

“THE STENOGRAPHER”

I was born in 1949 and drafted into the Army in 1968. I should've signed up for college right after graduating from high school, but I procrastinated, thinking for some reason there was no hurry. They weren't drafting kids right out of high school, were they? Well, no, not normally.

I should've delved into the draft situation more, but, to be honest, I'd already complacently settled into my game plan, which was to take off a year, get a job at the shipyard, and buy a car. I'd suffered through high school without a car, and I wasn't about to make that mistake in college.

My mom was a schoolteacher, and she was as uninformed about the draft as I. To her, I was just postponing college for a year, and she was sympathetic to my wanting a car. She'd put aside enough money for me to go to college, but the car, if I were to have one, would have to evolve from my own efforts. My dad, just to fill in a gap or two, had split long ago.

Mom told me that one of the things she regretted about her college years was she hadn't taken stenography and typing before enrolling. Stenography, she explained, would've been an asset for taking notes during lectures. Typing, in turn, would have been a boon for preparing term-papers, as it was her experience that typed term papers invariably received a higher grade than those written even in the best cursive. Made sense to me, so I let her talk me into taking a secretarial course at night while I worked in the shipyard during the day.

My mother fronted me money for a car from my college fund, as a car was a necessity if I were to get to work. The shipyard was 20 miles from our house, and there was no bus service.

The benefits of having a car did not end there. I was the only guy in my secretarial course at

night. Me and 20 girls, many of whom were not unattractive. I made it known that any girls needing a lift after class, especially on cold, rainy nights, could count on Ford Hayes.

Ford Hayes? That'd be me. And not because I owned a Ford. In fact, the car I bought was a 1967 Pontiac Bonneville. Ford was short for my real name, Rutherford, which one of my mindless ancestors had passed on to us because his last name happened to be Hayes at the time Rutherford B. Hayes was elected.

Things went along great. By the end of Summer, I'd paid my car off and graduated secretarial school. I was an excellent typist and a surprisingly good stenographer, and it was time for me to take my skills for taking notes and typing term papers to the college level.

We had a saying back then apropos of what happened to me next. The saying was "You think long, you think wrong." It was designed to caution people not to linger when making a decision. I'd no more than initiated discussions with a nearby college to enroll in their Freshman class the following school year than my draft board greeted me with the very unwelcome news my simple-ass had been drafted.

My mom's boyfriend was a member of the local city council, and he pulled every slippery string he could think of to get me deferred long enough to get into college. Didn't work. The sorry truth was the Selective Service System was desperate in 1968. They needed bodies to send to Nam, and they didn't grant favors or exceptions, at least to the lower classes.

My next stop was Fort Knox, Kentucky. I'll say this much for the training cadre there. They made no effort to disillusion us. From the word go, they assured us that giving them our undivided attention might possibly save our lives. There were 200 men in my company, and almost all of us were sent directly to Nam after 12 glorious weeks of training.

Our arrival at Tan Son Nhut Airport in Nam inn April of 1968 was hardly orchestrated by officials trying to bolster our morale. It was the busiest airport in the world at the time, and, as we wound our way through a myriad of military and commercial aircraft, we grimly noted sweating airmen loading dead Americans in black body bags onto C5-A cargo aircraft. I was scared anyway, but the idea that I might soon be one of those bodies terrified me. Although the heat was overwhelming, I began to tremble.

“Take a good look,” a sergeant bellowed. “That’s where you’ll be if you don’t kill those mother-fuckers before they kill you.”

They loaded us into trucks and took us to a transient barracks. They fed us and told us to get some sleep, as we’d be leaving early the next day to join the units we’d been assigned to. I couldn’t believe the fucking heat and humidity. I stripped down to my shorts and laid down. Within minutes the sheets were wet from sweating. I’ve never felt as sorry for myself as I did then. I was convinced it was only a matter of months, if not weeks, before sweating airmen would be loading my body into one of those C5-A’s. I hadn’t been praying, but the gods must’ve taken note of my self-pity because they interceded on my behalf at that point.

“Private R.B. Hayes, serial number US52504019, you in here?”

I got out of my rack and signaled to the sergeant standing in the doorway I was R.B. Hayes.

“Get dressed, grab your duffel bag, and come with me,” he ordered.

I did as told and followed him to a jeep, which took us through the unbelievable Saigon traffic to a wall of military buildings in front of the American Embassy in Saigon. Our driver possessed exceptional skills. How he dodged the hundreds of motor bikes darting around us amazed me. I saw one motor bike that had two adults and four kids on it. I swear. And the father was driving

like Evil Knievel.

I followed the sergeant into one of the buildings, which, to my surprise, was actually cool, thanks to a combination of ubiquitous floor fans and room air conditioners.

“Shut the goddamned door!” Someone gently reminded us as we entered the building.

The sergeant led me to a closed door, where he stood and respectfully knocked. A loud voice gave us permission to enter. The room had two desks and several windows, one of which contained an air conditioner practically groaning to beat back the intense heat. A Spec-4 was typing away at one of the desks, and a major sat nonchalantly at the other. A cot with tousled covers was against a wall.

The major looked up at me. He was in jungle fatigues like all of us. He was deeply tanned and wearing aviator-style sunglasses. He was about 30 and almost movie-star handsome. He noticed me noticing his shades.

“Helps me see better when I go out in the boonies at night,” he explained.

He smiled and held up a piece of paper which evidently had information about me on it. “Is it really true you went to a secretarial school?” He asked with a doubting look.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you can type and take dictation?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You wanted to be a secretary?”

I explained the hows and whys of my going to secretarial school.

He nodded. “Makes sense to me, but you wouldn’t be the first draftee to pad his resume a little to get out of serving his year in the boonies. So, before I offer you a job, you’re going to have to prove you possess said skills. Ready to take a little test?”

The Spec-4 gave me a steno book and a pencil. I took dictation from the major for about twenty minutes. It was all about what he’d seen when he choppered out to the boonies the night before and met up with a team of Navy Seals. They’d laid in ditches alongside a trail and jumped anyone who came down it carrying a weapon. They interrogated their prisoners and then turned them over to the ARVN, who promptly shot them. It was almost like an “Argosy” adventure story. I quickly typed it up. He read it through, and, other than whiting-out the part about the ARVN shooting prisoners, nodded with satisfaction.

“Excellent, Hayes. Not a single error. So good, in fact, I’m going to hand it in to the colonel just the way it is. You just saved Specialist Foles and me a couple hours of work. I’m willing to take you on here and let you spend your tour in beautiful Vietnam in an air-conditioned office instead of humping it for a year in the swamps and rice paddies, where, in the interest of full disclosure, I should warn you that you’ll stand a 10% chance of being killed, a 30% chance of being wounded, and a 100% chance of having your head fucked up for the rest of your life.”

I thought about it a long time. Maybe two or three seconds, then told him fuck, yeah.

Foles was a short-timer, which meant he was almost done with his tour and was due to rotate back home. He could type, but he didn’t do Gregg steno. I was his replacement. We had a month together, and he showed me the ropes.

“Major Anderson’s a great guy, Hayes,” he told me. “You just got to make sure you’re around when he needs you. If he goes out to the boonies at night, you got to be waiting on him when he gets back. He’s got his own jeep, and you gotta learn where everything is in Saigon. He may tell you to go over to Corps or MACV and pick up or deliver something. He speaks fluent Vietnamese and has a Vietnamese girlfriend, the most beautiful fucking girl I’ve ever seen.”

It didn’t take me long to learn Major Anderson was in Intelligence. It was his job to figure out what the hell the NVA and the VC were up to and where and when they might strike next. His boss, Colonel Vickers, had a large staff of other officers supposedly gathering intelligence, but the major was his go-to guy. He gave Anderson free-reign and carte blanche.

I learned quickly, and six months flew by before I even knew it. I’d heard about Tet, of course, and how the shit had hit the fan, but I thought that was all behind us. Anderson didn’t share my view. He kept telling me they were going to hit us again. He went out one day for a few hours and returned and stuck his head in the office door. “Help me unload the jeep, Hayes.”

We carried in a 50-cal machine gun, two M-16’s, two 45-cal pistols, a box of grenades, and a ton of ammunition. We stuck it all under the cot, where he took naps before going out on one of his boonie expeditions.

I suggested he no longer smoke in bed. He laughed and asked if I was checked out on a 45 cal.

“No, sir.”

There was a range nearby, and he took me there two or three times a week until I became proficient at firing a 45 cal pistol, which emitted a nasty kick. It scared the hell out of me at first, but he stayed on my case until I could hit what I was aiming at. He eventually acknowledged I

was pretty good. If I was pretty good, he was pretty expert. He gave me one of the 45 calcs and told me to wear it full-time, even when I went into town at night in my civvies. “Use the holster. Just wear a long shirt over it when you’re wearing civvies. Don’t rack a round in the chamber and make sure the safety’s on. You’ll get used to packing it in no time.”

It felt strange carrying a loaded pistol around, but he was right. After a month, it became second nature, like having my wallet or a handkerchief in my pocket. I would’ve probably fainted if I’d had to use it, but just knowing it was there made me feel a whole lot safer when I went into town.

Anderson even went with me sometimes. We’d wear civvies, and he said to call him Andy except when we were in the office. I met his girlfriend, and Foles had been right. She was fucking gorgeous. She spoke perfect English, although with a sexy French accent.

“She’s a great gal, Hayes, but she’s a fucking spy for the NVA. She knows I’m in intelligence and pumps me for information. I feed her shit that’s accurate, but shit they already know, and I pump her in return for info. She thinks I only know a few words of Vietnamese, so I hear a lot of stuff she doesn’t know I understand. Read your Graham Greene, Hayes.”

I later did, and Anderson belonged smack in the middle of those novels.

My one-year tour was up, and I still had nearly nine months left to do in the Army. He’d promoted me to a Spec-4 by then and offered me a Spec-5 if I finished out my two-year commitment with him in Nam. I hesitated, but eventually agreed. I’d often heard firing in the distance and the VC did whack stray American soldiers now and then, but other than that, it seemed pretty safe to me. Anderson had taught me where to go and where not to go.

“If someone comes after you, don’t be afraid to shoot the bastard. I’ll bail you out of any shit-storm you get into,” he promised.

So, I stayed.

I had two months to go when Anderson's prescience and pessimism was affirmed. I could see the excitement in his gray eyes when he returned from his most recent boonie. "They're going to hit us tonight, Hayes. We watched a whole fucking battalion of NVA parade by us last night."

"How can you be sure it's tonight?"

His girlfriend's name was Mai something-or-other. He called her Mary. He laughed and said, "Because Mary asked me to sleep over tonight. She never does that. That was her way of looking out for me. Ain't love grand, Hayes?" He grinned.

"Another Tet?" I gulped, butterflies invading my stomach.

"Well, a Mini-Tet anyway. They're trying to intimidate "Tricky Dick" so he'll back off on some of his demands at the peace talks in Paris. Dumb move on their part. This'll just piss him off. He'll double-down on their simple asses now."

"Tricky Dick" was President Nixon.

Anderson dashed upstairs to alert Colonel Vickers, who immediately put out a notice to all military units in the Saigon area they couldn't watch "laugh-In" that night. Anderson dragged out all the shit we'd stored under his cot and had our MP's build a sandbag bunker facing the front gate to our compound. "They'll probably blow the gate and then try to overrun us and get to the Embassy," he told the MP's. "We've got to keep a lot of fire power on the gate area."

While Anderson was confident and knowledgeable, I was fucking terrified. He couldn't help but

notice my trembling. “Being scared never helped anyone, Hayes,” he lectured. “It’s okay to have respect for the situation you’re in and not do anything stupid, but you’ve got a 100% better chance of coming through alive if you stay calm. You ever read Wyatt Earp’s theory on a gunfight? Forget that fast draw shit. Never happened. The guys he was fighting were usually scared shitless and missed most of the time they shot at him. Old Wyatt just stayed cool. He carefully aimed and put a bullet right between their fucking eyes. You’re trembling because you’re letting your hands shake. Get your brain on your side. Tell it to knock it off so you can get your simple-ass back home alive. Copy that?”

“Copy that.”

He seemed unconvinced. “Trust me, Hayes. I’m not gonna let you get killed.”

Easy for him. He got high on this shit. I was curious about the fight, and, in a way, looking forward to seeing it. Bear in mind I said seeing it, not being in it. It would’ve been nice to be a spirit and just float above the battle and watch it unfold, as if I were watching a movie.

They hit us at midnight. We were on full alert. An old truck pulled up to the gate, and an NVA soldier jumped out and started running. “Cover your ears, Hayes,” Anderson calmly cautioned.

The truck then exploded in a huge ball of flame, blowing away the heavy iron gate. We were 50 yards away, but we still felt the heat. Pieces of the wreckage landed all around us. Then scores of NVA and VC came pouring through the gateway. The burning truck worked to their disadvantage, as we could clearly see them while we hunkered behind bunkers and concrete walls. Anderson opened up with the 50 cal. He’d shown me again and again how to load and feed it, which was my sole job that night. Anderson and the MP’s mowed them down. They still came fanatically on. We were between them and the Embassy, and, as Anderson had said, that was their primary target. Killing the American ambassador would’ve really pissed Tricky Dick.

Long story short, thanks to Anderson, we successfully fended them off. The fight continued on sporadically, but they gave up when dawn started creeping over Dodge City, which was what Anderson called Saigon. After the battle was over, an ARVN unit showed up to relieve us, but all they did was walk around and shoot the NVA and VC wounded. Colonel Vickers tried to stop them, but their commander was a general and he told Vickers to fuck off.

Vickers put Anderson in for a Silver Star. Anderson insisted all the MP's and even I receive a Bronze Star. I was a little embarrassed in accepting it. All I'd done was hide behind a pile of sandbags and make sure the 50-cal stayed loaded. His advice had worked on me. My hands thought about shaking, but my brain convinced them it was a waste of time.

I rotated home shortly after that. I stayed in touch with Anderson for a few years, but he didn't have a lot to do anymore. We'd turned the war over to the ARVN by then, but 30 years of fighting was enough for them. When the NVA came rolling down into South Vietnam in violation of the Paris Peace Accord, the ARVN threw in the towel. It was ugly, and the 57,000 Americans kids killed over there made it even uglier. Shortly after Saigon became Ho Chi Min City, I got a letter from Anderson. He included a picture of him and his new wife, the beautiful spy. The NVA had her on a hit list, as they believed she had turned double-agent because of her association with him. So Anderson had married her and whisked her out of Nam before they could whack her. Ain't love grand?

I'd smuggled my 45 cal home with me. My mom fretted when I told her I'd been in a fairly severe battle, but she nonetheless bragged to her friends about my Bronze Star. I dusted off my Bonneville and this time quickly enrolled in college. With the help of the G.I Bill and my college fund, I went all out and wound up with a PHD in English. My doctoral thesis had to do with the writing and legacy of Graham Greene. I read everything he wrote, and, in damned near everyone of his novels, I saw Major Anderson lurking around somewhere.

I taught English at the University, put my 30 years in, and, as many of my fellow academics at the university were wont to do, retired to a cluster of homes surrounding the university and became a proud tailgater at the hotly contested football games.

Going through my things one day I came across the 45 cal Anderson had gifted me. It was still in immaculate shape, as I'd carefully prepped it for storage. I decided to try it out at a local gun range to see if my skills in firing it had diminished. They had, of course, but after several trips to the range, they returned. I found I enjoyed target shooting and made it my norm to go to the range and fire at least 20 rounds once or twice a month. I became quite good at it, and the rangemaster went so far as to say I was the best shot with a 45 cal he'd ever seen. I could easily put all 20 rounds into a 12" X 12" target from 20 yards away.

It was astonishingly easy to obtain a concealed weapon permit in Florida after passing the simplest of tests and paying a \$75 licensing fee. I decided to do so for a host of reasons, but mainly because it reminded me of the time I'd spent with my hero and mentor, Major Anderson. My wife attributed it to a post mid-life crisis. I was still a little young for a bucket-list item. None of my friends or associates even knew I carried a concealed weapon. It was certainly nothing to display at cocktail parties or otherwise brag about. It was just a part of my attire, much like my wallet or handkerchief.

Although I lived in a college community, there was a high school near my home. My wife and I found it invigorating to take a walk around our neighborhood each morning and had been doing so for a number of years. Walking past the high school and watching the students pour out of the buses into the school was a sight we witnessed with pleasure many mornings. Our daily injection of youth, we called it.

We were strolling past the high school one morning when students came hustling out of the

building instead of surging into it. I immediately thought fire drill, or, because of their urgency, perhaps a fire itself. That is, until I once again heard the sound of automatic weapons being fired.

It's a sound you never forget.

Students came rushing past us.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Two kids. They're shooting everyone."

A feeling of fright I'd not felt since Nam seized me. I looked around, hoping to see SWAT teams rushing towards the sound of gunfire. Nada. My blood pressure and heart rate soared. My hands began to tremble.

I knew of the other school shootings. I also knew it was often too late by the time the police arrived, and, even if it wasn't, they sometimes hesitated to charge into an active shooting scene until they at least had some idea of what they were up against.

Somebody had to stop the shooting while it was in progress. I had my pistol and the means to do so, but I, too, was hesitating. I had no idea what I was up against either. Then the "Twilight Zone" enveloped me. Even though it'd been nearly 40 years since I'd seen him, Major Anderson was suddenly standing at my side, goading me.

"You just going to stand there holding your dick, Hayes, or do something about it?"

That jarred me, not into reality, but into a world of fantasy. Anderson now had control of my mind and body. I hadn't done much more than a fast walk in years, but I suddenly found myself

jogging towards the school.

“Where’re you going, Ford?” My wife screamed.

“I’ve got to stop it.”

I was quickly inside the school building. “Where’re the shooters?” I asked a male student fleeing towards me.

”Cafeteria. At the end of the hall,” he said, as he bolted past.

The firing stopped for a moment, then resumed. The shooters had stopped to reload.

I rushed down the hall and into the cafeteria. The gunfire had resumed. It was loud and reminded me of the night we fought to protect the Embassy. I saw one of the shooters straightaway. He was wearing a black raincoat and was only a student himself. His face was so young, much like many of the dead NVA and VC I’d seen after that firefight so long ago. I was about my customary 20 yards from him. He saw me as he paused to reload. I clicked off the safety and racked my 45 caliber to inject a round into the chamber. I framed his young face in my gun sight just as he was raising what looked to be an AK-47 to fire at me. My hands began to tremble. No, I told myself, I had to remain calm and cool like Major Anderson had said. If I miss him, he’ll kill me. Be fucking Wyatt Earp. Surprisingly, my hands listened. They stopped shaking. I fired.

The bullet struck the shooter kid in the head and knocked him yards back.

I could hear further firing across the cafeteria. I ran towards it. I saw the second shooter. He had on the same black raincoat. His back was to me, and he was pausing to reload. I was about 20 yards away from him as well.

“Police, “ I yelled. “Put your weapon down, or I’ll shoot.” It was a stupid thing to say, but I just couldn’t shoot him in the back, so I said it. He quickly turned, expecting to see, I suppose, a swarthy, uniformed policeman. Instead, he saw a stodgy older man, who, dressed in shorts and an untucked shirt, looked remarkably like a tourist, and who, despite the gun, didn’t appear to be the least bit intimidating. That had to be the way it seemed to him, as he smiled when he raised his AK-47 towards the old fool standing before him.

I framed his face and slowly squeezed the trigger. His face disappeared, and he, too, was knocked backwards by the impact of my 45-caliber round. I heard a hiding girl scream as he fell on top of her.

“Mister, Mister,” a girl called to me. She was leaning against a wall. Her left shoulder was bleeding. She’d seen me shoot the second kid and staggered towards me. “There’s another shooter, his friend, Kevin.”

“There’re only two?”

“Yes.”

“Kevin’s dead.”

I could detect the relief in her eyes.

I holstered my pistol and pulled my untucked shirt over it. The cops might be coming in any minute, and my guess was their first instinct would be to blow away anyone they saw with a gun. I was one of the good guys and wasn’t crazy about having “collateral damage” chiseled on my tombstone. I stepped over several dead students as I hurried over to help the girl.

As I led her through the cafeteria, she began calling out to her fellow students that the threat was over, the two shooters were dead. Kids hiding behind the lunch counter and over-turned tables began to cautiously emerge. I'll never forget their eyes, so filled with fear and glazed over with shock. Jesus, if they couldn't be safe in school, where could they?

I helped the girl outside. A dozen cops were huddled by the school entrance. EMT guys ran up to take the girl from me. The cops were looking at me cautiously.

"There're kids in there who need help," I advised them.

"Orders are to wait for the SWAT Teams," a cop with sergeant stripes replied.

"The shooters were all killed."

"Who killed them?"

I paused for a moment as I descended from "The Twilight Zone".

"Major Anderson," I answered.

THE END.