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Danger Close

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“Danger Close” by James Daniel Crawford, May 28, 2020

Part I

Bill Murray’s film “Ground Hog Day” has become an overused cliché in the Army since its 1993 debut; released the same year I was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant and entered active duty. It’s an apt description for 90 to 95% of most soldiers’ time in the Army. Sometimes it works out, but for most of us, we do a lot of “hurry up and wait” and re-living the same monotonous “show” every day.

The odd thing about the Army is that it recruits thousands of young men and women each year who expect white-knuckle excitement during their tour. Doubt me, or wonder where they would get this notion? Watch every U.S. Army recruiting television ad ever produced. How many show recruits cleaning TA-50 gear, manning CQ desks or serving as kitchen police? Prior to September 11, 2001 it was hit or miss if they had exciting tours. Most of us served one tour, decided it wasn’t for us and moved on. Between the early 1970s, and 11 September 2001, hundreds of thousands did not experience combat and served monotonous careers. This is not to denigrate anyone’s service. Just reality. Those who served with honor defended our nation as much as anyone who served in combat. Deterrence is always preferred.

Oh, we had our conflicts post-Vietnam. The Grenada in ‘83, Panama in ‘89, and biggest of them all, the Gulf War, with the made for television operational names “Desert Shield” and sequel “Desert Storm.” I watched from a dorm in school, sure I had missed “my war.” My brothers, who participated, assured me otherwise. They sat in the Saudi desert for several months, drank their two-a-day “warm beer” limit and capped it off with the world’s largest combined arms live fire exercise. Miller time!

These conflicts are, in my opinion, footnotes in American history, or part of a broader story. Someone will be mad and think I belittled “their war.” Not at all. It is always monumental for those who participated. I once told someone back home about a small firefight in Afghanistan. He responded that it wasn’t significant because it only involved a few individuals. True. It wasn’t significant except for those being shot at. If you are the one being shot at it seemed like fucking Omaha Beach, 6th June 1944!

Why do a few stay and most depart after one tour? I'm not philosophical enough to explain. I'll leave that to others. I can only parse apart and share my own experience.

I'm a mid-western kid who attended a state university on the plains of Illinois down the road from one of Lincoln's boyhood farms. I graduated, paid for by the Army's ROTC. I graduated, in 1993, a 2nd Lieutenant commission in the Infantry. Soon thereafter, I was ordered to the "Benning School for Boys" in Columbus, Georgia.

Fort Benning, Georgia; "Home of the Infantry," the spiritual mecca for all Army infantrymen since World War I. Home of airborne, ranger, infantry, sniper, and other cool stuff.

Before graduating from university, I'd already finished Basic Training, Infantry AIT, and Airborne school, and thought I was tough. I wasn't. My training had ingrained in me the desire to become an infantry officer.

Reporting to Infantry Officer Basic Course was an eye opener. Combat arms were male only at that time. Most infantry officers are type A personalities and it created a hyper-masculine environment. It was a fraternity house on steroids with testosterone booster shots. The young Captain instructors splashed kerosene on the fire. The senior infantry noncoms fanned the flames to a bright orange.

Previously, I had been used to a mix of personalities in my small school ROTC environment. It included those who only wanted national guard or reserve roles. Very few requested to be assigned to infantry. Mostly medical or administrative types. Maybe I was a big fish in a small pond. Now I was swimming with sharks.

The infantry officer basic course encouraged an aggressive and competitive spirit. Putting all these type A's together, ruthlessly encouraged by our instructors, created a learning environment that self-wound itself. And it was kept very tightly wound. In the classroom, in the field and on the physical fitness track.

If you failed to conform you were shunned by the group. Any sign of emotional or physical weakness, you were double-damned shunned. If ostracized, it was nearly impossible to get a second chance back into the "club." It built a type of exclusivity that I had never experienced before. Like team

sports, yet more “hardball.” Much more controlled. Painful and scary, but I was up to the challenge. I competed and conformed as vigorously as the others.

The next “separate the men from the boys” test is Ranger school. The Fort Benning Commanding General greeted our class with a question. How long is Infantry Officer Basic Course?

“Sixteen weeks sir!”

“How long?”

“Twenty-four weeks, sir!”

Sixteen weeks of Infantry Officer Basic Course plus eight weeks of Ranger school. Ranger school is the final exam for an infantry Lieutenant’s training.

Our instructors warned us that it would be “hell on earth” if you, an infantry Lieutenant, showed up to a first assignment and didn’t have a Ranger tab.

“Your battalion commander will shake your right hand and pull you over to look at your left shoulder. If it doesn’t have a Ranger tab, he’ll ask two questions. First, why don’t you have one? Second, when will you go back?”

My Ranger course was slightly longer than eight weeks. I recycled the Florida phase, making me an “extra-qualified” Ranger at ten weeks. To describe the Ranger course in detail is beyond the scope of this piece. Suffice to say that it sufficiently toughens young infantry 2nd Lieutenants for the big, bad world.

And I was ready for the big, bad world. The “Benning school for boys” successfully molds thousands of young men, now to include some young women, to lead a platoon of 35 infantrymen into close quarters battle.

My first assignment in the Army was Korea. Never been outside of North America before then. I specifically asked to be assigned there. The branch officer said yes before I had time, he thought, to change my mind. Most new infantry Lieutenants request assignment to an airborne unit. More glamorous.

An ROTC instructor had regaled me with “war stories” of his time in Korea. He called it the “last bastion of the old Army.” This was the early 1990s and because the Cold War, for all practical purposes, ended with the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall, the Korean DMZ was “the only show in town.”

I showed up to shitty little Camp Hovey up north somewhere. Assigned to an infantry battalion as a rifle platoon leader. An air assault infantry battalion at that. It meant we were flown into battle via helicopters, exit close to the objective and fight on foot from there.

My first battalion commander, true to my instructor’s warning, shook my hand and pulled me over and confirmed I had a Ranger tab.

The first night in this battalion was their “Hail & Farewell” at the Camp Hovey Officer’s club, a Quonset hut dating from the 1950s. It was air-conditioned and served cold, cheap beer. The two essentials that mattered. In almost every unit I’ve been assigned, the “Hail & Farewell” routine introduces and lightly hazes the incomers. Farewells are more serious, with departing personnel receiving accolades and making a short speech.

The Lieutenants hailed in this Battalion were given a mug of beer with a unit coin at the bottom. They had to chug the beer in one gulp and catch the coin in their teeth.

The guest of honor, Brigadier General Scales, an old, crusty, tough-as-nails, Vietnam-era field artillery officer, was like out of a war movie. When toasted he picked up an Army canteen cup, half-filled with Soju, and downed it in one gulp. Then he slammed it upside down on the table to the loud applause of the attending officers.

The rest of the night, the Captains attempted to get the battalion commander drunk on Whiskey and Soju. I drank Soju for my first time and passed out.

The next morning at zero-dark-thirty another Lieutenant banged on my door. I was expected at formation in 15 minutes. Still half intoxicated, I dressed, dry-shaved, and scooted over to the Battalion headquarters parking lot.

The battalion commander led all the officers on an eight-mile run. This run called “Around the Horn,” is around a mountain with a steep kicker halfway through at a pass between two mountains.

Lieutenants were made, one by one, to run to the head of the column and report the names of any officers who fell out. I could hear Captains yelling at anyone who might be falling behind. Summer humidity in Korea is worse than anything Louisiana can dish out. Still suffering from jet lag, dehydration, body worn down from Ranger school, half-drunk, I somehow made it. I became part of the “club.”

That first year was not a “Ground Hog Day” experience. Everything was new and adventurous. Leading a rifle platoon is one of the best jobs around for a young man. If you met and kept up with the ever-moving acceptance criteria of the “club” life was fun.

Platoon leaders, the good ones, were treated like the star quarterback on a high school football team. If you were not good you were shunned. Professionally and socially. Good motivation to fit in.

We didn’t know it, but we were already being groomed for the future. Toughened physically and mentally. Confidence boosted by being accepted by the “club.” An affirmation of sorts.

Those who did not make the “club” were ostracized. A type of culling the herd. I had a sense of sorrow and guilt about them but was too busy trying to maintain my own status quo.

I was happy. I had succeeded in my first real test after college. Thought I was on top of the world.