

DOC!

The Adventures of a Navy Hospital Corpsman

HUGH SULLIVAN



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DOC!

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PO Box 3531
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email: info@hellgatepress.com

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This book is dedicated to Wanda—my loving, supportive, and loyal wife of forty-three years.. It was easy at times when I was in the middle of an adventure to forget that Wanda was at home handling everything involving three children—their health, school, and social problems. She took care of all the household matters, including the finances, dealing with broken down cars, plumbing and electrical troubles, and so on, while at the same time holding down a full-time job. There is no way I could ever express my appreciation for what she did to keep our family on firm ground and support my career. And without her prompting I would never have undertaken this book project. Thanks, Wanda, I love you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are instances in telling this story where I do not fully recall all the issues and details, and have taken the liberty to ad-lib a bit in order to keep the story moving. In addition, anyone who knows me and reads this book might be able to identify their aliases. It is my sincere hope that I have not offended any of you and if I have, I apologize.

ONE

YOU COULD SEE THE HEAT WAVES SLIGHTLY ABOVE the asphalt quarter-mile track that surrounded the football field.

“Damn it’s hot to be so early in June,” Bruce said.

I asked, “Do you think it will be this hot at Great Lakes?”

Bruce laughed and said, “They’re probably still digging out from last winter’s snow.”

“Is there supposed to be some kind of magic about this graduation ceremony tonight that requires two rehearsals before the actual ceremony?”

Columbia, South Carolina’s (S.C.) Olympia High School Class of 1961 was preparing for graduation on June 2nd. It was the largest graduating class in the history of the school—fifty-two students. Twenty-eight of the graduates started in the first grade together. The entire school from first through twelfth only numbered around 500 students. The school supported the families that primarily worked in the local cotton mills. While this class had its share of honor students, including one headed for the Air Force Academy, it will probably be remembered best for its athletic prowess. This graduating class won two state championships in basketball, two in baseball, and finished the football season that year with a nine and three record, the best in the previous four years. A number of the graduates already had wedding plans, though many joked that dating someone from Olympia was like “dating one’s sister or brother.”

I made my decision to escape the cotton mill way of life and join the Navy. I signed the necessary papers the Friday before graduation. I was to report to the Federal Courthouse on Monday morning to be part of a

recruiting class that was being sent to the Great Lakes Illinois Recruit Training Center for twelve weeks of basic recruit training.

The decision to join the Navy was not a spur of the minute one. It was made three years earlier when I and three older friends decided to borrow (steal) a car to go for a joy ride. It did not take long to find a 1952 Ford with the keys in it. Once we were in the car and out of the general area, the decision was made to go to New York where we would be put up at one of the older guy's cousin's house until we could find jobs.

Unfortunately we had little money, and half a tank of gas would not get us to New York. We were caught by the local police stealing gas from an automobile in South Hill, Virginia. As it turned out this was a Federal offense since we had crossed state lines. I was fifteen at the time and was in a position to have my trial separated from the older boys who were seventeen.

I remained loyal to my friends and refused to rat them out by saying I did not know what was going on. Consequently I was sentenced to five years federal probation. After a couple years of reporting monthly to my probation officer I asked if this would keep me from joining the military. My probation officer indicated that he could get my probation rescinded if I would join the South Carolina National Guard. I joined the following week, just before the beginning of my junior year summer vacation. Good to his word, my probation officer was able to get the remainder of my probation canceled. That summer I spent four weeks at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, undergoing training and digging a lot of foxholes.

I knew I was facing a two-year enlistment as soon as I graduated from high school. My entire senior year I worried about those two years of living in the mud and eating military food that came from WWII warehouses. In May of 1961 I made the decision to talk to the Navy recruiter and see if I could join. Even with the federal probation in my background the Navy accepted me.

I came from a poor but proud family. I got one new pair of shoes at the beginning of school every year and when they wore out I went barefoot. Olympia High School was fairly lax on things like bare feet and even smoking. The kids could smoke anywhere on the grounds of the school except in the classrooms.

My family was not much different than most in the neighborhood. My dad drank too much, but he never got violent when he was drunk. He worked as a welder in the local granite quarry and my mom worked in one of the cotton mills. She worked the third shift, which was from 11:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. Both my parents were smokers so I took up smoking at the ripe old age of twelve. Their respective jobs were hard and grueling. While my dad was at work during the day my mom was sleeping. This gave me ample opportunity to get in trouble. While everyone in the community knew one another they were quick to report misbehavior by any of the kids in the neighborhood. My biggest problem seemed to be that I could not avoid fights. I rarely won but would not back down. This attitude probably reduced the number of fights I was actually engaged in. While not a star by any means, I did letter in football and track.

I guess all in all I was lucky to be getting the opportunity to break the chains of the cotton mills.

The graduation was kind of anticlimactic. The biggest event of the ceremony was when three guys who had been drinking since the last rehearsal fell off of the top step of the bleachers and disrupted the ceremony long enough for them to be escorted off stage. The audience was assured that all were ok, that they were just being checked out to make sure they had not broken anything and that they would receive their diplomas after the ceremony.

TWO

TUESDAY, JUNE 5, 1961, I WAS SWORN INTO THE U.S. Navy along with fourteen other guys from the Columbia, S.C. area. We were given a bus ride to the Columbia Regional Airport and from there we flew into Chicago, Illinois.

It did not take long for this adventure to get interesting. When I arrived in Chicago I found that there were about sixty other recruits from around the southeast waiting for transportation to the Recruit Training Center (RTC). All were loaded onto Greyhound busses for the trip. My group of about twenty was anything but quiet and cooperative. One of them found that if you hit the bus window at the top it would fall out. It was built that way for safety reasons. The first time this occurred, the bus driver stopped the bus and gave a stern warning against any further such behavior. He went outside and closed the window. Well what was one to expect?

No sooner was the bus on the road when almost every window on the bus was knocked out and hanging on the side of the bus. The driver knew he was not going to win this one. I don't know how he warned them but when we arrived at the Recruit Depot we paid the piper. There were ten Shore Patrolmen waiting for us. We were ordered off the bus and herded into a large drill hall that was about the size of three basketball courts. During the winter months, drills outside were almost impossible because of the heavy snows. They stood us up in the middle of the drill hall and did not say another word to us. This was about 2200 (10:00 p.m. in civilian time). We stood there all night. We were not allowed to sit or move from our allotted space. At 0500 a chief petty officer came in and asked if any of us was interested in going for a bus ride. So began my second day in the Navy.

Anyone who has been through one of the military's basic training systems knows what a pain that experience is. Anyone who has not been through one would never understand, so there is no need to discuss it in detail. I do feel a need to explain that things were a lot different in the military of 1961 than they are today. Our Company Commander (CC) was an active duty first class petty officer and a Korean War veteran. He needed help from some of us recruits to ensure that things were done according to his and the Navy's requirements. He made recruit petty officer assignments based upon any prior military experience. Since I had served ever so briefly in the National Guard, I was assigned the position of the Boatswain Mate of the Watch. In that capacity I made up all the watch bills and stood no watches myself.

The most interesting assignment was the assignment of Master at Arms. The CC looked out over the company of approximately sixty recruits and found the biggest guy in the group. He brought him up front and after determining his name said, "Antoinette, you are my Master at Arms." Antoinette smiled. The CC asked him if he knew what that job entailed. Antoinette said, "No, Sir." The CC explained that he would be the enforcer of all the commands given by the CC and any of the senior recruit petty officers, and that he would get one additional recruit liberty.

Antoinette smiled. Then the CC asked if there was anyone in the Company who thought they would like to be the Master at Arms. A spark plug of a guy standing about 5'9" stepped forward and said that he thought he would like the job. The CC turned to Antoinette and asked if he wanted to give the job to the new guy. Antoinette said, "Hell no." The CC said, "It looks like we have a problem." Because of the wet snowy winters all the barracks had small drying rooms where hot dry air was forced through to dry our uniforms after we hand washed them. The CC suggested that Antoinette and the new guy go into the drying room and decide who was going to be the Master at Arms. As soon as the door was closed you could hear fists flying. After about five minutes, with a busted nose and a big grin on his face the spark plug stated, "I'm the Master at Arms." I knew at that moment that life in the Navy was not going to be a lark.

I made no lasting friends in boot camp and never saw one of my boot camp mates later in my career.

The most significant event in recruit training is classification day, when based upon scores from various test and the “needs of the Navy” you find out what job you will be doing after graduation. I was numb through most of the test from the previous day’s grueling schedule but scored high enough to be assigned as a hospital corpsman. There were two “A” Schools that taught basic hospital corpsman courses. One was right there in Great Lakes, the other was in San Diego, California. Typical Navy logic: I was at Great Lakes but my orders for training were to San Diego.

After a short recruit leave of five days I caught a train from Columbia, S.C. to San Diego. The train ride was an adventure in and of itself. Before joining the Navy I had only been out of the state twice, once in a stolen car and once to visit my oldest sister who was married to a sailor and lived in Pensacola, Florida.

By the time I got to San Diego I was down to my last \$.75 cents. In the train station I saw Sailors wandering around all over. I finally found one that did not look too intimidating and asked him where the naval base was located. He looked at me somewhat confused and asked, “Which one?” I asked, “How many are there?” “At least eight in the San Diego area,” he told me. Knowing that I was really lost he asked to see my orders. When he saw them he said I was going to the naval hospital at Balboa, and gave me general directions. Wanting to save my little bit of change I threw my seabag over my shoulder and started to walk in the general direction he had pointed. After about fifteen blocks I started to look for a bus stop. While standing on the corner a car stopped and a chief petty officer driving asked where I was going. I told him Balboa Naval Hospital. He said, “Throw your seabag in the back seat and hop in. I’m going that way.”

I did so and immediately upon getting into the front seat I knew something was wrong. The seat was wet. About that time he said, “Oh hell, I forgot my girlfriend got sick and threw up on the seat.”

Well needless to say I made quite an impression when I reported to the Hospital Corps School at Balboa Naval Hospital. I smelled so bad that the petty officer that was checking me in would not let me come into his office. I had to slide my orders and records across the room to him. He told me where the barracks were and that there was someone there that would get me settled. The petty officer at the barracks was just as nice and accommodating as the previous one. He made me stand outside and he threw the bed linens out into the hall and gave me directions to my squad bay. Lucky for me there was no one in the area so I had time to get out of my smelly blues, grab my shaving kit and find the shower. I took the dress blues with me and washed the vomit out as best I could. Dress blues are 100% wool and smell like a wet dog when damp. But at least I didn't have to explain the smell.

Hospital Corps School was extremely difficult. I had to learn all the muscles, all the bones and all the organs in the human body and their functions. We had to learn to identify symptoms of various ailments and identify treatment plans for the problems. We learned to give shots by giving them to each other. We learned to draw blood and start intravenous medications by again doing it to each other. We learned to suture minor wounds. Although the course was tough, I did find that I had more freedom and had a chance to make a few friends. We would study together and go on liberty and drink together. The enlisted men's club was the least expensive place to drink so we spent a lot of time and money there.

After Corps School I was assigned to the Commander, U.S. Amphibious Forces, Pacific Fleet, at the Naval Amphibious Base on Coronado Island near San Diego. The Navy ran liberty boats from the Navy's 5th Street Landing in San Diego to the Naval Amphibious Base every thirty minutes. There was also a civilian ferry system that ran between San Diego and North Island. If you took the civilian ferry you were still about three miles from the amphibious base. When I reported in I was told that I would be working in the base clinic and told to report to Chief Bowers at the clinic. Things went fairly well to start with. I slowly began to

understand that the senior enlisted and officer leadership was mostly made up of men who had served during WWII and Korea.

The Uniform Code of Military Justice was the governing system to deal with minor and major infractions of military law. Most of these senior enlisted and officers had served when the governing document was “Rocks and Shoals”—the informal name of the “Articles for the Government of the United States Navy.” Justice under the Articles was swift, and tended to be harsh. The current system, “The Uniform Code of Military Justice,” replaced Rocks and Shoals in 1951. But the old timers had a hard time adjusting to the new system so the old one was still frequently practiced. If you were told to do something and gave too much hesitation you could expect to be knocked on your butt. There were never any witnesses and the senior member was always believed if there were differing stories.

One morning while shaving in the washroom a junior hospital corpsman came in to shave and right behind him was a third class petty officer. Before I knew what was happening the petty officer punched the corpsman in the mouth and then in the stomach. There was a second class petty officer standing next to me shaving and he immediately looked the other way. I didn’t know what to do, but the second class petty officer suggested that I look the other way as he was sure that I had seen nothing. Later the hospital corpsman went to the Master Chief to complain and the Master Chief called all of us together to get the story straight. Of course the third class who had administered the punches did not know what the corpsman was talking about. And when the second class said he had not seen anything it left me with a decision. I’m not the smartest guy in the world, but I’m also not stupid. I saw nothing.

During this tour I met a guy who would become a lifelong friend, Ron Davis. We spent a lot of our liberty hours exploring the San Diego area and when we had the money for drinks and women we headed to Tijuana, Mexico. Ron and I learned a lot about life in Tijuana. We also learned how to outrun the local police when we got into a situation that might result in us spending some time in a Tijuana jail. If we could out run them

to the border, the U.S. officials were always accommodating in that they let us jump to the front of the line and get back on the U.S. side. Ron and I had a propensity to get ourselves into some interesting situations.

We bought a 1950 Ford that, although it was missing a back window, was fairly reliable. We started to go to Lake Arrowhead on our free weekends with another of our friends, Rodney Hanson. Rodney was a seaman with three hash marks and was our hero. At that time you earned a hash mark for every three years of service. So that meant that Rodney had over nine years of active duty. Interestingly he had never been busted. We should have known then that he was no Einstein, but he was our leader and we blindly followed his lead. He was the one that came up with going to Lake Arrowhead on the weekends. We got a job on Saturdays and Sundays cleaning up construction sites. We were allowed to room above the Lake Arrowhead Restaurant and Lounge in exchange for our bussing tables during the evening hours. Going to and from Lake Arrowhead was at times more of an adventure than we bargained for.

On one such trip we were on the way to Lake Arrowhead and had been drinking since we had left Coronado. On the way we noticed a female hitch-hiker and stopped and offered her a ride. Rodney was driving and I was riding shotgun. Ron was in the backseat with our new female friend. Ron made the mistake of trying to get too friendly with the hitch-hiker and she commenced to beat the living crap out of him. Even after he surrendered she continued to beat his ass. We finally had to stop and physically throw her out of the car.

On another trip we stopped at the side of a gas station to use the bathroom. When we got ready to leave we had the unfortunate event of running, broadside, into a beautiful Corvette. The body was fiberglass and we did a job on it. The young driver went nuts and finally Rodney knocked him on his butt. After that the driver went inside the gas station and called his dad. It seemed as if they were in the gas station the police arrived so fast. Rodney, Ron and I had been drinking for the past two hours and were in pretty bad shape.

All three of us were leaning against our car when the policeman in charge asked Rodney if he was the driver? Rodney said, "No, officer, I

was in the back seat.” I was next in line and as drunk as I was I knew that Rodney had lied because he was driving. When the officer asked me if I was driving, I quickly said, “No officer, I also was in the back seat.” Well that left poor ole Ron to take the heat. The officer asked Ron, “Well I assume you were the driver?” Ron smiled and said, “No, officer, we were all in the backseat drinking beer.” Within the next few minutes we were on our way to jail.

Once they determined we were military they contacted our base and the clinic Master Chief came up the next day and retrieved us from the local police. We paid a heavy price in extra duty for the next two months before the Master Chief decided we might now behave on liberty. We had car insurance and I assume they took care of the kid’s Corvette.

On another trip to Lake Arrowhead we had a wreck with a small Renault. The driver was the daughter of a doctor in the local area. She was driving too fast and sideswiped a car in front of us and hit us head-on. We were stunned but not hurt. Not so with the two occupants of the Renault. Rodney took charge. “Hugh, you and I are going to see if we can assist these girls. Ron you throw all of the empty beer cans as far down the mountain as you can and the full ones close enough to the road that we can retrieve them later.”

The passenger was hurt, but it did not look life threatening. The driver was obviously more seriously hurt. She was somewhat trapped under the steering wheel and the collapsed dash. We smelled gas and decided that we had to get her out of the car before a fire broke out. Getting her out was no simple task, but after Ron had completed his assigned task he gave us a hand and we were able to get her out of the car and away from the potential fire. The passenger was sitting against a tree next to where we placed the driver. Sure as hell the vehicle started to burn and then there was an explosion as the gas tank blew. Ron was the closest to the car and happened to be looking at the car when the explosion occurred. He had no facial hair and his face received first degree burns. Soon the police and two ambulances arrived. Both girls were hurt more than we were so they were loaded into the ambulances and left for the hospital. The car that the girls had sideswiped was the one who called the police

and reported the accident. The police loaded us up in their squad cars and took us to the hospital for examination. With the exception of Jack's facial burns, we were in good enough shape that they released us. Once again the Master Chief found himself on the way to Lake Arrowhead to retrieve his favorite three nitwits.

The father sued us for moving his daughter because she had a fractured pelvis and he claimed we did permanent damage by moving her. Well our old sea daddy Rodney saw that this was a defensive move because she was at fault and dad was worried about us suing her/him. Rodney contacted a lawyer and explained the situation and the lawyer filed suit on our behalf. Within a month the whole thing was settled and Rodney, Ron, and I received a check from her insurance company in the amount of \$500 each.

Lord knows giving us that much money with no supervision was sure to cause the local community some serious problems. Look out Tijuana there is going to be some serious liberty until the money runs out. It was all gone within three weeks. But, boy did we have some stories to tell.