



kentucky *windage*

kathy stearman

“Face it, Stearman, you can’t shoot. You’re going to wash out so you might as well quit now!”

The voice in my right ear was muffled by my shooting “ears,” the earmuff protection worn during firearms training. But I could still hear every single hateful word.

Tommy showed up on the shooting range every day, joking and laughing with the male agent trainees. When he looked at one of the females, his upper lip curled away from his teeth, a dog growling his dislike at a mongrel cur. It didn't take

me long to recognize that Tommy was a misogynist son-of-a-bitch. It took me less time to decide I needed to avoid him at all costs. That effort proved to be futile.

Tommy was the supervisory firearms instructor for New Agents Training class (NAC) 87-12 (the twelfth class to pass through the FBI Academy in 1987). And I was Tommy's new pet project.

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there were approximately six hundred female agents of ten thousand agents in the organization, women having only been allowed to join since 1972. This was just two short months after the death of legendary and infamous FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, who quickly began rolling in his grave. Today, with over thirteen



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thousand agents, the FBI population counts approximately twenty six hundred female agents, or 20 percent of the total force.

Of the ten women who started in my class, one female agent trainee had already been told to leave because of her lack of firearms skill. Her dismissal came early in our training so I knew if I didn't pass muster, I might be next. I hadn't given it much thought when she was asked to leave. The class was told only that

she had hurt her ankle and as a result, she wouldn't be able to pass firearms training. I thought it was odd because a minor injury, once healed, should have gotten her "recycled" to the class behind us. Now, having to endure Tommy's sarcastic harangue in my ear every firearms session, I was beginning to wonder if she had actually hurt her ankle or if she had been Tommy's first victim. All I knew was that he had now set his sights on me.

Every time I stepped up to the firing line and waited for the signal to start shooting, Tommy would position himself directly behind me, slightly to my right. He was so close I could feel his breath on the back of my neck. Cold shivers would run across my shoulders and I could feel my muscles clench involuntarily, waiting for the first insult of the day. Every now and then I would glance back at his pale, nondescript face, balding head covered by a baseball cap, arms crossed over his wiry little chest. His lips would press together in a nasty smirk and I would turn around without comment, trying my best to tune him out so I could focus on my target.

I had grown up on a farm in Kentucky, so I wasn't a stranger to guns. I had occasionally been allowed to shoot a "critter" gun, which in Kentucky parlance is a shotgun or rifle used to rid the farm of groundhogs or moles that invaded the yard and fields. Although no weapons expert, my childhood had probably afforded me more experience than a lot of people in my training class and

certainly more than most of the other female trainees. On our first day at the firearms range, I had shot pretty well. At least I hit the target. But, after the first day, something had changed. Every time I shot a round from my Smith and Wesson Model-13 revolver, nothing happened on the target in front of me. Literally, nothing. No bullet holes appeared even though I was aiming at center mass. What if Tommy was right? Maybe I couldn't shoot after all. Maybe that first day had been an anomaly and I was going to wash out of Quantico—a girl from Kentucky who couldn't shoot a freakin' gun.

Every firearms session, I would stare down range at the paper target, which theoretically is supposed to be shaped like a man, but actually looks like an oversize bowling pin. A thin black line divided the no man's land—the section around the edges that doesn't count in scoring—from the middle part of the target that counted. I needed to get my bullets *inside* that black line. Squaring my shoulders and gritting my teeth, tears I knew not to shed lying just below the surface of my stone face, I doggedly kept shooting. Every now and then a pitiful little hole would appear somewhere in the corners of the rectangular cardboard, but never inside the lines where it counted. I had already told Tommy multiple times I thought there was something wrong with the sights on my gun. His response was always, "There's nothing wrong with the gun, Stearman. The only thing wrong here is you just can't shoot. Give it up and walk away."

Other than Tommy, the rest of the firearms instructors were pleasant, if not overly friendly. At least they weren't actively trying to get anyone booted out. No, Tommy held that distinction and although some of the other male instructors knew it, they couldn't really say anything. Tommy was senior to them, and as I, unfortunately, found out during subsequent years of my career, male agents stick together, no matter what.

Joe, another firearms instructor, tried to be helpful whenever he could. I think he was aware of Tommy's attempts to demean me and he tried to put me at ease with a bit of humor.

"Stearman, now just relax. Pretend like you're shooting around the toilet sitting on your front porch back in Kentucky," he would laughingly say in my ear, as I took aim at whatever target was in front of me. I would turn and give him a little smile to acknowledge that I knew what he was doing. He had started kidding around with me that everyone in Kentucky was barefoot, toothless, and had various non-functional items of indoor furniture and appliances on their front porches. I was too new and too nervous to joke back, so I just accepted his ribbing with a grin and a shrug of the shoulders.

I started to dread firearms like nothing I had ever dreaded in my life. Training at the FBI Academy, which is located on the Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Virginia, was divided into three categories: physical fitness, firearms, and classroom. Later we

would add operational training at Hogan's Alley, the little mock town located on the grounds of the academy. I didn't really mind all the other training, but firearms was my nemesis and as soon as I received the new weekly schedule, I would scan it, seeing nothing but those half-day chunks of time I would be on the shooting range. My stomach would churn and a funk would settle in as each firearms day approached.

Several weeks had passed and I found myself in the athletic trainer's office, lying on an examination table. My right knee had started to grind painfully every time I went running. Not passing the physical

what prompted the question, but I am certain I didn't look like I was about to cry.

I looked up at him and said matter-of-factly, "I grew up with a 6'6" father with hands like baseball mitts, who fought on Okinawa in World War II. I can take anything anyone dishes out here."

He cast his eyes down, then looked up at me with a little Mona Lisa smile and said, "Okay, but if you need to, don't cry here at the academy. Go off to Lake Lunga, you know where that is, right?"

Lake Lunga, the largest lake on the Marine Corps Base, was located behind the main FBI Academy. It was a quiet retreat where trainees often walked to on

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fitness test was a no-no and if I blew my knee out, firearms would be the least of my worries. The physical fitness trainer had a quiet, no-nonsense demeanor. I hadn't really dealt with him prior to my knee injury, so I didn't invite any extraneous chatter while I let him do what was necessary to patch me up. As he iced my knee with an ACE bandage, he looked up at my face and asked me if I had cried since arriving at Quantico. I don't know

the weekends surrounded by back roads I had occasionally run with other female trainees. In spite of my own anxiety, I briefly wondered if the trainer had ever asked a male trainee if he had cried and offered the same advice, "Don't show your misery and insecurities around here. Go someplace else." For a split second, I felt a tiny flicker of sensitivity and empathy coming from the trainer. In the next second, I thought to myself, "Don't be

stupid, Stearman, this is just another guy. He's not here to offer you sympathy." I never went to Lake Lunga, nor did I cry.

Although my creaky knee had not completely healed, I started to worry less about it as the second firearms test was fast approaching. I had passed the first one, barely squeaking by, but my shooting hadn't improved. I knew I could easily fail this second test. Tommy hadn't tired of standing sentry near my right ear, berating me, sarcasm lacing every disparaging comment. I knew I wouldn't get a second chance if I didn't pass. I needed to keep my passing score. I needed to change my strategy.

Jim, a former West Virginia State Trooper, sat next to me in class because we sat in alphabetical order. We had struck up a teasing friendship. He liked to razz me about being from Kentucky, which I thought ironic since he was the embodiment of a good old boy, and loved nothing more than to encourage that stereotype. Jim routinely showed up for class seconds before the bell rang, hair smeared into buttery cowlicks, un-brushed morning breath wafting in my direction. I would sarcastically ask him if no one from West Virginia owned a toothbrush. His response was always a wide grin, totally unfazed that he always looked like he had just rolled out of bed, which he obviously had.

But Jim had a sharp mind and already had experience as a police officer. So, I recruited him to help me out. As luck

would have it, Jim not only sat next to me in class, he stood next to me on the firing line at the range. He couldn't help but hear Tommy's verbal abuse and knew how I was being treated. Although respectful of all our training supervisors, Jim loved a challenge and had a bit of a wicked, rebellious streak. There was no need to cajole him; he agreed to help me immediately.

During regular firearms sessions, all trainees were lined up side by side on the firing line. However, during certain exercises, only a few trainees at a time are lined up to shoot. The rest of the class stands to the back and waits their turn. On one of these particular days, I asked Jim to stand behind me and tell me exactly where all my bullets were going when I fired at the target. While I was shooting, Jim stood to my right, just as close to me as Tommy did, except, as quietly as possible, so as to not alert the attention of the firearms instructors, but loud enough for me to hear, he located every single bullet.

"Lower right. Lower right. Lower right." I heard Jim's calm voice in my right ear. My center mass aim resulted in all my bullets landing off target to the lower right, somewhere in the dirt of the berm. Finally! I knew what I needed to do. I already envisioned myself flashing a smug smile in Tommy's direction, with a "Take that, you asshole!" under my breath.

Being from Kentucky, I knew all about Kentucky "windage" which means adjusting your aim to account for wind

or other factors in order to be able to hit whatever target you're aiming at rather than adjusting the physical sights on the gun. If all my bullets were hitting lower right, I needed to aim upper left in order to be able to hit center mass.

From that point on, every time I stood at the firing line, I aimed upper left on my targets. This really only worked for stationary targets. My shooting still sucked when it came to the pop-up targets or any other moving targets used for tactical training. But our final firearms test was on a stationary target so I needed to improve and I needed to improve fast. I still felt like I had swallowed a brick every time I stepped onto the range. But by aiming upper left versus center mass, which felt counterintuitive and took some adjusting, I started to see some improvement in my scores.

Finally, our months of training were coming to an end and the last firearms test loomed. Waiting on the range with everyone else that morning, I felt like I was going to vomit although there was nothing but roiling bile in my stomach. I had eaten nothing for breakfast and all I could think about was that I hadn't come this far only to be kicked out. Instead of laughing and joking with my classmates as they stood around in clusters, chattering away in happy anticipation of being finished with firearms, I quietly stood off to the side, shoulders hunched against failure, trying to calm my nerves and stop the shaking of my hands.

All at once, the range tower microphone clicked on and I heard Tommy's voice say, "Today we'll see the last of Stearman. She's not going to make it." Cold, icy prickles shivered across my skin as if someone had thrown a bucket of frigid water over my head. Every head on the range turned to look at me, some with pity, some wide-eyed, not knowing how I would react. I knew instinctively Tommy had done it on purpose to psych me out. So far, he had been winning that particular game of warfare.

For our last firearms test, only a handful of trainees were on the line at a time. When my turn came to step up, Jim walked up behind me and stayed just far enough to my right so as not to draw attention from the supervisors, but like before, close enough for me to hear. After he gave me a "fuck 'em" grin, followed by a thumbs-up, I turned around and faced my target. After each shot, I could hear Jim say quietly, "That one's in. That one's in. That one's in." Although a few stray shots landed outside that much-hated little black line, I knew as the clock ticked down, each shot confirmed by Jim, I was going to make it. Tommy didn't speak to me the rest of the day. I had just won his game of warfare.

A couple of days before graduation, we were all headed out to the gun range for some final drills when I stopped by the gun safe to pick up my weapon. The agent in charge of the safe came back to the counter and told me he couldn't find my gun. My first thought was, "Shit, do they

think I stole my own gun or something?" I was standing in front of a massive safe which was either locked up or manned at all times. But, the ongoing paranoia of firearms had taken its toll on me. As I stood staring at the agent, speechless, Tommy came up behind me and said to the agent, "Her gun's on the repair rack." The agent, looking confused, walked over to a special section of the safe where repairs were done, read a tag tied to the trigger guard, snapped it off, and handed the gun over to me, butt first. He didn't say a word.

A few minutes later on the range, we stepped up to the line for the last time. Now accustomed to my Kentucky windage aim, I fired away. The target remained a pristine white blank space. Confusion washed over me as my mind became as

numb and blank as the cardboard target in front of me.

"What the fuck?" I continued to stare down range as it took me a few seconds to put two and two together. During the next volley of shots, I aimed center mass. A neat tidy circle of holes appeared on my target. I was both pissed off and ecstatic that I had been right. The sights of my gun had been manipulated all along. I hated Tommy more than I had ever hated anyone in my life.

As I headed back into the gun cleaning room, Tommy sidled up to me and said, "You know, Stearman, I did my best to get you kicked out, but you made it anyway. Congratulations." He then turned and trotted away on his little cloven hoofs. 🐾



Kathy Stearman is a retired FBI Special Agent who spent several years as head of FBI offices in south-central Asia and China, a position held by few women. Kathy is currently writing a memoir focusing on her time overseas, while reviewing who she became in order to survive a man's world, and who she is now that her life is her own. When not writing, Kathy and her husband, Keith, continue to explore the world.