

Scandal in the Air Corps Pre-flight School

by
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True gentlemen do not “kiss and tell”, of course, and therefore my lips have been sealed in this matter for over half a century. But now that I am a very old man, and getting dangerously close to meeting my Maker, I have come to believe that it is incumbent on me to set forth a sort of a confession that might be of interest and benefit to future generations. Hence, I now take pen in hand to render an account of certain events that took place when I was a cadet in the then U.S. Army Air Corps back in 1943.

Those events took place at Maxwell Field, Alabama, and I was in a class of air cadets which had just started pre-flight training there. I was quartered with some friends with whom I had progressed through an intensive several months of “college training”, and then through specialty classification. The quarters were a rather up-scale barracks, in which cadets were assigned some four to eight to a room, in double bunk beds.

Eventually we were given weekends off the base, a little more than a month after arrival, and I went along with roommates Fred, Calvin, and Pinky to visit Montgomery, and “do the town.” After touring the state capital building, we wandered about its grounds for a while, discussing what to do next, and stopped to bandy words with a small shoe-shine boy. A young woman came along, turned out to be the boy's sister, and engaged in conversation with us. The upshot of that was a parting of the ways. I left my comrades and went off with her to spend the afternoon taking in a movie and having dinner. Louise was a nice looking blonde, quite vivacious, and a more pleasant companion for the afternoon than my pals would have been. I had several scheduled dates with her later, before being shipped off to primary flying school, although that is just a sidebar to the present story.

When I arrived back at the base in early evening, and settled down in our room to get at my studies, as assigned for the weekend, I was soon put under a barrage of flak from my roommates, who had all returned earlier.

The light-gauge flak was about their swimming trunks, which were in the bag I was carrying when I wandered off with my new-found female acquaintance. That was because we had planned a brief escape from the oppressive Alabama mid-summer heat by means of a dip in a town pool.

Heavier gauge flak soon started, however, in the form of what nowadays might be called “sexual harassment”, of a sort. There was a tendency for young air cadets – and probably for other young military men – to fantasize somewhat about how their “gallant warrior” roles would make it difficult for even the most chaste or frigid young woman to resist their lustful amorous advances. So – disregarding that they well knew that I was a shy and backward, but relatively pious and faithful, Roman Catholic lad of Irish descent from Chicago's south end – my comrades started in on me with questions and innuendos of the most reprehensible type, in spite of my efforts to focus on my homework. It went something like this:

“Well, Bob, let's hear all about it.”

“You must have 'made' her for sure, eh?”

“It sure looked like she was hot to go.”

“It was pretty obvious what she had in mind.”

“She sure looked like she was warm for your form.”

“Come on, you can tell us, we're your pals.”

“Was she hard to get?”

“Did she put up much of a fight?”

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“Or did you put up much of a fight?! Haw! Haw!

“Did you do it in her house, or in a hotel?”

Etc. Etc. Etc.

That sort of thing went on sporadically for quite a while, with occasional lulls when I could focus on my studying. The lulls were semi-necessary, because the others had to do some studying too. As was the custom, cadets from other rooms on the floor would wander in to socialize and discuss the latest war news and poop from the group, and when they found out what was going on, they, too, happily joined in the hazing.

Finally, seeing as how I wasn't being able to study anyway, I decided that I'd better do something to either get them off my case or to just have a little fun. I slammed my book down, shoved my chair back, and blurted out,

“Oh, all right, you disgusting lechers! I give up!

“You finally nagged me into it! I confess!

“I did do it! When I was leaving her house I lost control!

“I... I... I PINCHED HER FANNY! Left cheek, I think it was.

“I know she would hate me for telling on her like this!

“You all ought to be ashamed of yourselves for making me do it!

“Have you had enough of the lurid details?

“I hope you're satisfied.

“Now shut up and leave me alone!

“Try and remember there is a horrible war going on!”

Then, as I slumped down with my head bowed in sorrow, as appropriate for a major confession of dishonor, a remarkable phenomenon took place. It was a major chameleon-like color change. One moment the fellows had been a horde of lecherous voyeurs, drooling in anticipation of a juicy scandal. A few moments later, after some feigned stunned silence, they became transmogrified into a group of horrified puritanical choir boy inquisitors! They all looked appalled, and some of them, aghast, staggered backward. Then the hue and cry began:

“You what?!”

“You devil, you! Scoundrel! Scalawag! Rogue!

“Disgusting cad! Filthy sex maniac!

“Stop! Say no more! I fear that I shall swoon!

“Kelliher! You are supposed to be learning to be an officer and gentleman!

“What would your mother think if she knew?!”

“What would your colonel think?

“What would your enlisted men think?

“You are supposed to be setting them a good example!

Etc. Etc. Etc.

One fellow, sitting on the edge of a bunk, slammed his forehead with the heel of his hand, and fell backwards in collapse.

Another fellow jumped up and ran out and up and down the hall of the barracks as a Paul Revere – like scandal monger, popping his head into other rooms to announce the hot news. Soon a parade of scowling cadets began to come and glare in at the door of our room with malevolent looks, and mutter words of condemnation and contempt.

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The turmoil of the evening eventually subsided, but the next morning at assembly formation it became evident that the incident was far from over. A voice from somewhere in the ranks behind me said, sotto voce, and in a tone of loathing,

“That's him! The pincher! Up there standing next to Fred! Trying to look innocent and inconspicuous!”

Low mutterings and sibilant hisses rippled up and down the ranks, with frequent repetitions of the word, “pincher”, until the lieutenant called the formation to order.

At mealtimes in the mess hall, this 'cause celebre' began to take the place of the “zoom!” game, which had been a popular one since the trappist-like silence & solemnity of the class system, upper and lower, had been discontinued. In the “zoom!” game, a cadet at one end of the long table would swing his head sharply to one side, saying, “zoom!”, the cadet next to him would swing his head sharply in the same direction, also saying, “zoom!”, and the relay would be continued from one end of the table to the other. The “zoom!” was marking the passage of an invisible high speed aircraft. This would be taking place at many tables in the large mess hall at the same time, with perhaps some races being held between one side of a table and the other. It created the air of a festive rave meeting.

At the table where my barracks sat, and soon spreading to others, the “zoom!” game began to be replaced by a variant. One cadet would lean toward a neighbor, point in my direction, “whisper” loudly, wag his head, as in shocked disbelief, and sit back and scowl, while that cadet would repeat with the next one. Soon it was “pincher”, not “zoom!” that was being relayed along the tables.

The next step might have been the appearance in the cadet newspaper of some scandal innuendos of this type:

“Rumor has it that a certain loathsome cadet from Flight G-8 Room 204, has been prowling around

Montgomery pinching the bottoms of decent, respectable southern belles. How much of such behavior can our great corps of cadets tolerate?”

Even though that had not happened yet, and even though I was pretty sure my fun-loving fellow cadets were having a high old time with the jollies of the episode, I was beginning to have a very small inkling of a sense of what it must be like to be really ostracized, condemned, exiled, excommunicated, cast forth into that outer darkness. I was soon to get an even stronger sense of it, and the “pincher” episode, which might have gone on for who knows how long, was soon to be eclipsed.

A few nights later, the entire corps of cadets was routed out of bed and marched out onto the drill field for a midnite formation. It was called an “honor board convention”, its purpose being to announce a verdict in the case of a violation of the honor code which stated, “An aviation cadet will not cheat, lie, steal, or allow any aviation cadet to remain in the cadet corps who is guilty of same.” A cadet was “drummed out of the corps” for cheating on a physics exam! I don't recall if there were any drums, or if the nasty rite of snipping buttons off the cadet's tunic was performed, but do recall the grim words, “His name will nevermore be heard on this field.”

Most of the cadets in the corps were shocked and angered. Not at the “offending” cadet, but at the high command which authorized the humiliating ritual. The anger grew to extreme bitterness when the ritual was repeated several more times in the following weeks.

High command may well have been right, and a character flaw, and weakness in academics, may have made the offending cadets unsuitable to become pilot officers. But they could have been shown the courtesy of being dismissed in a way showing appreciation for their good intentions.

After all, they were “cheating” in order to risk their lives in the thick of battle, at the front, not in order to flee to the rear like cowards!