

1975

YOU CAN'T FIGHT IF YOU CAN'T SING



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The challenge with earning and wearing the green beret is that people cannot predict how one will react to insanity.

While most officers accept the “Army Way” as being the divine guidance from the Puzzle Palace on the Potomac (also known as the Pentagon), Special Forces officers tend to rebel. They either question the conventional wisdom or just ignore it.

One of the strangest letters of reprimand I ever received involved my discovery that one cannot fight unless one can sing.

The year was about 1975.

I was the Operations and Training Specialist for the 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Fort Hanna, in Birmingham, Alabama.

Although I was a captain, I was responsible for the organization, training and mobilization of six battalions (in five states) and three separate companies.

This Special Forces Group was a trend-setter.

We were the first Reserve Component unit to have a Five-Year Training Plan. It not only included our training goals and measurements for those goals, it specified where we would conduct annual training and what we would accomplish during that period.

We had just completed a record-setting Annual Training wherein we deployed and controlled battalions into Idaho, Washington, Utah, Colorado and another state I can't remember.

Needless to say, we were “riding high in the saddle.”

We were at our peak of performance, and our world had begun to take notice.

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Life was good.

Among my areas of responsibility was mobilization planning. It involved ensuring that we had a Mobilization Plan. That plan, among other things, showed how we were going to transport all of our equipment in the event we were sent to war.

Having been alerted that we would receive an Annual Inspection of our training, administration and mobilization planning, we had devoted countless hours for three months to ensuring that everything was ready.

The man-hours my Operations Sergeant and I spent on updating, checking and rechecking the Mobilization Plan exceeded 80 hours. In addition, that plan was examined by the Headquarters Administrative Team (S1), the Logistics Team (S4), and the Support Battalion's people.

Knowing that mobilization planning was a "big deal" during that year's inspection, our Administrative Assistant, Major Donald R. Watts, had us write, edit and rewrite the Plan over and over and over.

We even went to the expense of bringing in all the Support Battalion's vehicles and physically loading the weapons, equipment and materials on them to ensure that our diagrams would work in a real mobilization.

Then Major Watts and his Administrative Assistant, SFC Donald Williams, inspected the plan. Finally, Major Watts pronounced it as being excellent.

Then he requested the State Headquarters inspect it. Inspected on two separate occasions, each inspection team announced it was the best they had seen in the state that year.

One inspector thought it was the best he had ever seen. Then he was reminded that he had inspected the plan from the 167th Corps Support Command which was his own unit. Suddenly, he remembered that its plan had been better, but ours was a close second.

In addition to the Mobilization Plan's comments, the senior evaluator remarked that our training plans, schedules and records were the envy of the other units in the state.

We were standing even straighter, prouder and taller, and our confidence peaked.

My Operations Sergeant, SFC “Butch” Goff, began talking about the awards ceremony that was an obvious followup to what would be our best Annual General Inspection in decades.

When you’re oblivious, life is good.

Then came the dreaded inspection.

The Pentagon’s Inspector General was an overweight, chain-smoking colonel who was gruff and had all the social skills of a jackal near a newly-killed carcass.

Although his uniform was clean and neatly pressed, it hung on him like a wet towel on a tree stump. The fact that there was no combat patch on it or the Vietnam Service or the Vietnam Campaign Medal — denoting service during the 16 years of the Vietnam War — left me wondering where this ‘desk jockey’ had been hiding out.

(The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, the American War in Vietnam and the Vietnam Conflict, lasted 16 years — from 1959 to 1975 — and ended with the Vietnamese victory, with over 1.5 million people dead on both sides.)

Yet here was a colonel with an array of ribbons, none of which were from that war.

The Inspector conducted the normally half-hour introductions in less than 10 minutes. He read his introductory comments in a flat, wake-me-when-it’s-over monotone, never looking up from the yellowed pages of the script from his well-worn notebook.

All we had to know, he pointed out, was that what he said and what he wrote would be what the Chief of Staff of the Army would read.

Quickly, he announced that although the Army was pushing the “Total Force” policy, relying upon the Active Component and the Reserve Component to go to war as one entity, he knew that the National Guard did not measure up. Among his introductory statements:

➤ “You people think you’re better and more prepared than our inspections show.”

➤ “When will you people understand you’re being held to a higher standard?”

➤ “I can tell how this inspection is going to turn out before I even begin.”

To make a long story longer, the inspector’s exit briefing was a disaster.

While he seemed overjoyed, our unit's members wavered between the pain of watching one's aging dog die and the distinctive let-me-kill-the-bastard look that overshadows one's face just before firing a fatal bullet into an enemy's dumber-than-a-sack-of-hammers brain.

Someone defined stress as "the confusion that results when the mind overrules the body's desire to choke the life of out someone who desperately needs it." It was all I could do to control the overwhelming desire to rip his eye out and hand it to him shortly before snuffing out his worthless existence.

Among the other things the Inspector General flunked was my Mobilization Plan. It failed the inspection.

It seems we had accounted for all our weapons, equipment and manuals — all, that is, except for the Chaplain's hymnals.

That's right: The hymnals.

(According to the dictionary, a hymnal is a collection of songs of praise, adoration or prayer, typically addressed to God.)

Technically, he pointed out, the mobilization regulations are quite specific: *ALL* items must be accounted for in the plan.

He seemed somewhat angry when I — dryly — pointed out that our warriors only needed to sing two songs. We sang "Onward Christian Soldiers" going into battle and "Amazing Grace" for those who didn't come out of that battle alive. Neither required any hymnals.

The disapproving look from Major Watts was enough to have me refrain from sharing any more wit with this socially-challenged, mired-in-mud colonel from the '5-sided wind tunnel' in Washington.

I could tell that Major Watts was angry beyond words.

While my training plans, schedules and records received a barely passing grade, all of his administrative plans, schedules and records received terrible grades. Major Watts prided himself — with cause — for keeping the best-of-the-best publications. Yet they had all scored poorly.

While it's customary to shake hands with an inspector at the end of a meeting, my Operations Sergeant abruptly left the room releasing a string of profanity against the Active Army that was audible through the door. Among his pronouncements was that the inspector was not qualified to pick the sergeant's nose.

The inspector looked aghast. We just smiled. That was Sergeant Goff being — well — Sergeant Goff.

When the Inspector extended his hand to me, I just stared into his eyes. My clenched fists held my hands down by my pant's seams.

When his head snapped back and he stepped to the rear, I could tell he would not be volunteering to go one-on-one with me in our next Mortal Combat Course.

I stepped back and nodded politely, just like my momma taught me to do when the stench of a sinner in church kept one from wanting to touch him.

Major Watts smiled meekly, shook the Inspector's hand and thanked him for coming. His words had all the warmth of five-day-old biscuits.

As courtesy demanded, Major Watts walked to the armory's door with the Inspector and his sergeant and bade them farewell.

After the door closed, Major Watts let out a string of profanity, stormed into his office and slammed the door. In the ten years that I knew him, this was the only time I ever heard Major Watts curse.

But life goes on.

Sure enough, within five working days, I received a Letter of Reprimand from the two-star, Adjutant General of Alabama. It pointed out, that in spite of the best efforts of his headquarters to assist our headquarters, my Mobilization Plan had failed. (It also gave me 30 days to correct 'all' the errors in this 'incomplete and unsatisfactory plan'.)

I had fixed the problem by retyping a single page. My operations sergeant volunteered to type it, but I insisted on doing it myself.

The Group's Deputy Commanding Officer, LTC William A. Jackson, assured me that the letter was just a formality and that no one at the State Headquarters really thought I was incompetent. However, he did say that I could file an appeal to the Adjutant General, but it would do no good.

It would have been a waste of time and spirit to appeal the lunacy that occurred that day.

In my decade of training and service, by that time, I had served with distinction in the 3rd Armored Division, 82nd Airborne Division, 173rd Airborne Brigade, 3rd Special Forces Group, 6th Special Forces Group and 20th Special Forces Group.

I held the Expert Infantry Badge, Combat Infantry Badge and Senior Parachutist Wings and have more letters of commendation than I could count.

I had qualified as an expert marksman with the M-1 rifle; M-14 rifle; M-16 rifle; M1911A3, 45-caliber pistol and the M-60 machinegun.

Until that day, I was confused into believing that the primary measurement of a combat unit was its ability to close with and destroy the enemy, his resources and his allies.

I had no idea that a combat unit can't fight without hymnals.

I had no idea that you can't fight if you can't sing.

The letter of reprimand stayed in my records for some unknown period of time.

We did receive a reinspection which we passed with 'flying colors'.

Until I left the 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne) at the end of 1979, the hymnals were the first item listed, in bold letters, to be loaded on the truck.

The Mobilization Plan received praise in every year's Annual Inspections from that time on.

I never saw that inspecting colonel again.

My Lord knows I looked.

I just wanted to invite him out to the lake for a swim — chains and all.