

## Sergeant Major and the Prize Patrol

“Danny, I'm having a party this weekend.  
How would you like to come over and mow my lawn?”  
-Judge Smails, “Caddyshack”

Colonel Herriot and I slow our running pace and eventually stop. We stretch and discuss the agenda for today: where the team will be working, what meetings we need to attend, etc. We've been running in the mornings for the past week; it's the only time we have to get some exercise, as we're busy usually up until dark.

The colonel abruptly changes his mind, and says he needs to do another couple of laps. I tell him that I'll pass and that I'll meet him back at the Crack House. He takes off, bounding away like he hasn't already run eight laps around the huge airport parking lot. But then again, he runs like a gazelle, and myself, I'm a Clydesdale. The figure in the brown t-shirt and black Army PT shorts recedes in the distance.

Stretching my hamstrings, I'm surprised by a shout from behind me.

“SOMEBODY STOP THAT MAN!”

I turn and search for the source. A sergeant major with a First Armored Division patch strides up and points at Colonel Herriot. I wonder what's wrong. *Is the colonel bleeding? Is he headed for a minefield?*

“What's wrong, Sergeant Major?”

“He's out of uniform!”

*You've got to be kidding me.*

The First Armored Division has been at the airport for about two weeks. They've assumed responsibility for the Baghdad area of operations, including BIAP. Being a conventional Army unit, they're notorious for operating by the book, and crave uniformity, even in a combat zone.

The standard Physical Training (PT) Uniform is the black shorts and a grey t-shirt with a large black Army logo. Colonel Herriot's grey T-shirts are probably at the bottom of a washtub back at the Crack House. He only brought two of them, and has been wearing the brown t-shirts, usually worn under his uniform top, while running. Being deployed to a combat zone, he probably figured that no one would mind.

Apparently, he figured wrong.

The Sergeant Major is scribbling furiously on a notepad. He acts like the colonel has committed some unpardonable offense. In an authoritative voice, he demands to know the transgressor's name and unit.

*So, this is what we're up against for the next year: Mickey Mouse, splitting hairs, garrison bullshit. Trying to maintain the atmosphere of an Army post back in the States. Uniformity at all costs. The mindset that treats the proper wearing of t-shirts as a matter of national security. Take us to DEFCON ONE!*

I turn to Darth Vader and decide to mess with his head a bit. It's the only show of defiance against what will probably be a year of tedious regulations and spit and polish. The sergeants major are the senior enlisted personnel in the Army who enforce the standards. It's their job to ensure uniformity, but this one is shooting a mosquito with a howitzer.

"Well, Sergeant Major, I'm going to tell you where his unit is located. See that brown eight-story building over there? Go up on the second floor, turn left and go through the double doors. His desk will be to the left as you walk in. The soldier's last name is HERRIOT, his first name is "COLONEL."

The Enforcer jumps and his head swivels toward me. Muttering under his breath, he tears the page out of the notebook and crumples it into a ball.

*Check!*

He knows he's been defeated; he was so close to punishing the violator. I don't like to pull rank, but it's obvious that I wouldn't have spoken to him in this way if I didn't outrank him. He can't write me up for being a wiseass.

*Checkmate!*

Saluting me, he turns on his heel and strides away purposefully to battle evil elsewhere. Looking down, I spot the crumpled paper on the tarmac.

*Litterbug!*

There's another high-ranking NCO that really has it out for our soldiers: Sergeant Major Short Stack. He's a slight, stocky individual with a Napoleon complex, who just loves catching soldiers off guard. Most of his victims seem to be Reservists like us. Every time one of our soldier's uniforms is even slightly out of compliance, he pounces.

Short Stack has always wanted to be a policeman. I don't know this for a fact, but he's beginning to act like it. He's gotten himself an SUV with a flashing blue light on the roof. He and his driver patrol the airport perimeter, searching for speeders, something the military police are already doing.

*Wow, you're really breaking some new ground there, Columbo.*

I'm riding in a HUMVEE coming back to the Crack House from the airport main gate, along with LTC Winston and two of our soldiers. The LTC is sitting in the back with me. Suddenly, I hear the driver, SSG Patrinelli, call out: "Ah, shit!" I look out the side mirror. An SUV is behind us, its blue light flashing. "Sonovabitch, it's Short Stack!" We come to a halt.

He's out of his vehicle and striding toward ours. He walks up to the driver's window, and barks: "Alright, hand over your military license and ID card! You exceeded the posted speed limit for BIAP!"

*He doesn't have a radar gun, so how does he know Patrinelli was speeding?*

SSG Patrinelli's vehicle has been through two ambushes, and been driven on shitty, uneven Iraqi roads for the past year, so the speedometer twitches like a hummingbird. It's impossible for its driver to maintain a constant speed.

*What is his problem? He has no idea what these guys have gone through the past year!*

LTC Winston exits the HUMVEE, saunters around the hood, and asks, "Is there somethin' I can help y'all with, Sergeant Major?" His tone is anything but folksy and cordial. Short Stack deflates in front of me and stalks back to his toy police car. Wild Eyed Southern Boy to the rescue! Score one for the good guys.

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There's a long, two story building off to the side of the Crack House. A communications battalion has occupied it since the Division has taken over BIAP. While we

have taken steps to protect our soldiers from rocket and mortar attacks, their commander and sergeant major are focused on beautification. On any given day, I watch young soldiers raking the sand around the building, and trimming the hedges.

*Oh, good! Your soldiers' next of kin will be grateful you gave them such a pretty spot to spend their final moments.*

Months later, around Christmas, I'm in a convoy heading back from a mission near the north end of the airport. The light is fading, and as I look south I see bright lights. This is not too cool as the enemy can use them to aim their rockets. As we get closer, I am absolutely shocked by the realization that the lights are from a huge Christmas tree! The leadership of the signal battalion has erected a huge plastic tree complete with multi-colored electric bulbs. The lights can be seen for miles; they literally scream: "Hey here we are! Aim here!"

Two hundred yards to the west, I see Frosty the Snowman outside Division Main, the nerve center for the entire Baghdad Area of Operations; there's more brass in there than the New York Philharmonic. A few rockets sent that way could decimate the entire chain of command for this part of Iraq.

Colonel Herriot complains to the sergeant major from the building next door. He gets a bizarre response. "Oh, Sir. Those guys are such bad shots! They never hit anything they aim at!"

"You don't get it, Sergeant Major!" says the Colonel. We're smack dab in between Frosty and your Christmas tree; if they miss those, they're bound to hit us. You need to take that shit down!" Of course, they refuse.

*Are these guys really that stupid, or are they only practicing?*

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It's one month before we redeploy. I'm making my daily mud march to Division Main so that I can forward my daily reports via secure email to the Puzzle Palace, the Brigade Headquarters in Baghdad. The 500-yard walk is good cardio. But, I'm also able to build up the muscle endurance in my right arm, as I have to return the salutes of probably dozens of soldiers. Yes, inside a Forward Operating Base (FOB) in a combat zone, saluting is mandatory!

These soldiers, who probably see the madness of rendering salutes in an area where the enemy could be watching, nonetheless do what they are told. As I approach, they snap to attention and call out the Division's standard greeting.

"IRON SOLDIERS, SIR!"

In keeping with my wiseass demeanor, I acknowledge them.

"RUST NEVER SLEEPS!"