

New Fiction from Steve Bills: “Bombing Pearl Harbor”



29 April 1971

From: Naval Science Department

To: Midshipmen Second Class, Navigation and Piloting 301 (NAV 301)

Subject: Final Navigation Project-Due: 1600 hours, 13 May, Luce Hall, Room 104

Mastering navigation is critical for every Naval Officer. This project covers topics from the last eight months and represents 40% of your grade. Instructions, answer sheets, and charts are provided. The exercise simulates USS Robinson's

(DDG-12) transit from San Diego to Pearl Harbor as part of a carrier task force. You will serve as Robinson's navigator.

"Company, ten-hut. Dress right. Attention to morning announcements."

Our midshipman company commander's voice was stern at our 0645 morning meal formation. "From the Battalion Officer: This is the final warning for whoever is bombarding the eighth wing tennis courts with debris. If littering continues, an all-night watch will be manned by eighth wing residents."

Chortles and snickers filled the company ranks.

"It's not my fault; business is business," whispered my roommate, Billy Gleason, beside me in formation.

"Maybe it is your fault," I said. "Did you look? Rubbers are everywhere."

The company commander continued. "Alumni returning from their first duty stations will attend a reception in Memorial Hall at 1700 today. First Lieutenant James Creeson, USMC, class of 69 from our company is scheduled to attend if anyone wants to say hello."

"We should go see him, hear his Vietnam stories," I whispered.

After classes we changed from working uniforms to whites and rushed to the reception, anxious to see what had become of Jimmy Creeson. He was alone on the balcony, smoking Camels, flicking ashes into a plastic cup. He was five-six, muscular, a former collegiate wrestler. His skin had a yellow tinge, his hands quivered, the flame dancing when he lit his cigarette. The Marine Corps logo was engraved on his class ring stone. As our first midshipman squad leader when we were plebes, he'd been disciplined but upbeat, always smiling. We respected his demanding nature because the tasks he gave us seemed to have a

purpose. We saluted him, excited to see him, but he didn't return it, nor did he smile. He discreetly took a flask from inside his left sock and poured vodka into his Kool-Aid. He offered us some and Billy, at the risk of expulsion, accepted. We had listened intensely to periodic announcements of the Academy's Vietnam casualties, including Creeson's classmates, relieved that his name was not among them. He looked exhausted, his eyelids drooped, but he had survived. His uniform was immaculate, with three rows of new ribbons, including the Silver Star.

"How's football?" he asked Billy.

"I didn't make the team," Billy said, slouching. "Lost my touch."

"Football isn't everything. It just seems like everything. It's a diversion from all the BS," Creeson said, his voice without inflection.

"How's the Marine Corps? What's Vietnam like?" I asked.

Creeson looked puzzled, perhaps offended, glancing about without eye contact. He took a long drag and gulped his drink. "I shouldn't have come here. You guys, be careful. Really," he said. He walked away, not checking out with the officer managing the reception. With perfect posture and bold cadence, he walked, heels clicking, down the Bancroft Hall stairway into Tecumseh Court.

I felt terrible about asking my questions. We talked with feigned interest to a few of the naval officers at the reception who had completed sea tours. Some had participated in naval gunfire support off Vietnam's coast; others had cruised the Mediterranean, gladly assigned to ships far from war. None of them, except James Creeson, seemed damaged.

"Creeson looked terrible. He didn't look like the same person. My uncle's skin is like that when he needs dialysis," said

Billy.

“The Marine Corps is out of the question for me. I’m going to drive ships,” I declared. Billy, perhaps a little tipsy, was falling behind as we walked, maybe frightened by what he’d seen. “What about you, Billy? Ships? Planes? Submarines?”

“I haven’t thought much about it. We don’t have to decide until January. I guess the National Football League is off the table.”

We were not exactly model midshipmen but did the best our consciences allowed. Billy, from New Mexico, and I, from Nevada, roomed together during junior year. We were brothers in western solidarity, sons of landlocked mountain desert states that were isolated from the Navy. We stayed mostly under the radar, not shining, not failing, getting by. Billy’s business acumen made him famous in an underground way. By junior year, our classmates seemed to forget that he was a football recruit.

Billy’s right glutes, hamstrings, and calves were marvels. His right leg juxtaposed with his left appeared to be twice as big. He held his state’s high school records for the longest field goal and consecutive PATs, leading to his induction into New Mexico’s High School Football Hall of Fame. He was 5’10” and weighed 165—perfect for a kicker. His 800 math SAT and 20-20 vision, coupled with kicking skills, made him a perfect Navy recruit. He told me he’d dreamed of being interviewed on CBS following his winning kick in the Army-Navy game.

After a successful year on the freshman football team, Billy was cut from the varsity because he developed a chronic hook. His range exceeded fifty yards, but he couldn’t shake the portside hex. The team hired an ex-NFL kicker to assist—no luck. His father engaged a sports psychologist who calmed Billy’s sweating nightmares but didn’t correct kicking problems. The Academy medical staff warned his father that too

much psychological treatment could hinder Billy's ability to obtain a security clearance when the time came. Treatment ceased.

Ashore in Italy during a summer training cruise, a fortune teller told him he would live until he was ninety, but kicking was, "I am sorry, che sfortuna." He tried confession in Saint Peters, seeking higher authority than the Academy Chapel confessional adjacent to the crypt of John Paul Jones. Religious entreaties failed. For two years, on his way to class, Billy threw pennies at Tecumseh's statue overlooking the Yard. Tecumseh, a Shawnee warrior, brought luck to penny throwers.

"That won't work," Bobby Williams scoffed, throwing a penny on his way to an exam. "It only works for tests—not kicking."

Billy suffered anxiety and boredom with the curriculum that he might have liked if playing football were included in his life. He suffered as an anonymous spectator among the rest of us. I marched next to him many times on our way through Annapolis to Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium for home games. Standing on the field within his kicking range of the south goalposts, waiting for the Brigade to complete the "march on," he softly read aloud names of famous battles decorating stadium bulwarks—Leyte Gulf, Midway, Iwo Jima, Pearl Harbor.

"This is chip shot range for you," I commented, attempting to change his mood.

"No kidding," he whimpered.

In the first game of junior year with ten seconds to play, Navy's kicker missed a thirty-five-yard field goal. We lost by one. A ray of hope emerged when Billy was invited to varsity practice on Monday—he was uninvited on Tuesday.

Billy searched for distractions. He wasn't interested in

Weapons Systems or Seamanship classes, earning lackluster C's. He effortlessly earned A's in calculus, physics, and physical education. He read passages aloud to me from his father's letters, mocking his father's chagrin. When the grades didn't improve, sterner letters arrived.

"Can't you try harder? You're embarrassing us. How hard can 'Introduction to Shipboard Weapons' be? What's going to happen when the weapons are real?"

Instead of studying more, he conjured a plan to become the entrepreneur of Bancroft Hall. He was our black-market Yossarian, a money-making machine, using his version of Wall Street analytical shrewdness.

"I can see the market," he exclaimed in October before midterms. "Everybody wants comfort food that reminds them of home."

"What?" I asked, looking up from homework.

"I can relieve homesickness. I'm going to sell grilled cheese sandwiches at night during finals week. We're going to make a fortune. The sandwiches probably don't even have to be good."

He piloted his business plan during midterms. The Brigade had extended study time beyond normal taps during test weeks and midshipmen were hungry late at night. Billy borrowed money from our banker classmate, Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and he recruited Bobby Williams and me as cooks. We practiced grilling in a Teflon-coated electric frying pan—a violation of every fire code and hygiene regulation in our universe. Billy hid the pan in his basement storage locker and retrieved it at night when we should have been studying. Instead, our spartan team wrapped steaming sandwiches in foil, stuffed them in paper bags with chips, and sold them door-to-door for two dollars each, quickly selling all we had.

When first semester finals week came, applying lessons from

the pilot, Billy upgraded production capacity with six electric griddles and more workers. The buttery aroma of sandwiches filled the hall. We posted guards to ensure that our kitchens remained hidden. Our company's seniors liked the grilled cheese so much that they turned a blind eye toward our enterprise and its brazen violations. We sold over 1000 sandwiches for four dollars a bag, five nights in a row. Miraculously we passed our exams, exhausted, cash happy. Billy repaid Stonewall with interest.

Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, from South Carolina, was the son and grandson of Academy graduates; his father was an oil company president and a member of Augusta National Golf Club. Stonewall received unsolicited monthly deposits, "from Motha," to his bank account and became a lender to classmates in need. After his successful investment in Billy's business, the two briefly seemed like close friends. They played golf and Billy helped him with calculus. In April their friendship crumbled.

"You have Masters tickets?" Billy inquired, a month before Spring Break when the golf tournament was scheduled.

"Of course," Stonewall replied. "Do you want to come? Mason's coming. You should come too."

"I can buy the tickets from you," said Billy.

"Are you kidding? You're a guest," explained Stonewall.

Mason, from Raleigh, was Stonewall's roommate and teammate on Navy's golf team. Mason would do almost anything to escape Annapolis and return to Raleigh for weekends. He bragged obnoxiously about his harem there.

Two days before Spring Break, Stonewall cancelled Billy's invitation explaining that his family "wasn't going to the tournament because MeeMa was ill." Billy had watched the

Masters with his father on TV for years. He was heartbroken not to see it in person but gracious with the bad news. "Hope your grandmother gets well soon," he said. We heard that Mason was still going on the trip, so Billy suspected that his own Yankee roots and lack of Navy "blue blood" had caused the family to veto the visit.

Instead of the Masters for Spring Break, Bobby Williams, Billy, and I took the train to New York, stayed in a Times Square hotel, drank beer, and watched the New York Knicks using free USO tickets. On Saturday in between tourist excursions, we watched the Masters on TV.

"Hey, that's Mason," yelled Bobby. "He's wearing a Navy golf hat."

Billy angrily glared at the screen, his blackball suspicions confirmed.

When we returned from break, Mason told us all about the Masters. Stonewall's grandmother had miraculously, "praise the lord," recovered. Mason bragged about the "ladies of Augusta" with whom he'd "had relaaations." We didn't believe him until we spotted the antibiotic on his desk a week later.

Billy became analytical about Mason's illness and devised a new enterprise to exploit the ways of midshipmen tomcats. He ordered a case of condoms that arrived in an enormous box with no return address. "If I'm right, we have a bull market—more profitable than sandwiches," he predicted. Advertising required delicacy—but he was convinced that confidential sales would be appealing. Mason and Stonewall were his first customers.

"Twenty dollars a box? Steep," complained Mason.

"Not for quality," explained Billy. "You don't have to leave Bancroft Hall. I know you don't want to be caught with your pants down again," warned Billy, winking.

They bought two packages each and I thought Billy was going to be sick with excitement when he considered the profit potential.

Gradually, however, Billy realized what liars comprised the bragging Brigade. He made a few sales to guys like Mason, but no significant market emerged. Even when Billy lowered the price multiple times, nobody wanted rubbers. Occasionally someone would "buy one for my wallet, just in case, you know, better safe than sorry." Billy sulked. "I should have run a pilot," he lamented.

Reengineering Billy's condom business was inspired by my chemistry professor, a Navy Commander whose whites were decorated with Vietnam War medals and a command-at-sea button. He seemed bored, unengaged with class, dreaming of the bridge of his destroyer. During class, he filled a latex glove with water and casually lobbed it to the lab's deck where it exploded.

"The purpose of the Navy, gentlemen, is to deliver ordnance," he proclaimed, suddenly inspired to provide us with important truths beyond the chemistry curriculum.

His explanation of the Navy baffled me. No one challenged his manifesto or even commented on the mess he created. My trouser legs were soaked, making me wonder how much water would fit in one of those high-quality condoms. Around three gallons, we discovered.

"The problem is lifting that little boy," proclaimed Billy. He lowered his prices and began an aggressive advertising campaign, showing others a condom's superb ordnance potential. They were nothing like conventional water balloons. Rubber wars erupted. Bombs were launched and booby traps set throughout Bancroft Hall. Vicious warriors, creative future ordnance deliverers, added Kool-Aid to their payloads—red water bombs were death sentences for Navy whites. For several

weeks floods and condom remnants were everywhere.

Billy became a cautious arms supplier, warning overly aggressive warriors of risks. "Dropping three gallons from six flights up could injure somebody," Billy counseled.

"We're not going to hit anybody, just get them wet. This is America; shut the fuck up!"

Water wars waged by future Navy and Marine Corps officers escalated. Just opening a door could be disastrous and bomb squad pre-clearance became a requisite. Booby traps were planted in the most unexpected places. Halls were awash in a rainbow of colors, slippery, treacherous.

After a month, the antics died, skirmishes completed, scores settled; mutually assured destruction necessitated a cease-fire after so many uniforms had to be replaced. Business subsided and remaining condoms were sharply discounted, deployed mostly to nightly test bombings from rooms above the tennis courts at the base of Bancroft Hall. Spring-fevered weaponeers sick of studying jettisoned enormous bombs that barely fit through the windows. Noisy splashing geysers were so commonplace that we no longer watched them. Custodians grew tired of policing the mess and complained to the Battalion Officer.

Billy and Stonewall had jointly organized and financed a weekend party for eight of us earlier in the year. The party was scheduled for May, a month before our Ring Dance and the semester's end. They had each paid half the deposit for a big house on Chesapeake Bay, ten miles from Annapolis. Because of continued tensions between them as the date approached, Billy requested a refund from the owner, a 1948 Academy graduate, who resolutely refused and reminded him that final payment was due. Seven of us wrote rental checks to Billy who consolidated payment. We cautiously proceeded with party plans, despite the

lingering animus.

Along with our dates, or drags, in Academy vernacular, we arrived at the majestic, weathered house, greeted by warm southern breezes, azaleas exploding with color, Marvin Gaye blasting over speakers, and picturesque views of the shipping lane to Baltimore. The place was calming, filled with the owner's Academy mementos including a signed poster of Roger Staubach. The intended calming effect of the party settled over us, temporarily easing the pressures of upcoming finals and the problematic Navigation Project. Our location, outside the seven-mile limit, a radius from the Academy's chapel dome, allowed us to drink beer and other "laaabations," Stonewall's phrase, without violating Academy rules invoking severe penalties.

Billy prepared detailed plans for the weekend in the same manner he ran his businesses-an inclement weather plan, a transportation plan, menus, assignments for cooking, clean-up, sports equipment, security, safety. We mostly ignored his fastidiousness but were immediately thrilled to see the results of his food planning: blue crabs in bushel baskets and a keg of Michelob greeted us on the screened porch.

"How do you do this again?" asked Alison, Mason's girlfriend.

With his mouth full of crab, Mason explained and demonstrated crab dissection. Alison, a student at Georgia Tech, was the reigning Peach Bowl Princess.

"See, there's nothing to it. The biggest legs, that's where it's best."

"Mason, I've ruined my nails. Can you hit this crab with the little mallet for me? The last one splattered crab guts. Smell your hands, Mason. How are you gonna get that off? If you think you're gonna touch me with those hands, you're dreamin, Darlin."

We fifteen, minus Alison, pounded away at crabs, swilled beer, and occasionally took breaks to eat salad and cornbread and dance to the music. A salty breeze rustled our newspaper tablecloths as the sun disappeared. With his planning, Billy sought harmony, mostly for the sake of recovering his damage deposit. Nevertheless, his planning had gaps. In this case, his oversight was sleeping arrangements.

We had four bedrooms, eight couples, and no plan. Some would be stuck sleeping on couches or on the floor. The relationships, including mine, having just met my girlfriend in March, were in various stages. Most seemed relieved with sleeping arrangements that posed no pressures.

Mason, on the other hand, desperately wanted a bedroom. In the hastily executed straw drawing for bedrooms, Alison and Mason were stuck on the living room floor. Mason continued his entreaties.

“Please, Bobby, you don’t want a bedroom. You hardly know that girl and she’s only seventeen.”

“Fuck you, Mason,” Bobby’s date snarled, taking Bobby’s hand, leading him through the bedroom door, sticking out her tongue at Mason.

Mason waved his checkbook, offering to buy a bedroom. He whined and threatened to leave, but classmates who’d drawn bedrooms ignored him.

Alison had been steadily sipping Manhattans after declaring that she couldn’t deal with crabs. Her speech was slurred as she coddled Mason’s arm and kissed his neck. With no bedroom, she made a cocoon-like bed on the floor with two air mattresses, quilts, and blankets she’d found in a closet. She changed into her Georgia Tech T-shirt and silk gold shorts with a yellow-jacket insignia.

“Goodnight classmates and thanks so much for giving us a

bedroom after I found this place and made the arrangements," Mason spouted, emerging from the bathroom with toothpaste on his lips.

"Mason, you didn't find this place, Billy did. And your contribution to the rent is pitiful. We should make you sleep on the beach," I said.

"There's room on that boat by the dock. You could move this little bed under the stars and practice celestial navigation," Stonewall suggested.

Mason and Miss Peach Bowl looked comfortable, framed by the pinewood floor, perched between the wall with Staubach's poster and a table filled with the owner's collectibles. Twelve of us, now in sweatshirts, paraded past them. We took our drinks to the beach, revived the fire with driftwood, and breathed in cooling breezes. It was not yet midnight—why sleep with so much beer left? The lights shining from Bobby's room ruined the starlight. We saw him through the window playing Yahtzee with his girlfriend. We banged on the panes, beckoning them to douse the lights and join us. The fire, the Old Bay aroma, beer, and female company created a lazy coziness.

"How far did you guys get on the Navigation Project?" Bobby asked.

"I'm past the fog in San Diego Harbor," Stonewall said.

"Relax, enjoy this last weekend," implored Billy. "We have until Thursday. It won't be that hard once the enemy submarine gets out of sonar range and the ship doesn't have to zig-zag. I think it's a straight track from there to Pearl Harbor. If there's some trick, we'll find it."

Under the stars the only sounds were the fire and the squeak of rubber fenders on the motorboat rubbing against the pier. No one seemed sleepy. Suddenly, the embarrassing sound of Miss Peach Bowl's groaning, muffled screaming, and pounding fists

against the pinewood emerged from the house, providing evidence that Mason was indeed the biggest stud since War Admiral. The ending to our jealous, disdainful listening came with the crash of glass shattering—a lamp or vase had been knocked to the floor. We assumed the amorous noises would cease, but they continued. I knew Billy was cringing at the thought of paying damages, but he remained calm, sipping beer, adding firewood. “Mason is such an idiot,” he complained.

On Monday Billy’s bank called informing him that Mason’s rent check had insufficient funds. The landlord also called wanting to know “What the hell happened to my wife’s crystal vase? I am taking the replacement cost out of the deposit.”

Mason immediately promised to pay his rent money the following week but grew hysterical when he heard about the additional cost of the broken vase.

“If you assholes hadn’t made me sleep on the floor it wouldn’t have happened. How did we know that vase was on the table? I can’t pay for it for a while.”

“What about you, Stonewall? You want to help your roomie out here?” Billy asked. “Should we convene a meeting to see what our classmates think about this?”

“It’s not necessary. When the owner tells you how much, let me know,” Stonewall said.

We were deluged with end-of-semester work. The Navigation Project took hours, but Billy was uncharacteristically inspired to finish. Thirteen charts and ten pages of problems covered the spectrum of navigation and piloting we’d studied—deriving fixes, ship positions, using Loran, radar, magnetic and gyro compass readings, celestial navigation with stars, sun, and moon. My charts seemed messy, bleared, smeared with erasures, and sweat. In all, I thought the Naval Science

faculty had created interesting problems. I finished on Wednesday evening and packaged my project as prescribed. Smiling, Billy returned from Luce Hall, waving his receipt after submitting his project early.

"You're finished, right? We can talk about it without worrying about an honor violation?" Billy asked.

"My charts are ready. I'm not opening them again," I declared.

"Did you find the math error in the Antares star line calculation? If you correct the math, the stars cross in a point, a perfect fix," he explained.

Billy's math error discovery was ingenious. I'd never considered the possibility that math errors would be purposefully inserted in the problem. He stood beside our window, rubbing the strings of a football.

"Having the task force arrive on a Sunday morning in December was a clever touch. You noticed that didn't you?" I asked. Distracted, he didn't hear me.

"Look at those idiots." He was peering down at Stonewall and Mason's room, kitty-corner to ours on the deck below. Bobby's room was next to theirs. Football fields and the Chesapeake Bay formed a scenic panorama to the south. Rooms were not air conditioned so in spring everyone kept the windows open. A cacophony of music blared from the open windows.

"What idiots?" I asked, examining the court lit with lights from dozens of rooms where midshipmen were studying.

"Mason and Stonewall. Look at them down there. You know damn well they're working on the project together. We should turn them in."

We turned off our lights and clandestinely watched them, reviving our anger at Mason, confirming our distrust of Stonewall who was peering out the window, yawning, checking

his Rolex Submariner. Mason was marking fixes and drawing tracks on the large-scale chart of Pearl Harbor where the transit ended a short distance from USS Arizona's memorial.

"It wouldn't be that hard to hit them from here, do you think?" Billy asked.

"With what? Noooo," I said. "No."

"Let me ask you something. If you'd broken the vase instead of Mason, do you think Stonewall would have offered to pay for it?"

"Of course not," I said.

"We're just not in the same Navy as they are. Don't you think an attack is justified? My balloons?"

"It wouldn't be that hard, but it's a bad idea."

"One try. If we miss, they'll just think it was another tennis court water bomb. We'll be Yamamoto-surprise attack."

"I have some line and canvas we can use—we can't just throw it. Aim and stealth are the problems."

Billy smiled. "Where's the hose? I've got red Kool-Aid that will be perfect."

"Don't fill it too much," I warned. "The plebes always add too much water and end up exploding it on themselves."

With the big red balloon, like a rising sun in the middle of our deck, we plotted our attack. We meticulously practiced with a shoe tied to the end of the line hung from a window in a room across the hall from us, out of sight from our target. As we prepared in the twilight some of the plebes noticed us slide the rope out the window. We decided to risk one more test and swing the shoe toward the target to validate trajectory and line length. I could see a sweaty sheen on

Billy's face. Mason continued charting, head down, and Stonewall was adjusting his stereo, raising the volume of "Give Peace a Chance." Despite their egos, they would surely see us. They glimpsed our way but somehow didn't notice the line. After several perfect practice swings with the shoe, we marked the line length with chalk and pulled the rope inside. When we raised the giant red condom to our window ledge and fitted the canvas straps around it, we could hear the plebes above the music gasping and applauding. Billy shook his fist at them, demanding silence.

The ball was heavy but manageable. We lowered it slowly to the marked line length and began swaying from side to side across the sill. The red ball moved smoothly, gaining momentum, bulging where the latex was weak, inching toward the target. It grazed the bulkhead below us, and we cringed at the thought of a rupture.

"Okay, here we go," Billy whispered. "One more big swing."

I guess we didn't account for the size of the ball compared to the shoe, or the added length of the cradle, or the line's stretch from the weight. The enormous red orb swung directly through Bobby's window and exploded over his Navigation Project, turning his world ubiquitously red. Bobby screamed, overwhelmed by the explosion, a casualty of friendly fire. The plebes were flashing lights, jumping up and down, shocked, awed.

We threw the rope to the middle of the tennis courts below. Billy sat down, pretending to read, listening to Bobby's profanity echoing across the court; I held a pillow to my face, fighting an explosion of laughter. Of course, we'd missed our target, like Billy's kicks, to the left.

Second Class Ring Dance traditions prescribe that class rings be strung on ribbons and worn as pendants around our dates'

necks until each couple ceremoniously dips them into a binnacle containing waters from the seven seas. We completed the ritual and donned our rings. After three years of anticipation, the ceremony seemed anticlimactic. We'd been counting the days, and now, entitled to wear rings like Jimmy Creeson's, they embodied alarming burdens we'd face in one year when we were commissioned.

Billy and I returned to our room after the dance just before curfew. Billy was jumpy, energized, twisting his ring, singing songs from the dance. Two Navy ships were anchored in the Bay, ablaze with strings of celebratory lights. The athletic field to the south was abandoned, its goalposts lit by streetlamps and a waxing moon.

"Come on," Billy insisted, pulling his bag of footballs from the closet.

"What?"

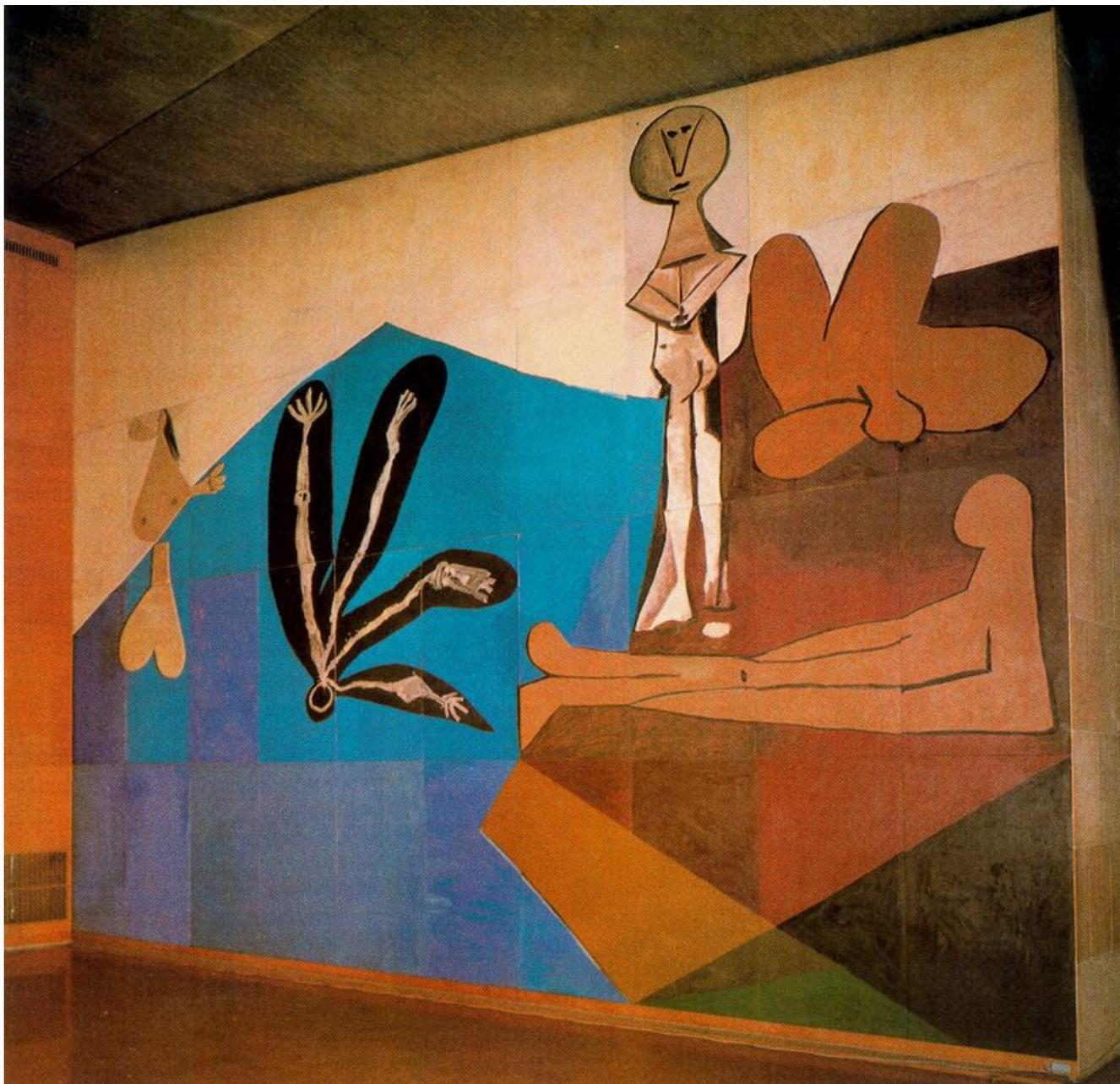
"Come on!"

We trudged down the back stairs in Navy tuxedos with yellow cummerbunds, pleated shirts, gold buttons, and dance-scuffed shoes. The damp grass soaked the knees of my trousers as I held the ball for Billy Gleason on the forty-yard line.

"Look," he exclaimed. "Antares is right between the goalposts. This is for Jimmy Creeson."

His kick soared triumphantly through the uprights.

New Nonfiction from Ciel Downing: “Burn Baby Burn”



“Fire in the belly!” “Be all you can be!” “Get fired up!” Slogans to incite, ignite, excite and encourage living on the edge—the thrill of defying death on the pages of peril. “Fire in the hole!” The acrid tang of sulfur and gun powder odor, the tympanic thrum in my ears. “Drive on!” “Hoorah!” Be honorable—I wanted that. “God! Duty! Country!” Be a part of something greater than yourself; ask what you can do for your

country. "Lockdown, lockdown—fires take your position!" Words seared into my adrenalin. The Pavlovian response to leap from the warm comfort of my bed to draping myself with combat gear, bare feet to boots, racing to a foxhole.

Each time my Sgt. copped a quick feel, each time I screamed "Cover me!" the soft and good and kind parts of me fragmented and fell away making me sharper, more linear, more chiseled. Each leer and lip lock, each lock and load inventoried in perpetuity in my brain—tiny registers of offense, stacking up sandbags of resistance, numbness, defenses inside me precariously high—get ready, keep vigilant—always on the alert. Balance, balance—those sandbags teeter and threaten to topple unceasingly.

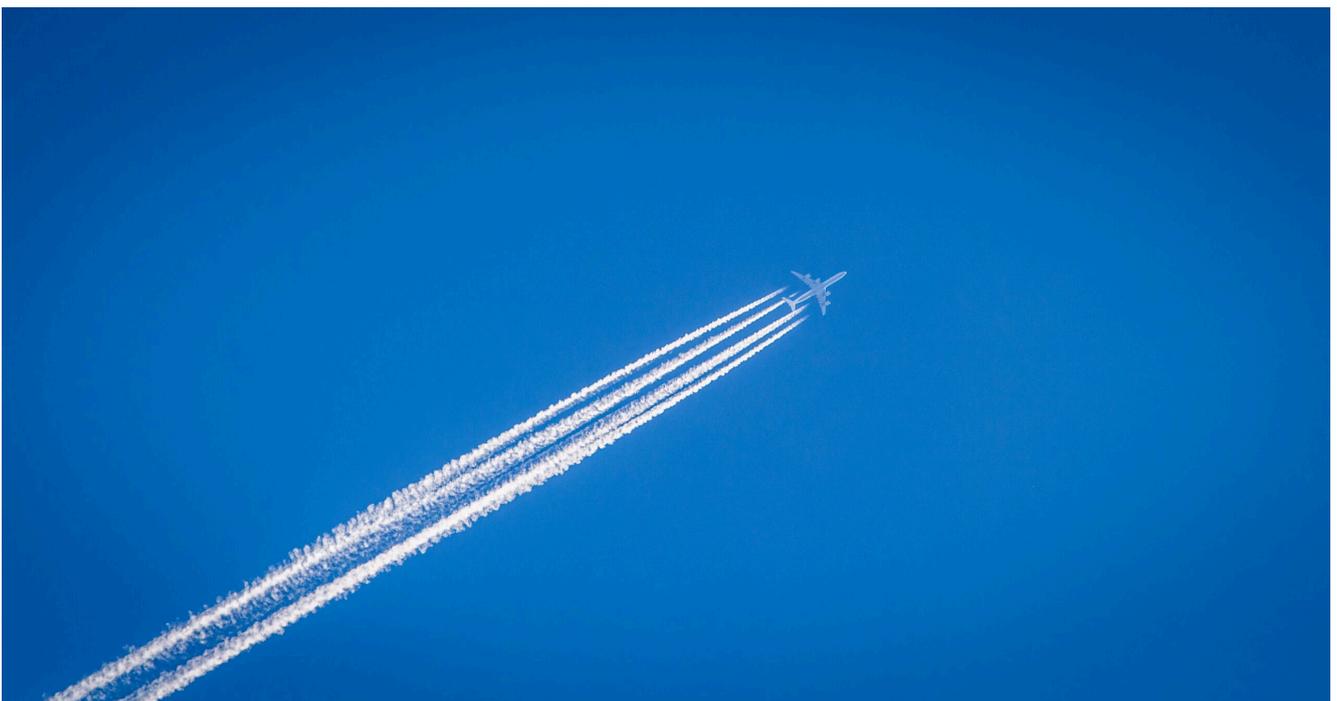
"Ruck up!" (time to move out). "Tits up!" (dead person ahead). "All one big Charlie Foxtrot," (cluster fuck). Sing along with the cadence, "We're gonna rape, kill, pillage and burn!" and the stack gets higher, sleep gets leaner, readiness gets sharper and the air gets thinner. Tight rope walking on concertina wire. It's all about being one of the boys, only I'm not. It's all about embracing the aggression and dismissing the vile, only I don't and I can't. It's going all in...only I don't belong "in."

Silverfish in shower drains, rats and rodents running rampant in streets where school children play crawling on warheads, where raw sewage seeps into rice fields. It's hookworms in the topsoil, cockroaches in the quarters, abandoned Amerasians, beggars, parasites and prostitutes—too much to keep up with. Jackhammering at my privilege, burrowing into my core, nicking away tiny shards of me. Increasing the pounding percussion in my ears, behind my eyes, throughout my head. Grinding my teeth unconsciously, knowing the expectations roll like an unstoppable boulder: higher, faster, smarter, more than, stronger, better, first place, tight group until yeah, that edge is now a razor; my nerves electric current, my heart in a chronic race with my respiration. The alert sirens and

flashing lights of gray matter pinwheeling wildly, working their way into a tornado-like funnel of frantic preparedness. Ever vigilant, ever ready, every day, every second.

“So get fired up Kid—get that fire in the belly!” with a yuk yuk solid slap on the back. Aspirations of the American Way. But more of me keeps dying. Splintering off, bleeding out, disfiguring like a Picasso. Bits of me swept up and away like smoke off a moth’s wing; dust motes of shoulds and oughts with nowhere to go. A wail chafes my throat, “God! Help me!” But god is a hologram bubble here; visible one second, then evaporates and is gone. What would there be to help anyway? All that fire leaves—is ash.

New Nonfiction from MaxieJane Frazier: “A Military Liberal Education”



The scored green vinyl seat inside an Air Force Bluebird bus at the base of the "Bring Me Men" ramp at the U.S. Air Force Academy was slippery under my jeans. On this 1987 June afternoon, I was wearing my acid-washed Levis and the shortest haircut I'd ever had. The Naugahyde stink of the seats with the warm, nervous bodies made my already churning stomach a witch's brew. In some ways, these nerves felt like they were happening to someone else. I was a distant observer of a movie scene where military recruits were about to enter basic training. I felt my damp hands opening and closing as if forcing my body to move would prove to me that I was still myself.

To my right, I saw the glass and metal dormitory windows of Vandenberg Hall blindly reflecting the sun. A line of tables with boxes set up on the open concrete pad beneath the windows stood between us and cadets fiddling with folders. They were wearing green fatigue pants and tight white t-shirts with dark blue cuffs, their last names and USAFA screened onto the left-hand side of their chests. The ones near the bus folded their arms and their tight faces under their molded blue berets showed nothing. Not one person on the bus with me said a word under the idling rumble of the diesel engine.

The whoosh of opening doors made me whip my head forward. A muscular demon of spit and sound boarded the bus yelling "Basics, I am Cadet First Class" but I wasn't hearing the details, only coming back into my body and noticing that every muscle there was vibrating. *It's starting.* A smile played around my quivering lips: nerves coming to the surface, that ingrained response to please that would become the bane of my existence. He growled "...if you have any doubts about this, *whatsoever*, do NOT get off this bus." When I stood, gripping my small bag with my pre-purchased and broken-in combat boots and my underclothes, a guy a few rows back from me stayed seated.

Under screams of "Go! Go! Go" we hustled off the bus and over

to the tables where other cadets handed us cards on strings to wear around our necks. With a checklist to complete, we snaked off in a single-file line through medical stations, unwittingly signing up for a life-time membership with the Association of Graduates, taking armloads of issued uniforms. We all received haircuts even if our hair was already cut; men were shaved bald and women had to have hair above their collars and less than one-inch thick. I misread that fact as less than an inch *long*, arriving with woefully short hair they still cut. We looped up and down hallways and through rooms that would become familiar in the coming years but were a blur without meaning on this first day.

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Thirteen years after I trailed in my brother's footsteps through a yellow jacket's nest outside our Oregon childhood home, I followed in his same footsteps to the U.S. Air Force Academy. The movie *Top Gun* was one year old by the time I stepped off the Bluebird bus, but my brother and his freshmen-year roommate visited our home the previous summer just as the movie came out, radiating that same cocky confidence that made the characters in that movie so enviable. I wanted that power, too, so I pursued their confidence all the way to the Air Force Academy. I didn't notice that Kelly McGillis's Charlie in *Top Gun*, was a civilian. That she never flew a plane or wore a uniform or served much purpose beyond being arm candy for Maverick. I just continued to believe that I could do anything my brother could do.

My beginning on this journey into the military was as an annoying little sister. I tried almost everything he did. And if trying the same stunts hurt me, I had to make sure he didn't see me cry. In fact, I just *didn't* cry by the time I was a teenager. I was his groupie, his cult follower, his worshiper. I learned that hiding my weakness was a badge of honor. That skill, at least, was great preparation for the Air Force Academy.

On the day I arrived at that steel and glass fortress for Basic Cadet Training, BCT or Beast, my brother was nowhere around. The large painted footsteps that taught basic cadets to stand in formation might as well have been made in his image. Somehow, I knew that this military college was small and that any failure on my part would be passed on to him. I'm sure I was feeling all of the emotions people around me were feeling: fear, anxiety, inadequacy, probably not in that order. I pushed them down so hard that I can't remember them.

Faking my way through the physical demands of Beast wasn't an option. My bravado was an act, and I wasn't sure about my ability to follow through in reality. Up to this point in my life, I set goals and I achieved them. Straight A's in high school? Bam. A four-year scholarship to Washington State University? Done. And that high school senior spring break, after visiting Cameron at his college, I decided I would apply there as well. Too late to be accepted to the Air Force Academy immediately after high school graduation, I took the scholarship to Washington State University for a year. When I applied to the Academy, I think I was expecting someone to finally tell me no. But they said yes.

Who leaves a nearly free ride at a state party school for a strict military college with payment in kind for military service when I finished? Apparently this girl.

The Bluebird bus was hours ago, now. At some point, after we dumped our pile of issued uniforms into our basic squadron dorm rooms and came out dressed in polyester tight shorts and white t-shirts with our last names scrawled in felt pen over the USAFA, I stood at attention studying *CONTRAILS*, the small book of knowledge we had to carry and memorize. An upperclass cadet woman leaned in and asked, "Do you have a brother?"

A smile ghosted my features as I said, "Yes, ma'am," one of seven basic responses I was allowed to give.

“Wipe that smile off your face, Basic,” she hissed. “What do you think this is, a tea party?”

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The next morning, the first real morning of Beast, bleary from a lack of sleep, I stumbled out into the brisk Colorado dawn making rows and columns with my peers, my arms locked at my sides, my feet in military-issue running shoes, splayed out duck fashion in my attempt to be at the position of attention. My hair was so short, the chilly, soft breeze didn't lift it. Cadets only two years ahead of us, but every bit adults in our eyes, were yelling instructions. As a group, we learned the basics of marching the afternoon we arrived. I was a member of the award-winning Montesano High School marching band. I wasn't worried about that part.

But almost everything else worried me. My alternately grinning and serious face gave no clear clues to my interior turmoil while my head spun with self-doubt. Could I make it through the physical training? Cameron joined me on a joint run and doing some push ups only a few days before I boarded a flight away from home for this challenge.

“You're not going to make it,” he said with frank eye contact and raised eyebrows.

Now as I faced the test of the first morning, I could feel the pre-breakfast acid trickling through my stomach. Punch drunk on minimal sleep, terrified someone would see I didn't belong, I clenched my hands to avoid shaking in the fresh, scentless air.

Even though we kept our eyes “caged” without looking around us, marching band taught me to sense my neighbor's state of mind by the smallest of body movements. Every last one of us, even the cadet cadre training us, was exhausted by the “oh-dark-thirty” fire alarm that sent us all stumbling out of the dorms and waiting across the street.

Hunched against the night air, the gaggle of brand new recruits looked like hundreds of mental patients in our pale blue Air Force-issued pajamas, velvety dark blue robes, and slippers. Upperclass cadre wore civilian pajamas and did their best to herd us into accountability. I, for one, wondered if the sense-splitting shriek of the fire alarms was the usual wake up call. They took away our watches and, for all we knew, it was time to get up. I knew so little about this training, and what I did know had an air of the ridiculous. We never found out if that first night's alarm was a prank or a real alert, but we never woke up in Beast that way again. After what felt like an hour, we returned to our rooms to sleep until reveille. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who waited in bed, plank stiff and staring at the ceiling, ready for the real wake up that would kick off the six grueling weeks of training.

There were about 120 of us in my Basic Cadet Training Squadron, almost 1400 new freshmen in total spread evenly over ten squadrons. The Basic squadrons were named by letters and each combined four groups of freshmen divided into flights. I didn't realize, at first, that the people in my flight would be in my numbered squadron in the school year.

For morning runs, they sized us shortest to tallest to make sure the people with the shortest legs, mostly women, were setting the pace. I was surrounded by other C Squadron "Cobras" of the third Basic Cadet Squadron when we received the order to "forward march." As we stepped off into the chill air, I wondered for the first time why that order, when the commander shouted it, sounded like, "Forward, HARCH!" In another few steps we heard the call, "Forward at the double time...HARCH!" In that pause before and during the final sharp directive we growled like animals showing our enthusiasm for the physical effort awaiting us.

We scuffed off across the pebbled-concrete Terrazzo, a square which connected the buildings of the campus. If I could have

been a falcon, the school mascot, that morning, flying at 10,000 feet, I would have seen the 10 basic cadet squadrons filling one side of the concrete, jogging beside Vandenberg Hall toward a massive ramp burnished with the metal words "Bring me Men" on the back side, just where we were dropped off by Bluebird buses the day before.

So far, our movement was flat or downhill. I could make it.

I learned that the Academy clusters in the foothills of the Rampart Range at an altitude of 7,258 feet above sea level... "far, far above that of West Point or Annapolis" we learned to say. Signs in the sports complex warned rival teams "The Air is Rare." Viewed from the air, USAFA is unique with its sharp angles, shining metal, and glittering glass. The architect intended a wholly modern space to represent this new military branch.

The massive rectangular space was lined with Terrazzo-pebbled concrete and marble strips with a grass square east of the chapel and between the dorms. From a falcon's height, the old fighter planes punctuating each corner of the grass became tiny models and the corner closest to the dining hall was a hill with the patently unbelievable myth that it covered the bones of the earliest cadets. Between that hill and Fairchild Hall, was the Air Gardens, with hatched terrazzo-style paths slicing the grass. Perfect, architect-model Honey Locust trees representing each graduate who died in the Vietnam War led our eyes to the Eagle and Fledglings statue facing the dining facility, Mitchell Hall, instructing on its brown marble front: "Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge."

When I felt the slope of the ramp dropping away under my feet that were slapping in time to our cadre's rhythmic call "Left, left, left-right-left," I heard a tall blond leader wail out the notes in cadence "C-130 rollin' down the strip," and I became part of a machine answering this call and response:

"C-130 rollin' down the strip!" My breath was taken away in the enthusiasm of the music of this military jody—the song forming some military complaint that was to take our minds off the running and keep us breathing. As I began gasping in the effort to sing and jog, even downhill, I was swept up in the camaraderie and sheer military-ness of the moment. I was doing it.

"Airborne Daddy gonna take a little trip."

"AIRBORNE DADDY GONNA TAKE A LITTLE TRIP!" our hundred-plus voices already knew that we needed to drown out the other 9 squadrons singing different jodys around us.

Later our required, rote freshman knowledge informed us that each of the USAFA building names belonged to a man famous in making the Air Force a distinct branch of the military or for his honorable and heroic service. In fact, my basic cadet summer marked the first year a woman showed up in our required memorization, even if there were still no massive structures honoring women's achievement. This 1987 summer, only seven years after the first women graduated, we were supposed to memorize a quote by Amelia Earhart from our small *Contrails* book of information Air Force doolies carried on our person at all times. We memorized the book from cover to cover by the time the year was over. Back then, I didn't bother to learn what Earhart said, already trying to inhabit these guys' values: to devalue women who I was already seeing as "other." I wouldn't find any value in the wisdom that pioneering woman was meant to impart to us. What could a woman teach me?

During that freshman year when a faceless upperclassman yelled, "Give me Earhart's quote," we recited in a high-pitched wail, "Sir, Amelia Earhart's quote is as follows: *I was lost when I wrote this.*" We were ridiculing a groundbreaking aviator's disappearance. I recently rediscovered the intended words, and learned that Earhart, who was also a poet, wrote: "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting

peace." Perhaps the eloquent, thoughtful words were too sophisticated for the juveniles meant to know them. If only I had memorized her words, held onto them as a form of rebellion instead of conforming to the older cadets' blind misogyny. I wish I had known who I would become instead of trying to be like everyone else, mostly men.

We trotted down the Bring Me Men ramp and then across the short leg of the road north of Fairchild Hall. Straight and farther down another ramp, we leveled out on the Cadet Parade Field, soon to be named Stillman Field for the male first Commandant of Cadets. In the third of 10 squadrons, I ran in the squishy tracks of the columns in front of me, and they reeked like an overflowing toilet underfoot. Across from the bleachers, we formed up into position so that all 10 squadrons faced the empty seats. The leaders gave us an order that spaced us out for calisthenics, and we went through the paces of jumping jacks and stretches before finding ourselves prone in the mud doing leg lifts and pushups. So far, so good. I could do all the physical work. I felt my confidence boosted. Later, we learned that the stench was from the non-potable water used to water the grass, cold and leaching through our clothes. The stains never came out of our white t-shirts.

When we finished a series of body-weight exercises, we formed up for the run back up to the Terrazzo. We circled the parade field once and headed up the ramps.

That first morning, I kept right in step, laboring under the absence of oxygen at this altitude but relieved to discover I was up to the task. On other mornings, those short people up front proved that having shorter legs didn't mean they weren't fast. Sometimes sprinkler saturated ground meant the mud sucked at our shoes and hindered our strides. Probably about the second week of training, our leader growled and turned us away from the ramp after the first lap. Soon I didn't always keep up with the formation. I also didn't always drop out, but some mornings I just couldn't get enough air.

Others dropped out of some runs, too, but I had no energy to notice their struggles. My ability to finish with the group, or not finish with them, still seems random to me. Some mornings I could keep up with the formation. Other times I was left gasping with my hands on my knees. Any time I dropped out of a run because I couldn't breathe, I found that, once I caught my breath, I could run at the same pace as the squadron behind them. I could keep running at the squadron's pace until we arrived back at the dorms at the top of the hills. This last trick infuriated the unfortunate cadre member staying back with me who hissed, "If you can run this fast now, Torrens, why can't you make it with your classmates?"

"Sir, I do not know." One of the seven basic responses I was allowed to give. And I was telling the truth.

New Nonfiction by John Darcy: "Hypothermia"

The email takes me to a link that takes me to an article displaying two mugshots. The mugshots take me back to winter. It was a southern snow day, at least five inches of accumulation and more flakes still falling. It was 2014. I believe weather records for the region were broken. I believe it was a Thursday.

In my mind the day has a mirror's shine, everything reflective. The ground stretched out in a pureness of white, like one great flattened pearl in the sun.

We were not supposed to be out. Ft. Bragg was closed. I was junior enlisted at the time, a Specialist, twenty years old, a team leader in charge of a fire team within a Reconnaissance,

Surveillance, and Target Acquisition Squadron of the 82nd Airborne Division. Mostly this meant paperwork. I never did get used to jumping out of airplanes. I never fired a shot in anger.

The 82nd is famed and storied, of course. Sicily, Normandy, Panama, Fallujah. Its mission statement boasts an ability to deploy anywhere in the world within eighteen hours. Often it's referred to as America's 9-1-1. And yet the base was shuttered and training halted for a few inches of snow.

Well, not all training was halted. We were out there in the snow.

We were lacking in cold weather gear but the Captain wouldn't hear it. Our unit's forefathers fought the Nazis without coats or gloves at the Battle of the Bulge; sometimes without boots or even bullets. Protests about weather were certainly blasphemous, possibly heretical. But the temperature was starting to dip toward the upper teens. And it was a wet snow, dense with a chill that leached through our uniforms like a reverse blood-brain barrier, totally porous. These camouflage uniforms, of a digital pattern now retired from service for their failure to blend into any environment, were made of a mystical material that sweltered you in heat and froze you in the cold.

I was close with our platoon leader for having served as his radioman before my promotion. I told him maybe a third of the guys had the proper gear, and this was a situation likely to turn hairy and soon. He concurred, and together we got a fire going. Hypothermia lingered on the horizon like a sunset, and all of us knew it. He told me the Captain would keep us out here as planned.

One of my soldiers was back on base and quarters-confined with a staph infection. To fill some other equally random staffing issue, the empty slot in my team was filled by Private

Underhill. He was a SoCal kid and five years older than me. Whenever he wasn't in uniform, he wore a flat brim hat etched with some variation of the Oakland Raiders logo.

After the platoon leader and I got the fire crackling, I went back to check on my guys. They looked frosted but generally okay. They liked to curse me for cluttering up and weighing down their packing lists, but today they were grateful, and I felt like a father finally vindicated for making his family arrive six hours early to the airport.

Underhill, prone in the snow, as a last-minute addition to my team did not have any of that same gear. Water draws heat from the body four times faster than air of the same temperature, and he was dripping, drenched. His teeth chattered with a strange music. We'd been out there almost twenty hours. His face was a glossy blue.

At the extreme ends of body temperature, motor functions begin to fail. Underhill spoke like an Adventist in tongues. There are videos online of non-English speakers acting out what an English conversation sounds like to those not fluent. They are uncomfortably strange clips, these sort of auditory illusions, like an Escher sketch for the ears. You can feel your brain almost literally stretching out to make sense of the nonsense, so close is it to being discernable. That was how Underhill sounded. And worse than the meaninglessness was his face, serious and concerned. A face that seemed absolutely certain of his speech, awe-struck that I appeared unable to understand.

I stripped him naked but for his boots and wrapped him in my poncho—not promising, but it was the only dry item I had. I got one of my guys to collect his gear, and we started back toward the central staging area where I'd met with the platoon leader, and a fire awaited. It was maybe not quite half a mile. I was maybe not quite certain that Underhill would make it.

With the base closed, there was some hiccup in getting a medic to the scene. Underhill, now in dry clothes and around the fire, was still stammering a stream of incoherence. There are stories of people so infected by cold that, when they finally draw near to a fire, they end up singeing themselves in their desperation for warmth.

I tasked one of my guys with making sure Underhill didn't topple into the fire.

I told the platoon leader I'd never seen hypothermia, real hypothermia, before. He said that neither had he. I said I didn't know how long he'd been like that, how far along he was. I told him this was my fault for not making frequent enough rounds with my guys, which was true.

The platoon leader said we've got to get out of here. He said the Captain was on his way, having heard the call for a medic over the net.

When I check on Underhill, his fingernails are a color I cannot describe.

The Captain arrives with a medic, who goes to Underhill directly. I hover close to the Captain and the platoon leader, a First Lieutenant. It was like eavesdropping on my parents arguing, and I remember thinking that simile at the time.

If we can't train in the snow, how are we supposed to fight in the snow?

We don't have the gear, sir. It's not that they didn't bring it, but that it was never issued.

I'm looking for some intestinal fortitude from the guys.

The base is shut down. Sir, I think we're approaching a bad situation.

We've only had one man go down.

Tell me how many need to get hypothermia before you end this, sir. Tell me what your number is, and when we hit that number I'll call you. Tell me what your number is.

It was a clash of two commissioned tectonic plates. Hearing a Lieutenant address a Captain that way seemed like a glitch in the simulation. It was the immovable object of care for the troops versus the unstoppable force of military authority.

I was preparing myself to freeze to death so I could spite the Captain. I would have done this for my platoon leader.

The whole beating, thematic heart of the collision is best illustrated in William Styron's short novel, *The Long March*. It's a forgotten little novella that I stumbled into after I left the army. It depicts the clash between the hero, Captain Mannix, and Colonel Templeton, the villain who orders his reserve Marines, out of shape after being suddenly recalled to duty over escalations in the Korean War police action, on a sadistic and pointless thirty-six mile forced march.

The march takes place the night after a training accident—a mortar round shot short, equally meaningless—leaves eight Marines dead. My own unit's time in the shivering snow came three days after a jump fatality occurred over Salerno Drop Zone outside of Ft. Bragg. A gruesome scene, a friend who was there told me. He used the word decapitated. Four American soldiers would be killed in Afghanistan throughout January 2014.

Captain Mannix, the obvious stand in for William Styron, confronts the hell of absurdity in a similar manner as the protagonists of Styron's contemporaries: but unlike Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, or Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Styron banishes all attempts at redemption through suffering and violence, of meaning through war, of clear-eyed stoicism in the face of the absurd. "None of that Hemingway crap for me," Mannix says to Lieutenant Culver, the book's narrator.

The tragedy of the story, of course, is that Colonel Templeton is forever destined to win—even when the Colonel himself falls out of the forced march. Mannix, who steps on a nail in the march's early miles, suffers through on the fuel of his unceasing hatred for the Colonel, even as the nail shreds his foot to a bloody scrap. A few miles from the finish, when the Colonel catches sight of Mannix's blood-sodden boot, he orders the Captain into one of the recovery vehicles. Mannix refuses. Again the Colonel orders, threatening court martial. Again, Mannix refuses. The Colonel places a hand on the pistol at his hip. Still, Mannix refuses.

Styron describes Mannix in those moments as “the man with the back unbreakable...lost in the night, astray at mid-century, in the never-endingness of war.” The tragedy for me, as I sat there saturated in snow, was that I hadn't yet read of Mannix's futile struggle with the Colonel. As I watched my platoon leader argue with my Captain, soldiers far better and braver than me were being asked to die seven-thousand miles away so that the soldiers who'd died before them didn't die in vain. Others commit war crimes that will later be pardoned by the president. I thought the situation in which I found myself, as well as the situation abroad, still possessed the capacity for a just conclusion. I believed the unstoppable force of the Captain's authority could be reasoned with, pleaded with, swayed. But this belief would become something I would look back on, marveling at how very little I knew about the world. I wouldn't understand until I read Lieutenant Culver say of the fictional Colonel and his march, that my Captain was beyond judgment, because “he was a different kind of man, different enough that he was hardly a man at all, but just a quantity of attitudes so remote from [the] world that to hate him would be like hating a cannibal, merely because he gobbled human flesh.” There was no exit, no alternate paths diverging in a snowy wood. Everything Colonel Templeton and my Captain embodied, the whole sluggish wheel that turned for the express purpose of turning again, was so far beyond my

comprehension that it might as well have come from another planet.

But this was all meaning I created in hindsight. In the wet expanse, that freezer of snow where the leaf-shedded trees jutted up from the white like mutated limbs, I focused on keeping my team's temperatures up. It would be many years before I began to free myself of Mannix's Hemingway crap. I fall victim to it still.

A second truck arrived, with a second medic, who soon whisked Underhill off. The first medic told me there was no doubt that I saved Underhill's life. That before my speedy intervention, Underhill was nearing a point where his body would have no longer been able to correct its inner thermostat. At the very least he would have suffered what the medic called a traumatic cerebral event. To have saved a person's life—possibly, probably, most likely—at the age of twenty. It felt to me like no small achievement. To have saved a life that—certainly, absolutely—should never have been endangered in the first place? This seemed, somehow, even more significant. A kind of mortal déjà vu, the sort of moral underpinning that always nagged at me, later on, when faced with the trolley problem in ethics classes; that is, in the simplest terms, why did all these people need to be in harm's way?

The article's mugshots paint a picture and a cruel one. After the army, after college, after my father fell ill, suffered, and passed away, I was living in the mountains of Virginia. A slanting summer rain fell in sheets outside my window as I read. I remembered meeting Underhill's wife when a group of us went out to dinner before my discharge. But in her mugshot she seemed changed—straight hair shortened and tinted bright red—as if the night we met she'd been wearing a disguise. Underhill looked the same, though, and I felt that I could

almost hear his brain-chilled babbling.

All of the charges are felonies. Battery of a minor. Child abuse inflicting serious bodily injury. Conspiracy.

There are a few other local news bulletins. Bail set at \$150,000. The infant son on a ventilator at UNC Chapel Hill, critical but stable. The four-year-old daughter, mercifully, already recovered from her injuries. The *Fayetteville Observer* quotes a police report of this girl saying she was hung upside-down until "red stuff" came out of her nose. Another says she was so afraid of Underhill that, long after her rescue, she would wet herself at the mere mention of his name.

It's skin-chilling stuff, grizzly. I scour through the sixth, seventh, eighth page of the search engine results. I can't find any subsequent articles about the married couple's sentencing, even now, four years after their arrest. As if they'd been whisked out of sight in the very same manner as the medic truck saving Underhill from the cold.

The whole scene really does present itself as a sort of one of a kind trolley problem made just for me. What I don't mean to do is impose an ex post facto morality. Underhill had been a friend of mine, awkwardly unfunny with his rehearsed punch-line zingers, a quality that endeared you to him instantly. And with this comes a certain feeling of being tricked, had, swindled into camaraderie by some cunning master of sociopathy.

It's the sensation, even now, of being the neighbor interviewed on the nightly news, who never could have seen it coming.

In a way it makes me feel a troubling exclusion from myself, a split-screen personhood in which each side communicates with the other. One hemisphere says stop, enough, what could you have done, it's a horrific thing but the guilt is fake, or worse, the inserting of yourself into a tragic story that

should be centered on what those two children faced, and what they will have to face, as they grow up haunted by a life tinged early with unspeakable trauma; because what could you have done, let him freeze? Let him topple into the fire you made? You couldn't have let him die even if you *had* known, which means you ought to stop creating a moral quandary where none exists; how many times do you think you've held the door open for a murderer?

This hemisphere is my own personal Mannix. Righteous and reasonable, always seeing through the fray and telling me the truth in no uncertain terms.

And yet. If this is my Mannix, that makes it the doomed hero, a voice who can't alter its own fate any more than it can turn iron into gold.

Because the other side of the screen, that other hemisphere, sings a far simpler tune: you saved a man's life and that man went on to torture his children, and something is owed for that, regardless of whether you understand what it is. Responsibility proves boundless. My own personal Colonel, who speaks inside my skull-sized kingdom with a voice oddly reminiscent of my Captain, issuing order after order inside my brain's confines with the volume fully cranked. The unstoppable force of some echoing and illusory guilt that forces me to march ever onward, further and further, with a pack whose weight never stops increasing, a march for which there's no chance of rest or respite in sight.

Growing up in Nebraska, where I lived at Underhill Avenue as a kid, we had a small, hardcover book not unlike a pocket bible that concerned itself with famous coincidences and wild convergences of fate and fluke. Kennedy's secretary. The final recorded fatality of the Hoover Dam's construction being the son of the first recorded fatality, deaths separated by

fourteen years to the day.

One of the anecdotes in this book of strange happenings took place as the Civil War was beginning to subside. On a train platform in New Jersey in the early days of '65, a man watches his train approach as others watch his face, stunned to be in the presence of a celebrity. His name is Edwin Booth. Considered America's greatest actor, he would go on to be seen as the most acclaimed Prince Hamlet of the 19th century. When the train pulls into station and bodies begin to flow from the doors, Edwin sees that a man has become caught at the far end of the platform. Edwin hustles to the man as the train begins to breathe the steam of impending motion. He manages to free the stranger, saving his life. Edwin learns some months later, after a friend sends a letter commending his swift action, that the man on the platform was Robert Todd Lincoln, oldest son of Abraham Lincoln. The whole affair was said to have given Edwin solace after his brother, John, assassinated the president.

There is, I learned, great solace in reading about other of occasions of blind, incomprehensible chance. Because without other wild strokes of chance, all of these curving occasions and flashes of happenstance threaten to create a worldview in which the universe is constantly arranging itself in purpose-giving shapes, constantly formulating patterns and events which set me at center stage. And to believe in a universe like that, where the infinite cosmos align themselves through chance of circumstance to inform and elucidate me, to create my meaning--that's a nasty business. Having company in coincidence helps me avert my eyes from the arrangement of events that took me from Underhill Avenue to Private Underhill's random assignment to my fire team and his unforgivable crimes that were, in some secondary respects, facilitated by my actions, which extended his life. From plucking Styron's novella off the library shelf, a total coincidence, and having the book flood over me with snowy

meaning. Or this: A year and a half after the snow, on the same Salerno Drop Zone where the gruesome training accident took place, myself and a man I didn't know saved the life of one Lieutenant Pedilla. We'd all jumped from the same airplane. A gust of wind on the drop zone screamed up to inflate Pedilla's parachute upon landing, dragging him ragdoll-like over the shorn grass, and preventing him from unhooking himself as the paracord risers lodged around his neck with tension. The man I didn't know chased after the billowed chute to smother it, while I launched onto the purple Lieutenant to jostle the cords free from his neck. I came to know Pedilla afterwards. I met his wife and kids. They live in Miami now, I think. Happy as happy can be.

This, however, is me waving a wand at the karmic tally, trying to cook its books. Because the voice of the Colonel makes it clear that the internal ledger is no palimpsest. There are no revisions here. It is often said that the paths of life are winding, but this is a misconception. There is only one direction. Only the painfully straight route of a forced march.

How dearly I would like to be the Mannix of this story. To be the man with the back unbreakable. But against the flow of all my striving, I find myself dominated by the Colonel, by my Captain; bogged down inside the villain's view and ruled by an unswayable voice completely immune to reason. What would Mannix do in the face of such bewildering randomness? He'd keep walking. He would understand that the searing pain in his foot, or in his soul, or in his heart, was nothing more than passing show. No sensation can last forever, even if it insists, in its screaming immediacy, that it will. For Mannix, there is no chance. Only what should be done. And it is in Mannix's knowledge of those things which should be, which could be, and which didn't need to be at all that I find, if possible, solace. There is a kind of quiet grace in accepting the world as it is without sacrificing, in that most

idealistic corner of your mind, the thought of how it might be. What if I hadn't saved Underhill's life? Well, what if the Captain hadn't put his life at risk in the first place? It isn't that these questions have answers. They don't. It's that, should I find myself some bright, snowy day not even bothering to ask them in the first place, then I know that something sinister has taken hold; that, without introducing the proper moral checkups, I might be on my way to becoming the Colonel.

And as far as the Colonel goes, I have little doubt that, faced with an event whose randomness made him question his place in the world, he would try to kill it.

I spoke to my mother on the phone a few days back. We were reminiscing about the Nebraska house on Underhill Avenue. It was the quickest of corrections. Wood, she told me. Not hill. Underwood Avenue.