The Only Good Thing About a Conscription Army

He was a little guy, maybe five-three. He would have to almost jump up to hit me in the face.

And he did, right outside the mess hall. He and his buddy followed me out. The beef was that I didn´t let them cut in front of me in the line.

It was 1968. Martin Luther King was murdered in April. Bobby Kennedy in June. Jim Crow had only really ended in 1965. Lots of blacks had an attitude, and the infantry had more than its share of blacks.

My nose was bleeding pretty good. The word was that the little guy was Golden Gloves, a pretty serious boxing group for amateurs. I couldn´t attest to it. I was just mad and chased the little fucker down, put him on the grass, rolled him over was just ready to punch him in the face, more than once likely.

But I didn´t get the chance. As my arm went up for the punch, it was grabbed—by his buddy it turned out, Faison. “Got to the stop. The captain is coming. Hurry,” he said.

It sounded like good advice at the time, and I couldn´t punch anyway. So, we go back to the barracks and I rinse my nose. Slowly it sinks in. “There wasn´t any captain,” I tell Faison.

“No,” he said, “but you were fighting him not boxing him.”

True. Wrestle a boxer. Box a wrestler. Something I knew and practiced. But this wasn´t going to be some drawn out vendetta. They got away with, and it would have been an Article 15 for everyone anyway. That is non-judicial punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Bullshit on top of bullshit that nevertheless got you extra duty.

This was the stateside army—bullshit, especially with Vietnam going on. Fort Carson, Colorado. Our company was made up of guys wounded in Nam but not seriously enough to get out of the Army. It was always somebody´s call that could mean six more months of freedom or six more months of Army bullshit stateside.

There was a guy, Haar, who had an inch-wide scar that went from his belly up over a shoulder and down his back—a 50 cal. hit that should have killed him. He drove our Armored Personnel Carrier. Others had bad feet or vague jungle maladies. The rest of us were just lucky, our numbers came up Fort Carson not Saigon.

The night I checked in Fort Carson my bunkmate was a six-eight black guy. “Please don´t hurt me,” I was thinking as a shock his hand too eagerly. I got moved to another room pretty quickly. There was kind of a unstated segregation. A black mafia of sorts, more or less ruled from one room. The lame white guys and chicanos were in another. Not a lot of animosity. We all thought the Army was bullshit.

There was crime though. A memo came down to look out for a gang who used razors to cut open pockets open of guys sleeping during the day and stealing their wallets. When I got to be brigade message center driver, I would carried stacks of Congressional Investigations started by parents usually of white boys who got mugged on the way to the movies. There was a huge unlit open parade ground between the barracks and the theater. Experienced guys crossed it in groups. New guys were easy prey for blacks who hated not just the Army but the people who were in it. There must have been some official bunch of paper shuffling that solved nothing and made no one happy which delt with these ´investigations.´ The MPs never did anything about it.

One days I was barracks orderly, whatever that meant—a chance to be inside and sham, laze around. Something came up where we had to break into a locker. I don´t know lost keys, someone AWOL someone sick. You could do it with an entrenching tool, a folding shovel. Put the tip of the spade on the padlock and whack it with another tool.

But it wouldn´t go this day. Everyone has an opinion why. Faison wants to try and fails with a bad method. I shove him away, and he freaks. There is dancing around pushing back and forth until I get him on the floor on his back. A have his shirt bunched at the chest with my left hand and can bloody his face as much as I want.

The thing is I don´t want. We both know it is there. Why go further. I let him up. He slinks off only to return wearing tennis shoes. He is convinced his footing betrayed him, but I quickly have him in the same position. Maybe I should hit him once just to end the thing, but I don´t. I tell him not to come back. He is a kid, maybe 19. I am 22.

Later I remember that he didn´t kick me in the face when he pulled me off little Golden Gloves or break my arm or stab me. He was a jerk but not as terrible as was possible.

It sort of threatens the company´s black mafia which really is just swagger and threat. An hour later their bad boy enforcer faces me up in the hall and demands “Ya got a cigarette?” Meaning give me one or its fight time. He is built. The day before he fought a beefy Arab guy who complained that we didn´t back him up. Who needs this? I give him a cigarette. Keep your fucking swagger

Somehow, I got transferred to brigade headquarters and put in the headquarters company which was run by its company clerk, an out-there gay black guy smarter than anyone in the company. His father was a doctor. We talked. Nobody else interested him except for their all being fools. He wanted to get me over to his father´s house off base. Nah.

Even the company CO, a tall uninspiring captain, had to ask him how many soldiers were ready for duty, how many on leave or sick or AWOL. In his leadership roll the captain called us all into his office one day explaining how the brigade commander wanted everyone to give to the United Way. It looked good to someone higher up. We weren´t leaving the office until we voluntarily gave he told us.

But this wasn´t basic training. We were happy to spend the day sitting in the damn office. Mission not accomplished.

At brigade HQ I worked for Sgt. Harris a diminutive master sergeant from the deep south who knew personnel services Army regulations in and out. I expect him to be the worst kind of Southern cracker, but he isn´t. He is a good man, a very good man. He got soldiers leave to see sick and dying relatives, help for mental problems, better health care, transfers closer to home.

There were a couple of privates from the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico at headquarters, black guys. One of them hadn´t been paid by his old unit for three months. Sgt. Harris found out and offered help. The guy said, no thanks, it would work itself out. His old brigade sergeant was working on it.

But nothing happed for weeks. I sat right in front of Sgt. Harris and listened to him tell the other brigade PSNCO, personnel service non-commissioned officer, that a simple form 4256 slash 112 stroke 14 could get our guy´s back pay to him in a few days. I kind of knew the other PSNCO was black and didn´t like being lectured by a Southerner.

When still nothing happened Harris persisted, so much so that a complaint went to Division HQ and the word court martial was used--for Harris not the other sergeant. Maybe it was professional jealously, but this deep southerner risked at least promotion if not his career to get a black private his back pay.

This was the draft Army of 1968, a reflection of the worst and best the country had. It went away in 1973. It broke overseas, especially in Vietnam, but even then it was one of the big engines of integration in a country reeling from its own craziness.