

POWDERED EGGS, BROKEN TANKS AND NO REGRETS - 3 WEEKS IN ISRAEL 15 YEARS AGO - PART 2

"So tell me," I said, "do we get to keep the uniforms?" I got a stern look. "Absolutely not!" he said. And then with perfect timing and a twinkle in his eye, "But everybody does anyway."

I was being interviewed for participation in a program of "Volunteers for Israel", an opportunity to spend three weeks cleaning greasy tank engines, painting trucks, taking inventory of uniforms, whatever. The program takes ordinary Americans aged 17 to 70, makes them pay for their own air fare and then puts them to work for no pay. Crazy? Well, I suppose so, but many nuts like myself have done it, some of them more than once, and I have yet to meet one of them who doesn't rave about the experience and is envious that I am going and he isn't. I suppose the whole thing makes for a lot of happy memories - the video they showed of people in the program had a shot of an American girl sitting on a tank with an Israeli soldier, holding hands. They had no common language but probably didn't do all that much talking while making many memories to remember later.

The idea is that volunteers will do whatever needs to be done on army bases and elsewhere and so free real Israeli soldiers to do more important stuff. We'll sleep in barracks with a bunch of other men, we'll eat in mess halls with the soldiers, and we'll get army uniforms to wear on base. I wonder if we get to keep them. I wonder...

By the time you are reading this I will already be over there doing the traditional army thing: complaining about the food, the accommodations, the weather. If the Israeli army is anything like other armies I am familiar with, complaining is practically obligatory. If a soldier doesn't complain - especially about the food - then there is something wrong with him.

Some of the complaints are actually justified. I worked at a hotel in the Catskills during the summer breaks at New York University. One of the owners of the hotel had been an instructor at a school for army cooks and the veterans who worked there as waiters - this was in the early 1950s and many of them were going to college under the G.I. Bill and working summers for a few extra bucks - kept teasing him about the food they had in the army. But what he said about the food made a lot of sense.

"Look," he said, "every soldier everywhere hated scrambled eggs that we made from egg powder. The thing is that the recipes were tested again and again and actually made pretty good scrambled eggs. The problem was with the cooks. Whenever a recipe called to mix, say, 2 buckets

of powder with 2 buckets of water, the cook would say, 'Hey, my guys deserve the best and so I'll put in an extra bucket of egg powder - this will make the scrambled eggs richer and better.' And so he would use the wrong proportions and the stuff would taste awful, and everybody complained... Actually, this applies to just about every food - the cooks want to make it better and in the process they screw it up."

My preliminary screening is complete - I had to provide recent EKGs, 4 photographs, a recommendation from a rabbi and a personal friend, and a whole lot of other information designed to make sure that I would behave myself when I got there. I also had to sign a promise not to abuse drugs or alcohol and not to proselytize any religion or ideology while in Israel. And after all that, I had to go for a personal interview. I guess they had to see for themselves that I wasn't a raving lunatic or a terrorist posing as myself.

The alcohol thing upset me a little - I do like a shot of something now and then, but I was told that it is OK to drink in moderation, that in fact most volunteers get tired of army food and go to a neighboring town to get pizza or Chinese food and wine or beer to drink it down. This reassured me - not just because alcohol wasn't completely prohibited, but mainly because I saw that the tradition of bitching about army food hadn't been broken by the American volunteers.

What bothered me just a little was that I wasn't a kid anymore. This was 1993 and I was born in 1930 – so you figure it out. And here I was ready to go to a desert and spend two weeks fixing tanks – for free and not even learning a new useful skill. How often would I get to fix a tank in California's San Fernando Valley, huh? I take pride in being able to change a leaky gasket in a faucet! Listen, I take pride in knowing what a gasket is! And here, I'll be fixing tanks! And, you know, yes, you reading it, aren't you just a little bit envious that I did it and you didn't? Well, I am and years later I probably will still be.

What helped a lot was that most of the people in my group were even older than me – all these old guys and ladies couldn't be crazy, right? So maybe, just maybe, this was the thing to do. It sure felt like it. And then there were all those bumper stickers then that said, "If it feels good – do it!". And this not only felt good – it somehow felt right!

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