



The Short Story Writer Competition

FIRST PRIZE

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Bunkle

by
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Whether Bunkle cheated or not is difficult to say. But it was fun while it lasted. Allow me to explain.

The first thought that crossed every National Serviceman's mind, once he was inducted into the regiment, was how to get out. How to work his ticket.

But working your ticket was a difficult and dedicated job. In fact, it was almost impossible. Even so, anything was worth a try, because the alternative was hell on wheels.

Here you were dragged off the street, lanced from your apprenticeship, university or labour exchange with not so much as a by-your-leave and press-ganged. The prospect was two years in an organisation for which you had little appreciation and no respect.

The qualifications for entry into the army were modest. If you were thought to be breathing during the medical examination and you could walk across a room without knocking the furniture over, you were in. Few conditions were deemed serious enough to prevent entry; and anyone not actually inside an oxygen tent was stamped A1.

Academically and socially, there were no limits. From the illiterate to the well-read, from borstalites to Old Etonians. If you knew your own name and could cough while the MO held a ruler beneath your testicles, you would be a soldier, my son.

However, the rank and file National Serviceman would do anything to get out of it; and Bunkle was among the most enthusiastic in this respect.

He came to prominence in 1955 during basic training, just two days into the course. A quiet lad, he had so far kept himself largely to himself; only the man in the next bed had had any communication with him. But on the second day, he rose.

"I tsol ym tseb stoob," he said.

"What?" queried Corporal Edmunds.

“I tsol ym tseb stoob.”

“What the hell are you talking about, you idle man?”

“Ym tseb stoob,” Bunkle explained.

“Ym steb stoob? What kind of language is that? Are you a bleedin’ foreigner?”

“On, Laroprocc – M’i Shilgne.”

Corporal Edmunds shook his head as though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Which he couldn’t.

“Don’t try and snow the snowman, sunshine. Talk proper.”

Bunkle remained stiffly at attention beside his bed. “I ma gniklat reprop, Laroprocc.”

The rest of the thirty-man platoon, standing at ease beside their beds, suspected that something interesting was afoot.

Edmunds took one pace smartly to the rear and addressed himself to a man at the far end of the barracks. “Sergeant, this man is idle.”

The Sergeant looked up from a minute inspection of a squared-off bed-pack.

“An idle man, Corporal? We have an idle man?”

“Yes, Sar’nt.”

“We’ll see about that.” His boots punished floorboards as he strode rigidly towards the offender. “Do you know who I am?”

“I knith os,” Bunkle replied.

The Sergeant thought about this for a moment, began to say something, changed his mind and then said: “I am Sergeant Dent. You will come to know me and love me. I am fireproof, waterproof, bomb-proof, and always bleedin’ right! Got it?”

“I tog ti.”

“What?”

“I tog ti.”

Frowning now and towering over the soldier. “Where are you from, son?”

“Nodnol.”

“Nodnol? Where the hell is Nodnol? Yugoslavia? Poland? And if you are a foreigner, what are you doing in this man’s army?”

“Nodnol si raen eht Semaht.”

“I do not believe this. Speak English, son. You know: the mother tongue.”

“I syawla kaeps ekil sith.”

Dent was by now somewhat unsure of himself. Over the years as a training instructor, he had run into every type and stripe of man possible. From the unkempt to the fanatically clean. From the straight to the bent. From the stupid to the intellectual. From the introvert to the extrovert. Never before had he come across an alien.

“What is the matter with you, lad?” he asked loudly, in order to be better understood.

“S’ereht gnihton eht rettam htiw em, T’nras. M’i etiuq thgira.”

“Jesus fucking wept!” The Sergeant cast around. “Does anyone know what this ponce is on about?”

The man at the next bed slammed his heel to the floor as he came to attention.

"Permission to speak, Sarn’t."

“Go ahead. What’s your name?”

“McQueen, Sarn’t.”

“Right, McQueen – what’s this man’s name.”

“Bunkle, Sarn’t.”

“Bunkle?”

“Bunkle.”

“Is he a British subject?”

“Yes.”

”Then tell me – what language is he speaking?”

“Well, Sarn’t, it’s English, but...”

“But?”

“But backwards.”

“Backwards.”

“Correct. I copped onto it last night when I was talking to him, like. And after a bit, I got the hang of it.”

Young eyed McQueen through lowered lids. “You wouldn’t bullshit me, would you?”

“No, Sarn’t. He definitely talks backwards.”

“Is he mad? Is he a nutter?”

McQueen shrugged. “It wouldn’t be for me to say, Sarn’t. But you’ve got to admit he’s bloody good at it.”

“At what?”

“At English backwards.”

“All right, let’s try it out. I’ll ask him a question and you ubersetzen...translate.”

“Okay.”

“Now then, Bunkle,” the Sergeant said, addressing the man in question. “You understand what I’m saying?”

“Erus,” Bunkle replied.

“He does,” McQueen supplied.

“Why are you talking like this?”

“Esuaceb s’ti yltcefrep larutan rof em ot klat ekil siht.”

“He says: because it’s perfectly natural for him to talk like this.”

“I evah syawla enod ti.”

“He’s always done it.”

Dent rubbed his chin. "I think you'd better see the MO, my lad. A couple of aspirins will soon put you right."

Later that day, Bunkle was marched into the Medical Officer's surgery, accompanied by translator McQueen. There, he was given as thorough a going over as the young second-lieutenant MO was capable of giving. The latter had been only a year out of medical school before being drafted; and his sole hands-on experience was eight months as a junior doctor on a casualty ward. Which meant that if his patients had neither fallen off ladders, nor got their heads wedged in railings, he was pretty much stumped to make a diagnosis.

He reported his findings by telephone to the platoon commander, another lieutenant like himself.

"This man Bunkle, Rupert."

"Yes, Tarquin. The one who converses backwards?"

"The same."

"Strange type."

"Quite. Well, I can find nothing organically wrong with him. He's as fit as a butcher's dog, so to speak."

"Oh, yah, I thought as much. But is he insane – that's the question?"

"Search me, Tarquin. You see, I'm really not qualified to say. I am a body man, not a bonce man."

"What's the drill, then?"

"Can't say really. I mean, do you *want* a platoon member who can only speak in reverse? Mind you, he's damn good at it."

"But is he genuine? You know, is he swinging the old lead?"

"Hard to say. I couldn't catch him out...and I tried, I really tried. Well, I get the lot over here. I get barkers, frothers at the mouth, fainters, simulated epileptics. I've had them all."

“Yah. You know, to be honest, Rupert, I don’t know how this Bunkle chap would work in practice. We’d need to have that other guttersnipe McQueen on tap all the time to tell us what he is saying.”

“Yes, that’s a point. But I’ll call in a psychiatrist if you think that will help.”

No, I don’t think so. They’re all crackers anyway.”

“Well, you’ve got that right.”

“Of course, this backward speaking business could be quite hazardous under certain circumstances, Tarquin.”

“Wouldn’t make much of a radio operator, eh?”

“How very droll. I think I shall recommend to the old man that he be discharged. Let’s throw the bugger out.”

“Good idea. Probably be more trouble than he’s worth.”

As was customary for anyone due for discharge on medical or non-compatibility grounds, the dischargée would be interviewed at length by the Commanding Officer. This final procedure was designed to trap and unmask the ticket-workers; and the CO was very good at laying traps.

The interview was short and sharp.

McQueen translated just five of his comrade’s sentences, while the CO, attempting to write down the backwards dialogue, quickly lost patience.

“Are you a lead-swinger, Rifleman? Are you a ticket-worker?”

On, ris. I evol eht ymra. I tnaw ot ekam a reerac fo ti.”

“He says no, sir,” McQueen confirmed. “He loves the army and wants to make a career of it.”

“Well, that’s quite impossible if we cannot understand a damn word he’s saying,” the CO he said. “But give him credit, he’s bloody good at it.”

Bunkle’s discharge papers were quickly signed and he was unceremoniously shown the main gate.

Which should have been the end of Bunkle.

Three months passed. Then, out of the blue, McQueen received a picture postcard from Hawaii.

Dear McQueen, it began

As you can see, I'm in Honolulu. I am working on a cruise liner as an entertainer. I do impressions and tricks with backward speaking, which I have made my forte. The customers love it.

Thanks for all your help, mate. As to the others: Skcollob

Ot eht tol fo meth!

Bunkle.

END