

Part 2: From Military through Marriage

After World War II, Korea was split in half and the Russians took responsibility for the north. So, when North Korea invaded South Korea in the summer of 1950, it started a superpower proxy-war inside of a Cold War.

It was a 4-year commitment if you “signed up,” but only 2 years if you were drafted. I volunteered to be drafted into the Army.

There was a brief stop at Camp Kilmer for a haircut and a uniform before joining 5,000 others just like me for Basic Training at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

In the first 8 weeks, they determined which guys would spend their last 8 weeks in more military training and who would be ordered to “specialty schools.”



(June 1952)

Everyone's next assignment was posted on the Commanding Officer's Bulletin Board, except for mine. I was told that they needed me to take my test again (for a third time)! I can only guess that perhaps my score seemed implausible to them. For the final round, it was just me in a little room with a Sargent watching over.



He said “Menendez, with a score like this you could go to any school you’d like.”

He thought my time at Fairchild Camera made office work a good fit for me, and so I was ordered to the Army’s Clerk-Typist School for Administration.

Meanwhile, the Army was sending investigators to speak to my former schoolteachers, employers and neighbors.

I didn’t learn about this until I was suddenly approved for Secret Clearance and assigned to the Army Chief of Staff in the Pentagon.



(My sister Pat, Mom and me.)

Coincidentally, the FBI had been poking around, asking questions about my sister Pat to clear her for a job in Germany with the CIA! She had answered an ad, took some tests, and qualified! This was a proud moment for my mother before Pat sailed off to Europe and I reported for duty in Washington, D.C.

Lined up to enter my new barracks, there were beds on either side and three potbelly stoves down the center aisle. A big guy with red hair threw his footlocker down on the cot directly across from the center stove, and I said, “You know how to light this thing?”

He said, “Yeah.”

I said, “So, you can keep it warm in here, all this winter?”

He said, “Yup.”

And I put my locker down on the cot next to his!

Sure enough, 6AM every morning that needed it, Jerry Croteau had already found wood and was warming up the place!

He was an authentic woodsman. He’d done every hard job there was on a farm in Groton, Massachusetts, where his mother worked. The owner of the farm, who’d taken Jerry and his mom in, taught him to “Earn and save!” Jerry was going to buy ten acres of his own up there someday and build a house.

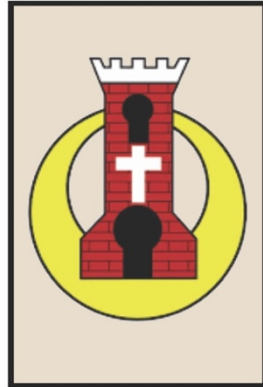
So, any kind of work there was, Croteau would take it. He’d even work your KP shift for a very reasonable price. And since the kitchen workers saw him constantly, Jerry had worked out a well-oiled situation for himself.

I started bringing Jerry to my Knights of Columbus meetings at the DC Fraternity and we both became very active. Jerry went on to become a “Grand Knight” after returning to Groton. I was a Fourth-Degree member, or “Sir Knight,” by the time I was 21.

Sir Knights are dedicated to “the service of their church, their country and their order.” And many of us also joined The Order of Alhambra which began as an extension to the Knights.

Its mission was to memorialize the significant historical events of North American Catholicism. Also, you got to wear a fez!

Order of Alhambra



I recall this evening very clearly. I owned my own tuxedo and I had prepaid my admission ticket but when the night of the event came, I had only 14 cents to my name – until pay day! The bus fare would be 13 cents in each direction (between the Pentagon and downtown Washington) so, I showered, dressed and walked from my Army post, Fort Meyer South, all the way to the hotel venue in Washington.

Here, one of my fraternity brothers had brought over his daughter and wanted a photo snapped of us. I had to avoid any further conversation with her. I was penniless – as I so often was in those early Army days.



I needed to become industrious like Jerry! I started small, buying 50-cent bottles of wine which I sold for a dollar. But then I saw a great income growth opportunity in rifle cleaning! See, there were a lot of men in our company of higher rank with more important orders who were married, or lived off-post, who didn't have time to return to complete this mandatory and tedious task.

(Where typically, a company of 350 men might have 1 Master Sergeant, our "Headquarters Company" had 200 of them!)

When payday came around, I'd wait at the end of the line to collect a dollar from each of my customers – not one of whom ever wound up on the de-merits list, which our Supply Sergeant tallied.

At some point, I turned the franchise over to Croteau. He sub-contracted out the actual rifle cleaning to the Supply Sergeant himself and kept half the fees for running it!

But Jerry wasn't all work; he was a helluva lotta fun too! And quite a goof who found his share of trouble. In fact, by now, I had remembered seeing Jerry one time before all of this. They had him running around a parade field with a rifle over his head.

As it turned out, Croteau and I were the only two of our initial group who had been given Top Secret assignments in Washington.

We never asked each other about our classified work. As they constantly told us, "Loose Lips Might Sink Ships."



Jerry was in G2 Intelligence which was the gathering and interpretation of information (as opposed to G1 which was Personnel, or G3 which was Operations). I was attached to the Army Chief of Staff inside the Pentagon. I'd say I was a glorified file clerk but I'm not even sure how glorified it was. Nevertheless, a truckload of sensitive documents and photographs (from past and present) traveled through my hands.

Being at the literal center of such a vast operation and building was an eye-opening experience for a kid from St. Albans. It was a unique lesson in both office culture and strict chain of command.



Our barracks were halfway between the Pentagon and The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Located on what today would-be part of the Arlington National Cemetery. It was walking distance to the Mall, the Capitol and the Monuments – we were in the center of everything!

US Army barracks had only become racially integrated in the previous year (March of '51) which seems absurd in retrospect, but at the time it felt quite progressive. As far as I could see, the transition was seamless and without issue, but of course we were in a major city and I had come from a public high school in the north. I saw no reason why it should be different anywhere else, but I knew that it was.

I bring this up only as being a juncture in history which I lived through. This was two years before the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional and three years before Rosa Parks.

I just liked that everyone could come to the parties we threw!

See, Jerry and I had befriended Miss Johnson who ran the Recreations Operation for the post. She explained how a percentage of profits from everything we purchased at the PX Stores went into funding our entertainment. We convinced her to let us ‘oversee’ a piece of that budget for entertaining our Headquarters Company.

Naturally, we ran the parties out of the Knights of Columbus Hall. One of our first really big ones was the Sweetheart Ball!



“There’s
no
toe
like
Croteau!”

We’d arranged for The US Army Band to perform so we had great, live music for the dancing! After all, I was bringing a lot of girls down from New York City. Jerry and I would charter two or three school busses and bring them in from everywhere.

Miss Johnson informed us that two weddings resulted from that particular party! I kept in touch with her after I left the Army. In fact – though I’m getting ahead of myself – I visited her on the way to my honeymoon a few years later, and in front of my new bride, Miss Johnson said, “Eddie, where are all the girls?”

The war officially ended on July 27, 1953, and I got out the following spring. Jerry and I remained lifelong friends.

Everyone was coming back to St. Albans from somewhere and the old group was forming again.

Nick had been overseas in Germany, stationed not far from his mother's birthplace. He'd reconnected with some cousins there who'd helped him to hone an appetite for schnitzel and German beer (or really any kind of beer).

Ray Mullen had been Navy, so, he was all over the place.



Meanwhile, Eugene Farrell had been stationed in Asia where he married a single mother named Annie, adopted her son, and moved to Kansas. Nobody saw that coming.

And Mary was no kid anymore! Instead of Jack Eschmann, she



was now dating his best pal, Eddie Herrmann (who co-owned that Crystal Coup in our driveway). Mary wrote to Eddie Herrmann every day while he was away in the military.

It was clear to us from the start that Mary and Eddie would be together forever.

My brother Jim was marrying his teenage sweetheart too! As soon as he returned from his service in the Army Tank Corps, he took a job as a mechanic at a paper products company and bought a house in Levittown. They were very happy, at first.



Mary was a bridesmaid; she and Jim were particularly close. Along with Eddie Herrmann, the two couples would often go hunting together in the Catskills where Jim kept an Airstream trailer and a mosquito-proof yurt.

By contrast, neither Pat nor I were very 'outdoorsy.' Even when we organized our "Delhi Hunting Expedition," none of us shot an animal, nor did we intend to. It was just another weekend party for a dozen or so friends who all slept on the floor of a buddy's house upstate. For us, that was roughing it!



By Christmas of '54, my sister Pat was home from Germany. Her next assignment was in D.C. She'd be heading to the Capitol just as I was leaving it. She snapped this photo.



One of the few photographs I have of myself with both my mother and my father.

I've been told many times that I'm like him, though I never thought so.

It's been pointed out how I now walk exactly as he used to walk – a little stooped over with his hands behind his back.

I do remember that he slept very easily. As do I.

And it's certainly easier now to see what pains he must have had when life started moving faster than he could. Sometimes now I really wish I had asked him out to a tavern, even once, to sit and talk over a couple beers. For some reason, it just never occurred to me to do that.

And I'm sure I didn't give it much thought at that time. I was 22, fresh out of the Army. I remember thinking that it was time to chart a more deliberate course for myself.

My time at Fairchild Camera had shown me the inner workings of an engineering company where it was clear that only a specialized degree could ever qualify one to upper management. I just needed to find a less specialized field.

At the same time, I was eager to use the education benefits of my G.I. Bill to enroll in courses somewhere, to study something, but I didn't know what or where.

And who knows, maybe I thought of philosophy, history, and theology as being more of a "generalized" curriculum but the next thing anyone knew, I was preparing to enter the Maryknoll Seminary up in Ossining, New York.

Today, I can only wonder about this decision. I couldn't tell you that I felt a particular calling to missionary work.

The pictures
on the
brochure
certainly
looked
very peaceful.



And I'd always been the type of extravert who needed quiet spaces afterwards. I could drive to Florida, and back, and never once feel the need to turn on the radio. And I've always had ascetic needs and tastes. (To me, empty space is a decorating concept.) But again, none of these personal traits were part of any conscious decision.

It certainly was a decent answer to, "What are you doing next?" which met with enthusiastic approval from people within my Fraternal Orders, my Church, even some members of my family.

Maybe it seemed like a natural extension to the oaths of service which I'd already taken? I just don't know.

Uncle Al's brothers, Father Cyprian and Father Chris, were both Franciscan Missionaries.

This is a 'promotional' postcard for Father Chris' "Chapel Car," prior to his taking it over to China.



(They're trying it out in Uncle Al's backyard! I can see my cousins, Mary Rose and Catherine, in the audience.)

Father Cyprian served as a Missionary, organizing schools in Brazil for 13 years before serving as an aide to the Vatican in Rome. Stories like these must have had their influence. Right?

Maryknoll's credo was "Go where you are needed, but not wanted, and stay until you are wanted, but not needed." That's what I was signing up for. But in the meantime, I had to find a job until the fall semester started.

And I don't know if I was wanted or needed in the textile industry, but in my view – at that time – it certainly qualified as a non-specialized industry.

I was hired by Wm. Simpson, Sons & Co. They were textile converters, meaning they bought plain grey fabrics and sold them as finished piece goods to the cutters. They were a wholly owned subsidiary of New York's première dye & print house.

They were also well-known, at the time, as a sponsor of the Miss America Pageant. In return, Miss America would promote their fabrics.



(Lee Meriwether, Miss America of 1955, models two of Wm. Simpson's new Everglaze Fabrics: Iced Cotton & Peerless Poplin.)

One block from Times Square in one direction, one block from Bryant Park in the other. I shared an office with the converter and the person who tracked sales by item. It was interesting to watch our inventory respond to consumer tastes and the changing needs of customers. I rediscovered my love for charts!

After a few months on the job, the company President, Douglas Macmillan, told the Sales Manager to promote me up to the sales department. Things were really taking off, I thought.

Now – as it is with most life-altering events – meeting Ria, my future wife, came about by an arbitrary impulse brought on by a conversation which happened only by the slimmest of chances.

The unlikely conversation was with a former schoolteacher who I probably should have avoided, since the last time I saw her I had let the air out of her tires! She had parked her brother's Rolls Royce in the loading zone of the Farm Fresh Fruit Market where I'd been struggling to bring in hundred-pound bags of potatoes. But a lot of time had passed, and it was a nice day, so I stopped to speak with her.

And who knows, maybe seeing one of my least favorite teachers from Shimer Junior High got me thinking about my favorite teacher, Mrs. Gross, who taught us all mathematics. But on an arbitrary impulse, I called her up. She was delighted to hear from me and invited me to attend a little get-together at her house for cocktails. I could bring a friend, so I brought Nick.

We were all adults now and she asked me to call her Jen Gross, and to call her husband, Arthur Gross.

Jen and Arthur
lived in a tidy
and tastefully
decorated ranch
in Garden City,
Long Island,
complete
with candy bowls,
doilies, and a
baby grand piano
without a speck
of dust on it.

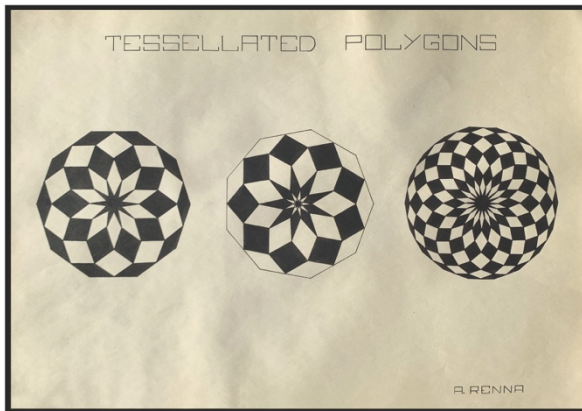
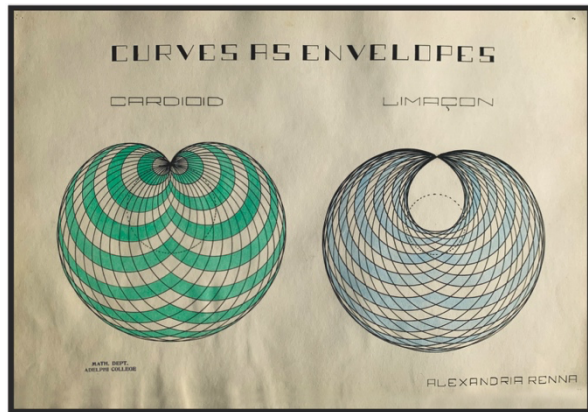


I was surprised when we arrived to find only one other guest at the party. She had also been a student of Jen's. And while she and Nick were downstairs playing ping-pong, I was putting two and two together – that I had been invited there to meet Mrs. Gross' star math student, Alexandria T. Renna.

"Ria," as she was introduced, had been the Salutatorian of her High School class and went directly on to receive a math degree from Adelphi College, where she could make things like this:

Just
pen
and
ink.

No
second
chances.



All
by
hand.

Not that
I saw any
of these
that night.

But it didn't surprise me at all when I finally did.

It's just how Ria was. Precise, perfectly symmetrical, and striving for excellence in every little thing she did.



She had already taught Calculus, taken graduate math courses at Columbia University, and was working as an engineer. She was not only brilliant (perhaps in a way that was new to me) but also very beautiful.

But of course, I was preparing to enter the Seminary in the fall – there was no way around that – and it really sounded to me like Ria already had a serious boyfriend. So, at the end of the evening, we just said we could all be friends and Nick invited her to one of our famous basement parties.

She asked if she
could bring her
gorgeous cousin,
Theresa.

It was all set!

Little could I have
known that Theresa
would become
the first of many
new and important
figures in my life
from Ria's family.



Over the course of that summer, Ria came to several of our best parties, either with Theresa or her girlfriend, Barbara.

We deduced that we hadn't known each other at Shimer, despite my having been Magistrate of the Court and her Editor of the school newspaper. Of course, she was always 7R (the Rapid Advance program) whereas I might have been 7B or 7C.

And I learned more about Ria's boyfriend. He was a doctor or studying to be one. Ria told us how her girlfriend Barbara had concocted a plan of hanging around hospitals to meet the young physicians. And how it was, that on one of those fishing expeditions, she'd caught Joe.

Apparently, Joe was finishing up a residency in California, which is why Ria had been so available all those Saturday nights. And anyway, she knew I was still preparing to enter the Maryknoll Seminary in the fall. So, what could be the harm?

It was an urgent phone call from Jen Gross which alerted me to the immediate drama, “Ria’s going to get engaged when Joe gets back! I think she’s making a terrible mistake!”

That night, I got on the phone with Ria for the first of a million times and asked her out on a date.

I couldn’t wine and dine her. Some nights, I barely had enough to gas up my Studebaker. I had a friend who owned a bowling alley. Mostly we just talked. But whatever we did, we usually wound up the night at this White Castle near her parents’ house in Rockville Center.



From meeting Ria at Jen and Arthur’s, to suddenly announcing that, it had become “my intention” to marry her was pretty quick – within a very few dates.

And I might not have moved so energetically had there not been the looming deadline with this other guy on the west coast but still, she was stunned!

I made sure there was no question for her to answer. All I did that first night was to introduce a dilemma. Now she had a set of hanging scales in front of her. Or at least I hoped she had.