

New Nonfiction by Kyle Abbott Smith: The Superman Fight



Fights within the infantry were common enough that their variations came to be source material for a dark form of in-unit comedy. So it was with one of my tussles in the Pendleton dirt.

My platoon, nearing a four-day weekend of liberty, hurled headlong into its assignments like men frenzied by a demon possession. Our leaders enthralled our thinking minds with the simple incantation of the word "leisure" alone. Noncoms whipped themselves into a lather, finding a way to use the carrot of a long weekend as a psychological stick. Every whiff of insubordination, every instance of languor was shouted-out as sufficient cause for losing precious hours of rest.

Leadership had planned this so-called Final Exercise prior to our release. It was as a field maneuvers demonstration—a check mark within the long list of requirements needed to attain the status of combat readiness, elevating us from a training atmosphere to a higher, deployable strata.

We hustled overladen vehicles hungrily about a portion of the base restricted from live fire. So deprived of ordnance within our training exercises, we found ourselves reduced to infantile instances of make-believe that rapidly bled-out the platoon's energy. The brass fed us unsatisfying reasons for our empty magazines and absent ammo boxes related to fire safety and protected wildlife species, all of which we decoded as thin cover for their avoidance of the paperwork and bureaucratic effort involved in drawing ammo and identifying a suitable training theater.

Jokesters in the platoon gifted us with over-blown sound effects to mock the silliness of the exercise, improvising the blast sounds of an 81 mm mortar system before gamefully cycling through childlike takes on the percussive noises of our small arms weapons. Daunted more by boredom than combat, they struggled mightily against the dullness by inventing a soundboard of fictional laser guns to mine for any scarce

laughs. Gruff Marines felt uncomfortable as such horsing around left a residue of foolishness, implying the unwelcome notion that we were unserious men at play. Soured by the exercise, the warrior class of our platoon retreated into stoic silences and meditative tobacco dipping, abruptly disinterested in bird-dogging us onward.

We were ordered, uncharacteristically, to establish a static firing position for all eight of our mortar squads without the usual fuckery of being shifted about the terrain like a knight giving chase across a chess board. We set aiming stakes, assembled the M252 81 mm mortar systems, practiced site-to-site procedures to ensure we were firing as a unit, and spent the ensuing hours digging ever deeper mortar pits, filling sandbags, and rotating out to periphery watch positions, vigilant for an imagined enemy within the borders of Camp Pendleton and, unthinkably, within the United States.

Idle hands.

We settled in for the night with ample time to find cause for complaint, for our muscles to tense from disuse, and to turn on each other.

Morning came sleepily with its characteristic valley cold. Light fog lazed about the hills until chased away by an ambitious California sun. We burrowed into our three-layer sleeping bag systems and bulked-up on layers of Polypro undergarments which we shed through the slow progression of the day and its rising heat. Relative to other large-scale exercises, we were skating along Easy Street which we managed to spoil with the tone of our own malaise.

There were no hypothetical fire missions, no ammo dunnage to be cleaned, and our weapons would be free of carbon upon our return to the armory. There was only the occasional squawk of the radio and light whispers between the radio watch. The officers and Staff NCOs hovered around some kind of illicit

field coffee maker that could have easily set the dry grasslands afire.

We reconciled ourselves to eating MREs the likes of beef stew or teriyaki chicken for breakfast, tending to their careful heating and preparations like entranced Zen masters engaged in sacred ritual. Some Marines tugged dog-eared novels from overstuffed cargo pockets and sought their escape through the mind. Others napped within their flak jackets and deuce gear, ready to move at a moment's notice should such orders ring-out like spontaneous gunfire.

I was sent on an early perimeter watch rotation having been spared from a night shift through a miraculous cosmic dice roll. The lax discipline that was everywhere on display had seeped into my bones, and I sauntered to a watch position on an elevated ridge cocooned in my green poncho liner which I had tucked into the neckline of my flak jacket, flagrantly assuming too much comfort to be an effective guard. I chose a prone position, laying on my stomach, occasionally scanning the hillsides for movement. Intermittently, a few CAAT platoon Humvees could be seen, sight-lined along various hillside approaches.

"Contact right!" I called out, generally unclear if CAAT was considered our ally or our enemy in this particular portion of the pretend field exercise, as much to feign attentiveness than out of any real desire to invest effort into the day's training. Our platoon leadership generally held back the underlying intent of any given exercise as a means of bottling information to feed their own self-importance and maintain an artificially created advantage they lorded over us. The only information that filtered through the sieve of ranks was when to break down, where to go, and when to dig-in. All else was "need to know" and it had been made abundantly clear that I didn't ever need to know.

Having established a veneer of alertness by communicating a

few vehicle approaches, I allowed the cool of the morning fog to lull my body into a relaxed state and slow my breathing as I pretended to look out beyond the sights of my weapon. Sleep quickly overtook me, drawing me down into a place of deep and inner calm like a rounded stone welcomed gradually to its new resting place at the bottom of a quiet pond.

“Wake the fuck up, Smith!” a voice screamed into my ear. His volume was deafening and was easily loud enough to carry throughout the valley. I had been caught. Panic and adrenaline began coursing through me. I had never fallen asleep on watch before; this was something I prided myself on, though many Marines struggled with the discipline of it throughout their enlistment. Yet, here I was, undeniably in the wrong and spotlighted before the Staff NCOs and the officer. I scrambled to my feet and sought out the snitch.

Alanzo.

Chunky. Worthless. He stood leering over me, a light duty commando who was able to slip through the cracks of the Marine Corps by embracing an encyclopedic documentation of his various and vague ailments that precluded him from ever engaging in any serious training. It confounded me as to why he had chosen to be in the infantry when he so clearly did not belong even, apparently, by his own assessments. I could understand not being talented; I could not abide the way he gamed the system to drift by. If you don't want to be here, my thought was, then be bold and shoot yourself in the foot or take a few sips of weed like some many others did and move on. Don't waste everybody's time pretending you're a part of the unit instead of a platoon bottom-feeder in search of an easy way out instead of working your way up.

He represented all that was wrong with the Corps. He regularly cheated on his Physical Fitness Test, finding sympathetic or similarly chubby Marines who would lie about the number of sit-ups he could perform in the span of 2 minutes to goose his

score by about 50 points. There was no cheating on pull-ups or run-times, which were too public, but it was obvious he did not meet the weight requirement standards, nor could he complete a unit run without falling back, wheezing and making over-exaggerated facial contortions intended to convey the depth of his unbearable pain to justify his inability to run further. Through his sick hall manipulations, he managed to alter his status to non-deployable before our pump to Iraq. Though his pretense had sickened me, I was glad he hadn't participated in the invasion. I had no desire for someone of his questionable worth to supposedly watch my back. Perhaps more true, I felt his inclusion in the Corps cheapened what it meant for me to be a Marine, robbing my chosen struggle of its intended meaning. That he represented what it was to be a Marine dimmed the light of our collective reputation.

His presence compounded my embarrassment and fear at having been caught shirking my duties. I felt dirtied by his involvement. Those emotions immediately evolved to rage at the sight of this shit-bag Marine gloating at having the upper hand over someone (anyone!) to divert the negative attention away from himself and garner a sliver of praise, if only for a fleeting moment. I reacted in the only way that made sense in an infantry platoon. I balled my fist and let fly a wild haymaker at the general direction of his stupid face.

My punch smashed into the side of his Kevlar helmet, dampening its intended effect but delivering enough power to knock him to the ground. After he fell, I immediately scrambled atop his chest to pin him to the ground with my body weight and began raining blows towards his mouth. My strikes were largely ineffective given he wore armor and used his flailing hands to shield the exposed portion of his mouth and nose and eyes. In the heat of the grapple, he managed to shoot his fingers up and into my mouth, thrusting his fingers into my throat. I let loose a bizarre animal growl, frustrated, and swatted his hand aside before resuming my ineffectual attack on his face. My

anger was only ramping up, with years of smoldering disdain for this near worthless Marine stoked to blast furnace rage by his momentary air of superiority over me.

We had the platoon's full attention. There wasn't much going on that morning, so it was a welcome entertainment. Even so, it could only be allowed to go on so long.

"Smith, get your fucking ass over!" called Corporal Wes. My anger waned, undermined by the uncertainty of just how bad the disciplinary action to come would be. "Now!" I didn't have much time to think it over. I released Alanzo, shoving myself to a standing position by pushing down on him to add a parting gesture of disrespect. I ripped the poncho liner out of my flak jacket, realizing how undisciplined I looked, collected my light machine gun, and trotted back to my squad's mortar pit.

"What the fuck were you doing?"

"Punching that piece of shit in the face, like he deserves."

"You were sleeping on watch, weren't you?"

"I was," I admitted, clenching my jaw, forever proud.

"I sent him over there. I knew you were sleeping, idiot." I didn't respond, waiting. "Why do you think he was wearing armor? I told him to put on his Kevlar before messing with you. Fuck! It's like I'm a puppet master pulling all the right strings! I knew you'd take a swing! I willed it into being!" he said, smiling around an oversized dip of Copenhagen snuff. I couldn't tell if he was proud of himself for busting me asleep on watch, for manufacturing conditions that led to Alanzo getting punched, or for having an excuse to screw with me for the remainder of the field exercise. Probably all three. Corporal Wes—master drama tactician. I appreciated the subtle genius of it. In addition to the obvious amusement, I had also served as an example to the remainder of the platoon

to tighten up. There was always a sacrificial lamb, and I had become the fool unknowingly marked for slaughter. Worse still, a fool unredeemed by innocence.

“What are we going to do with you?” he asked, rhetorically. I knew enough not to offer-up any solutions. Best to shut your face and work through whatever came. I deserved it, which made it easier to swallow. “To start, lock your body at Present Arms. Now hold out your SAW straight-out at arm’s length. Keep your arm perpendicular to the deck.” I followed his order. I was well versed in this game from boot camp. He observed me as the strain grew in my muscles, then he glanced at the Staff NCOs and the Platoon Commander who were watching from a distance. Unsatisfied with the visual tableau he’d created, he unclipped the Kevlar that hung from my deuce gear and placed it atop the flash suppressor on the barrel of my machine gun. He forced me to heft an extra five pounds or so, cantilevered at the distance of my extended, skinny arms. The weight immediately created fire in my delts and shoulder muscles. “You better keep it the fuck up, Smith.”

“Aye, Corporal.” The worst part was not knowing how long it would last and was worsened by knowing that it was a biological fact that I would ultimately fail. I threw myself into the hazing, concentrating my entire being into denying the existence of my bodily pain and to hold my weapon and Kevlar at a perfect arm’s length. My friends walked by, some laughing and shaking their heads, others making weird faces at me to disrupt my military bearing and get me in further trouble for their entertainment. I don’t know how much time passed. Not much. It could have easily been three minutes as thirty. Pain stabbed at my muscles with increasing fervor until Corporal Wes next came by to venture an appraising look.

“Put your Kevlar on and lower your weapon,” he said. “You’re going to be an Ammo Man for the remainder of the day,” he said, demoting me from my usual position of Gunner. “But while we’re waiting for our next fire mission, I want you to low

crawl out to both aiming stakes and adjust them.”

“Aye, Corporal.”

“That’s not all. Put a dip of Copenhagen in, before you go.” He handed me his can of snuff and watched as I pinched a healthy portion between my lip and gum-line. “That’s right.”

I stepped away, clipped my chin strap into place, then began low-crawling toward the first aiming stake fifty meters away, careful to drag my Kevlar’s edge in the dirt as I had done in Basic Training to simulate avoiding direct fire and, more importantly, to help convey the sense that I was being adequately punished. I used my sling to drag my light machine gun along with me, careful not to flag any one behind me, but occasionally (unavoidably) flagging myself, inadvertently breaking the weapons safety rules. By the time I reached my objective, the nicotine ambushed my body, vulnerable in its chemical unfamiliarity, leaving my head plundered and spinning. The day was by then hot. The heat coupled to the unfamiliar tobacco had my stomach turning somersaults. Once there, I made minute adjustments to the cant of the stake based on hand signals from my mortar squad. I crawled to the most distant stake a full hundred meters out from our position. Occasionally, I took a scenic route to circumnavigate clumps of cacti and brambles with thorny seeds.

“Hurry the fuck up, Smith!” Corporal Wes yelled. I marginally increased my speed immediately after he ordered such things, but quickly returned to my previous rate which is the only acceptable way to say “Fuck You” to a ranking Marine while in duty without actually mouthing the words aloud.

Once returned to the mortar pit, Corporal Wes smiled broadly. “Come on, Smith! Lighten-up! You know I had to do something, or Gunny and the Lieutenant would have come over, and it would have been worse. They probably would have fucked with all of us, and that’s when the whole damn platoon turns against you.”

I nodded, acknowledging the truth of this. I was sullen, but more so at myself for having fallen asleep than at having been called-out on it.

Stan Walton, a Lance Corporal like myself at the time, rejoiced in the retelling of my fight. Before enlisting, Walton had routinely played in a Death Metal Band while studying blues guitar at the University of Memphis. He had sleeves on his forearms—tattoos that covered all available skin with endearing messages such as “Dying” scrawled laterally down his forearms, with flaming skulls embellishing the periphery of each word.

“You looked like a retarded Superman!” he teased, smiling ear to ear. “We saw everything. When you went back to wind up for a punch, the poncho liner you had tucked into your flak jacket whirled out like a goddamn cape! Ha-ha! Then you gave this ridiculous over-punch that made you look like something out of a DC comic or like some fool trying a drunk version of a Street Fighter super move!” Everyone in the squad laughed until they couldn’t breathe. He began re-enacting the scene, miming it over and over, wildly exaggerating my every move. I couldn’t help but smile and laugh along with them at my idiocy.

“I just can’t believe you sent over fuckin’ Alanzo!” I kept saying. Obsessing over his involvement. Amazed by it.

“He’s worthless. He deserved to be hit in the face.” This was the general consensus of the squad and, most likely, that of the platoon. It was probably the driving reason Gunny and the Platoon Commander had decided not to get involved, tacitly approving of the desire to police our own. Letting us men work it out like men are supposed to do.

That I had been the bully in this remembrance gnawed at me, undermining my ability to think of myself as a good guy. I had beat on a weaker Marine to cover my shame. I regret. I have so

many regrets.