

The War

Spencer Campbell

Almost exactly a year ago today, I'm sitting in the SCIF (Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility) on site at the National Security Agency, studying something I can't tell you about. Boring stuff, though—believe me. In the SCIF I was part of a handful of sailors studying the top secret cryptologic aspects for our job in the Navy as Russian linguists. It was the last stage in a two-year process, which had begun with 47 weeks of intense Russian-language training.

This course was getting the better of me. The stuff we were learning made class nothing but six hours of uninspiring tedium. I would've rather listened to a woodpecker go to work on sheet metal than listen to my teacher's voice another second. And said teacher's mustache made him look like a fantastically unattractive Tom Selleck.

I had a hard time paying attention. Plus, the material we were studying offered no frame of reference. Look at it this way: You're looking at a map of the eastern seaboard of the U.S., and I tell you that Washington, D.C., is now Q4P2; New York City is P0F3; and so on for every city on the map from Miami to Portland, Maine. Learn that, and we'll have a test on it tomorrow morning. It's rote memorization. All the analytical skills you have are rendered moot.

It was while studying material just as ridiculous that I wished I had Adderall like in college days. Fortunately, I was friends with a sailor who was prescribed it. All what's important is that within an hour, I had what I'd wanted.

Now, while the military does perform random drug screenings, I'd been tested a total of three times in the two years I'd been in. It would take legendary bad luck to be drug-tested the day after I took these pills. I'd taken various prescription pills a few times while learning Russian in California just for fun and never gotten caught. So the next day (or was it that same afternoon?), when a phone call came in on the unsecured line, I thought nothing of it.

Before I go further, you must understand a few things. I was not the ideal candidate for the military. I don't have a tattoo on my back saying, "U.S. Navy: Droppin' warheads on foreheads!" I will never serve as a paradigm for honor, courage and commitment—the official core values of the Navy. And, truth be told, I lie too much.

I wasn't raised to be a liar, but I found at an early age how good I was at it. I remember my first lie better than the first time I kissed a girl—I think because I remember the shame of being caught. I didn't fill out the adverbs worksheet for homework in third grade. I told Mrs. Turner that I filled it out, but somehow, in transit from home to football practice back home, the sheet must have been lost. I remembered one of the sentences and recited it to her in an attempt to prove to her I'd worked on it. She believed me until a few days later when I had to turn in my English folder and she found the blank sheet among other completed assignments. The lesson I learned from her subsequent lecture and call home to my father wasn't that lying was bad. I simply learned what I did wrong and stored it in my mind as something not to do the next time I planned on lying.

I think the reason I became a writer is a direct result of my ability to lie effectively, as I've deduced that one reason people don't lie more often is because they're

not very good at it. Writers, essentially, are effective liars. We all do it. Even if I tell you things exactly the way I remember them, I'm probably lying.

But shouldn't my objective be to get my point across and tell my story--truth be damned? Tim O'Brien writes, "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen."

So I'll tell you what seemed to happen when all my lies came tumbling down on me. Because, in a sense, this is a war story. But instead of me fighting Russians or communists or terrorists, it's me fighting the Navy and my friends and family—and me losing handily.

It was around 2:30 in the afternoon when Ugly Tom Selleck answered that phone call on the unsecured line. He nodded and said, "Roger that."

"Petty officers Campbell and Koscianski, you guys have urinalysis," he said. "You can go ahead and leave. Stop by the barracks on your way home and take care of that."

My heart stopped, and when it started back, it felt like Quasi Moto was ringing church bells in my chest. I had until 3:30 to take the test, so I immediately went to my house on base and drank water until I threw up. Then I drank more. When I had to take drug tests for my probation as a juvenile, I'd gotten pretty good at passing them. I arrived, took the container, filled it up with urine that looked safe enough to bottle and sell as natural spring water, turned it in and went home.

For the ensuing seven or so days—about the amount of time I'd figured it would take to get results back—my heart stopped and revived itself every time that unsecured phone rang. Nothing happened—or ничего не было, as they say in Russia.

It was a full month and eight days later, long after my heartbeat remained regular at the ringing of the unsecured phone, when my chief, his face beet red and his eyes yellow and protruding, burst in the SCIF at 9:30am.

“Campbell, get your thi— You know what? Leave your things,” he said and looked at one of my classmates.

“Stone, when class is over, pack his things up and take them to him.”

“Roger that, Chief,” she said.

When I talked to the Master at Arms (the Navy’s version of military police), he told me I failed for amphetamine, which to unlearned ears sounds like meth. I assured him it was Adderall and that I had a prescription. I lied until I cried and I couldn’t lie anymore. I had taken this philosophical view on why I was lying. I was lying to avoid losing my livelihood, my way of life I’d become accustomed to over the last two years, the same way I’d justify stealing to feed my starving family. But I was kidding no one. I didn’t have a starving family, and I hadn’t earned anything in the Navy that was merited truthfully, considering my career was built on lies. I, no lie, told my recruiter I had never drunk alcohol or tried drugs, which is a *little* bit of a stretch. I lied to the Navy Criminal Investigative Service who conducted my background check for my top secret security clearance. My Navy career had been a falsehood from its genesis.

I received the stiffest punishment possible for NJP’s (non-judicial punishment): docked a month’s pay; 45 days of restriction (a sort of Navy jail) with 45 days of extra duty; and a discharge for drug abuse under other-than-honorable conditions.

“You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end,” O’Brien writes. “Not then, not ever.” And here I am. As far as you know, no better; no worse. My war

story didn't end with me leaving Maryland to come back to Little Rock. And while I can't say I don't lie anymore, at least my livelihood doesn't depend on it. I don't tell stories when I reminisce with friends and family anymore because I can't tell what's true and what's not.

Here's some truth: I joined the Navy. I lied to the Navy, and I got caught. I'm back in my hometown with people who know my lies and want to hear my stories regardless. And now, when there's a stall in conversation, I find consolation in the silence.

That silence could have really paid off sometimes. At least, that's the way I see it.