

Post-Grad Platoon

Except for the absence of black candidates, the platoon was a hodge-podge of social, economic, religious, and ethnic diversity. The NCOs-to-be hailed from all regions of the country - - the Midwest, Northeast, Far West, the Deep South, and everywhere in between. They had varied educational backgrounds: there were guys with law degrees, PhDs, Masters Degrees, and baccalaureate degrees aplenty. And there also were high school graduates and high school dropouts. Although I had a Master's degree in English literature, I was way down the academic pecking order and clearly outranked by graduates like Alan Page who had a PhD in botany from the University of Indiana. On our marches through the Georgia woods, Alan would keep up a running commentary on the various trees and bushes we'd encounter and during our breaks he would cut branches, examine leaves, and remark on the "muscles" of the oak trees.

Steve Norman was a lawyer from New York City who had graduated from Yale Law School. Although he was Jewish, he had an upper-class WASP patina and spoke with a touch of Locust Valley lockjaw. Steve was very funny and approached everything with irony. He saw our common predicament - - college grads, many with advanced degrees, rounded up to be turned into NCOs and sent to Vietnam - - as hilarious. He would purse his lips and stammer, "This is buh, buh, buh, buh bullshit" and the barracks would fill with laughter. He seemed to have an unending supply of amusing sayings. He never went to urinate. Instead, he went to "milk his mink" or "bleed the lizard". The platoon, even the rougher high school dropouts whom I expected to have limited appreciation for a sophisticated Jewish lawyer from Yale, liked him.

Steve was married to a young Frenchwoman, a pretty, quietly charming gamine, named Esme, who had moved to Georgia to be with him. I often thought how strange living in Columbus must have been for her. I was American and Columbus seemed odd to me - - the morning DJ on the local radio station would read the used car commercials and refer to automobiles equipped with "stoves" and "automatical gear shifters".

Some of the guys from the other regions of the country also stood out. On the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum from Steve Norman was Gene Rawson, a tough country boy from Tennessee. Whenever Gene wanted to get the attention of Tim Wilson, a tall, skinny, freckled red-head from West Virginia, he would shout out, "Hey you, red on the head like the dick of a dog". And when you asked him the whereabouts of one of the members of the platoon, he invariably answered, "Went to shit and the hogs ate him". I never did figure out what that meant.

Anthony Pavano was a handsome, blond-haired blue-eyed Italian kid from South Philadelphia. Although one of the platoon's high school dropouts, he was intelligent with a smart mouth and a running commentary on everything. He didn't want to be in

the Army and especially didn't want to be an NCO and he'd joke about the fact that the GIs who graduated from NCO Candidates School as buck sergeants were derisively labeled "Instant NCOs" and "Shake & Bakes". He was continually singing, much to the annoyance of the training company's officers and NCOs:

I'm a bastard, I'm a bastard,
I'm a bastard, don't you know,
But I'd rather be a bastard,
Than an 'Instant NCO'.

Pavano also liked to sing *Sammy Small*:

My Name is Sammy Small, fuck'em all
My name is Sammy Small, fuck'em all
Oh, my name is Sammy Small, and I only got one ball,
But it's better'n none at all, fuck'em all."

Although it was only occasionally that the rest of the platoon joined in the singing with Pavano, his songs did perfectly sum up the "I'm going to Vietnam, so none of this shit matters" attitude that most of the platoon embraced.

In addition to their geographical and socio-economic differences, the ages of the guys in the platoon varied widely. Having graduated from college and law school, passed the bar, and started practicing law, Steve Norman was probably the oldest at 26 or 27. Rick Ortegon, a quiet Hispanic guy from California, was definitely the youngest. A baby-faced 17-year-old, he immediately became "the Kid". A few months after we graduated from NCO school, "the Kid" was killed in action in Vietnam.