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Tougher than Woodpecker Lips

Patrick Potter

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Just before our 1300 formation, I signaled my platoon sergeant, SFC Thornton. He came to where I stood off to the side of the platoon.

I spoke in a low voice. “The CO is considering a special mission for us. You’ve heard of the Platoon Confidence Course? He says a platoon from Golf Troop went there last year. They thought it was useful. It looks like he’s trying to get us a slot.”

Thornton listened intently. “Yes, sir, I’ve heard of it, but we don’t need that.” He slowly shook his head. “No, sir. That’s more for the infantry. We need to get ready for gunnery.” Our semi-annual gunnery qualification course at Grafenwoehr started in March. Gunnery was critical for cav and armor units. However, March was three months away.

I responded that he had a good point, but the CO wanted to talk it over with us at 1700.

He nodded. “OK, sir, we can work this out.” He hustled to the front of the platoon as the troop first sergeant called for status reports.

“All present or accounted for,” echoed down the line of platoons.

At 1740, we waited outside the CO’s office. He’d been going over maintenance issues with the XO, with the door open. He’d been loud in his displeasure that two M-551 tanks had been dead-lined for more than three days. Lucky for us, neither was in the third platoon.

While in the hall, we’d been talking with SSG Hale. New to our platoon in Fox Troop, we’d already learned that he was quite a character. In spite of youthful looks and good fitness, he was older than most E-6s. Always energetic, he eagerly told us of his past exploits as a deputy sheriff in South Carolina before he joined the army.

Then he described his time in infantry units, how he earned the Expert Infantryman’s Badge, and how he kicked ass during a three-year stint as a drill sergeant. Hale was slotted as squad leader for our platoon’s scout squad, mounted in three M-113s, and tasked with

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dismounted tasks such as local security, foot patrols, and setting up ambushes. He was as gung-ho as anyone I'd come across. He even used cardboard inserts at the bottom of his trousers to give a better look to his bloused boots. That was an old drill sergeant trick.

SSG Hale had learned that SFC Thornton would retire in less than a year. In his direct and inimitable style, Hale made it known that he'd be a great replacement as the PSG. Most of us knew that wouldn't happen, as it would require retraining and a change of MOS. Most PSGs were experienced E-7s with Vietnam combat experience. No chance for Hale, we figured.

"Come in!" called CPT Amstern. The office seemed hot, maybe from all the ass-chewing, and he only wore his OD T-shirt. Thornton and I entered and saluted.

He got straight to the point. "You can leave the door open. I told LT Potter about the possibility of a slot at the Platoon Confidence Course. You've all have heard of that. It's good training run by the Tenth Special Forces Group at Bad Toelz. The S-3 says the slot's ours if we want it, so I took it. It starts in three weeks. I'm going to send your platoon, although the second platoon could probably use it as well. I know you all weren't here last October, but the third platoon did worst of all on the Operational Readiness Inspection. I think your platoon could use some challenges and confidence building."

I started to ask what type of preparation we should undertake, a typical 2LT question, but SFC Thornton quickly interjected, "Sir, this course isn't for tankers. It's more for infantry types."

CPT Amstern gave an abrupt response. "No. I think your platoon could use this. It only runs for two weeks. We can handle the next border tour without you guys. Look at this as an opportunity to build up confidence and cohesion in your platoon."

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“Yes, sir,” I replied. I somewhat selfishly considered this as a good chance to show off my skills from Ranger School. I also didn’t mind having some time away from the CO and the ‘flagpole.’

The CO interrupted my thoughts. “LT Potter, see CPT Carter in the S-3 to get more details. He can tell you what equipment you’ll need to draw from the S-4.”

“Yes, sir, we can kick some ass on a course like that, sir!” SSG Hale exclaimed. He stood in the doorway behind us. He beamed with righteous enthusiasm. This was unexpected—CPT Amstern ran a tight ship. I figured he’d be pissed with the bogus interruption.

SFC Thornton turned and half-snorted, half-laughed, “What the hell you doin’, Staff Sarg’int? Get the hell out of here.”

CPT Amstern cracked a half-smile, a rare event within the troop, then looked at Hale and said, “Yeah, you guys kick some ass. Now get out.” He stood, pulling on his fatigue shirt. His next task appeared to be reading an Article 15 to one of the HQ platoon mechanics waiting in the hall with his chain of command. A very bad day for the XO, I calculated.

Less than three weeks later, we had the Third Herd packed into a large army bus with all needed equipment, motoring toward Bad Toelz. SFC Thornton had accepted his fate. It hadn’t helped that the other two-line platoon sergeants ribbed him mercilessly about returning to infantry-type training, and in the snow no less.

In the three weeks before departure, SSG Hale put his enthusiastic talk into action. He’d huddled frequently with his scouts and infantry guys, providing them extra instruction on map reading, patrolling, dismounted ambushes and so forth. Working with me, but largely on his own initiative, he organized five increasingly challenging foot marches for the platoon, including loaded rucksacks. We got the rucksacks from the S-4, as they weren’t normally needed in

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armored units. The tank and mortar crewmen especially needed the hiking to toughen up their feet and shoulders and to break in their boots.

On the appointed date, after a three-hour ride, our bus passed through Flint Kaserne, the special forces compound in Bad Toelz. The kaserne looked inviting, very nicely laid out, even on a slushy late November afternoon. Its origins dated to before WWII, when it served as an SS training post, among other roles. We motored through the compound and into a hilly forest beyond. In another fifteen minutes, we pulled onto a gravel road and entered a smoky compound containing a dozen GP medium and large tents. Other buses sat half-empty nearby as soldiers moved their personal gear and rifle storage racks into their tents. The SF cadre directed us to our tent. It was furnished with cots for our platoon of thirty-eight, with a big kerosene stove in the middle.

At the orientation that evening, we learned that there'd be five platoons taking the course. That accounted for five of the tents. We'd already found the mess tent, and soon learned the other housed supply, training, and admin facilities. We learned that the Green Beret cadre didn't make a big deal regarding competition, but that most activities would be graded at the platoon level. We quickly confirmed we were the only cav or armor unit. In addition, the course had two mech infantry platoons, an engineer platoon, and an undersized MP platoon. SFC Thornton and I got to know the other platoon leaders and PSGs during a couple of meetings. The two infantry platoon leaders struck me as obnoxious right away. They tried to act like they knew more than the cadre.

In our tent, like the other platoons, the cadre assigned spots for the PL and PSG, in case they needed to get ahold of us. SSG Hale set up his cot toward the far end, surrounded on one side by his squad of scouts. On the other side, SGT Rodriguez, the 4.2-inch mortar squad leader,

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arranged his five guys. Rodriguez was a small but energetic and opinionated soldier. His command of English wasn't great, but he liked being around SSG Hale due to his colorful, never-ending stories. Also nearby was PFC Garza, who usually hung near SGT Rodriguez to get help with his poor English skills. Garza always had a good attitude, but normally stuck close to the mortar crew, where everyone seemed to understand each other, regardless of their native language.

The platoons jumped into challenging activities from day one, rotating through various stations and events. We worked from an ambitious two-week training plan: explosives and demolitions, orienteering and compass use, cold weather movement including use of snowshoes, mountaineering techniques with climbing ropes, and developing small unit plans and operations orders. The second week showed a three-day platoon FTX that focused on developing OPORDs and conducting patrols along with raids and ambushes. An escape and evasion course that included a simulated POW camp would finish up the last two days of the program.

We were relieved that SF cadre instructed in a calm, professional manner, sort of a "we're here to help you learn" approach. For most of us, this differed from basic training, most NCO courses, and from Ranger School in my case. The SF guys were top-notch, very competent, and willing to teach and counsel soldiers and set a good example. We were awed to learn that the Tenth SF Group's main mission, in the event of a Warsaw Pact invasion, involved "stay behind" operations. That is, they'd operate behind enemy lines, recruiting and training partisans and conducting disruption operations. Most of them spoke German, Russian, Czech, or Polish.

After evening chow, in the snowy dusk, SFC Thornton and I stood at the bulletin board, checking the results of the day. Over our heads, horizontally across the timbers, hung a rough, hand-painted sign, the camp's unofficial motto:

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“GOT TO BE TOUGHER THAN WOODPECKER LIPS”

It seemed a tough goal for our platoon to live up to. “We’re not doing too great,” I remarked with my eyes on the new numbers. We were mid-way through the first week of the course.

“No, sir, not great. ‘Course, we’re cav, not ground-pounders like most of these platoons.”

With some irritation, I replied, “I understand that.” I paused and thought things over.

“But we’ve been improving ... some. I think the classes in the tent have helped. Maybe we can get up into third place next week.”

SFC Thornton remained impassive. “That won’t improve confidence much. We need to be in first or second place. CPT Amstern won’t be happy with us bein’ the middle of the pack.”

Just then, the engineer platoon leader wandered over to us, looking self-satisfied as usual. His platoon was second at the moment, just behind the mech platoon from the Third Infantry Division—a fit bunch who really knew their stuff. They even displayed demolitions and mountaineering skills, skill to which most soldiers had little to no exposure.

The engineer PL said, “I can’t believe we’re not first anymore. I think those Third ID guys are cheating. They probably had some of their SF buddies grading them on the demo work.”

SFC Thornton responded, “No, LT. These guys are real pros. You know they wouldn’t do anythin’ like that.” The LT didn’t bite. Usually a big talker, he just turned and stalked back to his tent. We chuckled at his retreating back.

By the end of the first week, we continued to lag, ahead of the understrength MP REMFs and pretty much tied with the weaker of the two infantry platoons. Our scores inched up as SSG Hale and I continued to instruct the troopers on how to read terrain on a map (at infantry speeds),

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and how to read and develop patrol orders for small infantry unit operations. SFC Thornton also hammered away, drilling the guys on radio message formats, calls for fire, SPOT reports, and so forth. Our prospects weren't great, but we weren't out of it by any means.

Over time, SFC Thornton came to appreciate SSG Hale and vice versa. They talked through upcoming training events and traded ideas on training up soldiers on key tasks. Hale especially liked hearing the lessons learned and war stories that Thornton provided on armor and armored cav operations based on his tours in Vietnam, Fort Hood, and Fort Knox.

Actually, we all got in better sync with each other. We marched to all our training, even at distances of up to ten miles. SFC Thornton, who'd been a real athlete in his day, appreciated my fitness on the many snowy, slushy road marches and foot patrols. I felt good about that. Oddly, the platoon even took to "foot checks" by me and the NCOs, to make sure there was no frostbite or other problems. These weren't commonplace in tank or mech units. The checks caused laughter and jesting among the rank and file, with references to stinky feet and toe jam.

At the start of the second week, we prepared for the FTX. We also pondered the E&E—Escape and Evasion training. We heard nasty rumors from the experienced infantry guys. They maintained that the SF cadre, who seemed highly professional in the training, turned into devils during E&E and treated 'captured' soldiers like dogshit. According to the rumors, most of us wouldn't be able to evade capture. They also claimed that anyone captured would give up information far beyond name, grade, and SSN, including any 'secret' information, within a few hours of capture. We found this hard to believe, given this was peacetime training. Surely they weren't authorized to physically torture, abuse, or threaten us? Most of us didn't buy into this scuttlebutt. The rumor mongers were trying to psych us out.

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E&E training began Wednesday night, after evening chow. An orientation provided us with a review regarding the code of conduct and POW rights and obligations. The instructor then showed a slide of 1,500 acres where we'd be operating, laying out road networks, creeks, high and low ground, possible partisan link-up points, and the location of the simulated POW camp. He explained what actions to take in case of life-threatening emergencies. Some of us made quick sketch maps.

It was a surprisingly brief talk. Then we were partnered up with someone in our platoon. I paired up with one of my tank drivers, SP4 Halloran, a good guy but not especially fit. We lined up to receive a code word from a cadre NCO. We were to consider it 'secret' if we were captured. Mine was something like Green River. Our final instruction was that the E&E exercise started at 2000 and ended the next day at 1900. During that time, any vehicle or person we encountered could be 'enemy.' Alternatively, some might be helpful partisans who could shelter us.

We loaded into the cold Deuce and a Half truck beds and bumped over rough gravel roads and trails, surrounded by the snowy Bavarian forest. We had just our uniform: field jacket and liner, gloves, and cold weather caps, plus web belts with a canteen of water. I also carried my sketch map, including locations where we might find friendlies. In groups of two, we jumped off the truck and head into the dark, snowy woods. We'd suddenly transformed into unarmed, disoriented soldiers, behind enemy lines and trying to avoid becoming POWs.

My partner Halloran and I stumbled through snow, staying off the road but within sight. The snow drifted up to two feet in some places. Frozen branches and twigs smacked us as we passed through the trees. Darkness was complete except for a little moon and star light that reflected off the bright, usually unbroken snow. After 2200, as we paralleled the road, we

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observed increasing jeep and truck traffic, moving slowly, with no indication of who was who. The sketch we'd been given showed five main roads, the same number of streams, and hilly areas to the south and north. We moved slowly and fairly quietly toward where the map indicated a possible 'partisan' location. We went slowly because of the snow and to take time to listen for bad guys. At stops, we noticed that our feet were already wet from snow and sweat; moving helped keep us warmer.

Along the way, we encountered other groups of two, dark figures floundering along. We always approached each other with trepidation until we knew for sure they weren't SF aggressors. Our group grew to six by the time we approached the first likely partisan location at 0315. We all slowed, but the other four guys were in the lead, and pushed ahead. I held Halloran back. I shivered, and could sense him shivering too, from the cold, the darkness, the mystery of our situation.

Ahead lay a clear area of low ground just off the road we'd been paralleling, with a stream running along the far side. Three clearer areas crisscrossed the clearing, like power line passages. In the center of the clearing, we saw a nice-sized fire. As we drew within a hundred yards, through the now sparse trees, we saw a figure moving, maybe tending the fire. We approached carefully despite the temptation offered by the fire and maybe a friendly partisan. We watched for any activity, as the other four moved forward, cautious but intent on developing the situation. We saw them pause at the tree line before the first ones crept into the clear area.

As they left the concealment of the woods, I detected a white shadow zipping soundlessly toward them. I punched Halloran's arm, pointed, and dove into the snow. He did the same. Looking out, we saw two more white shadows zipping toward the clearing from another direction. Our four guys sensed the three SF shadows on skis, but it was too late. After excited

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shouts and a quick scuffle, three found themselves overpowered and trussed up, then led toward the log. Then two of the white shadows followed the fourth guy as he trashed through the woods. They caught up with him less than thirty meters from us.

As we watched, we could easily hear him. “What the fuck, man! You tryin’ to break my ribs! Get off o’ me, goddam it!”

An unemotional, authoritarian voice muttered, “Shut up. Move it, dirtbag.” One SF guy half-drag him back toward the clearing, while the other hung back, searching for trouble or additional victims. Thoughts of trying to save the guy crossed my mind, but it would be folly. Halloran had the good sense to avoid any sounds or moves as well.

Somewhat shaken, we quietly moved back south, the direction we’d come from. Clearly the cadre aggressors didn’t play games. The guy nearest us had gotten knocked around brutally. Our thrashing through the deep snow kept us fairly warm, but we were tired and getting drowsy. I had to be harsh with my partner to keep his attention and keep him moving. While still dark, we came upon another commotion to our right, closer to the road. We’d been walking in a slight depression, so our bodies were in partial defilade. We looked down on a now-familiar scene, where big guys in bulky white winter gear grabbed and trussed up two others in dark OD uniforms and led them away. It hit me like a gut punch—they expected us to either approach the partisan’s fires or to move parallel the roads! What the fuck! Of course most everyone got caught! We crawled away and I described the situation to Halloran. He barely registered what I said, but readily agreed we had to stop paralleling the road. He looked sour when I told him we’d be avoiding fires or partisan locations. Any fantasies about sitting around a warm fire, maybe slurping down a hot coffee or a can of stew, were now shattered.

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As we moved away from the road, things got more and more quiet. At one point, from a hilltop, we saw lights that were likely the outskirts of Bad Toelz. We contemplated heading there to find a warm barn but decided against it as it was probably five clicks away, three to four hours at our speed. We moved back west as the sun was rising, toward some roads but staying far from the POW camp location. Our plan, or mine since Halloran appeared to be sleepwalking, involved zigzagging around in safer remote areas, working to stay in the denser woods for better concealment. But damn, it was cold. Movement helped, but frostbitten feet seemed a very likely outcome. Plus the hard crust over many patches of snow frequently smacked our shins and calves.

Just after dawn we crossed paths with another group of three making a great commotion as they floundered through the woods. I wasn't sure how they'd avoided capture as it was evident they were lost, and had avoided the most dangerous areas by pure accident. By 1100 we started to warm a little. We sat or lay on evergreen boughs on top of the snow, sometimes stripping off our boots and socks and cradling frozen feet in our warmer hands. We decided to stay put but rotated lookouts in the direction closest the road, since we could sometimes hear vehicle engines or horns at a distance. We were all relieved when 1700 rolled around and we felt safe heading back toward a roadway, to get trucked back to camp. After a fast trek and slowly warming feet, we happily hailed one of the deuces and rode back to camp.

At camp, we exuberantly reunited with the guys who'd been captured. We gladly heaped up plates of hot chow, our only meal of the day, which we downed ravenously. As it turned out, roughly a hundred of the 140 PCC students were captured, including all the LTs except me and all the PSGs. Most were caught near the roadways, others tracked down by their tracks in the

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snow. The SF Green Berets held all the advantage: skis, snowshoes, night vision devices, even good winter clothing and heaters.

In the POW camp, it seemed the SF guys had gotten the ‘secret’ code word out of all but one of the internees. As I understand it, the SF guys were near experts in interrogation techniques, using only blindfolds, ropes, rough cages, cold water, and various slimy and smelly materials that were applied while the PWs were helplessly cuffed and blindfolded. They also made good use of threats and intimidations, or sometimes ‘incentives’ for those who cooperated, mainly time in warmer facilities. The LTs and some of the NCOs appeared visibly upset that they hadn’t endured their interrogations. A couple of the LTs acted indignant from a distance, like they hadn’t been treated with proper respect. I didn’t trouble myself to commiserate with them. I felt some curiosity about being subjected to POW treatment, but I was mostly happy to have avoided it.

As our platoon reunited and celebrated, Halloran and I and some others learned that the celebrated soldier that the aggressors couldn’t break was our PFC Garza. It was not clear how Garza did it, especially after the SF cadre focused their full attention on breaking him. Most of us suspected he’d never known or may have forgotten his code-word, but due to language barriers, he couldn’t explain this to the SF guys or even to us! Many of us recognized Garza as a guy who’d had a hard life, but always kept a positive outlook. Maybe that had helped him. In any case we hailed him as a hero. Not only our platoon, but all the platoons wanted to congratulate him; even the SF instructors, somewhat grudgingly!

Our bus rocked with happy warriors as we left Bad Toelz, heading back to home station. Garza enjoyed being the center of attention. His language skills appeared to be improving, happily chattering in some form of Spanglish with everyone, including many tankers he’d barely

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known before now. Clearly, the PCC had served its purpose for us. In the final standings and taking into account the E&E exercise, we tied for first place with the platoon from the Third ID and passed the engineer platoon by just a few points.

I know I felt more confident. Like the others, I learned new skills and got to know myself better, and better yet, I'd gotten the chance to see the good and bad of many troopers besides my small circle of key NCOs and my own tank crew. The tankers and mortar guys reflected on their unusual opportunity to experience a different part of the army. Most didn't like it, but it had been memorable. SFC Thornton had little good to say of the two-week ordeal, but the experience added to his 'war story' collection as he prepared for civilian life. PFC Garza ETS'd back to "the world of round doorknobs" with many good memories, including his period of POW celebrity. And SSG Hale certainly talked up our PCC success, big time! He made the phrase "Got to be Tougher than Woodpecker Lips" popular, even obnoxious, to others who came around our parts of the motor pool and barracks, and even with our CO. Maybe he would someday find a way to become an armored cav platoon sergeant. He certainly had a bright future in the army.