

New Essay by Patrick Mondaca: The Hideous Hypocrisy of Himmelstoss

“At the head of the column trots the fat sergeant-major. It is queer that almost all of the regular sergeant-majors are fat. Himmelstoss follows him, thirsting for vengeance. His boots gleam in the sun...Then he steams off with Himmelstoss in his wake.”

Himmelstoss, as anyone who is familiar with *All Quiet on the Western Front* knows, is the sadistic corporal who bullies with less power. The fat sergeant major, whose girth underscores his lavish and immoderate lust for comfort while the rank-and-file tighten their belts in the trenches, is happy to be the weight behind Himmelstoss's threats. As the protagonist (Paul Bäumer) recounts, he and the other soldiers immediately disregard both Himmelstoss and the fat sergeant-major, continuing on no worse for the wear.



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Not every human is a Himmelstoss, and this photo almost certainly does not represent one. But those that are make life miserable for everyone else.

We've all had a Himmelstoss in our lives at least once. They're school principals and executive vice presidents and postal deliverymen and yes, sergeants-major. Some are fat. One should not dwell on men like these for any more time than is necessary.

I encountered one during my time at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, coming home from Iraq.

"Where is your beret, Sergeant?" the Medical Corps sergeant major, who had halted me on my way to an appointment, said. "And why are you wearing a desert patrol cap with a woodland uniform?" Thinking it obvious, I respectfully informed the sergeant major that my beret was still in a metal box somewhere in the desert. "Put that cigarette out, sergeant, and stand at parade rest when you speak to me. And don't you dare throw that cigarette butt in my grass," the sergeant major said. His posture was threatening, though I sensed behind it the existential terror of a man without serious occupation.

What else is one to do in such a situation but put one's cigarette out on the pavement, then collect and squeeze it carefully in one's clenched fist? His wet eyes pleaded with me for a minor transgression. He ached to thrust himself upon me further, so that we might enter the kind of seedy relationships this type of flaccid fleshbag seems to require for satisfaction. At that moment, I was tempted to give in, but thought better of it.

"Roger, sergeant," I said instead.

But that wasn't the end of it.

“What’s your name? What unit are you with? Who’s your C-0? Take that flag off your right shoulder, you’re not in theater anymore,” he said, his voice picking up speed and certainty as he warmed to the subject. “Desert boots, that’s a no-go. Are you wearing a *field jacket liner*? Ohhhhh heeeeeaaaayl naw,” he said, his voice rising almost to a full-throated shout.

It was true, I was wearing an old M-65 field jacket liner under my uniform top instead of the newer issued winter polypropylene. “Yes, Sergeant Major, I will remove it, Sergeant Major,” I said, standing corrected, quite literally, in the brisk winter air. I had no intention of removing it, and I didn’t. I wore the motherfucker to bed that night. Hell, I’m still wearing that thing, deep in the recesses of the old foot locker that keeps my mementos of such places, stinking of smoke and dust and sweat and bullshit.

Whether you’re still in the military or you’ve transitioned to the corporate world, or are a civilian and have never served, it’s always the same. An FSM lurks, waiting to gig you on some stupid, asinine shit. It’s a threat we all must face, and disregard, with a smile and a nod and a “Yes, Sergeant Major” or “Vice President” or “Foreman”. Because that is all they will ever be—the barking, savage whiff of authority barely missed, one step below or behind the real boss. Forever the bridesmaid, never the bride. And after you realize the measure of their soul, what else do they have left to them but the illusion of power, usually shouted? They’re stuck within this sad, diminished aura, a victim of their penultimate rank. Give them “their grass” for the moment, or “their metrics” at close of business, or “their tie rods” in even rows in the next hour, and then go home. Or travel. Or go to school. Or anything. I have a photo of an Army cargo truck in Baghdad with “Stop the Insanity” scrawled across its passenger door. Sometimes that’s all we can do to remind ourselves who is really in charge and continue our idiosyncratic lives, one graffiti’d door at a time.

I never saw that particular sergeant major again, thankfully. I supposed he moved on to harass other troops about their shoulder patches until the regulation was changed a month later. I would have loved to see his face the morning after the paper came down, applying the patch he'd fought so hard against with resignation, then instructing the soldiers he'd yelled at the day before to get within regs... admitting his own impotence one betrayal at a time. Since then, there have been other FSMs who have thrown their "stripes" around in the various settings in which I have worked. Though, now that I think about it, when has it ever really mattered to anyone but them? We the people remain unimpressed.

In the Vietnam War film *Hamburger Hill*, a couple of troops try and buck up their platoon "Doc" after a casualty chanting, "It don't mean nothing, man, not a thing." And the medic, thus consoled and encouraged, goes on to fight another day. We all have bad days like Doc in the film. That sergeant major I met long ago now might have been having a bad day too. Doc doesn't survive the battle. He succumbs to his wounds after imploring his fellow soldiers to finish taking the hill, so they can have something to be proud of. And they do. They do it for Doc and for each other. Those are the things that matter.



While violence is likely not the answer to fix people who abuse authority, it's unclear what is.

We can choose to fall prey to the insanity of Himmelstoss and the FSM and others like them, or we can take their fear and insecurity in stride, their insistence that only by obeying the rules can one hope to elude destiny. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Bäumer and his mates lay a good old-fashioned beat-down on old Himmelstoss, and it's hard to feel sympathy for him. Like the bloviating sergeant major I encountered, Himmelstoss is a nonfactor. His existence to Bäumer and the men is of no great importance, like whether they live or die. It should be noted that Himmelstoss, when he's himself sent to the front, does eventually perform bravely following a motivational beating by Bäumer in a trench. Yet it remains to be decided whether Himmelstoss was merely a desperate ass-kisser seeking the favor of his lieutenant or acting out of a moral obligation to his fellow soldiers. The men aren't in it for Himmelstoss and the FSM though. They're in it for each other as were the men in *Hamburger Hill*. The regulations may not get changed every time so you can smile at the thought of the senior enlisted man or supervisor or other inflated authority wiping egg off their face. Nor will every Himmelstoss you come across fetch the beating of a lifetime every time they push the wrong troop too far. But don't you sweat it. In the end, they don't mean nothing, man, not a thing. Finish taking the hill, and be proud of it.