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Tanking the Tankers

June Forte

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Tanking the Tankers June Forte

I fast-tracked the stairs, two at a time, into the 4th Infantry Division's Public Affairs Office at Fort Carson, Colorado. The freshness of a fall day cleansed the air, foreshadowing summer's retreat. A week, maybe two and the main post would change from green to a fiery brilliance of russet, gold, and sunset orange. With nothing on my schedule, I expected nothing more than a routine workday.

Master Sergeant Carl Martin waited at the top of the stairs. "Got something for you." The ground shifted. I followed him to his desk. Captain David Hayes and Sergeant Ken Walker were already there. "You three are heading to REFORGER 78."

I understood why they'd send CPT Hayes and SGT Walker, our only official photographer. But—"Why me?"

MSGT Martin's eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't have picked you, but General Forest *suggested* you go."

Our orders didn't attach any of us to a unit. CPT Hayes and SGT Walker could hitch rides when the 4th infantry units deployed. I'd leave within the week with the advance team. Once I got to Germany, I'd be on my own. Not a place or person to check in with.

"What do I do about food, billets?"

"You'll figure it out. Your uniform will get you fed in the field. You have a shelter half. Find someone to share it."

NATO warriors overrunning the German countryside on foot and in tanks. Talk about Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf. I'd be dodging thousands of horny troops from sixteen countries. I couldn't possibly be the only woman out there for two weeks, could I?

I needed an international driver's license, last week. Not as far behind the curve, SGT Walker and CPT Hayes needed theirs as well.

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MSGT Martin had us covered. “You’re signed up for the 1100 class today at the tank-brigade headquarters.”

We checked in early and found seats. Soldiers filed in the room, filling armrest desks arranged in a horseshoe. I was the only woman in the room and probably in the building. No woman tankers.

A slide projector on perched a metal cart aimed at a pull-down screen attached to the chalkboard frame. The battalion First Sergeant up front did the talking. “Listen, look, pass the test, and claim your international driver’s license. It’s good for ninety days. Don’t pass? Take the class over. Simple?” He nodded toward the projector. “Let the show begin.”

A run-of-the-mill first lieutenant wearing army-issued birth-control glasses clicked the slides over my right shoulder. I cocked my ear to listen, while I took notes. A muffled group gasp caused me to look up. A field of eyes moved from me to the slide. I followed their lead and studied the slide. That gave rise to a ripple effect of swallowed chuckles.

No stranger to Playboy, this photo exceeded the limits of decency. The slide show continued in that vein. Every fourth or fifth slide was raw porn. A slide would appear. Sheepish laughter followed.

I stopped taking notes and drove a stake into the first sergeant’s conscience. He couldn’t meet my eyes. He rocked on one foot then the other. His voice cracked. Some soldiers blushed and tried to melt into their chairs.

Take the test; get the license. I couldn’t join the advance party without it. Poker-faced until the end, until that license was tucked into my fatigue pocket.

The class ended. I closed my notebook, stood up, took in the room. “Who’s responsible for the slides?”

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Tankers heading for the door hoping to go to lunch suddenly lost their appetites and turned around. The room closed in; the air smelled like a locker room full of sweaty men. The lieutenant upped their tension and strode into my personal space. “I am.”

“That’s all I need to know.” I pointed at my name tag. “Remember my name, Lieutenant. You may hear it again soon.” He didn’t say a word. CPT Hayes and SGT Walker watched from the door. Soldiers froze in place waiting to exhale.

“To those of you uncomfortable with the photos in the lieutenant’s slide show, thank you for your concern. For those of you who enjoyed my humiliation, I’d like to share my thoughts on the matter. What just happened wasn’t just a display of ill breeding in an army officer, but a disrespect of you. The lieutenant, perhaps your battalion leaders, think you’re too dumb to sit through a simple class. The only way to get you through it was by feeding you pornographic images at intervals to hold your attention. You should feel insulted. Might want to think on that when it’s time to re-up.”

I left them slack-jawed then headed for the tank commander’s office to complain. He and his deputy showed me the door.

In the short time it took us to get back to the PA office, I knew where I’d go to seek justice. This was not a chain-of-command issue. I’d have to run it up to the 4th Division Commander before the tanker colonel and I converged. To get there, I’d have to go through the Director of Public Affairs. He’d laugh it off. Going over my boss’ head was too much of a risk halfway through my tour. Undeterred and refusing to throw in the towel, I found another route: a visit to the Inspector General’s Office (IG).

MSGT Martin couldn’t resist needling me. “You can’t change the army.”

“Women already have.”

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SGT Walker offered to go along. CPT Hayes, always truthful, foolishly admitted he'd thought the particularly offensive slide depicted a road leading into a deep forest. The staff never let it go. Behind his back, CPT Hayes "couldn't tell a forest from a bush."

At the IG, I found two officers eating lunch at their desks. I related what happened in the training class, and the tank commander's reaction. SGT Walker backed me up.

I added a PA concern to the discussion. "It could have been much worse." Local newspaper reporters were in and out of PA, drinking coffee, hoping for an interesting story. The international driver's license class for the coming REFORGER would fill that bill on a slow day. Imagine the morning headline in Colorado Springs if they had come along. The 4th Division would take a deep dive in the respect of the community.

The officers swept the lunch crumbs off their desks, grabbed leather-covered notebooks, and set off to investigate my complaint. "Wanna catch the slide show before it's disassembled."

They stopped at my office on the way back to tell me what happened. Showing up at the battalion commander's office unannounced, they asked him to review the slides with them. He agreed, "claiming" he hadn't seen them. The colonel sent for his first sergeant. My words after class may have swayed him. He confirmed my account. The IG officers confiscated the entire slide show, carousel and all, as evidence for their formal report.

I never knew the outcome, probably just a warning to the commander. My satisfaction came in imagining what fallout rained on the lieutenant for bringing the IG down on the command.