About 4300 words

FORTUNATE SON

The red-eye's landing gear strikes the runway hard, angering my hangover. I retrieve the shopping bag that holds my one change of clothes and toothbrush from the overhead and step off the plane into a rain that needles right through my windbreaker. Trudging toward the "Standiford Field" sign that hangs above the squat brick terminal's door, I need to piss badly.

A soldier in starched fatigues, holding a clipboard and flanking the entrance like statuary, eyes my approach.

"Sir…," I begin.

"I'm a sergeant, Gomer, I work for a living. Let me see your Orders."

I dig into my pockets until I find the folded envelope and offer it.

"Do I look like your butler? Take the telegram out, unfold it, and hand it to me."

I fumble it open in the rain, then watch it smear until he grabs the soggy sheet and looks at it, then his clipboard, then the telegram again.

His eyes turn back toward the tarmac.

"Proceed through the terminal and board the cattle-car".

It takes a moment to realize I'm already forgotten.

I enter the terminal, hit the men's room, consider getting some coffee but head straight out the other door. An olive-drab bus is waiting. It has no seats, just hand-straps hanging from the ceiling, and is packed with men.

I wedge myself in between a pole and a muscle-shirted armpit.

#

The forty-mile stretch to Fort Knox on highway 60 known as the Dixie-Dieway is littered with roadside bars sporting flickering neon that shine like beacons for thirsty patrons from surrounding dry counties, who nightly liquor-up, get back in their vehicles and annihilate themselves. Used-car lots with drooping pennants, and billboards selling cigarettes and salvation complete the Boschian landscape.

We speed past the blight as I cling to the overhead strap, lamenting the previous night's drink-fest. Getting shitfaced because I got drafted seemed like a good idea, but if I'd known a few hours later I'd be fighting back nausea from strange men's body-sweat, and nursing my throbbing head in a jammed bus with no seats, I'd have timed the celebration differently.

Finally, we turn onto a road bordered by a high chain link fence with signs warning the land belongs to the United States government, and that trespassing would subject one to unnamed penalties under the United States Code.

As the cattle-car slows to a crawl, I hear projectiles hurling through the air followed by explosions. The macadam turns to crunch gravel, and the rain has stopped. We come to a guarded entrance below a red, white and blue sign that reads:

WELCOME TO FORT KNOX KENTUCKY

THE HOME OF ARMOR

Then we buck down a rutted road to an isolated area and park parallel to two more crowded cattle-cars, where another sign proclaims, "RECEPTION CENTER". It's October and cold, but the sun's come out, and the temperature and stench in the sealed bus rise quickly while we wait and squirm.

Suddenly the doors slam open and there are soldiers with bull-horns screaming at us.

"Get your asses out of those cattle-cars ladies! Move it! Move it! MOVE IT!".

Men scramble as the nasal horns stampede us into a latrine. People shove to use the urinals and toilets. There are no partitions. Soldiers hound everyone to finish quickly. Next, they funnel us into a large assembly room, where we are ordered to take seats and remain silent.

I find a seat and look around, wondering how many in the room are like me. The newspapers are full of articles about hippies, war protesters, draft-card burners, conscientious objectors and kids seeking asylum in Canada. They write stories about the brave lads who enlist and are spoiling for a fight. But they are silent about the rest of us, who graduated, got a draft notice and reluctantly but dutifully reported.

I don't have a lot of time to contemplate the issue before a tall African American sergeant wearing rows of battle ribbons strides to the front and waits for silence to smother us.

"I am Sergeant-Major Lewis. Welcome -- to the United States Army! "

"Nine years ago, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy told each of you to ask what you can do for your Country," he begins as he walks back-and-forth in front of us. "Today you have your answer. It will be your privilege, and your duty, to eradicate the Southeast Asian cancer known as the Viet Cong, and free the World from the Communist scourge."

"We're an equal opportunity employer. We don't care if you've done jail time, owe loan-sharks, or left your girlfriend pregnant. But from this moment forward, Uncle Sam will tell you when to wake, sleep, run, walk, crawl, fight, eat, wash, smoke and shit for your country. You're a ***soldier*** now!"

"Any questions?"

"Good. Now stand, raise your right hand and proudly repeat after me."

People rise slowly and mumble the oath with him.

"I said ***proudly*** repeat after me. Let's try it again!"

When the requisite amount of enthusiasm has been exhibited, the sergeant smiles broadly and says, "Now, turn and congratulate the soldier next to you! He is a member of the greatest fighting force the world has ever known."

Around me I see anything but. The military is drafting fifty thousand men a month, and most are hardly the stuff of legend. These days, about the only thing that keeps you from getting drafted is a withered limb, or a friendly congressman. I had neither.

I turn slowly toward a stick-thin, pallid teen-ager.

"Hi, I'm Augie."

"Hi," he replies, "I'm fucked."

I share his sentiment.

According to the wall clock it's barely 9:30 in the morning as I ponder the fact I need to acquire an entirely new skill set. If I don't, I could become my father. He too had gone quietly to war, so I could have a better life. He returned a cripple, his left leg rendered virtually useless by a Japanese mortar shell. I watched him hobble down the street each day and board a trolley-car to his clerical job the government handed him along with his monthly partial-disability check in exchange for his lost dreams; a forgotten man, tethered to his wound, consumed by a bitter pride.

My college draft deferment was supposed to protect me. But my war waited patiently for my graduation. I was set to go to Law School, but that would have to wait.

"Where you from?" I ask.

"Nebraska."

"Philadelphia."

Just then, a soldier moves an empty, lidless oil drum to the front of the room.

"Place all weapons into this barrel. There will be no questions asked. However, if you keep the weapon, we will find it, and incarcerate you," the Sergeant-Major announces at which point he, and everyone else who hadn't arrived in cattle-cars leaves the room.

I look at the men in the rows around me. Who in hell would bring a weapon onto a military base? Nobody moves- for at least a minute. Then the armpit from the cattle-car gets up, walks over to the barrel, and tosses in a blade. Someone else drops a handgun. Knives, Saturday-night-specials, ball-bearings, scissor-blades, stub-clubs and brass-knuckles materialize until the barrel is three-quarters full. Sergeant-Major Lewis walks out and stares into it.

"That's a good start. Now I want the rest."

Before we leave the Reception Center, the barrel is full.

#

Five-thirty the next morning I'm standing on a frost tipped parade ground, freezing with fifty other men. They march us to a mess hall where the food smells surprisingly good, then give us only ten minutes to eat it. By five-fifty I am back outside, waiting for the sun to rise.

In the pre-dawn light a sergeant appears.

" Welcome, to Zero week. You will be given a medical exam, a proper haircut, and a uniform. Then we need to test you, so we can see what you're good at. We will start with written tests. I know some of you may not have a lot of schooling. Don't worry. There's a job for everybody in this man's Army. Some of you are probably pretty smart. How many graduated College?"

I raise my hand.

The sergeant's eyes glint.

"Step forward, college boy."

He moves within inches of my face.

"The Army desperately needs someone with your education to clean the entire parade ground in front of us. Now PO-LICE IT!" he yells as his nostrils flare and the men smirk.

As I begin to walk in the half-light looking for trash, trying not to trip, I hear him shout, "What the hell are the rest of you dumb-asses just standing there for? Follow that genius and learn something!"

Later that night Nebraska and I sit on bunks in our temporary barracks talking about the only thing we have in common, baseball. The Miracle Mets, the worst of the expansion teams only a few years ago, had gone up 2-1 in the World Series. If the Orioles lost to them it would be the upset of the century. The room is dirty and the sheets smell. The lights shut off at Eight-fifteen. As we sit in the dark, Nebraska tells me his one leg is shorter than the other and he wears a lift in his shoe. He's worried it won't fit combat boots.

Finally, I lay in my bunk listening to tank treads rumble and artillery shells explode in the distance. I fall asleep dreaming they are coming for me.

#

I need a shower. But before sunrise the next morning I'm holding my one change of clothes and standing in a line outside a huge, windowless, steel-frame building, freezing yet again.

"Close that line up Ladies!" a testy sergeant directs.

"I said close it up! MAKE YOUR BUDDY SMILE!"

We march inside, (we march everywhere), and are given three items; an index card, a ball-point pen and a cardboard shipping carton. We line-up facing a row of tables that stretch to the far end of the building.

"Gentlemen," the sergeant begins, "Neatly print your first initial and last name on the index card. Then write your home address on the shipping carton's label. Then strip and put all your clothes and personal belongings inside the carton. Give the carton, pen and the index card to the soldier at the first station, who will hand you a duffel bag. Proceed to the subsequent stations where you will be given your uniforms, boots, head-gear, socks, underwear, poncho and field-jacket, which will all be stenciled with the name you wrote on the index card-- SO DON'T FUCK YOUR NAME UP ON THE INDEX CARD!"

As I deposit what little remains of my former life into the box, naked men proceed down the line, quickly dressing while placing the rest of their new gear in their duffel bags. When I reach the other end, everyone is in olive fatigues, black boots and a field jacket, shouldering a duffel bag.

Next, they march us over to the barber-shop and shear us. Without hair, a hundred strangers look frighteningly similar. Eventually a tall, thin soldier walks up to me and asks, "Augie?". The voice is Nebraska's.

#

I'm inoculated, blood-typed and dog-tagged. My GI life insurance beneficiary form has been filled out and filed away, and I'm somewhere in the bowels of the One hundred and four square miles that comprise Fort Knox, being taken by cattle-car to my basic-training unit. On the way, I glimpse the Federal Gold Depository surrounded by high iron fence, and the General George Patton Museum flanked by twin tanks, before arriving at a small dirt quad around which sit two-story wooden barracks. We line up in front of the one that says, "Fourth Platoon". I can see my breath in the cold. It's quiet, almost peaceful.

The barrack door opens and out steps a soldier wearing a drill instructor's Smokey-the-Bear hat. He's short, with a wrinkled face that resembles a bull-dog's. His fatigues crackle as he walks. He's Asian

"Oh fuck," somebody moans at the other end of the row, "they gave us a Gook!".

The drill instructor looks us over from the top step.

"I am sergeant Maurutani. You will call me Drill Instructor, or, if I like you, Sergeant."

He walks down and stops directly in front of the man who'd made the comment, staring him in the face.

"I'm a veteran of the Korean conflict, and three tours in Vietnam. I'm eighteen years in this man's Army. And you will sorely need my help to survive combat. Is there anything else you are wondering about me?"

Silence.

His gaze slowly shifts to the rest of us as he takes a few steps toward center.

"Good, then file into your barrack, put your duffel bags in a neat row, and assemble outside the Platoon Leader's room."

#

Ten minutes later everyone is standing in front of Maurutani.

He calls four names, hands them blue armbands with Corporal's stripes, and appoints them squad leaders, splits the men into four groups, giving one group to each squad leader and assigns them a section of the barrack to bunk in.

Then he calls my name and tells me to follow him into the Platoon Leader's room. He hands me a blue armband with sergeant's stripes.

"You're the Platoon Leader."

"Me! I don't know anything about running a platoon. Last week I was drinking beer with war protesters. I got drafted. I can't do this."

Maurutani smiles and says, "Anything's possible. Yesterday the Mets won the World Series. You 'd do well to remember the army doesn't want smart people getting shot. I saw your test scores. Brains are a rare commodity in this place. You want to be just a number?"

I take the stripes.

#

At precisely 4:30 AM the next morning squawk boxes throughout the barrack jar me out of my bunk with a shrill, scratchy recording of Reveille. BY 4:45 everyone is lined up out front where our Lieutenant introduces himself and welcomes us to our first full day of training. Then I get another fifteen minutes to shave, shit and shower before heading for the mess-hall. Each platoon is given fifteen minutes to eat.

Between me and the mess-hall door is a twenty-foot ladder, hung horizontally atop four eight-foot poles. Before I can eat I have to hang like a monkey and get to the other end of the ladder using just my arms. If you fall, you go to the back of the line. As I leave the mess-hall, five guys from my platoon are still trying to negotiate the overhead ladder. The next day they all get up at 3:30 and do an hour of running and calisthenics before the rest of us begin our day.

The military's approach to training many men at once is primal. If one man fails, command punishes the entire platoon, who quickly take matters into their own hands. One of my jobs is to make sure the poor bastard doesn't get killed.

It isn't easy.

I also give (or at least relay) orders. I decide who's sick, arbitrate squabbles, and break up the cards and dice before somebody loses their entire pay. Within days, even though I'm a trainee too, the men defer when I walk through the barrack, because everyone fears the chain-of-command.

#

The weather's getting colder, and the daylight shorter.

We train ten hours a day, six days a week. If you can't keep up, or you've pissed off your platoon to the point your life is in danger, they recycle you to a new unit, and you begin the process all over again.

Nebraska limps badly, and quickly becomes a target. I do what I can. I move his bunk just outside my room and sometimes eat with him. But one night my door opens at 2 AM and Nebraska stumbles in. His eye is swollen shut. He has a long scalp laceration that's bleeding

heavily, and his nose looks broken. He won't tell me who did it, and when I tell Maurutani he refuses to get involved.

#

During the second week we receive our first mail. Everyone is desperate to hear from loved ones back home. Several men line up outside my door so I can read them their letters. I do this each mail-call, and sometimes, I am forced read them their "Dear John" and watch their faces. One day in late November, my own comes from Kathy. We were becoming a thing before I got drafted, but she "refocused her priorities" after I left. That afternoon the platoon has a three-hour pass, which is long enough to walk to a post PX and have a beer, or on this day, a pitcher.

As the cold weather arrives, so does meningitis. With symptoms that mimic an upper respiratory infection and spread like wildfire in a barrack, men become fatally stricken before an outbreak is even identified. Three trainees in the neighboring company die.

#

One night during the fourth week I'm on night maneuvers in a freezing rain, eating cold c-rations in a field. Two of my squad-leaders sit down on a log next to me.

"Did you hear a guy got fragged on the grenade course," one laughs.

"How the hell did that happen?" I ask.

"The yahoo pulled the pin, froze, dropped it and blew himself to smithereens! I hear his balls landed in West Virginia," he smirked.

#

In the first week of December there is an inch of snow on the ground. The previous night I marched ten miles and pitched a tent in a soggy field. Today, soaked and cold I practice hand-to-hand combat, march to a cinder-block building pumped full of tear gas, and am ordered to remove my mask for thirty seconds before being allowed to put it back on. Then, nauseous from the gas, I break down my tent and stand around a fire barrel until dark. Finally, I march to a night combat exercise, which involves storming a machine gun nest firing live ammunition.

When we arrive Maurutani takes me aside.

“I need you to search the surrounding woods,” he says.

“For what”?

“For men hiding in them.”

I turn and walk towards a dense thicket, flashlight in hand. I can feel his eyes following me. Then I hear whimpering and follow it until I see the soldier curled in the underbrush.

I drag him back.

When it’s our turn, I march past the nest which holds three tripoded M-60 machine guns, then down a two-hundred-yard long, six-foot deep, two-foot wide earthen trench that runs along the left side of the range. When I get to the other end there are fox-holes for us to burrow into on the range itself. The only way off the range is an extraction trench just below the machine gun nest, now two-hundred yards away. Maurutani warns us one last time to keep our heads below the barbed wire.

The dirt is cold and hard. I can just make out the low-hanging, twisted, rusted barb-wire above me. Men are praying. I can hear my heart-beat.

Then, two-thousand rounds a minute demolish the silence. Phosphorescent “tracers” spray over my head like beads of water from a garden hose. It is impossible to tell exactly how high the bullets are, but to get onto the range, I must climb up towards them. As I pull my body upward, I bury my face in the dirt, choking on it while shimmying under the razor wire. The man beside me gets caught, then completely tangled.

Gunfire seems to be coming from all directions. I keep crawling perpendicular to the barbed wire. At one point I muster the courage to look forward and can see the glow of the M-60’s barrels beginning to superheat. Then a mortar shell explodes in front of me, its white flash blinding me and throwing huge mounds of earth everywhere. Unable to see, and my ears ringing from the explosion, I desperately keep crawling. Men are weeping into the dirt, others are frozen in place. One tries to stand up and run, stopped only by the barbed wire that rips at his face. Then flares whistle high into the sky and burst, exposing us for what we are; terrified and vulnerable targets in the ghost-light, helpless in the grip of the three killing machines.

#

It's the week before Christmas. In three days the training cycle ends and my platoon graduates. Today each recruit receives his "M.O.S.", his Military Occupational Specialty, his job. Today we learn who's going to Vietnam.

Breakfast is the best yet. Then the Lieutenant holds a formation, talks about how proud of everybody he is, directs the drill sergeants to hand envelopes to each man, then dismisses us.

I walk back to my room, sit on the bunk, take a deep breath and look at my envelope. There is a knock on my door.

"Jesus Christ, what!!??" I yell.

It's Nebraska.

"Augie, I'm "11 Bravo", an infantryman, a "grunt". I'm report to Fort Bragg for Jungle training. I'm going to 'Nam."

"Look," I begin. "There's peace talks. Anything can happen before you're deployed. You could be sent to Korea, or Germany."

"No. 11 Bravo's all go to the jungle. In three months I'll be captured or dead. I told you I was fucked," he says and walks out.

#

That afternoon the platoon gets an eight-hour pass. Everybody heads to the PX to drink. I pack my duffel while still trying to get up the courage to look at my orders. I ran a good platoon, followed every order and made Maurutani's life as easy as possible. It was time they gave me something to do that involved more than a weapon.

There's a knock on my door. It's Caleb, a meat packer from Kansas.

"Yes?"

"The MP's are out front. They have Nebraska."

There's a uniformed monster at the entrance.

"You in charge?" he asks,

"I guess you could say that."

"Well, is the moron in my jeep one of yours?"

Nebraska is unconscious in the jeep, with puke and beer all down his front.

“What happened?”

“Happened? Apparently, farm-boy ran to the PX, downed two pitchers of beer, got sick and passed-the-fuck-out as he tried to take a swing at a staff sergeant. You want him, or do I arrest him?”

Caleb and I get him out of the jeep.

#

Graduation is 8 AM tomorrow morning. Army graduations require parades, speeches and marching practice. I’m supervising the arrangement of the VIP chairs when a commotion occurs among the drill sergeants. Then Maurutani runs for a jeep and drives off. The remaining drill sergeants call a formation of the entire company. We stand for an hour in silence. It begins to rain. Finally, Maurutani returns, his uniform soaked and disheveled, his face gaunt. He marches our platoon to a separate area.

“There’s been an incident,” he says. “A parade weapon discharged. It was loaded with blanks, but the injury is serious.” I realize it’s Nebraska. I assigned him to be an honor guard and sent him to requisition a rifle and blanks from the armory.

When the platoon returns to the barrack, Nebraska’s gear is gone, and his bunk stripped.

“It’s not your fault,” Maurutani says, reading my face.

The next day, an hour before graduation, Nebraska dies.

#

Christmas leave begins immediately after graduation. As I board a cattle car to Standiford Field for a plane home, Maurutani tells me the army will transport Nebraska’s body back to his family. Waiting to board my flight, I stop in the terminal bar for a drink, and realize I still have my blue armband with the sergeant’s stripes on. I tear it off and look up at the bartender staring at me.

“Bad day, soldier?”

“Fuck the Army,” I reply.

“Just out of basic?” he asks, looking at my sheared head and lack of visible rank.

I nod.

“Where you going next?”

“Fort Bragg.”

“Jungle training?”

“11 Bravo.”

He pours me another drink on the house.

The plane is delayed in Pittsburgh. It’s snowing, and they de-ice the wings. The pilot notices me in uniform and moves me up to first class. During thewait I begin to tremble. On the flight to Philadelphia, I have another drink. There is no one else in first class to see me weep.

In the terminal, my father is waiting. I realize how badly I’d wanted it to be Kathy. Christmas music is piping through the loudspeakers. Garlands and wreathes decorate the ramps and terminal walkways. We hug.

Walking to the car we pass a sign draped with two American flags that reads “Welcome to Philadelphia, The City of Brotherly Love”. Just beyond is a group of protesters carrying placards and chanting “End-The-War.” When they see us walking towards them they start shouting at me.

As we close on each other, the group gets louder, surrounds us cursing and yelling “Baby killer”, “fascist pig”. Then, one of them spears a sign towards my face. I lunge for his throat, take him to his knees in a choke-hold, spin him around and hear his nose break with a satisfying crunch as my fist lands.

The group screams at me to let him go, but I keep him down until I’m sure he’s choking enough on his own blood that he’s no threat. Then I pull him to his feet and shove him towards his friends before continuing toward the car.