

STEVEN LIPARULO

---

## Monday Night Football: Everybody Wants to Rule the World (1985)

WILLARD (V. O.)

Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins, they gave me one. Brought it up to me like room service. It was a real choice mission, and when it was over, I never wanted another.

—from Michael Herr’s narration for Francis Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*

**O**ctober 21, 1985: Chicago Bears 23, Green Bay Packers 7, Soldier Field, Chicago. In the autumn of 1985, I watched a boring NFL football game with Lieutenant Tim Loonam. Tim’s hometown Chicago Bears were on the way to the Super Bowl that year, deep into the season even threatening to equal the 1972 Miami Dolphins’ undefeated season record until the Dolphins got their revenge in a Monday Night Football game in December. The Bears’ recipe for victory featured a conservative offense focused on the rushing attack led by Walter “Sweetness” Payton and a crushing defense led by buffoonish and outspoken coordinator Buddy Ryan. The “46 defense,” a complex set of pressure packages nicknamed for the jersey number of a safety who played up close to the line in the manner of a linebacker, confusing to

quarterbacks as they “read” coverage, was so dominant that it even started sending a representative over to the offense to run the ball. The Bears got in the habit of putting massive first-round draft pick defensive lineman William “Refrigerator” Perry onto the field as a running back in goal-line situation, as they did against the Packers in this Monday Night Football game.

After Green Bay got off to a quick start with a touchdown pass to speedy Pro-Bowl receiver James Lofton in the first quarter, the Bears answered with three short touchdown runs in the second, Perry taking in the second of them from one yard out. Dave Duerson, a third-year player out of Notre Dame who was developing a reputation as a smart businessman off the field and a vicious hitter between the lines, had one of three Bears interceptions and also ran back a punt. The defense even provided the closing punctuation, sacking Green Bay’s second-string quarterback in the end-zone for a fourth-quarter safety, making the final score 23-7 Chicago.

For prime-time Monday Night Football, this game came up short as entertainment, the Bears just crushing the Packers, a once-glorious team mired in a decade-long slump. For me, though, the setting gave the game an edge that the play on the field otherwise lacked. We watched the broadcast, which featured the indescribable three-player announcing team of Frank Gifford, O. J. Simpson, and Joe Namath, tape-delayed on the Armed Forces Korea Network, huddled around a little black-and-white set in Tim’s room in officers’ quarters on the American army base at Camp Casey. The telecast served me as an NFL appetizer for upcoming home-cooking. I was counting down the days until I would leave the 1-17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (the Buffaloes) in the Republic of Korea (ROK), heading back to the States for a vacation after an extended 18-month tour of duty on the “frontiers of freedom,” and then on to Special Forces (SF) school in North Carolina and a choice assignment as an A-team leader with 10<sup>th</sup> SF Group in Massachusetts.

There were four of us junior officers watching that game, as we were four for many purposes and occasions. We were an organic tetrad, four lieutenants somewhere on the spectrum between family and rock band, four lieutenants with the stability of the square, a quartet that could have been The Beatles or Led Zeppelin, or maybe more appropriately The Ramones, who sang with gleeful sarcasm that *we’re a happy family, we’re a happy family!* They weren’t related, The Ramones, weren’t even named Ramone. I was thinking a lot about the adventures of rock bands in those days because just as I was heading overseas for my tour of duty in the Second Infantry Division, my musician friend Jimmy Frech (with whom I’d first seen The Ramones back in 1978) was heading out on the road as bassist in the band opening for a couple of legs of Van Halen’s 1984 North American tour in support of the album that featured “Jump” and “Panama.” I

think we both hoped we would be competing to see whose road-trip wound up most debauched. *Might as well jump!*

We Buffalo lieutenants were musical in our own ways, each of us attached to a theme song, at least in my memory. We were certainly all spending plenty of our disposable income on hi-fi gear at the PX to blast our tunes. Tim, the medical platoon leader, seemed to have stepped out of the MTV video for Glenn Frey's "The Heat Is On," attractive and energetic as that signature saxophone riff, one big ongoing snap of the fingers. Pete, the wiry chemical officer, was forever bonded to Tears for Fears' "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" because he brought that album *Songs from the Big Chair* along with all of his other pop-culture machinery, a Macintosh computer and video camera and the TV we were watching. The mortar platoon leader was a lanky creature known only as Snake—as Willard says in that movie, I was unaware that he had a name nor would I be disposed to reveal his name if I knew it—and oddly enough, he was a big Rush fan and obsessively played that *Signals* album with "Subdivisions" on it through his monster Bose 901 speakers in the room I shared with him. *Any escape might help to smooth the unattractive truth*, the singer intoned portentously over the hypnotic droning synthesizer wash, occasionally jarred by the complex veering of the superb drummer. How could this be the anthem of a towering Aggie? *No comprende, it's a riddle!* In those days, having schemed my way to leading the scout platoon—the plum job for a lieutenant in an infantry battalion, especially if it was mechanized—I was mighty fond of Led Zeppelin's "Nobody's Fault but Mine" for its crack-of-doom drumming and apocalyptic blast of harmonica (and maybe, too, for its hint of contrition and guilt, that singer Plant was paying the karmic price for guitarist Page's dabbling in the "Left Hand Path" occult). Yes, we were a happy musical family, happy and loud.

We even created a music video using Pete's camcorder. You might say we shared an ironic sense of humor, maybe a little more than that, a rebellious sarcastic streak perhaps endemic to young men who volunteer for the profession of managing violence and representing the American Way of War in the overseas branches. We selected Wall of Voodoo's instrumental "On Interstate 15" as our soundtrack, techno-pop as postmodern and ironic as it comes (they had their MTV hit with "Mexican Radio," lines from which I frequently crooned out of one side of my mouth: *wish I was in Tijuana, eating barbequed iguana*). Our video documented the hygienic start to everyday life in the Bachelor Officers Quarters (BOQ), which I had dubbed, for a sign that must have puzzled the Koreans in the base paint-shop, "Chateau de la Montagna de la Rivieria English Country Manor Estates." There on screen went four Buffalo lieutenants, marching in tempo to the pseudo-spaghetti-western strains of Wall of

Voodoo, into the showers, brushing our teeth, shaving our faces. Happy, happy family, clean and minty-mediciny, preserved forever on video tape. *I hear the talking of the DJ, can't understand, just what does he say?*

We cooked up adventures worthy of The Monkees, like the time the four of us decided to spend a Sunday afternoon climbing the towering hills behind our barracks at Camp Casey. Korea, sometimes dubbed The Land of the Morning Calm for its frequent fogs (nicknamed The Land of Almost Right by one of our acerbic brigade commanders for the knock-off shops downtown where you could buy “Bolex” watches), is a very hilly country, but in the South, at least, few of the hills achieve “mountain” status. So our happy family Sunday outing wasn’t quite a walk in the park but it wasn’t really mountaineering, either—there was an entrepreneurial Korean guy up at the top of the hill taking pictures to sell to us (as I’m sure there was an older woman with a cooler, selling RC Cola and Moon Pies—frequently referred to by the semi-honorific *ajumma*, she was everywhere Americans went with their money). In some ways, it might have better resembled the surreal album cover photo from Led Zeppelin’s *Houses of the Holy*, naked children climbing on rocks. Well, we weren’t naked, but we were out of uniform and off the reservation, so to speak. If we were children, we were climbing the stones of adolescence and our destination was ultimately the peak experience of killing our fathers. There’s no other way to put it—for all of our commitment to an orderly democratic society and military hierarchy (and that commitment a thin crust, really, because beneath the superficial talking points and recruiting commercials we mostly got into this business to pay for college and maybe see the world and party it up like we were going out on tour with Van Halen), what really set blood coursing through our veins was the possibility that we could topple authority figures and, in the end, kill our fathers.

Our rage was formally encoded in an initiatory ritual called a Buffalation, a kind of military Carnival, a night to celebrate military discipline by indulging in its breach—transgressive revels that let the Lord of Misrule loose for one night, paradoxically keeping him in his place. Seen from one perspective as nothing more than the ceremonial induction of new officers into the fraternal order of our infantry battalion (as part of the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, it had quite a distinguished history, including suffering intense casualties in the Civil War debacle at Fredericksburg, a high-water mark for life-is-cheap infantry tactics), the Buffalation was from our subordinate point-of-view a chance to invert values and subvert the senior officers in all their false enlightenment (the majors and colonels were mostly veterans of the Vietnam war, and we knew how that had turned out, like Fredericksburg spread out over a decade). They

had their stupid routines to try to catch us up, their ritual inquisition that amounted to Trivial Pursuit for Dumb-Ass Infantry Officers.

INQUISITOR

How many MDL markers are there in the DMZ?

NEOPHYTE

1,292, sir.

INQUISITOR

How many steel balls are there in a Claymore mine?

NEOPHYTE

Approximately 700, sir.

INQUISITOR

Is Boss Buffalo's ass black?

NEOPHYTE

(awkward silence)

Revenge was swift. The lieutenants were required to put on entertainment as part of the program, after the questioning of candidates and before the climactic rite of fetching one's Buffalo nickel with one's teeth from the "sacred chalice of the vaunted Buffalo piss" (a pewter mug holding vile liquor punch). Our mandatory revels usually devolved to skits that I took a heavy hand in preparing, derivative of or straight-out ripped off from *Monty Python* and *Saturday Night Live* sketches, lampooning our officers, whom I viewed as pretentious, or undereducated, or uncultured—you name it, James-Dean style, I held it against them. Our "entertainment" frequently bordered on insubordination, and for me was just one of several outlets readily available for disordered passions.

When you think about it (when I think about it, now, a somber adult), there was something fishy about the whole legionary business, serving in the US Army and deployed to a foreign land (our unit crest included a symbol for a Cuban fort, and the "Buffalo" symbolism reflected the nickname of a regimental commander during the Korean war), the melodramatic cult of death and honor and history (putting a symbol of Fredericksburg on your unit crest amounted to a paean to blundering bloody

incompetence, like adopting Ambrose Burnside as your patron saint). Maybe this Korean tour was turning out to be a tragic Oedipal nightmare—having thought to flee an imminent disaster, had I blindly headed straight into the very heart of catastrophe? Maybe I hadn't avoided the Left Hand Path at all, that *esoteric* Satanic Majestic Rock-and-Roll Rebellion, when I signed on for a four-year scholarship contract with the Army, but instead had crossed the International Date Line, gone through the looking glass, and landed smack-dab in the Realm of the Serpent. My friend was off slapping his pink bass and snorting coke with Eddie Van Halen and the bearded guys from ZZ Top and I was here downing Buffalo Piss in the Land of Almost Right. My roommate here in the Hermit Kingdom was called The Snake, and this Dali-nightmare is true of him: he once stripped completely naked, donned his protective mask, smeared chem-light juice all over his body until he glowed bright as landing lights at the airport, and then proceeded to douse himself with Lindane powder, muffled screams emerging from his gas-mask, something about curing himself of these goddamned crabs. Something needed curing.

### Subdivisions

A few years after my service in Korea, as a graduate student in literature, I started hearing about this concept of history and destiny, American Exceptionalism. As an ideology, it's a whopper, and has lately become something like a litmus test for aspiring national leaders (*everybody wants to rule the world*, just like the song says, but American politicians claim it as a right), asserting that America is the exception to the general rules of historical development and decline, a nation destined to rule the world with its democratic values and personal freedoms. America the Exceptional would avoid the second-half trajectory of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, would not blow a first-half lead and spiral downward into decadence and decay, instead defying the laws of physics and remaining ever ascendant. Politicians love that idea just about as much as deficit spending.

When I first heard the term, I thought it meant something slightly different: the tendency among Americans to claim exceptions to otherwise firm articles of faith—"I really believe in telling the truth, except in this case it's better if I lie." You string enough of these exceptions together and it starts to look like systematic denial and a culture of hypocrisy, and I think some people from other parts of the world see Americans this way. I know it's a little easier to imagine if you've lived in another country for a while. That outsider perspective, that sense that other people put the world together differently from us, was part of the appeal for military service and world travel I picked up from my friend John Sperry, who came back from his Army tour of duty in Germany

and started noticing how *cute* our culture is (the poet and social critic Robert Bly tends to prefer the word *puerile*), America a never-ending plentitude of largely-inessential consumer products advertised with puns and word-play, a country that makes a big deal out of replaying the *commercials* from the Super Bowl.

Certainly my life as a military officer in Korea was conditioned upon these dualisms, these exceptional *subdivisions*. I was a soldier in a “peacetime” army, and yet here I was serving in a war zone, the Korean conflict having never been concluded by treaty, only suspended by a cease-fire agreement. Americans are a peace-loving people, runs the article of faith, yet our government is constantly involved in wars, either fighting them or encouraging and supporting them materially among our “allies.” We spend more on “defense” (one of those Orwellian euphemisms—the Department of Defense used to be called the Department of War) than most of the rest of the world combined, and our arms industries sell to the rest of the world everything they need to keep the wars going, lethality a pretty lucrative business model. America is a society putatively free from the rigid class-boundaries of decadent old Europe, and yet here I was in the middle of an essentially feudal caste system in the military, with strict subdivisions between enlisted men (“private soldiers”), non-commissioned officers (NCO’s--sergeants), company grade officers (lieutenants and captains), field grade officers (majors and colonels), and general officers (essentially, political appointees). In my own slightly surreal perception, possibly the result of growing up fatherless, I also saw a gender divide between officers and NCO’s, a “construct” that in literary studies is sometimes termed “separate spheres” but can just as easily be explained with reference to 50’s sit-coms in which Dad goes to the office to do paperwork and make plans while Mom takes care of the home and children.

The most controlling subdivision for the experience of the soldiers and officers of the combat arms battalions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division was the distinction between life in garrison at Camp Casey and life in the field, either in winter maneuvers after the rice had been harvested in the frozen countryside north of the “ville” of Tongdunch’*on* or in operations along and in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Korea. The five infantry battalions rotated through 73-day mission cycles on the DMZ, and for the Buffaloes, this took place in the first half of summer. I had arrived just in time for the mission in 1984 and then extended my 12-month tour of duty to 18 so that I could lead the scout platoon during a second round of the mission in 1985.

The DMZ mission was a chore endlessly subdivided, with major functions rotating between the rifle companies of the battalion: patrolling the DMZ, occupying and operating two guard posts in the DMZ, and serving as the ready-reaction force in case the shit hit the fan. The scout platoon, in our ongoing role as the “eyes and ears of

the battalion commander,” ran patrols throughout the ten-week mission, and as the platoon leader, I could take patrols as often as I wanted, since I was relieving my squad leaders from the duty every time I went out. The patrol process is demanding, so it was no small favor to give my sergeants an occasional break, but it was also the best practice for an insecure young leader looking to increase his skills and experience in small-unit tactics. I was already looking ahead to leading a Special Forces A-team, so I eagerly took out as many patrols as I could. Each patrol was really something like a three-day event (a short game-week, in football terms), all the stuff you spent the eight weeks of Ranger School learning how to do, only now with live ammo and a live enemy somewhere just the other side of that line. Graduate school, you might say. The DMZ patrol was the ultimate performance of the Army’s Holy Five Paragraph Operations Order, acting out its sacred script like a thespian taking on a role in a five-act Shakespearean drama. Situation, Mission, Execution, Service and Support, Command and Signal. Lay on, MacDuff!

The first day, you would receive your single-sentence mission from the S-2/S-3 Intelligence and Operations shop on a slip of paper with the essentials—time of departure, time of return, time on target, checkpoints, command and signal data—for both a daylight reconnaissance and a nighttime ambush patrol. You would plan, put up all the data in grease-pencil on a big acetate-covered board, work out the route on your map, deliver orders to your squad, memorize the times and azimuths and distances and radio frequencies and passwords, and rehearse immediate action drills and actions at the objective. Day two you would draw your weapons and ammo and gear and go through inspections and run your recon patrol, getting a look at the ground where you would set your ambush the following night. Day three would be the ambush, which meant heading out into the dark in the demilitarized zone. A spooky place, especially when you carried live ammunition and your sniper went out with one round in the chamber and the Claymore anti-personnel mines you carried were live, too.

When the Korean War ground to a halt and the cease-fire was signed in 1953, the battle front became the border subdividing the two warring countries and a four-kilometer zone was “demilitarized,” two kilometers either side of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), a 248 kilometer boundary marked by 1,292 identical signs on irregularly-spaced posts without a fence—a perfectly insane invitation to provocative border crossing. “Demilitarized” is another one of these through-the-looking-glass euphemisms, since that zone is actually highly militarized. Both sides basically built up fortifications and stationed forces just outside the DMZ, waiting to resume the fight, and they send armed patrols into the zone on a regular basis (the patrols are, putatively, “policing” the enforcement of the cease-fire, and patrol members thus wear “DMZ Police” brassards

on their arms). On occasion, the two Koreas will exchange fire across the MDL. In the American sector, a small fraction of the border but highly important since it encloses the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom where negotiations to end the long-stalled war still occasionally take place, military personnel are *required* to be armed.

During the DMZ mission, running patrols on a regular rotation, living in one of the big canvas tents pitched on concrete slabs at Warrior Base as if the circus had come to town, focused squarely on the mission 24/7, my life was nearly monastic, a great way to stay out of trouble. The patrol schedule told my life story. The same cannot be said for garrison life. While the US Army in Korea was, in the early 80's when I was there, on a near-war footing, conducting regular alerts in addition to maintaining the activities on the DMZ, working a five-and-one-half day week, life in garrison was still not that much different from any other job. Catch up on the paperwork, perform maintenance on the weapons and vehicles and equipment, do some training, keep regular hours. We ate lunch in the Officers Club almost every day, often enjoying ice-cream sundaes for dessert. Then evening would come and all hell would break loose on a regular basis.

Korea was what the Army called an “unaccompanied tour,” meaning that spouses and families were not invited and their expenses were not covered by the Army. A few soldiers and officers paid their own expenses for family, but mostly it was the single life—in a male-only combat arms battalion, the *bachelor* life. For that reason, among others, garrison life took on a Wild-West aura, as soldiers and officers stepped out the gate of Camp Casey into “the ville” of Tongduch'on (abbreviated as TDC), a carnival for disordered passions. While there were certainly plenty of good restaurants and a few decent shops and tailors, the typical menu for an evening in “the ville” was heavy with GI clubs, where copious amounts of alcohol and a plenteous variety of prostitutes were readily available. A lot of GI's went on sick call for venereal diseases.

Here is another of those subdivisions or hypocrisies or manifestations of the more-recent American Exceptionalism: while civilians in the post-9/11 world love to idolize our warrior class (you can't watch a football game anymore without an earnest ceremony of devotion to the military, often accompanied by a standing ovation that builds out of nowhere like a subconscious wave, no matter how inconsequential the honored “hero” might be), most have no idea of the often-squalid lives these “warriors” live and corrupt values they frequently live by. Stateside military bases are typically surrounded by pawn shops, bars, and strip clubs, where soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines love to waste money and get drunk and fight. Especially since we started fighting unending foreign wars over a decade ago, subjecting service members to frequently-traumatic levels of violence, the American military struggles with domestic violence, drug addiction, depression, and suicide (as I write this, the figure is 22 American veterans committing

suicide every day). Overseas, you can add essentially-legal prostitution to the mix, and pornography is a big part of the lifestyle, too, at home or abroad. The article of faith proclaims that we are a Christian, god-fearing nation of laws, but if you look at our military “heroes” you tend to see a lot of debased outlaw behavior. Exceptions to the rule, no doubt.

I readily confess that at the time, with the pretzel-logic of that Orwellian year of 1984, I thought I was having the time of my life in “TDC.” I particularly loved The Moon Club, in part because it was not a front for a house of prostitution (I found my way into plenty of those) but instead a haven for hard-core hard-rock music fans. The proprietor was an ex-Korean Air Force sergeant and his unique selling proposition was his extensive record collection. You would fill out a slip of paper with your song request and he would play them in the order received, blasting out from his excellent sound system. Part of the fun was the anticipation of what raving tune would come up next. My all-time favorite for these purposes was Deep Purple’s “Highway Star,” a metal anthem for speed-freaks that featured the exquisite multi-tracked guitar work of Ritchie Blackmore on an extended up-tempo solo orchestrated with a blues-based introduction followed by cascading Baroque triplets over four cycles through a pounding chord sequence, elevating and escalating toward the peak whammy-bar climax in the history of heavy-metal guitar. The specialty of the house at the Moon Club was a drink called Lig Mill: Soju, the Korean equivalent of vodka; Seven-Up or similar Korean knock-off; and a milky drink they called yogurt, though God only knows what it was. A good clean cocktail, the Lig Mill also happened to glow radium-luminous in the black-light. Awesome.

I had a major crush on the proprietor’s sister, Jina, and that whole affair worked out as ominous evidence of things not seen, not fully clear to me, disordered passions submerged into the unconscious and only visible under the Moon Club black-light. Something had happened in the long-ago shadows to deform me as an unusual man. It should have been easy just to get to know Jina, open up to her, see if we had common ground for pursuing something more than my lust for her (or whatever it was that stirred in my soul in her presence—I hadn’t really mastered that Platonic/Aristotelian discrimination of the various movements of the soul). She was quite stunning in her unadorned beauty, short, well-proportioned (19” waist!), with radiant bronze skin, and she wasn’t a “working girl.” But I became aware of a whole bank of circuits faulty in the wiring of my personality—I could not go from A to B to C when it came to women, could not process those signals. I could pay the price and find release, but I could only get so far down the road to ordinary love, the kind of simple flirting and courting millions of Americans with a whole lot less education and refinement than

me managed every day, before an internal “No” sounded mysteriously in my mind, sabotaging my best intentions. “No, this is not for you.” I didn’t really hear it so much as it seemed to cancel out other more positive signals. This pattern had emerged when I was in college and started up a romance that quickly bogged down, leaving me with a paralyzed sensation that I wasn’t in control of my own feelings and actions, a threatening sense that things were about to exceed the boundaries of simple, puerile sexuality and present insoluble challenges to my idealized and remote sense of romantic love. I got some counseling that suggested that the suicidal death of my friend Todd Miller probably was to blame. It would turn out that there was more down there in the repressed holding tank—really, more to my relationship with Todd than friendship, in addition to other sources of suffering—but that would take ages to work itself toward consciousness. In Korea, during the seemingly-normal stretches of garrison life, I tended to get mired in dark fugues of unhappy introspection, and looking back I would have to connect this problem to my aggressive subversion of my senior officers whenever I got the chance, and also to my frequent over-indulgences down in “the ville,” the drinks that glowed like radium and the working girls sadly imprisoned by the debt of their parents. I probably would have been better off spending all 18 months on the DMZ.

### “Periods of Limited Visibility”

The monastic life on the DMZ meant I had time for reading, and potent texts came my way through strange and mysterious channels. My first tour, I found a copy of Walker Percy’s second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, under the flip-up front seat of a Jeep—what was *that* doing *there*? It had to be a sign of something, coinciding as it did with the *Reader’s Digest* I happened upon a week or so later with a wry father-of-the-bride piece written by my old college professor, Richard Pindell, a self-mythologizing Dixie wild-man who had assigned me Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor when I was an undergraduate at Binghamton. Coinciding? Hmmm. Percy novels always featured a main character waiting for some kind of sign, while in the O’Connor stories someone always seemed to be violently beset by whatever they most fervently seek to avoid.

My second tour, I worked my way through T. R. Ferenbach’s 1963 *This Kind of War*, which I discovered was passed from hand to hand among the thinking officers, the mutedly cynical and Stoic descendants of the Roman centurions commissioned to lead the American legions. They read it as their preferred history of the Korean War, and it reflected what you might call the *ethos* of the American officer, post-Vietnam (though its author had only drawn upon a similar post-Korea *ethos*): critical of the politicians,

cognizant of the mistakes of preparation and leadership by the officers, and loyal to the combat soldiers. Something on the order of an Aristotelian examination of conscience concerning the relationship between the military and a liberal American republic of the post-World-War-II era, the book dispensed the wisdom of Zen-on-the-Imjin: “Only those who have never learned self-restraint fear reasonable discipline” (p. xi).

In between chapters, I ran patrols with the scouts.

Tim Loonam decided he should go along on some of my patrols as the medic, based upon his incisive reckoning of leadership. As the medical platoon leader, he was responsible for the training and disposition of all the medics in the battalion, each of whom got attached to a platoon in the line companies during deployments. Every DMZ patrol had to include a medic, which put them into an intensive rotation, and Tim believed that he should fully understand what his troops were required to do in order to properly train and lead them. It made sense, but it also ran up against a line of military “thought” arguing that no medical platoon leader had done this before and therefore neither should Tim (med platoon leaders tended to be what we called “pogues,” chairborne leaders habituated to their desks). Then there was the “problem” of rank, a threat to the whole feudal caste system—if Tim, as a second lieutenant, went out on a patrol led by a squad leader, a sergeant, he’d find himself in the unacceptable situation of an officer taking orders from an NCO. That’s where my practice of taking out scout patrols came in handy. I outranked Tim, so we wouldn’t have any risk of insubordination.

Tim was enthusiastic about his chance to get into the thick of things with the scouts, and he proved adept at processes like memorizing the route by legs: *X degrees magnetic azimuth for Y meters to first checkpoint, A degrees for B meters to second checkpoint, deploy on line along the tree-line, observe the site for tomorrow night’s ambush for two hours, return to the Main Supply Road (MSR) by a different route*, etc. He was good about helping the scouts memorize call-signs and frequencies and code words to use when reporting via radio, would enthusiastically run through mnemonic drills with them. Tim was patient with these soldiers, some of whom, let’s face it, had signed that Army contract because they weren’t academically competent enough to go to college to learn how to write essays. I think he had the right touch, maybe because inherently he liked people (I’m not sure that’s true of me, and I know I was impatient with the soldier who struggled with the “mental reps”). Tim kept his good humor further into the process, when both of the inspectors (the company commander or his delegated substitute, the battalion commander or his delegate) really teed off on him as the “fish out of water,” hammering him with all manner of arcane questions.

INSPECTOR

Medic, what would you do if this lieutenant got hit with a hand-grenade on your patrol?

LT LOONAM

I would apply the ABC's: clear the airway, start the breathing, check for bleeding and dress any wounds, and then treat for shock.

INSPECTOR

Would you take command of the patrol?

LT LOONAM

No, sir, the Assistant Patrol Leader would be next in the chain of command.

INSPECTOR

What would you do if Kim Il-sung stepped out of the tree-line and approached this patrol?

LT LOONAM

(awkward silence)

We made it through the recon patrol just fine. Tim showed he could deal in the field—operating as part of a unit, following the script for moving and stopping without the need for talk, knowing what was worth observing and reporting and what was just routine, staying oriented to the map at all times, knowing the pace-count and compass heading, using hand and arm signals as necessary, keeping all of the details under control in a tense environment. None of that is easy if it's not your regular job. The real test would come the following night, when we set up our ambush. Night time in the DMZ turns into a real freak show.

North Korea was one of the last of the great cult-of-personality communist dictatorships, and in the 1980's was still led by the original personality, the Great Leader Comrade himself, Kim Il-sung, Korean by birth and communist by dint of his life's journey. The 1950-1953 war had never formally concluded—as Fehrenbach writes, extending an ongoing metaphor linking America and Imperial Rome, "MacArthur was told to hold the frontier so that the tribes of the interior could continue to organize, and to forget about carrying the war to the barbarians" (276), and then Dugout Doug got sacked for not listening anyway. The country had been artificially subdivided by

outsiders, and North Korea kept up active measures to subvert the Western-aligned and financially-prosperous South. They maintained one of the world's largest standing armies, dug tunnels under the DMZ, and engaged in near-psychotic propaganda histrionics. For example, on the other side of the MDL from the American sector of the DMZ, they maintained a Potemkin-village façade where laborers "lived" in a model workers'-paradise community in plain view of the DMZ outposts (but then retreated out of the DMZ under cover of darkness). That was supposed to demonstrate ... something. They jockeyed back and forth with the South to see whose flagpole was taller at that same region of the DMZ. And at night, they tried to freak out the Americans on patrol in the DMZ with propaganda broadcasts on a network of loudspeakers aimed across the MDL (just the phase-differences of so many speakers spread out unevenly made it sound pretty freaky, and then they frequently threw in brief snatches of dissonant music, overloaded and distorted, like outtakes from a King Crimson album). Combined with their practice of turning on and off lights along the fence-line, it could make for an unsettling night for an American experiencing it for the first time. How would Tim handle that?

In my arrogance and ignorance I thought maybe Tim was the Nick Adams type, the Michigander protagonist in a number of the landmark Ernest Hemingway stories. Nick was always losing his innocence—when his father delivered an Indian baby by Caesarean section, when killers came to town to get Ole Anderson—but then somehow regenerating it so that he could lose it again the next story. That's why Hemingway was the great American writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—America was like Nick Adams, always losing its innocence and then having it again to lose in the next episode. Pearl Harbor, Kasserine Pass, Korea, Vietnam.

We ate our pre-game meal at the dining facility on Warrior Base and then started suiting up for the ambush patrol. Tim and I reviewed the game plan as we got into uniform and applied camouflage. He had played high school football in Chicago, and even made it as far as a prospect camp for college ball at Colorado, and that experience with teamwork probably made this whole process easier for him. I hadn't played any team sports, and I always felt I was trying to make up for that deficit. I'd gotten plenty of good Army training, of course, up to and including Ranger School, and now had run more than a dozen of these DMZ patrols, 60-plus paragraphs of Operations Order drama, so I felt OK about my ability, but still, none of it came naturally. I didn't really know what I would do if Kim Il-sung stepped out of the tree-line, either.

We made our way over to the inspection tent, where our equipment was laid out. This time, the inspectors were in no mood for horsing around with Tim. We were going to be patrolling out in the dark on the DMZ, setting up an ambush, carrying

live ammunition, and I would set out live Claymore mines the detonators to which were currently residing in my pockets, tied with parachute cord to my belt. Very close to me. We would be in a position to start the next world war if we chose to fuck up our mission, and the inspectors were determined to ensure that we didn't fuck up.

I could smoke my last cigarette of the night as we rode in the back of a "deuce-and-a-half" truck from Warrior Base to the Tactical Operations Center (TOC), a little tent-city just outside the DMZ. That was always a great smoke. The year before, I had been a green lieutenant working the radios at the TOC, and now I experienced what I imagined the varsity felt on game-day, coming in painted up and wearing all that gear, M-16 clutched in one hand the way a running back might carry the football in the open field, checking in with the Intelligence Officer (S-2) for final updates on the enemy situation. It was all routine, but nobody took anything for granted. I was always aware of the S-2, a pretty keen, soft-spoken officer, taking a moment to look me directly in the eye, probably scanning for any signs that I was off my game in any way. It was his job, too, to make sure I didn't fuck up and start the next world war. I was tight, but my breathing was slow and under control.

The whole process of getting underway with a DMZ patrol runs just the opposite of pre-game festivities leading up to kickoff of a football game. Instead of emotions rising as the crowd roar throbs, things get quieter as you motor through the DMZ gate, lights out on the truck, and then approach dead silence as you slither off the truck, take prone positions off the side of the road, and wait for the truck to disappear. You wait, silent, listening for anything out of the ordinary. It was my job as patrol leader, when I was assured that we were good to go, to get up and start to move in the direction of the first leg of our route. That was it. The patrol's job was to move out in concert with me, just like we'd rehearsed. We'd gotten off the truck in our moving formation. This was no game. We were heading to our ambush site.

The trick that most civilians don't get about military operations at night is that it's almost never really dark. In fact, the military favors the expression "periods of limited visibility," which beautifully captures the relative nature of light and dark. Minus man-made artificial lights, night may still be illuminated by moon and stars, and even minus the moon, starlight adds a certain "visibility." Only on moonless and cloud-covered nights away from civilization do you really approach total darkness. The key to operating in the limited visibility is getting your eyes adjusted and keeping them adjusted, pupils dilated to let in maximum light. That's why from the time we left the TOC until we were dropped off at a numbered pole on the side of the MSR we didn't use any flashlights and the truck was operating only using "black-out lights." By the

time we were starting our patrol route, we were dilated enough to get on with the operation.

A strange thing, though: we are so visually oriented, most of us, that even with a million abstractions and numbers to keep our mind focused—in my case, the azimuth, the pace-count, the head count, what the North Koreans are doing with the lights on the fence-line—in the absence of something to look at, our minds tend to wander. In my case, I found my mind subdivided, the main part still counting and checking the compass while one subdivision tended to drift to memories of similar situations, with that sticky associative poetic logic of dreams. Tonight begets another night as I return to ponder how far off its bearings my mind wandered when I was in the mountain phase of Ranger School last winter, patrolling the hilly country of northern Georgia. *Mountain Laurel*, I remember how much trouble the mountain laurel made for our night-time movements, always tangled up in that low shrubbery. My luck gyroscope had gone swinging wildly throughout the early stages of my active duty in the Army, from the yaw of failing a PT test and being cut from Airborne and Ranger School pitching up to a miraculous second chance due to a screw-up at headquarters to rolling on to a Pass on my first patrol at Camp Darby—something almost no one does because it comes early in the process and it's hard to master all the details of patrol leadership. Who would have thought that I'd be the guy to keep my bearings in that situation, a night-time occupation of a patrol base? Then I lost the gyroscopic platform altogether when we got to Camp Merrill in those Georgia mountains and I started screwing up, literally screwing up and around, gyroscope twisting around and up inside my head, hands dropping things, feet moving out when the rest of the patrol was at the halt, forgetting my rucksack and losing my head and then one night on patrol I am pretty sure I felt my eyes twist up inside of my head like scrotum retreating on contact with freezing pool as I hallucinated. It was too dark to know for sure if I knew for sure. I had gotten an infection on a small cut on my thumb, a little initiatory wound through which the educational process drew its sacrificial blood, and it turned into blood poisoning and I really was losing the executive functions of my mind when—

—*Fuck!*—

Something exploded in my chest, and I was fixing to start the third world war in the DMZ. No, not in my chest, but near it. I quickly patted my uniform blouse and found no blood nor tattered fabric from a gunshot or grenade blast. No. Now that I thought of it, I had felt a little skitter, almost like getting brushed in the face by a cat's tail, and then had felt the explosion. No, not a cat, a pheasant, and not an explosion at all. A fucking ring-necked pheasant taking wing right in front of me, bursting into flight

and scaring the shit out of someone in the patrol, who had violated noise discipline and shouted out, “Fuck!”

I figured I had better check in with the rookie, since Tim was right next to me in the order of march. The patrol had halted, frozen, then taken a knee according to our Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), weapons at the ready facing out from the line of march, so I just took a couple of steps to kneel right beside Tim, where I could whisper in his ear. I figured I’d better settle him down and let him know that it was OK if he had inadvertently blurted out.

“Did you hear who said that?” I asked, favoring the indirect approach.

“I did,” he whispered back.

“It’s OK. It can happen to the best of us.”

“No, I mean, I heard who said that.”

This was a lot of whispering for the DMZ at night, but once started down this track I figured I’d better wrap it up.

“Who?”

“You did.”

I did. Shit.

“All right. We’re moving out,” I whispered to the patrol.

Getting myself centered again, I did a little math in my head and sidled over to Tim Loonam again.

“What’s the pace count, medic?”

“Two hundred meters from start point, sir.”

“Attaway, Buffalo.”

For several long, tedious hours of this particular period of limited visibility, we were lined up in ambush formation, soldiers in the prone position with maximum cover if not concealment, weapons aimed and ready to fire, disposed to start the third world war if it came down to it.

In this strange crepuscular realm of Almost War and Almost Right, a foggy world of propaganda and illusion and mixed metaphor, we were pawns in a Cold-War game of chicken. The North Koreans were rumored to occasionally send infiltrators across the MDL, seeking to provoke an embarrassing response from the US forces, and so our role was two-fold: to be here to detect any infiltrators, and to keep the situation under control if it happened, exerting discipline in a chaotic situation.

In fact, there had been one of these “Spot South” incidents the night before I arrived on the DMZ for my first tour in 1984. It was shrouded in mystery, at least from me as a newbie, but I could tell it had rattled the battalion commander and his staff—when I was introduced to them on arrival, they had the sleep-deprived hair-standing-on-end

look of men who had survived a plane crash. The scout platoon leader's patrol had picked up on something approximately human-sized moving in the sparse vegetation of a field to their front, alerted to his heat-signature in the limited visibility by the thermal night-sights that the scout patrols took on ambush missions in those days. The world stopped turning for the battalion until the phantom finally disappeared—the scout had wanted to maneuver his squad to force the issue, but the battalion commander in his first night on the job was not inclined to pull that particular trigger. So nothing really happened. Had a North Korean played us for suckers, slipping in, stirring up the shit—they were undoubtedly aware that a new battalion had just taken over the mission—and slipping out? Had a lucky possum gotten away with its life, having avoided being targeted by a command-detonated Claymore anti-personnel mine, which would have shredded its hide with 700 stainless-steel balls propelled by 680 grams of C-4 explosive? A strange mystery everyone would have to live with. A great story for that scout to tell over endless drinks the rest of his life, like the pompous Commander McBragg. “There I was, ready to start a third world war but the Boss Buffalo wouldn't let me shoot ... .”

Mainly, the job on these patrols was to try to stay awake, to try to pay attention even though the odds said you wouldn't see much of anything. They gave us Essential Elements of Information, things to notice and record—which fence lights came on and off, and when, mostly, since these were thought to be signals to infiltrators working their way across the MDL. We brought along a “Korean Augmentation to the U. S. Army,” or KATUSA, a soldier from the ROK Army fluent in English, to translate and transcribe the propaganda broadcasts. The patrol would be deployed on line, facing the kill zone of the ambush, with rear security a dozen yards or so out back. The KATUSA would sit between the main line and the rear security, often with his back to the kill zone so he would listen and not watch. He carried a notebook to write down what he heard.

The Great Leader-Comrade Kim Il-sung deployed specialists to travel the fence line, climbing up into the guard towers to take over the live microphones and lay it down like rap artists. They would get on the PA system and holler propaganda into the night for hours on end. From time to time I would crawl back and check in with the KATUSA as he translated the rap. *Can't understand, just what does he say?*

The night that Tim Loonam went out with me as medic, I recall asking the KATUSA what was the message, since the rap artist had adopted a mellow tone, like he was imparting a narrative instead of the usual ideological rant (I got so I could recognize the Korean word for “running-dog lackey” pretty readily). The KATUSA told me it was a long story about the Great Leader-Comrade Kim Il-sung feeding

the multitudes, feeding vast hordes of the starving people during the war with Japan, feeding thousands with just a few loaves of bread. “He really said that?” I asked quietly, not sure how much of the allusion the KATUSA was on to. “Did he mention anything about fishes?” The KATUSA replied, “no, sir,” but I think I heard a little smirk in his voice. Oh, my. I’d heard that story before somewhere. What an insane madman up there, sending seething rant-artists all along the watchtower to holler parables at us. There’s nothing *cute* about the Great Leader-Comrade’s culture, his starving people and his standing army. It was more like something out of the paranoid science-fiction movies America loved in the 1950’s, alien perils and brain-washing evil-genius dictators, out to feed on our gray matter.

That was as far as we got toward starting the third world war that night. We got told a bed time story about a monster manipulator with one of the world’s largest collections of field artillery, who runs a side business feeding the multitudes.

I was nagged by the partial recall of an enigmatic phrase from Fehrenbach, something about the bones of the legionnaires, but couldn’t remember the exact wording. Funny how you obsess over little things like that, the same way your tongue can’t avoid the rough edge of broken tooth.

Well, I also got something a little more personal. I think. In that hypnogogic trance of a night, while disparate parts of my body fell asleep from lying prone on damp ground as the temperature dropped off, as my eyes wondered if they were open or closed, looking or only imagining they were looking, I thought I heard something very different briefly come flying out of those arrayed loudspeakers, prefaced by an extended piano arpeggio that often dramatically signaled a change of programming on this weird DMZ network. It was an American voice, a farm-boy Wisconsin type of voice (or was it Nick Adams from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, shocked at what he’d stumbled onto north of the MDL?), proclaiming “I want to tell you ... ,” but then abruptly cut off, not revealing anything. Had the henchmen around the weird evil genius Great Leader-Comrade invented a soul gyroscope, a distant-early-warning *lapsometer* that made it clear that *I wanted someone to tell me something*, like a character in a Walker Percy novel?

*I hear the talking of the DJ, can’t understand just what does he say? I’m on a Mexican radio.*

For our efforts, after we packed up our ambush site and made it back to the MSR, clambered onto the trucks for a quick stop at the TOC where we debriefed the S-2 on the whole Leader-Comrade story, as the sun started to invest the fog of the morning-calm with milky light, we got to enjoy French toast dripping with hot maple syrup in the Warrior Base mess hall. Man, that tasted good. And then, after a very satisfying

smoke and a few paragraphs from Fehrenbach, finding the passage I'd thought about in the night ("This was the kind of war that had bleached the bones of countless legionnaires on the marches of the empire" p. 59)—ah, such stuff to dream on, this kind of war—I would drift off to sleep as the world around me began to stir awake for another bustling summer day. By the time I woke again, dripping with sweat, I would have another mission.

**November 18, 1985:** New York Giants 21, Washington Redskins 23, RFK Stadium, Washington. By mid-November, I had completed my voyage home from the frontiers of freedom, and on Monday night I was welcomed home with an event equal parts family reunion and ritual humiliation. A gaggle of sisters and nieces and nephews were crammed into the living room of my mother's small apartment in Norwich, NY, and I was the guest of honor for dinner and dessert, an unusual man both admired and ridiculed for his ambitions. My father had enlisted in the Army right after Pearl Harbor, and my mother earned a nursing degree through the Cadet Nurses Corps, but he got busted for fighting every time he made sergeant and with the post-war demobilization she never got to serve out her commission. Neither of my parents earned college degrees. None of my sisters had gone to college, but they had all married—more than once—and had kids. I was the family freak-show, the worst combination of "book-smart" and lonely-heart single. Still, they had all loved me and supported me, so I was obliged to put up with their shit.

In those days, the kids liked to put on shows (not so different from our antic Buffalation entertainments), and they made good use of my military props, especially the black-framed "TED" glasses (Tactical Eyewear Device), evolving goofy characters, and nobody was paying too much attention to the Monday night game playing on the Trinitron color TV I had shipped home from the PX in Korea. The Washington team was hosting the Giants, with whom they were tangled in a three-way race for playoff spots in the NFC East that also included the Dallas Cowboys. Somewhere along the line, though, the horsing around in the living room petered out as all eyes were drawn to a replay on TV. Early in the second quarter, with the game tied at 7, Washington tried a trick play to exploit quarterback Joe Theisman's mobility—a flea-flicker, which entailed a handoff to the running back, who plunged straight up into the middle of the line, only to turn and pitch the ball back to the quarterback. Theisman was in trouble right away, since the Giants' linebackers were notoriously fast, smart heavy-hitters. Harry Carson thought he had the wiry quarterback, but Theisman wiggled free, only to be brought down for good by Lawrence Taylor, who came skidding into the play from off the edge, driving his knee into Theisman's lower leg and—

—Fuck!—

Something exploded and Lawrence Taylor came screaming out of the pile like a man possessed. Like everyone watching that game, whether they said it out loud or under their breath or in the silence of their hearts, all the family gathered together for my reunion gasped, “oh, my god.” Theisman’s leg had broken in two, and spear-tips of the bone protruded out from his bloody sock striped with team colors. Taylor had heard the shotgun blast of both lower-leg bones snapping and had screamed to the sidelines to get help out to Theisman, who was writhing in pain.

The game was stopped for a long time as medics reassembled the leg enough to wrap it in an air-cast so they could put Theisman on a stretcher. In the three-man ABC Monday Night Football booth, as they repeatedly ran the replay, you could hear something catch in the voices of the ex-players, who had all been there with injuries, some more serious than others. O. J. Simpson was relatively lucky by NFL standards, “only” requiring two knee surgeries but suffering from arthritis after his playing days were over, a fact brought up in his later trial for murdering his wife. Joe Namath’s middle name might as well be “knee injury,” so famous was his robotic Lenox Hill knee brace and gimpny drop-back gait from under center. Frank Gifford as a New York Giant had been carted off the field, some thought dead, after sustaining a concussion on a vicious tackle by “Concrete Charlie” Bednarik of the Philadelphia Eagles in a November game in 1960 between those two long-time rivals. Gifford had sat out a full season of football before returning for a couple more productive seasons.

Theisman would never play football again.

I think maybe my mother suggested we turn off the TV. I wonder how many TV’s across America were shut off that night. Theisman’s injury seemed to function like some sort of Return of the Repressed, revealing in a strobe-like flash that when we made an entertainment of football, prime-time, Monday Night Football, a national TV spectacle—hell, a *worldwide* phenomenon—we had repressed the violence at its core. I remembered something I hadn’t thought about in years: I used to shoot baskets with this guy from New Berlin, Jeff Ackerman, whose dad sometimes came out and shot with us, in between his work as an undertaker and part-time mail carrier. His father walked with a pronounced limp, but he cut no one any slack on the basketball court. He had lost his leg playing football when gangrene set in after his leg was broken in a high school game in the mid 1950’s. Jeff had grown up a rabid Green Bay fan, to the point that his nickname was Packerman, and initially his parents hadn’t given him permission to go out for football. In Jeff’s sophomore season, though, he prevailed upon them with the logic that emergency medicine had improved and that an injury like his father’s wouldn’t result in such a catastrophe today. Jeff had made a good career

of it as a high-school running back, and even played a little ball in college before giving it up to concentrate on his studies, then giving up on his studies to join the Navy, in which setting like Paul Brown he found his way back to football. I had to wonder what his father thought of this horrid spectacle on Monday Night Football.

I had just come back from one of the outposts of the American Empire, where the legionnaires' bones were supposed to be bleaching, and I'd watched the Packers get creamed by the Bears on Monday Night Football in Korea. The mighty NFL, its symbol a heroic shield redolent of warriors and legionnaires, strides the world like a Colossus, almost as much as the American Empire (and the NFL shield features white stars in a blue field, just like the American flag), and these two dread monstrosities share that repressed violence at their core, occasionally poking through like the bones of the quarterback's broken leg. Maybe bubbling even further below the surface the night of Theisman's gruesome injury was this dim awareness that my military adventure was, ultimately, a journey into the essence and function of violence, something essential but unpleasant that I had largely avoided through most of my early life. Watching something as exciting, expensive, and violent as Monday Night Football may have been enhanced by the tingle of having learned a truth written in invisible ink in the Book of the Cultural Repressed—that the empire must be subdued by violence or its threat. Why else would the "American" army have half or more of its duty stations outside of the country? In the Platonic dialogue, some character would answer, "there are monsters at large in the world, and nothing cute about the threat that Kim Il-sung presents from North Korea," only to be rebutted that it wasn't like the Great Leader-Comrade was menacing the Canadian border with his fence-lights and rant-artists. And then, if neither character was Socrates, you would have to figure out for yourself whom to support, what would be the consequences of supporting either one. *Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?*

Is it the definition of empire or exceptionalism to imagine your shores everywhere in the world? Isn't that megalomania?

I had earned my college degree in English literature, could rightly claim the title of a Word Man, and I took a close look at the words here. The Giants were playing the Redskins that night—the *Redskins*, a scandal of a moniker, like calling a team The N-Word, a name dripping with the Trail-of-Tears history of imperial violence. Maybe that's how the NFL worked, just like the American Empire. Even the name of the Washington NFL franchise carried that threat.

Ah, well. "The problem is," Fehrenbach had written, Zen-on-the-Imjin wise and inscrutable, recognizing how much more willing Americans were to sacrifice for team sports than to prepare for war, "to understand the battlefield as well as the game of

football. The problem is not to see what is desirable, or nice, or politically feasible, but what is necessary” (p. xi). He might as well have thrown in “cute” along with “nice.” So there’s nothing “cute” about a name like *Redskins* associated with the capital of the American Empire and representing one of the old-guard franchises of the NFL (and the last to integrate its roster, and then only when a cabinet officer from the federal government threatened to evict them from their stadium if they didn’t), but what is *necessary* about such a public obscurity?

That kind of question, which ambiguously invites us to travel or escape the Left Hand Path, seems like just the kind of vexation the Serpent spends his days slithering across the face of the earth to track us down and pose to us.

### **Works Cited**

Fehrenbach, T.R. *This Kind of Wark: The Classic Korean War History*. 1963 Dulles: Potomac, 2008 Print.

---

**STEVEN LIPARULO** is the author of *Farewell to Football? An American Fan’s Examination of Conscience*. A Ph. D. graduate of the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, he is the former Associate Director of the UH Writing Center. He received undergraduate and graduate degrees from Binghamton University and served as a US Army officer in the infantry and special forces.