

# Officer and Gentleman

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Old traditions never die—nor do they fade away easily. When I started my college ROTC training to become a U.S. Army officer, I was taught there were three things a uniformed officer never did in public.

He never pushed a baby carriage.

He never carried an umbrella.

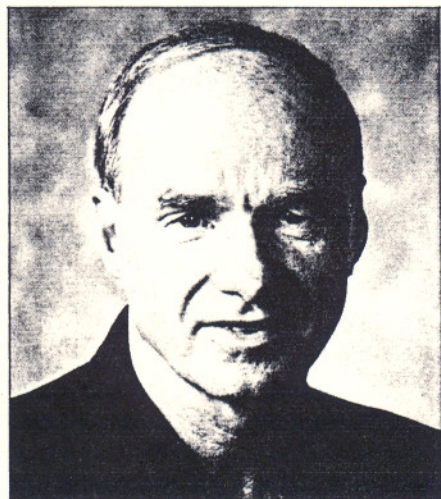
And I've forgotten the third thing.

I welcomed all traditions which enhanced my masculinity. Especially the one about umbrellas.

My father, who had been an army officer in World War I, never carried an umbrella. Like liquor, playing cards and calendars with pictures of buxom women, we never had one in the house. When it rained, we "real men" got wet the way the good Lord intended.

But I was bothered by my reaction to a lecture in a military science class one day. Our instructor, who stood ramrod straight, with every hair of his burr haircut at attention, reminded us we were fighting men.

"Can you imagine," he sneered, "a 13th century knight striding into battle carrying an umbrella?"



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The entire class leaped to its feet and shouted in chorus: "NO SIR!!!"

But inside I could picture myself out there in the rain. My armor soaking wet. Rusting together at the joints. Leaving me helpless while a dry, umbrella-carrying infidel ran his spear through one of the rusted-out places.

Years later, as a Southern Baptist pastor, I began to wonder if my anti-umbrella tradition was legitimate. After all, Ian Fleming's macho super-spy, James Bond, who was the ultimate in masculinity, carried an umbrella. Agent 007 was the perfect combination of muscle and suave.

So, like the preacher who sneaks into a Full Gospel Businessmen's meeting when he's out of town, I began carrying an umbrella on my occasional trips to our Baptist headquarters in Nashville. Just to see what it was like. But I was still a novice. Having never carried an umbrella I didn't know what to do with it when I got to my destination. Hand it to the butler with my hat?

Only I didn't wear a hat. And the Baptist Sunday School Board, contrary to rumor, didn't employ a butler. Worse, I was beginning to like the Dapper Dan image.

But everything came into perspective one stormy March afternoon in Nashville. Before leaving home I realized I might come in contact with some denominational guru. If my image was right, he might invite me over to his kingdom to preach. I went out and purchased a \$60 Lord Ashley umbrella with a rosewood handle and stainless steel shank.

That misty afternoon I emerged from the Baptist headquarters building and found myself standing on the rain-swept sidewalk beside Southern Baptists' greatest legend—Dr. R. G. Lee, pastor of the huge Belmont Baptist Church in Memphis. This was my chance to shine.

Stepping up to the curb beside the great preacher, I flicked off the safety catch on my \$60 Lord Ashley. Clearing my throat to draw attention, I popped it open.

Instantly the wind caught it. Before I

could gulp, the Lord Ashley was inside out. Snatched from my hand by a mighty gust it went flying into the middle of James Robertson Parkway in front of a Yellow Cab.

In one fleeting second it was smashed flat.

The great, old silver-haired preacher—who legend said had preached his famous sermon "Pay Day, Some Day" over a thousand times—turned slowly and looked at me.

"When I was a young country preacher—about your age," the great orator said in his cultured voice, "I once baptized a farmer in a mountain stream. When he went under, I lost my grip. He re-surfaced 75 yards downstream. His wife finally got hold of his leg and pulled him to shore, but the deacons had to roll him on a barrel to get the water out of him."

As his taxi pulled up to the curb, he looked kindly at me. "Always open an umbrella like you baptize—upstream. You'll lose a lot less that way."

He entered the taxi and disappeared.

In the gutter across the street a beer truck could be heard crunching the remains of my \$60 Lord Ashley into unrecognizable debris.

I've owned a lot of umbrellas since then. I've left most of them on airplanes or standing in the closets of Holiday Inns. But it's okay because I've never again purchased one which cost more than \$10. And I always open them into the wind.

Old traditions do fade away, however. Last week, for instance, I was praying with a Baptist pastor and before I knew it, I was using my prayer language. It felt good, like standing in a group of army officers who are braving the rain for the sake of macho, and popping open your umbrella.

And you should have seen me out in front of the church pushing a baby buggy—containing MY grandson.

Now, if only I could remember that third thing an officer and gentleman should never do, I could go to work on it, too. ☺