

SURVIVING AN AMERICAN GULAG



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Sample Chapter

Surviving an American Gulag

Including the short piece
A Dime a Dip

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A Dime a Dip

Chapter One

The Standards of War

1

Private Winslow Gibbs rested on his bottom bunk feeling the first instance of safety after months of torment. He was hot and tired and fat and more than a little confused about his feelings toward army life and soldiers in general. Still, he had broken the cycle and had been relieved. Had he known that the orders were coming his way, he might have been far less content in this safe harbor. He might have considered the window an escape, although his girth might have stuck him there, leaving him no course but to be a bung to keep out the flies. However, ignorance is a fine buffer between security and pure terror. Knowledge withheld gives precious souls fantasies on which to cling, and like all fantasies, truth is evident only in its revelation. Therefore, Private Winslow Gibbs, feeling that his tribulation was at an end, actually was poised at a new road's beginning; all things prior being no more than a prelude; and an easy prelude at that, in hindsight.

2

East of the City of Augusta, Georgia, on the banks of the willowed Savannah River, Fort Gordon baked, even under the weak February sun. It was a war year — 1967, and the military installation churned out in its flywheel America's young men to fight the foes of democracy. From city and country, from swamp and high-rise, from volunteer to draftee, they came, or were brought to learn the art of surviving the enemy, so that they could destroy the enemy. Lessons old in the craft, Spartan in the womb and centurion in the stance, spun from the mouths of automaton trainers, who had lived to teach these men how to outstrip death's ultimatum . . . or not. A fruitful task that promised the fatherland ample scope to keep the war fires ablaze.

Fort Gordon, sparse and nearly treeless, except for the occasional copse left to piss on when the authorities were back-turned, was divided into three parts. The permanent corps lived in neatly trimmed greenery, as posh as the Augustan golf courses that flanked the river. Here the officers and their families, and anyone tarred and feathered to be here, made the best of the apparent sameness of a military post and its redundant accommodations.

The training grounds, however, were regimental barracks, two stories high each — wooden, cookie cutter, and coal furnace stoked, and grouped by fours — Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta companies. Each group stood adjacent to three, rubber-stamped, squat shanties — a mess hall, a quartermaster's hut and a commander's post (the Top's shack). A Physical Training course (PT, for short) and drill field flanked each training unit, completing the suite. That and a flagpole. Twenty-four training units were arrayed about a vast parade ground that was also cuffed by a Post Exchange, a stockade, a motor pool, a chapel and a utility building. A troop churner, indeed.

Finally, there was the *wilderness* — a camp run-a-muck spreading for acres over hill and dale, hard baked in the red Georgia clay beneath the tyrant southern sun. Here the trails were cruel and steeply designed for torment. Here stood the rifle ranges, the confidence courses, the gas warfare shack, the grenade toss pits, and that terror called the Infiltration course. No matter how much stamina a man stored in his gut, the *wilderness* could pummel it to dust. Those that survived were dubbed *real men*, shaped from longhaired hippies and poor gas pumpers and scrappy street punks and marginal college students, into specimens groomed to the standards of war.

Fortune always touted such brigades, but fortune never countenanced failure. *That* wasn't in the directives, those official brassy memoranda that shaped all recruits uniformly. What about *short falls* from the standard? What about those who yearned for home — to be away from the sterile

dust bowl of the twenty-four training units? What about the disobedient, the malingerers and the fags? Not covered by instruction until . . . until the focus falls to a hidden flank, to an isolated zone — a twenty-fifth unit, whispered about during smoke breaks and in mess hall gossip and other such prating. A place as mythic as purgatory and conjured to make soldiers toe the line. Yet every now and then, a soldier could look down the road toward that isolation zone and see it . . . yet not see it, because it was hidden in plain sight. Still, occasionally at roll call or at evening muster, a fellow troop would be missing, and yet no drill sergeant hysterics heralded the disappearance. Just a dash in the line, one closed up by a *dress-right* and an *at-ease*. Brief puzzlement. A shrug, and then on to the tortures of the day until, within a few hours, perhaps less, that soldier's name was forgotten — red Georgia dust in the wind, hidden in plain sight.

3

Exactly when Private Winslow Gibbs decided he could no longer suffer the daily slings of military training only can be conjectured, but as he sprawled on the bottom bunk in the empty barracks, he had been delivered from those slings for the last two weeks. His whale belly arose above the mattress while he rested from lunch. It wasn't a bad lunch for the army — beans and franks with spud salad and sweet rolls. He wished that the salad had been tart, like the Brooklyn variety he was born to relish, but Cookie was from Alabama, so the stuff was smothered in some sour shit. Despite that, the grub wasn't bad, especially now that Winslow didn't need to trot from the table into formation, and then march ten miles until he puked. In fact, he couldn't march more than two miles before he puked, his breath hitching so fast he'd lose his keel and kneel in the bastard red clay. He had done that only once. Sergeant Eckles screamed at him, and then kicked his butt until a jeep picked him up. Not a pretty sight, but it took Private Gibbs out of the training cycle and just two weeks ago.

Gibbs sighed, and then righted himself on the bunk's edge. No one else was in the barracks now, but it didn't make a difference. Even bustling, as it had been just before lunch, he was scarcely noticed; except by the skinny prick that slept in the top bunk over his — Private Farley. Farley always cracked jokes on the *blubber bones* that anchored his bunk.

Don't roll over too hard, Gibbs. You'll make me seasick.

Gibbs ignored him, or attempted to ignore him. The other faceless clowns that laughed and jeered when Farley was on a roll were just that — faceless. Gibbs didn't care, now that he no longer trained — no longer lined-up like a lemming and shouted *Here sergeant*, when his name was called. No longer swung like a monkey through the overhead bars to earn a meal in the mess hall. He hadn't been able to do more than one rung anyway. He just hung there while Sgt. Eckles shouted *Fat boy*, or worse. Moreover, he no longer floundered through the daily dozen. No more mile run, which in his case was a twenty-minute walk. That was behind him now. Now he ran errands for Sergeant Fitz in the quartermaster shack.

Sergeant Fitzgerald, *Fitz* for short, didn't work the drill, which meant he was a regular guy — almost human. He didn't even fit the training bill being a bit smaller than Gibbs, flab overgrowing his musculature, and smoking an incessant cigar, when he wasn't *chawin'* and *spittin'*. In short, Fitz was a *lifer*, and easy in his domain. He didn't care who squatted behind his counter as long as it was manned. Gibbs was perfect, maybe because he was a good conversationalist and spoke circles around Fitz. However, the flabby supply sergeant liked to listen, even stoking the gab.

You're a college boy. Can you quote Shakespeare and those other flower people?

Gibbs could, and did. Fitz would settle back and listen as if the babble were hummingbirds come to feed. He enjoyed the rhythm more than the meaning. Who's to say that empty prattle doesn't hold more meaning than a dull, non-lyrical drone?

If Gibbs wasn't so relieved to be free of busting his ass with the other grunts, he could have read the signs of his coming fate. Two days ago, Fitz was in a surly mood. He paced the wooden floor of the shack waiting for Gibbs to run the inventory lists and sweep the floor.

"It's about time."

Gibbs darted for the broom, the big brushy one, and then attacked the rough pine floor.

"Sorry."

"Beauty sleep, troop?"

There was an unaccustomed bite in Fitz's voice — odd, considering that these two men were only acquainted for a fortnight. Gibbs pressed his shoulder into the broom, ignoring the comment, while Fitz muttered, his cigar smoke billowing. Suddenly, the sergeant's hand stopped the broom. He gazed into Gibbs' eyes.

"College boy," he snapped. "I like you just the same, but . . ."

"Am I doing something wrong?"

Fitz laughed.

"Wrong? You've done every fuckin' thing fuckin' wrong, troop. But you're not the first to sweep my floors, and . . . not the last."

"What do you mean?"

Fitz smiled, the cigar juices dripping over his stubbly chin. Then he frowned as if he saw another person there, perhaps a regiment of nobodies — faces without faces. Then he placed his hand over Gibbs' nametag.

"I might remember you," he said.

"What do you mean?"

Fitz chuckled.

"Nothing, college boy. Finish up and we'll play some checkers."

4

The beans and franks were active, Gibbs riding hard on gas. It was a good thing Farley wasn't there or there would have been a round of jokes. Suddenly, glancing at his watch, Gibbs had a real concern.

"Shit."

He was late. Very late. Sergeant Fitz was lenient, almost lax, but Gibbs was milking the golden calf now. He jumped off the bunk, grabbed his cap and field jacket, and double-timed it out the barrack's door.

It was a Georgian February, where the nights were cold, but the days sticky. With the ever-present dust and the choking aroma of the coal furnaces, Gibbs slung the army-issue jacket over his shoulder and hopped down the easy flight to the formation ground. The quartermaster shack stood across from the mess hall and the Top's shack. As he scurried toward Fitz's domain, he noticed the Company Commander hopping into his jeep. The First Sergeant stood at the door of the Top's shack. Gibbs slowed his pace. He didn't want to attract the Top's attention, and could have succeeded, because both were temporarily lost in the jeep's dust. Gibbs came to attention and saluted the C.O. as he passed, but when the dust settled, Gibbs faced the First Sergeant across the road.

"Gibbs," the First Sergeant called.

Gibbs froze. He wasn't sure whether the Top, a gray haired old fustian called Billingsly, was merely being friendly, or whether he needed something from the supply shack.

"Yes, sir," Gibbs barked.

"Don't call me *sir*," Billingsly snapped. "I want a word with you."

"Yes, s . . . Yes."

Gibbs crossed the road.

"Move your ass. We don't stroll around here. Move it."

Gibbs did his best impression of a run, following the Top into the shack. The place was a replica of the quartermaster's shack only narrower in gauge. In place of the storeroom were two offices — one for the Top and one for the C.O. The company clerk clicked away on his manual upright. He was a spectacled string bean named Heinz.

"Heinz," Billingsly snapped. "Smoke break."

Heinz dropped his hands to his side, stood like an automaton, lifted the counter divider, and then shuffled through the door.

"He'll make sure we're not disturbed."

The Top wore a fatherly grin, which unsettled Gibbs. This wasn't going to be a supply request, and since Billingsly held the counter up for Gibbs to enter the inner sanctum of desks and cabinets, there seemed to be an agenda to this moment and for this troop.

"Have a seat. This won't take long."

Gibbs took Heinz's post, while the Top stood with his hands behind his back, rocking on his spit-shined ranger boots.

"What can we do here?" he commenced. "You haven't made much progress, have you?"

"It's hard."

Suddenly, Billingsly trembled. His face turned granite, his ashen frown readied to a snap.

"Don't give me that horseshit. I've seen crap come through these doors twice as big as and far less strong than you, and leave us proud. Fit and blustering soldiers. Are you trying to get out of the army, Gibbs?"

"No, sir."

"Don't . . . call . . . me . . . *sir*."

"Sorry."

"Sorry for what? Sorry that you don't give a shit about your country. Just what do you think you're about? You can't even lift your own body weight, so how are you going to go on from here? How? You can't stay in boot camp forever, you know. You have to move on, one way or t'other. This ain't Boy Scout Camp."

Gibbs trembled. He wasn't sure what Billingsly meant. Would beatings commence? Would he put him in the stockade? Gibbs eyed the door. He had thoughts to bolt over the counter and flee to the quartermaster shack and seek Fitz's shelter, but he couldn't even lift his own body weight. What were the odds of him vaulting over the counter top?

Billingsly brought his face squarely to Gibbs', all sense of the fatherly gone now.

"Here's the deal, Gibbs. I want you to see Sergeant Fitz, but not to fold the God damned linen or sort the fucking boots. I want you to draw your weapon, son. I want you to proceed to your quarters and get your gear. Report back here at fourteen hundred hours. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," Gibbs stammered.

"I didn't hear you."

"Yes."

"Now, hear me. You're getting off light. You're going out with Charlie platoon. You've heard of them, haven't you? You *do* remember them. They're at the Infiltration Course as we speak. You're lucky. I'll give you a round trip transportation to the garden party, but you're back in training troop, as of now."

Gibbs rattled so much, his flesh reverberated, his shock complete.

"On your feet."

Gibbs shot up.

“Now get the fuck out of here. Fourteen-hundred hours. Fully loaded and ready to go. And send Heinz back in. Move it.”

Gibbs scurried to the counter. He lifted it, nearly snapping it off its hinges. It slammed after he passed through. His breath hitched. He marched through the door, his eyes meeting Heinz’s, who sucked on the smoke. No words were exchanged. Heinz knew, and pushed back into the shack, leaving Gibbs in his wake.

What had happened? He heard Fitz’s words tramping through his mind.

You’ve done every fuckin’ thing fuckin’ wrong, troop.

He stared across to the quartermaster’s shack and was suddenly afraid. It was no longer his safe haven. It was a place to *draw his weapon*. With much effort, Private Winslow Gibbs shambled toward the shack, tears standing in his eyes. He wanted to go home. He wanted his mother. The harsh Georgia sun gave no solace, no respite from fear. All he heard running through his head as he crossed the road was *I might remember you and fourteen-hundred hours, troop*.

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Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

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