

New Nonfiction: Soft Target

When I was nineteen years old, in 2016, I joined the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). I sat at my family's kitchen table, holding in my hands a contract for 13 years (standard length for a 00178 Armour Officer), over the moon with happiness and excitement. My family stood around me, confused and apprehensive but trying hard to be supportive. I could feel their unsaid thoughts: *you are making a mistake.*

I signed the papers.

I felt logic leave the building, felt a scorpion made of bullet casings climbing up my back.

*

At twenty, I went to basic training. In the CAF, it's called Basic Military Officer Qualification (BMOQ, say "bee mock") and it takes place in a giant, 14-story grey zigzag a full kilometre long. The building is officially known as the Batiment General Jean-Victor Allard Building, but its nickname is the Megaplex, or simply the Mega. "Megaplex" is also the name of a Furry convention that has taken place annually since 2002, in Florida. Perhaps I should have gone there.

My BMOQ course was taught by a rotating stable of instructors, all colourful characters in their own rights. One went by "Bear" and had had his nipple piercing torn out during a parachute jump, one was a cheerful master seaman who was into RuPaul's drag race in the creepy way straight men sometimes are; another couldn't stop talking about killing children. He wasn't the only admitted war criminal who taught us, but he was the one who made the biggest impression.

He was a big guy, exuberant, dramatic, profane, broken. He had gone to Afghanistan twice, and he had killed Taliban child soldiers there, and now that he was back in Canada teaching

recruits, he just could not shut up about it. Killing children, he told us, was easier than killing dogs. He had done it and he would not hesitate to do it again. When everything else from that course fades into an age-hazed blur, I will still see him standing by our sixth-floor window, talking about how easy it is to kill a child.



Banksy, Bethlehem street art.

Other candidates could laugh it off, ignore it, giggle at it, whatever, but I was the one whose brain it stuck in. After

basic, no one mentioned it at all. Sometimes want to ask my former classmates, "Did he really say those things? Did he kill those children? Did you forget? Did I hallucinate?" The instructor will probably die before me, and when he does, I may be the only one on the planet, aside from the parents, who remembers that those children ever even existed.

Things vanish like that, in the army. Uncomfortable moments, questionable incidents, they all disappear. The moment passes, the words fade, and then it's back to business, back to the military's hollow approximation of normalcy. Things vanish because they need to vanish, because if they didn't vanish, every soldier would end up like me, overburdened by memories, struggling to parse or even comprehend what they experienced. Under heavy physical weight, limbs fracture (mine did); under heavy mental weight, minds will do the same (mine did).

*

Before I joined, I interviewed a family friend for a school project. He had been one of several "mission monitors" authorizing NATO airstrikes in the former Yugoslavia during that nation's protracted collapse. This is how it worked: pilots enforcing the no-fly zone would see something suspicious— the four barrels of a ZPU anti-aircraft gun, or a Serbian attack helicopter spinning up its rotors— and radio the NATO control centre in Verona, Italy, asking for permission to destroy whatever they had spotted. Based on their information, he would say "yes" or "no".

From 35,000 feet, it's hard to get a full picture. Bombs sometimes don't fall where they're aimed. The ZPU turns out to be a playground, the helicopter is taking off near a mosque. You know how it goes. "I estimate I killed about 200 kids over there," he told me "but you can't let that catch up with you, or it'll kill you." Everyone knows someone whose deeds have caught up with them. Things vanish because they need to vanish. You forget, or you die.

There's a famous Mitchell and Webb sketch where two SS officers are nervously chatting during a firefight. "Are we the baddies?" one asks, in his charming British accent. "Our hats have got little skulls on them!" We laugh, but it's really not that funny. The British Royal Lancers wear skulls on their hats, skulls and two crossed lances and their motto *Or Glory*. American soldiers graffiti Punisher skulls on their helmets. Canadian soldiers wear them on their t-shirts.

"Are we the baddies?"

Yes. Of course we are. We've always been that way.

In the army, beneath every normal-seeming moment lurks the possibility of unimaginable violence, of cruelty beyond measure. Robert Semrau is a former Canadian army captain convicted of "mercy-killing" a wounded Taliban fighter, of shooting a dying man in the head with his pistol. I bought his book before my second army course, Basic Military Officer Qualification-Army (BMOQ-A, say "bee mock ah"). If you read the book, it's very clear that Robert Semrau had a pretty good time in Afghanistan, except for the whole murder trial thing. What's subtle, what whispers to you underneath each page, is that Robert Semrau cannot understand why he was arrested at all. What did he do that was so wrong? Only shot a wounded man to death.

Violence without thinking, cruelty as a reflex. The army puts enormous effort into making sure its soldiers are capable of these. Military training is a process not of breaking down and building up but of warping under pressure, the way plastic does when it's bent. Like plastic, the warping process leaves its stress marks on the brain. Like plastic, if you try and bend the soldier back into the position he was before he got warped, sometimes he will break.

*

BMOQ-A is what's known in the CAF as a "cock course". "Cock"

is an acronym; it stands for “confirmation of combat knowledge”. A cock course is a military training course that is designed to suck as much as humanly possible. It’s meant to harden the soldier against all physical and mental torment, designed to produce in him, her, or them the ability to be instantly and reflexively violent.

At the beginning of BMOQ-A, a friend asked me something about the army. I don’t remember what he asked, but I remember what I told him: that for me each day in the army required constant buy-in, that as soon as I woke up each morning I had to convince myself that everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to me. “Are we the baddies?” I asked myself every single day, and I didn’t have the spine to answer “yes.”

It is the narrowest of all possible lenses. If I had asked myself whether everything I was going to do that day would be morally acceptable to the families of the civilians killed by NATO, by ISAF, by the IDF, maybe I would have had my realizations sooner.

*

In the middle of BMOQ-A, my platoon was getting inspected by the commandant of the Infantry School and his regimental sergeant major (RSM). The RSM was a sturdy French-Canadian, and he walked from soldier to soldier, tapping us each on the chest and asking us why we joined. When he got to me, I babbled something about how interesting tank combat was to me (I’m an armour officer, remember) and my desire to lead men.

“You do not have *it*,” he told me simply, and moved on to the next man, asking him the same question.

“RSM,” bellowed the young officer. “For queen, god and country, RSM!”

“You have *it*,” the RSM said.

It: that precious ability to be cruel without thinking, to commit violence in the name of ideals that were never worth anything in the first place. To absorb and replicate the violence around you, to live in it, marinate, become it, and never ever even think of being anything else. *It*, the desire never to question but only to serve. I don't have *it*. I never had *it*. I'm too soft, and I couldn't harden myself, not the way they could. Some people have tried to reframe softness as strength, as necessary and worthwhile, but to me it never felt like anything but failure.

"I'm showing you my 'girl side,'" said the strikingly handsome young infantry officer, tall, with honey-tan skin and warm blue eyes. His "girl side" was the side of himself that he showed to girls he was hitting on. "Maybe I'll start hitting on you next." Was he joking? Wasn't he? I fell regardless. I fell despite myself. For the rest of the summer, he told me how much he loved spending time around me, how highly he thought of me. He ruffled my hair and flashed me tender smiles and for just a moment I forgot we were learning how to kill people.

We were in the woods on a five-day navigation exercise, and the sergeant was showing us how to put a grenade under a water jerry can so that if someone goes to get water, the grenade explodes. If a civilian is going to use that water, we have all just committed war crimes.

On the last live-fire range of the course, I mistook the realistic human targets for real people. I turned to the man next to me and was about to tell him to stop firing, that there were people on the range, but then I realized I was already shooting.

*

Sometimes I wake up panicked and sweating, thinking I'm back on BMOQ-A and late for formation.

Sometimes I think about the senior captain who paused a Russian propaganda video right as it was talking about “sexual degeneracy” and said *doesn't this make you wish you were Russian?*

Other times I remember the corporal who said *I'd rather fuck a five-year-old than a tranny, because at least the five-year-old is a real girl*, to a quiet smattering of laughter that accepted the joke.

It's really enough to make you want to scream. I want to go up to every CAF member I see in the hallways of my workplace and tell them *Listen buddy, I feel it too. I feel that growing gnawing sense of wrong. I hear your doubts in my own head! Give in, man, give in, let's leave this place together, let's those quiet doubts dominate our brains until it forces us to be the opposite of what the army wants. Please, just take my hand and let's get out of here! Let's build something outside this, something real and not based on the logic of cruelty. Let's do it! We can do it, if we really want to.*

If you say that to a soldier, of course, they'd think you're crazy. So I want to say it to you.

This essay is for you. It's for you to read and feel each wrong, for you to get to know the absurdity of this system the same way I have, for you to realize there is nothing, not one scrap, not one shred of it worth saving. It simply shouldn't exist.

I hope that if you take nothing else from this, you take that. I hope it stays with you. I hope you do something with it.

I hope I do too.