

as important, Viet Nam was well underway. I needed a deferment from the draft, or off to war I would go, like so many of my high school buddies. A few months later our class's first casualty, Randy Carpenter, would be killed in Nam. Besides NIU, two other schools in Iowa had accepted me, provided I played football. Incapable of being honest with anyone – even myself – my alcohol-abused out-of-shape body was already incapable of playing competitive sports on any level. So I set off to NIU and the four-story freshman dorm aptly called the Animal House – a flunkout mini-city of a thousand freshman boys.

Placed alphabetically in the dorm, I roomed with an archenemy from Palatine High, Steve Hanke. We loathed each other. Two other poor fellows shared the rooms with us. Mike Hiber wouldn't last a semester as he got "bed-itis", a not-so-rare disease where the super-depressed person is unable to get out of bed. Sufferers tend to come from a small town, away from family the first time, totally codependent, and afraid to leave the confines of their bunk bed. Their destiny was to flunk out and invariably get a one-way ticket to bamboo land. Sad as this may be, I don't even remember the fourth guy. The real fourth guy with Steve, Mike and me was Craig Anderson who, being an "A," lived on the first floor while we "H's" were way in the back of the second floor. Craig was in our room except when we were sleeping, and that wasn't too often unless you were one of unfortunates that caught bed-itis. We were all political science

majors or minors and crammed for tests staying up late drinking the horrible machine coffee, with Craig smoking. I hadn't started smoking yet.

Jerry McNeil, an "M," was almost directly above us mid "H's" and shared a number of classes with me. We were really different types. I was a want-to-be jock, want-to Greek and want-to-be girl's guy. Jerry was into just being Jerry, tall (not really tall, I guess, but taller than me, which isn't hard to be), with short black hair, and seemingly in control of himself at all times. He had an idea about going to University of Illinois for the weekend, a so-called "Walk-Out." Groups – fraternities, sororities, or some group greater than two people – usually did that but his Illini friend invited us, with another buddy driving down as well.

We didn't sleep that Friday night but drove to Champagne-Urbana non-stop, ready to start partying. Jerry could meet people easily. One of the sorority gals we were hanging out favored sloe gin fizzes. I didn't like gin since it gave me heartburn, but covered over with the red syrup and cherries, it tasted okay. I spent most of the time in a blackout.

Downtown who-knows-what time or what night, I came out of my blackout in a famous basement bar, rocking with a black blues band. I was having a great time – or at least it seemed like I was. Jerry was nearby. He didn't dance or act out like me; he was always in control even when he was drunk. I marveled at how he could do that. Sober almost thirty-two years, I still

can't sit still to music. I'll be up dancing my heart out with any kind.

My next memory is outside some building where I think we intended to sleep some before heading back to NIU. Throwing up my guts and into serious dry heaves that hurt so bad, I looked at the ground, thinking I'd thrown up half my stomach, red and bloody looking. I'd forgotten I'd spent the last who-knows-how-many hours drinking sloe gin fizzes. I didn't know who paid for all the drinks and obviously didn't care. Jerry stood near, his hand on my back, patiently asking if I was going to live or die. I didn't know. When I was done, though, I was ready to get at it once again. Into the sorority house we went.

Back at NIU I climbed into my upper bunk. Terrible wouldn't begin to cover the way I felt. My mouth tasted like a bottle of gin. My skin seemed to have a red tint from all the cherry juice and thick sugary red syrup. I didn't fall asleep. I passed out.

Of what happened next, I can only tell you what I heard the next day. Trust me, the tale echoed throughout the halls of the Animal House. Steve played the coronet. Not too long after I'd entered the deep beyond, he, Craig and a number of other guys gathered beside my bunk. Steve put the coronet to his lips and let out a blast heard on the first and fourth floors alike.

I didn't move. The alcohol level in my body had put me into a coma. That's the only explanation. I didn't move. In disbelief, they

moved to the adjacent room where our desks were. I understand they were afraid I had died. Only the rise and fall of my chest proved otherwise.

I never again drank sloe gin fizz. Just beer and bourbon from now on – the lesson I learned from our walkout to U of I. A psychology major, I never entertained the thought I could have a problem with alcohol.

## National Guard, a/k/a No Good

Senior year, Craig and I shared an apartment west and north of campus. I drove my green Bug for the copy boy job for the university newspaper. Three times a week I'd drive to the campus office, pick up the copy, and deliver it to the printer. They paid me for each trip, and I filled up my car for free at the campus pumps. Down the street from the printer was the fraternity's bar. After delivering the copy I'd walk to the bar, sit down, order the small draft, and eat free cashews. The beer was so cold and the cashews so good, I'd drink until nothing mattered. This was the best job I ever had – a lot easier than construction, my usual gig.

With nothing to do one Saturday I accepted the invitation of Jim, Dennis, and Charles to drive to Woodstock and put our names on a waiting list for the Illinois National Guard. The armory was a small gym. There we met

Sergeant Fisher for the first time and put our names on the list.

College was over. I failed German too many times to get my degree despite logging 124 undergraduate hours. My bad decisions – drinking but never knowing the root of my problems – would plague my life. I worked construction and went to night school, trying again to pass German.

I'd met Kathy at Northern Illinois University second semester of our freshman year, and we planned on getting married, renting a really nice apartment in my hometown. That January of '69 I got the letter. I was to report to Rockford, Illinois, armory to join the Illinois National Guard. That Sunday, Jim, Dennis, Charles and I took the oath and started, as E-1's – a rank lower than whale's poop.

Three things happened that month that amazed me and saved me from who knows what. Craig – who said he never would be drafted because of his flat feet – was drafted, made a shake-and-bake sergeant, and shipped off to Nam with a ninety-day life expectancy. He fooled them though, got malaria, and came home safe two years later. Kathy and I gave up the apartment and put off our wedding until after I came back from active duty training. Third, that Monday I went to the mailbox and found my draft notice. Across the form I wrote, "Member of National Guard," my enlisted NG number, and my date of enlistment. Recurring dreams of dying in Nam had haunted me for a couple of years – like the dreams of missing a

test because I had missed so many classes because of my drinking.

April 26, 1969. Denny and I flew from Chicago to Atlanta to Columbus, Georgia, and our final destination, Fort Benning, for basic training. Reading the orders, I remembered it was my birthday. According to the orders, we didn't have to be at the Fort until midnight. Party time. We'd paid a taxi driver to pick us up at eleven, storing our duffle bags in his trunk until then. Denny was a good friend, but not a problem drinker. He maintained himself rather well; I, on the other hand, got seriously drunk.

Reaching the Fort and being paraded into a formation of new recruits, I made a spectacle of myself in front of the sergeants and the troops. I can remember their amazed faces at how I was acting – drunk as a skunk.

The next morning came all too early – awake before sun-up. We were “No Goods,” short for National Guards. A black drill instructor grabbed me by the collar and escorted me to the back of the mess hall and immense pots of potatoes. He handed me a knife. The sun was coming up as I peeled the first of hundreds of potatoes, my first morning in the real Army – hung over, sick, and peeling potatoes. Happy birthday.

Would

Last weekend walking out of a building along with Jo Lynn, a new friend, a cold westerly wind slammed into our unprotected faces.

“Don't think we'll be making the sixties today like they said,” she said.

I readily agreed.

"Doesn't matter though I'm leaving as soon as a position becomes available." She smiled hopefully.

"Really? And where are you going?"

"I applied for teaching positions in Hawaii and I'm out of here as soon as one comes through."

I laughed. "The last time someone I knew said something like that was a long time ago."

Jo Lynn waited for me to continue while we took shelter standing next to a wide pillar supporting a walkway between buildings a couple stories above our heads.

"A friend of mine, Bob Stayner, and I were watching TV in his apartment. Drinking beers sitting on his small couch when a Shell commercial came on the station. It projected the winter ahead and how all could trust their improved brand of oil during the fierce weather ahead.

"When the commercial was over Bob said, 'I'm never doing it again.'

"I turned to my friend very interested, 'What's that Bob?'

"Spending another winter here in Chicago.'

"And where are you going, Bob?'

"Hawaii.'"

I looked at my friend leaning against the pillar. She seemed to be enjoying the account thus far. "Bob, you see had quite a history. He was always going to do something. Since we were in grade school he 'would' do this or 'would' do that so often it became his nickname - 'would.'"

She laughed.

"Bob worked for United Airlines at O'Hara in baggage. His Dad was way up the corporate ladder, and Bob was a Viet Nam vet, which would help his transfer to be approved so maybe this 'would' actually come to pass.

"Bob continued with his plans, 'I'm going to load up my car,' – he had a Mustang – 'and I'm going to drive to San Francisco and put me, my stuff, and my car on the boat and I'm never coming back.'

"Sounded like another 'would' to me but I was interested. 'Can I ride along to San Francisco?' This wasn't going to go over big since I was supposed to be saving money to get married that fall or winter.

"Sure that would be cool." Bob sounded sure we would be taking the trip, but all of his 'woulds' sounded confident."

Jo Lynn asked, "What happened?"

"A month later we left for San Francisco. His transfer was approved and off we drove with the Mustang loaded down. We drove straight through to Reno. The next day Bob said we were stopping north of town on the way west. Naïve as I was, I agreed and went along for the ride.

"Let's just say no one in my life would have approved of that stop except for our buddies back in Chicago. My choice was a black lady and Bob went Oriental – I think he fell in love when he was in Nam. How young we were! I remember the year because the next night driving across Wyoming Richard Nixon was nominated as the Republican candidate for the second time. We reached San Francisco just in



time for the Mustang's brakes to go out, and I was driving.

"We barely made it to the parking garage before the pedal was hitting the floor. Bob didn't care. He said he didn't need the car on the boat, and he was sure Hawaii was flat. So we checked into our room and went for a walk to Hate Asbury.

"All the stories were true. Flaming homosexuals everywhere, guitar players, other musicians, and speechmakers for one cause or another. We were standing on a corner ready to hop a streetcar when we heard someone yelling our names – 'Bob, Ed'. We turned and looked at a high school friend. We were totally amazed.

"Rick gave both of us long hugs. He was so happy, much happier than he was in school. After a nice visit Bob and I boarded the bus back to our side of town.

"We went out later that night bar hopping. We were both only twenty, but no one carded us. The last place sported a naked blond sitting on a Grand Piano being slowly lowered from the ceiling – oh, San Francisco! I guess that was wraps for Bob because he wanted to go back to the room. Reluctantly I went along. It was two or three in the morning and the only business open was an all-night diner. We walked past the plate-glass windows not even looking in. To our surprise we heard our names yelled again but this time it was a woman's voice.

"We turned to find another high school friend in a waitress's uniform running toward us as fast she could. She hugged me first and I have to

admit even in my fairly drunken state tears came to my eyes. Linda's story wasn't as successful or happy as Rick's. She was stranded, having followed an addict out west. He'd deserted her and their baby daughter some years earlier. She would make it back to the windy city, she promised. We hugged our goodbyes and Bob and I watched her return to the front door of the restaurant. She waved goodbye.

"The next day I took a cab to the airport to catch my flight back to Chicago. That was thirty-eight years ago, and I've never seen Rick, Linda or Bob since. I know he's on his boat reading paperback mysteries and drinking beer while smoking a cigarette. He said that's what he would do if he ever made to Hawaii."

"What a neat story," said Jo Lynn.

"Thanks." We started walking the rest of the way to our cars. "Would you be driving to Frisco when you go?" I asked.

## AIT

The Army never skipped a beat only one fellow wasn't going to Advanced Individual Training in the infantry – some regular army guy going to refrigeration school – out of the entire battalion. Most of us piled onto buses headed for Tigerland. By this time I was smoking Kools, figuring four million black guys couldn't be wrong, and sucking down all that dust the

menthol made it easier to smoke. I had lost so much weight in basic I was like a guy from a Nazi prison camp or someone in the late stages of cancer – but in the best shape I’d ever been in – and picked up my loaded duffle bag like it was a newspaper, tossing it into the bottom of the bus. I lost track of Denny – he went to another battalion – but hooked up with Jim, also from the Woodstock National Guard Armory.

Off to the field, they didn’t waste much time. The sergeant major, a four-time tour of duty guy in Nam who limped along with a cane, explained how difficult this training would be. In front of us was a stand of bamboo. I couldn’t believe here in Anniston, Alabama – Fort McMullen I believe it was – there was real bamboo and a big sign across the entrance: “Tigerland.” Oh, my heavens!

They made me a RTO, radio operator carrying a P-25 radio weighing – you guessed it – twenty-five pounds, along with my other equipment, which weighed another twenty. Gee, what a deal! There were two RTO’s per platoon, and my cohort was a giant of a black fellow, Jordan, from Mississippi. We’d take turns carrying the radio, four hours on, four off, and we were always right next to or behind the Lieutenant ready to hand him the phone whenever necessary. Yep, just like the real jungle, it was hot dense, and hot and dense. Jordan obviously didn’t have an extensive education and struggled with the radio alphabet, getting extremely nervous speaking on the net. We sat against a tree smoking and drinking from our

canteens, and Jordan explained how he didn't like talking on the radio. A simple solution came to mind – I offered to do all the talking if Jordan carried the radio. Being as tall and big as a number of the trees in the forest, lugging the radio to Jordan was like carrying an extra canteen. He thought my idea was excellent.

Through the woods we'd go in the center of the platoon formation, the Lieutenant, me right behind him, and Jordan right behind me. When a call came in Jordan would hand me the phone. If they wanted the Lieutenant I'd hand him the phone, but as time went on I handled most of the communications. They'd assigned us a lieutenant inept they made him a permanent party at the fort, knowing if Charlie didn't kill him within a week our troops would have.

I was ever so tired and would never feel that tired again, not for another thirty-four years when I was going through thirty-three radiation treatments for my cancer. Jordan even got tired once in a while. In a field at our home base they had constructed concrete bunkers on the perimeter, making it as realistic as possible. But the bunkers were damp and, compared to outside, actually cold at night. I made a lean-to with my poncho and slept outside at night on the hill our perimeter surrounded. We slept most nights on hills taking the high position in case we were attacked. We dug foxholes, too, of course, but usually I slept with my feet against the trunk of a tree as we took turns staying awake monitoring the radio.

The map course was important according to the sergeant major. When the Army stopped teaching the course, casualties in Nam went up thirty percent. As a result they re-instituted the classes. I thought, how nice of the military to experiment with our lives and wondered what other courses they were testing with our battalion. We were assigned some type of night patrol. My lean-to little place was so secure and tied down so well I didn't want to disturb it and decided to leave it set up and take a chance on the weather. Little did I know a hurricane called Camille was hitting Biloxi, and little did I know that thirty-six years later I'd suffer through another category-five hurricane named Katrina. The rain started that night, and it poured for hours. The Lieutenant tried to share his poncho with me but it was useless. I woke up lying on my side in a puddle of water that came up to the middle of my face. As I breathed in and out, my lips made bubbles in the water. I sat up, never having been so wet and cold in my life. I remembered as a child playing outside in the howling winds of deep winter, setting up camps and playing army along Salt Creek in two or three feet of snow, and not being as cold as I was as the rains continued. They finally called off the maneuver and brought us back to the barracks to clean up and get dry clothes. A hot shower and army bunk never felt so good.

AIT was coming to a close. They made us No-Goods clean the machine guns every night when not in the field and made us sing out loud that we were no goods as we marched back to the

barracks and split up to go to bed. We were broke most of the time and drank as much of the 3/2 beers on post that we could consume. Jim and I once again won sharp shooting contest – we had done the same in basic with the M-14, but now used the M-16, a weapon I despised. Celebration time. Off to town we went. It was a dry county. We had enough money to buy a bottle of bourbon from the state-owned store and planned on getting really drunk or as drunk as we could on one bottle.

I was carrying our treasure walking down the sidewalk to our hotel room when the thought crossed my mind how horrible it would be if I dropped our supply. Not a minute later Jim swung his arm up and hit the bottle I was holding by its neck. It flew into the air and landed on the concrete. Booze flowed from the broken bottle and the paper sack turned dark while the liquid rolled down the incline. We looked at each other as if our best friend died in front of us. For me it was – or was becoming – my best friend. For the next eight years, whenever I took a drink of booze, my problems went away – but not this weekend. Do you have any idea how boring a Saturday night in Anniston, Alabama, without booze and money can be? No you don't. Trust me.

AIT came to an end. Every swinging dick in our battalion got a ticket to Viet Nam except Jim, a Chinese kid from New York whose brother was already there, and myself. I'll never forget the look on those guys' faces. I said good-bye to my RTO buddy, Jordan, and wished him luck. I was

supposed to get married when I got back but really didn't want to. I was as scared of that as going to Nam. I knew I didn't love her but didn't have the courage to speak up, knowing all the plans were made and most of my high school and college friends were married and starting families. I felt deep sadness leaving Tigerland, so deep I can feel it even now. I liked not having to make my own decisions and having the system tell me what to do. I should have gone regular army, a decision I've regretted ever since.

## Jerry O.

Real drinking buddies are far and few between. Usually the drinking mentality is like the sea gulls in the animated movie about fish always screaming "Me-Me-Me-Me" but every once in a while you meet a true friend and drinking buddy. One of mine was Jerry O. He'd been in the Guard longer than I and took me under his wing. All those stories you may have heard about the drinking and marijuana smoking and carrying on in the National Guard are true, and Jerry and I spent more time trying to figure out how to get booze to the field than the equipment we might need for maneuvers.

We'd go to the Rockford area cow patty covered fields with short prickly bushes and hard dirt for our army games – ponds, lakes and rivers, undulating terrain fit for nothing but bugs

and cows and National Guard troops. Late one afternoon we bivouacked near a small lake. Jerry was usually part of the motor pool, though our battalion was strictly infantry. Somehow he always managed to have a ready supply of booze. We were partaking rather heavily when Jerry decided to go fishing, though it was a rather a cool evening. He took off his boots before wading into the cold water with his fatigues on. Splashing around, he caught a four-inch sunfish with bare hands and carried it triumphantly back to shore. I yelled for all to hear, "Jerry, you don't have a hair on your ass if he don't bite the head off that fish." He did. We rolled around on the ground, laughing so hard it hurt. Jerry shivered most of the night even though we built a rather large fire.

I retrieved the body of the unlucky sunfish and stuck it into the sergeant's pocket we all totally despised. It rotted away in his locker until our weekend drills the next month. He only had a little time left in the guard so he didn't pursue the issue or try to find the soldier responsible but those of us that knew had another hardy laugh.

Back to the fields we'd go. This time Jerry and I stayed up drinking and talking sitting near the fire in our sleeping bags while everyone else was sleeping soundly. I have no idea what we talked about and sure neither one of us remember the next morning. I moved a safe distance from the fire as Jerry was adding firewood and went to sleep.



The next morning I woke seeing my breath in the air. Had it snowed? I rubbed my eyes and looked closer at the white covering the ground. Down feathers! They lay scattered everywhere, giving the appearance of frost or light snow. I turned toward the fire and Jerry. Sure enough, he'd fallen asleep too close to the coals. His sleeping bag had caught on fire while he slept. We later learned he beat the fire out, losing most of the feathers in his sleeping bag. He snored loudly while the rest of us packed, shaking our heads in disbelief.

Summer camps were notorious for drinking. Jerry and I would sit outside on the barracks porch and consume endless quantities of booze. We'd get so drunk soldiers walking by couldn't understand what we were saying to each other, but we made sense of our secret language.

The uproar started at Kent State, caused a weeklong call up. We went to my former campus, NIU, first for riot control but the higher ups soon realized the real problem was in Evanston and off we went to the area of the turbulent Northwestern campus. We were allowed no ammo while we stood guard or went on patrol since troops at Kent State fired on unarmed student protestors. While we guarded one the university buildings over night, a squad car stopped to inform Jim and I that there were guys in a white station wagon with shotguns cruising the area and to be on the lookout. Great. Here we stood on guard with empty magazines for our M-16's. Every time a light colored vehicle rounded the corner Jim and I hit

the ground. Don't know where Jerry was during all this but knew he'd be safe.

They cramped us all into a grade school. Sleeping on the floors of the hallways and by this time the entire battalion was out of cigarettes booze and definitely marijuana. The officers realized the riot control troops would soon be rioting themselves if something wasn't done. They finally allowed visits from our wives friends and families. We were restocked and the near raging mood of the troops subsided into acceptance. The call up finally ended and we returned to our armories and drove our cars home exhausted dirty and silently wondering where our country was headed.

A year and a half into recovery working at Wolfgang's deli Jerry shows up and wants me to be the foreman building his new home, a modular deal three stories high. I had put away my tools swearing I'd never go back to construction. He offered me almost twice per hour what I was making running Wolfgang's and though it would be a commute to Lake Geneva Wisconsin I agreed to take on the project. Jerry respected my sobriety. He was married a father very successful in his business while I was divorced bankrupt and living in my little loft room at Larry's, another example of a heavy drinker gone well as compared to a real alcoholic.

Many commutes later and the house nearly done at the cost of my regular meetings and program fellowship I was driving back and looked up at a billboard advertising a cold beer

on a hot day. I experienced for the first and last time in all my recovery the physical compulsion of wanting a drink. It scared me big time. Not a mile down the road was our retreat house, an old abandon building rumored that it was owned by the Mafia and Al Capone himself, and donated to the Catholic Church. I pulled up to the front of the building and knocked on the door hoping Father Lutz would answer the door and help me out. Brother Pat came to the entrance and I told him what had happened and asked if I could just sit there on the porch until I felt safe enough to continue driving. He apologized that Father Lutz wasn't there and pointed to one of the rockers on the porch facing the calm waters of Fox Lake.

I sat down feeling really weird having never experienced this craving before in sobriety. The sun was setting and its rays sparkled across the lazy waters of the lake a beautiful sight. I prayed earnestly and the peace, which passes all understanding, returned to my mind and soul. But I knew I had had a close call. Working money wanting to complete the project not going to meetings and letting my life become unbalanced had nearly resulted in a relapse. I had to make a change and the project was far enough along that Jerry could supervise its completion easily enough. I returned to meetings that night.

Over the years there were other times I let my life become unbalanced with work and recovery but never to the extent of having the physical compulsion return as it did that day. All doubt about my condition were put to rest as I

sat there rocking on the porch of Desiderata the name of the retreat house.

## DUI

I don't really know why January became a pivotal month for me over the years. January 1975 would prove to be a turning point in my life and my disease. I had started my own construction business, suggested by my father; Kathy and I had purchased our first and only home; and, when I didn't have my own jobs, working projects with Joe P., a fraternity brother whose construction business specialized in remodeling restaurants. Drinking was becoming a problem, putting stress on all my relationships.

We were working on a huge restaurant remodeling job, and some nights after work we'd start boozing there on the jobsite and play poker. I had started this habit at the home of one customer where Joe P. was helping us. The homeowner would accompany us to the basement where we'd partake a few cold ones before heading home.

But this January night I hit it heavy while playing cards, and went into a blackout. I came out of it to flashing red-and-blue lights atop a squad car. I recognized the stoplight on Palatine Road. I learned I had passed out. My truck rolled into the back of the squad car while the light was red. The gig was up.