



173. Kilroy

HOW I SPENT THREE WEEKS ON AN ARMY BASE - PART 4

Kilroy was probably the most famous American soldier during World War II. He was totally anonymous. No one knows who he was or how the whole thing started, but anywhere that American soldiers went there was always a wall with a picture of a pair of hands and a face peeking over a wall and the inscription "Kilroy was here!" You never heard of it? Well, go to Google and on images punch in "Kilroy was here". You'll get over 30 pages!

Now that I was going to Israel, as a volunteer, I was seriously thinking of becoming the Israeli Kilroy. We were told that we were going to repairing tanks in the Negev and I was secretly going to write on a tank – with pink paint – "Frumkin was here!" Then, I thought, someone else may do the same thing and who knows, the thing would spread.

Childish? Of course, but I was going to do it anyway. But as it turned out we had nothing to do with tanks at all. The army base where we were sent was a place where, in the words of the base commander, colonel Yossi, medical supplies were "refreshed". He briefed us the day after we arrived and when he saw us looking puzzled he explained that we would be unpacking medical supplies returned from bases all over Israel, checking them for expiration dates or damage, and, if needed, replacing the old stuff with new so it would be shipped back "refreshed". Some of the stuff we replaced was more than old – it was practically ancient. There were even boxes of bandages that had been issued to the British army stationed in Palestine in 1943 – 50 years ago! Never mind, if the wrapping was intact they would go into the "refreshed" pile and go back to the troops.

Colonel Yossi was a very charming man. He told us that he was eager to solve any problems we may have and that we shouldn't hesitate in coming to him for help, any help at all. (I never learned his last name. The Israeli army is not a very formal organization. All privates call their officers by their first names and I never saw anyone salute anybody. On our last day there the volunteers assembled in a small hall where we were going to be given certificates, pins and a farewell speech. When the colonel came in, wise guy that I am, I jumped up and yelled 'Attenhut!' at the top of my lungs. All volunteers stood up as the colonel walked to the podium, a look of utter confusion on his face. Helplessly he waved for us to sit down. "Thank you," he said. "This never happened to me before.")

Colonel Yossi told us how proud he was to have these really nice quarters for us. "This year you have floors and ceilings," he said. When someone asked what it was that the volunteers had last year instead of floors and ceilings he grimaced. "Don't ask," he said. Actually the rooms were clean and looked brand new. The walls were corrugated metal, the floors were linoleum, the bunks for the 5 of us in the room were narrow metal frames supporting a sheet of canvas topped with foam rubber. The heat was supplied by a tiny table top electric heater that had two coils but only the top one worked. After the first freezing night we complained and were issued one more blanket and a replacement heater - it also had two coils but this time only the bottom one worked so we still froze but after a few days the weather improved, the nights got warmer and we stopped complaining.

"There is a problem with the showerheads and with hooks in the walls of the room," I said to colonel Yossi. "What's the problem?" he said. "There aren't any," I said.

The barracks with the washrooms and toilets were about 150 yards from our barracks. Inside the sinks had one faucet only - cold - but the showers were designed for both hot and cold water. The problem was that someone had stolen the showerheads and the hot water heater was broken so all we had were pipes pouring cold water all over the room. The walls of our sleeping quarters were virginally white - no nails, no hooks, no place to hang anything. Our stuff was piled on the floor and in the tiny square footlockers at each bed.

"I am glad you told me," said colonel Yossi. "It will all be taken care of. As soon as possible."

A week later I took a showerhead from the home of my nephew and screwed it on the pipe coming out of the wall. It was an instant success - there were lines in front of it every morning. I asked colonel Yossi if he would consider putting up a plaque: "Showerhead Donated to the Israeli Defense Forces by the Frumkin Family", but he didn't feel this was appropriate.

The closest we came to a tank was when we went to the Israeli tank museum at Latrun. There was always a guard watching us and so I never had a chance to write my name on a captured Egyptian or Syrian tank. I guess I'll never be the Israeli Kilroy.

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