

Our ride to Honolulu is reflective and soothing, if nonalcoholic, and with only one tense moment on Wake Island where the landing gear makes a sharp, loud bang upon touchdown. I can hear a collective groan arise from the inhabitants even above the loud reversing engines as the plane shutters and vibrates to a stop before exceeding the island's runway. With the refueling finished, we take off smoothly and land delicately at Honolulu where Dalton, the other guy from A Company, and I get off. We split a cab to Schofield Barracks and check in at the replacement office where we dump our duffle bags, draw clean bedding, and make up our bunks. After 10 months of eating Army food, Sergeant Dalton does not want to eat in a mess hall, so the three of us grab another cab back to Honolulu, and chow down on real civilian food.

By the time we finish eating, it is dark. We roam the streets of Honolulu for a time keeping in mind to stay off Hotel Street. We find ourselves sitting in a small park trying to figure out what to do next when I notice a massage parlor and thinking that after an 8-hour plane ride I should reward myself with a rubdown. Staring at the parlor's billboard brings fantasies of a hand job from a beautiful young Polynesian wahine as a welcome home present to me, but Dalton insists I will not get one in there. I am resolute though, and when the fat wahine at the counter tells me to go inside the massage room and take off, "all of your clothes," I tingle with optimism that my reverie will come true. I lie face down on the table dreaming a foxy babe will walk in, fondle me tenderly, roll me over, and with a great gorgeous smile offer to wank my wiener. I must reposition my stiffening erection so as not to squash my dickhead beneath my pubic bone. Lament is an understatement when the same ugly fat broad waddles in and halfheartedly kneads my back with her fat calloused paws. She resembles Devine in the John Waters film *Pink Flamingos* where in the last scene in a series of progressively grosser acts Devine eats dog shit. My attempt at conversation peters out after telling her I just got off the plane from Vietnam; her apathy is deafening, reticence ensues, and the conversation dies a hero's death. When turning over, I cringe at the sight of her ugly face; my fantasy of the idyllically tanned, grass-skirted Hawaiian honey keen to choke my chicken is kaput, blood drains from my dick. I close my eyes until the fat broad leaves the room; I sit up remorseful and limp and get dressed, forever regretting not listening to Dalton.

Upon rejoining my cohorts, Dalton wants to see a show, and a nightclub is only half a block away. We sit near the dance floor drinking very pricey highballs as a band plays tedious progressive jazz until a black man, billed as Mr. Clean, appears to emcee the night's entertainment. The first act is a diminutive black man who balances chairs atop one another in his mouth. His over-muscled lower jaw gives him a droll countenance. A malicious remark about the little man emanates from a heckler and after the act, Mr. Clean challenges the undetected detractor to a fight outside the bar. With a nom de guerre like Mr. Clean, there are no takers.

The main act is a chunky, aging stripper who embarks on a slow strip tease of no consequence until she bears her top to reveal two voluptuous teats adorned with tasseled pasties. As the band plays *The Stripper*, she rolls her right shoulder in a circular motion forcing the right boob to spin clockwise. Rolling her other shoulder in the opposite direction spins her left boob counterclockwise faster and faster until the patrons' heads are bobbing harmoniously, half affixed to the right boob, the other half to the left boob. Seamlessly, she changes the rotation of one tittie, so both of her pasties are now revolving in synch, as are the heads of her audience. With a kick of the base drum, she

stands spread legged, crosses her forearms in front of her squishing her boobies to an unforeseen halt. Her boobeyes gape back at the audience as the tassels drunkenly spin to a lazy stop. As the audience roars, the routine turns more elaborate; everyone is laughing, clapping, and grinning like jackasses as the aging stripper shimmy her shoulders causing her tassels to bobble up and down at the finale. The show is worth the price of admission any day.

After the performance, we loiter outside the club. My mind returns to Vietnam, it is night there too. I look up into a starry sky knowing a patrol is skulking its way to an ambush site to spend the rest of the night staring into the blackness. “Do you think it was worth it, Dalton?”

“What the show?”

“No, Vietnam.”

“I guess so. I mean, you and I made it out of there okay, didn’t we?”

“What about everybody who didn’t make it out of there? Was it worth it for them?”

The absurdity of the question stammers Dalton. “How the fuck am I suppose to know, Lupton. Goddamn it, forget Vietnam, you are out; you made it, who cares.”

“Exactly, who cares?” I muse pensively. Dalton is a real Texan where deep thinking is not a forte. Metaphorically, who cares if dieing in Vietnam is a noble cause? “I guess you are right, Dalton, the whole thing doesn’t mean shit,” I stand, stretch my arms with a yawn, jet lag is rapidly coming upon us, “so fuck it.” It is late; we eat at the snack bar next to the club then catch the Wahiawa bus back to Schofield.

On clean sheets, we sleep the entire night without interruption for the first time in 10 months. The next morning we eat a tasty breakfast, fresh OJ, fresh milk, fresh eggs, and unburnt toast – no weevils. Our shit disappears with a flush and a whoosh, no burning required. This truly is – The World.

With lots more to come, draftees, enlistees, and Vietnam returnees populate the newly formed 11th Brigade, which consists of the 4th Battalion of the 3rd Infantry, the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Infantry, and the 1st Battalion of the 20th Infantry. We dawdle around waiting for our unit assignments. The third man draws the 3rd Battalion 1st Infantry, a jeep takes him away, and I never seem him again. Dalton and I draw the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry. To our amazement, our jeep pulls into the exact same quad that we shipped from 10 months earlier. As we unload our duffle bags, Lieutenant Lewis, the executive officer of B Company, walks out of the orderly room and begins ragging us for not saluting him. We must stand at attention dressed in the wrinklely khakis we wore from Vietnam as he chews our asses’ then he struts away toward battalion headquarters. Shaking our heads in disbelief, we look at each other; Dalton walks over to A Company, and I enter the B Company orderly room and introduce myself to First Sergeant Lee.

The first sergeant assigns me to first platoon and tells Sergeant Jerkoff, who persistently hangs around the orderly room brown nosing, to take me upstairs and get me a bunk and a couple of lockers. This asshole does not have the good compartment to grab even my small AWOL bag to help me. I hoist my duffle bag onto my shoulder, clutch my AWOL bag, and hump up three flights of stairs to the third floor where I enter the exact same barracks as I departed from earlier with the 27th Wolfhounds. I drop my heavy bag and stand, awed, staring at the cavernous room, déjà vu all over again.

Our company commander is Captain Shelton who likes Vietnam returnees; he promotes me to E4 after 30 days and has hopes I can cut it as a squad leader and help train his new company. He is a super lifer, on fast track for general, airborne, ranger trained, and gung-ho for Vietnam to get in his six months command time. A former general's aid, he is all starched fatigues, spit shinned boots, and yes sir, no sir, anything for you sir to the battalion commander, Lt Colonel Beers. Colonel Beers fancies himself as an Old Army officer, who is a self-centered, narcissistic petty pedant whose raison d'être is his career, and not the enlisted lumpen under his command. A well-rumored certainty is that a trip to the Colonel's office is the death knell for the enlisted; your next stop is the stockade.

Sergeant Diaz is the first platoon sergeant; he is 6ft 3, two hundred fifty pounds, no fat, only muscle, and nobody fucks with him. He has a thing about long hair, and his most annoying idiosyncrasy is demanding we get a haircut every week. It only costs 90 cents and to make my new life tolerable under his dominion, I get my hair shorn every Saturday afternoon after inspection.

There are merely 16 men in the platoon making up only three squads. Sergeant Jerkoff is the first squad leader, and he divides his six-man squad into two three-man fire teams, A and B, with only six men, the whole thing appears childish. The idiot yells frequently as if we are basic trainees. I just shake my head at his petty stupidity. Sergeant Jerkoff plots furtively to get his promotion to E6 then immediately goes on medical profile and is history. Sergeant Ahuna, the pooched Pineapple, becomes my squad leader. He is a Staff Sergeant and at first we get along well but after a month, I resent his constant nit picking. Barracks life seems inconsequential after Vietnam and Ahuna, the loyal minion, prods me doggedly to perform tedious chickenshit tasks. Eventually, I relent. It is easier to give my faded jungle boots a quick shine than listen to Ahuna nag me about their scruffiness. After a few weeks, I give in and game the system by complying.

It is customary for Vietnam returnees to wear the unit patch of the outfit you served with in combat on your right shoulder, the 11th Brigade patch attaches to the left shoulder. I buy new fatigues, have them tailored, install my nametag, combat infantrymen's badge, and PFC chevrons, and then precisely hang the uniforms in my wall locker with the right shoulder neatly exhibiting the 25th Division's tropic lightening. New boots, new khakis, new dress greens adorn my wall locker, and two shiny new pairs of boots live under my bunk. I am not broke like before, and I have an incentive for promotion to Spec4 quickly because only privates and PFC's must pull guard and KP, but not E4s. It is not that I am gunho, but that I despise pulling KP and guard. This ruse works okay for a few months until there are too many Spec4s and not enough privates to pull KP without the privates being on KP in perpetuity. Now the Spec4s have to pull the shit details right along with everybody else, so much for that scheme.

On my first day of field training, Sergeant Ahuna assigns me to take a patrol and harass bivouacking troops in the next field. I take three men with me and sneak through the high grass, climb down a well-treed gully, and quietly climb the opposing bank. Poorly positioned with their fox holes dug in an open field shy of the tree line, it is a piece of cake sneaking up on them. I organize the others to fire their entire magazine on full automatic then we run like hell, laughing so hard we can hardly climb out of the ravine. Sergeant Ahuna thinks this is cool, and we lounge in the grass until Colonel

Henderson, the 11th Brigade commander, drives by. His jeep comes to a locked-wheel halt, enveloping him in a cloud of red dust, and a royal ass chewing ensues for not saluting him. We all jump up, stand at attention in a group salute while watching Sergeant Ahuna's ass obtain a royal ass chewing. After the colonel drives away, a testy Ahuna orders me back to harass the friendly troops again. I approach the unit from another direction and pull off the same caper. After chow, I lead another patrol but this time they set up a listening post in the trees, exactly where it should have been in the first place, and we come under fire as we climb the incline. Aside from patrolling and moving in platoon formations, this is the depth of our training; I am bored with it all. I begin searching for ways to sham out of field training just as Greko used to do.

It is after 1800 when I decide my tooth hurts too much to wait for the next morning's sick call. I walk across the quad to the dispensary where I hear muffled voices in the back room. I try the door, no more voices. "I hear you in there," I shout, but no one responds. I yell some more, but the medics are shitheads. My tooth hurts, and I am desperate for relief. All I want are some aspirins, but these assholes will not come to the door. I walk to the PX, buy a bottle of aspirins, and put one directly on the offending cavity where it melts, finally some respite.

The next morning I begin a prolonged series of trips to the dentist. My previous appointment in Cu Chi was more than nine months ago, and after Sergeant LaVilla ragged my ass, I never attempted to go again. My teeth need work and my frequent visits to the dentist annoy First Sergeant Lee, and especially Sergeant Diaz who thinks I am using this as an excuse to screw off, which is somewhat true. I study the next weeks training schedule before seeing the dentist and make my appointments for the days the company is training in the field. Most of the times there is not much for me to do when I return, which allows me to hang around the barracks all morning napping, Greko would be proud of me. At noon, I ride out to the field with the mess jeep, help serve chow, and then join the company. Before departing on leave, I endure a root canal and several large fillings.

Upon arriving at Schofield, I begin experiencing stomach pains. A visit to the battalion sick call produces an appointment in January for an upper GI x-ray at Tripler Army Hospital. In the mean time I shit in a cup to test for parasites, the results are negative, which means I am a strong candidate for an ulcer. My hopes soar with this news because I wrongly think this will get me out of the Army, but all the army will do is treat the ulcer with Maalox and diet. My dreams of early discharge are shattered.

Vietnam returnees are eligible for a 30-day leave upon returning from Vietnam. I elect to wait until the middle of December, so I may be home at Christmas time. Captain Shelton finds no problems with this, and he processes the paperwork without quandary. During my two-month wait, I notice platoon members like Taylor staying behind and spending his afternoon typing things for the company clerk, Sillen. I envy the stay behinds especially when the company returns from the field wet and muddy. Sergeant Diaz has a habit of making us clean and turn in our rifles before we eat chow and this pisses everybody off to no end. Taylor is dry, comfortable, and normally standing in the front of the chow line. I take special note of Taylor and promise myself to emulate his dodge whenever an opportunity arises.

Because I only spent 10 months in Vietnam, I dread the Army will levy my ass back to Vietnam after 18 months. I might have a full tour with only ten months in

Vietnam, but I can never find anything written in the Army Regulations confirming this. Every company has a complete library of Army Regs and their addendums but the only compelling reading I find rummaging through the AR's is the prohibition against sodomy. I never even knew there was such a thing. It is interesting reading for the naive, and everybody else eagerly peruses that section too. I beseech Captain Shelton to look into the full-tour matter for me. To my great relief, a few days later he tells me I do have a full tour, which means I am exempt from involuntary troop deployment back to Vietnam. Hot damn, in my judgment this is a great reprieve.

After the evening formation, a black fellow walks up to me asking how I am doing. I am a little standoffish at first and wonder why he behaves as if we know each other. I see the electric strawberry on his right shoulder when it finally dawns on me, "Oh, yeah, shit, I remember you now. How is your arm?" He is the 1st platoon member with me on the helicopter on July 19, I remember him now! He is with Captain Medina's C Company. (Yup, that Captain Medina) He draws up his sleeve to show me his scar. "Your fingers work okay?"

"Yeah, see, no problem." He wiggles his digits for me.

"How long have you been in Hawaii?"

"About a month and a half now, it is better here than Cu Chi." I never understand how he wrangles an assignment to Hawaii rather than going back to A Company. I feel bad that I never looked him up in C Company afterwards; in fact, I cannot even remember his name.

Two weeks after returning from Vietnam, I sit comfortably in the small snack bar next the athletic stadium reading Sunday's *Honolulu Advisor*. Operation Attleboro, in which the 25th Division is playing a major roll, is the front-page feature. The operation has been going on for some time now and after I left, the first battalion Wolfhounds become an important player in the action that will eventually engage 22,000 troops, the largest operation in Vietnam at that time.

On November 1, A Company joins the action by conducting Eagle Flights from the airfield at Dau Tieng while B and C Companies maneuver with units of the newly arrived 196th Infantry Brigade. On November 3, helicopters fly A Company to the field in support of C Company and shortly afterwards both units come under heavy fire from well-entrenched Viet Cong bunkers. Around 1300 the next day, the hapless first platoon endures an assault by 100 VC. Firing at maximum range from Dau Tieng, the 8th Artillery saves their asses. This time first platoon counts the meat. At 1400, Charlie makes another fruitless charge only to suffer more dead, and finally at 1800 they give it one last shot but cannot overrun the Wolfhounds. I learn Sergeant LaVilla loses his middle finger to a bullet. Harnack and Sergeant Rodriguez suffer shrapnel wounds from a mortar, and dust offs cannot evacuate them for over 24 hours. The battle continues for five days with 1st Battalion 27th Wolfhound's CO, Major Meloy, becoming tactical commander of 11 companies, a situation never heard of before, or since. The fighting rages in dense jungle and yet during the height of the combat, some troops never see a Viet Cong soldier, not even once. Confusion reigns: two platoons from the 21st Infantry of the 196th go in one direction to marry up with Company A's left flank while their third platoon leader misinterprets the order and takes off in another direction eventually linking up with A Company's right flank. Only the bewilderment of the higher command in Tay Ninh supersedes the confusion on the ground. Most disparaging of all is learning Beltz,

an old-timer who sailed with the division and who goes to Manila with me on R&R takes a round through his head. Two other FNGs die in the action also. A PFC and his company commander from the 2nd Battalion 27th Wolfhounds both earn the Congressional Medals of Honor.

The article boasts that the operation garners 400 tons of rice, an amazing number, other foodstuffs, and over 200 VC KIA. MACV speculates the 196th interrupted a planned Viet Cong winter offensive to commence when the rainy season ends in III Corps. I snicker with smug vindication for my 10 months of endless searches looking for the enemy we rarely find.

I sit sipping my coffee with a tinge of repentance for quitting the game early even though I know the combat would surely destroy my nerves. Memories of the inexorable fatigue, the nagging fear, the albatross of the M60 ammo, and yeah, shit, fuck it. I am thrilled to sit here safe and secure and without want or persistent dread of dying a vicious death. Although I do feel left out, as if not picked to play on somebody's team, but then again, hey, I elected not to play the game any more. Why should I feel remorse for anything?

I leave the newspaper behind as finality to my guilt. "Leave it all behind," I tell myself then hook up with Slater, Prince, and another fellow and walk to the Kemoo Bar across the street from Funston Gate. We occupy a table swilling Primo beer then high balls, and finally shots and Primos. An undercover Alcoholic Control Board man attempts to bust the table by checking our ID's. Slater is only 19, but he is not drinking alcohol, so the bust is a bust. After this affront, we continue our drinking at the EM club where Slater can partake. It is dark when we stagger past the officers' housing singing, *What Shall We Do with a Drunken Soldier?* We discuss this issue at length as we cross the large soccer field dancing and laughing like hyenas, and finally we chunk our way up the stairs to the third floor. We grab ass on the lanai when somehow I manage to drop the push broom down between three floors of banisters where it shatters the glass of the candy dispenser, scattering M & Ms all over the place. Like an idiot, I run quickly to my bunk and feign sleep until the CQ plods up to see what is going on. Somebody rats me out, "Lupton, he did it."

"Okay, get up Lupton and clean up your mess." Disgraced, I sweep up the M & Ms and glass shards from the ground floor. The next morning First Sergeant Lee asks me if I broke the dispenser on purpose which I quickly deny, and that is the end of the matter. On Monday mornings, we do PT, and I pay dearly for the night's revelry.

Prince and I agree to go halves on a car, and I get my Hawaiian drivers license without any problems. We each pony up two hundred dollars for a 10-year-old Lincoln Continental. It is large and clunky but still in good shape, and the electric windows still work.

My only problem is I am never able to drive the damn thing. When I arrived at Schofield, Prince is in the 1st platoon with me, and we became friendly. After I am here a few weeks, B Company finally gets our own mess hall and Prince becomes a cook. He works from 0400 until 1500 when he cooks breakfast and lunch then every few days he alternates his schedule by working from 1100 until after dinner, he always has some time off to do things. I on the other hand, start my day at 0500 and finish up at 1800 after I eat evening chow. Moreover, I am frequently in the field until late, or the company might stay out in the boonies for three days at a pop. Prince always has the car, he has a girl

friend too, and I never see him or the car. After a while, I start to feel shorted on the deal. One afternoon I have a dental appointment and it looks like rain, so I take the car and drive to the clinic a few quads away. While I am sitting in the dentist's chair, I hear somebody mention my name. It is Prince and his cook friend; he wants the keys to the car. I must fork them over, and afterwards, I walk home in the rain ruing the day I went halves with this jerk.

I cool my heels about the matter for a few days, but on Saturday night, I insist on going off base and driving the car. Prince and another cook, Daryl, and I decide to dress up in suits and go nightclubbing, hoping always to get lucky. I insist on driving downtown where we find a nightclub. We agree everyone will buy drinks on rotation, and like a dummy, I volunteer for the first round. When the drinks come, the tab adds up to seven dollars; I just about shit myself, seven bucks! I fork over the money. We consume our drinks, Daryl buys the next round, and after that, the cook buys a third round. I start talking with a couple of guys sitting next to us who crow incessantly about the 1st Division. They boast the 1st Division is the baddest unit in Vietnam. I listen to them yakking away then ask them what they think of the 25th Division. "Aw, the 25th Division ain't shit, they suck, they are a bunch of pussies," one brays like a jackass.

"Hey, fuck you," I retort. Their smiles fade from their faces. The waitress intercedes then Prince wants to leave the club. So okay, we finish our drinks and leave; I smirk at the two 1st Division schmucks as we exit. I want to walk to Ft DeRussy, the military resort on Waikiki Beach, but Prince wants to go back to the barracks, he has to work the next morning. "Come on lets go down to Ft DeRussy and check the place out, just one drink, besides it is your turn to buy," but Prince will not hear of it, and we grudgingly return to the Lincoln. Prince drives back to Schofield.

Daryl wants to keep drinking, so we drop him off at the Kemoo Bar, drive to the parking lot across from B Company, and then walk across the street to our barracks. Prince and the cook go upstairs, and I stop off for a visit with Sergeant Biggs, the CQ, for a few minutes then say, "screw this," get into the car, drive over to the Kemoo Bar, and hitch up with Daryl again. We consume a few drinks at more reasonable prices and decide to drive into Wahiawa, Daryl knows of a nice little hometown bar. It is a short drive to the bar where we occupy a table. A bland, insipid waitress brings our beers, and we chat about how friendly a place Daryl thinks this joint really is. After the bartender yells last call, we agree to buy a six-pack of Primos and go to a beach to drink it. I turn to the waitress to order the beer, and she apathetically shakes her head no. Disappointed, I turn to Daryl and say. "Shit, how are we going to get any beer now?"

"I heard what you said about me. If you keep talking about me that way I'll have you two tossed out of here." With arms folded, our raggy waitress stands next to me with scorn written all over her ugly mug. What is her problem? I never said squat about her. I look at Daryl then back at sourpuss. She sure has a set of brass tits talking to me this way.

"I never said shit about you, lady." Her frown deepens at my callous reply but before she can intimidate me further, the bouncer infers we should leave.

"Suck it up fellas, suck it up," he says as he circles the table stacking chairs upside down on other tables. Miss Chimera walks away smugly knowing she can get away with her bullshit. The bouncer is big enough to kick both our asses. We look at

each other, nod, finish our beers, but I feel slighted by this disagreeable, podgy Pineapple bitch.

As I turn sideways to get past her, I cannot resist not having the last word, "Fuck a bunch of whores," I tell her staring intently into her eyes. Boy is she pissed now.

"What did you call me?" From the change in her countenance, my insult strikes home big time. I just flip my middle finger at her as we walk to the car, open the door, insert the key, and start the engine. A chivalrous knight-errant rushes from the bar toward me. I hit the door lock, a push of the button rolls the window a quarter way down; he grabs the glass.

"What did you call the lady?" Can you imagine, he thinks this broad is a lady?

"Ah, fuck you too." The black bastard swears when I try to roll up the window on his fingers; he lets go just in time. The window behind me shatters from the impact of the beer bottle tossed by his cohort. I nudge the gas, roll backwards, put the car in drive, and head for the exit. We see a small crowd assembled at the door of Daryl's friendly hometown tavern. Sibilant tires shriek as I hear more glass shattering on the pavement, and I drive over the sidewalk thanking my lucky stars the Wahiawa bus stopped just short of the driveway to discharge its passengers. I drive quickly up two blocks and turn the corner to get out of sight of the hostile crowd.

"You better head back to the barracks, Lupton, those assholes will be following us soon enough," Daryl pants. I quickly round the block, reenter South Kamehameha Highway to observe the vacated parking lot of Daryl's not-so-friendly watering hole and escape over the Wahiawa Reservoir Bridge to Schofield. I feel vindicated by not taking that broad's bullshit. "What the fuck was that bitch's problem, anyway?" Daryl asks me.

"Shit if I know. I am just glad we made it out of there without getting our ass beat to a pulp." I re-park the car and examine the rear window. The glass is completely bellied in, shattered in a million pieces. The film between the panes is the only thing keeping the whole it together.

"What happened to the car?" Prince is frantic. I see his worried face peeking under the privacy blanket draped over my mosquito bar. I am still hung over from last nights near catastrophe.

"They threw a beer bottle at us. We were lucky we got out of there alive." He does not want to hear anymore; he is pissed to no end. The blanket drops; he stomps away. I feel bad about fucking up the Lincoln. If the MPs see the shattered window, they will write us a DR, the Colonel will know about it, Captain Shelton will become involved, and everything will be out of hand.

Hung over all day, I mope around feeling guilty about fucking up the car. Somewhere I decide to get out of the goddamn thing. I never get to drive it anyways and after Prince gets off work that afternoon, I give him 20 bucks for the damage, and he is mollified when I tell him I do not even want any money for my half of the stupid car, just take me off the title. I seldom associate with Prince even though we remain civil to each other.

I am only a few days away from going on leave when the company runs platoon maneuvers through the jungle not far from the barracks. While running, I step on a branch twisting the same ankle I injured while walking out on ambush one night. Lieutenant Holmes keeps yelling for me to get up and get my ass going. I test my ankle only to fall down then Captain Shelton happens along, "Are you hurt, Lupton?"

“Yes, sir,” I reply sitting on the ground fondling my right ankle. Always a take-charge officer, the Captain orders the medic to help me hobble to the roadside where he radios for an ambulance. Two minutes later, I ride on a stretcher to the dispensary with my feet sticking out of the rear canvas flap. I must look dead to the civilians gawking at me as we drive to the quads with an MP escort, siren blaring. I limp into the examining room where a doctor lectures a medic about locating the anterior pulse in the ankle to check for blood flow. As a matter of course, the doc decides I need an x-ray, and the medics point me in that direction. As I limp with some difficulty over to x-ray, a senior nurse approaches; I attempt a salute. “You’re not required to salute me here, and why are you not in a wheel chair?”

“I don’t know Major. They just told me to go to x-ray.”

“And you can walk all right?” She peruses my visibly swollen ankle.

“Yes, I think I will be alright.” I am always the good trooper.

“Okay then, go ahead.” I can only imagine the scene with the medics when the old battle-ax goes inside the dispensary to see why a medic is not pushing the patient over to x-ray in a wheelchair. I shamle back to the dispensary to await the results. The x-ray shows no visible breaks or serious ligament trauma, just a sprain. As a medic carries my field gear to the ambulance for the short ride to my quad, he comments how heavy my field gear is.

“Oh, that’s not even half of it,” I boast, “Normally I hump 400 rounds of machine gun ammo plus 150 more of M14 in Vietnam.” He is incredulous. “No shit. This is ain’t squat.”

Back at the barracks, the medic just drives away when I get out of the jeep. I suppose he figures there is no sense in helping me up the stairs with the field gear he thinks is so heavy, the thoughtless prick. I turn in my rifle and try using the crutches they give me to climb the stairs but this only produces aggravation, so I just shuffle up a couple steps at a time while tossing up my equipment in front of me as I go. I stow my field gear in my wall locker; stretch out on my bunk to enjoy this minuscule dispensation in the middle of the afternoon. The real throbbing and swelling set in after I get up to piss. I must ask Ramos if he would be kind enough to get me a towel full of ice from the mess hall, and he returns with a copious quantity. We pack the ice around my ankle until I can stand the cold no more, the swelling subsides, and my ankle can endure my weight. I limp down to chow using the crutches to good effect. I get another day of light duty by feigning pain with each step and play up the crutches angle for all they are worth. After a few days, I am back to a slight limp. I try to return my crutches to the battalion medic but the grumpy bastard will not accept them, and I have to hump them back to the dispensary. By the time I return, my ankle swells up again, but screw it, I can only get so much sham time out of this anyway.

The day I depart on my leave, I look spiffy. Captain Shelton complements my uniform and expresses concern that I come back on time, an AWOL reflects poorly on him. I am anxious to be home, but snow causes delay in Chicago and the airline puts us up in a motel for the night. The next day I fly to Philadelphia.

I want to experience the quintessential Norman Rockwell homecoming, so I never tell my mother what day I am arriving, and when I walk through the door, she is beside herself. I feel secure in this sanctuary with the people I know, but this will be my last memorable Christmas ever.

My mom gives me a small party by inviting relatives and a few neighbors. The party is nice except when my mother asks me about Knott; I feel ill at ease talking about that incident in front of others, and I wind up walking into the kitchen only to find myself standing alone wondering what to do next. I lean against the counter with a fresh drink as people drift into the kitchen. My aunt queries her son about his draft status. He looks uncomfortable explaining his deferment to her in my presence. There are only sunshine patriots in this room. They are the flag-waiving jingoist who surface at demonstrations and protests, who love their country, their democracy, their freedom, and especially their rights. Rights for this, rights for that, for rights you and for me, but put on a uniform and defend your wonderful country, defend those rights, and the rhetoric is only metaphoric. "I will fight them when they invade San Francisco." Yeah, right, my ass. The only thing you will fight for is the beer truck when it unexpectedly pulls away from the curb in front of your house.

The Vietnam War produces a surfeit of psychologists, teachers, social workers, and especially artists. The courses are effortless and passing grades easy to come by, but honestly, these curriculums produce nothing substantial except deferments. My cousin works his academic deferment for everything it is worth all throughout the late sixties until he gets his PHD in psychology and by then the draft changes to a lottery system, and he is home free with a high number.

I discover new changes to the neighborhood. The largest construction project is the Plymouth Meeting Mall built in the middle of a huge open field where we used to play. This is one of the first shopping malls of its kind using a couple of large anchors with many peripheral stores. For the holiday season, my younger brother works at a leather goods store in the mall beside Susan Tettimer, the fox extraordinaire. I find excuses to go pick up Brother John if only to become friendly with Susan. She went to high school with me, but we never knew each other. After high school, she became a hippy with little direction. Eventually, she becomes interested in modeling, and the modeling agency told her to drop the hippy look and dress more cosmopolitan. Now she is beautiful, pussy-to-die-for, definitely. We go for dinner and the ballet to see the Christmas perennial the Nutcracker Suit in center city Philadelphia.

As my brother, Gary, a neighbor friend of his, and I walk along the storefronts some kid burst a balloon. My survival reflexes have not diminished one iota and reflexively I drop to my knees. Gawkers, along with John and Gary, stare at my conniption fit. I stand red-faced, mortified, and their smirking embarrasses me even further, they have no idea. Explaining is meaningless, and I find myself spending more of my time home alone. All the people I knew before leaving for the army are engrossed in their college lives and the rest are in the services. Girls not in college date high school boys because of the scarcity of men their age. This seems surreal but it only gets worse in the succeeding years.

My mother works, my brother goes to high school, I spend a lot of time listening to records, and staring out the window with my mind revisiting Vietnam. Lots of alcohol greases my anxieties, and I anguish over my 29 months left in the Army. My leave is no fun; it is lonely in the house. I discover my brother's high school typing textbook. For something to do, I teach myself touch-typing on my mother's old Remington portable, originally owned by my grandfather who used the antique to put himself through Pierce Business College before WWI. I still have the typewriter. By the time my leave comes

to an end, I am able to type 25 words per minutes; I decide to take the typewriter back to Schofield with me to practice with the design of getting a clerk's job and kiss this infantry shit goodbye. At least that is my objective anyway.

I cut my leave short by a few days. A friend of the family drives my mother and me down to the airport. The ambiance is morose when I shake Jack's hand and give my mom a hug then walk through the port way to the airplane. I wear civilian clothes and pay full fare because I feel embarrassed I am in the Army. On the plane to San Francisco, I sit next to a Marine dressed in uniform but neither of us speaks to each other. I cannot even relate to a dumbass Marine.

Upon arrival at Honolulu, some dingbat girl is running around putting leis around the tourists' necks and saying with a big smile, "Aloha, welcome to Hawaii." She and this other idiot run around yelling out my name, but I drift away because I feel stupid with flowers around my neck. I guess one could brag they got a lei at the airport, but I digress. I take a taxi to the motel across from Schofield's main gate and get a room where I remain ensconced for two days until my leave is up. Captain Shelton looks happy that I return and greets me warmly as I sign back into the company. I change into fatigues after I put my clothes away and disappear to the beer garden for the rest of the afternoon. Technically, I am still on leave for the rest of the day even if I did sign in, and I know Sergeant Ahuna is eager to put me on some sort of shit detail. I am good and soused by the time I eat chow, stagger upstairs, and sleep off my drunk. All and all, my leave is a disappointment.