

## *The Write Place At the Write Time*

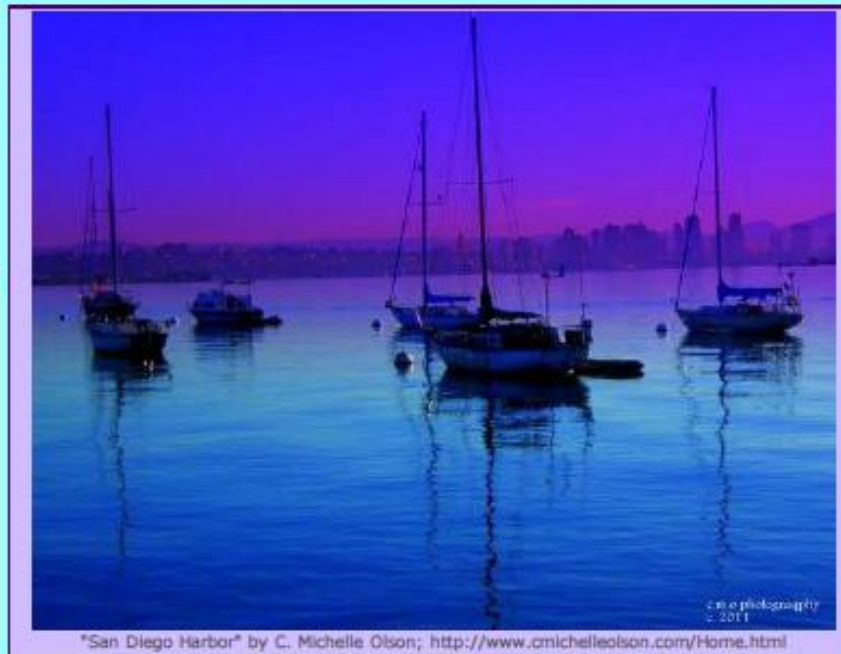
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### "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



## A Fortunate Accident

by Robert Iulo

I knew that inevitably the dreaded letter would arrive, and it did. The salutation was a cheerful "Greetings," with a subway token Scotch taped just above it. It was telling me to report to the 39 Whitehall Street induction center, the same address Arlo Guthrie sang about in "Alice's Restaurant," and the token was to make sure I arrived. I was drafted. I could have joined the reserves or gone to college and gotten a deferment but I didn't. It was 1968 and I was nineteen. Maybe I had a death wish.

After a perfunctory physical and an Army psychiatrist asking us if we were junkies or homosexuals, they sent us to Penn Station to catch a train going to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. After a few days of "processing," getting lots of inoculations, uniforms and equipment, I went still deeper into the South to Fort Gordon, Georgia for basic training. The Paris Peace Talks were just beginning then and we all hoped the Viet Nam War would be settled in the next few days and we'd all be sent home. That didn't happen. It took the better part of a year for both sides just to decide on the shape of the table they would have the talks around.

Except for Miami, this was the first time I'd ever really been in the South. The pace was different. You didn't just go into a store and say "Marlboro." You were expected to say, "Good morning. How are you? Can I have a pack of Marlboro please," and maybe a little small-talk after that before you got your cigarettes.

After all of the stories I heard about Army food it wasn't as bad as I had expected. It was just bland. During my first Army breakfast I couldn't find any bagels or Danish and thought it odd that they were serving mashed potatoes with eggs. I discovered it was actually grits – a part of breakfast that was common outside of the northeast. Some Southerners at my table told me to add butter, salt and pepper and enjoy it. I acquired a taste for it and still look forward to having grits and eggs when I'm out of New York.

I learned a lot in those next eight weeks. I, who was spared the necessity of housework by my mother and sisters, learned to make a bed, wax a floor and scrub burnt, greasy pans. I learned to crawl through mud under barbed wire, how many push-ups I could do, how long I could go without sleep and also, how to shoot a rifle.

I turned out to be a pretty good shot and actually enjoyed the rifle range until a sergeant gave me some subtle advice.

"Son, you're a fine shot. Keep that up and there'll be a sniper tree with your name on it waitin' for you in Nam."

He was just a few years older than I was but having just gotten back from Viet Nam felt much older, old enough to call me "son."

I learned to mow grass too. Having grown up in Manhattan, it was the first time I'd ever touched a lawn mower and didn't know there was a front and back to it. It doesn't mow if you push it backwards.

That same sergeant seeing me doing this said, "Where you from, son?"

When I told him New York he said, "Why, I'd rather have a sister in a whore house than be from New York."

That first eight weeks of training dragged on but finally ended. The next eight would be "Advanced Training" where I would be taught a military specialty. It could have been something like how to drive a tank or shoot a canon but thanks to some carefully answered questions on aptitude tests I was sent to Clerk School. It was there I learned to type and drill. Every day was a mix of typing in an air conditioned classroom and drilling in the hot sun. Eyes right, left face, dress right dress, forward march; there was a command for every move we made and if we didn't do it the way the drill sergeant wanted us to, we did it again.

After eight weeks of this it was over and we all got our orders for the next phase of our Army careers. As we opened the envelopes we compared and discussed where we were being sent. After two or three weeks leave most of the guys had to report to West Coast embarkation stations and their next stop would be Viet Nam. I got a brief reprieve. It was decided that after a three week leave I would get another four weeks of "Medical Records Specialist" training in Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

It wasn't much of a reprieve but it was still appreciated. I knew where I would be in a short time but I didn't let that stop me from enjoying my three weeks back home. Aside from spending time with my family, I caught up on the movies I'd been missing, ate in some of my favorite restaurants and saw "Hair" on Broadway and "Dionysius in Sixty-Nine" Off Off Broadway. These four months of training had been the longest I'd ever been away from New York so I was enjoying being back like a tourist.

Before the end of my leave some friends gave me a going-away dinner. My hostess was having trouble opening a bottle of wine and I offered to help.

As I was pulling the cork I heard a loud pop and felt like my hand was hit by a sledge hammer. The bottle had exploded and the base of my thumb was cut to the bone. I watched, fascinated, as blood squirted from a severed artery with every heart beat. At first the guests thought all that blood was spilled wine but then realized we were drinking rosé. Peggy, a close friend at the dinner, was a nurse. She reached into the opening in my hand and held the cut artery closed between her thumb and forefinger. We got into a car and were driven to the hospital with her holding me like that. There was no pain because I also cut some sensory nerves and already had a few glasses of wine before the bottle explosion.

As we walked into the emergency room, above her protests, an orderly put her into a wheel chair. He thought she was the patient because she had so much of my blood on her. When my artery started to pump again and Peggy gave a medical explanation of my condition, he realized his mistake and I took her place in the wheel chair.

As a doctor was examining my hand, someone with a clip board asked me questions about medical insurance. Not realizing that since I was on active duty my medical treatment was the Army's responsibility, I said I was covered by my father's policy. This raised other questions about parental consent because I was under twenty-one and needed surgery to put my hand back together.

Peggy took charge again and stated firmly, "If he's old enough to go to Viet Nam he can make his own decisions about surgery."

She was assertive, the doctor agreed and I was taken to the OR.

When I came to a few hours later my father was there and explained that the surgeon was able to reattach a cut tendon with wire that would be removed in a few weeks and patch everything else with thirty-two stitches. I wasn't supposed to move my hand for a month and to make sure I didn't, there was a cast extending from my elbow right over the tips of my fingers. I still had some leave remaining and didn't want to spend it in a hospital but I was stuck there for two more days.

I had a plane ticket to Texas but didn't know how I would manage a duffel

bag full of uniforms and another bag of personal belongings with my arm in a sling. My father called the Red Cross and they said they could forward my bags for me. When we arrived to drop them off a woman who was walking into their building with us began to ask questions about my injury. She was a high ranking Red Cross official and invited us into her office. My father, always a charming gentleman, explained what had happened. He also mentioned that he was a Marine in World War II and had the highest regard for the Red Cross.

Maybe she was a pacifist and anti-military and maybe she and my father got a little flirty with each other but the result of their conversation was her telling me, "You're not going to Texas."

She explained that in the military, you're either capable of full duty or you're not. If I went to Texas I'd be admitted to a hospital and stay there until fully healed, probably after months of therapy. It would make more sense and be more convenient if I went to a hospital closer to home. She called the director of Saint Albans Naval Hospital in Queens and made arrangements for me to be admitted that afternoon.

I spent the next eleven months there getting daily physical and occupational therapy. After the first few days my doctor determined I was ambulatory and I got to go home every night and weekend. Following a second surgery and some more therapy he decided I was fit for duty. I had less than a year left to my enlistment, too short a time for me to be sent to Viet Nam. I finished my last few months of service in a small Army base in upstate New York.

That was all a long time ago and I've lived a whole life since. At the time and in the language of the day, a friend told me, "Hey Man, its Karma." I suppose, in a way, I believed that and still do. It's very probable that a mishap with a flawed wine bottle kept me from going to Viet Nam. I was neither pro nor anti war; I was simply a fatalistic nineteen year old who put himself in the hands of fate and then fate handed me a bottle of wine that might have saved my life.

Bio- Robert Iulo has a Master's Degree in Urban Planning from New York University and is retired from a career with the City of New York. His work has appeared in *Epiphany Magazine* and he's had a special feature published in the *Mississippi Sun Herald* about his volunteer work on the Mississippi Coast after Katrina. He lives in New York City with his wife.