ATTENTION, PEDITASTELLII!

JOHN McCLELLAN
Woodstock, New York

For some, there is magic in words -- or hexing, if you will. How else can one explain this piece? For reasons now forgotten, we looked up a word (also forgotten) in Smith's Smaller Latin-English Dictionary, more than adequate for our occasional needs. (In view of its thickness, we wonder what Smith's Larger must look like, but have never seen it.) Pursuing our forgotten word in a rather lethargic fashion, the word PEDITASTELLUS jumped out of the printed page, and gave us pause. A lovely word! And its definition was 'A miserable, little infantryman!' The dictionary also revealed that it has a genitive in 'i', is masculine (as one might guess), and is a diminutive. It is attributed to Plautus, a Roman comic dramatist who lived and worked approximately 200 years before Christ.

Dr. Scott gives no etymology, but the 'pedi-' is clearly linked with PES, a foot, which has so many English by-products, and is the root of PEDITATUS, infantry, from which our PEDITASTELLUS may have come. The '-ast-' has two origins, the more familiar being the Latin word ASTER, a star. It is not always used as a suffix and is found in our ASTROLOGY, DISASTER, and many other compounds. The '-ast-' of the word in question survives with us from Medieval Latin in such words as CRITICASTER, POETAStER and MEDICASTER (used by Le Clercq in his new translation of Rabelais, but not found in the older translation of Urquhart and Motteux), GRAMMATICAStER and OLEASTER. The Oxford Universal Dictionary defines this '-aster' as 'a suffix of substantives and adjectives expressing incomplete resemblance and hence generally pejorative'. The '-ellus' is a diminutive suffix without any sense of belittlement. It was used in Latin to make adjectives from nouns, and these adjectives were sometimes used, in turn, to make new nouns. Allen and Greenough's New Latin Grammar lists LIBELLUS, a little book (from LIBER) and MISELLUS (from MISER), of obvious meaning, among others.

So our PEDITASTELLUS would seem to be a word composed of a root and two suffixes, one of which is diminutive and the other pejorative. It is suspected that Plautus coined it -- the Encyclopedia
Britannica speaks of his 'plays upon words and happy coinages of new terms...'. (It is pleasant to contemplate a Roman veteran on leave from the Provinces, attending a production of Plautus with his wife. How largely he would have laughed when he heard this new word, and realized its implications! "Oh, Puer!" he might have shouted. "We have lots of those in the X Legion!" To which his wife would have replied, in Latin, "Sh-h-h-!")

The magical serendipity, or serendipitous magic of words takes one back in time, and one remembers 1944 and a group of American peditastelli (or G.I.'s); and of how it was difficult to tell in this small group who was peditastellior; and how one thought of himself, sometimes, as the peditastellissimus...

Nor does serendipity stop here, but leads us gently back in time to the 1920's, and a hot classroom in June where a class of discipulastelli prepared for the forthcoming Latin College Board examination. The spring sun shone into the room and the last thing any of us wanted was to be there with our noses in the Fourth Book of Virgil. The class was taught by Mr. Samuel Carr, who gave us whatever love of his subject we now have, almost 50 years later. But we did not know, then, of his subtle influence -- we just wanted to get outside into the sunshine as quickly as possible. Mr. Carr is looking over my shoulder now as this is being written, and is saying in his dry, unforgettable way, "McClellan, I would like to propose the word LOGASTELLUS for a person whose enthusiasm for words outstrips his knowledge of them!"