



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive

Mighty Pen Project

2017

What Did You Do in the War?

Charles Krumbein

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/7

This 1961-1980 Army is brought to you for free and open access by the Mighty Pen Project at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

In 1970, the army sent me, a captain, and my family to Germany to wait until a captain was needed in another war. Having passed the bar, I was a graduate of law school and a lawyer. So, of course, the army made me a signal corps officer sent to maintenance battalion charged with fixing and supplying everything an army corps might need to repel a Russian or East German invasion if the old war began anew. It was a time of a military draft and some people should never have been in any army. An army is not a place for questions, no matter how thoughtful the question may be.

The day came when Sergeant Ochsensclager, an E-8 charged with keeping me straight, said, "Captain, there is a helicopter outside, get on it. It's for you."

"Me?"

"The general wants you in Fulda. Now."

"The general doesn't even know my name."

"Says you, so get on the chopper."

I wanted to ask lots of questions, but Sergeant Ochs' tone strongly suggested this was not the time. I went outside and got in the helicopter. Fulda was two hours by car or thirty minutes by chopper. It was a special place. Stationed there was one of the most important units in the US forces in Germany. It was in the middle of the Fulda gap; a gap or valley in the mountains paralleling the East German border. The mission of this front-line unit was to die fighting to slow down an invading mechanized army, Russian or East German, so that US civilians could be evacuated and the remaining US Army and its allies could group or regroup to repel the invading enemy. The invasion wasn't eminent. The world was focused on Vietnam, not the German border. But the mission was to be ready. These US soldiers needed to be ready to fight. The commander of the unit was using this assignment to get promoted; show somebody his real stuff.

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

Why on earth did a general of Fifth Corps need me, a reluctant soldier at best who had worked hard to develop a reputation as obstreperous? I was about to find out. How bad could it be? Well, that too would be revealed.

I was met by a sergeant major. Wow. These were the real army commanders. An E-9 sergeant major was the highest enlisted rank, earned and deserved. It was the wise head that commanders relied upon. The sergeant major saluted; I saluted back. I knew a little about being in the army. We couldn't talk because of the chopper noise. The chopper shut down its engines, but the noise continued. I was relieved. I decided that meant I would have a ride home.

“Did you see the assembly grounds in the middle of the quadrangle?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, without a care in the world.

“And did the captain see the crowd gathered there?” I almost said yes, the captain saw the crowd. Instead, I simply nodded. “Well,” the sergeant major continued, “That crowd is a black power demonstration.”

I stopped on the way to the rear of the headquarters building. I grabbed his arm. “Sergeant Major, even a brand-new fool like me knows that there are no demonstrations, black power or otherwise, in the army. Sergeant Major, what am I doing here?” I could feel the fear of incompetence and failure jumping around inside me.

“Well, I called the general when the colonel issued ammunition to his toughest non-coms.”

“Ammunition?” I hoped I sounded shocked and surprised. I was both. “What am I doing?”

The answer was worse than a heart attack and I was only twenty-five years old.

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

“The general says you can and will keep this lieutenant colonel from ordering US soldiers from shooting US soldiers.”

“Sergeant Major, you have to be kidding.”

“No, Captain. Trot out your best stuff.”

We were walking quickly in the rear of the headquarters building, up the stairs and in the hall where we found the commanding officer’s office door. He was waiting for me—and yelling.

The sergeant major did not hesitate. He opened the door and ushered me in to the colonel. He was bursting with fury. He was behind his big desk with his back to the window, through which anyone who cared to look could see a couple hundred black, lowest ranking US soldiers raising their clenched fists in the back power salute.

I saluted the colonel.

The colonel let loose. “Okay, you will authorize a declaration of mutiny and we can get this thing over with.”

The lawyer in me spoke up. “Colonel, this has happened very fast. I must investigate.”

The colonel interrupted, “Investigate? Can’t you see those fools through the window?” He used a different word than fool. “They sent me the dumbest lawyer in the whole fucking army.”

“Colonel, this is not a simple legal conclusion. I must be able to report in legalese why this deserves a designation of mutiny.”

“So, investigate.”

“Thank you, Colonel. I am going in the hall to consult and investigate. I’ll return promptly with a legal recommendation.”

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

What a crock. I had no idea what I was doing. But I turned and went into the hall with the sergeant major on my heels. I turned my head, looking for divine guidance.

The sergeant major began to speak softly so the colonel could not hear our conversation. That proved unnecessary as the colonel began yelling again.

I must have looked clueless as the sergeant major asked, “What now, Captain?”

“Well,” I said in my best, most authoritative voice, “We are not going to shoot any US soldiers.”

The sergeant major said, “Right. But how are you going to do that with the commander of this unit ready to give the order and a general an hour away waiting for your miracle.”

“Thank you, Sergeant Major. I am thinking and developing a plan.”

We stood there in the hall. Then we went into the sergeant major’s office.

“I want a step or stool and some kind of megaphone,” I said. “While I am getting ready you are going to get every E-5 or above to get a camera with a working flash—no film, just a flash. Go to the PX and charge every camera to me. I want to be able to surround three sides of the field with non-coms and flashes. I said flashes. Then I am going to get those misguided men back in the barracks where they belong.”

Then I heard the truth if it ever was spoken: “You are out of your mind.”

“At least we will buy some time and I will take whatever blame is necessary. Maybe this works, maybe not. Are you ready, Sergeant Major?”

“Yes, Captain. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I don’t. I’m just making this up.” I don’t think he was reassured, but it was better than just shooting some foolish misguided grunts.

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

A flurry of activity began. Cameras and non-coms were getting ready. It either happened instantly or over what seemed like hours. I began to practice my most important opening to a jury that was not on my side. The sergeant major opened the door to his office and indicated he was ready. Now it was up to the fool, me.

I went outside. Behind me were two sergeants with side arms. I looked to them, “No matter what happens you do not shoot. If someone gets injured it’s me. You run with your sidearm so no one gets a gun and makes everything worse.”

One sergeant put the step stool down and handed me the battery-powered megaphone. It was obvious in the way I looked at it that I did not know how to operate what should have been an incredibly simple device. He reached over and turned it on. He also gave me a look suggesting he hoped I knew what I was doing. I didn’t. I took a deep breath and began.

“I am a lawyer. I have been sent by your commander and the commanding general of Fifth Corps to put you in jail. I said jail. This is mutiny punishable by at least twenty years in prison and in some cases death. That’s the bad news. The good news is no death penalty will be enforced as long as no one gets hurt. Just jail time.” *Lots and lots of jail time*, I thought.

I waited a few seconds to see if I had their attention. Some stopped to listen. Others just yelled, “Black Power” and jabbed their fist in the air.

“I am a fair man and contrary to my orders I am going to give you a second chance. Anyway, I need evidence to put your dumb asses in jail for a long time, so look around. Those are cameras. Mutiny trials take a lot of time. I am going to cut down on the number of trials. I will count to ten. Then we take pictures. If the court-martial can see your face in the photo, it’s jail, lots of jail. If there are no faces, then we will all move on.”

I allowed another pause for my audience to think.

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

I began yelling, “Ten, nine, eight ...” I walked toward the men in the front of the group. “You can’t be that stupid. You made your point, now get the fuck off my quadrangle and save your ass.” After another pause, I continued, “Seven.” Hordes broke and headed for the doors of the barracks to the left and rear. To the right was the PX and to the rear was the headquarters building.

I walked up to the now self-nominated leaders.

One seemed to step forward and yelled, “Black Power. Get your white honky ass out of here.”

I stood as tall as I could and said quietly, “You have won. You made your point. Do not give that fool in the window behind me,” I knew the colonel would be watching, “the satisfaction of dumping on you. Escape and give him the finger right NOW!”

He looked at me as his brain worked. Then he and all the remaining protesters turned, broke, and ran for the barracks. Some flashes went off. Some sergeants with cameras were knocked down in the haste to escape. But I had won. I was the most surprised of all.

I turned with a chest two sizes bigger and stepped assertively toward the headquarters building to report to the colonel. The sergeant major, eyes popping out of his head, needed no report or explanation. He just nodded, his only recognition that I had succeeded. I walked past him up the stairs to the colonel’s office.

I opened the door with a newfound authority. Big mistake.

The colonel exploded. “What have you done?” I wanted to interrupt and say I saved your dumb ass, but I had a small amount of sense and remained silent. The colonel continued, “We needed to make an example of those fools.” He used his choice expletive. So that was the problem. He forgot what the civil war and all those amendments were all about.

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

I didn't have long to endure the colonel's anger until the phone rang.

The colonel yelled, "Who is it?"

The sergeant major said loudly through the open door, "The general for you, sir." I was saved for at least a few minutes.

The colonel picked up. He said, standing at attention as if the general could see through the phone from 200 kilometers away, "Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir," he repeated. Over and over again, "Yes, sir." Then he looked at me. "The general wants to speak to you."

I took the handset and listened. I heard the general say, "Thank you, Captain. The colonel will take your chopper and report to me in person in Frankfurt. I will talk to you later."

At this point I had the yes-sir thing down. "Yes, sir."

I gave the phone back to the colonel who listened, put it down, and almost knocked me down on his way out.

"I am going to Frankfurt to report to the general. He wants to hear from me." He spoke like MacArthur on his way to meet Truman: the master of all—the victor.

I gingerly walked out into the hall. The sergeant major smiled. "What now, Captain? Want a drink?"

"Naw, it won't help, and the sun is still up. I think I'll go the officers club for lunch."

At the officers' club I sat and ordered a hamburger. All kinds of people came over to shake my hand and thank me for avoiding a disaster. One was Lieutenant Folks, commander of D Company, Nineteen Maintenance, and my unit.

He said, "Thanks, that was going to be a real mess."

What Did You Do in the War? Charles Krumbein

I asked with great hope, “Have you got a vehicle going back to Giessen? I need a ride home.”

“Sure, we have a supply run every afternoon. It’s a Deuce and a Half. You deserve better, but it will get you there.”

My burger and French fries came. I could finally breath. All kinds of folks were fighting over who would pay for my burger and the manager said, “No charge, no way, no charge.” I accepted silently.

I went outside, looking for Lieutenant Folks’ office and the Deuce and a Half that was my way home. It came to me. What a welcome surprise. An E-4 jumped out of the passenger seat and offered it to me.

“Where are you going to sit?” I asked.

“In the back, sir.”

“Naw, I need some alone time. I’ll ride in the back with the rest of the spare parts and think about today.”

I walked around to the back to climb in. The sergeant major strode quickly over to where I was attempting to climb in. He snapped to a salute. I stopped and gave him my best return salute. I included a big smile, which we shared.

“Thanks, Captain. The general sent the right lawyer.”

“Sergeant Major, there’s nothing like luck to make a fella look smart. Please tell me how much I spent in the PX?”

“No problem with the PX, sir. We worked it out and the bill is covered.”

What a bargain, I thought.

I threw my self over the tailgate and found a soft place on the cold steel rear floor.