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### **Acknowledgement**

This story was written by Dr Barry Chant, Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. It can be found on [www.barrychant.com](http://www.barrychant.com). Dr Chant is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the founding president of Tabor College, Australia. He is married (to Vanessa) and they have three adult children and twelve grand-children.

For further information and other writings by Dr Chant visit [www.barrychant.com](http://www.barrychant.com).

**Barry Chant**

## **The Sergeant Saw Me Pray**

I was not a happy young man. It was January, 1958—on a hot summer’s day in South Australia, the driest State in the driest continent on earth. Together with many of my mates, I had been lined up in the fierce heat waiting to be loaded on a bus that would take us away from home for three months of National Service training—or ‘Nasho’, as we called it.

Uniformed military men were hovering around, trying to get us into some kind of order, shouting and swearing, calling us names we had never heard in all our lives before, and doing their best us to destroy any lingering, futile dregs of hope that we might still enjoy our summer holiday break.

Eventually, we were herded onto a bus, driven for a couple of hours through the Adelaide hills and finally off-loaded at Woodside Army camp. Here, again we were made to stand in line for long periods in the baking sun until eventually we were issued with uniforms and equipment and ushered to the hut that would be our home for weeks to come.

Two rows of ten beds and lockers, with two small rooms at the end for the non-commissioned officers, stood silently before us. The beds were uncomfortable and the lockers miniscule. But this was now home and they were going to have to do.

Our sergeant was a small, wiry Englishman named Croft, although he didn’t look English, with his swarthy skin and his shiny, black hair. Wherever he went, he marched, with quick purposeful steps, as if always on a mission. He made it clear to us in no uncertain terms that his word was law and we would disobey it at our peril.

Eventually we struggled into our new uniforms and, carrying our thick, regulation bakelite plates and cups, straggled dolefully to the mess hall for the evening meal. Here we lined up to be fed and then sat at long tables in groups of eight to ten while we ate.

There was plenty of grumbling and groaning that night as we prepared for bed. ‘Man, I’ve had enough of this already,’ moaned Jack.

‘Stop whingeing,’ said Nigel. ‘It could be worse. You could be in prison.’

‘So this is better than prison?’ Jack responded as if in pain.

‘Well, it can’t get any worse,’ Simon interjected.

‘Faint hope,’ said Jack. ‘I think this is the good bit.’

Around ten o’clock, Sergeant Croft marched into the room, his boots sharp on the wooden floor. ‘Listen up, you lily-livered, baby-faced civilians,’ he barked, his language decorated with numerous additional unsavoury adjectives. ‘Tomorrow we have work to do. So tonight you will need your beauty sleep even more than usual. There will be no fooling around, okay? Lights out and eyes shut. Now!’

He flicked the switch and left the hut, slamming the door behind him.

For a minute or two a kind of suppressed silence hung in the air.

Then, out of the darkness a pillow landed with a whump on Jack’s head. ‘What the...!’ he cried, grabbing the pillow and sending it back to its owner with interest.

‘Hey! Watch it!’ shouted Dave as another pillow landed on him and then tumbled to the floor.

‘You watch it, mate!’ Spence yelled, and proceeded to strip Dave’s blanket from him.

Soon, there was bedding and clothing flying in all directions. Shadowy figures could be seen moving between the beds. Occasionally the yellow glow from an outside light would trap them like spectres as it filtered through the windows only to lose them again as they disappeared into the darkness. There was a cry of pain as a flying object found its mark and a heavy dumping noise, and another loud exclamation, as somebody landed heavily on the wooden floor.

Now I had been advised by a friend who had ‘done Nasho’ the year before to let it be known right from the outset that I was a Christian. ‘If you don’t make a stand at the beginning,’ he said, ‘you never will.’

So as soon as the lights were off, I had knelt by my bed in my pyjamas to pray. This, I admit, was hard to do in the midst of all the racket. But I was still there when without warning the lights came on again and the room was instantly ablaze with brightness. Some of the lads were out of bed; others were trying to find missing pillows and blankets; others were arguing. They all stopped as if frozen in time, like wax figures. I looked up squinting and blinking in the unexpected glare to see Sergeant Croft standing in the centre aisle, glowering fiercely at us all. He stormed up and down, calling us all the unsavoury names at his disposal—of which there was a considerable number.

‘I don’t want to hear another squeak from you horrible little children until roll call next morning,’ he shouted. ‘If there is so much as a murmur, so much as the sound of a feather hitting the floor, so much as the echo of a wrinkle forming on a sheet, someone will be on a charge. And I can assure you, it will cost you more than you want to pay. Is that understood!’

‘Yes, sir!’ we all responded quickly.

He fumed up and down the centre of the hut, his black eyebrows and dark skin adding a menacing quality to his words. As he passed me, still on my knees, he paused, looked down at me with a frown, and then moved on.

The next morning, after breakfast, at our first parade, he ordered me to report to him as soon as we were dismissed. Clearly he was going to reprimand me for not standing when he had entered the hut the night before. I was filled with apprehension. We were not actually at war. There was no serious enemy. We were only a couple of hours' drive from the city. The worse that would happen was... well, I wasn't really sure. Maybe I would be consigned to washing dishes or polishing buckles or swabbing floors or standing to attention all night long in the parade ground. None of which seemed particularly inviting. And then there was the fear of the unknown. Could there be something worse? Something I hadn't thought of? I really knew nothing of army life. I approached him with trepidation.

'Private,' he said, without obvious anger. 'I noticed you were on your knees last night.'

'Yes, sergeant,' I mumbled, apprehensively. 'I was.'

'Has any of the lads tried to make it hard for you because you pray?'

'No, sergeant. Not yet, anyway.'

'Well, if they do, you just let me know and I'll sort them out.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I wasn't in trouble after all.

'Thankyou, sergeant,' I responded, both surprised and relieved.

Of course, I knew I would never report to him if there was a problem. It would be a fight I would need to handle myself. But I was encouraged, nevertheless.

And night after night, week after week, during the long summer months of our training, I knelt by my bed, just as I had that first night, when the sergeant saw me pray.

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