

**CONTROLLED
CRASH:
THE
MISADVENTURES
OF A YOUNG
SAILOR
BY SID BREMAN**

**Finding Fun and
Excitement While
Pursuing Happiness
and Success in the
United States Navy**

**PARTIAL SUMMARY OF
MISADVENTURES**

“Sir, during the 25 months I have served in the Navy, I have spent 19 of those months in the Combat Zone. During that time, I survived a helicopter crash in the South China Sea, been shot at by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Regulars many times, also taken fire, on more than one occasion, from the ARVNs and almost took a rocket from.....

Sid Breman responding to a charge of disrespect to a senior officer.

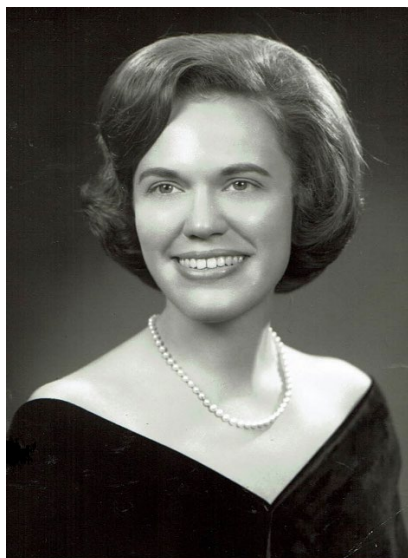
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Cover Graphics by Sally Butzow

Dedication

This volume is dedicated to Pat, who
waited.



Printed in the United States of America

About the Author



Sid Breman served for 46 months in the United States Navy from August, 1964 until June 1968, twenty of those months were served in the Combat Zone. He survived a helicopter crash into the South China Sea in 1965, and was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal, with Combat "V," for his participation in Operation Swanee in August 1966. Sid is a CPA. He holds an MBA, Univ. of Pitt, and a BA, Gettysburg College. His wife, Pat, and he have been married for 56 years. They live in Delray Beach, Fl. They have one son, Eddie. Sid and Pat met on the playground at Leechburg Elementary School in Leechburg, Pa., probably in 1948. Previously published works include "Parallel

Streams”, “Gwydi: A Wild Goose Tale”, and
“Operation Swanee and the Ghost Boat at
the Mythical Bridge”.

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Chapter: Making A Good First Impression

March 23, 1965: I was running across the flight deck of the USS Coral Sea half carrying and half dragging my two suitcases and one overnight bag. Just before being pushed through an open hatch, I paused for a second to take it all in.

Aft, aircraft were being recovered and forward they were being launched. The plane in which we had arrived was being towed towards the flight elevator, probably for some quick maintenance for a minor mishap upon landing. I was still trying to catch my breath after that experience.

Men in different colored, long sleeved shirts, yellow, red, green, blue, and more, were running, pushing, and working on aircraft. No one was standing still, and everyone seemed to know what they were doing.

The noise was one step away from unbearable. There must have been a dozen aircraft engines running at the same time, in various stages of starting up or shutting down. Most of the men were wearing noise cancelling headgear that looked like headphones. They were called "Mouse Ears" because, with the right amount of imagination, they appeared to be wearing Mickey Mouse hats.

Then there was the environment. The temperature that day was probably 90+ degrees and the humidity over 90%. In the 10 seconds it took to cross the deck, I had already begun to sweat. The wind that hit us as we

crossed the deck was stronger than anything I had ever experienced. It felt as strong as the wind you would feel while riding a motorcycle. The assault on my senses ended when the officer behind me pushed me through hatchway and slammed the hatch shut. The world was, relatively, quiet for the moment. I did not know it at the time, but tomorrow would be the first day of combat operations for the Task Force.

“Do not go out there unless you absolutely have to.” our escort said, “You can get maimed or dead very quickly”.

Our escort led us through a maze of passageways while giving us the basics we would need to survive during our brief stay. He showed us the wardroom we could use for meals and the times food was served. At the head, he gave us a quick lesson on how to take a shipboard shower. Get wet and turn the water off, get soapy without the water running, rinse quickly. The object was to use as little water as possible. Water was a precious commodity. He left us in a stateroom with two bunks that had clean sheets and told us to be ready to leave by mid-morning tomorrow.

Before he left, we asked him what ship we were on. He gave us a weird look and said “You’re on the USS Coral Sea and, by the way, we are at General Quarters so be

very careful where you go. This is not a drill going on up there.”¹

My traveling partner and I looked at each other and together we said “Wow!! What a hell of a experience this has been!”. The date was March 23, 1965.

Time to back up a little.

I have referred to “we” and “us” a few times now so let me clarify to whom I am referring. “We” are two ensigns who completed Officers Candidate School, Newport, RI in December 1964. Both of us received orders to the Staff of the Commander of the Seventh Fleet, homeported in Yokosuka, Japan aboard the Flagship USS Oklahoma City. Out of the thirty men in my section at OCS, I felt I had one of the most exciting assignments. My traveling partner was in another Company at OCS, and he felt the same way.

After Christmas leave, we attended eight weeks of Communication School at Newport, RI to give us the basic skills we would need as Top-Secret Crypto Officers. There is a job title that will get your attention.

¹ We were on the USS Coral Sea, part of Task Force 77, which was participating in the opening days of Operation Rolling Thunder. Other carriers in Task Force 77 were USS Ranger and USS Hancock. The bombing campaign began on March 2, 1965 and would continue until October 1968. Some sources reference March 24, 1965 as the first day of the Coral Sea launched aircraft in Rolling Thunder. Additionally, Navy photographers were on hand to record the events of March 24, 1965.

The downside was spending another eight weeks in the classroom. Both of us had just about enough classrooms for a while. Our lives have been spent in classrooms. First, elementary and high school, then college and we thought we thought we were done with it. However, OCS turned out to be nothing more than another semester of college without the personal freedom we had all enjoyed as undergrads. Again, we thought we were done with it, but no, another eight weeks.

With Communications School finished and our Top-Secret clearance completed, we drove, in two cars, from Newport to my home in Leechburg, PA for a last visit with my family. I left my car with my family (great car, 1955 Oldsmobile, white on baby blue, 4 door hardtop, never saw it again) and we loaded our gear into my traveling partner's 55 Pontiac, 2 door hardtop and headed for Los Angeles, CA where he lived.

We did a little sight-seeing on the way, making stops at the Indianapolis Speedway, the Will Rogers Museum, and the Grand Canyon. Saw the St. Louis Arch under construction as we crossed the Mississippi River. Twelve hours of driving per day got us to L.A. in five days.

I spent four days on my own in the City of Angles. I was probably the first time in my life that I was a solo tourist. The first day I went to Hollywood and Vine for the Walk of Fame, Grauman's Chinese Theatre and the La Brea Tar Pits. Grauman's is not as popular today, but to

someone who grew up in the 40's and 50's, it was the place where the stars left their mark. Next was a trip to Disney Land.

Call me naïve, but I was surprised that I had not seen any movie stars other than Mickey and Minnie. After two days of looking, I resigned myself to the fact that you did not see movie stars out on the street and that there was not going to be movie set on every street corner. The next day I was going to see the Pacific Ocean for the first time. All my information sources said go the Santa Monica Pier.

I got there early with the thought that I might be able to try a little surfing, but as I crossed over the bridge to the pier, I spotted an old Indian Motorcycle that looked like it was brand new. It had a California Highway Patrol emblem on the gas tank. It did not seem right that the CHIPs would be driving a 30-year-old bike. I started looking around and saw a 1938 Cadillac limousine. I had done it. I stumbled onto a movie set!

The movie was "Inside Daisy Clover"² and I spent the next two day watching the action, but I would not learn the title of the movie until two years later when I accidentally saw the movie (I went into the theater without knowing what was playing).

Then it was time to resume our travels.

² *Inside Daisy Clover* based on the book by Gavin Lambert starring Natalie Wood, released December 1965.

In a rented car, we drove up State-Route 1 through The Big Sur on our way to San Francisco. There we boarded a MATS (Military Air Transportation Service) Lockheed Constellation, a four engine, propeller driven, passenger aircraft. The trip, start to finish, was over 44 hours with four stops before we got to Japan. During the flight, I read "Grapes of Wrath", the whole book and still had time to do other reading. By the time we checked into the BOQ at the Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, I am not sure either of us knew our names. We slept most of the next 24 hours.

When our brains caught up with our bodies, we reported to the ComSeventhFleet office on the Base where we met the Admin Officer Ashore, a very pleasant and attractive WAV Lt. J.G. She welcomed us warmly, gave us some sight-seeing tips and told us to check in every morning until she had arranged transportation to the USS Oklahoma City which was currently at sea.

As it was still early, we took off to see Tokyo. On the way we discussed all the possibilities as to how we would be put aboard the ship while it was at sea. We were hoping to be able to walk aboard from a pier.

The next day we flew to Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines. This is where I first experienced the heat and humidity that would become part of my daily life in the coming years. It was not much worse than football practice in August in Western Pennsylvania, just more consistent.

The next day we checked in at the Cubi Point Air Station and were given a COD (Carrier on Delivery) flight for the next day. By now, my travel partner and I had established the fact that 1. We got along and were pleasant travel companions and 2. We had distinctly different ideas about what constituted entertainment. We were friends, but we did not pal-around.

I went down to the recreation beach where I saw some small sail boats. I knew nothing about sailing, but, hey, that never stopped me before. Luckily, I met another Ensign who did, and we sailed out to Grande Island. Except in a swimming pool, I had never seen water so clear. Nor had I ever seen tropical fish in nature.

Our COD flight was ready the next morning and we carted our six pieces of luggage, two large and one small for each of us, out to the twin engine Grumman C-1A Trader warming up on the tarmac. There were six other passengers which made it a full flight. Since we would be landing on a carrier, I would have preferred a lighter load. The takeoff was smooth, but I knew the landing would be a little different. The anticipation of a carrier landing added to my normal flight anxiety.³

The best description I have heard about a carrier landing is that it is a “controlled crash”. The aircraft literally “crashes” into the carrier and the damage is minimalized when the tail hook catches and stops the

³ My anxiety was justifiably earned, but, again, it never stopped me. More on that later.

aircraft. If the tailhook does not catch the wire, then.... I did not want to think about it.

In military aircraft, everyone sits facing the tail, a different feeling from civilian planes. I was sitting in the third seat, aft, port side. There was a window, but all I could see was the port engine and a thin strip of the South China Sea below. We did not know it, but we were headed for Dixie Station, located at 11° 00' N, 110° 00' E, around which Task Force 77 steamed.⁴

The flight was over four hours long. When I felt the aircraft descending, I watched that thin strip of water below us, and I could see the wake of the carrier. We were coming down and coming down and coming down for what seemed like a very long time. I decided to stop looking out the window and keep my head and neck straight. I glad I did because I was not prepared for what came next.

The noise generated inside the aircraft by decelerating from 100 miles per hour to zero in one second exceed anything I had heard to that point in my life. My knees flew into my chest and my torso was pressed deep into the seat. Then it was all over. The hatch opened and we were hustled away. We had landed on the USS Coral Sea.

⁴ "Except during the period in 1965 and 1966 when the aircraft carrier supporting operations in the South sailed at Dixie Station, the carrier task force was deployed at Yankee Station (after April 1966 at 1730'N 10830'E)." Naval History and Heritage Command, *By Sea, Air and Land: Chapter 3 The Years of Combat 1965-1968*

Now we are back to March 23, 1965.

One of the reasons, but not the most important, I joined the Navy was that I wanted some excitement in my life. Like many Americans who grew up in small towns, I found my life dull and unexciting. I wanted more. College provided the promise and opportunity, but, my grades were so poor, I spent all my time studying. That did change.

After two solid years without a break, I threw the towel in and dropped out for a semester and got a job. I do not know what happened during the first five months of 1962, but when I returned to college everything had changed. Grades came easy and I had time to begin enjoying life. The last three years⁵ had been great (a blast), and I wanted to keep it going. The Navy offered travel, seeing new things and new places. The Army and Air Force were more set in one location. Or so, I thought.

The Navy's biggest advertisement was "Join the Navy and See the World". What they do not tell you is that 75%, the oceans, of the World looks the same all over. I would learn that shortly.

So far, the Navy was delivering on the "See the World" and excitement ⁶ promises. For three and a half weeks I had traveled halfway around the world and seen things that I never would have normally seen. As a matter of

⁵ Yes, I crammed four years of education into five years of concentrated study.

⁶ I would shortly learn that all "excitement" is not necessarily pleasant and enjoyable. Some is downright scary and undesirable.

fact, the Navy experience was exceeding my expectations. Now we were set to complete that last leg of this twelve, thousand, mile trip with a two-mile helicopter flight.

March 24, 1965

The next morning, we were up early and ready to go. I considered this day to be the first working day of my Navy Career. The previous seven months had just been preparation and training. Some people may be tempted to say that a Navy Career starts the day you are sworn in and report for active duty. I would say that everything I had done up to this point was like packing for a trip and I do not consider “packing” to be part of the trip. At least, that is the way I felt on the morning of March 24, 1965. Attitudes and opinions like that are subject to change.

As we came topside, we could see that the Task Force was in the middle of an Underway Replenishment which made the flight deck busier than it had been the day before. Additionally, crews were arming aircraft and pilots were performing preflight checks. There was a small “waiting room” at the base of the aircraft carrier’s island. It was small, like most spaces on a warship, dark and noisy. I was working up a sweat just sitting there. I was not sure if it was anxiety and anticipation or the heat of the day. We were wearing our tropical khaki uniforms, short sleeve, open neck, cotton. We had

considered wearing dress khakis, but they were too heavy, and we would have been sweat soak before we reached the Oklahoma City.

After about an hour, a yellow shirt with mouse ears and tinted goggles motioned for us to come out. He pointed us to a helicopter that was ready for takeoff. We hustled, carried, or dragged our six bags behind us. As we entered, the crew chief helped us put on Mae West Vests and motioned us to sit down. He was wearing a helmet that had a microphone in front of his mouth. Our gear was stowed on the port side, and we sat on the starboard side. The crew chief sat in a jump seat on the port side.

He was not directly across from us. He was a little to our right. He said nothing. Just motioned for us to buckle-up.

We took off. It was a totally different flight experience, not a rush down a runway, but a gentle rise in the air then slowly moving in a gentle arc away from the carrier. To myself, I said "This is flying!" It was what I always thought flying should be.

At about 500 feet, the pilot banked to the right. I leaned forward to see out the starboard hatch, which was open. Laid out before us was what looked like the entirety of Task Force 77. There were two super carriers, the USS Coral Sea, and the USS Ranger, steaming side by side. Flanking them on either side was an armada of destroyers and auxiliary ships in the

process of an underway replenishment. The sight was overpowering, and I know my mouth was hanging open. Very few people would ever have the opportunity to see a sight like this.

The chopper bank again, this time to the left. The pilot was flying straight and level preparing to land on the cruiser which must have been directly in front of us. I could feel the aircraft descending. "Show time!" I thought to myself.

I heard a sound like a giant champagne cork popping and the crew chief jumped up, threw open the port hatch and kicked our luggage out of the aircraft. I thought "That is not the way to offload luggage." I stood up to reach for one of my bags as it disappeared, but the crew chief motioned "sit down". Before I could comply, the helicopter hit the water and I was knocked back into my seat. We had crashed into the South China Sea.

The port hatch was wide open, and my only thought was to get out of the aircraft. I thought it was about to explode. But the crew chief blocked my path and he said "No! Wait for the rotor to stop!". I looked out and up and could see that the rotor was still turning. The crew chief saved my life because, had I jumped out, the chopper would have rolled on top of me and the rotor, possibly, would have cut me in half.

Now the three of us stood motionless watching the rotor turn. I inflated my Mae West Vest. "NO!" the crew chief

screamed. “NOT UNTIL WE ARE OUTSIDE THE CRAFT”. Dumb mistake on my part, number two. It was almost as if I was trying to kill myself.

And then something happened that made me calm down. The helicopter was floating straight up, like a rubber ducky in a bathtub. This was not real. This was a dream, and I am going to wake up any second. Yes, this is a dream.

I watched the water creep on to the deck. We were settling slowly, and the rotor was still turning, slowly. What will happen if we sink and the rotor is still turning? But then, this was just a dream. The water flowed across the deck and was getting deeper. Then my shoes filled up with water and I realized “This is not a dream!”. We were sinking quickly.

We were not going straight down, rather we were listing to port. What I did not know was that there were emergency, inflatable floatation devices on the aircraft. They were about the size of 55-gallon oil drums, and they did not always inflate equally. Hence, the listing to port.

When the water was about knee high, the list was great enough that the whirling rotor struck the surface of the water, and we were immediately under water. Now we could exit the craft. I was last out and underwater. In the next three seconds I said 100 prayers, twice. I wanted the Mae West Vest to be buoyant enough to keep me afloat, but not so buoyant that I would drown because I

was plastered against the bulkhead and could not get out. The crew chief, who was in front of me, had a lot of help from me getting out.

Much to my surprise, when I got out, I was standing on the port side of the fuselage. The beast had rolled over on her side. In the next few seconds, I was able to take in the scene before me. The crew chief and my travel partner were already about ten yards away from the chopper. The pilot and co-pilot were twenty and thirty yards away. Both were in small, one man, rubber rafts and they were spreading orange dye markers. To my right I could see a destroyer heading towards us. The water was as blue as it could possibly be. I was almost calm. I had survived the crash and would soon be picked up either by boat or aircraft.

What happened next ripped all those thoughts out of my mind and threw me into a state of panic that almost, again, ended my life.

A quick aside: I have two brothers, one older and one younger and, to this day, we share a phobia. We fear being in any body of water alone. If we are alone, we feel that something was about to grab us and pull us under. Partly because of this phobia, I became a strong swimmer (I also became a strong swimmer because I enjoyed it). I was a certified Lifesaver before I was old enough to receive the certificate and I taught swimming for three years in our local Boy Scouts Swimming Program. I was a great swimmer..... if there was someone else in the water. They could be drowning and

that was fine. I could jump in and save them. But I could not go in alone. Now back to me standing on the port side of the chopper.

Without warning, the beast rolled over on her back. The port floatation device had inflated. I was thrown off the chopper which was now between me and the rest of the survivors. I was alone, in an ocean where there was a real possibility of something grabbing me and pulling me under. My brain froze along with my breathing and any control over my body. My eyesight was fading and being replaced by a bright light that made all the colors fade and become transparent.

Then a voice, which I heard clearly and distinctly, said “Sid, you better get a hold of yourself, or you are going to die.”

I snapped back to reality and my Lifesaving training kicked in. It was as if I could hear the instructor. “Someday you may find yourself in deep water quite unexpectedly and you will be fully clothed. Your clothes will slow down your movements, but you can stay afloat. If you do not have a floatation device, you can make one using your clothes. Keep your shoes. You may need them later. Look for an exit. Swim towards safety.”

For the first time, I could feel the water. It was warm, like bathwater. Now I looked around, but could not see anyone, only the overturned chopper. I considered swimming back to it and climbing aboard, but I heard

the whirl of rotors above me. A large, two rotor helicopter was moving into position to pick me up. The crew was lowering a cable with a loop on the end. I swam about twenty yards to the loop.

My first attempt failed as I was just hanging onto the



Figure 1 March 24, 1965: Sid Breman being picked up by a Navy Sea Knight helicopter. The origin of this photograph is unknown, but probably came from the Navy photographers.

loop and fell off shortly after I was airborne. Back in the water, I could see one of the crewmen making motions with his hands. He was telling me to put my arms

through the loop and place it around my body. I did. It worked.

Back on the Coral Sea, we were taken to sick bay. An orderly came in with robes and towels and asked for our clothes. He said he would have them run through the laundry as quickly as possible. A doctor followed the orderly. He entered with a large warm smile and asked how we were doing. There was a quick exam and eardrops to guard against infection from sea water. He stayed with us for several minutes and asked us about what happened. He left us with the impression that he genuinely cared about us.

When I came out of the shower, the orderly came back with the personal possessions I had left in my wet uniform. He gave me my wallet that had my I.D. card and three, dollar bills, a zippo cigarette lighter and a Parker Pen set (I still have the Parker Penn set). I look at the entirety of my worldly possessions contained in the palm of my right hand. I prayed that this was the poorest I would ever be.

Suddenly I was exhausted. I crawled into an open bunk and rolled towards the bulkhead. Before I fell completely asleep, I started shivering. Perhaps I was cold, perhaps it was the excess adrenaline working its way out of my body. Someone covered me with a blanket. I was dead asleep in seconds.

Later that day: With our clean clothes we were back in the flight deck waiting room, expecting to catch a

helicopter ride before the end of flight operations.

Patience, we waited.

The yellow shirt stuck his head through the hatch and said, "Room for one."

The noise level was such that I had to read his lips. My travel partner tapped me on the shoulder. I nodded and got up and trotted to the aircraft. I would later find out that he tapped me and said, "I'll go." I'm glad I did not hear him because the next day he was transferred by highline to the Oklahoma City. I watched the operation. It did not look like fun.

The helicopter made it this time. But heavy seas made it impossible to land on the fantail, so I was lowered by cable. My anxiety level was off the scale during the short flight. I, of course, was convinced I was going into the water again. If memory serves me correctly, the crew chief had to pry my hands off the seat. In the loop, I misjudged the distance from my feet to the deck below and slipped out of the harness prematurely. I fell the last ten feet.

It would have been nice to do a picture, perfect dismount. You know, landing feet together, arms outstretched and a smile on my face. Instead I fell in a heap on the deck and scrambled, crab like, to the edge of the landing pad. I probably would have kept crabbing all the way to the bow of the ship, but I ran into the legs of a Commander who was watching the landing. Our

earlier performance had drawn a group of spectators who wanted to see it happen again.

From my crab position, I looked up. The Commander smiled and said, “Welcome Aboard.” First impressions are important even during a misadventure.



Figure 2 May 7, 2018: National Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, Florida: Sid Breman standing beside a Seasprite helicopter, the type in which he crashed, and below a Sea Knight, the type that rescued him.

Chapter: The View from Here

This is a good place to take a side trip and discuss what you will find and what you will not find in this volume. First, what you Will Not Find.

One of the first lessons the Navy teaches Officer Candidates is behavior in social situation. Unlike the Civilian world, there is no concept of being “Off Duty”. As an officer you are always “On Duty”. Civilians can have a “personal life”. Navy Officers do not. When an individual swears to (or affirms) the enlistment Oath of

Office, they are ceding their rights under the Constitution of the United States and are then governed by the Military Code of Justice.⁷ (“To err is human. To forgive divine. Neither of which is in Navy Regs.” Anonymous)

So, what are the guidelines in situation that would be considered “social” in the Civilian world? Rule Number 1, Senior officers should never act as if they are senior. Junior officers should never forget that they are junior. That maximum alone will keep you out of most sticky situations. Combine that with Rule Number 2, in all “social” gatherings and especially in the Wardroom, an officer should never initiate nor contribute to topics dealing with religion, politics or the virtue of a lady. The combination of these two rules should keep a “socially” conscious officer out of trouble.

In this volume, Rule Number 1 does not apply. We can ignore it. However, I will adhere to Rule number 2, Religious and political discussions cause nothing but conflict and derision and that will add nothing to the topic of “Misadventures”. The virtue of a lady should remain Her business. Public discussion is inappropriate. Therefore, you will find nothing here that will sully a lady’s virtue.

What you Will Find in this volume.

⁷ Legal authorities may disagree with this position, but I would not advise arguing it while on Active Duty.

Earlier I alluded to the fact that I was looking for excitement when I joined the Navy. I considered most of my existence through the end of high school to have been dull and routine and I looked forward to the excitement of college. Unfortunately, the first two years of college turned out to be a living hell. Looking back on those days, I still view them as being the worst of my life. I would take another tour in Vietnam than repeat them.

During that time, I studied as hard as I possibly could and consistently spent the whole semester “underwater” which means my grade point average was always less than 2.0 ⁸, a C average. And, I must add here that I was working as hard as I could. Somehow, I would miraculously come through during finals. Life was a daily burden.

Then something changed. I still do not know what it was, but it was glorious. My grades went from 2.0 to 3.0 with half the study time and I started having some great times playing soccer, working at the College radio station, and having a social life. Life was fun and I did not want to lose that great feeling. In my mind, life was exciting.

Back then, I defined excitement as activities and events that I eagerly, enthusiastically, and joyfully pursued. Excitement was the new, the humorous, or just plain

⁸ For the younger generation, the early 1960s were the days of the Gentleman's C. The All-Men's GPA in 1964 was 2.3. These were the days before the Great Grade Inflation brought on by the Vietnam War.

fun. That is what I was looking for in the Navy. Under the heading of “Be Careful What You Wish For” the Navy delivered more excitement than I ever thought I could experience. However, I also discovered that my definition of excitement was incorrect. It was too narrow.

Excitement will always be pursued eagerly and enthusiastically, but not always joyfully and desirable. Excitement is such that you do not always have a choice as to whether you will participate. Sometimes you do and sometimes you do not have that choice.

During my twelve, thousand, mile journey across half the globe, I was a willing participant in the excitement. On the other hand, I was definitely not pursuing a helicopter crash in the South China Sea, but I eagerly and enthusiastically pursued a successful conclusion of that event. Sometime excitement sneaks up on you and you must deal with it.

Long before I left active duty, I had adjusted my definition. Excitement is activities and events that are enthusiastically and eagerly pursued; however, they may be pursued joyfully, frantically, desperately, grudgingly, skillfully, painfully, fearfully, and purposely. You can continue to add as many adjectives as you like. The point is that excitement cannot be confined to one emotion. Excitement is triggered by a flood of sensory inputs which overwhelm the brain or the anticipation of an impending sensory overload. You

may like or dislike the sensory inputs, but you must deal with them.

Joy and fear are relatives, part of the same spectrum of emotions. Both can be experienced through an exciting event, sometimes separately, sometimes together.

Among the other aspects of excitement I learned in the Navy is that an individual can actively initiate or passively experience excitement. It is like a chess game where you actively make a move and then passively wait for your opponent. Excitement can also be slow, where you savor the anticipation or fast and unexpected like my first ride in a helicopter. We humans seek it, constantly. Many of us become adrenaline junkies just looking for our next high.

With that foundation of what constitutes excitement, let us move on to adventures and misadventures.

Adventures almost always involve a journey, physical or mental, which is anticipated to be or purposely designed to be exciting. Adventures are always unusual and often take the participants into unknown territory. The best adventures are well planned and equipped.

Misadventures are adventures gone astray. The causes are many, poor planning, outside interference, Karma, or unexpected circumstances. Many definitions include the word “unfortunate” when referring to misadventures. However, this paragraph does not capture the essence of my perspective on misadventures.

A misadventure occurs when an adventure does not progress as planned or anticipated. The results and/or outcomes may be the same or altered from what was originally planned and may or may not be desirable. The “unfortunate” classification of any results or outcomes will be in the eye of the beholder and that opinion may be altered over time. The participants and spectators are often too close, in proximity and time, to truly understand what happened.

Misadventures are not inherently unfortunate, negative, evil, malignant, or maleficent. Nor are they always good, joyful, or celebratory happenings. They are just events in which you are involved that are unfolding and evolving and may be partially or completely out of your control.

Adventures and Misadventures do not always occur in isolation. Sometime an adventure starts and then another one starts so you have two adventures going at one time. Adventure number 1 becomes a misadventure and now you have an adventure and a misadventure happening at the same time. These events get tangled together and, at times, it is difficult to tell them apart.

In addition to getting tangled together, adventures and misadventures are also subject to and often evolve into the Russian Doll Syndrome. An adventure starts and then another adventure forms inside the adventure and then one becomes a misadventure and on and on until

you have the Russian Doll with six, seven, eight or more little dolls inside.

This volume contains a series of adventures and misadventures I experienced during my almost four years in the United States Navy. I was either a participant or spectator to everything that I write about. Sometimes I have verification of these events. For others, you will have to rely on my memory.

Where these events become tangled together, I will separate them as best as I can to preserve clarity and simplicity.

I have also included some “Sea Stories”, events that may or may not reach the level of an adventure or misadventure that I found humorous and/or interesting then and now. They are also true.

As a medium for further explanation of misadventures, what follows is a perfect example of one that happened to me before I joined the Navy.

Chapter: A Perfect Misadventure

It all started early on a Friday evening in the Fall of 1963, during my senior year at Gettysburg College. Two of my fraternity brothers and I lingered over after dinner coffee trying to decide what to do with the evening. Our chosen activity was drinking beer, but where and how much had yet to be decided.

Gettysburg College was a dry campus, so even though we, all three, had reached the legal drinking age,

drinking on campus was not a risk we wanted to take.⁹ “How much” was a large consideration because each of us wanted to keep our expenditures to one dollar or less. At that time, one dollar would get you three 12-ounce bottles at the Pub or two quarts at the package store.¹⁰

We had pretty much decided on the two quarts. The “where” was still eluding us. If we had a car, our problem would be solved, but none of us had a car. As the discussion continued, we were joined by two more brothers. And then another one showed up.

Before long, there were over ten of us and someone said we had enough money to buy a quarter keg. That idea generated some real interest and was quickly agreed upon. Everyone threw their money on the table. We were set until someone asked, “Who has a car?”

None of us did. Out of a fraternity of 45 active members, only 5 had cars and, unfortunately, they had all departed for parts unknown. Now time was running out. Soon the package store would close,¹¹ and it was on the southwest side of town. We were on the northeast. Just then I had a brilliant idea (a lot of misadventures start with brilliant ideas about obtaining

⁹ Former students who are younger than me may find it curious that we didn't just drink on campus. They do not understand that prior the rise of S.W.I.N.E. (Students Wildly Indignant about Nearly Everything – thanks to Al Capp, creator of Li'l Abner) college administrations actually enforced rules, like no drinking on campus and legally had the power of “in loco parentis”..

¹⁰ I know this reads like a high school math problem.

¹¹ I don't know what Pennsylvania is like now, but in 1963, the only place you could buy kegs was at a distributor store.

or consuming beer). I owned a Vespa motor scooter. It obviously was not big enough to transport a quarter keg, but it would get me to the package store to make our purchase before closing. By then someone would have found a car.

I was off with a pocket full of money.

I paid for the keg and the attendant carried it out to the parking lot expecting to put it in my car. But the lot was empty except for my little blue Vespa (I still wish I could have gotten a picture of the expression on his face). He put the keg down and I explained that a car was on the way. He chuckled.

Soon the lights were going out in the package store. The attendant came out and locked the door and said “Your buddies just called, and they can’t find a car. A quick call on the pay phone confirmed my situation. They had found a location on the Battlefield next to our campus, but still no transport for the keg. I made a bold decision ¹² to load the keg on the scooter. I told them I would meet them there.

Getting the keg on the Vespa was not as hard as I thought it would be. There was just enough room to lay the keg on its side where my feet would normally go. I was able to keep it steady with my feet wedged gently under either side. The downside was that I could no longer operate the foot brake which was attached to the

¹² Bold decisions about beer also contribute greatly to misadventures.

rear wheel. I would only have the hand brake which stopped the front wheel.

A sudden stop could get messy. But by now I was the proverbial monkey with a fist full of peanuts. The monkey reaches into a narrow-necked bottle and grabs a handful of peanuts. The monkey's fist is too large to fit through the narrow-neck and the monkey is stuck. He refused to let go of the peanuts and must drag the heavy bottle with him.

I did a quick risk assessment before starting off. The biggest danger was hitting a pothole in the dark. I decided to use the main streets that went straight through the middle of town to minimize the pothole risk. The only downside to that route was the three-lane round-about in the center of Gettysburg. It was always jammed on Friday nights. But I could handle it.

The next risk was the police. I did not think I was doing anything illegal but a college student on a Vespa with a quarter keg just might spark the interest of the local officers of the law. I looked at the keg and judged that it was well hidden by the scooter splash pan and my legs from any patrol car I would pass. I was ready.

The evening air was refreshing and clear. I entered Baltimore Street and was able to catch every traffic light green all the way to the round-about, known as the Square (it was not square, it was and is a circle).

Looking at the circle as the face of a clock and traffic moving counter-clockwise, I entered at six o'clock and

could not have timed it more perfectly (even one red light would have thrown the timing off) to pass directly in front of the police car that slowed up to let me enter the traffic pattern. My keg was on full display for them.

I exited the circle at 12 o'clock and since the red and blue lights had not come on maybe they were not following me. If they were following me, they were not going to pull me over. A clear example of 'hope springs eternal'.¹³

They hit the lights when I was in front of the Majestic theater. Either they wanted to clear the circle traffic before hitting the lights or they were laughing so hard they could not hit the button. I was already working on my speech to my parents on how this came about.

"License and registration please" the policeman said.

He reviewed the documents and then asked, "Where are you going tonight?"

"I'm just going out to have a few beers." I said.

"All by yourself?" he asked.

I really did not have an answer and mumbled and stumbled along until he said "Ok". He retreated to his car. I knew there were two of them because I heard the other one laughing.

After a few very suspenseful minutes, the officer returned and gave me my license and registration.

¹³ "An Essay on Man," by Alexander Pope.

“You are free to go. Sorry for the inconvenience. You are not doing anything wrong.” he said.

A silent sigh of relief from my brain. I fiddled around, taking more time than necessary to start the Vespa, hoping the police car would leave before me. When they did not, I look around to see if they were ready to pull out. They were not. They both smiled and waved. It was an “Oh SHIT!” moment. They were going to follow me.

I was heading north on Carlisle Street with the police right behind me, then east at the first corner I came to. For the next 5 minutes, I drove around trying to think of how to lose my Companions-in-Blue. Leaving the city limits was an option, but that would put me in high-speed traffic, and I did not see that as a viable option. Besides, I would have to come back, and they would probably be waiting for me. We could play “Who has more gas in their tank?” but I was sure I would lose that game. And then I had another brilliant idea. Necessity may be the Mother of Invention, but Desperation is the Sire of Cunning. I headed back to Campus.

I used the entrance at the end of West Water Street and followed the road around to Glatfelter Hall. The patrol car was right behind me. At Glatfelter, the road split with the right going past Old Dorm¹⁴. The left branch went

¹⁴ Old Dorm is now Pennsylvania Hall.

straight ahead past the Phi Psi Meeting House¹⁵ and the Plank Gym to West Lincoln Avenue.

Right in front of the Phi Psi Meeting House, the road was blocked by three, sturdy, steel poles. The distance between the poles was too narrow for a car to pass through, but just the right width for a Vespa with a quarter keg to pass through.

I drove about fifty yards and stopped. In the dim light of the evening, I could see two policemen, standing in front of their car having a good laugh. I blew the scooter's horn and disappeared into the night.

My fraternity brothers and I enjoyed an evening on the Battlefield.

All the elements of a misadventure are contained here. There was active initiation, outside interference and unexpected circumstances. There were no unfortunate results, and the process did not go as planned, but the results evolved as intended. No laws were broken, and no one was injured. What more could you ask for from a misadventure? It also had evidence of poor planning, a generous portion of youthful stupidity and alcohol.

¹⁵ Phi Psi Meeting House is now Glatfelter Lodge.

Chapter: Mail Call

I reported aboard to my first duty station mid-afternoon of March 24, 1965, barefoot but for paper slippers, with nothing but the clothes on my back and, thankfully, my orders and pay record.¹⁶ I had fallen the last ten feet to the deck and was down on all fours. The



commander helped me to my feet. He asked, “Are you OK?”

I checked myself for any signs of injury, like blood or broken bones.

*Figure 3 The USS Oklahoma City CLG5.
Naval History and Heritage Command.
K-109598/*

“I think I’m good” I said. “Thanks.”

A Lt.J.G. came up to me and asked my name, then he told me to follow him. The check-in process took the best part of an hour and at the end I was shown to my stateroom. One of my suitcases had been fished out of the water and everything was still wet. Most of the items were ruined, but there were some salvageable work uniforms. I asked around and was able to borrow a pair

¹⁶ We had been told in OCS that if you ever lose your pay record you will not get paid for 6 months.

of shoes that almost fit, a pen, some paper, and an envelope.

Then I sat down and wrote a letter.

August 1963: I was at home visiting my parents before the start of the Fall Semester. My hometown, Leechburg, Pennsylvania, was a small town, with a population of about 5,000 people.¹⁷ It was and is the kind of place where you know everyone and everyone knows you,

While running some errands in the downtown area, I ran into a girl who was three years behind me in school. She was gorgeous then, and she had only improved with time. I was stunned. We talked for a few minutes just catching up on what was going on in our lives. We were not close friends in school, but close enough to speak when we met. I had not seen her for five years. When we parted that day, I was sorry that I would not be home longer. Perhaps another time I thought.

December rolled around fast that year and I was faced with a problem that had to be solved. Otherwise, it would be solved for me. I had to do something about the military Draft because the time for my possible induction was approaching. For those readers who are younger than me, this probably needs some explanation.

¹⁷ Leechburg is much smaller today, around 2,000 people.

The United States has a long history of military conscription, which means that the government tells young men when, where, and how long they will serve in the armed forces. In 1963, the United States Draft, conscription, had been in effect since before World War II and provided many young men with several choices. They could enlist in one of the armed forces and get some choice in when, where and how long they served. Or, apply for one of the several exemptions, some temporary, some permanent, from induction. Or, be drafted when your number came up and serve two years with no say in when or where. All men, aged 18 to 26, were subject to the Draft at that time and I was one of them.

I had chosen the education exemption which was temporary and only effective while the student was making satisfactory progress (it means you needed a 2.0 or better with at least 9 credits per semester) towards graduation. I had struggled to meet that standard during my first two years, but thankfully had no problem during the last two.¹⁸

When an individual was no longer making satisfactory progress, quit being a student or graduated, they were eligible for the Draft once again. In the days before the Draft Lottery, each county government maintained a Draft Board and only they could tell you where you stood for involuntary induction. Depending on your

¹⁸ Do not judge these grades by today's standards. In 1964, the All Men's GPA at Gettysburg College was 2.3.

county of residence, you could be called as soon as you were eligible¹⁹. If you exercised an exemption, you went to the head of the line when your exemption expired. My education exemption was due to expire on June 5, 1964.

The week before Christmas, I went to Kittanning, Pennsylvania, the Armstrong County Seat, and paid a visit to the Draft Board. My question was simple. If I graduate on June 5, 1964, how long will it be until I was drafted? The middle-aged lady at the front desk smiled and took my draft card. She went to the back of the room to a section of files that look like a card catalog file in a library. Then she spoke with someone else. After about ten minutes she return.

She smiled. "If you graduate on June 5, you can expect to spend July the Fourth in boot camp."

I thanked her and left.

That was not the news for which I had hoped. My thought was to get at least a year after graduation to pursue my career which had taken off during the last six months. If I had to give up all my professional gains six months hence, I would forfeit the progress I had made. After two years in the Army, I would have to start all over again. And I would be two years older, but not necessarily wiser. Army privates are only trained for

¹⁹ In Armstrong County, Pennsylvania, my county of residence in 1964, if a young man did nothing, that is exercised no exemptions, he would probably be drafted by age 20.

low skilled; entry level jobs and I had passed that stage of my life a long time ago.

Viewing my strategy concerning military service from this distance, I would say it was respectful deferral. I knew I had to go, and I accepted the premise that it was my duty to serve. However, like millions of other young men, I wanted get my life started.

The Draft system offered individuals choices. Enlist, and have some say in when and/or where you serve; plus, some choice in what you will do. One option, if you qualify, was to become an officer. The service benefits from an education for which the government did not have to pay. The individual benefits by acquiring valuable experience and management skills. Or be drafted into the Army and the Army will ignore the fact that you have an education and put you where they need you. And there is one more catch. As a draftee, you only serve two years. When you enlist, you serve three or more years. Officers would serve three and a half years.

Another variable in my decision-making process was the amount and degree of United States military activity at that time. For the last ten years, since the end of the Korean War, there was no shooting war. Men were not coming home in body bags²⁰. A joke among returning

²⁰ Actually, men were coming home in body bags. We just did not hear much about it on the news.

veterans was that the biggest danger in the service was being hit by a flying beer bottle in a German bar.

And, oh yes, President Kennedy had sent advisors into Indo China, a country called Vietnam. But that was not any real concern.

That December day was not the first time I had gone through the “If/Then” analysis of what to do. But this was the first time I decided to do something about it. I made a strategic decision. I drove to the Navy Recruiting Office in Pittsburgh and picked up an application for Officers Candidate School.

At home, I retreated to my room and started studying the forms. And, with the aid of an antique typewriter, the required information was applied to the forms. It was dark when I took a break and stopped for the day. I wanted to finish as soon as possible; definitely before the start of the fall semester. But it had been a long day. I was tired. I went downstairs to be with my parents for the rest of the evening. I would have to leave the next morning and drive back to Gettysburg for work. I was the weekend disk jockey at WSBA FM in York Pennsylvania.

December 20, 1963: My car was packed and ready to go along with my half-completed application to OCS in a large file folder. I was having after breakfast coffee with my mother, and we were talking about the next two weeks of holiday activity when it occurred to me that I did not have a date or even the prospect of one during

this festive season. In truth, it had been awhile since I had a date, period.

I thought about Patti, the girl I had run into in August. Maybe, but no. She probably had a boyfriend by now or at the minimum, her date schedule was full. On the other hand, I would never know unless I asked. It was about 10 o'clock in the morning when I called.

Fortunately, she was at home, and we had a nice conversation. After an appropriate amount of dialog and getting the feeling that she might say yes to a date invitation, I asked if she would like to take in a movie next week, say Monday. She said yes and I was thrilled. With that accomplished, I was off to my weekend job.

I finished my OCS paperwork that weekend and was back home on Monday. I had a physical that day and my application was complete. It was December 23. I mailed my OCS application to the recruiter. It was around noon when I was returning from the post office, and it started to snow.

Snow, in Western Pennsylvania, was more of an inconvenience than a show-stopper. Snow always happened between October and March. No one was surprised and little, if anything, stopped. At that time, in our area, the municipalities were still spreading ashes on the streets, not salt and eventually there would be a snowplow to push the snow around. Outside of the town limits, highways would eventually get plowed and salted. Steep hills received the first attention. However,

it was never a sure bet that plowing and salting would happen when you wanted it to happen. Quite often, road crews would wait until the snow fall abated before beginning the clearing process.

By four o'clock, I was starting to get worried. I did not want to cancel this date. It was still snowing and coming down harder. If it continued at this rate, it could become one of those rare instances where reasonable and intelligent people decided to stay at home. Fortunately, I did not fall into either category.

By 5:30 p.m. there was at least six inches of snow on the ground. There was no sign it was going to stop, which meant that by nine o'clock, when a movie would generally end, I could be facing nine or more inches of snow to plow through to get my date home.

Before I even thought about getting her home, I would have to figure how I was going to get to a movie theater without getting stopped at the bottom of a snow-covered hill. This evening had the makings of a "Worst-First-Date-Ever".

At 5:45 p.m. I call Patti under the pretense of letting her know I would be arriving to pick her up in fifteen minutes. I wanted to give her the option of cancelling. I told her that there was only one theater we could get to without encountering the obstacle of a snow-covered, slippery hill. It was in Vandergrift, Pa., the next town over, and the movie was "Tarzan's Three Challenges".

She said fine and did not give me any indication she was concerned about the weather or the movie.

The movie was far from the ideal setting for a first date. At least the theater was almost empty, giving strong evidence that I was neither reasonable nor intelligent, and we could discuss the movie. I tried to intellectualize the plot by telling my date that Tarzan's conflict with his adversaries was analogous to the Cold War conflict. Tarzan represented the United States and NATO, and his opponents were the Communists. It was a reach, and I regretted my words as they fell out of my mouth.

When we exited the theater, we walked into a snow-covered Christmas card scene. All the flaws of reality were blanketed by the snow and the Holiday decoration added the perfect touch. We both paused and took in the view.

After a few moments, Patti remarked on the natural beauty laid out before us. I agreed and resisted the urge to tell her that my view was better than hers because she was in mine. Besides, after the Cold War analogy, she probably thought I was brain damaged.

We made our way to a small local restaurant which was, like the theater, nearly empty. We started talking about college and a host of other topics and before I knew it, eleven o'clock had come and gone.

When we arrived at her home, I walked her to the door. She thanked me for a lovely evening. I, in turn, thanked her. Then I got very bold.

“Do you have plans for New Year’s Eve?” I asked.

There was a pause.

“No, I do not have plans.” she said.

“Well” I stammered. “My cousin is having a house party. Would you like to come with me?”

I could feel the “NO’ coming. I should not have asked. I should have waited and called her the next day. Rejection at the end of the first date was particularly painful. Wait a day and get it by phone was a much better alternative. A phone call ends quickly and once the call is terminated you can go out in the back yard and kick a snowman.

“Yes, I would like that.” she said.

It was the greatest date ever, so great, a song was written about it.²¹

“Oh, what a night,
Late December back in sixty-three
What a very special time for me,
As I remember, what a night.”

New Year’s Eve was another successful date and at the end of the evening, I asked if I could write to her. She gave me her address and that was the beginning of our long-distance relationship. For the first time in my

²¹ “Oh, What a Night” (Late December Back in ’63). by Bob Gaudio and his future wife Judy Parke. Performed by the Four Seasons.

college career, I was receiving mail from someone besides my Mother and Father.

I also made more trips back to Pittsburgh than I normally would. Because of my work and class schedule my visits were generally on Wednesday. Fortunately, Wednesday worked for her. On one of my trips in March, I was sworn into the Navy.

Despite my Navy commitment, Pat (I dropped the “ti” from the end of her first name. She liked it better that way), we continued to develop our, mostly, long-distance relationship. It was not exclusive, but it was growing.

I finished my contract with WSBA FM in May. They offered me a new contract if I could give assurance, I would not leave for at least one year. I told them that was not possible, and we parted company. It was a great professional experience, one that could have started my career. The specter of the Draft ended that career.

After graduation from Gettysburg, and a weeklong celebration with college friends in Ocean City, NJ, I arrived at home with all my belongings for the first time in four years. After unpacking, I started thinking about the rest of the summer before I went on active duty on August 22, 1964.

Up to that point in time, I had a vague notion of getting a job to earn some money. However, for the first time in my life, I had some extra money. My disk jockey stint

permitted me to save money, unlike all my previous hand-to-mouth work experiences. Besides, I rationalized, I had been working after-school and weekend jobs since I was 13. I was now 23 and as I looked down the road, I could not see another chance to take off for ten weeks, ever. And so, I did.

Pat was home for the summer, and we saw each other two or three times a week. Many times, we would spread a blanket on the grass in her back yard and catch the afternoon sun while reading. Other times were dress-up dates or a movie. On some Sundays, I was invited to spend the day with her and her parents on her Father's boat, a 26-foot Trojan Cruiser, on the Allegheny River.

That summer was probably the most pleasant, enjoyable, stress free and comfortable experience of my life. I was living in a dream world where there were no conflicts, irritating people, or difficult problems to solve. And I was in love.

Our relationship had deepened over the summer, and I found myself regretting my enlistment in the Navy. We had not committed to an exclusive relationship although we had danced around the topic several times. It was difficult given that I did not know what would happen in the future for at least three years.²² Additionally, she still

²² Actually it was three years and 18 weeks. Most of us, Officer Candidates did not know that our commitment was three years after commissioning, not three from the day we started our active duty. There is a special place in Hell for military recruiters where the Devil promises then a steak dinner and then serves them pig slop.

had two years of college to finish; possibly more if she decided to go for a graduate degree. Our relationship was going to have to be a long-distance, kisses-in-the-mail affair.

Long term, “absence makes the heart grow fonder” separations were baked into our generation. The generation that sired us lived through World War II when ten million men spent years away from family and loved ones with nothing more than paper and postage connections. The continuation of the draft after the war ensured that love letters in the mail would continue.

Pat’s Father had entered the Army shortly after she was born in 1943 and she did not even see him until 1946. He had been wounded during the last days of fighting in Germany. He lost the use of his right arm and did not fully recover until 1947.

An additional twist entered our lives on August 2, 1964, when the USS Maddox, DD731, was attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese gunboats.²³ Two days later, the USS Turner Joy, DD 951 was involved in another incident. I did not think these events had any real significance for me.

On the evening of August 20, 1964, we said our goodbyes. We promised to write as often as we could.

²³ This fact has been disputed by Anti-war activists. However, sailors who ducked machine-gun fire disagree.

Chapter: “Dear John”

The “Dear John” letters started arriving in mid-September. The first was heralded by a litany of unholy oaths and epithets concerning the morals, parentage, and hygiene of a, now ex, girlfriend of one of our section members. The outburst came during what was normally a quiet time, after dinner and before study hours started. At the break before “Lights Out” he posted the letter on our Company Bulletin Board for all to see.

There were many to follow. My earlier assumption that long-distance relationships were “baked in” to our generation was being seriously tested. I did not think I had a problem, that is, I felt confident that Pat was not going to pull a “Pearl Harbor” on me, even as the bulletin board continued to fill with “letters she just hated to write”.²⁴ Even some of the married men were getting nervous answering the mail.

One evening in mid-October, I heard our section mail clerk “Mail Call. Come and get it”, and he started calling out names followed by brief comments on what he thought the envelopes contained. The mail was not sorted alphabetically, so even after most names had been called, there was still hope for me.

²⁴ “A Dear John Letter” Capitol 45-11461, Performed by Jean Shepard and Ferlin Husky, Recorded May 19, 1953, Written by Lewis Tally and Fuzzy Owen. First verse: Dear John, Oh, how I hate to write, Dear John, I must let you know tonight, That my love for you has died away like grass upon the lawn, And tonight I wed another, Dear John.

“Breman! A letter for a guy who still has a girlfriend.”, alluding to the fact that a lot of guys no longer had girlfriends.

Pat’s letters were generally several pages long. This one was a little light. I opened it and found out why. Our relationship was over. She did not say it, but it sounded like she had found someone else, and she did not feel there was a future for us.

That was it. The end of the most meaningful relationship I ever had. I loved her, but it was over.

The pace of life in OCS was such that if you stood in one place for too long, you would be run over. I moved on.

I did not post Pat’s letter on the Company Bulletin Board.

March 24, 1965:

Then I sat down and wrote a letter.

I had not answered Pat’s “Dear John” letter. I had no idea what to say. But now I wanted to let her know how much she meant to me. After seeing just how easy it was to die in this war, I at least wanted her to know how I felt. I knew it would not change anything, especially with me halfway around the world, but at this time, this day, this moment, I needed to write to her. My best information said that it took 5 days for a letter to go from the ship to the States and five days for a letter to come

from the States to the ship, under the best possible conditions. Ships' movements could make that longer.

My letter was in the mail that night.

Two days later, I received my first mail while aboard the USS Oklahoma City. Our letters were placed on our desks by the stewards. I figured it was from my Mother.

I glanced at my desk across the room and, even from 10 feet away I could tell it was not my Mother's handwriting. It was Pat's very distinctive script. There was no way that she could be responding to my letter. Mine was probably on an airplane somewhere over the Pacific heading east.

The letter told me that she had run into my Mother and asked for my address. She included some news about her activities and said she would like to hear from me.

That night I wrote to her again.

Receiving a letter from Pat and, more importantly, starting to reestablish our relationship was an electrifying jolt to my emotional state after the crash. The world was a happy place again even if my confidence in my personal safety had taken a severe hit.

Without realizing it, I had arrived at a point where my life now had two distinct components: Pat and the United States Navy. For the foreseeable future, the Navy was happening in real time, the now, see it, feel it, smell it, and deal with it part of my life. Pat and I,

separated by twelve thousand miles with a ten-day mail lag, was the think about it, dream about it, fantasize about it part of my life that made me see a bright future. I could live with that.

Chapter: Life With Com7Flt

The duties of a Top-Secret Crypto officer were not difficult. If the material had not been classified “top secret”, most of what we did could have been accomplished by a seaman straight out of bootcamp. The Navy assigned officers, deemed to be more responsible (has a lot more to lose if there is a screw up) than a seaman, to ensure the security and integrity of the material.

Our job was to receive top secret messages, decrypt when necessary, duplicate and hand carry them to the Chief of Staff who would create a distribution list. Then we had to deliver a copy to each officer on the list and get his signature acknowledging receipt. When all of that was completed, messages were filed for future reference. For outgoing messages, we would encrypt when necessary.

Our primary encryption device was the KL-7 ADONIS, POLLUX²⁵, a rotor-based off-line cipher machine, which fortunately has been declassified and I can write about it. The great bulk of classified material, including Top

²⁵ Crypto Museum.com,
<https://www.cryptomuseum.com/crypto/usa/kl7/index.htm>

Secret went through other encryption devices which were faster than our off-line, rotor device. Adonis was only used when the sender wanted to severely limit the number of eyes that saw the message. Theoretically that would be limited to the sender, the sender's cryptographer, the receiver's cryptographer, and the receiver. That is theoretical only.²⁶

Adonis was a bear to set up, either for encryption or decryption. Even short messages could take hours. It is also noteworthy that our machine was the grandson of the German Enigma that has been made famous by several authors and screenwriters.

The work we did was repetitious and would have been completely boring if it had not been for the material we were able to read. However, we were not supposed to read the messages. Surprised? That is the rule. An individual is only given access to classified information if they have a "need to know" the information. Our need-to-know what was in a message was derived from the need to properly process and handle messages. We proofed every message. Sometime the reading made our day.

The pace of the war was picking up. The Gulf of Tonkin Incident had happened August 2, 1964, and the

²⁶It was depressing to learn that John Anthony Walker Jr.(July 28, 1937 – August 28, 2014) a United States Navy chief warrant officer and communications specialist convicted of **spying** for the Soviet Union was selling the Adonis codes, there by compromising the entire system.

Vietnam War had been escalating since. President Kennedy had sent advisors to Vietnam, and now we were sending offensive and defensive troops. The Marines started landing in Danang in February 1965 and Operation Rolling Thunder Started in early March, 1965. By the end of 1965, there would be over 180,000 American troops on the ground. Navy ships and personnel had jumped from a few Destroyers and auxiliary craft to the several hundred ships and over twenty thousand men of Task Force 77, now on Yankee Station. For the Seventh Fleet Staff junior officers, the increased activity translated into a tenfold increase in transmissions.

That was the big picture. On an individual level, I came aboard a ship that was adjusting to a new reality.

The USS Oklahoma City, known to all as the OK Maru²⁷, was now spending 80% of Her time at sea as opposed to 80% in port. A lot of junior officers, primarily



Figure 4 1024px-USS_Oklahoma_City_(CLG-5)_at_sea_in_the_early_1960s Wikipedia By USN - Official U.S. Navy photo in Stefan Terzibaschitsch Die Kreuzer der U.S. Navy von der Omaha-Klasse (1922) bis zur Long

Lieutenant Junior Grades and Ensigns²⁸, had built a comfortable life around a schedule that gave them a lot of time off in port. This was especially true for the ones who were married, which constituted about half of the J.G.s and Ensigns. Not surprisingly, career minded officers, generally Lieutenants and above were happier

²⁷ Japanese ships are often named after cities and Maru is the Japanese word for city.

²⁸ Technically, junior officers include Ensigns through Lieutenant Commanders. However, informally the term only referred to Ensigns and Lieutenant, J.G.

with the change since it meant more experience and a better shot at promotion.

The J.O.s were collectively suffering from a malaise that could be described as group depression, a symptom of which was to wander in an intellectual desert, and bitch about everything. Not only were they unhappy, but they were also unfriendly, uninteresting and, at times, downright pains in the ass.

Here is an example of one Lieutenant J.G. being difficult because he did not want to take ten minutes to complete a task for the benefit of an Ensign, specifically, me.

I picked this J.G. out as a difficult case early on. Around Ensigns, he was unnecessarily arrogant and demeaning for no apparent reason. At work, as a Communications Watch Officer, he appeared to be overwhelmed and short with most of the enlisted men that worked for him.

This next part may seem like I am making it up just to make him look worse than he may have been, but I am not, this is an honest physical description. He was short, about 5'5", and bald. His clothes always looked like he had slept in them, and he had a foul body odor about him. Smudges from the purple ink used to duplicate messages in the Communications Center always reached above his elbows, unlike most of us who managed to keep the stains below our wrists. He was a wretched old man in the making, and he was one

of the married men who complained about being denied his conjugal benefits. I avoided him like he was “The Ancient Mariner”²⁹.

Every officer aboard ship had a safe. It was an 12”x12”x12”, steel, cube, mounted at the back of a fold out desk. A combination lock was in the center of the door. Above and below the writing part of the fixture were storage drawers. To either side of the safe, were cubby holes to store papers. The safe was a necessary part of an officer’s shipboard furniture to secure classified documents and personal valuables. When I came aboard, my safe was open and locked.

None of my bunk mates knew the combination, but one of them told me who the Safe Officer³⁰ was. The Safe Officer for the Staff was “Short Bald Smelly”.

I had to build up my courage to ask him for my combination. After a month, I finally caught him at what I thought was a good moment. It was not.

“Excuse me. I was told that you are the Safe Officer for the Staff.” I said.

“Yea. So what?” he said.

“Well, I need the combination to my safe.” I said.

He responded, “You do not need a safe.”

²⁹ The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

³⁰ Every US ship had a Safe Officer who was responsible for the combinations of all the safes on the ship. This practice, theoretically, avoided the necessity of using a cutting torch or pry bar to open a safe without a combination.

He had not made eye contact with me, and it did not look like he was going to do that. He continued working on something at his desk.

I was not quite sure how to respond to that, so I just waited for a minute.

“Are you still here? What the hell do you want?” he said.

“I want the combination to my safe.” I said calmly.

“And I told you, you do not need a safe. Now get the fuck out of here and leave me alone.” he said.

Having been assured that our conversation was at an end, I left.

Back in my stateroom, I sat at my desk and pondered the situation. The chair to my desk was directly below an open port hole which made my location desirable, at least to me. As the OK Maru steamed along, a constant wave was generated by the ships bow. My stateroom was on the port side of the ship on the 01 level, one floor above the main deck. The porthole was just far enough aft of the bow that the wave crested beside me, and I could hear the pleasant, rhythmic sound of the churning water. It was about 90 degrees, but I did not feel hot because of the constant, artificial breeze created by the ships forward motion.

I had dreamed about scenes like this and I was not going to let an ogre with body odor spoil it.

I opened the safe door wide and looked at the back of the combination lock. There was a plate held on by screws. Now I needed a screwdriver.

The bulk of my teenage years had been spent under the hood of a car where I acquired skills that have served me well throughout my life. Auto repair fostered in me a curiosity about how machines worked and a desire to return defective mechanisms to proper operating order. It also honed my critical thinking skills. My safe was an ideal project.

It was still morning on my day off and we were at sea. I had plenty of time to understand the operations of a combination lock. First, a screwdriver was needed. In the wardroom, I nosed around but only found knives, forks and spoons. None of them worked. Wandering through several other offices without any luck, I finally found one in the barber shop.

The combination lock was simple. It consisted of three disks that had to be aligned to permit the bolt to release, and the door could be opened. I was able to determine the existing combination and from there, reverse engineer a new number. I was finished before lunch.

I considered giving the new combination to Short Bald Sweaty because he was the Safe Officer. However, I did not trust him.

Some weeks later, Sweaty appeared in the doorway to my stateroom and said, "I need the combination to your safe."

That short sentence told me two things. First, one of my bunk mates had told Sweaty I was using my safe. Two, Sweaty had tried to open it.

Given that he had been such a prick about it, I said "Yes, I told you I needed it."

Not the answer he had expected.

"Your safe was open." he said.

"No. It was closed. That's why I came to you for the combination." I said.

He never got the combination from me.

The next Ensign to report aboard had the same problem with Sweaty. By chance, the new man told me about his experience. The two of us went to his stateroom and I set a combination for him. I did the same thing for the other Ensigns who subsequently came on board.

Is it still karma if you help it along?

True karma did visit Sweaty some months later. Storage space was in short supply for all the messages that were accumulating in the Communications Center. Sweaty came up with a plan to microfilm all the old messages, and thus create more space. He was placed

in charge of the project and was relieved of all other duties.

He quickly obtained the camera and began working. It was a long process, weeks I believe. When he finished the photographic work, he set about destroying the paper copies. He should have waited until the films came back. They were all blank.

Sweaty spent the rest of his time with Seventh Fleet Staff, many, many months, rebuilding the old message files. He even got to work every day we were in port.

Getting back to the J.O.s as a group, initially, I thought it was me. I talked with my traveling partner and after several discussions, we thought it was us. Time passed and within about six weeks, we had six new Ensigns. As they came aboard and we all got to know each other, we discovered that it was really them.

In military terms, the J.O.s, both Staff and Ship's Company, had a major morale problem.

Of course, we kept that opinion to ourselves.

We Ensigns formed our own little sanctuary group to keep our morale up. Bad attitudes are contagious and none of us wanted to spend three years with a bad attitude.

We also discovered another malady of the Ship's Company J.O.s. They had a "Staff" infection! Their life aboard an active, at sea, at war, vessel was a busy one. They worked their jobs six or seven days a week.

There were no eight-hour days. They worked until the job was done (of course, it never was done). In addition, they had watches to stand on various parts of the ship. Each watch was four hours long and the watches were maintained around the clock. I had no idea how long their work week was, but for many it was sixty to eighty hours a week while at sea. In port, it was a little better, but not much.

Contrast that with the Staff J.O.s. We worked three days on and one day off. Here is a typical watch rotation in the Communications Center: Start Monday at 5 p.m., end at Midnight, 7 hours. Tuesday, start at 7 a.m. end at 5 p.m., 10 hours. Wednesday, start at Midnight end at 7 a.m., 7 hours. Thursday was a day off and the rotation would start again on Friday at 7 p.m. Two watch rotations and a day off was a seven-day time period where each J.O. had worked 48 hours or, by our line of reasoning, constituted a six day work week (there is some false reasoning and math manipulation wrapped in that explanation, but I'll ignore it now just as I did then). Compared to the Ship's Company J.O.s, we had it easy.

This was a schedule that had been designed for a Staff that spent most of its time In Port. I got off watch at 7 a.m. Wednesday and had the rest of the day to myself. In Port, I was gone, off the ship and on a train to Tokyo. Thursday was my day off and I did not start work on Friday until 5 p.m. When the ship was In Port, I had 58 hours all to myself. At sea, I had the same 58 hours to

pursue as much reading and learning as I wanted. We had no additional watches to complicate our lives.

So, the Ship's Company J.O.s are busting tail, and, to them, we are along for the ride, literally in this case. They thought of us as passengers. Which brings us to the most painful, daily reminder, stick-your-finger-in-their-eye, burden they had to bear, the Staff itself.

In June of 1964, the OK Maru became the Flagship for Seventh Fleet Staff. That meant that the J.O.s were pushed out of their comfortable, roomy, spacious, well lit, more-room-than-you-need, quarters by the Staff which numbered about 70 officers, most of whom outranked the Ship's Company officers. These displaced and disgruntled J.O.s were squeezed into tiny cramped, dark, smelly spaces.

The Ship's Company J.O.s really did have a "Staff" Infection. Their major irritation was that they could not even complain about it. One thing you do not want to do is to start "bad-mouthing" senior officers. It is a law, not a theory, axiom, precept, adage, or old-wives-tale. It is an irrefutable truth because Shit Flows Downhill. If you live in a valley, keep your mouth shut.³¹

By Ship's Company J.O. thinking, Staff Ensigns were fair game because most of them outranked us. We were the recipients of their ire. As the old Navy saying goes, we were lower than whale shit. It was all verbal,

³¹ A little additional advice for anyone one in the Navy, regardless of rank, never piss off the men who handle your food, your mail or your pay.

nothing aggressive or physically harmful, but always demeaning with a hint of arrogance and disdain. Not exactly the atmosphere you wanted in the wardroom.

When it was just two of us, we played a defensive game, minimize exposure and retreat. When there were eight of us, we could go on the attack. We worked as a pack.

It did not take long until the relationship between the Ship's Company J.O.s and the Staff Ensigns mellowed. We were happy with the results. They pretended they were.

As a group, we Staff Ensigns were having a great experience. Socially, we ignored the Staff Lt.J.G.s. When we started coming aboard, they let us know that they had nothing in common with us and they were the experienced veterans. We, in turn, recognized that they had a morale problem and had decided we were not going down the same path. And we did not.

Privacy aboard ship is a precious commodity. There is, truly, little of it, much less for the enlisted ranks, but it does get better as you move up the ladder. For we J.O.s,' it was, relatively, not too bad. Each of us had our own bed (do not laugh because not everyone did) and a dresser/desk. Our staterooms also had sinks and running water. This constituted good living on a cruiser. Our only need was for a place where we could get together, hang out and talk about our work and our

personal pursuit of happiness. Then we discovered the Flag Bridge.

The Flag Bridge was just for the Admiral, a place where he could view the action and direct the battle. However, battles were now viewed on radar screens and directed by electronic communications, so the Flag Bridge was obsolete and rarely, if ever, used by the Admiral. It was located one level down from the Ship's Bridge and it was larger and uncluttered by all the equipment required to drive the ship. The view was panoramic, with large windows stretching from port to starboard. It was a place to sit, shoot the breeze, watch the ocean go by, and keep our spirits up. A great place for coffee after lunch or dinner. Is there any wonder that we were enjoying our tour of duty?

Chapter: Getting Back to Normal

Before all our self-preservation, mental wellness, activities came into being, I experienced "living-in-the-valley" firsthand.

When the helicopter crashed, I lost almost everything I owned. I was only able to salvage three work uniforms and a couple of personal items. My traveling partner and I learned that we had to file a claim with the Navy to be compensated for our loss. We were instructed to file our claim through the Ship's Company system because the Staff was not equipped to handle claims. The paperwork had to be submitted through the Ship's Executive Officer, the XO.

In the Navy, the Ship's Commanding Officer, the Captain, is in charge. He is ultimately responsible for everything that happens aboard his ship. Therefore, everyone aboard is responsible to him. However, the Executive Officer is the one who cracks the whip. He is called the Executive Officer because he executes the Captain's orders. And he will execute those who do not fall in line.

We were cautioned to tread lightly.

Completing the form was not a problem. We were straight out of OCS; all our uniforms were new, and we had a complete list of the articles we had purchased from the

Uniform Shop at the Newport Naval Base. We then had to search our memory for personal items, which

PERSONNEL CLAIM
NAVY PERSONNEL CLAIM REGULATIONS
NAVPERS-2002A (Rev. 4-77)

Submit in triplicate. Type whenever practicable.
Date: _____

TO: Commanding Officer USS OKLAHOMA CITY (CLG-5) SUBJECT: CLAIM FOR REIMBURSEMENT

FROM: BREWAN, SIDNEY D. SERIAL, SERVICE, OR FILE NO. RANK, RATE, OR GRADE
Ensign

CURRENT DUTY STATION ORGANIZATION AT TIME OF LOSS
Staff, COMSEVENTHFLT Enroute to current duty station

STATUS OF CLAIMANT AT TIME OF LOSS
 MEMBER, USN, USNR, USNCCORNSIC EMPLOYEE, U.S. NAVY OTHER (SHAW)

1. Claim is made in the amount of \$1213.35 for personal property, listed in detail on the reverse side hereof, damaged or lost incident to service. All applicable certificates, statements, and other documents required by Navy Personnel Claims Regulations are attached.

2. I hereby assign to the United States, to the extent of any payment of this claim accepted by me, all my right, title and interest in and to any claim I may have against any carrier, insurer or other party, arising out of the incident(s) described herein and will, upon request, furnish such evidence as may be required to enable the United States to enforce such claim.

I further agree to the checkage of my accounts by the United States to the extent of any payments made to me by a carrier, insurer, or other party for which I am also reimbursed by the United States in settlement of this claim.

3. If claim arises from a transportation loss, complete the following: N/A

HOUSEHOLD EFFECTS HOBBY BAGGAGE AIRPORTER

RELEASED TO (Name of packer or carrier) DATE

RELEASED AT (Actual location) BILL OF LADING NO.

DELIVERED AT (Address) DATE

3. (cont'd)

a. Was demand for this loss or damage made against the common carrier? If yes, enclose copies of demand on and within, taken by carrier. If no, attach explanation.
Amt. Claimed \$ _____ Paid \$ _____

b. Was the property insured? If yes, attach copies of policy, demand on insurer and action taken.
Amt. Claimed \$ _____ Paid \$ _____

c. Have the carrier and insurer been requested to address all correspondence to you in care of the Commanding Officer of the organization at which this claim is filed?

4. Has any previous claim been made against the United States for the property for which this claim is made? (If yes, explain.)

5. In the event any of the property for which claim is made is later recovered, or reimbursement is received from the carrier or insurer, I agree to give written notice immediately to the Commanding Officer of the activity at which claim was filed.

6. The date, place, facts and circumstances of the accident or incident are stated below. (State facts in detail, adding additional sheets if necessary.) (If this is a transportation claim, complete 3 above and add any additional facts here.)

On 24 March 1965 while in a travel status under BUPRES permanent change of station orders 090405 dated 20 November 1964, I was being transported by helicopter from the USS CORAL SEA (CVA-43) to the USS OKLAHOMA CITY (CLG-5), when the helicopter experienced an engine failure and made a forced landing in the sea. All luggage was jettisoned prior to landing to lighten the aircraft. This luggage contained uniforms and personal effects which were either ruined or never recovered.

Figure 5 Page one of my Reimbursement Claim form. See Appendix One for the complete form.

was not hard because we had packed and unpack

those bags a dozen times while crossing half the world. My total claim was \$1,213.35.

I really needed the money as soon as possible. First, I had to replace my lost uniforms and civilian clothes. That would be expensive. Next, I still owed the Newport Uniform Shop \$300 for the uniforms that I no longer had. The Newport Shop would automatically extend credit to graduating OC, interest free with no payments until you reported to your first duty station. Then you could pay off the debt at \$50 per month. The \$300 was the largest debt I had ever had in my life.

For many years I had told the following two stories as jokes: 1. As an Ensign I earned \$125 every two weeks. We were at sea for four weeks and in port for two weeks. However, out of the two weeks in port, I had to work half of the time. That meant I had six weeks' pay to spend in seven days. 2. I was paid \$125 every two weeks. I spent \$50 on beer, \$50 on women and the other \$25 I threw away foolishly.

Those stories were definitely jokes. Of the \$250 I received each month, \$50 went to the Officers Mess. There was another surprise, officers paid for their meals. It was a bargain, but the pay we were receiving was a bargain for the Navy.

I was sending \$50 to the Newport Uniform Shop every month and I my expenditures for new uniforms and clothes was about \$100 for the first three months after

the accident. That left me a whole \$50 to live the high life. I really wanted that claim money.

Two weeks after submitting the claim, I received it back from the XO. I had been hoping that I would have the money by that time, but no such luck. There was a note attached. I cannot remember the exact wording on the note, but the message I received was "Have you included everything you lost?" I thought it was nice of him to give me a chance to add any items I had forgotten, but I really wished he would have sent the claim. The message he wanted me to receive was "Did you really lose all of these items?" I would later conclude that he thought I was padding my claim. That light bulb would go on when I received his next note.

A full month later I received his second note.

"Commander Blank (I do not remember the name) had his ship shot out from under him in 1951 and his total claim was \$853, and he lost everything he owned." He did not say it, but I had just been accused of trying to rip off the Navy.

I had flattered myself to think that the XO was concerned for my welfare. He had 1400 officer and men he needed to supervise and direct.

We were at sea and on my next day off I sat down to write my answer. It went something like this; "In the fourteen years since 1951, the inflation rate in the United States has been a steady 3%. Using compound interest, \$853 is \$1290 today. My claim is for \$1,213.35.

I knew this would earn me a permanent position on his “Smart Ass List”.

At this point, I had no illusions that the XO was giving me any special attention. He had received my claim, and it went straight to his J.O. Supply Officer who was charged with handling such matters. The J.O. took one look at it and tossed it into his To Do basket, where it sat for two weeks. Then he took it to the XO and said, “This is too high.” The XO then sent me the first note and I had responded. My paperwork then sat in the J.O.s “Ignore It” box for a month.

We were now at the middle of May, and I was no closer to getting my money that I was at the time of the crash. One of us had to blink.

Two weeks later, I was making my rounds with a fresh batch of TOP SECRET messages, and I had one for the Staff Supply Officer. He was a Captain and being Supply he did not get many messages. He was also the nicest of the Staff Senior Officers. They were all good people and treated us, the messengers,³² with respect. In turn, we respected them.

However, this Staff Supply Officer was a cut above the others. His manner was pleasant and friendly.

As he was reading the message, a thought crossed my mind. When he had finished, I asked “Sir, I am having trouble getting my loss claim from the helicopter crash

³² They did not “shoot the messengers”. Author unknown, but the concept goes back to BCE 200.

processed through the Ships Company admin. Is there any chance you could process it through your office?”

He looked at me and gave me a warm smile that let me know he understood my problem.

“Sure. Just drop it off when you have a chance.” he said.

I was back in ten minutes.

My check came through in mid-June. The Navy reimbursed me \$1,034.02 after allowance for depreciation on a claim of \$1,213.35 (See Appendix One for complete form). I put the check in my safe with the intention of cashing it when we got to port and paying off my debt and purchasing the rest of my uniforms. But I kept delaying. By now, I had all the uniforms I needed and a much better-quality garment than I had from OCS³³ Also, I had enough civilian clothes to get by.

I rarely encountered the XO, but when I did, he generally treated me like I was one of the ship’s standpipes, moving slightly to the side so as not to trip over me. However, one day in July in the Wardroom, he stopped me and said “When are you going to take care of that claim? It’s still sitting in my office.”

He had caught me off guard. I am sure the expression on my face explained it.

³³ The Japanese tailors used much better material and were cheaper than Uniform Shop.

“Oh, I got the impression that your office was too busy to handle it, so I had it processed through the Staff Supply Office.” I said.

I did not wait to be dismissed. I simply walked away. I was now on his permanent “Smart Ass List” I never heard from him again and was immensely grateful that this misadventure never blew up in my face.

Chapter: A Life on the Rolling Seas

Our gatherings for coffee after lunch and dinner on the Flag Bridge were the highlight of our days at sea. All subjects were fair game, but the most popular was “Is the Navy a good place to make a career?” We were surrounded by career-minded senior officers and J.O. who were avowed civilians counting the days until they were released from active duty. We could sample opinions from both sides of the coin and then compare notes.

We concluded that the Navy was no different than civilian life. You were promoted based on the skills you had and how successfully you had applied those skills³⁴. It also, like civilian life, depended on who you knew. In the Navy, just as in other large organizations, there is a preferred path to promotion and that path involved acquiring your Sea Qualifications, known as Sea Quals.

³⁴ The application of skills is experience.

Sea Quals involve all the ship driving and leadership skills a junior officer is supposed to acquire in their first three years. These include but are not limited to being certified as the Officer of the Day, the OD, in port and at sea (underway), navigation, division officer and a host of other jobs too numerous to list here.

We were acquiring none of those skills. Instead, we were going to spend a year as a Crypto Officer which would qualify us to successfully carry message from one office to the next. Then we would be a Communications Watch Officer, CWO, for two years. That would qualify us to be (wait for it) a Communication Watch Officer. You would have pretty much sealed your career and if you were lucky you might make it to Lieutenant Commander.

You might be permitted to stay in for 20 years if you could get a USN Commission. We were all USNR Commissions³⁵. The “R” is for Reserve and our contract is at the pleasure of the Service. In a RIF, Reduction In Force, the Reserves are the first to be let go.

Theoretically, you could find yourself at the age of 34 and unemployed with skills that would only be useful to the United States Navy.³⁶ That was probably why all the Lt.J.G.s on the Staff were doing the Gloomy Gus routine.

³⁵ USN Commissions went to Annapolis and NROTC Grads. They would not be assigned to an Admirals Staff because it was a dead-end job. The Navy had an investment in those guys.

³⁶ Sure, you could get hired by a Foreign Government, but then you would be hung for Treason if you ever came back to the States.

We all had made sacrifices to join the Navy. We did so because it was our duty. But let us not pour chocolate sauce and whipped cream all over this noble cause. Without the threat of the Draft waiting for us, I am not sure how many of us would have joined. I know for certain that I would have preferred to pursue my radio and TV aspirations, given that I already had cleared the large hurdle of breaking into the industry. Trying to go back and recover that advantage was going to be difficult.³⁷

Because we sacrificed, we wanted to make the most of our Navy experience. Positioning ourselves for a Navy career was in our best interest and right now, we were not there. Informally, we all started discussing and thinking about how to improve our prospects.

³⁷ If not impossible. The day I left WSBA FM was my last day in the profession.

Before



Figure 6 The USS Oklahoma City CLG 5 in homeport, Yokosuka, Japan. Notice that the bow of the ship rises about four stories high. Remember that when you see the photographs taken while going through a typhoon.

moving on
to the next

Misadventure, this is a good place to take a tour of the USS Oklahoma City CLG 5. She was commissioned in 1944, in time to earn two battle stars in World War II. She was longer than two football fields, displaced 12,000 tons and had an advertised top speed of 38 knots, though I doubt she ever reached that mark. Refitted in the 1950's, her armament included Talos guided missiles aft, twin five-inch guns just forward of the bridge and three six-inch cannon mounted in a turret forward of the five-inch guns. The six-inch cannon were the largest in the 7th Fleet at that time.

She was twice the size of a destroyer, and she rode smoothly even in rough seas. However, we did have one occasion to ride the waves. In June 1965, we

encountered a typhoon³⁸ while returning to Japan. The following sequence of pictures demonstrates the wave intensity (remember that the bow is four stories high).



Figure 7 The USS Oklahoma City CLG 5 providing gunfire support for operations in Vietnam. This photograph was taken by one of the ship's helicopter crew, probably in September of 1965, and was purchased from him. Photograph from my personal collection.

³⁸ I have never been sure which typhoon we passed through that June, nor do I know how close we were to the eye of the storm.



Figure 8 The view is deceptive because you cannot see how high the swells really are. Here, the bow is riding high on the top of a swell. Photo from my personal collection.



Figure 9 The bow starts to fall. Photo from my personal collection.



Figure 10: The bow splashes into the swell and actually goes under the surface. Photo from my personal collection.



Figure 11 As the ship rises, the forecastle scoops up enough water to fill an Olympic size swimming pool. Photo from my personal collection.

This sequence of movements went on for a full two days. The rhythm became part of the environment; noticeable only if you stopped and gave it your attention. At night, the ocean motion gently rocked you to sleep.

Chapter: Mixing It Up

When I received my orders to the Seventh Fleet Staff, I thought it was a step up in the career process. I would be working with officers who were considered the best of the best. Admirals did not select losers. I believed it would be helpful, career wise, to work, associate and socialize with these accomplished officers. The reverse was true.

As I explained above, being assigned to the Seventh Fleet Staff was not a positive career assignment. However, perhaps I was too stupid to understand that concept. I was still investigating the career possibilities.

No one had said anything about the Staff social life, and I was beginning to think there was none. However, just before we pulled into Yokosuka Naval

Base, our homeport, in April, the Flag Secretary, a warrant officer, came up to my stateroom and told me that I was assigned to go to the Admiral's Cocktail party the first weekend ashore. I had been selected because 1. I was one of the newest Ensigns on the Staff and 2. It was my day off.

I asked the Secretary why someone was "assigned" to go to a cocktail party. He said the J.O.s would not go on their own, so one was always assigned to go. I did not say it, but I would have gone without being assigned because I believed the social life of the Staff was one of the Perks of the job.

Before leaving, the Secretary informed me that as the most junior officer attending, protocol dictated that I would have to arrive first and leave last.

“Be at the front door and knock at 1800 hours, not 1759:59. Understand?” I was told that the dress code was civilian clothes, jacket and tie for men. I was thankful that I had left my civies in a locker at the base. Otherwise, I would have had to buy clothes I could not afford.

“Yes.” I said. I was beginning to learn the importance of protocol. The message was clear. Violations of protocol will be swiftly punished.

The day we docked, I was eating lunch and the Ship’s Doctor came over to me and told me he was also going to the Admiral’s party and did I want to share a cab with him. I told him I was planning to leave at 1730 because I had to be there first. He said that was fine because he was, as a Lieutenant, the next junior officer attending, and he had been told to arrive at 1805. We chatted for a while. Talking to the Doc was like talking to a civilian. Nice guy.

Friday, we met on the Quarterdeck at 1730 and caught a cab to the Admiral’s house. We immediately fell back into the discussion we had started at lunch. It was a pleasure to talk with him.

The Flag Residence was located on the highest hill on the base. It had a magnificent view of the harbor and was large even by American standards. Of course,

nothing less than the biggest and best for Seventh Fleet. He commanded the most powerful armada in the world.

We arrived a little early, and protocol required that we wait until 1800, so we continued our discussion. It had been a long time since I had talked with anyone about something that did not involve the Navy, I was thoroughly enjoying the evening already.

At 1800, I rang the doorbell. The Doc jokingly said he would stand behind me so they would know I was arriving first.

Nobody answered the door.

We clearly heard the bell ring, and we could clearly hear people moving about inside. But nobody answered the door. There followed a quick exchange between the Doc and I about how long to wait before ringing it again. We were frozen by indecision. To ring or not to ring. If we ring, we could, potentially, irritate the Admiral. If we do not ring, we could be judged as arriving late, a black mark to be sure. One did not, we had been warned, violate protocol.

The minutes ticked by and finally, at 1805, the Admiral's wife answered the door. She apologized for making us wait but they were running late, as she moved back into the house while trying to fix an earring to her left ear. She paused next to a large sofa and introduced us to the Admiral's father, who was seated on the sofa. She told us to fix ourselves a drink and have a seat. She

and the Admiral would join us shortly. Good, we had not violated protocol.

The Admiral's father was a smiling, warm man, probable in his mid-eighties. As I moved towards the bar, he said in a somewhat hushed tone and with a smile on his face "Two fingers of scotch and two ice cubes", then he placed his extended index finger to his lips. I grabbed an ice-cold beer for myself.

The elderly gentleman on the sofa immediately engaged us in conversation. Within a very few minutes we learned that he was a retired Navy Captain. He added that "Sonny" thought he was a big shot because he had made Admiral. He asked questions about what we did for the Admiral, and he started telling us about his Navy life. He was delightful.

At about 1820, the doorbell rang, and the Admiral's wife call out "Would someone get that for me, please?"

I started to rise, but the Doc beat me to it. The Admiral and his wife came from somewhere deep within the house. The Admiral paused and spoke with his father, then extended his hand to me. We shook hands and I introduced myself "Ensign Breman, Sir."

"Of course, Sid. How is everything going? Recovered from the crash?" he said.

"Yes sir. All is well." I responded.

He moved off to stand beside his wife and greet the officers and their wives, some singles, as they arrived.

For the next twenty minutes it was a steady stream of people, all in civilian clothes. Doc became the doorman, and I remained standing by the Admiral's father, who remained seated. It was an ideal spot for me because almost everyone came over to introduce themselves to this smiling, warm gentleman and I, by extension, got to meet just about everyone.

I knew the last of the guests had arrived when the Chief of Staff and his wife came over to meet the Admiral's father. I did not know it at the time, but this was the first social event given by the Admiral and his wife. He had been appointed Commander, Seventh Fleet on March 1, 1965.

I told the Admiral's father it had been a pleasure meeting him and shook his hand. He held onto my hand for an extra second, then put his index finger to his lips and pointed to his empty glass. I smiled and complied. Then I started circulating through the rooms.

I had never attended a real cocktail party. Sure, there had been events at college we called cocktail parties, but I doubted real cocktail parties had a keg in the center of the room. I had a great time that night. It was totally a civilian evening. No Navy talk and lots of laughter. I stuck to the two basic rules: 1. Never forget you are junior (in this case to everyone in the room) and 2. Do not discuss politics, religion or anything that would impugn the virtue of a lady. More than one of the wives remarked how unusual it was to see a junior officer at one of these events. Some said I was "cute"

and asked if I was married. It was a fun evening. Good drinks and good food. The Doc and I, as was dictated by protocol, left last. It was around 2100.

My watch rotation started Sunday and finished up Tuesday morning. At breakfast I caught a couple of jabs from some J.O.s, both Staff and Ship's Company. Apparently, I violated an unwritten law in the unwritten Junior Officer's Behavior Manual. If it had been written, it would have gone something like this: "J.O.s shall not attend social functions given by or attended by Senior Officers. If forced to attend such functions the J.O. shall not have a good time and shall spread scuttlebutt³⁹ to that effect. Under no circumstances shall the J.O. in question indicate he had a jolly good time."

I assumed that since most of the J.O.s were unhappy campers, they felt everyone should be unhappy. Later, I would understand that their feelings were deeper than just unhappy. They had given up on the idea of a career in the Navy. As such, their current position was a waste of time. They were being held back from pursuing their life's work. If they saw someone who was enjoying themselves, it might indicate that they were wrong, so that person had to be stopped. Or, they had to be

³⁹ Scuttlebutt, used in this context, means information. If someone says "What's the scuttlebutt?", they are asking for the latest information on a topic. If someone says "Where's the scuttlebutt?", they are asking for the location of a water cooler. Before modern water storage containers, water was stored in a barrel called a "butt". To open a butt for use a sailor would have to scuttle, put a hole in it, the butt, ergo scuttlebutt, an early version of the original company watercooler.

unhappy also. My name was being added to more “Shit Lists”.

As I mentioned earlier, this happened early on in my tour. I did not have a lot of comrades around me for decision support. That situation changed as more Ensigns came aboard.

The next time we were in port in late May, there was no Staff social event. However, a formal dinner was planned for our return in July. The event was announced through internal mail while we were at sea.⁴⁰ Given the great time I had at the cocktail party, I decided to attend and returned my RSVP to the Flag Secretary.

A few days later, the Secretary came to me, and we had, what I considered, a strange conversation.

“I got your RSVP. Will your wife attend also?” he asked.

“I’m not married.” I said.

Then he stammered as if he needed more time to form the question.

“Will you be bringing a guest?” he asked.

He was embarrassed or reluctant to ask the question. I was not sure why, but I quickly found out.

“No, just myself.” I said.

⁴⁰ The invitation was probably issued to the wives, who were the ones making the decision on attendance. The shipboard invitation was just to let the husbands know what they would be doing that night.

A wave of relief passed over his face. He then explained that he was concerned that I wanted to bring a Japanese date which was not permitted.

I assured him I would be by myself.

He smiled and gave me a “thumbs up”.

“Remember,” he said before leaving “you will be the most junior officer attending so you must arrive first. Plan to be in the room at 1800. And remember! You leave LAST!”

I smiled and returned the “thumbs up”.

On the night of the formal, I arrived at the dinner location at 1800. It was a large, decorated for the occasion, ballroom in the Officers Club. There were 53 officers and their wives attending. Assuming a 100% attendance with wives there would be 106 people for drinks and dinner.⁴¹ It occurred to me that I was a singleton which would make for an empty chair beside me at the table. I had not considered the consequences of being alone at an event designed for couples. For the occasion, I had a brand-new set of Dress Whites picked up from the tailor the day before.

At 1805, I heard a door open behind me. It was the Wave Lt.J.G., the Flag Admin Officer Ashore. I had never even seen a picture of a Wave’s formal dress whites. The gown was floor length and part of the

⁴¹ I really cannot remember if there was dancing. I assume there was, but I didn’t see it. Keep reading and you will see why.

uniform was a diamond tiara. In her heels she looked straight into my eyes. She was an attractive woman, and friendly, but I could sense that she was also working. She had planned this event with the Admiral's wife and if anything went wrong, she knew where the blame would fall.

"Hi Sid. You got here first." she said.

"That was the plan. I've been here for about ten minutes." I said.

"You sure gave everyone a start when you signed up." She said.

"Why?" I asked.

She smiled and pinched my cheek. "Because junior officers never attend these things. The married ones are at home catching up on their sex and the single ones are in the Alley⁴²" she paused, "getting drunk."

I flushed with the "cheek pinch". She was an attractive woman.

"Listen, I have to check on a few things". She pulled a notepad out of the small, evening, purse that was part of her uniform.

⁴² The Alley or Honcho Street was several narrow streets outside the Main Gate. It consisted of a half mile of bars and fleshpots. Also, I do not want anyone to misunderstand me. I enjoyed a night in the Alley as much as the next guy.

“Be a Honey and act as the informal greeter for a while. By the way, you and I are dinner partners. That’s how they balanced the tables.” She smiled and was gone.

The Lieutenants and their wives started arriving at 1815, right on schedule. I knew most of them and they introduced their wives; many of whom I already knew from the cocktail party. Before the Lieutenant Commanders started arriving, the Flag Admin Ashore was back and I tried to move away from the informal receiving line. She caught me by the elbow.

“Bullshit Skippy! You’re with me.” She said.

I laughed and the two of us stayed close to the entrance until the Admiral and his wife arrived. The two of us were perfect for the task of informal greeters because she knew all the wives; I knew all the officers. What I did not realize is that everyone thought that she and I were a couple. With that idea unwittingly planted in their heads, the conditions were ripe for a misadventure of gigantic proportions with potential, monumental, consequences.

The Cocktail Hour was well underway, and, again, I started to move away, but she caught me by the elbow again.

“Not so fast Skippy” she said. “As my dinner partner, get me a drink.”

She smiled “That’s not an order. Just a simple reminder of proper social etiquette.”

I smiled. She smiled. We were having a good time. But I harbored no illusions about the prospects for anything other than a smile. I do not think she did either.

During cocktails, I circulated and talked with several people. One woman, a captain's wife, asked me if the Flag Admin and I were a couple. No, I told her. We just happened to be the only two single people in the room.

After cocktails, we sat down to dinner in the universally accepted "boy- girl" configuration. The Flag Admin was on my left and a Lieutenant Commander's wife was on my right. The food was excellent and the dinner conversation pleasant and enjoyable. It was a refreshing change from the daily discourse I experience aboard ship.

Then something happened that changed the entire complexion of the evening.

We had just finished the main entry and were awaiting dessert when the Flagg Admin reached for my left hand, which was resting on my left leg, with her right hand. She moved her hand into position and entwined her fingers with mine. Whistles, bells, and other types of alarms started going off in my head. She pressed down hard on my leg. I got the message but did not know what to do with it. I was frozen in position.

She leaned towards me, and I could feel her lips heading for my ear. I leaned towards her. I could feel her breath on my neck and my neck hair stood up. Inside my body, a full hormone alert started. Please do

not forget that I had not been on a date for almost six months.

To the people who were watching us, and I know it was at least our entire table of ten, it appeared that she was saying something more than “pass the rolls”.

And then she whispered, softly so that only I could hear “Sid, I am sick. I just got out of the hospital today and I have just relapsed. You must get me out of here without a fuss and to the hospital. Excuse yourself to the woman on the right and we will just get up and leave.”

I obeyed without hesitation. I excused myself and stood. I helped the Flag Admin to stand. She took my left arm and we started for the door.

At this instant, I believe every person in the room sat in stunned silence. The two most junior officers were leaving before dessert. Career decisions were being made here. I sure several officers were wondering just how deep into the Alaskan woods I would be sent to set up a one-man communication center.

I felt the pressure on my left arm increase, so I reached across with my right arm and took hold of her right arm. With my left hand free, I moved it around her, cupped my hand in her waist and pulled her too me to keep her from falling. She laid her head on my shoulder to help steady herself.

That was when I heard the collective “GASP” escape from every person in the room. From behind, it appeared that we were on our way to the sack.

I was too busy to contemplate the “Deep Shit” in which my chivalry had placed me. I got her into a taxi, and we quickly arrived at the base hospital. As they wheeled her away on a gurney, she said “Go back and tell the Admiral’s wife what happened.” And she was gone.

My mind had been so busy dealing with the emergency at hand, I had forgotten that there were 106 officers and wives who watch me, and the Flag Admin leave the gala giving everyone the impression that we may have gotten naked on the other side of the double door exit. For all they knew, we were both lying next to each other, smoking cigarettes, and commenting on our excellent performance.

Although it would only be in the figurative sense, I would be screwed if I did not take corrective action.

Back at the O Club, I remembered that there was a phone in the ballroom next to the exit. At the reception desk, I called that phone.

It took several rings, but finally a deep male voice answered the phone and I asked for the Admiral’s wife. There was a pause, and I could hear a lot of chatter and laughter in the background. Finally, a female voice answered which I recognized as the Admiral’s wife.

“Ma’am, this is Ensign Breman.” I said.

There was a long pause, then a cautioned response. “Yes, how can I help you?”

“The Flag Admin wanted me to call you. Her gall bladder acted up. She said she had a relapse, and I took her to the Emergency Room at the Base Hospital. They admitted her and rushed her off on a gurney.” I said.

“Oh my God!” her voice turned warm and friendly, almost motherly. “Is she Ok? Do I need to go to the hospital?” she said.

“No Ma’am. She said to tell you she will be fine. I waited around for a few moments, but the nurse couldn’t tell me anything.” I said.

“Well, I am sorry to hear that she has had a relapse. I picked her up at the hospital this morning and I told her she should rest, but she wouldn’t hear it and insisted on coming this evening.”

“I agree Ma’am. She should have stayed home.” I said.

“I’m glad you were able to take care of her. On a lighter topic, you cannot imagine what we have been saying back here! Your leaving has caused quite a stir. I hate to say it but everyone, except the Chief of Staff is having a good laugh at your expense.” She said.

“Ma’am, please extend my apologies to the Admiral and the Chief of Staff for leaving the party early. Although it was necessary, I am still embarrassed.” I said.

“You were the perfect gentleman. You have nothing to be embarrassed about. And I will tell you, the romantic

in me is a little disappointed that you two did not run off for a roll in the hay.” She said.

“Me too, Ma’am.” That slipped out of my mouth without thinking.

I could hear her laughing through the phone.

“Ma’am, please make sure the Admiral and the Chief of Staff know what happened.”

“I will” she said.

Our conversation ended.

It was early, probably 2030. It was a Saturday night, in port. I had enough excitement for the day (hell, that was enough excitement for a month), but I was still reluctant to give up and call it an evening. It would take too long to go back to the ship, change into civies and hit the Alley because the Alley closed at 2300. And the Main Gate closed at 2400. I did not want to stay at the O Club. Chances were good that I would run into someone from the party. I decided to go to the J Area Beach Club, an officers’ club on the other side of the base. It was less formal than the main O Club. I would be over-dressed, but dress standards were for minimums not maximums.

At the Beach Club, I ran into two of the new Staff Ensigns. They were in civies and said they had been out in the Alley on Friday and could not afford two nights in a row. I got a beer and joined them at the bar.

A few beers later, two Ships Company J.O.s walked in and, from their appearance, had survived another trip to the Alley. We acknowledge their presence with a nod and went back to our conversation.

“Hey Breman,” one of the J.O.s at the other end of the bar called out. “I hear you got rough with a Wave and put her in the hospital.”

Oh Shit, I thought, when bad skinny⁴³ gets out it really turns rotten, and it travels at the speed of light.

I corrected him and said that the Wave had gotten sick at the dinner party, and I escorted her to the hospital.

“Yea sure.” He said. “Save it for your court martial. I don’t want to hear any bullshit.”

He turned his back. I did not pursue the topic any further, but I did explain the situation to the two Ensigns with whom I was drinking.

Sunday was my day off. I was up early and off the ship before 0700. I really did not want to stick around to hear the story morph into a bigger horror story than it already was. All the senior officers who were at the party would be home Sunday and the true story would have trouble getting out. I felt I would be lucky if I did not end up in the brig when I came back to the ship.

I had a little bit more money to spend than I had on any of my previous stays in Home Port, so I took the train to

⁴³ Skinny is gossip. Skinny and scuttlebutt are both information and can be used interchangeably.

Tokyo. I spent the day just wandering around the streets and taking in the scenes. My Japanese was still limited to short common phrases. I did not know it at the time, but I was probably at my peak fluency and would never get any better.

I was back at the Yokosuka Naval Base just past 1800. Stopped at the Exchange and bought a toothbrush, razor, and a paperback book. I checked into the BOQ, Batchelor Officer Quarters, by telling them my stateroom was being fumigated. I showered and fell peacefully asleep somewhere after 2200.

The next day, I sat outside the BOQ bar and finished my paperback. Then I walked around and explored the base. Evidence that it was a Japanese Naval Base, before we took it over, could still be seen. Concrete and stone bunkers dotted the perimeter and there were entrances to caves dug into the hillside. I was tempted to try to enter one of the caves but thought better of it. At one end of the base there was a marina for private boats. I paused and daydreamed about boating on Tokyo Bay.

On the positive side, somehow the true version of Saturday night had emerged. The two Ensigns we relieved had some chuckles and laughs about Saturday, but there was nothing to indicate that they thought it was anything but a funny event. My watch partner had a few questions, and I retold the story. It relieved the boredom. Sunday in port was a slow watch.

I was off at midnight and back on Monday morning at 0700.

A lot of messages had built up over the weekend and I got to the Chief of Staff at 0800. He reviewed each message and filled in the distribution list on the first page. Numbers were used instead of names making the process go much quicker.

As he finished the last message, he took off his glasses and looked up at me and smiled, something he had never done before. Senior officers rarely exchanged pleasantries with us. Just instructions and an occasional “Thank you.”

“Did you have an enjoyable evening Saturday?” he asked.

“Yes sir.” I answered. “It was enjoyable and then it turned exciting.”

“I understand.” He said. “You were a true gentleman. Handled yourself properly. Good job.”

“Thank you, sir.” I left.

As I closed the door, I know I heard him chuckling.

My next stop was the Operations Boss, the only other Staff member besides the Admiral and Chief of Staff with a private office.

He gave me a big smile when I walked in. After going through the messages and adding to the distribution list.

He, too, looked up at me and smiled. “Hell of a Saturday night, wasn’t it?”

“Yes sir, one I won’t forget easily.” I said.

“Well, you handled yourself nicely. You should be proud of yourself.” He said.

All the other offices had multiple occupants. I knew I was going to run the gauntlet. Without dwelling on each office, because they were basically the same, here is a sampling of how the morning proceeded: On entering I would get smiles, a few cheers. Generally, the comment was “Did somebody call an ambulance?” My response was minimal. Upon leaving, as I was closing the door I would hear “Put her in the hospital, ya.” “Don’t these kids know how to do it. It’s pretty straightforward, get it, straightforward.” “You are supposed to knock them up not out.” They were all laughing.

I was immensely relieved that the true story had come out. And the people who really mattered understood what happened. I could deal with the J.O.s.

Tuesday after my midwatch was over, I was having breakfast with my watch partner and the two Ensigns I had met at the J Area Beach Club. The Ships Company J.O., who told me he did not want to hear any “bullshit”, approached our table. I wondered what the penalty would be for decking him. I would probably get my clock cleaned, but he would know he had been in a fight. I really was not up for any of his crap.

Before any of us could say anything, he said. "I want to apologize for my behavior and comments Saturday. I was out of line and had bad information. Gentlemen, I hope you will all accept my apology."

"Thank you." We all said.

He nodded and left.

For me, it was an exciting three days. It was good and bad, frantic, and calm, sometimes frightening and sometimes pleasant. But it was constant excitement, the dinner party, the hospital, the Beach Club, then spending Sunday exploring Tokyo and Monday walking around a base that had played a central part in WWII. It was all excitement.

But the effects of that weekend were not over. I did not know it, but my life was about to change.

Chapter: Navigating A Paper Maze

We were back at sea after two weeks in port and most of us picked up on the routine quickly. Our jolly band of Ensigns had spent considerable time before our homeport call making up a list of books we all wanted to read during our next trip to Yankee Station. Each man took a part of the list and purchased the books during our time ashore. Now, back at sea, we had our own lending library. We even attracted some other J.O.s who joined with their own supply of books. Reading was a big deal at sea, for everyone. For the boys in Crypto, with 58 straight hours of time off, it was an emotional necessity.

We had another wrinkle added to our lives on our previous deployment. The Oklahoma City began participating in Operation Market Time which involved destroying targets along the South Vietnamese Coast. Her six-inch guns were the largest in the Western Pacific Fleet. When She participated in a fire mission, the entire ship went to General Quarters, an operational status where every man had a specific position to fill. At GQ, the ship was ready to fight with all watertight hatches and portholes secured. This was known as Condition Zulu, enacted to preserve the watertight integrity of the vessel if holes were blown in the hull of the ship.

This presented a problem for the Boys of Crypto. A Crypto Officer's GQ station was in Crypto. But there were eight of us. With all eight Ensigns in the space, we had trouble closing the door, not to mention that no one could move. Additionally, the messages still had to be delivered, General Quarters and Condition Zulu be damned.

We were granted special dispensation regarding GQ. The GQ station for a Crypto Officer who was not on duty was his stateroom. Which meant that once you got used to the sound of the explosion that came out of the end of the barrel, we could enjoy an afternoon nap. Great for us, but more salt in the open wounds of the Ship's Company J.O.s who had to endure long hours in uncomfortable conditions.

The standing joke was that when the call to General Quarters came, six Crypto Officers fell asleep.

Additionally, all the Staff spaces, hatches and portholes were left open, in violation of Condition Zulu, to permit the staff to work. Which meant that we, and only we, could sneak up to the Flag Bridge and observe the firing. The Bridge windows had to be rolled down because the concussion from the explosions would break them (which happened the first time She fired – they were replaced with Plexiglas). We did not go to the Bridge very often because the noise was so loud. But it was a monotony breaker.

On one of our trips to the Bridge after lunch, and before the firing began, we got into a serious discussion about career advancement. The conclusion was that if we stayed in our current position for three years, our career was either over or we accepted the fact that all of our shore duty stations would be at Communication Stations, and we would be reporting to a career WAV who outranked us.

Or you could request a transfer to be effective at the end of two years, but we had found out that to get the transfer you would have to extend for an additional year of service. You could negotiate for your duty station, but most men ended up at sea again.

It was during this session that one of our number said he read a SECNAV message that was encouraging J.O.s to volunteer for various positions that were falling

short of their recruiting needs, such as aviation, submarines, coastal support craft and a few others. Two of us spent a couple hours in the Comm Center looking for that message.

The next day we had copies for everyone who showed up for coffee. The First Lieutenant of the Marine Company joined us for this one. He was interested in the Aviation Program. So was I, and the next morning he and I dug into the available material. It was not easy to apply for the Navy Flight Program.

First you had to pass a physical. That should not be too hard since we had a doctor on board and we both knew him. You had to take a test. No problem. You had to complete an application form. No problem. Then you had to get a recommendation and approval from your boss. Now we figured we had a problem. But not one that could not be overcome. So we thought.

In Sick Bay, we asked the Doc to do our Flight Physical. Unfortunately, he told us he could not do it because it required a doctor who was a certified Navy Flight Physician. Sorry, he said. We could either go to an aircraft carrier or a Naval Air Station. Now we had a problem.

Upon further investigation, everything we thought was “No Problem” was a problem. Those things we thought would be a problem, were. We congratulated ourselves that we did not get everything wrong in our initial analysis. Small victories gave us a pat on our backs.

The test turned out to be only available at a Naval Air Station, by appointment. The closest NAS was in Atsugi, Japan, twenty miles northwest of Yokosuka and accessible only by train. Because we needed both the physical and the test it would probably involve two trips. Additionally, we would have to make appointments beforehand, and it was not like we could pick up a phone and call.

Getting recommendations and approval from our bosses was probably the showstopper. And when should we approach them? Asking for a recommendation and approval before we were sure we qualified would mean that we exposed our intentions early on and leave ourselves open to the bosses' displeasure,

needlessly if we failed the physical or the test. Asking for permission after we passed the physical and the test was the more cautious path, but it meant we would have to arrange to take the test and physical covertly, which was not going to be easy. We decided to be cautious.

Of course, at sea, little goes unnoticed, and our planning sessions were stretching out over a couple weeks. One of the Ship's Company J.O. asked what we were up to. We simply responded, "Career Planning".

He said, "What do the career paths of a Navy Ensign and a Marine First Lieutenant have in common?"

We looked at each other, then responded “We’re going to switch services.”

He scoffed and left.

I investigated the possibility of scheduling the physical and test through messages, but every communication had to go through the Chain of Command which immediately killed that idea.

Then we discovered that the test would only be given after the physical was passed and since the physical involved dilation of the eyes, we would have to do the test on a separate day. That meant three trips to Atsugi, one to schedule, one for the physical and one for the test. If we were extremely lucky, we could get it all done in one trip if we could get a room at the BOQ. I could squeeze it all into my 58 hours off, but he would have to take leave. Leave time for him was an additional obstacle.

Our final plan looked like this: On my first free day in port, I would take the train to Atsugi, go to Sick Bay and schedule appointments, then go to the Admin Building and schedule the tests, Finally, if I was able to schedule the appointment on two consecutive days, I would go to the BOQ and check on quarters. If I left Yokosuka right after finishing my midwatch, midnight to seven a.m., I could stay over if I needed an extra day.

All this planning took the best part of a month. We were hopeful, but we knew it was a long shot. We could pass

everything and be shot down (pun intended) by our bosses. We pondered our situation.

Totally unrelated to our career planning efforts, my work as a Top-Secret Officer was going along fine. The work could not get much simpler and the messages more interesting. It was an easy job that, unfortunately, went nowhere. That is why I had done all the planning, and I knew that at least two of the other Ensigns were looking at other programs. It was late August and I had been in the job for a little over five months.

The bottom line was we were among the happier people on the ship.

The Senior Officers I saw daily were far friendlier than they had been before I “put her in the hospital”. I no longer felt that I was invisible when I walked in an office. I generally had a pleasant verbal exchange with them. So, what happened next probably would not have happened if the Dinner Party Incident had not occurred.

I handed a message to the Captain who was the Staff Aviation specialist. He took it and appeared to be studying it intensely. Then he looked at me and with a stern look on his face he said, “When are you going to start living like a real man and go Airdale?”⁴⁴ Then he smiled.

⁴⁴ Airdale, Navy slang for a Naval Aviator.

Although surprised, I snapped back “As soon as you cut the bullshit red tape and help me get an application off this ship.”

“Are you serious?” he said.

I then ran through the plan the 1st Lt. and I had put together. It took less than a minute and I ended up with “We figure we have a 50/50 chance of getting an app off the ship.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He said.

“Thank you.” I said and left.

During the rest of the day, I turned over in my mind what kind of help would be forthcoming from the Captain. I concluded that he could probably be a recommendation for me if my boss would not. That would be a great help. Beyond that, I did not see what else he could do. Of course, that did not stop me from thinking about it.

When my midwatch was over at 0700, I skipped breakfast and hit the sack. I was tired.

It was late morning when the Aviation Captain shook me awake. “Let’s go, quick, quick. You have two minutes to get dressed. Hurry up, quick.”

When you are young, you can jump out of bed and hit the ground running and that is just what I did. I had no idea where I was going, what I was doing nor why I was doing it. I was following the Captain aft, down a passageway, down a ladder then continuing aft on the

weather deck, past the missile hanger to the helo pad where a chopper was revving up for a takeoff.

The Captain shoved a large envelope into my chest and said above the roar of the engine “Instructions are inside. Go!” and he pointed at the helo.

I was inside and no wiser than before. I had no idea what was happening. Was I carrying a top-secret message somewhere or did this have something to do with my conversation with the Captain yesterday? I was hoping it was the conversation, but knew it was probably something far more mundane. Then I saw the port side of a carrier come into view. We landed within a couple of minutes.

Inside the Island Ready Room, I opened the envelope and found a handwritten note and another envelope. The note told me to go to Sick Bay and ask for a certain doctor who would give me a flight physical. I had never had a surprise party, but this must be how it would feel.

As I was waiting for the doctor, it occurred to me that the Oklahoma City was departing Yankee Station for Yokosuka today. If she left without me, I wondered if my absence would constitute a “Missing Ship’s Movement Charge”. Could not worry about it now.

The doctor was young, friendly, and jovial. A corpsman took blood, blood pressure, heart rate, listened to my heart and gave me a urine cup. Then the doctor did his part. The last step was the eye dilation. The doc told me I probably passed. He would send the results to the

Captain when they were in. He told me to say “Hi” to him.

I was aboard by 1600 and hungry because I had missed breakfast and lunch. I was able to grab a stale cinnamon roll and a coffee in the Wardroom. The senior Staff J.O. entered the lounge area and asked me where I had been all day. I really did not see where it was any of his #@^&ing business, so I just said “Around.”

He said, “Around where?”

I weighed my next words carefully. I could tell the truth and probably blow any chance I had of making it to Flight School. I could lie, which would probably be obvious and this guy probably already knew where I had been and that would end my aviation aspirations. Then I thought of a third option.

“That’s Need to Know”⁴⁵ information.” I said. This was a stretch, but it beat the other two options.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“It’s classified and it is “Need to Know”, I said.

Technically, I was correct. The papers I took to the carrier were automatically classified as “Confidential” just because of their origin. Since they were my papers, my physical exam, I could argue that the J.O. did not need to know what they were and what I was doing. I

⁴⁵ All classified information is subject to a “Need to Know” requirement. If you “need to know” it for your job, you will be granted access provided you have the required clearance.

am glad I did not have to defend that position any further.

Did he want to challenge me on this point? Was it possible that I had been given a Top-Secret communication that had to be carried to the aircraft carrier? Or was I just bullshitting him. Although I could not read his mind, I could hear the wheels turning and he was thinking there was a 98% chance I was hiding something and a 2% chance I had actually delivered Top Secret material. He yielded to the 2% and simply got up and left.

I heard no more from him or anyone else on the subject.

The 1st Lt. and I got together, and I was able to give him the name and phone number to call to schedule his physical and take the test. This was going to make the process a little easier.

Four days later, I was at the end of my watch rotation, having breakfast after the midwatch. A third-class yeoman entered the room. I noticed him looking around for someone and when he saw us, a group of Ensigns, he approached our table.

“I’m looking for Ensign Breman.” He said.

“Here.” I motioned.

The petty officer handed me a clipboard and asked me to sign a receipt for the message. Then he stood there

waiting for me to read the message. I got the hint and read it.

“Ship will dock at 0800. Be on the Officers’ Quarterdeck with I.D. and travel money. Confirm receipt.” the message read. It was signed by the Aviation Captain.

“Please respond Affirmative.” I said to the yeoman.

My breakfast companions did not ask, but just stared at me. They knew I had been planning to apply to Flight School, but I had not told them about the physical. Best to keep quiet about that for now.

After a pause, I said “I’m not sure what it is. I have to report at 0800.”

A few jokes were made as I left the table to get ready.

The Captain met me at the Quarterdeck and handed me an envelope. He pointed to a black Plymouth sedan sitting on the far end of the dock and said “The driver is expecting you. Good luck.”

I was wondering if this was another part of the physical. I did not think he would have been able to arrange for me to take the test. I thought about opening the envelope while the car was moving but decided to wait until it was stopped.

The car stopped at a helo port on the other side of the base. The driver said, “There’s your ride.”

I said to myself “Someday you are going to get in trouble flying in helos when you do not know where you are going.”

The flight lasted about fifteen minutes, which was normal flight time from Yokosuka to Atsugi Naval Air Station. I followed the instruction in the envelope and took the Entrance Exam for Flight School. Before leaving, I got all of the information the 1st Lt. would need to take his exam and several copies of the blank application. The last instruction on the note said “You’re on your own getting back. Suggest a cab to the train station.”

In the space of seven days I was able to complete all the paperwork necessary to submit my application for Flight school. I signed it and turned it in to my boss, a Commander. I think he knew it was coming. It was now early September.

The Aviation Captain shepherded my paperwork through the process, and it was off the ship three days after I turned it in. I would never be able to thank the Captain enough for the consideration he showed me. But I tried anyway.

My orders to Flight School came through while we were in Hong Kong on a port call. It was late October and a great place for me to celebrate with the Ensigns who were not on duty. We went to the Hong Kong Hilton, and I sprung for dinner. They were congratulatory and

happy to see that you could turn a dead-end job into a possibility for the future.

The next day I purchased the luggage I would need to travel and to ship my gear to Pensacola. I was on watch the last day in Hong Kong and finished my midwatch just before we left port. Two days later we pulled into Subic Bay. Now I was ready for my second trip across the Pacific.

The astute reader will notice that I have not mentioned Pat for a while. Rest assured; we had been exchanging two to three letters a week since March. I do not want the Navy adventures and misadventures getting mixed up with and diminishing the significance of Pat. I will discuss my and Pat's adventure later in this volume.

My trip back to the States held one terrifying moment for me. From the Subic Navy base, I caught a ride in a twin-engine Beechcraft out of Cubi Point to Clark Airforce Base. Checked all my flight arrangements and got a good night's sleep, anticipating my flight would be another two-day ordeal in a propeller driven aircraft. I was wrong there. It was a commercial size jet airliner and, by comparison to the first flight, comfortable.

The terrifying moment came at breakfast before takeoff. It was about 1000 and I was eating in the Air Force Officers' Mess in a near-empty dining room. An announcement came over the P.A. system "Sid Breman, you have a phone call."

I was terrified. Not one person in the world knew where I was. How was someone calling me? I should answer the call. No, do not answer it. Your boss found some way to cancel your orders. They are looking for you. Do not answer the call. Maybe something happened at home, someone is sick, or they died. So what! You are already on a flight home and answering the call is not going to do anything for you or them. You certainly cannot get home any faster than you are. Answer the phone. No, do not answer the phone. It is a trick. Do not answer the phone!

All this ran through my head in two seconds. I lost the argument and went to answer the phone.

I picked up the receiver and said, "This is Sid Breman." No one was on the phone, but I got an electric jolt when a voice behind me said "Hi Sid."

It was one of my high school football teammates that I had not seen for six years. He was a 2nd Lt in the Air Force.

"I thought that was you, but was not sure, so I had you paged." he said.

"Scared the hell out of me. I thought my orders back to the states had been cancelled." I said.

We talked for a few minutes and then he had to leave. I do not think I have ever seen him again.

Chapter: Moving Forward and Learning to Live With Marines

Two weeks later, after a great visit home, I was at Pensacola Naval Air Station in Flight School.

Drawing on my limited exposure to people, places, and things, I was now able to categorize my Navy experience as follows: OCS was another semester in college with discipline and the same grade pressure. You flunk out and you have two years as an enlisted man. The Seventh Fleet Staff and the Oklahoma City was a funeral wake; everyone (meaning the J.O.s) was grieving something. Flight School was a wedding reception. Two families getting together, Marines and Navy, celebrating the promise of the future and happy to have been invited. Everyone was having a good time.

Our class, referred to in Navy terms as a company consisted of fifty Junior Officers with the numbers evenly split between Marines and Navy. Our ranks were mostly 1st Lt. s and Lt.J.G. s, but a few of us were 2nd Lt. s and Ensigns. There was one Marine Captain, and, as the ranking member of the Company, automatically became the Company Commander. Probably half of the Company was married.

Among the Navy Officers, rank did not mean too much. We all knew who was junior and senior, but nobody cared much. The Marines were somewhat the same in a social setting. However, take one step out of the social realm and rank and discipline was supreme. Everyone followed the Chain of Command and God

help the Marine who showed up for Morning Quarters with a button undone.

We also had a company Officer, a Navy Lt. Cdr. whose primary job was to ensure the Administrative Integrity of our Pre-Flight Training. He interfaced with the Company Commander, and we sometimes saw him at Quarters. When he introduced himself at our first Call to Quarters, he said “I am an easy-going person. I like everything to go smoothly. We have rules and you are expected to know them. It is like a baseball game, and you are the players. Come out and play a good clean game; do not argue with the umpire; obey the rules. Because if you do not, I will shove the bat up your ass. Is that clear?”

That morning all Navy Officers learned to scream “Yes Sir” at full volume. The Marines were able to satisfy the Company Officer with one try. We needed several attempts.

Meeting new people had always been work for me, and still is. However, Flight School proved to be dramatically different in that it was much easier than ever before. First was the Interservice Rivalry between the Marine Corps and the Navy which is a little sharper, keener, than the Navy and the Army, Air Force and Coast Guard. The Marines and Navy have a lot more opportunity to exchange jovial insults designed to denigrate the opposing service⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ On my To-do list is the compilation of the “Interservice Insults”. My personal favorite is “I know a sailor who quit the Navy and joined the Marine Corps, thereby raising the average IQ of both services.”

I am not bragging, but I could hold my own in a good insult match. Trading dig for dig and keeping everyone laughing. The test of who won any contest was the informal Laugh Meter.

The second factor that made meeting new people easier was my first name, Sid. Informally, we called the Marines Jarheads and Grunts. They called us Squids. I was in the middle of a contest, and I thought I was winning when one of the Marines said, “Sid the Squid”. The assembled group of Navy and Marines found my new sobriquet hilarious. The group broke up laughing. And for the rest of the day, that was all I heard. “Hey, Sid the Squid.” It was all I was getting, even from the Navy.

At 1600, I escaped the jeers and taunts and knew I had to do something, and fast. I drove off base and looked for a bait and tackle shop, not a problem in a gulf coast town. Inside I purchased the largest plastic squid lure I could find. The whole squid was about a foot long, and the package had an image of a squid even bigger. Back at the BOQ, I took the hooks off the lure and put the wiggly, plastic cephalopod in a bag.

I had made it back in time to go dinner with some other guys. Of course, I got a couple “Sid the Squid” comments from them, but I waited. When we entered the Officers Mess, a table of Marines called out “Sid the Squid”. Before they finished, I launched the little squidly into the air. As it traced an arc from me to them, they saw it coming, thought it was real and began to take

evasive action. I got the biggest laugh of the day from the most people.

After that, I wore the mantle⁴⁷ proudly.

Chapter: Like a Duck

The subject matter of our classes was not difficult, nor was it a walk in the park. The instructors kept our attention by telling us often that the topic under discussion was important because if you do or do not do “this or that” you will die. They had my attention.

The PT, physical training, was more rigorous than OCS and the Marines loved it. Their goal seemed to be every Marine had to perform better than the best Navy man. In most cases they did not have much trouble. On the Obstacle Course, they reigned supreme. I do not know if any Navy man beat any Marine because I was never at the finish line in time to see anyone finish. There may have been a couple of my fellow officers I beat to the end, but I am not sure. I could not get over that damned wall obstacle.

It was a wall about twenty feet wide and 8 or 10 feet high and it did not matter how high it was, I could not get over it. On my first run of the circuit, I finally went around it, and the umpire took my name. After that I struggled over, but the time was killing me. I was a full minute over the one-minute limit for the course. I had to

⁴⁷ Coincidentally, a squid's mantle is the outer covering of the animal.

keep running every week. I knew I would eventually make it, but it was going to take some effort on my part.

In the rest of PT activities, I did fine, probably average, except for swimming where I excelled. My primary sport was swimming. Not the racing kind of swimming; that did not exist in my home area. No school had a racing pool. But there were Lifesaving courses and I participated as much as I could. The programs were conducted one night a week during the school year in the next town over from my hometown. I became a Certified Lifesaver when I was thirteen, and an instructor when I was fourteen. I taught swimming for three years in that program.

The Water Survival Training in Pre-Flight was extensive and intensive. No surprise, 90% of your flying will be over water. If your aircraft stops working and you bail out, you will want to have some confidence that you can survive while waiting to be picked up.

Everything in the program was important, but paramount among the subjects was the Parachute Escape and Release Training. I do not know if anything has changed in the last fifty years, so I will stick with the procedures that existed in 1966. The instructors lecture ran something like this:

“Gentlemen, please pay close attention to this lecture because if you do not follow these procedures correctly, you will die. First, remember that only a fool will jump out of a perfectly good airplane. You are going to be

pilots. Pilots drive the aircraft. We do not jump out of them. If that is true, then why are we learning how to get out of a parachute harness after exiting an aircraft? That brings me to my second point: You will exit an aircraft in flight when the environment inside the aircraft becomes more hostile than the environment outside the aircraft.

You are aspiring pilots, which means you spend your days down here wishing you were up there (the instructor points to the heavens).

When your aircraft fails, when not if, rest assured it will fail, you will be up there (points to the sky again) wishing you were down here. What you will learn here today will increase your chances that you will survive the trip after you exit the failed aircraft.

There are four possible scenarios in which you may find yourself. To graduate from preflight training, each of you will have to successfully complete simulations of these scenarios in this pool. Scenario one, you are conscious, aware of your surroundings and calmly drifting towards the water. You have time to prepare for your entry into the water. Arrange your buttock so that you are seated in the harness. Now release the harness straps around your legs. You are now sitting in the harness with your legs free. Place your right hand on the chest strap release buckle. Do not open the release buckle at this time because you may fall out of the harness, and you will not be happy with the results.

Why should you release the leg straps first? Because if you release the chest strap first, you fall forward and be caught hanging upside down in the harness and not be able release the leg straps. Additionally, you will lose all control of your chute during your descent.

You are now descending towards the water. As your feet touch the water, note, as your feet touch the water, release the chest strap and raise your arms about your head and straighten your legs so that you fall out of the harness. You are now free of your parachute.

And why did I tell you not to release your chest harness until you hit the water? Because your depth perception over water is impaired and you may look at the water and say "I'm only ten feet above the water. I'll get out of my harness now". Then this idiot discovers he was still 500 feet above the water. Can you imagine the look on that guy's face on the way down?

You will be secured in a parachute harness and dropped from the top of the ceiling. You must be out of the harness before your head goes under the water."

Involuntarily, we all looked up at the ceiling where a parachute harness dangled from a pulley.

"Second scenario, you are in the water and still in your harness. First, release your chest strap. This is the opposite of what you did in the first scenario. Why? Because if you release your leg straps first, a gust of wind may catch your chute and pull the chest strap up around your arms and you will not be able to escape

the harness and you will drown. Once your chest harness is released, release your leg straps, and exit the harness.

“Again, you will be secured in a parachute harness and dropped from the top of the ceiling. You will have ten seconds to exit the harness”

A student raised his hand and asked, “What if you prepare for scenario one and have your leg straps undone and now you in the water with your chest strap still attached?”

The instructor replied, “You’re probably fucked.”

Back to the lecture.

“Scenario three: You find yourself in the water with both your chest and leg straps secure as in scenario two, but your chute is now a sail, and you are being dragged through the water, like bait on a hook. This is like scenario two except that you may be under water, and you are being pulled rapidly through the water. This procedure takes elements from both previous scenarios. Quickly, you will do it quickly because you may be holding your breath, adjust your leg straps so that you are in a sitting position. Do not release your leg straps at this time. Reach up and release your chest strap. Without leaning forward, reach down and release your leg straps. Straighten your body and exit the harness.

“You will be secured in a harness at this end of the pool and a line⁴⁸ will be attached to an eight-horsepower motor on the other side of the pool. When I say “Go”, the man sitting beside the motor will hit the start button and the motor will drag you through the water. You will have to be out of the harness before you hit the other side of the pool.”

The instructor paused and looked around. He wanted to be sure we were all still listening. When he was satisfied, he had everyone’s attention, he continued.

“Scenario four: At the other end of the pool, the deep end, you can see The Dempsey Dumpster. It is the cockpit of an aircraft, including the fuselage, mounted on rails, fifteen feet above the surface of the water. When the brakes are released, the cockpit runs rapidly down the rails, hits the water and turns upside down.”

The instructor paused and looked at the Dumpster. A second instructor, standing beside the device, tripped the brake and we watched the cockpit roll towards the water. It splashed in and, as advertised, flipped upside down.

The room was silent.

The instructor did not have to say it, but it was clearly implied “If you do not master these procedures, you will die.”

⁴⁸ “Line” is a Navy term for rope.

I did not detect a great deal of enthusiasm for the class as a whole to get started, but a small group of us, about eight, thought this was a fun exercise and, like a bunch of teenagers, were jostling each other to be first.

I was the third man to finish all four simulation. I think I would have finished first except when I did the parachute drag. The instructor told me to check my harness and when I looked down, he hit the start button. I was caught off-guard and was dragged to the other end of the pool. I had to do it again.

The eight of us, both Navy and Marines, had a good time. For us, it was like a day at a waterpark, except that waterparks did not exist at that time, not that I knew about. We were laughing and joking around until we started watching some of the other guys going through the simulations. We quieted down. Some of these guys were scared shitless, not a lot of them, but some.

Two days later we had to do the one-mile endurance swim. When I was a teenager, I used to do a mile swim at least once a year to qualify for my Lifesaving Certificate but had not done one for a while. I did not think I would have any trouble. I did not.

However, I did get into a bit of a race with the Marine who lead the pack from the beginning. As I said earlier, Marines hate to be beaten in any physical contest, especially by a Squid. I stayed with him most of the way but started slipping during the last five laps. I finished second, but ahead of the rest of the Marines.

The Marine who finished first and I were out of the pool long before any of the other students. We got into a conversation about swimming. He swam competitively in high school, but not in college. I told him I would have liked to swim competitively, but my school did not have a program. I did lifesaving and lifesaving/swimming instruction for several years.

At one point, he said “Do you think we will ever have to use this stuff?”

“I already have.” I said. “I went down in a chopper last year in the South China Sea.”

“No shit!” he said. “Really?”

“Yea, really.” I said.

There was a pause as we watched the swimmers complete laps and turn around for another one. A lot of people were starting to drag.

“Anybody hurt, killed?” he asked.

“No, good thing there were other choppers in the sky. They picked us up within a half hour.” I said.

“So, how would you describe it?” he asked.

“Absolute terror. I panicked. Damn near died three times before I realized I had to do something to save myself. Do not want to do it again, that’s for damn sure.”

The conversation drifted to other topics, and we were joined by other students who had finished the mile swim. There were still a lot of guys in the water, and we

noted it was going to be awhile before everyone was finished.

The instructor came over when about half the class was finished and dismissed us.

Note to the Reader: By now you have probably discerned the real difference between an Adventure and a Misadventure. It is the Big Surprise. To be sure, Adventures have unexpected events and surprises. But Misadventures have The Big Surprise, like a helicopter crashing or finding a narrow passageway to avoid a pursuing police car. The Big Surprise is always exciting, but not necessarily fun.

At Quarters the next morning, Friday, at the end of the announcements the Company Commander called out my name and I was instructed to report to him when we were dismissed. I did. The C.C. said he heard I was a certified swimming instructor. I said I was, but not currently certified. I had taught swimming for three years when I was a teenager.

“Good” he said. “I have a few Marines who are having trouble passing the swimming test. Actually, two of them cannot swim at all. Is there any chance you would be willing to help them?”

The Marines were good at internal communications. Much better than us, the Navy.

“Sure. Can you get us into the pool today, this afternoon?” I said.

“I’ll set it up for 1500.” He said. It was Friday and we finished classes early.

“How many students?” I asked.

“Probably six.” He responded.

At 1500, I walked into the pool wearing Navy issue swimming trunks and sweatshirt and was greeted by six, similarly clad Marines. The CC was there, still in uniform, to introduce us. It was not necessary.

I said “Hi, I’m Sid.”

In unison the Marines interrupted me “the Squid”. I laughed, they laughed.

I did an initial evaluation. Two of them could not swim a stroke. Two thrashed about for maybe five feet. Two could “dog paddle”.

We did a three-hour session and I started with the basics, stick your head underwater and blow bubbles and moved on to more complex concepts from there, floating, strokes etc. Most of my work had been with teenagers. Now I had a class of highly motivated adults. This was different.

The next day we started at 1000 hours. Already, they did not look like the same group I had the day before. We worked for five hours and at the end of the session all of them were swimming widthwise laps and I had some experimenting with swimming underwater. The CC showed up around 1200 and stayed for an hour. He was just observing.

Sunday, we hit it again at 1000 and went to 1300. They were now doing laps and enjoying it. In three days, they had overcome their fear of the water and were on their way to passing all the water skills of the program. I was willing to work with them in the coming week, but they said they were good and would work on their own. I think there may have been a little pride involved, but it was up to them.

Within a week, all six finished the water skills tests.

Chapter: Squared Away

On Thursday of that week, the Navy Officers had to report to the Base Supply Office to requisition fatigue uniforms for the Survival Training Exercise that would start Friday morning and end Sunday evening, three days and two nights of what was essentially camping. For all the Marines and for the Navy Officers who had camping experience, this was more of a great weekend in the woods. For anyone who had never experienced camping, this was an endurance event that threatened to end their existence. At least, that is the way they made it sound during the exercise. I was, fortunately, one of the ones with experience and I enjoyed the event.

Thursday, before dinner, I was in my room inspecting the fatigues I received. They were the right color but looked more like the uniforms I had seen inmates wearing in a military prison in a War Movie. Additionally, although they smelled clean, they look, as my Mother

would have described them, like they “came out of the dog’s mouth”. The cover⁴⁹ had no discernable shape.

As I inspected my weekend wardrobe, my best friend, Butts, enter my room.

Butts: “You’re not going to wear those rags, are you?”

Butts was a career Marine. He had joined the Corps straight out of high school nine years ago and had rapidly made his way up through the ranks and received his commission two years earlier. He was now a First Lieutenant and was on his way to being a RIO, Radar Intercept Officer. The most popular job for a RIO was riding in the backseat of an F4 Phantom. His nickname was derivative of his surname and had nothing to do with his anatomy.

Me: “Of course. What are my choices?”

Butts: “No, no, no. You cannot go outside looking like that. I would be embarrassed for you. I would be embarrassed to be seen with you. You look like, like, like a Squid!”

Over my protestations, Butts pushed me out the door and we started making the rounds and I found out he was going to borrow a complete Marine uniform for me to wear. He also knew who my swimming students were and picked them to donate to the cause.

There is the Marine Grapevine in action again.

⁴⁹ Cover is Navy speak for “hat”.

We were back in my room in an hour. I carefully hung the freshly laundered, starched and pressed garments on hangers and we went to dinner.

Everyone made a short night of it, anticipating three long days ahead. Before retiring, Butts told me he would be over in the morning to help me get dressed properly. And he did.

The next morning, when Butts and I left the barracks, I was indistinguishable from the Marine and we caught comments all the way. At Quarters, we started forming into our Navy and Marine ranks, having a morning cigarette and some guys finishing coffee, when we hear a commotion on the other side of where the Marines had started forming into ranks. One of the Marines had screwed up, somehow or something, and was catching hell from the CC and some other Marines. They were not happy people, and someone's ass was in trouble.

Butts, with a serious look on his face, trotted over to me: "Sid, I need you to come with me." When we were a few feet away from anyone, he said "I want you to double time, with me, over to the Company Commander. When you get there, brace and salute. Got it?"

Me: "Got it."

The urgency with which Butts had separated me from the group told me this was a time to follow and not question. When I got to the Company Commander, I snapped to attention and rendered my best salute. The

CC returned my salute as crisp and distinct as I gave. I automatically remained at attention. Directly across from me was a Second Lieutenant, I knew slightly. He was married and lived off base. He had arrived in a uniform that was wrinkled, and it appeared as if he had slept in it. None of his lines were straight and part of his shirt was out.

I could see why he was in deep trouble. The Marines took pride in their appearance. That was why Butts had helped me put myself together. Appearance matters! If you let the little things fall apart, the big things will never get together.

As I remember it, this was the ass chewing the Company Officer delivered to the 2nd Lt. who was flanked by the four senior 1st Lt. s of the Company. As you read the following, imagine it being deliver at full volume.

“Moron! How dare you report for Quarters looking like you spent the night in a whore house! You look like shit. Are you mocking the Marines who got up early to arrive here looking like the Marines they are and you come in, half awake and half dress looking like a vagrant who spent the night sleeping off a drunk, lying in some back alley? Do you think you are exempt from the Marine Corps standard? Do you really want to be a Marine? Are you bucking for a Section 8?

You do not even look like a Marine. From this day forward, you will report for Quarters at 0730 every day

and you will stand at attention for inspection by every Marine who arrives at this Parade Ground until you have convinced every one of them that you are a Marine. Do you understand me?"

I do not know how he did it, but the CC delivered this last sentence at twice the volume that I thought was his full volume.

"Yes Sir!" the 2nd Lt. responded just as loud as the CC. I thought he was going to blow my cover off.

Now the Company Commander lowered his volume and leaned into the 2nd Lt.

"Look at this man in front of you. He looks better than you. He looks more squared away than you. He looks more like a Marines than you do. And guess what? He's a squid. A squid looks more like a Marines than you do. A squid looks better than you. Here is the personification of a squid, Sid the Squid. And he looks better than you. Let that sink in. A squid looks better than a Marine. You have embarrassed every Marine in this Company. You have embarrassed every Marine on the base. You have, single-handedly, embarrassed the Marine Corps. Now get out of my sight. You have twenty minutes to report back for inspection."

The CC turned to me and said, "At ease sailor."

I complied.

“Thank you for your assistance this morning. You look outstanding. Have a good exercise. Dismissed.” And with that, the CC was calling the Company to attention.

I returned to my group of Navy friends with a confused look on my face. One of the group asked me what happened. I gave the men around me a quick summary of the events. Then I added “I think I have just been complimented and insulted in one sentence using the same words.”

The exercise went off without complication. We were split up into groups of about fourteen, half Marines and half Navy. I am sure this was done to keep from losing any of the Navy Officers, some of whom had entered another strange and confusing universe. On the way to our bivouac site, we had to forage for food as this was a survival exercise. Butts and I got into the same group and neither of us had any problems. I am happy to say that since that weekend, I have never had any desire to eat racoon and catfish stew.

Chapter: The O Course

It was February, and we were within a couple of weeks of completing the Pre-Flight Program, but we still had a few boxes to check. One was the Pressure Chamber, but I will come back to that subject later. Another, for me, was the Obstacle Course. I had gotten to the point where I could make it over the wall, but it was still taking too much time. I had gone around the course several times and could not see any place where I could save time except the bloody wall.

At Friday's Quarters, I heard my name, along with seven other Navy Officers, to report to the O Course at 1500. The scuttlebutt started on the way to class. The "word" was that those of us who had not completed the Course in the appropriate time would be running it daily until we did. I looked forward to 1500 hours like it was a dentist's appointment. I knew that I was the slowest one of the group. My high school football coach once told me, in front of the team, "Breman, you're small, but you're slow."

We all showed up at 1500 in our Navy issued running gear, light grey sweatshirt, khaki shorts, white socks, and high-top white sneakers. We did not look the same way we felt. We looked like an average group of young men, in their early to mid-twenties, out for a little exercise. We appeared to be in good physical condition. However, we felt, individually, like the last guy picked for the after-school baseball game.

Like the swimming pool, there were NCOs in charge of the operation of the O Course. And, woe-be-to the officers that tried to pull rank on them. Their word was law on this course, backed up by the full weight of the Company Officer. They were referred to as referees.

The head NCO called out the first name. It appeared he was going in reverse, alphabetical order.

"On your mark, set, go." The referee clicked a stopwatch, and we watch the first runner disappeared into the maze. The guy beside me was tracking the

runner's progress with the second hand on his watch. The rest of us moved our heads back and forth from his wrist to the Course exit.

"He's not going to make it." our unofficial timer said.

Just then we heard the runner crashing to the finish line. He tripped and slid across the mark.

The referee helped him to his feet and said, "Well done, you had a whole second to spare." Then he called "Next" followed by a name.

The first runner came over to where the rest of us were sitting and joined us. He was huffing and puffing. When he had caught his breath, someone ask him how many referees were on the course.

He said "There are refs at every &%#*ing obstacle, sometimes two. Today is not the day to look for any slack. Good luck guys."

He walked off in the direction of the barracks.

The second man was gone, but none of us were timing his progress. We were all thinking about running the course with all the referees out there. Not that we were hoping to cheat, no. More like having the latitude to use our wits instead of just our brawn. OK, so today would be all brawn.

The second man finished and managed to stay erect crossing the finish line.

The NCO said “You missed by five seconds. Report here tomorrow at 1000 hours for O Course training and additional testing. Dismissed”

While the third man was running, I saw the CC walk up to the NCO and they had a short discussion. Then he walked away a joined two other Marine Officers who were watching the runners. They were all still in uniform.

The third man failed, but number four and five passed. Six was not ever close. I could have beat him. Seven missed by a good ten seconds. Now it was my turn. Now I really felt like the last kid picked.

The NCO said “Go!”

I was off and, damn, there were referees at every obstacle. The wall was at the back of the course, the halfway point, but it was hidden from view because it was around a corner. After turning the corner, you had about fifteen feet to gain speed and attack the wall.

As I rounded the corner, I saw swimming students one and two standing about three feet apart holding a board between them. Student three and four were straddling the wall directly above them. At a full run, for me that is, I stepped on the board and one and two heaved upward while three and four caught my arms to guide me. My right foot touched the top of the wall and I saw five and six on the other side of the wall ready to spot me on my descent. My landing was not perfect, but acceptable and I was gone.

I never knew how fast I completed the course. I did not ask, and the NCO did not offer. He just said “Passed.” And called the referees in. I did not see my swimming students among the refs.

I walked over to the Company Commander and was about to thank him when he thanked me for helping with the swimmers. I told him, again, I enjoyed giving lessons. Then I thanked him for everything he did for the Company and told him I appreciated that he looked out for everyone.

He smiled and said, “It’s my job.”

Chapter: Up In The Air

Within a few weeks, I would be a student pilot..... again. Four years earlier, March 18, 1962, I climbed into a cockpit as a student for the first time. This story needs some context around it.

After two and a half years of struggling to get a grade better than a C, I threw the towel in. The college system had beat me to a pulp. Every mid-semester report had me failing something or carrying Ds in somethings. It would have been understandable if I had spent my time partying, but I was not. I was working, hard, as hard as I knew how, but the grades were not returning. I had had it and I was able to withdraw barely holding on to my C average which meant that I left in “good standing” with the college and could return at any time.

I turned 21 just before I withdrew.

My Father was not happy with me and it took a long discussion with my Mother and Father for him to understand that I needed a break. When he accepted the situation, everything was fine. Then, I had to solve two other problems: no money and the military draft.

I take the draft first. It was the simplest to solve.

I was home for a month when my notice to report for a draft physical came in the mail. I passed it. I was not surprised. The day after the physical, I went to my county draft board and found out that I was scheduled to be inducted in July, 1962. I checked and found that if I was back in college by June, I would get my student exemption back. All I had to do was present a letter of acceptance.

I could have done all of that by mail, but the anxious animal inside me said “No, let’s do this in person”. It was still early morning and I called in sick to work that evening. Then I called my Mother and told her that I was driving to Gettysburg College to enroll in summer school and why I was doing it. She agreed with my reasoning. I got to the College Registrar’s office by 2 p.m. and was officially enrolled as a student by 4 p.m.

I decided to stay over till morning and spent a fun evening in the local pub, named The Pub, then found an empty rack at the fraternity house. By noon the next day, I had my 2-S student deferment status again.

Money was not so simple. In our home, the able bodied were not excused from work. It was understood by me

and my brothers that when you were old enough to work, then you would work for our spending money. My older brother and I had both started at thirteen by washing cars in the alley beside our house. We then got jobs in gas stations and/or garages. My younger brother was still too young to work.

I was reluctant to go back to working in a garage after almost three years away from it, especially in the winter. So, I was looking about for something else, and I was not having much luck. After two weeks, my Uncle hired me to be the Assistant Dispatcher in his trucking company. The company had been started by my Grandfather and was now run by my Uncle. My Father had worked for the company all his life.

I would start at 5 p.m. and work until we were finished, generally around midnight. The good news was that I would earn \$2,80 per hour, the most I had ever made in my life. The bad news was that I gave up any chance of a social life with working every weekday evening. I reluctantly reported to work the first evening, taking solace in the fact that I would have one of the biggest paydays I had ever seen.

My first day was Wednesday. We finished close to Midnight, and the Dispatcher, a man I had known through my Father for many years, asked if I wanted to join him at a bar just outside of town. It was called The Crossroads. I knew where it was. I had been in it once a few years earlier and remembered it as just a small, local bar with local patrons.

When we got there, the parking lot was full, and the overflow cars were parked on both sides of the road in either direction. I ended up parking about a hundred yards away. This place had been a “shot and a beer” bar for as long as I could remember. Something had changed. As I found out shortly.

Inside, there were new owners and a new business model. They had the entire first floor of the building and built a bar shaped like a boat which probably measured fifty feet long. At the end of the bow, was a large dance floor and small stage. I had never heard of the group that was playing that night, but they were louder than anything I had ever heard. Amidship was the cabin portion of the boat which housed the inventory of beverages and other equipment that did not fit under the bar. The stern was for bar seating with ample standing room around it. The people were five deep, drinking, talking laughing and trying to order drinks. It took me about a half hour to get my first beer. This place made my fraternity parties look like afternoon tea.

The Dispatcher and I got separated and I did not see him until the next day. As I navigated the crowd, I started meeting a lot of people I knew and, although it was impossible to carry on a conversation, I learned that this place, now called The Boat, was the “in-place” on Wednesdays and Fridays, closed Sundays,⁵⁰ and drew a good sized crowd the rest of the days of the week. They also ignored the legal closing time of 2 a.m.

⁵⁰ Pennsylvania law at the time.

and kept rolling until the crowd fell off, whatever time that may be. Perhaps my social life was not going to be as curtailed as I had originally thought.

I make it home that morning somewhere around 4:30 a.m.

Life had just gotten a whole lot better. I had money in my pocket. I had a social life fuller than I had ever experienced. And, I had the perfect job to go with it. I started at 5 p.m., finished around midnight, partied till 4 a.m. any night I choose and could get ten hours of sleep if I needed it.

I also started to save some money. I knew I would, someday, return to school and I wanted to have some extra spending money when I did. This was not a new concept for me as I had always saved a portion of each paycheck. I never had a lot of money, but I always had enough to cover the cost of car repairs and maintenance. I had not been given a car by my parents. Rather, I was told by them that I was permitted to buy a car when I was sixteen, but I had to pay for the purchase and operation. I never had a lot of money, but I always had some, until I went to college and then there was nothing to save.

Now I was making more money than I had ever made before and for the first two months, I put away more than I ever had. I was clearing over \$80 a week and saving \$60. At the end of eight weeks, I had almost \$500. My mind started to wonder. What could I afford to

buy now that I had never been able to afford before? I wanted something that would put a real thrill in my life. I came up with learning to fly an airplane.

There was a small, grass-runway airport just three miles outside of town. It was a popular destination for children on bicycles where, if your timing was right, you could see planes taking off and landing. If you were lucky, you might be able to look inside a cockpit and wonder what it would be like to be flying.

I drove out to the Leechburg Airport which sat on the top of a hill overlooking an open expanse of farmland, probably a mile wide, followed by the Kiskiminitas River, then a hillside and another open expanse of farmland. A portion of this second plot of real estate had been converted to a golf course some years ago. It was a perfect spot for an airport.

The airport owner provided me with all the information I needed. I purchased a Pre-Flight Manual and he told me that when I had finished the book, I could call and schedule my first flight. I went home and started the lessons.

I will not say the book was easy, but there were times when I expected to turn a page and find a picture of Dick and Jane flying a plane. I finished the book in a week and schedule my first flight for the next Sunday.

The airplane I would fly that Sunday was a Piper J3 Cub. By reputation, the J3 was a “safe” airplane. As I got more experience, I would learn that a “safe” airplane

was a relative expression. Compared to other aircraft, the J3 was “safe”. But you could not say the airplane was safe. That is a totally different concept. It was well known, among pilots, that a “safe” airplane could just barely kill you but would always take you to the scene of the crash.

Based on what I had read on a quick trip to the library, the J3 was a highly rated “safe” airplane. If you were going to learn to fly, this was the favored machine. The J3 had been the instructors’ choice during World War II. I had no qualms with the plane. I felt safe, or I should say I felt as safe as one can while flying an airplane. With every thrill, there is a risk.

The instructor had become a pilot during the War, and, although he did not say it, I got the impression he was a fighter pilot. His manner was calm and his explanation clear. We walked around the aircraft and I did my first pre-flight check. I was impressed by how much there was to check on such a small machine. I felt that I was understanding everything because of my familiarity with cars and engines.

The J3 had a tandem seat arraignment and I was sitting in the aft seat. The instructor showed me the magneto switch and emphasized where the “Off” position was. He moved to the front of the plane.

“Switch off,” he said.

I looked down and made sure the red switch arrow pointed to “Off”. “Switch Off,” I said.

He rotated the propellor several times and I could hear the pistons pushing air on the exhaust cycle.

“Switch on,” he said.

Carefully, I moved the arrow to the “L”.⁵¹ “Switch on.”

He spun the propeller with a quick jerk and the engine started on the first try. It was louder than I had thought it would be. However, I was sitting behind an unmuffled engine. What did I expect?

The instructor explained everything he was doing over the roar of the engine. Every second was a new experience. He pushed the throttle to “Full” and we were rushing down the runway. The J3 rose quickly and I could feel the ascent in my butt. I realized why I had often heard someone say “he was flying by the seat of his pants”

I looked out the port window and watched the runway drop away from us. I look up and surveyed an unrestricted vista unfolding around me. Never in my life had I ever seen anything as majestic, as awe inspiring. The feeling was one of absolute freedom. The instructor interrupted my thoughts.

“How are you feeling?”

“Great!” I said.

“Ready to do some flying?”

⁵¹ The J3 had two magnetos, one on the left (L) side of the aircraft and one on the right (R) side.

I was ready. According to my “Pilots Flight Record and Logbook”, we spent that session with Preliminary Familiarization. One of the lessons he had impressed on me was to always be looking for a place to land because you never know when you may have to land. I had to really concentrate on what he was saying because I was excited to be flying. The lesson went way too fast.

On the ground, I scheduled my next lesson for Saturday. As I walked to my car, I had a strange feeling that I belonged in the air. It was my first “Hanger Moment”. That moment when you are standing in a hanger wishing you were up “there”.

Saturday came fast. I had studied the pre-flight checklist and tried to do it myself. I needed some corrections. As we moved to the J3, the instructor told me that the aircraft had just been returned to service after a complete engine overhaul. He said it would probably ascend and fly faster than it had the week before.

“Great!” was my response.



Figure 12 Piper J3 displayed in the Palm Springs Air Museum, 745 North Gene Autry Trail, Palm Springs, CA. Known as the safest plane ever build because it can just barely kill you and will always take you to the scene of the crash. Photo, my collection.

We took off and he gave me the stick at about 200 feet and told me to take it to 1000 feet and level off. I did. It was one of those bright, sunny days that are common to a Western Pennsylvania Spring. The wind was 4 to 8 knots out of the west. At 1000 feet I could see for miles. We were passing over the aforementioned golf course when I heard something strange coming from the engine. It was a hissing sound like a vacuum leak.

The mechanics I had worked with over the years had taught me that the best way to start diagnosing a mechanical problem was to listen to it. Your ears become tuned to what an engine sounds like when it is running well and when it is not. Those mechanics probably taught me more about analytical, also called critical, thinking than any teacher. The engine, to which I was now listening, had a problem.

I leaned forward to tell the instructor that I thought there was something wrong with our engine, but before I could say anything, an explosion roared through the cockpit. I saw the engine hood jump about three inches due to the force of the explosion, but it did not come off. The tachometer dropped from 2000 rpm's to below 600 rpms. The instructor immediately took the stick and started checking his instruments. He banked left and made a 180-degree turn. The tachometer fell below 300 rpms.

I looked down at the golf course directly below us and said, "Lets land there."

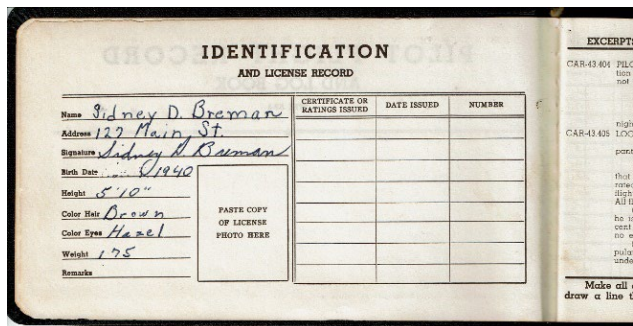


Figure 13 My Student Pilot's Logbook.

"I think we can make it back," he said.

It was at that moment that I had my second "Hanger Moment". I was

up "here" wishing I was down "there" in the hanger.

Remember my description of the terrain around the airport. Now it did not look as bucolic as before. When we left the golf course, we left the only good landing spot until we got to the airport. All the farmland was off to our left. At the edge of the course was a steep wooded hill, probably a 200 to 300 foot drop down to

the river which was flowing perpendicular to our flight path. Then there was another hillside, as steep as the one after the golf course and at the top, the airport. We had to stay in the air for two and a half miles to reach the airport. Additionally, we had to have enough altitude to circle around and land going into the wind.

DATE	FLIGHT FROM	FLIGHT TO	EQUIPMENT FLOWN			CLASSIFICATION	DURATION OF FLIGHT	BREAKDOWN	
			AIRCRAFT MAKE, MODEL AND NUMBER	ENGINE	H. P.			INTEREST	REMARKS
10/62									
3-22-63	Leesburg	Local	PA-11 4969M	Cont	65		1.08		
3-24	Leesburg	Local	PA-11 4969M	Cont	65		1.08		
3-25	Leesburg	Local	PA-11 78861	Cont	65		1.08		
4-8-62	Leesburg	Local	PA-11 78861	Cont	65		1.08		
4-29-62	Leesburg	Local	PA-11 4969M	Cont	65		1.08		

THE RECORD ON THIS PAGE IS CERTIFIED TRUE AND CORRECT.

PILOT _____ ATTESTED BY _____

CARRY TOTALS FORWARD TO TOP OF NEXT PAGE

CARRY TO _____

Figure 14 My complete civilian flying record. 3-24 was the day of the crash.

The engine was still turning, but I expected another explosion at any moment. The only casualty I could think of that would make

a noise that loud and be forceful enough to lift the hood, was throwing a rod and the piston going through the hood. If that was what happened, there were large chunks of metal churning around in the crankcase getting ready to cause an ever-bigger explosion. I was not familiar enough with this engine to know how much danger there was of a fire under these circumstances, but I did know there was gasoline and sparks under the hood.

There was nothing I could do but sit there. I was struck by the realization of how many thoughts could race through my mind in ten seconds.

We were approaching the airport and even I could tell we were too low to go around and land coming into the wind. We were going to have to land with the wind on our tail. "I'm going to slip it in," he said. "Hang on."

Hang on to what I thought. I braced for whatever was coming. I felt the port wing dip low toward the ground, and I had the feeling were falling out of the air (Yes, my eyes were closed). Then there was a sudden jerk to the right, and we hit the ground. I felt the plane slide to a stop.

The instructor jumped out of the J3 and pulled me free. We both stumbled several yards away making "all due haste" in the event the plane did catch fire. We looked back. No fire. The landing gear was about twenty yards behind the plane. Other than that, she seemed to be in relatively good shape. I am sure there was fuselage damage but, since she was resting on the ground, we could not see it.

We approached the wounded bird and lifted her hood. I was expecting to see a cylinder head completely shattered. Instead we found a sparkplug hanging from its ignition wire. The mechanic who overhauled the engine had failed to tighten the sparkplugs. We found two others, on a four-cylinder engine, we could turn by hand. Good fortune had followed us that day. The biggest lesson I learned that day is that a landing is a good landing when you can walk away from the aircraft.

I flew several more times that spring, but never got to the point where I felt that I wanted to try to solo. Perhaps another time I thought. I was back at college in June.

Author's Aside: Some of you may be scratching your head and wondering why I applied to Flight School after surviving two airplane crashes. Some of you think that one crash would have been enough to stop most people. But I was not deterred by either accident, I was encouraged.

Here is how my rational mind handled the situation. After my first fall from the heavens, I looked at the statistics. How many people ever survive an airplane crash? Very few is the answer. I did not put an actual number to it. I just knew it was a low probability.

Once a person survives one air crash, what is the probability that they will be involved in a second air crash? That number is extremely low, barely registers on any scale. If you could reduce it to a number, it would look something like .000001. The probability that I would ever be involved in another casualty was ridiculously remote. I was virtually "crash proof". My rational mind had swept away all danger. Note that my logic was flawed.

Of course, I did not know what my irrational mind was doing.

And now, back to the Pressure Chamber. This was a simulation exercise where we were taken to an altitude of 35000 feet in a metal device that looked a lot like a

large steam boiler with little porthole-type windows. For anyone who may misunderstand the functioning of a chamber, the chamber stays on the ground and the environment inside is adjusted to simulate conditions at high altitudes. The object of the exercise was to give each student hands-on experience working in an oxygen starved environment. This was another instance of “if you do/do not do” you will die. The big dangers for pilots were (and probably still are) hypoxia and hyperventilation. I am sure there were/are other dangers, but for now, I will stick with these.

I knew virtually nothing about either hypoxia or hyperventilation until I sat through the class that preceded the “ride” in the chamber. I remembered experiencing a “red out” playing football and found out that is really hyperventilation. I had some apprehension about the Chamber “ride”. I saw it as the same thing as an unloaded and a loaded gun. If you know the gun is unloaded, it is harmless, just another object. But jack a round into the chamber and it is a whole different animal. The gun is alive and dangerous and lethal. It is something to be respected.

I saw the chamber the same way. Sitting there with the doors open, it looked like a vessel that had escaped from the Submarine ride at Disney Land. With the hatch secured, much like a hatch aboard ship is secured in General Quarters, except that the chamber made hissing noises, it was a machine from Dr.

Frankenstein's laboratory. Rationally, I was good with it. Irrationally, something bothered me.

Nine students and two NCO instructors went up in each "ride". Everyone in the Chamber wore an oxygen mask and the instructor started as we entered. We had to get our masks securely on our face. Then, understand how the connection worked to the oxygen system. Once our oxygen was secure, we started to ascend. To me, it felt as if we were rising, but I could look out of the portholes and see that we were firmly on the ground.

My mind was playing tricks on me. I recalled that in one of our classes the instructor had emphasized the importance of relying upon your instruments, not what your body is feeling. Here I had instruments and body telling me I was ascending to 35,000 feet except my eyes said I was on the ground. I told myself to relax. Nothing was wrong. I was safe.

Just before we reached the peak of our ascent, I blacked out. When I regained consciousness, I was outside the Chamber, laying down on a cot. Apparently, this happened with some regularity, at least often enough to have a cot handy.

When I was steady, someone drove me to Sick Bay for an examination. The doctor checked me over, asked a few questions, like "What happened."

I did not have much to say. I told him I blacked out and I was a little apprehensive about the Chamber, but nothing extreme.

He made some notes in a file, then left the room. I felt tired and I laid down on the exam table and fell asleep.

I had been asleep for about twenty minutes when he came back and gave me a note telling me to report to a doctor in the hospital the next morning at 0900.

The doctor I reported to at the hospital was a Navy Captain. His uniform jacket was neatly hung in a corner with four gold stripes on each sleeve and four rows of service and campaign ribbons told me he had not spent his career in one location. I made a bold assumption that he was a psychiatrist. I was right.

We chatted for a while, about the weather, my social life and how Pre-Flight was going. Topics that would establish a friendly foundation to get to what he really wanted to discuss.

“So, what happened in the Pressure Chamber?”

I had been expecting the question and had thought through several answers, going from “just a slip-up, won’t happen again” to “it was going to crash, and we were all going to die”. What came out of my mouth was not what I meant to say. But it came out and there was no way I could get the evil Jinni back in the bottle.

“I think I had the crashes in my head.” How and why did I ever say “crashes”? I meant “crash” singular, nobody knows about the first one. Why did I say crashes? Shit, shit, shit!!!

“Crashes?” he said, calmly, almost a whisper. “Tell me about the crashes.”

I gave him the “Reader’s Digest” version of both incidents including my interpretation of how remote my chances were of ever crashing again. He sat, quite impassively, listening to my tale. In my mind’s eye, he did not move during my monologue.

I sat quietly while he made some notes.

He asked me “When did these crashes happen?”

“The helicopter was March 24 last year and the.....” I stopped talking. It was as if two live wires connected in my head for the first time. I had never put these two facts together.

He waited.

I finally got my mouth going again. “I’m sorry. I never realized this before. I never put the two together. The dates did not mean anything before.”

I grabbed some tissues from the table next to my chair, blew my nose, took some more, and wiped my face. It occurred to me that I probably looked like roadkill. I was emotionally shaken.

“So, when was the first crash?” he asked.

“It was March 24, 1962,” I said.

The doctor made some more notes and if we discussed anything after that, I do not remember it.

My student status was “Grounded” until I completed the Pressure Chamber exercise, and I scheduled a time for the following week. Before that happened, I received a letter to report to the Commanding Officer, Naval Aviation Schools Command. My appointment was for 0900 the next day.

I had Butts check me over before I left for the meeting. There is not much that can be out of place on Navy Officer Dress Blues, but why take a chance. I did not want to go in there looking like a slob. Regardless, I felt like one.

The Commander was a Navy Captain. His office was huge, at least 30’x30’ and two walls were glass panes from the chair rail up. His back was to one of these windows. The other two walls were filled with pictures of men standing in front of or beside aircraft. On the tarmac outside the windows sat a collection of Navy trainer aircraft, mostly T-34s, affectionately known as Teeny Weenys.

I walked into his office as smartly as I could and came to attention in front of him. “Ensign Breman reporting as order, Sir”

“Stand at ease Sid and have a seat.”

He was affable. Smiling, we talked easily about several topics. I knew he was trying to make me relax. I may have looked relaxed, I will never really know, but if someone were to pull the chair from under me, I would

not have fallen. I would have stayed in the same position, my feet cemented to the floor.

Finally, he got around to his point.

“Sid, do you see the aircraft behind me?”

I nodded.

“If I lose one of those planes, it will take me six months and stack of paperwork two feet high to replace it.” He paused for effect. “If I lose you, I can replace you in two weeks with one piece of paper.” Another pause for effect. I had the feeling he had done this before. The graphic of a two-foot stack of paper was sinking in.

“I think you are an accident looking for a place to happen and I would prefer you did not happen in one of my birds.” He slid a piece of paper across his desk.

I leaned forward and read the heading “Naval Aviation Training Drop on Request”. I had read about this form the day before. All Naval Training is voluntary. Therefore, a student may request termination at any point. All I had to do was sign the form. It was one of the more painful experiences of my life to that point. I signed the form.

That night, Butts and I started working on a huge hangover.

Chapter: Naval Support Activity, Danang

It took about seven days for my new orders to come through. I was assigned to APL 27, permanently

stationed with the Naval Support Activity, Danang, Vietnam.

I would see Butts about a year later in Danang. He was a RIO in an F4 Phantom with the Marine Airwing. I learned that three of our classmates died in training accidents and one was permanently crippled. Sometime after I saw him, Butts was wounded during a mission and was hospitalized for several months. We still exchange Christmas Cards.

Ironically, as I was doing research for this misadventure, I came across an article on the web site of the Pensacola News Journal, dated June 12, 2020, which stated that the officer who was the current Commanding Officer of the Naval Aviation Schools Command at Naval Air Station Pensacola, was killed in a single engine, civilian, aircraft crash.

After two weeks of SERE Training (Survival, Escape, Resistance, Evasion) and two weeks of leave at home, I arrived in Danang on April 5, 1966. My flight across the Pacific was much easier this time. It was a commercial airliner which only made one stop in Hawaii and landed in Saigon. From there, it was an Air Force cargo plane with canvas, web seats. No stewardesses here. I started my second tour in the Combat Zone, and I was still an Ensign.

Author's Note: When the topic of the Vietnam War comes up these day and I say that I did two tours, one

at sea and one in country, some people will say “Oh, the one at sea would have been safe.”

I always respond, “Except for the helicopter crash, it was.”

I stood on the tarmac next to the plane that had just brought me from Saigon, trying to figure out what to do next. I was wearing a tropical khaki uniform and I seemed to be the only person so clad, as everyone else was in green fatigues.

The ambient temperature was what I had expected and more. My guess was 95 degrees with humidity above 85%. I started to sweat just standing there.

I found out that the Air Base and all other US Military facilities were closed. I had landed in the middle of a South Vietnamese civil war, the first of many I would experience in Vietnam. I found out that my best opportunity to get to Naval Support Activity was to go to the DOOMS Club (Danang Officers Open Mess) and look for Navy officers.

On my way, a Navy Seabee Chief Petty Officer walked up and saluted me. “Sir, I need your help. I’ve got fifty men who haven’t eaten for 24 hours. Can you help me get them fed. We just arrived on an Air Force C-130”

I returned his salute. I was a little surprised. A CPO I did not know had just asked me to help him. So, I asked “Why me Chief?”

“You are an officer. I am a Chief. If I walk into the mess hall and asked to have my men fed, they will probably throw me out. They’ll have more trouble doing that to you,” he said.

That sounded logical to me. He had one of his men carry my bag and we set out looking for a mess hall. When we found one, I approached the NCO in the kitchen who I thought was in charge and made my request.

“Not a problem, bring ‘em right in” he said.

The Chief and I went through last and ate together. We had both just arrived in Vietnam, but he had served for three years in Korea during the war. He was not expecting to be surprised by anything here. We became friends and would bump into each other about once a month throughout the year.

At the DOOMs Club, I found a Navy Lt. Cdr. who had lined up a helo ride to NSA Headquarters in downtown Danang. Once there I reported to the Personnel Office and discovered that I would not be serving aboard APL 27 but was assigned to the Lighterage Division. I did not know it at the time, but I could have objected to the change in my orders (not that it would change my assignment, but I could have objected). I was instructed to catch a ride on any boat to the APL and get a rack and a locker. My ride was in a Mike 8 with about 30 other people. We had to keep our heads below the gunwale just in case the people fighting the civil war

thought we looked like a good target. It was sound advice.

Before arriving, I had read that Danang was a “safe” city. I was now seeing that it was a “safe” city in the same way that the Piper J3 Cub was a “safe” airplane. Everyone was armed either with sidearms or rifles. I was surprised to see a lot of sailors carrying M1 Garands, a weapon I thought had been retired in the 1950s. Surprise, surprise, they were still very much in use.

The trip to the APL 27 took over an hour because she was anchored in the middle of the harbor. An APL was an Auxiliary Personnel Living barge. It was called a barge because it had no propulsion system and had to be towed. There were four levels that contained sleeping quarters, mess halls, toilets, and some recreation areas for several hundred men. The top level was reserved for Officers and Chiefs. These vessels gave the Navy the ability set up shop anywhere. Unlike any other Navy vessel, I had ever seen, they were painted white, not Navy grey. There were two in Danang Harbor, the 27 and the 5.

Once I had a rack and a locker (normally, officers rate a stateroom, but there were none available), I started asking around to see if anyone knew anything about the Lighterage Division. No one did. I did find out that I could draw a sidearm from the Armory at Camp Tien Sha which was about a mile from the Tien Sha Boat Ramp.

Between waiting for a boat to get to the Boat Ramp and hitching a ride to cover the one mile of dirt road, it was getting dark when I arrived at the Camp. At the Armory, I was told they were out of sidearms, and they were out of any kind of weapons. The NCO in charge told me I should go to the Chiefs Club (there was no officers' club) and check around for someone that might have a sidearm for sale. I was starting to get the feeling that being in Danang was going to be very much like living in the Old Wild West of America. I was right.

The Chiefs' Club was housed in a Quonset Hut in the Center of the camp. The inside looked like a Wild West saloon except that everyone was in some type of uniform. Most were in khakis, but a few were in fatigues. Men were three deep at the bar and it took a while to get a beer. It took so long to get served, I bought two. I settled into a corner table, the only one open, and enjoyed my beer while I surveyed the room.

Within a few moments, an Army Second Lieutenant came to my table and ask if he could sit down. I said sure. I was happy to have the company. Since talking with the Seabee Chief, I had not found anyone who would give me much more than short answers to all my questions.

The 2nd Lt. had been in country for about a month and he gave me a lot of information and living tips about Vietnam. He confirmed the impression I had that most people are not interested in talking to strangers or outsiders. We both agreed that everyone was caught up

in what they were doing and did not have time or patience enough to have a conversation or share information. We hoped that we would not fall into the same pattern. Our conversation rolled on for a couple hours.

Somewhere around 2130, an announcement was made from behind the bar that the Camp gate was closed, no one in or out till 0700 tomorrow. Temporary quarters were available, and the announcer gave directions.

At this point I mentioned that I had tried to draw a weapon from the Armory, but they had nothing. He offered to sell me a 38 Special for \$35. He had it in his bag. I said "Great". He threw in a black western style holster and twenty rounds of ammo.

We continued talking for most of another hour, then sought out our temporary quarters. It had been a long day, but I had survived it. And, I had met another person on my first day In Country with whom I would maintain a passing friendship during my tour in Vietnam. Of course, I did not know that at the time.

I felt a little safer going to sleep with a revolver, especially when I was startled awake twice by gunfire that night.

I was familiar with having a revolver strapped to my hip. I was also comfortable with it. Not a lot of Americans can say that unless they work in law enforcement or are a professional criminal and a few other occupational

titles that routinely carry weapons. I fell into a ridiculously small niche, called Frontiersman, Actor.

I am taking a little detour from Vietnam because there is a little misadventure related to carrying a revolver that is worthy of note here.

Back to the Summer of 1963, I secured my first professional position on my way to becoming a radio and tv personality. I was hired as the announcer in a wild west theme park and rodeo exhibition at Fort Apache in Rio Grande, New Jersey. The adventures and misadventures from that summer are worthy of their own volume, but I will share one here.

Our park opened at 10 a.m. and our street shows, and rodeo exhibition took five hours to complete. Then we started over and did them again. The park closed at 8:30 p.m. I talked all the actors' parts and explained what was happening, announced the rodeo and generally kept the patrons moving about the park. Our street shows were what you would expect, The Bank Robbery, The Indian Attack, The Gunslinger. All the actors were real cowboys who had chosen to spend the summer a little easier than working on a farm.

This job was off the scale for excitement and fun and made up for the three summers I had spent in summer school. And, the money was good, and I had my own rooms and bathroom on the second floor of the Hotel. My announcing stands were on the front and back

porches. I could announce the action regardless of where it was in the park.

We all carried revolvers. Some of the cowboys/actors had their own equipment, but I used what the park issued, an Enfield. We all were responsible to load our own blank rounds. When firing a blank, a two-foot stream of flame would come out of the end of the barrel. Impressive in daylight, more impressive at night. And the noise was louder than a live round.

Several of the actors/cowboys also lived in the park, and it was not unusual for a group of us to gather in a convenient spot after closing and drink some beer.

One evening, the nightwatchman, an elderly gentleman, came to our little group, there were five of us, and he told us there were some teenagers trying to steal our covered wagon that served as our sign on the highway in front of the Park. There was an open field between the wagon and the main gate. He was afraid they were going to come back and try again. It was a great sign but could easily be towed away with the right hitch.

Someone suggested we go out and sit down in the tall grass and give the young men a surprise. We all checked to see that we had a full load of blanks, filled a bucket with beer, and took up a position about thirty yards from the wagon.

We patiently waited, drinking beer, smoking, and talking about nothing in particular, but laughing a lot.

After an hour's wait, they returned. The driver backed the car, which looked like a 1950 Ford, up to the wagon hitch and two of the passengers jumped out and started working on the hitch.

One of our number stood up and yelled "Hey you kids! Get away from that wagon."

I will not record their response, but it left no doubt in our minds that they were not going to comply with our request. With that we all drew our revolvers and emptied them in the direction of the car. The flames from our blanks lit up the night and filled the air with one hell-of-a roar.

As the car sped away, I could see one of the young men trying to crawl in the passenger door window. We never had another assault on our wagon.

Back in Danang

The *United States Naval Forces Vietnam Monthly Historical Summary, June 1966* described the Naval Support Activity, Danang as follows:

"Summary report of activities covering the period through 31 December 1965

The youngest and one of the largest of the U.S. Navy's overseas commands is headquartered in Danang, the second largest city in the Republic of Vietnam. Its official title is Commander U.S. Naval Support Activity, Danang. The mission of this command is the support of

the more than 50,000 United States troops who operate in the I Corps Tactical Zone. It also supports various United States government agencies in Vietnam and military units from “third countries” allied nations assisting Vietnam in its fight against the Viet Cong.

Drawn from various units operating under Commander Amphibious Logistics Support Group (CTG 76.4), the command was commissioned on 15 October 1965. The former Commander, Task Group 76.4, CAPT K.P. HUFF, USNR, assumed command of the U.S. Naval Support Activity.

When commissioned, U.S. Naval Support Activity, Danang numbered 1,412 officers and enlisted men. As operation expanded to Quang Tri, Hue/Phu Bai, Chu Lai and Quang Ngai, NAVSUPACT, DANANG expanded. By 31 December 1965, there were 2,596 officers and men assigned.”

The United States Naval Forces Vietnam Monthly Historical Summary, July, 1966 and August, 1966 reported the NSA officers and men at 3,858 at the end of March, 1966 and 4,838 on 20 June, 1966.

The NSA Danang 1966 - 1967 Cruise Book lists the following manning levels: “From an original 1,412 officers and men, NAVSUPACT has grown to a force of 8,000 Navy personnel and more than 3,000 Vietnamese civilian employees.”

The NSA Headquarters was called The White Elephant and the HQ radio call sign was Mortuary. Neither name

instilled confidence. The front of the building looked over the river and in a peaceful setting would have been prime real estate in just about any other city. In a war zone, not so much.

The front of the building looked very much like the Alamo in Texas, including the large doors that would open wide enough to admit a truck. It was two stories high. Inside was a large, 50'x100', courtyard with offices on all four sides. The walls were about one foot thick, made of some type of mortar and everything was



Figure 15 The White Elephant circa 1966. Naval History and Heritage Command.

painted white. It was an old building and none of us could discern its original use.

The placement of the headquarters was a bit of a puzzlement because it was not close to any

of the NSA operations. Additionally, security was questionable, at best, in a city that was classified as a 'safe city'. Repeating what I said earlier, I would discover that Danang was "safe" in the same way that a

Piper J3 Cub was a “safe” airplane. Safe was simply a relative assessment, not an absolute condition.

There was no Liberty for American service members in Danang, which meant that all Vietnamese businesses were Off Limits. The official reason behind this restriction was that our spending habits were so lax that the Vietnamese could not afford to buy alcohol or ride in pedicab taxis with Americans throwing money around. However, regardless of how valid the stated reason was, the opinion among the J.O.s of NSA was that Danang served as the R&R location for the Viet Cong and the last thing either side wanted was the carnage that would result when a bar full of drunk Marines and Sailors ran into a bar full of drunk V.C. We believed that Danang was safe because the Cong did not want to screw up their R&R. That did not stop attacks on individuals, it just curtailed large scale operations within the city.

I reported to the Lighterage Division at the beginning of my second day In Country.

May, 1966: Within six weeks, I was the LCM8 Division officer. I was responsible for the management of 250 men, who crewed thirty-two, 60 ton, LCM8 landing craft. We moved tens of thousands of tons of cargo of every possible description every month. We were the solution to a port that had no “deep water” piers to off-load cargo, a vital link in the supply chain.

So how did I manage that assignment?

You must understand that the US Navy will sometimes take a person with no understanding of how to do a job and anoint them as being capable and competent. This happens mostly during a war when unusual jobs are created out of necessity. Jobs like build a new base on the other side of the world.

I am a perfect example. When I reported aboard at the Naval Support Activity, Danang on April 5, 1966, I did not know what an LCM8 was. Nor did I know what Lighterage was, and I had no experience managing men. It was amazing that within six weeks I was not only the LCM8 Division Officer, but I was also considered THE EXPERT of same. I should also add that I had no idea what a division officer was supposed to do.

Some people might ask “Didn’t they teach you that in OCS?” Not exactly, in OCS, an officer candidate is taught what to expect as a division officer on a destroyer or other ship where you might, after a year as the assistant division officer, be in-charge of 15 to 30 men. You would have a chief petty officer (or two) who does the actual management of these men while you learn things like “where is the head” and other interesting and useful bits of information. If you keep your wits about you, maybe in 6 months or so, the Chief will let you do some actual division officer work.

So how did it happen that I ascended to the division officer level after six weeks as the assistant division officer? I was responsible for a critical link in the military

supply chain, managing 250 men using \$60,000,000 of equipment, and I had zero qualifications to even oversee one of my boats.

Here comes an apparent improbable event.

Before I expand on that promotion, I should tell you how the Navy makes assignments on the junior officer level. For those of you who play bingo, you are familiar with the Plexiglas box filled with numbered ping pong balls. The box has a powerful air fan in the bottom that scatters the balls in every direction. When another ball is needed, the person calling the numbers opens a valve and a random ball enters the pipeline awaiting the person to remove it from the box. The ball is then placed into a board where the numbers on the ball match the numbers on the board.

In the Navy's process of assigning junior officers out of OCS back in 1966 (it probably was different for Academy grads) the ping pong balls are the people available to be assigned, but they have no numbers, just names. The board represents the billets that must be filled, arranged by priority. The detailer places a randomly selected ball and places it in an open billet and the assignment is made. The assumption is that everyone is qualified for the assigned position. This process is, of course, different for new officers with special qualifications such as engineering, lawyers, and doctors.

To an outside observer, the only filter in the process is the breathing test. If the person is breathing, they will fill the position. Please understand that this process works very well for assignments to ships where, as I outlined above, there are redundant checks in the system to correct any deficiency in education, training, or ability the officer may have. The junior officer is surrounded by other officers and NCOs who are constantly monitoring his/her performance. Any deadwood is identified quickly and moved to a job where they cannot do any damage. In extreme cases, they are transferred to an established shore facility where they can be neutralized and finish their tour without doing harm to themselves or the Navy.

The process does not work quite as well in an operation like NSA Danang which was a wartime base that had to perform and grow at the same time. All the checks and balances necessary to develop and maintain an operating organization were ignored in favor of output. Any flaws or losses were considered a cost of waging war.

I have often been amazed when history recalls, during World War II, the speed with which the United States shifted from a lingering depression economy to a full-blown war machine supplying the Allies with the equipment and training to make war. Complete bases were staffed, equipped, and made operational in months, sometimes weeks, instead of years. Examples abound and I need not divert our attention here. I will let the reader seek out their own examples.

NSA Danang was such a base. When I arrived on April 5, 1966, it was still in Phase I of its gestation. The base had been established in October, 1965. Phase I is where the supplies are dumped on the beach along with people and the people distribute the supplies and at the same time build lean-tos for shelter. Nobody really knows (although some profess to) what is going on because the normal communications channels do not exist, and no one is actively trying to establish them. Nor do normal processes and systems exist to make the organization produce. However, somehow, somehow, it works. You make-do with what you have and if the piece does not fit, force it, if you do not have it, make it or steal it. And everyone had to work under those conditions.

So here is where I found myself, untrained and inexperienced for the job I was performing and not much worse off than the other junior officers with whom I was working. The emphasis here is on the three words “for the job”. This became abundantly clear in May, 1966.

The Lighterage Division was a massive department. By my estimate it consisted of almost 100 boats (LCM6s, LCM8s, LCUs), one diver’s vessel and a scattering of other small things that float. The number of personnel assigned to operate these vessels was somewhere between 800 and 1000. On the management side of this department were 10 commissioned officers ranging in rank from Ensign to Lieutenant and 50 Senior NCOs

with rates of First-Class Petty Officer or Chief Petty Officer. Most of the senior NCOs were assigned to the LCUs which had crews of 12 to 16 men. My rank as an Ensign, however, placed me at the tail end of the officers.

I felt like I had walked into the middle of a bad movie when I was assigned to Lighterage. The “boss” was a Mustang Lieutenant (Mustangs came up through the ranks as opposed to most officers who were commissioned after college) who hated “college boys” (surprising since all of his officers were all “college boys”). It was obvious he was in charge. He was loud, arrogant, and physically large. At least that was the way he appeared to me. The rest of the officers seemed to look at him as their fearless leader and would gather round his desk to listen to his words of wisdom. Given that I was not, yet, accepted into the “in” group, I remained an outsider.

So, let me review my position in mid-May, 1966. I was the lowest ranking, commissioned officer with the least experience and training for my position in a division where being a “college boy” was a handicap. I had only been on the job for 5 weeks and was probably more concerned with not getting shot than my job performance. I was the “new guy” who was automatically labeled “Dilbert” (long before the comic strip, the Navy had a Dilbert) and judged to be wrong or at fault no matter what happened. Within a week, I would become the LCM8 Division Officer and the “go

to” guy for information in the Lighterage Department. I had a whole new supply of “Respect” and with it, a load of responsibility. In the Navy, responsibility comes from above. Authority comes from below. An officer only has as much Authority as his men give him.

If I had been a horse in a race, I would been the long shot (like 1000 to 1 or better). In a boxing match, the decided underdog with no chance of pulling it off. I would love to go back and calculate the probability that I would have the reversal of fortune (or misfortune) that I experienced. Keep in mind that for me to “ascend” to my new status, every commissioned officer in my department had to be removed. So how did that improbable event come to pass?

In the Navy, there are an endless number of operations or processes that must be functioning 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Steering the ship when you are at sea is one that comes to mind. These are called “watches”. For a ship to operate properly, there are several positions that must be manned. The person occupying that position is “standing the watch” or he is “on watch”. Generally, a “watch” will last 4 hours. Standing a watch is boring work and a long time ago, someone determined that most humans lose efficiency after 4 hours performing a boring task and decided to rotate the people to maintain efficiency. To this day, some ships practice ringing a bell every half hour, once for each half hour that has passed since the beginning of the watch, so that the people standing watch know

how long it will be before they are relieved. It also lets other crew members know how long they have before they must assume the watch. Eight bells is the end of the watch.

No such luck in the Lighterage Department. We had the harbor watch, called the Lima watch. (No significance there, just the radio call sign assigned to the watch). It was 12 hours long, and the primary duty was to patrol the harbor and identify the location of each boat or barge beside a cargo ship. The purpose was to ensure that every ship being unloaded had a vessel into which to offload cargo. The assumption here was that the coxswains of the boats could not be relied upon to efficiently self-assign themselves to a ship. (This assumption was correct and proven thousands of times. Yes, it would have been nice if each boat had a radio, but they did not.)

To perform these duties, the officer on watch would travel from ship to ship and any other pier or docking site a boat may have wandered to and record their location or reassign them to another location. For transport, the officer rode an LCM6 boat, none of which had any creature comforts, including seats.

Communication with headquarters, referred to as Mortuary (because sometimes it looked like one), was accomplished through a handheld radio about the size of a lunch pail. To receive and broadcast messages the “squelch” had to be minimized which produced constant, loud static. Add to that the ear-splitting noise

produced by two un-muffled diesel engines, located directly below the deck and exhausting about 8 feet from the only good place to stand, and you have a perfectly designed Navy watch, one that everyone hates to stand. There were seven of us that shared this watch which meant that we stood watch every three and a half days.

I came off the Lima Watch on Wednesday morning at 7a.m. and found that I was scheduled for watch again on Friday evening. When I asked the watch officer why, all I got was a “tough shit, the rotation has changed”. I pursued a better answer and was told that there was a big “wetting down” party Friday night (16 supply Ensigns were making Lieutenant Junior Grade) and since I was junior to everyone else, I had to take the watch because the regularly scheduled person wanted to go to the party. This is just one of the disadvantages of being the bottom feeder.

Friday afternoon, around 5 p.m., I was getting ready to eat dinner when the person standing the watch came in and handed me the radio and clip board and told me I had the watch. I was not due to take over till 7 p.m., but that did not matter. He was gone, and I was on watch. I took my time eating dinner.

Most of the Lima watches were just boring and uncomfortable and this one started out that way. However, around 2300 the environment changed. I was located about 100 yards from the Ten Shaw boat docks when I saw a lot of headlights moving around

and heard people shouting. It was not the pleasant kind of shouting, but the angry, aggressive variety that sounded like a brawl. I instructed the coxswain to head for the docks and informed Mortuary of my destination.

Almost instantly, Mortuary told me to stand down because the situation was under control and no assistance was needed. No problem. I did not feel like putting my butt in the middle of a fight if I did not have to do so. However, I did not mind being a spectator, so we cut off our engines and drifted closer.

There was no outdoor lighting anywhere in the harbor, but the night was clear and must have been moonlit because I could see the outline of the docks and some boats. At about a distance of 200 feet I saw a group of men standing on the edge of the dock, yelling, and waving at us. I told the coxswain to back down as I wanted no part of whatever was happening and I, fortunately, had been ordered to stay away. And then the men started jumping in the water and swimming away. I remember thinking that there must be one hell of a fight going on over there. I was surprised and amazed that there was no gunfire. Eventually the noise subsided, and the headlights disappeared. Time to get back to a boring, uncomfortable Lima watch.

There is no communication system faster than the U.S. Navy Grapevine. Nor is there any that can spread as much disinformation. In the morning, as the boats were changing crews, several stories were already brewing in the pot. The favorite seemed to be that the Shore Patrol

broke up a smuggling ring operating out of Ten Shaw ramp. I am not sure how any of the sailors, who were probably asleep when the ruckus happened, would have the slightest idea what really happened. However, as with most scuttlebutt, believe it until someone has a more interesting version of the events. I was content to wait until I got into the office to find out what the real story was. I picked up a fresh crew and headed for Mortuary as my relief was nowhere in sight.

When I walked into the Lighterage Office, I had the feeling I had walked into a wake. All the officers except the boss were present including a lot of senior petty officers I recognized as Chiefs in charge on the LCUs. Everyone looked like shit! Several looked as if they had gone swimming, fully dressed, and then let their clothes dry on their bodies.

Before I could ask any questions, my boss, a Lieutenant JG, got up and took me by the arm. Outside he told me I would have to take the watch until they got some things straightened out.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Things are really screwed up right now. I’ll fill you in later.”

He never did. As a matter of fact, I never saw him again.

Back to the Lima watch in Danang harbor, the Grapevine had shaken off any rumors and was passing

only good skinny (information). The Lighterage Division Officer, the Mustang, had a real fun streak in him and he loved to party. I had, apparently, missed this side of his personality, probably because I had never been invited to one. Of course, this is a speculation on my part, but there was ample evidence to support that assumption which I will get into in a moment.

The Wetting Down party had been a blast. Several people woke up in strange places, wondering how they got there. Not so the entire officer corps of the Lighterage Division, minus me of course. When the party broke up around 2130, our Fearless Leader suggested the party continue at Ten Shaw boat ramp and took up a collection to send a flatbed truck into a village to pick up a load of prostitutes. Meanwhile, he broke out the beer, wine, and whiskey for everyone at the ramp that included about 50 enlisted men. Sometime around 2300 the party was in overdrive. And then the Shore Patrol arrived.

I mentioned earlier there was ample evidence to support the assumption our leader had held similar parties. The fact that the Shore Patrol landed in force, the estimate was 60 men led by an officer equal in rank to our leader, one who was known to dislike him, means someone was waiting for him to make a mistake. He did. One report said he was caught running down the beach in his skivvies. The Grapevine speculated that he would have gotten away if he had not been drunk.

Some of the men I saw jumping off the dock were my fellow officers.

I would never see most of the officers of the Lighterage Division again. All of them were reassigned as far from Danang, but still in Vietnam, as possible, except for the boss. The boss was singled out for special attention. He was not reassigned. He stayed at NSA in the least important job the brass could find. Status among officers means a lot and he had none. Additionally, the brass made sure he would never be promoted to the next highest rank and his career in the Navy would be over as soon as he was eligible for his pension, which we understood would be two years. He would spend those years inventorying yards and docks, somewhere. It was a sad end to his career.

I spent another day and a half on watch, taking out some time to sleep, and wishing I could talk to my direct boss and find out what was really happening. I finally decided to go to the Lighterage Division office and find someone to take the Lima watch. I walked into an office full of strangers. Everyone I knew was gone. And I received a warm and cheerful greeting. I had walked into the middle of a meeting where I was the topic of the day. I was the officer who knew more about the Lighterage operations at NSA than anyone else in the Navy. I was considered The Expert and I was still junior to all of them.

It works like this: In the Navy, if no one knows anything about ducks and if you are seen carrying a duck, you

are recognized as the Duck Expert, regardless of how much you actually know about ducks. And to those people who have never seen a duck or read anything about ducks, the Duck Expert title is well deserved. And this is where I found myself. I went from stable mucker to shining knight. At the end of the day, I shared what knowledge I had and became the new LCM8 Division Officer, a position for which I was totally unqualified and unprepared. I do not think I would have survived if it had not been for the extremely competent, trained, and experienced senior petty officers who worked with me. However, I was unaware that another assignment was coming down the pipe that would make my new assignment a walk in the park or as it turned out, a swim in the river.

Chapter: Meeting Celebrities

You never know when a Misadventure is going to start or when it is going to end. Sometimes you think it is over and it has actually just begun. Sometimes the ending creeps up on you, while other time the Misadventure comes crashing in on you like a train wreck. However, in many cases, you, the participant, create the Misadventure using your own ignorance. This is one that was born out of my total ignorance.

I played football in high school, not because I had any love of the game. I played because it was the thing to do for freshman boys in a small town in Western Pennsylvania in 1954. I grew to love playing football even though I was never an outstanding player. In my

senior year, one coach told me “Breman, you are small, but you are slow.”

In college, I found that I needed some physical exercise and thought about going out for the team. I quickly discovered the student football managers were bigger than me, so I turned to soccer. I finished an undistinguished career there also. However, I enjoyed the competition and sport along with getting the necessary exercise I needed.

During my entire active career in high school football and college soccer, I never developed an interest in watching either game. I enjoyed playing, but watching a game live or on television did nothing for me, not even the slightest bit. I preferred other pursuits. In high school, I worked on Saturdays and Sundays were for enjoying the great outdoors (even if it was inside a car). In college, tailgating before, during and after a football game was preferred to sitting in the stands watching your team get pounded into oblivion (they mostly were).

Therefore, when I started my Navy career, I was totally ignorant of what was happening in college or professional sports. This was not something I spoke of openly among friends, or even casual acquaintances. I was able to maintain this state of near total ignorance well into my mid-thirties. You, the reader, will understand how this next Misadventure came about.

July 1966: Several of the J.O.s from the Lighterage Office, including me, entered the Officers Club to grab

some lunch. In addition to good food, there was also air conditioning. The food could have been pure slop and we would have gone there to eat just for the cool air.

One of our group stopped dead in his tracks and said “There’s Roger Staubach!”

My question was “Who?”, but my question was lost in the dust as my fellow officers rushed forward to join the group around Roger. I brought up the rear and was looking around for a seat, hoping to get started on lunch quickly. I could hear the word football mentioned several times.

Shortly, everyone moved to a table. If memory serves me correctly, there were ten seats and when I got there, the only seat open was the one directly across from Roger. That is where I sat.

At this point I should point out that, in addition to my lack of interest in spectator sports, I had been absent from civilian society for two years. There was a near total disconnect between me and what was happening in the United States.

Sitting across from Roger, I decided to initiate a conversation. I asked him “Did you play football for Navy?” I did not notice the stunned silence that engulfed the table. Nor did I notice the officer sitting on Roger’s right turning a brilliant red.

“Did you have a good year?” I asked.

Before he could answer, the officer who turned red blurted out in a loud voice, “For Christ’s sake man, this is Roger Staubach. He won the Heisman Trophy⁵².”

I looked at him and, just as loudly, asked, “How long you been in Vietnam, kid?”

“Three days.” He said and was about to say more.

I jumped in, “Stick around and you’ll find out we don’t get the broadcasts over here.”

Roger took control of the conversation at that point and responded to my original inquiry. He told me he had a very good year and was looking forward to more. The conversation during the rest of the lunch was normal and friendly. Roger was a true gentleman. Even though I knew nothing about the celebrity sitting in front of me, he made me feel at ease and let me know that he understood how I had not heard of him. This was the first time I had heard there was a Heisman Trophy. I would hear it again.

I never ran into Roger again. I did hear about him. The word was that he had signed a contract with the Dallas Cowboys to play professional ball when his enlistment in the Navy was up. I also heard that if anyone want to catch a football thrown by Roger, all they had to do was go over to Camp Tien Sha and get in line. When he was off duty, there were always three or four guys willing to

⁵² Roger won the Heisman Trophy in 1963, If I had been even vaguely aware of sports news, I would have picked that up. This simply demonstrates just how clueless I was.

snap the ball for him and lots of willing receivers lining up.

I did become a fan of his when he started playing professional ball for the Dallas Cowboys.



Figure 16 Roger Staubach throwing passes on a pitch at Camp Tien Sha, Danang, Vietnam. Naval Support Activity Cruise Book 1965-66.

I just mentioned that I never saw Roger again, but this is one of those Misadventures that goes dormant for a long time, like a year, and then jumps out to bite you on the ass again.

After my tour of duty at the Naval Support Activity, I was assigned to the First Naval District, Boston, Mass. I was an administrative officer for Navy Reservists in the New England area. I selected this duty for its geographic location and the fact that it promised to be an assignment far

removed from any conflict. I wanted a job where I could go to work five days a week, quit at 1700 each day and

not worry about my office “getting underway” and leaving port for 9 months. This job delivered.

My job was a simple one (that is why I chose it). I made sure that any paperwork that hit my desk was properly processed and moved onward. One of types of papers I received was requests for the reservists’ Two-Week, Active Duty Training, which was required of every reserve officer every year. I cannot remember how many requests I processed, probably hundreds.

As Summer, 1967 approached, I was called into the Chief of Staff’s office, he was a Captain, where I was informed that any reservist who lived in Boston had to take their Two Weeks outside of Boston because too many officers were doing their training and still working their jobs. The Captain gave me a letter to that effect. He told me to use it if anyone disagreed with the policy.

Several did, but I would pull the Chief of Staff letter out of my desk and let them read it. That took care of the problem. However, one day a guy named Joe, I did not catch his last name, came into the office and asked for two weeks at Boston Naval Station. I asked where he lived and he said Boston. I said sorry Joe, and I showed him the letter. He thanked me and left.

Five minutes later, my phone rang. It was the Chief of Staff. “Breman, what the hell are you doing? Get up here!”

The Captain’s tone let me know he was not happy, and I started going through the reception area of the Admiral

and Chief of Staff's offices, I could see Joe having coffee with the Admiral. The Captain simply motioned me into the Admiral's office.

The Admiral turned from his conversation with Joe and smiled at me. "Sid, do you think you could fix Joe up with two weeks at Boston Naval Station?"

"Sure thing Admiral. Just have him come down to my office when he is finished here." The Admiral nodded and I knew I was dismissed.

Shortly, Joe showed up in my office.

I, half, jokingly said, "What up Joe? Do you have nude pictures of the Admiral's wife?"

"No." Joe replied. He saw the blank look on my face and continued. "I'm Joe Bellino. I play professional football."

My blank stare continued.

He continued, "I play for the Patriots."

My expression stayed the same. At this point, we are both thoroughly surprised.

He realized that I was still confused and he said "I played football for Navy and I won the Heisman Trophy⁵³."

⁵³ Joe won the Heisman in 1960.

Then I honestly asked what must have sounded like the dumbest question he had ever heard. “How many of you guys are there?”

Joe said, “What do you mean?”

I replied, “I met a guy named Roger who did the same thing.”

Joe laughed and I explained that I was not a football fan. I apologized for not knowing him. He apologized for assuming I knew him.

I would meet Joe on several other occasions, and we always had a pleasant exchange.

He, too, was a real gentleman.

Chapter: Biggest Surprise of My Life

June 1966: Everyone worked seven days a week; 10 to 14 hours a day. My job involved managing all of the details that keeps a division of 250 men operating thirty-two, 60 ton landing craft, moving thousands of tons of cargo every day, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. We, the LCM8 Division, were one of the units of NSA that operated continuously. We were not alone in round-the-clock operations; several other units did the same.

Every day was a challenge magnified by a host of complicating, semi-controllable, and uncontrollable factors. Without getting too far into this subject, here is a list, in no particular order or priority, of the life's

obstacles in a Tropical War Zone: temperature above 90 degrees, humidity above 90 percent, heat-rash in the most uncomfortable places, infection in the smallest cuts, disease (black plague, yellow fever, malaria, dysentery), contaminated food and water, no liberty, insects the size of house rodents and house rodents the size of cats, Viet Cong, random hand grenades, shots fired, occasional snipers, occasional booby traps and other threats to life generally encountered in a War Zone.

In addition to the regular operations one would expect to encounter, an important part of my job involved untangling problems caused by processes, that were either incomplete or poorly conceived, and errant sailors, generally the young ones on their first enlistment. The base was in the building stages and the top brass may have known where we were going, but the details of getting there did not always filter down to the bottom brass who had to guess where we were going. The work was anything but pleasant; nor was it what we expected when we joined the Navy, but we all knew that we had volunteered.

Unpleasant does not adequately describe it, something above unpleasant and related to painful does. Most of us alternately bitched about our life and then gave thanks to God we were not in the bush getting routinely shot at or wondering if the next step would be in a booby trap or punji stake. We knew we did not have the worst jobs in the world. The Marines did.

Occasionally, I could get my mind beyond the everyday discomforts of life and look at the pure beauty of Vietnam. When I was on watch in the harbor, I was often struck by the fact that the hills looked so much like the hills on the banks of the Allegheny River. I saw many places in Vietnam that reminded me of home.

Additionally, much smaller in the grand scheme of things, I was promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and the Wetting Down party was good, but much calmer than the one in May. There were four of us promoted that day.

I cannot remember the exact day, but sometime shortly after the Wetting Down, my boss, a career Lieutenant, told me that the Operation Officer, a Commander, wanted to see me. I quickly went through the catalog of things that I may have screwed up badly enough that the Commander would want to see me personally to deliver an old-fashioned ass-chewing, but I failed to think of anything that extreme. I had never even talked to the Ops Boss, nor had he ever talked to me. My ass-chewings came directly from my boss. Now that I was a Lieutenant Junior Grade, had I possibly moved up the ass-chewing chain of command?

A quick side note here. Remember that I said the habitual screw-ups got assigned to inventorying yards and docks and, I should add, they never got an ass-chewing. The theory behind this treatment is summarized by the expression "Never try to teach a pig to sing. It will frustrate you and irritate the pig".

However, if you are doing a good job, and your job is critical to the operational mission, you do not get fired from that job and you catch an ass-chewing almost every day. Ass-chewing is Navy motivational speech.

I asked my boss what the Commander wanted, and his reply was. "Go find out." I was in his office within a minute.

The Commander looked ancient. He was bald, wrinkled, mumbled and in my 25-year-old eyes he had to be in his late 50's. If he was any younger, then he led an extremely hard life.

He told me that the Marines were planning a mission and wanted to use one of our LCM8s. I was to go to a meeting and be the liaison officer for the exchange and the meeting would start in half an hour at the III MarDiv compound directly across the river. I knew I could make it if I hurried and caught the ferry at the right time. Before leaving, I picked up a can of C Rations cookies for breakfast.

At III MarDiv, I found the meeting room, but it was not what I had expected. It was a large, dimly lit, lecture style room that would seat about 50 people. There was a junior officer giving a presentation to an attentive audience of about 20 Marine officers. I was able to quickly assess that I was the most junior officer in the place except for the presenter who was a first lieutenant. I took a seat in the last row, not noticing that I sat down beside a full bird colonel. I whispered to the

colonel, still not realizing his rank, “Is this the operation that needs the Navy boat?”

He responded: “Next up in about 10 minutes.”

It was about then that I realized the room was air conditioned and my body sweat was drying. It felt good, and I thought how nice it would be if the meeting lasted an hour or so, maybe a couple of days. I looked around and saw a coffee stand about fifteen feet behind me. Great!

With my can of C Ration cookies in hand I went to the coffee table. There were cups, but I was not about to assume they were there for any Junior Navy officer to use. With my P38⁵⁴, I opened the cookie can, removed the contents, bent the lid back and used the empty can as a coffee cup. I had done this many times before, sanitation being what it was in Vietnam, and saw nothing wrong with the practice. Back to my seat where I began to enjoy coffee and cookies.

I was only vaguely aware that the officer next to me got up and walked away. When he returned, he placed a cup in front of me, picked up my coffee “can” and poured my coffee into the cup. With a steady even tone he said, “We are not quite that barbaric here.” It was only then that I noticed he was a full bird colonel.

For the first time in my life, I experienced professional embarrassment. I should have known the cups on the

⁵⁴ C Rations can opener.

table were for anyone. I felt my face flush and I was frozen in place, afraid to move because I might not have complete control over all my bodily functions.

Aside: The reader must understand that Marine Colonels are a breed unto themselves. In the animal world they would be at the absolute top of the food chain. Feared and respected by all, their reputation was as the fierce warriors who had fought their way from island to island in the Pacific during WWII, landed at Inchon in Korea, withdrew from The Chosen Reservoir and now were leading the Marines in their third war. Additionally, my brief, but memorable encounter with one while on Seventh Fleet Staff impressed upon me that Marine Colonels saw Navy Junior Officers as the lowest form of life on Earth, perhaps in the Universe. End Aside.

The Colonel apparently understood my situation (probably saw my face glow brilliant red even in the dim light). He placed a hand on my shoulder and said, "For God's sake, son, it not a big deal." And then he smiled or, at least, showed what passes for a smile on a Marine Colonel.

That was it. The lion had taken the thorn out of the mouse's paw. We had what would pass as a friendship between a Colonel and a Lieutenant J.G.

The presenter finished his spiel, asked for questions, answered same, gathered his slides and papers, and left. Another first lieutenant moved into position.

Scanned the room and asked if the Navy was present. I looked around the room and did not see any other Navy officers. I was contemplating identifying myself as “The Navy” in a room full of Marine senior officers when the Colonel poked me in the side. “Here” I said, loud enough to be heard. Most of the officers looked around to see “The Navy”. None seemed impressed or surprised. And the presentation started.

This was the first briefing on the proposed Operation Swanee, whose mission objective was to map the Thu Bon river complex from Hoi An to the An Hoa Marine Base. This would be a first step in determining the feasibility of river borne supply operations to An Hoa. The waterway is located about 18 kilometers (for some reason the Marines used kilometers instead of miles) south of Danang. It flows northeast at its origins and then turns east for about 25 kilometers and terminates in the South China Sea. It is a swift river, flowing at approximately 8 knots. The area surrounding the river was held almost exclusively by the Viet Cong and had been nicknamed “The Arizona Territory”. The Marines expected stiff resistance to this operation. This was all highly informative, but I just wanted to know where and when to bring the boat. The operation was tentatively scheduled for mid-August.

The meeting/briefing lasted about 30 minutes and the presenter suggested a second meeting next week. The assembled room agreed, and another presenter took the stage. I took that as my cue to leave rather than

making a fool of myself and ask a question that would probably be answered at the next meeting.

July 1966: But my question was not answered at any of the following meetings. Each meeting got a little longer and more detailed with the fourth meeting lasting a full hour. The Colonel and I were getting along famously, exchanging twenty or thirty words per meeting. We were getting to be old buddies. As the fourth meeting was wrapping up and we were a month away from the start of Operation Swanee, I leaned over to the Colonel and said, "When are they going to send a crew over so we can train them on how to run the boat?"

The Colonel looked at me and his expression was an odd oleo of surprise, sadness, sympathy, and humor. I do not think I had ever, or since, seen so many mixed emotions on a human face.

Finally, he said, "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" I said.

He did not say anything more. He just kept staring at me with that odd expression. (Had this been a comedy skit, someone in the background would have been whispering "wait for it, wait for it".)

All my respiratory functions ceased as the enormity of this non-verbal communication sunk in. I was the one who would take this boat up that river! Me!

"No!" I said.

The Colonel⁵⁵ just shook his head “Yes”.

I was gone, out the door and headed for the Commander’s office.

I did not wait for permission to enter. I just walked in.

“Commander, I was just told that I’m taking that boat up the river.”

“Oh, did I not tell you that?” he said.

“No, you told me the Marines needed a boat, not a crew,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said almost apologetically “must have forgotten. Yes, you are in-charge of the boat”.

I wheeled and headed for the Lighterage Office just 30 feet away. Standing over my desk, I studied the dirty coffee cup I had left there earlier. My mind would not wrap around the fact that I was, not only going to the front, but would be a lead element (translates to target) of the operation. I could feel a panic attack crawling up my back.

When I was a small child, under six years old, I had either a dream or a vision that I was in a foxhole and an Asian soldier was charging at me with a bayonet on the end of his rifle. The vision stopped before he got to me, but I was sure I was going to die because I did not know how to defend myself. I never completely forgot about it

⁵⁵⁵⁵ I never did learn the Colonel’s name.

and occasionally, it would play in my mind. It played several times that day.

I was now in a position where I could encounter an Asian man with a bayonet.⁵⁶

Everyone who joins the Navy quickly learns that “You Volunteered”. Regardless of what happens, “You Volunteered”. When you stood up and raised your right hand and said “I, Sidney Breman, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.” (Title 10, US Code; Act of 5 May 1960 replacing the wording first adopted in 1789, with amendment effective 5 October 1962), “I Volunteered”.

My boss finally interrupted my little “Pity Party”.

“Hey, what’s up?” The office was empty except for him and our Yeomen. He must have addressed me several times.

“I just found out I’m the guy who is going to take that Marine boat up the river,” I said.

⁵⁶ The Asian man with the bayonet is discussed extensively in “Parallel Streams” by Sid Breman.

I had briefed him on the meetings at III MarDiv several times, so I knew he was aware of the operation, but I was not ready for his reaction. Nothing. Dead silence. He knew. And the Commander knew. Why had they not included me in that important piece of information? My boss knew that I was only planning to turn over a boat, not a boat and crew. I have never been able to come up with reasonable answers to this question. However, at that moment, my mind was not working. Everything was jammed up. I grabbed the keys to the Division pickup truck and headed out the door, not to return until the next morning. When I did return, I was ready to start working on Operation Swanee.

Chapter: Operation Swanee

The events of that morning shook my faith in the Brass and their judgement. They sent an inexperienced, Junior Officer to a planning meeting where the senior officer present was a Three Star General in the United States Marine Corps! I know I have said this before, but what (expletives deleted) were they thinking? Surely the Senior Officer receiving the request must have asked a couple questions about why the USMC needed a Mike 8.

Did the conversation go something like this?

USMC: “Hey Squid, we need a Mike 8 and a crew to send on a combat mission. It will probably be about a month long and they will be the biggest target on the

river. Matter of fact, they have a good chance they will not come back.”

USN: “Boy, you Jarheads play a dangerous game. Sounds like this is an important operation. I will send over the most inexperienced Junior Officer we have. I’ll go even one better. I will let him plan the entire U.S. Navy participation. How’s that work for you?”

USMC: “Sounds like just the ticket. Are you sure he has no experience? Is he stupid? That would help. “

USN: “Stupid? If he accepts this assignment, we can rest easy that he hasn’t got any IQ points to spare.”

USMC: “Squid, you are a real pal. If this mission goes down the tubes, we can blame him. Thanks.”

My respect for any officer senior to me was seriously eroded that day.

Author’s Note: Earlier, I made mention of my theory of Responsibility and Authority, two human behavior concepts that are greatly misunderstood in most human endeavors involving more than one person.

Here is how I believe it works: A Senior officer does not delegate Authority. They can only delegate the Responsibility. A Junior officer either accepts or rejects the Responsibility.

Here is an example: Let us say the Senior turns to the Junior and says: “I want the entire ship painted by the end of the week and you are in charge.”

This is a delegation of Responsibility, not Authority.

The Junior turns to the deck hands and says: “Start painting. I want the whole ship done by the end of the week.” The Junior has accepted the Responsibility to complete the job. He has given the Senior officer Authority over his behavior and further delegates the Responsibility to the deck hands.

At this point, the deck hands will do one of two things; they will start painting the boat or they will light up cigarettes and ignore the Junior.

If they start painting the boat, they have given the Junior Authority over their behavior. If they ignore him, they have denied the Junior the Authority to complete the job and have committed the Navy crime of insubordination.

Enter, stage left, the concept of Respect, the connecting link between Responsibility and Authority. When Respect exists between senior and subordinate, then Authority will be granted over the subordinate’s behavior. Without Respect, Authority is withheld.

At this point, some readers are saying to themselves: “That’s not true! In the military all you have to do is tell someone to do something and if they do not do it you send them to the brig.” I have actually seen authors, who claim to be the best and most knowledgeable in the field of Leadership, put those word or words to that

effect into print in a top selling book on the subject.⁵⁷ My response to that author and anyone who believes him is this: “You obviously have never been in charge of men in a combat zone where the brig is like a vacation from the job you have to accomplish. You also have never been in a situation where you send someone to the brig and then you still must complete the task. Who’s left to do the work?”

Respect in a senior/subordinate relationship is a fragile connection. Once shattered, reconstruction is nearly impossible.

End of Author’s Note.

None of the questions I have had about the way I was assigned to this operation and the way I found out have ever been answered. However, over the last 50 plus years, I have managed to distill all the questions down to just one (which, of course, still cannot be answered). Why was an inexperienced, junior officer sent to the planning meetings and left to flounder around? The Marines had a room full of brass pondering and planning. The Navy sent a junior officer whose only qualification was that he had spent two months watching sailors drive boats. What happened? Did the entire Navy Command structure miss the fact that this was a combat operation? We were not hauling picnic supplies for a Marine party. This was combat! And here I was, probably the least qualified Navy officer in

⁵⁷ The author will remain nameless. I do not need the legal hassle.

Vietnam (OK, that is an exaggeration, but not much of one) leading the charge! Was I the best they could send? Somebody really missed the boat (pun intended).

I have been eternally grateful that this error of omission by the Command structure did not produce any fatalities or injuries (at least none that show) for me or my crew. Many aspects of the mission could have been improved with competent and qualified leadership. I had no illusions about my level of competence, then or now. One of the most terrifying aspects of the mission for me was being aware that I lacked the training to perform my duties and to protect myself and my crew. I was faking it because I had no other choice, at least none that would not have put me in front of a court marshal board.

Most of my time during the month preceding the start of Operation Swanee, scheduled for August 13, was consumed by planning, and equipping the boat. With the advice of my three leading petty officers, I selected the LCM8 860 because it was the best maintained and had the best crew. We started gathering supplies, tools, spare parts, and weapons we estimated we would need. I kept a small notebook in my back pocket and as an item would come into my mind, I would write it down immediately. The list would grow over night as I would wake up from a deep sleep with two or three items in my head, then write them down and fall back to sleep. I am eternally grateful that we had an abundance of

everything. By the time August 13, 1966 would roll around we would be ready to move.

Just as my "To Do" list continued to grow, so did the complement of the LCM8 860. First there were two men from Saigon who would run the sonar equipment to map the river. Then one week before departure, I was informed that three Lieutenant Commanders were coming from various parts of the Navy (finally, the Brass shows up... with tons of last-minute suggestions). They represented Task Force 116 (the PBR's), Swift Boats and MACV Saigon.

Upon arriving, one of the Lt. Commanders informed me that he was SOPA, Senior Officer Present Afloat. SOPA is a U.S. Navy regulation that makes the senior officer on any ship or vessel responsible for the safe operation of the craft. Which means that SOPA can overrule the Commanding Officer of a ship or the Officer in Charge of a boat if, in his judgement, the ship or boat and the personnel aboard will be placed in danger by the poor judgement of said C.O. or O.I.C.

Then (we are into the last week before D-Day) someone (Brass) had the bright idea that we should have an EOD (Explosive Ordnance Demolition) Team on board. (Where the Hell were these people in June?) So, a four-man team (a Lt.J.G. and three NCOs) shows up at my boat. They also brought along a 14-foot runabout complete with 40 horse outboard. The outboard, of course, needs a supply of gasoline (there is a liquid I always wanted aboard a boat going into

combat and, yes, that is sarcasm) and oil and a place to be stowed. Then a Navy photographer showed up from Saigon.

Now we had nine additional bodies that would have to be fed and watered. I told my leading petty officer to stock the 860 with enough C Rations and water to last 60 days. Fortunately, the LCM8's had a lot of storage space, but we were running out of people space. And, fortunately, he doubled my order. With all these people showing up, we used a 20'x20' tarp to make a tent over the rear of the well-deck as protection from the sun and rain. It was a last-minute modification but, fortunately, sailors are the best jury riggers in the world and our tent looked like it had been made for the LCM8.

During that last week, I was informed that a Marine Colonel wanted to inspect the 860. It was an irritation I did not need because it meant I would have to take the boat to Headquarters, a two hour round trip, and we would have to use precious time to "trix up the boat" (make it pretty for a senior officer). One of the modifications we had made to the 860 was a 50-caliber machine gun mount on the stern sheet. It was strictly for the use of the Marine Corps if they wanted to use it. We, me, and my crew, thought it would afford us a lot of protection.

We arrived at Bach Dang Pier next to the White Elephant, a good half hour early. I told the crew they could leave and gave them two hours to come back. I knew that would give them enough time to make it to

the Take 10 Club for a few rounds. It was early afternoon.

The Colonel arrived and his facial expression said, “Someone put sand in my Preparation H.” We exchanged salutes and he glanced around the boat. He was not quite sure what to look at any more than I could assess the combat readiness of a tank. However, he spent some time looking at various parts of the boat, nodding his head or shaking

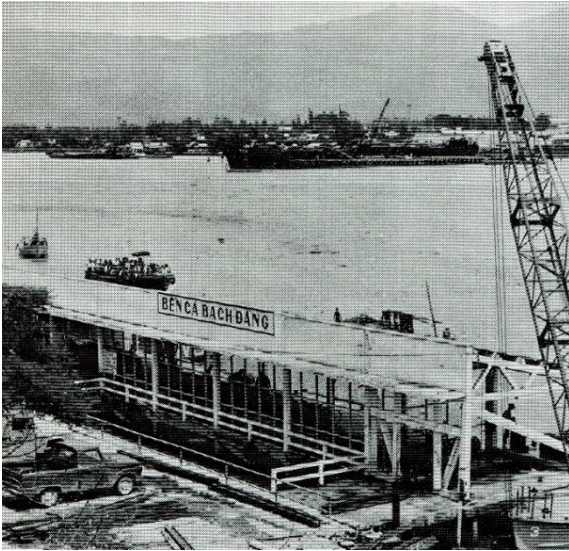


Figure 17 Bach Dang Pier taken from the roof of the White Elephant. Photo from the NSA Cruise Book, 1965-66.

it and mumbling to himself.

Finally, he pointed to the 50-caliber mount and said, “I want that off immediately”.

I said it was for the Marine Corps use.

He cut me short. “I do not care. I want it off now. The next thing you will do is remove that mount”.

It is worth noting here that the Marines passionately believe that the most dangerous thing in the world is a sailor behind them with a weapon, a belief that has been reinforced many times over the centuries.

It was obvious that the Colonel had not intended this to be a discussion, so I said, “Aye aye Sir.” I hoped that would be the end of our exchange, but I was disappointed.

“And” he said, “I do not want you or your crew armed”. He waited for me to do the “Aye aye” thing again.

I felt his words go down to the bottom of my sole and bounce back. I had spent two months attending meetings where I was told about all the different ways we, I, could get our, my, asses, ass, shot off, that we would be constantly pushing the enemy out of our way, like a bubble rising up from the bottom of a fish tank, we would always be surrounded by the enemy. And then I saw the image of the Asian man charging at me with a bayoneted rifle and, for the first time in my life, I noticed that I was unarmed. The vision was clearer than it had ever been.

This was the point in my life where I lost all, complete, and total, respect and trust in and for authority. And I would never reverse my position.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Sir, I will not give up my sidearm nor my weapon, nor will I instruct my men to give up theirs. If you do not like

it, then I suggest you arrest me now.” I paused and waited for the Colonel to detonate. To say that my heart was filled with a little fear would be to say that the Titanic took on a little water after hitting the iceberg. I had not just disagreed with a Marine Colonel, I had, point blank, in no uncertain terms, told him to “kiss my ass”. I would not follow a direct order.

And another long moment of silence. We held each other’s gaze for what seemed like an hour but was probably only five seconds. Then he said, “Aw fuck it”, and he walked away. I thought that was the end of the discussion, but it was not. See “Note to self” later under August 14.

August 12, 1966: On the day before leaving, I arrived at the boat to find the EOD team building a sandbag wall from gunwale to gunwale about ten feet from the loading ramp. They told me the sandbags would provide protection when the ramp was down and having the ramp down would afford a better view of what was immediately in front of us. The runabout would go in front of the sandbag wall. EOD teams were combat trained, and I considered them a welcome addition to the operation. But, again, where the Hell was the Brass in June?

The hardest part about not knowing what you are doing is that you do not know what you do not know. (That is a well-worn phrase today, but in 1966, I did not know that I did not know it.) And, when someone points out the obvious, you feel like the idiot you are. The Lt. J. G.

apologized for making the modification without consulting me, but he felt that time was short (no shit?) and was sure I would agree with the changes. I was incompetent and I knew it. I just hoped that my lack of training did not get me or someone else killed.

My vision from my youth was in my mind almost daily now. I wondered if, somehow, it had been a premonition, an omen, of what was to come, that I was predestined to die on a battlefield at the hands of an Asian man.

For me, and therefore the Navy, Operation Swanee started on the evening of August 13, 1966 and ended August 24, 1966. The official USMC documents mark the beginning and end of their participation as August 14 to 20, 1966 according to the Command Chronology⁵⁸.

⁵⁸<https://www.archives.gov>

Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966

Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966

Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division (REIN) FMF,

September, 1966

Command Chronology, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966

Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966

Considering the full spectrum of USMC Operations in Vietnam, Swanee was not a big one. The stated mission was to complete a “hydrographic study” of the Thu Bon River, but not much else has been written. If the hydrographic study was of any use or had any significant impact, my research has yielded nothing. We only managed to reach the halfway point of our stated objective, and, from that perspective, Swanee was a failure. However, it is time to add to the record. When the misadventure of Operation Swanee kicked in, the ripple effects were felt throughout the War, and, in my opinion, beyond. See Liberty Bridge later in this chapter.

The Marine Corps saw Operation Swanee as an opportunity to conduct a Search and Destroy mission over a long stretch of real estate that was controlled by the Viet Cong. The Marines accomplished that goal. There was daily contact with the Viet Cong during the entire operation. Even after the Marines terminated Swanee, the daily firefights continued. August 20 1966, saw the heaviest fighting and was the day the tide of the Operation turned. Heavy action continued until the morning of August 24, 1966.

I deeply regret not keeping a daily journal during Swanee. Fortunately, with my memory and the previously mentioned USMC Command Chronologies, I

Command Chronology, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMMF, August, 1966

have been able to reconstruct what I probably would have written.⁵⁹

August 13, 1966: Left Danang at 2100 and followed a Swift Boat to the mouth of the Thu Bon.

August 14, 1966: Marines landed unopposed at first light. Beached 860 at Hoi An, waited for Marines to move forward. Got the “Go” around noon.

MC (Marine Commander) sent nine Marines as security detail for 860 with a LCpl. (Lance Corporal) in charge. MC said we were too exposed and needed protection. He is probably worried that we will start returning fire. Marines’ nightmare = sailor behind them with a weapon. Security detail Marines are happy to not have to walk this day. Note to self: Be careful when you tell USMC Colonel to kiss ass.

Instructed to wait for MCV (Marine Command Vehicle) to move one thousand feet then catch up, then wait, then do again.

At 1500, navigating narrow channels around delta islands, got caught in fishing net. While trying to free 860, VC opened fire. Heard rounds whizzing through

⁵⁹ A detailed account of Operation Swanee is contained in “Parallel Streams” and “Operation Swanee”. Both volumes are authored by Sid Breman.

the air around us. Experienced maximum Pucker Factor.⁶⁰

Sound of gunfire, coming and going, continued till dusk.

Receive word of first USMC KIA. Dampen mood on 860.

At 1730, ran aground in very wide part of river. Tried getting around with no luck. Stuck about midstream. MC sent Amtracs to surround us. Gave us a five-foot steel wall of protection.

Everyone bedded down early, thank God. The Boats⁶¹ took turns on watch in the con.

August 15, 1966: Awoke to find our deck level with Amtracs. Tide came in. Embarrassed that I did not know tides hi and lo. Should have checked.

On the move at 0700.

LCpl. with security detail is great source of information. I could have used him when prepping for Swanee.

Drawing fire all day. With 4 diesels, Charlie can hear us coming. Waits at the bend in the river.

⁶⁰ Pucker Factor is an informal fear index. One sign that a human being is experiencing fear is the appearance of “goose bumps” which are caused when the skin tightens in anticipation of being injured. The tighter skin will reduce blood loss in the event of an injury. A Marine will tell you that in Maximum Pucker Factor, you will taste something hairy in the back of your throat. Do not, under any circumstances attempt to spit it out. It’s your asshole.

⁶¹ Nick name for a coxswain..

Amtracs continue to bog down in the mud. Slows progress.

SOPA wants everyone sleeping in foxholes. I argue that I need my men aboard. End up with two of crew sleeping in foxholes. Not happy.

Sniper starts when men are finishing dinner. LCpl. says he or she will show up at same time each night. Called the Duty Sniper.

Everyone baths in the river. Children come to the riverbank to watch, laugh, and giggle. Nice tension reliever. LCpl. says we will have a safe night when children visit.

August 16, 1966: Thank God night was quiet. Underway at 0700.

At 1200: Amtracs cannot handle mud bottom. Treads dig hole in mud banks and Amtrac stuck. Lots of time wasted while other Amtracs try to free stuck unit. Doesn't work well.

Boats says let's show them how it is done because Amtrac is 8 tons, Mike 8 is 60 tons and 1000 horses. Amtrac popped out of hole like scared rabbit. Marines had thought LCM8 would be the slowest element. So much for theory.

VC contact much the same as day before. Hear bullet whizz by before BANG reached our ears. LCpl. says not

to get nervous with sound of gunfire, get ready. You will never hear the one that gets you.

LCpl. says a Marine stepped on a punji stake. Medevac picked him up.

Stopped at 1700. No children come to visit. Hope for a quiet night.

August 17, 1966: At 0130, Charlie drops 15 rounds of mortar on us. Never heard anything that loud. Max Pucker Factor in effect. Gouged leg during attack. Found out not to move or talk after attack because someone will shoot you.

At 0700, underway. Got new security detail. New LCpl. is good, interested in what we are doing, but not as talkative.

Mix up in communications and we passed up MCV by 800 feet. Though it was all over. Probably would have been if VC knew how lightly armed we are. Do not think they know for sure what we are.

Tired, can imagine how Marines feel walking all day.

Slept soundly.

August 18, 1966: MC summoned Lt. Cmdr.'s and me at first light. Tells us he is going to overrun all VC in front of him all the way to the Liberty Bridge site. Found it on the map. We will have to keep up as best as we can. Lt. Cmdr.'s want to know if I can. We can.

Hit gravel bar at full speed. Unavoidable, bent starboard prop and shaft. Still arrived at Bridge Site with Marines.

EOD diver assessed damage. LCM8 860 out of commission until repaired.

Lt. Cmdr.'s and I will inform MC tomorrow morning.

This is the end of the hypothetical journal.

Author's Note: There were two huge misadventures that followed our arrival at the Liberty Bridge Site. One involved an attempt to complete the mission of Operation Swanee. The other involved the LCM8 860, a vessel that I now refer to as the most famous Mike boat in the World.⁶²

Back to August 18, 1966: Our stopping point was not what I had expected. There was a road going north and south on either side of the river and a pontoon ferry that, theoretically, would shuttle vehicles across the river. We discovered that the ferry did not work. The ferry had an outboard motor and the pontoons looked like the ones that were used to construct temporary bridges. It was not sturdy enough to carry a jeep, let alone a truck. Someone remarked, "It looks like something a Marine would put together." We laughed. There were also construction vehicles, sandbag bunkers and an M50 Ontos tank with six recoilless

⁶² See "All Hands, Magazine of the U.S. Navy" August 2021

rifles. It appeared that the Marines permanently manned this location.

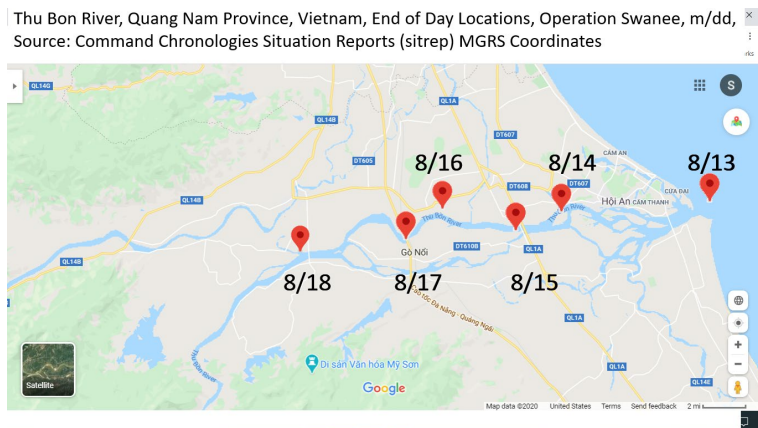


Figure 18 Operation Swanee end of day locations.

The road was Liberty Road and would be the main supply route for the Marine base at An Hoa when finished. The Seabees were going to build the bridge (later named The Liberty Bridge) that would connect the north and south portions of the road. But the bridge was still in the planning stage.

The MC told us that the rapid push forward had been a success. Several enemy had been killed or captured and he believed the force in front of us had been eliminated. He was confident that our forward progress would be better in the coming days. We were about halfway to our destination of An Hoa.

Since neither of the Lt. Cmdr.'s were speaking up, I was the one who told him we would have to lay up for repairs. The men from the EOD Team, who were trained divers, were helping us to assess our damage.

He was not disturbed at the prospect of staying put for the rest of the day. His men could use the rest. He wanted a report as soon as we knew the operational status of our boat. He asked if we were operational enough to transport some Marines from the south bank to the north. I said we could.



Figure 19 Figure : Transporting Marines and POWs across the Thu Bon. I was not aware that there would be a group of POWs with the Marines. It gave me chills to see the enemy alive and up-close.

August 19, 1966: The LCM8 860 was finished as far as Operation Swanee was concerned. The starboard driveshaft was bent so much that it would not operate without doing more damage and fail completely. With only one bank of engines and the prospect of encountering more shallow water (once you hit shallow water going up river, there is more ahead of you), I could not say that we were able to continue. Another

grounding like the one we just experienced, and we could all be dead.

The Lt. Cdrs. agreed with my assessment and backed me when we went to the MC. However, the senior Lt. Cmdrs. had developed an alternative plan, of which I knew nothing until hearing about it at that moment. They proposed that the Operation be completed using the runabout the EOD Team had brought with them. It would be driven by the EOD, Lt. J.G. along with one or two of his men.

A few minutes were spent discussing potential problems and obstacles and then the MC said, "When will you be prepared to start?"

"Tomorrow morning," the Senior Lt. Cdr. said.

The two map makers from Saigon and their equipment were gone when I got back to the boat. I had told them the boat would not be continuing upriver and, after consulting with the Lt. Commanders they packed their equipment and hitched a ride in a Marine resupply truck heading north. I never saw or heard from them again. The Lt. Cdr. who had been sick the entire trip also left.

I briefed the crew on what was happening. We all felt that we had given our all to the success of the Operation, but we also were glad our part was done. They wanted to know what we were to do next. I told them I did not know. We would have to wait for instructions from NSA Danang. I had sent a message

through the Marines and we should hear something soon. We were standing on the ramp of the boat during this discussion when a jeep pulled up. It looked like the driver wanted to board the boat.

A Marine senior officer (I am sure he was a Colonel, but officers do not wear rank insignia in combat areas) got out of the jeep and was staring, wide-eyed at the boat. "Who's in charge of this boat?" he asked.

"I am," I responded. "Can I help you, Sir?"

"Yes. Where the hell did you come from?" he asked.

I was not quite sure what he meant by that question, but I answered, "We are part of Operation Swanee mapping the river."

"And where are you going now?" he asked.

I told him we were down for repairs because we lost our starboard prop shaft, and I was awaiting orders from Danang.

"Who's your boss?" he asked.

I gave him the name of the Lighterage Division Officer and the Ops Boss. Now I was getting curious.

"Ok, do not go anywhere. Do not leave here," he said. He seemed genuinely concerned, almost anxious, that we might try to leave. "Do you need anything?"

"We could do with some beer," I said, half joking.

“You’ll have to pay for it. How much do you want?” he said.

We all went through our pockets and came up with \$30 bucks. (That was 15 cases in 1966 prices.) He took our money and before leaving said, “Remember, do not leave until you talk to me.”

We almost saluted him, then remembered that you never salute an officer in combat. We just waved.

What we did not know was that the Marine engineers were desperate for a reliable ferry across the Thu Bon to carry supply vehicles to An Hoa several miles south of our location. Their pontoon ferry was not cutting it and the 860 looked like it had just fallen from heaven.

I called for “All Hands” to offload the runabout and watched while the EOD Team got it running. They motored around the river for a while, testing the engine. We put our heads together and tried to think of a complete list of tools and supplies they might need. Our Engineer came up with a hand full of wrenches, screwdrivers, and pliers for engine repairs. Our two Coxswains found some line in the lazarette and we put out life preservers. When the Team returned, they said the engine was running rough and our Engineer started working on it. I had nothing to do but be a spectator and decided to take a nap.

The Engineer shook me awake. “Sir, beer’s here,” he said.

The other crew members were walking towards the boat, each carrying multiple cases of beer and big smiles. We thought about cracking a few but decided to wait until dark.

After dinner I took up my Watch position in the con. I was relaxed and just watched the sky turn from blue to black. Our two Coxswains joined me in the Con and we shot the breeze, finding humor in most of what we said. And then the show started.

Some distance away we could hear helicopters. It was too dark to see them, but we heard their props beating the air and they were not flying in a straight line. Then they started firing. We saw the tracers first which formed a red, dotted line that seemed to wobble down to the ground as the gunner moved from one side to the other. The sound came several seconds later, giving us an estimate of how far the action was from our location. We guessed one to two miles. We all watched for several hours. It was entertaining.

August 20, 1966: The outboard motor was running perfectly and after a little breakfast, lots of good luck wishes, they were ready to move out. The two Lt. Commanders had decided they would ride in the runabout and the rest of the EOD Team would join the Marines on the ground. A Marine officer, probably a Major, came down to the LCM8 and asked if we could transport his men across the tributary and land them at the point where it joined the river. No problem. The

Navy photographer told me he was joining the Marines. His choice, and “good luck”.



Figure 20 Marines disembark from LCM 8 860 on The North Bank of the Thu Bon, just west of Liberty Ferry site, the morning of August 20, 1966.

Several minutes later we watched as the Marines disembarked and disappeared into the vegetation.

Now it was just my crew and me. We slowly motored back to where the road met the river, within the protective semicircle of the Marine encampment. The officer in charge, a 1st Lt., came down to the boat and asked if we had any spare C Rations. He was short some meals and the re-supply truck would not be back till late afternoon. We happily gave him two cases. A Lance Corporal took them away to be distributed and the Lt. and I smoked a cigarette and shot the breeze for a while. We both squatted down, Vietnamese style, with our arms outstretched, our upper arms resting on our knees.

I made sure the Coxswain had set the Watch. He had and he put me in for my regular 1800 hours to 2200 hours. Although we had shaved every day, none of us had not bathed in the river since the mortar attack. Perhaps we had lost trust in the water. Perhaps we were afraid to be caught naked in the water by an ambush. I needed to do something. I smelled like a goat.

I took a gallon of water to the rear of the stern sheet, behind the Con and stripped down. Using a washcloth, I wiped over my body until I felt clean and then poured the rest of the water over my head. With no clean towel, I let myself air dry, then put on the last of the clean underwear and socks I had. Then I picked out the cleanest shirt and pants I could find. I had just enjoyed a luxury that few of the Marines had that day and I thanked the Good Lord for it. I have never forgotten to be grateful to God that I have had so much clean water during the rest of my life.

Refreshed, I called the Crew together for a meeting. We had a full day ahead of us and, literally, nothing to do. After discussing the situation, I decided to declare "Holiday Routine" (which is Navy speak for relax, take a nap or whatever). We set up a Watch for the day and started relaxing. None of us had had a day off in weeks or maybe months. It was good to do nothing. While I was talking with the crew, it occurred to me that during all my meetings with the Marine planning group, no one had ever said anything about how we would get the

boat back to Danang. Nor did I think to ask. Maybe I should think about that.

Around 1630H hours, the Marine 1st Lt. came down to the boat with a worried look on his face. He told us that we were to proceed to the South Bank of the river and be ready to transport Marines to the North Bank.

“What happened?” I asked.

“They ran into a buzz saw,”ⁱ he replied. And he was gone, giving orders to his men. They were preparing for something. We took the tent down and moved the cots to the side. We did not know how many men we would be transporting, and I wanted to be prepared. We stowed our beer in the lazarette and decided to keep it our little secret for now. I did not think the Lt. Commanders would approve if they saw it.

On the South Bank, an officer, probably a Major, came aboard first, followed by a lot of men. The officer came up on the deck. He greeted me and said, “Thanks for being here.” He was irritated. That was very obvious.

“Glad to be of service,” I said. I thought better of asking what happened, so I just kept my mouth shut.

On the next trip, the two Lt. Commanders, the Lt. J.G. and the rest of the EOD Team were first on board. They all came up on deck. None of them looked good. Stress will do that to you. And then they filled me in.

They were making good progress during the morning and early afternoon when the Marines on the north/west side of the river ran into a large force of, they thought, a battalion of North Vietnamese regulars, about twice as large as our Marine force. They were forced back to the river and were able to get all the Marines across only by using the runabout. The Marines put their packs in the boat and held on the sides.ⁱⁱ The Lt. J.G. made several trips that way. The best information they had was that the Marines did not know the NVA were there and the NVA did not know we were coming. (Surprise!) Now we were going to have to keep them from crossing the tributary and pushing us back to Hill 55. They made it sound like it was a real possibility.

That night we had another part of the war to see and hear. The Marines had taken up position along the East bank of the tributary. Our best information was that the NVA forces were on the West bank and they would probably try to cross at night. There was sporadic fire and mortars (ours) until about midnight. The gunships were back but still one or two miles away. We thought we might see them closer, but it did not happen.

Somewhere after 2200 hours, we heard the low, steady growl of a twin engine, propeller driven aircraft, not a helicopter. It was about the same distance away as the choppers, so the time delay between any action and the related sound was the same. Suddenly what looked like a laser beam shot down to the earth and seconds later, we heard the high-pitched scream of the fastest guns in

the world. Puff the Magic Dragon had joined the fray. It sounded like a rip saw tearing the Earth.

We prepared to get underway if our position was overrun.

August 21, 1966: It was not fully light when I woke up and, after taking care of life's necessities, followed the smell of the Hobo coffee one of the crew was brewing. We were exchanging "Good Mornings" when we heard explosions off in the distance, East Northeast of our position. The crewman noted that they were a good way off. I agreed. Then something ripped through the air, almost directly above us, then another, another, and another. An artillery barrage had begun.

The projectiles were exploding in the peninsula formed by the West bank of the tributary and the North/West bank of the Thu Bon, no more than one klick away. We could see the shock waves ripple out from the point of impact, followed by fire and smoke. From the sounds coming from the East, we guessed that there were four artillery pieces firing.

I walked up to the bunker where the 1st Lt. was observing the effects of the barrage and asked if he knew what was happening. He told me it was the beginning of the assault on our neighbors whose estimated strength was about 400. They needed to be stopped before they tried to cross the tributary. He also told me that I should be prepared to provide transportation for the Marines to the battle site. That

was a sobering thought. Newsreel clips of D-Day came into my mind as well as my vision of the Asian soldier charging at me with a bayonet.

Back at the boat, I briefed the crew. We all turned-to and got the boat ready. Meanwhile the barrage continued. We were set within an hour. Our tent was down, the cots were stowed, and the engines were warm. The coxswains and I discussed how we would approach the beach. Fortunately, we had already made one landing in that area and we knew what the bottom was like. We also discussed who would take the wheel if the driver were shot.

The cannon stopped and everything was quiet for a while. Then we heard jets coming in from the south; they were Air Force. We watched as they dropped bombs in the peninsula. The bombs were much larger than the one-o-five artillery shell and we could clearly see most of the explosions.

After the Air Force, the Marine Phantoms came in, flying lower than the Air Force jets. At almost treetop level, they dropped napalm. The first one landed close to the riverbank and we saw the bank engulfed in flames. Seconds later, a wave of hot air rushed by us and we were surrounded by the smell of burning gasoline. I wondered how anyone, or anything could live through this kind of pounding.

After the air assault, the ground troops opened fire along with a second barrage from the artillery. I looked

around, but did not see any gathering troops, so it did not appear, at least yet, that we would be called upon. Still, I stayed mentally prepared for anything.

It was late morning when I realized I had not eaten anything yet, so I sought out some C-Rations and made another cup of Hobo coffee. Most of the firefight was over before I finished my meal. The rest of the day was quiet. Even so, we stayed alert all day and night. None of us had any illusion or delusion that we were not on the tip of the spear.

August 22, 1966: The day passed quietly. The 1st Lt. was busy, and I did not want to bother him as he seemed to have his hands full. We remained ready. If attacked, we would get underway and try to stay in the area. If forced to, we would run for the ocean. We would rather take our chances there than abandon the boat and go on foot.

August 23, 1966: The 1st Lt. said his information was that the enemy force in the peninsula had withdrawn, but he was not sure. "Stay alert" was his advice. In the afternoon, we noticed that the ground troops were moving north. By evening, it was just the security detail at the ferry crossing and us.

August 24, 1966, early morning: The explosion was so loud I thought a bomb had hit the boat. I had been sleeping on a cot in the well-deck, but the blast had slammed me to the steel deck. It was dawn and still not dark, not light. I scrambled to the gunnel and peered

over the side. The Ontos was enveloped in a cloud of dust and it appeared as if it had exploded. I heard our engines start and saw two of the crew manning the forward lines. We were ready to get underway. I made my way to the Con.

The Marines, including the Ontos, were directing their fire towards the peninsula. I discovered that the loud explosion that woke me up was the Ontos firing all six recoilless rifles at the same time. I assumed that (1) all the enemy had not withdrawn as reported and (2) they were coming after us. I watched the Marines to see what they were doing. If they started withdrawing and were heading towards us, we would get them onboard and withdraw to the center of the river. If they were moving away from us, we would close the ramp and withdraw to the center of the river.

The firing subsided within a short period of time, but nobody moved. The Marines stayed in their bunkers and we stayed in our boat. Two of our crew were in the well-deck and three of us were in the Con.



Figure 21 The LCM 8 860 on the north bank of the Song Thu Bon, August 24, 1966. Author is sitting on the port gunwale, amidships, wearing a white T shirt.

Around 0900H hours, the 1st Lt. came down to the boat and told us he had received an all-clear message concerning our enemy. The firefight this morning was from their rear guard. They were gone for now.

Around 1600H the crew decided it was time to open our beer, but before we did, the crew wanted to be sure we took care of the Marine security detail. I approached the 1st Lt. and asked if he would accept a few cases of beer to celebrate the withdrawal of the NVA force. He gladly accepted. He also told me that he had just received a message for me. I was to be ready to return to Danang tomorrow at 0900H hours. A jeep would take me to Hill 55.

Back at the boat, the crew had anticipated that we would celebrate tonight, and they had been cooling the

beer in the river since noon. The Marines were happy with their beer, and we had an impromptu picnic on the stern-sheet. The crew toasted returning to Danang. We wished we knew how that would happen. I assured the crew I would be back with supplies and relief as soon as possible. The day ended with all of us watching the gunship light show and, of course, the grand finale with Puff the Magic Dragon.

Chapter: A Boatload of Nails

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

by Anon

August 25, 1966: At Hill 55, I was invited to meet the Battalion Commander. He was a Lt. Col. and he greeted me as if I was a friend of an old friend. I had the best cup of coffee I had had since leaving Danang and became acutely aware of how dirty I was and how badly I smelled (actually, your nose smells and your body stinks). We shot the breeze for a few minutes. Then he thanked me for bringing the boat up the river and shook my hand. I did not understand that “thanks for the boat” comment, but I would find out when I got back to Danang.

Operation Swanee was a smashing success! Not for the stated mission of completing a hydrographic study of the Thu Bon. Rather, the success was placing the right piece of equipment in the right place at the right time.

Our arrival was a serendipitous solution to a big problem the Marines had been wrestling with for some months as they needed to open a dependable supply line to the base at An Hoa asap, and they could not wait for the bridge to be completed. They had constructed a pontoon ferry that worked some of the time with smaller vehicles. Contrary to statements in other histories, the pontoon ferry did not work for large vehicles. The LCM8 heavy hauling capacity, 60 tons, was the answer to the question, “Why was a Marine Colonel so glad to see us and was willing to deliver beer to keep us happy?” He should have been able to conclude that we were not going anywhere without a large Marine escort.

The pontoon ferry was dismantled and hauled away once the Marines knew the LCM8 860 was staying.

The LCM8 860 and her crews provided the final link in the supply line to An Hoa. She was a significant part of the war effort. The first convoy of supply trucks to An Hoa arrived on August 27, 1966, just 3 days after we started providing ferry services. The 860 continued to provide ferry services across the Thu Bon for several years⁶³. It is noteworthy that the men who crewed the

⁶³⁶³ See the next Chapter: The Mythical Liberty Bridge.

860 were trained as sailors and had no combat training whatsoever. They trusted that the Marines would provide for their safety.

Here was a misadventure gone right.

For my part in Operation Swanee, Officer in Charge of the LCM8 860, I received the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V". The Award was made in May 1967 while I was serving at the First Naval District in Boston, MA.

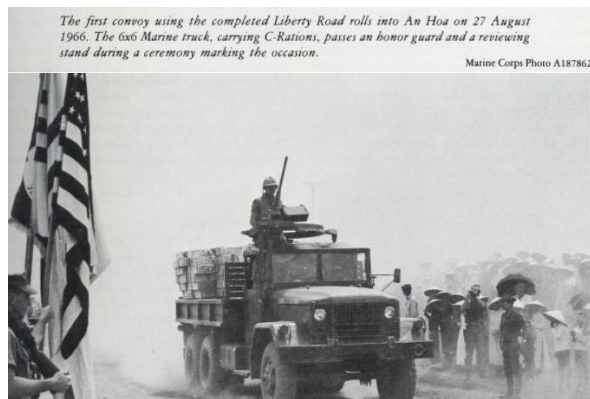


Figure 22 Figure Without Operation Swanee and the 860, it would not have happened.

UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET
HEADQUARTERS OF THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF
770 SAN FRANCISCO 36110

In the name of the Secretary of the Navy, the Commander in Chief
U. S. Pacific Fleet takes pleasure in awarding the Navy Commendation
Medal to

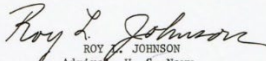
Lieutenant (junior grade) Sidney Daniel BREMAN
United States Naval Reserve

for service as set forth in the following:

CITATION

"For meritorious service while serving as Officer-in-Charge of the river reconnaissance team embarked in the LCMS-860 within enemy Viet Cong territory, Republic of Vietnam, from 13 August to 21 August 1966. Exhibiting great courage, resourcefulness and dedication to duty, Lieutenant (junior grade) BREMAN carried out a vital river reconnaissance survey despite hostile fire. He made a significant contribution to the successful completion of this phase of Operation SWANEE, a Marine Corps search and destroy mission. By his leadership, courage, professional skill and outstanding devotion to duty, Lieutenant (junior grade) BREMAN upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

Lieutenant (junior grade) BREMAN is authorized to wear the Combat "V".


ROY L. JOHNSON
Admiral, U. S. Navy

TEMPORARY CITATION

Figure 23 Citation for the Navy Commendation Medal with "Combat" V.



Figure 24Figure : I had no idea this Award was in the pipeline. It came as a shock and a surprise.

The assignment of the LCM8 860 was a blessing for the Marines, but it became a burden for me. My management resources in a division with 32 boats and 250 men were stretch thin from the day I took over and I made several requests for more officers and senior petty officers. In July, those requests were granted.

Two Ensigns, a Chief and a 1st Class were assigned to the Mike 8s. This happened in the middle of the preparation for Swanee. For the first time, we were close to being adequately staffed for the job we were being asked to perform. I felt that the Division would not be operating without management oversight in my absence. Then I found out that we, the Mike 8 Division, would be expected to man, supply and support the 860 while She was providing ferry services at the Liberty Bridge Site.

The parameters were dictated to me. I was told we would provide an officer as OIC (Officer in Charge) and a four-man crew to operate the 860. Each crew would serve for two weeks, then a new crew would be assigned. The two new Ensigns would alternate two weeks as OIC and two weeks in Danang. I was prohibited from serving as OIC, given that I was the Division Officer.

Effectively, I was back to having no subordinate officer support. Mathematically, I had one officer in Danang and one on the river, but in practice, it did not work. Just as one of the Ensigns was getting into a project, he would leave and the other would come back. But the one that came back had to start all over. And that went on for the rest of the time I was in Danang.

Personally, I felt sorry for the Ensigns because their life on the river was not easy or pleasant, and it was a lot more dangerous than being in Danang. However, there was not much I could do.

Support of the Ferry boat took up additional resources. One day, an officer and three petty officers pulled all the supplies together. Then a day was consumed by the same men, plus a fresh crew traveling to the river site. An additional day was consumed by the returning officer and crew as they put themselves back together, got a hot shower, a hot meal, and an evening at a club. For every man who was at the Liberty Bridge site, another man had to do their job back in Danang.

Sometimes misadventures with long-term benefits come with short-term liabilities. Operation Swanee was also a case where “no good deed goes unpunished.”⁶⁴

Chapter: The Ghost Boat at the Mythical Liberty Bridge

Sometimes, someone else’s Misadventure is so large that it overshadows yours. This is what happened with the myth of the Liberty Bridge. For decades I labored under the impression that the LCM8-860 performed ferry duty across the Thu Bon until shortly after I left Danang in March 1967. It was only when I started doing research for “Parallel Streams” Kindle Press, 2022, that I discovered the Liberty Bridge was only open for 35 days in September and October 1967! For all those decades, I had read about this great bridge that had been constructed by the Seabees. And, it was a myth.

⁶⁴ “left no good deed unpunished, no bad one unrewarded,” “De nugis curialium. By Walter Map, 12th Century A.D.

I have to add a disclaimer here. I want to be perfectly clear to all readers that nothing that follows is meant to impinge the dedication, integrity or competence of any of the men of the Navy Construction Battalions who worked under hostile and arduous conditions to complete all of their projects. The Seabees prowess are legendary and above reproach. I salute them.

That being said, let's investigate the Myth.⁶⁵

Do even the minimum amount of research on the Liberty Bridge, Vietnam and you will find a articles and stories that tell you three things about it: 1. It was an engineering marvel. 2. The construction required skill and courage because it was built, literally, under fire. 3. The bridge became a vital link in the supply chain between Danang and the Marine Base at An Hoa.

Only one of the three item above is true.

Going one at a time, An Engineering Marvel: Not really. True, when finished, it was constructed of wood and over 2,000 feet long. Add to that another 400 feet of wood for an approach bridge and you have almost a quarter of a mile of wooden bridge, promoted as the longest ever constructed in Vietnam. It would have been a marvel....if 800 feet of it had not fallen down and

⁶⁵ A complete history of the Liberty Bridge can be found in "Operation Swanee and The Ghost Boat at the Imaginary Liberty Bridge" by Sid Breman, Kindle Press, 2023.

washed away 37 days after it opened. I do not think it qualifies as a marvel.

Next, the bridge became a vital link in the supply chain between Danang and the Marine Base at An Hoa: Not really. The first bridge never opened again. First, there was a construction delay because of a lack of materials. While they were waiting, the approach bridge caught fire and was completely destroyed. A new approach bridge was completed in January 1968, but they still lack the materials.

While they were awaiting materials, the 1200-foot, southern section caught fire and was completely destroyed. The original Liberty Bridge was abandoned.

A new Liberty Bridge was designed and built about 100 yards upstream from the original site. The construction was wood and steel beams and was either 660 feet or 880 feet depending on which article you read (little is written about the second bridge). It opened in March 1969.

Finally, the construction required skill and courage because it was built, literally, under fire. This is true, very true, and as I stated earlier, the Seabees who worked there deserve praise for their dedication and bravery.

So why am I even bothering with this Misadventure? Because the men who crewed the LCM8-860 worked under the same conditions and no historian has ever

recognized their contributions. Photographic evidence indicates that the 860 acted as ferry for at least two years, probably longer. But, she has been left out of the history books until now. She was truly a Ghost Boat because no journalist or historian ever saw her. Sacrifice without remembrance is wasted.⁶⁶

I wish I knew what happened to the 860, but I could find no record of what happened to Her after she was the Thu Bon Ferry. Wherever She is, may She be sailing in fair winds and following seas.

Chapter: What you do not know, will eventually bite you.

Other than work, there was not much to do in Danang. Everything was “Off Limits” except the Officers’ and Enlisted Clubs, and there were no women allowed. So, yes you could go to the Club, but the only thing to do there was drink. For a lot of J.O.s that produced a little boredom, and “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop; idle lips are his mouthpiece.”⁶⁷

One of our number, a Lt.J.G., loved to play practical jokes. Not little ones. Big ones that gave him no end of laughter. I was personally the recipient of more than one of his jests. I will call him Jake, not his real name. It is just for reference.

⁶⁶ Attributed to many people. I have to list it here as Anon.

⁶⁷ “Proverbs 16:27 Living Bible (TLB)

One morning in October, I was finishing some paperwork and trying to plan out the rest of my day, when Jake ran into our office in a complete panic.

He blurted out “Sid! One of your boats is on fire at the Bridge Ramp. They need you.”

I was out the door with the keys to the Jeep.

The Bridge Ramp was about 100 yards long and always had a variety of craft offloading or unloading cargo. I kept looking for smoke as I weaved through the staging area. Vessels and cargo were so arranged that I could not see everything at once and had to be right in front of a vessel to see it.

At the end of the staging area, I saw two of my boats and I asked them which boat was on fire. They said they did not know of any boat on fire. After checking every boat or ship at the ramp, I went back to the office.

Jake was there, laughing his butt off.

Jake: “You should have seen the look on your face when I told you one of your boats was on fire! Oh, I wish I had a camera.” And he went on and on and on, to the point where I really considered physical retaliation.

I think retaliation was his goal. He probably wanted someone to pay him back so he could start a practical joke war. It was tempting, but I spent enough time looking over my shoulder for VC and checking for

booby traps. Every day the Grapevine carried a tale of some unfortunate sole who was not paying attention and ended up maimed or dead. I did not need nor want the additional stress of wondering what Jake was going to do next. So, I put retaliation out of my head.

Jake continued his reign of sick humor. Our problem was that he concentrated on those of us who were equal in rank, Lt.J.G. s, and there were only about 25 of us in the White Elephant. Sooner or later, someone would try to even the score, then all Hell would break loose.

Several weeks later, it was a busy morning in the office. About ten of us were individually working on various projects with everyone trying to finish up so we could get into the harbor where the real work happened. The boss was gone and the room quiet except for the sound of the yeomen's typing. I was deep in thought.

My concentration was broken when I heard a heavy, metal object hit the cement floor. I looked up and saw a pineapple grenade bouncing off the floor and arcing toward the center of the room, a thin wisp of smoke tracing its path.

We had all learned to react to emergency situations. Reflexively, I dove for the corner of the room just behind me, just in time for six more men to land on top of me. We were all holding our breath, then we heard Jake laughing. He had found the unloaded grenade in a street vendor's push cart and rigged it to smoke.

We chased him for the rest of the day, but he was quicker. It was probably best that we did not catch him because everyone wanted a piece of him. We were beyond upset, angry and out to retaliate. We were seeking revenge.

Eventually, we all calmed down, and a few days later we had forgiven Jake. I knew someone would eventually pay him back. We also learned the story about the grenade. Jake saw the device, along with several other war souvenirs, on a street vendor's cart. The explosive material had been removed and it was fitted with a homemade fuse made of wood. The fuse looked like a wine bottle cork and it could be rigged with a match and matchbook striker. That is what made it smoke. He paid a dollar for it. One of our guys kept it. Jake had gotten his money's worth.

A few weeks later, I was on the Lima watch and, at about 0200, Mortuary told me to investigate a report of an LCM6⁶⁸ boat sinking next to one of the APLs. It was not hard to find. Several men were working to try to stop the craft from going under. She was going down by the stern and I could tell the engine room was almost completely flooded. Several men were working to keep the boat from sinking. If the men could not save Her, this would be a major mess. Then I recognized the boat. It was Jake's.

⁶⁸ LCM6: A landing craft, smaller than an LCM8, 40 feet long, 14 feet wide, but weighs almost as much as the LCM8.

Jake had a rack and locker in the APL, and it took a little while to find him in the dark using only a flashlight. Six guys had already cursed me out for waking them. I shook Jake awake and told him his boat was sinking. He needed to be out there. He told me he would be right there.

Back at the site of the sinking Lady, the men had secured several lines to the stern and had a P500 pump on the APL deck but had not got it started. One of the men screamed, at full volume, “Stand Clear”, and everyone scattered. I heard the first line part.⁶⁹ It made a “crack” sound, like the report from a pistol. It was followed by six more and she was gone. Only the bow ramp remained above the water.

I was back beside Jake’s rack. I shook him awake.

He rolled over and looked at me and said, in a whisper: “Come on Sid, I didn’t fall for that the first time. I saw right through it. For Christ sake, go away.”

He rolled back to his sleeping position. I did not say anything. I just kept the flashlight beam centered on the back of his head. It probably took a full minute for it to sink in.

He rolled over again, eyes wide this time: “You weren’t kidding. Oh shit. Is it gone?” He was up and gone, barefooted and wearing only boxers.

⁶⁹ The rope broke.

I was the only officer on duty in the harbor and the Operations Duty Officer requested a preliminary report before I left the scene. I initially suspected the sinking was revenge for Jake's practical jokes. However, it turned out that an inexperienced seaman had been assigned the task of installing a new exhaust boot.⁷⁰ The boot had not been properly installed, and, no surprise, the boat sank.

It was Karma in all her glory, but she was not done.

Fall brought milder temperatures and the weather was not the biggest complaint we all had. There was one small window on the outside wall of our office and, combined with the double screen doors on our entrance, we would often get a refreshing morning breeze across our desks. We could also hear whatever activity was going on in the courtyard and other offices.

The loud "KABANG" of a 45 shattered the air. Reflexes kicked in and I was on the floor under my desk, revolver in hand. Then we heard excited shouts coming from the next office over. Someone shouted: "Get the ambulance!" More shouting, someone had been hit. We all stayed in place, every one of us armed and ready.

The boss made the move to the door and surveyed the activity. After a few minutes, he was able to determine that we were not under attack. Someone had accidentally discharged a 45 and someone was injured.

⁷⁰ Exhaust boot: A rubber seal around the exhaust pipe that keeps water from entering the engine room.

We stood down from “General Quarters”⁷¹ and went back to work. Someone would fill us in shortly.

The Operations Officer, a Navy Captain, came around later and told us what had happened. He was going from office to office to make sure that everyone knew what happened. An officer had been cleaning his 45 and, as prescribed by the safety manual, kept the muzzle pointed away from any people and towards the wall. Unfortunately, he did not realize the wall was made of plywood. The weapon accidentally went off and the bullet went through the wall and hit the man on the other side of the wall. The slug went through the man and he has been rushed to the hospital. The man was alive when he left the White Elephant. The Captain said he was waiting for word from the doctors.

Someone asked: “Who got shot?”

The Operations Officer said: “It was Jake.”

The official investigation ruled the incident an accident. I knew the J.O. who was holding the 45 when it went off, and I have no doubt in my mind it was, indeed, an accident.

Jake spent three months in the Danang Navy Hospital. For a combat wound that severe, a man would have been shipped back to the states. But Jake was not wounded in combat, so he had to recover in-county and

⁷¹ General Quarters: Ready to fight.

return to work when he was healed. Also, no Purple Heart for non-combat wounds.

Karma can be a real bitch in a misadventure.

Chapter: Duck!

It was always a good time for a civil war in South Vietnam and Danang was one of the favorite starting points. I was told it had something to do with the relative size of the Buddhist and Catholic populations. Whatever it was, it made for uncomfortable situations for us. The rules⁷² to follow, when a civil war started, were:

Rule 1: Stay where you are when the war starts. If you are at work, stay at work. If you are in your billet, stay in your billet.⁷³

Rule 2: Keep enough food and water in your billet to last one week. Most of the civil wars were over in three days.

Rule 3: Avoid shooting at the participants. We do not want to appear to favor one side over the other.

It was 0700⁷⁴ and I had just assumed the Lima watch and we were about a mile down river from the White

⁷² Yes, civil wars were frequent enough that we had rules for what to do when one started. We called them “pick-up wars”.

⁷³ It is amazing how many guys were in a Club when these wars started.

⁷⁴ I have spent many hours researching the actual date of this Misadventure. Most likely this “pick-up” war started during the April – May 1966 civil unrest in Danang. Also, when you work seven days a week, you lose track of what day it is.

Elephant. I was riding one of my Mike 8s, headed for the harbor.

The radio buzzed: “Lima this is Mortuary. Request you proceed to the White Elephant in an empty 8 boat, ASAP. “

I responded: “Be there in 15.”

Mortuary: “Roger, out.”

I took a seat on the port side of the con while the coxswain did a 180 in the middle of the river. We exchanged a few pleasantries about how we thought the day would go. The coxswain noted the aircraft traffic was unusually heavy this morning. We watch a pair of Spads⁷⁵ circling around the city.

“Sir, we got people on either side of the river and they do not look friendly,” the coxswain said.

I looked in both directions and saw about one hundred men on either side. Some were loading their rifles and others already had them pointed in our direction.

The coxswain screamed: “Duck!”

We hit the deck and both sides of the river opened fire on us. The coxswain hit the transmit button on the radio: “Mortuary, Lima, we are under fire!”

⁷⁵ Spad: Nickname for the Douglas A-1 Skyraider, mostly used by the South Vietnamese Air Force.

Mortuary: "Take cover!"

Coxswain: "NO SHIT!"

We would have laughed if we had not been so damn scared.

I could hear the slugs pinging off the steel bulkhead of the con. Thank God they were not using anything heavier than rifles.

The assault lasted about 30 seconds. I felt like my heart had stopped beating and was having trouble catching my breath. The coxswain was in the same condition. As soon as we were able, we checked on the other three crew members. They had all taken cover in the welldeck. No wounds, but, like us, shaken.

At the White Elephant, I went into the Ops Office and reported to the Operations Officer. He told me another civil war had just started and asked about the fire we had taken. I told him it looked like the opposing sides had taken the opportunity to exchange fire as we were passing between them and that no one was hit. Why? Who knows? They were probably bored, and they thought it would be fun to shoot at something.

The incident did not endear me to the Vietnamese military.

I was ordered to stand-by Bach Dang Pier to take on American civilians and FONAs, foreign nationals, and evacuate them to Tien Sha Ramp for truck transport to

Camp Tien Sha. I would be notified by radio when to depart. I was told to expect over 300 people. I thought it might get a little crowded.

An hour later we were still waiting. There was extraordinarily little traffic on the streets, neither vehicles nor foot. I also noticed that the normal number of aircraft were not flying. Even the two Spads had disappeared. The coxswain looked at me and said, "Somethings up."

"Yea," I said, "and I hope we're not part of it."

When the wind is blowing in the right direction, you can hear a piston driven aircraft engine coming from a couple of miles away. We both heard the Spads coming at the same time. The bow of our boat was pointing up-river. We could see the Bridge Ramp clearly, even though we were about a mile away. The aircraft were approaching from our right over the city.

The two propeller driven fighters roared over the White Elephant at about 100 feet, went straight across the river and over III MAR DIV HQ. These people were targeting Americans. I could clearly see that they were armed with rockets.

Maybe they had turned against the United States and we were now the enemy. If that was true, we were dangerously exposed and needed to get some cover. I picked up the radio handset.

Before I could say anything, the coxswain said “Sir, we have a problem!” He pointed upriver. The Spads had turned south after buzzing III MAR DIV HQ. About three miles out they did a 180 and started to dive.

If you spend all day and night riding boats, judging whether your craft is on a collision course with another vessel becomes instinctive. If the other vessel holds a steady bearing and has decreasing range, you know you are on a collision course. I was looking into the propeller of the lead airplane and he was headed straight for us.

It did not take the two of us more than three seconds to conclude that the Spads were making a run on us. The pilots had established a stable firing platform and now had our boat in their sights. It would take about 45 seconds for them to cover the three miles between us, but they would fire from, probably, a half mile away. So, we had 36 seconds to screw up their aim.

I clicked the transmit button: “Mortuary, Lima. We are getting underway, being targeted by aircraft.”

“Lima, Mortuary. Hold your position.”

I flinched. The coxswain flinched. The line handlers flinched. We were all programmed to follow orders.

We knew that running was useless. The planes were now in firing position and, any second, we expected to see the ignition flames from the rockets. The only question now was whether we would be killed or

maimed. Instinctively, I reached for my dog tags, hoping they would not be blown off my body.

When the Spads passed over our boat, they were low enough that I could see the rivets in the underside of the wings. If someone would have asked, I would have said they were ten feet above my head. But that was not possible. They had to be higher, maybe fifteen feet.⁷⁶

The wind generated by the low flying fighters almost knocked me over. I had been standing in front of the con and was knocked against the con bulkhead.

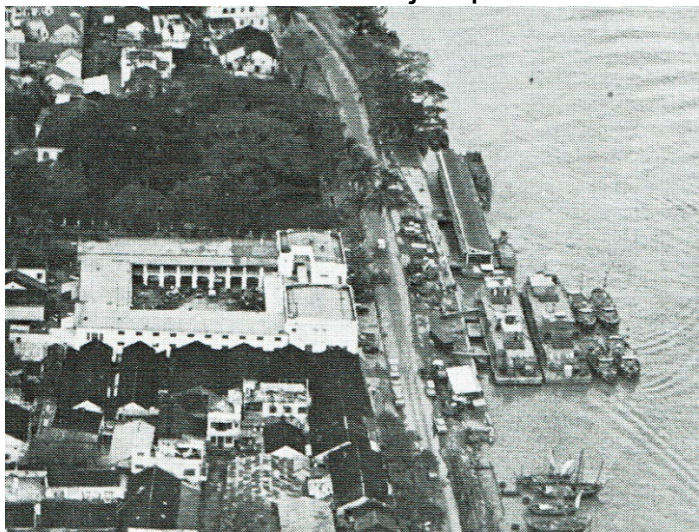
I turned and watched them climb. I could see all the way to Monkey Mountain where they did a 180.

The coxswain, who was also watching them, yelled: “They’re coming back!”

“Shut it down! Secure all lines. Let’s get the Fuck out of here!” I said.

⁷⁶ That was humor. I have no idea how high they were.

We ran across the street and jumped behind a stone



wall.

Figure 25 The White Elephant and Bach Dang Pier: All small craft were removed from the area around the Elephant and the Pier prior to April 1966 as a safety measure. On the day of this incident my LCM8 was the only boat at the pier.

We were all armed and ready (untrained, but ready).

We could see the Spads start their dive and we could see they were on the opposite side of the river. I decided to get back to the boat. The crew followed me. From our vantage point on the river, we could see they were headed for III MAR DIV HQ. As they got closer, it was hard to tell if their target was the Marine base or the ARVN base immediately south of the U.S.M.C. base.

All twelve rockets fired at the same time. A huge, black, and orange, fireball erupted in the Southeast corner of III MAR DIV. We were awe struck, eyes wide, mouths agape, with the realization that for some unknown

reason, that was not us. By the time I snapped back, the Spads were gone.

We evacuated a lot of people that day. We made two trips and were standing-by for a third trip when we were told there were no more evacuees. Fortunately, my relief lived on one of the APLs and I did not have to stay on watch for the rest of this civil war.

The next day, the scuttlebutt said that the rockets hit the Marine mess hall and two mess cooks were killed. I have never been able to confirm that fact.

Not all misadventures have a happy ending.

Chapter Beach Party!

NAVSUPACT operated all the time. It never shut down. Which meant we worked all the time. In a civilian operation, men would be paid overtime for any time over 40 hours a week, double time for weekends. Managers would not be limited to 40 hours but would have no requirement to work weekends unless necessary. But NAVSUPACT was not a civilian operation.

Everyone was expected to work every day for as long as was necessary. That was a nice theory, but in practice it did not work. People need time off, and I do not need to catalog all the reasons here. Within the Mike 8 Division, we had an informal system to ensure that everyone who needed time off, got it. It was

handled by the senior petty officers and worked very well.

But the boats were another matter. Machines also need time off. Not all preventive and curative maintenance could be performed while the craft is operating. In June, ⁷⁷ I set up a Preventive Maintenance program for the boats and the men. Each boat would be sidelined for two days. The first day and a half was devoted to working on the boat. We sidelined two boats at a time and the day and night crews worked together. When the boats started operating again the day and night crews switch positions.

The last half of the second day was time off for the men. That was their official time off..... for the month. They could spend it as they choose, but for anyone that wanted to relax, grill steaks and drink beer, we held a beach party at a secure beach located at the mouth of the harbor at the base of Monkey Mountain.

Early on, we discovered we needed a senior petty officer or officer in charge of these outings. Without going into details, supervision was required. This meant we had 15 beach parties a month that had to be covered by 6 people. It was not easy to handle this schedule.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Naval Forces Vietnam Monthly Historical Summary*” page III-10 “An effective preventive maintenance and repair program has resulted in a down-rate of only 6.4%.”

⁷⁸ This is not a joke. It was hard to take the time away for work.

There were always a lot of men at the beach, but it was never crowded. Women were not permitted. There were steaks, burgers and hot dogs and everything that went with them. And there was beer, lots, and lots of beer! Not everyone got drunk, but a lot of them did. I never heard anyone say they had a lousy time at the beach.

Historical Note: This was before the opening of the now famous “China Beach” which was located south of Monkey Mountain on the Ocean side of the land. My understanding is that Vietnamese women were permitted at China Beach. Today the area that was China Beach is now lined with luxury hotels. The beach at the base of Monkey Mountain is now a private beach for a resort. End Historical Note

At one beach party, I had a couple of beers and was making my rounds to check and see if everything was going smoothly. As I walked by our boat, I noticed that only the aft quarter of the boat was in the water. I saw the coxswain sitting in the con, probably drinking beer, and I said to him: “Hey Boats⁷⁹, the tide is running on you. You’re going to be out of the water pretty soon.”

He yelled back: “She’s comin in, Sir, not out. Been watchin her.”

Good enough. He was on the ball.

Two hours later, the boat was high and dry. The coxswain was asleep in the con and I realized he had

⁷⁹ All boatswains mates were called “Boats”.

had no idea which way the tide was going. My fault, not his. I should have known.

The other beach goers were leaving, and the second Mike wanted to know if they should stay. There was no reason for them to stay. I told them to leave. They did.

The rest of us, the day and night crews of the high and dry boat sat around the fire and just shot the breeze. The coxswain woke up and joined us. He apologized for not knowing which way the tide was going. He got a lot of humorous comments from the rest of the men, and I assured him it was an easy mistake to make at a beach party. We watched the sun set behind Danang. When it was dark, I suggested we get on the boat and close the ramp. Everyone agreed. A couple asked if they could bring the beer. I said yes. There were ten of us on the boat.

The coxswain would periodically check the water level with a flashlight and every time he would say: "Just a little more and we will be fine."

Then I would check it, and to myself say: "Bullshit."

I do not know what time it was when one of the crewmen came to me and told me something was coming down the hill towards the beach. It had been dark for over an hour. I wondered if it was still a "safe" beach at night. He and I made our way to the bow and climbed to the top of the ramp. We could hear people

coming down the side of the mountain. They were moving slowly, cautiously, and they were headed right towards us.

I told the crewman to get anyone who was reasonably sober and meet me in the lazarette. He showed up with three other men. He had told them what was up and that helped sober them up a little. I was sitting on the lazarette deck, it was not big enough to stand, working on an M1 Garand to make it operational.⁸⁰ When I had a clip in the M1 and two more clips in my pocket, I told the men to meet me on deck ASAP.

I had told the coxswain what was happening before I went to the lazarette. Now I told him the five of us were going to climb up on the ramp. If the people coming down the mountain side were still coming, I would yell “Now”, and start firing. When he heard me yell, he was to immediately (1) turn on the boat’s search light, (2) start the engines and (3) throw the engines into reverse at full throttle.

Was it wise of me to decide to fire on an unidentified target? No, but it would be pure stupid not to fire on an unidentified target advancing on your position.

With all five of us at the top of the ramp, in a whisper I said; ‘Everyone ready?’

“Yes,” came the hushed replies.

⁸⁰ Since the M1s were not needed on a regular basis, most crews just kept them stowed in a box in the lazarette. Not the smartest idea in a combat zone.

I screamed: “NOW!”

We all pulled the trigger eight times. Fire flew out of the muzzles and it was eerily reminiscent of the night at Fort Apache when we chased the teenagers away from the covered wagon. Except this time someone was probably going to shoot back.

I heard the empty metal clip eject from my M1, but before I could reach for another, the floodlight lit up the picnic area and two monkeys screamed and jumped thirty feet in the air.

We broke out into hysterical laughter and I realized the boat was moving backwards. The coxswain had gotten us afloat.

We were all still laughing when we got back to the con. The coxswain joined in the laughter, and then the radio interrupted our celebration.

“Lima, Mortuary. We have a report of gunfire at Monkey Mountain beach. Please investigate.”

Before the Lima watch officer could answer, I jumped in: Mortuary, November.⁸¹ I am in the area and will investigate.”

“November, Mortuary. “Roger. Be careful. Report ASAP.”

⁸¹ November: My personal call sign when not on Lima watch.

“Mortuary, November. Roger, out.”

The six of us cracked up again.

Some misadventures are just like a ride at Disney World; scares the hell out of you while it is happening and then the thrill at the end makes you laugh like an idiot.

Chapter: Happy New Year

The names of days had lost their meaning in Danang. There were no Mondays to be depressed about, no Wednesday hump day and no TGIF. Every day was just another day to be checked off your “Cheat Sheet” which started at 364 and went backwards to 0.

I need to add a little note here about the weather. The daily temperatures dropped a little in November and December. It was still warmer than summer in the Northeastern United States, but cool enough that it was almost pleasant. Then in late December it started to rain, and it rained until Tet, which is February 2. Occasionally, it would stop raining, but not for any extended period of time. It was impossible to get dry. My clothes always felt damp.

My orders came through in mid-December and I was able to check off 24 days all at once because my departure date was March 12, and not April 5 which

was one year to the day after my arrival. I did not ask why March 12 came up, did not care. It was 24 days earlier than I had anticipated.

As I walked to the office, on New Year's Eve morning, I was trying to decide how quickly I could duck out of the office and start celebrating. I was not celebrating the new year. I would be celebrating the fact that at midnight, I could say I am going home "This Year". It gave me a warm feeling. I was content and I stepped slowly and deliberately. In my mind's eye I was moving in slow motion, almost in a dream world. I snapped out of my daze when I got to the entrance to the White Elephant. I checked my watch. It was 0657.

I was opening one of the screen doors to the Lighterage Office when my boss charged at me with an excited look on his face. He grabbed my arm and spun me around. Speaking extremely fast and louder than necessary he said, "Go to your room! Pack a bag! Be prepared to be gone 30 days! Here's the keys to the jeep! Be back here in 15 minutes."

I started to say "What?", but only got half the word of my mouth,

"Go, God damn it. Move!" he screamed. For emphasis he pointed towards the front gate. I was off at a run.

Back at my room, I threw pants, shirts, t shirts, skivvies, socks, and covers⁸² into a soft side suitcase plus

⁸² Hats

toothbrush, razor, money, cigarettes, revolver, holster and ammo and I was gone. Could not have taken more than ten minutes.

As I approached the White Elephant, the Operations Officer, a Navy Captain, was standing in the middle of the street in front of the White Elephant and he was not wearing a cover.⁸³ When he saw me approaching, he started waving and pointing to an open parking space next to the main gate. It was the Admiral's parking space.

I pulled in and before I could get out, the Captain grabbed my suitcase out of the back of the Jeep and caught me by my left arm and hustled me over to the Chief of Staff's black and white 1966 Plymouth. He pushed me in the front door and tossed my bag in the backseat and yelled "Go, go!" to the driver. I cannot overemphasize how unusual this was. Under normal circumstances, I would not even speak to the Operations Officer unless he spoke to me first. Now he had just carried my suitcase. Something mighty strange going on here.

I looked at the driver. He was 18, maybe 19 years old and he looked like he was in a "Life or Death" race, trying to speed through the pedestrian crowded streets. I gave myself a few seconds to catch my breath. This

⁸³ Navy officer never go outside without a cover.

was more like something out of a movie rather than another day in Danang.

“Where are going?” I asked.

“The Air Base,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Do not know Sir. My instructions are to personally deliver you to Lt. Johns⁸⁴ at Hanger 33,” he said.

I decided not to ask him any further questions as I could see that both of our lives were dependent his ability to concentrate on not crashing into something.

As we approach the security gate at the Air Base, the guards raised the barrier and waved us through. They knew we were coming.

In the very few seconds I had had to think about what was happening since my Boss screamed at me, a whole lot of questions were collecting in the back of my head. Where was I going and why? More specifically, why me? Who was Lt Johns and what skills did I have that he would need for thirty days? Will there be a New Year’s Eve party where we are going?

At Hanger 33, the driver took his instructions literally. He was holding on to my right arm while carrying my bag as we looked for Lt. Johns. The Captain must have

⁸⁴ Johns: Not his real name.

scared the hell out of him, so I did not tell him he was being overly attentive.

It was easy to find Lt. Johns, as he was the only person, except me, wearing a Navy tropical khaki work uniform. He was talking, excitedly, to two Air Force officers when we walked up to him.

The driver diverted the Lt. s attention by tugging on his sleeve, not gently.

Lt. Johns looked at him and the driver said: “Are you Lt. Johns, Sir?”

“Yes,” Johns said.

Still holding onto my arm, the driver pushed me towards the Lt. and said: “I was instructed by the Captain to deliver this officer to you, Sir” And with that the driver was gone.

The Lt. skipped any introduction, pushed a clipboard into my chest and said: “Our men are over there.” Pointing in a direction behind me. “Take a roster and be ready to move quickly.”

And he was gone.

I looked behind me, and, about thirty yards away stood 100 men. They were standing in relaxed ranks, wearing, as was the custom in Danang, an assortment of Army and Marine green fatigues and Navy-blue work dungarees, but I knew they were all Navy. I walked half

the distance between me and them and called out:
“Where are my chiefs?”

Four men advanced to me. They saluted and greeted me by name, then they introduced themselves by last name and rate. I asked how they knew my name. They smiled and said: “By reputation. We’re cargo handlers.” These were the men who offloaded cargo into my boats. I knew they were good people, toughest job on the base. I hope my reputation with them was favorable.

“OK, Chiefs,” I said. “who wants to tell me what’s going on here?”

One of the chiefs spoke up: “We thought you were going to tell us. They rolled us out of the sack at 0400 and told us to pack our bags. Then they fed us, and here we are.”

I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes before 0800,” Less than an hour ago, I was trying to figure out when the party was going to start, and now, here I am.”

We, briefly, discussed some of the possibilities that lay ahead of us, but we knew we were guessing. Finally, I checked the clipboard Lt. Johns had handed me and there were lists of names. “Let’s do a roll call before we get moving,” I said.

I held out the clipboard and the chiefs divided up the lists. For the next ten minutes, I heard names called out followed by “Here, Yo, Yea”. All were present. Our complement was composed of 106 enlisted men and

two officers. Now the big question had to be answered. What the hell are we doing here?

Withing a half hour, two Hercules C-130s rolled up in front of us. The rear cargo ramps dropped down and Lt. Johns popped out of the lead airplane. Our company split into two groups and entered the planes. Lt Johns and I were the last to get aboard, once we were sure there were no stragglers. He told me to join him so he could fill me in on our mission.

I had flown in one cargo plane when I came up from Saigon to Danang on my second day In-country. The plane was equipped with the most uncomfortable, canvas-strap seats in which I had ever sat. But this plane did not have those uncomfortable seats. It did not have any seats at all.

The Crew Chief stuck his head out of a hatch in the forward bulkhead of the airplane and said: "We'll be taking off in one minute. Lay down and hold on."

The only thing to hold on to were steel ribs that ran the length of the aircraft. I discovered that uncomfortable canvas-strap seats were not the worst way to fly.

Once in the air, the Lt. and I found a relatively comfortable spot laying on a pile of duffle bags. He explained our mission.

The Saigon dock workers union called a strike one minute after midnight this morning. They figured the Americans would be too busy to do anything until after

the New Year holiday, and they only had to stay out for a few days before it started to hurt the U.S. Army. The Army called NavSupAct and asked for any cargo handlers we could spare. We were going to Saigon to move urgently need supplies. Our mission was critical and dangerous. Dangerous because we would be targeted by the union as scabs. We had to be prepared for hard work and surprise attacks.

When the Lt. had explained our mission, I had one more question. If this was a cargo handling mission, why was I selected as the second officer. I knew little about cargo handling. The answer was simple. The Brass planning the mission did not know if we would encounter a dockside or a lighterage operation. Either way, I would be useful because I had a lot of indirect cargo handling experience.⁸⁵

With that explanation out of the way, we did a quick S.W.O.T.⁸⁶ analysis, concentrating on our weaknesses, obstacles and threats, the major things that would stop or kill us.

When the Lt. was satisfied we were sufficiently ready to hit the ground running (literally, that is what he planned to do), he said he wanted to get some sleep because he had been up all night. I had had a good night's sleep, but a nap sounded like a good idea. Throughout

⁸⁵ This was a stretch, at best.

⁸⁶ The term SWOT was not used at this time, but the method was in common in the Navy. Look at your strengths, weaknesses, obstacles and threats and plan ahead.

my life, the Good Lord has blessed me with the ability to take a nap when the time and place were available.

In Saigon, we were loaded into six-by trucks⁸⁷ and taken to a Replacement Base,⁸⁸ and dropped off in front of a row of large field tents. Lt. Johns told me to have the men ready to move in 30 minutes. The men stowed their gear, answered nature's call and were ready to move. It was late morning, and everyone was sharing food from C Rations they had brought with them. They had not eaten since 0500. Someone gave me a can of C-Rat cookies. It was the only thing I had had to eat so far that day. I would have gladly shot someone for a cup of coffee.

Lt. Johns came back and got up in the bed of one of the six-bys. He told us to stand down till 1400. There was a mess hall close to our tents and he told us to get lunch and rest till 1400.

I lead the way to the mess hall and cleared the way for our men to go through the line. The mess hall staff looked at us quizzically because they could not tell what we were by the wide assortment of our uniforms. Even my tropical khaki work uniform was foreign to them.

⁸⁷ Six-by truck: A 6-ton, six wheel drive combat truck.

⁸⁸ Replacement Base: A base set up to receive and process arriving troops, equipped with transient housing and mess facilities.

I was standing at the beginning of the chow line making sure that everyone got in when one of the senior NCOs walked up to me and asked: What are you guys?"

I responded: "Navy."

"Which one?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Ours, the U.S. Navy, you know, Anchors Away, Go Navy," I said jokingly.

"You guys here to break the strike?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I'll put some ice cream out for your guys. Tell 'em it will be at the end of the line," he said.

The chiefs were standing with me and gave a "thumbs up".

"Pass the word," I said. They did.

I was with the chiefs, enjoying coffee and a smoke when Lt. Johns joined us. He sat his tray down but remained standing and addressed our men: "OK, cargo handlers, listen up! We are to stand down and rest today. Be prepared to move at 0700 tomorrow morning."

The announcement was greeted by cheers. These men rarely got a day off.

Someone called the chiefs away and I sat with Lt. Johns while he ate. He was concentrating on eating and

not talking. He had been up all night and probably had not eaten since dinner the day before. Then, one of the chiefs summoned me to their conversation.

The chiefs told me that the men wanted to know if they could have liberty in Saigon. Unlike Danang, Saigon and the surrounding area were open to U.S. military personnel. What did I think?

I thought it was a good idea, but it would be up to Lt. Johns. I would ask.

He had finished lunch and was relaxing with coffee. I put the idea to him, emphasizing that these men had gone months without liberty. He turned the idea over in his head a few times and asked what I thought. I said if we wanted these men to work hard for us, we needed to give them liberty when it is legal. He agreed.

I took one of the chiefs with me and went to the Battalion Admin Office to find out what we needed to get the men off the Base. They needed a typed Liberty Card, signed by their commanding officer. They gave me a supply of cards and access to several typewriters located in a separate tent. Apparently, this was not an uncommon situation.

Back with the men, I asked for volunteers who could type. I got two who said they could type and one who said he would try. With me that made four. We set up an assembly line. The chiefs spread the word to the men that they should enter the tent when a typist was

available. Have your I.D. card in hand. Sit down. Slowly, spell your name, using the phonetic alphabet, for the typist. Slowly, say your I.D. number. Go to the Lt. for a signature.

The process went a lot smoother than I thought it would. We were finished around 1700 and all the men had disappeared through the main gate. I typed a card for myself and asked the Lt. his information. He signed them and we were ready for Liberty. He suggested we go to the Officers' Club for a good meal. That sounded like a plan to me.

At the Club, we were invited to join the Base Commanding Officer for dinner. We had a pleasant dinner and had a few drinks. It was dark when we left. The Lt. told me he was beat and was calling it a night. I agreed I really did not have any desire to walk into a completely unknown situation in town. I could celebrate the new year by sleeping.

We had been assigned to a barracks that was nearly empty, only one other occupant, a 2nd Lt. who had just arrived In-Country. The building was the standard wooden rectangle with lots of screened windows. Two rows of cots lined both sides of the building. I enjoyed a good hot shower and was in bed by 2200. I put my revolver under my pillow.

The world exploded. The first blasts knocked me out of my cot, and I woke up pointing my revolver at the door. My cot was on its side and I was using it to protect my

body. Anyone who came through that door was going to get shot.

“Stand down Sid, “Lt. John said. “All the tracers are going straight up in the air and I do not think the Cong have an air force. Happy New Year.”

I looked out the window and saw hundreds, maybe thousands, of tracers streaking skyward. Turns out that I was not knocked out of my bunk by a blast. It was just my reflexive dive for cover. The 2nd Lt. was nowhere in sight and we never saw him again.

I straightened my cot and got a good night’s sleep.

Lt. Johns and I were eating breakfast in the Officers’ Mess the next morning at 0630, discussing how we would start the day. There were a lot of “if, then” situations we discussed because we still had no idea what kind of environment we would encounter, what equipment would be available and which cargo would receive priority. In the middle of all this, the Lt. was summoned to the office for a phone call.

I finished my meal and got a fresh cup of coffee. It was a pleasure to just sit still. When I would get the chance to do so again? Hard to tell. From my experience, growing up in Western Pennsylvania, I knew unions could dig their heels in and stay on strike for a long time. I also knew what happened to scabs. But this was different than back home because lives depended on a

continuous flow of goods. This was life or death, not dollars and cents.

My thoughts turned to our cargo handlers. Were they all hungover? Did they all make it back? How many would still be drunk this morning? Are any injured? We will soon have answers to all these questions, but I knew all would be well because God does love sailors.

The Lt. came back to the table and sat down. I could not tell if he was happy or sad, was going to laugh or cry. His face was a mixture of pleasure and pain. He stared vacantly across the room. I decided to wait and let him talk when he was ready.

After about three minutes, he explained what happened: "The strike is over. They settled early this morning. Apparently, a rumor went through the city that four battalions of Navy cargo handlers arrived in Saigon yesterday. Some rumors said 1,000 men, others said 2,000. The clubs were packed with them last night and they were bragging how they were here permanently and were taking over the port. Scared the hell out of the unions."⁸⁹

He paused. We looked at each other and busted out laughing. Our men, our Boatswains Mates, had taken

⁸⁹ My timeline for the Dockworkers Strike does not agree with articles published in The New York Times. *DOCK STRIKE ENDS AT SAIGON'S PORT; U.S. Army Settles Dispute After 5-Day Tie-Up*. The New York Times, December 31, 1966, page 3. I cannot reconcile this difference. I can only say I remember the days accurately.

the city by storm. Only a sailor could drink like he was ten men.

The flight back was quiet, with most of our crew falling asleep as soon as we boarded the plane. I hitched a ride back to the White Elephant and found the place virtually deserted except for the people on duty. It appeared I was one of the few people on the base who was not hung over.

The evening was spent writing a report on our accomplishments in Saigon. The document noted that the success of the mission was not due to our efforts, rather to our men's ability to live up to their reputations, that is, to party like drunken sailors. I am not sure my report ever made it further than my Boss.

Misadventures are often supplemented by alcohol.

Chapter: A Growing Disrespect for Authority

I was in the office early the next day because I wanted to get to the harbor and make the rounds of my boats. The Boss arrived at 0658 and was surprised to see me there before him. Nobody ever arrived before him. I handed him the report and fielded a few questions. I also asked if he wanted me to give the Operations Officer a verbal summary. Not necessary he said. I started to leave.

“Not yet,” he said. “You’ve done a good job and the Ops. Boss wants you on the J.O.s Operation Watch for January. Congratulation. You start tonight.”

The J.O.s Ops Watch had been started in December. Three of the most experienced Lt.J.G. s shared the watch bill, standing twelve hour watches every third day. This, of course, was in addition to your regular duties. The purpose of the watch was to give the Senior Operations Duty Officer a chance to sleep but be on call in an emergency. The J.O. Duty Officer was to handle anything that was not an emergency and wake the Senior Duty Officer if there was an emergency.

I understood the theory of using inexperienced brains, Lt.J.G.s, to let experience brains, Commanders and Captains, get some rest so they would be available to use those experienced brains for the war effort. I could also appreciate the fact that being assigned to this watch was a tremendous opportunity to develop and sharpen management, leadership, critical thinking, and decision-making skills. Anyone assigned to this watch, especially early on in its development, should be proud to have been chosen. It was an honor.

However, this watch sucked!

It is hard, nay impossible, to appreciate the true value of this theory when, in practice, it takes away a full night sleep every third day and you still must perform your regular duties.

And here, also, was another great example of “no good deed goes unpunished.” All good military organization are meritocracies. The people who can, do. Those who

cannot do, are shipped off to inventory yards and docks.

Of the ten J.O. Ops Watches I stood that January, three times I finished the watch and had not slept for 36 hours: four times I had not slept for 24 hours: and, three times I had an afternoon nap before assuming the watch. My experience was not unusual. No one who stood these watches felt like the Lone Ranger. It was just the way it was. Every one of us knew that we were far better off than the Marines in the jungle, much better off. We also knew that we were respected by the senior officers (that was a little comfort, not much, but a little). January passed very slowly.

I am not going to say my Boss and I did not get along. We hated each other. He thought I was an insubordinate, argumentative, sneaky, conniving J.O. who coddled his men. I thought he was capricious, arbitrary, unrealistic, overly demanding and thoroughly uninformed on how hard my men worked.

We were both right and wrong.

We also did things to irritate each other. I will not talk about the things he did. That would be unfair because my view is too biased to give an accurate description of his actions. I should note that this topic is being brought up now because my presence on the J.O. Ops watch gave me an opportunity to irritate him and maintain the appearance of innocents.

Earlier, I mentioned he was surprised to see me in the office before him when I returned from Saigon. No one ever got to the office before him and he greeted everyone as they entered the room. He would glance at his watch and make comments about anyone who arrived after 0700.

Part of his leadership image was tied up in being the first person in the office. That was easy to do given that everyone, except me, lived on the APL and it took an hour to an hour and a half to get to the White Elephant. I was the only one who lived in town and I timed my arrival for 0700 on the button.

I had noticed a little disturbance in his tone when he greeted me that morning but did not give it any further thought.

I was almost at the end of my first Ops Watch when I thought of something that had to be completed the next day. It was about 0630 and I walked to the Lighterage Office to find some papers in my desk. The office was just 30 feet away from the Operation Offices.

While I was making some notes, the Boss walked in. It was 0645. He noted my presence and asked what I was doing there so early. I told him I was just finishing up the Ops Watch and continued my work. After being relieved from Ops, I continued working for another hour before going to my room for some sleep. I got the distinct feeling he was not happy with my early arrival.

I decided to really test my theory that the Boss wanted to be the first person in the office every day. On both of my early arrivals, I had beat him by just a few minutes. On the second day, he had shifted his arrival time by a full fifteen minutes. If he shifted his time again for the third time, I would know my theory was correct.

The next morning, I arrived at 0600; scattered papers on my desk to give the appearance I had been working for a while and had a half cup of coffee sitting in plain sight. The Boss walked in at 0615.

“Good morning,” I said without looking up, faking concentration on the papers in front of me.

“What are you doing here so early?” he asked.

“The J.O. Watch Officers have a 0700 meeting with the Ops Boss, and I needed to get ready,” I said.

“I did not hear about any meeting,” he said.

“Probably because you are not on the duty roster,” I said and kept pretending to work.

At 0650, the office was still empty except for the two of us. I cleaned up my desk and was ready to leave for my pretend meeting when he stopped me.

His tone was not angry, just even and definite enough that I knew it was not a suggestion: “Sid, from now on you are not to be in this office before 0700. Is that understood?” He was expecting an argument from me and he was ready for it.

I looked at him, and I am sure I had a smile on my face, and said: “Aye, aye Sir”

Were my Boss and I being juvenile? Of course we were. We both had tough jobs and we both worked hard to do our jobs to the best of our ability. It would be naïve to think that there would be no friction between us. Our behavior gave us some relief from our frustration.

The J.O. Ops Watch dominated my life during January. It did not just take a half day out of three days. It was more like a day and a half out of three. My only salvation was my senior petty officers, their competence, and their dedication to duty. I was blessed in that area.

The Ops Watch was not one where you got to sit around with your finger in your ear and do nothing. Most of the time something was happening. Mortuary had two radios operating now and the Watch officer would often stand between them and listen to both conversations and make decisions while listening and thinking. As advertised, it did develop and sharpen management, leadership, critical thinking, and decision-making skills.

One of the big decisions was judging when a situation was dire enough to wake up the Operations Duty Officer who was always a Commander or Captain. That was not something any of us wanted to do lightly. Better to let the Old Man sleep, than awaken and feel his rath.

I only had one emergency where I had to wake up the Operations Duty Officer and, upon assessing the situation, he woke up the Operations Officer. That emergency involved a refrigerator barge loaded with frozen meat being towed to a port south of us. They hit rough weather and the civilian tug performing the tow, decided to cut the barge loose to save their boat. That left four sailors on a barge drifting towards Viet Cong held territory. We were able to remove them from Harm's Way, but it was close.

I had one other emergency where I was tempted to wake the Old Man but decided against it. A phone call came in around 2300 from the Army Provost Office stating they had two Navy officers in their jail and the Army wanted us to take charge of them. I asked for their names, ranks and the infraction for which they had been picked up. They were Lieutenants, not known to me or anyone else on duty, and they had been picked up in an Off-Limits establishment.

For an enlisted man, getting picked up in an "Off Limits" area was a minor charge. For an officer, and these were Lieutenants, it was a career changing offence. This was a serious situation. If I had been on the other end of the phone, I would want someone to check out the situation before notifying a senior officer who may not be as sympathetic or understanding as a junior officer who can imagine himself being in a similar situation.

I took the jeep and drove to the Provost's Jail. I figured if this was just a misunderstanding, I could spring the Lt.s and let them disappear into the night. If this was serious, like property damage, fist fights and bodily injury, I could always inform the Duty Officer after I picked them up.

At the Jail, I found two very pissed off Seabee Lieutenants who swore they had done nothing wrong. They had arrived in Danang and went to their assigned billet when the Army breaks down the door and arrested them. Then the Army 2nd Lt. started arguing with the Navy Lt.s.

I was a little skeptical. Something was out of place. This was either a major communication break-down or two officers who got caught in a whore house and were desperately trying to wiggle out of it.

In the middle of a situation that was starting to turn ugly, I heard my name called out from the back of the room.

“Hey, Mr. Breman!” the voice said.

I looked over my shoulder: “Chief! What the hell are you doing here?”

It was the Seabee Chief I had met during my first hour in Danang, the one who had asked me for assistance getting his men fed. We bumped into each other every month or so, but I had not seen him in a while.

Everyone else in the room got quiet.

The Chief and I shook hands and patted each other on the back like the old friends we were. He told me he had taken the two Lieutenants to their assigned quarters and the Army arrested them. Someone, somewhere, had screwed up.

Half laughing, I said: “Chief, you vouch for these two miscreants?”

“Absolutely!” the Chief said.

The 2nd Lt. shrugged his shoulders and tore up the papers in his hand. “You are free to go.’

In the Jeep, one of the Lieutenants said: “Chief! They told us you were good, but they did not let us know you were a miracle worker.

I never saw the Chief again. I hope he finished his tour and his career safely.

The last night on the operations watch was a cause for celebration. I planned the rest of the day off, catch up on my sleep and go to the Club. Even the outside world was cooperating not throwing any emergencies at me. This I could handle.

There were, however, three officers, a Lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander and Commander, who were planning a mission. They were working at, what passed for, a conference table in the largest of the three common rooms of the Operations Department. I had never seen them before. It was about 0400.

I was updating what would become my Morning Report and I had been working for 22 hours. I was not in a bad mood, but I could sure put one on in a hurry. I heard one of the three say “We need a junior officer too.” “Yes,” said another “but where are we going to get one at this hour. We leave at 0700.”

“There’s one.” It was the Lieutenant Commander. “Hey, J.G.”

I turned and looked at the officers.

“You are going to be part of this mission. We leave at 0700 from the III MarDiv helo pad,” he said.

I looked at him with my best disbelieving eyes. “Do I have a choice in this matter?” I said.

They were startled by my reaction. “Sure, I’ll give you a choice.” It was the Lieutenant Commander again.

“Count me out,” I said.

“What’s a matter? You chicken?” he said.

I was about ten feet away. I walked over and stood beside him, leaned down so that I was in his face. “Go Fuck yourself Commander.” Calmly, I straightened up and walked away.

The three officers did not address me further that morning. They left around 0600. I was relieved at 0700 and went straight to my room. I did not need the

aggravation of the Lighterage Office today. The Lt. Cdr. had gotten under my skin.

Once in my room, I rummaged through my dresser and found a tin of C-Rats peanut butter and some crackers. That was my breakfast. After one cracker and peanut butter, I needed something to drink. Searching my and my roommate's dresser, I found nothing. I pulled a beer from the case under my bed.

A common adage in Vietnam was that cold beer is better than warm beer, but warm beer is better than no beer at all (and it was healthier than drinking any water). Taking the first sip, I thought about what cold beer would taste like. I finished my breakfast and the beer.

The alcohol hit bottom and bounced up to my brain. The buzz was stronger than I had anticipated, but I do not usually drink beer on an empty stomach after staying awake for 27 hours. I grabbed another beer. I was aware that I needed a shower.

As I drank the second round, I stood motionless, staring out my window that faced the street. I could see the entrance to the USO, where a group of pimps were already buttonholing Marines. As my buzz intensified, I wondered: "What should a group of pimps be called? Gaggle? No, that was geese, and would be demeaning to goose and gander alike. How about a prick of pimps? That would fit, but maybe too crude. A pussy of pimps?"

No, no. wait... a dose of pimps, a clap of pimps, a dose of clap of pimps.”

I fell asleep, maybe while standing up, I do not remember. However, I was laying on my bunk when I was awakened by someone pounding on my door and loudly calling my name. My watch said 1030, my head had been split down the middle by an axe and my assailant left the weapon in place.

It was a struggle to get to being conscious, which did not take as much effort as being awake. “Whatdaya want?”

“Sir, the Chief of Staff wants to see you in his office ASAP.” said the voice on the other side of the door.

OK, now I was awake. “Give me a minute.”

“OK,” said the voice. “Please be quick about it. I have my orders.”

I hit the head and pulled on the uniform I had worn for 27 hours, all of which took about three minutes. Two 1st Class Petty Officers awaited me on the other side of the door. I considered asking them what this was all about, but decided it was a waste of breath, and I needed all the breath I could muster to keep my body functioning. I was still buzzed. I lit a cigarette.

The Chief of Staff’s office suite was located on the second floor of the White Elephant, overlooking the river. The Captain and I had never spoken to each

other, nor did we have reason to speak, until now. I waited in the antechamber where a 1st Class Yeoman was punishing an electric typewriter with heavy finger blows. I thought it must be his first experience with an electric machine.

Directly across from where I stood, was a 3'x4' mirror. It had probably been strategically placed in that location to give guests an opportunity to make themselves presentable to the Captain. Good idea, I thought, forewarned is forearmed, straighten up or get chewed out by the Captain. With that thought, I studied my image.

I needed a shave, and my hair was not combed. Thank God my hair was short. The blood being pumped out of my heart was now flowing directly through my eyes, so much so that there was no white visible. My uniform looked as if I had rolled in in a ball and stowed in under the hood of a Jeep. Additionally, I probably smelled like a goat, a goat who had just had two beers. I had seen roadkill that looked more alive and better than I did. This was not going to end well for me.

The yeoman stopped torturing the typewriter and ushered me into the inner office. I stood at attention in front of the Captain while he handed a folder to the yeoman and gave him instructions. When the yeoman left, he looked at me.

I think he winced when he saw me.

He got right to the point, no small talk. “Tell me about the conversation you had with the Lieutenant Commander this morning.”

I retold the incident as I remembered it, ending with “the Commander insulted me, and I felt it was within my rights to respond.”

I should have stopped before “the Commander insulted me.” Now he had me unprepared. I thought for a moment. Then I started: “Sir, during the 25 months I have served in the Navy, I have spent 19 of those months in the Combat Zone. During that time, I survived a helicopter crash in the South China Sea, been shot at by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Regulars many times, also taken fire, on more than one occasion, from the ARVNs and almost took a rocket from the Vietnamese Air Force. I have ducked friendly fire from the Marines and watched mortar rounds fall short within killing distance of my boat. I have fallen overboard twice and almost drowned on both occasions, driven my boat through real estate we did not own, and I have traveled more than once over ground that no other officer on this base has tread. I have walked through mine fields and sailed through mined channels and I was damned near fragged by an ARVN soldier who was fishing with a hand grenade. I have ridden an out-of-control, 200-ton surfboard loaded with 100 tons of high explosives through 25-foot waves, worked 4000 hours in the last 10 months. And I did not go through any of it because someone told me I had to. I did it because it was my

duty and I wanted to do a good job. . I believe I have earned the privilege of responding to an inference that I'm a chicken" I paused and took a breath.

The Captain held up his hand to stop me. He picked up the paper in front of him, ripped it in half and dropped it in the wastebasket. He said: "Son, go get some sleep."

I came to attention, did a right face, and opened the door to leave. Before I could exit, the Captain said: "and for God's sake, take a shower."

I was gone.⁹⁰

I had 40 days and a wake-up remaining in Vietnam.

Chapter: My Revolver⁹¹

I arrived in Danang in the middle of a civil war. This meant that no one was where they should have been and everyone was busy getting out of the way. I was more lost than anyone because I had no idea where I should be nor to whom I should report.

⁹⁰ I can only wish I had been that glib. The actual conversation, much less dramatic, went something like this "Sid, did you tell a Lieutenant Commander to Go Fuck himself?" "Yes Sir." I said. "Why?" the Captain asked. I said: "he told me I was going on a helo trip in the morning, and I have already survived one helo crash. I asked if I had a choice. He said Yes. I said No. He asked if I was chicken. I think I've earned the right to respond to that question. Sir." The Captain responded. "Yes, you have. But don't ever, I repeat, ever, do it again. Now go get some sleep, and, for God's sake, take a shower. I manufactured the above conversation because I just could not resist running through a partial litany of misadventure I had experienced, some detailed here, some not. Excluding my monologue, everything else is true.

⁹¹ I previously mentioned that I purchase a revolver from an Army 2Lt. my first night in Danang. This is the full story of my life with a revolver.

I made my way to Camp Tien Sha, across the river and downstream from NSA Headquarters, which is where I was told everyone would be sheltering. On my way, I noticed that everyone, American military personnel, was armed with some kind of weapon, mostly 45s and M1 Garands⁹². I decided I also needed one. It was late in the afternoon when I found the Armory.

“Sorry,” the clerk said “we are fresh out of weapons.”

“Everything?” I asked.

“Everything.” He said, and he went back to his chair and paperback.

With that search ended, I went back to trying to find someone to whom to report. Personnel told me I was assigned to Lighterage. There was a word I had never heard before, and had no idea what it meant. It also seemed that no one else had either. As I asked around for if anyone knew anyone from Lighterage, all I got were blank stares and dumb looks. One the advice of one individual, who took five seconds to consider my question, he said “Go to the Chiefs Club. That’s where all the officers are hanging out.”

The Chiefs Club was the only functioning club at Camp Tien Sha. Enlisted men of ranks below CPO could purchase warm beer in the evening, dispensed from two trashcans from various location around the base. Officers were invited guests at the Chiefs Club, an

⁹² I thought the M1 Garand had been retired from the U.S. Military, but not so. It was the standard issue for the Navy at the Naval Support Activity, Danang.

invitation that irritated the Chiefs to no end. However, it was preferable to having the officers take over the Club and throw the Chiefs out. There was still a little daylight left when I entered the Club.

The structure was a large Quonset Hut, filled with tables and chairs and a large bar located in the left rear of the building. The place was packed. I have no idea how many individuals were there, but the bar was four deep trying to get drinks and it appeared that every chair was taken. It took about twenty minutes to get to the bar and I ordered two beers because the wait was so long. With my beers in hand I looked around for a place to sit.

In the far corner I saw another J.O. sitting by himself and when he spotted me, he waved and pointed to an empty chair beside him. He was an Army 2 Lt. who was attached to a unit in the city had been evacuated to Tien Sha that morning. The information he had about what was happening was as spotty as mine. He had, however, been in Danang for a month and was able to give me a lot of information.

During our conversation, I mentioned that I had tried to draw a weapon from the Armory, but they said they had nothing to issue to me. For the first time in my life, I verbalized my need for a weapon. I was feeling, beyond insecure, threatened.

It was then my new friend offered to sell me a 38 revolver as he had two other weapons and really did not need the 38. I paid him \$35 on the spot and he threw in

a black, western-style holster and 18 rounds of ammunition. It was probably one of the best buys I ever made in my life.

The 2 Lt. and I spent the night in a temporary barracks with a couple hundred other people. It was not ideal, but beat sleeping outside, and I felt a lot safer with my revolver. I was firmly attached to it and would be for the rest of my tour in Danang.

In the morning we parted ways, but occasionally ran into each other and would take time to have a beer and catch up on what was happening in our worlds. I hope he made it home in one piece.

The 38 revolver became a part of my uniform. It was not a legal weapon, but no one ever challenged me on it. Much like carrying an umbrella, I always erred on the side of caution. I only went without it when I was 99.9% sure I did not need it. There were times, not many, I was caught without it and wish I had it, but I never had it with me and wished I had not worn it. I gave a feeling of security.

I also preferred it to the Colt 1911 45. First, my 38 was lighter and easier to carry.

It was more accurate than the 1911 because it had less kick. The 45 kicked so hard, you were never sure what the round would hit.

The 1911 45 was also notorious for killing its owner. So many men were killed or wounded by the 45, one General in WWII said we should give it to our enemy

and end the war sooner. In order to keep from shooting yourself with the 45, it was recommended that you should never have a round in the chamber and always have the safety "ON". All those motions in a tense situation would take time. You could be dead before you pulled the trigger. My revolver could be made safe simply by leaving an empty chamber where the hammer rested. It a "pull and fire" weapon. I turned down the offer of a 45.

The black western-style holster was right-handed and I am left-handed. This would occasionally make me nervous when the situation was tense. I define a tense situation to be one where I judged that a firefight was about to break out and I would be in the line of fire. In those instances, I wanted my revolver to be as close to my left hand as possible. At these times, I would take the holster off my waist, re-buckle it and sling it over my shoulder. It looked a little like I was being a hot-dog, but I really did not give too shits how it looked. I wanted my revolver to be as ready as possible.

I was only called on my "gun sling" once, and it was in the thick of another civil war. Like all the Vietnamese civil wars, this one started without warning. I was off duty and happily hiding in my billet at 23 Doc Lap. Our standing orders were that when a civil disturbance, as they were called by senior management, started, we were to shelter in place. That meant if you were in your room, stay there. If you were on duty, stay there. This meant you either had the duration of the civil war off

duty or you were going to work the whole time. I have been drawing “work the whole time” all the time. Finally, my timing was right and I was caught in my room. I was enjoying a mid-morning nap, when someone knocked on my door.

It was our division yeoman. The boss needed me to coordinate our LCM8s to evacuate civilians and non-essential military personnel from the city (this is what I got for doing such a good job before). I dressed in fatigues and, given that I had been taught to dress like a Marine by Marines (Flight School and Operation Swanee), I looked like Marine. Not everyone looked that way in Navy issue fatigues, but I did not dress this way to be different. I dressed that way because that was the way I had been taught. The only difference was my cover, which had a Navy emblem imprinted on the front as opposed to the Marine Corps globe and anchor.

Back at the White Elephant, my boss told me two LCM8s were on the way to Bach Dang Pier. He said “You know the drill. Take care of it. And don’t get shot at this time.” I noticed he was wearing his 45, something he almost never did (he was inside the Elephant most of the time).

As I left the office, I took off my holster and slung it over my right shoulder, being mindful of my previous experience. If I got shot at this time, dammit, I was going to shoot back.

Outside, people were moving in several different direction, with a lot of them being civilians heading to Bach Dang Pier, probably one hundred or more were already lined-up. My two LCM8s were idling about fifty yards off the Pier waiting for me to wave them in. I was standing in front of the Elephant, just taking in the situation.

“Hey John Wayne!” The voice was gruff and sounded pissed off. I only half heard it and ignored it, assuming it was directed at someone else. Then there was a second calling.

“Hey you! I’m talking to you, John Wayne!” This time it was louder and definitely aimed in my direction. I turned to see a Marine Colonel.

“Yeah you, John Wayne!” The Colonel, who was about my size, strode forward until his face was six inches from mine.

“Mister, who do you think you are, John Wayne?” he asked.

I was standing in stunned silence, not quite grasping his inference or problem. Before I could answer. The expression on his face changed from pissed off to puzzled.

“You’re not a Marine. You’re Navy. I don’t expect much more out of you people.” With that he wheeled and left.

I think I received a complement and an insult in the same sentence.

Note: The evacuation went without incident. The civil war was over the next day. Back to My Revolver.

Being armed in a city like Danang was a little like living in the Old West.⁹³ Almost everyone carried a gun for self-defense. If you were not carrying one, you would be an easy target for anyone who meant you harm. You may not have to use your gun, as its presents cautioned others to beware. I have no idea how many time my revolver saved me because you cannot count the times someone did not attack you. I suspect it was more than a few times. However, there was one instance where I know it saved me.

February, 1967 was a pleasant surprise. For the first time since arriving in Vietnam, the weather was pleasant. The wet monsoon⁹⁴ was over and we were starting to dry out. Being off the Operations Watch was akin to going from working two full-time jobs to just one. I felt like I had time to spare.

The Lima Watch had given me a lot of time to interact with my men, but I had been taken off that watch in November and, along with several other Lt.J.G. s from various divisions assigned to be the Duty Officer for convoys of LCU's hauling cargo to Dong Ha. The round trip to Dong Ha always took at least two days. That

⁹³ I have no idea what the real Old West was like. I only know the way it was portrayed in the movies.

⁹⁴ Monsoon: A seasonal prevailing wind in the region of South and Southeast Asia. Too many people think a monsoon is a storm, like a hurricane or typhoon. It is not. It is a seasonal wind.

change, along with a month as the Junior Operations Watch Officer had decreased the amount of time I had to spend with my men. I was playing “catch up” by spending whole days in the harbor moving from boat to boat, getting a feel for what was going right and wrong in my division.

There was one complaint that I heard from several men. Their standing orders were to take their assignments from headquarters or Lima. A normal assignment would be to go alongside a designated ship and receive a load of cargo, then move the cargo to a designated off-load site and repeat the process. Lately, there were having their assignments changed by one Lt. J.G., a supply officer who knew he was not supposed to do that. He knew that only Mortuary or Lima could assign boats. I told the men I would look into it.

I asked around and discovered this Lt.J.G. had a reputation as a disagreeable person. He was doing things his way and to hell with what anyone else thought. One officer, who had a problem with him, tried to take the matter to the next level and was told to deal with it on his own. I suspected I would get the same response from my boss. However, I had to do something because my men were being unfairly put in the middle when they were assigned to one ship, but a commissioned officer assigned them to another. I was also getting complaints from Mortuary and Lima.

I placed myself on one of my boats, let's say it was the 517, that had just been assigned to a ship. It was a

pleasant morning, temperatures in the low 80s and low humidity, a mild breeze coming out of the southeast. It took us about 45 minutes to reach the assigned ship. We were tying up alongside when the radio crackled to life.

“517 you are to move to the Dakota Liberty⁹⁵. Confirm your orders.” a voice said.

I recognized the voice. It was Mr. Disagreeable himself.

I picked up the Mic and pressed the transmit button. “On whose orders?” I said.

“You get your ass over here and you’ll find out whose orders!” the voice said.

“Roger, on the way.” I said.

We tied up along side the Dakota Liberty and a Jacob’s Ladder was immediately dropped from the ship.

As Mr. Disagreeable made his way down the ladder he asked “Who’s the smartass who answered my call?”

I was standing on the stern sheet as he came aboard and turned to face me. We were about 15 feet apart. I was totally unprepared for what came next.

Mr. Disagreeable started by spewing a stream of obscenities, oaths and profanities about me and anyone close to me. He told me, leaving no room for

⁹⁵ Not the name of a real ship. It is noteworthy that a lot of the ships that brought our cargo were Liberty and Victory ships from WWII.

misinterpretation, that he was in charge and he would assign the boats.

I waited for him to take a breath.

“No, you are not in charge, and you will not assign boats.” I said calmly.

I could see his face turning red (this was a sick puppy). Then he said “You son-of-a-bitch!”, and he reach for his 45.

I held up my left hand in a “stop it” motion and said “Is the safety off? Do you have a round in the chamber? If not, I will have six in you before you pull the trigger once.”

The world literally froze in that moment.

He started mumbling to himself, turned and disappeared up the ladder.

My feet were welded to the deck, and I thought I was going to have trouble controlling my bladder. My coxswain was standing about three feet to my right, and inside the protective steel of the boat’s conn.

“That was pure balls.” the coxswain said.

“No, that wasn’t balls. Balls was knowing my revolver was unloaded.” I said.

My men were never bothered by Mr. Disagreeable again. I am sure he would have shot me if I had not been armed.

Chapter: Exiting on a High Note

My days in Danang were coming to an end, and every day when I woke up and crossed another day off my Cheat Sheet, I would get an electric tingle as I scratched off another day. With 12 days remaining, I was only two days away from going into single digits⁹⁶. But I still had 12 days to go, and I there were things I wanted to do.

For one thing, take another R&R⁹⁷

I had eight days and a wake-up when I boarded a plane for Tokyo. For me, it was a familiar destination, one where I could relax. I stayed in the BOQ at Yokosuka and just enjoyed walking in a secure environment. The most exciting thing I did was call Pat. More on that later.

I had three days and a wake-up when my return flight to Danang landed. As the wheels touched down, the P.A. system crackled to life and we all heard the a message that went something like this: “All personnel report immediately your commands. Danang Airbase attacked by rocket fire within the last twelve hours. Again, report immediately to your command.”

My first thought was that Danang was under a general attack and I would not be leaving on time. I remembered the stories of what happened to the

⁹⁶ It may not sound like a thrill to you, but it was my entertainment for the day.

⁹⁷ Rest and Relaxation, five days of time off in a in a secure environment, popular destinations were Bangkok, Hong Kong and Tokyo.

French after Dien Bien Phu, and how they were overrun by the Viet Min. I immediately regretted not having my revolver. Back at the Elephant, my fears were quickly put to rest by the staff in the Operations Office. I was glad I had made contacts there. There was no general attack. The rockets were an isolated incident.

At the Lighterage office, my boss welcomed me back and told me my replacement had arrived. My job during the time I had left was to transfer as much knowledge and information as I could to him. Although it was unsaid between us, we were both happy we would soon part ways.

“When is he arriving?” I asked.

“Any minute now. Try not to warp his mind.” he said, but only half joking.

Our office was large enough to easily hold fifteen people, seated at desks. On this morning, there were just two of us, me and the boss. I was catching up on the latest news by reading the last seven issues of *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, our only regular information source about the Land of the Big PX.⁹⁸ My boss was deep into some paperwork. It was quiet.

The serenity of the moment was shattered by a loud voice, “Holy Shit! Sid Breman!”

⁹⁸ Home, the United States of America.

I looked up. It was Billy Gee⁹⁹, a section mate and drinking buddy from OCS. “Billy! What the hell are you doing here?”

“According to the man upstairs, I’m the new LCM8 Officer.” he said.

“Well, I’m the old LCM8 Officer.” I said.

“This is going to work out just fine, cause I know we speak the same language. Tell me, what the hell is an LCM8?” he said.

All the while, we are shaking hands, doing a half embrace, and slapping each other on the back.

“Hey!” the boss called at about three-quarters volume. “Do you two know each other?”

I looked over at the boss. “We were in the same section at OCS, and we were drinking buddies. Closed up most to the bars in Newport at one time or another.” I said.

Still sitting at his desk, the boss buried his face in his hands and shook his head. I think I heard him say “Shit, what are the fucking odds of this?”

We made the most of the next three days, touring all the working areas of NSA and meeting with most of the men in the division. We spent a lot of time talking with the senior petty officers and I was glad to see that they were getting along. It helped a lot that Billy Gee and I

⁹⁹ Not his real name.

were old friends. When I left, I felt the LCM8 Division was in good hands.

At the airport that last day, standing in line to board the plane, a young Marine verbalized what all of us were thinking. “What if the plane crashes?” he wondered aloud.

It did not.

Chapter: The Other Half of My Life, Pat.

I need to go back to the beginning. All of the above adventures and misadventures are insignificant when they are compared to my life with Pat.

Our first date coincided with the beginning of my Navy experience. The day was December 23, 1963 when I mailed my application to OCS, and we had our first date.

In the early chapters of this work, I told you about the beginning, end and rekindling of my relationship with Pat. What follows is an enhancement, expansion and continuation of that adventure.

June 1964

College was done for me. I was finished with finals forever¹⁰⁰ I had my degree and had enough money to take the summer off and relax. I did not know it, but it would be forty-three years before I could do that again.

¹⁰⁰ Sometimes it is a good thing that you do not know how wrong you are.

Pat was home for the summer. She would finish her degree in June of 1965.

We did not see each other every day, but we talked on the phone every day, sometimes twice. Sometimes it would be an afternoon date to some local event. One that stands out in my mind was a trip to an antique car rally near Pittsburgh. We both saw cars that we had only seen in books.¹⁰¹ Other times would be a long walk in a park, or just spreading a blanket in her back yard and reading a book. Those were beautiful days.

Evening dates could be a movie, but, even though we were both adults, we were never out late. I generally had her home by eleven.

Her Father and Mother knew me or knew of me. More likely, they knew my parents. I knew I had gotten the nod of approval when I was invited to spend a Sunday aboard her Father's 26-foot Trojan cruiser on the Allegheny River. We spent several Sundays that way.

Pat and I had been born and raised in the same small Western Pennsylvania town, Leechburg in Armstrong County, and we both graduated from Leechburg High School. I was in the Class of '58, she was in the Class of '61. It was a small town, and everyone knew everybody else. The town was 5,000 people strong with an economy supported by steel mills, foundries and coal mines. Leechburg, PA. had one shopping district,

¹⁰¹ A lot of girls would not view a car rally as an ideal date, but Pat's father was a Pontiac, Cadillac, GMC dealer. Pat had an interest in cars.

called Market Street. Main Street ran parallel to Market Street and was mostly residential. The town was very much alive during the 1960s. The Rust Belt disease had not yet infected our hometown.

Our dating relationship was not exclusive, nor had we discussed the topic. I was, however, trying to monopolize the prime date days and nights, mainly by securing the next date before ending the one in progress. At the end of one Sunday we had spent boating with her parents, I ask her if we could go to a movie on Wednesday.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m busy Wednesday.”

I was not dumb enough to ask her what she would be doing. Instead, I asked if we could go out Thursday. She said yes. An obstacle had been cleared. A NO for Thursday would have told me that the relationship was in trouble. The YES said it was still alive.

“I’ll call you about Thursday,” I said, collected my “goodnight kiss” and made sure she was safely inside before I left.

By Wednesday, I had a plan. First, I had to call her at the right time. I knew she always ran late and her date was probably picking her up at 6:00 o’clock, so I called her at 5:30. I was able to keep her on the phone for a good twenty minutes, insuring she would be very late. We were set for Thursday, and I finally ended the call. I put on my white ducks, white shirt, tie, and my madras

jacket. These were not Wednesday night threads. These were Saturday night special occasion clothes.

I parked my car on Market Street, knowing there was a 90% chance she and her date would have to pass by my location. I was standing at the front of my car when I saw them coming and I gave her a big smile and a wave as they passed by. She smiled and nodded her head. My mission was accomplished. At home, I changed clothes and watched a little TV with my parents. I was staying home for the evening.

On Thursday, the topic of Wednesday never came up. I did, however, find out later that she had spent a lot of time that night wondering what I was doing; mission accomplished.

August 20, 1964 came very quickly that year. It was the last night we had together and there were a lot of words unsaid that night. I realized that I had no idea when I would see her again. It had been a beautiful summer, unmatched by any previous relationship I had experienced. We finally said our final parting words shortly after midnight. We promised our relationship would continue by mail and I left with "I'll see you soon."

As I mentioned earlier, most of my generation believed that long distance relationships were baked into our lives. We both had relatives who had been called away by World War II and Korea. Many of our friends enlisted in the service and their girlfriends, fiancées and wives remained at home.

Pat's Father had been drafted into the Army shortly after she was born and did not return home permanently until 1947. He had been wounded in the final days of fighting in Germany and spent the next two years in military hospitals. He lost the use of his right arm to machine gun fire.

I was not facing anything as dire as her Father, we would just have to endure the separation. Thankfully, I was not going into a hot war zone. At least, that was the delusion under which I lived.

I squeezed letters into the few free minutes allotted to us in Navy OCS, and Pat matched me letter for letter, sometime two for one. Receiving mail when you were in the service was a big deal. When the mail clerk called out your name, a genuine thrill that shot through your body¹⁰². Always good to get mail....almost always.

In 1953, Ferlin Husky and Jean Shepard popularized a song titled "A Dear John Letter"¹⁰³. It told a story of love lost while serving in the military. Insult followed the injury when "John" found out his girlfriend was marrying his brother, and just to rub it in, she wanted her picture back so she could give it to his brother (anyone want to guess what happened to that picture). I bet the police

¹⁰² The US Post Office was everyone's primary means of communication at that time. Yes, there were phones, but Long Distance calls were expensive and reserved for special, good or bad, occasions.

¹⁰³ "A Dear John Letter" by Billy Barton, Fuzzy Owen and Lewis Talley and sung by Ferlin Husky and Jean Shepard..

got a 273D¹⁰⁴ call on the Thanksgiving when John returned from Korea.¹⁰⁵

It was early October when the flack started hitting the targets. We called them “Dear Johns”, but it was also referred to as “getting shot down”. You would be flying along with clear skies and fair weather. The next thing you know, the whole thing blows up in your face. Some letters ended long term relationship, some engagements, we even heard of one guy in another company whose wife sold their house and disappeared. Some were short term friendships. It did not matter. Under the circumstances, they all hurt.

The first Dear John received by a man in our Section was announced with loud cursing, screaming and references questioning the legitimacy of his, now ex, girlfriend. He also cast doubt on her attention to personal hygiene, and her membership in the race of human beings. He posted the letter on the Section bulletin board for all to read. And so it had begun with more to follow.

Mine arrived in mid-October. She said she wanted us to remain friends, but that was all our relationship would be. She wished me good luck in the Navy and hoped I would be safe with the Vietnam War getting hotter.

¹⁰⁴ 273D: Domestic Violence.

¹⁰⁵ A situation that was not out of the realm of possibility. My great grandmother divorced her husband and married his younger brother.

I was stunned.

Later, my bunkmate came in and said we had three minutes to line up for chow. I told him I was not feeling well and to tell the Section Leader¹⁰⁶ I was going to Sick Bay. I did not go. Rather, I ate the remaining snacks I had hidden in my locker and got an early start on the evening's homework. There was little else I could do. OCS was college with military discipline, and you had to keep going or get run over.

Many of the guys in our section posted their letters on the Section bulletin board. I did not. The letter was too personal for public display. I tried several times to complete a reply, but never did. There was not anything to say. But I cannot say I forgot about it.

The next week, we received our Duty Request Form". It was a simple, one-page document that listed all the choices you had for your first duty station. You could choose the Ocean where you would serve, Atlantic or Pacific. And you could choose the size ship on which you would serve, Large or Small Combatant.

From the time I was a child, I had always seen myself on a destroyer (small combatant) in the Atlantic, which was what I was prepared to select. For a reason which I still suspect was related to my Dear John letter, perhaps a desire to get as far away as possible, I checked large combatant, Pacific, and that is what I got.

¹⁰⁶ Section Leader: Each company had four sections. Each section had one cadet appointed as the person in charge of the section.

Those ten seconds probably altered the direction of the rest of my life.

I completed OCS, was commissioned an Ensign and was home for Christmas and discovered an invitation to a classmate's wedding. Great chance to see a lot of people.

It was a big wedding, one of those events where the whole town showed up.¹⁰⁷ At the beginning of the evening, I was in line to get a drink, when a guy who graduated in '56 was behind me and struck up a conversation. After we had our beverages, our conversation continued. He was not a good friend. Barely knew him and do not think I had ever talked with him before. While we were talking, a third man, Class of '61 joined us. He was another person with whom I had never exchanged more than pleasantries of the day. However, he joined our discussion. I was struck, at that time, by the interest these men took in my well-being and what I was doing. I thought it strange but assigned no importance to it at the time.

We had been talking a while when I glanced across the banquet hall and saw Pat and her parents enter. I would have loved to go and talk to her. But, no, better to stay away. I had talked to her Father a couple days before at his place of business, as we had gotten to know each

¹⁰⁷ OK, that is an exaggeration, but it did seem like it.

other well over the previous summer. I went in uniform. He appreciated my visit.

My conversation with the two other wedding guests came to an end and I moved on to mingle. I thought to myself that those two had been awfully friendly. It was only later, years later, that I learned the first was the guy Pat was currently dating. The second was her boyfriend from high school who was trying to get back with her. I am still amazed at the brazen depth of insincerity and duplicity displayed by these two individuals (assholes).

Fast forward to March 24, 1965.

Our long-distance relationship was reestablished that March 24, 1965, when I penned my reply to Pat's Dear John. I knew it would take at least five days for it to reach her. For clarity, I will repeat the paragraphs I wrote earlier about this event.

"Then I sat down and wrote a letter.

I had not answered Pat's "Dear John" letter. I had no idea what to say. But now I wanted to let her know how much she meant to me. After seeing just how easy it was to die in this war, I at least wanted her to know how I felt. I knew it would not change anything, especially with me halfway around the world, but at this time, this day, this moment, I needed to write to her. My best information said that it took 5 days for a letter to go from the ship to the States and five days for a letter to come

from the States to the ship, under the best possible conditions. Ships movements could make that longer.

It was in the mail that night.

Two days later, I received my first mail while aboard the USS Oklahoma City. Our letters were placed on our desks by the stewards. I figured it was from my Mother.

I glanced at my desk across the room and, even from 10 feet away I could tell it was not my Mother's handwriting. It was Pat's very distinctive script. There was no way that she could be responding to my letter. Mine was probably on an airplane somewhere over the Pacific heading east.

The letter told me that she had run into my Mother and asked for my address. She included some news about her activities and said she would like to hear from me.

That night I wrote to her again.

Receiving a letter from Pat and, more importantly, starting to reestablish our relationship was an electrifying jolt to my emotional state after the crash. The world was a happy place again.

Without realizing it, I had arrived at a point where my life now had two distinct components: Pat and the United States Navy. For the foreseeable future, the Navy was happening in real time, the now, see it, feel it, smell it, while Pat and I were separated by twelve thousand miles with a ten-day mail lag. I could live with that."

Now we see a bunch of misadventures come together and form a whole new adventure.

By early September we had exchanged a lot of letters. I was convinced I wanted to ask her to marry me, but there were a lot of problems to overcome. Just getting on the same continent was one of them. My application to Flight School could solve that one and if it did, I needed to be ready. I needed to buy a ring.

I still had all the reimbursement money from the helicopter crash tucked in my safe. I had added to it nicely since I had replaced my uniforms. It was more money than I had ever put together in my life and I was not going to just frit it away.

I went to the man who was probably my best friend on the ship, the Marine 1st Lt. who was my co-conspirator in applying for Flight School. I had heard that it was good luck to take your best friend with you to buy a wedding ring. We went to the exchange one afternoon.

It was not hard. I wanted the biggest diamond I could get for the money I had. We zeroed in on one quickly. To me it looked exactly like what I thought an engagement ring should look¹⁰⁸.

When I arrived home on my way to Pensacola, I put the ring in my top dresser drawer to await the day I would

¹⁰⁸ I did not have the slightest idea what an engagement ring should look like.

ask Pat to be my wife. Unfortunately, the conditions were never right during the time I was in the States and, when I found out I was headed back to the War Zone. I did not feel it would be fair to her with so much uncertainty ahead of us.

I regretted my hesitation immediately after leaving her on my last day home and I had a long flight ahead of me to think about it. I also thought about it for several weeks after arriving in Danang. It was the only thing on my mind when I was not otherwise trying to keep from being shot.

Author's Note:

Recall that in May of 1966 all the officers of the Lighterage Division were fired and reassigned to places other than Danang because they were all involved in drunken debauchery¹⁰⁹ at a NavSupAct location. I was excluded from the reassignment because I had been on the Lima Watch. With no one to relieve me, I spent the best part of three days on that watch.

End Author's Note.

The summary reassignment of the entire officer corps, except me, of the Lighterage Division and my ascension to the position of LCM8 Officer, made me realize that situations and people could be altered drastically in a war zone. My fellow officers could have just as easily

¹⁰⁹ Drunken Debauchery: I am not knocking the practice. I am just saying that is what happened.

been killed by a booby trap. I wanted Pat to know that if I made it out of this war, I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. If I did not make it out, I still wanted her to know.

And so, I sat down and wrote another letter. It was not a short letter, it took a couple of days to write and the exact words of that letter are still very personal, but the essence was “Pat, I love you. Will you marry me?”

I counted the days. At five days I figured she had the letter. Could she possibly have written an answer and got it in the mail the same day. Not realistic, but I could hope. Her reply came twelve days after I had sent my proposal. Like mine, not a short letter, but the essence was “You have to ask my parents.”

OK, it was not what I had been expecting. It also was not a refusal. I should have known to ask her parents first. But how embarrassing would it be to ask for her hand and they say yes and then she says no. I rationalized that I would have to ask her first so that she could tell me to ask her parents, and if they said yes then she would say yes. But what if they said NO?

I wrote another long letter, and it took even longer than the first letter. Again, only the essence, which was “May I have your permission to marry your daughter?” I was glad that I had the chance to get to know them and they me during the Summer of 1964. Of course, that could work against me. I got the letter off but could not get it out of my mind.

Fifteen days later, I counted them, fifteen days, I received their reply. It was late afternoon when it arrived, and I tucked it into my pocket and disappeared. Back in my room, I opened the letter and was prepared for the worst. It was a long letter. At the end of it, they said “Yes, you may marry our daughter.”

I was now a full month into proposing marriage to Pat and I was still at the starting line.

I wrote another letter, not as long as the first, but it was long. Of course, the essence was “Will you marry me? By the way, your parents said yes.”

Twelve days later, I received her answer. She said “Yes.”

Words are not powerful enough to describe my feelings at that moment. However, a little later I realized I had proposed marriage, but had not really thought what my next steps would be if she said yes. Now what do I do? Back to the pen and paper. That night I asked her how long she wanted to be engaged before we were married.

I received her response in another twelve days. She wanted to have at least a six-month engagement. After giving that timeline due consideration, I wrote back: “That’s fine with me.”

So far, my proposal has taken two months and, we were not finished. We needed to be engaged. Also,

while I was proposing, the Operation Swanee planning had started.

Uncharacteristically, I had done some advance planning for the engagement. I wrote a long letter to my parents and I asked my Mother to plan a surprise engagement party for Pat. I reminded her where I had stowed the ring and told her my younger Brother should be the one to give it to her.

I received my Mother's reply shortly before Swanee kicked off on August 13, 1966. The party was set for August 23, 1966. Pat's parents had joined in the planning and the two families would "accidentally" meet at the Holiday House, a dinner theater in Monroeville, Pa. Pat did not know anything about the party. It would be a complete surprise. The time set for the start of the party was 8 p.m. Given that I was on the other side of the International Date Line, the time would be 0800H, August 24, 1966. As fortune would have it, I was at the Liberty Bridge site in Quang Nam Province, Vietnam where the Viet Cong were delivering their parting shots, ending a battle that started four days before.¹¹⁰

We still celebrate our engagement anniversary on August 23 and August 24.

My tour of duty in Danang ended on March 12, 1967.

¹¹⁰ August 24, carries addition significance not related to our engagement. Those events are detailed in "Parallel Streams by Sid Breman".

Pat and I were married on April 8, 1967, seven months after we were engaged.

At this writing, we have celebrated fifty-six anniversaries of our marriage.

Some adventures do not turn into misadventures. Some adventures not only save you, they make your life.

Chapter: Postscript on People, Places and Things

The ship that was the USS Oklahoma City now rests on the floor of the Pacific Ocean, somewhere off the island of Guam. Before being used as a target in war games, She was stripped of Her name and battle ribbons. Her last fight was a good one and she refused to go down until a torpedo hit Her amidships. Rest easy Old Girl.

The building that was the White Elephant has been razed. I believe a multi-story hotel now occupies that location. The view of the Han River at sunrise is probably stunning.

The Liberty Bridge (II) no longer exists. It fell into disrepair after the war and slowly came apart according to pictures I have seen over the years. The most recent picture showed nothing but a few pilings in the water. From the pictures available, I cannot tell if the pilings are from Bridge (I) or (II). A new, four lane, bridge has been constructed about 1000 feet downriver.

The fate of the LCM8 860 is unknown. Photographic evidence indicates She was still acting as the back-up ferry as late as 1969. I hope She too, like the OK Maru, is resting.

Danang is a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors from all over the world. People are attracted by a modernized city, luxury hotels and resorts, huge, white, sand beaches and winter temperatures in the F70s and F80s (C20 and C30).

The beach where I mistook some hungry monkeys for Viet Cong is now attached to a large resort.

Happiness and Success

“Success is getting what you want. Happiness is wanting what you get.” Dale Carnegie

The subtitle of this work is “Finding Fun and Excitement While Pursuing Happiness and Success in the Navy.” Those words dictate that I must answer a few questions here.

Did I find (any) Success in the Navy?

Yes, I made a bargain with the Navy and the Navy delivered. I learned about and had practical experience in leadership, management, systems operations, systems development, project management, project execution, discipline and much more. With four years of experience, I was prepared to step into a position far

above the entry level jobs offered to people fresh out of college. But....

It was not the Navy's fault, but all that experience did nothing for my career opportunities. When I left active duty in 1968, and for at least twenty years thereafter, putting military experience on your resume or job application had the same effect as cutting a loud fart during your interview. Mentioning that you served in Vietnam would be the same as laughing at the noise of your flatulence. I had two tours in the Vietnam Combat Zone.

For most veterans, the promised benefits of their service were delivered. Unfortunately, the people of the United States rejected them. The operation was a success, but the patient died. The only time American Military personnel received a more hostile reception from American Citizens was when General Robert E. Lee invaded Pennsylvania in 1863. Vietnam Veterans were rejected, reviled, and rebuked by the Americans they were defending. Perhaps this is a topic for another volume.

I can honestly say my pursuit of Success in the Navy was fruitful.

How about my pursuit of Happiness?

Well, consider the following: I started my Navy adventure on the same day I started my relationship with the Love of My Life. When my active duty ended, I

was married to Pat. We are currently looking forward to our 57th Wedding Anniversary. I would say I pursued and found Happiness.

Was I happy every day in the Navy?

HELL NO! The Navy never said I would be happy, nor that I would enjoy my time. Happy was not issued by the Navy. You had to find it.

Pursuing your Happiness and Success

What follows is not a manual, checklist or comprehensive analysis of Happiness and Success. It is, rather, a series of thought to help you start or continue your adventure and hopefully enjoy both adventures and misadventures. Some thoughts are mine own, while other have been acquired during my journey.

Happiness and Success are not the same. Success is not Happiness nor is the reverse true. I know carloads of people who are successful but have no happiness in their lives whatsoever. Consider the celebrities who are at the height of their careers but cannot finish a day without drugs or alcohol.

Happiness and Success are all in your head. They are mental concepts that can change in an instant. They are what you think they are.

Decide which is more important to you, Happiness or Success.

Happiness and Success are different for each person. No one can tell you what yours should be or where it can be found.

You must pursue Happiness or Success. It is rare, but not impossible, for them to just arrive in your in your life. It is a journey, an adventure.

Success is overrated and pursued to the exclusion of Happiness. We spend the bulk of the first quarter century of our lives learning about and being taught what Success is and how to achieve it. Success is heralded as the goal and objective of human existence. If we diverted 1/100 of the resources we devoted to teaching Success to teaching Happiness, our children may not have to turn to chemicals to make their world a Happy place.

Develop a clear picture of Happiness and Success. Study both. Know what you are chasing and why. If you are serious about your journey, write it down, record it.

Some Happiness must be sacrificed to achieve Success. Some Success must be sacrificed to achieve Happiness. There is a balance in each life that must be found.

Do not accept Happiness or Success as defined by someone else. Design your own.

Many people plan their Success and then try to make their Happiness fit inside it. Try planning the Happiness first, then build your Success there.

Do not make Success or Happiness dependent on anyone other than yourself.

Do not make Happiness dependent of drugs or alcohol. “O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains!”, “Othello, (Act II, Scene iii)” by William Shakespeare.

Happiness and Success are never final.

“May you have fair winds and following seas.”¹¹¹

Chapter: Appendix One

I have no idea how this document survived 50 years in storage, but it did and I’m glad. Even I suffered from “sticker shock” when I reviewed the price of the items lost. It also gave me pause when I realized that the list represented most of my net worth.

¹¹¹ A good luck wish offered to sailors at the beginning of a voyage.

PERSONNEL CLAIM
NAVY PERSONNEL CLAIMS REGULATIONS
NAVEXOS-2662A (Rev. 8-62)

Submit in triplicate. Type whenever practicable.
Date:

To: **Commanding Officer USS OKLAHOMA CITY (CLG-5)**

SUBJECT: CLAIM FOR REIMBURSEMENT

FROM BREMAN, SIDNEY D.	SERIAL, SERVICE, OR FILE NO.	RANK, RATE, OR GRADE Ensign
CURRENT DUTY STATION Staff, COMSEVENTHFLT	ORGANIZATION AT TIME OF LOSS Enroute to current duty unit station	

STATUS OF CLAIMANT AT TIME OF LOSS
 MEMBER, ~~USNR~~ ~~USCOURSE~~ EMPLOYEE, U.S. NAVY OTHER (State)

1. Claim is made in the amount of \$ 1213.35 for personal property, listed in detail on the reverse side hereof, damaged or lost incident to service. All applicable certificates, statements, and other documents required by Navy Personnel Claims Regulations are attached.

2. I hereby assign to the United States, to the extent of any payment of this claim accepted by me, all my right, title and interest in and to any claim I may have against any carrier, insurer or other party, arising out of the incident(s) described herein and will, upon request, furnish such evidence as may be required to enable the United States to enforce such claim.

I further agree to the checkage of my accounts by the United States to the extent of any payments made to me by a carrier, insurer, or other party for which I am also reimbursed by the United States in settlement of this claim.

3. If claim arises from a transportation loss, complete the following: N/A

<input type="checkbox"/> HOUSEHOLD EFFECTS	<input type="checkbox"/> HOLD BAGGAGE	<input type="checkbox"/> AUTOMOBILE
RELEASED TO (Name of packer or carrier)	DATE	
RELEASED AT (Actual location)	BILL OF LADING NO.	
DELIVERED AT (Address)	DATE	

3. (cont'd)

a. Was demand for this loss or damage made against the common carrier? If yes, enclose copies of demand and action taken by carrier. If no, attach explanation.	YES	NO
Amt: Claimed \$ _____ Paid \$ _____		
b. Was the property insured? If yes, attach copies of policy, demand on insurer and action taken.		
Amt: Claimed \$ _____ Paid \$ _____		X
c. Have the carrier and insurer been requested to address all correspondence to you in care of the Commanding Officer of the organization at which this claim is filed?		
4. Has any previous claim been made against the United States for the property for which this claim is made? (If yes, explain.)		X

5. In the event any of the property for which claim is made is later recovered, or reimbursement is received from the carrier or insurer, I agree to give written notice immediately to the Commanding Officer of the activity at which claim was filed.

6. The date, place, facts and circumstances of the accident or incident are stated below. (State facts in detail, adding additional sheets if necessary.) (If this is a transportation claim, complete 3 above and add any additional facts here.)

On 24 March 1965 while in a travel status under BUPRES permanent change of station orders 090405 dated 20 November 1964, I was being transported by helicopter from the USS CORAL SEA (CVA-43) to the USS OKLAHOMA CITY (CLG-5), when the helicopter experienced an engine failure and made a forced landing in the sea. All luggage was jettisoned prior to landing to lighten the aircraft. This luggage contained uniforms and personal effects which were either ruined or never recovered.

7. I make this claim with full knowledge of the penalties involved for willfully making a false claim. (U.S. Code, title 18, section 287 provides for maximum fine of \$10,000 or imprisonment for 5 years or both.)

ADDRESS TO WHICH CHECK IS TO BE MAILED Staff, COMSEVENTHFLT FPO San Francisco, California	SIGNATURE OF CLAIMANT (OR AGENT) <i>Sidney D. Breman</i>
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See BUPERS Manual, Article A-5101, MARCORPS Manual, Appendix A, Volume 1, or JAG Manual, chapter XXI.

(Over)

(Continued)

SCHEDULE OF PROPERTY

LINE	INVENTORY ITEM NUMBER	QUANTITY	NAME OF ARTICLE (Include trademark or brand name, if known)	DATE OF PURCHASE OR ACQUISITION	PURCHASE PRICE OF EACH, OR VALUE AT TIME OF ACQUISITION IF ACQUIRED OTHER THAN BY PURCHASE	TOTAL VALUE LOST OR DESTROYED	IF DAMAGED ONLY: ESTIMATE DAMAGE SUSTAINED	ALLOWED VALUE (For Addressing Officer's use only)
1	1		Uniform, blue, wool	9/64	54.00	54.00		48.00
2	1		Uniform, blue, dacron	11/64	66.95	66.95		66.95
3	2		Uniform, white, dress	11/64	18.95	37.90		37.90
4	1		Uniform, khaki, wool	12/64	63.95	63.95		63.95
5	1		Uniform, khaki, dacron	11/64	63.95	63.95		63.95
6	1		Trousers, khaki, wool	12/64	19.95	19.95		19.95
7	1		Suit, civ., black	9/63	75.00	75.00		60.00
8	1		Suit, civ., green	6/64	70.00	70.00		56.00
9	1		Jacket, sport, civ.	9/62	30.00	30.00		12.00
10	1		Shoes, white, pair	12/64	9.95	9.95		9.95
11	1		Shoes, black, dress, pair	12/64	30.00	30.00		30.00
12	1		Shirt, white, formal	12/64	4.50	4.50		4.50
13	1		Tie, bow, black	12/64	1.00	1.00		1.00
14	3		Shirts, khaki, cotton	9/64	3.50	10.50		8.40
15	4		Trousers, khaki, cotton	9/64	4.00	16.00		12.80
16	2		Neckties	12/64	1.00	2.00		2.00
17	12		Socks, black, pair	12/64	.50	6.00		6.00
18	1		Luggage, flight bag, blue	12/64	25.00	25.00		25.00
19	1		Insignia, Ensign kit	12/64	24.00	24.00		24.00
20	1		Camera, Kodak Instamatic	7/64	54.00	54.00		51.30
21	1		Shaving kit, leather	8/64	5.00	5.00		2.50
22	1		Eyeglasses, regular	1/63	20.00	20.00		*DIS
23	1		Sunglasses	6/64	5.00	5.00		4.50
24	-		Cash	3/65	110.00	110.00		110.00

TOTALS (continued on attached page)

(If not sufficient space for all items, add additional sheets retaining columnar arrangement)

25	1	Trousers, blue, civ.	1/63	21.95	21.95	13.17
26	1	Trousers, gray, civ.	1/63	20.00	20.00	12.00
27	1	Fraternity pin	10/62	65.00	65.00	58.50
28	2	Tie Tacks	7/64	3.50	7.00	6.30
29	1	Key Chain	3/65	10.00	10.00	10.00
30	1	Raincoat, black	12/64	20.00	20.00	20.00
31	2	Cap covers, white, cloth	9/64	1.50	3.00	2.40
32	2	Cap covers, white, vinyl	9/64	2.50	5.00	4.00
33	1	Cap cover, khaki, dacron	9/64	2.50	2.50	2.00
34	1	Cap cover, khaki, cotton	9/64	1.25	1.25	1.00
35	1	Cap cover, khaki, vinyl	9/64	2.50	2.50	2.00
36	1	Radio, Bulova Transistor	6/59	65.00	65.00	26.00
37	1	Luggage, suitcase, leather	11/54	55.00	55.00	27.50
38	1	Luggage, overnight bag	11/62	15.00	15.00	13.50
39	3	Belts, web	9/64	.50	1.50	1.20
40	2	Belts, leather, black	7/64	2.00	4.00	3.20
41	1	Sword, dress, complete	11/64	70.00	70.00	70.00
42	1	Pen, Parker	3/65	15.00	15.00	15.00
43	1	Pencil, Parker	3/65	10.00	10.00	10.00
44		Gold lace & stars	12/64	15.00	15.00	15.00
				Total:	1213.35	1034.02

*Disallowed in the absence of evidence that replacement cannot be effected through naval facilities.

Citations:

ⁱ Silver Star Recipient.

<https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/39717>

This award demonstrates the intensity of the fighting on August 20, 1966.

CITATION:

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Staff Sergeant (name deleted, see web site for more details) United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Tank Section Commander with Company B, Third Tank Battalion, THIRD Marine Division, in connection with military operations against insurgent communist (Viet Cong) forces in the Republic of Vietnam on 20 August 1966. During Operation SUWANEE, Staff Sergeant (Deleted) was participating in a coordinated tank and infantry operation as the leader of a section of two tanks in support of Company M, Third Battalion, Ninth Marines. As the infantry unit moved along an open area, it came under an intense volume of automatic weapons, rifle grenade, and anti-tank rocket fire from concealed ambush sites. The ferocity of the attack pinned down the Marines so effectively that they were unable to maneuver into assaulting positions without suffering

heavy casualties. Reacting instantly and with great professionalism, Staff Sergeant Alvarado immediately positioned his tanks between the Viet Cong force and the Marine unit while he directed effective 90-mm. and machine gun fire on the enemy positions. The enemy responded with a heavy concentration of anti-tank fire which hit Staff Sergeant Alvarado's accompanying tank, wounding the Tank Commander seriously and severely damaging the communications system. With complete disregard for his own safety, he left his armored vehicle, maneuvered under intense small arms and anti-tank fire, to assist his wounded comrade to a position where he could receive medical aid. He then returned to the disabled tank, reorganized the crew, and utilized arm and hand signals to direct the movement of the tank. Again braving the enemy fire, he returned to his own tank and maneuvered his section to positions where they were able to gain fire superiority over the enemy. Exhibiting outstanding courage and presence of mind, he successfully maintained his section of tanks as a cohesive fighting force and contributed significantly toward the death of at least 27 Viet Cong and the ultimate defeat of the enemy. By his inspiring leadership, resourceful professionalism, bravery, and loyal devotion to duty, Staff Sergeant Alvarado upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.

ii Additional testimony to the intensity of the Combat on August 20, 1966 can be found in *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966.*