

A DRUM CORPS AND A WEEKEND

An English Composition by

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Slamming the door of our family car shut, I hastily said good-bye to the old man. I was off and on my own for another weekend with the corps. My usual faded jean cutoffs, striped T-shirt, and sandals added to my freedom by exposing me to the late afternoon's cooling breezes.

The buses weren't due for twenty minutes yet, so I piled my pillow, sleeping bag, and suit case on the grass in front of the old dilapidated building that served as the corps' headquarters. A few of my friends had already arrived and were standing in a group on the porch. I headed in their direction, throwing punches at the chests of some of the rookies that stood in my path. Closing my ears to the rookies' obscene words of protest, I clomped up the wooden stairs of the hall and approached my friends.

Noticing my arrival, one of them commented jokingly, "Hey Ben, when ya gonna get that mop of ugly hair cut? Ya know...King is gonna be pissed about that."

"I'll tell him to kiss my ass. And for you...when ya gonna grow some hair on your balls?" was my quick response which set the whole gang laughing.

"Well Ben, are your arms in good shape for tomorrow?" Ted asked as he held his own arms out in front of him to stretch the muscles.

"I don't know," I replied, "All of that practicing can have its bad points."

"They all better be good points tomorrow," Tom said puffing on his cigarette, "If you and that idiot drum section screw it like you did last weekend at U.P. State, we'll put ya all in a line and chop all your damn hands off."

"I'm sure we'll come through," Ted said confidently in defense of the drum section. "Me and Ben worked the section out three hours a day every day this week."

"You'd better believe it," Steve added with a groan, also bending his arms in odd ways to stretch his arm muscles. Out numbered, five drummers to himself, Tom seemed to regain his confidence in the corps' chances of taking first place in the next day's V.F.W. drum corps competition.

Ted and I split from the group and entered the confines of the hall. We were in search of a place to hide from further attacks on our pride. Just inside the main room, 15 drums, 45 bugles, uniforms, and other equipment were neatly lined up and ready to be loaded aboard the equipment truck. We fled from that room in a hurry when we heard the equipment manager command all corps members to help load the equipment truck.

Grabbing two bottles of Coke as we passed the Coke machine, we ran for the seldom used office. Once inside, we bolted the door. We figured that if they wanted us bad enough, they would first have to break in to find us. Feeling quite safe, we picked up some beat-up, old drumsticks and began playing through all the drum ensembles that we could think of. It wasn't much later that we heard voices announcing that the buses were coming.

We were about halfway to Sault Ste. Marie before the corps made its first rest stop. Everybody dropped what they were doing and got off the bus to checkout the small town of Manistique, Michigan. After eighty guys had a quick walk around the town, something to eat, and a name calling contest with some local studs, we all boarded the buses and resumed reading, sleeping, and playing cards. A escort of local studs on motorcycles followed the buses out of town. Everybody on the bus peered out the back window at the pursuers. Then, someone got the

great idea of teasing them. We started to make weird faces at them, gave them the finger, and threw pop cans and other garbage out the window. I could hear Roetzer laughing like hell as he said, "Must be their big Friday night happening."

Looking to the back of the bus as Roetzer and a few others flipped bare asses at the studs, I began thinking about just what I'd be doing on a Friday night if I had to stay home weekends. I couldn't picture myself chasing buses out of town, but I thought further and concluded that there probably would not be much more to do than that.

It wasn't much later that the inside of the bus was darkened by the black night. Cards and reading were no longer possible, so we resorted to story telling. It seemed as though half of the bus was crowded into the back three rows of seats. Bodies were on the floor, three in a seat, and hanging from the luggage rack. We all listened and laughed as Roetzer and a few other older members told stories about corps life when they were rookies.

The three hour ride from Manistique to Sault Ste. Marie passed quickly. I think mostly because I had fallen asleep. When I awoke I found that we were stopped on a deserted main street in front of what seemed to be a V.F.W. club building.

I looked at Ted sitting bent out of shape next to me sleeping. I couldn't see how six feet could be so wound up in such a position so I thought I'd do him a favor and wake him up.

"Ted....What time is it?" I asked waking him with a elbow in the shoulder.

"Hah....Ah..It's quarter after twelve."

"SSShhhiit....I hope we won't have to get up early tomorrow morning. I'm so damn tired," I said yawning.

"My back is killing me," he said as he slowly straightened up in his seat.

"Where the f___ are we?" somebody from the back yelled as he woke up too.

"Dykesville!" someone shouted from the front.

"Shut up ya god damned rookie."

"All of ya shut the f___ up."

"I second it, I need sleep."

Then the whole bus became alive with chatter. The racket came to a halt when the stubby form of Bill King, the corps director, boarded the bus. He turned to the rows of sleepy heads and began to speak. "You will be sleeping in an armory tonight. The buses will take you there shortly. When you get there, bed down as soon as you can. We have prelims tomorrow morning. So, get all the sleep you can. I'll know for sure what time we will be going on in about a half hour....but I think that it will be around 7:00 A.M.." A moaning sound came from the bus as King stepped out the door.

It was a long ride to the armory and when we got there we found that the V.F.W. was holding the final minutes of a dance marathon in the gym where we were supposed to be sleeping. We were kindly informed that it would be over in an hour or so.

Eighty guys just sat around on old crates and benches in the garage of the armory. They had truly the most blank expressions on their faces that you could imagine. I was no exception. The wait seemed unbearable, until someone discovered five cases of quart bottles of pop hiding in the corner. "Hey! does someone have a can opener?" one of the discoverers yelled. "Why, ya got a case of beer for me?" Roetzer replied. "No....just five cases of pop." "What are we waiting for?" And the whole corps was set into action. Guys were grabbing whole bottles for themselves. The younger members were trying their hardest to get a swig or two off of bottles that happened to pass their way. By the time King had arrived back, all five cases had been sucked down. Most of us sat around burping as King began to tell us the latest news.

“We are scheduled to go on first...” he said, looking suspiciously at the empty pop cases that lay about the floor. “That means we all must be up by 5:30 A.M. We are expected to be on the inspection line at 7:30 A.M. We will eat after the prelims. Are there any other questions?”

“Yes, when are those old fogies gonna clear out of the gym?” Steve complained.

“YA....YA....YA....YA, YA, YA,” came the repetition that grew louder and louder.

“SHUT UUPP!” King shouted as his face became deep red with impatience. “They are finished now. So, grab your bags and move in.” I looked at the clock on the wall. It was 2:30 A.M.

In less than ten minutes the corps took over the gym. The old fogies that were still standing around were quite embarrassed when we started to strip down to our underwear and crawl into our sleeping bags. Even though the gym was hot and stuffy, it didn’t take me long to fall asleep. The hardwood floor didn’t feel bad at all.

I awoke after a short three hours of sleep to the voice of King as he walked from bag to bag saying, “Wake up. Rise and shine.”

I was so tired. My sleeping bag felt like a magnet. As I slowly crawled out, it seemed to pull my body back. After five minutes of fighting off my sleeping bag, I finally made it out, grabbed my towel, and stumbled to the shower. Nothing is better than a shower for the purpose of waking me up. The warm spray tingled every cell of my body alive. Pulling myself from the shower was just as hard as pulling myself from my sleeping bag.

I drifted back to my belongings, dragged my drum from its case, and started to clean and polish it for the inspection. I wasn’t too fussy. In a short time I had finished that task and began putting on my uniform. The heavy wool pants and satin blouse for the first time, really felt good. The temperature had fallen to the present 45 degrees during the night. Drumming becomes very difficult when the temperature is anywhere below 60 degrees. To go outside and warm up seemed almost impossible, but we were an impossible snare section. At six in the morning, we ventured outside into the frosty cold. “Let’s go back in,” Mark said pretending to be headed back inside. “Oh no ya don’t,” Ted said, “you’re staying right here with us until you either warm up or die.” I wasn’t saying too much. I was busy watching clouds form as my breath condensed.

“Here we are, three hours of sleep, six o’clock in the morning, and it’s 45 degrees out here. I can’t believe it,” Mark said as his whole body shivered in the cold.

“I believe it,” I replied. “But how about those poor people in those houses? What will they think when they wake up to our drumming? There is no way that they will be able to believe what they see and hear.” We all laughed our loudest for that time in the morning, which wasn’t very loud. Then, we got down to business. We started by playing simple rolls and singles. The sound of drums echoed through the neighborhood. We started to play through our repertoire, but stopped when our hands just quit functioning right. We walked back into the gym. Our hands were numbed by the cold and we were convinced that we didn’t have a chance in the prelims.

“What! Third place....with that dog shit show!” my jaw dropped. “Everyone else must have done just as bad.”

“Yup!” Tom replied, “and we were only three points out from taking first.”

“I made thirty mistakes myself,” I said. “Just think, if King would have let me sleep, we probably would have won.”

“We can do it easy tonight,” Tom said walking towards the bus door. “We only had six ticks on inspection. Wyandotte had a point and a half off. That will give us a little lead for tonight.” Tom then stepped from the bus.

I was much too excited to sleep now. The bus wasn't too comfortable to sleep on any how. The sun was high in the sky and it had warmed up quite a bit since the early morning. My stomach told me it was time to eat lunch, so off I went looking for a restaurant.

I got back from eating just in time to dress for the parade. The parade was a corps member's dream. It was quick and short. The corps played unusually well for once. Things were looking good.

After the parade I showered and reestablished my sleeping bag in the middle of the gym floor. I fell asleep in a snap.

I awoke at about 5:30 to the fuzzy sound of rain on the roof of the gym. "What's going on?" I asked a couple of the fellows that were running around the gym.

"They're talking about canceling the contest due to the bad weather," they replied. I got up and walked over to the door. Sure enough, the rain was coming down hard and it seemed to be as cold out as it was during the early hours of the morning. I shook my head in disgust as I thought to myself, "All this way for nothing."

My spirits changed when I was informed that the contest was rescheduled to be held in a ice hockey building. Only one problem existed. The size of the floor was half the size of a football field. Our marching drill was designed to be performed on the football field.

Punky, our music director, called the whole corps into a group in the center of the gym. He began to explain the situation. "Now," he continued, "to adapt ourselves to this small floor area, we must change our drill. A mini-step must be used instead of your regular foot step."

That explained the problem quite well. Within the next hour we took advantage of a break in the rain and started to work on the new drill outside. The organization was simple and the corps took to the new idea quickly. We practiced the new drill for the next two hours, checking every movement for possible penalties. When the check was complete, Punky ordered everyone to rush in and get ready to go to the contest. It was seven-thirty and we were due to go on at eight. It would be a three point penalty if we came late. That was something we could do without.

The whole corps suddenly turned into a machine whose accelerator was slowly being pressed down. I dressed in a hurry and went outside with the other drummers. Nobody joked. Everyone was dead serious. We played through our warm-ups with remarkable precision. Our spirits were high and we were very confident of ourselves. When we were through warming up we stood in front of the horn section as they warmed up. I could feel a ferocious drive in me to play the show and win as they also played with the same faultless quality.

The machine was warmed up and ready to go. Eighty guys were lined up in front of the armory to accept the handshake of good luck from King and the section instructors. Then, the signal was given and the long line of green and white uniforms began to move. We were moving in the direction of the ice hockey building that was four blocks away. It was two minutes to eight. The line's pace quickened to almost a run. Across the streets it went like a super green caterpillar. All traffic yielded to its presence. Over the boards of an old rusted bridge the thing wound, and up an incline to the entrance of the stadium it marched. The corps should have received an award for that performance alone. We made it with only seconds to spare. The other corps just finished their show when we finally got lined up on the starting side of the floor. Then came the announcement. **THE NEXT CORPS TO PERFORM HERE TONIGHT IN COMPETITION FOR THE V.F.W. STATE CHAMPIONSHIP...IS THE MENOMINEE NORTHERNAIRES FROM MENOMINEE, MICHIGAN.** The crowd wildly applauded. I could feel their warmth within me, but I wanted to win so bad my entire body shook all over.

“Good luck,” I said to Ted just before the drum major called us to attention. Then, I snapped my sticks up and stood at the rigid position.

“MENOMINEE NORTHERNAIRES....ARE YOU READY?” The loud speaker blasted. Every note or mistake I had ever made seemed to flash by when the speaker then announced, “THEN TAKE THE FIELD OF COMPETITION.”

“Mark time....march,” the drum major commanded. I shivered with excitement as Roetzer hit the opening solo of Momentz. Within the next few seconds I had my sticks out and was ready to start playing. The whole corps then voiced itself. The crowd responded with an applause that was unreal. The bugles echoed through my head, a sound that would make ‘Blood, Sweat, and Tears’ sound like trash. My emotions were pushed to a peak. The Corps was turned on totally and played effortlessly, but with great precision. People in the stands were crying and clapping madly, unable to control their overwhelming happiness.

Our fifteen minute performance seemed to flash by due to the high state of concentration that I was in. After the closing fanfare we were greeted with a standing ovation that wouldn’t end. The crowd applauded with great pleasure. I wiped away the beads of perspiration that dripped from my forehead. I was completely dazzled by our performance. Truly the best in the corps entire history.

I stepped outside the building to join the other laughing and happy members of the corps. The coolness of the night was soothing as I drank from a cup of fizzling pop. Now all that was left to do was to wait to hear the final results of the contest. It would be a long wait.

Two hours later, Tom, Ted, and I were sitting in the far corner of the stands listening to the final results of the day’s activity. They were handing out awards for such things as: solos, duets, and trios, drum majors, drummers, rifle teams, baton twirlers, color guards, and so on. The number of different awards seemed endless.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to take this,” Tom said, “I’m getting stomach cramps. But I’ll just have to stay.”

I felt the same way. Every time I thought about wining or losing, a match would light the crinkled piece of paper that seemed to dwell within my stomach. I thought I’d go crazy if they didn’t start to announce the scores of the drum corps contest soon.

But then, my blood ran cold. “NOW LADIES AND GENTLEMEN....WE WILL MOVE TO THE SCORES OF THE COMPETITION THAT YOU HAVE WITNESSED HERE TONIGHT.”

I tried to relax but the more I tried, the more tense I became. I couldn’t sit still as they announced the order of corps from sixteenth to third place. Then came the most terrifying moment of my life. Neither the Wyandotte Royal Lancers nor the Northernaires were mentioned in the previous placings. My mind seemed to float for a moment. Then it came crushing in on itself as the announcement was read, “IN SECOND PLACE, WITH A SCORE OF 65.5.....” a long pause in which I put my hands over my ears, closed my eyes, held my breath, and said a prayer for the best. I remembered hearing the words Menominee Northernaires so many times after that particular phrase that I couldn’t bear listening. Above all, my heart pounded madly.

A gigantic roar filled the air. I opened my eyes and saw Tom jumping up and down. Then my whole body let lose and I screamed with them, “WE WON! WE WON! WE WON!”

That moment was unreal. I truly felt eight miles high. The words telling me that we had won, turned my three years of hard labor into a most unforgettable experience. All the long bus trips, hard gym floors, and hours of frustrating practice were all brushed aside. Winning the contest not only proved that we were the best in the state of Michigan, it was the completion and

proving grounds of one of my most sincere efforts of learning. I admit that it doesn't seem like much of an achievement this very day, but from that day on my life has never been the same.