

The Great and Powerful Ogg

I had an experience like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz when I got off the bus at Basic Training in Fort Knox, Kentucky. Like Dorothy, I said to myself, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Betsy.” Drill Sergeants were yelling at us for any and every reason. It seemed insane.

“Move, move, move, get off that bus!” they yelled. There were over 50 of us on the bus, all rushing to get out. The drill sergeants didn’t seem to understand or care that the doorway only allowed one person to pass at a time.

Basic Training stories are funny because they are about a life that is so different from life quotidian. The job of training people to be disciplined enough to face mental and physical hardship even when they don’t want to is serious business. Trying to train people well enough that they have a chance to live and survive on a battlefield is also serious business. So, when that very system is seen in a humorous light, it relieves tension. And because it is so different, it provides irony and humor.

As I stepped off the bus, a tall, ebony gladiator yelled, “You’re not dragging that duffel bag fast enough, Cadet! Didn’t your parents work for a living?”

I wondered what that even meant! Of course my parents worked for a living, but what did that have to do with dragging a 60 pound duffel bag, which was over half of my weight, out of the bus and onto a pile of other stacked duffel bags?

About ten feet from me, a medium sized, two-legged American Bulldog wearing thick glasses and sporting a “*high and tight*” haircut yelled out, “When I call your name, you will sound off with ‘Here, Drill Sergeant!’” He had a thick southern drawl. I found out later that he was from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Tennessee. I could see that his nametape read “Ogg.” I kept the thought to myself that the name *Ogg* rhymed with *dog*, which is what he looked like. It was a good thing I didn’t share my humor with him, because I found out that he was humorless.

He started taking roll call.

“Once you claim your name, you will form a line on the lines you see painted on the ground in front of you.” He pointed at four yellow lines. “You will fill in the lines from my left to my right. Once the line is full, you will begin to fill in the next line back. Do you understand?” yelled Ogg.

A few of us conversationally and in normally-toned voices replied, “Yes,” or “Sure.” You would have thought we had just put Ogg’s favorite kitten in a microwave.

“Where do you think you cadets are?” He bellowed. He started yelling sentences at machine-gun pace, “This is not Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood! Do you think we are sitting in Mr. Roger’s living room taking off our sneakers and putting on a special sweater so we can watch a puppet show and a toy train??!” he paused, then growled, “When I ask you a question, you will respond with either a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ unless the answer requires a more detailed response. At the end of every response, you will end your statement with ‘Drill Sergeant’ and all of this will be said in a command voice. A command voice is one that is delivered at the volume that I am using right now. That way everyone can hear everyone else and everything is out in the open, so that when each of you makes a mistake and I correct it - and believe me, ALL Y’ALL will make mistakes and I will be right there to correct you - everyone can hear and learn. Is that clear, cadets?”

This time, we all yelled back in a thunderous cry, “Yes, Drill Sergeant!!”

“Good. We can now commence with roll call,” said Ogg in a ‘command voice. “Arnold, Michael J.”

Arnold yelled back, “Here, Drill Sergeant!” He had blond shoulder length hair and looked like a hip tennis player or surfer.

“Brown, Marquez A.”

“Here, Drill Sergeant!” Bellowed a tall cadet with a handsome face and a fade cut. His trimmed and shaped Afro had a gleaming gel in it. His muscular biceps were so large that the short sleeves of his polo shirt puffed up and couldn’t fit over those bulging biceps. I thought to myself that no one would ever

dare tell Cadet Brown that Anne of Green Gables would have been envious of those puffed up sleeves. I thought that Brown looked like a man who could stand up to any force, but looks can be deceiving.

“Brown, Shaniqua C.”

From the back of our group, I heard a mouse squeak in its loudest voice, “Here, Drill Sergeant.”

“Who the hell let Minnie Mouse join this man’s Army?” belted out Drill Sergeant Ogg. “Brown, Marquez A., you will train your sister to use a command voice.”

“That ain’t my sister,” Replied Marquez.

That was the wrong answer.

“Drop and give me 100 push ups, Brown, M.” Directed Drill Sergeant Ogg. As Marquez began knocking out push-ups, Ogg stated, “From now on you will be known as ‘B.M.’ which is merely an acronym for your name, Brown, Marquez. Is that understood?”

From the push up position Marquez yelled, “Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Gooooood,” replied Ogg, with a wide grin.

When Ogg finished calling our names there were 32 of us standing on the four lines. We were his platoon.

Ah, the platoon: Third Platoon, Charlie Company. We were fondly known as “The Third Herd,” because we were as slow as cows and pretty dumb – at least to the ways of the Army. Or maybe it was just because the words rhymed.

If you’ve ever seen the drill sergeants in movies like *Major Payne*, *Biloxi Blues*, or *Full Metal Jacket*, you know what drill sergeants do. If you haven’t, then let me tell you a little about the mission of drill sergeants and Basic Training.

I went to Army Basic Training in 1984. The Vietnam War had ended nine years earlier. Some of our drill sergeants and training cadre had served in that war. Luckily, I don’t think any of them had metal plates in their heads like the unbalanced Sergeant Toomey of *Biloxi Blues*. But although Toomey was

unbalanced, he got it right when he described the mission of the drill sergeant in his conversation with Epstein in the movie:

This isn't Sunday School, this isn't pass or fail – this is death shit we're talking about. Men do not face enemy machine guns because they're treated with kindness. I don't want them human. I want them obedient. I'm trying to save those boys' lives you crawling bookworm.

Just as Sergeant Toomey ruled over Epstein in *Biloxi Blues*, Drill Sergeant Ogg ruled over me and my fellow cadets at basic training. What he taught me is carved into my psyche more permanently than the "Mother" tattoo on his biceps. I always wondered if Drill Sergeant Ogg's "Mother" tattoo was a testimony to his "Dear Old Mom" or to remind him to always be a "Mother F----r." It remains a mystery, but if I had to guess, it would be the latter.

When I got off the bus and saw my surreal surroundings, I immediately made the determination that I wanted to stay out of the crosshairs of Drill Sergeant Ogg. I didn't like getting yelled at. Some people have thick skin, but I don't. I might even cry if someone yelled at me and that would be very embarrassing to cry in public! I wanted to do everything I could to meet his requirements, so he wouldn't yell at me.

For two weeks, Ogg had let us know that he was in complete control. During his first lecture to us, he said, "You will not eat, sleep, or defecate unless I tell you to!" And that wasn't far from the truth. Every evening, he posted a schedule onto our barracks door. It told us the times for chow, personal hygiene and lights-out. If we deviated from it, he yelled at us and made us do 100 push-ups. If any poor Soldier happened to moan from the pain of doing those push ups, Ogg would yell, "THAT'S WHAT MY WIFE DID WHEN I SATISFIED HER LAST NIGHT! DO YOU THINK DOING PUSH UPS IS PROCREATION, RECRUIT????? GIVE ME ANOTHER 100 SO YOU'RE NOT CONFUSED!!!!"

Initially, members of the platoon would want to kill the person who had moaned, or anyone else who messed up and made us do push ups. But as time passed the numbers of platoon members who Ogg yelled at increased and the targeted insults created a special bond among those who received them. So far, Ogg hadn't yelled at me personally and I was proud of that. I was trying hard to be perfect. My pride set me apart from my fellow platoon members. I felt that I was better than them.

At the end of the second week of basic training it was my turn to lead the platoon. During the first two weeks, I had been excelling at everything: I "maxed" the physical training test, got expert at the firing range, "maxed" the land navigation test, and made it to every formation ahead of time. I was happy and proud of my success and it seemed to keep me out of hot water with Ogg. But I didn't notice that as time passed, my fellow platoon members seemed to be avoiding me. They sat together during meal times and didn't save me a seat. They didn't go out of their way to say, "Hi," or to talk to me during breaks. I was letting my success go to my head. But, Sergeant Ogg would soon show me that I was a mere human, just like my fellow platoon members.

So there I was, leading the platoon home after a grueling day at the Fort Knox grenade range. I was confidently calling cadence: "They say that in the Army, the chow is mighty fine! A biscuit rolled off the table, and killed a friend of mine!"¹ To which the platoon responded appropriately, "Oh, Lord, I wanna go, but they won't let me go ho-o-o-o-o-me, hey!"¹

The sun was on my back and I was looking forward to getting to the mess hall for some chow. We ruck marched as a form of transportation, burning over a thousand calories daily. We only ate three meals a day, no snacks. We were so hungry, we usually devoured everything the cooks threw onto our plates: mashed potatoes and gravy, fruit cup, overcooked spinach, dense rolls with as many pats of butter as possible, and whole chicken legs including the tendons and nubs on the ends. We were so hungry that

¹ If you didn't get the irony of this cadence, called a "Jody," let me point out that the Army biscuit of legend is so hard that if it rolls off the table, bounces and hits you, you will surely die.

even if it had smelled like canned cat food we would have devoured it; if the food seemed mildly edible, we ate it.

Then, as I dreamed of eating dinner, I called a command on the wrong foot. Who cares about this simple mistake, right? Well, in the Army everything is about unity and the team. As the Drill Sergeants say, normally with a southern drawl, "They ain't no 'I' in TEAM, dipshit!" and the Army is the ultimate team. So, when marching troops, you want them to move as one unit - organized and pretty. To keep the unit together when turning, you gotta call the command on the correct foot. For a right turn, you call it on the right foot; left turn, you call it on the left foot. I wanted the platoon to go right, so I needed to yell, "Right turn! March!" with each portion of the command on the right foot. If the timing is right, the platoon will flawlessly execute a 90-degree right turn.

But, this was my first test on a team event. I was good at individual displays of competence, like firing a rifle, finding points on a map while using a compass, and taking written tests. But, looking back, I can see that I was still green when it came to team activities and Drill Sergeant Ogg was getting ready to snap me like a twig!

I said, "Right turn! March!" on the left foot, instead of on the right one.

I expected the platoon to collapse in on itself, a lightning bolt to strike, or the ground to swallow me up. Nothing like that happened, no, something much worse! Although it didn't look pretty because a few people shuffled their feet while turning, the formation did make the right turn. Then, Sergeant Ogg magically appeared at my side like Voldemort. Ogg marched to my left, sandwiching me in between him and the platoon. He started calling cadence above my voice and took command away from me. Despite this jarring loss of authority, I forced myself to stand tall, all five foot two of me.

Sergeant Ogg barked, "MARK TIME! MARCH!...PLATOON! HALT!." Spittle glistened on his small, Army-regulation, Hitler mustache. We stopped marching. Everything was quiet. I remembered to execute a left face so I could face him. My eyes were pinned to the nametape on his chest with its three

terrifying letters, O-G-G. I dared not to look into his beady little eyes for the fear that they would burn a hole into my soul.

“LIZZY!” He bellowed. I could smell the burnt coffee and Cremora on the stressed syllable of my nickname, “Lizzy.” “Yes, Drill Sergeant!” I yelled back, pretending to be fierce and confident, though I wanted to run and hide.

“What did you do wrong?” he menaced, his eyes squinting behind his black-rimmed, “birth-control” glasses, fondly known by the acronym BCGs.

“I called the command on the wrong foot, Drill Sergeant! Sorry, Drill Sergeant!” I said, wondering how many hundreds of push-ups he would make me do. But, he momentarily held off on the push-ups and did something that hurt me even more.

“SORRY?! SORRY?!” He fumed. His face got red and he looked like a volcano ready to blow, “SORRY LIES SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SHIT AND SYPHILIS IN MY BOOK! NOW DROP AND GIVE ME 100!”

I got down into the front-leaning-rest position, all alone, and started knocking out push ups. “One drill sergeant, two drill sergeant...”

Then, the platoon burst out laughing. They couldn’t help it. They weren’t just laughing at Ogg’s alliterative joke – they were laughing at me. I was mortified. I wanted to crawl into a hole from the embarrassment – both from my mistaken marching command and from saying the dreaded S-word, “sorry.” Then, Sergeant Ogg dropped the whole platoon for laughing and we started counting out the push-ups. We stopped laughing somewhere after push-up number nine because it didn’t seem like Ogg was getting tired. Of course he would never get tired, He is Ogg: He was just standing there, as always, watching us. Finally he called, “ON YO’ FEET, DISEASE!!!!” We rose with effort. He marched us over to the mess hall and filed us into line.

At chow, I thought the platoon would be pissed at me for my mistake, for making us all do push-ups. As we waited in line, everyone followed the rules, standing silently looking straight ahead at some random spot on the back of the person in front them. We were only allowed to talk in the mess hall for the last five minutes of chow, but until then, we were under a cone of silence.

After I got my tray of mystery meat, overcooked broccoli (at least that's what I think it was), and rice that crunched when I chewed it, Marquez motioned me over to his table. At first I didn't understand what was occurring since no one had ever asked me to come sit with them before. I approached hesitantly and when I arrived, Shaniqua pulled out a chair for me so I could sit down next to her. She actually smiled at me. I was in shock. Then, a drill sergeant yelled, "TALK!" Almost everyone at the table turned to me and started laughing and teasing me with comments like, "Lizzy that was an awesome display of ineptitude! Welcome to the Herd!" or, "Ogg sure laid into you, Lizzy, that was awesome!" and "I thought you were Ogg's Golden Child. I was getting ready to draw a Hitler mustache on you while you slept!"

At first, I was indignant. Then, I smiled too and laughed at myself along with them.

That night, lying in my bunk, thinking about my embarrassment, I realized that by making a mistake, I had become a member of the team. The Great and Powerful Ogg's targeted belittlement of my marching commands and use of the S-word, had taught me an enduring lesson: "They ain't no 'I' in TEAM!" For that moment I was the happiest cow in Third Herd. "Mooooo!" I was no longer an arrogant outsider, but a Soldier on a Team. Who would have thought that mistakes would lead to great friends and memories?