

CHAPTER 31A – BLACKBOARD JUNGLE

“With the exception of a very limited number of parliamentary democracies, during a very limited number of decades, the history of nations is entirely a history of revolutions and seizures of power. And whoever succeeds in making a more successful and more enduring revolution is from that moment on graced with the *bright robes of Justice*, and his every past and future step is legalized and memorialized in odes, whereas every past and future step of his unsuccessful enemies is criminal and subject to arraignment and a legal penalty.”

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, p. 355.

Not “codes,” but “odes,” as Mr. Solzhenitsyn intended. I think it makes more sense to say “odes.”

What prompted this chapter, is not the “codes” verses “odes” consideration, but the trigger “bright robes of Justice,” which fell upon my deaf ears at the time I first heard that phrase.

It all goes back to my then pinko-liberal Forward Observer, a young intellectual Artillery Second Lieutenant who had the colossal misfortune of being assigned to my Light Infantry Company to act as liaison with the lanyard pullers of the big 155 and 105 millimeter howitzers emplaced on the various firebases within my Company’s area of operation.

As we patrolled the jungle in enemy infested I Corps, we were usually within range of these devastating monsters, which could spew forth hell in the form of hot shrapnel, white phosphorous, and high explosive energy virtually within seconds of my admittedly talented Forward Observer cranking up their unbridled fury.

The Lieutenant had been charged with accompanying me at all times out there, and in effect protecting me against myself, ensuring that when I called for artillery fire I was located where I thought I was, and getting the bang I wanted on the exact target selected.

I admitted in previous Chapters that this guy more than once kept us from blowing ourselves to Kingdom Come, and often was the winner in our nagging myriad of petty arguments and bets over assumed locations out in that green hell of vicious and confusing flora and terrain.

My disenchantment over the young officer did not touch on his competence or professionalism, or even his attitude, which was understandably jaded and laced with sarcasm. In all fairness, I must color those judgments with my crayons of baiting and argumentative ambush, which stemmed more from boredom than the mean streak within me.

I found myself all too often barking vicious cease and desist orders to gain some relief from his untimely unsolicited comments. But when he was shut down like that, his mouth zippered and locked, he always came back during a more appropriate moment with a little well-considered verbal nudge, to test the water and see how far he could get this time.

Maybe I was reading more into the interplay, and gave him credit for more than he deserved, when realistically he was no more than a single-minded whining pest. But I would always forgive his most recent transgression as it related to the Army's pecking order thing, and entertain the next inevitable probing of my shell, which usually came during some otherwise innocent discourse, such as banter concerning women, beer or C-rations.

Since his sole purpose in life, as far as I was concerned, was the provision of his professional opinion and combat liaison assistance upon demand, I was able to keep his brilliant mind at bay and his mouth in the niche within which he belonged most of the time.

His lot was a hard luck story. He undertook the R.O.T.C. college program and had maneuvered himself into a technical slot within the Army, having excelled in the competitive Artillery programs and earned those combat skills which normally would preclude his eventual fate: finding himself flat out there as a "ground pounder" (Infantry soldier), yet now suffering each and every experience common to the grunt. The rain, heat and insects paid no mind to his Artillery branch insignia or his claim of another MOS (designated Military Occupational Specialty).

In this regard, and to throw salt into the wound which he consistently verbalized like a mantra, I would often poke fun at his situation in the presence of others whom I knew would not only be a fitting and appreciative audience for my cutting wit, but would fully participate, jumping in at every opportunity and adding to his misfortune by throwing barbs which only a seasoned and insensitive grunt could conjure.

Of course, his constant bitching and expressions of sorrow for himself only served to give birth to his further frustration and agony once those *real* victims of governmental abuse understood that they finally had a "RAMF" (Rear Area Mother Fucker) to torture like a cat playing with a wounded mouse, and an officer at that.

I confess that I enjoyed a measure of glee at throwing significant barbs dead on target, and never passed up an opportunity to add to his self-inflicted misery by, for example, expressing my opinion that his superiors in the rear "with the gear" had erased his name from their rolls in order to save a politically-favored designated replacement from doing his duty, such as some Congressman's nephew. Or inquiring as to what he had screwed up, or whom he had offended, to merit such a fate. If these questions are posed with

apparent seriousness, they can be devastating to such a paranoid wretch.

When an intelligent and introspective mind is severely limited in its opportunity to enter into discourse and interface, by debate or otherwise, with another, it must steel itself or go mad. Not that my own relatively meager intelligence was such a challenge for him, but considering the apparent attitude and demeanor of the others in our little realm, the D Company Command Post entity, I was apparently his only reasonable outlet for serious venting using logic or sophistication.

I mean, if he had consistently run up against Prince, Red, Laza or even Mitch with his bullshit, he would be in a chronic state of depression and perhaps be totally ineffective in his job. (Significantly, he never seized upon the Army's apparent "fuck up and move up" policy, which would have provided relief in the event of a major debacle, such as blowing half of us up, and taken him right out of the bush and into a cool, dry bunker on an Artillery firebase.)

Each when these individuals, when confronted with his rhetorical question of "How can a guy shoot women and children?", were quite capable of responding with a straight face: "Oh, you just don't lead 'em as much." For this reason, he never ventured too deep into their twisted realm of reality or debated their particular slant on the situation in which they found themselves.

Perhaps he had sucker in me, but I was a willing participant in his endeavor, I guess owing to boredom in the main.

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It came to pass that a colloquy developed regarding my decision and ancillary orders given during one of the plethora of "search and destroy" missions which had become almost the daily repertoire during the 1968-9 era of the Vietnam War.

An Infantry company such as mine would be routinely ordered to "check out" an isolated village, usually located on dry insular land surrounded by the muddy rice paddy which permitted the inhabitants to eek out an existence, in order to determine whether it was "friendly," and hence worthy of survival; or "enemy." We've all seen the movies where the American unit finds weapons or excessive amounts of food stores during the search, and responds by burning down the place and marching off the inhabitants for "relocation," or something far worse.

Of course, this always involved the guarded protests of the villagers, the anguish of at least some of the troops, and often the sadistic action of certain individuals, stemming from their perceived victimization during some other recent outrageous incident. In other words, retribution. The salient fact in this analysis is that there was, unfortunately, almost

always such a recent outrageous incident, and the commander's succeeding struggle against the *ad hoc* vote for retribution

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Anyway, such a "search and destroy" mission was underway, and my attention was drawn by a gleeful soldier to a particular hooch (straw hut) wherein a makeshift blackboard was found emplaced on an easel. There appeared a crude but certain chalk drawing of a Huey helicopter, and three "stick-man" renditions of soldiers (or persons) on the ground with "stick-man" weapons and conical hats, with little dashes emitting from the weapons striking the aircraft at its most vulnerable points. Without a great deal of imagination, it could be fairly said that the dashes were meant to depict rounds fired by the soldiers, and with a little more imagination, that the rendition was an endeavor to illustrate and target the preferred parts of the helicopter in order to cause its certain demise.

I jumped to the inescapable conclusion that at least one edifice of this township was being utilized as a school for guerilla warfare. And since at the time ours was the only army with air superiority, it had to be *enemy* guerilla warfare.

If one were looking for a reason to torch the village and, at a minimum, relocate the inhabitants, he need look no further. In short, that's just what I did, looked no further.

To this day, I stand by my decision.

Now, you know what is coming next.

Of course, Mr. Pain-In-The-Ass deemed it necessary to second-guess yours truly and develop and offer alternate reasons for the existence of such a heinous and conclusive indictment as to that particular commonwealth.

Consistent with his pathetic and chronic "devil's advocate" role, he commenced a diatribe which included such innocent theories justifying the existence of the criminal evidence as: the sketch was none other than the common child's whimsical rendition of ground-to-air combat as we kids admittedly had drawn in grade school; the blackboard contained none other than someone's illustration in aid of explanation of how the Americans were being assaulted by the bad Viet Cong, and why such an unpatriotic element should not be countenanced; and (this is by far the best) that one of our own Company members had hastily made the drawing in order to ensure the demise of the village.

Trust me, there were no members of my Company so Byzantine as to take this additional step and manufacture evidence. (At least not for *that* reason.)

Nevertheless, the Lieutenant took on the crusade to save the village from its condemnation and our special eminent domain tactics, which of course entailed no appellate process or compensation whatsoever.

Characteristically, the Zippo Squad was already at work, their pyromania getting the best

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of them. Mitch was on the radio seeking some sort of transportation for the relocation of the chronic coughing and sneezing hundred or so inhabitants of the now smoldering confluence of former homes. The animals had been herded along and the villagers permitted to carry off their few precious possessions, such as looms and ancient pedal-driven sewing machines.

The long march toward Highway One was already underway, and the snap and pop of the bamboo trusses and columns to our rear undoubtedly added insult to injury for the poor peasants, many of whom were weeping hysterically and banging themselves on their heads with their fists in outrage, confusion and frustration.

The whole scene, the heavy black smoke and intermittent bleating of beasts, represented just another day in the life of most of us there, except for the Lieutenant, who continued to argue his lost case all the way to the melting asphalt road, and beyond, his arms flailing and his rage uncontrolled.

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That night, he sat next to me after we dug our common ditch, staring into space and seemingly oblivious to the brutal attack of insects upon his eyes and nostrils.

He looked over at me and mouthed something about my “friggin’ *bright robes of Justice*.”

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It wasn’t until many years later that I had the pleasure of reading Mr. Solzhenitsyn’s courageous work, which plunged us all into that gulag and had any red-blooded American reader thanking God for the gift of having been born in the United States of America, free and endowed with inalienable rights.

And when those words about the *bright robes* jumped off the page, I again saw the Lieutenant’s face, his anguished and tortured look that night, with the small insects sticking to his tears, and for the first time, gave him credit for his compassion and good intentions, all in the face of our hostility and vicious ridicule.

end of Chapter 31A

