

**The Literary Club**  
**November 15, 2021**  
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*Note that this paper is based on actual events. Personal notes by the author provided the basis for much of the dialog. The names of individuals have been changed to avoid any embarrassment to those involved or their families.*

**The Army Abides**

What do mosquitos eat when there is no moveable feast of soldiers? Sweat only attracted more, and my jeep was a simply a serving station for the winged blood suckers. The troops in my platoon crammed into two trucks behind the First Sergeant and me had it worse. We were all stuck in a column of vehicles blocked from moving on a narrow road edged by heavy green vegetation.

The blockage was another unit obstructing the crossroad in this desolate shallow valley. Senior officers were in the middle of the crossroad shouting at each other and gesturing wildly. Maps fluttered in the hands of junior officers trying to explain why the others were in the wrong position. This situation became dire when the enemy discovered this rich target area and started a low-level bomb run. One officer in the lead group disengaged from the bazaar argument and ran down our line of vehicles shouting: "Hold this ground at any cost."

Before we go any further with this gripping tale, I need to clarify the location and timing of this military action. The year was 1959 and the location was Ft. McClellan, Alabama. This confused scene was part of a peace-time training exercise. I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant fresh out of three months in Officers Basic Training for the Chemical Corps, and assigned as Platoon Leader in a Company of recent draftees going through their Chemical Corps training. Oh yes, that bombing run was a Piper Cub dropping paper bags of white flour to simulate bombs – the Marx brothers playing at soldier.

I turned to my First Sergeant sitting behind the steering wheel of the jeep starting blankly out the windscreen. With my most mature tone of voice, I snarled: "Sergeant, how does this army ever win a war?"

Without so much as a nod of his head, Sergeant Clark said: "Lieutenant, all we do is fight other armies. If we are less fucked up than them – we win!" If there was ever a metaphor for the frustrations inside an organization as big as the U.S. Army, Sergeant Clark nailed it.

Of course, the Chemical Corps may be an extreme example. In all the backwaters of the military. The Chemical Corps was the one charged with preparing to do battle with a kind of warfare that was considered inhumane – as if warfare was humane. No ambitious officer wants to be in a largely ignored branch of military service. This led to a certain relaxed attitude at Ft. McClellan which was the Army training headquarters for Chemical, Biological, and Radiation – called CBR. Preparation of the troops and officers who were often chemists, engineers, and pharmacists - most with bad eyesight - had been more technical than military.

This atmosphere changed quickly in 1959 when Ft. McClellan received a bad efficiency report noting the lack of military preparedness. The response was a predictable over-reaction with tougher training and deep concern about the career impact on senior officers. There was a general atmosphere of paranoia about the core mission, the Cold War, and the fear of any criticism. This paper will focus on the fate of one Black soldier who had to deal with the weight of the chain of command in that environment.

With the in-depth knowledge of CBR warfare imparted by the Chemical School, my actual duty assignment was much more routine. The 562<sup>nd</sup> Training Company was the boarding house for draftees fresh out of basic boot camp who were attending the Chemical Corps School for enlisted soldiers. With the majority of the platoon attending the Chemical School every day, my duties as Platoon Leader did not require much creativity or effort. Sergeant Clark made sure I signed the right papers, and I tried to not make more work for him.

The US military had been pushing racial integration following WWII, and was ahead of most of the nation at that time. As an example, P&G did not have a Black manager at any level in any manufacturing plant until 1965. By 1959, the military had racial integration at all but the most senior levels. Not perfect by 2021 standards, but real progress was notable across all ranks. The possible exception was the individual state National Guard units which were more subject to individual state direction.

To make the point, a major irritation at Ft. McClellan was the visit of the Alabama National Guard for their annual summer training camp. At that time, the ANG was reported to be the only completely segregated unit in the U.S. military. Their band wore Confederate Grey uniforms, and marched to the tune of "Dixie." They flew the Rebel battle flag with stars and bars along with the United States and Alabama flags. It was reported that the ANG troops could bring their personal weapons to the encampment and, alcoholic refreshments flowed freely. This entire camp was like an Alabama football tail gate party and gun swap. Not a very impressive military outfit and their presence at Ft. McClellan was disruptive. However, like many states, the Alabama National Guard was very connected to the politics and politicians of Alabama. The post commander had to suffer through this summer melee without disrupting the rest of the post, and certainly not ruffling the feathers of the Alabama National Guard.

Any Black soldiers wandering into the ANG encampment would not only cause an ugly scene, but could receive serious injury. Rather than risk any official statement, a message went out through the network of First Sergeants starting with the commander's office and ringing down to the First Platoon. The system was called the Sergeants Call, and this message was to be delivered to every Black soldier. The National Guard Encampment, called Area 48, was off-limits to all Black soldiers.

I didn't know about the message or the Sergeants Call until Sergeant Clark alerted me that one of our regular staff, Corporal Collins, had reacted badly to the off-limits declaration. Almost embarrassed, Clark asked me to go talk to Collins. Now, I did know who Collins was. He was hard to miss – standing 6'5 or 6'6" tall and more than 250#. Clearly, the biggest man in the entire company, and the only Black in my First Platoon cadre. He was the middle of eight children of a share-cropping family in Georgia, and today would likely

have been a left tackle for the University of Georgia and maybe the NFL. However, in 1959, he was very happy in the Army. He had his own small room, three meals a day, clothing, potential for advancement, and the work wasn't as hard as picking cotton. His years on the farm had filled out his body with muscle strength that became the stuff of legends around the platoon. He was recognized as a good soldier who was diligent with his duties, followed orders, and rarely complained – the Army's dream.

Sergeant Clark and I crowded into Collins small room, and the big man expressed himself clearly with a strong Georgia accent. He was very proud to be a soldier and wanted to be treated like anyone else wearing the uniform. Being excluded from any part of the post because of his race was insulting and he was not happy. Collins was only partially mollified when I told him how much he was valued and was certainly as good as any other soldier – Black or White. In fact, he was better in every way than the rabble in Area 48.

Collins appreciated my comments, but that only made him bolder to ask, "then why can't I be trusted to go where anyone could go?" Hearing my further comments that Sergeant Clark was only looking out for his welfare in this undisciplined area, didn't help much.

Finally, the resolution to this conundrum became obvious to me. Area 48 was so dangerous that it posed a danger to anyone who wandered around those tents. Black or White, there was no reason for anyone from First Platoon to be in Area 48. I told Collins and Clark on the spot, that the off-limits notice was appropriate except that it was not complete. I wanted a bulletin board notice posted that afternoon that Area 48 was off-limits for the entire platoon – draftees and staff. It took Collins a few deep breaths to realize that the reason for his complaint had disappeared and he thanked me. I reminded him that Area 48 was now off-limits by my direct order for all of the platoon including him.

Leaving Collins room, Sergeant Clark asked if a Platoon Leader really had the authority to make the off-limits notice for our one platoon. I recognized that the company commander, Capt. Rogers, might be irritated, but his only instruction to me when I took over the platoon was to "keep these kids out of trouble." It seemed to me that I was doing just that.

Back at the office, the Sergeant, his typing Corporal, and I wrote a beautiful notice for the bulletin board. It highlighted the importance of the National Guard Training, and their tight schedule. The presence of outsiders would interfere with this critical training, etc. etc. Anyone who wants to visit an individual in Area 48 may do so after submitting a formal request through their normal channels – in other words, not likely. Later that day, Capt. Rogers did his best at trying to ream a new opening in my body for not conferring with him. However, he did a small re-write of my notice and placed Area 48 off-limits for the entire company.

Near the end of my active duty time, in preparation for returning to the P&G plant in Baltimore, I took a week's leave and drove my young wife to Baltimore so she could start the school year teaching First Grade. Returning to the platoon on a Monday morning, there was a real surprise. Knowing that my presence in the Platoon didn't have much more impact than my absence, Sergeant Clark's greeting was a shock:

"Lieutenant, am I glad you're back! We have a big problem."

An unusually agitated Sergeant Clark continued: "Corporal Collins is in the stockade accused of assaulting an officer, inappropriate language toward an officer, being out of uniform, and maybe other stuff. He is in deep shit and I don't know what to do!"

Incredulous, I responded: "Collins? You mean our Corporal Collins? Big black guy, easy going, loves the Army Collins?"

"Well Sir, you should know that Collins has refused to talk to the JAG officer, a Captain Rosen, and will only talk to you."

Shaking my head and sitting down: "Well, first things first. What happened?"

The sergeant then gave a very detailed review of what happened. He started by reminding me that, before I left, Collins suffered a gash on his forehead. The doc told him not to wear any head-covering until the stitches came out. He had a letter from the doctor verifying that he was authorized to be out of uniform without a hat. Collins and a couple of guys from the platoon went to the PX Thursday afternoon, and he was confronted by an officer for not wearing proper head-covering.

The name of the officer involved, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Walter Snavelly, was familiar. He was part of an infantry company assigned to Fort McClellan to provide basic infantry training. Snavelly was an eager, officious, and annoying graduate of the Army Airborne School. You never saw him without his jump boots, the Airborne wings, and a walk that was more like a strut. He was not very tall - no more than 5'6" - but very intrusive. As you might guess, he was not particularly well liked around the post.

When confronted by Lt. Snavelly, Collins stood at attention and tried to explain about his head wound and the letter from the doc. A small crowd formed at the entrance to the PX and Snavelly chose to verbally attack the lack of military bearing of Cpl. Collins and the Chemical Corps. He tossed the doctor's letter to the ground and bounced around Collins talking to the watching group as much as to Collins. Finally, his diatribe triggered Collins to say something in defense of the Chemical Corps. That prompted Lt. Snavelly to get very close to him while shouting up at him that Collins wasn't fit to tie the boots of Airborne troops. At that point, Collins could take no more. He reached down, grabbed the Lieutenant by his shoulders, picked him straight up, walked him over to a counter, and stood him up on the counter. He stepped back and in a clear voice said:

"OK Airborne, jump mother fuck!"

Snavelly stood up there while his audience got hernias trying not to laugh. Two MPs had come over to check on the commotion and Lt. Snavelly demanded the arrest of Corporal Collins on a string of charges. The MPs did their job and fortunately Collins did not resist. He had been in the stockade for four days with Captain Rosen trying to figure out how to deal with the military legal issues.

All I could think of to say was: "Oh shit! This is bad!"

Sergeant Clark told me that he had been to visit Collins every day. He was being very quiet, but angry at Lt. Snavely and confused about what could happen to him. Based on our earlier interaction over the Alabama National Guard, Collins trusted me, and, at this point, did not trust any other officer. Clark verified that the guards were treating Collins well since they didn't like Snavely for trying to tell them how to run the stockade. However, due to the severity of the charges, Collins was watched 24 hour a day in a separate cell.

My first reaction was mostly one of hopelessness. Once a soldier enters the military justice system outside of their own unit, there is not much that unit can do except moral support. The charge of assaulting an officer could lead to what was called a General Court Martial, and possible sentence of 20 years in a place like Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. Well above my grade level or expertise. The biggest concern I had at that moment was making sure that Collins didn't react to the guards and make his case impossible to defend.

After verifying the details with Sergeant Clark, I went to see Collins before contacting Capt. Rosen at JAG. The MP's at the stockade reported that Collins had been no problem for them, but they were becoming concerned with his silence. The big man jumped up when the guards let me into his cell. Collins let loose a stream of questions and concerns that he had been storing away. When he paused for breath, I interrupted him to ask his side of the alleged assault on Lt. Snavely. Collins version was very close to Sergeant Clark's with the addition of how angry he felt when Lt. Snavely attacked the Chemical Corps. The whole event caught him by surprise and he felt he had been singled out because he was Black – of course being a mountain of a man made sure he was noticed.

Collins was relieved that a friendly officer would be helping him, but was not happy that the handling of any Court Martial was in the hands of JAG and Captain Rosen. Leaving him, I will admit to feeling sick, worried, and very much a worthless 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant.

Capt. Rosen was almost as glad to see me as Collins. Never had someone so ill prepared to assist in a legal crisis been greeted so enthusiastically by both the accused and the law. Captain Abe Rosen and I had played poker together so at least had some sense of each other, and I liked him. He had a realistic view of the Army with all its faults, and a good understanding of how to best work inside the system. Rosen reported that the post commander, Col. Gallagher, was very agitated about this possible trial. Any General Court Martial is reported to Washington, and a physical assault of an officer by a soldier would look very bad after the recent poor efficiency report. All made worse because the offended officer was attached to the post from the Infantry, and seemed intent on pushing through his initial charges. Based on the evidence, the Colonel and the other officers who serve as judges on the Court would almost have to hand down a serious penalty to maintain an image of strict military discipline – maybe not the full 20 years, but at least 10 years and a dishonorable discharge.

Rosen suggested that I could help him, and likely ease the anxiety of Corporal Collins by doing the initial interviews of witnesses. Assuming this case did go to General Court Martial, there was nothing else I could do except be a character witness. He gave me a list of about 10 witnesses and instructed me to hold off interviewing Lt. Snavely until we reviewed the result of the interviews.

I tapped one of the corporals in the Platoon office to come with me and help record interviews. Neither of us were particularly good at transcribing, but the story line did not change much from one to another. On the plus side, it was clear that Lt. Snavelly did not have many friends, and there was a general feeling of support for Collins as the real victim in this case. Also, everyone agreed that it did not appear that Lt. Snavelly was physically harmed in any way. In fact, he eased himself off the counter so didn't even risk a jump injury. On the negative side, all saw Collins pick up Snavelly and place him on the counter, and most heard him call the Lieutenant an insulting term.

Captain Rosen agreed to release Collins from the stockade into the control of our company. Collins was not likely to try to escape from his own room, but could react badly at some point to the bars and guards. The MP's tried to talk me out of taking Collins from their tender care, but the order from Rosen was all we needed. However, they insisted that he would be released only to two armed guards, and be controlled in ankle and wrist chains. So, Sergeant Clark and I armed ourselves with loaded 45 caliber pistols, and hauled Collins, in chains, back to the friendlier confines and better food of his company. Before we got to the back entrance to our building, we stopped the jeep and removed the chains. The image of this big, Black man in chains coming home to his unit was simply not acceptable to either Sergeant Clark or me

Captain Rosen reviewed the interviews and he was not encouraging. In the current situation at Ft, McClellan it was hard to see the Court Martial Board granting much leniency. He said rather simply: "We have to get the charges removed, and you are the guy who's going to do it." My reaction was to express incredulity. Never had I felt so useless to help someone than at that moment. Rosen actually smiled and said: "You have a certain earnestness about you that may just work here better than it has in poker. I would guess that Lt. Snavelly singled out Collins because he is Black. Also, I understand has no great love for Jews either. With any luck, we can turn some of that against him." He proceeded to map out my interview with Snavelly himself. He wrote an outline of a script and we did a role play of how this interview might work with just Snavelly and me.

The interview was scheduled at his unit where he would feel more in command. Sergeant Clark talked to the Infantry First Sergeant to provide some idea of the set-up before I arrived. He learned that the Infantry commander was on leave that week and Snavelly had commandeered his office – including moving his name plate to the desk.

Lt. Snavelly greeted me curtly and complained about taking time out of his busy schedule. I responded as contritely as possible, and immediately passed along the apologies of Capt. Rogers and my own for the untypical behavior of one of our soldiers.

Snavelly responded with a muttered an acknowledgement – not an acceptance.

Hoping that sweat had not soaked through my uniform, I launched into the planned program.

"Sir, I have finished interviewing the 10 identified witnesses to the altercation between you and Cpl. Collins. This is all in response to your serious charges that could lead to a General Court Martial. Initiation of procedures for a General Court Martial will begin next

week, so this is moving ahead quickly. The testimony is very consistent so there is no need to take your time and ask you to recount the event. If it is OK with you, I will simply review the interviews, and you can react to anything that seems incorrect.”

Snavely tried to look unconcerned and shuffled papers on the desk: “Yeah sure, whatever.”

“Basically, you approached Cpl. Collins as he was entering the PX and reprimanded him for being out of uniform for not wearing headgear. He produced a letter from a military doctor about the stitches on his head preventing head covering. You are reported as throwing the letter to ground and continuing to reprimand Cpl. Collins on his lack of military bearing. Is that about right so far?”

“Well, officers cannot be diverted by any random piece of paper waved at him by an insolent soldier. Your corporal said something about a wound which was laughable compared to the wounds of real soldiers. I couldn’t see any wound and accurately assumed he was a goldbrick.”

Responding with what I hoped was my most sincere look: “I understand, thank you. Then you continued your reprimand by pointing out the seriousness of military bearing and standards. Here are some direct quotes from the witnesses: ‘your slovenly appearance and attitude is an embarrassment to the Army and is typical of the slovenly approach in the Chemical Corps. You people aren’t capable of even marching with the infantry or Airborne. The Chemical Corps is a joke compared to the military bearing and skill of Airborne troops. You are not fit to tie the boots of Airborne troops.’ Is that the gist of your comments to Collins?”

Shifting in his chair, Snavely looked down: “I don’t remember that I used that strong language, but it seemed important to use this obviously unfit soldier as an example for others. You can probably delete the details of those comments as being typical of drill instructor talk.”

“I understand Sir. Based on the interviews, it was after your comment about tying boots that Corporal Collins laid his hands on you, physically moved you, and made a derogatory remark toward you. Let me interject here that Capt. Rogers was particularly concerned that this unwanted contact did not cause you any physical harm.”

Snavely shot back: “Of course not. Your corporal was lucky that I chose not to fight him on the spot!”

At this point, the plan was to try to establish a military rapport between Snavely and me. Looking up from the folder in my lap and leaned forward a bit: “Lieutenant, you don’t know my background, but I come from a military family. My father recently retired after 33 years as a Lt. Col in the Air Force having enlisted as a private. An uncle was a West Point grad and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, posthumously, from his actions in WWII, the other uncle served in the Marines in the South Pacific and received a Purple Heart, my grandfather served for 25 years in the artillery including 2 years in France during WW1. I value military discipline and recognize how difficult it is to develop it – like you do.

So, I very much respect your efforts to take action against this breach of military discipline – even at the risk of your own career.”

Snavely looked up quickly from his shuffled papers: “What the hell do you mean about the risk to my career? Your SOB Corporal attacked me!”

Trying to look sad, I continued: “There is no question about Cpl. Collins laying his hands on you, and being guilty of a breach of discipline. However, you are aware that, if this goes to a General Court Martial, at least three of the court are going to be senior Chemical Corps officers including Col. Gallagher. They are going to hear your comments that the Chemical Corps is a slovenly outfit and undisciplined. Do you want me to read those quotes back to you?”

A clearly engaged Lt. Snavely snapped back: “Those were just the kind of stuff anyone might say just like the drill instructors. Comments like that should not be part of that big oaf’s defense.”

Trying to look calm and again worried about sweat stains, it was time to play the next card: “It’s up to the JAG defense counsel, Capt. Abe Rosen. He has seen the interview summaries and I think plans to quote them as part of the defense.”

Lt. Snavely became noticeable paler and his eyes seemed to lose focus: “Rosen? Why is that - uh uh – why is he involved?”

“Sir, Capt. Rosen is apparently well regarded in JAG, and I hear he often advises Col. Gallagher on legal issues.”

A little sweat appeared on Snavely’s brow: “Well, I will object to this obnoxious choice of defense counsel. No telling what his type would do to defend someone like this soldier. Hell, he would put me on trial!”

Shaking my head: “Sir, I’m afraid that the person making the charges cannot choose the defense counsel. Also, unfortunately, JAG has already chosen Rosen because he is known as tough in the court room.”

More sweat on Snavely’s brow: “This is becoming a real pile of shit.”

Trying to sound sympathetic, the next card was played: “My concern is that those senior Chemical Corps officers who are responsible for your annual efficiency report will be pissed about your comments about the Chemical Corps. Even with a good prosecuting attorney, those officers will not leave with a good feeling toward you, and that would be a shame.”

Snavely got up and started pacing: “That dammed ER hangs over my head like a bag of crap. Rosen of all people.”

Sensing a turn in his attitude, I nervously went on: "Sir, seeing how this might turn against you, I have a suggestion that could achieve what you want in a way that might enhance your image with Col. Gallagher."

Snavelly stopped pacing and looked at me intently. Hard to tell if he was ready to take the bait or if he was going to shoot me.

I opened a folder and tried to sound like a confidant: "What you and I want is to not just discipline Cpl. Collins, but to present your position as a leader. We could handle Cpl. Collins inside the company in ways that would not only discipline him, but show him as an example to other soldiers. I have drawn up a letter that would be placed in Collins permanent record that details his offense. It also removes his name from the next promotion cycle, confines him to quarters for another month, and eliminates any leave for six months. He will be an expert in cleaning garbage pails. This punishment will be seen not only in the company, but around the post since that big guy will be there for all to see."

There was a long pause while Snavelly walked over to the desk and sat down. The Lieutenant leaned on the desk: "But won't that make me seem weak?"

"Sir, actually it presents you as a thoughtful leader. Cpl. Collins would be punished, and the Army is spared the cost and distraction of a court martial. Seems like a wise position for you, the Chemical Corps, and the Army."

"What about the charges I filed?" Snavelly was clearly engaged --- and maybe hooked.

"You can withdraw charges at any time, but the sooner the better. Rosen's boss at JAG, Major Riley, has agreed that he has no interest in pushing for a court martial as long as we agree to the discipline in the letter."

"What about Gallagher?"

"From what I understand, Col. Gallagher would be very happy that you have taken this course of action. I don't know how that affects your ER, but a happy CO seems more favorable than a pissed CO."

"OK, I'll withdraw the charges, but only on condition that letter goes into Collins permanent file." Lt. Snavelly had followed Capt. Rosen's script very nicely.

Now it was time to wrap it up. "Sir, you have made a very wise and smart decision. For your convenience, I brought along the forms to withdraw the charges. If it is convenient for you to read and sign the forms, I'll take them to JAG right now."

The charges were dismissed and Capt. Rosen seemed amazed that I had pulled it off. Returning to the platoon, Sergeant Clark and I went to see Collins in his room. The Corporal was so relieved that he had trouble speaking. We did emphasize that he would have some months of limitations and might be passed over for promotion. However, his likely next chance at promotion was a year away, so that wasn't an immediate threat. To my embarrassment as we were leaving, Sergeant Clark spoke sharply to him and said that

he owed me more than a “thank you.” His exact words were: “You should name your first son after Lt. Kremzar.”

As Sergeant Clark placed the letter describing his discipline into Collins file, I suggested to him, that, whenever Lt. Snavelly was transferred from Ft. McClellan, there would be no one to know or care if that letter disappeared. If I were staying, I would take care of that myself.

The epilog to this story was in a piece of mail I received about six months after returning to civilian life. It was addressed simply to my name at Procter and Gamble, Baltimore, Maryland. The envelop contained only a single sheet of paper – the discipline letter from Collins not so permanent file. Obviously, Lt. Snavelly was gone from Ft. McClellan, and Sergeant Clark had done his duty. Collins was free to continue his career in the Army. Starting 18 years later, I have looked carefully at SEC football players to see if there were any Michael Kremzar Collins listed. To my relief none have appeared.

I don't know the current state of race relations in the Army today. Sadly, they may be no better than the rest of the nation at this moment. However, I do know that success in diversity and armed conflict depends on individuals like Captain Rosen, Sergeant Clark, and Corporal Collins. People who know what is right, and are willing to use their position to work around and through the system. Fortunately, those people do live and thrive more on our side than the opposition. Hope is good and somehow the Army abides.