2023

A Fighting Chance

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Six am in the infantry barracks at Ft. Campbell we privates were awakened for PT. It was my first duty station, a few months in as enlisted. I looked to my left and noticed the little dorm size refrigerator was gone—the juice and leftover ramen were placed on the floor. I knew who took it. I shared a room in this pale-yellow cinder block structure with another guy—he on one side and me on the other, common door and air. In the middle were large metal lockers so we didn't have to look at each other; the headboard of my single bed was by the high squat window while his bed shared a wall with the door.

Woolridge and I did not have a good relationship and technically we could have shared the fridge. Yet he was clear he would not use it, so I made sure it was entirely on my side of the room. He had to have crossed four feet or so into my space to nab it—and do so without waking me up. It is true, he had threatened to take it—if such a thing could be called 'a threat.' In such an environment as the army infantry casual cruelty and laughing about violence was the norm, kindness the exception. Some did have good senses of humor but taking the fridge was not a prank.

His threat, in a sort of big-boy voice, went like this: "I think I'm going to return the refrigerator."

To which I would say, "Why? They gave it to us for free."

He would say, gruffly and as if it were not obvious, "Because you're the only one using it." And? While he was not wrong, it was mystifying why this twenty-year-old would see that as a reason to spirit it away in the night and carry it down two sets of stairs, outside, turn left down the gravel parking lot where all the squads lined up to the CO offices with the equipment and weapons locker.

What would motivate anyone to do something so petty and deliberately provocative? I only wish he was trying to be funny. Woolridge was a boaster—he loved to talk big about all that he would do if given the chance. A heavy-set guy, he liked to believe he was more high-speed than anyone; he knew weapons systems well and sprinkled his hot air with how he would take this weapon and do that with it and really fuck shit up. It was both expected and tiring unless other guys saw humor in the image of destruction. He was a bit of a blowhard, like one of his non-military idols, the radio-turned-TV talk show host Rush Limbaugh.

Each evening, it seemed, Woolridge would play Fox News and, in particular, Limbaugh's late-night show. This was the 90's and Fox was in the early days honing its brand of polarizing polemics. It was not easy to sleep with it as background noise. I suppose it made him angry to hear all that the liberals were doing to ruin the U.S. of A. because he would then at 11 or 12 at night, begin to clean his half of the room. Well past curfew and the rest of the hallway quiet, I would brush my teeth in the common area bathroom across the hall and relish the silence.

Perhaps the one thing he and I had in common, and the similarities end here, is that neither of us were very popular and both of us had our eyes on something beyond where we were. Both of us saw Special Forces as a way to do something meaningful as a career in the military. I was fit, he was a slouch, but he knew his weapons. The first step was to be invited to Pre-RIP or Ranger-in-Processing, a three-day trial where you are kept moving, having to be on the alert and respond instantly and accurately, with no sleep and little food, in the woods.

I personally found the routine of active-duty infantry, in peacetime, after the first Gulf War and before 9-11, to be mind-numbing: weapons cleaning, shoe shining, marching, and details. As a unit we felt unprepared (and in honest moments somewhat scared) for what would happen if we were to be activated or deployed. We trained with Vietnam-era equipment with a

few improvements like night vision goggles. But we did little training for an urban environment, and it was all but certain that the next action would not be fought utilizing the movements we practiced in the woods on base.

I was told I would be invited to pre-RIP at some point; I was odd because while I was bookish, I loved exercise and aced the fitness tests, lifted weights at lunch, and often ran again in the evenings. It felt like my only escape. I did not fit in with the guys, eighteen–nineteen-year-olds from poorer, rural communities, especially the first few months. I liked to read, they liked to smoke and use 'fuck' in sentences. The infantry, for them, was like vocational school without a trade. It was a way to get out of the house, make money for college or to survive in the outside world.

At twenty-three, I had enough college to be a lieutenant if I had only passed. I went to a small mid-western conservative Christian college where I also did not fit in. Only half-kiddingly, I described course syllabi to friends as the suggested reading list because I believed in the arts and could not conform. I wanted to be challenged and the professor's outsourced so much of student evaluation to TA's that it turned me off; it felt miseducative. After I finished four years without a degree, I worked on a purse-seine fishing vessel in Alaska and then came home to my parents to do landscaping and painting. I could see that my future, though, would not be in the trades despite my diligence, talent, and energy level. Still, the irony was not lost on me when a recruiter netted me and I enlisted for the most conformist (and conservative) institution for employment. Poet warrior or "Be all you can be" sucker?

Many days were filled with sitting and shooting the breeze and I had so little patience for small talk. I could not stop wondering what else we could be doing with our time and energy (and taxpayer dollars). By contrast, Woolridge seemed fine to sit and talk tough. If the beauty of

the military ethos is that one is trained to look out for one's buddy, to see if others are squared away—he took care of himself and made it clear that was where his business ended except perhaps when it came to G.I. refrigerators.

I did my level best to befriend; he was sullen. Guys saw his abuse, offered some sympathy, and wondered how it would play out. After enduring his attitude and the late nights for weeks with no movement toward rapprochement, I asked the sergeants if I could get another room / roommate. They laughed; one held up his hands and motioned fisticuffs and another said, "You work it out." I was not a fighter; indeed, growing up in a comfortable enough lower-middle-class Midwest suburb I was conflict averse. The army was the first place I learned that discomfort did not always mean danger and sometimes the sergeants were right.

So that morning, at six am, I felt frustrated, angry, and resolved when I got out of bed. Woolridge walked in the door from taking a piss and I confronted him saying, "I guess by this it means you want to fight?" He looked up in time to receive a right hook that landed precisely on target. His bleary eyes would remain bloodshot and swollen for close to two weeks as the blow had broken his nose. I moved quickly past him into the bathroom and the communal showers—I wanted space if this would continue. He ran after and tried to land a few body blows but quickly enough other guys put each of us in an arm hold and I was done anyways. I locked myself in the stall until others could calm my counterpart down and then they brought the two of us together to say our peace.

The sergeants were not pleased. While I was not too surprised, it was satisfying, in so many words, to thank them for the idea. I felt victorious and relieved. While I was written up and had to do desk detail for a couple weeks, I immediately got a new room and roommate. Beyond the immediate benefit, the new roomie was / is a great guy. A little older like myself, Daris had

also struggled with his choices in life and was reflective, moral, a few months into sobriety and attending AA meetings regularly. He also had a car which meant I could get off-base on occasion.

I received serious 'barracks cred,' as well. I had proven something and from that point forward, my relationships overall began to improve. The other soldiers were impressed and kind of inspired to see me stand up for myself and for a smug talker to get some comeuppance. I think it communicated that I would stand up for them, as the Army wanted, if push came to shove. I would, at least, fight alongside and it was so out of character for me that fellows took an interest.

As the months passed, it was clear that something shifted for Woolridge as well. He seemed to put his head down and work harder toward his goals—exercising, losing weight, picking up slack, even some attentiveness toward a battle buddy. Sergeants noticed too, and when he finally had the opportunity to do pre-RIP and complete the ordeal, I wanted to be among the first to say I was impressed and 'way to go.'

In the all-volunteer army, we all enlisted by choice, but I realized the privilege I had. Many came from difficult backgrounds and joining up gave them a fighting chance in an uncertain, even violent world. While I could not understand the social pressures they faced, I valued their camaraderie and respected their willingness to put their lives on the line. I knew they would stand by me and when sergeant Finney would scold, "And no fighting, Barr!" I smiled.