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An Understanding of What Matters

CRAIG MICHEL

For the first time in weeks, I sat alone with my thoughts in relative silence. I shifted nervously in the high-backed chair, fingering the edges of my chapel cap, and pulling occasionally at the stiff wool collar of my full dress uniform. Outside, I could see cadets scurrying busily across the main area, and for the first time I wished that I was being rushed somewhere too. I rose slowly and walked to the window, looking out past the reviewing stand and onto the companies that had begun to gather for noon formation. Running a gloved hand across my closely shaven head, I enjoyed the corps from a vantage point that I had never seen before—the outside.

What am I doing here? What do these people want from me? I'm too new here to be mixed up in any of these troubles. I'm not supposed to be watching the corps through a window, I'm supposed to be marching in its ranks.

I had been thinking about this day for some time. Since that moment when I was swept into the current situation, I had been contemplating what I was going to say.

This board doesn't care whether I think Sergeant Kopelen was hazing us or not, they just want facts—they want the truth.

I glanced down at my shoes for what must have been the hundredth time. My uniform was immaculate. I had shined for hours, spinning dark smudges of polish beneath my finger until they blended into a black mirror, and working over each button meticulously with Brasso and a rag. My blouse and pants were pressed sharply, and then carefully combed with a lint brush to remove any remaining fibers. There were only a handful of cadets in full dress that day, a handful that would pass before the dean of the academy and college, and one that would sit through it all.

“New Cadet Michel, the board is ready for you.” I spun to see the Sergeant of the Guard standing behind me. His face was totally impassive, and the sun caught his breast plate in a reflection of distinct white beams.

I nodded in his direction, locking his eyes with mine, hoping for some last bit of advice or forewarning. There was nothing.

Hey, it's not this guy's problem. He just leads the lambs to slaughter, opening and closing the door behind them.

The Sergeant of the Guard took a step backwards, revealing the doorway to the corridor, and motioned with one finger the direction that I was supposed to go. I nodded again and tucked my chapel cap under my left arm. With both hands, I straightened my blouse with a quick pull, and walked quickly past the guard and into the corridor. Reaching the first door on my right, I executed a flawless right face and took a deep breath as I stood only inches from the slightly cracked door. I knocked twice, entered, and brought my right hand up in a crisp salute.

“New Cadet Michel reports his presence.”

From the moment I entered the room, each of my movements was followed by eyes aged before their time. Two full bird colonels, the dean of the college and the dean of the academy, were seated facing me behind a large mahogany table. Their uniforms revealed much about the careers they had led: Bronze Stars with small, gold valor devices, Purple Hearts, and Meritorious Service ribbons.

“Order arms, Mr. Michel, please sit down.”

I quickly settled into the dark wooden chair, directly to the right of the only other person in the room—Kopelen. Prior to entering the room I had no idea that he would be present. No one had thought to mention it, and for some reason, it never occurred to me.

Jesus, they're making this kid sit in on his own Academy Board. That's how it works?

Kopelen's presence made my stomach knot, and for a moment I was unsure whether I would say anything at all.

I'm not testifying with him sitting right here. There's no way.

For a moment I had convinced myself that with Kopelen there I would say nothing to defame him at all. As far as I was concerned, the whole thing never happened, and nobody there could prove otherwise.

Kopelen didn't seem to be breathing. He sat perfectly still, back straight, arms down at his side. Throughout the entire ordeal I don't think that he ever moved, but then, I tried to avoid looking at him. His presence petrified me. He was under arms in the full dress parade uniform, the school's most ceremonial attire. His parade hat rested in front of him on the table, and I caught glints from its gold and silver shield even under the soft blue fluorescent lights. The chest of his full dress was covered with two years worth of medals that Valley Forge had pinned on him. I couldn't help but think that now he would lose them all because of what a kid who had been in the corps less than two months had to say.

Colonel Rowe, Valley Forge's Dean of the College, made brief introductions for himself and Colonel Miller. He went into a short statement about some of the board's formalities, and the questions began almost instantly.

Colonel Rowe glanced quickly at the notepad in front of him, and then back up at me. “Were you ever struck by Cadet Master Sergeant Kopelen?”

I felt the weight of the board's stares, the weight of Kopelen's presence.

“Yes, sir.”

“Did it bother you?”

“Not really, sir.”

“Did you observe Sergeant Kopelen striking other cadets?”

“Yes, sir.”

Beneath the table, I ran the ribbed palms of my white parade gloves back and forth against each other.

“Cadet Michel, is there anything else that you’d like to add?”

I stared into Colonel Rowe’s eyes, trying to imagine what he saw, and what he was thinking. My hair had just started to grow back from the shave it had gotten the day that I’d reported. My uniform was bare, and hung loosely on a frame that had grown thin.

I’m a goddamn new cadet. I don’t know how this school works. A week ago I was still a plebe, and now I’m testifying at an Academy Board! The guy hit us. How the hell am I supposed to know if that’s the way things work here? The school’s been here for seventy years, I don’t need to be the one to change things.

“Yes, sir, there is.”

My mind rushed to a room where Kopelen had proudly told us about tradition.

“This is how it’s done,” he explained, “this is what being in the corps is all about.”

In a flash, he brought a two-foot broom stick down into my gut. I braced for the hit, breathing out hard on impact and absorbing the sting of the wood. There were two others in the room, still with smiles on their faces. Kopelen was smiling too.

“You guys think this is funny?” Kopelen sneered.

Two more hits. The stick ignited a strip of fiery red across each of their abdomens. Kopelen’s hits were becoming progressively harder, he was into it now. With a maniacal smile he paced back and forth before us, talking about his plebe year and the strength of the corps. His sermon was blurred in my mind, but the same words seemed to keep coming up again and again: “Honor,” “Pride,” “Character”.

My hands were balled into fists, seeking some way to absorb the pain. My mind raced to find answers among his strikes. Honor, pride, character, is that what this is all about? Why did it all feel wrong? Why did I suddenly feel so cheated? My mind spun. This is military school, right, this stuff is supposed to happen. Honor, pride, character—is this how it’s built?

Some things are wrong, some things you don’t do anywhere. There are some things that cannot be compromised. Who cares about the hits. Tell this board what made you the most angry. Tell them when things were wrong for sure.

“Sir,” I said looking first at Colonel Miller and then back to Colonel Rowe. “I’m just a new cadet. Sergeant Kopelen is my platoon sergeant. I’m not supposed to like him, but I respect the training he’s given us. He’s trained us well.”

What was it, Craig? What was it that went too far?

“But earlier today, sir, he came into my room, and told me what he wanted me to tell the board today. Sergeant Kopelen told me how he wanted me to testify. You know, what happened and what didn’t. I didn’t like the way it made me feel.”

It was the one thing that had any definite clarity, the one thing I was sure about.

The moment Kopelen stepped into my room, the moment I heard the tone of his voice, I knew what he was doing was wrong.

He had spoken to me as though we had been friends for years, casually propping himself against my desk, and telling me to relax. His manner and tone were ones I had never seen before, it was not the Sergeant Kopelen that I knew.

How could he have done that to me? Fuck Kopelen and his corps! Don't tell me how to think and what to say.

But they had been doing it since the day I arrived. Not just Kopelen, but all of them. They had all been telling me what I should be thinking about, what I should say, where I should go, and exactly how to do all of it. My life was being lived at the command of other people, so how did this differ? I wasn't sure, but I did know that if I didn't say anything to Colonel Rowe, if I didn't bring this up to the board, I would be hurting something more important than tradition. By not saying anything, Kopelen, not Valley Forge, would have taken something from me much larger than the corps and its seventy years.

Colonel Rowe folded his hands together on the table in front of him. "I understand what you're saying, Mr. Michel, is there anything else that you'd like to add?"

I couldn't believe that I had actually gotten it out. I had rehearsed it in my head for days, but each time it had come out differently, and each time I had wondered whether I would say anything at all.

In a simple sentence, Colonel Rowe managed to lift much of the burden that I'd been carrying with me. For the first time, there seemed to be someone on my side.

"Cadet Michel, is there anything else that you'd like to say," he repeated.

"No, sir," I finally spit out.

"Thank you, then. The board has noted your comments, and appreciates your time and cooperation. You are free to go."

I was free, free from so much of the anxiety that had consumed the previous weeks.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

I stood and saluted again.

"F troop leads the way, sir!"

They nodded, already scribbling notes onto the pads in front of them, and I left.

Once back at the barracks, I hastily began pulling off my thick, full-dress uniform. I was eager to blend in once again, to fall back in among my peers. I felt more confident, more prepared to adapt and succeed. Outside cadets were moving to class on a beautiful October afternoon. Red and brown leaves kicked across the main area, chased by a cool wind. All around, things were changing.

Within a week of my testimony, Sergeant Kopelen was dismissed from the Corps of Cadets. His orders were read before the corps at main area formation, but Kopelen wasn't there to hear them. He had quietly packed his bags and left two days before.

I was not the only cadet to testify against him, there were others. But I noticed that over the next two years we spoke little of what had occurred behind the doors of the board.

Our Superintendent, Rear Admiral Hill, did not take the hazing issue lightly, and the night after the orders were published the entire corps was to assemble for a vespers service in the chapel. As we marched past the lights of E Battery on our way to the chapel, our ranks cast long, angular shadows against the walls of the barracks. I had never seen the chapel at night before, its white pillars bathed in light and darkness, its steeple cutting majestically into the night sky.

The corps filed smartly into the pews. Cadets coughed and fidgeted in small but powerful acts of defiance. Heads bobbed back and forth in exhaustion. There was an aura of disinterest.

The Admiral welcomed us, and began speaking about another school, another time. Things were familiar, though; and the afflictions they faced were ours. The Admiral spoke of a boy hazed so severely that rather than report the incident, he chose to take his own life.

"We found him one morning," said Admiral Hill, "hanging by his own belt, from a pipe in the bathroom."

The entire corps fell silent. The Admiral's voice trembled, revealing his connection with the situation, and he paused to let the power of his words settle among the pews. I had never experienced the power of silence. For several seconds, no one breathed, no one moved, no one lived. The image of a cadet hanging lifeless from the ceiling sent goose bumps across the back of my neck.

What was important here, what really mattered?

In that moment, nothing mattered outside of the chapel, outside of the corps.



Fashion as it is to-day
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