

Spit-Shined Combat Boots

By Dennis Payton Knight

A shine on your shoes is important if you are going to the prom or conducting the London Philharmonic. There are many situations in life where shiny shoes can put bounce in your step and make your mother proud. I like to wear shiny shoes myself, although I prefer not to be the shiner-in-chief.

That essentially is how our sergeants felt about combat boots when I was in the Army in the early sixties, but their standards were more particular. We were expected to be ready at any time for full-dress inspection, and our boots had better be spit-shined to the depth of ebony glass.

Now, were I in a position of military command, I would judge that overly shined combat boots on the troops would be detrimental to waging battle because they would likely draw the enemy's attention, even with helmets and fatigues camouflaged. But, from my bottom spot in the chain of command, I kept to myself my opinion that it was horse droppings to require a shine just so the general could see his stars in them.

Then along came Jackson, a private first class and entrepreneur in Army green. He introduced us to a product called Shoe Glow that would spray an instant spit-shine on the most battle scuffed of combat boots. He ordered it by the case from a warehouse in Michigan, and soon, every GI in my outfit had a can of his own, paying a buck-seventy-five per. I would venture there wasn't another unit on base whose bloused hooves glowed like ours. Jackson kept a stock of his magic product and I was one of his best customers for the rest of my time in Alaska.

When I was transferred after two years to New Jersey, Jackson gave me the name of his distributor, and I soon introduced Shoe Glow to my new comrades. I found there wasn't much profit, but no overhead, either. It sold as well for me as it had for Jackson, and I liked the status it brought me.

One hot, July day, on the eve of a command inspection, demand for Shoe Glow was high, and I quickly sold out. Later that evening, after we returned from chow in the mess hall, we all sprayed fresh glows on our boots, and stood them like mirrors ready for inspection at the foot of our bunks.

Overnight, things turned humid and sultry, and as I rolled out at reveille, I heard my name shouted from all points in the barracks. Knight! Knight! You son of a... Knight! Every boot in the barracks had transformed into a display of crackled lacquer.

My brilliant technical advice to my loyal customers to spray again only made things gooier. I will leave to your imagination the reaction of our Colonel at that morning's inspection. I can tell you most of my next paycheck went to doling out refunds, and my career as a budding entrepreneur was over.

Thankfully.