

Baptism of Fire

The title term typically refers to the first time a warrior experiences what it's like to be in combat. I have already written about that experience for me, which came in late August 1952, on a hill just east of what remained of the North Korean city of Kumhwa. However, I had gone through an equally memorable baptism nine months earlier in Topeka, Kansas.

When I graduated from Infantry Officer's Candidate School, I was assigned as a training officer at Fort Riley in central Kansas. I was 21 years old and had been in the Army just a little over a year. But, as my father once said of himself at about that age, "with the enthusiasm and inflated ego of youth," I undertook the assignment with profound confidence. And, when an order came down assigning me the task of escorting two busloads of young women from Topeka to Ft. Riley for a dance at the camp enlisted men's service club, that confidence prevailed as I undertook the duty.

Attached to the assignment order were instructions outlining precisely how this mission should be carried out. I was to be assigned two GI busses and a pickup truck, with a driver for each. The following Saturday, we were to leave in convoy for Topeka, with me leading in the pickup. At no time were we to exceed a speed of 45 mph. Given the antiquity of the busses, that was not going to be a difficult order to comply with—and the truck was not much better. I was instructed to leave in plenty of time to meet the young women at a hotel in Topeka (a distance of 60 miles) and get them loaded into the busses and back to the service club by the time the dance started at 8:00 pm. Limited to 45 mph, that was going to take a fair amount of time. So, I met my drivers Saturday afternoon and we got on the road.

The hotel where we were to collect our passengers was in downtown Topeka. When we arrived there, two large, modern Air Force busses were already parked directly across the street from the hotel. So, we found places on a side street to park our vehicles and I went into the hotel lobby to find the lady who was responsible for the women we would be escorting. By that time, the lobby was teeming with females, but one of the older ones, recognizing me as their likely escort, came up and introduced herself.

I explained to her what my instructions specified as the procedure by which we would be transporting her charges to the service club at Ft. Riley and back. She responded that they had already acquired two busses with drivers from the local Air Force base, and that they intended to use those busses for the trip to Ft. Riley. I showed her a copy of my orders and insisted that I was compelled to follow them explicitly. I'm sure, in my insistence, I was trying hard to hide the fact that I had been an officer for little more than a month.

To her credit, the lady remained patient as she dealt with me—but she also remained insistent that her girls were going to ride on the Air Force busses. It wasn't hard to see her point. My busses were relics—essentially old school busses with GI paint. I had my orders, but seeing her determination and admitting to myself that those blue busses were only a small deviation from the orders, I relented and agreed to use them instead of the antiques I had brought along with me. We would all convoy back to Ft. Riley, with me in the lead in the pickup, the ladies following in the two Air Force busses and the GI busses tagging along behind. Of course, the pickup would be setting the pace—at 45 miles per hour.

However, this compromise lasted no more than a couple of minutes. When I assembled my drivers and the two from the Air Force to explain how our "troop movement" would be carried on, the Air Force guys protested vehemently. They advised me that the busses they were driving were geared for cross-country travel at high speeds and could suffer significant damage if

required to maintain lower speeds over a long distance. I listened, thought about it for a moment and responded, “My order say 45 miles per hour max—and that’s the speed we’ll be driving.” Then, after a few more futile attempts to change my mind, the lead driver asked, “Lieutenant, what happens if we just decide on our own to pass you and drive on at the speed our busses are intended to be driven?”

“Sergeant,” I replied. “I’ll have you court-martialed.”

They walked away grimly and took their plea to the lady in charge, who quickly came to their defense. I again referred her to my orders and made it clear that I intended to stick to them. Then came my baptism of fire. The lady replied simply, “Then we’re not going!”

My leadership training—particularly in infantry tactics—had emphasized a discipline called “estimate of the situation.” Every battle plan begins with such an estimate, and all decisions made for the battle are based on it. Now, I found myself faced with the need to put that discipline to work in a most unexpected arena.

Of all the many things that flashed through my mind at that moment, the most dominant was a vision of hundreds of enlisted men anxiously waiting for dancing partners that, because of me, would never show up. I simply couldn’t let that happen. So, my estimate of the situation had to result in a plan that guaranteed two busloads of women arriving at the service club before the dance started. Clearly, a lot of the elements of that plan were going to involve my violation of several direct orders. Among those orders was one that specifically prohibited me from riding on a bus with the women.

Even if my pickup truck could stay ahead of those two cross-country busses—which was most unlikely—there was no way I was going to allow my driver to become a participant in my disobedience. This was going to be my decision and, if there were consequences, I intended for them to be mine alone. So, I told the lady to load her charges onto the Air Force busses and that I would be riding with her in the lead bus. Then, I instructed my drivers to return to Ft. Riley in convoy—at 45 mph as the orders specified—and to return the GI busses to the motor pool. I relieved the bus drivers from further responsibility after they checked in with their busses. My driver was instructed that he could attend the dance, but that he had to leave at 10:30 to drive back to Topeka and meet me there when I returned with the young women after the dance concluded at 11:00.

Then, with the GI vehicles on their way and the Air Force busses loaded and ready to leave, I climbed on the lead bus to the loud cheers of the passengers. I don’t recall ever having been acclaimed as much a hero for following orders as I was that night for disregarding a whole bunch of them. And, for me, it was certainly a much more pleasant trip than the one those orders intended me to have.

The next day, I was a little apprehensive about the possibility that my improvisation in Topeka might produce some unpleasant fallout, but the event quickly faded into history and I was left with nothing more than an interesting story about my first baptism of fire.

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