

SHORT TIMER

I was seventeen when I volunteered for a hitch in the army. My mother had to sign the papers so that I could join before my eighteenth birthday and she offered me a deal. She'd sign the papers if I'd paint her house.

When I told that to Mickey Rice, a nineteen-year-old rocket jockey, he said, "No kiddin'? So, what'dja do? Didja paint it?"

I said, "Sure. I scraped and primered it and gave it two good coats. I'm a good painter."

"You coulda just waited 'til you turned eighteen."

That thought had never occurred to me. I'd been itching to get out on my own and seek adventure. Painting a house seemed a fair bargain. And now, three years, eleven months and two weeks later, I was ready for my next adventure. I was set to get out of the army and be free again. All I had to do was put in 14 more days to emerge victorious over a system that absorbed guys who needed a structured life and preferred not to think for themselves.

I considered Mickey lounging on a folding metal chair by the duty desk. His Army-issue black plastic-framed glasses reminded me of Clark Kent, but Mickey didn't look like a superhero in disguise. Brown haired and brown eyed, of average height, he was just an easy-going kid who had enough smarts for the army to train to be a missile mechanic. In the year I'd been in the outfit, we'd shared a few bowls listening to rock and roll and talking about home, or the future. I was leaving the service and going to college, but Mickey was always vague about his plans.

I asked, "Why'd you join up, Mick?"

"Oh, there wasn't nothin' goin' on in Cleveland."

I imagined that was true as far as it went and returned to a beat-up copy of *True Grit*. Mattie Ross was trying to convince Rooster to go after Tom Chaney.

We were pulling barracks watch on a warm Friday evening in June, 1977. The outfit was stationed in Schwäbisch-Gmünd, West Germany. Barracks watch required a junior NCO—me—and a runner—Mickey—to stay up all night keeping an eye on the barracks. We were supposed to respond to any situations such as a fire, a busted water pipe, or in case war broke out. There wasn't much chance of that, thank God, but we were on duty earning Uncle Sam's pay.

Since it was a weekend night, the most likely situation to arise was guys coming in drunk at all hours, but more about that later.

Mickey asked, "Mind if I play some music?"

I said that was okay if he kept it down and he turned on his cassette player. The driving beat of Jethro Tull's *Aqualung* got cranking as two guys from my platoon came in.

Tremont Benjamin was saying to his buddy LeRoy Jacobs, "...he said that taking a good healthy piss was the best thing to do."

Tremont was maybe five-ten with a darker complexion than LeRoy who was at least six feet and more substantial. He'd been a wide receiver in high school, but he quit the game when his friends suffered concussions and torn up knees.

LeRoy said, "I'm sure Sarge knows about whores. That's the only way that goofy mofa can get any."

Tremont cracked up as LeRoy glanced into the office. "Hey, short-timer! They got you on barracks watch? And on a Friday night, too."

I smiled. LeRoy and Tremont were good guys and we got along fine. I said, "You know the army, man. They always got to fuck with you. What've you cats been up to?"

"Back kinda early, ain't ya?" Mickey said.

"We was just over to the movies and the EM club," Tremont said.

"We're hoppin' a train to Stuttgart in the morning," LeRoy said. "Gonna meet up with some brothers and look around."

"Check out the goods in the red light district?" Mickey asked, being a wise ass.

"More like get some good food, hear some good music, and meet up with some fine sisters," LeRoy said. "I don't pay for trim."

"I've never made it into Stuttgart," I said. "They got some good nightclubs there?"

"My buddy from back home that's stationed in Karlsruhe knows a couple."

"What's he doin' up in Karlsruhe?" Mickey asked.

"He's an MP."

"Man, you wanna know the good spots," Tremont said, "Just ask an MP. They know 'em all 'cause they always roustin' 'em."

"Anyway, you chumps have fun on duty tonight," LeRoy said. "While you're down here dealing with drunk assholes, I'll be in my bunk dreamin' about Stuttgart women."

"Maybe not," I said. "If I get some mean drunks on my hands, I'll send Mickey up to get you guys to help."

Tremont said, "Mickey know better dan to come knockin' on our door in the middle of the night."

LeRoy said, "You better!"

Mickey laughed and did the dap with LeRoy and Tremont who went on upstairs bullshitting about how they hoped Mickey would come up to get them so that they could hang him out of the window. The 'dap' was also called the 'hand-jive' and was a complicated form of handshake involving slaps, knuckle bumps and finger motions.

LeRoy had called me "short-timer" because in two weeks I'd be on that big, beautiful freedom bird home! Being called a short-timer always gave me a jet of satisfaction.

I got comfortable in the wooden swivel chair behind the government-issue desk while Mickey grooved to his music. Mick was a Pershing nuclear missile crewman, but I

was part of a platoon of grunts – infantrymen – who had volunteered for security duty. I guess some artillery general convinced his boss that his nuke batteries needed more security than the rocket jockeys could provide for themselves? Anyway, not long after I passed my sergeants' exam in my armored infantry outfit, word came down that this nuke unit was taking volunteers. Since my best friends had recently left the army or rotated back to the states while I had another year to go, I figured I'd see a different part of Germany. Being in a nuke unit was different, and if the 'balloon went up' and the Soviets attacked, the nukes were said to be high on their priority list to eliminate. So, I took a chance that a war would not start in the last year of my enlistment.

Now by ourselves again, Mickey said, "So, you painted the house and your mom signed the papers. And now you got your stripes and you're gettin' out. How come you wanted to join up, anyway?"

I put my finger on the page I was reading and gathered my reasons. "Well, my dad was in the infantry in WWII and fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and I wasn't ready to go to college, plus didn't have the money anyway, so I figured I'd sign up for a tour in Europe and get the GI Bill."

Mickey lit up a cigarette and exhaled smoke toward the ceiling. I detested cancer sticks, and suspected that Mickey took them up to look tough or cool or whatever. With his jug-handle ears and prominent Adams apple, I guess he figured he needed to do something?

"Yeah," he said, "but now that you're a sergeant you got it made."

I said, "So? I make fifty bucks more a month than you. What are you saying? Once you make sergeant you'll turn into a lifer?"

In the army there are two kinds of soldiers. There are guys like me just doing a hitch as a means to an end, and then there are guys who want to put in their twenty years: Lifers. They like to call themselves 'career men', but the non-lifers usually look at them with disdain as guys who couldn't make it on the outside. Lifers are willing to put up with all the regulations that tell you when and where to eat, when to get your hair cut, where you'll live – whether it's Colorado or South Korea, always moving from one assignment to the next. F--- that!

Mickey talked the non-lifer talk, but it sure looked like he was just going along. That's what lifers are good at.

He took another drag on his coffin nail and said, "I don't know, Sam. Putting in twenty wouldn't be so bad. Get out at 38 and already have a retirement plan set up? I could go work at the Post Office for another fifteen years and be set for life."

I looked at Mickey in a new light. He'd come from a poor family and was making some money for the first time in his life. He liked being a missile mechanic, and wasn't overly picky about food. I ran a hand through my hair that was longer than regulation length and said, "Well, you can do what you want, Mick. If making it a career makes sense to ya, then go on ahead. I got better things to do."

Some guys would've looked at me as if to say 'Sure you do', but not Mickey. He just made a little shrug and blew a smoke ring toward the doorway.

"Well, I think it's great you wanna go to college, Sam. What're ya goin' to study?"

"I'm thinking about literature."

"Literature? You wanna be a teacher?"

"Nope. But I don't want to go into business, either."

Mickey seemed perplexed. "What about bein' some kinda scientist? You could study somethin' interesting like volcanoes or hurricanes."

I was pleased to see Mickey's own adventurous side and smiled. "I guess I could study volcanoes in Hawaii. They've got mountains there that are always erupting. Or in Italy, or California. Though I don't much fancy living in California."

"What's wrong with California? They got good weather and orange trees and lots of babes on the beach."

"Too crowded," I said, "Plus, they get earthquakes. Nope. I'm heading to Oregon, check that out. Then maybe I'll look around in Washington, too."

"I hear it rains most of the time up there."

"Yeah, well, I'm damned sure not going back to Syracuse. I've shoveled enough snow to last me the rest of my life..."

At that point, my best buddy Frank Bergman walked in. Frank is a six foot two blond Swede from Denver with an easy smile and a laid-back manner, although no one with sense would mess with him. He grew up in a rough neighborhood and could take care of himself. That evening he wore starched fatigues and spit-shined boots. "You're goin' on about Oregon again?" He said. "You're like a broken record."

His smile bristled his mustache and made his blue eyes shine.

Mickey said, "Hey, Frank. Ain't you on guard?"

"Yeah, I am, but I just popped over here to fetch my book. Has Sam been talkin' about becomin' a literature professor?"

I gave him a sour frown while Mickey said, "He tol' me he doesn't wanna teach, though I don't know what else you'd do with a degree in literature. I said he oughtta study volcanoes."

"That'd be a whole lot more fun and excitin'," Frank said, "'long as ya didn't fall in."

"Fall in, hell!" I said. "I'd go to Hawaii and go down into the crater where they were gonna throw in a beautiful princess and catch her."

"That'd be about the only way you'd ever get a beautiful princess," Frank said. "Now me, all I'd have to do was get off the boat and they'd come runnin'."

I said, "Yeah, to get their mail."

Mickey cracked up and Frank made as though he wanted to punch me, but he was amused. He said, "For a little guy, you sure have a smart mouth."

"Little? I'm five ten and a half!"

Frank lowered his fist with a smirk. "Like I said. Anyway, I can't stand here bullshit-ing with you boys all night. I gotta get upstairs and fetch my book. Don't go fallin' asleep, now."

I replied, "You have fun walkin' your post, buddy."

"Don't got to," Frank said with an air of triumph. "I made the man. Later, suckers."

"Alright, Frank!" Mickey called after him. "He sure has the boots for it."

Knowing how most soldiers hated boring guard duty, the officers had a regulation that called for at least one extra man on the guard detail. The extra man was called a 'supernumerary' and usually got to stay in the guard shack and get a decent night's sleep. That encouraged competition for who got to be the supernumerary. The man with the smartest uniform and who correctly answered questions about the general orders won out and was said to have 'made the man.' Sometimes, there'd be two extra men and the best would be excused from guard duty altogether. It was a clever way to make sure that the guard detail turned out looking 'strack.'

Frank came back down and gave us more crap about staying alert as he left and then things got quiet. Guys entered in twos and threes from wherever they'd been carousing and went on up to bed. It was passing midnight when Mickey made a huge yawn that he partly covered with an old Popular Mechanics magazine.

I said, "You want to sack out for a couple of hours, Mick?"

"Well, I am pretty beat. You don't mind?"

"Naw, go ahead. I'll handle things here."

Mickey went into the office to catch some Z's and that's how I came to be alone when Chip "Stank" Snelling and Pete "DumDum" Dunn came in drunk on their asses and full of piss.

"Well, look who's barracks chief tonight!" Stank declared. He was five eight and blond-haired with a thin little mustache and bloodshot blue eyes. He probably weighed one twenty soaking wet. He was always a smartass, but especially when he had a load on. He had a pinched, ferrety face that he shaved maybe three times a week.

"It's Sampson!" DumDum said, slurring his words. Dunn was five ten with brown hair cut to regulation length and a mustache that was thicker than Stank's. DumDum did not get his nickname from the deadly expanding bullet. He was stout and that made him at least good for heavy lifting.

Looking at these knuckleheads, I figured that somewhere there was a platoon sergeant who had been happy to get rid of them. He probably hadn't been able to fill out the transfer papers fast enough.

"You two look like you've been up to no good," I said. I had no desire to have a conversation, but I figured it'd be easier to keep them moving toward their bunks if I avoided calling them by their nicknames which they hated.

"Tha's right!" DumDum said. "We ben drinkin' and causin' mischief!"

"While you've been stuck here all night. Sarge." Stank emphasized my rank like you do when you think it's undeserved. "We was up at the ranch gettin' laid."

He was referring to a cathouse on the edge of town that I had often heard about but never visited. That these two Einsteins would throw their money away on hookers was not beyond belief, but I doubted that they had the nerve and figured it was baloney. Rather than call him on it, I merely said, "You fellas must be all wore out with all that humping."

"Damn straight!" DumDum said. "We screwed them bitches silly."

"They tol' us to come on back and they'd give us a free ride next time," Stank said. "How 'bout that?!"

"You guys are a real couple of studs," I said. "And lucky, too. You get to go to bed when you want."

"Uh huh," DumDum said. "We do. And tha's just where I'm goin'."

Stank said, "You have fun glued to that desk, Sarge. C'mon Pete."

I was relieved to see them moving for the stairs, but then they laid eyes on the beer machine. "Hang on, pal," DumDum said. "I wanna 'nother beer."

"Good idea," Stank said.

From the desk I could hear them going through their pockets for change. Of course, it turned out that they only had enough for one beer and started arguing.

I let it go until they got loud and belligerent. Part of barracks watch is keeping the peace, so I reluctantly stood up when somebody impacted the beer machine.

Hindsight later told me that what I should've done was give them enough money for another beer so that they could go pass out in their room. But even if I'd had some change on me, I was in no mood to give them one red cent.

DumDum had shoved Stank into the beer machine and Stank was holding a can of beer and cussing him.

"Hey, you two!" I said, "Keep it down! Guys're trying to sleep. Just take that beer upstairs and split it."

"I put in seven'y cents!" DumDum shouted into Stank's face. "That beer's mine!"

"F--- you!" Stank snarled. He shoved back and the two started wrestling. The beer dropped to the floor and erupted in foam. With an enraged howl, DumDum turned Stank loose to swing on him.

Like an idiot, I stepped in to break them up. DumDum swung and missed because Stank backed up and loosed a kick that impacted my scrotum.

"Goddammit!" I yelled. I turned away clutching my privates as the malefactors grappled and cussed each other. If I'd had a billy club at that moment, I'd have applied it with gusto, but I didn't have so much as a broom.

Then inspiration struck. The military police station was just around the corner.

I gingerly made my way to the desk as Mickey came out of the office rubbing his eyes. "What in hell's goin' on, Sam?"

I ignored him and dialed the MPs and told the duty sergeant that we had two belligerent drunks that needed to be hauled in. He said he'd have someone there pronto.

Mickey went to the door saying, "You guys better break it up! Sarge has..."

I grabbed his arm and spun him around. "Shut up! Don't tell those shitheads! I want the MPs to haul their asses in!"

"The colonel won't like that."

"Who gives a shit?! The motherf-----s kicked me in the balls!"

"They did?"

From down the hallway, someone yelled, "What the fuck's goin' on around here?"

Guys were starting to come out of their room in their skivvies looking pissed off. Meanwhile, the morons had slipped and fallen on the wet linoleum and were cussing as they wallowed in the suds.

My nuts were throbbing and I was considering nailing them with the folding chair when two big MPs arrived. They wore shiny helmet liners and smartly pressed fatigues with their pants bloused into the top of their gleaming combat boots. The older one was a staff sergeant. He exchanged a "here we go again" look with his partner, a corporal, and saw me. "You the one that called us?"

"Yes, I'm Sergeant Thompson."

By then, one of the missile jockeys had directed the drunks' attention to the MPs. Stank looked bleary-eyed at the police and DumDum head-butted him. Stank yelped in pain, and blood streamed from his left eyebrow.

"Jesus H. Christ!" the MP sergeant moaned. He pulled DumDum away while his partner jerked Stank to his feet.

I said, "You're going to haul their asses out of here, I hope."

The older MP ignored me and glared at the drunks. "I oughtta throw both of you in the stockade right now and let your CO Article 15 your sorry asses!"

"Him especially Sarge! That little fucker kicked me in the nuts!"

While his partner grinned in amusement, the MP sergeant glared at me and noticed my 'short-timer wheels'. This was an informal 'decoration' that guys used to show that their enlistment was almost up. It was a little metal curtain roller that had a pair of small wheels and a hook. You looped hook through your top left button hole.

The sergeant considered for a moment and said, "Cuff 'em, Dan."

His partner applied the handcuffs while the sergeant held the now silent morons.

"Aw Sarge, you don't wanna haul these boys in and do all that paperwork, do ya?" This was Sergeant Murphy, a missile jockey with a couple of years seniority on me. "We'll see that they go to their bunks and don't cause any more trouble."

The MP sergeant thought about that and turned to me. "Do you want to press charges?"

Murphy looked at me and shook his with a 'you'd better not' expression. He said, "We'll see that they get extra duty, Sarge."

The MP corporal said, "We had oughtta run this one over to the doc for a coupla stitches, Sarge."

Stank's cut eyebrow had made a bloody mess of his civilian shirt, not to mention the floor. He said, "I'm alright."

The senior MP shook his head with a tired frown and asked me, "What about it, Sergeant?"

Much as I'd have loved to see both of the idiots hauled away, I knew that Murphy was warning me that the old man would not be happy about two of his men getting arrested in his own barracks. So, despite my aching testicles, I relented. "Well, it'd give me a world of satisfaction to see these shitheads dragged to jail, but I guess I'll let it slide."

The MP made a resigned shrug, but I think he was actually glad not to have to run the miscreants in. He said, "Okay, but we'll take this one over to the infirmary to get patched up. That'll let his pal here cool off. Dan, take the cuffs off him and bring this one along."

"Gee, thanks Sarge," Murphy said. "I'll buy you a beer sometime. You know, I was an MP in Korea a few years ago."

"Izzat right? Murphy, eh?"

And so Murphy made a new friend and the MPs took Stank away while guys from DumDum's platoon took him upstairs and I got Mickey to mop the floor. But I had to grit my teeth as I wrote up the incident report in the log. My nuts had settled into a dull ache by four-thirty in the morning when the MP corporal delivered a bandaged Stank. Since he wasn't in jail, I figured that the little shithead owed me big time, but I just let him go on upstairs with a silent glare.

I was relieved from duty at six thirty and told Frank the story as we went to get breakfast. He thought it was pretty funny. "It's a good thing you broke up with that gal back home 'cause now you won't have to show her your black and blue balls."

I said, "You're a regular laugh riot, you know that."

When we got back to the barracks, I went up to my room to survey the damage. Sure enough my left testicle was swollen and blueish purple. Being a sergeant, I had a room to myself with its own shower. I gingerly washed my injured jewels and shaved wondering if I should turn in or wait for the summons to the office. Not two minutes later, someone knocked on my door.

It was one of the battery office clerks. "The colonel wants to see you now."

A nuclear missile battery was commanded by a lieutenant colonel.

"He's pretty sore about your callin' the MPs. Better get yourself squared away and get down there on the double."

I frowned and said, "I'll be right there." I closed the door and put on my fatigue shirt that still bore my short-timer wheels. I considered taking them off to avoid antagonizing the man. But on the other hand, what could he do to me? I was within my rights calling the MPs and had been injured. I decided to leave the wheels in place.

But when I got down to the office, the First Sergeant took one look at me and said, "Get those goddam things off! What in hell's wrong with you?"

I said, "My nuts, Top. F---ing Stank kicked me."

"I know," Top said. "I read the log. But you can't go in there wearin' that shit." He unpinned the wheels and handed them to me, and then gave me a look-over. "Okay. I'll tell 'im you're here."

In a minute, Top ushered me into the colonel's office. I advanced the regulation distance to the desk, stood to attention and saluted sharply. "Sergeant Thompson reporting as ordered, Sir."

The colonel, a balding career man in his mid-forties, had been reading a typed paper when we entered and now looked up. He did not return my salute. "Why in the hell did you call the military police to my barracks, sergeant?"

I dropped my salute and remained at attention. "Sir, after I tried to separate privates Snelling and Dunn and was kicked in the groin, I figured I'd let the MPs have 'em."

The colonel frowned and shoved the paper down onto his desk. "Goddammit sergeant! I expect better from NCOs under my command. You should have gotten Sergeant Murphy or men from the unit to help before you called the MPs."

"Sir," Top said, coming forward next to me. "Sergeant Thompson should have handled this within the unit. However, privates Snelling and Dunn clearly can't hold their booze. May I suggest we confine them to quarters and assign extra duty for a month?"

The colonel glared at me and said, "Yes, Top. And make sure those assholes know that if this happens again, I'll Article 15 their asses so fast, they won't know what him 'em! And Thompson, if you weren't so short, I'd have you on extra duty, too! Dismissed!"

Top and I saluted and left the man's office. Top walked with me to the outer door. With a smile threatening to break out, he asked, "How're the stones, Sam?"

"They've been better," I said. "Thanks, Top. I'm gonna turn in for a while."

And that's how I came to the end of my army career with a discolored testicle. When Frank drove me to the airport, he joked that I had "one hung low." We laughed about that and I reflected on the strange turn of events as the freedom bird turned west for the good old U S of A.

There I was on the verge of the next chapter in my life looking forward to moving to Oregon and starting college. But the moment was not unalloyed. Does life ever afford a clear victory?

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