

Copyright © 2023 by Tim Pompey
All Rights Reserved

Rules of Engagement

Bonaparte Hendricks—“Bo” to his friends—got out of his beat-up Ford pickup and hunched his shoulders against the late winter cold.

It was one of those rainy Florida days where the water just soaked you to the bone, and the chill wind drove at you like an armored tank.

“Damn, it’s cold,” Bo muttered as he walked up the steps to Rainy’s Produce and Hardware.

Rainy’s, located in the tiny village of Hope, was planted in the middle of a long string of fruit orchards in Central Florida.

Bo, a Black Army veteran just back from serving in Europe during World War II, was unsure if he considered Hope his home anymore. Located in the heart of Jim Crow territory, it seemed smaller, shabbier than he remembered, and not at all welcoming. Or perhaps it was Bo who had changed. From serving in a great war, perhaps his world had been pried open and its breadth revealed. Back in Hope, he remembered what life had to offer for a Black man in Florida. For Bo, being in Hope was like putting Christmas presents back in their boxes.

Even as a segregated soldier, Bo had experienced a sample of authentic French wine, the company of some fine French women, and the tastes and smells of genuine French cooking. By comparison, Hope did not offer even a tiny fraction of this finery. Instead, the sad reality was that Bo had traded fights—one dictatorship in Germany for another here in the U.S. Unfortunately, if he chose to go to war in Hope, it could be just as fatal as fighting in the Ardennes.

A dreary day like today made it even more oppressive, to the point where Bo wondered if he had stepped into another story altogether—from Europe to Florida and straight into hell. Bo shivered and pulled at his coat.

“Damn,” he repeated and walked in the door.

The ramshackle store was small. Bo felt the walls closing in on him as he walked the aisles to pick up a pack of bread and a carton of cigarettes.

He didn't like being in enclosed spaces anymore. The horrors of war had squeezed his space limit to the point where he rarely slept indoors. Rather, he chose the barn over his father's cabin. At least in the barn, he could feel a breeze, and Croppy the mule served as his primary source of company.

Returning to the counter, he greeted Pozy McDonnis, the owner's son. Pozy was all right. Not too bright, but friendly to everyone, even colored folks.

"Pozy," Bo said quietly at the counter.

"Hey, Bo," Pozy greeted.

Bo prepared to pay for his purchase.

Suddenly, from the side, he felt someone push him.

Bo, a good-sized man with a military build, was not easily moved. At six foot four, 225 pounds, the shove bounced off him like a beach ball.

The shove came from George Baker, a longtime acquaintance of Bo. George was rotund, a loudmouth who liked to push people around if he felt he could get away with it. His father, Rusty, was a plantation owner, a drinker, and a bully. George had naturally followed in his footsteps. Bo knew them well. He had picked oranges on their farm. He always gave George a wide berth. In this case, he had no choice.

"Excuse me there, Mr. Hendricks," said George as if he had been blind to Bo's existence. "I believe I was here in line first."

Bo and George were the same age but far apart in society. George had the benefit of his white family. Bo had no one. He had just buried his father two weeks ago, and his mother had chosen to leave Florida just after Bo was born. He hadn't heard from her in years. Everyone else—his kin, his friends—had gotten the hell out and moved to other parts of the U.S. No sane colored person wanted to live under the constant and unpredictable threat of a Florida lynching.

George was slovenly and prone to beer and bootlegging. He was a hell-raiser as ornery as any nest of hornets. Once, just for fun, he beamed Bo with an old moldy orange. This in full view of the other colored workers. Today, he stood next to Bo with his usual chump-faced grin and his superior assumption that Bo would simply step aside.

Copyright © 2023 by Tim Pompey
All Rights Reserved

Bo came out of his cold-weather reverie, his wandering thoughts, his distractions, and stared at George. Not a daring stare. Simply a gaze.

"Problem here, Bo?" said George.

"No problem," said Bo as he stepped back to the counter, threw down his bread, and gracefully edged George out. "I'll take a pack of smokes there, Pozy."

Pozy handed him the cigarettes and tallied up the total. "52 cents," he called out.

Bo gave him a dollar. "Keep the change," he said and proceeded to the door.

"Thanks, Bo," said Pozy.

Bo had his hand on the handle when George issued an ultimatum.

"Did you not hear me?" he demanded.

Bo looked back at George, gave him the same placid stare, and smiled.

"Sorry there, George. Did you say somethin'?"

"I said I was first in line," he repeated.

"Well, George," Bo said without raising his voice. "It's just us here. First or second don't matter. You're up now."

"That's not the point," said George.

Bo looked him over. Serenely. Patiently. He knew every move mattered, and he was skilled at working around these kinds of threats. He also knew exactly what this meant to him, a proud soldier who had just returned from serving his country being asked to allow a line cut to a lowly cracker like George. There *was* a line here, an invisible line, and Bo was crossing it as carefully as he might approach an enemy encampment. He gave as much attention to the method as to the accusation itself.

"Sorry there, George," said Bo diplomatically. "Didn't see ya."

George let loose his protest. "How could you miss me? I bumped right into ya."

"Did you, now? Well, I guess that's my bad. Thought it was the counter. Go for it now, George. Pozy's waitin'."

Again, Bo turned to leave.

"You know the rules," said George.

Bo turned around, stood in front of George, and crossed his arms. "What rules is that, George?"

"You a nigger. You wait your turn."

Bo's nostrils flared. He took a deep breath and steadied himself. Now, he crossed that line.

"What you orderin there, George. A bottle a pop?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"What it's worth to you?"

"Whaddaya mean? It's worth a nickel."

"No, I mean, say, it costs you a couple teeth, a broken finger, a black eye, a cracked rib? Somethin personal. What's it really worth for all this trouble?"

George swallowed. He was a talker, not a fighter, prone to pick fights when it was to his advantage but not to back up his bravado if it was mano y mano.

Bo had called his bluff, and George was forced to consider the question. What was a bottle of pop worth compared to a confrontation with Bo? A strong man come back from the war, willing to fight, even if he fought a white man? But George knew he was being watched, and in a small town, word passed quickly of conquests and losses, especially among men.

"Are you threatenin me?" George huffed.

"Threatenin?" Bo countered thoughtfully. "I spose it depends on you, George. I've got no beef here. I'll just walk away and mind my own business. You're the one got to choose. What's it worth? That bottle a pop. It's just a drink. Goes quick. Throw away the bottle. Sun sets. Nother day comes. Like always in Hope. Nothin happens. Threat works both ways, you know, George. So, what's it worth? A nickel? Your time? Some pain? Just askin."

Bo's eyes settled firmly on George. Everyone knew where Bo had been and how he'd killed Germans with his own hands and lived to talk about it. Now George caught those same determined eyes, maybe a hair trigger away from going back to war.

George nodded and backed down.

"Go bout your business," he said and turned to the counter. Pozy quickly rang him up.

"I'll do just that," said Bo. "You two have a nice day."

Bo eased out the door and got into his truck. He drove slowly back to his cabin, deep in thought. When he arrived, he started his preparation. He knew exactly what to plan for.

Bo eased into his chair for his favorite time of day. It was sunset in Hope. The expanding spring light added warmth to the horizon. The rain had stopped. The evening had settled into a fresh set of stars against a backdrop of gold and red.

Bo sat on his porch with a lantern on the table beside him. Across his lap, his favorite deer rifle.

As he often did these days, Bo thought back on his life. Even under fire in Europe, he had wondered if he'd ever come back here. He had chosen to return, mostly to care for his sick father.

Now he sat alone, the quiet an assuring gift. After the bloody scenes of battle—guns, hand grenades, tanks, bombs, bodies scattered in the fields—he appreciated the gentle sounds of nature, the sun's reflection at dusk, the serenity of life lived alone. If only people could get along as well. But Bo knew. This peace was temporary.

He missed his father, his one solid source of companionship. But Buster, who had gone on to a better life, had escaped with his body and soul intact. Bo had doubts if the same would happen to him. His finger on the trigger said otherwise. Bo had gone to war and returned prepared to continue the fight. All he needed was a good reason. Today, he had found one.

He thought about the young woman he had met while working his way, mile by mile, through the Ardennes. Amy Latoise who lived near the tiny village of Asanne. She was the same age as Bo. A slim girl with dark brown hair and lovely eyes. She spoke a little broken English, enough to communicate with Bo and his comrades.

Amy had been caught on the front lines in the middle of a major onslaught of soldiers, weapons, and battles all converging on her homeland. She gave his squad whatever shelter she could offer and shared information regarding German outposts. Bo gave her some of his rations and a few cigarettes. Their encounter was swift, bewildering, even brutal in its end. She died from German machine gun fire as she foraged for supplies around the village to assist them.

"You will not forget us?" she asked the night before she died.

"Never," he promised, and he had kept that promise. As a memento, she had given him a necklace threaded with a tiny silver dove pendant, a small gift of appreciation for their efforts to liberate her country. He kept it hidden in a small pouch in his little cove in the barn.

That was more than a year ago. Now, he was anticipating another kind of attack in his own homeland. He took several deep breaths and lit a cigarette. He waited. If this was the end, he was ready. Like a good soldier, he had planned, practiced, and now sat patiently. Whatever came, he would fight tooth and nail.

His thoughts returned to his father and what he suffered under the hands of white men. At this moment, Bo wondered if his father saw him from the great beyond and if he would be proud of his son for taking a stand.

Copyright © 2023 by Tim Pompey
All Rights Reserved

He had to believe Buster would be right behind him, gun in hand, ready to fight with him. He knew his father. Buster would be on the front lines, leading the charge.

They came that night in a single large flatbed truck; six of them, including George Baker and his father Rusty, leading the charge in the front seat. Bo assumed they were armed and carried rope and kerosene, tools for a hanging and burning. As was usual in the case of white violence against Black citizens, they drove with the lights off in hopes of pulling off a sneak attack.

Bo had anticipated all of this. White folks always used surprise, numbers, and cruelty. Sometimes, the odds were a thousand to one. But tonight, there were only a small number in the truck, a personal Rusty and George vendetta. The truck stopped ten feet in front of Bo's cabin, and everyone emptied out. The way they stumbled around, Bo knew they'd been drinking to elevate their courage.

Rusty leaned on the truck's bumper. He resembled his son in girth and intelligence. His eyes, however, were more dangerous. Like Bo, Rusty knew how to kill. He had done it before in Hope. He would continue to do it as long as the law allowed.

Bo knew some of Rusty's victims by name.

Washington Carver, one of his best friends growing up. As a teenager, Washington had been accused of stealing oranges. They beat him to death and left him to rot in an orange grove.

Joseph Wagner, a work associate of Bo's. Old Joe, as they called him, had glared at Rusty when Rusty had refused to pay his wages. They strung him up on Rusty's property, where he swung for a week.

Bo's uncle, General Arthur, had been caught stealing a loaf of bread at a local grocery store for his starving family during the Depression. Buster had bitterly recounted the hanging, the burning, and the dragging of his older brother through the little town's main street. Rusty had been one of the ringleaders. Bo's father had been haunted by it.

And now Bo, waiting for his own funeral. But unlike these other three, Bo would not take it lying down.

"Evenin, Bo," said Rusty as if he was out for a casual stroll. When he spoke, his ragged voice growled like a hurt dog. Illuminated by the dim lights from the truck, his face was fat and flushed.

Bo didn't answer. He just sat patiently and waited.

Rusty continued. "Heard you and my son had a little disagreement this afternoon."

"No, sir," said Bo. "We did not disagree. That boy a yours got what he wanted, same as me. We all came to an agreement, and everyone left with what they paid for."

Rusty looked around the property as if surveying what he would torch. He had a grim smile on his face. This was blood sport, and he was enjoying himself.

"Not what I heard," he said. "Not even close."

"Don't matter what you heard, Mr. Baker. What you didn't see, you don't know. Simple as that."

Rusty motioned to George to stand with him. George walked up unsteadily, his eyes darting. Maybe the thrill of battle had also pushed him to get drunk, but standing next to his father, even with extended support from the group, he didn't look very courageous.

"What you tell me he said?" Rusty barked at George.

George hesitated. "He called me a white cracker, said he'd kill me if he ever saw me again."

Rusty looked back at Bo. "That true, Bo? You threaten my boy?"

Bo stood up slowly.

"Maybe I did, Mr. Baker. In his mind, maybe I did. Don't know what people think sometimes. Speak the same language but get different results. He say yes, I say no. He speak his side. I give you mine. Come down to who said what and what they heard in their head. I can't tell you nothin beyond that."

Rusty peered at Bo as if trying to understand a man who spoke Spanish.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"Ask George," Bo nodded. "He knows."

Rusty grew quiet. George moved to the back bumper of the flatbed truck as if to seek shelter from the ensuing storm. The remaining four farm hands came around and formed a line at the front fender. Bo knew them and had worked with all of them at some point. They were part of Rusty's so-called supervising crew, a motley bunch prone to punish for the slightest offenses. In the weak light, they looked like attack dogs waiting to be unleashed.

"Fore you decide what you decide," said Bo. "You should hear me out."

"Why?" said Rusty.

"I know what you think, but they's also things you don't know. Might change your mind if you listen. Might even save you some damage, too."

Copyright © 2023 by Tim Pompey
All Rights Reserved

Rusty looked at his crew. They were all grinning. For what, Bo knew only too well.

“Why’s that?” said Rusty smugly.

Bo nodded. “You ever been in the Army, sir?”

Rusty hesitated. “Nope. I had to work the farm during World War I and was too old for the last war.”

Bo took a deep breath and exhaled.

“There’s some things I learned in battle over there, sir. The Army taught me some good things. Probably why I’m standin here today.”

Rusty looked puzzled. “Where’d you say you served?”

“Mostly over in Europe. I was a supply guy. Ain’t too many white officers wanted us colored soldiers with guns in our hands. But I did get sent to Belgium. Battle of the Bulge, they called it. Even saw Patton once from a distance. I heard he was a tough sumabitch. Wouldn’t want to face him in a knife fight.”

“That don’t sound right, you fightin for Patton.” Rusty looked at his crew, then leaned forward and leered at Bo. “Good God, they must a been desperate.”

A chuckle rose from the farm hands.

“They were, and it don’t matter how it sounds. True enough. We was mostly coloreds fought together. But still. Plenty of brothers like me called up last minute. Damnation. We were good. The Army was proud of us. We knew how to fight. And beings, it was the whites we fought, you can imagine. Being paid to shoot white folks. Never dreamed that would happen. It was like Christmas.”

Rusty eyes narrowed.

Bo smiled as if he knew exactly where the arrow's tip landed.

“Think of it,” Bo continued, “puttin a gun in our hands and askin us to aim, shoot, and kill. Turns out I was good with a rifle. *Damn good shot*, they said a me when we were trainin. More’n once I heard that. And then, when we was out there, I proved what I got. Mad dogs, we wuz. Think, all in all, they was happy they called us up.”

Bo noticed the look in their eyes. Rusty’s troops. Not used to dealing with Black soldiers. Not used to hearing about killing white men. Their face said it all. Hesitation. Anger. Confusion. Exactly what Bo intended.

Bo’s face hardened.

“Now, you come on my property, think you can just roll over here and do whatever. You don’t know much ‘bout the rules of engagement, now do ya?”

Rusty and his crew waited.

“First off, you go into battle, you gotta realize it’s him or you. He knows that. You know that. That means a man who’s desperate to stay alive, he fights like hell, like a coon cornered by hounds. In war, you don’t hesitate cause if you wait, he’ll kill you first. It was hand-to-hand where I fought. Guns, knives, hand grenades, sometimes just your bare hands ‘round his neck. It’s a funny feeling. You watch a man die ‘cause a what you do. You see the life go from his face. You know you won. I learned quick. I wanna live, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes. So, that’s me in front a you. I’m that crazy sumabitch with his teeth bared and his claws out. You come here with your little raggedy Army. I fight you to the death if I need to. Do whatever it takes. I won’t hesitate. Understand?”

Rusty stayed quiet, but his face was beet red as if steam pressure was building in his head.

Bo continued. “Second, you don’t go into battle less you know what you doin. Ain’t gonna send a group of men into war without weapons, knowledge, or numbers. Would be a waste a time and get you nowhere. You know why we won in Belgium? We was better. Our group a soldiers coulda taken on twice those Germans. Tanks, planes, guns. We was . . . better! That’s why we won.”

Bo let his words sink in.

“So, sir, you think you better’n me? You come prepared?”

Rusty came to life. “I got what it takes. There’s six a us, one a you.”

“Ah, man, you ain’t listenin. I’m a warrior. What the fuck er you?”

“I’m the one gonna kill you,” Rusty retorted. “Far as I can see, you’re just one lonely nigger with a deer rifle.”

“Am I now? That’s all?”

“Yup. And tonight, you gonna die.”

“Think so?” Bo stopped and let his question sink in. “What I tell you ‘bout being prepared?”

Rusty hesitated.

Bo reached down and picked up something from the table.

“Know what this is?”

Rusty squinted against the light. Then his eyes widened. “Is that . . .”

"Yup. *This* is dynamite. I got about four, five sticks sittin here. Thought it might come in handy out here on the farm. Blow up a stump or two. Maybe use it for somethin just like this. People like you sneakin round in the night tryin to kill people like me. My calculation, one stick equal 'bout four of you straight up, you being so close together and all. The rest I'll just take out with my rifle. Member. I'm a *good* shot."

Rusty glared at Bo. "You do that, all hell breaks loose. Posse'll find you quick. Then you *will* hang."

"Not fore I get you. I talk to your boy today. Ask him. What's it worth? Now I ask you the same question. What's it worth, Mr. Baker? You might wanna think about it. You dying over his gripin bout gettin served first. Over a nickel bottle of pop? If six a you die in the process, includin your own son, is it worth that over a lousy soda?"

"Now, you put that down . . ."

"No, sir. I ain't finished yet. This is me talkin to you, givin you my valuable experience about war, soldiers, fightin. You ain't a soldier. You just a fat white man think he can kill anyone, anywhere, anytime, 'specially if he's colored. I'm just showin you that you don't know shit bout fightin or Black men or war. You just roll in here and put yourself in a dyin place. Don't even occur to you what you done. I wouldn't be here now if I'd done that in Belgium. They wouldn't be singin my praises in Washington, D.C. I wouldn't be tellin you how to *really* go to battle. I'm the one with the knowledge here. All you got is . . . what? Farm hands? That boy a yours? What's he gonna do when you're dead? Think he can run your little plantation? Oh, brother. You don't know what you doin. You better hope clearer minds prevail so you can wake up tomorrow and pick oranges or make us pick 'em for you."

"All I see," said Rusty, "is a nigger full a himself. You better think twice fore you go gainst me. Ain't just you will suffer."

"Yeah, but you *will* suffer," said Bo. "And whatever the outcome, you won't be around to see it."

"Six a us, one of you," said Rusty. "I like them odds. Only takes one bullet to kill ya."

In a flash, Bo lifted his rifle, aimed, and shot Rusty straight in the head. The shot echoed in the dark like a cannon. No one saw it coming. The Earth suddenly went silent as if deafened from the explosion. Rusty collapsed, his head crashing against his bumper.

"Five now," said Bo. "Gainst me and my rifle and my dynamite."

Bo stared down the barrel.

“What you boys gonna do? You done lost your captain. Ain’t no one left to give orders, less you trustin George back there hidin in the shadows. You think he wanna take charge? How ‘bout it, George?”

The four ranch hands blanched at the sight of Rusty’s body. They quickly ran to get in the truck.

“Oh, no, no, no,” said Bo. “You bring that truck on my property. It’s mine now. You guys can skedaddle down that road on foot. Take your time. It’s a long walk, and I ‘magine you’ll probably get tired. Feel free to take a nap. And if you do decide to come back, just remember. This is my property, and I’ll be waitin here in the mornin. Same rifle. Same dynamite. Same result.”

The ranch hands hurried off into the darkness. George waited by the truck door.

“You kilt my daddy,” he said.

“He brought the war here, George, and I took it to him. Ain’t no one to blame but hisself. Member what you say ‘bout the rules? You was right. You gotta know the rules, George. Ain’t worth fightin otherwise. What about you? You wanna fight? I’ll give you his rifle. You and me, we’ll go out in that field, just like I did in Belgium. Man to man. See what comes of it. How ‘bout we fight for who gets first in line next time?”

George looked at his father, bleeding in the dust. Then he shook his head and ran down the road like a man chased by a hive of angry bees.

Bo returned to his seat. He looked at his kill in the dim lantern light. Bo, more than familiar with the sight of death. Rusty, a lousy soldier, unprepared and undisciplined.

Furthermore, the ripple effect would hit the Baker family tonight and reverberate for generations to come. The family would suffer some losses. As the new man in charge, George would be confounded by his leadership role. The Baker name might take a hit. The farm, too.

“Well, Daddy, we did it,” Bo muttered. “Finally got something back for all our years a hard work.”

Once again, he sat serenely and listened as the nightlife began to cry out. This being the end of winter, with the days lengthened, new sounds were emerging. The Earth was rising again despite its brutal masters.

Copyright © 2023 by Tim Pompey
All Rights Reserved

Bo always marveled at how the Earth just kept moving along in cycles. Nothing that he did or anyone else accomplished would change that. He liked to think he had some part in this. Being a farmer's kid. Seeing new things grow. Picking crops so people could eat.

He turned out the lantern and sat in the dark. It was as if he had come full circle from the day of his birth to now. It felt good to know he had a purpose and had lived according to a worthy code. He had defended his country and himself with distinction.

He stood up, saluted as if on parade, then pivoted and marched into the cabin. He was ready to move out of the barn and into something worthy of his rank. Officer's quarters. Tomorrow, the enemy would come again in force. It might be one against a dozen, maybe more. Tomorrow, he might even perish in battle. But Bo would be ready.

War was like that. It spared no one. Still, if you understood that going in, you would never be disappointed. In loss or victory, the outcome depended on your preparation, equipment, and courage. Bo felt as if he had shown up ready and served with honor. He stretched himself on his father's cot, proud that he had carried out his mission. He hadn't left his post. He had defended himself and, as he had proved in battle, he was not afraid to die for what he believed in. Sleep came easily. Bo, the good soldier, was at rest.