, I will send only one at a time. One is blurred anyways.

I plan to buy another overseas cap and when I do, I'll send Prescott mine. It'll be very much too big for him though.

Received Aunt Ruth's letter today in an envelope addressed by you. Is all my correspondence going through you now?

Am in the process of writing to Mr. Swenson. I can't seem to develop a closing sentence.

Well, that's all I have time for now.

Love,  
Sam

P.S. Have been in the Army five weeks today, and I feel as though I have been in a year ... but then, it only seems like yesterday when I left 39 Lloyd Street that dark morning. I suppose it's because so much has happened, and we're always on the go.

Private Samuel S. Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

12 Dec 1942

Dear Franny,

My barracks has developed into quite a peculiar sight this evening. On my left a former Columbia football player is giving haircuts at 40 cents per head. He has an improvised barber chair made up of a collapsible chair on top of a trunk. He does a very good job and has a waiting list of customers. As I had mine cut at Rome Saturday night, I can't help him out. He says he worked his way through college cutting hair and I can see how, because in the two days he's been here, he must have made \$10. Well, further down in the barrack there is a fellow pressing his uniform with an electric iron and using an ironing board made up of a board between two bunks. I've been thinking of taking out my shoe shine kit and going to work myself.

Received Prescott's letter yesterday and yours today. Prescott sounds like he must have had a little prompting in his.

Are you still in love with Louis? Is he flying yet? Who have you been going out with besides that jerk shavetail?

I have charge of a table in the mess hall, and my duties are to see that there is general order and no shortstopping, loud talking or refilling of dishes. It's not a bad racket as I can get to the table a few minutes before the rush and can manage to get a pretty good feed. Whatever I say goes, because any violator gets KP for a week and extra duty.

To give you an idea how difficult school is, my grades in the five tests we have had to date are 92, 99, 95, 90, 92 or an average of approximately 94. I have reached the point when I'm not satisfied when I get 90.

I think you're foolish working in the bank at your present salary as any good-looking girl can get a job any time. I'm saving more money in the Army than I ever did before. I received \$40.08 over two weeks ago and still have \$30.

Well, I think I'll take in the 8:30 show at the movies, and I'm also running out of paper. So, don't work too hard. Until I hear from you again,

Love,  
Sam

Private Samuel Keyes  
Rome Air Depot, New York

12 Dec 1942

Dear Family,

Have just received your letter dated the 11th and also the Reader's Digest finally reached here.

Glad to know Harry's address. I will write to him after I finish this letter.

Had a shot this afternoon so didn't have to go on the weekly hike.

We are going to school Saturday mornings now, so I imagine it will shorten the course somewhat.

No, I haven't received a Red Cross sweater yet, and it doesn't look as though I will. So, if you would like to knit one, it would be swell. Of course, it wants to be sleeveless and don't make the shoulders too big so they go over my shoulders.

I think Harry's much better off in the heat as compared with this weather.

Received Dad's letter and the U.S. button yesterday. Did you notice the U.S. part was way off center?

I plan to go either to Rome or Utica tonight and will mail these letters.

Well, that's all the news for now.

Love,  
Sam