

LOOKING FOR FLYBOYS

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To all the flight crews, maintenance teams, allied shops, and command personnel for their perseverance during the Vietnam War. Their skills kept the CH-47 Chinook in the air performing its duties for all the infantry units in the field. It is my hope that this book sheds some light on our sacrifices.

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LOOKING FOR FLYBOYS

TOM MESSENGER

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

EVERYONE HAS A NUMBER

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK ME, “WHAT MADE YOU JOIN THE ARMY?” Or sometimes, “What made you join the Army Air Corps?” Often it’s, “What were you thinking?” And even, “What in God’s name were you thinking?”

It all began as I rode to work on the Rock Island train to Chicago. As I looked over the many faces, I saw the same blank stare and I thought to myself, *That’s me in ten to fifteen years*. They were staring across the coach, thinking about their mortgages, their kid’s dental bills and tuition, and yes, their wives.

I tried talking to these guys. All they could talk about was their kids, their wives, and sports. Every once in a while a good-looking lady would walk down the aisle and grab their attention. They would make a remark, a face, or a gesture. They were harmless, and every one of them insisted they were an expert on sex. These men vowed they were happy, but their faces betrayed them. I wondered if these guys had any adventure in their lives.

I just knew there had to be more. Everyone was following the same pattern and I was about to do the same. It looked like high

school, college, job, marriage, kids, mortgage, bills, bills, etc. Was this the order God wanted? It seemed most of the time life unfolded this way. Why couldn't I find adventure and have sex with a girl anytime I wanted, and not have a mortgage, kids, and bills (except a car payment for a 1962 Corvette)? It didn't get any better than that.

I left the LaSalle Street station and walked east on Jackson. I heard a loud clapping noise coming from the east. I looked up and saw three cool Army helicopters. I identified them as Bell UH-1s, otherwise called "Huey's." I was awestruck by what I saw. This was my epiphany. I knew it same as God made little green apples. I had to get on those helicopters, that day, that minute, that second. It wasn't about the other guys on the train. They had chosen their path; it was my turn to pick a path. I noticed I had a little spring in my step, a little swagger, and yes, a little bit of cockiness. I just had to find a way to get on those choppers.

I walked into the nearest Army Recruiting Center and asked, "Where do you keep the helicopters?"

The recruiter looked at me with a big smile on his face and said, "We usually keep them at a fort or Army airfield." Vietnam had been raging now for about five years and the Army was not too well thought of. My draft number was pretty low so I had to make a move. I was thinking if I signed on for an extra year I could get the job I wanted in aviation. I had a lot of questions to ask the recruiter, and he answered them all.

Recruiters are the Army's salesmen. If they need pilots, they go after people for pilot slots; mechanics, artillery, whatever it takes. In the old days they could embellish quite a bit. Remember, there are no French chefs in the Army, just cooks who are of French descent. I signed up for three years so I could get aviation mechanics. That could lead to a crew status like crew chief or flight engineer.

I signed up to leave on Jan 6, 1970. I went home to tell my parents. My mother was beside herself and beside her was my father, who was proud but concerned. At first I thought he took the news rather well, but he kept insisting I try pro baseball again. We both knew whenever a pitcher would throw a breaking ball my knees would buckle. I was the third oldest of nine kids. A year ago they had moved me from the upstairs bedroom to the back porch bedroom. They were slowly edging me out.

LIFE AS I KNEW IT WAS ABOUT TO CHANGE

MY FATHER DROVE ME DOWN TO THE INDUCTION CENTER on Van Buren St. in Chicago. He was offering tidbits of information about the Army and how to survive Basic Training and AIT (Advanced Individual Training). The last thing he said was, “Try to keep that smart mouth of yours shut.” As I got out of the car he tried to say more but the words never came out. He hugged me and I walked into the building. I knew what he was thinking: He had gone to war so I wouldn’t have to, but the plan hadn’t worked out. America has its wars. We are a fighting nation, and I sometimes think we love it. About a hundred of us took the oath that day and boarded a bus bound for Ft. Campbell, Kentucky.

A sick, queasy feeling came over me, and it reminded me of the first time I had gone to church summer camp. That was for two weeks; this was for three years. As I looked around the bus, I saw guys from all over the Midwest. They all had the same look of bewilderment. Was this going to be a great experience, or was this

next eight weeks going to be a laborious and torturous time in our lives? I will tell you this: If you have the proper frame of mind, you can get through times of uncertainty like this.

The bus pulled into the Ft. Campbell Welcoming Center. What a misnomer this was. Two soldiers got on the bus. Their uniforms were neatly pressed and tailor-made for their bodies. They had these round, brown hats on, like Smokey the Bear wears.

All of a sudden they started yelling at the top of their lungs. They had the most irritating voices I'd ever heard. They were speaking a new lingo I had never heard before: "Get into formation, form four ranks, dress right dress, right face (*this is my right face*), left face, (*yes I have a left side of my face*), come to attention, at ease (*nobody was at ease*)." This was a gaggle of men milling around, trying to satisfy the needs of two crazed Drill Sergeants.

Drill Sergeants, by the way, are not your friends; they are not kind, not understanding, not compassionate, not forgiving, not your big brother, not your advisor, and most of all, not human. They are loud, commanding, sadistic, short-tempered, and intolerant of rule-breaking and infractions. In all fairness, their main objective is to give you an even chance on the field of battle. It's all about acting and reacting, and most of that is mental. They have to break you down so they can build you up. The Army has been doing this for years and it works. Just don't take it personally.

The Drill Sergeants addressed us as trainees, maggots, pieces of dung or whatever else came into their minds. They started inspecting the ranks and taking a good look at us, stopping at every fourth soldier and asking, "Where are you from?" The men would answer, "Iowa," "Wisconsin," "Michigan"; they were from all over. One of them instructed us to call him "Drill Sergeant"; his title was that important. He stopped in front of me

and there was an awkward moment of silence between us, and I couldn't stand it anymore.

I blurted out, "How's it going, Sarge? Where do you keep the helicopters around here?" As I waited for an answer I saw his face turn red. His nostrils flared and his eyes bugged out so much I could see the little capillaries in the whites of his eyes. Then it came: Mount St. Helens started to erupt. That irritating voice was once again booming, this time three inches from my left ear. He commanded I get into a prone position and give him ten pushups. I was doing pushups in the parking lot of the Welcome Center! I was not doing well. With each pushup I would yell out, "One Drill Sergeant, two Drill Sergeant," etc.

The guy standing next to me thought this was amusing and had a smirk on his face. The Drill Sergeant saw this smirk and quickly turned his wrath on him. He ordered the young man to give him twenty pushups.

The young trainee objected with the lackluster excuse, "But I didn't do anything!"

The Drill Sergeant retorted, "You didn't do anything, *Drill Sergeant*." We immediately became friends, because misery loves company. Later on, we found out the best weapon you could have in your arsenal was silence, unless you were addressed by one of the cadre. You might also want to have a blank, motionless face. I asked myself, *What have I done enlisting in the Army?* I would ask myself this many times over the course of the next three years.

After we were processed, we all got haircuts and everyone looked around at each other, not recognizing anyone. We looked like a bunch of axe murderers. From haircuts we went to clothing issue. We walked into the largest clothing warehouse I had ever seen. People were yelling at us, "What size pants do you wear? What size shirt do you wear?"

We would say things like, “I don’t know, my mom knows, give her a call.” If you didn’t know, the Army would guess, and they didn’t guess too well. Everything was too baggy. Everything on me was too baggy in the legs, too baggy in the waist, too baggy in the ass, because I had no ass.

We all struggled with the weight of our new wardrobe. Some of us managed to stuff all the clothing into what they called a “duffle bag.” I figured this was all the clothing I would ever need or want. Being from a family of nine kids, I was always getting hand-me-downs. My parents were products of the Depression of the twenties and thirties, and they impressed their thinking on us. We double-timed to the barracks and quickly got acclimated to what would be our new home for the next eight weeks.

Each trainee was issued a wall locker, a foot locker, and a bed. My, my, my—my very own Army pieces of furniture. I didn’t have to share it with anyone. *Except for some yelling and screaming from the Drill Sergeants, this might not be a bad gig.* But of course, you change your mind every fifteen minutes in the Army. It’s a soldier’s right. Now it was time for chow, and they made us run double-time to a place called the mess hall.

This name really worried me: a “mess hall.” My stomach was growling so much, it was winning the battle over my vision of a mess hall. There was a line to get into the mess hall and another line inside. Everywhere you went in the Army there was a line. There is a theory that you have to hurry up and wait. Once I got to the hot table, I studied all the available selections: roast beef, chicken, vegetables, potatoes, corn. I decided to have a little of everything, even dessert. The mess hall had a milk machine, and two little signs that read “White Milk” and “Chocolate Milk.” I was surprised and elated that they had chocolate milk. So I put my glass under the spigot and all I got was white milk. I called the assistant cook over and told him I wanted chocolate milk.

“Trainees don’t get chocolate milk,” he said.

“The sign says chocolate milk,” I told him.

“Trainees don’t get chocolate milk till the last day of Basic Training.”

“Well, now I have something to look forward to, don’t I?”

I realized I was making another enemy and I backed off; besides, the man was a cook. No telling what he could do to me.

I sat down at a long table with five other guys with the idea of enjoying a big meal and having dessert and coffee and smoking a cigarette and just generally kicking back. No such luck.

A Drill Sergeant barked, “You have three minutes to eat and get out!” In the Army, you learn how to eat fast and smoke like a chimney.

After all this marching and running it was time to check out the bathrooms, but in the Army they called it the “latrine.” Why, I don’t know. If you look it up in the dictionary it simply means “a hole in the ground.” I walked into the latrine and to my horror I saw the oddest sight I had ever seen.

There were eight toilets in a row, with no walls separating them. I turned to a guy and said, “Where are the stalls?”

He looked at me with a stupid grin on his face and said, “There aren’t any.”

I told him, “Look, all I need is three walls, a rickety door, and a cheap bolt lock in order to pinch a loaf. Throw in some bawdy graffiti on the walls and I can really enjoy myself.”

Seven guys chimed in and said, “There ain’t any!” So I decided to suck it up, sit down, and have a group poop. I noticed they were all reading a section of newspaper. I asked if I could have a section and they gave me one. I dropped my pants and got all nestled in. Nothing looks more ridiculous than eight men sitting on toilets with their pants down around their ankles. More unnerving was the fact that each man’s knee touched the knee of the man sitting next to him.

I opened up my section of the newspaper and found out it was the obituaries. *Oh great, I'm reading about deaths of people I don't even know: Bill Dawson of Clarksville, Tennessee, died of a massive heart attack while raking his lawn. Oh God! Is this where my life has gone?* As it turned out, I had to go to the dispensary and they put a torpedo up my yoo-hoo (also called a stool softener). After that started working, I rejoined my fellow soldiers in the latrine, pants down, knees knocking, and read the editorial page.

We all hunkered down for the night; it had been a big day and we were all pretty tired and getting used to our new life. Besides, we were all tired of walking around in our underwear. No robes, no slippers, and no pajamas. I got into the top bunk. When you're six-foot-seven you're halfway up there anyways.

The guy in the lower bunk was a Mormon named Gary: nice fellow, big smile, with a long drawl when he spoke. I asked him if he wanted a cigarette but he said no thanks, he didn't smoke or drink or dance.

I asked him, "How do you woo a woman then? Those are the three things you need in your arsenal. I mean, women love men who can dance." There were some guys who could just flat out dance. They had no problem finding women.

Gary told me, "We just start courting women within our religion and then we get married, and if we want, we can have another wife."

I said, "Whoa, wait a minute, are you telling me you can have two wives?"

He responded in that long drawl, "Ooorrr mooorrrr." This really got my attention.

I asked, "So, theoretically, you could have six wives and go to bed with a different wife every night for six nights?"

He looked at me with a puzzled look on his face and said, "Yes,

you could, but you would have to rest on the seventh day because you would be pooped.”

I responded with, “Even God rested on the seventh.”

He said, “Who would want to do such a thing?”

This time it was my turn to look puzzled. Why wouldn’t you want to do such a feat if you could? “Well,” I said, “let me ask you this. If you wanted another wife, would you have to take the homely girls or could you still take the pretty girls?” He said it didn’t matter, they were all beautiful to him. I said, “No, seriously, do the homely guys have to marry the homely girls and the cool guys marry the pretty girls? No more wining, dining, or begging. I think you Mormons are on to something. Well, tell me more about it tomorrow.”

I started drifting off to sleep and I could hear guys sniffing and whimpering because they missed their mommies and daddies or girlfriends. Me, I was just trying to figure out how I was going to get six Mormon wives into a 1963 Corvette.

The beds in the Army were too short. In fact, most beds were too short for my long legs. There was no room to stretch them out. At this time I was six-foot-seven and prone to leg cramps. When I was at home I would get these terrible charley horses and wake up screaming for my mom. One night I was sleeping in the barracks and I had another one. I started yelling for my mom. Suddenly the Assistant Drill Sergeant was standing by my bunk, staring at me, wanting to know what the problem was.

I told him, “I get these charley horses and my mom rubs them out for me.”

He retorted, “Do I look like your mom?” I said no. Then he said, “Do you think I’m going to rub your leg?”

I replied, “Wouldja?”

Once again that booming voice came out: “Everybody get to sleep!” Boy, did I take a lot of shit from the guys after that.

Suddenly I was awakened from a sound sleep by a horrendous noise which sounded like somebody beating on a garbage can. Somebody was beating on a garbage can! It was the ungodly hour of 5:00 a.m. They were yelling at us to get up, get dressed, and get outside. This was our routine for the next eight weeks. Up early and running in formation and running to the chow hall, more exercise and marching and running to the mess hall. In between running and eating we had classes on hand-to-hand combat, chemical warfare, and infantry tactics.

One of the most popular exercises was pugil sticks. You used a stick with padding on the ends and you got to wear a football helmet. Then you beat the hell out of each other, taking your aggression and frustration out on another guy, and nobody got hurt. Everybody loved it and everybody wanted to do it again.

I only enjoyed two training classes in Basic; one was the grenade pits, and the other was the rifle range. These two operations are very dangerous and could be fatal. Everyone was focused when it came to these. One day you're driving around in your car, hanging out with friends, trying to find something to do, and the next day you're holding a one-pound explosive device in your hand capable of killing or injuring three to four people.

The training cadre performed an exercise with balloons, putting them in a thirty-foot circle and throwing a hand grenade into the middle of the circle. We watched from a distance and looked on in horror as the grenade exploded; every balloon popped. The military is the largest on-the-job training organization in the world. If you don't know how, they will teach you. Getting through the grenade exercise was pretty cool and most of us enjoyed it.

The next exercise was the rifle range. Isn't this a scary thought? One hundred guys you don't know, who have never handled an assault rifle, much less seen one, all holding a loaded weapon.

This was not like playing war in your backyard or popping off your Daisy Pump-Action BB gun. To be a good marksman, you have to put a lot of thought into what you're doing. You have to "zero your weapon in." This means adjusting the sight to the left or right in a nice shot group. It should also be noted that you have to control your emotions and heart rate. When shooting at silhouetted targets, most likely everyone can control their emotions, heart rate, and breathing. When you get into combat, it's another story.

One of the most important jobs was tearing the weapon down, cleaning it, and putting it back together. It seemed like the guys from Tennessee and Kentucky were really good at shooting and maintaining their M-14s. If anybody invaded the hills of Kentucky or Tennessee they would have a huge problem. Every man had to qualify with an M-14 or M-16 assault rifle, no matter what job you had in the Army. Everyone was a basic infantryman.

As Basic Training was winding down, you could start to see little changes in each man. The biggest change was that you were stronger and had more stamina. The second change was that you were more organized: a place for everything and everything in its place. The third change was that you were more conscious of your grooming and cleanliness. The fourth change was the growth of confidence and self-worth. Sometimes this led to cockiness and an overbearing attitude, but with a little counseling this could be managed.

Graduation day was upon us and everyone was busy pressing their class A uniforms, shining their dress shoes, getting last minute haircuts, shining their brass. It was time to get into the last formation of Basic Training and pass in review in front of our brigade commanders and battalion commanders. Eight weeks of marching, running, exercising, rifle range, hand-to-hand

combat, bayonets, chemical warfare, and health classes had come to an end. Delta 4-1 passed in review, smartly saluted the commanders, and waited to be inspected in four ranks. Eight weeks ago we didn't know what a rank was. After it was all over we threw our head covers up in the air and congratulated each other.

We returned to the barracks and waited for orders to our new duty stations. As the orders came in, small groups of guys would say their goodbyes, not knowing if we would ever see each other again. Some were going to infantry school, some were going to artillery school, and some were going to armor tank school. They were going all over the United States. I was the last one to leave. My orders were coming in the next day, so I had to sleep in the barracks all by myself that night. That was all right, because I could finally sit on an end toilet, smoke cigarettes, and read the whole paper. The next morning, the Drill Sergeant woke me up and told me to get up. I had a plane to catch to Fort Eustis, Virginia, home of the U.S. Army School for Aviation. The Army even gave me a voucher for plane fare to Newport News.

As I got into the taxi, a new batch of recruits was coming in. They looked like a mob, milling around the parking lot with no direction. It reminded me of a gaggle of geese looking for the wolf to come attack them. The wolves came, two of them with Smokey the Bear hats on. I knew what was going to happen next, and got into the taxi and smiled to myself.