

In the Dark **Notes of a Raw Recruit**

By T.R. Healy

“Service in the Army is a duty and privilege. Each individual in this nation has the duty to contribute as much as he can to the well-being of the nation and its people. Military service is one form of such a contribution. From the oldest times it has been considered a privilege to be permitted to bear arms in the defense of one’s nation or people. This privilege is afforded only to those who are individuals of good standing and good reputation.”

The Soldier’s Handbook (DA Pam 21-13)

Blood Test

The medic administering the blood test at the U.S. Armed Forces Examining Station sat prominently in front of a dark green table with his chair tilted on its back legs, resting against the wall. He had thin, coarse lips that resembled a faded ink line, stolid eyes mounted to his large, immobile head like small black pebbles. Solemnly, as though he were a mystical totem to be appeased and treated with the greatest delicacy, our line of fresh meat approached him from the doorway and moved across the trim, compact room to where he sat on the opposite side.

His appearance, I thought, expressed a sense of portentousness, and his darkly evil pronouncements, impeccable imitations of some gruesomely theatrical monster, confirmed it. For after each test he always had a deranged comment to make to those of us still waiting in line for his services.

“That one really hurt! I could damn well feel it myself.”

“The last guy’s blood spurted all over me,” he complained, pointing a finger at the marks on his gleaming white jacket, “and the wall,” and then pointed at the waterfall of dots on the wall closest to the table.

“Had to prick that bastard’s finger five times before I got anything I could use. Struck water the rest of the time.”

And following each remark he gave a hideous, hyena-like laugh that never built to a peak but started at one, full, high, and screechingly loud, then peeled to an abrupt end.

He created fear like a skilled artist. Besides his shocking commentaries and his laughter, he had the habit of waving his blood-tinged blade high in the air like a cutlass after each procedure so all of us would be sure to see it. Staring at the blade and the starched arm waving it, I thought him mad, a cruel fiend untiring of the sight of blood.

“Fee, fie, foe, fum,” whispered a deep voice in back of me. “I smell the blood of a civilian.”

I smiled faintly.

The line’s progression was unrelenting. There were now only four people in front of me, and then the Fiend. I felt a shivering chill race through my veins. But I tried to repress it and put myself into the proper frame of mind like an athlete before an important game. To prepare myself physically, I began to dig my fingernails into those two or three fingertips most likely to be chosen to draw a sample of my blood from. I struck hard enough and often enough till I could feel a stinging sensation which, I felt, was roughly comparable to the one I would receive from the razor blade. The slight pain that I managed to produce across my fingertips did not hurt in the least, but still my confidence about facing the Fiend flagged and seemed impossible to restore.

“Lord!” someone gasped.

I heard, at exactly the same moment, a muffled but blunt crashing sound, like a sheet of paneling falling to the floor. Quickly, excitedly I raised my head and gazed toward the front where the sound seemed to have originated. I looked straight ahead, the level of my eyes fixed

in an even direction, and all I could see were several obliquely hanging necks so I followed their crooked line of descent and came to a sight of stark terror: a fellow specimen lay motionless on the floor like something adrift that has been washed ashore.

Watching him as he lay there still as a corpse, and again thinking of what was waiting for me, I tried to retreat to the end of the line but quickly discovered that I was already there.

The Fiend's thickset shoulders thrust violently against the back of his chair, crashing it into the wall behind him, and in a slow, lumbering movement he rose up, moved around the table, and stood above his listless victim, taking one long look. He seemed quite relaxed and stroked his jaw patiently. "Stand back and give the candy ass some air," he bellowed.

"Watch him go and drive a stake through that guy's heart."

"Kick him to see if he's still alive."

"Check his pulse, for God's sake."

Either of two things for the Fiend to do now, I thought: revive the man with a pail of cold water or else place a foot on his chest and assume a stance of triumph. I guessed the latter. He did not choose either one, however. Instead, surprisingly, he abandoned his cultivated ferocity, knelt down, spread out his hands, and toiled over the prostrate man with a damp cloth and a bottle of smelling salts, saying nothing. Suddenly the man's head wagged back and forth, his eyes opened and closed and finally opened, and his deadened fingers began to shake and scrape at his face and hair. Then he rose up on an elbow, and after a few minutes stood and walked out without ever turning around. Just right out the door as if nothing had happened. A stone in motion.

A smattering of applause trailed after him.

The Fiend, in one swift stroke, had vividly shown his power. It was an indisputable fact, and still there was no way I could avoid him. From my armpits beads of sweat dribbled, steadily, falling everywhere. Self-conscious, I clamped my arms into my sides to smother the drops against my ribs, anything to keep them from being seen.

The body in front of me jerked then moved away.

I was there. I felt the cold edge of the table press against my thighs, but I refused to look at it or at the Fiend sitting behind it. I simply waved out my left hand and waited for it to be caught. I waved it for what seemed like quite a long time before I finally felt the icy touch of the Fiend's rawly textured fingers and, as soon as I did, I flinched and heard him say in a darkly haunting tone, "You ain't lookin', eh?" Then he chuckled to himself.

At first, all I could feel were his five fingers curving around my middle finger then I felt the cool, soggy splash of a damp cotton ball against my skin, soft and soothing until the Fiend began to scrub with it and change it into a stiff wash rag, and then, and then nothing. I waited anxiously, knowing the blade would strike any second. Hurry, I wanted to shout to him. My finger, wet with antiseptic, was tightly enclosed between the tips of his thumb and index finger. With my eyes fixed on the wall, I was like a blind man. Hurry, I cried. Please, please. But nothing happened. Nothing. He must be doing this deliberately, I decided, he must be deviously prolonging the test out of some cruel, malicious pleasure.

Then I felt the thin, sharp blade sink into my skin; it felt no more painful than the quick scratch of a safety pin. So easy, I thought to myself, amazed. So so easy, and to think that I was actually worried about such a simple procedure. The blade pierced cleanly across the tip of my finger and, in my blindness, I tried to imagine its straight, even path and the line of redness it left behind till I felt my finger being drawn away from my hand. Then, for the first time, I dropped my eyes from the wall and peered at the Fiend sitting behind the table in his blood-spattered jacket. A stained razor blade lay on a white cloth in the center of the table along with several other blades and cotton balls and glass slides, one of which the Fiend was using to catch drops of my own bright red blood that he was impatiently squeezing out of the tip of my finger. I looked away, hurriedly, feeling upset.

“It’s all over, buddy,” he said gruffly as he let go of my finger.

Sensing a coolness playing across my fingertip, I gazed down and accepted from the Fiend the soaked cotton ball he had just set against it to contain the slight trickle of redness that was oozing out and sliding toward my palm. I clamped the ball hard and grunted a response. Lifting my eyes up, I watched him wipe spots of blood from his sleeves. A pelting warmth suddenly struck my face. It was over, he had said. All over. I felt I could touch the moon as I strode out of the room and wanted to try.

Scalped

On a dark, cold Monday morning I began my first real work day in the military. Quite appropriately, as it turned out, I spent it waiting in lines---all sorts of lines, of all sizes and shapes and purposes. And each one, so it seemed, was just as long, just as idle, and just as frustrating. Yet there was nothing I could do but stand in them and wait.

Out on a flat, vacant parking lot behind one of the office buildings, I and several hundred others waited first for our military Class A haircuts. The early morning air was cool and slightly humid. In place of my jacket and long-sleeve shirt, I wore an old navy blue sweatshirt that was cut off at the elbows, and, after a few minutes of standing perfectly still, my arms started to become cold, as if my veins had suddenly been opened, and so for the rest of the wait, at changing intervals, I spent my time rubbing them to keep warm. I worked diligently. Since our main preoccupation was to destroy time, this seemed to be as good a way as any to achieve that goal. Others talked. Some talked about home, some about the military, and several made clear their feelings about having to wait in the cold and dark like small children.

The person ahead of me, a tall young man with a long, ruddy, horselike face, pale bulging eyes, and a large toothy mouth, spoke openly to me and several others of his anxiety the first two days at Fort Polk. He spoke quickly and excitedly, with abrupt shifts in thought. "God, I've never been so scared in my life as I was that first day," he gasped, tearing his fingers across his forehead. "I didn't know a soul, and I always seemed to be running into someone who was screaming at me to get moving or to get working on something. And it was so goddamn hot. Hell, I sat in the movie house all day Sunday and watched the same damn film four times in a row. But I didn't care. It was air-conditioned inside and no one was there yelling at me." He gripped me hard on my right shoulder and rattled me, smiling wildly. "All I wanted to do was talk to my wife. I got up before five o'clock yesterday so I wouldn't have to wait in line. When I heard her voice, I forgot all about this place and thought I was home again, right next to her, and for the next fifteen minutes I never thought of being in the Army. I was home!"

"Knock off the talking!" hissed a small, portly man with a dark armband wrapped around his left forearm, which identified him as a platoon leader, not of the platoon I was in, but of one of the others. It was his job to patrol the line and keep it reasonably quiet and reasonably straight. He walked right past us, without even pausing in his crisp, clean stride. As soon as he left, the tall young man in front of me immediately began to go on about his wife and his fears.

But I paid less attention to him this time, only catching a few words now and then. He did not seem to notice, though, because he continued to speak at the same rapid, excited pace. Like Nim, he was a person who preferred talking to listening, and the sort who always assumed he had an audience for his words and emotions, so I ignored him without feeling in the slightest way discourteous.

Minutes later, the short, heavysset Italian sauntered toward where I was standing in line, found Nim, who was a couple of steps in front of me, and stretched out his hand. Quickly his eyes dropped, and so did mine. The pocket of his large, pink hand was filled with a small gray egg-shaped rock. "Look at this," he said in a slow, important-sounding voice. "A sex stone!"

Everyone had quizzical expressions on their faces and seemed to be more than slightly dumbfounded by his statement. A few smiled politely, most just stared.

"What's that?" Nim muttered, after a second or two of pure silence.

The Italian grinned. "A fuckin' rock. I just dug it up."

A sudden burst of laughter broke through the line, jarring its stillness for a minute. Several people laughed very hard and very loud, clapping their hands together and folding their sides. Smiling, the Italian tossed the rock up into the air, caught it in one hand, and walked on, apparently to try his trick on someone else. Nim went in the opposite direction, eager to tell others of the joke. Shortly, another platoon leader came by and told us to quit talking. We did, till he left, then we quickly started up again, killing time like trained professionals.

After a little while, I began to hear strange voices. Several, I thought. Like those of small children shouting on a playground. I held my breath and listened closely. A slow, whispery sound cut through the dark blue air, like a sudden gust of wind. It came, I thought, from in back of us, from somewhere in the area of the woods located behind the parking lot. Gradually, it increased in volume till it pierced through the trees cleanly, shockingly, striking deep into my ears.

"Oh, here we go,
We're at it again.
We're movin' out,
We're movin' in.
We're on our way,
To Vietnam.

We're gonna kill
Old Charlie Cong."

And so it went, on and on---loud, clear, and invisible like the long, slow cry of a train passing through the night.

"Jesus!" Nim cried, "listen to that."

"It must be troops heading for Vietnam."

"It kinda chills the blood."

I shook my head in agreement. "It does. And it also gives one a clearer sense of why we're here than any speech could." Saying this, I began to think more carefully about the unusual meaning and tone and emotion and lyrics of the song; how it was designed to excite one's passions and stir in one a furious desire for sudden action. Also it made it clear that, in the military, the demonic quality of man was to be encouraged, sanctioned, cultivated, and employed. Rational argument and persuasion were declared unnecessary in attaining military goals, the song suggested, because it was recognized that, in general, men bleed for passion not for reason. And, I was afraid, such an analysis of human behavior was probably very, very accurate.

Slowly the sound of the marching soldiers faded to faint echoes then to nothing. And, once again, the air became silent and still.

Once the light broke through, with the sun looking like a great orange-white stone against the pale, milky sky, the line began to move. And, within a few minutes, I found myself on the steps of the building I had been standing in front of, right next to a spinning red-and-white barber pole and then, a minute or so later, inside the shop. I paid no money but was handed a tiny brown slip of paper that notified me that I owed the shop the cost of one haircut. I stood against the wall with Nim and the others and waited for a vacancy. The floor was sprinkled with small piles of bushy brown, black, red, and blond hairs. I kicked at one of the piles with my toe, shaking the hairs loose from their unity and scattering them all over.

"Next!" one of the barbers shouted, and before I realized it I was in his chair, with an oily, pinstriped sheet wrapped around me like a jacket. The man said nothing to me, just pulled the sheet tight around my neck and switched on his powerful-looking electric razor. Instantly I felt the instrument's warm metal blades pressed against the back of my neck then shoved straight up in a hard, rough motion toward my crown. Waiting, I began to count to myself: 1000 ... 1002

... 1003 ... 1004 ... 1005 ...1006 ... 1007. Abruptly, then, the ragged razor was yanked from my skull and the sheet ripped off.

“Next!” the barber said in a low, expressionless voice.

I got up quickly and walked away. As I did, I came to a mirror and stopped in horror. I knew my eyes were pointed directly at the center portion of the long, wall-length mirror in front of me, but what I saw was not me, but a round, ugly, bony head, bleached white and very large like the end piece of some enormous prehistoric fossil. My scalp was sheared to the bone, not a speck of hair existed anywhere. My eyebrows were dark and bushy and now appeared to be like two thick walrus mustaches pasted side by side across the middle of my forehead. Shocked, I rushed out the door, delicately and disbelievingly touching my fingertips across my raw skull.

Outside, everyone was laughing in nervous, uneasy tones. Those waiting to go into the barber shop laughed at those coming out, and those coming out laughed just as hard as those waiting to go in. I hurried down the steps, stopped, and brushed the loose hairs off my back and neck. Nim came out behind me and, as I stared at him, I had the strange feeling I had to shake his hand, reintroduce myself, and get to know him all over again, because with his gleaming, pure white head he looked like an entirely different person. He approached me hesitantly.

“Christ, look what they’ve done!” he stammered bitterly, standing in front of me like a prisoner, with his hands clasped around the back of his great shaven crown. “We look like two huge ostrich eggs.”

For several seconds, our eyes focused searchingly on the new white skin of our heads. Then the Italians came out screaming, the short, heavyset one held a handful of his curly, black hair in his fist and waved it madly above his head, which, in the half light of the morning sun, shone like a white ball of liquidy glass. “He let me keep it!” he shouted crazily. “He said I could have all I wanted.” He raised his fist directly above the center of his head, opened it, and smeared the loose, dark hairs all across it, laughing frantically.

“You people,” snapped one of the platoon leaders, waving a long, straight arm, “get on over here.”

Quickly we walked toward him, crossing the gravel and grass to the next building. Curiously I turned around and glanced at the other scalped people coming out of the shop. They all looked exactly alike I thought, as if they were no more than identical parts to some machine, their only difference being the color and style of their clothing.

On the March

We assembled to his cry and stood before him neat and erect like headstones in a graveyard, then we snapped to the left and marched out. Alone and away, in a voiceless place in my mind, I thought of him as a god. He screamed and cursed and we said nothing, then he shouted and we shouted back.

“Give me your left
--Left!
Your left, your left; your left, right
--Left!
Your left, your left, your left, right
--Left!
Sound off
--Sound off ...”

More than a hundred of us were now under the complete control of a single man, a Drill Sergeant, whose duty it was to escort us to our new training site, guiding us there like a father walking his son to school. And, like a father to his child, the DI held a position of supreme power and authority over us, demanding respect and obedience from us as if we actually were ignorant little children. As soon as he stepped in front of us and started the march, we literally became his possessions, totally submissive to his wishes and commands, instinctively responsive to his screams and songs. In an instant, in one precise unforgettable instant, our civilian privileges of choice, deliberation, refusal, and dissent vanished, as if they had been set on fire and destroyed in a warm brilliant blaze. All we could do now was follow him, willingly and without complaint. It was part of our new obligation. This march, in fact, was our initial soldiering experience; here, we learned our role as docile children, learned the powerful position of the DI, and learned how to obey and to respond rotely to any and all demands made by our declared superiors. The way we felt and moved and shouted and acted provided the first true glimpse at what it meant to become a soldier. It was as much of a lesson as anything we could be taught in a classroom or on a training field.

“Come on, you dickheads!” the DI screamed. “Get in step and look sharp!” His voice

pricked the air like a shiny blade. When he shouted, which was more often than not, and which was always in a voice of extreme agitation, his entire body shook and his face exploded in the rampant dynamism of a hastily conceived Expressionist painting, with bright fiery red skin that was twisted and wrinkled and wet with glowing sweat. “Now sound off like soldiers, TRAINEES!” he yelled, and so we screamed louder and looked meaner and stamped our boots harder. It was all part of the required identity game, and as of now each of us played it strenuously and passionately.

At the Reception Station DIs occasionally shuffled through the grounds, and whenever I saw one I instinctively cringed and made every possible effort to avoid him. Nearly all of us had the same response; indeed, I sometimes imagined, it was as if we were the followers of Odysseus who, on entering a hollow black cave, confronted for the first time the dark, ugly eye of Polyphemus. We were shaken and timid and unsure, our foreheads sprinkled with beads of sweat and our pulses beat faster than usual, all because of the rumors we had each heard and believed about the omnipotent DIs. We knew them as mean and merciless creatures with ferocious tempers and superhuman abilities. We had been taught to see them as images of terror, as objects who, without reason and on any given occasion, would indiscriminately attack us and try to break down any gesture of resistance to what they demanded and expected. Seeing one of them was comparable to seeing all of them, for each was alike, each manifested a quality of implacable strength, of contained power that at any moment could break out and do considerable harm. They had the neatness of a tucked-in shirt, their fatigues were always immaculate and crisp and painted with starch, their arms heavy, strong, veined, and instantly ready to snap into a salute or plunge a sharp bayonet into the pit of an adversary’s chest. They wore the common sinister scowl of tough, brawny, arrogant men and even the youngest of DIs had a harsh, ossified countenance that was as straight and firm and humorless as a chunk of gray slate. It would be unseemly for such men to ever tire or wince or cry or complain or show any emotion that was not officially proclaimed, I felt, for they were the superior products of the Machine. They were the paragons, the ones whose function it was to provide the image that was designed to express most vividly the sturdiest and best of soldiering qualities.

On top of their round shaved heads they proudly wore the principal identity symbol of all DIs: the firmly starched, perfectly creased old style campaign hats that had been worn by soldiers at the time of Pershing’s expedition in Mexico and, more recently, by Smokey the Bear on thousands of fire prevention posters. The very sight of these peculiar hats, whether sitting on

a head or held in a hand or lying on a table, was guaranteed to stir the blood and cause a feeling of utmost caution in any new recruit. In a way, I thought, it produced the same sort of response that the rattle of a poisonous snake did: for you observed the hat and its owner discreetly, making sure not to antagonize him and, at the same time, hoping he would not bother you and would pass on by. Pinned to the front of each hat was a sparkling brass badge and on it was printed the saying “This We’ll Defend,” which announced, among other things, the strength and dedication of these men and made clear their determination to fulfill any assignment given them. Their central purpose, of course, was to transform us, as young recruits, into soldiers with the skills knowledge, and attitudes of infantrymen. They had to expunge our habits of the past and mold us into something vastly different from what we were, into, it seemed, near imitations of themselves.

“Let me hear you girls sound off!” the DI screamed as we strode militantly down a long, broiling, vacant road that wound through the glassy sand like a piece of lost string.

Sucking in the hot air deeply, with lines of conviction visibly straining across our faces and necks, we shouted:

“One ... Two ... Three ... Four!
One ... Two ... Three ... Four!
One Two Three Four!
One Two Three Four!”

“I can’t hear you, TRAINEES!” he hollered back, and so we sounded off once more. Then again, then again and again. The feeling of disbelief shot through my mind. I was here, I was marching in a military formation through the heat and desolation of western Louisiana, yelling and screaming like a maniac, yet still I found it incredible. I knew it but I did not believe it. It was one of those odd, bewildering moments when the chill and thrust of perceived experience penetrated too deeply, plunging far into the mind to the point where it could only be translated as something out of the imagination. Like a nightmare. I was sure that I should not, indeed could not, be here. Instead, I should be home near the streams and mountains I knew, swimming and riding the rapids, drifting with the wind, letting the cold rain rinse across my skin. Anywhere but here, I thought silently.

The march was pummeling; it was a Mad Walk that quickly pushed introspection. Soon

my brain was full of many distracting thoughts. I thought first of all of the last book I had finished reading before I left for Fort Polk and Basic Training, it was a book of biographical reflections dealing with the theme of personal success, and in particular I thought of the chapter that dealt with the author's experiences in military training, an ordeal he referred to contemptuously as "subhuman servitude." Knowing that shortly I was to enter the same kind of existence, I read his remarks closely, searching for information and counsel that might better prepare me for my own experience in military training. And later, while I was at the Reception Station, I compared his view with the one sketched in *The Soldier's Handbook*, a small manual given to us to read and study, in which Basic Training was defined as a hard and serious challenge that was good for one's character and, if passed, would develop a boy into a grown man. This was familiar rhetoric, of course, for the military was often portrayed as a challenging life that was the touchstone of manhood, the essential test that determined the virtue and worth and masculinity of a young male. But, in contrast to this, there was a passage in the book I had read at home that said something about the purpose of military training that seemed more likely to be true than anything the *Handbook* had to say: its real function, the author said, was not to instruct young men in the basic skills of war, but rather to make civilians into soldiers, into creatures responsive to the needs and demands of the military community and, at the same time, no longer constrained by their natural instincts so that, if ordered to do so, they could and would put themselves into a dangerous situation and risk injury or possibly death.

As I marched and listened to the insanely screaming Drill Sergeant, my brain still full of many distracting and rapidly disintegrating thoughts, I recalled the author's explanation of how such a transformation would take place---the classical reward-punishment conditioning process, he said. The conversion from civilian to soldier is, I realized, a major and extremely drastic change in almost any person's life. It cannot be gradual and partial but must be sudden and total, as overwhelming as an angry storm. And in order to effect such a change the military---through, in large part, the Drill Sergeants---must wage a full and constant psychological assault on the new recruits by demanding military actions and discouraging civilian ones. The sergeants must kill the initiatives, motives, and feelings we were accustomed to, but, even if they were not able to do that, they must at least succeed in making us check those impulses for the sake of the ambitions that have been set up for us to have and to meet. By means of a varied assortment of rewards, then, so I later discovered, like post privileges or positions of leadership or special commendations, proper military behavior is promoted and enforced; similarly, a wide

range of punishments is used to eliminate those actions that are considered unacceptable for the man in uniform. So, as the author made clear, the new recruit is actually the human equivalent of a salivating dog and the DI the commanding Pavlov, for the ambition of the training is for the individual soldier to be shaped into a creature that learns how to behave without reasoning, and only by doing this does he become acceptable.

Behave ... Behave ... Behave, cried the giant beat of our boot heels as they pounded hard against the flat yellow ground.

However obnoxious, demeaning, and restrictive such a human habit is to free and separate men, it is, I supposed, the only really suitable pattern of action for a soldier engaged in combat, since on the battlefield a man cannot take the time to reason and argue and question, but must instinctively respond to a declared order with speed, force, and efficiency. Unlike those soldiers, say, in the early French Revolutionary Army who debated whether or not to fight while in the midst of combat, the responsible soldier must accept the orders he is given---unless, of course, they are inhumane and illegal, and then a man must make his own ethical decision---and respond effectively. It is the safe and successful course, yet it is also unfree and irrational and, indeed, may be reprehensible at times. But, whether he likes it or not, the common soldier must accept the choices of others, especially in situations of combat, for this is the only way a military group can operate with the unity, strength, and competency that can insure success.

Behave ... Behave ... Behave.

So, even before I took a step into my training unit and started the program that was to make me into a soldier, I felt I at least partly understood the procedures involving in creating soldiers and the ambitions that these procedures hoped to fulfill. From my readings, from conversations I had at the Reception Station, from the DI who was now marching us, from the strange and regimented walk itself, I had gained, I thought, some insight into what lay ahead. This private, self-learned knowledge comforted me as I marched now, it made me feel relaxed and gave me a fresh sense of confidence in my abilities to deal with this new situation. Curiously I wondered if my own experience in training would affirm or deny these opinions I had now come to believe in, but for that I would just have to wait and see.

“Look sharp, you clowns!” he screamed as we swerved around a fence corner, leaving the gravelly path for a moment and touching the smooth black surface of the two-lane highway. “Look sharp! Keep in step and dress to your right.” This dark, dark soul, who shouted an endless stream of words, numbers, commands, and lyrics, never seemed to lose his step or to

slacken his pace. He had the invincibility and precision of a well-tuned machine. His black shoes were still as shiny as glass, completely unaffected by the swirls of dust our marching created, his hat was straight and firm and spotless on top of his milk pail-shaped head, his brass belt buckle gleamed brightly, matching the tone of the noon light. “Don’t look down at the ground, TRAINEES! Keep your heads up and your eyes straight!” he continued to shout. “And sound off so I can hear ya!”

“Echo. Echo. Echo. All the way!”

“You sound like little girls!” he screamed. “Now you ain’t home no more. Mama ain’t gonna take care of you and nurse you with her big milky teats and tell you how good you are. You’re in the United States Army now. So sound off like you got a pair!”

“ECHO! ECHO! ECHO! ALL THE WAY!”

“Do you like this, TRAINEES?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Are you happy, TRAINEES?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Are you glad you’re here?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Then sound like it.”

“Graah! Graah!” we roared. “Graaahhhhhh!”

“Can’t hear you, TRAINEES.”

We roared again.

“Louder!”

“Graaahhhhhh!”

“What?” he shouted back, cupping a hand behind one of his ears.

“Jesus!” someone said in exasperation. “What’s he expect from us?”

“EVERYTHING,” said another voice.

“Do you like me, TRAINEES?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Do you really like me, TRAINEES?”

“YES, DRILL SERGEANT.”

“Well, I don’t like you.”

Impossible. Suddenly I wanted to scream with laughter. Was he serious? I asked myself.

Was he really and truly serious? I stole a glance and, for a moment, just fastened my eyes on him as he strutted alongside of us, his lungs screaming, his veins throbbing, his stiff olive-skin arms thrashing back and forth like mighty iron blades. He looked like a huge ball of muscle, like the most perfect personification of strength and power ever imagined, yet his language was that of a child's, full of the simplistic threats and challenges made by gangs of angry little boys. It cracked his image, if only for the moment, and made him an object of laughter.

“Can't hear you, TRAINEES!” he hollered again and again.

I opened my mouth and tried to ignore him. High above us, there came a series of long, beautiful screams. Curious, I broke my Rushmore pose and looked up at the pale blue sky. A line of large, dark birds flew overhead, going east.

“They're the smart ones,” a voice in back of me whispered. “They're leaving this place.”

“You ain't wrong,” whispered another.

The air was heavy and damp. The body sweat soaked deep into my fatigues, making the cloth feel as heavy as burlap, and my hat ban felt like a vise and seemed to become tighter with each step, but I could not remove it or even shift its pressure for that would disturb my immaculate pose of arms swinging, heels crunching, eyes front, back stiff, head straight. I was a walking mannequin, a robot, not a person of individual expression any longer. However, though carefully and rigidly manipulated by the DI in our movement, our language, our manners, there were still a few ways of asserting ourselves and defying the order being imposed on us. Some in the march whispered their complaints and made signals with their hands that conveyed special meanings of dissent; some broke the rhythm of the march by not swinging their arms at the same speed or in the same direction as the majority did; some did not look straight ahead but made glinting, sidelong glances or wore odd facial masks that stamped them as different and unique; some clicked their fingers or whistled or yawned instead of singing; some became mute and refused to say a thing, mouthing the songs and shouts with their lips. Even mannequins, it seemed, had the capacity to identify themselves and to make known their feelings and thoughts.

We came to an intersection, turned, and then sang some more.

“You get a line and I'll get a pole

--Honey, honey.

You get a line and I'll get a pole

--Babe, babe.

You get a line and I'll get a pole

And we'll all go fishin' down at the Old Crawdad Hole

--Honey, oh, baby, mine."

"Give me your left, your right, your left.

Give me your left, your right, your left."

The land was ugly; it was flat, baked, and yellow like pie crust, as desolate and scorched as any desert. A smooth, winding black strip of highway cut through it, otherwise there was nothing but the sand, the dust, and the scattered brown shrubbery, plus a few pine trees that were stripped and bare like winter skeletons. And, of course, there was us. Regardless of the waste and heat and isolation, we screamed and stomped our heels as if we were marching down main street, U.S.A., in front of a thousand cheering spectators. After a while I did begin to notice a few hints of life in this enormous void of dust. There were some traffic signs, saying Stop and Troop Crossing, and several tall shiny fences and, in the distance, I could see the faint horizon of tarred roof lines and pointed wooden pediments. But for the most part the ground we marched through was a vast stretch of empty, desiccated plains, flat and clean and dead. The sun had cursed this place, I thought to myself, had scoured it of everything that was alive and attractive.

"Standin' tall and lookin' good!" the DI shouted.

"Ought to march in Hollywood!" we shouted back.

For a while we seemed to be continually walking up a small incline then all of a sudden the land flattened permanently, and we were there. Not with excitement or flourish, not even with the feeling of surprise; just there. Then the DI really started screaming at us to look sharp and to sound off, to cover down, to dress to our right, to keep our heads straight and our eyes to the front, for it was all important that we make an outstanding first impression on those awaiting us at our training unit, Echo Company. In fact, as I quickly learned, to make a good impression was perhaps the highest military ambition. For always, it seemed, the image of something was considered much more important than its content.

"Company!" hollered the DI. "Count cadence delayed cadence count cadence COUNT!"

I awoke from my thoughts and joined the screams, fecklessly.

“One ... Two ... Three ... Four!

One ... Two ... Three ... Four!

One Two Three Four!

One Two Three Four!”

We marched a few more steps then the DI shouted, “Company, HAWLT!”

I held my breath and stood perfectly still. He had directed us onto a large, empty street that was blocked off by a long plank of lightly stained wood set across two huge oil drums, and there we stood in close formation before a reviewing stand that was situated on a steep grassy bank just in front of one of the barracks. Several soldiers, many of whom were wearing drill hats, stood together on the lawn, with their arms spread across their broad chests like heavy swords and with lit cigarettes stuck in between their fingers; anxiously and curiously they examined us as we stood before them like serfs before knights. No one said a word, each of just stared ahead, burying one another with cold, dark scowls.

Pacing back and forth in front of us like a caged panther, with his hands clasped behind his back, the DI continued to ramble on about our slackness and our need for stern discipline and training, then all of a sudden he stopped and bellowed angrily, “What are you smiling about, TRAINEE?”

His question crashed into the stillness like a peal of thunder. He was no longer addressing a faceless group of subhuman trainees but was speaking directly to a single man. An individual. I cringed at the thought of what that person had now brought upon himself. My arms and legs felt stiff, my shirt stuck to my back, my forehead was warm and perspiring. I drew a breath, secretly, and stared at the DI in horror. He now appeared, if it were at all possible, even grimmer than before. Intensely and belligerently he glowered at us, his large, morose eyes threatening us like knives.

He continued to stare at us penetratingly, obviously delighting in his power to frighten us, then in his rough, New Jersey-sounding accent he screeched, “Come here, boy!”

Strangely, he seemed to be looking at the file I was in and even in my general direction, but I was safe. I knew I couldn’t have smiled even if I had wanted to. So, I decided, he must be talking to someone next to me. I made hesitant glances to my side but saw that everyone was just as tense and stoic as I was. Who was it then? I wondered.

Then, quickly, impulsively, stupidly, I pointed at myself with guilt and asked in a voice as feeble as any infant's, "Who, me?" Immediately it sounded to my ears like the voice of another person, it was so alien and insane, so comically absurd that, for a split moment, I felt like laughing. I could hardly believe that I had said anything.

"Get up here, TRAINEE!" he snarled commandingly.

As fast as I could I ran out of the formation, shot halfway up the bank, and assumed a fragile position of attention in front of him. The DI said nothing; he just scowled at me, drooling his fiendishness like brown tobacco juice.

Hello, Polyphemus!

I felt helpless standing there and, for perhaps the first time, I really understood what it meant to lose personal control and to become a figure of manipulation. I had to be here, I kept thinking to myself angrily. I was forced to go through with this charade. I wanted to run, but all I could do was wait. It was his move, not mine. Finally, after what seemed like an unduly long time, the quiet ended and the creature bellowed, "Do you think this is funny, TRAINEE?" With his rough, snarling, viscous accent he had the keen ability to draw out the word *trainee* and make it sound like the vilest epithet imaginable.

"No, Drill Sergeant," I answered quickly. "I wasn't smiling about anything." My mind blanked and all I saw were those large, wildly bent nostrils waving in front of my face like two enormous torches.

"I said you were smiling, boy. Are you calling me a liar?"

"No, Drill Sergeant."

His face reddened and I watched the thick arteries along his neck pulsate with a hard, wrenching force. He stepped closer toward me, coming within inches of my face, stopped, and stared ominously. Then, in an action that happened too fast to remember anything but the result, he pulled on my cap and brought it down hard across my forehead, bent down swiftly like a hungry, quick-moving lizard, pressed his colossal nose against my ear, and growled coldly, "I'm gonna knock your goddamn motherfuckin' teeth out, TRAINEE!"

Masterfully gloating and savoring the joys of his performance with pure self-delight, the DI behaved, I thought, like some splendid, magnificent dancing mammal intensely alive and terribly eager to sprout its power and affirm its achievement in active public celebration, a self-indulgent creature full of confidence and the brilliance of silver blood. For several long moments he was perfectly still, his arrogance and pride radiating like hot rays of light, then, at exactly the

correct moment, just before the inanity of his effort became too recognizable, just before his shield of omnipotence dissolved and became laughable, he broke his exulting silence and, for all to hear, hollered out, “If I look at you any longer, TRAINEE, I’m gonna get sick. And I don’t want to get sick. Do you want me to get sick, TRAINEE?”

“No, Drill Sergeant,” I answered.

“Now get outa my sight, TRAINEE, before I get sick all over you!”

Eagerly I ran back to my place in the formation, back to the comforting anonymity of being just another recruit, and as I ran I tried desperately to rip off the tight-fitting cap so I could see where I was going, but it was stuck and difficult to budge. Stumbling and struggling to remove the blinder, looking like a buffoon and feeling crazed, I saw myself as a juggernaut of total absurdity. A clown, really. Something to be manipulated for others’ benefit and amusement. Unforgettably, I thought to myself, I had learned now that a trainee was to be the slenderest of reeds, conditionally susceptible to the slightest wavering force. All I had to do was prevent myself from trying to resist what I was told to do, and if I did this I would be a success. A real authentic thorough-going success.

Double Time

Every morning, as raw recruits, we ran. First, we had to strip off our field jackets and gloves, our helmet liners and fatigue shirts and any other apparel we brought out of the barracks, which momentarily caused our skin to turn to ice in the chilling air, then we marched to the end of the street and, in the thick, brass-tinted darkness, under the direction of the Senior Drill Sergeant, we ran in platoons, at staggered intervals, around two long, vacant blocks of rubble and sand that the CO and others had estimated by means of the odometers in their cars to be approximately a mile in length. It was all quite orderly and exact, at least in the beginning. “Go!” the SDI would yell, dropping his long warm arm down, and we would be off, perhaps twenty yards in back of the lead platoon. We ran unctuously at first in a neat, well-aligned pack, with our platoon guide two to three steps in front to direct us and our squad leaders in the front ranks, all of them exhorting us to stay close together and not break the precision and unity of the formation in between audible gasps for air. The loudest, harshest, most enthusiastic squad leader was Cools, of the first squad. Sly and savage, he was an intemperate little man with an inclination for assaulting a problem or a barrier rather than analyzing it. He had wide, gingerbread lips, bulging dark eyes, the shoulders of a player of games that demanded strength above skill, and a high, peeling voice, the sound of which made me think of a piece of chalk grating across a blackboard. Inexorably, he would shout at us to keep in step, to move with a purpose, to sound off, to hurry, to take the initiative, to overtake the front platoon. He was a lover of standards and rules and a favorite of the DIs.

His, however, was not the only voice heard, in fact, after the first couple hundred yards, everyone had some kind of remark to make. Some like Cools wanted to break away and take the lead, some wanted to slow down, some even to stop and rest a bit. People spoke in whispers then, as they moved farther away from the cadre, in normal tones and even screams. Most of the speech was chewed and garbled, spit out like cattle-eaten hay, and only half-intelligible so that the words sounded like amalgamated midnight groans or the gaggings made by someone trying to clear his throat. One voice, in addition to Cools’, that stood out prominently was that of L’s, for as he moved down the street he talked constantly. “Come on, you can do it,” he said again and again, pleading with himself as if there were something he had not yet taken. For him each run was torturous.

Initially we ran in a smooth, fluid line, closely bunched together like books on a shelf, the

columns straight, the lines aligned, our steps in joined rhythm. We were a moving phalanx of breath and shoulders and legs. Then, after making it two-thirds of the way past the first block, our unity began to break. People started stumbling and falling out. Tired, out of shape, slices of pain in their sides, muscles starting to cramp, the reasons varied with the individual. Among those who regularly fell out, the most conspicuous one was the Titan, conspicuous because of his immense physical size. He was about six feet five inches in height and scaled well over two hundred pounds. He had thin arms, thin shoulders, a thin nose, and a huge sunburned face with one long dark eyebrow spread across it like a shadow. Witty, affable, a very good friend, the Titan had the stature and required good-nature of his pre-military occupation, which was that of a part-time bartender in a university pizza parlor; his life, as his character and habits clearly testified, was meant to be that of a kind, gentle hedonist, not a militant warrior, especially not one who went on mile runs before sunrise.

Generally he began the dreaded runs in good, bolting fashion, keeping pace with everyone else and occasionally even going a little faster, but after a quarter-mile or so he would start to slip back then drop out completely and walk or jog the remaining distance along the side of the road. This was highly dangerous because, every so often, one of the more vigilant DIs would trail the formation in his car, flashing his flashlight in search of stragglers, and if any were found that meant instant abuse, threats of physical harm, being hauled in front of the rest of the company and demeaned, and possibly given extra duty on some meaningless work detail. So, as a way of protecting the Titan from this, the two Cajuns devised a system of bilateral support. Whenever the Titan started to falter and lose speed and drop back from his place near the front, the two Cajuns, laughing zantly, would wrap their arms around his waist or stuff their burnt hands into his hips and actually propel him along, as though he were a stuck tire that needed a push, using their own strength and power to keep him going until he had sufficiently regained his energies to make it on his own again. It worked perfectly. Because it was so dark out and because of all the jostling confusion inside the formation anyway, the DIs never detected the Cajuns' scheme of shared propulsion, and the Titan was always able to finish the run in fine Olympian fashion, at the front and in stride.

By the time we were half way around, the neat precision of our formation as well as that of the lead platoon's had usually collapsed into something more ragged and real, a snarl of loose, pretzel-shaped forms scattered about and going their own way at their own pace. The dark figures in front of us looked less like human beings than tortoises overturned, as their arms

and legs waved helplessly all over the place. Breathing became heavier and louder, muscles harder to control, the air felt like a thick cloud of damp flour and tasted warm and acrid. Sweat dominated everything. Everyone continued to shout out their own private list of complaints, munching the air like a stray munching a scrap of food. The platoon guide shrieked at our squad leaders, and they, in turn, shrieked at us. Soon, at the urging of Cools, we began to sing infantry songs in order to make a good impression on the waiting DIs as well as to restore some semblance of unity to the formation. Always we reached the finish line singing. It was inevitable. Every time we took a step, it seemed, whether to class, to the training field, the chapel, the barber shop, the dispensary, the mess hall, we sang songs. Emphatic, boastful songs meant to express an unknown enthusiasm.

The Quick and the Dead

First, as always, we stood and waited on the edge of an immense piece of dull flat browning earth twice the size of a football field and streaked with faint chalk lines that were barely wider than threads of yarn. Like everyone else in the company, I was in my undershirt, having taken my fatigue shirt off and placed it with the rest of my downed equipment, and was holding my rifle up in front of my chest, at port arms, and sweating freely. The air was humid and very hot. So, as a way of defying it, I imagined I was standing in a shower stall with streams of ice cold water shooting down my neck and back. For a few seconds I felt cool and relaxed, jailed in idleness like a person of extraordinary wealth.

Then I heard a shrill mechanical wail come from the other end of the field, and my heart raced. Immediately, without any sense of planned movement, all of us walked across the chalk line bordering the field, then began to move in a stampede, yelling fiercely, loudly, sounding possessed. We ran in the sand with the awkward carelessness of manacled slaves, stumbling and slipping each time our heels bit into the soft, changing ground. Soon we were strung out in a loose herd, each person going his own way.

Raggedly we headed toward a large elevated platform, approximately the size of a theater stage, at the north end of the field. On it were two long green trumpet-shaped loudspeakers, hooked to poles on either side of the stage, and in between them stood the short, heavysset DI with the bullet-scarred neck. He had a long wooden pointer in his hand which he flagellated across his head like a sword. Around his neck hung a thick green rope of solid metal and wire, to which was attached a small, square-shaped microphone. His other hand gripped it tightly and held it close against his screaming mouth. His clear, imperious voice cleaved sharply through the dense air. And so did our voices. As we ran toward him, all of us shouted wildly and emphatically, “Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!” every time our left heels struck the ground.

On approaching the platform, we stopped our running but continued to scream out our one word chant, and with equal passion the DI’s voice met our cries and came piercing through the microphone and loudspeakers, shouting, “What’s the spirit of the bayonet?”

“To kill!” we shouted back in unison.

He had us spread out into long, equal ranks, then began to perform in earnest, screeching in his powerfully charged voice, “There are two kinds of bayonet fighters. Which one are you?”

“The Quick!”

“Which one is Charlie?”

“The Dead!”

“What kind of fighter are you?”

“The Quick!”

“You don’t sound like it.”

“The Quick!”

“I can’t hear you,” he yelled, cupping his right hand behind his ear.

“The QUICK!” we screamed, growling and wrenching our faces to prove our aggressiveness.

Then, under his careful supervision, we practiced the various thrusts and parries and whirls deemed essential to the art of bayonet fighting. We held our rifles up in front of us and went through each tactical maneuver step by step, pushing and stabbing our bayonets through the air, until we had reached the point of executing the move with what he considered to be the proper mixture of grace, precision, and effectiveness. The movements had to become completely ingrained into our reflexes, making our actions conditioned and instinctive, not deliberate, so that in an actual combat situation we would be capable of employing the bayonet spontaneously with speed and effect.

The constant practicing needed to attain this state of execution was not unlike learning ballet, where exact steps and techniques and positions have to be perfectly fused together to produce an accurate and fluid performance. The goal, as far as all our superiors were concerned, was to have every little step coordinated so precisely that our thrusts and whirls had the fine, graceful movement that was part of ballet, as well as the dependability and rote perfection of machines.

We kept at it and kept at it, going well beyond what seemed necessary for merely learning a particular physical skill. In fact, at times, it seemed as if we were doing an elaborately contrived dance of death out there on the bayonet field, or else were making a kind of primitive, self-fortifying preparation for some great but unknown contest that lay ahead of us. Over and over we practiced. Frantically, I thought.

“Long thrust and hold!” the DI shouted.

Hold! God, I thought, not that. Already I could feel my muscles begin to tighten and ache. Let us go, I screamed at him under my breath. For what seemed like hours, though, in truth, it

was only a few minutes, we stayed frozen in this agonizing position, with our legs split wide apart and our arms stretched out in front of our shoulders as if they were trying to pull an immovable object, and in our hands, heavy as steel beams, were our rifles, which we had to hold in a high, lancing thrust.

Slowly he worked on us, drilling us psychologically, taunting us, challenging us, demanding to know if we were man enough to use our bayonet and kill with it, if we were quick enough and good enough to take it and stab it into the center of someone's chest and then pull it out in one clean stroke.

"Jody's got your girl and gone," he shouted at us, referring to some mysterious figure who was supposed to represent our civilian counterpart. "What are you going to do to Jody?"

"Kill!"

"Jody's big and mean."

"Kill!"

"What are you going to do to Charlie?"

"Kill!"

"He's got a knife and he's comin' right at you and he's gonna cut out your heart."

"Kill!"

"What are you?"

"The Quick!"

"What's Charlie?"

"The Dead."

"Charlie says he's better than you."

"Kill!"

"Charlie wants your watch and wallet."

"Kill!"

"Charlie's gonna take that picture of your girl that you keep in your wallet."

"Kill!"

"What's the spirit of the bayonet?"

"To Kill!"

"Can't hear you, trainees?"

"TO KILL!"

"One more time."

“TO KILL!”

“Let’s hear ya!” he hollered shrilly.

So we growled the guttural sounds we had been taught to growl then began to change, “Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!”

The weight of my rifle grew and grew. It felt like a huge stone. My muscles burned. I could feel the vessels popping out across my forehead and sweat rolled everywhere. For a moment, I wished I could cut my arms off, they hurt too much to keep. Then, finally, the DI released us. “Shake it off,” he said annoyingly. I dropped my rifle butt into the sand and frantically rubbed the ache from my biceps. Slowly it disappeared, and I reveled in my miraculous powers. The rest lasted for only a few seconds, however, then we had to pick up our rifles again and do some more thrusting movements. The ache in my arms returned immediately.

A few minutes later a visitor stepped onto the platform. Koprolight. I had not seen him since the day he marched us from the Reception Center, the day I had that unforgettable confrontation with him in front of the whole company. He looked as mean and angry as ever, and I was glad I was far away from him this time. Very, very glad. He knelt down on one knee near a green chest and drew from it a sheath, and, quickly, he pulled out a bayonet, which, for one melodramatic moment, he held straight up in the air---parts of the blade were caught by the sunlight and gleamed brightly---then he brought it down to his waist, cupping it loosely and confidently in his right hand like a comb. He moved around the platform smoothly, buoyantly, moving from side to side, conscious of keeping our attention by letting all of us have a clear look at him.

“You people look scared and weak,” he shouted suddenly, waving the bayonet in front of his eyes. “I bet I can take anyone of you on---right now, right this second---just like this. Come on up here, and let’s see what you’re made of.” He held the bayonet coolly and dramatically, letting the handle roll slowly back and forth across his fingers. A large, watery grin ran across his mouth. No one made a move. “Come on, ain’t nobody got any guts out there. You people are supposed to be big, tough bayonet fighters, and you can’t even go against me with just this little old knife.” He waited a moment more then flipped the bayonet up in the air a couple of times, put it back in its sheath, and threw it into the green chest. “No guts!” he screamed, laughing, as he sauntered off the platform. The DI took charge again and immediately put us through some more lunges and parries.

Koprolight, knowingly or not, was just as much a teacher with his antics as our instructor was, for besides wanting to test our physical skill as bayonet fighters, he was testing our will. And this two-fold approach was at the heart of everyone of our bayonet classes: the instructors first taught us the mechanical skills, then they tried to inculcate into us the will to use these skills in actual combat. This psychological edge to the training program, evident at all times and in a variety of ways, both subtle and dramatic, was, I felt, as I attended more and more classes, directly related to the ideas expressed in an old pre-World War I book, *Battle Studies*, written by Colonel Ardant du Picq, a late-nineteenth century French soldier and theoretician.

Often, while standing on the drill field rotely screaming and going through the exercises we were supposed to go through, I thought of the book and wondered if anyone else on the field knew of it, if anyone besides me saw the close relationship between what we were doing and what du Picq had written. To me, the book, which was primarily concerned with the motivation of soldiers in combat, seemed to be the intellectual framework for the kind of psychological education in killing that our instructors were teaching us and that we were expected to adopt and exhibit. By studying past military history, particularly focusing on the armies of ancient Rome, as well as distributing a questionnaire among his associates in the French officer corps, du Picq gleaned the information that was to enable him to make a very important and influential military thesis: namely, that in all things relating to war the human heart is where one begins. It is the starting point, the place where decisions and plans are made, where victories are achieved.

With this idea, he grasped the real significance of human nature as far as war is concerned and discovered the need for proper motivation of the individual soldier as the way to make an army successful in battle. The source of power of the Roman legions, he discovered, lay in the way they motivated their troops; they did not focus on heroism, but on individual fear; not on creating in each ordinary soldier a heroic spirit, but on recognizing the terrible fear of battle and death that existed in him and trying to cope with it. So, he concluded, the correct methods of motivation and psychological conditioning through discipline and drill would not eradicate a soldier's fear in battle but would reduce them, would repress them until the fighting has been decided, thus enabling the soldier to engage strongly and decisively throughout the course of the battle.

Payday

As a rule, payday was one of the moments of highest individual importance for the lieutenant since it was his special duty to distribute our pay, which, among other things, meant that he could wear a pistol and black leather holster strapped around his waist, just like a gunfighter. It was also a day of considerable ceremony. Conspicuously the military thrives on pomp and payday was no exception. Like nearly every official activity we were ever involved in, regardless of its size or its place of importance, the procedure of being paid had multiple rules and formalities to be obeyed to the letter, all of which served to transform the simple transaction of payment into an elaborate ritual.

As the people being paid, we had to make one long alphabetical line outside the day room where the lieutenant sat handing out pay envelopes and, one by one, we filed into it. Once inside, we had to march within one meter of the pay officer, who was always seated at a cardtable strewn with tan-colored envelopes and pink sheets of paper, had to place our identification cards on the table just in front of the officer's eyes, then we saluted him and said, "Sir, Private _____ reports for pay," dropped the salute without waiting for him to return it, waited for him to count out the money we were to be paid, then counted the pay ourselves, and left with an abrupt about-face out the back door. Again, the military preference for display and style was demonstrated, and again the emphasis on the ostentatious intruded into an operation's speed and efficiency. But that did not matter really for time was of little importance, as I had first learned at the Induction Center then at the Reception Station. Our time was no longer valuable because it was no longer ours, instead we were under the constant control of our superiors, which meant that our presence was always assured and our time theirs, completely, to do with as they pleased.

Anyway, on the day in question, I had made a mistake about the positioning of "sir" in my required address to the lieutenant, making it a precedent rather than an antecedent, and so he routinely had me do thirty push-ups for such a breach of etiquette. An hour after this happened, I was in the barracks preparing for a shower when the Huffer came running up to me and said that the lieutenant wanted to see me at once. I was astonished. At first, I thought he was joking, but quickly he convinced me of his seriousness. Still, I had my doubts because I was sure the lieutenant did not even know who I was, either by sight or by name. But, the more I thought about it, the more I became flattered that my presence, my identity, was actually known by the

training officer, and at the same time I grew more and more curious about the reason for his demand to see me. So I put on my boots and fatigues and hurried over to the day room where he was still distributing the pay forms and, after taking a quick breath, approached him as he was fingering through a thin stack of tan envelopes.

“Sir,” I said confidently, “I was told you wanted to see me.”

Blankly he looked in my direction and touched the portion of his glass frames which straddled the bridge of his nose then said patiently, “Yes, I’ll be with you in a minute.”

I stepped to the side and gazed, with fascination, at his hands. On a finger of his left hand was a ring the size of a walnut. So many of the officers I had seen in my short time in the military wore college rings like this one---big bold brass objects covered with swirling indentations and solemn, important-looking Latin quotations---that it almost seemed like a uniform signal of character, as if these men were the kind who needed to brace themselves on such signets, else they might fall of their own weight.

He finished counting out the money for the trainee standing in front of him, gave him a stack of crisp green bills, then told the trainee waiting by the door to stay there a minute. I stepped up to the cardtable, stopping when I felt its edge press against my thighs, and stood at attention. “Well, mister, did you forget something?” he asked, with the hint of a smile forming across his evenly bitten lips.

“No, sir,” I said, puzzled at the meaning of his question.

“Are you sure?” he persisted.

“Yes, sir,” I mumbled. And then, suddenly, I realized what he was talking about. “Oh, my ID card! I must have left it here, sir.”

The suspected smile did not appear, instead there was a strange, almost whimsical expression on his face. In a clear, stern tone he said, “Yes, you did, mister,” and tossed my card onto the table.

“Thank you, sir---“

He went on, “You know, the ID card is a pretty valuable piece of property.” Reflectively he seized the end of his long white king-sized cigarette and slowly inhaled. “You know, if you didn’t have this card, you couldn’t get paid.”

“Yes, sir. I realize that. But you see, sir, I was doing some push-ups in here for you, and after I did them, I must have left the card on the table.”

Impervious to my feeble explanation, he said, “I’m afraid you don’t understand the

importance of your ID card or else you wouldn't have gone off and left it here. You didn't even know it was missing until you got back in here, isn't that so?" His fingers were spread and his hands uplifted, as if he had just been put under arrest and was now dutifully raising his hands for the investigators.

"That's correct, sir." The game was old and tiring, but I answered his rhetorical question and waited for him to make the next move.

"You're not in a cradle any longer."

"Yes, sir. I realize that."

"No, I'm afraid you don't. So I guess you're just going to have to be taught a lesson," he said matter-of-factly. I assumed he was going to have me do fifty push-ups instead of thirty, which was all right with me just as long as he ended his drawn out maneuvers and hurried up and told me what he wanted me to do so I could do it and leave. "Where's your wallet?" he asked.

"In my back pocket, sir."

"All right, then, I want you to go over there"---he pointed to a space along the wall nearest his table---"and get in the front leaning position." He shoved the burning end of his cigarette into an empty paper cup and crushed it to death, like an ant, then shook loose another one from the tattered package he kept inside his shirt and set it, unlit, into his mouth. "Right over there," he said a second time, motioning with his hand. Mechanically, not grudgingly or angrily, I obeyed and walked over to the spot he was pointing to and dropped myself into the extended push-up position. Then, in a flash, I saw my ID card fly down in front of me, landing just a few inches from my left hand.

I waited, curiously.

"Now," he explained, "I want you to remain in the position and pick up your card and put it away." He took a breath and lit his fresh cigarette. "With your one free hand, right or left, it doesn't matter to me, take your wallet from your pocket, put the ID card into it, then put the wallet back into your pocket and make sure you button the pocket up. You won't leave until this is done, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"This way maybe you'll learn how valuable your identification card is and you won't be losing it by going off and leaving it somewhere."

Kindergarten, I thought. Yet, surprisingly, I was not upset. Though I hated doing such

trivial and ridiculous things such as this, by now I had grown to accept them as realities to be endured and passed and never taken seriously. Besides, I found a certain childish challenge in the exercise. Quickly I concentrated my energies on supporting myself with one hand and with maneuvering the pocket button, the wallet, and the card with the other. It proved not to be difficult at all once I managed to undo the button and, I told myself, was probably one of the more enjoyable and interesting activities I was to participate in while training.

Finished, I said to the lieutenant, "Request permission to get up, sir?"

"Permission granted," he said after a long moment of silence, and as I got up he asked in a vaguely insistent tone if I had learned a lesson now, and I said I had; however, the lesson I learned had very little to do with my misplaced ID card, rather it reemphasized the position of impotence that I, as a trainee, was now in, and again made clear to me how, at will, I could be compelled to do things that, under ordinary circumstances, I would never dream of doing. Yes, I wanted to tell the lieutenant, I had learned a lesson, the lesson of power and the lesson of being without it.

Tango Sierra

In slow, ragged steps we marched across the open bowl of the park to a small clearing tucked far back in the corner like a vault in a bank. On reaching it, we immediately fell to the ground because we were tired and bored. We had spent the past day and a half going from one training station to another in order to prepare for our final proficiency test, which had to be passed before we could graduate and leave for our next assignment. Now we were at the station on individual tactical training where, as in all the other classes, we had to practice certain skills and relearn certain information until it was virtually impressed into our brains so that during the test we could respond and give the correct answers with the spring and sureness expected of highly conditioned reflexes.

In front of us, sitting down with his back braced against a pine tree and his legs casually spread apart, was our instructor, Hack, a buck sergeant straight from a section of backwoods deep in the Southern hill country. Next to him, propped against a stump, was a tripod stand on which was draped a roll of illustrated lesson charts. “You people here ta larn something?” he asked stonily.

“Yes, sergeant,” Cools answered obediently.

“Well,” he drawled, in his high, nasal voice, “I ain’t teachin’ no more.”

We cheered.

“I quit!” He smiled, not showing a tooth. In his hand was a short oyster-colored pocket knife, not much longer than his longest finger. Turning it over so it lay flat, he unlocked one of the blades and began to make a large abstract sketch in the sand along the side of his left knee. “This is my day off an, my luck, that sonovabitch SDI comes up ta me yesterday an says I gotta teach this here class so you people can pass your proficiency test. Well, I’m tellin’ ya what I told all ta other classes ... fuck it!”

Again, we cheered.

“Fuck ta test, fuck ta SDI, fuck ‘em!”

Hack was tedious and brash. Thin as a stick, his oversized fatigues fitting him like a burlap sack draped over a pole, he was short and wiry, sharp featured, raw tongued, his complexion an anemic white, his hair a peculiar shade of brown the resembled the color of rain-drenched sand. His eyes, shaped like almonds, were small, hungry, and somber, and sprang out at you like those of an owl. He had a flat, bony face that gave him the look of a seasoned

ascetic who was determined that everyone recognize and appreciate the many sacrifices he had made in his years of work. Though not always sure of his own worth, he was intolerant of criticism and of any apparent threat to the share of power his rank and time of service afforded him, and was more than capable of lashing out hard to defend that power. His aggressiveness moved lightning fast against any person he saw as a challenge or who released in him feelings of his own self-conceived inadequacies. People who had money, who were officers, who had more intelligence and education than he had, were his principal enemies, and he attacked them at will. He seemed to be more authoritarian and authoritative, seemed to cultivate a visibly powerful shield that advertised strength and determination, and yet, I felt, this was a pose designed to conceal his own brittle frailness. Because he could only respond to those challengers who, because of their rank or their ignorance, were considerably weaker than he was, the others he attacked from behind screens and corners. He was rarely convincing, never impressive. I thought of him as a thing composed mostly of glass---something obvious and breakable but with a cutting edge that, at times, could be very sharp.

Hack looked up from his mindless sketch and turned his eyes from left to right. Then he stopped and glared at the Minstrel, who was lying quietly on the ground with his hands clasped behind his neck. Slowly he got up and walked over to him. "You owe me two cigarettes, trainee." With a look of irritation drawn across his full lips, the Minstrel leaned up, rubbed the light from his eyes, and said nothing. Hack pulled out his knife, bent down, and cut off a shirt button that had not been fastened. "Two cigarettes," he said with a practiced grin, "or I'll keep this." The Minstrel gave him the cigarettes and took back the button. "That better be sewn on by tomorrow an buttoned to that pocket," Hack warned, "or else ya better have a whole lot of cigarettes on yourself." The Minstrel grunted a reply and returned to the ground, placing his shoulders against his field jacket, which he had wrapped into a square and set beside his rifle.

"Anybody else with any buttons undone?" Hack asked, laughing, as he walked around and inspected our pockets. He found a couple more, sliced them off, and collected several cigarettes, then returned to his spot against the tree and began to chain smoke.

Like nearly everyone else, I took my helmet liner off, put it behind my neck as a cushion, fell back, and eased into a quiet silence, like an object burying itself into a pool. Not a part of me moved. Such an absence of activity, especially during duty hours, felt marvelous, and I was quite prepared to stay like this for the rest of the cycle. Maybe forever. Lazily, as I lay there, my mind drifted through a series of thoughts, searching for a place distant and far, a place where I

could do exactly as I wished. For a while, I imagined I was all alone at the beach, stretched out on the sand beneath a warm sun, waiting for someone to come with whom I could have an honest conversation that would last the day and make me feel, when it was over, that I had done something worth my time.

“Corporal,” I heard Hack cry, and slowly I rose up to look at what he wanted from Cools.

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Git yo people around here,” he said, drawing an arc in the air with his pocket knife, “in a semi-circle in case someone might come around ta check on us.”

Promptly Cools sprang to his feet. His face lit up, became bright and damp, like a reflection in a pond. His arms flailed and his voice jumped as he herded us together in the desired formation. We sat in an erect, attentive-looking posture for perhaps a minute, then we were back down on the ground, either lying on our backs or our sides, heads propped on elbows, eyes shut. Cigarette smoke filled the air. The smell of pine vanished. I thought once again of various people coming toward me across the sand and grew sleepy. The only sounds were the cries of birds and the swift momentary whispers of branches and leaves as the wind swept through them. Soon, though, a couple of people began to talk and laugh in open, almost strident tones, then a couple more and a couple more. Angrily, I wondered why these people could not stay still for just a few minutes. Were they really that restless? That starved for something to say? Perhaps the reason was nerves, I thought, the strangely uncomfortable feeling of not having something specific to do, or perhaps the conversations began out of an instinctive need to placate Hack, to keep him relaxed and content so he could not feel inclined to start teaching his boring class as a way of keeping us as well as himself occupied. Anyway, whatever the motives were, the conversations grew and, quickly, they began to center around Hack, to the point where he was answering one question after another in very rapid fashion. Keep him active, keep him interested, the strategy seemed to be, so he would not feel obligated to begin the awful class. And, as it turned out, Hack was more than willing to extemporize and give us some of his opinions about life and the armed forces; it made him seem just that more important than he actually was.

One of his most persistent questioners was Oxy, a person who was quite similar to Hack in terms of character and personality, except that he was a great deal more volatile. Indeed he was a nest of hotly racing intuitions; a noisy squeak who was always complaining and whining; the sort of person who made it a point to make sure everyone knew how he felt and what he

thought at all times. He had a lean face, large, white eyes that resembled sea shells, and a constantly moving mouth full of small, pointed teeth that, when it was not chattering away, was smiling broadly. Often it made me think of a mausoleum because it was so open and empty. His chest and neck were built like a long, slender cane so that when he approached you from a great distance he gave the impression of a scribbled line come to life. Then, as he came closer, you discovered he was more than a scribble, that he breathed, and the very fact that he could move and make sounds made you reconsider your former doubts about the possibility of miracles happening outside of myths and dreams.

“How much time left, sergeant?” Oxy asked, in reference to the amount of time till Hack received his discharge.

“I’m short!” he answered emphatically. “Two months an 19 days an then I’m a civilian agin.”

“You’re not re-upin’?” the Sandman blurted out.

Everyone laughed, as conditioned.

“Hell, no. I ain’t no lifer. I’m just doin’ my time an waitin’ ta get back where I come from.”

“I thought you were a 20-year man, sergeant,” Oxy said in his tight, whining voice.

“Sheetit!”

After Oxy was finished with his brainless questioning, the conversation slowly turned to the war, specifically to the role Hack played in it and his views about it. The questions first asked of him were tentative ones, designed, in the main, to gauge his mood and see how receptive he was to talking about the subject. Unlike the other combat veterans in the company, Hack had never spoken to us of his war experiences. He had told us he had been there but that was all. Quickly, however, it became apparent that now he was more than willing to tell us about his experiences and state his opinions about anything we wished to know. So we drilled him with what was on our minds, as though he were a medieval philosopher who could make objective judgments and give correct answers to all conceivable questions. We asked him everything we could think of, from the conditions of jungle warfare to the weather to urban politics to the sensuality of the young women.

“How are the women?” Oxy asked shyly.

He told us.

“Are the snakes as big as they say?”

He nodded yes.

“What’s Saigon like?”

“A shit hole.”

Then Coonas, who rarely did anything but sleep during classes, raised his hand and Hack called on him. “What’s wrong?” he stammered, his voice fraught with untested nerves, his arms flapping like empty shirtsleeves. “How come we haven’t won? How come we haven’t taken care of those people yet?”

Hack drew his head back and braced his shoulders hard against the tree. For a moment he said nothing, apparently lost in his thoughts, and the silence was complete, except for a soft, clicking sound he made with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “We didn’t lose ta war,” he said slowly and deliberately, using the past tense as though everything had already been decided. “We just didn’t win it like we could’ve.” He made his remark as though it were a completely original idea, something no one had ever uttered or thought of before, and he seemed rather pleased with himself. With his own intelligence and his own smattering of personal experience, his eyes seemed to suggest, he had accurately defined in a few simple words the character and meaning of the war as far as America was concerned, and this, he was probably sure, could not be done any better or more accurately by any scholar. About this subject he had said everything that needed to be said. Quickly, then, he jabbed his cigarette into the side of the tree he had been leaning against and lit another one. His sixth, I estimated.

Other questions were then asked of him, and he answered them quickly and laconically, giving us the information we wished without disclosing any hint of a personal feeling. When the rate of our questioning did not subside, and our interest in his views became more and more apparent, his answers gradually broadened till he concluded the hour by giving us what amounted to a monologue, only briefly interrupted by our comments and questions. The flow of his talk was smooth and spontaneous and increased in meaning and intimacy as he drew into himself and spoke of what he had actually observed and felt in the distant, warring country. Like a plaque of tessellated stone, I thought, his monologue contained small bits and flashes amid a great deal of waste. Yet I found myself clinging to each word, eagerly listening and anticipating what would follow.

In these reflections about his participation in the war, he spoke of many things: the firefights he had been involved in on patrols through the jungle; the weariness and boredom he experienced during the long periods of inaction in the field; the filth and wretchedness he lived in most of the time; the scorching heat which he described so vividly that he made it seem as

though the sun bled from a great gash and poured all its fiery light onto him alone; the stifling humidity; the heavy rainfalls that lasted less than a few minutes; the people he met in the hamlets and the vastly different breed he saw in the cities; the unimaginable horror of certain black moments when the mood and texture of the war almost overwhelmed him; the mine he had nearly stepped on that was off the side of a trail where, according to the intelligence reports, all the mines had been cleared. He became so involved in his reminiscences that I no longer felt like part of a class, but rather like someone peeping through a hole and discovering another person's long-buried secrets. In a way, rightly or wrongly, I thought of his monologue as a sedative against the pain of his memories, as something that gave him momentary relief from his stored feelings of bitterness and confusion. And, because of this impression, I saw myself and the others in the squad as intruders, silent and respectful ones to be sure, but nonetheless intruders, like spirits in a dream.

Because he was the shortest and smallest man in the company, Hack was the "Tunnel Rat" on most of his unit's search and destroy operations. The Viet Cong, he explained, had developed an intricate network of subterranean passageways that delved some 20 feet into the ground and stretched out for miles in long complicated labyrinths; inside were places to eat and sleep, large first-aid stations, machine gun bunkers, maps, agricultural equipment, radios and transmitters, storage areas for food and water and clothing and weapons and ammunition--- everything that people needed in order to wage war. Besides being ideal military fortifications, these hidden enclaves were dependable shelters from aerial and artillery attacks. There were thousands of such underground systems in the countryside, Hack claimed, and whenever the American forces discovered one, they always destroyed it. First, though, the tunnel had to be entered and investigated, and being the Rat, this was his function. Armed with a revolver, a flashlight, two or three smoke grenades, and occasionally a can of insecticide to ward off jungle ants, he had to squirm his way into the ground and then search for prisoners and any valuable supplies or documents; after that was done, the tunnel was demolished with sticks of dynamite. This was, he said rather superfluously, one of the more certain ways to die in the jungle, yet somehow he had made it through without any serious wounds. Dropping his cigarette, he tapped a knuckle against the tree in a gesture of luck

Then, though not in answer to any specific question---for such a question could hardly be posed, even here---but rather in the general flow of his remarks, he spoke of the first time he had knowingly killed someone.

“That first time,” he said, in his slow, Southern drawl, “ya see him over yo sights, runnin’, comin’ straight at ya, and ya can see he’s young, probably even younger than ya are, and ya ease off on ta trigger and, all of a sudden, ya see him drop and squirm all over ta ground, it seems like forever, then he quits, he just lies there, like a possum that’s been squashed on a road by some car during ta night. He doesn’t move. Not a leg, not an arm, nuthin’. Ya got him. And yo’re glad about it, too, believe me, yo’re damn glad cuz ya know what he was tryin’ ta do to ya, and ya beat him at it. Later, ya can’t think about anything or do anything for a while, and ya start ta feel sick, ye think yo insides are bein’ sucked out of ya. Ya wanta do something that first time ta make yoself forget about it, ta never remember doin’ it, but ya can’t, no matter what.”

He paused and took a deep, lengthy draw on his cigarette. Slowly his appearance changed, as if he had just realized what he had told us, and was now filled with second thoughts about what he had said. His face reddened slightly, adding some color to his chin, his eyes opened a little more than usual, making the cornea clear and watery, and he smiled grimly. With his free arm, he lifted two fingers to his jaw, grazed it slowly, then took off his helmet liner and swept his hand across his scant hair. Then he put the helmet back on and let his fingers wander in a small mound of sand that, a few minutes ago, he had shoved against his left thigh. A new cigarette was poised on his lip but was not yet lit and danged there like a small pencil.

“But once ya get by that first one,” he added, reflectively, “yo’re all right. It doesn’t bother ya no more, or at least not like it done ta first time. Ya realize it’s part of yo job so ya don’t mind ta others as much. Ya can’t! Less ya want ta end up a war loss like some people do.” He stopped and lit the cigarette. “They don’t get ta ya like ta first one did. Nah, it’s never like that agin. Ya just see ta rest as part of ta jungle, as branches an snakes an rocks. They aren’t people no more---ya larn ta think like yo drill sergeants tell ya back in basic, that ta dinks don’t bleed, an it makes it easier on ya when ya start thinkin’ that way. A hail of a lot easier. Ya ... ya just accept it, ya get used ta it I guess, ya don’t let it get ya down like it done before, ya don’t feel so bad about it agin, ya start thinkin’ only of yo own life an yo buddy’s life. That’s why yo’re there, isn’t it? It’s yo job, it’s what yo’re sent there to do, an ya do it, plain an simple. Ya don’t even pull ta trigger no more, ya don’t even know when it happens cuz yo’re just lookin’ over yo sights and kinda lightly brush a finger against ta trigger and blam! it goes off. An somebody’s on ta ground screamin’ his guts out, an all ya know is that it ain’t you. Ya’ve got no choice about it. It’s him or ya. That’s all it comes down ta out there.” He stopped and relit the dead cigarette. “Right?”

There was a silence. Not a silence of judgment or contemplation, just a long empty silence. Hack smoked his cigarette and then, after finishing it, went on to tell us some other things about his year in combat, talking quietly and intensely right up till it was time for us to leave. As I listened to him, I continued to have the feeling that I was intruding upon his privacy, and though fascinated with what he had to say, I felt uncomfortable and, strangely, began to experience a sense of actual embarrassment, as though I personally had done something foolish or wrong. So I tried not to listen any more, and to use the time to think of more pleasant things, but his reminiscences had left in me a sharp, lingering chill I could not seem to shake. Never, I thought silently to myself, had I ever dreamed I would hear someone confess that he had killed a person. Yet now, as frankly as if he had been talking about the weather or his plans for the coming weekend, Hack had given us a personal description of this most terrible of human acts. I could hardly believe it. But, what was perhaps even more incredible, the longer I thought about it, was the realization that I was now in a community where such an admission could be made without apology or fear. That, clearly, was the most astonishing thing of all.

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