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The Metascope Story

When I joined the 82d Airborne Division as a Second Lieutenant in 1950, I was promptly designated Supply Officer. In the rifle company of those days, being a Supply Officer meant--in addition to the ignominy status as junior officer in the organization--coping with an evasive and canny NCO known as the Supply Sergeant, certain Army forms of masterful obfuscation, and an irascible company commander who fretted constantly lest some of his sheets and pillow cases be mislaid by the laundry, or that--much worse--one of the serial numbered items of ordnance entrusted to him by the government would be lost. My company commander was a nut on the latter, and delighted in putting me through a weekly "see it, touch it" inventory, which required that the Supply Sergeant and I crawl with flashlights and wiping rags over the arms racks, and around the mortars and the machine guns, squinting at the stamped numerals until we thoroughly reeked of gun oil. These duties had the salubrious effect of informing me of the existence of the unit's infrared equipment, the Sniperscope (which the Supply Sergeant assured me was never used, because the batteries ran down too fast, and anyways, the company commander didn't believe in it). I also was inducted into the mysteries of the company safe, which was a heavy metal trunk-locker-like affair chained to a radiator behind the company commander's desk. This receptacle dubiously secured the book wherein was kept records of the company fund and its associated checkbook, several boxes of switchblade knives which,

while not serial numbered items, were regarded as too temptingly dangerous to be left on the shelves of the Supply Room, and a number of inscrutable small round drums in little canvas pouches, called Metascopes, which were indeed serial numbered items, and hence, my charge. When queried, my company commander was vague as to why the Metascopes were secured in the safe at all. The first time he told me that they were CONFIDENTIAL (classified), but on another occasion he informed that they contained radioactive material, and were kept in the metal container so as to protect the First Sergeant and himself against sterility and balding.

One of my earliest professional triumphs was discovery of mention of the Metascope in the technical manual for the Sniperscope. It seemed that the Metascope had converted infrared radiation into visible light, and the technical manual sagely observed that enemy use of Sniperscope-like devices could be therefore detected by squinting through one of the little gadgets. I searched in vain for a manual on Metascopes.

One night, the company commander being absent on a trip to a distant post (I believe he was trading cook's whites for bed sheets), I managed to get both a Sniperscope and a Metascope into the field. The Sniperscope was impressive. Perched atop a carbine, it permitted a firer to see his target plainly, and we satisfied ourself that, after zeroing, we could effectively put a bullet where a chevron-like sight was aligned. But the Metascope remained inscrutable. Looking through its little peephole we were unable to see anything clearly. Even when a target was clearly

illuminated by infrared rays from the Sniperscope, there was a bright spot, yes, but little more. We experimented and experimented, but were never able to establish that the device did more than respond vaguely to the presence to infrared light sources.

The Metascope, in its little canvas bag, went back into the company safe, and our bulwark to my knowledge, remained there, against infrareading Reds. In two years of service with the Airborne Division, including extensive exercising at night, I never saw them in use in my company, or in any other organization.

Twenty-five years later I found out what the Metascope was for. I was talking with Lieutenant General Jim Gavin, US Army (Retired), about the difficulties and frustrations of proceeding from an idea to an item of materiel in the hands of troops. He responded that occasionally it was possible to move fairly rapidly. For example, he said, the 82d Airborne Division had encountered a great deal of difficulty in assembling troops after the night jump in Normandy during the invasion of 1944. When he became Chief of Research and Development of the Army, he caused immediate issuance of infrared beacons for use in assembling troops, and a device called the Metascope, whereby troops could see said infrared beacon. I didn't have the heart to tell him the whole story, but I did remark that indeed, I had encountered that offshoot of his genius.

The moral of the story is simple: no concept, no item of materiel, will accomplish its intended purpose unless it is fielded with a training subsystem. That training subsystem must insure that, long after original explanations are made, there are ways and means for informing potential users of the whys and wherefores of the gadget.