

K E N H R U B Y

Dancing and Fighting

Somewhere between the paw prints inked on our birth certificate that establishes our legitimacy (or not) and the orthotic molds that confirm our generic flaws, our feet define us. Baby boots are bronzed for posterity. Old sneakers are kept far beyond their usefulness out of fear that there will never ever be another quite as perfect. Fathers leave their sons big boots to fill. Comfortable shoes are a major quest of old age. Friday's footprints on the beach confirmed his being to Robinson Crusoe and the next astronomical high tide on Good Harbor Beach, in Gloucester, MA, where I jog each morning, will erase my presence there and remind me of my limited role in this life cycle. The images of Neil Armstrong's boot prints on the moon that August day of 1969 after the lunar lander touched down are indelibly printed in the memories of those of us who watched that "one small step for man..." and indelibly printed in the lunar dust.

There was a time when it didn't matter, a time when I was young and pliable, when comfort was a luxury, when my feet suffered seemingly incessant indignities. As a practicing infantryman, feet ascended to the top of the scale of things that really mattered. The army gave us formal instructions on foot care; blister prevention and first aid, if prevention failed, identification and treatment of calluses, corns, warts and fungi of all sorts. We infantry leaders were also taught to conduct a physical inspection of our troops' feet during the rest break in long road marches. An ounce of prevention... a soldier disabled by a blister could be rendered incapable of doing

his real mission as an infantryman: to “close with and destroy the enemy.” And it was to that end that feet drew so much attention: killing.

In the most primal way we were trained to kill the enemy; *kill or be killed* they told us. Survival motivation was at the base of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. Because my own survival depended on how well I learned my lessons, the basic combat training moves were embossed in my muscles—“deep learning,” as Dr. Jonathan Shay describes it in *Achilles in Vietnam*, so that the drill could be conjured up, without misstep, decades after it was hammered home. Repetition was key. There’s the old saw about the tourist in Manhattan who asked a native, “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” “Practice, practice, practice” is the now predictable response. Repetition. Again and again. Over and over, ‘til you get it right. And once you get it, you own it; it’s yours and, until you die, the moves are indelible.

Over fifty years ago, between wars, with Korea four years behind us and the Vietnam war only a small dark cloud on the horizon, with the rest of my West Point class, in the sultry July heat of the mid-Hudson River Valley, I growled and grunted my way through the bayonet and unarmed combat pits until I was hoarse and muscle-weary. With well-honed bayonets fixed to our rifles, caked with mud, sweat and sawdust, we sprinted through the prescribed course to charge, thrust, parry, lunge, recover, slash and lunge again at the sandbag enemy surrogates. It was all spelled out and illustrated in unambiguous detail, complete with sequenced footsteps and arrows, in the War Department Field Manual 23-25 on “combatives.” This was the “Bayonet Assault Course.” Convinced that we would be invincible on the battlefield when the call came to “fix bayonets,” we cheered each other on as each cadet maneuvered through the formation of dummies. With each pass through the gauntlet our camaraderie grew in what was just the beginning of our bonding into what Shakespeare’s *Henry V* called the “band of brothers” in his inspirational Saint Crispin’s Day speech before the battle of Agincourt in 1415. The four years that ensued would launch this collection of post-pubescent high-achievers into lasting relationships that are paralleled in only the rarest circumstances; bonds that will be ever incomprehensible to civilians, spouses and offspring.

In modern times the assault with fixed bayonets was seldom used in combat. The last bayonet charge in the US Army records was in 1951 during the Korean War led by Captain Lewis Millet taking out a machine gun position on Hill 180 outside of Pyongtaek South Korea. In spite of the infrequent employment in combat, bayonet training persisted in the Army until 2010, not because it was deemed useful, but because it generated esprit and confidence in the trainees. Snipers and Drones have pushed the bayonet aside. With improvements in optics snipers have

become more and more useful on the modern battlefield with accuracy for kills well beyond a mile distant and drones, remotely controlled half a world away, have put distance, a standoff, between the shooter and the target.

Running through the bayonet course felt good after I insulated myself from the brutality of the drill's ultimate intent and transcended the pain. We got a sense of accomplishment running the course and running it well; the movements had a very real physical beauty to them when the steps and the rhythm were done right. The steps were the key to a smooth execution; properly executed, the upper body followed the feet in a gracefully coordinated flow of momentum and kinesis; a brutal ballet, of sorts. If the footwork went wrong, nothing else worked.

Manipulation of the rifle, with and without the bayonet, was what I had expected and prepared for growing up within the Army community—Army Brats, they called us and we wore the moniker with a certain amount of pride in later years. I had an adventure-filled childhood, not uncommon within the Army circles, but exotic in the extreme to my civilian friends. My brother, Dale, older by three years, and I collected salamanders and built forts and tree houses in the sacred grounds of the Meiji shrine in early post-war Japan. We searched for Nazi artifacts on the wooded banks of the Isar River in Munich while in high school. We ate abalone steaks on Zushi Beach, in the shadow of the Great Buddha of Kamakura and zigeunerschnitzel at the local gasthaus in the shadow of the Zugspitze in the Tyrolean Alps. There was normal boy stuff; sliding down banisters, wrestling, making carbide rockets, building tree houses and forts, teasing one and all and generally playing grab-ass. Growing up at a variety of posts, camps and stations, we were exposed to rifles and other weapons, with the traditional cannon salute at daily reveille and retreat as the military announced the beginning and end of the work day honoring and retiring the national flag. Weapons safety was drilled into us on the weekends when dad took us to the firing ranges on post and later, with my dad and uncles, when I hunted elk in the Cascades of Eastern Washington and shot pheasants in the rolling fields of Perkins County, South Dakota. I learned early the life-long lesson that guns and booze do not mix.

On the parade field across from the old brick quarters #23 on tree lined officer's row at Fort Warren, Wyoming, just west of Cheyenne, Dale and I marched and mimicked the drilling soldiers as they prepared to ship out to the campaigns in the Pacific theater. What, before the war, had been a sleepy cavalry post on the western edge of the great planes, Fort Warren bustled with activity as a training base for soldiers deploying to the war in the Pacific and a recovery hospital for the convalescing wounded back from the battles. Our father, an erstwhile cavalry

sergeant, was a newly minted Lieutenant in the Quartermaster Corps which procured, stored and distributed all of the army's supplies and equipment and who thus had access to scraps of surplus army accoutrements that the two Hruby boys donned to join in the daily dismounted drills at, of course, a respectful distance. Beckoned by the cadence calls that echoed across the parade field in the late afternoons, we abandoned our play to tag along with the recruits, trying to keep in step with legs too short to get the rhythm right. The drill sergeants were tolerant of us, perhaps seeing our potential as future warriors or perhaps, more likely, just seeing two young boys able to play in a nation that was totally engaged in the seriousness of global warfare on two fronts.

So the bayonet course was not a big stretch. But there was another side to this coin that no one had prepared me for. No one ever told me "dance or die" like we saw in those old "B" Westerns.

As hard as it was to believe at the time, while we struggled to shed our civilian skins and don the gray of new cadets, dance lessons were integrated into the training schedule. There was much to learn in the four years of our transformation from civilians into "officers and gentlemen" and the sage planners and molders of men considered dancing an essential skill, so, imported up the Hudson River from New York City, instructors from the Arthur Murray Dance Studio came to teach us fledgling leaders the fine art of ballroom dancing. The instructors were always young, attractive women, a very welcome break from the crusty Drill Instructors and upperclassmen who shepherd us through the combatives pits. Twenty years before the admission of women to the academy, my most vivid recollection is not how fine they looked but as to how good they smelled. With no choice in the matter, we men danced with each other during these lessons, taking turns, of course, at leading. Effective leaders must first learn to follow, we were told, but this put a new twist on that leadership axiom.

Unknown to us New Cadets at the time, dancing, in a wide variety of contemporary forms, had been on the cadet training schedules, as "voluntary" beginning fifteen years after the founding of the academy in 1802 and remained so until 1822 when it became compulsory for first and second year cadets until 1902. Etiquette, military customs and traditions and protocols, along with dancing, have ebbed and flowed in cadet schooling as cultural mores and national interests shifted over the generations and appear to have remained static through the seventies. There is little information available about the intervening years, but dance lessons are not offered twice a week to upperclassmen for \$20 per person.

Cullum Hall, where all this social honing took place, was the most formal of formal function halls. It stood, like a gigantic gray granite brick, at the east edge of the Plain overlooking the Hudson River and was an oasis of civility from our normal Spartan routines. After we marched through the ionic columns and the massive bronze front doors into the cavernous great hall, our steps and turns, our skips and twirls were done under the stern stares of famous graduates and former dancers, all heroes for one reason or another, all frozen in bronze bas-reliefs hung salon style on every vertical surface of the hall. We paid attention. And we followed an oddly familiar instructional notation of sequenced footsteps with numbers and arrows to get the steps right. We learned our steps well.

When our lessons in social graces and civility were completed for the day and the intoxicating scent of our dance coaches evanesced, we marched, double time in the steam heat of the afternoon, back to the barracks to change into the next uniform on the training schedule, perhaps fatigues, perhaps athletic gear, to assemble minutes later for one drill or another where the instructors smelled more like we did. As a class we learned, often in the same sultry afternoon, the vertical butt-stroke series and the tango, the high-port cross-over and the cha-cha-cha. Brutality and civility. We were expected to show equal finesse in both arenas.

Bayonet drill and dance lessons, the last resort in combat and the first skirmish in the battle of the sexes, use the same choreographic notation to imprint their teaching points. The irony in the circularity in our movements from the muddiest bayonet pit to the most formal, waxed dance floor escaped us; we new cadets were too close to the events to see our footprints with any objectivity. But like it or not, during that sweaty eight week period of “beast barracks” of 1957, there was imprinted within us forever, the feet of a dancer and the hands of a fighter, more or less under control.

Now, over fifty years after the fact, the extent to which this deep learning is burned into my fiber continues to astonish me. It also frightens me. Although I was trained as an infantryman to “close with and destroy the enemy” and went on to more specialized training at the Ranger and paratrooper schools where the “destruction” skills were honed to a fine edge, I never did “close with the enemy” in combat. My contact with the Vietnamese and North Korean enemy was relatively remote: they were peripheral movements and shadows; they were foot prints and trip wires; they were invisible snipers and ambushers, whose physical presence was implied but seldom actually evidenced save for its aftermath. No eye-to-eye contact. No bayonet thrusts, No hip throws. No hand chops. No lethal blows to the carotid artery. I called in air and artillery strikes, but my close quarters training was never

put to the ultimate test. I never killed anyone that I was aware of, not that I ever wanted to. But I was capable of it. And I still am.

That is the part that frightens me. I had thought that the drills and the instincts would have grown dull and eroded with time, but they have not. They persist at some deep, subliminal level that can only be accessed when the wrong combination of levers is switched. I discovered the wrong combination about twenty years ago, fully three decades after I had left the hand-to-hand combat pits at Fort Benning and ten years after I had left the Army behind to explore gentler, right-brained activities as a sculptor. I was assisting a colleague in the renovation of a studio in an old warehouse. It was hot, dusty work with lots of heavy lifting. In the space directly below the new studio was a small business owned by Aldo, a South Boston townie. He was loud, street-wise, brash, a bully, and a bit of the thug and his shortness, I suspect, was the source of much over-compensation. When the first board accidentally crashed to the floor, Aldo and his co-thug stormed up the stairs and demanded that we cease work. He was, after all, trying to run a business and we were frightening all of his customers away. Our efforts to be neighborly succeeded for most of the remainder of the day until, out of fatigue, I suspect, a beam got away from me and crashed to the floor, once again, directly over his office space.

The response was nearly instantaneous. Three of them, this time, burst through the door and the confrontation was immediate. And he was in my face, literally, with accusations of deliberate sabotage of his business, clinched fists and a red face. When apology was demanded and refused, he wanted to fight me, as if the code of the streets required either an apology or an ass-kicking. Testosterone hung heavy in the air. He got louder, redder and more profane. And he got closer and closer to my face, standing up there on his tip toes, a full head shorter than I, so that each stream of threats and curses was accompanied by a shower of spittle that invaded my sense of privacy.

The last fistfight I was in was just after World War II when I was in the second grade. We were living in my Dad's hometown of Oxford, Iowa, waiting to join him in Japan where he had been posted as a part of the Army Occupation Forces, serving on General MacArthur's vast staff. We were new to town, although related to many of the town folk, and would be there only until the War Department sent our port-call. So I was easy pickings for the local toughs and Jerry Larmer had me in his sights. He was two years older, but had already been flunked twice, as it was called then. He still sucked his thumb in class. I was big for my age, so we were an even match when the fight came about at recess over some imaginary slight. It was a good fight, as fights go. We punched each other with jabs and hooks. We got down

on the ground and rolled around, smacking each other in the face and ribs with a ferocity that was all fury and no finesse. Seven-year-old boys know little about finesse. Oblivious to gravity and inertia, we rolled and punched our way down the sloping lawn from the swings, through the crowd of on-lookers, across the grass knoll and the sidewalk and ultimately down the bank into the drainage ditch across from Windy Yenter's garden. I was on top pounding on him as he lay there in the shallow water trying to fend off my blows when some grown-up pulled me off and sent us both to the teacher. Sweaty, breathless, and covered with dirt and grass stains, we were both scolded and sent home, but the word went out quickly in this small farming town that Jerry had had his butt kicked by Joe Hruby's younger boy. In the two months that we stayed in Oxford he never bothered me again. The last I heard, Jerry was stabbed to death in prison.

This later confrontation with Aldo raised questions not yet thought of in the second grade. Killing someone was one of them. As the level of anger rose and as my rage at this uncivil behavior mounted, emotions that I thought long since dead welled up from some depth within me. I really wanted to fight this little twit to teach him some manners for, besides being a head shorter, he was twenty years my junior. I knew that if this outrageously overblown disagreement came to blows, I would act swiftly, without restraint. There was absolutely no doubt of the outcome. The two-by-four just inches from my hand would serve as weapon. The moves were racing through the back of my mind as the tension mounted. The steps were clear, and came back to me in a rush. My fingers itched at the ready. This is what surprised and scared me, although the fright came later when I looked back in wonder. I really, if only momentarily, wanted to kill him. And I cannot say how close I came to snapping. The execution of the moves would have been automatic on one level, and completely without rational thought. Pure response. Response to training completed three decades prior—deep learning.

Self-control and civility ruled the day, fortunately. I suggested to Aldo that grown-ups did not solve their problems this way, that I was on the clock and he was wasting my time, so he should leave and cool off. In one of his few credible acts, he withdrew and I went on with my work.

But I was badly shaken by the incident, not so much the incident itself, but by my palpable response to it. How could a fifty-three year old man get sucked into such an emotional pit? If I could entertain even the thought of killing someone over such a trivial slight, what difference existed between me and some whacko gone postal with an AK-47? Was my mild and even avuncular manner merely a facade that covered a repressed rage over some larger injustice or was there latent PTSD

at work? Where is the line, anyway? And just what amount of provocation would it take to launch me across it? And equally important, what refinement within me overrode the knee-jerk response? With Boston drivers, known as “massholes” in the region, where road-rage is always a possibility lurking around the corner with the next lane change, I thought I had conditioned myself to maintain a measured, controlled response to capricious BMW drivers and other outrages. Clearly I had not.

My wars are behind me now, so far as I know. Other windmills remain, I am sure, but I now look to the muses and not to Mars for inspiration. With a memory that appears to have a finite capacity, details of those exotic combat experiences fade as years log on and more pressing demands vie for space in my organic hard drive. I never did nor do I now hold romantic notions about going off to war; it was mostly dull and boring, with interminable periods of waiting and inactivity, accented by brief flashes of terror and frantic action. In that regard, combat was a lot like baseball: long run; short slide.

Over three million men and women in the armed forces served in Vietnam. Because of the complexities of that particular war and the type of warfare, the “tooth to tail” ratio, the number of support troops required for each combat trooper in the field, was quite high. In relative terms, few of us, less than one tenth, were on patrol, on the ground, in the rivers and aloft; few of us were at the “cutting edge,” few of us “humped the boonies,” few went “outside the wire,” but almost all of us were trained in the basics and all of those basics are burned into our muscles. While everyone’s war was different, the basics, for the most part, were something we all shared; they were the common bond between draftees, enlistees and professionals.

This fundamental, “basic,” training is strong stuff. It lasts a lifetime. I was returned to “jump status” as a paratrooper fourteen years after I had finished basic qualifying airborne training. It was not the same body then that had been so finely tuned at age twenty-two, but when the “go” light flashed green at the exit door of the C123 troop transport and the jump master tapped me on the butt, I leaped into the slip stream without a second thought; the body knew exactly what to do and it responded perfectly. It must have been excellent training that motivated a sane person to jump from a perfectly good aircraft. When I attempted to translate the bizarre experience of dance lessons and bayonet drill into a sculptural installation for a recent sculpture show, “Fix Bayonets, Let’s Dance,” the same intense training allowed me to waltz and stomp around my studio to get the steps right, with a broom stick alternating as partner and weapon. It did not take long before I had retraced the three-quarter step and twirl. The horizontal butt-stroke series took

longer. I can only attribute that to more occasions for dancing than for fighting in the ensuing years since the steps were burned into my soul. In spite of their high mileage, there is yet a dance or two left in these old feet, but it's still a long way to Carnegie Hall.

For **KEN HRUBY'S** biographical information and samples of his art work, please visit <http://www.kenhruby.org>.

