

DRAFT NOTICE

Chapter 1

"Greeting"

It was only a simple, plain white, number 10 envelope, but it caused an intense wave of nausea.

It sat quietly in my mailbox. It looked like it might be official, and any envelope with that look in the mailbox of a healthy young man in the mid 1960's could have the power of a letter bomb, the power not only to change lives but to end them.

It was Saturday. I hadn't noticed its arrival during the day, and now it was 10 at night. I was returning from a pleasant dinner with friends, so its presence was unexpected, out of context. I reached to open the box, saw the envelope's official look and pulled my hand back quickly as if the box was too hot to touch.

I thought about crouching like a thief, quietly opening the box and snatching the letter so stealthily that no one could possibly notice. Then I could see the return address and, if I needed to, slip the letter back to its resting place untouched, unseen.

I had graduated from college a few months before, and my life was perfect. I was where my parents always wanted me to be, off the family payroll, "on my own," self sustaining, starting a career in advertising with a respected international ad agency and living almost

DRAFT NOTICE

poetically in the very midst of American history on Washington Square in Philadelphia only a block away from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. I had met a woman who allowed me to understand the meaning of the not yet clichéd term "soul mate."

And this simple letter, if it was my notice of being drafted into the United States Army, had the power to ruin it all.

I opened the mailbox window, reached in and with hand shaking, grabbed the letter between my fore and middle fingers, to leave no telltale prints. Immediately, I saw the part of the return address that read "Dearborn, Michigan." I grew up there but hadn't been back for years. My parents had fled the brutal winters of the family home for Florida as soon as I'd left for college. I had no family remaining there, no connection with it whatever, except that it had been my residence when I registered for the draft at age 17. This had to be my draft notice.

My first impulse was to rip the letter open to find out, but I resisted it. That was too final. It eliminated several options, like noting on the envelope "no longer at this address" and dropping it immediately back into its box.

Instead I carried it between my fingers up two flights of stairs into my apartment, laid it gently on the dining room table to let it rest while I went to wash my hands, and think.

DRAFT NOTICE

Returning to the table I circled it as if the letter might explode trying to decide if I could disarm it. *Can't you steam envelopes open to see what's inside then re-seal them?* I could do that to confirm the contents and, depending on that discovery, dispose of the envelope or return it to sender, unopened.

I sat at the table next to the envelope and tried to calm myself into rational thinking.

After four years of college, I didn't get married and have a child. I didn't get a graduate school deferment. I was a single, 21 year old man, finished with college and completely exposed. My draft board had been watching and waiting for just this moment.

I opened the envelope. It went off in my hands.

I had heard that the draft notice started with the word "Greeting," but found it difficult to believe that the military had an ironic sense of humor, but there it was. My letter began with that very word.

It continued. "You are hereby ordered to report to the US Army induction station, 1215 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA on Tuesday November 18, 1963 for your physical examination and academic testing. Approximately three weeks following those tests you will receive your orders to report to Ft. Dix, NJ to commence basic training."

DRAFT NOTICE

Although it was a form letter, it was actually signed by a familiar name, Mrs. Elizabeth A. Harrison. I had communicated indirectly with her when I'd registered for the draft five years prior and intermittently thereafter to advise her of any changes in my address. I had never met her.

The words "ordered to report" and "induction" were so final. No understanding that maybe I had a job and needed to give notice to my employer. That maybe I had a lease on my apartment that I couldn't escape. Nope. None of that. I'd never received an order so presumptuous. So unrelenting. I was a mere three days away from the physical date and three weeks away from the end of my current, exciting, wonderful life. Three weeks to maneuver, perhaps, but I had no "plan B."

Truthfully, I had thought about the inevitability of this moment and always hoped that my vision—or lack of it—might save me. All my life it had been nearly a handicap. Through kindergarten and most of first grade I was thought to be "slow." I wasn't close to reading. I hated days without sun. I called them "dark days," because they added another element of difficulty for my horrible vision. Finally, my first grade teacher, Mrs. Oulette, one of my first heroes, discovered that I couldn't see letters on the blackboard. Shortly thereafter I got glasses, and my life began.

DRAFT NOTICE

Now that old handicap was my hope. My 20:350 vision would finally, after all these years, be the asset that would save me from the military.

I reported to the Army Induction Center as ordered, submitted my urine sample and proceeded through a cattle herding physical exam. I'd heard from some of my contemporaries that it was possible to "fix" the urine sample that would in some way disqualify you, but I had placed all my hopes on my naturally horrible eyesight.

At about the midway point in the physical, I finally arrived at the eye examination station. I sat in a darkened room peering at a glowing eye chart in the distance. A voice behind me asked, "Nicholas Williams, right?"

"Right," I said and thought, *Bring it on.*

The voice commanded, "Read the red line."

"Glasses on or off?" I asked the voice.

"Glasses off for crissakes," came the impatient reply.

Perfect, I thought.

"Ok. Read the red line."

"I can't see the red line," I said smiling to myself.

DRAFT NOTICE

"Ok," impatiently, "Read the green line."

"I can't see the green line," I said, and feeling a need to explain, I added, "I really can't see the chart." This was absolutely true. I couldn't. "All I can see is the glow of what must be the chart in front of me."

The voice was angry. "Cut the shit," he said. "Do you know how many times every day, assholes like you try to cheat their way out of the Army on this eye test? Now read the fuckin' red line."

"Honestly. I can't even see the red line."

Then I felt the voice behind me. "Gimme your glasses," it said. And, reaching to grab my glasses, he said, "We'll check the prescription in these. Go sit against the wall, and wait 'til I get back."

I waited and hoped. It didn't take long.

"You're nearly blind but your vision is good enough for the Army," he announced.

I was dazed and crestfallen. To suffer a lifetime with bad eyesight only to discover that it was "good enough for government work," seemed a grave injustice.

I staggered back into the line headed for the intelligence test. With a college degree it seemed that feigning

DRAFT NOTICE

ignorance on this section of the test would be completely unbelievable. I was wrong.

The intelligence test contained a long and detailed mechanical aptitude section. If there is such a thing as a mechanical moron, I am it. The simplest tasks have always befuddled me. Proper use of a screwdriver can be puzzling. This section of the test provided simple drawings of tasks. The test taker was asked to select from a list of options, usually four, which tool was the proper one for the task, how it should be used, which way it should turn. Fortunately, there was not a "none of the above" option, so I was forced to guess randomly.

I had no idea that this opportunity would appear. Without even trying to flunk the test, I was certain I did.

I left the induction center with but a slim and remote hope that I'd somehow disqualified myself only to realize that my mechanical underachievement would most likely serve only to limit my options and head me in a more scary direction—an infantry ground pounder who couldn't see.

I couldn't imagine myself in a combat situation. It would be likely that my glasses would be lost. How could I shoot the enemy if I couldn't see them? And I'd not be able to distinguish an enemy from a friendly. I'd probably be more of hazard to my own side than the other. Give new meaning to the term friendly fire.

DRAFT NOTICE

Chapter 2

"This is Your Little Mess"

That first encounter with the Army was over by noon. I was relieved to go back to my apartment, put on a comfortable suit and tie and return to the refuge of my civilian job. I immediately sought the advice of one of my colleagues on the agency training program. He had joined the Navy's Officer Candidate School (OCS) and served his three years immediately after graduating from Princeton. Having chosen that route he was three years older than most of us. He also had more hair in his eyebrows than on his head, wore granny glasses with thick lenses and because of all these remarkable characteristics had earned the moniker, "Dad," from his trainee colleagues. He was my first stop when I got back to work that day.

I leaned on the side of the doorway to his cubicle, arms crossed over my chest, doing my best to look casual.

"So, Dad, you old fart. You got a minute?"

He looked up from his work, eyes peering over his glasses and just under those weighty eyebrows.

"Any time for you my boy."

"Just got back from my Army induction physical," I said.

"Oh yeah? Lucky you. We wondered where you were this morning. How'd it go?"

DRAFT NOTICE

"Unfortunately, I'm afraid it went way too well. I think I passed, bad eyesight and all."

"Yeah. They're takin' everybody these days. Even you."

"You've been through all this. Got any advice for me?"

"Shit Nick," Dad began turning serious. "You know we've talked about this. The last thing you want to do is go into the Army as a draftee. It's like going back to high school for god sakes. Yeah, it's only two years, but, if there's any conflict, your chances of participating are way too high."

"At least you get it all done in just two years," I said.

He leaned back in his chair, took off his glasses and tossed them on his green ink blotter. "Sure," he said. "But it's two years of hell. If you go the OCS route," he waved his head back and forth with each advantage, "you're an officer in the Navy, you make a little money, you're in with a bunch of guys like yourself, the living conditions are tolerable and you actually learn something...like how to drive a ship." He stopped swaying and extended one open palm at me. "And you can put it all on your resume. It was a great experience for me. Almost fun. And those years just flew by." He was even wistful.

"Do you think they'd take me, since I've already been drafted?" I ventured.

DRAFT NOTICE

"I have no idea." He waved a hand at me again. "There's no predicting the Navy. 'Designed by geniuses for execution by idiots.'" He quoted the famous line out of The Caine Mutiny. "But whaddaya have to lose in tryin'?"

The next morning I shaved with particular care, selected a plain white shirt, blue tie and dark grey suit. I hoped to look like serious Naval officer material. I walked briskly to Broad and Walnut, boarded the 27 bus and sat nervously all the way down Broad to the South Philadelphia Naval Base, and, as the ubiquitous recruitment ads of the time would say, "my nearest US Navy recruiting station." My plan was to be there just after they opened, eager, first in line.

I was welcomed somewhat warmly—it was a recruiting station after all—by a sailor manning a reception desk. After some preliminary questions, he handed me extensive forms that would be the first phase of my application to OCS. On the forms I revealed all my personal information, including, ominously, the fact that I had received my draft notice from the Army.

The sailor tapped on the door behind his desk, entered and disappeared into the room, my forms in hand, returning only seconds later, empty handed and with no further acknowledgement of my presence.

I waited nervously reflecting on my changing situation. In a matter of hours I had progressed from hoping to avoid the

DRAFT NOTICE

military totally to hoping, almost praying, that I could join the Navy.

Finally the door behind the sailor's desk opened. A tall middle aged man filled the open space. He was wearing a navy blue uniform with three gold stripes standing out on his cuffs. His starched white shirt and collars seemed stiff. His silver grey hair close cropped framed a thin face with high cheekbones. He looked fit. He was not smiling.

Looking directly at me he asked, "Mr Williams?"

"Yes, sir," I answered, surprised at how automatic the "sir," was.

"Come in," he grunted. It wasn't inviting. It was a command.

As he strode behind his desk, he half turned back to me and with an arm extended, motioned for me to sit in the chair that would face him on the other side of his desk.

He sat, paused, then, "So, Mr. Williams, I understand you're interested in volunteering for our officers candidate program."

"That's right, sir."

He stared at me again. "Why? Is it that you just love the Navy?"

DRAFT NOTICE

I had not expected or prepared for this. I fumbled mentally looking for the proper response and decided quickly that anything beyond straightforward honesty would lead to trouble.

"Honestly, sir, I don't know much about the Navy, but I've talked with a colleague at work who went through OCS and three years on a destroyer. His story is really what got me here."

"Yeah, that may be true, but we have a problem here, don't we Mr. Williams."

"Problem, sir?"

"You've already been drafted, Mr. Williams. The Army owns you, and you're here because you want to avoid being an enlisted man in the Army, not because of any great desire for a Naval career."

He continued staring at me but said nothing, the silence purposely awkward. Was he waiting for my response? I waded in.

"Yes, sir. I've been drafted, and I'm not sure of much, but I am sure that I'd rather give three and a half years of my life to the Navy than two years to the Army."

He moved his chair closer, leaned forward, forearms now on his desk and stared at me again.

DRAFT NOTICE

"Every one of us has debt to this country, Mr. Williams. Every one of us owes his Uncle Sam a commitment of part of his life to our democracy. I sense that you were just waiting and hoping that your draft notice would never come, and you'd never have to pay that debt. Now you want me and the Navy to come to your rescue."

He watched his words land their blows.

There was no way I could defend myself that would be truthful. He had wrapped it up, captured my situation so perfectly that I knew he'd been here before.

"Even if I wanted to—and I don't—I'm not sure I could take you. We're not in the habit of stealing folks from the other branches."

Then he excused me. "Go back out there and have a seat while I consider this."

I was surprised. I'd thought it was over.

Back in the waiting room I settled into one of the straight backed metal chairs against the wall facing the reception desk. The sailor ignored me. If it hadn't been for his overdose of Old Spice offending my nostrils, I wouldn't have known he was there. There was a coffee table in front of me, but all it had on it were some old issues of what looked like a newspaper, *The Navy Times*. This was no doctor's waiting room with *Time*, *Look*, *Rolling Stone*. Probably thirty minutes passed. It felt like two hours.

DRAFT NOTICE

The door opened. "Mr. Williams." With a slight nod of his silver grey head he motioned me back into his office. He stood next to his desk and didn't offer me the chair. Arms folded across his chest he said, "Here's my offer to you. If you can persuade your draft board to rescind your draft notice, I'll consider, just consider, mind you, your application. We've done this a few times before, but I have no idea what your board might be willing to do. You'll have to talk with them. But in order for us to consider you, they've gotta release you. That's the only way we'll do this."

I wanted help. I took a chance. "Sir, you said you've done this before. Would the Navy help me with this?"

He didn't hesitate. "Absolutely not, Mr. Williams. This is your little mess, and it's up to you to clean it up. If you want to."

With that he released one arm, stretched it out toward me and with his hand made that wagging motion of dismissal as if to sweep the detritus out of his office.

As I turned to leave he said, "Get relief from your draft board, you can come back and see me."

DRAFT NOTICE

Chapter 3

Draft Dodger

It wasn't much, but it was a hope. I left my local recruiter with a small and unexpected enthusiasm for the US Navy and one goal for that afternoon—to contact Mrs. Elizabeth A. Harrison in Dearborn, Michigan.

As I planned my strategy for the call, I had trouble accepting that Mrs. Elizabeth A. Harrison was a real, living person. How could the Selective Service actually reveal the real name of the person who had the power to change—and ruin—the lives of so many young men?

On the other hand maybe she was real. She had the title, "Mrs." Maybe she was the mother of sons. Maybe she could be sympathetic.

That afternoon I spoke with the female voice that responded to her calls.

"Mrs. Harrison, this is Nick Williams calling from Philadelphia," I began. "I know I'm probably just one of many..."

She interrupted. "Yes, Mr. Williams, I know who you are. You were in the greetings we sent out just last week, I believe."

DRAFT NOTICE

It was the first of several surprises. It felt like she actually was Mrs. Harrison, and she actually knew who I was. And I was more than a number.

"Yes, Mrs. Harrison. I got my greeting. I've had my physical, but there's one problem. I've been accepted into the Navy's Officer Candidate School. I've decided to give the Navy three and half years of my life instead of just two to the Army, and I'm hoping you can somehow take back my draft notice, so I can start OCS."

Then I added, "I was in the process of volunteering for OCS when I got my draft notice."

I hadn't planned to lie. In fact, I'd decided that the best strategy was to be straightforward. The lie just happened. It was born in the moment, of necessity, and out of my mouth before I could grab it back, not that I would have.

And certainly it was a gamble. If my draft board and the Navy communicated, I'd be in trouble.

"Oh, this happens occasionally. You need to send us a letter stating your plans. We'll review it, take it under consideration and get back to you by mail."

"But," I added quickly, "I'll need to hear from you soon. I'll probably be getting my orders to basic training within a few days."

DRAFT NOTICE

Another necessary prevarication. I wondered if there might be a penalty for those. They were mounting up.

"We'll get back to you quickly. We know the timing. But understand, I can't guarantee anything. Everything depends on meeting our quotas here."

I sent my letter registered mail, special delivery directly to Mrs. Harrison that afternoon.

What a difference a few weeks had made. My world was upside down. Now, I was desperate to hear from my draft board and instead of avoiding my mailbox, I checked it religiously in the morning before work and evenings after, even though the mail was delivered only once daily.

Finally, it came in the afternoon mail. It was waiting for me when I returned home from a day's work at the agency.

It had the same power as the first letter bomb, but also with the potential to free me from the US Army's infantry saving both the Army and me from the distinct possibility of mutual disaster.

I snatched it from my mailbox with no concerns about leaving fingerprints, ran up the two flights of stairs to my apartment, sat with it, again, at my dining room table.

It was clearly a US Selective Service form letter nearly identical in look to my "Greeting." There could not have been a form letter to match the uniqueness of my request.

DRAFT NOTICE

My hopes fell. They were not going to take back my draft notice.

This time there was no greeting.

"November 10, 1963

Mr. Nicholas B. Williams,

The US Selective Service office at 2710 Michigan Avenue, Dearborn, Michigan hereby rescinds the notice drafting you into the United States Military dated November 1, 1963.

With this letter we are alerting your induction center at 1215 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA of same.

Any orders following the date of this notice to report for duty, will be null and void.

Mrs. Elizabeth A. Harrison"

And it was quite official with the seal of the selective service stamped at the bottom of the letter. They had even notified my induction station on Market Street.

The letter rattled in my shaking hands. My breath caught. I read it again. And again. The words didn't change. It was quite beautiful.

I stood up leaving the letter on the table to give it some distance, brought my hands to either side of my face.

I fell back into my chair, letter in its place in front of me on the table. I reviewed everything.

DRAFT NOTICE

I wasn't drafted any more. I would not be receiving orders to report to Fort Dix for basic training. I was free to enter the US Navy and OCS. I was on the verge of celebration when devious thoughts crept like ants through this gaping hole in the Selective Service process, and into my draft dodging brain.

This all happened without an endorsement letter from the Navy. My draft board had no idea whether I was or would be headed for OCS, and I was willing to bet that they would never check. They had officially rescinded my draft notice. They were done with me, another young man for whom they had made their final decision. They were moving on to all the many others. There was no connection whatsoever in this form letter to any other military service. They had simply made my prior draft notice and subsequent orders null and void.

And what if I just disappeared? Never returned to the Navy recruiting office. Certainly, the Navy wasn't about to chase me. They had left everything appropriately in my hands, would most likely dispose of all my forms and application documents after a time.

The realization of my opportunity threatened to carry me away.

I was out of the military. I hadn't even planned it. After my expansions on the truth, it had just happened naturally. I had just dodged the draft, and it appeared to be totally legal.

DRAFT NOTICE

There was no need to revisit "My Local Navy Recruiter." No need to suffer what in my new giddiness I saw as the imperious, feigned patriotism of the Navy's recruiting officer.

Sure, there was some risk, but it was minimal. Worth taking. And there were countless excuses to explain my delay in finishing my OCS application.

My Dearborn, Michigan draft board had given me my life back.

I stood up and shouted to the world, "Mrs. Elizabeth A. Harrison. You've rescinded my draft notice. I love you!"

Overcome with relief, I collapsed in my chair, elbows on the table, head in my hands when two ladies joined in my thinking...uninvited. They just barged in. They both had the title "Mrs." Mrs. Elizabeth A. Harrison and Mrs. Williams, my mother. Mrs. Harrison spoke first. "Really, Mr. Williams," she started. "We've trusted you here, haven't even checked in with the Navy. And you're going to betray us? And your country? Cause someone else; maybe one of your friends from Dearborn to be drafted in your place?"

Mrs. Williams joined in. "You'd better think long and hard about this, sonny boy." My mom's use of "sonny boy," was always saved for her most serious advice.

DRAFT NOTICE

I protested, "Wait a minute. You guys are guilt-tripping me. This is no moral dilemma. This is my life we're talkin' about here."

Just as I was about to dismiss them, Mrs. Williams had, of course, the last word. "Remember what we always say. 'Oh, what a tangled web we weave...'"

After all our years together, I saw this coming. "You know you don't have to finish," I interrupted.

"Oh yes I do," my mother insisted. "I think you need to be reminded. 'when we practice to deceive.'"

"Ohh boy. Yeah. Got it," I said. "Thanks."

Just as I had with the original greeting, I left its beautiful recision on the table. I circled that table a few more times. Gave the letter a day or so to brew, mature, fester. I started to enjoy my freedom, my career taken off hold. But those pesky voices wouldn't leave me alone.

Two days after being almost freed of the military debt "every one of us owes this democracy," I got back on the 27 bus, rescinded draft notice in hand, and headed for the South Philadelphia Naval Station to complete my application to the Naval Officers Candidate School, Class 501.

After weeks of forms and physicals, I stood in line at the US Naval Base, Newport, Rhode Island waiting to be issued,

DRAFT NOTICE

along with my rifle and other essentials, "boots, black 1 L
1 R."

Three months later, I learned that my shouted response to
any question should I be captured by the enemy was my name,
rank and serial number, "Williams, Nicholas B. Ensign.
USNR. 741 523."