

Leonard Costopoulos

Setting an Example

I suppose I could have resisted the draft in the first place. I could have dodged conscription altogether and fled to Toronto or Stockholm or somewhere like that, but I lacked the courage.

And how would that look, anyway? A former public school teacher—an agent paid and certified by the State of Illinois to dispense the principles of Civics and the American Way to the youth of our nation—fleeing for his life. No, I was still pure then. Those poisonous appellations ... *draft resister*, *draft dodger*, and worst of all, *deserter*, were much too daunting for my self-image. So I waited painstakingly, yet nobly at the Memphis airport for the flying silver vessel and my ultimate deliverance. That weary, stoical patience—which all experienced transients ultimately succumb to when they find themselves stranded at some unanticipated way station—and a spicy, western omelet from the all-night Mississippi Grill, got me through the wee hours of morning.

I finally arrived at the company area at two-fifteen p.m. the next day. Suffice it to say that the final segment of my odyssey would appear to Sgt. Davis just as untenable as what had taken place thus far. Briefly this is how it went: departed Memphis at six-fifty five a.m., due to arrive New Orleans eight a.m., *but* the landing was aborted... the radar in the Big Easy, for some unknown reason, had suddenly gone deaf, mute and blind; returned, therefore, to Memphis nine a.m.; no chance for New Orleans until the radar was back up; took the only flight to Shreveport, hoping to connect somehow with the Greyhound; landed there at noon; caught the Greyhound for Leesville...arrived two p.m.; inanely sauntered into the company area of Echo Company, Tigerland, Fort Polk, Lousiana at quarter past two in the afternoon just as the First Sergeant was throwing his gear onto the back seat of *his* jeep parked in front of headquarters. He looked well-rested.

“Well...well...well, ”He looked me over with the sanguinary eyes of an Aztec high priest anxious to get on with the sacrificial ritual. “Now I recognize you. So, you’re our prodigal son. Nice of you to show up. Drop, you slug! Give me twenty!”

I assumed the position and began pumping out the twenty push-ups. All the time during the drill, two images came to mind: I was the nomad, the pariah, Ishmael bowing and kissing the ground twenty times at

Abraham's feet as I was about to be cast away. That's what I imagined every time I lunged down toward the ground. But with each upsurge I envisioned something else, my comrades who were nowhere to be found. The area was deserted ... no one on the parade grounds, no one policing cigarette butts around the barracks, no screaming or yelling 'kill, kill...kill the Cong!' *Remember* ? They had all left, gone on that grueling advance into the swampy hinterlands for jungle training. Oddly, I felt that I had abandoned them. That I wasn't with them...together, suffering with them, becoming exhausted like them, angry and apprehensive like them as they delved deeper and deeper into quasi-war and the harassment that awaited them in the creepy marshes of the notorious Tigerland. Nineteen...twenty. I stood up and looked directly into the hollow, chipped stone that was Sgt. Davis' cratered face. His hazel-gray eyes narrowed, almost lizard-like, as if he could detect and therefore relish even more, the gnawing apprehension curdling up inside me.

"Go get your gear. Meet me here in two minutes." His calm voice bothered me even more. "Oh," he added as I trotted off, "don't change into your fatigues...keep your dress greens on."

Dress greens? What was Davis up to? I fumbled around in the deserted barracks gathering up my duffle bag and the things I would carry: steel pot, helmet liner, poncho, rucksack and web-belt, canteens, trench tool and two sets of fatigues, extra socks, a pair of combat boots. I dashed across to the armory, presented my weapons card like an admission ticket, retrieved my M-16 and double-timed it back to where the sergeant and Lt. Neeley were waiting by the company vehicle.

"I didn't hear you!" Davis bellowed out. "Try it again!"

Larcenous impulses immediately rose up within me. Resentment. Anger. Violence. I scampered back to the barracks, stopped at the door, spun around and then raced back to the company headquarters at full speed, this time screaming at the top of my lungs, "*Kill! Kill! Kill the Cong!*" I was back in Tigerland now.

"That's better." Davis said. "So, Lieutenant," he went on, turning to Neeley, "what do you think? Should we escort Private Leonidis here out to the bivouac area? I'm sure he misses his friends. And I bet the entire company misses him, so much so that when we pull up in the vehicle with this candyass—all duked up in his dress greens and not having broken a sweat—that one hundred and thirty of America's finest young men, who after having hiked with full gear for seven hours through the varmint-infested marshes of the Great State of Louisiana will welcome him with open arms."

"Why, Sergeant," the lieutenant replied, "I think that's a fine thought. In fact, the Battalion Commander just happens to be in the area this afternoon,

and after having told him about our special guest here, he thought it might not be a bad idea if he too came along. And we could use his personal car. To Hell with this silly old jeep. Celebrities deserve special treatment. Don't you think so? How about if I radio ahead and request that another company formation be called just before we get there? That way, the troops, as tired as they are, will have the opportunity to greet Private Leonidis here with the utmost southern hospitality and military courtesy we can muster. You know, we can even have a full inspection...but I'm sure the boys are just plumb tuckered out; no, we'll let the inspection go. I bet there will be enough excitement anyway, since the BC has decided to join us. I know how much the platoon leaders and other NCOs will love having the battalion commander give them a surprise visit out in the field...and all of this because of Pvt. Leonidis' auspicious return to our beloved Fort Polk."

Even First Sergeant Davis winced at the thought of yet another officer joining his troops out in the boondocks. The lieutenant he could take to some extent, simply because Neeley happened to be from Richmond, not far from the Sergeant's home town. "Sir, how about we convince the Major that his presence out on the ridge might hinder things, if you know what I mean."

Lieutenant Neeley glanced over to the First Sergeant for a little more illumination.

"I mean, Sir," the sergeant said disingenuously—profaning even more, with his air of false subservience, the lieutenant's lack of authority and combat experience—"maybe this is something we should keep just at company level. I'm sure Major Stone has other more important battalion business to attend to. Besides, I'm not sure the entire company's up to speed right now for a visit from the BC, if you know what I mean, Sir."

"But Sergeant, he already knows about Leonidis and he was looking forward to a little fun."

"I know sir, but the Major, he's up for lieutenant colonel, and he should be reminded that his personal participation in the making an example of this asshole here (he looked over to me) is really beneath the dignity of a soon-to-be field commander. How about you go inside and explain that to him in those terms. I'm sure he'll understand that, while we'd love to have him there, his presence or even the knowledge of his presence may be detrimental to his...you know Sir...his military future, I mean ... Sir."

Lieutenant Neeley smiled for a moment, then nodded in agreement. He was learning. He then went into headquarters to explain to the Major who was inside skimming through his soon-to-be warriors' 201 files. Five minutes later, both officers came out. There was the silent ritual of salutes and then Major Stone having heralded his driver, sped off into the strange, murky light of a Louisiana mid-afternoon.

It was when the major bailed out that the rankness of what Davis and Neeley had in store for me began to settle in. I was to be their specimen, their model, their exemplification to the troops of what happens when, by design or not, a foot soldier even thinks that he can preempt command authority, that he can demand special treatment and cheat (get over) on his fellow soldiers by deviously avoiding the grueling march into the backwaters of the Kisatchie National Forest. And as the two smiled towards one another watching the major depart, it became obvious that their punishment for me was going to be a thing of beauty, one which they themselves could hardly have anticipated. No sir. The major had read them correctly; he was not about to degrade his position (and his career) by being present—as much as he'd like to—at this dressing down.

Still, my only real concern was what the other guys in Echo Company would say or do once this little drama was over. According to Davis and Neeley, I got over. I didn't have to suffer like the others in that damn trek from the soggy bottoms of Tigerland into the prefabricated, replicated terror of the Vietnam jungle. And even though we were all eventually headed for the real thing within a few months, I myself resented life's whimsical nature which, in the last twenty-fours, prevented me from sharing the plight of my compatriots.

"Get in the damn jeep, Leonidis. We're taking you out to meet up with the rest of the boys," said Sgt. Davis, breaking through my reverie.

"Sir, I'd like to march out there like everybody else did. Give me a map and a compass. I'll change into my fatigues and be on my way."

"What? A city boy? You don't know shit about the woods. Besides, how do we know that you might not just take off again?"

"*Take off again?* I didn't *take off* on anybody, First Sergeant. Besides, where would I take off to?"

"Don't argue with me you little worm. In the jeep! Now!" Davis looked over to Lieutenant Neeley with crocodilian eyes.

"You heard him, Leonidis," the lieutenant parroted back with the deepest imitation of a command voice that he could marshal. "Today, you're our special guest. And once we're through re-introducing you during the company formation, then you can be 'one of the boys' again, if that's what you're so worried about. Knowing how much trainees enjoy being called out for such an event, especially after having humped all day, why I'm sure that they'll find their own methods to celebrate your decision to just drive out and join them. Most of them are gangsters. You know that don't you?" He glanced over to Sgt. Davis and then returned his focus on me. "Deadbeats. Lowlifes. Losers. Delinquents. The unemployable, dragged off the city streets and piddling farms because they're too stupid to do anything else except learn how to kill. And for that privilege they can thank this

man's army for giving them something worthwhile to fight for. They're sickening, ungrateful conscripts. Scum, all of them. And my, my...I can't wait too see the welcoming home party they'll have in store for a pansy-ass goldbricker like you, Leonidis."

For some inexplicable reason I was watching Sgt. Davis during the lieutenant's entire harangue. The sardonic smile on his face had taken on the contour and rigidity of a painful scar. What was he thinking about? Was he thinking about some of *scum* and *lowlifes* who were dragooned out from the hollows of his rural Virginia, or the South Side of Chicago, or North End of Boston, or from Ames, Iowa? Was he thinking about the dying expressions of those same *losers* who he claims to have seen perish a few years back while defending Mother America and the rest of the world at Pork Chop Hill? Maybe something in Neeley's inferences reminded Davis of himself.

"Can we go now, Sir," mumbled Sgt. Davis as if he were a hospital patient who wanted to return home, wanted to go off and turn invisible after just being told by the chief of oncology that his condition was terminal.

I had had enough of the human race, including myself for the day. During the jeep ride up to the ridge, I let my mind and senses cavort around the lush, distantless precincts of Mother Nature. Words and comments from the front seats of the vehicle were filtered away. I heard nothing human. And I said even less. There was only the indigenous breathing of the forest. I went aboriginal and became one with the beeches, the oaks and hickories...the magnolias. Deep within the cavern of my mind's eye, I slithered along the spongy mulch of the Louisiana bottomlands with the armadillos and the cottonmouths. I chased bobcats and beaver, followed the flight of a heron and inhaled the organic aroma coming from the iris, the azalea and the bog orchid. This was more of a pilgrimage for me. And it wasn't until we made the transition up onto the pinewood ridge where the vertical shadows given off by wax myrtle and longleaf pine took on the seriousness of sentinels. Here, where the smell of kerosene from Echo Company's recently arrived mess trucks soured the otherwise earthy atmosphere, did the imperfections, flaws and claws of the human condition snag me back into the prickly substance of where I actually was...and who I was.

They were waiting in full gear. All three platoons, in perfect formation and standing at parade rest, just as Neeley had prophesized. He turned his head and grinned at me as the jeep pulled up in front of the second platoon. I swiped a glance past the lieutenant and looked over at Sgt. Davis whose gaze now seemed lost and abandoned somewhere within the muster roll of tired, beaten men.

"Well, First Sergeant," the lieutenant said as he got out of the vehicle.

“you know what to do.”

“Captain, maybe we—” Davis mumbled.

“Do it!”

“Yes Sir!” Sgt Davis slowly unfolded himself out from behind the wheel and took his position, centering himself mid-point in front of the entire company. “Company!” he yelled out, then hesitated a few seconds before finishing it off, “Attention!...Present...Arms!”

Lieutenant Neeley grabbed me by the arm. “Get out, Leonidis. Time for you to inspect the troops.” He glanced over my uniform. “Straighten that tie for Christ’s sake and put your cap on. Let’s make this look official.”

I was led to stand alone in front of the entire company. There was a brief pause when nothing was said. I just stood there. I thought of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas where the military penitentiary is. I heard the words ‘court martial’, ‘dishonorable discharge’ and imagined myself doing time, busting rocks in a big prison yard in middle America. Even Vietnam took on some entrancing quality compared to what was now going through my mind. For a brief moment, I envisioned my trench tool splitting Neeley’s head in two. The mere thought, let alone the utterance itself of the word ‘murder’, made me go cold. It always had, ever since I had first witnessed a ‘murder’ on TV back in the early Fifties. *Martin Kane, Private Detective*. Prime time. A couple of rotund hoods wearing wide-brimmed fedoras and double-breasted suits had dumped a ‘corpse’ in the office of the formidable sleuth as a message to lay off. I could never get over the impression it made on me. Scared me, shitless, I remember. No sir. Lugging around a ball and chain in the land of Dorothy, Aunt Em and Toto for assaulting an officer, maybe...but creating a corpse, uh, uh. ‘Murder?’ The child in me would never tolerate it. Still, I had to show some act of defiance, just to get this Virginia wonder boy off my back. I looked over to the First Sergeant thinking that maybe, just maybe, some sense of compassion might have spoken out to him when I saw him looking so forlornly at the other men. But he had taken himself off center stage. He was over by the mess tent sipping hot coffee with a few of the other NCOs. I didn’t know what to do or say. I must have looked like the proverbial deer caught in someone’s headlights. Then, in my peripheral vision, I picked up a slight movement from within the tight, rigid formation to my front. It came from somewhere buried deep within the phalanx of the first squad, first platoon. It was a wink.

It was Private Horace Smith, the muscle-bound, Bible toting black bulldog son of a Baptist Minister from the badlands of Chicago’s West side. Strongest, toughest man in the company...and my friend. We had done basic training together at Ft. Leonard Wood. He, I and all the other *street punks* from the Windy City. Funny what brings people together. And now here he was, literally the sultan of Echo Company giving me the high sign,

signaling to me some beforehand knowledge of what the cadre of Tigerland were up to and how they were going to set me up as the example. And as I watched those feathery, ebony eyelids flutter up and down, I tried visualizing nothing other than the winglike apparition of a fearless, but benign, black angel.

"Gentlemen. At ease. Smoke 'em if you've got 'em." Neeley motioned me over to stand next to him. In the distance, the cooks had already ignited the cans of sterno beneath the portable stoves. Skillets loaded with chicken parts, kettles of creamed corn and cauldrons filled with tomato soup had all begun to simmer. A strange mixture of tobacco, kerosene, Louisiana pine and fried chicken permeated the air. "Gentlemen, in a few weeks you will be headed for Vietnam where you are going to meet the Viet Cong, or Mr. Charles. At some point, you'll also meet up with the regular North Vietnamese Army. They are good, gentlemen. Very good. And that is why you are about to receive the best training ever for such a mission. What he have planned for you out here this week is as close a simulation as possible to the actual battle conditions you will face in Nam. This will be the culmination of all our efforts here at Fort Polk, and especially here at Tigerland. Once you leave here, you will be among the best-trained soldiers ever to go to war." He hesitated a moment to brush some wayward pine needles from the sleeve of his crisp, starched fatigues. "I wish that I would be going with you, but I've just received orders to report to the Pentagon for duty with the Adjutant General when this training cycle is over. Still, it really bothers me that this...this...slacker, this goldbricker, this candy-assed S-O-B here has to be present in your midst. Private Leonidis expects special treatment, that's why he couldn't hump all day with the rest of you. Instead, he waltzed into the company area at three this afternoon, claiming that his plane connections got fouled up. Then he said that he wasn't feeling well, that he was too exhausted to make the hike...if we could drive him up here with the rest of the cadre and the mess trucks. At first, we considered marking him AWOL, and handling it through the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the people at base headquarters. But since he is such a special case—someone worthy of better treatment than the rest of you—we thought, given the gravity of the situation which you all will soon find yourselves in, that it was be better to handle this as it might be handled, not stateside, but as if in a combat zone..."

Someone over in the mess area inadvertently knocked over a tray of fresh dinner rolls. The men of Echo Company looked over and winced.

"...So, gentlemen, what would you do with someone who thought he was better than you, who let you down, let you go ahead and suffer while he got over, someone who obviously couldn't be trusted in a combat situation? We are at war, gentlemen! America and the democratic way are being

challenged by the Communists. We must contain them! The sovereignty of our nation is at risk, our sacred soil, threatened with foreign occupation. Our boys are out there dying for liberty." He paused, then shoved me further out into public display. "And then we have Pvt. Leonidis, here. So, after having discussed this case with other company officers, the First Sergeant and other NCOs, and because we think that there still might be some hope for this loser, we are returning him to his squad, to his platoon and to the rest of Echo Company in the hope that you, the common soldier, might better be able to correct his errant, selfish attitude. That you, his peers would be better qualified to really prepare Pvt. Leonidis for what he too will have to face, and to teach him the serious consequences of what would befall someone who lets his comrades down during difficult times...."

All the men of Echo Company suddenly turned their heads toward the mess area and collectively held their breath when they saw the smoke billowing up black and foul from out around the edges of a huge simmering pan containing numerous sections of roasted chicken quarters. I noticed two recruits beginning to forage around in their rucksacks for mess kits. Surely, I thought, the lieutenant would get the message and dismiss the company. But no. He went on.

"...Therefore, men of Echo Company, we have decided to place him in your hands for rehabilitation. We—" just then First Sergeant Davis ambled up to the lieutenant, whispered something in his ear and pointed in the direction of the mess area, where other NCOs were in a flurry getting the grease fire under control, trying to extricate as many of the crisp, blackened, but still edible portions of poultry from the inferno as they could. "OK. OK." I heard the Lieutenant Neeley say to Sgt. Davis. He looked back over to the men and stared curiously into their midst as if it were the first time he had set eyes on them. "Company!" he bellowed, "...Fall out!" He then stood reverently, his head somewhat bowed and his hands crossed piously in front of his groin, as he contemplated the men forming the chow line. And for a moment I wondered whether that pastoral-like expression of his was really not the result of some presumption that his soldiers were queuing up for their meal with the same servility he would expect from a group of starving souls lining up just outside a soup kitchen in skid row. But just as I too began to walk toward the food, Lieutenant Neeley turned to me and mumbled, "...not you Leonidis, I'm sure you ate on the plane. Besides, I'm not finished with you."

I felt that I had been left standing alone in front of a cemetery. The lieutenant had ordered me to remain at attention while he left to join other officers in their mess tent. Now to my front, in three sections, each with four long, neat ranks (as if a professional landscaper from Whispering Glades Memorial Park had just finished his tableau to the dead) lay a formation of

one hundred twenty identically arranged little mounds of military armor. Each little knoll, a dwarfish-looking mass consisting of a flak jacket, poncho roll, web-belt (canteens, bayonet, protective mask and cartridge pouches) all topped off by the steel helmet (camouflaged, off course) with the sacrosanct M-16 propped up against it at a perfect forty five degree angle. Each a troll-like stand-in for the real men of Echo Company who now were behind me devouring their very brittle chicken, creamed corn, tossed salad, dusted-off dinner rolls and ice cream sandwiches. From behind, I could hear their muffled, satiating hum, but all that I could see in front of me, as I awaited the nature of my atonement, was this Tom Thumb-sized necropolis.

For some peculiar reason—maybe it was the onset of dusk—my mind slid down its memory path back to where I was last evening at this time. I had set off with good intentions. I embarked on my mission to return to Uncle Sam. I recalled leaving home with the stoic acceptance of the inevitable and with a conscious determination to play the game according to the rules. I even entertained, although briefly, some gratitude for the US military for having disciplined me enough to follow thru. What really bothered me now, however, standing like a loon in front of Neeley, was not that I had obeyed orders, nor that I took my responsibility seriously like a schoolboy, but that I had not considered the remote. I neglected to give due respect to that cursory nature of our being which is always subjected to the whimsical and far-fetched. I had not taken the time to make explicit to myself the perfidious role fate, luck, destiny, the stars, God—whatever one wishes to call it—plays in our lives. That was my mistake. Last night—as the chilly forest with its disinterest and half-light reminded me—I was among friends, eating and drinking. And now, twenty-fours later here I am in the marshy womb of the Great Mississippi, semi-stripped, my dignity at the mercy of someone, who up to today, hadn't even known my name.

“Leonidis,” Lieutenant Neeley had returned from his meal. “Let’s get this over with.” He had me remove my jacket and shirt, shoes and socks and made me roll up my trouser legs to my knees. He glanced back over his shoulder at the rest of the men finishing their food and shouted. “Gentlemen,” some of the troops began to stir from their seated positions. “As you were. Continue with your meal. I just wanted you to take notice here of how well Pvt. Leonidis performs his task.” He looked back at me. “Assume the position, Leonidis.”

“What position is that, Sir?”

“Private Leonidis!” he shouted, for he wanted all to hear and see. “Assume the low-crawl position!”

A muffled roll of laughter rose from the troops as they sat crossed-legged finishing their food.

The words slipped out of my mouth before my brain could regain control. “Your’re kidding, Sir.” Other than the ‘dying-cockroach’ position which for some minor malfeasance, a trainee was required to drop on to his back, raise his arms and legs vertically and gyrate them wildly—like some pest in the last throes of death by asphyxiation—there was no other more humiliating nor strenuous punishment as the low-crawl. The insect world was one thing, but to be reduced to some craven, slithering reptilian-like creature was, for me at least, the most degrading physical chastisement there could be.

“What did you just say, Leonidis?” Neeley screamed. “Are you disobeying a direct order?”

There was no response from the spectator section this time.

“You’re to low-crawl, my way, around the entire formation of company gear. When you’re done, return to your squad” He came closer and whispered as he shifted his eyes slantback toward the men of Echo Company, “then, God help you, I’m sure those assholes over there will have their own methods of settling the score with you for thinking you’re so fucking special.”

His way. That meant that you could not use your legs to help propel yourself along the ground. You could use only the power of your arms to drag the rest of your entire body across the muck like some mutant alligator with only one pair of legs. There was no sense in defying his order. That’s exactly what he wanted; to put me up on official charges. I dropped to the ground at his feet, lengthened out my belly flush with the ground, drew in my arms, placed my hands to each side of my chest and began to push away, dragging the rest of me behind.

“Get up,” Sgt. Davis commanded. Lieutenant Neeley had retreated to his tent. I would not talk personally to him, nor would he ever address me again during the rest of my time at Fort Polk. He was finished with me. I was back in the hands of the First Sergeant, who, now standing at parade rest in front of the re-assembled company, appeared to me—from my prostrated vantage point—huge, like some mythical man-god. He reached down and took hold of my arm. I wanted to bite his hand off as if I had momentarily gone feral from having to crawl around too long with my nose to the ground. “About face!” he screamed at me. He took two giant steps to his left then turned to address the company one more time.

The men were ordered to saddle up again. They milled around pensively as Sgt. Davis went on reviewing for them all my transgressions. Clearly, they were agitated at me, I imagined. And why not? All this Mickey-Mouse shitload of unnecessary company formations, delayed burnt food and command hassle was brought on by *my* indiscretions, *my* disobedience, *my* disregard for their welfare, *my* attempt to ‘get over’, *my* selfish-

ness, *my* attitude of preeminence...*my* expectation of special treatment, since it should be obvious by now that '*Pvt. Leonidis*' could arrive back from leave anytime *he* damn well pleased, avoid a grueling march and then be *driven* up out into the boonies by jeep. *I* was the sad example of all that is wrong with humanity. And now it was up to them, his *peers*, to set this *asshole* straight once and for all and to prepare *him* to fight and die in the jungles of Vietnam like everyone else. At least that was the gist of First Sergeant Edgar Davis's remarks before he officially dismissed the soldiers of Echo Company to their leisure.

Private Smith made certain that Sgt. Davis—before walking away from company formation area—had seen him grab my arm and push his well-worn Bible into my hand. The two men even smiled at one another, as if both had understood what was about to happen next. "Be cool," whispered the black angel as he led me back to where the rest of my platoon would be waiting.

"In there," Private Horace Smith said, pushing me through the darkened opening of a large tent located out on the perimeter of the bivouac area. "Keep your mouth shut and don't move your little dumb white ass. I'll be right back."

"But—"

"I said keep your mouth shut."

They can't kill me, I said to myself as I roamed around the darkness within the tent. They'd be destroying government property. That would get everyone in trouble, especially the Lieutenant and NCO's. Run for it? Then they would shoot me. Desertion they might call it. Or resisting arrest. Why not just throw me in the brig for being AWOL? Dishonorable discharge? But then that's one less soldier for the Nam, and they do have a quota to fill. Maybe I can ask to see the chaplain. What chaplain? There's no chaplain out here in these swamps. An accident. That's probably what will happen: I'll have some sort of 'accident' Snake maybe. Shit. Smith and the boys are going in the woods to get a snake and bring it in here! Maybe—

"Kill, kill, kill, kill the Cong. Kill, kill the—"

I heard their voices growing louder as the men approached the tent. Suddenly there was the black angel with a sack in one hand and a flashlight in the other guiding the rest into the tent. There were maybe ten or fifteen, their faces camouflaged. Without a word, they formed a circle around me, then waited for the 'angel' to join me in the middle where he held the lit flashlight just below my chin.

"Man, you made a big mistake. Who do you think you are, waltzing up in here with a ride and in dress greens and clean smelling and all that other stuff? You trying to get over? Trying to put one over on the man and all the rest of us?"

I heard the rustling of boots as the others closed in.

“Know what’s in the sack, Leonidis?” asked the angel.

“Look, Horace. What the Hell is wrong with you. I thought—”

“Shut the fuck up,” someone said. “So you think that you’re better than the rest of us, is that it, you sorry motherfucker?”

“Blaze? Is that you, Blaze?” I couldn’t see beyond the cone of light illuminating my face.

“Get him down on his knees and open the sack, so we can get this over with,” another voice called out.

Private Horace Smith shoved me down to the ground and held my head down while Blaze Summers, a red-haired Georgia boy from my squad, approached with the army-green laundry bag still knotted at the top. I could see that something was weighing it down at the bottom. “Should we just put it over his head with...you know Smith...with the thing still in it?”

“Go ahead,” someone else said, “just stick this candyass’s head in the sack and see what happens.”

“Tie the whole thing to his balls, and let’s get the Hell out of here,” somebody whispered.

Nothing was worth saying at this point.

“Alright, let’s do it,” said the black angel. “Let’s show Leonidis here what we do to guys who try to put one over on Uncle Sam, his officers and their United States army. Someone hold his head on the ground. Blaze, do the bag thing.”

The noose around the sack was opened just below my nose. I shut my eyes, tight. I held my breath and waited. Five seconds. Ten seconds. Fifteen. Nothing.

“Go ahead Blaze, let it out; but be careful,” said the angel.

I heard the rustling insides of the bag begin to tumble out. I opened my eyes and looked. I saw them scattering all around me as they came slithering down. Clark bars. O’ Henry(s). Peaches and pecans. There were sticks of gum, Hershey bars, someone’s C-Rations (franks and beans), cookies and even some peanut brittle. I saw cigarettes, a small box of condoms and one of those miniature bottles of Beef Eaters Gin you get on the airplanes. A fried chicken leg (very crisp). Then there was a muffled round of applause. The angel pulled me back up and gave me one of those bear hugs. Others gathered around and slapped me on my back like I had just kicked a winning field goal. Then there was a hushed chant: “Leeo, Leeo, Leeo ... put one over on the lifers. Fuck The Army. FTA, FTA all the way...Leeo, Leo fooled the man.”

“Coolest damn thing we ever saw, Leonidis,” said Blaze, “you driving up in the jeep with the Lieutenant and the First Sergeant. We had to do everything in our power from pissing in our pants at the sight of you put-

ting one over on those maniacs. How the Hell did you pull that off?"

I tried to smile.

"See you'all in the rice paddies, brothers," the black angel called out, signaling an end to the brief celebration. "Praise the Lord!" "FTA, FTA...FTA all the way," responded the others.

Leonard Costopoulos was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, where he taught high school social studies for 30 years. He served in the U.S. Army 1967-1969.