

Expendable

At the age of twenty plus a day, Lefty left his wife and baby girl, for a seat on the 6 am bus leaving the county courthouse headed to Missouri for Army Basic Training. Nixon thought that he needed him so badly for the butchery in Vietnam that they had to pull him away from family and friends, cut off his hair, and dress him in funny-looking OD green clothes and shiny black boots.

He had registered for the draft at age 18, and was labeled 1-A following the Army physical. No 3-A or 4-F¹, classification for him due to his new family or the asthma inherited from his great grandfather. He now was given the promise of active duty call up within months. He knew his future, and it paralyzed his will.

Forced to confront his own mortality at a young age, with the 1-A classification from the local draft board left him unmotivated, and he struggled living independently and kicked around working short-lived jobs at car dealerships, auto repair shops, and tire stores. He used his self-taught skills to survive.

Born of the Vietnam War generation, his unlucky number “19” had been pulled out of the war machine’s Selective Service lotto² drum by his elders³. The one-way ticket later came via postal mail, with a “Greetings” letter from a previously unknown Uncle Sam. Yet for a freak of calendar, the outrage of a nation’s youth, and the act of a too-late-smart Congress, he dodged being more cannon fodder for this unwarranted, stupid, and senseless southeast Asian war which in the end claimed nearly 60,000 young men of his generation. With more than 150,000 mentally and physically wounded, he believed he was now owed his life and good health, to those who protested to demand an end to this insanity. These included Tom Hayden and SDS, returned veterans groups, Daniel Ellsberg, some brave college students, and particularly those 6 student protesters shot and killed at Kent State and Jackson State.

Two prime years of his life were essentially wasted with ineffective meaningless training activities in preparation for more meaningless construction work in upgrading foreign military bases. He became yet another cog in a wheel supporting the colonizing of northeast Asia, and to him the equivalent of an involuntary twentieth century government assigned working class post-secondary indoctrination. He would not run off to Canada, shoot himself in the foot, feed himself fat, starve himself skinny, or mutilate an extremity by freezing and chopping off part of a big toe, like some did. He would not pretend to be mentally ill or intellectually deficient, like others. He was not raised that way. He would not emigrate to dodge conscription like his Great Grandfather. He was who he was, and who he had grown to become. He could not allow someone else to take his place to die in the distant jungle. He

¹ There were 20 plus draft classification numbers including, 1-A Available for unrestricted military service, 3-A Hardship deferment; deferred from military service because service would cause hardship upon their families, and 4-F where the registrant was not physically acceptable for military service.

² This dubious lottery selected an outsized number of poor and minorities, plus those unable or unwilling to obtain various deferments or classifications.

³ By 1966, President Johnson was fearful that calling up the reserves or abolishing student deferments would further inflame war protesters and signal all-out war. And so, even after McNamara began privately declaring the war was unwinnable, the defense secretary devised Project 100,000.

Under his direction, an alternative army was systematically recruited from the ranks of those who had previously been rejected for failing to meet the armed services' physical and mental requirements. In all, 354,000 men were rolled up by Project 100,000. Touted as a Great Society program that would provide remedial education and an escape from poverty, the recruitment program offered a one-way ticket to Vietnam, where "the Moron Corps," as they were pathetically nicknamed by other soldiers, entered combat in disproportionate numbers. A 1970 Defense Department study disclosed that 41 percent of Project 100,000 recruits were black, compared with 12 percent in the armed forces as a whole. 40 percent of Project 100,000 recruits were trained for combat, compared with 25 percent for the services generally.

knew that he could not live with that guilt. He would instead accept his fate, determined by the lottery balls and the date of his birth.⁴

Basic training consisted of calisthenics and obstacle courses, interspersed with physically and mentally demeaning treatment, repetitively called turds, knuckleheads, and shit-for-brains. The sergeants took pleasure in continuously reminding them that they, like their closest relatives whale shit, were so low that they resided at the bottom of the ocean. Instructed to write home and tell mom to sell the outhouse, because their asses now belonged to the Army,⁵ and told that *Backdoor Jody* was sleeping with their girlfriends and wives.⁶

At the mess hall for chow three times each day, while standing the line they were required to bark out their serial numbers followed with RA, for regular army, US, for draftees, and NG for the National Guard. It was a point of pride for Lefty to bark out his US, as he was one of the few remaining conscripts and was disgusted with his whole experience.

The physically demeaning treatment also took the form of a dozen guys marched into a gas chamber, only to have their gas masks ripped off by a sergeant to experience the full effect of the tear gas. Drill sergeants sitting outside under shade trees sipping cold soft drinks, would laugh heartily as they ran out, tears streaming, coughing, and puking. Or being woke mornings to bright lights and sergeants banging the lids on metal trashcans, to their early morning serenade of “*drop your cocks and grab your socks.*”

When they marched or ran in formation, they were required to sing responses to marching cadences, known colloquially as Jody calls. Singing made it harder to march or run and perhaps served as entertainment for the drill sergeants. Later versions replaced the many expletive-ridden cadences from the politically incorrect 70s, perhaps as an adaptation to the ways of the *new* volunteer Army.

*A yellow bird
With a yellow bill
Sat up upon
My windowsill
I lured him in
With a piece of bread
And then I smashed
His fucking head*

Trained to call their rifles weapons, as they ran or marched, they recited, “*This is my weapon, and this is my gun. This one is for fighting, and this one is for fun,*” while alternately raising their rifles and grabbing their crotches.

Those falling behind on these forced marches were required to run around the outside of the marching group holding their weapon over their head. Forced to continue until they

⁴ He would rise in rank twice, based on time in grade without any specific merit, and despite some minor disciplinary offenses. He disdained and abhorred the whole mission, but readily accepted the additional beer money, and missed it during the temporary Article 15 nonjudicial disciplines.

⁵ Sergeant Hulka: Men, welcome to the United States Army. I'm Sergeant Hulka. I'm your drill sergeant. Before we proceed any further, we gotta get something straight. Your mamas are not here to take care of you now. It's just you, me, and Uncle Sam. And before I leave you, you're gonna find out that me and Uncle Sam are one in the same. From the movie *Stripes*.

⁶ The name “Jody” refers to a recurring civilian character, the soldier's nemesis, who stays home to a perceived life of luxury. Jody drives the soldier's car, dates the soldier's girlfriend, or lives with his wife, hangs out with the soldier's friends, and eats his mom's great cooking.

dropped of exhaustion, they were then loaded onto a trailing truck. Due his asthma, Lefty was barely able met these requirements.

Having been a ballplayer, Lefty was substantially fit going in, but came out in the best shape of his life physically. He had once fainted due to heat stroke on a particular hot day of calisthenics in the sun. Taken to an air-conditioned hospital, he was required to drink some nasty salt water for a few hours. At least it was cold and clean. The typical water source available to them in Basic training was warm to hot salt water from a lister bag⁷ with spigots on the bottom, hanging in the sun. The taste of this water closely resembled what warm urine must taste like. Filling your canteen at the fresh water fountain in the barracks in the mornings was actively discouraged, of course.

Mentally however, he was confused and dismayed as the Vietnam veteran drill sergeants bragged of blowing up gooks heads like watermelons, thereby ruining their whole day. He trained himself to avoid absorbing any of this nonsense deflecting it, and laughing off being called demeaning names each day. "Good Morning Shitheads!"

One time one of these so-called *knuckleheads* was late in line for morning formation and when confronted in front of the whole platoon by the drill sergeant, sheepishly explained he was in the latrine having a bowel movement. The sergeant barked out he did not care what his excuse was, take a scissors and cut it off if need be. There was simply no excuse for not being on time for the formation.

Another so-called *turd* was somewhat weak, uncoordinated, and a bit goofy. The drill sergeants relentlessly harassed and cajoled him throughout Basic Training, threatening him with recycling.⁸ They apparently thought he was just a goof and not trying hard enough. They were especially hard on him at the rifle range. He did not graduate with our class and we caught a glimpse of him as we departed; now however wearing eyeglasses. Lefty hoped for his sake, he would make it through the second time around.

He wrote a letter to his older brother while in Basic Training.

Dear Brother,

I thought you might want to know some of what you have missed with your student deferment, so I will relay this story to you.

There we were, brand new recruits at the military base for Basic Training. The time eventually came for night firing at the rifle range, but first we were herded into a darkened auditorium and given instruction on how to fire at the targets in the dark of night. One key point that was stressed, was to get your eyes adjusted to the dark called *gaining night vision*, hence us being in the darkened room. They told us there was a small red flashing light on the human silhouette target, which would blink at ten second intervals. Another key point stressed was that only every fifth bullet, in a twenty round clip, was a tracer round which showed the path the bullet traveled. "If you can't tell where your rounds are hitting, instructed the training sergeant, aim low and you will see the dust fly up from in the dirt berm in front of the targets." There was great importance stressed to have a good showing here, as the hits would be

⁷ A Lister bag is a canvas bag with faucets, similar in size to a duffel bag, and is used for supplying troops in the field with water.

⁸ Recycling was a term that meant being forced to repeat Basic training. This was a motivating factor for many, including Lefty, as this was the last thing anyone would wish to experience more than once.

electronically scored. If you did a bad job they would need to repeat Basic Training, which they called being *recycled*. We both thought this wouldn't be that difficult, and might even be some fun.

After receiving the training, we assembled outside to wait to march over to the rifle range. Hurry up and wait as usual, we all lit up cigarettes to kill time as we waited for them to get their act together. Meanwhile a sergeant came over yelling at us about having ruined our recently achieved and most valuable night vision, by lighting cigarettes. We wasted his time for nothing, and rant and rave, and so on and so forth. Oops!

This motivation now behind us, we marched to the range and lined up in the prone position in front of the targets as usual. The officer would call "ready on the right" and the sergeant would answer "ready." Then another officer would then call "ready on the left" and the sergeant would answer "ready" and then the head officer would say FIRE! Everyone let loose their rounds hopefully aimed at the human silhouette targets, with the small occasionally flashing red light. What then occurred is that apparently most everyone couldn't see anything, so they aimed low and the resulting cloud of dust over the targets resembled what the dust bowl storms of Oklahoma must have looked like. The electronic scoring later revealed that the group in fact made little contact with the human silhouette targets. On hearing this, we originally thought it to be funny as hell, but as with most experiences in Basic Training, our attitudes were about to be adjusted.

We were ordered off the firing line and herded into bleachers, which resembled a baseball grandstand. The officer then proceeded to tell us what a bunch of low life's we were, the worst seen in all his years, and an embarrassment to our entire genealogical line; past, present, and future, as well as our actions having dishonored God and Country. We were also assured, as threatened when back in high school; this bad behavior would in fact be stamped indelibly on our permanent records.

In the end, we both received Marksmanship medals, but the Army perhaps reevaluated the process after this event, because we never did go to "night fire" ever again.

Following Basic, Advanced Individual Training (AIT) his program included electrician training in such things as hand setting power poles, pole climbing, basic exterior and interior wiring, as well as generator operation. They would learn whatever they could, in six weeks.

His instructor sergeant made himself famous on base climbing a 60-foot pole for each class, placing the six-inch top of the pole in his stomach doing a spread eagle showing no fear. A macho yet stupid thing, Lefty thought. Nevertheless, he learned to climb poles correctly with his leg-mounted gaffs and did not fall. As with most things he worried about, they never happened anyway.

Taught that if you are going to fall, do not hug the pole, but push off to fall free to the ground instead, he doubted this advice. He saw this lesson first hand when one of his

classmates fell, hugged the pole, and slid down the pole driving a 12-inch wood sliver under the skin of his inner forearm. The injured panicking trainee ran over to the sergeant for assistance as everyone watched who quickly distracted him yelling at some other grunts and then ripping out the sliver before the poor guy knew what happened. The rest of the training consisted of the basic wiring of interior switches and receptacles, and a few lessons operating a small 5kw gasoline engine generator.

They passed time in the evenings lying in their bunks before lights out, listening to LP's of Cheech and Chong classic skits like "Dave's not here man," "El Monte Slim," Sister Mary Elephant, and "Basketball Jones." They would laugh their asses off, as this served as a great stress release at the end of their long days.

During the wiring classes he made the mistake of asking a question regarding wiring a three way switch, thereby showing some understanding of and interest in the process. So identified, he was offered the chance to stay behind at AIT as an instructor he declined, reflecting his non-volunteering attitude.⁹ His refusal to comply with the offer resulted in him being sent to the colonel who insisted on the offer via intimidation. But Lefty was imbedded with a don't give-a-shit draftee attitude, and again declined the offer. After all, what are they going to do? Take him away from home and family, cut his hair off, and put him in a goofy OD green suit with funny black boots? Oh wait, they already did that Lefty supposed. He questioned the colonel as to where he would go if he did not accept this offer, and perhaps to scare him, said Fort Benning Ga., to which Lefty replied I've been here, but ain't never been there. In the end, it did not matter, as a few days before graduation the whole company received orders for South Korea.

By the time he was done with training, Congress had shut off the money tap for Vietnam, but the Army had all these draftees ready to go, that Lefty thought that they didn't know what to do with. They could have assigned them to the Army Reserve, or National Guard, or they could have just sent them home. But they didn't, and instead sent a lot of us to maintain existing operations in Korea and also in Germany.

In Korea, he spent his first few weeks in an arrival and departure center before shipping off to his new unit. While there, the new arrivals received a lecture from the commanding officer who talked about how, on average everyone in the room would get VD during their tour, and some twice because *he* himself was not going to get it. This departure area "holding pen" was absent things to entertain them, and bred boredom as they weren't allowed to be off base. He read library books, shot pool, and snuck off base to the bars a few times. He finally received his orders late one day.

Driven by truck to his new Army home, arriving in the late evening at Camp Mercer¹⁰ when most everyone was asleep. The guy on night duty, a comical little Hispanic guy named Flores, was nice enough to offer him his bunk until he had a chance to settle in the next day. He slept across from a guy, chained to his own bunk and detained under house arrest for selling Post Exchange goods off base to the locals. There was a big demand for this and money to be made, but also severe penalties for being caught. This *detainee* played Neil Young's Harvest album and he heard "A Man Needs a Maid" for the first time. Having severely twisted his ankle a few weeks earlier Lefty was taking serious pain meds, making him loopy, which kept him inside the barracks and off regular duty for a while.

⁹ *Lefty had already been "got" once in basic when the sergeant requested volunteer equipment operators. Lefty had experience driving trucks, tractors and various other farm and industrial equipment. In this case, the sergeant presented the volunteer equipment operators with a shovel. He called it a model M1-A, and pointed out that it was both hand operated and air-cooled. Once bitten, twice shy.*

¹⁰ *A former American soldier claimed that the U.S. military buried hundreds of gallons of chemicals at Camp Mercer in the 1960s and 70s. Nixon strikes again.*

His time in Korea consisted of Temporary Duty Deployments or TDD, doing off-base construction work at missile sites. They worked rebuilding security dog kennels, created erosion control projects, and built the concrete lincoln logs for the later purpose. Of course being the Army, they loaded these lincoln logs manually onto a lowboy semitrailer down in the motor pool. Lefty pointed out to the Sarge, that within their view was a forklift. The Sarge explained that the forklift did not belong to them and they could not borrow it for this job, which puzzled Lefty because its color was an exact match for his funny green suit. Lefty injured his back doing this job, and this would bother but not disable him, for the rest of his life.

Back on base at Camp Humphreys¹¹, he also saw Korean soldiers in training to kill their cousins in the north over political differences, as well as the general societal decay of the US twenty-plus year military colonization. The local city buses used tires with non-directional treads stamped *for military use only* on the sidewalls, and the local shops were full of black market American goods apparently stolen off the unloading ships in the harbor. He did attend a wonderful Bob Hope USO show late into his tour. Lefty never cared for his politics, but Hope performed a great service to many GI's, over many decades with his shows.

Music became important because of the homesickness and the proximity to Japan, where most of the audio equipment originated. One result was the availability of high quality stereo and quad music systems at good prices in the Post Exchange Store called the PX.

In this environment without many places to spend your Army money, he saved most of his in savings bonds. He did buy a modest stereo system, which he later shipped home and then loaned to his Irish twin brother when he was attending graduate school at the time, while he left for his last five months of service at Ft. Bragg.

He heard the music of Elton John and Carlos Santana in Basic. He heard Rod Stewart and Faces, Cheech and Chong and Curtis Mayfield in AIT. He heard Joe Walsh, Mott the Hoople, Carole King, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Savoy Brown for the first time in Korea. Guys thrown together from around the country and a long way away from home, led to many cultural and music discoveries. Puerto Rican troops would sit around on weekends drinking 100 proof rum out of water tumblers, and teach everyone swear words in Spanish. In the Army, you got peer labeled as either a juicer (boozer) or a head (pot smoker).

In the Korean nightclubs, the hookers sat around a stove for heat in the winter, and GI's would walk in and select one to their liking, who would walk them to her paper-lined hut and screw them short time or long time. Maybe she would try to steal their wallets, or maybe not. Maybe she would try to get them to marry them and take them back to the US, known as the land of the great PX.

The Army in its wisdom helped direct them to the correct club for them to frequent providing a large billboard sign at the base exit listing the names of the clubs, with the tally of VD cases reported at each over the past month. According to common lore, if you did go on *sick call* with that problem, the doc would ask which club you recently visited, bringing out a photo album for identification of the girl involved. Later the MP's would visit her, bring her back to base and the doc would pump a shot of penicillin in her ass, and the MP's would deliver her back home, he later learned.

The village, built up tight to the base gate, required you to step through the muddy streets, where urine ran through the open gutters and open defecation was common. He tried hard to rationalize that while these people live in filth and in paper huts, they only needed us to teach them how to kill their cousins.

¹¹ Named for Chief Warrant Officer Humphreys, who died in a helicopter accident.

Some guys maintained girlfriends called yobo's, who they kept in the village and slept off base. Korean cooking of food was done in an open area over a round charcoal brick in a pit, and ducted to provide radiant floor heating for the wood and paper constructed huts in the winter. Some GI's died, poisoned by the leaking heating systems; others woke to severe headaches during the night and knew enough to suspect carbon monoxide poisoning. These experiences ended up being the germination of a seed that later led him to join Peace Corps and travel to West Africa to try to help. He also needed to clear his conscience from Nixon forcing him into being another classic ugly American GI abroad.

A tour of Korea, was classified as a "hardship tour," which disallowed families from joining. His tour of duty required 12 months, and 29 days of service with no rest and relaxation or R&R. The week of his 21st birthday, he took a leave accompanied by a Korean friend, and rode a civilian bus south to the furthestmost point in the country. From the ocean beach in Pusan, he was as far away from the base as was possible. He did not speak the language or particularly enjoy the local food, but he needed to be far away from the Army for a while. He needed to celebrate this personal milestone, reflect on his life to this point, and prepare himself for his final six months.

While out on TDD, his crew worked building a concrete ditch down the mountain road from the helipad to keep the road from washing out during the annual monsoon rains. Near the infamous Incheon harbor, this particular missile site presented a spectacular view of the East China Sea. Of course, the Army way was digging this ditch during the winter, using a jackhammer and pickaxes to remove the frozen dirt. They rode to the job site on wood benches in the back of a dump truck covered with a wood framed canvas top. Working in what felt similar to a prison chain gang, Lefty frequently dreamed about stowing away on a merchant ship down in the harbor, to find his way back home to civilization and freedom. Later on, they would fly to job sites on Chinook helicopters. He thought them to be scary, loud, and cold. The pilot would sometimes leave the rear entry ramp open to make the experience less claustrophobic, and give them a view of the countryside.

In the early spring, they poured the concrete for the ditch. This work reflected a classic Army four-part FUBAR¹² operation. The cement mixer sat on a lowboy semi-trailer, with piles of sand, gravel, and bags of cement stacked alongside. Then the draftees¹³ and volunteers¹⁴ would shovel the sand and gravel up over their heads into the mixer and pass the 40 lb. bags of the cement to someone up top, who would pour in the powder. With the concrete mix made, a dump truck pulled up alongside the mixer and the batch dumped in. The truck would then back up the mountain road and dump the load onto the road surface where the prisoners, err soldiers, would shovel the mix into the wooden forms built by the local Korean workers. A trailer mounted air compressor would run the vibrator, which was then plunged into the forms to remove any air pockets from the mix.

This air compressor was hard to start in the cold thin mountain air atop this mountain. The Army in its wisdom did not provide ether starter spray, with good reason perhaps. They would instead use a stick, wrapped with a rag soaked in diesel fuel, lit on fire, and held under the air intake of the compressor's naturally aspirated diesel engine. Cranking the engine over, while allowing it to suck in the flames, nearly always made the engine start. Giving

¹² *FUBAR is a military acronym for "fucked up beyond all/any recognition/ repair/ reason/ redemption."*

¹³ *Lefty rejected a sergeant's offer during basic training, to sign up for an additional year and select his choice of Military Occupational Specialty or MOS. He recalls his response being something about he may have been born at night, but not last night.*

¹⁴ *Many volunteers who joined to avoid being drafted, worked on the same crew, just for a year longer. They typically did not enjoy this being pointed out to them. After all, they had been promised they would "Be All They Could Be" and selected the MOS they wanted; but alas they were lied to. Nixon strikes again!*

draftees a can of ether starting spray in this environment would possibly ensure they would blow the heads off the engine using the “if some is good, more is better and too much is just enough” logical theory.

On this site, the temperature would fall below freezing at night, and the Army did not want the newly poured concrete to freeze before curing, which would cause weakening. Someone needed to cover the forms with tarps and connect the hoses to a Herman Nelson heater underneath the tarps. Liking the idea of having the next day off, he frequently agreed to this duty, despite his nervousness due to the gasoline fuel tanks of these heaters being mounted directly over the burner. Lefty would stay up all night talking with the guards in the guard shack and would refuel the heater after it shut off, being sensible enough to allow a cool down period first.

These guards are just nuts he thought, talking about killing border crossers. These guys held the 11 Bravo or infantry MOS and were way too high strung for comfort, he thought. Close enough to hear gunfire from the DMZ area, in those days Korea frequently operated under martial law¹⁵. United Nations Peacekeeping Force his ass he thought, these places have missiles for a reason. Rumor had it that the red tipped ones were the nukes.

Out on another TDD job, they covered a helipad using a heavy rubber mat held down with giant thumbtacks built from three quarter inch rebar rods and six-inch diameter flat diamond plate heads welded together. The first attempted landing of a double blade Chinook helicopter, blew the whole mess down the mountainside, and was recovered by the villagers and then disappeared. Their group returned to the site later, spread cement powder over the helipad area, tilled in with a rototiller, and then wetted down. This “soil stabilization” was the Army’s Plan B.

At another location, they rebuilt a security dog kennel by installing and wiring some security lights, creating a gravity fed water supply system, and building a fence around the kennel. The missile sites had a double fence enclosure, and the MP’s ran the dogs between the fences at night to discourage intruders, known as *slicky boys*, or thieves. As an Army trained electrician,¹⁶ there was not much work for him and he did whatever ordered to do. For the most part, he and his buddies helped to reduce the apparent excess inventory of canned beer in-country.

One advantage of off-base temporary duty was that they reported to a sergeant, with no officer’s onsite. This was a more relaxed environment being off-base and absent the constant verbal harassments and harping of getting a haircut, polishing those boots, buttoning that pocket, or tucking in that shirt.

Later during his tour in Korea, his unit moved to a larger camp near the center of the country, and into a modern volunteer army or MVA barracks. The barracks was now a concrete-block dorm-type building and each individual room contained four bunks, wardrobe lockers, and a desk under the window with a lamp, not to mention a throw rug on the floor. This new modern volunteer army was *quite the deal* he thought, not. You still showered with a dozen of your buddies, but the days of the old wooden barracks bunk, footlocker, bunk, footlocker, as far as the eye could see was now in the past. Living in the barracks during the evenings you typically could not see to the end of the hallway, for the cloud of pot smoke. The most egregious potheads would have their room door removed, at least for a time.

¹⁵ *Martial law is the imposition of the military as the head of the government.*

¹⁶ *The day they gave the aptitude tests to assign each of them an MOS in Basic, it was excessively hot inside the building, Lefty about to pass out, just filled in any old answers on the test just to get outside for some air. If these tests were done right, he would probably have been sent to Office Candidate School OCS, and likely died as a second lieutenant in Nam. In the end, it worked out for the best.*

At one point due some Middle East turmoil, they went on full alert. Ordered to form up, march to the armory, and draw weapons with no ammo, and then sit in the barracks in the dark for several hours until the crisis passed.

They put up a poster they purchased out in the village on the wall of their room.

I Want to go Home - Korea

I AM DRUNK, SICK. PISSED OFF, STUPID, AND HUNGRY. I HAVE A HANGOVER, FLATBROKE, NEED A HAIRCUT, TIRED, AND NO MAIL. I MISSED BEDCHECK, NO PUSSY, NO FRIENDS, AND DAMNED FEW RELATIVES.

I AM IN DEBT, POOR CHARACTER RATING, AND AM OVERTIME INGRADE.

MY LAUNDRY WAS REJECTED, I MISSED CHOW, AND MY LEAVE WAS DISAPPROVED.

I LOST MY SHOT RECORD, HAVE NO BUTTS TO SMOKE, CAN'T SHAVE, GOT A DR. 3 DAYS AWOL, AND THE 1ST SGT WANTs TO SEE ME AFTER THIS FORMATION.

I GOT A HARD ON, GOT VD, ABOUT TO SHIT MY PANTS AND THE LATRINE IS OFF LIMITS UNTIL AFTER THE INSPECTION, AND THEN SOME SON-OF-A-BITCH SAYS, "RE-ENLIST FOR THE BENEFITS"!

In Korea he met a baby-faced youngster from Pennsylvania known as The Kid. His first time away from home and Lefty's platoon members reveled when he lost his cherry, and continued to be otherwise morally corrupted by the members of his unit. With all the drinking, whoring and swearing, his own mother may not be able to recognize him when back home, Lefty thought.

At one point, a mechanic joined the unit named SP4 Schneider who did a tour of Vietnam prior to Korea. He would regale us with stories from when he was in Nam as a tank mechanic, and drove a Contact tool truck. As Nam is primarily jungle, the tanks did not get much use. His main job turned out to be going around the country to these tanks and welding the water drain holes shut in bottom of the ammo boxes. These boxes were bolted onto the tanks, and designed to hold machine gun ammunition. The tank crews however wanted to repurpose them into beer coolers, and needed the holes closed for that to work properly. Lefty called that, *conflicted priorities*.

In Korea, they worked on an erosion control project where they built a structure against the hillside of a mountain. The projects purpose was to keep the road above from washing down into the motor pool. This structure made of concrete lincoln log type interlocking pieces about the size of parking lot stops. Using a crane, they would stack these structures in squares about twenty feet high and a few hundred feet long, filling them with blast rock out of the quarry, as they built them vertically.

Back on base during the previous winter, Lefty would help pour concrete into the oil coated steel forms to create these "lincoln logs." They would then cover them with tarps and blow heat under the tarps using a Herman Nelson heater. He would stay up at night babysitting and fueling these heaters in part because he would receive the next day off. Because these heaters tended to blow up, no one else was anxious to take on the task. Of course Lefty carried his *don't give a shit* draftee attitude with him at all times.

Lefty also spent time traveling in the trucks while out on TDD. They traveled to and from the rock quarry hauling the needed blast rock. The Army required two men, both a driver and a spotter to be present in each truck. His official job at the worksite was generator operator, which unofficially meant he ensured that the refrigerator kept their beer cold. They lived in tents, with dirt floors and no heat, but they somehow managed to acquire a fridge and keep it stocked with cold beer. Ah, the priorities of young men thousands of miles away from home. He built a sandbagged shed for the generator, topped with the wood framed canvas roof from the five-ton dump truck. He setup two 55-gallon gasoline barrels for fuel supply and the generator would run for days without refueling. Lefty planned this to have time to ride the trucks as a spotter, and avoid other grunt work.

Whenever their travels took them near an Air Force base, they would stop in to eat. The food was airlifted in, and they enjoyed a massive buffet with three meats, potatoes, and vegetables. In contrast, the Army grunts were trucked the less desirable food which frequently meant choices between hot dogs and hamburgers or occasionally roast beef and liver. When finished eating at the mess hall they scraped their plates into garbage cans, where the common saying was to remember that today's garbage, is tomorrow's fruit salad.

When they went out in the field and were not near a base, they would eat K-rations, apparently left over from the Korean War. These meals came in cans and they opened them with the small can openers that they kept on their dog tag chains around their necks. They also came with a small charcoal piece and a disposable stand to hold the can. They could then heat up a can of ham and eggs chopped for example, to a nasty lukewarm mess of a congealed greasy food-related substance. These *meals* also contained canned fruit, a canned dessert, and included two unfiltered cigarettes in the package. Many times as they traveled, they would punch a hole in the top of a can of so-called food, and place it on the truck exhaust manifold to heat up while going down the road.

When they ran the trucks offsite, strict discipline did not exist which allowed them to pick up a twelve pack of beer at the PX for the quarry roundtrip. Typically a whole day trip, they drove over bad dirt roads which led to the center of the country, and then to a four lane north and south concrete highway which ran the country's entire length. The iron pipe barricades dividing the north and south lanes had steel wheels on them to allow them to roll away, and the highway used as an airstrip in the event of another war. Once at the freeway exit, they faced many more miles of bad dirt roads to the quarry.

They also learned to split shift these trucks for maximum acceleration through the manipulation of both shift levers. Hooking their left arms through the steering wheel to shift the Hi-Lo transfer case lever, they would use their right hands to shift the transmission gearshift lever. They would then be able to shift from 1st low to 1st high to 2nd low to 2nd high and so forth. This was a learned skill, not unlike speed shifting his hot rods.

Because they made these all-day trips¹⁷ to the quarry hauling the blast rock, they wanted maximum speed on the four-lane highway, especially for the return trip with blast rock loaded level to the top of the truck sidewalls. Using a combination of fuel screw adjustment on the diesel engine fuel pump, stretching the waste gate spring in the turbocharger, and mixing gasoline with the diesel fuel, their top speed increased to 60 MPH.

They discovered that putting enough fuel into the engine, would cause the unburned excess to run up the vertical exhaust pipe on the passenger side of the cab to deliver a nice-looking six-inch orange red flame when meeting the outside air at the angled exhaust pipe outlet. Flipping down the engine side panel, would reveal the turbocharger glowing a nice bright cherry red. The Continental truck engines were labeled as multi-fuel, and they decided

¹⁷ *These quarry runs were often made at night during curfew.*

this meant they could fill up one of the 50-gallon saddle tanks with diesel and the other with gasoline. They would then use the electric transfer pump switch to sweeten the diesel fuel with gasoline from time to time. As a result, required engine oil changes became more frequent than normal.

One time a truck driver came back from the quarry with one giant rock that filled the entire bed of his five-ton dump truck, as a joke. He either forgot to calculate or did not care if the truck would drive the heavy load up the mountain road to the base. When the truck could not, the sergeant made him break the giant boulder up inside the truck bed with a jackhammer. It turned out to be not so funny anymore, at least for him.

Lefty and a mechanic buddy named Boldt from Pennsylvania also repaired these WWII vintage trucks. The many years of accumulated grease and dirt made the trucks hard to work on. The solution they found was to drive the trucks into town, and allow the locals to pump diesel fuel out of the tanks in trade for their steam cleaning services.

On one remodel job at a dog kennel, their sergeant was being pressured by the brass to finish the job, but they lacked the necessary materials to accomplish this due to supply problems. Mimicking Marines, the Army guys who liked the discipline lenient Polish Sarge nicknamed Ski, *improvised adapted and overcame*, trading surplus cement bags for water pipes down in the village. These pipes were probably previously stolen military property anyway. They escaped being busted with that one too, but probably would have been court martialed if caught by the brass for doing either.

When back on base, he would play for the softball team during the evening games. They would play the other branches of service including the Navy guys who unlike them would have the day off before a game. They would meander onto the ballfield in their sloppy dress and scraggy beards, allowed in those days. Lefty got thrown out of one of these games for second-guessing a bad call at second base. This is precisely why you do not want sergeants as umpires, Lefty later fumed to his teammates after the game over some beers.

When his tour was over, he brought back small gifts for each family member, including two sets of beautifully hand carved wood statues of elderly Korean couples as gifts for his paternal and maternal grandparents.

After Christmas leave at home he was required to serve another five months at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. He had requested Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. On the other hand, he requested to do his tour in Hawaii before shipping off to Korea. He suspected that they Army just asked this question to mess with them. Bragg was a buttoned up place compared to Korea, and he did not enjoy the excessive discipline on base.

He met some real characters including a funny little guy named Pagett, often teased as a ridge-running Kentucky hillbilly and born with one leg shorter than the other. He was comical and said self-deprecating things, like "shoot we just got plumbing up to the house last year."

He got pulled over for speeding off base one time and the cop only gave him a warning perhaps because he was a GI and didn't notice or ignored that fact that he carried a suspended Illinois license, had offered an expired Missouri vehicle registration as proof of ownership, and displayed expired Delaware license plates on the car.

At Bragg, he drove his dump truck around base for various construction projects. Lefty's work ethic came from his dad and he did the required work, including dirty jobs pumping out a sewage ditch, shoveling dirt or whatever. Many guys spent more effort hiding from work, than required to just do it. Alternatively, they reported to sick call. As a result, the sergeants depended on him for some leadership, and tolerated his short timer draftee attitude. He felt like the one-eyed man made king, in the land of the blind.

A few months before his discharge, his unit needed to support Marine and Army Airborne units playing war games out in the woods. Because their engineering unit was a support unit for the 82nd Airborne, their job would be to make roads and otherwise support these war game operations. They formed up a big slow truck convoy for the 150-mile whole day trip towards the coast, near the Marine base at Camp Lejeune.

After setting up their tent camp, they hauled culverts to make roads into the woods, and hauled sawdust from a local sawmill back to camp and place around the generals' tent so he would not get his boots muddy. As a northerner, Lefty had never been down south before, and was amazed at how the sawdust pile was white with the now exposed termites as the loader scooped buckets to fill his truck at the sawmill.

Despite the tent camping and dirt floors, he liked being in the woods, as always. This despite tree spiders the size of saucer plates and hundreds of little babies riding on their backs, which would roam their living spaces. He and his buddy Reno from the Lake Tahoe area ran barefoot on the trails through the woods, in the early evenings. This was a place of limited rules, and guys would roll out of their bunks in the morning fire up a joint, or crack a beer, before their eyes completely opened. Coolers of beer sat everywhere. He knew guys adept at rolling a joint in the back of an open deuce and a half¹⁸ going down the road; this was the 70s after all.

At one point in his trucking travels, he came across a military convoy in his path, after waiting patiently and driving slowly behind for a while, he decided he did not care for the pace. Unclear regarding the proper protocols he pulled out and passed, as Lefty was *Short* now, and gave less of a shit than usual.¹⁹ This soon seemed to be a mistake as he saw in his mirrors the whole convoy stopping behind him, and the blue flashing lights of the Army Jeep closing in, with some MP's who just happened to have a *bird coronel* with them. The *bird* inquired "just what the hell did he think *he* was doing passing *his* convoy". Lefty supplied some semi-invented bullshit about being under direct orders from his General to move this sawdust directly back to camp with no delays, and after some back and forth, this worked. The coronel bought his bullshit, but gave him a stern warning nonetheless. Truth be told, his hurry involved being back to camp in time for beer-thirty with the guys.

They did not have showers at their tent camp only a small lake to bathe in, and were allowed drive to the base at Camp Lejeune to take showers once a week. Later, everyone would learn that this water had been contaminated for some twenty years.²⁰

One early morning some guys he did not know tried to wake him up to drive something they called a *honey wagon*. He told them that he worked some double shifts and was supposed to have the day off, encouraged them to screw off, and went back to sleep. Next thing he knew, a big burly unknown sergeant was standing over his cot barking a direct order to get up and drive a truck. He was *volunteer-assigned* to a crew that would pump out the portable toilets the troops used. They would pump this into a tanker truck, aka *honey wagon*.

Lefty never drove a tanker truck before, but soon figured it out as he could drive anything with wheels since being a teenager. They drove through the encampments out in the woods, his team handling the hoses to do the job. When the tanker was full, their directions were to travel through the local town to dump the load at a local landfill site. On their subsequent trip to the town dump, they ran up onto another slow moving convoy and now knowing better,

¹⁸ This is a two and a half ton truck with wood benches used for troop transport.

¹⁹ Short timer or Short, was a term used by GIs to describe being close to getting out of a place or out of the Army in general. Guys would say things like "I am so short that I need a ladder to get into my truck."

²⁰ During that time, service members and their families living at the base bathed in and ingested water contaminated with harmful chemicals. Some former base residents later developed cancer or other ailments, and claimed that leaders concealed the problem and did not resolve it, or notify them of the risk.

remained behind this time. The locals came out of their houses to line the road and wave to the troops in the truck convoy, with us now bringing up the rear. The honey wagon crew now laughed their asses off watching in the rear view mirrors, as our truck passed, and at how the civilians transitioned from waving their hands to holding their noses.

Once in the town, they stopped at a stoplight. At one of these stoplights, there was an open Jeep with officers in the next lane over. Lefty stopped short, and some liquid from the over-filled truck splashed over the sides. This was again hilarious to watch the reaction of the officers to the newly discovered aroma.

Back at their temporary camp in the woods, he barely escaped a terrible highway accident when he blew out a tire around a high-speed curve. He always drove fast, and some unknown knucklehead GI put a retread tire on the front left wheel. These typically stayed only on the rear, due to their unreliability, and uncharacteristically, Lefty did not notice the tire being there on this particular truck. This was the worst possible place for a blowout, as this problem could have pushed him into oncoming traffic. He was however able to wrangle his beast of a dump truck over to the side of the road and repaired it shortly with the spare tire.

They also did some work for a local farmer who responded by supplying a pig. Before they broke camp, they all enjoyed a big pig roast out there in the woods.

At one point, they brought their civilian vehicles to the camp and wore civilian clothing during their off times. They found a country bar within walking distance of their camp, where they could party and commiserate during their off hours. He first heard Rare Earth's *Think of the Children* on the jukebox there. When the time came for them to leave, and he needed to drive the Buick back, he had someone else drive the car back to base allowing him to drive his truck. After sitting idle for a while, the car battery was dead and it would not start. They did not have any jumper cables, but one of the guys suggested a *hillbilly jumpstart* method of touching bumpers with another car to achieve a ground connection, and then using a metal coat hanger to connect the positive battery posts. Lefty did this and while it worked the guy failed to mention the coat hanger would become extremely hot in the process and without any gloves, he now had the burn marks on his hands as proof.

After the war games, it became just a matter of going through the Army out-processing paperwork, for release to his long awaited freedom on his 22nd birthday.

Back home after his honorable discharge, he received a letter from the Army inviting him to come and play war-games at the local military base for a couple of weeks. He responded with a well-crafted letter letting them know he was completely disinterested in doing this, as he was now working and planning to attend college. He not so mildly requested that they leave him the hell alone. Shortly after, he filed for and received Conscientious Objector discharge status, assisted by the great Quakers at The American Friends Service Committee. He did not want to play war games for two weeks every summer with these warmongers at an Army base for the last four years of his six-year total commitment. Now, he was done with the military.

A short time later Nixon resigned in disgrace and Lefty held an honorable discharge signed by a dishonorable man. He hung his framed discharge paper upside down on the wall of his house and with that; his Army circle of life was complete.