

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

When the US Army engages in peace-keeping, it's usually a farce. But in an upside down world so much of Army life is a farce. Like an effeminate regiment that discovers a heterosexual in the unit.

The quartermaster corps has a regiment of highly skilled specialists whose fabric of reality is of a different cut. They design fashionable military clothing. Within that regiment is an elite unit, the *Iron Busters*. Their motto is "Sew Sure"; their mission is to outfit a stylish Army with flair. But they find designing a new camo ensemble is a battle in itself. Everything clashes, gas-resistant fabric chafes the skin, Kevlar is unforgiving, the footwear is too practical, and those bucket helmets don't seem to work with anything. The CO, Colonel Priss, *really* hates everything in his warehouse.

The final coup is the problem of accessories, i.e. weaponry. The new rifles don't even have slings! When Colonel Priss requests a weapons specialist, the troubles begin.

Lt. Striker is a fashion mercenary of sorts. He's just returned from an assignment abroad, outfitting – of all outfits! – the French Foreign Legion. At first the *Iron Busters* are impressed with the smart-looking weapons that Striker's designed. He humbly tells them that they're merely cosmetic changes to the hardware, like his *Wonder B.A.R.* (a Browning Automatic Rifle fitted with full-support, cross-your-heart shoulder harness.) Striker shows them a series of fashion photos: the Legionnaires look stunning on catwalks of Paris, specially the summer line of desert chic – accented with pastel webbing and chiffon ponchos. Capt. Buff, the Admin. Officer, makes a catty reply (he's obviously jealous).

Striker then displays his portfolio of fashion designs (fluid sketches) harping the trendy theme of *holistic weaponry that heals*, a catch phrase that he himself coined for the New Age Peacekeeping International Network (NAPKIN). But Buff thinks Striker *shares* too hard, and the captain becomes suspicious.

Buff becomes more suspect when Striker says that he studied fashion at Vassar College. He knows that Vassar doesn't have a fashion program. Buff gets hold of Striker's military records and finds the new star in town isn't from the Village in New York City, much less a buyer for Saks Fifth Ave. Striker is from Freeport in Maine, where he worked for LL Bean!

Buff snoops in Striker's footlocker and discovers what he suspected, a pair of tasteless Bean Boots. He sneers, "He's as drab as fatigues." His words are prophetic, for Buff also finds off-the-rack fatigues, "Not a single pleat!" Digging deeper he finds a stick of Old Spice deodorant and winces. Finally there's an envelope – yes, scented. He slips out the letter and reads the revolting words about how much he is missed, how much he is loved, how sensitive he is... but before he can finish the fluid lines, his eyes catch the flaring signature, *Love, Wanda*.

Buff goes to the CO and declares that Striker is not as precious as he appears: he's a con-artist, a master of deception. Buff hisses, "He's an olive." Colonel Priss is stunned: an olive in his fruit basket? "Striker couldn't be!" Buff nods, then leans forward to whisper, "Green to the pit.":

The CO has a real problem of how to handle this, both for political and morale purposes. Normally he'd let Army protocol take care of it and transfer Striker to another unit. But Colonel Priss needs an accessory specialist for the spring line of tropical wear. And without doubt, Striker is a weapons-grade designer. This is all the CO needs, what with the Pentagon trimming his Afghan budget and the chronic turf-conscious bickering with the other armed forces: the Navy is giving Priss grief about the white berets designed for NAPKIN dinners; the Air Force thinks they've got dibs on anything in gray gabardine; as for the Marines... Colonel Priss just shutters.

Colonel Priss handles the Striker affair with military authority. He doesn't ask, and hopes Striker won't tell. To placate Captain Buff, the CO orders him to give Striker "the thimble" – military jargon for assigning one to a simple repetitive task. Buff relishes the thought. He cocks his head like a spiteful loser at a junior miss pageant: "Sir, may I suggest we stitch the bitch.?" The CO replies, "Go ahead. But remember, we might need him later."

Striker's *thimble* is to stitch parachutes. In particular the new chutes Captain Buff has designed for the 101 Airborne. Striker winces when he sees the chutes: tacky rainbow-motifs more suited for state fair balloon rides than airborne invasions. He fingers the material then bites his lower lip in silence – though his inner voice is screaming, "Polyester!" For the prince of the Paris cat-walks, it's a humbling demotion.

But the worst is the shunning – and the looks. Striker's khaki-clad brethren don't speak to him, but they let him hear their catty talk. And they tease him with feigned expressions of shock or indifference. It's enough to make a Girl Scout cry.

Suddenly the world finds the Middle East flaring up again, and NAPKIN calls the *Iron Busters* into action. Colonel Priss fears the worst, and gets it. The 101st airlifts them to the Iraqi border – a region noted for men with three-day beards and bad taste in clothing. To make matters worse, the *Powder Puffs* (a cosmetic unit) and the *Green Bidets* (a personal hygiene unit) miss the airlift, and Colonel Priss is given full command – to make the brave and bold look beautiful.

As soon as the Hercules land, supply trucks race across the parched ground, spewing rooster-tails of dust everywhere. Colonel Prissy emerges from the tail of the Hercules and brushes the grit off his cashmere battle fatigues: "They should have called us the *Dust Busters*." Suddenly a jeep races up to the CO. Captain Buff hops out and says, "Sir, we've got a situation." Colonel Prissy discovers that war really is hell: there are runs in the parachutes. He barks an order to Buff; "Get me Striker!"

Lt. Striker is given command of a sewing machine company. He shows them how to file down the safety latches to get a seamless double-zig stitch with half the amount of thread. One of the new recruits whispers in amazement, "Striking." Another says, "That's how he got his name." Captain Buff walks by and picks up a length of chute fabric. He examines a sample stitch, cocks his head with jealous disgust and says, "Is that how they stitch catalog tents...in Maine?" and walks away. Striker grits his teeth, then spits out an imaginary the hangnail: "Bitch!"

The *Iron Busters* mount an all-out assault providing valuable supplies to the bored paratroopers. The CO calls a staff meeting and outlines his strategic battle plan:

'We've got to keep those boys looking good at all costs. A lot of 'em are just kids, so make sure the Clearasil gets up there first. I know the 101st is into buzz-cuts, but I want the hair conditioner there just in case. If it's like last time... we might be here for a while.' A sigh of dread fills the room.

'Next I want the hygiene ordnance up there. Fast. Q-tips, dental floss, cuticle remover... Remember, those fellows are putting their butts on the bags for us, the least we can do is keep them supplied.'

(The CO then stands up and gives them a pep-talk.)

'I know a lot of you fellows are scared. You have a right to be. The whole world is watching. And they're not looking at the UN inspectors.

'You're probably wondering whether or not you'll chicken out when the going gets tough. Don't worry. When you look in the mirror and see your hair is a mess, you'll know what to do.'

(He pauses, then pulls a comb from his breast pocket and runs a manicured thumb over the teeth.)

‘You all know what this is, and how to use it.’

(He pauses again)

‘The US Army is the best trained, the best equipped, and best looking Army in the world. And we’re going to keep it that way. ’

(Another dramatic pause)

‘One last thing: I don’t want to get any messages that we’re holding on to our appearances. We – are – advancing – constantly! We’re not just going to look fashionable. We’re going to look fabulous!’

But as the days wear on the stress of looking good wears thin. The CO manages to keep the troops looking smart – but barely. Casualties are high: bad-hair days (one after another), broken nails, and hand lotion is running low.

Then the double-whammy: First, the top brass tell Colonel Prissy that he’s to outfit a group of UN inspectors – and three are Italian. Captain Buff comes in whining: “How does one make a statement with a flack-jacket? And that damn plastic face shield. Colonel, I can’t make a silk purse out of a pig’s prick.”

Second, the best seamstress in the unit succumbed to seam stress. The Velcrow flaps on the flack-jackets were just too much for the guy to handle and he cracked up. He grabbed a bottle of fabric softener and headed for his Quonset hut. They found him on his cot, sicker than a dog: he’d been drinking Woolite.

Prissy is in a pinch. The CO has no other choice: he ends up calling in – yes! – Lt. Striker.

Striker’s battle weary comrades find him, well... somewhat different. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are products of our environment. And war makes people do things they wouldn’t do in normal life. Maybe it was all those days of boredom, maybe it was the tedious din of sewing machines, maybe it was seeing one stain after another. Who knows. What we know for certain is that Striker ends up caring what he looks like – really caring. He’s filing his nails with sincere interest, looking in the mirror with conviction, dressing to kill. Buff is jealous of Striker, but it’s a new jealousy.

Lt. Striker comes to the rescue and saves the UN weapons inspectors from looking like a bunch of re-tread mine detectors. We find him on the battlefield, fitting a powder blue, double-breasted, flack-jacket with pleats. He pulls up the high collar. Then he adjusts the helmet, duck egg blue with a rose-tinted face shield. Finally he pulls out the inspector’s ID tag to expose the blue and white braided lanyard, smugly knowing that’s just the accent the ensemble needed. “There,” and he steps back to take one final look. But as luck would have it, he steps on a pot-mine and gets tossed in the air like a rag-doll.

The *Iron Busters* are at the Arlington Cemetery graveside. Standing in pairs, most of them are ignoring the eulogy and whispering comments on what others are wearing, especially the butch-looking woman clad in bikers’ garb. Captain Buff, alone, indifferent and bored to death, is examining his nails. Colonel Prissy concludes the ceremony by awarding Lt. Striker a Mauve Heart (custom designed by a 5th Avenue jeweler): “May I ask Lt. Striker’s sister to step forward and receive the medal.” Captain Buff looks up and sees the woman in black leather walk forward: *Well, at least she’s wearing black.*

When the ceremony is over she approaches him and asks if he is Captain Buff. He looks surprised, and says yes, how did she guess? She introduces herself as Wanda, and says that her brother often wrote about a Captain Buff – the best looking guy in his unit. “He really admired you,” she says with a sly look, “...in his own special way.” Wanda then says that she has something for him.

She walks him over to her Harley. From one of the saddlebags she pulls out a pair of LL Bean boots and says, “I think Bob would have wanted you to have these.” Buff looks

shocked. The rubber soles are worn and cracked, the leather uppers are dried and needed conditioning. But what really catches his eyes are the laces: they're pink satin.

Buff says, "I didn't know." Wanda says, "You didn't ask."

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