

The Other Army

Excerpts from a trooper's journal
EXPANDED PRISM MAGAZINE MATERIAL
SGT Joshua J Mellon

I Must Not Be God, Because...

Where to begin... late last evening, I left my M16 in our nearby camp latrine and I didn't realize it until this morning. I'll jump ahead to a selection from the 500 word mea culpa I had to write about *The Importance of Weapons Accountability*: "In this essay, I hope to demonstrate that I recognize the seriousness of weapons accountability, and that I am sincerely remorseful for leaving my weapon unattended. I have compiled a long list of strong reasons why weapons accountability is critically important, but I believe they boil down to three central issues: 1) I am ineffective without my weapon; to defend myself or my fellow soldiers, 2) an unmonitored weapon puts all of us in danger, and 3) a lost weapon will prompt many undesirable bureaucratic consequences." I really focused on this last issue since it affected me the most. After my weapon was returned to me, I was berated by an officer younger than me, stripped of entertainment privileges, made to clean the heavily used toilets every other day, and ordered to stand at attention for 20 minutes in front of my unit. This experience was capped by a demand that I perform 60 push-ups. Though I regularly score within the top 1% on the Army Physical Fitness Test, it was important to ensure that the officer who ordered me to do the push-ups felt like 60 was the right number. This entails breezing through the first 30, struggling a bit with the next 15, fighting through the following 10, shaking over those near-the-end fierce 4, and finding Jesus in that final push-up. Yes, I learned my lesson with that perfect 60. But just in case I didn't, I also have to carry my M16 everywhere I go (bathroom, running, etc.). My training experience just went from unpleasant to decidedly un-fun. An essay that better resembled my true feelings would have emphasized that I don't want this M16 in the first place, and I therefore found it easy to lose. And so, as I write this, I look disdainfully at my weapon thinking: "Well, M16 #24601, we're going to share some sour times together."

An English professor of mine once told me that the best response he's heard to the ancient question of "What is the purpose of life?" is: seek to match how you view yourself with how the world views you. I wouldn't suggest this advice to anyone who is at all interesting, but for the military, I think it's a good fit. There is a well-known respect hierarchy in the military that requires that you match your rank to a certain expectation of respect from others. I find this difficult. I expect more respect than I receive, and I offer less respect than expected. I suppose my personal rubric to gauge the appropriate respect level for myself and others is based on how close a person's worldview is to my own. Supremely arrogant, I agree, and I must remind myself to play the military's respect game and say things like, "I see your rank is bigger than mine, surely you are a person of superior quality." So, as I spend my quiet evenings scrubbing the insides of these foul shit-receptacles with only incessant mosquitoes as company, I'm struck by how there has never been such a large chasm between how I view myself and how my current world views me.

I suited-up and slogged through the desert rain for another evening spent cleaning the latrines when I discovered that six troopers from my unit were already busy cleaning. I stood at the glory-house entrance with scrub brush in hand and called out, confused, "Hey, I'm supposed to clean this. It's a punishment. You don't have to..." But I was interrupted with a, "Yeah, we know; go turn on the hose." I cranked the hose on full blast, as ordered, and watched with surprise as a bold

sergeant doused the entire latrine, and shortly thereafter declared it clean. That's a really good idea, much better than working with this stupid brush. My surprise at their ingenuity slowly transformed into my first pangs of camaraderie with these suddenly accepting troopers. I must have looked disturbed because as the six walked past me one of them offered, "Don't worry about it, we're all a team."

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The Sad Tale of How SGT Afflicted Was Made Insane By SPC Evil

SPC Evil hates girls prettier than her, and said so by spreading the rumor that SGT Afflicted was cheating on her husband with SPC Hollywood. This rumor is at the very least highly improbable considering that Hollywood never misses an opportunity to excessively expound upon his sexual exploits, and he is mute on SGT Afflicted. SPC Evil's talent for, well, evil, successfully solidified this untruth and pushed SGT Afflicted's husband to threaten divorce. This made SGT Afflicted go nuts-o and do everything possible to be sent home. She complained of depression, became withdrawn, and approached me for advice.

SGT Afflicted is a clearheaded, hardworking trooper who left a child at home to join this deployment. I told her to hold tight, open a dialogue with her husband, or maybe get pregnant with Hollywood's baby to get the hell out of here. She felt I wasn't listening to her and confided to me that she felt crazy, like really crazy. I appreciated her commitment to being sent home via the "I'm crazy" routine, but I warned that it could spectacularly fail if proved false. I subsequently dubbed her SGT Oscar for earning a stay at an Army psychological center, but then she was back to Arifjan after only four days. Good try, but I guess it's time to follow my advice and just stick it out, right? Nope, she was on a mission and proved it by slashing up her wrists and continuing to act plain weird. No one bought it, so she just hung around for awhile and was ignored. After another few weeks, her odd behavior finally earned her a psychological evaluation in Germany. Not bad, everyone seemed to think.

My civilian doctor once dissuaded me away from trying to act insane (long story) by advising, "It's very hard to fake the symptoms of insanity." Yet, nearly three months later, SGT Afflicted accomplished this feat; although, without her long hair, which was cut off by the hospital staff. Congratulations, I admire your tenacity. You finally fooled those silly professionals, what with your deeply scarred wrists, months of tearful depression, and traumatic divorce. Yep, it was all a clever lie. Eight months later, she's still in a mental ward...

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Troops First!

Oddly, or not oddly, depending on your experience with motivational seminars, I feel like my recent depression was triggered by a highly uninspiring speaker named Tom McCarthy in a Camp Arifjan/Gulf Telecom sponsored "True Leadership Seminar." This fellow's clients are mostly Kuwaiti oil companies and banks, with Johnson & Johnson and Marriott seemingly on his list for good measure. I'm not sure why Camp Arifjan called on Mr. McCarthy's services. He told our largely officer-filled audience to "play full out," and rhetorically demanded to know, "Who's committed to having fun?" If I was, would it matter? My right hand became sore from pumping my fist in the air on Tom's command while yelling, "Yes!" He said outstanding leaders love their subordinates... This statement threw me into a mental montage of my various Army leaders and their actions. At the end of my extensive recalled footage, I came to the resentful epiphany that my Army leaders didn't love me *at all*. In fact, they seemed to be trying to communicate that they *didn't* like me, much less love me. What a bunch of non-outstanding leaders.

Tom McCarthy's central emphasis, besides commanding us to stand up and absurdly yell "Yes!" was that we have 60,000 thoughts a day that we can control and, well, that's a lot. "Can you believe that statistic?!" I waited for a punch-line, but instead just watched Tom quietly ponder in wonderment that amazing statistic. No, Tom, I can't; if you're conscious for 16 hours a day and actually think the entire day, that's more than one distinct thought a second, and don't tell me your counting dreams because that's bullshit! Tom, bullshit. His 60,000 mantra eventually turned into a new mantra: "Optimize them!" How? "Choose new thoughts... [like] I am an outstanding leader!" Now I'm with you Tom, because being an outstanding leader means loving your troops, and I want to feel that love, Tom. Perhaps because of the lukewarm audience response, he quickly shifted from this love message to emphasizing that outstanding leaders are also confident. Damn, bad message. These officers are already supremely confident. After this weird and disappointing seminar was over, I departed knowing that the officers left feeling that they had attended a great talk which encouraged them to just be more confident, and play full out, and have fun, and something about... love? No, that's not right.

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On Winning

Wow, maybe I've actually learned something about helping myself out when confronted with a military man's struggle with his own inadequacy. While I was performing Headcount, a duty that involves standing at "parade-rest" and counting the thousands of individuals going for meals, a sergeant attempted to bring a bomb-laden bag (...potentially) inside the dining facility. One of my responsibilities is to check all personnel for appropriate identification and block all bags. A military dining facility had been recently bombed via a bag, so I took this responsibility seriously. I told this man that his bag needed to remain outside, and that he would not be allowed in without proper identification. In front of a large group of civilian contractors, this sergeant berated me and yelled that he was the shift manager. Amazingly, I didn't argue. Rather, and watch me now, I informed him that I would need to notify my supervisor of the situation. At that point, he blew up, threw his bag at my shins, and screamed, "I'm the damn shift leader, *specialist*, and I'll do what I want, *specialist*!" He stormed past me after saying "specialist" one more time, while giving me a fierce glare to ensure that I knew I was, in fact, a specialist.

I followed the man and promptly located my supervisor. My supervisor and I sorted through the hoards of hungry troops to find the man, who had taken the liberty of going directly to the front of the line. Boy, was he pleased to see me pointing him out like a terrorist. I returned to my post, and the man who was, in fact, the shift leader, followed me back to detonate on me in front of those same waiting contractors. He did, and I did my best impression of a trooper pretending to listen, but here's my point: I didn't argue. I stated, when asked repetitively, that yes, he appeared to be the shift leader –I couldn't get in trouble because I was doing my assigned job. His bag was removed, the man was forced to show me proper identification (which I scrutinized at length), and I received praise from the contractors for my poise, all in front of the man. Moral? You won't feel burned if you always win power struggles. I felt great for the next week.