

“White Out” settings and characterizations
By Dexter Jeffries

SETTING:

Macro Setting: The Vietnam War has been over for a few months. The American Army has 250,000 men stationed in West Germany. Many have served tours in Viet Nam; others haven't. The mission of the American Army in West Germany is to be prepared for an attack from the Warsaw Pact Alliance. The American Army holds positions along the borders of East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Micro Setting: the orderly room of an army base is the bureaucratic center of the basic unit of the service, “the company,” which is composed of 250 men. Records, personnel jackets, medical histories, plans for present and future operations, are all kept in classic olive drab file cabinets. The managers of all this paperwork are the First Sergeant and the Company Clerk. Overseeing all matters, of course from a distance but with confidence and security, is an officer, a Captain. All three are a team and are thoroughly familiar with what forms and papers must be filed and processed in the cycle of a day, a week, a month or a year.

The Offices

The offices are explicitly divided: the boundaries are not just physical but psychological and sociological. Think of the opening scene of *From Here To Eternity* with Burt Lancaster and that image is correct. The captain possesses his own office which is solely for him. To enter, one must cross from the world of the enlisted men, privates, corporals and sergeants, to the world of officers, captains, majors, colonels, and if they are from West Point, gentlemen. These worlds are not supposed to overlap, but human circumstances dilute those barriers to a certain degree. However, both sides are always aware of the need to transgress only so far, and at the same time to return to the world to which they belong.

The other much larger office which is joined by a door to the Captain's, is wide open with two desks and numerous file cabinets along the walls. Attached to one wall is a large board in a grid with every soldier's name, his rank, disposition and status. Illuminated in red grease pencil, it is more than just a backdrop; it is overwhelming. The Company Clerk, a lower level sergeant, sits closer to the general entrance door obligating every soldier to make initial contact with him before speaking to the First Sergeant; he screens, interrogates, questions and does everything within his bureaucratic power to curtail contact with anyone but himself. He is successful 90% of the time. His “in and out” boxes are filled to the top. A typewriter sits on his desk with paper in it almost all the time.

Parallel to his desk is the first sergeant's domain; they are only four feet apart; the desk is the same, but an abyss exists between them for many reasons. There is no typewriter- the first sergeant's "in and out" boxes are proof of how much work has been processed. They are overflowing but kept neat. Most importantly, a First Sergeant is a soldier who has been in the army for twenty to thirty years. The army is his life, his home, and he wears this proudly. In that 30-year period of time he has straddled universes; army bases from Korea to West Germany, France to Texas, and California; wars, stretching from World War II to Vietnam. When asked the classic question, "What did you do before the army," their classic reply is, "I was always in the army; as long I can remember, I've always been a soldier."

CHARACTERS:

Captain Copley: 38 years old, married, white, an officer with 15 years of service in engineer battalions, one tour in Viet Nam; below average in height, standing at five-seven but makes up for it with his rigid poise and a guarded disposition when in large groups of men. Brown hair, a mustache, his alert eyes confirm an awareness of himself and his intelligence; he is handsome and enjoys showing his physical prowess every morning during the 2-mile run leading the entire company, always first.

First Sergeant Allen: "Top" and no one ever calls him anything but that since this is an army tradition. He is the "Topkick" and that expression carries a lot of weight. "Topkick" was reduced to just "Top." Top is Black, 55, wears black framed glasses when reading, and this always compounds his methodical and calm appearance. Lean, all bone and muscle, he is light on his feet, and one doesn't hear him approaching until he is right next to you. He usually smiles a little smile when you turn around in surprise. With 30 years of service he has seen and done everything but be with his family. He misses his wife in Louisville, Kentucky and has given up on having a relationship with his teenage son. He smokes a pack of Lucky Strikes by the end of each day and promises to cut down.

Sergeant Jeffries, Company Clerk: he is a light skinned Black man who is near the end of his 3-year enlistment. When he was young, he was the envy of the neighborhood with his "good" straight hair; with the evolving Black consciousness of the late 1960s, his "good hair" brings about occasional derisive comments from other Black soldiers. With a mustache that makes him seem older than he is, at five seven he is the same height as Captain Copley, and this adds to his sense of competition and envy. Maybe even contempt. Any time he's asked, "With that college degree how come you're not an officer?" he mutters, "I don't wanna be a lousy officer; I don't want to oppress my fellow man." A bit withdrawn he makes compromises with "not wanting to oppress his fellow man" by mildly oppressing soldiers of the company when they come to his desk requesting forms and papers. He rationalizes this to himself by thinking, "Gotta protect

Top from these low lifes.” Capable of celebrating his good fortune, he relishes his weekend dinners with Captain Copley and his wife which is a violation of army decorum since Copley is an officer and Jeffries is an enlisted man. He adores Mary Copley since she’s a poet, and he was an English major at City College of New York.

White Out

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by Dexter Jeffries

A darkened stage with no sounds for a few seconds. Then the sound of a manual type writer being pounded furiously. Light comes on to reveal a soldier typing at a desk. He is completely focused on his work, not getting up from his desk until he pulls the paper out of the machine. He walks to center stage and commences his monologue.

Jeffries

I keep the orderly room of Charlie Company orderly. Brown desks with green in-and out trays are neat, and by 1700 hours they are empty. As “retreat” sounds all over the base on the loud speakers and the flag is lowered, empty trays and a quietude take over the room. My weapons to do battle are staplers, a manual Royal typewriter, stick pins and paper clips.

Light now illuminates the entire stage revealing another desk with a sergeant who is using a ruler to scroll down a chart that is on his desk. Sergeant Jeffries remains, facing the audience for a few seconds and finally turns to watch Top in silence. Top is just as focused, almost studious in his attention to detail with his bureaucratic project. Jeffries now turns away and walks to his desk with a briskness; from his drawer he pulls out a roll of paper towels, rips off one sheet; he picks up a bottle of Windex also in his drawer, sprays the paper towel, folds it neatly, and walks back to center stage and continues his monologue.

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Jeffries

First Sergeant Allen beams when I take a paper towel with Windex to his plexiglass that covers the entire desk. I know just when to clean it, not just when he's present, but when he is in prized solitude. I protect him from the one hundred and fifty men in the company, create bureaucratic walls that novice first and second lieutenants cannot breach and am a reinforcement in reserve when it's time to confront the Captain. I'm a barber. As he attends to some United States Army form of which there are hundreds, I start to clean. A good barber makes you feel that you are worthy of personal attention. It works every time.

At the last sentence Jeffries walks over to Top's desk:

Jeffries

Pardon me, Top. Just take a second.

Top

Sure, let me get out of your way.

Jeffries

No, Top, you just sit right there. Only take a second.

Jeffries maneuvers around him with his pre-sprayed paper towel. Left side first. He returns to his desk and gets a day-old newspaper, returns to Top's desk and buffs the left side. He must move Top away from the desk to clean the middle of it. He then pulls him in his swivel chair a foot or two from the desk.

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Top

Jeffries, what are you doing?

Jeffries

Just keepin' the orderly room orderly. Don't move. Keep that clipboard in your lap. I got everything under control.

He polishes the middle of the plexiglass and gently pushes him back to this desk.

Jeffries

Ya see, Top. You didn't lose a second, and now all I have to do is the right side.

Top

Right.

Jeffries removes Top's in-out box (ins are on the left and outs are on the right) and places it on a small table next to a large radiator. Buffs it nicely with a new paper towel. It dries, and he notices a small streak of fog has been born. He gives it one more swipe aborting its growth and future life. The fog dissipates. He steps back, dispassionately satisfied.

Top

What do you want, Jeffries? *(normal tone of a question and no hint of an accusation)*

Jeffries

Nothing Top, absolutely nothing.

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Top

Well, you sure are giving this place a facelift.

Jeffries

Needs it. Captain Copley will like it. You'll like it, and I'll like it.

Top

And you don't want anything?

Jeffries shakes his head, smiles.

Jeffries

Top, this story is in our blood. It's a reenactment of what's in our blood. This has happened a thousand times. How do you think our ancestors survived? You do too much, and the master gets suspicious. You do too little, and he's ready to motivate you. Nobody wants to be motivated, right? Our people have been practicing the perfect balancing act for three-hundred years. That's all ya seein'. It's second nature.

Top

Never thought of it that way. But I'm going to think about it now.

Jeffries

Sure, that's it. How do you think we made it? You're a productive person, right? I'm a productive person. Don't you know what that means?

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Top readjusts his black framed glasses that always give him that meditative look. He coughs politely.

Top

I can see that you've given this some thought.

Jeffries

All my life.

Top swivels his chair so he doesn't have to make eye contact with Jeffries and asks a question that is never asked.

Top

What did your people do?

Jeffries

The slaves?

Top

Yes, the slaves.

Jeffries

I think they had it pretty good, considering.

Jeffries puts his cleaning things back in the top drawer of his desk which is six feet away from Top's. He bends down not wanting to make eye contact. The noise of the drawer going in and out is a relief.

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Jeffries

Top, they were lucky. They were slaves in Maryland. Masons and carpenters.

Housebuilders. Maryland was probably the best place to be a slave. You ever read

Frederick Douglass? He says something like that, especially when he's working in that shipyard in Baltimore. If you're needed, things are always better.

Top coughs again. Adopting a new pose, he slips into a small slouch in his swivel chair and relaxes.

Top

I know about him. Never read his books or his writings. I know he was important.

Jeffries

No more textbook history; I want to go back to what's real. How about your folks?

Top

Kentucky, Kentucky slaves. Not so lucky. Tobacco slaves.

Jeffries

I hear ya.

Top

Tobacco slaves, big god damned plantations. Picking and sweating from dawn to dusk.

He repeats it with a linguistic alteration.

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Top

Sweatin' and pickin' from dawn to dusk.

Jeffries slams the drawer. Top looks up from his mild slouch at the bang.

Jeffries

But that's my theory, Top. Even in that situation, a few figured out what they had to do.

I bet, I bet if we looked up your folks, they found that balance, even in that situation.

They had to. That is why you're in the army, doing what ya doing. You're a First

Sergeant in the United States Army, an E-8 in a Combat Engineer outfit, been in since

1944, Battle of Okinawa. No Korea, but two tours in Vietnam, West

Germany before that and...

Top

Don't forget Greenland, Jeff. Don't forget that one year in Greenland. God-damn, that

was terrible. Making that airbase. Well, beautiful but all the time wondering why they

called it Greenland.

Jeffries walks up to the large bulletin board that is dead center on the wall in front of them, as big as a piece of plywood, also covered with plexiglass.

Jeffries

That's what I'm referring to. Black guy in the United States Army for thirty years, never

busted down.

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Top sits upright, and his uniform takes on his statuesque form.

Top

That's not one-hundred percent true. I told you that story.

Jeffries starts wiping all the streaks from the red grease pencil that are used to make changes next to every soldier's name on the board. He keeps moving a new paper towel in circles.

Jeffries

Top, a lousy Second Lieutenant called you nigger, and you hit him. Even those officers at your court martial understood why you hit him.

Top grabs the desk with two hands, maintaining his poise.

Top

But still, a general discharge and a one-year appeal to get back in. Man, oh man.

A moment of silence passes, long enough to hear Top cough. Jeffries turns away from him and walks back to his desk. Top's phone buzzes which means the C.O. wants to see him. Since he was already sitting erect, he performs a ballet move, leaving the swivel chair in one fluid motion as he moves to the Captain's door. Raps on the door twice.

Captain Copley

Come in, Top.

White Out

Top enters the captain's office. Jeffries stares at his empty typewriter. Thirty seconds later Top walks out with papers in his hand that he didn't have when he entered. He sits at his desk a bit dejected.

Top

Captain Copley wants to see you.

He left the captain's door open, so Jeffries doesn't have to knock. Jeffries walks to the door but at the last second sharply pivots toward the audience, still outside of the door and stands not quite at attention but prepared.

Jeffries

Sir!

Jeffries relaxes and address the audience: Captain Copley does not respond and remains at his desk.

Jeffries

Captain Copley's uniform is not as neat as mine or Top's because he lets his wife press his uniforms on Sunday evenings. I know this from the few times I've had dinner at his off-base housing. We send ours to the dry cleaners on the post. Mary Copley is a good cook and writer. She's showed me her poems more than once and I said, "Emily Dickinson?" She nodded her head. I saw those numerous dashes and broken lines. They weren't there for show. They were appropriate. I like her. My monthly presence breaks up the loneliness of an army post in West Germany where estrangement starts as soon as

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your car leaves the front gate of the base. If you're not acquainted with Germany or aren't willing to take steps to meet your neighbors, it's just you.

Jeffries pivots toward the captain's door and enters and stands erect but not quite at attention since it is not necessary once the army work day begins.

Captain Copley

At ease.

Jeffries

Is it something new, sir?

Captain Copley

No, just the letter to Garrison's parents. Look, I understand you want to save time, and I would make the same cost saving measures, but that typo with the white out. That smacks of a form letter, and that's the last thing we want his parents to think. I know you have to type the whole letter over, but he's dead, and we must exhibit the right protocol. Understood? It's a good letter. Professional and sympathetic. Just that blemish, can't stand for that. And I have to sign my name to it.

Jeffries

Yes, sir. You're right.

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Captain Copley

Good. You know, I can always requisition an electric for you – the battalion has a whole batch up at headquarters, and we rate at least two, one for supply and one for you.

Jeffries

Appreciate that, sir. But I really like the manual. It's the feel of it, that you're typing. I mean, that you're really writing.

Captain Copley

You and my wife. No wonder you get along.

Jeffries

Well, I'm a clerk, but she's a poet. A real poet.

Captain Copley

OK, no electric typewriter. No rush, you have the whole afternoon after chow. I need it by 1700 hours; I want it to go out today.

Jeffries

No problem, sir. It will be ready by 1600.

Captain Copley

Good, Jeffries. Thanks.

White Out

Jeffries stands at attention. He pivots with sharpness; he leaves his office and closes his door. Top's at his desk flipping pages that are stapled in the upper left-hand corner.

Top

It's my fault. I should have given that letter a second read. You asked me to proofread it.

Jeffries

It's nobody's fault, Top. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I made that mistake. Looked at the carbon copy and wanted to save time. White Out is like trim for carpenters. When carpenters make mistakes and the walls or windows aren't absolutely square, they get out a piece of trim and "voila." A secretary takes the white out and splashes a few drops and, voila. Only this time there wasn't any "voila-ing."

Top nods his head slowly in agreement. They are both silent.

Jeffries

Don't worry, Top. That letter will be done by 1600, maybe even 1500. And it will be perfect.

The door opens, and the Captain walks out with some more army papers. Top and Jeffries start to get up, not with that habitual jump and barely clearly their chairs; Captain Copley waves his hand.

White Out

Captain Copley

Please, please. Not necessary and you both know that by now. Top, keep working on whatever you're doing. Jeffries, read this letter; it's from an insurance company and then come into my office when you're finished.

Jeffries

Yes, sir.

Captain Copley returns to his office and closes the door. Top hasn't looked up once as Jeffries sits back down with the folded letter. Top's paperwork that was stapled in the left-hand corner keeps him occupied. His voice, rich and sonorous, bounces off his clean plexiglass.

Top

Back to that letter, Jeff?

Jeffries

Which one? This one?

Top

No, the one with the mistake in it.

Jeffries

Sure, I'll have it done by 1500.

Jeffries rolls in his swivel chair toward center stage; he remains sitting with his legs on the base of the chair. He is truly relaxed and addresses the audience as though they are his confidants. He smiles as though sharing a secret.

White Out

Jeffries

Top does everything twice; first in pencil and he moves his ruler with the care of a high school trigonometry teacher working out a problem on graph paper. I like it that he can scroll with his ruler, make notations in pencil, talk, and then transfer everything into black ink for his final copy. Blue ink isn't permitted on official documents, only black. *Jeffries scoots back to his desk on his swivel chair like a school boy, late for class.*

Top

No, forget about the deadline. I just wanted you to know that you have to make it right because I know the people who are going to read it, and they need everything to be as perfect as possible.

Jeffries

Top, you know Garrison's family? That's impossible!

Top

Of course, I don't know them, but one time I had a job that put me in contact with them on a weekly basis, not Garrison but other Garrisons.

Jeffries sets up the margins of his typewriter for official correspondence and takes carbon paper which comes in three sheet-sets out of his drawer.

Jeffries

I'm listening. Two guys can work at the same time and talk. Remember what I said about our ancestors?

White Out

Top nods.

Top

Look, Jeffries, in the army, you get a lot of odd jobs. That's not the best word, but what's that word you like so much, 'esoteric?' Well, for six months I had to deliver the notices to families of soldiers who were killed in the war. Terrible. We would drive up; I always had a driver. I had a manila folder, no, a tan envelope. Normally, they wanted officers to perform this duty, but there were so many guys getting killed that they drafted senior enlisted personnel like myself to do the job. Not the kind of thing you volunteer for. Six months of going to homes, apartments, trailers, farms. Farms. You know, farm people are never around. We always had to return in the evening, during dinner, and I think that made it worse.

Top takes a deep breath, and his ruler wasn't square to the lines that he was reviewing.

Top

Twice a week, three times a week, sometimes four. They knew. The only good thing about returning in the evening to that farm was that there was a ninety-nine percent chance the Dad would answer the door. In the day time, you get the Moms. It's good there was always two of us, the driver and me, since these women would faint, and we got good at grabbing them before they hit the floor. I missed one, one time. Damn screen door was locked. If it hadn't been, I would have caught her. I knew that you ring

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the bell and just get the screen door ajar. Just a little bit. Makes all the difference, that one second. The men, the Dads would shake their heads in the most, what's that other word you like so much, 'quixotic,' quixotic manner, like they were agreeing but not quite agreeing, like they understood but they didn't. The Moms would scream. Sometimes that would set off kid brothers and sisters. But we always did it right, no matter how much commotion. We gave those people as much comfort and support as possible because we did things right. So, back to your letter about Garrison dying, that's why you have to retype it. Got it?

Jeffries

Yeah, Top. I got it.

Stage goes completely dark.

The End