

A DATE WITH THE ARMY

A SAM CALDER STORY

Humility through Intimidation



BRIAN MINIKIN

A Date with the Army

By Brian Minikin

This short story is the fifth one in the Sam Calder series.

A lesson in humility through Intimidation

They are fictional stories based on the life and times of Sam Calder, a rather goofy and naïve Australian who was lucky enough to spend time working in sport development throughout the countries of Oceania. Any reference to a specific person or their story is purely coincidental.

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A Date with the Army

Sam Calder believed in preparation.

This was one of his strengths.

It was also one of his more tried and true methods for getting into trouble.

By the time he returned to Navatu to help prepare the national volleyball teams for the South Pacific Games, he had begun to think he understood the islands a little better. This was dangerous. A man who knows nothing is often cautious. A man who knows a little can become a public safety issue and more likely to do something really stupid.

Sam had been in Navatu for three months, working with the national men's and women's squads. The task was not small. No Navatu volleyball team had ever won a match at the Games. The ambition, therefore, was modest by international standards and revolutionary by local ones.

Win once, that was the dream. Sam liked the purity of it, but deep down he felt that they could do better than that. There was no talk of podium strategies, high-performance pathways, or four-year medal forecasts. The players wanted to win one match and return home with proof that they had not merely attended.

That was honest enough for Sam but his own ego wanted more. Also he knew that even though the team lacked height, they had an ability to jump like he had never seen before, which meant that they could still surprise teams as long as they could get their fundamentals right.

What Sam did not yet understand was that national selection in Navatu was not only about volleyball. It was about families, church, old friendships, village pride, personal ambition, and the mysterious ability of certain nephews or nieces to appear on team lists at exactly the right time.

He thought he was coaching a national squad.

In reality, he was coaching a volleyball team, a political compromise, several family expectations, two committee disputes, one quiet rebellion, and a number of young athletes who were trying to improve quickly before someone more connected replaced them.

Sam remained unaware of most of this.

He was busy counting passes and developing flawless footwork.

The squads were not strong enough to train only against themselves, so they entered the local league in two separate but evenly balanced teams. At first, this was painful. Experienced clubs beat them regularly and with cheerful disrespect. The women lost early matches, then learned, adjusted, and began to dominate. The men took longer. They improved week by week, first becoming difficult to beat, then unpleasant to play against, then dominant.

They eventually beat everyone.

Everyone except the Army.

The Army team was not called the Army team officially. Officially, they had a proper club name involving duty, discipline, and a bird of prey. No one used it. They were the Army. Everyone knew it. They arrived together, warmed up together, shouted together, and looked at opponents as if civilian volleyball were a generous concession but well beneath them. They were arrogant, but able to back it up with performance.

They were powerful, athletic, intimidating, and experienced. Several of them, in pure volleyball terms, should have been in Sam's national squad. Unfortunately, a local rule, or perhaps a local excuse wearing the uniform of a rule, prevented them from joining the programme.

This frustrated Sam and he never knew what the real reason was.

He looked at their height, jumping, strength, and aggression and saw the missing pieces that he really needed to develop a squad that might challenge the best in the Pacific.

They looked at Sam and saw a skinny foreign coach teaching national players to warm up like schoolchildren.

The relationship was not promising.

Six weeks before the South Pacific Games, someone proposed a special test match, the national squad that had been surprising people with how quickly they had improved, against the Army.

Sam loved the idea. He saw opportunity. The Army would provide pressure, power, noise, and exactly the kind of physical test his players needed. Better still, if the match went well, perhaps some of the Army players might be persuaded to join the national programme after all.

This was Sam at his optimistic best. He thought that humiliation could be used as a recruitment tool. History would suggest otherwise had he been around to learn it.

He studied the Army's game carefully. They loved power. They enjoyed hitting hard through people. They were used to opponents backing away, flinching, arguing, or admiring them from safe distances. But they had weaknesses. Their serve reception was loose under pressure, especially from deep into the corners. They did not like being made to move backwards. Their hitters became less terrifying when forced to attack from poor positions. Also, since most local teams feared their attack, they had rarely faced organised blocking designed to take away their favourite angles and a back court defence that covered the gaps.

Sam prepared accordingly.

For two weeks, his squad served deep. Then deeper. Then deeper again, until they were able to consistently hit the back corners with a float that often died onto the baselines rather than float beyond them. They worked on blocking lines, defensive positions, transition plays, covering tips, and not looking frightened when large men jumped at them with violent intentions.

"Do not admire them," Sam said.

The players nodded. "If you admire them, you will forget to defend."

They nodded again, "and if they shout?"

One of the setters smiled. "We shout inside?"

"No," Sam said. "You pass the ball where it needs to go."

This became the plan.

Use speed and our ability to jump and hang and then pass the ball where it needs to go to do the job. Do not admire the Army. "They are actually not that good compared to the teams that you will have to play soon." This was Sam's final word.

On the day of the match, the gymnasium felt different before anyone touched a ball. The Army arrived with numbers: players, substitutes, friends, senior officers, junior officers, men who looked

like they had not smiled since independence, and supporters who treated warm-up as an extension of military policy.

They were loud, very loud. The kind of loud that enters the chest before it reaches the ears. They wanted to intimidate and they were good at it.

The national squad warmed up in lines, pairs, and stations. Sam had taught them a structured routine, and they followed it carefully: mobility, movement, pepper, serving, hitting patterns, blocking footwork. It was sensible, progressive, and entirely mockable.



The Army supporters found it hilarious.

When the national players lunged, they laughed.

When they shuffled, they laughed louder.

When one young middle blocker hit long during warm-up, a roar went up as if the war had already been won.

Sam watched his players' faces change. Good, he thought. Then he corrected himself. We need to be careful now.

There is useful anger and there is stupid anger. Sam had seen both. Useful anger sharpens attention. Stupid anger turns setters into philosophers and hitters into artillery. His team needed edge, not explosion.

He gathered them before the first serve.

"They want you to be emotional," he said. "Do not give them the easy version of you."

The captain looked across the net. "They laughing now," he said quietly.

"Yes," Sam said. "Let them enjoy the warm-up."

The match began. The Army had expected resistance but they did not expect organisation. This was a new concept for them.

The first deep serve pushed their passer backwards. The second did the same. On the third rally, their outside hitter received a poor set, launched himself into the air, and met two national blockers who had arrived on time, with hands pressed over the net and no interest in his reputation.

The ball came straight down.

The gymnasium changed temperature.

The national team did not cheer wildly. Sam had warned them about that too. They turned, reset, and served again.

That irritated the Army more than celebration would have.

Point by point, the plan worked. The national squad served deep, defended patiently, blocked aggressively, and refused to be impressed. When the Army hit hard, the ball came back. When they tried to tip, someone was waiting. When they shouted, the national players breathed, passed, and played the next contact.

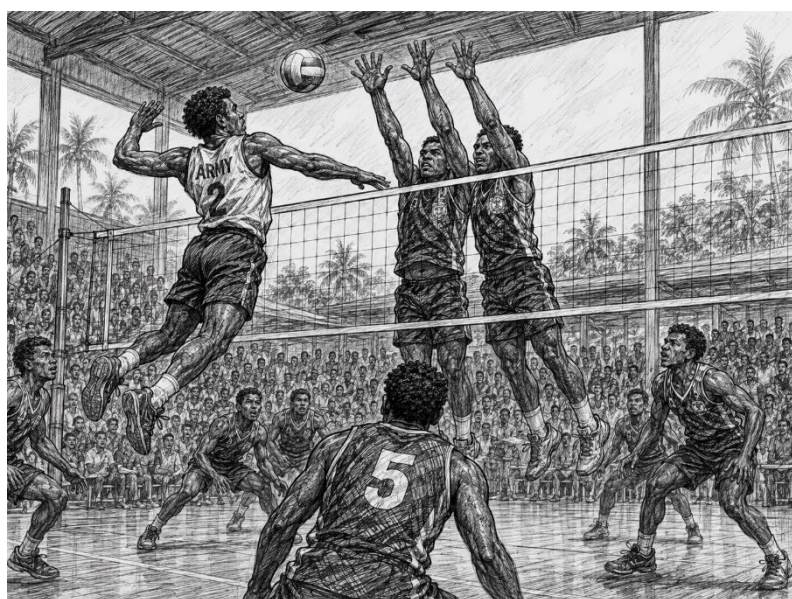
Sam stood near the bench trying to look calm.

Inside, he was conducting an orchestra, a weather system, and a small nervous breakdown.

The first set went to the national squad.

The Army laughed less.

The second set was worse for them.



Their frustration became visible. They argued with each other. They hit harder and less intelligently. They served as if the ball had personally offended them. One middle blocker tried to intimidate Sam by staring across the court after a disputed touch.

Sam, who had seen it all before, was not easily improved by staring. "Good eyes," he said.

The player did not understand him. That was probably best.

By the third set, the match was no longer a contest. It had become a lesson, and

unfortunately the Army were not students who enjoyed feedback. The national squad were winning cleanly and before the third set was halfway finished, the Army team simply left the court and took their supporters with them.

A narrow win could have been dismissed. A lucky win could have been argued away. A clean win, in front of officers, supporters, and girlfriends, was not a volleyball result, it was an insult.

Sam shook hands with the referee, then turned toward the Army team.

The Army players gathered their things and left, followed by supporters whose faces had changed from noisy confidence to something colder. Words were shouted in the local language. Sam understood none of them, but tone is one of the world's more reliable translators.

The national players went quiet. This was Sam's first warning. His second warning was that none of them smiled.

They had just beaten the best team in the league. They should have been laughing, jumping, teasing, inventing heroic retellings of events that had occurred five minutes earlier. Instead, they packed slowly and watched the doors.

Sam, still operating under the dangerous influence of coaching logic, decided this was a good time for a team meeting.

“Bring it in,” he said.

The players looked at him. “Now?”

“Yes, a quick review,” he ordered.

They sat in the main hall of the gymnasium. Sam began with positives. He spoke about serving pressure, block timing, defensive discipline, and emotional control. He was perhaps thirty seconds into what might have become a very useful review when the first rock hit the corrugated iron roof.

Bang.

Everyone stopped.

Sam looked up.

Bang.

Another.

Then several.

Bang-bang-bang-bang.

The noise was enormous. Corrugated iron does not receive rocks quietly. It turns each one into a booming announcement.

Sam stood. “I’ll see who’s doing that.”

The nearest player grabbed his arm. “No, Coach.”

Sam frowned. “They’re throwing rocks at the roof.”

“Yes.”

“So I’ll tell them to stop.”

Several players looked at him with the sadness reserved for brave men about to become examples.

“It’s the Army,” the captain said.

Sam paused.

Outside, the roof exploded into sound.

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

The rocks came harder now, faster, bouncing, clattering, sliding, striking the iron above them with a fury that filled the hall. The players moved away from the walls and sat together near the middle. No one panicked. No one ran. No one suggested calling anyone. There was no one to call who would arrive before the rocks stopped, and perhaps no one who wanted to be involved even if they did.

Sam sat down slowly. This went against every instinct he had. He came from a world where problems were confronted, complaints were lodged, committees were notified, rules were invoked,

and someone in authority was expected to be embarrassed into action. He had not yet fully absorbed that, in some places, authority might be the source of the rocks.

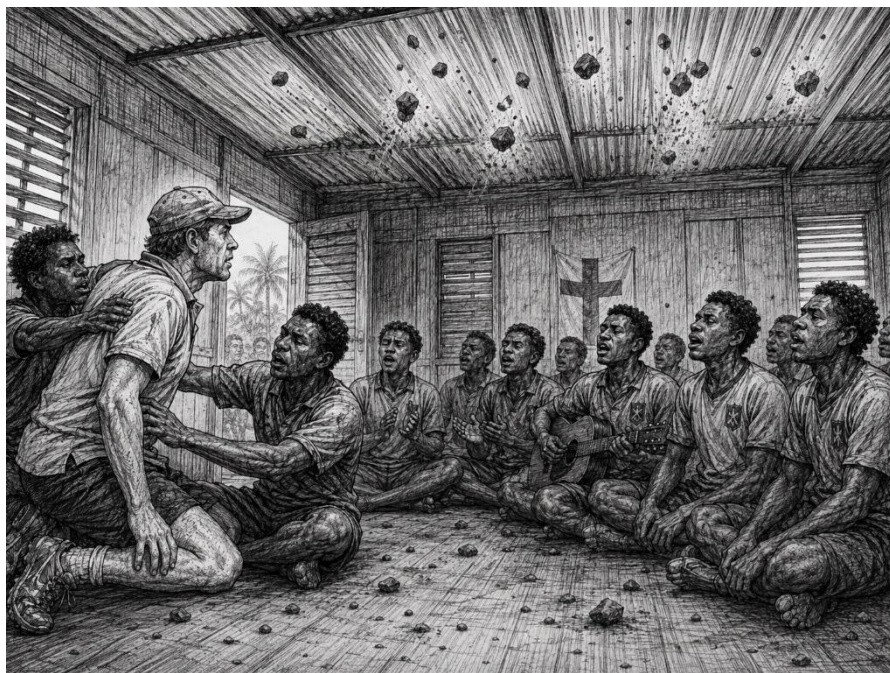
The bombardment continued. Five, ten, fifteen minutes.

The roof shook with each strike. Dust drifted down. Somewhere outside, men shouted and laughed. Inside, the national squad sat quietly, their faces calm in a way that made Sam feel both proud and useless.

He had trained them to handle hostile serving. He had not trained them to cope with artillery.

After twenty minutes, one of the younger players began to sing.

At first it was barely audible beneath the rocks. A church hymn, low and steady. Another voice joined. Then another. Soon the whole team was singing.



Sam sat among them as the roof thundered.

The contrast was so strange that he would never forget it. Outside, anger. Inside, harmony. Outside, wounded pride. Inside, steady breath, shared rhythm, voices rising into the noise until the rocks no longer had any significance in their lives.

Sam did not know the words but he knew the lesson.

The players were not pretending nothing was happening. They knew exactly what was happening and that fear did not have to be given the final sound.

So they sang.

For thirty or forty minutes, the rocks came. Then they slowed. Then stopped. A final stone struck the roof, rolled down the iron, and dropped outside with a small, almost embarrassed clatter.

No one moved. The team kept singing for a little while longer with increasingly cheerful rhythm.

Then they sat and waited.

Sam wanted to leave now but learned that patience was a necessity now. He wanted to congratulate the team for showing so much character. He also wanted to apologise to the team for putting them through this. Then he thought he wanted, briefly, to find every Army player and explain sportsmanship in terms so clear that even heavily armed pride might understand it.

He did none of these things. He sat and while this was difficult for him, he felt it best to follow the lead of his team. After an hour, the captain stood. "Now we can go."

They left together, quietly, not as frightened boys but as a team. No speeches, celebrations or heroic gestures. Just bags over shoulders, eyes open, moving through the night with the discipline they had shown on court and under the roof.

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Sam walked with them, feeling older than he had at the start of the match.

He had wanted the Army players to join the programme. That idea was now dead, buried, and possibly guarded.

He had also learned that beating the top dogs was not always respected. Sometimes it was treated as an invitation for trouble. In coaching books, improvement led to recognition. In real life, improvement could threaten people who had built their status on everyone else remaining slightly afraid.

Still, there was something good inside the mess.

His team had played beautifully. They had followed a plan under pressure. They had refused to be intimidated on court and when intimidation followed them off court, they had not answered anger with anger.

They had answered with song.

Six weeks later, at the South Pacific Games, Sam would remember that night. He would remember sitting in the middle of the hall while the roof shook and the players sang.

That was when he understood that courage did not always look like confrontation.

Sometimes courage was staying seated.

Sometimes it was keeping your voice steady.

Sometimes it was knowing exactly when not to walk out the door.

Sam Calder had taught them to serve deep, block hard, and defend long.

They had taught him when to sit still.

About the Author



Brian Minikin graduated with Honours in Physical Education from the University of Western Australia at a time when there was little work in the field of sport or sports science outside of the school system or Universities. He chased a career that saw him at the University of Adelaide, The Federal Department of Finance in Canberra, the Department of Sport and Recreation, The Australian Institute of Sport, The Tasmanian Institute of Sport, The Australian Sports Commission, the Tonga National Olympic Committee, the Oceania National Olympic Committees before moving onto to academic positions at the University of Kent, the University of Stirling and Chengdu University.

He spent many years coaching and training athletes across a number of different sports including a period spanning 30 years working or volunteering in sport across all of its aspects throughout the Pacific Region.