
SICK-CALL (NF)

A Birthday I'll Never Forget

(March 1990)

From the ANCHOR CHAIN series

This is the original story (with a few minor edits) that was written and sent to family and friends while deployed on the USS Independence (CV-62) based at Naval Air Station (NAS) North Island, Coronado, CA

March, my birthday month. The last year I would be able to say I was “twenty something”. The reality of being single, and a year away from thirty years old, is lapping at my heels and perceived receding hairline.

At sea most of the month and I’ve developed a medical problem. As stated in previous letters, I don’t like the so-called witch doctors and corpsman (aka pecker-checkers) on the ship or in the Navy as a whole (including dentists, as you may recall from a 1980 letter). But these medical visits can be a necessity; getting rid of the crabs was the one highlight of those visits.

This time, I had no choice but to seek help from the USS Independence’s (Indy’s) Medical Department. My need to seek that help left me pale and queazy, like I had a 30 pound rock lodged in my stomach.

Soon after departing out to sea on our work-up cruise, I began to itch internally, with what I self-diagnosed as a urinary tract infection (UTI). After some researching UTI’s (not much available to be honest) in the ship’s library, I concluded my UTI was the result of my mass consumption of coffee each day during the 12 on 12 off shifts. If you recall, we all work seven days a week at sea, no weekends or holidays off, just 12 on 12 off. I made a concerted effort to cut down on how much I drank. Sure, we had coke machines and Kool-aid (aka bug juice) onboard, but I’ve never been a big soda drinker. As for the bug juice, it’s always overly saturated with sugar. Most of us, perhaps all of us onboard figured that was to cover the taste of JP-5 (jet fuel) mixed in. I’m not kidding, the sugar masked the taste but they couldn’t block out the faint smell of JP-5 with each glass raised to your mouth. I can’t think of anyone who drank just water from the water fountains onboard. Despite my reduced caffeine intake, the itching I couldn’t reach, only got worse.

I was walking around the ship grabbing myself, like one of the outfielders you see during a baseball game. After a number of days at sea, it became evident that whatever it was I had, it wasn’t going to be cured by what I did. I made up my mind based on this realization, to tell my supervisor that I had to go to medical. As stated earlier, this was not a choice made lightly. It’s sorta of like playing Russian roulette knowing every chamber of the gun has a bullet poised and ready to go... a no-win situation.

For me, any visit to sick-call is dreaded, even more so, with the ship’s airwing and full compliment of crew onboard. When they’re all present, it literally means over 5,000 of us living and working on this ship. The vast majority of the crew are sailors (aka squids) but we also have a number of marines (aka jar heads) here.

Whether you visit due to need or visit to get a little break from the job you're doing, all know you will be standing in a line from Hell by the time Medical opens for sick-call at 0715. The only line longer on this ship, a hundred times longer, is the one for chow. In that line, you obviously hate the wait, especially when you only have 30 minutes to eat. For most of us, it's 25 minutes in line and less than 5 minutes to wolf down what's on your tray. Even worse, you stand there for what seems like forever each day and your number one hope is that they don't run out of the menu items, which are posted in the POD (Plan Of the Day). For those that like the opportunity to taste the food or at least chew it, no matter how it tastes, there is a speed line. That's where I learned that eating a hotdog, silvery green in color, would not make you sick. It looked that way because it was re-boiled day after day until eaten.

Shortly after morning muster, which was promptly at 0700 each day, I headed down to Medical. I worked on the 03 Level (deck) in CVIC (Carrier Intelligence Center) and Medical was on the main deck (2nd deck). I slid down the four flights of ladders (four decks) using the hand rails, just like in the movies, to the main deck. The mess decks and galley were also on the main deck as is the vast majority of the common areas used by the enlisted crew.

Once I reached medical, I passed their door and headed to the end of the line. The passageways are not wide, so we all just stand there, leaning back against the bulkhead. Then, the line kind of side steps in unison, sliding horizontally ever so slowly toward medical once another of us gets in to Medical, on the other side of that door. It took me about 45 minutes before advancing far enough in line to cross the threshold into the ship's medical. I was met by one of the corpsman, a Third Class Petty Officer (PO3), his blue chambray shirt had the sharpest military creases I'd seen in years and not a wrinkle from sleeve to waistline. His dungaree pants were still deep blue and his boots shined to a mirrored state. He was totally in the 'ready for inspection' condition ... *looked like the first time he'd worn it*, I thought. I found myself envious of him, being able to look so sharp wearing a clean and pressed work uniform like that. It was also plain to see this guy, not bad looking for a guy, had a new haircut and might even work out based on how his biceps, even in a relaxed state, seemed to over fill the ends of his short-sleeved-shirt. Yep, he was working it. He was working on getting those good evals so he'd have a chance to advance to Petty Officer Second Class, maybe even Sailor of the Quarter for the ship. You could tell he liked his job or maybe it was the fact he got to meet people and work all day in an air-conditioned space; just like those dental techs. I liked him, you could tell he knew what he was doing and that's a comfort in a stressful situation such as mine. Where he was the

picture of a 4.0 Sailor, nearly all the enlisted waiting in line, like myself, had faded, sometimes wrinkled and dirty chambray shirts on, probably the third or fourth day in a row of wearing them. The Air-Wing personnel, due to the nature of their jobs on the flight deck, wore long-sleeve pull over shirts ranging in colors from green, blue, purple, brown, red, yellow, and white, based on their jobs. Most of their shirts were just as dirty as ours, and at the least, smelled of fuel. We wore the traditional bell-bottom dungaree jean pants, nearly all faded from knee to thigh and probably worn as many days, if not more than our shirts; before deciding it was time to send them to the ship's laundry.

The PO3 corpsman led me near the corner of the space to have a seat against the bulkhead. This was the main medical compartment, which was quite large, by design I'm sure. Meant to be a perfect set up in case of a mass casualty event taking place onboard. Even with all the smells of sweat and fuel, this space seemed to suck those odors away. A faint hint of alcohol prevailed in the air, which made your nose feel cleaner, if nothing else. I doubt any of us in there would have complained about that smell, given the alternative odors trying to sneak in. The PO3, clipboard in hand, asked the basic questions they always ask prior to taking my temp and blood pressure. After noting the numbers he asked why I was there. I was only a chair away from others like me, each paired with a corpsman holding a clipboard. I made sure to speak softly. I told him the subject was a little embarrassing to talk about but I told him all about it... I figured they'd prescribe a pill or two, hopefully no shots, and I'd be back to normal in a couple days.

Not sure how long I waited the second time, before I heard "Petty Officer Sager". I looked to the direction of the voice and locked eyes with "Alfred E Neuman" walking towards me. He stopped and motioned for me to come to him. For those of you that aren't familiar with MAD Magazine, Alfred E Neuman was the animated figure on the cover. Like that Alfred, this corpsman had wavy bright red hair and a set of perky ears. He also had what I thought were those telltale freckles on his nose and cheeks. As I got closer, it was not freckles but a bad case of acne. I've been in the Navy 11 years, by now I can pick out the new squids, both to the Navy and to the ship. This guy was green as they come. In the 'end', that would not work in my favor. I'm 5'10" in height and about 175 pounds. He was visibly shorter, and about 120 pounds best guess. I'd like to think my uniform looks pretty good, being a First Class Petty Officer (PO1); I have to set a good example for those in my division. I try to take the time to iron my uniforms after they come back from the ship's laundry, which are then always heavily wrinkled and knotted up. The iron in our berthing is used by all of us, the sole plate is normally

covered in something like starch or just burnt fabric. If you don't remove it once the iron is hot, you tend to transfer what's on the sole to your shirt. As I said, I do try to get my uniform, no matter how faded, looking wrinkle free with those vertical creases. I give all the credit to my can of Niagara spray starch. Even with all the prepping I attempt to do, the PO3 I met earlier, made my uniform look average at best. But this redhead's uniform was hastily put together. His shirt and dungarees were both textured in soft wrinkles, which is normally achieved by running the hot iron over the uniform in one quick swipe. His boots dull, not sure when he last polished or buffed them; it had been awhile though. I make the effort to buff mine daily. From what I saw, I found myself a little uncomfortable that he was the one now assigned to take care of me, while in medical. He directed me to a little room, not a room actually, it was a space veiled by dingy white curtains on wheels. The space just large enough for a gurney with about 2-feet of clearance around all four sides allowing for medical staff to have free access to a patient. The curtains provided about as much privacy as a fan in the outfield bleachers of a San Diego Padres game. All you have to do is find one of the many gaps in the curtains to see what the staff was doing to the other patients; they can do the same to me. Given the set-up, anything said by the patient or medical personnel became common knowledge to all within ear shot. Not that bad I guess, unless they happen to address you by name while discussing what they believe the medical problem is.

The corpsman, who I will call Seaman (SN) Alfred was as new to the job as I had thought, he seemed to stutter a little when he addressed me... He was still learning the ropes. I was growing more uncomfortable with him, because he was new. Though I'm not always right, I pegged him, based on our interaction so far, as being in that mental decision phase we all go through shortly after joining the Navy. Boot camp is mind altering shock to your system and for those that are assigned to a ship immediately after, there is a lot more mind alterations to come. SN Alfred was shellshocked, if he hadn't yet, he would soon make the decision to embrace this type of life or decide, as many do, to adopt the "Fuck this shit, I'm getting out as soon as I can" attitude. These latter guys will start their short-timer calendar countdown while they still have three plus years remaining in their enlistment. Most are not shy about telling or showing those around them how they feel, which is 'I don't give a shit'. Thankfully, Alfred never shared his thoughts, if he had any, about the Navy.

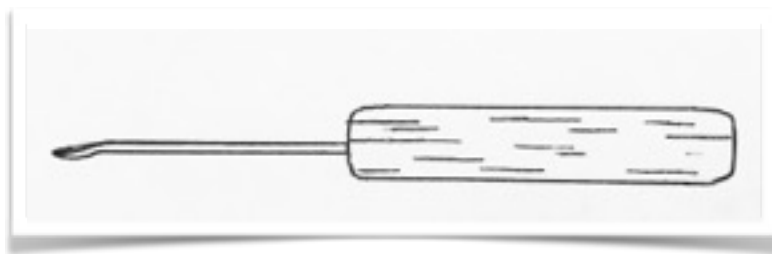
Alfred carried with him the same clipboard I'd seen earlier with the PO3, who I missed already. Alfred asked me why I was there as well, confirming what was noted on my chart before handing me a bottle to pee in. I noted his

small freckled hands and fingers, he was a nail-biter and an extreme one at that. It was difficult to see his nails, they had receded to his cuticles. Hard to explain in a narrative, but on each finger and thumb, there looked to be the thinnest of pale pink ovals, adhered to the top of each. Not sure why I remembered that, I guess I had a hard time envisioning him chewing away on those nails each evening, after being in contact with patients like me, each day. Before I left with my marching order to fill the bottle, knowing it meant nothing to this kid, I still wanted to assure him that whatever I had was something borne and bread within me, it was not the by-product of sexual contact.

When I returned, bottle filled, Alfred told me that he'd spoken to the doctor regarding my symptoms and that the doctor relayed that it was very rare to get a urinary track infection based on what I'd said. *Man, this was going south fast.* Alfred stated the doctor would be over soon to conduct additional tests.

Alfred needed a blood sample too, I turned pale, which is what I do whenever I hear that. I hate needles, and those that add to or take things out of me via needles. I was so full of dread of an expert taking my blood and here, I've got this kid ready to stick me. To his credit, he drew my blood without the pain anticipated, I let myself feel a little relaxed, not much, but at least a little. Before he walked out with the test-tube filled with my blood, he had one more thing to pass on to me; saving the worst news for last; "... we're also going take a culture from your urinary track". I tried to assimilate what that actually meant. Not sure how they were going to do that and nothing I imagined made it a good way. Even if he was pretty good with needles, I had huge gigantic reservations about Alfred getting near my urinary tract. There I sat, on the gurney, feeling my dangling legs weakening, aware I'd began to sweat oodles and oodles of the wet stuff, just as the Doctor appeared through the curtains. He introduced himself, then repeated what Alfred had said, '... we need a culture'. As he reached into his pocket to pull out a set of pale yellow latex gloves, he told me I needed stand up. Before he could put the gloves on, I took inventory of his fingernails too. His were fully intact and trimmed smooth. If guys do get manicures, he may have been one of those guys. Like those before him, I told the Doctor that whatever I had, it was nothing sexually transmitted. You see, I had heard long before this, that the Navy uses the "SCRAPER" to break guys of being sexually active. Once they got scraped it was not as much fun to have sex with every woman in every port-of-call. Again, it's what I heard and as far as I was concerned after hearing those stories, I was keeping my pants on and I did.

Unfortunately, there I was, dropping my pants, they fell to my ankles, covering my boots, the belt buckle striking the blue specked terrazzo deck making a single “ding” sound that seemed way too loud. I was scared, shaking, and still sweating. The Doctor pulled something from his left pocket, at first glance, it looked the size of a Snicker bar, wrapped in white paper with tiny blue print covering it. He ripped away the paper, which also seemed to drown out the other noises around me. There in his pale yellow covered hand was something smaller than a Snickers, but to me, it looked like a full-sized crowbar. I was transported to place in my head where all the noises in the room were muted. I couldn't look at him or what he had in his fingers. I looked around at the white painted bulkheads, then fixated on the overhead, and the maze of spider webbing pipes hanging from it. It all appeared freshly painted but it wasn't; it just doesn't get that dirty in Medical. I searched out and read each of the 1” stencils on the pipes above, delineating what each insulated pipe carried within, be it potable water to JP-5. Something made me snap back to reality. I looked back down, meeting the eyes of the doctor, who was talking to me. He was telling me that he would need to stick the crowbar in my most sacred of possessions. The “scraper” itself was probably about three inches long, a little more than half of that, was a wooden handle about the diameter of one of those cigarillo cigars. I did my best, from my horrified memory, to draw it below.



My imagination had already kicked in, providing me its own idea of the upcoming procedure, filled with searing pain and blood everywhere. My stomach queasy and reaching nauseous levels as I stood there. The doctor told me to pull down my underwear, I complied but my arms didn't want to help. There was stanchion in my tiny shrinking space that I gripped with my right hand, using my left to put the book I was reading, appropriately written by Stephen King, in my mouth. I bit down on the book as I took my gaze back to the overhead pipes. Having that book was a blessing, having the presence of mind to know I didn't want all those around me to hear my screams. Alfred the corpsman, interrupted my current state of mind, saying ‘... you're going to have to hold yourself (i.e. my penis) Petty Officer Sager’ (What!!!!!! I have to help with my own torture!). Not sure how I remained conscious but I did.

I released my iron clad grip on the stanchion knowing I didn't have enough hands to prepare as I had wanted. I shuffled my feet, bound by my pants, to the edge of the gurney and leaned my bare butt against it. Remaining fully aware of the audience that were probably watching between those gaps in the curtains; everything was so surreal. There I stood, about as vulnerable as any man wants to be at anytime in their life.

I was still holding, perhaps shoving the book in my mouth with my lone free hand as he shoved the scraper inside me while I held myself with my other hand. The pain was so intense causing me to involuntarily bite down on the book; I bit down hard. My eyes squeezed shut so tightly, I'd swear I saw flashes of light; my own internal lightning show. Out of each eye, a single tear rolled down my cheeks as I remained quiet due to the book stuffed in my mouth. Then it was done. Probably took only a second or two but it seemed like an eternity. The only thing that brought me back was when the Doctor stood up, looked at me, uttering that really stupid idiotic quote.. "That wasn't so bad, now was it?" It was the first time in my naval career I just wanted to punch an officer in the face. Actually, what I wanted to do, is tie him up and do to him, what he'd just done to me; knowing he'd never utter that stupid quote again.

The Doctor walked out through the curtains after placing the scraper back in its original white packaging; followed out by Alfred, after telling me I could pull my pants back up. I was still standing there, my knees locked yet ready to buckle, still leaning against the gurney, still holding myself. I couldn't look down, my mind told me I'd see blood dripping from me... I just reached down and blindly grabbed for my tighty whities and pants, pulling them all up in one motion; my book in hand as I did. Not sure when I removed the book from my mouth, but the first and the last 10 or so pages of the book had a very clear and distinct impression of my teeth.

Alfred reappeared sometime after I'd gotten enough energy to return to a fully dressed state and told me to come back tomorrow because it takes about 24 hours to get the results from the procedure. Then as before, saves the worst for last. '...you will probably notice blood in your urine for a while'. At that very moment, I was so dazed and worn out, wanting to curl up in a ball. But I had to get back to work. What seemed like a full day spent in Hell, was only about two hours, leaving me with nine plus hours of work before I might find sleep, hopefully erasing the events of the day.

I climbed the ladders back up to my office more slowly than usual and took a seat in my chair. I was scared to pee, took me a long time to try, unconsciously seeing how much my bladder could really hold. When I finally had no

choice but relieve myself, there was blood and thought I would faint; I didn't. Except for the restroom (head) breaks, the rest of the work day was unremarkable compared to how it began. As the shift ended at 1900, I had one thought, that was to sleep the rest of this day away. I skipped dinner and another line, heading straight down to OZ Berthing on the third deck. I walked down the ladders and into our berthing compartment's TV Lounge, each seat already occupied, everyone focusing on the movie playing on the ship's CCTV. That made the choice of immediate sleep a no brainer. After those hours of the alcohol scent soothing my olfactory glands, smells I had gotten way too use to came back much stronger, like getting slapped in the face. I was back in reality. 24 guys in my Division slept here, three racks high, consisting of the bottom, middle, & top. 24 guys equals 48 socks and their underwear and maybe a uniform all shoved into a mesh laundry bag we attached to the towel bar at the foot of our rack. The smell of sweat soaked feet, crotches and underarms, plus cigarette smoke was amazingly strong. By tomorrow morning I knew I'd be back to not noticing, like the rest of us. There I stood below my rack, which was on the top, shedding my uniform, placing the shirt and pants in my small standup locker; ready to wear again tomorrow. I removed my t-shirt, underwear, and socks, the morbid curiosity strong enough that I looked down to the crotch area and as expected, a few dried drops of dark red stood out in stark contrast to the white cloth of my underwear. Yep, today really happened and I felt the nausea try to return. After adding to the already unique odor of my tiny living space, shoving my dirty underclothes into my laundry bag, I was ready for a quick shower. It's very rare that I would take a shower after work, I always take my shower in the mornings when it's quieter. My towel wrapped around my waist, shower shoes on my feet, and toiletry bag in hand, I headed out to the head nearby, which had toilets in one space and an adjoining space with shower stalls. I'll explain the showers and the heads in another story. I can tell you that this particular shower was so needed and it felt so good to mentally wash away the day as best it did. I made it back to our berthing and crawled up into my rack (aka coffin locker). Thankfully, sleep came fast, even slept through the ship's nightly 1MC broadcasts of "Sweepers" at 2100, the "Evening Prayer" by our Chaplain at 2150, and "Taps Taps, Lights Out", at 2200.

The next day I woke early, a little sore 'down there', but okay other than that. I headed back down to medical after our morning muster. There I was back in line, vowing to never let them do that to me again... I learned a little later I need to use more generalities when making such vows. After about 30 minutes in line, reading my tooth-marked book, I reached Medical's door. I saw Alfred, now permanently associated with my penis pain, and waved to

get his attention. He disappeared from view a couple minutes, then reappeared, walked over to where I stood and said ‘...come back tomorrow at sick-call Petty Officer Sager, we don’t have the results yet’.

A third morning in the sick-call line, at least the blood in my urine was gone. This time Alfred was apparently looking for me in line, calling me up to the front, allowing me to escape the long wait. I thought my luck may be changing though I was painfully curious as to what the results were.

Alfred walked with me back to another curtained off space like the last one, just not the same one. He said my “culture results are positive for a UTI, but ...” that’s what I was telling this medical trio all along, there were no STDs involved, I knew I had a UTI already. *Geez! So much for keeping it in my pants, I still paid the price of the guilty.* He went on to say the Doctor should be here soon. As if on cue, the same Doctor entered my curtained enclosure and after telling me what SN Alfred had just said ‘... the results were positive’, he added “... I would like to run an additional test’. In my mind, I’d already convinced myself that I’d itch inside the rest of my life before I let them use that scraper on me again. But that was not the additional test he had in mind, he wanted do a rectal exam, What!?! To be honest, that sounded real bad, but compared to the scraper...it couldn’t be as bad. Hmmmmm I hate when I’m wrong. And don’t think I had a choice, I’m literally considered U.S. Government property. When anyone senior to you in rank says “please” or “would like you to” or “can you” it means “you will”; they’re giving you a direct order to do it; which we call ‘mandatorily volunteered’. I know I looked defeated when he spoke to me, keep in mind I was again in a curtained rectangular space but with a new audience with the same curiosity. I took my boots, pants and underwear off, leaving them in a pile on the deck, and assumed the fetal position on the gurney per his orders. It was quick a violation, though I felt his finger against my lungs. The doctor instantly assessed the cause of my condition but before he let it be known, he looks down at me and says ‘... corpsman Alfred had not been involved with this condition before, please remain as you are so he can correctly diagnose this in the future’.. *Really?!* So there I lay like a honest to goodness guinea pig so Alfred could do training.. I was like living in my own MAD Magazine right now. Alfred spent the next few minutes searching my insides with his finger, at least he greased me up really good. Seemed, as you already know, like 30 minutes of exploration of an area no one has the right to explore. In the background, the doctor giving directions and play by play of the event to Alfred and anyone else in earshot. Saying things such as ‘...can you feel that? ... if you move your finger to this position and now guide it over to your right, you should ...’ *blah blah blah* Then it was done, I was allowed to get up and

off the gurney with the feeling of a lot of grease between my cheeks. I felt violated by mankind and the Navy, the ultimate definition of BOHICA (Bend Over, Here It Comes Again). Now dressed, I was once again facing the Doctor, he told me that my prostate was very enlarged. I'd heard of this thing before somewhere, but had no idea what a prostate was or what it did... I just knew it's located in a place that it shouldn't be. At some point during the conversation, I felt like I was outwardly grinning. I couldn't help but wonder if Alfred was going to chew on what was left of the nail, attached to the finger, he had plunged into me.

Soon there after, I left Medical, never wanting to go back, with a medicine call "Septra" in hand, it's for the UTI. Along with the medicine, I was warned I'd need to drink as much water as I could. If I failed to do so, the medicine could crystalize in my urinary track and would feel like broken glass when I discharged. Big deal, I was still feeling that exact thing from the first expedition they forced upon me. But I did drink all the bug juice I could.

In the past 72 hours, I actually experienced first hand, three of the more notable acronyms I learned while in the Service. They are "NAVY" (Never Again Volunteer Yourself), "FUBAR" (Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition) and the last one, the one that most directly impacted me these last few hours; that would be "Max BOHICA".

Later, when the ship returned to port, I got a chance to call my Dad and tell him of my ordeal. He tells me that a swollen prostate is an early sign of cancer. *Well, Happy Birthday to me, Thanks Dad.....*