

CATCH 17 -- INSPECTION

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Catch 17 is the military doctrine that says you will not pass inspection if they don't want you to, nor is it easy to fail when they want you to pass.

Basic training is where I first discovered inspections. When not actually training or sleeping, the other two legs of the activity triad, I was either being inspected or preparing for inspection. Being part of general harassment and discipline, inspection is crucial for stripping away that sense of uniqueness and entitlement common to many still near childhood, and helps to transform boys into the men America needs.

Inspection is constant like air. Daily, we privates stood at attention in rows and ranks to have our rifles, brass, and footwear inspected for sufficient shine. We stood nose to nose with those we dared not make eye-contact with, else public humiliation or worse. We had our heads and faces scanned for excess hair and closeness of shave. A daily shave for most was no problem, but the laggards among us in the hormone struggle were advised to lather up and scrape their faces, even if with a bladeless razor. They must possess the razor anyway, needed or not, as there was a place for it in the top drawer of each footlocker next to the clean bar of soap, soap dish, one hair comb, one tooth brush, paste, numerous pair of precisely rolled black socks, and (in the bottom of the locker) folded boxers and tees, each item to be perfectly aligned with its fellows in conformity of bristle, tuck, tine and fold, this tableau oriented to some mysterious organizational compass held much higher up the chain of command.

That inspection is a training tool does not mean that it later goes away.

My first day at Ft. Carson also began my second year in the Army. I quickly learned of a vacancy for Company Armorer, and I jumped at the chance. I was not seeking responsibility or rank (though after nearly 5 months of promotionless hospital time, I was still an E3 private), merely avoiding the alternative, the Recon Platoon and its high probability for crawling in dirt and other grunt-like behavior. I did not yet know about the Inspector General.

My new responsibility was to maintain and secure all the CO's guns: ninety .45 caliber pistols left over by Teddy Roosevelt, a half dozen 50-caliber machine guns from WWII (stamped General Motors), some two hundred-sixty M-14s, one dozen M-60 machine-guns, the one seen carried on shoulders and protruding from helicopters, a rack of M-49 grenade launchers, one .45-caliber grease gun, even a pair of Stinger shoulder-fired ground-to-air missiles. (Though the Stingers were in the arms room only for security and storage as I was not authorized to even open the box.)

This was on-the-job training. Cleaning is what the weapons were mostly used for, and for this I was qualified by having myself cleaned a thousand weapons. Or at least a couple weapons a thousand times. But generally the weapons were cleaned by those who dirtied them, then I inspected them and put them back in their rack.

For repair and maintenance, I managed drawers of spare parts seeming sufficient to build at least one rifle from scratch. A designated number of spare parts was required to be on hand for inspection. Technical manuals, TMs, were useful as maintenance guides, and also for show like razors and socks; they held the additional pages, addenda and recent updates, required for examination during major inspections. But actually, except for the occasional missing screw, worn pistol slide, or firing pin, repair was mostly filling out the form and sending the weapon down the road to Maintenance.

What I did not learn about arms-room management from perusing manuals or from those of higher rank who'd been in uniform longer, perhaps for decades, I learned from the gigs and demerits my arms room received during inspections. Gig avoidance lead me to studying a stack of old maintenance forms found in the bottom of a drawer, the paper trail of past inspections. One old form showed how one hundred-twenty M14s had been sent down the road to Maintenance, all the same day, each rifle with a cracked shoulder stock. This stock extends three-quarters the length of the rifle. At the narrow end cupping the gas piston, it is possible to find in that last inch of wood, by looking closely and with sufficient determination, the tiniest hairline crack. TM 9-1005-223-20, merely says there should be no crack. But after giving me a gig, an inspector explained a crack as anything detectible by fingernail, and demonstrated that by pressing the end of the stock against a hard surface, a crack might suddenly appear. Thus did my predecessor send away for 120 brand-new, crack-proof, taxpayer-funded, fiberglass stocks.

Daily routine was to issue these rifles for guard duty, field training, inspection, whatever. On payday, I issued a pistol and three rounds to the payroll officer. Before returning to my bunk at the end of each day, all these weapons were secured in their assigned racks after I'd inspected each returning weapon for sufficient cleanliness and shine. A thumbnail inserted into the receiver reflected light up the barrel to expose traces of gunpowder and rust, or too little, too much, anything not the right amount of oil. My diligence earned enmity, especially from those in Recon Platoon, who also wanted to return to their bunks. Only the Payroll Officer did not clean his own weapon. The .45 I had to clean myself. Co-opted, I am now part of the inspection machine.

Whether the Inspector General was a real person or just excuse for another acronym, I'm not sure. But the IG Inspection is the mother of all inspections. The IG is when every item with a serial number is examined for condition and presence. Most anything not a blanket or pencil has a serial number (including me, of course). I learned this one day when, in search of such numbers, a patrol swept through the company area, clipboards and little devices in hand to make more such numbers when targets of opportunity were found.

Then somebody in The Pentagon changed a regulation, and they built a steel-mesh cage around the end of the supply room that was my arms-room area. Now it really was a room, though of the see-through variety. When the nuts on the clamping bolts were discovered facing outward, they took it all apart and reassembled it. Of course this cage was affixed with a serial number.

Mechanized Infantry being two parts, vehicles and guns, this coming inspection was a big deal for me and the arms room. It was also a big deal for the Company Commander, who had already signed for all this stuff. Anything broken or missing, that was his buck-stopped responsibility. Personnel files might be involved, promotions affected. Company Commanders often being serious lifers, the IG was a very big deal.

Preparation began weeks and months in advance. Company inspections prepared for battalion inspections preparing for the brigade inspection. At each higher level, inspection became trickier. White gloves might appear.

A favorite location for discovery of dirt, rust and other foreign matter was beneath the M14 butt plate, or Stock Plate, Butt, Hinged. Here resided a combination tool and cleaning rod, brushes and oil, all having to be clean and present. Another location was the Trigger Guard Assembly, which was the lever for breaking down the rifle into its other major groups, the Stock Assembly and the Barrel and Receiver Group, exposing vastly more surfaces to rust, dust, carbon, sweat. Push one small pin from the trigger assembly and the whole thing falls apart, 11 more items to be examined. And with the rifle now splayed, hairline cracks can be sought on the inside of the stock. Thus did the remainder of my cherished maple stocks, a hundred or so, go down the road to Maintenance.

With 4 or 5 months and the IG to get through before becoming a free man, they offered me money to re-enlist. They could never have had enough. But with so much to do (Insert here - Quiet weekend locked alone in arms cage with nasal-inhalant, happily cleaning machine guns.) and my time growing short, I was allotted one E5 buck sergeant to train as my assistant and replacement. This shortly after my own promotion to E4. (Insert here - What the brand-new recruit fresh from basic training and company-clerk school teaches me about squeaky wheels and grease.) And the Captain has been wandering through to remind me how important this all is. Also about this time somebody notices that the organization chart says the company armorer, that's me, is slotted as E5. (Insert here - Very long and cranky diatribe concerning arbitrariness, merit and promotion.)

There was no conflict between me and my E5. He was a few years older and from someplace seeming very deep-south to my western experience. A black man, he showed me how chitlins aren't so bad if you don't think about it. And we were assigned a second assistant, a very young in so many ways PFC. (Insert here - How to extract, using gun oil and petroleum jelly, one index finger from .50 caliber machine-gun barrel. See also, Sky hooks, Wall-locker stretchers.) I'm even assigned extra details - Recon was not happy about this - to help clean the guns seldom or never checked out, the ninety .45s, the .50s, those M60s I didn't get to that weekend I locked myself in the arms room.

The big day finally arrived, everybody in dress blues, everything already inspected and reinspected. Just outside the arms cage door extended a long counter usually used for folding blankets and sheets. Left leads deeper into the supply room and the orderly room beyond that. To the right, now partially blocked by the portable counter, is the truck-sized door leading out to Colorado sunlight and the arms room of the company next door.

About 50 feet away, they are also being inspected, just before us. So when he comes, it will be from that direction.

We are eagerly anticipating this arrival when an armorer from next door drops in to ask about the spare barrel bags for our M60s. Machine gun barrels may get hot, even melt down, he explains, so each comes with a spare barrel, asbestos gloves, assorted tools. In fact, the IG inspector is right now looking over their spare-barrel bags.

This is all brand-new information to me, and much reason to panic. I have six M60s. I need six bags. It is far too late to write up a requisition, but there is a plan. The inspector next door will soon finish inspecting our neighbor's spare-barrel bags, then we will borrow them. Secretly. He can inspect them all over again. My E5 leaves with the armorer to expedite receipt of the barrel bags.

The IG inspector set up his paperwork on the counter just outside the arms-cage door. He withdrew his list from his briefcase and began issuing his summons. I supplied him with spare parts and manuals and requisition forms as requested. He began on the weapons, and the young PFC began ferrying M14s back and forth from arms cage to counter. M60s would be last. My job during this phase was to stand respectfully and listen to whatever the inspector might say. The buck sergeant and two details from the Recon Platoon returned with a spare-barrel bag gripped in each hand. Squared at one end, blunt at the other, with zippered pockets and about 20 inches long, the spare-barrel bag for an M60 doesn't look like anything else. The three sidled around the end of the counter about six feet from the IG inspector to "sneak" the bags into the arms room. My job at this point seemed to be to not notice the inspector not noticing. The last items to be laid out on the counter were the M60 machine guns, fastidiously clean, just the right amount of oil, each with its own spare barrel, with bag, and various tools.

Both the motor pool and the arms room passed the IG inspection that day with high marks. The Commanding Officer was very pleased.