

Cool on Honor: Sadism, Cruelty, and Character Development at West Point

I have had one serious unanswered injustice done to me in my life, and it occurred when I was 21 years old. I mean “unanswered” in the sense of reciprocity—there has been no accounting for this injustice. I have always wanted to write about it, not because of self-pity but because of something I learned from it that has grown on me over the years. This personal essay describes it as a snapshot from the Army’s troubled times in the 1970s. The story surfaces one important aspect about leadership and stewardship in the modern Army: the antithetical relationship between gratuitous cruelty and honor and the duty to do something about it. In my experience as an Army ethicist, having been sent to graduate school for that purpose, I have seen this antithetical relationship as potentially the most important ethical failure the institution faces. I say this because the institution puts weapons in the hands of young, inexperienced people and then gives them the power of life and death over others. If we do not do all that we can to get this part of Army culture right (the relationship between cruelty and honor), we stand convicted of hypocrisy of the worst kind.

When the Army educated me to teach ethics (a sign of health in the organization that it actually does such a thing), I developed an eye for institutional moral window dressing. That's mostly what I want to talk about here. In the *Odyssey*, Homer says that "the blade itself incites to violence." I want to rephrase that beautiful observation to say that "power over others itself incites to cruelty." When one exercises power over another, if there is a lack of moral sense, of maturity, or of wisdom in the execution, it inevitably becomes entangled with that most basic of impulses, sexual dynamics.

As Jean Paul Sartre demonstrates in *Being and Nothingness*, this sexual component to power dynamics remains a common denominator in human nature, a basic component of our social-political experience. In the case of power over others, there is a psychological impulse to see the other as an object, to dehumanize the other, and to attempt to take action to literally objectify the other through violence or through institutionalized cruelty. This impulse stems from a need to exert one's existence at the expense of the other, and in this effort there is a tendency toward sadistic abuse. This dynamic is what happens when adults abuse children, as in the case of pedophiles. In power relationships, like rank hierarchies in the military, sexual impulse arises either overtly or in some sublimated way. If it arises overtly, it often ends in sexual harassment or assault, such as what became known at the Air Force Academy in 2005 when several women came forward to say that they had been raped or otherwise assaulted there. Another famous case occurred at the Naval Academy when women were chained to urinals in the men's latrines. When this impulse arises in some sublimated way, it often finds its outlet in violence vented out in some more or less "acceptable" form, such as hazing. Army leaders have to be knowledgeable of and on guard against this natural tendency and not minimize it, writing it off as, or justifying it as, discipline, toughness, or some other thing not daring to name it for what it is, which is what happens all too often. Such abuses happen primarily at the lower levels, at the young levels of leadership, though we are all too familiar with the abuses of more senior and notorious "toxic leaders" of the past.

This year, 2011, the U.S. Army is trying to examine what it means to be a member of the “profession of arms,” and the institution is also trying to come to grips with what its professional ethic is and how to deal with its toxic leaders. As General George Casey noted last year, the U.S. Army has yet to define its professional ethic exactly. To me that is an alarming realization after having been shooting at people for a decade. If one has not defined the limits of one’s authority in principle, how can one know how or when one has overreached those limits? Abuse of authority, especially the authority that comes from a weapon, has to be part of any professional ethic, and if we have been deceiving ourselves in tactical, operational, and strategic ethics, we have much to account for. No one wants to hear this sort of thing, yet it has to be aired if we are to avoid regression into the kind of sadistic moral chaos we saw at Abu Ghraib and other facilities and with murders in Haditha, Mahmudiya, and elsewhere in the last decade. The moral implications are paramount, but the strategic ramifications are massive.

In many ways, the Army of the 70s was a harbinger of what happens when moral issues are pushed to the back burner, as they were ten years ago in the beginning of our recent operations in the “Global War on Terror.” Most of us who remember the Army of the 1970s look back with loathing. I look back with loathing, anger, and disappointment.

Idealism

I saw the astronaut Frank Borman when I was 15 years old in March 1969. My Dad took me on a business trip to Washington D.C. for a conference of physicists. We were excited about hearing Borman speak because he had recently commanded the

Apollo 8 mission that had orbited the moon the previous Christmas. He had also been a professor of fluid mechanics at West Point. Borman's keynote address fascinated the physicists, and he told of how ejected urine turned to crystals and floated beautifully in space next to the command module. The physicists gave him a standing ovation.

During the physics conference, my Dad also took me to the Bureau of Standards. There he met with a small group of other scientists and introduced me to the group's chief, a tall man in a gray suit. The gray man nodded and, looking down at me, asked me what I wanted to do after growing up. I said, "Go to West Point." He straightened and gave me a solemn approval. That approval mingled with my tremendous admiration for the West Pointer, Borman, in my adolescent memory, and the implications of this encouragement and admiration informed my thoughts about West Point's historical importance to the Nation.

Later in life, I realized that the Academy was assumed to be the formal and informal historical steward over the Army's moral legitimacy. Its Honor Code arguably served as the cornerstone of the Army's professional ethos and ethic. Seven years after that physics conference, Borman was in the spotlight again. Army Secretary Martin Hoffmann asked the astronaut to head a commission to provide an explanation for one of the Army's most memorable moral crises, the 1976 cheating scandal at West Point. Borman, a natural choice, symbolized everything that was great about the institution and the Nation as a whole.

Honor is a Learning Process

In April of '75, I was in the desert in New Mexico as a private first-class, an M-60 machine gunner in weapons squad, 1st platoon, Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion (Ranger), 75th Infantry. The first battalion of the Ranger Regiment was new in those days, a little over a year old from its inception but having just become fully operational in early December of 1974. We parachuted into the desert from C-141s out of Savannah, Georgia. After weeks of sand and mountains that April, Alpha Company headed to a small base for a rest. While there, I called my Dad. In the course of our conversation, he told me I had received a letter in the mail from the U.S. Military Academy admitting me. My squad leader, then-Staff Sergeant Victor Aviles, had taken the initiative and labored to write letters to request my nomination in the summer and fall of '74. After hearing this good news from my Dad on the phone, I made a beeline for Sergeant Aviles to thank him and tell him his efforts had succeeded.

Later in June of 1975, as I departed the 1st Ranger Battalion, my platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Vennard, asked me in an avuncular way why I wanted to be an officer. Half-joking, he said "What do you want to do that for? Don't you know it's more honorable to be an enlisted man?" He made me laugh at the idea. However, when I left 1-75 for West Point, I was a typically naïve 21-year old. The Army of the 1970s awaited me beyond the discipline and professionalism of 1-75.

In early July, I caught a ride from LaGuardia Airport to the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in downtown New York City. It advertised a good deal for new cadets flying into the city and included cheap accommodations with breakfast and a bus ride to West Point. The new cadets staying at the Barbizon all paired together per room as part of the deal, and

I roomed with a kid just out of high school from south Texas. He was tall and had a huge head of curly, bushy hair. That evening, before sleeping, we talked some. He mentioned he met some West Point cadets on leave in the Padre Island area, and he said, "They had hair like yours."

Every former cadet from West Point remembers registration day, "R-Day." On my R-day, my fellow new cadets from the Barbizon caught a bus together bound for the Military Academy. We arrived at Michie Stadium on the hill above the West Point Chapel in mid-morning. Those of us who traveled up from New York City de-bused and with our bags filed into the bleachers on the east side of the stadium. Written instructions that came in the mail from West Point said what should and could accompany new cadets to the Academy. The list included only a few items, including a pair of broken-in black leather shoes. The suggestion was a reminder that we would be doing a lot of drill and ceremonies and the copious amounts of shoe shining that came with it. Other than the shoes and the clothes we came in, plebes (incoming freshman) could bring a bag of toiletries and pretty much nothing else.

I brought a small bottle of Formica floor wax and cotton balls with me. In airborne school, earlier at Fort Benning, I had learned the technique of preserving a spit shine with a Formica over-coating on the toe and heel of my jump boots. Before patent leather dress shoes and brushed leather field boots, spit-shined waxing on shoes and boots was de rigueur. However, in the hot summer sun, spit shines might last only an hour without Formica, something I learned the hard way by trying to buff up my boot toe on the back of my pants leg during an inspection at Fort Polk's infantry school. The

Formica would save me some time in frenetic scrambles to inspections and meal formations during cadet basic training, so I reasoned. The little bottle made it through my bag's contents inspection at the stadium. It never occurred to me that this floor wax might constitute cheating, but at West Point, it became a question mark for me. Honor indoctrination began almost immediately upon arrival, and, perhaps amazingly, the advantage the wax brought made me wonder if it was "cheating" as the summer progressed.

On that first day of what tradition calls "Beast Barracks," new cadets trundled naively to the numerous processing points dressed in black knee-high socks, regulation gym shorts, and "USMA" logoed T-shirts with names already emblazoned. We got into our new dress uniforms later that first day for the famous first march of the plebes for our official swearing in. With portentous black stripes down our grey pant legs, I felt the first sense of difference. One kid in my platoon that day made the march in "earth shoes," much to the chagrin of our cadet cadre. To me he appeared the perfect contradiction, the stripe of an officer and the earth shoes. My platoon called him "Woodstock." This kid's parents, as he claimed, were hippies, which we believed given his shoes. He had been at the concert when he was 12, he said. Woodstock gratuitously laid himself open to abuse at West Point without the slightest clue. One could only wonder what would happen to him in the gravity of the place.

During the marching, drilling, yelling, saluting, and bag filling that first day, senior cadets repeatedly asked if I was a "Prepster" (from the U.S. Army West Point Preparatory School) or if I was from Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). The drill

instructor seniors, the “firsties,” who we reported to, saw my salute was exact, and it was their job to teach us how to do it. It never dawned on me to feign salute incompetence. “Did you learn this in ROTC?” they asked—to which, among the four things we were limited to uttering, “No sir” was the correct response. The seniors that day never asked if I had been a soldier, only if I was a “Prepster” or an “ROTC” product. This line of questioning continued for weeks, and it bothered me just as the Formica wax did.

For us new cadets, the West Point Honor Code possessed a growing presence. Sometimes, as the summer dragged on, I thought I could be brought up on charges for having violated the Honor Code, either for my shoeshines or for not telling someone I was a soldier. With the deepening indoctrination, I wondered where the line lay. The first honor case I heard of from my class was about Cadet Steven Verr, a starving plebe who, during Beast, intimated to a firstie haranguing him about his moistened eyes that his parents had been in an accident. A cadet honor court charged Verr with lying. When the superintendent later in the academic year exonerated Verr (in March 1976), some cadets unwilling to accept General Berry’s decision threatened his safety. Some actually implied they wanted to kill him. One cadet even said he would lie to convict Verr and publically claimed he wanted to “bury my snow pick in Verr’s head.” He and others announced they would harass Verr so “he’ll wish he quit.” This information comes from Verr’s hometown newspaper, the 24 May 1976 Nashua Telegraph, and from Time Magazine articles about West Point’s growing troubles that year. The head of the Cadet Honor Committee, Cadet William Anderson, was accused of abusing his position in the

Verr case, and the Academy subsequently assigned Verr a bodyguard at the request of Secretary Hoffman.

That summer of 1975, when Verr allegedly lied to an upperclassman, a detachment from 1-75 traveled to West Point to train the sophomore class at Camp Buckner. A ranger from Alpha Company 1-75 named Youhouse, whom I knew only casually, tracked me down to my room and took me for an unauthorized ride out of the garrison in his pick-up truck. This was the first of my violations of the rules. We drove out to his hooch to meet up with old friends and have a barbeque. Soon after this, a few others from my own ranger platoon found me in Washington Hall at lunch and asked my cadet commander to let me eat with them. My cadet table commander moved me from my table squad and took me across the great room to sit with the rangers. After this happened, the senior cadets told me to wear my badges on my cadet uniform. I felt relieved that I was not in trouble with the honor system.

Where it is Most Esteemed

Near the end of cadet basic training, the seniors put the plebes through a week of elementary field training around Lake Frederick. The last event in the bivouac was the bayonet lanes, an event intended to be a training crucible. The night before this final event, someone erected a screen and treated us to an outdoor viewing of *The Sting*. It was a perfect late summer evening, and we were all glad Beast was nearly over. I had seen the film and so just relaxed on the grass near my tent looking up at the stars. The movie helped make the night feel like a celebration to everyone.

The next morning after breakfast, we began the drill. Before our turn in the lanes, my platoon waited in the bivouac area roughly a couple hundred meters from the wood-line where the training occurred. A first-class cadet in our company trainer cadre called out to me, and, with a certain glee, he told me his roommate was going to put me into the hospital before this event was over. I remember telling one cadet that it was not a big deal—just more “spirit of the bayonet.” Just then, an ambulance sped toward the lanes’ training area. Later we were told that a firstie had struck an African American cadet in the head with great force, which had knocked him unconscious and briefly stopped his heart. I saw this cadet in the hospital later, and except for a concussion, he was apparently okay.

When I entered the bayonet lanes, I held onto my stick instead of throwing it over the wall all plebes had to climb to start the event. The senior cadets had a scheme going on to catch trainees off balance, as usual. Each plebe cadet had to fight five firsties in his lane, and the first opponent in line stood behind a wall, roughly six-feet high, poised to pounce as trainees descended to confront him. The idea was that in each case, the first-class cadet would issue a command to execute a stroke, and he would counter it and release the trainee to the next opponent in line. In fact, the plan was really a way to pound on the plebes as they obeyed the first command—the firsties turned it into a hazing event; no big deal I thought at the time, as this was our crucible event. In the case of the wall at the first opponent, the seniors had a tradition of telling plebes to throw their pugil sticks over the wall, as doing so would make it easier to climb over.

Anyone foolish enough to believe the advice, and do as they were told, would face his opponent with no stick to wield and be pummeled mercilessly.

When I went over the wall, I was psyched up to fight and forgot I was supposed to wait and execute the stroke ordered to begin the bout. I bounded at my opponent with a butt-stroke to the left side of his head. He was surprised and much maddened by my unexpected attack, and he came back at me furiously. The noncoms in 1-75 had trained us repeatedly on techniques, and I blocked everything. Finally, the senior told me to go on to the next opponent down the lane. As I “range-walked” away he came at me hard from behind and tried to blindside me. I heard him moving, turned, and blocked and hit him again. He retreated angry, and, as I was looking over my shoulder, I saw him go to talk to one of the lane controllers. I do not remember much about the next three opponents, except that they seemed to go as advertised: a command to thrust or block, which I obeyed, a stroke from the firstie, a counter-stroke, some frantic fighting, and off you go to the next senior cadet.

The fifth and last opponent-trainer in my lane was “A-man,” one of the football team’s mascots, a former lineman who would dress up in a Superman-type costume at games and stride the sidelines bellowing and flexing his muscles, trying to motivate the crowd. When I confronted him in the bayonet lanes, he gave me the command to thrust at him. I did so, my left arm fully extended as though I had a bayonet aimed at an enemy’s chest. I heard an audible snap and felt my left arm sink. At first, I could not feel anything other than the stick fall. A-man brought the aluminum part of his stick’s pole straight down, aimed at striking my extended forearm at a right angle. He had

commanded me into a vulnerable position, as expected, to take a free shot at me—but this went beyond merely whacking a plebe. The trainee would expect a padded butt-stroke to the head or body, but not a metal-on-bone direct hit on his extended forearm.

The aluminum hit the middle of my forearm and broke the left radius and ulna in several different places, shattering them. The strike was hard enough to break the skin in a four-inch abrasion above the bone break. When I looked down to see why my left arm would not come up, I saw it hanging at what looked like a second elbow. The bones were sticking jaggedly in the skin, threatening to break through. I dropped my stick and went to the ground trying to lift my arm back into normal position to prevent more damage. At the same time, I stretched out by a tree and raised my feet up against it.

A-man snarled something at me but quickly backed off when he saw my arm was hurt. As I lay on the ground trying to keep my arm stable, the senior lane controller—the most senior cadet there—approached and screamed at A-man. This dressing down impressed me, so much so that I remember it in detail now 36 years later. At first, I thought A-man’s cheap shot was revenge for my misbehavior with the first opponent. However, this cadet commander, now in his tirade at A-man, said something like “this is the third time today!” I remember clearly being taken aback with how angry he was at A-man, his words and irritation suggesting a pattern.

As a medical specialist from the 82d Airborne splinted the break at the scene, I cursed at him. He was viscerally compassionate with me, nevertheless. The pain was making me lash out, he knew it, and I felt ashamed and apologized to him. Later as other senior cadets gathered, they started to ask in a taunting way if the arm really was

broken. The 82nd medic told them it was, and he led me from the woods to a controllers' hut.

At the hut, the specialist turned me over to more firsties, and the staff there called for a driver who took me on a rough ride to the old cadet hospital maybe a half-hour away near Grant Hall in the garrison at West Point. The surgeon on duty, a Major Kimball, looked me over. After the X-ray tech finished and the doc examined the pictures, he tried to straighten the arm out and set it. The next day, he took me into surgery and attached two six-screw stainless steel plates to help the pieces of bone knit.

After the operation, I went to a bed in the orthopedic ward. There were three others with broken arms all in line with my bed in a big room. The nurses called our beds "swan row" because we all were initially dressed in a line with our arms in traction, like a formation, the hand pointed out like a bird's beak over a broad white body of plaster. Fluid soaked through about six inches along on both sides of the cast where the incisions were. When someone asked me to give a statement about why my arm was broken, I presumed it was a cheap shot gone "unintentionally" awry—essentially an accident to the degree that A-man could not have meant to hurt me so badly. To this day, I do not know if this was the case. At the time, I guess I figured A-man was just a jerk who, in hazing the plebes with free shots, had simply gone overboard, a few times.

While in the hospital, I had many visitors. One visitor at this time was A-man. I remember him sitting at the end of my bed with an impatient hangdog look on his face. We said nothing to each other. I heard later that the chain of command had ordered him to come and apologize. General Ulmer, the commandant of cadets, came to visit

too, when I was more or less conscious, about three-days after the surgery. He brought cookies from his wife and tried to cheer me with news of my platoon-mate, his son Bucky.

After the first week went by, I was much more mobile. Major Kimball decided to have me stay in hospital for a little more than two weeks, but he let me start attending classes so as not to get too far behind. I brought my books back to my bed. During the first of those two weeks, I had missed “reorganization,” a time when plebes endure much harassment and enculturation as they entered their regular academic year companies, which in effect were fraternities. My company was Alpha Company, 2d Regiment—colloquially known as “A2,” a fraternity self-conscious of its long, hidebound tradition.

Fostering a Subculture

When I first reported in to A2, I had to report back to the ward nurses each day to have the bloody fluid seeping through my cast graphed and the time checked. The time marked on the cast was, they said, to make sure I was not losing fluid too quickly. The upper classmen in A2 told me several times they would accuse me of cheating in math if I persisted in having these numbers on my cast. This nonsense struck me as a bellwether.

A month or so after classes started, I received two apologies from first-classmen who had been at Lake Frederick. In one case, a firstie whom I knew of from my Beast company came to my room when my two roommates were gone. He sat down, and when he saw the pink drainage stains on the sides of my cast, he began to cry. He told

me that he should not have let it happen. He had known the attack was coming beforehand, and he knew it was a serious matter. I was literally speechless. Until this time, I found it difficult to imagine A-man had purposely broken my arm. Another apology very soon came from the cadet who warned me while standing out in the field at Lake Frederick—ostensibly A-man’s summertime roommate. He caught me between classes and, less emotionally, told me he did not think it would turn out as bad as it did, the way it did, and that he was sorry. The implicit therapy of these apologies did far more for them than it did for me. I got angry and started to think about going back to the Army, certain that legal recourse at West Point was out of the question. I thought that even if A-man had not really intended to break my arm, there was still something seriously wrong.

Following closely on the heels of these apologies, some anonymous plebe in our company had the temerity to write his “congressman” complaining that he was not getting enough to eat, and the blame fell to me through a case of mistaken identity. Word had come down to the company, but the commander had no idea who it was. Either that same day or the next, I found a green colored official note stuck to the door of my room saying I was to report to General Ulmer in the commandant’s office. This coincidence was damning. During the time between the posting of the note and the time I found it, apparently, several upperclassmen saw it. The note merely said I was to report—nothing else—and the missing reason was the proof of my guilt. I went to see the commandant at the appointed time in his office unsure of what was happening. However, he only wanted to see how I was doing because I had intimated to his son that

I was thinking of going back into the regular Army. He encouraged me to hang in there and see out the semester. I said nothing to him about the apologies. When General Ulmer finished, I told him I certainly would finish the semester before making any decision about going back in. When I returned to my room, an upperclassman delivered an inchoate threat of retaliation that I wrote off as more of the same.

However, the timing of some of my classes required me to carry several books and notebooks at once. I used my cast to brace things while I held the books up with my right arm. As I approached some steps one day—I think they led down into Thayer Hall—an upperclassman intentionally pushed my books from my arms onto the pavement. I took it, with similar incidents, as an indication of the promised harassment. I took it for sadistic bullying and abuse of power. As the tenor of my experience there continued to worsen, I tried to imagine what it would come to. At one point, I contemplated revenge by ambushing one particular senior cadet and bashing in his head with my cast. It dawned on me that the cadet system was similar in many ways to the prison system in that it fostered a psycho-sexual power dynamic that went largely unsupervised.

The line between the legitimate toughness one would expect in the military and the sadistic torment the cadet chain of command system seemed to foster, at least in those days, grew clearer. I never experienced sadism as a soldier before West Point, only tough training, and demanding leaders. I know there is intramural sadism in the force, even today in the case of unauthorized "smoke sessions," but I never saw it when I was enlisted. I only personally experienced sadism when I was a cadet. In my confusion

at the time, I tried to articulate it to myself, but I know better now what I was trying to comprehend. I wanted to reconcile how intentional and gratuitous cruelty fit with the Honor Code. How could the code be about only lying, cheating, stealing, and tolerating it? All concerns for developing military toughness aside, tolerating sadism and cruelty toward others had to be worse. West Point's honor system seemed to me then to have moral priorities twisted. There seemed to be no notion that power had any implications for honor; the Honor Code seemed to be a simple legalistic rubric for its specific injunctions. (Former colleagues among the faculty tell me that this largely remains true today.)

My roommates and I were late for a class sometime after I had this realization. Our squad leader or another upperclassman set us up as part of the vendetta against me for my imagined squealing to a member of Congress. The three of us *were told a lie* that our drafting class had been cancelled that day and that we had some menial tasks to complete for the upperclassmen; I recall being told to unload their laundry cart. By the time we found out we had been deceived, the three of us were several minutes late. My instructor wrote me several demerits for tardiness as expected. I started to imagine walking the area when the time for my punishment came and my anger surged into contempt.

Soon after this, I went to see my cadet company commander to tell him I was not going to play their game anymore. His demeanor shifted, and he asked me to continue at least going through the motions of respecting cadet norms until I had cleared post. The spell was broken, and his normal contrived bearing became solicitous.

In the past, he said, former soldiers rejecting the system had notoriously thrown a monkey wrench into the whole "Lord of the Flies" fantasy they had going. He did not say it that way, but his words had that affect on me. Alpha-two was like Jack's tribe from William Golding's Nobel Prize-winning novel. To me, becoming a Simon or Piggy, a Sam or Eric, was not going to be an option.

A few days after talking to my cadet company commander, I stopped going to class, mostly out of a rebellious attitude that had control of me now. A day or so after that I stopped participating in table drill (the structured and supervised eating process cadets endure), which I realize was a provocation, but I do not think I consciously meant it to be one at the time. It drove the senior cadet at the table into fits of imperious rage. I laughed at him. Oddly, he growled that I was unworthy of my airborne wings and expert infantryman's badge. When he said that, I remembered my leaders in 1-75. Wondering if it were true, I recalled that most of the E-5s in those days were combat veterans from the jungles, people who had an unvarnished view of the world.

After that, I stopped going to Washington Hall to eat and left the barracks late one night to get a pizza from a vendor. The proprietor seemed to know immediately that I was not supposed to be there. Just as he handed my pizza to me, two firsties walked in. They fell into a tempest of competition in dressing me down. During a pause, I told them I was not doing "plebe things" anymore. I went back to my room balancing the pizza on my right hand and shared it out with my roommates.

Clearing post included a mandatory trip to a counselor, a flamboyant infantry major named West. I remember his down-to-earth character. He put his arm around me

and kept insisting I was leaving to go back to a girl in California. I had to tell him three times, there was no girl. Later he commanded 2-7 Cavalry, and I ran into him while I was a lieutenant in 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division.

After visiting Major West, I had to go see General Ulmer one last time before departing. He said, "I thought we had a deal." I told him I didn't see any reason to stay but refrained from telling him why I thought that. I met General Ulmer again later at Fort Hood when he came to command III Corps. I was the assistant secretary of the general staff, 1st Cavalry Division Headquarters, and when he came to visit us, he saw me and stopped to talk briefly about Bucky before going into Major General Chambers' office.

After seeing the commandant, I went to see Major Kimball. He wanted to look the incisions over one last time, and he removed the cast for good, exposing a crusted twig of an arm. He told me he wanted me to keep the arm immobile for a while until it got stronger, and he gave me a couple of olive drab slings and wished me luck as I reentered the Army.

The senior cadet who had hollered at A-man at Lake Frederick came to see me off when I got on the bus to the airport. I don't know how he knew I was leaving, but he tracked me down. He was widely known to be an honorable person, hence his high rank, and perhaps he felt some responsibility for what happened. Visibly upset, he asked me why I had come to West Point. This farewell was inscrutable enough for me to have remembered it all these years.

I had nearly two years left on my enlistment contract, and the Army moved me on to the 82d Airborne Division where a scarred-up, cynical noncom with half his right hand missing suggested I return to New York and break somebody's legs.

Cool on Honor

Time, 27 December 1976, "ARMED FORCES: A Barrage Hits West Point's Code":

Honor is a learning process, but it is being taught badly where it is the most esteemed: West Point. This was the harsh conclusion of two reports issued last week, offering some of the toughest criticism the 174-year-old academy has ever received. Shortly before the studies were made public, the commandant of cadets, Brigadier General Walter Ulmer Jr., was abruptly transferred. The major report was drawn up by a six-man commission appointed by Army Secretary Martin Hoffmann to investigate last spring's cheating scandal (*TIME* cover, June 7). Wrote Commission Chairman Frank Borman, the former astronaut, in a letter to Hoffmann accompanying the 91-page study: "We believe that education concerning the honor code has been inadequate and the administration of the honor code has been inconsistent and, at times, corrupt. The cadets did cheat, but were not solely at fault. Their culpability must be viewed against the unrestrained growth of the 'cool-on-honor' subculture at the academy, the gross inadequacies in the honor system, the failure of the academy to act decisively with respect to known honor problems, and other academy shortcomings" The report maintained that too much authority has been given to the cadets to

supervise themselves, while the academy's staff has reneged on its responsibility.

I see a connection between the cheating scandal and the fact that West Point seemed inundated with a frat-boy mentality in the way the cadet companies operated (at least some of them). The insular mentality of loyalty to each other against the institution is clear in both cases. No negative consequences that I know of fell to people regarded as known sadistic “leaders,” yet cheating merited an extensive investigation. Not to say that cheating is not important, but such are the priorities. The experiences and treatment of women at West Point and the other service academies in the years after their arrival revealed overt sexual abuse, a testament to this mentality and set of priorities. Women officers who are close friends of mine, those who graduated in the first few classes of women from West Point, used to participate in a private blog in the late 90’s in which numbers of them commiserated about the hidden abuses they and their successors endured there.

Character Development at West Point

The tone shifts here somewhat because I want to convey the feeling. The Army of the 1970s was fucked up, and West Point was a part of it in those days in its own special way; no one denies it but the excessively faithful who prefer to forget it. Not many people want to hear about it, especially in the Army’s West Point community. When I was an officer, bringing up the Army of the 70s, and the ethical climate at the

Academy in particular, was a professional buzz kill. I learned quickly to shut up, not to blaspheme the sacred institution. Regardless, we need to remember it.

From a practical standpoint, while I was at the 82nd Airborne Division, I questioned if I had made the right decision in leaving the Academy. I felt like I was marking time at the 82nd, which in those days was self-referentially called "The Jumping Junkies." My immediate supervisor there took shots from a bottle of vodka during the morning while at his desk. At noon, he would go out into the parking lot and stand behind the dumpster to smoke a joint while the rest of us went up the hill to the club to have several beers before coming back to the job. When he moved on to Korea, his replacement ran a prostitution ring in Fayetteville.

Living in the barracks at Fort Bragg meant dealing with an array of issues I had never imagined, including loaded guns, drugs, mud, fights, contraband stored in the ceiling, piss on the floors, and vomit where it should never be. Yet, there was a general sense that going into town was riskier behavior than staying in the barracks. When I was promoted to sergeant, I had to do foot patrols with the military police. There was so much trouble, the command wanted noncommissioned officer presence with all lower ranking MPs. In one incident, an over enthusiastic MP I was with got into a physical altercation with an infantry platoon after he had roughly cuffed a drunk troop emerging from a car. An MP officer with back up had to come rescue us.

The 82nd started doing clumsy drug testing in the fall of 1976, and it got better at this testing quickly. A new commander came to our unit to replace our captain, a former ranger officer named Major Sinclair who had the power to issue field-grade

Article 15 non-judicial punishments. He had a black eye patch and a reputation for toughness. The MPs started bringing dogs through our barracks on sniffing inspection regularly. Health and welfare inspections with full gear layouts also became routine. In spite of such conditions at Fort Bragg, I never had the sense of abusive authority and sadism that had permeated the cadet chain of command at the U.S. Military Academy.

When I left the Army to return to home and college in February 1978, I decided to enter the reserves while waiting for the next semester. Eventually I signed up for ROTC, unsure if the detachment at the university would take me. They did, and I found myself twelve years later reporting to teach ethics at West Point, as a promotable captain with a masters degree in philosophy.

During my career, I spent six years teaching English and philosophy to cadets. For three of those years I served as the secretary of the Superintendents Honor Review Committee under Colonel Tony Hartle. The Army gets much right for an organization as large as it is. Sometimes its ability to function well is surprising, but ethics is one area where it has problems. The troops often see talk of ethics and values as an exercise in platitudes associated with the solemnity of religious authorities, perspectives conceptually miles from the action—just meaningless clouds really. Part of this ineffectiveness stems from assumptions that ripple outward from West Point.

At West Point, a sense of ritualistic sanctity dominates talk of values, blending with its august history and traditions, and it mixes in a toxic brew of self-deception about the holiness of the place and one's position in the world. What results is a kind of pressure-cooker imposed sense of propriety brought on partly by cadet sequestration

from society. Rather than character development, the Service academies often foster this insular, self-aggrandizing parochialism, a sense of personal righteousness just for being there. For a young cadet to resist this pressure is a difficult thing.

In spite of the good intentions of West Point's leaders and faculty, this ingrained parochialism develops in many less reflective cadets a loss of respect and a sense of themselves as better than others. It encourages certain of them unconsciously to temper their moral outlooks with the quasi-religious air of moral superiority, which unreflectively pushes cadets to cultivate attitudes ripe for the objectification of others.

Compounding this situation, in the Army at large (as well as at West Point), sexual tension dominates moral thinking, frequently blinding the institution from even recognizing sadism for what it is. Had commensurate ethical reflection in the exercise of power been a serious educational factor in the Army, in the U.S. military in general, it would not have taken so long to address the forces of inertial bigotry and institutional cruelty directed toward women and homosexuals. (We still have a long way to go in this area.)

If West Point is to live up to its mighty reputation for decency, as an example for the Army's professional ethic, its Honor Code should clearly define the antithetical relationship between gratuitous cruelty and honor. I am certainly not advocating for "cruelty commissars" here, only for the idea of a more effective institutional conversation. The idea of character development needs to start with this most basic realization: cruelty harms character. The conversation should address how power over others can lead subtly, toxically, and unchecked to abuses. Such a conversation would

go a long way toward helping ameliorate sexual harassment and other problems, both at West Point in the military at large.

With its long tradition and ideal of honor, West Point has a tremendous burden and responsibility to get ethics education right and to be honest about addressing character development. I have been associated with the Army now for 38 years, 28 of which was as a soldier. Among officers in particular, the force rarely encourages self-awareness and self-criticism—this may have been what my Platoon Sergeant at 1-75 was trying to tell me. The Army’s focus on eliminating “toxic leadership” should aim to improve this situation; it should leave scarce room for developing the self-deception of abusive authority and the hubris of those who embrace the principle that the end justifies the means. Such thinking is still a common ethical approach in the Army today, as sadism often emerges during such things as “smoke sessions,” which are seen as a palliative for poorly defined poor performance by many low-level leaders. Many view cruelty in such situations as toughness, a way to get things done.

Toughness is one thing, cruelty another. Cruelty corrodes the institutional fabric. It corrodes the individual, both the giver and the receiver—this is enough reason to not tolerate it. There is another reason though. Whether zealous cadets or myopic noncoms and officers, for those who excuse their own cruelties toward others in the name of some imagined greater good, the moral sloth involved in capitulating to impulses of sadism is a form of cowardice—it’s an honor killer.

The information in this article reflects the personal opinions of the author and should not be construed to be the official position of Military Review, the Combined Arms Center, or the United States Army.