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The Pit

John H. Price III

“I don’t know but I’ve been told,” Sgt. Lopes’ voice rang out in the chill morning, chanting our favorite jody as we hiked the two miles to the grenade range.

“I don’t know, but I’ve been told”, echoed the trainees of Delta Company.

“Delta Company’s mighty bold!” Lopes skipped backward on the road with the practiced ease of a prizefighter as we slogged through deep sand on the berm.

“Delta Company’s mighty bold!”, we parroted with gusto, more than halfway through the Army Basic Training Course at Fort Dix, NJ. Sgt. Lopes, first platoon DI, led the jogging company while another DI brought up the rear, heckling stragglers. The two remaining DIs requisitioned a 5/4-ton truck to pick up hand grenades from the ammo dump.

“Am I right or wrong?” With palms upward, our DI exhorted us to drown out Charlie Company across the road on their way to the rifle range. “Sound off like you’ve got a pair!”

We roared, “Am I right or wrong?”

“Company, double-time, march!”

Delta responded, picking up the pace, gear clanking as slung M-16’s banged against full canteens on web belts. Six weeks ago, as raw recruits, double-timing the final half-mile to the grenade pits in deep sand with full gear would have killed us. Today, we were barely breathing hard when Lopes ordered, “Company, halt!”

One man, our mama’s boy Reeves, staggered toward the platoon in last place, totally winded. He looked for a place to sit.

“Thanks for joining us, Pvt. Reeves.” Sgt. Lopes made no attempt to conceal his sarcasm.

One of our best runners, Martin, a former high school track star, jeered. “What the fuck, Reeves, you ought to be in Charlie company the way you run, you loser.”

“Can it!” Lopes’ voice was hard enough to scratch glass.

“First platoon, take a knee. Listen up. I survived two combat tours in Nam and do not intend to die today. All you have to do to qualify here is what we have been practicing, nothing more. Any questions? Reeves?”

“No, Sergeant.”

“Okay, saddle up and move into the blockhouse. Find your name on the platoon list, that’s the order you will join me in the pit for qualification. Watch what the man ahead of you does. This ain’t rocket science.”

Reeves looked ashen, clearly scared shitless. He and I made eye contact; slowly he shook his head. The fine-mesh net of the draft scooped up young men indiscriminately; some, guys like Reeves, were unfit for military service.

The list ranked our platoon from best to worst. Reeves was last. The four DIs took positions in the grenade pits, oversized fox holes, five feet deep, six feet square, with wooden pallet floors so we didn’t have to stand in ankle-deep mud. Each pit had a case of grenades in the corner, on the DI’s side.

“First wave, link up with your DI and wait for instructions.” The salty E-8 range officer had tattooed forearms like Popeye. The four top trainees in Delta strode down the concrete steps

from the elevated blockhouse; the rest of the company watched from behind bullet-resistant glass.

A two-foot tall, six-foot deep continuous berm ran in front of the row of pits. Made out of the orange clay from the pits, it had been tamped into a hard, smooth, curved surface. As each trainee dropped into a pit, the DI raised his hand, the ready signal for the range safety officer. When he saw four hands in the air, he raised his microphone, “The range is hot, repeat, the range is hot. Fire when ready.”

Lopes gave the command: “Pull pin!” Martin, our number one, did not hesitate. “Throw!”

Martin pegged the one-pound grenade forty yards; it bounced once, rolled, then detonated, followed closely by three more explosions. The shock waves slapped the reinforced concrete building, followed immediately by a storm of hot metal slivers that ricocheted off the concrete and glass. Orange dust hung in the still morning.

The E-8 boomed, “Second wave, move out!”

First wave re-entered the building, all smiles and fist pumps. Martin took Reeves by the shoulders. “You can do this,” he whispered, “don’t sweat it.” Reeves offered Martin a wan smile, unconvinced. I’d tried coaching him on tossing a grenade, and learned he was never allowed to play outdoors as a kid; Reeves didn’t know how to throw a ball. He threw mostly forearm, a little wrist, no shoulder. His first practice grenade toss was under ten yards. “Reeves, you just killed yourself and barely scared the enemy.” He improved a little, but live fire would be a challenge.

Reeves started to hyper-ventilate as his turn in the pit neared. “Reeves, calm down, man, just do what we practiced, it’s no big deal, I know you can do it.” He gave me a half-hearted smile.

When the “Next wave” command came, he hesitated, afraid to exit the building. I gave him a nudge. “Just do it, man.”

The four trainees in the pits were the dregs of Delta, the worst of the worst. Here was where the DI’s would earn their money. Three DI’s had hands in the air while Sgt. Lopes spoke with Reeves, hand on his shoulder. Reeves nodded; Lopes raised his hand.

“The range is hot, repeat, the range is hot, fire when ready.”

Three grenades were lobbed downrange, weakly and inaccurately, but they were away and qualifying. All eyes shifted to Reeves. Sgt. Lopes repeated the command, “Pull pin.” Three times before Reeves, shaking, removed the pin.

“Throw!” Reeves turned toward Sgt. Lopes, right arm out, attempting to hand the live grenade over. Lopes gently returned Reeves into position, then yelled, “Throw!” I watched in horror as Reeves crumpled to the floor of the pit, grenade in hand.

The grizzled E-8’s jaw muscles bulged; a vein on his temple throbbed. “Jesus H. Christ.” He shouted into the loudspeaker, “Reeves, do not release the grenade, do you understand? Get on your feet.”

Reeves rolled to his knees as Sgt. Lopes’ remained locked on the grenade. In the pit beside reeves, Lopes asked, “Can you stand?”

Reeves shook his head.

“You hold onto that grenade while I help you up, understand?”

Comprehending, Reeves nodded weakly.

“Okay, let’s get rid of that grenade.” Sgt. Lopes’ voice stayed smooth as silk, with no hint of tension or fear.

“Throw the grenade, Reeves.”

Reeves reverted to his godawful throw; the grenade bounced off the berm, a foot above the lip of the pit. The scene shifted into slow motion.

The spoon separated from the grenade’s body, struck the berm, then slid back into the pit. Sgt. Lopes slammed Reeves to the floor and jumped on top of him. Forward momentum carried the grenade slowly up the face of the berm; from my safe perch, I silently counted; *one-thousand*, the grenade rolled toward the crest of the berm; *two-thousand*, the revolutions stopped at the apex; *three thousand*, the grenade appeared to be making up its mind which way to roll, before finally dribbling over the far side of the berm; *four thousand*, the front of the berm erupted in a geyser of fist-size chunks of clay. Silently I counted; *five thousand*.

The E-8 unleashed an impressive stream of profanity over the loudspeaker. In the pit, Sgt. Lopes stood, waving his arms to clear the dust. The range officer shouted. ”Get that fucking moron off my range, now, do you understand?” Reeves lay crumpled on the floor of the pit.

The three other DIs from Delta rushed to Lopes’ pit, hoisted Reeves out and bore him to the 5/4-ton truck that had delivered the grenades. Sgt. Lopes inspected the fresh blast crater in the berm to see exactly how close he had come to death.

Delta company silently filed out of the blockhouse; we formed up, ready to march back to the barracks. The mood was somber, we chanted no jody’s on the two-mile hike. We never saw Reeves again.