

# The Cool Cat

THE STUDENT company barracks at Fort Devens were a wild scene of activity on this sunny Saturday morning. Baker Company was due for barracks inspection in just half an hour. Third Platoon, downstairs, seemed to be having a bit of a skirmish brewing. Voices were raising along with tempers which were usually short when a slacker became apparent in the group.

"Birtle, by God, if you don't get those damn windows cleaner than clean, I, personally, am gonna wipe up the barracks with your fuzzy little head!" This was the barracks sergeant, Sinclair, speaking. Birtle had the window cleaning as his reward for not getting out of the sack for reveille the day before. A perpetual goofup if there ever was one.

He took another swipe at the streaked window. "Yeah, man, I hear you tootin'. Don't get it in an uproar. There's plenny of time before the big daddy strolls down here."

Sinclair turned a little bit redder at this. "If the old man ever heard you call him that, I wouldn't have to bother with you, you damn fugitive from a rock and roll nightmare."

"Man, get off that callin' me rock and roll. That's strictly from nowhere. That ain't music."

"I'll music you if you don't get that window clean. You got about ten minutes to get those three windows spotless before inspection starts. And if we miss out on a three-day pass just because you screw up, I ain't gonna be responsible for your worthless life."

Birtle returned to his casual removal of the streaks on the window. His manner was that of a bored, superior per-

son placed in a pig pen with a group of low intelligence reptiles. To say that he was unhappy would not be quite right however. He was apparently quite happy when he could cause enough confusion and dislike to disrupt the normal operations of the company. He had never done any job in the army exactly right. There was always a little bit of incompleteness or a small mistake in everything he did. It seemed, after a while, that it was intentional. He refused to conform. His language was a perfect example of that.

"Hey, man, what's so damn cool about a three day pass anyhow? You guys all flip over the chance but none of you has the jack to go out and really ball it up. Why bust your festeris for a lousy pass, all those other sharperinos will just beat us anyhow. Like man, let's take it easy, huh?"

This got a cool reception from the little private who was working one of the fire extinguishers with Brasso to make it look like minted gold. He never had liked Birtle anyhow. His eyes were too glassy. He always looked like he couldn't quite see what he was looking at. And that kinky hair, what a combination.

Sinclair was back in their area again. The little private polished frantically. He lived in mortal fear of the sergeant's shout. Birtle stepped back from the window and lit a cigarette. He threw the match on the floor.

"Birtle! Pick up that damn match and put it in your pocket. Fer Christ's sake, do you want to get us gigged on our floor as well as your lousy job on windows?" He pointed at a smudge on one of the windows which Birtle had already done.

"Jeeze, Sarge, that won't come off. I worked for an hour on that peeper panel. It just ain't got it, man."

Sinclair took a rag and wiped the window. It was now clean. "So help me Christ, Birtle, I'll put you on restriction for a month if you don't get those windows clean and FAST!" He wasn't kidding and the hotshot from Chicago knew it. He started to move a little faster. The windows were clean when he left them.

Sinclair moved on down the barracks, checking every little item which might cost them a point in the inspection.

"Barracks of the Week" was an honor which he wanted this week. Especially since a three day pass for the whole platoon in barracks number three went with the deal if they won. Six weeks since they had even been in the top two. Almost three months since they got the "Barracks of the Week" award. The old man had been very explicit. "Win this week, Sinclair, and you and your boys get a three-day pass. Lose, and you'll wish you hadn't."

And Captain Billy hadn't been fooling either. The supply room was full of paint that had just come in. Sinclair didn't relish the thought of the third platoon having to paint all the buildings in the company in their spare time. He would have to stay and oversee the job and that would raise hell with his social life in Boston. If only that damn Birtle would quit goofing off. He could be a good soldier if he'd only do a little shaping up. Just a showoff kid with that language of his. By God, he'd better get a haircut before the next inspection or they'd get a gig for that lousy mop that he called a "Piperino of a hairdo." Christ! Piperino. What a word!

"Birtle, are you done with the windows?"

"Yeah, man. You wanna bop over here and take a look at 'em?"

"Hell, no. They just better pass is all. Somebody check those butt cans and make sure there's nothing in 'em. No matches, no butts, no candy wrappers, no nothin! And start picking up all that junk. They're comin' out of the orderly room door. We get inspected in about a minute so every one of you guys get by your bunk."

There was a last minute scurry to get dust off shoes, tuck in blankets so they were tight and straighten little items. The Captain and two of his officers could be seen through the windows as they rounded the corner of the barracks and headed towards the front door.

"Birtle! Put that Goddamn cigarette out. For Christ's sake."

Birtle casually flipped his cigarette into one of the shiny cans set in the center of the floor. It made a tiny hiss when it hit the water and then bobbed gently, as out of place as

a manure pile in Utopia. Sinclair started to run towards Birtle just as the officers walked up to the barracks door.

"Birtle, you stupid son of a . . . . .

"HUT-TENSHUN!!!" The man at the door had dissipated all his lung power in that one magnificent yell. All the men froze at rigid attention, Birtle not quite so rigid as the rest, but still rigid. The inspection of the barracks had started and nobody would move until it was over.

Sinclair saluted Captain Billy, "Third Platoon ready for inspection, Sir." He was trembling with rage.

— *Nick Saum, Sc. Jr.*

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## *A Poet*

A poet is a man lost.

Ragged, torn by that within him,  
 Haunted by those around him,  
 He stumbles endlessly in circles.

With his dry throat and cracked tongue  
 He mumbles incoherent prayers  
 Of hope and bitterness  
 As the mirage appears and fades.  
 Sometimes he rouses and screams in desperation at the  
     buzzards,  
 But mostly he croaks quietly to his ever-leading shadow.

Those who search the erratic trail  
 May find him  
 In time to lead him back,  
 Though often only a few scattered bones  
 Mark his reabsorption into the wild.

— *James Wickliff, Sc. Grad.*