

## Family Helps Historian Find a New “Famous First”

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You might know that Fort Monmouth is home to the first U.S. aircraft detection radar, the first communications satellite, and the first weather radar, among many other things.

Now we also know, according to *The World Almanac* and other published reports, that a Fort Monmouth variety show depicting satirical representations of Army life aired on the very first day of commercial television.

The Dramatic Association of the Signal Corps Replacement Training Center of Fort Monmouth first presented “Bottlenecks of 1941” on 9-13 June 1941 at the Red Bank Elks Club. The 7 June 1941 *New York Times* reported that this event was staged by “Broadway and Hollywood talent, snapped up by the draft and sent [to Fort Monmouth] because of their ability to cope with photographic and radio problems.”

These Broadway veterans-cum-Soldiers wrote an original score and danced alongside women from the post’s neighboring communities. (The Women’s Army Corps would not arrive at Fort Monmouth until 1943).

Private Edmund North, formerly an assistant producer for Samuel Goldwyn, directed the show. He went on to win an Oscar for the film “Patton” in 1971. He shared that award with famed filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola.

Among those assisting North was Private Sol Shor, whose writing credits before the war included “Dick Tracy Returns,” (1938) “The Lone Ranger Rides Again” (1939), and “The Adventures of Captain Marvel” (1941). Post war, Shor went on to write screenplays including “The Adventures of Frank and Jesse James” (1948).

Another Associate Director, Private Franklin Coen, went on to earn an Oscar nomination in 1966 for “The Train.”

The actors featured in “Bottlenecks” included Private Douglas Kennedy, who had just recently appeared alongside Bette Davis in “The Bride Came C.O.D.” (1941). He later appeared in films such as “Dark Passage” (1947), starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, and eventually in television series such as Gunsmoke, Bonanza, Dragnet, and Hawaii 5-0.

Command leadership from general officers on down attended the show’s opening night on 9 June.

The 12 June 1941 *Red Bank Register* reported, “A highlight of the show is a five-minute movie entitled, ‘Care and Peeling of the 87MM Potato...’”

That segment begins, “Let us consider the function and properties of the 87MM potato as a vital force in our military machine...in civilian life, the potato functions as a nutritive corollary to a sizzling steak. In the Army, however, it functions not only as a potato, but as a steak.”

Broadway producer Lee Shubert declared “Bottlenecks of 1941” to be “the best amateur show I’ve seen in twenty years. It outranks many professional Broadway shows...”

Fort Monmouth Signal Soldiers performed “Bottlenecks” on a stage in Red Bank at a time when big changes were occurring in the fledgling entertainment medium of television. According to Ed McMahon in the book *When Television was Young*, the U.S. Government’s National Television Systems Committee announced in April 1941 that commercial TV would begin on July 1.

The excitement generated by “Bottlenecks” amongst Broadway types such as Shubert was so great that a repeat performance aired on NBC that very evening. According to *The World Almanac*, four companies bought air time that day: Bulova watches, Ivory Soap, Spry shortening, and Sun Oil. The *New York Times* reported that Boluva paid \$4 for a minute of advertising that essentially consisted of a clock face being flashed on the screen.



COL (Ret) Ramon Laughter's first commission after attending Officers Candidate School at Fort Monmouth was in the Army Signal Corps. He transferred to the Army Air Corps. In this 1945 photo, he is shown upon his return to the U.S. after the end of WWII. He wears the old Army Air Corps uniform as the Air Force had not yet been established as a separate service.

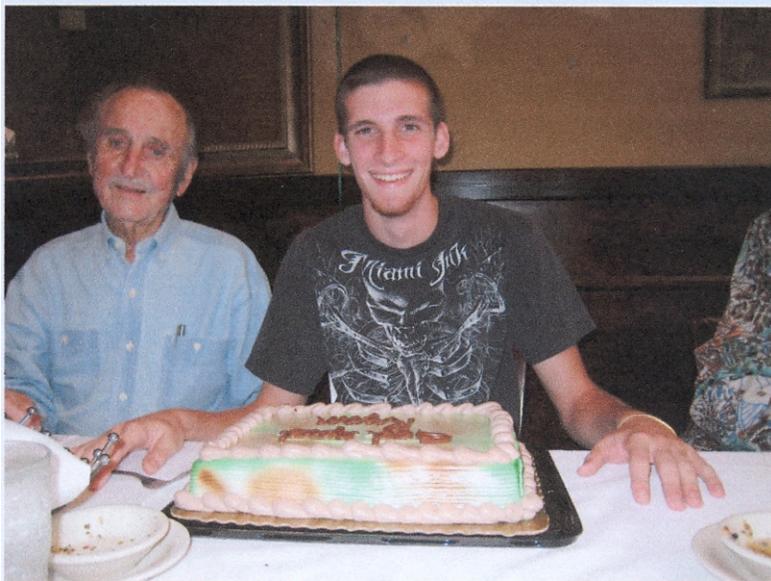
The buying power of \$4 in 1941 equates to \$58.77 in 2009, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That doesn't buy you much television advertising today, according to an Advertising Age survey of media buying firms. NBC's "Sunday Night Football" continues its reign as the most-expensive fall 2009 program for advertisers, with a 30-second ad commanding an average of \$339,700. One of the cheapest new shows of the year is NBC's "Jay Leno," where a 30-second spot can be had for an average cost of between \$48,803 and \$65,678 depending on the night of the week. Times have changed since that first day of commercial televised programming!

The Fort Monmouth part of this story might have been lost to history, if not for the Laughter (pronounced "Lawder") family of Texas. Ryan Laughter, whose grandfather performed in "Bottlenecks of 1941," contacted the CECOM LCMC Historical Office on 3 November of this year saying, "Recently I have discovered that my grandfather COL Ramon Laughter was ...on the show 'Bottlenecks of 1941.' I was wondering if by any chance you would know where to come about any audio from that show or pictures or anything really. It would mean a lot to me and even more to my grandfather."

A quick search of the Command archives returned a program from the event and, perhaps even more interestingly, audio tape reels. The program immediately confirmed that COL Laughter, then a Private, participated in the show. The audio reels posed a bit of a challenge, though- how to play these antiquated media?

One work order and a few days later, Ed Azzaro of Chenega Technology Services Corporation solved that problem by converting the tape reels to CD.

Internet research then revealed “Bottlenecks” role in television history.



COL (Ret) Laughter and his grandson, Ryan, at a going away party for Ryan on 7 November 2009. Ryan contacted the CECOM LCMC Historical Office about his grandfather's story days before departing for Basic Training.

I think Ryan Laughter was as happy to hear all of this as I was to tell him. Since he was off to Basic Training at Fort Jackson, he asked me to contact his grandfather directly.

Speaking to me from his home in Montgomery, Texas, COL Laughter described in splendid detail his life beginning with his birth in Morales, Texas (about 100 miles southwest of Houston). He recalled the early days of his military career at Fort Monmouth vividly, even at age 90.

COL Laughter was drafted into the military on 21 March 1941 (prior to the United States' entry into WWII). He arrived at Fort Monmouth shortly thereafter for

training at the Signal Corps Replacement Training Center. There, he was drafted again- this time, into a singing trio with Privates James McCullough and James “Iron Lung” McClung! The Fort Monmouth based trio built up quite a reputation playing to local crowds, to the point that the guards would salute them as they left the base in McClung's convertible (as COL Laughter recalled with a chuckle).

It was not only the guards who recognized their talent. Some of the Hollywood professionals-cum-Soldiers staging “Bottlenecks of 1941” must have, too. They tapped Privates Laughter, McCullough, and McClung, along with Private Thomas Lynch, to perform “Do What the Good Book Says” in the show.

COL Laughter was a bit surprised, recalling, “I'd always been a wannabe singer, but I didn't realize I was any good!”

The skit “Do What the Good Book Says,” began with a narrator’s admonition that “In the Army, the ‘Good Book’ means the book of regulations. Every Soldier gets one, and he’d better know what’s in it. And there are many don’ts in it. A few dos, but an awful lot of don’ts. But then, nobody minds, for in this Army, all the fellas are glad to do what the Good Book says.”

Laughter’s musical career was short lived. He finished his training and left Fort Monmouth shortly after his performance. He returned to Fort Monmouth briefly for Officer Candidate School and graduated on 16 October 1942.

Shortly after that, Laughter recalled, “I met an enlisted man on the street, and not expecting him to salute me, he scared me to death when he saluted me! I started to salute, and I had my hands full, and...knocked my pipe out and broke it! Not an auspicious beginning for a Second Lieutenant, is it?”

Laughter’s military career flourished, though, built on a foundation laid at Fort Monmouth. He worked in overseas intelligence during WWII. He went with the Air Force when it separated from the Army in 1947, and served several more overseas tours. This included service during the Korean War as Fifth Air Force Officer in charge of electronics, and a stint as a NATO Officer in Turkey.

Laughter remained in the service, with some brief breaks, until his retirement 1 April 1966 (an “interesting date,” he mused).

COL Laughter and his family settled in Texas. His subsequent, successful career in private industry lasted for decades. Today, he serves as Chairman of the Board of the Montgomery (Texas) Historical Society. He and his wife, Reba, have been married for 63 years. They have three children. Despite the many, varied adventures he has had, he deems Fort Monmouth, the Signal Corps, and “Bottlenecks of 1941” a part of his history worthy of retelling.

Thanks to the Laughter family, this interesting and significant event in television history can now be relayed as a part of our organizational history, too.