The Big Itch

Jack Gill*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1959 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The Big Itch

Jack Gill

Abstract

Master Sergeant Albert Wiber Valerius was a battery commander’s dream. Nowhere in the Army could a unit boast of a better First Sergeant...
MASTER Sergeant Albert Wiber Valerius was a battery commander's dream. Nowhere in the Army could a unit boast of a better First Sergeant. He was efficient. Carried the whole filing system around in his head and could recite section by section the Uniform Code of Military Justice. He was a man of his word. When Sergeant Valerius spoke, it was with the authority and power of a General Command.

The Sergeant was a thirty-year man, as all true soldiers are, with twenty-eight full rich years of it behind him. His experience had taught him never to utter a hasty word, or something that might have a shade of untruth in it. Truly, the Sergeant was a jewel among his men. He knew that to command respect one must present his ideas in a manner that would leave no doubt in any mind as to the sincerity and desire of these. So, like all good, really good sergeants, he had acquired what I should like to describe as one of the most colorful vocabularies I have ever had the pleasure to be addressed by. His choice of words certainly never left any doubt in my mind as to what he wanted. I became truly amazed at the power of well-selected four-letter words.

Battery "B" went along fine with cool efficient Master Sergeant Valerius at the controls.

That is, until that damn inspection. Ordinarily, an inspection was of little concern, for Battery "B" was always in tip-top shape. The Sergeant wouldn't have it any other way. But now it was different. Eighty-five per cent of the unit had been replaced. After the new men had been in the outfit for a week Valerius confided to the Captain that the brass were out to get them. By no set of odds could they have drawn one hundred and two men, all with ten thumbs and two left feet. There must be a plot. The Captain sympathized with him, but said they should plan to do the best they could.
It was Valerius' problem to shape them up. And the Good Lord knows he tried. Certainly, never before had his vocabulary been put to such a trial those last few weeks before the inspection. If the Battery failed, they would face re-inspections until they finally passed, with all leaves and passes cancelled. Therefore, the good Sergeant thought it to the best interests of all to apply himself to this problem with gusto.

After an especially trying day, Valerius released the troops and retired to his room. He didn't even bother washing before turning in. It was a bad night. He had a horrible dream that thousands of little red ants with general's stars were crawling over him, biting him to pieces.

In the morning he rolled wearily out of his bunk, picked up his towel and ditty bag, and headed for the wash room. He wondered at the seemingly real reactions to his dream as he dug with his fingers at an itch. In fact, he seemed to be itching all over. He entered the wash room, stepped up to a sink and turned the water on. Then he looked into the mirror.

Now, the Sergeant had seen many strange things in his twenty-eight Army years, but all he could do was stand and look at himself. All over his face and neck were bright red welts about the size of a quarter. He backed away slowly from the glass. As more of his body came into view, the red spots were right there, inch upon inch of them, and every one of them was beginning to itch.

With a whoop, Valerius whirled, bowled one man over at the wash room door, and thundered back down the hall to his room. He tore his bunk apart, looked under it, checked in his clothes locker. No red ants, with or without stars. He stood in the middle of the room scratching his head. Also, several other spots as fast as he could cover them. The itching was becoming more intense.

About an hour later the Captain walked into his office. It would be a busy day; just three more before inspection. He wasn't quite prepared for the sight that greeted him when he opened the door. There was 230-pound First Sergeant Valerius, the epitome of the classic soldier, the backbone
and pride of Battery "B", with his back against the edge of the closet door, sliding up and down on it like a horse on a merry-go-round, both hands clawing at himself, tears streaming down both cheeks, and soft whimpering sobs coming from deep inside him.

"What in Hell's name is the matter with you?" the Captain whispered.

Sergeant Valerius stood at attention as best he could, gently rubbing against the door. "Captain, I itch."

"You what?"

"I itch. I've been eaten alive by red ants with stars on their shoulders."

The Captain crossed the room slowly and sat down behind his desk, never taking his eyes off the gyrating N.C.O. "Damn it, Valerius, stand still so I can talk to you. What are all those red marks?"

"That's where the little s.o.b.'s bit me."

"Valerius, you been drinking this morning?" The Captain knew the answer to this before he asked it, because the Sergeant did have one small failing as a soldier. He couldn't hold his liquor. So, the Sergeant simply didn't drink.

"No, sir. I haven't had one since the last time you and I..."

"Yes, yes, that's right. I remember. But what is the matter with you?"

"It's a plot, sir. There were these little red ants with stars..."

The Captain cut him off. "Let me smell your breath." After a quick check he ordered Valerius to the infirmary. The Captain was worried. If Valerius wasn't tip-top for the inspection, they would never make it. The Battery was at the critical point now. Only Valerius could hold it together.

The Sergeant shuffled into the infirmary. He had discovered that by walking with his legs together they would scratch each other. He could do the same thing with his arms against his body. An occasional quick scratch at an extra bad spot every few steps made it almost bearable. Almost. The medic on duty watched him come up the hall with his rather strange gait, and then went into the doctor's office.
"There's a master sergeant here to see you, Sir. Piles, I think."

The Sergeant shuffled into the office. The doctor was reading some notice and didn't look up. "Take your clothes off and bend over."

"Sir, that isn't the trouble. I itch. Look." The Sergeant opened his shirt. The doctor looked at the red welts covering him. They were bigger than a quarter now.

The doctor smiled and got up. "By George, that's the finest case of Urticara I've seen for years."

"Sir?"

"Hives, Sergeant, hives. How'd you do it?"

"Oh, no Sir. I was bit by a lot of red ants with . . . Well, they were ants."

"Nonsense. Those are hives. Are you allergic to anything?"

"Well, sometimes when I eat onions I have a little trouble."

"That isn't what I mean. Did you eat anything unusual yesterday?"

"No, Sir."

"You've got a big inspection coming up in a couple of days, haven't you, Sergeant?"

"Yessir, the Commanding General himself."

The doctor put one eye up close to one of the finer specimens on the Sergeant's chest. "Pretty worried about this inspection, are you?"

"Well, yes Sir. I've had a hard time of it."

"Aha. Very simple. Sergeant, you're nervous, that's all."

Valerius scratched again. "I beg your pardon, Sir?"

"You're nervous. Very common occurrence. You get nervous, so you get hives. Some people get headaches, some faint, some have crack-ups. You just itch." He went over to a cabinet and put some capsules into a small glass container and handed it to the Sergeant. "Take one of these every four hours. They'll relax you. I'm going away tomorrow until after the inspection. Official business, you know. There are enough there to last you."

Valerius thanked the doctor. About an hour after he took
the first capsule the hives started to leave, and in three hours were completely gone.

For the next two days, Valerius seemed to be everywhere at once, checking this item, correcting that mistake. But he did it. Every piece of equipment was perfect, every man knew the General Orders, there wasn’t a cigarette butt to be found. The Captain was a happy man. “Good work, Sergeant. It’s men like you that make the Army what it is today.” They saluted each other and parted. The Sergeant glowed inside, a warm feeling of satisfaction. He was going to take two weeks’ leave after this inspection. He had earned it.

Now, the story would have ended here except for an extraordinary happening. Such is the fickleness of Lady Luck. Valerius had taken the container of capsules out of his pocket. He was outside at the time, having acquired the habit to taking medicine without water, like a real man. There was a dead tree behind him. The position of the tree and the Sergeant were such so that when a limb broke off and fell, it hit Valerius across his arm. The container flew from his hand into the street where a five-ton truck ran over it, crushing the capsules into a fine white powder.

The full impact of the tragedy didn’t hit the man until three hours later when he reached behind him to scratch. Then it dawned. He pulled his clothes off and ran to a mirror. Faint pink spots were starting to rise across his body. That old feeling was coming back.

He had a moment of panic and then caught hold of himself. Why, he would go to the doctor first thing in the morning and get some more capsules. But the doctor wouldn’t be there, he recalled.

While he scratched, he tried to think of a solution. The doctor said all the capsules did was relax him. What else could he use? The answer was so obvious that it eluded him for some moments, before it dawned on him. He hurried into his uniform, caught a cab outside of the gate, and hurried into town. An hour later he was back in his room unwrapping a package. He sat down on his bunk with the new bottle, and arranged a mirror, a small glass, and a pad of
paper and a pencil before him. He marked a line on the glass about an inch from the bottom, broke the seal on the bottle, and poured the liquid out up to the line. He downed the contents in one gulp, looked at his watch, and wrote the time down on the paper. Then he held the mirror up in front of him and scratched, and waited, and scratched . . .

The next morning, the troops piled out at five and started last-minute preparations for the inspection that would start at ten. When the Captain came in the Battery Clerk was busy making last-minute forgeries of required records. The First Sergeant was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Sergeant Valerius?" the Captain asked. No one seemed to know. At that moment the door opened and the missing man walked in. Rather, he almost walked. There was a smile on his face, slightly red, but not spotted, and he was gayly humming to himself.

"I did it, I did it. Yesshir, I did it." He spotted the Captain and weaved across the floor to him. "Captain, I'm a cured man. I beat those god-damned red ants. I drown-ded them. Yesshir."

The Captain turned his head to one side from the blast of Valerius' breath. "Sergeant you are drunk this time."

The First Sergeant appeared hurt at the remark. "Oh no, I'm merely under my doctor's orders. Stay loose, stay relaxed, thash what he said to me. Sir, let me assure you that I am as loose as a goose." He pulled from his pocket a bottle that had lines drawn around at intervals of less than an inch. "This is my loose-as-a-goose medicine. Just drink down to the next line every fifty minutes and you keep those damn ants drown-ded. Here you are, Shir, you wanna looshen up, too?"

The Captain sunk into a chair, hands to his head, his eyes shut. He saw himself in front of a court martial board. A man said something, and then he was let to a brick wall and blindfolded . . .

It took about eleven of us to get the Sergeant under a cold shower. After we got him into a fresh uniform we helped the Captain lead him into his office. He went in with him and shut the door.
Ten o'clock came. The sentry at the gate called and said he could see the staff car with big gold stars heading for the gate. One of the junior officers called the honor guard to attention, and the rest of us manned our posts.

I was stationed at one of the vehicles and soon I saw the General and the Captain coming towards me, led by Sergeant Valerius. When he spoke his breath smelled strongly of Juicy Fruit. I looked at him. He was covered with sweat. I could see a few red welts starting to reappear along the edge of his collar. While the inspectors checked the vehicle, I noticed he had backed up against the edge of another vehicle and was gently rubbing back and forth on it, a look of contentment on his face. The man sure had guts.

The brass seemed pleased with what they saw. Valerius pointed out that the vehicle was in better shape than when they received it, and pulled out the records to prove it. The ink was hardly dry on the paper.

As they left, I noticed the Sergeant was using his close-legged shuffle. If you weren't looking for it, you would hardly notice his casual movements as he scratched around.

Needless to say, we passed the inspection with a superior rating. The Captain was happy, the General was happy, Valerius was happy. The General said it had been a long time since he had seen such a sharp outfit. There was one thing, though. The First Sergeant had better let a doctor look at him. It appeared, by the way he walked, that he might have piles.

As for the Sergeant? Well, he's retired now. He has a little business on the side, just to keep him busy. He's taken up exterminating, specializing in ants. Those who know say he's got a sure-fire method.

---

Looking For Religion

Wait. Hold your head high and wait.
Fear not. Only listen to the sky
And keep a space within for something great.

— M. J. Miles, Sc. ’58