

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

WAR STORIES LIKE WE'VE NEVER SEEN THEM

EN101: COMPOSITION

SECTION K44

CAPTAIN WARREN

BY

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JF MY DOCUMENTATION IDENTIFIES ALL SOURCES USED AND ASSISTANCE RECEIVED IN COMPLETING THIS ASSIGNMENT.

NO SOURCES WERE USED OR ASSISTANCE RECEIVED IN COMPLETING THIS ASSIGNMENT.

SIGNATURE:

Everyone has a story they want to share. Usually it's something that we are proud of, like winning a tournament or going on an exciting trip or helping someone with a problem. For Leroy Farmer and CSM Hu Rhodes, the men who wrote "It Was Monday," "Tradition Perils," and "Panama, 1976," those stories are about their time in the military. "It Was Monday" was written by Farmer and talks about a controversial combat experience he had in Iraq, while the other two, by CSM Rhodes, focus on non-combat aspects of military life. All three of these stories convey aspects of the Armed Services and situations that most people would never think about, so they are especially interesting to read and analyze as a new member of the military.

The first story, "It Was Monday," begins with the author assigning every day in Iraq to be Monday, a suggestion to everyone who has ever had a work week that a deployment is not a pleasant experience. This braces the audience for a sad and/or conflicting story and sets a mood that they can relate to. Farmer then lays out his mission: to "run a convoy 50 miles north to Sammara to check in on another team stationed there and then 30 more miles north to Tikrit" (Farmer 1). He also describes the way that the convoy moved- fast and forceful so as to avoid ambush. This detail puts in the light a reason that a convoy might travel this way. Anyone who didn't understand this might simply think the soldiers were being reckless and view them in a negative way. This is a good way to get the reader in the mindset that not everything is just as it appears.

After arriving in Sammara and talking to the team stationed there, the convoy moved through a supposedly hostile market at a painfully slow pace with no incidents. This is one place that my group felt the author could embellish a bit. We don't really get

any idea of how the convoy communicates with the team in Sammara- was it by radio, (if so, why did the convoy need to go to Sammara?) or did they meet up and talk? It's just kind of a blank spot in the story that leaves questions. I personally would have liked to know more about this rendezvous.

When the convoy takes fire after the "danger" has passed, Farmer does a good job of describing the initial contact. He describes the noise of the bullet impact and says that he was "stunned for a split second" (3). Additionally this is good because it comes right after a peaceful moment where he is looking at the Mosque and appreciating its beauty. "Being awestruck in Iraq can get a soldier killed" is a great way to foreshadow this attack (2).

This next critical part in the story is where we get the real conflict. The author realized after letting his anger get the better of him and giving chase that the attackers were two boys- children. After he ordered a cease fire¹, Farmer had to evaluate the situation quickly. The obvious moral dilemma was that Farmer did not want himself or his men to kill children, but those children were trying to kill American soldiers and likely would again. Farmer decided to shoot. He shot and killed one boy, "the oldest one with the AK-47" (4), and then pursued and wounded the younger one. He sobered up when he was standing over the wounded boy who was begging for his life. "I could not kill another child," Farmer said (5). Farmer then described how he treated the boy, turned away, buckled, and vomited. From that point on in the day he was withdrawn, and he "stopped functioning as a combat leader" (6). At the end of the story Farmer provided a good culmination of events when he wrote that he found it was a Monday.²

This whole section is a very powerful one. It takes the reader on an emotional and mental roller-coaster as we try to stay with and sympathize with the author. What would I do? How would I feel? Are both questions that came to my mind as I read it. The events are wonderfully described and the adrenaline and horror are depicted perfectly. One really feels by the end that they have learned a lesson about what combat in Iraq is like, and the kinds of situations that American soldiers face every day. The one revision I had for this section was when Farmer transitioned from debating about shooting the boys to actually shooting them. It seemed like one minute he was agonizing over it, saying that the boys should be “watching cartoons, not fighting in a war” (4), and the next the boys are “armed target[s]” (4). I understand that the point is that decisions are instantaneous, but I would have liked to hear more about that moment when he decided to fire.

Overall Leroy Farmer has a wonderful emotional appeal to his audience, and does a great job of powerfully telling his story. His intended audience is most likely anyone without a complete understanding of the things that go on in modern war, which would be anyone who has not directly experienced it. Many people view war as black and white, with bad guys and good guys, and clear choices. Farmer shows us that unfortunately, that is often not the case. Aside from one or two spelling or punctuation errors that I highlighted, I believe that this story is ready for publishing. It has obviously gone through several layers of writing and revision and is very well put together.

The next story is “Tradition Perils,” by CSM Hu Rhodes. In the first couple of paragraphs, he gives an overview of why flags are so popular and available overseas and why it was popular to have them flown for people. It is a good introduction into the

mood and theme of the story, but he starts off by saying that the tradition “wasn’t really a tradition” (“Tradition” 1). This is rather distracting, as tradition is a part of the title, and the reader is expecting a story about a tradition. And it is. In the next paragraph, he starts off with “the tradition I inherited” (1).

CSM Rhodes then talks about not wanting to continue the tradition of raising flags for people. He describes talking to the commander and CSM of the base about their thoughts; “they were getting good PR by presenting these to congressmen ... so it looked like the tradition had to continue” (2). This is a great and rather comical example of military culture; without actually having been ordered to, CSM Rhodes was told to continue doing the flag raisings. This is something that I wish he had elaborated more on. It is a great look into what often happens in the military, and anyone who has ever been in it in any capacity can relate. Maybe even saying something like “it wasn’t an order, but...” or “so I had been told without having been told,” could help lay it out for those who may not understand.

When the rope on the flag pole breaks, the really descriptive part of the story begins. The fact that he doesn’t make a big effort to fix the rope until September 11 is approaching is a good reminder to the reader about his reluctance to continue the tradition. When he does, though, his description of the “adventure” (4) is vivid and effective. The description of the scaffolding that was available is detailed so the reader has a good idea of what the men were working with, and the climb up to the top is so real that my palms started sweating just reading about it. Saying things like how the pole was swaying back and forth really added some suspense to the narrative.

I would have³ liked the ending to be a bit stronger- it is rather abrupt as it is now. The last sentence, however, is what is confusing to me. I don't really know what the significance of the Air Force OCS guy is. If CSM Rhodes is going to include this, I think he needs to go into it a little more.

This is a good story that needs some work before publishing. We as an audience still don't know why the author doesn't like the tradition, even though he makes this clear several times. That should be explained better. Also, tense is inconsistent. He switches back and forth between past and present tense constantly, and it is distracting. Also there are quite a few basic grammatical and punctuation mistakes throughout, but I believe that this is simply because this appears to be an early draft.

The last story, "Panama, 1976," is also by CSM Rhodes. It goes back in his career to, obviously, Panama in 1976, when he was a squad leader. It begins by stating a purpose for the story; "A story that helped my rep and proved beyond doubt that being lucky is better than being good" (Rhodes, Hu. Panama, 1). The side-story that follows is, in my opinion, unnecessary. This story about "Pete and Re-Pete" (1) could be interesting if they were worked into the story somehow, but we never hear about them again.

When CSM Rhodes goes on with the story, he says that the first 5 days of the mission go fine, because he and his team leader are leading the company. They don't get lost, and that's why they stayed out front. Then when he finds out he won't be leading on the new mission, he says something about pouting. This is the first he mentions this, however, and the way he introduces it makes it seem like the reader knows this about him already. I would suggest something like "I have this thing about pouting," or something to that effect.

The CSM's description of the jungle is just as vivid as his narrative of climbing the flag pole. It actually makes me dread a time when I may be deployed to or training in a jungle environment. The comments about the slick hills and constant wetness get across just how unpleasant and frustrating this area must be, especially to be travelling in on foot.

We get a good idea of his pouting from his actions when he is not leading. He does not look at his map or compass, and seems generally bitterer than he was when he was leading. "I like to lead," he says (2). We also get to see his frustration with the others in the group when they get lost, and have to rely on him to get them on track again. In addition we get a good impression of CSM Rhodes's leadership style as he puts up the impression of being in control in front of his men. "We were talking low enough not to be heard, but with enough positive body language and pointing to cause confidence to grow in the lads" (3-4).

His land navigation could be explained a little more. For those of us who have done some land nav, we can relate to his predicament. For those who haven't, however, this section would be confusing, especially when he brings up azimuth. Maybe he should simply state what an azimuth's function is, but he should give something.

The presentation of how CSM Rhodes finds his way is good. It gives the reader the sense that he really was oblivious to the fact that he was right where they needed to be when they got there. He does well by not saying it right away, too, because this really makes it jump out when he does. It makes the audience step back and admire the power of luck- it's a very good moment for anyone who's ever benefited from blind luck, which most of us have.

The bargaining with food items on page 5 is another little glimpse into military culture that can be appreciated by anyone who's ever been in uniform. It really is comical how much these items become valuable in the field- I think that it's a great way to wrap up the story.

The ending of the story seems to bring in too many new ideas. Specifically, the author states that the is "very confident and... [doesn't] forgive easily" (6), and that he needs to learn humility. These are not mentioned before, and while earlier he does bring luck and reputation back in, he needs to do it here in the conclusion as well.

This is another great story that just needs some work before publication. Similar to the previous story, it seems to be an early draft, so the same punctuation and editing errors need to be corrected, as well as the tense-shifting. Also the informal shout-outs to the audience, such as "are you bored yet" (2), and "hang with me" (5), don't really work in this setting. It almost seems like the author is apologizing to his audience for telling the story making these parts sound awkward. The audience for both stories by CSM Rhodes could be just about anyone, as long as they are at least slightly interested in the way that the military functions or the things they do. In this way both stories are well presented.

I gained quite a bit from reading these stories. I learned more about the gray areas of combat, about the hazards of training exercises, and about different tasks I could have on deployment. All three of these stories have a lot of value to them and a lot of things to learn, and it is my belief that all three could do a great deal of good when published.

¹ CDT Williams, G-3, '12, assistance given to the author, email discussion, West Point, NY, 23 October, 2008. Cadet Williams suggested I reword this sentence from “after a cease fire order,” and I felt that it made sense.

² CDT Williams, G-3, '12, assistance given to the author, email discussion, West Point, NY, 23 October, 2008. Cadet Williams pointed out that this sentence was awkward as it was, so I restructured it.

³ CDT Williams, G-3, '12, assistance given to the author, email discussion, West Point, NY, 23 October, 2008. Cadet Williams pointed out that I had not provided anything previously that was in accordance with what I said, so I shouldn't have an “also” there.

Works Cited

Farmer, Leroy. "It Was Monday."

Rhodes, Hu, CSM. "Panama, 1976."

Rhodes, Hu, CSM. "Tradition Perils."

Williams, Griffith. Email Discussion with author. 1 October 2008.