

## T.O. AND THE BULL

Anyone who served in the army during World War II will bear me out when I say that the Table of Organization (or T.O., as we in the “ranks” called it) was not to be dealt with lightly. Requisitions and going through channels were a familiar phase of the war to all of us who needed to order supplies, but perhaps the most baffling encounter I heard of involved the British T.O. and did not occur until the actual fighting was over and outfit was preparing to leave Burma for home.

The unit with which I served had been in the China-Burma-India theater since March, 1944. During that time we centered our activities chiefly in a hot, mosquito-ridden area of the Assam jungle, cooperating with some scientific teams that were studying environmental and breeding conditions of insects and other epidemiological work. One group of experiments of which my friend Teeters was in charge required the use of a bovine animal – to be more specific, one bull. Now although cattle were plentiful in the civilized areas of India, it was impossible to obtain an animal directly for scientific purposes in the jungle. The proper American authorities had to be applied to, forms filled out, requisitions checked and rechecked, but above all, this animal was needed within a period of ten days. The fastest rush order from the U.S. would take at least a month. It looked as if the last group of experiments, which had looked so promising, were going to be entirely wasted by that interim of waiting and would have to be needlessly repeated when and if the rush order finally came through from Washington. But then, as Teeters told me, he thought of Johnson, and he knew that their troubles were over, temporarily, at least.

Johnson was a corporal with whom all the members of every unit in the area were well acquainted. Indeed, Johnson’s “social connections” with neighboring army detachments were a matter of common renown and envy. Let a new unit of troops move into the area, and within two days Johnson and the mess sergeant of the new outfit were already talking over “old times”. When it was rumored that a huge supply of canned delicacies and turkeys had arrived at the warehouse two weeks prior to Thanksgiving, Johnson suddenly discovered that he and the depot supply sergeant came from the same home town and had even gone to school together. The strange thing was that Johnson somehow managed to convey the same spontaneous enthusiasm to the other fellow who, coincidentally, always happened to be strategically assigned at the moment. It was no longer a matter of surprise to find Johnson constantly supplied with thirty extra rations of beer per month, or the possessor of twenty-two sets of blankets (ten of which he generously presented to “close friends”, renting out the rest at a reasonable fee on special occasions). And of course, needless to say, it was Johnson who kept our supply of

turkey replenished to fill in the gap between the Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners traditionally supplied by the army.

In constant attendance he, too, had his Boswell, a Southern corporal with a passion for whittling, named Stevens, who admired him religiously, imitated him copiously, and somehow managed to be present “at the kill”.

It was entirely natural, then, for Teeters to turn to Johnson with his problem of obtaining a bull within ten days. As usual, Johnson did not fail him. By the end of the week, Johnson walked into the tent used as testing laboratory leading a huge animal obtained “straight from British headquarters.” No, he didn’t steal him; it was perfectly legal to keep him, he assured Teeters, adding, “The requisition officer and I used to go to the same pub in London – had smashing times together – we’re distantly related, you know – third cousins, once removed!” From then on, the animal remained in Teeters’ possession. He had no more trouble with him till the end of the war.

When the hostilities ended, preparations got underway for leaving Assam, Enthusiastically experiments were brought to a close, supplies checked, inventories taken, equipment packed, and arrangements made to have unused and left-over items returned to British, Indian, and U.S. depots from which they had been requisitioned through the proper channels. Each group had its own Table of Organization, a thorough listing of inventory to speed and facilitate matters.

The first indication of trouble came when Johnson, whose diplomatic maneuvering had blossomed and matured through the war years, convinced one of the “brass” that he had more points than anyone else in the immediate area (because of a short visit to a forward area during a lull of activities at headquarters) and got himself shipped home along with the first contingents. Teeters, having been made supply sergeant of his outfit two months earlier, now found himself with the problem of returning the bull Johnson had supplied.

The day Teeters was sent to the British Supply Depot with an inventory list proved unforgettable. He was ushered into the office of a trimly-mustached and manacled liaison lieutenant who, with business-like punctiliousness requested him to be seated at once and proceed systematically to read from the list while he, the lieutenant, checked off the items on his Table of Organization. Teeters was to list the name of the item, quantity received, quantity returned, condition of returned item, the purpose for which requested, and the order number. It was to be a beautiful display of precision and accuracy, the calling off of information and the lieutenant’s checking it fastidiously on his list. They made a remarkable team until the end of the b’s. Then with a quick inward prayer, Teeters drew a deep breath, assumed his most nonchalant voice, and recited, “One bull, condition good, purposes experimental.”

The monocle dropped from the lieutenant’s eye.

“What was that?” he snapped.

Teeters smiled heartily and added, “Oh yes, no order number on that one.”

There was a long pause. Teeters felt his smile becoming glassy. Then, replacing the monocle, the lieutenant said cursorily, “Would you mind repeating that last item – all of it?”

“Why certainly,” Teeters rejoined with a desperate attempt at joviality. “One bull, condition good, purposes experimental, no order number.”

The lieutenant studied him awhile in silence, “I’m sorry, sergeant,” he replied at last, “but that item doesn’t check.”

“It doesn’t?” Teeters exclaimed with surprise.

“No, you see, the Table of Organization has no listing under ‘bull’.”

“But we received one, and from your outfit,” Teeters responded emphatically. “We have it in the flesh. We can produce it any time you –”

“That won’t be necessary,” the lieutenant held up a hurried hand to silence him. “We must proceed entirely from the T.O. and not let our emotions become involved. Now, there is no listing here under ‘bull’.”

“Well, let’s add it, then,” Teeters interrupted testily. The gravity of the situation was growing on him by the moment.

“Add it?” The lieutenant’s voice showed him the seriousness of his mistake. “Add something to the T.O.! But it’s never been done before! One doesn’t add to the T.O. One simply checks off inventory on it,” and he looked at Teeters incredulously.

“But how could you ever be able to check off an item which isn’t even listed?” Teeters blustered.

“Righto, we can’t. The item isn’t listed here. Therefore it couldn’t have been issued to you in the first place.”

“But we *have* one bull,” Teeters repeated dismally, raising his voice slightly.

“But you couldn’t have,” the lieutenant replied sweetly. “We never gave you one.”

“Look,” Teeters began patiently, “If you don’t believe me –”

“I *do* believe you, my friend,” the lieutenant replied wearily, replacing his monocle, “but the T.O. doesn’t lie. I can’t take back what isn’t listed here.”

“But what am *I* to do with it?”

“That, my good fellow, is your problem. Now, shall we go on to the next item?” Teeters realized that the subject was decidedly closed.

Later, he reported the events of the morning to his commanding officer. If he had expected constructive advice from that echelon, he was soon disillusioned.

“The British T.O., like ours, is very carefully prepared,” the C.O. informed him.

“We can’t go against it. You’ll have to find some way out of your difficulty. Let me know if there’s anything I can do, though you understand, of course, *you* are

the supply sergeant, so the problem is essentially yours.” Teeters’ mood was becoming more and more desperate by the minute.

It was Johnson’s pal Stevens who finally provided the solution. Teeters had been sitting moodily in what we called the “entertainment tent”, the one with the kerosene lamp, a few books and magazines, and a recently installed radio where we congregated during free hours. The problem of what to do with one bull made him oblivious to his surroundings. Donating the animal to one of the nearby villages would be out of the question, he had been told, as it would assuredly lead to a riot concerning individual ownership; officially presenting him to one particular native would so upset the economic equilibrium of the tiny Asian community that the American government might be accused of political interference; turning him loose might render him dangerous to the neighboring population; and outright slaughtering of the animal would certainly offend the religious ethics of certain native groups. Teeters had a problem, all right, and he had to get it solved in a hurry, for we were due to be shipped out any day.

“Hear you’re having trouble with the T.O.,” a voice drawled at his right.

“Oh, shut up!” said Teeters, glancing miserably at Stevens, seated beside him whittling away at a piece of wood. His army pals had been capitalizing on the situation all day with dramatizations, puns, and “advices” that would have seemed ludicrous had Teeters not been so intricately involved himself.

Stevens ignored the rejoinder. Glancing hurriedly around him, he edged closer to Teeters and quipped out of the side of his mouth, “Johnson would have licked the T.O.”

“Nobody licks the T.O.,” Teeters replied moodily. “Go away.”

“Johnson would’ve. I’ve watched him long enough to know how, too. Want advice for some beers?” He put away his whittling knife. “Meet you in front of your tent after chow.” And he stretched, rose, and sauntered off nonchalantly.

If not for Stevens and his insight into character, Teeters might still be sitting in Assam today, looking after one bull, condition good, no order number. But fate was kind, and the two traded beer for advice that evening. The next step was the signature of the commanding officer to Stevens’ suggestion, which they put into writing. They got it begrudgingly.

The next day Teeters reappeared in the office of the British lieutenant. “Oh, it’s you again,” he muttered as Teeters offered him the note from the C.O. He read it, stared blankly into space for a moment, and then with sudden decision opened his desk and took out a copy of the T.O. “Unusual,” he remarked as he made a quick notation on it, “but entirely regular.” Then, passing the copy to Teeters, “There, does this satisfy you, Sergeant?” he asked.

For the first time in twenty-four hours, Teeters experienced a deep sense of relief. For on page 3, in the lieutenant's handwriting, appeared the following item:  
"Returned – one cow – male."

"It certainly does, sir," Teeters replied.