

ASSAULT ON A FORTRESS
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West Point, New York is the fortress of the Hudson and imperial citadel of the United States. Since the days of the Revolutionary war only once has the fort been threatened by a conspiracy which would have left its cadets crimson faced and aghast.

Several hundred miles south of the Point lies a trade school on the Chesapeake Bay commonly known to the natives of those areas as the United States Naval Academy. Shortly after the Thanksgiving Holidays each year, the Midshipmen from the Naval Academy venture forth to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to do battle with Cadets of West Point in a game called football.

The traditional Army-Navy football game is telecast live to millions of sports fans in the United States, radioed to hundreds of thousands U.S. service personnel throughout the world and played before a standing-room crowd of one hundred thousand spectators in the stadium. The game is only a part of the pageantry which occurs annually in Philly; the other part is called "One Upmanship" as each academy tries to surpass the other in pre-game originality and halftime ceremonies.

It is this behind-the-scenes-activity that this story is all about.

Following their summer cruises several Septembers ago the Brigade of Midshipmen returned home to Annapolis where, one evening a group of seniors gathered in a room in the sixth company to discuss their summer's adventures. After the traditional sea stories, talk shifted to the current academic year and what might transpire for the next nine months before graduation. It was during this discussion that the idea of a felony occurred. When it was first broached there was a couple of guffaws and a quick shift of subject, but the conversation snapped back to the idea; laughing

eyes replaced with credible stares. Minds began to churn and embryonic plans were formulated.

The crime was larceny; the haul would be mules ... Army mules!

I was one of those dedicated individuals, as were my two roommates and our room became the “War room” for the task that lay ahead. Our tactics grew to such proportions that we had to enlist the services of six civilians. All were specialists in their field and each had a key function in this misdeed against the Army. We had a three-day weekend beginning on a Saturday, which meant we didn’t have to be back until 6:00pm the following Monday, Veteran’s Day. It was thought that the Military Academy would be most vulnerable at midnight Sunday when the corps would be sleeping soundly after a weekend of football and dating.

Intelligence had netted invaluable sources of useful information such as drawings of the interior of the mule compound, pictures of the mules themselves (only two of the three were worth taking as the third one was an ornery critter), schematics of the burglar alarms, location of the mule stalls and information as to the number of guards on duty inside and outside the building. The most valuable contribution came from our inside man, Charlie, a hulking six foot-nine inch giant, who would lead us down a seldom used mountain trail into the Academy grounds. This old path would permit us to infiltrate via the unguarded portion of the campus with minimum risk of detection by the guards.

Pre-invasion headquarters was to be established in nearby Newbury at the home of a North Carolina NROTC student. An electrical engineer from New Jersey was called upon to handle the burglar alarms while a close friend of his, with an innate ability to break into buildings, volunteered to get us into the mule compound. A fellow

midshipman agreed to rent two trailers with full loads of hay and provide one car to haul away the Army merchandise. I then arranged a date with a Navy Junior who was more than eager to furnish the second car for the excursion. One of my roommates had a girl friend who, living on a farm near Annapolis, furnished us with two bridles and also agreed to house the mules until we were ready to transport them to Philadelphia in time for the game. A newspaper reporter was contacted in New York City to carry the story of the theft once we had successfully achieved our goal ... riding the mules onto the field during the Army-Navy Game halftime.

Eight of us, including my date, drove from Annapolis to New York City for a rendezvous with the civilians: the engineer, the "second-story" man, the NROTC student and the brother of one of the middies who was to be one of the lookouts. A pre-mule party was scheduled so that we might all become better acquainted before leaving for West Point the next day. By party time the two brothers had contracted the trailers and all was in order for Sunday's event.

At 7:00pm Sunday we left for Newbury and arrived at our commando headquarters at 9:00pm. This left two and a half hours for rehearsing the attack plan and for preparing ourselves for the invasion. All of us were dressed in black parkas, black trousers, black socks, and black sneakers and we covered our faces with burnt cork. As an extra precaution no identification was taken so that we would not be linked to the Naval Academy if apprehended as West Point was definitely off limits to the Naval Academy midshipmen. Most of us concealed only fifteen cents and a phone number to command headquarters in the event we had to make that one desperate call and in the event the mission ran aground, we had left ourselves an avenue of escape. An old water plant was cited as the rendezvous point for all misplaced persons. The

NROTC student would pass up and down the highway at thirty minute intervals commencing at 1:30am. If something happened to the escape car, then the phone number would bring his brother from Newbury.

As H-hour arrived our caravan made its way to the obscure trail with Big Charlie leading the way in a lone car. The two cars pulling trailers were driven off the road and awaited our signal. After links were cut on the chain barring the trail, both vehicles were signaled to move out and pull up into the narrow, woody area. The severed chain links were reconnected by wire so signs of tampering would not be noticed by passing cars.

The trailers were driven into a wooded area atop a hill and turned around to be headed out. The lookout slipped off into the night to assume his position for observing the entire Academy grounds. A red flare in the air would be the signal that all was afoul and he and my girl friend would move the vehicles with the empty trailers back to the Newbury headquarters.

The ten of us comprising the main body split into two waves. The first wave consisted of two middies, Big Charlie, and me. Our primary job was to seek out, bind and dispose of any guards who might hinder our operations. Once the area was clear the second wave would be called in. Theirs was a multi-purpose mission. Two Mids, equipped with the railroad flares, were to position themselves in vantage points where the flares could best be seen by the lookout on the mountain. While the engineer and the "second story man," along with two more Mids, would commence work on the building.

As soon as they were inside, one Middie and I would be let in from the large entrance at the side. We were designated to bridle the two "cooperative" mules and ride

them bare back into the mountain trailer retreat. Another midshipman would be waiting nearby with packets of dog food, since the compound contained dogs as well as mules. It was hoped the food would act as pacifiers so we could work in quietness.

Everything was going like clockwork. We were on the trail by 1:00am and we made our way down the mountain path with no hindrances. But as soon as the first wave arrived at the objective, they encountered an unexpected problem. Instead of having only one M.P. and a Veterinarian on duty inside, as our intelligence had reported, there were at least ten slumbering bodies.

Strong armed tactics on the sentry outside proved unnecessary since he was in a car parked in front of the building making amorous advances towards a sweet young thing. It would have taken an earthquake to tear him from his current endeavors.

After a thorough surveillance of the compound and the corral, the second wave was motioned to move in and join us. One middie with the flares posted himself at a window where he could best watch those ten "sleeping beauties" and warn us if anyone should wake. The M.P. in the car was so busy that my roommate was able to walk up to the well-lit front door and see if it was locked. It was.

The rear of the building had a brightly lit corral with a large, rocky ravine separating it from a back road, which ran behind the complex. Trees and embankments kept us from being seen from that road as we checked all the rear windows. Working the front of the building was out of the question since the industrious M.P. might decide to give up and send his date home. Base police cars were patrolling on the average of once every twenty minutes so we were able to set up a time table.

We checked all the rear windows on the ground floor but they were barred and locked. At last, a window on the split second level was discovered without bars. My

roommate, Lund, the second storey man with his “little black bag” and the engineer with his tool kit sneaked up to the window. Unfortunately, it too was locked, but a pair of sure hands took out a roll of masking tape and covered one of the small panes near the latch. A rubber mallet produced the desired results as the pane gave way with a loud thud, but the noise did not awaken the sleeping cadets. Lund and the engineer entered the building and managed their way down to the first floor as all remained quiet as a tomb. The dogs began to stir as Lund opened the back door to let in the Mid with the dog food. Meanwhile, skilled hands went to work on the alarms in the mule stalls.

As I waited in the darkness at the side entrance, I noted that the time was 4:30am. Suddenly the entire scene shifted from serenity to chaos as blinking red lights of two base police cars lit up the front of the building, dogs began to bark, cops yelled and red railroad flares lit the night.

My legs were already engaged with my feet and I sprinted like a bat out of hell for the ravine behind the mule compound. Climbing up the other side, a vine clothes-lined me and sent me sprawling back to the bottom where I pitched my blanket aside and made another attempt to break free. Over the top and running down the back road, I glanced over my left shoulder to see three of my friends with their hands on the walls of the building being frisked by two burly policemen. The last thing I heard was, “Stop or I’ll shoot!”

I thought to myself, “nuts to you friend. If you want me, you’ll have to do more than yell.” Running for a large building at the base of a mountain, I heard a thumpity-thump directly astern which made me run that much harder. Reaching the rear of the building, I hid behind a huge log. Having no sooner gotten my head down when

a large, black figure jumped in beside. My heart leaped in my mouth as I stared into his face. It was a midshipman, my friend, Bo Kearns. I was relieved beyond words.

The mountain jutted up only a few feet away where we lay hidden. After the two of us had caught our breath, we began the climb up the sixty-five degree of pure rock and thorny bushes. About three quarters of the way up we became separated in the darkness. For better or for worse, I was strictly on my own, the fifteen cents and solitary phone number not leaving me much security. My position was in doubt, and I was worried about finding my way back to the plant. Making my way to the ridge I attempted to find the path by which we had entered. That idea proved futile so I struggled on through briars, vines and rocks. At one point, exhaustion so consumed me that when I came to a creek, I fell on my stomach and drank like a man lost in a desert.

Finally, upon reaching the mountaintop, the sounds of passing cars somewhere below became evident. The Almighty must have taken pity on my tired body because, after reaching the base of the mountain, I found the water plant across the road.

An initial inspection revealed a deserted area so I began to reflect the next course of action to take. The first impulse was to determine if the trailers were still hidden. As I was quickly striding in their direction, a police car sped by. I dived beside the road, allowing the darkness to swallow me as "John Law" unsuspectingly darted past.

I pondered the fate of the trailers as I retreated back to the plant. A position in the rocks across the road enabled me to observe anything that moved in the area. Suddenly, a dark shadow emerged from behind the plant. As the figure moved towards my position, I saw it was my roommate, Lund. Softly I hailed him over. From his waist down he was soaking wet, due to a fall off a log while fording a stream.

Our teeth were chattering too much to talk so we just waited in the rocks. About five or ten minutes later a large figure came sneaking towards the plant. Six foot nine inch Charlie lumbered along about as graceful as a grizzly bear. No sooner had he joined us than another patrol car zipped by.

Something had gone wrong with our getaway car because it was not running on schedule. Daybreak was only an hour away so a decision had to be made before we lost the cover of darkness. Charlie lived about thirty minutes from our hiding place so we set out for his home. As we single-filed down the road, police cars kept forcing us to take refuge in the nearby trees.

A mile or so from our original hiding place, we saw so many red lights on the mountainside. There were enough to pass for a Fourth of July celebration. There was no question that the trailers had been discovered.

As I was to find out later, our lookout had mistaken the railroad flares for a shooting star and had not reported the sighting so the trailers remained on station. Unfortunately a new alarm, installed in the back door to the compound only a few weeks before we had arrived, had triggered a red blinking light on the panel board in the M.P. shack, so we had no warning that our actions had been discovered. Only one other midshipman had been able to get as far as the trailer site, but the cops had added up the score and figured out how we had gone unnoticed. The long arm of the law had reached out and proved once again that crime doesn't pay!

One of the first things we did when the three of us arrived at Charlie's house was to call Newbury to find out what had happened to the getaway car. Our friend from North Carolina had given up around 5:00am and had gone back home to sleep. That gave us something to talk about as we sat down to breakfast!

Since I had also gotten wet back on the mountain, Charlie gave me a pair of his trousers while Lund dried his on the radiator. Charlie's nine inch height advantage didn't exactly make his trousers look like a Brooks Brothers tailoring fit on me.

Big Charlie had to go back to Junior College that Monday so he drove Lund and I twelve miles out of town. The two of us looked like a couple of skid row bums as we thumbed for rides. Finally, a couple of hunters picked us up and took us as far as a little burg called Tuxedo. As Lund hadn't limited himself to fifteen cents, he was able to produce just enough bus fare to get us back to his home in the Bronx.

On the train to Baltimore I heard the classic remark of the day. There I was, dressed in a black parka, a black crewneck sweater, Charlie's baggy, light-blue pegged pants, and dyed black tennis shoes. As I reached up to grab a package just before we disembarked, one marine turned to the other and casually remarked, "Boy, that guy sure likes black and blue." I just stared at him with tired, red eyes and shook my head as I headed for the exit.

Lund and I made it back to the Naval Academy on time to find that our names had not been divulged, even though the others had been thrown in jail for six hours and thoroughly interrogated. The pact we made before leaving on the venture held and no one squealed.

When the holiday expired at 6:00pm, all midshipmen were back with the exception of one ... my buddy, Bo, back on the mountain. As far as I knew, he was still running around the woods like a little lost lamb. Four hours after curfew, he showed up. He had had to stay in the woods until noon Monday because the cops were really hot on the highway. Finally, he was able to make it to Highland Falls and catch a bus to New York.

Taking his seat on the bus he looked like the scum of the earth. He hadn't had the opportunity to clean his face and hands of the burnt cork and his dress was still that of the night commando. The little, gray-haired old lady sitting next to him politely asked if he would like to come to her home and wash his face once they got into the City. Unfortunately, his response will never become a quotable quote for Naval history's famous sayings!!

After several delays on the bus, he arrived in New York needing money for the plane fare to Baltimore. Some friends met him at the bus station and gave him enough cash to get him back to Annapolis. Fate struck again as he boarded the plane. The stewardess took one look and ushered him to the most remote seat on the plane. She then refused to speak to him for the duration of the flight. However, once back at the Academy, anxious officials were more than glad to see him. He was immediately confined to quarters along with the other culprits.

Of all the holidays that I have observed since that one Veteran's Day, that one will always have a special place in my heart. Often when I am daydreaming, my mind has wandered back to it and I catch myself laughing.