

Mohammad and the Captain

“Cooper! Master Sergeant Cooper! Where the hell are you?”

That’s the captain’s voice, I thought. What’ve I done now?

Captain Kuchinski—Captain Francis (Frank) Kuchinski, US Army Corps of Engineers, my CO—was a man to be feared if ever there was one.

He’s supposed to be in the field all day, so why’s he back now? This can’t be good.

“I’m here, sir . . . in the motor pool,” I replied.

Within a second the shredded remains of a tire—a Jeep utility vehicle tire—shot through the door leading to the garage work bay, followed by the captain himself. “Jesus, sergeant, those guys working near Wad Medani go through rubber like a drunk goes through a pint of Kentucky whiskey.”

It was nine-thirty in the morning at our geodetic survey field headquarters just south of Khartoum. The temperature, already at 107 degrees Fahrenheit, caused the images on the desert floor to shimmer.

The captain’s fatigues were bathed in sweat. He turned and walked to the wash tub, removed the oil and grease from his hands with the gritty soap lying there, and then, turned the COLD water faucet fully counterclockwise. After filling a metal cup with water, he poured its contents over his head, enjoying for a moment what most people would have assumed was a refreshing respite from the morning heat.

“You know what, sergeant?”

“Sir?”

“It’s true what they say: everything is relative.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I mean, this water has to be—what?—80 degrees or more. And still, it feels like I just dunked my head in a cold lake back home.”

I knew what he meant. But there was nothing he or anyone could do about the water temperature. The holding tank behind our headquarters, though protected by a canvas awning, had virtually no time to cool at night before the sun rose the following morning, taking the water temperature back up again.

The captain removed the large olive-drab handkerchief from around his neck, wrung it out, and wiped his face. “By the way, sergeant, did Private Peters ever report for duty this morning?”

“No, sir. As you know, he didn’t stand formation at 0500 hours and Bravo Team was forced to leave without him immediately following breakfast. I would have gone looking for him by now, but some problems surfaced with the optics on one of our instruments and then—”

“You’re sure he hasn’t returned to base?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Am I correct in stating he’s done this once before?”

“Yes, sir, you are.”

“And am I correct in recalling that you had one of your special ‘come to Jesus’ meetings with him after that first infraction?”

“Yes, sir. And it would have brought tears to your eyes . . . sir!”

“Hmmm.” The captain nodded, appearing to be deep in thought. Then he began rubbing his chin, and after a long silence, spoke again. “I had a dog like that once.”

“A dog, sir?” I wasn't sure where the conversation was heading—no doubt toward yet another of his stories about growing up on a farm in the Midwest. Given he was my superior officer, I had no choice but to indulge him.

“Yep. A black Lab Retriever. Big dog, too. Called him Jeb.”

“With all due respect, sir, that's a funny name for a Yankee dog. I mean, I assume you had J. E. B. Stuart, the Confederate general, in mind when you named him, but as I recall, you once told me your family's farm was in Michigan.”

“That it is, sergeant, but you have to remember, it's in *southern* Michigan.”

“Well, okay then. It all makes perfect sense to me now, sir.”

After more than 15 years in the Army, a career that began when I was an 18-year-old private in the US 8th Cavalry fighting the Chinese at the Battle of Unsan in North Korea, the path of least resistance has always been to go with the flow.

The captain continued without skipping a beat. “Anyway, every once in a while, old Jeb would disappear for a day or two, just like our private. For the longest time we couldn't figure out where he went or what he was doing, but he always returned, none the worse for wear. Then, one day, I happened to be at the McCullochs' farm—you know, the people who own the 200 acres behind our back 40.”

“The McCullochs' farm. Of course, sir.”

“And there he was, old Jeb, cavorting with the prettiest little brown Lab I ever seen and her litter of six pups.”

The captain again filled the cup he was holding, but this time he slowly and deliberately sipped its contents, savoring each drop as it slipped down his parched throat before he turned and continued. “Well, this went on for several years until Jeb was around twelve years old. Then, one day he just up 'n' left, and we never saw him again.”

“What do you think happened to him, sir?”

“Truth be told, sergeant, I think he ‘died in’ just like the *guanacos* of Patagonia that Darwin described in *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Old Jeb knew it was his time, so he found himself some spot under the bushes near the river that crossed our land, lay down, and died.”

I said nothing for a few seconds while my mind sorted through what I had heard.

“So, just to clarify, sir, are you saying you believe Private Peters, who is all of 18 years old and in the prime of his life, most likely died after first crawling off somewhere into the desert, though God knows where he'd find any bushes, much less a river, to ‘die in’?”

“Well, now that you put it *that* way, Cooper,” said the captain, “I'm inclined to believe Private Peters has been whoring it up in town, obviously found someone more attractive to spend his time with than anyone on his field team, and now is officially AWOL.”

Captain Kuchinski was that kind of guy. He had a sixth sense when it came to dealing with people, which, combined with a knowledge of just about any subject you could name, made him a formidable adversary indeed. The captain was the type of guy you'd meet in a bar, get into a friendly argument with, think about telling him to “put his money where his mouth was,” and then hear him say, “Well, I'm just an old country boy, but this here's how I see it.” If you didn't grab your wallet at that point, boy howdy, were you going to be in a heap of trouble. Which is another way of saying you had to get up pretty early in the morning to put one over on the captain.

But that's exactly what one man—actually, a boy, a *14-year-old boy* by the name of Mohammad Aziz Qasim—did earlier this morning, and Captain Kuchinski wasn't even aware at this point that he had been “had.” Unfortunately, the matter of Private Peters

has so far prevented me from apprising the captain regarding the boy's audacious behavior.

"Sergeant, when one or the other of your survey teams returns this afternoon, and if Peters isn't back by then, send two men into Khartoum and grab him. Once he's back in camp, confine him to quarters. In the meantime, contact our command in Bethesda and request a permanent change of duty station for him, preferably something in Southeast Asia!"

Captain Kuchinski knew something about the war in Vietnam. He already had served two tours as a combat engineer, which resulted in his being awarded both a Bronze Star with two Oak Leaf Clusters (for bravery under fire) and a Purple Heart. Among other acts of heroism, troops under his charge prevented the North Vietnamese from destroying a critical bridge over the Drang River, which runs through the valley west of Plei Me, where the Battle of Ia Drang took place. So, to say the captain had no patience with slackers would be a gross understatement, especially now, when, as the captain often would say: "All are giving some, some are giving all."

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Permission granted, sergeant."

"Don't you think your recommendation for a change of duty station for Peters is a bit harsh? After all, he's done good work as a topographic surveyor and seems to get along with everyone on his team."

"Well, I can tell you for a fact that Corporal Mason isn't a big fan of the private's right now, given the corporal is doing both his job and Peters's this morning."

"Yes, sir, I understand that, but—"

"Sergeant, we both know the mission comes first—it's all about getting business done. Any considerations relative to the people are secondary. And at this point it doesn't matter what Peters has done or can do. The fact is, he can't be trusted to complete the mission."

"Yes, sir."

"Look on the bright side."

"The bright side, sir?"

"Sure. A good tour in Nam will give him a chance to test his mettle with the best the US Army has to offer. And besides, those units in the warzone have much larger supplies of penicillin than we carry in the field. Peters won't have a worry in the world," he said with a wink.

"Now, regarding a replacement tire for the Jeep—"

The captain stopped in mid-sentence and stared at me. "Why are *you* plugging that tire? Where's Mohammad?"

Ah, there it is. You're not going to like this, sir.

Mohammad, age 14, and his friend, Ahmed Elmahdi, two years his senior, had appeared at our headquarters soon after we arrived in Khartoum a month earlier, begging for money, and it was Captain Kuchinski who came up with the idea of putting them to work in the motor pool. Mohammad was given the responsibility of removing and remounting tires while Ahmed was assigned the job of repairing them. Pay was modest. Tire removal was valued at US\$0.50, with the same amount paid for remounting. The repair itself was worth US\$1. The Army provided the tools and materials, of course. Mohammad and Ahmed were ecstatic (some days they earned more than did their fathers in a week); the US Army was happy (the trucks of the two geodetic survey teams were kept

rolling); and Captain Kuchinski was thrilled (having proven once again the intrinsic beauty of the Protestant work ethic).

Almost immediately, however, problems emerged. From the beginning, it was apparent Mohammad was by far the brighter of the two lads. It wasn't long before he could remove a tire in less than three minutes, with remounting taking only slightly longer. Meanwhile, Ahmed struggled with plugging leaks, sometimes taking more than 20 minutes even to find their sources. So, after watching Ahmed for three weeks and seeing little improvement, and following a discussion with the captain, I had been ordered to switch the pair. I also was ordered to release Ahmed and award both jobs to Mohammad once the younger boy showed sufficient skill in repairing damaged tires.

It sounded like a good plan . . . until this morning, when it was fully implemented.

“Well, sir, as I reported last night, I let Ahmed go—I gave him the \$5 you gave me for him—and with the help of the cook, who speaks some English, told Mohammad that from now on, he would be doing everything.”

“And?”

“And he reported to me about an hour ago and was given the job of removing and fixing the tire I'm working on here.”

“Okay,” said the captain, looking a little impatient. “So, where is he?”

“Well, sir, that's where we have a little problem.”

“What do you mean, ‘that's where we have a little problem,’ sergeant?”

“Well, sir, at that point, Mohammad refused to work.”

“He what?!”

“That's right, sir. He threw up his hands and shook his head ‘no.’ No, he wouldn't remove the tire from the truck, and no, he wouldn't repair it, either.”

“Let me see if I got this straight, sergeant. After you trained him on Ahmed's job, let Ahmed go, and gave Mohammad all the work—and money—he's now saying he won't do anything?”

“That's affirmative, sir.”

“Why in the world would he do that? He stood to take home *twice* as much money as when he was just removing and remounting tires. Doesn't he understand that?”

“I thought he did, sir, but I fetched the cook and had him explain it to the boy again. Mohammad still refuses to work.”

The captain, frustrated, threw his hands into the air. “Then what the hell is the problem, sergeant?”

“Well, sir, according to Mohammad—and truth be told, sir, something may have been lost in translation because there was a whole lot of shouting going on between the boy and the cook—it all boils down to this: the boy thinks he knows enough now to be a supervisor. In addition, he kept insisting that Ahmed should work for him.”

The captain's jaw dropped and the blank look on his face spoke volumes.

“Oh, and sir, Mohammad—through the cook, of course—said to tell you it was nothing personal. He said he had the utmost respect for you and appreciated everything you did for him, but that, in their culture, it is best to live together like brothers and do business like strangers.”