

# The Funny Thing About War

AL CAMPO

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

# THE FUNNY THING ABOUT WAR

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# CONTENTS

	Preface & Acknowledgments.....	VII
I	Bell Bottom Blues.....	1
II	In Transit.....	19
III	“Request Permission to Come Aboard”.....	29
IV	The Gun Line.....	61
V	Return to Subic.....	123
VI	Back on the Line.....	159
VII	R & R: Hong Kong.....	201
VIII	Taiwan On.....	313
IX	Fire Up the Grid: DMZ.....	333
X	Gang Banging in Subic Bay.....	353
XI	Long Days & Short Timers.....	389
	About the Author.....	415



## PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I REMEMBER A TV SHOW MY PARENTS USED TO WATCH when I was a kid called “The Naked City.” If you are unfamiliar with the show it was a police drama series that aired on ABC from 1958 to 1963 and took place in New York City. I can distinctly recall the narrator, Laurence Dobkin, in his dramatic voice during the introduction proclaim, “There are eight million stories in the Naked City...,” attributing one story to each citizen of the town. That introduction in many ways can be analogous to the Vietnam War. Between the periods of August 5, 1964 to May 7, 1975 a total of 9,087,000 military personnel served on active duty of which 3,403,100 served in-theater and along the shores in the waters of the South China Sea. Every one of those survivors has a story to tell of their experiences during that lengthy and tragic war. *The Funny Thing About War* is but one of them.

As a Navy veteran of the war I have always wanted to put that experience on paper and retirement provided me the time and opportunity to do so. Though the war itself was devastating to those that participated and to their families as well, I believed that sufficient time had elapsed whereby the general public might accept a reflective book on the war similar in nature to *Catch 22*. My original concept was to treat my book as a comedy and accentuate the raucous behavior of sailors while on liberty in some of the more unusual and exotic locations to which nearly all sailors deployed to WestPac at that time could relate. Additionally, and to my astonishment, my research revealed only a few books written

and published about the Blue Water Navy's activities in the conduct of the war as opposed to the myriad of books involving infantrymen. Of those few concerning naval activities one was a non-fiction memoir of an officer aboard a non-combatant ship and the other was a documentary account of ships involved and their tactical usage in the conduct of various operations. The remaining books about the U.S. Navy focused on the Brown Water Navy and the personnel stationed aboard Swift river patrol boats.

It seemed only logical to write a book about an aspect of the war that so many participated in yet whose stories remained untold. But rather than write the book as an autobiography, I elected to portray it as a fictionalized, human-interest story. I have attempted to do so by depicting and providing a perspective of the conflict through the eyes of an enlisted sailor, named Chris Columbo, as his life's choices thrust him into the crucible of a war.

Though much of Chris's journey of rediscovery is elicited from many of my own personal experiences and eyewitness accounts, others were embellished or fictionalized to augment the interest and entertainment value to you, the reader. As I began to write, in deference to those that served, it became clear to me that I could portray a perspective of the tragic conflict, treat the subject matter honestly, interject humorous anecdotes and simultaneously furnish an historical narrative of an actual ship's deployment. *The Funny Thing About War* is the culmination of that concept.

This book was a labor of love that took four decades to formulate and complete. As time and distance can erode even the sharpest memory I apologize if naval protocol and shipboard policies were at any time mistakenly represented. I would also like to stipulate to any of my shipmates who read this that the characters herein are fictionalized compilations of many and any similarities to actual persons are purely coincidental and unintended.

In summary, I would like to add that this project could not have been done had it not been for the love and support provided by my wife Josephine who has my eternal love and gratitude. Additionally, I would



like to thank Harley Patrick at Hellgate Press for all his support, patience and hard work.

There are others to thank as well, such as the shipmates with whom I served alongside during the war, whose courage, professionalism and camaraderie helped assure our survival and allowed me to recount this tale. It is to those individuals to whom I dedicate this book along with the millions of others who served, the 303,704 who were wounded and the 58,202 who perished during that war, as well as to all those military personnel that have followed thereafter and have so gallantly kept watch to help preserve our freedom.

And finally I would also like to dedicate this to my son Anthony whom I dearly love. This is my legacy to you.



# I

## BELL BOTTOM BLUES

IT WAS 1972, THE WANING STAGES OF THE WAR. On a life-altering journey to Vietnam, Chris watched the Chief Petty Officer cram another cigarette into the bouquet of butts between them. Its smoky apparition merged with the existing cloud in the cabin of the chartered 727. As they coursed through the sky, above the snow-capped Alaskan mountains, the pilot announced Mt. McKinley would soon be visible through the port side windows. Chris in his vise-like seat, his head propped on his palm, turned his gaze below.

Spotting the white peak rise above the wrinkled landscape, he sighed and thought, *How the colors of one's life constantly changed from black and white to gray and back again.* He prayed for the fog enshrouding his recent years to lift, so his future may become as black and white as the scene below. The seventeen-hour trip to Clark Air Force Base would give him ample time to reflect on such matters and question how his parade of failures so changed his life that he would now place it in jeopardy.

Growing up as a teenager, his future looked promising. With modest effort, he graduated in the top ten percentile in a class of six hundred scoring fourteen hundred on his SAT's. He received offers to play football and baseball from West Point, Marshall University and Lycoming College. He had an infectious grin. Inheriting his father's obliging

gene, he was always willing to help those in need. He wasn't a joke teller per se but his satirical wit spawned laughter from those around. He was popular with the girls in school but in his senior year was devoted to only one. Respect for "famiglia" was an inherent trait and he enjoyed his time with them. He was a normal kid from a middle-class Italian family on Long Island, never venturing far from the friendly confines of the tri-state region on his own...until he left for college.

During his senior year in high school, Chris had taken the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corp scholarship exam scored well on it and interviewed for acceptance. He applied to a number of colleges offering the NROTC program. The University of Missouri, which had one, was on the list although it wasn't his first choice of schools. Villanova, which also had one, was. It was the perfect place for him. Its strong engineering curriculum suited his aptitude for math. It was close to home, which would allow him to continue his passionate romance with Cassie.

However, within a week of leaving for Villanova, together with his good friend Matt, he opened an envelope containing the mother of monkey wrenches.

*Dear Mr. Columbo:*

*It is my great pleasure to inform you that the United States Navy has chosen you as a candidate for officer training at the Columbia campus of the University of Missouri. Towards that end, the Navy is offering you a full scholarship, which will defer the total cost of your tuition and books along with a monthly stipend of fifty dollars.*

*Please advise the undersigned should you wish to avail yourself of this excellent opportunity and become a proud member of our organization rich with tradition and history.*

*I look forward to welcoming you aboard here at this illustrious institution.*

*Yours truly,*

*Captain Phillip T. Hunnicutt*

*Battalion Commander N.R.O.T.C., University of Missouri*

“So, you will be going to Missouri then?” he remembered his father saying upon learning of the letter.

“No, Dad, I’m not. I’m leaving for Villanova next week.”

“I want you to seriously reconsider going to Missouri. Full tuition, money for books and fifty dollars a month is really a good deal. All we have to pay is your room and board.”

“A good deal for me, but a better deal for you, right, Dad?”

“I can’t afford to pay for more than two years at Villanova.”

“I don’t understand how it’s possible for Matt to go there. He was raised by a single mom who worked as a clerk all these years and never made the money you have, yet she can send him and you can’t send me! I am not going to Missouri, period! Villanova is a far superior school. It’s a three hour drive from here. I can come home more often on weekends to see the family. Missouri is seventeen hundred miles away. How often do you think I’ll be able to come home from there? Are you going to force me to give up my dream?”

“Force you, no. I just want you to be reasonable and see my point.”

“Yeah, I see your point and it has nothing to do with my plans or being happy. It’s about saving your fucking money!”

“Don’t you talk to me that way!”

They argued daily and fiercely. Chris weary and beaten by the constant arguing finally relented the day before he was to depart for Villanova. His relationship with his father would never be the same. He would remain bitter towards him for making him alter his plans. He informed Villanova he would not be attending, and apologized to Matt for upsetting their living arrangements. He notified the captain at Missouri of his intention to accept the scholarship and re-activated his application there.

Three weeks later, while standing by the gate he shook his father’s hand and turned to Cassie. The tears in her eyes trickled down her cheek. They mingled with his as they embraced and kissed.

“I miss you already,” she said.

“I am going to wear your ears out over the phone. I love you so much.”

“I love you more,” she said as she squeezed him tight not wanting to release him.

They kissed once again and he turned to head out the gate. Little did

he realize then when he boarded that plane to St. Louis how it would affect the course his life would take.

\*\*\*\*

The aircraft shuddered and rumbled rousing him from his thoughts. The turbulence augmented his anxiety as the “Fasten Seatbelt” sign illuminated above him. He lit a cigarette to soothe himself and stared out at the glaciers. Once the flight calmed down so did his stomach and he continued to ruminate about how Missouri led to his demise.

The box-like dorm room with its tan enameled block walls had echoed with each footstep as he entered. The black light poster, of a young man sporting an Afro with a raised fist, taped on the wall was the only evidence of his roommate. When he returned from dinner the poster was gone. For now, he was alone. Affable as he was, he soon made friends with those on his dorm floor but always longed for the comforts and familiarity of home, the camaraderie of his life long friends and more importantly Cassie’s passionate and loving embrace.

He called her frequently and helplessly listened to her cry. Her flowing tears eroded his selfish concern about their long distance romance. Chris the pragmatist didn’t doubt he would remain faithful to her but also realized hermitage wasn’t in his nature. Wanting to be fair and assuage her tears, he suggested she go out with friends rather than stay home every weekend. He promised to travel back east to be with her at every available opportunity.

Honoring his promise, he decided to surprise her one extended weekend and flew home. He greeted his family long enough to borrow the car and without changing clothes sped to her.

Her younger sister Lauren, who was quite fond of Chris, answered the door.

“Chris! What a great surprise to see you here! Did Cassie know you were coming home?”

“No, I wanted to surprise her.”

“You sure will! Come in. She’s in the shower and should be out soon. Wow, you look really handsome in that uniform!”

He stepped inside. “Oh this? Thanks. I wore it to fly standby. It’s not only cheaper but military personnel get seated before civilians.”

Cassie called out, “Who was it, Lauren?”

“It’s Chris!” she shouted.

“Chris?” Cassie cried out. He didn’t answer. She called his name again, “Chris?”

Again, he didn’t respond.

“Lauren, stop teasing! Who’s there?”

“I told you. It’s Chris!” she called out laughing, aware he was playfully teasing Cassie.

“Come on, cut it out!” she yelled.

“I swear it’s him! Tell her it’s you,” she said while petting his arm.

Chris remained mum as a mime.

Cassie chastised her sister, “You’re gonna get it when I get out of here!”

Lauren continued to laugh approving Chris’s little game.

The door to the bathroom in the hall swung open. Exiting in her bra and panties toweling her golden hair her pale blue eyes fixed on him in his dress blues. “Oh, Chris!” Dropping the towel, she sped into his arms squeezing the air from his lungs. Their bodies clasped together like magnets. She kissed him repeatedly on the lips, cheeks, eyes, and nose.

“Cassie, how I’ve missed you.”

“And I’ve missed you.”

“Are you cold? You’re trembling.”

“No. I’m just so happy to see you and hold you.”

All that passion would vanish the ensuing summer following his midshipman cruise. As a condition of the ROTC scholarship, he was required to report for training exercises. He would have to spend six-weeks of that summer training aboard the USS *Wasp*. The carrier’s home port was Quonset Point, Rhode Island but the ship was on station as part of a Hunter Killer task force in the Northern Atlantic. To get there he reported to Maguire Air Force base and flew on a chartered flight to Rhein Mein Air Force Base in Frankfurt, Germany. He had a day layover in Frankfurt and spent it touring Gothic cathedrals and beer gardens. The

following day, he marched into the belly of a C-5 transport plane bound for Oslo where, he reported aboard the carrier, began his training and toured the palaces, Viking museum and beer gardens during his off time. The ship spent two weeks at sea, then berthed in Copenhagen for seven days where he continued to train, and during liberty toured the King's palace, took in a Blind Faith concert in Tivoli Gardens and consumed large quantities of Pilsner beer in their brewery. After another two weeks of maneuvers and training at sea, the ship steamed home.

The Atlantic crossing couldn't go fast enough to please him as he anxiously awaited the day they would tie up to the pier at Quonset Point, where he expected to be re-united with Cassie and his family. His apprehension grew with each turn of the ship's screws as it finally entered the harbor and approached the pier. The Navy band began to play Anchors Aweigh when the mooring lines were cast down, as the crowd of housewives, children, parents, and friends assembled on the pier blew kisses and waived to the crew manning the rails. The ship tied up and the gangway installed. The crew dismissed from formation and liberty call sounded soon after. Chris sprinted down to the hangar deck for a better look and stood at the rail scouring the crowd trying to spot his family or Cassie. They weren't there.

He obtained a pass to leave the ship to phone home but no one answered. He assumed they must be on their way. He phoned Cassie.

"Hello," she answered.

"Cassie! Hi, it's Chris. I didn't expect you to answer the phone. Haven't my folks picked you up yet?"

"Oh, Chris," she hesitated and continued. "It's good to hear your voice. But, no, I couldn't make the trip. My dad's not well and I have to take him to the doctor."

He thought it odd she would be taking her father to the doctor rather than her mom, but accepted her explanation anyway.

"I hope it's nothing serious."

"We all hope so too."

"Well it doesn't matter, because I have a pass for the weekend and will see you when I get home."



“Uh, you’re coming home?” she asked.

“Yes I am. Is something wrong?”

“Uh, no. It’s just that I have plans for Sunday night, that’s all.”

*Plans?* he thought. She knew he was arriving that weekend. His belly began to boil.

“What plans?”

“Uh, someone asked me to go see Buddy Hackett at the Westbury Music Fair on Sunday night.”

“Someone asked you? Who’s that someone?” he said raising his tone.

“Uh, a friend. Do you want me to cancel?” she asked sounding disappointed.

He felt the fabric of their love affair begin to unravel. Hoping to salvage things he thought she would think more of him if he acted noble.

With sadness in his voice he said, “No, no, I suppose it’s okay. I have to return here Sunday night anyway and since you already made the commitment I won’t stop you.”

“Uh, okay. I’ll see you when you get home then.”

“Yeah. I am so looking forward to holding you in my arms. I love you.”

“... I love you too.”

He hung up the phone shocked and anguished. How and why would she do this? She knew he was returning! It would be a harbinger of things to come and none were good.

\*\*\*\*

There were two weeks left to his training cruise. He spent the workweeks in Rhode Island and traveled home on weekends with his friend Matt, who, coincidentally, was on his training cruise on board a destroyer, also based in Quonset Point. Ironically, the ROTC battalion at Villanova had several scholarship openings and issued one to Matt. Chris knew Matt’s family wasn’t as well off financially as his and was genuinely happy to learn his friend received the scholarship. But, he was far more upset to think that having better grades and test scores than Matt it may have been offered to him had he gone to Villanova. His plans would then been unchanged and he and Cassie would not have to contend

with the anxiety of separation, which now haunted him. Matt receiving the scholarship was a cruel twist of fate for Chris.

When his training cruise ended, he wanted to make up for all the time he and Cassie were apart. He spent as much of the remaining summer as he could with her until he had to return to school. Their time together was fulfilling emotionally and sexually until one unusual night.

While at her house and cuddled on her couch the doorbell rang. He answered it. Standing on the porch was a young man who could have been Chris's twin. He stood about the same height of five feet eleven, had black hair, brown eyes, Roman nose, full lips, rounded chin and was about one hundred sixty pounds with Chris's physique less twenty pounds. He only lacked his Carey Grant dimple and the small beauty mark on his upper right jaw.

"Is Cassie here?"

"Yes. Who are you?" Chris asked lowering his eyelids.

The gentleman caller was just as surprised to find Chris there, as Chris was to see him. Fidgeting, he said, "I'm a friend of hers."

"The same friend who took her to see Buddy Hackett?"

"Uh, yeah that's right."

Chris's brain went numb. He could have said, "Get fucking lost," but he didn't.

"Yeah, she's here, come in."

He slowly swung open the screen door to grant access to the surprise visitor. Chris followed behind him as he walked into the living room, stopped and stood by the coffee table in front of the couch where Cassie was sitting with Chris before the intrusion. Chris continued walking to the couch brushing his shoulder against the young man like a lion warning a contender to stay away from his pride. Chris sat next to Cassie, put his arm around her and glared at him. Cassie and the interloper shared furtive glances, awkward greetings and pleasantries.

Chris mortified sat silently. A minute of palpable silence passed as the nervous visitor fumbled for a hasty exit and left. During their two-year relationship he and Cassie never argued and although he was deeply upset and angered over what transpired he didn't want to compound the

situation by being critical. Within a week of his return, Cassie succeeded turning him from a virile self-assured individual into a milquetoast schlub.

A week later and one week before he was to return to college, the first float in his failure parade appeared. Chris and Cassie attended one of her neighbor's backyard barbecues. She was edgy throughout the affair and became prickly with him when she went to sit and felt his hand beneath her. For her to react as she did was unsettling to him as it was she who initiated the sexual aspect of their relationship. It was evidence of something more profound.

When the party ended and he walked her home, she stopped in the street at her front yard and turned to him.

"Chris, we need to talk."

"Let's go inside and we can talk there."

"No. We should talk here."

"What? What is it that you can't wait to discuss inside?"

"I think we have to break up."

His heart fluttered and his body wilted as the blood stopped flowing through his veins. He leaned against her father's car placing his hands upon it to steady himself. This was his worst fear coming to fruition.

"What? How can you say that? Don't tell me you don't love me anymore because except for that incident three weeks ago you certainly haven't acted like you don't love me."

"Yes, I think I still love you, but I need time to think. I know you were hurt the weekend you came home, and I don't want to continue to hurt you. You being away so long and often has been hard on me too. This hasn't been an easy decision for me to make, but it's one I think is best for the both of us."

"You don't want to hurt me? What do you think you're doing now? Cassie, please don't do this. I am sure we can work it out. I love you and I know you love me! Together we can solve this. I know we're young and talked of marriage and that day seems so far away, but time will pass quickly. Everything I am doing and have done is for the two of us."

"I'm sorry but this is how it has to be."

“Are you leaving me for that dick who showed up at your house that night?”

“Uh, no, but I have to find out if I truly love you.”

He begged, he pleaded, he cried but she would not relent. With their conversation concluded, his summer and love affair had come to a disastrous end.

The black and white realities of his life quickly turned to white noise. He lacked the antidote to deal with his heartbreak. His plan for their future vaporized. With his plans shattered his motivation and ambition withered like unpicked fruit on the vine.

He returned to college humiliated, hollow and abandoned, and to comments such as, “I told you hometown honeys don’t work.” When he lost Cassie, he lost his North Star. To numb his sadness he consumed alcohol more frequently and in greater quantities. His views on the war changed and along with it his commitment to the ROTC program faltered. His schoolwork suffered and his confidence with women went the way of the dinosaur. Mired in a vortex of sadness, he was incapable of establishing any romantic relationship with women fostering a crescendo of despair to further swell within him.

He turned to a vast menu of illicit drugs ranging from barbiturates to psychotropics. His letters home to his friend Rick became increasingly despondent. He resigned from the ROTC program and wallowed in an ocean of self-pity inducing a paralysis of his will to move on.

A reversal of fortune seemed apparent, though, when his roommate Barry began dating Carol, a student at Columbia College. She introduced Chris to her dorm mate, Shelly. She was a fun-loving girl, vibrant and sexually aggressive, which relieved the tension often pervading his one-dimensional encounters with women. He enjoyed Shelly’s company, she laughed at his jokes, possessed a sense of humor herself and had a hearty sexual appetite that his hometown friends Rick and Linda witnessed.

Rick and his high school sweetheart Linda were moving to Los Angeles. Driving cross-country, they stopped in Kentucky to elope and detoured to Missouri to visit Chris. They arrived at his apartment on their wedding night and, since his other roommate was home in St. Louis, Chris invited

them to spend the first night of their honeymoon with him. He would sleep on the couch in the living room. Carol and Shelly dropped in unexpectedly and decided they would spend the night too. Before it was over Carol and Shelly were running and giggling half naked around the off-campus apartment. Unable to explain their behavior Chris repeatedly shrugged his shoulders at Rick and Linda intimating his own surprise at the girls' antics. The scene they created was an aberration, and far from typical of his nights at college, but managed to become a memorable night for all. The sweet recollections of the evening quickly evolved into a bitter memory when Chris decided to write a letter to his friend Matt.

Several days later Chris spent an afternoon with Shelly and when he drove her to her home, he asked her to do him a favor and drop the letter in her dormitory mailbox. In it, he described the evening's frivolity in explicit detail. Rather than mail it as he requested, Shelly roguishly opened and read it. Later in the evening, there was a knock on his apartment door. Chris answered it only to find a pile of envelopes bearing his name. He opened and read them.

*You are a male chauvinist pig! Where do you find the nerve to look at yourself in the mirror?* The letter was unsigned.

*What manner of man would do such a thing? Let me answer for you, not a man at all but a wretched human being!* This one was signed "Anonymous."

*Burn in hell, you bastard!*

*Shelly deserves much better than a worm like you.*

He became increasingly upset with each letter. Their criticisms and insults were tremors further loosening the man's mortar. He was injured and furious. Once again, a woman had violated his trust, in addition to violating federal law.

This would be but another float in his parade of failures and a fatal blow to his already fragile psyche causing him to again retreat into despair. Soon after, he simply surrendered; stopped attending classes altogether and flunked out of school. He packed his belongings into his car and hit the long gray highway back home, knowing how to get there but uncertain about the route his life would take.

At home, Chris could not look his parents in the eye. He could only find jobs in local factories and by the end of each weekend would have a few dollars left in his pocket from the meager salary earned at those menial jobs. His money went up in numbing smoke, numbing pills and numbing liquid. His life was a blur. His best friends were moving on with their lives and he was a park statue. He surrounded himself with new friends and nihilistic acquaintances bobbing along with the tide as well. The parade of failures however was nearly at an end. One last float in the parade would compel him to seek a change.

It all began one evening in Screwy Lewy's when he told Hank and Tom, two of his partying pals, of the marijuana fields he knew of in Missouri. This conversation turned to planning a road trip. They intended to gather as much free reefer as possible and bring it back to Long Island for personal consumption and sale. They loaded up Chris's car and together with his Doberman, Aries, headed down I-80, making a brief stop in Pittsburgh, to visit their friend Steve attending the university there.

Their journey continued the following morning and ended later in the day when they reached the Missouri campus. After renting a motel room, and locking Aries inside, Chris took them to the campus where he ran into several of his old college classmates. One they met was Susie. Susie was a stunner with long flaxen hair, aqua blue eyes and bore a strong resemblance to Tuesday Weld, one of Chris's childhood infatuations. Chris was attracted to Susie at their first meeting, but his fear of rejection prevented him from making any advances. Much to his surprise, while they were catching up over coffee in the Commons, and in the presence of Hank and Tom, Susie made a confession.

"You know, Chris, I was really sad when you told me you were leaving school."

He could not imagine why and asked the logical question.

"Really, why?"

"Because, from the moment we met I had a massive crush on you. Couldn't you tell?"

Chris gulped down his coffee together with his surprise.

"No, I couldn't. I mean, I never noticed. Why would you not tell me then?" he asked, still reeling from her belated admission.

“Well, I was too shy to come right out and say it, but I tried to show you by meeting you here everyday.”

“Susie, honestly if I had only known, or picked up on your signal, things might be quite different than they are now. I thought you only wanted to be friends.”

She reached across the table placing her hand on his. “At first I did,” she said, and while gently sliding her foot along the inside of his calf added, “but it only took a heartbeat for want to change to desire.”

Chris stammered at her sudden display of sensuality. She was never this brazen. In the past, they would talk about class, about current events, about their pasts and other less trivial matters but never about pairing up. Chris quickly glanced at his traveling companions. They sat staring at her with their mouths agape. Chris and Sue continued their conversation until she would have to leave for class. She stood up and he did as well. They hugged and she kissed him on the cheek.

“Good to see you again, Chris. Take care of yourself. Nice to meet you fellows,” and off she went.

The three stared at her firm bottom as she walked away. Hank said, “Man you must be fucking crazy for leaving a school with foxes like her on campus.”

“You heard her. She never let me know how she felt.”

“So what! All you had to do was ask and that prime real estate was yours for the taking.”

Neither Tom nor Hank ever kept company with a woman. They were never in love. They could never understand what it was like to have one’s heart ripped from one’s chest and how the vacuum created by a lost love could suck the life from someone obscuring their judgment. He didn’t want to take the time to explain it to them, as it would only rekindle a painful memory and offered, “Susie is a drama student. I am sure she was just rehearsing.” Standing to leave, he fidgeted with his pants to disguise the excitement she imparted on him.

\*\*\*\*

The next day they proceeded to the interior farmlands and drove around looking for patches of marijuana plants within easy access of the road.

They found a concentration of them growing between a cornfield and a solitary country road. At nightfall, the trio of harvesters returned to the cornfield. To avoid suspicion, Chris dropped his partners off with several trash bags. He returned for them two hours later to find they picked enough marijuana to fill the footlocker he had in the trunk. They went back to the motel and struggled to smoke some of the damp illicit cargo to ascertain its quality. It was good.

In the morning they hit the road home stopping again in Pittsburgh long enough to sell one pound of the weed. The sale financed the trip and defrayed the cost of tickets for the Blood Sweat and Tears concert they would all later attend. Their good fortune was soon tested because, after the concert, they returned to the dormitory to find Chris's car missing. The police towed it away with the footlocker still in the trunk. They were forced to use the remainder of the proceeds of their first sale to bail out the car from the impound lot. Rather than press their luck, they got back on the interstate and headed to New York.

Since each still lived with their parents neither of them could store nor dry the weed in their homes. Tom and Hank had a friend Mike, who lived alone, and suggested they ask him if they could store and dry the grass at his house. Chris had never met Mike before. When he saw the artwork to King Crimson's "In the Court of the Crimson King" in day glow paint on his living room wall he knew immediately Mike was deeply committed to the drug culture. He agreed to their request without hesitating. They spread their cargo atop plastic bags in his attic to cure. Once again, misfortune bestowed its dour countenance upon Chris.

An acquaintance of theirs, Sal the "Weasel," a known heroin addict, frequent visitor of Mike's, police informant and someone Chris despised learned of their arrangement. The next day the local paper's afternoon edition had a photo of Mike in handcuffs exiting the front door of his home with three officers in the background each carrying a contractor's bag containing the forty-three pounds of marijuana. The trio of foiled dealers knew they were responsible for his arrest and wanted to make amends. Together they pooled their few resources to hire an attorney to represent him. Chris having no savings had to sell his only possessions,



which were his car and record collection. It could have gone worse for the three smugglers had Mike given them up to the police, but he was steadfast, and took it on the chin receiving three years probation. This was the final float in his failure parade.

His aborted enterprise as a pot-picking dealer occurred slightly over a year after leaving college. Since he resigned from ROTC after completing the first semester of his junior year contractually, he was indentured to the Navy. They came to collect the debt owed. The postman delivered a registered envelope containing Chris's orders. Now opposing the war, he refused to sign the receipt and the envelope with its contents returned to the sender. Chris was clueless and absent a plan of what he would do should they come to arrest him. He liked living in the states and essentially proud of his country so Canada was out of the question. Like a boxer who received one to many blows to the head, he was nearly catatonic from the neck up. Unless he came to his senses, he would stumble through time, as the boxer stumbled about the ring.

Dismay bred anger and it swelled up inside him like lava. He was Mt. Etna waiting to erupt. One hot summer evening while hanging out at Screwy Lewy's it spewed out violently.

A stranger had come in for a drink. Inexplicably, Chris's friend John began to taunt the man who immediately left the bar. John followed him continuing to goad him. The confrontation led to blows with John getting the better of the exchange.

Chris empathized for the stranger knowing John had no cause to accost the man.

"Come on John, leave the guy alone. He didn't do anything to you. The poor guy just came in for a drink. Why are you doing this?"

John turned on him telling him to, "Stay out of it!"

"No I am not going to stay out of it. Leave the guy alone, please!"

"This is none of your business!"

"Fuck you! I am making it my business! He's done nothing!"

"I'm not going to tell you again. Stay out of this!"

Chris could not and would not. He grabbed John to separate him from the man he was assaulting. They pulled and tugged at each other. Chris's

wrestling coach would have been proud to see him maneuver into position and get a firm grasp of John's upper torso. He quickly repositioned his legs, thrust and turned his hip into John and executed a perfect hip toss slamming the larger man to the ground. With John now on the ground Chris pummeled John's face, compressing his head with his fists slamming it to the rough macadam surface. He punched and kicked John repeatedly. If his vicious assault were to continue, he would kill him. His rage was irrepressible, but he regained his senses when he hesitated, for just a moment to look down at John and the carnage he wrought upon him. He could not understand why he vented his fury on someone he considered a friend. Ceasing his brutal onslaught, he turned and leaned slamming his back against the dated shingled wall, slunk down, propped his arms on his knees, lowered his head in shame and wept uncontrollably.

Their friends from the bar witnessing the scene were shocked and angered with Chris, but mostly befuddled by his pitiable display. John slowly rose to his feet and stood before Chris watching him as he continued to weep. He helped him to his feet. Chris dropped his arms to his side offering no defense for John's reprisal.

"Go ahead hit me," he said.

John didn't accept his invitation. He simply put a hand on Chris's shoulder. Overcome by John's compassion Chris reached out and hugged him.

Still weeping he said, "John, I am so sorry for losing my cool like that. I don't know what came over me. I just feel so fucking frustrated. All the drinking and drugs is becoming too much for me. I am so damned tired of feeling lost and going nowhere. I have to get the hell out of this whole damned scene, before I kill someone or myself."

John simply patted Chris on the shoulder as they separated.

Chris turned to the stranger who was nursing a bloody lip and said, "I think it would be best if you got out of here too."

He thanked Chris for his help and left.

Submitting his fate to the Navy was his only logical escape plan. The next day he drove to the Naval Recruitment Station to ask their help

tracking down his orders, which is how he came to find himself sitting besides the chain-smoking chief petty officer replaying the sequence of events that led him there.



## II

### IN TRANSIT

THE CHARTER PLANE LANDED IN NOME for refueling and before continuing on its next leg to Yakusaka, Japan, the passengers had a chance to stretch their legs in the terminal. He walked about and stood in front of the stuffed polar bear on display taking pity on the magnificent beast. His mood was as devoid of spirit as the animal was of life. The brief respite did little to soothe his aching butt or ease his growing anxiety. When they re-boarded, he settled back into the torturous seat, and once they were airborne, lit a cigarette, and continued to replay the events of the past month.

The night before he was to report for active duty Hank and Tom gave Chris a sendoff which consisted of a case of beer and a bonfire on the town beach. Lacking any loose timbers on the beach, they used and burned one of the lifeguard stands.

As the sun began to make its appearance Chris dropped his friends off and returned home to find his father ready to drive him to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Chris said goodbye to his mom and plopped his drunken carcass into the rear seat of his father's car. Chris barely said two words to his father on the drive in, nor did he pay attention to anything he had to say. He just wanted to sleep. After a brusque handshake and simple goodbye, Chris entered into his new world.

The robotic yeoman at the Brooklyn Navy Yard processed his orders, assembled his personnel file then instructed Chris to report to sickbay for medical clearance. After his physical, he reported to the supply room and given his uniforms. He received one dress blue and one dress white uniform, his seaman first class stripes, a Dixie cup cover, a working cap, two pair of working denim bellbottoms, two pair of working denim shirts, a pair of shoes, a nylon web belt, a brass belt buckle, a pea coat, a black scarf tie and a duffel bag. The assembly line processing had one last step as he reported to the Quartermaster for testing and evaluation. After the exams, he reported to the Petty Officer in charge of his assigned barracks to await further orders. Those orders ultimately came. He was to stand the early morning “Cinderella watch” at the main entrance to the barracks.

Chris’s hangover from his farewell party on the beach with Tom and Hank subsided by dinnertime. He had to prepare his uniform to stand the midnight watch. He purchased a sewing kit at the supply depot to sew on his rating insignia and hem his white bellbottoms. He sat plying needle and thread remorseful about the meteoric decline his life had taken. In a year and one half he went from possibly becoming an ensign in the U.S. Navy with all the privileges afforded a naval officer to a Seaman 3rd class with little or no privileges at all. When he severed his relationship with ROTC, he also erased much of what he learned as a midshipman. He even forgot the various insignias and associated ranks. He struggled to recall those ranking insignias rather than ask someone and look foolish. Once he finished, he sat in the lounge and passed the time watching television until he had to relieve the watch.

As he stood guard in the glaring entranceway, he realized the lighting amplified his slovenly appearance. He didn’t have creases in his blouse and pants, he didn’t have his shoes spit shined, his belt buckle was unpolished, and his insignia not sewn on his sleeve properly. He hoped no officers would pass through those doors during his watch and relieved none had by the time he was relieved.

The rest of the week consisted of cleaning the living spaces and hallways, standing a watch at the Admiral’s Barge, mooring details in

Newark and further testing. He traveled home to spend one final weekend with his family. His orders finally arrived at the end of the week. He was given ten days transit time to report to Travis AF Base in San Francisco where he was to board a military transport which would bring him to his final destination. He spent his last night in the enlisted man's club quelling his nervousness about the next leg of his journey by imbibing a quantity of tequila sunrises.

His orders provided an ideal opportunity for him to travel to Los Angeles and spend time with Ricky and Linda before leaving the states. At the time of his visit Ricky's mom, dad, and younger sisters were visiting as well. It was pandemonium in Rick's two-bedroom apartment as it used to be at Ricky's parents home with six kids running amok. Chris traveled with them to Tijuana where Rick's mom had her pocketbook stolen within the first thirty minutes of their arrival. Rick's family returned to New York two days after Chris arrived and afforded them some quality time to spend together before Chris had to leave to war.

He lounged poolside at Rick's apartment complex, went to see Woody Allen's movie "Play It Again Sam," got tanked at Busch Gardens on the free beer and one night tried unsuccessfully to hitchhike from Van Nuys to Anaheim to visit Disneyland, yet the alternative was far more enjoyable.

Two young blue-eyed Californians of the surfer clan with sandy blond hair wearing white tee shirts with color images of waves and surfers screen-printed on the back picked Chris up at the entrance ramp to the freeway. That ride resulted in what would be one of Chris's most unforgettable nights of his life. They explained that Anaheim was sixty miles away from Van Nuys and a trek to get to, however they would take him as far as they were going. Chris discouraged about the prospect of not getting to Disneyland quickly altered his itinerary.

Chris recalled having heard a promotional broadcast regarding a concert on the radio earlier that day.

"I heard there is a concert tonight at the Hollywood Bowl."

"We know that's where we're going," answered the passenger.

"Cool, then I'll get out there with you and try to 'kink' it."

“Kink it?”

“It’s an expression we use back home to crash an event. I guess you don’t say it here.”

“No, we don’t. So where are you from?” asked the passenger. The question would become commonplace to Chris in the coming weeks.

“New York, ” he responded omitting the more obscure Long Island portion of the response.

“Yeah, what part?”

“Long Island. Are you familiar with it?”

“Yeah, I have some relatives who live in a place called Brookhaven, I think.”

“Okay, I’m about a thirty minute drive from there.”

“If you ask most people who live here they probably have someone living in New York because most Californians actually migrated here. By the way, my name is Curt,” reaching back to shake Chris’s hand. “Our chauffeur here is Lance.”

“Glad to meet you guys. My name is Chris. Chris Columbo.”

“Like the explorer. So you’re out here exploring California, Chris?”

“Sort of. I have to catch my ship in the Philippines. I was given ten days travel time so, I thought I would take advantage of it and visit my friends from home, who moved here.”

“You see, what did I tell you, about most people migrating here! Are you going to Vietnam?”

“I don’t know. The fellows at the recruiting station told me the ship was coming back from Nam. What about you two, were you born here?” Changing the subject, which became more distressing the closer it came for his departure.

“We’re both born and bred here.”

They continued to chat throughout the ride and paused at times to listen to music played on the radio. Lance parked the car and the three began the walk up the hill to the concert.

“Thanks a lot for the ride guys.”

“Not a problem,” said Lance as he turned to talk aside with Curt while reaching into the breast pocket of his shirt. Chris’s story and situation



would foster an act of generosity on the part of his benefactors. After Curt nodded to Lance, he turned and extended his hand to Chris.

“Here this is for you.”

Chris took the ticket and read it. The concert would feature Fluorescent Leach and Eddie, Loggins and Messina, and the Allman Brothers Band.

“Holy shit! I know guys back home who would sell their mothers to Moroccan slave traders for this ticket!”

His exuberance waned when he saw the forty-dollar price tag. He reached in his pocket and leafed through the few bills he had left.

“I’m sorry but I can’t afford this,” handing the ticket back to Lance.

Lance and Curt waived their hands refusing the ticket.

Curt said, “That’s not necessary Chris. We talked it over and decided we want you to have it.”

Their kindness and generosity overwhelmed him. First a ride and now a free pass to a concert. Amongst his circle of friends charity of this sort would never been offered to a stranger. They might cover for one in their own circle short of cash, but expect repayment at some future date. Their menial jobs only provided enough sustenance for beer, pills, weed, an occasional movie and gas money.

“I don’t know what to say. You two have just become my new best friends,” as he high-fived each of them.

The gifts kept coming! They shared their wine and pot with him as the music of Fluorescent Leach and Eddie, Loggins and Messina and the Allman Brothers Band spilled into the warm eucalyptus scented California night. Lance and Curt gave Chris an unrivaled farewell-parting gift, which made his last case of beer on the beach with Tom and Hank a slumber party in comparison. They treated him to a mystical night replete with great music, great wine, great reefer and great amity. As an encore, they drove him back to the exact spot they found him.

The next morning Rick dropped him off at the Greyhound bus station where he caught a bus to San Francisco, then a taxi to Travis Air Force Base. There he checked in at the military transport terminal and boarded the chartered flight now on its second leg.

The flight refueled in Yakusaka, Japan. The final leg to Clark Air Force

base would take six hours. It was dusk when the plane landed at Clark. Chris stood with blood shot eyes.

“Motherfucker! My butt is blistered!” he exclaimed while he massaged his rear.

As he exited the plane, the blast of tropical air struck him sending his sweat glands into overdrive. His face perspired profusely and shadows of sweat formed on the front and back of his shirt. The Chief Petty Officer on the tarmac greeted the passengers barking orders to form up for roll call and billet assignments.

“There are no quarters available on the base so you men will be billeted at a local motel for the night. A bus will pick you up outside the motel tomorrow morning at 0900 hours.”

Chris found his duffel bag among the others piled outside the cargo hold of the plane and climbed onto the bus destined for the motel. On the way to the motel, the CPO announced the room assignments. Chris and the rest were to give their name to the desk clerk and obtain their room key.

Chris entered his room, plopped down on a bed and stared at the stained ceiling. When his bunkmate entered, they made their introductions and chatted briefly about where each was from and going. Chris decided to shower and wash off the long trip. He climbed into the tub and reached for the shower knob.

He let out a startled, “Oh Shit!” as the large green lizard bolted from its perch on the knob. The gecko scurried off more fearful of Chris than he of it. He shouted, “There was a friggin’ lizard in here taking a shower!”

After his shower, he desperately needed to sleep, but could not. Not only was he wound up from the trip but there was also a constant knock on the door. Throughout the evening they heard, “Hey Joe I got girl for you, twenty dollar.” About the fifth time, Chris reached into his pants pocket to find he had ten dollars left from his week in LA. He thought perhaps he could expend some energy getting laid. Accepting the pimp’s offer would also stop the incessant knocking. With only ten dollars to his name, he would have to negotiate the price down.

Chris opened the door and the pimp entered with a young girl no more

than fifteen years of age in tow. She had enough gold in her teeth to make Mr. T. envious. She sat down on Chris's empty bed.

"Twenty dollar for all night fuckie-fuckie," said her manager.

"I'll give you five dollars for a fuckie," eliciting a chuckle from his roommate.

"No, twenty dollar!"

Chris turned to the merchandise and looked her over. By Filipino standards, she was cute. Her breasts were small mounds jutting straight out. He reached to feel one and it felt hard. He tapped on it with his knuckle. It made a knock-knock sound as though he were tapping a coconut shell.

"I tell you what I'll give you five dollars and this pair of sandals for fuckie-fuckie."

The pimp replied, "No deal," grabbed his wares by the wrist, and left the room.

"At least maybe now we can get some sleep."

He eventually fell into a dreamless sleep awakened by a loud rap on the door. A voice bellowed, "Rise and shine sleeping beauties. Chow is being served in the restaurant."

Chris reluctantly stirred from his comatose sleep. "Not bad. Wake-up calls and restaurant styled breakfasts. This tour may turn out ok after all."

The personnel billeted in the motel slowly streamed into the restaurant. Chris feasted on a buffet breakfast of omelets, pancakes, cereals, breakfast meats, juices, toast and coffee. Nearing the end of the meal the CPO stood in the middle of the dining room.

"All hands are to gather their gear and muster out front at 0830 hours."

Chris would have to adapt to military time. After breakfast, Chris got his sea bag and reported to the motel parking lot.

"Fall in!" shouted the CPO.

Chris had been the Executive Officer of the ROTC drill team, which finished in 2nd place at the regional competition in Champagne, Illinois. He had no problem complying with the order. He fell into rank and sharply dressed right. The CPO called the roll and when finished they boarded the battleship gray bus to Subic Bay.

Shortly after leaving, the CPO ordered the driver to stop at a roadside ramshackle Filipino style 7-11. It was a small wooden structure with a rusted tin roof tilted back to front. There was one window in the front and a screened door with gaping tears in it. The CPO announced the drive to Subic Bay would take about three hours and this was the one and only refreshment stop. Anyone who cared to imbibe was welcome to chip in. Chris wasn't going to miss this party and handed the CPO five dollars. He took the money he collected and two Sailors with him into the shack.

While waiting, Chris surveyed the area. He was in a scene of a William Holden movie. They were on a dirt road that rose above two ditches on each side of the road perfuming the air with what he called "eau de sewage." Extending past the ditches were rows upon rows of pineapple plants. Interspersed amongst them were Filipinos tending to the plants dressed in black slacks, shirts, and sandals, with kerchiefs around their necks and wearing straw conical hats. In the distance through a faint haze, he could see a rust colored mountain range majestically rise from the horizon on each side of the valley. Several Filipino men were sitting in front of the convenience store chatting. One was wielding a machete and occasionally struck a stump in front of him, which also served as a small table. They looked up at the bus chatting in Philippine and periodically laughed. Lord only knows what they might have been saying and what jokes they might have been telling about the occupants in the bus.

The CPO exited the store along with the two Sailors each carrying two cases of San Miguel beer. They brought the beer to the back of the bus and those that contributed money descended on it like a school of piranha. Chris yanked out his six-pack and cracked one open. Surprisingly, the beer was cold and tasty.

About midway through the trip the bus pulled over and the CPO announced in a drunken tone "Piss Call." Everyone scampered off the bus, lined up on the side of the road, and like a row of fountains urinated into the ditch. Chris was at the end of the line and while relieving himself heard something and turned his head to see a massive water buffalo sauntering towards him. By now, he had a good buzz on, marveling at the creature's size and apparent docility.

“Do you want some of this?” twisting his lower torso to hose down the approaching beast. The beast skipped away making a brisk retreat. “Wow, that’s something you won’t see on the LI Expressway,” he joked.

The hilly terrain flattened as they approached the coast. The bus then coursed through the busy main street of Olongapo to the main gate. When they reached the gate, the CPO handed the Marine guard the manifest of passengers. Their transport shuttered past the raised gate with each shift of the transmission. Chris surveyed the base from his seat marveling at its size. Through the front window in the distance, he could see a number of warships, tankers, tenders and dry dock vessels either berthed or tied three abreast to the main pier. To the left he saw several other ships moored. Chris wondered which of those vessels was his. A large open area with baseball fields was to the right. Clustered about the base were a number of buildings one to two stories high and dozens of Quonset huts side by side.

The bus finally came to a stop alongside the Administration Building. Chris slung his duffel bag over his shoulder, disembarked and entered the building to check in. When he finally reached the window, he handed the yeoman his orders. After the yeoman took his copy, he checked the clipboard.

“The *Lawrence* arrived this morning. She is berthed at the Alava Dock. You will find a van outside to take you to the pier.”

“How will I know which ship it is?”

“Let’s see,” as he rechecked the clipboard, “look for hull number four.”

“Hull number four, okay, thanks.”

“Next!”

Chris boarded the van and when filled the driver headed down to the pier making several stops along the way calling out each stop. At last, he heard the driver call out the Alava Pier. Slung the bag over his shoulder, he took a deep breath and as he exited the van gazed in awe at the sight of the battleship gray warships tied alongside the pier. Their superstructures with radar arrays, smoke stacks and antennas formed a steel skyline. At every turn of his head, he witnessed a flurry of activity. Metal grinders were sending sparks everywhere. Bearded Sailors in their

denim blues were carrying soft goods from palettes on the pier. Sailors were sitting on scaffolds hanging over the sides of the vessels painting the hulls while others were polishing brass works or chipping paint.

As he approached the edge of the pier he could see the numbers 148 painted on the bow, which he discovered was the heavy cruiser USS *Newport News* (CA 148). She was a massive and impressive ship about two football fields long and her mast rose some three hundred feet. The gangway was at the stern of the ship, which he slowly crossed where he encountered an ensign carrying a sidearm, a petty officer third class and seaman recruit all in dress whites. He saluted the flag at the stern, then the ensign and asked the requisite, "Permission to come on board," which was granted. He explained he was looking for the USS *Lawrence* (DDG-4) and the ensign told him the *Lawrence* was the third vessel breasted to the pier. He responded with a salute and a "Thank you, sir" and proceeded to cross over to the USS *Cochrane* (DDG-21) where he repeated the boarding ritual and crossed to the USS *Lawrence*.