

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

**THE
ALMIGHTY
PENN**



HARTLEY STEVENS

The Almighty Penn

A Living-In-The-Country Short

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Published in the United States of America

By Big Toe Writes, LLC.

Cover & Website www.HartleyStevens.com

design by Sharon Julien

www.sjulien.com

Editing, provided by Graeme Hague

Polgarus Studio

www.polgarusstudio.com

Original songs by Douglas Haines

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By

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Fort Sill is the home of Field Artillery for the U.S. Army. They consider themselves and only refer to the Field Artillery as the King of Battle. Field Artillery is cannons for the civilian-minded of you.

A Battery is a Company, made up of three platoons, first, second, and third platoons in our case. A Battery/Company is made up of roughly one hundred-fifty soldiers, fifty to each platoon. A platoon is made up of four squads, roughly twelve soldiers in each. It is very organized, never varies, has been done this way for eternity and is never open for creative input.

Beginning in February 1987, I spent nine weeks in the company of some of the most professional, hard-working, knowledgeable mean-ass humans on the planet. These somewhat-humans were drill sergeants, the place was Fort Sill, Oklahoma, the event was my Basic Training for the United States Army.

We, the newly christened trainees of the 107th Training Battery, had suffered though the “welcome station” and were now the wards of our permanent drill sergeants, Drill Sergeant Weir

and Drill Sergeant Penn. DS Weir was six foot six inches of hardened black lava, DS Penn was five-six in his boots.

Drill Sergeant Weir was the one who gave us our initial shock of reality. I've written about the experience in the story *The Drill Sergeant*. For the first couple of days we just ran around getting yelled at. Nothing we did was correct and we were rewarded with hundreds of push-ups and grass-drills per day.

Day Four was to be an administrative event. The 107th Training Battery was tasked with filling out personal paperwork. Of course, before the day could begin, we needed to get our morning tasks accomplished.

At 0500 hours, after being woken by banging trashcan lids, we fumbled all over each other getting dressed and making our beds.

0515, we assembled in formation, poorly, for which we received *focused intensive training*. We marched to a stretch of asphalt the size of stadium parking lot and did the callisthenic and stretch part of our physical training routine. What would eventually take thirty minutes some weeks later doubled in time now as we routinely screwed up every command and suffered the consequences. Then we ran in formation for a hundred miles. Okay, it wasn't really a hundred, maybe only four, but it sure *felt* like a hundred.

0630 hours, we returned to the barracks having done a normal person's whole day of work. We quickly conducted personal maintenance (shit, shave and shower) and were back in formation at 0645.

0646, we marched to the chow hall, where we marched in place outside singing cadence at the top of our lungs until we were given permission to enter.

0659, every trainee had crammed as much food as possible down his gullet and stood in line for pull-ups.

0700, the drill sergeants ushered us into a large conference room with folding tables and chairs. The sergeants dimmed the lights and turned up the heater, which was oh so welcoming coming in from the freezing, thirty-degree Fahrenheit temperature blasting winds, buffeting the Oklahoma plains.

A single sheet of paper was in front of every chair. We were given the proper command and all sat in unison.

Drill Sergeant Penn stood alone on the raised stage in front of us. In his raspy, smoker's voice, he bellowed commands as he walked back and forth across the dais. A dull spotlight followed him. "On the single sheet to your twelve, you will write two-hundred, neatly printed words detailing your love for the United States Army. Take out your DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument. Do you understand?"

In unison, the one-hundred fifty trainees of the 107th Training Battery hoarsely croaked, "Yes, Drill Sergeant!"

"Begin."

The spotlight died, the warm air blew. Half the Battery began to nod, snoring erupted. Whispered comments passed between the hearty, still awake.

Maybe ten minutes the lights above, burned to high volume. The side doors were opened, letting the razor-edged wind into the conference room. Ninety percent of all trainees were dead asleep when the wind came in. I wasn't one of the sleepers—I was just too damn scared, I'm not ashamed to admit.

With the wind and the light every trainee popped to seated attention.

Drill Sergeant Penn again stood on the stage alone in the spotlight. “It has been observed by me and every other Drill Sergeant present that not one of you—not *one* completed the last order. I assume you want more motivation, I assume you want the sand. Are every last one of you puked illiterate?”

No pin dropping would be an exaggeration.

“Speak to me 107, are you literate?”

In unison, one-hundred fifty souls, me included, yelled, “Yes Drill Sergeant!”

“I guess I'm being the sissy Drill, I suppose I'll have to endure the rebukes of my fellow soldiers, but I'll give you another chance. Take out your DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument and begin.”

The lights went dead again, and the heat blasted.

This time there was some moaning and mumbling to join the disjointed confusion.

A minute later the lights were back on high-beam and the doors flung open for the cold to blow in.

Again Drill Sergeant Penn strutted the stage. “This is the dumbest, last drip of semen, sorry assed, useless band of cocksuckers I’ve ever encountered. Can you not write at all? Are you completely ignorant of written communication?”

“What the ever-loving hell is wrong with you people?”

A skidding noise echoed across the room. One asshole, dingbat, stood. I would later come to recognize him as brave and innovative. He was Private Lie, a lad of Asian descent. Today, I leaned far away.

“Drill Sergeant?”

DS Penn paused dramatically. He put his hand to his forehead to shield against the spotlight. “Is that Lie, the china-man? You want a foot up your sideways ass? You want the Penn tsunami?”

“No, Drill Sergeant.”

“Speak your piece china-man.”

Lie, was four tables from the stage, one behind me.

The yellow boy boomed, “Drill Sergeant, I do not have a DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument. I admit my incompetence and ask your forgiveness. Drill Sergeant, I do not have a pen.”

The little leprechaun of doom exploded. He leapt off the stage onto the first table, smashing hands with his boots as he crossed over two more. He jumped off the table nearest to PVT Lie and poked him with the brim of his smoky-bear hat while yelling, “You useless sack of

yellow monkey squirt, you dog-eating, mustard-colored lack of ass, you're telling me you don't have a DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument on your sallow-skinned, hard-to-behold boney body?"

Brave Lie got his voice. "No, Drill Sergeant!"

Drill Sergeant Penn circled Lie, hating him with body-language. "You are an ass-less, useless, sack of shit, Lie."

"Yes, Drill Sergeant."

"But I'm gonna loan you my pen. Thank God you're the only stupid one. Write your paper. Stand when you're finished."

The bouncy leprechaun handed his pen from his pocket over to PVT Lie, then bounded onto the table and nimbly leapt across the others to the stage. "Now that we got PVT Lie settled, write your papers you loveless anus-loving herbivores."

The lights dimmed again, the heater swelled. PVT Lie—and only PVT Lie—scribbled with intensity. The rest of the 107th Training Battery sat in the dark, listening to sleepy music.

Wishing for a pen.

Less than ten minutes later, PVT Lie bounded to his feet and stood at attention. The lights beamed, the doors opened. Drill Sergeant Penn walked over to Lie and snatched his paper off the desk, reading it. "Substandard for a china-man. You musta got born from one of the sickly tadpoles. Give me back my DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument. The rest of you weeds proceed to the front of the room in an orderly fashion and hand your papers to one of my fellow Drill Sergeants."

One shaky hand raised from the crowd of 150. Drill Sergeant Penn, plus two other heaving Drill Sergeants rushed to the raised hand. Penn began another verbal assault, “Did I tell you to raise your hand, maggot crap?”

Private Davis, the raised hand, screeched, “Drill Sergeant...”

“On your feet, dung beetle. You stand when you address a Drill.”

PVT Davis shot to his feet. “Drill Sergeant, I also do not have a... DD ...”

Drill Sergeant Penn breathed in all the air from the room. “You carcass of useless k-nine crap, are you telling me—are you *seriously* saying—you sat there all the while, as PVT Lie did his little dance and you also didn’t have a DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument?”

PVT Davis boomed, “Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Beat your face, Davis.”

PVT Davis dropped to the now, all too familiar, front-leaning-rest position and began pushing up Oklahoma earth. The two other bookend Drills crouched and began yelling at Davis as he did his penance.

Drill Sergeant Penn, with the practiced drama of a Broadway actor, slowly turned and looked out at the rest of us, as if seeing us for the first time. “I’m getting the feeling that more of you dog-assed, sack of turds might not have a DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument. Stand if you’re missing a pen.”

Minus Davis and Lie, one-hundred-forty-eight shaking souls stood in unison.

“To the sand-pit, every last, sorry excuse for wasted food, every last dick-swinger beat feet to the sand.” He twirled his finger in the air as if a wand and a dozen more Drill Sergeants descended on us with hate and fury. They turned over tables and chairs, barked and rebuked with surprising creativity. They ran us around the training area, another two miles, until we were sweating and convulsing. Then they put us in the sand and screamed, bellowed and yelled for nearly an hour as we did all manner of physical intensive training meant to get our minds right.

Drill Sergeant Penn stood sentry on a raised platform, surveying the pitiful scene and yelling insults through a bullhorn.

1100 hours, the 107th Training Battery again assembled in the cavernous conference room. Sweating profusely, covered in sand and grit, every exposed orifice clogged with dirt, we were each issued a DD route 02-niner-hearty, single-click writing-instrument and given the identical instructions—to write a paper detailing our love for the United States Army.

The lights were bright, the heat and music were manageable. As we wrote, the leprechaun instructed, “The *pen* is not mightier than the sword or the M-16 rifle or our beloved Howitzer. But you weeds, in my garden of life, you will never again find yourself without the capability to write down every command you are given. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

Nearly thirty years later, I almost never find myself without the almighty pen.

The End

Before You Go...

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