

THE PINE TREE

It helps to have served in the military to fully understand my incident with a pine tree. I was in the Air Force attending a long radar school at Lowry Air Force base in Denver, Colorado.

Some classmates and I were rock climbing in the Rocky Mountains near Mt. Evans one day in early spring. On one of our many stops to catch our breath, I saw a small, perfectly shaped pine tree. It was about three feet high and several hundred feet above the timberline and was growing out of a crack in a rock. I pointed out to my friends that this tree had no business growing there and without soil would soon die, but I was going to save it. I would pull it out and re-plant the tree in good soil below the tree line.

My friends, saying I could not do that ensured the tree's chances for survival. They had lots of reasons, as we sat in the sun at ten thousand feet. I had no tools; the roots would break; it was too big to move; and they added, might be against the law.

That did it! Now I would not only save the tree, but also would take it back to base and plant my tree by our barracks. That announcement set off a great cry, "You can't do that, no Airman Second can just go and plant a tree on the base without permission!"

So I made a wedge of flat rocks and hammered with a big one until the crack opened up and released my tree. Then, with the roots wrapped in moss and snow, and carefully held in my field jacket, I left Arapaho National Forest. All the way back to base I carried the tree, as my friends carried on about how much trouble I was getting into.

That night with a bed adaptor, butt can, and fingers, I planted my tree. I put the tree in the only safe spot near Barracks 768. I put it about three feet from the sidewalk in the middle of a small square of grass between our barracks and the orderly room, right near the Major's window. I knew that the tree would be safe there, from formations and football games. For several days the tree got water at night, sun at daytime, and I got assurances that when the Air Force was done with my hide, I would be paying a big fine to the Park service. In defense I replied that since I had saved the tree, the Park officials would not mind and what could the Air Force do to me, ship me off to the Air Training Command for a long, boring RADAR school?

About four days later when most had forgotten about my tree, there came a message to our classroom. "Airman Bertram will report to the First Sergeant ASAP!" I left for the Office as my classmates patted my back and wished me well in my next base in Greenland or Goosebay. With not just a little apprehension, I headed for the First Sergeant's desk. This would not be my first or even second visit under less than favorable reasons.

My timing was definitely not good. Only two weeks before, I had been spokesman for a complaint to the First Sergeant. The Airmen that were on a paint detail with me had failed to convince the sergeant in charge of the painting that we should not paint a certain barracks. I pointed out to him, and later to the First Sergeant that the barracks in question was to be torn down soon, and a parking lot was to be there. The First Sergeant asked me how many stripes I had, and then how many stripes the sergeant in charge of the paint detail had, and if that

answered my question. The bulldozer was now at work on that barracks with the paint still wet.

As I walked, I tried to think what I would say; what was a good reason for me to have dug up a tree and plant it near the orderly room. So with sweaty palms and a lump the size of a bowling ball in my throat, I reported.

‘Bertram,’ said the First Sergeant, ‘did you plant that tree over there?’

‘Yes, Sir, I mean yes. Sergeant,’ I replied. Then he said, ‘well, the Major thinks you put it too close to the sidewalk, and would it be okay with you if he has it moved over?’

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