Elvis And His Time In The Army

Ever since the beginning of America, there are many artists and bands that can be considered influential on American culture. Be that as it may, there is one artist that sticks out among the rest: Elvis Aaron Presley. Known as the “standard American boy,” Elvis effectively captures the essential essence of the standard American teenager, and during his time of fame, that included time spent in service to the United States military.

The well-known “King of Rock-and-Roll” first received his notice of draft from the Memphis Selective Service Board in December of 1956 (Linn, 1). This does not come as a surprise, however, as all men, eighteen years or older, were required to sign up for the draft, and if selected to serve, spend two years on active duty and four years in the reserves. This system that randomly selects names on the list to be required to be put into the United States military. Refusal or burning of a draft card resulted in serious consequences. Being a celebrity, Elvis could not even consider trying to get around his draft notice.

However, this did not mean he did not receive specialized offers from different branches within the military. The relatively new United States Air Force offered to let him tour around the country for their recruiting centers, as they thought the star would be a good model for their efforts, while the Navy offered to form a “Elvis Presley Company”, an appeal to the King himself to come aboard their branch (“Elvis Aaron Presley: In The U.S. Army 1958-1960.”) Presley, however, declined both of these offers, in his attempt to be treated as fairly and as normally as possible.

Before his draft notice, however, Elvis and his team began production on the movie “King Creole.” Since the production of the movie had already started, the draft board gave a deferment to Elvis so that he could finish filming.

Since Elvis was going to be gone for a while, his music manager, Colonel Tom Parker, and his record label, RCA Records, wanted to keep him in the spotlight as long as possible. In the span between his notification and his departure from his normal career, Presley and his record label recorded a good amount of songs to release while he was away in service.

Leaving Graceland on March 24th, 1958, Elvis reported for duty to the Memphis Draft Board. He was transported to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas and assigned to the Second Armored Division at Fort Hood, Texas within the United States Army. (“Elvis Aaron Presley: In The U.S. Army 1958-1960.”) It was there where the King underwent basic training, learning the fundamentals of how to fight, shoot, and survive on the battlefield. Elvis also underwent advanced infantry training at Fort Hood.

While at Fort Hood, Elvis’s mother, Gladys Presley, became sick with acute hepatitis (“1958 - 1961.” Graceland). The trainee immediately made plans to go home, which required permission from the government in the form of emergency leave, and traveled to Memphis, Tenennsee to visit her in the hospital. As soon as he arrived on August 12, Elvis stayed at the hospital the entire night and next day visiting his mother before leaving to head back to Graceland to get some rest. However, in a terrible twist of events, Gladys Presley, the mother of the King of Rock

and Roll, died only a few hours after her son left on August 14, 1958..

Elvis, understandably, seemed to break, while grieving for his late mother. According to https://www.elvispresleymusic.com.au, Elvis was heartbroken, “crying out, 'Oh God, everything I have is gone'. [He] leans over the grave, crying out, inconsolably, 'Goodbye, darling, goodbye. I love you so much. You know how much I lived my whole life just for you'.” Ten days later, Elvis returns back to duty at Fort Hood after spending roughly a week and a half grieving for his late mother.

Roughly two and a half weeks later, Elvis was assigned to the 3rd Armored Division, which was based at the time in West Germany. Germany was essentially split into two countries at that point, the United States in control of the western part, while the USSR, or the Soviet Union controlling the eastern part. Germany then was a hot spot, as the two countries controlling the two areas had extremely different political ideologies. Because of the rising tensions, both countries kept armed forces on the border between the two parts. Elvis leaves for Fort Hood on September 19, arriving in New York on September 22 with the intent of boarding the U.S.S Randall for the journey to Germany (“Elvis Aaron Presley: In The U.S. Army 1958-1960.”).

Elvis arrives in Germany on October 1st, 1958, and travels to where his unit is stationed in Friedberg, Germany. There, he meets his platoon, and starts a typical life as an American G.I, performing squadron exercises, trying to make it through regular inspections, and just living the typical army life. Elvis lives off base with his family, in a house Elvis does make an effort to spend some free time among others’ concerts as he was known to go to see Bill Haley and his Comets while they were in Germany.

There were times his fame affected his career in the military. Presley was assigned to an armored division, and because of that, spent much of his early military career in a tank. Throughout training, he eventually learned how to load, drive, and shoot the tank. However, he did not have this job for a long time, as it started to have adverse effects on the famous rocker. One day, one of his army buddies passed him and called out to him, trying to get his attention. Elvis never heard him, and kept walking away. His friend caught up to him, and explained to him that he had been calling out to him for a couple of seconds. Elvis realized that he must not have heard his friend, and told his buddy that he never heard him. This incident prompted his army friend to notify Elvis’s manager, Colonel Tom Parker, who immediately pulled Elvis out of a tank and transferred him to a position in which his hearing could not have been affected (“Elvis Aaron Presley: In The U.S. Army 1958-1960.”).

The instance of him being pulled out of the tank is not the only time his fame has affected his military career. Someone above him in rank assigned Elvis to guard duty on the outskirts of the base. As Elvis was patrolling the area, fans found out about his assignment that night and raided the area, trying to see the King. Lamar Fike described the scene: “There he was standing like he was supposed to, but surrounded, absolutely surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of fans. It took platoons to rescue him. That was the last guard duty Elvis pulled.” (“Elvis Aaron Presley: In The U.S. Army 1958-1960.”)

While in Germany, Elvis meets a fourteen year old girl named Priscilla Beaulieu, the daughter of an Air Force captain named Joseph Beaulieu, at the time stationed in Germany as well. Presley makes quick friends with the young girl in September of 1959, careful of not doing anything that would jeopardize his career, as spending time with a fourteen year old girl is suspicious already.

A few months later, Presley was promoted to sergeant on January 20th, 1960 (“1958 - 1961.” Graceland). With his sergeant stripes, Elvis is eventually done with his two years of active service two about a month later, leaving Germany for the United States on March 2nd, 1960, and is formally discharged three days later on March 5th, 1960. However, many speculated on the fact that he had left a girl behind in Germany, ironically not knowing that they were actually in-fact talking about Elvis’s future wife.

Because of the lack of combat during his time in the service, Elvis was able to leave the armed forces without any adverse physical or psychological effects. One might say that the greatest effect on Elvis during his time in the U.S military was the death of his mother, as his mother meant very much to him and fought very hard with the government to receive his emergency leave.

Because of the fame Elvis had, he had an overwhelming influence over some of his fans. His transformation from the rebellious scoundrel shaking his hips to the clean-shaven, respectable military man helped earn the respect of the older generation above him, while also influencing many of his younger fans to consider signing up for the military. Gilbert B. Rodman mentions this in his book, “Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend”, as he states “...Elvis’s induction in 1958 implictly legitimated military service in the eyes of the US youth who idolized him.” There is no doubt that because Elvis acknowledged his call to the military, other military aged men saw their opportunity to be something like the most famous celebrity of their time.

Overall, Elvis had a major effect on American music, but America was able to influence him through his service in the armed forces. Through the Army, the King of Rock and Roll was able to clean his public perception, while also serving his country when called. Elvis also met Priscilla through the army, giving way to a future with the woman. Despite his repeated attempts to normalize his situation, his fame made its way into his army life, giving an eye-widening reality of how far-reaching and contagious his music and celebrity status was.