Major Billy Deramos

When a new commanding officer calls a private into his office, it isn´t usually a good thing.

In 1970 we all thought this. My previous CO had sold me down the river, consenting to my transfer from a cushy bunk at a radio station to a bullshit brigade headquarters company.

After that a loony lieutenant colonel who hated my guts chased me on early morning training runs yelling personal insults. I had been used to getting up when I wanted and not taking orders from anyone as long as I turned in copy for the division newspaper every week.

This was Korea. Koreans fed us, did our laundry, cleaned our barracks, and even pulled guard duty. Nobody did physical training. But this was Camp Kaiser, home of the First Brigade, not Camp Casey 30 miles south, which was 7th Inf. Div. HQ and had bigger bars and brothels in the village outside it. I was there to hold a job that kept me out of the infantry.

So when I was called to the Public Information Office at Casey to meet the new CO, I was nervous. Anything could happen. When the previous CO left, the newspaper staff managed to corral both PIO jeeps the day he was leaving. He had to hire a cab to Seoul while we took the jeeps to the Imjin River and dropped acid.

Why did the new CO want to see me?

Major Billy Deramos asked me what I was doing. I took that to mean what was I doing at the First Brigade. A tote board at PIO showed how many press releases each reporter had. I had two hundred and some. The next guy had 20.

I wrote stories about Kaiser´s water system supplying clean water to the village as well as the camp, about the US Army vaccinating stray dogs for rabies, about a GI who had a big hit with the song Hot Pastrami, about the careers of incoming commanders, about training maneuvers and test firings, and Korean paratroopers making their first jump.

I was told to get reactions to a new regulation allowing troops to wear civilian clothes off base. The villages next to the camps were segregated, left to white bars and brothels, right to black bars and brothels. MPs patrolled the vils in groups of four with loaded 45s and nightsticks, but there wasn´t too much trouble. Infantry units often were a third black. It turned out that civilian clothes didn´t cause more trouble in the vils. The blacks I talked to were interested in keeping their civies looking good, not messed up with beer or blood.

But Major Deramos wasn´t asking just what I was doing at Kaiser. He wanted to know what I was doing in the Army. He could tell from my serial number that I was not a draftee but an enlistee. He wanted to know why I joined the Army in 1968 after graduating from university.

Was I against the war, he wanted to know--an amazing question from anybody in the Army, especially an officer, especially a black officer and especially a PFC. He suspected rightly that I was, and I suspected that he was too. By 1968 almost everyone who paid attention knew Vietnam was an endless disaster.

So why was I here, he asked. I told him I was against the war from the first in 1965. As a college student I had a draft deferment as long as I stayed in school. Married guys with children, divinity students and conscientious objectors had deferments too, but everyone else got drafted if they couldn´t wheedle a spot in the National Guard or the Coast Guard.

There was a lot of cowardly behavior among us. I told Major Deramos that I tried all the chicken options, but they didn´t work for me. Then I told him I thought it was wrong that guys who didn´t go to college had to go into the Army. So I joined. I don´t think he was terribly impressed, but he did ask. Nobody else ever asked. I wanted to get his story, but I was afraid to ask. I was a PFC.

I imagined his story was more complicated than mine and much more difficult. The spring before I enlisted Martin Luther King was assassinated. Cities erupted. The month I went in the Army Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. The Democratic National Convention in Chicago took place while I was in basic training. There was a lot of crowd control training, foot stomping advances with fixed bayonets. Would we really do it? We didn´t even ask ourselves.

The Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia that fall. The US Army did nothing. The next year protesting white students at Kent State in Ohio and black ones at Jackson State in Florida were shot dead. When I reached Korea four sergeant majors in Vietnam were busted for skimming off $20 million of entertainment money. Newsreels showed grunts with FTA (Fuck the Army) inked onto their helmets. There were stories of lieutenants getting blown away by their own men. Even at Camp Kaiser brackets were burned by black troops.

I wanted to talk more with Maj. Deramos. He knew more than I, I was sure. No one in the Army had ever talked to me like this. But we left it there that first day.

Or so I thought. At that time the largest pay jump in the Army was from Private First Class to corporal, something like $240 to $465. I knew it because I had been a PFC for about 18 months. Ten days later I was a Specialist Fourth Class, a fucking-big-money corporal. I knew it was him.

I was short by then with only a few months left before going home. I hadn´t used any leave in Korea and quickly arranged a solo trip to Japan to buy a Honda 750 motorcycle for much less than they cost in the States. The Major had to approve my leave. When he did, he asked me to buy a stereo, a turntable and some speakers for him in Japan and gave me $700 in cash.

This never happened. A good man trusts me? An officer? A black officer? In the Army?

I spent a week in Japan and ran into men who spent their lives in the military. Men strange to me, unlike Maj. Deramos.

I bunked with a Korean corporal in Seoul when our flight was canceled. He was in the Korean White Horse Division in Vietnam, a unit known for brutality. In his mid 40s, he was sinewy with a hard face and strict politeness. Their Army was so different from ours. In Japan I spent a night in an Air Force barracks for traveling servicemen. An enormously fat and content Chief Petty Officer was there, tattoos everywhere. He had not seen the US for years and didn´t plan to. He had a Philippina wife somewhere. What was that union like?

Back to Korea, I only had time to pack my stuff and process the paperwork to leave. Although all the stereo stuff was insured, some of it was stolen or misplaced. I

I gave Maj. Deramos all the receipts and insurance papers. I was made a Spec. 5 before I left. It happened quickly. I was grateful but too eager to be out of the Army to show it. I couldn´t really anyway. It was like that. He was a good man in a tough spot who helped me for some reason and maybe even liked me. I never forgot.