

While Winning Hearts and Minds

Opening the door to that wonderful room caused the April morning sun to spill into the dark, dreary corridor where I stood. The room had been some kind of ballroom and was situated on the southeast corner of our building where, at any time of year, sunlight worked its magic to assuage the ennui of the idle soldiers who called it home. As I entered, someone called out, “ten-chut,” and everyone quickly rose. The card players stood by their chairs and the loungers by their bunks. Six months as a 2nd lieutenant and I was still unaccustomed to this kind of obeisance.

The room was about 25’x40’ and all of the bunks were perpendicular to the four walls— home to the men of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon. In the center were three tables, evenly spaced, each surrounded by four chairs. As part of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, we were comfortably ensconced in this fine old South Korean hotel. Only two doors away, down that dark hall was my room with a cot, a desk and a typewriter. Next-door was the room of my number one man, Sergeant Holmgren.

The U.S. Army’s primary mission, after have freed this little-known country from 30 years of Japanese domination, was to stem communist activities and see that the pro-American government we were trying to establish remained viable— and pro-American. Our own little slice of this mission consisted of traveling about our assigned area and reporting any insurgency. The Allies had occupation responsibilities all over the world and the tired

men who had won the war wanted only to go home. We were the younger brothers and sons of those men and it was our job to police the defeated countries and their colonies.

“As you were, men,” I said. “I only have a thing or two to say. We haven’t had a patrol in weeks and I am bored as hell, as I suppose are all of you. Anyway, the company carpenter has asked that we supply three or four men every day to help erect a pre-fab hut to expand the signal building. You can volunteer now or I’ll have Sergeant Holmgren make up a roster.”

No eager volunteers responded so I shrugged and turned to go. Before reaching the door I was stopped by Corporal Novak. “Sir, if I could impose on you for a few minutes. I’d like for you to listen to something Private Swisher has to tell.”

“Sure, let’s hear it.”

Novak led me to the bunk where Swisher was standing. He looked wan and seemed unusually fidgety. I liked Swisher a lot. He was nice little guy from Wisconsin, bright, scholarly and well spoken. He was very observant during interrogations—excellent memory—a good man to have on an important patrol. A little more power to his personality and I could have promoted him.

“Hi there Swisher,” I offered breezily.

Novak looked to me and said, “Can we sit, sir?”

“Sure, by all means.” So I dropped onto the bunk opposite Swisher’s. The two men sat facing me.

“Last month, sir,” Swisher began, “I got this dose of clap; ironic too—first experience

I ever had with a woman. The doctor said I was lucky; had I come to the hospital a month earlier, I would have had a whole series of penicillin shots. Now they had a newly developed shot that could knock it out in one treatment, but I was to stay overnight.

The next morning I was taken to a camp where, I understood, I would be lectured, for a few days, on the dangers of venereal diseases. It was a small tent city located south of town and I was, at once, put to work digging a latrine. I worked until 6:00 pm and then was given some soup with bread. After that, and while everyone was getting ready for bed, I was filled in as to the real purpose of the camp. It was much more than a few days of lectures and horror movies. It was punishment for our sins, conceived and overseen by a Major Moore.”

I broke in, “A tall blonde guy with a saggy face?” Swisher nodded yes and I said, “The guy is a lunatic.”

“I know, sir,” Swisher replied. “Everyone in the camp knew.”

Then he continued. “He’s a sadist and a religious fanatic. He said that when he learned of the growing incidence of VD he decided that the medics were not doing their job. Abstinence and getting right with God were the only answers. Making condoms available had failed, so he conceived the idea of the camp.

“Some said that in recruiting the camp cadre from the rifle companies, he chose the most vicious non-coms available and it sure seemed to have been true. The everyday head of the operation was a Lieutenant Bosco— a really scary guy.”

“A Neanderthal,” I said. “I came over on the ship with him. There was no way that idiot could have made it through Officer’s Candidate School without bullying some poor sap into doing the work for him.”

There was a pause. Swisher looked down, then began again, “I soon learned that my stay was to be more than a brief stop-over. Our sentences were for thirty days and a typical day began at 4:30am. We washed, had a barely edible breakfast and were on the job at 6:00. Lt. Bosco gave perfunctory prayers before each meal, before beginning our work, and at the end of the day. I felt like a Muslim.

“We dug six by six holes then filled them. We crushed rocks with sledgehammers and made walks in the mud all around the camp— most of them went nowhere. We worked from six to six and were so exhausted that there was no thought of recreation— no Saturday afternoon off. And Sunday— The Day of Rest— was almost the worst day. We didn’t work because it was the Sabbath and after a soggy breakfast, we attended movies and were shown graphically what could happen if one continued in his wicked ways. Then church: two hours or more of a moving service by Major Moore.

“One of the things that made the place even more terrifying was the extension rule. Misconduct, judged at the whim of any of the cadre, was punishable by another 30 days.

“I had arrived with a tough Jewish kid from New York and we became friends. At our first Sunday service, the major spoke of the way to heaven being through Jesus alone. Ira, my friend, looking bored, rolled his eyes at me. I was afraid that if they had seen him it would mean an extension. Outside, I told him about my concern. He shrugged and said, ‘Hell! I’m a Jew. I shouldn’t have been there.’

“That next Sunday Ira and I had each completed almost two weeks in that hellhole. Ira informed Bosco that as a Jew he shouldn’t be compelled to attend the services. Suddenly he was someone caught up in a tornado. Lt. Bosco was pulling him this way

and that—screaming at him—and then flinging him against the wall. Ira was cited for insubordination, had 30 days added to his sentence. Then we all left for church. During the service I glance to the back of the room; Ira and Lt. Bosco were seated together.

“After the service, I arrived back at my bunk and Ira, his head in his hands, was seated on a foot locker sobbing. Here is this tough New York kid completely broken. As I watched him, I swore that they would never get me there again. And now I’m having a recurrence of the damn gonorrhoea. I guess that new drug doesn’t work. I can’t go to the hospital this time and I can’t live 30 more days with Lt. Bosco.”

That seemed to be the end of his story so I patted his shoulder and said, “Look, I’m only a 2nd lieutenant—the bottom rung. Outside of this room I carry very little weight, but I’m going to do something about this. I have a doctor friend I’ll talk to. Plan on a trip to the hospital tomorrow. I promise you that neither you nor any of my men will go to that camp again.”

It was Saturday and that night, at the Officers’ Club, I would see Captain Frank Mauro from the medical detachment. Frank was my good friend and didn’t seem to mind hanging out with a 2nd lieutenant. I got there early and didn’t see him so I got a beer and took a seat near the bandstand. Finally he came through the door, smiled and nodded to me while picking up a scotch at the bar; then he ambled over and dropped into the chair beside me. We exchanged the usual greetings and after a few minutes I said, “Frank, I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve something really important to talk to you about.”

Just then Captain Dodge, my immediate superior, worked his way over and dropped into chair beside Frank. “I can’t leave you two alone. You might start talking about me,”

he said.

The Captain drank a lot, yet I had never seen him drunk. This night he seemed a bit jollier than usual. He called to the waiter, “Hey, Kim, get these gentlemen a drink and put it on my tab.”

“No thanks Captain,” I said, holding up my drink, “we’re good.”

Captain Dodge lifted his drink as if to toast, then said to Frank, “Doc, you know something, I love this kid— best damn platoon leader there ever was. I send him out on a mission and he never fails. I get a typed report— lots of facts— a form that looks like Hemingway wrote it. I used to get a jumble of raw notes that took me days to decipher, and then more days to turn it into a something comprehensible. Now I put my name to his report and it’s off to G2. I tell you I love this guy.”

I was floored. We had never seemed to click and I had been afraid he was considering shipping me out to a line company.

“I’ve got to get back to my wife,” he said. “Nice talking to you boys.”

Turning to me, Frank said, “What’s this big thing you wanted to talk to me about, Charlie? You looked so troubled. —Wait a minute, let me guess: —You’ve got a dose. —Naw, you’re in love with some friggin’ nurse. Or— maybe you’re homesick and want your mommy.”

“Cut it out, Frank, I am serious. It’s that goddamn concentration camp Major Moore is running for VD patients.”

“Whoa, Mr. Crusader, I’m on to that and doing everything short of insubordination to close the damn thing down. As soon as we, over at the hospital, heard what was going on

we circled the wagons —quit reporting VD cases. Flus and colds have become epidemic. Now that's not a good thing to do. We need to have honest figures to support our supply requisitions.

“I thought that Moore, seeing his population dwindling, would surmise that he had won his war. But the camp is still there. I don't know where he's getting his new people; we haven't sent any for a couple of weeks. This has got to stop and we've got to start keeping records again. I didn't think talking to Moore's pal Colonel Smith would do any good so we kicked it upstairs to Division. Now we're waiting.

“I'm glad you're with us Charlie. I have been worrying over this thing ever since I got wind of it. You keep talking it up; tell everyone you know. If enough of us get fervent, we might sway Colonel Smith, then we won't have to wait for Division.”

I smiled and responded, “Nothing like having a 2nd lieutenant on your side, uh, Frank? —But I do have one urgent need. One of my men went through that hell. He thinks he is having a recurrence and doesn't want to see you guys.”

Frank nodded and said, “Who could blame him? Tell him what I said about it going unreported. —No, just tell him to come in and ask for me and that you've got it covered. We need to test him again, but my educated guess is that the dripping is nothing— maybe psychosomatic, brought on by what he went through. We'll hold him for about a week and see if it doesn't stop.”

I said goodbye and hitched a ride back to my barracks. I got a good night's sleep and after breakfast, headed for the I&R squad room to give the news to Swisher. Walking down that part of the hall where the sun beamed through that lone skylight, I was

euphoric. The Old Man loved me. I had stepped up for one my men and succeeded. Hey, I was quite a guy. Then I heard the report of a rifle. “Some goof cleaning a loaded M1,” I thought as I raced down the hall, “I sure hope no one is hurt.”

People were pouring out of doorways along the way. At the bend of the corridor was the door to the latrine where everyone was pushing to get in. As I reached the door, Corporal Novak, having fought his way out, locked eyes with me—and I saw terror. “Aw, Lieutenant,” he screamed above the din. “He did it— Goddamn it, he did it.”

I bulled my way through that crowd to the open stall they had grouped around. I looked in to see a crumpled little boy in a soldier suit looking up with blank eyes and a gaping mouth. I followed a meandering stream of blood make its way to the floor drain. I looked again at that face. Poor little Swisher.

I wheeled and fought my way back out. Novak was leaning against the wall sobbing. I raced down the corridor to the headquarters office, no one was there so I grabbed the phone and got the hospital on the line. I explain that a soldier had been shot, then I returned to the corridor. Looking down its length and through the bedlam, I saw Novak still leaning against the wall crying. I ran to him.

“It’s over Novak,” I said. “He shot himself through the mouth; there’s a hole in the back of his head.” I took him by the shoulder and began walking him down to the east corridor, then to the squad room. At the door, I pulled in a deep breath, expelled it and said, “Would like to go to my room and lie down?”

“Yes Sir,” he sobbed.

We walked on to my room. I opened the door and guided him inside. I didn’t go in.

As I turned to leave he called to me, "Lieutenant, you and me, we know the bastards who did this, don't we?"

I turned to the side, faking a look back. I didn't want to cry with him. Then, reflexively using my commissioned officer's voice, I answered, "Yeh, Corporal, we know."